

Nothing for nothing was the way of her people.

When Kristalena turns sixteen she becomes heir to the Whitehead Throne. Finding her sister's killer, dealing with scheming palace functionaries and ambitious imperial ambassadors and being the Queen's least favourite child are problems enough. But when a demon stalks the palace Kristalena learns that the world is a darker and more desperate place than she ever imagined and the price of persuading an ancient warlock to send it back to Hell is higher than she could possibly imagine.

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A DEBT TO PAY

Daughter of the Winds Book I

by

Simon Berry

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One

‘I AM NO LONGER a child. I am an adult.’ Sixteen-year-old Kristalena mouthed the two sentences inaudibly. In the triptych of mirrors she watched her lips form the words with exquisite precision. If a spy was observing her, more likely than not in the Whitehead Palace, they would be able to read her words with ease.

It doesn't matter. Not this time, but I must be more careful.

The gentle tugging of a brush drawn repeatedly through her shoulder-length hair was a soothing ritual, but today it did nothing to help her relax. This day was the most important of her young life. It was a day which she had never wanted to come; an involuntary elevation.

‘No, Alana,’ she instructed, ‘I will not wear a ribbon today.’

Ribbons are for children.

The attendant put the accessories aside. If Alana was a little slower than usual, Kristalena ignored the slight hesitation. It was not the servant's place to question the decisions of her mistress. Alana resumed the unnecessary brushing of Kristalena's hair. Jarine removed a stack of books from the counter and replaced them with an exquisite lacquered box; Sharakan craftsmanship. She carefully opened the lid revealing layered trays of jewellery. The gemstones and their mounts of gold and silver glittered in the bright light of an early summer's morning pouring through the open windows and reflecting from the mirrors facing her across the dressing table.

Kristalena was unmoved by the display of wealth. History was another matter, one which made the decision for her. ‘Catriona's Necklace. And the earrings.’ Nothing else, not even a thick bracelet to hide the ugly bruising on the inside of

her left forearm. Most likely another training injury; the military arts were something she persevered with rather than mastered. Other bruises, and two small scars, decorated her body but the discolouration on her forearm was the only one not concealed by her dress or her hair.

In the mirrors she saw Alana nod as though she'd expected the princess to make precisely that decision. The trays were folded back, the lid replaced and the box passed to another servant. A smaller container made of ornately wrought silver was presented. The name of Thessalonia's first ruler, inscribed on the lid in a flowing cursive script, was still visible in spite of centuries of careful polishing. Inside lay a necklace of deceptive simplicity. The silver strand lying against the black velvet appeared as a single unbroken piece of metal but was, in fact, a series of perfect links, so flawlessly connected that the gaps were all but invisible to the eye. Kristalena knew that if she looked closely she would see archaic symbols faintly engraved on the underside of each link. A single blue sapphire was suspended at the bottom of the necklace. Legend held that it had been given to Thessalia by her younger sister, an unsuccessful attempt to heal the rift between them. Whatever Loraline's motivations there were few mentions of her in the official histories after the kingdom's inaugural coronation and Queen Thessalia herself had refused to wear the necklace. Instead, she had given it to her only daughter on the day Catriona had been named heir, a tradition that had continued for eleven hundred and fifty-one years. Today the necklace belonged to Kristalena.

Kristalena rebuked herself, remembering that she was merely a custodian of a millennium of royal tradition. *History does not belong to me.*

At a nod from the princess, Jarine carefully removed the heirloom from its velvet bedding. Alana ceased her ministrations and held her mistress's midnight-black hair out of the way. Kristalena ran one finger down the necklace and across the face of the sapphire as it was placed around her neck. The gemstone was neither the largest nor the brightest in her collection but Kristalena had chosen this necklace because Philomena had worn it when she was designated heir, as had

scores of Thessalia's descendants before her. With Philomena dead and it was now Kristalena's turn.

Whether I want it or not.

Jarine closed the clasp and Kristalena felt a faint tingling as the necklace settled into place against her skin and mentally chided herself for imagining things.

'And the earrings,' she instructed. The earrings were a more recent creation than the necklace, but still centuries old.

Kristalena felt the touch of the servant's fingers and then the weight of silver and sapphire gently tugging on her ear lobes. She stood and inspected herself in the mirrors. Taking her time, the princess ignored the concern on Alana's young face and the impatience deepening Jarine's furrows.

Kristalena wasn't sure if she liked what she saw. Her complexion was the pale white of a young woman spared the necessity of working on the docks and bore the firm smoothness of youth, a good diet and plenty of vigorous exercise from her military training. It would be years before she needed powders or creams to hide imperfections. Her proportions were unremarkable, apart from being tall enough to feel ungainly at times, and her hair the familial black. But it was the clear grey eyes that she thought her best feature: well-placed and just wide enough to be distinctive. The serious eyes of one who sees far, as her mother had said in one of the Queen's rare lighter moments. Kristalena didn't pretend that anyone would consider her a beauty but her portrait would make a fine addition to the Hall of Ancestors when the time came for her to ascend the throne.

I must not think in such terms.

'It's time, Your Highness,' Collegier interrupted.

Kristalena took a last look at her reflections but did not permit herself so much as a nod of satisfaction. Alana and Jarine stepped back and bowed deeply as the heir-presumptive rose to her feet. Her bodyguards came from their stations near the door and windows and took up their escort positions, four ahead and four behind, with Lieutenant Collegier's muscular

form stepping into her shadow. Even in the supposed safety of the palace, a member of the royal family never went anywhere without a contingent of men and women raised from infancy for the single purpose of protecting Thessalia's bloodline.

It was only yesterday that Kristalena had bowed over her sister's tomb in the royal crypt deep beneath the palace. Suppressing the urge to cough as the fine particles of marble dust from the new tomb tickled her throat, she'd tried not to think about Philomena's mutilated body lying beneath the freshly-chiselled stone. Trying to remain impassive as she stood beside the mother burying her eldest child. Trying not to look to her right where an empty tomb waited for the next member of the dynasty to die. Kristalena had shown no weakness as the priests had sanctified Philomena's final resting place with their meaningless rituals. Nor had she reacted as the eyes and attentions of the witnesses had slowly transferred from the dead princess to the live one standing beside the tomb.

Here is not safe because there are no safe places for such as I.

It was a truth she had known since childhood but only as she bid farewell to her older sister had Kristalena finally accepted the uncompromising reality of her station. Assassination and misfortune had reduced every generation of her family to a single survivor, even if nobody spoke the fact aloud. With Philomena dead, four sisters had become three. And Kristalena had no expectation that Philomena's assassination would be the last.

Her escort stood aside as they reached the throne room and she went on alone. *Slowly*, Kristalena schooled herself as she walked past the guards standing rigidly to attention. *Slowly*, she silently repeated as she stepped through the twenty-foot-high doorway into the throne room. She could feel her heart beating faster and hoped she wouldn't perspire.

The princess walked with the deliberate pace of a royal, conscious that she was the reason everyone had gathered today. Stately and serene. Head high and back straight, she made her way past the nobles, the wealthiest merchants,

representatives of foreign powers and favoured palace functionaries assembled for the occasion. She acknowledged the presence of the Duke of Weighbridge with the slightest of nods but ignored most others. There was no meaning behind the selection of whom she favoured and whom she snubbed but the politicians would spend days, if not weeks, reading meanings into her random selection and the Queen's spies would report back on every single one of them. Keeping the powerful and the insecure, potential enemies all of them, off-balance was an essential skill for someone in her position.

It's not the nobility who matter, she reminded herself. The Tamurian and Sharakan ambassadors in all their diplomatic splendour would be waiting in the front row along with those representing the lesser northern realms. Separated by the ten-foot width of the red carpet running down the centre of the room and their respective rulers' ambitions to reforge the ancient Karolignian Empire, Ambassador Nikolai and Ambassador Petrovich were the people who mattered most.

Serephanie and Lapheria were also standing at the front, impeccably dressed as befitted their rank. One looked worried and the other furious. Neither had a smile for their older sibling. A year younger than Kristalena, the twins shared a birthday but in dress and temperament and interests they were poles apart.

Eventually Kristalena reached the base of the three broad steps at the end of throne room. Only as she went down on her left knee, head slightly bowed, did she notice just how quiet the room was. It was hard to imagine so many people, maybe two thousand all told, making so little noise as they waited for the Queen to acknowledge her daughter.

'You may rise, my daughter.'

Queen Salamander XXIII's flat words relieved the silence. Kristalena wondered if the reluctance in the Queen's voice was as obvious to everyone else as it was to her. As she rose to her feet, Kristalena could hear the sounds of people letting themselves breathe again. Heavy breathing from behind the Queen, almost a wheeze. That would be Neshar, bloated and shiny as he sweated in his ceremonial robes. The rustle of

clothing as people shifted from one foot to the other. The creaking of leather against steel as the guards watched the watchers.

Kristalena looked at the woman sitting on the throne. Queen Salamander ruled Thessalonia absolutely and had done so for twenty-one years.

Commander Varana stood immediately behind the throne, his massively broad chest and shoulders made him look squat, even though he was precisely six feet tall. The commander of the Queen's guards wore his official armour for the occasion but there was nothing decorative about the heavy broadsword sheathed at his waist. Neshar and the other five eunuchs who made up the Royal Council sat impassively in their ornate chairs placed a few feet further back on the dais. The six men who were no longer whole and no longer subject to the temptations of sexual desire or dynastic aspiration were the Queen's most trusted advisers.

'Your Majesty,' Kristalena addressed her mother but did not break protocol by asserting that anything except the relationship of ruler and subject existed between them.

I am a subject first and your least favourite daughter second.

There was an empty chair to the right and slightly behind the Queen's throne. *Mine.*

Salamander waited, that was her prerogative, before standing. Not yet forty, she was now handsome rather than striking. The considerable beauty of her childbearing years was fading with the passage of time and the demands placed upon the ruler of a small kingdom. The softness around the jaw, hair that was no longer glossy and the faint creases radiating from the corners of her eyes: all these things marked the monarch's ageing but none more so than the grown child waiting in front of her.

Salamander descended to the last step, where she matched her daughter's height.

'You are very tall, Kristalena,' said the Queen.

I have my father to thank for that.

Alone among her sisters, Kristalena had inherited their father's height and grey eyes. She imagined much of her mother's disfavour stemmed from that paternal resemblance. It reminded Salamander of the lover who'd abandoned his Queen.

Kristalena's father was not among the gathered nobles. He'd disappeared shortly after the twins were born. In a realm that only recognised matrilineal primogeniture, a queen's consort was not a figure of any importance and Kristalena had been raised not to miss the father she'd never known. The same would have been true of any male siblings for that matter but she had no brothers and their genetic irrelevancy to confuse the orderly process of hereditary succession.

Salamander paused, this time addressing the witnesses.

'This is our eldest daughter and today is her sixteenth naming day. In accordance with the law of the realm, today we designate Her Royal Highness Kristalena san Thessalia heir and successor to our throne, our titles and our possessions.'

Kristalena dared to briefly look her mother in the face as Thessalonia's monarch placed the tiara on her head. The Queen ignored the impertinence.

*I have survived this long, yet I must still be cautious.
Always cautious.*

Kristalena followed the Queen up the stairs, taking the heir's ornamental seat to the right and slightly behind the throne. No one had sat in that chair in the week since Philomena's murder. The search for the unknown assassins and their paymasters had wound down in the belief that those culpable had long fled, leaving behind suspicion and an empty seat at the dining table.

My sister is dead and I must take her place.

The simple ceremony was complete. Kristalena was now officially the heir and would ascend to the throne on her mother's death, if she survived that long. The young woman smiled a controlled smile and looked again at the witnesses

massed in the throne room. More than two thousand, she thought, now she could see just how few seats were unoccupied. Closer to three thousand. This time she made eye contact with as many as possible and hoped her fear didn't show.

I don't want to die.

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Two

THERE WAS NO BANG. No crash. No blinding flash or flickering lights. The sacred design had been inscribed in the earthen floor. A supplication to great power repeated over and over. The earth had wavered like the surface of a pond when a fish rises to the surface. For a dozen stuttering heartbeats, the reek of something beyond foul invaded the mean cottage. A human shape clawed its way to the surface. Shiny and streaked with black slime and blood, she quivered, emitting a weak moan. One hand scrabbled at the dirt, breaking the gateway inscribed across the floor. The laments of tortured souls overlain with delighted laughter echoed briefly off the mud-plastered walls before being cut off. A moment longer and the floor was once again hardpacked earth but now a figure was lying amid the week-old rushes. A woman.

One fist rubbed at the filth obscuring her eyes. The other was clenched around a mucus-covered stick longer than the woman's forearm. First one and then the other eye opened, the wide colourless orbs focusing on the four slack-jawed humans watching the apparition.

The woman gagged and vomited; viscous yellow and green liquid sizzled as it splattered across the floor. She cleared her throat and spat twice. 'Free. I am free, Lord. Free to serve your will.' There was a note of triumph in her utterance. Slowly, as though testing her body, the intruder rotated her head, looking around. She pushed herself onto her knees before rising to stand upright. A peasant's hovel, she thought as she took in her surroundings. The stale odour of spilled ale, unwashed bodies and the remains of a pitiful evening meal invaded her nostrils. They were wan sensations compared with the foul stench coming from the slime coating her body but enough to confirm that she had succeeded in crossing the Void to the realm of

mortals. A world made by Gods she had not worshipped for many painful centuries. Home.

‘W ... who are you?’

She straightened, staring at the trembling white-haired man clutching his ale mug. ‘One who is set as far above you as the stars above an earthworm. Arrange a bath and some clothes. And wine. Your best, mortal. It has been too long since I have experienced the pleasures of the palate.’ Small bursts of spittle accompanied her words.

The man did not move. A farmer, she thought. She was on a farm.

‘Now, mortal.’ She lifted her arm and pointed her stick, not at the bewildered old man but at the younger one making a dash for the front door.

He howled in pain, stumbling, colliding with a stool and crashing to the floor.

‘My bath, worms,’ she repeated, indifferent as to which of the humans obeyed.

A smell? Mutton, she thought. Poor fare but the first sustenance her body had known since . . . she didn’t like to think of it. She only had to raise her wand once more before her hosts were scrambling over themselves.

As she watched the father and son bring in buckets of water while the older woman prepared a meal and the younger stood there trembling, the naked visitor carefully rinsed the slime and gore from the one object she had brought with her from Hell. As wands go, hers was larger than most: two feet of mottled blood-red and dull black was revealed as she cleaned it.

Satisfied that it was undamaged, she slipped into the water anticipating the sensation of water against her skin and the simple glory of being clean. Yet she felt nothing. She was aware of the water against her flesh, water that was fouled the moment she squatted in the small tub, but. . . . She sat still for a very long time, adjusting to her body’s incompleteness.

‘A small price,’ she said before turning to the task at hand. Scraping the worst of the slime off her small frame, she demanded that the farmer’s daughter refill the wooden tub with clean water twice more before she was satisfied.

‘How long?’ she whispered softly as she traced the runes etched into the wand’s surface. ‘How long has it been since I saw sky, felt the breeze and heard silence?’

More years than she cared to think about but she did just that, lying in the water, hearing the liquid hissing softly as it lapped against her naked almost-skin. But of heat and pain she felt nought.

Eventually, she stepped out of the wooden tub before it disintegrated around her. Ignoring the tattered grey robe the girl held out for her, she walked through the cottage in search of food, wine and a life to give her body the substance she had been forced to leave behind when she had crossed the Void.

‘Avaline,’ she said loudly as she crossed the floor. The dry rushes rustled against her bare feet but she could have been walking on broken glass for all that she felt. ‘My name is Avaline and I serve the Lord of All.’

She stopped near the fetid stain that marked her return to the world of her birth and looked around. The place was a fleapit. A common room no more than eight paces across. A small fire with blackened pots and a spoutless kettle set beside it in one corner and the tub only partly concealed by the hanging mouldy blanket in the other. Three stools around an uneven table and a fourth lying sideways on the floor. Oft mended clothes hanging on the walls. An open door leading to a sleeping chamber. Four people; the old couple, the girl who had helped her bathe and the young man rubbing the side of his head.

‘Mirror,’ she demanded of the humans cowering before her, but they had none. She held up one hand, turning it over and inspecting her flesh in the flickering light of the small fire. The centuries corrupting her body had made the journey with her. Already she could feel herself weakening.

‘Fetch me a meal,’ she pointed at the old farmer, ‘and raiment fit for my status.’ Her finger shifted to the young woman.

The old man ladled stew from one of the pots warming next to the fire into a crude earthenware bowl and set it on the table while the woman rummaged through a chest.

Sitting on a stool, she spooned the stew into her mouth. Thin with only scraps of fatty meat and uneven lumps of potato. It was the first meal to cross her lips since her exile. She tasted nothing but swallowed the cottagers’ supper anyway. And promptly retched.

‘Another pleasure denied.’ This time she snarled.

Taking one of the unspilled cups, she sniffed and sighed. Ale. Watery, tasteless stuff, but she drank it anyway and threw up again. Avaline hurled the cup across the room where it shattered against the lintel post. Her hosts trembled, the older woman apologising from her knees.

‘It would appear that conventional forms of sustenance are not for me. But do not despair mortal, for you can still serve.’

Brushing past the grovelling woman, she placed one rotting hand against the young man’s cheek. ‘You have the strength of a man used to labour and the vitality of the young,’ she told him. ‘And I have need of both.’

He tried to push her off but then grunted as though punched in the guts and staggered backwards. Avaline followed, keeping her palm to his face until he was pressed against the door frame. The young peasant woman shrieked, clutching a patched dress to her chest as her husband aged years with every agonising breath, his face desiccating and shrivelling, his back bending into the hunched posture of the few who outlived their body’s ability to perform useful labour. She screamed again as his eyes whitened then collapsed and the corpse crumbled to the floor.

The scream faded as Avaline’s opaque body became whole flesh and blood and organs functioned again, but she was

already degenerating like a body left to decompose in a pool of muddy water.

The old man recovered his wits. Shouting for his wife and daughter to run, he flung the kettle at the murderous invader and snatched a woodsman's axe hanging from pegs in the wall. With a flick of her fingers, Avaline knocked him sideways, separating him from the weapon. Pointing her wand at the struggling farmer, she gestured once and his head slammed against the hearthstone with a sickening crack. Satisfied that the pitiful threat had been neutralised she turned towards her surviving hosts.

Backed against the wall, the shaking girl held out the dress. Ignoring the offered raiment, Avaline raised her hand and the girl was screaming even before she felt her visitor's touch.

Better, Avaline thought as she took first the girl's life and then the mother's to feed her own. Her arms were no longer transparent but the light flesh tone she thought she remembered. No more could she see the blood pulsing through her veins or the bones and sinews within.

Avaline looked around, once more taking in the meanness of the hut. She noticed the dress lying next to the corpse of the wizened old hag that had, until a few moments ago, been a healthy young woman.

'This is a cesspit and I will not degrade myself by wearing rags,' she declared.

It was too soon to announce her return to a world a millennium removed from the one she had once lived in, yet she could feel the impermanence of her form. The incompleteness of her body meant that her return to this universe was a tenuous state of existence. As she obliterated the remains of the gateway through which she had been summoned, Avaline could already feel the faintest pulling, a reminder that she would remain in the world of mortals only as long as she had the strength to sustain herself.

As she stepped naked into the warm night, it occurred to her that the dead would have had names but she was indifferent to such irrelevancies.

Fire would attract attention sooner than if she left the bodies to be discovered but burned corpses were less remarkable than desiccated husks. She would be gone before anyone arrived.

‘Too soon,’ she said to an owl gliding overhead.

She gestured once and flames started licking at the thatch roof. Satisfied that the fire had a good hold, she walked away, choosing a direction at random. She knew where she needed to go but not where she was. One way was as good as another.

‘Far too soon,’ she repeated as she walked barefoot across the dew-dropped grass of a fallow field with only the pocked face of the near moon to watch her leave.

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Three

CROWN PRINCESS KRISTALENA entered the chart room, stood the correct five paces from her ruler, curtsied in the prescribed manner and waited for acknowledgement. The Queen was finishing a discussion with Sartor but she glanced up and made a small gesture with her left hand. Kristalena took one of the hard-backed chairs, its legs short so that any audience privileged to sit in the Queen's presence would be lower than Her Majesty. As a tall girl, sitting still would become progressively more difficult, but she would have to endure the discomfort. It was another test of her self-discipline.

'I'm confident this year's Assentation Day celebrations will go smoothly,' said Sartor, shuffling the documents before him. 'The last item is the fiscal requisition for the additions to Your Majesty's navy. We are selling two obsolete ships, refitting a third as a merchant vessel and building four new deep-ocean warships.'

'And vessels for upriver?'

'The current fleet is regarded as more than sufficient, Your Majesty. There really is nothing to challenge our control over the Haddin River.'

While Salamander read the document, running her finger down the columns itemising the costs to be incurred, Kristalena studied the eunuch. Sartor was a man of average height, no taller than Kristalena herself, with an olive tinged complexion and aquiline nose that suggested the foreign but, in a trading centre like Queenshelm, the same could be said of many. Like all the eunuchs serving on the Royal Council, he was heavily overweight, though not so gross as Nesher. Streaks of grey had invaded his flowing dark brown hair, showing his age, but the face remained smooth and seemingly untouched by the passing of his sixtieth year. Blue silk robes and a pair of curved ceremonial daggers, sheathed in his

crimson sash, served as a reminder that the eunuchs were traditionally the final line of defence for Thessalonia's monarchs. The rubies in the hilts glittered in the sunlight pouring through the windows.

'Your Majesty's treasury has a sufficiency. Indeed, if you were to consider raising another loan—'

'No Sartor,' she interrupted him. 'If the navy is large enough to protect the national interests, then I have no wish to cripple myself with more debt. There are other projects that make better use of the funds. Expanding the grain silos on the South Bank without resorting to the moneylenders again is a priority.'

The eunuch made no demurrals as he showed his Queen where to sign, melted the blue wax and affixed the monarch's seal.

'Let me know when the keel-laying ceremony is to be held,' she commanded as Sartor gathered up the papers.

'Of course, Your Majesty.'

Sartor bowed to his ruler, then more briefly to Kristalena, on his way out.

'Being my heir carries responsibilities,' said Salamander as soon as the door closed behind the functionary. There was no warmth in her voice. 'And you are old enough to assume some of them.'

'Yes, Your Majesty.' Kristalena bobbed her head.

'When we are alone you may address me as "Mother".'

'Yes, Mother.' Kristalena understood that Commander Varana and a half score of the Queen's personal guards standing rigidly against the walls didn't count. Nor did anyone listening behind the tapestries. This was as alone as she was ever likely to be with the monarch.

'We will start with the little things. There is a meeting with the Slavers' Guild tomorrow. They are asking for licence to operate in Queenshelm.'

‘They ask that every year, Mother,’ Kristalena dared an interruption. Like the white-cloaked Knights of Alacia, the Tamurian Slavers’ Guild had not been invited to Kristalena’s investiture, though for very different reasons. The former were religious fanatics prone to denouncing witches and rabble rousing wherever they went. The later were traders in human misery.

‘They ask and we refuse. There are no slaves in Thessalonia, nor will there be.’ The Queen was adamant.

‘So I am to refuse their request?’ Kristalena thought that sounded simple enough.

‘Yes, but in such a way that they do not take offence.’

‘I should explain that we do not wish to affront the Sharakan emperor?’

‘You can imply that, leave them to think that may be the reason, but we cannot admit to weakness. Thessalonia is a small kingdom. Our neighbours are larger than us, more powerful, but geography and their mistrust of each other makes us prosperous. We have the largest seaport for a hundred leagues north and south and the only one with access to the Haddin River. More trade passes through Queenshelm than every other port in the north combined. You know these things.’

‘Yes, Mother,’ Kristalena said after a short pause.

‘You have thought of something. Tell me.’

‘An irrelevancy.’

‘I will hear it anyway.’

‘Yes, Mother. I was wondering why we still refer to Thessalonia as a kingdom.’ It *was* an irrelevancy, but it was better to admit it than to prevaricate. A reputation for speaking only truth would serve her better when it was necessary to lie.

‘You need to focus. You must.’

Kristalena lowered her gaze, accepting the rebuke.

‘Now go and prepare yourself. You have had all the guidance you will get from me on this subject.’

The princess stood, curtsied deeply and backed towards the exit. Only when she was outside and there was a solid gilded door between the Queen’s gaze and her stiff back did she allow herself to relax slightly. Already Kristalena knew what was expected of her. The Queen would not speak to her again but there was nothing to prevent her seeking other guidance. Two turns and the length of a short corridor lined with pictures of the realm’s warships later, she reached her destination.

‘Lord Neshher.’

‘Your Highness. To what do I owe the pleasure?’ The chief administrator shrugged off the ministrations of the servants helping the grotesque lump of fat to his feet. Even by the standards of the palace eunuchs, Neshher’s bulk was excessive. His dark eyes were made small by the sagging flesh surrounding them, all set in a hairless head that resembled nothing so much as an upturned chamber pot. He was one of the few people who could make Sartor appear moderately attractive. Left foot and right foot – the palace and the whole kingdom marched to the direction of the two senior eunuchs.

‘Perhaps we could speak in private?’ It was a suggestion. Only the Queen herself now outranked Kristalena, but she wasn’t so naïve as to assume either that she spoke for the crown or that other powerful men and women did not have the monarch’s ear. Until her position was more firmly established, authority was a tool to be wielded with caution.

‘Of course, Your Highness.’ Neshher made a small gesture, and all but one of his attendants bowed and left.

The remaining servant had no ears, only patches of leather sewn directly into his skin. The obviousness of the man’s disfigurement did nothing to reassure Kristalena – she expected the man could lip-read – but not wanting to appear clever she let it pass. Clever people were dangerous and dangerous people were dead people as the saying went. Philomena had been both too clever and not clever enough.

Kristalena waited until she heard the door close behind her before taking a seat. She motioned for the sweating eunuch to do the same. Collegier and her other bodyguards took up stations near the door and the windows.

‘Tell me, Nesh, about the Tamurian Empire and their Slavers’ Guild.’

‘An interesting subject, Your Highness. Also a complex one. The Tamurian empress Katayana maintains the fiction that the Guild is an independent association of merchants rather than a branch of her government. Was there anything in particular you wished to know?’

He knows, she thought as Nesh collapsed back into his wide and heavily reinforced chair. The thick wooden legs creaked in futile protest. *Mother would have sought his counsel before giving me this task.*

‘I think we both know why I’m here,’ she said, and a calculated little of her irritation showed. It was a game, one she had to play even if she didn’t have to enjoy the game for its own sake.

‘Yes, I suppose we do. The Queen asked what functions she could delegate to you and I offered her several suggestions. Her Majesty chose this one.’ Nesh plucked a small scented towel from a silver platter on his desk and wiped the sweat off his face and the folds of skin around his neck.

‘Why?’

‘I would not presume to. . . .’ He dropped the sodden towel into a small gold bucket next to his chair.

‘I meant, why did you suggest that I meet with the slavers?’

‘Ah, yes. I see.’

When Nesh failed to provide the requested information, Kristalena prompted him. ‘Well?’

‘As Your Highness knows, the principal trade goods of Tamur are slaves, wheat, other foodstuffs. Timber also, but that doesn’t affect us as much.’

I'm aware of that, she wanted to shout. The overstuffed bureaucrat was treating her like a child but she schooled herself to patience.

‘Think of it as a matter of geography, Your Highness. Where do the Guild get their slaves? Mostly through their breeding programme. The days when they raided Tamur’s neighbours for people foolish enough to stray too close to the borders are largely behind us. Or so they would have us believe. And that is precisely the question. Sharakan comes to blows with the slavers often enough.’

‘But they never resort to actual war.’

‘There was a series of skirmishes that lasted for three years that some historians like to dramatise and call the Fourth Border War. It was a long time ago and things haven’t got that serious since. There’s too much at stake for either of them to risk that. So Sharakan will not mass her armies over a few abducted peasants and Tamur will not retaliate over the occasional party of slavers that gets strung up on the northern side of the river or sent to work in the mines.’

‘And if we granted the Slavers’ Guild the right to conduct business—’

‘The Sharakan Emperor would view it as a threat, but Anslov considers his own shadow hazardous to his dynasty. Not having an heir can do that to an ageing ruler,’ said Neshar with a shrug which set his jowls wobbling. ‘If we let the Guild operate in Thessalonia, Anslov would assume that we favour Katayana over him. Sharakan rightly views the Slavers’ Guild as a tool of Tamurian foreign policy. Allowing the Guild to build an enclave in Queenshelm would be considered the first step in a scheme to establish a bridgehead and seize control of the only navigable river north of Nar Mala. Anslov wouldn’t stand for it.’

He paused, looking at Kristalena, perhaps checking to see if the young pupil was paying attention.

‘And each of them would leap at half a pretext to annex Thessalonia into their empires as a first step in reuniting the ancient Karolignian Empire,’ she concluded.

‘Quite possibly. We may be critically important to trade in the North but, from a military perspective, Thessalonia is not strong. As I said, neither of them really wants a conflict but each knows that our harbour makes us far too valuable a prize to fall into the hands of the other. It wouldn’t take much for either of them to be goaded into taking pre-emptive action.’

Kristalena thought about that and watched as the supposedly deaf attendant gently waved a large ostrich feather fan, creating a cooling breeze. It didn’t slow the rate at which sweat droplets appeared on Neshher’s puffy skin.

‘Your Highness, we control every cargo that goes up or down the Haddin River, at least as far as the shallows at Weighbridge, but we do so at the sufferance of a greedy woman and a paranoid man.’

Kristalena understood. The benefits of trade were to be preserved and the spectre of imperialism to be avoided. All she had to do was be polite, to be patient and, above all, not agree to anything. It seemed a little too easy.

‘Neshher, if I can figure this out, and I’m barely sixteen, I have to assume everyone else can too.’

Neshher adjusted his silken robes and waited for the princess to complete the thought.

‘So why do the slavers bother? They know that we will give them the same answer every year. So why do they come?’

‘That, Your Highness, is a very good question,’ said Neshher. His heavily lidded eyes narrowed further, threatening to disappear within his flesh. Another towel completed the journey from the silver platter to the bucket with a detour to collect the sweat from his face.

Kristalena took her leave. This was her first task as heir – the first time she would represent the Queen. Any mistake would be remembered for a very long time.

I can't afford that.

Four

THE CITIZENS OF KNOTTS HARBOUR took pride in the fact that it was a free city even if few people questioned precisely what that meant beyond being part of the loose coalition of city states and principalities comprising the Norder League. One vigorously exercised freedom was the right to go about their business (legitimate or otherwise) at any hour and, in the warm summer months when the harbour was free of ice, commercial and private activities continued long after sunset. The proprietor of *The Lonely Whale* took that to extremes and never closed her doors. Regulars considered the quality of the wines and ale on offer adequate and the food more palatable than ships' fare, all things being relative, and patronage was high.

Dawn was closer than the preceding dusk and when the last group, sailors and a couple of women of dubious appearance and questionable occupation, joined the other clientele of the fine establishment by falling asleep. Taerelle grumbled about the bodies snoring at the benches or lying prone amid the rushes.

'Should charge 'em a night's lodging, I should.' The small minority still awake didn't take the landlady seriously. The stout proprietor was always complaining about something and if she grumbled more than usual on this humid summer's night, nobody was going to say anything. Taerelle wasn't the sort of person one took liberties with.

She looked at the door, another habit, and grumbled again. A drunk sleeping at his drinking bench with his head on his folded arms turned restlessly, muttering something about South Head Spit. His empty tankard rolled away, clattering to the floor. A serving girl stepped around the recumbent drinkers, helping her mistress gather the empty mugs and plates.

The door swung open and a tall figure wearing a black cloak stepped through, ducking his head to clear the lintel. His face was hidden beneath the cowl.

‘Bradon,’ breathed Taerelle. ‘At last. I feared something had happened or maybe you’d taken a different road.’

‘No, Taerelle. Nothing happened to me. My old nag is another matter. She came up lame two days’ ride short of the city. I left her with a farmer up country who’ll have one of his boys bring her here in a week or so. Stable her for me until the next time one of us passes through, will ye.’

‘Of course, of course.’ Mistress Taerelle wasn’t a short woman by any means, but she had to tilt her head back to look into the cowl hiding her visitor’s face.

Bradon pulled a few coins out from beneath his robe.

She waved the offered payment away. ‘There’s no need for that. Not here.’

‘For the farm boy. I promised him a couple of silver marks when he brings the horse and a noose if it isn’t here when it’s needed.’

Taerelle laughed briefly, a low coarse sound that wouldn’t disturb the paying customers’ slumber. She took the coins.

‘I still need to get to Queenshelm if the Seers are even half right.’

‘You can take one of my cart horses. Not the fastest, but they be dependable,’ she offered.

Bradon shook his head. ‘Thank you kindly, but if there’s a ship leaving in the morning, that will get me there quicker without being left to the mercy of another bout of equine unreliability.’

‘Aye, the wind’s a fair one for Queenshelm at this time of the year. There’s that,’ she allowed, ‘though whether it’s something I can recommend is another thing entire. That’s the first mate of the *Kupar’s Maiden* in the corner. Goes by the name of Belsa.’ Her eyes did the pointing.

Bradon surveyed the indicated body. A bulky man with a sailor's mandatory collection of earrings and tattoos was propped upright in the corner of a booth, drool leaking from the side of his mouth. A piece of his left ear was missing; most of it in fact. Three other men and a youth, all sailors from their attire and sun-browned skins, were sleeping on, or under, the table.

'Not a sight which fills me with confidence,' the tall man admitted. 'But time, as the tax collectors constantly remind us, is very much of the essence. It's near enough dawn so they need to wake soonish. I'll wait here.'

Bradon rolled his shoulder and a large bag fell to the table with a heavy thud. Leaning a staff as tall as he was against the wall, he threw back his cowl exposing strange symbols inked across his forehead and one cheek. Taking a seat at one end of the bench, Bradon fastened his eyes on the sleeping sailor in the corner like a raptor eyeing its prey.

'Can I get you anything?'

'Some tea and a meal would be appreciated, Taerelle,' said the warlock. 'It's been a long day.'

'Girl! Fetch Master Bradon some tea, the best Westalian mind you, and a good helping off the joint with all the trimmings.'

The serving girl scurried to obey.

'Queenshelm? There's been rumours flying around thicker than a drunkard's skull. The heir was killed so they say and the new one's not half as pretty. Though why it matters. . . .'

Bradon ignored her question, his eyes never leaving the drooling sailor, even when the girl returned to place a pot of tea and a plate of food in front of him.

'Of course. Of course,' she gushed in a whisper, perhaps realising that the warlock's business was none of her concern. 'Only. . . .'

'No,' he said at last. 'I've no interest in who ends up on Thessalia's throne.'

Taerelle nudged the first mate with her boot.

Drunk or not, Belsa was half way to his feet pulling a straight dagger from his waistband before he recognised Taerelle. 'Whad ya wake me for?' He squinted at the blackness outside the grimy windows. 'Ain't dawn yet.'

'Got you a passenger, Belsa. This here's Bradon,' she introduced the tall man calmly eating his dinner.

'Skipper don't take passengers,' Belsa said gruffly. He slipped his dagger back into its sheath.

'I'm sure we can reach an accommodation,' said Bradon mildly. If this was Taerelle's idea of her 'best fare' he didn't want to see what kind of muck the less well-regarded customers were served. Still, he ate, knowing that shipboard meals would be worse.

Belsa groped around in the smoky haze. Finding a cup he lifted it to his lips and then tossed it aside. It bounced off one of his crew before clattering across the floor. 'Empty. Another pint before I go. My new friend's buying for all of us.'

Bradon nodded without looking at Taerelle and she waddled towards the bar.

Belsa roused the rest of the sailors. A mixed lot they were, with bleary eyes, tattooed skin (apart from the boy), rank odour and a general air of disrepute being the only common denominators.

'Time, is it?' grunted a lean man with more white than grey in his close-cropped hair and a gap in his front teeth.

'Soon enough, Lonnie. This gentleman's just agreed to stand a round on account of us being such fine upstanding citizens.'

'You mean he wants passage. Cap'n won't like that,' said the old man, pulling on one ear.

'Doesn't mean we can't take a drink while we tell him that, does it now Lonnie,' said an impressively muscled man with a shaven head and scars down one side of his face. 'Come on, lad. There's honest drinking to be done.'

The lad, barely into his teens, was rubbing his eyes when Taerelle returned with the drinks.

‘Why you want to ship with us? Queenshelm’s the best part of three days even when we’ve a following northerly,’ said Belsa.

‘It’s quicker than riding, and you’re sailing for Queenshelm with the morning tide,’ said Bradon.

‘Aye, we got a hold full of iron bound for Queenshelm as everyone knows. No, the sea’s the only way to move a cargo like ’at,’ the mate agreed.

The boy nodded attentively as the older hands talked.

‘Come on, young Mirk. Drink up,’ said Lonnie. ‘It’ll be dawn soon and we need to be aboard if we’s not to be left behind.’

The boy sipped from his tankard while the deal was negotiated.

‘You got coin? Skipper’ll skin me alive if you don’t.’

Bradon tossed a few coins on the table for the drinks and his meal then jangled his purse. ‘We should get going. It’s getting light.’

‘Aye, drink up,’ implored the mate. He set the example by draining his tankard in one.

‘You can do better ’n that, lad,’ said the heavy-set sailor with black hair. ‘The way you’re drinking, anyone’d think it was yer first tankard.’

The boy dutifully raised his drink and swallowed. Amber rivulets dribbled down his hairless chin.

‘’At’s better,’ said the grey-haired Lonnie. He thumped the ship’s boy on the back.

A strange expression came over the boy’s face, like he was trying to concentrate on something a long way away.

‘He’s going ta bring it back up,’ said Belsa.

‘Get ’im outside,’ muttered the heavy man. He grabbed the boy by the arm and jerked him upright.

The rest of the crew followed, grins on their faces.

The sailors got Mirk through the door, where he stood in the street looking around and trying desperately to focus on something. It was a lost cause. The boy bent double and vomited onto the cobblestones, spraying Bradon’s boots as he exited *The Lonely Whale*.

‘Ere, we don’t want any trouble. Boy’s young, an’ all,’ said Belsa. His hand strayed in the direction of his waistband and the pair of daggers it held.

‘It’s no trouble,’ Bradon said in a deep, measured voice. ‘I’ve had a long journey and my boots need cleaning anyway. Shall we go?’

‘You’s lucky the gentleman didn’t cut rough, young Mirk,’ said Belsa.

‘Aye, many’s the one who’d have clouted you for it. Need to learn to hold your ale like a proper sailor,’ agreed Lonnie who’d been around long enough to know what he was talking about.

Mirk retched again, but there was nothing left to come up.

Mistress Taerelle set her lantern on the floor, knocked once at the door of the worst room on the first floor and obeyed the command to enter.

Carefully closing and locking the door behind her, she advanced two steps and then dropped to both knees. It took conscious effort not to wrinkle her nose at the odour of rot and decay but she couldn’t avoid glancing at the withered corpse lying in the corner.

‘Speak.’ The single word was uttered with clipped precision.

‘He’s gone, Great Lady.’

‘That I saw for myself.’ The slight figure was standing in the darkest part of the unlit room, no more than a slender silhouette against a dark wall and seemingly indifferent to the

unkempt state of her surroundings. Only starlight and the sliver of yellow light from the lantern Taerelle had left in the corridor seeping under the closed door intruded on the blackness, illuminating the dust Taerelle's arrival had disturbed and little else. The guest had chosen this particular room for a reason. Putting up with the noise from the narrow street meant a window overlooking the front door and the way to the docks.

‘Bradon he still calls himself, does he? Perhaps there is a little defiance in him yet.’

‘He sails for Queenshelm on the *Kupar's Maiden*. They'll be casting off before it's full light, Great Lady.’

There was no response.

‘The girl died a long time ago, yet the compulsion to find her still drives men.’ The voice seemed more distant, an echo of a tragedy played out long ago.

‘With the wind as it is, he'll have a fast passage. The *Maiden's* a flyer with the wind behind her.’ Taerelle blathered on, not understanding the spectre's words but desperately wanting her information to be of value. The life force of the chamber maid sustained her guest for now but the innkeeper had no wish to be the next to feed her visitor.

The figure in the shadows shrugged, a movement barely discernible in the poor light. ‘He could have travelled faster before now. He's no cunctator. No, he delays his arrival in Queenshelm for some reason.’ The voice spoke again, dry and with a hollowness that suggested it was coming from much further away than the other side of this small room.

‘Why would he do that, Great Lady?’

‘It doesn't matter. Whether he knows it or not, he serves our cause. Now go. See that I am not disturbed.’ Avaline turned back towards the window, though the scant view no longer held anything of interest. Anthropomancy had led her to Knotts Harbour and the knowledge that she was not alone in her quest. It would serve her again.

Five

THE AFTERNOON MEETING had gone smoothly. Neshar had taken care of that, introducing the newly elevated heir to the members of the slavers' delegation with exquisite courtesy. Tea had been served in the chart room, which offered a sweeping view over the city of Queenshelm down to the bustling harbour and across the Haddin Basin to the flat, sandy expanse of South Head Spit. The flow of ocean-going and riverine vessels was a reminder that Kristalena was here to pretend to discuss the possibilities of trade.

Neshar had made the introductions and retreated to a chair half a pace behind the Princess. Close enough to whisper in her ear.

Esteemed Droshka was a pale-skinned man of unassuming height and build, whom Kristalena might have found pleasant to look at were it not for the extensive array of studs and rings puncturing his ears, nose, lips and eye brows. His associates, a man and a woman, also middle-aged and also extensively perforated, bowed and smiled and said little.

Respects and practised compliments were exchanged before they moved on to an afternoon of empty inconsequence. Alana and other servants poured tea and offered pastries and sweetmeats while the slavers chatted about the weather and the prospects for the harvest season and talked of the latest fashions from Setovia. Kristalena asked unthreatening questions and hoped that the slavers' rooms were adequate and ignored the rattle of the cup against the saucer as Alana served the second pot of tea and pretended not to see the serving girl mop up the spilt beverage.

Apart from her servant's unacceptable clumsiness, things went exactly as Kristalena intended. She neither opened nor closed any doors. Droshka and his seconds bowed courteously to Kristalena and Neshar as they left. Officially at least, the

slavers weren't sufficiently important to merit a formal dinner so she wouldn't have to sit with them this evening. She had neither taken nor given offence and was confident she would emerge from the following day's negotiations in much the same state. Still, it wouldn't hurt to be sure.

'Lord Nesher, please give me your observations,' she asked as soon as the door was closed behind her.

'You deported yourself admirably, Your Highness,' said the eunuch as he wobbled along the corridor behind her. She adjusted her stride, slowing to keep pace with her mother's adviser.

'They didn't actually ask for anything. It was just two men and a woman being polite to me in an excessively formal way. Did I miss something?' Making an admission bothered her.

'They were just getting to know you. Tomorrow will be more challenging but I am sure you will continue to do an excellent job, Your Highness.'

Kristalena swallowed the counsellor's condescension.

No one dared to intrude on Kristalena's sleep until first light.

'Your Highness? Please, you need to wake up.' Alana plucked respectfully at her mistress's shoulder.

'Speak,' Kristalena commanded without opening her eyes.

'It's the slavers, Your Highness. They were all murdered last night.' Alana's voice was at least an octave higher than normal.

'That cannot be true,' Kristalena decided and rolled over, pulling the bed covers over her head.

'They're dead, Your Highness. Forgive me, but the Queen has commanded that I inform you. They . . . they were torn to pieces.'

Kristalena sat bolt upright, pushing the silk sheets aside and rubbing her eyes. 'Torn to pieces?'

'Yes, Highness,' Alana spoke quietly as she had been trained to, but there was some emotion lurking under the

young woman's veneer of proper behaviour. Shock, but something else etched into her servant's ashen face as well. Satisfaction?

Kristalena dressed as quickly as possible in sombre colours, put on her most comfortable shoes and declined to have her hair brushed or to wear any jewellery. Not wanting to waste time locking it away, she grabbed her diary on the way out. Hurrying through the palace corridors she headed towards the guest suite occupied by the slavers. Her usual quantum of protectors doubled before she had covered half the distance. Alana followed, holding a ribbon and a hairbrush. The corridor leading to the slavers' rooms was thick with more soldiers, far more than the usual complement of guards allocated to visiting dignitaries. Neshar was standing at the doorway, peering in.

'Neshar? What happened?'

'Highness? My apologies, I didn't hear you approach.' A drop of sweat ran down the eunuch's bulbous nose just missing his protruding stomach on its way to the floor as he bowed.

'What's happened?' Kristalena repeated. Neshar was wide enough to block her line of sight.

'I very much fear that the slavers have all been killed, Your Highness.' He moved to one side allowing the princess to step closer.

Kristalena stood in the doorway. She'd seen dead bodies before, witnessing the transformation from living to dead through the formal process of hanging or assignment to the tidal fish traps many times. Once she'd watched from upwind, where her dress was safe from the smoke and her ears from the screams, as a young wizard was burned at the stake. But nothing had prepared her for this. While the princess absorbed the sight of blood-splattered bodies and smashed furnishings, Alana deftly swept Kristalena's hair back and tied a thin navy-blue ribbon around it. The maid seemed untroubled by the gore.

'Your Highness,' the lieutenant in command of her personal guards acknowledged Kristalena's presence with a

deep bow. Collegier frowned at the soldiers stationed around the Queen's heir. Shoulders straightened, defensive positions were taken up and most of them started looking for threats to the crown princess instead of gawking at the scene of the murders.

'The Queen is safe?'

'Yes, Your Highness. Commander Varana is with Her Majesty and the guards on Princess Serephanie and Princess Lapheria have been doubled. I checked myself,' Collegier replied.

Kristalena nodded. She trusted Collegier much more than the obsequious commander of the royal guards, but perhaps that might be due to greater familiarity with the officer in charge of her own personal safety. Subjectivity was a weakness, but she could analyse that later. She stepped over the threshold, ignoring Collegier's protestations, into the reception room and looked around. She felt dizzy; the floor seemed to be tipping to one side, heeling like merchant ships reaching across the Haddin Basin. She put a hand on the nearest wall to steady herself and pulled it back instantly. Having a fainting spell would be unacceptable. She wiped her hand against a torn wall hanging.

'Who could have done this?' Kristalena asked aloud, hoping her voice didn't sound as shaky as she felt. A tapestry depicting Thessalia's ascension and the foundation of her dynasty had been torn from the far wall. Furniture and carpets had been pushed aside and a crude pentagram inside an incomplete circle had been drawn on the exposed floor.

'That's been drawn in blood,' she whispered. She took a few steps towards the symbol, lifting her hems a little higher so they wouldn't drag through the mess on the floor. Wanting something to distract her, she copied the design into her diary and wished her hands shook a little less.

The naked remains of the source of the red liquid were lying on top of the ripped tapestry. Both arms had been torn off and the jaw smashed back into his face. The dead man's eyes were open, staring at nothing.

Kristalena closed her own eyes and counted five slow shallow breaths to compose herself. She could hear the guards talking quietly in the corridor and out on the balcony. She could smell things too. Moist salt air blowing in from the harbour. Stale tobacco from the shattered ashcups. The sour acidity of wine decanted but not drunk. Something unfamiliar that made her think of iron and a faint sweetness that made her gag. Already the slashed and torn flesh was bloating in the seasonal heat and humidity. A fly buzzed past her.

Now that I'm heir, I have to show people I can deal with these . . . whatever this is.

When she opened her eyes again, the body parts were still there.

‘This is Droshka. I recognise the nose rings,’ she said at last. There wasn’t much else to use as a basis for identification. Body parts, smashed furniture, glass slivers crunching under the guards’ feet, torn wall hangings and a broken window. An intact decanter of wine and four glasses on a silver tray appeared out of place on a long side table near the western wall. She wondered who the fourth glass was for. Perhaps an offering to the absent Gods, some people were strange like that, or perhaps they’d been expecting a guest. They were the only unbroken things in the room. ‘Were there any survivors?’

‘It’s difficult to be certain, Your Highness,’ said Collegier.

‘This must have made a lot of noise. What do the duty guards say?’

‘Nothing, Your Highness. We can’t find them. When the morning watch came to relieve them, there was no sign of the guards and the door was ajar. You can see what they found.’ Collegier spoke in a flat even voice, the same voice he used for discussing the weather or ordering a flogging. The only time she had ever heard the professional soldier raise his voice was during her military training sessions.

‘A search is being conducted?’

‘Yes, Your Highness.’ Collegier’s tone added an ‘of course’ to his confirmation.

Ignoring Neshor’s tepid objections and wanting to give at least the appearance of being decisive, Kristalena inspected the rest of the apartment but found only an unfamiliar corpse, probably one of Droshka’s servants, and a scattering of documents. She ordered the nearest soldier to gather up the papers before bending down to inspect a severed arm.

‘Neshor! Look at this.’

The eunuch waddled closer. Smears of red marred his blue robe.

‘Those are teeth marks,’ she whispered. ‘Whoever did this, whatever did this, was hungry.’

What little colour remained in the eunuch’s face disappeared.

‘Get some artists in here before anything is moved. I want drawings of everything in these apartments. Make sure they pay particular attention to the wounds on the bodies and that symbol on the floor.’

‘Yes.’ Neshor was too disturbed to observe the customary forms of address.

‘Once they’re done, have someone gather up the remains and see if every member of the slavers’ delegation is accounted for. Also, their personal possessions – I doubt this was an act of robbery, but I’d like to be sure.’ Kristalena spoke quickly, as concerned about appearing to be in command as she was about leaving before her stomach betrayed her.

Collegier nodded.

‘If I’d known sooner, I’d have had every ship, wagon, pack mule and priest leaving the city searched, but first light was an hour ago. Whoever did this is long gone,’ she said, hoping it was true.

‘You’re probably right, Highness,’ agreed Collegier.

Kristalena picked her way across the floor intent on escaping the sight and smell of the butchered humans. Another

thought occurred to her before she reached the door. ‘You would have had spies watching them? Nesher?’

‘I, uh, yes, Highness. One observer,’ he admitted.

‘Where is your *observer*?’ Kristalena stepped into the sweating eunuch’s path, forcing him to a halt in a pool of drying blood. His robes were sticking to his arms and shoulders.

‘Here, Highness.’ Nesher abandoned his failed attempts to keep his robes clean. Pressing the gilded frame housing a painting of an ancient war galley, he swung the picture aside, revealing a hole. A small woman in a grey dress was curled into a foetal position next to a water canister and a notebook. Before the door to the spyhole was fully opened, the woman’s body rolled forward onto the floor. The wide staring eyes and contorted expression were enough. The woman had quite literally died of terror.

Kristalena beat Nesher to the notebook.

‘I’ll read this while I have breakfast and let you know if I find anything useful,’ she told the eunuch on her way out.

Nesher’s protest ended in a choking sound as he retched copiously onto the floor. The esteemed councillor had eaten well this morning.

‘Send word as soon as there’s news of the missing guards.’ She didn’t look back as she walked away, leaving before she too lost control of her stomach.

Kristalena lengthened her stride, forcing Alana to all but run to keep up on the way to the library.

Six

TO THE DEAD SLAVERS and Neshher's observer, two guardsmen unfortunate enough to be on duty when the attack happened could be added to the toll. Their remains were found among the sunflowers of the North Garden. With no signs of violence evident on their corpses, people were trying to convince themselves that poison was the likely cause of death. The possibility of witchcraft was only advanced in embarrassed whispers. Kristalena wasn't alone in wondering why, among all the victims, the two soldiers had been spared mutilation.

Neshher composed a letter of condolences to Nikolai, the Tamurian ambassador. As the slavers were not an official delegation, the letter was signed by the eunuch instead of by the Crown Princess or the Queen herself. Kristalena was content to let someone else lie about how regrettable the deaths had been. If Droshka was still alive, she might have told the slaver that his death was just a cost of doing business. The Thessalonian soldiers were another matter and she ordered the customary twenty pieces of silver be sent to their families before meeting with the Queen to discuss more substantive matters.

'There is nothing in the spy's notebook that helps. They were talking about trade and making arrangements for leaving Queenshelm the day after tomorrow. It's all business and trivia,' Kristalena reported. The slavers had also said that the new crown princess wasn't as handsome as the last one, or her clumsy servant for that matter, but that wasn't exactly news. Philomena had been very beautiful and her mother wasn't shy about pointing that out.

'Nothing at all?'

'The last sentence breaks off in the middle of a discussion on acceptable attrition rates when shipping slaves by sea.'

Perhaps Neshar will see something I missed.’ She passed the journal to the eunuch.

‘What *do* we know?’ the Queen demanded.

‘Whoever did this was very strong,’ said Kristalena quietly. ‘Unnaturally strong, you might say.’

‘Continue,’ said Salamander.

‘The symbol on the wall is a pagan one. According to this,’ she held up a book taken from the palace library, ‘it’s used by witches and wizards to summon demons.’

‘Demons! Are you sure?’

Demons, Dreams and the Delusional Desires of the Self Damned had been the only book Kristalena had found in the palace library which seemed at all on topic. But there were gaps in the shelves. She had tasked the librarians with finding the missing books.

‘Please see for yourself, Your Majesty. I’m hoping someone will tell me I’m wrong.’ Kristalena continued to speak softly. It took all her willpower to appear composed.

After a certain amount of fidgeting and a hushed exchange between Sartor and Neshar as they bent over the book, nobody told the young princess she was in error.

‘Your Majesty, this is most grave,’ said Neshar after studying the diagram again.

‘It is. What would you suggest, Neshar? I’ve already ordered Varana to increase the guards in the palace.’

‘We may already have reached a conclusion, Your Majesty. Last night I received information that a notorious wizard had come to Queenshelm. After seeing the fate of those poor merchants, I ordered the vile man to be arrested. He’s in the dungeons now.’

‘I am not a believer in coincidences, Your Majesty,’ said Varana. The grey-bearded block of muscle stood in his customary position behind Salamander, his eyes constantly moving, seeking threats to his Queen.

‘Nor am I,’ the Queen replied. ‘Nesher, obtain confirmation by whatever means necessary that this wizard was indeed responsible for the atrocity committed last night.’

The eunuch rose and bowed. ‘I will see to it personally.’ The fat man was smiling even before he left the room.

This is all too easy.

Kristalena doubted anyone one believed that a culprit capable of tearing people into pieces would be so easily caught. It was all about being seen to be doing something. She kept the thought to herself.

Kristalena waited until Nesher and Sartor were in council with the Queen before telling Collegier that she wished to see the wizard for herself.

‘Of course, Your Highness.’ Collegier made a small fluid motion with his left hand, the right held close to his sword grip, and Kristalena’s escort took up their positions.

She slipped her diary into the pocket of her dress and hurried through the passageways that led to the east wing of the palace.

If the Queen had prohibited this, the jailors would turn her away. The fine line between showing initiative and overstepping was not an easy one to walk but Kristalena was desperate to appear decisive. She followed Collegier through the barracks and then down to the dungeons carved into the bedrock deep beneath the palace. There was only one heavily guarded entrance, then several gates and many feet of solid rock between the prisoners and freedom. The drains and ventilation shafts were too narrow for even a child to crawl through. In spite of spending her whole life in the palace, she’d never been here before.

Kristalena felt the walls closing in around her as she descended and almost changed her mind. Almost. At the bottom of the stone steps was a large room complete with tables, chairs and cooking utensils. Some kind of stew was simmering above the low fire; shellfish and potato she guessed, though the poor ventilation made the blend of odours

unpleasant. She walked through the mess room, catching glimpses of unmade beds and clothes hanging from hooks in the ceiling in other chambers hewn into the bedrock.

An iron door was unlocked and pulled back with a harsh grating noise revealing more stairs, still wide, leading deeper into the earth. The smell was stronger, pungent, sour and faintly like roast meat. Kristalena's stomach was having a rough day but she was even more conscious of the many feet of rock and stone pressing downwards and how only the slightest weakness in the walls—

‘E's in 'ere, Your 'ighness. We put 'im in the deepest cell we 'ave.’ One of the guards, she didn't know his name, raised the lantern, holding it close to the rusty bars.

Kristalena followed Collegier through the iron door. The faint light inside came from a solitary brazier. Collegier threw a few pieces of coal onto the glowing embers and the jailor hung his lantern on a peg. Even then, the room was uncomfortably dark, the rough-hewn walls absorbing the light instead of reflecting it. It was, thought Kristalena, a place for those without hope, a way-station to an even more unpleasant destination. This dungeon was a hole where only the most dangerous or evil people would be sent. She imagined the despair of those left alone in the darkness with the knowledge that the return of light and of other humans would be accompanied by a beating or worse. An assortment of whips and rusty tools lay scattered on a small bench near the door.

Kristalena moved a little to the side, so she wasn't standing between the prisoner and the brazier's erratic light. The wizard, if that's what he was, was chained to the back wall of the cell, his arms and legs pulled wide. More chains secured his neck and waist.

‘Has he attempted to use witchcraft?’

‘Not as we've seen, Your 'ighness, but we got the mesh on 'im right quick and them chains are silver too. There's not much a wizard can do when the silver's on 'im,’ said the jailor, his nasal voice sounding appropriately unpleasant for a man who routinely inflicted pain on his guests.

That much was true, thought Kristalena. Neshar had assured her of silver's power to render wizards impotent.

Her eyes took in the wizard's naked chest. Dirt and blood matted the dense chest hair but the symbolic tattoos were as apparent there as they were elsewhere on his lean body. As tall as Kristalena was, she had to lift her chin to look at his face. The wizard's head was only a few inches away from the ventilation hole in the smoke-blackened ceiling. If his head was bowed as he stared down at her, it was merely a reflection of his considerable height. His eyes were his most striking feature; not their colour which was difficult to be sure of in the lighting, but their unblinking focus on the girl standing in front of him. Their intensity drew her attention away from the mystic symbols tattooed onto his body. There was no fear, no hatred and no pain in those eyes. Neither incarceration nor interrogation had broken him. The silver chains might have bound his body, but not his spirit. She concluded the wizard still believed he was master of his own destiny.

‘So nice to receive a visitor.’

Kristalena was shocked to hear the prisoner address her and flinched back half a pace.

‘I'd offer you some refreshments, but amenities around here are somewhat limited.’ His voice was deep and measured.

The warden punched the prisoner in the rib cage. ‘Shut it, scum.’

‘No, let him speak.’ Kristalena overrode the jailor and wished her voice was steadier.

‘You're a pretty young thing to be giving orders,’ said the wizard. He grunted as he was hit again.

‘This might be easier if you wait outside,’ she suggested.

‘Ighness, this accursed wizard's been summoning demons. It's not safe to—’ The jailor voiced his objections.

‘Get out.’ The exercise of authority was a skill the crown princess was still mastering. ‘You too, Collegier.’

I must show that I'm not afraid.

Neither man showed any sign of moving.

‘You can wait at the top of the stairs.’ She didn’t take her eyes off the prisoner and the two men eventually obeyed.

The conversation with the wizard was short, circular and pointless.

‘It will be easier for you, if you confess,’ she advised him.

‘Confess to what?’

‘To raising the foul demon that murdered the delegation from the Slavers’ Guild,’ she said attempting to replicate the prisoner’s apparent calm.

‘How do you know it was a demon?’

‘They were torn apart. Some were eaten. No human could have done it. Besides, your pagan symbol was scrawled on the floor.’ The airless hole stank of unwashed bodies and rot. She would need a bath after this.

‘Describe it,’ he commanded.

Without knowing why, she opened her diary and showed the wizard the sketch. He squinted at it in the dim light.

‘It was drawn in blood?’ All trace of amusement had gone from his voice.

‘How would you know that? It must have been you.’

‘I need to stop this thing and soon,’ he said.

‘You summoned it. There are no other wizards or witches in Queenshelm.’ *I hope.*

‘You don’t need to be a sorcerer to raise a demon, you dunderwhelp. Listen girl, whoever summoned this thing is losing control over it.’ All banter was gone from his voice, replaced with a cold seriousness.

She ignored the insult. ‘Why do you say that?’

‘Because the demon attempted to draw a gateway. No one who knew what they were doing would permit that. Each time the creature is summoned, its connection to this world gets a little stronger. If it succeeds in completing the design, it will be

able to bring others across the Void. This palace will become their home and you its food.'

Kristalena said nothing, wondering why the wizard was telling her this. Surely he couldn't expect her to believe such nonsense – it contradicted everything she had been taught on the subject.

'You're running out of time, girl,' he shouted after her.

'Where's his wand?' Kristalena asked when she was back upstairs, glad to be moving towards the surface.

'We didn't find no wand, 'ighness,' said the jailor. He was standing inappropriately close but the confines of the room made that unavoidable. The man's breath was foul.

'No wand?' Every wizard needed a wand to work their filthy magic.

'Maybe he dropped it,' said Collegier, slipping into the small space between the princess and the jailor.

'Did you search for it?'

'Commander Varana did. We're thinking maybe the wizard threw it into the harbour, Your Highness. Everyone knows wizards are particular about their wands.'

That didn't make a lot of sense but Kristalena moved on. 'What else did he have? His possessions? Show me.'

The jailor pointed to a bench in the corner.

With trembling fingers, she touched the black robe. It needed washing, which, she supposed, was only to be expected after a sea voyage. Little stains on the cowl. More blood. Probably the wizard's, she thought. She picked it up and felt along the fabric. It was good quality, closely woven goat hair, and would keep the wearer dry in anything short of a heavy downpour. It had none of the cabalistic signs she'd expected, certainly nothing like those on the skin of the sorcerer chained below her.

'We searched his clothes already, Highness.'

She put the robe down. There was nothing hidden in its seams. No concealed pockets in which a wand could be concealed. Likewise, the shoulder bag was empty, its contents untidily arrayed on the wooden table; gold, silver and bronze coins from various realms, clothing, an ordinary knife, no different from what any traveller would have, and a couple of books (*Origins of the Gods' War* and *Lineage of the Royal Family of Thessalonia Volume III*). She couldn't understand the wizard's interest in either.

'His boots?' She looked at the pair of square-toed boots. It seemed unnatural to see them on the table. They were of good quality, though none too clean. It looked as though someone had thrown up on them. The laces were new.

'Nothing inside them, Highness.'

'Is this everything?' It didn't seem like much.

'There's his staff,' the jailor pointed to the corner. 'Apart from that, we didn't find nothing else.'

Kristalena picked up the staff. The blackened length of wood was heavier than she expected and she almost dropped it in surprise. A faint tingling sensation ran up her arm and she hurriedly put it down. 'It is long, but he is a tall man,' she said to hide her confusion.

'That 'e is,' said the jailor.

'And what do his possessions tell us about him?' She touched the staff again, experiencing the same sensation.

'Not much, Your 'ighness. He can read, but we all know them witches 'n wizards can read or 'ow would they learn their cursed spells?'

Kristalena didn't give voice to her agreement.

'He's got a bit o' money. That's real gold there. Wonder who 'e stole that off? But that's about it, Your 'ighness.'

'Mostly Sharakan. Some Thessalonian and a couple of coins from Westalia and places further south,' said Collegier as he inspected the coins.

There was nothing unusual about having a mixture of coins in Queenshelm. Merchants from all over the world did business in the Thessalonian capital and brought their home currencies with them when they came. Money changing was nearly as important as trade to the small kingdom.

It was a deeply troubled young woman who ascended the steps back to the more salubrious parts of the palace. The librarians had failed to find the missing books, leaving *Demons, Dreams and the Delusional Desires of the Self Damned* as her only source of knowledge. She opened the heavily foxed tome at the beginning and began to read.

Alana interrupted Kristalena's unrestful sleep at an hour that was probably closer to midnight than the early summer dawn.

'Your Highness, there's been more killing,' the servant breathlessly told her.

Kristalena got out of bed and dressed as quickly as she could before hurrying through the palace. She didn't have time to be tired.

Kristalena looked at the corpses. Two men, guards who'd been on duty in the garden outside the throne room, had met violent ends; a crushed skull and a broken neck. Tooth marks were evident on one of the corpses. This was as much a feeding as a killing. The book had said that demons ate people. Reading about such things was one thing. Seeing the remains of an interrupted feast was something else entirely. Her guts spasmed and she was thankful that the murders took place before breakfast rather than after.

I must not show weakness.

'I knew him,' she said quietly and it bothered her that she couldn't remember the bald man's name.

'Ceddar. He's stood many a watch over Your Highness. At least he went down fighting,' Collegier said, using the toe of his boot to point to the severed hand, still holding the grip of the soldier's sword. The blade had been snapped off a hand's width from the guard.

'He was your brother,' Kristalena remembered.

‘Yes.’

‘I am so sorry, Collegier,’ she whispered.

‘He died fighting. He always worried that he’d die in his sleep.’

‘Did. . . I should know this. Did he have a wife?’

‘Ceddar never married. Wasn’t the type to settle down.’

Kristalena couldn’t think of anything else to say. He’d be offended if she offered comfort or time away from his duties to mourn. Attend Ceddar’s funeral? Yes, he would accept that gesture from her. She looked around. ‘Here,’ she said. ‘Bring the lantern closer.’

Clearly outlined in the blood-soaked grass was a footprint. Four long toes with large gaps between them and a small mark at the heel, which she guessed was a claw. The footprint no larger than that of a full-grown man.

‘No animal made that,’ Collegier said. The fleeting sign of the human behind the chiselled professional soldier vanished.

‘I know,’ agreed Kristalena, pulling out her diary to sketch the imprint. ‘I wonder what the demon looks like.’

‘Begging Your Highness’ forgiveness, but I’m hoping you never find out.’

As she walked to the throne room to brief the Queen, Kristalena decided that the soldier’s opinion was entirely sensible.

The meeting with the Queen was short.

‘It’s time to end this. The wizard will go to the flames tomorrow at noon. In Maritime Square so all may witness his death and know that evil has been vanquished.’

Kristalena hid her growing doubts and applauded the Queen’s decisiveness along with the Royal Council. Only when she was alone could she re-examine the facts.

‘It’s a nice day. I will read outside. Bring the other books, Alana,’ said Kristalena. She was already holding her diary and a lacquered box containing a handful of pencils.

Alana gathered the pile of books, seven in all, from her mistress's desk and hurried to catch up.

Kristalena chose her spot with care. The wooden table was close to the waterfall where it was coolest and the stone pine trees would shelter her fair skin from the harsh sun. The chirping of the birds mingled with the sound of water cascading against ornamental rocks. Her guards took up station close enough to protect the heir but not too close.

'Sit down.' Kristalena pointed at the chair next to her, one that would keep Alana's back to the palace and to anyone trying to read the woman's lips.

'Your Highness?' Alana was confused.

'Here. Next to me,' said Kristalena. 'I wish you to take notes.'

It was unusual for a servant to be able to read and write and even more so to find one who could do it well. Literacy was the reason Kristalena had selected this young woman as her personal servant from a dozen put forward for her to choose from. Alana carefully placed the books on the table and slowly sat down on the very edge of the designated chair as though it were red hot. She'd never been invited to sit in her mistress's presence, nor had any other servant been so privileged.

'Make yourself comfortable. We may be here for a while,' Kristalena said.

Alana didn't relax.

'Do you know why I chose this spot?'

'No, Highness,' said Alana very quietly.

'I can barely hear what you're saying over the noise,' said Kristalena.

'I'm sorry, Your Highness.' Alana spoke a little more loudly.

'Don't be dense. That is precisely why we've come here. It's just about the only place I can talk without a spy listening and reporting every word.'

Alana stiffened.

‘And that is the point. Here you can tell me all you know about the murder of the slavers and no one else need ever know.’ The princess looked hard at her servant.

Alana half rose to her feet.

‘Sit down,’ hissed Kristalena. ‘Sit! Before you attract attention.’

Alana almost collapsed back into the chair, her eyes wide and wild.

‘Well?’

‘I . . . I had nothing to do with it. Please, Your Highness I didn’t kill them. I—’

‘I believe you,’ said Kristalena and she did. ‘But there’s something you have not told me and I will have the truth of it.’

Alana bowed her head.

‘You spilled the tea and allowed my cup to rattle against the saucer. I have never known you to be clumsy before. You were frightened. Something to do with the slavers? Did you know that they were going to be killed?’

‘Please, Mistress, I—’

‘Just answer the question, Alana.’

Alana took a deep breath and straightened her back. ‘As Your Highness knows, I have been in your service for four years and the two years before that I worked in the guest suites, attending the needs of visitors. I was lucky to be accepted into service in the palace and I would never risk the life I now have.’

‘Where were you before you came to the palace?’ Kristalena already knew the answer.

‘I . . . I was born in Tamur, from the Guild’s breeding programme. My parents? I never knew them but was told they were selected for their beauty. For a while I was grateful that I was a beautiful child. I was tutored in the arts from an early age, taught to read and write and tell stories and to sing, to

dance and to play the harp. I was told I played very well. Of course, when you get beaten for every missed note or forgotten hero, you learn very quickly.'

Kristalena could see where this was going. Beatings had been part of her own education.

'When I was twelve, a woman came and purchased me. A nice little gift for her husband, she said when they held me down and branded me so everyone would know who I belonged to.' Alana slipped the dress off her left shoulder, exposing a family crest seared into her flesh. 'I learned very quickly that feeling and smelling my own flesh burning was not the worst thing in the world. I never would have imagined that there were so many ways a man could hurt a woman.'

Alana stared into the water tumbling over the rocks a few feet away.

'After a few years, my owner tired of me, I think he got a replacement, and gave me to his oldest son to play with. I was lucky I suppose. The son was more interested in a young boy who'd caught his eye and left me alone but that didn't turn out so well either. My original owner was a rich and powerful man with eight sons from three wives all of whom felt that their prospects might be improved if there were fewer potential heirs hanging around waiting for the old man to die. The oldest son had to keep up appearances so he made me sleep on the floor in his room at night and made sure I had new bruises to display each day. Then I woke up one morning and found him dead, his throat had been slit, and the boy gone. I knew that I'd be tortured and killed whatever I said or did. I grabbed his purse, climbed out the window and ran.'

'And eventually you ended up here,' Kristalena finished the story.

'Yes, Your Highness. The fact that I could read and write meant that I was always able to find work so I never had to steal again,' she said. Her voice trembled as she spoke.

Kristalena absorbed Alana's story. Her servant had motive but she flatly refused to believe that Alana had been responsible for the slavers' deaths. If she'd wanted to kill

them, why now? Why wait six years? And why do it in a manner which was bound to cast suspicion on anyone who had justified personal enmity? There were much easier ways to kill without being caught. A poison, one that took weeks to make its effects felt, would do the job. Slip it into their food and, by the time anyone knew about it, the list of suspects would be in the thousands. No, it didn't make sense.

‘Have you ever met this wizard, or any witch or wizard for that matter?’

‘No. Never, Your Highness.’

‘Cover up your shoulder,’ Kristalena said after a while. ‘Who else knows?’

‘No one, Your Highness.’ Alana pulled up her dress. ‘I’m not sorry they’re dead, but I didn’t kill them. I’m not brave enough for that.’

Kristalena watched as Alana’s shoulders hunched, as though bracing herself for a beating, not that she could recall her ever receiving one. The woman did her work well. ‘It would be best if you didn’t tell anyone else.’

‘Aren’t you going to denounce me?’ Alana’s mouth hung open as she turned to stare at the princess.

‘You have given me no reason to,’ she said, rising. ‘And now, I should get ready for dinner.’

Seven

‘TOMORROW YOU WILL BURN.’ Kristalena had spent all afternoon thinking of a good way to start her second conversation with the wizard.

‘And you think that will stop the demon?’ The voice was little more than a whisper, dry and throaty.

Kristalena considered the prisoner. In the poor lighting of the brazier and Collegier’s lantern, signs of further abuse were evident. Blood was still drying under his nose and around his mouth and bruises were robbing the tattoos on his torso, face and arms of their definition. She knew the guards would not waste food or water on the condemned.

‘I can barely make out what he’s muttering. Give him some water,’ she ordered the jailor. Pirum, she’d heard one of the guards call him.

The prisoner gulped the water as Pirum poured it into his mouth; a frantic swallowing and apparent indifference to the quantities running down his stubbled chin, mingling with the blood and dirt on his naked chest.

‘If you die then the demon, as you call it, loses the power to enter our world. It will not be able to leave Hell on its own once the person who summons it is dead.’ That was logical. She had spent the afternoon reading about such matters.

‘And everyone says you are such a clever girl.’ The wizard grunted as Pirum slammed a fist into his belly.

‘Maybe it’ll come for you next, girl,’ the man hissed as soon as he had drawn breath and was hit again for his insolence.

Pirum punched the prisoner again. ‘Speak properly, scum.’

‘Why do you say that?’ Kristalena asked before the beating could continue.

‘He’s just trying to buy his sorry self some time,’ snorted Pirum.

‘Possibly, but I will hear what he has to say anyway. Answer me, wizard.’

The wizard cleared his throat and Kristalena impatiently gestured for him to be given more water.

‘Why don’t you work it out for yourself, o learned sciolist.’ He turned his head as far as the chain around his neck permitted to look at the thicker chain holding his arm against the stone.

‘Silver,’ she said. ‘The chains are made of silver. Silver binds a user of magic. It drains your unnatural powers so you cannot use your black arts.’

‘You paid attention to your lessons, I see. Good, good.’ His tone was openly mocking. ‘And?’

‘You have been bound the whole time, so you must have summoned the demon before you were caught, but. . . .’ the princess trailed off, seeing where the wizard was taking her and not liking the destination.

‘But?’ he prompted when she failed to continue.

‘You were on the ship when the slavers’ bodies were found,’ Kristalena said at last. She began pacing up and down. There wasn’t much room. Six small steps away from the prisoner and six back across the grubby uneven rocky floor. Collegier, sword drawn, stood back to give her room. ‘So, either you can summon a demon from a long way away or you weren’t actually on the boat at the time. You just wanted us to think you were.’

She paused in her pacing, waiting for a response that wasn’t forthcoming.

‘Yes, that has to be it. Problem solved.’

The man shook his head, droplets of water falling from his long hair as he did so.

‘It fits all the known facts.’ Satisfied that she had her answer, she turned to leave.

‘Not all,’ said the man as she walked away. His mocking laugh ended in the sound of a calloused fist striking flesh.

‘There’s no need to beat him. There is nothing more he can tell us,’ she told Pirum without looking back. She needed to wash up and change before dinner.

If silver drains a wizard’s powers, how can he carry silver coins?

The thought came to Kristalena as a liveried servant placed the main course of fang fish stuffed with sea urchin on a silver plate in front of her. She spent the remainder of the informal family dinner pretending to listen to the stilted inconsequentialities of her sisters’ complaints about their dressmakers while trying to reconcile what she knew of wizards with her observation about the contents of his purse.

By the time the Queen had bid her surviving children goodnight, Kristalena had come to a single, unacceptable, conclusion.

The pounding on her door eventually pulled her out of her troubled sleep.

‘Highness,’ a voice whispered in her ear.

‘Uhhhh.’ Her Royal Highness rolled over and buried her head under one of her goose-down pillows.

‘Highness,’ the insistent voice spoke again, competing with dreams of dancing with a handsome prince from Sharakan which was impossible because there were no princes in Sharakan. The dream was doubly strange because the ballroom floor was green grass illuminated only by light coming from two full moons and a towering bonfire.

Something tugged at the comforting softness of her pillow.

‘Wha . . . what?’ Kristalena gave up and opened her eyes.

‘Mistress, the monster. It’s back. You asked to be woken,’ Alana stepped back and bowed, her shiny blond hair, not confined by its usual braiding, fell across her pale face as she

moved. Even in the dim light Kristalena could see her servant shaking with fear, whether of the monster, as she put it, or of the beating that she might expect for waking a member of the royal family before her proper time.

More guards poured into the royal bedchamber.

‘Your Highness, we have to get you to safety,’ said Collegier. He was breathing heavily.

‘After I get dressed.’ Her Highness was sitting up. ‘Wait outside.’

‘We don’t have time for—’

‘We don’t have time to argue. Now step outside.’

Kristalena hurriedly pulled on the first clothes that came to hand, the same dress she’d worn for dinner, and the first pair of flats she could lay her hands on. She shrugged Alana’s attentions aside, flicking her hair over her shoulder. She couldn’t remember where she’d left her sword and didn’t have time to waste looking for it.

‘Where is it?’ Kristalena demanded as soon as she stepped into the corridor outside her suite.

‘The demon’s in the library,’ said Collegier as they hurried down the corridor. ‘At least it was. That Hell-spawn is fast.’

‘And it’s definitely a demon? You have seen it?’

‘It no longer appears to be concerned about stealth, Your Highness.’ His head turned to look down each passageway as they made their way through the palace.

Kristalena took the next left, her footfalls beating rapidly against the marble floor.

‘Highness,’ Collegier protested.

‘You said it’s in the library, so that’s where I’m going.’ She didn’t slow down.

‘It’s too dangerous,’ Collegier said, stepping in front of her. A scream echoing down the passage ahead of them underscored his warning.

‘Doing nothing is dangerous too. We have to fight this thing,’ Kristalena insisted. She tried to duck around her bodyguard but he was too quick.

‘We should kill the wizard now,’ suggested Collegier.

‘No.’ The word just blurted out.

‘Why not? If the wizard’s dead, he can’t summon it, Your Highness.’

‘The demon is here now,’ she prevaricated. ‘If we kill the wizard, will it go away or will it be free to stay here forever?’

Collegier looked troubled.

‘I don’t know either, but I’m not willing to risk it taking up permanent residence in the palace.’ They rounded another corner.

‘Her Majesty has ordered the wizard killed,’ he reminded her.

‘Not until tomorrow.’

‘It’s tomorrow now, Your Highness,’ he said.

I’m running out of time.

Kristalena’s chances of persuading her mother to change her mind were only marginally better than of salmon spawning in the depths of winter.

She ran faster, wishing she had worn a shorter dress and wishing even more she’d taken the time to find her sword. Turning a corner she stumbled over something lying in the middle of the corridor; a human leg, torn off at the hip and still wearing a servant’s polished brown shoe. The rest of the woman’s body was face down several paces away.

‘Mortal Goddess,’ she whispered. ‘The poor woman.’

The shouting grew louder and a wrenching scream echoed down the passageway.

‘This is not safe, Your Highness.’

Trying not to slip on the blood, Kristalena picked herself up and hurried toward the noise. At the entrance to the library,

she stopped. The beast was standing near the scholars' desks, chewing on a forearm ripped from the soldier pinned under its clawed feet. Even in the flickering light of the soldiers' lanterns, she could see the red smeared around its mouth. The soldier convulsed in a spreading puddle of his own blood, one unbroken leg beating against a toppled stool. Abandoning its snack, the creature contemptuously kicked the almost-corpse across the room into a trio of soldiers advancing behind their oval shields with spears held in front of them. Leaping at the soldiers, the demon snatched a double-bladed axe off the floor and quite literally hacked them to pieces.

'Your Highness is leaving here now,' shouted Collegier. He grabbed the princess by the arm and dragged her back the way they had come. Kristalena was too shocked to resist until they were two turns and a long corridor away from the library.

'How can we stop it?' She shook her arm free.

'Try crossbows,' suggested Collegier. He sent one of his soldiers off at a run with instructions.

'I'm going to speak to the wizard again,' she decided.

'Why?'

'If we can persuade him to call it off—'

'But—'

'Do you have any better ideas?' she asked as she lifted her impractical skirts and hurried towards the dungeons for the third time.

'Tell me something, wizard,' began Kristalena, breathing heavily from her run through the corridors. 'Where does your devil go to during the day?'

'Feels like a demon to me,' he replied.

'You can educate me on the precise nomenclature of Hell spawn another time. Answer me.' *Demons, Dreams and Desires* had had something to say about it but it was too late to wish she had spent more time reading the arcane volume.

'Back to Hell, of course. Where else? If it could stay in this universe it would and it will certainly try to. I've told you this

already.'

Kristalena cringed at the idea. 'How do we stop it?'

'Why should I help you?'

'Because I don't believe you summoned it. I don't know why you came to Queenshelm, but it was not to unleash this upon us.' She held up the lantern in her left hand and looked directly into the wizard's brown eyes. He stared back, pupils contracting in the increased light, waiting for her to continue.

'Destroy the demon, and the Queen will grant you your freedom,' said Kristalena.

The prisoner laughed, the sound cutting off as he looked around the cell. His head cocked to one side, running from Kristalena's hand holding the lantern to her face and back again. His eyes narrowed, the banter replaced by unwavering intensity.

'Leave us, soldier. I will speak with your mistress alone,' the wizard commanded.

Collegier took two steps towards the iron door before he shook his head and turned back. 'I don't take orders from you,' he snapped at the prisoner.

Kristalena looked at the wizard, studying him as a man rather than a prisoner for the first time.

'It will destroy this place. Each time it is summoned its passage becomes easier and the connection pulling it back to Hell weakens. It can stay longer and move more freely. Eventually it will no longer be bound by the night. Can you understand what that means, girl? Can you?'

'And you can stop it?' Kristalena desperately wanted to believe that he could, that he would.

Please say you can.

'Why should I? Even a lesser demon is a dangerous thing to fight.' He looked pointedly at his chains. 'Why should I help you?'

‘Because you, whoever you are, if the Gods have given you the power to fight this thing, then you have an obligation.’

‘The Gods,’ he sneered. ‘I never had any obligation to you and I certainly don’t now.’

Kristalena understood what he was implying. Thessalonia lived off trade and the one immutable law of the small kingdom was that nothing came for free.

‘Then what price for your help?’

The wizard smiled, making her shiver.

‘Tell your toy soldiers to leave us and not to listen at the top of the steps while you and I bargain for your city’s life.’

Kristalena knew with absolute certainty that the wizard’s services would be expensive.

But what choice is there?

‘We will release you now,’ she said when their bargain had been concluded. The wizard merely looked at her as the iron and silver chains holding him to the dungeon wall clattered to the floor.

Eight

‘**W**HERE ARE MY POSSESSIONS?’

‘Upstairs,’ she whispered, frightened of him and even more frightened of what she had agreed to. It was one thing to face a wizard in chains and something else to be alone with the same man free and angry. She could call the guards, tell them he had used sorcery to free his chains, but they were silver so no one would believe her.

‘Tell your guards to get out of my way,’ he commanded as they walked up the worn stairs.

It took some persuasion and a certain amount of shouting, although the jailors didn’t lower their weapons, eventually they stepped back. She saw Collegier standing in the doorway, sword in hand, and motioned for him to stay where he was.

The wizard dressed quickly and in silence before throwing the books, money and rope into his leather shoulder bag.

‘Take this,’ he said.

Kristalena accepted the bag he thrust at her. ‘What now?’

‘Now we find out just how powerful this demon of yours is.’ He picked up the heavy wooden staff and lifted it, feeling the weight. As tall as the wizard was, the staff was a match in length. Pirum and another jailor stepped forward, swords raised.

He looked at them in contempt and gestured with the staff. ‘You’d just be in my way. Sleep.’

Kristalena watched in shocked fascination as small blue sparks flickered from the end of the staff. Both guards crashed to the floor.

‘You killed them.’ Kristalena realised that she’d had the wizard’s wand all the time.

‘Are you deaf as well as stupid? I told them to sleep, though the temptation to make it a permanent arrangement is considerable.’ He kicked Pirum hard in the ribs and Kristalena thought she heard something crack.

‘I don’t even know your name,’ she said. Why hadn’t she asked before?

‘It just wasn’t important to you, was it?’ The wizard’s contempt ratcheted up another notch.

‘I guess not and I will pay for that and everything else that has happened to you, but can we do it later?’

‘Bradon.’

‘Bradon,’ she repeated as she led the way through the gate into the outer guardroom. Her escort reacted instantly when the tall wizard appeared behind the crown princess.

‘No! Don’t!’ Kristalena was unsure if she was shouting at the guards or at the wizard.

‘Listen, the wizard didn’t summon the beast. I don’t know who did, but it wasn’t him. He’s the only person who can send it back to Hell. Where is it? Still in the library?’ She was running before they could answer, Bradon right behind her and Collegier attempting to keep himself between the unfettered wizard and the crown princess.

Presumably content with the damage it had done to the library’s inhabitants and its décor, the demon had moved on, leaving a trail of body parts and blood for the soldiers to follow.

‘Sir, it’s heading for the throne room,’ a soldier reported to Collegier.

‘Where’s the Queen?’

‘Safe. Her Majesty is—’

The screeching of metal against stone made the rest of the man’s words unintelligible.

‘Can we get ahead of it?’ Bradon asked, elbowing the stomach of a soldier trying to push him away from the

princess.

‘This way,’ replied Kristalena, leading them down a narrow side passageway to the throne room at a dead run.

‘It’s coming,’ said Collegier. The warning was unnecessary. The screams were getting closer. A huge crash echoed through the double doors.

Bradon was chanting too softly for Kristalena to make out the words. He gripped his staff with both hands and began tracing a design on the polished marble floor with it. Scratch marks appeared on the stone as he worked. A circle a dozen paces across. A pentagram within the circle. Symbols around the circumference of the circle.

More screams came through the open doors. Guards rushed to close them and drop the crossbar in place.

‘Don’t bother,’ began Bradon without looking up from his work. ‘It won’t make any—’

The doors buckled under a heavy blow. Another. A vertical slit appeared between the two doors. Another blow and the crossbar was wrenched off its mount and the doors crashed open. Men trying to hold them shut were tossed across the floor like discarded string puppets.

This time Kristalena got a proper look at the demon and blinked in surprise, but not at its appearance. She’d seen it before, albeit briefly. The thing was ugly, a blotchy red skin glistening with slime leaking from festering blisters dotting its body. A short twisted horn rose from the middle of its forehead. Hairless. No, it was none of those things that surprised her. The monster was no bigger than an average man. Certainly it was a shiny, hairless head shorter than Bradon.

One of the soldiers knocked down by the burst door struggled to his feet. Before he could swing his sword, the beast struck. One moment the man had been standing there, resplendent in his immaculate tan and blue uniform, ready to face the demon and the next Kristalena was ducking to avoid

being knocked over by the man's head. A few drops of warm blood splashed on her face.

She gasped in shock and horror and dropped Bradon's bag, but shrugged off Collegier's efforts to pull her away from the conflict.

The monster had no interest in her, nor in anyone except the wizard beside the design he had carved into the floor. It stared at him with unblinking, dull orange eyes and pulled its axe out of the fresh corpse.

'Gark!'

'What does that mean?'

'A challenge of sorts. Now get back and stay out of the gateway unless you fancy a trip to Hell,' Bradon snapped. His attention never wavered from the beast in front of him.

The creature crouched and crept sideways, its claws leaving shallow grooves in the marble floor. Bradon turned to match its movements, his glowing staff held high above his head.

'Gark!' The creature leapt towards Bradon and Kristalena shrieked as the demon's blood-stained axe flickered towards the wizard's unprotected head.

Bradon's staff came around so fast it was a blur to block the demon's blow. An explosion of blue and red sparks merged to an unhealthy green as the two weapons collided.

Green? But blue and red make purple, Kristalena thought, irrelevantly.

The demon swung again and again and Bradon was forced backwards. Another lighting-fast swipe from the murderous axe was parried, but the wizard had been knocked off balance. The floor rippled like water disturbed by a ship's passage.

The demon roared with triumph and lunged after the staggering mortal – then shrieked as it stepped inside the pentagram.

Kristalena slapped her hands over her ears. She would never have believed that any creature could have made such a

horrible sound.

Bradon stabbed the silver-tipped end of his staff into the creature's rib cage and it screamed again. Once more Bradon struck. The demon crashed to the floor and the marble cracked beneath the impact. Bradon raised his staff to strike a third time but the beast was too fast, rolling to its feet and spinning sideways into the guards arrayed around the wizard's flickering arena. It was the humans' turn to scream before the wizard jabbed his staff into the demon's back. Blue flames flickered across the leathery red skin and the beast howled, its claws raking deep gouges into the floor. The axe fell from its grasp.

'Begone!' Bradon hit the beast in the chest. The flames rippled over a wider area of the demon's frenetically thrashing body as it was driven into the centre of the gateway inscribed on the floor.

'Begone!' Bradon shouted more loudly, his deep voice clearly audible over the shrieking and jabbed the tip of his staff into the creature's chest again and leaned forward, putting his weight behind his weapon. Flames, blue, red and green emerged from cracks in the demon's skin as it sank into the insubstantial stone, floundering like a man wading through the shallows. The keening of hundreds, thousands of voices could be heard coming up through the rippling floor, a lament of horror and misery beyond human endurance. The stench of sulphur. Bradon thrust again and the demon sank into the marble, through it, and disappeared, one hand reaching for the blood-stained axe that had fallen from its grasp. Bradon raised his staff one more time, bringing it down on the edge of the design carved into the floor, obliterating part of the circle. There was an ear-splitting crash and tremors rippled across the floor of the throne room. Kristalena staggered into Collegier but managed to avoid falling.

And then it was over, off faint tendrils of green smoke wafting from the cracked marble. The moans of the wounded and the whimpering of the terrified sounded unduly loud in the aftermath of the battle.

'Is . . . is it gone?' Kristalena asked.

‘Gone for good. That one . . . won’t be back but there are . . . Sceadu’s creatures are legion,’ Bradon said. He was gasping for air, sweat was running down his temples and his long hair clung to his face in untidy strands. He leaned on his staff.

Around the antechamber people were regaining their feet and cautiously inspecting the smouldering floor where the demon had disappeared. Nobody stepped onto the wizard’s gateway. Bradon straightened and waved his staff across the remains of his circle, erasing it further. Kristalena was the first to speak. ‘Are you unharmed?’

‘Just a little tired,’ he admitted. ‘It’s no easy thing doing that.’

‘I can imagine.’

‘You can’t imagine,’ he retorted bluntly. ‘Now see to your people and have this gateway destroyed.’

Kristalena quickly gave some orders and a semblance of calm was gradually restored under Collegier’s supervision. The soldiers did what they could for the injured and covered the greater number of dead with their cloaks. The palace surgeons arrived quicker than she expected. There wasn’t anything left for her to do but tally the fatalities and think about how she would—

‘An explanation is in order.’ A familiar voice interrupted Kristalena’s observation of an injured guard being lifted on to a stretcher. The man’s lower leg was bent into an unnatural right angle.

‘Your Majesty.’ Kristalena was so overwrought she forgot to curtsy.

‘You released the wizard from the cells. I gave no such order.’ Monarchical displeasure radiated from Queen Salamander. Unlike her daughter, she was properly attired and had even taken the time to have her hair brushed and a triple strand of deep-ocean pearls placed around her slender neck. Neshor was standing behind her left shoulder, his shaven head

and hairless face shiny with sweat, and Varana to her right in his neatly pressed blood-splatter-free uniform.

‘Your Majesty, I can explain,’ began Kristalena.

‘And you will, but not here.’ Salamander transferred her attention to the wizard, looking him up and down like a merchant inspecting merchandise of doubtful quality. ‘You vanquished the beast and for that we are grateful.’ She didn’t sound grateful at all.

Bradon seemed indifferent to the formalities.

‘But your kind never does anything for nothing. What price do you demand for your services?’ The Queen was a Thessalonian to the core and got straight to the point.

‘So direct, Salamander?’ He offered no recognition of the Queen’s title or rank. He was speaking to an equal.

‘I know your kind, wizard.’

‘A bath, a decent meal, some clean clothes and a comfortable bed for what remains of the night, will do to start with,’ he said. ‘I’ll let you know the rest when I leave in the morning.’

So soon?

Bradon hadn’t told her so, but Kristalena knew she would be leaving too and wondered if travelling with the intimidating wizard might be safer than staying in the familiar palace with her stone-cold mother, manipulative eunuchs, scheming nobles, demonic visitors and determined assassins. Her tomb already awaited her.

‘You will remain here in Queenshelm until we find the person who summoned the Hell spawn. If it wasn’t you, it must have been someone else.’

Bradon pushed a matted lock of hair away from his forehead. Instead of answering, he resumed his attack on the design he’d carved into the floor, obliterating it.

‘Answer me!’

‘I have no idea. If I had, I would have dealt with them already.’ He didn’t look up from his work.

The Queen looked at the smashed and scarred marble floor. ‘Go and have your bath, wizard. We will speak later.’

‘Not likely,’ Kristalena heard him mutter too quietly for anyone else to hear.

It’s not like I can be any worse off.

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Nine

‘THAT WILL BE ALL for tonight, Alana. Unless by the Queen’s summons, there’s no need to wake me at the usual hour. You should catch up on your rest too.’ Kristalena didn’t need to look in the mirror to know that three sleep-deficient nights in a row had given both princess and servant black circles under their eyes.

‘Yes, Your Highness.’ Alana bowed herself out of the room leaving her mistress alone. This time, alone meant precisely that. The guards had removed themselves to the corridor when Alana had started disrobing her mistress for a much-needed bath and would not return without good reason.

Kristalena sat at her desk and pulled a sheet of vellum towards herself, thinking about the letter she needed to write.

Dear Mother

I address you as such because, in my heart, you are my mother first and my Queen second. This is not something I would ever say aloud, or at all, but with the knowledge that I may never see you again perhaps this is a rare moment when the truth has no consequences.

You asked Bradon his price for sending the demon back to Hell. The answer is simple – I am the price. He did not come to Queenshelm to unleash the beast upon us but to help us fight it. Some seers had foreseen a demon being raised in the palace, though by whom and to what end Bradon does not know.

As soon as I realised that he could not have been the one to summon the demon I begged him to help us. Given his treatment at our hands, you will understand the immensity and justification of his anger. I offered him gold, land, women, whatever he desired but he would accept only one thing. I will spare you the details, but the bargain we struck in the dungeons is that I spend the rest of my life as his bound servant.

It is not an appealing prospect but one I would endure many times over to secure your safety. In a single day, I go from having the honour of being your heir and daughter to washing clothes, fetching water and whatever other tasks he sets me. I am Thessalonian and a bargain is a bargain, however unpalatable and I will keep it. By the time you receive this letter, we will have left the city, though he has not disclosed our destination. I beg you not to besmirch the family honour by searching for me. Bradon says it would be pointless anyway.

*Your heir and daughter,
Kristalena
P.S. Please give Serephanie and Lapheria my love.*

Kristalena sanded the letter, careful not to smudge her handwriting. Once satisfied that the ink had dried, she folded the parchment and used a candle to melt the sealing wax. As the wax dripped she wondered why so many things were red. It was such a brutal colour. No wonder the Queen preferred blue. She took off her signet ring, the one designating her the Queen's heir, and pressed it into the warm wax.

Four daughters had become three and now three was now two. The Queen would elevate one of the twins as soon as they turned sixteen but had over a year to wait until they came of age. Kristalena put the ring back on her finger.

I am still heir.

Kristalena left the letter on her dresser to be found by her servants in the morning. Whichever one found the courage to pass the letter along until it reached its intended recipient would be beaten and she hoped it would not be Alana. The soldiers now standing guard outside her room would face consequences as well, but Kristalena was more concerned with her own fate.

She could simply refuse to honour the agreement struck in the dungeon. She could, but at what moment? A warlock who could vanquish a demon could surely summon a legion of them. But even if the consequences were nothing but a battered conscience she would go through with it.

*Better the unknown than the certainty of joining
Philomena.*

And it was a certainty. There was a reason a tomb was prepared for each member of the royal family as soon as they'd had their naming ceremony.

She thought of the lives of her servants. They worked hard but were not badly treated. A warm bed and a full bowl at meal times, coin to spend on their day off every other week and the security of knowing they would have that position as long as they were able to work and as long as they were loyal.

Punishment had to be earned and seldom resulted in serious injury unless a crime was involved.

Thinking of Alana's story, Kristalena understood that there were much worse things than scrubbing pots and if Bradon decided to sell her into slavery there was nothing she could do to prevent an owner's mark from being branded into her shoulder and a stranger's seed planted in her belly.

Anything could happen.

It didn't matter. Those were risks she had to take – in a family where every generation was ultimately reduced to a single surviving monarch, dangerous choices were all that she had. Whatever Bradon had planned for her, at least she would be alive and this could well be the only chance she had of escaping her sister's fate. It wasn't even a hard decision. *But I'm frightened anyway.*

Bradon had said he would come for her before dawn, not so far away, and they'd leave directly, though he had not said for where. The only clue was the instruction that the clothing she was to pack should be light and comfortable, though with a good cloak, and she should wear sturdy outdoor shoes for walking long distances. She didn't do a lot of walking, not outdoors anyway, and didn't have much in the way of either shoes or clothes fit for that purpose. The best she could do was one of the tan-and-ocean-blue soldiers' uniforms she wore for military training. The boots were robust enough and the knee-length skirt, much shorter than her usual dresses, gave plenty of room for movement. She walked through her wardrobe and pulled these things out. She picked a dress, a longer one in a mid-weighted grey fabric; the colour would hide at least some of the dirt of a long journey. Chemises and small clothes followed the dress and were folded into the backpack. She'd never used it but it had conveniently come with the uniform.

There was room for more, but Kristalena expected to be carrying it herself. She added a few more items anyway, cream for her feet. She'd heard soldiers talking about blisters. Money. Bradon had carried money with him. She filled her purse with gold and silver coins and tipped a score of loose gemstones into a small pouch. It wouldn't last forever but she

couldn't carry it all. She looked at the books scattered around her room and accepted that she'd be leaving them all behind. Except her diary which she added to the pile along with a handful of pencils.

What else? There was a water canister hooked to the military belt. It was surprisingly hard to pour water from the jug into the canister's narrow mouth. More ended up on the table than in the intended receptacle.

Kristalena stood there, looking at the mess; water dripping off the edge of the table onto the carpet. One of the maids would have to mop it up in the morning.

She couldn't think of anything else. Bradon hadn't carried any blankets with him so she wouldn't either. The cloak would have to do. She pulled everything out of the backpack and lined the items up on the sofa.

'I'll be washing my own clothes,' she said aloud with no idea how it was done. 'And mending them. How hard can it be?'

She folded the clothes again, knowing Alana would have done a better job, and returned them to the backpack. It wasn't heavy at all but she suspected it would become so as the miles wore her down. After a little thought, she found a second purse and split the coins. One purse went on her belt and the other in the bottom of the backpack with the pouch of jewels. After hefting her military dagger for several minutes she slipped it in as well. She added an extra pair of socks, another set of clean small clothes and a towel. The solitary apple from her fruit bowl. She was as ready as she was going to be. Stuffing the bag, the boots and the cape under her bed, she threw herself into the soft blankets fully dressed and wondered how bad life as a wizard's servant could possibly be.

'It can't be worse than here,' she lied to herself thinking she'd never be able to fall asleep.

'Mmmph.' A rough hand, smelling of unscented soap, clamped over her mouth prevented her from screaming.

‘Get up,’ a voice hissed. ‘It’s time and I told you to be ready.’

Kristalena pushed the blankets out of the way. Bradon stood back, a looming indistinct presence in the near darkness. The candle had burned out during the night, leaving only the thin light of a solitary crescent moon and the stars spilling through the open window to see by. She pulled on her boots, fumbling with the laces in the gloom, slipped on the backpack and cloak and clipped the water bottle to her belt.

‘Should I bring a sword?’ She had one somewhere.

‘No.’

‘Then I am ready,’ she whispered, though she knew it was unnecessary. There were two thick doors between her bedroom and the guards stationed in the corridor.

‘How do we get out? The window?’ It was two high stories from the balcony to the royal garden and there were soldiers patrolling the garden at the bottom of the steps.

In adventure tales people escaped by climbing down ropes, something that Collegier had not taught her. Thoughts of her departure ending ignominiously when she broke her leg failing at the unfamiliar task went as quickly as they came – Bradon led her to the stairs at the north end of the balcony.

‘The guards?’

‘Are asleep. No talking and step quietly. I want to be out of the city before first light.’

‘How. . . .’ Kristalena stopped. The palace gates were locked from sundown to sunrise and only an order from the Queen, Neshor or Sartor could open them. The wizard would have thought of that.

And he had. She followed Bradon down the stairs, past the comatose sentinels, and across the manicured garden, moving quickly from shadow to shadow. She had to run to keep pace with his long strides and was relieved to find her breathing was only slightly strained when they reached the palace wall. The military drills had been useful after all. Self-congratulations were premature as she discovered the flat

green of the manicured lawn was not as smooth in the near darkness as it looked in the daytime. She stumbled over nothing she could see in the moonlight and fell to the ground.

‘Quiet,’ Bradon whispered. ‘The guards will hear us.’

Kristalena jumped to her feet, grimacing at the grass burns on her knees and palms.

I will complain of nothing, she resolved as she hurried after Bradon.

A solid wooden door reinforced with iron bands stood before them. Heavy bars across it made it secure from the outside so no additional guards were stationed here. Bradon lifted the bars from their rests and set them aside. Kristalena watched as he pointed his staff at the lock and muttered a few words. She could hear the drawn out click-click-clack as the lock turned. She looked behind her only once as they ran down the hill towards the city.

Queenshelm was the largest port in the North, its fortune derived from trade and most of that water-borne. The moment they turned south and started down the slope towards the city centre, she guessed that they would be taking a boat. At least I can swim, she thought, hoping she wouldn’t be seasick. She’d spent plenty of time on boats, inspecting her mother’s warships and simply being a royal presence, but only once had she briefly ventured outside the sheltered waters of the Haddin Basin.

She followed Bradon through cobbled streets, past the shuttered shops and the modest houses of the moderately prosperous mercantile class; bakers, tailors and tinsmiths, public houses and coopers and an apothecary. The occasional light shone behind the shutters and cheap curtains, reminders of the people who lived here. A bakery was one of the few businesses showing activity.

The sound of boots striking stones in unison prompted Bradon to grab her wrist and pull her into an unlit alleyway. Kristalena gagged on the sour smell of urine and peered around Bradon as a patrol of the City Watch marched past; keeping the peace by failing to spot the one thing that

mattered. Bradon gave the soldiers time to turn onto another street before leaving their hiding place. Two more city blocks and they reached Maritime Square, with the main road leading to the docks to the south and faced by the Sacred Temple of the Creators to the north. The most valuable warehouses and offices in Queenshelm flanked the other sides.

At a hundred paces across it was the largest open space in the land-poor city. Even at this time of the morning a sizable crowd had gathered. Lanterns and torches supplemented the moonlight. Locals and foreigners were standing in clumps or seated on upturned wooden crates. Women with sleepy children sat on blankets talking quietly. Boys and girls moved through the crowd, offering snacks and ale and spoiled vegetables in baskets made from seaweed.

Bradon walked directly across the square making no attempt to hide as he weaved between the gathering spectators. Kristalena followed in his wake.

‘Only a copper a pound, miss.’

Kristalena ignored the boy. Why would she want to buy rotten tomatoes?

‘All this is for me, I suppose,’ said Bradon, his voice low and angry.

It was only then that Kristalena noticed the thick wooden stake rising from a pile of wooden logs ringed by fire blackened stones in the middle of the square. She had no answer. She’d seen a wizard being burned before.

Soldiers placed around the fireplace chased off a youth trying to throw a bucket of water over the wood. Everyone knew that damp wood burned slower. He collided with a girl selling straw-stuffed dolls draped in black.

‘Get off me, you brute,’ the girl yelled.

The first of the chasing soldiers kicked the boy in the backside as he rolled off of the girl. ‘Be off, you lout,’ he shouted.

The grinning boy picked up his bucket and scampered away, leaving the girl to recover her scattered merchandise as

best she could.

‘I’m sure they’ll be disappointed when I don’t show up,’ said Bradon. ‘With any luck there’ll be a riot.’

Kristalena doubted that. Thessalonians were too civilised to indulge in that sort of mindlessness but the Queen would send more soldiers into the city before news of the wizard’s release was announced anyway.

She could smell the blend of ocean and commerce before they reached the docks. The pleasant whiff of hot tar, varnish and fresh timber from the ship yards on the Low Bank was absent, held at bay by a faint northerly breeze too slight to disperse the less appealing odour of salt and decay coming from the harbour. Commerce in the port city of Queenshelm didn’t stop with the sunset. Sailors moved about, pulling on ropes, carrying barrels and crates up and down gangplanks and swearing at each other. Around her, young children were busy transferring fish guts and scales from the fishmongers’ barrows into chum buckets, making way for the next catch to be cleaned and sold to the people of Queenshelm. Just about anything had some value.

Bradon stopped by a vessel. ‘This is ours. Pull up your hood and say absolutely nothing, not one word, ’til I give you leave. Try not to fall in.’

Kristalena nodded, not trusting herself to speak. She imagined she was the only person in Queenshelm who had never taken a real sea voyage. She’d been on boats of course, lots of times, but she’d never slept on one. *Kupar’s Maiden*, she read off the side of the ship. Someone liked their mythology.

‘And hide that ring.’

She slid the signet ring off her finger, claspng it in her fist and wondering if she would ever wear it again and whether she should have left it for one of the twins after all, but she needed to concentrate on walking up the gangplank, not worry about things she couldn’t do anything about. It wasn’t at all like the ones she was used to. Narrow, springy and without

safety of guard rails to keep her royal personage safe from falling into the less-than-pristine waters.

The plank wobbled and she had to pause to recover her balance but she made it onto the deck without starting her journey with an unwelcome swim.

‘That you, Bradon?’

‘You expecting someone else, Tresca?’ Bradon shook hands with a blocky man, clean shaven, even his head, wearing a loose fitting, sleeveless leather vest. Blue and red tattoos covered his shoulders and arms and a collection of rings and chains dangled from his ears and nose. The two men exchanged a few more words but they spoke too softly for Kristalena to overhear.

From the safety of the deck, Kristalena looked around. *Kupar’s Maiden* was a narrow two-masted ship. A skiff was lashed to the deck amidships between the masts. Sailors stood ready at the warps holding the stern of the vessel fast to the quay. Towards the bow, two more men, indistinct in the darkness, were standing by the forward mooring ropes. Sails made of cream-and-brown canvas were only partially furled or arrayed loosely across the deck. A small headsail had already been hoisted on the foremast and was rippling gently in a breeze more imagined than felt. This was a boat ready to sail. Behind her, a pair of shirtless sailors were hauling in the gangplank.

‘How soon can you leave?’

‘As soon as the flag’s raised over the harbour master’s office. Cast off ’fore then an’ it’ll cost me a fortune in bribes to keep me trading licence,’ the sailor replied. Kristalena assumed he was the captain.

‘We go now,’ said Bradon. ‘I’ve paid enough for the privilege and you won’t be the only one jumping the dawn to catch the tide, Tresca. Besides, no one pays much attention to that rule anyway.’

The swarthy captain stared at his passengers for a moment and rubbed his smooth head.

‘That you have,’ he acknowledged after a pause that was too long for Kristalena’s liking. He looked around the ship, catching a nod from a large man standing by the steering wheel. ‘Cast off, mister mate. Haul in the port jib sheet and throw her head off.’

‘Aye, Skipper,’ the man standing by the wheel whispered back. He waved one hand twice and Kristalena watched as the crew scrambled to haul in the triangular foresail and release the mooring lines. A gap opened between *Kupar’s Maiden* and the wharf and widened as the vessel began to make way. Her last chance to back out of the bargain disappeared in the widening expanse of water.

‘Hoist the main.’

Sailors started swinging on ropes and the mainsail rose up the foremast, slowly climbing upwards but hanging loose in the almost windless night.

‘It’s been a long night. Which cabin did I buy?’

‘Belsa’s. Port side under the quarterdeck. Same place it was last time you were aboard.’ Tresca stamped his foot on the decking. ‘Now get the pair o’ you below before someone sees you on my ship. And stay there until we’ve rounded South Head Spit. There’s precious little wind but we’ve got the tide with us and should clear the Spit before it turns.’

Ten

IN THE WAN MOONLIGHT leaking through the window Kristalena could make out a single narrow bunk built into one curved wall. There was a shelf above it and a pair of iron-bound trunks underneath, a small table nailed to the floor and a three-legged stool. And a bucket with a lid on it. Kristalena's royal bed would have just about taken up all the floor space, not that they could have got it through the door. A rancid stench completed the furnishings.

One bed, she thought, accepting that she would be the one sleeping on the floor.

Get used to it.

The boat moved gently under her feet and she heard the crew's footsteps on the decking above her. This was becoming more and more real. Kristalena could feel her life in the Whitehead Palace receding. Within a few hours, she would incur the wrath of the woman who was her queen first and her mother a far distant second. The cold ring clenched in her fist meant nothing now. For all practical purposes she was no longer the crown princess, no longer a powerful woman with servants obedient to her whim and the soldiers sworn to protect her would soon be hunting her. She was a serving girl bound to a wizard who had made no secret of his contempt.

Bradon entered and bolted the flimsy door. Sniffing the air, he squeezed past his servant and flung open the small round porthole. Kristalena flinched at his proximity and put as much distance between the warlock and herself as the confines of the cabin permitted.

'We'll have to close that if we get a big enough sea, but let's leave it open for now,' he said. 'You can take your cloak off and if you must talk keep your voice down. Sailors don't like having women on board. It's bad luck.'

‘Very bad if the Queen finds out I’m on this boat,’ Kristalena said, her voice dry and husky.

‘Ship. Captain Tresca will be mightily offended if he hears you referring to the *Maiden* as a boat.’

‘A ship then. Now that there’s no turning back, can you tell me where we’re going?’ She also wanted to ask what he intended to do with her, but was afraid of the answer.

‘What’s in that pack of yours?’

‘A change of clothes. Extra socks. Cream for my feet.’ She recited what now amounted to all her personal possessions in the world. It didn’t seem like much at all. She shrugged the straps off her shoulders. ‘Some money and a few gemstones.’

‘No food?’

‘One apple. If I’d asked the servants for anything else, they would have wondered why.’

‘Well, I hope you like sailors’ rations because that’s all there’ll be until we reach our next port. No books?’

‘Only my diary; I didn’t want to carry any more than I had to,’ she said, wondering if that had been a mistake; there was little in the way of diversion for shipboard passengers. Bradon had a couple of books but she didn’t have the courage to ask if she might borrow one. The creaking of blocks as sails were raised and trimmed distracted her from the thought of boredom.

‘At least that makes sense though it’s going to make for a very boring journey. Put the money away, and that purse on your belt, and make sure no one sees it. Not unless you want your throat slit.’

‘And a dagger,’ she completed her inventory. It didn’t seem like much.

‘Let’s hope you don’t need it for anything more serious than cutting up your next meal.’ He placed his shoulder bag on the table and sat on the stool.

‘Tresca’s right about the wind. There’s barely enough to stir a candle flame but if he can clear South Head Spit before

the tide turns, he thinks there'll be sufficient breeze out at sea to give him steerage way.'

The ship didn't feel like it was going anywhere but the limited view through the porthole confirmed that they were slowly drifting past vessels moored in the harbour. Kristalena sat on the edge of the bunk feeling miserable. There wasn't anything else to do.

A bang on the door preceded the appearance of a surly man with no shirt and long greasy hair in pigtails who told them they could come on deck if they wanted. Kristalena put on her cloak. Hurrying away from the cabin's cloying closeness she followed Bradon up the narrow ladder to the quarterdeck.

The ship had cleared the long reach of grey-white sand known as South Head Spit that marked the southern side of the Haddin Basin. In the soft pre-dawn light, she could make out groups of people walking along the water's edge, bending and straightening in the shallow water, gathering shellfish and dropping them into wicker baskets. Cockle stew was a popular dish among Thessalonia's commoners. Other figures were casting throw nets or spearing fish stranded in tidal traps by the retreating water.

Behind them, ships were weighing anchor and leaving the harbour. Another two-masted vessel crawled past the dirty-white cliffs bounding the northern side of the harbour's entrance and began reaching across the light breeze towards the west. The Silver Isles and their valuable guano deposits lay just beyond the horizon.

'We're heading south,' Kristalena observed, forgetting Bradon's injunction to keep her mouth shut.

'For now,' said Bradon.

She watched as first one and then a second ship cleared the shelter of the clifftops and felt what little wind there was. Turning north, they were close hauled into the gentle northerly zephyr. A solitary ship, heavy in the beams, drifted past the pair of red conical buoys marking the edge of the navigable water at the end of South Head Spit. It slowly separated from

the land, gybed and let its sheets loose to settle into a southerly course, following in the wake of *Kupar's Maiden*.

‘That one’s following us,’ she said.

‘I doubt it. They’re heavy with cargo and bound for Nar Mala or places further south. Possibly they’ll go as far as Marichek or even Atture. They’ve no interest in us, nor we in them, though falling in with another vessel’s no bad thing when there’s pirates about,’ said Bradon.

‘Pirates? Here?’ Kristalena looked around, searching for the threat and finding only seagulls and glassy-green water.

‘Not something to worry about, this close to Queenshelm, Missy,’ said Tresca with a laugh. ‘Even if they was chasing us, they’ve no chance, not when they’re loaded to the gunnel and we’ve nothing in our holds but sea water for ballast.’

The runaway allowed herself to relax a little. Behind the vessel sailing after them she could make out the graceful outlines of the Whitehead Palace looking down on the ancient port city. They would have realised that she was gone by now. Alana or Jarine would have found the note she had left behind. Would it have reached the Queen yet? Probably, she decided and was glad not to witness her mother’s reaction.

By the time the sun had fully cleared the horizon the fitful breeze had barely carried them six or seven miles from the breakwater when the lookout shouted something and pointed back towards the city. Captain Tresca pulled out his spyglass and looked in the direction of the pointing arm.

‘That is a different matter entirely,’ he said. He passed the two-foot long bronze tube to Bradon.

‘A warship,’ the wizard announced after a brief look.

‘Aye. That it is. Two of them. Friends of yours?’

‘Not likely. Can you outrun them?’ Bradon asked the question Kristalena wanted to ask.

‘Normally, I’d say no. Not a chance but there’s next to no wind and the tide’s turned on ’em before they could clear the Spit so they’ll be stuck there until high water. We’re all but

becalmed and then warships need a decent wind to move. If it stays like this, well, we'll have a good enough start. No, they won't catch us today but, unless we can lose them in the night, tomorrow'll be different story.'

He cast his eyes aloft and the mizzen sail gave an empathetic flap. 'Belsa. Move them water barrels to starboard. Give us a bit of heel to keep the sails full.'

'And if the wind picks up?' Kristalena asked.

'Then they'll catch us for sure.' The heavily tattooed captain seemed as bothered by the prospect as Kristalena. It wasn't hard to understand why – if she was caught and taken back, the entire crew would incur the Queen's wrath.

And Bradon? How would he react?

Bradon's defeat of the demon was too fresh in her memory.

They watched the masts of the tall warships lying motionless amidst several smaller vessels that had also missed the tide on the other side of the South Head Spit. There was nothing to do but hope the wind didn't strengthen.

Kristalena spent the time sitting in the shadow the mainsail cast over the deck. It kept her out of the sun and she could watch southern Thessalonian slowly slide past. It was mostly farms growing palms and rubber plants on the poor soil near the coast. Forests covered the better soil of the gentle hills further inland – the same fast-growing conifers which the shipyards of Queenshelm turned into the finest ships in the North.

'Here, Missy,' said a quiet voice behind her.

Kristalena turned and found herself facing a sandy-haired teenage boy, perhaps a couple of years younger than herself.

'I brought you some food.'

He held out a bowl and a cup, both made out of wood.

'Thank you,' she said.

'Name's Mirk,' he said. 'But everyone just calls me "boy".'

‘Well, thank you, Mirk,’ she said taking the offering.

‘Ain’t you going to tell me your name?’ He peered at her face, partly hidden within the hood of her cloak.

‘That would be polite wouldn’t it?’ she said with an involuntary smile. ‘But the thing is, Mirk, I don’t have one. I’m a bound servant and my master hasn’t given me one yet.’

I hope he doesn’t come up with something really stupid.

The boy’s lips formed a soundless oh.

Kristalena took a sip of water. It tasted of wooden casks and stagnancy, not at all like the crisp fresh water she drank in the palace. The scarred wooden cup wasn’t pristine silverware and the food was well short of the meanest meal she had ever been served in her sixteen years: a round of brown peasant bread, a burnt chicken leg and half an orange. She saved the orange for last and hoped the juice would cleanse her mouth. The bread was still fresh, a night-time baking she guessed, but coarser than what emerged from the palace kitchens twice a day – she could feel unground husks between her teeth. The chicken wasn’t too bad once she got past the blackened skin but heavily salted. She ate it all. Skipping breakfast had given her an appetite and she needed the nourishment. It’s not that bad, she tried to convince herself, as she ate and looked back at the steadily diminishing palace she had called home her entire life.

Really, it’s not.

It wasn’t until the sun was directly overhead that the grey-haired lookout came scampering down the mast to speak with his captain.

‘At least two warships cleared the Spit when the tide changed, Cap’n,’ he reported. ‘Heading south, though not doing more than drifting. I’d says we have better wind here. Other ’n that there’s a dozen or so traders set for southern ports or makin’ for the Shrimps.’

Tresca took the spyglass and looked behind them. With the naked eye, it was barely possible to make out the cargo vessel that had left the harbour at the same time they had. Beyond it

were the unthreatening sails of other merchant ships. Kristalena could no longer distinguish either the warships or even the city of Queenshelm for that matter, only the sheer white cliffs on the northern side of the harbour. There was, she realised, good reason for putting a lookout at the top of the mast.

‘Can’t see anything from down here,’ said Tresca. He handed the spyglass to the lookout. ‘Drop this and you’re barnacle fodder, Lonnie. Now get back up there and let us know how quickly they’re gaining.’

The man stuffed the instrument into his waistband and scampered back up the rigging to the crow’s nest.

‘They be chasing us now for sure,’ said Tresca.

‘So it would seem,’ said Bradon. ‘How long before they catch up with us?’

‘Answer’s the same as I gave you this morning – depends on the wind. If it stays like this, a couple of days if we’re lucky. Them warships carry a lot of canvas, but they’re heavy and need half a gale to move them. A good blow from the north and they’ll run us down afore tomorrow gets here and naught we can do about it.’

‘How did they know I was on this boat?’ Kristalena was curious. *Kupar’s Maiden* was one of several vessels that had left the harbour that morning. The merchant ship that had left shortly after them had fallen behind, its hull and lower rigging seemingly amputated by the horizon.

‘Ship. Ye’re on a ship,’ growled Tresca.

‘How did they know?’

‘The Queen has spies all over the docks. She probably knowed which ship ye be on before ye did. There’s precious little ’er Majesty doesn’t know about what goes on in her city.’ He spat over the rail.

There wasn’t much Kristalena could say to that. She knew it was true. Paranoia was a trait that kept the family on the throne.

‘So are you going to tell me why the Queen wants the pair o’ you so bad?’

Bradon ignored the question and Kristalena didn’t feel any compulsion to speak, quite the opposite. It was too hot on the quarterdeck so she returned to her spot on the maindeck in the shadow of the sails and thought about what she’d left behind and what lay ahead and just how awful the food Mirk had given her had been.

Maybe I should have brought a few books.

It was going to be a long day.

‘I’m going to get some sleep. You should too,’ Bradon told Kristalena after they had finished dinner. She declined the offer of a slug of rum but climbed up the short ladder to the quarterdeck and looked behind them. Distance had reduced Queenshelm to a hazy grey promontory barely visible in the fading daylight on the northern horizon and the warships that lay somewhere between her last glimpse of home and the ship carrying her away had all but disappeared. In the erratic breeze, Tresca’s ship had proven itself the faster. She nodded to the captain and went below.

Kristalena looked around the small cabin again, hoping she’d missed something important on her first inspection. She hadn’t. Still just the single narrow bed against the curved hull but she did see a solitary shelf with a handful of books, an unlit lamp and a cockroach scuttling into a crack in the decking. The ribbed ceiling was low, Bradon couldn’t stand upright, compounding the sense of confinement. An apt comparison for the life she was now bound to, but that wasn’t her main concern. ‘There’s only one bed,’ she whispered.

‘Bunk. On a ship they’re called bunks. It’s too short for me.’ Bradon was rummaging in one of the trunks (the other was locked) and pulled out what looked like a fishing net made from coarse rope. Within a few minutes, he had slung a hammock from one side of the cabin to the other, laid a tattered blanket across the sailor’s bed and climbed in.

Kristalena watched in silence and stifled a yawn. Sliding her backpack alongside the trunks under the bunk, she

removed her boots and cloak before lying down.

The bunk was narrow and the mattress hard and one of the ship's ribs jutted into her side making it difficult to lie comfortably. The smell was worse, salt and sweat and hardwood that was seldom washed and never dry. She pushed the stinking blanket aside. It was hot enough that she didn't need it anyway.

Whatever happens, I will accept it without complaint. I will adapt and I will survive. I am Thessalonian and I won't cry. I won't.

She rubbed the tears from her eyes and told herself it could be worse. She imagined what worse could amount to, reminding herself of the things she did have and the fears that hadn't materialised.

I'm not starving and I'm not thirsty. I have a good pair of boots and I'm not being made to go barefoot. I am sleeping in a bunk and not on the floor. I haven't been beaten, abused or even yelled at.

It didn't escape her that Bradon might be waiting until they'd got to wherever he was taking her before. . . . She tried not to think about it.

Every gentle lift and fall of the ship beneath Kristalena took her a little further away from home and that was the only thing that really mattered right now. Going back wasn't a possible future.

It wasn't long before the rising and falling of the ship's stern overcame her fears and discomforts and lulled the exhausted runaway to sleep.

Banging on the cabin door woke Kristalena too soon. She could feel the pitch and roll of the ship's motion more than when she'd been rocked to sleep. Bradon's hammock was swinging in erratic arcs. Wind was blowing through the porthole, cooling the tiny cabin.

'Stir yerselves in there!' a voice shouted. There was more thumping on the wood.

‘Coming,’ Bradon shouted as he rolled out of the hammock.

Kristalena sat up blinking. When she tried to stand, the movement of the ship threw her off balance and she stumbled into one of the ship’s beams, knocking her hip against its rough surface.

‘Close that porthole and put your cloak on before you come out,’ Bradon told Kristalena.

She followed Bradon as quickly as she could, rubbing her hip before drawing the cowl close about her face and stepping out onto the deck. Losing her balance again, she grabbed the doorframe to steady herself. By the time she pulled herself up the ladder to the quarterdeck, she understood the gravity of the situation. The wind had come and was driving *Kupar’s Maiden* before it. Sailors were wrestling the barrels containing fresh water and food from starboard to port, trying to stabilise the vessel. The blue sky had given way to grey clouds and rolling waves capped with foam were pushing at the ship, lifting her stern as they passed under the hull. Kristalena held on to the railing to brace herself against the motion. What was a good sailing wind for the fugitives would be a better one for the chasing sea hounds. She looked astern, searching for her mother’s warships and was relieved she could only make out two smaller vessels. Much to her surprise, being rescued and hauled back to Queenshelm in disgrace was the last thing she wanted.

It was a vain hope, but she had to ask. ‘Have they given up?’ Kristalena knew her mother.

‘Not likely, Missy,’ Tresca told her. ‘Not at all likely. I told the boy to get you some breakfast if you think you can hold it in.’

‘Thank you.’

Mirk was quick enough to bring a bowl filled with some sort of gruel with a pinch of sugar sprinkled on top and a cup of the wood-flavoured water. She didn’t like gruel but she liked hunger even less and thought about asking for some more sugar but that would have sounded like a complaint so

she said nothing and forced the stuff down her throat one half-spoonful at a time. It was easier if she didn't look at what was going into her mouth.

'Just remembers to puke yerself over the leeward rail or Cap'in'll be having you scrubbing the deck all day,' Mirk told her when she surrendered the empty bowl.

She felt like telling Mirk that crown princesses did not throw up over either the leeward or any other rail and did not scrub decks either when her stomach clenched and her mouth went dry and a hot wetness could be felt behind her eyes. It was all happening so fast as the boy snatched the cup from her with one hand and gave her a highly inappropriate push with the other but the rail with the restless blue-green sea beyond it seemed so very far away and she was sure she should be doing something about that and—

'C'mon, Missy. Move quick now.' The boy dragged her by one arm and she stumbled across the lurching deck, falling to her knees, one hand grasping a stanchion and her head hanging over the low railing. Retching she watched the yellowish remains of her meal splatter against the indifferent water and quickly disappear astern as the ship ran before the fresh north-easterly.

But I haven't been eating carrots, she thought as she heaved over the rail for a second time. Another new experience.

'Better out than in,' the boy said cheerfully. 'Give it a couple of hours an' you'll be right enough and ready for a bit o' salted pork.' He patted Kristalena on the back.

If Kristalena hadn't been devoting her remaining strength to squeezing the last of the bile from her spasming stomach she would have tossed the brat overboard. Eventually, her insides ceased attempting to escape her body and she returned to sitting on the deck, closer to the railing than she had been.

'You know the old sailors had the right way to cure ocean sickness? You see what you do is tie a bit of bacon rind on the end of a piece of gripping string and then yous swallow the

rind and when it's down good and proper you jiggles the string and—'

Whatever else the boy had to say was lost as the royal passenger made another dash for the leeward rail.

It was a long and wretched day for Kristalena, not helped by the obvious amusement she was generating for Tresca's crew. At one point she saw a group of sailors exchanging coins and guessed that wagers had been placed on the frequency of her communion with the rail.

Bradon left her in Mirk's care for almost the entire day, only approaching her close to evening. 'You feeling better?'

'Hungry more than anything now,' she said, surprised that he cared. 'Any sign of anyone chasing us?'

'No, but I don't believe that they've given up. Now, go see if the boy can find you something you can hold down.'

Something turned out to be a thick piece of broken biscuit, tack he called it, a lump of greasy salted meat which might or might not have been pork and a leather flask of foul tasting water.

'Best eat a bit, Missy. You need to get back what you lost to the fishes.' Mirk watched her nibble at the hardtack, taking back the bowl with the untouched pork and cup when she'd finished.

Every day holds good things if only I am prepared to see them, she told herself as she lay in her bunk. As she waited for Bradon to blow out the lantern she resolved to go to sleep thinking of one good thing each night.

I will not be seasick again.

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Eleven

THE GAP THAT HAD SLOWLY opened up during the almost windless calm of the first day and the illusion of security of the second vanished at dawn on the third when the lookout reported two warships hull down to the north of the *Maiden*.

‘It’ll be a close-run thing,’ Tresca was saying as Kristalena climbed up onto the quarterdeck, her legs wobbly from bracing against the increasingly violent gyrations of the ship. ‘They’re closing and I reckon there’s more wind where this came from. Normally, this’d be great conditions for a fast passage but them warships of Queen Salamander are getting more out of it than we can.’

Kristalena looked astern but could see nothing. ‘Can’t we go any faster?’ She knew it was a stupid question even before she’d finished asking.

‘If I could, I would, Missy. But the *Maiden*’s no ship o’war and she’s already carrying every stitch of canvas she’ll hold.’ Tresca spat over the side.

‘Cap’in,’ a sailor called for attention. Most of his left ear was missing, making him look lopsided.

‘Mister mate?’ Tresca didn’t turn around, his eyes on the sails and his hands moving the steering wheel.

‘Lonnie says there be three o’ them warships now, Cap’in.’

She remembered Lonnie was the grey-haired lookout perched at the top of the mainmast.

‘Three? The Queen must want you real bad. Maybe I should have set a higher price for taking the two of you an’ your troubles on board?’ He looked at his passengers before carrying on. ‘No, you needn’t be afraid. I’m an honest scoundrel. We made a deal and I’ll keep to it but I wish I knew what this was all about?’ His tone made it into a question.

Kristalena pulled her cloak a little tighter.

‘I’m guessing the Queen don’t hold with your kind,’ he said to Bradon.

‘Witchcraft is legal in Queenshelm,’ said Kristalena.

But they burn witches anyway.

‘Legal but not exactly encouraged as I understand it. No, I reckon you’ve done something to make Her Majesty right angry,’ Tresca said. ‘There were whispers ’bout some kind of beast loose in that palace o’ hers. You wouldn’t know anything about that, would ye?’

‘I might,’ allowed Bradon. ‘I dealt with the demon, but there was a certain amount of collateral damage.’

Tresca laughed, showing his teeth. ‘That’s women fer ye. Ungrateful whether they be highborn or common. Nothing seems to please ’em.’

While the Captain watched his sails, Kristalena stood between Bradon and the mate. Squinting into the brisk wind, she looked abaft for the warships bearing down on them.

‘We’ll get rain before nightfall,’ said Belsa.

Kristalena looked at the clouds. Dark had become darker. At least her military-issue cloak was waterproof. Her stomach felt steadier and she allowed herself to sip a little water, feeling the lip of the flask knock against her teeth.

‘There’s nothing to be done, not before we’re past Narino Peninsula anyway,’ said Tresca. ‘You two get some food and leave me to sail my ship.’

Kristalena watched the Westalian coast sliding past before deciding that since the crust of bread Mirk had given her for breakfast had stayed down it was safe enough to follow Bradon to the galley forward of the mainmast.

The food was no longer disappointing, if only because the princess had lowered her expectations to the correct level. The bread might have been baked only the day before yesterday, but it was still coarse peasant bread, brown and full of partly

ground seeds and husks. The chicken was dry and the water still tasted of wood. Sailors lived on a monotonous diet.

‘Enjoy it while you can. We got to eat all the fresh food before it goes off,’ the cook said. ‘Tomorrow and it’ll be tack and salted pork till we make landfall.’

No one would have dared serve her this in the palace but Kristalena ate it anyway and would have had more if any had been offered.

No complaints, she reminded herself. Bradon was probably waiting for her to show just how soft and pampered growing up in the Whitehead Palace had made her.

As the morning wore on, Kristalena watched as Tresca used a compass and sightings against a solitary mountain rising a few miles inland. After marking the ship’s position on a worn chart, he told Bradon that if the wind held it would only take two more days to make the mouth of the Sol Duc Estuary. She recognised the outline of the coast from her lessons and the maps decorating the Whitehead Palace and could put a name on the conical mountain. Real places were much more interesting than they appeared on maps.

By the time the sun was directly overhead, the sails of the leading warship were clearly visible from the deck. It was obvious to even the inexperienced Kristalena that the possible safety of the estuary was too far away. As they slipped past a fishing village tucked into the southern side of the peninsula, she overheard Tresca suggest that Bradon go ashore at Narino. A couple of trawlers and a small brigantine were heading into the shelter of the small port but Bradon shook his head. Tresca held his course and the *Maiden* kept racing southwards.

Late afternoon brought the rain but it was not heavy enough to offer concealment and didn’t last long enough to do more than provide a brief respite from the heat. When it cleared, the leading warship was no longer hull down and the other two were not far behind.

Captain Tresca had taken the wheel himself and the stocky captain was spending as much time looking over his shoulder as was watching his course.

‘Will they catch us before nightfall?’ Bradon asked.

‘Close, but no,’ said the captain. ‘And we’ve a chance to lose them. Just before it gets full dark, we’ll douse our navigation lights, shift course westwards and hope they waste the night poking around the Shrimps.’

‘Do you think they’ll fall for it?’ Kristalena wondered why anyone would think they were fleeing to the low-lying chain of islands and atolls famed for oyster beds, pearls and pirates. Beyond that, there was nothing there but a scattering of insignificant villages and an abundance of the small crustaceans which had lent their name to the islands.

‘There’s three o’ them and Queen Salamander don’t give many idiots commissions in her navy. They’ll likely split up and cover all our choices, but if they’re trying to sink us, better one than three.’

In the last of the fading light, when only one of the trailing warships was still visible, her sails ghostly grey, and the other two only present though their navigation lights, Tresca gave the order to bring *Kupar’s Maiden* onto a new heading. The ship lurched violently as she turned to starboard. Kristalena lost her footing on the wet decking and slid into the gunnel on her royal backside. Her cowl was thrown back, exposing her face. Belsa grabbed her arm to stop her from being knocked overboard by the next wave.

‘Ow.’ She rubbed her hip as the mate pulled her to her feet.

‘Shut it,’ hissed Tresca.

Kristalena looked where the Captain was pointing and saw the red and green lights sparkling in the darkness. She could hear a voice, faint and indistinct, shouting at people.

‘They’ve followed us onto starboard tack, so I reckon’s we should come about and get back on course,’ murmured Tresca.

‘Aye, Captain,’ Belsa acknowledged and the whisper was passed along. The crew scampered into position, releasing ropes on the port side and hauling them in on the starboard as Tresca brought his ship onto a south-easterly course. The creaking of blocks and the slap of canvas sounded incredibly

loud. Kristalena held her breath, willing the warship to keep going and was relieved as the lights became fainter and then more imagined than visible in the darkness before disappearing altogether.

‘Well, I reckon we lost ’em,’ said Tresca after a while. ‘And now it’s time to see how much distance we can put between us before daybreak.’

Kristalena tried to make out shapes through the thick night air and found nothing but the products of her imagination, scary and uncertain things that did not acquire substance merely because one frightened young girl had created them in her own mind.

‘It’s going to rain again. Best if you get below, Missy,’ Belsa said. Superstition and losing his cabin to passengers didn’t seem to involve either bad manners or an aversion to physical contact.

‘Thank you.’ That was precisely where she had decided to head when she felt the first raindrops. She pulled her hood up with one hand and used the other one to grab a handhold and pull herself towards the comparative safety of her borrowed cabin.

Bradon ducked his head under the lintel and joined her. Mirk slid another bucket through the door before he could close it. Kristalena knew what the bucket was for. It had taken two days and she was no longer bothered by the increasingly violent motion but, perhaps, it was better not to think of the gristly meat she’d forced down her throat for dinner.

She grabbed the edge of her bunk as the ship heeled violently. Green water slapped through the porthole to wet the floor.

‘I told you to close that,’ he said.

She’d miss the fresh air, but there wasn’t really a choice. Lena got the porthole closed before too much water sloshed through. By the time she’d fastened it, Bradon was already in his hammock.

Lena awkwardly climbed over the lee cloth someone had rigged for her bunk and collected a bruise on her forehead when the *Maiden* lurched at precisely the wrong moment.

I was not seasick today.

When Kristalena returned to the quarterdeck at dawn on the fourth day, she was dismayed to find that the answer to Captain Tresca's aspiration wasn't nearly enough.

'We made good time,' he'd told her, 'but they made better or maybe they just figured out where we were headed and set the same course.'

'They're sailing faster than we are,' said Kristalena. She didn't need to be a sailor to know that. She watched the water foaming under the warship's bowsprit as the hull sliced through the rolling swells. 'It's the *Loraline*,' she said. Named after Thessalia's sister, it was the newest and most powerful vessel in her mother's fleet. She'd stood behind Philomena at the commissioning ceremony.

'You best go wake that wizard of yours, Missy. We needs to make some decisions.' Tresca ran a hand over his shiny head and his eyes over the set of his sails.

Kristalena climbed back down the ladder, still slippery with the morning dew, and returned with Bradon.

'They'll catch us before we reach the estuary,' said Bradon after a single glance. It wasn't a question. The warship was close enough to make out the figurehead on the prow and men readying a catapult on the foredeck. 'And we'll be in range long before then.'

'Aye an' that wouldn't be a good thing for any of us,' said Tresca. 'I don't suppose you could do something? You being a wizard an' all?'

'I'm a warlock, not a wizard. What sort of something did you have in mind, Captain?'

'If you could see your way to sending 'em to the bottom. . . .' he suggested.

‘I try very hard not to kill people if I can avoid it Captain but, if there’s no other choice, they might find themselves without a mainmast,’ said Bradon. His eyes never left the chasing warship.

‘That would do nicely, Bradon.’

‘But if I do that, it will attract attention I’d rather avoid. Do we have any other options?’

‘If you don’t mind a bit o’ walking, there’s a river of sorts a couple of leagues this side of the main channel through the estuary. The tide’s high enough that we can get over the sandbar but them warships draw too much to follow us.’ As far as Kristalena could see, the coast was an unbroken stretch of white sand with heavy, dark green vegetation on the flat land behind the beach.

‘All right. A couple of days walking won’t do us any harm. How long before we reach this river of sorts?’

A couple of days was two days longer than Kristalena had ever walked continuously.

‘We’re almost there,’ said Tresca. He pointed to a small promontory a mile or so ahead of them.

Something splashed into the water eighty paces astern.

‘They’re shooting at us!’ Kristalena was first astonished and then furious. ‘They could kill us.’

‘They only want to stop us. I wonder who gave that order?’ Tresca didn’t look away from his steering.

‘Only my mother could give an order like that,’ snapped Kristalena, entirely forgetting that she was supposed to be concealing her identity. She turned away from Tresca and wished the cowl was a little deeper.

‘So they would have everyone believe,’ Bradon said, the dryness of his tone disclosing his scepticism.

‘What do you mean by that?’

Another rock splashed into their wake.

‘They’re getting closer,’ said Bradon.

‘Thank you. I hadn’t noticed,’ said Tresca.

‘Shooting,’ called the lookout.

Kristalena turned – they all did – in time to see a small rock being flung into the air in front of the chasing warship. It landed less than a boat length astern.

Tresca’s knuckles were white on the steering wheel. ‘They’ll have our range soon, so . . . unless you’re inclined to do something constructive?’

‘I’d prefer not to.’

‘Very disappointing,’ he grumbled. He took another look behind him. ‘There’s no point in being subtle about this. Gybing,’ he yelled loudly.

Sailors ran across the ship’s deck, hauling in the starboard sheets and easing the ones on the port side as the Captain brought his ship around. This time Kristalena knew what to expect and steadied herself against the anticipated motion. The ship heeled sharply as it headed across the northerly wind, aiming directly for the small headland.

Tucked behind the headland lay the mouth of a river banked by muddy flats. Small waves ran across the water’s surface, the silted green of the river corrupting the cleaner blue-grey of the sea.

The next projectile fell close enough for some of the splash to land on the quarterdeck. Lena looked over the side. The sand bank seemed far too close for her liking.

‘Brace yourselves,’ bellowed Tresca and the crew grabbed whatever they could.

There was bump and Kristalena lost her hold on the rail and flew into Belsa who grasped her arm. This was becoming a habit. The ship lifted with the ocean swell and then bumped again, less violently, before finding smoother water.

‘We’re in,’ said Tresca.

‘Look out!’

This time the catapult found its mark, tearing through the mizzen sail, ripping ropes and jerking the *Maiden* further to port before falling into the water off the starboard side. The rocks didn't seem so small now. Tresca spun the wheel hard to bring the ship back on course before it ran aground on the muddy shore.

‘Can they follow us?’

‘I hope they try,’ said Tresca with a laugh. ‘We barely got through ourselves and they’ve got a lot more below the waterline that we have.’

Kristalena watched as the warship continued towards the river mouth under the full press of its creamy sails.

‘I take back what I said about Salamander not handing out masters’ warrants to idiots. The lackwits are going to try it. Whoever’s captain on that tub isn’t worth his weight in bilge water.’ Tresca was gloating like a schoolboy who had just pranked his tutor.

Kristalena could hear the grating as the *Loraline* ran into the sandbar lurking invisibly below the surface of the water. Spun sideways by the impact the huge warship heeled onto its starboard side and, more slowly than she would have expected, the foremast snapped off at the crosstrees and crashed on to the deck, tearing away much of the rigging and dragging down the jib and staysails with it. The lookout was hurled from his perch and ended up in the water, as were two other men thrown over the forward railings by the impact.

The sailors around Kristalena laughed and jeered at their pursuers. Mirk jumped up and down with boyish excitement.

While Kristalena watched the stricken warship, Tresca gave orders to reduce sail and sent another man forward with a lead line to measure the depth of the river. Behind them, the sailors on the stranded warship were hacking at the tangled rigging, frantic to prevent the surf pounding the fallen spars into the hull of their ship, and recovering what they could of their sails. Others were throwing lines to the men splashing in the short waves and Kristalena was relieved to see all three

pulled back aboard. Amidships, men were lowering a rowing boat.

‘Are they going to come after us?’

‘Four fathoms and sand,’ a voice called from the foredeck.

‘In that? No. If they’re holed too badly to refloat they’ll be abandoning ship. But I doubt it. That’s soft sand they’ve hit and none too hard. They’ll be setting a stern anchor and winching her off before the tide turns. They’ll have some explaining to do when they gets back to Queenshelm and them’s captain will be looking for a new job somewhere a long way from home, but they’ll come to no harm. More’s the pity.’ Tresca spat over the side.

The *Maiden* rounded a gentle bend in the meandering river and the grounded warship slowly disappeared from view. Tresca worked his ship up the river with painstaking care. Shiny mud, unfamiliar trees and the odour of rotting vegetation replaced the restless waves and salt tang of the ocean. Along the muddy banks, crocodiles twice as long as Bradon was tall basked in the sun and birds with absurdly long spindly legs stalked across the mud, pecking at crabs and small fish.

‘We’ll be going ashore tonight,’ said Bradon. ‘Make sure you’re packed.’

Kristalena nodded. There was nothing to pack. Everything she had was either in the backpack or on her person.

‘Three fathoms and mud,’ called the sailor testing the water’s depth. Kristalena could see him feeling the tallow pressed into an indentation in the lead weight to see what the bottom was made of.

‘By the way, you can swim, can’t you?’ Bradon asked.

‘Not very well, but yes. My mother insisted that we learn.’ Why had he waited until *after* the sea voyage to ask?

‘At least she did something right. It won’t be long.’

‘Two fathoms. And a half.’

‘Actually, it’ll be now,’ said Tresca interrupting them. ‘Until the autumn rains flood the river banks this is as far as we can go.’

The remaining sails were lowered as the ship dropped anchor mid-stream and sailors swung the skiff across the railings and lowered it into the water.

‘Then we’ll take our leave of you, Captain. Will you have any trouble getting away?’

‘I might have to lay low for a week or three. After they give up waiting for us we’ll head south just as soon as we’ve patched our mizzen sail. I hear the trading’s good down in Marichek, Atture too for that matter, and I can pick up a less troublesome cargo along the way.’

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Twelve

‘YOU HAVE BEEN remarkably incurious,’ said Bradon.

‘About where we’re going and what you intend to do with me?’

‘That.’

‘Oh, I’m curious alright but I didn’t think it my place to ask. I’m supposed to be your servant, if you recall. A servant who shows that kind of impertinence would deserve a good whipping. In Queenshelm she’d get it too.’

Kristalen concentrated on feeding the unnecessary fire and ignored the discomfort from her skinned knuckles and the unfamiliar sensation of sweat drying on her body. Trying to start a fire with a piece of flint wasn’t as easy as it looked. Damp wood made a lot of smoke but it was better than no fire. She coughed and shifted so she was no longer downwind and thought about washing her uniform, and herself, next time they stopped but didn’t know how to go about getting mud and sweat out of clothes. In any case, it was too late for domestic chores tonight. After a hard day’s walking, her legs were more concerned with rest than the cleanliness of her attire.

‘Not everyone’s as cruel as your family,’ said Bradon.

Kristalena coughed as the warm evening breeze pushed the faltering smoke over her.

‘Aren’t you going to tell me how humane your family is?’ Bradon asked.

‘No, because we aren’t. Did you know my mother was the youngest of three daughters? She’s been an only child since she was twelve and never knew her own mother. There have been two attempts to assassinate her this year alone, and those are just the ones I know of. We don’t have time to be soft.’

‘Only to be ruthless.’

‘If we want to survive.’ The first attempt against Kristalena’s own life had been made when she could barely walk. A poisoned needle hidden in her favourite doll and the Queen had decreed no more dolls for any of her daughters. If the poison had been slower acting, the nanny would have lived long enough to pass the doll to the young princess. Kristalena had cried over the doll but not the nanny.

‘Is that why you came with me?’

‘I came because you and I made a bargain. You sent the demon back to wherever it came from. In exchange, I became your bound servant. I’m here because I value my word.’

And I would have been assassinated anyway.

The fire was giving off enough heat as more twigs caught alight. She stopped adding small pieces of wood to the miniature blaze.

‘I know I’m useless. I have no idea how to wash clothes or cook food, never mind catch it first, and I threw up on my first sea voyage which is completely pathetic for someone who comes from Queenshelm. Belsa probably doesn’t want his cabin back. You saw how long it took me to start a fire. I can’t think of a single practical thing I can do well enough to be worth doing. But you knew all this when we made our bargain. So why did you want me? You could have had a reward worth having.’

The flames embraced and devoured more of the wood. It was a pity they had nothing to cook on it.

‘You’re going to burn your only pair of boots,’ he told her.

She pulled them back a few inches. In the warm summer night, a fire wasn’t needed, but Bradon had insisted she learn.

‘Is that the only reason you came with me?’

‘No,’ she said. ‘No it’s not.’

‘Show me the mark on your wrist.’ He changed the subject.

Hesitantly, she pulled back her sleeve and held out her arm to be inspected. She didn’t need Bradon to tell her it was getting darker, something like a wavy edge was forming on

one side of the bruise. Even in the moonlight that was obvious. He released her hand after a brief inspection.

‘Get some sleep. We’ve two full days ahead of us, but we should reach Lower Haft by the end of the second day if you’re not too much of a drumble.’

If the bunk in Belsa’s cabin had been lumpy and smelly, the dirt floor of the jungle was harder and full of things like roots and stones. Kristalena was further from the precarious comforts of her mother’s palace than ever. She wrapped her cloak around herself and closed her eyes, doing her best to ignore the night-time chorus of unfamiliar noises and the buzzing insects. She told herself that if there was anything to worry about, the wizard would take care of it. He wouldn’t have brought her all this way just to abandon her out here.

But with nothing but dry tack and two wrinkly oranges between them, water for nourishment and legs already aching from a day spent following the bank of the narrowing river it was going to be tough.

The unfamiliar and the unknown made sleep elusive. The strange tweets, chirps, and grunts from things she couldn’t see in the dark didn’t let up and she hoped the local wildlife had no interest in making a royal banquet out of her. She could smell more than dead leaves and damp too. When the wind shifted to the west, it brought the salty warmth of the ocean and she wondered about the *Maiden*. When the wind blew across the river to the south the smell was decidedly less pleasant, something dank and festering.

If Bradon can sleep here then so can I.

At least the ground didn’t move around like Tresca’s ship.

‘No complaining,’ she whispered the mantra to herself as she stared into the embers of her fire. She heard the wizard’s snoring.

I saw a crocodile, a bask of them, and I didn’t get eaten.

Something nudged her in the back. ‘Get up.’

Kristalena groaned and rolled over, catching her knee on an exposed root. She sat up and blinked. It was still dark and she

could feel dampness on her clothes from the morning dew.

‘It’s light enough that we can start moving.’

Kristalena rubbed her knee and stood, brushing the leaves and dirt off her dew-covered cloak and dress in the near-darkness. Boots. Thank goodness for the cream, but it wasn’t easy tying the laces, black against the black of her boots. She reattached the water canister to her belt and fumbled with the straps on her backpack before settling it in place. There was nothing else. Her fire was dead and cold.

‘I’m ready.’

Bradon led the way along a trail running above the riverbank. Kristalena was tall for a woman but the wizard had more than a foot of extra height on her and she had to hurry to keep pace. Precisely zero experience of walking in forests in inadequate pre-dawn light meant she tripped over a fallen branch within minutes of setting out. She cried out with the shock of falling onto her hands and knees and again at the sight of the blood welling from the palm of her left hand. There would be scabs on her palm to match the ones on her knuckles.

‘Watch where you’re putting your feet,’ said Bradon. It was his only comment as he waited for Kristalena to pick herself up again.

It could have been worse, she told herself. She could have fallen down the bank to feed the crocodiles in the sluggish river.

They walked in silence after that until Bradon announced their first stop. He propped his staff against a tree and sat down, stretching out his legs. ‘You should eat something.’

Kristalena picked a dry spot. It was a relief to stop walking.

‘How far have we come?’ The sun was still some way short of being directly overhead so she judged it to be late morning.

‘Six or seven miles, if that.’

‘Feels like a hundred. Are we moving quickly enough?’ Kristalena started chewing one of the ship’s biscuits. They were hard, stale and tasteless. Chew. Sip. Swallow. Suppress gag reflex. Repeat. She knew her body needed the sustenance. Eventually she got it all down and hoped it would stay down. When the tall warlock refilled his canister under a small waterfall, she drank freely from the fast-flowing water and then did the same. At least this water was fresh and clean. The bleeding from the scrape on her palm had stopped but the water still stung as she quickly washed her hands and face before hurrying after Bradon.

‘Take your water from where the stream’s fastest,’ Bradon had told her when they stopped to rest and refill the water canisters in the afternoon. She nibbled at the tack, saving the orange for dinner, and wondered if any of the berries on a nearby bush were edible. Bradon kept the break short and pushed onwards until sunset. Kristalena pulled off her boots and lay down as soon as Bradon decided the light was too poor for safe walking.

Today I learned that a stout pair of boots will take me further than a title.

The third day was a repeat of the first two with stiff muscles and sweat-stained clothes at the beginning of it as well as the end and more grumbles from Bradon about her slowness. Her feet were chafing and her muscles threatening to mutiny. Just as she had at the end of the first two days, she rubbed cream on her feet and resolved not to give Bradon the satisfaction of hearing her complain. Her pack didn’t seem so light now.

‘Can’t you walk any faster? I’d like to get there before the monsoon rains arrive, failing which before they stop serving dinner tonight.’

Nothing like hunger to motivate people, Kristalena thought. The nearest she’d come to dietary deprivation was listening to the Sharakan and Tamurian ambassadors, separated by the full length of the high table, make long-winded and dull speeches congratulating Salamander on the twentieth anniversary of her reign. The soup had been cold and congealed long before they’d finished pontificating. She’d had

smiled until it hurt and she'd had to eat the damn soup anyway.

She pushed her unwilling legs to move a little quicker, promising them a hot meal and good night's sleep in a real bed tonight if they cooperated.

Daylight had surrendered to twilight when they finally reached a collection of tired buildings pushed up against the river bank by the surrounding jungle that Bradon called Lower Haft.

'It's more of a trading post than anything else though the locals insist on calling it a town. This is the farthest upstream that the Sol Duc Estuary's navigable, by seagoing vessels anyway. The soil's too poor for crops and there's not much grassland so it's really just a stop for travellers doing business they don't want to share with Nar Mala's tax collectors. The company can get a little uncivilised. Put your hood up and keep your mouth shut.'

He led the way past a handful of warehouses where business was still being conducted under the light of the twin moons and an abundance of torches. Men and a few women were busy loading or unloading cargo from shallow-bottomed scows tied to the docks. Horses and mules laden with goods jostled for space on the muddy promenade and the streets leading off it. Strange languages and accents rose and fell in volume as coins and curses were exchanged. The smell of mud and rot hung in the air.

'Here,' Bradon said, pushing open the door to a large two-storey wooden building with a battered sign projecting into the street: *Emerald Arms*. He exchanged words with a dough-faced woman, dropped a few coins into her waiting hand and received a key and a searching look. Kristalena hobbled up the stairs to their room. Even the cream hadn't been enough to prevent more blisters developing. Some bandages wouldn't go amiss. If she'd had any.

'You're limping?'

'Blisters.' And sore muscles and chafing where the straps of her backpack had dug into her shoulders.

‘I bet that’s a new experience for you,’ he said. There was no mistaking the amusement in his voice.

‘I had a blister on my thumb once. The apothecary put a salve and a poultice on it,’ she said before she realised how pathetic that sounded.

‘Well, we don’t have either of those here, so you’ll just have to make do without.’

‘Couldn’t you?’ She made a wiggling motion with her fingers.

‘I’m a warlock, not a healer,’ he replied sharply. ‘I’ve paid for baths for the both of us but don’t take too long or you’ll miss out on dinner. Oh, and better give me your backpack and purse. I don’t care if they get stolen, but you might.’

Kristalena watched as he wrapped both of their backpacks in a grey blanket taken from one of the beds. He tied a knot with the corners and pointed his staff at the bundle. She might not know the difference between a wizard and a warlock, but she understood that the knot was just for decoration. The real defence against curious servants and pilfering travellers was something unseen. Her possessions were safe enough for now and her knife was in the sheath at her waist.

Kristalena wasn’t anticipating a marble pool filled with scented hot water and servants holding chilled tea for her to sip while others scrubbed her back and massaged her feet. This wasn’t her mother’s palace. It was Lower Haft where the pinnacle of luxury was a wooden tub that had once been one of the ale barrels she had seen being rolled around on the wharfs.

‘Here,’ said a heavysset woman dripping with sweat. She poured a bucket of steaming water into the tub. ‘You’re Bradon’s girl? This one’s yours.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Thank Bradon. He’s paid for it. There’s a shelf on the wall where the towel’s hangin’ to keep your clothes and things dry and soap and a brush on the stool.’ The fat woman nodded

once and then waddled away with her empty pail. Creaking floorboards marked her passage.

There wasn't much in the way of privacy. Sheets nailed to the beams running along the ceiling were all that separated her from someone splashing energetically in the next tub. She had no way of telling if the enthusiastic bather was a man or a woman.

'I want to be clean,' she said very quietly and pulled the mould-splotched sheet across to close off her cubicle. There was nothing to be gained by procrastinating and a proper meal to be lost if she was too slow. She pulled off her dirty clothes, carefully placing them on the shelf with her boots and climbed into the tub. The dagger she kept closer, placing it on the stool where she could reach it in an instant. There was no bench to sit on and not enough room to move freely but the water was at least warm and she could feel her muscles relaxing. She tried not to think of the people who'd used the soap and scrubbing brush before her as she attacked the accumulated dirt and dried sweat. She counted the days: four at sea and three on land. A whole week without a proper bath and she had never worn the same clothes two days in a row either. She could ask Bradon if there was somewhere she could get her clothes washed but knew the answer would be that, if she wanted clean clothes, she'd have to get busy herself.

She finished vigorously towelling her black hair and reluctantly put her dirty clothes back on her clean body. There was no comb so Kristalena resorted to running her fingers through her damp hair to impose some kind of order. Raising her cowl, she followed the sound of revelry to the common room. It took a few moments to locate Bradon in the hazy air. The freshly scrubbed wizard was seated in a booth opposite the door leading onto the street. She went to join him.

'Feel better?'

'Much. Thank you,' she said.

'Thought you'd be longer.'

'I didn't want to miss out on dinner,' she admitted. She peered out from under her hood. The common room was

buzzing with activity; patrons clamouring for ale, wine and food. Sailors were easy to recognise by their habit of standing with their legs a bit further apart than the landsmen and their penchant for earrings and loose-fitting clothes. A group of heavy-set men who prioritised eating over hygiene she labelled miners, because she knew the inland regions of Nar Mala were an important source of gems. Some of the stones in her pouch came from here. At the nearest table a merchant dressed in a felt jacket rolled some small brown leaves between his fingers and sniffed.

‘What’ll it be then?’

Kristalena started. She hadn’t seen the serving woman approach.

‘Full meals for both of us with an extra helping of the roast and two pints of your best ale,’ said Bradon.

‘You got coin?’ There was an edge to her voice.

Bradon jangled a pouch and the scowl disappeared.

‘At least I’m not the only one wearing a cowl,’ Kristalena said watching the transaction being conducted a few feet away. The merchant had finished weighing the leaves and was talking to the swarthy man dressed in plain leather sitting opposite him.

‘People around here like to guard their identities. It’s that sort of place.’ He saw where she was looking. ‘The spice trade’s important in these parts. If you know your spices and poisons you can make a fortune here or end up dead quicker than just about anywhere else, ’cept Atture. There’s plants that are worth a lot to the right buyer, some that are fatal even to touch.’

The merchant and the spice gatherer, Kristalena didn’t know what else to label him, spat into the palms of their right hands and shook on their deal. The merchant’s spotty-faced apprentice carefully swept the leaves into an earthenware jar and affixed the lid. The merchant wrote something on a piece of paper before pressing a signet ring into melted wax; instructions to a banker.

‘It must take a lot of trust,’ Kristalena said.

‘Self-interest. Reputation’s a coin you can only spend once and most people have better things to do with their lives than constantly look over their shoulders – Ah, thank you,’ Bradon spoke to the serving woman arriving with dinner.

Kristalena’s stomach clenched at the sight of real food. If she’d been a dog the aroma would have had her drooling all over the table. The plates were large and the helpings generous; thick slices of meat, three large roasted root vegetables and a pile of something dark green all swimming in a heavy brown sauce. She had her knife and fork in hand even before the woman put the plate in front of her. Half a loaf of bread hot from the oven with a pat of butter melting on top of it was placed between them.

‘Ohhh, this is good,’ she mumbled past a mouthful of spiced goat. A week ago she would have spurned such simple food.

Bradon was in a decent mood and ordered another round of ale. Drinking ale was as much a new experience as everything else and Kristalena didn’t know if the herbal tang was how ale was supposed to taste or a local flavouring. It wasn’t unpleasant and, as tired as she was, she was content to linger and observe the comings and goings before heading to their room.

The idea of the heir to the throne of Queenshelm sharing a bedroom with a man who was not her consort would have scandalised a lot of people, herself included, but Kristalena had already shared a ship’s cabin with him for four nights and spent another three sleeping on the ground within arm’s reach. I’m really past worrying about my reputation, she thought as she prepared for bed. *That coin was spent when I fled the palace.*

‘Tomorrow, we’ll set off as soon as we’ve had breakfast,’ she heard Bradon say before she fell asleep.

Tonight I am clean and I have a full belly.

Thirteen

BREAKFAST WAS MORE than good. Eggs, bacon, sausages, fresh-baked white bread and, if the tea came with an earthy flavour, it was piping hot and helped clear her head. Though enjoyable at the time, two pints of unfamiliar ale had been one too many, Kristalena decided. Wine was easier.

Bradon settled their account with the innkeeper and headed out the door. Picking up her backpack, Kristalena followed him along what appeared to be the only paved road in Lower Haft. She had to run to keep up with him as he turned down a muddy side street and entered a large warehouse. By the time she caught up, Bradon was conversing with a weather-beaten man with a hooked nose. Three horses, two already saddled, were hitched to a rail against one wall.

‘They’ll do the distance. Well rested,’ the man was saying.

Bradon asked if anyone had been making inquiries.

‘Arrived before dawn, they did. Asking about you and a girl.’ The man spoke with strange accent, drawing out his *rrr* sounds. He stared at Kristalena. ‘Unless you intend to make their acquaintance, I’d suggest you leave now. I had my boy send ’em on a fool’s errand across to the south side of the estuary, but they’ll be back an’ looking for the boy as well as the pair of you before too long.’

‘I’m much obliged, Tillgarth. Will you have any difficulty?’

‘This isn’t Thessalonia and Queen Salamander’s writ runs mighty small in these parts. Even if someone tells ’em that it was my boy who took their copper pennies, they won’t start a fight, not here. They’ll know you’ve been around and you’ve got horses but figuring out where you went is a whole other matter.’

Kristalena helped distribute the provisions into the saddle bags and packs on the third horse. She tossed the sacks in for good measure. There was also a bundle of folded canvas and some wooden poles that Kristalena hoped was a tent. Sleeping under the moons was all very well but sooner or later it would rain.

‘Any messages for me to take back?’ Bradon asked.

‘Just tell Fandalia it’s time I retired from this trading lark, will you?’

‘I doubt she’ll listen, but I’ll pass the message along. We all appreciate what you do here,’ said Bradon as he mounted his horse. He bent down and gripped the man’s hand in farewell. Only then did Kristalena notice a tattoo on the man’s forearm.

‘Do you think they’ll keep chasing us?’ Kristalena asked after Bradon stopped to look behind them for the third time.

‘Maybe. The local militia might take issue with another monarch sending her soldiers into Nar Mala but they won’t start anything that affects trade unless the King tells ’em to. So they could still be searching. If they figure out which way we’re going.’

‘We could ride faster,’ she suggested. Riding she could do.

‘We have a long way to go and it won’t help if we exhaust the horses on the first day,’ he countered. ‘I would’ve thought you’d be delighted if your mother’s soldiers caught up with us.’

‘No, I would not,’ she replied shortly. Every step took her further from home, but after the near sinking of the *Loraline* distance was more appealing than ever.

‘A strange attitude. Why?’

‘I gave my word,’ she said as if that was sufficient answer.

He gave her a long steady look.

‘I saw what you did to the demon and I don’t want anyone killed for just following orders.’ Another evasion.

Bradon grunted and nudged his mount into a brisk walk.

Bradon didn't call for a rest until noon. 'Best get off the trail,' he said, dismounting and leading his mare and the packhorse through a gap between the trees. 'There's a stream back here we can use to water the horses.'

If lunch wasn't as good as breakfast, it wasn't tack and it was still palatable. Brown bread, still fresh, a slice of meat and a piece of cheese washed down with water from the stream. She spent her time watching the birds flittering in and out of the trees. Drab plumage made them hard to spot, which was, she supposed, the point.

Days passed this way. They would begin riding in the predawn light, stop three times each day to rest and water the horses and finish sleeping in open. Kristalena marked the passing of each day by the deterioration in the quality of their meals and her deficiencies in preparing them.

Gruel is better than tack, she reminded herself as she fell asleep.

Barely.

The riding grew tedious and her backside sore after the first few days. She passed the time looking at trees and birds on the slow climb through the jungle and forests of eastern Nar Mala but the scenery could only provide so much diversion. Reasoning that the worst Bradon could do was tell her to shut up, she set her curiosity free whenever they stopped for meals or to water the horses.

'The tattoos. Why do you have them? It makes it a bit obvious what you are.' The rain may have stopped but the trail was all mud and the going was slow.

'They're not tattoos.'

Kristalena waited until nightfall for an explanation. Even though she could now build a fire without taking the skin off her knuckles, the scarcity of dry wood made it difficult.

'They're not tattoos,' Bradon repeated. 'We call them runes, though you might just as well call them a curse.'

Kristalena waited, sensing she was about to learn something.

‘Think back to the time before the Gods’ War. Sorcerers had the power to do just about anything if they wanted to do it badly enough. Of course different people were stronger or more talented at different things but the point was that we didn’t need runes to empower us.’

He paused, looking at the moons, his face vacant. Perhaps, thought Kristalena, he was remembering a lesson from his youth.

‘It was only after the failings of the very powerful group of sorcerers people remember as the Twelve that the Gods, the ones who were still around anyway, imposed limitations. A sorcerer’s talents are limited by the runes they’re given. Different runes for different things. This one,’ he pointed to a collection of overlapping circles on the left side of his face, ‘is useful for warding against eavesdroppers. It’s not something I need very often, but there’ve been a couple of times I’ve been grateful for it.’

‘And every wizard has different runes?’

‘Different combinations,’ Bradon confirmed.

‘How do you get the runes?’

Somewhere in the night air an animal coughed. Kristalena ignored it. She’d become used to the unthreatening noises of the world that emerged after the sun had set.

‘You don’t,’ Bradon said after a long pause. ‘Sorcerers don’t get runes. They grow from within and appear on your skin. Choice and desire don’t come into it. Since the Binding, the runes you’re given define your talents.’

She waited for him to continue but he didn’t. In the short time she had known him, it was the first time the warlock had opened up about anything. It was new knowledge and gave her something to think about as she waited for sleep to come.

Several days passed without seeing another person. The trails, where there were any, twisted and turned but always seemed to lead them to the south-east. Though the gradient was, at times,

almost unnoticeable, they had steadily gained altitude and the jungle had given way first to scrubby grassland and eventually to more rocky terrain. It was also noticeably cooler and she appreciated her cloak at night. There was no discernible trail here, but Bradon never hesitated as he led her into a broad canyon that gradually narrowed and deepened. Kristalena tried to recall what she'd been taught about the geography of this part of the world. If they went far enough south, they would reach Marichek and the fabled Rift Spires but she guessed they were still in one of the small independent kingdoms that were collectively known as the borderlands. If they continued further inland to the east? She wasn't sure. Her tutors had focused on Thessalonia's neighbours and the places their ships traded with.

'We're not the only people out here,' said Bradon pulling Kristalena away from her musings.

Kristalena turned and saw a small cloud of dust rising six or seven miles behind them.

'Is that a bad thing?'

'Not if we reach the caves before they catch us. It's just around the next bend.' He kicked his horse into a gallop.

Caves?

'Hold the horses,' Bradon commanded as he swung down from the saddle. He faced a boulder that looked no different from dozens of others on the southern side of the gorge and lifted his staff.

With a grating rumble, the boulder rolled to one side, exposing a hole in the canyon wall only a little taller than the warlock. Hesitating, Kristalena led the horses into the darkness beyond the cave mouth. They were blowing heavily and needed a rest more than their riders.

Bradon followed closed the entrance.

The light vanished and Kristalena was left standing in blackness with three unsettled horses. She could feel the walls closing in on her, the roof pressing down. 'I don't suppose you

have a lantern or torch in one of your saddlebags do you?’ Her voice cracked. Even the echo sounded like a squeak.

A light appeared in the darkness, becoming a little brighter. When her eyes adjusted she saw it was balancing on the upraised palm of his left hand.

‘Ask a silly question,’ she said trying to speak in her normal voice and knowing she was failing. ‘Do we just wait here for them to ride past?’

‘No. We go this way.’

The cave opened up and then narrowed to a single passageway with enough ceiling height to ride but only wide enough for one horse at a time. Bradon led with the light dancing erratically on his palm. After a while, the dimly seen irregularity of the rocky walls smoothed into a roughly hewn tunnel and a little later the clip-clop of horseshoes on rock gave way to a more subdued sound and Kristalena saw that the cave floor was now dirt.

It was hard to measure the passage of time underground. The tunnel levelled off and, although she thought they were still heading south of east, there had been enough disorientating twists and turns to reduce that almost to a guess.

‘We’ll rest here for a bit,’ Bradon announced. ‘There’s water and a bit of space.’

Kristalena duly climbed down from her saddle and looked around. The shiny blackness to her right was a slow moving river. She led her stallion and the packhorse to the edge and let them drink.

‘You’ve hardly said a word since we entered the caves.’ The sorcerer gently waved his hand and the light moved from his palm to an outcrop of rock.

‘There isn’t much to say. I spent most of the time listening.’

‘Apart from the dwarves working their mines, there’s not much to hear down here.’

‘Dwarves?’ Kristalena scoffed at the idea. ‘Not someone following us?’

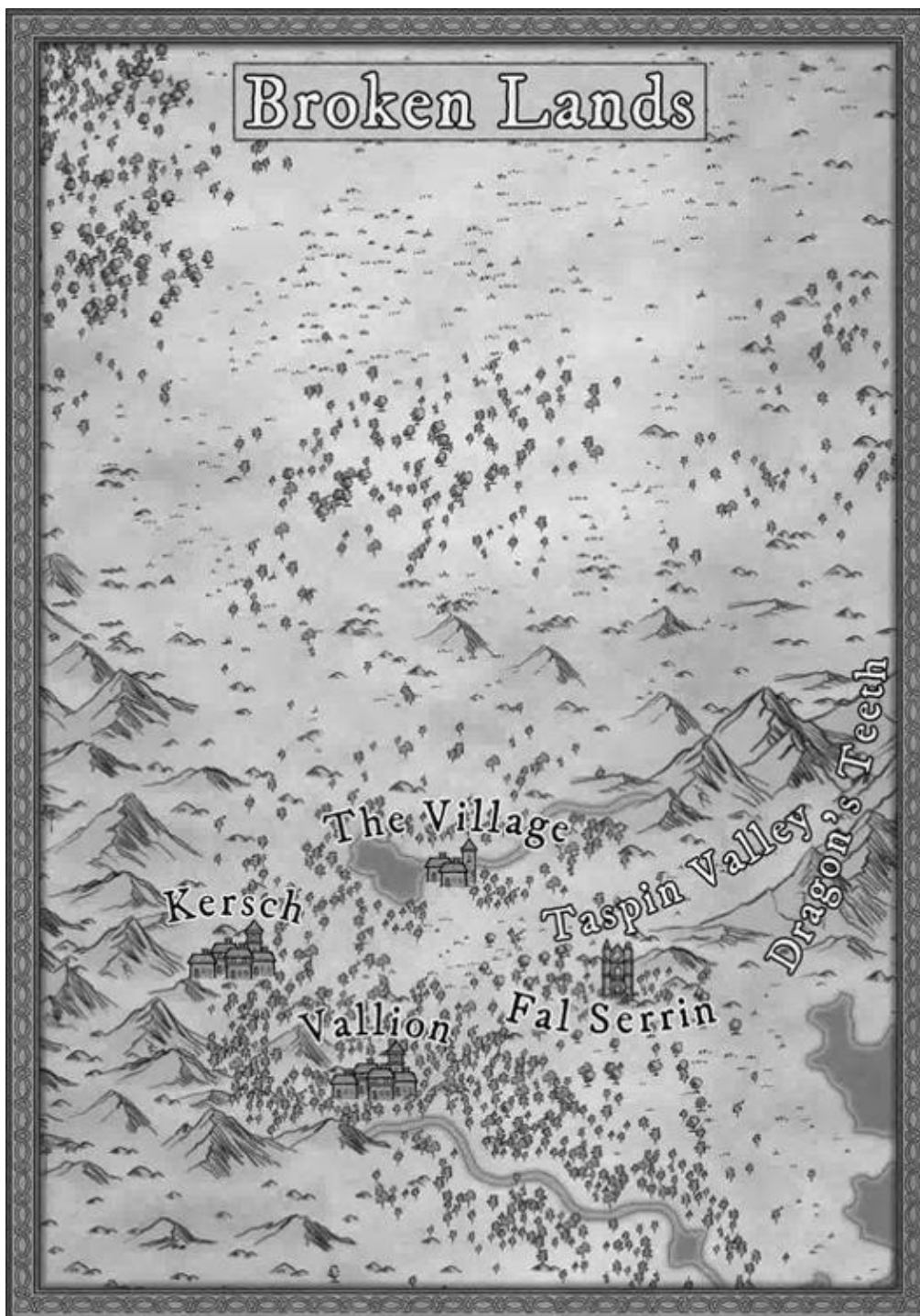
‘I would know if anyone used sorcery to move the boulder.’

Kristalena satisfied her own thirst and then refilled her water canister. The water was pure and icy cold. She had no wish to disclose her fear by asking how long they would be underground or if her master really knew which forks in the network of tunnels to take.

The possibility of ending her days wandering round in circles in an oversized tomb was terrifying. She moved a little closer to Bradon.

It would be eight days before she saw the sun again.

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Fourteen

‘WELL, I MUST SAY it’s a relief to be out in the open air, even if it is raining,’ Bradon said.

‘We’re being watched,’ Kristalena said. ‘Up there, on the ridge.’

‘I’d be concerned if we weren’t. A few more days and we’ll reach the Village.’ The wizard didn’t look up at the two figures silhouetted against the skyline.

Only a few days, she thought. A chance to wash. Some proper food. Maybe even a bed that isn’t rock or dirt and a chance to heal the saddle sores that pained her with every step the horse took. She cut off her thoughts and focused on her surroundings and the trickle of water which had found its way inside her cloak and was running down her neck. She pulled the edges of her garment a little tighter.

Two more days.

The travellers paused on a low hill just as the rain petered out.

‘It’s so pretty,’ was Kristalena’s first reaction.

The Village, she would learn that the community had no other name, was situated in a broad oval valley, several leagues across and longer than it was wide. Fields and orchards covered much of the flat land. Rolling tree-covered hills formed natural boundaries to the north and east, while more exposed and rocky hills, one of which looked scarred by quarrying, rose to steep peaks behind them to the west. In the far distance, enormous snow-capped mountains completed the sense of utter isolation. A modest river, fed by several tributary streams, ran through the centre of the valley to end in a large lake. On the far side of the valley she could just make out a white slash against the darker hillside. A waterfall? The

trail wound its way around the southern edge of the lake before reaching a proper road.

‘Good soil, plenty of water and a manageable climate if you don’t mind several feet of snow in winter,’ Bradon told her as they made their way past the first cottages. ‘It’s a fair place and it’s a long way from anywhere and hard to get to. The Assembly doesn’t like visitors. None of us do.’

‘Oh? Should I be worried?’

‘You’re not a visitor. This is your home now.’

‘I’m not even sure where we are,’ Kristalena admitted. ‘Is this near Marichek?’

‘Not even close. There’s a few kingdoms and a lot of empty space between here and the Rift Spires. It’s not part of anything. Those peaks in the distance are the Dragon’s Teeth. They’re the tallest mountains in the world and a lot further away than they look.’

‘Dragon’s Teeth? This is the Broken Lands? Where the monsters live!’ Kristalena’s studies had been focused on Thessalonia’s neighbours and trading partners, but she hadn’t completely ignored the geography of the rest of the world.

Why has Bradon brought me here?

‘Monsters, sorcerers and other people who prefer to keep their distance from humans and their prejudices. There’s not many places our kind can live without being used as kindling or forced into military service.’ Bradon nodded at two men clearing a drainage ditch. They interrupted their labours to stare as Bradon and Kristalena rode past.

Kristalena looked around with wide-eyed curiosity. The Village was a large settlement, though not big enough to be called a town, and evidently prosperous. The main road ran straight through the Village and was paved with loose stones, though most of the side streets were unrutted dirt. The buildings were either of grey stone or wood and most had slate roofs, only a few had thatch, but all were well maintained. Glass windows were everywhere. The people’s clothes were made from heavier fabrics and more sombre colours than was

the norm in Queenshelm, but were not so different as to seem strange.

‘Evening, Bradon,’ a woman in a pale green dress called out as they rode through the main street. ‘Fandalia will be pleased you’ve returned.’

‘I doubt that. Is she in the Assembly building?’

‘She’ll be expecting you.’ The short, olive-skinned woman looked at Kristalena with interest.

As Kristalena returned the woman’s inquisitive look, she was shocked to see pointed ears, delicate and curved but unquestionably not human. There were other differences as well but it was the ears that—

‘What’s the matter, girl? It’s rude to stare.’

‘You’re an elf?’ Kristalena blurted the question.

‘No, I’m a three-horned boggard. Of course I’m an elf,’ the woman snapped.

Bradon laughed. ‘Pay the girl no mind, Sharell. The only place she’s seen elves before today is in story books.’

‘Mmmmm. New then. I thought I didn’t recognise you, girl. Don’t mind me. People say I take offence too easy. Welcome to the Village.’ The elf didn’t smile as she wandered off.

At a large stone building, Bradon hitched his horse to a fence-post and bid Kristalena follow him through a side door into a modest room that reminded her of an administrator’s office.

‘So, you’re back.’ An elderly woman with grey-white hair pulled back in a severe bun didn’t get up from her seat to greet the returning warlock or the tall girl with a dirty face and dirtier dress standing in his shadow. ‘And in desperate need of a bath.’

‘Correct on both counts,’ said Bradon. He made no effort to introduce Kristalena.

‘Don’t goad me, Bradon. Do you have any idea how much of an uproar you’ve caused?’ Trimmed fingernails drummed against the wooden top of her desk.

‘I got rid of the demon, Fandalia.’

‘So the Seers told me, and a job well done, though why you let them lock you in that rat-hole of a dungeon needs some explaining. More than some.’

‘It was the easiest way to make sure I was in the Whitehead Palace when the creature was unleashed,’ he said.

‘Did you find out who opened the gateway?’

‘No, and I know that means he might try again but whoever it was had no control over the beast at all as far as I could tell.’ He frowned as he spoke, and Kristalena shared his concern even without understanding fully.

‘Well, they’ll pay the price soon enough,’ said the old woman with a heavy sigh.

Bradon nodded. ‘We’ll just have to hope—’

‘Hope isn’t the most dependable ally in the world. I’ll tell the Seers to keep a close watch on Queenshelm, which won’t make me very popular.’ Fandalia sounded, and looked, exasperated.

‘They grumble if you ask them to do something and moan like banshees in the autumn rains if you don’t make use of their talents.’ Bradon shrugged, seemingly unconcerned at the prospective ire of the Seers.

‘True enough but it’s been almost a century since the last one came through—’

‘So why now? Why Queenshelm?’ Bradon pre-empted Fandalia’s questions. ‘I don’t know.’

The old woman frowned and then transferred her attention to the dishevelled girl. She looked Kristalena up and down, like she was inspecting a side of beef. ‘What on earth possessed you to bring *that* here?’

‘It seemed like a good idea at the time,’ Bradon said mildly.

‘Another servant. I don’t see why you need a second.’ Fandalia shook her head, a wisp of pale grey hair fluttering as it escaped the bun.

Kristalena dipped her head, pretending that there was something more interesting than her scuffed and muddy boots on the stone floor.

‘Show Fandalia your wrist.’ Bradon didn’t even look at Kristalena as he spoke.

Kristalena hesitantly pulled back her sleeve and held out her left arm, conscious of the dirt under her chipped fingernails.

‘Closer.’ Fandalia stood up and came around her desk, moving more fluidly than her weight and apparent age suggested.

Kristalena obeyed.

‘A birthmark. So what?’ The plump woman’s clear eyes were too young in the face of someone old enough to be a matriarch with generations of descendants.

‘It’s not,’ said Bradon. ‘Look again.’

Fandalia grabbed Kristalena’s arm and turned her wrist over, looking at the outside and then twisting it back again.

Kristalena stepped back as soon as her hand was released.

‘You can’t be serious. She’s far too old to start training.’ Fandalia stared straight ahead, looking at Bradon’s travel-stained shirt instead of up at his face.

‘Not too old, no. Others have been older.’

‘I can’t argue with the truth. There have been others, but most of them ended up in the same place and didn’t enjoy the journey. Too much to unlearn and too little time to do it in. Not that it matters now that she’s here. The Assembly’s meeting tomorrow morning. Bring the girl so they can make up their own minds.’

Bradon's face darkened.

'That's the rule. It always has been, even for you. Especially for you,' she said, her voice dry.

Fandalia looked the new arrival up and down. She frowned. 'Do you have a name, girl?'

'I—'

'Until tomorrow, Fandalia.' Bradon cut Kristalena off. Wrapping one big hand around her upper arm he steered her through the door to their waiting horses.

'My place is at the end,' Bradon told her.

Kristalena said nothing as they rode the tired horses through the township, down the main street in the direction of the distant waterfall. A three-storey stone building with a slate roof in the centre of the Village was the largest building. Between the buildings on her left she caught glimpses of the lake but it was the people who attracted her attention. The place wasn't crowded, not compared to Queenshelm, but she saw several women and a few men showing the distinctive tattoos that marked them as witches or wizards. Two boys and a girl, they couldn't have been more than fourteen or fifteen years old, were sitting in the shade of an apple tree with a young woman. Bradon stopped to watch.

'Mistress Haidi, what's this one?' she heard the small brown-haired girl ask the woman. The girl had the same delicate pointed ears as Shaerall.

'I'm not sure. It could be ice, I suppose? It's not clear yet, Shaeralli.'

The elves must be related, Kristalena thought. Possibly Shaeralli was Shaerall's daughter?

'Looks more like levitation to me. That would be a good one,' said a pudgy boy, as big as a full-grown man. His curly hair was a darker shade of brown than the elf's.

The conversation broke off as the students noticed Kristalena and Bradon watching.

‘He’s back,’ she heard the brown-skinned boy whisper. ‘Who’s that with him?’

Conscious of the scrutiny, Kristalena straightened her already stiff back and lifted her chin.

‘My, she’s a snooty one.’ The thin youth wasn’t whispering now.

‘Let’s just focus on our lesson, shall we, Khannie?’ The young woman regained her pupils’ attention by snapping her fingers, making a noise like a small thunderclap and startling the sparrows out of the foliage above them.

Further back from the road, a middle-aged witch and an older girl with pale skin and blond braids were tossing two apples backwards and forwards without using their hands.

‘That’s it, Amber. Don’t drop them or the fruit will bruise,’ the woman said. ‘Farmer Freth won’t like that.’

Bradon was already twenty paces ahead before Kristalena realised he’d moved on. She nudged her horse to catch up.

Humans were the most common inhabitants of the Village but the elves were not the only non-humans. She saw Sharell talking outside what appeared to be a warehouse. A group of dusty men and even dustier women, shorter than the elf woman but much stockier, carrying hammers and chisels and other tools on belts around their thick waists or strapped to their backs were arguing loudly. Could they be dwarves?

‘Why’s it always me who has to go into the hole?’

‘Cause you’re the smallest.’

‘Am not.’

The dwarves ignored the tired travellers passing by.

A man even taller than Kristalena’s master, holding a book that looked comically delicate in his huge hands, glanced up from his reading and nodded as they went past a tavern, *The Speckled Dragon*, but said nothing. There was, she thought, a certain wariness in the way people eyed the returning warlock.

She followed Bradon past a smithy, several cottages, a handful of more substantial houses and a row of covered stalls set back from the road. The local market, she thought. There was a second inn, a farrier's and what looked like grain silos and barns scattered around the farms. Behind the buildings, large fields were planted with crops and orchards were ripe with summer fruits. To the south-east, past the river, she could see a slender white tower perched atop a low foothill. Most of the people were human, but she saw one more elf, a serious-looking youth, sitting cross-legged with his back against a grain silo talking to an elderly man. The youth looked up as they rode past, frowned at the distraction and resumed his discussion.

Kristalena was so engrossed in what she was seeing that she was surprised when her horse stopped at a low stone wall.

‘This is your home?’

‘And yours, for now.’

Kristalena looked at the warlock's dwelling. Like many of the buildings she'd walked past, it was made of stone. The similarities ended there. It was more of a squat square tower than a house. Perhaps thirty paces across at the base, it rose about half that in height with windows cut into the stone at regular intervals. Three storeys. She caught a brief glimpse of a face peering out from behind the curtains on the ground floor and assumed this was Bradon's other servant. At the end of a short path made from flat squares of worn stone was a high and wide door made of dark wood and darker iron. She could hear the waterfall, a quarter of a mile away, and guessed that the river or one of its tributaries must lie close, though she could not see it. Crops and fruit trees and stacks of hay could be seen past the stone barn. And she could smell the surprisingly large chicken coop. But for the unusual design, it could have been any well-maintained and prosperous farmstead.

She dismounted and followed Bradon through the gate.

The tower door crashed open and Kristalena screamed as a huge creature, close to her master in height but much wider,

bounded out waving what looked like a dripping soup ladle. Tusks jutted upwards from its lower jaw. Kristalena had a blurred impression of two short horns, a wide flat nose and bristly black hair before her horse reared, almost ripping the reins from her hands and pulling her off balance. She stumbled backwards, crashing into a lemon tree.

Bradon muttered a few words and the horses calmed.

‘Master! Master is back!’ The thing – Kristalena didn’t know what to call it – bellowed. It ran up to Bradon and stopped in front of him, bobbing its huge misshapen head and stretching its toothy mouth wide.

‘Yes, Grung, I am back. This is a . . . guest,’ he gestured to Kristalena.

‘Nice to eat?’ Grung looked at Kristalena with huge black eyes. A reddish coloured tongue ran over one of its stubby tusks.

‘No, Grung. We do not eat guests. Speaking of which, we’ll want a good dinner tonight. We haven’t eaten since daybreak.’

‘Pretty guest,’ said Grung, nostrils dilating as the gentle afternoon breeze carried Kristalena’s body odour to him. Reaching out one outsized hand it lifted a lock of her hair. She was too terrified to even flinch away.

‘Dinner, Grung. Though we could both do with a bath first. Hot water. She’ll be staying with us for the time being.’

The monster was still caressing Kristalena’s hair. She was too frightened to ask what Bradon meant when he emphasised she would only be staying ‘for the time being’.

‘Baths, Grung.’

Bradon had gone first which meant Kristalena could take her time in the bathing chamber attached to the back of the tower. She doused herself with buckets of cold water and removed the worst of the dirt before allowing her tired muscles the luxury of soaking in the warm water of the stone tub. It was a shame that she had to get back into her filthy clothes after completing her bath. She donned the least-dirty, rubbed the

rest down with soap and threw them into the tub to soak overnight. After washing them tomorrow she'd need a needle and thread to repair the tear in her grey dress.

Hesitating at the thought of the creature inside the tower, she left the detached bathing chamber and returned to the large room which took up most of the ground floor. Her grubby backpack and other assorted items were still where she had left them stacked against one wall. Bradon was sitting in front of an empty fireplace with a glass of wine in one hand and a letter in the other. She noticed with no small amount of envy that he was wearing clean clothes. Through a doorway she could see Grung stirring a pot over a low cooking fire.

'While we're waiting for dinner, there's a few things we need to discuss.' Bradon put the letter aside.

She hesitated, not quite willing to divert her attention from the thing in the kitchen.

'Oh, don't worry about Grung. He won't hurt you,' Bradon assured her. 'And he has much better hearing than you or I. Anyway, to more important matters. Tomorrow the Assembly will see you. Be respectful. Speak only when spoken to and then politely but, above all, don't tell them who you are or where you're from. They won't like it and they can make your life difficult if they choose to, but as long as you follow the rules, they won't make you leave.'

'What are the rules?'

'Very good question. Sometimes, I think they just make them up as they go along.'

'Is that woman you spoke to—'

'Fandalia.'

'Is she on this Assembly?'

'She's the Village Apex. Apart from myself and, possibly, a pair of antisocial Seers no one in the Village knows who you are. Keep it that way.'

The creature placed a large pot with steam rising from it in the middle of the table. A board of bread rolls, a ceramic bowl

of green vegetables and a carafe of water followed. He'd laid three place settings at one end of the table. Kristalena took the human-sized seat next to Bradon and opposite the cook.

'Dinner good?' the creature asked.

'Excellent, Grung,' said Bradon ladling stew onto his plate and helping himself to bread.

'Girl eat too,' he insisted, pushing the pot a few inches closer to Kristalena.

She wasn't at all sure if she wanted to eat anything prepared by a monster, but she was hungry and the herb-laden odour was making her stomach growl. If Bradon was happy to eat it, she decided she would too. *Not that there's any choice in the matter.*

She took her first tentative bite, conscious of the creature's unwavering scrutiny.

'This is delicious,' she said sincerely, already hoping there would be enough for a second helping.

Grung's mouth widened to show his pebbled red tongue dislodging a piece of bone stuck between his molars.

After dinner, Kristalena retreated upstairs to the room on the first floor Bradon had said was hers. Sitting on the bed she looked around. There was a small wardrobe near the door where she could hang her spare clothes once she'd washed them. The small table beside the narrow bed had a jug of water and a candle on it. There was a chair missing its back and that was about it. The bed itself felt comfortable, more than anything she had slept on since she'd fled the palace. How many weeks ago? The white sheets were clean and crisp and there were two pillows and a blanket. She had already seen a second blanket folded in the bottom of the wardrobe when she had unpacked her limited possessions.

This isn't too bad.

She left half the coins and jewels in her backpack and put the rest under the mattress. Even though Bradon knew she'd brought a small fortune when she'd fled Queenshelm, he had paid for absolutely everything on the way here. She still had

money and would need it – all her clothes were worn to the point of being more suitable for a peasant than a princess. More, Bradon had already told her that winter in this place would bring a need for warmer attire, new boots included. She put her dagger on the bedside table, keeping it close.

The broad window looked over the gate and back towards the Village. She left the curtains open as a precaution against oversleeping. It would create a bad impression if she turned up late to her appointment with the Assembly.

‘Grung has the room next to yours and I’m on the second floor,’ said Bradon from the doorway. ‘He snores, but you’ll just have to get used to that. I’ll see you tomorrow morning.’

She closed the door, blew out the candle and stared at the darkness. She had reached her destination. It was nice to be clean and sleep in a comfortable bed with a full belly but the people here had been as welcoming as a porcupine’s posterior.

Today, I met a witch, an elf and a monster and the monster was the polite one.

Fifteen

A NIGHTMARISH COLLECTION of tusks and thick, claw-like nails shook Kristalena awake long before the cockerels announced the dawn. She'd screamed and Grung had backed off, covering his ears and grunting something about 'girl needing breakfast'. She'd have bruises on her shoulder to match the shadow along the inside of her left forearm.

'What, if I may ask, is Grung?' Kristalena asked as she trudged along the main road in the pre-dawn darkness.

'Mountain troll. At least one of his parents was. I don't know about the other. Because he was different, the clan drove him out when he was a cub. I found him starving, or maybe he found me. He's been here ever since. Spends most of his time obsessing about food.'

'Are there many trolls . . . mountain trolls, here?' She moved to the side of the road to avoid a cart pulled by a pair of piebald horses. They weren't the only ones up early.

'Bradon.' The driver, a thickset man with iron grey hair and skin burnt brown by long exposure to the sun, nodded briefly at the wizard and stared at Kristalena from his perch at the front of the cart.

'Freth.' Bradon's reply was equally terse.

Kristalena first smelled and then saw hundreds of red apples piled high in the cart as it rolled past. Time at sea and days on the trails had heightened her appreciation for fresh fruits and vegetables.

'Freth is an orchardist. He grows apples, peaches and other stone fruits when the seasons allow it and occupies a bench in *The Speckled Dragon* or *Ye Olde Knotted Wand* the rest of the year. His wife prefers it that way,' said Bradon.

Kristalena nodded. 'Trolls in the Village?'

‘Of course not. Most people aren’t happy with having one troll in the valley. Dangerous things they are, but Grung causes no trouble, keeps to himself and doesn’t take offence easily.’ Bradon rubbed a hand over his clean-shaven chin. ‘He’s better company than some of the people around here and the best cook for a hundred leagues in any direction.’

‘At least you don’t have to worry about thieves.’

‘No one worries about theft here,’ he said, his voice sharp. ‘You might want to remember that.’

Kristalena wondered what Bradon meant but never got a chance to ask as he stopped in front of the second largest building in the Village.

‘This is a formal Assembly hearing. You’ll be told to stand in the middle so everyone can see you. Whatever you do, be respectful. Only speak when you’re spoken to and answer every question they put to you, except your real name and where you’re from,’ he repeated last night’s instructions.

‘And what’s this Assembly hearing for?’ she asked.

‘To decide what we’re going to do with you.’

Maybe she wasn’t good enough to be a servant. She had learned to catch a fish and clean it and could start a fire with flint and not burn whatever it was she was being told to cook, not too badly anyway, but was that enough? She could do needlework and had hurriedly made some repairs to her dress last night but wished Bradon had waited for her washing to dry so she could wear clothes with less mud on them before parading herself before this Assembly. There had been porridge for breakfast with bits of bacon in it and roasted rye bread with strawberry jam. She had no idea how to bake bread or how to make a new dress or anything really. What if they told her to leave?

I am no longer a princess. I am nothing. I don’t even have my own name anymore. But I’ve come this far and there is no turning back.

Kristalena smoothed her hair away from her eyes wishing she had a ribbon to tie it back. It was a mess but here was

nothing she could do about it now. She resolved to search Bradon's tower for a comb and a mirror so she could make herself presentable should she be allowed to stay.

The stonework might be simple but it was well crafted. Lena noted the precision of the joinery as she followed her master up the broad granite steps and through the double doors.

The Assembly Chamber was a square room with an open space in the middle surrounded on three sides by seats on a low dais with an empty viewing gallery on an upper level. Maps and drawings depicting places familiar and unfamiliar hung from the walls in simple wooden frames. Half a dozen iron candelabras hung from the high-vaulted ceiling but they weren't lit. Early morning sunlight was pouring through the eastern facing windows. Like her ride through the Village the previous afternoon, when Kristalena trailed Bradon into the room it was the people who attracted her attention. She counted five women and five men. Several were marked as witches or wizards.

Two of the women and one of the men were standing in conversation, the rest were seated, either reading or resting with their eyes closed in protest at the early start. For the most part they ignored the new arrivals.

'Convention is not a tenet of your behaviour is it, Bradon?' said the plump woman who'd inspected Kristalena's wrist yesterday afternoon.

'But consistency is, Fandalia.'

'Of course,' she replied, her sarcasm obvious. She patted her bun and sighed. 'Since we're quorate, and at least some of us are awake, we might as well get on with it.'

The Village Apex took her seat and the others followed. Bradon nudged Kristalena towards the middle of the open space and stood behind her.

'This is um . . . Lena,' Bradon introduced his servant to the Assembly.

He really thought hard about that didn't he?

Clearly she wasn't important enough to waste time on trivia like choosing a name for his new serving girl. Kristalena forced herself to think positive thoughts. *He could have given me a worse name. Strumpet. Retard. Bootlicker. Fallen Far.*

She lifted her chin a little higher and thought of names she could give Bradon if their positions were ever reversed.

'And where are you from, um, Lena?' said another sorceress. Her lips twitched downwards, perhaps in exasperation. Lena recognised the slight young woman who had been instructing the children in the orchard yesterday. She had the distinctive ink-black hair and angular eye folds of an Atturan. Kristalena wasn't the only one who was a long way from home.

'That's not important,' said Bradon, cutting off that line of questioning. 'We're all strangers here.'

'She's too old. Most sorcerers begin their apprenticeship when they reach puberty, sometimes sooner but seldom later. How old are you, girl?' The speaker was a middle-aged woman who might have outweighed Bradon in spite of being a foot and a half shorter.

'I am sixteen,' said Kristalena quietly.

'As I said, much too old. Think of all the things she has to unlearn before she can begin to learn. It's a waste of anyone's time even trying.' The woman leaned back, her chair creaking in protest, the posture of someone who had already made her mind up.

'We've had this discussion before.' The balding man with receding hair and a grey-streaked beard spoke mildly but there was no mistaking the rebuke.

'Yes, Delphan. Her age is a problem but not an insurmountable issue if one is prepared to give her proper guidance,' countered Bradon.

'How old did you say you were?' another sorcerer asked. The fate of the new arrival wasn't sufficiently important to cause the man to look up from the scroll he was reading.

It took Kristalena a moment to realise that the question was directed at her. 'I am sixteen,' she repeated.

'And confident. Even arrogant,' said a thin woman with long blond hair woven into complex braids.

'She doesn't know, does she?' A pale man Kristalena thought possessed of an ethereal beauty spoke in a gravelly voice devoid of tone or warmth.

Fandalia snorted but there was no amusement in the abrupt sound. 'How typical, Bradon. You keep secrets the way shepherds keep their flocks. You won't let one go until the wolf steals it from you.'

'Do whatever you wish with the child,' said the pale man. 'I have no opinions one way or another. What will be will be, whether we desire it or no, but know that she burns like the summer sun and I cannot remain in her presence. Not in daylight.'

Kristalena watched the man pull a hood over his head and hurried out of the chamber, skirting the far wall and keeping as far away from Kristalena as the confines of the room permitted.

What was that about?

The silence continued until Fandalia stood up and came down the steps to stand directly in front of Kristalena. 'Look at me, girl.'

Kristalena obeyed. She was surprised to find flecks of red among the grey. The tattooed symbols were clear and sharp on the soft flesh of Fandalia's face. Not even the passage of time and the arrival of old age touched them.

'This one,' Fandalia touched a mark that looked like a strand of ivy on her left cheek, 'allows me to sense poison in my food and drink. That would be useful for some, I'd imagine. This one,' she held up her left hand, palm facing Kristalena, 'is for light.'

Kristalena looked at the rune embedded in the flesh, a half circle with three short straight lines rising above the curve, and was astonished to see it glow.

‘This one,’ she grabbed Kristalena’s arm, pushed up the frayed sleeve and pointed to the shadow on the inside of her forearm and wrist, ‘is for fire.’

Kristalena felt her jaw drop open.

No!

‘You really had no idea? And Bradon claimed you were clever. Already I doubt it.’ Fandalia turned her back on the stunned girl and resumed her seat.

‘There must be some mistake. I’m no witch.’ Kristalena blurted the denial; it was a bruise, not a tattoo.

‘Be silent.’ Fandalia didn’t even look at Lena as she spoke.

‘Somebody needs to take her. We can’t send her away now,’ said Bradon, slamming his staff into the stone floor making Kristalena flinch.

‘Why not? She should never have been brought here in the first place,’ Fandalia retorted.

‘She’ll be dead within a year if—’

‘Lots of people will be dead within a year, Bradon. They die all the time whether we like it or not. Makes no difference whether she dies by her own foolish hand or another’s.’

‘Send her back to wherever she came from. No one will take her as apprentice,’ said the big woman with the masculine voice.

‘We have six apprentices in the Village already. That’s plenty,’ said the woman with the braided hair.

‘Our numbers are few enough, and getting fewer still as the centuries roll by, Edythe. We can’t afford to ignore anyone with the talent,’ countered Bradon. His eyes shifted to the youngest member of the Assembly present.

‘Don’t look at me,’ said the Atturan woman. ‘I’ve got three already and might as well have the lot for all the effort the rest of you put in to training them.’

There was silence.

‘Call,’ said a voice.

‘Call,’ agreed a second voice.

Fandalia stood again. ‘Will anyone take this possible sorceress as her, or his, apprentice?’

Kristalena looked at Bradon. Surely he would speak for her?

‘I would—’ he said.

Fandalia cut Bradon off. ‘It’s not permitted and we won’t be changing that rule today. Only members of the Assembly can take apprentices. You don’t get to pick and choose your privileges around here. I ask a second time, is there anyone here who will take this child and teach her?’

More silence. Some had already lost interest, rolling up parchments and adjusting their robes. The signs of a meeting coming to an end.

‘For the final time, I ask—’

‘I will take her.’ A man whom Kristalena had assumed to be sleeping in the sunlight rose to his feet with some difficulty. He looked the oldest person in the room by decades. ‘She is my apprentice.’

Fandalia burst out laughing. ‘Can you actually remember how to teach someone Baragwanth? You haven’t taken an apprentice for nearly a century.’

‘A hundred and eight years and thank you for the reminder.’ Baragwanth eased his way down the steps with the aid of a stick as gnarled as he was.

‘Are you sure about this, Baragwanth?’ asked Fandalia. Doubt and disapproval vied for dominance in her expression.

‘I have spoken so it is done. Let her name be entered in the records.’ He spoke more sharply. A few more careful steps and he reached the floor.

‘You’re the Keeper of the Roll, as I recall,’ Fandalia said dryly.

‘Dear me, so I am. So I am. I must be getting old.’ Baragwanth didn’t look at Fandalia as he spoke, nor did he stop his slow advance across the floor towards his new apprentice. ‘Come with me, child.’

Bradon nodded so Kristalena duly did as she was told and slowly followed the old man out of the Assembly Chamber with only the vaguest understanding of what was happening.

‘You might say that the Library is my other home, where I do my thing whenever I can remember what it is that I’m supposed to be doing. It’s also the only library in the Village, so you’ll find a lot of people here for one reason or another. Now, where did I leave the Roll?’ Baragwanth asked as he walked Kristalena into the only building in the Village that was larger than the Assembly Chamber.

Looking through the glass-panelled inner doors, Shaeralli and the other two children Kristalena had seen in the orchard yesterday were seated at one of the long wooden tables, carefully copying words from a heavy book onto scraps of paper. As one, they looked up at the disruption.

‘It’s in the case,’ said Bradon who had followed them. ‘Same place as always.’

‘Ah, yes. Easy to lose sight of these things.’ Baragwanth pulled a silver chain from around his neck, selected one of the two small shiny keys dangling on the end and unlocked the glass case in the middle of the foyer. Pulling out the large scroll which appeared to be the only thing inside the glass box, he continued into the main room and laid it flat on the nearest desk.

‘Thank you, Max.’ Taking a quill from the pudgy youth’s hand and dripping ink across the table, he turned to his student.

‘What was your name again?’

‘Lena.’

‘Quite right. And how do you spell that?’ he asked Bradon. ‘Have to get it right, you know. It’s not the same name if it’s spelt wrong.’

‘L – E – N – A,’ Kristalena said. It was her name now. Her Royal Highness Crown Princess Kristalena san Thessalia heir to the Whitehead Throne had passed amid the humiliation and disparaging comments of the Assembly Chamber.

‘She can read?’ Baragwanth’s head jerked up in obvious surprise.

‘Can’t everyone? Of course I can read,’ said Lena. The other students scowled at the newcomer and her education.

‘How unusual. Can you write as well?’

Lena nodded at the foolish old man.

‘Excellent. You can start by writing your name here. That makes it binding.’

Lena hesitated. ‘Binding? How?’

‘The contract between an apprentice and her master, of course. What did you think it was?’ Baragwanth looked at her and there was a sharpness in his washed-grey eyes at odds with his apparent age.

‘But I’m not a witch. I’m not. I can’t be!’

Shaeralli and Max were grinning. The third boy, tall with skin the colour of coffee beans looked on with impassive curiosity. Lena glared back at the three of them, realising that they were closer to her own age than she’d first thought.

‘Of course. You’re a sorceress, not a witch. At least you will be if you take your lessons seriously. If not, you’d better be good at scrubbing floors because that’s all you’ll be doing for the rest of your life.’ Bradon’s message was blunt and harsh. He loomed over Lena, his expression telling her that he was not open to discussing the matter further. ‘Sign.’

Lena knew with absolute certainty that Bradon meant exactly that. Her hand was shaking as she took the quill from the ancient sorcerer, dipped it in the inkpot and signed her new name on the parchment. As she lifted the quill from the paper she felt the same uncomfortable tingling running up her arm as when she had briefly held Bradon’s staff in the dungeons of Queenshelm.

The children looked directly at her, sullen and silent. Lena stared back as she relinquished the quill before abruptly turning her back on them.

‘I’ll leave you to it then, Baragwanth,’ said Bradon, already leaving through the foyer.

‘Yes, you will,’ said Baragwanth and there was the same note of authority in the old man’s voice as when he had confronted Fandalia in the Assembly Chamber.

It was mid-afternoon when Baragwanth finally dismissed her and she returned to Bradon’s strange home. Lena washed and mended her clothes and Bradon’s as best she could then hung them to dry on the ropes stretched between the tall pine trees behind the tower. With nothing else for her to do she sat at the sturdy dining table brooding over the day’s events. Grung was busy in the kitchen fussing over something that would soon be dinner and she preferred to keep her distance.

She only had her thoughts to occupy her and they were not pleasant ones.

‘This is ridiculous,’ she muttered. The day had been an unpleasant blend of embarrassment in front of the village elders and an utterly pointless exercise proving to Baragwanth that she could both read and write by correcting all the mistakes Shaeralli, Max and Khannie had been making in their copying. There was no shortage of them. The elf’s writing was all but incomprehensible in places and the fat boy’s wasn’t much better. It hadn’t taken long before Lena’s impatience at her supposed teacher wasting her time had rubbed the fragile egos of the other apprentices to breaking point. Resentful glares had been exchanged over battered copies of an impressively thick book called *Runes and Ruination*.

It must have been around noon when Baragwanth announced a break. She’d followed the three children to *The Speckled Dragon* where she’d been told the proprietor provided lunch for all the apprentices. That had been another snubbing. Shaeralli had led Max and Khannie to a table for four and Max had draped his cloak over the fourth chair telling the new girl she wasn’t welcome. Lena had picked another

table that allowed her to sit with her back to the wall as she ate. She'd long finished the potato-and-something stew when the Atturan sorceress to whom the three younger children were apprenticed swept into the inn. Standing over them she frowned, looking around. 'Where's the other one? Ah, why are you . . . never mind. You lot would waste the whole afternoon here if you could.'

Khannie had stood even before Mistress Haidi had begun speaking. Max and Shaeralli weren't far behind.

'You too, Lena.'

Haidi seemed unaware of the obvious hostilities; Baragwanth just seemed indifferent.

'How can I be a witch when I've never had a tattoo?' Lena remonstrated with Bradon while endeavouring to repair a seam on her dress. The last time a needle had come so close to penetrating her skin was another nearly successful assassination attempt when she was six.

'That's a myth,' said Bradon without looking up from the book he was reading.

'What's a myth?' Lena realised she must have spoken aloud.

'Sorcerers don't have tattoos. I told you this.'

'But. . . .' She stared at the markings on the side of Bradon's face.

'The runes aren't tattooed onto our bodies, they grow from within,' he repeated the explanation he'd given her on the trail. 'It's something you need to understand.'

Lena waited as Bradon closed the book and exchanged it for his wine glass.

'The runes define the powers of a sorcerer, sorceress in your case. Each rune is associated with a specific talent. There's nothing any of us can do without the correct runes. They usually start appearing at around ten or twelve years of age but sometimes later. In your case, a lot later.'

Lena didn't believe a word of this nonsense.

‘The first one often takes months to fully develop,’ he continued. ‘After that, they start appearing more rapidly.’

‘It’s just a bruise,’ she said, refusing to accept the possibility or to acknowledge that bruises didn’t take several weeks to heal. ‘I’d know if I was a witch.’

‘Being stubborn won’t change anything. A year or two from now you could have a dozen symbols and look like a sailor who spent more of her shore leave in tattoo parlours than taverns.’

‘A dozen!’ Lena was horrified. A dozen runes was twelve too many. She didn’t want any. A vision of herself standing in front of her mother and the Royal Council with archaic runes marked on her face came and wouldn’t go away.

‘Maybe. Haidi has eight or nine. There’s two score inscribed on the Western Pillars so I suppose it’s possible to get forty but most people only get a handful. We’ll just have to wait and see. Ah, Grung. It smells wonderful. Thank you.’

The cook cheerfully placed platters of steaming roast beef and root vegetables on the table. A bucket of gravy and a couple of loaves of fresh baked bread followed.

‘Any other questions?’

Lena nodded. ‘A hundred and eight years. Baragwanth said it had been a hundred and eight years since he last took an apprentice? People don’t live that long.’

Shaking his head, Bradon said, ‘Baragwanth’s over four hundred years old. The Seers are a little younger and Bethine and Fandalia around three hundred, give or take. I can’t remember exactly.’

‘Need more spices. All used,’ Grung interrupted before Lena could think of something to say in reply. There was twice as much food on his plate than on Bradon’s and Lena’s combined.

‘Lena can go to the market tomorrow for you,’ said Bradon. ‘Normally I have to do the shopping since Grung scares most people witless. Now you’re here, that will be one of your tasks.’

If I can buy a battleship I can buy spices.

‘Can I ask—’

‘You’ll need coin. I’ll show you after dinner.’

Lena had already explored her new home and seen the treasure in the basement but decided not to mention it. ‘The man in the Assembly Chamber.’ The mundaneness of shopping at the Village market was not what Lena wanted to talk about.

‘There were five men there.’

‘You know which one I mean.’

‘Istvan. His name is Istvan and to answer the question you were afraid to ask; he’s only half human,’ Bradon spoke around a mouthful of medium roast beef.

‘And the other half?’

‘Vampire. He likes his meat raw and bloody but don’t lose any sleep over him. Not too much, anyway. You’re safe enough here.’

‘He said I burned him. What did he mean by that?’

‘You’ll have to ask him.’

Lena wasn’t done with the conversation but Bradon pointed in the direction of the kitchen. With a sigh she rose to do the dishes.

After dinner, Lena wrote Grung’s extensive shopping list out on a sheet of parchment and Bradon took her down into the basement. The large room was filled with crates and chests piled one upon the other. Some of the precariously balanced stacks were taller than Lena. A full-length mirror looked out of place. Bradon lifted the lid on the nearest chest, revealing a heap of gold and silver coins. A closer look and she saw rubies and sapphires mingled in amongst the bullion.

Lena stood there, holding the lantern, looking around the room, wondering if they were all filled with coinage. If so, there was the wealth of a small principality scattered around

her and nothing more than an unlocked door and a solitary troll to guard it.

Bradon told Lena to take however much coin she needed and do Grung's shopping before meeting Baragwanth in the Library tomorrow morning.

'Shouldn't you at least put a lock on the door?'

'I told you already that no one worries about theft here. The Seers are pretty quick off the mark with things like that,' Bradon said.

That wasn't the question Lena really wanted to ask.

'The gold and silver's from the dwarves. I do them a favour from time to time and they give me a small stipend every month. It's not much but it's more than I spend. I guess it just piles up over the years.' He looked at the overflowing chests and buckets and shrugged. 'Speaking of which, your coins are all stamped with your mother's face so I don't want you using them around here. Take whatever you need for the markets or your own needs. Don't let anyone know about those gemstones you've got either.'

'I'm not sure—'

'Money may be the only thing neither of us has to worry about. Just don't forget Grung's spices. He gets irritated when he doesn't have the right ingredients and I don't want to be living on a diet of gruel and water for a week while he's sulking.'

Lena had no idea what things like food cost. A battleship and a gift for the sixty-second anniversary of the Sharakan Emperor's reign she could price to the half penny, but a quarter-weight of dried peppercorns? Not a clue. She bent to count five gold pieces and twice as many silver into her hand. Surely that would be enough? When she turned to check Bradon's reaction, he was already climbing up the stairs. She slipped the coins into the pocket at the front of her dress. She would need a basket for tomorrow, she decided as she made her way to bed. Waiting for sleep to take her, Lena recited the names of the people she had met today. Freth. Fandalia. Haidi.

Istvan. Baragwanth. Edythe. She'd missed one and there were the other Assembly members, bored or disapproving, whose names she didn't know. The big woman with the sour face. The bald one was called Havel and Delphan was the one with the long beard. She went through the names one more time, fixing them in her memory.

Kristalena san Thessalia fled the Whitehead Palace and a bound servant called Lena arrived at a nameless village in the Broken Lands. Lena is all that I am now.

She drifted off to sleep.

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Sixteen

‘MASTER GRUNG?’ Lena tentatively interrupted the troll industriously polishing the second of a pair of silver candlesticks. Grung’s shopping list had been extensive and she had spent more time at the market than expected. She presented the overflowing basket, trying to keep the troll at arm’s length and wishing she had longer arms.

It was the first time she’d been alone with him. He seemed even bigger.

‘Girl hungry?’ He held the candlestick up to the light then put it on the bench next to its twin.

‘I brought your spices and herbs... .’

Grung rooted through the basket, extracting each item, inspecting it, sniffing some and transferring them to the wide wooden kitchen bench.

‘Parsley not fresh.’ He tossed the offending bundle of wilted green herbs into the slops bucket. ‘Rest good but not best. Girl bring best next time.’

Lena’s shoulders sagged. Wasn’t there anything she could do right?

‘Grung make good dinner for Master and Lena. Eat well tonight,’ he assured her with a light pat on the shoulder.

Too upset to cringe from the physical contact, Lena nodded, not willing to speak about her latest failure, as she left for her lesson.

‘We will begin with what you know,’ said Baragwanth when Lena eventually scurried into the Library still feeling the sting of Grung’s gentle criticism.

‘I’m beginning to suspect that the little I know of witchcraft is wrong,’ said Lena.

‘A surprisingly good start. Sorcery is not allowed in the Library. There are too many valuable books, people sleeping when they should be working and that sort of thing in here. Wouldn’t want any accidents, so we’ll go outside.’

The gnarled wizard led Lena out of the Library, leaving the collection of books and scrolls safe from whatever she would be doing. They didn’t walk far, fifty paces or so, to a grassy orchard filled with rows of heavily laden apple trees. Mistress Haidi was already there and the three youths whose abysmal copying Lena had corrected yesterday were sitting on the brown grass at their teacher’s feet, heads bowed in concentration. Behind the orchard, further back from the road, mature fields of wheat, barley and sorghum rippled in the slight breeze. Here and there villagers could be seen using scythes to reap their crops.

Lena was first sent to fetch a chair and position it in the shade and then to scavenge for dry twigs.

‘A nice day is an excellent place to start,’ said Baragwanth as he settled into his chair. ‘You have the twigs?’

‘Yes.’

“‘Yes, Master,’” he corrected her, leaning his walking stick against the armrest. ‘Etiquette is important.’

‘Yes, Master.’ Feeling stupid, Lena held out the handful of twigs she had gathered.

‘Those are most excellent twigs,’ he congratulated her. ‘Now, most sorcerers can do a bit of everything that we have a rune for but we end up only being genuinely powerful in one or two things no matter how many runes we have. Some of us only manage to do one thing well. Bradon, to use a completely random example, excels at irritating people. So we’re going to start with some of the more common talents, beginning with fire since that’s the rune growing on your wrist.’

‘Fire,’ repeated Lena.

‘Don’t interrupt. Where was I? Fire? Yes, very useful thing that, being able to start a fire whenever you want. A nice cup

of tea on a cold day. The other thing is you must learn to read. We'll start you on that tomorrow.'

'I can read, Master Baragwanth.' She had proven that only yesterday.

'Of course, we went through that already, didn't we? It's unusual. When they get here, most of the children can't read at all, or only a bit. We spend more time teaching them to read and write than we do sorcery.' He pulled at a knot in his long white beard.

'Yes, Master Baragwanth.' She looked at the other three apprentices, recalling how terrible their writing had been and understanding that maybe there was something useful she could do properly.

'Most unusual,' he repeated. 'Decidedly so. Hmm . . . well, let's begin. Do you know what sorcery is?'

'Magic.'

'Most definitely not,' Baragwanth said, his eyes narrowing. 'Magic and sorcery are completely different things.'

The elf snorted. Lena flushed with mortification and scowled at the diminutive twerp.

'You concentrate on your own lesson, Shaeralli,' said Baragwanth without turning away from his own pupil. 'That's one of the things you will have to unlearn. Magic is nothing but sleight of hand, pulling rabbits out of boots, hiding coins in the back of your hand, birds in your beard, that sort of nonsense. Sorcery is something else altogether.'

Shaeralli rolled her eyes.

'Since you seem more interested in what I am teaching our newest apprentice, Shaeralli, since *you* appear to be unable to do what you are supposed to be doing, perhaps you would answer the question.' Baragwanth still wasn't looking in the elf's direction.

Lena realised that the young elf was staring at her, and there was no mistaking the malicious grin on her face.

‘Sorcery is the power of the mind, used to affect the physical world, Master Baragwanth.’

‘Correct but incomplete. Now get back to your own lesson. You too Khannie.’ The dark-skinned boy looked away as though embarrassed.

‘Put your twigs on that stone, the one beside your foot that’s flat on top. Now, Lena, tell me – what is fire?’

Lena did as she was bid. If she’d had a piece of flint, her twigs would burn easily.

‘Burning.’

“‘Burning, Master,’” he corrected her, his voice a little harder. ‘If you can’t learn to address people properly you’re going to end up offending someone. Around here, that can be dangerous, so best I not have to remind you too many times.’

‘Burning, Master.’

‘Your answer is wrong. Try again.’

Lena thought furiously, her mind skipping from one possibility to the next. This was a waste of time but what choice did she have but to play along? Bradon couldn’t have been any clearer. If she wasn’t an apprentice she was out and she had nothing but a servant’s life of drudgery to look forward to. She wasn’t a witch either and no amount of bruising made her one. The discoloured skin on her wrist was no different from the blue-black mark forming where her shin had banged into a water trough at the market this morning or the much larger bruise from when she had slipped in the bathing chamber that still made sitting down uncomfortable. Nobody had looked at either of those and she had no intention of offering her left butt cheek for inspection. She just didn’t believe Bradon’s claim that the runes somehow grew themselves.

‘Heat? Master.’

‘Better. Think about the sticks and think about heat. Think about sticks and think about them getting hotter. Think about the sticks bursting into flame and think about nothing else until they do.’

Lena sighed and turned her face to the twigs.

‘Try sitting down.’

This is a complete waste of time.

Instead of thinking about heat and small twigs burning in response to the directed power of her mind, Lena wondered what was happening in Queenshelm. Had the Queen called off the search? Had Serephanie been designated heir presumptive even though the older twin’s sixteenth birthday was a year away, or would anyone realise that the absence of the heir’s signet ring meant she intended to return? And Catriona’s Necklace? *I should have taken that too.*

A cloud passed overhead and she welcomed the respite from the heat. Summer was almost over and it wouldn’t be long before the leaves started changing colour, shades of green and yellow giving way to brown and gold. She wondered how heavily the snow fell in this nameless community. She could see touches of white on the distant mountains surrounding the valley.

‘It helps if you keep your mind on the task at hand,’ said Baragwanth.

‘You can read minds?’ That would be really embarrassing.

‘Not I, don’t have that rune, but I can read faces and yours is the countenance of a girl daydreaming. Concentrate.’ Baragwanth closed his eyes again.

Lena sighed and tried to focus on the idea of heat, just a little heat. It was ridiculous. Had *Kupar’s Maiden* escaped from the warships sent to catch her?

‘Look! Look!’ A shrill voice interrupted Lena’s reminiscences of her sea voyage. ‘Oh, it went out.’ The tiny elf girl was jumping up and down with excitement. ‘It was just a spark and . . . just a spark, but it was there. I did it.’

The other two children applauded.

‘Well done, Shaeralli. Can you do it again?’ asked the young Atturan instructor. It was the first time Lena had heard her speak since she arrived in the orchard.

‘I can try Mistress Haidi. I’m sure I can.’ Shaeralli rubbed her pointed right ear, sat down and bent over her collection of dried twigs. Her lips moved and her face scrunched up in concentration. She muttered some more, then more audibly. ‘Burn. Just burn, won’t you!’

A wisp of smoke came from the centre of the elf’s small pile of twigs. A tiny orange flame appeared, flickered and died.

‘Yes!’ Shaeralli shrieked in triumph.

The other children, both with normal human ears, were congratulating the young girl. The fat boy, Max, patted her on the shoulder. ‘I hope I can do it soon,’ he said, though what it was he was supposed to be doing with the pebbles scattered in front of his battered adult-sized boots was unclear.

Shaeralli smiled triumphantly and Lena went back to staring at her own sticks, stubbornly unlit and seemingly immune to her limp efforts.

By the time the sun was approaching the western horizon, a very happy Shaeralli had reduced her twigs to ashes, been told off for trying to set fire to a fence-post and been reminded that she should eat something soon. None of the other apprentices had succeeded.

‘Goodness me. Did I fall asleep? I must have done. Well, it’s getting late so best we call it a day. Come to the Library tomorrow morning after you’ve finished your chores and we will carry on from there,’ Baragwanth told her. ‘Now just put my chair back under the eaves and you can be on your way girl.’

Lena was happy to abandon her unburned sticks and bring her first full day as an apprentice to an end. It was about two miles from the orchard to Bradon’s squat, ugly tower and the walk helped improve her mood.

‘What are you doing?’ Bradon asked as he walked in to the main room.

‘Accounting for the money you entrusted me with.’ She swept the coins into her purse to clear the table.

Bradon glanced at the list she had written out. ‘Bunch of thieves – didn’t you think to bargain with them?’

‘I thought about it but—’

‘But, what?’

‘Pretty much everyone I’ve met either dislikes me or. . . . Anyway, I don’t need more people complaining about me.’ She could feel the heat in her face.

‘You were worried you might offend a bunch of unscrupulous merchants? You’d rather they take you for the village idiot? Well, you got your wish.’

I can’t do anything right.

Lena unclenched her fists and moved the paper and pencil to make room for plates heaped with steaming food. Pale dumplings bigger than her hand surrounded by mashed root vegetables. A loaf of bread and a slab of yellow butter were already on the table along with a carafe of water and two tankards of foaming ale.

Grung returned to the kitchen and began ladling something into a bowl. A delicious odour wafted through the room. Lena was starving. She’d had nothing to eat since breakfast.

‘Pretty girl hungry. Yes, she is. Grung make good dinner,’ he repeated the morning’s assurances without turning around.

Lena closed her eyes and inhaled. The food smelt good and she really was hungry. Last night’s dinner had been the best meal to pass her lips since leaving the palace.

The troll returned, his broad mouth widening in what Lena supposed was a smile. He put a plate piled high with additional dumplings and a bowl of sauce in the middle and took the chair that was nearly as big as her mother’s throne for himself.

‘You’re a laughing stock all over the Village,’ Bradon continued, leaning his staff against the wall and taking his seat at the head of the table. ‘The merchants and farmers are taking turns to boast about how much they overcharged you for less

than the best produce. Stalya was positively gloating down at *The Speckled Dragon*. Didn't you ever learn to bargain?

'I've never had to buy anything smaller than a warship before.' Stalya was the flabby old bat who cultivated ice peppers and other exotics in her shaded nurseries. Lena jabbed her fork into something on her plate, no longer caring what it was.

'This isn't Queenshelm. You won't find merchants using hollow weights here, but bargaining closely is something of a local sport. I'll come with you next market day,' Bradon offered.

'No,' said Lena after a moment. Market days were every Monday and Friday. She had three days to come up with a plan. 'It will be worse if you deal with them. Let me sort it out.'

Lena was aware of the troll looking at her. Bradon picked up his spoon and took a mouthful and she allowed the whatever-it-was to finish making its way to her mouth, cautiously taking a small bite. Pork, she decided, and took a full mouthful. She could taste the herbs.

'Mmmm . . . this is fabulous,' she said. Grung could have served this at a royal banquet and had Sartor coming back for thirds.

The troll smiled and popped a whole dumpling into his mouth.

'I can deal with this,' Lena repeated.

'Fine,' Bradon said after a long pause. 'Just don't do anything too drastic.'

'Not girl's fault,' said Grung, his voice deepening. 'People not nice to her.'

'Well, if you don't want me to speak with them, I'll expect you to get better prices next time,' said Bradon. 'I have plenty of money, but it's embarrassing for me as well as you when this sort of thing happens.'

Lena nodded, wanting the conversation to end.

‘So how did your lesson with Baragwanth go?’

‘What lesson? I learned nothing,’ she told Bradon, all too aware that she sounded like a petulant child.

‘Really? All afternoon and the old wheezebag taught you nothing?’

‘It’s not his fault. I’m not a witch,’ she said.

‘Hummmph. Your rune says otherwise. Anyway, tomorrow, you’ll have your lesson in the morning and then come back here after lunch. The crops need harvesting. If we’re lucky we’ll get in another planting before the seasons change on us. Winter comes early here. Be back here at noon. I’ve spoken to Baragwanth.’

‘I need some new clothes,’ said Lena after she had finished her first dumpling. ‘I’ve mended all the tears and turned the hem on my dress, but there’s only so much I can accomplish with a needle and thread.’

‘There’s a seamstress or three in the Village. Ellish makes my clothes. Her cottage is just past Nathen’s smithy. You can go tomorrow on your way back from your lessons and make sure you get something warm. Winter’s closer than you think and it gets a lot colder here than in Queenshelm.’

‘It snows in Queenshelm.’

‘Not like here. Tell Ellish it’s for winter,’ said Bradon dryly. He emptied his mug of ale. ‘This is excellent ale, Grung. Is there any more?’

The delighted troll was out of his chair and back with a small barrel and refilling his master’s drink faster than Lena would have believed possible. He came around the table and Lena flinched. ‘Girl not like ale? Good to drink,’ he insisted.

Lena took a sip. It was smoother than what she’d been served at the *Emerald Arms* in Lower Haft but still tasted bitter to her inexperienced palate.

‘It’s very nice, thank you Grung,’ she said and drank a bit more. It wasn’t bad at all.

At least it's not staring at sticks and listening to children taunting me.

Lena snipped another heavy eggplant from its stalk and placed it in the basket. There was room for a couple more of the big blackish-purple vegetables. Once the basket was full she would carry it to the cart waiting at the head of the field. Most of the villagers were working in the fields and orchards at this time of the year. Harvesting the vegetables and fruits that would see them through the long winter months when, she was told, the ground would be covered in frost and snow and growing food would be an impossibility.

A couple of hundred paces further north, Bradon was using a mule to plough the ground. He wasn't the only landowner hoping that a fast-growing crop could be seeded and harvested before the autumn rains turned the fields to mud. Beside him, Grung was also pulling an iron-shod plough through the soil. Without the assistance of a mule, the big troll was turning the soil faster and leaving straighter furrows than his master.

Her wicker basket was full again. Struggling under the unaccustomed weight, Lena staggered back to the cart. She estimated that she had only two more rounds of picking and carrying to finish gathering the eggplants, but was pretty sure her day was far from over. Bradon's land holdings were among the largest in the Village and the late summer harvesting would take weeks. Other villagers would be coming to help as soon as their own crops had been brought in, exchanging their labour for a share of the produce.

'Hard day?' Bradon asked as she came in from the washroom, still towelling her hair. The long bath in cold water piped straight from the mountain waterfall had been shocking and refreshing in equal measure.

'No different from anyone else who lives here,' she replied. Her back ached from the endless bending and straightening, she could feel a burn on the back of her neck and forearms from the sun and her palms were red and sore. *I will not whine.*

'I thought you'd be complaining.'

‘Why? What do I have to moan about?’ Still shivering from the bath, she moved a chair closer to the fire but didn’t sit. The season was hovering indecisively between summer and autumn, but she could already feel a coolness in the evenings and could imagine the snowline on the distant peaks slowly creeping down towards the waiting Village.

Bradon grunted as Lena refilled his ale mug and poured some for herself before sitting.

‘I was forgetting, aren’t you a little young for that kind of thing?’

‘I had my first glass of wine when I was eight. It was part of my training, so I wouldn’t make a fool of myself at state functions,’ she explained.

‘I suppose that makes sense.’

Lena flinched as she settled her aching body into a chair. ‘Same routine tomorrow?’

‘Every other day for you. I don’t want you to fall behind in your lessons.’

Lena pulled a face.

‘You prefer the fields to the classroom?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘At least I’m achieving something when I pick your crops. Staring at a pile of twigs all afternoon is not an achievement. It’s nothing.’

‘It will be the greatest thing in the world once you succeed.’

‘If you say so, Master.’

She wondered how much longer before Grung had dinner on the table. She could have eaten it raw, she was so hungry.

Market day. Round two with the conniving Village merchants. Basket in hand, Lena approached the large rectangular space with its sheltered stalls and overflowing tables, small carts and

produce bins. Farmers, smallholders and artisans bellowed to attract custom.

‘Dried peppers! Sun-dried peppers! Will last through the winter!’

‘Smoked eel! Best smoked eel!’

Show no fear, she reminded herself, looking at the shadow on the ground dwarfing her own. *And don't laugh either.*

Lena strode through the cart-wide opening, basket in hand and purse on hip, joining the melee of eager customers.

‘Let's start with the olives shall we?’ Bradon had asked for some to nibble on when he was relaxing before dinner.

The hubbub waned. Space opened up around her. The crowd began to thin.

‘Half a pound of marinated olives, please,’ Lena asked politely. She didn't know the thin man's name, but he was standing slack-jawed behind a table covered in earthenware pots filled with stoned and marinated olives and bowls of unprocessed black and green fruit. She stepped closer to inspect the goods.

The olive merchant stepped back, as far as the retaining wall behind him allowed.

‘Does Bradon prefer green or black?’

‘Black. Master like black olives,’ said Grung, bending over the table to sniff the goods. He pointed to a jar, though how he could smell anything through the wax seal Lena did not inquire.

‘How much for this jar, goodman?’

Lena eventually coaxed the vendor into stammering out a price, told the man that two pennies less would be better and waited for his head to wobble before placing the required coinage on the table. Since olives weren't grown locally, the high price was only to be expected.

‘Now, what's next, Grung? Spices?’ Lena turned around to look for the spice merchants and her resolve faltered into a

broad grin. The open space between the merchant's stands was all but deserted. The last of the villagers were scurrying back towards the main road, their baskets and bags empty. Some of the merchants weren't far behind and she guessed the remainder weren't quite ready to desert their precious wares.

Lena led Grung from stall to stall, hampered by finding many had been abandoned by their proprietors, checking items off her list and watching closely as the experienced cook sniffed, prodded and tapped the merchandise before making his selection.

'Melons?' They hadn't been on her list.

'Make good soup.' Grung picked the vine-green and sun-yellow melons from the barrow one by one, placed them next to his ear and tapped delicately with a single knuckle. Some were carefully returned to the barrow, others placed on the table. He continued the process until he had set eight aside for Lena to purchase. Her overflowing basket was full of goods that would be better off not having something as heavy as a melon placed on top of them so she laid out two more of Bradon's bronze pennies for a pair of string bags to carry the melons.

'Last and certainly least,' she muttered to herself as she approached the final stall. 'A good morning to you, Mistress Stalya.'

The woman's jaw wobbled but no sound came out.

Lena went through the motions of inspecting chilies, coriander and other herbs, asking Grung for his opinion on each of the neatly bound bundles before making a selection and moving on to the next one.

'And how much will all this be today, Mistress Stalya?' Lena asked with exquisite courtesy. 'Oh! Are you all right? I do hope you haven't hurt yourself,' she said with all the sincerity she could pretend as the hard-bargaining horticulturalist stepped backwards, tripped over a pail and made a satisfying splonk as she hit the muddy ground.

Mistress Stalya regained her feet with quite remarkable speed, possibly motivated by Lena's offer to let Grung help her up. Eventually, they got around to discussing the price.

'Just . . . just take them and go,' Stalya babbled.

'Come, come. I can't do that. We must agree a fair price.' If Lena wasn't under orders to attend Baragwanth in the Library, she would have been prepared to spend all day standing between the old hag and any customers who were brave enough to return. Eventually, Stalya muttered a number much smaller than Lena had paid on her first visit and Lena cheerfully placed some coins on the table.

She escorted Grung back to main road to the sound of silence.

'Master Baragwanth is not feeling well, so you will join my apprentices,' Haidi told Lena when she eventually arrived at the Library.

'Great. Nursery school,' she said, not sufficiently softly.

'You're more or less the same age,' Haidi pointed out. 'Take a board and some chalk and sit with the others, Lena.'

Realising she had no choice, Lena picked one of flat slate boards from the pile by the door, a couple of pieces of chalk and a damp cloth. *This is going to be as big a waste of time as staring at twigs.*

'And wipe that scowl off your face,' the young Atturan added. 'You need to be able to read and write properly if you're going to be any good as a sorceress.'

Lena groaned. 'Baragwanth . . . Master Baragwanth knows I can read and write. He had me correcting their work on my first lesson.'

'Really? He never mentioned that.' Haidi was unmoved.

'Somehow, I'm not surprised.'

Haidi's lips thinned. 'Since you're so confident, sit down and read this.' She dumped a finger-thin book on the table in front of Lena. A black-and-white sketch of smiling children playing with a hound decorated the front cover.

‘*The Woodcutter’s Cottage.*’ In the name of the Mortal Goddess, I grew out of this before I was three. It’s a book for children, very stupid children. . . .’ Lena looked pointedly at Shaeralli sitting opposite her and then turned her head to include Max and Khannie.

‘Hey!’ Max objected.

‘And, unless my memory has succumbed to infirmity rather early in life, there’s nothing about sorcery in it. If I have to be stuck in here reading things, at least make them useful things,’ Lena all but snarled.

‘You really do think a lot of yourself, don’t you?’ The sorceress moved closer, staring up at the tall girl and down at her arrogance.

‘Of course not, Mistress Haidi,’ said Lena, belatedly remembering that she was speaking to a woman who was not only a sorceress who could probably turn her into a frog but also a member of the Assembly who could banish her from the Village. ‘But I can do better than waste my time, and yours, reading nice little tales about happy families and—’

‘Then try this.’ Haidi pulled a thick volume from the nearest shelf, one of several identical copies, and slammed it down top of the offending children’s storybook.

‘*Runes and Ruination,*’ Lena read aloud. It was the book Shaeralli and the others had been copying from yesterday.

‘It’s the standard book of sorcery. Quite dated in parts, but that’s where everyone starts once they can read well enough. Find the rune for fire and read what it says. Aloud.’ The Atturan’s unspoken threat hung there.

Haidi’s delicate fingers with their long nails were tapping softly against the slender wand stuck into her waistband.

‘Miss High-and-mighty’s bluffing,’ Shaeralli whispered to Khannie.

Lena looked at the elf, sat, pulled the book towards herself and flicked through the pages until she found the correct entry. The book was divided into three parts; known, unknown and

no longer. Alphabetical ordering within each section made it easy. She let out a small gasp when she found the correct page.

‘She can’t do it,’ agreed Max, not bothering to lower his voice.

“‘Fire is one of the more common runes’,’ Lena began reading the text aloud, enunciating each syllable carefully and stumbling over nothing. Lena continued until, eighteen pages later, she reached the beginnings of the entry for something called fluxation and stopped.

‘Where did you learn to read?’ Haidi demanded.

‘You’ll have to ask Master Bradon. I’m not allowed to talk about myself,’ Lena replied, staring at the rune drawn on the open pages in front of her. All the heat and frustration had disappeared from her voice. She struggled to maintain her composure, took two deep breaths.

‘Please allow me to apologise for my rudeness, Mistress Haidi,’ she said at last. Lena pushed *The Woodcutter’s Cottage* across the table towards Shaeralli. ‘So, what would you suggest I study today?’

Reading nonsense for most of the day was, Lena decided as she opened the front door, a step up from staring at twigs. Bradon and Grung had spent their day in the fields and Lena hoped she would be joining them tomorrow.

Bradon was sitting in his comfortable chair beside the west-facing windows where the late afternoon sun provided plenty of light for reading. A scroll lay partly open on his lap and a glass of white wine and a small plate of olives sat on the table to his left.

‘And how was your lesson?’

‘Master Baragwanth was feeling unwell, so Mistress Haidi made me sit in the Library reading with the brat brood.’

‘Those three didn’t have your advantages,’ he reminded her.

‘True. I should make allowances.’

‘And the market?’

‘Why ask if you already know?’

‘I heard. They may have been laughing at you yesterday but right now they’re actually begging me to go the market instead of you. That’s a first.’

‘I’m embarrassed to say I found it quite satisfying.’ That had been the good part of her day.

‘There’s been a request that you don’t take Grung with you when you go to the market, or anywhere else for that matter. Several requests.’

‘Why ever not, Master? I can’t possibly carry everything myself,’ she said, feigning innocence.

Bradon just looked at Lena.

‘Fine. The first time I went they overcharged me. Maybe I should have bargained harder but they were much more reasonable today.’

‘You mean Grung scared the breeches off all the other customers.’ Bradon smiled, not bothering to mask his amusement with official disapproval.

‘I wouldn’t put it quite like that.’

‘Spare me. Do what you want, but just remember that you’re living in the same village as these people. You’ve made your point, but you’ll have dealings with them every week.’ He popped an olive into his mouth and picked up his scroll. ‘Good olives, by the way.’

As she blew out the candle and lay down on her bed, Lena’s thoughts were on the only thing that mattered. The picture of the fire rune in *Runes and Ruination* was too similar to the increasingly well-defined discolouration on her left forearm for her liking.

Please let it not be true.

Seventeen

LENA'S DAYS BECAME ROUTINE. Grung cooked breakfast for twice as many people as lived in Bradon's tower and ensured there was no wastage. Lena did the dishes, a chore that got easier once she learned to use hot water and found a balance between too much and too little of the grated soap that made her eyes sting. On market days she bought whatever Grung said was needed from the grudgingly compliant merchants in the Village market. Otherwise, her schedule was mornings in the Library reading books that made no sense and afternoons that alternated between harvesting the sun-ripened late crops and staring at piles of twigs in the sunburnt orchard while the other three young apprentices practised their developing skills and her putative instructor dozed in the shade.

Shaeralli could start a tiny fire almost as soon as she focused her attention on the twigs. Haidi still looked far too young for the responsibilities of Assembly membership, but Lena was beginning to understand that she was an excellent teacher. The Atturan sorceress had begun making things more difficult by dousing the elf's twigs with water. Her other students were not far behind – Max could move a pebble the size of an eyeball a few feet at a time while Khannie was. . . . Lena still wasn't sure what he was doing but, whatever it was, Haidi seemed pleased with the dark-skinned boy's progress. Only Lena had been unable to do anything. Not so much as a single spark had she produced. Her twigs showed no sign of being warmed by anything other than the afternoon sun. Worse, she had looked at *Runes and Ruination* several times, making sure she arrived in the Library before Baragwanth. Comparing the book's drawing of a fire rune against her progressively clear bruising had become an exercise in confirmation. Denial was giving way to fear. And frustration.

Each evening, she walked back to Bradon's squat tower for a hearty troll-cooked meal and told her unconcerned master that she had learned nothing because there was nothing for her to learn.

'I'm not a witch,' she said, sipping wine while she waited for the nightly banquet to be served.

'Sorceress. So, you'll stop going to lessons?' Bradon kicked off his boots and settled into one of the comfortable chairs near the unlit fireplace. There was a hole at the heel of the sock on his right foot. Lena would darn it next time he put his socks out for washing. Needlework she could do.

'Of course not. You have commanded that I attend lessons, and I shall. I gave my oath. I expected to be spending my time scrubbing floors and polishing boots, but—'

'Pretty girl not wash floors. Grung do that,' interrupted the troll, placing four roasted chickens, an assortment of vegetables, fresh bread and a boat of heavy gravy on the table.

'—I'm spending my time sitting under an apple tree, staring at twigs and being laughed at by children. It's a very nice apple tree, of course. Much better company than those brats.' By the time she finished washing her hands and took a seat, Grung had loaded her plate with much more than she could possibly eat.

'That's the first time I've heard you really complain since we left Queenshelm,' said Bradon, sounding amused. Instead of coming to the table, he unrolled a tattered scroll covered in neat rows of archaic script and started reading.

'For that I am sorry,' she said. The chicken had been roasted to perfection. 'A serving girl has no right to complain about anything, least of all one in my position. It won't happen again, Master.'

'The rune on your forearm's getting darker. It's almost complete,' he said more seriously. 'Usually, people can't do anything until they have at least one fully formed rune. Give it time.'

‘If it is a rune, are you sure it’s the one for fire? A lot of others look similar.’ She looked at her forearm, wishing Bradon would tell her she was wrong but knowing he wouldn’t. A couple of months ago Princess Kristalena would have laughed at such a preposterous discussion.

‘Definitely fire,’ Bradon said without looking up from his scroll. ‘Fire, light and fluxation are the most common. Maybe physical warding. Just about everyone has one of those.’

Lena stood and picked up her plate. Fluxation was what Max used to move his pebbles around. It was easier to read about sorcery than to do it.

‘Not eat?’ asked Grung. ‘Food no good?’

‘I have eaten enough, thank you.’ Being polite to a proud cook big enough to tear her into pieces without his attention wandering from the chicken carcass disappearing down his gullet was the diplomatic thing to do.

‘I finish.’ He’d already devoured two chickens.

She gave him the plate and watched as the remaining slivers of breast meat were consumed, bones and all, followed by the last crust of bread. Only the crockery escaped consumption. Barely. Grung was scooping up the crumbs with his foot-long tongue when Lena took the kettle off the fire and poured boiling water into the stone sink.

This is the highlight of my day.

Lena dutifully reported to the orchard for her lesson. After dragging Baragwanth’s chair to the indicated location, she sank cross-legged to the ground. Giving up on her assigned task almost immediately, she watched Payron and the other older apprentices, both girls, practising their talents. One had the same rich ebony-hued skin as Khannie and the other the creamy complexion, blond hair and excessive bust associated with people from the free states comprising the Norder League and the Sharakan Empire. Both were a few years older than Lena. Rochelle and Amber, she’d heard they were called, though neither had condescended to introduce herself. Nor had Payron, whom she was told should be addressed as Lord

Payron because he was the grandson of the Elven King. With a sigh, Lena bowed her head to give the slumbering Baragwanth at least the impression she was concentrating on the indifferent pile of twigs in front of her.

‘Are you really a sorcerer?’

It took Lena a moment to realise that Shaeralli was talking to her. She ignored the elf until a small pebble struck her in the shoulder. Max, showing off, she assumed.

‘All your education and you can’t even start a fire.’ Shaeralli held a small stick in her hand and stared at it intently. A thin tendril of smoke appeared almost immediately. The smoke thickened and then became a solitary flame, taunting Lena as it danced in the gentle breeze.

Haidi was several paces away from her young charges talking to Freth about the production of apple cider and didn’t seem to notice the byplay. Beyond them, she could see Payron suspended a foot above the ground, reading a book of exceedingly dull Tamurian verse aloud; *The Trials of the Penitent Merchant*. A six-year-old Lena had been forced to memorise the wretched thing and, under threat of a beating if she was less than flawless, recite it aloud at a banquet welcoming Tamur’s new ambassador to Queenshelm.

‘My second rune’s getting clearer,’ said Shaeralli. She lifted up her dress to show the discolouration on the outside of her right thigh. ‘I’m hoping for flying or levitation, Lord Payron’s got flying, but Mistress Haidi says it’s too early to tell.’ She dropped her skirt when Max started taking too much interest.

‘I don’t think she’s a sorcerer at all. Only Master Baragwanth would take her and he’s too old and doesn’t even try. No one else wanted to waste their time on her,’ said Max. In front of the man-sized boy, a small black pebble lifted itself off the ground and flew towards Lena, striking her arm. ‘Dang, I was aiming for her head.’

‘She lives with the troll,’ said Khannie. ‘That’s creepy.’

‘Do you think she kisses it? Does it use its tongue, Lena? How far down your throat does it slither?’ The elf snickered.

It took Lena’s entire royal discipline to suppress the urge to reply to Shaeralli’s childish taunt in kind. Or maybe, just maybe, to slap the pint-sized bitch around the head a few times.

Max was laughing. At her. They all were.

She clenched her teeth and looked at her sticks. The same uncooperative pieces of wood she’d been staring at for over a week.

‘As useless as a bishop in a brothel,’ said Khannie.

‘Not a sausage. Not even one of Bethlemann’s sausages. She’ll be here forever,’ added Max. The local butcher had a reputation for mixing coarse flour with his ground pork.

Shaeralli turned away from the object of her derision. ‘Who cares? What do you think we’ll learn next?’

Lena had endured the unfairness of a mother’s disfavour, the terror of a rampaging demon, the deprivations of an arduous five-week journey to the Village, the slow ache of unfamiliar manual labour under an unforgiving sun and the impropriety of living in the same house as a domesticated troll with barely a word of complaint. All the frustrations and fears of the long summer boiled to the surface under the taunting.

‘Burn! Goddamn you! Burn!’ She screamed at the twigs, leaping to her feet and then gasping in pain as the rune writhed and clenched inside her forearm. A column of flame erupted in front of her, reducing the twigs to ashes in an instant. The stone beneath them cracked into blackened pieces with a sound like thunder. Flames raced across the brown grass of early autumn. A pair of crows flung themselves skywards, burning and falling as they failed to escape the inferno.

Shaeralli screamed as she beat frantically at her burning dress, her green eyes bigger than unripe tomatoes while Khannie threw himself over the low stone wall protecting the fruit trees from the goats in the next paddock. In spite of his bulk, Max was just as quick and rolled down the bank,

splashing into the muddy irrigation ditch to escape the spreading fire.

The nearest apple tree, laden with late-season fruit, burst into flames, then the next and the next as the firestorm spread from its uncomprehending epicentre across the tinder-dry orchard.

A wave of heat washed back over Lena. She staggered, falling to the ground as the world seemed to tip on its side, only vaguely aware of the flames climbing up the left sleeve of her blouse.

‘Water,’ shouted a woman’s voice. Edythe. ‘Water!’

A globe of shimmering brown water flew from the drainage ditch, past the nearest apple tree to drop over the fire. Freth was stomping on patches of burning grass and screaming obscenities. Both gestures were equally useless to stop the fire leaping from tree to tree. Edythe continued summoning water from the ditch and Baragwanth did the same. Payron and Haidi came running with buckets and joined the efforts to contain the blaze.

‘My best dress,’ wailed Shaeralli slapping impotently at the smouldering ruins of her clothing. ‘My—’

The elf’s complaints were cut off when Payron tipped a bucket of dirty water on her, followed by a second one.

There was a moment when nobody spoke and the only sounds were the snapping and popping of the burning orchard and the hard breathing of Freth, his face as red as the unfettered flames consuming his trees.

‘I hate you!’ Shaeralli shrieked at Lena before turning and running away from the onlookers gathering on the road, but not before everyone had seen the tears tracking down her ash-stained cheeks.

Lena swayed, fighting desperately to remain conscious as she stood up.

‘You’re on fire,’ said Payron.

Lena looked around, confused. Her blouse was burning, flames licking their way across her shoulder and chest. ‘That’s strange—’

Her words were cut off when one of the sorcerers dumped a load of water over her. An unfamiliar hand grabbed her upper arm, preventing her from falling over again.

‘What just happened?’ Haidi asked quietly, when the nearby fires had been brought under control and all apprentices had been accounted for.

Payron was, too obviously, trying not to laugh. ‘I guess somebody decided that she’s a sorceress after all.’

Lena became aware of both the elf’s hand holding her upright and that there was far too little of her blouse left for decency.

‘My trees,’ yelled Freth finding his voice again. ‘You’ll—’

‘Yes, yes. We know,’ said Haidi, silencing the irate orchardist.

‘I think that’s quite enough for today, Lena,’ said Baragwanth, watching Edythe still dousing the burning fruit trees. The old sorcerer seemed utterly unperturbed by the scale of the damage. ‘Go home and eat something. Be in the Library early tomorrow.’

Lena stared at the blazing trees, stretching out in rows to the south like outsized torches. She could smell scorched apples and taste ash on her tongue. With wide staring eyes, she looked from the fleeing Shaeralli to Khannie peeking over the top of the stone wall to the ruined orchard, struggling to accept what had happened and realising that she had been the one to cause all the chaos.

‘What . . . how—’ Lena shook off the unwanted elven support and reached for a smouldering fence-post to steady herself. She somehow missed the post and staggered into Payron. ‘Keep your hands off me,’ she blurted as he prevented her from collapsing. When he didn’t let go, she swung her fist and missed completely, succeeding only in pulling herself further off balance.

‘Fishguts,’ she exclaimed as their heads clashed.

Payron seemed unaffected and she wanted to punch him again.

‘She’s about to pass out,’ said Haidi. ‘Payron, make sure Lena gets back to Bradon’s safely. I don’t want to have to drag her out of a drainage ditch.’

‘If his lorsship doesn’t keep his eyes to hisself he’ll be the one in the ditch,’ slurred Lena.

A trickle of blood was running from his nose and Payron ignored that as well as the garbled threat. As he steered her in the direction of the road leading to Bradon’s tower, Lena thought it was a good thing she hadn’t lost her temper in the Library.

From the edges of the forest a figure watched the burning trees. The distance was too far to make out the faces of either the firefighters or the irate farmer and his wife frantically yelling words lost on the dry breeze blowing in the wrong direction. It didn’t matter. The watcher could sense the echoes of the wand-users’ sorcery. Pale weak things compared to the thunderclap that had started the inferno. The power of the untried and untrained girl had been surprising.

‘But it shouldn’t have been,’ she whispered to the foliage dying around her. If the seeker was to do what was required of her, she would need considerable power and the ability to use it. Not for the first time, she considered taking the girl from the fool who guarded her. In other hands, she would learn faster. She could even be turned. The temptation was sizeable, but she resisted. After all, what did another year or two matter? When the time came, the girl would find her own way and the darkness would claim her.

‘You will make a fine servant for the Lord of the Pit, daughter of the winds. A fine servant indeed.’

The slight woman silently retreated deeper into the forest, her passage making no noise as her feet touched the twigs and leaves beneath her, the birds and insects falling silent as she passed.

‘So what did you learn today?’ It was the same question Bradon asked every evening. He had to repeat his inquiry.

‘That I shouldn’t lose my temper.’ Lena spoke in a murmur, looking at her untasted food. A thick juicy pork chop, an inch and a half thick, swimming in brown sauce with roasted potatoes and some kind of green and purple vegetables that might have been one of the eggplants she had harvested herself. It smelled wonderful but she wasn’t hungry any more. She wasn’t anything that she wanted to be.

Bradon took a sip of ale and waited for Lena to continue.

‘I learned that I shouldn’t let children bait me and apple trees are worth two silver marks and . . . and I learned . . . that you were right. I’m a witch,’ she said in a jagged whisper. Lena picked up her knife and fork, looked at them as though wondering what they were for and then put them back on the table, indifferent to the tears that followed.

‘You don’t seem very happy about it.’ Bradon put his empty mug down.

‘Why should I be? In Queenshelm we’re taught that witches are evil, they work for the Dark One and—’

‘You think I am evil? That every sorcerer who lives here, all thirty of us, is evil?’

‘I don’t believe that.’ She lifted up her head to look directly at her master.

‘It’s a start,’ he said, his voice grave.

Lena pushed her plate away. ‘It’s not something I can change, can I? I can’t not be a witch?’

‘Sorceress. And, it’s true, you are what you are. The choice is between using your talents and ignoring them and it’s not an easy thing to suppress. Sooner or later, when you’re angry or frightened or merely upset something will happen that you have no control over.’

‘Like today,’ she whispered, tears falling down her cheeks. ‘I could have killed those children. I nearly did.’

‘Girl crying. Not like food?’

‘The food’s fine, Grung,’ said Bradon. ‘She’s just upset about something that happened today.’

‘People not nice to girl? Grung hit bad people with club,’ he growled, domestic amiability instantly replaced by bestial wrath. The leather goblet was crushed in the troll’s fist. Goat’s milk sloshed over the table. It was the first time Grung had displayed anger since Lena’s arrival.

‘Not this time, thank you Grung,’ she said quickly. Lena pushed her plate across the table to distract him.

The troll’s anger evaporated. He tossed the remains of the goblet over his shoulder towards the kitchen and started eating Lena’s dinner even before the crumpled goblet landed in the exact centre of the slops bucket.

‘I could have killed someone,’ she repeated herself, not even trying to wipe the tears from her face. ‘If I’d been looking at Shaeralli instead of the twigs. . . .’

Bradon let her cry it out for a bit before speaking again. ‘Two silver marks?’

‘Forty-two,’ she whispered, not lifting her head.

‘You incinerated twenty-one trees without a wand?’ His eyes widened. ‘Without killing yourself?’

Lena didn’t say anything.

‘You know where the coin is. Take whatever Freth is demanding and you might as well take some more and get yourself a heavy cloak, the one you got from Ellish isn’t warm enough, a good pair of boots and some thick gloves. You’ll need them when winter comes. It’s not far away,’ he said, getting up to refill his mug.

And some new dresses, thought Lena miserably.

After a moment’s hesitation, Bradon dipped a second mug into the ale barrel and placed it in front of Lena.

Eighteen

THE MORNING AFTER her display of temper-fuelled pyrotechnics, Lena walked through a gauntlet of fretful, curious and amused looks from the Villagers and arrived in the Library very much wishing today was her day to labour at the crops. There was a whole field of grapes to be harvested but it wouldn't be her hands that carefully cut the sweet black bunches from their vines. She picked the book Baragwanth had assigned her yesterday, and just about every day before that, from the shelves; *A Basic Ontological Introduction to Mystical Theory, Part Six, Volume Three* (second revised edition with expanded supplemental footnotes). A further fourteen dust-covered volumes in the series, all with uncreased spines, were waiting on the shelves. Having found nothing that seemed remotely useful or interesting in the first three tomes, the thought of spending the entire winter reading the turgid, stilted prose was depressing. Before yesterday it hadn't mattered so much; the assigned reading was just boring. Now it was worse than tedious; it was a waste of precious time that could have been spent studying something useful. Frustrated, she also grabbed a battered dust-free copy of the book Haidi was using to teach her three young apprentices, *Runes and Ruination*, and took a seat near the southern wall, positioned so her back was not facing either the window or the locked door to the restricted section. Habit. She opened a page at random hoping to learn something before Baragwanth tottered through the double doors. The ancient sorcerer's tardiness wasn't unusual and she wasn't about to complain.

Shaeralli arrived wearing a patched hand-me-down dress, too large for the elf's half-pint frame. She looked at Lena and then selected a desk on the far side of the room instead of a seat at her usual table. Max and Khannie entered together a few minutes later, and sat next to Shaeralli, flanking the elf like bodyguards. Nobody said anything. Without Haidi to keep

them at their learning, the three students were free to glare at Lena as she tried to concentrate on the words in front of her.

Mistaken identification can lead to troublesome, if not dangerous, outcomes. Particularly problematic are runes which are distorted by natural skin discolouration, birthmarks or scarring.

That didn't come as a surprise. She could have sworn the inside of her right forearm had been unblemished when she went to bed last night and there was no denying the ugly dark blotch spreading across the back of her right shoulder blade. She wasn't at all sure whether the mark on her hip was a bruise or something more permanent. With more discolorations likely to appear on her skin, figuring out what each of them allowed her to do was as important as learning to use them.

Yesterday morning, I was still in denial. Or merely ignorant.

She glanced up and was confronted by three hostile pairs of eyes. Bowing to the inevitable, she placed the scrap of worn parchment she had been using as a bookmark between the pages and closed the book.

'Fine. They've obviously left us alone so we can talk about what happened yesterday, so why don't we do that?' Only Chakobu, hunched over his elevated desk and painstakingly copying words from a book that had all but disintegrated onto fresh parchment, suggested a notional degree of adult supervision. She pushed the eight hundred and forty-two tightly bound leaves of *Runes and Ruination* to one side, giving the three younger students her undivided attention.

'I don't like you,' said Shaeralli, her voice flat and hard.

'Fair enough. There's no law that says you have to like everyone.'

Shaeralli's eyes narrowed. 'I mean, I hate you.'

'I got that yesterday. I really did,' Lena assured the elf. How could someone so small be so obnoxious?

The three continued to glare at the girl on the opposite side of the Library.

‘Not that it matters, but would you like to tell me why? I’m stuck here until Bradon decides to pull me out. After yesterday’s err . . . incident, I suspect that will be never, so we’re just going to have to put up with each other. If I’ve offended you, I’m sorry. If it’s just about me being me, there’s not much I can do about it.’

Shaeralli and Max exchanged a look. Khannie’s attention never wavered.

‘You always act like you’re better than us. Like you’re some kind of lady but you’re not. You’re just a servant, a bound servant at that. We’re all free, so you shouldn’t be putting on airs and being all lady-like to us, even if you can read properly.’

Lena considered the elf’s complaint.

‘Rubbing it in that you can read proper like and we weren’t taught how to,’ growled Max.

‘Always looking down your nose at us, you are,’ said Khannie.

‘It’s a bit hard not to. I can’t help being taller than you. Unless you’ve learned how to make me shorter, our yourselves taller, there’s not much I can—’

‘I’m taller than you,’ interrupted Max. ‘And still growing.’

‘As if you care,’ said Shaeralli.

‘Actually, I do,’ said Lena, a little bit surprised at the discovery.

‘Mother is furious. That was my best dress and she’s says it’s too badly burnt to be anything but rags. Now I have to wear this one,’ she ran a hand over her loose bodice, ‘and she says it’s my own fault.’

‘So don’t try and make nice. Just leave us alone,’ shouted Max.

Lena returned to *Runes and Ruination*.

Attempting to develop a talent for which one does not have the correct rune almost inevitably leads to failure (or worse) and only rarely results in limited success. However, of greater concern is the risk of the sorcerer draining himself in the attempt. It is for this reason that experimentation with unfamiliar runes and practice with new runes is best done without the assistance of power amplifiers.

She wondered why the windbag of an author couldn't have just said 'don't use a wand until you know what you are doing.' This was important. She could perform sorcery without a wand, which had made her wonder why being given a wand was such a big deal? Now she knew. Wands made sorcerers more powerful but that just led to the next obvious question; what, exactly, was a wand? All of the people she knew to be sorcerers had them, slim pieces of wood ranging from half a foot to the length of a forearm, some highly polished, others knobby and made from different types of wood. Lena knew that Fandalia had two wands and that Bradon's wand was seven feet long – as tall as its owner. She started flicking through the pages, looking for answers.

Not so much as the noise of a page turning crossed the floor separating Lena from the hostility of the other three apprentices. She shouldn't care what they, or anyone else, thought of her, but she did. She was stuck in this story-book village and having half the local population hating her was not going to make for an easy life.

I have to do something about this.

It was mid-afternoon before Lena gave up on Baragwanth putting in an appearance and decided she could leave for the day. The other students were still at their desks, laboriously copying unfamiliar words out of books with varying degrees of success. None of the apprentices had been allowed out to practise today. Payron, Amber and Rochelle had also been confined to the Library and showed their disdain for Lena by sulking on the second floor. Something about giving Freth time to calm down. Or maybe count the coins Lena had poured into his outstretched hands on the doorstep of *The Speckled*

Dragon. As days went it had been better than yesterday in that she hadn't caused further depletion of Bradon's treasury and, more, Baragwanth's absence had allowed her to read something useful. Hopefully she'd cleared up a few things with the other young apprentices, but there was something more she needed to do. Heading in the opposite direction from Bradon's squat tower, it was only a short walk to the pretty ivy-covered cottage with its shaded nursery beds and profusion of sweet-smelling herbs and shrubs.

'Hi,' Lena said brightly when Sharell opened the door. She dropped her chin, not wanting to appear haughty.

'You're Bradon's new servant,' said the elf who answered the door. 'The one who's never seen an elf before?'

'Yes. I'm Lena.'

'Does Bradon want something from me?' The small woman looked alarmed at the prospect. Lena was beginning to understand that the towering warlock made a lot of people nervous.

'No, no. Actually, I came to apologise for burning Shaeralli's dress yesterday.' Feeling embarrassed, Lena lowered her gaze before forcing herself to look Shaeralli's mother in the eye.

The woman eyed at Lena in surprise.

'She told you what happened?' Lena asked.

'No. She wouldn't talk about it. I just assumed she'd been careless again. It's not the first time. So you're the new apprentice? Aren't you . . . that's not any of my business?'

'Too old to be a new apprentice? So they keep telling me,' said Lena forcing a brief laugh.

'Well, you're here. Won't you come in and have a cup of tea? I'm Sharell, but you knew that already.' The elf took it for granted that her visitor would accept the invitation. 'I'd like to hear what my young one's been up to.'

The sun was setting along the western ridges when Shaeralli opened the front door. It had, she thought, been another

miserable day. No one had openly taunted her about the awful dress but the amused looks as she had walked along the streets had been humiliation enough. Even Khannie had been caught grinning. That wretched, stuck-up nothing of a servant, a bound servant she reminded herself, had reduced her wardrobe by a third as well as burning off her right eyebrow. That could take weeks to grow back properly. And what if it didn't? Go through life with only one eyebrow? As if she wasn't enough of an oddity in this human village already.

Shaeralli wiped her feet, not wanting another scolding and a worse dress tomorrow, or none at all, and came up short when she realised that there was a visitor in their cottage.

'Ahh, well that is interesting. I've never seen the ocean myself, you know. It's such a long way from here,' she heard her mother say.

'Once I stopped throwing up, I found it very beautiful. There's a sense of something infinite and infinitely alive. Sunsets on a ship when it's calm are magnificent.'

Shaeralli knew that voice. Her little fists clenched, the nails digging into her palms. That over-tall serving girl had no business being in her home. 'What are you doing here?' If Lena had been closer she would have been covered in spittle.

'I came to apologise to your mother about the dress, Shaeralli. After all, it was my fault,' said Lena.

'You could have told me what happened yourself, you know,' said Sharell with a smile for her daughter.

When her confusion subsided enough to allow rational thoughts to form, Shaeralli said that she didn't want to get anyone else into trouble.

'Thanks. I appreciate that. It's hard enough being a newcomer without being in hot water on a daily basis as well,' said Lena.

Sharell chuckled.

'Thank you for the tea,' said Lena rising. 'Now, I should get back before my master starts wondering why I'm late and

sends Grung out to search for me. See you tomorrow, Shaeralli.'

'Ara . . . ararch. . . Ohhh, this is too hard.' Shaeralli balled her little fists and scowled at the impossible words.

'Can I help?' Lena asked, moving closer. Haidi had disappeared behind the shelves looking for another book, leaving her charges to their own devices for a few moments.

Shaeralli stared at the older girl. Eventually she swallowed her pride. 'Yes. Please.'

'Which word? This one?'

Shaeralli nodded.

'Arachnid. A-rac-nid,' Lena drew out the syllables. 'Ignore the "h". They're animals like spiders and scorpions. Those sorts of things,' she explained.

'Oh. That makes sense. So what about the rest of it? The "bane of arachnids"? Spiders are annoying but it doesn't seem like that's what the book's trying to say?'

'Bane's also an old word for poison. Its a fancy way of saying that scorpion stings and spider bites can be poisonous,' Lena gently corrected the elf.

'Why couldn't the wretched witch just write it like you said it?'

'I don't know, but if I ever start talking like this, throw something at me, will you?'

Shaeralli giggled, the tips of her pointy ears vibrating with what Lena assumed was amusement. 'Will do. Thanks, Lena,' she said.

'You're welcome.' Lena returned to her own desk.

'How come you know all this stuff?' Shaeralli asked.

'I grew up with a lot of books,' she said after a pause. Lena didn't like lying but Bradon had been very clear about not giving people clues.

‘And why aren’t you allowed to tell us where you’re from?’

‘You’d have to ask Bradon,’ she said, killing the conversation as decisively as Grung slicing melons. No one wanted to get on the wrong side of Bradon.

‘How come you’re not mad at her anymore?’ Lena heard Khannie whispering.

‘She told my mother what happened to my dress and said it was all her fault,’ Shaeralli whispered back.

All three of the young apprentices turned away when Lena looked up.

‘Well, you did get me to use sorcery for the first time. I should thank you all for . . . motivating me,’ said Lena.

Shaeralli smiled. ‘Anytime. You want to sit with us at lunch?’

‘Good. Since you lot are no longer at war, Lena can sit with us whenever Baragwanth isn’t here.’

Lena turned, realising that Haidi had witnessed the entire exchange. Having no objection, she carried her books and quill pen to the larger table and took a seat next to Max.

Preparations for the winter were in full swing in the Village. Crops were still being harvested, fish and meat hung to dry in the wind and the sun and roofs were being repaired in anticipation of the autumn rains which, Lena discovered the hard way, tended to come early. Lena had left Ellish with coin and measurements for her winter wardrobe and begun the two mile walk back to Bradon’s tower and a well-earned dinner when the heavens opened.

Dashing through the door to the nearest grain silo, she failed to beat the arrival of the storm. She wiped the rain from her face and eyes in time to see a muscular young man scrambling through the loading hatch, clothes and boots clutched to his chest.

‘Lena?’ Haidi sat up.

Lena turned away from the naked sorceress, intent on fleeing the embarrassing scene as quickly as the blacksmith's son. Marcus, she thought his name was.

‘What are you doing in here?’

‘It's raining and this was the nearest—’

‘Of course it was.’ The Atturan sorceress, Assembly member and instructor of apprentices sighed. Standing, she donned her slip and pulled a simple grey dress over her head.

Still too shocked to do anything other than stand in awkward silence, Lena watched the woman do up the antler-horn buttons then pick up one shoe. ‘Where'd the other one . . . ahh.’ Haidi pointed towards the top of an overflowing grain bin. ‘You're taller than I am. Could you get that for me?’

Lena retrieved the errant footwear.

‘Thank you. There's something reassuring about the vigour of youth, don't you think?’ Haidi flipped a bucket upside down and sat on her improvised stool. Brushing off the grains of wheat sticking to her feet, she looked at Lena. ‘You're judging me.’

Lena denied the accusation with a shake of her head. It was still pouring outside, the raindrops splashing their way through the open doorway. Leaving wasn't an option. At least, not a sensible one. She shut the door.

‘That's understandable,’ Haidi said, putting on her shoes, ‘because you probably don't understand. How old are you?’

‘Sixteen. You know that.’

‘And how old do you think I am?’

Lena blinked, not sure if she should even attempt a guess. The woman didn't look much older than Lena herself. If she'd met her as a stranger in the streets of Queenshelm she would have said not much more than twenty.

‘Go ahead. I promise not to be offended.’

‘Well, you're on the Assembly and you do more teaching than everyone else put together, so you have to be older than

you look—’

‘I’m a hundred and four. Even by the standards of our kind, I’m ageing uncommonly slowly.’

Lena swallowed, a belated realisation coming to her. *Bradon told me sorcerers live for centuries. I’m a sorcerer—*

‘We live a long time. Too long, many would say. And that has consequences. Whom should I marry? I’ve yet to meet a sorcerer I’d want to bind myself to and if an ordinary man captures my heart it will break as I watch him grow old and die at my side. Of course, that’s not the only reason sorcerers never marry. It’s not even the most important one. Marriage equals children, children who may have the talent which bestows such long lives upon us but just as likely won’t. If there’s anything more cruel than outliving your own sons and daughters I cannot think of it. Maybe that’s what the Gods had in mind when they cursed us.’

The barn door creaked as a gust of wind struck it.

‘It takes a while before we realise these things but there’s a reason why none of the sorcerers in the Village are married. We all live with the reality that the families we come from will perish while we go on.’ She stared at the young girl who had interrupted her tryst. ‘You could say it’s part of our punishment but the idea of bringing a child into this world, then to spend centuries digging graves for my descendants. . . . It’s not something I can face.’

‘But—’

‘How do I take my pleasures without the consequences? There’s a weed that grows in a lot of places. Silphium. It’s got other names but where I come from, it’s known as maiden’s bliss. One cup of disgusting tea every week or so and I get to keep my waistline and my sanity. Come round to my cottage sometime and I’ll show you. You’re a woman and you should know about these things.’ She stood up, straightening her dress and brushing a few stray husks from the front. ‘These autumn storms can go on for a while. I’ve got the rune for keeping myself dry but that’s no good for you so unless you’re willing

to get drenched for the sake of getting back to your lessons, we're stuck here.'

Lena didn't miss the faint emphasis on 'lessons'.

'Don't look so surprised. The only thing Baragwanth's been teaching you since you torched the orchard is patience. I won't deny that you could use a few lessons in that area, but it's pointless. I want to know why?'

'So would I,' said Lena. 'He took me on and then makes me read books that belong in the midden pit. He's wasting his own time as much as mine. Couldn't someone else teach me?'

'Not unless Baragwanth relinquishes the contract. For reasons which predate my arrival in the Village, no one's going to interfere and, before you ask, I didn't take you because I'm already doing most of the teaching and I'd be doing all of it if I didn't draw the line somewhere. It was nothing personal.'

Haidi gave a sigh and told Lena that as they were stuck here she might as well ask whatever questions were on her mind. Lena rolled up her sleeve and held out her left wrist for inspection.

'Fire,' said Haidi, sounding disappointed. 'You know that.'

'I know. Does it mean anything when you get the same rune twice?'

'A strange question. It never happens,' she said slowly.

'Never isn't always forever,' said Lena misquoting from a story she'd once read. She rolled up the sleeve on her other arm, displaying a nearly complete identical rune.

Haidi was on her feet in a heartbeat, turning Lena's wrists first one way and then another as she compared the two runes.

'This is unprecedented,' she said after a very long inspection. 'And I've no idea what it means.' After another silence, she went on. 'Given what you did with one fire rune, you'll have to be even more careful not to lose your temper now.'

There wasn't much she could say to that. Lena looked at the floor. A mouse stuck its head through a hole in the wooden siding and then retreated.

‘Sit with us when we're in the Library. The table's big enough. I'll be talking to the others but there's nothing stopping you from listening.’

‘Thank you, Mistress Haidi.’

‘Why am I helping you? I could say that there are so few of us that we can't afford to lose anyone either through neglect or worse – both have happened – and that would be true. It's also a matter of honour. I owe Bradon for going all the way to Atture and smuggling me out of the Empire before anyone realised what I was. It was more like kidnapping. He crept into my sleeping chamber one night, used his talent to make sure I stayed asleep and carried me down to the harbour in a sack. I woke up inside a barrel halfway across the Rift.’

‘A barrel?’

‘The first thing I did when he let me out was kick him in the knee. I couldn't reach much higher,’ she smiled at the memory. ‘Still can't for that matter. The Seers spend most of their time searching the world for new sorcerers. They can't see them directly of course, have to infer them. When they see a mob forming and firewood being piled up around a stake they know some poor wretch is about to be burned. When they find a new one, almost always an adolescent going through puberty, either Bradon or Havel is sent out to get them. In my case it was Bradon. There's no doubt he saved my life so I guess we have that in common.’

‘I wasn't kidnapped.’

‘Then why did you come with him? You didn't know you were a sorceress until you got here and you're not some slave he purchased in a market or a runaway serf.’

Lena couldn't come up with a safe answer for that so she said nothing, listening to the rain drumming against the roof. Somewhere she could hear the steady dripping of water close

by and realised there was a leak which she should let someone know about.

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Nineteen

THE SEASONS MADE UP their mind and the last of the long hot summer drifted into autumn. Leaves faded from green to red and gold to brown, becoming brittle before finally being set free by their trees. The evenings came a little earlier and on days when she stayed late in the Library it would be dusk before Lena returned to Bradon's tower. It wouldn't be long before a lantern would be a necessity, or perhaps she would learn to control her fire talent enough to use it as a torch. Mornings came with a chill in the air, especially when the wind shifted to the north or east and the distant peaks were frequently hidden in banks of white-grey clouds.

She was all too aware of the wrongness of being a witch, sorceress rather, an offence against the natural order of things and a defiance of the absent Gods. But there was something unsettling about labelling the people who lived here, the people who practised their talents, as they called them, as unnatural. Observations of the daily activities of the villagers were an affirmation that life here was not so different from what she imagined life in any other small community to be. If any altars to the Dark Lord were being raised on which to sacrifice new-born babies or virgins in an attempt to resurrect the Twelve or open the Gates of Hell, it was being done very discreetly. There wasn't even a temple to the Mortal Goddess, although she'd been told that the ruins of one of the last major theological seminaries was at Fal Serrin, only a few days' ride to the south-east in good weather. The latter was fortunate because Khannie had added the rune for necromancy to his collection and Haidi had spoken of taking him there so he could get some experience using it. She'd also told her pupil in rather blunt terms not to practise necromancy anywhere near the local cemetery. 'People get upset if we use their recently departed relatives as training tools,' she'd cautioned the eager youth.

Every sorcerer in the Village had inspected Lena's forearms, told her that no one ever got the same rune twice and expressed astonishment that the too-old apprentice was the only one who had. Even Bradon had been surprised. Bethine had thrown in a warning about not destroying any more crops and others had speculated on just how much damage Lena would be able to do if she lived long enough to get a wand.

The only grievance Lena had about the rock troll sleeping in the next room was that his snoring often kept her awake at night. She lacked the courage to ask Bradon if she could move to the empty room on the other side of the tower. As for the other non-humans in the Village, the dwarves only came to the Village on business and largely kept to themselves when they did so. Ditto the clan of marsh goblins who inhabited the far side of the lake and were not to be approached under any circumstances. She hadn't seen any to approach. Nor had she seen Istvan since the half-vampire had glided out of the Assembly Chamber but she'd learned that the extremely tall man with a penchant for reading she'd seen on the day she had arrived was called Doerall and that he was the best chess player in the Village as well as the local glassmaker. The elves were nice enough once you got to know them, a bit sensitive perhaps, but pleasant enough; at least Shaeralli and her mother were. Payron hadn't spoken to her since she'd headbutted him in the flaming ruins of Freth's orchard, but neither had a lot of other people so Lena didn't take it personally. Lunches were better now that Lena didn't have to sit on her own even if Max's attempts to be a gentleman and hold her chair for her earned him some ribbing from his friends. Sharell made a good cup of tea and had been grateful for the time Lena had spent helping her daughter with her lessons.

'It's very kind of you, dear,' she said, as she refilled Lena's cup. 'I was so proud when they told me Shaeralli was going to be a sorceress. It had been decades since the last time an elf was found with a talent. Lord Payron's aunt it was, though she's disappeared, and then two more within a few years. It was ever such good news for us elves. I only wish my father had lived long enough to see his granddaughter get apprenticed.'

‘I am sure he would be very proud,’ said Lena.

‘Oh, he is. He is. I had a necromancer raise him so I could give him the news,’ said Sharell.

Lena had spent the next two days reading a book about necromancy. If she ever returned to Queenshelm, could she raise Philomena and find out who had driven that dagger into her guts? Of course, she knew she wouldn’t be going back to Queenshelm any time soon and possibly not ever. Not without being tied to a stake and burnt to death, and she didn’t have the rune for necromancy anyway. In fact, she still had only a single complete rune but the marks on her skin were becoming more numerous. Apart from the two fire runes, most of them were still indistinct and incomplete, but they were there. On her hip, her left leg, and a single mark rapidly expanding on her right shoulder blade. That one was almost complete but, in spite of poring through the pages of *Runes and Ruination* whenever Baragwanth wasn’t paying attention (which was most of the time), she had no idea what it was. Lena had sketched it into her diary using the tall mirror in the basement of Bradon’s tower. She’d asked Baragwanth but he’d simply told her it was too early to worry about a second talent. Most sorcerers had runes on their faces and hands and Lena expected she would too. Eventually, she would be instantly recognisable as a witch wherever she went.

Which means I can never go anywhere. She now understood why sorcerers lived on the fringes of society, or outside it completely. It wasn’t a matter of choice, but of survival. *I can never go home.*

She methodically read through the list of known runes, wondering how many she would end up with. She also realised there were some runes she didn’t want and didn’t want to meet anyone who had them. Nighttouch stood out – the power to appropriate the life force of another person. She shuddered at the thought.

‘That is not the book I gave you to read.’ Baragwanth interrupted his pupil’s daydreaming.

‘I have finished *A Basic Ontological Introduction to Mystical Theory, Part Three, Volume Six*, Master,’ said Lena quietly. And fell asleep doing so, she didn’t say.

‘So quickly? Students take months, sometimes years,’ he looked pointedly at Shaeralli and Max, ‘to work their way through that text.’

‘It wasn’t that difficult . . . Master.’

‘So, you picked *Runes and Ruination*? Why? You only have one usable talent and,’ he leaned forward to look at the open page, ‘it’s not the one for raising the dead.’

‘No, Master. I do not have any other complete runes but I can still learn about them,’ said Lena. It wasn’t quite a lie and she spoke respectfully, not wanting to lose the freedom to select at least some of her reading material. The second fire rune was almost complete as was the mark on her hip she was struggling to identify. Maybe some history? It would be more interesting than the multi-volume, brick-thick pages of philosophical drivel Baragwanth kept assigning her.

‘Hummmph. I suppose that makes sense. So tell me, what are the limits of a necromancer’s power?’

‘Ummm. Daylight for one and distance for another,’ she said.

‘Anyone else?’ Baragwanth swept his eyes over the other apprentices.

Khannie waved his hand.

‘Yes, Khannie?’

‘Master Baragwanth, necromancy is best done immediately after the Witching Hour,’ he prattled off. ‘Also, without any lanterns or torches and—’

‘And you, Lena, would know that if you had read what you were told to,’ said Baragwanth. ‘I suggest you go back to getting a firmer grasp on the theory, and forget about practical applications until you’re ready.’ He tottered over to his comfortable chair under the window.

‘Yes, Master.’ She closed *Runes and Ruination* and pulled *Endlessly Rambling Obfuscation* towards herself. It was going to be another long, pointless day.

She waited until Baragwanth was snoring before swapping the books back.

‘I’m bringing Grung to the Harvest Festival,’ Lena announced a little bit louder than she intended. Baragwanth stirred but there was no other interruption to the geriatric wheezing.

‘Who’s Grung?’ Max asked.

‘That’s, you know, the troll thing,’ said Shaeralli.

‘It has a name?’ Khannie asked.

‘What do you want to invite that for? It’s dangerous and it smells.’

‘He’s only dangerous to people who are rude about his cooking and he doesn’t smell half as bad as you do Shaeralli. When was the last time you had a bath?’ Lena wrinkled her nose even though the elf girl actually had quite a pleasant odour. Crushed pine needles and something floral.

‘Is it, like your boyfriend?’ asked Max. He just about managed to keep a straight face.

‘No.’ Lena laughed. ‘Just a friend.’

The sleeping Baragwanth expressed no opinion on the matter. She would let Bradon know.

‘Master?’ She waited for Bradon’s nod before proceeding. ‘There’s a festival tomorrow.’

‘The Harvest Festival. And you wish to go?’ He didn’t look up from his food.

‘Only if it’s not inconvenient.’ Most of the crops had been harvested, only the plots of kale, cabbages, radishes and other hardy late-season vegetables that could survive a light frost remained to be gathered and added to the stores of dried and preserved foods that would feed the Village through the winter and following spring.

‘Of course you should go. I’ll be going. The whole Village will be there. Well, most of them.’ He glanced at Grung as he spoke.

The troll paused in the process of grinding a large bone between his molars. ‘Stay here. Work to do. House to clean.’ Shards of bone fell from his mouth as he spoke. He put the rest of the bone back on his plate.

‘The last time Grung went into the Village, people got a little bit excited and, well, he hasn’t been back since. You saw what happened when you took him to the market? You’ve probably noticed I don’t get many visitors here either.’

‘I haven’t seen a visitor to your tower since I arrived, but then I’m seldom here during the day,’ said Lena. She’d already perceived that, if the villagers didn’t exactly avoid Bradon, they didn’t seek the grim-faced warlock’s company either.

‘You haven’t missed too many,’ he said dryly. ‘None at all, in fact.’

‘But why?’

‘Trolls dangerous,’ said Grung. He stared at his plate, no longer eating. A sliver of meat hung from his lower lip. He inhaled and it disappeared. ‘Everyone say that. Not good for humans to have me close.’

‘That’s just because they don’t know you, Grung. Of course, you should come,’ said Lena.

Bradon said nothing, leaning back in his seat and sipping his ale.

A huge pile of wood had been set up in an empty field next to one of the streams that fed the Sky River. Two long, shallow pits lined with faggots lay twenty paces further upstream surrounded by several slaughtered pigs, a few score of dressed chickens and geese and a huge number of pots, Grung’s cauldron being much bigger than the others, waiting for the ceremonial lighting of the fire. The task had been Amber’s for the last four years, but now that some of the younger apprentices were able to use their fire runes the responsibility passed from the blonde girl’s graceful shoulders. Lena was the

same age as Khannie and, though she had a year on Max and Shaeralli, her recent arrival made her the junior. She was embarrassed to learn that it was her job to start the bonfire with the entire community looking on. Worse, she'd been told that the festival usually took place in the Village common by the orchards but Freth had thrown a fit on hearing that Lena was to start a fire near his remaining trees and the whole proceeding had been quietly moved to a tree-free grazing pasture beside the lake.

It's no worse than launching a warship in Queenshelm, Lena reminded herself as she stood in front of the pile of wood. *Am I supposed to say something?*

'Well, get on with it, child. Some of us want our supper before the moons die of old age,' said Fandalia, pointing at the small mound of dried grasses and twigs at the edge of the heaped branches and logs.

Ignoring the more combustible tinder, Lena raised her left arm, pointed at the centre of the pile and said 'Burn.' Flames gushed from her hand, reaching out to the waiting timber, embracing it and igniting it. The complete fire rune tensed and warped within her flesh and she could feel the second rune stirring more gently, but Lena felt only a slight warming as the power built within her body. She wondered how much hotter she could make the flames and the incomplete fire rune inside her right forearm twitched which was wrong in more ways than—

'Lena!'

The flames kept flowing into the woodpile.

'Stop showing off, girl.'

'Of course, Apex,' said Lena, instantly dropping her hand. She looked around and was surprised to see the entire pile burning brightly, flames dancing towards the evening sky. A gap of several paces had opened up between the bonfire and the surrounding onlookers. Only Grung and Bradon, both standing silently a few steps behind her, had remained close.

I really must learn subtlety.

She retreated to sit on one of the fallen logs used to supplement the benches and stools borrowed from *The Speckled Dragon* and *Ye Olde Knotted Wand* for the occasion. Her contribution to the festivities complete, she beckoned Grung to sit beside her. Allowing herself to relax, she watched people pull burning branches away from the main bonfire to light the cooking pits. The sun had almost disappeared, its duty for the day complete and both moons had risen, full and pockmarked in the darkening sky, yellow warmth surrendering to pallid white. The fire had a good hold. She slipped off her cloak, carefully folding it onto the log at her side, and hoped they would eat soon. Using sorcery gave her an appetite.

Shaeralli came to join her, Max and Khannie following. Max was still getting nods of congratulation on his efforts in the games which had taken up the afternoon. Only fifteen years old, the boy was basking in the glory of coming third in the throwing competition, only bettered by the blacksmith Nathen and his grown son Marcus. Of course, neither Doerall nor Grung nor any of the other non-humans had taken part. Nobody sat next to the troll.

‘You’ve got really powerful,’ said the elf. She held out her hand and a thin flame the length of her chewed fingernail appeared, flickered and vanished. ‘It’s taken me nearly two years to be able to do that.’

‘I can only do one thing. You can do more,’ Lena replied.

‘But none as well as you. You make Apex Fandalia nervous.’

Lena smiled. She didn’t mind that at all.

‘I think that’s why Bethine doesn’t like you,’ said Khannie. He spoke quietly, staring at the flames. ‘She knows you’ll become more powerful than she is.’

Khannie was intelligent, he could bury Lena at chess and was already one of Doerall’s toughest opponents. This time he’d drawn the wrong conclusion, but it was better he thought himself right than start looking for a different answer.

In time people started helping themselves to food. There didn't seem to be any kind of protocol in operation, old and young, sorcerer and lay, Assembly members and farmers all jostled as they filled their bowls and plates from the pots and cauldrons. Pigs and poultry were being roasted on the other pit.

‘We should get some, before all the good food’s gone,’ said Max.

‘Boy not worry. Plenty to eat,’ said Grung. It was the first time he had spoken all evening.

‘Not by the time that lot has done with it,’ Max retorted. His fear of missing out on a meal outweighed his fear of the troll.

‘There’s plenty, but I’m hungry.’ Lena rose to her feet. ‘Grung?’

The troll stood up, towering over the apprentices, and followed Lena to the nearest cook fire. The crowd melted away, surrendering proximity to the cooking pots without a fight. Lena suppressed a smile.

‘So, what smells best, Grung?’

Grung leaned forward, closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, his nostrils expanding as he sucked in the odours.

‘Chicken stew with potatoes,’ he pointed at a battered pot with only a single handle close to Lena’s feet. ‘Beans with pepper. Capsicums. Tempered onion leaves.’ He pointed at each pot in turn, identifying their contents.

Lena made a point of half filling her bowl with Grung’s eel casserole before adding the braised onion leaves and capsicums to her plate. She guessed the last one was from Sharell. When she looked up, she realised that she was the only person taking food. The entire Village was staring at her and the big troll looming over her.

‘Max? I thought you were hungry? The eel casserole is excellent,’ she said, taking a spoonful. It took a little cajoling but eventually appetite overcame the pudgy youth’s

nervousness and he darted forward armed with a bowl nearly as big as Grung's.

As they returned to their seats, they passed Haidi. The Atturan was grinning widely. 'Well played. If nothing else, you've given Bethine something else to complain about and us all something to gossip over. Winters are long hereabouts and the conversations tend to get a little repetitive by the time spring rolls around.'

Unable to suppress a laugh Lena relaxed, enjoying the occasion. It wasn't until she was ticking herself off for not grabbing a second helping of Grung's eels before the villagers had scraped the cauldron clean that she saw Istvan's moon-pale figure walking up the road. 'Finally.'

The half-vampire's silver-threaded doublet reflected the dancing flames as he flowed past the conflagration. Lena knew he lived on the fringes of the Village, an arrangement that had as much to do with Istvan's preference for not being disturbed while he slept through the day as the villagers' discomfort at his proximity.

Moving more smoothly than his human cousins, Istvan weaved his way through the knots of celebrating people, sniffing the air as he walked unerringly in the direction of the barbecue pits. Bethlemann chopped a raw pig's liver into cubes, scooped the bloody mess into a wooden bowl and respectfully held it out. Istvan took the offering without even a brief nod of thanks before joining Haidi on a bench close to the cook fires. Lena would have to wait for her opportunity.

Grung was eyeing the nearest pig carcass. Most of the meat had been stripped and eaten. Bones and gristle were all that remained.

'Go ahead,' said Lena. 'I don't think anyone else will want them unless to make soup.'

'Good bones. Good to eat.' Grung needed no encouragement. He'd sat quietly next to Lena the whole evening and ignored the gaping hole to his left in the circle of people gathered around the main bonfire. A couple of Assembly members had lurked, quite obviously, behind him

from the moment he'd arrived with Lena. Their wands might not have been pointed at the troll but they were in hand.

Musicians started to play and Lena watched a little enviously as the villagers danced. Mistress Haidi and a few of the younger Assembly members joined in. A small group of visiting dwarves had their own way of dancing and, for once, weren't shy about stepping into the flat open space to mingle with the humans. The dwarves seldom stayed overnight in the Village but had made an exception on account of the free food and drink on offer. There was an acute shortage of unclaimed males and a surplus of single females in the Village – Lena resigned herself to being a non-participant.

‘You have been staring at me all evening.’

Lena started. She hadn't heard Istvan approaching.

‘I—’

‘You are scared of me,’ Istvan stated, lightly emphasising the pronouns.

‘No, of course not—’

‘You lie. If you wish to speak with me, come to my cottage after sunset one evening. Alone.’ He looked first at Grung, chewing the unwanted bones, and then at Bradon conversing with Havel closer to the fire.

The half-vampire turned and floated away before Lena could recover her wits.

‘Hello.’

Lena looked up. She hadn't noticed Payron approaching.

‘P. . .Payron,’ she acknowledged the elven lord's presence while wondering what he wanted. He was probably still mad at her.

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. ‘If you're not otherwise engaged, would you like to dance?’

‘I've been in the Village for months and you've ignored me the whole time. Now you expect me to dance with you?’ She regretted the words as soon as they were out of her mouth. He

had helped her home after the orchard fiasco and she'd shown her appreciation by trying to flatten his lordly nose.

Payron's half-smile wavered and disappeared, replaced by a look that could only be described as embarrassed. 'My apologies, Lena. I will—'

'Though you were kind enough to escort me home in spite of my incivility. I would be honoured, My Lord.' She swallowed her pride and offered her hand.

He hesitated before taking it and helping Lena to her feet.

As Payron led her towards the flat patch of trampled grass serving as a dance floor Lena felt as though everyone was staring. Probably because they were.

'I waited until it was a slower song before asking you—'

'Because you assumed the unlettered serving girl can't dance properly,' she finished. She placed her left hand on his shoulder and her right in his left hand. 'I hope you know how to lead.'

He did.

They glided effortlessly in time to the music, not speaking but occasionally looking into each other's eyes. *The River* was a long song, but not nearly long enough for Lena. When the music faded away, it was with considerable reluctance that she let go of her partner.

'So,' Payron said as they applauded the musicians, 'is dancing here as pleasant as dancing back home, wherever your home is?'

Lena decided to give him the benefit of the doubt; he was fishing for compliments, not information. 'Nobody has ever asked me to dance before,' she said.

'I don't believe that.'

'Sadly, it's true.'

'But you dance so well.'

'I thank you for the compliment, My Lord, but a lot of instruction is not the same as the real thing. You lead very

well. Even with the grass and the strange music, I think I only stepped on your toes twice.’ She could have bitten her tongue.

‘It was three times and I hardly noticed.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t be.’

The music started again, a quicker tempo, not one that Lena recognised.

‘Would you like another one?’

‘That won’t make me popular with your admirers,’ she said.

He laughed; a light, free sound. ‘My admirers, as you call them, will tease me mercilessly about dancing with the prettiest girl in the Village.’

Compliments from Payron? She hadn’t seen him drinking anything stronger than water. He’d all but snubbed Lena in the weeks since her arrival in the Village and now he wanted another dance with the serving girl? ‘One more, then you must dance with some of the other girls, including Rochelle and Amber.’

‘I suppose I should.’ He led Lena in a gentle twirl and then abruptly stopped, looking past her.

‘What are they doing here? They almost never come into the Village,’ he added.

The ripple of silence spread as first conversations and then the music died.

Lena followed Payron’s gaze and saw two old people in long, loose-fitting white robes. It took a moment to determine that one was a woman and the other a man and only a little longer to notice that the robes were desperately in need of washing.

‘Who are they?’

‘Karrith and Karriane. They’re our seers but they usually stay in their tower.’

The Seers were obviously held in high respect in the Village. Chairs were placed close upwind of one of the fires and plates of food, including roast pork salvaged from a carcass Grung hadn't consumed, and cups of wine were offered. The entire Assembly gathered around the elderly pair.

Along with the other villagers, Payron edged closer to stand in the second row. Since he hadn't got around to releasing Lena's hand, she had no choice but to follow him and ended up close enough to hear the conversation.

'Please,' said one, 'carry on. I know it is not—'

'—often we come, but we do enjoy ourselves when—'

'—we do.'

'Karrith. Karriane, it is nice to see you,' said Fandalia with a slight frown.

'Yes. Not often enough,' said Haidi. 'Now, whose death are you foretelling this time, Karriane?'

'My sister is not predicting anyone's death,' said Karrith, his voice indistinct as he chewed his way through the food.

'Not tonight,' said Karriane, already waving her cup for a refill. 'But we did come for a reason. We need to talk about the girl.'

'Err . . . which girl would that be, Karriane?' Fandalia asked.

'The new one who—'

'—is standing behind you trying to hear what we have to say about her.'

Fandalia turned and glared at Lena. 'Eavesdropping, are we?'

Lena said nothing. She was one of dozens crowding round the two elderly seers. If that was an offence, then half the Village was guilty. Feeling self-conscious, she pulled her hand free of Payron's.

'Stand closer, daughter of the winds,' said Karrith.

They know who I am.

Fandalia and Haidi moved aside, allowing Lena to step between them.

‘Why would you want to speak with me?’

‘It’s certainly not for your manners, girl,’ snapped Fandalia.

‘You should listen to this too, Fandalia, since you will be —’

‘—going with her,’ completed Karriane, her words rendered unclear as she chewed on a rib. ‘This is good.’

‘Better than your cooking,’ agreed her brother. ‘But that’s a low threshold. You will be going on a journey, child.’

‘And soon. You need to be back before the first snow falls,’ said Karriane. ‘And if my cooking isn’t good enough for you dear brother, you can do your own.’

‘I do most of the cooking, as you well know. Fandalia will go with you—’

‘—some exercise will do her good, give her some perspective.’

The smattering of giggles was instantly silenced as Fandalia looked around to see who was laughing at her. The respected leader of the Assembly had a tendency to stoutness.

‘And give you and the girl time to get to know each other.’

‘And where will this journey take me?’ Lena had no wish to get to know Fandalia any better than she already did.

‘Taspin.’

With a single word, all the giggling and whispering ceased. Lena could hear the crackle of wood burning, the sound of Grung obviously chewing pig bones and a nervous silence around her.

‘Why would I want to do that?’ Everyone else obviously knew where, what or who Taspin was, so she didn’t expose her ignorance by asking.

‘To speak with Neritza.’ Karriane made it sound like the most obvious thing in the world.

Fandalia went rigid. ‘Are you trying to get her killed?’

‘You’re going with her—’

‘—and we are not trying to get either of you killed, though it is a possibility,’ said Karrith.

‘Merely a possibility,’ confirmed Karriane. ‘Is there any more wine going?’

‘Why Fandalia? Why can’t Bradon come with me, assuming I go at all?’ Lena demanded.

‘Neritza has issues with men in general,’ said Bradon quietly. Lena hadn’t noticed him approach. ‘This isn’t a conversation to be held in public.’

‘For once I agree with you,’ said Fandalia. ‘We can discuss this lunacy at my place.’

‘As soon as we’ve finished our dinner,’ said Karriane.

‘Perhaps some more pork,’ said Karrith, holding out his empty plate. ‘Before it all disappears. Just to give me a buffer against tomorrow’s breakfast.’

‘It’s your turn to cook breakfast tomorrow, you old fool.’

‘Who’s calling who an old fool? You’re older than I am.’

‘And wiser.’

‘I think senile is the word you are looking for.’ Karrith snorted but whatever else he was about to say to his sister was forgotten when his plate was returned to him.

Twenty

THERE WERE PRECISELY four chairs in Fandalia's comfortable parlour. Lena could do the math and remained standing while their hostess lit three lamps and a small fire. Fandalia didn't offer anyone tea. Instead she waved her wand and Lena assumed the Apex was warding the cottage against eavesdroppers.

'Well? Out with it!' she barked at the Seers even before she took the last seat. 'You know and I know and everyone except this ill-educated girl-child knows that Neritza and her abominable brood will kill any human who comes within striking distance.'

'Not just humans,' said Bradon quietly. 'She's not that fussy about her diet. Lena, tell me what do you know about Neritza?'

'Nothing. I've never heard of her before this evening.' Lena abandoned her pretence of knowledge.

Bradon shook his head. 'There's irony for you.'

Fandalia's eyes snapped from the warlock to his servant and back again. 'What do you mean by that, Bradon?'

'It is a very old story, so old it's mostly forgotten and in the few places where it's still remembered, it's a myth that's been distorted past the point where fireside retellings contain more imaginings than recollections,' began Bradon.

'We all know that,' interrupted Fandalia.

'But Lena doesn't and she needs to. Anyway, it begins about eleven hundred years ago, a bit over a century before the Gods' War. Like most tragedies it started with love and ended in remorse that came far too late. The short version; Neritza was a young girl, she was quite beautiful, who grew up in an insignificant fishing village. She fell in love with a man who

fell in love with her, much more ordinary looking, older sister. Neritza didn't take rejection well and her desire made her desperate. She tried love potions; she tried pleading with her sister. She tried everything she could think of, but to no avail. Neritza's sister would not be moved and became cold to her. As her sister's wedding day approached, Neritza's despair became unbearable. It consumed her. Believing she would win the man's heart if only she was more powerful, Neritza begged a mighty sorceress to help her. The sorceress agreed to make Neritza more formidable than any human but the price was high: she would have to kill her sister.'

Lena listened spellbound as Bradon told the tale.

'The night before the wedding, despair gave over to rage. Neritza accepted the witch's offer. The sorceress, her name was Didyme, kept her part of the bargain, bestowing great power but did so by turning Neritza into a monster so hideous she couldn't stand to look at her own reflection. Didyme demanded that Neritza complete their bargain and kill her sister but Neritza refused and tried to kill the witch instead. Didyme was strong but the sorceress had made her creation almost indestructible. In the end, it was Didyme who fell.'

'If Neritza thought she had known despair before then she knew it a hundredfold now. Didyme had turned her into a monster cursed with an appetite for human flesh. The witch was the monster's first meal but far from her last. She fled the fishing village and hid as far away from people as she could.'

'And Neritza's still alive,' asked Lena. The idea that someone could live for a millennium wasn't as unbelievable as it would have been only a few months ago.

'Yes. She's been living, if you can call it that, in the Taspin Valley ever since.'

'Why does anyone need to go? Why now and why me?'

'That gets right to the point,' said Bradon. He looked at the Seers, raising one eyebrow.

'A masterful if somewhat abridged—'

‘—retelling of an old tale,’ said Karrith. ‘Now is important. There is something in her possession that must be retrieved and—’

‘—you will need it for what lies ahead of you,’ said Karriane. ‘Information that—’

‘—that will start you on your journey.’

‘I suppose I should ask what information and what journey,’ Lena said, tapping her foot against the carpet. Her patience with the Seers was wearing thinner with every cryptic pronouncement.

‘You should, but it doesn’t really matter, does it? Your master will command you to go and go you will,’ said Karrith. He peered at Lena with his milky-white eyes. ‘Neritza’s very old and she has little to keep her occupied but accumulating knowledge. She may be one of the wisest beings alive. That could be—’

‘Yes, you will go,’ said Karriane. ‘You will.’

‘Great. So I’m supposed to walk over to some monster that eats human flesh and what? Ask her if she’d like to have me for dinner? Should I ask Grung to fatten me up first?’

‘Now you’re being ridiculous. Bradon will lend you a horse,’ said Karrith. He leaned back in his chair.

‘Which I’m sure will make a very nice appetiser,’ said Lena, her sarcasm cutting.

‘Some things are best left unsaid,’ interrupted Bradon, glaring at the Seers. ‘Be careful what you reveal—’

‘Explain why anyone has to go and why it has to be me?’ Lena cut across the warlock’s objection.

‘Or what? You’ll refuse a command from your master?’ Karriane asked.

‘He hasn’t commanded me to go anywhere,’ Lena retorted. ‘Would Bradon stop her if she walked out on this nonsense?’

‘*Yet*. He hasn’t commanded you to go *yet*,’ Karrith said. ‘You know, this is a very comfortable chair. I wonder if I could

find a matching footstool—’

‘But he will,’ agreed Karriane, ignoring her brother’s interest in Fandalia’s furniture. She spoke in tones that suggested certainty.

‘I’m waiting for some answers,’ Lena snapped.

‘You forget yourself, girl. You’re a servant here on sufferance,’ said Fandalia, her voice hard.

‘I forget nothing. Answer me,’ Lena demanded of the Seers. She didn’t even glance at the Apex.

‘Since you asked so nicely,’ said Karrith. ‘Would it help if you knew that before her transformation Neritza was called Loraline and that her older sister’s name was Thessalia?’

Lena shut her mouth to make sure she didn’t say anything stupid.

‘Yes, the same Thessalia who crowned herself the first monarch of Thessalonian. Your many-times-removed ancestor, Kristalena san Thessalia,’ Karrith said calmly, stroking the cross-hatched fabric covering of the armrest.

‘What?’ Fandalia leapt to her feet staring from the impossible serving girl to the aged seer and back again. ‘You? You’re the missing heir to the Whitehead Throne?’

Fandalia gaped at Lena while Lena glared at the Seers and clasped her hands behind her back. There wasn’t any point in denying it but she still needed to understand why they had exposed her now.

Fandalia’s eyes made another circuit from the smug seers to the straight-backed princess and back again before finally settling on the warlock.

‘You . . . you kidnapped Queen Salamander’s daughter! What in—’

‘Later, Fandalia,’ Bradon interrupted, waving away the Apex’s shock. ‘Let’s hear the rest of it.’

‘Neritza will kill any other human who approaches her but she will smell her sister in you,’ explained Karriane.

‘Loraline hated Thessalia,’ said Lena when she could find her voice. She knew a different version of her family’s history.

‘Remember Neritza fled rather than kill Thessalia. In the end she realised that she loved her sister more than her own life and accepted the permanence of the transformation rather than murder her sibling. Apart from your mother and your sisters, you’re the only person who has a chance,’ Karriane explained without interruption from her brother.

‘And Bradon?’

‘There’s a bit of history there,’ Bradon said quickly. ‘She definitely won’t like seeing me again. I’m sorry, but you’re going and Fandalia will go with you.’

‘Oh, I will, will I?’ Fandalia demanded. She seemed to partially recover her wits and clumsily sank back into her chair.

‘Yes,’ said Bradon, giving the Village Apex a direct look. ‘You should leave in the morning. I’ll tell Grung to prepare some provisions.’ He rose to leave.

‘At least I’ll be well fed when I die,’ muttered Lena, loud enough for everyone to hear. Right now, she trusted Grung’s cooking more than her master, the Village Apex, two doddering seers or her education.

‘Lena.’ Bradon spoke as soon as they had returned to the tower.

‘Yes, I will go to Taspin Valley. I will speak with Neritza,’ she replied. It was late, she was tired and it was closer to dawn than to midnight. And she didn’t have a choice in the matter.

‘There’s something else you should know. Just to complete the story, the witch was called Didyme. I think I mentioned that. A bitch as beautiful on the outside as she was sin-ugly within. But, in case you missed the point, before Didyme got her hands on her, Loraline was already a sorceress with the potential to develop a real talent for healing.’ It wasn’t often Bradon spoke so harshly about anyone.

‘So Neritza’s a sorceress as well as a monster.’

We always were a strange family.

‘A very old and formidable one, but that’s not all. Didyme used a silver bracelet to boost her strength. By all accounts it was an incredibly powerful talisman, comparable to the instruments of the Twelve. No one’s seen it since she was killed.’

‘So you assume Neritza has it and you want me to steal it?’ Crown princess to servant to witch to thief. How much lower could she be dragged?

‘Absolutely not! That’s far too dangerous. Even if you succeeded, she’d follow you back here for something like that.’ He rummaged through his chaotic bookshelves, eventually pulling out a sheaf of yellowed papers that might, long ago, have been a book. Those floor-to-ceiling shelves, and others hosting the overflow of books and scrolls in a spare room upstairs were the only parts of Bradon’s home exempted from the rigours of Grung’s cleaning regime. Rifling through the sheets until he found the one he was looking for, Bradon placed it on the table in front of Lena who dragged her lantern closer so she could study the etching. ‘Here. Keep your eyes open. If you see it, let me know but don’t even think about trying to grab it.’

It looks more like a soldier’s wrist guard than a bracelet, Lena thought as she ran her index finger over the picture. She looked again, studying the strange symbols inscribed in the bracelet, and realised that she had seen similar designs before. Possibly the same ones? She couldn’t be sure. She opened her diary to a fresh page and carefully copied the drawing.

‘Pretty girl must eat. Too skinny,’ Grung could be heard saying over and over again as he laboured in the kitchen preparing food for the journey.

‘Just let him do his thing. He’ll give you twice as much food as you need and most of it won’t keep more than a few days,’ Bradon had told her when she attempted to tell the troll not to make too much for the third time. Her master had expressed his concerns in his own way by presenting her with a leather pouch covered in archaic symbols.

‘Keep your diary in this. The pouch will keep it dry, even if it ends up in the river. You’ll need your wits about you when you get to Taspin, so try to catch up on your sleep.’

His refusal to say more about the journey or about Neritza before sending her off to bed caused Lena more irritation than additional concern.

There was so much that Bradon wasn’t telling her. The Twelve? Mythological apostates who had defied the Gods and started the Gods’ War. How long ago? A thousand years? Not long after Thessalia’s time. More recent but less well remembered; which was strange. How could anyone know what had really happened? Even if the Gods had actually existed, which she didn’t believe, whatever history had actually occurred must have been as much corrupted as forgotten and as much reinvented as memorialised. Tall tales for long winter evenings and maybe a pretext for the war that had had come close to depopulating half the continent. She blew out her lantern but sleep proved elusive.

A month ago I didn’t believe in elves, dwarves, vampires or trolls. A month ago I would have sent anyone who dared suggest I was a witch to the dungeons with instructions not to sprout above ground until spring.

And Loraline was Thessalia’s sister. Loraline had existed as had the man who had broken her heart, however unwittingly. History, Lena realised for the first time, wasn’t just pages in a book or a fireside story, it was real people and the messes they left behind.

Only as she was trying and failing to fall asleep, did it occur to Lena that she didn’t know what it was that she was supposed to retrieve or what kind of monster Loraline had been transformed into. It had been one of those days where the obvious questions didn’t occur to her until it was over. *I can ask Fandalia on the way.*

Fandalia banged on the door well before first light and didn’t wait for one of the tower’s inhabitants to admit her before barging in.

‘Get up, you lazy brat,’ she shouted up the stairwell. ‘I told you to be ready at first light.’

Lena was already awake; she hadn’t slept at all. She’d washed herself, dressed in her travelling clothes, had breakfast and returned to her room to rest while she waited for Fandalia and the dawn to arrive.

‘I’m ready, Apex,’ Lena said as she hurried down the stairs tying her hair back with a leather thong as she went. She took her heavy winter cape off the peg near the door. It was already cold enough to be needed.

‘Are you planning on walking? We need to be back before the first snowfalls trap us and we have to spend the winter enjoying Neritza’s hospitality.’ Fandalia left the possibility that they wouldn’t return at all unsaid. ‘And where are those provisions you promised, Bradon? Foraging in this weather’s a good way to end up feeding the wolves.’

‘Grung is bringing the horses,’ said Bradon also coming down the stairs. ‘And there’s plenty of food.’ He didn’t offer any advice.

Fandalia looked like she wanted to complain about that too but just turned around and stomped away. Lena stifled a yawn and strode after her.

‘I hope you’ve broken fast, girl because we will not be stopping for some hours.’

‘I’ve eaten,’ replied Lena. She had dried beef, cheese and the usual quota of stolen late-season apples in her saddlebags to snack on as she rode if she got hungry. She looked back at the tower as they rode through the gate. Grung was standing beside Bradon, bidding them farewell as Lena nudged her horse to follow Fandalia’s mare towards the distant mountains.

Twenty-one

DENSE FORESTS DELINEATING the eastern border of the Village slowly gave way to sparse scrubland as the travellers gained altitude. By the end of the fourth day, there were almost no trees at all and the denuded and bent bushes offered little in the way of shelter from the bitter wind. The best that could be said was that the weather had cooperated and there had been no snowfall or rain to slow their progress. Fandalia had the rune for regulating her bodily temperature but used it sparingly. ‘It takes effort, girl, which you would know if you spent more time on your lessons and less time offending people.’ So they wrapped themselves in their thick cloaks by day and spent the nights huddled close to camp-fires made meagre by the shortage of wood in the broken rocky gorges. It was six days ride to Taspin Valley. Fandalia passed the time by telling Lena what to expect and how to behave when they met Neritza and reminding her that being a princess in Queenshelm did not make her one in the Broken Lands. If the Apex was hoping Lena would turn around and flee back to the Village, she came close to having that wish fulfilled.

‘Here we are. Remember what I said about keeping a civil tongue. Talk to her like you do to me and it might just be the last thing you do. I won’t be shedding any tears.’

They had arrived shortly before sunset, not that it mattered, but the lingering daylight allowed Lena to look around. Taspin Valley was small, perhaps a couple of miles long and, at its widest, no more than half a mile separated the steep slopes bounding its northern and southern sides. There was fresh water and dried tussock grasses for the skittish mounts. The only sounds were the water flowing in the ice-fringed brook, the rustle of the wind through the shrubs and the heavy breathing of their horses.

‘This is where Neritza lives?’

‘If you can call it that,’ said Fandalia dryly. ‘I’m guessing it’s that one.’ She pointed to a wide uneven opening in the southern rock face.

Lena nodded. The Seers had drawn the cave mouth from their visions.

‘Now, listen to me and for once you had better listen good. Neritza does not like visitors and she does not like human visitors in particular. The only thing worse than a human female is a human male. If she hadn’t told her children to kill Bradon before he’d come this far, it would be because she wanted the pleasure of doing it herself and doing it slowly. Bringing him would have been a really bad idea.’

‘I see.’ The wind shifted and the vaguely unpleasant odour of a midden pit invaded her nasal passages amplifying her fear.

‘I doubt that, but you will. Neritza knows we’re here, so let’s not keep her waiting.’

Lena took a deep breath. It was one thing to find a terror in the safety of a dusty book or in conversations in the comfortable sorcerer’s tower that she now thought of as home. It was something else entirely to approach the monster’s lair in person.

‘Leave the horses. If we take them inside, she might claim them for her next meal, besides it’s too low to ride.’

Lena dismounted and tethered the skittish horses to some of the scraggly low bushes bordering the small stream and hoped she would see them again. She took only the pouch with her diary inside, leaving everything else. The cave entrance might be wide enough for a waggon, but it was low and she had to duck her head. The single passageway sloped down. Within a few steps the rough, uneven flooring gave way to smooth rock, though the walls and ceiling remained in their natural state.

The tunnel curved to the right and the moonlight disappeared. Fandalia raised her hand and summoned a flame to light their way. Lena hesitated before following, but decided

she liked being left alone even less than going into another cave. She made her own witchlight a little brighter.

In the gloom beyond their illumination, the cave opened up, wider and higher. The air became progressively more sour and sickly as they descended. Occasionally Lena saw tunnels branching off to the right or left but the Seers had told them to stay in the main passageway. Once she thought something moved in the shadows, dark against dark, and turned to face it.

‘Yes, we’re being watched. Keep moving.’ Fandalia didn’t slow down, but her shoulders hunched.

They kept walking. Always downwards. Sounds came to them. Their boots against the floor of the passageway. The drip of water. The clack of something hard striking rock or a stone being dislodged. A hissing and twittering behind and to either side. There was no question of taking the wrong turn; they were being herded.

‘It’s getting lighter.’

‘Phosphor in the rock,’ said Fandalia tersely. ‘The same stuff the Atturans use in their firestars.’ The Apex let her flame go out. Lena hesitated and then did the same, conserving her strength and wondering if it would matter.

Here and there objects were scattered about the floor. Coins mostly. A plain silver ring. The haft of a dagger pitted with rust. The leavings of owners who no longer needed such things. Shadows moved around and above Lena in the poor light. It took considerable willpower not to light up the tunnels with her fire.

‘The stench is getting worse,’ she whispered as they rounded another bend.

Fandalia didn’t reply. They now stood at the entrance of a grotto, the roof higher than Bradon’s stubby tower and the other end too far away to make out more than shadows in the wan phosphorescent light.

Around them the clicking of shell against rock intensified and then subsided, waiting. Fandalia had told Lena what to expect and she could see the scorpions now, unnaturally

enlarged, scuttling around their underground home, stingers raised and seemingly indifferent to whether they were on the floor, the walls or the roof.

In front of the intruders, a shape separated itself from the surrounding darkness. Something taller than a warhorse walked closer. Something living inside a shiny carapace. Something with a dozen eyes and sharp-pointed pincers waving slowly in the fetid air. Something with multi-jointed legs; legs as thick as a human body rendered slender by their length. A mouth surrounded by gently wafting mandibles.

But the most shocking thing of all—

‘Fandalia. I senssssed your presence days ago,’ it spoke.

‘Yes, Neritza. I’m sure you did,’ said Fandalia. She motioned Lena forward, repeating the gesture when Lena failed to move. How could the woman be so calm?

Reluctantly, Lena approached the monster. Eight paces. Seven. Six. Each stuttering footstep was matched by the tinkle of gold against silver against gemstone. Against rock. Five paces. Four. The wealth of nations served duty as a floor covering. Three paces. Too close. This was Thessalia’s sister? She couldn’t bring herself to speak.

‘Do not be too harsh, Fandalia. The child thinks me the most repulsive thing she has ever seen in her short life.’

‘I am sure she’s merely surprised, Neritza.’

‘She is nauseated.’ The twittering scorpions edged nearer, their anger palpable. ‘She is wondering what it’s like to be eaten and if I will consume her alive.’

‘Lena’s young. I am sure she does not mean to give offence.’

‘I am not offended. I am generations past being concerned about my appearance or troubled by the rational fears of mere humans. Come closer girl child. Come closer, heir to the puppet throne.’

Fandalia resorted to a physical nudge but eventually Lena took two more trembling steps closer to the giant arachnid.

Close enough to touch. She had to look up into the creature's mouth and beyond that orifice to the shiny black eyes.

'I once had hair like yours. Black. Long and shiny in the ssssunlight. A long time ago it was,' the monster hissed. 'People thought me beautiful too. Do you know how old I am, girl child? When I walked on two legs and had ssssilken hair, the city you now call Queenshelm was an insignificant fishing village and my beloved sister had yet to dream of the realm she would one day carve from the mighty empire on its border.'

Lena trembled. Thessalia had lived and died over a thousand years ago. Even before the Gods' War.

I am face-to-face with legend.

'I have seen empires rise and crumble beneath the weight of avaricious neighbours, incompetent rulers and self-serving bureaucrats. I have seen the stars grow weary at the follies of humans and I have borne witness to all the malice and evil that lies in the races of men.

'Thessalia was my sister,' Neritza acknowledged her past and her loss, her voice now a whisper in the near darkness, 'and you are her descendant. Did you think claiming kinship would save you?'

'I . . . I came because I was told to, Neritza.'

'Then the thought belongs to others who feared to come themsselves.'

Lena didn't have a safe answer to that.

'You came because you think I can help you.' It wasn't a question.

'Yes, Neritza.'

'No one comes to me for any reason but to kill or to steal and it is rare that any have been so foolisssh in recent centuries. Why should I help you? What price could you pay? Nothing for nothing is the way of our kind, is it not?'

'I can think of no reason and I have nothing to give,' said Lena, bowing her head.

‘Everyone has something to give.’

‘I have a few coins in my purse and the clothes on my back. That is all,’ Lena glanced at the wealth strewn around her, ‘and I’d not insult you by—’

‘You have your life.’

‘I cannot offer you service. I am bound to another,’ she said quickly. Being unfree wasn’t all bad.

‘I knew your master once. I doubt if the centuries have made him any less galling. And what could Bradon do if you defied him?’

‘It does not matter whether he could or could not do anything. I gave my pledge and I will abide by that,’ she said quietly, noting that Neritza knew Bradon was her master.

Centuries? How old is Bradon? She hadn’t thought to ask when he’d been explaining how old Baragwanth and some of the other sorcerers were.

‘You’re a sorceress and an extremely powerful one. In time, your powers will far outstrip those who now teach you, even his. Your servitude could last for centuries should you survive.’

‘It doesn’t matter. If I made a bad bargain, that is my own fault and changes nothing.’

‘But you miss your home,’ Neritza replied.

Lena demurred, saying the Village was her home now.

‘You are stubborn. A family trait we share,’ said the creature. ‘I too once made a bad bargain and still live with the consequences. Ssssooo, why did Bradon send you? To what purpose does he risk your life rather than his own?’

‘I was told there’s something here, some information that must be retrieved,’ said Lena. She could sense that Neritza was playing with her. The arachnid knew precisely why Lena was here, even if Lena didn’t know it herself. ‘They didn’t tell me what, only that it would start me on a journey.’

‘So Bradon continues his quest because he must . . . never asking whether he is chasing his hopes or fleeing his failings. Others have journeyed on the path he sets before you. They died or worse. All of them,’ the creature whispered.

‘So now it’s my turn.’

‘Yesss.’

‘And you have whatever I have been sent to find?’

‘I do,’ the creature rasped.

‘And will you give it to me?’ Lena blurted, alarmed at her daring.

‘If I was kind, I would refuse and sssend you on your way, but that path is as dangerous to you as the other. There are no safe places left for you, Kristalena san Thessalia.’

‘Thank you.’

‘You have the stance of one who hasss not finished with her requests. There is something else you wish to ask of me?’

‘I have a rune that we cannot identify,’ said Lena. She didn’t know how Neritza had come to that conclusion. Perhaps the creature’s abilities surpassed the Seers?

‘Then show me,’ Neritza commanded. Was that drool coming from her mouth?

Knowing that her strange host was not interested in the drawing, Lena unbuttoned her dress and turned her back so the ancient creature could see the rune growing within her flesh of her shoulder. She flinched when she felt something hard and cold moving backwards and forwards against her exposed skin, tracing the rune’s outline.

‘This is something old, though not as old as I,’ she said after a long pause. ‘But, yes, I have known this.’

‘I couldn’t find it in *Runes and Ruination*, not even in the unknown runes or the ones in the back which aren’t on the Pillars anymore,’ said Lena. She turned to face Neritza again.

‘Rrrrrr. It is not a very useful book,’ the creature rumbled, perhaps in amusement. ‘This is strange. Be silent for a time

while I search my memories. Ssssssoooo many.’

Lena finished restoring her dress and watched as the scorpion’s pincers rubbed against each other making a gentle rasping. It was a soothing gesture.

She waited.

And waited.

‘Ahhhhh,’ Neritza hissed at last and there was satisfaction in the sound. ‘I have succeeded and more. Yes, more.’

Lena realised she was holding her breath.

‘You,’ a pincer pointed at Fandalia, ‘will wait outside. If the girl-child does not return by dawn, you will know that my children have satiated their hunger. Now go.’

‘I’ll be with the horses,’ said Fandalia, not even trying to argue. She gave Lena a brief glance before walking stiffly away, weaving her way through Neritza’s gathered offspring. Lena turned her attention back to the monster.

‘Time is not eternal. It lives and it dies like all mortal things. It is neither your friend nor your foe in what lies before you but its passage will be the measure of your success or failure.’ Neritza’s bulging eyes clouded as she spoke, as though focusing on something far away.

‘If I’m too slow, then I will fail? Is that what you are saying?’

‘Or too fast. Either way, failure isss misery and death,’ the creature replied.

‘I will die if I don’t succeed in doing whatever it is you and Bradon think I’m supposed to do?’

‘You and that elf-boy you will not admit to caring so much for—’

‘I do not care for Payron. He’s a stuck-up, arrogant—’

‘Rrrrrsssss. His life is already in your hands. His and millions upon millions more; good and bad and all the shades of human inconsequentiality in between. All lie in your hand.’

‘But I’m just a serving girl,’ Lena prevaricated, leaning closer to the ancient creature.

A flash of something black and shiny slammed down in front of her and a shower of gold and silver coins erupted from the impact.

‘My son cares for me ass I care for him.’ Neritza rubbed her pincers against each other and made some clicking noises. The scorpion withdrew its stinger and scuttled back a few paces.

‘I couldn’t hurt you even if I wanted to,’ said Lena.

‘Not yet. No, but sooner than you think you will have the strength to kill even such as I.’

‘I would never—’ She was horrified by the idea.

‘The stars say otherwise. But even such power as you will come to possess may not suffice. No.’

‘Success or failure you said. That implies a task?’ Lena asked. Bradon had flatly refused to speak of it.

‘To search, to find, to possess and, above all, to use. All those of the races of men do much the same. They abandon themselves to the pursuit of trinkets of gold and silver and possession of the lives of others. You are no different and yet you must be. The things which you must search the world for are no mere baubles but will bestow on the one who holds them power not held by any mortal since the Binding.’

‘Why should I be given such power? I’m nothing.’

‘Reasons matter not at all. Go with my son. He will take you to the remains of the elven warrior. Return with the satchel that wass hers while she lived. Go!’

Lena knew with absolute certainty that she had no choice in the matter. Her giant relative twittered impatiently. She raised her hand to create some more light and reluctantly followed the lesser scorpion, waist high and more than a match for a young girl such as herself, across the glittering floor and into a wide passage. The coins became thinner and soon she was walking on slimy rock. She hurried to keep up. A weak

current of air brought with it a stench that was at first unpleasant and then unbearable. Suppressing a gag reflex, she drew a fold of her cloak across her mouth and nose to act as a filter. It didn't help. The short journey ended when the scorpion led her onto a wide ledge and waved a single antenna into the darkness ahead of them. Afraid of what she might see, Lena took a deep breath and raised her palm, willing the light to be brighter yet.

The charnel pit was huge. Even with her illumination she could only dimly make out the far side at least eighty paces away. A few feet below her were the remains of the scorpions' meals. She could see shreds of flesh on the nearest bones and, beneath them, more bones. There was no telling how deep the pit was and how many centuries of appetite it represented. She looked again and saw scraps of clothing, broken weapons and a crumpled iron shield and realised that many of the scorpions' victims had been human.

How many people have died here?

Her guide twittered.

'I have to go in there?' Rats crawled over the carcasses, enjoying their feast. Something slithered near the edge of the darkness. A hooded snake attracted by the rats.

The scorpion extended one hard-jointed claw and gave her a push.

Lena's stomach muscles tensed. Abruptly she gave up and retched, allowing her stomach to spasm and empty itself. She thought about running but couldn't move her feet. Another nudge, harder this time, and she almost fell into the pit.

'All right! I'm going.' She spat out a mouthful of bile and laid her cloak on top of a rock. Bracing herself, she climbed down into the pit.

There was nothing to stand on but carcasses and bones and the rotting remains of clothing and rusting armour. Gingerly, she balanced on the cracked pelvis of a large animal and began to look more closely at the spurned table scraps. A skull with an eyeball still sitting in one socket stared back at her. A bear,

she thought. Other animals. A group of humans piled together, twisted bones and tattered remainders of bloody uniforms rotting in the fetid darkness. A helmet crushed flat provided a foothold as she worked her way across the pit. She methodically traversed the open grave, desperately hoping the satchel was on the top layer. If she had to fight the rats for the privilege of digging her way through the decomposing bodies, she'd be doing it with her bare hands. Her stomach spasmed at the thought of touching what she was walking over and she lost her footing on a curved ribcage. Falling forward, she instinctively threw out her arms and her witchlight instantly extinguished itself as she crashed into the grisly floor.

Much later, Lena would say she was rather proud of the fact that she didn't scream. The truth was that her mind and her body's capacity to react to the horrors around her had been exhausted. She'd become numb to the legion of dismembered, devoured dead.

Lena turned her head sideways, took a few quick shallow breaths and then willed her light to return and almost regretted it. She was lying across the skeleton of something much bigger than she was with two broken tusks growing out of its cracked jaw – a troll. Even Grung would not have survived here. Carefully placing her left hand on a dented breastplate, Lena started to push herself to her feet and then froze. There was a much smaller corpse underneath the troll's and wrapped around the delicate arm bones was a leather strap. She couldn't see what the strap was attached to. Cringing when she touched the slimy carcass, she tugged and pulled at the thick bones. The troll's skeleton was heavy but eventually it came free from the pile and she fell backwards into the morass of bones and rotting flesh. A rat screeched at her and she kicked at it.

Scrambling for purchase on the gruesome carpet she grabbed the leather strap and pulled it to the surface. Her efforts were rewarded when the arm snapped off above the elbow, bringing with it a black leather satchel. Shaking it free of the slender finger bones, she held it closer to her light.

'Finally,' she said aloud. She recognised what remained of the design and a thought occurred to her. Inspecting the

skeleton she retrieved another object and spoke to the elf's remains. 'I'm sorry I can't offer you more than this,' she whispered.

'But you can,' a hollow voice echoed amidst the death.

Lena watched in amazement as a slivery-grey apparition appeared in front of her.

'You have my haversack and my ring, human. Look again amongst my remains and take also my sword,' the figure commanded.

'Who ... who are you?'

'In life I was Sathene, daughter of Eraphon,' the figure said. 'Hurry, human. My will is finite and my time short.'

Lena did as the shade instructed. The sword was there, in its scabbard, strapped to the elf's twisted backbone. She pulled and tugged until it came free.

'My ring, I command thee to render up to my family.'

'But—'

'You need not seek them out. My brother will come to you,' the shade told her. 'But tell him not where my remains lie. He is as passionate as he is vain and I would not see more of my family die needlessly in this place. The journal inside I give to you for you are my true heir and must succeed where I have failed.'

The Seers had also spoken of a task.

'The Wanderers' Journal.'

Lena looked down at the satchel, feeling its weight.

'Bradon knows. It was he who set me on my path and will start you on yours,' the elf's spirit said. 'Already I wane and I will not return. My wand lies at your feet – I bequeath it and my sword to my nephew.'

As Lena bent to search through the carcass once more the elf spoke again, her voice fading as though coming from a vast distance. 'Remember this, human – you must live or die by your own decisions and not those of others.'

When Lena looked up, the slivery figure faded and then vanished entirely.

‘Is this what I was sent to retrieve?’

‘The knowledge you seek is within. Some anyway. You ssssshould leave now. The smell of death is upon you and my children are always hungry.’

‘You spoke of a price,’ said Lena. She was trying to ignore the stench she had carried from the pit and what it represented.

‘Nothing for nothing. That iss true,’ she said, seemingly pleased that the human had not forgotten. ‘What will you offer for the knowledge I have given you?’

Lena had nothing the giant arachnid might want. She looked at the riches indifferently piled across the floor of the grotto. Nothing meaningful, anyway, she thought. ‘What would you ask of me?’

The creature made a clicking noise and a pair of her unnatural offspring retreated. Lena hadn’t noticed them closing in.

Lena carefully turned the satchel over in her hands. The slippery leather was worn with use yet not cracked with age. She wondered how many years it had lain there, waiting for a young girl to crawl across the pit. Not too many she thought. She held up the signet ring she had pulled from the elf’s finger, the sheathed sword and the delicate wand that tingled against her fingers. ‘For the elf’s family. I would not have you think me a thief.’

‘They belonged to a sorceress who thought she was greater than I. I killed her though it seems longer ago than it was. Time passes strangely when you have lived as long as I. Past, present and future are not so easy to separate. You may keep them.’

‘And the price,’ Lena repeated. ‘I do not like to leave a debt behind.’

‘So persistent. You have come to me when I have not seen a descendant of my beloved sister before this day. Not one. The . . . pleasure of your company has been sufficient. Like

your vain Seers, I see many things without leaving my domain. Know this, girl-child. Others seek what you seek and the price of failure is all.'

Lena nodded, though not in understanding.

'There are two more things that I shall offer you. The first of what you must gather already liesss within reach.'

Lena listened, astonished as Neritza explained. 'Why didn't you keep it for yourself? You must have loved Thessalia dearly.'

'I still do,' Neritza whispered, the harshness briefly banished by emotion. 'When you return to Queenshelm, you mussst claim my gift for yourself.'

'And the other? My rune?' That was important too.

'Even before the Gods took back what they had given, the talent you now possess was among the rarest. The answers you seek lie within the ancient journal you now hold. A most dangerous curse you carry—'

There was movement to Lena's right as a scorpion stalked closer.

'Your time here issss done. Leave now.' Human speech gave way to clicking and the lesser scorpions retreated once more, though not so far.

'Thank you,' said Lena turning to leave, shaken by the tragedy of eleven centuries of grief. She had mourned Philomena's passing, had lamented the loss of a sister and genuinely missed her, but love? It hurt to realise that she had never truly loved her older sister. The lament was a lesser thing than love.

'Thank me? You will curse me and all the infinite reaches of the universe for the knowledge you have found here.'

Twenty-two

‘YOU TOOK YOUR TIME,’ said Fandalia, her face visibly relaxing as Lena emerged from the cave entrance alone. ‘It’s nearly dawn. What happened? You smell worse than Bethlemann’s midden-pit.’

‘I’ll explain as we go, Fandalia. We should hurry.’ There was sufficient light for riding. Opting to be cold rather than foul her cloak, Lena folded it over the pack horse, touching it as little as possible . . . she didn’t want to think about what was clinging to the rest of her clothing and her exposed skin. She had a spare dress and would change as soon as she had a chance to scrub the filth from her clothes and body.

The clacking of claws scrabbling against broken rock in the darkness of the cave mouth was all the incentive the travellers needed. The two women mounted and rode hard until mid-morning, not stopping until the lathered horses needed resting.

‘There’s a stream here,’ said Lena. ‘I need a wash.’

‘You’ll get no argument from me, nor your horse most likely. You clean yourself up and I’ll see to breakfast,’ replied Fandalia.

Lena stripped naked, threw everything she had been wearing into a pool by the slow-moving stream and followed, welcoming how the icy water first shocked and then numbed her. She scoured every inch of her shaking body with coarse sand from the streambed and then repeated the process twice more before starting on her clothes. Scrub and pound with unfeeling fingers as her naked skin turned a mottled blue. Scrub and rinse. Repeat as her teeth chattered uncontrollably and all sensation disappeared from her hands and feet. Eventually she accepted that she’d done the best she could and wrung as much water out of her garments as possible before

washing herself again. She used handfuls of tussock grass to dry herself and then her boots.

As soon as she was dressed in her spare clothes she spread the wet ones over low bushes to dry beneath the weak sun and joined Fandalia next to the small camp-fire.

‘Well?’ The Apex had been surprisingly patient.

‘She said I had a task to perform but was annoyingly cryptic about what it was. I think I have to find some things that were lost.’ Lena held her hands towards the fire, beginning the painful process of restoring feeling to her fingers.

‘Did she say what?’ Fandalia leaned closer, her eyes tight with suspicion.

‘No, only that others were already seeking them. And she didn’t say who or how much of a head start they have. Do you recognise this seal?’ Lena pointed to the elvish design on the outside of the rat-chewed satchel. She’d cleaned the satchel too, using damp grass to remove the worst of the legacies of its time in the pit. It still stank of death and decay but she was afraid that more rigorous cleaning would destroy her hard-won prize.

‘House Everthrall,’ said Fandalia, her voice falling to a whisper, barely loud enough to be heard over the crackling flames.

‘That’s Payron’s family? I thought I recognised it.’ It was embroidered on the elf’s doublet.

The Apex paused in her stirring of the contents of the blackened pot over the fire. ‘Did Neritza give it to you?’

‘In a manner of speaking,’ Lena said. She could feel her eyes watering as the wind shifted and she blinked away the smoke from the fire. ‘And these?’

Fandalia turned the silvery signet ring over in her hands while Lena unwrapped the sword and wand. ‘That’s an elven sword. Lady Sathene’s? Where did you find them? Does Neritza know you took them? If you stole something from her, she’ll send her brood after us.’

‘Neritza said I could take them,’ Lena assured the Apex.

‘It’s been a dozen years since Sathene disappeared. She’s the daughter of King Earaphon and a powerful warrior in her own right. Payron’s aunt, not that you’d know it to look at her. Elves don’t age the way humans do.’

Lena ran her fingers over the pale wood of Sathene’s wand, the tingling sensation reassuring her that feeling had returned, before looking up to meet Fandalia’s grey eyes, again wondering about the flecks of red in them and worrying more about the conversation she would need to have with Payron.

‘She’s dead then. We suspected as much but the elves won’t take it well. It took years to get King Earaphon to let Sathene come to the Village to study. Actually, he didn’t agree at all but Sathene renounced her right to inherit her father’s throne and came anyway. Earaphon’s not one to forgive being slighted no matter how many years have passed. He’ll blame us for getting his daughter killed.’ Fandalia slopped gruel into bowls and passed one to Lena.

‘You mean war?’

‘No. Not that. There’s precious few of us but enough to make him think twice even if the Elven Council supported him, which they won’t. The dwarves wouldn’t stand for it either. No, House Everthrall has other ways to make its displeasure felt. Trade for one.’

‘And Payron for another.’

‘Yes. Payron’s parents, Lord Payson and Lady Velawyn, will take their son back to Vallion. Shaeralli too, and we couldn’t refuse them if they demanded it. Speaking of Payron —’

‘He needs to be told,’ agreed Lena. ‘I’ll do it. He’s my friend.’

‘Really? They’ll like that even less.’

Lena smiled ruefully.

‘And the rest? You don’t have enough control for a wand.’ The Apex held out her hand.

‘It’s not for me,’ said Lena. ‘It’s Payron’s inheritance.’ She wrapped up the sword and the wand.

‘Ummm... .’

‘I know. He hasn’t has his attainment ceremony yet, but Sathene was insistent. The signet ring to her brother and the wand and sword to her nephew.’ Lena took back the ring and slipped it into her pocket.

‘Sathene spoke to you?’

‘Her ghost or whatever remained after she died,’ said Lena. She held her hands closer to the fire. ‘She said I was to have the journal; that I’d need it.’

‘A journal. I was afraid of that,’ said Fandalia, rising to her feet.

‘Sathene called it *The Wanderers’ Journal*. You know about it?’

‘We still have plenty of daylight left.’ Fandalia started kicking dirt over the pitiful excuse for a fire. ‘You can ask Bradon about the wretched journal when we get back to the Village.’

As Lena gathered up her damp clothes she realised that she had a problem. In fact, she had several of them. They seemed to travel in packs, nipping at her mind, distracting her from whatever else she was supposed to be focusing on. With several days’ ride ahead of them she hoped to come up with some answers before getting back to the Village. Fandalia hadn’t asked what Neritza had said about the unknown rune and Lena felt it was better that way, not least because she didn’t know herself. She doubted that Bradon would be so incurious about Didyme’s bracelet which was something else she didn’t want to discuss.

‘Lena back!’ Grung was bouncing up and down with excitement as Lena walked her horse through the gate separating Bradon’s tower from the main road. ‘Have girl for dinner.’

Lena patted Grung on his thick forearm but didn’t smile as she shook the snow off her cloak and followed Bradon inside.

Dinner was a banquet of sufficient magnitude for the entire Assembly and their assorted apprentices but there were only the three of them to confront half a pig, a tureen of soup, a couple of yards of fresh white bread and a cartload of roasted vegetables. Grung loaded Lena's plate with more food than she'd eaten in the last three days while she helped herself to a glass of Bradon's best wine before taking her seat. The cryptic journal lay on the table to her left so she could feed herself with her right hand while reading.

It wasn't much to look at. At about seven inches in height, five inches across and as thick as the thimble she used when darning clothes. The covers and spine were made of undyed russet-coloured leather stretched over ivory. Whoever had made it had gone to some expense but there was no title. In fact nothing at all was inscribed or stamped on the outside. There was a colophon inside the front cover and most of the pages within were covered in writing produced by different authors.

'We can all be thankful you found it,' said Bradon, watching her turn to a page near the beginning. 'And you can read it?'

Lena delicately sliced a roasted rutabaga into neat pieces and used her fork to convey one to her mouth. 'Best meal I've had in nearly two weeks. Thank you, Grung.'

The troll bobbed his head up and down as he crunched his way through a handful of ribs.

'I see. How much did Neritza tell you?'

'Not a lot,' said Lena. She had no expectation that her master would tell her what she needed to know, but that wouldn't stop her from asking. 'If I am going to do this—'

'If?' Wine slopped from Bradon's glass.

'Conditional word. I need to know more about what I am being asked to do. Neritza was rather vague about some task I am supposed to perform. Apparently I need to find some things, though she didn't tell me what.' Lena looked her master straight in the eye, daring him to keep lying to her.

‘Premature knowledge isn’t always a good thing,’ he said, making a token attempt at mopping up the spilt wine with his sleeve.

‘It’s better than pointless prevarication,’ she retorted ignoring the dead pig on her plate. She’d be washing his shirt tomorrow and wine stains were a bear to get out.

‘So like Thessalia,’ he murmured. ‘She had a temper too.’

‘It’s a family trait. Get on with it.’ Lena closed the journal and started eating. She had barely begun to work her way through the first of its nearly indecipherable entries, but the journal wasn’t going anywhere. Reading could wait.

‘I could do without the attitude, Lena. Sometimes you forget the nature of our relationship.’

‘Quit stalling and start from the beginning, Master. Mythology was a bit like religion for me, inane ramblings from dusty scholars that I did my best to ignore.’

‘Then you know.’

‘A bit.’ It was Lena’s turn to be evasive. Archaic spelling, bad handwriting and fading ink made for slow progress. And riding for most of the last six days had left little time for reading to begin with.

Bradon gave her a hard look. Leaving the heavily-laden table, he picked up the thick black staff that served as his wand. He muttered a few words and a pale blue glow briefly appeared at the staff’s head. ‘Doubling the wards to make sure no one can overhear us,’ he explained. He refilled his glass before sitting down. ‘This is quite long, by the way.’

Lena nodded. She’d already bathed and the only other thing she had to do tonight was the dishes.

‘It’s too soon but. . . . It’s called *The Wanderers’ Journal* and I suppose it’s better that you know instead of trying to figure things out by yourself and getting them wrong. Where to start?’ He glanced at Grung and the disappearing pig carcass. ‘One of the things about being human is that we make mistakes. Most of the time those mistakes don’t mean all that much in the overall scheme of things. The universe doesn’t

care whether a man marries the wrong woman or a sea captain runs his ship onto a sandbar or . . . well, you get the idea. It doesn't really matter what we do, the sun will still rise in the east and the rains will water the crops in the spring. Now the Gods, on the other hand—'

'You're trying to tell me the Gods were real?'

'Don't interrupt. Yes, Liden, Phegnos and the other Gods were real and they made us and everything else including this world we're standing on. Most of them still exist but it's been a long time since they deigned to grace this world with their presence and therein hangs the tale. A lot of what people pass down as myth has a grounding in truth. It's been distorted and reinvented over the centuries, but yes, the Gods are very real even if the few scatterings of people who still believe in them are dismissed as lunatics. Belief and disbelief don't change the facts.'

A log crackled and settled lower in the hearth. Grung had already laid the bricks next to the fire. Later, Lena would wrap one in an old blanket to keep her bed warm.

'As I said, humans make mistakes but seldom ones that matter,' he continued. 'But when the Gods err, the consequences tend to be much more significant. For the humans anyway.'

'To hear the zealots' raving, you'd think they were infallible,' she said.

'You'd think, but no. Far from it as it turned out. Starting at the start. When the six Gods spun this world out of the elemental forces inhabiting the Void they created all the things on it. Land. Oceans. Seasons. Plants. Animals. And all the races of men: humans like you and me and the elves, dwarves, trolls, goblins and others. Not all of them are still around. Wars and neglectful deities can do that to a species, though that's getting ahead of the story.'

Lena gave her dinner some breathing space and refilled both wine glasses.

‘Everything was going well, but the Gods learned that they were not immune from the disputes of their creations. They fell out. More precisely, one God. . . .’ He sipped his wine before continuing. ‘So the rest of the Gods made some people more powerful to protect the world from Sceadu and his ambition—’

‘Sorcery. They made people into sorcerers.’

‘Yes, and that’s where hubris and belief in their own infallibility came together. They messed up. Can you guess how the almighty messed up?’

‘Not all the men and women they made sorcerers were good.’

‘True, some fools aligned themselves with the Lord of the Pit or the Fallen One as people started calling Sceadu after his siblings teamed up and banished him to Hell for being more powerful than they were.’

‘And I suppose some sorcerers used their powers for their own benefit?’ Her fork grated against the ceramic plate. She’d barely been aware that she’d been eating.

‘Certainly, but that wasn’t the real problem. You see, the Gods forgot two of the fundamental traits of all the peoples they’d created: curiosity and the ability to learn.’

Lena barely noticed when Grung shovelled more vegetables onto her plate. The only thing left of the pig was the odour of well cooked meat.

‘What’s wrong with being curious?’

‘Nothing, until you combine it with the powers of a sorcerer. The sorcerers, some of them anyway, had a hunger for knowledge and they grew ever more powerful as they acquired it. Eventually the Gods woke up to the fact that a handful of the sorcerers had developed powers to rival their own.’

‘I’d bet a year’s wages that didn’t go down too well.’

‘If I paid you anything you’d be a rich woman, not that you could find anyone foolish enough to take your bet. Yes, the

Gods were alarmed at the thought of anyone, especially the mortals they'd created, having more power than them. Things hadn't got that far but it was only a matter of time before the Gods were toppled. Of course, they weren't going to sit around and wait for that to happen so they imposed limitations on their humans: the runes that now define and limit our powers. "The Binding" we called it.'

'I see.' Lena knew there had to be more.

'Not yet. But you will.' Bradon leaned back in his chair allowing Grung to clear the plates. 'Once again the infallible beings who created us got it badly wrong – some sorcerers had already progressed beyond the limits the Binding imposed.'

'How many?'

'We never quite figured that out exactly; about a score give or take. Anyway, the Gods decreed that all sorcerers should submit to the Binding. Hardly anyone did. Some wanted power. Some were frightened of the Fallen One's taint spreading through the world and didn't trust the rest of the Gods to protect them. A few, though we didn't know it, had already pledged themselves to walk in Sceadu's shadow. Dinkle declared she was a god, called the old Gods lesser deities and demanded that they bow down and worship her. She always was a bit soft in the head and it was a short-lived delusion that went down about as well as your cooking. Yvaine was quickest and made a rather messy example of her. A few submitted but most held out.'

'The Twelve.' Lena stood up, gathering her plate and cutlery.

Bradon looked through the archway to the kitchen where Grung was pouring boiling water into the stone basin used for washing dishes. 'Leave the pots for tonight, Lena. Grung gets them properly clean anyway. Where was I?'

'The Twelve,' Lena prompted as she settled back into her chair.

'The Twelve,' the sorcerer acknowledged, 'although there were only eleven by the time things started to get out of hand.'

Neritza had killed Didyme more than a century before the worst of it and it's a given that the rancid hag would have joined Sceadu. She all but worshiped the Fallen One's slimy toenails. So maybe Neritza did some good in the end, however unwittingly.'

Neritza had done a little more than Bradon knew, but Lena wasn't inclined to share the information. 'So twelve, I mean, eleven very powerful sorcerers rebelled against their creators,' she prompted.

'The Gods would have won eventually,' said Bradon, 'but that's when Sceadu made his move, promising the Twelve they could keep their powers if only they opened the Gates of Hell. As I said, some already worshiped the Fallen One but a few more threw in their lot with the dark. Dinkle's spectacularly grisly end may have pushed them in that direction. Pretty soon the Gods' War erupted, the conflict dividing realms and races as it spread across the world. It was the bloodiest time in human history. We're only a few of years shy of a millennium since it all ended, but the scars still lie upon the land. The Atturans broke on the plains of Alacia and fled with their shame. This continent was cleft in two by the Rift and the Sarashan Empire of the Sea Peoples all but obliterated in the process; most of it sank beneath the oceans with only the highest mountains remaining above the water – what we now call the Shrimp Islands – and its surviving peoples scattered. The two most powerful empires the world has ever seen cast down. The human population still hasn't recovered and it was worse for others. The dragons, loyal to a fault, became extinct when the last of them fell halting a demon lord's advance at Alacia. Alacia itself was all but depopulated. Worst of all, when it looked like Sceadu would prevail the goddess Inanna sacrificed her immortality and ultimately herself to create the Great Seal between our world and Hell.'

Bradon stared at the flames reflecting off his empty glass. In silence Lena refilled it, leaving the bottle on the table between them.

'The death of a goddess is a terrible thing. The other Gods were appalled. Some wanted to unmake this world but Liden

reminded them that Inanna's sacrifice had been for their creations. So they limited the Twelve, the ones who were still alive and hadn't fled to Hell, but they didn't destroy either the sorcerers or their talismans. It wasn't an act of mercy but of punishment and pragmatism. The humans were made to live both with the knowledge of what they had done and without the Gods who mourned their sister and, in their grief, abandoned this world. Religious observance has been in decline since then. But Sceadu's still sitting in his underworld prison, plotting and scheming and seducing. He still has powerful allies and minions to do his bidding. He's never stopped trying and, sooner or later, he'll find what he needs to free himself and wreck his revenge on the universe. The Gods hid the Twelve's remaining talismans, the ones they could find, decreed sentence on the guilty and left the survivors to their own devices.'

'Late. Go to bed now.' Grung was bending over the fire picking out the hot bricks with his bare hands and deftly wrapping them in layers of towelling.

'Thank you, Grung.' Lena knew that when she got upstairs her bed would be warm.

'He's right. That's enough for tonight,' said Bradon.

'But—'

'There's more, a lot more, but if you believe only one thing, understand that the world's a lot more dangerous than most people imagine. There are people, and things, out there that make Neritza look like a paragon of virtue and—'

'And some of them want me dead.'

'Or worse.'

'Why me?'

'Read *The Wanderers' Journal* and do your research. We'll talk again when you're done. We should pay another visit to the Seers too.' As Bradon stared into the fading embers of the fireplace, his face seemed to age and that told Lena more than all the words he had spoken.

'*The Wanderers' Journal*? You'll tell me why it's called that tomorrow?'

Bradon nodded.

'Good night then.'

As she climbed into bed and blew out her candle, Lena thought about Bradon's tale.

We're living in the kind of world where everyone should be carrying around a spare set of small clothes.

Another thought came to her.

Bradon was talking as though he was there, as though he had seen it happen.

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Twenty-three

IT WASN'T LONG AFTER DAWN but the sun made its appearances late at this time of the year and Payron was already sitting cross-legged in the orchard at his lesson with Haidi. To be more precise, he was sitting a few inches above the tufts of dead winter grass protruding through the patches of snow and reading aloud from a thick book held in his left hand and balancing half a dozen dented pewter goblets stacked one above the other in his right. It was cold, but when the cold became bitter they'd all be confined to practising anything but fire in barns and haylofts so she understood the edict that all lessons should be taken outside while the weather was co-operative.

‘Levitation is not the same as flying and confusing the two disciplines will impair performance in—’

Payron caught sight of Lena approaching and fell to the ground with a soft thump. The goblets crashed down beside him though he managed to retain his grip on the book.

‘When did you get back?’ The elf sounded surprised; perhaps he'd expected the serving girl to perish in the Taspin Valley. Perhaps he'd hoped she had.

‘Last night,’ she said, holding back her annoyance. ‘Mistress Haidi, please excuse the interruption but Payron and I need to talk.’ She held the wrapped blanket containing Sathene's legacy a little tighter.

‘I know. Fandalia told me.’ Haidi's inflection turned it into a question. When Lena didn't explain the teacher nodded. ‘Payron, I'll be in the Library when you've finished though I'm sure Tarraday would appreciate the return of his goblets before he opens for business.’

‘It's a nice day, Payron. Why don't we go and sit by the stream?’ It wasn't a nice day at all but she felt like she had to

say something. Lena glanced at Haidi walking towards the main road before steering the older apprentice towards the river bank.

‘Something awful has happened,’ he said. Lena’s face was telling him more than her words.

‘I’m afraid so,’ she said quietly. ‘You know where I went?’

‘The whole Village has been talking of little else. I’m just relieved you’re back safely. It’s almost unprecedented for an apprentice to be sent anywhere dangerous. Actually, I don’t think it’s ever been allowed.’ He dusted the snow off his hose before it could melt.

Lena just nodded, thinking about what she needed to say.

‘So what was it like?’ He swept the slush off a log and allowed Lena to sit first.

‘I’m afraid I have some bad news, Payron. When I was at Taspin, I met a spectre, at least I think that’s what she was, and she gave me some things.’ Lena unwrapped the bundle she had carried, revealing the glittering sword in its sheath and the fine-grained wand.

‘They’re my aunt’s,’ he said, reaching out to lay a finger on the emerald set into the pommel.

‘I am so, so sorry.’

‘Are you sure ... I mean... .’

‘Lady Sathene was definitely dead,’ said Lena, her voice soft. ‘She did speak to me briefly and I can’t even begin to imagine the effort that must have taken.’

‘Yes, my aunt was formidable. Wait, what do you mean she spoke to you? Did you raise her?’

‘No. Her shade came to me. She asked. . . .’ began Lena and then started again. ‘She gave me four things. This she asked me to give to her brother. I guess that’s your father?’

Lena offered him the silvery signet ring. It glittered in the winter sun. ‘That’s your family crest, isn’t it?’ She didn’t

know enough about the elven royal family to know if Sathene's death affected the line of succession.

'Yes.' The young elf took the ring and closed his fist around it. 'This is her ring.'

Lena presented the sword.

'That has been in the family for generations,' said Payron. 'One of a pair forged in dragon fire, if you believe the legends. King Earaphon wields its twin.'

'And her wand,' she picked up the slender piece of elder oak and gave the wand to its new owner. 'I know you're not supposed to have your own yet, but she wanted you to have it and it's only a few days until your attainment ceremony.'

Payron ran his fingers lightly over the stick of ash-pale wood.

'And a journal. That's what the Seers sent me to find.'

'Aunt Sathene kept a journal?' His tapered eyebrows went up in surprise. Elven history was predominantly an oral tradition.

'It wasn't hers. Most of it's in Common for one thing, and the writing's so archaic it's taking me forever to decipher just the first few pages. Whoever started it must have lived a very long time ago.'

They sat quietly for a time. A broken leaf, picked up by the gentle breeze, fluttered into the slow-moving stream. It wouldn't be long before heavier snowfalls and plunging temperatures put a layer of ice across the waterways.

'How did my aunt die?'

'I don't know the details, but she must have died bravely. I cleaned the sword.' Lena could feel the cold seeping through her dress and pulled her cloak a little tighter, thinking she should have donned the winter garb Ellish had made for her.

'Where is she buried? The King will want to know. My father and uncle too.'

‘The last thing Lady Sathene said was that no one should look for her or try to avenge her. She commanded me not to tell anyone. Even if I did, I don’t think it would be possible to find her again.’

‘You can’t know that,’ he objected, looking towards the distant mountains.

‘Not for certain, but I will respect her wishes, Payron. I have to. It cost Lady Sathene too much to deliver the message for me to fail her.’

‘The Assembly’s approved my attainment, but you knew that. . . ?’

‘Fandalia told Bradon last night. Congratulations, Payron.’ She was genuinely pleased for him. Attainment was an acknowledgement that a sorcerer had enough self-control to use a wand and use his talents without destroying himself by overreaching. But it was only a beginning. In a world where knowledge was power, learning was a lifelong activity. For sorcerers that could be a very long time indeed.

He nodded. ‘My parents will be coming for the ceremony. A week tomorrow,’ he said after a pause. ‘Will you tell them what you can?’

‘I will,’ she said. His parents wouldn’t like the fact that it was a human serving girl bringing them news of their relative’s death but she would do it for Payron.

Payron wiped a tear from his eye and turned away, trying to hide it.

Lena put a hand on the elf’s shoulder. He tried to shrug it off and then collapsed into her, crying.

It was close to noon by the time Lena wiped her boots on the rough mats outside the Library doors.

‘Ah, Lena. I was beginning to think that you’d forgotten your lessons.’ Baragwanth didn’t seem happy at his apprentice’s return.

‘Apologies Master Baragwanth. I had an errand to run.’ And some goblets to return to an innkeeper who had insisted

she wash the dirt off them before allowing her to leave his premises.

‘So Bradon told me,’ the sorcerer said dryly. ‘In any case, you are here. Since it has been nearly a month since you applied yourself to your studies, I suggest you start by reviewing the first two volumes of *A Basic Ontological Introduction to Mystical Theory*.’

It hadn’t been half as long as that but Lena kept her mouth shut, dutifully pulled the prescribed double dose of boredom from the shelves, opened at the start and began reading under her teacher’s watchful eyes. Across the room Shaeralli and Max were puzzling over a scroll while taking instruction from Haidi. Behind them Khannie was rooting through the stacks while one of Chakobu’s assistants ambled around the librarian’s domain, returning things to their rightful place at a much slower pace.

‘I need to go or I’ll be late for the Assembly meeting,’ Haidi told her apprentices. ‘Keep working and I’ll check your progress when I get back. Baragwanth?’

Baragwanth nodded and tottered towards the heavy doors. Haidi fell into step beside the old man, slowing her pace to match his.

‘So, what happened?’ Max asked as soon as the teachers were out of sight.

‘Is it true? Is Lady Sathene. . . .’ Shaeralli’s lips were trembling.

Lena shoved the offending symbols of her mental drudgery aside. If there were less interesting books than *A Basic Ontological Introduction to Mystical Theory* lurking in the Library she hoped Baragwanth didn’t know about them.

‘Well, it’s good to see you again, too.’

‘We’re just glad you made it back. Freth was going on about how you were sure to be eaten and how you deserved it. He’s got a pretty gruesome imagination,’ said Khannie, returning with an armful of scrolls. ‘This should be the rest of them.’

The rolls of parchment scattered across the wooden table. Max put out one ham-sized hand to stop them falling off the edge. Was he ever going to stop growing?

‘What does Haidi have you doing now?’ Lena asked. It had to be more interesting than the turgid dross sitting unread on her table.

‘Researching what we can do without runes,’ explained Khannie. ‘The short answer is that we can’t do anything without the relevant rune, but we’re supposed to look at what happens to people who are dumb enough—’

‘Or desperate enough,’ interjected Max.

‘—or desperate enough to try. I think she just wants to make sure we’re too scared to even think about it.’

‘Her ladyship?’ prompted Shaeralli.

‘I’m afraid Lady Sathene is dead. I’ve just told Payron. That’s why I was late,’ said Lena.

Shaeralli sniffled, wiping her nose with the back of her sleeve. Tears trickled down her cheeks.

‘Did you know her?’ Lena asked.

The elf nodded, blowing her nose into her sleeve.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Lena, handing over her handkerchief. She guessed that the elves were a close-knit community.

‘She w . . . was nice to me. The rest of the royal family snubbed me and Mum because . . . we weren’t important. But Lady Sathene was different. Before she disappeared she used to come and visit when I was very young. King Earaphon forbade her but she did it anyway and the King’s not the sort of person one goes against.’ Shaeralli’s palpable anger tainted her grief.

Max put a hand on Shaeralli’s shoulder but she shrugged it off. ‘Has word been sent to Vallion?’

‘I would imagine so. Payron’s parents are coming for his attainment. Sathene wanted me to deliver her signet ring to her brother, so I can do it then,’ said Lena. At least she wouldn’t

have to visit Vallion. Max forced her to recount the entire story from start to finish.

‘A scorpion?’ Max’s eyes bulged.

‘A very large scorpion,’ confirmed Lena.

‘And the journal?’ Khannie, of course.

Lena produced her hard-won prize and the other apprentices crowded around her.

Max turned page after page. ‘It’s all blank?’

‘Not to me.’ She wondered why.

‘So what does it say?’ Max asked.

‘I don’t know.’

‘But you can read it?’

‘Even the bits which are in Common are a very old dialect. And some seriously awful handwriting doesn’t help. The twit who wrote the second set of entries must have been galloping on horseback at the time. Probably drunk too,’ said Lena. ‘Anyway, it’s a good thing it’s winter because it’s going to take me a long time to make sense of it.’

The days might be short but with no crops to harvest and no fields to till, chores were mostly things like helping Max and Khannie repair a leak in the roof of Sharell’s cottage (for which they were paid with a cup of boiling hot tea and a herbal scone), mending her master’s clothes (for which she received no reward whatsoever) and not getting in Grung’s way as the troll enthusiastically cleaned Bradon’s tower (for which she received an excellent dinner). All of which left plenty of time to spend on *The Wanderers’ Journal* and her unsanctioned quest to identify the unidentified rune slowly twisting its way from her right shoulder blade towards the centre of her back. Neritza had said that the answer to this question, and all the other questions Lena should be asking were in the *Journal* and in the past. One of the first things she had learned from the *Journal* was the name of its first author. Kharon had been a monk although she did not know which God he worshiped.

Chakobu had been delighted to show off his knowledge and explained in excessively meandering detail that it had been common for monks to be literate because they had very little else to do. Lena doubted that but listened as the elderly scholar explained how the great religious orders had used their wealth and influence to build power centres to rival the monarchs of their era.

‘Of course, all that came tumbling down with the Gods’ War,’ the librarian prattled on, oblivious to the loss of his audience. Lena already had her hands on *Institutions and Ingrates: the decline of the religious orders*. The six-hundred-page book had a completely uncreased spine and a trio of dead silverfish between its stiff leaves but no index. She was going to have to do this the hard way.

One sentence, sometimes one badly written scribble at a time, her familiarity with *The Wanderers’ Journal* grew. The first forty-two worn pages were in Kharon’s cultured but archaic hand. The next twenty-four in another. And all of the eleven people who had held possession before Lena had left their names there, though not all in Common. She turned to the final author. Much to her surprise, Sathene had written in Common and Lena wondered if she had done so in anticipation of her own death.

I am Sathene, daughter of Earaphon. As others have done before me, I take upon myself the search for those of the talismans of the Twelve that remain in this plane. Perhaps my search will be in vain. Indeed, I hope it is unfulfilled for the finding of what was lost will be a harbinger of a devastation upon all the lands surpassing even the Gods’ War but search I must because the greater risk is to allow Sceadu’s minions to render them up to their unholy lord.

As much as she disliked criticising the recently deceased, Lena struggled to suppress her irritation at the florid prose of a woman who thought she was addressing history instead of her sixteen-year-old successor. Said audience flicked forward several pages to the last entry.

I have arrived at the Taspin Valley and now must confront thrice-cursed Neritza. If I am right and she possesses

Didyme's bracelet, then I must take it and the power it contains from the once-human beast. I have the sword of my ancestors and my talents but should they prove insufficient, should I prove unworthy, then another must take up the burden.

The remaining pages were blank. And it didn't escape Lena's notice that there were only enough of them for one more journalist.

Lena cursed the futility of Sathene's fatal quest. Thessalia's sister had held Didyme's talisman only briefly before fleeing humanity to her unending exile. Two plus two made four. Some vaguely familiar symbols on an old drawing Bradon had showed her and a cryptic remark confirmed what Nertitza had said about Didyme's bracelet. Didyme wasn't one of the Twelve, she'd perished well before the Gods' War, but she would have been among them had she lived. Sathene had been right to believe that the witch's talisman mattered as much as any of the others.

And I know precisely where it is.

'I am deeply sorry, Your Lordship.' If Lena bowed to the second son of the Elven King she did so as an equal showing respect for the loss to his people and his person. She had been trained for occasions like this. 'Lady Sathene asked that I deliver you this.'

Lord Payson stared at his sister's ring. Lena had polished it until it gleamed. His lips thinned and Lena sensed the anger in rigid stance. Payson was taller than his son, tall enough that Lena had to lift her chin to look into his eyes. Green of course, just like all the other elves.

'Such was never meant for the taint of human hands,' he snapped, grabbing his inheritance. In his haste, he succeeded only in knocking the ring out of Lena's outstretched hand.

It landed on the thin covering of snow, glittering under the midday sun. No one bent to pick it up. Beside his father, Payron held his aunt's sword by its sheath, unmoving.

‘You insolent—’ The regal woman Payron had introduced as his mother took half a step closer to Lena.

‘Mother,’ Payron intervened.

‘Don’t interrupt. You, girl, refuse to tell us where her ladyship lies? Why did you not bring her back to Vallion so she could be farewelled as is proper for one in whose veins flows the blood of kings?’

‘My Lady, that wasn’t possible—’

Whatever explanation she had been about to offer was cut short when Velawyn’s palm smacked across Lena’s cheek, hard enough to jerk her head around. The quiet conversations taking place around them were cut off by the sound of flesh striking flesh.

‘Lena? Are you all right?’ Payron demanded, his mouth hanging open.

‘And you will have nothing to do with this upstart serving wench and her doubtful antecedents.’ Velawyn’s anger transferred to her son. ‘If Fandalia hadn’t persuaded me that you need further training for your own safety, you would be coming back to Vallion with us tomorrow. As it is. . . .’

Lena stared at a point midway between Payson and Velawyn, kept her chin high, her mouth shut and ignored the runes tensing within her forearms.

‘I am sorry for your loss,’ she stated flatly when the woman paused to draw breath. Lena avoided meeting Payron’s embarrassed stare as she turned and walked away.

‘You have not been dismissed, girl!’

Lena ignored both Velawyn’s implied command and Fandalia’s horrified expression, reasonably certain that the limits to her self-control were uncomfortably close and absolutely certain that the price of incinerating obnoxious elven royalty would be far higher than two silver marks apiece.

She applauded when Payron received his aunt’s wand from Haidi. Lena might envy Payron’s right to wield a wand but she

had nothing but pity for his unfortunate choice of parents.

I finally met a woman who makes my own mother look like a model of maternal affection.

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Twenty-four

‘WHY DOES EVERYTHING have to be so annoyingly cryptic?’ This Kharon, well-educated priest that he was, might well have been writing in a different language.

Forasmuch as the unbeknownst doth take forth they symbole of his most foul apostasy upon the lands of ayl thuy worlde. . . .

‘Nobody, and I mean nobody, speaks like that. Not unless he wants to be mistaken for a complete lackwit.’ Lena didn’t look up from the pages of the grey-skinned journal as she vented. Kharon’s archaic penmanship might be beautifully written but every sentence, sometimes every word, required considerable effort to understand. The second author, someone called Biekleb, had terrible handwriting and a penchant for filling page after page with irrelevant self-obsession.

‘Language changes over time,’ Bradon told her.

‘Very helpful, Master.’ Sarcasm dripped from her tongue. ‘And the next wretch deserves to be keelhauled for his handwriting. If my penmanship had looked anything like that, I would have been beaten.’

And I was.

‘So the journey was a waste of time.’

‘Not at all.’ Lena blinked in surprise. *The Wanderers’ Journal* was not the only thing she had brought back from the caves of the Taspin Valley; a piece of knowledge that, if true, was not for sharing.

Bradon was staring at her and she realised she had been caught daydreaming. ‘Kharon must have been writing shortly after the Breaking. So much hate. The second one, Biekleb, was just obnoxious. His role in the Karolignian War of Succession was . . . it makes me wonder how much of what we

think of as history has been carefully edited over the centuries.’ That was as far as she’d got and even then she was struggling. Antiquated formality and bad handwriting made every sentence a challenge.

She flicked to the colophon inside of the front cover where there was a list of eleven names. She assumed they were the people who’d possessed *The Wanderers’ Journal* before her. There was just enough room for Lena to add her own name. There wouldn’t be room for another and she didn’t know whether that was ominous or not.

‘Bad times. Bad times,’ rumbled Grung from the kitchen. Trolls had good hearing and a long oral history.

‘So nothing about your mysterious rune?’

‘Actually there is but I don’t understand it.’

Wyndowes of they mynd wryte as reale shall be undoing of awl and source of egress and. . . .

Lena turned the page. ‘And then he goes on about reward for service and talks about Lissandra. I don’t know who that was?’

‘Santhadena’s daughter. And what else?’ Bradon’s interest was marginal.

‘And nothing. Biekleb never finished the sentence. It was the last thing he wrote. I have absolutely no clue what that means. Any idea?’ Lena suppressed the urge to suggest that someone had taken affront at Biekleb’s atrocious writing style. Lena would have offered short odds on his death being an unpleasant one.

‘As a warlock, I’d like to read that myself.’

Lena closed the book and passed it across the table. ‘Please be careful. You know how old it is.’ She pulled her brown dress out of the basket and inspected the damage caused by weeks of hard riding and sleeping rough. It wasn’t so bad that some darning and a turn around the hemline couldn’t keep it in serviceable condition.

It's not like I'm going to be wearing it in front of anyone who cares what I look like. And that thought brought her back to the afternoon's confrontation with Payson and Velawyn and the knowledge that it was not about her, but about a family grieving. Lena had to admit that she could have, should have, handled the situation more tactfully. 'I could apologise.'

'Excuse me?'

Lena hadn't realised she had spoken aloud. 'I was thinking of Payson and Velawyn. They're not happy with me. Will there be consequences for the Village?'

'Velawyn's always angry over something. She was born that way.'

'But she'll be queen when her husband takes the throne,' said Lena.

'*If* her husband takes the throne. It's up to Eraphon to name a successor and the elves lose more sleep over that than anyone else does but, yes, you've given her another reason to stir up trouble. She's tried to sever ties between the Village and Vallion before and I doubt she'll give up on the idea.'

'Oh dear.'

'Don't worry about it. Eraphon's in good health and could rule for decades yet. He knows Payson would be a disaster on the throne, everyone except Velawyn knows that, and there's a good chance he'll choose Turndath when the time comes.'

'Turndath?'

'His other son. He doesn't have Eraphon's charisma but he's sensible. More importantly, his wife doesn't let anyone push him around. Including her sister-in-law.'

'I'll give the dance a miss,' Lena decided. She knew that Payson's parents had been persuaded to stay for tomorrow night's festivities.

Bradon slowly flicked through the pages, staring briefly at each one in turn. When he got to the end, he closed the book with a sigh and set it down on the table. 'I'd hoped something had changed.'

Lena looked up from her needlework.

‘I can’t read it. To me it’s just blank pages.’ Seeing Lena’s surprise, he explained. ‘The *Journal* is very old, but you knew that already. More than that, there’s some kind of enchantment working on it. Most people can’t see any of the writing in it at all.’

‘Max said it was blank too. How is that possible? I mean, obviously it is, but why? Ouch!’ She dropped the needle and sucked her thumb.

‘More to the point, you should be asking *who* did this.’ Bradon picked the tattered volume up, hefted it briefly then sent it spinning into the hearth fire with a flick of his wrist. Sparks flew and embers spilled over the grate on to the floor.

Lena jumped up and snatched the book out of the flames. She might be fireproof but the protection given by her fire runes didn’t extend to her clothes or anything else. She’d risked her life to get *The Wanderers’ Journal* and not so Bradon could destroy it. She blew the ash off the cover and. . . . ‘It’s not even scorched!’

‘You could leave it there all night and it wouldn’t burn. After dinner we’ll go and see the Seers. They’ll be able to explain some of this better than I can.’

The Seers’ tower was a mile south from Bradon’s. The distance from the main hub of the Village and the strangeness of their inhabitants were possibly the only things the two structures had in common. While Bradon’s tower was short and squat, resembling a small fortress, the Seers’ abode was taller and almost graceful by comparison, a fact exaggerated by being sited on the crest of a small knoll. The Seers, Lena had been told, needed peace and quiet to best practise their talents and lived apart for that reason. Like Bradon and Istvan, they also lived a little apart to avoid getting dragged into local politics except when it suited them. In spite of the light dusting of snow and the leak in her boots the walk was welcome exercise after her too-large dinner.

Bradon stood in front of the double doors but didn’t knock. The doors opened almost immediately. No one was behind

them.

‘It looks like we’re expected. They’ll be upstairs.’

Lena followed her master up the spiral staircase to the first floor. Behind her, she heard the doors creak shut. The room was a large one, larger than the rectangular common room on the ground floor of Bradon’s tower. Through a narrow archway she could see Karrith’s sister labouring over a cutting bench. A fire burned in the hearth against the rounded wall opposite the staircase and the warmth was enough to offset the chill from the open windows.

‘Welcome, Bradon. It’s been a while since we had the pleasure of your company,’ said the old man rising to greet them. ‘My sister will be with us shortly. We were expecting you.’

‘Of course, Karrith. Of course you were.’

‘So sceptical, Bradon. Have your years taught you nothing?’

‘Not enough apparently.’

The old man turned to face Lena. Though they had met, Lena flinched from the clouded milk-white eyes.

He smiled a little. ‘Is my appearance so shocking, child?’

‘Please forgive me,’ whispered Lena.

‘Stop teasing the girl, Karrith,’ said the old woman poking her head through the archway. ‘I’m Karriane and I have the misfortune to be this old fool’s sister, but we’ve met before and you know this.’

It was easy for Lena to believe that the two elderly seers were siblings. They both had the same long white hair that fell to their waists, the same smooth parchment-fragile skin and the same translucent eyes. They even dressed in identical white robes; only the stains of meals past differentiated their attire. In spite of their age they didn’t keep a servant to see to their needs.

‘You see what I have to put up with? Nearly four hundred years of it,’ Karrith grumbled as his sister returned to the

chopping board and cooking fire. ‘Here, let me get you something to take the edge off the chill.’ He filled four silver goblets from a carafe set close to the fire. ‘Don’t worry, it’s not our wine. We stole it from Vivienne when she was sleeping off one of her sessions. If she notices any stock shrinkage, she’ll think she drank it herself.’

Bradon didn’t say thank you.

Lena sipped the warm spiced wine tentatively. It tasted different from the wines she drank in the palace and at Bradon’s, more floral, but it wasn’t entirely unpleasant.

Karrith stroked his beard. ‘Take a seat. It’s a little early. My sister has cooked enough for us all, but you took the precaution of eating before you came.’

‘Most definitely,’ said Bradon.

‘It would be very embarrassing if visitors ever took us by surprise,’ said Karriane from the kitchen.

‘And even more so if anyone had to eat your cooking,’ said Bradon. He sounded smug.

‘Well, maybe next time you could bring a few leftovers. You have wonderful meals.’ Karrith spoke wistfully and Lena sympathised. Whatever Karriane was brewing for the Seers’ dinner smelled like a silage pit after a heavy downpour.

Lena took a seat near one of several open windows, in the path of the unpolluted night air flowing into the semi-circular room and watched as the Seers went about ruining potential food.

‘We see some of what’s happening but less of what may happen, child,’ said Karriane as she carried out a dented iron pot and dumped it on the badly scarred table near the fire. A few drops of lumpy grey liquid slopped over the rim to run down the side onto the table.

‘I understand the limitations,’ Lena replied.

‘Do you?’ Karriane asked.

‘At least, I understand that there are limitations.’ Lena prevaricated, not wanting to appear foolish.

‘An important distinction,’ said Karrith. He sniffed his sister’s offering and pulled a face.

‘And one that few people recognise. There is another important constraint. Two actually. Has your education taken you that far?’ Karriane continued.

Lena shook her head.

‘Can you guess?’ the aged sorceress pressed.

‘While your student is thinking, I’ll get some more wine to cleanse my taste buds,’ said Karrith.

‘She’s not my student,’ said Bradon quickly.

‘Of course not.’ Both Seers spoke at once.

‘I’m not on the Assembly and, even if I was, I’ve been banned from taking another apprentice.’

Karriane snorted. ‘After what happened to the last three? I’m surprised Fandalia let Lena stay in the same home as you.’

‘It was a long time ago. Sixty years,’ said Bradon, sounding defensive.

‘Sixty-three since Yennifer went all entrepreneurial. It wasn’t your fault, but Fandalia still holds you accountable,’ pointed out Karrith.

‘So does Bethine and everyone else. Then there’s Sathene. Even though she wasn’t your apprentice—’

‘This is not a discussion to have now.’ Bradon cut the old man off.

‘The child has a lot to learn and surprisingly little time in which to do so.’ Karriane ladled spoonfuls of something into grimy bowls and got the discussion back where it was supposed to be. She pushed one of the bowls across the table and took a seat opposite her brother.

‘A conversation for another time.’ Bradon spoke a little louder.

‘Well, you’ve had long enough to practise the art of being stubborn, haven’t you Bradon? Anyway, we’re not in the

business of taking on apprentices.’ Karrith stared first at Bradon and then at Lena. Apparently he could see perfectly well in spite of his deformed eyes.

‘Never have,’ agreed Karriane, sipping her dinner.

‘And we never will,’ said Karrith. ‘But if Fandalia doesn’t put a stop to it, we’ll teach you what we can through our talent. Though you lack the rune for it, you’ll still find our teachings useful.’

‘I thought—’ began Lena.

‘You thought wrong. We can’t see *you* with our art but we can see what others see.’ Karriane reached out and poked one tendril-thin and unmanicured finger at Lena’s left hip. ‘This,’ she said, ‘is not the rune for sight but for necromancy. Possibly the corner of your hipbone distorts it. Soon you’ll show it to Haidi and in a week or so she will take you to Fal Serrin to practise.’

Karrith continued. ‘We can’t see you but we can see the entries Baragwanth will make in the Roll next to your name: two fire runes, necromancy, fluxation and protection against poison.’

So much for not spying on people in the Village.

‘But not the one on your back for some reason,’ concluded Karriane.

Bradon looked at Lena who nodded. Karrith tipped his dinner out the nearest window while his sister’s back was briefly turned.

‘One night a week, starting tomorrow. Be here just after sunset,’ said Karriane. ‘And I saw that. If you’ve poisoned my roses—’

‘The wretched plants died years ago,’ Karrith retorted. ‘From neglect.’

‘I’ll have Grung bring you here and back,’ said Bradon.

‘Probably best if Fandalia doesn’t hear about this,’ said Karriane. ‘One less argument.’

‘She’ll know soon enough. If anyone asks, it’s fine to tell them,’ said Bradon.

‘And if you could bring a little something when you come, child,’ suggested Karrith.

‘Are you trying to say something about my cooking, brother?’

A refilled goblet later, the Seers gave up on their dinner and banished whatever it had been to the slops bucket. Lena felt sorry for the pigs. The stench was a little more resistant to removal. In spite of the cold, Karrith opened the windows a little wider.

Lena could feel her senses becoming fuzzy. If this was what it felt like to be drunk, she could understand the appeal. Maybe one more goblet if it was offered.

‘It’s the mark of a seer: to lose one’s sight so that we can see more clearly. I lost the use of my eyes when I was only a little older than you are,’ said Karriane.

Lena realised she had been staring at the old sorceress.

‘We both did.’

‘Don’t interrupt. But we see so much more and so clearly.’

‘But we don’t see everything. We know you, Crown Princess Kristalena, heir to the Whitehead Throne. We know you from what we see of those around you but—’

‘What do you mean, you can’t see me? I’m right here,’ interjected Lena.

‘Oh, a mundane thing it is to know that you stand before us and infer that you do so in your new winter dress that you have yet to set fire to and your boots that are old and need replacing because the left one already lets the snow in through the hole under your second toe.’

‘From our seclusion we know Bradon will shave tomorrow morning and place his boots out for you to polish in the evening. We can imagine Baragwanth pacing up and down in his parlour wondering if he is doing enough to stop you learning and—’

‘Wait! What do you mean? Baragwanth is supposed to be teaching me,’ Lena half stood. Haidi had told her that Baragwanth was wasting Lena’s time, but learning that her education was being sabotaged by design rather than neglect was a darker revelation. ‘Why? Why would he do that?’

‘That, child, is a very good question—’

‘—and one that has engrossed Bradon for weeks now,’ said Karrith. ‘We can see the Queen of Thessalonia telling the Royal Council that you are still her heir though they urge her to strip you of your titles. We can see the darkest fears of the elven king and the dwarven king’s wife dallying with her cousin and—’

‘The point my rambling brother is making is that few things are hidden from us. We can’t see sorcerers or those tainted by the night. We have to divine their actions, even their existence, from the effects they have on others.’

‘Why?’

‘The Binding didn’t just take powers away from sorcerers, it placed constraints on the ones we were left with.’

‘So you can’t foresee everything?’

Karrith shook his head. ‘Life would be more simple if we could. But we can’t.’

‘But if you can’t see me in your visions, how do you know about the rune on my hip and my leaky boot?’

‘We don’t see you, but—’

‘—we see the people around you. Haidi will look at your rune and discuss it in the Assembly where not all are sorcerers. We can see and hear what they are saying and witnessing and —’

‘I guess that makes sense but I’m not sure I even understand the question,’ said Lena. She sipped the floral wine again and decided it was nice enough to be dangerous. ‘Does that mean I have no future?’

‘We’re not saying that at all,’ said Karriane, shaking her mane of silvery hair.

‘It could be true, though I doubt it,’ agreed Karrith. ‘We didn’t see the demon in the Whitehead Palace but we saw the bodies of its victims and the gateway scrawled in the marble floor. We saw a boy on a ship bearing an ancient name address someone we could not see as “Missy”. We saw three riderless horses leave Lower Haft. We—’

‘You get the idea. We only know what you look like from the drawings your mother sent to every town and village in Queenshelm and every one of her trade outposts abroad. That,’ Karriane repeated, ‘is normal for a sorceress but—’

‘You’ve become even harder to follow since the destruction of Freth’s unfortunate apple trees. We don’t know why,’ concluded her brother.

Lena mulled that over. ‘So I’m somehow different from other sorcerers?’

‘Perhaps a rune for ethereal hiding?’ Bradon suggested. ‘It looks like this.’ He took a stick from the edge of the fire and drew a complex rune in the grime on the stone floor.

‘Definitely not,’ said Lena.

‘You know anyone with this rune, Bradon?’ Karrith asked.

‘Not recently. I saw it a long time ago,’ he said. He threw the stick back into the fire. ‘A very long time ago. It’s on the Pillars.’

Karrith nodded and Lena felt like she was missing part of the conversation.

‘You had me drag the girl here for a reason and it wasn’t to tell her about the gaps in your vision,’ said Bradon.

‘Although the now is clearest, the future is our main concern.’ Karrith sighed as he spoke, the small noise a man resigned to disclosing something that might be better left unsaid.

‘The possible futures,’ corrected Karriane.

‘There are many paths the peoples of this world can take. A handful are good, a greater number are bad and some terrible beyond imagining. Most people strive to avoid the bad

and little more. It's a sad failing. Besides you, there are other things we can't see. Demons for one and those who serve the Dark Lord can be difficult as well. We still don't know who summoned that demon into your mother's palace and it's not for want of trying.'

'Things too—'

'No,' Bradon interrupted the recital, jumping out of his chair. 'She's not ready.'

'You're not the only one who seeks them, Bradon. We agree that it would be better if they were never found but—'

'—there's a good chance they will be found by someone sooner or later.'

'Sooner rather than later,' corrected Karrith. 'The Lord of the Infinite Pit wants the ones he does not already have and the Blighted Ones would dearly love to wield them in his name. Each object will only make them more formidable.'

'What are these objects?' Lena was completely lost but she remembered both Neritza's words and Kharon's wish to destroy.

'Another good question girl. You're full of those. If you grew up in Queenshelm, I suspect your education on this issue was limited even though the library is said to be excellent.'

'You know of the Twelve of course.'

'Mythological figures. You saw Bradon telling me about some mythological figures.' Neritza notwithstanding Lena was hovering somewhere between scepticism and unsatisfied curiosity on the whole theological story.

'Oh, they were, and most of them are, all too real, unfortunately.'

'And we didn't see him tell you anything. We are far from omniscient, child.'

'And you're not supposed to watch people in the Village,' said Bradon dryly. 'But you do it anyway.'

‘Sorcerers have wands,’ said Karriane, ignoring Bradon. ‘You know what a wand is, don’t you?’

‘Umm. . . .’ Lena thought hard and realised that any answer she could give to what should have been a simple question would only make her sound foolish.

‘Not all of them look like wands,’ interjected Bradon. He stood up and walked to the window, staring out into the night.

‘No, they don’t,’ agreed Karrith. ‘Lena’s confused.’

‘Most people think of a wand as a stick of wood we wave around to create sorcery. They’re not. The sorcery comes from within us. A wand doesn’t create anything, it just amplifies whatever power we have,’ explained Karriane.

‘Most wands are in fact small sticks of wood, but they can be in any shape or size,’ supplemented Karrith.

Lena nodded, looking at Bradon’s staff propped up against the wall.

His sister chimed in, saying they could be made out of anything. ‘Anything at all.’

‘You could be sitting on one,’ said Karrith.

‘But no two wands are the same. Some are a bit more or less powerful and some work with specific talents but not others,’ Karriane continued. ‘Importantly, the ability to make wands was taken from us at the Binding so we can’t create any new ones. Fortunately they’re very difficult to destroy but, even so, there are only so many of them so—’

‘—so the Assembly only gives them to people who can be trusted to use them responsibly,’ completed Lena.

‘That, but there are still more wands than sorcerers and from time to time we stumble across one. Usually in a grave or washed up from a shipwreck.’

‘What we call the talismans of the Twelve were different again. The one thing they had in common was their power. Like all wands, they were created in an earlier time before the Binding—’

‘—but stand apart by the power they confer on whoever wields them. They’re not just more powerful but *much* more powerful than the puny things we’ve used since the Binding and think ourselves fortunate to possess. It’s possible that all the talismans still exist. Some of them more likely than others. The Dark Lord obviously believes they do or he wouldn’t take so much effort sending minions out to look for them.’

‘And you think *I* can find them?’ Lena looked from the Seers to Bradon wondering how much the three of them had discussed behind her back.

Karriane was the one to speak. ‘*The Wanderers’ Journal* contains the efforts of a tithe of the people who’ve searched for them over the centuries. Because you can read it, you now represent the best chance this world has of making sure they don’t fall into the wrong hands. That, I think, is the issue. The only issue.’

‘You need to understand their importance, Lena,’ said Karrith, leaning towards her. ‘Even the lesser wands we wield today are incredibly valuable because of the power they confer on their owners. The talismans are something else altogether. Whoever gets their hands on one, any one of them, will have more power than almost any living being. In the wrong hands that would be a disaster.’

Lena let them talk, holding on to her scepticism and her silence. Bradon had said much the same thing and she assumed he’d primed the Seers to deliver a consistent message.

As Bradon and Lena rose to leave, Karriane stopped them near the top of the stairs. ‘There’s something else that we’ve seen that you should know—’

‘It’s too soon,’ interrupted Karrith. ‘You know that but you’ll tell her anyway.’

Karriane ignored her brother. ‘We saw your sister’s death.’

‘Lapheria? Serephanie?’ Lena turned around and planted herself directly in front of Karriane. ‘No! What are you saying? We have to stop—’

Karriane shook her grey hair. ‘The other one.’

Lena froze, realising what they were talking about. ‘Philomena. You know who murdered her?’

Bradon pushed Lena towards the exit while glowering at the old aged woman. ‘I forbid this—’

He grabbed Lena’s arm and dragged her down the stairs and outside. Karriane shouted after them – a name.

‘The bastard. I’m going back to Queenshelm now,’ Lena snarled as they walked through the night.

‘No.’

‘I’m not leaving Philomena unavenged,’ she hissed. ‘One way or another—’

‘I’m not suggesting that you do—’

‘And what about the twins? What’s to prevent them from being next? Or my mother? They trust. . . . You have to take me back, Bradon.’

The warlock waved one hand at the snow falling around them. ‘Leaving the Village in winter’s somewhere between impossible and extremely foolhardy. Chances are you’d freeze to death and you can’t do anything about it if you’re dead.’

Not willing to let it go, Lena pushed. She yelled. She stomped her feet. She shut up when Bradon told her she was staying in the Village until he decided otherwise.

They walked in sullen silence until they reached the main road. She didn’t like it but there wasn’t anything she could do about it until spring and her master came around.

She turned to other subjects, reasoning that Bradon was more likely to help her if she helped him, ‘This thing you want me to do?’ She brushed the snowflakes off her face.

‘It’s the same thing Sathene was doing and it got her killed. You must do it but you’ll have to be discreet. You can’t tell anyone, especially the elves. The scars of the Gods’ War run deep with them.’

As distrust runs deep in me. ‘And Baragwanth?’

‘Same. Until I figure out why he’s holding you back, you’ll just have to work around him.’

Lena nodded and they completed the walk in silence. A wand, Lena knew, was a small thing and the world was a big place and she didn’t even have a description of what they looked like let alone where to look for them but she didn’t have to start from the beginning.

She understood the importance of *The Wanderers’ Journal*.

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Twenty-five

THE SEERS PUSHED OPEN the door to *The Speckled Dragon*, shook the water off their cloaks, appropriated seats from the apprentices sheltering from the rain, ordered lunch from the delighted innkeeper, pronounced that the weather would clear tomorrow and suggested, in terms sounding as though the decision had already been made, that taking the four youngest apprentices to Fal Serrin would be an ideal learning experience. Karriane smiled as Karrith assured Haidi for the fifth time that the weather would be clear for the few days needed to get there and back.

Max dragged a couple of additional chairs over to the now crowded table and Lena sat next to the youth. He'd grown again without waiting for the spring and was already as tall and heavily built as many full-grown men. It was hard to remember that he was younger than she was. Khannie was growing too, but only in one direction: upwards.

'No snow. No more rain,' Karrith repeated, his milky eyes fixed on the kitchen doorway across the common room.

'Well, Khannie's rune's been formed for nearly a year now,' Haidi said. 'I've taught him all I can without having someone to practise on.'

'Lena's rune is complete too, Haidi,' said Karrith. 'Ahh. . . .' He broke off, his attention shifting to the plate being placed in front of him. 'And another flagon of your best ale, Goodman Tarraday,' he instructed the proprietor.

'Lena should definitely go. Definitely,' agreed his sister, speaking quickly while her brother's attention was on his lunch.

'You have the rune for necromancy?' the young teacher asked, her delicate eyebrows rising. Haidi's own bowl of lentil and pork bone soup was untouched.

‘I didn’t know myself until a few days ago.’ Lena smiled at the amiable innkeeper and hoped Haidi wouldn’t ask to see the rune for herself. She asked about Fal Serrin as a distraction.

‘It’s one of those religious places, where people used to worship the Gods,’ said Max, talking without slowing the pace at which food was being relocated from his plate to his mouth.

‘Like a temple?’ she asked. There was a Sacred Temple of the Creators in Thessalonia; a poor broken collection of buildings a last handful of religious fanatics struggled to preserve from commercial enterprises desperate for more space to house their scribes and trade goods. Lena nibbled on a crust. At least two days old, she thought. Grung only served bread baked the same day. Tearing it into small pieces she dropped them into her bowl and took a spoonful of soup. Too salty but not bad at all.

‘They called it an abbey,’ explained Haidi. ‘It was the last major place of worship built by the religious orders in these parts after the Gods’ War. But it’s been nearly two centuries since anyone lived there and it’s mostly ruins now.’

After lunch Lena followed the rest of the group back to the Library where Haidi inspected the rune in the privacy of a storage room. ‘Definitely necromancy, though I can see how you might think it something else,’ she announced after Lena had put her clothes back on and they had joined everyone in the main hall. Bradon had his stockinged feet on a chair, a dozen scrolls and books piled on the desk in front of him and Chakobu’s disproving frown behind his back. Bradon’s leggings were beyond darning, Lena thought. Probably beyond washing too. She wasn’t the only one wrinkling her nose. Bradon merely nodded when Haidi explained the Seers’ suggestion and Baragwanth didn’t break his slumber so no demurrals were made.

‘It’s haunted,’ said Max, when Bradon and Haidi had left the Library to let Fandalia know.

‘Really? By ghosts?’ Lena asked, her eyebrows rising. She checked the book Bradon had been reading, *Talismans of Power*. Curious, she allowed the book to fall open and

recognised the pictured object immediately: Didyme's bracelet. Why would Bradon be reading about this? Why now? She'd told him she hadn't seen it in Neritza's lair. It was the literal truth, but she fretted that her master might have seen through her evasions.

'Real ghosts. Payron doesn't have the necromancy rune but he went two years ago and told me all about it,' said Shaeralli rocking backwards and forwards on her toes.

'Spirits, not ghosts,' said Khannie.

'What's the difference?' asked Max.

'Who cares? It's better than sitting here, which is just about the only thing we can do once it really starts snowing,' said Shaeralli. 'Besides, you'll get to use a wand. That's worth the trip. Wish I had that rune.'

Lena didn't disagree with either proposition. None of them had been allowed to use a wand yet and that alone was enough to motivate her.

'We get to practise some real sorcery,' said Khannie, clearly as excited as the elf girl by the prospect.

'And get out of the Village for a few days,' said Max. 'How much food should we bring?'

Fandalia had decided that Haidi, Bethine and Havel would be sufficient escort and Haidi had approved Payron's request to join the small expedition over Bethine's objections. 'He's not an apprentice anymore. He can go where he wants.' So the eight of them set off on horseback shortly after dawn. Fal Serrin was closer to the Village than Taspin – two days riding on easy terrain. It was the same trail Lena had taken to Taspin for the first day before branching south to the forested hills. Lena shared a small triangular tent with Shaeralli and spent the first night listening to the elf's quiet breathing and wishing she had the rune for regulating body temperature, failing that, a towel-wrapped hot brick. Clear, the Seers had said the weather would be. Bitterly cold, they had not. Both days had been spent on horseback, listening to the elven girl talk about the silver firs and how they held their flattened needle-like leaves

all through the winter and how the resin was used to make perfume and how in spring time spruce beer could be extracted from the bark and leaves and the uses to which the wood could be put and a lot of other things that washed over the unappreciative and involuntary audience.

Lena was more concerned with recalling what she had read about necromancy when Baragwanth wasn't in the Library and found the straight back and clean lines of the young man riding directly in front of her more distracting than Shaeralli's patter.

Towards the end of the second day the forest thinned as they rounded a low spur revealing a wide plain into which the trees had untidily encroached, to grow among the neat rows of crumbling lichen-covered tombstones and tumbled down stone cottages. At the head of the small column Bethine looked neither left nor right but kept riding. A couple of miles ahead, long walls and broken spires grew amidst the trees.

'Why would anyone build an abbey out here?' Lena wondered.

'The monks envisioned Fal Serrin as a religious retreat. After the Gods' War and the Breaking they wanted to get as far away from the rest of humanity as possible. Of course, if they'd known the Village was so close, and Vallion for that matter, they might have chosen a different site,' said Havel. Lena hadn't noticed the balding man draw his mare alongside her. 'Sorcerers and non-humans were distinctly out of favour at the time. Still are, for that matter.'

'How many people live here?'

'No one now.'

'And before?'

'We don't know for sure, but some estimates go as high as five thousand. Maybe three or four hundred in the religious orders. The rest were laypeople who served and provided for the devotees. The graves you see around here are for the commoners. More important people were buried further west

and the monks were interred in the consecrated grounds within the abbey proper.’

‘Commoners were buried?’ Not where Lena came from.

‘Most people are buried,’ the bald truthsayer said placidly. ‘Or cremated. But if they served faithfully, they received the passing rites of the order they had pledged themselves to. To them it was a belief significant enough to devote their whole lives to.’

‘Sounds like a wasted life,’ said Lena. As they drew closer, she could see the irregular gaps in the wall and the blunted spire on the nearest tower. Time had passed and nature had asserted itself. ‘In the end, everything they built came to nothing.’

Havel nodded. ‘It may seem that way from a distance measured in centuries, but it was the most important thing in their world.’

Raised in a court famed for its intrigues and taught from earliest childhood to read shades of meaning into every gesture and word, Lena saw past the spoken. ‘You have a connection to this place.’

‘Some of my ancestors are buried here. My great-great-grandmother lies within the catacombs and her lover somewhere around us. Probably somewhere around us – I’ve never been able to find the place and, as she passed before he did, she can’t tell me herself. Even the most devout have lapses, and, by all accounts, they appear to have been fairly common. Celibacy was one of the first casualties of a declining population. How did you know?’

‘A guess,’ said Lena.

‘No. It wasn’t a guess.’

‘You have the rune for truth.’ Lena remembered too late.

‘I do. Sometimes it’s inconvenient since it also stops me from telling a lie myself but right now, I know you’ve lied to me.’ He didn’t seem upset by the apprentice’s evasion. ‘Would you like to give me a different answer?’

Lena sighed. This was not a conversation to continue. ‘No, Master Havel, I would prefer not to.’

‘As you wish, though you do make me curious.’

Lena was content to allow the truthsayer’s curiosity to remain unsatisfied.

They made camp in a sheltered corner just outside what Havel described as the North Gate. ‘It’s not safe to camp inside the walls,’ he said.

‘Because of the ghosts? I mean spirits?’ asked Max, peering into the shadows beyond the gate. He was fixated on the subject.

‘Nothing so interesting,’ said Havel, with a smile. ‘I’ve never seen a ghost, not here anyway. Not that sort of place. No, the whole abbey is falling apart. I wouldn’t want to be underneath one of those towers when it decides to come down.’

Max failed to hide his disappointment.

‘Don’t worry young Max. We’ll be raising enough spirits tonight to satisfy even you. But dinner first, I think.’

Lena joined Max and Khannie scavenging wood from among the trees. There was plenty. ‘The cones are good too. They give off a nice smell,’ Khannie told them, adding a couple to the growing pile of fuel. ‘I wonder what it was like to live here?’ was Lena’s only reply. She bent to look at the nearest gravestone, a waist-high rectangular pillar. Even after scraping off the drab lichen, the carved lettering was too worn to be legible. Realising she was standing on the grave, she stepped back. Havel had been wrong about the normalcy of burial. In Queenshelm, the royal family were interred for eternity in catacombs carved into the soft rock beneath the Whitehead Palace. Everyone else, even the wealthiest and oldest of the nobility, had to buy a plot outside the city in the shifting sandy soil on the south bank or, if they lacked the money and the willingness to spend it, make do with sea burial. Other realms were different, she knew, but gazing at the rows of tombstones, the sheer selfish inconvenience of the

dead struck her for the first time. ‘And to die,’ she whispered quietly. ‘People came here to die, not to live.’

Khannie looked at her but Max spoke first. ‘We should get back. Mistress Bethine’s getting impatient for her dinner.’

‘And you’re hungry,’ said Lena.

‘A bit,’ the man-sized boy admitted.

Khannie laughed and said Max must have a rune for hunger as they picked up the firewood. Max’s offer to carry Lena’s load kept Khannie grinning.

Dinner was about what one would expect from a simple camp fire in the open air. Most of the provisions had been sourced from Grung’s kitchen and Lena wasn’t slow to notice that Bethine’s frequent and vitriolic objections to the troll didn’t extend to his cooking.

The apprentices were assigned the dishes to wash and told there was no hurry. ‘It’s easiest at midnight,’ Haidi explained. ‘The Witching Hour. We’ll start when Shideer is directly overhead. The extra moonlight will help us see what we’re doing.’

They passed the time listening to Havel tell how there had once been a separate religious order, with its own temples and ceremonies, devoted to each God. After the Gods’ War and the departure of the surviving Gods from this world, the believers’ numbers declined as atheism and apathy took root amidst the masses. Eventually, they were forced to merge into a single order and consolidate their places of worship. The abbey of Fal Serrin may have been the last religious construct of any substance. ‘On this continent anyway,’ he concluded. ‘I can’t say about Atture or whatever realms may lie beyond the Spine.’

‘When the First Emperor reunited Atture after the Breaking, he repurposed all the old temples and built new ones so his subjects could worship him as the earthly manifestation of the Gods,’ said Haidi. ‘It’s a practice his successors have continued, setting themselves up as the embodiment of the divine in the mortal world. There’s precious little remaining as

far as I can remember, though I couldn't say for sure since I was smuggled across the Rift in a barrel as a child.' She stared into the crackling fire.

'As fascinating as this is, it's time,' said Bethine.

Haidi nodded and Havel led the way through an intact archway, across what had once been an open courtyard, now overgrown with denuded scrub and dead grey-brown weeds, and into a long rectangular room that, he explained, had once served as the layperson's dining hall. 'The Orders didn't mix with the laity,' he explained. 'Hierarchy was everything here; being admitted to an Order brought you closer to the Gods and set you apart from the mass of humanity.'

As Havel led them further into the pile of stone, Lena realised that the abbey was larger than the Whitehead Palace. 'It must have been magnificent,' she said.

'Large and well-crafted but rather bland. Apart from depictions of the deities and significant religious events they frowned on ostentation,' explained Havel. He pointed to an arched window. It must have been at least twenty feet high. The white light of the near moon shone through what was now a large hole in the western wall, but here and there pieces of dirty coloured glass still clung to the stone frame; a reminder of what had once been.

'I think that was a representation of the Binding. Ironic that the divine intervention that may have saved us all also marked the rise of the apostates and, ultimately, gave birth to the atheism that prevails today.'

'The Twelve,' said Lena, walking beside Havel.

'Yes, that's right although there were, in fact, only eleven of them,' the truthsayer said.

She knew that. 'Then why do all the books persist—'

'This isn't a sightseeing tour,' interrupted Bethine. 'The night won't last forever.'

'We're here,' said Haidi as they passed through another doorway. Every entranceway Lena had seen was arched, as were most of the windows. There had been a door at the end of

the passageway but time had done what it does and only orange fragments of the rusted iron frame remained among the stones. Moonlight pouring through the irregular holes in the ceiling allowed the sorcerers to extinguish their witchlight. The huge room was rectangular, Lena estimated forty paces across and four times as long. At either end, a stepped pyramid of carved marble rose to twice the height of a tall man. Finger-deep engravings in a strange language were still visible on the sides of the nearest structure and, amid the fragments of stone, a bundle of twigs on the penultimate step might have been an abandoned birds' nest. Arranged between the altars were rows of raised rectangular stone boxes, each seven or eight feet in length. Following Haidi, Lena and the others walked through the narrow gap between the nearest boxes towards the centre of the room.

‘The priors were interred here. The rest of the devotees were given places in the crypt beneath us.’ Haidi pointed to a smaller doorway across the room where steps could be seen leading downwards. She ran one hand lightly over the nearest box and Lena realised that each was a tomb. ‘I’ll start with this one, Saarinen was the last monk to hold office as prior before Fal Serrin was abandoned. I’ve raised her before. She didn’t mind too much.’

Haidi touched the top of the sarcophagus with her wand, concentrated and commanded the spirit of the dead woman to return to the realm of the living. ‘Like all talents necromancy can be exercised without a wand but you’re a lot more likely to succeed with one. Either you raise the dead or you don’t,’ she explained.

‘And you did,’ a thin voice complained.

Lena instinctively stepped back as a translucent spectre walked through the dusty stone, to stand in front of them.

‘Good evening, Holy One,’ Haidi bowed respectfully.

‘There’s little that’s good about it, even for the dead, but at least someone remembers.’

‘We do,’ said Haidi.

‘But so few. With each generation the Abiding dwindle and the Gods have not returned to restore our numbers.’

‘The Gods abandoned us, the guilty and the innocent alike,’ said Haidi, speaking in tones suggesting this was a conversation she’d had many times.

‘All are guilty, child. The Great Seal that protects this world crumbles regardless and innocence avails nothing,’ the prior said in the whispery voice of the incorporeal. ‘At least the orders interred me as I wished before they deserted our humble sanctuary.’ The spectre turned slowly, looking around the remains of her deteriorating place of repose. ‘Every time you raise me I see the Abbey’s ruin closer to completion. The sight distresses me. Unless you have some good news for a change I will return to my rest.’

Haidi bowed as the translucent woman faded back into the dull stone. She took a deep breath and pointed at another grave and beckoned Khannie forward.

‘This is your first time using a wand. Remember what I taught you – keep breathing and stop the moment you feel dizzy or light-headed.’

Khannie nodded. Carefully taking the wand from his teacher with both hands he touched its tip against another dirt-covered tomb.

‘Be respectful and don’t hold on too hard or he’ll try and drag you back into the grave with him. That’s never pleasant,’ said Bethine. She had her own wand in hand.

It took Khannie several attempts but eventually a rather short and ill-tempered spirit was coaxed out of his stone shell, long enough to tell the youth that interrupting perpetual slumber was the height of incivility and, in a more pious world, would be nothing short of blasphemy.

Khannie wiped the sweat off his forehead. ‘Not as easy as it looks.’

‘Hmmpf,’ muttered Bethine.

‘It will become easier with practice,’ Haidi assured her pupil. ‘Your turn, Lena. Pick a different one.’

‘And be gentle. It’s not like you’re trying to incinerate the place,’ said Bethine.

Lena’s fingers tingled as she took the wand from Khannie and she remembered holding Bradon’s staff in the dungeon beneath the palace. Following Haidi’s lead, Lena tapped the slim wand against the dusty lid of the nearest coffin and willed the spirit within its stone confines to attend her. Nothing. She clenched her jaw and focused. The coldness of the winter’s night became icy as she concentrated; every breath searing her lungs as she inhaled and fogging the air in front of her face as she breathed out. She flinched when a flicker within the pitted stone formed itself into a robed man, bent double with age, leaning on a walking stick with all the substance of smoke.

‘You blithering idiot,’ Bethine’s gasp broke Lena’s concentration.

Lena cringed, wondering what she had done wrong this time. One glance around the chamber and her confusion was replaced by mortification.

Monks were rising from every tomb and slowly the men and women who had led the faithful of Fal Serrin drifted towards the slack-jawed apprentice.

‘Stop it, Lena,’ Haidi shouted.

Lena dropped the wand and snatched her hands away from the casket.

The spirits kept talking in hushed tones, a restless empty murmuring.

‘Lena.’ There was exasperation in Haidi’s voice.

‘I . . . I’m not doing anything. Not now. Go back,’ she squeaked at the hunched figure in front of her. ‘I release you.’

Across the chamber, more of the spectral figures, plain robed and pale translucence, marched up the stairs leading from the crypts on the lower levels.

Lena backed away. The growing abomination of monks had flowed solemnly after the retreating visitors, forming up on either side and behind the prior she had raised.

‘They’re not ghosts so they can’t actually harm us,’ said a quiet voice behind her. Havel seemed unconcerned at the mass of figures congregating in front of them.

The tonsured dead gathered in rows, stopping their advance, and began chanting prayers amidst the abbey’s ruins.

Lena stopped trying to retreat. There wasn’t much point – she was sure the spirits could move faster than her and was equally confident there wasn’t much she could do if they decided to harm her.

‘How in the name of the Mortal Goddess did you do this?’ Haidi asked as she bent to retrieve her wand from where Lena had dropped it. Her delicate eyebrows were struggling to return to their normal position. ‘Even with a wand—’

‘Why would she want to?’ Bethine snapped.

‘Well, I was just thinking about ... and well I... .’

‘You’re even more stupid than I thought you were,’ snarled Bethine, flinching as an enthusiastic monk swung a misty chalice through her body.

The monks’ voices changed from a babble of meaningless noise to an atonal chant.

‘You did this? Lena?’

‘Sorry, Shaeralli.’

‘What for? This is amazing!’ The elf was shaking with fear, but she nudged Khannie who nodded.

‘N . . . never thought I’d see a real religious ceremony. When did they last gather here?’ Max asked in a squeaky voice. He was gasping for breath.

‘Is this all of them?’ Payron spoke softly, but his newly bestowed wand was in hand. Havel shook his head. ‘These are all adults. I don’t see any of the initiates.’

‘Lena, do you think you could raise them as well?’ Shaeralli’s teeth were chattering.

‘Please don’t. This is quite enough for one night,’ said Haidi, wiping the dust and dirt from her wand. She exhaled

and her breath hung in the air, a frozen cloud. ‘Feel how cold it is?’

‘Something’s strange,’ said Havel quietly.

‘Apart from hundreds of dead monks chanting prayers for ungodly sinners?’ Haidi asked.

‘They’re not facing either of the altars,’ whispered Havel, his eyes widening. ‘They should be facing either east or west.’

‘Sunrise and sunset,’ agreed Haidi. She was rubbing her hands together. ‘The beginning and the ending of all things.’

The ghosts were gathered amidst the stone coffins, the priors in the front rows, facing the corner of the chamber where the living huddled closely together.

‘A little north of west,’ said Payron.

Lena looked at him sharply.

‘Elf thing,’ he explained. ‘Lena, could you move a few paces to your left? I just want to test a theory.’

Lena hesitated and then took three steps away from the tightly bunched group towards the nearest altar. The monks swivelled to follow her. She took two more steps with the same result.

‘They should disappear at dawn,’ Haidi said. She blew on her hands to keep them warm. ‘If the rest of you want to leave, I can stay here with Lena. They’re not going to hurt us. Bethine, why don’t you take the other children outside?’

‘Lena’s my friend and I’m staying with her,’ said Shaeralli. She sat down on the nearest coffin.

The monks’ chants continued, deep toned but muffled and indistinct. It was hard to pick out the words.

‘They’re not praying for sinners,’ said Havel after a while. He spoke very quietly and looked directly at Lena. ‘They’re praying for you.’

Dawn came late at this time of the year, far too late as far as Lena was concerned, but come it did and the spirits of the dead

bowed to her and returned to their rest without protest before the sun put in an appearance.

‘You’re going to tell Apex Fandalia about this, aren’t you? Bradon too?’ Lena broke the silence as she rode beside Haidi.

‘And Baragwanth. I have to. We don’t keep these sorts of things to ourselves. I’m sure you can understand why.’

Lena just sighed and looked to the east. The sun had fully cleared the horizon and the comparative warmth it brought was more welcome than usual.

‘I would very much like to know how you managed to do it,’ said Haidi. ‘I haven’t seen anyone raise more than one spirit at a time before.’

‘When I was trying to raise the monk, it reminded me of my . . . a . . . ceremony I attended and I couldn’t help recalling some of the details.’ That had been Philomena’s funeral, a nod to historical tradition rather than religious observance, but she couldn’t reveal that.

‘Well, all I can say is that it’s a good thing we weren’t doing this at Alacia. You have an absolute genius for thinking and doing the wrong thing at the worst possible time,’ said Haidi. Trying to sound strict the teacher was showing every sign of being amused about the night time incident now that it was safely behind them.

Lena knew her history. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers, humans and their allies, had fallen on the fields of Alacia in the final battle of the Gods’ War, along with uncountable numbers of the enemy, human and not. It had taken the survivors over a month to bury all the dead in the blood-soaked earth. In the end, they’d given up and lit massive funeral pyres for those who had walked in the light or the dark alike.

As they rode through the trees, she heard Havel reassure Max that the monks would remain at Fal Serrin and they would not be followed back to the Village by a procession of spectral monks chanting prayers for the sinners of the world, or even one particular sinner.

Late in the day, Payron pulled his horse next to Lena.

‘Would it help if I said I was sorry?’ asked Lena. It was nearly sunset and he hadn’t said a single word to her the whole day. Neither had anyone else apart from Haidi.

‘A bit,’ he said.

‘I’m sorry I frightened you.’

‘I wasn’t frightened,’ Payron said quickly.

Lena didn’t waste her breath teasing him.

‘It was impressive though,’ he said after an awkward pause. ‘Even if I had the rune for it, I’m not sure I could raise one ghost, let alone a whole congregation of them at once.’

‘Spirits, not ghosts,’ said Lena, though she was completely ignorant on the distinction.

‘I stand corrected,’ acknowledged Payron. Suddenly he laughed.

‘What’s so funny?’

‘The expression on Bethine’s face. I’ve never seen her look so shocked.’

Lena chuckled too. It wasn’t really funny, but it was good to know that Payron didn’t think that badly of her. He might not like her, but he didn’t think badly of her. That was the best she could hope for.

‘I suppose it’s my turn to apologise,’ he said.

‘For what?’

‘For. . .’ he mumbled, looking down at his horse’s reins. ‘I can’t go against my parents’ wishes and my father is one of the King’s sons. I definitely can’t disobey the King. Now that I’ve graduated, they want me to go back to Vallion and will use any excuse to compel me, but I’d prefer to stay in the Village.’

‘Will you leave?’

‘Not yet. I told them I had to stay to keep an eye on Shaeralli.’

‘That makes sense.’

‘Not really. Sharell is quite capable of looking after her daughter and the Assembly won’t risk their relationship with us by letting anything happen to either of them.’

Lena let the silence work on him.

‘It’s not that they’ve anything against you,’ he said.

‘Bilge water. They made their opinion of me crystal clear. I’m not only human, I’m a common serving wench to boot. One with “doubtful antecedents”, as your mother so succinctly put it.’ Lena felt all the suppressed bitterness well up inside her. The pain of being not good enough added to the lingering pain of rejection.

‘I mean—’

‘Maybe you should go back to this Vallion of yours and leave me to the company of my master’s pots and pans, My Lord?’

‘Lena, I—’

‘Just leave me alone, *Lord* Payron. Go and associate with people your father will approve of and your mother won’t look down on or find some other wench’s affections to abuse.’ She nudged her horse to move a little faster and pulled ahead of Payron. Shaeralli was caught staring and blushed before looking away. Only then did Lena realise she had been shouting.

Wonderful. Just wonderful.

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Twenty-six

LENA'S UNINTENTIONAL RAISING of an abomination of monks added to the notoriety gained from incinerating the occasional orchard, offending visiting royalty and cohabiting with a troll. The entirely appropriate collective noun was the only thing she liked about the incident.

Fandalia had placated the concerned citizenry by decreeing the cemetery out-of-bounds to all apprentices, even if supervised. Baragwanth had lectured his wayward charge, and Haidi, about the dangers of practising sorcery before she was ready. While her putative teacher was handing her, with both hands, a massive dust-covered book, fully two feet in height and thicker than a hearth stone, Haidi stuck her tongue out at the elderly sorcerer.

‘But before you start with this, you can move my chair nearer to the fireplace,’ Baragwanth ordered his apprentice.

Lena resisted an impulse to emulate the Atturan woman. She also declined Max's eager offer of assistance. When Baragwanth was comfortably settled close to the warmth of the guarded flames, she took a seat at the table she shared with the other apprentices and inspected . . . *Emulation of the Sorcerer's Curse: An Illustrated and Annotated History of Tattoos After the Binding.*

‘I am sure that somewhere out there in the vastness of the world we inhabit there is someone who finds this interesting,’ Lena said staring at the book in horror, ‘and I hope, I really hope, never to meet that person.’

Haidi broke off from explaining to Khannie the nuances of communicating with groups to glance at Lena's assigned reading. She shook her head, frowning. ‘In some places tattoos are considered an art form, which is all very well, but unless

you're planning to take up a career in piracy, it won't teach you anything useful,' she said.

'Piracy is beginning to sound appealing. Why—'

'You're apprenticed to Baragwanth so you'll have to ask him—'

'When he wakes up,' Lena muttered.

There was a long pause, during which Haidi looked from the frustrated apprentice to the slumbering master and back again. 'I still can't teach you, not without Baragwanth's permission. I've told you this before. They're blaming me for encouraging you to try necromancy at Fal Serrin.'

'And he's never going to agree to that, is he?' said Lena as she walked away.

When she got back to the tower, she made another plea to assign her a new instructor. 'If Baragwanth doesn't want me to learn, can't I have another teacher? Why not?' Lena's voice rose an octave when Bradon didn't answer and there was a pause in the noises coming from the kitchen. Grung was listening but it didn't bother her.

'Excuse me?' Bradon's thick eyebrows went up.

'You dragged me half way across the world so I could learn to be a sorcerer and then lumber me with a dodderly old wheezebag, your words, devoting his final years to the promotion of outstanding mental tedium and—'

'The latter wasn't my intention. Quite the opposite. People with the talent are few and far between, and getting rarer as the years go by. We can't afford to ignore any of them. Finding people like you is the main reason Havel and I risk going out in the world.' He looked Lena straight in the eye.

Lena picked up her wine glass and reminded herself that she was bound in Bradon's service.

'Besides which, most untrained sorcerers end up dead,' Bradon continued.

'So you told me, and that's something which he still hasn't explained to me. Why's he doing this?'

‘I’ve no idea.’

‘Really?’ She didn’t know whether to believe Bradon or not. There were too many things he wasn’t telling her.

‘Yes, really.’

‘You’re saying I have to learn if I don’t want to kill myself and I’m saddled with someone who is doing his damndest to ensure I don’t learn how to avoid destroying myself! Perhaps that’s what Baragwanth wants?’

‘It could be, but if he wants you dead, there are more certain ways to do it,’ said Bradon. He might as well have been discussing the order for a new pair of boots.

‘Without raising suspicion? He hasn’t asked me to actually use sorcery since, well, you know. . . . He was testing me. Once he knew I was a sorceress, he stopped trying to teach me.’

Bradon said nothing, and Lena took that as agreement with her argument.

‘So who is going to...?’

‘Officially? No one. The rules we have were made for good reason. Fandalia will enforce them if she sees a breach and she’ll have a fit if she thinks I’m tutoring anyone again. She’s a long way from being the most powerful sorceress in the Village, but people respect her because she’s fair.’

‘But—’

‘The Seers have volunteered to spend time with you. Fandalia won’t do anything about it because they won’t be lessons in sorcery. More like they’ll be showing you things that will help you learn and teaching you history which is not sorcery. It’s hair-splitting, but apart from Baragwanth and Bethine, people will go along with it.’

‘I’d better have dinner early,’ she said, draining her glass. It was either that or go hungry; she wasn’t going to risk her intestines on the Seers’ cooking.

‘Sensible, but no need. They’ve asked you to bring food with you. It’s far enough into the season for the wolves to be

making a nuisance of themselves, so Grung will walk you there and back. How are you getting on with the journal?’

Lena assured Bradon that she was making progress. Bad handwriting and archaic linguistics made it a challenge but she was beginning to pick things up. Kharon was of the Sea Peoples and had grown up in the aftermath of the Breaking, describing the divine temper tantrum as an act of retribution for the apostasy of the Twelve and the death of the Mortal Goddess. He’d written of the family he’d lost in the cataclysm and how they’d only survived by climbing the cliffs above Pherach and how the graves of his ancestors had been drowned by the rising sea. Bitter and enraged at the Gods’ treatment of their creations, he’d tasked himself with destroying the surviving talismans. He’d found nothing but the clues cryptically chronicled in his narrative. The lazy twit hadn’t even bothered to describe the objects he was searching for. Perhaps everyone had known what they looked like back then.

‘I suppose he was there, more or less,’ she mused, flipping through the pages while she waited for Grung to pack dinner into a wicker basket. ‘He spoke to people who fought in the Gods’ War, actual witnesses.’

‘Not necessarily reliable ones,’ said Bradon.

‘After all these centuries, there’s no way of knowing,’ said Lena reaching for her cloak.

Winter wasn’t all bad. With no crops to harvest, only faggots to split and few errands to run Lena had plenty of time to use in the shortened days; fencing with Baragwanth’s inattention to read the things Bradon suggested in the Library and long evenings either deciphering *The Wanderers’ Journal* line by frustrating line in front of the fire or marching along the pathway separating the comforts of Bradon’s squat turret from the Seers’ graceful spire. Bradon had said the task was hers. Tasks, plural. She had to read the *Journal* and that wasn’t as easy as it sounded. Kharon’s archaic rage was close to incomprehensible, Biekleb’s nauseating musings on his own glory tediously irrelevant and the rest were scarcely better. One had written in some kind of cuneiform and he or she was

not the only diarist whose contribution to the search for the talismans had been made in a language other than Common. Worst of all, the tenth author's words had been all but obliterated – line after line of neat, tidy script had been systematically scribbled over. Whether by the original author or someone else, Lena had no way of knowing but the vandalism had been done in a hurry. Scattered words remained readable. Setovia. Apostasy. Temple.

There were drawings to go with the words in places. Maps for the most part. What might or might not have been a tombstone. Symbols that meant nothing to her. Several had drawn their runes.

‘Take your time,’ Bradon had said. ‘We’ve still got most of the winter and nothing much happens around here until we start clearing the fields for the spring planting.’

Lena had reasoned that the more she knew about the Twelve and their talismans the better. If she knew where someone had lived, or better yet where they had died, and what the talismans looked like, that would be a good place to start. So she read and asked Bradon questions and found herself hovering between self-education and his unacknowledged guidance.

She'd also been told to keep practising her talents, such as they were. Fire was too easy to create and impossible to control. She could send bursts of incandescent heat from both hands out to a distance of twenty paces, strong enough to have Freth glaring at her. As for the rest, her tiny fluxation rune was a source of endless frustration. It was complete and she should have been able move things around with it but could she? Not so much as a feather. And she still had no idea what the rune on her back was. It now straddled her spine, and her twice weekly inspections told her it was still growing and changing shape, though more slowly which, she hoped, meant it was nearly complete. She was also experiencing the nagging feeling that she had seen it before and was close to wearing out the pages of *Runes and Ruination* in an effort to find it.

Why didn't Neritza just tell me?

Baragwanth had objected to her reading books he hadn't assigned. He'd objected to her visits to the Seers and, when Lena had hidden behind the mantle of her master's instructions, the old man had taken his objections to Fandalia. The Apex had calmly sided with Lena, telling the infuriated teacher that what Lena did on her own time was her business. So long as someone was supervising the erratic and ill-disciplined apprentice, she didn't seem too concerned.

Max had been the first to point out that the skin on the right side of Lena's neck was darkening. The Seers had told her it was the rune for poison and it already resembled the distinctive ivy-vine shape Fandalia had shown her in the Assemble Chamber. Soon it would be there for everyone to see. There was a rune for concealing runes, but only Bradon and Havel had that one, which explained why so few of the other sorcerers left the village. The mark of the witch is death, went the saying. She still had most of the winter season ahead of her, Lena thought as she pored over her books.

'Thank you, Karrith, Karriane.' Lena politely said her good-byes. She wasn't looking forward to walking back to Bradon's tower in rain so cold it threatened to turn to hail but it would be preferable to enduring Karriane's cooking for breakfast. Like the other apprentices, she was eagerly waiting for the lake to freeze over. Ice running sounded fun and Nathen and his son had been producing runners for sleds and skates in large quantities. Lena's set had been waiting to be put into use for over a week now. She drew her cloak across her shoulders and pulled the hood over her head before stepping out into the night.

Grung was waiting, standing in the inadequate shelter of the eaves and wearing only his leather vest, grey leggings and heavy boots. A crude wooden club hung from one hand; he was taking his instruction to protect Lena seriously. He was also hoping to add a few more wolf-skin rugs to the tower's decorations.

As they had on her previous visits, the Seers had invited Grung in, but he'd sniffed the warm air leaking from the siblings' tower, shaken his head and left Lena to carry the

basket of food up the stairs. Cold didn't bother the troll nearly as much as the stench emitting from the Seers' kitchen and, when it came to standing in the rain, the heavier the better. His idea of a bath was sitting under the shockingly cold mountain waterfall near Bradon's tower for half a morning.

'Lena,' he greeted her. 'Go home now?'

'Yes, Grung. We can go home now.'

Her cloak was a good one but the wind still drove the sleet into her exposed face and numbed her hands. She'd forgotten her gloves. It was cold enough that the precipitation couldn't make up its mind whether to arrive as bone-chilling liquid or skin-pummeling solid. Thinking of Queenshelm in an attempt to distract herself from the frigid water dribbling down the side of her neck. She walked faster, hoping Grung had put some bricks next to the fire. It would feel good to crawl into a warm bed. She'd eaten but was still hungry and remembered there had been plenty of soup left over from dinner. A small bowl of something hot before bed would be nice too, though Grung didn't do anything food related in small size.

Lena followed Grung's reassuring form to the bottom of the rise and had just turned onto the main road when she was struck from behind. The blow tore the cloak from her back and smashed her to the ground, to land face first in a regrettably deep puddle of dirty water. She lost her grip on the basket and the witchlight in her hand went out.

'Eeeeerrrrrkkkkk,' something screamed above her, before landing with a mud-splattering thud.

Lifting her face out of the dirt, Lena saw only the shadow-dark form of Grung grappling with something huge gripping him around the throat and beating at him with its wings. She felt the air around her moving from the force of its blows.

'Light,' she commanded her witchlight to return, rising to her knees.

The near darkness would have been preferable. The thing was massive, taller than Grung, and was stabbing at the troll with a short powerful beak. Grung was holding onto the

creature's wing with one hand and bashing its head with his wooden club. The creature jabbed again and again with its beak and Grung lost his grip on his assailant. It raised a taloned leg and brutally kicked Grung in the chest. The troll, so much heavier than any human she knew, fell backwards, stumbling off the road splashing into the overflowing drainage ditch.

With a shriek of triumph, the creature turned to Lena. It took one deliberate step, then another and spread its wings. The wingspan had to be at least sixteen feet. The wings beat against the night, and her witchlight wobbled before going out once more, reducing the beast to a shadow.

I don't want to die. Not like this.

It was more than the cold rain making her tremble.

'Not hurt Lena!' However badly injured he was, Grung had scrambled out of the ditch.

Lena heard the thumps of Grung's big fists striking the creature's mottled grey and green skin and the sounds of Grung hurting as the creature retaliated. The troll was going to die for her and terror became fury.

She took one terrified step towards the struggling pair and then another. She raised her hands.

'Burn,' she whispered to the night.

For the first time she used both of her fire runes. Flames erupted in front of her, lighting up the darkness.

'Burn,' she screamed at her fears, advancing on the monster attacking her friend. The flames reached out, now more than a dozen paces from her hands, and touched its leathery skin.

The creature's cries became more urgent, higher pitched. It flung Grung aside and retreated from the source of its pain.

Lena willed her flames to be even hotter. Orange-red became white and then blue. The runes spasmed and twisted inside her forearms, glowing in the dark and sizzling beneath

the rain. She could feel her flesh burning from within and her sodden sleeves smouldering.

The creature lifted its wings, as wide as the road, as Lena closed the gap between them. The predator had become prey. It flapped them once, twice and then lurched sideways, shrieking as its leathery skin smoked and cooked in the chill downpour and it collapsed into the mud.

Lena was weakening, her vision faltering. It was becoming harder to maintain the flames. She gave up. Her flames flickered and died. The thing was down and she could hear other sounds now. Running feet splashing through the mud and people shouting. Lanterns and witchlight were approaching from the Village behind her and across the denuded farm lands on either side of the road. Rain drops hissed and stung as they fell on her exposed forearms. She reeled but managed to stay upright.

‘What’s happening?’ Payron was first to arrive of course, elves could outrun humans on their best day and a dark rainy night wasn’t their best day. Even so, Istvan arrived at almost the same time, a pale figure in black flitting impossibly quickly across the bare winter fields and the other villagers weren’t far behind. Payron’s witchlight illuminated the scene producing startled gasps from the others arriving.

The creature’s cries had become sporadic whimpers; it was dying a horrible death but Lena felt no pity. It had tried to kill her. It had hurt Grung. She felt nothing but rage. Its blistered skin was smouldering and blood was oozing from its wounds, becoming lost as it blended with the churned-up mud.

Lena looked around for Grung and was relieved that the troll was still on his feet.

‘In the name of the Mortal Goddess! What is that thing?’ Payron demanded.

‘It’s a harpy,’ said Nathen, sledgehammer in hand and bare chest heaving with the effort of running the short distance from his home behind the smithy. Marcus was right beside his father. More villagers arrived.

‘Of course it’s not. Harpies have feathers and it’s too big for that,’ Istvan said, his voice as deep as the blacksmith’s.

There was another scream as Grung shoved his way through the people gathered around the dying monster.

‘Lena! Lena hurt.’

Bethine ended up lying in the mud as the troll shoved his way to Lena’s side.

‘Lena not hurt?’

‘I’m fine, Grung,’ she lied, sounding weak and breathless.

‘She’s going to pass out.’ Istvan’s earthy voice sounded close.

‘No. I’m not.’ Only because of the chill of the rain, she thought. She looked around for her cloak.

The creature twitched weakly, spasmed and lay still.

‘Is it dead?’ Doerall prodded it with a pitchfork. When it didn’t react, he jabbed harder, bearing down from his considerable height. It seemed like most of the Village had been roused.

Bradon arrived barefoot, his long hair matted with the rain, demanding to know what was happening.

‘Forget about me. Grung’s been injured.’ It was nothing less than the truth. There were deep gashes across the troll’s left shoulder and face and four deep holes in his jerkin were leaking dark blood. ‘Someone get Delphan. He needs a healer.’

It took a bit of persuasion but Lena’s insistence that Grung had saved her life and Delphan’s compassion carried the day. White light flew from the tip of Delphan’s wand and ran across Grung’s skin. The troll batted at the light in confusion and then gawped in astonishment as the blood stopped flowing and the rents in his skin closed.

‘He’s a big one, isn’t he,’ grunted Delphan. Healing was harder than it looked, but you could say that about all sorcery.

Lena was shaking again. She found her cloak and pulled it from the mud. It had been torn across one shoulder, testament to how close she had come to needing Delphan's services herself. She wrapped the ruined garment around herself as best she could and ignored the stinging ache in her forearms.

'This is your fault, girl,' snapped Bethine, trying to wipe the mud from her bright pink nightdress and succeeding only in smearing it further.

'My fault? Why do you say that?' Lena was astonished at the suggestion. She stood straighter, swayed and would have fallen over if Payron hadn't grabbed her. It was becoming a habit but, on the whole, the young elf's arms were less objectionable than his parents' opinions and she was too weak to push him away.

'You summoned this thing,' Bethine accused.

'You're being ridiculous,' said Bradon. He didn't even look at the woman standing next to him.

'Again,' Istvan muttered behind Bethine's back.

'As for you, warlock, where were you while this was happening? You're supposed to protect us from things like this,' Bethine gestured theatrically at the still smouldering corpse.

Behind her, Grung stopped poking at his healed injuries and stepped closer. The space around him widened, witchlight and lanterns flickering as people edged away from the troll.

'I've a good mind to—'

Whatever it was that Bethine had been minded to do was forgotten as she became aware of the hulking presence of the troll looming behind her.

Grung leaned towards the mud-splattered Assembly member. A low uneven rumble came from his throat. Bethine took a quick step back. After a look at the troll's long arms and the stubby remains of the club clutched in one oversized fist, she took a few more steps.

‘Well, ah. . . . All things considered,’ Fandalia intervened in a more moderate tone, ‘the Assembly should discuss this in the morning.’

‘Excellent idea,’ said Bradon rubbing his gloveless hands together against the cold. ‘I’ll get these two home and see you in the Assembly Chamber after breakfast.’

He motioned to Grung. The troll tossed the remains of his weapon aside, retrieved the shaking girl from Payron and scooped her up in one arm as though she weighed no more than an emaciated straw doll.

Fandalia delegated Istvan and a handful of villagers to stand guard over the smouldering corpse while everyone else went home to gossip or sleep as they preferred.

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Twenty-seven

THE VOLUBLE AND PUBLIC DEBATE on what to do with the dead monster ran on for most of the morning. Bradon told them it was a 'bathgon' and that, outside the mating season, they were usually solitary creatures but that didn't help them dispose of the carcass. Lena's suggestion that they simply let Max eat it was badly received; only Haidi grinned. As the day wore on the word 'inconvenience' featured more and more heavily in the discussion. The torso and wings covered most of the road. One wing dipped into the drainage ditch. Mothers were telling their children that the creature didn't have any friends and would not rise from the dead at midnight and urged the Assembly to get rid of it before sunset. There was a noticeable shortage of volunteers to form a burial detail and an unsuppressed fear that some bumbling teenage necromancer might raise the creature again. Towards the end of the afternoon, three sorcerers completed what Lena had started and incinerated the carcass, but not until measurements and detailed sketches had been made.

The less public discussion focused on what the bathgon had been doing in the Village and whether Lena had been targeted or just been unlucky. By the time Fandalia gathered the Assembly members together to discuss the matter, there were plenty of opinions but no conclusions.

'It would help,' Bethine expressed the sentiments of most everyone present, 'if you would tell us who Lena is and where she's from.'

'I have to agree with Bethine,' Istvan said. The matter was sufficiently serious for the half-vampire to make a rare daytime appearance in the Assembly Chamber. 'People need to know.'

Fandalia looked at Bradon and the towering warlock shook his head. 'No.'

‘Why tell Fandalia but not the rest of us? We don’t keep secrets here,’ Bethine continued.

Bradon threw back his head and laughed. The Seers had enlightened the Apex and that meant there were at least five people in the Village, including Bradon and Lena herself, who knew the apprentice’s real identity. That was three more than the warlock liked. He’d told Fandalia and the Seers to hold their tongues but, short of culling a few people from the local population, there wasn’t anything else he could do to ensure their silence. ‘We all keep secrets, Bethine. Too many for my liking, but this is no different from any other.’

‘It is if it’s going to get people killed. If you won’t tell us about the girl, can you at least tell us if it is possible that someone sent the creature to kill her?’ Bethine wasn’t ready to let go.

‘It’s certainly possible,’ he said without hesitation.

‘Then she endangers us all.’

Bradon made no effort to hide his contempt. ‘We’re the most powerful collective of sorcerers in this part of the world. Dealing with things like this is hardly a challenge but we should take some precautions. Not letting villagers wander about at night alone, for example.’

‘If this was directed at her and not just a random event, Lena shouldn’t be allowed anywhere without an escort,’ said Havel calmly.

He was the only Assembly member not standing. Very little perturbed the wiry little man.

‘She has her own talents but that may not be enough,’ Bradon replied.

‘Two talents which she can actually use and raising the dead isn’t likely to protect her from anything,’ interrupted Bethine.

‘If Lena was its intended victim,’ the bald truthsayer concluded, ‘do you really trust that troll to safeguard her?’

‘He did last night.’ Bradon was obviously being careful with his words. Havel was not merely a truthsayer, he was astute enough to pick apart the subtle evasions and half-truths that fell short of being outright lies.

‘Why didn’t the Seers warn us?’ Istvan asked from his place in the shadows.

‘That,’ said Fandalia attempting to regain control of the debate, ‘is a very good question. As soon as it is dark, I’ll pay them a visit.’

‘The girl should leave. If she won’t tell us who she is, then doesn’t belong here,’ said Bethine.

‘Letting her loose before she’s fully trained could be a disaster. What if she tells people how to find us?’ Edythe countered.

‘Or worse, what if a night walker gets her hands on the girl. Lena torched that thing without a wand. With the right wand, she could be dangerous to more than herself,’ said Havel. ‘Is that why you brought her here? To train her as a warlock?’

‘She would make a formidable warlock, but such is not my intent,’ said Bradon, not meeting Havel’s eyes. ‘Lena has a different future awaiting her, a very different one.’

Lena was hanging her laundry to dry near the fire when Bradon returned from the day-long Assembly meeting. Washing the mud and burnt-flesh smell out of her clothing had been something of a priority. Repairing the foot-long gash across the back of the heavy winter cloak had taken more time than she expected but eventually she’d accepted that she had done all she could while she waited for Elish to make her another new one. Suspecting that destroying her wardrobe was becoming a habit, she’d delighted the seamstress by ordering three new dresses and two cloaks at the same time. Through the archway she could see Grung rotating half a goat over the cooking fire with one hand and stirring a pot with the other. The smell of herbs and roast meat made her stomach rumble. Dinner couldn’t come soon enough.

‘The Assembly,’ began Bradon when he had taken his usual seat near the fire with a glass of wine in hand, ‘has decided that it would be imprudent for you to go anywhere without an escort at night.’

‘So that thing was looking for me, specifically for me?’ Lena swallowed and forced herself to breath slowly and deeply. ‘But why? I’m nothing. I’m just a servant girl.’

‘You’re not nobody. You are still your mother’s heir.’

‘Spare me. We both know that any chance I had of taking the throne ended the moment I ran away.’

I still have the signet ring.

But she didn’t have Catriona’s Necklace and she needed that. Her cloak was dripping onto the floor. Grung wouldn’t like that. She moved the bucket a few inches.

Bradon emptied his glass. ‘It’s been a long day. Could you top this off for me? My point being, that you are far from ordinary. Not just because of who you are but because of what you can do. As far as we know, you’re the only person I’ve ever heard about with the same rune twice. More importantly, you’re the first sorceress in generations to develop a new rune that’s not in *Runes and Ruination*, even the old editions. Fandalia’s been asking when I’m going to visit the Pillars.’ He waved away Lena’s question before she could ask. ‘Any luck figuring out what it is yet?’

‘Not really, no.’ She didn’t have to explain that Baragwanth’s reading assignments, prioritising the useless over the useful, were severely limiting the time she could devote to researching. ‘It’s getting bigger and it’s still changing but I think it’s almost finished.’

‘That’s also unusual. Unheard of in fact. Once a rune is formed, that’s it. They don’t change.’ He put his empty glass down on the table. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Very sure,’ she said, uncorking the wine bottle.

Bradon sighed. ‘You had the strength to kill a bathgon without a wand. People take you very seriously indeed. You scare some of them witless.’

‘Which says more about their shortage of wits than my supposed talents. And we still don’t know why Baragwanth is holding me back?’ Lena refilled Bradon’s glass and returned the bottle to its place near the window where it would be kept cool away from the fire.

‘Thank you. More people are realising what he’s doing, and some of them are worried about it.’

‘Worried? That I’m going to kill someone by accident? Most likely myself, which would solve everyone’s problems.’ Her eyes instinctively followed Grung’s movements as he took the pot off the fire and rotated the roast again, ensuring it was cooked evenly. Lena watched the outline of the meat change as the spit turned and the realisation came to her. She didn’t know what the final shape of the rune on her back would be or what it was for. But she knew what was happening within the flesh of her back.

It’s rotating as it moves.

‘And so obvious once you know,’ she said, wondering if Bradon had known all along and guessing that he did. Now she had to imagine what the rune would look like when it had finished turning.

‘What is?’

‘Master?’ Lena hadn’t realised she had spoken aloud.

‘What is so obvious?’

‘That I might hurt someone by accident.’ She lied quickly, grateful that the only truthsayer in the Village wasn’t present.

‘That’s certainly a possibility, but it’s not what I meant.’

Her moment of discovery pushed aside, Lena looked at Bradon in astonishment. He was suggesting that she would deliberately hurt someone. Neritza had said the same thing. ‘I would never.’

‘Dinner. Dinner is ready, Master,’ Grung placed plates of roasted goat on the table.

‘Thank you, Grung. This smells delicious.’

Grung nodded happily. Whatever the healer had done to him had worked. He showed no ill effects from the attack and seemed utterly unaffected by having missed a night's sleep.

For her part, Lena was just about ready to fall over.

'Never is a long time, girl,' Bradon told her as he began eating, 'I should know.'

And you do know?

It was a troubling thought to carry with her as she slowly climbed the stairs to her room. If it was now obvious to her, it must have been obvious to Bradon a long time ago. He'd seen all her sketches.

So why didn't you tell me?

Rain gave way to snow and the cold become colder as it does when the winter deepens and the lake to the northern side of the Village froze over. 'Nathen was out on the ice after sunrise and said it was bearing near out to the centre,' Max had reported. 'If it'll support him, it'll support just about anyone.' Meaning the ice was thick enough to prevent Max from falling through. Haidi had succumbed to the wishes of her three students. Baragwanth, briefly roused from his slumber, had told Lena she could go too, so she had joined the others in hurrying home to collect her skates. Having farthest to go she'd run there and back, finding Khannie waiting for her on the narrow path leading to the lake. Max and Shaeralli were ahead of them, sitting down to strap their skates to their boots.

'Have you done this before?' Khannie asked.

'Never,' she said.

'It took me weeks to stop falling over,' he said. After a pause he continued. 'It doesn't snow where I come from either.'

Lena walked a little faster, but the lean youth of the Sea Peoples was not to be deterred.

'Khannie is short for Khanenhouser and I knew a woman called Mistress Caraline. She taught people how to read and write though she wasn't as good at it as you are but her

husband called her Cara so I've been wondering if Lena is short for something.'

Lena said nothing.

'And then there's Master Bradon. The way he discourages people from asking questions about you but he couldn't be bothered to make up a story about where you come from. It's like he wants us to solve a puzzle.'

'Have you talked to Bradon about this?'

'Phhhfff. That's another thing. You don't act like a servant. Sure, you've told us you do dishes and mend clothes and we've all seen you running errands and working the harvest and clearing ditches like everyone else but even though you call everyone master or mistress, it's like you're talking to equals or maybe even lowering yourself to match their level. Even Apex Fandalia.'

He waited a bit, perhaps hoping that Lena would admit something. The dark-skinned boy was as quick-witted as everyone said he was, thought Lena.

'Even here, which is about as far from anywhere as you can get, we do hear about what goes on in the world, though we'll have to wait until spring to hear anything new now the mountain passes are snowed in. Anyway, the head of the Slavers' Guild and her latest acquisition had a bit of a disagreement about what amounted to a good time. The boy died hard and slow, they were saying in *The Speckled Dragon*, but that didn't make her any less dead and there were more tears shed at his funeral than hers. Master Baragwanth's telling everyone who'll listen that there's been another attempt to break into the Mortal Goddess's tomb but I'm sure he just made that up since that would imply that someone had actually found Divine Inanna's final resting place. He's like that sometimes. Then there's the heir to the Whitehead Throne disappearing from some fancy palace in Queenshelm. Queen Salamander has every ship in that navy of hers scouring the coast from the fjords of Byrnhold as far south as the Rift Spires and all the way out to the Shrimp Islands. Crown

Princess *Kristalena* they were saying her name was. Even here, we hear things, we do.'

'Knowing what's going on in the world is seldom a bad thing,' said Lena, not looking at her friend. 'Even if the news is embellished and twisted to the point of untruth long before it reaches the Village.'

'I figure there's a reason Master Bradon wants to keep you a secret and there's another reason he's being so clumsy about it. I just wish I knew why.'

'You and me both, Khannie,' said Lena. Bradon wasn't going to like this at all. 'I'd be grateful if you didn't have this conversation with anyone else.'

'Yeah,' he said after a long pause. 'That's probably the smart thing to do. Master Bradon'll send that pet troll of his after me if I say too much.'

'Took your time,' grumbled Shaeralli when Lena and Khannie eventually reached the shoreline. The elf was already standing on the frozen lake, tapping one shiny skate against the ice. Further out, Payron, Rochelle and Amber were racing across the surface, making it look effortless. Amber flung herself into the air, twisting and coming down in a graceful glide. A handful of other villagers were also enjoying the activity.

'Lena had further to go,' Khannie reminded her.

Lena fumbled with the unfamiliar straps and Max was quick to offer assistance which she rebuffed. 'Thank you, but I have to learn to do it myself,' she said.

Haidi joined them. 'The ice is still a bit thin near the centre and I don't have to tell you to stay on our side of the lake and not to go too close to the stream mouth at the eastern end.'

The straps didn't take long. Lena stood up, tossed her cloak on top of the pile and carefully navigated the few feet separating her from the ice and—

'Ouch.' She was down so quickly she was barely aware of falling before her backside hit the ice. Hard. She scrambled to her feet, or rather tried to, and found that the ice was

extraordinarily slick, that standing up was a lot harder than it looked, that falling down was remarkably easy and that banging your face against the ice was painful.

Shaeralli was at her side, arriving with the soft hiss of steel on ice. ‘Slow down, Lena.’

‘It just takes a bit of practice,’ said Amber, appearing on Lena’s other side. ‘Here, lean on me.’ The blonde Sharakan girl held out her hand.

With Amber and Shaeralli both helping, Lena was pulled upright, though she only remained so because the two experienced skaters were gripping her upper arms. She would have bruises there as well.

‘You’re bleeding,’ said Amber. ‘Do you want to call it quits for today?’

‘It’s nothing.’ Lena ignored the trickle of blood coming from her nose, conscious that her audience had grown; Payron, Khannie and Max hovered close by.

‘Then stop struggling and relax. Forget about moving around and concentrate on keeping your feet underneath you,’ said Amber. A sharp crack warned them that that the ice was only so thick and a frigid dunking was waiting for them if they fell through. ‘I’ve got this. The rest of you go and not annoy the marsh goblins. You too Shaeralli.’

Amber towed the hapless novice away from the safety of the snow-dusted land and further out to a less populated part of the frozen surface.

‘Not that I’m complaining or anything, but—’ Lena’s feet betrayed her and the rest of her started heading towards the ice.

‘I won’t let you fall, Lena,’ said Amber arresting Lena’s latest attempt to face-plant. ‘You were saying?’

‘How come you’re helping me?’

‘It’s what people do around here, Lena. Sure, we bicker like ferrets in a sack but when it comes down to it, we need each other. There’s a whole world of people out there who’d

kill us if they could. All we have is this small community of ours. We're the lucky few, the very few, who made it here. Most of us get burnt or pitchforked or . . . well, you get the idea. We should turn back; the ice gets thin near the stream.' She led Lena in a slow turn.

'But Bradon spends most of his time travelling?'

'He's the only one. Master Havel sometimes. And we keep a few outposts manned by people whose runes don't show on their faces. Someone has to go out looking for people with the talent and, in spite of being so tall, Master Bradon somehow blends in. I'm told he's the most powerful sorcerer we have though Mistress Bethine's supposed to be very strong as well but she can't hide those runes on her face and I . . .'

'That's another reason why he doesn't take apprentices? He's not here long enough to train them.' Lena wondered what would happen to her the next time Bradon left the Village.

'That and I gather his track record in that area is a long way from stellar, though all that happened before he found me and brought me here.'

'So he told me,' said Lena.

'You helped Shaeralli and Max with their reading. And Khannie, though he hardly needs anyone's help when it comes to learning,' said Amber. She smiled as they talked and skated. Even with an ice rune harsh against her alabaster cheek, the girl was beautiful. And Amber was doomed to spend the rest of her very long life in the Village or, at best, hiding on the fringes of hostile human populations. Long sleeves and a cloak couldn't hide what she was from even the briefest of glances.

This place is a prison.

By the time the sun reached its zenith in the pale blue sky and Max came over to suggest that they were in danger of missing out on lunch, Lena's legs were trembling and she was satisfied that she could more or less stand upright and propel herself around by pushing with one leg and probably regain her feet without the assistance of her teacher. Lena thanked

Amber once she had reached the safety of solid land and was reminded to dry her skates to prevent rust.

‘You know,’ said Shaeralli as they were donning cloaks, ‘this is a first. We’ve finally found something that we can help you with.’

Lena laughed as they walked towards *The Speckled Dragon*. ‘Glad to be of service. What’s happening here?’

A half score of people were gathered on the road outside the smithy. Curious, Lena decided she wasn’t in too much of a hurry to get to lunch.

‘Bigger,’ grunted a deep familiar voice. ‘Make sharp.’

Lena pushed her way to the front and looked inside. Grung was standing near the forge, oblivious to the heat, and waving his hands. The blacksmith and son, were, if not exactly cowering, standing as far away as the confines of the workshop allowed.

‘Grung? What are you doing here?’

‘Need axe. Big axe. Keep girl safe.’

‘But you have a club,’ she said.

‘Club broke by bird-thing. Others come. Need axe.’

Lena considered that. If Grung was going to put himself in harm’s way, the least she could do is see that he was properly equipped. ‘Goodman Nathen? I believe Grung would like an axe to defend himself if any more of those creatures attack the Village.’

It took a considerable amount of coaxing, but eventually Nathen was persuaded that if a troll was allowed to run loose in the Village, giving him a battle-axe wasn’t going to make things much worse. It took only a little more persuasion before the grey-haired man pulled a piece of knotted cord from a pocket in his burn-scarred leather apron, took his unusual customer’s measurements and sketched a design.

‘No. Like one in Master’s book,’ said Grung, shaking his head.

‘What does that look like, Grung?’ Lena asked.

The big troll scratched his nose. ‘Grung not good at drawing. Get book and come back.’

Later that afternoon, Grung showed the reluctant blacksmith the picture of the axe he wanted made from the strongest steel the dwarves could supply and Lena showed him the money to pay for Grung’s new weapon. Bradon raised no objections to Lena’s rising incursions into his treasury saying that, in spite of her best efforts, he still had more coin coming in than going out.

‘That favour you did for the dwarves must have been a big one,’ Lena said as she hefted her refilled purse.

‘It was and it’s ongoing,’ he replied. ‘The dwarves’ mines go deeper than human ones. A lot deeper. There are things down there that resent the intrusion. I keep telling Perrack, he’s the dwarven king, that there’s no need to pay me, but they don’t like owing people favours. They like to keep their account current.’

‘Makes sense to me,’ she allowed. Thessalonia was a realm of traders, where a reputation for meeting your obligations was the most valuable asset most people had.

Twenty-eight

LENA REREAD THE PASSAGE again. And again.

‘Yes,’ she breathed.

‘Something you would like to share, Lena?’

Lena looked up, realising she had spoken aloud. ‘Apologies, Master Baragwanth. I was just excited to find some new references to the Karolignian War of Succession. It’s a fascinating period of history.’

‘Some people get excited over the least little thing,’ the old man grumbled. He gave Lena a hard look and, presumably satisfied that the thick book she had propped open on the reading stand in front of her was the dusty copy of *Move and Unmove: Politicata and the Theory of the Absolute Ruler After the Binding* he’d assigned his student, closed his eyes and settled back into his fireside chair.

It wasn’t a question so Lena felt no obligation to tell another half-truth to the doddery Assembly member, though it was perhaps a good thing that he didn’t leave his seat. *The Wanderers’ Journal* was nestled inside *Politicata*’s open but unread pages.

Haidi and the other young apprentices seated at the other end of the long table knew what was going on but if the Atturan woman had any issues with another teacher’s student disobeying instructions she gave no sign of it. Shaeralli grinned at Lena but, fortunately, the elf’s back was to Baragwanth. Lena opened her own diary, comparing her latest sketch of the rune on her back with the one Biekleb had felt sufficiently important to memorialise long ago.

Biekleb had, by all accounts, including his own, been flattered to be described as a second-rate wizard. He was neither powerful nor wise (nor did he have very good handwriting) but he had one skill possessed by no other

sorcerer of his generation. And he gloried in it. She now understood why the second contributor to the *Journal* had been so close to the leading rulers and sorcerers during the protracted civil war that had torn the Karolignian Empire into pieces. Her own education had fixated on the mundane aspects of the events that had seen Sharakan and Tamur and a handful of lesser kingdoms, principalities and city states emerge from the fractured colossus that had dominated the northern half of the continent following the Gods' War. Dates, rulers, battles and shifting borders she could recite from memory. But this was a new history. She read Biekleb's entry for a fifth time:

I open'd the portyl and our glorious Empress's forces didst
pour forth and smyte the mynyons of the most unholy
despot from afar.

She studied the sketch, comparing Biekleb's drawing against her recollection of the unknown runes in *Runes and Ruination* and the one in her own flesh. His rune covered the entire right side of his stomach. Even if he had been a small man, a point on which she had no information at all, it would still have been larger than the palm-sized rune which had nearly completed its migration from her shoulder blade to the centre of her back. Which might or might not mean anything – opinions within the talented community were divided on whether there was a correlation between the size of the rune and strength with the associated talent. The smallness of her necromancy rune hadn't limited the number of dead she'd raised at Fal Serrin. Regardless, the points and edges and shapes that made up her portal rune didn't precisely match Biekleb's sketch but if it was turning like a roast on a spit they would soon enough. She was sure now – the rune wasn't just moving, it was rotating as it made its way across her body.

I have an answer.

In retrospect, it was so clear and so obvious. She now knew what she was potentially capable of and, if Baragwanth continued to let her practise unsupervised after lunch, she could move on to the how.

It was a cold day and ice had formed along the banks of the slow-moving stream, but the leafless orchard was still in use.

Not even the worst of winter could overrule the prohibition against apprentices practising sorcery in the Library. Lena drew her cloak a bit tighter and once again envied those who had the rune for regulating body temperature. Max was showing off. Stripped to his hose, he splashed around in the icy water as happily as he did in summer. Lena doubted if she was the only one who would have preferred the man-sized boy to keep his shirt on. Other students were warming their hands above small fuelless fires burning in the snow. Lena went a bit further away, more to avoid the distraction of apprentices juggling pebbles than because she was seeking privacy. Everyone had seen her frequent failures and her rare successes. She truly had nothing to hide but her real identity and her entirely inappropriate and unreciprocated thoughts about a certain elf. Even that was something she suspected was known to too many people.

‘A window. A portal.’ She selected the image of the window in her bedroom, the smallest window she could think of, and fixed it in her mind.

‘A window. The window.’

She lifted her hands and gathered her will.

‘The window,’ she said aloud and visualised the stone embrasure.

‘Window,’ she said and imagined the dark wooden frame.

‘Window,’ she said and pictured the plain white curtains, yellowed by the summer sun.

‘Window,’ she said and thought of the glass which had run in the lower left pane when it was being set.

‘Window,’ she shouted as she released her will and used her index finger to sketch an outline in the air.

Nothing happened. Nothing at all.

Lena told herself that she shouldn’t expect to succeed the first time. She hadn’t with anything else, some things not at all, and this would be harder. She had very little guidance to help her. Books could only describe the what, not the how.

It was a long miserable failure of an afternoon and she was in a foul mood when she scraped the worst of the slush off her boots and pushed open the door to the tower. She hung her cloak above the bucket Grung had left out to catch the drips and sat at the table.

‘Tea. Make Lena warm,’ said Grung putting a cup of steaming liquid in front of her.

‘Thank you, Grung,’ said Lena automatically. She pulled out both the *Journal* and her diary and began reviewing her notes, comparing them against Biekleb’s terrible penmanship.

‘Any progress? I was told you were in the orchard all afternoon.’

Lena looked up, startled. She hadn’t heard Bradon walk in. ‘No. That is, yes. I finally worked out what the rune is for.’ She explained the idea of a portal and read out the passages she’d found in the *Journal*. The portal rune was in the ‘Unknown’ section of *Runes and Ruination* and the speculation on what it might be was entirely off-topic and useless.

Bradon stretched out his feet towards the fire and stared into the glowing flames. It was some time before he spoke. ‘Did you speak to Baragwanth?’ He sounded worried.

‘I didn’t think it my place to wake him. I spent the afternoon standing in a cold, wet field thinking about the window in my bedroom, waving my finger in the air and looking silly.’ She’d almost passed out, but wasn’t in the mood for another lecture about pushing herself too far.

‘HMMMMM.’ Bradon steepled his fingers and placed them underneath his chin. ‘Why did you start with a window? Why not a door?’

‘A window is smaller. I thought that would be easier. Pebbles to stones to boulders to bullsnot,’ she recited. Not that she could budge even a pebble with her puny fluxation rune.

‘That makes sense. What was on the other side of the window?’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘The point of a *portal*,’ he pronounced the word carefully, ‘is so people can get from one place to another; there have to be different places on each side. One side is here where you are. What did you envisage on the other side?’

‘Nothing. I never thought of that.’ Lena felt stupid and elated at the same time. She stood up.

‘Save it until tomorrow,’ said Bradon. ‘You’re tired and tired’s never a good time to be trying something new.’

‘Dinner,’ announced Grung. Half a chicken, well roasted, surrounded by tubers and kale, all swimming in gravy, was placed on the table in a clear spot near Lena. A glass of warm goat’s milk followed. There were three chickens on Grung’s side of the table.

Lena had been practising sorcery all afternoon and was starving. She dipped a piece of breast meat in the rich gravy and thought carefully about what she was about to say.

‘You knew it was a portal rune all along. Why didn’t you tell me?’ She looked at her food while she spoke, carefully slicing a potato into bite-sized pieces. ‘And please don’t lie; I know you knew.’

‘I suspected—’

‘You knew.’

‘I suspected, but I didn’t want to send you off on a wild goose chase if I was wrong,’ he said. ‘You want candour? I haven’t heard of anyone having a portal rune since . . . what was his name? Flabby Tamurian man. Opening a doorway and purifying water were just about the only things he could do. Had himself covered in tattoos to make people think he could do more.’

‘Biekleb. His name was Biekleb,’ Lena reminded him.

‘That’s it. Biekleb. His ability to open a doorway, and keep it open, gave Santhadena, the first Tamurian empress, enough of an advantage to overcome Alexander’s Sharakan loyalists and break up the Karolignian Empire.’

‘I know who Santhadena was,’ she said. ‘Although I don’t recall any of my tutors mentioning Biekleb’s name.’

‘They’d probably never heard of him. After she’d seceded from the rump of the Karolignian Empire, the first thing Santhadena did was have Biekleb’s head removed from his shoulders and his name from the historical record. She wasn’t sharing the glory of her victories with anyone, especially not a vainglorious sorcerer with ambitions on her daughter. Incidentally, Biekleb’s one of the reasons sorcery was banned in most of the northern realms. Both the Tamurians and the Sharakan couldn’t get over the fact that a single sorcerer had been such a decisive factor and issued an edict that anyone practising sorcery was to be burnt alive. With the idea that sorcerers had sided with the Lord of the Pit in the Gods’ War still popular, other kingdoms weren’t slow to do the same.’

Lena chewed and swallowed, giving herself time to think. Another mouthful and Bradon didn’t interrupt her thought processes. ‘You’re afraid that I’ll be used to start a war of unification. If, and I stress the if, I can open a doorway like Biekleb, Anslov or Katayana would want to use me to march an army into the other’s palace and reforge the Karolignian Empire.’

Bradon nodded. ‘It’s the sort of thing they’d try.’

‘I—’

‘If they were holding a knife to Thessalonia’s throat, you’d do it too. Everyone is vulnerable to something.’ He cut off Lena’s objection, his voice hard.

They ate in silence after that, not just because Bradon was right but because all the questions Lena wanted to ask had edges to them, nasty admissions of her own suspicions and doubts. She wanted to know why Bradon had withheld the information from her but, more than that, she wanted to know how he’d known that Biekleb was flabby and tattooed. Nothing she had found said anything about his appearance, beyond the drawing of the portal rune on his stomach. She decided against asking.

I will reveal more in asking the question than he will in evading it.

A warm bed and a weary body weren't enough to send Lena to sleep. Thoughts chased themselves around inside her mind. Identifying the rune on her back solved one mystery and presented several more. She was dangerous, far more dangerous than a fire wielding youth; an instrument of war with a talent that placed her apart from any other sorcerer in the Village. This she understood instinctively; it was only geography and distance that kept the more powerful kings and queens of the world from succumbing to the temptation of glorious conquest. Geographical barriers stopped invaders and gave defenders sanctuary. Distance stretched supply lines, rendering armies hungry and vulnerable. Opening a doorway allowing thousands of soldiers to travel hundreds of leagues as easily as crossing a jousting field would change everything. The obstacles to conquest would disappear. And what better way to defend than to attack? It was a line of reasoning with only one logical end: empire.

That evening Lena had stripped to inspect her body in front the chipped mirror. Shivering in the cold of the treasure-filled basement, she could see that that the portal rune had arrived at the centre of her back; within her youthful flesh it was still getting larger.

Runes are immutable. She had read that in *Runes and Ruination*. She could recall Haidi explaining it to Max and Shaeralli under the wan winter sun. Once you have them, they don't disappear and they don't change into something else. The talents denoted by the black marks appearing on their bodies were the one permanent thing in a sorcerer's life.

Nothing is immutable.

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Twenty-nine

‘MISTRESS BETHINE, why do you hate me so much?’ Lena asked when the class ended. Bethine had given this lesson because she was the only person in the Village with the rune for transfiguration. In Lena’s opinion that made for a complete waste of time; what was the point in teaching something to people who could never use it? But the lesson had been taught, with Bethine sitting rigidly at the head of the book-strewn table lecturing to three of the young students in attendance and glaring at the fourth with unwavering intensity. The full length of the table separated Bethine from the object of her ire and Lena wished it was longer. If Bethine had transformed herself into a cockroach Lena would have been sorely tempted to bring her boot down as hard as she could.

The corpulent Assembly member ignored the girl’s question, apparently as affronted by her impudence as her existence. She patted her iron-grey bun and rose to her feet.

‘Well? I’ve been here for months and you have hated me, it’s the only word for it, since the day I arrived.’ Lena could still remember the sting of being told she didn’t belong in the Village.

‘You are as stupid as you are arrogant, child. Class is over for today,’ she told the other apprentices. Bethine lumbered out of the Library, back stiff, without waiting for the students to acknowledge her departure. A solitary insubordinate tendril of hair waved erratically behind her like a pennant in a breeze.

‘It’s not wise to antagonise Mistress Bethine. Everyone says she’s extremely powerful,’ said Shaeralli keeping her voice low. Bethine moved slowly.

‘There’s more to power than just being able to do things, Shaeralli. We learned that,’ said Khannie. Lena thought of the respect universally shown to Seers and agreed with him but

then she'd witnessed Bradon banishing a demon too and understood that power came in many forms.

'Not the point. Why do you provoke her? Everyone says she'll be Apex one day. Once she is, she can order you to leave the Village any time she wants.'

'Actually, she can't. As people keep reminding me, I'm bound to Bradon. If he tells me to stay, I stay and that's the end of the matter,' Lena replied with more confidence than she felt.

'You think?' Max muttered. 'Isn't it time we went to get some lunch?'

'It's far too early to be thinking about food,' said Lena. 'If she wants me to leave, she can go and talk to Bradon about it and I'd be happy to wager a fair amount of his money on the outcome.' Seeing Bradon vanquish the demon wasn't the sort of thing you forgot in a hurry. 'Why does she dislike me so much? I don't believe it's just because Bradon won't tell her where I'm from.'

Shaeralli shrugged. 'It's probably not personal, Mistress Bethine doesn't like anybody so's I've noticed. But Bradon keeping something from her. . . .'

'Sometimes I wonder if he's just doing it to irritate everyone. But Bradon does want it kept secret,' Lena replied wondering if that was really true.

I haven't told anyone. Khannie's voice sounded faintly in her mind even though he hadn't spoken aloud.

'You know where she's from!' Max stared at his friend, seemingly unaware of the ink dripping from his pen onto the table.

'And you didn't tell us?' Shaeralli's head snapped round. She punched Khannie on the shoulder.

'Ow. . . . I thought I was only speaking to you,' he pleaded, looking at Lena.

'Clearly you thought wrong,' Lena retorted. Khannie couldn't have picked a worse moment or subject to

demonstrate his talent with.

‘I’m sorry—’

‘I’m not mad,’ Lena shouted at the mind talker. ‘But I suggest you have a long conversation with Mistress Haidi about how not to communicate your thoughts to the whole damn Village.’ Lena picked up the *Journal*, her diary and her little leather bag of writing tools and stormed towards the exit.

‘So give,’ she heard Shaeralli whispering before she’d taken her third stride.

‘Leave him alone, both of you,’ Lena snapped without slowing her pace. She needed to burn off some of her irritation. Orchards were out of season but there was time to go skating before lunch. Khannie was smart but he was a show-off. He had the rune for voice and had, obviously, progressed to the point where he could place his thoughts in the minds of others. As impressive as that was he hadn’t learned the difference between communicating a confidence to a single person and making a general announcement. By the time Lena had collected her skates from the shelves inside the Library entrance and made her way down the narrow path to the frozen lake, another thought had come to her; Chakobu had been industriously transcribing a disintegrating manuscript at his high desk only a few paces away and Baragwanth had been sleeping beside the grated fireplace.

How much did the old men hear? Khannie’s announcement? The discussion afterwards? All of it?

There was no way of knowing. Worse, Bethine had taken her time collecting her cloak off the peg in the entranceway. Had she heard Khannie’s proclamation too?

Skating was fun, more so now that she could make her way across the ice without assistance. Amber still hovered ready to pick her up when she fell but interventions were becoming less frequent. ‘You’re getting better at this,’ she’d said while skating in a brisk circle around Lena, ending by spinning rapidly, blond braids flying, and then coming to a poised standstill.

‘Avoiding bruises is a great incentive,’ said Lena, concentrating hard on making sure the iron skates strapped to her boots remained under her.

The northern girl laughed. ‘Come on, let’s see if you can go a bit faster. Work your arms.’

Lena did her best to keep up with Amber as the older girl glided effortlessly towards the northern side of the lake. Realising the more experienced skater was holding back, allowing the newcomer to keep up, Lena pushed herself harder, swinging her arms vigorously from side to side and greedily sucking cold air into her lungs. Her blades hissed as they carved shallow grooves in the ice beneath her. The feeling of speed as she accelerated was exhilarating. Nothing was said as they rapidly approached the edge of the clear ice, knowing they had to turn back before reaching the point where the winter-brown reeds poked their way through the frozen water. Lena tried to emulate Amber’s smooth gliding semi-circle but her feet had other plans, slipping out from underneath her as the momentum of her race across the lake carried her forward.

‘Ahhh.’ Her shoulder and hip hit the ice hard and frozen reeds buffeted her face as her body continued its unplanned journey. She crashed her way through the brittle reeds marking the edge of the lake and slid up the shallow embankment before coming to a painful halt only after bouncing backside first and face down through a wooden door.

She lay still, feeling an ache in her shoulder and pain in the side of her head. Hoping she hadn’t done herself any serious injury, Lena pushed the remains of the door aside and got to her knees. A hairless grey face with narrow black eyes and flat ears was peering down at her. Two smaller versions of the creature peeped out from behind it and she could hear movement to the side. Broken crockery and the smouldering remains of a small cooking fire were scattered around her in the dimly lit hut. The stench of wind-dried fish assaulted her nostrils, bringing realisation.

‘Lena!’ she heard Amber calling from the other side of the man-high vegetation, her voice low and urgent. ‘You need to get back. We’re not supposed to go into the marsh.’

‘I . . . I’m sorry. It was an accident—’

As the creature growled at her, its lips curled upwards exposing needle-like teeth and two more of the strange beings dashed in to crouch in front of the children.

‘I’ll go. I’m going,’ Lena said, scrambling to her feet, losing her footing and banging into something hard. Eventually she managed to get herself outside of the marsh goblins’ home and pick her way through the reeds back to where Amber was anxiously waiting.

‘We’re not allowed to go into the marsh goblins’ territory. If one of them saw—’

‘They did,’ said Lena, dabbing at the blood trickling down her cheek; evidence of her misadventure. Her face was too numb to feel the cut. ‘I think I interrupted their lunch.’

‘There will be trouble over this,’ Amber predicted as they made their way back to the shoreline. Seemingly half the Village had witnessed Lena’s unplanned violation of the agreement with the tribal marsh goblins and they hadn’t been slow in spreading the news to the other half, including the Village Apex who was hurrying to mitigate the damage. Fortunately, the marsh goblins had found Lena’s uncontrolled slide across the ice into their territory amusing. After offering the goblins a brace of wolf-skin furs by way of apology, Fandalia had been content to lecture the red-faced culprit about her irresponsibility in front of the assembled patrons of *The Speckled Dragon*. The object of the telling-off tried to appear contrite and said nothing, hoping it would be over sooner. Lena’s relief that no lasting harm had been done was matched by the humiliation of knowing that her public scolding was providing entertainment for so many.

‘Got off lightly,’ Bradon remarked once Fandalia had stalked out of the common room. He’d stood beside the Apex as she’d torn into Lena, his expression grim. Lena didn’t disagree at all. The understanding between the villagers and the marsh goblins dated back centuries and basically came down to a ‘you-leave-us-alone-and-we’ll-leave-you-alone’ agreement punctuated by infrequent bartering along the ill-

defined boundary and occasional requests for Delphan's services. They could easily have made it more serious than it had been.

After Bradon left to join Doerall for a game of stones and the rest of Tarraday's patrons had gone back to their conversations and ale cups, the apprentices started eating, not caring if their vegetable stew was no better than lukewarm. Max asked Lena what the marsh goblins looked like, he'd never seen one, and Shaeralli told him to shift over and make some room if he wanted her leftovers.

'Grey, thin and grumpy,' Lena told them. 'I didn't really get a good look. I was too busy trying to pick myself up and get out of there.'

The stew wasn't as good as anything that came out of Grung's kitchen, but it wasn't half bad either. There was a reason Tarraday's inn was popular with those too busy, too talentless or too lazy to cook for themselves. Like Queenshelm and, she supposed, most places, the Village's inhabitants ranged from the prosperous to the humble but there was an absence of either genuine poverty or ostentatious displays of wealth. There were no beggars, no one starved, no one lived in hovels and the nearest the Village had to a palace were the contrasting towers of Bradon and the Seers. She could understand the economics of it to some extent. The rich soils, the river and lake and the extensive forests provided food and many other things in abundance for those willing to work the fields or hunt and gather outside the Village. What the villagers couldn't supply themselves they obtained through trade with the elves, the dwarves and, at a cautious distance, other humans.

The collective abilities of the sorcerers undoubtedly made a contribution; healing and weather forecasting being particularly useful. The absence of theft and other crimes was explained by the combined talents of Havel and the Seers. The only time Lena had seen anyone punished was a pair of farmhands who had come to blows over a game of dice that might or might not have been rigged. Fandalia had sentenced them to spend an extra two days filling in potholes on the main

road and neither had complained. Political friction was as plentiful as ale in the Village but violence was as rare as smiles on Bethine's face.

Their longevity and power would have allowed the sorcerers to set themselves up as aristocracy but they hadn't. They worked the fields taking their turn to clear the drainage ditches and doing other chores and they shared power giving the commoners representation on the Assembly. Even Payron, a member of a royal family, lived, studied and worked much the same as everyone else. So did Lena for that matter, although she was fully aware that Grung's enthusiasm for all things domestic meant she had far fewer mundane chores than the other apprentices; Max scrubbed Havel's pots and pans after breakfast and dinner, Khannie helped Tarraday sweep out *The Speckled Dragon* after it closed each evening and Shaeralli was always ready to complain about cleaning her mother's clothes as well as her own on top of the time she spent keeping the Assembly Chamber clean. Lena washed dishes and mended clothes but only for three people. Not for the first time, Lena accepted that the Village was a good place to live because everyone contributed to making it that way.

'So, Khannie? How does this mind-talking thing work?' Lena said.

Khannie continued staring at the table, his meal untouched.

'Snap out of it,' she said, becoming exasperated. 'I'm the one who's in trouble today, not you.'

'Just like most days,' said Shaeralli sliding her half-eaten portion of stew down the table to Max. The elf seldom ate much.

Khannie smiled briefly and picked up his spoon.

'You need to be able to defend yourself better. Incinerating your attackers lacks finesse and Grung won't always be around so, starting tomorrow afternoon, Payron's going to give all the apprentices lessons in swordsmanship.' Bradon slipped the announcement into the conversation as they walked down the snow-dusted road together; Lena from her non-lessons in

the Library and Bradon from what she assumed was an equally pointless meeting of the Village Assembly.

‘A sword?’

‘Sharp pointy thing.’

‘I know what a sword is. I’ve had military training already; it’s traditional,’ Lena said. She hadn’t taken it seriously though. There had always been bodyguards surrounding her royal person to deal with that kind of danger.

‘Elves are the best swordsmen. Fast reactions. Actually, just faster and stronger than most humans and I’m told Payron has considerable potential even by elven standards.’

‘Payron’s agreed to this? He’s supposed to be staying away from me.’

And he hates me.

‘He’s old enough to make his own decisions,’ said Bradon.

Lena wasn’t so sure about that. The elf had barely spoken to her since she’d yelled at him on their trip back from Fal Serrin.

‘It could be important, Lena. You can’t always use sorcery to protect yourself.’

‘It attracts the wrong kind of attention,’ she said. ‘I know. I can hear people practising, not the normal sounds but a soft humming or buzzing inside my mind. Is that what it’s supposed to sound like?’

‘Yes. After a while you may be able to hear who is doing it, what they’re doing and where it’s happening. Not many can do that,’ said Bradon, speaking slowly. ‘At this stage, I’m surprised you can hear anything.’

‘I’ve got a new rune,’ said Shaeralli. She pulled up her skirts, exposing her calf and showing a triangular pattern: two straight lines pointing upwards towards her knee forming a wedge open at one end with drop shaped blips falling off the sides.

‘For keeping water off?’ Khannie said. Most runes gave no obvious hint to the talent they bestowed. This was one of the few that even the rawest apprentice could guess.

‘Mistress Haidi has that one,’ said Lena.

‘Master Baragwanth’s entered it on the Roll already,’ said Shaeralli, nodding at the glass case. That made it official.

‘Congratulations,’ Lena offered. She still hadn’t told anyone except Bradon about her portal rune.

‘Next time it rains really heavily, Mistress Haidi’s going to make me stand outside until I can keep myself and my clothes dry.’ Shaeralli didn’t sound too happy at the prospect.

‘That sounds like fun. Not,’ said Max.

‘At least it’s stopped snowing so we can go and practise outside for the rest of the afternoon.’ The entire Village had been blanketed in a new layer of white during the night. ‘What about you? Have you got any new runes?’ Shaeralli allowed her skirt to fall back into place. The seam needed turning.

‘Yes,’ Lena said and instantly regretted it. She wasn’t ready to discuss the unknown rune on her back.

‘If you show me, I might recognise it,’ said Payron. Lena hadn’t heard him enter the Library. He was carrying two sheathed swords and hadn’t taken off his cloak. Both blades had plain unadorned leather grips and crude crossguards.

Lena had no objection and turned to the page in her diary where she had sketched the incomplete rune.

‘It’s not clear yet. Are you sure you drew it correctly?’

‘No, I’m not,’ she admitted. Drawing anything from a mirrored reflection while standing birth-naked in a freezing basement wasn’t the easiest task in the world.

‘That doesn’t help. Show us the real thing,’ Payron insisted.

Lena could feel a flush of heat on her cheeks. Exposing her back was not on her list of things to do today.

‘Come on, we’re wasting time. It’s bad enough that I have to spend time teaching you how to wave a sword around without chopping your own leg off. Show us this new rune of yours.’

‘Never mind,’ Lena blurted. ‘I wouldn’t want to waste any more of your valuable time, Lord Payron. Shall we make a start?’

‘Getting a bit above ourselves, aren’t we?’

Eventually Payron got around to telling them he would teach them swordsmanship individually and that Lena would have today’s lesson, so she packed up her books and pencils and collected her cloak. Once outside they made their way to the orchard. Edythe and Haidi brought the other apprentices out to practise sorcery in the snow. Lena would have an audience.

‘Have you ever used a sword before?’ Payron asked.

‘Not much,’ she said, preferring to downplay whatever abilities she had. Questions about where she had received her military training would not be as embarrassing as demands to display certain parts of her anatomy, but they would be awkward.

She scrapped the snow off the top of Freth’s stone wall, noting that the section she had repaired in the autumn was still standing, and deposited her satchel and cloak on the cleared space. Payron slung his own cloak over a denuded branch. Lena could see Sathene’s wand, Payron’s now, poking out from a pocket reminding her that the young elven lord was no longer an apprentice. Unsheathing the sword he’d offered she held it as she had been taught, with the point low. She waited. The weapon was lighter than the ones carried by the Thessalonian soldiers and had neither a sharp cutting edge nor a point; a practice sword.

‘Your grip is good, but your feet are too squared off. You’re right handed? Bring your right foot forward and let your body turn sideways. It makes you a smaller target.’

‘Like this?’

‘Perfect,’ he said, looking at her with the strange serious expression that often appeared on his face when he was poring over a difficult text in the Library. ‘Let’s try some drills.’

Payron kept his student working through the afternoon, churning the slush of the last snowfall into the frozen mud with their footwork. By the time Fandalia interrupted to remind Lena that she had to be home before sunset, Lena could feel the sweat dripping down her forehead in spite of the chilly evening breeze. A wash before dinner would be welcome.

‘How’s the wrist feeling?’ Payron asked when she returned her borrowed sword. He wasn’t even breathing heavily.

‘A little stiff,’ she admitted, reluctant to show weakness but not wanting to lie either.

‘Wrap a damp towel around it when you get home to keep the swelling down,’ he suggested.

‘I will,’ she said, picking up her bag. She wondered what Grung was cooking for dinner. ‘Thank you for the lesson, My Lord.’

‘I’m not your first teacher,’ he said as she was walking away.

Thirty

‘YOU HAVE TO MOVE your feet if you want to stay alive. How many times do I have to tell you?’

Lena slid her left foot forward, emulating her instructor and pretending half the village wasn’t watching. Far too many people had far too little to do during the short winter days for her liking.

‘Wrong foot,’ Payron snapped, slapping her blade away.

Lena raised her sword again and switched feet, leaving more blemishes on the snow.

The elf knocked her blade aside and slapped her thigh with the flat of his blade. ‘Too slow. You’re making it easy for anyone who wants to kill you.’

That blow stung, but it wouldn’t bruise any more than several other knocks Payron had given her in the week since her first lesson and certainly hurt less than falling on the ice, but the contempt with which it was delivered was something else.

‘The only reason you agreed to teach me was so you could knock me around,’ she accused him.

‘What? You think I would hit a girl? Stupid serving wench.’

Things deteriorated rapidly after she called his lordship a padded, pint-sized codpiece and they ended up standing nose to nose shouting insults at each other near the edge of the field. Lena was satisfied that her recall of curses picked up from the *Maiden’s* crew had been put to good use when she realised just how close he was and just how good looking he was and that he smelled very nice in spite of the sweat and pushed him away with her free hand.

‘Don’t shove me, you snooty scullion.’ He shoved back and Lena lost her footing. She instinctively snatched at Payron’s arm with her free hand to prevent herself falling but they both ended up tumbling down the steep snow-covered bank.

Lena felt an acute pang in her side as she rolled towards the water.

She had no chance of regaining her balance before falling through the cat ice lining the edge of the slow-moving river and into the shockingly cold water.

‘Idiot. You’ll drown.’ Payron reached for her shoulder as the momentum of her fall dragged them both under the surface of the dark water.

She thrust her feet towards the river bottom but even in winter the water was deeper than she was tall. Kicking strongly, she pushed herself towards the surface. A hand grabbed her under one arm and pulled her upwards.

‘Let go of me,’ she told Payron after she had taken a few deep breaths while treading water. A pain in her side was receding as the cold numbed her. ‘Now!’

‘You can swim?’

‘Of course I can swim, you brainless bilge rat,’ she yelled through chattering teeth as she swam awkwardly towards the safety of dry land. She was still holding the wretched practice sword when Khannie arrived, Max puffing heavily only a few steps behind. Between them, the two boys pulled her out of the river leaving Payron to crawl up the bank on his own.

‘You’re bleeding,’ said Payron. All the hardness disappeared from his expression.

In the heat of her anger and the exertion of extracting herself from the river, Lena had forgotten the piercing pain in her side. There was a gash in her dress and a spreading patch of red.

‘My dress! I’ll never get the stain out.’ It was only a practice blade but she must have fallen hard enough to drive its blunted edge into her flesh.

Payron's eyes widened.

Lena looked from the blood-stained dress to the astonished elf to the weapon clutched in her left hand and burst out laughing. She was only vaguely aware of the crowd gathering around the pair and Shaeralli's horrified expression. 'We're being ri . . . ridiculous, aren't we?' She could hear more people running towards them. She was shivering now and water droplets were hardening to ice on her sleeves and, she assumed, the rest of her.

Payron wasn't smiling. 'More than a bit. You need to see Master Delphan. Put your hand on it to slow the bleeding.' He took the sword from her shaking hand.

'Sit down.' He brushed the slush off a section of the low stone wall and wrapped Lena's cloak around her.

'I'm fine,' she objected and then looked at her body. Blood was oozing out from around her trembling fingers, dripping bright red against the white and brown of the trampled snow. She pressed harder and decided it was better to look at something else. A pair of clear green eyes. That wasn't such a good idea either. Perhaps it wouldn't hurt to sit down for a bit, just until the field stopped rolling up and down like *Kupar's Maiden* before a following sea.

Payron was shouting at someone but the elf seemed a long way away.

'Funny,' she mouthed without making a sound, 'but it doesn't hurt at all.'

'Lena wake up!'

'She's coming round.'

'About time,' someone grumbled.

'Lena hungry? Grung make soup for Lena?'

'Excellent idea, Grung. We could all use something to eat,' said Bradon's measured bass voice.

Lena heard the troll's big feet moving further away, the familiar clack, clack, clack of claws against the stone floor receding as he left. She opened her eyes, tracing the familiar

lines of the gaps between the wooden beams of the ceiling above her. She was in her own bedroom. A moth had built its cocoon near the corner.

‘No, don’t sit up,’ said Delphan.

‘What happened? Did I faint? I fainted. I’ve never done that before. How embarrassing,’ she muttered.

‘She’s blushing. That’s a good sign,’ said Delphan. He smiled.

Lena looked around. Three visitors made her little room seem crowded. The healer was sitting on the chair next to her bed. He looked satisfied which was all Lena needed to confirm that there was no serious damage. Her hand drifted towards her hip. It wasn’t painful, maybe a little uncomfortable, but that was all. A big hole had been cut in her dress to allow the healer to do his work.

‘Leave it,’ said Delphan. ‘I put in seven stitches but there’s no permanent damage. You’ll have a nice tidy scar to show your husband.’

‘Thank you, Master Delphan.’ Lena hoped she wasn’t blushing again.

‘My pleasure, Lena.’

One of the things Lena liked about the placid healer was that he never asked people why they did stupid things. He was content to leave judgments to others. Unfortunately, there was no shortage of people willing to fill the void.

‘Now that you’ve had time to gather whatever wits your parents wasted on you, you can tell us what happened.’ Fandalia was perched on the heavy three-legged stool usually kept in the kitchen for Grung’s use. The Apex was several inches shorter than Lena and her feet didn’t reach the floor.

‘Payron didn’t tell you?’ Lena asked.

‘The elf has been confined to his room at *Ye Olde Knotted Wand*,’ said Bradon. The tall sorcerer was leaning against the window frame. A tight grin appeared on his face.

The Village Apex didn't share the warlock's enjoyment. 'This is not a matter of amusement, Bradon. One of our students, your servant, has been stabbed with a sword. She could have been killed.'

'Payron told us that he was responsible for your injury,' said Bradon.

'What? But he wasn't responsible at all. It was my own stupid fault. I'm the one who lost my footing on the bank and ended up in river.'

'Then how do you explain getting stabbed? Don't expect us to believe that you stabbed yourself. Not even you are that imbecilic,' snapped Fandalia. She wagged her finger at Lena and clutched at the edge of the stool to avoid falling off.

'But I did. At least I must have done. Payron was teaching me how to move my feet and then . . . I think I must have stabbed myself on the way down after I lost my footing. It all happened so fast.'

'Really. Then how did Payron end up in the river too?'

'He pulled me out. He has a very strong grip,' she said. 'He was worried that I couldn't swim. I can, of course, but he didn't know that.'

'Really?' Fandalia didn't sound at all convinced.

'You can ask Khannie or Max. Shaeralli too. They were all watching,' protested Lena.

'Those three aren't saying anything,' said Fandalia.

'An accident then. These things do happen,' said Bradon mildly.

'Horse dung,' snapped Fandalia. 'Lying is bad enough. Clumsy lies are insulting. If those two are going to fabricate a story, they could at least take the trouble to agree on the same lies. You were seen fighting and it's not the first time the two of you have fought. We don't tolerate that sort of thing in the Village.'

'But—'

‘You’re banned from using the Library for a week.’

‘But—’

‘And consider yourself lucky it’s not longer.’

‘But—’

‘Unless you think I am being too lenient,’ she said.

‘No, Mistress Fandalia.’ Lena suppressed an almost overwhelming urge to tell the most respected Apex to join the night-soil collection detail. She was spending more time in trouble than out if it and arguing with the Apex wasn’t going to help her any.

‘And the same for Payron. He may be royalty at home, and he may have graduated but he still has to follow the rules like everyone else.’

‘But – ow! – he did nothing wrong,’ Lena objected, sitting bolt upright and wincing as the pain lanced through her side. Delphan placed a hand on her shoulder, pushing her back down.

‘Fine. Neither of you are allowed into the Library for a month.’

Lena shut her mouth and did the math. A whole month. If she goaded the Apex any more, she would be knee deep in mud, planting the first crops beneath the early spring rains before she had access to the books she needed.

Fandalia climbed down from her awkward perch and stalked out of Lena’s bedroom, brushing past Grung who had returned with four bowls of steaming soup on a tray.

‘Soup?’

‘Not today, thank you,’ said Fandalia without slowing down.

Bradon took a bowl.

‘Chicken soup. Good for sick people,’ assured the troll.

‘Thank you Grung, just what I need.’

‘He’s a marvellous cook,’ Lena assured Delphan.

The bearded healer hesitated and then accepted the bowl being eagerly offered to him.

‘Next time something like this happens, make sure you and the elf agree your stories before she starts asking questions,’ Bradon told Lena.

‘Was it that obvious?’ She sipped her soup directly from the bowl; chicken and leek.

‘Oh yes. That’s what got her so angry. She doesn’t like being treated like a fool. And your friends didn’t help. Judging by their expressions, Payron could well be the next person needing Delphan’s services. You should talk to—’

‘Wait! The *Journal*! It was—’

‘Max brought your satchel back. The *Journal*’s still there,’ said Bradon.

Lena sighed with relief.

Bradon finished his soup and returned the bowl. ‘Thank you, Grung. Now, if you’ll all excuse me, I have some things to attend to.’

‘I should be going too.’ Delphan told his patient to stay in bed for a couple of days and that he would be back to see her tomorrow. ‘Very nice soup.’

Grung grinned at the compliment.

Bradon looked back at Lena as he followed the healer out of her room, ‘You must really like that boy.’

Lena could feel her face burning.

‘Soup too hot?’ asked Grung, peering anxiously at the patient lying on her bed.

Being banned from the Library had its perks; chief among them Baragwanth’s declaration that he didn’t do house visits. Lena could have suggested lessons elsewhere at Baragwanth’s convenience but decided to spare herself the daily dose of pointless tedium.

‘I’d teach you but I don’t want to give Bethine an excuse to start another argument,’ Bradon had said. ‘She’s already

fretting about the shortage of apple cider and complaining to no end about drinking sheep's wool though none of that seems to affect her intake. For the most part, you'll have to educate yourself.'

'Teach myself?' Lena was more concerned with her education than supplies of essential beverages.

'Yes. Now that you've made a start, it's easy enough to carry on once you've figured out what the runes are for.' Bradon had told her to practise anything except making fire in the barn until she was better.

'Keep practising but remember your limits and don't push yourself to exhaustion. Consider it an order. Making a portal is important, but so are your other talents. Don't get so obsessed over one thing that you neglect everything else.'

Lena accepted both that Bradon was right and, even if he hadn't been, her master had given her a command. She had complete runes for four talents and was pretty sure that breaching the edict against raising the dead in the Village would have more serious consequences than literary exile. Bradon had decreed no fire, which left the portal rune, slowly settling into its final shape in the centre of her back, and the puny fluxation rune on her thigh.

'Try not to destroy the barn or turn the horses into hippogriffs while you're there,' he remarked as he left for the Assembly meeting.

'No hippogriffs,' she said, having no idea what they were. Since none of her limited collection of runes, complete or incomplete, was for transfiguration that particular risk wasn't one Bradon need be concerned about.

Two weeks and yet another heavy snowstorm later, Lena had achieved nothing, unless you considered getting a head cold an achievement. When she'd told Bradon as much, he'd shrugged and told her to keep at it.

'You'll get there eventually,' he said, pointing to the door.

Lena reluctantly picked up *The Wanderers' Journal*, her diary and the battered copy of *Runes and Ruination* Max had

smuggled out of the Library for her and waded through the snow to the more combustible but less valuable barn. Sitting on a hay bale, she opened the book to the chapter on fluxation. She'd read it so many times, the book was almost superfluous but she reread it anyway, hoping she'd missed something.

Fluxation, moving objects from one place to another, was considered a basic skill since most sorcerers had the rune for it. Start small. A piece of straw was the lightest thing she could think of. After several minutes of concentration punctuated by a sneeze, she thought the inconsequential weight of the sun-dried grass moved a little, but that could have been due to the snow-laden easterly sweeping through the gap under the barn doors. She pulled her cloak a little tighter, opened her diary and re-read the note on making portals she'd distilled from Biekleb's drivel:

Picture where you are, not with your eyes, but inside your mind. Picture where you want to be. Picture the two places as one, separated by nothing.

It sounded simple but, with weeks of unqualified failure under her belt, she knew it wasn't. Some instruction would be welcome, but there was none to be had. No one else in the Village had the portal rune. No one knew of anyone who had even heard of anyone who had a portal rune. Biekleb's notes in the *Journal* rarely dealt with the talismans of the Twelve and offered little more about his rare talent than a badly-drawn sketch of the rune and boastful snippets about the uses to which it had been put. There wasn't a single word about how he did it. Far too much about Lissandra's 'fine figure' and 'expressive eyes'. Lena was on her own, unless you counted Bradon's incessant exhortations to keep trying.

She stood up and began pacing across the narrow floor space separating the stabled horses from their supply of winter fodder. Perhaps somewhere more specific? She'd been thinking of the orchard where the apprentices trained but the 'orchard' covered several fields of bare trees and snow. Somewhere else? Bradon was in the Assembly Chamber. Maybe she could see what they were talking about. Knowledge was currency. She closed her eyes and pictured the

space above the hay bale she'd been sitting on when trying to move the piece of straw. She pictured the Assembly Chamber, the open space in the middle where she had stood next to the fire pit on her first day in the Village. The two tiers of seats surrounding that space on three sides. The map-covered walls. She willed the images inside her head closer. She pictured . . . she felt a surge of energy and her knees buckled, a glimpse of shocked faces and broken furniture before the floor rushed towards her and. . . .

'Wha . . . what happened? Where am I?' She was moving, the rolling ambulatory movements of walking, but her feet were not on the ground.

'Strange noise. Lena lying on floor. Not clean. Better in bed. Keep warm.' She was being carried by a troll. He'd done that before.

She heard the sound of hooves pounding on the road and thought that was peculiar because trolls didn't have hooves before she passed out again.

'Unbelievable.'

'Unbelievably dangerous, you mean. You should never have left her unsupervised, Bradon.'

The annoying voices became clearer.

'She's coming round.'

'Will you please tell your troll to go and stand somewhere else?'

'Tell him yourself, Fandalia.'

Lena drew a deep breath and opened her eyes. It took a few minutes but eventually the room stopped gyrating like a crow's nest against the sky and the faces of Bradon, Fandalia, Havel and Delphan, all crammed into her small bedroom, settled into focus. Grung was squeezed in there too, his huge black eyes peering anxiously over the top of Havel's bald head.

Lena tried to sit up but felt a searing pain in her head the moment she moved and sagged back into her bed.

'Something hurts,' said Delphan.

‘My head,’ Lena managed to whisper.

‘Perhaps she cracked it when she fell. Might have knocked some sense into the brat,’ said Fandalia.

‘It could be more serious than that.’

‘It should have been,’ growled Fandalia. ‘I’ve never heard an apprentice make such a noise.’

‘Or anyone else,’ said Havel quietly. ‘Why was she left unsupervised?’

‘Baragwanth refuses to teach her again until she’s served out her punishment, not that he was helping her before,’ said Bradon bluntly. ‘You know, I could—’

‘That’s not something to discuss here. How’s Bethine?’ Fandalia said.

‘Fine, more shocked than anything else. She’ll need a new chair,’ said Delphan.

‘And a change of smallclothes,’ said Bradon with a laugh.

‘It’s not funny. A hand’s width to the left and she would have been sliced in half,’ snapped Fandalia.

Lena gaped. *I almost killed someone?*

‘You stupid, stupid girl. You just about drained yourself and you came this close,’ she held her hands a few inches apart, ‘to killing a member of the Assembly. What do you have to say for yourself, girl?’ There was nothing subtle about the emphasis on the word ‘girl’. Sixteen made Crown Princess Kristalena san Thessalia an adult, old enough to be crowned heir, take a consort and bear children but Lena the apprentice was an irresponsible child.

The four sorcerers stopped arguing with each other and turned to the girl lying on the bed.

‘I . . . I don’t know. I was trying to make a portal, like Biekleb did and it was so hard. I remember getting frustrated and angry that nothing was happening. And when I got really, really mad, I could see the air rippling and for a moment I

could see the Assembly Chamber and . . . I think I passed out. Could I—’

‘A portal? That’s not one of the known runes. Are you certain?’ Havel leaned closer.

‘Very sure, Master Havel. Could I have some water?’

‘Later, you foolish infant. Why in the name of all the Gods didn’t you tell us you had one of the unknown runes? You’ve no idea what you’re doing,’ scolded Fandalia.

‘How else should she learn with no one to teach her?’ Havel’s question was rhetorical.

‘We are not having that discussion again,’ retorted Fandalia.

‘Actually, we are. Things have gone too far not to give her the guidance she needs,’ said Bradon.

‘I forbid it.’

‘It pains me to admit it but, this time, Bradon’s right. Baragwanth’s doing more harm than good and if this carries on, someone’s going to end up dead. I don’t care if it’s her, but I don’t want it to be me,’ said Havel, scratching his nose. ‘A portal rune. Surely you can see how important this is? We could—’

‘Havel, you know what’s at stake here.’

‘I do and that’s—’

Whatever else Havel was going to say was lost as he was unceremoniously shoved into Bradon by Grung returning with an earthenware jug and a glass. ‘Lena need water.’ The troll poured a glass and held it out for Lena.

‘Thank you, Grung.’

‘Stop shoving and get your nose out of my ear,’ said Havel. It wasn’t clear who he was speaking to in the crowded space.

‘The Assembly will have to decide this,’ said Delphan, standing up.

‘Great. Another meeting and I’m not even on the wretched Assembly,’ muttered Bradon.

Fandalia eventually manoeuvred herself into enough space to straighten her dress and speak clearly. ‘You chose not to be but if you want to be heard you’ll be there at first light tomorrow, Bradon.’

Lena wasn’t exactly overjoyed at the Assembly’s collective decision. Collective, but far from unanimous. Most of the lay members had decided the education of an apprentice sorceress was a matter for those who could use sorcery and had abstained from voting. A dozen sorcerers had turned up to debate the issue and, although not all were entitled to vote, most of them had plenty to say on the subject of Lena’s education. Bethine and Baragwanth had voted against Bradon’s request that Lena be provided additional tuition. Haidi and Delphan had agreed with Havel that a portal rune could be immensely valuable to the Village and voted in favour. Likewise, Fandalia had nodded when Istvan had said that providing instruction was a lesser risk than leaving Lena to her own devices. Everyone had been as surprised that the half-vampire had stayed so long after dawn as much as he had taken enough interest in the matter to vote at all.

As grateful as she was, Lena also knew that her days of comparative freedom were over. Days spent on the things *she* thought were important were gone. Each instructor brought his or her own ideas about what Lena should be learning. Lena wasn’t sure whether Bethine had volunteered as one of her new supervisors so she could belittle Lena’s efforts or because she wanted the honour of being the one to teach Lena to use her portal rune. Delphan didn’t seem to care what she did so long as he didn’t have to go outside during the cold winter weather. For his part, Baragwanth had taken the moral high ground by refusing to resume his mentoring until her Library ban had been completed, although he continued to hover nearby whenever Lena was receiving instructions. The former was welcome, the latter not.

Like everyone else, Haidi had lectured Lena on the significance of her potential talent. ‘It could be very

important,' she said when she had finished explaining a paragraph on telepathy to Khannie over lunch in *The Speckled Dragon*. 'Now, this time, please think of somewhere close. The other side of the stream will do.'

Lena concentrated and a ripple appeared in the air, wavered and then vanished.

'That's a start,' said Haidi encouragingly. 'Try keeping it small. You're not trying to ride a carthorse through it.'

That made sense. Lena refocused, thinking of a hole the size of her purse. She could do this. She had to. She had a murderer to bring to justice. *If I can do this I can get back to Queenshelm without Bradon.*

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Thirty-one

HISTORY WAS EXCESSIVELY well represented in the Library and, like everything else, meticulously catalogued by Chakobu and his dust-free assistants. Unfortunately, Lena still had another two long winter weeks to endure before being allowed across the threshold of the Library and Bradon's own collection of texts was strangely deficient on the subject. Fortunately, she had three friends willing to risk additional time shovelling snow and other unpleasantries to help her. After spending the morning washing clothes, polishing boots and generally getting in Grung's way, she checked her purse, donned her latest heavy cloak and told the amiable troll she was going into the Village. Instead of turning into the comfortable familiarity of *The Speckled Dragon* on the north side of the main road, she pushed open the door of *Ye Olde Knotted Wand*.

The Village's second inn was unfamiliar territory for a reason. Tarraday provided the apprentices with a free lunch at *The Speckled Dragon*; 'free' meaning the Assembly paid for it. Here Lena would have to put coin on the table if they wanted to eat but it was a small price for not being in the same common room as Bethine and Delphan, both of whom had an inconvenient habit of lunching at *The Speckled Dragon*. Besides, it was Bradon's coin.

Hanging her cloak next to those of the other patrons, Lena looked around the unfamiliar common room, noting the similarities as much as the differences. If the ceiling was low enough for Bradon to bang his head against the beams, the windows were larger and the room a little wider but the odour of well-cooked meals and warmth was as reassuring here as it was across the road. There were modest stone fireplaces at each end and decent spaces between the tables lining two sides of the room. A few people looked up from their food as she

strode towards an empty booth in the far corner but most ignored the newcomer.

Lena pulled out *The Wanderers' Journal*. It had taken weeks but she had finally made it to the end of Biekleb's nearly illegible and obfuscatory exercise in self-deprecation. The Tamurian sorcerer's last entry had been a cringeworthy expression of admiration for the fine personage of her newly-ascended majesty's elder daughter. Bradon had told Lena the rest of the story: once Santhadena had used Biekleb's portal talent to secede from the Karolignian Empire, the self-crowned Empress of Tamur had done what despots did best and removed the possibility of her tool being turned against her. She'd butchered every sorcerer she could lay her hands on.

Between them the first three journalists had listed the talismans: the Fire Sceptre, the Aerolith Sword, the Ebony Staff and the Jadeite Wand.

Only some of them.

Kharon had written endlessly about the need to destroy them. But he hadn't described a single one of them.

Perhaps that was common knowledge back then?

Sighing, Lena turned the page. Whoever the fourth author had been, he or she had written in a hand that was an almost unbelievable contrast to Biekleb, each character inscribed with precision and each line perfectly straight as it progressed across the paper. Unfortunately, it was written in a language unknown to her. Likewise the fifth was scripted in an even less familiar cuneiform language. Lena skipped back several pages to the third author's entries which was in Common. She began to read.

It is small comfort to know that the road I must walk on is a long one and that I will not be the one to see its end. Like those before me I must travel far both in mind and body searching for what the Gods have hidden. I can ask why the terrible talismans of the accursed apostates were not destroyed but there is no answer to my prayers for the Mortal Goddess lies dead and her divine siblings have forsaken this world in their righteous anger. Even Bradon,

the eternal sinner himself, has no answers for me. All he can tell me is that the compulsion which drives him was the Gods' punishment for his transgressions. Though generations have passed since Kharon made his last entry, I will begin where the acolyte of the Gods left off and visit the Sacred Temple of the Creators in Setovia.

If the language was somewhat archaic in its formality, it was legible and Lena could read it with ease. Setovia was the city Santhadena had founded in Tamur which at least made a visit possible if somewhat risky. But one name caught and held her attention: Bradon.

Snippets of information stacked up towards understanding. Bradon was punished by the Gods. The Twelve were punished by the Gods. Bradon is centuries old. Neritza knew him. Bradon was enormously powerful. Bradon knows all about the *Journal*. Bradon was in the *Journal*. She had suspected, but now was certain.

Bradon is one of the Twelve.

A throat cleared and she became aware of a pot-bellied man with untidy grey hair standing next to her booth. 'Apologies, Goodman. I was somewhat distracted by my reading.'

'That I could tell, young Lena. If you want to eat here, you're more 'an welcome but you'll have to pay for it. This year it's Tarraday's turn to give youse apprentices lunch an' what have you.'

'I know. I just felt like a change, Master Haldren. It's still early, but a pot of tea would be nice and I'll be having lunch later.' She pulled out her purse and shook it gently, making the coins rattle.

'Tea it is,' Haldren said with the sincere smile of a man taking business from his competitor.

It wasn't a bad brew and Lena was considering ordering a fresh pot when her friends arrived.

Max plonked himself into the seat next to Lena making the whole booth wobble. Khannie and Shaeralli took the bench

opposite her. ‘Here’s the book you asked for,’ said Max digging a slender volume out from inside his breeches.

‘Actually we weren’t sure if it was the right one so we got you two,’ added Khannie, producing a second tome from underneath his cloak. ‘Chakobu recommended it for anyone interested in the talismans. He said everyone looks into those sooner or later.’

‘Thanks. I hope you don’t get into trouble over this.’ Lena tried hard to convince herself that Max had laundered his undergarments at least once since the late autumn harvest.

‘Mistress Haidi probably knows, she doesn’t miss much, but she’d likely bring you books herself if you asked her,’ said Shaeralli. ‘She was saying how odd it was that you’re the first person who’s got the same rune twice and now you’ve got one of the unknown ones as well. According to her, the Assembly’s spent more time discussing you than they’ve spent on trade with the dwarves.’

‘And *Runes and Ruination* needs updating. A whole section’s now obsolete. Master Chakobu’s going to be busy,’ added Khannie.

‘We can’t stay too long or we’ll miss lunch.’

‘You’re so predictable, Max,’ said Lena with a laugh, ‘but you can relax. We’re eating here today.’

‘But—’ Khannie objected.

‘I’ve got it.’ She placed her purse on the table next to the books and waved at Haldren. The innkeeper scurried over. ‘Lunch for four please, Goodman.’

‘Of course, Lena,’ he nodded.

‘Oh, and Master Tarraday says *The Speckled Dragon* offers the best food in the Village. If you prove him wrong, we might be back,’ she added.

Haldren was grinning like anybody’s business as he hurried away.

‘Does Master Bradon...’ Khannie asked.

‘If he complains, he can take it out of my wages,’ replied Lena without looking up.

‘You get paid!?’ Khannie and Shaeralli spoke simultaneously.

‘No.’ Lena picked up the books. *Gods, Rebellion and Consequences* was thinner than she expected. *Apostasy and Aftermath* was twice as thick. Enough to keep her occupied for a few days. She started reading the second one while her friends complained about their chores. For Lena the books were more compelling. There was a short epigraph, a prayer of sorts, from the Most Revered Obfuscus, by the Eternal Grace of the Devine Gods High Priest Emeritus in the Temple of the Eternal Flame at Appolon Muras, that the penance of his Humble History would inspire Others to return to the True Faith. It was also a precursor to an annoying affectation of capitalising far too many words unnecessarily.

Defying the power of our Divine Creators was a sin and sin, as all but the Most Depraved know, has consequences and the consequence of the Great Apostasy was a Fallen World populated by Fallen Peoples for all were Sinners; the cursed Twelve, the Faithful too fearful to stand against the Dark Lord and the Masses in their sheep-like ignorance and indifference.

She kept reading until Max interrupted her.

‘Are you really going to eat that?’

‘Yes, Max. I really am.’ Lena belatedly realised she was letting her lunch get cold. She spooned some venison stew into her mouth. Good, but with its delicate touch of herbs and less fatty meat Grung’s was better. Her enjoyment was short lived.

‘What are you doing here?’

‘Having lunch? You?’ Shaeralli retorted without looking up from her meal.

Lena risked eye contact and was surprised to see Payron sporting a thick white bandage around his head. ‘What happened to you? Did I do that? I didn’t, did I?’

Khannie and Shaeralli laughed and Payron turned and stalked away without a word.

‘What happened to him?’

‘Max happened,’ said Khannie.

‘We all tried to whack him after what he did to you, but—’ said Shaeralli, still grinning as she watched Payron take a seat on the far side of the inn.

‘He was just too fast,’ continued Khannie, grinning from ear to ear. ‘None of us had a chance, so Max here decided to dispense with subtlety and just swung hard—’

‘Really hard,’ said Shaeralli. ‘Broke both practice swords and left his lordship in dire need of Master Delphan’s services.’

‘It wasn’t that bad, just a flesh wound and a bit of a bump,’ said Max smugly. ‘Wish I’d hit him harder.’

‘There’s always next time,’ said Shaeralli, reaching across the table to pat Max on the hand.

‘Sadly not,’ said Khannie with a deep sigh. ‘Mistress Fandalia’s decided that teaching us to use a sword is not, how did she put it . . . not in the best interests of maintaining the Village’s relationships with the elves.’

‘But why?’ Lena demanded.

‘In case you forgot, he stuck a sword into you.’

‘He did no such thing. I slipped and stabbed myself when I fell down the bank. All Payron did was pull me out of the stream.’

Shaeralli made a silent *Ohhh*.

‘Well, damn. So I busted some lord’s head for no good reason?’ Max didn’t seem too put out by the whole thing.

‘I suppose we should be getting back before Mistress Haidi comes looking for us. Reading and writing practice this afternoon and you’re not there to help,’ Shaeralli said with a groan.

Lena opened up her purse and counted a handful of coins into Haldren's outstretched palm.

'That's too much.' The innkeeper slid one of the silver coins back across the table.

Lena raised one eyebrow, surprised that the innkeeper hadn't simply pocketed the extra money.

'I heard what you did to Stalya and the rest of them at the market. There's no need to bring the troll in here,' said Haldren.

'I wish I had your reputation,' said Shaeralli as they were leaving.

'You can have it,' muttered Lena by way of goodbye. She glanced back at Payron, sitting and eating lunch on his own, and told her friends to go ahead. Walking back to the solitary elf, she hesitated.

'I'm sorry,' she said after a long uncomfortable pause.

He didn't raise his bandaged head from his book.

'For getting you in trouble for one. And for. . . .' She gestured towards his head. 'I own up, Payron. You got banned and hurt because I couldn't control my temper.'

The elf put his spoon down, placing it neatly next to an unused knife.

'It wasn't your fault.'

'We'll have to agree to disagree over that,' she said, allowing her lips to turn upwards.

'I see you've managed to dodge the Library ban. You should hide those before you leave. If Mistress Bethine sees you with them, she'll have the four of you shovelling out the midden pit for a month.'

'Good point.' She managed to squeeze one of the borrowed, not stolen, books into her satchel. She'd hide the other under her cloak.

'Tell me about the Twelve,' began Lena after she'd finished washing up the dinner dishes and dried her water-wrinkled

hands. If Grung opened an inn, he'd put both Tarraday and the amiable Haldren out of business overnight but the number of pots and pans she had to scrub after each meal was similarly impressive. The cook was sitting at the dining table, drooling over a large book open in front of him. Lena didn't need to look to know he was searching for recipes using the preserved and wind-dried foods that made up a large part of everyone's winter diet.

'Eleven, and they were very real,' said Bradon. He stood and stretched his considerable height before picking another bottle of wine from the rack. 'Somebody decided that twelve sounded more auspicious than eleven and the label stuck.'

'And they started the Gods' War?'

'It was more complicated than that,' he countered.

'And this,' Lena tapped her index finger against the fire rune inside her left forearm, 'is the Gods' punishment for defying them?'

'In a sense the Binding was a punishment inflicted on all those possessed of talents. If you look at it a different way, it was something close to the salvation of the races of men.'

'I don't understand,' she admitted.

'I've told you how it all started and how it ended.'

'A bit different from what my tutors taught me.' Fading religious veneration had been a casual aside, a dismissive explanation for the crumbling temple complex still holding out against the rising tide of commercial demands for prime real estate in Queenshelm.

'Yes, it would be. But unless you understand what really happened, you won't know why it's so important to find those talismans.'

Lena waited.

'No one's quite sure where the idea of wands came from. Before the Gods imposed limitations on us, sorcerers didn't need anything like that, but after, somebody came up with the idea of amplifying a sorcerer's abilities with objects infused

with power. It became something of a race to see who could make themselves the most powerful. I told you about Didyme's Bracelet. Are you sure you didn't see it at Taspin?'

Lena shook her head. Bradon was getting repetitive. She wasn't lying but she wasn't ready to reveal what Neritza had told her either.

'And the Gods took the knowledge to make more away from us,' Lena concluded. 'But there are plenty of lesser wands. So why the obsession with the talismans? A wand's a wand, isn't it? So what if some are a bit more powerful than others?'

Bradon smiled ruefully. 'If it were that simple, it wouldn't really matter whether the talismans still existed or who had them. No, as I told you, the rest of the wands that survive today are weak pitiful things in comparison. Even with the best of the lesser wands, no sorcerer has a fraction of the power the Twelve possessed before they were dethroned.'

Lena added a piece of firewood to the fire. One would do, she decided. She'd be going to bed soon enough.

'All right,' she said at last. 'At the risk of sounding stupid, I'll ask the obvious—'

'Why haven't the talismans been unearthed already?' he completed the question.

'It's been nearly a thousand years,' she agreed, wondering if that was somehow significant.

'Because the Gods hid whichever of the damn things weren't destroyed or sucked into Hell and have been taunting us with the possibility of finding them ever since.' He drained his glass and refilled it, not hiding the bitterness in his voice.

Lena wanted to ask why she had been chosen to search for the talismans but another more troubling question pushed the personal aside.

What happens if I find them?

What happens if someone else finds them?

Thirty-two

UNLIKE THE LOCAL plant life, Max continued to sprout in all directions during the winter. When his sixteenth naming day rolled around, he was taller than Khannie and a broad-shouldered match for Marcus, one of the few men in the Village still willing to wrestle with him. The younger apprentices celebrated the occasion by pelting him with snowballs.

‘I wish I didn’t make such an easy target,’ he complained when another missile from Khannie found his nose. He concentrated for a moment and the snow-laden branch of a fir tree flexed, dumping its load on Shaeralli.

‘Not fair,’ the elf complained after they dug her out.

‘And you didn’t use fluxation to lift a pastry from Tarraday’s kitchen last week?’ Lena pointed out.

‘That was different,’ the elf replied, shaking the snow from her auburn hair.

‘It always is,’ said Lena. She was laughing, enjoying the release.

‘You stole a pastry and you didn’t share? Now I’m hungry,’ said Max.

Khannie threw another handful of snow at him.

‘Fancy a biscuit?’ Lena rummaged through her satchel which she’d left on top of the stone wall. ‘Happy naming day, Max.’ She handed him a package made of plantain leaves bound with coarse brown string.

Max eagerly snapped the string with his fingers and peeled back the leaves revealing a dozen hand-sized oatmeal and honey biscuits. ‘You didn’t bake these yourself did you?’

Lena sighed. ‘Yes, but Grung supervised.’

Max sniffed the exposed food cautiously.

‘Really closely. He didn’t leave me unattended at all. He wouldn’t. Not in his kitchen,’ she assured him. Once had been quite enough for both of them.

‘The troll really knows a thing about food, doesn’t he?’ Max was already on his second biscuit.

‘I’m lucky to be living with him,’ said Lena.

Another biscuit disappeared before Max remembered his manners and passed the food around.

‘These are good,’ said Khannie, around a mouthful of Lena’s offering. ‘I wish I knew when my naming day was.’

‘You don’t know?’ Lena asked.

Khannie shook his head. ‘My mother . . . I think it’s some time in spring, but even that’s a guess. Anyway, we should go to class before Mistress Haidi comes looking for us. See you at lunch time, Lena.’

‘I’d offer to get you another book, but Chakobu’s watching us like . . . well, like we’re a bunch of thieves,’ said Max.

‘Which we are,’ said Shaeralli with a big grin. ‘We’re just not very good at it. Need to practise more.’

‘I hope you didn’t get into trouble,’ Lena said.

‘Not this time, but that’s only because he doesn’t know which of us has been pinching his books,’ Khannie replied, flicking the accumulated dusting of snow off his cloak, ‘and apart from Mistress Bethine nobody thinks it serious enough to ask the Seers or Master Havel to investigate.’

Lena picked up her cloak and satchel and was about to say something about letting things quieten down when she noticed that her bag felt light. Dropping the cloak and pulling the satchel open, she stared in dismay. ‘It’s gone!’

‘What’s gone?’ Shaeralli asked.

‘The *Journal*. It was here. I put it in before I left home. I know I did.’ She tipped the satchel upside down. A clatter of pencils, a few sheets of loose paper, her purse and a paring

knife used to keep her pencils sharp tumbled onto her cloak. 'My diary too.'

'Someone's taken them,' said Max. He looked up from eating the leaves the biscuits had been wrapped in.

'Surely we would have seen—'

Khannie cut Shaeralli off. 'There are tracks here. Looks like a weasel.'

'It's too big for that,' said Max. 'Much too big and it's walking – no, running on two legs.'

The tracks came to the stone wall where the apprentices had left their bags and cloaks and then away towards an iced-over stream where they ended.

'This can't be happening,' mumbled Lena, her complexion as pale as the snow. 'I have to tell Bradon.' She set off at a dead run, not even pausing to gather her cloak.

When Lena found Bradon in the Assembly Chamber he reacted with a mixture of fury and fear, dragging Fandalia and the rest to the scene of the crime. He punctuated Lena's explanation with obscenities and accusations of carelessness.

'I told you over and over again not to let the *Journal* out of your sight, you useless twit. The one thing I ask you to do that matters and you just have to go and mess it up.' The ashen pallor to the warlock's face damned her more than his words.

'Definitely a shape shifter,' said Bethine after studying the implausibly large weasel tracks, 'but I thought I was the only one in the Village.'

'This is a nasty way to find out there's another,' said Delphan, 'though I suppose it's possible it's not someone from the Village?'

Fandalia shook her head. 'Whoever the thief was, he only stole the books. That was targeted.'

'Bradon? Why would anyone want to steal Lena's books?' Havel asked.

‘It’s *The Wanderers’ Journal*, the most important book in the world,’ the warlock said, his voice solemn.

‘You’re going to have to explain that one,’ said Bethine.

‘It’s old. The first entries were made by a religious fanatic and the second by a miserable idiot of a sorcerer during the break-up of the Karolignian Empire. Since then, others have made entries. Sathene was the last of them until Lena. And the thing is, for most people it’s just blank pages. Even I can’t read it.’

‘It would take an enormously powerful enchantment to last all those centuries,’ said Havel, wrinkles creasing his smooth forehead. ‘None of us could do it, but it doesn’t tell us why it’s so important. What’s in it?’

Bradon cleared his throat, the hard angles of his face sagging, aging him. It was the look of a defeated man. ‘It’s a record of what each of them has learned about the talismans of the Twelve—’

‘Hunting unicorns under a blood moon—’ said Delphan, twisting his fingers around the end of his waist-long beard.

‘Waste of time—’ agreed Bethine.

‘Quite the opposite,’ said Bradon, his voice hardening again, ‘but the middle of a field isn’t the place for this discussion.’

Lena looked around, realising that half the Village had gathered by the roadside, trying to edge close enough to learn what all the excitement was about. Lena endured Bradon’s second tongue lashing, knowing she deserved worse than being called an irresponsible cretin, before Fandalia interrupted with instructions for the apprentices to go home and stay there. ‘Not you Lena. I’m not having you walking so far as Bradon’s on your own after this. Baragwanth’s cottage is nearer. Go and wait there for Bradon.’

Max handed Lena her cloak and satchel before following Shaeralli back towards the centre of the Village. Khannie accompanied Lena in silence as far as *The Speckled Dragon*, nodding in farewell when he turned off. Lena continued alone

down the road. She passed Freth's sprawling combination of stone cottage, storage facilities and the stone shed where he pressed his apples to make apple cider. Bethine's immaculate house with its low picket fence was right next door. Lengthening shadows being cast against the whiteness of the snow reminded her that was close to sunset. In all the uproar, she'd barely noticed most of the day passing or even that she'd missed lunch. When she reached Baragwanth's tired cottage nestled close to the southern forest the door opened even before she could raise her hand to knock.

'Lena? What's all the upset? Has something happened?'

'Yes, Master Baragwanth. The old journal and my diary were stolen. Mistress Fandalia told me to come here and wait for Bradon to take me home.'

'Are you sure? Why would anyone want those? Never mind. Come in. It's too cold to be waiting around outside.' He stood back, holding the door open.

Lena had never been inside the old man's home. Books and scrolls were piled on every available shelf and table top. Maps covered the walls and even the closed doors leading to other rooms, some clearly pinned on top of others.

'This is very kind. . . .' Her voice trailed off. In the centre of the only clear space on the table were *The Wanderers' Journal* and her diary.

The door creaked shut behind her. Something banged into her back, knocking her face against a wall. She caught a glimpse of Baragwanth pointing his knotted wand and her arms were jerked downwards, pinned against her sides. With his free hand he snatched up the stolen books.

'What are you—' Something she couldn't see slammed Lena's mouth shut and she was dragged through a door that opened of its own accord, across a snow-covered garden and into the forest. Her head smacked against a low branch but whatever was forcing her mouth closed muffled her cry. Baragwanth kept flicking his wand, tossing his prisoner ahead of him as he strode deeper into the trees. The walking stick he used in the Village was nowhere to be seen.

‘This is far enough. No one can see us here.’ He shoved Lena up against a tree trunk. ‘I can’t read *The Wanderers’ Journal* but I can read your diary. Bradon’s set you looking for the talismans, hasn’t he? Reckless fool.’

Lena tasted blood in her mouth and stared into the lined face of the man who had betrayed her. There was nothing doddering about him now. The forces holding her mouth shut relaxed allowing her to speak. ‘Why are you doing this?’

‘I stopped Sathene and I’ll stop you,’ he said, his voice as hard as his face.

Lena connected the dots. ‘You sent her to Taspin? You wanted Neritza to kill her? Why?’ Something warm was trickling down her temple.

‘Pawns never understand the game. They just get sacrificed,’ he said, smashing her into the tree again. ‘I don’t know where Bradon dug you up from, but you end here.’

‘You’re going to kill me?’ It hurt to breathe and she wondered if he’d cracked some ribs.

‘Of course I’m going to kill you, but before you die you’re going to tell me—’

Through her fear Lena realised she had only a single weapon. The runes within her forearms contracted and burned, flames reaching out straight towards the ground and setting fire to the sleeves of her blouse along the way. Whatever Baragwanth was doing kept her arms pressed against her sides and pointing down. The snow melted and her dress caught fire but the flames never reached her abductor.

‘The girl will tell you nothing, old man.’

Baragwanth whirled to face the slight female figure stepping out of the shadows. The invisible bindings holding Lena against the tree relaxed. The sorcerer raised his wand but the woman was quicker and Baragwanth flew backwards, landing on his back several feet away, still clutching his wand in one hand. The books fell from his grasp, tumbling onto the carpet of pine needles and snow. ‘Who are you?’ he demanded.

‘One whose talents far exceed those of a pitiful old man cowering in the shadows.’ The woman moved forward and Lena gasped. In the fading light, her clothes consisted of a patched dress and tattered blouse but it was the woman’s exposed flesh that made Lena swallow convulsively. Patches of normality interspersed with bruised and cracked blotches and spots of translucent skin beneath which blood could be seen pulsing. Blackened teeth were visible through the woman’s semi-transparent cheek. If a corpse could walk it would look like this.

‘What are you?’ Lena echoed Baragwanth’s demand.

The stranger lifted her wand, revealing her missing fingernails. The mottled black and red wand was two feet long, larger than any Lena had seen barring only Bradon’s staff.

‘One who has waited a long time, far too long, yet returned I have and I will not let the seeker be interfered with.’ She hefted her wand in a manner that suggested it was almost too heavy for her.

Baragwanth bent, snatching the *Journal* from the snow and then vanished.

The woman blinked and then laughed, a broken rattling sound. A tooth fell from her cracked lips.

‘Who—’

‘Maybe you should ask Bradon as he still calls himself. And you should hurry – patience is not in me.’ The woman came closer and Lena retched as the stench of rotting meat washed over her, reminding her of Neritza’s charnel pit. The corpse woman cocked her head to one side. ‘Your friends are nearly here. Don’t forget your book, seeker.’ She pointed towards a patch of dark colour, indistinct against the forest floor before turning and walking away into the darkening forest.

As Lena slapped at the smouldering edges of her dress, she could hear people shouting.

‘I don’t know,’ said Lena for the third time. ‘She didn’t tell me her name.’

‘What did she look like?’ asked Fandalia.

‘A walking corpse.’ Lena kept her eyes firmly on Bradon as she described her strange rescuer. ‘Smelt like it too.’

‘And her wand?’

Lena put down her cup of tea and held her hands a bit more than shoulder width apart, wincing as the hurt lanced through her back. Delphan had pronounced her ribs bruised but not broken and stemmed the bleeding from her scalp. She’d declined a tonic that would ease her pain and help her sleep. She needed all her wits about her now and the throbbing ache from the gash on her head wasn’t helping. ‘As thick as a thrusting spear and coloured black and red.’

Bradon looked like he was about to throw up and Lena took that as an admission of sorts but with five members of the Assembly gathered around the table in Bradon’s tower she decided that this wasn’t the time to call him on it.

‘Baragwanth disappeared,’ said Istvan. ‘Wherever he went I couldn’t find any trace of him.’ As usual, the half-vampire, half-human sorcerer was standing slightly apart from the rest. ‘I followed the woman’s stink for a couple of leagues towards the south before it just disappeared. Lena’s right though. Whatever she was, she reeked of death and corruption. I’m not even sure she’s human.’

‘And the *Journal*?’ Bradon asked.

‘I wasn’t looking for books, Bradon. I was tracking a killer,’ Istvan replied in his too-deep voice. He tossed a brace of heavy gold rings on the table. ‘I found a pair of dead dwarves and hoof prints half a league to the south. Dried out like fish in the summer. But their camp-fire was still burning.’

There was no need to spell it out. The corpse-woman had killed the dwarves and stolen their horses.

‘King Perrack will blame us,’ said Bethine.

‘I know that,’ snapped Fandalia, her mouth puckering as though tasting something unpleasant. ‘The dwarves blame us for everything they can’t pin on the elves.’

‘The dwarves’ insecurities aren’t the issue. We have to recover the *Journal*,’ Bradon banged his fist on the table, causing the rings to jump. ‘You have no idea how important it is. How could you have been so careless?’

Lena didn’t flinch under Bradon’s outburst. She was too angry for that.

The warlock’s irritation was interrupted by Grung placing a huge pot of stew on the table. It was well past midnight but the troll wasn’t missing an opportunity to cook. Lena pulled her diary out of the way when Grung returned with an assortment of bowls and a plate of raw and bloody meat for Istvan. ‘Have food,’ he said.

Some taking the few chairs and stools available, the rest standing, they helped themselves and talked about Baragwanth’s betrayal, the strange woman and what they were going to tell the villagers in the rapidly approaching morning. Through it all, Bradon and Lena remained largely silent, the former staring at the fire and the latter at her master as she blindly spooned lunch into her mouth. Only when the pot was empty did another thought occur to Lena.

‘I have a question,’ she said. ‘Why didn’t the Seers see this?’

‘Because they don’t look at people within the Village,’ snapped Bethine.

‘So they say,’ muttered Istvan.

‘And they can’t see sorcerers. Besides which, none of us like being spied on,’ explained Haidi, ‘and they respect that.’

That made sense up to a point – Lena knew the Seers did keep an eye on events in the Village but were highly selective about sharing their visions. ‘Baragwanth specifically stole *The Wanderers’ Journal*. I’m guessing from all the maps in his house he’s been looking for the talismans for a long time. Maybe he left some useful information behind.’

‘Maybe,’ said Bradon.

‘It’s worth checking,’ agreed Fandalia getting to her feet. ‘This is the second time someone’s tried to kill you, Lena. From now on, you get an escort during the day as well as at night. I’ll see you and Bradon tomorrow after which I need to make a trip to Kersch to give King Perrack the news,’ she added in tones suggesting that the Apex wasn’t looking forward to the conversation. She took the signet rings with her as she left.

‘Shall we quit pretending?’ said Lena when the last of their guests had departed and she’d washed away the soot and blood from her injuries and changed into a clean dress. The old one was barely fit for rags. She’d be giving Elish more business tomorrow but for now she wanted answers. Between Baragwanth’s actions and the corpse woman’s puzzling remarks a number of things had fallen into place. She was tired and she was tired of dancing to Bradon’s machinations even more so since she wondered whether Bradon was, himself, no more than a purblind pawn in a much larger game.

If Bradon’s a pawn, what does that make me?

Bradon poured a glass of wine and sat down at the table, leaving the bottle between them. He gestured towards a chair but Lena remained standing.

Bradon sipped his wine. ‘These sorts of conversations are always easier if people are sitting down. It’s harder to be angry, though I’ve never figured out why.’

Lena hesitated and then took a chair and poured a second glass of wine.

‘You’re rather young to be drinking regularly.’

‘It was part of my training. I told you,’ she said. ‘Use a sword, kick a man in the crotch, lie like a Sharakan merchant, dance like a Tamurian harlot and hold my drink and my bladder like a sailor on shore leave. The skills of a princess,’ she repeated the mantra.

‘I forgot,’ he said mildly.

‘You forget a lot of things. Why did you bring me here?’

‘I’ve told you.’

‘Because you knew I was a sorceress. Yes, you did say that.’

‘And to save your life. Members of your family have an unfortunate habit of dying before their time.’

‘And you have told me that too. Now, you can tell me what you haven’t said.’

Bradon sighed and propped his feet up on an empty chair. The hem on his trousers was frayed and she’d already turned it once. There wasn’t enough material to repeat the process. She mentally added new trousers for Bradon to the list of clothing to order from Elish and then castigated herself for daydreaming.

‘Why did you bring me here, Bradon?’

‘You already know the answer, so why ask?’

‘To hear you say it.’ She placed her untouched wine back on the table and looked Bradon directly in the eyes.

‘To carry on where Sathene left off. To find whichever of the eleven talismans still remain in this plane. The Tanzanite Wand’s the most important, but—’

‘Why me? Why now? Why can’t you find them yourself? You’ve had long enough to search for them.’

‘Those are good questions,’ he admitted after a long pause. He was already on his second glass. ‘So you know? Did the Seers tell you?’

‘Viarno mentioned your name. The third journalist. So did the corpse woman.’ Lena waited.

Bradon made no attempt to deny that he was the same Bradon who had rebelled against the Gods many centuries ago. ‘You are almost unique and not just because you’re the only person who can read the *Journal*. You know that Seers can see people, what they are doing now and what they may do in the future. The recent past too.’

Lena nodded. Neritza had, not the same but similar abilities.

‘There are some things they can’t see; demons for one, but you know that, and some other things which have magical properties.’

‘Like sorcerers and wands.’

‘Including the eleven talismans.’ It wasn’t a question. Kharon had written that in the *Journal*.

‘Yes. Something else, remember.’

‘Me? Are you saying I’m shadow tainted?’ She hadn’t considered the possibility.

Bradon burst out laughing, spraying a mouthful of red wine over the table top. ‘You’ve got the temper, but, no, I am not saying that.’

‘I never knew my father. He disappeared after the twins were born.’

‘Aberon heard the eunuchs had given the order for his removal and slipped away as quick as he could. A smart decision.’ Bradon wiped the table top with his sleeve.

‘You knew my father?’ Lena was astounded. She couldn’t recollect anyone speaking his name before.

‘We met a few times down in Marichek. Last I heard he’s still alive if you want to meet him.’

‘I do and I will but that’s a different discussion.’ Not willing to let Bradon divert her, she suppressed the desire to ask more about the father she had no memories of.

‘So focused. You will be a formidable queen someday.’

‘Why me, Bradon?’

‘I’ve been looking for these particular artefacts for a very long time. I know where three of them are and I’m pretty sure Revenam and Avaline had the Brimstone Wands with them when they were sucked into Hell at the end of the Gods’ War and the arch-demon whose name I will not say aloud probably

took the Fire Sceptre with him when he butchered Iphigenia.’ Bradon trailed off, perhaps anticipating what was to come.

‘You know who she was? The corpse woman?’

He got up and pulled a tattered leather folio from his shelves. After flicking through the loose sheaves of paper he laid one on the table in front of Lena. ‘Your description matches one of the Brimstone Wands. If that’s right, then your rescuer was Avaline.’

Lena moved the nearest candle closer and nodded.

‘You said she was in Hell.’ She put her wineglass down. Wine would do nothing for her headache.

‘I hope I’m wrong, but if she’s returned that’s bad news. Very bad,’ he said, his voice dropping.

There wasn’t anything Lena could say to that; at least some of the Twelve were still alive and one of the evil ones had escaped from Hell. ‘That’s six,’ she said eventually.

‘I think one or two may have been destroyed, though I don’t know for sure. The rest are hidden from me. I know where some of them should be but I can’t find them.’

‘And you’re hoping I can.’

‘Yes. Sathene was a sorceress which means the Seers couldn’t see her, they could only infer her presence from the actions of others. Regardless, I need you to finish what she started.’

‘Started and perished for,’ said Lena bluntly. ‘It may have been Baragwanth who sent her to Taspin, but Sathene still died chasing the ghosts of your ambition. Even after being in the charnel pit, I can’t even begin to imagine how horrible her death was.’

‘She knew the risks. She also understood why it was so important.’

The next obvious question slipped from her mouth. ‘Why can’t you look for them yourself? Why do you need people like Viarno?’ *And me. Why do you need me?*

Bradon drained half his glass. ‘A sore subject. At the end of the Gods’ War, Liden and the rest of them could have just killed us. They’d won. We’d lost. There’ve been times when I wish they’d . . . anyway, they cursed those of us who were still alive. My penance, if you will, is a compulsion to search for the missing talismans. All of them, but especially the Tanzanite Wand and the Argentine Ring.’

‘That doesn’t explain—’

Holding up one hand to silence her, Bradon continued. ‘And then they punched holes in my memories. There are too many things I can’t remember because of what the Gods did to me.’

Lena picked up her glass and took a sip. It wasn’t very good, too much sediment and the wine rack was looking as naked as a tree at the end of autumn. She’d have to restock tomorrow but on the rare occasions when sober enough to conduct business, Vivienne was the laziest merchant in the Village. Too much of the red-faced vintner’s stock never made it to the customers. Delivery would be promised for the next day and might turn up a week later if Lena gave a few reminders. She’d take Grung with her and he could bring back the new head for the well pump at the same time.

I’m letting myself be distracted.

She looked at the staff standing in the corner.

‘Yes, that’s the Ebony Staff,’ Bradon admitted. ‘Only Fandalia and, I suspect, the Seers know. Keep it that way.’

Lena nodded. ‘And the other two? The ones you know about?’

He hesitated.

‘If I am going to spend my time looking for things, I’m not going to waste it,’ she said bluntly.

‘The Jadeite Wand’s in Marichek,’ he said after a pause. ‘It’s safe enough there. Well guarded.’

‘How come you haven’t retrieved it yourself?’

‘It’s not part of the compulsion the Gods cursed me with.’

‘And the other?’

‘The Aerolith Sword moves around a lot. I don’t know where it is right now, but I can track it down if I need to.’

‘You are being evasive, Master Bradon,’ she accused, sarcasm dripping off her tongue.

‘It seems that way, doesn’t it? The point being, you don’t need to look for the Jadeite Wand or the Aerolith Sword.’

Six accounted for. Five remaining. And Didyme’s Bracelet. Lena thought about the implications. One of the Twelve had escaped Hell. Did that mean the Great Seal was weakening? She watched Grung pull a brick out of the fire, wrap it in a piece of blanket and head up the stairs.

‘I’ll miss Grung’s cooking,’ she said. Lena pushed her wineglass across the table for her master to finish.

Bradon lifted his eyes from the table.

‘Avaline called me “seeker”. She’s right – I can’t find the wretched things sitting here. Sooner or later, I’m going to be doing a lot of travelling, beginning with a trip back to Queenshelm.’

‘We can talk about that,’ said Bradon.

‘We just did.’ The thought of weeks on a diet of pack rations, salted pork and mouldy tack was not a pleasant one.

‘Formidable,’ Bradon murmured.

It was Lena’s turn to be surprised. Compliments from Bradon were a rarity.

‘I keep thinking that you’ll make a formidable queen.’

‘Which isn’t going to happen,’ she said.

‘The Seers have been checking. Your mother’s refusing the eunuchs’ demands to disinherit you but she’ll have to accede eventually.’

‘I know. Declare that I’ve renounced my titles or something, but that wasn’t what I was thinking of. I’m your

bound servant. I can't serve Thessalonian and you, so I won't be taking that job.'

'And wise.'

'When we made our agreement, I was saying goodbye to everything that I had grown to expect out of life. My expectations now could not be more different. I hope my mother will occupy the Whitehead Throne for many years to come, but when the time comes, Serephanie will succeed her.' She'd have to find a way to send the signet ring to her sister.

'And if I released you?'

'I am not asking you to. I made an agreement and I will keep it, up to a point,' she said. Pride was a pain in the butt and at times she wished she had less of it. 'Practically speaking, sorcerers live for centuries. I think someone might notice if I didn't die of old age within a normal lifespan.'

'There's that, but as a powerful sorceress you could be the first genuine ruler Thessalonian has had since it was founded.'

'So that's the bait you dangle in front of me. Find the talismans and I'll make you queen, is it?' Everyone had their price but Lena flatly refused to compromise the autonomy of the Thessalonian monarchy.

'That's not what I meant.'

She scowled. 'The answer is no to the throne, Bradon. I'll never be anyone's sock-puppet.'

'You would make a very good ruler, but that's your decision,' he said with a rare grin. 'You'd scare the living crap out of the Tamurian Empress Katayana. And the other?'

'I'll think about it.'

His eyebrows went up in astonishment.

'Yes, I am your bound servant and will obey you in most things, but I'm going to think about it. If these things still exist, it was the Gods themselves who hid them and I'm sure that going against the Gods is a bad thing. Then there's the question of what you are going to do with them if I do manage to find any. If even half of this is to be believed, whoever

possesses them will have tremendous power. I don't want to be responsible for unleashing something bad.'

'You could keep them yourself,' he suggested.

'With my temper? That's a truly awful idea. I'd probably incinerate half of Vallion the next time Payron annoys me. Now, if you will excuse me, her royal highness needs to get whatever sleep she can.'

If the Gods left the Tanzanite Wand and the rest of the talismans lying around instead of destroying them, it could only be because there would come a time when they would need to be found and that meant that someone would have to find them and use them. It wasn't a difficult exercise in logic. It was almost too easy.

'Don't let it be me,' she whispered as she curled up beneath her blankets.

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Thirty-three

APPARENTLY BEING KIDNAPPED, threatened with death and rescued by a walking corpse that might or might not be a mythical sorceress recently escaped from Hell did not justify an early reprieve from her Library sanction and Chakobu's newfound vigilance made it impractical for Shaeralli and her enthusiastic henchmen to smuggle books out for Lena. Fortunately, Lena had other plans for the remaining days of her ban. Bradon had thought it an excellent idea and had walked her up the road to Baragwanth's abandoned cottage.

Lena began by enlarging the clear space on the table. Sitting, she opened her diary, turned to a new page and began to write. On top of the first page she wrote down everything she could remember from the missing *Wanderers' Journal* as it came to her without trying to impose order.

'I thought you were going to search Baragwanth's cottage?' Bradon was standing by the south wall, inspecting a map.

'I am, but want to write down everything I can remember before I forget, especially anything about Philotta and the Argentine Ring.'

Bradon nodded. 'Philotta was short, not much taller than Sharell, but so are most dwarves. Red hair and too much energy. Spent all her time running around the world trying to fix things that didn't need fixing for people who didn't appreciate her efforts.'

Lena made some notes, going slowly. Recording facts and hiding suspicions. Most of the morning passed that way. Lena recording what she remembered and the things Bradon talked about. Though her writing was tidy, the text was a disorganised jumble of half-formed ideas, some possibly misremembered facts.

‘The Jadeite Wand,’ she prompted when he didn’t reply.

‘No need to worry about that,’ he said. ‘I told you I know where it is. Marichek’

‘That and the Aerolith Sword,’ she agreed putting down her pencil. ‘And the Ebony Staff. Which you made yourself?’

Bradon nodded.

‘There’s something else you’re not telling me.’

‘It’s going to take you weeks to go through all this,’ Bradon replied running a long finger across a stack of books. ‘Take your time and be thorough. Once you’ve finished, most of it should go to Chakobu, minus the dust.’

Lena understood. Anything important to her quest for the talismans was to be quietly slipped into her satchel and taken back to Bradon’s tower which meant no one could be allowed to help her. She looked at the daunting piles of books, racks of scrolls and layers of maps and charts. This was just one room and the rest of the house was as cluttered as the parlour. With a sigh she reached for the nearest book.

The spring thaw put an end to ice-running and snowball fights and the swelling of the Sky River and reminded everyone that the drainage ditches and irrigation channels needed clearing. Bethine made sure that Lena was amongst the first to stand knee deep in the icy mud shovelling out the mass of rotting twigs, leaves and other detritus accumulated during the long winter. She didn’t mind the labour any more than the ache in her back or the callouses on her palms from swinging the shovels and hoes and turned down Max’s offer to do her share as well as his own. The work gave her time to reflect on the knowledge that was slowly transferring itself from her master’s patchwork memory and the eclectic and vast collection of materials in Baragwanth’s house to her diary. Baragwanth had been a hoarder of anything and everything about the talismans, testament to a centuries-long obsession that rivalled Bradon’s. As she transferred piles of maps and scrolls to Chakobu’s eager hands and smuggled smaller quantities into Bradon’s tower Lena could only speculate on how many years the old man had spent chasing the ancient

symbols of power. A century? Longer? There was no evidence that he had found any of them but as she pored over crinkled maps, she realised he'd done enough to point her in a direction which might or might not be the right one.

Spring brought other changes as well. Trade with the dwarves resumed at a pace defined by the depth of the mud on the winding road to Kersch. Iron and other metals were delivered to the smithy where Nathen and Marcus turned them into horseshoes, scythes and other tools needed for the first planting of the new season. The dwarves departed with their wagons full of foodstuffs and wine. Elish and her geriatric husband were expecting a new baby in the summer and Haidi wasn't and Lena didn't know which surprised her more.

Payron's parents returned, yelled at their son, argued with Fandalia, glared at Lena, complained about the food and generally annoyed anyone they came into contact with. Surprisingly, Payson and Velawyn avoided the only other elves in the village altogether. Apparently Sharell and her daughter weren't sufficiently important to merit attention from the elven royal family.

Communal labour and studying the arcane weren't her only concerns. Fandalia had made it abundantly clear that whatever else Lena did, practising sorcery was her most important task. She might not be apprenticed to anyone, but there was no longer a shortage of people willing to provide instruction. Edythe taught her more about controlling fire, shaping and concentrating the flames before flinging them away from herself. In time she was able to throw a ball of fire thirty paces where it would explode with enough force to shatter a tree. Four days spent rounding up stray livestock and rebuilding a barn door was a small price to pay for the knowledge. It could be used in subtler ways and she practised those as well in the hope that one day she would be able to use her fire runes without burning her sleeves in the process.

Under Bethine's austere tutelage all attempts to use her fluxation rune ended in failure. Finding her limit, the point at which she would drain herself was a lesson she kept failing. Too many times for either her own liking or Bradon's she

would find herself feeling light-headed and nauseous, vomiting or just passing out from her efforts. More than once she woke up in her own bed or on an uncomfortable bench in *The Speckled Dragon* with no recollection of how she'd got there or why the patrons were grinning at her. Bethine had taken a different approach to these episodes, summoning shockingly chill water from the Sky River and dumping it on the comatose student. The young sorceress could do more and do it better but, most importantly of all, Lena learned that she lacked the dispassionate temperament of those who taught her. Necromancy alone she was prohibited from practising in the Village, though Havel had promised all the apprentices another field trip while they waited for crops to grow after the second planting.

As the skies cleared and the days lengthened, her collection of secrets sprouted faster than the weeds she cleared labouring alongside Grung in Bradon's muddy fields. The Seers' predictions and Neritza's parting words made Lena's return to Queenshelm a necessity; there was more at home than an irate mother to placate and her sister's murderer to bring to justice. Then there was the not-so-small matter of Bradon possessing one of the talismans. And, if Baragwanth's attempt to murder Lena was common knowledge, Avaline's escape from Hell was information guarded by the few who knew more closely than Bethine's last cask of apple cider.

Still, Lena wondered. Everyone said that the Seers didn't attempt to see events within the Village and Havel had promised Fandalia that he couldn't read anyone's mind but Lena had grown up in a world of unrelenting intrigue. Trust and innocence had been the first casualties of her education. What people said they could and would do and what they actually did were three entirely different things and she had recently added another secret to her catalogue.

Apart from the intimidating assemblage of knowledge, Baragwanth's cottage held all the usual possessions accumulated by a man who had lived in the same place for many decades. Everything from clothes to cooking utensils to unopened bottles of wine, pickled lizards, foul smelling potions and a long needle-like dagger were found as Lena

opened cupboards and lifted threadbare carpets in the search for something that would help her find the talismans. Hampered by the sheer volume of detritus she persevered for no better reason than necessity. It was not until the spring rains were showing signs of easing that she finally got around to Baragwanth's bedroom. As she impatiently rummaged through a modest collection of heavily darned socks her hand tingled. It was a sensation she'd experienced just thrice before. Moving more slowly, she reached deeper into the drawer, knowing what she would find.

It had been a strange day. The Library had been quiet when she'd arrived after lunch to deliver some of the materials from Baragwanth's cottage. Shaeralli had squeaked good afternoon and buried herself in a scroll. Lena was about to ask what was going on when Delphan arrived and escorted Lena outside to practise. He took a seat under a blossoming peach tree and, if he opened a book, he seldom took his eyes off Lena for very long. Payron had been in the orchard too, over by the stream practising with his wand. The elf could now fly from one side of the stream to the other with little effort. It had been weeks since he'd ended up in the water. He'd looked at her, stared really, and then turned his back.

What am I supposed to have done now?

The temptation to go and pummel his lordly nose was strong, but channelling her anger into making a functional portal was, she decided, less likely to end in embarrassment. The last time they'd tussled she'd ended up in the river with a gash in her side. He was physically stronger and faster than she would ever be and she felt no need to humiliate herself further by giving him an opportunity to prove it.

Lena wanted to believe that she was starting to achieve greater separation between the near and the far side of her tiny portal window. The gap between the two openings was close to fifty paces, further than she could throw one of the spoiled apples from the bottom of the winter storage barrels being fed to the pigs. But it was still less than the width of the Sky River and even the slightest lapse of concentration would cause the portal to collapse, leaving herself on the ground gasping for

breath and hoping she wasn't going to get another lecture about destroying valuable fruit trees. Worse, when she lost control, the two doors of the portal would rush towards each other, jerking all over the place, before colliding and disappearing. Anything caught between them was sliced cleaner than a joint on Grung's carving board. The other limitation was the need to physically see both sides of the portal. Her disruption of the Assembly meeting had been a one-time event – she had never come close to replicating that achievement.

She'd tried to open one side of the portal in front of herself and the other side around the corner of a stone wall. Not only had she failed, but she'd had to loot Bradon's treasury to pay for materials and extract six valuable days from her schedule to reconstruct a stone wall to a height of precisely four feet and the exacting specifications of a humour-deficient horticulturalist. Lena was getting good at rebuilding things.

'Losing the odd tree to you sorcerers I can live with. You lot pay for that, but what'd you have to go an' destroy my wall for? I need 'at to keep them goats out.' Even after Freth had grudgingly accepted that she'd made his wall as good as it was ever likely to be, he'd still complained, but couldn't ban her from practising in the orchard because it wasn't his property. He got to grow fruit trees on the common land just as long as he didn't bother the students beyond making them account for any damage.

Late in the afternoon Havel arrived, exchanged a few words with Delphan and told Lena it was time for her to return to Bradon's tower before it got dark.

As she walked beside Havel through the Village enjoying the warmth of the setting sun on her back, she became conscious of people staring at her. In front of the smithy, Nathen and his son Marcus nodded in her direction as she went past. Maybe people had concluded it was acceptable to acknowledge her presence now. Maybe incinerating a bathgon had earned her a little respect?

Farmer Freth bowed to her from the door of his house and Sharell stepped out of *Ye Olde Knotted Wand* as Lena

approached. The elf's herb basket was empty but her smile disappeared as soon as she saw Lena.

'Good evening, Sharell,' said Lena.

'Good ... you ... Your Highness,' stuttered Sharell.

Lena froze, one foot hovering a few inches above the ground, sure she had misheard. 'What did you just call me?'

'It's true, isn't it? You're the heir to the throne of Queenshelm, aren't you?' Sharell curtsied.

'Well, I'm not sure if I am or not. My titles have probably been voided by now,' she said, slowly allowing her foot to complete the interrupted step. There was no point pretending it wasn't true and even less in venting her fury against one of the few people in the Village who actually liked her.

'Who else knows?'

'I'd expect that the whole Village will know by nightfall, Your Highness.' Nightfall wasn't far away.

'It was supposed to be a secret,' she complained through clenched teeth, fighting to control her temper. Narrowing her eyes, she stared down at the wide-eyed elf. 'Tell me, Sharell, how did you find out?'

Lena listened, getting more and more irate with each word that emerged from Sharell's mouth. When the explanation ran out, Lena excused herself and resumed her journey.

'Is it true?' Havel had remained silently impassive during the exchange.

'As if you didn't know,' she retorted.

'Actually, I didn't,' he replied. 'And could you slow down? My legs aren't as long as yours.'

'I thought you could read minds.' She adjusted her pace.

'No, I can't.'

Lena turned her head to look at her escort.

'It's a matter of trust,' he explained. 'Even if I could read people's minds, it wouldn't make me popular and, quite

frankly, I'd rather not know what most people are thinking. So, are you?'

'Yes. I am Kristalena san Thessalia, and I may or may not be heir to the Whitehead Throne. I'm also Master Bradon's bound servant,' she said, the words coming out in a growl. 'Why are you grinning? This isn't funny.'

'I'm just looking forward to witnessing Bethine's reaction and no, Lena or whoever you are, you are not going anywhere except back to Bradon's palace, I mean place, tonight,' Havel said when Lena attempted to take the turning that led to the Seers' tower.

'Those irresponsible gossiping old busybodies,' Lena ranted at Bradon before she'd even taken her cloak off.

'That's no way to talk about the Assembly,' said Bradon. He didn't look up from reading one of the books Lena had swiped from Baragwanth's home.

'I'm talking about those meddling Seers, not the half-baked Assembly of Clodsville,' she snapped, throwing her cloak in the general direction of its usual peg. It missed.

'The Seers? What have they done now?'

'They've gone and told the Village who I am, that's what. The whole stinking Village. I've been getting bows and curtsies and "your highnesses" all afternoon,' she exaggerated. 'If there's anyone in the Village who doesn't know, it's only because they're six feet under.'

'Karrith and Karriane have known since before you arrived here, why would they tell people now?' Bradon growled, rising half way to his feet before slumping back into his chair.

'I'll be sure to ask them,' she said.

Bradon closed the book, not bothering to mark his page, and tossed it onto the table. A short temper and the talents of a powerful sorceress were a combustibly bad combination.

'I'm surprised you didn't go straight there to yell at them,' he said. 'It looks like dinner's ready.'

‘Havel stopped me,’ she said as she picked her cloak up off the floor. Grung was placing a steaming joint of meat on the table. ‘Pretty girl princess,’ he said with a big toothy smile. ‘Grung like princesses.’

‘At least someone’s happy then,’ Lena retorted as she washed her hands in the basin and took her seat at the table. Sorcery used up a lot of energy and she’d need to replace it before torching a tower and its interfering occupants.

Even by Bradon’s rather lax standards, the discussion that followed exceeded the acceptable norms of communication between master and servant. In the end, the warlock had bluntly told her to remain in the tower, and out of the wine bottle, until he gave her permission to leave.

‘Yes, Master,’ she’d said through clenched teeth. ‘Now, if you will excuse me, her royal highness has some pots and pans to scrub.’

The dishes took about as long to wash as for two overweight women to hurry from one end of the Village to the other. Fandalia and Bethine arrived as Lena was standing the iron baking tray upright in a rack where the water could drip into the stone sink as it dried. She wiped her hands and returned to the sound of raised voices directed at the parlour’s owner.

‘So it’s true?’ a familiar voice demanded. ‘What were you thinking? Kidnapping a member of a royal family? You idiot.’ A voice she’d prefer not to hear.

Lena joined them.

‘No one outside the Village knows,’ said Fandalia. ‘That gives us a little time.’

Lena snorted and Fandalia and Bradon turned to look at her. Bethine’s glower remained fixed on the warlock.

Bradon sighed. ‘Lena’s right. Sooner or later someone will talk about it outside the Village. By the time the last spring planting’s done, the minstrels will be raking in coins for much-embellished tales of the rune’d princess and her fictitious exploits. We can’t hide her or what she is for long.’

‘And the Queen of Thessalonia will raise an army and come looking for her daughter, never mind that she has no idea where we are or that she’ll have to go through half a dozen kingdoms to do it. We’d have a war on our hands and no easy way to end it without losing everything we’ve built since the Binding.’

Lena didn’t say anything. *I’m going back. I can avenge Philomena.*

‘I don’t think the Royal Council will let that happen, but we can’t risk it. More likely, Tamur would see a Sharakan plot and vice versa. We have to head that kind of thinking off before things get out of hand,’ said Bradon. He pointed to his empty wine glass.

‘After this, the chances of persuading Queen Salamander that her daughter’s anywhere else but here are pretty much non-existent. She’s many things, but stupid is not one of them. We have to send the girl back to her mother,’ Fandalia concluded unhappily, her eyes following the subject of their argument as the princess removed the cork from a new bottle of wine and poured drinks.

‘That will be a death sentence,’ Bradon accused, interrupting his pacing to stare out the window. ‘If the eunuchs don’t decide to kill her themselves, someone else will. The possibility of having a sorceress on the throne in Queenshelm for a few centuries will give them nightmares.’

They were talking about Lena as if she wasn’t there. She refilled her own glass and took a chair in the corner near the fireplace.

‘I know and I was actually beginning to like the brat myself but do you see any alternative? The safety of everyone who lives here is my first concern, to say nothing of the tens of thousands who would die if Tamur and Sharakan go to war. How much of this does the girl comprehend?’

Lena, cleared her throat, reminding Fandalia that she was right here. ‘I grew up there and it’s time for me to go back.’

‘Not a good idea,’ repeated Bradon. ‘What you need to understand is—

‘I understand perfectly, Master Bradon. Witches are no more popular in Queenshelm than anywhere else and the Royal Council is more than just a rather oily administrative branch of my mother’s government. I didn’t completely waste all those evenings I spent avoiding the Seers’ cooking.’

And you know I have other reasons for going back.

‘How much did they show you?’ Bradon asked.

‘They saw me returning home, in the summer which means we have to leave soon. They’ve seen it. It will happen.’

‘And did Karrith and Karriane show you what will happen when you get there?’ Bethine spoke.

Lena shrugged but didn’t tell them the Seers had seen her confrontation with Philomena’s killer.

‘It’s a pity you can’t portal yet,’ said Fandalia.

‘A great pity,’ agreed Bradon. ‘I’ll go with her to Queenshelm.’

‘Last time you went to Queenshelm, my mother threw you into a dungeon,’ Lena reminded him.

‘I wasn’t planning on announcing my arrival.’

‘You can’t fight an entire realm,’ she pointed out. ‘Not even one as small as Thessalonia.’

‘I wouldn’t try, but I could get you out of there if—’

‘You mean you would try to get her out of Queenshelm when the daggers start flying,’ interrupted Fandalia.

‘That,’ he said.

‘Lena, your training is far from complete. Barely begun, in fact.’ Fandalia approached the issue from another angle. ‘I can’t stop you and Bradon from leaving the Village but you’re just not ready.’

‘It will take at least a couple of months to get to Queenshelm. I’ll teach her what she needs to know on the way,

well, a few things anyway,’ said Bradon. ‘And no, I don’t need reminding what happened to my last apprentices.’

‘Little things, like remembering not to sit with her back to a doorway and using that poison rune on her neck would be a good start although I don’t think there’s much point in trying to hide what she is from anyone,’ said Fandalia, her voice dry.

‘I’m not intending to try,’ said Lena. ‘It’s time people got the idea that sorcery is not synonymous with evil.’

‘You’re the one who’ll end up as kindling if you’re wrong,’ said Bethine with a shrug of her heavy shoulders.

‘Even a wand won’t be enough to protect you from a mob,’ said Bradon.

‘Definitely not,’ shouted Fandalia and Bethine at once.

‘I’m not ready for a wand,’ said Lena, feeling very glad that Havel wasn’t present.

Fandalia drained her glass. ‘Leave as soon as you can get provisions together. Day after tomorrow?’

News of Lena’s imminent departure and the reasons for it spread as rapidly as her identity along with a good many stories that simply weren’t true. News was a rare and prized commodity in an isolated community. She’d managed to squeeze enough time out of her last day to say her farewells to Shaeralli, Khannie and Max. As she readied the horses in the pre-dawn light, she realised just how much she would miss them.

I was miserable when I arrived and I feel miserable leaving.

She heard footsteps entering the barn, too light for Bradon or Grung.

‘You’re leaving.’ Payron made it sound like an accusation. ‘Without even saying goodbye.’

Lena pulled her cinch a little tighter and turned her attention to the chestnut mare that would serve as a packhorse if things went well and a spare mount if they didn’t.

‘You seem very practical for a princess.’

‘Your lordship must be happy to see me go,’ said Lena.

‘How could you think that?’

‘You’ve barely spoken to me since, well, you know.’ She didn’t look up from packing the food supplies for the journey. They’d exchanged apologies but that hadn’t been much of a conversation.

‘Since I tried teaching you to use a sword. How long will you be gone?’

‘I don’t know, Payron.’ Lena knew that the correct answer could well be forever. It wasn’t something she wanted to dwell on.

‘I could come with you.’ It was an admission of sorts.

‘Why would you want to do that?’ Lena was astounded. The elf had made his disdain for her perfectly clear.

He stood in silence, watching her tie bedrolls and a small tent to the saddlebags.

‘I guess because I behaved badly.’

‘You don’t have to apologise. Elves don’t like humans and your parents definitely don’t like me. I don’t understand why, but it is what it is.’ She gave the knots a hard tug. Satisfied that nothing would come loose on the trail, she turned towards Payron.

‘I’m not my parents and I’m sorry. Will you forgive me?’ He stepped a little closer.

‘If you think it’s necessary. It’s not, you know.’ Payron really did have beautiful eyes and he was tall for an elf.

‘I was going to kiss you, that night we danced. I really wanted to, but then. . . .’ He spoke softly, uncertainty evident.

‘Your parents would have been furious.’

‘What about *your* parents?’

‘Mother would be shocked more than anything. Most people in Queenshelm would say that there’s no such thing as

elves.'

'If I came with you, I'm sure I could persuade her that we are quite real. Would you like me to come?' He was standing so close she could inhale the fresh smell of his skin; spring growth after the rain.

'I would like it very much, Payron.' Unsure of his reaction, she lifted one hand and placed it on his cheek. 'But it would be a bad idea.'

'I'll miss you,' he said, still speaking quietly. 'Please come back.'

'Would you want me to?'

'Of course.'

'Then give me a reason to remember you.'

'That sounds so corny, like one of those epics the village girls get all moon-faced over.'

'You have the sensitivity of a boar in the rutting season. If you're going to kiss me before I leave, get on with it.' Lena hoped she wasn't blushing.

She could see his Adam's apple move up and down as he swallowed and realised that he was nervous too but she didn't have time to think of anything else before his lips found hers.

'I wondered what was taking you so long,' a deep voice said from behind them.

Payron snatched his arms from around Lena's waist and stepped back.

'Oh, fishguts,' muttered Lena. She could feel her face burning and imagined her cheeks turning bright crimson.

'If you two are finished, we should leave now,' Bradon said, ignoring their discomfort.

'Yes, of course. I'm ready, Master,' she said without making eye contact. She unhitched her own mare and the packhorse and followed Bradon out of the barn. Grung was there; standing by the gate, his massive shoulders slumped,

and joined Payron in walking with them as far as the entrance to the cave system.

‘You will come back, won’t you?’ Payron asked.

‘I want to,’ she said, looking down from her mount, ‘but I won’t make a promise I cannot keep. It’s not up to me.’

Payron held her hand for a moment before releasing her.

As she turned away from the Village and nudged her chestnut mare to ride next to Bradon, Lena realised that she’d never got around to speaking with Istvan. It was a small thing.

‘You and the elf boy. I didn’t see that one coming.’

‘Neither did I,’ she murmured.

‘You know nothing can come of it, don’t you?’

‘Is that a command, Master?’ Lena hid her embarrassment behind a cutting tone.

‘Being your master doesn’t give me rights over your heart, or your body come to that. Who you fall in love with is your business, but as a member of the eleven royal family. Payron needs the approval of the elven king to marry and Eraphon will never sanction marriage to a human. Doubly so since Payron is one of only two elven sorcerers currently alive. As for your mother—’

‘I know what Mother would say and it would not be pretty but I’m an adult and I no longer need her consent,’ she said, trying not to think of going underground. ‘The caves are rather depressing. I miss the sun already.’

‘I won’t miss your cooking,’ was Bradon’s only complaint as they descended into the caves.

Thirty-four

LENA WALKED DOWN the gangplank and quickly melted into the crowd of stevedores, sailors, merchants and petty thieves going about their business. She'd waited until just after sunset so it was dark enough to pass unrecognised in the flickering torches and lanterns but early enough that the streets were still busy. Maybe she would be mistaken for a harlot. There were worse things to be but so long as no one knew her for who she was it didn't matter. There was something she needed before confronting an irate queen and a cabal of brutal murderers and someone would need to get it for her. Between the Seers and Neritza she knew what she needed to do.

Behind her, the *Maiden* cast off. Berthing charges made tying up at the docks an expensive business. Mate Belsa would drop anchor in the harbour until Captain Tresca and the rest of the crew returned.

It was raining in Queenshelm, a light drizzle that could last all day if it was minded to. There was nothing unusual in that and it gave the returning native an excuse to keep her hood up and her face hidden within its shadow as she threaded her way through the crowded streets.

'Way! Make way for His Excellency Lord Sartor.' A thick voice bellowed and Her Royal Highness Crown Princess Kristalena san Thessalia pressed herself back against a shuttered window to allow the gold-liveried carriage and its escort to pass. She bowed her head to preserve her anonymity rather than to show deference. She was one of hundreds jostling for space in the narrow streets leading from the docks, another unremarkable woman heading home. The smell of split fish drying in the salt pans reminded her that she wasn't the same person who had fled from the palace in the night. The last of her childhood had been outgrown on ocean voyages and cross-country travels, burned away with apple trees and a

monster in the rain, sweated off in the autumn harvest and finally traded for an elf's kiss. In the child's place was a young woman, fit and toned by her labours, with the markings of a sorceress reaching up from her collar bone to the right side of her neck. The rune against poison which, she supposed, would be equally useful for both state banquets and her own cooking.

Her black hair was longer, untrimmed and untidy. Normally she wore it tied back with a leather thong but today her hair was loose, hiding the rune on her neck. Her skin had tanned on the southward journey and in the fields at harvest time. If the brown had faded during the winter, the long journey from the Village back to the diminutive realm she called home had restored her unladylike complexion. The changes went beyond the physical and it wasn't what the casual observer might notice that was most striking. She identified a certain hardness in herself and decided she liked that. Knowledge was making her ruthless and her developing powers as a sorceress made her temper a dangerous thing. Those aspects she didn't like. Worse, the year apart had made her a stranger to her home and her conspicuous runes made it unlikely that her mother or sisters would welcome her back with open arms.

The year had been both too long and too short. Too long to be separated from family and too short to learn a fraction of the things she needed to know. For her rigid mother it might well have seemed like a lifetime.

I never asked to be a witch. I never asked to be a princess either, or anything for that matter, but I am what I am and have to deal with it. Wishes are fish guts in a chum bucket.

'I can't hide what I am,' she declared quietly, her words unnoticed amidst the rattle of iron-rimmed wheels clattering over the cobblestones.

Left and then a right and then straight on. She walked away from the docks into a part of the city where the population hovered somewhere between poverty and the barely middle class. Past the bakeries and the house that doubled as a school for the few who could spare their children from the necessity of contributing to the family's daily labours. She counted the

buildings on her left as she walked up the hill – seven, eight, nine – though it was unnecessary; like most inns the establishment she was seeking was identified by the sign hanging above the street, high enough to allow a man on horseback to pass beneath it. She recognised Mirk, waiting for her near the well-lit entrance. The boy nodded, telling her that the person she wanted to meet was inside and was alone. She stepped across the threshold before any of the drunks propositioned her.

The Lazy Dog was nothing like *The Speckled Dragon*. Cramped and poorly lit, the establishment smelt of spilt beer and unwashed bodies. A polished wooden counter, bar stools, tables and booths, about half of which were occupied by patrons, few exhibiting evidence of sobriety. She took a stool next to Tresca and looked around. She was early but the man she wished to meet had turned up even earlier. She sipped a tankard of the establishment's best ale while she waited to see if anyone had followed him.

'If this is the best ale in Queenshelm, I'm a marsh goblin,' she muttered, not that she had anything against the reclusive marsh goblins. Grung's brew was much smoother and less watery. The troll could make a fortune here.

'He's been sitting in that booth for a bit. Hasn't turned around once. Just sits there like you told him, fingering his sword hilt and looking like he wants to gut everyone who walks past him,' said Tresca.

'He could do it too. Anyone with him?'

'Nah. Not that we've seen anyway. He came out of the palace on 'is own and followed yer note like he were supposed to.' Mirk had slipped the note to Alana and the faithful servant had conveyed it to Collegier who had come alone to hear news about his queen's eldest surviving daughter. Kristalena owed Alana an apology for suspecting her involvement in Philomena's murder but that would have to wait.

Kristalena watched a little longer before deciding that this was as good as it was likely to get. Tresca's cousin owned *The Lazy Dog* and their relationship was solid, backed by regular

business dealings. The *Maiden's* blocky captain had enough of his crew posing as regular clientele to muscle their way out against anything short of a company of the Queen's Guards, but Lieutenant Collegier had come alone. Catching the innkeeper's eye, she tapped her empty tankard, held up two fingers and put her money on the counter. Tresca wandered off to join some of his men at another table.

Taking a deep breath, Kristalena walked over to the corner booth and slid into the wooden bench opposite the straight-backed guard.

'Thank you for coming, Collegier.'

The shocked officer attempted to salute and stand up at the same time, his legs banging clumsily into the battered table between them.

'Sit down,' she hissed. 'Sit!'

Eventually Collegier settled back into his bench, if not his composure. 'Your Highness,' he said when he could speak coherently.

'Not here. I don't want to draw attention to myself,' she said, keeping her voice quiet. *Not yet.*

'You're alive!'

'Never felt better. Did you bring it?' If Neritza had been as faithful to Thessalia's descendants as she claimed, Kristalena would live or die by his answer.

The arrival of the drinks gave Collegier time to gather his wits. His right hand dropped below the table. He pulled a silk-wrapped bundle out from beneath his regulation tunic and hesitated.

'It's mine by right. I am heir to my mother's throne,' she reminded him, displaying the heir's signet ring on her finger.

'Only just, Your Highness. The Royal Council is demanding that you be declared legally dead so that Princess Serephanie can be named heir. Queen Salamander is delaying matters by claiming Princess Lapheria is better suited to the role, but the Queen can't hold out much longer. There'll be an

announcement voiding your titles very soon. You have to present yourself before that happens.’ He spoke quietly, looking around the tavern and locking eyes with Tresca.

‘He’s with me. I’ll return to the palace tomorrow. There’re a few arrangements to put in place first,’ said Kristalena, reaching across the table, ‘and when I do walk in there I need to remind Neshar and the rest of those bastards who I am.’

Collegier unclenched his hand, allowing Kristalena to take the package, and watched as she carefully unwrapped it. Spreading the red and green silk handkerchief flat on the table, she placed the earrings to one side and picked up the necklace. Kristalena looked at the inscription, so faint in the tavern’s dull lighting, on the flat underside of Catriona’s Necklace. Her memory had played true. Neritza had been honest with her sister’s descendants. ‘Thank you,’ she whispered, wondering if the scorpion queen had seen this moment.

Collegier nodded, thinking the softly spoken words were for him. ‘There are rumours going around that after the wizard kidnapped you he dumped your body at sea and then new stories started coming out of Tamur that you were being held hostage and—’

‘Garbage. I wasn’t kidnapped and I’ve never been held hostage anywhere,’ she said, as she finished fixing the clasp behind her neck. It was heavier than she remembered. She slipped the necklace inside her shirt and wrapped the earrings with the silk handkerchief before putting them into her pouch. Her skin tingled, confirming what she already knew. ‘I left a note for Mother explaining everything.’

Collegier frowned, his expression appearing sincere.

‘So my note was never found. That should not have surprised me.’ She sipped her ale and pulled a face. ‘This stuff is really terrible.’

‘When did—’

‘When did I start drinking ale? About a year ago, obviously, and much better than this bilge water. Now, there are a few things you need to understand. . . .’ she said and

explained to the guardsman what was wrong in Queenshelm and how she was going to fix it.

‘Forgive me, Your Highness. I can accept most of what you say. Sartor and Neshor’s treason has long been suspected and we all know that Emperor Anslov could swallow us up anytime he wanted—’

‘Not without inciting a response from his neighbours. The one thing we all fear is being picked off and absorbed by Sharakan one by one and Anslov knows that just as he knows that the Empress Katayana would—’

‘That’s probably true, but as for the rest. . . .’ He gestured with his hands, emphasising his scepticism.

Kristalena concentrated. A small flame appeared at the tip of her little finger, ran down the side of her hand to settle on the rim of her tankard. She made a small gesture with her hand and the flame slowly danced its way around the edge.

Collegier blinked but didn’t recoil from the sight. ‘How did you do that?’

‘Sorcery. I’m inexperienced and clumsy but I have enough skill for what I must do tomorrow. I’m not looking forward to it, but it has to be done.’ In spite of the warmth from her flames, she shivered. ‘I’ll see you in the morning,’ she said, rising to leave.

Thirty-five

HER MAJESTY, Queen Salamander XXIII was in a towering fury. By all accounts it was a family trait, but she showed little inclination to rein in her temper. Not today.

‘Show this witch in,’ she commanded, both hands gripping the arms of her throne.

‘Your Majesty, I feel compelled to advise against—’ interjected Sartor.

‘If this miserable creature knows the whereabouts of my daughter, I will see her,’ the Queen repeated in a tone that cut off further objections.

Sartor signalled the guards at the far end of the throne room and the huge doors opened to admit the visitor.

Commander Varana moved closer to the throne.

Slowly the cowed figure walked down the crimson carpet. Back ramrod-straight, face concealed beneath a black hood, the tall woman approached the waiting queen. Matching the visitor’s progress towards the throne, two ranks of the Queen’s bodyguards stayed close, swords drawn and faces hard. The noises of their footsteps and the rubbing of steel against leather marked the witch’s progress towards the throne.

Five paces from his monarch, a visibly sweating Collegier thrust his sword across the carpet, bringing the advance to a halt.

The figure went down on one knee, head bowed.

Salamander was on her feet and stepping off the dais in a heartbeat. ‘Have you come to mock me, witch? Your kind steals my daughter and now you have the audacity to—’

‘I do not mock Your Majesty. I pay respect to my Queen and to a mother dearly loved.’ Kristalena threw back her hood,

exposing her face but keeping her neck concealed.

‘Kristalena?’ Salamander’s regal dignity and outrage were abandoned in an instant as she stepped towards her missing daughter.

‘It is good to be back home, Your Majesty,’ said Kristalena quietly. She rose to her feet without permission.

The Queen closed the distance between them, Collegier quickly pulling his blade out of the way, and wrapped her arms around her eldest surviving child. Kristalena returned the embrace, careful not to let the sleeves of her robe ride up and expose the fire runes and pebbled flesh on her forearms.

One shock at a time.

‘So you escaped?’ Salamander seemed surprised at the idea that her young daughter could evade a sorcerer powerful enough to banish a demon.

‘Escaped? I was never a prisoner.’ Kristalena shook her head in exasperation. ‘No. I came back to stop a war.’

‘A war? What war?’ The Queen stepped back, looking at her prodigal child more closely.

‘A long story. Katayana and Anslov each thinking the other had kidnapped me and was going to use me to annex Thessalonia. Suspicion run amok. They would both have been wrong, of course. Ridiculous, but that’s the way of insecure monarchs the world over.’ Kristalena looked past the mother in front of her to the doubting faces of the council members on the dais behind the throne.

‘That’s what we suspected, but how can you be so sure it would have led to war?’

‘The Seers had some pretty compelling visions of—’

‘Seers?’ Salamander’s chin jerked upwards and she stared hard at her wayward daughter.

‘The most interfering busybodies I’ve ever met, but they have their uses,’ said Kristalena. Even now that she understood why Karrith and Karriane had done it, she was still

mad at them for exposing her identity to the Village. But even more grateful for the knowledge they'd shared.

'Back to your kidnapping.' Salamander would only let herself be diverted for so long.

'I wasn't kidnapped, Mother. I left with Master Bradon of my own free will.'

'Why in the name of the Endless Ocean would you want to run off with a wizard?'

'Warlock,' Kristalena corrected her mother. 'I made a bargain with him. He sent the demon back to Hell and I agreed to become his servant, Mother.'

'A servant!'

'I know. Washing dishes. Mending clothes. Harvesting crops. That sort of thing. It was highly educational.' She pulled a face.

'The heir to the Whitehead Throne does not wash dishes!' Salamander's wasn't the only face expressing shock.

'This one did. It helps to use boiling water. I learned that one the hard way.' She laughed again. 'Oh, Mother, it is so good to see you. How are the twins?'

'Serephanie and Lapheria are both fine.' Salamander seemed to be at a loss for words.

'With Your Majesty's permission, may I withdraw? It has been a long journey and I really should clean up and have some breakfast.' And she would need all the energy a good meal could provide for what was to come. 'Oh, perhaps we should meet with the Royal Council before lunch. There are some important matters to discuss.'

It was, thought Kristalena, nice to be in possession of a clean body and wearing a dress that didn't smell of the dried sweat and dirt of a long journey. The pink-and-awful dress would be a provocation once she removed the satin cloak and exposed her runes which was precisely why she had chosen it. Catriona's Necklace and the earrings made another statement. The four lesser members of the Royal Council were absent

from the Council Chamber. Kristalena wasn't surprised. It was a familiar place; a long wall with expansive floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the harbour on one side and a wood-panelled wall with a double door and portraits of Thessalia and some of her descendants on the opposite side. The ends of the rectangular room were hung with rich tapestries depicting scenes from Thessalia's life. There were additional doors hidden behind the tapestries, guarded but unlocked in case the Queen needed to leave quickly.

Salamander walked in with Neshar and Sartor flanking their monarch. Kristalena bowed, waiting with everyone else for the Queen to take her seat at the head of the table. Alana and another serving girl poured tea for the royals first and then the eunuchs who sat either side of the Queen at the heavily carved table. Varana, the only soldier in the room, took up his customary station behind the Queen.

Standing near the window, Kristalena passed the time looking down on the vessels that symbolised the lifeblood of the kingdom.

Sweating for reasons that had nothing to do with the heat, Kristalena removed her cloak as soon as the servants had retreated and closed the door behind them. Draping it over the back of a chair, she deliberately turned to give everyone a good look at the portal rune spread across her back. The reactions were all she'd expected: horror, surprise and disgust.

And only a little fear.

The Queen's response was more practical. 'What in the name of the Endless Ocean possessed you to wear that dress?'

'It shows off as many of my runes as decently possible, Mother. People need to get used to the idea that your heir is a sorceress,' she spoke calmly. The *Maiden* was down there somewhere but she couldn't pick it out amidst all the other vessels from this distance.

'You're a witch? How could you do this to me? To your family?' Salamander demanded as she rose to her feet.

‘In our rather exclusive society, calling someone a witch is an insult,’ said Kristalena, finally turning away from the view to face the room. ‘Anyway, to business. The Seers showed me Philomena’s murder.’

‘Seers?’ Sartor demanded.

‘Sorcerers with the ability to see the future and, in this case, the past.’

‘Ppffff,’ he snorted derisively.

Kristalena ignored the pre-emptive attempt to discredit her. ‘Tell me, Neshar, did you enjoy driving the dagger into my sister’s guts? Did you savour Philomena’s screams as you twisted it deep inside her? Did it empower you? Did it make you feel like a man?’

‘Your Majesty, I must—’ The fat eunuch held his hands up in protest.

‘Save your protestations for when you arrive in Hell, Neshar. The Seers showed me her death. I saw you standing over her. Philomena took a long time to die. Such a very long time. You made sure she suffered. You enjoyed her suffering.’

‘Kristalena! You cannot go around accusing people of such crimes,’ said Salamander. Her rebuke was not as forceful as it should be.

You knew, Mother. You knew and you did nothing.

‘I can and I just did, and Neshar will hang for that murder. This lump of rancid blubber is well overdue for a date with a noose anyway. All the money he’s been stealing from the royal treasury and secreting away in Tamur. You’ll be pleased to know that I gave orders to stop his purloining of our gold. The people who actually did the stealing are being transferred to the fish cages as we speak,’ she said casually.

‘Kristalena! You idiot. Those payments were all that kept Empress Katayana from annexing us.’ Salamander was horrified.

‘Rubbish. Katayana had nothing to do with it. It was greed and theft. In any case, she can’t annex us without starting a

war with Anslov and vice versa. Incidentally Sartor was as much a thief as Nestor, so he'll hang as well. We'll need to strengthen the gallows before they swing,' she said looking at the two corpulent councillors.

'You have doomed us all.' Salamander collapsed back into her chair, staring wide-eyed at her daughter.

'Oh, grow a backbone Mother. No longer will Thessalonia be known as the puppet kingdom.' She moved closer to Neshor, bracing herself for what was to come.

'Any last words before you get strung up as the traitor you are, Neshor?'

'I think it is time for dynastic succession, don't you dear Sartor,' was the accused man's only response.

'I must agree, old friend. Perhaps the Duke of Weighbridge might enjoy adding to his titles?' Sartor suggested.

'Possibly. We can talk about it after we have finished here,' replied Neshor. A dagger appeared in his hand.

'Treason,' shouted the Queen. 'Varana! Call the guards. Arrest them both!'

'He won't do that, Mother. You see, when Philomena discovered Sartor and Neshor had been lining their pockets, she went to the one person she thought she could trust. The commander of the palace guards – the person entrusted with safeguarding the royal family. But he was as much a thief as the other two. He was the one who held my sister down while Neshor gutted her like a fish in the market.' Varana didn't deny the charge.

'This one,' Kristalena ran a finger down the side of her neck to goad her prey, 'is for poison.'

'Witchcraft!' Sartor shouted, pointing at the princess silhouetted against the sunlight pouring through the windows.

'Sorcery, and still the truth. I can ask a necromancer to raise Philomena's spirit if anyone's interested or I can do it myself, if you don't want to wait.'

And you don't mind if I accidentally raise every inhabitant of the royal catacombs at the same time.

‘That won't be necessary,’ Neshar assured her, moving closer to the young princess.

The scent of his perfume washed over her, lilies and something that reminded her of Grung's spice pots, but all her attention was on the short dagger with the ruby in its hilt held in his left hand. The same knife the Seers had seen taking her sister's life. The blow came faster and harder than she expected. With all of Neshar's considerable weight behind it, the blade sliced through the silk fabric of her dress, shearing the bones of her ribcage and cleaving her heart with a grating thud. Kristalena staggered backwards against the window frame, her mouth open in a silent scream as blood spurted from around the dagger embedded to the hilt in the centre of her chest, staining the crisp pink of her attire. As she slumped to the floor a trickle of her crimson life blood ran out of her mouth and dripped down her chin, onto her dress and then stopped. She coughed once and then lay still, unfocused eyes staring past her killer at the woven picture of a young Thessalia and Loraline walking hand in hand beside the Hadden River.

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Thirty-six

‘KRISTALENA! NO! NO! NO!’ Salamander rushed towards her daughter’s body but was brought up short when Varana grabbed her from behind.

‘Unhand me! I am your Queen.’

‘Apologies, Your Majesty.’ Varana wrapped one thick arm around the Queen’s neck.

Nesher surveyed the corpse lying motionless against the windows; bright red, stark against the pale pinkness of her dress. Blood no longer flowed from around the protruding dagger. His thick lips twisting into a smile as he turned away from his handiwork to face the monarch. ‘It’s a shame really, Salamander. You made a very good puppet, so compliant.’

‘Get it done,’ said Sartor. ‘We can’t let her live after this.’

‘I am your Queen,’ repeated Salamander, her struggles impotent against Varana’s strength.

‘Do you mind if I do this myself, old friend?’ Nesher ignored his monarch’s plea.

‘Not at all, my dear Nesher. Not at all. Enjoy yourself.’ Sartor waved one bejewelled hand nonchalantly and the wobbling mountain of fat strode towards the shocked Queen, a second dagger plucked from his sleeve and held theatrically high.

Salamander screamed and shouted for her guards but was cut off when Varana slapped his free hand over her mouth.

‘Time to bring down the curtain on Thessalia’s miserable excuse for a dynasty,’ Nesher proclaimed.

‘Agggghh.’ A long moan came from behind the murderous eunuch. Every eye in the room jerked to the body against the window.

‘Still alive, are you? Well, you can suffer a little longer for your arrogance, Princess.’ Nesher didn’t seem upset at the thought of prolonging the princess’s death.

‘I will . . . outlive . . . you . . . by centuries,’ gasped Kristalena, sitting up and looking towards the man who had murdered her with unfocused eyes. Everyone else was staring at the dagger protruding from the centre of her chest. She used the window frame to pull herself upright, smearing blood over the glass and wood in the process.

‘By . . . the Mortal Goddess, that hurt but do you know what really pisses me off, Nesher? You’ve ruined a perfectly good dress.’ Now on her feet, Kristalena leaned against the window frame for support. As she drew deep shuddering lungfuls of air into her body, her vision was slowly returning to normal. ‘Are we done here? Being stabbed in the heart gives one a certain appetite and we still have to conclude all the hangings before lunch. I’d send you to the fish cages but, under the circumstances, something much more public is in order, wouldn’t you agree?’

Behind Varana on the far side of the room the wall hangings twitched. Kristalena took a deep breath and winced as the agony tore through her heart.

‘You’re dying bitch, but maybe you can live long enough to watch your mother perish for your conceit? Varana, kill the Queen! We’ll take care of the other two as soon as. . . .’

The commander of the royal guards didn’t move. A blade placed against the side of one’s neck was a powerful incentive to remain still. Like the eunuchs, Varana had been too focused on the princess standing before them with the dagger embedded between her breasts to notice Collegier slipping into the room from the door concealed behind the tapestry. Other soldiers followed.

‘I order you to kill that slut of a queen!’ Nesher’s voice was shrill as he became aware of the soldiers flooding into the Council Chamber.

‘We are loyal to Her Majesty,’ said Collegier. His sword never left his commander’s neck. Even so, his eyes were

focused on the horrifying spectacle of the princess with the dagger protruding from the centre of her chest. One of the guards stumbled as they fanned out behind him.

I told him what to expect.

‘And you just stood by and watched while I killed this witch?’ Nesher sneered.

‘Her Royal Highness ordered us not to interfere, though it came close to being the only time I have ever disobeyed an order,’ snarled Collegier, his eyes were still on the princess.

‘And if you want to kill me, you will have to try harder than this, Nesher.’ Kristalena was standing fully erect now. She stepped away from the support of the window frame; a blood-stained spectre with the ruby-encrusted handle sticking out of her body, red against red, for everyone to see. With deliberate slowness she wrapped both hands around the handle of the dagger, took a deep breath and jerked it free.

Everyone watched in utter astonishment.

‘Agggghhhhh. Ow! Ow! Ow! Goddamnit! That hurt worse coming out than going in. Fishguts!’ A final spurt of fresh red dribbled down her already bloody dress as Catriona’s Necklace burned against her skin. She tossed the dagger onto the table and leaned against the window frame to recover her equilibrium.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Varana ducked and twisted, attempting to snatch a dagger from his belt. Collegier kicked his commander in the back of the knee and clubbed him on the side of his head with the hilt of his sword, smashing him to the floor. Only a very explicit order from Kristalena had stopped him from killing the traitor the moment he’d entered the Council Chamber. Varana tried to crawl away. Collegier stomped and the snap of wrist bones breaking under the soldier’s boot was clearly heard.

‘What are you? Some kind of demon spawn?’ Nesher’s mouth hung open, his droopy jowls trembling.

‘I am heir to my ancestors’ throne and a sorceress with some unique talents. It will take so much more than a bloated

traitor with a sharp knife to end my life.’

‘If I can’t kill you, I can kill her,’ yelled Neshar, turning towards the ashen monarch.

‘No!’ Collegier yelled, reaching forward to pull the Queen out of the eunuch’s path.

Kristalena lifted both hands and pointed at the treasonous eunuch. Twin streams of flame, yellow and white, surged across the room, hitting Neshar’s huge form with enough force to knock him sideways.

Neshar screamed as he burned, staggering backward as the fire ignited his robes and consumed his flesh. Driven up against the tapestried wall, he collapsed writhing to the floor. Still Kristalena kept her will on the flailing man, almost unrecognisable now as his skin bubbled and his face melted beneath the incandescent flames, stalking the eunuch’s tortured form as it flailed pathetically across the Council Chamber. Visible for all to see, the fire runes twisted within her bare flesh. Only when the body stopped twitching, did she lower her arms.

‘Sister, I have avenged you,’ she announced, her voice soft but certain as she stared at the man she had burned alive and inhaled the smell of roasted meat.

Tendrils of flame began to appear on the carpet beneath the smoking corpse. Kristalena sighed theatrically. ‘Apologies for making a mess, Mother.’

The first person to move was Sartor, making a break for the door. She wouldn’t have believed a man so fat could move so fast but the fate of his colleague provided a certain motivation.

‘Arrest him,’ said Kristalena. This time the guards moved, seizing the surviving traitor. ‘The punishment for treason has always been the same, Your Majesty and I see no reason for delay. He can hang in Maritime Square immediately.’

Salamander made no objection, apparently unable to find voice or even nod.

‘For his part in this, you can string Varana up as well. All those bribes he took have brought him a date with a noose. Do

it now. I'll come and inspect the bodies after I've cleaned myself up and had some lunch,' Kristalena said, knowing the three traitors were only a small part of the kingdom's problems. She didn't even look at the former commander of the palace guard lying prone on the floor with Collegier's boot pressed against his neck.

'And the rest of the eunuchs, Your Highness?' Collegier asked the question she had told him to ask. Apart from the four other council members, there were another score of expensive functionaries working in the palace.

It would be a long time before Kristalena would fully trust any of them but the Seers had seen nothing that suggested complicity in Sartor and Neshor's crimes. The fact that Sartor and Neshor had excluded them from this meeting was, at the very least, indicative of innocence. Pragmatically, the Queen needed them to administer the kingdom. *Trust. Philomena was killed because she trusted the wrong person.*

'I'll not have a man punished for the crimes of another. Tell them to continue their duties.'

'At once, Your Highness.' Collegier saluted and supervised the removal of the condemned, as silent in accepting their own fate as they had been to witness Kristalena's. He didn't ask for the Queen to confirm Kristalena's decree. In the space of a few minutes, true power in Queenshelm had shifted from the corrupt pair of senior councillors to a blood-splattered teenage sorceress, bypassing the titular monarch.

'If either of them wish to appeal their sentence, send them to me. They can burn if they prefer. And tell someone to clean up this mess,' she said, pointing to Neshor's smouldering remains and the smoking tapestry. The smell lingered in the air, but even the repugnantly sweet smell of burnt flesh wasn't enough to suppress her hunger.

'Neshor was right about one thing,' said Salamander, watching Varana being marched away, while an uncooperative Sartor had to be dragged by four large soldiers.

'Probably about many things, Mother. He was a traitor, a killer, a pervert and a thief on a colossal scale but he wasn't

stupid.’

‘Anslov and Katayna will not take this lying down. News of a sorceress here . . . they won’t stand for it,’ said Salamander.

Kristalena was too tired to think about such matters.

‘Their spies will have reported this morning’s events before the sun sets.’

‘I really should clean myself up, unless you think it’s appropriate to spend the rest of the day looking like this? No? I didn’t think so.’

Salamander just nodded, looking at the ruined needlepoint hanging from the wall rather than at her daughter.

‘I’m sorry about the tapestry,’ Kristalena said quietly.

‘What are you?’

‘Your daughter, Mother. I am and always will be your daughter.’

‘But . . . but . . .’

‘Loraline’s gift to us,’ Kristalena touched the necklace with one bloody finger. She could feel where the links had burned the skin around her neck. Sorcery had a price, a minor one today considering what she had achieved. She pointed at the two girls woven into the unburnt part of the tapestry. ‘A very long time ago, Loraline was a young sorceress with a talent for healing who was doomed to love a man who loved her sister. Her passion made her desperate enough to make a very bad deal with a sorceress far more powerful than she was. Didyme was the witch’s name. Immortality for her sister’s life was the bargain Loraline made with Didyme and the price of winning the man’s heart.’

‘But Thessalia survived and Loraline disappeared.’

‘To make her immortal, Didyme changed Loraline into a monster, cheating her of the love she sought. Only then, when it was too late, did Loraline realise she loved Thessalia more than she wanted the happy ending now forever denied to her. Didyme tried to murder her creation for breaching their

agreement. They fought and Loraline slew Didyme – making someone nearly immortal makes them surprisingly difficult to kill. Loraline’s final act before fleeing to exile was to take the source of the witch’s power, a silver bracelet, and recast it into something new.’

‘Catriona’s Necklace,’ said Salamander, her eyes still wide.

‘Yes. She also poured her own talent for healing into the metal while it was being forged.’

‘Making the wearer immortal.’

‘No and no,’ said Kristalena, taking the seat Sartor had once occupied. It was the nearest and she was close to exhaustion. The dagger was. . . .

It was a good thing I didn’t use my wand.

Neritza had been born from the pyre of Loraline’s unconsummated love and had withdrawn from the world. In her remorse, she had left her sister with something that would protect her and the generations that would follow Thessalonia’s first queen. In the succeeding centuries, Thessalia’s bloodline had failed to produce sorceresses who could take advantage of the Necklace’s power. Until now.

Until me. It is mine by right and this was its intended purpose.

She fingered the ancient piece of craftsmanship, wondering about the strength of the two sorcerers who had made something so breathtakingly powerful.

‘Catriona’s Necklace?’ Salamander interrupted her daughter’s daydreaming.

‘It only has power if the wearer is a sorceress. It’s just jewellery to anyone else,’ said Kristalena, not knowing if that was true or not but she didn’t want her mother to think there was anything to gain by taking it from her.

‘And how did you learn this?’

‘Loraline told me.’

‘She’s still alive! How is that possible? She must have died a thousand years ago. More.’ Despite having watched her daughter pull a knife out of her heart, the unflappable monarch could still be shocked further.

‘Almost immortal, remember. She goes by another name now and that’s a story for another time.’ Kristalena needed food and she needed sleep and she didn’t want anyone to see her pass out. Word would spread and she wanted, needed, the word to be of a powerful sorceress who could not be killed, not a young girl who had almost drained herself setting one corrupt old man on fire. She steadied herself with one hand on the table as the room swayed. ‘If you will excuse me Mother, there are a number of things that need my attention. I’ll see you at breakfast tomorrow.’

Salamander watched her daughter leave.

She thought of Neshor’s smouldering remains as she walked through the corridors with her guards staying close.

I have taken a life for the first time.

The word that troubled her more than the burnt corpse was *first*. Shortly, her tally would increase when a once-trusted councillor and the equally trusted commander of Her Majesty’s guards dangled from the gallows in Maritime Square. An easier death than the fish cages or the stake. Easier too than having a short dagger twisted through your intestines. They all deserved their fate.

Three lives have I ended this day and I have only just begun.

By the time she reached the sanctuary of her quarters, Kristalena san Thessalia, heir to Whitehead Throne, sorceress, servant and killer wept, not for what she had done but for the lives she had yet to take.

Afterword

The second novel in the *Daughter of the Winds* series will be released in 2023. A brief extract follows.

A Road to Follow

‘You’re just a scared little girl hiding away from the hopelessness of another’s cause and pretending that the darkness will pass you by when you know, you must know, that you will share the fate of the rest of us,’ Yennifer continued. ‘My God is a binary god.’

‘How nice for him,’ Kristalena retorted, frantically patting the flames out on her clothes. She had no idea what Yennifer was babbling about. Behind her the screaming stopped.

‘The absoluteness of death is only for the truly fortunate. Did your master explain that to you, girl? Did he?’

The devotees’ chanting grew yet louder.

*lead us to the edge of night
to the depths within our souls*

‘No? Whether he educates you or no, that is the fate of all who give themselves to the darkness that is their nature. Embrace the darkness. Bathe in the glory of the Lord of the Boundless Pit, bearer of the portal and bringer of freedom. We faithful have waited generations, waited and prayed for him to be freed.’

*bring us to the place where
light is dark and black is the ever-endless day*

‘Sounds cheery,’ said Kristalena, wondering how Yennifer knew she had a portal rune. ‘Some kind of prayer?’

Yennifer laughed.

‘You’re stalling, Yennifer.’ Bradon moved closer, deflecting a thrown knife with his staff. The casual motion of a man who’d had centuries to hone his reflexes. ‘Give it up. It’s over. There’s no way out for you. Give me the Argentine Ring and I’ll let you go.’

‘Let me? You lost the right to “let me” do anything a lifetime ago.’ She made a small gesture and a slender man charged at Bradon, attempting to cut the warlock in half with a woodsman’s axe. Using his superior reach, Bradon jabbed the man in the face with the butt of the Ebony Staff. The man buckled and fell, bloody pulp where his nose and mouth had been. He didn’t get up.

Why didn’t she order all of them to attack us?

Bradon was right, Yennifer was dragging this out and Kristalena assumed she was hoping more of her subjects would come to her aid.

Wanting to end this quickly without killing more people, Kristalena flung another series of small fireballs at the sand in front of the mob hoping to scare them off. Once again, puffs of sand and gravel were flung upwards, scattering across the remaining men and women defending the short red-haired woman behind them. More grooves and ridges were exposed . . . a curve . . . an acutely angled corner. . . .

Too late, Kristalena recognised what was concealed beneath the blood-stained sand. ‘Bradon! It’s a trap! Get off the sand,’ she yelled. Grabbing Mirk by the arm and leaping sideways, she dragged the ship’s boy off the floor of the arena and scrambled up onto the lowest tier of seating, bashing her shin against the steps in the process.

Unwilling, perhaps simply unable, to divert his attention from his gloating former apprentice, Bradon was slower to react. Too slow.

It was one of those increasingly common occurrences when Kristalena would much rather have been completely and utterly wrong.

*come before us, embrace the night
rule us, greatest lord and
let us and all abase—*

As the worshippers' chants reached a crescendo the floor of the arena rippled and shifted. The air in the middle shimmered, becoming hazy. The moaning and wailing of an uncountable multitude of tortured souls drowned out the penitents' chanting as something rose up out of the ground. The air around the enormous beast stabilised and the last few Pherachians clustered around their queen were sucked into and through the quivering gateway, flailing haplessly in their terror. The ones Bradon had put to sleep and the unconscious axeman made their final journey more quietly. The prostrate worshippers whose prayer had opened the gateway were still chanting in their religious ecstasy even as they floundered at the edges of the arena. Torches lay scattered on the ground, some extinguished as they fell while others continued to provide light but there would be no light to comfort those who were now in Hell.

Only Bradon and Yennifer, the two sorcerers standing in the middle of arena, seemed able to resist being pulled through the gateway open beneath them.

There were non-human creatures like the amiable Grung and the winged bathgon that Baragwanth had summoned to kill her on a rainy winter's night. There were the bloody horrors of the demon Bradon had banished from the Whitehead Palace. All so insignificant and unthreatening compared to the beast now looming at the centre of Yennifer's gateway. Towering over the nearest humans it was more than twice Bradon's height. Its long slender tail flicked delicately backwards and forth as though testing the air. Feet like the talons of a raptor dug into the sand and rock alike. With a dimpled grey-green hide and twisted horns on either side of its bull-shaped head it was unlike anything she had seen before. Only she had seen its like before; it was the statue she had passed on her run from the harbour, it was the creature engraved on the temple wall at Setovia.

What struck Kristalena most forcefully was the beast's clothes. Multi-hued in tones of pink and brown, images in darker ink were scattered randomly across its raiment. It took a moment for Kristalena to realise the demon's attire was made from tattooed human skin. Shortly after the beast had appeared, the soft evening breeze carried the stench of burning sulphur to Kristalena's nostrils.

'May the Gods protect us,' whispered Tresca.

'Tresca! Get out of here,' Kristalena yelled.

'What is that thing?'

'Get back to the *Maiden* and stand out to sea. I'll signal you when it's safe to come ashore.'

'But—'

'Go and protect my sisters,' Kristalena insisted, giving Tresca a shove. It was like pushing against a rock.

Tresca made no move to lead his sailors back to the harbour and it was easy to see why: more of Yennifer's subjects were gathering amidst the rubble in the passageway leading from the arena, all on their knees, bowing before the enormous demon.

'We're cut off,' Mirk squeaked.

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A Wasting Asset (2016)

Daughter of the Winds series

A Debt to Pay (2023)

A Road to Follow (forthcoming)

A Mistake to Compound (forthcoming)

A Life to Give (forthcoming)

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