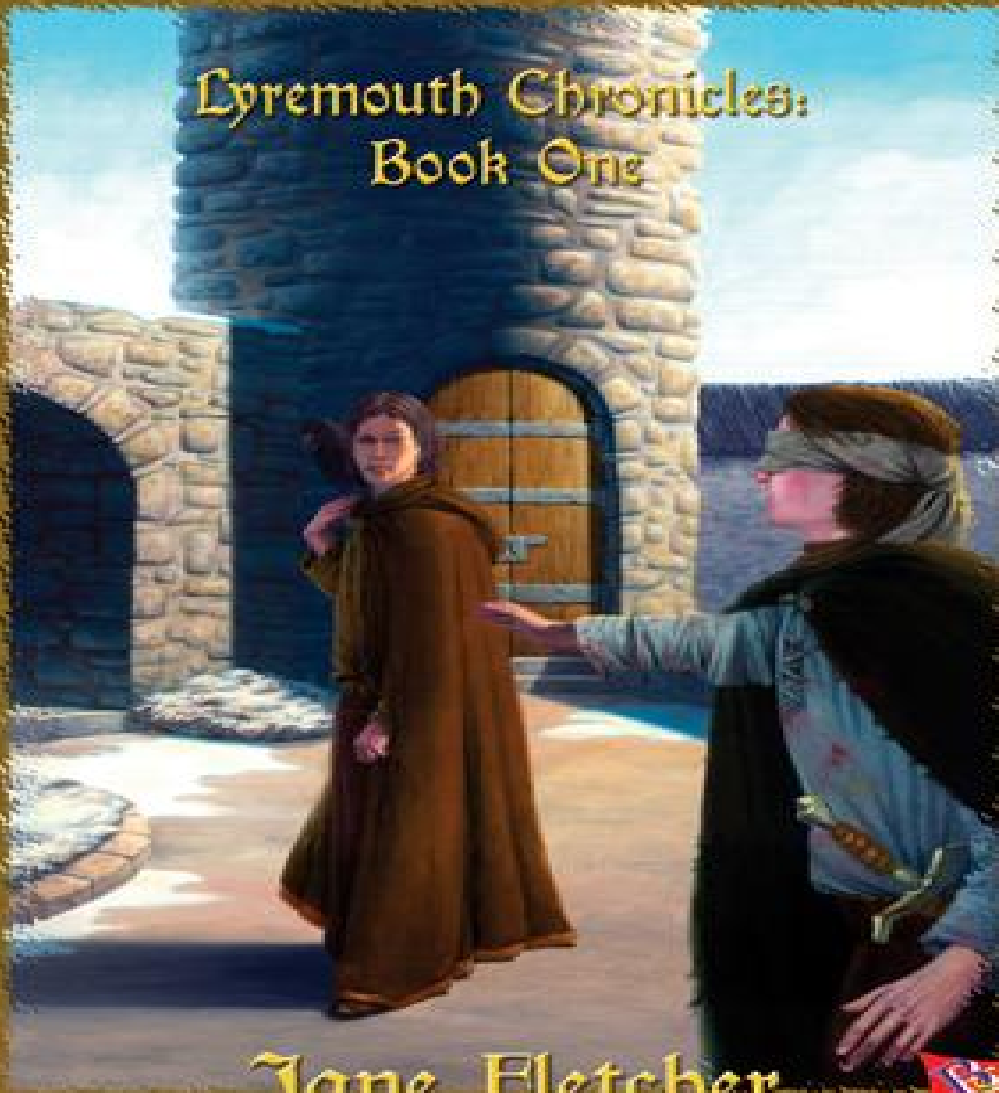


The Exile and The Sorcerer

Lyremouth Chronicles:
Book One



Jane Fletcher



The Exile
and
The Sorcerer
Lyremouth Chronicles Book
One
by
Jane Fletcher



2006

THE EXILE AND THE SORCEROR

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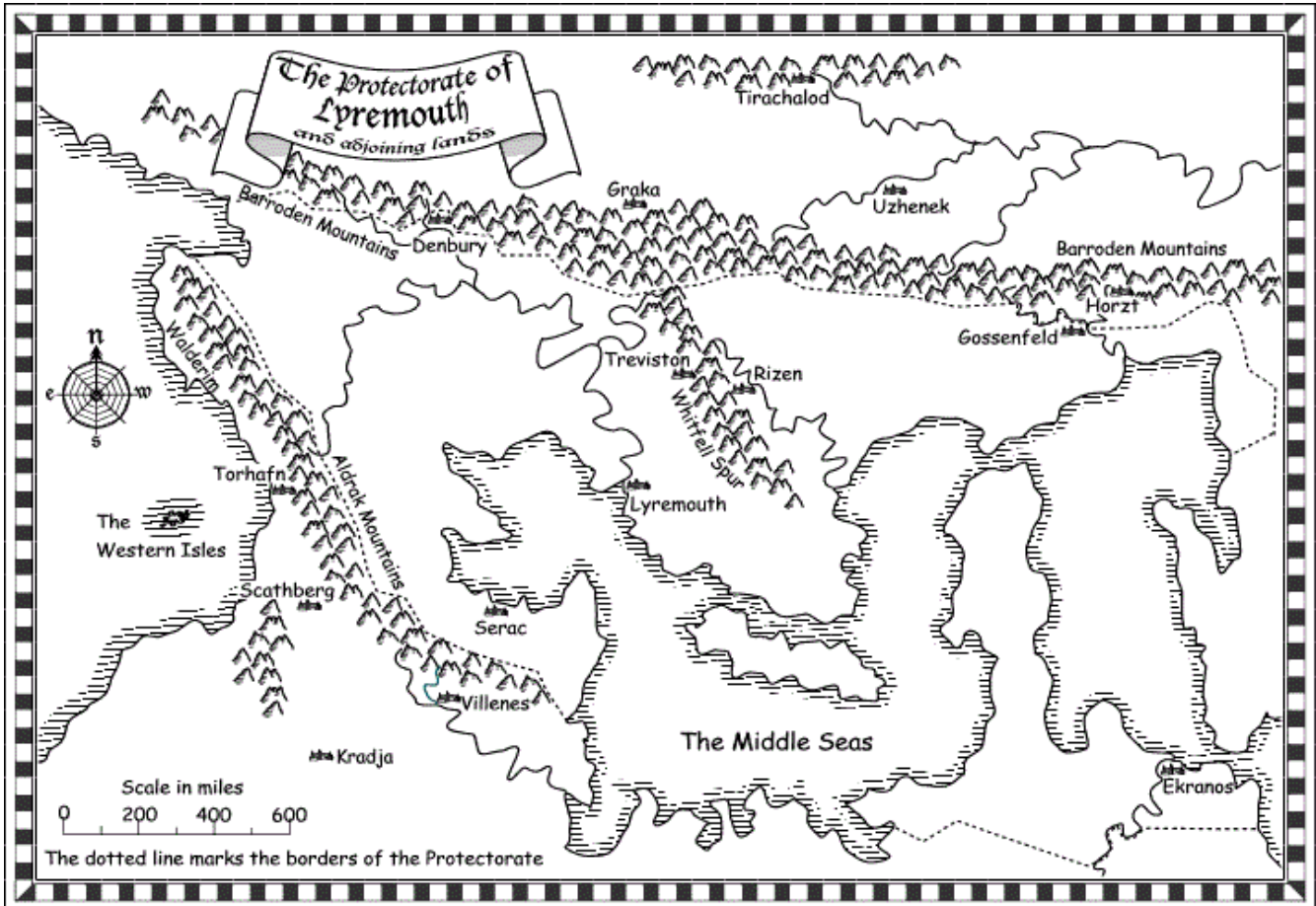
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DEDICATION

In memory of my father

Tom Fletcher

the one who first talked me into reading a book that had no pictures.





Part One

The Exile

CHAPTER ONE—A bad joke

Pre-dawn light filtered through chinks in the stone walls, so faint it did little more than hint at the sleeping figures scattered across the earthen floor. Tevi lay on her side, awake, staring bleakly at nothing. Her thoughts were tormented by memories of a dozen miserable events over the past month. A hard day's work loomed ahead, yet sleep eluded her. She felt utterly alone, despite being surrounded by all her family. A pained grimace crossed Tevi's face at the thought. Her family. She was an enormous disappointment to them. She knew it - how could she not be? She was an even greater disappointment to herself.

The light strengthened with the passing minutes. Then came the wailing cries of seagulls. Tevi rolled onto her back. There was no point trying to return to sleep now and, as if hearing her thought, several bodies stirred. A woman by the hearth sneezed and sat up. Whispered words rippled around the corners of the hall.

"Hey, who's taken my boots?" The first loud voice of the morning. It was Laff - it always was. The question provoked several retorts, the wittiest of which were greeted with laughter.

Tevi closed her eyes. She did not for a moment think her sister's boots were missing, it was just Laff's excuse to be noisy and claim everyone's attention. What Tevi never understood was why people were so pleased by her sister, and so irritated if she tried similar childish ploys herself.

A man stepped over Tevi's legs. She watched him head towards the central hearth, weaving between the shifting bodies. He knelt and began coaxing the fire back to life. All around, people were getting to their feet, brushing dust from their clothes, rolling up blankets and sleeping mats. Noise in the hall rose. The double doors at the end were pushed open. A sudden shaft of daylight glittered on eddies of smoke rolling under the thatched roof.

Tevi turned her head and looked towards the centre of the hall. Laff was standing by the hearth, making a show of stretching the muscles in her shoulders while teasing the men preparing breakfast and exchanging boisterous good-mornings with the women. Everyone seemed to like her. It was a trick Tevi had never been able to master. Did the differences between them mean so much?

It was not their looks. Both were tall, with brown eyes and straight black hair, hacked short. They had small oval faces, on the bland side of good looking, with thin nose and wide, straight lips. However the similarity ended with their appearance. Laff was loud and assertive, quick to argue, quick to make friends. Tevi was always unsure of herself, uncomfortable in company, uninterested in the show of swaggering bravado other women put so much effort into. *'Weak and soft'* were their mother's words to describe Tevi. Maybe, if Laff had been the firstborn, it would not have mattered that she was always the one to take the lead, but, at nineteen, Tevi was the elder by two years.

Virtually everyone in the hall was now moving. Tevi sat up and looked around. She was not the last to stand; a few still slept at the edges of the hall. One couple were lying nearby with their arms around each other. The man was sprawled lazily on his back. The woman, one of Tevi's many aunts, was up on an elbow looking down on him. Tevi's movement caught the aunt's notice. For a moment Tevi was subjected to a critical stare before the aunt bent back to whisper something in her companion's ear. The man's eyes brushed over Tevi as he twisted to giggle into the aunt's shoulder. Tevi felt a flush start to rise on her cheeks. She scrambled to her feet and hastened towards the hearth, but she knew she was being over-sensitive. Judging by the noises last night the couple had plenty of topics to laugh about.

Laff now had her arm around the waist of the young man she had spent the night with. A selection of cousins were standing near, matching her in good-natured banter. Something Laff said made the man blush and raised a howl of laughter from the women. He smiled shyly at Laff, who hugged him still closer.

Despite Tevi's attempt to join the group unobtrusively, Laff noticed her arrival and yelped. "Watch out! Don't tread in the porridge!"

Tevi froze and looked down, but her feet were nowhere near the porridge pot. It was a joke. Laff sniggered.

"You fall for it every time."

Tevi looked up to meet her sister's eyes. "Yes, I know. It's sad. I get caught out because I keep expecting you to grow up. I really should accept that you'll have a toddler's sense of humour all your life."

"Oh, I'm quite grown up." Laff squeezed the young man and asked him playfully, "What do you think?"

"Everywhere except between your ears." Tevi interjected.

Laff's face twisted in a scowl, but before the argument could escalate further they were interrupted by their mother approaching the hearth. Red was tall, a trait inherited by both her daughters. Her body had once been strong and agile, but no more, not since an ill-fated skirmish, four years before. Never again would Red lead the war-band to victory. She hobbled across the hall, leaning heavily on a wooden crutch. Her naturally stern face creased in pain, but she managed to smile indulgently at Laff as she passed. If Red noticed her older daughter she gave no sign.

A slight bustle announced the emergence of Tevi's grandmother, the Queen of Storenseg, from behind her screens. Her status was marked by a wicker partition around her sleeping area. It was the nearest thing to a private room to be found on the island. Two of Tevi's cousins hovered in attendance while the Queen settled herself on a bench. Sound faded as people paused to nod respectfully in the Queen's direction before picking up their conversations again. The hubbub flowed from group to group, the friendly family chaos binding everyone in the room, from laughing grandmothers to squealing babies - everyone except Tevi.

The group around Laff had subtly closed ranks so that Tevi stood outside. Her mother and grandmother were in conversation. They glanced once in Tevi's direction, but their expressions were not warm. Nobody else in the hall seemed anxious to catch her eye. Tevi looked at the porridge heating over the fire. It would be some minutes before it was boiling, and Tevi had no wish to hang around. A nearby basket held several loaves of dark rye bread. She tore a chunk off one, dipped its corner in a bowl of honey, and then headed for the doorway.

No one looked in her direction. The whole family was happy to ignore her existence. Tevi paused at the entrance and glanced back. For an instant the Queen's eyes met hers. The ancient face held an expression of shrewd appraisal, and regret. Once her grandmother had been an ally, but it had changed. Tevi was not sure when, or why, she had lost the Queen's favour. Now, of the whole island, only Brec was ever on her side. Tevi spun on her heel and escaped outside.

The sky to the east was awash with pink. Clear dawn light hit obliquely on the surrounding hills. Seagulls overhead called raucously as they wheeled around the valley and, pitched below the sound of their squabbling, the hissing roar of surf on the beach carried cleanly on the crisp air.

Tevi rested her shoulder against the stone wall of the hall and breathed in deeply, tasting the salt on the air. The smell was comforting. Soon she would be out on the water, with the solid timbers of her boat beneath her feet. Captaining a fishing boat was the only thing she was good at, and the women in the village respected her ability even if they did not respect her.

Thinking about her boat eased the knotted tension in Tevi's stomach. She lowered her gaze from the hilltops and began eating the bread. Abrak's chapel stood in the middle of the village square. An armed woman was posted at the door. Tevi allowed herself a cynical smile at the sight. There was little point setting a guard now, after the chalice had been stolen. In Tevi's opinion there was no likelihood of the thieving raven returning. Obviously a sorcerer had wanted the chalice and had sent the bird to take it. Whoever it was had now got all that was wanted. There was nothing left in the chapel worth stealing. In truth, even the chalice had been purely symbolic. Abrak's

true legacy lay in her potion, the magic brew that gave the women of the islands their strength. Without it they would be even weaker than men.

Tevi could not stop the grimace as she remembered being forced to take her daily dose of the potion, throughout her childhood. It tasted foul, but it had done its work. Her enhanced strength would stay with her for life. Typically, Laff claimed to like the taste, but Tevi was pleased she would never need to take it again. However, at that moment, it was the only thing Tevi could think of to be grateful for. Her situation was hopeless. The friends of her childhood had deserted her one by one, until only Brec remained. Now her family scorned her. It was not that anyone thought she was a bad person, just a bad joke.

The round chapel was the spiritual centre of, not just the village of Holric, but the whole island chain. It marked the spot where Abrak had been burnt, many years before. Now she stood, in spirit, at the side of Rangir, goddess of the sea - or so the myths claimed. Tevi was rather sceptical, but equally she knew she needed whatever help she could get. On impulse, her lips moved as she silently offered a small prayer; *"Please Abrak, speak on my behalf to Rangir. Give me the chance to improve my reputation, so people will speak of me with respect. Show me a way to leave the scorn behind."*

The space around Abrak's chapel was clear, but the edges of the square were busy with people. Clusters stood by the doorways to the halls, soaking in the new spring sunlight before they began their day's work. One group was definitely looking in Tevi's direction, although whether it was herself, or her grandmother's hall that was the topic of conversation was not obvious. Either way Tevi felt self-conscious. She was about to walk away when the character of the activity on the far side of the square changed. A few voices were raised in shouts although Tevi could not make out the words. Heads turned in the direction of pointing fingers.

Tevi stood straight and moved away from the wall just as a running woman burst from a pathway between two buildings. It took a second for Tevi to recognise the runner, Anvil, a senior member of the war-band. It took less than a second longer for the significance to dawn. Anvil was due to be on lookout duty on the Stormfast Cliffs that morning.

"Rathshorn." Tevi whispered to herself. It had to be the explanation. It was early in the year for the women of Rathshorn to come raiding, but Anvil would not be running so frantically just to bring a report on the weather.

Tevi spun back through the doorway. The family looked up, startled from their breakfast. "Anvil, from the lookout... she's coming."

Women in the hall leapt to their feet, but the Queen remained impassive, looking at the doorway. Tevi stepped aside as the drumming of running feet grew louder. Anvil charged in and skidded to a stop before the Queen, gasping for breath.

"Who is it?"

"Is it Rathshorn?"

"What's wrong?" a cacophony of questions greeted the sentry.

The Queen stood and waved her hands for silence. "Let her catch her breath." The questions stopped although the noise did not abate noticeably. Feeling strangely detached from the scene, Tevi leaned against the doorpost and surveyed the hall, taking in the fear on the faces of the old, and the excitement of the young. Laff even looked happy, as if she had received a gift. Tevi gazed at her sister with something between irritation and sorrow. *Maybe not a gift, but a prize*, the thought came to Tevi, *just one more game for Laff to win*.

Anvil had one hand pressed to her side but the heaving of her shoulders had eased enough for speech. "There's a boat. It must have come close during the night."

"Just one?" the Queen asked.

"That's all I could see. There might be more around the headland."

"Anything else?"

"They've got a green pennant on the mast." Anvil's words drew a soft sigh of relief from some corners of the hall. The green flag was a sign of parley.

"So they want to talk." the Queen said thoughtfully.

"They've got shields on display."

"They want to talk while reminding us what they back their words with." The Queen's face twisted in an ironic smile as she amended her words. "Did you recognise the shields?"

"It's Rathshorn." Anvil confirmed everyone's guess.

"It might be a diversion to catch our attention while they attack elsewhere." Red said from her position at the Queen's shoulder.

"True." the Queen agreed. "Send two scouts to Hanken ridge and the Skregin to see if any other boats are lurking. And for this parley we can play their game. Muster the war-band on the beach."

"The whole band?" Red questioned.

"Oh yes. It never hurts to bargain from a position of strength."

Laff was across the hall, heading for the weapon rack, even before the Queen had finished speaking. The rest of the family broke into groups. The men herded children to the back of the hall, the old women stood in the centre talking in low voices, the councillors gathered around the Queen, and the young women of the war-band assembled by the weapon rack.

Tevi joined the war-band, her heart thumping. All her life there had been relative peace - a few minor raids, such as the one where her mother had been hurt. However, the new Queen of Rathshorn was minded for war. Everybody knew that trouble was brewing.

Swords hung in their scabbards under the shields. Tevi took hers and adjusted the belt round her waist. Around her women were putting on helmets and greaves. It was all so serious, deadly serious, yet the atmosphere was like children playing on the beach.

"Tevi, what do you think. Is it war?" Tevi glanced over her shoulder to see Laff, her eyes alight, as excited as the young girls. In the enthusiasm Laff's hostility was forgotten. It was the first time in months she had addressed Tevi without a sneer.

"Hopefully not." Tevi said quietly.

"NOT?"

"I don't want to see women killed for no good reason."

"You're frightened." Laff's voice returned to its usual contempt.

Tevi cursed herself; she should have held her tongue. "It isn't that..." her words were cut off.

"I'm sure it is. And in your place I'd be frightened. It's only because the handle sticks out of the scabbard that you know which end of your sword to hold. And you're supposed to lead the war-band. It's going to be so embarrassing following you. You're the worst fighter we have. You'll be dead within two minutes."

"Then you won't have the embarrassment of following me for long." Tevi snapped back as she rammed the helmet onto her head and left the hall.

Of course, Laff's words were true. If it was war then Tevi knew she would be dead within days. Her incompetence at fighting was a running joke. The sight of Abrak's chapel made Tevi remember her prayer. *Give me the chance to improve my reputation, so people will speak of me with respect.* Another bad joke. No one would talk ill of a woman who died in battle, no matter how quickly or incompetently.

Tevi's face was grim as she followed the elders towards the beach, gathering the members of the war-band from their family halls as they went. The women were in high spirits, laughing with each other, but only Brec had a smile for Tevi.

"I hear we have visitors." Brec said as she joined the line of armed women, her well-formed features holding their usual easy grin.

"Just one boatload, so far." Tevi replied.

"So we're all going to pose prettily on the beach for them." Brec's laughter rang out.

"I think that's about it." Despite her bleak mood Tevi found a grin rising to her own lips.

Unfailing good humour was possibly Brec's most valuable trait - that and the simple, uncritical friendship she offered. Tevi was aware her own feelings for Brec were altogether more complicated. Everyone liked Brec. She was witty, honourable and good-looking, skilled with both sword and fishing net, easy-going but not weak-willed. *So why is she eager to be my friend, when anyone in the village would welcome her company?* The thought sprang from Tevi's bitter mood.

The war-band gathered in an untidy phalanx at the head of the beach. Tevi, her mother and the matriarchs of the families stood slightly detached from the warriors, directly behind the Queen. They had barely reached position when the boat from Rathshorn rounded the Stormfast Cliffs and cut across the blue waters of the bay. The figures of several women were visible on the small craft, working in unison, taking in the sail as they neared the beach.

Tevi's eyes were on the boat but, behind her, she heard the excited exchanges between members of the war-band.

"What do you think they want?"

"Might be some sort of ultimatum."

"As a pretext for war?"

"Could be."

"Perhaps Queen Fearful wants her brother back."

"I say we should let her take him - he's the next best thing to useless."

"You've had him?"

"Only once." The exaggerated exasperation in the woman's voice brought yelps of laughter that were quickly stifled by glares from the older matriarchs.

The boat ran aground in the shallows. Seven women jumped out, up to their thighs in the waves. Together they hauled the boat up the beach, beyond the reach of the tide. An older woman then disembarked and splashed through ankle high water. The green pennant from the boat was tied to a long spear in her hand. A dozen yards from the Queen she stopped and planted the butt of her spear in the sand.

There was silence while the two groups studied each other. Tevi looked at the leader of the Rathshorn women, taking in her spiky white hair and twin scars across her left cheek. It was always strange to see a face you could not recognise. Normally you could go months on end, even years, without seeing one. The temptation was to try to mentally force the features into familiar contours.

At last the stranger spoke. "I am First-in-battle, cousin and envoy to Queen Fearless-warrior of Rathshorn." Her clear voice was loud over the sound of the waves.

"I am Fists-of-thunder, Queen of Storenseg. I welcome you to the island and to the village of Holric." Tevi's grandmother replied, at her most austere.

The envoy's gaze raked appraisingly over the Queen before continuing. "My companions and I have travelled far to speak with you. We bring an offer that will aid both our islands."

"Then we will be pleased to hear to it." Despite the conciliatory words there was an icy edge of sarcasm in the Queen's voice.

The envoy was unflustered. "May I introduce my companions? This is Raging-shark, foremost in victories, whose courage is famed in song throughout the isles." A tall, redheaded woman nodded. "This is Steadfast-shield-wall, the despair of all who stand against her, fearless and invincible. This is..."

Tevi stopped listening. It was a meaningless formality to identify the women before the parley could commence. The ascribed feats were largely fictitious. The warlike birth names were never normally used. All the women on the islands were known by abbreviations or puns on their birth names, or as in Tevi's case, acquired nicknames.

The envoy finished speaking. The Queen continued the naming ceremony, with the small group assembled between her and the war-band. Brec's grandmother Lizard was introduced as Dragon-heart. Miam, ancient, half-blind and deaf, as Mighty-sword-arm. All were credited with feats of valour. Tevi would have found it funny, if she had not been dreading her own introduction.

The Queen was nearing the end of the line. There was only Red and Tevi to go. "This is my daughter, Blood-of-my-foes, a warrior whose name is spoken with awe, who has triumphed in countless battles." For once the acclamation was completely true - or had been once. The envoy looked with interest, but her attention was fixed on the crutch under Red's arm. "And finally this is my grand-daughter, Strikes-like-lightning, who boldly leads the war-band."

Tevi fought to keep the grimace from her face. It was decidedly weak praise, but anything stronger might have drawn sniggers from the women behind her. Now at last they could all go back to Holric, and learn the nature of the envoy's mission.

Thick brown wax sealed the stopper of the terracotta flask. Beneath the dried surface it was still tacky and dull red in hue, where Tevi's knife picked it back. Her hands shook as she worked, aware that everyone in the hall was watching - not that there were crowds; in fact Tevi had never seen the royal hall so empty. Apart from herself and the Queen, the only ones present were the eight women from Rathshorn, the matriarchs of the seven main families and three veteran captains of Storenseg's war-band, including Red. Those who would normally have occupied the hall, mainly domestic slaves and the very old, had been ejected. Guards outside the doorway kept the curious at a distance. Undeterred, folk gathered some way off, peering in as best they could. Shouts drifted around the square, but no one inside was yet talking.

The Queen was the only one seated. Tevi stood before her grandmother, struggling with the stubborn cork. She could feel her mother's eyes burning into her back, imagining the shame should it be said that the leader of the Storenseg war-band could not fight her way into a wine flask, but soon Tevi had scraped away the last of the sealing wax and the stopper was loose enough to be pulled.

Tevi balanced the flask in the crook of her arm and poured a stream of yellow wine into a drinking bowl. The sweet, sickly smell seemed too heavy for the early hour, yet custom had to be observed. She offered the drink first to the Queen, who accepted with a faint nod and took a tiny mouthful, barely wetting her lips. Of course, anyone with her grandmother's years of experience would be alert to the risk of negotiating when light-headed. Tevi moved on to the envoy and again offered the bowl. The woman from Rathshorn also swallowed a sip - a small sip, but enough. The tension in Tevi's neck eased slightly. Whatever else the envoy might say, by all rules of honour, she had now shared their hospitality and could not declare war.

As the Queen's chief advisor, Brec's grandmother, Lizard, was the next to be offered the wine. It was thereafter passed from woman to woman in order of seniority. Some accepted with exaggerated formality, others knocked back the wine as if throwing down a challenge. Last of all Tevi herself took a draft. The sweet liquid rolled over her tongue like waves over sand. She had not realised how dry her mouth was.

With the wine ritual over, benches were pulled from the sides and arranged forming a square about the hearth. The women sat. The drinking bowl was refilled and commenced a second, less formal circuit of the hall. Tevi found herself at the end of a bench, next to her mother. Her eyes flicked from person to person. The older women sat in postures of rigid authority, their backs as straight as swords. The younger ones were more blatantly aggressive, with their feet square on the ground, arms folded or braced on their knees, bodies tensed as if ready to leap up and hit someone, and fierce expressions as if waiting for an excuse to do so. Tevi tried to imitate the pose, but she felt ridiculous, a poor burlesque of her sister. She prayed the women from Rathshorn did not realise.

It was hard not to wince as she met Blaze's eyes. Blaze, a captain of the war-band, had been the one charged with the impossible task of training Tevi in the arts of war. Impossible not because Tevi lacked strength or speed, or that she was half-hearted about weapon practice. It was just Tevi's inability to put what she knew into effect. The set exercises were easy, the faint, parry, thrust and advance, but as soon as she was pitted against a living opponent Tevi's defence crumbled so she might as well have been naked and blindfolded. "Watch her feet out of the corner of your eye. Don't just follow her sword! Think ahead." Blaze had screamed over the years, until even she had given up in disgust. Her caustic remarks about Tevi's incompetence were common knowledge. Blaze swore Tevi was the worst excuse for a warrior she had ever attempted to train.

The voice of the Queen broke the silence, pulling Tevi back from her brooding. "And now, may we ask the reason for your coming?"

The envoy got to her feet. Her gaze travelled slowly over the women assembled before she fixed upon the Queen. "I speak on behalf of Queen Fearless-warrior, defender of her people, head of the families of Rathshorn, rightful Queen of all the Western Isles..." She got no further.

"You must be aware I would also claim that last title." The Queen's voice was firm.

The interruption was accepted with a faint smile. "As would several others."

"Not all have history or law on their side."

"True. However the rival claims of Rathshorn and Storenseg are not the subject I wish to discuss." the envoy said with only the barest hint of conciliation.

"Then perhaps you should leave the titles until such time as you do." The steel underlying the Queen's voice was unmistakable.

After long seconds of silence the envoy continued, but less overtly confrontational. "I have come to speak concerning the island of Argenseg. This island is by treaty, and by will of the people, subject to the crown of Rathshorn. But, as you know, twenty years ago corrupt traitors overthrew their lawful rulers. They have not honoured the oaths of their mothers. They have not sent tribute; instead they have sent bands of pirates to harry the villages of Rathshorn. Their insults can not go unpunished any longer. It is the intention of the Queen to reclaim her rightful property."

"Why do you come to tell us? Surely your Queen is not seeking our assistance."

"We do not ask you to fight beside us. But there is help you may give. Storenseg is blessed with mines that yield ores of the highest quality. Blades made by your blacksmiths are the envy of the islands. It sometimes happens that these blades find their way into rebel hands. If you agree to stop this trade then Queen Fearless-warrior would take it as a sign of goodwill. And Rathshorn is always loyal to her friends."

"Swords may go from Storenseg to Argenseg by many routes. And I can hardly deprive my traders of their livelihood." the Queen said reasonably.

"Rathshorn will undertake to buy all the weapons you have for sale, at a fair price."

"What benefit do I get from interfering in the concerns of my traders?"

The envoy was silent for a while, as if weighing her next words. "There are some who say Storenseg has given aid to the rebels. Some, no doubt misguided, even say Storenseg first encouraged the treasonous revolt. A friendly gesture would silence the calls for retaliation, otherwise Queen Fearless-warrior might be hard put to ignore the council of war."

"Thank you, I think you have made yourself clear. Is this all you wish to say?" By her tone the Queen might almost have been bored.

"It is." the envoy said.

"An interesting offer, and one I must consider further. While I prepare my answer, you will be our honoured guests."

"My crew and I are willing to camp on the beach."

"Lodgings will be found for you. And, so that none of your misguided councillors may say I slighted the envoy of Queen Fearless-warrior, tonight we will hold a feast in your honour."

The Queen stood, signalling the end of the formal debate. The meeting broke into small groups. The matriarchs huddled together, waiting for the envoy to go before expressing their opinions. However the envoy clearly had other business before she was lead from the hall. She made her way through the melee around the heath and waylaid Red.

"Blood-of-my-foes, it has been a long time since we met, and the last time I saw you was over the rim of a shield. I'm sorry we did not have time to talk on that day."

"It was a brief visit to Rathshorn." Red spoke so calmly it took Tevi a second to realise they were talking about her mother's last, ill-fated raid.

The envoy went on, "But you went away with such valuable souvenirs. The Queen still greatly misses her brother, not to mention the fine jewellery and weapons."

"And no doubt she complains I scorched the roof of her hall." Red said, dryly.

"She was none too pleased." The envoy's tone was also light-hearted. "But I heard you were wounded returning to your boat. Now I see you walk with a crutch. Has your leg not healed?" There was no mistaking the interest in the state of Red's health.

"One souvenir of Rathshorn I would rather not have taken."

"It has been a bad time for Storenseg, losing both you and Abrak's chalice." The envoy was veering towards smugness.

"Neither loss is unbearable."

"Of course." The envoy's eyes shifted abruptly to Tevi. "And now your daughter leads the war-band. She must be a great comfort to you."

The urge to shuffle out of view almost overwhelmed Tevi, but somehow she managed to meet the envoy's enquiring gaze. Before anything else could be said, they were joined by Blaze who addressed the envoy.

"My name is Blazing-sword. If you are ready, I have been appointed to lead you to your lodgings."

"Ah yes, thank-you. I was just commending Strikes-like-lightning as leader of your war-band. Although young, the child of such an illustrious mother must surely be a warrior to be reckoned with. Doubtless the defence of Storenseg rests safe on her shoulders."

"Her skill with a sword is the talk of all the island. I have trained many warriors, but never before have I met her like." Blaze said with a deadpan face.

The crowds moved apart as Blaze led the women from Rathshorn across the square to a hall with sleeping space to spare. After a short discussion at the door two of the visitors trotted to the beach to collect such things as they needed. Several young girls tagged along, whooping in excitement, but the majority of the population remained, milling about the square. Families, eager to learn what had happened, surrounded their matriarchs as they emerged from the royal hall.

Tevi stood by the doorway, watching until the envoy disappeared from view. As quietly as possible she slipped around the edge of the square, avoiding all the questioning looks. Few would chose her as a source of information, but she had no wish to be involved in the overblown and facile arguments that she knew would take place.

Brec caught up with her at the entrance of a narrow passage between two halls. Her friend's habitual good-natured grin was replace by anxious, wide-eyed concern.

"Tevi, what's happening? What did they say?"

"They're playing some sort of game... the goddess knows what the point is. Our grandmothers will have a better idea of what it's about than me."

"Someone said they've given an ultimatum about selling swords to Argenseg." Brec said.

"I'm sure there's more to it. Come on, let's get away from all this noise and I'll tell you everything they said." Tevi gestured for Brec to follow.

The pair of them started between the buildings, leaving the bustle of the square behind. Before they had taken a dozen steps another voice assailed them.

"So. Did the women of Rathshorn tremble in their boots at the sight of our mighty war leader?"

Tevi turned around. At the entrance to the passage stood Laff, arms crossed and a sour expression of disdain on her face.

"I'm sure you won't be at all surprised to learn they hardly noticed me." Tevi said.

"What, you managed to avoid drawing attention to yourself by walking into a bench? You must be having a good day." Laff moved closer, until she was less than an arm's-length away. The two sisters glared at each other until Tevi sighed in exasperation and dropped her head - she was not in the mood to deal with her sister's hostility.

"Look, I know you're angry that I was at the meeting and you weren't. Honestly I'd much rather you'd been there instead of me. But I wasn't given the option, I didn't chose to be the firstborn daughter." Tevi spoke brusquely.

"I couldn't care less about the meeting." Judging by her tone, Laff's words were blatantly untrue.

"Then what are you so wound up about?"

"You; and the way you're going to bring shame upon our family." Laff spat out the words.

"I'll try my best not to."

"Your best is pathetic. Strikes-like-lightning - they named you well. You couldn't hit the same spot twice for trying." Laff rephrased one of Blaze's jokes.

"And you could do so much better?" Tevi snapped. She was starting to get angry.

"Of course I could! I should lead the war-band, not you."

"Then perhaps you should go to mother and suggest she reschedules our births." Over Laff's shoulder Tevi saw a group of women begin to gather at the passage entrance, attracted by the raised voices. It was time to cut the argument short, but Laff was not about to let it drop.

"How do you have the nerve to bring mother into this! She was a great warrior. She must be so ashamed to have you as a daughter."

"Oh she is. She makes that quite clear." Tevi spun about and began to walk away.

"You aren't fit to follow her. You should have been a boy - you go out of your way to act like one. How far do you take the act?"

Tevi knew she should have kept walking, but there was an edge to Laff's voice that could not be ignored. She turned back and snarled, "At least I don't act like a girl who has to think with her sword since she keeps her brain between her legs."

Laff grinned, pleased to have provoked a reaction. She looked her sister slowly up and down before saying, "Oh, no. No one would ever accuse you of that. I don't know about being a real warrior, you're not even a real woman."

Tevi's hands clenched into fists, she could feel herself shaking. It had been a bad move to start trading insults with Laff, but she could not back off now, not with the audience. "I'm enough of a woman to ram that stupid remark back down your throat."

"You think you want to try?" Laff was, if anything, getting louder. "Where were you and Brec going? Off to hold hands and stare into each other's eyes? But I'm probably being unfair to Brec. Perhaps she doesn't realise you'd like to play the man for her - on your back with your pants down."

Laff had gone too far, much too far. Tevi leapt forwards, her fist swinging for her sister's face. The sudden attack took Laff by surprise but she managed to raise an arm to parry. Even so, the punch clipped her on the side of the head, and knocked her backwards into the wall of the hall. Tevi swiftly moved in for a second blow, but her sister kicked at her legs, causing her to stumble and miss.

The fight was short and predictable. Tevi attempted to take the offensive; she knew she was better in attack than defence. Unfortunately, her sister was equally well aware of this. They traded a few quick punches; most were easily blocked. Then Laff connected with a hard kick to the knee. Tevi did not see the unexpected low strike coming - she never did. The first she knew was pain exploding in her leg. She crumpled forward, straight onto another vicious punch to the stomach that sent her crashing to the ground, gasping for breath.

Laff stood over her fallen sister. "You really should have been a man. I'm sure even our brothers could fight better. You're..." Laff's words were cut short.

"What do you think you're doing?" Blaze pushed her way through the row of spectators and arrived at Laff's shoulder.

"Tevi and I had a disagreement."

"This isn't the time to pick fights with her." Blaze said.

"Tevi started it."

"Then she's a bigger fool than I thought. And you're no better." Blaze's voice was low, but biting. "Supposing one of the women from Rathshorn had seen this."

"So what if they had?" Laff sneered, still looking down at Tevi.

Blaze pulled Laff around and glared into her eyes. "We all know Tevi is as much use to the war-band as a straw dummy - slightly less, we could burn the dummy to cook our dinner over. But she's your mother's eldest daughter and she has to lead us. How would they react in Rathshorn if they learnt the truth? Have you considered the boost it would give them, and what it would mean in battle? When you're as old as me you'll know that half of fights come down to confidence." Blaze paused for a moment, while the defiance faded from Laff's face. "Try to act like adults, at least until the envoy leaves."

Blaze stalked away. Laff gave a last angry glare at her sister and followed. The crowd dispersed. Tevi managed to haul herself to her feet and braced herself against the wall, massaging her damaged knee.

"You should have let me tackle Laff, I was only half a second behind you." Brec said.

"I lost my temper." Tevi did not look up as she spoke.

"I don't blame you. I don't know what gets into Laff sometimes... she can have a nasty mind. What made her say that?"

This time Tevi glanced at her friend, then dropped her eyes back to her knee. Brec was a good friend, but Tevi wondered how she could be so naive. Not that Tevi would complain. Of all the women on Storenseg, Brec was the only one Tevi could rely on for support, the only one she could talk to. But even so, there was no way she could admit to Brec that Laff's accusation was true.

The Queen's private sleeping area had its own small hearth, though the fire was unlit on the warm spring morning. A rush mat on a bed of straw took up a third of the space. Two low stools were the only furniture. The Queen sat on one, her chief adviser, Lizard, on the other. Their heads were close as they spoke in low voices, discussing the envoy's message.

War had taken both of the Queen's sisters long ago, depriving her of close family support. Lizard had filled the gap. Together the two women had dominated Storenseg affairs for decades. The current situation was merely the latest in a series of potential crises they had avoided, or overcome.

Lizard was scathing in her appraisal of the Queen of Rathshorn. "Silly young fool."

"She'll learn - if she lives long enough." the Queen said.

"Do you think she'll attack Storenseg?"

"I think she'd like to. Control of the two biggest islands is a logical first step in conquering all the Western Isles." The Queen sighed. "Of course she won't be able to take Storenseg, but a lot of women will die while she finds that out."

"The traditional claims to rule all the islands create a lot of wild dreams."

"I know. I'd drop my own claim with no regrets, if I could do it without losing face. I worry about Red trying once I'm gone."

"She won't." Lizard said confidently.

"Can you be sure?"

"I agree she lacks political sense, but she knows enough about war to spot a lost cause."

"And Fearless doesn't." The Queen said firmly. After a moment's silence, she continued. "We need her to learn - and quickly. If I read things right she's heading for war, but can't make her mind up on the target. We need Fearless to go for Argenseg. She'll be able to take it all right; it's not a tenth the size of Storenseg, but she'll lose a fifth of her war-band. It might give her a better grasp of the practicalities of war, and she certainly won't be in a fit state to worry us."

"It would be comforting if she did decide on Argenseg, but I'm worried about this nonsense over the swords. It sounds as if she's trying to create a pretext for war with us. There was nothing subtle about the threat at the end." Lizard said.

"I noticed. But I don't think it's reached that point. This parley is just an excuse to send a party to scout out how things stand - you saw the envoy's eyes light up at the sight of Red limping. We need to make sure she goes back with the right message."

Lizard pursed her lips. "So what will you do about selling swords to Argenseg?"

"That's a hard one. To agree might be taken as a sign of weakness. To refuse would give an excuse to attack. But, if I'm right, she's not serious about the swords, and she can always find another excuse."

"True."

"I have to make polite noises and do nothing. We certainly aren't going to sell Rathshorn swords they can use to cut our throats with." The Queen looked thoughtful. "Perhaps I could send Fearless's brother back as an irrelevant gesture."

"That won't please Hilo - she's taken rather a liking to him."

"There's no shortage of men." the Queen snorted.

"We can't afford bickering among our families."

The two women sat in silence for a while, with identical frowns on their faces.

"And of course there's Queen Axe on Skuden." Lizard said at last.

"In what way?"

"She'd like to take Breel from us. Axe isn't stupid. She knows if Rathshorn attacks we'll fight them off eventually, but we won't be able to send reinforcements to Breel while we do it."

"Thank the goddess Fearless and Axe have a blood-feud so they can't co-operate directly." The Queen's tones were heartfelt.

"But if Axe attacks Breel and draws off some of our warriors, Fearless may think to turn it to her own advantage, and Axe may count on that."

The Queen groaned and sank her face into her hands, but after a moment she looked up, her face set in determined expression. "All right. We need to take a three-prong action. First we'll try and manoeuvre Argenseg into provoking Fearless - something she can't ignore. Perhaps we can suggest to some of their hotheads that it might be funny to take another of Fearless's brothers captive. Second we send our own envoy to Varseg. They've given more support to Argenseg than us. We exaggerate their danger and offer a mutual-protection treaty so if either is attacked the other will come to their aid."

"I doubt they'll agree." Lizard sounded unsure.

"Probably not. But I have sufficient reputation for engineering victories that they won't reject the offer out of hand. And their acceptance isn't the main object. We can make sure the news gets back to Fearless. Since Rathshorn is sandwiched between Varseg and us, she'll have to consider the risk that if she attacks either way she'll have an enemy at her back."

Lizard smiled. "And if she can't see the danger she has plenty of advisors who can."

"Finally we send Red to Breel. We've always been fair to Breel, and allowed them a lot of autonomy. If they have to choose between us and Axe I think they'll chose us. Red can no longer fight herself, but she could inspire the women of Breel to fight in their island's defence."

"And organise them for their maximum effect." Lizard added.

"Quite. If Axe knows that Red is in charge it will make her realise Breel will not be an easy battle, even without any other support from us."

Lizard smiled. "It's all sounding like one of your typical schemes. And just the news that you're playing politics ought to make Fearless think twice - or make someone remind her of the times when others tried to attack you, and found themselves out-maneuvred before the first sword was drawn."

"A good reputation can be the best weapon of all." the Queen said. "My family has a lot of prestige, even with the loss of the chalice. I want to use our name to bluff a way through this without a fight. We want to make sure every woman on the whole island chain is reminded of the things Red and I have achieved. We want to make sure they think of the royal family of Storenseg as dangerous enemies."

"I do see one potential problem." Lizard said after a moment's pause.

The Queen's face was grim. "I know... Tevi."

CHAPTER TWO—In the hay barn

By mid-afternoon Tevi was able to climb to the fortified stockade high on the hillside, although her knee still shot twinges up her leg whenever she shifted her weight awkwardly. The stockade would be needed to keep livestock safe from raids if war came. Tevi had volunteered to inspect the structure. Her intention had been to avoid attention and get time alone to think, however Brec had insisted on coming along. There was no easy way to turn down the offer of company - not without getting into a debate on the interpretation Laff might put on their going off together.

The stockade was a large enclosure surrounded by a deep ditch with a timber reinforced embankment. Its layout made use of natural rock faces wherever possible. From its entrance, Tevi looked down on the valley. Nestling among fields far below, Holric looked small, like a toy village made by a child in the sand. Tevi felt as if she could put out her hand and knock it flat. She almost wished that she could. Her brooding was interrupted when Brec trotted over from the far side of the enclosure.

"The ditch and bank are sound, but the palisade needs a bit of work in places." Brec said as she came to a stop.

"It's the same this side. I'll tell grandmother she needs to send some women up here with axes. What do you reckon - about two days work for three women?" Tevi said.

"That would do it easily."

Tevi nodded but said nothing more; neither did she show signs of wanting to return to Holric. Brec frowned at her friend's dark mood.

"Come on. Let's go back and see how preparations are going. We could check out the cooking - maybe sample a few bits to make sure they're doing it properly." Brec said in her brightest tones.

"You could. I might go and see my boat."

"Surely it can wait?" Brec sounded exasperated.

"We've missed out on fishing today. We'll have to set off early tomorrow. I want to be sure everything is ready."

"I'll come with you."

"You don't have to." Tevi said quietly.

"Yes I do. But I warn you, if you don't cheer up I'm going to start singing happy little songs."

Brec was irrepressible, and at last, Tevi smiled. "That's quite a threat."

"I know. That's why I reserve it for dire emergencies." Brec said in mock-seriousness.

Their route to the beach took them through the jumble of barns and workshops on the outskirts of the village. Decades of trampling feet had worn hollows in the dark soil. Dry-stone walls lined either side of the path, overhung by steep thatch roofs reaching nearly to the ground.

The fires in the smithy were low and untended when they passed. The carpenter's, potter's and tanner's workshops were also deserted. The arrival of the boat from Rathshorn and coming feast had disrupted the daily schedule. Little real work was being done. The men still cleaned and cooked, but most of the older women were using whatever excuse they could to gather in groups and discuss the prospect of war. The younger women had assembled on the open ground beside the river, where they practised their swordplay with even more zeal than usual, hoping their ardour, if not their skill, would impress the visitors.

Outside one of the stores, a group of three men were struggling with a large cider barrel. One was Brec's brother Sparrow, the others were distant cousins of Tevi. As soon as she saw what they were doing Brec marched over and put a restraining hand on the barrel. The men immediately stood back.

"Is this for the feast tonight?" Brec asked.

"Yes. Grandmother told us to get it." Sparrow answered defensively for the group.

"No one will drink it if you stir up all the dregs."

"We were trying to keep it steady."

Brec relented and smiled. "Don't worry, Tevi and I will carry it."

"We'll cope." Sparrow said softly.

"I'd rather not take the chance, I'd like to drink some - or to be more precise I'd like to drink quite a lot."

"We'll be careful."

"Tevi and I will carry it." Brec said decisively.

"They'll be all right without us." Tevi said, wishing to spare her knee.

"We can't leave the boys to lug this to the main square. It must weigh twice as much as the three of them put together." Brec said.

It was an exaggeration, but the full barrel was certainly too heavy for the men to lift. However, thanks to Abrak's potion, it presented no problem for Brec and Tevi. Tevi's knee complained with each step, but the need to avoid shaking the barrel gave them the excuse to go slowly. They wove their way to the main square with the men tagging along. Brec kept up a stream of banter.

"You don't want to pull a muscle, else you'll be no fun at the feast, and even less fun afterwards - although the fun thing to pull then doesn't have a muscle in it." Brec said.

Tevi's cousins giggled.

Brec's flow of innuendo continued. The men blushed at her more outrageous teasing. Sparrow walked beside Tevi, smiling at her shyly. He was barely an inch taller than her, with long hair and large brown eyes. As children, they had played together, collecting crabs and shellfish on the beach and acting out games of make-believe. As adults their lives were divided by the roles allocated to them, but he was still someone Tevi could consider a friend. He seemed to like her.

"It's kind of you to help us." Sparrow said.

"Brec was right. It's too heavy for you to carry. Lizard should have sent some women." Tevi replied.

"I guess grandmother didn't think."

"She must have a lot on her mind."

"Do you think Rathshorn is going to declare war on us?" Sparrow asked seriously.

Brec heard the question and broke off her own conversation. "Don't worry. We'll look after you. The Rathshorn war-band won't stand a chance. We'll cut them into pieces to use as fish-bait."

The assertion made the men smile, although a trace of unease remained in their eyes. Brec returned to her attempt at seduction, clearly feeling she had said all the men wanted to hear. Tevi was not so certain. Every woman in the village was eagerly debating strategy and politics - were the men so different? She knew Sparrow was not stupid. Surely he could not be content with Brec's trite boasting? Yet he asked no more questions.

The barrel was finally deposited on a stand in the village square. The five young people stood a while, talking. Tevi was anxious to leave, but Brec prolonged the conversation, her attention fastened on one of Tevi's cousins, who appeared flustered, but not displeased.

The square was busy. While waiting for Brec to finish flirting Tevi had plenty of time to look around. It seemed that she was getting more than her usual share of disapproving looks, but it was impossible to say whether it was due to Laff's accusation, or if people were for the first time seriously considering the prospect of her leading the war-band. *In fact*, she told herself, *it could be that I'm looking for evidence of people's dislike, rather than trying to ignore it*. It was hard not to be over-sensitive.

At last, Brec was ready to continue to the beach. They walked in silence. Brec's face was unusually serious. Tevi assumed her friend's thoughts were still with the young man she had been chatting up. As they reached the boat, Brec said. "Do you mind if I say something?"

"Would saying 'no' stop you?" Tevi replied with a grin - the sight of the boat had put her in a better mood. It always did. She placed both hands flat on the hull and felt its solid reassurance flow into her. Tevi glanced over her shoulder. Brec was staring at her own feet and her jaw was set. She had clearly built herself up to say something and was not going to be deflected. A sense of premonition kicked at Tevi's stomach.

Brec swallowed and said. "You like Sparrow, don't you?"

"Yes. He's a nice lad. Friendly to talk to."

"I don't mean like that."

"What do you mean?"

Brec hesitated for a second, biting her lip. "I mean... like... as a man."

Tevi fixed her eyes on the boat, not daring to face her friend. *Laff has got even Brec wondering*, she thought, *What must the rest of the village be thinking?* Out loud she said, "Well... yes. He's good-looking, and he..." Tevi's words died.

Brec was also not at her most fluent. "Because... well, what Laff said... before you hit her..."

"She was just being spiteful." Tevi fought to keep her voice steady.

"Oh, I know that. But I think I know what made her think of it."

Tevi's mouth went dry.

Brec's words came out in a rush. "Tevi, I can tell you're nervous with men. I know that doesn't mean anything... lots of women are, they just hide it. That's what the stupid bragging is about. I do it myself, like with your cousin just now." Brec raised her eyes, her expression worried, but sincere. "But you've got no need to be nervous. Lots of the men like you, I can tell. Sparrow likes you. You must have noticed how he's started hanging around you. And... I think he's just waiting for you to... say something. You have to be more..." Brec stumbled to a stop.

Tevi could think of nothing to say. For a moment, the truth hung on her lips. *Actually, Laff was on the right track. I'm attracted to women, not men.* They were words that could not be said. Tevi managed to mumble, "I don't know..."

"You can't let rumours get out of hand, just because you're not like Laff, chasing after every man like a bitch in heat."

Even if she was naive, Brec was right, but Tevi did not want to discuss it - could not discuss it. In a desperate bid to shift the conversation, Tevi latched on to the topic of Laff. "You're spot on about my sister. I think she's had every available man in Holric."

"And a few who weren't really available. There's going to be a big bust-up one of these days." Brec agreed, but her expression was troubled.

"I don't know how she gets away with it. She's not even discrete." Tevi could hear herself babbling and stopped short. Brec's candour deserved a better response. "But thanks... I'll... er, think about it."

Brec brightened. "If you want I'll speak to Sparrow for you."

"No." Tevi said quickly, but then gave an apologetic grimace. "I'll sort it out myself."

"All right." Brec gave a sigh of relief and made her own attempt to change the subject. "Why does Laff hate you so much?"

It was not the way Tevi would have liked the conversation to go, but she tried to give an honest answer. "I don't know if she does. I think she just puts on a show to distance herself from me."

"Why?"

Because she's astute enough not to get linked to a loser. Tevi did not voice the words; they were too blunt and too simplistic. As a child, she could remember Laff running after her, adoration in her eyes, but at

some stage Laff had learned that her big sister was not someone to be proud of. How much had the discovery hurt? Tevi suspected most of the venom behind her sister's attacks was revenge for that first disillusionment.

In the face of Tevi's silence Brec answered her own question. "She's jealous because you'll be Queen one day."

Tevi shook her head "No, that's not fair. Laff would be happy with the role of loyal sister to a respected Queen, but she feels I won't be able to play my part when the time comes."

"You'll do fine."

"Laff may be right." Tevi said quietly.

"Don't be stupid."

"I'm hopeless at fighting."

"So was your grandmother, from what I've heard. It's why she wasn't so keen to go into battle with her sisters - and it's why she's still alive. Yet, she's been a great Queen. You must have more faith in yourself. Why are you so worried?"

Tevi struggled to find an explanation she could give to Brec. The sound of footsteps, scrunching on the sand, was a welcome distraction. The pair turned to see Red appear behind the stern of the boat. Her eyes skipped over Tevi and fixed on the other young woman.

"Brec, I was looking for you. Lizard wants to see you right away."

Tevi's eyebrows rose. Passing on the message was such a menial errand - surely a child could have been sent instead of Red. It had to be something serious. Brec trotted off immediately, saying only "I'd better go see what grandmother wants."

Alone on the beach, Red looked at her daughter with an expression of distaste. "I don't suppose you know where Laff is?"

"I think I saw her practising her sword-play by the river."

Red snorted and turned away.

"Mother." Red stopped but did not look back. "If there's something you need? Can't I help?"

"I doubt it." Without any further words, Red limped off up the beach.

"Right. Fine. I'm sure Laff will be more use to you." Tevi spoke to her mother's retreating back, in a tone pitched too low to be heard.

Red vanished behind the dunes at the top of the beach. Above the high tide line, the black sands held a ragged cover of sea-grass. The first blooms of sand-pinks were starting to show with a flush of colour. Tevi's gaze skimmed over the deserted scene. There was nobody in sight. She turned and leaned her shoulders against the hull of the boat, staring bleakly at the sea.

"You want to know why I'll be no good as Queen?" Tevi addressed the waves with the words she could not say to Brec. "I don't like shouting and arguing. I don't like swaggering around all the time as if I'm looking for a fight. I don't like pretending the only strong emotions I feel are anger or lust. I'm no good at the act anyway. My mother is ashamed of me." It was a simple, painful fact.

Of the children Red had borne before Tevi only three sons survived infancy. Tevi had been a desperately longed-for heir. By the time she was three, her mother was already planning the victory feast for Tevi's first triumphant return from battle. Tevi knew she was supposed to become an invincible warrior and awe-inspiring leader. Watching her dreams crumble had made Red bitter. The injury to her leg had been the final blow.

Tevi's chin sagged onto her chest - if only one of her brothers had been a girl. She envied them. They gossiped, dyed their beards and went about their work, unheeded and unchallenged. *Men don't have to pretend to be*

something they're not, she thought. She could almost wish she had been a boy. *Then it wouldn't matter how I feel about women. Brec might even want to be my lover and...* Tevi's head shot up as she squashed the thought.

The islands had a strict set of unwritten laws. Cowardice in battle would leave a woman disgraced forever; her family would disown her. There was a range of punishments for stealing, from a fine to enslavement. Treason or murder warranted the harshest penalty - death by stoning. For one woman to take another as lover was not so clearly defined. You might be executed, exiled, flogged or merely ridiculed - at least for a first offence. It would all depend on circumstance, the mood the Queen was in that day and possibly the direction the wind was blowing.

A memory came to Tevi, sharp and vivid. Eight years before a prisoner had been brought before her grandmother. The woman had killed another in cold blood. The Queen had passed judgement. The murderer had been taken to the scree slopes and tied to a post. Tevi had gone with the rest of the village to see justice done. The crowd had been a little overawed, watching as the Queen ceremonially threw the first stone. Others had joined in hesitantly. The first forty or so hits had resulted in torn and bleeding skin, a broken shoulder joint, and two or three fractured ribs. The woman had screamed for forgiveness. The next large stone had smashed the side of her face, crushing her skull and killing her. She had been deemed fortunate.

Tevi groaned and looked at the boat. Everything was in perfect order. There was no reason to stay away from the village any longer, except she could not face it - not just yet. Turning away, she walked along the beach and up the cliff path to the headland. Brec's words kept running through her head. Her friend was right about the risks of rumours. Tevi knew her status in the village was low enough. She did not need further scandal.

Women's sexual exploits formed a major part of their conversation, with imagination used, where necessary, to embellish the facts. Even allowing for exaggeration, Tevi was aware that all the women her age had been sexually active for years. The tally Laff was notching up gave rise in equal parts to jokes and envy. Tevi knew her own lack of enthusiasm for men would be noticed eventually - she just hadn't worked out what to do about it.

A line of cloud hung over the horizon, but the sky above was clear. Sunlight glittered off the waves. Tevi stood on the cliff tops. The brisk wind, heavy with salt, snapped at her hair. Seagulls screeched, their feathers rippling as they hovered. For a long time Tevi stood watching them while listening to the crash of surf below. It eased her tension, but the decision could not be put off. It was essential she took steps to silence the gossip. One particular course of action was unavoidable.

Tevi thought of Brec's comments about Sparrow. Presumably, Brec knew her own brother. Would he really be willing if she made a play for him at the feast? A rueful smile crossed Tevi's face. His response was unimportant for her purpose. It would probably have more effect on gossip if he ran from her screaming "No, no. You beast, unhand me!" But if he agreed...? Tevi pursed her lips - it probably would not be so bad. After all, she liked Sparrow. He was a friend.

Tevi hung her head. She had to do it, but the cynical way she was planing on using Sparrow did not sit well with her conscience. The coming evening would be a trial. The rest of her life would be a trial. She remembered her childish disappointment when she realised that being the Queen's granddaughter did not automatically make her the best at everything. Tevi turned around and looked back at Holric in the distance. The sun was sinking close to the horizon. It was time to go to the feast but, all things considered, maybe death in battle might not be so bad.

The smell of roast boar greeted Tevi on her return to the main square. She paused by the fire pits. The air was thick laughter and with ribbons of sweet smoke. It seemed as if every child in Holric had gathered to watch the two pig carcasses cooking over the glowing coals. Many stood in silent awe, eyes and mouths wide open. Others laughed and squabbled.

Women had already begun their festivities, passing around flagons of wine and beer. There was no sign of the envoy and her comrades - they were presumably in the Queen's hall, being entertained more formally. The mood in the square was cheerful. For once Tevi did not feel herself to be the subject of hostile scrutiny. A gang of

young women were sprawled to one side. For a moment, Tevi was tempted to join them, but she had an objective to achieve that night. With a determined expression, she turned to Lizard's family hall in search of Sparrow.

Inside it was dark and noisy, but once her eyes got accustomed to the light, she saw Sparrow surrounded by a group of small boys. He was helping braid their hair. Tevi made her way to within a few feet of him, then came to a standstill, suddenly very nervous and uncertain. For a while, she watched Sparrow, until one boy tapped his shoulder and pointed in her direction.

Sparrow looked up and smiled. "Hello. Are you looking for Brec? She's only just gone."

"No." Tevi said. "Actually I was looking for you."

"Me?"

"Well, I thought... you might like to come with me... if you're finished here. And I... we could see if the cider has settled. It might be nice if you and I, er..." Tevi knew she was flustered, she prayed she was not blushing as well. "spent some time together."

The knot in Tevi's stomach tightened, however she was relieved, and just a little surprised, to see the expression on his face change to a broad smile.

"I'd like that. But I thought you were due to meet Brec. She was looking everywhere for you." he said.

"We had no plans." Tevi was a little confused.

"She seemed very anxious to find you."

"I'm sure we'll bang into her at the feast."

"I think it was important."

"I don't know..." Tevi hesitated.

"It's not a problem. I'm going to be a bit longer with the children. When I'm finished, I'll look for you. I promise." It was Sparrow's turn to be shy. He fiddled with the comb in his hand, but then gave Tevi another broad smile.

"All right. I'll go and find her. We'll meet later." Tevi stood shifting from foot to foot, wondering if she should make some gesture - hug him, but it felt false. Besides, all he'd agreed was to meet her at the feast. He might be assuming she only wanted company. There would be time to say more later - and the cider would help.

Tevi settled for trying to match his smile before she left. Once outside she raised her face to the sky and let out a deep sigh. Sparrow had seemed happy. Maybe Brec was right about his liking of her. Tevi did not know whether to feel pleased or frightened.

At the thought of Brec Tevi stopped and looked about. The village square was swarming, but there was no sign of her friend.

"Have you seen Brec recently?" Tevi asked a woman standing nearby.

"She was looking for you. I think she headed off to your boat... thought you might be there."

"Right, thanks."

Tevi jostled through the crowded square with as much speed as possible. The sun had not yet set, but already some people were slightly drunk. They would not last until the end of the feast. One almost fell in her path. Running bands of children presented further obstacles, colliding with her at waist height. It took several minutes before she cleared the press of people lining the edge of the square. The noise was left behind. The outskirts of Holric were deserted but, on the way to the beach, she could see a lone figure.

"HEY. BREC!" Tevi shouted.

The figure stopped and ran back. "Where've you been? I've searched everywhere for you."

"What's up?"

Brec was clearly agitated, now she was close enough for Tevi to see her face. "I need to talk to you. Come with me." Brec said.

"What about? What's wrong?" Tevi was worried.

"We can't talk here. Come on."

Brec could not be drawn to say anything more. Anxiously Tevi followed her friend along the riverbank. They passed the empty workshops. At last, Brec lead the way into one of the barns at the edge of Holric. A mound of hay filled the back of the room. A row of small barrels lined one side and a few others were scattered in the middle. Apart from this, the building was empty.

"Right. So what is this about?" Tevi asked.

However, Brec held up one hand. She clambered onto the hay and peered over at the rear wall. Tevi stared in astonishment.

"I have to check if we are alone." Brec said.

"What... why?"

"You'll understand."

Brec returned to where Tevi was standing and pushed the door shut. The last of the sun's rays fell square on the timber planks. Light squeezed through the cracks so Tevi could see well enough. She selected one of the barrels and sat on it, waiting for an explanation.

Brec had her hands clasped behind the back of her head, staring at the ceiling. The dim light made it hard to judge her expression. Only the faint sounds from the distant square broke the silence.

"Brec?" Tevi prompted her friend.

"I've been thinking... about what we were saying beside the boat. At least... I've been doing a bit more thinking." Brec said unsteadily.

"And so have I. I've talked to Sparrow and I think you're right. He does like me."

"You're not really keen on him."

"Of course I am." Tevi said.

"But not as a man." Brec's voice was quiet. "Your sister was right, wasn't she?"

"Brec!"

"It's all right. You don't have to deny it."

Tevi's mouth went dry. For the space of a dozen heartbeats she could not force out any words. She was tempted to give in to panic and run. Eventually she found her voice. "Has someone been getting at you? Was it Laff? You shouldn't bother about her. Come on, let's go back to the feast." Tevi stood.

The other woman made no attempt to move. She was clearly fighting for words.

"Brec?"

Brec face dropped into her hands. Her voice came in a strangled whisper through her fingers. "I love you, Tevi."

The words hit Tevi like a physical blow. Her heartbeat pounded in her ears. Her legs turned to jelly. Stunned, she sank back onto the barrel while the barn around her seemed to ripple and fade.

"Tevi?" Brec's voice was tense, devoid of emotion.

Tevi did not answer. In her mind's eye she saw the body of the executed murderer, sagging broken and blood-soaked against the post.

"Tevi. Did you hear me? I said I love you."

"It's dangerous."

"But do you love me?"

"You must know that I do." Tevi said in a monotone whisper.

"Will you meet me here tonight?" Brec spoke urgently.

Things were going too far, too fast. The solid world was wrenched out of joint and Tevi felt half-stunned, or half-drunk, yet the implications of the request struck through the fog. She stared at her friend in alarm. "Hang on! Have you gone mad? Do you know what'll happen if we're caught?"

"I don't care." Brec said.

"We could be exiled or executed."

"Are you frightened?"

"Yes. Aren't you?" Tevi's head was spinning.

"But it's just the fear of being caught? If it was safe you'd want to be my lover?" Brec's voice was harsh in its insistence.

Tevi's head dropped as she fought for control of her voice, but now she could be honest. "More than anything in the world. I've loved you hopelessly for years."

"Then please, meet me here tonight. No one will miss us with the feast."

Tevi knew it was insane, but she could not say no. "All right, I'll be here."

"And we'll be lovers?" Brec's question sounded like a challenge.

"Yes."

"I think we've heard enough." The Queen's voice rang out. Tevi's head jerked in its direction. There was movement at the rear of the barn - someone emerging from behind the hay. Bewildered, Tevi spun back just in time to see Brec's fist. The blow knocked her sprawling on the floor. A foot swung into her stomach, driving the air from her lungs.

"Stop that." the Queen said sharply.

Gasping for breath, Tevi was vaguely aware of the presence of more people in the barn - walking around, standing over her. Their feet passed in front of her face.

Brec's voice sounded over the others. "Goddess! Did you hear her? I don't know how I managed to..."

The Queen broke in sharply. "We heard her. You played your part well. Don't overplay it. Now, bring her here and let's see if we can sort this out."

Still fighting to suck air into her lungs, Tevi was hauled to her knees and dragged across the barn. There was the sound of a flint being struck and the gentle light of a lantern sprang into life. Movement in the barn subsided. Tevi's head cleared as her breath returned.

She found herself kneeling in the centre of the floor. Both her arms were twisted behind her - sufficient to hurt a little and prevent her standing, but not enough to cause any damage. Tevi twisted her neck. Brec was holding one of her arms, Laff the other. In front of her Lizard and the Queen sat on barrels. Red adjusted the lantern before limping over and joining the two older women. A cold fist clenched Tevi's stomach - three judges and herself as prisoner. The hay barn was empty apart from the six of them.

Silence dragged on painfully until her grandmother said. "I take it you accept the authority of this court. Or would you prefer a public hearing?"

Tevi shook her head, not trusting herself to speak.

"I thought as much. So, what are we going to do with you? You really do present quite a problem."

"She always has. I blame myself for bearing her." Red interjected.

Tevi looked towards her mother, swamped with the bitter thought that Red would be unmoved to see her elder daughter provide the village with one last afternoon's entertainment on the scree slope.

The Queen spoke calmly. "Blame isn't the issue. As I said, Tevi presents us with a problem. We have to decide what to do about it."

"You're going to have me executed." Tevi found her voice.

The Queen shook her head. "That's an option, but not a very good one. I'd have to tell people why, and I'm afraid it would have a damaging effect on our family's reputation. With imminent war against Rathshorn we cannot afford that sort of scandal."

"So why have you engineered this?" Tevi asked.

"Because you were all set to cause a scandal whether I acted or not. Knowing you, you'd set it off at the worst possible moment. That's why I decided to pre-empt things. Always meet trouble halfway, it lets you pick the battleground. I learnt that years ago. Right now we're in an awkward situation. Executing you will only make it worse." The Queen paused while she brushed loose straw from her knees. The lamplight flickered in a gust of air. "So I'm going to give you an option."

Tevi raised her chin. A pulse leapt erratically in her throat. "You want me to kill myself - fall on my sword." At least it was a clean death and would spare her the humiliation of a public execution. She took a deep breath, steadying herself, but her grandmother shook her head.

"That would be a better option, but still not the best. If you commit suicide, people will talk. The gossip might even make things worse than they actually are. You can bet Queen Fearless-warrior would do her best to fan the speculation. Even if you make your death look like an accident - fall overboard and drown, it will be seen as bad-luck. Coming on top of your mother's injury and losing the chalice, we would be seen as a very unlucky family. People would say the Goddess had turned her back on us, which won't help in gaining allies."

"So what do you want me to do?"

"I want you to go." the Queen said firmly.

"Where?"

"Anywhere. The further the better."

"You're exiling me." Tevi said.

"In effect, yes. To do it officially would give free reign to the rumourmongers, so I want you to appear to go of your own accord. The feast tonight will provide a suitable audience. I want you to put on an act for them, like Brec did just now. Make a scene. Say the theft of the chalice is an insult to our family and you can no longer sit back and do nothing. Swear that you're going in search of Abrak's chalice and won't return until you find it."

"But nobody knows where the chalice is."

"So nobody will be surprised when you don't come back." the Queen said.

"And if I refuse?"

"I'll have to think of something else. Maybe arrange for you to be murdered and frame one of the women from Rathshorn. It might work in our favour, but it would be a very high-risk plan. Much better for you to disappear on a heroic quest - it's romantic and will make for some good songs. But, one way or another, I'll make sure you don't disgrace the family." Steel had crept into the Queen's voice.

Tevi raised her eyes to the roof. Shouts and laughter carried from the square. Someone was beating out a rhythm on a drum, displaying more enthusiasm than skill. Both Brec and Laff were shaking, even more than herself. A trap had closed around her, and there was no escape. "It's not a real choice, is it? All right, I'll give you what you want. I'll go." The gasp of relief from her sister surprised Tevi.

The Queen nodded. "Let her stand."

Tevi's arms were released. She got to her feet, rubbing her shoulders. She did not attempt to look at Brec. The Queen also stood and said, "Now I think we should leave as discreetly as possible, not all at once."

Laff beat everyone to the door, wrenching it open and rushing out. Brec would have followed close on her heels, but the Queen repeated sharply, "I said, not all at once."

Brec stopped as if she had hit a wall. She leaned against the doorpost, breathing deeply, her eyes fixed on the Queen. After a while, the elderly woman nodded. Brec spun out of the door and marched off in the direction Laff had taken.

A cold, dead feeling settled on Tevi. She stood, hardly conscious of the room around her, until a gentle push from her grandmother sent her tottering through the doorway.

Lizard left next, after a brief exchange of regrets.

Once she was alone with the Queen, Red ran her hands through her hair and scowled. "It's the one big disadvantage of being a woman - you can't dispute who your children are. At least, if I were a man, I could've questioned whether she really was mine."

"Nor can I deny that I'm her grandmother, but, unlike you, I'll confess I'm saddened to lose her, particularly in this fashion." the Queen said quietly.

"You can't mean that."

"But I do. And I also think, somewhere deep inside, you're grieving too, though I know you'll never admit it."

Red snorted and stuck out her chin. "That's because I'm not. If I'd been in your place I'd have gone for framing one of the Rathshorn women for her murder."

"How can you say that? It's our flesh and blood we're talking about."

"Supposing she doesn't leave the islands? Supposing she joins with Fearless-warrior?"

"She won't"

"How can you be so sure?" Red demanded.

"That's what this whole charade was about. I could have just spoken to her in private, explained my suspicions about her preference in lovers and asked her to go. Then she might have fled to Rathshorn. What I had to do was drive it home that she had no future on any of the islands. There'd always be the risk of rumours catching up with her. On top of that, my guess is she'll want to get as far from Brec as possible. If she sails to the opposite end of the earth she won't feel it's far enough."

"Well it's my bet that she comes to a miserable end, no matter where she meets it."

"Hopefully not. Anyway, she should do better than she would here. If only she knew it I've done her a favour. She wouldn't last five minutes in battle, or five days as Queen. But if I thought she had a chance I'd back her to the hilt."

"You've always had a soft spot for Tevi." Red said.

"While you've long preferred Laff. But let me tell you, given an even chance, Tevi would make a much better Queen. Leastwise I'd feel happier passing Storenseg on to her care."

Red gave a barking laugh of disbelief.

"I'm being serious." the Queen said.

"With respect, mother, I think you are being blinkered."

"Tevi is neither a fool nor a coward."

"Nor is Laff." Red retorted.

"Laff doesn't think she can lose, and that's a good starting point for leading the whole island to ruin."

"At least I know I can trust her."

"Despite what you think, you can trust Tevi. At least she'd never betray a friend, unlike Brec." Contempt was clear in the Queen's voice.

"I think Lizard will tell you it took a lot of argument, not to mention downright threats, to get Brec to go along with this. They were embroiled together for hours after I sent Brec to her. Come to that, it took me enough time to talk Laff into assisting."

"She clearly wasn't happy." the Queen observed.

"I'd have thought she'd be more eager for her chance to lead the war-band."

"I've always suspected she taunted Tevi more to persuade herself of her dislike than anyone else. I only hope she doesn't blame us too much." the Queen said thoughtfully.

"Why should she?"

"Because I blame myself. I keep thinking I should've been more alert, or found some way to avoid this situation."

"I don't think it was ever possible. Anyway, it's over now."

"Oh yes, for us." The Queen looked at her daughter with clear disapproval. "We'd better get to the celebrations before our absence becomes too marked." After one final glance around, she stalked out.

Red collected the lamp and followed slowly, addressing her last comment to the empty barn. "I still think we're well rid of her."

The sound of waves rushing onto the beach echoed softly on the night air. Stars peeked between torn shreds of clouds. Tevi lay on the sand in the lee of her boat, wrapped in an old wool blanket. She was warm and comfortable enough, but could not sleep. The scene she had made kept running through her head. It had gone much easier than expected. Carried by the pain of rejection and betrayal, her vehemence surprised even those expecting the speech. People had sat stunned, some with jaws hanging open. The Goddess alone knew what the women from Rathshorn had made of it.

Throughout it all her mother had stared at the ground, lips compressed in a tight line. Laff's eyes had darted nervously, not resting on anything but particularly avoiding Tevi. No doubt some added Laff's guilty expression to the fresh bruise on Tevi's face and drawn the wrong conclusions as to what had prompted Tevi's outburst. There had been no sign of Brec. Only the Queen dared meet Tevi's glare, but that ancient face, schooled by decades of intrigue, had given no indication of her thoughts.

The surge of emotion had carried Tevi on. Fired by her determination to get away, she had gone further than required, swearing by earth, wind and water, not to eat another mouthful nor sleep another night under her family's roof, until she returned with the stolen chalice. Now it was all over, her rage had faded and she was alone with her boat on the beach.

She placed a hand on the wooden planks of the hull, a small fishing boat, barely fifteen feet in length. Normally it held a crew of four but, without the need to handle nets, Tevi knew she would have no trouble sailing alone. Her grandmother had not said she could take it, but she could hardly be expected to leave Storenseg on foot. It would take only a day to stock the boat for the voyage and gather her few belongings, then she would be gone - forever.

In the distance, the sounds of the feast were dying down. Only the occasional barked laugh or chorus of song disturbed the peace. The revellers were going to their beds. The poorest, the slaves and outcasts, would sleep in rough shacks on the edge of Holric. The more fortunate would enter their family halls. In the Queen's house, the members of her family - cousins, aunts and nieces, would be settling around the fire. At the edges men of the

household who were not claimed by a woman, would sleep with the babies and young children snuggled to them for warmth.

In that hall, Tevi had slept virtually every night since she was born. She could envisage the scene. Many of the elder ones, overcome by drink, would already be snoring loudly. The younger girls, too excited to fall asleep quickly, would be whispering jokes and gossip. The silence would also be disturbed by people making their way to and from the village midden, with sharp oaths when they drunkenly tripped over an out-flung foot or arm. And then there would be the quiet noises of women, amusing themselves with their choice of man for the night, the only privacy coming from darkness and custom. Only if someone created too much disturbance would anything be said and even then it would be one of the standard, age-worn clichés, no names mentioned, addressed to the room in general. It would be appalling rudeness to watch or make comment, but of course everyone knew who every woman's lover was. Tevi realised she had been beguiled by the etiquette. It must have been so obvious that she always slept alone.

Even great-aunt Wirry, toothless and deaf, had taken a man four or five times a year, right up to the month of her death. It had strained convention almost to the limit, only her great age sparing her. Like most deaf people, she underestimated the volume of her own voice. Tevi recalled one occasion when Wirry had snapped out. "What do you think you're doing now?" It was in the days before hostility had grown between the two sisters. Laff had been close by. She rolled over and whispered a suggested answer so outrageous Tevi had been forced to bite on her arm to stop from laughing aloud.

The memory cut Tevi like a knife to the heart. Never again would she sleep in her family hall. She rolled onto her back and lay, staring upwards. By now the village was almost silent. Tevi could hear the sea-grass whispering in the breeze, and then the sound of uncertain footsteps approaching.

She slipped from her blanket and crouched in the shadow of the boat. In the faint light she could see a silhouette, standing on the sand a few yards away. Tevi started to fumble for her knife, suddenly worried that her grandmother might be putting another plan into effect.

"Tevi?" It was a quiet male voice.

"Who is it?"

At that moment, the moon drifted clear of the cloud, illuminating the beach and, even as she recognised Sparrow, he leapt forward and dived into her arms. Tevi was surprised to realise he was crying.

"They say you're going." Sparrow said between sobs.

"That's true." Tevi said.

"Please don't."

"I've sworn an oath, I can't break my word."

Sparrow pulled back a little and sat upright. He turned his face from her. In the moonlight his half grown beard was almost invisible and Tevi could see Brec's nose, and Brec's high cheek bone. She had always known where the attraction she found in Sparrow lay.

"You're going to get Abrak's chalice." Sparrow said.

"That's what I said."

"How will you find it? I was in the square the day it was stolen. This big black bird just picked it up and flew straight out to sea. They say it was heading back to a sorcerer on the mainland. The chalice could be anywhere, how will you know where to look?"

Tevi did not know how to reply. There was no sensible answer to the question. In the end she mumbled, "I'll talk to people on the mainland when I get there. Find someone who knows."

"Take me with you."

"Don't be silly."

"I mean it." Sparrow said earnestly.

"I'm leaving the islands. It's no place for a man." Tevi looked at him curiously. "Why do you want to go?"

"I like you. You're not like all the other women."

Tevi groaned inwardly.

Sparrow dug holes in the sand with his fingers as he continued. "All the men like you. You talk to us as if you're interested. The other women pester us, some won't leave us alone, but you're the only one who acts as if you actually like men - as people, as if you want to be our friend."

Tevi tried to cover her surprise. "I've got to leave Storenseg, and I can't take you with me. The other women here - they like men really. You'll be safe here with them."

"I'd rather be with you."

"You can't come with me." Tevi said gently.

"I'll miss you." Sparrow was crying again.

Tevi put her arm around his shoulder. "I'll miss you too."

Sparrow continued pushing the sand back and forth, while he built up courage for his next sentence. "Can I spend the night here with you? To remember you." Tentatively, he reached for her hand.

This time Tevi groaned out loud and raised her eyes to the sky. Somewhere there was a goddess with a very poor sense of humour.

Sparrow drew back, hurt by her response. "You do like me, don't you?"

"Yes I do, but... look, if things hadn't turned out how they did I would have..." Biting her tongue, Tevi let the sentence trail off. She searched desperately for something to say. "I've got to go, and I don't know when I'll be back. It would be best if you tried to forget me and sleeping with me tonight won't help. Also I don't know what's ahead of me, but I'd rather face it without the chance of being pregnant."

Sparrow looked as if he still wanted to argue. Tevi did not give him the chance. "I think you should go back to your grandmother's. I'll escort you."

Nothing was said as they walked to the village. At the entrance to Lizard's family hall they stopped. The square was empty except for them. Tevi was tall for a woman, her face level with Sparrow's. Tears were forming in his eyes. On a sudden impulse, she took hold of his shoulders and pulled him to her. They kissed for a while. His arms slowly tightened around her as they explored each other's mouths. For a moment Tevi was tempted to change her decision. At least Sparrow wanted her. Yet, finally she pushed them apart gently. Sparrow stepped back, looking as if he was about to speak, but instead turned and disappeared into the hall.

Tevi slowly walked back to the beach. The moon lit the familiar landmarks in harsh tones of black and white. She was overwhelmed by an unbearable sense of loss. This was the only world she'd ever known; the fact she didn't much like it hardly mattered.

CHAPTER THREE—The Market Porter

The middle aged man stood half a head taller than most. The first fanning of white hair at his temples accentuated his sharp features. Laugh lines around his mouth spoke of an active sense of humour, but he was not smiling at the moment. He wove between the jumble of stalls in the Torhafn market square, surveying the scene around him with a grim expression.

The man, Verron, was aware that the good quality of his clothing was attracting attention. He could see the eyes of stall-holders light up as he approached, all hoping for a profitable sale. To his mind, the traders of Torhafn market were no more honest than the would-be pickpockets who were also sizing him up, anticipating a well-filled purse. Both groups were wasting their time. Verron was far too experienced to fall easy prey to the cheap tricks of market thieves. He had seen it all before, many times, but this did not mean he felt comfortable with his surroundings.

During his career as a Protectorate trader Verron had been to many of the less attractive spots the world had to offer, however Torhafn never ceased to impress him with its corrupt squalor. The whole place was a product of vicious greed - brutal and crass. If a more sordid town existed anywhere in the world, then Verron had no desire to see it, and particularly not after nightfall.

Centuries ago Torhafn had been an elegant capital, the centre of a sorcerer's empire. The sorcerer and the empire were now long gone - only the ruins remained. The town huddled around its harbour, squatting amidst the ancient masonry. Above the shabby market place, with its potholes and stench of rotting fish, the rooftops still held their original outline, but timber and mud shacks now encrusted the lower walls. In the middle of the square two rows of broken columns raised themselves above a field of dirty cotton awnings, like the clean white rib-bones of an ox, protruding from the earth at the spot where the animal had met its end. Filth smeared the cobbles underfoot.

A stall-holder held a length of patterned material out across Verron's path, flapping it gently to further attract his attention. Verron neatly dodged both the vendor and his goods. There was nothing on sale in the market he needed, and he did not have time to waste.

Numerous roads and alleys led off from the square. Most were narrow and dark and dangerous to walk down alone. Tightly packed slums formed the major part of Torhafn. Verron left the market on one of the wider streets; the better visibility at least allowed him to spot trouble approaching. Fortunately, he did not have to go far before he found what he was looking for.

A small group of mercenary warriors stood at a crossroads. The backs of their hands were tattooed with the red and gold swords of the Protectorate guild. Their leather jerkins bore the badge of the recently formed Torhafn militia. The eldest was a thickset, granite-faced man, whose tattooed hands were never far from his sword's hilt. As he approached the group Verron made sure his own hands were clearly visible and well away from any potential hidden weapon.

"Well met, fellow citizens. I'm Verron of Cottersford, a member of the Merchants' guild."

The mercenaries assessed him for a few seconds before the eldest replied. "Well met, fellow citizen. Can we assist you?" The mercenary's tone was polite but cautious.

"I hope so. I see you've all taken contract with the local militia, but I wonder if you know where I can find some your comrades who would still be available for hire?"

"No chance of that, I'm afraid." the mercenary said.

"Surely there must be some."

"Not with how things stand right now."

Verron raised his eyebrows, inviting the speaker to continue.

"The local bosses have hired every able-bodied warrior who can tell one end of a sword from the other." The mercenary shrugged as he spoke.

"And a few who can't." another mercenary chipped in, contempt evident in her voice.

Verron's lips twisted in a rueful pout. "From the tone of your voice I get the feeling that all the recruitment activity isn't part of an attempt to crack down on local crime."

Several of the mercenaries snorted in amusement. The atmosphere eased noticeably.

"You've got the right idea." the eldest mercenary said.

"So what is the situation at the moment?"

"What was the last you heard?"

"Before we left the Protectorate we heard the town council had created a proper militia to police the area. Has something changed?"

"*Town council* is an awfully grand name to give the bunch of thieves who run this place."

"You don't sound very fond of them." Verron said ironically. The councillors were not his idea of pleasant company either.

"I wish I'd never come here. I just hope I get to serve out my contract and leave with the same number of arms and legs I started with." Several of the other mercenaries nodded their agreement. The eldest went on. "Like you I'd heard they were forming a town militia so, like a fool, I came over the Aldraks and signed on. As for the current situation, I don't know whether they started with good intentions, but half a dozen gangsters have taken control of the so-called council. It's my guess they're going to try and use us to remove a bit of the competition. Now everyone is hiring bodyguards. I've never minded a good brawl, but when the blood starts flowing here it's going to be knives in the back down dark alleys." The man's jaw clenched in anger. "I'm a warrior, not a murderer."

Verron pinched the bridge of his nose, feeling like a fool. He had enough experience of the place to know better. He should have guessed.

"With all the contact with the Protectorate, you'd have thought some of the civilisation would have rubbed off." another mercenary chipped in.

Verron shook his head, "Hardly. In fact quite the opposite. Torhafn just soaks up the worst the Protectorate has to offer. A large section of the population got here by fleeing justice in the Protectorate. Once over the Aldrak Mountains they tend to stick around - the rest of Walderim is reasonably law-abiding and wouldn't put up with their nasty habits. Torhafn acts like a magnet for criminals. Most of the trade between Walderim and the Protectorate goes through here on its way over the Aldraks. There's a lot of easy money to be made."

"You sound as if you're familiar with the town." The eldest mercenary spoke again.

"Only too well. We've been through every spring for the last five years - and we're always pleased to get away. Normally we contract guild mercenaries before leaving the Protectorate, but when we heard a militia had been formed, we decided to wait until we got here before hiring guards. With hindsight it was incredibly silly of us, given what we know about Torhafn." Verron sighed. "I suppose it would be even more silly to ask if you're ever sent out to patrol the surrounding countryside?"

"You're right. It would be a very silly question." the mercenary said.

"So you wouldn't know if there's been any bandit activity on the road between here and Scathberg?" Verron asked.

"That's where you're heading?"

Verron glanced over his shoulder to make sure there were no eavesdroppers before he answered. "Yes. We leave tomorrow."

The mercenary screwed up his face while he searched his memory. "There's been no trouble for over a month, that we've heard of. If it's any comfort, all the local bandits seem to have come into Torhafn to join the militia

and other gangs. The town is set to explode. The hills are probably deserted - only the odd rogue out there. Are you in a large group?"

"Just my partner and two of our children."

"Are your kids old enough to be much use in a fight?"

"No. They're just ten and fourteen. Last year we had our eldest with us. She's handy with a crossbow, but she's joined the Ostlers' guild and stayed behind in the Protectorate. We've got the youngster along in her place."

Verron could not restrain his grimace. The presence of his youngest child made it so much harder to risk the road to Scathberg without an adequate escort.

"You could go back to the Protectorate." the mercenary suggested.

"We can't afford to abandon this year's trade cycle."

The mercenary's expression was thoughtful. "One of our captains is in town. Given the circumstances he might sell you a dispensation to hire non-guild guards."

"And we both know that wouldn't be a cheap option either. Moreover I wouldn't trust any non-guild warrior that I picked up here. I'm afraid we're are going to have to just take a chance."

"Oh well, we mercenaries know all about that."

"I guess so, but thank-you anyway for your time."

"I'm sorry we couldn't be more help. I wish you a safe journey." The faces of the mercenaries looked genuinely sympathetic as they parted.

On his route back to the market, Verron's eyes frequently strayed up to the fortified mansions on the hills overlooking the town. These were the homes of the various gang-leaders that ruled Torhafn and the source of much of the evil that embraced the town. On previous visits, Verron had met some of the bosses. The elegance of their homes gave them a veneer of respectability, but always hard-eyed henchmen stood by, ready to follow any order.

The rest of Walderim, sandwiched between the Aldraks and the sea, was as civilised a land as could be found outside the Protectorate, but Torhafn was an ugly blemish on the country. It would, no doubt, stay that way until Walderim became part of the Protectorate. Already a sizeable proportion of the inhabitants were keen to join. So far they were still a minority, but everyone knew it was only a question of time. One day a threat would come out of the Western Ocean, sufficient to frighten the inhabitants into giving up their independence, swearing allegiance to the Coven at Lyremouth and paying taxes to its sorcerers. Verron sighed - it could not happen too soon for his liking.

The two wagons with their cargo of merchandise still stood where he had left them, at the richer end of the market square outside the entrance to a warehouse. From their alert posture it was obvious his two sons, Derry and Kimal, were taking their guard duties seriously. Yet Verron knew the safety of the cargo lay more with the protection money the warehouse owner was paying to one of the local gangs - at least, the money he hoped the owner was paying. The two boys smiled at the sight of their father.

"How's the haggling going?" Verron asked as he drew close.

"Last time I looked in the merchant had tears in her eyes. I think it was something to do with her starving children. But I expect mama will get the best of it, in the end." fourteen year old Kimal answered with a grin.

"I expect so too. She usually does." Verron agreed.

He refrained from sticking his head through the doorway to witness the state of the bargaining for himself. Over the years, he and his partner had reached a good working relationship, with the verbal side of the business handled by Marith on her own. When money was involved, his partner could release a dramatic flow of rhetoric that would reduce Verron to a fit of giggles if he listened for long. Marith was a trader to the very core of her being and haggling was her favourite pastime. She would argue up the price of their goods as if her life depended on it. It wasn't that she was grasping or incapable of generosity, more that she took enormous

professional pride in never parting with a penny more than she needed to. However her better judgement could sometimes be lacking - it had been mainly at Marith's urging they had delayed hiring the guards.

Verron leaned his back against the wall and tried to ease the frown from his face. He knew it was not fair to blame Marith for their present situation, and they would most likely reach Scathberg without meeting any criminal more menacing than an innkeeper who watered down the beer. More immediate was the danger that, caught in the passion of her bargaining, Marith would lose track of time. Nightfall was less than an hour away. For the sake of a few small coppers, they should not run the risk of trying to reach their lodgings after sunset.

Already sun was low in the sky and shadows in the miserable alleys were hardening. The business of the market was closing down for the day. Stall-holders shouted frantically; the perishable goods that were not sold would be wasted. Even in Torhafn, it was hard to make a profit from rotten fish. Last minute bargain-hunters moved from stall to stall, although the press of the crowd was dispersing.

The remaining people were poorer, more wretched and, if not more villainous, probably more desperate. Around the edge of the market stood groups of vagrants and casual labourers, still hopeful of a little more work. Verron ran his eyes over them, estimating their capacity for trouble. Most looked like deserters from a zombie army; the rest looked drunk. As the first carts got ready for departure, the vagrants started to move in, searching the rubbish for anything of value.

Verron was just reaching the decision to join Marith and try to speed the negotiations when he heard movement behind him. The hanging over the doorway was pulled aside.

"Your partner drives a hard bargain." the warehouse owner said in rueful tones as she emerged.

"Oh I know." Verron agreed.

Marith smiled at him as she passed, taking his words as a compliment, which in truth they were. Verron knew he would not succeed in trade half so well without her. Marith's light-brown hair fell around her face in child-like curls, her body bordering on the plump, but her sweet-tempered, motherly exterior housed the keenest business mind Verron had ever met.

As he joined her by one of the wagons she asked, "Did you find some guards?"

Verron shook his head. "There are local difficulties. We need to talk things over, but there isn't time now. Let's get the crates into the warehouse."

Marith accepted his words and turned back to the warehouse owner. "We'll need to hire four labourers to unload the wagons."

"Let's make it eight. It's not long till dusk." Verron interjected.

"We don't want to hire more than necessary."

"I think we might splash out a bit for once."

From her expression, Marith was not convinced. However, the warehouse owner prevented any further debate by announcing, "Well, if she's free, you'll only need one porter." The woman scanned the clusters of people standing around the market square, then raised her voice to a shout. "TEVI."

A young woman detached herself from a nearby group of casual labourers and jogged towards them. In the evening light, her hair was dark, almost black. It lay in a spiky fringe, uncombed and hacked short. Her face and hands were grimy. She was dressed in rough, homespun material, however the clothes were far less ragged than those of the other market porters. Rather than barefoot, she had open sandals on her feet, and, even more unusual, her brown eyes met Verron's with an honest candour as she came to a halt.

The warehouse owner gestured at the wagons and said, "These folk want their goods unloaded into my warehouse before the watch calls seven. Do you reckon you can do it?"

The porter looked up at the sky as if evaluating the time available. "Sure." she said confidently. "Standard rate for the job?"

Marith looked confused but nodded silently. However, Verron could not stop from protesting, "Those crates are heavy, it took two men to just lift them."

"I can probably handle it." the porter said.

The warehouse owner winked and drew Verron out of the way. "Just watch."

The porter went to the first wagon and pulled on one crate gently, testing the weight. Then, in one fluid movement, she swung it off the back of the wagon and walked towards the doorway, carrying the load with little sign of effort. Verron felt his jaw sag open.

One by one the crates disappeared into the warehouse as the porter went on to empty both wagons, well within the allotted time. Verron watched in astonishment. The woman was tall and sturdily built, but certainly not muscle-bound. There was nothing about her to indicate the source of her strength. Once the last crate was safely stored the porter walked back to the two traders, brushing the dust from her clothes. There was only the faintest sheen of sweat on her forehead.

"I think that's three copper bits you owe me." The porter held out her hand, although she seemed a little uncomfortable.

Marith dug into her money pouch and pulled out the coins. Before the porter closed her hand, Verron added another three from his own purse. "For the entertainment value."

"Oh. That comes free of charge." the porter said, smiling.

"I'm sure you could use the extra." Verron insisted.

"I offered to work for the standard rate."

"You're still a lot cheaper than hiring another seven of your fellows."

The porter looked a little guilty, but then shrugged. "All right. I'll try and find a good home for the money." Her voice was a soft lilting drawl, an accent Verron could not place, for all his years of travelling. She gave a respectful nod to the adults, a broad grin to Kimal and Derry, then strolled back across the square.

Verron turned to the warehouse owner. "Who is she?"

"Some youngster out to seek fame and fortune. She arrived by boat, just over a month ago. I can't see her staying around long. She's too naive. I mean, when did you last have to offer money to a porter twice?" the warehouse owner's voice held something like astonishment.

"That won't last in Torhafn." Marith said pointedly.

"True enough. And she's far too honest - not that there's anything wrong with honesty of course." The warehouse owner added quickly, remembering she was talking to business associates.

"But how is she so strong? It must be magic." Verron persisted.

The warehouse owner nodded. "Someone said she comes from an island way off to the west. They brew a magic potion which does it."

That bit of information caught Marith's attention immediately. "Do you think they'd be interested in trading for it?"

The coins jingled in Tevi's hand as she walked back across the square. They felt hard, cold and alien to her - rather like Torhafn itself. Money was not unknown the on islands, but she was not at ease with its general usage. In Torhafn it bought everything from food and clothes to a mooring site on the quay, even the use of someone's body for the night - if you were so minded. With money, you could get whatever you wanted. Without it, you could starve. Nothing seemed to matter to the townsfolk, except how much of it you had. To Tevi, money had come to mark the absence of trust, of honour, of family. She was tempted to simply open her hand and drop the distasteful coins to lie among the other debris of the market square.

The onset of dusk had sent most of the other porters to their homes. One ragged group remained, squatting on the steps of the tax-office, heads close together in conversation. They watched Tevi go by, hostility marked on their faces. One spat into the dust after she had passed, venting his resentment. Tevi had earned more on the last job than some had made all day. Her strength and sobriety made her the first choice of the market traders. It also meant there was little the other porters dared do to express their feelings. In her first days at the market a few had tried to intimidate her. Tevi had been more than equal to the challenge, and now she received nothing worse than scowls and muttered comments.

However not everyone was unfriendly. As she was leaving the market square an elderly voice called out, "Hey, Tevi!"

Tevi smiled on hearing the cry, and sauntered over to where old Aigur sat on a low wall, with two of her numerous grandsons in attendance. The elderly woman headed an enormous and diffuse family, with members scattered through all spheres of Torhafn life - few of them legal. Aigur had taken unconcealed pleasure in seeing the rout of the market bullies. Realising the young islander was unversed in the workings of the world, she had taken Tevi under her wing, giving freely of her lifetime's store of advice on what to do and not to do - although chiefly the latter. Despite her sharp tongue and questionable morality, Aigur was easily Tevi's favourite person in Torhafn.

Aigur gave a broad, toothless grin as Tevi stopped before her. A heavy blanket shielded her creaking joints from the evening's chill. Her hair was white, her face etched deep with wrinkles, but her eyes were as sharp as those of her teenaged grandsons.

"So, how have you faired today?" she asked.

"Not bad." On impulse, Tevi held out the six copper coins to her. "Here, I've got a present for you."

Aigur looked exasperated. "Don't be a fool. You can't go around giving money away."

"Why not? I've got more than I need and you've got more mouths to feed than me."

"That's not the point." Aigur snapped.

"Yes it is. It will help me sleep easier tonight." Tevi said with amusement.

"If you give money away for no reason people will think you're a fool."

"So?"

"Fools make good targets."

"Then what do I do with money I don't want?" Tevi asked, not entirely in jest.

The elderly woman sighed and gestured to her grandsons. "If you're hell-bent on generosity why don't you take these two layabouts to an inn and treat them? That way you'll save me the expense of feeding tonight them and I can still feel free to get ratty when they come home singing."

Tevi was about to argue when she saw the hopeful expressions on the young men's faces. "All right, have it your way." she said.

The two grandsons, Derag and Joran, eagerly leapt to Tevi's side. With an amused snort Aigur rose and tottered off towards her crowded home on the edge of town. Her stooped figure was soon lost from sight around a bend in the alley.

Tevi looked at the two youths. "Well boys, where would you like to go?"

After a quick exchange of looks, Joran answered for the pair. "How about 'The Silver Mermaid'?"

A battered pewter tankard was dumped in front of Tevi. The momentum of its arrival caused a little of the beer to slop over the top and roll down onto the stained boards of the table. For a second Tevi sat staring at it, making no attempt to touch the tankard. The metal was dull-grey and pockmarked. It caught the light with the same sheen

Tevi remembered from Abrak's chalice, taunting her in a fleeting vision of someday finding the heirloom and returning home.

She clenched her teeth, biting back the wave of homesickness. The chalice was irrelevant; with or without it there was no going back. At her shoulder, the barman cleared his throat impatiently, reminding her of the need to pay. Tevi offered one of her coins, accepted a smaller one in change, then picked up her beer from the table and sampled a mouthful. The barman slouched back towards the counter. Derag and Joran grabbed their drinks enthusiastically.

While surveying the tavern, Tevi slowly sipped her beer, pacing herself carefully. She did not intend to get drunk and risk wandering around Torhafn at night without her wits about her - one of Aigur's many gems of advice. The barroom had a low ceiling, with smoke blackened rafters. The tables and benches were sturdy but well worn. Underfoot the stone floor was sticky from spilt beer. The clientele appeared to be a fair cross section of the lower ranks of Torhafn society, except that the atmosphere was jovial and friendly, which in Tevi's experience was quite unusual for the town. After a few unpleasant encounters she had avoided social contact with the townsfolk whenever possible - Aigur's family excluded. Tevi decided however, leaning her elbows on the table, that the inn the two young men had selected was a pleasant enough place to spend a few hours.

On the bench beside her, Derag and Joran were loudly debating the merits of the different ales available in the town. They were happy and relaxed, giving voice to their opinions with a forthright vigour that, on the islands, would have been considered unseemly for men. Tevi watched with amusement. She was trying hard to come to terms with the men of the mainland. In her first few days in Torhafn she had formed the opinion that, by shaving their faces, the men were trying to imitate the opposite sex. They certainly seemed, to her eyes, to act like women. She now recognised this was far too simple an analysis, especially as nobody seemed at all concerned when, at times, women chose to act in a manner the islanders would have considered masculine.

It was also received poorly if she treated the men of Torhafn with the patronising gallantry considered good manners on the islands. Tevi had soon learned it was best to deal with each clean shaven face as if it belonged to a woman - a trick which did not require the same level of mental gymnastics as it would on Storenseg. Without beards and the distinctive styles of dress and behaviour, Tevi found it very hard to tell men and women apart. She was often still uncertain of a person's gender, even after several minutes of conversation. On other occasions she had been led to form a definite opinion one way, only to have subsequent events prove her wrong. The mainlander's flexible use of pronouns, titles and other gender specific words made her job even harder, although it did allow her to disguise her confusion.

"That old gut-rot! It's awful." Tevi's thoughts were interrupted as Joran dug her with his elbow. "What do you say, Tevi? Have you ever drunk the cat's piss they serve in the Red Dragon?"

Tevi tried not to wince at the sound of the crude phrase coming from a male mouth. "I don't think so."

"You're lucky. I can guarantee it'd be the worst thing you've ever tasted."

Tevi smiled. "That's quite a claim. I doubt that anything could out-do the potion they give girls in the Western Isles."

"Is that the one that makes you so strong?" Derag asked.

"Came close to making me throw up as well sometimes."

"Even so, I'd happily down a bucket-full." The young man sighed wistfully. "What do you reckon, if we sailed out there, do you think your family would sell us some?"

"Absolutely no chance." Tevi shook her head. "And anyway, it wouldn't do you any good. You have to take it regularly when you're still a child. It doesn't work so well for boys even then."

Derag's shoulders slumped slightly. "It would be great though. Do you remember the way you dealt with fat Barbo? Grandma still smiles when she remembers it."

"I tried not to hurt him." Tevi said regretfully.

"I know. That's what made it so insulting for Barbo."

Joran joined in. "Why should you worry about hurting him? In your place I'd have flattened the bastard."

"It's the way I was brought up. Women on the islands are so much stronger than men, that it's seen as cowardly to hit them. I hated doing it, but Barbo gave me no option. He had me cornered on the quay, and wouldn't let me apologise - I hadn't meant to offend him."

"So you picked him up like a sack of flour and tossed him twenty feet out into the harbour." Joran's words were almost lost in his grin.

"What else could I do?"

"Actually, what really amused grandma was when you realised he couldn't swim - the way you dived in, dragged him out, and then offered to escort him home to his parents to explain how he'd got so wet." Both the young men dissolved into laughter at the memory.

When he had calmed down Derag said "You know, you're getting quite a name in town, people are..."

Whatever else he might have been about to say was swallowed by a sudden burst of noise from the far corner of the room. All heads turned in the direction of the disturbance. A large crew of dock workers were cheering on one of their comrades who had left their table and was heading across the floor. From his size, Tevi was sure it was a man. His shoulders and arms were knotted with muscle; his head almost brushed the rafters, towering over the seated patrons of the tavern. He did not look angry but, to Tevi's dismay, his eyes were fixed on her. The noise level on the other tables fell to a quiet murmur of anticipation. Tevi placed her hands flat on the table and pushed her bench back slightly, readying herself for possible action. However when the man reached her table he squeezed onto the bench opposite and smiled in a friendly fashion. Tevi took very little reassurance from this.

The man cleared his throat. "Good evening."

"Good evening." Tevi replied.

"I've heard that you reckon you're the strongest person in town." His voice was a deep base rumble.

"I make no claims." Tevi said, uncertainly.

"Then others do it for you."

"I can't help what people say."

"That's true." He looked at Tevi from under his bushy eyebrows, as if appraising her, "Well, there's a game we play in these parts. It's called arm wrestling..."

His sentence was cut off as Derag whooped and slammed his palms loudly on the table. "You'll slaughter him Tevi."

One of the man's friends shouted back, "Three tin halves says she doesn't."

"You're on."

Tevi interrupted the betting. "I'm not going to fight you."

"It's just arm-wrestling." the man said.

"And that isn't fighting?" Tevi's voice revealed her confusion.

"Oh no. You see, it's just a test of strength."

The excited chaos in the tavern was such that it took the stranger and Joran between them some minutes to explain the rules to a perplexed Tevi. At last, she understood what was involved. She studied the man. His arm would have served most people as a leg, she doubted that she could have joined the fingers of both hands around his biceps. In an assured manner he rested his elbow on the table and smiled at her while around the room people stood on benches and tables to get a better view.

"Are you on?" he asked.

She frowned. "It's no contest."

"You concede defeat?"

Joran nudged her. "Go on Tevi."

There was no easy way to refuse, so Tevi sighed, "All right then." She positioned her elbow on the table next to the man's, stretching to grasp his hand. "Now I just push?"

Without speaking the stranger nodded and started to apply pressure. His bulk was evidently muscle rather than fat, however Tevi had no problem keeping her hand steady. While he strained Tevi considered her opponent thoughtfully - he really was very strong for a man. His jaw was clenched. Veins stood out like rope on his arms and forehead. His face was so contorted that the lids were half closed. His breath came in raw, hissing gasps. Apart from this, the room was silent.

It was possibly the absence of sound from Tevi that finally alerted her opponent. His gaze shifted to her face. The man's expression changed slowly to disbelief as he realised that she was not even exerting herself. Tevi met his eyes and shook her head slowly. A smile twitched the corner of her mouth. In a swift jerk she cracked his hand down hard onto the table and released her grip, leaving her opponent rubbing his bruised knuckles. The audience exploded into uproar.

"I didn't hurt you, did I?" Tevi asked, suddenly contrite that maybe she had overdone the force.

The man held out his hand to examine the backs of his knuckles. The skin had been broken slightly and was starting to show red. His expression was one of utter bewilderment. His friends in the corner were muttering among themselves. For a moment, Tevi wondered if he would try to make trouble but then he threw back his head and roared with laughter.

With a beaming smile he pointed at her half empty mug and asked, "What do you want to drink?"

CHAPTER 4—Torhafn by Night

By the time she left the Silver Mermaid it was considerably later than Tevi had intended and, as her feet stumbled on the uneven cobbles, she realised she had drunk a little more than was wise. Not that she had any serious fears; dressed in the common clothes of the islands, soiled by work in the market, she hardly presented the appearance to attract the attention of the professional thief and, even in her present, slightly tipsy state, Tevi felt she could cope with the amateur opportunist.

Night had long since fallen and most doors were locked and shuttered. However the narrow, rubbish filled streets surrounding the docks were not deserted. Surly individuals posed aggressively at intersections, their faces lost in deep shadow. Drunken gangs of youths whispered among themselves in the light of the occasional torch, their voices breaking into shouts as they spotted friends or rivals. One fight broke out as Tevi passed through an open courtyard, but no one attempted to waylay her.

Derag was right to say she was acquiring a name in Torhafn. She had been quite pleased about it; it meant, as a result, that trouble generally left her alone. However, as that night's challenge had shown, notoriety could also attract attention. So far, her reputation had not gone beyond the circle of quay and market but, if the bosses atop the hills got to hear of her, there might well be attempts at recruitment, or elimination. It was a possibility for the future she had to consider. In the meantime, for the benefit of anyone watching with robbery in mind, she straightened her shoulders and walked purposefully through the darkened town, back to her boat, moored on the east wharf with the houseboats and the poorest fishing craft.

The east wharf was one of the more depressing parts, of a generally depressing town. The poverty, both material and spiritual, was sharply visible. Few of the craft were sea-worthy. Many were little more than lashed together rafts, the occupants of which lived in flimsy shacks tacked precariously on the deck. The area swarmed with rats and other vermin, some of it two legged. Rubbish and filth floated in what little scum-covered water could be seen between the jostling boats. Everywhere there were wide-eyed children, ragged and hungry.

The inhabitants of the wharf formed a tightly knit community, spending the whole day in and out of each other's boats. Tevi had given up trying to make sense of their family structure, deciding that it was either non-existent, or so complex and interwoven as to be incomprehensible to the outsider. Throughout the day, the air would be filled with shouts. The people seemed to need to conduct their lives at high volume to compensate for the other deficiencies.

At night Tevi would lie in the bottom of her boat, listening to the sound of cold water slopping against the hull, the creaking of timbers and the dull knock of wood on wood as boats rolled together. The only human sound would be that of a baby crying or the distant shrieking of a couple, raising their voices in domestic strife. She desperately wished she was somewhere else, but had no idea where to find anything better. In Torhafn, she had a mooring and an income, for the summer at least. Perhaps autumn would be a good time to leave the town - if she could stand it that long. Tevi paused for a moment and looked back along the squalid, filthy street - there was little she would miss about the town when she left.

Eventually she emerged from the smothering crush of houses into the comparative open of the dockside. The usual assortment of people was visible, moving to and fro between the pools of light given off by oil-soaked torches. There were guards patrolling the warehouses, vagrants curled in dark corners, a few sailors coming back from the town and whores trying to attract their attention as they passed. Further down the quay dockers were loading a ship, working into the night so the vessel would be ready to depart on the dawn tide.

Tevi passed a lamp that smoked and guttered in the offshore wind. She stood on the pockmarked flagstones and breathed in deeply. The rising moon reflected off the water on the horizon. Closer in, bands of surf showed luminous white in the moonlight. The sound of the waves was gentle, calming, and somehow honest. Tevi reached a sudden decision - tomorrow she would give the market a miss and take her boat out fishing. In the freedom of the ocean, perhaps she could find both fresh air and peace.

The renewed bounce in her step carried Tevi swiftly along the dockside. She jumped over a coiled rope on the wharf and rounded the last warehouse. Her boat's mooring was less than twenty yards further along the quay, although the craft itself was lost from sight between the larger houseboats. For once, the east wharf was peaceful - quiet enough that her ears could pick up the desperate sobbing from the depths of a nearby stack of rubbish.

The sound of crying was not uncommon on the quay. Tevi almost ignored it, and intended only the briefest glance in passing. She had no wish to be drawn into one of the petty feuds between the inhabitants of the houseboats.

The source of the noise was a young child of ten or so, huddled between two broken crates, head sunk on knees. The pitiful misery of the sight brought Tevi to a halt. Common-sense and all of Aigur's advice told her to keep on walking, but that night her sense of caution was dulled by the beer.

She went over to the child and knelt down, "It's not that bad, surely?"

A tear-streaked face was raised to hers. The first thing she realised was that the boy was not from the boats - he was too clean, too well fed. He gulped for air but "Lost." was all he could manage to say.

"And how did you get lost?" Tevi asked gently.

"Don't know." The downturn of his eyes gave rise to a strong suspicion that this was not the entire truth.

Tevi sat back on her heels and considered the boy. The inhabitants of Torhafn were always ready to leap to the worst conclusions and mistrust was second nature to the townsfolk. Tevi knew she could expect few thanks and even a charge of kidnapping if she were found with the child, yet her thoughts drew her back to the islands, where everyone was known and recognised. A stray boy would have been quickly taken back to his family hall. Tears came to her eyes as she wished she could be a child again - that somebody would come and take her home, back to Storenseg.

Tevi turned her face to stare inland. The dark, menacing bulk of the town spread out before her, full of locked doors and strangers. She looked up and down the length of the wharf, and then took a deep breath and stood.

She held out her hand to the boy saying, "Come on. Let's go and find your parents."

All along the eastern wharf decayed, ramshackle jetties projected over the polluted water, spaced at irregular intervals. The jetties were joined by lashed together catwalks that formed a web of pathways between the decrepit assortment of craft. The rough-cut planks were covered with a film of green algae that made the surface difficult to walk on by day and treacherous by night. Tevi's own small boat was moored on the sea-ward side of the swaying mass, a dozen yards from the quay, and hidden from sight between two semi-derelict river barges that now each housed several families of dock workers.

After instructing the boy to wait on the dockside Tevi cautiously sidled out along the rotten timbers. The jetty swayed beneath her feet, as the larger boats were pulled by the surge of the waves. It drew tortured creaks and groans from the piles driven into the seabed. Tevi reached the point by where her boat was tethered. The tide was out and her boat was rocking gently several feet below the level of the jetty. She gripped hold of the mooring rope in one hand then swung out over the edge and dropped down into the open end of the hull.

The boat was now her home. The mast had been lowered and a waterproof tarpaulin sheet was draped over it as a roof, protecting the rear two thirds of the boat from the elements. There was just enough space to crawl under the canvas, but it was snug, clean and adequate for her needs, particularly when judged by the standards of her neighbours.

Deep at the rear was a heap of blankets and a few spare clothes under which Tevi hid her weapons. As she scabbled beneath them her hand closed around the scabbard of her sword. She hesitated. Aigur had given many lurid warnings about the dangers of roaming Torhafn by night. It was tempting to take the sword, yet it would be wiser to avoid confrontation. A visible weapon might attract more attention than it deterred. Surely the street gangs would not expect to make much profit from an unarmed labourer and a young boy?

There were other considerations. Tevi peered out from under the tarpaulin. Through the piles of the jetty, she could see the dark hulking shapes of other boats. A few silhouettes were moving against the night sky. In what little honour they showed, the residents of the wharf did not steal from each other, but Tevi placed no trust in this honesty. She suspected the custom owed more to the fact that the boat people owned nothing worth stealing.

Since she was alone and could not guard her boat by day, she avoided displaying the few valuables she possessed. After a few more seconds of deliberation she returned the sword to its hiding place under the blankets. Instead Tevi took a long knife, which she slipped inside her jerkin, out of sight.

She rejoined the boy on the dockside and the pair of them walked back along the quay, leaving tightly packed houseboats behind. To their left the black ocean stretched out into the night. The cold wind carried the sound of unseen waves crashing in the darkness against the crumbling harbour wall. They passed two figures arguing furtively in a doorway and another staring bleakly out to sea. There were few other people about.

When they turned the corner onto the western wharf, there was a scrum of activity beside the berth of a sea-going merchant vessel, where relays of dockers were noisily manhandling bales and crates up gangplanks and into the ship's hold. Another small band stood not far away, awaiting fresh instructions while warming themselves around a crackling fire and shouting humorous but impractical advice to their fellows. The flames snapped and flared, sending a stream of sparks up into the night sky. Hunched at one side of the fire an old woman was stirring a large pot of stew. She was filthy, wrapped in layers of rags that fluttered in the wind, but the smell of the food was tempting. Tevi stopped at the woman's side. Before going any further, it might be wise to soak up the beer she had drunk.

"Is the stew for sale?" Tevi asked.

"It's for the loaders... counts as part of their pay." The old woman looked briefly at Tevi, before turning her head to scan the dockside. Her voice dropped slightly. "Why? Did you want to buy some?"

"That would be nice."

"Well, as a favour I can let you have a couple of portions for a tin half." the woman said.

"I don't want you to get into trouble."

"I made the stew. I can sell it, but don't let everyone see. I don't want the whole dockside bothering me."

Tevi smiled and passed over the coin without comment. With the two bowls in her hands, she nonchalantly strolled to a spot behind a large mound of cargo, obscured from the view of anyone aboard ship. Of course the woman was planning on pocketing the money and the term *whole dockside* referred specifically to the work overseers, who would be angry if they knew - not at the theft of their employer's property, but that they did not get their cut of the profit. It was the way things worked in Torhafn.

Safely out of view, Tevi and the boy sat down on an empty crate and sipped the hot stew, using crusts of stale bread as scoops. The stew was highly spiced - probably to disguise its contents. Despite this, the food was welcome and its warmth offset the night's chill. The boy's spirits had improved considerably, bolstered by the upturn in his fortune. While he ate, he looked about with interest, obviously deciding to make the most of the adventure. His eyes finally fixed on Tevi.

"I know you. You're the strong porter from the market who unloaded our wagons. My name's Derrion, but everyone calls me Derry." he said happily.

"And everyone calls me Tevi."

"Is that really your full name?"

"More or less." Her birth name was something Tevi was quite happy to have left behind on Storenseg.

In the light of the fire, Tevi now also recognised the boy from the market, despite the dirt and the streaked lines of tears that now adorned his face. His parents had been wealthy foreign traders and, to judge from the extra payment, more generous than the local townfolk. They might even be grateful for the return of their son.

"Do you have any idea where your mother and father might be?" Tevi asked.

"Probably at the inn." Derry said after a pause for thought.

"Which inn? Can you remember its name?"

The boy considered the question gravely. "No." After a moment's thought, he added brightly, "There was a sign hanging outside though."

"And what was on the sign?"

"It was a barrel."

"I think you'll find every inn in Torhafn has a barrel outside as its symbol." Tevi said dryly.

"Really?"

"Yes." Tevi said with a deep sigh. The question and answer session could take ages.

Derry took a mouthful of stew and grinned cheerfully. "I'm not being much help, am I?"

Tevi tried a different approach. "After leaving the market, did you cross over the river?"

"Yes. And we climbed up the hill beyond, but not quite to the top." Derry said.

This was only as Tevi expected. The west side of the river Tor was the richer part of town, where the better class of inn was found, with views overlooking the bay. It was the place one would expect wealthy traders to stay, but at least the confirmation of her guess gave her somewhere to start the search.

"Do you think you'd recognise the front of the inn if you saw it again?" Tevi asked.

"Probably."

"Well then, if you've finished your stew, we might as well be off."

But, instead of moving, Derry became unaccountably dejected. "Do you think mama and papa will be angry with me?" he mumbled.

"You know your parents better than me."

"I'm going to be in big trouble." His voice was glum.

Tevi was about to assure him that no one would be too hard on a boy, but stopped. Maybe, on the mainland, a boy might be treated no more gently than a girl. Her face softened and she tussled his hair. "Even if they are angry, you can't stay here forever." Tevi said sympathetically, reaching out for his hand. "Come on, let's go."

After returning the empty bowls, Tevi led the way into the maze of houses behind the docks. The sinking moon lit the wider roads but did not penetrate the small alleys running between silent houses. There were fewer street gangs than earlier in the evening, although they were more blatantly ill-willed. They watched the pair pass with hostile eyes, but made no move to intercept them. Voices were raised in angry shouts a few streets away, then abruptly a scream cut above the sounds of fighting. Tevi was glad their route did not lead in the direction of the brawl.

The market place was now deserted as they skirted its edge on their way to the main bridge over the river. The shop-fronts and warehouses were blank and lightless. Even the gangs seemed to have melted into the darkness, leaving only a threatening silence. Derry was jittery and ill at ease. Tevi put her arm around the boy's shoulder.

"It will be better once we cross over the bridge." she said, trying to encourage him.

However, they did not get that far. The narrow passageway from the market opened out onto a riverside wharf for unloading barges. The open expanse of cobbles was about 10 yards wide and five times as long. The moon lit the side nearest the water's edge, but the shadows of warehouses covered the other side in thick darkness.

Derry suddenly grabbed her arm and pointed. "There they are." Despite his excitement, the oppressive, darkened town had affected him and his voice was barely a whisper.

Tevi followed the direction of Derry's outstretched arm and saw his parents at the far end of the wharf, near to the water's edge. That was not all she saw. The well cut clothes and obvious wealth of Derry's parents had not gone unnoticed. Silently emerging from a dark passage, half way down the wharf, were two stocky figures. The thugs crept furtively through the thick shadows, cudgels in hand. Tevi propelled the boy into a darkened

doorway. "Stay here and don't make a sound." she whispered. Derry stared back at her with wide-open eyes, but said nothing.

The hilt of her knife felt reassuring as Tevi pulled it from her jerkin and slipped it into her belt. Then she too began to edge around the side of the yard, keeping to the shadows.

The two traders were deep in conversation and completely unaware of the danger when a third figure stepped into the moonlight.

"Well, well, well. What have we here?" A light, woman's voice delivered the mocking cliché with real menace.

The words jolted Derry's parents. They looked up startled and then nervously backed away - unknowingly retreating straight towards the other two thugs. At first, the other footpad stood her ground, hands on hips in jaunty belligerence, then she raised a hand and snapped her fingers. At the signal, the two accomplices stepped from the shadows, menacingly swinging their cudgels. The sound of footsteps behind them rooted the pair of traders to the ground, as they realised they were trapped. The leader of the gang began a slow advance towards her victims, clearly enjoying the game.

"Now why don't you behave yourselves, and hand over all your money, and anything else that you think I might like?"

The thieves' attention was fixed on the traders. No one noticed Tevi's stealthy approach. As the leader of the gang got to within a few feet of Derry's parents Tevi made her move, leaping forward. The nearest thug was hoisted into the air and literally hurled against the other, sending the pair of them smashing into a brick wall with a bone-breaking crack. The two collapsed to the ground in a mound of arms and legs.

Tevi did not bother to wait and see if the thugs would offer further resistance. Hopefully, Derry's parents would have the presence of mind to claim the dropped cudgels for themselves. She turned and charged past the traders, bearing down on the third thief, only to be confronted by a drawn sword.

The years of training took over. Even before Tevi realised, her knife was in her hand and outstretched before her. She dropped to a defensive stance and met the gang leader's angry eyes. The pair of them glared at each other for long seconds.

Tevi broke the silence, saying steadily, "Why don't you go and find someone else to play with?"

"Why don't you get out of my way?" For the first time the woman sounded rattled, upset by the unexpected interruption, however she was clearly not ready to back down. Slowly the two adversaries began to circle, each watching for an opening.

In icy calm Tevi reviewed Blaze's advice on how to fight when your weapon was outmatched, "*Let your opponent make the moves. She'll be over-confident. She'll let her guard slip. Take no risks. Watch what she does. Wait for the mistake.*" It was the style of combat in which Tevi knew she was at her worst. The memory of countless defeats on the practice field assailed her, but this time her life was at stake.

The footpad's sword flicked out in a few feints to test Tevi's defence. They were amateurish efforts, easily blocked, and the sureness of Tevi's response drew a frown from her opponent. It was clear that Tevi was not an untrained novice, making free with someone's kitchen utensils. For her part Tevi was surprised at how easy it was. It was as if she could hear Blaze's voice, offering advice.

"*She's going for your throat!*" Blaze screamed in Tevi's ear, even as the woman made a more ambitious high thrust. In automatic reflex Tevi ducked and knocked the blade aside. She swung across sharply in riposte with her knife, and was rewarded by feeling the point make contact. The footpad gasped and lurched a few steps backwards. They both knew it was no more than a flesh wound, but the woman was unnerved and her eyes flicked anxiously around the square.

The traders were frozen in paralysis. The cudgels still lay where they had fallen. Fortunately, the two thugs were in no condition to make use of them. They had barely recovered enough to clamber to their feet, one moaning, the other hanging onto the wall. At last, this sight provoked a reaction the traders. They began to shout loudly.

"Help! Watch!"

"Call the watch!"

Tevi grimaced. Like all Torhafn residents she knew the town watch were very unlikely to come to anyone's aid, unless by chance some members of the Protectorate guild were on patrol. However the sound further alarmed her opponent.

"Shut them up." the gang leader snapped to her accomplices. However, another quick glance showed that she could expect no support from them. One appeared to have a broken arm. The other, with a blood smeared face, was still braced against the wall for support. The leader's bravado had almost completely gone, when the new sound of running feet reverberated around the walls.

The circling action had taken Tevi and her opponent through 180 degrees. Over the footpad's shoulder, Tevi could see that the approaching footsteps, amplified by the echo, belonged to Derry. He was running down the wharf, wildly swinging a wooden stake he had found. Fortunately, the thief did not stay to investigate the nature of the arriving reinforcement. She jabbed her sword forward again. Tevi parried easily, but the action forced her to step to one side as she did so. This was what the gang leader had intended, clearing her escape route. After one last wild swing of her sword she rushed past Tevi. Her figure disappeared down the same dark alley she had originally emerged from.

With the leader gone, Tevi turned to the two thugs. She gestured with her knife in their general direction. "You can clear off as well."

No second bidding was needed. The pair hobbled in pursuit of the first thief with whatever speed they could manage. The sound of their uneven footsteps faded away.

Tevi's gaze was caught by the dark smearing of blood on the tip of her knife. She looked at it thoughtfully, before wiping the blade clean on her leggings. Over by the water's edge Marith had caught hold of Derry and was simultaneously hugging him while wresting the wooden stake from his hand. Verron's face was pale in the moonlight and beaded with sweat on his upper lip, but a relieved smile was starting to spread over his features.

Tevi slipped her knife into her belt and walked towards him. Suddenly, into her head came Blaze's voice, hammering out one of her favourite lessons, "No matter how defeated she seems, never, never, never turn your back on an enemy."

Tevi spun toward the entrance of the alleyway, turning just in time to see a dark figure swinging its arm down in an arc. Without time to think Tevi pitched backward, aiming her dive to collide with Verron and knock him down. Before they had even hit the paving the thrown knife flew overhead, passing harmlessly through the space Verron had just been occupying. The knife's trajectory carried it far across the wharf before it fell to the ground and skittered across the cobbles. Tevi pushed up onto her feet at the end of the rolling dive, in a fast fluid motion. However, even before she was upright, the figure was gone.

Tevi took a long step back to steady herself, only to feel her heel hit a mooring ring anchored into the flagstones beside the water. There was the sudden knowledge that the diving roll had taken her a lot closer to the river than she had realised. The mooring ring wedged between sandal and foot, twisting her ankle. Her arms flailed out in a desperate bid for balance, but there was no longer paving beneath her second foot as it came down. Helplessly, Tevi tumbled backwards into the river.

The traders rushed to the embankment and a line was thrown to help Tevi climb back onto the quay, where she knelt, wiping water from her eyes and trying desperately hard not to think about how filthy the river looked in daylight. In response to the barrage of concerned questioning she simply shook her head ruefully. It was exactly the sort of ending she knew her mother would have predicted for her first serious duel.

The lodgings the traders had taken were small but very comfortable, easily the most luxurious place Tevi had ever seen in her life. She stretched out her feet towards the fire and sunk back into the cushions on her chair. Her eyes roamed around the room. It was currently empty apart from herself. Her rinsed and cleanish clothes were hanging on a rack above the chimney-breast. They appeared to be drying nicely, waving slowly in the rising

warm air. Amber firelight from the burning logs in the grate danced cheerfully over an array of tapestries and furniture. Tevi's toes dug into the thick sheepskin rug on the floor. It occurred to her how austere life on the islands was; even the Queen's hall could not match the casual display of wealth about her. Yet, she knew that, by the standards of the mainland, Verron and Marith were well off, but not rich.

The door to the boys' bedroom opened and Verron emerged. He sank into a chair with a sigh.

"Are they asleep?" Tevi asked.

"Pretending to be. I think they just wanted me to go, so they could talk." Verron replied.

"Have you sorted out how Derry got lost?"

Verron shook his head, "I doubt we'll ever get the full story, I don't think he's too certain how it happened himself. I'm just so relieved to have him back safe." Contrary to fears about his parents' anger, Derry's only ordeal had lain in being smothered by the repeated hugs and kisses he had received.

"I guess you'll be wanting to sleep soon as well. Once my things are dry I'll leave. You can have these back." Tevi said, indicating the borrowed clothes she had on.

"Please, you're welcome to keep them. They're only some old garments we had lying around. They were due to be thrown away." Verron said, insistently.

"They may be cast-offs to you, but if I start walking around Torhafn wearing these, I'll soon attract the same sort of attention you did."

Tevi was not sure that she would not attract attention anyway. By the time she had escorted the family back to their lodgings she had been shaking from the twin effects of the cold dunking and the ebbing adrenaline. On the other hand, the traders had regained some of their self-assurance and insisted that she come inside. Then, they had badgered the innkeeper into providing food, drink and a hot bath. The last of these had been a completely new experience for Tevi. She was still trying to evaluate whether or not she liked it. Whatever her final decision, it was certain that the effect of the bath would make her stand out from the rest of the market workers for at least a week.

From the corridor outside the room Marith's voice was heard, calling to someone indistinctly, then the handle turned and she entered, bringing with her a bottle of sweet brandy and three round glasses.

"Is the innkeeper calm now?" Verron asked.

"Reasonably." Marith said, while pouring out three generous measures of the brandy.

"And you didn't pay him double for the late meal?"

"Of course not." Marith snorted at the idea. She distributed the drinks and sat down between the other two.

"I could have warned him that separating you and money is like getting a limpet off a rock." Verron teased affectionately.

"That's not true. For example, I'm going to try again to get Tevi to accept a reward."

Marith's indignant tone made Tevi grin. However she still shook her head. "I don't want paying."

"But I insist." Marith said, firmly.

"I don't particularly like money."

The answer left Marith nonplussed and speechless. In the resulting silence Verron asked, "We were told at the market that the people on your home island make a potion that gives you your strength. Do you think they might trade for it?"

"Never." Tevi had absolutely no doubts of her answer.

"We'd pay well. You might mention it when you return. Do you have any idea when that might be?"

"Never."

It took a second for Verron to realise Tevi was not merely repeating her previous assertion. "But surely your family will miss you and..."

Tevi fought to keep the expression of pain from her face. From the way Verron's voice trailed off she knew she had failed. The two traders discretely exchanged confused glances while Tevi concentrated on the bottom of her glass.

After a few seconds of silence Marith took up the conversation. "So you're planning on staying in Torhafn?"

"For the summer. Maybe I'll move on after that."

"Then you must accept a reward, to see you through winter, when work dries up. We can really never thank you enough for finding Derry, and rescuing us from the footpads."

"It was nothing, I only regret leaving my sword behind tonight."

"You've got a sword!" Marith said in surprise.

Tevi's composure had recovered. She grinned. "And a shield, a short spear and a hunting bow."

Marith pursed her lips thoughtfully while she swilled the brandy around in her glass. "I guess you have to be well armed in a town like this."

At that Tevi laughed. "Oh, I wouldn't dream of walking around the streets with all that on me. But is Torhafn so much worse than anywhere else on the mainland?"

"Definitely. You've picked just about the nastiest town I know." Marith said.

"So where else would you recommend going?"

"Anywhere - it would have to be an improvement."

"Except the Halvia peninsular." Verron chipped in with a laugh.

"What's wrong with Halvia?" Tevi asked.

"A family of dragons."

"Oh."

"But there's lots of other places you could go to and make a decent living. With nothing to tie you to one spot there are so many things you should see." It took little encouragement for the two traders to launch into an enthusiastic account of their travels, which rapidly turned into a mutual nostalgic review, their audience forgotten.

"You remember the first time we met?" Verron asked his partner.

"You won't let me forget it."

"There you were, hanging over the rail on the aft deck. I don't know about the ship, but you were certainly eight sheets to the wind."

"I was seasick, not drunk!" Marith said indignantly.

"So you said at the time, but I've never seen you have trouble with sailing since."

Tevi settled back into the chair and closed her eyes. She had been working at the market since first light that morning. The voices faded to a quiet background hum as the warmth and the brandy overpowered her in a softly enveloping cocoon of sleep.

Some time later she awoke with a start. The fire had burned down to a dull glow, and the even pale colour of her clothes indicated that they were dry. While she had slept Marith and Verron had shifted away a little and now they were talking quietly, their heads close together.

Tevi hauled herself upright in her chair and said, "I must be off."

At Tevi's words the two traders exchanged small nods of agreement, a decision seemed to have been reached.

Marith spoke for them both. "Actually we've got a proposition to put to you. Tonight has brought home to us that we're very vulnerable. Normally we'd have hired a couple of mercenaries as guards, but due to local difficulties they're in short supply at the moment. We desperately need extra protection."

"You want to employ me as a bodyguard?" Tevi asked.

"Ah... well..." Marith hesitated. "It's not quite that simple. We're members of the Protectorate Guild of Traders and Merchant Adventurers. Our guild has a negotiated agreement with the Guild of Mercenary Warriors so that, except in certain defined situations, we're only allowed to hire their members to guard us or our property. In return we get discount rates. If we were caught breaking the rules we would be flung out of our guild, and all our loans would be revoked."

"Then what is your proposition?" Tevi asked frowning. A month before, Marith's words would have been complete gobbledegook to her. Her time in Torhafn gave her some insight, however she was still more than a little confused.

"Well, there's nothing to stop you coming with us as a friend. We could treat you to a guided tour of the sights to be seen along the way. We could even pay you a reward, as long as we make it very clear that it is purely for finding our son." Marith said.

"But of course, if we were attacked by bandits we'd be very pleased if you were to defend yourself." Verron added brightly.

Tevi frowned as she considered what the traders had said - and what they probably meant. She thought she understood. "Isn't that what they call 'bending the rules'?"

Marith shrugged and smiled. "Oh no. Just being a little imaginative in interpreting them."

While she turned the idea over in her head Tevi watched the embers twinkling on the burning logs. She did not know the identity of the thieves she had clashed with, but it was certain she had made enemies that night. Leaving Torhafn might be a very good idea - and sooner rather than later. The two traders also seemed to be the nearest thing to reputable company she had met since leaving Storenseg.

"OK, I agree. When do you leave?"

"Tomorrow. Will that be all right?"

"I've got a boat in the harbour. I'll have to get rid of it somehow." Tevi said.

Verron smiled broadly. "Well if you like, Marith will help you sell it."

CHAPTER FIVE—The Trade Route

The watch were calling mid-day and Torhafn market was awash with its usual chaotic activity as the last of the bales were loaded onto the wagons. Tevi heaved the final one into place, and then stepped back while Verron and Kimal secured the tarpaulin cover. Nearby Marith was finalising payment to a burly fur-trader from the north of Walderim, who appeared to be wearing half his merchandise across his own broad back.

"I hear you're leaving town." a voice said at Tevi's shoulder. She glanced around to see Aigur standing behind her. "Derag said you came looking for me this morning."

"I wanted to say goodbye. These folk have asked me to go with them."

Aigur's eyes glanced in the trader's direction. "They're from the Protectorate?"

"Yes."

"You'll be going back there with them?"

"Is that not wise?"

"You could do a lot worse." Aigur looked a little wistful. "I'm sometimes tempted to go back myself."

"You came from the Protectorate?" Tevi said in surprise.

"Long, long ago. And if I hadn't been a rash fool, I'd never have been forced to leave. It's a good place, for the honest. You should do well there."

"Well... maybe." Tevi shrugged, a little self-consciously.

"Oh, go on with you." Aigur nudged her in the ribs. "Will you promise me something?"

"Of course."

"In the Protectorate, if someday you go through the town of Longford Ash - you won't find anyone who remembers me, or if they do, they won't speak well of me - but there's a tavern, the Blue Boar. Buy a tankard of their best ale and toast the old place for me."

"I will. I promise."

Aigur gave a toothless smile and patted Tevi's arm. "Good luck. May your gods watch over you."

"And may your gods watch over you." Tevi replied.

"Oh, I think they gave up on me long ago."

The nearby wagon rocked as Verron climbed onto the driver's seat. Aigur met Tevi's eyes and said, "I think your new friends are ready to go. Farewell Tevi."

"Farewell Aigur."

A lump rose to Tevi's throat. The static life of the islands had given her little experience at goodbyes - until recently. The purse at her belt was heavy with coin from the sale of her boat. She was tempted to give it to the old woman, but she knew the offer would be turned down. There was nothing Tevi could do but smile take her place by Verron.

Marith, with Derry beside her, steered the leading wagon. Kimal rode on a saddle pony, a sturdy mountain-bred beast, dwarfed beside the shaggy carthorses. When Tevi looked back there was no sign of Aigur among the market crowd.

The wagons crawled their way through the busy streets, rumbling over uneven cobbles. Tevi watched the stream of mean faces flow past. She was not sorry to be leaving Torhafn. The weather conspired to show the town at its most dismal for their departure, a grey overcast morning holding the promise of rain. Colours were stretched in the sullen light. To the east, the tops of the Aldrak Mountains were lost in cloud.

A ruined gatehouse marked the remains of the old city walls. Thereafter the dwellings became even more squalid and the road turned into a rutted dirt track. In a short while, the travellers had left the last of the miserable hovels behind and began the ascent into the hills rising south of Torhafn.

The well-worn road climbed in a series of bends. As the incline grew steeper the horses strained against the load, their muscles bunching and the harness creaking alarmingly. A niche cut into the rock-face held a small shrine. Tevi stared at the engraved statue to take her mind off the sheer drop on the other side of the road. The nearest horse snorted loudly.

"Is this road safe?" Tevi asked.

"There won't be any bandits this close to town." Verron answered.

"I was thinking more about the danger of falling."

Verron smiled. "The horses will manage fine."

After a few more hairpins, the road levelled out. Verron leaned back in the seat and relaxed his grip on the reins. He glanced at his passenger. "I'm always glad to get out of Torhafn. It's just about the worst place I know, and I've seen some dire spots in my time. When we were younger, Marith and I used to take the eastern sea routes, out past Ekranos and the straits of Perithia. We even travelled north to Tirakhalod a few times."

"You don't go there any more?"

"They can be dangerous places. We risked it because there's fortune to be made. But now Marith and I are getting on we prefer a quieter life. For the last few seasons, we've done the southern trade route. It's a lot safer - apart from Torhafn. There's not such a good profit, but we've built enough capital so we can trade in luxuries that give a better margin, and we have other investments, back in the Protectorate."

"Don't sorcerers control everything in the Protectorate? I'd heard ordinary people weren't allowed to run their own lives."

"You'll have heard that in Torhafn."

"Isn't it true?"

"Hardly. The Coven of Lyremouth theoretically rules the Protectorate, with the Guardian as their leader, but they pretty much let the guilds manage their own affairs, as long as we pay our taxes." Verron shrugged.

"You don't mind paying taxes?"

At that Verron laughed. "I admit I'd rather not, but it isn't as if we don't get something in return."

"Which is?"

"As the name suggests - protection."

"From what?" Tevi asked.

"Mainly other sorcerers."

"That sounds similar to the sort of protection you can buy in Torhafn."

"It's a lot cleaner than anything you'll find in Torhafn, and it's not as if there's any other option. Sorcerers have ruled every civilisation since time begun. At least the Protectorate is benign and, best of all, stable. It's been going for over four hundred years, which makes it unique."

"What happened to the other civilisations?" Tevi asked.

"They collapsed when the sorcerer who built the empire died. The Coven isn't dependant on any one sorcerer. When the Guardian dies they just elect another."

Tevi frowned "Aigur did say the Protectorate was a good place to live."

"It is, but it will be some time before you get to judge for yourself. We won't return to it until we reach Serac in the autumn."

The wagons finally reached the crest of the hill. Ahead of them the road dipped across a swathe of gently rolling moor. Tevi twisted in her seat and looked back on the town. Seen from a distance, Torhafn was not so bad. If you did not know better you could almost imagine the docks looked quaint. Tevi's gaze shifted to the horizon, a grey blur of rain and mist. Far out to sea was Storenseg. Then the wagons rolled forward and both town and sea were lost over the brow of the hill.

Despite Verron's fears, the journey to Scathberg passed without incident. The only people on the road were fellow traders and couriers. To help pass the time Verron gave Tevi lessons in controlling the team of carthorses and Kimal coached her in the art of riding.

The mountainous islands did not lend themselves to land travel. The sea was the main highway and the original settlers had not bothered taking horses with them; the nearest things were the wiry donkeys used to pull carts. As a girl, Tevi had sat on the backs of these long-suffering beasts of burden, but that had been a game for children, not a method of transport. However, Tevi soon began to acquire a degree of competence on horseback.

They entered Scathberg eighteen days after leaving Torhafn. The sun was high as they rode down the main street. Both sides were lined with shops and taverns and houses. Apart from the absence of ancient ruins, the architecture bore a strong resemblance to the richer parts of Torhafn, with solid grey- stone buildings and slate tiled roofs, but there was no way Tevi could confuse the two towns.

"It feels friendlier" she said to Kimal, who was riding beside her.

"True - you don't have to sit with your back to the wall in the taverns." Kimal's tone was dismissive.

The distinctive sound of a market was growing louder, a hubbub overlain with the shouts of peddlers. Just before they reached it, the wagons turned into a side street and finally came to a halt in a small courtyard. Their arrival brought a thin young man, of twenty or so, out of a doorway. Despite the advanced hour, a dark shadow of stubble masked his jaw, allowing Tevi to be sure of his gender. His bleary eyes and dishevelled clothing told her he had not long been awake.

Marith jumped down to greet him. "Well met Yarle."

"Well met Marith, Verron." He gave a half-hearted nod.

"Is your mother available?" Marith asked, looking around.

"She died last autumn. I'm running the business now." Yarle said, looking at his feet.

Marith floundered for a suitable response. "I'm sorry to hear that. I enjoyed doing business with her."

"She got a fever last winter."

"That's tragic. She wasn't old."

Yarle shrugged, he clearly did not want to discuss it further. "You're here to trade?"

"Of course. I'll show you our goods." Marith took her lead from the young man.

A tap on her knee made Tevi look down. Verron had wandered around to her side of the wagon. "We'll leave Marith to it. She always works best on her own." He raised his voice. "I'm going to show Tevi around the market. You can meet us at the Three Barrels when you're finished. I'll reserve a couple of rooms."

"That'll be fine." Marith called back, already preoccupied with the business of barter. She spared no more attention as Tevi and Verron left the courtyard, accompanied by the two boys.

Marith joined them an hour or so later. They were sitting on a bench outside the inn, overlooking a small square. Around the central fountain, children were playing and a few servants stood gossiping. Occasional porters

trundled across pushing a handcart or with a stack of baskets balanced on their heads. In the distance the Aldrak Mountains raised their snow-covered peaks against a clear blue sky.

"How did it go with Yarle?" Verron asked.

"Like a lamb to the slaughter. I almost felt sorry taking the money off him. He'll never be in business by the time we get back next year. He's got as much talent for bargaining as I have for flying."

"Mother's feeling guilty. She must have got the shirt off his back." Kimal said with a broad grin.

"I felt I was taking advantage of his inexperience."

"You could have given him an easy deal." Kimal suggested mischievously.

"We're not in business for charity. If I don't get his money someone else will. But it's a shame - I respected his mother." Marith shook her head slowly and sighed. "Are you ready to come and see to the wagons?"

Verron answered by standing and linking his arm through his partner's. Tevi and the two boys followed behind. While she walked, Tevi considered what had been said about Yarle. Her island-born morality was appalled at the thought of a young man, helpless and alone, being cheated out of his money - not that Marith was dishonest, but the experienced trader clearly had an unfair advantage.

Tevi turned to Kimal. "Is there no one to help Yarle? Doesn't he belong to a guild or something?"

"You don't get guilds here - not in the same way as in the Protectorate. Anyway, from what mama said, I can't see a guild lending him money." Kimal replied.

"He wouldn't need to borrow money, he's got his mother's." Tevi pointed out.

"But in the Protectorate he wouldn't have inherited the money."

"Why not?"

"Because, strictly speaking, it wouldn't have been hers in the first place."

"Who would it belong to? The Coven?"

"No, the guild, of course." Kimal's tone implied that the answer was obvious.

"Your parents have got money... haven't they?" Tevi's voice betrayed her confusion.

"Not really. When they finished their apprenticeship the guild licensed them and gave them their advance to set up in business. They could do what they liked with the money, within reason, though they have to pay tithes to the guild and taxes to the Coven. But when they die the guild will take everything back." Kimal explained.

"You and Derry won't get to share it?" Tevi asked in surprise.

"No."

The prospect clearly did not bother Kimal in the slightest, but Tevi had some trouble coming to terms with the idea. The islander in her was not bothered by the thought of losing money as much as the complete disregard for family and inheritance. She remembered being told that there were no hereditary leaders in the Protectorate.

Kimal carried on talking. "Hopefully, we'll be in guilds for ourselves, long before our parent die. I mean, it must be awful, having to wait until your parents peg-it before you can start your own career."

"Don't your parents want you to take over their business from them?" Tevi asked.

"Why should they?" Kimal seemed nearly as confused as Tevi. "We might not want to be traders."

"You told me that you did."

"I want to be a mercenary." Derry cut in loudly.

Kimal raised his voice to drown out his brother. "True, but when I'm ready I can get my own advance from the guild, if they think I'm good enough."

"And if you're not good enough?" Tevi asked.

"Then there'd be no point in my parents giving me their business, would there?" Kimal said reasonably. "It makes sense. Protectorate traders always come out best, 'cause we don't let fools make a mess of things just because of who their parents were."

Tevi did not answer. It seemed a strange way to organise things but, thinking of her own experience, how much simpler it would have been if her family had simply accepted that she was not cut out to be queen, and had chosen someone more suited for the job - such as Laff. The corners of her mouth turned down in a bitter grimace as she realised that this was exactly what they had done.

The two wagons were waiting in the courtyard. Yarle watched sullenly as Tevi unloaded the cargo. The others helped with lighter items and soon the party was ready to depart. Yarle had counted the load into his storeroom, but seemed unsure of what to do next. He still had not shaved. To Tevi's eyes, it made him seem even more pathetically vulnerable. She could not restrain herself from trying to help him.

"Is everything all right?" she asked gently.

"Why shouldn't it be?"

"It's a lot of responsibility, running a business."

Yarle looked her up and down defiantly. "I can cope."

"Isn't there someone who can help you, a cousin or an aunt? People might take advantage of a young man on his own."

"I don't need help." A surly note entered Yarle's voice.

"But it's not fair to expect you to run your own finances and things like that."

"I'm not an idiot."

"I wasn't saying you were, I just think you could do with a woman to look after you. It's too much to expect a boy to take care of himself."

"What the hell do you think I am? A child or something? I'm probably older than you."

"Yes, but..." Tevi managed to stop herself before she finished the sentence; *it's not the same for a woman*. It was the island's way of thinking that, rightly or wrongly, would not be understood on the mainland. She drew a deep breath and tried to juggle her head and forget she was talking to a man. "It's just... Losing your mother must have been a shock and... I thought you might need advice, or..."

"I don't need anyone's advice." Yarle snarled the words. He marched into his storeroom, slamming the door behind him in Tevi's face. She glanced over her shoulder at the others, who had been listening to the exchange.

"I didn't mean to insult him."

Verron's face held a slightly perplexed frown. "If you don't mind me saying so, you sometimes seem to have a problem taking men seriously."

Tevi sighed and raised her eyes to the sky. "I know, but I'm working on it - believe me, I'm working on it."

The line of wagons rolled out of Scathberg, accompanied by the crunching of stones, the shouts of riders and the crack of whips. Hired guards and scouts flanked the caravan as outriders. Tevi was halfway down the line, with the reins in her hands and Verron beside her, offering the occasional word of advice.

Hills rose on either side, striped with row upon row of grapevines - the source of the famed red Scathberg wine. Between the neatly trained lines, the ground was dry and bare, except for tufts of thin, yellow grass. Scattered grey-stone farmhouses dotted the vineyards. High above, the sun shone brightly through fine wisps of cirrus cloud. A light morning breeze carried dust, stirred up by the hooves of horses ahead.

"How far will we go with these people?" Tevi asked.

"Through the desert as far as Kradja." Verron replied. "Then we'll join another caravan for the journey to Gu'lith and on to the river port of Limori."

"Do you travel with groups for protection?"

"Partly. It's also a way to share resources. The desert is unpredictable; landmarks shift from one season to the next. If we were on our own and we missed a water hole it could be fatal. The nomads are usually friendly, but you can't rely on them coming to your rescue."

"How long 'till we get to Kradja?"

"Maybe twenty-three days, twenty-five at most." Verron estimated.

"Kimal said there's an enormous temple there."

"There certainly is." Verron agreed.

"We had a shrine in the middle of the village I came from, I've been trying to imagine it scaled up, but I guess the temple won't be quite like that." Tevi said thoughtfully.

"I doubt it - unless your people confuse brooding with meditation, and have a liking for cryptic images and overblown dramatics." Verron smiled as he spoke.

Tevi matched his grin and flicked the reins to encourage the horses to keep up with those in front. Behind them, the walls of Scathberg shrank into the distance and soon were lost among the farmlands.

As they moved southwards the landscape became ever more arid. Trees and bushes changed to waxy-leafed, drought-resistant varieties. On the nineteenth day out of Scathberg, they reached the edge of a plateau. An eroded escarpment overlooked a featureless plain of dust and rock stretching off until it met a cloudless turquoise sky. Isolated cacti and long-thorned shrubs were the only things growing on the parched landscape.

That night they pitched camp in a stony gully where clumps of green plants revealed the presence of underground water. This was confirmed once they swept the wind-blown gravel from the cistern cover. One of the guides told Tevi that, during the autumn rains, the gully was a riverbed. It was strange to think of water flowing through this dry land. The sun sank low and long shadows covered the campsite. After the heat of the day, the wind was chill as it whispered across the desert, and sucked heat from everything it touched.

When the evening meal was over, Tevi took a thick cloak and left the fireside. From the top of the gully, she watched the sunset turn the sky to fire. The heavens flamed first gold, then blazed with fierce red that smouldered to solemn purple and finally blackness, strewn with the white sparks of stars. Tevi stared across the barren land in awe at the harsh, inhuman beauty. She returned to the camp with tears in her eyes. She had not wanted to leave Storenseg, and wished with all her heart she could go back, yet it would have been an unbearable loss to have lived her life without ever seeing a desert sunset.

Five days later they reached the oasis town of Kradja, a sprawling mass of flat-topped houses built of mud bricks, the same colour as the landscape. The town seemed to be growing from the desert. Without transition, the rough trail became a dusty street, crowded with workers, children, merchants and servants. Robed nomads led strings of improbable gangling beasts, taller than a horse, with sinuous necks and a wobbling lump on their backs.

"Camels." Verron told her, seeing Tevi's eyes follow the animals in amazement. The air was full of the sounds of shouting, laughing, hammering and the jingle of horse harness.

Closer to the centre of town the walls became higher, blank except for wide gateways guarded by sentries with barbed pikes. Most were closed, but through the open ones Tevi caught glimpses of gardens, with surprising greenery, and rich in lavish blooms. The scent of flowers mixed with the dust and sweat of the street. Tevi raised

her eyes. Above the walls, the soaring crowns of palms pierced the blue sky. Towering over all was the green copper dome of the temple.

Later that afternoon she stood in the cavernous interior. The huge echoing void was filled with hushed whispers. Light from a ring of windows filtered down through a haze of incense. In the gloom huddled groups of chanting priests, wild-eyed prophets and praying supplicants. Alcoves held grotesque statues of gods. Some idols were bedecked with garlands of fruit and flowers. Before the more warlike were bloodstained altars.

"Impressive, isn't it?" Kimal observed.

"I should say so. Is this considered a very holy place?" Tevi whispered in reply.

"There's a legend among the locals that this is a very auspicious spot to make money out of visitors. For a price they'll tell your future or bless anything you feel needs blessing."

"Are the prophecies accurate?" Tevi asked.

"If you've got money to waste you could find out."

The question immediately rose in Tevi's mind, *Will I ever return to Storenseg?* But she knew it was pointless, and required no skilled oracle to divine the answer.

A fresh burst of chanting began nearby, voices rose and fell in wavering cadences. Tevi watched as a robed priest threw fistfuls of incense into a crucible, while the body of an entranced seer swayed and shuddered. The oracle's eyes were glazed but, as Tevi looked, they seemed to fasten on her and the head wobbled up and down, as if nodding - as if an answer.

For a second Tevi's breath caught in her throat. Then she sighed and dismissed the taunting fantasy. The oracle drooped, and then twitched into a shuffling, circular dance. The smell of incense became overpowering and Tevi and Kimal moved away, coughing. They squeezed through the crowds blocking the main entrance. Outside was bright and refreshing after the scented darkness, although the heat hit them like a blow.

The temple was set in the midst of a garden. Fountains splashed into geometrically shaped pools of dark-green water. Birds sang from rooftops; the sound floating lazily on the hot afternoon air.

"What gods do the people in the Protectorate worship?" Tevi asked.

"It varies. A lot of places have their own local deities."

"Are there no temples like this?"

Kimal shook his head. "Oh no. It's all very unorganised and informal."

"Who do the sorcerers worship?"

"No one in particular, although some of them have very elaborate ideas about the meaning of life and how we all came to be here." Kimal's tone was, as ever, irreverent.

"On the islands we worship Rangir, goddess of the sea, and her sisters."

"I shouldn't think anyone would mind if you want to keep practising your faith. But your goddess is almost certainly no more than the folk memory of an ancient sorcerer - that's what most turn out to be."

"You sound as if you don't believe in any of them." Tevi was not sure if she did either.

"Only when I'm frightened. Most of the time I need proof - and there isn't any." Kimal sounded quite definite.

"Couldn't the sorcerers find out?"

"Some have tried and got nowhere. And they're the experts in unseen powers. If sorcerers can't find the smallest scrap of information, it's a bit silly for any ordinary mortal, like the priests in there, to claim they know the gods'

names, how they made the world, what songs they'd like sung in their honour, or which style of head-dress they normally wear."

Tevi smiled at his light-hearted tone. "Still, it's a very impressive temple."

"Oh yes, and their religion is probably no more wrong than anyone else's."

Verron, Marith and Derry were waiting at the appointed rendezvous. Together, the five of them left the temple garden and wandered through the marketplace, full of noise and the tang of strange spices. The sight of a row of camels caught Tevi attention.

The rubbery mouths moved in continuous chewing and, to judge from the peeling fur, they were all in the middle of a fairly major moult. Tevi reached out to touch a shaggy haunch, but stopped as a nomad spotted her and jabbered harshly. She frowned. The nomad repeated a string of similar, incomprehensible syllables.

"Pardon, I didn't catch that." Tevi said politely.

"I only know a few words of their language, but I think you were being warned that the camels bite." Marith said at her shoulder.

"Their language?" Tevi asked, confused.

"Yes. Not everyone speaks the same language as us."

"There's more than one language?" Tevi was dumbfounded. The idea had never occurred to her before. It felt as if it should be impossible, although, once she stopped to consider it, she could think of no valid reason why.

Verron laughed at the surprise on Tevi's face. "There are dozens of languages, maybe even hundreds. All the lands around the Middle Seas have a common tongue, which is due to a sorcerer who enforced it as an experiment 600 hundred years ago. I think he had some naive idea that if everyone understood each other there'd be no conflict. Of course all that happened was everyone could argue much more effectively." Verron explained dryly. It was easy to tell where Kimal got his ironic outlook on life.

"How do people with different languages communicate?" Tevi persisted.

"With great difficulty - although I think Marith can haggle in every language in existence."

Marith laughed, "It's not me, it's money that can talk any language."

Kimal joined the discussion. "Even where languages start out the same they drift apart over the centuries. The Coven keeps the Protectorate constant, but you can find some strange accents from time to time - like yours. Another few hundred years of isolation and no one on the mainland will be able to understand a word you islanders say." He spoke the last sentence in a fair imitation of Tevi's soft drawl, and then he elbowed her lightly in the ribs.

The playful scuffle that followed ended quickly as Tevi caught Kimal around the waist, flipped him over and effortlessly held him upside-down by his ankles. Kimal yelped, his arms flailing and hair brushing the ground.

"I think, my son, the moral is, that if ever you meet a woman with an accent like Tevi's you should treat her with some respect." Marith said laughing.

Tevi returned the boy to his feet and they continued the relaxed stroll through the streets of Kradja. Yet, Tevi could not help thinking that there was little chance of Kimal meeting anyone else with her accent - she alone was exiled forever.

The trader's route went from town to town, with the value of their merchandise growing steadily. Autumn was fast approaching as they returned north. A last caravan took them to the city of Villenes, within sight of where the Aldracks trailed away into the Merlieu hills. On the other side was Serac - and the Protectorate.

A genuine affection had grown between Tevi and the traders. Kimal and Derry treated her like an older sister, Verron and Marith like a trusted niece. She felt more accepted than had ever been the case with her own family,

although there were things about herself she dare not reveal. Tevi was also aware she could not stay with them forever. She would have to find a way to make her own living.

While Verron and Marith completed arrangements for the last stages of the journey, Tevi wandered through the town in the company of the two boys. The shops were piled high with clothes and rolls of material. Villenes was famous for its textiles. As they paused at a stall, the owner rushed over, beaming, and extracted a crimson shirt from the nearest pile. The item was held up against Tevi who shook her head, somewhat abashed. On the islands bright colours, particularly reds, were reserved for men, while women wore neutral tones. It took little to imagine the comments if her kin saw her wearing anything the colour of the shirt. However, there was no chance of them seeing her again, and trying to fit in had never stopped them talking anyway. In a sudden mood of defiance, Tevi commenced bartering and shortly after walked away, carrying the shirt. She felt like a naughty child.

The traders were lodging with a friend - someone they had once travelled with, and shared dangers and difficult times. Tevi was assured the woman had been a little wild in her youth, although she was now a highly respectable merchant. Her home was a rambling building, set among gardens leading down to the river. At the door Tevi and the boys were greeted by servants, who took their parcels and offered the traditional soft slippers. They found Marith in the central courtyard, surrounded by potted ferns. She was talking to two unfamiliar men.

One was about thirty, strongly muscled all the way up to his bull-like neck. Topping it was a round, good-natured face. His companion was older, taller and leaner, with weathered skin and close-cropped grey hair. Both men were wearing mail-reinforced leather jackets. Swords hung at their sides. On the backs of their hands were tattooed red and gold crossed swords - the mark of the Protectorate guild of Mercenary Warriors.

The men glanced around as Tevi and the two boys approached. Marith performed the introductions. "These are my two sons, Kimal and Derry, and this is a friend of ours, Tevi." She gestured to the mercenaries. "This is Cade," the younger of the two men nodded, "and this is Alentris. They'll be escorting us to Serac."

Tevi was aware that both men's eyes had fastened on the sword hanging her side.

"Do you know how to use that?" the mercenary called Alentris asked.

"A little." Tevi said, diffidently.

Derry piped in. "We met Tevi in Torhafn when she rescued mama and papa from a gang of footpads."

Both mercenaries looked satisfied. Evidently, their concern was solely with assessing the defensive capability of the party. Only Tevi caught the look of relief that flitted across Marith's face.

"It never hurts to have..." Alentris was interrupted by Derry tugging on his jerkin,

"I'm going to be a mercenary when I'm older." Derry's defiant tone made the adults laugh.

Cade grinned at Marith. "Don't worry. They grow out of it - most of them."

The road from Villenes to Serac led over a dusty plain of low-lying thorny shrubs and wind-blown yellow grass. After travelling so far in large caravans, it was strange to be on their own again. The monotony of the landscape also subdued the traders. Only the two mercenaries were unaffected, they rode ahead of the wagons, swapping anecdotes and laughing.

On the third day, the terrain began to rise. That night they pitched camp beside a weathered outcrop of rock crowning the top of a low hill. The sloping ground was sparsely covered with the same coarse bushes found in the lowlands, but at the bottom was a small stream. The banks supported the first real patch of greenery they had seen since leaving the irrigated fields surrounding Villenes.

While the others arranged the campsite, Tevi and Cade went down the slope to replenish their supply of water. In the wet mud was the imprint of a single row of footsteps. The pair examined the track in silence.

Cade spoke first. "We're on a reasonably well used route..."

"We haven't seen a sign of anyone all day and they're very fresh." Tevi said.

Cade studied their surroundings thoughtfully. There was no other trace of human activity. He shrugged and bent down to fill the water container, "It's probably a fur trapper, or goatherd."

"You could be right." Tevi agreed, a little uncertainly.

"And it should help focus the thoughts of whoever's on watch tonight."

Back at the camp, the news was greeted without undue alarm; there were too many legitimate reasons for someone's presence in the area. After the evening meal Derry was put to bed inside one of the wagons and Alentris sat first watch on top of the rocks. Leaving the lowlands had lifted the trader's spirits. The lighter mood kept the group sitting around the campfire, talking, well past the time when they would normally have gone to sleep.

Marith was affecting a comic burlesque of indignation. She tapped the ground with a forefinger and demanded. "Okay. Who's pinched the last of the cinnamon biscuits?"

"Would I do a thing like that?" Cade asked, going along with the game and pretending to sound hurt.

"From the way you wolfed down the rest of them, I'd say it's more than likely."

"But the guild guarantees my honesty." Cade said, spreading his hands in appeal.

"So we'll put in a claim."

Verron laughed. "I can just imagine the response if I submit a claim for one cinnamon biscuit."

"Three!" Marith corrected, mock-righteously.

"The honour of the guild demands that I confess." Alentris's voice drifted down from the rocks, just above their heads, as he joined in the performance. "It was I who took the biscuits, but if you forbear to submit your claim then I will more than make good the loss when we get to Serac."

"You see Marith, I told you it pays to hire mercenaries with two swords." Verron said. He caught sight of Tevi's puzzled expression. "I was referring to their tattoos. Junior mercenaries only have a single sword on their hands. It's not until they've proved their trustworthiness that the guild gives them the second, crossed sword. After that the guild guarantees to refund any losses if they prove dishonest."

"Which is why they feel they can charge such an exorbitant fee." Marith concluded

"We're excellent value for money." Cade spoke with heavy irony.

"What stops thieves from tattooing their hands to pass themselves off?" Tevi asked.

"We do." Alentris said. "If ever you're in Dresinton you can see the remains of a couple that tried it."

Cade grinned up at his colleague. "Are the skulls still there then?" he asked in a conversational tone of voice.

"Oh yes, they're wedged in tight, they'll never..." Alentris's voice stopped abruptly. Something about the arrested speech drew all eyes to him in an instant. His attention was fixed on the bushes at the bottom of the hill. He then gestured sharply. Cade scuttled to the side of one of the wagons and stared down the slope. There was silence around the campfire.

"By the bushes."

"I see them." The two mercenaries spoke in taunt whispers.

Without a word Marith, leaned forward and dowsed the fire by emptying one of the flasks over it. The water hissed furiously for a second. Suddenly it was very dark. The new moon was low in the sky, lighting the hillside obliquely but not touching the campsite in the shadow of the rocks. Alentris scrambled down from his lookout point. The faint scuffing of his feet was the only sound that could be heard.

The traders slipped into a wagon. Verron reappeared almost immediately, carrying two crossbows. Tevi's mouth went dry as she reached back to her scabbard. She drew her sword and joined the two mercenaries, standing

shielded by the wagons but with a clear view down the hillside. Tevi's eyes ached as they stared into the gully, slowly adjusting to the dark. Nothing was moving below.

Marith's voice was heard, whispering quietly to Derry, before she emerged and tiptoed over to take the second crossbow from Verron. There was a tap on Tevi's shoulder. She looked back to see Kimal holding up her hunting bow, with an unspoken request on his face. She nodded her consent and Kimal strung the bow, slung the quiver of arrows over his shoulder and went to stand by his parents. There was a brief period of whispering and then the traders took up positions in the shelter of the wagons.

Alentris and Cade were conferring quietly. "About a dozen of them, do you think?"

"Maybe less."

Tevi bit her lip and asked, "So what now?"

Alentris spoke grimly. "If they've got any sense they'll realise we've spotted them and they'll give up and go away." At that instant, there was a shout from the bottom of the hill and nine figures burst from the undergrowth. "Damn. They're idiots."

Cade caught hold of Tevi's arm and hissed urgently. "There may be more in the bushes with bows. Stay back until this lot are close enough to obscure you from their line of sight."

Tevi nodded to show she'd understood.

The bandits continued their charge up the hill. To Tevi's eyes, it seemed as if they were running in slow motion. From the wagons came a succession of twangs as the traders started shooting. One of the advancing figures fell, with hands clasped against a thigh. Then, as the first of the attackers got to within twenty yards of the wagons, Alentris shouted "Right!" and charged forward. Cade was close behind. Tevi took a deep breath and leapt down the hill.

The nearest bandit to her took a defensive stance, planting both feet firmly on the ground. With no attempt at subtlety, Tevi swung her sword down hard. Her opponent's blade rose to make the block, but the bandit was completely unprepared for the force of Tevi's blow. The attempted defence was knocked aside while Tevi's sword was barely deflected. The sharp edge sliced deeply into flesh. With a cry, the wounded bandit staggered backwards, then slipped and stumbled away down the slope.

The momentum of her charge carried Tevi some way after her foe, until she managed to regain her footing and skidded to a halt. Before she had time to turn, Tevi heard footsteps behind her. In her head, she heard Blaze's voice screaming "DUCK". By instinct, she obeyed, turning as she dropped. One of her knees brushed the ground as a blade whistled harmlessly over her head. Directly in front of Tevi's face was a pair of legs. Tevi's hand tightened on the hilt as she drove her sword up, in a quick, determined thrust. The point entered just below her assailant's breastbone.

Only then did she look up. It was a young man. Surprise on his face turned slowly to horror. His sword slipped from his grasp as his hands twitched futilely towards his chest and then stopped. Slowly he keeled forward. Tevi raised her hand to stop him from landing on top of her. The bandit's body hit the ground with a soft, dull, thump.

Tevi wrenched her sword free, then stood and looked around. Ten yards away Cade was hard pressed in combat against three attackers. The nearest bandit did not even turn as Tevi ran towards them. Again, her sword swung down in an arc, hitting the outlaw on the joint between shoulder and neck. The force of the blow almost severed the head. The bandit collapsed with a sharp guttural sigh - a sound which rooted the other two outlaws to the ground. Cade lashed out with his sword, severing the weapon, and possibly a few fingers, from one of the stunned bandits. Suddenly the battle was over. The two turned and fled, followed by their surviving allies.

"Quick! Back to cover." Cade cried.

They dashed up the hillside and skidded to a stop behind the wagons. In a second Alentris joined them. The older mercenary ran his hand through his cropped hair, then slumped into a crouch, elbows on his knees, breathing deeply.

"Are you all right?" Cade asked.

"Not a scratch. They were amateurs. But I'm getting too old for this game." Alentris said between gasps.

"How about you, Tevi?"

"Oh, I'm fine." Yet as she spoke, she was aware that the right side of her face felt wet and sticky.

Cade also noticed and reached over to wipe her cheek gently. He rubbed his fingers together and looked concerned. "That's a lot of blood."

Alentris looked up. "Is it yours?" he asked.

In confusion, Tevi searched her memory, and saw again the young man crumpling above her, blood gushing from his chest. "No. It's not."

Alentris nodded and said, "Good. That's the important thing."

The crescent moon had climbed high into the sky. Tevi sat on the rocks and stared at it. She had volunteered for first watch duty, knowing she could not sleep. Every time she closed her eyes she saw the young bandit's expression, his eyes and mouth wide open with astonishment and fear. Her second victim did not upset her quite so much - she had not seen the face, did not even know if it was a man or a woman. However, each time she relived the sight of the first, dying bandit he looked more like Sparrow.

There was a scrabbling sound from below and Cade's head appeared over the edge of the rocks. He climbed up to sit beside her and offered a mug of hot soup. Tevi took it with a mumbled word of thanks and sipped in silence. Cade shuffled back into a comfy position, leaning against a rock.

Cade let her finish the soup before he spoke. "Was that the first time you've killed someone?"

Tevi nodded, not trusting her voice.

"You know you had no choice?" Cade said after a short pause.

Again Tevi nodded in silence.

"No. I suppose it doesn't help much." Cade's nose wrinkled. "Didn't help a great deal when someone first said it to me."

"But it didn't put you off becoming a mercenary?" Tevi's voice cracked as she spoke.

"It made me think long and hard for about a month. Still does, sometimes."

"Will tonight give you much to think about?"

"No. I guess it gets easier after a while. And tonight was simple - it was us or them. A cliché, but true."

Tevi put down the empty mug and wrapped her arms around her raised knees. Her voice was muffled as she spoke, "I keep wondering what he was like; what his name was."

"That's a bad game to start playing." Cade said softly.

"I keep thinking someone must have cared for him. Someone said goodbye to him as he went out tonight. They'll never see him again. For the rest of their life that person will hate me for what I did tonight, without even knowing who I am." To her dismay Tevi realised tears were rolling down her face. "He'll have parents who fed him, washed him, told him stories, watched him grow, dreamed of grandchildren, and now all that is gone."

"Then they shouldn't have raised him to be a thief and a murderer. Believe me, you can't start tearing yourself up like this. At least tonight makes some sort of sense - you were saving the lives of your friends. As a hired sword, I've been in some nasty brawls." Cade's voice grew bitter. "At the end, you don't know what it was about, or what was gained, or where the right and wrong of it lay. You just wake up in the morning, spare a thought for those who can't, and thank whatever god watches over you."

Tevi's head sunk onto her folded arms. Cade slid over and put his arm around her shoulder. He patted her gently. "Go on. Get some sleep. I'll sit watch."

"I can't sleep." Tevi said.

"You probably can, I put a whole spoonful of Marith's best sleeping draught in your soup."

Even as Cade spoke the effects of the drug hit Tevi. The stars spun as a wave of drowsiness washed over her. Without another word, Tevi slithered across to the edge of the rock and accepted Cade's offered hand to help her down. She stumbled over to where her blanket lay beside the campfire and was asleep before her head touched the ground.

In the morning light the wreckage of the fight lay visible on the slope. Apart from splashed blood, dropped weapons and uprooted bushes, four of the attackers lay dead on the ground. As well as the two Tevi had slain, there was a woman with a crossbow bolt in her throat, and a man cut open by Alentris. Their silent presence unsettled the travellers. People moved quietly about their tasks, preparing to depart as soon as possible. Even Derry was subdued.

After breakfast Tevi walked down to the young man she had killed. Seen clearly in daylight he looked nothing like Sparrow. She stood staring at him blankly for a long while, until a call from the top of the hill roused her.

"Hey, Tevi. We're ready to go."

"Aren't we going to bury them or something?" Tevi shouted back.

"Haven't got the time, or the inclination. If their friends are concerned they can come back and get them once we've gone." Alentris shouted down.

"And if not?"

"Then they'll make some little, furry animals very happy."

Tevi took a last long look around the scene, as if trying to impress it on her memory, then turned and trotted up the hill to join the wagons.

CHAPTER SIX—The Mark of the Guild

Serac was a busy town, centred around its port, with wide streets full of traffic. It was the first time Tevi had been in the Protectorate. The town was obviously prosperous and well-ordered, however it did not seem particularly noteworthy compared to other places she had seen - although she was not quite sure what she had been expecting. Most of her time was spent sitting on the harbour wall, watching boats bobbing on the water and smelling the heavy, salt-laden sea air.

The mercenaries were paid off. Alentris bid the group farewell, taking contract as a guard on an outgoing caravan. Cade, however, wanted to visit Lyremouth and would still travel with them, although no longer as an employee. At Serac the traders also parted company with the horses and bought passage on a ship bound for Lyremouth.

Marith had explained, "You can always find a buyer for the wagons, though you never make any real profit on the deal. But we can make a fortune selling the spice in Lyremouth, and the sea is the quickest way there."

"Couldn't we take the horses with us?"

"It would be too expensive."

Tevi was unhappy saying goodbye to the horses. She had come to view them almost as friends. "Will they be alright?"

"Oh yes." Marith had assured her. "They're too valuable for anyone to abuse."

The party boarded their ship a few days later. Like all islanders, Tevi was a born sailor and felt at home with the pitching deck beneath her feet. However, she had never been on a ship the size of the 'Aspen Rover'. It dwarfed the tiny boats of the Western Isles and required teamwork unlike anything she had experienced before. Tevi realised her fishing experience would not qualify her for a career as a Protectorate sailor, and the time plan her future was getting close.

Nine days out of Serac, the northern shore hove into sight. It was a warm afternoon. Seagulls flocked above the wake of the boat, fighting over the pickings churned up by its passage. Tevi leant on the starboard rail, dividing her attention between the distant shoreline and the water racing past below. Kimal and Cade were beside her.

Cade was speaking. "I was born and bred in Lyremouth. It'll be nice to see the old place again and it's about time I called in on my parents. They worry about me." He sniffed reflectively. "Can't say I blame them."

"What's Lyremouth like?" Tevi asked.

"Big." Kimal replied quickly.

"Isn't the Coven there? Do you see many sorcerers?"

"A few." Kimal shrugged.

"What do they do?"

"Just walk around, looking important." Kimal was at his most dismissive.

"You don't get sorcerers on the islands, but we have lots of legends. I guess I'm hoping to see something spectacular."

"Then I'm afraid you'll be disappointed. Sorcerers aren't prone to putting on shows for people's amusement." Cade said laughing.

"So how can you tell them apart from anyone else?"

"Members of the Coven all wear amulets on their wrists, engraved with a pattern of oak leaves. Witches' are various colours, depending on rank. Sorcerers have a black amulet and the Guardian's is white, but there's little

chance you'll ever see it. She rarely leaves the Coven buildings, except for festivals when she's surrounded by a swarm of guild- masters."

"I'd still like to see some real magic." Tevi's voice was wistful.

Kimal whooped. "You walk around with the strength of five men, and complain you don't see any magic!"

"We all take the potion on Storenseg, and I've grown up with it, so I don't see it as anything unusual."

"Do you have any other magic potions?" Cade asked.

"No. And we only got the strength potion from a sorcerer who was shipwrecked on our island ages ago."

"How about dragons or werewolves?" Cade persisted.

"No. A sea-monster was washed onto the beach when I was a child, but it was half eaten and not very impressive." Tevi said.

"And no magic users?"

"No."

Cade's eyes travelled to the horizon as he said, "It would be nice to be rid of them all."

"Don't you like sorcerers?" Tevi asked with surprise.

"I don't like thunderstorms, but they're unavoidable. It's the same with sorcerers. You just have to put up with them. The Coven is indispensable, but if it wasn't, I'd happily ditch the lot."

"What's wrong with them?"

"They're not like us. They're too bloody powerful and the few I've met have given me the creeps. Though don't get me wrong - as things stand I'd willingly die for the Coven. It's still a damn sight better than any of the alternatives." Cade's voice was resigned rather than bitter.

"You sound like papa." Kimal said. "He says folk complain about the Coven and the taxes, but if they saw how the rest of the world runs they'd change their tune."

"The places we've seen have been okay." Tevi pointed out.

"The southern lands have been very quiet since a big bust-up fifty years back. And the border countries, like Walderim, are all under the sway of the Coven, even if they don't pay allegiance. Sorcerers born in these regions either come in to join the Coven or move further away so they can have a free hand to do whatever they want." Kimal explained.

"What do sorcerers do elsewhere in the world?" Tevi asked.

"Ruin the lives of ordinary folk." Cade rejoined the debate. "And have done since the dawn of time."

"How?"

"Building empires. They've enslaved people, conscripted them into armies, even used them for experiments. They've destroyed millions of ordinary folk who wanted nothing more than to get on with their own business - farming or hunting or whatever." Now there was definite bitterness in Cade's voice.

"Couldn't people resist?"

Cade shook his head. "A sorcerer is so powerful compared to ungifted folk like us. The only person who can do anything to stop one is another sorcerer, and the gods alone know how many have died in wars between them. They make the nastiest brawl I've ever seen look like a lover's tiff. And all for nothing - once the sorcerer dies their empires collapse back into anarchy."

"Couldn't their children take over?" Tevi asked.

"Hardly." Cade snorted.

"Why not?"

"They don't have the ability. Maybe one person in a hundred has limited magical gifts, but only one in a hundred thousand has enough to be a sorcerer. I don't think anyone knows what makes a sorcerer, but its not inherited. A sorcerer's children are no more likely to be gifted with magic than a labourer's." Cade explained.

"The empires all rise and fall in the space of a lifetime." Kimal added.

"Verron told me the Protectorate has lasted for hundreds of years." Tevi said.

"The Protectorate is different. It's not dependent on any one sorcerer." From his tone, Kimal was clearly more sympathetic to the Coven than Cade was. "The Coven also leaves us alone, as long as we pay our taxes. They don't ask us to fight wars. They even do useful things, like training healers and weather-witches. We don't..."

Any other advantages to the Coven were lost as a bucketful of water landed on Kimal's back, followed by a giggle from Derry. After a second of stunned shock, Kimal spun around He spotted his brother disappearing into the hold. Kimal shouted and chased after Derry, but there was a smile on his face. He evidently took the soaking in good part. Cade and Tevi laughed at Kimal's rapid departure

"He's a nice lad." Tevi said, putting aside the conversation about sorcerers.

"They're a nice family." Cade added.

"True."

"Will you be staying with them for long?"

Tevi shrugged. "Marith and Verron have invited me to spend the winter with them."

"Have you any thoughts about what you're going to do after?"

"Not really."

"You should join a guild." Cade said, seriously.

"Which one? I'm a bit old to start an apprenticeship."

"You wouldn't need to, if you already had the skills for the trade."

"I'm not sure I have any worthwhile skills." Tevi said, sombrely.

Cade chewed his lip for a while and then said, "Would you be interested in joining the mercenaries?"

Tevi gave a humourless laugh. "My old weapon trainer would be utterly dumbstruck to hear you ask that. Back in my home village, I was considered to be the worst warrior of all time."

Cade looked surprised. "There's a gang of bandits outside Villenes who'd disagree with that."

"I guess being three times as strong as anyone else gives me an unfair advantage here."

"You don't worry about fairness in battles - use every advantage you've got. Anyway, I know the guild would be pleased to have you."

"Can anyone just ask to join?" Tevi said, looking at him.

"No. You need to be nominated by a guild member. Normally it's the warrior you've been apprenticed to, but it doesn't have to be. And you weren't born in the Protectorate so you'd need two other citizens to vouch for you, but I can't see Marith and Verron refusing you that." Cade patted Tevi on the shoulder. "Think about it. If you like, I'll nominate you. You did alright with the bandits - certainly saved my neck."

He walked away, humming softly to himself. Tevi looked out to sea, deep in thought.

The Aspen Rover reached Lyremouth harbour late the following evening. The autumn sunset turned the spires and rooftops of the city to a dull pink. Overhead the first stars were starting to show. The ship dropped anchor well out in the bay. It would not dock until high tide, early the next morning. Tevi and Marith leant against the

railing and watched as dusk claimed the city. Silhouetted against the darkening sky was a forest of tall masts. Lower in the water were the squat shapes of river barges that had brought produce down the Lyre, from the hinterlands. Light from numerous torches burning on the dockside shimmered off the still water. Further inland other lanterns speckled the gentle hills rising behind the harbour.

Marith pointed out some of the major landmarks.

"Which is the Coven?" Tevi asked.

"Out there to the right. It's the group of buildings on the south-east side of town." Marith pointed it out.

"The Guardian lives there?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever met her?" Tevi asked.

Marith snorted. "She doesn't mix with the likes of us. I did see her predecessor once, but that was in the days before he was elected Guardian."

"A man can be Guardian?" Tevi said, stunned.

"Of course. Why not?" Marith was amused.

Tevi hung her head, trying to disguise her surprise. "Well... it's just, coming from the islands. I don't tend to think of men being in positions of power."

Marith smiled. "The only thing that affects someone's ability to wield power is whether or not they're a sorcerer. It's the most important, if not the only, real difference between people."

"On the islands we'd say the most important difference is between men and women." Tevi said thoughtfully.

"That's silly. There's a few minor physical differences, but none of them amount to anything significant."

Tevi stared down at the dark waters lapping against the hull of the boat. She could think of one area where the differences were very significant, but did not want to raise the subject. The traders had never commented on her lack of interest in the young men they had met on their travels, nor asked why she had left the islands, and Tevi was not about to risk their friendship by telling them.

"My people would say that men are naturally inferior to women." Tevi said at last.

This time Marith laughed aloud, "And that's even sillier. You can only get away with it because you don't have sorcerers. On the mainland any baby, male or female, born into any family, might grow up to be a sorcerer. It's a hard job trying to act innately superior to someone who can incinerate you with a single word."

"I'm not trying to justify my people's beliefs; just trying to explain why I have problems sometimes."

"I understand. You're doing alright." Marith reached out and squeezed Tevi's shoulder affectionately.

"I can see that sorcerers create problems for hereditary rulers." Tevi said, although she had a gut feeling her grandmother would do fine, regardless of the political system.

"The power structure of your islands could only work if everyone was basically the same."

"But men and women..." Tevi let her sentence trail away, no longer certain quite what she still believed.

"It doesn't count for anything." Marith stated confidently. "If ever you meet a sorcerer you'll see what I mean."

Tevi decided it was wiser not to push the point. The two women remained on deck, talking quietly, until the last light faded and the city was lost to the night.

The traders found lodgings at a comfortable inn not far from the docks. They took a light lunch in the main room, seated with the other guests at a long oak table. Sun streamed through the thick glass of the windows, casting bands of green light over the floor. From outside came the sounds of the city.

With the meal over, Marith pushed back her chair and stood up. "I'll go and finalise the sale of the spice." she volunteered.

"I suppose you want me to see the guild auditor." Verron said with a heavy sigh.

"Oh, go on. You love presenting the accounts." Marith grinned mischievously as she headed for the door, followed by Derry who eagerly leapt from his chair.

"Can I come too?" he piped.

"If you want." Marith held the door open for him and the pair departed, bound for the spice market.

"Do you want me to come with you?" Kimal asked his father cautiously.

"It wouldn't be a bad idea for you to see how the accounting goes." Kimal's face fell, and his father took pity on him. "But I know you'll have more fun showing Tevi around the city." He smiled. "I'll see you back here for supper."

Tevi and Kimal accompanied Verron as far as the trader's guildhall. It was an imposing structure, with gabled roof and half-timbered walls. Fanciful beasts were carved into the stone lintels over the windows. The three parted company at the arched gateway and the younger pair spent the afternoon strolling around the streets of the city.

There were wide tree-lined avenues, linked by narrow allies that twisted and branched, occasionally opening out into paved squares. Shops sold a bewildering array of goods. Tevi had no idea what much of it was. The size and wealth of Lyremouth overwhelmed her. All the guilds had halls, and there appeared to be some form of competition to determine which profession could out-do all the rest. She was also surprised to find there were no city walls, as if Lyremouth, or the Coven, were boasting of its impregnability.

On one wide thoroughfare they were passed by an open carriage, complete with uniformed footmen. Sunlight sparkled off the inlaid gilt and polished wood. Tevi pointed at the passenger. "Who's she?"

"It's 'he'. And he's the head of the potters' guild." Kimal replied. "You can tell from the crest on the door."

Tevi watched the carriage disappear down the street, uncertain of whether the symbol related to the passenger's occupation or gender, or possibly both. Before she could ask for clarification, Kimal had disappeared into a shop. Tevi leant against a tree and waited for his return. After a little thought she was pretty sure the crest would be the mark of the potters' guild, like the crossed swords were for mercenaries. Tevi smiled ruefully, thinking it would not be such a bad idea if Protectorate citizens wore badges to proclaim their gender. She still had great difficulty telling the sexes apart. On the other side of the street a couple of young lovers ambled along, arms around waists. For the life of her, Tevi could not tell which one was the woman.

Kimal reappeared, carrying a parcel, which he opened to display a tiny ivory figure of a horse - a midwinter's gift for his sister. He talked of her as they continued their stroll.

"Arnet's been working up north, but she'll be home for midwinter. I can't wait to see her again, I've missed her."

"Your parents have as well." Tevi had heard the ache in Marith's voice when she spoke of her daughter. Tevi was caught by the barbed thought that there would be no similar distress in Red's voice when speaking of her.

Kimal carried on, oblivious. "Oh, I know, but Arnet was never interested in trading. Her only real love is horses - doesn't care about its shape or size. As long as it's got four legs and neighs, she's happy."

"Didn't your parents mind her not becoming a trader?" Tevi asked, trying to forget her own situation.

"Why should they?"

Tevi smiled ruefully. "Where I come from it was the done thing. You had to follow in your mother's footsteps."

"Like having kings and queens and things?"

Tevi was about to correct the mention of kings, but it did not really matter. She nodded and said, "Yes."

Kimal shrugged. "It wouldn't make sense on the mainland. Power is always dependant solely on ability. I guess the guilds mimic the Coven. All our leaders are elected by their members."

"It's fair." Tevi could see the point.

"And it makes sense. Anything else would be a very chancy way of arranging things. I mean, just because your mother or your grandmother were good at something doesn't mean you will be as well, does it? You might be absolutely hopeless."

That was altogether too close to home, Tevi decided to change the direction of the conversation. She asked, "Do you have any other brothers or sisters?"

"Mama and papa had two other children, but uncle Ged and his partner are their parents now. We'll be seeing them when we get home."

"He adopted them even though their true parents were alive? Isn't that unusual?" Tevi was a little surprised.

Kimal shook his head. "No. Happens all the time in the Protectorate. Obviously a lot of people won't produce their own children so they adopt any spare ones their siblings or cousins have."

The 'obviously' did not follow in Tevi's experience, but much of what she was told about the Protectorate baffled her, and Kimal seemed to have a particular knack for throwing her off-balance. She was saved any further confusion by their arrival at the open parkland surrounding the buildings of the Coven.

Once upon a time, when Lyremouth had been an insignificant village, the Coven had been located some way removed from the dwellings of ordinary folk. With the passage of years, Lyremouth had grown into a great capital, yet none of the new buildings had encroached on the land around the Coven. Tevi guessed it was due to nobody wanting the sorcerers as close neighbours rather than a sense of aesthetics. The buildings were nothing to look at, and the open panorama only served to emphasise it.

The tower of the Guardian stood proudly in the centre, but the remaining structures were an unplanned jumble of styles and sizes. The walls were old and plain. When compared to many of the guildhalls, they seemed humble, even dilapidated. The few touches of elegance or grandeur appeared to have been tacked on as an afterthought.

Tevi shook her head. "It's not as impressive as I expected. The temple at Kradja was more to look at." Her disappointment showed in her voice.

Kimal grinned back at her. "When you're as important as the Coven you don't have to resort to awesome brickwork to remind people of the fact."

To bear out his words, groups of travellers from across the known world were gathered at the edge of the Coven grounds, looking at the buildings with expressions ranging from apprehension to reverence. The onlookers even included a small party of dwarves, who babbled excitedly among themselves in their clipped guttural language. Nobody else could understand what they were saying but, judging by their actions, they were having an intense debate about the architectural virtues of the flying buttress.

In the middle of the grounds was a low outcrop of granite. At its highest point it barely reached shoulder level, and it was dominated by an ancient oak tree. There seemed nothing noteworthy about the rock, yet many of those watching were giving it a great deal of attention.

"What's that?" Tevi asked.

"The Heart of the Protectorate. The spot were Keovan sat and looked out onto the world." Kimal replied.

"Who was Keovan?" It was a name Tevi had heard before.

"A sorcerer. He died 447 years ago. He lived in a hut on the site of the Coven. He sat every day on the rock and talked to anyone who would stay and listen."

"He founded the Protectorate?" Tevi surmised.

Kimal shook his head. "No - five of his students did. Keovan himself never did much, except bewail the state of the world and the futility of life. He felt very guilty about a lot of things."

"Did he do much harm?"

"None at all."

"But no good either?"

"He did - sort of. He was the strongest sorcerer of his day. His reputation kept trouble at bay, so the land around here had peace. After he died none of his students had enough ability to take his place. Everyone assumed the region would be swallowed up by another sorcerer's empire. But his students had gained a more expansive worldview from him, or something like that. They agreed to work together and swore a pact with the townsfolk of Lyremouth. Other sorcerers joined them, and that was the beginning of the Coven and the Protectorate."

"And they kept the rock." Tevi grinned as she spoke.

"Oh yes. It's used every year for a ceremony on midsummer's day. They all troop out here and guild-masters swear allegiance to the Coven on behalf of their members. Then the Guardian swears on behalf of the Coven to defend the Protectorate and help the citizens. After that, all the new sorcerers are introduced to the people. And then they stand on the rock and repeat the Guardian's oath and are given their black amulets."

Tevi frowned. "I don't see what the sorcerers get out of it. If they are as powerful as you say, why don't they just take what they want?"

Kimal looked thoughtful for a moment. "Not all sorcerers are power-mad maniacs. Before the Coven, a lot of them used to be hermits out in the wilds. You still come across them from time to time. The empire builders were always much more rare, but the ones who just wanted to sit in a cave and think about life used to let them get on with it. Then the Coven came along, and gave them a chance to talk to each other and write books. I think the Coven gave the thinkers something to fight for - thankfully. If the Coven falls the Protectorate goes with it."

Tevi and Kimal stood for a while surveying the buildings. The walls did not seem to be in immediate danger of collapse, despite the concern of the dwarves. They eventually left the site and headed back through the winding streets of Lyremouth.

Verron and Marith were busy after dinner that night, totalling up the money and making plans for the final stage of their journey. Their work was interrupted by Tevi, who hesitantly entered the room, and slipped into a seat at the end of the table. The serious expression on her face caused enough concern for Marith to roll up the map she had been studying and for Verron to put down his pen.

"Is something wrong?" Marith asked.

"No... not really." Tevi said.

"But?" Marith prompted.

"I've been thinking."

"About what?"

Tevi took a deep breath, then spoke in a rush. "I appreciate the offer to spend winter with you, but... did Cade say anything about me joining the mercenaries, because I feel it's probably a good idea."

Neither of the traders looked happy. Marith was the first to speak, "Cade mentioned it to us, since we'd have to vouch for you. Of course we're willing to do that."

Verron eyes were fixed on the table as he picked at some wax that had been spilt. "If it's what you want..." His voice trailed off before picking up. "Not that there's anything wrong with the mercenaries' guild, but its members don't tend to reach a ripe old age."

"If I want to live in the Protectorate I should join a guild, else I'm stuck as an itinerant labourer. And, I fear, the mercenaries are the only guild I'm trained for." Tevi said, a little sadly.

"We'd be sorry to part company with you." Verron's voice was sincere.

"It needn't be forever. Once I'm a member, there's nothing to stop you hiring me officially - if you want."

Marith brightened up. "That's an idea. There are so few mercenaries who know how to take care of a wagon team properly."

"Then we'd have the waggoner's guild down our necks." Verron glared at his partner.

"There's nothing to say a mercenary can't..."

Before the discussion could get waylaid, Tevi interrupted. "So if it's all right with you I'll go and visit Cade at his parents' house tomorrow and tell him I want to join."

The traders hesitated a second before answering.

"Yes, of course."

"We'll come with you."

Two mornings later Tevi stood on a riverside wharf. Autumn was advanced and her breath formed clouds of steam in the chill dawn air. The family of traders solemnly hugged her in turn before boarding one of the river barges. The boat would take them on the last step of the trade route, ten days up-river, to their home. Once everyone was aboard, the crew loosened the mooring rope and pushed the barge away from the dock.

Verron called out. "You won't forget how to get to Cottersford will you? Once you're there, anyone will tell you how to find us. We're always at home for two months either side of midwinter."

Marith added her voice, "And we always take the same route. At any other time of the year, you'll know where to find us. I hope we meet again soon, but if not, farewell Tevi."

"Farewell Marith, Verron, and you too, Kimal and Derry." Tevi called back. The words sounded awfully final, but it was too late to change her mind.

The barge soon reached open water and the oarsmen set to work. Tevi stood and watched until the craft was lost from sight amidst other traffic on the busy river Lyre. She turned and retraced her steps through the city.

The working day was just beginning. Shopkeepers were removing shutters and setting out their wares. Customers began to cluster, ready to buy provisions for the day. As Tevi neared the centre of town, the noise level grew. Peddlers shouted their wares, rowdy groups of dockers headed for the harbour, children on errands raced by, calling to each other

A wide, tree-lined street led Tevi straight to the largest square, in the heart of the city. The grandest civic buildings could be found there - the law courts, the mayor's palace. Standing proudly was the most imposing guildhall of all, displaying the wealth and prestige of its members. Without hesitation, Tevi walked up to the main entrance and entered, passing under the sign of two crossed swords in red and gold.

The point of the man's sword came straight for Tevi's heart. She managed to bring her own weapon across to parry, while pivoting on one heel to avoid the lunge. The sword missed by a hair's breadth, but her desperate defence left her hopelessly unbalanced. A long step back stopped her falling, however her opponent pressed forward his attack before she had time to recover and again she was forced to concede ground.

The wall of the hall was not far behind her. Tevi knew she was running out of room to manoeuvre. In a bid to gain space, she launched her own attack, a series of sharp jabs. Her opponent evaded them easily and

immediately shifted back into offensive mode. With lightning speed, the edge of his sword flicked upwards diagonally. Tevi blocked, at the cost of yet another retreat. She felt her heel touch the wall. Her opponent smiled, dropped his guard, and took six paces backwards, generously allowing her more space. Tevi took a deep breath and stepped forward. The man was extremely good, easily the most skilful warrior she had ever encountered. It was hardly surprising - he was the senior swordmaster of the Guild of Mercenary Warriors.

Their eyes met. Again, the swordmaster raised his wooden practice sword and gestured with his free hand, inviting her to attack. Tevi clenched her teeth. She could not defeat the swordmaster by skill - he was quicker and vastly more experienced than her. Tevi's only advantage lay in strength. Dropping her left hand to the hilt of the sword, she leapt forward, swinging her whole body into a double-fisted stroke that caught her opponent by surprise. The two swords met with a resounding crack, striking close by the cross-guards. As ever, the swordmaster's timing was perfect, but he was completely unable to withstand the force of the blow. The impact sent the wooden sword spinning from his hand. It bounced off the wall of the training hall and skidded across the floor, finally coming to rest, some thirty feet away. The swordmaster treated it to a long, rueful stare while shaking his jarred wrist.

From the far side of the hall came a burst of assorted noises - generally indicative of both support and good humour. The swordmaster scowled in feigned belligerence at the three other nominees sitting at the side. The sounds ceased, only to be replaced by three broad grins. Everyone knew the swordmaster was an amiable character, slow to push his rank and indulgent of high spirits in his pupils. He was consequently well-liked by all. Once a semblance of order had been re-established, the swordmaster turned back to Tevi and nodded thoughtfully.

"Crude, but very effective." He granted. "You'll do."

"Thank you, sir." Tevi said.

"But it's risky to rely solely on strength. You must pay closer attention. I was able to catch you with some very simple traps. You can't afford to let your opponent get away with things like that. Watch and anticipate."

One side of Tevi's mouth twitched downwards. "Would you be surprised if I said you weren't the first person to tell me that?"

"No, but I'm surprised you haven't taken more notice of the advice." the swordmaster said sharply.

"I try, sir."

"Not hard enough. Your sword teacher should have made more effort to help you work out the problem. Generally speaking you've been well trained from an early age."

"I started when I was three."

"Quite right too. You'd be surprised at the number of wide-eyed hopefuls who arrive here. They have no training but think they can pick up a sword and become a hero overnight." He turned to include the other nominees in the discussion. "It's a point to remember - swords are like some musical instruments. If you don't start young enough you'll never develop the right muscles and reflexes. If a child hasn't started training by the age of seven and doesn't keep practising all the time their bodies are developing, then they'll never be anything other than average and a very poor average at that. So, if ever you get an untrained teenager begging and pleading with you to take them on as apprentice - don't. You're not doing them any favours, just raising false hopes."

The other nominees glanced towards Cayell. It was no secret that she was the worst swordsman among them. However Cayell was unconcerned; her skills lay in other directions. Basic competence with a sword was all she aspired to.

The swordmaster resumed his appraisal of Tevi. "You know, I'm loath to suggest it, but do you have any experience with a battle-axe?"

"Some, it was..." The rest of Tevi's reply was drowned by shouts from the other nominees.

"They're only fit for chopping wood."

"Tell him you're a warrior, not a lumberjack."

Cayell's voice came loudest of all. "Axes are only for warriors too stupid to work out which end of a sword to take hold of."

"Ignore the hecklers." The swordmaster dismissed the objections with a wave of his hand. "It's true axes are unsubtle. They come down to how much force you can put behind them - which in your case is quite considerable. It was a classic axe stroke you used to disarm me. You're not bad with a sword but you can't structure your defence. With an axe you wouldn't need to bother."

Behind his back Cayell was shaking her head vigorously. Tevi decided to talk to her later and gave a non-committal response. "I'll think about it."

At that moment, the gong signalling the end of the morning session rang out. The swordmaster collected the practise weapons and dismissed the nominees, saying, "I'm going to pass you, Tevi. You can report to the assessor, after lunch. But I want to see the rest of you back here."

The four nominees left the practice hall and filed through the maze of buildings. Long ago, the mercenary guildhall had been laid out to an elegant plan, which had been modified and added to over the intervening centuries. Very little of the original design now remained. It resulted in a bewildering network of passages, doorways and courtyards, sandwiched between the old and the new. Even after the best part of a month, Tevi still had great difficulty finding her way around. In contrast, Cayell seemed to have the entire guildhall mapped out in her head. She was never lost for direction, or for something to say. Her body was lightly built, but had an acrobat's balance and agility, which helped hold her own in the practice bouts. Her footsteps were silent, but her personality was loud. Despite her size, she was the undisputed leader of the nominees, and not just in finding the dining hall.

"Down here, it's a short cut." Cayell called as she disappeared in the gap between two buildings.

"Are you sure?" asked Perrin, an affable young man with the general proportions, and appetite, of an ox. His six foot six inches of solid muscle made him the strongest of all the nominees, apart from Tevi.

"Of course - don't you trust me?" Cayell sounded hurt.

"Well yes, but dinner's important. I want to be sure I'm in time for seconds."

"And maybe thirds." added Rymar as he pushed Perrin down the alleyway.

In the rear was Tevi. She studied her comrades' backs as they walked in single file between the two buildings. Cayell was completely lost beyond Perrin's bulk, though the high sound of her laughter drowned out his base rumble. Rymar was a head shorter than Perrin, yet broad shouldered and athletic. They were a good bunch, Tevi thought, although Rymar looked like he could be a hell-raiser when let loose. He was clearly on his best behaviour while being assessed, but the wildness showed at the edges.

The four nominees emerged directly opposite the guild refectory. A steady flow of mercenaries streamed through the door. The air inside was thick with the smell of food, and the hubbub of conversation. The tables all held large pots of stew and trenchers of bread to use as plates. Tevi and the others wove their way down the hall to the table reserved for nominees. Referred to as '*the babies' table*', it left them in no doubt as to their status in the guild. There were currently nine nominees for assessment. Apart from Cayell and Tevi, there was only one other woman, which, Tevi had discovered, fairly represented the male to female ratio of the guild.

Once they had sat down, Tevi addressed the table in general. "What's so bad about a battle-axe?"

"Poor image." said Perrin, who was squeezed into the place directly opposite her.

Cayell joined in, a broad grin on her fine-boned features, "Don't worry Tevi, you're great with a sword. There are precious few nominees who've been able to disarm the swordmaster."

"She didn't!" someone else said in disbelief.

"She did." Perrin affirmed.

"Even so, he might be right. An axe might suit me better." Tevi said.

Cayell shook her head. "Women warriors who use axes are a stock joke character. As I said in the hall, axe-men tend to be warriors who are poorly endowed with brains..."

Perrin butted in "Women are out-numbered in the guild, particularly as warriors. They usually specialise in a field that requires less strength..."

Not to be outdone, Cayell cut back in. "...and more intelligence - like tracker or scout. Me, for example." She threw out her hands in an extrovert gesture that was met with good-humoured jeers from the nominees, and disapproving frowns from the other tables.

"I've got the strength for an axe." Tevi pointed out.

"You've also got brains, and you'll get work easier if you let people know it." Cayell said.

"How does that follow?"

Cayell stopped eating to explain. "Girls know they can't count on developing the full strength necessary for fighting - boys can't either, come to that, but they're more likely to. Most girls who want to be mercenaries try to specialise, as Perrin said. Being a scout is ideal. Women are often smaller and lighter so we make less noise. We can go further on less food and can withstand harsher weather. Women warriors tend to be girls who lacked the brains to do anything clever, but turned out lucky with the physique. Axe wielding just compounds the effect. No axe-man is expected to be a genius."

"Which could all work to Tevi's advantage." Dale, another of the nominees, said thoughtfully. He was a lanky lad with a serious face masking a mischievous sense of humour. People looked in his direction with surprise as he continued talking. "Just think. In a battle, someone would see Tevi with an axe and think 'Oh yes, axe-woman - not going to be too bright'. Then Tevi could say something really clever and hit them while they were still stunned with astonishment. They'd be a sitting target." Laughter and a few flicked peas greeted this idea.

"Someone told me that, in the Protectorate, you don't make assumptions about people based on their sex." Tevi said.

For a moment Cayell's face looked a little blank, then she shrugged and said, "I suppose it depends on what assumptions. Sometimes you have to play the odds."

"Like you don't expect people from over the Spur to be particularly alert." Perrin said - a playful dig at Rymar, whose accent marked him as coming from that region. Tevi's forehead furrowed in thought. The indolence of people from the east of the Protectorate was an item of folklore she had already encountered, yet Rymar was one of the quicker nominees - and astute enough not to rise to the bait.

Cayell laughed and added, "Or sorcerers who specialise in prophesy. For some reason they all tend to be..." She paused with a frown on her face "Now, what's the word?"

Suggestions came from around the table.

"Neurotic."

"Highly-strung."

"Unbalanced."

Cayell waved a piece of carrot. "No, no. '*Sensitive*.' That's the word I wanted." She pointed the carrot at Tevi. "Now remember, if ever you meet a seer from the Coven the word is '*sensitive*'. Unless you have some great desire to experience life as a toad."

Tevi chewed thoughtfully, "But I guess nobody dares to call axe-men many names to their faces either."

"Oh, as long as the word has more than three syllables you're quite safe." Cayell retorted.

Once the laughter had died, the banter continued with a bawdy story about the '*mad axe-woman of Rizen*'. Many of the jokes were lost on Tevi. She had not come to grips with all the necessary slang usage, but she got the general idea of the perception of axes and their users.

Once the meal was over Tevi left the others and managed to find her way to the guild assessor's quarters, needing only to stop twice to ask directions. The clerk in the anteroom informed her that the assessor was busy interviewing someone else. Tevi wandered back outside and stood on the low veranda at the front of the building, watching people passing through the courtyard below. It was a mellow autumn afternoon. The sun shone brightly on ornate stonework surrounding the open grass area. Seagulls wheeled against the blue sky overhead.

Directly opposite the assessor's rooms was the guild infirmary. Many of the occupants had been placed in the open, to get what benefit they could from the sun and fresh air. The invalids sat on a bench running the length of the courtyard, tightly wrapped in warm blankets. Some laughed and joked among themselves, swapping stories and accounts of their exploits. Some sat in silence. Tevi studied a gaunt young man, no more than a year or two older than herself. Both his legs ended in stumps just above the knees. Next to him sat a middle-aged woman, one arm paralysed and useless, and the side of her face a scarred wreck, leaving her undoubtedly blind in one eye.

Tevi was certain the location of the assessor's rooms, next to the infirmary, was no accident. All the hopeful applicants had to walk past the grim reminder of the fate that might await them. She suspected the warning had little effect. From what she had seen most mercenaries were over-confident of their own abilities, sure the worst could never happen to them. Many were blind to everything they did not want to see. They would not know or care where the infirmary was, until they were carried in. They were the ones who would begrudge the quarter share of their income the guild took; unaware of where the money went, until they became the beneficiaries.

Ten minutes later the door behind Tevi opened and a tall mercenary strode out, followed by a young woman, presumably his apprentice about to be nominated for guild membership. Neither paid any attention to the row of people sitting opposite. Tevi wondered if that did not hurt more than all the scars - to no longer be worthy of notice.

After a last, long look at the invalids Tevi turned and entered. The clerk pointed her to a small room at the rear of the building. She found the assessor, a stout, elderly woman, sitting in a high-backed chair at one side of a large fireplace. Despite the warm day, a few logs burned vigorously in the open grate.

Tevi halted mid-way into the room, "The swordmaster told me to report to you, ma'am." she said hesitantly.

"Ah, yes. Please." The assessor gestured to a second chair as she spoke, and waited until Tevi was seated before continuing. "I'm happy to say we've decided to accept your nomination."

It was more or less the announcement Tevi was expecting but, instead of replying, she stared into the fire with a frown on her face. For a short while, only the crackling of the flames broke the silence.

"You're not looking overjoyed. Have you had second thoughts?" The assessor prompted her gently.

"No ma'am. I'm pleased you've accepted me. It's what I came here for. But I was watching the invalids opposite before I came in and I was thinking about them." Tevi turned to look directly at the assessor. "That's what we're supposed to do, isn't it?"

"We would prefer our members join with as few illusions as possible. We get too many young idiots, dreaming of glory." the assessor said dryly.

"I don't think I have any unrealistic hopes."

"No, I don't think you have." The assessor watched Tevi thoughtfully for a moment before continuing in a brisker tone. "You realise, of course, that the assessment is not just about fighting skill. We could have evaluated that taking considerably less time than the twenty days you've been here. If you decide to join the guild, you'll receive its mark - a single sword tattooed on each hand. With that mark the guild is declaring that it believes you to be competent, honest and reliable." A smile twitched the corner of the assessor's mouth. "Although we're not yet backing our judgement with money. It will be some years before we're likely to guarantee you, and add the second sword."

"I understand that." Tevi said.

"It's important that the mark of the guild mean something. Our livelihood depends on people trusting the integrity of guild members. The time a nominee spends here constitutes part of a general appraisal, which has been all the more important in your case, as you haven't served a formal apprenticeship. But we're quite satisfied. In our judgement, you will not do anything to bring the guild into disrepute and we're more than willing to accept you as a member. The final decision lies with you. We don't allow people to desert the guild once they've accepted its mark. Those we expel leave their tattoos, and their hands, behind."

The assessor stood up and walked to the small window. When she turned back, her voice was quiet and measured. "I'm going to suggest you think about it for this afternoon. Sleep on it, then come and see me first thing tomorrow. If you decide to join, we'll move you to the junior members' quarters. You'll need to be instructed in the first level of guild passwords, which shouldn't take you too long to learn..." The assessor rolled her eyes to the ceiling with a sigh. "...unlike some other nominees we've had. And we'll make an appointment for you with the tattooist. So.... unless you have any questions?"

"No, thank-you ma'am. I think I know all I need in order to make my mind up."

"However you decide, I wish you well."

The assessor walked over and held the door open. Tevi gave a respectful nod and walked back into the autumn sunlight. Her aimless steps took her out of the guildhall and into the streets of Lyremouth. She spent the afternoon wandering about and thinking, although in all honesty she had little choice. As a mercenary, she could earn a good living. Without a guild, she could be nothing more than a poorly paid casual labourer.

Standing by the main docks, she watched the ships sail out across the harbour and disappear over the horizon. If she closed her eyes, from the sounds and smell of the sea she could imagine herself back on Storenseg. It occurred to her that guild membership would be one further, irrevocable, step away from the islands. Tevi shook her head sadly at the folly of her thoughts and left the quay, heading into the busy streets of the city. There was no going back.

CHAPTER SEVEN—Dishonourable Conduct

By the time Tevi returned to the guildhall the evening meal was in progress. Luckily, she arrived at the babies' table before Perrin had embarked on his third helping, so there was still food left. The others shifted along to make room for her. Even before she had sat down it was obvious Cayell was in high spirits.

"They've decided I'm more help than hindrance in a fight. Now they're going to see what I can do as a scout." Cayell was almost bouncing up and down with excitement. Tevi wondered whether the scout had been more concerned than she had let on.

"What tests do you get now?" Tevi asked.

"Oh, dreadful, awful things that would make you shudder just to hear about." Despite her words, Cayell was grinning as she spoke. "I'll probably be dumped in the middle of nowhere and have to survive off the land, while a team of hunters try to catch me."

"And you'll have to eat spiders." Perrin said, smiling, before he took a large bite of his food.

"Big, juicy, tasty spiders?" Dale enquired innocently.

The young woman Tevi had seen leaving the assessor's rooms was also sitting at the table. She now joined in. "There's no such thing as a tasty spider. Believe me. I speak from experience."

"Are you a scout as well?" Perrin asked eagerly.

"Er... yes. My name's Aroche. I'm just starting my appraisal."

"Right, well, while Cay's away, do you mind making it your job to find short cuts to the refectory?"

Aroche smiled. "I'll do my best, if you think it's important."

"We're talking about Perrin's stomach - of course it's important." Rymar quipped.

When the table had quietened, Tevi asked Cayell, "How long will you be gone?"

"About ten days. You can take my bed while I'm away, if you want." Predictably, Cayell had managed to wangle one of the better positions in the nominees' dormitory.

Tevi shook her head. "I won't need it. I've been accepted into the guild. I'll be moving to the members' quarters tomorrow."

At the news, Cayell cheered loudly and punched the air, drawing stern looks from other tables. She pointed at Tevi. "Promise me you'll save the celebration until I get back. There's not time to do it justice tonight, and with any luck we can celebrate my acceptance as well."

Confronted with such exuberance Tevi could do nothing but agree. It occurred to her that, for the first time since childhood, she felt like an accepted member of a group. The camaraderie of the guild enveloped its members with a sense of belonging. She had been very fond of Marith and Verron, but they had been more like aunt and uncle to her. Cayell and the other nominees were her friends.

That night Tevi got ready to sleep in the nominees' dormitory for the last time. Light-hearted banter was flying around - as were pillows and items of clothing. Tevi joined in, mainly by ducking at the appropriate points. She felt relaxed and happy for the first time since her interview with the assessor that afternoon.

Eleven days later, Tevi was wandering along a colonnaded walkway that she hoped would lead her back to the junior members' quarters, when she was startled by a loud whoop. Running towards her was a figure, that was presumably Cayell, on account of the general size and shape, though the exterior was so covered in mud and other debris that almost anybody or anything could have lurked beneath.

"I passed. They're going to accept me." the figure screamed, thereby confirming its identity. Cayell would have flung herself onto her friend and hugged her, but Tevi held the mud-covered scout at arms' length.

"Cay! Look at the state of you!" Tevi exclaimed.

"I've only just got back." Cayell replied, as if it was some sort of explanation.

"I guessed, but I hadn't realised mud fights formed part of your appraisal."

"It's camouflage. I had to blend into the countryside."

"You've been somewhere where walking cow-pats are commonplace?" Tevi said dryly.

"Um... actually most of it is due to a slight accident on the way into town." Cayell grinned mischievously

"Why don't you tell me about it on the way to the bathhouse?"

"I've got to go and see the assessor." Cayell paused and inspected herself. "Or do you think I should get cleaned up first?"

"It might be a good idea. I've seen more presentable scarecrows thrown out as scrap."

"You're probably right." Cayell reached out and grabbed Tevi's hands. Holding them palm down she inspected the tattooed red and gold swords. Her eyes met Tevi's while another huge grin plastered itself across her face.

"Very pretty. We've got to go and celebrate. Get some of the others to meet up tonight."

"I know Dale and Rymar will be keen, probably Perrin as well."

"That'll be great." Cayell began to walk away backwards.

"Then you can tell us all about the slight accident." Tevi suggested.

"Only if you promise not to laugh. It was a touch unfortunate." She raised one hand to her head in a melodramatic fashion, and then grinned again before disappearing in the general direction of the guild bathhouse.

The Golden Swan was a noisy tavern with grimy, splintered tables, and lanterns burning coarse, foul-smelling oil. The straw on the floor appeared not to have been changed since the founding of the Coven. The only heating came from the largely unwashed bodies of the customers. However the beer was cheap, and the bar-staff kept selling it long after the more respectable establishments of Lyremouth had closed.

In a poorly lit corner at the back, the five young mercenaries had monopolised a small table. They were studiously trying to get drunk, and meeting with considerable success. A succession of toasts was made to the new guild members. These included Rymar, who was also sporting swords on the backs of his hands, only two days old and still slightly itchy.

During a lull in the banter Perrin leaned across the table to Tevi and said, "Do you remember what we were saying about women with axes? Well, as a prime example, have you seen that Big Bron is back in the guildhall?"

Tevi shook her head.

"Oh you must have seen her." Dale chipped in. "You know the one - six foot two, square, long blond hair and has a copper torque around her neck that could double as a wagon-wheel. She has a permanently pained expression on her face, as if she's just sat on something uncomfortable."

Tevi raised her eyes to the ceiling; she had been mistaken yet again. "I thought that was a man."

"Now that's unusual." Cayell said seriously, "Most people mistake her for some sort of architectural support structure."

Rymar nudged Tevi's shoulder. "You wouldn't make that mistake if you'd seen her naked."

"YOU WHAT!!!" Even Cayell was almost speechless.

"Oh, no, no. Nothing like that." At the sight of the stunned faces, Rymar held up his hands in denial. "She was in the baths and someone swiped her clothes as a joke. Honest, it wasn't me. I'm not the suicidal type. But I was

standing outside when she stormed out, looking for blood." He shook his head slowly. "What a sight - half a ton of scarred muscle charging towards me. I nearly made a mess of my underwear."

"You mean the sight of all that well-toned flesh didn't arouse your ardour?" Dale asked in mock surprise.

"Don't be a fool. She eats boys like me for breakfast." Rymar ran a finger around his collar.

"It could have been a cute beginning to a beautiful relationship for you and Bron."

"The words 'cute' and 'Bron' do not belong in the same sentence." Rymar sounded definite.

"You did it just then." Dale pointed out.

"Look... just take it from me. Romance was not in the air. Murder, yes. Romance, no."

"Probably just as well. They say Bron doesn't have much in the way of a sense of humour." Cayell joined in.

"And...?" Rymar prompted.

"From what I've heard, she'd need it with you." Cayell said innocently.

Rymar acted hurt. "That's a nasty, untrue, malicious rumour. I am a lover of great sophistication and skill - as I'll willingly demonstrate to anyone here." His expression changed to an idiotic leer and he rubbed his hands together. "Come on, any takers?"

"I would pick you up on the offer, but..." Perrin clasped a hand to his breast in a flamboyant gesture. "I am sworn to another."

Dale slid over and put his arm around Perrin's shoulder. His voice oozed sincere concern. "Look. You've got to learn to be adult about this. One night of passion with a mange-ridden sheep does not constitute a binding commitment - for either of you." he finished as everyone gave way to yelps of laughter.

Tevi wiped her eyes. Sometimes she was unable to tell whether people were being serious or not. Even when she had that much sorted out, she was often unsure of exactly what the point of the joke was. This, she realised, was a completely invented leg-pull.

Summoning her self-control, she looked steadily at Perrin. "Take no notice. They're just being very silly, and making things up. I'm sure she didn't really have mange and, even if she did, there are medical treatments. There's no reason why the two of you can't be very happy together."

At the sight of Perrin's expression Cayell curled forward, holding her sides and whimpering. Perrin stood up to his full height and looked down sternly at the rest. "If you're all going to act the fool, I'm going to buy another round of drinks." His features broke into a large grin.

Dale hugged Perrin round the waist. "Your logic's flawed, but I'll love you forever." He then fell backwards off his stool.

By the time they left the tavern, none of them were capable of walking in a straight line unaided. They formed a row, five abreast, with their arms wrapped around each others' shoulders in an attempt to provide mutual support and marched back to the guildhall in time to a song about a young mercenary called '*mighty Marrick*'. The lyrics related the tale of the hero's encounters with, among others, a ship full of pirates, a family of hill trolls and one very surprised dragon. Tevi had trouble understanding much of the song, it contained many slang phrases and euphemisms, but she made enough sense of the words to know that it was both obscene and biologically impossible.

It took Cayell three attempts to get up the short flight of steps leading to the side entrance of the guildhall. Tevi stayed to help while the others went ahead. In the end Cayell literally crawled up the stairs, and then lay collapsed at the top, giggling. Tevi dragged her to her feet and propelled her forwards. Some distance ahead, the three men were embarking on a spirited repetition of the fourth verse.

The singers were crossing a small courtyard when a door at the side was flung open. A large shape blocked the light, almost filling the entrance. Tevi was about to step into the open, but Cayell grabbed her shoulder and pulled her back behind a pillar. "It's her - Big Bron."

While the two young women leaned against the pillar, biting their knuckles to stop from laughing, Bron loudly extolled the virtues of peace and quiet. She proceeded to give an unflattering account of the men and, by implication, their parents. Bron appeared to know only one adjective, but used it to great effect.

When they heard the door slam, Tevi and Cayell peered cautiously around the pillar. Their friends had fled and the courtyard lay deserted in the moonlight. With exaggerated care, they tiptoed across the open space, then rushed all the way to the junior members' quarters where Tevi had her room. They stumbled to a halt outside.

"I've got to go and see the assessor first thing tomorrow and confirm that I still want to join." Cayell gasped, trying to regain her breath. "Then I can move my things down here. Is there a spare room near yours?"

Tevi nodded. "I'll meet you up in the dormitory and give you a hand."

By way of acceptance Cayell flung her arms around Tevi and gave her a hug, which threatened to send the pair of them sprawling. They regained their balance and then Cayell stepped back. "Right then. Tomorrow, mid morning. See you there." She staggered away unsteadily, heading towards the nominees' dormitory, while quietly humming the chorus from 'mighty Marrick' under her breath.

The nominees' dormitory was deserted the next morning, when Tevi and her hangover entered. From four high windows, a muted, grey light fell over pale blankets on the row of empty beds. To Tevi's bloodshot eyes, the effect was dazzling, and forced her to squint as she peered around. The pulse throbbed at her temples with hammer blows and waves of nausea threatened her hold on the contents of her stomach - or would have, had there been any.

She groped her way to Cayell's bed and fell, rather than sat, down, then she wrapped her hands about her head, as if trying to stop her skull from splitting. For a long time, only her gasped breathing broke the silence, as she sucked air into her lungs through clenched teeth.

The door behind her swung open with a crash. "Oh dear, oh dear. Look what the cat's dragged in." Cayell's voice boomed mercilessly down the dormitory.

"Go away, I hate you." Tevi mumbled in reply, drawing a peal of laughter from Cayell.

"Yes, I can see you're going to be a bundle of fun today."

This time Tevi only groaned.

"Don't worry. Sit still. I haven't got much to pack." Cayell said.

When Tevi still made no reply Cayell sat on the bed opposite and studied her friend's face dispassionately.

"Feeling rough, aye? I wondered how you were when you didn't show up for breakfast."

"Please don't mention food." Tevi muttered.

"Best thing for you. Come on."

Without waiting for a response, Cayell thrust a hand under Tevi's armpit and yanked her to her feet. She pushed and coaxed Tevi all the way to the refectory. The smell of cooking from the kitchens made Tevi's stomach heave, but her protests were ignored and Tevi felt too ill to put up much of a fight. She collapsed at the table where she was dumped and listened with half an ear as Cayell browbeat the staff into providing breakfast, water and a mug of something called *the chef's special*. The food and drink arrived shortly. Tevi could only stare at them in horror.

"I can't eat."

"Yes you can." Cayell said firmly.

"I feel ill."

"That's obvious. Look, take this. It's the chef's special remedy. Mercenaries swear by it." Cayell thrust a mug into Tevi's hand.

"By it or at it?" Tevi asked.

"Down it in one. It will make you feel better."

It was too much hard work to withstand Cayell injunctions. Tevi drank the potion, then the water and started gingerly on the food. She hated to admit it but Cayell was right. Her stomach settled and the pounding in her head eased.

"That's better. You're getting some colour back in your face." Cayell said.

"Hmmpf."

"You're supposed to say 'Thank you Cay'." Cayell's tone was cheerful, but hardly sympathetic.

"You can't expect gratitude from the dead." Tevi quipped grumpily.

"Oh, you'll survive."

"I'm not certain if I want to."

Cayell laughed. "It's amazing the philosophical insights alcohol can bring. Apparently it took Keovan 40 years of meditation to question whether life was worth living. One night and twelve pints of beer and you've matched him."

Tevi managed her first real smile of the day, and asked, "Was that how much we drank last night?"

"I'm not sure. I lost count. If it's any consolation, Dale and Perrin both looked pretty green this morning, and they were due at the archery butts straight after breakfast."

"You're looking alright."

"Practice." Cayell said primly.

Tevi finished off the last of the bread and drained the tankard of water. The blinding headache had shifted to a rumbling throb at the base of her skull. Tevi massaged it with one hand, then grinned ruefully at her companion. "I guess we can go and collect your things now."

"If you're ready."

"Sure... and thanks Cay." Tevi said softly.

"Anytime."

Grey clouds hung low in the sky over the guildhall; rain was not far off. The wind was cold and damp. People scurried along with their heads down and collars up. Seagulls sat despondently on the roofs. As the two women walked through the gloomy maze of pathways Cayell slipped her arm through Tevi's. Despite the beneficial effects of the chef's potion, Tevi was grateful for the additional support for her shaky legs.

Back in the dormitory Cayell began to assemble her belongings, not that she, or any of the nominees, had much in the way of possessions. A chest at the foot of her bed held everything she owned. There was little need of Tevi's help - fortunately. Although she felt vastly better than when she had first entered the dormitory, she certainly was not up to any vigorous activity. Her body ached as if it had been put through a wringer. The pounding in her head threatened to return.

Tevi wandered across the room to stare out of a window. The sky was darker and the first few splats of rain struck the glass. "You had no doubts about joining the guild?" She asked over her shoulder.

"No. It's what I've always wanted."

"Don't your parents mind? Or were they mercenaries as well?" Even as the words left her mouth Tevi bit her tongue. It seemed to be an unspoken rule that the nominees did not mention their families. Cayell paused in her packing, and her face grew sombre.

"Little papa is worried sick. But he won't stand in my way." Cayell said eventually.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pry."

"It's all right." Cayell sighed. She shook her head, as if trying to clear her thoughts and returned to her packing. "Little papa is a forester. He was the one who taught me how to live in the wild. He hoped I'd follow him. When he realised I wasn't interested in trees he wanted me to be apprenticed to a fur trapper. Big papa helped me talk him round. I want to pit myself against an enemy who's my equal, not an animal. I think all scouts feel like that."

"Does Aroche?"

"She's no scout." Cayell was dismissive.

"She said she was."

"She may have said it, but that doesn't make it true. My guess is she's an assassin."

"Assassin!" Tevi said in shock.

"There are other politer names, like personal security guard."

"Why did she lie?"

"Force of habit. It can become a way of life with those people. Or perhaps creating a false identity is part of her assessment. I don't know if anyone else has twigged her, but she can't fool a real scout."

"I know the guild has assassins in it, but I thought..." Tevi's words trailed off in confusion.

"That we're always good-guys?" Cayell suggested with a grin. "Don't worry, security guard isn't such a euphemism. Most guild assassins are hired by Protectorate traders who are going to places where murder is part of everyday business practice. Her training is all about poisons and traps and breaking into places. The knowledge works both ways - doing or preventing. In general, guild members go for the latter. I'm sure she'll spend most of her working life stopping people bumping off her employer. "

"But not all of it?" Tevi asked.

"Maybe not. But, in theory, there's nothing to stop a band of thieves hiring you or me to boost their numbers. However, the guild-masters don't like guild members fighting each other. They've also decided that theft doesn't contribute to long-term economic growth, and the more money honest citizens make, the more they can afford to pay us. So traders are in and bandits are out." By now, all of Cayell's things had been put into a haversack, or folded neatly into two piles. She looked over at Tevi and asked, "Are you all right to help carry?"

"As you said, I'll survive."

When they reached the outside door, they discovered the rain had arrived in full force. Large drops were drumming on the flagstones. Water washed down the sides of the doorway and dripped from the lintel. The distance was lost to the grey falling sheets.

Cayell grinned at Tevi. "We're going to have to run. Last one there gets wettest."

The two women raced between buildings, hurdling puddles and the occasional rivulet pouring from an overflowing gutter. Cayell led the way, charging through the entrance to the junior quarters at full pelt. Tevi was close behind. Even after the short run, their shoulders were soaked and hair stuck to their foreheads. Laughing and wiping the water from their eyes the pair of them walked down the narrow corridor.

The quarters had originally been one large open dormitory. During an expansion of the guildhall facilities, some years previous, it had been divided into individual small rooms by the erection of thin wooden partitions. Tevi halted outside one door and pushed it open. "This one's empty, and you're just three along from me."

Following Tevi into the room Cayell looked around. There was a narrow bunk and a chest. A wide shelf ran the length of the wall above the bed. There was not much in the way of floor space. The light came from half a window, which the more recent partition had divided into two.

"It's small enough. They're certainly not splashing out on we lesser mortals." Cayell remarked.

Tevi deposited the pile she was carrying on top of the chest. "It's luxury, pure luxury. In the village I came from only the queen had her own room and she still slept on the ground. I hadn't seen a proper bed before I reached the mainland. At first, I used to lie awake at night, frightened I'd roll over in my sleep."

Cayell laughed and turned to face the other woman. Her expression changed from amusement to concern when she saw Tevi's face. "You've gone very pale. I don't think the run helped you."

"It will ease." However, the sick pounding had already returned. Specs of light danced before Tevi's eyes. She groaned and raised her hands to her head.

"Why don't you lie down while I put my things away? You'll only get under my feet if you stay standing."

With relief, Tevi dropped onto the bed and scrunched her eyes shut. The blood roared in her ears. Pressure built in waves, as if her skull was about to crack open.

"Do you want me to go and get some water for you?" There was an uncharacteristic gentleness in Cayell's voice.

"I'll be alright. It will pass." Tevi said, although her voice was lacking in confidence.

Cayell knelt beside the bed. She pulled a shirt off the pile of clothes and begun to use it as a towel, softly wiping Tevi's face dry. When she had finished, Tevi opened one eye. Her friend's face was serious, even tentative, both rare emotions for the exuberant extrovert.

"You don't need to worry about me. I'm only hung-over."

"I don't want you passing out on me." Cayell replied. "Or throwing up - there's not enough room in here for me to get out of your way."

"I won't."

Cayell's mouth opened, as if she was about to say something. Instead, she reached out and squeezed Tevi's shoulder. Her eyes remained fixed on Tevi's face.

"You know, I think I... er... You have..." Cayell's mumbled speech ground to a halt.

Tevi looked at her friend in confusion. It was most certainly not like the outspoken scout to be tongue-tied.

Abruptly Cayell stood and busied herself about the room, unpacking her clothes. She started talking quickly. "I suppose we're lucky to get rooms to ourselves at all. If more people wanted accommodation they'd shift us juniors into a dormitory quickly enough. It's only because winter's a slack time. Not much is happening so lots of people take the chance to go and visit their families." She paused and looked at Tevi stretched out on the bed. "I guess you won't be going home much."

"I'm not planning on it." Even with the headache, Tevi could hear the bitterness in her own voice.

Cayell stared, then hurried on. "It will be great here in Lyremouth. The midwinter festival is one big party through the streets."

"Perrin has told me about it."

"Big papa brought me here one year. I'm really looking forward to taking part again. Since there's no work to be had we can have lots of fun and get fat on the guild food without being accused of shirking."

Although lodging at the guildhall was nominally free, Tevi was familiar with the guild rules requiring its members to take whatever work offered to them, regardless of festivals. Tevi frowned - not at the thought of work, but at the feeling Cayell was using the midwinter festival as a diversion, and that her friend had been about to say something else. Of course, with the state she was in, it was easy to get confused. The flashing lights had gone but the throbbing in her head was keeping pace with her pulse.

"I'm not sure how much fun I can stand." Tevi said with feeling.

"You could stick to drinking milk - though I'm not sure what it'll do to the reputation of mercenaries."

"I could threaten to thump anyone who laughed."

"Now that would be more in keeping with the way a warrior is supposed to behave."

"How long do you think the guild will let us stay here, without working?" Tevi asked after a while.

"Probably 'till early spring, when things start moving again."

Cayell shut the lid of the chest and sat on the edge of the bed by Tevi. "What do you say that we try and get on the same contract? Some large caravan going north to the wild-lands, maybe. They can be pretty rough - it would be nice to have at least one good-looking face around. I'd be doing you a favour."

Tevi smiled and punched her friend gently. "You flatter yourself."

"It's good for my ego. But you'd be pleased if we were together?"

"Of course."

"I'd like... having you around." Cayell's voice was quieter, the joking tone gone.

"Even when I'm hung-over?"

"Maybe you're not at your best right now, but..." Cayell paused, as if bracing herself to say something. "I like you... a lot." Cayell carefully raised her hand to stroke the side of Tevi's face, pushing the wet hair back from her cheek.

"What do you mean?" Alarm flared in Tevi's gut. Her heartbeat leapt.

Cayell was watching intently. Her lips twisted in a half smile. "I mean that I think you're really nice, and I'm hoping that you feel the same about me. And you're great to have as a friend, but I'd like to be more than that. And I know you probably won't feel like it at the moment... with your hangover, but I'm desperately wondering whether I can talk you into keeping me company tonight."

The memory of the hay barn on Storenseg surged into Tevi's head. Again she could smell the stale odours of the barn, hear Brec's treacherous voice. Wild panic stopped the breath in her lungs as she sat up, and forcefully shoved Cayell away. The sudden onslaught of old nightmares sent searing bolts of pain ripping through her skull. Tevi glared around the room, her eyes screwed up in agony, searching for possible hiding places. There were none, but the partitions were thin. Anyone might be standing next door. She lurched to her feet, almost falling in her haste.

Tevi raised her voice, loud enough for any eavesdropper to hear. "If I want that sort of company I'll find a man."

Cayell had landed on the floor beside the chest. Too overcome by surprise to speak, she stared wordlessly at Tevi. She had still made no attempt to move by the time Tevi had wrenched the door open and run away, down the corridor.

Tevi raced wildly through the guildhall, paying no attention to where her footsteps led her. She finally stumbled to a halt in the covered walkway surrounding a paved quadrangle. Several wide stone benches were positioned in spaces between the pillars. Tevi picked one at random, sat down and watched the rain. A small round pond lay at the centre of the flagstones. The surface of the water was laced with rings of ripples.

Tevi pulled her heels onto the seat and rested her forehead on her knees. Her skull felt as if it was about to explode. Ideas scrambled through her head, fighting their way between the stabs of pain. The words of the assessor came back to her. "*In our judgement you will not do anything to bring the guild into disrepute.*" Tevi's face twisted into a tortured scowl as she tried to remember all the guild rules and regulations. Nothing specifically had been said or hinted at, but she guessed it was covered by the catch-all clause of '*dishonourable conduct*'.

Why had Cayell done it? Or had she? Tevi groaned. With her head in its current state she could not be certain of anything much. Perhaps she had misunderstood, and should go and apologise, though there was no explanation that was not, in itself, a confession of guilt. Then Tevi remembered the look on Cayell's face. She was suddenly quite certain she had not been mistaken.

Was Cayell's overture genuine, or a trap set by the guild? The latter option made no sense. They should have made all their tests before accepting her as a member, not after. Yet, surely Cayell would not be so reckless in risking both their futures? What if they had been overheard? Tevi raised her head and settled her chin onto her knees. Her chaotic thoughts would not settle into any sensible order. The hangover made the process of thinking as profitable as fighting with fog. The agony of her headache left her incapable of tackling anything else.

Still the rain fell in sheets, drowning out all other sounds, including that of soft footsteps approaching.

"Ah, Tevi. I was looking for you." An elderly voice said behind her.

Tevi was caught completely by surprise. She jerked around so violently she almost fell. One of the guild-masters was standing at her shoulder.

"Sir?" Her heart thumped in her breast. Her mouth was dry.

"I've been told that you have experience with driving a wagon. Is that true?" the guild-master asked.

The question was so unexpected that Tevi was unable to make sense of it. She could only stare blankly at the guild-master.

He tried again. "You know, a wagon. Wheels underneath and some horses in front to pull. You know how to drive one?"

"Er... yes. A wagon. Yes."

The guild-master chuckled at her confusion. "I'd heard you had quite a good time last night." He smiled indulgently at Tevi. "We've just had a request from someone who wants to hire a mercenary. He intends to go north, to spend winter with his daughter at Treviston. The route is straight through the heart of the Protectorate and all he really needs is a wagon driver - which is what we told him. However, he seems convinced that everyone outside Lyremouth is a psychopathic barbarian and he wants protection. I said we'd try and find someone." The guild-master paused for a second. "Normally the guild insists junior members accept any contract they're qualified for. However this is not quite how the guild expects to see its warriors employed, and I imagine that you would much rather stay here with your friends. So the guild will let you refuse the contract this time - as a one off concession, you realise."

"I'll go."

The speed of Tevi's reply clearly surprised the guild-master. "You're sure?"

"Yes sir."

"Well... It's good to see such enthusiasm for work."

"When does he want to leave?" Tevi asked quickly.

"I told him if we found someone we'd send them over tomorrow morning." The guild-master stared at her, clearly baffled by her willingness to accept the petty assignment. "If you're certain you want the job I'd recommend you spend the afternoon buying yourself warm clothes. Treviston is some way north and high up in the mountains. Don't worry about the cost; your new employer is paying well. After you've bought what you need, you can call over at the pursers and pick up the contract. I'll arrange to have it ready."

After a final, puzzled look at Tevi the guild-master nodded and left. Tevi followed his departure with her eyes, until he disappeared around a corner, then she swivelled back and sat for a long while, watching the rain falling steadily in the courtyard.

CHAPTER EIGHT— Difficult Company

Early the next morning Tevi arrived at the address she had been given, a substantial town house in one of the richer areas of Lyremouth. There was a scattering of tradesmen about, but the street was quieter than most. Tevi suspected it would remain so throughout the day. Nothing would be permitted to disturb the genteel tranquillity. While waiting for the door to open Tevi shuffled from foot to foot, while examining the half-timbered frontage of the house in a futile attempt to distract herself from feeling exposed and vulnerable.

She had risen early and grabbed some food from the kitchens, not bothering to hang about and take her breakfast with the others. The previous evening had been a strain. She and Cayell had largely ignored each other, but once or twice Tevi had caught the other woman glaring in her direction, confusion and anger plain on her face. Perrin and the other nominees had clearly been surprised by the breaking up of their friendship, but had wisely refrained from interfering. Tevi wondered what they had been told.

An elderly servant eventually opened the door, and studied her with cursory disdain.

"You are the mercenary guard?" the servant asked

"Yes - I've got the contract with me." Tevi held out the paper.

"Master Sarryle is expecting you. Follow me."

She was led into a small parlour. Her new employer was sitting by the fire, blankets draped over his knees. He was a thin man of advancing years. To a first glance he looked far older than he actually was - an effect he seemed to be deliberately cultivating by his outmoded dress and frail mannerisms. His head was bald on top, with a frill of white hair hanging over his ears. Sunken eyes blinked irritably in Tevi's direction, as if she was an unpleasant distraction. A partly eaten breakfast lay on the table to one side. His lips pulled into a sour pout.

"You're very young. I was expecting somebody more experienced." Sarryle sounded indignant.

The caustic tone was disconcerting, however Tevi stepped forward to present the contract, saying, "I have considerable experience of driving a wagon, sir. And I am a trained warrior."

"You're early. The horses aren't harnessed yet. Eli will have to do it after finding my willow-bark ointment. I always wake with this terrible pain in my joints. I don't know how I'm going to cope with the journey to Treviston, half the town councils don't maintain the roads as they should..."

Before Sarryle could say more Tevi interrupted. "I could harness the horses, sir."

"If you think you're able." Sarryle's tone made his doubt evident. "Though I'm not sure how far we'll get today. The weather witch said it will be fine, but you can't trust them. My knees ache, that's always a sign of rain. We'll be up to our necks in mud by mid-morning. I don't know why my daughter had to move so far away - typical of her."

"The horses, sir?" Tevi inserted into a break in the tirade.

"Oh yes, yes. Eli, show her to the stables. And these eggs are overdone. You'll have to do some more. You must..."

Tevi and Eli escaped from the stream of whining complaint. As they walked to the stables Tevi tried to catch Eli's eye, in the hope of gauging how seriously she should take Master Sarryle's behaviour.

"Will you be coming with us to Treviston?" Tevi asked.

"I am to stay and look after the house."

"There'll be other servants?" After the welcome she had received Tevi was not too sure about being alone with the old man.

"The cook and the valet have recently left Master Sarryle's employ and have not yet been replaced."

Tevi assumed that meant 'no'. Eli's voice had been so deliberately neutral that it was obvious there was a lot more which could be said on the subject. Unsurprising - Tevi had already worked out that her new employer was not easy to deal with first thing in the morning.

It soon emerged, however, that Tevi was mistaken in her judgement - Master Sarryle was never easy to deal with, regardless of the time of day. His only pleasure in life was finding things that displeased him. Before the journey was halfway complete Tevi had formed the opinion that the protection of a guild mercenary was not an extravagance on her employer's part. Without her presence, Tevi was convinced someone would have strangled the old man. She was not sure if she could withstand the temptation herself.

The journey proceeded slowly, limping from town to town. Before leaving Lyremouth Tevi had established that the distance to Treviston could be travelled in fifteen days, twenty at the most. Yet, thirty days did not see them to their destination. Master Sarryle would not start early, nor would he travel after night fell. He complained about potholes if she raised the speed above the slowest pace the horses could practically maintain. In Lower Deaford he developed a chill and would not move at all for three days. Tevi was approaching the end of her patience.

On the thirty-second day of the journey, they reached a small hamlet, less than nine miles from Treviston. The weather had been mild for the time of year. There was a sharp frost most nights, but the skies had remained clear. However, that night, winter struck. They awoke to see the world cloaked in white. Huge flakes danced in the light wind and drifted into deep banks Tevi was astonished. Snow was rare on the islands of her birth, never more than a light dusting on the highest mountains.

The snow continued to fall steadily all morning. Just before lunchtime it slackened noticeably and finally ceased. Tevi stood in the doorway, next to Master Sarryle. The old man scowled and turned to Tevi with a reproachful glare.

"If you'd made better time we'd be safely in Treviston by now. I thought you were supposed to be competent at driving a wagon." he snapped, before stalking off.

"I'll throttle him." Tevi mouthed silently to herself.

The place at her side was taken by the owner of the farm who had given them shelter for the night. Tevi continued to look out across the hills. Ominous grey clouds hung low in the sky. Only the stark blackness of trees broke through the soft contours of white. The wind blew across the threshold with an icy bite. The farmer studied the dull sky keenly before offering her appraisal of the weather.

"It will hold off for a while, but when it gets going again we'll be snowed in. It's always the same when winter comes late. It hits quick and hard and won't let up 'til spring."

"Do you think it will hold long enough to get to Treviston?" Tevi asked.

The farmer pursed her lips. "Chancy."

At that moment, Sarryle's voice was heard berating the farmer's youngest son. "You boy, don't screech so. It hurts my ears."

"Lee just put an icicle down my neck." a young voice wailed.

"I don't know what your parents are thinking of, letting you run wild."

"I was only playing." protested a second child, presumably Lee.

"You think this weather's a game. If you had my knees..."

Tevi met the farmer's eyes. She could tell that the same thought was going through the other woman's mind. Freezing to death would be fun, compared to months, cooped up with Master Sarryle.

"I'll risk it." Tevi said. From the sudden dazzling smile, Tevi thought the farmer was about to kiss her.

While Tevi and Sarryle dressed in their warmest clothes, the entire work force of the farm was called on to harness the horses and make ready the wagon. Even one ancient great-grandparent hobbled out to offer advice.

Sarryle was not grateful for the help. He stopped in the yard and looked at the snow settling over the tops of his boots. "I'm not sure if we should travel today."

"Nonsense sir. It will be quite all right." Tevi said briskly.

Sarryle was clearly about to refuse to leave - his mouth started to open. Tevi did not give him the chance. She physically swept her elderly employer off his feet and hoisted him into the wagon, then fastened the awning and leapt onto the driver's seat. The wagon rolled out into the snowy landscape accompanied by a high-pitched barrage of accusations emanating from the covered section. When Tevi looked back, she could see the farmer's whole family standing by the gates, waving an enthusiastic goodbye.

The heavy blanket of snow and deep drifts made it hard to tell the line of the road. Once they had left the dry stone walls of the farmland behind, only the gap between stunted upland trees showed the correct direction. Twice the wheels of the wagon ran off the road into the draining ditch and were only pulled free with much coaxing of the carthorses. By the time they had travelled three miles Tevi was obliged to get out and lead the horses, while feeling for the road with her feet. Her toes were soon frozen, but there was the advantage that she could no longer hear what Master Sarryle was saying.

As the afternoon advanced, the snow began to fall again. White flakes swirled ghost-like in the gloomy half-light. The horses fought their way over the last hill, with their hooves sliding on the ice. Down in the valley below faint lights were visible - Treviston at last. Snow lay less thick on the this side of the hill, and once again, the path of the road was visible. Tevi climbed back onto the wagon with relief. She set the horses off at a good pace, ignoring the complaints from behind.

Two miles outside town, they reached a side road. Lights from a large farmhouse shone out at the end of the short track. Tevi knew this was the approximate location of the daughter's farm. She raised the awning of the covered section. Master Sarryle was wedged sullenly in a corner, almost lost under a mound of furs and blankets.

"Do you know exactly where your daughter's farm is, sir?" Tevi asked.

"Do you mean to tell me you're lost?"

"No. There's a farm over there. I wondered if it was your daughter's."

"Don't you recognise it?"

"I've never been to Treviston before."

"Didn't you pay attention to your instructions?"

"I was told your daughter lives two miles south of town." Tevi's patience was almost gone.

"Well you obviously haven't been..."

Tevi dropped the flap and steered the horses onto the path. She did not care whose house it was - they could take the old man; she was not going a step further with him.

Fortunately, it was the right farm and Sarryle was welcomed inside. The display of pleasure in the greeting impressed Tevi - she could not believe it was genuine. The wagon was taken to the stables to be unloaded by the farm hands. With a warm feeling of satisfaction Tevi realised her contract was completed. She stood, slightly dazed, while the hubbub resolved itself into order and Sarryle was led to the room prepared for him.

The daughter beckoned Tevi aside. "Do you wish to stay here tonight?" she asked.

"It's taken longer to get here than planned. I think I should report straight to the guild-master in town."

It was a weak excuse. One night's delay in reporting to the guildhall would make no difference, even if her arrival were expected. In truth, Tevi would rather have slept in the snow on the hilltop than spend another night under the same roof as Sarryle. The daughter smiled sympathetically, probably suspecting Tevi's real reasons for

declining the offer. Using a wax candle, she put her father's seal on the contract and passed it back to Tevi, with the money. As an afterthought, she handed Tevi a few more coins. "I'm sure you've deserved it."

In a mood of light-headed euphoria Tevi shouted goodbye to everyone within earshot and headed swiftly back to the main road. Night was descending rapidly. The freezing wind had picked up and the snow was falling hard, but it hardly affected her. Tevi felt so happy to be free of her charge that she practically skipped all the way into town.

"So she came over to me and she looked me straight in the eye and she said 'Lad.' she said. 'I need a volunteer. But it's a tough one and I can't guarantee you'll come back'. I didn't hesitate. I looked at her and I said 'I'm your man'. Then she took me by the hand and she said 'Good lad, I knew I could rely on you'. That's what she said. 'So what's the score?' I said. 'Well' she said, 'We need someone to get behind enemy lines and set fire to their stores, as a distraction for when we attack.' So I said 'Consider it done.' And when she'd gone I went straight to the captain and I told him what she'd said, and do you know what he said to me?" The narrator paused dramatically.

Tevi was not sure how much more she could stand. It would not be so bad if the old warrior did not expect audience participation. "No. What did he say?" She asked, trying to sound interested.

Ricard leaned back and rested his hands on his knees importantly. "He clapped his hand on my shoulder and he said 'Ric.' he said, 'The honour of the guild rests on your shoulders.' That's what he said."

It was a month since Tevi had arrived at the Treviston guildhall, and the third time Ricard had told the tale of his part in the Troll Wars, four decades before. The story was not improving with re-telling. Tevi let her eyes wander around the dining room and through the open door into the kitchen beyond. No escape was in sight. The guildhall was a modest sized building, principally occupied during the summer months, when the town was the main stopping point for people crossing over the Langhope Pass. The harsh winter had blocked not only the pass, but also virtually all other access to the town. Only six mercenaries, other than herself, were currently lodging in the guildhall. They were mainly elderly members, retired from armed employment, who supervised the guild affairs in town. Ricard was running out of people he could recount his life story to.

The tale was rambling on. "So I looked up and I could see the 'rabbits' everywhere. We called them rabbits because they were always popping out of holes. I remember old Chalky, the cook. Do you know what he said? He said 'If ever I catch one of them we'll have rabbit stew all month'." Ricard's face broke into a broad smile, which grew to chuckles, his shoulders and stomach shaking. Tevi assumed the joke had lost something with the passage of time.

The tedium was plumbing new, mind-numbing depths when a door opened and Nevin, the Treviston guild-master, limped in. A mace had shattered her knee several years before, making a cruel mockery of Nevin's otherwise athletic body. She was somewhat younger than the other residents of the guild-house and marginally more entertaining to be with. Tevi suspected that, once, Nevin would have made good company. Now, the constant pain from her leg made her short-tempered and cynical. Sandy hair hung in a fringe over shadowed eyes. Her lips were permanently turned down at the corners.

Ricard halted his story as the new arrival settled into a high-backed chair beside the fireplace. "I was telling young Tevi here about the old wars, up north."

"You can give it a rest. I've heard it all before." Nevin said bluntly.

Tevi leapt at the excuse to flee. "I'm sure Ricard can finish the story some other time." Then she smiled at the old man - he meant well.

"We could go to the kitchen." Ricard offered.

"Well, actually, I'd planned to go into town tonight." It was not strictly true and Tevi could feel a slow blush rising on her cheeks.

Fortunately, Nevin spoke up. "Ric, why don't you get the chess-board out and give me a game? That should keep you quiet."

"Oh yes... yes, of course." Ricard's expression was a little confused as he adjusted to the change in plans. He shuffled across the room and collected the board and pieces.

Seizing her chance, Tevi slipped from her seat and headed for the door. As she reached it, she paused and glanced back. Ricard, the firelight playing on his bald head, was busily fussing over the playing pieces, swapping them back and forth as he tried to remember their positions. Nevin was slumped, with her head sagging as she rubbed her maimed leg with the heel of one hand. It was the same gesture Tevi remembered her mother making - the easing of tendons in a wounded knee. Yet, the setting was so very different from the family hall on Storenseg.

Instead of dry stone, the walls were wood-panelled and hung with tapestries. Four stout trestle tables stood in the middle of the room. A blazing log fire roared in the open grate of the chimney. Rather than a bare earth floor, there were flagstones, scrubbed clean. Suddenly it all seemed very alien to Tevi. Swamped by a rush of homesickness she closed the door and retreated to her room on the second floor of the guildhall.

There were no fires in the private quarters and the air was freezing. Tevi's breath formed white puffs of steam. The room was austere and dreary, clearly intended to be functional rather than homelike. It was generous in size, but lacking entertainment. The bed was ready, piled high with blankets and furs, though it was too early for sleep. Tevi's few possessions were neatly arranged on shelves, however nothing needed cleaning, mending or sharpening - the previous month had taken care of that. Tevi sat on the edge of her bed and stared despondently at the four bare walls. They seemed to close in around her, pressing with the weight of the deserted guild-house.

A door below slammed. The sound reverberated through the empty corridors. Listening to the fading echoes, Tevi became aware of voices, coming softly through the thick green glass of the window. It was an indistinct murmur, punctuated by the occasional high shout. Drawn by the sound, Tevi got to her feet and wandered over to stare out on the town. A panorama of snow covered roofs filled the skyline. On the narrow street below well-wrapped figures made what haste they could, stepping carefully with their eyes set on the slippery pavements. The scene reminded Tevi of her fabricated excuse to escape Ricard. On impulse, she decided to make good her words.

She grabbed her thick woollen cloak from the rack in the entrance hall and changed into the warm, waterproof boots she had bought with money from Sarryle's contract. One quarter had gone to Nevin as the guild's share, but there was plenty left. Coins filled the purse at Tevi's belt. Fleece-lined gloves and woollen hat completed her attire. Tevi walked down the steps of the guildhall and onto the street outside.

Dusk was settling over the town as she emerged. It was a crisp, clear evening; the first stars already showing overhead. The street was filled with trampled snow; brilliant white close to the walls, turning to grey and brown slush in the ruts where traffic passed. The snow lay on every horizontal surface, clinging in sharp lines to the details in the brickwork and capping the tops of walls. The street was busy with people going home to their families after a day's work. A horse-drawn cart went down the street. The driver was clearly well known and was hailed by several pedestrians.

With no clear destination in mind, Tevi wandered from street to street until she reached Treviston's market square. The stalls and peddlers were now gone. Tevi stopped in the centre of the empty square and inspected each side in turn. The solid timber frame of the council hall held her attention for a while. Tevi finally halted and faced east. Mountains loomed above the snow-covered tiles; vertical rock faces, black etched on white, stark against the darkening blue sky. The last rays from the sinking sun glinted off the icy peaks, and washed them with pink. Slowly the light faded. With each passing minute more stars appeared.

Tevi stood watching until the white of the snow on the mountains was almost lost in darkness. She lowered her gaze and continued her restless wandering. By now, most of the townsfolk were home and the streets less active. Doors and window shutters were closed. Lamplight gleamed through joins in the wood.

Tevi passed a group of children indulging in one last snowball fight, ignoring the calls to come in for as long as they dared, until a more emphatic shout ended the game. A small knot of townsfolk caught her attention as they walked along the road, jostling each other and laughing boisterously. Tevi's eyes followed them enviously until they were out of sight. She felt desperately lonely. Pools of light, cast by lamps on street corners, glittered off the white ground and sparkled on the plumes of powdery snow her boots kicked up as she walked. Her thoughts drifted aimlessly, like the dancing flakes.

She was caught completely unaware when a figure cannoned into her, careering wildly out of a steep side street. The collision knocked Tevi sideways. She slithered on the icy paving. Her arms flailed wildly but caught only on the new arrival, who was even less steady than herself. The two of them ended up in a heap on the ground.

Once her initial shock had passed, Tevi was able to squirm from under her involuntary assailant and get to her feet. "I'm very sorry." Tevi apologised on reflex, offering a hand to assist the other person to rise.

"Oh no, it was my fault. I was going too fast and these shoes are useless. Can't get a decent grip on the snow - soles are like glass."

"You haven't hurt yourself, have you?" Sir? Ma'am? Tevi could not tell. The accent belonged to one of the local townsfolk, but the speaker was so muffled that it was impossible to guess the gender. The person was shorter than Tevi by several inches, yet the voice seemed on the low side for a woman. Not for the first time Tevi wished men on the mainland would let their beards grow. One of these days, she was going to make a mistake and insult someone. It was just as well that gender was of so little consequence in the Protectorate.

"I'm fine, apart from my dignity. Are you alright?" the stranger asked.

"Yes. Fortunately the snow's soft to land on."

"Though I guess I wasn't quite so soft, landing on top of you."

Tevi grinned. "It was a bit like being hit by a sack of potatoes... meaning no offence."

The other person let out a peal of laughter. "None taken. If someone tells me I look like a sack of potatoes - then I'm offended."

"I'm sure that isn't likely to happen."

"I don't know. I'm a greengrocer from Eastside. They say traders end up looking like their wares."

Tevi joined the laughter. The pair exchanging light-hearted pleasantries for a few minutes, while brushing the powdery snow still clinging to their clothing. It was not long before all traces of the accident had been erased.

"I must be off. Good evening to you, and once again my apologies." The greengrocer said in farewell, and started to head off with cautious steps, one hand braced against the wall.

"Excuse me! Before you go. I'm a stranger in town. I wonder if you could recommend a good tavern." Tevi spoke, half hoping her new acquaintance would offer to come with her for a drink.

The face inside the fur-lined hood turned back, smiling broadly. "The ale in the 'Bees and Bonnet' on Mickle street is very good. My new lover's one of the bar-staff. He won't be there tonight, but it's always friendly."

With arms held out for balance the unsteady figure tottered down the street, and disappeared into another side turning. Tevi stared at the empty street. Any hope of company was gone. In disappointment Tevi continued her aimless roaming, with no purpose in mind other than creating the rhythm of walking.

She would have been willing to buy as much ale as the greengrocer could drink, just to have someone to talk to. Even Ricard's unending stories would be better than nothing. Tevi was about to head back to the guildhall when she noticed a painted sign hanging above the door of a tavern. Several garish yellow and black bees swarmed around a frilly pink object that was just conceivably an item of headgear. This must be the 'Bees and Bonnet'.

The greengrocer had said it was friendly. While Tevi stood thinking, three townsfolk approached from the other direction, pushed the door open and went inside. There was a brief glimpse of lamplight falling on busy tables and clean scrubbed floor, the sound of people talking, chairs scraping, glasses clinking, even the faint smell of

beer and wood smoke. Without Tevi making a conscious decision, her feet started moving, following the three townsfolk into the tavern.

Sweat prickled at her neck and sides as the heat of the alehouse swept over her, accompanied by a matching wave of sound. The sensation was like wading through treacle. Tevi was in a medium sized room, rectangular, with tables lining the longer walls and a dozen more arranged in the middle. Benches were filled with animated customers, though a scattering of empty seats remained. The walls were orange brick, except for one that was completely taken up by a huge stone fireplace. The flickering light played over the low rafters of the ceiling, and added to the cheerful glow from a dozen lanterns. There was much activity on both sides of the L-shaped counter, that was squeezed into the corner facing the door, with a row of barrels stacked behind.

Tevi tugged off her gloves and hat and pushed them into the large pocket sewn on the inside of her cloak, which she also removed. The bar was busy, but she was able to find a spot where she could rest her elbows on the wooden surface of the counter and wait her turn to be served. It did not take long. A barman rushed to attend to her, ignoring several other customers. From the quick, slightly nervous glance at her hands Tevi realised it was the tattoos that gained her prompt service. Tevi recognised the three townsfolk she had followed in. She gestured to the waiting group. "They were here before me."

"Oh no. You first." One of them spoke quickly and then looked away.

Most ordinary citizens treated mercenaries caution. Remembering Big Bron, Tevi could understand why. She was tempted to explain that she was happy to wait her turn, but it would only waste time and fail to reassure anyone.

"I'll have a pint of bitter, please."

"Yes, ma'am"

Tevi waited for her drink in silence. The other people at the bar did not act overly nervous, yet Tevi got the strong impression they wished she was not there - certainly none seemed ready to engage in friendly conversation with her. She faired no better once she had got her drink and taken a seat at the side of the room, close to the fire. As soon as the tattoos on her hands were noticed, people sitting either side of her shifted ever so slightly away.

The hopes of finding companionship taunted Tevi as she sat, surveying the other customers of the tavern. During her journey with Sarryle, she had become aware that the red and gold tattoos served to distance her from the general population. Young children would gape at her with something approaching hero-worship in their eyes, but their older relatives gave her a wide berth. Traders and others, used to employing her guild comrades, were less apprehensive, but mercenaries were generally left to their own company.

Folk sitting close by busied themselves in conversation, mainly about the weather from the little Tevi overheard. A few, further away, were staring in her direction, although they looked away sharply if she caught their eye. Tevi's lips tightened in annoyance. *Am I being too sensitive? On the islands, we would always stare at strangers.* The thought struck her - but on Storenseg, you could go from one year to the next without seeing a face you did not know. She remembered how comical it was to see an unfamiliar face, and study the eyes and nose, trying to work out what there was about it that made it so odd. *And I've changed, to sit here surrounded by dozens of strange faces and find them no more worthy of note than the bricks in the walls.* It was a sudden, unsettling realisation. Somewhere on her travels, the islander's mentality had slipped its hold on her. It was bad enough to be exiled in strange lands, but worse to think that even Storenseg might become alien to her.

The mellow ale washed the tightness from her throat. In the open hearth flames leapt over the burning logs - in them you could see demons and castles, swords and flowers, if you chose. It was a deep glowing well of fantasies that drew her thoughts in. A wry smile touched Tevi's lips as she remembered the family hearth of her childhood, and siting by it, playing games of make-believe. She had dreamed of growing up to be a warrior queen who would conquer all the known world - or at least the nearest couple of islands. *Things never work out the way you expect.*

But what next? Precise plans were hard to make, although a job was not likely to be a problem. In spring, the pass would re-open and traffic would start to flow through town again. There would be caravans and traders,

some of them heading off to the wild-lands beyond the Protectorate and in need of guards. Tevi could be sure of finding work with one of them. The world was wide and diverse beyond the dreams of her childhood, beyond the imagination of the island women. Visions of the sights she had seen with Verron and Marith danced among the flames.

Her tankard was empty. Tevi looked at it, a little surprised, and considered returning to the guildhall, but she was warm and comfy, and the other customers had long ceased paying her any attention. The noise of the tavern had become a steady background rumble in her ears, letting her think in peace, and the ale really was very good. Good enough to tempt her to a second tankard.

She had scarcely returned to her seat when the door to the tavern opened. The sudden drop in noise warned Tevi that the new arrival was not just another customer, seeking cheer on the frosty night. Like everyone else in the room, Tevi turned her head, to see a tall, middle-aged woman standing just inside the entrance. The hem of her heavy blue cloak fluttered in the last of the icy draft that had followed her into the tavern. The cut of the woman's clothes indicated wealth. Her expression was one of bored arrogance. There was nothing else of note about her, but the innkeeper rushed to greet the new arrival and escort her to a table by the fire, unceremoniously displacing its original occupants.

It was obvious that everyone in the tavern recognised the woman. Folk returned to their gossip, but the atmosphere was slightly strained, the laughter muted. Then Tevi caught a glimpse of a black amulet, engraved with oak leaves, on the woman's wrist. It explained all - the town sorcerer. By now, a bottle of vintage wine and assorted delicacies had arrived at the table, accompanied by much bowing. As the bar-staff retreated, the bottle floated into the air and poured itself into a glass. Oblivious to the disturbance she had caused, the sorcerer picked up the glass and sipped the wine, while her eyes stared vacantly into the air.

The floating bottle was the first piece of magic Tevi had seen in the Protectorate, however it did not appear to be the precursor to anything more dramatic. Soon Tevi's attention drifted back to the fire and her plans for the future. Taking a contract as a caravan guard would be a good move. It would bring money, and the chance to see more of the world. There would also be the comradeship of other mercenaries - new friends, and new risks. Tevi's forehead creased in a frown, hit by the memory of Cayell that had dogged her all the way from Lyremouth, and the questions it raised. *Why did she come on to me like that? How did she know I would be open to the approach? On the islands, with hindsight, it was obvious. I stood out like a sheep in a pigpen. Too soft and masculine. Even the way I walked and talked must have had them guessing.* But on the mainland the same codes of conduct did not apply - or did they? *How did Cayell know about me?* Until she could answer that question Tevi knew she dared not let anyone get close to her. She bit her lip and let her head drop forward, heartsick at the prospect of loneliness. *But I want friends.*

Tevi raised her head to take another mouthful of ale. Her eyes fell on the woman sitting alone by the fire. The sorcerer was someone who must have even greater problems in finding friends. *Do they like the way they're treated with awe?* Tevi wondered. Sorcerers met with even more wariness than mercenaries. Might a less deferential approach be preferred? *Probably depends on the sorcerer,* she concluded. This one had been unconcerned to see people kicked off their table to make room. Admittedly, they had shown no sign of objecting, but it was hardly a way to make people like you.

It was no surprise that normal folk had mixed feelings about the Coven - although, if it did not exist, there would be nothing to stop the sorcerers from doing whatever they wanted. At least the Coven ensured its members gave something in return. The town sorcerer was responsible for the welfare of the inhabitants, supervising healers and other witches who worked in the area. She was oath-bound to protect the people from attack, magical or otherwise. She led the town council, was the final arbiter of all inter-guild disputes and the chief civic judge. Her word, quite literally, was law. On top of that, she could be called on for help and advice in virtually any situation.

And what possible advice could the sorcerer give me? Tevi sighed to herself. The situation was hopeless. She had learnt to treat the mainland men as if they were female but it was only a mental game she was playing with herself. Tevi knew the only lover she would ever want would have to be a woman.

Her tankard was empty again. At the bar Tevi was once more served without delay, but the route back to her seat was blocked by a group of people gathered at one of the tables, forcing her into a detour by the sorcerer's table. Tevi glanced at the woman's face as she passed. Seen close up the sorcerer was older than Tevi had first thought. Wavy grey hair framed a deeply lined face, and pale brown liver spots marked both hands. *What advice could she give me?* The words repeated in Tevi's head. Before she had the chance to think it through, her feet had stopped.

Immediately Tevi knew it was a mistake. All around the room heads twisted in her direction, only to turn away again as folk decided true wisdom lay in minding their own business. The sorcerer looked up with interest, yet her eyes seem to be focused on a point far beyond the walls of the room.

"May I talk to you, ma'am?" Tevi asked politely.

By way of consent, the sorcerer indicated an empty chair. She waited until Tevi was seated before speaking. "And what do you want to talk about?"

"I'd like some advice."

"Eat three meals a day, sleep well and avoid sharp objects when they're poked in your direction." The sorcerer rested her head on one hand, her voice heavily ironic. "Or was there something slightly more particular bothering you?"

"Er... yes. I wanted... If, er..." The unfocused gaze was disconcerting. Tevi's eyes dropped to the tabletop as she floundered for words. The mocking tones made it even harder to bring herself to speak.

"I'm afraid you'll have to be a little more precise with your question. There are very few sorcerers who can use telepathy to any useful extent, and I'm not one of them."

"My problem is... I need to know what to do..."

Again, Tevi's words ran into a brick wall. However, instead of taunting her, the sorcerer froze, her expression puzzled. For the first time her eyes focused on Tevi.

"What to do?" The sorcerer's voice was light, but serious. "Well, unlikely as it may seem, you should ask those two men to give you a job." She pointed to the people she meant, sitting at one side of the room in the middle of a long table.

"I...? Pardon?" Tevi's surprise jolted her out of her awkwardness.

"You should ask them for a job. Do you know why you should do that?"

"No."

"Neither do I. Isn't it intriguing?" The mocking tone returned to the sorcerer's voice. "Perhaps they pay well."

"That wasn't the question I wanted to ask, ma'am." Tevi said with slightly more determination.

"Maybe not, but it's the question you should have asked."

Tevi opened her mouth to speak, and then closed it as she considered the implications of the sorcerer's words. "You mean it's a prophecy?" she asked at last.

"In a way."

"I thought oracles were supposed to be cryptic."

"If it makes you happier I could tell you that you're about to go on a difficult journey and to expect health problems towards the middle of next month, possibly with your eyes. But I think my original advice was better. It's certainly easier to act on, wouldn't you say?" While Tevi sat, trying to think of an answer, the sorcerer drained her glass and stood up. "Before I go, do you want to try again and see if you can ask me your original question?"

"Er, no. Thank you, ma'am. You've been most helpful."

"True. I have." the sorcerer said pointedly.

The woman spun on her heel and swept out of the tavern. The door swung closed behind her. In the hush that followed, Tevi looked around the room. The two men identified by the sorcerer appeared extremely uneasy. They were obviously aware they had been pointed out, as was everyone in the room, judging by the looks of frank curiosity they were receiving.

Tevi picked up her drink and walked towards the table where the men were sitting, hoping it was not just the sorcerer's idea of a joke. Both men were in their early twenties and dressed in the style of the eastern Protectorate, on the other side of the Spur. The taller of the two had a round face and unruly fair hair that fell forward over his forehead, obscuring his eyes. His companion was dark with angular, boyish features. They stared at Tevi as she sat down; their eyes, edgy and distrusting, fastened on the tattoos on the backs of her hands.

"Well met, fellow citizens." Tevi said, trying to give her most reassuring smile.

"Well met, citizen." They replied in disjointed unison.

"The sorcerer thought you might be able to offer me a job. My name's Tevi by the way."

The fair-haired one answered her cautiously. "My name's Harrick and this is my partner, Rorg. We're traders from Rizen." He gestured to his companion, who nodded sharply.

"Are you looking to hire people?" Tevi asked.

"Um... yes. But we're mainly after guides and mule drivers, though I suppose a scout might be useful - if that's what you are." Harrick replied after a short pause.

"No. I'm just an ordinary warrior." Tevi said.

Harrick's wariness was fading into confusion. "Then I can't see we'd have much need of you. Bandits are rare in the mountains, even in good weather. They aren't going to be about in conditions like these."

"We'll be lucky to get anyone." Rorg interjected. Like his companion, he spoke in the clipped accent of the eastern Protectorate.

"Look, I keep telling you - it will be all right." Harrick hissed at his partner with unconcealed anger.

"You've said that before." Rorg scowled.

Tevi realised she had stepped into an ongoing argument. Admittedly traders were more relaxed around mercenaries than most citizens, but it was amazing that the two men could do so quickly get over the implications of a sorcerer singling them out. It indicated that some major trouble was occupying their thoughts.

Tevi leaned forward to interrupt. "You have a problem?"

Rorg merely shrugged and raised his tankard to his lips. Any nervousness was overwhelmed by his mood of sullen despair.

Harrick turned back to Tevi. "We're planning on going over the old pass, but Rorg has some doubts about it."

"I wasn't aware there was an old pass." Tevi said.

"Oh yes. The current Langhope pass was made sixty years back. Three sorcerers and a couple hundred dwarves did the work. Before that, the old route ran further to the north - an old pack trail, following the contours, twisting and turning all over the place. The new pass just blasted its way straight ahead, up one side and down the other. They even knocked a couple of tunnels through bits that got in the way. You can drive two wagons abreast the whole way."

"Except when it's neck-deep in snow."

The interruption from Rorg was met by a long angry glare. At last, Harrick went on. "We were held up on our way to Treviston. By the time we got here the Langhope pass was closed and may not reopen for months. We're on a tight schedule and low budget and can't afford to wait 'til spring. We only got our loan from the guild last year." Harrick's lips twisted in a grimace, making Tevi remember some of Verron's remarks about the risk of young traders overreaching themselves.

"You think the older route may be passable?" She asked.

"Yes - on foot. It always was, according to Rorg's grandmothers. They used to cover this route in the days before the new pass."

"If you can believe the old fools." Rorg mumbled.

"And why not? The old pass isn't so high and it's sheltered from the north-west wind all the way." Harrick snapped angrily.

"So that's your plan?" Tevi spoke softly, trying to ease the tension.

"Yes. We're going to sell the wagons and transfer the load to mules. Not right now, but according to the weather-witch there should be a clear patch in another twenty days. If we can get a team together we'll be setting off then." He frowned at Tevi. "We're looking mainly for guides and muleteers. The only unskilled labour we're going to need is the brute strength to dig our way out of snow drifts, and that's not going to be your field."

Tevi looked at the table. It was about ten feet long, made from solid timber, probably weighing more than she did. It was ideal for a demonstration. Tevi stood to avoid damaging her chair, raised her eyes to meet Harrick's, and placed one hand on the underside of the table. With a smile, she lifted it a foot into the air. People sitting at either end called out in surprise.

"When you discuss the contract with the guild master, it would be better not to use the word 'unskilled'. You could say you wanted me to fight off starving wolf packs and the like." Tevi said evenly, not in the least exerted by the weight she was lifting. "The mercenaries are very keen to be seen as professionals."

The two young traders stared at Tevi in astonishment. Even Rorg was shaken from his bitter cynicism. He bent down and peered at her hand under the table then sat upright again.

"I don't suppose you've got a couple of friends? We could forget the mules."

CHAPTER NINE—Nightmares

Either Rorg's scepticism of his grandmothers was well founded, or the old women had been tougher in their youth than they'd been given credit for. The journey over the old pass was a nightmare.

On the day they left Treviston Tevi began to have second thoughts. She picked her way along the old pack trail, feeling dwarfed by the overhanging crags scoured with ice and snow. A twinge of foreboding unsettled her stomach, but she brushed away the doubts and fixed her eyes on the trail. Ahead of her went the others in the small team. Apart from Harrick and Rorg, there were two muleteers, a local guide, six hill ponies to ride when possible and nineteen very unhappy mules.

It wasn't long before Tevi was wishing that she had turned her pony around and headed straight back to the comforts of the Treviston guildhall. For the first two days, the route wove its way slowly into the mountains. The track hugged the southern side of a long winding valley that was comparatively sheltered and free from deep snowdrifts. However, the temperature was bitterly cold, firewood was hard to find and the damp managed to find its way into everything. The track then rose sharply, running up the bottom of a steep sided ravine. The gorge acted like a wind tunnel, hurling walls of sleet into their faces. When they reached the top, they were met by a trackless expanse of open moor under a leaden sky.

It was at this time Tevi realised that Harrick had been obliged to employ anyone willing to undertake the journey - consequently the team was not of the highest calibre. The guide, Lerwill, appeared to have less idea of direction than anyone else in the party. After two hours of his dithering Tevi was left wondering how the man normally found his way home at night.

The wind whipped them with freezing blasts as they scrambled out of yet another gully. Lerwill stood a short way in front of the others, looking around in confusion. "It wasn't like this last time I was here." he muttered.

Tevi shouted to be heard over the wind. "Let me guess. There wasn't any of this white fluffy stuff about."

Lerwill pouted sullenly. His hands shook as he pointed to a long ridge cresting in a triple peak. "That's Langhope Rigg. The new pass goes to the south of it, which means..." He spun around and gestured in a vague north-easterly direction. "We need to go that way." He scowled at Tevi, as if daring her to dispute his words.

They remounted their ponies and set off across the snow-covered upland. The mules were miserable and made no attempt to hide the fact from anyone - the same could be said for the muleteers. Tevi pulled her hood forward to shield her face from the wind, and wished she could place more confidence in the guide. At the rate they were going sunset would see them less than a mile from the point where they had climbed onto the moor. Listening to Ricard's stories by the fire suddenly seemed like an extremely enjoyable way to spend time.



Over the following days Tevi learnt a lot about manhandling mules. She also learnt that, while adversity often brings people closer, this is not necessarily the case. Harrick cursed the weather, the muleteers cursed the mules, Rorg cursed his grandmothers and Lerwill fell into a sulk and cursed everyone. It was mainly due to the efforts of Tevi and Rorg that they eventually found their way across the moor and back onto the trail, wasting no more than a day in the process. Thereafter the route got worse as it passed through the heart of the mountains. Rock-falls and lost paths caused repeated detours and delays.

The muleteers, Jansk and Orpin, were a couple barely out of their teens, whose relationship fluctuated between vicious argument and passionate reconciliation. Orpin had the same wiry build and stubbornness as one of his mules. Jansk was a solid young woman with a short temper. Neither appeared overly endowed with brains. Throughout the early part of the journey, the pair quarrelled incessantly. For some reason, both chose to unburden their hearts to Tevi. During those days, Tevi learnt more intimate details about their relationship than she had any wish to know. She soon ran out of sympathy for the tales of jealousy, selfishness and spite, but neither muleteer picked up on hints that she didn't want to listen.

As far as she could judge, Tevi spent her twentieth birthday carrying the cargo over a rock-fall, while Jansk and Orpin took the mules around a precipitous detour. The route was judged too dangerous for the animals to attempt

when laden, although Tevi was unsure whether it was the risk to the mules or the merchandise that prompted the decision. The voices of the muleteers were still audible long after they had disappeared from sight.

"Why are you wearing that old hat again?"

"It keeps my ears warm."

"It makes you look stupid."

"You're only saying that 'cause Lonny gave it to me."

"I didn't know who gave it to you."

"Yes you did. You were there..."

To Tevi's relief the voices faded into the distance leaving her to do her job in peace - apart from the stream of unhelpful advice from Harrick, Rorg's sarcastic interjections and Lerwill's sullen muttering. That night she collapsed into her bedding roll, wet, cold and exhausted from hours of manhandling the heavy load. Her fingers were bruised and chaffed and a wrenched ankle was throbbing.

Jansk crept over. "Do you know what he said to me?" Her voice was a whine.

Tevi peered out from under her blanket. There were tears in Jansk's eyes, but from what Tevi knew of the woman they were more likely due to frustration than grief.

"Who?" A silly question, Tevi realised, even as she spoke.

"Orpin - the dog-sucker."

The phrase was one Tevi had heard Jansk use on several occasions. She hadn't tried to find out its precise derivation, though several possibilities had occurred to her. From Jansk's tone, it was not a term of endearment.

Go away. I can't be bothered with you. The words were on Tevi's lips, but instead she said. "What's wrong?"

"I told you... Orpin."

"What's he done?"

"He won't let us name our first child after my father. He said Pa's an evil old toad."

"Are you pregnant?" Tevi asked.

"Not yet - but after all my Pa's done for us... Can you believe it?"

Tevi buried her head back under the blanket. She couldn't believe any of it.

By the next night, the mule drivers had apparently worked out a compromise for the name of the, as yet, unconceived child. Ignoring the rest of the team, they sat by the fire, staring intently into each other's eyes and mumbling words of endearment. Kisses grew ever more passionate and hands disappeared under the layers of clothing, accompanied by giggling. Tevi found the display acutely embarrassing. On the islands, people used the cover of darkness and didn't make love brazenly in the firelight. She tried to talk to Lerwill by way of a distraction, but his eyes were glazed and his speech slurred. What words she could distinguish carried little sense. Still she persisted until a gesture from Harrick prompted to her to leave the guide and slide across to where the traders were sitting.

"What's wrong with Lerwill?" she asked.

"Opium." Harrick whispered.

Tevi twisted to stare back at Lerwill. "He's an addict?" She had heard of the drug during her travels with Verron and Marith, and even seen users sprawled blank-eyed outside taverns and brothels, but had never made the connection with the guide's erratic behaviour.

"Sort of. He promised not to take any on the journey but he can't seem to function without it. I let him have a little to see if it helps." Harrick said quietly.

"Bloody stupid idea to try this route without a decent guide." Rorg muttered.

"It was all due to your grandmothers' stories." Harrick snapped back.

"I told you, from the start, not to believe the senile old liars."

"And it was your fault we were late getting to Treviston."

"Oh not that one again!"

In front of Tevi's horrified eyes the two traders swung into their bitterest argument to date. Both men were soon trying to get her to side with them.

"Tevi, have you ever heard a bigger load of crap?"

"He's the one talking out of his arse, isn't he Tevi?"

Tevi had no intention of being drawn in. With an excuse she left the traders and went to where the ponies and mules were hobbled. Her own mount snorted in the darkness and shuffled up to nuzzle against her. She hugged the pony around its neck, burying her face in the shaggy mane. "You and me. We're the only sane ones here." Tevi whispered. Although she wondered if confiding in an animal might prejudice her own case.

The next day, the trail rounded the side of a lofty, sheer-sided mountain before dropping into a thickly wooded valley. They were now on the eastern side of Whitfell Spur and the air was noticeably warmer and dryer. That night they camped under pine trees. For the first time firewood was not in short supply.

The trail continued its steady descent for another two days. On the morning of the sixteenth day after leaving Treviston, they reached the head of a wide valley. Fields and villages were spread below in a patchwork. The party made their way eagerly down the trail, encouraged by the thought of a dry bed and food other than trail rations.

At midday, they passed the substantial remains of an old castle, perched on a spur of rock jutting from the hillside. Heavy ramparts linked two towers, one tall, one short. All were built of dark grey granite and dotted with black arrow slits. Tevi looked up as they passed below.

She turned to Rorg who was riding beside her. "Who lives in the castle?"

"Nobody, as far as I know." Rorg said.

"So why is it here?"

"I think the castle goes back to before the region joined the Protectorate. A small garrison used it when this was the main route over the Spur. Since the new pass was built this valley has become a bit of a backwater and the soldiers have gone. They now patrol the new pass."

"The castle seems in good shape." Tevi observed.

"Perhaps the locals are keeping up the maintenance just in case."

The road took them on through the bare winter farmlands until, with enormous relief, the party entered the largest village, situated a mile and a half below the castle. The difficult part was now over. It was three days easy travel to Rizen. Harrick was as keen as everyone else to stop for the night. He soon arranged accommodation with the local reeve, a thin middle-aged woman, who led the small crowd of surprised villagers that came to greet them.

The villagers used their arrival as an excuse for an impromptu party that evening. Visitors from the outside world were always cause for excitement, especially during the winter isolation. Virtually everyone from miles around squeezed into the meeting hall in the centre of the village, next to the reeve's cottage. Their curiosity, however, was confined to the local area, and the main interest was with Harrick, Rorg and their news from Rizen. Once it was learnt that Tevi came from 'far distant lands' she was more or less ignored, apart from a few curious stares and the customary band of small children, entranced by her mercenary tattoos.

A barrel of the local beer was opened and someone began playing a fiddle, although the space was too cramped to allow dancing. From what Tevi could see the meeting hall doubled as a hay barn and sheering shed. It would also be their accommodation for the night. Tevi lifted her eyes to the rafters and smiled. The thought of dry hay to sleep on and a roof over her head was bliss.

As the evening progressed the children were sent to bed and the crowd began to disperse, although it promised to be some time before the travellers would be able to sleep. The reeve, Sergo, was one of the few villagers to have any interest in the wider world. She had just engaged Tevi in talk about Lyremouth when the door opened and a grim-faced man stepped in. He made straight for the reeve, who stopped speaking mid-sentence at the sight of the newcomer's face.

"You've found more victims?" Sergo sounded frightened.

"Two sheep. Up by the north falls." The man jerked his head back over one shoulder.

"Spring's on the way. It won't stay around much longer, surely?" Sergo's tone made it more a plea than a question.

"So you say, but I reckon it depends on who called it here, and why." The man crossed his arms on his chest belligerently while a small circle of villagers formed around him and Sergo. Voices in the rest of the barn were muted.

"No one has called it." Sergo's tone did not match the confidence of her words. "It's just the bad winter has forced the thing down the Spur from the high Barrodens up north."

"Or her, up at the castle, has called on another pet."

Sergo looked at him in dismay, clearly lost for words.

In the resulting tense silence Tevi asked, "What's been called here?"

"A basilisk." The man snapped out the answer.

"What's a basilisk?" Tevi was still confused.

"A monster from the wildlands. It feeds on life essence. It's got this third eye in the centre of its forehead. It locks eyes with its prey and drains the life out. Turns the body to stone, and the eyes become like jewels."

"Has it killed anyone?" Tevi asked.

"Not yet. So far it's just taken a dozen or so sheep." Sergo said weakly.

"But it's going to get someone soon. Mark my words - we've got to do something." The man glared at the reeve as he spoke.

"Nobody here can deal with it. You need magic on your side to stand a chance. It will go soon - I know it will." Sergo sounded as if she did not fully believe her own words.

"Can't you call in a sorcerer to help you?" Tevi asked, remembering the one in Treviston. After the journey over the mountains, Tevi would happily have directed a dozen basilisks in her direction.

"There's one too many in these parts as it is." someone in the crowd muttered in scorn.

"Most likely her behind it." a second voice added.

Others agreed

The angry man turned to face Tevi. "We've got a Coven sorcerer, black amulet and everything. We never used to have one and were far better off like that. We got by with a simple witch, a healer who could turn her hand to a bit of rain calling. Nothing much happens around here; we don't need anyone fancy. But when old Colly died we got a sorcerer sent here. If I could I'd slit her throat." The man's face twisted in hatred. "Take my word for it - she's evil and she knows all about the basilisk." The last sentence was spat at the reeve, then the man spun on his heel and stalked towards the door.

Sergo called after the departing figure. "She can't be involved. The Coven know what they're doing. They wouldn't send her here if she was corrupt or dangerous."

"If you believed that you'd go and ask her to help." The man tossed the words over his shoulder as he left the hall.

Nobody else challenged the reeve's statement directly to her face, but there were plenty of muttered comments. As the crowd in the hall thinned still further Tevi found herself seated on a rickety bench, next to a plump elderly woman, who was sipping noisily from a mug of beer.

"What's so bad about the sorcerer?" Tevi asked, to open the conversation.

The woman glanced around the room, then put her head close to Tevi's and whispered theatrically. "She's up to no good." The woman nodded to reinforce her words. "When she arrived she wouldn't stay in the village. We offered her Colly's old house, but she moved up to the castle. Said if we wanted her help we could go up there. But I won't. Not after what happened to Gerry's daughter. It's a mercy everyone's been so healthy, hardly as much as a cold since last summer, 'cause there's no one who'd risk going up to the castle if they were sick. Gerry was the one who came in just now with the news about the sheep. The sorcerer's put charms and things up on the hilltops. I dread to think what they're for. Gerry's been hunting them down. He reckons he's destroyed about five of them, but how many more are there? That's what I want to know, and what are they for? That sorcerer's up to mischief. Some nights you see lights flickering around the walls. Gives me the creeps."

"Perhaps she just wanted peace and quiet to practice her magic. The charms might be totally harmless." Tevi suggested.

The woman snorted. "She's hiding something. She's got a room she won't let anyone in. We know because Dorin went up there to help out at first, but he wouldn't stay. He wasn't too clear in his wits to start off with, but he's been worse since he came back. And you should hear some of the stories he has to tell." In her enthusiasm to recount the tale the woman's voice had risen. "Then Shiral went up there to work for her. Now she was a bright girl. But something happened. After a month, the sorcerer brought her back to her parents. The girl was out cold for three days and when she woke up, she just screamed at everything for hours on end. Her parents say she still has horrible nightmares, and we've never got a clear story out of her. She was frightened senseless by something up there. Now the sorcerer has *'things'* running loose at the castle. Sergo says they're bears, but I've never seen bears act like that. And there's other creatures. She has a magpie that talks to her. It spies on folk."

The woman stopped and glanced fearfully over her shoulder, as if expecting to see the malevolent bird behind her. Her voice dropped to a whisper again. "But Gerry's daughter was the worst. The girl had cut her leg and it was turning bad. When he saw there was nothing for it, Gerry took her up to the castle. The sorcerer took the child and sent him away - forced him out of the castle. The next day the sorcerer brought the child back down to the village." The speaker sat back and glanced fearfully in the direction of the castle then lent forward to finish decisively, "The girl was dead."

"Can't you report the sorcerer to the Coven or something?" Tevi asked.

"That would be for the reeve, and if you ask me she's too frightened." The villager scowled in Sergo's direction.

Tevi left the elderly woman and wandered thoughtfully around the room. She was not totally convinced of the sorcerer's wickedness - the villager had clearly enjoyed her own story much too much to take it all on trust. The death of a seriously ill child was not proof of murder, and as for the rest, the Treviston sorcerer clearly had a peculiar sense of humour, perhaps this one did as well. The basilisk was a more urgent, and probably unrelated, problem. Tevi was considering the villagers' plight when she was disturbed by Orpin's whining voice.

"Tevi, I need your help."

"What with?" Tevi said, impatiently

"Jansk is ignoring me."

"What do you expect me to do about it?" Tevi snapped.

"Well... I thought... perhaps if you were to pretend that you were, you know, getting keen on me..." Orpin shuffled his feet looking slightly embarrassed. "She'd get jealous and stop acting funny."

The suggestion did not merit a reply, and three more days with the muleteers did not bare thinking about. On the far side of the barn, Harrick was now talking to Sergo. Tevi headed straight in their direction.

Tevi spoke in a rush. "Harrick, I don't know if you've heard, but the villagers have a problem with a basilisk. Now we're over the pass you won't need me any more. I wondered if you'd consider paying me off early, so I can stay here and help out."

Sergo was overjoyed, and made her own appeal to the trader. "Please. You don't know what this could mean to us."

Harrick hesitated, slightly shame-faced. "I don't mind you staying, but I don't have enough coin on me. I was counting on selling the merchandise in Rizen first."

The traders were certainly running to a tight budget, but it was not Tevi's concern. She shrugged and said, "You can pay my salary into the Rizen guildhall. I'll collect my share when I get there and the guild can keep its quarter."

Tevi knew she could trust Harrick to do that. Even if he would short-change her, no trader with any sense would dare try cheating the mercenaries' guild. In the end Harrick offered to let her keep the pony she had been riding as collateral against her wages. Everyone was happy with the arrangements - except Orpin.

The following morning Tevi stood with the pony to wave good-bye to Harrick's team as they disappeared down the road. The rest of the day was spent learning as much as she could about her quarry, talking to the villagers and getting a feel for the surrounding countryside. It involved a lot of travelling and being introduced to folk, all very keen to talk to her, yet with very little real information to give. Only one ancient woman, huddled by her great-grandson's fire, could remember the last time a basilisk had troubled the valley, but her wits were going and her speech rambled without direction. Tevi finally left after lengthy questioning, still unsure whether the woman's advice was for killing basilisks or peeling potatoes. The reference to eyes could have applied to either.

In the late afternoon, a shepherd took her to see the most recent victims of the monster. In the pastures above the main village stood two stone sheep, their eyes shining like polished glass. Tevi knelt and ran her hand over the back of one. It wasn't proper stone. It felt soft and crumbly, like a powdery grey chalk. Dust clung to Tevi's fingers and already much of the fine detail on the wool was gone, blown away by the wind that gusted over the hillside.

On all sides, snow covered the ground, pock-marked with the sharp round hoof-prints of sheep, and the larger, softer paw- marks of the basilisk, like those of a great cat, stalking its prey. The villagers' estimates of the size of the beast had varied wildly. Tevi tried to form her own judgement, measuring the width of the prints with her fingers. It was hard to come to any definite conclusion, apart from casting doubt on the more sensational claims.

The paw-marks ran off in an undulating line across the fields. Tevi and her guide followed them for some way, until the trail reached a rocky ford across a stream, fringed with ice. The shepherd's two dogs ran sweeps around them, excitedly sniffing the snow, though probably more interested in rabbits than basilisks. On the other side of the stream, the paw-marks continued their line towards a wooded area, high on the hillside, a mile or so away.

"That's were it's hiding out. Its tracks always lead there." The shepherd said and pointed to the trees.

"Has no one tried putting snares out for it?" Tevi asked.

"One or two, but no one's dared go back to see if they've caught anything."

"Since the beast struck yesterday, they obviously haven't."

"True." The shepherd agreed with Tevi's assessment.

"Have you seen it?" Tevi asked.

"My sister did once, at dusk, drinking at the pool on Matte's farm. That's when it comes out most - dawn and dusk."

Tevi stood on the banks of the stream and studied the distant wood, shading her eyes against the setting sun - a reminder that dusk was not far away on that day. The trees gave no clues as to their occupant. Tevi's survey followed the line of the hillside down to the valley floor. Three small villages and a dozen isolated farmhouses dotted the fields and riverside water meadows. Sheep, goats and cattle grazed the lower slopes of the valley. Above them, almost directly opposite where Tevi was standing, the castle hunched on its outcrop of rock, a sombre presence in the valley. The fortifications were already fading into the shadows of evening. The shepherd followed the direction of Tevi's eyes and spat into the snow but said nothing, only whistled in the dogs and led the way back down the hillside to the welcoming lights of the village.

That night Tevi was offered lodging in the reeve's home. Sergo lived with a woman relative and a young son - Tevi was unable to work out whose, but the three were so close it didn't seem to matter. The family lived in a small room at one end of the cottage, while the rest of the building was given over to a cow-barn, dairy and all-purpose workroom.

Tevi felt it would be ill-mannered to refuse the offer of a bed, even though the cottage was cramped and noisy - particularly when a group of villagers squeezed in and stayed up late, to recount all they knew of the basilisk and its ways. Their advice didn't amount to much, apart from a general agreement that looking into the third eye was the thing to avoid. However, the cottage was warmer than the sheering barn and homely, smelling of cows, cheese and wood-smoke. And the bed, when Tevi finally got to it, was soft.



Dawn the next morning was cloudless, though the sun held little warmth. The mountains of the Spur cut a sharp line against the washed blue winter sky. In the reeve's cottage, Tevi was awakened before first light. While Sergo and her relatives began their daily tasks, she sat by the fire with a bowl of porridge and completed the last of her preparations, sharpening her weapons and checking them for weaknesses that might betray her at a crucial spot. A knock on the door announced the arrival of the village blacksmith. In addition to the promised small iron shield, he bought an old two-handed battle-axe. It was probably scavenged from the castle decades ago and since used for chopping wood, but it had been sharpened to a keen edge. Tevi accepted it with a wry smile, remembering Cayell's remarks concerning axe-women.

On the previous afternoon, in a display of bravado, two local youths had volunteered to accompany Tevi as far as the wood. They now joined her outside the sheering barn. The three of them left the village to a chorus of good-wishes. The young men were still putting a brave face on for their friends, though Tevi wondered if they were starting to regret their rashness - she was wondering the same thing about herself.

The wood was silent as they approached. All that could be heard was the whisper of wind in the branches, the bleating of sheep and the distant clatter of a cowbell. Not far to their left a clear trail of paw-marks, less than a day old, disappeared into the trees. The basilisk was using a faint trail made by wild deer. Tevi tried to judge how far it went, but although most of the summer undergrowth beneath the trees had died back there were still enough evergreen leaves and coils of dry bramble to prevent her seeing more than a few yards ahead.

"Do you want to wait out here for me?" Tevi asked.

"We'll follow you a little way." One of the youths said, and managed a sickly smile. "After all you've got the weapons if the thing shows up."

Progress was slow and uncomfortable, watching each footfall as best they could while crouched almost double due to low hanging branches. They had advanced about a furlong into the wood when they heard the unmistakable sound of a large animal nosing through the undergrowth a short way ahead. The noise was certainly too loud to be a bird, although it might be a lost sheep. The rustling ceased briefly, then began moving again. The sound played among the tree trunks, making it difficult to assess direction or speed. Tevi's hands tightened on the shaft of her spear. Her heart thudded against her ribs. Behind her the villagers froze as if already turned to stone, even their breathing stopped.

"Wait here. If it's safe I'll call to you." Tevi whispered.

"Right." The two men seemed more than willing to follow her instructions.

"And if anything goes wrong..."

"We run."

Tevi smiled grimly. "Right."

Twenty yards further on Tevi reached the edge of a small, snow-filled clearing. She hid behind a tree with her back braced against its broad trunk, then cautiously twisted and peered around the side. The rising sun had cleared the tops of the trees. Light glinted dazzling white off the icy ground, while in the shadows the snow was palest blue. The bushes and trees on the far side made a dark, knotted, unbroken barrier. At first nothing stirred, then a bush twitched, and then another and then stillness. Tevi's eyes were locked in dread fascination on the spot where the last sign of movement had been. Abruptly the branches dipped and were pushed back. The basilisk broke through the undergrowth to stop a little way clear of the trees, sniffing the air.

It was much smaller than Tevi had expected. The size of a large dog, with a long sinuous neck and a head that would have been rather like an otter's, if it weren't for the protruding third eye, bulging in the centre of its forehead. The animal was dark brown, covered in a thick, shaggy pelt, that told of its home in the high northern mountains. It stood poised as if ready to spring, long tail trailing in the snow. Its nose pointed into the air, casting about for scent.

Tevi ensured her sword was loose in its scabbard and the axe secure on the strap hung over her shoulder. She took the spear firmly in one hand and raised the shield in front of her face, guarding her eyes. All she could see of the creature was its shadow on the ground. She stepped around the tree and out into the open. The basilisk gave a soft whine and started to pad towards her.

Under the rim of her shield Tevi watched the basilisk's shadow as it approached. She noted the swinging motion of its head, the roll of its shoulders and its graceful cat-like gait. *And will it also pounce like a cat?* she wondered *Or charge like a boar?* The villagers had been able to give no advice.

The basilisk halted a few feet away, wary, and half-crouched on its haunches. It appeared to rise up and then drop back on all fours. Its head swung low and out to the right. Tevi prayed that she was interpreting the movement of the shadow correctly. For a split second, she almost gave in to the temptation to lift her shield and confirm her guesswork, to see clearly what the basilisk was doing. She clenched her teeth; a second's lapse in concentration - that was all it would take.

Without warning, the beast sprung towards her, a high, lunging attack. The claws of one paw caught on the edge of Tevi's shield and pulled it aside, but already she was moving, ducking with her eyes closed, and trusting upwards with the spear. She felt the jolt as the point made contact and lodged firmly in the animal's chest. The basilisk's piercing howl filled the clearing. It flung itself back, dragging the spear from Tevi's hand. Still with her eyes shut tightly, Tevi shrugged the axe off her shoulder and grasped the handle. She risked one brief glimpse of her quarry. Scarcely an arm's length away the basilisk's head was thrown back in a second long howl. Its front paws scraped at the shaft of the spear, while its body crumpled against the snow. The axe felt solid in Tevi's hands. She swung as hard as she could and, with a single stroke, decapitated the beast.

Suddenly it was very quiet. In front of her, the headless carcass collapsed, gushing red blood that melted into the snow. There was the faintest twitch of a back leg, and then the beast was still. Tevi was surprised to realise she was shaking violently. She sunk to her knees, breathing deeply and waited for the pounding of her heart to ease. The shaft of the spear was within reach. A quick tug pulled it free and Tevi used it as a staff to help herself stand. Unexpectedly, she felt a childish grin spread across her face. Fighting back giggles, she scooped up a handful of snow and rubbed it roughly over her eyes, cheeks and mouth, and took another deep breath.

"It's alright. You can come now. It's dead." She shouted to the young men.

Despite her assurance, they advanced cautiously through the woods, with hesitant steps and hushed voices, until they reached the clearing and saw the scene before them. Broad smiles replaced their anxious expressions.

"Hey, you did it!"

"Swiped its head clean off!" They gave vent to twin exclamations of delight.

"It was pretty straight forward. The thing didn't..." Tevi stopped herself; too much modesty might seem arrogant.

Feeling slightly detached, Tevi stood back and watched as the men approached the body, prodding it with their feet and making silly jokes between themselves. Her gaze shifted away and set on the basilisk's head. It had bounced, rolled and ended up in a small hollow in the snow, a dozen paces away. Tevi walked over and grabbed it by the fur between the ears. "Who gets to keep the trophy?"

One of the villagers laughed. "You do, if you want it."

"It could go on the wall of the sheering shed." The other suggested.

Tevi held the basilisk's head up level with her own. The jaw hung open, revealing a row of blunt peg-like teeth. The basilisk would never have been able to deliver a serious bite, and its body, although well-muscled, was ill adapted for a fight. Tevi had already noted its claws were weak and blunt. The creature had only one real weapon - the strange protrusion on its forehead. Tevi examined the dome-like bulge and the thick lids. Close up they looked more like a mouth than an eye. With the thumb and one finger of her free hand she tried to prise them open, to see what lay beneath. The lips were just starting to part when Tevi felt the sudden twitch of muscle under her fingers. The central eye snapped open.

The young men were involved in a debate about the best way to remove the basilisk's pelt. They didn't realise anything was wrong until Tevi screamed. They spun in her direction, in time to see her crash down to her knees, the echo of her scream still ringing in the air. Both Tevi's hands were pressed tightly against her eyes.

The men froze, caught on the brink of flight, but no new danger was apparent. Slowly, one man crept to Tevi's side and knelt beside her.

"What's wrong Tevi?" he asked, nervously.

She did not answer.

He took hold of her wrists, trying to pull her hands away so he could see her face. It was a futile attempt. Whatever the problem was, her strength was unaffected and he could not compete. Tevi's shoulders shook with gasps, sounding as if they were ripped from the back of her throat. The man looked up to his friend, unsure of what to do. The other could only shrug.

"What's happened?" The kneeling man tried once more.

Again there was no answer, instead Tevi threw back her head and screamed again. Her hand clenched into fists.

"Tevi?"

At last, she turned her face towards his voice. The young man found himself staring into two blind eyes of polished glass.

A small group of people huddled in one corner of the reeve's house, arguing among themselves. Tevi lay on a bunk against the opposite wall, well within earshot, but completely incapable of paying attention to what was said. It felt as if her eyes had been replaced by red-hot coals. The pain flared out and ran like liquid fire across her face and down her neck, surging with each throb of her pulse. Nothing existed except the pain. A crude ice pack of snow rolled in linen was tied over her eyes, for what little good it did. Despite her efforts at silence, Tevi knew she was whimpering like a whipped child.

Sergo's voice was the clearest, "It's her only hope."

"Better to give her a knife, like she asked, and let her put an end to it." another argued.

"No, not yet. The pain will probably ease in a day or two." said a third voice.

"But she'll still be blind." Sergio spoke again. "We owe her a better chance."

"She won't get that at the castle."

"We could send her to Rizen."

"Is she fit to travel?"

"It's easy to give advice you wouldn't take yourself."

"Enough!" Sergo raised her voice and put a stop to the muttered disagreements. "She can choose."

The reeve walked to Tevi's side and put a hand upon her shoulder. "Tevi, do you hear me?"

Tevi managed a nod to show she was listening.

"We can do nothing for you here." Sergo said softly.

"I know." Tevi's voice was a rasp.

"I think you should go to the sorcerer at the castle. She might be able to help you."

"Is that likely?" Tevi had to fight to form each word.

"There's a lot of silly rumours, and I admit I'm a bit disturbed by her. But I don't think you have any other options." Sergo glanced over her shoulder at the sullen group behind her. "Do you agree, Tevi?"

After a long pause, Tevi's mouth formed the word, "Yes." She would have agreed to anything.

Tevi was vaguely aware that she was being bundled out of the cottage and onto her pony. There were voices but she couldn't be bothered to make out the words. The only detail that registered was that her weapons were still attached to the saddle pack. Presumably, nobody had taken the time to unload her belongings. Tevi certainly had no use for them. The only thing that sustained her was the thought, *With any luck, the sorcerer will complete the basilisk's job and turn me to stone, and statues don't feel pain.*

The journey to the castle seemed unending. When they at last reached the gates, hands helped her dismount, patted her on the shoulder, and guided her to the pony's reins. She wrapped them tightly around her wrist and leaned against the flank, fighting the twin urges to pass-out and throw-up. Her legs felt as weak as a baby's. Without the support of the pony, Tevi knew she would have fallen. A bell chimed loudly. One of the people who had brought her must have rung it, or maybe it was the sorcerer's magic. Whatever the cause, the bell was followed by the sound of her guides, running away down the hillside as fast as their legs could carry them. In a better state, she might have been apprehensive, to be left forsaken at the sorcerer's doors. However Tevi was now completely beyond caring.

There was a long silence, broken only by the whisper of wind through the long grass and the call of wild birds. Then came soft, furtive shuffling from the other side of the gate. The hinges groaned as it swung open. Knowing what was expected of it, the pony trotted forward a dozen yards or so, dragging Tevi with it. She felt the loss of warmth as she went from sunshine into shadow. The ground under the pony's hooves changed from earth to cobblestones. The reverberations indicated that she was now in a large, enclosed courtyard. The gate closed behind them - not a loud crash but a solid, decisive thud.

Rapid chattering broke out just above Tevi's head. Small things rushed passed her feet. Something with claws touched her knee. Then uneven, shambling steps came slowly in her direction, accompanied by wet, guttural breathing - it was surely not the sorcerer, nor anything human. Whatever it was frightened the pony. It skittered away, nearly jerking Tevi to her knees. She yanked on the reins, pulling the pony to a stop. There was no point running from anything in the castle; it could do its worst; she only hoped it would do it quickly.

Again the pony tried to flee. Lacking the will to fight, Tevi released the reins, and let it go. She was left alone, surrounded by the unseen creatures of the castle. The ground seemed to sway beneath Tevi's feet. She nearly stumbled, but somehow remained standing. Her teeth clenched shut. The approaching thing grew near. Something wet touched her hand and, despite all her resolve, Tevi flinched away.

A new sound caught Tevi's ear - the unmistakable rhythm of human footsteps, the beat of heel and toe on stone. The sorcerer was coming, walking confidently and descending stairs. The shuffling stilled and retreated. The small things around Tevi's feet fled. Tevi twisted her head, following the sound of the sorcerer's footsteps, listening as they reverberated over a hollow, wooden platform. The feet descended more steps and stopped. In the sudden silence, a harsh, inhuman screech rang out, echoing off stone walls. The cry seemed to reverberate from beyond the limits of the known world, cold and desolate.

For the space of two dozen heartbeats nothing in the courtyard stirred. Then the human footsteps resumed, walking steadily towards her, getting closer. With the last of her courage Tevi turned towards the sound of the sorcerer's advancing feet, waiting until they were no more than ten paces away before she spoke.

"Please. I need your help."

"I know. I've been expecting you."



Part Two

The Sorcerer

CHAPTER TEN—A Student of Magic

The wind blew in sharp gusts over the castle walls, sending flurries of snow to swirl and chase around the battlements. Stars glittered coldly in the clear night sky between the boughs of trees growing in the enclosed courtyard. A warmer, yellow light spilled from the thin arrow slits of the great hall and lay in bars across the trampled snow covering the cobblestones. Icicles hung from lintels, but the windows, sealed by magic, allowed no cold drafts to enter the building.

Inside it was warm and still. The steady light from several small floating spheres was supplemented by the red glow from the stone-built fireplace. In front of the hearth lay a brown bear, sleeping peacefully on a rug like a huge dog. Its faint snores and the crackling of flames were the only sounds.

The hall was clearly a workroom. Charts and well-stocked bookcases lined the walls. Open shelves held collections of dried herbs, bones, stones and arcane instruments. Larger items were stacked in corners. Dozens of stoppered bottles, filled with a multicoloured assortment of liquids, reflected back the firelight from every part of the room. The flagstones of the floor, although stained and pitted in places, were swept clean.

An open wooden staircase was fixed to the wall at one end. It gave access to two doorways. The lower of these was halfway up the wall; the higher was level with the blackened timbers of the rafters. The opposite end of the room had a raised dais with an ancient table. Its scorched and battered top was bare apart from an open book, an ink bottle and a pen.

A floating sphere hung over the table, but this one was very different to the lamps. It was nearly two feet in diameter. A green sickly tincture rippled over it, while the surface quivered in the soft currents of air, like a soap bubble. The light from the fire and lamps did not appear to touch the sphere. It was semi-transparent, but the indistinct outlines seen through it did not look like the far side of the room. It did not move, but it still gave the unmistakable impression of searching - or hunting.

Some yards away sat the sphere's creator, Jemeryl, oath-bound sorcerer of the Coven at Lyremouth. She leaned back to view her handiwork. Her chin was supported by her cupped hand. Her free arm was draped along the back of the chair. One leg was hitched over the armrest. Her clothes were loose fitting and clearly chosen for comfort rather than to reflect her status. They looked not so much as if she had slept in them, but rather that it would be hard to tell if she did. Her face was composed of angles, narrow chin, pinched nose, chiselled cheekbones. Her hazel eyes studied the green sphere intently. Then, slowly, the serious expression gave way to an impish grin, that transformed her face in a display of youthful delight. Her fist punched the air in triumph. She ran a hand through her curly, auburn hair then twisted her head to view Klara, the magpie, who was perched on a nearby bookcase, busily preening her left wing.

"Well, what do you think?" Jemeryl asked.

Klara hardly glanced in the sphere's direction. "It's not exactly pretty." the bird said.

"It isn't supposed to be, but it will create a lot of interest in the Coven."

"Why? Is there a serious shortage of hideous green blobs?"

Jemeryl grinned at the magpie, before swinging her leg down and bouncing to her feet. She paced around the table, appraising the shimmering globe from all sides. "It's the theory behind it that's important. By all the accepted rules of magic it ought to be completely and utterly impossible." she said softly.

Klara flew over to the table and considered the sphere with distaste. "Well personally, I think it's a bit of a shame that it isn't."

The sphere emitted a faint high-pitched whine, that sounded like a hundred trapped mosquitoes. The air around it was unpleasantly chill.

Klara fluffed up her feathers. "I suppose I should just be grateful it doesn't smell - or is that likely to come next?"

Using the back of her hand, Jemeryl brushed the sarcastic magpie off the table, ignoring the indignant squawk. She hooked a small, three-legged stool from under the table with her foot. Klara returned to her perch on the bookshelf while Jemeryl sat down and pulled an open book towards her. For several minutes she riffled back through the preceding pages, cross-checking her notes, then she picked up the pen and began writing. All was silent except for the faint scratching of quill on paper. On the other side of the room, Klara tucked her head under her wing and fell asleep.

The logs on the fire were burning low by the time Jemeryl put down the pen and stood up. She stretched her arms behind her and rolled her head from side to side to loosen stiffened muscles. As usual, she had lost track of time while she worked, though with her sorcerer's senses she knew it was still well short of midnight. She gave a mental shrug. One advantage of her current situation was that she could set her own schedule. There was nothing to stop her from taking a late supper and having a lie-in the next morning - especially as there was one more thing she wanted to do.

"Now what I need is..." she spoke aloud, awakening Klara,

Her staff was leaning in a nearby corner - six feet of polished oak wood, unadorned apart from the iron-caps on either end. It looked better suited for use in a street brawl than as a magical aid. From her observation point atop the bookcase, Klara watched with increasing alarm as the sorcerer grabbed the staff and returned to the sphere. After five years as Jemeryl's familiar, the magpie knew an ill omen when she saw one. She launched herself from her perch and landed on the head of the sleeping bear.

"Quick Ruff! Get up and hide. Jem is going to do something silly." Klara said.

The bear awoke with a jolt and snorted, a loud, surprised, "Wuff."

At the magpie's insistence he scabbled to his feet and lumbered down the hall as fast as his four legs would carry him, vanishing from sight behind a heavy cupboard in a far corner. After a few seconds, his head reappeared, as he peered cautiously around the edge, with Klara still in place between his ears.

Jemeryl grinned at the sheltering animals. "Cowards! Look, they aren't frightened." she called and gestured to the row of three squirrels on a high shelf, that were peering down at the table with their bright inquisitive eyes.

"They haven't got the sense." Klara replied as she and Ruff again disappeared from view.

Jemeryl spoke to the squirrels, using tones normally reserved for babies. "Don't worry your fluffy little heads. Auntie Jemi knows what she's doing."

"Rubbish!" came the derisory squawk from behind the cupboard.

The smile faded from Jemeryl's lips as she turned her attention back to the sphere, and a look of intense concentration took its place. Her eyes stared at the shimmering green globe, however her perception was not limited to sight. Her extra-dimensional senses let her see far beyond the boundaries of the ordinary world of the

ungifted. Long seconds slipped past, then she raised the staff horizontally in front of her, holding it firmly in both hands. It was time to put theory to the test.

The sphere heaved and began to slowly swell in size, accompanied by an increase in the volume of humming. From deep inside its core, a faint glow appeared, pulsing and surging like a heartbeat. The light grew stronger. Forms started to congeal inside the globe, twisting and fighting like imprisoned phantoms. Jemeryl's breath came in strained gasps and sweat beaded her forehead, while the intertwined shapes grew ever more chaotic. They had almost filled the entire sphere, touching and flowing around the inner surface, when, without warning, the green globe exploded, filling the hall with acrid yellow smoke.

The blast reverberated loudly around the stone walls of the hall. Glassware on the shelves rattled and dust rained down from the rafters. As the last of the echoes faded into silence, there was only the sound of three sets of squirrel claws, frantically scrabbling on the flagstones as the animals dashed for the exit. Hand held over her mouth and nose, Jemeryl followed as quickly as she could. She bumped into furniture in her haste and swore as she cracked her ankle on an obstacle before making it through the doorway and into the clean air of the covered porch. She leaned against the wall, coughing spasmodically. Wisps of luminous smoke trailed away from her hair and clothes on the wind.

In a blur of black and white, Klara landed on a nearby ledge. The magpie put her head on one side and peered at the sorcerer. "Did you mean to do that, Jem?" she asked innocently.

A fresh burst of coughing prevented Jemeryl answering. Once it subsided, she rested her head back on the stonework, and took in deep gulps of the icy night air. Her eyes stung, her throat would be sore tomorrow and her ears were still ringing from the blast, though she had taken no serious harm. The aegis of the staff had shielded her and the squirrels. The other animals had been at a safe distance - at least she hoped so; there was still no sign of Ruff. Even as Jemeryl realised this, the bear ambled from the door at the foot of the adjacent small tower, trailing a plume of yellow smoke behind him and carrying a thick cloak in his mouth. She took it from him gratefully and pulled it around her shoulders. The bear sneezed, and shook his head. More yellow smoke drifted away from his fur.

Through the open doorway of the great hall the light spheres were lost in the sickly yellow haze. There was no point trying to clear up; it could all wait until morning. Jemeryl sighed and stepped from the shelter of the porch into the snow-covered courtyard. All the buildings of the castle opened onto this enclosed space, surrounded by the battlements. There were the kitchens where she could find supper, and the small tower where she had her bedroom and study. She considered them both, but her stomach was queasy from the smoke, and to reach her bedroom she would have to use the stairs at the rear of the hall - better to wait a while for the air to clear. So instead she headed for the keep. The tall stone tower that dominated the site served no purpose in her work. She needn't have bothered putting it back into the reconstruction - except it completed the aesthetic feel of the castle and provided a wonderful lookout point.

Jemeryl climbed the stairs to the small drawbridge and entered under the old portcullis. The spiral staircase led her up past the old armoury and the barrack room, and onto the roof. She emerged under stars. The morning's freezing mists had covered the stonework in a coat of sparkling rime that had not melted during the short winter's day. It crunched faintly under her hand as she leaned against the battlement and looked down.

The castle courtyard was laid out below, with its circle of buildings. Five beech trees grew in the enclosure. They did not truly belong in the reconstruction, having sprouted after the garrison left, but the squirrels liked them so Jemeryl had let the trees stay. Ruff had remained in the courtyard and was padding around the trunks, sniffing at anything that caught his notice. While Jemeryl watched the other bear, Tumble, came out of the kitchens to join him. The two began to play, skidding on the icy cobbles and sending up plumes of powdery snow as they chased each other between the trees. Squirrels scattered in front of them, chattering in indignation - or maybe it was excitement. Sometimes even a sorcerer could be hard put to know exactly what a squirrel was feeling.

Jemeryl wandered to the other side of the tower and looked down on a winter landscape of bare fields, deserted pathways and the snaking line of the river. White snow, brilliant in the light of the rising moon, was cut by inky black shadows under the fir trees. Small silhouettes of cattle and sheep clustered near their barns. The houses of the village were grouped in picturesque disorder around the sheering shed. The wind had dropped and the far

side of the valley was lost in blue-grey mist, through which twinkled the lights from distant farmsteads. It was starkly beautiful but, as Jemeryl looked out, she was aware of having mixed feelings. Klara landed on the parapet beside her.

From the village came the faint sound of music and voices, the noise carrying cleanly on the cold air. There seemed to be some sort of a party going on, presumably to entertain the small group of travellers who had passed under the castle walls earlier that day, leading a train of mules. Visitors from the outside world were rare at any time of year. It was unsurprising if the local folk were making an event of their arrival. Jemeryl looked thoughtfully at the high mountains beyond the head of the valley. Even with her magic she wouldn't fancy crossing Whitfell Spur in midwinter. She wondered what desperate circumstances had prompted the travellers to risk the journey - perhaps she should go and find out.

Jemeryl's eyes returned to the village. She was drawn by a sudden desire to go down and join the party, to meet people and talk. She stared at the village hall bleakly, imagining the kind of reception she would get. Jemeryl couldn't remember the last cheerful face she had seen, but she certainly wouldn't find any if she entered the village.

"They don't like you, you know." Klara volunteered.

"I know." Jemeryl sighed deeply. "I just wish I knew why."

As a child, in the village of her birth, Jemeryl had inspired fear and resentment. The other children would not have her as a playmate, although they soon learnt it was unwise to throw stones at her. When she was four her family had persuaded the local witch to adopt her, more to rid their house of Jemeryl's disturbing presence than to benefit her career. She had felt no regret to go. It had been a home without love. At the age of eleven she had left the village to study at Lyremouth, still holding a child's contempt for the ungifted. The education she had received from the Coven had done much to increase her tolerance and understanding - for all the good it had done with the villagers.

True, she had not really wanted to come to the valley, had not wanted to leave Lyremouth. She loved the esoteric study of magic and would happily devote her life to it. However, the Coven rules insisted new sorcerers spend time out in the world, to learn at first hand the needs of the ungifted. Her application for assignment to the valley had been a long shot; she was ridiculously overqualified. To her astonishment, the authorities had agreed.

At the time, Jemeryl had assumed they saw things the same way she did - the rule was a waste of talent. All her local responsibilities in the valley would take no more than a few days each month, leaving her free to concentrate on her studies. When the necessary period in the community was completed, she would be able to return to Lyremouth with a substantial body of work behind her. Jemeryl had a high opinion of her own talents and would not have been in the least surprised to learn that many of her teachers secretly agreed with her.

Two years had passed since she had arrived in the valley. The research had gone well, but she had to admit that her relationship with the villagers had not proceeded totally to plan. Over the months, her contact with them had dwindled to the point of non-existence. On the rare occasions they crossed paths with her, many displayed blatant hostility or fear.

"I've tried to be nice to them." she said defensively.

"That was a waste of effort." Klara retorted.

"I know. I just couldn't seem to talk to any of them."

Klara's head swivelled towards her. "If you want my opinion, the lessons about getting on with the ungifted took totally the wrong approach. Instead of stressing the ideals of citizenship and equality, they should have taught you a few amusing anecdotes about sheep. That would have helped you fit in - it's all the locals ever seem to talk about."

"I think they now talk about me quite a lot." Jemeryl said with bitter honesty.

"In a year's time you can apply to return to Lyremouth; then they'll have to find something new to talk about - or go back to the sheep."

The dream of returning to Lyremouth was what sustained Jemeryl through the setbacks, the hard work and the isolation, but, standing on the battlements, she was hit by unusual self-doubts. "Am I deluding myself, thinking my research is important? That they'll want me back? Perhaps the Coven let me take this assignment because it's all they think I'm fit for."

"Nonsense. The office is trivial. It wouldn't strain the powers of a third-rate witch." Klara answered.

"Even so, I'm not fulfilling its requirements."

"Only because the locals don't want you to. It's not your fault, Jem. You can't force them to come to you for help." Klara spoke reasonably.

Jemeryl was not convinced. "I'm supposed to be in control. It shouldn't come down to what they will or won't let me do. I'm supposed to be looking after them."

"You've done your best. You've set up so many charms to keep out enemies and illness, a belligerent hamster couldn't enter the valley, especially if it were feeling a bit under the weather."

Jemeryl pursed her lips and sighed. "I'm not sure. I might have overstepped the mark a bit."

"In what way?"

"Over-protecting people is bad for them. It has side effects. They can lose all common-sense and start acting like children."

"In which case it might be nasty. Some of them didn't have a long way to go to start with." the magpie said with heavy irony.

"Perhaps I should go and talk to Sergo again."

"You *are* in a dismal mood. Look, if I say I'm sorry your sphere blew up will it make you happy? You can invoke another one tomorrow." Klara hopped onto Jemeryl's hand.

"There's a strange emanation in the air tonight." Jemeryl said slowly.

"A premonition, or are we downwind of village dung-heap?"

"Probably just me worrying." Jemeryl studied the distant village for a long time before asking softly, "If something was seriously wrong they'd come to me, wouldn't they?"

"Of course they would. They'd race up here like scared rabbits." Klara asserted.

Jemeryl stroked the magpie's head and dismissed all thought of going down to the village. If she admitted the truth to herself, she was nervous of the villagers, and unwilling to face their hostility - it brought back too many painful memories from her childhood. She forced a smile to her lips. "Perhaps things aren't so bad. I've got plenty of time to study and if the villagers aren't happy and healthy, they've only got themselves to blame. Still, I wouldn't object to someone to talk to."

"Don't I count?" Klara sounded indignant.

"You know you don't."

Music from the village drifted up on the wind. Jemeryl turned her back on the sound and retraced her steps down the tall tower, through the courtyard and into the kitchens, in search of supper and then bed. She waited at the doorway, holding it open until the bears galloped into the building after her, then pushed it shut, leaving the courtyard once more deserted under the stars.

Two mornings later, Jemeryl sat at the desk in her study. A large book lay open before her, but her attempts to read were not going well. Her concentration kept drifting, teased by something that was pricking the edges of her mind. It was even more irritating since she did not have a clue as to what that something was. For the third time

she started at the beginning of a long paragraph. Before she got half way through, her attention slipped again and she lost the thread of the argument.

"I don't know what's wrong with me today."

"You mean in addition to what's wrong with you generally?" Klara asked.

The gibe from her familiar softened the frown on Jemeryl's face. With a yawn, the sorcerer flipped the covers shut and stretched back in her chair. The book could wait.

"Maybe I've been overdoing things. A break might help. I could take the bears for a walk."

The suggestion found favour with Tumble, who had been sitting in a corner of the room. The bear lumbered to her feet and trotted to the sorcerer's side, stubby tail wagging. The big, hopeful eyes made Jemeryl's smile broaden. She reached out to scratch Tumble's head, causing the bear to growl softly with pleasure. However, now that she had abandoned all attempts to read, Jemeryl's sense of foreboding shuffled to the front of her mind. Something was about to go very seriously wrong.

Jemeryl left the chair and went to a nearby window, one that afforded good views over the valley. Everything seemed much as usual. Snow lay on the ground, though less thick than of late. Sheep dawdled across the fields tended by shepherds wrapped in layers of clothes. In the distance smoke rose from chimneys. Jemeryl leaned her head against the stonework of the window recess, and tried to call on all her training and talents to identify the threat.

"What do you think it is, Jem?" For once Klara was devoid of sarcasm.

"I don't know."

"Are you going to see Sergo?"

"She might know nothing. Perhaps an oracle would..." Jemeryl's words trailed away.

"You hate oracles." the magpie pointed out.

"True."

"You've said it yourself. They never give anything other than ambiguous hints that only make sense with hindsight."

Jemeryl stood, biting her lip and trying to pinpoint the centre of her anxiety. The harder she concentrated the less substantial her fears seemed, until there was nothing but a vague feeling of unease. She sighed and shook her head. "Perhaps I'm mistaken. I might just be picking up leakage from one of the crystal reservoirs in the hall."

"So what are you going to do?" Klara asked.

Jemeryl took a deep breath and straightened her shoulders. "I'm going to pay Sergo a visit. Even if I'm imagining things it's about time I had a word with her."

Jemeryl hoped that making the decision would ease her tension, but, if anything, her agitation intensified as she left her study and stepped onto the high platform at the top of the stairs in the great hall.

Her living quarters occupied the small tower. They were rooms that had belonged to the captain, in the days when a garrison of soldiers had been stationed at the castle. The top floor was now divided equally between her study and her bedroom. The floor below held a larger room that had been the captain's audience chamber. Jemeryl had initially intended to use it for the same purpose. However, since nobody ever came to see her, it had become her private parlour, and was now cluttered with her personal belongings, including the outdoor clothes she would need for the ride to the village.

Jemeryl reached the lower landing and was about to open the door, when a noise made her spin around. Echoing around the great hall was the sound of a gong, beating softly from a long way away - a summons, and one Jemeryl recognised instantly. It set her leaping down the remaining steps and skidding to a stop in the centre of the hall. An image was intensifying before her, accompanied by faint hissings and rumblings. The figure was just identifiable as Iralin, Jemeryl's mentor in Lyremouth.

Klara landed on Jemeryl's shoulder. "A sending, from the Coven."

Jemeryl nodded her agreement.

While waiting for the figure to clarify, Jemeryl's mind worked furiously. A full sending of sound and vision over the many miles between them was an enormous undertaking, undoubtedly requiring the energies of several sorcerers. In practice, it would require less effort for Iralin to walk the entire distance on foot. It implied a desperate urgency that confirmed the morning's sense of grim foreboding.

Iralin's image was becoming firmer by the second. She was sitting in familiar surroundings, her study in the Coven, with Lyremouth harbour visible through the window behind. The books and charts lining the walls were unchanged since Jemeryl had last seen them, two years before.

Apparently, Iralin's view of Jemeryl was also improving. The senior sorcerer glared sternly in her direction. "What have you been doing?"

The last thing Jemeryl had expected was for the conversation to start with her own activities. The angry tone also threw her off balance. "Ma'am?"

"I said, what have you been doing?"

Jemeryl floundered for a suitable reply. "With regard to anything in particular?"

"Don't try being flippant. We've had reports about you, passed on by sorcerer Chenoweth in Rizen. They haven't been amusing."

"Are you sure there hasn't been some mistake, ma'am?"

The total bewilderment in Jemeryl's voice was evidently enough to prompt Iralin to try another approach. In slightly less accusatory tones she asked, "What have the villagers said to you recently?"

"I, um... haven't spoken to any of them for months."

"Why not?" Iralin snapped.

Jemeryl could think of no suitable words to say aloud, although dozens of unsuitable ones came to mind. She cursed herself for not paying more attention to the locals. Somewhere, something had got completely out of hand.

"You're supposed to be in charge of the valley, and look after its inhabitants. How do you do that without talking to them?" Iralin persisted.

"I assumed they'd come to me if they had any problems."

"You don't consider it your job to go to them?"

"They said they didn't want me to." Only as the words left her mouth did Jemeryl consider how they might sound.

There was a long silence, during which Jemeryl could hear her heart pounding and feel Klara's claws digging into her shoulder as the magpie mirrored her own tension.

At last, Iralin leaned back and steepled her fingers. "Why don't you tell me, in your own words, and starting at the beginning, how this situation has arisen between you and the people entrusted to your care?"

The emphasis on the last four words made Jemeryl flinch. "I'm not quite sure."

"Make some intelligent guesses." It was an order.

Jemeryl took a couple of deep breaths, trying to clear her thoughts before starting the account - not that it helped much. "Um... when I first came to the valley, they offered me a cottage in the village. I think it belonged to the previous witch. But it wasn't suitable and there was this abandoned castle, so I moved here instead... I explained to the reeve that I wanted to work on my research, and that it wouldn't be safe with lots of people around but I don't think she really understood. And then there was Dorin..."

Jemeryl's face brightened as an idea occurred to her. "Yes of course - Dorin. He'd be the source of anything you've heard. The villagers insisted I had someone to wait on me. I told them it wasn't necessary, but I think Dorin was the village simpleton and they just wanted an excuse to get him off their hands for a while. It was ridiculous. He couldn't cope here. The mere sound of Klara talking would terrify him. He only stayed a month, and I was better off without him. He spread some daft rumours back in the village. It's understandable. For the first time in his life people wanted to listen to what he had to say. I know he made up things - stories about me calling up the dead, turning people into frogs, even sacrificing babies to the full moon, for all I know."

"Do you think we'd pay any attention to stories like that?" Iralin said curtly.

I can't imagine what else you've got the arse-ache about. The words nearly escaped Jemeryl's lips. Fortunately, she managed to restrain herself and phrase it a bit more diplomatically. "Then I'm afraid I don't know what stories you have heard, ma'am."

"How about the stories concerning two children lured to your castle. The lucky one was in a coma when she left, the other was dead."

"They weren't my fault, ma'am - neither of them." Jemeryl said quickly.

"So why don't you tell me what happened?"

Jemeryl frowned - what had people been saying? And what version of events had got back to Lyremouth? But at least she now knew what Iralin was after. "The coma... that would be a teenage girl called Shiral. She came here after Dorin left, and I think she had some of his stupid stories stuck in her head. One day when I was out, she went poking through my things. I'd told her not to - perhaps that was the attraction. I kept everything really dangerous locked away, but she found an old shadow-mirror. I'm not sure what she saw in it, but we both know the visions can be nasty. The fright sent her into shock - it wasn't a real coma. I took Shiral back to her parents. I thought a home atmosphere would do her good while I helped her recover, but her parents wouldn't let me near her again. There was nothing else I could do for her."

"And the child who died?"

There was no way of avoiding the question, although it was an incident Jemeryl would rather not recall. It had caused her anguish at the time and still intruded into her nightmares. "About a year ago a man brought his daughter to the castle; she was only a toddler. She'd been hurt in an accident. I tried everything I knew but it was too late. Gangrene had set in and they'd left it too long before coming to me. I fought to save her life, I really did - a day earlier and I might have done it. I know her parents were upset and blamed me, but it was their fault. They should have brought her here sooner."

"Has it occurred to you, that if you'd performed your duties properly and gone out to talk to your citizens, you might have heard about the child's injury in time?" There was no compromise in Iralin's voice.

"They wouldn't talk to me. Even when I made the effort to see them, they hid things from me."

"They were frightened of you."

"I suppose so." Jemeryl conceded.

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"So - if you haven't been performing your duties, what have you been doing?" Iralin's voice could have cut through stone.

"I've been researching into overcharged ether currents, using them to induce force-fields as containers for elemental auras."

"That's a waste of time. It's been proved it can't work."

I've done it. Jemeryl was proud of her achievements, but now was not the time to boast.

Iralin's gaze shifted slightly as she caught sight of something moving in the hall. "Is that a bear behind you?"

Jemeryl glanced over her shoulder. Tumble had followed her down to the hall, but the bear had enough sense to hang well back. "Er... yes."

"You have bears in the castle?"

"Only two."

"Only!" Iralin said sarcastically.

"They are both fully entranced and safe. I've been alone up here - they're company." Jemeryl was completely on the defensive.

"You have bears roaming the castle and then wonder why the villagers are scared to come and see you - why the girl's parents left it too late before asking your help."

"The bears are quite harmless. To be more frightened of them than of gangrene is stupid."

"Looking after stupid people is part of the job you asked to do - the job you begged to be allowed to do."

"But..." Jemeryl began.

Iralin did not let her finish. "I was totally against you taking this appointment from the start. My objections were overruled, but I find I've been proved right. I doubted your motives in taking this post. I felt you lacked the necessary maturity and sensitivity to other people. In dealing with ungifted folk, you have always been arrogant and inconsiderate. You see the villagers as an interruption from your real interests. To you, they are just a distraction, but it is their lives we are talking about. They are simple, unimaginative, honest men and women, who are also loyal citizens of the Protectorate. If you were unable to feel responsible for them, you shouldn't have taken the job in the first place. You have disgraced the Coven. You have totally failed to perform the duties of your post, and failed due to lack of effort rather than inability."

Jemeryl was stunned by the accusation. Wilful failure to fulfil an appointment was the second worst offence a sorcerer could commit. Only breaking her oath of allegiance to the Coven would be judged worse. She attempted to defend herself. "I've tried my best to perform all my duties."

"Your duties consist of caring for these people. You have not cared for them. Instead, you have ignored them and frightened them away. You made no attempt to overcome your problems with them, you were happy to simply give up. When you realised you no longer enjoyed the confidence of the locals, you could have asked the Coven for assistance. We have considerable experience of young sorcerers alienating their charges. Apart from that, you could have monitored them without their knowledge. You have the ability to aid the villagers without being asked. But you didn't care. You have not shown a single trace of concern for their well-being."

Here at last was a charge she could refute. "I haven't just forgotten them. I set wards all around. I would have detected disease or anything dangerous entering the valley. Nothing serious could harm the villagers without my knowledge."

Iralin regarded her solemnly. "Then I take it you would be quite surprised to learn a basilisk had come to the valley?"

Jemeryl was speechless. At last, she said, "It can't have. There must be a mistake."

"There is no mistake."

"I'll go and..."

Again, Iralin interrupted. "You needn't bother, the basilisk has been taken care of. Even as we speak, a passing warrior has done your job for you and killed the creature."

Silence hung heavy in the room. Eventually, Jemeryl found her voice. "I am indebted to him."

"Her." Iralin corrected. "However she has paid for her bravery. She removed the head of the basilisk, but neglected to treat it with due caution. The beast was able to transmute her eyes to a crystal bridge. I take it you are willing and able to rectify that."

"Yes, of course. I'll go and find her at once." Jemeryl spoke in a half-daze.

"There's no need for that. She will come to you."

"Yes, ma'am."

"There is only one more thing."

"Ma'am?" What more could there be? Jemeryl fought to keep some semblance of composure. As a young student, she had been hauled up for her share of misdemeanours - juvenile pranks that had gone wrong and the like, but never had she been in trouble like this.

"The judgement of the Coven upon you." If Iralin's voice had been harsh before, now it was as cold as the grave. "Sorcerer Jemeryl, the Coven hereby imposes the following sentence upon you. You are removed from your post and a new task is allotted to you. It will be recorded that you failed to perform the appointment you accepted and the mark will stand against you until you prove yourself fit for some other work. Your new assignment is this. The aforementioned warrior is currently on a quest of great importance. You will accompany and assist her until the quest is completed or you die in the attempt."

Jemeryl was aghast "But my research? I have been achieving so much."

"Your so-called research is unendorsed and unapproved. There is nothing more to say. You will heal the warrior and leave the valley with her. You have twelve days to quit the castle. Is that clear? I would suggest you use the next few hours to get ready for your guest. This conversation is hereby terminated. Next time we speak, I trust the circumstances will be more favourable."

With that, the image slowly imploded on itself and vanished, leaving Jemeryl standing alone in the hall. She stared in horror at the point where the figure of her mentor had been. Her head was in turmoil, as she fought to absorb the implications of what had just happened to her life. The least of her worries was the curtailment of her current studies. The reprimand meant her reputation might be permanently sullied, destroying the hope of a research post in Lyremouth forever. As the full impact hit home, tears stung the backs of her eyes. Her mood shifted from shock to shame to anger. Jemeryl's hands clenched into fists, and she was overwhelmed by bitterness, at Iralin, at the villagers, and at the unknown fool of a warrior she was now bound to follow.

Many miles away, Iralin slumped back in her chair, exhausted by the effort of maintaining the link. She raised one hand to her face and pinched the bridge of her nose between her forefingers. After a couple of deep breaths her arm dropped back to her lap and she looked at the other two sorcerers, a man and a woman, who had silently monitored the conversation from the other side of the room. Her eyebrows raised in a silent query.

"That was a bit heavy." The younger of the two said, but his tone implied a statement of fact rather than criticism.

Iralin took another breath and then snorted. "Conceited young puppy. She needed something to shake her. Everything I said was quite true and I wanted to be certain in my own mind that her behaviour was simply due to thoughtlessness."

"You surely didn't think Jemeryl had become a murderer?" the man exclaimed.

"Oh no, but she can be arrogant enough sometimes to think the rules don't apply to her. I wanted to know how far over the line she'd been stepping, and there wasn't the time for gently wheedling out the truth."

"I guess you know Jemeryl best, but I don't think I'd have been that hard on her. My own record at dealing with the ungifted isn't too good."

Iralin spoke firmly. "Jemeryl has to accompany this warrior and it's vital she applies herself to the task wholeheartedly. Given her low opinion of prophecy, I doubt she'd do that if I gave her the candid truth on the matter."

The third sorcerer had been staring out through the open window, her thoughts clearly pursuing some other line. She was older than the other two; sunlight etched deep shadows on her lined face. Yet, despite her frailty, she had

an aura of authority that even Iralin could not match - a power that made it unnecessary to see the white amulet on her wrist to know she was the Guardian, the leader of the Coven.

At Iralin's words, the Guardian's lips twisted in an ironic pout. She spoke for the first time. "In Jemeryl's place I wouldn't take it very well either. She has to drop everything to go, gods know where, with some muscle-bound oaf, just because an extremely vague oracle said the future of the Coven probably depends on it."

There was a long silence as the three sorcerers sat in grim reflection. Iralin shook her head slowly, as if she was combating her disbelief at the situation. "I guess we're just incredibly lucky to have got the warning at all. When I received the report from Chenoweth, I was torn between ignoring it completely and writing to Jemeryl for an explanation. I only put it to the oracle on a whim, and that was the answer I got."

"The whims of sorcerers can be serious things." the Guardian said.

"Don't I know it." Iralin sighed. "Have we still got no better idea of what's involved? I know you were working on it all night."

"No. Poking around with fate is always asking for trouble. We've caused as much temporal disruption as we dared, probably more than was wise, and got virtually nothing from it. Our best attempts have produced no more information than you gave Jemeryl just now - a blind warrior, a basilisk and a quest." She shrugged. "Make what you will of it. We've had to give up and weave the neatest patch we could. Even so, Jemeryl will pick up the after-waves when she hits the critical moment."

"Jemeryl won't be pleased if she thinks we've been tampering with her fate." the male sorcerer said.

"That's one more reason why I wanted to give her a good kick in the right direction." Iralin answered him.

The expression on the Guardian's face hardened. "It's not just her fate, the whole Protectorate is at risk. It is my sworn responsibility, and I'm helpless. We just don't know enough. The oracle was the next best thing to useless."

Iralin nodded her agreement, and said dryly, "In fact a quote from Jemeryl herself comes to mind - Foretelling is great as a party trick, but you can't rely on it to tell you tomorrow's date."

CHAPTER ELEVEN—The Web of Fate

The preparations took Jemeryl all the rest of the morning. Even so, her expected patient had not arrived by the time she had finished. As the hours stretched into the afternoon, Jemeryl found herself checking and rechecking artefacts, pacing the hall and snapping irritably at the squirrels, although they were one thing Iralin had not picked out for criticism - presumably, even the villagers were not frightened of them.

Her actions were becoming more pointless by the minute. She swapped the positions of two bone talismans, considered the new arrangement for a second, and then swapped them back. She was reaching out a third time when irritation took over. Her hand clenched into a fist, which she thumped loudly on the tabletop.

Jemeryl marched the length of the great hall and out onto the porch. She glared at the castle gates, fighting the childish urge to blast them into flames. She was in enough trouble as it was - what would happen if she actually did something to justify the villagers' fear of her?

And where was the blinded warrior?

Jemeryl raked the fingers of both hands back through her hair in a gesture of frustration. What could she do? If she tried to scry the entire valley to locate the woman, she would be mentally exhausted before she even started to reconstruct the eyes. If she went out looking in a more conventional manner, she would probably miss the woman on the way. Iralin had been confident the warrior would come to the castle - presumably, the senior sorcerer had a reason for thinking this.

"It would've been nice if she'd shared the fucking information with me." Jemeryl gave vent to her feelings aloud.

Ruff whined in sympathy, although it was unclear whether it was for Jemeryl or himself. The bears had been avoiding her, clearly made nervous by her angry mood. Jemeryl glanced over her shoulder. Ruff was peering around the edge of the hall doorway, his dark, pathetic eyes fixed on her. The sight caused Jemeryl a twinge of guilt and her expression softened. Ruff was emboldened sufficiently to pad to her side and bat his head against her hand, wanting his ears rubbed.

"It's all right. I'm not angry at you. You're both good bears. I don't care what Iralin and the rest of them think." Jemeryl said with a sigh. It was not fair to blame the bears for her misfortune - there was no one to blame but herself.

Still the warrior did not come. Jemeryl left the bears happily digging into their lunch and climbed the stairs to the old barrack room, high in the keep. Once, a squad of soldiers had slept there, now it was a large empty room, with bare floorboards and unplastered walls. The only windows were arrow slits, set in wedge shaped alcoves in the thick walls. The openings were a couple of feet above floor level and had obviously been intended for kneeling, rather than standing, archers. They made good window seats - provided you could use magic to warm them.

Jemeryl clambered into the one commanding the best view of the path leading down to the village and curled up inside, bracing her knees against one slanting wall and a shoulder against the other. The narrow slit let her see a hundred or so yards of the path before it ended at the gatehouse. There was no sign of anyone, blinded or otherwise, approaching the castle.

With nothing else to occupy her mind, Jemeryl's thoughts kept returning to Iralin's tirade. To call it a severe reprimand was an understatement. Iralin had verbally ripped her apart. Jemeryl's face twisted in a pained grimace at the memory. Tears stung the backs of her eyes - Jemeryl was not sure whether they were due to anger, humiliation or disappointment, and she did not want to poke around at her emotions to find out.

The relationship between Iralin and herself had never been warm, but Jemeryl had believed it to be marked by respect on both sides. Several times, during her training in Lyremouth, Jemeryl had been tempted to request a change in mentor. However, Iralin was third in seniority in the Coven and Jemeryl was keenly aware of the honour of being chosen as her personal apprentice. She knew Iralin had taught her more than anyone else could have done. Their talents and personalities were very similar - and therein lay the source of much of the friction between them.

Had she really been behaving irresponsibly? In all honesty Jemeryl had to admit Iralin's words held an element of truth, but she could not see that she had so wilfully negligent as to deserve all that was said, or the final judgement. It felt as if Iralin had deliberately skewed the facts to make a justification for her conclusions - as if the outcome had been determined before the start.

Jemeryl was still brooding bitterly when Klara flew in and landed on her hip. The magpie's bead-like eyes fixed her with a piercing stare. There was no need for Klara to report her findings aloud. Jemeryl already knew what she had discovered on her circuit of the valley - six of the protective ward-charms, broken and scattered.

"Someone's been deliberately wreaking them." Klara said.

"But who, and why?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes it does. Why break the wards and let the basilisk in? Was someone deliberately trying to harm the villagers? Or was it just a game by someone who was too stupid to see what they were?"

"I wouldn't bother trying to make sense of it. You can't hope to understand the ungifted. They've got less sense than the squirrels."

Jemeryl thumped her fist on the stone. "How could I have been so careless?"

"You couldn't have predicted it." Klara said.

"I shouldn't have relied the wards - it's the sort of mistake novice witches make. I should have gone down to the village every day and made certain I knew what was going on. I've walked into this like an idiot, and there's more to come, I can feel it."

Klara tilted her head to one side. "I think you should try to calm down a little, otherwise you'll be in no state to heal the warrior when she finally decides to show up."

Jemeryl sighed and closed her eyes, then opened them again. A small pile of broken nutshells, left by one of the squirrels, littered the ledge. Jemeryl arranged them into a neat row, then irritably swept them out of the window. The thought of the warrior had brought a fresh set of worries.

"Who goes hunting basilisks without even the most basic knowledge of the risks involved?"

"A fool?" Klara suggested.

"She must be. I've got to go with her - and no idea for how long. If Iralin knew anything, she didn't let on. It could be months, even years."

"Following a brainless, sword-swinging lout." Klara's words were not comforting

"You're coming too. Iralin didn't forbid it and I think I'll need a friendly beak to turn to." Jemeryl stated, although this was a trap in itself, as she was well aware. The magpie was a fully-locked familiar, giving only the appearance of independence. In a very real sense Jemeryl was talking to herself. It was a bad habit she had fallen into; even sorcerers could suffer from loneliness.

The bell hanging outside the gatehouse rang loudly. Jemeryl jumped - while talking to Klara she had forgotten her watch on the gates. She twisted her neck to peer through the narrow window. The intervening castle walls prevented her seeing whoever had rung the bell, but the harsh clanging had not stopped reverberating before two of the villagers raced out from cover and fled away down the hillside.

"Have they left the warrior outside?" Jemeryl wondered aloud.

"Either that or they've become totally infantile and are playing knock and run." Klara suggested.

Tumble lumbered across the cobbles in the courtyard below. With her teeth, she caught hold of the rope hanging on the inside of the gate and pulled it open. Jemeryl heard the grinding of the hinges and the clatter of hooves, and then a pony trotted into view. The saddle was empty, although the pack on its back bristled with assorted weaponry. Someone on foot was almost completely hidden from view on the far side. The sight of the weapons

reminded Jemeryl that Iralin had said warrior, not scout or even assassin - it did not bode well for the woman's intelligence.

Jemeryl glanced at Klara. "I guess I'm going to need you to talk to, after all. Her conversation skills are probably very limited."

The pony came to a standstill between the trees. A two-handed war-axe protruded prominently from behind the saddle. "An axe-woman!" Without waiting to see more, Jemeryl twisted round and scrambled out of the window alcove.

Klara fluttered over to take her place on Jemeryl's shoulder. "Limited conversation my foot. She's probably still at the grunt and point stage."

Jemeryl braced herself for the worst. She cast a last muttered obscenity at Iralin, and strode to the spiral staircase. With each step Jemeryl's feeling of anxiety grew - not about healing the warrior's eyes, she had no doubt of her own ability, but at the sense that she was being pushed into something irrevocable. She was quite certain that far more was at stake than Iralin had implied.

By the time Jemeryl reached the keep's exit the scene in the courtyard was approaching utter chaos. Tumble had wandered over to make friends and the pony had fled in panic. It was now clattering around by the kitchen door, threatening to kick over the water butt. The bear was trying to lick the warrior's hand and even Jemeryl would accept that the gesture was likely to be misunderstood. Some squirrels were bouncing around the woman's feet, excited by the novelty, while several of the eldest sat on a branch above her head, chattering a noisy welcome. And still, Jemeryl could not get a good look at her visitor - in retreating from Tumble the woman had turned her back to the keep and was partially obscured behind a tree.

Re-establishing order was a good starting point. Jemeryl pulled all the animals under her control and commanded them to back off and keep quiet. Peace descended on the courtyard. In the resulting silence, Jemeryl crossed the drawbridge, and descended the stairs. At the bottom, she turned for her first clear view of the warrior.

The future crashed into the past. Time was ripped open. Jemeryl recoiled in shock, with no sense of when she was. There was a gaping hole in the web of fate, inviting her to see things she had no wish to know. She felt herself sucked in, while forever spun around her. On her shoulder Klara screeched in terror, a cry more awful than anything Jemeryl had ever heard from her familiar.

The sound pulled Jemeryl back to the courtyard - to here and now. She hurled out every block on prophecy that she knew, and forced the future out of her head. For a space, fate still rippled in the courtyard, distorting Jemeryl's sense of time, in the same way heat above a fire would distort vision. Gradually, the seconds resumed their steady march, each one following the last.

Jemeryl stood with her eyes closed, recovering her senses. This was the meeting that had overshadowed her all morning, she realised, not the confrontation with Iralin. It was also a meeting that had not been allowed to run its own course. Someone had been tampering with fate - not merely casting oracles, but trying to affect the outcome of events, and it took little to guess who that someone was. Iralin and the Coven were playing games.

Why couldn't they trust me with the truth? Jemeryl thought in fury. *Instead, they just left me to walk into that bodged mess.* However, there was nothing she could do. Iralin had effectively tied her hands. She was going to have to bite back her anger and get on with the task before her.

Jemeryl opened her eyes and again looked at her visitor. This time there was no upheaval and she was able to make an evaluation. The results were a little surprising. The woman was both younger and smaller than Jemeryl had expected - scarcely older than herself and only four or so inches taller. She was of medium build with short dark hair. Over her eyes was a crude, wet bandage. The backs of her hands bore the red and gold tattoos of the guild of mercenaries. Her clothes were covered in blood, which to judge from its colour and quantity, had belonged to the basilisk. She was clearly confused, frightened and in pain, but making a desperate attempt to hide it all.

Feeling a fair degree of confusion herself, Jemeryl forced her feet to continue walking. The warrior turned to face the sound of approaching steps.

"Please. I need your help."

"I know. I've been expecting you."

Jemeryl continued to study the woman, while trying to calm the turmoil due to the after-effects of time-shock. In particular, her emotions were lurching off in a quite unexpected direction. Jemeryl had anticipated feeling dislike, even contempt, for the warrior. There had been the temptation to hold her partially responsible for the turn of events. However, the young woman in front of her, vulnerable and suffering, could only inspire pity. She was even more a victim than Jemeryl herself, and in a far worse state. How much was her condition due to Iralin's tampering? Jemeryl directed a fresh blast of anger towards her mentor - this time on behalf of the blinded warrior.

Jemeryl spoke, more gently than before. "Come with me and I'll see what I can do."

The woman flinched at Jemeryl's touch. For a moment, it seemed as if she might give way to panic and bolt - or would, if she could see where to run, but then she meekly allowed herself to be led towards the great hall.

Just before they entered the building, Jemeryl caused the harness on the pony to loosen. The pack slipped to the ground for the bears to take care of. The pony was sent to the stables. Everything else could wait until the matter of the eyes was resolved.

The woman collapsed rather than sat on the chair Jemeryl led her to. Her breath came in ragged gasps. Her hands gripped the armrests so tightly her knuckles were white.

Jemeryl put a hand on her shoulder. "Don't worry, you're going to be fine."

"Can you help me?"

"Yes I can, and I will. My name's Jemeryl, I'm the Coven sorcerer for these parts. You've got nothing to be frightened of."

"My name's Tevi... A basilisk, it..."

"It's alright, I know." Jemeryl took a deep breath and released the warrior's shoulder. It was time to start work. In business-like tones she said, "Okay Tevi, I'm going to remove the bandage and examine your eyes."

The clumsy knot took only a few seconds to untie. The material was wet and very cold to Jemeryl's fingers - someone's attempt at an ice pack. She swore under her breath. It felt as if everything was stacked against her. Did the villagers really know nothing about basilisks? The chilling would have reduced the flow of blood, compounding the damage to the eye socket. The surrounding tissue must be unharmed if the reconstruction of Tevi's eyes was to be a complete success.

Despite her fresh worries, Jemeryl tried to make her voice as reassuring as possible. "Now Tevi, I'm going to examine your eyes. I'm afraid you need to be conscious so I can test the reactions of the nerves and muscles. It will be unpleasant, but it won't take long. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Can you open your eyes?"

The prospects were poor if the twin effects of transmutation and ice had caused too much damage for Tevi to do this. To Jemeryl's relief, the eyelids quivered open. The surfaces underneath shone like polished glass. Any ordinary, ungifted, person would have found the sight unsettling. It was far more shocking for Jemeryl, who could see the eyes for what they were - a crystal bridge. They were hideous twin drains in Tevi's aura, through which her life's energy could be sucked away.

Jemeryl raised her hands to Tevi's face, and placed her fingertips on forehead, temples and cheeks in a circle. With her extended sense, she could feel the coursing of blood through veins, the faint electric messages in the nerves, and the taunt elasticity of membrane. Unfortunately, it was impossible to numb Tevi to the pain without blocking the very responses Jemeryl needed to examine. Jemeryl mentally probed the tissue as carefully as she could; yet still she heard Tevi whimper.

Soon Jemeryl let her hands drop and sat back, more than satisfied with what she had learned. There was no damage to the eye sockets, although it would have been far less painful for Tevi had this not been the case. The active nerve ends must be causing her agony. Jemeryl looked at her patient with respect, surprised she was able to walk and talk at all. At least it was now possible to do something about the pain. A goblet stood on a nearby bench, with a sleeping draft ready prepared.

Tevi was slumped forward, her shoulders shaking as she took sharp gasps of air. Jemeryl gently coaxed her to sit upright and placed the goblet in her hands. "There's a lot of work to do, but I'm sure you'll be pleased to know you don't have to be aware of it. If you drink this you'll be able to sleep through the entire process."

"Can you stop it hurting?" Tevi's voice was a raw whisper. The pulse in her neck beat rapidly.

"I can do more than that. I can restore your eyesight. I can't guarantee it will be like before, but it should be good enough for you to continue with your profession."

The goblet was almost at Tevi's lips when she hesitated. Mistrust showed on her face, but then she resolutely downed the contents.

"It will be easiest if you're lying down, so if you could come over here..." Jemeryl took Tevi's hand once more and guided her to the table. "You'll be asleep soon and won't know anything more until tomorrow morning. When I've finished working on your eyes, I'll put a bandage around them. You mustn't try to remove it, even if you feel fine. Your eyes will be extremely sensitive to light. If you expose them before they've had a chance to heal you may cause fresh damage."

Tevi lay on the table, with a cushion under her head. "I won't touch it." Her voice was already starting to sound drowsy.

"Next thing. I'll try to be around when you wake up. If I'm not, you can say my name aloud anywhere in the castle and I'll hear. My name is Jemeryl - will you remember that?"

Tevi nodded and mumbled. "Jem'r."

There were a few final preparations to make. Tevi was deeply asleep by the time Jemeryl had finished. The expression of pain had faded from the warrior's face. Without the grimace and the bandage she looked even younger than the first estimate, probably even a couple years short of Jemeryl's own count of twenty-two. Her body was athletic, but certainly not muscle-bound. *Where did she find the strength to swing an axe effectively? Jemeryl wondered, and how did one so inexperienced manage to kill a basilisk?* The questions would have to wait. Jemeryl had a long afternoon's work ahead of her.

"Oh... Keovan's knickers! I forgot to ask what colour she wanted her eyes to be." Jemeryl paused. "I guess it's down to my own preference." She studied Tevi's face for a few seconds and smiled. "Grey." she announced decisively.

It was dark by the time Jemeryl finished. The job had taken her longer and presented more problems than expected; now she was totally worn out. She was just about able to haul Tevi from the table and lay her on Ruff's back. It took a similar strained effort to stop the unconscious woman slipping off while the bear shuffled up the short flight of stairs to the parlour.

There was a small side chamber that Jemeryl had set as a bedroom, back in the days when she had expected to be called on regularly to nurse sick villagers. Tevi would be only the second person to occupy the room. As she rolled Tevi onto the bed Jemeryl pushed away the memories of the other patient, the young girl dying of gangrene.

She tugged off Tevi's boots and outer clothing then pulled up the blankets and stood back. Waves of tiredness swept over Jemeryl. Her hands were shaking with exhaustion. Lank strands of hair stuck to the sweat on her forehead.

Klara flew in and perched on the bedstead. "Finished already?"

"Just about. I want you to stand watch. Call me if Tevi wakes. If she doesn't, let me sleep through."

"Why do I get all the boring jobs?" Klara moaned.

"Because I'm the one who can open the food cupboard."

Jemeryl turned to leave. At the door she paused, intending only a last backward glance. Instead she stopped, overwhelmed by the change in her life the day had brought. What was so important about her meeting with Tevi? She studied her patient. Tevi's face was relaxed and at peace. A clean white bandage was over her eyes. Dark hair fell over the top of it and the tip of her nose stuck out below. Her lips had fallen slightly open. Her cheeks were smooth and slightly flushed in sleep.

An assortment of vague ideas scrambled their way through Jemeryl's mind. None of them were clear enough to be identified, except for an awareness that she had been celibate since her arrival in the valley, over two years before. Jemeryl laughed softly at herself and shook her head.

She looked at Klara. "It's amazing the funny ideas you get when you're tired."

"You never needed tiredness as an excuse before."

"Impudent bird." With that, Jemeryl pulled the door shut and headed to her own bed.

Tevi awoke from a series of troubled dreams. Her first thought was that the night was not over, since it was still too dark to see. Then memories disentangled themselves from the fragments of dreams. Her hand shot to her face. She touched the bandage and, with the feel of the material, came the sudden realisation that her eyes no longer hurt.

Tevi's hand fell back to the bed covers. Her joyful relief was short-lived. From the foot of her bed came a faint sound - like something rustling in the wind, except there were no air currents in the room. It was something moving.

Tevi's memories continued to drop back into place. She was in the sorcerer's castle, alone and sightless. There had been non-human things in the courtyard. The villagers' stories suddenly seemed a lot more credible. Tevi felt a childish urge to hide - an urge all the more inane since her only current options were under either the bedcovers or the bed. Neither were likely to be in the least effective if the sorcerer, or anything else in the castle, meant her harm. Tevi fought back her panic. What was it at the foot of the bed?

A new set of sounds came from the other side of a wall. Tevi's entire concentration focused on her ears. Something was moving around in an adjoining room, and getting closer. The noises stopped, then a handle rattled, and what had to be the door to her room opened.

Tevi jerked up onto one elbow, facing the sound. "Who's there?"

"It's me, Jemeryl. Are you all right?"

Tevi fell back onto the bed, feeling simultaneously frightened and stupid. "Yes... yes I think so."

"Do your eyes still hurt?"

"No. They feel fine." Tevi took a grip on herself. The sorcerer had kept her word so far. She had taken away the unbearable pain. The very least Tevi owed her was the benefit of the doubt.

The bed moved as if Jemeryl had taken a seat on the edge. Tevi pulled herself into an upright sitting position.

"Any other aches and pains?" Jemeryl asked gently.

"I don't think so."

"Did you sleep well?"

"Er... I must have." Tevi did not feel completely certain about anything.

"Then can I interest you in breakfast?"

"Oh yes." This was the easiest question so far. Tevi had not eaten since the bowl of porridge in Sergo's cottage the previous morning.

"The villagers leave supplies for me on a regular basis. I think I can offer bread and honey, maybe slices of ham, cheese. How does that sound?"

"Fine."

"There's a bowl of water and a towel on the table beside your bed. I'm afraid I was too tired to clean you up last night. If you want, I'll help you wash when I get back." Jemeryl offered.

Tevi shook her head. "I can probably manage on my own."

"Right, I'll go and get breakfast."

With her fears easing, Tevi's body was able to attract her attention. Jemeryl must have noticed the resulting expression of concern on Tevi's face.

"There's something else you want before I go?"

"Um... a latrine?" Tevi asked, slightly sheepishly.

"Oh, of course." Jemeryl took Tevi's hand and helped her out of bed. "There are latrines built into the wall of this tower where it overhangs the cliff face. The entrance to one is in the corner of your room. I'll show you. It's primitive but functional - just a seat with a hole over a hundred foot sheer drop. If you suffer from vertigo it would be a good idea not to look too closely, once your bandage is removed." Jemeryl paused for a second. "However in spring and summer the cliffs below are covered with nesting birds. I sometimes think the latrines were the architect's idea of revenge."

Tevi laughed out loud for the first time since leaving the guildhall at Lyremouth. There were a few seagulls on Storenseg she had a score to settle with, although they were unlikely to be so far from home.

Jemeryl let go of Tevi's hand. "There's not much furniture in the room. If you go carefully, you shouldn't bang into anything. Your saddle-pack is under the table. If you're alright on your own I'll see about breakfast."

"I'll manage." Tevi said confidently. It was only after the door to the room closed that she remembered the thing she had heard moving at the end of the bed. What was it? And was it still there? Tevi took a deep breath. She was being stupid. Nothing bad had happened so far; the sorcerer seemed friendly and, even if she weren't, acting like a coward would not help the situation.

Working by touch, Tevi was able to take care of herself, including finding a clean shirt from her pack. By the time Jemeryl returned, she was back in her bed, feeling clean and in possession of slightly more self-control. It lasted less than a second. Almost immediately after she heard the door open, something small leapt onto the bed. A tiny clawed hand touched hers.

"What is it?" Tevi fought to keep the panic from her voice.

"It's just a squirrel."

"A squirrel!"

"Most likely after your breakfast. It won't like the honey or the ham, but squirrels are incurable optimists."

"A squirrel?" Tevi was having trouble with the idea. Given the circumstances, an imp or a huge spider would have been far less surprising. While she was coming to terms with the idea, a plate was pressed into her hands. The weight of the small creature was lifted from Tevi's lap and deposited by her feet - not that it stayed there for long.

"Yes, I'm afraid the castle is a little overrun with them." Jemeryl's voice sounded rueful.

"Aren't they supposed to be hibernating?"

"They should be, but it's warm in the castle and I feed them, so mostly they choose to stay awake."

"They're tame?"

"Lightly entranced. I can make it go if you want." Jemeryl offered.

"It's alright." Partly to confirm the truth, Tevi cautiously put out a hand and stroked the squirrel. She could feel that it was perched on its back legs and peering about the room, unconcerned by the attention it was receiving from the two women. "Was it squirrels I heard outside in the courtyard yesterday?"

"In part. Tumble was also contributing to your rather riotous welcome." Jemeryl hesitated, as if considering her words. "Ruff and Tumble are bears... quite large bears. I'll try to keep them away from you, but you needn't be frightened of them. They really are completely safe. Tumble just wanted to make friends with you."

Obviously, some of the villagers' stories were based in fact. Tevi concentrated on eating while she turned ideas over in her head, hoping Jemeryl would put her silence down to hunger. Although the sorcerer had been pleasant, it might all be part of a less altruistic plan. Subconsciously reflecting her doubts, Tevi's hand rose to the bandage over her eyes, wondering if she could trust Jemeryl's word that they really were cured.

"Stop that." Jemeryl said sharply.

Tevi flinched. "Pardon?"

"I'm sorry, not you, the squirrel. It's eyeing up your bread. It's realised you can't see."

"Oh, well... if it wants some, there's more here than I need."

"Best not to encourage them, or they'll be stealing dinner from under our noses." Jemeryl sounded exasperated, but amused. "Here, I have some acorns in my pocket. If I put a few on the floor that ought to distract it while we finish eating - unless it decides to try its hand at making a nut sandwich."

Again, Tevi found herself laughing. The thought of a Coven sorcerer with pockets full of squirrel bribes did not fit in with the evil necromancer of the stories.

"The villagers... they told me a bit about you." Tevi began.

"I'm sure they did." Jemeryl replied dryly.

"You don't seem quite like I expected."

"You mean I haven't fed you to my pet dragon?"

"Er..." Tevi wondered if she should have kept quiet.

"There's a simple explanation - it's not hungry yet."

Tevi could tell Jemeryl was joking, but there was an edge to her voice. The sorcerer was very serious about something. Uncertainly Tevi asked, "Do you have a dragon?"

"No, of course not - but I've got a mentor who could give real dragons nightmares." The second part was muttered under Jemeryl's breath so quietly Tevi was not sure if she had misheard.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to sound as if..." Tevi's words trailed off.

Jemeryl sighed. When she spoke her voice was completely serious. "It's all right. I'm aware the villagers don't trust me. In a large part that has to be my fault, but half of what they say about me is distorted, and the other half is completely untrue."

There were repressed undercurrents to Jemeryl's voice. There was a lot that was not being said - there was also unmistakable sincerity and genuine distress. Tevi realised that she trusted the sorcerer far more than the villager's stories - or would until the evidence of her own experience persuaded her otherwise.

Before she could think of a suitable response, a large yawn caught her by surprise. "I can't still be tired."

"You probably are." Jemeryl said. "It's a side effect of the magic. Having your eyes turned to crystal and back can take a lot out of you. Sleep might be a good idea."

After a moment's deliberation, Tevi slid down under the blankets. The squirrel hopped back onto the bed and snuggled up against her, nestling into the curve of her arm. There was something very reassuring about the small, warm, furry body. The last of Tevi's fears dissolved as a fresh wave of sleepiness washed over her. She was only vaguely aware of the sound of the door closing as the sorcerer left the room

It was not only Tevi who was in need of rest, Jemeryl also felt drained by the previous day's events. She spent the rest of the morning dozing by the fire in the parlour, sprawled in a battered old armchair, while keeping one eye on the door to Tevi's room.

The blazing fire was purely for effect. Jemeryl did not need it to keep the room warm, but its light played cheerfully on the furnishings and the eclectic range of books, presents and curios littering every horizontal surface. Jemeryl was by nature tidy in everything except her personal appearance. Somehow, the room had gained a life of its own, mostly due to the squirrels, who hated to leave anything where they found it. Any pretence at a formal reception room had vanished long ago. The parlour was now cluttered, comfy, and far less imposing than most citizens would ever imagine a sorcerer's home to be.

Jemeryl's gaze drifted over the treasured items scattered about the room. They held memories of the many nights she had spent there, reading in front of the fire and making plans for the future. *So much for planning*, she thought ironically. Even without the intervention of the Coven the meeting with Tevi would have been a life-changing event. All her training told her it had been a node in the web of fate. *But why?* Jemeryl's eyes fixed on the door to Tevi's room. Was it to do with the quest, or the woman herself?

Jemeryl was aware that a soft grin was growing on her face as she thought of the warrior, and recalled the sight of Tevi snuggling down to sleep, with the squirrel curled up at her side. *And if I didn't know better I'd swear I was envying that squirrel*. Jemeryl shook her head in self-mockery. *One step at a time my girl, and remember your career depends on this; you can't afford to make mistakes*. Iralin's aggressive meddling had made one big difference to the situation. Not only were the stakes raised, but also Jemeryl's options had been limited. If she was ever to achieve her ambitions within the Coven, she was going to have to start by fitting in with Iralin's schemes.

Klara had been asleep on the back of the chair, tired after her nightlong vigil. At this point, she awoke and hopped down onto Jemeryl's wrist. "Have I missed anything exciting?"

"No." Jemeryl yawned as she replied.

"How's the patient."

"Sleeping."

Klara looked towards the door to Tevi's room. "She doesn't seem too bad. Far better housetrained than you expect for a woman warrior, and I'm sure I heard her attempt a few polysyllabic words."

"Oh, I don't think she's stupid."

"Except when it comes to basilisks."

"We all make mistakes." Jemeryl said and then groaned. "I know I have."

"So how do you feel now about having to go on this quest with her?"

"I'd rather not."

"But you're quite happy to have Tevi as company?" Klara's voice was deliberately innocent.

Jemeryl gave her familiar a long cynical stare. She knew exactly what Klara was implying. "I don't have a problem with Tevi - it's Iralin and the rest of the Coven seniors I want to incinerate. They're playing silly games. If they want to involve me, I wished they'd explain the rules first. Why couldn't Iralin simply tell me what was going on, rather than treating me like a football?"

"Maybe it's because she's a rotten, mean, nasty individual."

Despite Klara's attempt at levity, Jemeryl did not smile. "The attack of foresight when I first saw Tevi is the worrying bit. The Coven seniors have been poking about with fate - and not just casting oracles. You don't get a rupture in time like that from merely asking questions."

"What do you think they were after?"

"I'd say they were trying to affect the outcome of events triggered by my meeting with Tevi. As for why..." Jemeryl finished her sentence with a shrug. "They certainly left an ugly patch job behind."

"I noticed." Klara's tone made feelings plain.

Jemeryl stroked the magpie's head. "You saw something in there that really upset you."

Klara said nothing - Jemeryl did not want her to. She was determined to resist the temptation to probe the magpie's memory. Klara had screamed in terror at something seen when they blundered, unprepared and off-guard, into the ragged temporal discontinuity. More than just Jemeryl's core dislike of prophecy stopped her from trying to find out what it was.

There was a fable, probably apocryphal, told to all young sorcerers. It concerned two brothers who went to consult the oracle at Kradja. They had only one question to ask, "Where will we die?", and intended never to visit the place named. The oracle had replied, "In Kradja". Both brothers immediately attempted to flee the town. In his blind panic the brother in the lead slipped on the temple steps and broke his neck. The other saw the accident and stopped, realising the futility of escape. He settled in Kradja, took a partner, made his life there and prospered. He died there decades later, after a long and successful life, surrounded by friends and family.

The events probably never happened, but the moral was very sound. No matter what fate may dictate, the greatest chance of tragedy lay in trying to evade it. Klara had seen something bad. If it was truly inevitable, there was no point in trying to prevent it from happening. Jemeryl's expression was solemn as she recalled the old fable. Iralin herself was the one who had told the story to her, many years ago, when Jemeryl was a fresh novice at Lyremouth. If the senior sorcerers were trying to rewrite destiny it meant something very, very important was involved.

"So why not tell me what they're up to? Do they think I'll work better if I don't know what I'm doing?" Jemeryl glared into the fire, feeling like a pawn in a chess game. "I never did trust oracles. I bet they've had some vague prediction and are even more confused than me."

Klara bobbed her head in agreement, then tilted it to one side. "But it could be worse. As I said earlier, Tevi doesn't seem to be too bad, does she?"

Jemeryl's anger faded as a slow smile crossed her face. "No, she doesn't seem too bad at all."

CHAPTER TWELVE—Old Legends

Jemeryl was still in her chair in the mid-afternoon. It was definitely a day for being lazy. The two bears were asleep at her feet; she was using Ruff's ribs as a footstool. Klara was perched on the armrest, and together they indulged in idle speculation about the possible nature of the quest.

"She might have to kill a monster." Klara suggested.

Jemeryl pursed her lips. "More likely has to find something."

"Such as?"

"It would have to be important."

"Obviously - Iralin's hardly likely to think Tevi needs you along if she's just popped out to get a couple of cabbages." Klara exercised her taste for irony.

"It could be some person she's looking for."

The sound of a door opening interrupted the debate. Sorcerer and magpie simultaneously turned towards the source. Tevi stood in the entrance to her room, twisting her head from side to side. The low, winter sun was falling square on the window behind her. Its rays streamed out around Tevi, lighting her in silhouette.

"Madam Jemeryl?" Tevi said dubiously, as if afraid of what else might answer her call.

"I'm here." Jemeryl answered immediately.

Jemeryl studied her guest for a moment longer, before rising to guide her to a chair by the fire. The young squirrel bounced up onto the warrior's lap as soon as she was seated, evidently feeling it had made a true friend. It never seemed to occur to any of the squirrels that they might not be wanted. Tevi, on the other hand, although looking much better for the sleep, was clearly not at ease. She sat with her back stiff and straight, while shifting uncomfortably in the chair.

"I am very grateful for your help, ma'am. I hope I haven't ..." Tevi had obviously taken time to reflect on the high status of Coven sorcerers.

Jemeryl interrupted. "There's no need to thank me. In fact, you could argue that it's my fault you were hurt in the first place. And please, forget the ma'am bit. Jemeryl will be fine, or you can called me Jem - most of my friends do."

"While her enemies call her much more interesting things." Klara added.

At the inhuman sound of the magpie's voice, Tevi jerked around. Her hands tightened on the arms of the chair.

"What is that?"

"Just an impertinent magpie." Jemeryl said.

"It talks?"

"As you just heard."

"I'm sorry." Tevi slumped down in her chair. "It was a silly question."

"She's a silly magpie. And, although you can't see it, she's giving us a rather indignant look at the moment."

Tevi managed a crooked smile. "I guess even magpies don't like being called silly."

"Especially magpies. Her name's Klara. She's quite safe, as long as you can cope with sarcasm."

Klara turned her back on the pair of humans in disgust.

Tevi swallowed and then said, "So you have squirrels and magpies... and bears?"

"Just the one magpie. One is more than enough, believe me. The bears are asleep in front of the fire. If you want I'll send them away." Jemeryl offered, remembering Iralin's words about ordinary people's fears.

Tevi's expression battled between uncertainty and self-control. In the end she said, "It would be mean to kick them out in the cold, when they're doing no harm."

"They aren't dangerous." Jemeryl stressed.

"I know, you said that before. I'm being childish. It's just..." Tevi hesitated, summoning her nerve. "I think it's not being able to see them. Things are always worse in your imagination. Would it be all right if I touched them?"

"If you want. They won't bite."

Jemeryl's mental prompting roused Tumble from her sleep. The bear rose with a snort and then shuffled the few steps to lay her chin on Tevi's knees. Cautiously Tevi patted the furry head, growing more confident as Tumble lapped up the attention. Her expression turned to a broad grin as Tumble licked her hands. Ruff also awoke and went to claim his share of the fuss.

"They're like a pair of great sappy dogs." Tevi exclaimed in amused surprise.

"I know." Jemeryl agreed. "It wasn't quite the effect I was aiming for, but that's how it goes when you enchant animals. Their own nature tends to skew the magic."

Jemeryl settled back in her chair, and rested her head on one hand. Tevi was almost completely lost behind the two bears. Only her head and shoulders were visible above their shaggy rumps. Light from the fire played over her face, highlighting the line of her chin and throwing soft shadows at her throat.

One advantage of the bandage over Tevi's eyes was that Jemeryl could study her guest without inhibition. She found it a very pleasant occupation. *Not bad at all*, she repeated to herself, but it would not do to sit there all afternoon, and stare. After a few minutes she got to her feet and said, "Now that you're awake I'll see about a late lunch. Do you want me to take the bears with me?"

"I'll be fine, or do you need them to help you?"

"Oh no, their paws aren't up to doing anything worthwhile in the kitchen. The squirrels would be more use, but they will insist on putting nuts in everything - it wouldn't be so bad if they remembered to shell them first."

Jemeryl left the room to the sound of Tevi's laughter.

Once the meal was over, Jemeryl gave Tevi a tour of the sections of the castle she might need to use. They went slowly, to let Tevi feel her way, so she could build a mental image of the layout. In particular Jemeryl pointed out the location of stairs and similar hazards. They stayed awhile in the stables when they got there, and made sure Tevi's pony had everything it needed.

On their return to the parlour, the two women reclaimed their seats by the fire. Tevi told the story of the hunt for the basilisk. As the account progressed, Jemeryl's horror grew. She was appalled to realise how little Tevi had known of her quarry.

"A small shield was all the protection you had? That was suicidal."

"I held it in front of my face so the basilisk couldn't see into my eyes." Tevi explained.

"But the crystal bridge works in the sixth dimension. It can only have been pure good fortune it worked." Jemeryl stopped, lost for words. "How big was it?"

"The shield or the basilisk?"

"The basilisk."

Tevi indicated with her hands.

"Well that partly explains it. It was only a juvenile, probably inexperienced."

"I thought I'd done quite well. Except for the bit at the end, of course." Tevi said, slightly deflated.

"You did. But you should have come to me. I could have given you proper shields, in fact I'd have dealt with the beast myself."

"The villagers were against telling you."

"Why?" Jemeryl asked, confused.

"Some of them thought the basilisk was yours - that you had called it to the valley for some reason."

"They thought..." Jemeryl stared at her guest, lost for words. It was small wonder bad reports had reached Lyremouth. How could the level of trust in her have sunk so low?

"Wasn't that what you meant, when you said it was your fault I got hurt?" Tevi asked hesitantly.

"No!" Jemeryl was at the point of outrage. "I would never have done anything to risk harming the villagers. I'm sworn by my oath to defend them, with my life if need be. They must know that - what's got into their heads?"

Tevi looked awkward. "I'm not sure they think very clearly. They seemed a bit gullible."

Jemeryl groaned, "And that's my fault as well. It's a side-effect of the wards I put up."

"Wards?"

"I put wards around the valley to keep out danger. Someone destroyed them and that's what let the basilisk in. When I said it was my fault, all I meant was that I should have talked to the villagers more often, and not relied on the wards. But I never dreamed someone would deliberately wreck them. It makes no sense."

Tevi looked as if she might have said something, but held her peace.

"The thing could have killed someone - but the villagers were more frightened of me than the basilisk." Jemeryl was speaking mainly to herself.

"Perhaps when the villagers hear that you've healed my eyes it will give them some faith in you - if you're sure I will see again."

"Your eyes will be fine." Jemeryl said quickly.

"I didn't mean to imply..." Tevi's words tailed off and there was silence for a while, before she went on again, "I just don't understand what happened to them, and why I wasn't turned to stone."

Jemeryl sighed and then shook her head. Cursing yourself for past mistakes was pointless. She redirected her thoughts to providing a suitable explanation for Tevi. "The basilisk feeds directly on energy. It doesn't really turn its victims to stone. It's like a form of burning. It takes the energy out and leaves ash behind, fused into place. In order to get the energy it has to create a bridge in the sixth dimension - which is the easiest place to work with elemental forces. Its third eye is a receiver, which it uses to change the eyes of its prey to a transmitter." Jemeryl grinned at Tevi's puzzled expression. "I'm afraid it's hard to put it in simpler terms."

"I have a vague idea of what you mean - very vague."

"Vague is probably good enough." Jemeryl conceded. "The organs that extract the energy are where its stomach would be, if it had one. The receiver was able to transmute your eyes even after you cut its head off, but it couldn't complete the link to its stomach - fortunately for you."

"So the head can survive on its own?" Tevi asked.

"Only for a very short time, a bit like a headless chicken."

"So everything is quite safe after a few minutes?"

"Not from the chicken's point of view." Klara joined in.

Tevi laughed and sunk back in her chair.

Jemeryl studied her patient for a moment. Tevi's aura was clean and regular; all traces of the sickening crystal drains were gone. Jemeryl could still detect unfamiliar perturbations in the aura, but in her opinion they were not

dangerous. It was something she might look into later. After all, she was going to be spending quite some time with this woman.

"Changing your eyes back was a bit tricky. There were a few problems I hadn't expected, but it went all right in the end." Jemeryl's memory prodded her. "Oh, and um... I don't know if you were particularly keen on your previous eye colour, but they're now grey."

"Grey?"

"Yes. Were you hoping for something else... green or blue?"

Tevi looked confused and then shrugged. "As long as they work, I'm not too bothered." She was clearly perplexed by the idea however and raised a hand to her eyes. "When can you take this bandage off?"

"I'd like to leave it another day. If you don't have headaches or other problems, we can see how your eyes are after nightfall tomorrow. It would be best to remove the bandage when it's dark as you will be very sensitive to light for a few days."

Tevi nodded and looked happy with the answer. The pair of them talked for a while longer before Jemeryl announced, "I think it's time for bed."

Although Tevi could have managed alone, Jemeryl took Tevi's hand and escorted her to the door of her room. The warm grip of Tevi's fingers sent ripples through Jemeryl, prompting her to ask, "Are you sure you're okay in here? The bed's pretty small and lumpy, and there's no fire in this room - won't you be cold?"

Before she could say more, Tevi interrupted, grinning. "Thanks, but I've just come over the old pass. I spent the fifteen nights before getting here sleeping on snow and rock. This room is heaven by comparison. If I get cold there's a spare blanket in my pack and I've got a cloak somewhere." She slipped her hand from Jemeryl's and closed the door.

The sorcerer's face held its own bemused smile as she made her way to her bed. She spoke softly to the empty room, "It wasn't a blanket I was planing on offering."

Klara crowed with derision. "Oh go on. Give the poor girl a chance to view the merchandise first."

After breakfast the next morning, the two women went for a walk on the battlements. The sun was rising in a clear blue sky. Jemeryl breathed in the sweet, crisp air and listened to the sound of water all around, dripping from the melting snow, trickling along gutters and splashing underfoot. With her extended senses she could feel the presence of new life, ready to burst forth from the earth.

"Spring is on the way." she announced for the benefit of her blindfolded companion.

"Good. I've seem enough snow for this year."

"Your trek over the Spur can't have been fun."

"It wasn't." Tevi said with a heartfelt sigh.

"Why did you make the journey in winter?"

"I was hired by traders who'd got stuck in Treviston. They didn't have time to wait until spring." Above the bandage, Tevi's forehead creased in a slight frown. "Do you know how long it will be until the main pass over the Spur is reopened?"

"That's still some way off. The roads will be getting busy soon, but people will have to take the long route around the bottom of the Spur for a while." Jemeryl looked at Tevi, wondering if there might be more behind her question than thoughts of the traders. It was definitely time to start learning about her, and her quest. "Where will you be heading when you leave here?"

Tevi shrugged. "It will depend on what work I get."

"I'm sure you have more detailed plans than that."

"Why?"

"Because I know that you're currently on a quest." Hearing her own words Jemeryl frowned. It was a bad habit of sorcerers to use odd scraps of information they picked up to give the impression of omnipotence.

Tevi, however, seemed more puzzled than impressed "I don't think so."

It was now Jemeryl's turn to be confused. "You're not sworn to catch someone, or to find anything?" she suggested, feeling more than a little foolish.

"Oh, well... yes. Abrak's chalice." The sudden awkward shift in Tevi's manner was conspicuous.

"Has Abrak lost her chalice?"

"She's dead. Her chalice is a family heirloom."

"But you're looking for it?"

"Sort of. A bird stole it, so I said I'd get it back." Tevi said, indifferently.

Jemeryl's eyebrows rose. Tevi's attitude certainly made a change from the arrogance of most quest-bound warriors. Something very strange was going on.

"We've got all day. Why don't we get ourselves comfy by the fire and you can tell me about it?" Jemeryl suggested.

From the expression that flitted across Tevi's face, Jemeryl got the feeling that the warrior would rather talk of something else. On the other hand, Jemeryl was becoming very tired of not knowing what was going on. She wanted answers.

Once they were settled back in the parlour, she allowed Tevi no opportunity to evade the subject. "Tell me about this chalice."

Tevi's expression showed a clear unwillingness to speak. Her lips tightened in a line, but at last she started, "Do you know anything about the Western Isles, out to sea from the coast of Walderim?"

"Is that where you come from?" Jemeryl asked; it would explain Tevi's unfamiliar accent.

"Yes."

Jemeryl searched her memory. "I didn't even know there were any islands. I've never seen them marked on any map. I take it your people don't have much contact with the mainland?"

"No. Abrak was the last person to arrive from the mainland. And I'm the first person to leave the islands for..." Tevi's voice faded, her face contorted in obvious distress.

Jemeryl sensed that Tevi was fighting with memories - the young islander must be missing her home and family very much. Softly she asked, "Tevi?"

"I don't... it's..." Tevi took a couple of deep breaths, and managed to regain control of herself. "I'm not sure what to tell you about Abrak. We have lots of songs and stories about her. As a child learnt I them all, but you won't want the full saga - it would take days." Tevi bit her lower lip. "I guess I should start with the old clans fleeing to the islands..."



One hundred years after its founding, the Protectorate was expanding rapidly. At first, this worked to the advantage of the warrior clans of Walderim on the other side of the Aldrak Mountains. The magic users withdrew from the strip of land between the mountains and the sea. Some went to join the Coven. Some moved further away, to places where their power would not be challenged.

The vacuum left by their departure was soon filled by men who relied on strength of arms. They believed it was their swords that had freed the land from the tyranny of sorcerers. It was what they wanted to believe - real men

could put their faith in sharp steel, and not submit to the whims of women, weaklings and foreigners with their cowardly magic arts

Yet, the days of the warrior clans were short-lived. Within decades the wealth of the Protectorate guilds, rather than the magic of its sorcerers, had put an end to their dominion. A few warlords saw the inevitable coming and looked to tales told by storm-blown sailors of uninhabited islands far out to sea. Magic could not cross water, so common knowledge had it. With their rule failing, the last clans took their families and possessions and fled, although in their stories it was not retreat but regrouping. They saw themselves as heroes in exile, who would one day return to the mainland, raise the flag of liberty, burn every sorcerer and rule forever as kings of all the known world. They called themselves the 'Sons of Freedom'.

The men settled down to a life of fighting and fishing. They engaged in bloody feuds between the islands. They made sure women kept in their place. They told stories, reinventing the history of the world they had left and made prophecies of their glorious return. None dared admit that the islands were not a cradle of kings but a forgotten backwater. In time, all contact with the mainland ceased, while each year the shoals of fish returned to the seas around the islands and the war-bands fought their petty wars.

No one would have predicted any great change when Thurbold the Blood-handed became ruler of Storenseg. He was a strong warrior, and an ambitious man who had arranged the murder of several close relatives in order to take the kingship while scarcely into his twenties. His schemes went further still. He led his war-band into battle, inspiring them with his berserker courage, until he was on the brink of becoming king of three islands.

Then Rathshorn, Skuden, Varseg and Tanenseg allied against him, forcing him back from every gain he had made. Thurbold's warriors were spent; food stocks were low, and he was on the point of surrender. On a bitter autumn morning he sat brooding in his hall, when the message came that a survivor from a shipwreck had been washed onto the beach.

The castaway was not an enemy sailor, as Thurbold first assumed, but an elderly woman from the mainland. She had no possessions except for a small leather bag containing a battered pewter chalice and some salt encrusted leaves. Exposure had addled her wits. She cackled and sang and talked to herself. Between the nonsense, she said enough for Thurbold to realise he had a sorcerer in his hands.

It should have been straightforward. In the clansmen's way of thinking, a burning was the only proper option, but Thurbold was desperate. (Although, had fortune telling been an art practised on the islands, he might have learnt that he was quite secure. The coalition against him would break down that winter, victim to the ever-present mistrust between islands.)

In his despair, Thurbold decided to bargain with the sorcerer. He offered her gold and a husband if she would cast a spell to make his warriors invincible - she giggled about seaweed. He offered her life and a boat off the islands - she sung songs about apple blossom. He had unpleasant things done to her, then offered to have them stopped, and finally she agreed.

The sorcerer was named Abrak. She was allowed to roam the island under the scrutiny of a few trusted guards. For several days, she shuffled through valleys and over hills, muttering and babbling her nonsense. Thurbold's warriors muttered in turn - that he was a fool to trust the madwoman. Yet, his reputation was such that none dared say it to his face.

Abrak returned to Thurbold's hall. She had found what she needed - the ingredients for a potion that would give his warriors unbeatable strength. She promised that Thurbold would conquer all the islands and his name would be remembered there forever. Thurbold was elated, his decision to negotiate had been the right one.

Abrak offered to show the men how to make the potion. It was a step even fear of Thurbold would not move his warriors to accept. They would take the potion, if there was no other hope of victory, but they would not defile their hands by brewing the sorcery themselves. It was woman's work. None thought anything of it when Abrak's screeched laughter shook the rafters of the hall. The sorcerer was mad.

Abrak instructed the woman on harvesting plants and preparing the potion. She stood before Thurbold one last time to explain how the magic worked. A boy should be given a mouthful of the potion each day, from the time

he was weaned until his beard started to grow. Then, with the change to manhood, there would be a change in his body, and the man's strength would be increased twofold for the rest of his life.

Abrak swore by the gods of earth, sea and sky that she was telling the truth. However, it was not the spell Thurbold wanted. His fear was for the coming summer campaign, not for the wars of twenty years time. This was his excuse, if he felt an excuse were needed, to order a pyre built in the village square and to send Abrak to the flames. The brutality and double-dealing were typical of Thurbold, yet all accounts agree that Abrak's mad laughter was never louder than when she went to her death.

The decision to use the potion could not have been easy for Thurbold. In the end he took the risk and gave it to his infant son, and every other baby boy on the island. However, the concoction was not poisonous and time proved that Abrak had spoken the truth. The potion-enhanced warriors of Storenseg were unbeatable. Within twenty-five years of the sorcerer's death, they had conquered all and Thurbold was undisputed king of the Western Isles, the first to claim the title - as his son was to be the last.

Thurbold's ancestors might have warned him - those who'd had dealing with magic users in the days before the flight to the islands. The vengeance of sorcerers may be slow and subtle, but it is as sure as the turn of the tides.

Abrak's vengeance began with the rebellion of the sons. The superhuman warriors were not about to take second place to a rabble of weak, elderly men. Thurbold had less than one year as king, then spent the rest of his days as his son's slave, tending the sheep. Yet worse was in store for the men of the Western Isles.

The legends vary over the reason for the next stage in the story, although they all agree on the outcome. Some man was anxious to push more work onto his daughters, or a nurse found it easier to give the potion to all babies in her charge, or a woman had been privy to Abrak's plans, or it was merely someone's curiosity. Whatever the cause, long before Thurbold's son had taken the kingship, it became the custom to give the potion to girls as well as boys.

The men who ruled the islands gave no thought to women; they took no interest in their daughters. Their lives revolved around men, swords and the clan. Women were not worth consideration, except as vessels of sons, or as trophies to their virility. Which is how it escaped their notice that, while the strength of men was increased twofold by the potion, the strength of women increased fivefold and more.

Maybe this oversight was not so remarkable; even some women failed to see what the potion would mean, unable to conceive of the social order standing on its head. Not all were so blind. One woman in particular saw a new future for the islands. She was a schemer and a manipulator, who engineered the second rebellion, and became the first queen.

It was not easy to turn women, trained to cower, into warriors. However, Abrak had put all the weapons in their hands. Even the basic facts of reproduction worked in their favour. They could kill ninety-nine men out of a hundred, but the men could not reciprocate without forgoing the next generation. By the fortieth anniversary of Abrak's death, the warlike patriarchy had been replaced with a mirror image matriarchy.

The women settled down to a life of fighting and fishing, in a society that revolved around women, swords and the family. They called themselves the 'Daughters of Abrak's Revenge.'



"It sounds as if, in their revolutionary ardour, they got a bit carried away with the rhetoric." Klara observed at the end of the tale.

"I think they got a bit carried away with everything." Tevi said.

Jemeryl had mainly listened to the story in silence. Now she asked, "So on your islands the warriors are all women?"

"Yes."

"And the story of Abrak explains why." Jemeryl mused. "It's imaginative, but it must raise more questions than it answers."

"Such as?"

"For example, what excuse do your people give to explain why the potion no longer works?"

Tevi looked puzzled. "None. Why do you think we'd want one?"

"Aren't you curious?"

"About what?"

"The..." Jemeryl stopped with a frown on her face. The conversation had got out of step somewhere. She decided to start again. "I know enough about herbalism to know the potion could never have worked the way the story said. Therefore it..."

Tevi interrupted, "But it did - it still does."

"It's imposi..." Jemeryl broke off mid-word. "Have you ever seen a woman with this supernatural strength?"

"Of course. I took the potion myself."

The announcement left Jemeryl dumbfounded. She sat back in her chair and stared open-mouthed at Tevi, while recalling the strange perturbations in the islander's aura and the unexpected problems in rebuilding her eyes. Still unsure of how seriously to take the claim, she leaned forward and asked, "So how strong are you?"

"In the mercenaries' guild they use an iron ball to test the strength of applicants. I think there are balls of different weight for different groups. As a warrior, I had the heaviest. I was told to pick it up and throw it as far as I could. I did ask the examiner if he was sure he wanted me to do that. He said yes." Tevi shrugged. "The ball made a nasty dent in the wall at the other side of the yard. Apparently, no one has ever thrown it more than half of the distance before."

"That's..." Jemeryl was lost for words.

"Surely you've got similar potions? I haven't come across anybody who's taken one, but I assumed the Coven was keeping them secret for some reason."

"No. I've never even heard of anything like it. Do you mind if I do a few tests on you?" Jemeryl added, slightly hesitantly.

Tevi considered the request for a moment and then nodded. "Okay. It's forbidden to discuss the potion with strangers, but it was a gift from a mainland sorcerer to start with and, despite your apology, I still think I owe you a lot."

Jemeryl led Tevi to her workroom in the great hall. It took a few minutes to assemble the necessary equipment. At Jemeryl's request, Tevi removed her jerkin and shirt. Jemeryl studied her thoughtfully.

Tevi stood very still. Her top half was covered in only a thin, close-fitting shift, leaving her arms and shoulders bare. It didn't conceal much. Jemeryl was aware her thoughts were drifting away from the line of pure scholarly interest. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Klara watching. The magpie's head was tilted jauntily to one side. A faint blush rose to Jemeryl's cheeks and she concentrated her mind more firmly on the matter in hand.

Jemeryl went to stand behind Tevi, close enough to run her hands slowly over the muscles in the islander's back and arm. She managed to keep her thoughts almost, but not completely, on the subtle irregularities she could detect.

To the perceptions of the ungifted there would be nothing out of the ordinary. Tevi's body showed the results of regular exercise, but was in no way over-developed; any young woman involved in manual labour might have looked much the same. However, now that Jemeryl's extended senses were alerted, it was apparent that the structure of the islander's body had been changed on a cellular level. It was definitely magic of the very highest order. Jemeryl reached for her notebook.

Recounting the tale of Abrak had been a constant battle for Tevi. The story had launched an onslaught of memories - the nights around the fire in her family hall, singing the old songs. Several times, she had been on the point of being overwhelmed by homesickness. Through the blindfold, she could almost see the familiar faces, hear their voices.

The migration to the hall came as a relief; a chance to regroup while Jemeryl's bubbling curiosity took over. Tevi could not comprehend the point of most of the things she was asked to do and very little of what the sorcerer said made sense, but Tevi never felt she was being patronised or ridiculed - quite unlike her experience with the Treviston sorcerer.

Jemeryl talked excitedly. "You must go to Lyremouth and let them examine you fully - that is, if you think the laws of your culture allow it. The potion is astounding."

Tevi considered the request. Her family wouldn't approve, but they had never approved of anything she had done. "Would the Coven be that interested? I'd have thought they'd have lots of potions like it."

"Oh no. Many sorcerers have tried to make strength enhancers, but they all had nasty consequences. If you're lucky it's just people breaking their bones when they try to lift things. Usually the heart goes wild and bursts a blood vessel in the brain. Your potion is very different. It doesn't try to channel external forces through the body. It changes the way a child grows, so the muscles are more efficient. Your bones are stronger as well - that's the really clever bit. The potion makes your body develop a certain way, and then the hormones released at puberty spur everything into action. That's why it works differently for the sexes. Muscle structure is identical for men and women, but the hormones aren't."

Tevi wasn't too sure what hormones were, but the results were something she had given increasing thought to. "It's a shame the potion couldn't have made men and women equal, like they are on the mainland. When I was growing up on the islands, I never saw anything wrong in the way men were treated. If anything it seemed that they were having an easy time - not having to take responsibility and always having women to look after them. But since I've been on the mainland, my attitude has changed. I don't think the men in my village could really have been happy."

"Having heard the whole story it sounds more like poetic justice to me." Klara interjected.

"It's actually the inequality of sorcery that makes for the balance of the sexes on the mainland. Without it, men's physical strength usually distorts things and patriarchal warrior clans take control." Jemeryl paused as if searching her memory. "I seem to recall from my history books that they did flourish briefly in Walderim, a few centuries back. Which would tie in with your story."

"It's a shame they were so violent - and that they took the bloodshed with them to the islands." Tevi said.

She was interrupted as something that felt like a glass pyramid was placed in her hands.

"Can you hold it above your head." Jemeryl asked.

Tevi did so.

"Presumably once the women took over, and the power balance changed, things became a bit more peaceful." Jemeryl picked up the conversation.

"Not that you'd notice. The first queen was the only one ever to rule all the Western Isles. Straight after her death, a dispute broke out between her daughters. Before long the islands were back in a state of permanent warfare, only with women doing the fighting instead of the men."

"The first queen must have been a very strong personality."

"According to my family she was - I'm her great-great- great-granddaughter." Tevi's head sank. If it were not for the blindfold, she would have been staring at the floor. She could hear the taunts, naming her a pathetic product for such a famous lineage. At least living up to her ancestor's reputation was no longer a problem for her.

Fortunately, at that point, the glass pyramid must have revealed something unexpected, requiring Jemeryl's full concentration. The conversation was temporarily abandoned.

Some hours later, after a short break for lunch, Jemeryl had discovered all she could, given the limited resources available in the castle. She scribbled down the last of her observations and put the notebook away. The pair returned to the comfort of the parlour.

"I'm astounded, but you're right. The potion most definitely works." Jemeryl said, once they were settled.

"So do you think the story is true?"

Jemeryl chewed her lip thoughtfully. "It still has to be more fiction than fact. If I had to make a guess, I'd say Thurbold brought Abrak from the mainland on purpose, and gave her far more help than the story implies. He could have invented the shipwreck story to cover himself, so it wouldn't appear that he'd gone looking for a sorcerer."

"To placate his warriors?"

"Something like that. The disproportionate effect on the sexes has to be an accident."

"How can you tell?"

"Herbalism isn't my strongest discipline, but I can estimate how long it would take to develop a potion like yours. The sorcerer would have needed an awful lot of luck and inspiration, and decades rather than days just to get the strength enhancement right. The subtlety to deliberately cause the gender bias is beyond anything that could be achieved in the field. It would take all the resources of the school of herbalism in Ekranos to have any hope of doing it."

Tevi looked thoughtful. "Would Abrak have been a Coven sorcerer?"

"Probably. Herbalism isn't well developed outside the Protectorate. It's only because the Coven is responsible for citizens' health that we spend so much time on it. Sorcerers elsewhere aren't too bothered about colds and sprained ankles." Jemeryl frowned. "But it's hard to see how a Coven sorcerer could have become mixed up with the island clans."

"I always wondered why someone as powerful as Abrak allowed herself to be burnt." Tevi said.

"I suppose that bit might be true." Jemeryl replied slowly. "The idea that magic can't cross water is an oversimplification. The elements affect magical forces in different ways. Water focuses the flow. Small islands are hard to predict until you reach them, especially if they have a high iron content. Some concentrate all the power for hundreds of miles around and some are so dead you can't even light a candle. Your islands must be the inert sort if magic users aren't found on them. Abrak might have been virtually powerless once she got there. When Thurbold realised it, he got rid of her, to destroy the evidence of his complicity."

"But surely then the potion wouldn't work?"

"Living things hold their power in a dimension that isn't affected by water. Herbalism is the most universal of all magical disciplines; not even iron disrupts it."

"Would you be surprised if I said I don't know what you mean by other dimensions?"

"I'd be more surprised if you did." Jemeryl's forehead creased as she tried to find an easy explanation. "Virtually everyone can perceive four dimensions, three spatial and one temporal. And most people have seven senses to perceive them - sight, touch, taste, smell, balance, hearing and time. However, there are three further dimensions and at least six other senses - even sorcerers can't agree on the exact number. Everyone's body extends across all seven dimensions, but most people's paranormal senses don't work, in much the same way as a deaf person can't hear in the four ordinary dimensions. Objects exist in the paranormal dimensions. If you're aware of them, you can use them and that's what's called magic. I know it seems strange to the ungifted, but if you have full use of your senses, it's very straightforward. When we sorcerers wave our hands about and perform magic, all we're doing is moving things on other planes of existence."

"You touch them with your hands?"

"You use your limbs as they project in the other dimensions. The gestures the ungifted see are largely incidental."

Tevi sat in silence, clearly turning the concept over in her mind. "I suppose, if nearly everyone was blind, the few who could see would be able to do things - like use a bow and arrow. To the blind majority it would be a strange and powerful mystery. Is it something like that?"

Jemeryl nodded. "That's it precisely. Many people have limited awareness of their paranormal senses, though it results in nothing more than the sensation of icy fingers down the spine and things like that. Probably nobody has complete control of all their extra-dimensional senses, but the more you can perceive the more powerful a magic user you are. A witch is someone who is aware of one or two of the paranormal dimensions. A sorcerer is competent in all three."

"So you can see me in these extra dimension?"

"Yes."

"How do I look?" Tevi asked, curiously.

Really nice, was Jemeryl's first thought, although she did not say it aloud. "Umm... it's hard to describe. There aren't the right words, since language has been almost entirely developed by the ungifted. Before the Coven, sorcerers didn't get to talk to each other much.

"I suppose the words wouldn't mean anything to me even if you had them." Tevi's wry grin faded into a sigh. She raised her hand to her blindfold. Jemeryl guessed that the talk of extra senses had made her more aware of her current blindness.

As the silence grew Jemeryl returned to the earlier conversation, partly to divert Tevi from worry about her eyes. "You said you were looking for Abrak's chalice. Finish your story. How did it go missing?"

The change in topic did not work as planned. If anything, Tevi looked even more uncomfortable. "The island I come from is Storenseg, which is where Abrak landed. Her relics are still there. They don't amount to much - her satchel, her pewter chalice and some ashes."

"Her last mortal remains?"

"They're supposed to be. They were kept in a shrine to Abrak on the site of where she was killed. One day, just over two and a half years ago, a large black bird swooped in through the door, picked up the chalice and flew off with it. People who were there say it went straight out to sea, heading for the mainland. Everyone was shocked but didn't know what to do about it. So I said I'd go and get it back." Tevi finished in a rush.

"How were you going to find it? The mainland is a very big place."

Tevi shrugged but said nothing.

Jemeryl leaned forward eagerly. It seemed a good time to gently introduce the idea of accompanying Tevi on the quest. "It's a good job that you came here. I can give you a lot of help and advice."

"To be honest, I've pretty much given up hope of achieving the quest." Tevi mumbled, interrupting before Jemeryl could say more.

Tevi was avoiding something she didn't want to talk about - that much was obvious. Jemeryl eyed her guest, hoping it was nothing more than feeling foolish for taking on a task she could not perform. But, watching the tight set of Tevi's lips, Jemeryl got the nasty feeling that a whole new set of pitfalls had lined up in front of her.

Tactfully, she decided not to push the point and allowed Tevi to change subject again, to her travels through the mainland. Jemeryl settled back in her chair and listened with interest, idly watching the firelight play over Tevi's face. The afternoon was well advanced; soon it would be dark and time to remove the bandage from Tevi's eyes. Once she could see again, Jemeryl was sure Tevi's enthusiasm could be revived. Plans for the quest could wait until then.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN—New Eyes

While the short winter's day drew to a close, the two women sat chatting in the parlour. Tevi needed only her ears to tell that the clear skies of the morning were gone. Clouds had blown over from the east and a stiff wind sprung up, sending bursts of sleet and rain splattering against the windows, a reminder that winter was not over.

She lazed comfortably in her chair by the fireside, with two squirrels asleep on her lap. Jemeryl was an attentive audience and Tevi willingly recounted the tale of her travels. Master Sarryle proved to be a fertile topic of conversation. A simple description of him ordering a meal at an inn could be guaranteed to entertain anyone.

"I sat there and watched him. Then he called the waiter over and said, *Young man, do you consider thirty-six peas to constitute an adequate portion?*" Tevi managed a fair impression of the old man's voice.

"You mean he counted them?" Jemeryl was incredulous.

"Yes. Every time. Thankfully he was never given rice."

"What happened?"

"It didn't help when the waiter offered to get him a ruler so he could measure the length of the sausages." Tevi said dryly.

"It wound him up further?"

"No, irony was lost on the man - he said yes. In the end, there was the innkeeper, the chef and half the staff around the table. They cooked him a fresh meal, with double portions of everything. Sarryle then said he wasn't hungry anymore and went to bed. I thought they were going to lynch him. I almost offered to go and get them a rope."

"It's easy to see why his daughter left Lyremouth." Jemeryl said, laughing.

"Her mistake was stopping so soon. In her place I'd still be running."

"No. Her **big** mistake was in telling him where she'd moved to."

Tevi grinned and continued with the tale of her travels. With each passing hour, she was finding it harder to reconcile the woman she was getting to know with the villagers' tales. She didn't see how anyone could spend five minutes in Jemeryl's company without liking her - but she had noticed that the mainland people held a peculiar attitude to sorcerers. Many spoke of them as if they were not human, and no more comprehensible than a thunderstorm. Tevi had already learnt that Jemeryl had a lively sense of humour. Perhaps the villagers had taken her too literally, not ready to credit a sorcerer with being ordinary enough to make jokes. For her part, Tevi found Jemeryl very good company.

Jemeryl's voice was light and clear, with a rich nasal burr of an accent. Tevi was not familiar enough with the people of the Protectorate to place it, but it sounded easy on her ear. She found herself wishing Jemeryl would say more, so she could listen. It would be interesting, when the bandage was removed, to see her and match a face to the voice.

Jemeryl also made no play of superiority. She spoke to Tevi as an equal, easy and unaffected. In fact, she was so quick to be friendly that Tevi wondered if Jemeryl might have been even lonelier than she was herself. After all, Jemeryl was just an ordinary woman - give or take a few enchanted bears.

No doubt the villagers were already working on stories, about the young mercenary who went into the castle and was never seen again. Tevi suspected some would be quite disappointed when she returned, whole and healthy. Really, she should send word that she was safe, but it was far too tempting to wait until she could give the message in person and see the reaction.

Tevi's story ended with her arrival in the valley. Harrick's team of misfits provoked their share of disparaging witticisms; there was also brief a mention of the villagers. Jemeryl suspected Tevi was being tactfully vague about their gossip.

Jemeryl stretched back in her chair and looked about the room. She was surprised to see how dark it had become. Beyond the firelight, the rest of the room was concealed in shadow. Even the squirrels were sleeping. At the snap of her fingers the window-shutters closed. The faint sound of wind whistling over the battlements stopped abruptly.

"What's happened?" Tevi asked, in curiosity rather than alarm.

"I've just fastened the shutters. It's night." Jemeryl said.

"Already?"

"I lost track of time as well. It's been an unusual day." Jemeryl took a deep breath, surprised by her own unexpected anxiety, but there was no point in delaying things. "I think we're ready to take off the bandage and examine your eyes."

Tevi's hands tensed on the arms of her chair. She also was clearly torn between hope and apprehension. "All right."

Jemeryl leaned over and squeezed Tevi's shoulder for encouragement. "Don't worry. I did a good job on your eyes."

"I'm sure you did. It's not that I don't trust you, but I don't know what will happen to me if my sight isn't restored. The mercenaries could even refuse me a pension, as I got the injury in an unauthorised venture."

"You're not going to need the pension - not for a long time." Jemeryl stated confidently.

Tevi nodded but said nothing.

Jemeryl stood and took her hand. "Come on. It will be better if we go to your room, where there's no firelight."

"How long am I going to have to stay in darkness?"

"Just while I do a few tests, then we can come back in here."

The absence of light in the bedroom was no problem to Jemeryl with her extended sorcerer's senses. Under her guidance, Tevi sat on the edge of the bed. Jemeryl removed the bandage and lightly touched Tevi's eyelids with her fingertips. She could feel the faint electric currents of nerves pulsing at the back of the retina, the warmth of living flesh and the elasticity of muscle. A pleased smile crossed Jemeryl's face; everything seemed very satisfactory. She then sat beside Tevi on the bed, and twisted sideways so she faced her patient.

"I'm going to make three small balls of light, a red, a blue and a green. They should all appear the same size and have sharply defined edges. Tell me if you see them." Jemeryl reached out and gently rippled the currents in the sixth dimension, to create the effect she had described.

Tevi's voice rung out immediately. "Yes. I can see them. Just like you said." The joy in her voice was unmistakable.

"Right. I'm now going to merge the three coloured balls to make a white one. I'll move it to where it won't shine directly into your eyes, then we'll check out the rest of your vision."

The lights merged. Slowly, Jemeryl started to raise the level of illumination in the room. Tevi's outline became visible, then the bed and the floor, but, just at the point when the light was beginning to touch the far wall Tevi's gave a gasp and closed her eyes tightly, a look of panic on her face.

Jemeryl doused the light at once. "What's wrong Tevi?"

"There's too much." Tevi's voice was raw and tight.

"Does it hurt?"

"No, but it looks all wrong."

Jemeryl matched Tevi in despair - she had been so sure the reconstruction had gone well. She needed more information; hopefully the problem would be rectifiable. "What did you see?"

"There was too much. Things were where they shouldn't be, all over the place."

Jemeryl thought furiously. "That sounds as if a nerve has been misconnected. Wait a few minutes and we'll try again. If you can give me a better idea of what you're seeing I should be able to correct the fault. Let me know when you're ready to continue."

Tevi's hand clasped Jemeryl's arm. "I'm okay. It wasn't painful, but it threw me. It just didn't look right."

Once again, Jemeryl gradually increased the light and said, "Now. Tell me what you can see that's strange."

Tevi let go of Jemeryl and gripped the edge of the mattress with her hands, keeping her head very still. She spoke deliberately, between gulps of air. "I'm looking straight ahead at the wall, but I can see my knees, and your shoulder, and part of the ceiling, and there's too much wall." Again, she squeezed her eyes shut.

Inspiration hit Jemeryl with a thump. She leaned back and studied her patient in astonishment. The unexpected snags she had encountered while reconstructing Tevi's eyes at last made sense. Abrak's potion had not been the cause of the problem, although the truth was just as surprising.

"Can you fix it? Do you know what's wrong?" There was an edge of panic to Tevi's voice.

"I know what *was* wrong."

"Was? But they still aren't right."

Jemeryl spoke gently. "No. Your eyes are fine now. The problem with them was in the past, and I'm not referring to the crystallisation."

"What... when?"

"It's known as tunnel vision. In rebuilding your eyes I've inadvertently cured it."

"Cured?"

"Even before you fought the basilisk, you had defective vision. You only saw out of the centre of your eyes. The nerve connections to the outer segments were damaged. I guess you were born like it and never realised you weren't seeing properly."

"My eyes were fine."

"I don't think they were. While I was rebuilding your eyes, I came across some irregularities. I put them down to a side effect of the crystallisation, but they would tie in with tunnel vision. More to the point, what you described seeing just now would be considered perfectly normal by anyone with healthy eyesight."

Tevi sat in silence while Jemeryl's words sunk in. "You mean that everyone sees the world like this all the time? It's awful. How do they cope?"

Jemeryl laughed softly, mainly with relief. "It comes down to what you're used to. Once you get the hang of it, a wide peripheral vision is a useful thing to have, especially, I would have thought, for someone in your profession."

It was some time before Tevi was able to open her eyes without being overwhelmed by nausea. She needed Jemeryl's assistance to get back to her chair in the parlour, walking with her eyes closed. Jemeryl dimmed the light from the fire to a dull red glow that illuminated the immediate surroundings without casting any harsh, bright light.

Tevi sat uneasily in her chair, taking quick peeks at her surroundings while trying to keep as still as possible. Every time she moved, the room whirled. It took a very slow and cautious effort to turn her head and examine the sorcerer. The subdued firelight showed a young, triangular face, surrounded by unruly auburn curls. Dark

amber shadows were cast in the hollows of Jemeryl's eyes and cheeks. A lopsided grin completed the impish effect.

"I'd wondered what you looked like." Tevi said.

"Well don't say whether I'm better or worse than you imagined. It gives grounds for offence either way."

"Can I say you look a lot better than the villagers implied?"

"You mean I haven't got a hooked nose, fangs and bloodshot eyes?"

Heedless of the dignity of her status as a Coven sorcerer, Jemeryl sat in a nonchalant pose. One leg stretched out to the fire while the other was hooked over the armrest. Her right arm was draped across the back of her chair, with a slender, long-fingered hand dangling loosely at the end. She was wearing a shapeless white shirt, several sizes too big for her, with sleeves rolled back to the elbows. Tevi thought that Jemeryl's looks, if not exactly what she had imagined, accorded very well with her easygoing manner.

"You're younger than I expected. I could tell by your voice you weren't old, but I still had a picture in my mind." Tevi studied the sorcerer thoughtfully. "Do you genuinely look like that or have you altered your appearance?"

Jemeryl laughed. "I'm really, truly only twenty-two. Using magic to change the way you look is seen as very immature. I'll admit to combing my hair from time to time - not that it does much good."

"If she was going to muck about with magic, wouldn't you expect better results than this?" Klara said, from her habitual perch on Jemeryl's chair.

"Oh, I would say she..." Tevi's mouth went dry; her stomach flipped over.

Jemeryl's face was not one of refined classical beauty. Such a face would not have suited her irreverent manner, nor could it have taken the mischievous grin that lit her features. Yet, as Tevi felt her heart pounding against her ribs, she knew that Jemeryl's appearance was altogether much too much to her liking. Almost against her will she found herself picking out the details: the belt that pulled the shirt in to reveal a slim waist, Jemeryl's finely formed hands, long straight legs, and the small dark hollow at the base of her throat.

"What?" Jemeryl asked.

"Pardon?"

"What would you say? You didn't finish your sentence."

"Oh... nothing." Tevi mumbled.

"It's okay. You're allowed to have an opinion about me. After all, I've been watching you for the last couple of days and I've formed some opinions of my own. If you like I'll come over and sit beside you and tell you what they are."

In her agitated confusion, Tevi did not register Jemeryl's words. The only coherent thought in her head was a desperate hope that mind reading wasn't one of the sorcerer's skills. She had no desire to discover Jemeryl's response to the uncontrolled emotions churning inside her.

She could feel Jemeryl's eyes, as if they were deliberately trying to catch hers. Rather than risk that happening Tevi sharply twisted back to the fire, and was swamped by a burst of nausea as the room leapt cartwheels around her. Her lips pulled back in a grimace and she scrunched her eyes shut.

After all her plans to avoid personal contact, she had allowed herself to become far too keen on Jemeryl, and hadn't realised it until the moment she set eyes on her. *Just because you were blind to the world didn't mean you had to be blind to what was going on inside you.* Tevi cursed herself as a fool. She was in trouble. She was a heartbeat away from being in love - with someone it was far too dangerous to offend.

At the other side of the room, Jemeryl was waiting for Tevi's response to her overture. Part of her was confident that Tevi would welcome the offer to sit beside her, and from there things would progress in a predictable, and

very enjoyable direction. Part of her was gnawed by agonised apprehension; butterflies in the stomach didn't begin to describe the feeling. Jemeryl found herself desperately praying for a smile and a nod of agreement, instead she saw Tevi's expression switch to one of pain.

"Are you all right, Tevi?"

"I moved too fast. It upsets my stomach, and my head. Are you sure everyone sees like this?" Tevi said quickly.

"Everyone with normal vision."

"I guess I'll have to learn to get used to it."

And I guess I'll have to learn to improve my timing, Jemeryl commented wryly to herself. *Try waiting until she's not feeling sick next time.* Aloud she said, "I could block off your peripheral vision again, but I'd be loath to do that. I think you should give it a good try before you make any decisions."

"It's strange to think that all my life I just assumed everyone saw things the same way as me." Tevi's voice was strained, as if she were deliberately pushing herself to follow the new topic of conversation.

Slightly mystified, Jemeryl went along with it. "Didn't you ever notice other people could see more of what was happening around them?"

"Not really, although some things now make sense. My weapons teachers were always telling me to watch my opponent's feet out of the corner of my eye. I never knew what they meant."

"It must have been quite a handicap for you."

Tevi's attempt at a rueful grin looked more as if she was about to throw up. "It would be nice to think it's the reason I'm so incompetent at fighting."

"Incompetent is not a word normally applied to any warrior who kills a basilisk."

"I am by the standards of my village. I was the joke of the island because I was so hopeless. Do you think I'll be better now?"

"It's hard to say. You may be able to make full use of your vision, or habits may be so ingrained you'll be unable to change. But your family can't have thought that badly of you if they entrusted you with the quest."

"I wasn't given the quest as a mark of honour." Tevi looked as if salt had been poured on a raw wound.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Jemeryl was now very concerned.

"I'm just a bit queasy with my eyes. Maybe some smoke from the fire..." The half-hearted words trailed off, clearly a weak attempt at an excuse.

Jemeryl left her chair and moved to a stool by Tevi's side, but restrained the urge to reach out and touch the other woman. Adding everything together, things were starting to make more sense. *She volunteered to find the chalice as an act of bravado to silence her critics,* Jemeryl thought.

Tevi sat staring forlornly at the ground.

This could be the chance to introduce the subject of accompanying Tevi on the quest. Jemeryl said softly, "I can't promise, but now that your eyes are fixed you might be better. If you find the chalice and go back..."

Tevi interrupted, "There's not much chance of that."

"Yes there is, with my help."

"Do you know where the chalice is?"

"No, but I know how to go about finding it."

"I suppose, if you point me in the right direction..." Tevi began, half-heartedly

"Better than that, I'll come with you."

"You can't do that." Tevi's response was immediate, horrified.

"Why not? The villagers will be relieved to see me go and I can help you enormously. Wouldn't you like my company?" Cautiously Jemeryl reached out and took hold of Tevi's hand.

The effect on Tevi was instantaneous. She snatched her hand away and lurched to her feet, swaying. "I don't know if I'll even bother to get the chalice. But you can't come with me. I don't want..."

Jemeryl was dismayed and astonished by the response. "Tevi?"

"I'm sorry. I'm don't mean to sound rude. Thank you for the offer. It's kind of you, but it's out of the question. I... I'm... I think I need to go to bed." Tevi fled to her room.

Left alone in the parlour Jemeryl sat bewildered. How had things gone so wrong, so quickly? She looked at Klara. "Why was she so upset? What did I say?"

"I think it's more what you did. She doesn't want to hold your hand. Mumbling sweet nothings in her ear and long walks in the moonlight are probably out as well. And you can forget the rest."

Jemeryl stood up and looked around the room. Her eyes fixed on the door to Tevi's room. She took a half step, then stopped, turned around and threw herself back down in her chair. She glared at the embers of the fire, her confusion giving way to hurt. Somehow, she had taken it for granted that Tevi would return her affection, but it was impossible to miss the rebuff in Tevi's behaviour, and it did not take any sorcerer's arts to know the rejection had been largely personal.

"I thought she liked me." Jemeryl said.

"Ah, but that was before she saw you. Maybe you look an awful lot worse than she was expecting." Klara fluttered down to land on the arm of the chair. She tilted her head to one side and studied the sorcerer thoughtfully. "And to be brutally honest, her expectations needn't have been that high."

With a forced attempt at a smile, Jemeryl pushed the magpie off her perch.

Jemeryl left the shutters in place the next morning, since she knew Tevi's eyes would be hypersensitive to light. Consequently, the room was still in a dim half-light when Tevi made her appearance in the parlour, even though it was long after dawn. Jemeryl watched her entrance with concern. It was apparent that the night's sleep had done nothing to improve Tevi's mood. Problems with her newly restored vision had to be a contributing factor, but Jemeryl was gloomily certain there was more to it.

"Good morning Tevi. How are you?" she asked, with little hope of learning much from the reply.

"Not too good." Tevi mumbled.

"Is it just your eyes?"

"More or less. I feel a little nauseous as well."

"Breakfast might help. There's bread, honey and milk on the table. I've already eaten, but I'll help you if you want."

"I'll manage on my own."

Tevi stumbled across the room and sat down with a partially repressed groan.

Jemeryl joined her at the table, though she kept a discrete distance. For a while Tevi picked at her food in silence, her whole manner subdued. The easy friendship of the previous day was gone, replaced by a strained reserve. This was not the time to pursue the issue of joining Tevi on the quest, but it would be several days before Tevi was able to travel, hopefully things between them would improve by then.

Tevi ate slowly, her eyes glued to the tabletop, as if not daring to move her head. "I'm not sure if I'm ever going to be able to cope with this." she said at last.

"It will get easier. Give it time." Jemeryl tried to put some reassurance in her voice.

"I... I'm sorry if I'm not seeming too grateful at the moment."

Tevi's voice had lost some of its sullen tone, which gave Jemeryl the confidence to quip, "That's okay. I can wait until tomorrow for you to tell me how wonderful I've been."

"I suppose, to be fair, I could concede that now." Tevi sunk back in her chair and closed her eyes in a grimace. "But the light's very bright."

"Oh, Tevi. You should have said sooner." Now that Jemeryl looked closely she could see Tevi's eyes were watering. At a gesture, rolls of shadow flowed down over the windows, reducing the parlour to a thick dusk. "There. Is that better?"

"Yes. Thank you."

"I should have guessed it would still be too bright for you, even with the shutters closed." Jemeryl said, remorsefully.

"How long before my eyes will be better?"

"You should notice some improvement by tomorrow. In eight or nine days you'll be able to cope with full daylight."

"I guess that's not too bad." Tevi conceded, although her tone was far from happy.

"It might be a bit boring for you. There's not much I can offer in the way of entertainment in the dark." Jemeryl said, adding mentally. *At least nothing you've given me grounds to think you might be interested in.*

"I've had quite enough excitement in the past few days. But I don't want to stop you, if there's anything you need to do. I don't mind being left alone." Tevi's tone implied that solitude would even be preferred.

Jemeryl bit her lip, and tried to prevent disappointment from showing on her face - an unnecessary precaution, given that Tevi had not once glanced in her direction. There seemed little hope of charming her way back into Tevi's favour. Investigating other options seemed the best hope. She was sure at least part of Tevi's reticence was due to a belief that the quest for the chalice was impossible. Proving otherwise might not remove all objections, but it would be a start. There were few resources at hand in the castle, yet they were almost certainly sufficient to deduce Abrak's true identity. From there other leads might come.

A little diplomacy was called for. Jemeryl tried not to sound too eager as she said, "There's nothing I have to do. However, your story of Abrak caught my interest as a sorcerer. I thought, while you're still around to answer questions, I might try and find out more about her."

"What would you like to know?"

"I've got books upstairs in my study, which will probably mention her, but I'd need to know her real name."

"Her real name? What's wrong with Abrak?" Tevi said, surprised.

"It's like a miller called Dusty, or a carpenter called Chips. Abrak is a joke name for a sorcerer, short for Abracadabra. It's a piece of meaningless gibberish that for some reason is linked with magic in the minds of storytellers."

"Oh."

"Do you know of any other name for her?"

Tevi shook her head and clearly regretted it instantly. She clasped her hands to her temples and shut her eyes tightly. "Idiot." she hissed between clenched teeth. Her arms dropped and she met Jemeryl's gaze with a faint smile, for the first time that morning. "I meant me, not you. The room whirled when I did that."

"I realised." Jemeryl smiled back at her, happy that the air of tension had eased slightly. "Since you don't know her name, it might help if I had some dates to work with. Do you know how long ago it was that Abrak arrived on your islands?"

"I'm afraid we islanders don't go in for arithmetic. We didn't even use the words for numbers over twelve - there wasn't any need. If you saw an enemy war-band with more warriors than that, you didn't hang about to count the rest. Sheep were added up on tally-sticks. I've mainly learned about numbers since I've been on the mainland. Marith gave me lessons. She said I'd need them to keep track of money and things like that."

"Well, perhaps you can give some indirect dates. You said the leader in the rebellion was your..." Jemeryl's forehead creased. "Great-great-great-grandmother. Do you have any idea how old your ancestors were when they gave birth?"

"My mother was quite old when she had me. She'd had three boys and five miscarriages before I was born. She was my grandmother's first child, but after that, it gets a bit vague. My grandmother had two elder sisters who survived to adulthood. I think there was also a brother, plus a couple of others who died in infancy. My grandmother was still a child when her both older sisters were killed in battle. Which was how she became queen."

Tevi paused, halted by a gesture from Jemeryl.

"Males don't become Kings?"

"Never."

"And your grandmother was queen?"

"Yes, didn't I say?"

"You're the eldest daughter of her eldest daughter." Jemeryl frowned. "I admit I'm not over familiar with the workings of hereditary monarchies, but doesn't that mean you'll be queen yourself one day?"

Tevi's expression became even less happy. "Probably not. I promised not to go back without the chalice, and I doubt I'll ever find it. But I've got a younger sister, and I'm sure she'll do a good job."

Tevi spoke diffidently, but she was clearly fighting to keep her lower lip steady. Jemeryl was confused. From what she had put together so far, Tevi had not been held in high regard by her family and had volunteered to find the chalice to prove her worth. That Tevi had been willing to risk her place in the succession must have been a desperate gamble on her part. People from hereditary cultures attached immense importance to following their parents, or so Jemeryl had heard. Yet, although Tevi was clearly distressed, she showed no sign of being driven to complete the quest and reclaim her inheritance. Tevi's character did not appear to lack determination, and the basilisk proved she was no coward. Why was she so ready to abandon all hope of returning to her home? Something else had to be involved, and it might well be relevant to the quest, however Jemeryl was sure it would not be wise to probe the subject until some level of trust could be re-established.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..." Jemeryl stopped herself on the point of saying *upset*, "er... interrupt you. We were talking about dates. Do you know how old you are?"

"Twenty."

"You were your mother's ninth pregnancy. So when you were born she must have been... mid-thirties?" Jemeryl guessed.

"Yes, about that." Tevi's voice was steadier.

"Right, then your grandmother..." Jemeryl grabbed a pen and began making notes.

A short while later, Tevi had passed on all the relevant information she possessed. Jemeryl added up the figures and chewed the end of the quill thoughtfully.

"I estimate Abrak arrived on your islands in the region of 140 to 175 years ago. It's something to work with."

"I'm sorry I can't be more help."

"That's all right. There can't have been too many sorcerers who disappeared without trace in the vicinity of Walderim during that time."

"Is there anything else you want?" Tevi asked.

Jemeryl sighed. She would have liked to bring her books down and sit in the parlour, but Tevi would clearly be happier left on her own. "No. I'm going see if I can find anything out. If you have any problems call me."

"I'll be fine. The bears can stay and keep me company - if you don't need them."

"Might as well, they'd only get in my way."

Jemeryl slumped despondently up the stairs to her study. She had hoped Tevi's abrupt departure the night before had been due to a misunderstanding, but Tevi had been blatantly building barriers between them just now. Even after you made allowances for problems with her sight, she had pointedly not looked in Jemeryl's direction. And it was too late for Jemeryl to wish she had kept a tighter rein on her own emotions - just one more problem she would have to resolve.

The more immediate task was tracking down Abrak. A long row of books on herbalism lined one shelf in the study. Jemeryl groaned at the sight of them. None was quite what she needed. A directory of sorcerers would have been best, but all she had were the medical books she had brought with her, anticipating the needs of the villagers. Iralin's words of censure echoed in her ears - most had not been off the shelf since she arrived in the valley. Jemeryl was not even sure what some of them contained. Hopefully there would be biographical details of the creators of various potions, with cross-references for people interested in further details of their work.

Jemeryl called a book over to her - it was going to be a long tedious search.

By late afternoon Jemeryl had gone through five books and learnt nothing. She closed the cover of the one she was reading and sent it back to the shelf. The hours were taking a toll and her concentration was starting to suffer. It was probably best to stop for the day and start again in the morning.

It was getting dark outside; the window displayed only her reflection. Apart from a brief meeting at lunch, she had not spoken to Tevi. Maybe by now the mercenary would be ready for company.

Everything was much as she had left it when Jemeryl entered the parlour. The two bears were sleeping in front of the fire. Several squirrels had dragged a cloak onto a chair to make a nest. However there was no sign of Tevi. The absence was a little surprising; on her way from the study, Jemeryl had seen that Tevi was not in the hall. Even with the fading light, being outside would put a strain on Tevi's eyes, although it was possible that she was attending to her pony. Before going to check the sables, Jemeryl first tried knocking on the door to Tevi's room.

"Tevi?" she called. There was no answer. Jemeryl pushed the door open and peered in.

Tevi was curled in tight ball on the bed, her face knotted in agony.

"Tevi, what's wrong?" Jemeryl rushed to her side.

"My head hurts." Tevi hissed through clenched teeth.

"Why didn't you call me?"

"I'll be okay."

"No you won't. When did this start?"

"I was practising walking up and down. Things were starting to spin. I thought I could manage but..." Tevi ground to a stop.

"But you pushed it too far." Jemeryl finished the sentence for her. "You should have called me when you started to feel ill."

"I'm sorry."

Jemeryl's initial alarm was giving way to anger. There was no need for Tevi to start acting like one of the stupid villagers. Why hadn't the warrior called when she started feeling unwell? Why hide in her room? It was unlikely that any serious damage had been done, although Tevi was clearly in pain; her face was bloodless pale, her aura distorted.

As she took in the details Jemeryl's mood softened to exasperation. *Maybe it's my fault*, Jemeryl told herself, *There's something about me that makes the ungifted act like frightened idiots when I'm around*. She just wished she knew what it was. In the meantime, Tevi needed her help.

"Roll over and lie face down." Jemeryl ordered. Once Tevi had obeyed, she sat beside her on the edge of the bed.

The muscles of Tevi's neck and shoulders were snarled like twisted rope. Deftly Jemeryl began to massage away the tension. At the same time, she worked on Tevi's aura. Her abilities as a sorcerer allowed Jemeryl to see the series of tiny vortexes littering Tevi's astral projection. They disrupted the flow of life energies. In time, they would fade of their own accord, but reversing the spin would speed up the process. Relaxing the cramped muscles and raising the flow of blood would prevent their return.

Within minutes, she could tell the pain in Tevi's head was starting to abate. The hard cords in Tevi's neck softened, although the tightness in her shoulders was proving more stubborn. It would be easier if Tevi removed her thick jerkin. Jemeryl was about to ask but stopped, uncertain. Suddenly her hands were very aware of the touch of Tevi's skin - the texture and the warmth.

Jemeryl's gaze travelled the length of the body lying motionless on the bed. She finished staring at the back of Tevi's head. There was an overwhelming temptation to run her hands through Tevi's short dark hair, to take hold of her shoulder, turn her over, and look into her eyes. It was so easy for Jemeryl to fantasise the act of then kissing Tevi, slowly and very thoroughly, and imagine the feel of Tevi's arms tightening around her. Jemeryl's hands started to move before she had a chance to think, but then she mastered her errant emotions.

From Tevi's reaction the night before it was easy to guess the outcome of attempting such an manoeuvre. Jemeryl barely suppressed her groan of despair. Iralin had given her a job to do, one she had to succeed at. She dare not risk alienating the woman she was obliged to accompany. After only a second's pause, Jemeryl continued to massage Tevi's shoulders, but she had moved her hands to the outside of the jerkin, breaking the direct contact with Tevi's skin.

"How do you feel?" Jemeryl asked, once the last of the vortexes had disappeared.

"I'm okay, the pain has gone." Tevi's voice was muffled by the blanket.

"Will you come and sit in parlour?"

"I think I'd rather lie here a while."

"Do you want me to stay with you?" Jemeryl offered.

"No."

The answer was so faint Jemeryl had to strain to catch it, but unmistakable. Jemeryl got off the bed and walked to the door. "All right. But in future call me when you don't feel well."

"I'm sorry. I didn't want to disturb you."

Before leaving the room, Jemeryl stopped for one last look at her patient. Tevi still had not moved. Her face was buried in the pillow, preventing any eye contact. Jemeryl pulled the door shut and went to her seat by the fire. The faint noise she made woke Ruff briefly. The bear snorted and rolled over before falling back asleep.

The room was very quiet. With only the animals' slumbering presence for company Jemeryl sat for a long time, staring bleakly into the flames. Her heart was pounding. Her hands ached from the memory of touching Tevi. In despair she thought, *Oh gods, I've really fallen for her*. Her emotions were totally out of control, and all her skills as a sorcerer could not help her.

And Tevi wasn't interested - she was making it very obvious, taking every chance to put literal as well as metaphorical distance between them. Jemeryl could guess why.

Many of the ungifted were uncomfortable around sorcerers. Few would be willing even to have one as a friend, let alone as a lover. Tevi had shown no sign of being bothered by Jemeryl's status - *Until she saw me*, Jemeryl thought. *Or rather, until she saw how I was looking at her*. Tevi's tolerance of sorcerers apparently did not extend

that far. It was not merely that Tevi did not return the feelings - she was running scared. *Does she think sorcerers can't take 'No' as an answer?*

Of course, there was one definite area where Jemeryl could not accept a 'No'. Whether Tevi agreed or not, she had to go with her on the quest for the chalice. Tevi's consent would make it less unpleasant, but either way it was going to be miserable. Jemeryl's jaw clenched at the thought - to spend months in Tevi's company, with her close at hand but out of reach. *Did Iralin know what she was condemning me to when she gave her orders?* Jemeryl wondered. Then her lips twisted into a bitter grimace, *Probably not. It's just one of those things.*

When she heard the door shut, Tevi rolled onto her back and flung an arm over her face. With her eyes closed, she could almost see the hay barn at Storenseg, and hear the contemptuous voices. What would her mother say to see her now? Would Red be able to overcome her disgust long enough to laugh at the bad joke?

Tevi clenched her jaw. She should have called her grandmother's bluff back on Storenseg. Even if she had lost the gamble, it would have been honest. She could have been true to herself, but, like a coward, she had accepted the option to run. She had been running ever since. She had fled from Cayell and now she wanted to escape again. However, Tevi knew in her heart it was the most pointless form of flight - she was trying to run away from herself.

"What else can I do?" Tevi whispered under her breath.

She was not handling things well. Her behaviour had been nothing short of rude in rebuffing Jemeryl's overtures of friendship. She had snubbed the offer to go on the quest, from fear of causing worse offence. Yet even if the search for the chalice had been in earnest, she could not have risked Jemeryl's company. She liked the sorcerer, far more than was safe, far more than could be hidden. It could not be long before she did or said something to give herself away. She knew she had annoyed Jemeryl - the knowledge hurt; she did not want Jemeryl to think badly of her.

The honourable course would be to face things squarely. To go to Jemeryl, tell her the whole sordid truth and except what ever might come of it. But what would Jemeryl say or do? As the Coven representative in the area Jemeryl was responsible for maintaining law and order. Would she, in her official role, feel obliged to report to the mercenary guild-masters? How would it feel to have Jemeryl look at her with loathing?

I can't do it. It was an admission of cowardice. Tevi hated herself.

Tevi got to her feet and walked to the window of her room. The shutters had been in place all day. She gave a shove to open them, venting her anger by using far more force than necessary. Night had fallen. The moon was rising in the eastern sky, floating above the mountains. To Tevi's newly rebuilt eyes its gentle light burned like the blast of a furnace. Fumbling blindly, Tevi refastened the shutters and collapsed back on the bed.

The only option she had was to get away as soon as possible, and keep moving, but there was no chance of doing it immediately. She must wait until her eyes were strong again. Until then, she would have to keep herself under tight control, guard her words and actions. When she could withstand daylight she would go - but she didn't want to. The thought of staying with Jemeryl was appallingly tempting. Tevi could hardly believe how much she craved it. The memory of Jemeryl's hands touching her neck washed over her with painful intensity. Tevi's self-control deserted her. Hot tears escaped from under her eyelids as she sobbed.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN—A Cautionary Tale

Jemeryl's hunt for Abrak the next day did not produce the name of even one potential candidate. By evening, she was becoming dejected. Tevi contrived to be both more sociable and less friendly, which further depressed her mood. Tension permeated the entire castle; the bears were irritable and even Klara's stream of sarcasm dried up. Only the squirrels were unaffected.

Affairs improved slightly on the following day. Tevi's eyes were less sensitive which produced a positive effect on her humour. Her greeting at breakfast was warmer. Jemeryl wondered if this was a cue to stay a while and chat, but as soon as the meal was finished Tevi disappeared into her room. To Jemeryl's consternation, she returned a few seconds later, carrying her sword.

"I need to do some exercises." Tevi explained.

"Promise you'll stop if you get a headache?"

Tevi nodded, a little sheepishly. She moved to the largest clear space in the parlour. Her sword tip began to trace swift patterns in the air, moving in set routines of feint, parry and riposte.

Clearly, Tevi was not ready to talk. Jemeryl was about to leave, when an idea occurred to her, one that might get Tevi to accept help.

"That doesn't look very exciting." She said casually.

Tevi paused and glanced over her shoulder. "It isn't, but it's the only way I have to keep the muscles in my sword arm in shape."

"If you want I could conjure a phantom opponent for you."

"A phantom opponent?"

"An illusion for you to spar with."

"Um... thanks, but I wouldn't want to waste your time." Despite her words, Tevi was clearly intrigued.

"It's no trouble. It will only take a minute to set up. Everything I need is in the hall."

Tevi looked uncertain, but then nodded. "Okay, I'll give it a try."

Jemeryl reduced the light in the great hall to a soft twilight that would not hurt delicate eyes. It was the first time Tevi had seen Jemeryl's workroom and she wandered around, bemused by the strange artefacts. A call from Jemeryl reclaimed her attention. The sorcerer had drawn a twisting pattern in chalk on the floor. A grey humanoid shape was forming above it, sword in hand.

"I'm afraid I don't know enough weapon-craft to make a serious opponent for you, but it should be more fun than waving a sword at thin air." Jemeryl said.

"Oh no, it's er..." Tevi's words ground to a halt in wonder. She stood in front of the figure. "What do I do with it?"

"Just attack. It will stop when you move away."

Tevi tentatively jabbed her sword towards the phantom's midriff. The figure responded instantly with a block. A shower of sparks fell as the two blades clashed. Tevi swung her sword across in a more purposeful attack. The phantom dodged, then struck out with its own weapon, forcing Tevi to parry.

She stepped back and looked at Jemeryl quizzically. "Before I go on, how dangerous is it?"

Jemeryl grinned. "Don't worry. I'm not about to see my work fixing your eyes go to waste. The sword will tingle if it hits, but that's all."

Tevi returned to the attack. Jemeryl settled back to watch. The phantom did not need her presence and it might be wiser to leave, but the sight of Tevi fighting, graceful and deadly, was too seductive. Then something else caught Jemeryl's attention. She leaned forward, intent on the timing of the two swords slicing through the air.

After several minutes of sparring, Tevi stood back, breathing heavily. Eyes closed, she pressed a hand against her forehead.

"Are you all right?" Jemeryl asked.

"Just a little giddy. The room spins when I move but it doesn't make me feel ill as it use to." Tevi's hand dropped. She sounded pleased.

"Good." Jemeryl paused. "You know, I don't think you're completely ungifted."

"Pardon?"

"You've got a trace of a paranormal ability."

"I've what?"

"It's nothing too conspicuous. I'm sure nobody else would have noticed. But it's my phantom, so I knew what it was going to do, and I could tell you were getting ready to parry its blow before it moved. I'd say your second dimensional time sense warned you." The surprise on Tevi's face made Jemeryl laugh. "Time exists in two dimensions. Nearly everyone can perceive one, but you need the paranormal ability for the other. A few can't see the first dimension - a bit like being blind or deaf. They appear mad to the rest of us. For them everything happens without order, cause or effect."

"And the second dimension?"

"It's used for fortune telling and the like. Fortunately it's an ability that isn't well developed in me."

"Why fortunately? It sounds like a good thing."

Recent experience came to mind, although Jemeryl decided not to use it as an example. Instead, she said, "It's more trouble than it's worth. If you see time in two dimensions, the future is as fixed as the past. There are very few with the faculty to any great degree in the Coven - most live as hermits. Keovan was a rare sorcerer who was fully aware of two dimensional time and still able to cope with other people."

"Wasn't he the one who founded the Coven?" Tevi remembered the name.

"It was founded by his apprentices after his death. Keovan couldn't have started the Protectorate; he was too overwhelmed by the ultimate futility of everything."

"The Protectorate don't seem futile to me."

Jemeryl's expression became solemn. "Nothing can last forever. One day the Coven will fall and the Protectorate with it. Four hundred years of peace and prosperity have swollen the population. There are over 70 million citizens, plus another 15 million in surrounding lands that depend on the Coven for their security. That's twice as many people as the rest of the world put together. When the Protectorate collapses most will die, one way or another. If I were permanently conscious that all the good I could achieve would only make for a bigger catastrophe at the end, I'd be as paralysed as Keovan."

"You said you thought I had something of the sense."

"Nothing like enough to give you problems. I'd guess it's working a fraction of a second into the future and only giving you critical information - such as where your enemy is about to strike."

"How does it work?"

"You know what you were doing. How did it feel? How did you know where to move?"

Tevi frowned. "It seemed as if Blaze, my old weapons instructor, was giving advice. I thought I was just remembering her lessons."

"That's the way your mind rationalised the information, because you haven't grown up with the sense. It wouldn't have worked on your islands. Judging by the absence of sorcerers, there must be a high iron content to the rocks, and iron puts a complete stop on prophecy."

"I'm not sure if I like the idea."

"I'd have thought it would be very useful to you. But if you want to block it out, wear iron or steel armour, particularly a helmet. Your sword will be impairing your precognition, although the wooden handle will insulate you to some extent. If, on the other hand, you want to make more use of it, you could consider getting a rune-sword that's been crafted to harmonise with temporal currents, but they are expensive."

"Supposing one day the voice screams in my ear, *Too late, you're going to die.*"

"Then it won't make any difference."

Tevi swung her sword back and forth thoughtfully. Eventually she asked, "How rare is this extra time-sense?"

"Hard to tell. Many people have limited paranormal senses, but not enough to put to any use - just vague feelings. Sorcerers are rare; there are less than 3,000 of us in the Coven. Witches are far more common; they are people with good use of one or two extra senses. They work in occupations such as medicine, which only requires the sense we call aura- empathy. People who have it to a lesser degree tend to be farmers and gardeners."

"That doesn't sound very magical."

"Plants have auras too. Aura-empathy is the most widespread of paranormal senses and it isn't totally blocked by iron. Some people on your islands must have had it, though they probably weren't aware of what it was. Senses are so personal. You assume everyone sees the world the same way you can - like with your tunnel vision. Think about it. Didn't you find some people were good at looking after plants... green-fingered?"

"Like my aunt Han." Tevi's face brightened. "I remember her shouting things like *Any fool can see the peas need watering.* It may have been obvious to her, it wasn't to the rest of us."

Jemeryl nodded. "That's a typical remark from someone who can see the aura of plants."

For the first time in days, Tevi smiled directly at Jemeryl. The sorcerer felt her heart lurch, but, before she could speak, Tevi's face hardened. The warrior spun and attacked the phantom with a ferocious slash. Taking the hint, Jemeryl rose and went upstairs to her study.

Four afternoons later Jemeryl sat alone and disheartened. She slammed the book shut and shoved her chair back from the desk. The search for Abrak was going badly. So far, she had come up with only two possible names, both of which were later discounted. It seemed as if sorcerers disappeared inexplicably even less often than might be imagined. She thumped her fist on the cover of the book.

From a nearby perch, Klara looked on, critically. "You could always throw it at the wall if you think it would help."

Jemeryl closed her eyes and sighed. "Perhaps the Abrak story is a complete fantasy. I ought to have found something by now. You know what old legends are like, maybe the whole thing was someone's idea of a joke."

"And the chalice was just an old beer mug?" Klara was at her most ironic.

"No, you're right, that wouldn't make sense either. The chalice must be genuine; otherwise someone wouldn't have bothered sending the bird to get it. And the strength potion is genuine as well. You can see the effect on Tevi."

"And I can see the effect of Tevi on you. You're really keen on her, aren't you?"

"She doesn't want to know." The pain showed on Jemeryl's face. "I can't make her out. Most of the time she cold-shoulders me completely. Then, once in a while, her guard slips and she acts like she wants..." Jemeryl's voice trailed off in despair.

Klara stood on one leg and examined the claw on the other foot, like a woman regarding her fingernails. "And they have the nerve to call sorcerers temperamental. But I'm sure she'll make up her mind about you in the end."

"There isn't much time. Iralin only gave me twelve days and they're running out. Tevi's eyesight is improving rapidly. She'll be ready to leave soon and she's still determined I can't go with her. I've got my future in the Coven to consider."

"She can't stop you following her."

"I don't want her to be frightened of me. I want her to like me."

The magpie fixed Jemeryl with a cynical look. "Like?"

"If she can't manage anything else." Jemeryl's thoughts churned in the state of chaos that Tevi normally inspired. She buried her face in her hands.

"Gods, you've got it bad."

Goaded into action, Jemeryl sprung from the desk and marched to the bookcase. "I'm going to broaden my search. Maybe if I look at the background to the island folk there might be a few clues. My grandfather's history of Walderim is here somewhere."

A faint smile touched Jemeryl's face at the memory of the old man, the only one of her blood kin who had not been frightened of her when she was a child, the only one she had any fondness for. He had come from Walderim and had pretensions of being a scholar, hence his history. The only good memories she had from her childhood were of him and her foster-mother, the witch. The only items from her birthplace she still had with her were the copy of his book, given as a present on the day she had left for Lyremouth, and a good-luck charm from her foster-mother. Jemeryl's own skill now far exceeded the elementary charm, and the book was not well-written; her grandfather's view of his talents had been rather inflated, but both items were a source of comfort when she was feeling low.

Jemeryl pulled the volume from the shelf, and hugged it to her tightly, her eyes closed. She felt in desperate need of comfort right now. Then, with a resolute expression, she returned to the table and opened the cover.

After sunset, that evening, the two women wrapped themselves in thick cloaks and went for a walk around the battlements. It was the nearest thing to being out in daylight for Tevi since the bandage had been removed. She leaned against the stone palisade and gazed at the panorama on the opposite side of the valley. Distant ice-capped mountains faded away into soft purple shadows. A few faint stars glinted in the dark blue sky overhead. Beside her, Jemeryl tried to hide her nervousness; she was not looking forward to the coming conversation.

"Do you think I'll be able to leave soon?" Tevi asked.

"In a day or two. You could probably go tomorrow if it isn't sunny."

"Oh." Unaccountably, Tevi seemed deflated by the answer.

Jemeryl rested her arms on the parapet and peered over. The road passing under the castle walls was more mud than snow. Soon Tevi would be riding along it, leaving the valley. The issue would have to be forced. She had hoped for definite information before she spoke, but her search was running out of time.

In her most decisive voice she said, "I'm going with you when you leave."

"You can't." Tevi was equally determined.

"Why not?"

Tevi fiddled with the ties on her cloak, in obvious distress. At last, she said, "Because the quest is a wild goose chase. I haven't got a hope of finding the chalice and there was no expectation of me doing it from the start. I told you I was an embarrassment to my family. The quest was just an excuse to go away and get lost."

Tevi's words described a scenario even bleaker than the one Jemeryl had expected, and there was still something that did not tie in. "That was due to your tunnel vision. Now your eyes are fixed you'll be able to hold your own on the islands."

"Maybe not."

"Even so, you can prove it isn't your fault." Jemeryl insisted.

Tevi shrugged. "Anyway it doesn't matter. I don't know how to find the chalice."

"Which is why you need me with you. I can make a good guess as to why the chalice was stolen and that gives me a start in knowing where to look."

"What do you mean?"

"Abrak must have been a herbalist, so her chalice would have been made of crystalline silver. It's known a *memory chalice*. Herbalists work a lot by trial and error, with luck and accidents playing a part. They add a bit of one thing, then another, watching how the potion blends in the fifth dimension. By the time they get the mixture right they've usually forgotten exactly what they put in. A memory chalice works like a magical notebook. You can retrieve the formula for anything that has ever been made in the vessel. That's why someone would have gone to the effort of tracking down the chalice and snatching it. They must want to reproduce some of her work. All I have to do is work out who Abrak was and find out what her interests were. Then we go to whoever's working in that area. Herbalists exchange information between themselves, so even if the sorcerer we select isn't the one who took the chalice, they'll have a good idea who was."

"But whoever it is won't just give the chalice back."

"No reason why not. They must have found out what they wanted to know by now, so they'll have no further need for the chalice."

"It's not that simple." Tevi's voice was raw with despair.

Jemeryl would not be put off. "Yes it is, but you need me with you."

"Please believe me. I've got reasons I can't tell you. You can't come with me." Tevi's agitation was growing by the second.

Jemeryl did not have the option to compromise. "I'm afraid I have to."

"I don't want you with me." Tevi turned to flee the battlements. "I'm going back inside."

"I'm not such bad company, am I?" Jemeryl said softly.

Tevi froze at the head of the steps leading down to the courtyard, but did not turn back. "It's nothing to do with... It's not your fault, but you can't with me. I'm sorry." She disappeared down the stairs. Her footsteps faded away into the dusk.

"Tevi dashing off like that is getting a bit monotonous." Klara commented from a perch on the battlements.

Jemeryl leaned against the wall and stared blankly at the stars. Somehow, she had managed to alienate Tevi. Jemeryl did not have the first idea of what she had done wrong, but it was obvious that she had made mistakes as fundamental as those with the villagers.

The likely consequences if she returned to the Coven alone, and explained that the warrior had refused her company did not make for pleasant contemplation. One failure to discharge a duty was bad - two in the space of a month would be catastrophic. The authorities would be certain to withdraw her title of sorcerer and assign her to a punishment duty.

"You'd be lucky to get off with spending the next five years cleaning out the Coven latrines."

Jemeryl suspected Klara's flippant comment was nothing short of the truth. "I have no choice. I've got to go with her, whether she wants me or not."

Mid-afternoon on the following day found Tevi in the courtyard, playing a fast moving game of tag with the bears. The sky was overcast, easy on her eyes. The world still wobbled when she twisted quickly, but Tevi no

longer found it so disconcerting. With practice she was confident she would be able to make full use of her new expanded vision and, even now, Tevi was aware how much easier it was to avoid the bears. Trees no longer threw themselves into her path as she dodged.

Tevi hurdled over Ruff's back. After a last race past the porch of the great hall, she charged through the door to the kitchens and collapsed, out of breath, in front of the massive fireplace. The two bears lumbered in, also breathing heavily. Tumble flopped down at one side with a snort, while Ruff rolled onto his back, wanting his stomach scratched. He rumbled in pleasure when Tevi obliged.

Running her fingers through the thick fur was soothing. Tevi felt in need of something to calm her thoughts, now she was no longer occupied by the game. Her eyes were almost completely healed. The dull light had caused no discomfort; she could probably withstand sunshine. There was no reason to delay departure, yet the thought of saying good-bye was unbearable. Jemeryl's request to go with her was the final twist of the knife, but it was a risk Tevi dare not take.

Tevi's face knotted in a grimace as she explained to Ruff. "It's not that I don't want her with me. It's that I want her too much, and in all the wrong sort of ways. I've got to get away."

Ruff's stubby tail beat enthusiastically against the floor. He had no idea of what she had said.

Tevi got to her feet, and walked to the kitchen door. Directly opposite, on the far side of the courtyard, were the castle gates.

"Where do I go?" Tevi whispered to herself.

In the first case, it was an easy question to answer - the Rizen guild-house, where she could collect Harrick's pay and return the pony. >From there she could secure another contract, which might take her anywhere in the world. But to what purpose? How much longer was she willing to run?

Of course, it assumed she would be allowed to leave the castle alone. Jemeryl's request was shifting from an offer to a demand. Should it become an order, Tevi could not legitimately refuse. The word of a Coven sorcerer was law in the Protectorate. So far, Jemeryl had made no attempt to use her status - but she could.

Tevi's only hope would be if her guild-masters made a direct appeal to the Guardian, which they were most unlikely to do. The fate of a sorcerer's magic chalice was clearly a valid Coven concern. If the assistance of one junior mercenary was required, the guild would not refuse - it was very doubtful they would even bother asking for a formal contract.

But if she were to leave the castle in secret, pack her things that night and be gone, what would Jemeryl do? Would she come looking for her ungrateful patient, or go after the chalice herself? Tevi had no idea why Jemeryl was so interested, but obviously the chalice held considerable significance for the sorcerer. If she found the thing she was welcome to keep it - Tevi made no claim of ownership.

Tevi left the kitchen door and crossed the courtyard. Her footsteps echoed in the enclosed space. The gatehouse formed an arch over the entrance. Jemeryl had no need of the portcullis it had once housed, and now only two wooden gates barred the way. There were no locks that Tevi could see - no bolts or bars. However, she had only one way to check for magic. Tevi caught hold of the rope hanging on the inside and pulled the gate open. If an alarm sounded Tevi could not hear it.

Bracken covered hillside rolled down to where trees breached the ruined outer wall of the castle. Snow still lay in sheltered corners, but spring was clearly on the way. The weather was warmer. A mild wind from the south had sprung up overnight, bringing rolls of heavy cloud. There seemed to be nothing to stop her going. Tevi took one hesitant step through the gateway, then another.

Without warning Jemeryl's voice rang out. "Tevi. Come here."

A selection of excuses rushed through Tevi's head. Heart pounding, she returned to the courtyard. Jemeryl's head was poked through one of the windows to the small tower. As nonchalantly as she could manage, Tevi trotted over to stand beneath.

"What is it?"

"Tevi. Come up here. I've found her. I've found Abrak."

Jemeryl stood waiting excitedly outside the door to her study, on the landing at the top of the stairs in the great hall. "I've found her. Come and see." Jemeryl called, as soon as she saw Tevi enter below. "And I take back all my sceptical remarks. I think your story is entirely true - almost."

Tevi took the stairs two at a time and followed the Jemeryl into the study. She pulled over a stool and sat at the other side of the large desk in the centre of the room.

"What have you found?" Tevi asked.

"Abrak, she was a herbalist from the school at Ekranos." Jemeryl's finger tapped on an open page. "That much I could have guessed. But her real name was Lorimal."

"She's mentioned in your books?"

"Not nearly as much as I'd have expected. I'm surprised there isn't more written about her - if only as a cautionary tale. But there's no doubt she's the one."

"What makes you so sure?"

"She was last seen 152 years ago, paddling a small boat, and talking to the seaweed off the shores of Walderim. More than that, she's probably the only person in history who could have made the potion in the way your story says. Everything ties in. Her speciality was potions producing permanent changes in body functions. As a young woman she was starting to make quite a name for herself, but then she made her big mistake." Jemeryl looked up from the book on her desk. "I told you how herbalists work by watching the harmonics of auras in the fifth dimension and projecting their observations back through the underlying planes?"

Tevi's face screwed into a bemused frown. "Well, maybe."

"Lorimal wanted to improve the process, so she developed a potion to give her intrinsic empathy with plants. After she'd taken it she could look at a plant and intuitively deconstruct its aura."

"She could do what?" Tevi was clearly struggling to keep up.

"She said the plants talked to her." Jemeryl was aware that she was being even less coherent than usual, in her excitement.

"You said she made a mistake."

"The mistake was that after taking the potion she empathised totally with plants, and there was no antidote. Have you ever tried talking to someone who thinks like a daffodil?"

"My great-aunt Worry?" Tevi suggested, after a few moments getting her head around the concept.

Jemeryl threw her head back and laughed. "I'm sure your aunt isn't in the same league. What happened to Lorimal was her view on life changed so utterly she could no longer relate to humans. Your ancestors assumed exposure had addled her wits, but actually, it seems to have shocked her into the sanest frame of mind she'd had for decades. After Lorimal had used the potion on herself, she carried on charging around the Protectorate, doing all manner of things, but it was impossible for anyone to understand her reasons. The only thing she invented with any known use was a cure for a type of mould that infects wheat in the eastern plains. One of the ingredients is a small amount of the farmer's own blood. Some say it shows the way her mind was running - most herbalists use plant extracts to heal people, she used people extracts to heal plants."

"That makes some sort of sense."

"It was the only thing that did. Apparently, she once spent four months, standing in a garden belonging to a weaver in Davering, acting like a rose bush. Don't ask me why she didn't starve to death, the book didn't explain, nor did it say what the weaver thought of it, but it's no more bizarre than most of the other things Lorimal did. However there's plenty of evidence to show she'd have been quite capable of creating your strength potion,

complete with gender bias. Her abilities were phenomenal, it's tragic they went to so little use - from a human point of view."

"Why would anyone want her chalice?"

"Perhaps someone's got a turnip they want a chat with?" Klara interjected.

Jemeryl grinned at the magpie before continuing. "I'd guess it's more likely they're after some of her earlier work, though I can't find any information about what that was. As I said before, I'm surprised Lorimal is so overlooked. I came across her name by chance in a history of Walderim written by my grandfather, and he was more concerned with whimsical anecdotes than herbalism. Lorimal hardly appears in any of my other books."

"So it doesn't help us find out who took the chalice."

"Lorimal's name is a good starting point." Jemeryl managed to keep her voice level, even though her hopes soared at Tevi's use of the word 'us'. "The best thing would be for you and me to go to Lyremouth. There's bound to be more information in the Coven library. It shouldn't take long to dig it out."

Tevi's brief burst of enthusiasm died. Her eyes fixed on the desk and she dug at the grain with her fingernail. "That's if I bother trying to find the chalice. I'm sorry Jem, but you can't come with me."

"I have to."

"I don't want company."

It was the old stalemate. Jemeryl's patience snapped. "It doesn't matter what you want, my superiors have ordered me to go."

"What's it to them?" Tevi asked defensively.

Instead of answering immediately, Jemeryl kicked her chair back from the desk and stalked across to the window. She stared out over the valley. Ten days before she would not have dreamed telling the whole truth to a common ungifted citizen. Now her emotions were so raw that the thought of losing face before Tevi was irrelevant. But would it help? Jemeryl took a deep breath and turned back to face the room.

"I wasn't told why." Jemeryl spoke in a bleak monotone. "My mentor contacted me a few hours before you came to the castle. She told me about you and the basilisk. She said that when you left I had to go with you. She also took the opportunity to tell me I'm a disgrace to the Coven."

"What!"

"Reports from the village have got back to Lyremouth."

"But the villagers have got you all wrong."

"It's nice you think that, but I wasn't able to convince my mentor. She tore me to shreds. I've been removed from my post in the valley and ordered to go with you and help you on your quest. So I'm going with you and that's the end of it."

Tevi face fell in dismay. Her eyes darted around the room, as if desperately seeking inspiration. "You have helped. You've found Lorimal's name. I could go to Lyremouth on my own and ask someone there to do the rest."

Jemeryl shrugged. "If I don't leave the valley with you, I might as well go straight to Lyremouth anyway. They like you to be there in person when your case is taken before the disciplinary tribunal."

"You wouldn't be punished?"

"Disobeying a direct order? Of course I would."

"What would happen to you?"

"I'm trying hard not to think about it." Jemeryl left the window and came back at the desk, again taking the seat opposite Tevi. "But it isn't going to happen, as I'm going with you."

Tevi licked her lips nervously. "Perhaps you could come as far as Lyremouth. When we're there I can explain that I don't want you with me."

"That will go down nearly as well as me deserting you."

"Why?"

"I was hauled over the coals for upsetting the locals. Now I've done the same with you. I don't know how." Jemeryl's head sank; her voice dropped as well. "Would it help if I said sorry?"

"You haven't upset me. You've been really nice."

"Oh sure. You think I'm so wonderful you can't stand being in my presence."

"That's not so far from the truth." Tevi mumbled.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Jemeryl buried her face in her hands. When she spoke her voice was quietly desperate. "Tevi, please. Tell me what I've done to offend you. Give me the chance to put things right."

"You haven't done anything."

"Tevi, come on." Jemeryl pleaded. "You can't stop me following you, but I can't stop you saying what you will to my superiors. If you're going to destroy my position in the Coven and wreck my life, you at least owe me an explanation."

Tevi slumped backwards. Her knuckles were white where her hands curled into fists on the tabletop. At last, she blurted out, "It's not you. It's me."

"What is?"

"It's me. I'm not fit company for any woman."

"Don't be stupid."

"No. It's true. The quest for the chalice was a sham. It was just a way to exile me, while saving my family the embarrassment of a public trial."

She's murdered someone. It was the first thought to shoot through Jemeryl's head, followed quickly by disbelief. There was no trace of malicious violence in Tevi. It must have been an accident, or a mistake, or something else. Who could tell what the barbarian legal code of the islands might be.

In a whisper, Jemeryl asked, "What did you do?"

"It was what they thought I was going to do."

Jemeryl frowned. "Be sensible. Even Coven seers don't punish people for what they're going to do, and prophecy wouldn't work on your islands - not with the iron."

"They were right." Tevi said, anguished.

"If I'm any judge of character, you're a decent, honest person." Jemeryl said earnestly. "I don't know what you think you were about to do, but I can't believe it was anything that bad. Even if it were, it wouldn't matter. The Coven leaders have some reason for wanting me to go with you. I can't see them being put off by a crime that hasn't yet been committed, in a land outside their jurisdiction."

"Wouldn't they want to protect you from me?"

Even in the overwrought atmosphere, Jemeryl had to restrain the urge to laugh. "I think you'd have difficulty persuading them you presented any threat to me. I don't mean to imply that you're not a formidable warrior, but I'm a sorcerer. A dozen of you couldn't..." Jemeryl's voice broke off as she tried to find some logic in what had

been said. "Tevi, you're not making sense. What is this crime you're going to commit? How could you harm me?"

There was a long silence. When Tevi finally spoke her voice was a dry whisper. "I have a problem with men." She stared bleakly at nothing. Her eyes were devoid of fight, and of hope.

Jemeryl tried to understand. "I'm sure the same could be said for most of the women on your islands."

"No, it's different... I'm not sure how to explain." Tevi looked as if she was trying to swallow. "There were slang terms on the islands, crude ones. I've not tried to find out what your words are for it. I thought it best to avoid the subject completely."

Jemeryl opened her mouth to speak, but then closed it again. Tevi was clearly finding things difficult enough without interruptions. Better to let her take her own time.

Tevi continued, picking her words deliberately. "I feel about other women the way a normal woman would only feel about men. In my heart I can only..."

The struggle to say that much had left Tevi shaking. She leaned forward over the desk and rested her head on her hands. However, Jemeryl was no more the wiser. It was plain to see the confession had taken a lot of effort but, despite turning the words around in her head, Jemeryl could produce no interpretation that was not totally absurd.

"I'm sorry Tevi. I don't understand what you mean." Jemeryl spoke as gently as she could.

"Don't play games with me." Tevi's torment gave way to anger. She sprang to her feet, knocking over her chair. In three steps, she had reached the door.

Jemeryl could not allow Tevi to escape. A pull on the sixth dimension tensors sent the bolt on the door sliding into its socket and all of Tevi's superhuman strength could not get it to budge. After a few futile attempts Tevi let her hands drop and turned around slowly to face the sorcerer.

Jemeryl had not moved from her chair. Quietly she said, "I'm sorry, but believe me, I'm not playing games. This is much too important to me."

"Jem..." Tevi begged.

"I really don't know what you mean."

Tevi slumped against the door, breathing in deep gulps. She closed her eyes and swallowed. "I'm physically attracted to other women, not men. I fall in love with them. I can't help it. It's women that I want sexually. And right now I want..." Tevi's words died in a grimace of pain. She twisted around to face the barred door, resting the palms of her hands on the wooden planks. "Please let me go."

There was utter, desolate despair in Tevi's voice. Regardless of the answers she needed, Jemeryl could not refuse the appeal. The bolt moved back. Tevi tore open the door and fled. Her footsteps sounded loudly on the stairs and away.

Behind her in the study, Jemeryl stared through the open doorway. She was still not certain she understood the full significance, but Tevi's confession had struck a chord with something she had read earlier that morning. Thoughtfully, Jemeryl pulled her grandfather's history book towards her and thumbed back several chapters.

The section she wanted was a lengthy extract from a 250- year-old report by a Coven sorcerer named Bolitho. It had been made in the mistaken expectation of Walderim imminently joining the Protectorate. In the guise of an itinerant healer, Bolitho had travelled throughout Walderim, while preparing extensive notes on the inhabitants. Some of Bolitho's analysis reflected ideologies, fashionable at the time, which were no longer accepted. However, he had been a conscientious and thorough observer, and one of his findings seemed to offer the explanation Jemeryl needed. It took a few seconds to find the part of Bolitho's report she wanted, relating to gender stereotyping.

Jemeryl settled down to read.



Inherent to a hereditary culture has to be the belief in the inborn superiority of the ruling elite. Other groups in society have their value and assumed abilities assigned on a descending scale, with the lowest sections relegated to subhuman status. In Walderim, the main groups to suffer from this have been women and migrant workers from the north.

The position of women is especially bleak, partly due to the widely held belief that, instead of being distinguished by minor statistical variations, the characters of the two sexes are in some way diametrically opposed. In fact, the phrase 'the opposite sex' is in common usage. There is a refusal even to accept that a male sorcerer has vastly more in common with a female sorcerer than with an ungifted man (although I strongly suspect that this will change quickly once Walderim joins the Protectorate).

This results in an almost comical need to exaggerate any perceived gender difference into an unbreakable law of nature. For example, a local will categorically state, "men are taller than women". If I point out that only a small average difference exists and the divergence is such that many women are taller than many men, I am met with animosity, as if I am being deliberately perverse.

This may at first seem amusing, but in practice it is quite odious. People's lives are made miserable if their stature is such as to challenge the assertions about gender and height. It is as if tall women or short men have committed an indiscretion and are deserving of derision or censure. With personality traits, such as aggression or compassion, which are harder to measure objectively and seen as under the individual's control (despite the contradiction with the idea that they are fixed by nature), the extent of the assumed polarisation and culpability is intensified. It is a brave person who refuses to distort their personality by pretending to match their gender stereotype.

I had a conversation with one of their 'philosophers'. He explained how the universe was divided into male and female principles. Male was active, light, hard; female was passive, dark, soft, etc. We had this conversation sitting on the trunk of a fallen tree. I found a male and female wood-lice in the rotten wood and asked the philosopher to illustrate these two opposed 'universal' principles, using the wood-lice as examples. The philosopher then accused **me** of being absurd!

Other people in Walderim are open to the argument that the gender stereotyping of their culture is almost entirely artificial. Yet, by adulthood, the beliefs have been ingrained on a subconscious level and, despite their better logic, they cannot disengage their cultural perceptions. However much they might value courage and independence they are still more socially comfortable ridiculing an assertive woman than they are respecting her, since, needless to say, the majority of positive character traits are seen as male. For women to assume an active role in the society they will first need to overcome the stigma of being 'unfeminine'.

The enforced divergence of the sexes has one other inevitable side effect. It has been observed that everyone is romantically attracted to a reasonably narrow spectrum of personality type, normally centred around a few key traits. Since children in Walderim are raised to see the characters of men and women as diametrically opposite, it follows that anyone seeking a long-term partner will perceive their idealised mate as falling into an exclusively male or female pattern. I strongly suspect that very few raised in this culture will be capable of falling passionately in love with persons of either sex.

This would be of no more than incidental interest were it not for strict local doctrines forbidding erotic relationships between people of the same gender. Such relationships are claimed to be corrupt, deviant and 'unnatural'.

During my time in Walderim I have been discreetly approached by many with an exclusive attraction to people of their own gender, who wish me to 'cure' them. I have been astonished by the extent to which they believe their culture's doctrine to be a natural principle, despite the evidence of their own emotions. They agree that people are right to despise them. They despise themselves.

The first time the request was made of me, I made the mistake of telling the man that, while in the Protectorate, my own lovers had in no way been restricted to women. I offered to let him accompany me when I returned. Instead of the relief I expected, the man accused me of trying to turn Walderim into a "decadent" region like the Protectorate. To my astonishment, he told me in an impassioned speech that, "some people still know what

normal behaviour is". His attack changed from verbal to physical, and I was obliged to defend myself. He then resorted to denouncing me to the rest of his tribe, claiming I had tried to "defile" him.

I can conclude by saying that of all the things I have found in Walderim, this is the one that has surprised me the most. I was prepared to find people held in a state of subservience and those in power enforcing their beliefs on the less fortunate. However, this self-oppression has left me dumbfounded.

Even where people of different genders are attracted to each other, the result is less than satisfactory from a Protectorate viewpoint. As each partner has to try to conform to their own gender stereotype, and may only appreciate their partner as the opposite stereotype, it seems impossible that they can ever really know their lover. "My wife doesn't understand me." is a cliché so common as to be a joke. It is all quite astonishing and also very sad.

Eliminating the exploitation of migrant workers from the north of Walderim is also likely to encounter some problems...



Jemeryl scanned the rest of the extract quickly, but nothing further of relevance was to be found. At the end of the chapter were a few additional comments from her grandfather, which stated that the conditions described by Bolitho had largely disappeared in Walderim, although echoes remained, particularly among the lower social orders.

Jemeryl pushed the book away, and sat for a while in thought. "I guess that explains what Tevi was going on about. The clans would have taken their beliefs with them when they fled to the islands. And it explains her tortured attitude. It must be awful, to believe that you're evil and depraved, and unable to do anything about it." Jemeryl spoke quietly. "Poor Tevi."

"So what do you to do now?" Klara fluttered down to land on the open pages.

"I don't know. If Tevi has absorbed her society's morality in the fashion described by Bolitho there's no hope of persuading her to change her mind. But it still doesn't explain why she doesn't want me to go with her. Although I suppose she might be worried I'll try to seduce her."

"That's not a totally groundless fear on her part."

Jemeryl shook her head slowly. "It doesn't match the feel of Tevi's words. It was as if she expected me to be shocked by her confession."

"Bolitho described a pretty strange mind set. From what he wrote, you wouldn't expect Tevi to be able to accept the personal freedom offered by the Protectorate. Perhaps the island's culture is so ingrained in her that she has to accredit the same ethics to others, even when she must know they won't share them."

"Maybe. But there has to be some way around it."

"On to a new field of enquiry." Klara said, brightly.

Jemeryl pushed back her chair and headed to the bookcase. She plucked a tall, thin volume from the top shelf. "Somewhere in here is a section on the perpetuation of cultural ethics by transferred guilt, considered as an imbalance in fifth dimensional perspective fields."

"I suppose you've got nothing about the utilisation of incomprehensible terms by sorcerers, considered as an nervous reflex under pressure?"

"No, but I might have a recipe for roast magpie somewhere."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN—Clueless

Night had fallen by the time Jemeryl finished reading. Before leaving the study, she stood a long while at the window, staring at the moon riding between ragged clouds over the mountains. She had found a lot of ominous warnings but very little in the way of helpful advice. Talking to Tevi was going to be very difficult. Apart from wanting to avoid causing Tevi any further distress, Jemeryl had the nagging feeling that an important piece of information was still missing.

Jemeryl paused outside the parlour door and tried to compose herself before confronting Tevi. The castle was so silent she could hear the thudding of her heartbeat. She opened the door and stepped inside. The only light came from the red flicker of the fire. The chairs were all empty. Jemeryl almost turned to leave, but then spotted Tevi, who sat cross-legged on the floor in front of the open hearth, staring bleakly into the flames.

Tevi did not move at the sound of the door opening and closing. Jemeryl came to a halt a few steps into the room.

"Tevi?" Jemeryl said softly.

There was no response.

"I'd like to talk to you."

"If you want - I'm finished with running." Tevi answered apathetically.

Hesitantly, Jemeryl advanced towards the fireplace and slipped into a chair at one side. Tevi's eyes remained fixed on the hearth. The flames lit her face in profile; her expression was one of absolute desolation. All of Jemeryl's carefully planed questions evaporated at the sight. Jemeryl knew she was way out of her depth. She was going to have to start talking, keeping her words and tone as neutral as possible, and hope an acceptable resolution could be found.

"Tevi... what you said, in the study. I've been looking at my books. I think I'm beginning to understand, but I'm still unclear in parts. I wonder if you... if we could sort things out."

Tevi's lips compressed in a twisted line and the muscles bunched in her jaw. "What is there to sort out?"

"Well... from what you've said, on your islands men and women have strictly differentiated roles." Jemeryl spoke in a general search for inspiration. "What are your feelings about the way people relate to each other on the mainland?"

"It doesn't help, if that's what you mean." Tevi replied bitterly.

"In what way?"

Confusion gave Tevi her first spark of life. "Pardon?"

"In what way doesn't it help? If that's not a silly question."

Tevi glanced in Jemeryl's direction, as if to judge the seriousness of her expression. "It confuses me. All the men look and act like women. It's often impossible for me to tell them apart. But I've found it best not to make the effort. If I become too mindful that someone is a man, they usually end up complaining that I'm treating them like an idiot. So, I try to act as if they're all women, but I can only push the pretence so far. Inside I know they're not really women, and I'm not... attracted to them like women."

"That wasn't quite what I meant."

"Then what did you mean?"

"I've been reading about the history of Walderim, back at the time when your people left the mainland. Apparently, your ancestors found the Protectorate attitude to sexual relationships to be abhorrent. I suppose you feel the same?"

"No. Why should I? If anything, it's better than in the islands. When I see couples, like Verron and Marith, I think they're sweet. They treat each other as equals. So much so that, like I said before, often I can't tell which is the woman and which is the man. It must be nice to have a lover who can also be a friend."

Jemeryl ran her hand through her hair, confused by Tevi's response. It tied in with nothing she had read or expected, unless Tevi was wilfully side-stepping the issue as a defensive strategy - in which case things might get explosive if Jemeryl prodded too far, but she had to try. Quietly she asked. "So if there's a couple who are both the same sex, how do you feel about them?"

"You're asking me?"

"Yes."

It looked as if Tevi bit back her first intended retort. Her mouth clamped shut and she stared into the flames while rephrasing her response. "If I met such a couple and realised?" She paused. "It would hardly be my place to condemn them. I suppose I'd mind my own business and pretend I'd noticed nothing - which shouldn't be hard. It's not likely they'd be brazenly advertising what they were doing."

Comprehension caught Jemeryl by surprise. She slumped back in her chair and her eyes fixed on the ceiling. Firelight chased shadows between the wooden beams while her mind raced, adding together the odd comments and the conjectures. It seemed as if things might just tie together after all. However, Bolitho's experience warned against optimism. Locked in her culture's inflexible beliefs, Tevi had been unable to even see what was happening in the Protectorate, let alone accept it.

"What else do you want to know?" Tevi broke the silence.

"Actually I was thinking about tunnel vision. More as a metaphor than a medical complaint."

"What do you mean? My eyes are fine now."

Instead of replying immediately, Jemeryl sat, reviewing her options - not that there were many. Despite what had happened to Bolitho, she had to take the risk of enlightening Tevi.

"But you only see part of the picture." Jemeryl dropped her gaze from the ceiling. "I told you I spent this afternoon reading my books, including a history of Walderim?"

"Yes."

"Part of what I read was written by a sorcerer who visited there, 250 years ago. He reported a warrior society, very similar to yours, except for the gender switch-around due to Lorimal's potion. Your confession would have made no sense to me, if I hadn't read the account of his travels. What you said reminded me of some odd requests for medical treatment he'd received, from some individuals who complained they were sexually attracted to people of their own gender."

"You mean you can cure it?"

The intensity in Tevi's voice left Jemeryl speechless. It was a few seconds before she found her voice. "I don't know. It would honestly never have occurred to me to try."

"What did this sorcerer do?"

"He advised them to move to the Protectorate, where it wouldn't matter what sex their lovers were."

Jemeryl anxiously awaited the response to the statement but, instead of a violent outburst, Tevi only looked puzzled. "Why would he say that?"

"Because it was true - and it still is. Having an exclusive preference for one gender is a bit unusual, but no one is going to get upset about it."

Tevi stared in bewilderment.

Carefully Jemeryl asked. "You said you stayed with Sergo and her son, in their cottage. Who else lived there?"

"Her sister."

"Who told you it was her sister?"

"Well maybe not her sister, but she was a close relative. They..." Tevi's words died.

Jemeryl held her breath, trying to guess which way Tevi's reaction would go. She wished Bolitho's report could give her more grounds to hope.

For a while, only unspoken questions formed on Tevi's lips. Eventually she found her voice. "But you can't let the world run like that."

"Why not?"

"You need a woman and a man to have children." Tevi was starting to sound heated, although not violent.

Attempting to keep things calm, Jemeryl went for a reasoned, practical response. "That's true, but were babies in short supply in your village? Because the reverse problem is generally much more common. Even with potions to help prevent unintended pregnancies, most relationships where the partners are of different sexes produce twice as many children as they're able to care for. Families hope some of their members will settle with a partner of the same sex to provide homes for the rest. For example, Sergo's son was born to her brother."

"But it isn't..."

Tevi's voice faded as a confused kaleidoscope of emotions chased across her face, yet inflamed moral outrage did not appear to be one. Jemeryl decided to risk a few further comments. "When you made your confession this afternoon, I couldn't see why you thought it would upset me. What I now don't understand is how you could have spent a year on the mainland without noticing the way Protectorate families operate. It defies belief - even with the problem you have telling men and women apart."

"You're being serious? It's not part of..."

"Totally serious."

"But what do..." Again, Tevi's voice trailed away. She pressed one hand against her forehead. Her eyes would not meet Jemeryl's, but for the first time they seemed to be fully focused on the room around her.

Despite Tevi's obvious emotional turmoil, Jemeryl was starting to relax slightly. There were many other things they had to discuss, such as the quest, but it could be left until morning. It would be better if Tevi had time to think on her own. There seemed to be hope that the islander might overturn her upbringing and reach a rational conclusion.

Jemeryl got to her feet and walked to the door. "I'm going to bed. Perhaps if you sleep on it we'll be able to talk things through tomorrow."

Tevi nodded in a dazed fashion. Jemeryl left her in a position, virtually unchanged from how she'd found her, still cross-legged on the floor, still staring into the flames, but now the expression of hopeless despair had gone.

A quick check when Jemeryl awoke the next day revealed that Tevi was still asleep in her room. There was no indication of how long she had sat up thinking, or what the end result had been. Hoping for the best, Jemeryl began to prepare for departure - there was much in the castle that would require careful dismantling.

It was just before midday when Tevi emerged from her room, looking rather sheepish. Jemeryl prepared a meal for them, by re-heating the stew that had been intended for the previous night's supper. She limited her comments to the mundane, waiting for the other woman to open the discussion. It did not take long.

"I've been thinking." Tevi said, between mouthfuls.

"I'd rather thought you would. What conclusions have you reached?"

"That a lot of things fall into place - things Kimal told me; things I heard and saw in the guildhall; jokes I didn't understand; lots of small details and the assumptions I made. Like a friend of mine, Cayell, talking of big papa and little papa. I just thought 'big papa' was a wordplay on 'grandfather'."

"So now you've thought it over, how do you feel about the depraved behaviour of the Protectorate?" Jemeryl kept her tone light, although it was the most fundamental, if not the most important, of the three questions she wanted to ask.

"I feel I ought to be shocked, but somehow I'm not." Tevi answered thoughtfully. "There have been so many things that were accepted without question on the islands, which don't hold true on the mainland. This is just one more. I'm not sure what it means for me though."

It was a much calmer appraisal than Bolitho's report had led Jemeryl to expect. With considerable relief, she moved on to her second question. "Might one of the things it means be that you don't object to me accompanying you on your quest?"

"I think I've... um. Sure, I don't mind." Tevi gave a half shrug and started toying with the food in front of her. Something else was clearly on her mind. Jemeryl let her take her time. "Does everyone in the Protectorate take lovers from both sexes?"

Jemeryl had the impression that Tevi was skirting around her real question. She answered carefully. "That would be a bit sweeping. I guess we all have preferences - some go for blondes, some for women, some for manual workers. It's not anyone else's business."

"What about you?" Tevi's eyes were fixed on her plate.

The breath caught in Jemeryl's throat. Her third question might be rapidly approaching, however Bolitho's experience warned her to proceed with caution. "Um... yes. As an apprentice in Lyremouth, I had affairs with my fellow students, both male and female. It wasn't important to me which they were." she said, adding mentally *as long as they were tall and dark-haired.*

"When we leave, do you still think we should start by going to Lyremouth?"

Jemeryl did not know whether to be relieved or disappointed by Tevi's abrupt change of subject, but there would be plenty more opportunities for questions.

"Yes."

"Is there anything we need to get ready?"

"A few extra supplies for the journey. If you go to collect some from the village, you can also reassure the locals you're safe and give them the good news that I'm going. You can take my pony to help carry. While you're gone, I'll clear up the more hazardous magical bits and pieces I've got around the place. There's no real risk but it would be safest if you weren't here."

"What do we want?"

"Depends on what's going. Use your own judgement. Why don't you take Klara? If you get stuck you could send her back with a message."

A short while later, Jemeryl stood alone on the castle battlements, watching Tevi ride down the overgrown path leading to the village. The ponies and rider disappeared through a gap in the outer walls of the castle. Jemeryl sedately descended the steps and entered the great hall. She paced to the centre of the room, and stood looking gravely around her at the piles of equipment. Then her composure broke and a huge grin swept across her face. A volley of fireballs erupted from her fingertips as she indulged in a sorcerer's pyrotechnic display of delight.

By early evening, the great hall and study had been emptied - a considerable achievement even though one small sack was all there was to show for it. Jemeryl smiled as she deposited the bag in a corner of the parlour. It was not so much packing as pushing matter into a suitable dimension. The bag was a gateway rather than a container. However, it was not quite such a useful trick as the ungifted might imagine. It had taken only half a day to dispose of the equipment, but would take much painstaking time and effort to unpack. Several reckless sorcerers had been killed by the impact of their own belongings, exploding through a carelessly opened dimensional gate.

There was still no sign of Tevi. Jemeryl was wondering whether she should have something to eat or wait a while longer, when Klara flew in through the open doorway.

"Message from Tevi."

"What is it?"

The magpie landed on the table and fluffed her feathers importantly. "Jem. The villagers want to throw a party in my honour. They kept insisting, so I agreed. Unless you've got objections I'll stay down here and bring the supplies up with me tomorrow." Klara spoke in a fair imitation of Tevi's lilting drawl.

"She's not coming back tonight?" Jemeryl asked, disappointed.

"That was the general drift of it. There's no point in me carrying messages if you don't listen."

"I just wanted confirmation. I was looking forward to seeing her."

Klara put her head on one side. "Do you want me to go back and say you've got objections?"

"Only if I can think of something plausible."

"You could go down and join the party. "

"I don't think that would be wise."

"Maybe not." Klara flew over and settled on Jemeryl's shoulder. "Never mind, she'll be back tomorrow."

Despondently, Jemeryl collected the crockery remaining from lunchtime and then walked slowly down to the kitchens, to prepare a lonely supper.

Jemeryl sat in front of the fire in the parlour, flipping idly through the pages of a book. Ruff and Tumble lay asleep by her feet and Klara was perched on the arm of the chair. This was the way she had spent most evenings since her arrival in the valley, pursuing her studies. Tonight however, she could not concentrate on reading. Once again, her eyes drifted away from the lines of text.

A faint rustle from Klara recalled Jemeryl to the parlour. She reached out to stroke the magpie's downy throat. Firelight glittered in small black eyes, alive with the echo of Jemeryl's own intellect. Unlike the bears and squirrels, Klara was a true familiar. It was debatable whether she could even be considered a separate entity from the sorcerer. The bond was so close that, effectively, Jemeryl performed part of her thinking in the magpie's head.

Many sorcerers viewed taking a familiar as a dangerous affectation - affectation because the effort of maintaining the bond often outweighed the benefits, and dangerous because of the risk of becoming dependant on the animal. There were tales of sorcerers who had been killed by the shock when their familiar died unexpectedly, although in Jemeryl's opinion these stories were of dubious authenticity. Great care was needed in choosing a species; cats were virtually the only mammals worth considering, although many types of reptile and bird were suitable.

A magpie was an uncommon familiar, but Jemeryl was pleased with her choice. Klara's bird brain was surprisingly adept at complex calculations. There were also the useful abilities to fly and talk. A rueful expression crossed Jemeryl's face. Tevi's presence had made her realise how much she had fallen into the trap of treating Klara as a friend - playing the game of creating a sarcastic personality for the magpie. Talking to yourself was a bad habit, regardless of how you disguised it.

Jemeryl sighed, and then sat up straight. The book was snapped shut and discarded. Thought of Tevi had dispelled all hope of reading, but brought another idea to mind. Klara hopped off her perch and onto Jemeryl's lap. The sorcerer placed her forefingers on either side of the bird's head.

There was one further advantage to a familiar - Klara was permanently available for mind-riding. Jemeryl closed her eyes and blocked out her own senses. After a second of disorientation, she re-focused on the room, out of

Klara's eyes. For a moment she studied her own relaxed human face, devoid of expression in the trance, then she leap upwards. Her wings caught the air and Jemeryl/Klara flew out of the room.

Noise and light were spilling from the half open doorway of the hall at the centre of the village. The gentle night breeze carried the magpie spiralling down, gliding over the huddled cottages to the spot where a large gap under the eaves let her into the hall. The magpie was invisible in the dark shadows beneath the thatched roof. Jemeryl took a perch on one of the rafters and settled down to watch the scene below, trying to ignore any pangs of guilt at such blatant snooping.

It looked as if the entire population of the valley was squeezed into the hall. The noise and confusion were such that it took a little time to spot Tevi, even with Klara's keen eyesight. Eventually Jemeryl saw her, surrounded by a group of admirers at the side of the room. To judge by her actions, Tevi was recounting the tale of the hunt for the basilisk. The young mercenary was obviously the toast of the village; children clustered around and a constant stream of people came to congratulate her. Jemeryl was amused to see Tevi's bashful response to all the attention.

Several young people were paying Tevi even more attention than the rest, their intentions clear. Jemeryl was unconcerned, even by the efforts of one young woman who was especially persistent. Tevi's general reticence, combined with Bolitho's experience, reassured Jemeryl that she was not about to face any imminent threat of competition.

The revelry in the hall got more boisterous as the night progressed. Several bodies, collapsed in a drunken stupor, littered the edges of the hall. Children were sent to their beds. From her vantage point, Jemeryl saw Tevi squeeze her way to the back of the hall, where the beer barrels were stacked. As Tevi refilled her tankard, the young woman again appeared at her side.

The pair talked as they moved to a clear spot on the floor. Tevi's neck was bent to catch what the shorter woman was saying over the hubbub. Jemeryl ruffled her feathers, hit by a twinge of jealousy. She did not need to hear the conversation to know that the villager was flirting outrageously. Whatever was said caused Tevi to look embarrassed, which she covered by taking a hasty gulp from her tankard.

"You're wasting your time, young lady." Jemeryl muttered quietly. "At least, I sincerely hope you are."

Unaware of the watcher above, the unknown villager brushed blond hair back from her face. Her eyes danced with amusement as she stepped closer to Tevi. Jemeryl confidently expected the mercenary to back off. Instead, Tevi very deliberately put her free arm around the woman and kissed her ardently on the lips.

There was a jarring storm of sensation, an impression of being torn, as Jemeryl wrenched herself back to the castle, leaving Klara to return on her own. The sudden dislocation made her nauseous. The parlour spun and then settled. Even before she was fully attuned to her surroundings, Jemeryl had lurched to her feet, disturbing the squirrels that had settled on her lap in her absence.

Jemeryl's first intention was to rush headlong down to the village; common sense stopped her. All knowledge of human nature told her that such an intrusion was highly unlikely to achieve good results. It was not possible to dismiss the villager and forcibly claim Tevi's affection - at least, not by any method the Coven permitted. There was nothing other than to leave Tevi and the villager free to do as they wished.

Jemeryl sunk back down into her chair. Summoning all her self-discipline, she tried to clear her thoughts and not think of Tevi, or of what might be going on in the village hall. Her efforts met with total failure. The night dragged by slowly while the fire in the parlour burned low. Klara returned from the village but wisely made no comment.

The image of Tevi, kissing the villager, kept slicing at Jemeryl's thoughts. Visions of what might follow stung like acid in the cuts. It became too much to bear. Jemeryl went to her stock of herbs and prepared a sleeping draught. *Tomorrow I'll have Tevi back with me*, she told herself, *We'll leave the valley and the villager behind. It's pointless, to sit up all night, brooding. I'm going to sleep.* Her face crumpled at the thought. Was it too much to hope that Tevi was also sleeping, considering what else she might be doing at that moment?

The discordant honking of migrating geese woke Jemeryl at first light. She rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling. Memories of the previous night flooded back. Jemeryl pulled a pillow over her face in a futile attempt to block them out. She then tossed the bedclothes aside and swung her feet onto the floor. It was a little before her normal time to rise, but there was no point in trying to get back to sleep.

Tevi should be returning soon. It might be wise to take time to prepare herself mentally for the meeting. *Although preparations will be as much use as hiding my face in a pillow,* she added silently.

Concentrating on the job of sorting and packing was hard, especially as time went by with no sign of Tevi. In the end, Jemeryl abandoned all pretence of working and stood by an upstairs window, watching the path to the village. An eternity seemed to pass before her vigil was rewarded with the sight of a lone rider leading a second pony towards the castle. Jemeryl leapt down the stairs and was waiting in the porch of the great hall when Tevi finally arrived in the courtyard.

Even before the pony came to a standstill, Tevi had slipped off its back and trotted over to greet Jemeryl, her broad smile reflecting obvious high spirits. "Sorry if I've kept you waiting, but I had a late night and overslept this morning."

It took all Jemeryl's self-control not to wince. "That's all right. I've been busy." It wasn't strictly true on either count.

To cover her threatened loss of composure Jemeryl began unsaddling the ponies, which allowed her to keep her face averted while they talked. The bears came out to assist as porters.

Tevi seemed unaware that anything might be wrong. "You missed a good party." she said brightly.

"I doubt my presence would have added to the general merriment."

"I suppose some of the villagers might have been a bit unsettled."

"To put it mildly."

"I tried explaining that you're not dangerous."

"Did they believe you?"

"Perhaps if you'd been there..." Tevi paused. "I didn't put it in my message with Klara, but I was sort of hoping you'd come."

"You'd have been the only one." Jemeryl knew she was snapping, despite her best attempts to act calm.

"Are you okay?" The curtness of her retorts had registered with Tevi.

"Yes, I'm fine." Another lie.

"I suppose it must be a wrench to have to leave your home."

Jemeryl tried to force the tension from her voice. "It's not that. I had an unsettling side effect from some of my work with magic yesterday." She even managed a weak attempt at a smile.

Tevi looked dubious. Before she could speak, they were interrupted by a bump, followed by a whine from Ruff. The bear had been dragging one of the packs to the kitchens but a strap had caught on a tree root. A tug-of-war was now in progress.

Tevi darted over. "Hey, take care. There are breakables in the pack." She grinned at Jemeryl, her buoyant mood restored. "The villagers insisted on giving me two bottles of their very best local wine."

"I wouldn't raise your expectations too high. The stuff doubles as sheep dip in spring." Klara added her comment.

"It tasted all right last night. But I guess anything would after the cider." Tevi hoisted the pack onto her shoulder and headed towards the kitchen door.

"I made a start at organising the provisions yesterday. If you dump stuff on the table, I'll be along as soon as I've got the ponies stabled." Jemeryl said, grateful for the shift in conversation.

"Fine." Tevi disappeared from view, humming cheerfully to herself.

Jemeryl stood on the cobbles and buried her face in her hands. After several deep breaths, she let her arms drop and looked at the familiar stone buildings. She would cope. Tevi was back with her. Neither of them would set eyes on the woman again, or else, Jemeryl told herself, regardless of her Coven oath, there would be nothing left of the villager but a smouldering pair of shoes.

The knapsack landed on the floor with a resounding thud. Jemeryl shoved it next to the other bags with her foot, then turned to survey the room. Everything was packed. The parlour looked bare, devoid of personal possessions, although the fire still bestowed a cosy glow. It would be her last night in the castle. All that was needed was to load the packs onto the ponies and ride out - just as well, since Iralin's allotted period to quit the castle expired on the next day.

At the other side of the room Tevi was opening one of the bottles of wine, struggling with an implement that looked better suited to removing stones from horse's hooves than corks from bottles. Finally, the stopper came loose with a soft pop; a celebratory drink for the true start of the quest.

Jemeryl dropped into her favourite chair and stretched her feet towards the fire, using Tumble's rump as a footstool. She accepted a mug of wine and took a cautious sip. Contrary to Klara's remark it wasn't bad - a touch sweeter than a connoisseur might wish, but quite drinkable.

At first the conversation was about the route they would take to Lyremouth, starting with Rizen and then on, skirting the southern end of Whitfell Spur. The villagers had confirmed that the main Langhope pass was still closed and Tevi was very keen not to re-traverse the old pack route. She recounted a few of the incidents from the journey with Harrick's team, although the account was unusually vague. Tevi's attention was wavering, her thoughts clearly on another subject, the nature of which Jemeryl refused to speculate on; she would rather not know - however she was not given the choice.

"Jem. Can I talk to you about something?" Tevi said, taking advantage of a lull in the conversation.

After the briefest of hesitations Jemeryl replied, "Of course." She tried to mask her reluctance. The topic Tevi wished to discuss had to be personal if she felt the need to ask permission. It did not require an oracle to guess what it was, but it would not be either polite or tactful to refuse the request.

Tevi took a moment to gather herself before speaking. "Last night, I spent a lot of time watching the villagers. It wasn't too hard to tell men from women once I stopped making assumptions. In fact, things were so obvious I don't know how I missed it before. Like when Sergo's son referred to 'my mothers'. It's an expression I've heard, but I always assumed the person was just referring to their family - mother, grandmother and so on. Or when people referred to someone else as 'my partner'. Verron and Marith always called each other that, so I ought to have known how the expression is used in the Protectorate, but with Harrick and Rorg I just thought they meant 'business colleague'."

"No, a business colleague would be referred to as an associate - to avoid confusion." Jemeryl explained, although she was coldly certain it was not mere linguistic usage that was concerning Tevi.

"Well, yes... but what I wanted to talk to you about was... at the party, lots of the younger villagers were showing an interest in me. It's happened before, but I've always assumed the person was male and avoided them, or that I'd misinterpreted something, or in one case I... er... didn't react well." Tevi's expression shuffled between guilt and embarrassment before she continued. "But last night, there was one woman in particular - she was acting really keen, virtually chased me around the hall. Not that I minded, she was nice and fun to talk to."

Tevi was trying to look relaxed, and failing. It wasn't just an idle chat - Jemeryl knew that anyway. She realised that an interested, *'Yes, go on'* was called for, but could not bring herself to say it.

"Her name's Tally. She's a cheese-maker from up the valley. Do you know her?"

"I don't think so."

"Blond hair, about your height, rather pretty."

"Oh." Jemeryl sunk back in her chair, bracing herself for what Tevi was going to say next. Suddenly a hideous thought struck her. She jerked upright. "You don't want her to come with us, do you?"

"No - nothing of the sort. In fact, she's almost incidental to what I want to say. It was just that she..." Tevi finished with a shrug.

A wave of relief washed over Jemeryl. Listening to Tevi's account would be easy by comparison to a long journey, forced to endure watching Tevi with a new-found lover. It gave Jemeryl the strength to ask for a completion to the sentence. "That she what?"

"It was... with her chasing me. I wanted to test my own reactions, so when she asked me, I kissed her." Tevi swallowed. All pretence at nonchalance had gone. She was sitting uneasily on the edge of her chair. Her eyes were fixed on the floor. "It was all right. I felt conspicuous, but not immoral or anything, and nobody else batted an eyelid - except for friends who were making encouraging gestures to her. That's when I got worried. I realised this woman saw me as some great hero and lover. I didn't know how to tell her the basilisk was a one-off thing and I didn't have a clue about the other. So I made a joke about never trusting a mercenary's kiss and left her. I barricaded myself in a corner with the old folk and told them stories until Tally left."

"You didn't spend the night with her?" Jemeryl blurted out.

"Oh no. I didn't say I liked her that much."

Jemeryl's heart started to pound. "So, what is it you want to talk about?"

"It's just... like with the woman last night... about not having a clue..." Tevi ground to a halt.

Jemeryl opened her mouth but could not force any words out, not daring to risk saying the wrong thing.

After a long silence, Tevi continued. "Supposing... if there was a woman, and you were really attracted to her, but didn't know how she felt about you. What would you say to her?"

"It would depend."

"On what?"

"On how sober I was - among other things."

"Would you want to be drunk?" Tevi sounded sceptical.

"It would help overcome any nerves, though it would do nothing for my eloquence." Jemeryl was amazed to hear how steady her own voice sounded. "We aren't just talking hypothetically, are we?"

"No." Tevi answered after a slight pause.

"There's someone you have your eye on."

"Yes."

"Not another of the villagers."

"No."

"Or someone from Lyremouth, or Treviston."

"No."

Jemeryl sat motionless in her chair, willing Tevi to look up, meet her eyes, give a smile or some other unequivocal sign - in vain. Tevi remained staring at the floor.

There had to be more than one possible interpretation for Tevi's words; for why she had chosen to say what she had said. *The way my luck's been running, she probably wants me to recommend a few suitable lines from a*

poem to put in a love letter home, Jemeryl told herself. *But surely there must be a faint possibility that she's referring to me?* Her jaw clenched at the afterthought, *If not, it will be beyond bearing, regardless of what I do.* She had to take her chance, and hope.

Jemeryl got to her feet, walked to Tevi's chair, then knelt so their heads were level. "What I'd say would also depend on who it was, the circumstances, and whether I could steer the conversation. Maybe I'd say nothing and let my actions speak for me."

Slowly, hesitantly, Jemeryl reached out and took hold of Tevi's hand, dreading that it would be snatched away, but the fingers she gripped tightened about her own. At last, Tevi raised her head and their eyes met.

While red firelight flickered and danced over the room, the two of them stayed frozen in position. Tevi's gaze held Jemeryl cocooned from the rest of the world. It felt to Jemeryl as if her entire life had been distilled into that moment. Nothing else had, or would, ever exist apart from the woman in front of her. She tried to speak but her lungs were not working properly.

Jemeryl lifted her free hand to cup Tevi's cheek. She felt the slight pressure as Tevi leaned into her touch. Then Jemeryl slipped her hand to the back of Tevi's neck, and drew her forward into a slow kiss.

Tevi's mouth was soft, moving against hers, nuzzling, sucking and then opening. Their tongues touched and Jemeryl heard herself moan. She began to explore - at first tentatively caressing, and then more fervently as her lips and tongue struggled to express the surge of desire.

Tevi's hand twisted free of the grasp. Both her arms wrapped around Jemeryl, tightening and pulling her close. Effortlessly, Tevi's enhanced strength lifted Jemeryl clear of the ground. She clung to Tevi's shoulders. Even through clothes, Tevi's body felt more real than anything Jemeryl had ever touched before; the firm softness filled her arms.

Somehow, they ended up sitting on the floor, squashed awkwardly between the chair and Tumble. Neither obstacle showed any sign of moving. At last Tevi broke from the kiss. She rested her forehead on Jemeryl's shoulder, gasping.

"Dare I hope from this, that I'm the woman you have your eye on?" Jemeryl's tone was not quite as light as she intended.

"I've wanted you since the moment I saw you." The thick cloth of Jemeryl's shirt muffled Tevi's voice.

"It's been the same for me."

"Truly?" Tevi sounded disbelieving.

"And you must remember I had a two day head-start on you."

"You really..."

"Yes."

Talk was inadequate. Jemeryl turned her head. Her lips travelled along the line of Tevi's jaw, detecting the faint tastes of salt and wood-smoke. The smoothness of Tevi's throat became wet and slippery under Jemeryl's mouth. She could feel Tevi's hands were trembling as they moved over her shoulders and down her spine. She suspected her own hands were none too steady either.

Jemeryl laid her face against Tevi's and opened her eyes. The wooden chair leg was inches from her nose. She stared at it while forming the words she wanted to say.

"Would you like to share my bed tonight? I'll understand if it's too much, too quickly and..."

She broke off as Tevi nodded sharply, her face still buried in Jemeryl's shoulder.

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

"In that case, perhaps we should move while my legs can still carry me."

Jemeryl wondered if they might be beyond that point already. Getting to her feet required both hands braced on the chair. Her actions felt as clumsy as a toddler's. Her knees were rubber. The stairs would have been impossible without an arm around Tevi's waist as support.

In her bedroom, they stood a while kissing, until Jemeryl gently pushed Tevi to onto the bed. In a business-like fashion, she undid the ties of her own shirt. Her hands moved on to her belt, but stopped. Tevi's gaze was transfixed on the gapping cloth. Letting her arms fall to her side, Jemeryl moved within reach of the seated woman. Tevi's hands slipped under the shirt, encircling Jemeryl, while her face tunnelled through the folds of material.

Jemeryl gasped at the touch of Tevi's lips on her skin. Had it not been for the supporting arms she would have fallen. She leaned forwards and braced her knees against the bed-frame. Her fingers burrowed through Tevi's short, dark hair. Her grip was firm enough to steer the path of Tevi's mouth towards her breast. Tevi's tongue flicked across her nipple. Jemeryl heard a small sound, like the mew of a new-born kitten, escape from the back of her own throat. She guided Tevi's head to her other breast. Waves of sensation flooded through her. Jemeryl looked down. Tevi's eyes were closed. Shadow filled the hollow of her cheek as she sucked. By the time Jemeryl pulled away, her body was trembling so much it was hard to finish undressing, and harder still to get Tevi free from her clothes.

The air was chill on exposed flesh. Jemeryl tugged back the bed covers and pushed Tevi inside, then snuggled in. Jemeryl's senses were overwhelmed by the awareness of Tevi; the texture of skin on skin, the rhythmic whisper of breath, and Tevi's eyes, inches away, staring into hers. She rolled back, pulling Tevi on top of her. Tevi's weight pressed her into the mattress. With her fingertips Jemeryl began investigating the contours of Tevi's back and sides. Her thumbs rippled over the furrows of Tevi's ribs.

Tevi drew back, resting up on her elbows. She adjusted her balance so she could lift one hand to Jemeryl's face. Her fingers traced the lines of cheek and jaw. Earnest desire was plain in Tevi's expression, and so was uncertainty.

The doubts solidified. "Um... you know I said about not having a clue?" Tevi's voice was barely audible.

Jemeryl smiled in understanding. "You've never done this before with a woman?"

"With anyone."

"Ah." Jemeryl considered the implications. "In that case, I'm afraid you might find it a bit of a disappointment - most people do."

Jemeryl's smile broadened. She rolled over so that Tevi was the one on her back. Jemeryl began a series of light teasing kisses, moving quickly over cheeks, nose and eyes, dancing away from Tevi's lips, until Tevi grew more assertive and caught hold of Jemeryl's head. She clamped her mouth against Jemeryl's, claiming her in an embrace that became ever more passionate. Their legs entwined.

Jemeryl felt herself swept along. Her paranormal senses only served to intensify the message her other senses were providing. Tevi's aura was energised with the heat of desire. Her persona crackled with tension.

Jemeryl pulled free of Tevi's grasp and lifted herself on one elbow. The tip of her forefinger touched the hollow at the base of Tevi's throat. Jemeryl interwove the contact through the higher dimensions, connecting to the hub of Tevi's aura. Tevi gasped with the shock. Jemeryl's hand moved on, tracing the ethereal lines of arousal across Tevi's body, flaring around her breasts, snaking along her thighs and condensing in the pit of her stomach. Tevi's breathing grew ragged, as if the air had to be dragged into her lungs.

Jemeryl's hand reached the elemental pivot between Tevi's legs, that was now the focus of both body and aura. Her fingers slipped into the silky wetness. Tevi's aura was overloaded, ready to erupt. Her body shuddered in spasms. Jemeryl guided the rising waves, moulding them to the rhythm of Tevi's breath. Jemeryl's fingers slipped inside Tevi. The surge through Tevi's aura matched the cry that broke from her lips. Tevi was close to climax. It took only the final pressure from Jemeryl's thumb to send her over the edge.

Jemeryl witnessed Tevi's climax in seven dimensions. Tevi's body arched. Her aura... Jemeryl shook her head, regretting the lack of words to describe the effect. If it were sight, it would be blazing blue light. If it were sound,

it would be a trumpet. If it were taste, it would be raw alcohol. The experience left Jemeryl herself on the point of release - but it could wait, at least for a few minutes.

Tevi had twisted onto her side with her face buried in Jemeryl's shoulder. Slowly her breathing returned to normal. She rolled back and looked up. Her gaze met Jemeryl's with an intensity that burned through all the planes of existence. Jemeryl stared back into the pair of grey eyes she had created.

Abruptly, disconcertingly, Jemeryl's extended time-sense intruded. The room broke into a kaleidoscope of seconds, then the world fell back into place. For better or worse Jemeryl knew, with a sorcerer's certainty, that her life would never be free of the consequences of that night.

The temporal shock when she had first set eyes on Tevi - Iralin had provoked it, tinkering with time. It had been an attempt to manipulate the outcome of a train of events starting with the meeting in the castle courtyard - but which part was cause and which effect? Maybe she and Tevi had always been fated to meet, to become lovers, and the Coven's interference had merely confused the web of fate, or maybe it was the tampering that had entwined her destiny with Tevi's and bound them together.

Whichever it was, Jemeryl did not care.

Lowering her head, she lost herself again in the sensation of Tevi's mouth on her own.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN—Ordinary folk

The ponies' hooves clattered on the cobbles of the courtyard. Tevi made a final check to ensure the load tied behind each saddle was secure. She grinned at the two squirrels, perched on her pony's rump, that watched eagerly, as if confident that acorns would soon form part of the game. Tevi placed her hand on top of the bedroll and pushed it back and forth in an experimental fashion, testing that nothing would shake loose.

The straps and harness passed the test. The squirrels complained noisily and jumped to the ground. Tevi stepped back and yawned, stretching her arms up above her head. The joints in her shoulders cracked. The sun had not yet climbed high enough in the sky to appear over the battlements and the courtyard was chilly. Tevi's breath created white clouds in the still dawn air.

Tevi flexed her neck, testing the way her body felt. There was a definite change, as if her muscles no longer fit in quite the same way on her bones. The grin reappeared on Tevi's face. Contrary to Jemeryl's words, Tevi had not been disappointed - surprised once or twice, but most definitely not disappointed. She pressed both hands against her cheeks. It was getting serious; she couldn't stop grinning and her face was starting to ache. She tried to imagine what her mother would say, an exercise that normally removed any trace of a smile, but today it only produced a desire to giggle. She had the feeling her feet weren't touching the ground, that her life had abruptly shot off on an unfamiliar route, but she wasn't complaining.

The sound of Jemeryl's footsteps came from the open doorway to the great hall. The sorcerer appeared in the porch, wrapped in warm travelling clothes, with the two bears in retinue. At the sight of her Tevi's insides turned to mush. Her first impulse was to rush over and sweep Jemeryl into an embrace, but Tevi hesitated, unsure of herself. Would it be too over-enthusiastic? Too immature? She waited by the ponies for Jemeryl to join her before reaching out self-consciously and placing her arms around Jemeryl's waist.

"Everything ready?" Jemeryl asked, after planting a gentle kiss on Tevi's lips.

"Yes."

"Then I guess it's time to go."

"Do we really have to leave today?"

"I was given a deadline to heal you and quit the valley. My time's up."

"Couldn't you tell them I suffered a relapse?"

Jemeryl muffled her laughter in Tevi's shoulder. Her embrace tightened, and then released. "Don't tempt me. I'm in enough trouble with Iralin as it is."

Tevi started to turn away forlornly. Jemeryl put a hand on her shoulder and pulled her back.

"Believe me, I'd like nothing better than to stay here in the castle, alone with you. But we'll be together until we find the chalice. With any luck it'll take us months... maybe years."

"It might not."

"I'm sure we'll find a way to drag it out." Jemeryl said mischievously.

The tone put the smile back on Tevi's lips. After one last kiss, the pair of them climbed into the saddles. They rode out under the heavy stone arch of the gatehouse, and into the watery morning sunlight beyond. Ruff and Tumble padded along behind, accompanied by an excited group of squirrels.

The trail led across the ruined outer ward of the castle, before winding its way downhill between bushes and outcrops of bricks and stones. Tevi would have headed straight on to the village but, once they were well clear, Jemeryl reined her pony around and faced the castle. She closed her eyes and muttered softly under her breath, while her hands made a series of sharp cutting movements.

Before Tevi's eyes, a change came over the buildings. The solid timbers of the gate decayed and fell apart. Stones crumbled and fell. There was a loud crash as a floor inside the castle gave way; the boom echoed back from the surrounding hillside. The squirrels fled in panic to the shelter of the nearest tree.

"Why did you do that?" Tevi's voice was a mixture of alarm and surprise.

"Didn't I tell you the castle was a partial illusion? I just returned it to the state it was in when I found it. The wooden parts and furniture were temporal reconstructions. It wouldn't have been safe to leave them, in case the villagers came poking around once we're gone. Now the squirrels can have it all to themselves again."

Jemeryl turned her pony around and guided it down the trail, leaving Tevi staring in bewilderment at the ruins. Her mouth worked at unspoken questions in the effort to come to terms with the idea that she had spent the previous twelve days in a heap of rubble disguised by illusion. It did not make sense. She urged her pony on to catch up with Jemeryl.

"You can create a castle from a ruin, but we have to ride all the way to Lyremouth on horseback. Can't you make us fly there or something?"

Jemeryl's face held a good-humoured grin as she tried to explain. "Magic isn't like that. Even sorcerers can't make things happen out of nothing. We have to study the paranormal dimensions and use whatever we find there. For telekinesis to be effective, you need a suitable drift pattern in the sixth dimension. If you can coerce the essence to flow with the currents, then the mass in the three normal dimensions follows."

"What?" Tevi said, utterly confused.

"Flying isn't easy." Jemeryl summed it up.

"The sorcerer in Treviston was able to make a bottle of wine float in the air."

A guilty expression crossed Jemeryl's face. "You can force things over a short distance, but it's hard work. I'm afraid that most of the time, when you see a sorcerer make things defy gravity, it's just to impress the ungifted. It would actually be less effort to move the items by hand."

"You mean it's not very useful?"

"It is sometimes. And when the currents are suitably configured, telekinesis can be quite impressive - but it doesn't happen often."

"Sounds rather haphazard."

"That's like a blind person saying sight is haphazard because it doesn't work very well at night."

The trail reached the point where it passed through a breach in the outer walls. Before them, the bracken-covered hillside rolled down to the cultivated fields of the valley floor. The slopes above were covered in pine trees, ending in a ragged line a short distance away. Jemeryl brought her pony to a halt once more and pointed to the trees. In obedience to her gesture, Ruff and Tumble ambled up the hill, shouldering their way through the coarse vegetation. When they reached the first of the trees, Jemeryl stood in the stirrups and clapped her hands together three times.

As the sound faded the two bears froze in their tracks, as if turned to stone, then Ruff shook his head and sneezed. Tumble looked up at the dark green branches above her head, whining softly. Back on the path, Tevi's pony fidgeted restlessly. The sound of small stones, crunching under its hooves, made both bears look around. Instantly they spun back and pelted into the woods as fast as their legs would carry them.

Tevi watched them go sadly. "Will they remember us?"

"Just a few confusing details that will make them even more wary of people - which is the way I'd want it." Jemeryl said firmly. "I'd hate to think of them wandering up to a fur trapper and try to make friends."

"But Klara comes with us?"

"You bet, sweetheart." The magpie answered for herself, perched on the pack behind Jemeryl's saddle.

Jemeryl prompted her pony into a gentle trot down the hillside. "Come on. Let's go and bid our fond farewells to the villagers."

Late afternoon, two days later, they reached the outlying farms surrounding the town of Rizen. Flocks of sheep grazed on rough pasture between areas of dense woodland. To the east a slow-flowing river twisted in loops through waterlogged meadows. The road forded several shallow tributaries that ran down from the hills. High above, the ragged peaks of the Spur were lost in cloud. A light drizzle was falling in the dwindling light. Nobody else was visible on the road, although the track showed signs of considerable use. Its surface was dotted with potholes and furrowed with deep ruts from the wheels of farm carts.

Ahead of them, Rizen lay in a wide bend of the river. The massive defensive walls were a reminder of less civilised days, before the area had taken allegiance with the Coven. The drizzle turned to rain as they approached the town gates. Tevi pulled up the hood of her cloak, grateful they would be spending the night under a roof.

Three guardsmen were sheltering from the rain beneath the stone arch of the gate. They were dressed in the uniform of the town militia, and their hands carried the red and gold tattoo of the mercenaries. They paid far more attention to their own banter than the approaching riders. Bursts of laughter echoed in the confined space.

Jemeryl halted her pony beside them. "Could you tell me if the sorcerer is in town today?" she asked.

The sergeant broke off in mid sentence and slowly turned around, his mouth set in a self-important sneer. His contemptuous manner lasted no more than a fraction of a second. Without making an ostentatious show, Jemeryl's sleeve was pushed back to reveal the black amulet on her wrist. At the sight of it, the sergeant snapped to attention. The other two guardsmen were only an instant behind in copying his action.

"Yes, ma'am. Sorcerer Chenoweth is in residence. Please, if you would wait a moment, I will arrange a suitable escort to take you to him."

"Thank you, that isn't necessary."

Giving the faintest nod to acknowledge the sergeant's salute, Jemeryl rode on into the town. The abrupt change in attitude was not so easy for Tevi to ignore. *Of course - that's how people respond to sorcerers*, she reminded herself. It left her with a feeling of discomfort. The eyes of the guardsmen seemed to go straight through her. There was no response to her friendly smile. Tevi hesitated, tempted to speak, but was put off by the blank expressions. She urged her pony forward to catch up with Jemeryl.

Substantial timber-framed buildings lined either side of the main street. Above the doors hung the signs of a dozen guilds, however none of them denoted an inn. Tevi was about to suggest they look for suitable lodgings, when she caught sight of a sign bearing the red and gold swords of the mercenaries' guild, swinging outside a tall building.

"I ought to call in at the guildhall." Tevi pointed it out as she spoke. "I should check that Harrick left the payment for the contract. I suppose I'd also better explain about the basilisk. I didn't get paid for it, and I wouldn't want them to think I was cheating the guild out of its share."

"Don't be surprised if they aren't very pleased." Jemeryl gave a crooked smile. "The mercenaries don't go in for unpaid acts of charity, as you might guess from the guild's name. While you're explaining it to them, I'll go and visit the town sorcerer. It counts as good manners to tell someone when you're in their area. I'll pick you up from the guildhall afterwards and we'll find an inn for the night."

Tevi slipped out of her saddle and caught hold of the pony's reins. "I guess I'll have to hand the pony over as well, it was only on loan. I don't know what to do about..."

"Don't worry, we'll get another one."

"Right."

Tevi shared a last smile with Jemeryl before heading off beneath the archway leading to an inner courtyard, and presumably the stable block.

Once Tevi was out of sight, Jemeryl continued riding slowly down the street. There were a fair number of people about, despite the rain. Most rushed by with their heads down, and paid little attention to her, but those who spotted her amulet stepped aside discreetly. Jemeryl gave no acknowledgement to their respectful nods. Her thoughts were locked on the imminent meeting with the Rizen sorcerer.

She was not looking forward to the conversation. Iralin had claimed that it was Chenoweth who passed the reports from the villagers on to Lyremouth. Jemeryl had met Chenoweth on several occasions. They had not got on well - not as far as arguing, but Jemeryl had found the other sorcerer uninspired and, frankly, not very intelligent. She suspected Chenoweth thought her both arrogant and unorthodox. He was probably gloating over the current events, as far as he was aware of them.

Chenoweth's home overlooked an imposing square, close by the gates. Jemeryl could not hide her scorn as she looked at it. The place was a monument to a weak imagination. In truth it was actually a pleasant town house, built in the local style to generous proportions. However, Chenoweth had overlain it with illusion to the extent that it now appeared hideously incongruous with its neighbours. He had managed to work in every cliché for a sorcerer's dwelling, including animated gargoyles guarding the door and multicoloured smoke issuing from the chimneys. If it impressed the local ungifted population, it would imply a sad lack of sophistication on their part.

To Jemeryl's mind, Chenoweth was little more than an overrated witch. It was very doubtful that Iralin would have informed him of the actions taken over the reports he had transmitted, but Chenoweth would be quite able to draw his own conclusions when he learnt Jemeryl was bound for Lyremouth. It was a safe bet that his response would be smug, petty-minded and vindictive. Jemeryl chewed her lip, trying to work out the most tactful way of dealing with the situation.

Klara hopped onto her shoulder. "Don't worry, just give him quick summary of the relevant facts." the magpie whispered.

"Which are?"

"That he's an interfering arsehole, who pays too much attention to the ramblings of ignorant morons."

Klara's suggestions were rarely helpful.

The guild-master crossed his massive forearms, laced with a network of scars, on the desk in front of him. "And you're quite certain you haven't anything else you'd like to declare?" He sneered.

"No, sir."

On the other side of the desk, Tevi stood sullenly to attention. In the two hours since her arrival at the guildhall, she had come to realise that Jemeryl's warning was well-founded. The guild-master had insisted on her repeating her story half a dozen times, while his attitude had got progressively more hostile. He clearly did not believe a thing she said. For her part, Tevi was forming an intense dislike of the man. She was not used to having her word doubted.

The guild-master shifted back in his chair and gave her a long hard stare. The only sound in the room came from one corner, where another senior guild member had the contents of Tevi's saddle-pack spread over a long table and was rummaging through the items suspiciously.

The guild-master's voice snapped out. "Why don't you start again, from the beginning, when you decided not to complete your contract with Trader Harrick?"

"Trader Harrick agreed I had completed my contract in getting the cargo over the mountains."

"Your contract said you would stay with him until Rizen. Where did you think you got the right to change its terms?"

"By mutual consent a contract may be amended." Tevi replied.

"Don't try quoting rules at me." the guild-master bellowed. "I was living by them before you were born. Amendment of contract is only allowed in exceptional circumstances."

Tevi would have laid money that the man had been a bully as a child. "The lives of Protectorate citizens were at..." Her words were interrupted by an urgent rapping on the door of the room.

"What is it now?" The guild-master shouted in exasperation.

A young apprentice poked her head around the edge of the door nervously. "There's a sorcerer here to see you, sir. She says it's about the new arrival."

The announcement was greeted by a sigh of relief from Tevi. Its effect on the two guild officials was far more dramatic. They both froze with blank expressions of confusion on their faces while their eyes shifted from the messenger to Tevi, and then on to each other.

The guild-master was the first to recover from the surprise. "Don't stand there gawking. Show the sorcerer up immediately." he barked at the waiting apprentice. As the door closed his glare shifted back to Tevi. "I suppose you think this is your *friend*?"

Tevi felt a blush touch her cheeks at the emphasis he put on the word 'friend'. "Yes sir. Jemeryl said she'd meet me here."

"Still sticking to your story? Well maybe now we'll get to the truth."

Despite his continued belligerence, the guild-master was noticeably unsettled. He got to his feet, then stood, adjusting the set of his clothes and tightening his belt. As the sound of footsteps was heard in the corridor outside, he combed his thinning hair back with his fingers, in a last nervous effort at personal grooming.

Suddenly, Tevi understood what the guild-master had meant by the way he had stressed 'friend'. An immense gulf in social status existed between a junior mercenary and a Coven sorcerer. In the castle Jemeryl herself had insisted on acting like equals, but the rest of the world would not see them as such.

Tevi realised it was the assertion that the Coven authorities took an interest in her quest for a family heirloom that had prejudiced the guild-master against believing her story from the start. Referring to Jemeryl in terms more appropriate for a personal friend than a superior had also not helped. Judging by his reaction to the news of Jemeryl's arrival, the guild-master had not even believed the sorcerer existed. Now he evidently expected to have Tevi's account revealed as a distortion of the truth, if not an outright lie. However, Tevi did not have long to analyse all the implications. The door opened and both guild officers bowed stiffly as Jemeryl swept into the room.

"How may we assist you ma'am?" The guild-master's bellicose tones were gone, replaced by starched politeness.

Jemeryl did not answer immediately. Her gaze travelled very deliberately around the room. Tevi guessed that her own face held an expression of aggrieved irritation. Jemeryl could add it to the guild-master's stern officiousness and his colleague's edgy sideways glances. It would not be hard to read the situation.

Jemeryl's eyes finished up fixed on the guild-master. "Thank you, but my business is actually with Tevi." Her manner was nothing short of condescending.

"On that subject, I'm pleased you've arrived, ma'am. There seems to be a little confusion. We are..."

Jemeryl interrupted. "Confusion? Didn't Tevi explain the situation?"

"We've had a version of events, but we're unsure of the accuracy. If..."

Jemeryl cut him off again. "You're surely not calling my friend's honesty into question?"

Despite her tension Tevi could not help being amused by the guild-master's face as he tried to cover his stunned disbelief. "Er... well... No, ma'am."

"Then what is the problem?" Jemeryl's voice had become icy.

"It's... we..." The guild-master swallowed. He glanced towards his colleague, as if hoping for inspiration or advice. Nothing was forthcoming.

In the resulting silence, Jemeryl turned to Tevi. "You told them I want you to accompany me?" Her voice sounded coldly offended.

"I've tried to." Tevi replied.

Jemeryl looked back to the guild-master. The questioning expression on her face demanded an answer.

"Um... no, ma'am. There's no problem." the guild-master mumbled.

Tevi was starting to feel uncomfortable. She had hoped that Jemeryl's arrival would result in the situation being resolved with the minimum of fuss, however Jemeryl was clearly playing the game of baiting the guild-master. Having recently been subjected to bullying, Tevi was unhappy to see it continued - even though it was her tormentor who was currently on the spot. Yet, despite her qualms, there was a point that had to be cleared up.

"They've refused me permission to leave town." Tevi said quietly.

"They've said what!" Jemeryl's tone was outraged.

"Ma'am, we didn't..." the guild-master tried to get his explanation in.

Jemeryl spoke across his voice. "You told them we're on Coven business?"

"They said I had to stay here, regardless of who wanted me." Tevi tactfully refrained from quoting verbatim.

The guild-master flinched.

Jemeryl stared at him. "You question my authority to claim Tevi's services?"

"No ma'am, of course not."

"But you won't let her come with me?"

"Oh no, ma'am. But we didn't want her running off without proper authorisation."

"You want me to sign a formal contract for her employment? Of course, you are quite within your rights to do so."

During her assessment in Lyremouth, Tevi had been told that the Coven would only be asked for formal contracts of employment in exceptional circumstances. Should a sorcerer require any mercenary's services the guild would reimburse its member from its own coffers. Tevi had not understood all the ramifications, only that it amounted to an indiscretion to even suggest charging the Coven. Despite this, Jemeryl held out her hand, as if waiting to be passed a pen and paper.

"Please, that won't be necessary. I'll sort out all requisite details." The guild-master was half an inch from grovelling.

Jemeryl stepped back and treated him to a glare that could have stripped the varnish off his desk. "So what is all this nonsense about?"

"We were just a little confused ma'am, your... friend's story was so... unusual. We couldn't see why you'd need her services."

"You're surely not calling on me to give an account of my reasons?" Jemeryl's voice was soft, but deadly.

Tevi felt sorry for the guild-master as he floundered in the face of the sorcerer's determination to put the worst interpretation on his every word.

"Oh no, ma'am. There's just been a misunderstanding. Your companion can leave at once."

The guild-master had the sense to realise that anything he might say would only make things worse. A fierce gesture goaded the other official into a burst of activity. Both men fumbled clumsily in their haste as they shoved Tevi's belongings back into the bags. In next to no time the two women were outside on the street. Tevi had even been given back her pony. The guild-master had promised to pay Harrick for it on behalf of the guild.

Night had fallen while Tevi had been in the guildhall. The dark streets were now deserted and the rain had turned to sleet. Jemeryl created a small globe to light their way and urged her pony forwards. Its hooves splashed though the puddles dotting the wet cobbles. Tevi rode in silence, relieved to be out of the guildhall, but deeply uneasy as she considered events since arriving in Rizen, and the consequences of Jemeryl's rank. Alone together in the castle it had not mattered. They had become friends, without deference or superiority, and then lovers. Could this familiarity continue in the presence of others? Would Jemeryl want it to? Tevi found herself wondering just how Jemeryl saw their relationship.

Chenoweth had recommended an inn. It was a prosperous establishment, well situated in the centre of town. The Rizen sorcerer had apparently also sent word to the innkeeper, since a member of the staff was awaiting their arrival in the yard behind the inn, standing out in the open despite the weather. The stable-hand rushed forward to assist the two women, although, once he had established which one was the sorcerer, Tevi received only cursory attention. She stepped back in the shelter of an overhanging roof and stood, studying Jemeryl's profile.

Instead of her usual impish grin, Jemeryl's expression was grave and impersonal. She hardly spared a glance for the sodden stable-hand. Her whole bearing was disdainful and remote. Her voice was a crisp monotone, leaving no doubt that she expected her instructions obeyed. Tevi's jaw clenched as she watched. It was hard to see any resemblance to the woman who had become her lover.

The ponies were left in the care of the stable-hand and two porters arrived to carry the baggage. Before Jemeryl and Tevi had reached the rear entrance of the inn, the door was pulled open by an anxious innkeeper who was waiting with another member of staff in attendance. The lively hubbub of voices in the taproom, clearly audible from the stable-yard, immediately dropped to a hushed mumbling as Jemeryl stepped inside.

"We'd like a room for the night." Jemeryl's voice was cold.

"Yes of course, ma'am. We're just having our best suite made ready." The innkeeper was clearly torn between nervousness and pride at his prestigious customer. His hands fidgeted restlessly with the cloth of his apron.

In Tevi's opinion, there was an excessive amount of fuss as they were led upstairs and along a wide hallway. The room they finally entered was large and elegantly furnished. Rich tapestries hung on the walls. The floorboards were scarcely visible between the rugs. What looked like half a tree was burning in the huge inglenook fireplace. Opposite the entrance was a deep bay window that, in daylight, would command views over the river. Doors on either side gave access to further rooms.

The innkeeper stood by anxiously as the sorcerer examined the accommodation.

"These are your best rooms?" Jemeryl's neutral tone could have implied anything.

"You are welcome to inspect any of the others."

"Don't you know which are your best rooms?"

"Y-y-yes ma'am" the innkeeper stuttered. "These are. I'm afraid they're due for redecoration, but..."

Jemeryl held up a hand to interrupt him. "It will be satisfactory."

"Is there anything else you require, ma'am?"

"A bath before we eat would be appreciated. That will be all."

The innkeeper bowed and backed out. The second the door closed Jemeryl's autocratic air vanished. "Well - what do you think of it?" she asked with a sweep of her arms.

Tevi had been standing awkwardly at one side. She hesitantly left the position and wandered towards the fire. Her eyes shifted uneasily, taking in the whole room, with the exception of the spot where Jemeryl was standing.

Jemeryl's exuberance softened into sympathy. "Were they giving you a hard time in the guildhall? I could tell as soon as I walked in that something was up."

"It's not that." Tevi pointedly refused to meet her eyes.

"What's wrong, Tevi?"

Tevi ran her hand over the back of a long couch, fingering the embroidered fabric. "How much will it cost to stay here?"

"We won't have to pay. If I'm asked I'll sign a receipt the innkeeper can offset against his taxes, but I doubt that he will. It's taken as a sign of poverty to charge the Coven. Besides, he'll make it back. Saying that these rooms were good enough for a sorcerer will let him put two shillings on the price."

Tevi slumped onto a chair by the fire. Her eyes were fixed on the thick rug by her feet.

"What's upsetting you? I thought you'd like a bit of luxury." Jemeryl's voice betrayed growing confusion and disappointment. "It's not really the money, is it?"

"No."

"Then what?"

"It's the way you behave with ordinary folk." Tevi mumbled.

"The way I what?"

"The way you trample over people."

"I don't." Jemeryl's voice was rising.

"You do. Not just in taking it for granted that you could have the best rooms in the inn, free of charge. You were deliberately trying to intimidate the innkeeper - you didn't even act grateful."

"It's the innkeeper who should be grateful to me." Jemeryl blazed. "I told you he'll recoup his money. Anyway, ungifted citizens owe all their prosperity to the Coven. Without us they'd be living in mud huts, at the mercy of any magic-wielding tyrant."

Tevi was shaken by the angry outburst. Instead of responding in kind, her manner was even more subdued as she said, "I know what the Coven does for people and I know all about poverty. On the islands we worked from dawn to dusk. We regularly went cold and hungry. We saw one child in four die before its first birthday - and that was in the Queen's household."

"So what's wrong?" Jemeryl snapped. She stood in front of Tevi's chair, glaring down at her.

"I'd forgotten how ordinary citizens jump when a sorcerer talks to them."

"Is that my fault?"

"You were playing it as hard as you could." Tevi was also starting to sound heated.

"Why are you bothered? I wasn't trying to pull rank on you."

"The affect rubs off. If it keeps up, I'm going to start calling you ma'am."

"Don't you dare."

"Is that an order?"

Jemeryl bit back whatever she was about to say and strode away to stand facing the bay window, although it was too dark to see out. Raindrops were running down the outside of the glass, glittering in the reflected light from the fire. Tevi watched her lover's back, too overwhelmed by her own clashing emotions to speak.

At last Jemeryl turned away from the window and walked back to Tevi's side. "Look, I know all the bowing and scraping can be irritating. Sorcerers make most people nervous - it's not that I want it or expect it." Her voice was deliberately gentle, as if she was working on sounding reasonable.

"You looked like you were enjoying the whole thing."

Jemeryl drew her breath in sharply. She held it for a second and then let it out in a sigh. "Yes, you're right. I was."

"Why? You're not you when you act like that." Tevi could hear the pain in her own voice - it clearly got through to Jemeryl as well.

The sorcerer knelt and took Tevi's face in her hands. "I'm sorry. Lording it over people is a bad habit that sorcerers get into. It's a silly game and I didn't intend to upset you."

"You don't care about anyone else?"

"It's hard to." Jemeryl said, honestly. "There's a barrier between Coven members and ordinary folk. And it's not one-sided. Most citizens want to keep their distance. It would probably have worried the innkeeper more if I'd tried to act all chummy. It would certainly have confused him."

Tevi was silent for a while, before saying, "I don't feel like that."

"No. And I'm very pleased you don't. You're different. "

"It made me understand the villager's view of you... a little."

Jemeryl pulled a wry grimace. "Only a little? Well, take comfort that I'm not normally so bad. I had an unpleasant time talking to Chenoweth and I've been taking it out on everyone else. I'm sorry. It was wrong of me." A corner of her mouth twitched slightly. "Mind you, I think your guild-master was asking for it."

For the space of a dozen heartbeats Tevi stared into Jemeryl's eyes, and then she glanced down, a faint smile catching her lips. "Maybe, just a little."

Before anything else could be said, there was a knock at the door. Jemeryl stood and called, "Come in."

Four of the inn staff entered, carrying a large brass bath and copious amounts of hot water and towels. These were taken into one of the adjoining rooms.

"Will you require assistance with your bath, ma'am?" The eldest of the servants asked politely, addressing her question to a point several inches to the side of Jemeryl's head.

"We can cope." Tevi answered quickly, however the servants waited for Jemeryl's nod of agreement before leaving the room.

By the time both women were clean and dressed in fresh clothes, a table had been set for them in the centre of the room. The glasses were cut crystal; the cutlery was solid silver. The dinner, when it arrived, was an elaborate creation from the chef, complimented by a bottle of vintage wine. Everything was of the highest quality, but Tevi did not enjoy the meal. She felt awkward to be the centre of so much attention.

The waiters fussed about them to the point of irritation. Jemeryl was clearly making an effort to be friendly but, as she predicted, the inn staff did not know how to respond and retreated into even more vacuous servility. Yet, once or twice, Tevi caught unguarded expressions of resentment directed at Jemeryl, and something closer to contempt aimed at herself. It was impossible to concentrate on Jemeryl and the food with the sensation of hostile eyes boring into her back. She found herself straining to catch the whispered comments the waiters exchanged among themselves just out of earshot.

She did not relax until the door closed behind the last waiter taking away the empty plates. Her relief was short-lived.

"Let's go down to the taproom for a drink." Jemeryl suggested.

"Why?"

"Why not? We spent last night camping out and we'll probably spend the next few nights in the same way. We might as well make the most of the comforts of civilisation while we have the chance. There's a harper with a very good reputation who plays here."

"You could go on your own." Tevi said nervously.

"Don't be silly. I want your company. I promise I'll be nice to people."

"If you really want to." Tevi's voice made her unhappiness plain.

Jemeryl put out a hand to grasp Tevi's shoulder. "What's wrong? Have I done something else?"

"Oh no, it's not you." Tevi's head dropped. "I think Rizen has just been too much for me. I don't think I can stand any more. If we go down to the tavern everyone will be watching us. I don't feel up to being the centre of attention. The waiter's faces during dinner - they were acting polite, but you could tell they didn't like us. It brought back lots of bad memories. On the islands I was heir to the throne. Every move I made was watched, and I knew I never measured up. When everyone is looking at you with contempt, it..." Tevi's voice failed her.

"The memory hurts that much?"

"I hated it... being seen as a joke when I failed. The one thing I liked about exile was being ignored."

Jemeryl placed her hand under Tevi's chin and turned her face so their eyes met. "It's all right. I think I understand. I've got my own ghosts which haunt me from time to time." Jemeryl's expression was caught between sadness and affection. "We can stay up here."

"No, I'm being over-sensitive." Tevi berated herself remorsefully. "We should go down to the tavern. I'll cope."

Jemeryl smiled. "We'll stay here."

"I don't want to spoil your evening. You want to hear the harper."

There was a glint in Jemeryl's eyes as she spoke. "Don't worry. I'm sure you can think of a way to compensate for missing the music." With a smile, she lowered her hand and began to unbutton Tevi's shirt.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN—Forbidden Spells

The two women reached the brow of the last hill. Behind them freshly ploughed fields of dark soil covered the undulating landscape, and hedgerows teemed with spring flowers. Ahead of them was Lyremouth. The sprawling mass of buildings and streets hugged its harbour under a pale blue sky. On the side nearest them, close by the city, yet unmistakably distinct from it, were the buildings of the Coven.

The road was busy. The press of carts, riders and pack animals made for slow progress. By the time Tevi and Jemeryl reached the point where the road split their patience was being tested. The two women reined their ponies to one side to talk, though it was impossible not to be in someone's way.

The wider, busier fork headed into the city. The other branch, lined with oak trees, lead across parkland towards the Coven. It was much narrower and calmer, however no one could mistake it for a side street - it was probably the most famous stretch of road in the world.

"Are you sure you don't want me with you, to confirm the villagers were a bunch of childish gossips?" Tevi volunteered.

"I'll be fine on my own. You can back me up later if need be."

"If you're sure." Tevi dismounted and handed the reins to Jemeryl. The pony would only be a handicap on the crowded city streets. "I'll go and tell the guild-masters that I've been commandeered by the Coven. Hopefully they'll be more reasonable than the crew at Rizen - if I phrase it right."

"I'm sure they will. They've far more experience of sorcerers."

"Right. See you later."

Tevi was soon lost from view among the mass of people on the road. Jemeryl's face was pensive as she rode the last short distance alone.

It had not been easy to persuade Tevi to separate for the first meeting with their superiors, especially since Jemeryl had not given all her reasons. The initial talk with Iralin was likely to be unpleasant, and not merely because the senior sorcerer might want to elaborate on the subject of their previous conversation. Relationships with the ungifted were strongly disapproved of, although not completely forbidden. It was all too easy to forget self-control when strong emotions were involved. The ex-lovers of sorcerers had been known to come to untimely ends.

Despite her worries, Jemeryl gazed around fondly as she rode through the familiar surroundings. Only a few weeks ago she would have said without reservation that the happiest time of her life had been spent there as an apprentice. A confused frown crossed Jemeryl's face. Tevi had changed that. In her castle, Jemeryl had dreamed only of returning to the Coven to claim a place as a senior sorcerer. She was no longer quite so sure of what she wanted.

The stable block was unchanged since she had left, barring a new coat of paint. Even before she had dismounted, the leading stable-hand came over to greet her, brushing loose straw from his cloths. A smile of recognition lit Pym's weathered face. The Coven would not be the Coven without Pym.

"Madam Jemeryl. We hadn't expected to see you back so soon. Have you been recalled for more important work?" he said, cheerfully.

"In a way."

"I guessed they wouldn't leave you to rot in a backwater for long."

"It all counts as part of the Protectorate."

"But the best of the action is here." Pym said pointedly.

"And what is the latest action?" Jemeryl asked.

"Official or unofficial?"

The look Jemeryl gave answered the question. Pym laughed and proceeded to gossip amiably for a while, neatly summarising a string of minor scandals involving several of the Coven members.

"Nothing much has changed." Jemeryl said when the account had drawn to an end.

"It never does, just some of the faces."

"I'm sure. Thanks for the chat."

"You off to see Iralin?" Pym asked.

"Yes. And if you ever hear any rumours about her..."

"I'll keep them to myself. I'm not that much of a fool."

They both laughed again. Jemeryl left the stables, more comforted by his words than she let show. Pym was the best source of gossip in the Coven. If he was unaware why she had returned, then news of her disgrace was not common knowledge - but, if she read things correctly, there was more to it than Iralin had admitted. Perhaps the senior sorcerer had reasons for wanting to keep quiet.

At that time of day, Iralin was most likely to be found in her study, high in one of the central towers. Jemeryl climbed the stairs with sinking spirits. Chatting to Pym had been partly a delaying tactic, but there was no sensible way to put off the confrontation any longer. Summoning her courage, Jemeryl knocked on the door, half hoping there would be no reply.

"Enter." Iralin's voice answered immediately. She was always there when you didn't want her.

The senior sorcerer looked up from her desk. Her face hardened as she recognised her visitor. "Jemeryl. I hadn't expected to see you here. Where is the warrior you are supposed to be assisting?"

"We thought it might be best if we were to talk to our superiors separately."

"You have bad news?"

"Oh no, ma'am. But Tevi had neglected to tell the guild- masters she was quest-bound. I also wanted to make my first report in private and explain the situation as regards the quest."

"Tevi is the name of this warrior?"

"Yes ma'am."

"And what do you have to report?"

"I've made a start, but I need more facts - I had limited resources with me. We've come to Lyremouth to consult the Coven library and to get some more detailed information from you."

Iralin shuffled some papers on her desk before replying. "Precisely what sort of information were you anticipating?"

So far, the interview was going easier than Jemeryl had feared. Iralin seemed more concerned with the state of the quest than with repeating the reprimand. It was too soon to relax, but Jemeryl was starting to feel happier.

"In order to find the current location of the memory chalice I need to narrow down the list of people who might have taken it. It would help if I had some clues as to what might be in the chalice's memory. So I'm really after more information about the previous owner."

Iralin's face showed no sign of emotion, and not much of comprehension. It occurred to Jemeryl that her mentor had known far less about the quest than she had implied. It would not be tactful to draw attention to the shortcoming. Feigning omnipotence was a common failing with sorcerers - one frequently denounced by Iralin herself.

"Would it be better if I were to start by giving a full report on events in chronological order?" Jemeryl suggested diplomatically.

Iralin nodded shrewdly - always a good cover. "Yes. I think it would be an idea. You can take a seat while you're doing it."

Once settled, Jemeryl launched into an account of what she had learnt since Tevi arrived at the castle. Iralin listened intently. Jemeryl had the feeling that the older sorcerer was waiting for subtle clues - hints dropped that might mean more than was apparent. The story got as far as the end of the saga of Abrak before Iralin interrupted.

"Like most folk tales, that's nine tenths fantasy."

"I also thought so at first." Jemeryl conceded.

"Nobody has ever managed to create a viable strength potion, as you should know. Are you seriously suggesting that a lone shipwreck survivor could churn one out to order?" Iralin retorted impatiently.

"There was one sorcerer who could have done it, and the dates and other facts would tie in with her. I only came across a brief mention of her by chance, with very little real information - that's why I've come to Lyremouth. I think Abrak was actually a sorcerer named Lorimal."

It was the sudden absence of movement on the other side of the desk that alerted Jemeryl. Iralin was frozen in something that looked like speechless horror.

"You recognise the name." It was more a statement than a question from Jemeryl.

"Continue with your report." Iralin recovered her composure. She listened in silence as Jemeryl continued the narrative. The senior sorcerer's eyes were fixed grimly at the table between them. She displayed no further emotion, even when Jemeryl announced she and Tevi had become lovers.

"You've just arrived in Lyremouth?" Iralin asked, once Jemeryl had finished speaking.

"Less than an hour ago."

"Have you spoken to anyone?"

"I met Pym in the stables."

Iralin caught her breath. "Did you tell him any of this?"

"Oh no, I mainly listened."

"This young mercenary. Will she be talking to anyone?"

"Yes... as I said. She's gone to report to her guild- masters."

Iralin pressed the backs of her interlaced fingers against her mouth while she withdrew into her thoughts. Abruptly she dropped her hands and said. "Where were you planning on staying?"

"I'd thought we could take rooms in town." Jemeryl replied hesitantly. She did not want to be separated from Tevi and the authorities took an extremely dim view of the ungifted residing on Coven grounds.

However Iralin shook her head. "It would be best for the pair of you to lodge here. Get the registrar to allocate you quarters. I'll arrange the necessary permission for your mercenary to share them."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"I'm not offering it as a favour." Iralin snapped. She leaned back in her chair and studied Jemeryl, appraising her. "You must have realised that the name of Lorimal is very significant. It is possible you will soon come to learn why, but first I need to discuss this with others. Get yourself a room and go to it. Leave instructions for your mercenary to be shown there, if she arrives. Apart from that, say nothing to anyone. You will be hearing from me shortly."

"Yes ma'am." Mystified, Jemeryl made her escape.

The next four hours trickled by while Jemeryl paced restlessly about her room. The more she thought of Iralin's reaction, the more anxious she became. If only Tevi would arrive, so she had someone to discuss it with.

"Do you have to keep wandering about like that? How do you expect a bird to get any sleep?" a familiar raucous voice asked.

"How can you sleep at a time like this?" Jemeryl responded.

"You mean at a time when someone is stomping up and down, muttering?"

Jemeryl sent a withering glare in Klara's direction then walked over to the box-window. She perched in the deep embrasure, and craned her neck in the hope of catching sight of Tevi on the road to the Coven. After a minute of staring, the corners of her mouth pulled down in a grimace. Her view was almost completely obscured by the intervening buildings. What little she could see of the road was at too acute an angle to allow positive identification of people. The chances of picking out Tevi were slim.

There was no point trying to scry by magic. Wards built into the walls of the Coven prevented any such work. Nominally, the wards were to protect the Coven from external spies. Jemeryl suspected they were largely to provide the senior sorcerers with a degree of privacy from the unscrupulous curiosity of young students.

"For all the good it does. We just go and ask Pym." Jemeryl said aloud, grinning.

She rested her head against the glass, and watched Klara, who was dozing on a bookcase. The conversation with Iralin kept going around in her head. It was obvious that the senior sorcerer had known virtually nothing about the quest - she had not known Tevi's name and almost certainly had no idea of her island background. Iralin had not even been aware that a memory chalice was the object of the quest. The mention of Lorimal had left Iralin completely thunderstruck.

"I keep trying to work out who Lorimal was. If she's important enough to send Iralin into a flap, you'd have thought I'd have heard of her before now."

Klara jerked awake. "Perhaps you nodded off in the relevant lecture."

"Don't be silly, I never fell asleep."

"No. And you won't let do it me now." Pointedly, the magpie stuck her head back under her wing.

Jemeryl made no progress trying to reason things out. In the end, she gave up. Hopefully a summons would come soon, and she would be getting some answers. Jemeryl slipped down from the window and went to the bookcase, where she selected a volume at random. She settled in a chair, and tried to focus on the printed words.

The expected knock finally came. Jemeryl tossed the book aside and leapt out of her chair. She yanked the door open with such eagerness it took the young apprentice outside by surprise.

"Please, you've been summoned..." the girl begun.

"To Iralin's study, I know." Jemeryl interrupted.

"No. You have to go to see Gilliart. She's in her private chambers"

The Guardian's name stopped Jemeryl in her tracks. The search for Lorimal's chalice was very serious if Gilliart herself had become involved. Jemeryl stared at the apprentice. There was no point asking her for more information. Jemeryl was starting to suspect that ignorance might even be an enviable state.

It was even more worrying that Gilliart was not using one of the large audience chambers for the meeting. A servant at the Guardian's quarters directed Jemeryl to a small room, that was clearly intended for private discussions. Wooden panels lined the walls and reed mats covered the floor. A rectangular table stood in the centre of the room; three people sat around it; their identities confirmed Jemeryl's foreboding.

Gilliart had her back to the window. The white hair sweeping from her hawk-like features matched the white amulet on her wrist. Her expression was solemn, even by the Guardian's standards. Her deputy, Alendy was on

her left, a stocky man in his late fifties. Light from the window glinted off his bald head. Opposite him sat Iralin, staring grimly at the tabletop. All three looked troubled - even frightened.

The fourth chair at the table was empty. Jemeryl looked at it nervously. An interview with the three most senior sorcerers in the Coven would be daunting at the best of times. It would be closer to an ordeal in the tense atmosphere that permeated the room but, to Jemeryl's considerable relief, Iralin pointed silently to a small bench against one wall.

They were clearly awaiting the arrival of another person. Jemeryl slipped onto the bench. Her heartbeat had almost returned to normal when the door opened and Tallard, chief guild-master of the mercenaries, entered the room. He was a thin, wiry man with sharp eyes. From what Jemeryl could remember, he had originally been an assassin. A second person followed him into the room. Despite the situation, Jemeryl could not keep the smile from her face as she recognised Tevi.

There was an exchange of greetings as the senior mercenary took his seat. Tallard was a frequent visitor to the Coven, and was clearly not in the least intimidated by the situation. Meanwhile, Tevi had spotted Jemeryl and had sidled over to join her. Her supportive presence boosted Jemeryl's confidence. Already there was a rapport between them, negating the need for speech. Tevi reached out and squeezed Jemeryl's hand.

As soon as everyone was settled Gilliart leaned forward, addressing her words to the guild-master. "Thank you for coming so quickly. I know you have many demands on your time, so I'll attempt to be brief. But first I'd like to know how much your young colleague has told you."

"That she's oath-bound on a quest, which she should have told us earlier. That she's looking for a chalice which used to belong to a sorcerer, and that one of your members is escorting her. When she got as far as telling me that, I told her to stop. Prying into the Coven's affairs is a bad move. I thought if I needed to know more you'd tell me - since you've called for me, obviously I do." Tallard's words came in crisp bursts.

"You displayed the prudence we've come to expect. So I'm sure you'll understand that this meeting is in total confidence." Gilliart waited for the guild-master to nod before continuing. "To summarise. The Coven forbids studying certain areas of magic. Nearly 200 years ago a young sorcerer conducted experiments in one of these areas. If you've been told her name it would be a good idea to try and forget it."

Tallard shook his head in answer to the Guardian's sharp look.

"Her transgression was due to naivete rather than wilful disobedience, so no major disciplinary action was taken. She was allowed to remain in the Coven, although not to continue her experiments. Regrettably her superiors were not as rigorous as they should have been. For various reasons it was assumed that the young sorcerer had made virtually no progress. In fact, she'd almost completed her work, although this wasn't realised at the time. A short while later the sorcerer entered an unfortunate state that made it difficult to question her. Eventually she disappeared, and was presumed dead. Only then was the original oversight discovered - rather too late. The decision was made to delete all references to her, to prevent anyone copying her work. However her chalice had been lost with her and couldn't be found. It was mistakenly believed to have been destroyed."

"Another oversight." Tallard said, impassively.

"Not totally. On the faint chance that the chalice might someday be found, five people have known about its existence at any one time, the three seniors at Lyremouth and the Principals of the ancillary schools at Denbury and Ekranos."

"Surely there was a risk in letting them know?"

"It was necessary to ensure a lookout was kept for the very circumstance that has now arisen. Somebody has tracked down and taken the chalice. We can only assume they're trying to retrieve the prohibited information. It is very serious. It means a sorcerer has broken the oath of allegiance and turned traitor to the Coven."

"The person may be acting in all innocence." Tallard suggested.

"No." Alendy's base voice broke into the discussion. "Various safeguards were left in place. Anyone searching openly would have been detected. That the person has been able to get so far means they knew what they were doing was forbidden and took steps to conceal their actions."

"You found out about it." Tallard pointed out.

"Only because of luck. Things may already have gone too far. We can only hope that the situation is recoverable." Alendy said.

"It would appear you have a problem."

Gilliart rested her hands on the table and said quietly, "Believe us, it is a problem for everyone. This magic threatens the existence of the Protectorate. The ungifted stand to lose far more than the sorcerers."

Tallard pursed his lips as he mulled over the information. "I hate to use clichés, but why are you telling me this?"

"We know we can trust you to act sensibly. We need some assistance from you now, and I fear that we are likely to need a lot more before this affair is over. There will be less chance of mistakes happening if you understand the background and know what things you and your subordinates should avoid."

"What do you propose?"

"We can be certain the culprit is a member of the Coven and the possible candidates are limited. We three will take care of the suspects at Lyremouth. It's unlikely that Denbury is involved, but we will make inquiries there. The most probable place is the school of herbalism at Ekranos. However, this is where we start to hit problems. Ekranos has always been jealous of its independence..."

"And the Principal must be one of the main suspects, so you can't simply send a letter asking him to look into it." Tallard interrupted.

Gilliart regarded the mercenary in silence for a moment. "Quite. You understand the situation."

"It's the sort of thing I've earned my bread and butter dealing with for the last thirty years." Tallard leaned back in his chair. "To get to the point - what help do you require from the mercenaries?"

"Not much at the moment. We intend to send Jemeryl to investigate at Ekranos. We would like your young colleague to accompany her. We want Jemeryl to have a backup, preferably not based in the school. Someone who can forward her reports and provide general assistance."

At the mention of her name, Jemeryl sat up straight. She had been listening intently. The scarcity of information on Lorimal now made sense, but it would appear she and Tevi were witnessing the meeting not merely to satisfy their curiosity. Jemeryl was not sure whether to be flattered or frightened by the role allocated to her - to call it a heavy responsibility was an understatement.

Tallard seemed to share similar doubts. He scrutinised the young women. "Not wishing to disparage the abilities of our two associates, it does seem a rather... limited response to the level of threat you describe."

Alendy again joined the debate. "The sole task of the people we send to Ekranos will be to identify the culprit. We'll provide warrants so that they can call on the entire school resources to apprehend the traitor once this goal is achieved. We considered sending a senior sorcerer. However, unless the culprit is absurdly over-confident, they must be watching to see if their activities have been detected. The arrival of a senior figure would run the risk of the traitor fleeing before they could be identified. We're hoping that one junior sorcerer will not raise the alarm. We also want to keep the number of people who are aware of the chalice's existence to a minimum. Jemeryl and Tevi already know, so sending them will avoid the need to spread the knowledge further."

"And I'm already oath-bound on this quest." Tevi spoke out, her voice soft but clear.

Tallard looked in her direction. "I take it that you're willing to go?"

"If Jemeryl goes, I will too."

Tallard rubbed his chin thoughtfully, and then looked at Gilliart. "I suspect she's let herself in for more than she knows. It's not the sort of job I'd be happy ordering someone to accept, but since she volunteers, I've got no objections. You say you trust me to act sensibly - in turn I trust you to do what's best for the Protectorate. What else do you want from me? "

"We'll send Jemeryl on the pretext that she's gone to improve her knowledge of herbalism. She'll be sailing within the next few days. We'd like you to manufacture a separate alibi for Tevi, and arrange for her to be on the same boat. It would be better if they pretended to meet on the journey. Once at Ekranos, Tevi can take a job with the town watch or the port customs and liaise with Jemeryl."

"Won't people be surprised if a sorcerer is seen spending time with a junior mercenary?"

Iralin spoke for the first time. "I'm sure the pair of them can improvise an excuse." To Jemeryl's surprise there seemed to be a faint smile on Iralin's face. "I've heard even sorcerers can fall under the spell of a shipboard romance."

Tevi trekked across the crowded quay towards the waiting vessel, the Sea Eagle, due to depart within the hour, bound for Ekranos. The sound of waves washing against the harbour walls was lost in the clamour of shouting. Tevi stopped to let a long cart trundle by, piled high with sacks of flour. Klara was perched on her left shoulder; a large rucksack was slung over the other. It had been decided that Klara would play the part of Tevi's tame pet. The magpie peered around at the commotion with bright-eyed curiosity but, in accordance with the plan, she gave no unusual display of intelligence.

A gangplank led up to the ship's deck. Tevi waited for a group of porters to pass before making her way aboard. Five or six sailors were clambering through the rigging, still more were busy on deck, working through the dozens of small jobs necessary before the ship set sail, checking ropes and bolting hatches. One crew member stood by the rail, the ship's mate to judge by her air of authority, shouting instructions to those overhead and monitoring traffic on the gangplank. Tevi gave her name to the mate and was directed to the sleeping area below deck.

A hatch gave access to steps down to the narrow galley. A row of bunks disappeared into the gloom at the far end. Most had already been claimed - ownership marked by assorted piles of belongings strewn across, but several were still free. Tevi picked one on the top row and dumped her rucksack on the pillow. It was the only baggage she had, apart from a small satchel strapped at her waist. The contents of this satchel were her purported reason for making the journey to Ekranos. Mercenaries were often employed for courier duties. The guild gave assurance of their honesty and they were able to defend themselves, should anyone try to misappropriate the items.

Before leaving the galley, Tevi took a look at the passenger accommodation. It was far from luxurious. The only light and ventilation came from the hatch; the space was cramped to the point of claustrophobia. Hopefully, they would have good weather, since being cooped up with over twenty fellow travellers did not promise to be much fun.

The scene back on deck had not changed much. The landward side was a bustle of activity as the last preparations were made for departure. Tevi found a seat well out of the crew's way and took stock of her fellow passengers. One in particular caught her attention, as was clearly his intent. The man was an elderly official from the guild of goldsmiths and evidently considered himself a person of great importance. In an attempt to impress upon everyone within earshot, he was standing in the middle of the deck, talking loudly at some unfortunate soul. His topic of conversation amounted to variations on the theme that *'he'* had one of the two small private cabins at the front of the ship. Tevi was immensely pleased to learn this. The idea of being stuck with the goldsmith in the confined passenger galley did not bear thinking about.

Several groups of traders formed the main contingent of the passengers. A small child from one party wandered over to Tevi. His eyes fixed on Klara.

"You've got a bird on your shoulder." the boy said earnestly, as if the fact might have escaped Tevi's notice. "Is it a pet?"

"Sort of. Her name's Klara."

A woman detached herself from the group of traders and came to join them, most likely the boy's mother, judging from her age and the supervisory watch she kept on the child. She did not appear concerned to find him talking to a mercenary and, rather than dragging him away, settled down and introduced herself.

"Well met, citizen. I'm Etta." It was the customary Protectorate greeting, although delivered at a more breakneck rate than normal. "My partner and I are traders, specialising in spices. Are you travelling with us?"

"Well met, citizen. Er... yes. My name's Tevi, from the guild of mercenaries."

"I could tell from your hands." Etta was a small dark woman, who gave the impression that she was going through life at double speed. She went on speaking without a pause. "We're based in Talimide. How far are you going?"

"To Ekranos."

"So are we, and beyond, through the straits of Perithia and out to the eastern ocean. The Sea Eagle isn't going that far so we'll have to change ships. I'm hoping we'll have a few days in Ekranos, but it will depend on what passage we can get. Have you been to Ekranos before?"

"No." Tevi managed to squeeze in her answer.

"It's a nice town, you'll like it. My partner comes from there. We'll stop off and leave the youngster with his grandparents while we go on through the straits. He was going to stay with my partner's sister who owns a farm on the south of town. She's a really nice woman, but we're a bit worried about her - her health has been playing her up. Mind you, it's the best place to be ill, with the school of herbalism on the doorstep. My cousin..."

Once Etta had got going there was no stopping her. Over the next ten minutes Tevi learnt an awful lot about the woman's family, friends and their assorted idiosyncrasies. Etta spoke with an intense lilting accent and an enthusiasm that made it all sound, if not exciting, then at least cheerful. It would, no doubt, get wearing after a while, but given the choice between Etta and the goldsmith, there was no question of whose company Tevi would choose. While Etta talked Tevi raised a hand, so Klara could step on and then held the bird towards the child. To the boy's delight, Klara hopped over to sit on his head.

By the time Etta had got to her aunt's best friend the cargo was loaded and preparations were complete. The crew were still obviously waiting for something. The captain had come onto the deck and was pacing up and down impatiently, pausing repeatedly to scan the quay.

"Do you know what we're waiting for?" Etta asked, breaking off her recital.

"Could be anything." Actually, Tevi could make a good guess at the cause of the delay, but thought it best to feign ignorance.

"Probably the occupant of the other private cabin." Etta speculated. "Looks like it's someone important. I hope they're more fun than the other one." She indicated the goldsmith with an exaggerated expression of dislike.

At that moment, there was a minor disturbance on the dockside. The captain rushed to the top of the gangplank. Several traders wandered over to the railing and the crew paused in their work. Tevi was glad no one was watching her as she tried to maintain a nonchalant air - acting had never been one of her skills. Fortunately Etta's attention was completely taken with the sight of Jemeryl being welcomed aboard and escorted to her cabin.

The crew prepared to cast off.

Etta turned back to Tevi. "A sorcerer. That'll put master goldsmith's nose out of joint. Mind you, sorcerers can be odd. The last time I was on a ship with one, he never showed his face outside his cabin the entire trip. Apparently, he was a seer - which was a bit worrying. You kept wondering, *'What does he know?'* Every time I saw a black cloud on the horizon I thought, *'That's it, we're going to go down in a storm.'* However it was one of the smoothest voyages I've ever been on. But someone told me seers can be a bit..." She paused, searching for a word.

"Sensitive?" Tevi suggested, trying not to laugh.

Four days out of Lyremouth and the Sea Eagle was making good progress. A steady wind filled the sails. The sky was grey with a thin cover of cloud. Tevi leaned over the bows, and watched the hull slice through the water. It was good to feel the motion of the sea under her feet, the pitch and roll of the deck. A floating strand of seaweed was picked up by the bow wave. It glistened and twisted in the surf for an instant and then was sucked under the glassy green surface.

The sound of footsteps made Tevi look over her shoulder. Jemeryl had climbed onto the foredeck and was casually strolling in her direction. Tevi pushed away from the rail and stood up straight.

"Good morning, ma'am." Tevi spoke respectfully. So far on the journey they had scarcely acknowledged each other, making a show of being strangers.

Jemeryl raised her eyebrows at the formal greeting. A hint of a grin caught the corners of her mouth. "Good morning, citizen."

"Is there anything I can do for you?"

Jemeryl's eyes danced mischievously. "Now there's a question." She looked around; her perusal included the rigging overhead. No one was within earshot. "But we'd better take things in order. I'm thinking it's about time for us to get to know each other."

"That's fine by me."

In fact, it was better than fine. The enforced separation was having a bad effect on Tevi's sleep patterns. Each night she found herself lying awake in her cot, battling with the temptation to try and slip into Jemeryl's cabin without being noticed. When she finally did drift off, Jemeryl would play a prominent part in her dreams. Tevi was increasingly worried that she would speak or call out in her sleep and wake her fellow passengers. Giving the likely content of any such outburst, there would be very little chance of her persuading anyone that she had been suffering from a nightmare.

The ship's chicken hatch was bolted in the centre of the foredeck. The clucking of its inhabitants was strangely incongruous against the occasional screech of seagulls. Jemeryl took a seat on the roof, looking out to sea, and indicated that Tevi should join her. Klara launched herself from Tevi's shoulder and perched on the railing, facing them.

"It's all right, we can talk. Klara will let me know if anyone comes near." Jemeryl said.

Tevi let out a small sigh. "Good. How have you been? I heard you weren't too well yesterday. Seasickness?"

"No. I was fine. It was just an excuse to avoid eating in the captain's cabin."

"Isn't the cooking any good?"

"Oh, first rate for aboard ship. It's the goldsmith that gives me indigestion. He manages to grovel and boast at the same time." Jemeryl sounded disgusted.

Tevi laughed softly. "The problems that come with privilege."

"I've tried sarcasm to shut him up. I think I might have to move on to thinly veiled threats. How have you been?"

"Fine."

"And Klara?"

"She's been fine as well. Nobody seems the least surprised by a mercenary with a tame magpie on her shoulder all the time." A frown crossed Tevi's face. "Though I'm still not happy with the reasons why I've got her."

"I've told you why. All Coven establishments have extra-dimensional shields built into their walls, and Ekranos is no exception. Once I'm inside, I won't be able to scry you out, or pass messages magically. But my link with Klara is so deep that I ought to be able to maintain residual contact with her. In an emergency I'd only need to step outside the school gates to talk to you via her."

"It's not the magic side I'm unhappy with."

"Then what?"

"It's the nature of these potential emergencies. I don't like the thought of you alone and in danger."

"Then consider her a source of reassurance. As long as Klara doesn't start acting like a wild magpie, you know I'm all right."

"And if she does start acting like a wild magpie?"

"Grab the warrant and rush to the school as fast as you can." Jemeryl replied.

It was not very comforting. Tevi stared across the waves. The distant coast was little more than a thin dark line, smudged on the horizon.

"Have you had any further thoughts about this forbidden spell of Lorimal's?" Tevi asked after a long pause.

"I've been reading up on the rules for all the things I'm not allowed to try. One large section of the forbidden list is to do with reversing death - things like attempting to create zombies. Incidentally, all experiments have failed, but some very nasty things have happened along the way. The search for immortality is also strictly forbidden since it involves similar immoral practices, such as trying to usurp a younger person's body."

"What else is on the list?"

"We aren't allowed to enslave the ungifted, and anything which might undermine the Protectorate's economy or cause wide-scale destruction is banned." Jemeryl forehead creased in thought. "I'd say the most tempting infraction is to change the past, which is theoretically possible, but very dangerous."

"Do sorcerers outside the Coven ever try to do it?" Tevi asked.

"Some have. The spots where they made the attempt are usually marked by rather large craters." Jemeryl's dry tone made Tevi chuckle. "After that you get to esoteric experiments, like infinite loops impinging on physical space, but you'd have to be a bit unbalanced to want to try those to start with."

"You're a young ambitious sorcerer, like Lorimal. What would tempt you to break the rule and poke into things you shouldn't?"

Tevi took a quick sideways glance. Jemeryl's mouth was open in mock outrage, before her face collapsed into an easy grin. "Would I do a thing like that?"

"I know a hundred or so villagers who'd say yes."

"I thought we'd agreed they misunderstood me?"

"Maybe."

"Anyway, it's not the same. Lorimal was an herbalist, which is probably my weakest discipline. It's certainly not going to strain my acting ability to play the part of someone in need of improving her skill."

"So where does this leave us?"

Jemeryl chewed her lower lip. "If I had to make a guess, I'd go for Lorimal's spell being a method of mind control. There are several drugs that make people more malleable and we know her speciality was formulas producing permanent physical or mental effects. She may have produced a potion that would turn people into mindless slaves."

"Is that likely? The Guardian said she wasn't malicious, just naive."

"I'm afraid there are some sorcerers who are convinced the world would be a happier place if everyone obeyed the Coven's wishes without question."

"Wouldn't it..."

Tevi was cut short by a hissed whisper. "Someone's coming." Raising her voice Jemeryl continued. "Was it difficult to train the magpie?"

"Er... I didn't do the work myself." Tevi picked up on the cue. "I got Klara from a friend when she was already tame."

"That was kind, to give her to you."

"The person is a very good friend of mine."

Jemeryl stood up. "It's been nice talking to you. We must..." her face shifted through a range of expressions. "talk again soon." She moved off down the deck.

"Good morning, ma'am." It was Etta's voice.

Even before Jemeryl's footsteps had completely faded away her place on the chicken coop was taken by the talkative trader.

"She seems very pleasant - for a sorcerer." Etta said.

Tevi made a noncommittal sound by way of agreement.

"You were having quite a cosy chat. I didn't interrupt anything did I?"

"We were just talking."

Etta was silent - a rare enough occurrence to cause Tevi to turn and looked at her.

"What is it?"

"I suppose she was the one who came over to talk to you?" Etta's tone was hinting at something.

"Yes."

"Do you think she's nice?" Etta definitely had something in mind.

"What do you mean?"

"Well... a couple of times now, when you've both been on deck, I've noticed her watching you. At first I thought it might be trouble, I didn't know if I should warn you. But then I thought, *Ah-ha, I know what 'that' look means.* Now, I don't know how you feel about sorcerers. I mean, I think they're human like anyone else, but I know they give some people the creeps. One of my uncle's neighbours is a gardener at the school and she says..."

"You think what?" Tevi interrupted, confused.

"Sorry, I'm rambling. To get back to what I was saying. She's definitely got her eye on you. I think she likes you." The trader smiled slyly and nudged Tevi with her elbow. "I'd say, if you're interested, play your cards right and you're in with a chance."

Another two days and Etta was not alone in speculating. Tevi was beset by advice from passengers and crew alike. There was little in the way of entertainment on the ship and gossip was the main pastime, although opinion was sharply divided. Few expressed any great dislike of Jemeryl personally. Many more were moved by a general wariness of the Coven and felt that Tevi would be ill-treated. "You can't trust sorcerers. They just use ordinary folk." and, "It's not right for us to get mixed up with the Coven." were typical remarks. Etta, with her enthusiasm, was in a marked minority.

Late one evening, Tevi was sitting on deck, playing dice with a group of passengers. The door to Jemeryl's cabin opened and Jemeryl herself emerged. The sorcerer wandered across to the side of the ship and leaned on the railing, with the apparent intention of watching the sunset. Tevi was aware that a lot of people were looking pointedly in her own direction - and it wasn't down to waiting for her to throw the dice.

Unsubtle as ever, Etta dug her in the ribs. "Go on, talk to her."

The anticipation on the faces about her was more than Tevi could take. She stood up, brushed the dust and rope fibres from her clothes and strolled over to where Jemeryl was standing. Tevi reached the rail and rested her

elbows on it. A glance back confirmed the impression that absolutely no one on deck was minding their own business. Etta's young son scrambled to his feet and bounced forward as if to join them. His mother grabbed him by his jerkin and dragged him back. At the same time, she sent an encouraging gesture to Tevi that was probably meant to be discreet.

Tevi turned her gaze out to sea and sighed.

"How are things?" Jemeryl whispered.

"A strain."

"Why?"

"It's not so bad for you. I've got everyone on board giving me advice and suggestions about how to deal with you."

"And what are the suggestions?" Jemeryl was amused.

"Most people think I should avoid you completely, though they aren't too specific on how I do it on a ship this size."

"You find it upsetting?" Jemeryl asked softly.

"Yes." Tevi's eyes fixed on the horizon as she searched for words. "I don't understand people in the Protectorate. Even Marith, who was a really nice, sensible woman, talked about sorcerers as if you were some sort of bizarre monstrosity. I've known people credit more human emotions to their pet dogs than they do to sorcerers. They can't seem to see..." her voice faded away.

Jemeryl looked solemn. "I think I know what you mean, but I've grow up with it, so I take most of it for granted." She paused. "I wasn't popular when I was a child, back in my home village. It's the same for all sorcerers. The other children knew I was different, some of the older ones tried to pick on me... they soon learned not to. But even when they weren't being deliberately unpleasant, I was still isolated. As I got older and my powers developed, they started to avoid me and treated me... like a sorcerer. Even the adults were very polite and very distant. It was probably wise of them. Children aren't good at restraining their temper. We learn a lot about self- control at the Coven." Her lips shifted into a rueful smile. "It cuts down on the number of talking frogs you meet."

"A shame. I could nominate a few on board who'd be better as frogs." It wasn't clear from Tevi's tone how much she was joking.

The two of them stood in silence for a while, before Jemeryl asked, "Would people be appalled if we made it obvious we were lovers?"

Tevi weighed it up. "Maybe a fifth of them would be, and there's an equal sized group who'd think it perfectly all right."

"And the others?"

"They'd be against it on principle, but privately delighted to have something exciting to gossip about."

Jemeryl laughed softly. "Perhaps we should give them their chance to be shocked."

Deliberately, Jemeryl slid along the railing so their shoulders touched. After a few minutes of standing like that, she slowly moved her arm to encircle Tevi's waist.

Tevi half expected to hear a mixed chorus of gasps, boos and cheers from the deck behind them. She put her own arm around Jemeryl's shoulders and pulled her close. A smile grew on Tevi's lips as the familiar feeling of total contentment washed her previous irritation away, and now at least they could go to Jemeryl's cabin and shut out the rest of the world for a while.

She was about to move away from the railing, when her eyes caught sight of an island, out on the horizon. For a second, her thoughts darted to Storenseg, but without longing. She realised that, even if the chance was offered

to her, she had no desire to go back. The island was not home to her; she had outgrown it. Which meant, she guessed as she and Jemeryl left the deck, that in her heart, she was an exile no longer



About the Author

Jane Fletcher is a GCLS award winning writer and has also been short-listed for the Gaylactic Spectrum and Lambda awards. She is author of two fantasy/romance series: the Lyremouth Chronicles—*The Exile and The Sorcerer*, *The Traitor and The Chalice*, and *The Empress and The Acolyte*, and the Celaeno series—*The Walls of Westernfort*, *Rangers at Roadsend*, and *The Temple at Landfall*. In her next writing project she will be returning to the Celaeno Series with *Dynasty of Rogues*.

Her love of fantasy began at the age of seven when she encountered Greek Mythology. This was compounded by a childhood spent clambering over every example of ancient masonry she could find (medieval castles, megalithic monuments, Roman villas). Her resolute ambition was to become an archaeologist when she grew up, so it was something of a surprise when she became a software engineer instead.

Born in Greenwich, London in 1956, she now lives in south-west England where she keeps herself busy writing both computer software and fiction, although generally not at the same time.

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