

## Prologue

'And do you know what the sword was called?'

'Slayer?' Yarek replied, getting it wrong deliberately so that it wouldn't spoil his grandfather's story.

'No.' Takkara smiled at the boy's innocent expression. 'It was called the Peacemaker. Strange name for a sword, eh?'

Yarek nodded.

'It was called that,' the old man explained, 'because it made the warrior who wielded it invincible. His foes would fall before him, making the ice run red with their blood, and only when they were all defeated would there be peace.'

'So why don't our generals use it?' Yarek asked.

'It's not as simple as that. The Peacemaker was lost long ago, many centuries before even I was born.'

'How could anyone lose anything so important?'

'That's a good question,' Takkara replied. 'The only answer I can give you is that the gods are sometimes capricious – even cruel.'

'Who forged the sword?'

'No one knows for certain, but it must have been a very great wizard.'

'Then why can't one of our wizards make another one?'

'Because the magic was lost too.'

The boy nodded, looking thoughtful.

'No one knows where the blade is now,' Takkara went on, 'although most people assume it's buried deep within the ice that never melts, guarded by the Lonely Peaks. And that's not all.' The old man's voice fell to a conspiratorial whisper. 'The sword only becomes visible when the Red Moon is full and all the other moons are new – and that's a very rare combination. You'll be lucky to see it once in your lifetime.'

'Have you ever seen it?' Yarek asked.

'No, but my father did, when he was not much older than you are now. He told me that all the mountains, all the snow fields, all the glaciers turned red, as if the gods themselves were weeping blood.'

'Did he look for the sword?'

'Of course! But he was too young to go very far, and much stronger men had to turn back that night. Many men died and even more lost fingers or toes to the bitter cold, but no one even caught a glimpse of the sword. Some say that only a hero who can walk on through the winter dark will ever be able to find the Peacemaker.'

'But that's impossible!' Yarek objected.

'Who knows what a true hero can do?'

The boy still looked doubtful, but decided not to argue. He knew that he'd been lucky to have his grandfather to himself for so long. Takkara was the best inspirator in the whole of the Black Quarter, and his services were much in demand. This late in the season the generals called for him less often, but there was usually one last campaign being planned, one last daring raid on the White or the Gold, and it was rare for Takkara to be able to return to his village home for more than a few hours at a time. It was rarer still for him to be persuaded into retelling one of the old stories. When he was not working he liked to take a rest from such things – but he found it almost impossible to refuse his grandson.

Yarek could see that the old man was tired now, and wondered how he could keep him talking. If he did not, the boy knew that one of the women would soon come and drag him back to their world, to the tedium of lessons, of cooking and sewing, of building fires and weaving cloth. Yarek preferred the world of adventure and battle, and ever since his father had been killed, his grandfather represented his only direct link to that world.

'Can I fetch you a drink, jokull?' he asked, using the term that denoted respect for an elder. Literally, it meant 'ice-wisdom', implying that the person had a great deal of experience and was known for the proven worth of his advice.

Takkara nodded his assent and watched as the boy scurried away. Sometimes, as

with most children, his motives were transparent, but there were other times when it was clear that Yarek's mind worked on several different levels. Watching him now, as he dipped the ladle into the mitral cauldron and filled a metal cup, Takkara could not help wondering about his grandson's future. Yarek had always been good-natured, but recently there had been something disturbing about the intelligence hidden behind that deceptively cherubic face. Someone so young should not question things as much as he did. Takkara was about to say something to this effect when Yarek beat him to it – and in doing so, deepened the old man's disquiet.

'But it's not really true, is it?' he asked, as he handed over the cup. 'I mean, the sword is just a myth, isn't it?'

'Myths can be real. They have to begin somewhere. And there are some things we just have to accept on faith.'

'Why?'

'Because that is what it means to be a soldier,' the inspirator replied awkwardly. 'And you'll be a soldier soon, like your father.'

That silenced the boy for a while, and Takkara felt a wave of sadness envelop them both. He reminded himself that his son had died in glory, that he now strode across the Great Plain, but the pride he felt in Borgar's sacrifice did not wholly counteract the ache of his absence. Nor did it quell the old man's anger.

'What if I become a wizard instead?' Yarek asked eventually.

Takkara laughed, glad that the boy had returned their conversation to the future rather than dwelling on the past – even if his question was ridiculous.

'You mean a neomancer. That would be good too. You could–'

'No. A wizard,' Yarek stated with solemn persistence.

'That's impossible!' the old man snapped, angry now. 'And you know it.'

The boy retreated into silence again, realizing that he'd gone too far this time. A short while later, Takkara's curiosity overcame his misgivings.

'Do you think you have talent?' he asked tentatively. 'Enough to gain a sizarship?'

'I hope so,' his grandson replied, though he sounded less confident now.

'Life under the pyramids is not easy,' Takkara told him. 'And any glory you may earn will be at second-hand. You may never see the results of your work. Are you sure that's what you want?'

Yarek didn't answer and Takkara took a sip of his mitra, which was growing cool now. As always, the infusion of herbs tasted bitter, but he was used to that. Their scent filled the house almost constantly – which was only right and proper. He watched his grandson over the rim of the cup, wishing he could tell what the boy was thinking.

'You're a bright lad,' he said, when the silence had dragged on long enough. 'I'm sure you can do anything you set your mind to. But be careful you don't anger the gods.'

'I'll be careful, jokull,' Yarek promised earnestly.

'Besides, you don't have to decide yet. And you'll soon have the chance to sleep on it.' Takkara smiled, and the boy grinned back, but – as so often now – there was something hidden behind his large, pale blue eyes.

The reference to the long winter sleep had indeed set Yarek thinking. When he'd been an infant, he'd accepted the hibernation as natural, just another part of the life that was organized for him by others. By the time he was a few years old, it had frightened him, and his mother had been ashamed of his crying. He had grown out of that and had returned to unquestioning acceptance once more – though with a little more understanding this time. And now, as the days grew shorter, Yarek was actually looking forward to it. When the spring came, unlike most of the others, he would remember his dark dreams. And it was in those dreams that he learnt so much, saw so much.

That was his great secret, the reason he knew he was destined to be a wizard – no matter what anybody said. Unwittingly, his grandfather had confirmed his faith. 'You can do anything you set your mind to.' Rules were meant to be broken. Yarek had decided that long ago. And if the greatest wizard the four

Quarters had ever seen could not break some rules, then who could?

PART ONE

MYVATAN

Chapter One

Far off the starboard bow, the sea was burning.

'I bet you've never seen anything like that before,' Kahl remarked. 'However far you've travelled.'

Terrel stared at the fire, wondering how such a thing could be possible. As he watched, another burst of flame erupted, sending a shower of glittering red sparks into the air and burnishing the surrounding waves as though they were made of bronze. Above them, a pall of black smoke and grey steam trailed away on the wind.

'There'll be an island there come the autumn,' Kahl added knowledgeably.

'An island?'

'The fire conies from the heart of Nydus,' the sailor explained. 'And as it rises up from the seabed, it brings rock with it. Those sparks you saw just now, some of them were boulders bigger than your head, and they're all made of stone so hot it turns to liquid and glows like a blacksmith's furnace.'

Terrel turned to look at his companion, trying to judge whether he was being serious or not. Kahl was one of the few crewmen who had been willing to talk to him and Terrel had tried to establish some degree of friendship with him. He had told the sailor a little of his own travels, and hoped for information in return. He was heading towards another alien land, and seeing the ocean burst

into flame had emphasized just how little he knew about this region of Nydus.

'But when it hits the water and cools, the rock becomes solid again,' Kahl went on, apparently quite in earnest. 'And it gradually builds up until there's a new island for us to sail around.'

'I'm glad you said sail around,' Terrel commented. 'I wouldn't want to get too close to anything like that.'

Even from a distance it was an awe-inspiring sight. From close to, it would have been terrifying.

'Nor me,' the seaman said. 'The captain wouldn't like it much either, and he's kept us in clear water until now. Of course, one of them could break out right in front of our bows. There wouldn't be much we could do about that.'

Terrel found this idea extremely alarming, but saw that Kahl was grinning now.

'Don't worry,' the sailor said, relenting. 'We've done this run a few times now and no one's suffered so much as a singed beard.'

'Let's hope it stays that way,' Terrel replied, feeling the uneven stubble that now covered his own chin.

'Mind you, it's not just the new islands that make navigation tricky,' Kahl added. 'The fires under the water make their own currents too. Sometimes it's difficult to tell what's going on, especially now the tides aren't reliable any more.'

Terrel was already aware of that anomaly – and the reason for it. For several years now the Dark Moon had been behaving erratically – in defiance of all the precise astronomical laws laid down by the seers of his homeland – and recently, it seemed that the changes in its speed and size had begun to affect the orbits of the other three moons. This meant that predicting the rise and fall of tides had become increasingly complex.

'Of course,' Kahl went on, 'once the fire-islands are in place, they can actually help us, give us reference points when we're out of sight of land – provided you can recognize them from one month to the next.'

'You mean they keep changing?' Terrel guessed.

'Sometimes. See those islands there?' He pointed further ahead, to where three black mounds rose from the sea. 'They weren't even there two years ago, and each time we come past they've got bigger. They still smoke sometimes too, so we steer well clear.'

Terrel squinted into the distance, studying the irregular cone-shaped rocks, and tried to imagine them growing out of the ocean.

'These are dangerous waters,' he commented.

Kahlshrugged.

'Any sea can be dangerous. This one more than most, maybe.'

'Then why do you cross it?'

'The usual reasons. Gold and adventure.' He grinned. 'But mostly the gold.'

'They have gold on Myvatan?'

'Loads of it. We wouldn't bother trading with them otherwise. They've got precious little else we're interested in. I'm more interested in why you want to go there.'

Terrel had several reasons, but none that would mean much to a practical man like Kahl.

'I don't know, really. I've been travelling so long, it seemed like one of the few places I hadn't been to yet.' This contained at least an element of truth.

'And I've heard it's different from anywhere else.'

'That's one way of putting it,' the seaman remarked. 'But there must be some purpose to your travelling.'

'Not really.'

Although Kahl was clearly not convinced, he chose not to press the point.

'Well, a person with your talents is going to find a welcome in most places,' he observed.

Terrel's healing abilities were something he accepted now, though he never took them for granted. He had paid for his passage on the Skua by helping the ship's first officer make a speedy and complete recovery from a nasty fever. In return, Ostan, the captain, had been only too willing to take him aboard – one extra passenger cost him very little – and, since then, most of the crew had benefited in some way from Terrel's skill.

'So have you decided which side you'll work for?' Kahl asked.

'Side?' Terrel queried. 'In the war.'

The healer had heard several rumours about Myvatan, including one claiming that the island had been in the throes of civil war for many years. However, few people had been either able or willing to talk about the place at all, so he'd remained in ignorance for the most part. His decision to go there had been made in a rush. Sailings were rare, especially this early in the year, and Ostan's offer had been dependent on his being able to leave immediately.

'Neither,' Terrel answered eventually.

Kahl laughed.

'You'd better make up your mind one way or the other before we dock,' he advised. 'Say the wrong thing in the wrong quarter and you're dead.'

Terrel looked at him in dismay.

'I've no interest in the war,' he said.

'Then what are you going to Myvatan for?' the sailor asked. 'Apart from gold, the war is all they have.'

Now I know cats are mad, a familiar voice complained. This one hates water as much as I do, but it's chosen to live on a ship!

Alyssa! Terrel exclaimed, sliding out of his hammock to kneel in front of her. He had been aware of the cat's presence earlier in the voyage. The crew called it Dranga, which meant rat-trap, and it usually prowled the lower decks in search of prey. The animal's face was heavily scarred, one of its ears was torn and its left foreleg was slightly lame, but its ginger coat was glossy, testament to its success as a hunter. Until now it had paid Terrel little attention, and he'd been surprised when it had stalked up to his sleeping place that evening. But not even in his wildest imaginings had he thought that Alyssa's spirit might have taken over the cat's body. Not only did she dislike the devious nature of feline minds – of all the other animals she had tried, horses were the only creatures she found as difficult – but, as her opening remark had implied, she disliked large bodies of water even more. In the past, the mere fact that Terrel had crossed an ocean had prevented her from joining him for some time, even after he was back on dry land. And when he was actually on water, there had been no chance of proper contact. And yet here she was, inhabiting a cat, in the middle of a vast and dangerous sea.

I didn 't expect to see you so soon. Even though Terrel's delight at her arrival was as great as ever, he was perturbed by the fact that she had forced herself to overcome her fears. What was so important that she could not afford to wait a few days?

I was never meant— Alyssa began, then broke off as the ship shuddered under the impact of an unusually large wave. The cat staggered, its mismatched ears twitching, and its fur stood on end. Hissing, it dug its claws into the deck — and Terrel saw the 'ring' looped around one of its forepaws. The ring was made of twine interwoven with one of his own hairs, and although at first Alyssa had

worn it as a joke, it had soon become the precious link that helped her to find him wherever he was. Seeing it always made him think of Havenmoon, his home for the first fourteen years of his life — the asylum where Alyssa's comatose body still lay.

You're quite safe, he reassured her, sensing her unreasoning terror.

Why aren 't you back in the palace? she asked. That would be safe, not this. I won't be able to stand this for long.

Was there something you wanted to tell me? he asked quickly. The cat hissed again as the Skua rose with the swell. This time I'm not even going to try to sing, Alyssa declared, looking around wildly.

The irrelevance of this remark made it clear to Terrel that she was more than usually deranged, and he wondered whether he'd get any sense from her at all. You don't have to, he said. Just give me your message and you can go. Much as he wanted her company, he couldn't bear to see her suffering.

What message? She sounded bewildered. / thought—

Oh, that! she interrupted. All the windows are closed. What?

Muzeni says . . . She paused, apparently trying to remember something elusive.

Muzeni says . . . the crystal's broken, isn 't it? Smashed.

What does that mean? he asked, desperate now. Be careful where you choose to follow, she stated tone-lessly, as if she were reciting the words from memory. Don't fight the wrong war. And don't trust your instincts.

More confused than ever now, Terrel was about to speak again, but Alyssa overrode him.

I'm sick, she announced. And if you think I'm coming up on deck, you 're crazy.

Sick? Terrel queried, his heart sinking. Let me help you.

I have no need of your healing, she replied, sounding a little calmer at last. Just your love.

You have that always, he told her.

But there are others in your path who are in terrible pain, Alyssa added. Look ahead. Even the sky is at war.

And then she was gone. Terrel caught a last glimpse of the ring as it faded away — and then the cat was just a cat again. Dranga wandered off, with a puzzled 'miaow'. Terrel remained where he was, too stunned to do anything. Whatever message Alyssa had intended to bring had been garbled by her terror. Her utterances were often obscure, but under normal circumstances Terrel could usually interpret the meaning beneath the words. This time he was completely at a loss.

The one instruction that had a potentially relevant interpretation was the last. Look ahead. Coupled with Alyssa's apparently pointless refusal to even consider going up on deck, it did at least give Terrel something to do. Leaving the long cabin he shared with several of the crew — all of whom had been quite unaware of the silent conversation — he climbed up the steep wooden steps to the foredeck. As soon as he emerged, he knew instantly that the windswept night was lit by more than normal moonlight, but he was not prepared for the sight that greeted him.

Ahead of the ship, the sky was filled with a shimmering arch of greenish-white luminescence, stretching from horizon to horizon. Along its upper rim, even brighter beads of light moved at incredible speeds, leaving behind them glittering silver trails that trembled like the strings of a star-born lute.

As Terrel watched, spellbound, the archway expanded and transformed itself into a swaying curtain of unearthly light. Streaks of green and blue tinged the white

as the delicate fabric moved slowly on an unseen wind. Finally, as the rest of the astonishing display began to fade, the entire spectacle was suffused with an eerie crimson glow. As the other colours splintered into separate swathes and shards, the red mist remained constant, until it too vanished back whence it had come.

'Not a bad show tonight, eh?'

Kahl's voice made Terrel jump. The sailor's soft boots had made no sound as he'd come up behind him.

'Do you see this often?' Terrel whispered.

'Often enough. But there aren't many nights it's as bright as that.'

'It was beautiful.'

'I suppose so.' Kahl did not sound unduly impressed. 'Though they say that the winter lights are ill-omened when they turn the colour of blood.'

That gave Terrel pause for thought as he stared into the now empty darkness. Even the sky is at war.

## Chapter Two

Terrel's dream that night made the fire he'd seen rise from the ocean seem like a candle flame. Above him the sky was obscured by a threatening dome of thick cloud, which extended to the horizon in every direction. It blotted out the sunlight so that the scene below was illuminated only by its own infernal glow. There were huge lines of fire snaking across both land and sea, dividing them into distinct areas, which were themselves in turmoil. In places the ocean boiled, spitting forth great gouts of steam and flame. Elsewhere the waves were discoloured, with swathes of red or brown running through the grey waters. On land the conflagration was, if anything, even worse. Molten rock spilled from open wounds in the ground and flowed like rivers of fire, consuming everything in its path. Other eruptions hurled debris into the sky with an incandescent fury, their smoke and ash adding to the all-encompassing gloom. It was as if the entire planet was in the grip of a vast convulsion. Gradually the fires dimmed, and without the sun to warm it the world became a frigid wasteland. Seas froze over, and snow and ice blanketed the darkened land. But the forces that were destroying Nydus were not done yet. There was movement, slow but massive, as whole continents drifted into each other, creating another type of upheaval. Mountains rose and were smashed, complete oceans were thrown aside, only to inundate other regions and form new seas. And in the midst of the tumult one island floated free, finding its own escape route from the chaos.

At first Terrel thought it must be Vadanis, but its contours were unfamiliar. It was too big and too cold to be his homeland. By the time he'd realized that it must in fact be Myvatan, the dream had taken him closer, so that he could see individual landmarks within its bleak terrain. Much of what he saw was bewildering. Steam rose from pools of muddy water, even though they were surrounded by snow; crevasses in the great sheets of ice glowed bright blue, although the sky above was still an unremitting grey; and the interior plains were daubed with great splashes of colour - yellow, ochre, green and mauve - as if they'd been attacked by an insane artist.

And at the last, just before he woke up, Terrel saw the first indication that this daunting world might once have been inhabited. Atop one of the coastal cliffs, a huge boulder had been carved into the shape of what looked like an enormous fish. Although it resembled nothing Terrel had ever seen before, its fins and tail were undoubtedly meant to be part of a marine creature. He had seen another, much smaller and simpler, representation of the beast once before. And seeing it now gave him a surge of hope. This at least was a sign he did understand.

'Are you sure?' Terrel asked excitedly. 'Like a giant fish?'

'Yes. It's a whale,' Ostan repeated patiently. 'I've seen it many times. Why?'

'That's where I want to go ashore.'

The captain of the Skua looked at Terrel as if he were mad.

'That's impossible.'

'Please. It's very important.'

'It's just a sculpture,' Ostan said. 'I mean, it's impressive all right, but you'd get just as good a view of it from the sea. Better, in fact.'

'That's not the point.'

'Then what is? Why is this so important to you?' Ostan was aware that several of his crew were standing nearby, listening to the conversation with interest. Passengers were usually tolerated on board, rather than welcomed, but Terrel had been more acceptable than most - for obvious reasons. However, that would change quite rapidly if the foreigner became more trouble than he was worth. Ridiculous requests like this would not help his cause.

'There's a path I'm bound to follow,' Terrel replied, looking uncomfortable now. 'I swore an oath, and this is part of it.'

Ostan didn't know what to make of that.

'You're not making any sense,' he said. 'There's no path near there.'

'That's not what I meant,' the healer said, but Ostan ignored him.

'In fact, that part of the coastline is treacherous,' the captain went on.

'There are shoals and rocks just below the tide line and the currents are dangerous, especially when the tides are turning. I probably wouldn't be able to put you ashore there even if I wanted to. And if I did, you'd have to scale the cliffs to reach the whale. You don't look like much of a rock-climber to me. Then--'

'That's my problem,' Terrel cut in. 'Won't you at least try?'

'No. You obviously don't understand--' 'You wouldn't have to put me ashore yourselves. Just get me close enough so I can swim for it.' Ostan's expression changed from one of puzzlement to

outright incredulity, and Terrel saw that some of the sailors were grinning now.

'I can swim well enough,' he claimed, but then began to doubt his own words. He was much stronger than when he had escaped from Havenmoon, and he'd been able to swim even then, in spite of the fact that his right leg was twisted and his right arm was withered so that the hand was little more than a rigid claw. The heavy clothes he now wore as protection against the cold disguised his deformities a little, but he would never be genuinely athletic. What was more, although he'd swum in various lakes and rivers, he had never been in the open sea - especially one as rough as this - and if the coastline was as rugged as Ostan claimed, he was just as likely to be dashed upon the rocks as he was to drown. And there was another factor he had not even considered.

'I'm sure you can,' Ostan conceded, 'but in these waters no one would survive such an attempt. You'd soon be paralyzed by the cold, and dead after a very short time. It would be suicide.'

'There must be some way,' Terrel pleaded.

'We could probably get the skiff close enough to the shore, if we time it right,' the captain admitted, 'but it's not going to happen. It's too risky.'

'But I'm willing to take that risk.'

'I meant for my crewmen,' Ostan stated flatly. 'Someone would have to row you ashore and bring the boat back. Give me one good reason why I should jeopardize any of my men.'

Terrel was silent, racking his brains for a way to convince the captain without sounding like a complete lunatic.

'Besides,' the seaman added. 'Supposing we did get you on to the rocks somehow and you were able to climb the cliffs. You'd still probably get yourself killed inside an hour.'

'Why?'

Ostan stared at him, obviously wondering whether the strange young man could possibly be as naive as he appeared.

'You really don't know anything about Myvatan, do you?' he said eventually.

'I know there's a war there, but--'

'So you know you'd be walking into a forbidden zone?'

At this Terrel's face lit up with renewed excitement, which he knew would make Ostan doubt his sanity even more.

'That's where I have to go!' he exclaimed.

'Are you crazy? Both sides would kill you in an instant if they found you there.'

'Why?'

'Because you're an outsider and it's a forbidden zone,' Ostan replied with heavy emphasis, then paused. 'Unless . . .'

'Unless what?' Terrel asked hopefully.

'Unless you've been lying to us all along.'

'What do you mean?' The healer felt genuinely uneasy now. Which of his half-truths was Ostan referring to?

'Which quarter do you follow?' the captain demanded.

'I don't know what you mean.'

'Which moon, then?'

Terrel shook his head in bewilderment.

'Forget it!' Ostan snapped. 'I'm not taking you to Whale Ness. You're coming with us to Port Akranes - and that's final.'

Terrel's bitter disappointment could not be dispelled even by the enchanting sight of a school of dolphins swimming alongside the Skua, effortlessly matching her pace and occasionally leaping from the water as though they were playing. He wished Alyssa would return - and bring the ghosts with her - so that they could discuss the situation properly, but he knew he was on his own, at least until he made landfall. And by then it might be too late.

'Don't take it too hard,' Kahl advised.

Terrel was sitting, huddled in several layers of clothing, near the bows of the ship. He had been deep in thought and the sailor's approach had taken him by surprise.

'Do you make a habit of sneaking up on people?' he asked, glancing around.

'I could've been wearing hobnail boots and singing at the top of my voice and you still wouldn't have heard me coming.'

'Probably,' Terrel conceded. 'What shouldn't I take too hard?'

'The skipper's decision,' Kahl replied. 'Ostan did some pretty reckless things himself when he was your age, but he's older now and more responsible. Or so he'd like everyone to believe. I reckon you could get him to change his mind.'

'Really?'

'Aye. But you'll have to come up with a better argument than before.'

And that, Terrel thought, is the problem. He'd been trying to think of a way to convince Ostan, but hadn't got very far.

'Why don't you talk to Kjolur?' the sailor suggested. 'He might be able to help you. Myvatan's his homeland and he knows more about the place than any of us.'

Terrel knew who Kjolur was, but had assumed he was just another member of the crew. Now that he thought about it, he couldn't recall ever seeing him at work on board or in the rigging.

'He keeps himself to himself,' Kahl went on, 'but he's not a bad sort.'

'You've met him before, then?'

'He's sailed with us several times. He's a merchant of some sort. Quite secretive about his trade, but he pays well to add his cargo to ours, so we've no quarrel with that.'

'I'll talk to him,' Terrel decided. 'Thanks.'

'Just so you know,' Kahl said, 'he's been asking a few questions about you, on the quiet, like.'

'What did you tell him?'

'What could we tell him? We don't exactly know much ourselves, other than you've a way to take the ache from a man's bones.' Kahl paused, perhaps hoping that his companion would volunteer some more information about himself, but Terrel had no intention of doing that. He was too busy wondering whether Kjolur's interest in him stemmed from idle curiosity or something more.

Terrel found the islander sitting inside a coil of thick rope, near the stern



of the vessel. It looked like an uncomfortable seat, but Kjolur seemed quite relaxed. As he drew closer, the healer was astonished to discover that the merchant was reading a book - which immediately marked him out as unusual. In all his travels, most of the people Terrel had met could neither read nor write. Indeed, some of them - like the Toma in the desert land of Misrah - had no written language at all. And everywhere he'd been, books were considered rare and valuable objects, with many people regarding them as mysterious and even magical artefacts.

'What are you reading?'

Kjolur looked up sharply, but did not seem particularly surprised to see who it was. The islander had a thin, pinched face, with pale green eyes.

'It's a collection of old legends. My great-grandfather made a point of writing them all down. I'm not sure why.'

But they help to pass the time on a voyage like this. Do you read?'

'I do,' Terrel replied, 'but probably not in your language.' They were speaking in what the sailors called 'the northern tongue', which was common to many lands bordering the cold ocean and which, according to Kahl, was widely spoken on Myvatan. That had come as a relief to Terrel, because it simplified the process of communication. Psinoma enabled him to learn new languages quickly, but he still felt guilty about the necessity of prying into other people's minds. However, he had rarely had any need to become familiar with the written word.

'Then you've travelled far,' Kjolur concluded.

'I have, but I don't come across books very often. May I take a look?'

'Of course.' The islander passed the slim volume over and Terrel flicked through a few pages of the precise calligraphy. This was enough to tell him that it was quite indecipherable.

'It's beautiful,' he said, handing it back, and remembering a time at the haven when he'd had access to a whole library of books. For the first years of his life, those books had been the source of everything he'd known about the outside world. The reality - especially after he'd left Vadanis - had proved rather different.

'The tale I've just been reading says that Myvatan once floated free in the ocean, like a gigantic ship. Can you believe that?'

'Perhaps,' Terrel replied, amazed at the apparent link to his dream - and to his own homeland.

'My people apparently ruled all of Nydus from their mobile fortress,' Kjolur went on, 'but then one of our enemies put a curse on the island and froze it in place, isolated from all the other countries. That must have been some sorcery.' He was grinning to show he regarded the story as no more than an imaginative myth, but Terrel wasn't ready to dismiss it so lightly.

'I come from an empire that's made up entirely of floating islands,' he said.

'Really?' It was the merchant's turn to be amazed.

'The main one is called Vadanis.'

Kjolur's expression made it clear that he had never heard of it, something that did not surprise Terrel at all. His homeland no longer seemed real, even to him.

### Chapter Three

By his own reckoning, Terrel was now twenty-one years old, and he was a very different person to the terrified boy who had been cast adrift from Vadanis. It was incredible to think that his exile had already lasted more than seven years, and that there was no immediate end in sight. During all that time he had been almost constantly on the move, and he'd experienced more than he could ever have imagined when he was growing up in the confines of the remote madhouse. His bargain with the elementals, the strange creatures who had no substance or shape and yet who wielded immense power, had become the core of his existence - and it drove him onward still. However, he had begun to feel that the circle was closing at last, that he had passed the furthest point in his long journey. He had come to believe that each step along the unknown road now took him closer to home.

That feeling had been reinforced by his most recent meeting with his ghostly allies. Their latest theory was that his trip to Myvatan might be the end of the road, the point at which he could finally fulfil his bargain, and thus set himself free to return to Vadanis - and to Alyssa. The hope that this might be true had given Terrel the strength to carry on, after a long period in which he had not seemed to be achieving anything.

Three and a half years - an eternity in his young life - had passed since he'd left the deserts of Misrah, and since his last encounter with one of the elementals. When he'd crossed the northern borders of that territory he had been full of expectation, sure that he would soon find out what his next task would be. But although he'd hoped that this would begin with his 'going to the other side of the mountains' - the first part of his journey - he had subsequently been presented with an almost limitless succession of choices, and had been given little or no guidance. He'd been left to trust his own instincts - instincts he had begun to doubt more and more as time passed - to decide where he should go next at each stage. It was only recently that his goal had become clear, which was why he was now aboard the Skua. Yet in his heart it was not Myvatan but another island, on the other side of the world, that he longed for. Although Terrel was indeed a different person from the boy he'd once been, he still sometimes felt like a homesick child.

'You are a long way from home,' Kjolur commented, bringing Terrel back to the present with a rush. 'What brings you to this part of the world?' Once again Terrel wondered how to answer this most obvious of questions. If he replied truthfully - that he came in search of a shadow-born entity that possessed intelligence and strength but no physical body - he would be dismissed as mad and would lose any prospect of being helped by a potential ally. After some consideration, he chose to move one step closer to the truth than he had done with Ostan.

'The seers of my homeland prophesied that I would make this journey. I swore an oath to follow their guidance, wherever it led.' He paused, trying to assess Kjolur's response, but the islander's expression was unreadable. 'Seeing into the future,' Kjolur said, nodding slowly. 'That's a useful talent.'

Terrel couldn't tell whether the other man was being genuine or facetious - and wasn't sure whether he agreed with what the islander had said. Prophecy had been his travelling companion for seven years, but it had brought as many pitfalls as triumphs.

'It is sometimes,' he said cautiously, 'but augury isn't an exact science.' That was one of the seers' favourite axioms.

'I find that rather reassuring,' the merchant said. 'I wouldn't like to think that everything was preordained.'

'Me neither,' Terrel agreed, remembering one particular vision in which he had seen the moment of his own death.

'And yet you're sailing to Myvatan because of this prophecy?'

'Sometimes you can't argue with destiny,' Terrel replied, knowing it was a feeble response. He was aware that his companion was studying him intently, and guessed that Kjolur was a shrewd character. It was obvious that the islander was not only weighing up his words but also the expressions on his face. Was it possible that those pale eyes could somehow see beneath the surface of their conversation? Could it even be that Kjolur was skilled in the use of psinoma, and thus able to read Terrel's thoughts without him knowing it? This was an unnerving idea, but the healer was able to convince himself that it couldn't be true, that he would know if his mind was being probed.

'Those are old wounds?' Kjolur asked, indicating Terrel's misshapen limbs.

'Were they received in battle?'

The abrupt change of subject took Terrel by surprise.

'No,' he replied. 'I was born this way.'

In fact the injuries had been caused by a battle of sorts -but not the kind Kjolur meant. Terrel had been in his mother's womb when he'd been crippled by

his twin

brother. Their enmity still caused occasional conflict between them, even though they were many hundreds of miles apart. Jax was the Emperor's son, the acknowledged heir to the Floating Islands. Terrel had been discarded at birth. 'Old wounds indeed,' Kjolur said. 'That was bad fortune.'

Terrel shrugged; his misfortunes had played a part in making him who he was. 'Too late for our healing pools to be of use,' the islander added, still watching Terrel closely.

'Healing pools?'

'You've not heard of them? Each quarter has them, but their efficacy is limited. And most are restricted, kept for military use. A soldier's injuries can be repaired if they're treated quickly enough, so that he can return to the war. But after a certain time ...' He spread his hands in a gesture of futility.

Terrel belatedly caught the implication of his words.

'You think that's why I'm going to Myvatan? In the hope of healing these?' He tapped his right hand on his leg.

'The thought had crossed my mind,' Kjolur admitted. 'I've seen it before, with those who've had no luck elsewhere. There are legends told about the pools - there's one in this book, in fact - of miraculous cures, and when all other hope is gone that's the sort of thing people cling to. It's generally women who make the voyage, though.'

'Why women?' Terrel asked curiously.

'Because a supposedly barren wife once gave birth to twins little more than nine median months after bathing. A tale like that soon turns to myth if enough people want to believe it. But only the truly desperate come now. They know they have very little chance of even getting close to the waters. The army guards them jealously.'

'Well, that's not why I'm here,' Terrel said. 'I didn't even know about the pools, and I'm not sure I'd want to be cured even if it were possible. I'd like to see them in action, though.'

'Your line of work,' Kjolur said, nodding. 'You might be lucky. I may even be able to help.'

'That would be wonderful. Thank you.'

'I'm not promising anything, mind. A merchant only has influence with the generals when he's got something they want.'

'And do you?'

'Ah, now that would be telling,' Kjolur replied with a smile. 'You have to allow me a few trade secrets.'

'I'm sorry. Curiosity is one of my vices.'

'What are the others?' the islander asked, still looking amused.

'Now you have to allow me some secrets,' Terrel said, grinning back.

'Tell me, as you've never been to Myvatan before, how do you know about Savik's Whale?'

Coming so soon after their good-natured exchange, the question sounded abrupt, and it caught Terrel off-guard. He began to suspect that this was exactly what Kjolur had intended.

'I didn't know it was called that,' he said, stalling for time so that he could collect his thoughts.

'Savik is the god of stone and earth,' the islander explained. 'Who else could have carved a life-size whale from a granite cliff? You haven't answered my question, though.'

'I saw it in a dream.' Terrel's honesty was instinctive. There had been times in the past when he'd had to disguise his real motives - as much to avoid ridicule as for any other more sinister reason - and he had come to recognize that

deception or dissembling were sometimes necessary. On this occasion, however, he saw no reason to lie. And he had learnt from experience that telling the truth whenever possible caused fewer complications later on.

'Are you a seer yourself, then?'

'No, not really. But dreams are sometimes meant to show us things.'

'I wouldn't argue with that,' Kjolur said, surprising Terrel again. 'Still, what makes you so sure you want to go ashore there?'

This question was not as easy to answer. The truth was that once Terrel and the ghosts had determined that there might be another of the elementals on Myvatan, Shahan and Muzeni had returned to their study of the Tindaya Code and discovered a passage referring to 'a land ice-carved and sea-girt'. The same section of the ancient inscriptions also described an ocean voyage that would end by alighting 'where the rockbound giant of the sea guards the gateway to a forbidden realm'. When Terrel had seen the sculpture in his dream, and confirmed its existence in the real world, he'd been in no doubt that this was his intended destination. Explaining all that to Kjolur would be much too complicated, though. He needed something simpler.

'I have a task to do here,' he said. 'And that's the starting point.'

'What is your task?'

'I don't know yet.'

'Then perhaps you need to dream some more.'

Terrel wasn't sure whether Kjolur was being serious or sarcastic. Not knowing how to respond, he glanced up and saw the Amber Moon, two thirds full and waxing. Against the azure of the midday sky it looked like a coin of pale gold.

'Which moon do you follow?'

Once again the conversation's sudden turn disconcerted Terrel, and he sensed that the question was important. Ostan had asked the same thing but hadn't waited for an answer. Kjolur, he knew, would be more patient.

'All of them,' he replied eventually.

'All of-!' the islander exclaimed, apparently caught off-guard for the first time. Then he was silent again.

'Did I say something wrong?' Terrel asked.

'I don't think you understood my question. We all fall under the influence of a particular moon. It decides our allegiances, our place, our whole lives. There must be one - just one - for you. Which is it?'

Terrel was aware that he was on dangerous ground now. More might depend on his answer than he realized. Yet he obviously had to say something. He followed his nature once more, thinking it better to suffer the consequences of the truth rather than a lie.

'The Dark Moon, I suppose.' It had always been the one he felt a strong connection to.

'Black, then,' Kjolur said. 'That makes sense.' He seemed relieved. 'We should be natural allies, at least.' He unbuttoned and lifted an epaulet on the shoulder of his coat. Underneath was a small circular patch of red cloth.

'So the red and black are allies?' Terrel queried. 'In the war?'

Kjolur looked startled.

'Surely you know that much,' he said.

Terrel shook his head.

'Tell me.'

Over the next half an hour, Terrel learnt more about Myvatan than he had in all his previous conversations put together. And almost all of it was unpleasant.

'Akranes is in the Red Quarter, of course,' the islander concluded. 'I wouldn't be on board if we weren't heading for one of our ports. You'll find a welcome there if you can't persuade Ostan to take you to Whale Ness.'

'Which quarter is that in?' Terrel asked.

'Theoretically it's in the Black, which would be good for you, but ownership of the headland is disputed, which is why it's a forbidden zone. You still want to risk landing there?'

After what he'd been told, Terrel's doubts were growing. But then he remembered the words from the Tindaya Code and knew he had no choice.

'Yes,' he said. 'If Ostan will give me a chance.'

Kjolur looked thoughtful.

'Do you think you could persuade him for me?' Terrel ventured.

'I don't think my word counts for much with the captain,' the merchant said apologetically.

'More than mine, at a guess,' Terrel muttered.

'I wish you well, though,' Kjolur added. 'Every man must follow his own path, no matter where it leads.'

Increasing cloud cover and a lack of strong moonlight made that night darker than usual, but Terrel was fascinated to see patches of almost luminous colour – white with traces of pale green – floating upon the waves around the ship. He eventually realized that they were chunks of ice, and the discovery made him shiver in spite of his warm clothing.

As he went below decks to try to get some sleep, he wondered whether Kjolur might really prove to be an ally in his quest. The merchant was difficult to read. Terrel still didn't know whether the islander had believed his own answers, nor did he know whether everything he had been told was true. Had Kjolur's version of events been the whole story?

Terrel continued brooding once he was settled in his gently swaying hammock. Just before he fell asleep, it occurred to him that although he had been told quite a lot about Myvatan, and had in turn revealed a good deal about himself, he had learnt almost nothing about the merchant – or his trade. Had they both been hiding things from each other?

Chapter Four

Terrel was woken by Kahl the next morning. 'The skipper wants to see you.'

'What about?' Terrel mumbled. 'He didn't tell me. You'd better go and find out.'

'Do you still want to go to Whale Ness?'

'Yes.'

'Then we'll go. I think you're mad, but it's your life.'

'Thank you.'

Ostan waved aside any gratitude.

'What made you change your mind?' Terrel asked.

'The sad look in those eyes of yours,' the captain replied. He'd spoken with a straight face, but several of the crew were smiling, and Terrel knew he wouldn't get a straight answer.

Although Ostan's reference to Terrel's eyes had been a joke, the healer was used to people making remarks about them. His eyes were indeed remarkable. The irises were almost colourless, like pale diamonds – which gave the impression that they were almost crystalline – with only occasional rainbow flashes deep within. Strangers often found them intimidating at first, but as Terrel pointed out, they were just eyes. If necessary, he could disguise them – and other aspects

of his appearance – through the use of the glamour, the trick of making people see what they wanted to see. But he only ever used this now as a last resort. As Alyssa was fond of telling him, there was a price to pay for such magic, and in this instance it came at the cost of making himself vulnerable to his twin's malign influence.

The weather worsened during the day, and Ostan kept his crew busy with almost continuous adjustments to their course and the set of the sails. When a ship was out of sight of land, navigation could be difficult, and Terrel knew that the seamen used a variety of observations to help them. Ostan and his second-in-command studied the angle of the waves, cloud patterns, the position of the sun during the day and the stars and moons at night. They even noted the colour of the seawater around them, and the types of seaweed within it. However, that afternoon Terrel watched as they prepared to take a completely different set of measurements. He didn't like to interfere but he was intrigued, so he sought out Kahl.

'What are they doing?'

'We're coming into shallower water now,' the sailor told him. 'The rope they're preparing is knotted every four paces, so that when a weight is tied

to the end and we lower it over the side, we can tell exactly how deep the water is. That'll give the captain a better idea of where we've got to. Sometimes they spread tallow on the base of the weight. That way, when it touches the sea bed, some bits get embedded, and when we draw it up again, Ostan can tell more about where we are, depending on whether it's sand or pebbles or mud.'

'Ingenious,' Terrel said, impressed.

'It's called fishing for treasure,' Kahl added. 'To my knowledge no one's ever come up with any gold, but

sometimes – especially if you're lost – information can be just as valuable.' From his own experiences, Terrel knew that to be true.

'I hear we're going to Whale Ness after all,' Kahl said, as they watched the rope being carefully lowered over the side of the ship.

'Yes. Do you know why Ostan changed his mind?'

'That's not for me to say. But I can tell you he spent some time talking with Kjolor last night.'

'Kjolor told me his word wouldn't carry much weight.'

'No,' Kahl agreed. 'But his gold might.'

That evening, Terrel found himself becoming increasingly restless. Kahl had had no proof of his theory. The idea, that money might have changed hands was pure supposition, and neither Terrel nor the sailor had been able to come up with a reason why Kjolor should have thought such an arrangement worthwhile. Nevertheless, there had to be some reason for Ostan's abrupt change of heart. But if Kjolor had intervened, what was his motive? Simply to help an ally of one day's standing? That didn't seem likely, but Terrel couldn't think of any sensible alternatives. And – assuming the islander was responsible – then why was he seemingly intent on acting anonymously? He'd made no attempt to talk to Terrel that day, and had spent most of his time below decks.

Terrel wasn't sure whether to confront Kjolor or simply accept his good fortune. Eventually, however, his curiosity overcame his reticence and he tracked the merchant down to his tiny private cabin. When he knocked and announced himself, a few moments passed before the door was unlocked – and from the various noises within, Terrel got the impression that the islander was tidying some things away before letting his visitor in. However, when Kjolor

eventually opened the door, he was smiling and his welcome seemed genuine.

'Come in, come in. It's a bit cramped, I'm afraid. Would you like a glass of meletar?'

Terrel looked at the clear, honey-coloured liquid and shook his head.

'No, thanks. I don't have a good head for drink.' That was a simplification of the truth. His very real aversion to alcohol stemmed from more complicated reasons.

'Shame. This is good stuff Kjolor took an appreciative sip from his own glass.

'What brings you to my lair?' He settled himself and waved Terrel to take a seat at the other end of the narrow bunk.

'I was wondering whether you had anything to do with the captain changing his mind about Whale Ness.'

'Would it be so surprising if I did?'

'We've only just met. Why would you want to help me?'

'Don't you believe in first impressions?'

'Sometimes.'

'So do I. Call it intuition, if you like. My powers of persuasion are obviously greater than I thought.'

'So you didn't pay Ostan, then?'

Kjolor did not respond immediately. His smile faded slowly, and Terrel felt as if he were being impaled by the calm gaze of those uncanny green eyes.

'I'm a businessman, Terrel,' the merchant said at last. 'Why would I do that?'

'I've no idea.'

'There's no profit in it for me, is there?'

'No, but—'

'Tell me, have you revealed everything about what you're going to do on Myvatan?'

'I don't know everything myself.'

'Fair enough. But have you told me all you do know?'

Terrel's hesitation betrayed him. He wasn't sure where the conversation was leading, but Kjolur had succeeded in putting him at a disadvantage.

'It's all right,' the islander said. 'You don't have to answer, and I've no intention of prying. Every man is entitled to keep his own counsel when he wants to.'

'Including you,' Terrel said, finally seeing the point the other man was making.

'Including me,' the merchant said, nodding.

They sat in silence for a while. Kjolur seemed perfectly at ease but Terrel was nervous, not quite knowing what to say or where to look. He took note of the few things he could see in the cabin, but knew it would be both pointless and rude to enquire about the ledgers or the small casket that sat in one corner.

'Well,' he said eventually, clearing his throat. 'You have my thanks. I'm in your debt.'

'Few foreigners come to my homeland,' Kjolur responded. 'Most of my people prefer it that way. Even Ostan and his crew won't venture more than a few paces from the docks. For myself, I wish it were otherwise. Perhaps you're the first of many visitors.'

From what he'd heard,' Terrel felt it unlikely that Myvatan would attract many outsiders, but he chose not to say so. Instead he tried to bring the talk around to the merchant himself.

'Do other Myvatanians travel as you do?'

'Very few. We're an insular breed in more than one sense. And for much of the year our climate is not conducive to travel.'

'Is it true that the sun never rises in midwinter?' Terrel asked. It was one of the tales told about the island that he'd found hard to believe.

'It's true,' Kjolur confirmed. 'Just as it's true that for two months at midsummer the sun never sets.'

'Really?' Terrel breathed, his astonishment plain.

'You get used to it,' the islander said, smiling again. 'Of course, we sleep through the darkest months anyway.'

'You actually hibernate':" Terrel was even more astonished now.

'For about two median months each winter,' Kjolur confirmed. 'If you'd made this trip much earlier in the year, you'd have found us all asleep.'

This idea took a bit of getting used to. Although Terrel had come across long-term sleepers of a quite different kind, the prospect of an entire community deliberately falling asleep every year was bizarre.

'It's really a very practical arrangement,' the islander went on. 'We save on supplies at the bleakest time of the year, and conserve our own energy for when the light returns.'

Terrel nodded, even though he still felt that - practical or not - it was one of the strangest things he'd ever heard.

'Do you do the same thing on your travels?' he asked.

'No. When there's light and warmth, I've no need to. My body adjusts. I might feel weary, sometimes, but that's probably just old age creeping up on me.' He grinned.

As far as Terrel could judge, Kjolur was probably about thirty. Old enough, but hardly ancient. He grinned back.

'There's a story in here,' the merchant said, picking up his book, 'about Savik's Whale. I reread it last night after our talk.'

'Will you read it to me?' Terrel asked eagerly.

'Not the whole thing. Our poets tend to be a little . . . overelaborate, shall we say? But the gist of the tale is that it's more than just a sculpture. It's a beacon, a marker for the gods. They take notice of anything that happens there.'

'That's a daunting thought.'

'It is rather, but I shouldn't let it worry you,' Kjolur advised. 'As far as I know, the gods haven't put in too many appearances lately. What's more interesting is the fact that there's supposed to be a funnel that leads all the way up from a cave at sea-level to the top of the whale, where it emerges at the creature's blowhole.'

'Its what?'

'Blowhole. Whales aren't like other fish. In fact, some people say they aren't really fish at all. Sounds crazy, doesn't it? It's because whales have to come up to the surface every so often. They breathe the same air we do, unlike true fishes. The blowhole is on top of their heads, and that's how they breathe. Blowing water out and taking air in. But that's all beside the point. The stone whale mimics the real creatures in a most ingenious way. If there's a storm, and the wind is in the southwest, the waves force water up the funnel until it bursts out at the top in a spout.'

'That must be quite a sight,' Terrel commented.

'I'm sure it is,' Kjolur agreed. 'And according to the legend, anyone who stands beside the hole when it appears - especially if they're splashed by the seawater - is granted a vision of the future. Sound familiar at all?'

'It's certainly an odd method of prophecy,' Terrel said, 'but then it's a strange process by its very nature.' He was intrigued, and wondered whether he might be able to climb the sculpture. Then something else occurred to him.

'I'd rather there wasn't a storm when we get there, though. If Ostan's to be believed, going ashore's going to be hard enough as it is.'

The next morning, Terrel was beckoned over to the starboard rail by one of the sailors, who pointed to something

in the water some distance away. A smooth black hump rose above the waves, then sank again. It was replaced by a fluid shape that looked rather like a double-sided black sail. This rose, streaming foam, flipped over with slow grace, then slid back into the sea.

'What was that?' Terrel asked, though he thought he already knew.

'A black whale. That was its tail there at the end, when it dived.'

Terrel stared in awe, but saw nothing more. He had glimpsed only the top of the creature's arched back and its tail, but that was enough for him to tell that it was enormous. Which meant that the life-sized sculpture would be just as big.

Two days later, a shout from the lookout in the bows alerted both Terrel and the crew to the fact that their voyage was almost over. The healer gazed at the purple smudge on the horizon and knew that it was his first view of Myvatan.

#### Chapter Five

When Terrel eventually set foot upon the rocks of Myvatan, his first impression was not of the bitter wind that threatened to overbalance him, or of the black water that swirled around his perch. It was not of the daunting cliffs that towered above him, or of the seabirds that shrieked and whirled overhead. It was not even the sheer relief of finally having had the courage to leap from the skiff, timing his jump with the swell, and managing to gain a foothold on solid ground. The feeling that swept over him and through him, filling every particle of his being with a chill dread, was an almost overwhelming sense of madness.

This was not the harmless and occasionally benevolent lunacy of someone like Alyssa. This was violent, furious, unreasoning and yet malicious. Evil. What was even more disconcerting, it seemed to be coming from the island itself. It was as if the whole place was insane.

The initial onslaught was so savage that Terrel instinctively clutched at his head, then staggered and almost fell back into the sea. He recovered just in time, tried desperately to shield his mind, and went on. As he clambered over the barnacle-encrusted rocks, taking himself further from one peril at least, he heard yells of encouragement from Kahl and the other oarsmen who had brought him ashore. He couldn't pick out their words, but knew they



were glad both that he had survived the first stage of his journey and that their part in his escapade was over. They were pulling away again now, returning to the Skua.

Catching his breath once he was no longer in any immediate danger of being sucked back into the icy water, Terrel watched the skiff's retreat. Doubts assailed him. He'd been so sure that coming ashore at Whale Ness was the right thing to do, and yet now his decision seemed incredibly rash. Even without the all-pervading sense of madness, this was a bleak and forbidding place, where any number of dangers might await him. Even if he succeeded in climbing up to the island proper, there was nothing to suggest he'd be able to survive long enough to achieve his purpose there – whatever that was. He could die of cold or starvation. Even a minor injury could prove fatal.

That's all irrelevant, he told himself. You're here now. There's no going back, so you just have to make the best of it.

Readjusting his pack, which contained his few belongings and the food he'd been given, Terrel got to his feet and moved further inland. His first intention was to get well out of reach of the waves, even if the wind freshened, and then to try to find some shelter. It was already growing dark and he had no intention of attempting to scale the cliffs that night. He concentrated on each footstep, on making sure his boots did not slip, and tried to focus on his immediate practical problems. But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't dismiss the atmosphere of insanity from his mind. As a healer he felt it as a sickness, an unnatural state, but treating such a disease was clearly beyond him. The best he could hope for was to ignore it – and to ignore the implications for his own mission. This was easier said than done.

'Don't you believe in first impressions?' Kjolur had asked. Terrel was beginning to wish he didn't.

It had been late afternoon by the time the Skua had dropped anchor off Whale Ness, but Ostan hadn't given his passenger the choice of waiting until morning. The captain's words had been succinct. 'It's now or never, Terrel. Make up your mind.' One of the reasons for his haste had been the fear of encountering local naval vessels. Sea raids apparently played a major part in the war, and Ostan hadn't been willing to linger near a forbidden zone and risk being discovered by military forces. And he and all his crew had also been anxious to reach Akranes and complete their trading so they could sail for home as quickly as possible. The detour had already cost them several hours, and any further delay was out of the question.

The little Terrel had seen of Myvatan had not been encouraging. He'd already known it was very different from Vadanis. For a start, it was much bigger and – of course – it was not moving. But from the sea it had not really seemed like land at all. So much of it was covered in snow and ice, some of it apparently permanent, that it looked more like a piece of ocean that had frozen over, like a giant iceberg. Even from a distance it was clear that the mountains of the interior were huge. They were mostly shrouded in mist or cloud, but when the sunlight finally broke through, their peaks shone like pure white beacons.

As the Skua sailed closer, the rugged nature of the coastline had become apparent. Where the slopes were too steep to be covered with snow, much of the rock was black or dark grey, but even that sparkled, as if it were studded with crystals. Finally, Terrel had caught a glimpse of the fabled sculpture. Although he'd known it would be

impressive, the real thing had taken his breath away. The manner in which its sinuous lines mimicked life, almost as though it were swimming in the air above the cliff, was remarkable. This was no crude shaping of a convenient piece of rock; this was a true work of art, as beautiful as it was astonishing. And the fact that it could achieve this effect on such a huge scale was truly awe-inspiring. The stone whale was colossal. To conceive of such a structure, let alone actually shape it, did indeed seem to be the province of gods rather than men.

As the Skua had drawn round into the lee of the headland, Terrel had gazed up in wonder. For a moment he'd thought that perhaps a real creature had been frozen in stone many ages earlier, just as the dragon-lizard and her eggs had been preserved in the desert of Misrah. But he'd soon dismissed the idea. Savik's Whale was a deliberate creation, not an accident of history. He had been given no more time to stare and speculate, as preparations had quickly been made for his departure. At least the weather had been kind, with the sea as calm as it was ever likely to be. Terrel's blithe assumption that a landing would have been possible whatever the conditions had seemed very foolish then. If it had turned rough, he would have had no chance at all. As it was, he'd already begun to doubt his own decision, purely because of the nature of the terrain he would be entering.

'I hope you know what you're doing,' Ostan had said in parting.

'Be careful,' Kjolur had advised. 'The Gold Moon is full tonight.'

Terrel had not known why this was relevant – and at that moment, as he climbed down the rope ladder to the waiting skiff, the position of the moons had been the least of his worries. The rest of the crew had been silent or, like Kahl, had simply wished him good luck. By then, Terrel had known he was going to need it.

He spent the night huddled in a small, salt-smelling cave, which he fervently hoped was above the highest tide line. The darkness proved to be almost complete, with just a little moonlight filtering through a canopy of cloud. Terrel found that when he could see nothing, the relentless, ever-changing noise of the wind and sea seemed even louder and more threatening. He kept imagining that the waves were coming closer and would soon flood his meagre shelter, plucking him from his refuge like a clam being pulled from its shell. He was cold and afraid, and although he knew he ought to get some sleep to prepare himself for the exertions of the next day, both his body and his mind remained restless.

Part of the reason for his long journey towards Myvatan had been the advice given to him by the ghosts about their latest discoveries in the Tindaya Code. But that was not the whole story. Many years ago, in what seemed now like another lifetime, he'd had a dream which at the time had seemed nonsensical, but which in retrospect had granted him brief glimpses of places he would one day visit. The fog-bound valley, with its dwelling that floated on the surface of a lake, and the shimmering desert populated by camels and women with tattooed faces, had been so far outside his experience of the world that he'd thought them ludicrous visions. And yet both had proved to be fragments of his own future. That same dream had also featured a frozen sea of blue-shadowed ice.

And in addition, for the first time in all his wanderings along the unknown road, Terrel had felt the influence of another, new force shaping his destiny. Although he couldn't explain it, he knew that it stemmed from the Ancients. Having now met three elementals and struck a bargain with them, twice renewed, Terrel was sure that there was a permanent connection between him and the strange creatures. He had been responsible – at least in part – for reassuring each of them that it was not alone, that it had 'brothers' elsewhere on Nydus. He had subsequently come to believe that they were not separate entities at all, that they were somehow part of the same being, sharing memories, abilities and fears, even though they were separated by enormous distances. As a result, it seemed entirely possible that the three might have concluded that there was at least a fourth elemental, and possibly more, somewhere on the planet. If that were the case, they might well be trying to help Terrel to find the rest of their 'family'. Such guidance as they had given him had begun as he left Misrah and, although it had certainly not been continuous or even straightforward, he felt that they had been with him – in some sense – ever since.

Although these thoughts should have been comforting, now that he'd reached the ice-covered island nothing was clear any more. Insanity had invaded Myvatan's air and rock, and Terrel couldn't help wondering if there was some connection

between this and the presence of an Ancient - assuming that one of the creatures was really here. This possibility, together with Alyssa's last instructions - which had been unusually obscure even for her - did little to reassure him. Don't fight the wrong war was presumably a warning not to get involved in the island's internal conflict. On the other hand, Be careful where you choose to follow could mean anything. Surely being careful was just common sense? But the phrase that caused him the most concern, and which kept returning to his thoughts now, was And don't trust your instincts. That made no sense at all. He had relied upon his instincts in all his travels. If he couldn't trust them, then what was left? Until Alyssa returned, this was a question he couldn't answer. Terrel's last thought before finally falling asleep was about something Kjolur had said. In the Floating Islands, the Amber - or Gold - Moon was said to be the harbinger of dreams, and this belief had been reflected in the various lands Terrel had visited since his exile. And as with any of the moons, the Amber was at its most potent when it was full. The crystal city rose from the waves of a dark sea that was dotted with luminous pieces of floating ice. He had seen the city before, although he could never go there, but this time its fractured beauty was gone. It was an ugly, crumpled mass of glass splinters and piercing light. It had never been real; he knew that. But it was important. Seeing it in ruins made him tremble. He wanted to scream, to warn her, but he had no voice here. He watched in dismay as the city began to break into jagged shards and sink below the icy water.

A different sea claimed him then, the pulsing crimson ocean he thought he'd left behind for ever. The blind realm of red terror was from a time before he'd been born - a world ruled by Jax and his malevolent energy, where Terrel's only defence had been to make himself small, invisible.

When Terrel woke, drained and shivering, something else Alyssa had said was running through his mind. The crystal's broken, isn't it? Smashed.

She knew.

Although the message had apparently been from Muzeni, it hadn't sounded like something the old seer would say - even taking into account the fact that he'd been a heretic when he was alive. On this occasion, Alyssa had been speaking for herself.

She knew.

Terrel understood the dream a little better now. Although earlier visions had been incomprehensible, he had learnt that the crystal city represented the shield around Alyssa - and presumably the other sleepers - a shield that both imprisoned and protected her. And because the fate of the sleepers was inextricably linked to the Ancients, it followed that the vision must somehow come from them. In a sense it represented them. But if that were the case, the elemental here on Myvatan was not only very ill, it was also hopelessly unbalanced and possibly beyond help. It was not an encouraging thought. It's just a dream, he told himself as he forced stiff, cold muscles into reluctant action. He had used this argument before. He hadn't believed it then and he didn't believe it now.

Morning spread a chill light over the empty grey-green sea. The Skua was long gone, and Terrel was on his own. He had no way back. He could either stay where he was, and die, or he could climb.

As he settled the straps of his pack over his shoulder, and retied the laces of the specially adapted boot that fitted his crooked right foot, Terrel realized that the madness he had sensed the night before was still there. But now he found he was able to treat it as a constant part of the background. Unnatural though it was, it was like the noise of the sea. After a while you still heard it, but you ceased to listen. In the same way, he was still aware of the insanity, but it no longer threatened to disorientate or disable him. At least now, unpleasant though it was, he had a possible explanation for the sickness that had permeated the very fabric of the island.

As he left the cave, he looked hopefully up at the wheeling gulls and other birds that inhabited the cliffs and coastline. He longed for one of them to be Alyssa, but no matter how welcome her aid would be just then, there was no sign of her. And there wasn't likely to be until he got further from the ocean. He was on his own.

Terrel was relieved to find that the cliff face was not entirely vertical, as it had appeared from out to sea, and that it was possible to scramble up parts of the lower section in relative safety. It was rough going, and he had to be careful where he planted his feet, but he made steady progress. Higher up, the slopes became steeper and keeping his balance was more difficult, but at least the surface of the rock was drier here and less slippery now he was some way from the water's edge. Eventually, however, it became a matter of real climbing, rather than scrambling, and on several occasions Terrel scouted a possible route only to be faced by an impossibly sheer cliff or an overhang. Each time this happened he was forced to backtrack, and as his frustration - and fear - increased, he was reminded of when he'd climbed Makranash. The arid heat of the desert had made his partial ascent of the mountain a very different proposition, but he had succeeded there and was determined to do so now. The other difference was that in Misrah he'd had friends, both on the mountain and at its foot, who might have been able to rescue him had he suffered a mishap. Here any such failure would almost certainly result in his death.

Eventually, as his desperation mounted, Terrel discovered a narrow vertical crevasse. He was able to wedge himself into it, bracing himself on either side, and edge

upwards like a sweep climbing a chimney. His lop-sided physique made some movements impossible, and several of the necessary contortions were very painful, but at least he was moving upwards again. The fingers of his good hand were already raw from cold and the rough stone, but at least the exertions of his latest attempt warmed the rest of his body.

The crevasse had many twists and turns, and there were several awkward moments when Terrel had to negotiate various jagged protuberances or a particularly narrow section. However, apart from one occasion when he made the mistake of looking down - and then had to rest for a while until his limbs stopped shaking - he made constant advances. By midday he was high above the ocean and, knowing that a fall now would be fatal, he was moving with great caution. He had no way of telling how far he was from the cliff top, but he fervently hoped that the chimney continued all the way there. If he reached a dead end now, he wasn't sure he'd have either the physical or mental strength to make the long descent, let alone try again elsewhere. He kept looking up, longing to see his goal, but it remained tantalizingly out of reach.

Far above him, the clouds had dispersed and the sky was a pale but clear blue, and Terrel was glad of that. The sun's rays held little warmth but it was better than nothing, and any rain, sleet or snow would have made his task even more of an ordeal. As it was, he was apparently trapped in a nightmare where every new hand- or foothold seemed to make no difference to his overall progress.

On two occasions, something startled him to such a degree that he almost lost his grip. The first was when a loud clap of thunder burst in the air above him. The shock almost dislodged him, and in its aftermath, as the blood pounded in his ears, Terrel dreaded the arrival of the storm that was surely on its way. However, what sky he could see remained clear, and he'd just begun to think that the thunderclouds must have moved away again when two large, white birds flapped past him as they emerged from their eyrie. They were squawking furiously at his invasion of their territory, and the noise and flurry of their wings set Terrel's heart racing once more. Ducking away from their assault, he almost slipped again, clinging on only by his fingertips. He didn't have enough breath left to shout at the birds, and could only hope they'd leave him alone once he was past their nest. And then it seemed that his worst fears had been realized. The crevasse

appeared to end in a blank, horizontal roof, which would be quite impossible to pass. Even so, Terrel was not willing to give up yet, and went on. A few moments later he was intensely relieved to find that the crevasse did not end, but veered sideways in a sort of open-sided tunnel that was big enough for him to be able to crawl along it quite easily. What was more, to his great joy he could see level ground, with a covering of threadbare grass, at the end of the traverse. By the time he reached that, he knew he'd achieved the first of his goals. He was at the top.

As he stood there, taking in deep lungfuls of the cold, clear air, Terrel wondered for the first time what he was supposed to do now. The Tindaya Code had led him to this spot, but it had given no indication as to what was supposed to happen next.

Looking round, he saw that Savik's Whale was only a few hundred paces away and, without thinking, he set off towards the great sculpture. However, before he'd gone very far, movement from a little further inland caught his eye, just as the faint sounds of clashing steel and raised voices drifted to him on the wind.

Terrel stared in horror, knowing that he'd overcome one danger only to find himself embroiled in another. What he had stumbled into was not a forbidden zone but a war zone.

#### Chapter Six

The terrain over which the battle was being fought was uneven, but Terrel was on relatively flat ground, with no vegetation to speak of, so there was nowhere for him to hide. His first instinct was to throw himself flat, in the hope that he could avoid being seen by the combatants, but as soon as he'd done this he realized that the battle was moving in his direction. He still felt horribly exposed, and knew that he'd have to find a better hiding place if he was to have any hope of remaining undetected. Going inland was out of the question – that would simply take him closer to the fighting – and behind him was the cliff edge. His only alternative was to go along the coastline one way or the other. In either case that would mean crossing a stretch of bare earth and rock, covered only by sparse patches of grass and a few pockets of snow. To the east the land rose slowly, but there was nothing large enough to conceal him there. The only possibility of cover to the west was Savik's Whale, but going in that direction would take him further out on to the tapering headland, making it more likely that he'd be trapped there as the battle went on. However, this was clearly his only chance, and so he took it. Heedful of Alyssa's warning, he wanted nothing to do with the islanders' war, so he scuttled along the cliff top, keeping as low as he could and hoping he would not be seen. The awkward movement sent needles of pain shooting through his twisted leg, but he limped on.

With every step he expected to hear the shout that meant he'd been spotted, but it did not come. In fact, the noise of battle seemed to have receded a little, masked now by a rising wind that was blowing from the other side of the headland.

When Terrel finally reached the whale, and staggered under its massive upraised tail fins, he crouched down in the shadows where the belly of the creature joined the granite below. As he caught his breath, he saw that the sea was now flecked with white and a rolling swell was building up. He heard – and felt – waves crashing into the base of the cliffs on the windward side of the headland, and shuddered to think what might have happened if he'd tried to come ashore in such conditions.

Renewed shouting brought his attention back to the soldiers. For the first time, Terrel was able to see how the battle was being fought. It was difficult to tell how many men were involved, but both sides seemed to be operating with groups of archers to the rear, who provided some protection for the advancing patrols of foot soldiers. These troops were continuously manoeuvring for position, making use of what cover the terrain provided, sheltering behind outcrops of rock and drifts of snow, or in the deeper gullies and hollows. Most of the fighting came in short but bloody skirmishes between these

patrols, before one side or the other retreated, allowing their archers to fire on the enemy forces left behind.

Even from a distance, Terrel could tell that the conflict was in deadly earnest. He had seen some terrible things during his travels, but little to match the savagery of this encounter. The field was already littered with the bodies of the dead and dying, and it was clear that neither side was showing any mercy. No prisoners were being taken; the wounded were butchered where they lay.

The appalling carnage was already making Terrel feel sick, but what happened next left him not only horrified but also astonished. Out of nowhere a swirling dark cloud appeared, low over the battlefield and growing in size by the moment. By rights it should never have been able to form in such conditions, and even if it had, the strong wind now racing across the headland should have either dispersed the sudden mist or blown it away completely. But neither of these things happened. The cloud moved back and forth over the combatants, writhing as though caught in a vortex of several opposing gusts of wind, but never moving very far one way or another. What was more, within its churning shadows a strange light began to flicker, and the air all around it began to hum and crackle. As Terrel felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end, he realized what must be coming next. Flashes of lightning burst from the cloud, each accompanied by a deafening concussion. The strikes were obviously directed at a group of soldiers, and Terrel watched in horror as the men were smashed to the ground in blackened heaps or thrown into the air by the impact. He could hardly believe that such a primeval force could have been used for a deliberate attack, but that was the only possible conclusion. Almost immediately, a second salvo of lightning leapt from the cloud, but this time it never reached its intended target. Instead of hitting the ground, the lightning fragmented, apparently deflected by some sort of invisible shield surrounding the forces under attack. This took the form of a pyramid that shimmered briefly with each bolt of fire, then vanished again.

Terrel had no idea what was going on. The use of such weapons – and the defences used against them – was quite beyond his understanding, though he couldn't help thinking of the much bigger magical dome that the sharaken had built over the palace in Talazoria, and of the murderous chaos that had reigned within. What he was watching now was also clearly the province of sorcerers, which made the nature of the battle even more horrifying.

After some time the cloud began to break up, and finally it drifted away on the wind, its unnatural potency clearly exhausted, but the fighting was far from over. The various advances and retreats continued, interspersed with bouts of violence, the bowmen still firing volleys of arrows. There was no indication as to how long the battle was likely to rage, but there seemed no possibility of escape for Terrel. The fighting now stretched across the entire width of the headland, effectively cutting him off from the rest of the island. To make matters worse, one patrol was coming closer to the whale, apparently trying to outflank their opponents, and Terrel knew he had to find somewhere else to hide.

Stooping to walk beneath the smooth curve of the sculpture, he made his way under a fin the size of a small roof and moved towards the whale's head – which was positioned so that it looked out over the point of the promontory and was therefore as far from the battle as possible. Terrel hoped that by positioning himself there he would not be seen, but as he crouched under the gigantic jaw and looked around, he thought of a better idea.

The whale's mouth formed a small cave that had been visible even from the Skua, and if he could get inside, there would be little chance of anyone spotting him. Moving out to take a look, Terrel saw that the opening was easily big enough for him to climb in. The only obstacle was the rows of widely-spaced, inward-facing teeth, both above and below the entrance. He decided that as

long as he was careful, they should present no real problem. In fact, the

lower set provided him with excellent handholds when he pulled himself up. After that it was just a matter of edging inside into the semi-darkness and then keeping very still.

He was just congratulating himself on having found the perfect refuge when a harsh grating sound - which reverberated through the hollow stone - made him unsure once more. It was a few moments before he realized what was happening - and then he couldn't believe it. The grinding noise was coming from the sculpture itself, as the lower jaw moved slowly upwards. At first Terrel was too stunned to react, and then it was too late. The two lines of stone teeth had clamped together, barring his way out. The giant mouth had closed. Savik's Whale had swallowed him.

Panic gripped Terrel by the throat and squeezed the breath from him. He crawled back to the enmeshed teeth and, bracing his back against the roof, tried with all his might to push them apart. Nothing happened. Then he tried hitting one of the teeth to see if he could break his way out, but all he did was hurt his hand. He sat back, telling himself to be calm. There was no rational explanation for what had happened, but as the whale's jaw had closed of its own volition, there was a chance that it would simply open again and release him. In the meantime, he had to be ready to escape.

Still afraid, but able to think a little more clearly now, Terrel took stock of his situation. There was nothing in his pack that could help him. He had the curved dagger given to him by the Toma, but it wouldn't be any use against such immovable stone. He wondered whether he should stay close to the teeth or try to explore the rest of the cavernous mouth. Looking around, he saw something white in

one of the deeper recesses, and realized that the back of the cave was not entirely dark. There was obviously a source of light there, which meant that there might be another way out.

Crawling awkwardly on his hands and knees, Terrel made his way towards the patch of light. As he passed the white object he stopped to examine it - then wished he hadn't. His eyes were growing accustomed to the dim light now, and as soon as his probing fingers turned it over, it was all too obvious what it was. The empty eye sockets of a human skull stared back at him above grinning rows of exposed teeth. Other bones lay scattered beyond it. Terrel was obviously not the first person to have walked into this trap. If the gods of Myvatan really were responsible for the giant sculpture, it seemed that they had a particularly unpleasant sense of humour.

Terrel could hear the sounds of battle again now, echoing faintly in the chamber, and he knew that the fighting must be coming even closer. For a moment he considered calling out, hoping to attract the soldiers' attention. Whatever they might decide to do with him, it could hardly be worse than the fate of the one-time owner of the skull. However, he knew that the chances of anyone hearing him amid the tumult of warfare were very slim, and decided that he'd still prefer to try to find his own way out. He went on.

The light was coming from a narrow tunnel at the back of the whale's mouth. The tunnel was circular and barely wide enough for Terrel's shoulders. The sides looked rougher than the ridged floor of the mouth, but unless it became an even tighter squeeze, that wouldn't be a problem. He told himself he should at least explore, and find out where the light was coming from. He could always return if the tunnel led nowhere. Taking off his pack, he wondered whether to take it with him or leave it behind, and quickly decided on the former. If he did discover a way out, he wouldn't want to have to come back for his belongings. He pushed the bag into the tunnel. Unfortunately, this had the effect of blocking off most of the light, but Terrel couldn't think how else to keep it with him.

As he crawled into the hole, shoving the pack ahead of him, he was immediately aware of the sharp points of rock digging into his belly, arms and legs. The skin of his good hand was caught painfully as he pulled himself forward, but once his feet were inside the tunnel his boots were able to get a good purchase and he moved forward more rapidly - albeit at the cost of a few more

scratches.

He had not gone far when his pack came up against an obstruction, and pushing only seemed to wedge it tighter. Whatever was ahead was not shifting. Terrel tried to squash the pack to one side and peer around it, but he couldn't see anything. So he reached round with his good arm to see if he could find whatever was barring his progress and dislodge it. His fingers encountered something slim and hard, lying across the width of the tunnel, and he had no need to see it to know what it was. He'd found part of another skeleton. It was one of the larger bones that was now wedged tightly, blocking the whale's throat.

With no way through, Terrel reluctantly decided that he'd have to go back. He began to wriggle around, and immediately cried out in pain. The stone points that had been mere nuisances earlier now stabbed at him like sharp knives, snagging his clothes and sticking into his flesh. Almost immediately he saw what had happened and cursed himself for not having recognized the peril earlier. The whale's throat was lined with backward-facing 'teeth', which allowed him to go in but not back out again. So now he really was trapped, unable to move in either direction.

Fear, coupled with the sheer stupidity of having got himself into such a situation, made Terrel want to weep. After all he'd been through, the idea of his life ending in this horrible, farcical manner was too much to bear. He thought of Alyssa, and wondered if she'd ever be able to find him here - alive or dead. He heard once more her words about being careful where he chose to follow, and wished he'd heeded her advice. Following the man whose skeleton lay ahead had not been a wise move. He had let her down. He had let them all down.

'No!'

He had been breathing in convulsive gasps, and was startled by the sudden roar that burst from his lips. It had come from a surge of burning anger, a rage against fate, and it fuelled a new and furious determination. He would not surrender meekly. If he couldn't go back, then he would go on. And no flimsy skeleton was going to stop him!

Squirming even closer, so that his face was pressed up against his pack, Terrel used his crooked arm to hold this out of the way as best he could while he reached forward with his other hand. Locating the bone, he felt along its length to find the central point, where he hoped it would be at its thinnest, then aligned the heel of his palm, drew his arm back and slammed it into the obstacle as hard as he could. The impact jarred his shoulder and sent spikes of agony through his neck and chest, but it had no effect on the bone. After a few deep breaths Terrel tried again, with a similar lack of success, but he was in no mood to give up now. He repeated his assault.

On the seventh blow, when his arm and shoulder were hurting so much he had almost ceased to notice the torment in the rest of his body, there was a loud, sharp crack and the bone snapped in two. Breathing heavily, almost weeping from the effort it had cost him, Terrel shoved his pack forward again and found, to his immense relief, that it now moved easily. As he crawled on he passed other bones, but none of them impeded his progress.

After a while the tunnel began to slope upwards and the light became stronger, which gave him a little hope. The passage was soon almost vertical and was joined from below by another, much smaller tunnel. This was smooth-sided, and Terrel could hear the rumbling of the sea far beneath him. However, by then he wasn't concerned with this curiosity. He had just glimpsed the sky through a gap above him, and he hurried on up to the open air.

Although he had to be careful still, the stone teeth actually made it easier for him to climb now, and he stuck his head out of the hole, finding - as he'd expected - that he had emerged at the top of the sculpture. Looking down over the smoothly curving sides of the whale, he saw to his dismay that fighting was going on all around him now. The soldiers had abandoned any pretence of strategy and had settled for a pitched battle on the relatively open ground of



the promontory. In just a few moments Terrel saw several men cut down, and there seemed to be no end in sight. Both sides appeared intent on fighting to the last man. He had no wish to become embroiled in such violence, and decided to stay where he was until the slaughter ended or moved elsewhere. Preoccupied as they were, it was not likely that the warriors would notice his head poking from the top of the sculpture.

The wind had risen considerably since he'd been inside the whale and was now blowing at almost gale force. Out to sea, a huge swell was building up, and although Terrel

couldn't see them, he could hear some of the waves crashing into the base of the southwest-facing cliffs. The next thing he heard was not so easy to explain. It was a loud, mournful whistling, that rose and fell in an echoing, melancholy song of the sea. He had never heard anything like it before, but it seemed to be all around him and he knew, with a sudden intuition that he did not question, that this was the whale's song.

The extraordinary noise had clearly been heard by some of the soldiers too. There was a brief lull in the fighting and many of them glanced at the whale, their faces betraying a mixture of surprise and fear. Terrel ducked down, trying not to impale himself on too many of the stone teeth, then found that he was now under threat from another source. A huge thump from below, louder than any that had gone before, had not completely died away. The vibration was augmented by a rushing, gurgling sound that grew louder by the moment - and Terrel realized what was going to happen just before the source of the noise reached him. He was standing in the whale's blowhole - and it was about to blow.

Directly below him, water exploded from the smaller tunnel with incredible force. Expanding to fill the larger space, it lost some of its momentum, but was still strong enough to lift Terrel up bodily and propel him towards the open air. Flailing and spluttering, he found himself momentarily weightless as spurts of seawater, foam and spray flew past him into the sky. The next thing he knew he had been deposited, almost gently, on the whale's back, next to the still-gushing fountain. He had landed on his feet, upright, his boots resting on solid rock. It was almost as though the water had set him aside so that it could get on with its proper business of shooting towards the stars, and had decided that his entrance would be more dramatic

if he was not just sent sprawling to the ground. He was soaked through, and the water was so cold that it seemed to burn his already bruised and scratched skin, but otherwise he was miraculously unharmed.

The rush of water next to him subsided as the pressure from below relented, and what was left drained back to the sea and into the whale's mouth, dribbling out between its clenched teeth. Terrel stood where he was, too shocked to think, only gradually becoming aware that the only sound he could hear now was the sougning of the wind. Even that seemed strangely hushed.

The warriors were still there, but the fighting had come to a complete stop. All the men seemed to be frozen where they were, some with their swords still raised for a blow that had been halted in mid-strike. Terrel found that vaguely worrying. But what was more worrying still was that every one of the soldiers was now staring at him.

#### Chapter Seven

The silence seemed to last for ever, and then was broken by a banshee wail that was recognizably human in origin but which also sounded like a deranged echo of the whale's song. The effect this had was remarkable. Soldiers on one side of the conflict took up the cry - which had presumably come from one of their own number - and at the same time they began scrambling to get away from the battlefield. A few dissenting voices - their officers, perhaps - tried to stop them from running away, but to no avail. The retreat became a disorderly stampede, carrying even the objectors along with it.

Meanwhile, those who were left - who were clearly not at all interested in pursuing their fleeing enemies - stood where they were, still staring in amazement at Terrel. He found it hard to believe that his appearance - even

popping up out of the whale like a child's jack-in-the-box -could have brought such a dramatic end to the fighting, but he couldn't think of any other explanation.

He could see that the remaining soldiers, who were now drawing close to the sculpture as if pulled by some mysterious force, wore gold flashes on the shoulders of their uniforms. Now that he thought about it, those who had run away had worn similarly placed black patches. Their allegiance to their quarter - and their moon - was evidently signified by the colour of these badges, but unlike

Kjolar's hidden epaulet, theirs were worn in the open. In the confusion of battle, such markings must be a convenient way of distinguishing between friend and foe.

Exposed as he was, there was nowhere for Terrel to hide, and he felt desperately vulnerable. But the soldiers showed no sign of aggressive intent. Rather than enmity, their regard seemed to be tinged with awe, even reverence, and he realized that - for the time being at least - he had no need to hide. One of the soldiers laughed nervously, and for some reason it made him think of Jax. He heard his brother's mocking laugh, and then his voice sounded inside Terrel's head. Now this looks like fun! Then he was gone, and forgotten.

An impulse Terrel could not explain made him glance to his right and look out over the sea. He spotted several black shapes amid the surging waves and sensed, rather than heard, their mournful song. As if in response - or perhaps as a repeated summons - the stone whale called again. The ethereal whistling flowed over the headland, then faded into the noise of the wind.

This time Terrel knew what the strange music presaged and, as another loud thump shook the cliffs below, he stepped carefully to one side, distancing himself from the blowhole. Without a human presence blocking its path, the seawater shot into the sky in a single stream which was eventually bent and split apart by the gale, sending spray in a wide arc over the headland and beyond the cliffs on the far side. For a moment, a shaft of sunlight created a small rainbow within the fountain before that too was blown away on the wind. As the last droplets pattered down, Terrel returned his attention to the soldiers. One of them, a bloodied sword still hanging limply from his hand, gazed back.

'What do you want us to do?'

Terrel had not known what sort of greeting to expect -if any - but he could not have anticipated this. Moreover, he had no idea how to answer. As he stood there, shivering, with icicles forming in his hair and at the bottom of his sleeves, he recalled the legend which said that anyone splashed by water from Savik's Whale would be granted a vision of the future. As far as the soldiers were concerned, he had not only been doused but had actually emerged in the midst of the eruption. He still didn't understand why this should make him an object of awe, but a more calculating part of his mind decided that he should try to take advantage of the situation. They clearly thought he was someone - or something - that he wasn't, and this presented him with both an opportunity and a problem. He could try to exercise his supposed power, and perhaps be obeyed at first, but sooner or later they would find out the truth. So what was he supposed to do?

'Is he reading the far-crystals?' another soldier asked, misinterpreting Terrel's distracted air.

'He has eyes like ice,' another breathed - and suddenly there was a rush of questions.

'Is he really the child of the whales?'

'Who else could it be?'

'Is this the time of change, then?'

'Why doesn't he speak?'

'Quiet!' The voice of the swordsman who had spoken first easily overrode all the others. With instant obedience the rest fell silent, their military

training overcoming their curiosity.

'I command this company,' their leader told Terrel. 'Tell me what you need us to do.'

Paradoxically, the earnest expression on the warrior's face made Terrel want to laugh. He was so cold and confused that logical thought was almost beyond him, but he

quickly realized that he should pretend to have seen a vision of the future - a future that included his own safety and comfort. The soldiers would presumably do their best to see that this came true. If and when his deception was discovered, he would deal with the consequences then. However, lying had never come easily to Terrel, and he hesitated before forcing himself to speak. 'I saw . . .' The words came out as an almost inaudible croak, and he found he did not have the strength to go on. His tongue seemed frozen and his lips were numb.

'What did you see?' the commander asked eagerly.

But Terrel did not get the chance to even try to answer. As the soldier finished speaking, an arrow slammed into the side of his neck, sending him sprawling to the ground.

Terrel stared in horror, knowing that the man was dead, but his comrades reacted with more presence of mind. Shouted orders filled the air, and suddenly there was movement everywhere as the Gold forces prepared to resume battle. However, they were now at a considerable disadvantage, bunched together on open ground with their enemy having both the element of surprise and a greater readiness for the fight. The black-fletched arrows took a terrible toll, and those who were left were outnumbered and demoralized. The battle became a massacre.

Terrel was forced to watch all this from his elevated position. He crouched down, trying to protect himself from the freezing wind - and to make himself as small a target as possible in case one of the archers decided to take a shot at him. Other than that he was helpless, unable to influence either the course of the remorseless carnage or his own fate. Now that it was obvious that the renewed conflict could only end one way, he wondered whether the earlier retreat might have been a ploy, enabling the Black forces to turn the tables on their opponents. At the time their fear had seemed genuine, and that had either been exceptionally good acting, or their leaders had subsequently persuaded them to overcome their doubts and return to the action. Terrel was inclined to believe the second option, but in the end it did not affect his own plight. Before long, it was clear that he would be at the mercy of men who were capable of inflicting a truly merciless defeat upon their enemies.

'I could easily get one of my archers to shoot you down,' the commander of the victorious Black company pointed out. 'You're an easy target up there.' The battle was over, and Terrel was now being watched by an entirely different group of soldiers. Some of them were obviously nervous, but there was none of the reverence he had seen in the faces of the Gold troop. In fact, several men seemed to regard him with unmistakable hatred. Still recovering from the revulsion he'd felt at the recent slaughter, Terrel was nonetheless bemused by the diversity of the reactions to his presence. Clearly, the legends surrounding Savik's Whale could be interpreted in more than one way. 'You'll freeze to death soon anyway,' the soldier added. 'You're soaked through. It's your choice.'

He had begun by insisting that Terrel could not stay where he was and had then demanded his surrender, which seemed a little superfluous. What could one unarmed man do against such a force? Terrel, who so far hadn't spoken, soon realized that there was more to it than that. His appearance had initially caused them to flee, and it seemed that some of the men still harboured suspicions about him.

'How am I supposed to get down?' Terrel asked, through chattering teeth. The question had been in the back of his mind for some time. Returning through the tunnel would be impossible, but simply leaping from the top of the sculpture

would almost certainly result in his being badly injured or even killed. The frozen ground would not be a forgiving landing place. 'How did you get up there in the first place?' Terrel explained, and although he sensed that at least some of his audience did not believe a word he was saying, their commander seemed a little more open-minded.

'Well, at least that makes more sense than the rubbish about you coming up out of the sea,' he remarked contemptuously.

Was that what the other soldiers had believed? Terrel wondered. It seemed barely credible, but their awed reaction had indeed been puzzling. If they had truly thought that he was some kind of supernatural creature from the ocean, it would at least explain their attitude. However, he had the feeling that his arrival had had a more specific meaning for the Gold troops. But he would never know what this was. The bodies of those soldiers now lay still, growing cold on the windswept ness.

'I guess you'll just have to jump and take your chances,' the commander said.

'It's too far down,' Terrel objected. The sides of the sculpture were smooth, affording no holds, and sooner or later he would slip and fall.

'Move back a bit, and see if you can slide down to one of the fins,' the commander suggested.

'Captain?' one of the others ventured. 'It'd be better if he went down to the lowest part of the tail. Before it turns up again. We could help him from there.'

'Aye, with a prod of steel if necessary,' one of his colleagues added, waving a metal-tipped spear.

'So, Terrel, where do your allegiances lie?'

The healer had made it down unharmed, and had told the captain his name.

'I have none,' he replied. 'I'm not from Myvatan.'

'Then why are you here?'

'I ... I'm just a traveller.' He was aware that the mood among the listening soldiers was becoming even uglier, but he didn't know why.

'That's not good enough. Which quarter do you belong to?'

'The Black,' Terrel claimed.

'Good guess,' the captain sneered. 'You do realize you're in a forbidden zone?'

Terrel nodded.

'So if you're one of us, you'll know the password for this phase.'

The newcomer's bewildered expression was all the answer the warrior needed.

'Thought not,' he said.

'I'm not a soldier,' Terrel began. 'I don't--'

'I can see that,' the captain cut in, flicking at the plain shoulders of the healer's jerkin. 'You've no markings.' Turning aside and addressing one of his men, he asked, 'Find anything there?'

One of the soldiers had been rummaging through Terrel's pack.

'Not much,' he replied. 'There's this.' He held up the nomad's dagger. 'Not a lot of use unless you're planning to kill someone by stealth. The rest is just food, clothes. Nice belt.'

'Any markers on it?'

'None that I recognize.' The soldier paused uncertainly. 'The only other thing is this. The gods know what it is.' He held up a small object – the only thing that had accompanied Terrel on all his travels.

'It's a clay pipe,' the healer volunteered. It had belonged to Muzeni when he'd lived in the observatory at

Havenmoon. Terrel had taken it from the heretic's long-dead hand himself.

'Does it have power?' the captain asked.

Terrel wondered again about lying, about whether to claim that it was the magical artefact his interrogator clearly suspected, but he couldn't see the point. Any such claim could be easily disproved.

'No,' he said. 'It's just a pipe.' He couldn't understand why such a commonplace article should create such unease.

'What's that?'

'You put tobacco or herbs in the bowl,' he explained, once he'd realized the question was serious, 'light it, and breathe in the smoke through the stem.' Many of the soldiers clearly thought this was hilarious, but their captain was not amused.

'You think to mock me?' he demanded. 'What is its real purpose?'

'I've told you,' Terrel said, frustrated by the fact that telling the truth only seemed to be getting him into more trouble.

'Put it away,' the commander snapped, and the soldier replaced Terrel's belongings and closed the pack.

'What now?' the healer asked.

'Are you one of Reykholar's people?'

'No. I've never heard of him.'

At this there were more smiles from the soldiers around him.

'But you still refuse to tell me where your loyalties lie?'

'I told you—' Terrel began, but another warrior interrupted him.

'He's a spy, Captain.'

'A brilliant deduction, Pjorsa,' the captain remarked sarcastically. 'Of course he's a spy. Do you think I'm stupid?'

'No, sir.'

'What I'm wondering is who he's spying for and why. But there's no doubt he is a spy.'

Terrel saw others nodding in agreement.

'So shall I kill him now?' Pjorsa asked. 'Or should we torture him first?'

Chapter Eight

'Oh, I think we'll hear a little more of what he's got to say before we kill him,' the captain decided. 'But I'm not going to hang around here till my fingers drop off. Let's get back to camp. Narvat, your detail set the lookouts. Stykkis, make sure the wounded get the help they need. Pjorsa, organize the collection of tags. The rest of you, move!' As his men hurried to obey, their commander turned back to Terrel. 'You stay in front of me, where I can see you. And don't try anything funny.' His hand rested purposefully on the pommel of his sword, making it plain what would happen if the prisoner did try anything.

Terrel nodded meekly. After the recent exchange he was grateful just to be alive, and in his current state his best chance of remaining that way seemed to be to stay with the soldiers. Without their help he was likely to die from the cold before too long. And anyway, he couldn't think of anything funny to try.

He was given a dry cloak to wrap himself in and, at the captain's prompting, he began walking. The entire company went on their way, leaving the bodies of both friends and enemies where they lay. Terrel was simply glad to be on the move. Although their pace was determined by that of the wounded soldiers, it was still fast enough to test his depleted reserves of energy. But at least the exercise warmed his limbs enough for him to be able to concentrate on other things.

His fate evidently hung in the balance, but any delay could only work to his advantage. He still had the chance to learn a little more about his captors, to plead his case, and hopefully to prove that he wasn't a spy. He already knew that these men were capable of killing in cold blood, so he'd have to tread very carefully, but surely it shouldn't be beyond his skill to persuade them that he would be worth more to them alive. His main chance would come when they reached their camp and the injured needed treatment. He could offer his healing abilities then. In the meantime, he had to come up with a story that would be convincing enough to ensure his safety. In particular, he had to decide whether or not to mention Kjolur. As a merchant loyal to the Red Quarter, he was theoretically an ally of the Black soldiers, and the fact that he'd been at least partly responsible for Terrel's arrival at Whale Ness might count in the healer's favour.

This reminder of Kjolur set off a whole new train of thought. Terrel knew that he and the merchant had both been hiding things from each other when they'd talked aboard the Skua. Assuming that Kjolur was the one who had made Terrel's landing at Whale Ness possible, why had he wanted Terrel to go there? Had he had an ulterior motive? And if so, what could it have been? Could he possibly have guessed what was going to happen, or what was likely to happen? He'd been away from the island for so long that this seemed a remote possibility. Surely no one could have foreseen the extraordinary events that had just taken place at Savik's Whale – nor the fact that two groups of soldiers would have been there to witness them. Even so, Terrel found it difficult to believe that everything that day had happened purely by chance.

The soldiers' camp was not what Terrel had expected. It lay within a low-walled fortress which appeared to have been built out of blocks of ice and compacted snow. This bizarre structure would presumably melt in the warmer summer months, but for now it was solid enough, and provided both an excellent means of defence and – even more important – shelter from the ever-present wind. Inside the enclosure there were a large number of tents and, much to Terrel's delight, several glowing fires. Left under guard beside one of these, his clothes dried out at last and he felt himself begin to thaw. The intense tingling in his hands and feet was agonizing, but it was preferable to the awful numbness that would have meant he'd suffered permanent damage. For the moment, this was all he could think about – but when the captain returned with several of his lieutenants, Terrel recognized that he was still in considerable danger.

'Feeling better?'

'Yes.'

'Good. Some of my men think we should have cut your throat and left you out on the headland. Failing that, they'd like to kill you now. Can you give me any reason why I should stop them?'

'I'm not a spy,' Terrel replied. 'I've no interest in your war. I'm just a traveller. And a healer. If you let me, I can help your wounded.'

'You're not touching any of my men,' the captain retorted sharply, revealing the depths of his own mistrust.

'But I could lessen their pain, help them to recover more quickly.'

'Pain is a warrior's reward. They'll bear it until we get them to the pools.'

'Won't some of them die before then?'

'Probably,' the commander admitted, without sounding overly concerned.

'Then let me help them,' Terrel pleaded. 'I may be able to save their lives.'

'Are you a magian, then?'

'No.' He didn't know what the term meant.

'Then how do you heal?'

'It's just a talent I was born with. I know how to deal with pain.' He indicated his twisted limbs.

'You said you're from the Black Quarter. If you're a foreigner, what made you say that?'

'He was just trying–' Narvat began, but the captain waved him into silence.

'The Dark Moon has controlled my fate since the day I was born,' Terrel replied.

'Where were you born?'

'On an island called Vadanis, that floats in the Movaghassi Ocean.'

It was clear that his answer meant nothing to the soldiers.

'It floats?' the commander asked sceptically.

'All the islands of the empire do. They travel in a complex pattern, determined by the passage of the moons.'

'He's crazier than a cut snake,' Pjorsa remarked.

'You realize we have ways of making sure you answer our questions truthfully?' the captain asked.

'Why should I lie?' Terrel argued. 'Why would I make up something like that? What good would it do me?'

The soldier nodded, conceding the point.

'What's that marker on your hand?'

Taken aback by the sudden switch in the questioning, Terrel glanced at the tattoo on the back of his left hand. It depicted four concentric circles, representing the four moons, and it had been put there to identify him as one of the inmates of Havenmoon.

'I was a slave once,' he said, repeating a story he had used before. 'This was my owner's brand.'

His audience was clearly not convinced.

'If it's a marker, we can negate its power by cutting off his hand and burning it,' Stykkis said.

The captain seemed to consider this suggestion for a few moments, then shook his head.

'No. I don't think he's any danger to us that way.'

Terrel's relief was short-lived.

'Does anyone else have any questions before we decide what to do with him?' the commander asked.

'What made you go to Whale Ness?' Narvat asked. 'There are easier ways to come ashore.'

'Many of my travels have been foretold in an ancient prophecy,' Terrel replied, hoping he was doing the right thing. 'The stone whale was part of that.'

'You're an important person, then,' Pjorsa commented dryly, 'if prophecies are being written about you.'

Terrel couldn't think of a suitable response.

'You don't look so important to me,' the warrior added. 'Even Savik's Whale decided to spit you out.'

That brought a few smiles to the gathering.

'He did do us a favour, though,' Stykkis pointed out, 'distracting the Gold scum.'

'We'd have beaten them anyway, no matter what he did,' the captain claimed. Then why did your men run away when I first appeared? Terrel thought. What did they think I was going to do? He said nothing, but wondered whether he could still play on that initial fear. The soldiers had obviously been able to overcome their original panic – they were even able to joke about Terrel's sudden arrival now – but could he somehow reinstate it? Why had they been afraid of him? Apart from his healing, the only reliable magic he could call upon was the glamour, and he would only use that as a last resort, if it looked as though they really were going to torture or kill him. But there were limits to what he could do with the glamour – changing the colour of his eyes was unlikely to impress these men – and if he used it and didn't make much of an impression, his pointless sorcery would only reinforce their suspicions. Such magic could just as easily condemn him as save him.

'Anything else?' the captain asked.

'I met one of your allies on the ship that brought me here,' Terrel volunteered. 'He helped me get to Whale Ness.'

'What's his name?'

'Kjolur. He's a merchant from the Red Quarter.'

'Never heard of him.' The soldier's disdain for a mere tradesman was clear. The ensuing silence went on until Terrel could stand it no longer.

'If you're not going to kill me,' he said forcefully, 'can I have something to eat?'

His bravado brought some approving smiles and even a little laughter from the soldiers.

'Bring him some food,' the commander told one of the guards, 'but keep a watch on him. I don't know what to make of this one.' He paused, considering. 'We'll take him back to Saudark. The generals can decide what to do with him.'

After three days' march through an unremittingly dreary landscape, the soldiers and their prisoner reached the stone-built city of Saudark. It nestled in a wide valley, beneath the great bulk of a mountain whose lower slopes were bare rock but whose summit was a bright mass of ice and snow,

rising above the layer of mist that lay over the city itself. The weather during their journey had been foul, with constant strong winds bringing showers of snow, sleet and hail, but as soon as they entered the valley the temperature rose appreciably. Terrel discovered the reason for this as they made their way to the fortress that was their final destination. One section of the town was cordoned off from the rest, with guards stationed at every entrance. Only military personnel were allowed inside and, as their own wounded were admitted, Terrel realized that this must be the site of the healing pools - and the water within them was obviously so hot that it made the climate of the entire city more pleasant. The cloud that hung over Saudark was not mist but a blanket of steam.

The rest of the party went on to the generals' castle and there, after certain formalities, the captain, his lieutenants and Terrel were all admitted to the central keep. They were eventually shown into a large bare room where they met with an adjutant called Myrdal.

The commander's first duty was to present the tags that had been collected from the battlefield. These enabled the dead to be identified so that their families could be informed.

'You lost some good men,' Myrdal said solemnly, looking at the slivers of metal, each one punched with a unique design.

'We did. But the Gold lost more. We wiped out an entire company.' There was grim satisfaction in the captain's voice. 'There was no one left to take their tags home.'

'The generals will be pleased. Give a full report to the recorder in the morning.'

'Yes, sir.'

Myrdal was several years younger than the commander, but his rank - and his influence with the generals - meant that he commanded respect.

'You've earned some time to rest, Captain. Make the most of it. You'll be getting new orders soon enough.'

'There's something else, sir.'

The adjutant glanced at Terrel, who was standing between Pjorsa and Stykkis, his wrists bound together.

'I'd like the generals to see the prisoner,' the captain said.

'Are you sure it's worth it?'

'I think so. The circumstances--'

'I'll see what I can do,' Myrdal cut in. He was obviously a busy man. 'You can wait in the anteroom, but I'm warning you, you could be there a long time. They've just begun a conference to plan the new campaign.'

'That's fine.'

'Treat anything you overhear in the strictest confidence, Captain.'

'Of course.'

'What about the prisoner?' Myrdal enquired.

'It won't matter what he hears. He won't be going anywhere once we've finished with him.'

So saying, the captain turned and signalled for his lieutenants to follow him. Having no choice in the matter, Terrel went with them.

Chapter Nine

'What was that?'

'We've captured a spy, General,' the captain repeated.

'We execute spies, Captain. Why are you bothering us with this?'

'He's a little unusual, sir. I thought you might want to interrogate him first.'

'You thought?' General Pingeyri turned back to the group of senior officers who were sitting round a large table cluttered with maps, sea charts, goblets and plates of food. 'A captain thinking? he declared. 'A dangerous precedent, eh, gentlemen?' His colleagues laughed obediently.

'He claims to be foreign, sir,' the soldier persisted, ignoring this good-natured mockery.

'Well, he would, wouldn't he? Look, Captain ... Raufar, isn't it?'



'Yes, sir.'

'Myrdal tells me you did a splendid job on your last sortie. I'm sure there'll be an official commendation when all the reports are in, but right now we don't have the time to interrogate prisoners. If you really think it's important, let him wait. When we're finished here - ' Pingeeyri waved a hand at the gathering around the table ' - we'll take a look at him.'

'Yes, sir.'

Raufar glanced at Myrdal, who gave a resigned shrug as if to indicate that he'd done his best. The captain returned to the anteroom, where Terrel sat on a bench, still bound and still being watched by the three lieutenants. After a whispered conversation, Pjorsa and Narvat left, but Raufar and Stykkis sat down, looking as though they were prepared for a long vigil. Pingeeyri's booming voice carried to them easily as the general returned to his staff conference.

The door to the main chamber remained open, and both guards and prisoner were able to see into the room.

'Well, gentlemen. The season's just getting into full swing. What shall we do to start the year off nicely? Colonel Davik, I understand you've got a suggestion.'

'Yes, General. It occurs to me that a raid on Hvannadal would be the ideal way of demonstrating our resolve to strike at the very heart and soul of the White Quarter this season.'

There was a moment's silence while the others considered this proposal. Then everyone started speaking at once, their voices betraying a mixture of enthusiasm and concern - which made it impossible for Terrel to make out what anyone was saying. The general quickly called the meeting to order.

'I think it's a capital idea,' he declared. 'Set the tone for the whole campaign. So, what's our strategy here? Davik, this is your brainchild. What would be your plan of attack?'

'We can't do this by the book, General,' the colonel replied. 'We have to take some chances, balance the need for surprise against generally accepted methods.'

'Daring against common sense, eh?'

'Exactly. We need a mixture of the two. The White will be expecting us both to play to our strengths and to try to prey on their weaknesses. Ordinarily those would be sound tactics, but if we're too obvious their foreknowledge will wipe out our dominance.'

'Most battles are won and lost before they're fought,' one of the others commented.

'Planning is vital,' Davik agreed. 'Which is why it's essential that we confound the enemy's expectations, while at the same time avoiding any situation that puts us at too great a disadvantage.'

'And how do you propose to do this?' Pingeeyri asked.

'Let's examine their expectations one by one. Firstly, they may not even have considered the possibility of an attack on Hvannadal. The springs are a considerable way inside enemy territory, and they've long been regarded as sacred, even by some from our own quarter. That sort of belief is outdated, of course, but preconceptions can often get in the way of clear thinking. In any case, it's possible their outer defences might be lax. Any such complacency would play into our hands.'

'But surely we can't rely upon it?' another officer queried.

'That's correct, Brigadier. Such speculation is by its very nature dangerous. My point is, the White will certainly be far better prepared to defend other sites precisely because Hvannadal is such an unlikely target. By going there we may gain the advantage of surprise, but at worst we'll be doing something they couldn't have expected or planned for. Of course, we need to prepare a response for when they recognize our intention.'

'If necessary we could mislead them by creating a diversion,' Pingeeyri suggested. 'Pretend we're heading somewhere else before we tip our hand.'

'An excellent idea, General,' Davik said, pretending that he hadn't already

thought of this himself. 'But sooner or later we will, as you put it, have to tip our hand, and that brings us to their next expectation. They'll assume we intend to march our main force over the Sorendur Pass.

That's the most direct route, and by far the easiest. It's also accepted practice to keep an invading army together, sacrificing speed and stealth for strength in numbers. It's a method that's served us well in many campaigns, but now might be the time to change our strategy. I'd like to divide our men into smaller units which can move fast and strike quickly along any of the minor passes either side of Sorendur. That way each captain will be able to advance or withdraw on his own initiative, and keep the enemy guessing, before we eventually consolidate our forces on the far side of the mountains. It may even be possible to attack the fortifications in Sorendur from both sides.' 'I like the sound of that,' the general rumbled. 'However,' Davik went on, 'the White know that the pass is the best route, and they know that we know it, so they may be wise to such tactics. If they realize we're intending to use all the other high valleys, we could be faced with a stalemate. That's why I'd like to send the bulk of our force by sea, into Hofnar Fjord.'

This announcement caused quite a stir, and in the anteroom Raufar and Stykkis glanced at each other, their eyebrows raised in silent comment. Terrel couldn't tell whether their expressions were meant to convey disapproval or merely surprise.

'That won't be easy,' the brigadier said. 'In part, that's the point,' Davik responded. 'We'd have to go in at night. If the boats were spotted too soon, they'd become sitting ducks and any landing would be impossible.'

'It'll be damn near impossible anyway,' the brigadier stated. 'Hofnar's all cliffs!'

'There are sufficient inlets and low-lying areas near the inner end for our purposes,' the colonel replied. 'But that would be right next to the glacier.'

'I know, but if we can get there before they're able to set up defences, we can do it - and once the army's ashore, the route to Hvannadal is relatively short and very difficult to block.'

'We'll have them in a classic pincer movement,' the general said, nodding his approval. 'What about timing?'

'Well, using the same reasoning, they'd expect us to wait until the lunar alignment favoured us before we launched any major offensive. That's when their defences would be at their most alert. On the other hand, if we go when the moons favour them, we'll have the element of surprise again. But we'll have to be careful, because their neo-mancers will be comparatively powerful. My suggestion is that we pick a date that's neither one thing nor the other, so we can give Tofana and the rest a chance to instruct their people in exactly what will be needed, but at the same time retain at least some element of surprise.'

The other officers considered this for a while, and Terrel had the impression that they were waiting to see how the general reacted before speaking themselves. The healer's brain was already buzzing with questions. Why were the springs at Hvannadal so important? What they were contemplating seemed a huge operation for such an objective. And why were the springs considered sacred? Who or what was a neomancer? But getting answers to any of these questions was impossible. Raufar and his lieutenants had been eavesdropping too, but they remained silent, and Terrel knew that any inquisitiveness on his part would not be appreciated.

The situation he found himself in seemed unreal. He had to keep reminding himself that he could soon be arguing for his life. The very fact that he was being allowed to overhear the deliberations of the council of war was in itself ominous. Unless he could convince them that he was on their side - and having already disavowed any interest in the war, that was going to be difficult - they were hardly likely to let him go free now that he knew so much.

'When is the next counterbalance in our favour?' Pingeyri asked eventually.

'Myrdal, where are the latest tables?'

'Here, General,' the adjutant replied promptly, passing over a parchment covered with various symbols and columns of numbers.

'Damn lunarists can't seem to get anything right any more,' Pingeyri grumbled, running a thick finger down one of the columns. 'Always changing their minds. Is this the one?'

Myrdal leant over and glanced at where the general's finger had stopped.

'Yes, sir,' he said. 'Twenty-seven days from now.'

'Black Moon full. White new. On the same night.'

'And the others?' the brigadier asked.

'Red half full but waning. Gold exactly the same.' Pingeyri grunted in surprise at his own discovery.

'That would be the perfect alignment for us,' Davik said. 'Which is why I think we shouldn't go then.'

'Because they'll be expecting us?'

'Precisely.'

'So do we go before or after?' another officer asked.

'Both have their attractions,' the colonel replied. 'If we go earlier we might catch them unawares, and if the campaign lasts for any time, the fact that such a day is coming up will certainly work in our favour. For morale if nothing else.'

'It would certainly prey on my mind if it was the other way round,' the brigadier remarked.

'On the other hand,' Davik went on, 'if we wait until after, they may relax after having been so vigilant. Mentally, they'd be dealing with an anticlimax once the time of greatest danger seemed to have passed. We'd catch them off guard.'

'Before sounds better to me,' the general declared. 'Apart from anything else, it would mean we'd be able to see some action sooner rather than later. That's always a good thing, especially so early in the season.' He paused, looking around the table. 'So, gentlemen, what's the verdict on the colonel's proposal?'

'Hvannadal's bound to be heavily defended,' the brigadier said. 'Whichever way we approach it.'

'True,' the general conceded.

'And any damage we could do to the springs would be limited. We can block or poison them for a time, but there's no way we can achieve a permanent occupation, so they'll be able to restore them eventually. It'd be a temporary victory at best.'

'True.'

'If they get wind of our plans, or see us coming in Hofnar,' one of the others put in, 'getting ashore will be the least of our problems. Just getting anyone out alive will be hard enough. It would be easy for them to collapse part of the glacier and swamp the fleet.'

'True.'

'No one's ever done anything like this, so we'd be in unknown territory - in more ways than one.'

'True.'

'And it would be imprudent for all of us to be there in person,' the brigadier added.

'True.'

'In fact,' the brigadier summed up, 'the whole thing is absurdly risky.'

'True.'

There was a pause.

'So when do we leave?' the general asked.

Terrel had been astonished to see the officers smiling as they listed the various perils they'd be facing. They had sounded positively gleeful. It was almost as if they regarded the war as some sort of game, and their apparently light-hearted attitude contrasted starkly with the reality Terrel had seen on the battlefield at Whale Ness. The action there had been anything but light-hearted. He glanced at Raufar and Stykkis to see whether their reaction

was the same as his, and found that they were smiling too.

Is this whole island and everyone on it mad? Terrel wondered. It was a bleak thought. He saw again the corpses littering the headland, and hoped he'd never have to see anything like that again. All his healer's instincts rebelled at such a horrible waste of life – which was made even more horrifying because he didn't understand what any of them were fighting for. What had caused the war? And why had it been raging for so long?

Such speculation was quickly put aside when his companions rose to their feet. Terrel realized that the meeting was breaking up, with officers heading in various directions, all filled with an obvious sense of purpose. The detailed preparations for the operation were evidently beginning.

Myrdal appeared in the wide doorway between the two rooms and beckoned the soldiers forward. Stykkis took hold of Terrel's good arm and dragged him to his feet.

'Time for you to meet the general,' he said.

#### Chapter Ten

Raufar went into the council chamber ahead of Stykkis and their prisoner.

'You still here, Captain?' Pingeyri sounded vaguely surprised.

'Yes, sir. I believe this could be important.'

'Very well.' The general glanced round; apart from Myrdal, only the brigadier remained from the meeting. 'What do you think, Eskif? Can you spare a few moments to take a look at this spy?'

The brigadier looked up from the map he was studying and shrugged, his indifference plain.

'Bring him in,' Pingeyri ordered.

At Raufar's signal, Stykkis marched Terrel forward, still holding his arm in a grip of steel. The senior officers stared, their interest piqued by the prisoner's misshapen limbs and crystalline eyes. Terrel met their gaze as steadily as he could, aware that these men held his fate in their hands. From close to, the general was a more impressive figure than he'd seemed at first. Pingeyri was a large man, but his bulk came from muscle, not fat. He was more than twice Terrel's age but his movements held the vigour of youth, and there was a shrewdness in his grey eyes that spoke of calculation rather than bluster. Even his voice seemed sharper now that he was not surrounded by so many of his colleagues, and Terrel

wondered if the rather bluff character he'd seen earlier had been just an act.

'So, Captain, what makes this fellow so extraordinary?'

'It's a combination of things, General. But mostly it's the way we came across him. He climbed out of the top of Savik's Whale when its waterspout blew.'

Pingeyri was clearly astonished. He glanced at Terrel, then returned his gaze to Raufar.

'Great gods, man! Why didn't you tell me this earlier?'

The captain wisely chose not to point out that he'd been given no chance to do any such thing, and the general didn't seem to expect an answer.

'You'd better tell us what happened, and then we'll see what the prisoner has to say for himself,' he decreed.

'Yes, sir.' Raufar gave a brief but surprisingly fluent description of Terrel's appearance and his subsequent capture and interrogation. It was clear that he'd spent most of the enforced wait deciding exactly what to say. When he'd finished, Pingeyri and Eskif exchanged glances, then turned their attention to Terrel.

'Would you say that the captain has painted an accurate picture of what happened?' the general asked him.

'For the most part, yes.'

'You really expect us to believe you climbed the cliffs at Whale Ness?' the brigadier queried.

'Yes, because it's the truth. And if you send someone to Port Akranes, either Kjölur or any of the crew of the Skua will confirm it.'

'The ship will be long gone by the time a messenger could reach Akranes,' Pingeyri told him. 'Foreign merchants tend not to hang about.'

'Kjolur, then.'

'Even if we manage to locate him,' Eskif said, 'what are we supposed to do with you in the meantime?'

Terrel had no answer to that.

'I'm not a spy,' he stated instead.

'Simply a traveller?' the brigadier said sceptically.

'Yes.'

'One who just happens to come ashore at the right time and place to re-enact a scene from one of our best-known legends?'

For a moment the question baffled Terrel, and then he remembered the tale from Kjolur's book.

'I wasn't trying to re-enact anything,' he said. 'I was trapped and the blowhole was my only way out. And I didn't see a vision of the future, even though I was soaked through.'

'A vision?' the general queried.

'Isn't that what the legend says is supposed to happen?'

'That's one version,' Pingeyri admitted.

So what are the others? Terrel wondered, realizing now that Kjolur really hadn't told him the whole story.

'What puzzles me,' the general went on, 'is what you hoped to achieve by this charade.'

'Nothing. I was just following my own destiny.'

'You weren't trying to influence the progress of the battle?' Eskif asked.

'No. I was hiding.'

'And it didn't work anyway,' the brigadier commented, disregarding Terrel's denial. 'Captain Raufar saw to that.' The soldier's description of events had emphasized the tactical nature of his company's withdrawal, drawing a veil over the panic that had accompanied their initial retreat.

'You were doing nothing,' Pingeyri said, 'and yet you claim to be a magian?'

'No. I don't even know what a magian is. I'm a healer.'

'But you've given us no proof of this claim.'

'I haven't been given the chance,' Terrel replied, glancing at Raufar. Two of his men had died from their wounds before they'd reached the healing pools. Terrel was convinced he could have saved their lives, but chose not to say so now in case he antagonized the captain still further.

'Such talent must surely have been learnt at the foot of a master,' Eskif declared. 'Which wizard trained you?'

'It was a gift I was born with,' Terrel said, shaking his head, 'and which I have learnt to use by experience. I've never been to Myvatan before, and I've never even met a wizard.'

'You claim to come from an island that floats upon an ocean none of us have ever heard of, and yet you speak our language,' the general observed. 'Who but a spy would need to learn a foreign tongue?'

'A traveller,' Terrel replied. 'How else am I supposed to make myself understood?'

'Myvatan does not welcome travellers.' The brigadier's views presented quite a contrast to Kjolur's, but Terrel saw no point in revealing that.

'Coming here was not entirely my choice,' he said.

'Ah yes, this prophecy of yours. Tell us more about that. No, wait.' Pingeyri held up a large hand. 'Myrdal, get Vatna up here, will you? I think he should hear this.'

The adjutant nodded and strode from the room.

'You think it's worth bothering him?' Eskif asked. 'This man's obviously a spy. His story is full of inconsistencies.'

'That's what intrigues me,' the general replied. 'For a spy, he's remarkably incompetent. I can't believe even the Gold would send someone as badly prepared as this. Reykholar's no fool.'

'You're not saying you believe him?'

'No, but Vatna will be able to put some of his claims to the test. And if he fails, his end will be all the more unpleasant.'

Terrel did not like the sound of that. Whoever this Vatna was, he was in no hurry to meet him. However, a few moments later a commotion from the anteroom made them all turn to see what was happening. Myrdal had returned, accompanied by three men, but Terrel doubted that any of them was Vatna. Two soldiers were supporting the third newcomer, who was wrapped in blankets. His bare feet dragged across the floor and his head lolled from side to side. His lips were dark blue, as if they had been stained by ink. At the sight of him both Pingeyri and Eskif had risen to their feet, and the expression on the brigadier's face was one of shock and horror.

'I'm sorry to interrupt you, General,' Myrdal said hurriedly, 'but this may be urgent.'

'What happened to him?' Pingeyri demanded.

'He'd been captured by the Gold at Melrakka, sir,' one of the soldiers replied breathlessly. 'But instead of killing him they left him on the glacier, half naked. He was near dead when we found him.'

'Why didn't you take him straight to the pools?'

'He insisted on being brought here, General. Said it was vital he talk to you. But he passed out on the way.'

'He may have intelligence,' Myrdal guessed.

'Well, it's not going to do us much good if he dies before he can talk to us,' Pingeyri muttered. 'Where's Vatna?'

'He's on his way, sir,' the adjutant replied.

'He needs warmth. Bring some mitra. Quick!'

The sick man had been placed on a cushioned chair, and Terrel could see that he was in a very bad way. His nose, fingers and toes were all chalk white, and the rest of his skin had the greasy, pallid look of dead flesh. The cold had sunk deep into his body, right to the bones, robbing him of all but the last vestiges of life. When one of the soldiers brought a cup of steaming liquid, its fragrant herbal scent filling the room, the invalid was unable to swallow, the mitra running unnoticed down his chin. His eyes had rolled up so that they showed only white, making his appearance even more ghastly.

Belatedly, Terrel saw his chance.

'Let me help him,' he said loudly.

Everyone except the dying man turned to look at him.

'I'm a healer,' he added earnestly. 'I can help him if you let me.'

Pingeyri turned to the brigadier, who shook his head, his face a pale mask of grief.

'We'll wait for Vatna,' the general decided. 'Where is he?'

'Even Vatna may not be able . . .' Myrdal left the sentence unfinished. 'What have you got to lose?'

Pingeyri hesitated, indecisive for once.

'Please,' Terrel begged.

'Let the stranger try,' Raufar said, lending the healer unexpected support.

'If he fails, I'll kill him myself here and now.' The captain drew his sword.

The general looked to Eskif again. The brigadier seemed at a loss, but then nodded.

'Go!' Pingeyri commanded. 'Do what you can.'

Terrel moved quickly and knelt in front of the chair. He took one of the invalid's hands in his own, feeling the cold as a double shock. The skin was lifeless, but worse than that, the blood inside the fingers was frozen, turned to crystals of ice, and it was the same at the man's other extremities. Terrel found it hard to concentrate with Raufar standing right behind him, his blade at the ready, but the healer was determined not to let this chance slip away. Closing his eyes, he let the outside world fade away and fell, unresisting, into the patient's waking dream. The cold had almost succeeded in shutting down the man's entire system, but he was clinging tenaciously to the last strands of internal warmth and strength. Terrel pushed and cajoled, feeding his own dream-heat into the void, at the same time trying to push back the twin invasions of pain and lethal indifference. If the mind and the body ceased to care whether they lived or died, the end would not be long in

coming. He felt a glimmer of consciousness return, spreading light into the darkened dream and bringing new agonies with it. Terrel hurried to convince his patient that such torment was worthwhile - that it was a sign of returning life - but even the healer had rarely experienced such exquisite tortures. As he fought on, he was only vaguely aware of voices outside him, in another realm.

'He's got a little more colour.'

'His eyes! Look.'

'Is he coming round?'

Terrel knew that the man would not die now, that the energy he'd bequeathed him would be enough to prevent a total surrender, but he needed more than that. As the patient's own body began to fight for itself, Terrel was at last able to turn his attention to the frozen extremities, hoping that he could restore the ruined flesh before it was damaged beyond repair. Melting the malignant ice crystals proved easy enough, but the various balances within the blood were still all wrong, and he had to expend even more of his own reserves to try to put them right. If he failed, the fingers and toes would still rot and die even though they were attached to a living frame. He was just completing this painstaking task, coming close to exhaustion himself, when he was roughly shoved aside and the contact was lost. Sprawled on the floor, he tried to protest,

but he didn't have the strength to speak and simply lay there, looking up at the man who had replaced him and who was now examining the patient's face and hands.

'Can you save him?' the general asked.

'That's already been done,' the newcomer replied, sounding puzzled. 'In fact, there's nothing wrong with him. As far as I can tell, he's just asleep.'

In the silence that followed this summation, several of those present looked at Terrel.

'Are you sure, Vatna?'

'Of course, General. What's going on here?'

'Kopak was near death when he was brought in,' Pingeyri explained. 'I'd swear that his hands and feet were already lost to frostbite.'

Others nodded in agreement.

'Well, there's no sign of it now,' Vatna said.

'But he was on the glacier . . .' The soldier's voice faltered, his incredulous expression mirroring the other faces in the group.

'Looks like Terrel really is a healer,' Raufar said softly.

All conversation came to an abrupt halt as the patient coughed. His eyes returned to normal and came into focus, and he looked down at his own hands and flexed his fingers carefully. The brigadier went to kneel beside him.

'Are you all right, Kopak?' he whispered.

'I'm fine, Father . . . I mean, Brigadier.' He looked round at the officers and tried to stand up, but Pingeyri pushed him back down. The patient accepted this indignity, looking very weary now but otherwise unharmed.

'You have something to tell us, I believe,' the general prompted.

Kopak looked bemused.

'Do you remember anything?' his father asked.

'I've just had the most extraordinary dream,' he replied, speaking slowly and uncertainly, as he blinked and glanced around the group once more. 'But before that I-' Terrel heard no more. He had fallen asleep where he lay.

## Chapter Eleven

There had been other occasions when Terrel had woken up and not known where he was, but it had usually been an unpleasant and unnerving experience. On this occasion, however, he felt refreshed and invigorated by his enforced rest. Part of the reason for this was obvious as soon as he opened his eyes. He was lying on a comfortable mattress within a wooden box-frame, and covered with blankets that were both soft and warm. It had been a long time since he'd

slept in such luxury.

The room was small and held little in the way of furniture - just the bed, a stool and a small table - but its whitewashed walls and brown stone floor were bright in the hazy sunlight that streamed in through the open window. The shutters had been thrown back and the door at the other end of the room stood ajar, so there was no question that these were lodgings rather than a prison cell.

The air that drifted in through the window was cool and crisp, scented with the now familiar tang of herbs, but also with something that made it seem pure and almost sharp, like the taste of underripe fruit. Without knowing why, Terrel had the impression that he was high up, above the busy and sometimes fetid domain of mankind, and this was confirmed when he got out of bed and hobbled over to the window. His room was near the top of one of the highest towers in the fortress, and it had a view over the upper part of the city and the snow-covered mountain beyond. Although the thin cloud of steam filtered the sun's brilliance, the panorama was breathtakingly beautiful.

Terrel shivered and realized he was wearing only a kind of shift, loosely tied with a cord at his waist. His pack and boots lay beside the table, but there was no sign of his clothes. He was debating whether to go exploring or to get back into bed when the door was silently pushed open and a woman's head peered around at him.

'Oh,' she said. 'You're awake! I was beginning to wonder.'

'Why?' Terrel smiled at her evident surprise. 'How long have I been asleep?'

'Almost a full day,' she told him as she came in. 'Can I get you anything? Are you hungry?'

'I'm famished.' He hadn't realized it until that moment, but now his hunger was almost painful.

'I'll bring you some mitra first,' she decided. 'Then food. Is there anything in particular you'd like?'

'Whatever you have.'

She turned to go, but in spite of the protestations of his stomach, Terrel didn't want to be left alone again so soon.

'Wait a moment,' he said, and she stopped in the doorway.

'Have I done something wrong?' she asked anxiously. 'No, of course not!' he replied, wondering why she should even think to ask such a question. 'I'd like to know your name, that's all. I'm called Terrel.'

'I know,' she said, looking shy now. 'My name is Latira.'

'Thank you for looking after me, Latira.'

'I'm only doing what I'm told,' she said, but she smiled anyway. She had a plain face and short mousy hair, but the smile lit up her pale blue eyes. She was the first woman Terrel had seen on Myvatan.

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'Do you know where my clothes are?' he asked.

This time Latira averted her gaze and blushed, and Terrel realized that she must have been the one to undress him when he was unconscious. The thought embarrassed him too, though he wasn't sure why it should.

'They're back from the laundry,' she said, 'but they're not quite dry yet. I'll bring them up soon.'

'Thank you.' Terrel couldn't help thinking that in this climate a lack of clothes could imprison him as effectively as any iron bars, but he sensed no deception in her words.

'I'd better go,' she said. 'They wanted me to tell them as soon as you woke up.'

'They?' Terrel queried.

'The generals, of course,' she replied, and slipped away before he could ask her anything else.

His next visitor was Vatna. Fortified by a hot drink and a large meal, but still without his clothes, Terrel greeted him from his bed.

'Are you recovered?' Vatna asked as he drew up the stool and sat down, resting



his elbows on his knees and looking at the healer intently.

'Almost.' In truth, Terrel still felt rather weary but, compared to the uncertainties that had plagued him for the last few days, he was in an excellent frame of mind.

'Good. Is there anything you need?'

'No. Latira is looking after me perfectly.'

'I'm sorry I treated you roughly yesterday. I didn't know then that we were brothers.'

'Brothers?' Terrel queried.

'You wear the marker of Jokulsa, the god of snow and rain. As do I.' Vatna rolled up his left sleeve and turned his shoulder towards Terrel, who winced involuntarily. Branded deep into the flesh of the islander's upper arm were two vertical wavy lines and a small star. The scars were old now, but Vatna must have endured terrible pain when the wounds had been new. The healer did indeed wear the same symbol, but his own marker had cost him no discomfort. It was inscribed upon a small clay tablet, which hung on a cord around his neck. He reached inside the shift and pulled it out now, comparing the two designs.

'No one had seen your pendant,' Vatna explained. 'You could have saved yourself a lot of trouble if you'd shown it to us earlier.'

'I didn't realize,' Terrel said. 'I'm not familiar with your gods. Where this comes from it's called "the river in the sky".' He remembered the ceremony when it had been presented to him by the desert nomads of Misrah. They had named him 'the voice of rain' when he'd been accepted into their tribe.

'The gods have many different names,' Vatna commented. 'But here, Jokulsa watches over us.'

Different and yet the same, Terrel thought. Some symbols apparently had a universal meaning. During all his travels on Nydus, the same shapes and motifs had turned up over and over again. He couldn't imagine two places more disparate than Misrah and Myvatan, but even they had such things in common.

'Your marker . . .' Terrel said awkwardly. 'What does it signify?'

'That I am a magian,' Vatna replied, as if this ought to be obvious. 'In name and rank, at least.'

'Does that mean you're a healer too?' Terrel asked, hoping to clarify his thoughts.

'I have some slight skill in that way. We all do, but it's nothing compared to yours. I might have been able to save Kopak's life, but at the very least he would surely have lost his hands and feet, if what the others have told

me is correct. He will remain a soldier, thanks to you. The Great Plain would have been denied him otherwise.'

Terrel wasn't sure what to make of this. He was simply glad that here – as elsewhere – his healing abilities had earned him respect and gratitude from the people he met. Now, perhaps, he'd be able to pursue his own goals without being threatened with torture or death. It had been some time since he'd even thought about trying to find the fourth elemental.

'You proved a couple of things there,' Vatna went on. 'Firstly, you obviously are a healer, and if that part of your story is true, then we have to take the rest seriously. A lot of people are going to want to ask you a lot of questions.' He grinned, and shrugged apologetically as Terrel looked pained.

'Secondly – and just as important – you demonstrated that you're not an enemy spy. You certainly wouldn't have kept Kopak alive if you'd thought he had vital intelligence about our foes.' 'And did he?' Terrel asked.

'Yes. He remembered it soon after you passed out.' 'What was it? What was so important that he should risk his life like that?'

'It's not for me to say.'

Terrel nodded, perversely glad that the soldiers were now keeping things from him. It meant they expected him to remain alive.

'Perhaps you could tell me something else, then,' he said. 'I'll do my best. What do you want to know?' 'General Pingeyri said that what I'd been told was

only one version of the legend about Savik's Whale. What are the others?' 'I thought that might interest you,' Vatna said with a slight smile. 'You certainly made quite an entrance, didn't you? I wish I'd been there to see it.'

'It was all an accident, really. I had no idea what it meant.'

The magian eyed him speculatively for a few moments, then evidently decided to take Terrel's statements at face value.

'There are a lot of theories about who or what could emerge from the whale as you did,' he began. 'Some say he'd be half man, half fish, and would swim up from the sea. Others claim he'd be a messenger of the gods, or a phantasm created by wizards.'

'I'm sure I'm none of those things.'

'I don't see any gills or fins,' Vatna agreed, smiling, 'and you seem real enough to me. You could be a messenger and still be unaware of it, I suppose. The gods don't always tell us how they're using us. And they are meant to have built the whale.'

'I still don't think they'd have picked me,' Terrel said. 'Don't I have any other choices?'

'The only other version I know of is that the stranger is a man who's been enslaved by the monster who lives in the fires beneath the island. But that's just a tale for children. The old dragon of the volcanoes. My mother used-' He broke off, seeing the expression on Terrel's face. 'You look as if you know that story.'

Terrel had been doing his best to hide his reaction from the other man. The legend of a 'monster' underground was indeed familiar to him. He'd heard similar tales relating to the elementals in Vadanis and Macul - but he did not feel ready to reveal the true purpose of his journey to Myvatan yet.

'It's just that I was a slave myself once,' he said. 'Of a man, though, not a monster.'

'Raufar told us,' Vatna said, nodding.

'It brought back some bad memories,' Terrel improvised.

'Silly, really.' He did his best to smile, wondering if he really had been enslaved by the Ancients.

'Doesn't sound silly to me,' the islander said gravely. 'We're all free men on Myvatan.'

Terrel could have argued with that claim, but he had no wish to get into such a debate.

'Tell me about this monster,' he said instead.

'As I said, it's just a fable. Volcanoes played a big part in the creation of this land, and many of them are still active. When you're little it helps to have some explanation of what makes them erupt.'

'The dragon?'

'Just hope you're not too close when he sneezes,' Vatna advised with a grin.

'I'll try to remember that. Where is it likely to happen?'

'You mean where does the dragon live? No one knows. My mother used to say its lair was somewhere under the Lonely Peaks, but that it could travel anywhere by swimming down the tunnels of molten rock.'

Terrel wanted to ask more about the Lonely Peaks, but he was aware that he'd already shown rather more interest in the mythical monster than he could justify, so he just smiled and let Vatna go on with his retelling of the legends of Savik's Whale.

'That's all beside the point, really. The more interesting parts of the stories concern what the arrival of the stranger portends. The most common version in this quarter is that of a great fire - rain turning to burning tar, smoke and ash filling the sky and choking the life out of the land. Fortunately that hasn't happened yet.'

But it might explain the initial panic and retreat of the Black soldiers, Terrel thought. Had they really expected fire to rain down from the sky? It seemed ridiculous until

he remembered the unnatural lightning that had played a part earlier in the

battle.

'Alternatively,' Vatna went on, 'it's supposed to predict a terrible run of luck in the war, a series of defeats beyond our control. It's all nonsense, of course - Raufar and his men proved that - but soldiers can be a superstitious lot. Of course, for the Gold it means the opposite - a great victory, possibly the final decisive victory in the war as a whole, or at the very least, the return of the sculpture and the land it stands on to their "rightful" owners.' 'The Gold Quarter think it belongs to them?'

'Exactly. That's nonsense too. I can show you ancient maps and treaties, but good faith never meant anything to those scum.' For the first time Vatna's face showed traces of real anger and disgust. 'We'll never surrender what is rightfully ours.'

Terrel now had an explanation for the differing reactions of the two groups of soldiers. He also knew why Raufar and his men had found it necessary to return and kill all of the Gold troops. They couldn't allow any of them to go back to their own quarter with news that a legend had come to life. The propaganda value of such a story would have been enormous. By the same token, the soldiers would have wanted to keep the stranger's arrival from their own people, in case it was considered an ill omen. It was no wonder some of them had wanted to kill him on the spot.

'To be perfectly honest,' Vatna added, immediately contradicting Terrel's assumption, 'that's part of the reason Raufar chose to keep you alive. He wanted to prove you were just a man, not some fantastical creature.'

Terrel nodded.

'And the most rational explanation,' he said 'if I was an ordinary man, was that I was a spy.'

'Yes. Not that I'm saying you're ordinary.' The magian's lean face creased in another grin. 'But you could have been an impostor sent by one of the Gold wizards—'

'In order to fool people into thinking the legend had come true,' Terrel completed for him.

'That was certainly a possibility.'

'But you don't believe it any more?'

'No. Nobody does. What's happened since wouldn't make sense. And if you were one of Reykholar's people, you'd be trying to connect yourself to the legend, not denying any link.'

Terrel was glad now that he'd acted the way he had and hadn't tried anything more fanciful. Logic, it seemed, had proved his innocence.

'There are two more possible consequences to the appearance,' Vatna added.

'One is a vision of the future so powerful that it has to come true and there's nothing anyone can do to prevent it. That's the version you'd already heard, I gather.'

'Yes. But I certainly didn't see any visions.'

'So the final possibility is that it marks the beginning of a new era for Myvatan, a time of change.'

Terrel had come across that phrase before, in connection with the Dark Moon's suddenly erratic behaviour, but it seemed to have a more specific meaning here.

'What sort of change?' he asked.

'Who knows? It's so vague the inspirators can read whatever they like into it.'

'Inspirators?' Terrel queried.

'Storytellers,' Vatna replied. 'They're usually soldiers who've retired from active service. We use them to entertain the troops.'

'And to inspire them?'

'Perhaps. None of our men ought to need inspiration.

Our cause is just.' He sounded fierce now, and this made Terrel feel uncomfortable.

'So those are all the legends of Savik's Whale?' he asked.

'Not quite. There's one more thing,' Vatna hesitated, then smiled. 'You should

be glad you're not associated with it, in fact.'

'Why?'

'Because in all the versions I've heard, the end is always the same,' Vatna told him. 'The man who comes from the whale dies.'

Chapter Twelve

'So if Raufar had killed me,' Terrel said, when the implications of Vatna's words had sunk in, 'he'd have been fulfilling the legend, giving it credence.' 'That was probably part of his reasoning too,' the magian admitted. 'Contrary to what the general likes to tell people, you don't get to be a captain without having some brains.'

'How is the stranger supposed to die?'

'Think of something unpleasant and someone's suggested it. Fire, of course, a fall from the cliffs, being turned to stone, decapitation, or being struck by lightning. One way or another the stranger becomes a martyr or gets his just deserts, depending on your point of view. Raufar decided to let someone else take the responsibility for that.'

'Wise man,' Terrel commented.

'Of course, if you'd died from the cold anyway it would have made things a lot more complicated. Fortunately for us - and you - that didn't happen.'

'So what now?'

'We're considering that,' Vatna replied. 'You've got to admit, your appearing as you did was quite a coincidence, and we won't be able to keep it quiet for much longer. Some of the soldiers are bound to talk, so what we have to do is decide how to use these events to our advantage.'

'A new version of the legend?'

'It's been done before,' the magian agreed. 'Who knows? You might end up becoming a talisman for the whole army. Pingeyri's sent messengers to the other generals, and they'll put their heads together, ask the advice of anyone above a certain rank, and then come up with a plan.'

'Do I get any say in this?'

'That remains to be seen,' Vatna replied noncommit-tally.

'What rank are you?' Terrel asked.

'Technically I'm a colonel, but really it's just honorary. I act as liaison between the general's staff and Tofana's.'

'So will you be part of these discussions? Is that why you're here?'

'Yes. And partly. I have a professional interest in your healing. I'm a soldier and a magian. Having a foot in both camps can be difficult, but it has its advantages.'

'Tofana's a wizard?' Terrel queried.

'Yes. The best of them all,' Vatna replied proudly. 'I wouldn't be surprised if you get an invitation to the pyramid. Then you'll see for yourself.' Their conversation was interrupted before Terrel could ask any more. Latira came into the room quietly, and although she was obviously afraid of Vatna, she was deter- mined to say her piece.

'I think you've been here long enough, Magian.' The words came out in a rush, as if she was appalled by her own temerity. 'Terrel needs to rest.'

Vatna looked as if he were about to object, then thought better of it.

'You have your own dragon protecting you, it seems,' he remarked to Terrel.

'I'm only doing my job,' Latira stated defiantly.

'Indeed. It's good to know you're taking such good care of your patient.'

Vatna turned back to Terrel. 'I can see you're tired. We'll talk again.' Standing up, he gave Latira a mock salute before striding from the room. Terrel smiled at his nurse.

'I hope you don't think . . .' she began. 'I was only . . ."' 'I have no complaints,' he told her. 'I'm in good hands.' 'I'll bring you some more food,' she said, looking much happier now. 'Then you should rest.' 'Thank you.'

Terrel lay back as she left. He was indeed weary, and in one sense he was glad to be alone again. Vatna had given him a lot to think about.

As evening drew in, and with his stomach comfortably full once more, Terrel

knew he ought to try to rest again, but while his body was tired, his brain was all too active. It kept returning to the problem of the riddle posed by Kjolur's role in recent events. As an educated man, it was reasonable to assume that the merchant would be aware of all the legends surrounding Savik's Whale, not just the one he'd told Terrel. So if that were the case, had he somehow been trying to use the mythology to take advantage of the superstitious nature of the people of Myvatan? Had he actually wanted Terrel to become a victim? Or a martyr? On the surface, that made no sense at all. Most of the tales pointed to outcomes that favoured the enemies of the Red Quarter, so to deliberately promote the possibility of them coming true was irrational. Unless, of course, Kjolur had lied about his real allegiance. Terrel only had the man's word for it - and he'd felt at the time that the merchant had been keeping something back. The red patch under his epaulet could easily have been faked. And yet the Skua had been heading for Akranes, which was in the Red

Quarter. Was it possible then that Kjolur was himself a spy? Given subsequent events, that would be ironic to say the least.

There were alternative explanations, of course. It was possible that Kjolur had genuinely been trying to help Terrel, and was either unaware of the dangers or had believed them to be irrelevant. The versions of the tales told in the Red Quarter might be very different to those Vatna had described. But the fact that Kjolur had not even admitted that he was responsible for Ostan's agreement to go to Whale Ness indicated that the merchant was unwilling to be associated with the stranger. That in itself cast his motives into question, and left Terrel more confused than ever.

In any case, the healer thought, even if Kjolur did want one of the legends to come true, how could he have possibly have predicted the events of that day? The presence of the two warring factions, Terrel's own decision to climb inside the whale's mouth, the rising wind - none of those things could have been known to anyone who had been away from the island for several months. It was a conundrum that had puzzled Terrel before, but he was no nearer an answer. Unless, of course, Kjolur was a prophet, and it was he, not Terrel, who'd had a vision of the future. Terrel's experiences in Misrah had convinced him that such things were possible, but he had no proof of it here. Either way, the chances were that he would never meet the merchant again. He wasn't even sure he wanted to. Although he didn't understand how or why, Terrel believed that Kjolur had used him for his own mysterious purposes, and he didn't want to risk it happening again.

The healer's thoughts were interrupted by the muted sounds of an argument outside the chamber. He couldn't

hear what was being said until the end, when Latira's voice grudgingly conceded defeat.

'All right then. But only for a little while.'

The door opened and Eskif came in. The brigadier looked at Terrel, then hesitated, his deeply-lined face showing signs of strain.

'I wanted . . .' he began eventually. 'I wanted to apologize for misjudging you.'

'You don't need to apologize,' Terrel said. 'I'd probably have thought the same in your place.'

'Yes, but it would have been the greatest mistake I ever made if . . .' Eskif couldn't complete the sentence and instead looked down at his feet. A moment later he glanced up again and faced Terrel with a new determination. 'My son is alive and whole because of you. That is a debt I can never fully repay. If there is ever anything you need, you have only to ask.'

'Thank you.'

'That's all I wanted to say, really.'

'Good,' Latira said from the doorway. 'Off you go, then.' She stood outside to let the brigadier pass, then pointed a finger at her patient. 'You, go to sleep.'

Terrel copied Vatna's earlier salute and grinned. Latira smiled back, then

closed the door. He lay down, thinking that now at least he had some allies he could count on.

The bitter scent of mitra followed him into his dreams. Among the images of ice and fire, of madness and blood, its soothing influence spread a calm detachment, so that Terrel was able to watch without pain or revulsion. It allowed him to be objective, to remain coolly observant, learning even from the images of a nightmare.

But such composure came at a price. An ominous presence hovered in the shadows, just out of reach - not that

Terrel had any wish to bridge the gap himself. If anything it was the other way round, with the interloper's frustration at not being able to do more spiralling into impotent anger. Terrel knew who it was. He knew he'd have to face his twin brother again one day, but he wasn't ready yet. He might never be ready. But he knew for certain that he didn't need Jax's interference now. The dream changed then, twisting from the war in the night sky to the underground rivers of flame - where a dragon's eyes looked back at him with a crystalline stare that mirrored his own.

Terrel was woken by a loud rumble of thunder. Someone - presumably Latira - had closed the shutters while he slept, and a dull light filtered through the slats. A rattle of hailstones against the wood showed that the weather had taken a turn for the worse. In contrast to the previous day, the air in his chamber seemed thick and stuffy. The scent of herbs was stronger too.

Terrel found himself worrying that the mitra might have had an intoxicating effect. Its fumes seemed to be ever-present in the fortress, and had even filled the soldiers' tents on the journey to Saudark. There seemed to be no way to escape its influence, but if he was right, it was possible that -fax might be able to invade more than Terrel's dreams. In the past - in those extreme cases when Terrel had become drunk or had been incapacitated by the sharaken's potion -the prince had taken over his body too, with disastrous results. That was the last thing Terrel needed, and he made a mental note to ask Latira to take the herbs out of his room. He had no idea where they might be.

By the time his next visitor arrived, Terrel was up and dressed in his own clothes. Although wind-blown ice

continued to batter against the shutters, the room was brighter now, thanks to an oil lamp Latira had brought in. His nurse had reacted strangely to his request about the mitra, claiming she couldn't smell anything, and for the first time Terrel had the impression that she was not being quite open with him. However, he didn't have much time to dwell on this before the arrival of General Pingeyri.

'Well, young man, you've created quite a stir.'

'That wasn't my intention, sir.'

'You're looking better than when I saw you last. Are we treating you well?'

'Yes. Thank you.'

'Good. Vatna's already been talking about his plans for you. Is there anything you'd like to do while you're here?'

'I'd like to see more of the city,' Terrel replied. 'I'm strong enough now.'

'I'd be glad to arrange that,' the general said, 'but perhaps you should wait until the weather improves. There's only so much the wizards can do about it this early in the year.'

'Your wizards are weather-mages?'

'I've not heard it called that before, but I suppose it's the same thing. The war wouldn't be half as interesting if all we had to fight it with were swords and arrows.'

'So the lightning at Whale Ness was deliberate!' Terrel exclaimed. 'The soldiers were using it as a weapon. Does that mean there were wizards there?'

'No.' Pingeyri laughed. 'Wizards are too valuable to risk in the field. That's what neomancers are for.'

'Neomancers are soldiers who use magic?'

'Didn't you know that?'

Terrel shook his head.

'Boys and young men who show a certain aptitude go to the wizards for training,' the general explained. 'When they're ready, they join the army. At least one to each company, sometimes more. They're vital to most operations, for attack and defence.'

'And your enemies do the same?'

'Oh, yes. Wouldn't be a fair contest otherwise, would it.' He laughed again. 'Our lads can use lightning, wind, hail -even storms and tornadoes - but they have to be able to protect their comrades from such things too.'

The whole process sounded horrifying to Terrel - an appalling misuse of magic - and it was impossible for him not to think of Jax. He too was a weather-mage, and if he was ever let loose in Myvatan, he'd be in his element. The consequences would not bear thinking about. It made Terrel even more determined not to give his twin such a chance.

'It's all part of the game,' Pingeyri added cheerfully.

The healer found this attitude hard to take.

'Doesn't all the killing bother you?' he asked.

Pingeyri frowned.

'Why should it?' he said. 'Our enemies deserve to die. That's the whole point, isn't it?'

'But what about your own men?'

'I'm sad to lose friends,' the general admitted, 'but what better way to die than as a warrior? To take your place in the march across the Great Plain? One day I shall do the same.'

'You don't direct operations from here, then?'

'What would be the fun in that? Or the glory?'

'So you really will sail with the fleet to Hofnar Fjord?'

'Of course. Did you doubt my intentions? This will be a major campaign. It's only right that I should be at the head of my army.'

Terrel was beginning to see why men would follow such a leader, but he still couldn't understand why the war seemed to be the only thing that mattered on Myvatan.

'Why are the springs at Hvannadal a worthy target?' he asked. 'It seems an enormous operation for such an objective.'

'The hot water springs are a powerful magical source for the White wizards,' the general replied. 'They also feed one of their main healing pools. To strike a blow there would demoralize the enemy forces, and boost our own.'

'Is that why the springs are considered sacred?'

'Of course. Their potency varies with the lunar sequence, but we can turn that to our advantage if Davik's plan works. You should come along.'

'Me?' Terrel wasn't sure if Pingeyri was being serious.

'Why not? Someone of your skills would be welcome in any company.'

Terrel didn't know how to respond. He didn't want to offend his hosts, but Alyssa's advice - and his own inclination - made him reluctant to get directly involved in the war.

'Think about it,' Pingeyri said affably. 'In any case, there's plenty for you to do before then.' He stood up. 'I'd better go. No peace for the wicked, eh?'

'How long has the war been going on?' Terrel asked quickly. It was one question he'd never got a straight answer to and it had been preying on his mind.

'Oh, I don't know. A long time. Hundreds of years, probably. But we'll win in the end. I'll see to that - with a little help from the gods, of course.'

The general strode out, leaving Terrel aghast. Hundreds of years of warfare? It was no wonder the entire island was insane.

'Tell me more about Kjölur,' Myrdal said.

'There's not much more I can tell you,' Terrel replied. 'What does he trade in?'

'I've no idea.'

After the general left, Terrel hadn't had long to wait for his next visitor. Pingeyri's adjutant had arrived carrying several scrolls, though he hadn't

referred to them at all. After some initial pleasantries, the conversation had turned to Terrel's journey to the island – and to the merchant in particular. 'Why do you think he was so keen for you to go to Whale Ness?' 'I don't know for certain that he was. I'm just guessing that it was his influence that made Ostan change his mind.' 'But why would he have done such a thing?' Myrdal persisted. The adjutant was a young man, about the same age as Terrel. His serious face was framed by light brown hair which was short but thick, reminding Terrel of an animal's fur. 'Perhaps he was just trying to help a friend,' he said. It didn't sound convincing, even to him. 'Because of this prophecy of yours?' 'Maybe.' Terrel shrugged. 'I don't understand his motives, but he couldn't have foreseen what was going to happen.' 'Unless you'd agreed it between you beforehand,' Myrdal suggested. 'No. I–' Terrel faltered, realizing that he had not won the trust of all the Black officers. 'The general and his staff certainly seem to have taken a shine to you,' the adjutant remarked, his face displaying no emotion. 'Are they perceptive judges – or simply gullible?' 'I'm not a spy,' Terrel said. He had thought he'd put all that behind him, and discovering he'd been labouring under a misapprehension came as a blow. 'Perhaps I just have a suspicious mind,' Myrdal went on. 'But this could be a plot to gain their confidence. Healing Kopak was a clever move, but it didn't necessarily prove your allegiance.' 'He was sick. I'm a healer,' Terrel said desperately. 'That's all I cared about.' 'Of course, you probably never anticipated ending up here. You wouldn't have expected all the Gold troops to be killed.' 'I never expected any of this,' Terrel protested. 'If even one of them had got away, you might have achieved your purpose.' 'No. That's not–' 'We only have your word that you arrived on a foreign ship, which – conveniently – was heading for Akranes, on the far side of the island, so there's no way of checking your story.' Terrel was silent, unable to think of any plausible response. 'Of course, you may be the innocent you claim to be.' Myrdal's expression turned to a smile that was patently false. 'But I'm not as easily convinced as the others. I'll be keeping an eye on you, Terrel.' With that, the adjutant turned and swept from the room.

Chapter Thirteen

So much for allies I can count on, Terrel thought ruefully. All of a sudden his room had begun to seem like a prison cell after all. The encounter with Myrdal had shaken his new-found confidence. The adjutant's suspicions had been bad enough, but the prospect of his sharing them with his fellow officers was even worse. If that happened, all hope of co-operation would disappear and Terrel really would be a prisoner again. He wondered why Myrdal had kept his doubts to himself. Surely his duty to the general would have forced him to share his thoughts? Was it simply a case of his not being quite sure of his facts, and wanting to avoid the embarrassment of being proved wrong? Judging by the little he knew of him, Terrel thought the adjutant was probably someone who was used to keeping secrets. But might he have some hidden agenda of his own? If so, Terrel couldn't imagine what it was.

The other puzzle was why Myrdal had chosen to reveal his mistrust to Terrel. If he had been intent on unmasking him as a spy, then surely it would have been better for him to let the healer remain in ignorance. Then he could watch, and wait for Terrel to make a mistake. By warning him, he would have put any real spy on his guard. So what was he up to? On reflection, Terrel realized that even those people



who seemed to be on his side had said nothing about granting him his freedom. They appeared to be more concerned with the various ways they could use him. Only Eskif had offered to help him, and as a result of Myrdal's visit Terrel was now wondering if he could take even that at face value. Did Pingeyri and Vatna really trust him, or were they playing roles in an elaborate game? They had both seemed perfectly genuine, but now Terrel was filled with doubt. At the same time, the walls of his room seemed to close in upon him, and he felt a desperate need to prove he was not a prisoner. He went over to his pack and rummaged through its contents. The nomad dagger was still there, which made him feel slightly better. His hosts wouldn't have let him keep a potentially murderous weapon if he was considered an enemy. Unless that too was part of the bluff - hoping he'd try something stupid and give himself away.

Stop it! he told himself. You'll drive yourself mad if you go on like this. He stood up, leaving the knife where it was, and walked over to the door. Hesitating for only a moment, he lifted the latch, opened it and stepped into the corridor. The passage outside was dark and narrow. At its midpoint, doors led off to either side, but they were all closed. At the far end, next to what Terrel assumed was a stairwell, Myrdal and Latira stood together. They appeared to be in an earnest conversation, but they fell silent, looking round, as Terrel emerged. Latira smiled. Myrdal didn't.

'You're looking better,' his nurse observed.

'I'd like to go out.' The weather had improved recently, and it had become very important to Terrel to prove that he could go out. 'I'd like to see something of the city,' he added. 'The general said I could.'

After a brief murmured exchange, Myrdal disappeared down the stairs and Latira came to join her patient.

'Colonel Vatna will be here soon,' she informed him. 'He's been wanting to show you around.'

Terrel would have preferred to wander off on his own - but he'd also realized that the chances of that happening were very slim.

'Is there anything you'd like before you go?' she asked.

'No. Thank you.'

'Are you going to help them?'

'Help who?' he asked. 'With what?'

'The war is all they think about.' Latira was the first person to show little enthusiasm for the fighting. 'With anything new, their first thought is how it - or he - can help them win.'

'I don't want anything to do with the war. I'm a healer.'

'Even healers are a valuable resource. The sooner the wounded get better, the more the army benefits.'

Terrel hadn't thought of it like that before. His healing had always seemed a good thing - and it still did - but if all he did was help men return to battle and get injured again - or even killed - then what had he really achieved? All he'd ever wanted was to reduce the amount of pain in the world.

'I'm sorry, Terrel,' she said. 'Don't look so worried. You're a good man, I'm sure of that. You don't need me to lecture you.'

Vatna came bounding up the steps before the healer could respond.

'You're ready,' he said breathlessly on seeing Terrel. 'Excellent. Let's go.'

A blustery wind was blowing down the street, but after his recent confinement, Terrel revelled in the freshness of the

air. The hail had stopped, but high grey clouds moved swiftly across the sky - the protective layer of steam having been blown away - and the upper slopes of the mountain were no longer visible. The pavements were still wet, and it was cold enough to suggest that the puddles would turn back to ice by nightfall.

After their initial spiralling descent from the tower, their exit from the fortress had involved a labyrinthine trek through corridors and courtyards until they'd reached one of the lesser gates. The sentries there had saluted the colonel - and had tried not to make their interest in his companion too obvious. After that the two men had been the objects of many more curious

glances. Inside the castle, almost everyone Terrel had seen had worn a military uniform, but the people in the city streets were the usual mixture of men, women and children. Yet even here there was a sense of orderliness, of purpose. Everyone seemed to be going somewhere or doing something specific. Terrel had never felt at ease in cities or large towns, avoiding them whenever he could, and Saudark was no different in that respect. However, he was observant enough to realize that it was like nowhere else he had ever been. No one loitered on corners, gossiping. If there was any trade going on, it was taking place indoors, out of sight. The cobbled lanes and alleyways were remarkably clean and quiet. Compared to the noisy, odorous chaos of somewhere like Betancuria or Qpmish, Saudark was like a ghost town.

That thought brought a wave of longing to see Alyssa and her ghostly retinue, but there did not seem to be any animals about for her to occupy. No dogs or cats prowled the streets; no one rode on horses or mules; there didn't even seem to be any birds. Terrel knew that in a place this size there must be some animal life, but he had yet to glimpse any of it.

'Where are we going?' he asked, although he'd already guessed their probable destination.

'To the healing pools,' Vatna replied, confirming Terrel's prediction. 'I thought you'd want to start there, it being relevant to your line of work, so to speak.'

Having only seen the pools from the outside, and having observed the steam rising above the compound, Terrel had imagined them to be small, open-air lakes of hot water. But the reality proved quite different. After the guards at the entrance had let them through, Vatna led him into a windowless building and along a dimly-lit corridor.

'I'll take you to see the springs first,' he said, his voice echoing from the stone walls. 'That's where it all begins.'

They eventually emerged into a square courtyard surrounded by a cloistered pavement. The interior of the quadrangle was open to the sky and it was immediately clear that this was the source of the steam that lay over the city. Great white billows rose into the air from its centre, where water, half-hidden in the mist, gushed from the earth in undulating waves. From there it poured out in all

directions, rippling over smooth mounds of multicoloured stone before dividing into separate streams. These in turn flowed into carved channels and eventually disappeared, still bubbling, into small holes that led beneath the pavement Terrel was standing on. Even from his position at the edge of the deluge, the heat was tremendous, and he knew without having to test the theory that the water would scald him if he allowed it to touch his skin. Near the centre, where it was literally boiling to the surface, it would kill him in moments.

'It's too hot to use it here,' Vatna said, as if he'd read Terrel's thoughts. 'That's why we siphon it off, and let some of the steam escape. The water cools as it flows through the pipes to the healing pools, so when it gets there it's just the right temperature.'

'Does it flow as strongly as this all the time?' Terrel asked, recalling the feeble springs of Misrah's desert.

'Without fail,' the colonel replied. 'The supply is constant. All we have to do is make sure the channels don't silt up.'

The water looked quite clear to Terrel, but he realized that Vatna had not meant the type of silt he was used to. There were presumably various minerals and salts dissolved in the liquid which would settle out as it cooled. That explained the weird mounds of grey-white stone, coloured with streaks of orange, blue and green.

'Are the springs at Hvannadal like this?'

'I've never seen them,' Vatna replied, 'but I suppose so, yes.'

'Have your enemies ever tried to destroy this place?'

The colonel shook his head.

'If they have, they never even got close,' he said dismissively. 'They'd be stupid to try.'

Does that mean your proposed raid on Hvannadal is equally stupid? Terrel wondered, but he kept the thought to himself. He simply stared at the massive spring, marvelling at the underground forces that brought such immense power to the surface. He would have expected the water to emerge with the roar of a mighty cataract, but in fact the outpouring was eerily quiet, punctuated only by the intermittent hiss of escaping steam and the gurgling of the lesser rivulets. The uncomfortably humid air was filled with smells that varied constantly, quite sweet one moment, sour or noxious the next, but there was something else in the atmosphere too, something Terrel could not explain. There was a vague sense of potency that impressed him but also made him feel uneasy. If this

power was truly used for healing, it would dwarf his own meagre talent, but he couldn't escape the feeling that - in spite of appearances - it was somehow unnatural.

'We can go inside now,' Vatna said, obviously gratified by the foreigner's awe.

Terrel was led down another passageway, then through a side door. Leaving their coats on pegs provided in the vestibule, they went on into the lamp-lit warren beyond. The air here was very warm and thick with vapour, and Terrel was soon sweating profusely. The close atmosphere also held a new mixture of scents. Terrel couldn't hope to identify them all, but while some fragrances were flowery, others were bitter, and underlying them all was the herbal reek of mitra. He could only hope that he would not be overcome by the fumes.

'The magians work here constantly,' Vatna told him, 'making sure each patient gets the right mixture for his injuries, and checking that the water is aligned properly.'

'Aligned?' Terrel queried. 'What do you mean?'

'You really need someone better qualified than me to explain it properly. I can sense it, and use it to some extent, but I never really understood the theory.' Vatna sounded slightly ashamed of his shortcomings. 'The best I can do is say that water is a remarkable substance, and the elements that make it up can be aligned in various ways. To be effective for healing it needs to be in a certain pattern. It's the magians' job to make sure that the pattern's correct.'

Terrel was no longer surprised at learning something new and unexpected about a substance he had once taken for granted. Water was central to all life - his time with the Toma had taught him that - and as far as the Ancients were concerned, it was not only magical but also very dangerous.

By now the two men had reached a long narrow hall which had rows of small cubicles on either side, divided by plain stone walls. Inside each cubicle was a sunken bath, through which water bubbled, entering from openings at one end and exiting via drains at the other. In each pool of hot, swirling liquid floated a man. They were all naked, their eyes closed as if asleep. Each of them bore injuries of one kind or another. Although some of these appeared quite serious, none of the men was actually bleeding. Immersion in water would ordinarily have been the last thing Terrel would have recommended for open wounds, but what was going on here was clearly far beyond his expertise.

Seeing a man he recognized from Captain Raufar's company, Terrel stopped and stared. When he had last seen him, Kavika had been badly cut on his left arm and shoulder and his chest had been covered in a massive dark bruise. Terrel had suspected broken bones within, and had feared that the damage done would prove fatal before they reached Saudark. But the man had survived, and now it was hard to see anything wrong with him. There were only faint scars where his skin had been sliced open, and the discoloration over his ribs had vanished entirely. And all this had happened in less than two days.

'That's incredible,' Terrel breathed.

'He's ready to wake,' an unfamiliar voice stated.

The newcomer had approached silently, his bare feet making no sound on the

warm tiled floor, and his words had startled Terrel. Turning now, he saw a young man dressed in a short grey tunic.

'Hello, Solva,' Vatna said. 'This is Terrel, the healer I told you about. Terrel, Solva is a magian whose talent far outstrips mine. He's in charge of the pools.'

Solva bowed his head slightly in acknowledgement, but said nothing. After a moment he knelt down and dipped his fingers into Kavika's pool. He nodded, apparently satisfied, then stepped into the water. Supporting the patient's neck with one hand, he tapped his forehead gently with the other. The soldier's eyes opened and he took a deep breath, then sat up and smiled. Solva helped him to stand and when he had done so, retreated, letting Kavika come to terms with his new situation. The soldier stretched, then deliberately thumped himself on the chest with both fists. Terrel winced, but Kavika only laughed. He was whole again.

'What's he doing here?' he demanded, glaring at the foreigner.

'He's our guest,' Vatna replied. 'Terrel is a friend, not a spy. And he is a true healer.'

Kavika looked sceptical, but knew better than to argue with a superior officer.

'Could you have done this for me?' he asked.

'I doubt it,' Terrel replied truthfully.

'The difference is that he could have treated you in the field,' Vatna said, 'rather than having to wait until you got back here.'

The soldier did not seem overly impressed by this argument. He merely stood there, water dripping from his muscular frame, quite unabashed by his nakedness.

'You can return to your company now,' Solva told him. 'Come with me and get a new uniform.'

After the other men had gone, Terrel and Vatna continued their tour. The buildings on all four sides of the quadrangle were similar in design, and there were literally hundreds of pools, nearly all of them occupied. Terrel saw some invalids with quite horrendous injuries, but was assured that they would all recover eventually and return to active service. He was left with a deep sense of admiration

for the work the magians were doing, and wished that it could be seen as an end in itself, rather than a means of helping the war effort.

'Could the pools be used to treat ordinary illness, rather than just wounds from battle?' he asked.

'I suppose so,' Vatna answered doubtfully. He had clearly never considered such an idea before. 'If the alignments were done properly. But all the resources here are needed for the army, so the question doesn't arise. If you've seen enough, I'd like to show you another part of the compound.'

'All right.' Terrel was beginning to feel rather lightheaded now, and hoped that wherever they were going next was not so full of fumes.

Vatna led him back to the vestibule, where they collected their coats and went outside. The air felt very cold after the muggy atmosphere of the pools, and Terrel was soon shivering inside his damp clothes. Before long, however, he forgot all about his temporary discomfort. The colonel ushered him into a building a short distance from the springs. Inside was a dormitory, with rows of narrow beds, where a few dozen men lay perfectly still. Terrel knew what had happened to them even before his guide spoke.

'These are some we haven't been able to heal,' Vatna said. 'This ward is normally used for less urgent cases, who have to wait when the pools are full, or for those who've had to come out early to allow more serious wounds to be dealt with. But recently there's been a rash of injuries we can't explain. At first we thought they were just unconscious after a blow to the head, even though most of them showed no outward signs of that. But the healing pools didn't help them at all. They look as if they're dead, but they're not. If you watch closely, they're still breathing, although very slowly.'

'Sleepers,' Terrel whispered.

'That's what we call them,' Vatna said. 'How did you know?'

That's what everyone calls them, Terrel thought.

'I've come across this before,' he said aloud.

'Really! Can you cure them?'

'No.'

Vatna's disappointment was palpable.

'I'll try, just to make sure,' Terrel added hurriedly, 'but I'm reasonably sure that what's afflicting them is beyond my healing. Or anyone else's.'

'We had hoped-' Vatna began, then fell silent as Terrel went to one of the beds and took the hands of the comatose soldier in his own. The man's skin was cool, but not completely lifeless. The waking dream was still there, but so far away that Terrel had no way of connecting to it, let alone sharing it with the sleeper. His spirit was wandering elsewhere.

Terrel gave up the attempt and looked around. There were more sleepers here than he'd ever seen in one place. He had only ever seen isolated cases before. Alyssa had been the first, of course, at a time when he'd understood nothing of what was happening to her. Like all the other sleepers, she was somehow being protected, although that protection came at a price. He still found it hard to believe she had been in a coma for more than seven years now and, despite all the evidence to the contrary, even harder to believe that in all that time she had come to no harm. In fact, if her long sleep followed the pattern of others he had seen, she would hardly have aged at all since her dramatic collapse. Terrel had no idea what having so many sleepers here meant, but it confirmed that he had been right to come to Myvatan. Although he didn't understand it completely, there was undoubtedly a link between the Ancients and the sleepers.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'There's nothing I can do for them.'

'Some of them have been here for months,' Vatna told him, 'but they don't seem to have come to any harm.'

'They won't,' Terrel assured him. 'I've seen sleepers who have hardly changed in ten years.'

'Ten years! We thought maybe their bodies had just got the signals for hibernation mixed up.'

'It's more complicated than that.'

'I see,' Vatna said, though clearly he didn't. 'Is it enemy sorcery?'

'I doubt it,' Terrel replied. 'Do you know if these men have anything in common?'

'Not that I'm aware of.'

'Did they fall asleep in any particular place?'

'No. Cases have been reported all over the quarter. Even one or two here in Saudark.'

'And they're all soldiers?'

'Yes. Of course.'

'Have any civilians become sleepers? Any women?'

'I don't know.'

'Who would know?' Terrel persisted.

'I think it's time you went to the pyramid,' Vatna decided. 'There's clearly a lot you need to discuss with Tofana.'

Chapter Fourteen

'Just ring the bell and give the doormen the password,' Captain Hosak repeated patiently. 'They'll let you in.'

'"Look into the ice-worm's eyes"?' Terrel asked doubtfully.

'Yes. Think you can remember that?' The soldier sounded as though he was speaking to a small and stupid child.

'It's a strange password,' Terrel commented.

'That's the point. It's not going to just slip out in normal conversation, is it? Ice-worms don't even have eyes.'

The captain was in command of the eight-man patrol that had escorted Terrel from Saudark. Vatna had arranged the trip, but had been too busy with his own

duties to accompany them. Hosak, like his men, had been generally uncommunicative during the two-day march, and had given the impression that he resented having to play nursemaid to a foreigner.

'Aren't you coming in with me?' Terrel asked. When he had first glimpsed the pyramid, he'd felt some initial stirrings of unease, and now that it was only a short distance away he was unaccountably nervous.

'No. Tofana summoned you, not us.'

'But it would save you having to camp out in this weather tonight.' Snow had been falling intermittently for

the last day and a half, and now lay ankle deep all around them. The soldiers had hardly seemed to notice this while they were on the move, but once they'd come to a halt their expressions had grown sullen, and they were stamping their feet impatiently. Terrel wondered which of them had been commissioned by Myrdal to watch over his progress – and who would take over that duty once he was inside the wizard's domain.

'We're used to it,' Hosak replied tersely. 'And if we stay here much longer they'll be using us for target practice. So get going.'

Terrel wanted to ask what he meant, but the captain's tone did not invite further curiosity.

'Thank you for escorting me here,' he said instead.

Hosak nodded but said nothing, and Terrel turned to look at the pyramid again.

Its sloping walls were built of large slabs of warm, honey-coloured stone, which stood out from both the predominantly grey rock of the mountainous terrain and the pristine whiteness of the new snow. The triangular surfaces were quite smooth, except for incised symbols carved into some of the blocks. Terrel was not surprised to see that the carvings depicted familiar emblems. He had seen most of them, with minor variations, at different points on his travels. The most prominent was a large version of the design on his pendant and the brand on Vatna's arm – 'the river in the sky'. That was presumably Tofana's own marker. Terrel wondered if this was a good omen.

As he began to make his way towards the wizard's domain, Terrel heard some muttered comments from the soldiers.

'If an ice-worm did have eyes I'd bet they'd be just like his.'

'You really think he's never been inside a pyramid before?'

'He's in for a surprise then,' someone added, and Terrel could sense the smiles behind him.

He tried to set these remarks aside and trudged on, his boots sinking into the powdery crystals. The bell that Hosak had pointed out hung from a wooden frame that looked disconcertingly like a gallows. By the time Terrel reached it, he was only three or four paces from the lower edge of the pyramid itself, but he could still see no sign of a door, let alone any doormen. Reaching up, he grasped the clapper and pulled it against the bell. His nervousness made him tentative, and the resulting sound was dull and barely audible. Nothing happened. Overcompensating, Terrel yanked the clapper back and forth, setting up an ear-splitting clangour that he tried in vain to quiet. But still nothing happened.

As the last reverberations were dying away and he was steeling himself to shatter the peace of the mountainside once again, a movement caught his eye and he froze, his stomach tying itself in knots. A panel of stone had slid back and to the side in total silence. The opening this created was square, narrower than the width of his shoulders, and situated just above head height. This was obviously the doorman's window, not the door itself, but Terrel couldn't see anyone looking back at him. All he could see was the entrance to a small, dark tunnel.

Moments later he glimpsed movement within, and heard a faint pattering sound. First one, then several more pairs of small bright eyes emerged from the gloom, all of them fixed on him. As Terrel's unease turned to astonishment and then to laughter, a pack of furry rodents gathered in the opening, those at the back practically climbing over the others in their eagerness to get a better view of the outside world. To the healer they looked suspiciously like

longhaired rats, but with their noses and ears twitching, their pink staring eyes and glossy coats, they seemed more like pets than vermin. Apart from the scrabbling of claws on the stone floor as they competed for the best vantage points, the rodents watched Terrel in complete silence, until one of the larger animals, near the bottom of the shifting pile, opened its mouth. It chattered for a few moments, displaying some unpleasantly sharp teeth, then fell silent again. Terrel got the uncanny feeling that it had been speaking to him, but it was only when the performance was repeated – in a sharper tone – that he stopped grinning and realized what was happening. Even then he was not sure he believed it. Could these rats really be the wizard's doormen? There was only one way to find out.

'Look into the ice-worm's eyes?' Because he was feeling rather foolish, the password came out as a hesitant question. However, to his amazement, the creatures reacted instantly. As some of them trotted off back into the tunnel, their spokesman let out another series of squeaks, and then those that were left moved to one side of the opening, with several standing up on their hind legs and placing their forepaws against the inner wall. Terrel had no idea what they were doing, but then he heard a distinct click and felt some sort of mechanism grind into action. The rats had pressed a lever and were opening a door for him. Although Terrel had come across invisible doorways before, that had been because the sharaken's dream-trading had hidden the truth from his sight. The door that was opening here was solid and real, sliding back and in as the portal had done, but this time with the slight grating noise of stone upon stone. However, Terrel knew he could have spent hours inspecting the sloping wall without finding the entrance. Whoever had built the pyramid had not only been a master stonemason but also a master of disguise.

The first thing Terrel noticed when he stepped inside – apart from the welcome dry warmth of the air – was that the interior walls glowed with their own pale light. Inside the solid, windowless structure, day and night would mean nothing, and but for the almost ghostly luminescence its inhabitants would have been left in permanent darkness. Burning torches or lamps inside such an enclosed space would soon have made the atmosphere unbearable.

As the outer door closed behind him, with an ominously final clunk, Terrel threw back his hood and shook the moisture from his coat. He stepped forward and was immediately presented with a choice. Ahead of him was a blank wall, but there were stairs to either side. Turning left led downwards, into what was presumably a cellar. If he turned right he would be climbing diagonally, traversing one side of the pyramid. Just as he was debating which way to go, and wondering whether he'd be given any further guidance, one of the rats popped out of a hole in the right-hand wall and chattered at him. It had emerged just above a thin stone shelf that ran along the wall at hip height, parallel to the stairs, which Terrel realized was a walkway for the rodents. With an imperious swish of its tail, the small creature began trotting up the slope. Taking this as his cue, Terrel followed.

The passageway wound up and around the perimeter of the pyramid in a triangular spiral. Terrel and his companion passed several open doorways to the interior, but although he looked into several of them, he couldn't see anything. He wasn't sure whether this was simply because the light was too dim, or whether there was something obscuring his view. At times it almost seemed as though there was something wrong with his eyes. But he somehow felt that he was not meant to explore those avenues yet – and this was confirmed by his guide, who was still pattering uphill, pausing every so often to glance back and make sure that Terrel was following.

Eventually, after a number of traverses and turns, and what felt like hundreds of steps, they rounded the final corner and saw another doorway – this time not shadowed but brightly lit. By then Terrel was breathing quite hard. Far from being stuffy, as might have been expected, the air was fresh, though much warmer than it had been outside. There was also a tang to it, which made the healer's tongue and lips tingle, but – thankfully – he could detect no trace

of mitra. However, as he made his way into one of the most peculiar rooms he had ever seen, the air seemed almost to crackle against his skin, and the small hairs on the backs of his hands and his neck stood on end.

The triangular room was huge – the size of a large barn – but because the walls leaned inwards to form a pointed roof within the apex of the pyramid, it felt claustrophobic. This was emphasized by the extraordinary amount of clutter inside. Terrel only had time to get a vague impression of several tables – which were all covered with forests of bottles, jars and bowls, numerous parchments and lumps of rock, as well as a mass of quite unrecognizable paraphernalia – before his attention was drawn to the people in the room. They were all – both male and female – dressed in a variety of black tunics, and they all seemed quite young, from about ten to twenty years old – with one notable exception.

Terrel guessed the woman's age to be around forty, but that was not the only thing that set her apart. Her black tunic was more like a robe, reaching down to her ankles, and her skin was paler than any Terrel had seen since he'd left the sunless world of the fog valley in Macul. Her cheeks were ghostly white and made a startling contrast with her bright green eyes and rich brown hair. Even in

isolation, her hair was extraordinary. It seemed to consist entirely of corkscrew curls, which sprang out from her head in all directions as if trying to escape.

All the others had stopped what they were doing when Terrel entered the room, but she was still striding between the tables, gesticulating wildly with her thin hands and talking to nobody in particular – in a piercing, high-pitched voice that could have sharpened steel.

'We've got the shapes backwards, my little snowflakes. Backwards! Hah!'

Fingers so pallid that the nails seemed almost blue weaved patterns in the air to emphasize her speech. 'You can't have chains without links, so you can't have a chain reaction without a means of forging those links. Like putting the sled before the dogs, eh? Do you think I don't see what you're doing?'

This last remark came out as a screech, and appeared to be addressed to a line of buckets which stood at the base of one of the walls.

'What do you take me for?' she demanded shrilly. 'A frostbitten old baggage?' With that she turned round and faced the room again.

In a rare moment of silence, Terrel's furry guide squeaked as if to announce their presence, and the woman finally noticed what everyone else in the room was looking at. During her almost hysterical monologue, the visitor had had a hard time stopping himself from laughing. He couldn't imagine what this madwoman was doing in the wizard's lair, but when she fixed her emerald gaze upon him he forced himself to keep a straight face. He gave a small bow in greeting, but before he could speak the woman transferred her regard to the rat.

'Not now, Bezymum,' she groaned. Although she was speaking more quietly now, her voice still grated in Terrel's ears.

The rodent chattered again.

'Yes, I can see that,' the woman snapped. 'But I don't need a healer at the moment. Terrel will have to look after himself for a while.'

Terrel gaped. Not only had it not been necessary for him to introduce himself, but unless he was very much mistaken, the woman had understood what the rat had said. In that instant he knew who she was. He had imagined the wizard as a grey-bearded old man, rather like some of the seers in his own homeland. It had never occurred to him that Tofana might be a woman – and certainly not one as eccentric as this.

'No, I'm not angry with you,' she said now, waving an expressive hand. Then she set her teeth together and uttered her own series of squeaks. Bezymum immediately turned tail and disappeared through another small hole in the wall. Terrel was impressed. The wizard could speak to rats, and in their own language.

'Talk to her,' Tofana said, pointing to one of the young women. 'I have work



to do.'

She turned away, leaving Terrel in no doubt about his dismissal. He glanced at the girl who had been chosen – apparently at random – to take charge of him. She hadn't moved, and was looking rather bemused, so he walked over towards her. As he got closer, his first impressions were confirmed. She was perhaps a couple of years younger than himself and she was beautiful, with straight blonde hair, blue eyes and a delicate, heart-shaped face. Terrel smiled.

'Hello. I'm Terrel. I—'

'I know who you are. I am Magian Tegan.' Her response was slightly haughty, as if he ought to have known who she was. Terrel got the impression that she had no wish to act as his nursemaid and felt the task to be beneath her. This suspicion was confirmed when, having introduced herself, she turned away and called to one of the younger boys.

'Yarek, come here!'

The boy arrived quickly, with every appearance of eagerness.

'Take the healer to the guest quarters,' Tegan instructed. 'See that he has everything he needs.'

'Yes, Magian,' Yarek replied, then turned to the visitor with an earnest expression on his youthful face. 'Come with me, sir.'

Terrel was about to thank Tegan but she had already turned away and was engrossed in a manuscript that lay on a nearby table.

'Please don't call me sir,' the healer said quietly as he followed the boy out. 'My name's Terrel.'

'Yes, s—, Terrel.' Yarek gave him a hesitant smile.

On their way to the door, they walked past some of the buckets Tofana had addressed earlier. They were full of water. At the same time, Terrel heard voices muttering.

' . . . bitten old baggage . . .'

' . . . sled before the dogs . . .'

' . . . now Bezylum . . .'

If it hadn't been such a ridiculous idea, Terrel would have sworn that the mutterings were coming from the buckets themselves.

#### Chapter Fifteen

Yarek led the healer down the same stairs he had climbed earlier and, like the rat, he glanced back every so often to make sure his charge was still following. On several occasions Terrel had the feeling that the boy was about to speak, but each time he seemed to think better of it, and went on in silence. For his part, Terrel's mind was teeming with questions, but he wasn't sure Yarek was the right person to ask. He didn't want to get the boy into trouble, or offend his peculiar hostess, so he too remained quiet.

Eventually they came to the short tunnel where Terrel had entered the pyramid, but they didn't stop there. Yarek went on down, taking the visitor into unexplored territory. If it hadn't been for his prior knowledge, Terrel would not have been able to tell that they were now below the surface of the ground. The quality of light didn't change, and the design of the corridor was the same as the others, with more passages leading to unseen rooms in the interior. The traverses became longer, with the sharp corners now further apart, indicating that the pyramid extended outwards as well as down.

'So the guest quarters are underground?' Terrel ventured, thinking that this should be a safe enough topic to begin a conversation.

'All the living spaces are,' Yarek replied. 'And the storerooms, kitchens and wash-houses. The pyramid's like an

iceberg.' Seeing the visitor's blank expression, he added, 'When you see an iceberg floating in the sea, the part above the water is only a small fraction of the whole thing. There's much more beneath the surface.'

'I see.' Terrel understood the comparison now.

'I would have thought you'd have known that,' his guide remarked. 'You must have seen some from your ship.'

'Yes, but I don't know much about this part of the world.'

Yarek nodded, accepting the explanation easily.

'Is it true you came up out of Savik's Whale?' he asked. Now that the silence had been broken, he seemed eager to talk.

'Yes,' Terrel said, wondering what else this apparently lowly member of the wizard's household already knew about him. 'But there was no magic involved. It was just a strange coincidence.' Even as he spoke, he wondered if he believed what he was saying.

'You were supposed to have died,' Yarek commented.

'According to the legends. Yes, I know.' Terrel didn't want to discuss that any more. 'Does Tofana really talk to the rats?' He hadn't seen any more of the creatures, but their walkways ran alongside all the staircases, and there were holes every so often.

'They're not rats!' his guide exclaimed, and Terrel couldn't tell whether he was offended or amused. 'They're mustelas. The Wizard can talk to them, but only a few of them are clever enough to be able to talk back properly. Like Bezylum. They're all completely loyal to her, though.'

'And some of them can understand human speech,' Terrel said.

'Not really. They respond to her vibrations, the tone of her voice, things like that. Oh, you mean the passwords?

They can recognize patterns of sound even if they don't know what they mean.'

'Remarkable.' Terrel had talked to a lot of animals, but only when a human spirit was inside them, and their conversations had been silent, using psinoma rather than speech. Tofana's achievement in being able to communicate with the mustelas was extraordinary, but it was obviously only one of her talents.

'Tofana's the most powerful sorcerer on all Myvatan,' Yarek said, reinforcing the point. It didn't sound like a boast, more a simple statement of fact.

'I hadn't realized Tofana was a woman,' Terrel said, then – seeing the boy's puzzled glance – he hastened to explain. 'I mean, the army seems to be in charge of everything here, and all the officers are men. So I thought–' 'Oh no, all the wizards are women,' Yarek cut in. 'All of them?' Tofana's sex had been a surprise, but the idea that, in what had seemed an entirely male-dominated society, the most powerful – and secretive – occupation of all was reserved for women came as a shock.

'I thought everyone knew that,' Yarek said. 'Women can't be soldiers, can they? So this is how they fight in the war. With magic'

Something in the boy's tone made Terrel hesitate before asking his next question. He couldn't quite pinpoint what it was, but Yarek didn't seem quite so sure of himself any more.

'Are you here to train as a neomancer?' 'I suppose so.'

'You don't sound very sure.'

'I thought once–' Yarek began, then shook his head. 'There are some things you can't change, no matter how hard you try.' This time his air of disillusionment was easy to recognize.

While they had been talking, they had been tunnelling deeper into the underground warren. Now at last Yarek turned into one of the inner doorways and led Terrel along a level corridor. The healer was glad of that – his mismatched leg muscles had been complaining about all the steps for some time – but he didn't want the conversation to end just yet. Before he could say anything, however, his guide pushed open a door and ushered him inside.

The room was triangular, with the walls leaning inwards only very slightly, and had a flat, luminous ceiling. The furniture consisted of a narrow bed, a small table, a stool and a storage chest. Empty shelves lined part of one wall.

'This will be your private room for the length of your stay,' Yarek informed him. 'When the door is closed no one will disturb you unless you want them to. The nearest wash-house is just a little further along the corridor. Meals are usually taken in the refectory, but you can ask the servants to bring food to you here if you prefer. Is there anything you'd like now?'

'Perhaps later,' Terrel replied, tossing his pack on to the bed and slumping down next to it. 'Why don't you sit and talk to me for a while?'

'I ought to be getting back,' the boy said doubtfully. He was clearly tempted

by the invitation, though, and Terrel sought to reassure him.

'You can blame me if anyone complains about you being late. I'm a stranger here and there are a lot of things you can help me with. Tegan did say you were to make sure I had everything I needed.' He smiled encouragingly, and after a few moments the boy grinned back, a new excitement in his pale blue eyes.

'What do you want to know?' he enquired pulling out the stool and sitting down.

'Are all the rooms in the pyramid the same shape?' Terrel asked, beginning with something that couldn't possibly be forbidden.

'Yes. They all fit in that way. The triangle is the most stable and strongest geometric shape there is,' Yarek explained. 'And a pyramid is easy to defend from above as well as from the ground. Not that anyone would dare attack this place.'

'That's true,' Terrel remarked, with a wry smile. 'Even your own soldiers seem afraid of it.'

'I'm not surprised,' Yarek said, and once again the healer sensed an undercurrent of disenchantment. 'Why do you say that?'

'It's just... ' the boy began, then faltered. 'I think you'd better talk to one of the magians about that.' 'Is it because of the work you do here?' Yarek nodded, but did not elaborate. 'I already know that Tofana trains neomancers,' Terrel went on, 'so they can use weather-weapons in the war. What's the difference between them and the magians?'

'Nothing to begin with. It's just a matter of how they use the skills they learn here. Neomancers use theirs directly for fighting. The others do ... different things.' 'Like the people who look after the healing pools?' 'Yes. Is it true you can heal people without using the springs?'

'Sometimes, yes.' 'How do you do it?'

'I'm not really sure. It's just a gift I was born with.' Not that I knew that for a long time, Terrel added to himself.

'But you must use the water-lines somehow.'

'I'm not sure what you mean.' He didn't really want to talk about himself, and sought to return their exchange to life within the pyramid. 'Water's important here, isn't it?'

'It's central to everything we do,' Yarek confirmed.

'When we left Tofana, I thought I heard voices coming from some of the buckets of water there. Is that possible?'

'Oh, yes! The chains are the Wizard's special-' He broke off once more and looked down at his feet. 'I shouldn't really . . . This is . . .'

'I should wait to talk to Tofana herself?'

'Yes,' Yarek agreed gratefully.

'Will you tell me a little about yourself, then?' Terrel asked. He was intrigued by the way the boy veered between eagerness and reticence.

'If you like. What do you want to know?'

'Oh, how old you are, how you came to be here. That sort of thing.'

'I'm fourteen. I came here when I was ten, because I'd shown enough talent to earn a sizarship and become an apprentice. I would've been training for the army by now if I hadn't.'

'And you'd rather be a magian than a soldier?'

'I'd rather be-' Yarek hesitated again. 'Yes.'

Terrel knew he'd been going to say something else, but decided not to push him.

'What did your family think of your choice?' he asked instead.

'My father was already dead,' Yarek replied bluntly. 'I think my mother was pleased. I'm not sure about Takkara. He's my grandfather,' he added, by way of explanation.

'Was your father killed in the war?'

'Yes. He walks the Great Plain now.'

This last sounded like an oft-repeated refrain, and Terrel couldn't tell whether Yarek believed it or merely hoped it was true.

'Do you miss him?' he asked quietly, thinking of his own father, a man he had never met.

'Yes. No. Not really.' The boy looked completely flustered now. 'I was too young to remember him properly, but sometimes I think . . . No. It's silly.'

'What is?' Terrel prompted gently. 'I dream about him sometimes. He shouts, trying to tell me something, but I can never hear him. He doesn't seem very happy.' Yarek paused. 'You won't tell anyone about this, will you?'

'No, of course not,' the healer promised. Although he was surprised that the apprentice had chosen to unburden himself to a stranger, on reflection perhaps it was because he was a stranger that Yarek had revealed his secret.

'Can I ask you something now?' the boy ventured, obviously wanting to change the subject. 'All right.'

'Have your eyes always been like that?' The question took Terrel by surprise. He'd been aware of the boy's fascination with their unusual coloration, but few people expressed their curiosity so directly. 'Yes. They were like this when I was born.' 'They're beautiful. Like ice,' Yarek said, then blushed and stammered. 'I . . . I mean . . .'

'Some people find them unnerving,' Terrel said, remembering the horrified reactions his unveiled eyes had sometimes caused, 'but I can change them if I like.' He blinked, summoning the glamour, making his companion believe that a lie was the truth. When he next looked up, Yarek saw eyes that were the same shade as his own, and he gasped in astonishment. At the same time, warning signals flashed through Terrel's mind, and he felt a dark presence stir and look around. He quickly released the spell, allowing his eyes to revert to their true appearance, but it was too late. His demonstration had been a mistake and he knew it. A door had opened and he was powerless to close it again. As Alyssa had reminded him on numerous occasions, all magic exacted a price, and using it for such a frivolous end had been stupid.

'That was amazing!' Yarek breathed. 'Can you show me how to do it? Can you do it again?'

'Not now,' Terrel replied firmly, regretting his impetuous action even more. 'I—'

He was interrupted by a strange, almost musical buzzing, which made the air in the room shiver and seemed to vibrate through the floor and walls.

'What was that?'

'Just an earthquake,' Yarek replied casually. 'It's all right. You're quite safe here.'

'Does Myvatan get a lot of earthquakes?'

'I suppose so. We generally know when they're most likely to happen, but it's more difficult to be precise now that the moons are behaving oddly.'

Terrel nodded, having heard that explanation elsewhere on his travels. But he was confused by the fact that he'd received no internal warning of the tremor. For several years a trembling deep inside him had preceded quakes, allowing him to predict their arrival — albeit by only a few moments. But on this occasion he had been taken quite unawares. The only other time that had happened had been in the fog valley in Macul, and for the life of him he couldn't see any connection between that place and the pyramid.

'That wasn't a very big one,' Yarek was saying, 'but even the largest of them don't affect us. The pyramid is self-contained and adjusts to cope with any external forces.'

'That's good to know,' Terrel murmured, for want of anything better to say.

'I should be going,' Yarek said, standing up. 'Would you like some food now?'

'Yes, please.'

'I'll tell the servants. Or I could bring it myself if you like,' he added hopefully.

'That would be good. Thank you.'

'Is there anything else?' the boy asked, eager again now. 'Do you need writing materials, or something to read?'

'I'd like to read, but I'm not familiar with your written language.'

'I could read to you,' Yarek suggested. 'The library has lots of books on

legends and so on.'

'I might take you up on that some time,' Terrel said. 'But for now, do you think you could bring me a map of Myvatan? I'd like to get my bearings.'

'I suppose so. There must be one somewhere.'

After Yarek had left in search of food and a map, Terrel lay down on the bed and stared up at the ceiling, lost in thought. At one point he closed his eyes, and sensed that the room immediately became darker. Opening his eyes again made the ceiling grow in brightness once more. He tried this again a few more times, with the same results. When his eyes were closed for any length of time, the light in the room responded, apparently trying to lull him into sleep. It was uncanny, feeling all that magic responding to his needs and knowing that it was only a tiny fraction of the power contained within the wizard's domain.

Half an hour later, when Yarek had still not returned, weariness overcame Terrel's awe and he closed his eyes with a greater sense of purpose, deciding that a nap would do him good. A few moments later, he fell into a nightmare he would have given anything to escape.

#### Chapter Sixteen

The full Red Moon was alone in the night sky. There weren't even any stars to set against its dominance. Fire, love and violence, Terrel thought, wondering which of these portents held true this time.

In the blink of an eye his vision changed. The sky was now made of ice and the moon was a sword, its blade running with blood. Moments later he was looking down, not up, into the terrible chaos of war. As he watched, men were engulfed by flame and clouds of sulphurous steam. Gouts of boiling mud sent great swathes of different colours splashing out over the snow, and stripped flesh from bone. Elsewhere, hailstones the size of fists battered limbs and crushed skulls, freezing rain turned soldiers to icy statues, and then avalanches buried them in wintry graves. A river of fire, where dragons swam, ran across the battlefield, its two banks sliding sideways but in opposite directions, as if the land itself was being torn apart. And everywhere men screamed in agony, disfigured by hideous injuries, burns, frostbite and gangrene – but the fighting went on, driven by a relentless hatred that had crossed the border into madness.

The carnage made Terrel feel sick to his stomach, his revulsion stemming not just from a healer's sensibilities but also from simple human compassion. He had lost the cool objectivity of his dream in Saudark, but he was trapped by his own visions, unable to look away.

Just when he thought it couldn't get any worse, he saw the wizard. The black-robed figure stood on a hilltop, facing away from him. As a pale finger pointed, an entire city was destroyed by an icy deluge, the glittering water ripping buildings apart. Another gesture, and a whole mountain was torn to shreds by an explosion of flame hurling boulders as big as houses high into the smoke-filled air. The wizard turned to look at him then, but it was not Tofana's face that Terrel saw. Yarek stared back at him in triumph, with the eyes of a dragon. Eyes that matched the healer's own.

The dream changed, lurching from the crowded horror of battle to an empty, featureless plain of bare earth and parched grass. The war had gone and all that was left was the endless desolation of this fearful place. The sense of loneliness and grief was overwhelming, but there was no one to be seen. Terrel struggled to escape and succeeded, only to find himself somewhere even worse. The room was dark, but he knew the walls were closing in on him and he felt himself suffocating. There was no way out. The door he had inadvertently opened earlier only let others in. The ominous presence was close now, hovering in the shadows. Waiting.

The red sword appeared again, above him, bright against the pitch black.

I see you've found a new plaything, a familiar voice remarked. I'd be careful if I were you. It looks dangerous.

Well, you're not me, Terrel replied.

No, Jax conceded, laughing. But I could have been. Have you ever wondered what

would have happened if you 'd been born first? Would our roles have been reversed, do you think?

Leave me alone. Terrel still couldn't see his twin.

Now why would I want to do that? This is too much fun.

You think this is fun? the healer gasped, feeling the last of his breath being squeezed out of him.

I think I'm going to like this place.

Terrel was seized with the desire to see his brother, to confront him face to face. It was an absurd, irrational impulse, but he could no more control it than he could tell his heart to stop beating.

Where are you? he shouted.

Are you afraid? Jax taunted. And you with that great big sword.

It's not mine.

I'll show you how to use it some day.

Why not now? Terrel demanded. You're the one who's afraid. Come in here and show me!

Not this time. I-

'Get in here!' Terrel yelled.

Light flooded his senses as he returned to the waking world with a rush.

Blinking away the nightmare, he found that he was sitting up on the bed and that the door to his room stood open. Yarek was waiting there, holding a tray, a terrified expression on his young face.

'You did say to come in, didn't you?' the boy asked nervously.

'Yes, yes. I'm sorry. I fell asleep.'

'But you were shouting. I thought . . .'

'It's all right. I'm glad you woke me up.'

Yarek relaxed visibly, then came in and set the tray down on the table.

'I'm sorry I was so long,' he said. 'It took me a while to find the map.'

Terrel glanced over and saw the rolled parchment that lay beside the food, but he was distracted by the familiar scent filling the room. Even though he would have

welcomed a calming influence just then, he knew he couldn't afford to have any of his senses dulled.

'Is that mitra?'

'An infusion, yes.'

'I don't want it. Take it away, please.'

Yarek looked surprised but obeyed, picking up the steaming cup and taking it out into the corridor. As he went, Terrel thought he detected a faint smile on the boy's lips and wondered why his refusal had prompted such an intriguing reaction. Without any way of answering that question, he moved to the table, set the map aside for later and began to eat. In spite of his recent experiences he was hungry - and he needed the reassurance of ordinary activity to distance himself from the nightmare and its possible interpretations.

When Yarek returned, he was obviously nervous once more.

'Is your meal all right?' he asked tentatively. 'I wasn't sure what you liked.'

'It's very good.' Terrel had not taken much notice of what he'd been eating, but now that he thought about it, it was excellent fare. The pyramid's storerooms were clearly well supplied. Yarek looked pleased.

'Most people would be glad of mitra,' he remarked with studied nonchalance.

'Why don't you like it?'

The ingenuous question seemed natural enough, but Terrel had the feeling there was more to it.

'It's too bitter for me,' he said.

'It would help you sleep better.'

'I'd rather sleep naturally.'

Yarek nodded, apparently approving of this sentiment.

'The soldiers drink a lot of it, don't they?' Terrel prompted.

'Almost everyone does. The war would be much harder to cope with if they didn't.'

Terrel was about to follow this up when there was a knock on the door. 'Come in,' he said.

Yarek, who had been perched on the end of the bed, stood up as the newcomer entered.

'Do you have everything you need for the moment?' Tegan asked Terrel.

'Yes, thank you.'

'Then you may go, Yarek.'

The apprentice accepted his dismissal meekly, slipping out into the corridor and closing the door quietly behind him. Tegan remained standing, watching over the table, her face as expressionless as it had been earlier. Terrel found her presence vaguely menacing, like that of a bird of prey.

'Why are you here, Terrel?' Her tone was faintly accusatory.

'I didn't have much choice,' he replied. 'Tofana summoned me, and the generals decided I should come now.'

'I didn't mean why are you at the pyramid. I meant why did you come to Myvatan in the first place?'

'I don't mean to be rude,' Terrel said, deciding he'd had enough of answering this particular question, 'but I'd rather discuss that with Tofana.'

Tegan accepted the implied rebuke impassively.

'Are you going to help us win the war?' she asked.

'I've no reason to fight for one side or the other,' he told her. 'I would rather help end the war.'

'The generals will tell you that the only way to end it is to win.'

'And do you believe that?'

'What else can I believe? The gods would not have granted me such talent as I have unless it was for a purpose.'

'So you're trying to become a wizard.'

'Less than one in a hundred magians go on to become wizards,' she replied.

'I'm under no illusions about my chances of going that far.'

'So what will you do with your talent?'

'The same as almost all the other magians. Learn how to find, channel, store and release magical powers.'

'For Tofana to use?'

'And the neomancers.'

'Of course.'

Tegan paused, apparently waiting to see whether the healer wanted to continue their conversation. When he said nothing, she broke the silence herself.

'It's late and we have an early start tomorrow, so I'll leave you to rest. Has Yarek explained the way things work around here?'

'Yes. He's looked after me very well.'

'It seems to me he's done more than that,' Tegan remarked, looking at the map.

'But for one so young he has remarkable talent, so we forgive him a few indiscretions.'

'Are there secrets on this map I'm not supposed to see?' Terrel asked, half smiling.

'I don't mean to be rude,' she replied, mimicking the tone of his earlier words, 'but can we be sure you're not an enemy spy?'

'You must have been talking to Myrdal,' he muttered.

'Who?' she asked, looking puzzled.

'He's General Pingeyri's adjutant,' Terrel told her. 'There's no reason why you should know him.'

'Actually, I think I do. We grew up in neighbouring villages, but I haven't seen him in a long time.' There was an odd inflection in her voice now that Terrel couldn't identify.

'Since you came here?'

Tegan nodded.

'When was that?'

'Three years ago. My talent developed later than most.'

'And yet you're a magian already, rather than an apprentice.'

'The Wizard is a good teacher,' Tegan said, her serenity restored. 'And she is

generous with her knowledge.'

'Will I meet her again tomorrow?'

'I can't say.'

'What's the early start for?' he asked, trying another line of questioning.

'We're conducting some new trials.'

'Weather-weapons?'

'Yes.'

'Excellent,' Terrel said, rubbing his hands together in mock glee. 'Something interesting for me to spy on.'

Tegan actually smiled. It didn't last long, but it transformed her beauty from that of a porcelain doll to that of a real person. Then she became serious again.

'You know,' she said, 'if you are a spy, you'll never leave this pyramid alive.'

#### Chapter Seventeen

The first thing Terrel noticed when he'd made his way back up to Tofana's room was that the top of the pyramid was no longer there. The wide triangular floor was as it had been before, the cluttered array of tables and equipment were much as he remembered them, but the inward sloping walls that formed the roof were gone.

The entire scene was now open to the air, and Terrel stared in disbelief at the sky above – which for once was a cloudless blue – and at the mountains that surrounded them, the dark rock of the steeper slopes contrasting with the dazzling white of the snow that lay everywhere else. Such was his astonishment that it took him a few moments to realize that, although they were supposedly exposed to the elements, there was no wind and the air was as warm as it had been before. Even on a calm sunny day it ought to have felt much colder.

He made a more detailed inspection of his immediate surroundings then, and saw what he had not noticed before. On closer inspection, the roof was still there, but it was just a ghostly shadow of its former self, a faint outline of light almost invisible in the brightness of the morning. If he concentrated hard and squinted, he could trace the angles of the corners leading up to the apex of the pyramid. Elsewhere, he could just make out the spectral shapes of several markers that had been carved into the outside of the walls. Otherwise the solid blocks of stone had become invisible.

Instinctively, Terrel knew that the walls remained in place. Tofana would never leave herself open to attack by having them moved. Logically, therefore, it must be that some form of sorcery was being used to enable him – and presumably everyone else – to see past them for the moment. For a brief instant he wondered whether it might be some extreme form of the glamour, but he soon rejected that idea. The technique Babak had taught him helped him to make people believe they were seeing things that weren't there – or were different in reality – but he didn't think it could be used to make people see through something that was there. There had to be more to it than that.

No one else seemed surprised that their place of work was now open to the sky. Terrel was the only one looking at the spectacular scenery around them. The magians and apprentices were all busy with various tasks, and Tofana was striding among them, her shrill voice cutting through the silence like a knife.

'No, no. That way. That way!' she chided one unfortunate. 'Look at the chart, my little icicle. Only the Gold Moon is waning. Look at the chart.' A white finger stabbed at a parchment covered in spidery script. 'There are rules to the dance,' she added, hopping and spinning around as if to demonstrate the principle, her black coat swirling out and then becoming tangled around her legs. She stumbled and half fell before righting herself, shooing away the assistants who had moved to help her.

Shaking her head so that her unruly hair bounced and swayed, the wizard moved on. Coming to the table where Tegan was stationed, Tofana picked up a clear glass phial and held it up to the light, inspecting the contents.

'Excellent. Excellent!' she exclaimed, glancing back at



the magian. 'We'll make a real sorcerer out of you yet, my pretty one. In spite of your foolish qualms.'

'I-' Tegan began, her usually placid face looking alarmed.

'Don't look so worried,' Tofana said, cutting off her feeble protest. 'You think I don't know? As long as you do work like this, it doesn't matter what you think in your more sentimental private moments.' With that she casually tossed the stoppered phial into the air and turned away, leaving Tegan to lunge forward and try to catch it. She did so easily enough, but Terrel had seen the momentary terror in her eyes, and wondered what would have happened if the container had fallen to the floor and broken. He found that his heart was beating fast - and guessed that Tegan's was too. Looking at her now, she seemed calm enough, but her cheeks had a little more colour than usual and her embarrassment was plain. Several of her companions were glancing at her curiously.

Tofana had continued on her way, and now came to a halt in the middle of the room, directly under the ghostly apex. Raising her arms, she performed a sort of jig on the spot, laughing quietly to herself as she stared up at the sky. 'What better day to challenge the gods?' she cried suddenly. 'Do you hear me, Jokulsa? Will you bless our efforts? Or curse them?'

The wizard looked down again and spun slowly round on one heel, so that her emerald gaze passed over everyone in the room. Terrel thought she looked demented, but more like a clown than a true lunatic. He found it difficult to reconcile her fearsome reputation with her eccentric behaviour and appearance. 'Just as long as he's not indifferent, eh?' Tofana declared. 'That would be an insult.' She caught sight of the healer and smiled. 'Ah, the child of the whale is here,

so we have Savik watching over us too. I think it's time we began, don't you, my little snowflakes?'

The previous night had done little to prepare Terrel for the experiences of that morning. After Tegan had left him, he'd found he had neither the willpower nor the energy to study the map, and had decided to leave it for another time. He'd had no way of telling how late in the evening it was, but judging by his own weariness, night must have fallen some hours earlier. Even so, it had been a long time before he could bring himself to lie down and close his eyes. After the magian's parting words, darkness had not seemed a welcoming prospect. And since his earlier nightmare, the idea of going to sleep hadn't been too enticing either.

The curious thing was that in spite of Tegan's suspicions, and Yarek's part in his dream, Terrel found that he was drawn to them both. It was as he considered this anomaly that he remembered Alyssa's advice about not trusting his instincts, and this was enough to make him doubt his own feelings. Tegan's attitude to him had been vaguely antagonistic, and even though Yarek was just a boy, the dream might have meant that he was destined to become a wizard whose power would add to the misery of the war. It was becoming clear that no matter how hard Terrel tried to distance himself from the conflict, it was going to affect him - and his own mission - whether he liked it or not. These musings had kept him awake for a while, but eventually he'd been unable to put off the inevitable. In the event his slumber had been undisturbed, and he'd woken refreshed, wondering what the new day would bring. Light had filled the room when he'd opened his eyes, but he'd had no idea of the time. Getting out of bed,

he had dressed, and then wondered whether to go exploring. Reluctant to disturb the deep silence - and not wanting to make anyone think he was sneaking round like a spy - he'd chosen to study the map instead. Soon after that he'd been alerted by a sonorous tolling, which apparently marked the beginning of the day within the pyramid. Yarek had arrived, bringing the visitor some breakfast, but the boy had had no time to talk and had scurried off again. Shortly after Terrel had finished eating, the apprentice had returned and ushered him up to the wizard's workroom.

Showing unexpected agility, given her earlier performance, Tofana jumped up on

to one of the tables and swung her arms wildly. It took Terrel a moment to realize that she was waving everyone else forward, but at a nudge from Yarek he went with the others as they crowded close to the northwest-facing wall - the wall that was now transparent. He found himself standing next to Tegan and Yarek, and wondered if this was by accident or design.

'What's happening?' he whispered.

'There's going to be an imaginary battle fought across that escarpment over there,' Tegan replied, pointing to a ridge running down from one of the mountains. 'The soldiers' positions are set by were-marks, and their subsequent movements will be based on observations of what happens in real encounters, both for our own men and the enemy.'

'But there's really nobody there?' Terrel guessed.

'Only our three trainee neomancers,' she told him. 'They'll take it in turns to assist our troops, then see if they can work as a team as well, both in attack and defence.'

'Defence against what?'

'The Wizard will be supplying the enemy magic to counteract our own.'

'That doesn't seem fair.'

'She'll only use the strength enemy neomancers would have,' Tegan explained.

'Together with a few tricks. The test will be to see if our neomancers can still win, and destroy the enemy while neutralizing their magic. It's the sort of thing they have to learn before they can be entrusted with the lives of real soldiers.'

'And Tofana will do all that from here?'

'Yes.'

'How will we know what's going on?'

'Just watch,' the magian said shortly, her patience evidently having run out. Terrel did as he was told, but he didn't see how it was going to do him much good. As far as he could judge, even the nearest slopes of the battlefield were well over a mile away, and he had no idea where the were-marks - whatever they were - or the three would-be neomancers might be.

Another bell rang then, its deep note rolling out over the intervening crags even as it made the stone beneath his feet vibrate. Terrel assumed that this was the signal for the trials to begin, and was wondering what would happen next when his legs almost buckled under him. The air shivered and distorted as he found himself flying. He swayed backwards, thinking he was about to topple over the side of the pyramid, but then felt a steadying hand grip his arm. As his reeling senses recovered a little, he watched the escarpment come towards him at an alarming rate, growing bigger with every moment until it seemed to fill the whole horizon. Details of the terrain that had been quite indistinguishable were now plain to see, including the areas designated as military positions. The were-marks were faintly glowing outlines of men, some yellow, some grey.

When the landscape finally grew still, Terrel understood that the movement had been an illusion. Neither he nor the escarpment had gone anywhere, but something had happened to make their observation possible. He suspected that the properties of the invisible wall that separated him from the outside world had been altered once more. Now, in addition to being transparent, it also magnified whatever was on the other side. He remembered the telescope he'd found in Muzeni's abandoned observatory at Havenmoon, and guessed that this was a vastly more sophisticated and powerful way of bending light.

'You could have warned me,' he breathed, but neither of his companions took any notice. The first of the neo-mancers had set to work.

The mist rose from a patch of snow in an irregular spiral, swirling into the sky and then moving quickly across the ridge. Behind him Terrel heard Tofana mutter something, and in an instant the new-born whirlwind flew apart and evaporated. However, it was immediately clear that this had merely been a diversion. The real threat came from another emerging cloud that had drifted serenely from a narrow defile much higher up the mountainside. The cloud was thick and grey, its bulges concealing another source of power. Lightning

flickered and a sudden sheet of rain lashed down, but neither was aimed at the enemy positions. Instead they were used to set off an avalanche from a large snowfield above them. As the boom of thunder reached the spectators, the first cracks appeared in the hard-packed surface, and soon after that the loosened snow began to slide in great waves, exploding into powdery billows in places, flowing like water in others. In spite of Tofana's efforts - which managed to divide and divert part of the deluge - some of the enemy locations were inundated. Murmurs of approval rose all around Terrel.

After that, battle was joined in earnest. As each neo-mancer tested his skills against his mistress, the weather on the side of the mountain became a chaotic mixture of miniature tornadoes, sudden cloudbursts, blizzards and squalls. Drifting snow blocked some routes and made others treacherous; abrupt shifts in temperature added to the pitfalls a real army would have faced; lightning cracked and rocks split asunder; and pounding gusts of hail pelted the enemy to protect the movements of their own troops. At the same time, Tofana - in her role as the enemy neo-mancers - did her best to counter such attacks and launched some of her own, testing the defences of her pupils. Shields like the one Terrel had seen at Whale Ness sprang into life to protect what was beneath, while other more subtle methods were used to divert further forms of attack.

Tofana muttered constantly to herself, sometimes sounding annoyed, sometimes disappointed, but more often than not simply reacting to the drama unfolding before them with satisfaction and even a little excitement. Finally, however, when the three prospective neomancers were acting as a team and the mock battle was at its most intense, the wizard grunted, then spoke aloud.

'No, Dayak, you idiot! You're not ready for that. Leave it alone!'

Terrel was sufficiently distracted by the harsh words to notice that both Tegan and Yarek had glanced round uncertainly. Before he could ask what was happening, Yarek had turned and slipped away. Terrel would have followed him, but his attention was caught by a huge sheet of flame that shot out of the ground, splitting the escarpment in two. The fire was so intense that he stepped back, unable to believe he could not feel the heat of it.

'Fool!' Tofana shrieked. 'You go too far. Don't try to help him! Don't! It will only-' Her words were lost in the sudden hubbub as the view disappeared.

The stone wall was back in place, as solid and impervious as it had first appeared - and the room was in pandemonium. The centre of the commotion was further back, near where the wizard had been standing. Following Tegan, Terrel pushed his way through the gathering crowd and saw Tofana kneeling over a prostrate figure. When she stood up, her face was contorted by fury, but it was Yarek's appearance that shocked Terrel to a much greater extent. The boy lay on the floor, gasping for breath. His lips were dry and cracked, his eyes feverish and staring. Huge angry blisters were rising on his hands and face, growing larger and more livid even as they watched.

A few moments earlier, the boy had been perfectly healthy. Now he looked close to a brutal and particularly painful death. It made no sense. Terrel remembered what had happened to Kalkara, a desert nomad girl, when she had thought - wrongly - that she'd seen a creature of fire and light called a darken. But her injuries had been real enough at the time - and Yarek's were even more serious.

'This is what happens when you interfere in the magic of others,' Tofana growled, glaring round at all her magians and apprentices. 'Dayak will not thank him for this, and Yarek himself has already paid the price for his stupidity.' She paused, her flashing green eyes coming to rest on the foreigner.

'Well, now!' she intoned, a faint smile replacing her frown. 'This gives us an opportunity to see our legendary guest in action. Come on, Terrel. Let's see you heal that.'

Chapter Eighteen

The first thing Terrel felt when he came to was the water lapping gently at

his face. For a moment he was seized by panic, which overcame the pleasant lethargy that pulled him down, and he tried to sit up. But he could only flail wildly and ineffectually, as warm liquid splashed over his face and chest. He spluttered, thinking he was going to drown, unable even to open his eyes. 'Be calm and still. Nothing can harm you here.' The gentle voice floated out of the scented darkness, and Terrel found reassurance in its solicitous tone. He tried to do as he was told, and found it surprisingly easy. Taking a deep breath, he willed himself to relax - at least until he understood what was going on. Very deliberately, he took stock of his situation. He was lying on his back in water that supported him easily and in perfect comfort. There was clearly no danger of his sinking, let alone drowning. He was naked, but he felt warm and safe. What was more, for the first time he could ever remember, there was no pain in his crooked leg. Nothing at all, not even the smallest twinge. He flexed it now, hardly believing that it could be true, and felt the joints move slowly and easily. Then he grew still again, enjoying the wonderful sensation of being totally at ease. Sleep beckoned once more, and he gave into it contentedly. It had been a very long time since he had felt so tranquil, so free from any responsibility.

When he next awoke, it was to a vague feeling of disquiet. He was still very comfortable and relaxed, but something - perhaps from an unremembered dream - was nagging at the back of his mind, telling him that all was not well. He tried to ignore it, and to simply take pleasure in doing nothing, but the annoying presence would not go away.

Opening his eyes with reluctance, he saw in the faint glow of subdued rooflight that he was in a small cubicle. He had already worked out that he must be in a healing pool, and assumed that it was somewhere in the pyramid - although for all he knew, he could have been taken back to Saudark. He closed his eyes again, having seen all he needed to see.

'That's right,' the unknown voice soothed. 'You've no need to struggle. Your treatment's almost over.'

Part of Terrel didn't want it to be over. He wanted to stay there for ever, cocooned in this artificial womb of comfort and safety. But another part of him was struggling to assert itself, reminding the healer that - for him - his mother's womb had been anything but safe.

Memories, as unwelcome as they were necessary, began to return in fragments. He saw Tofana dancing amongst the cluttered tables. The shape of Whale Ness on the map. A glass phial sailing through the air. The ghostly outlines of the vanished pyramid walls. An avalanche. The vertiginous sensation as the escarpment rushed towards him. Fire bursting from the mountainside. And Yarek, writhing in agony.

He could not make sense of all the images, nor put them in sequence, but each one increased his sense of unease. Once again he fought against himself, simultaneously

wanting to hide the memories away and yet needing to explore them, like a tongue returning to a broken tooth.

He kept seeing Yarek's tortured face, and finally Terrel knew that he could not deny what had happened. Tofana's challenge had left him with no choice. Just as the neo-mancers had had to endure their trials, so he'd had to face his own. Kneeling beside the stricken apprentice, he had taken the boy's burning, blistered hand in his own, and had fallen into the hidden realm. He would normally have been able to seek out the pain and illness, in order to repel it, but on this occasion the experience was unlike anything he had encountered before. This waking dream had originated outside his patient. Terrel had to do more than heal Yarek; he also had to trace and remedy the cause of his ailment. And that had been far away, in another dream. Terrel had traced the links back to their source, and set aside their malign influence, before dealing with the boy's own pain and distress. He had been able to heal Yarek -but only at great cost to himself. He'd been engulfed by a black wave of exhaustion, and the next thing he could remember was waking up in the

healing pool.

'Easy now.' A face wavered into view. 'We don't exactly know what you did, but it left you very weak.' Her eyes were kind, matching her voice. 'The pool will have restored what was necessary, but it might take you some time to adjust, so take things slowly.' She was gentle but strong, far stronger than he was. One arm was around his shoulders, each hand supporting him under his arms.

'Ready?'

Terrel nodded. He seemed to have lost the use of his voice.

'All right. Up on your feet.'

He moved, pushing down with his legs until they encountered stone and driving himself from the warmth at the same time as she lifted him. Water ran from his body in rivulets, and even though the air was balmy, he shivered, feeling the loss of his cocoon.

'Don't worry if you feel wobbly at first,' she said, still holding his arms.

'I'm here, and even if you fall the water will protect you. How's that?'

Standing upright seemed alien, and Terrel felt slightly light-headed, but otherwise he was fine. It was even easier than normal to balance on his upturned right foot.

'I'm all right,' he whispered.

'Excellent. We'd better get you dressed, then. The Wizard's waiting to talk to you.'

Once Terrel was able to put on his own clothes, and his specially crafted boots, he became prey to mixed emotions. Although physically he felt fine, better than he had done for some time, several matters were now weighing heavily on his mind. But the servants who attended him barely spoke, and the magian who had helped him from the pool had left before he was able to formulate any questions, so he had to school himself to patience.

Outside the pool section of the pyramid, the air seemed fresher as well as cooler and less humid, and he realized that the air he'd been breathing while he was healing – and perhaps the water he'd been lying in – had been suffused with mitra. This made him feel even more uneasy, but as he left the fumes behind his head cleared, and he began to look forward to meeting Tofana and getting some answers from her.

He managed the long climb easily, but when he reached the wizard's workroom, he was glad to see that all the walls were firmly in place. On this occasion Tofana was the sole occupant of the top floor of the pyramid. She was bent over something on one of the tables, murmuring to herself, and either did not hear him come in or pretended not to. Terrel waited, not wanting to disturb her, while the servants who had escorted him retreated down the stairs. At one point he heard low voices coming from another part of the room, but he couldn't tell what the muttering buckets were saying, and so decided to ignore them as best he could.

Eventually the wizard straightened up, with a small groan, then turned and faced her visitor. Terrel had to stifle a smile; an optical instrument had been fixed over her left eye, which made it appear huge, several times larger than its twin. The monstrous green orb blinked, then widened in surprise. The wizard stretched her face, allowing the eyeglass to fall out into her hand, and gave Terrel a measuring look.

'So, you've recovered again?'

'Yes.'

'Well, come here then,' she commanded impatiently. 'Or are you going to stand there all day like a ten-year-old apprentice?'

Just at that moment Terrel felt as if he were about ten years old, and he moved forward like a reluctant pupil meeting his tutor. He had to remind himself that he was a grown man now, and even if he didn't feel comfortable as the wizard's guest, he ought to act as though he did.

'Think you can stay awake this time?' Tofana enquired.

This time? Terrel wondered, enduring her scrutiny with difficulty.

'I hope so.'

'Good. I was enjoying our talk earlier. Have you any more tricks you'd like to

show me?'

Terrel's bewilderment must have shown, because she decided to explain further without any prompting from him.

'You could show most neomancers a thing or two. Even the good ones. Your handling of that tornado was particularly impressive.'

'I don't know what . . .'

 Terrel began, but a truly horrible suspicion was growing in his mind and he faltered, aware that Tofana was still watching him very closely. 'How long was I in the healing pool?' he asked at length.

'Three days the first time, two the second.'

It took a few moments for the significance of her answer to finally sink in.

'And it was the time in between when I controlled the tornado?'

'You don't remember?'

'Not really. It's all a bit like a dream.' He was improvising now. In fact it was only his imagination that was filling in the gaps in his memory. But that was bad enough. 'What happened, exactly?'

'Does this mean you don't have anything else to show me?' Tofana asked, ignoring his question.

'I'm a healer,' he replied awkwardly. 'I could--'

'I've seen that for myself,' she cut in. 'I'm more interested in the talents you weren't prepared to admit to when you got here.'

'I don't know what . . . Something must have happened. I'm not really a weather-mage.'

'Well, you were doing a pretty good impression of one two days ago,' the wizard remarked. 'Not feeling yourself then, eh?' A slow smile spread over her face.

She knows, Terrel thought. She may not know it was Jax, but she knows it wasn't me.

'Interesting,' Tofana said, as if the healer had spoken aloud. 'I thought there was something different about you then. Your lines had changed.'

The irony was not lost on Terrel. In the past, whenever

Jax had taken over his body, no one had been able to tell the difference between them, and so he'd been blamed for the prince's misdeeds. This time, when claiming to be responsible for his actions might actually have gained him some respect, the only observer who mattered could tell the twins apart.

Terrel didn't know what the lines she had mentioned were, but he was willing to bet they had nothing to do with his physical appearance.

'Does this often happen to you?' Tofana asked. 'This switch from one personality to another?'

'No,' he replied, deciding there was no point in trying to deny that such a change had taken place. 'It's very rare.'

'What brings it on?'

'I've no idea,' Terrel lied. 'I think it just happens at random.'

Tofana nodded, although her expression remained guarded and he wasn't sure whether she believed him or not.

'Does he have a name?'

'Jax.'

'I should like to meet Jax again sometime,' the wizard said, confirming Terrel's fears.

'It's not something I can control.' He had no wish to reveal his particular vulnerability to his brother when his mind was affected by something like alcohol or mitra. 'Will you tell me what I - I mean Jax - did?'

'Oh, I haven't had so much fun in years!' Tofana exclaimed, waving her arms in the air in one of her expansive gestures. 'It's a shame you missed it.' She giggled, suddenly sounding like a much younger woman. 'He came up here, all pink-faced and bright-eyed from the pools, and looked around as if he'd never seen any of this before -which makes sense now. He was particularly fascinated by the various samples of water. From that, the obvious next step was the way such things translate to the outside world, and we ended up showing each other some tricks, as I said. He went a little too far in the end, of course, which was why he collapsed and was taken back to the pools.'

Terrel wanted to ask whether Jax had run out of strength or had simply become bored and decided to abandon his usurped body, but there was another possible interpretation of the wizard's words, and this made him hesitate. Had Jax and Tofana become embroiled in some sort of contest with their tricks? And if so, had his brother 'gone too far' by opposing the wizard in some way? It would have been a battle the prince was bound to lose. But he wouldn't have minded that; he'd have known he could leave at any time, and that he would not be the one left behind to face the possible consequences. And making trouble just for the sake of it would be the sort of thing Jax enjoyed.

'This is the first time I've seen either of you since his relapse,' Tofana added. 'Are you telling me you remember absolutely nothing about what happened?'

'I'm afraid not.' Terrel was glad to know that even Jax had his limits. Whatever the reason for his return to the pools, it had eventually enabled Terrel to reclaim his own form.

'Perhaps we should work at helping you call on the talents of this other self,' the wizard suggested. 'They could prove a valuable asset.' Terrel was surprised by the way Tofana had simply accepted the presence of a second person within him - and he wondered whether she had come across something similar before. For himself, talking openly about Jax with a relative stranger had been an unnerving but strangely liberating experience. However, he'd had enough of it now.

'I don't think I want to do that,' he said. 'In any case, you might not want to make me too powerful. Some people in the Black Quarter still think I'm a spy.' This was not something he'd have chosen to bring up, but he was so anxious to change the subject that he'd jumped at the first thing that came to mind. He achieved his purpose, but Tofana's reaction was not what he had expected.

She laughed.

'I don't really care if you are,' she said. 'What are you going to do? Heal our armies into oblivion?'

'I could send information back to your enemies,' he argued, wondering why he was advancing such theories.

'If you do,' she replied cheerfully, 'it'll just be what we want them to hear. You really think you'd be allowed to betray anything important? You're simply another part of the game. We just have to decide how to use you.'

'You think the war's a game?'

'What else can it be? Boys will be boys. We just make the toys they play with a little more interesting.'

'But that's-' Terrel stopped. He'd been about to say 'insane', but had thought better of it. 'Have you ever considered all the wonderful things you could achieve if you put your magic to use for good? For peace?'

'Peace!' Tofana exclaimed derisively. 'You might as well go looking for Akurvellir. No one wants the war to stop. Why should they? If they weren't fighting, they wouldn't know what to do with themselves.'

Terrel found he had no way of countering that argument. Even though it was insane, it was the truth. All the soldiers he had met, from the general to patrolmen, appeared to be afraid of nothing and actually seemed to revel in the carnage. Their bloodthirsty enthusiasm and eager, even cheerful attitude to the conflict had been demonstrated often during his time on Myvatan.

'Nor would I, come to that,' Tofana muttered. 'My work is fascinating. You'll see that soon enough, even if the neomancer trials didn't convince you.' Mention of the trials reminded Terrel of Yarek and his dreadful injuries.

'Is the boy all right?'

'He made a remarkable recovery. None of my magians could have done as much for him.'

'Could you?'

'Perhaps. But I don't waste my energies that way. That's what the pools are for.'

'What happened to him?'

'Ah, so you are interested,' Tofana said, chuckling.

'I've never come across such injuries before,' Terrel said. 'At least none that were inflicted in such a way.'

'Dayak made the first mistake,' the wizard explained. 'He's too clever for his own good. He'd make an excellent neomancer if he applied his talent wisely, but he overreached himself, tried to make use of power he couldn't hope to control. Earthquakes and volcanic activity can be used as weapons, but only under certain conditions, and under the supervision of very experienced people. Armies usually just try to take advantage of such things when they happen naturally.'

'Did Dayak try to create such an upheaval?'

'He nearly succeeded too,' Tofana replied, nodding, 'but he used too much of himself, left his defences open. Such power is not bought easily. Dayak's own lines became distorted and broken. He'd probably have died if Yarek hadn't intervened.'

'Yarek was trying to help him?'

'Exactly. I believe he and Dayak consider themselves friends. The boy is certainly talented, but this was beyond him. In trying to disentangle Dayak's lines, he disrupted his own - and suffered the consequences. He's lucky you were there to help him, or he'd still be paying for his error.'

'You think trying to help a friend is an error?'

'In this case, yes. And a potentially deadly one. I'm grateful to him, though. His efforts provided some insights that may well help my own research. Now, tell me about your healing. How do you do it?'

Terrel was wondering how best to answer this question when he was saved from having to respond by the unexpected arrival of another visitor. The mustela emerged from one of the holes in the wall and scampered across the floor, its claws skittering on the stone.

'Bezylum?' the wizard queried. 'What are you doing here?'

The rat-like creature answered with a nervous chattering, then - showing unexpected agility - it leapt up on to one of the tables, skidded on the wooden surface and scattered pieces of paper and stone in all directions. Coming to rest amid the debris, it stood up on its hind legs and chattered again. Its fur appeared to be standing on end, making it seem twice its normal size.

'Don't be silly, dear,' Tofana said. 'No one can do that. Not even me. And anyway, why would anyone want to?'

The animal shook itself and clicked its teeth, looking about with wild eyes. Tofana looked puzzled.

'We're busy here,' she pointed out. 'I'm sure you'll feel better soon. Now scam!'

Bezylum did not react well to the reassurance. Although the wizard clearly expected the mustela to leave, it did nothing of the sort. Instead it suddenly seemed quite demented, leaping to and fro as if trying to evade an invisible foe, and sending various objects flying over the side of the table.

'Bezylum!' Tofana shrieked, angry now. 'Stop that at once!'

But the rodent paid her no attention. In fact, its manic exertions became even wilder, until it misjudged one particular twisting leap, slid over the edge of the table and fell directly into a bucket full of water below. Tofana exclaimed in annoyance, but Terrel couldn't help laughing at the ludicrous spectacle. A moment later the laughter died in his throat as the mustela laboriously dragged itself over the rim of the container, flopped to the ground with a squelch and then shook itself vigorously.

'Perhaps that'll teach you not to be so stupid,' the wizard muttered.

Terrel didn't think so. But then he knew something Tofana did not. The spiky, bedraggled creature was no longer Bezylum. It was Alyssa.

Chapter Nineteen

There's something really peculiar about this thing, Alyssa complained, still shaking water from her borrowed fur.



That's probably because— Terrel began, then saw Tofana glancing back and forth between the two of them.

Who's she? Alyssa asked. A friend or an enemy?

I'm not really sure, he replied truthfully, but she's a wizard and—

A wizard? Alyssa sounded understandably alarmed.

Yes, and there's—

Their silent exchange was interrupted by a fierce chattering from Tofana which was clearly directed at her strangely unbiddable doorman. Alyssa tensed at the sound, her damp fur becoming even more spiky.

Am I supposed to understand that? she asked.

Yes. She must be telling you to do something.

What?

I've no idea, but you ought to do something, even if it's the wrong thing. She was telling you to go away earlier.

But I've only just got here, Alyssa objected. You've no idea how—

'What's got into you, Bezymum?' Tofana grumbled. 'Get out of here before you make me really angry.' She added a further comment in the squeaking language of the muste-las, and ended in an unpleasant hiss.

You 'd better go, Terrel said. She might suspect something,

and in any case, we can't talk here. I'll catch up with you as soon as I can.

'I don't know why you're so fascinated with Terrel,' the wizard said, confirming the healer's fears. 'He's not the one who trained you. Or the one who feeds you.'

Go, Terrel urged. There'll be another chance to talk later.

We may not get another chance, Alyssa replied. The window was only open a crack this time.

Her cryptic comment dismayed Terrel. He'd waited a very long while to be able to talk to Alyssa, and the thought of missing this opportunity was appalling.

But he knew their present situation was hopeless

You have to go, he told her. I'll follow you.

Finally bowing to the inevitable, Alyssa turned tail and scampered off, skirting around the edge of the room until she came to one of the rat-holes.

As she disappeared inside, Terrel hoped she'd retained enough of Bezymum's memories and knowledge to find her way about in the dark maze of tunnels. If she got lost, she might not be able to locate him again before the window closed and she had to leave.

'That's not like him,' Tofana muttered. 'He's usually the most reliable of them all.'

'Perhaps he's ill?' Terrel suggested.

'It's lucky the alignment-potency of that meltwater wasn't too great,' the wizard added, glancing at the puddles around the bucket. 'Or he wouldn't have recovered so quickly.'

Her comment raised Terrel's level of unease another notch. He could only hope that, whatever the water might have done to Bezymum's body, it would not have affected Alyssa's invading spirit.

'I should leave you to get on with your work,' Terrel said as Tofana stooped to pick up some of the fallen objects and replaced them on the table.

'Right now you are my work,' she replied. 'You were going to tell me about your healing.'

'I'm not sure there's much I can tell you,' he said quickly. 'And I'd like to go back to my quarters now.'

'Not yet. You have to earn your keep first.'

'But—'

'It's not much to ask, is it?' Although the wizard had spoken mildly, there was a stubborn glint in her eyes and Terrel realized he had no choice.

Reluctantly, he launched into a hurried account of his progress as a healer, but the wizard would not allow him to rush his explanation, and demanded further details and examples of the experiences he was describing. Terrel eventually tried to curb his impatience, realizing that haste would only make the examination last longer. He wondered briefly what Tofana would do if he

simply walked out, but he didn't have the nerve to try it. Towards the end of the discussion, Terrel realized that he too was learning something new. The 'waking dream' that he used when healing was similar in concept to the 'lines' that - according to the wizard - lay inside everyone, and which were utilized in many of her magical processes, including the healing done in the pools.

'Of course, the lines aren't just confined to our bodies,' Tofana went on. 'They're everywhere, and they can be used for destroying things as well as mending them. Obviously, the more violent a tornado you can bring down upon your enemies, the more proof you have that the gods are on your side.' Terrel couldn't tell whether the wizard was being sarcastic or serious. He wanted to know more about her work - but not now. He was desperate to get away and talk to Alyssa.

'Of course, the gods are supposed to be above such things,' the wizard added, with a wry smile, 'but if that's the case, then why did they cause the Lunar Schism in the first place?'

'What's that?' Terrel asked, unable to restrain his curiosity.

'It all goes back to the last Great Conclave,' she replied. 'At Akurvellir, three hundred and seventy years ago. During a debate in the Circle of Truce, a dispute arose over Bvandir's comet and whether it could materially affect the orbits of the moons. That was easy enough to resolve, of course, but the more important aspect of the argument, the one that caused the divide, was whether Bvandir and all the other gods could arrange such things to suit themselves, or whether they were as much the victims of fate as we are.'

'And that caused the schism?'

'Yes. Black and Red against White and Gold.'

Terrel blinked, hardly believing the implications of what he was hearing.

'You mean that was the start of the war?' he exclaimed.

Tofana nodded.

'A point of philosophy?' Terrel was half shouting now. 'You've been fighting for hundreds of years over a tiny philosophical disagreement?'

The wizard shrugged.

'Such matters of theology were important then,' she said. 'Now it's just history.'

'Then why don't you stop} Thousands of people have died - your country is literally being torn apart - and all for nothing!'

'The hatred is sufficient reason now,' she explained. 'It's unquenchable. We just have to go on until we gain the victory we deserve.'

'That's insane,' Terrel declared, his earlier inhibitions swept aside by sheer horror.

'Hardly that. The gods themselves sanctioned the conflict.'

'How? What did they do?'

'Nothing.' Tofana smiled at the healer's astonishment.

'Then how . . .'

'The leaders of the four wizardly orders set out a covenant. The dispute would be settled by a sign from the gods. But none came.'

'They did nothing.'

'Exactly. Which proved our side of the argument, as far as I'm concerned. Of course, the White and Gold didn't see it that way at the time.'

'And the fighting began,' Terrel whispered.

'Yes,' Tofana admitted cheerfully.

'That's the most-' Terrel began, then stopped. He felt a mixture of outrage and revulsion at what he'd learnt, and knew that he couldn't stand to be in the wizard's presence a moment longer. Heedless of her attitude, he swung round and strode blindly towards the door. Once there he hesitated, glancing back. Tofana had already returned to her solitary pottering amongst her documents and samples, and appeared to have accepted his abrupt departure easily enough. Looking at her now, she seemed to be nothing more than an ineffectual eccentric, but Terrel knew better. Tofana and her kind were responsible for the continuing madness of all Myvatan.

As he turned to leave, hoping to find Alyssa, Terrel was halted by another, quite different voice – but one he knew just as well.

'You can't hide from your dreams,' one of the water buckets whispered. 'You never could.'

It was something Jax had said to him before Terrel even knew who he was, and to hear his brother's mocking

tone coming from a supposedly inanimate object was doubly unnerving.

'And now you can't hide from me either,' the bucket added ominously.

Chapter Twenty

The stupid thing even tried to drown itself rather than let me take over, Alyssa declared. When it realized it couldn't stop me, it went berserk.

All the mustelas are trained to be completely loyal to Tofana, Terrel pointed out. Taking orders from anyone else must have been horrifying for him.

It wasn't much fun from my point of view. I've never met such resistance before.

That's probably Tofana's doing. She can talk to them – not like this, but so they can understand each other. They must have a very strong link.

Which might make them wise to what I do, Alyssa concluded.

Terrel nodded.

Are you all right now?

Yes. I'm in control – for the moment, at least. He . . . what's his name?

Bezylum.

He's lying low, but I can't help feeling I'm being watched.

You think he might remember? Terrel queried. The only aftereffect shown by the other creatures Alyssa had inhabited had been a short-lived puzzlement.

/ hope not. That could make things awkward for you.

I'm glad you're here, anyway.

To Terrel's immense relief, the mustela had popped

out of one of the rat-holes just as he was nearing his own room. No one had seen them go inside, and once the door was closed they had been able to relax in the knowledge that their privacy would be respected.

I didn't have any choice, Alyssa added, obviously still worrying about the possible consequences of her host's connection to the wizard. There aren't any other animals in here.

I'm just happy you were able to stay this long, Terrel said. After her earlier warning, he'd been afraid that she would be gone when he finally managed to get away from Tofana.

Sometimes, when the windows aren't open wide enough, it's necessary to break a few, Alyssa replied, sounding grim.

You haven't put yourself in danger, have you? he asked, not liking the tone of her voice. You know that's the last thing I'd want. I mean–

You 're not the only one who needs these meetings, she said, cutting off his protest. / have to keep an eye on you, don't I? What's the point of loving someone unless you try to look after them?

For a few moments, Terrel was unable to respond. He'd known for a very long time that he loved Alyssa, and knew that the feeling was returned, but each time he was reminded of this fact he was swept by a wave of longing to see her in her own shape. Her presence in spirit, and the familiar sound of her voice, had been of great comfort to him during their years apart, but he wanted more. Even in his dreams he was denied the sight of the real Alyssa.

I'd look after you too if I could, he said quietly.

Someone else is doing that, she replied. But don't worry, Terrel. I know what's in your heart.

Moons! Are you two getting all slushy?

Elam's ghostly figure had materialized in a corner of the room, sitting cross-legged on the floor. Apart from being

transparent and faintly luminous, he looked exactly like the fifteen-year-old boy he'd been when the warden of Havenmoon had stabbed him to death, and the expression of mock disgust on his urchin face was one Terrel remembered well. Since that time – over seven years ago – the boy's appearance hadn't changed

at all. Had he lived, he'd have been a full-grown man by now, just like his friend. Setting aside that melancholy thought, Terrel grinned.

It's good to see you, he said.

At least you've got some decent accommodation for once, Elam remarked, looking around. Even if it is a bit weird.

All the rooms in the pyramid are this shape, Terrel told him.

Are the others with you? Alyssa asked.

They'll be along soon, Elam replied, his expression turning sour. Let's just enjoy our time together first. I'm sick of having to be serious all the time. You're still not much good at cutting your own hair, I see, he said, looking at the mustela.

The animal's fur was dry now, but it had set in clumps that gave it an uneven, unkempt look. The same had been true of Alyssa's own blonde hair, which she used to crop herself, careless of her appearance. The memory of it now almost overwhelmed Terrel. He thought back to the last time he had seen her – lying unconscious in a dungeon cell, a pale shape in the darkness as she began her long dreaming. Everything he had been doing since then was worthwhile in part because he believed he would get back to her eventually. Without that hope, he would have given up long ago.

Animals don't cut their hair, silly, Alyssa said, her laughter making the mustela chatter softly.

I've always wondered about that, Elam went on, grinning again now. Why is it only human hair that keeps on growing? And why only on our heads?

It could get a bit embarrassing if it happened anywhere else, Alyssa commented.

And I don't suppose you'd get too many people wanting to be barbers, Elam added.

Terrel found that he was blushing – which was mortifying – while laughing at the same time – which felt wonderful. There hadn't been much laughter in his life recently. It was good to have the three of them together again, even if they could never go back to the way they'd once been.

Almost like old times, isn't it? Elam said, echoing the sentiment. Except that unlike the rest of us, he's growing up. He peered closely at Terrel's face.

What is that?

Terrel rubbed his chin, knowing that his recent attempts at shaving had been only partly successful.

My Aunt Melia had a better beard than that, Elam declared. She was someone you wouldn't want to meet on a dark night, I can tell you.

Terrel had never heard his friend joke about his family before. He had always referred to them in resentful terms. The fact that – like Terrel's parents – they had abandoned him to a madhouse had been one of the similarities that had drawn the two boys together in the first place.

Do you suppose I have aunts somewhere? the healer wondered.

When your father has seven wives, you're bound to have quite a few, Elam commented.

I don't know that I want to meet any of them – even in daylight, Terrel added. I have all the family I need right here.

A rat and a ghost? Elam exclaimed. You're not fussy, are you?

I'm not a rat, Alyssa stated haughtily. I'm a mustela.

I'm sorry, your ladyship, Elam said, bowing. At least you should feel at home here. This whole island is mad.

You felt that too? Terrel queried.

It would've been hard to miss. It's stronger in some places than others, mind you.

This was something Terrel hadn't known, but now Elam had mentioned it, it seemed to tie in with his own experiences. Just as he was about to ask how the newcomer knew so much about Myvatan, the air shivered and two more ghosts appeared. As they did so, Elam's smile turned to a resigned frown, and Terrel remembered the disquiet he'd felt at his friend's earlier comment. He'd been aware of friction between his spectral allies for some time, and the last

thing he needed now was for that to get worse. The expressions on the faces of the latest arrivals did little to quell his anxiety.

How long do we have? Shahan asked quickly, looking down at Alyssa.

I'm not sure, she replied. Long enough not to have to rush, I think.

Good. With his great beak of a nose, his straggly beard and grey hair, Shahan looked just like the common perception of an imperial court seer – which had indeed been his role in life. Hello, Terrel. It's good to see you again.

And you. Do you have news for me?

We 've a lot to tell you, but much depends on what you already know, Muzeni replied.

Even though his image was less sharp than that of the other ghosts – because he had died peacefully, centuries before them – the old man was an instantly recognizable figure. His colourful, outlandish clothes were unlike any Terrel had ever seen on anyone else, and his eyes still shone with heretical zeal. So it would probably save time if you fill us in on what you 've been up to since you got here.

Terrel could see the logic of this argument and, in any case, he knew that was the way things always worked

during their infrequent meetings. So he set aside his own impatience and tried to put his thoughts into some kind of order. His voyage on the Skua seemed a long time ago now – even though in reality he'd been on Myvatan for less than a month – and so much had happened since then that it took him a while to think back. Presenting his experiences in chronological order was the only sensible way to proceed, so he began with his conversations with Kjolur and the subsequent arrangement for him to go ashore at Whale Ness. Muzeni and Shahan were obviously pleased that the local legends seemed to be linked to their earlier discoveries, but they were clearly as uncertain as Terrel himself about the reasons for Ostan's change of heart.

Have you seen this Kjolur again since then? Shahan asked.

No. And I'm not likely to. The Red Quarter's on the opposite side of the island. Look, I'll show you. Terrel pulled out the map and pointed to where they were, then to Port Akranes. And this is Whale Ness, he added. You can see why the whole peninsula is a forbidden zone. Most of it's in the Black Quarter because it's to the west of the dividing line, but because it's such a long spit of land, the only way to reach it from the main part of the island is to go into the Gold Quarter and double back.

Unless you approach from the sea, as you did, Muzeni said, nodding.

That's right. I climbed the cliff directly below Savik's Whale, Terrel told them with a touch of pride. He went on to describe the sense of madness he'd encountered, the crystal city dream that had reinforced his sense of foreboding, and his adventures inside the stone whale. His audience remained attentive as he told them about the battle, his eventual capture and the journey to Saudark. With the benefit of what he had learnt more recently, he was also able to tell them something about the background to the war and its cause.

The war is everything here, he added. No one alive has ever known anything else. The hatred is inbred. The wizards think of it as an elaborate game – with the soldiers as their willing pieces. Everyone else just goes along with it. It's awful.

Does anyone here still think you 're a spy? Muzeni asked.

A few of them are still suspicious, Terrel admitted, but there's not much I can do about that. I keep telling them I don't want to get involved, but no one seems to be able to accept it.

You're right to do so, Shahan muttered. This isn't your war. Go on.

Terrel obediently related his exploits in Saudark, describing the various people he had met and the things he had seen after he'd been accepted as a healer. The healing pools and the hall full of sleepers were singled out for particular mention.

After that I was brought here, he continued. Providing a description of the pyramid and its inhabitants took quite a while and, naturally enough, some of

his recent discoveries were the subject of considerable interest. Magic seems to be very important on Myvatan, Muzeni hazarded. Yes. It runs through everything here. And it's all connected to water. Alyssa gave a small chitter and Terrel sensed her discomfort. No wonder . . . Muzeni began. That would mean— That the elementals' belief is true, Terrel completed for him. Water is a magical substance, at least in the hands of Myvatan's wizards and their neomancers. So this island is the worst possible place for one of the Ancients, Shahan concluded. Exactly. There's so much water here, in every one of its forms - snow, ice, liquid, steam. And they make use of it all. That explains a lot, Elam said grimly. Terrel wasn't sure what to make of this comment, but his friend did not elaborate. That's not my only problem, Terrel added, and told them about the time he'd lost when Jax had taken over. He's a weather-mage, don't forget. He's in his element here. You 'd better make sure you don't give him another chance then, Muzeni advised. Which means avoiding this mitra stuff, Elam put in. That could be tricky, Terrel said. It's everywhere. Everywhere? Shahan queried. Yes. It's not just in the pools, it's in every building I've been in - except this one - and even the soldiers' tents were full of the smell of it. I wonder whether that might have anything to do with the general attitude to the war? Muzeni mused. This idea made perfect sense to Terrel. The detachment he'd felt while under the herb's influence had dulled his outrage at the violence, as well as ultimately leaving him unable to defend his own body. In that moment he became determined to find out more about mitra and its effects. You'll have to watch your step with Tofana, Shahan said. She's probably going to want Jax to take over again sometime, so they can compare notes. Terrel hadn't considered that possibility. You'll have to be on your guard, Muzeni agreed. Are you a prisoner here? Elam asked. Could she force you to inhale the stuff? I haven't actually been told I'm a prisoner, Terrel replied. There's just no way to leave. It's as if the thought that anyone would ever want to is beyond belief. As far as I know, there's only one door to the outside, and the mustelas control that. So if you ever need to get out, Alyssa could occupy one of them again and help you to leave? Elam concluded. I suppose so, Terrel replied, glancing at the quiet creature. But she might need some of the others to go along with her and— If they're all as stubborn as this one, that could be a problem, Alyssa completed for him. So if you're stuck here, Muzeni said, could Tofana make you take mitra? My guess is that inside this pyramid she could do anything she wants. I'll just have to try to persuade her not to. She's preoccupied with a lot of other things at the moment. Terrel paused. That's just about it, really, he concluded, hoping they'd give him some news now. As I see it, Shahan said slowly, apart from the indications that brought you here in the first place, the only real corrobor-oration that the fourth elemental is on the island is the presence of the sleepers. There's my dream too, Terrel said cautiously. The crystal city is linked to the Ancient somehow - as well as to the sleepers. You said it was in pieces? Muzeni queried. Yes. He'd been reluctant to talk about it too much in front of Alyssa, but as desperately as he needed her help and companionship, he did not want to endanger her - and the least he could do was warn her. It was all fractures. The original structure was unrecognizable.

He'd known at the time that there was no chance of his being able to heal the shattered city.

And you think this could mean the Ancient here is either sick or mad? Muzeni said.

Yes. It might even be infecting the whole island. Terrel looked at Alyssa again, hoping she'd be able to reassure him that her protection was still intact, but she remained silent, the rodent's hooded eyes giving nothing away.

Then it seems imperative that you locate the elemental as soon as possible, Shahan commented.

If it's as bad as I think, I'm not going to be able to heal it, Terrel warned. Well, you 've got to try.

No one else would even have a chance, Muzeni added. And we'll do all we can to help you.

Elam made a derisive snorting noise. Psinoma did not allow for genuine sound, of course, but the silent link could be just as eloquent as the human tongue. What? Terrel asked. What is it?

Our friend here has been feeling a little low recently, Shahan said quickly. This extended stay in your world isn 't easy for any of us, Muzeni explained. Oh, come on! Elam snapped. That's not the problem. You know as well as I do that we 're not meant to be here.

As if to punctuate this emphatic declaration, someone knocked sharply on Terrel's door.

Chapter Twenty-One

Everyone froze in place, the same thought running through each mind. Apart from Terrel, only a very few people had ever been able to see the ghosts, and they had usually been young children. But because so many of the pyramid's inhabitants had some sort of magical talent and training, it was possible that they'd be able to see into the spectral world. It was even possible that Tofana herself was outside – and Terrel doubted whether they could hide anything from her.

'Who is it?' he called out, nervousness making him brusque.

'I've brought your evening meal, sir. Shall I bring it in?'

With some relief, Terrel recognized the voice as belonging to one of the servants.

Shall we go? Shahan asked silently.

No. We'll risk it, but you 'd better hide, Alyssa. Quick.

The mustela scampered across the room and disappeared under the bed.

'Come in!' Terrel called.

The girl entered with a tray, putting it down on the table in front of Terrel at his signal. She gave no sign of noticing the three ghosts, who remained quite still, watching her closely, and after Terrel thanked her she hurried out, closing the door behind her.

Definitely better accommodations, Elam said. You 've never had service like this before.

Nobody responded to the light-hearted remark and, in truth, Elam's habitual flippancy had seemed forced. Terrel ignored the food. He had no stomach for it now.

What did you mean, you 're not meant to be here?

Just that, Elam replied dourly, unable to meet the healer's gaze.

We don't have any choice, Shahan said.

You think I don't know that? Elam exploded. But just by being here we're going to make things worse. You know we are.

Make what worse? Terrel asked.

You wouldn't understand.

This dismissive comment was so unlike Elam that Terrel was hurt, and shocked into silence.

If we can keep the disruption to a minimum– Muzeni began.

How? Elam demanded. Just because we 're in this triangular box, it doesn't mean they're not aware of our presence.

No, but—

Who are they? Terrel cut in.

This has nothing to do with your task, Shahan said.

You can't fob me off like that! On too many occasions in the past, Terrel had discovered — too late — that his ghostly allies had not told him all they knew. Their excuses — that they had done it for his own good, or because the information had seemed irrelevant — had already worn very thin.

And anyway, how can you be so sure? Elam asked belligerently. What if this is another test?

It goes way beyond that, Muzeni answered. And besides, why should Terrel still need to prove his worth? Time and again he's—

Not here, Elam countered. Not to these gods.

You have to tell me what you're talking about! Terrel shouted.

We can't, his friend replied, sounding wretched now rather than angry. It would only make it worse.

Then talk about something that is useful. Otherwise we're just wasting time.

The ghosts were obviously shaken by Terrel's unaccustomed venom.

I'm sorry, Shahan said eventually. You're right. We should not be burdening you with our problems. The seer glanced at Elam, who was hunched over, looking down at the floor.

I'm sorry too, the boy said quietly.

Reluctantly, Terrel accepted that he was not going to learn any more. Even so, he was still feeling both distressed and indignant, and he was glad when Muzeni took the lead in bringing up a topic relevant to his own progress.

Assuming they're going to let you out of this place eventually, the heretic began, and regardless of the elemental's state of health or mind, you're going to have to try to track it down. Do you have any idea where it might be? No, not really, Terrel replied. The one in Misrah settled in the most remote place possible, but that was because it was also the driest place it could find. The trouble with Myvatan is that there's water everywhere. He pulled the map out from under the tray and pointed to the middle section. The central part of the island is furthest from the sea, but it's covered by an enormous permanent icefield, so it's not likely to be anywhere there. But there are rivers, springs and other glaciers spread all over. I just don't know where it could have gone to escape the water.

Do you think that's why it's gone mad? Shahan asked. Because it couldn't find a safe resting place?

/ doubt it. If what I saw and felt in the dream was accurate, then I think it must have been caused by something worse than that. Even the Ancient in Talazoria was nowhere near as bad, and it was surrounded by a moat.

Which doesn't get us very far, Elam concluded, rejoining the discussion. Have you heard any rumours or gossip that might help you?

Not that I can think of.

What about local legends? Muzeni asked.

Nothing that seems relevant.

After a few moments, Shahan pointed out another problem.

If the war is going on all the time, it's going to make travelling difficult, let alone tracking the creature down.

The war doesn't go on all the time, Elam said. Perhaps Terrel could use the period of hibernation, when everyone else is asleep.

Maybe, the healer responded. But what if I fall asleep too? There's no way of knowing how I'll react when the time comes.

And it will be horribly cold then too, Shahan added. It might be hard for Terrel to survive on his own.

Anyway, that's months away. It would mean me having to stay here almost a year. I'd rather get on with the search sooner if I can. Terrel paused. Wait a moment. Surely you can find out roughly where the Ancient is! All you have to do is to travel round the island with Alyssa and find out where the wind comes from.

In the past, each of the elementals had been surrounded by a power that could



not be felt by anyone in Terrel's world, but which had repulsed the ghosts with the force of a hurricane. The trouble was that with each successive discovery, the distance at which they were held had increased. If the same thing happened this time, they wouldn't be able to pinpoint the strange entity's exact position but they could confirm its presence.

When none of the ghosts answered immediately, Terrel was worried.

What's the matter?

We've already tried that, Shahan admitted. It didn't work.

You didn't feel it at all? But that means the Ancient can't be here!

The ghosts glanced at each other.

It's not as simple as that, Muzeni said. We did feel something, but... it was so erratic it was impossible to draw any conclusions.

It's as though it's there sometimes but not at others, Shahan added.

At first we thought it must be moving around, the heretic went on, but the fluctuations are too chaotic for that. Nothing is consistent – the strength of the force, its direction, even the places it affects. So we can't be any help, I'm afraid.

The only thing we can say for sure is that the elemental here – assuming that really is what's producing the wind – is different from all the others, Elam said.

It's lined up differently, Terrel murmured.

What?

Nothing. He didn't want to articulate his fears. It sounds as though this isn't the first time you've been to Myvatan.

We've been here several times, Shahan confirmed. Whenever we could. But it's always been the same. You'll have to trace the Ancient by some other means, I'm afraid.

Fishing for treasure, Terrel whispered.

In the meantime, Muzeni said, sounding a little more positive, there are aspects of our own researches at home that may be useful.

Tell me. In the past, such guidance as Terrel had received from the seers had proved confusing and dangerous at

times, often only becoming clear in retrospect. Nevertheless, one way or another it had usually led him closer to his eventual goal, and in his current situation it was certainly better than nothing.

We're short on specifics as yet, Shahan began, sounding uncharacteristically apologetic, but the background's becoming a little clearer at least. The seers are still monitoring the changes to the Dark Moon, but it took them longer than it should have done to realize that the orbits of the other three are now being affected too.

Most people know that, Terrel claimed. The sailors who brought me here were certainly aware of it.

Yes, well, Kamin and the other court seers aren't exactly quick on the uptake, Muzeni commented, with a return to his normal disdain for Shahan's former colleagues.

To be fair, the seer commented, the changes were quite subtle to start with. They still are, in fact.

Are the changes because of the Dark Moon, or is something affecting each moon separately? Terrel asked.

It almost certainly stems from the Dark Moon, Muzeni replied, but no one's been able to prove that conclusively yet. What it has done is make the calculations for predicting the next confluence fearfully complicated.

Even we've had trouble with it, Shahan admitted, and with Lathan still a sleeper, there's no one in Makhaya who's really up to the task. As it is, the one thing we can definitely say is that it keeps getting earlier.

There are several different possibilities, Muzeni went on, depending on whether the changes continue, and at what rate, but the most likely projection now puts it between ten and twelve years from now. That's only thirty-two to thirty-four years after the last one, rather than the seventy-five it's always

been before.

Terrel and Jax had been born on the night of the last four-moon conjunction, which was why their lives had always been under particular scrutiny.

That's less than half the previous cycle, Shahan pointed out.

But it's still a long way off, Elam said.

It's not going to take me ten years to find the last elemental, Terrel agreed. Wherever it is.

Perhaps it's not the last one, Elam suggested.

The healer frowned at this idea. He had assumed that once he'd completed his task on Myvatan, he'd be free to start the long journey back to the Floating Islands. But if there was yet another Ancient, the nature of his bargain would force him to seek it out before he could go home.

Even if this is the last one, Alyssa said, it's still going to take you some time to get back to Vadanis. That's where the circle closes.

Not that long, I hope! Terrel exclaimed. He wanted to talk about the prospect of seeing her again, but he felt awkward about expressing such a sentiment in the presence of the others – and then he was distracted by the mustela's odd behaviour. Unnoticed by any of the others, she had crawled out from under the bed and was now lying on her back in a most unratlike pose, with all four legs in the air. Are you all right?

I'm fine. Keep talking.

Are we running out of time?

No. I just need to concentrate.

Concentrate on what? Terrel wondered, but he knew he'd get no answer. Turning back to the others, he found Elam grinning, his eyebrows raised.

Practising her backstroke? he suggested.

Terrel smiled. Alyssa had always refused to join the boys when they swam in the lake at Havenmoon. She hadn't even liked getting splashed.

The Tindaya Code still seems to indicate that this is the last one to be found, Muzeni said, returning the discussion to its original course.

And in any case, we're getting ahead of ourselves, Shahan commented. Until Terrel renews his bargain with the Ancient here, this is all speculation. In that sense, it doesn't matter if there are any more.

It matters to me, Terrel thought, but didn't say anything.

Have there been any new developments with the Code? he asked instead.

Actually, quite a lot, the seer replied. There's been a huge increase in the scope for new research recently.

Really? Why?

You might find this hard to believe, Shahan answered, but it's because of Jax. You mean he's actually been helpful for once?

Not deliberately, I'm sure, Muzeni remarked, but his actions certainly led to the new discovery.

What did he do?

He came across a reference to a spring at Tindaya, Elam said. He had made it his duty to keep an eye on the prince ever since the allies had discovered that Terrel's destiny was linked to his brother's.

On top of the mountain? the healer enquired.

That's what surprised everyone. It made no sense to take it literally.

Interpreters had always assumed it was just a poetic notion – a fount of knowledge, or some such phrase – but Jax insisted on an expedition to find the source of what he called the 'sacred water'.

And because almost everyone there still thinks he's the Guardian, Muzeni put in, no one was prepared to argue with him. The extraordinary thing is, he was right.

He told them where to dig, Elam said, taking up the story, and they discovered an underground chamber, a cellar no one had even known existed. When they finally broke through, the workers were almost swept away. The entire room had filled up with water. After it emptied out, they found a small spring bubbling up from a hole in the floor – but that wasn't all. The

malls and even the ceiling of the chamber were covered with writing and signs. It's another part of the Code, Shahan said, one that no one's ever seen before, and it's provided a whole new field for study. For us, as well as for Kamin 's people.

Jax wasn 't much interested in that, though, Elam nodded. He just wanted the water. He insisted on taking samples of it back to Makhaya, and building a system of channels and reservoirs so that in future supplies would always be available when he needed them.

This was beginning to sound unpleasantly familiar to Terrel, and he understood now that there had been another reason for the ghosts finding Myvatan's link between magic and water so disturbing. The prospect of Jax as a wizard did not bear thinking about.

Has he done anything with the samples yet?

Not as far as I know, Elam replied. But two days ago he left for Betancuria, taking some of the water with him.

Terrel was unable to conceal his dismay. Betancuria was the mining area near the centre of Vadanis where he had encountered the first of the Ancients. It had made its lair in the disused workings, and part of his initial bargain with the creature had been to promise that it could remain in the mines undisturbed. Jax had already broken that promise, and now seemed to be intent on doing so again, but this time he might be armed with a magical weapon that would terrify the elemental. The possible consequences of that were too appalling to contemplate.

I wasn't able to follow him there, of course, Elam added regretfully.

We just have to hope Kamin doesn 't let him do anything too stupid. Shahan did not sound very confident. In the meantime, we're left with the new section of the Code.

Does any of it apply to what's happening here? Terrel asked, trying to rid himself of the dread he felt at this latest news of his twin.

We think so, yes, Muzeni replied. For a start, there's mention of a group of creatures – some people say snakes – who eat ice and possibly even live inside ice.

Ice-worms? Terrel wondered, remembering the soldiers' comments about his eyes. Could be. Have you seen them?

No. And I don't think I want to. How do they fit into the prophecy?

Believe it or not, Shahan told him, they're supposed to become bodyguards to the Guardian.

They 're protecting the Ancient?

It seems like it, but it's hardly going to need protecting from you, is it? The Guardian and the Mentor are allies.

It hasn't always felt like that, Terrel muttered.

The central premise of the Tindaya Code was that a hero, known as the Guardian, who had been born - or perhaps awoken - on the night of one lunar confluence, would fulfil his destiny at the time of the next four-moon conjunction, and in doing so prevent an upheaval that would destroy most of Nydus. The other main figure in the prophecy was the Mentor, described as a go-between, or translator, who was supposed to teach the Guardian to distinguish between good and evil. The ghosts' latest thinking was that the entity was the Guardian, and that Terrel, as the link between them and humanity, was the Mentor. Everything they did was based on that assumption, even

though - like most oracles - the Tindaya Code was frustratingly ambiguous. The same section of inscriptions also describes a 'city drowned beneath the sea', where a 'sacred flame burns even in the darkness', Muzeni stated. Have you heard of anything like that? In one of the legends?

Terrel shook his head. A vague memory nagged at the back of his mind, but he couldn't place it.

Well, see what you can find out, Shahan suggested. It could be important.

And there's another passage that's interesting, Muzeni went on. Do you remember the inscriptions at Y-Harah?

I never saw them myself. Terrel had been blind at the time. But I remember being told about them.

Well, one of the carvings there referred to a pendulum. The same motif is repeated at Tindaya, but this time it seems to imply that the pendulum is not swinging through the air but through water, possibly the sea, until it becomes fixed in place.

By a curse? Terrel asked.

I don't remember anything like that, Muzeni said, glancing at his colleague for confirmation. Why do you ask?

Because one of the legends here describes how Myvatan travelled back and forth across the ocean, as a floating, mobile fortress, until it was set in place by their enemy's curse.

Interesting, Shahan responded. So you think Myvatan might be the pendulum. We'll have to look at that section again. It also contains an obscure reference to the Dark Moon, just as the one at Y-Harah did, so I'm sure it's connected to your task.

None of this really helps me, though, Terrel said.

I suppose not, but it might be useful later as we learn more.

Is there anything else?

There's a very strange reference to a family becoming starlight, but we can't make head nor tail of that.

Could it be anything to do with my star? Terrel glanced at his left hand. That was where, under special circumstances, the invisible amulet that he carried within him appeared. He had captured it at Tindaya during the first total eclipse Nydus had ever experienced. The Ancients referred to it as his 'spiral', but to human eyes it looked just like a miniature star.

It's possible, Shahan conceded, though I don't see how.

Are there any eclipses involving the Dark Moon forecast some time soon? Terrel asked. In the past, he'd been able to make remote contact with the elementals during those rare and awe-inspiring events.

None here that we can foresee, Muzeni replied at once, as if he'd been expecting the question. But if the orbits keep changing, you never know.

The only other translations we've managed so far are some lines about 'crossing a bridge between the clouds', and a warning to 'beware the fire within', Shahan added.

And I don't suppose you know what they mean either? Terrel remarked resignedly.

Don't eat too much spicy food? Elam suggested.

I don't suppose the people who built the temple were too concerned about our digestion, Terrel replied, grinning nonetheless. It's frustrating, though. I keep getting warnings I don't understand. When I saw Alyssa on the Skua, she told me not to trust my own instincts.

The ghosts all looked at the mustela.

I don't remember much about that visit, Alyssa said, rolling over on to her stomach and then squatting up on her hind legs.

We were trying to warn you about the perils you were facing, Muzeni told Terrel. We couldn't come ourselves, and Alyssa offered to act as messenger. It seems she got a little confused.

As it turned out, things went as well as we could have hoped, Shahan added, but it might have been very different. Playing with legends can be a dangerous business.

But you wanted Terrel to do it all the same, didn't you? Elam's faintly accusing tone was not lost on the seers.

We had little choice, Shahan argued. He had to come ashore somewhere, and his exploits have given him access to much more than any orthodox arrival would have done. It led him here.

The fact that the seer had bothered to defend his own actions to the boy was another sign of the change in the relationship between the ghosts. When Terrel had first come to know them, both Shahan and Muzeni had regarded Elam with an amused tolerance that was not far short of contempt. It was very different now

- almost as though the boy was the one who held the reins of power within the trio. In the ghosts' world, it was possible that Elam had grown up.

#### Chapter Twenty-Two

There's no point worrying about the past, Terrel told them, as anxious as ever to avoid any disputes among his friends. It's what happens next that's important. Is there anything else I should know?

You've moved again as far as the predominant lunar alignments are concerned, Muzeni said. You're in the sphere of the Red Moon here.

Fire and violence, Terrel thought. That's appropriate for Myvatan. And love, he reminded himself. Don't forget that. Unconsciously he glanced at Alyssa before returning his attention to the ghosts.

I've lost track of the cycles since I've been in here. What is the Red Moon now?

It'll be full in six days' time, Shahan replied.

And the others?

The Amber was new two days ago, the White will be full tomorrow night and the Dark Moon was full yesterday.

Everything changing, Alyssa remarked.

The wizards here know that their respective powers alter according to the relative strengths of their moons, Terrel said. One way or another, everyone on Nydus was in thrall to the moons.

Shahan and Muzeni nodded, apparently having come to the end of what they wanted to say.

There's something else you can tell me, Terrel said. Apart from anything Jax might do with what he's learnt here, is there anything on Vadanis that's being affected, or is likely to be affected, by what I'm doing on Myvatan? Much to his dismay at the time, the earlier threats that he'd had to deal with had expanded to include his homeland, regardless of how far away he had been. The last thing he needed now was to have to worry about the safety of the island where Alyssa still slept.

Not as far as we know, Shahan answered.

Good.

But ultimately, all of Nydus will be affected, Muzeni pointed out.

He knows that, Elam snapped irritably. And so will-

What's she doing? Shahan cried in sudden alarm.

Terrel swung round to look at the mustela. It was holding one of its forelegs up to its mouth and was gnawing at something in the fur. At the seer's cry, it looked up, its beady eyes flaring, and Terrel saw that the rodent's teeth had been chewing on Alyssa's ring.

What are you doing? he gasped, his heart pounding at the thought of what might happen if that precious link was destroyed.

I...I... Alyssa sounded bewildered.

Is it all right? Terrel asked, getting down from his stool to inspect the animal's forepaw. To his great relief the ring was still intact, if a little frayed. What were you trying to do?

It wasn't me, she muttered angrily. This . . . this thing keeps trying . . .

I think we should leave, Shahan offered. She obviously won't be able to take the strain for much longer.

No, Alyssa responded. I'm all right now. You can go on.

Terrel was just as concerned as the seer, and he was about to tell her that when something happened to throw all his thoughts into confusion. Although Terrel couldn't

feel anything, it had suddenly become clear that the ghosts were being affected by a strong, blustery wind blowing across the enclosed room. Their clothes and hair were flapping wildly, and Muzeni was having difficulty keeping himself upright. From the expressions of panic on their faces, Terrel guessed that they were terribly afraid - and knew that the meeting was finished now, no matter what Alyssa thought. He had never seen the ghosts in this state before.

We . . . have , .. to . . . Shahan gasped.

Go! Terrel shouted, making it an order.  
The three ghosts vanished instantly, and the room was still once more.  
Did they get away safely? Terrel asked.  
I think so.  
You think so?  
I couldn't exactly follow them, could I?  
Terrel calmed down, recognizing the sense of her argument.  
That was the elemental, wasn't it?  
Yes.  
Is it still blowing?  
Yes. It's even stronger now. I won't be able to leave for a while yet.  
But you're all right?  
Of course. As long as I'm in the shape of an animal, there's no problem.  
Even this one?  
He is giving me more trouble than usual, but I'm still in control.  
Can I do anything to help you?  
Just keep talking to me, Alyssa replied. Did you manage to discuss everything you wanted?  
I wanted to tell them that I feel the other three elementals were somehow guiding me on the journey here. That's a good sign, don't you think?  
You mean there was a link between them and the one here even before you arrived?  
Yes. It might be that they're aware their 'brother' is sick, and they want me to help him.  
Let's hope so. I have the feeling you're going to need all the help you can get this time.  
Do you know what's happening with the other elementals now?  
No, but I know Shahan and Muzeni have a theory that they only came up to the surface of the planet recently – in their terms, at least. When you're as old as they are, a few years, even decades, are the mere blink of an eye.  
Terrel considered this. He was quite willing to believe the theory because it coincided with his own impressions. It would surely have been impossible for the Ancients to remain undetected for so long unless they had been buried deep within the rock and fire at the heart of Nydus. But quite why they should have chosen to rise now – and thus unknowingly disrupt so much human activity – was still a mystery. As yet, all Terrel knew for certain was that it must somehow be connected to the changes in the course and size of the Dark Moon.  
What are they trying to do? he wondered.  
I've no idea, Alyssa confessed. But I guess we'll find out at the next four-moon confluence.  
Whenever that is, Terrel agreed, nodding. All their fates seemed to be leading up to that one shifting point in the future.  
The mustela began to fidget, and Terrel quickly began to speak again. They had already been talking long into the night, but he wanted to keep her mind alert in case Bezyllum tried to reassert himself again.  
Do you know why they were arguing? What's the problem they wouldn't tell me about?  
They won't talk to me either, she replied, rather resentfully. I can only think there must be something wrong in their world.  
Is it because they can't 'move on', that they're still stuck here helping me?  
No, I don't think so. That is affecting them, Elam most of all, but this is something different. Maybe I should ask some of the ghosts here.  
There are ghosts on Myvatan?  
Too many, Alyssa replied mysteriously. They're everywhere.  
I haven't seen them. Terrel had no idea what she was talking about.  
You haven't been looking, she told him. The corners are different here.  
Alyssa had always seen ghosts – even back at Havenmoon, where the dead were often just as insane as the living inmates. She had told Terrel that ghosts 'walked differently' and that, for most people, they were always 'just around

the next corner', but after the adventures of the last few years, Terrel had come to believe that this was a corner he could now see around. Apparently that was not always true. Are there any here now? he asked.

Of course not. The wind is blowing. But when it stops you won't have to look far. Really? I told you about them earlier.

You did?

You'll find out soon enough. Although . . . She broke off, and the mustela cocked its head to one side as if listening to something.

Although what? Terrel prompted hopefully.

The palace builders have lots of names, Alyssa remarked obscurely. If I can't rest, I'll have to sleep here.

Is that wise? Won't Bezymul-

He can share my dreams if he wants to, she decided, with a touch of mischief in her voice. So saying, she jumped up on to the bed and curled into a ball. Almost immediately her breathing slowed to the rhythms of sleep, and Terrel was left alone.

He spent the next hour revising everything he had learnt, and picking at the food that had been left for him. He hadn't expected to have much of an appetite, but when the mustela finally stirred, he was surprised to see that the plates were all empty.

The trouble with breaking windows, Alyssa remarked drowsily, is that you sometimes get hurt.

Are you hurt? Terrel was used to her abrupt way of starting conversations in the middle, and was only concerned with the implications of her words.

No, but then I haven't tried to close it again yet.

I don't want you taking any unnecessary risks.

Too late for that now, she told him. The wind's stopped, and I have to go.

. Terrel had been expecting this.

Goodbye, he said quietly, trying to hide the sadness he felt at her impending departure. You'll come back soon, won't you?

Of course. There are a lot of twists and turns ahead of us. She was referring to the unknown road that Terrel had been following for the last seven years, and to the critical points along the way where she had been able to join him. Good.

Aren't you going to open the door? she asked patiently.

Why?

Because if Bezymul comes to in here, he's going to know you've been up to something - even if he remembers nothing of the last few hours.

Terrel nodded, feeling stupid. He got up and opened the door, peering both ways down the dimly-lit corridor.

All clear, he reported.

Alyssa jumped down from the bed and rubbed briefly against his ankle on the way out. Terrel watched her scurry away until she disappeared into one of the rat-holes, then he went back inside and lay on the bed, feeling the small patch of warmth where she had just been sleeping. For some reason it made him want to cry.

A short while later, he felt a tiny wrench inside his heart and knew she was gone. He was truly alone once more.

#### Chapter Twenty-Three

The sound of bells invaded the end of Terrel's formless dream, so that when he awoke he imagined he could still hear the last echoes of their tolling.

Opening his eyes so that the ceiling brightened into life, he wondered how long he'd been asleep, and whether it was the next day or still the middle of the night. Then he realized that the bells in his dream had almost certainly been prompted by a real one - the one that roused the inhabitants of the pyramid from their beds. He was in no hurry to confront a new day - he was still struggling to come to terms with everything that had happened the day before - but a knock on the door made it clear that he was to have no choice in the matter.

'Come in!' he called, assuming it would be a servant with his breakfast. But

when the door opened he saw that his visitor had come empty-handed. There was a look of serious determination, mixed with a little trepidation, on Yarek's face as he came forward, making it obvious that this visit was an onerous duty rather than a social call. The apprentice showed no sign of his earlier injury. His skin was smooth and unmarked.

'I came to thank you,' he blurted out. 'I would've come sooner, but I only just found out you were back from the pools.'

'You've no need to thank me,' Terrel replied, sitting up and smiling at the boy's earnest expression. 'I'm a healer. It's what I do.' 'But you didn't need to. It was my own fault.' Yarek almost faltered then, but forced himself to go on. 'If you hadn't been there, I could have died. I brought it on myself, and I deserved—'

'No one deserves to suffer like that,' Terrel cut in. 'Especially not for trying to help a friend.'

Yarek looked up, meeting the foreigner's gaze for the first time. What he saw there seemed to calm him a little.

'Even when it's forbidden?' he queried. 'When I knew it was wrong?%' 'Forbidden, maybe,' Terrel replied. 'Wrong, no. You can't measure friendship in that way.'

'I did save Dayak,' the boy stated quietly.

'Then you have no reason to regret what you did.'

'I don't. I never even thought about what I was doing. It just happened. But you didn't have to help me. You used up a great deal of your strength.'

'Actually, Tofana didn't give me much choice, but I hope I'd have acted on instinct anyway, just as you did.'

'Does that mean you're my friend?' Yarek whispered.

'I'd like to be.'

Terrel's words were rewarded with a shy smile from the boy, which faded quickly as something else occurred to him.

'Even when what I did meant that you were left . . . vulnerable?'

Terrel surmised that the news of Jax's appearance had become common knowledge in the pyramid.

'That's gone and forgotten,' he lied. 'I'm fully recovered now — and even Tofana seemed pleased by the eventual outcome. In some ways, at least.'

'She was very angry with me and Dayak,' Yarek admitted.

'Still is, in fact. But she did learn something from it. I'm not sure what it was, but she's been quite excited these last few days.' He fell silent then, perhaps aware that he should not be discussing the wizard's business so freely.

'Has Dayak recovered?' Terrel asked.

Yarek nodded.

'He had to spend a day or so in the pools after they brought him back, but he's fine now.'

'Then all's well that ends well.'

'I should go. Thank you again.' The apprentice's eyes were downcast, and he looked so meek that the image from Terrel's earlier dream — of the boy as an insane sorcerer with the eyes of a dragon — seemed ludicrous.

'Do you have to go? I'd like to talk.'

'What about?' Yarek asked, unable to keep the eagerness from his voice.

'What can you tell me about the ice-worms?'

If Yarek was surprised by the question, he gave no sign of it, and at Terrel's suggestion he settled himself on the stool.

'I've never seen one myself, but I'm told they can grow up to six paces in length, and the biggest ones are much thicker than a man's body. They're mostly white, but sometimes you can see right through them, as if they're made of living crystals. They live in all the glaciers.'

'/> the glaciers?' Terrel queried. That tallied with what the ghosts had told him, but he still didn't see how it could be possible. 'You mean actually inside the ice?'

'Yes. They tunnel through it.'



'How do they do that?'

'No one knows for sure. Some people say they melt the ice and swim through it before it freezes again behind them. Others say they eat their way through.' Neither method sounded at all plausible, but Terrel knew that these creatures were unlike anything he'd come across before, so he was in no position to dispute the theories.

'Do they live in groups?'

'No. They usually travel alone.'

Terrel frowned, sure that Muzeni had referred to a group of animals.

'Do they ever come to the surface?'

'Only rarely. The best way to see them is from above, where the ice is clear enough. Some prospectors follow them that way. They believe the worms will lead them to mineral deposits.'

'Really?'

'There's all sorts of things embedded in the glaciers,' Yarek explained.

Terrel nodded, wondering how creatures who lived in an environment so hostile to the elemental could possibly act as its bodyguards.

'What made you ask about them?' Yarek enquired.

'The soldiers who brought me here told me about them. They said my eyes reminded them of the ice-worms.'

'I can see what they mean,' the boy said, 'but ice-worms don't have eyes. They don't have any features - apart from a mouth, of course.' He shuddered slightly.

'Are they dangerous?'

'Not usually. They keep to themselves most of the time. But I wouldn't want to pick a fight with one.'

'Neither would I,' Terrel agreed. 'At the moment I don't think I'd even like to meet one. Can I ask you something else?'

Yarek nodded.

'Is there a drowned city somewhere off the coast of Myvatan?'

'I don't think so.' The boy was obviously puzzled.

'There's supposed to be a sacred flame burning there,' Terrel went on.

'Oh, you must mean Akurvellir. That wasn't drowned, it was lost. But it's just a legend. Most people don't think it ever existed in the first place, and even if it did, it disappeared hundreds of years ago.'

Belatedly, Terrel realized where he'd heard the name before, and understood why Tofana's inference had been that 'looking for Akurvellir' was a hopeless task.

'How did it come to be lost?'

'It apparently happened during a hibernation. The city was there when people went to sleep, but when they woke up it was gone.'

'Even for a legend, that doesn't make much sense,' Terrel commented.

'Not many of them do. And as you may have noticed, we have a lot of legends here.' Yarek's timid smile reappeared briefly.

'So you've no idea where it is?'

'I wish I did. The Circle of Truce is there - that's where the flame is supposed to be - and it's said that it needs to be relit before the war can end.'

'You want the war to end?' Terrel asked, surprised.

'I want us to win,' the apprentice said, looking nervous again.

'That's not what you meant, though, is it? The Circle of Truce is a place of peace, isn't it?'

'I'd better go,' Yarek mumbled, standing up. 'The Circle of Truce never existed. It's just a silly idea.'

'Do you really believe that?'

The boy nodded, but didn't speak.

'Why did you really come here?' Terrel asked. 'To the pyramid, I mean.'

Yarek didn't answer, and it seemed to the healer that he was engaged in some sort of internal debate.

'I can keep a secret,' Terrel told him softly.

'I wasn't like the other boys,' Yarek whispered. 'I didn't want to fight, so they laughed at me. I had to lie about it to everyone. I thought if I could use magic, I could . . . But it's all the same. In some ways it's worse. The neo-mancers don't even have to look into the eyes of the men they kill.' 'Some magians do good, though,' Terrel pointed out. 'In the healing pools, for instance.'

'I know. That's what I'd like to do, if they let me.'

It came as a great relief to Terrel to find someone on Myvatan who found the endless warfare abhorrent. He'd begun to despair of the entire country, but Yarek had restored his faith a little. And he couldn't help feeling sorry for the boy. Having his romantic notions about wizardry dashed by experience must have been a painful process.

'You won't tell anyone what I said, will you?' Yarek pleaded.

'No, of course not,' Terrel promised. 'But surely there are others who think like you. You could—'

'No! The war is everything. If Tofana knew . . . ' The boy shrugged helplessly, unable to bring himself to complete the sentence, then started violently at a knock on the door.

'It's all right,' Terrel hissed, then raised his voice. 'Who is it?'

'Tegan. May I come in?'

'Open the door for her,' he told Yarek.

The boy did as he was instructed, and the magian glanced at him in surprise.

'Yarek came to thank me for my healing,' Terrel explained.

'That was courteous,' she responded, nodding her approval to the apprentice.

'You may go now.'

Yarek ran off instantly.

'He's a strange one,' she murmured thoughtfully.

'I don't think anyone here is ordinary,' Terrel remarked.

'Perhaps not,' Tegan conceded, unsmiling. 'The Wizard wants to see you.'

This was clearly a summons, not a request, and Terrel's heart sank.

'Do you know why?'

'No. I'll wait outside while you dress.'

After Terrel had made himself presentable, he came out to find the magian leaning against the wall. She set off immediately and he hurried to fall into step next to her.

'Do you still think I'm a spy?'

Tegan glanced at him suspiciously.

'I'm not sure,' she admitted. 'What you did with Yarek was remarkable, but . . . I don't know what to think.'

Terrel found her candour endearing.

'What do you think in your private moments?' he asked.

'What?' She glanced at him sharply again.

'I remembered what Tofana said to you,' he explained. '"It doesn't matter what you think in your more sentimental private moments".'

'She was just teasing me,' Tegan claimed, but the touch of colour in her cheeks told another story.

By now they were climbing the steps that led up to the wizard's workroom.

'There's not much room for sentiment in war, is there?' Terrel remarked, probing gently.

'No.' Her voice was flat, expressionless.

'Is that what your "foolish qualms" are about?' he asked, quoting Tofana again.

'It's none of your business,' she snapped.

They walked on in silence for a while.

'I'm sorry,' Terrel said. 'I didn't mean to pry.'

'I'm sorry too,' she replied. 'I'm just a bit tense at the moment. Some soldiers arrived during the night, with messages from Saudark, and there are all sorts of rumours flying about.'

'What sort of rumours?'

'You'd better ask the Wizard that. She's the only one who really knows what's

happening.'

'Perhaps she's planning to find the Circle of Truce,' Terrel suggested innocently.

This time the look she gave him was one of frank astonishment.

'That's just a dream,' she said, then corrected herself. 'A legend, I mean. It doesn't exist.'

'Legends have to start somewhere.'

'If you're a foreigner, how do you know so much about our myths?'

Terrel realized that she was trying to change the subject, and decided to ignore the question.

'And sometimes dreams are meant to tell us something,' he added quietly, but Tegan did not rise to the bait. She remained resolutely silent for the rest of the way up to the top of the pyramid.

At the entrance to the apex room she stopped abruptly, and Terrel looked past her to see that Tofana was not alone. Standing talking to her on the far side of the room was a military officer. After a moment he realized who it was, and also became aware that Tegan had recognized him too. However, the magian stood where she was, making no attempt to make the others aware of their presence.

'Excellent, excellent!' Tofana was saying, her unruly hair bobbing in emphasis. 'That fits my plans perfectly. The timings will have to change, of course.'

'I'm not sure the generals will--' the envoy began.

'They will when they hear what I've got to say,' the wizard stated confidently. 'Hvannadal will be protected by magical forces as well as military, but we can find ways round that. This is going to be the greatest, most decisive campaign of the war. When we all get to Saudark, I'll explain why.'

'You're coming to the city in person?' the soldier exclaimed.

'Actually, I - and quite a few of my magians - will be coming all the way to Hvannadal,' Tofana replied, enjoying his astonishment. 'This is one operation I must supervise personally.'

'But it's unheard of,' the envoy spluttered.

'Exactly! You said yourself that this expedition needs the element of surprise. Well, it's going to have it by the bucketful.' The wizard laughed at her own witticism, then saw the newcomers for the first time. She beckoned them over in her usual extravagant style.

'You already know our foreign healer, I believe,' Tofana said, nodding at Terrel. 'This is Tegan, one of my best magians. Tegan, this is Adjutant Myrdal.'

'It's a pleasure to meet you, Magian,' the soldier said as they shook hands in greeting.

Tegan simply nodded, but her face betrayed rather more. Terrel suspected that she did not trust her own voice at that moment. Although Tofana seemed quite oblivious, Terrel could see that Tegan's earlier explanation - that she and Myrdal had grown up in neighbouring villages - fell short of the whole truth. Although they looked calm enough, neither of them could quite hide their inner turmoil. This meeting might have been foreseen, but no amount of prescience could have prepared them for the feelings it evidently aroused.

'I'll have something very exciting to show you later, Adjutant,' Tofana said, still unaware of the undercurrents in the room. 'But until then I think our business is complete, and I need a word with Terrel here. Tegan, perhaps you could see that the Adjutant and his men are given a meal in the refectory. They've been travelling all night and must be in need of sustenance as well as rest.'

'Of course,' Tegan replied. 'Please come with me, Adjutant.'

Terrel watched as the soldier followed her from the room, wondering what would happen once they were out of sight of the wizard. He had a feeling they might well end up in each other's arms. Alternatively, they might come to blows. He couldn't be sure whether the spark he had seen between them had been lit by

love or hate, but either way, there was no doubting its power. 'That's one thing soldiers are always good at,' Tofana remarked. 'Obeying orders.' She turned back to look at Terrel, and at the same time Bezymlum emerged from a nearby rat-hole and hurried up to his mistress. Terrel felt as if a lead weight had just been deposited in his stomach.

'Well now, healer,' the wizard said. 'You just keep getting more and more interesting.'

#### Chapter Twenty-Four

'Can you show me how you did it?' Tofana asked. At her feet, Bezymlum chattered nervously.

'Did what?' Terrel replied.

'Come now, don't be coy,' the wizard chided him. 'Usurping the mind of one of my little friends is an admirable achievement. I didn't think it was possible. But it was also rather impolite. The least you can do is tell me how the process works.'

Terrel had no idea how to respond. He desperately wanted to find out how much Bezymlum had remembered -and passed on to his mistress - but Tofana hadn't given him enough to go on yet. Although she clearly knew that something had happened, Terrel needed to tailor his story to exactly what she knew - and what she didn't.

'I'm afraid I can't,' he said cautiously. 'I don't know how it works.' That was at least partly true.

'You just happened to kidnap him?' the wizard responded sceptically. 'What did you hope to learn?'

'Nothing,' Terrel replied, before the implications of her question sank in. If Tofana was inferring that his motive had been to learn from the mustela, it was unlikely that the creature had been aware of the ghosts' presence, or of his conversation with them.

'Then what was the point of the exercise?' Tofana asked.

'There was no point. These things just happen. I can't control them.'

'I don't believe you.' The wizard paused, then smiled. 'It wasn't you, was it? You were here with me when Bezymlum was first affected.'

Terrel said nothing, uncomfortable with the fact that Tofana was edging closer to the truth.

'Was it Jax?' the wizard asked, excited now. 'Is this how you talk to him?' Once again the healer did not reply, hoping in this case that his silence would be taken for assent. It was as plausible an explanation as any he was likely to come up with - unless he told the whole story, and that was something he wanted to avoid at all costs.

'What did you learn from him?' Tofana asked. 'Did our ideas work?'

'What ideas?' Terrel said, instantly worried.

'So he didn't tell you much,' the wizard reasoned. 'A pity.' She glanced down at the mustela. 'You see, little one. You have nothing to fear from our guest. And now that I've shown you how to protect yourself, you've/no need to worry about his friend either.' She looked up at Terrel to make sure he'd got the point.

Bezymlum chattered briefly in response, and Tofana laughed.

'You could say that,' she replied, but chose not to translate the mustela's remark for Terrel's benefit.

The animal trotted off, apparently satisfied, and Terrel watched it go with a mixture of relief and foreboding. In all Alyssa's previous visits, not only had the various creatures she had inhabited seemed to dismiss the missing parts of their lives almost instantly, but they had not been able to tell anyone about the experience either. This time it was different, and if Alyssa tried again there was no

telling what the consequences might be. Terrel found himself hoping that she would stay away while he was still in the pyramid. Borrowing the shapes of animals outside the wizard's lair would be considerably less risky.

'You disappoint me, Terrel,' Tofana remarked. 'You claim not to be a foe of

our quarter, yet your actions are more like those of a spy than a friend. As allies, you and I might make a formidable team, but you would not want me as an enemy. You'd be much better off being honest with me from the start.' 'I've no wish to be your enemy,' Terrel replied. 'But I have no enthusiasm for this war. I've made no secret of that.'

'The war is going to end soon,' the wizard claimed, a visionary gleam in her eye. 'I'm going to see to that.'

Terrel thought that if Tofana got her wish, he wasn't going to like the way the war ended, but he saw no point in telling her that.

'You can choose to play a part in our victory,' the wizard offered. 'Your talents are great, but at present they are limited by your ignorance. I could teach you how to make the most of them.'

'How would you do that?'

'Conventional wisdom tells us that in this phase of history the Red Moon is dominant, but that doesn't take into account the signals the Black Moon - our moon - is sending. You know as well as I do that this is a time of change. The skies themselves tell us so. And a time of change is also a time of opportunity. Our time.'

'I still don't see-'

'Your arrival here is no coincidence. It was a sign. You're an innocent, Terrel. A natural.'

'An innocent spy?'

'You're confusing politics and magic,' she muttered

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impatiently. 'Your healing uses principles of magic even though you don't understand the theory behind them. Just think how much more powerful you could be if you had that knowledge ingrained in your mind, your fingertips.'

'Why would I want to be more powerful?'

Tofana waved his question aside as irrelevant.

'You don't even know where it comes from, do you?' she said. 'Your mind only shapes the magic, it doesn't create it. The source of all such power is deep within Nydus, contained within forces we can't imagine. A little of it is released every time the planet's core is breached, and even then it's useless unless you can control it. I've spent my life learning to do just that. And the oldest secret of wizardry is also the most extraordinary. Water, that common, ordinary substance, is uniquely suited for storing such power.' Terrel already knew this, but there was no need for him to respond. Tofana was talking as much to herself as to him, lost in a world of her own.

'It's not only the moons telling us it's a time of change. A few years ago, a volcano erupted under the central glacier. It thawed an enormous section of ice, creating vast mud slides and flash floods, as well as the usual ash and smoke. Of course this event caused the level of magical potency to rise dramatically - something we've all taken advantage of - but the most remarkable aspect of the eruption was that so much of the meltwater was lined up naturally. It was already full of latent sorcery - without any of us having to do a thing!'

'Where was the volcano?' Terrel asked. 'Among the Lonely Peaks,' Tofana replied, 'but its location is of no consequence now.'

Terrel disagreed. He already knew he was going to have to go and see this volcano for himself.

'The point is,' the wizard went on, 'that that was the beginning of the change, the first signal. There have been others since, but your arrival has marked the latest stage.'

'Why do you think that?' Terrel asked, though he wasn't really sure he wanted to know the answer.

'You've given me the last great secret of wizardry,' Tofana replied. 'And later today I'm going to demonstrate it to everyone here.'

This time Terrel was ready for it. As the invisible wall distorted, and brought the distant mountain into immediate focus, he was able to accept the

transformation without feeling too dizzy. He was back in the wizard's workroom, several hours after his last visit, and this time the place was crowded. All the magians and apprentices were present, and their numbers had been swelled by additional observers - Myrdal and several other members of the military. Everyone was waiting to see what was about to happen outside, but as yet there seemed to be no movement there, and Tofana reclaimed their attention when she climbed up on to one of the tables and spoke to the assembly.

'We have long used water-lines to create what are commonly known as weather-weapons. Lightning clouds, avalanches, freezing rain, acid lakes ... all these things are commonplace on the battlefield now. But there are other lines, lines that stretch far beyond the boundaries we set. It took a foreigner to show me how to use them - and even then it came about by accident.'

Terrel listened uneasily, aware of several sidelong glances directed towards him.

'Such are the quirks of fate, the jokes that the gods like to play on us. The seeds of our victory lie within this bucket.' Tofana pointed to the container that sat on the table beside her. 'As you will soon see for yourselves.' With that she turned away from her audience and faced the magnified image of the outer world. A bell rang out, and a man soon appeared in view, scrambling over the ridge. He was looking around anxiously, perhaps expecting a new trial.

It was with some disquiet that Terrel recognized the man as Dayak, Yarek's friend. He wondered whether the magian was being given the chance to redeem himself, or whether Tofana's choice had a more sinister motive. Glancing across at Yarek, he saw that the apprentice looked pale and worried. Tofana made a small gesture, and a swirl of cloud began to form above the mountainside. Dayak spotted it immediately, and responded. The cloud dispersed before it could take proper shape, but as it did so the neomancer clutched at his chest, his face contorted in sudden agony. A moment later he fell to his knees and then, to the consternation of all the onlookers except one, bright flames burst from his mouth and eyes. In the next instant, the fire erupted from his rib cage and belly, spilling out of his scorched flesh and searing away his clothes. By then Dayak was clearly dead, but his body continued to burn fiercely even after he had collapsed to the ground, until - an incredibly short time later - all that was left of him were his hands and feet. Everything else, including his bones, had been reduced to a pile of grey ash that even now was blowing away on the wind.

At first the audience was stunned, but then they burst into rapturous applause and cheering. Tofana beamed as they congratulated her, basking in triumph, and some of the soldiers were almost dancing with glee.

Terrel watched the celebrations in horror. He felt sick, especially when he remembered that he had been partly responsible for the repulsive spectacle. He could not

believe that human beings - any human beings - could react with joy at such a nauseating sight, and yet this was what was happening. There were a few notable exceptions. Tegan's smile was forced and, for a moment, Terrel saw his own disgust reflected in her eyes. Myrdal too appeared more subdued than his colleagues, while Yarek was hiding in a corner, being quietly ill. A few others seemed a little uncertain, but the vast majority were obviously delighted by the wizard's latest demonstration.

'You have seen the fate that awaits our enemies!' Tofana declared, her voice rising above the hubbub and silencing the room.

Terrel remembered the words from the newly-discovered section of the Tindaya Code. 'Beware the fire within' now had a meaning that was all too clear. And if Tofana was prepared to do this to one of her own people, the thought of what she might inflict upon her enemies did not bear thinking about. If Terrel had ever thought of the wizard as a figure of fun, that idea had been completely eradicated now.

'Dayak would have been useless as a neomancer,' Tofana added. 'This way he

goes to the Great Plain as a hero, his sacrifice pointing the way forward.' It was a revolting piece of self-justification, but everyone except Terrel seemed to accept it readily.

'Earlier today, Dayak drank some of this water,' Tofana went on, indicating the bucket again. 'Once those lines were set up, the reaction was ready to be triggered. As soon as he tried to use any form of water-magic, the water inside his own body responded. Quite literally, he burned himself up from within.' She paused, looking around the room. 'This will be our final vengeance on our foes!' she cried. 'We are ready. We leave for Saudark tomorrow!'

PART TWO

THE ICE ROAD

Chapter Twenty-Five

Ten days after he had left Saudark, Terrel found himself back in the city, installed once more in his tower room high above the generals' fortress. The journey from the pyramid had been achieved with the help of several sleds, pulled by willing teams of dogs - a novel form of transport that Terrel had never encountered before. During his time in the enclosed realm of the wizard's lair, a lot of snow had fallen in the outside world, which would have made the trek both arduous and dangerous had it been undertaken on foot. As it was, with the short spring season now well under way - a prelude to the long light of summer - the large party had travelled swiftly and in relative ease. Forewarned by a messenger sent ahead by Myrdal, the citizens of Saudark had come out in force to witness the arrival of the wizard and her entourage, greeting them with a mixture of enthusiasm, awe and a little trepidation. Tofana had not ventured from her home for several years, and she had never brought so many people with her before. Everyone knew that something important was afoot, and because the wizard had been in conference with the generals since then, with no public announcement of what was being discussed, it was inevitable that rumour would fill the void left by the lack of any real news. One hotly disputed piece of gossip maintained that Tofana intended to accompany the army on its next

campaign. Some people argued that this was why she'd brought so many of her magians and other followers with her, while others refused to believe that she would do any such thing. The idea of a wizard risking her own life on the battlefield was unprecedented. Another popular line of speculation concerned a wondrous new weapon that Tofana was supposed to have devised, one that would finally enable the Black Quarter and their allies to win a decisive victory in the war. But this was not the first time such stories had been circulated, and most people were inclined to dismiss the rumour as wishful thinking. However, it was beyond dispute that the discussions taking place within the fortress must be of unusual significance, not least because Tofana and her company had not been the last to arrive. Three other wizards - two Black and one from the Red Quarter - had also come to Saudark, and they too had been accompanied by a larger than usual number of magians and neomancers. Military envoys from other parts of the quarter and from the opposite side of the island were also in attendance. Strangest of all, the city had also witnessed the arrival and subsequent incarceration of a sizeable group of prisoners. Enemy soldiers were usually executed on the spot, or left to die on the frozen battlegrounds. Although some would occasionally be held for interrogation in the field, it was unheard of for them to be transported all the way to a city like Saudark. Their unexplained presence added fuel to the fires of gossip.

'They'll have to tell us what's going on soon, surely,' Latira reasoned. Terrel could only shrug. In the five days since his return to the city, he had relied on Latira to keep him up to date with the gossip. The fact that he knew more about what had happened at the pyramid - and was thus in a position to make a more educated guess about what the wizards and generals were discussing - did not mean that he had no interest in the latest rumours. He still was not sure whether he was considered a guest or a prisoner. He'd

been granted a relative amount of freedom within the castle, but knew he was unlikely to be allowed to go anywhere he pleased. When he did go somewhere he was either accompanied, or watched over by the numerous sentries on duty. His uncertain status had made him wary of revealing what he knew of Tofana's plans, even to Latira, and she had been tactful enough not to press him on the subject.

'I've never known a time like this,' the maid went on. 'Don't you wish you could listen to what Tofana and the generals are saying?'

'This isn't my war,' Terrel replied. He did indeed wish he could be privy to some of the discussions, but of even greater concern just now was his own lack of progress. Being stuck in Saudark was not getting him any closer to finding the elemental.

'No, I suppose not,' Latira said quietly. Her expression was wistful now.

'Sometimes I think . . .' She was silent then, and shook her head.

'What?' Terrel asked, wondering what had prompted her sudden melancholy.

'I used to be married,' she told him, after a pause.

Almost at once Terrel could imagine the rest of the story, but the details of her tale went beyond what he had foreseen.

'His name was Hallen. He looked a lot like you - except his limbs were straight and his eyes were blue, just like mine. We used to joke that they matched because our souls were intertwined. He was the love of my life.' She paused again, evidently gathering enough resolve to continue. 'I was pregnant when they brought me his tag and told me he'd died a hero. I wanted to be proud that he'd gone to the Great Plain, but all I could think about was that he'd never see his child. In the end it didn't matter, because a few days later I lost the baby too. I've always wanted children.' Her voice had been growing quieter as she spoke, until now it was little more than a whisper. 'Always.'

'I'm sure it's not too late,' Terrel said sympathetically. Latira was older than he was, but only by a few years.

'The magians told me I'd probably never be able to conceive again,' she told him bleakly. 'Besides, I'll never find anyone else like Hallen.'

Terrel wanted to reassure her, but as he thought of the way he felt about Alyssa, and realized what his own reaction would be if the prospect of their being together was taken away from him, he found he had nothing to say. He couldn't ask Latira to settle for second best when he would not be willing to do so himself.

'I know I'm not the only one it's happened to,' Latira added. 'And I don't regret a moment of our time together, but sometimes it's hard not to think about what's been lost. I know the war is more important than anything else, and our cause is just, but ...'

'Do you really believe that?' he asked.

'Of course,' she said, but there was no conviction in her voice.

'I know I'm a foreigner, and that it's none of my business,' Terrel went on, 'but I don't think this war is just at all. It's insane - and quite unnecessary.'

'No.' Her pain was obvious now. 'No, you can't say that. You mustn't.'

'It's the truth, Latira. Surely there must be some people here who can see that?'

She shook her head, but Terrel couldn't tell whether this was in denial or from the desire to avoid even thinking about such things.

'You deserve better,' he said.

'Me?'

'All of Myvatan. But you in particular.'

'Why me?'

'Because you're kind and decent and hard-working and beautiful-'

'Beautiful?' she exclaimed, her eyes glittering with unshed tears. 'Now you're mocking me.'



'I'm not,' he stated earnestly. 'You think I can afford to judge people solely by outward appearances, when I look the way I do? You are beautiful, Latira, because you're a good person. Hallen saw that - and so would a lot of men if you gave them the chance.'

Latira looked so distraught then that Terrel instinctively took her in his arms. She cried quietly on to his shoulder for a while as he held her, then she drew back and tried to smile.

'You're a remarkable man, Terrel. I wish there were more like you here.'

'Are you sure there aren't?' he said. 'You don't have to be a healer to dislike the suffering of others.'

She didn't respond, and something else occurred to him.

'I am a healer. Do you want me to look at you, to see if the magians were right? I might even be able to do something about it.' He was remembering Ysotel, who had finally become pregnant with her husband's child after Terrel had inadvertently healed her. That she had subsequently become a sleeper - and still was, as far as he knew - was a matter for sorrow, but the fact remained that she had conceived, against all expectations.

Latira's reaction was to pull away slightly.

'I wanted Hallen's child, not yours,' she whispered, then - realizing what she had said - she blushed.

'I didn't mean . . .'

Terrel began, feeling his own colour rise. 'I know you didn't,' she said hurriedly. 'I'm sorry. Thank you, but . . .'

She fled from the room without finishing the sentence, leaving Terrel in a state of some confusion. Terrel's restlessness increased over the next few days. He took to wandering about the fortress, testing the boundaries of his freedom. He twice tried to leave the castle, but on both occasions he was turned back. By then he had learnt from Vatna that the sleepers he'd seen on his previous visit had first started falling into their comas after the eruption of the meltwater volcano. This reinforced his opinion that the elemental must somehow have been involved, and increased his frustration at not being able to go and seek it out. Vatna had also told him that although only a few sleepers had been reported during the early years of the phenomenon, the majority had been overcome only the previous year. Neither man had any idea why that should have been. What was more, beyond the fact that the volcano was centred somewhere within the area known as the Lonely Peaks, Terrel was unable to discover any more about its exact location. Everyone he questioned seemed very vague on the subject, and it soon became clear that the site was so inaccessible that travelling there was considered out of the question - and apart from the healer, no one had any reason for making such an attempt. It was a depressing thought that the natives of Myvatan, who were presumably hardened to the island's harsh conditions, seemed unwilling to venture into that part of the interior. If that was the case, Terrel did not rate his own chances of making the journey very highly - always assuming that he was ever allowed to leave Saudark. He was certainly going to need help, but he had no idea who to ask. The generals were too preoccupied with their own agenda to even talk to him - and in any case, he wasn't sure how he could phrase his request.

With the continuing high-level talks within the fortress, it had become obvious that Tofana had vetoed the original timing of the raid on Hvannadal. Even Terrel could work out that if the army had not moved by now, there was no chance of them completing their mission by the date Colonel Davik had proposed. However, the healer did not know what had caused the delay - and he could find no one who was able to tell him. He was thus left in limbo, half hoping that the operation would begin so that he could volunteer to go with the soldiers, while also wishing that further bloodshed could be avoided. News of some distant battles filtered through to him, but it was clear that these were comparatively minor border skirmishes. Opinion seemed to be that both the White and the Gold were puzzled by the Black forces' lack of action, and were trying various sorties in an attempt to determine what their enemies'

plans might be. Everyone on both sides knew that something big was coming - but only a very few people had any idea of what it actually was.

Late one afternoon, Terrel stood shivering in one of the larger courtyards. He was wearing all the clothes he owned, together with some Latira had found for him, so that he looked rather like some kind of overweight, bulbous animal - but he was still cold. He had taken to spending as much time out of doors as he could stand, because the enticing, bitter scent of mitra was everywhere within the fortress and, while he tried to avoid the worst concentrations, he still feared being overcome by fumes whenever he was in an enclosed space. On this occasion he was watching a group of young boys, who were playing with toy sailboats on a shallow pond which was already encrusted with ice around its edges. It seemed an innocent scene, out of keeping with the generally tense mood of the castle, but the boys - and their tutor - were evidently taking the game very seriously. While they occasionally shouted in triumph or despair, most of them were concentrating fiercely.

'Think you could do any better?' Vatna asked, coming up beside Terrel.

'At sailing boats? I doubt it.'

'It's an important part of their early training,' the magian explained. 'At least some of the boys here will go on to command real boats, ferrying soldiers around the coast. This is where they first learn the ways of wind and water - and how they can be manipulated by neomancers like Atha there.' He nodded in the direction of the boys' tutor.

'So it's not just a game,' Terrel said. He was disappointed, but not surprised.

'It is,' Vatna replied, 'but it has a serious purpose too.'

Even children are preparing for their part in the war, Terrel thought dismally.

'However,' Vatna went on, 'that's not why I came to find you. The generals want to see you.'

'Now?'

'Now,' the magian confirmed.

As the healer was escorted into the campaign room, he realized that several conversations were going on at once. The only voice he could pick out was Pingeyri's.

'Capital, capital!' the general boomed. 'An excellent suggestion, Colonel. Make the legends work for us, as you say.' His remarks were addressed to a thin man - whose uniform sported a red epaulet - who was standing with his back to the newcomers.

A hush fell upon the room as those present noticed Terrel's arrival.

'Ah, Terrel,' Pingeyri said. 'I think you know most of the people here, but there are some of our allies you won't have met.'

The colonel from the Red Quarter turned then. Terrel struggled to match the other man's calm gaze, but inwardly he was reeling.

'Terrel, this is Colonel Jarvik. Colonel, this is the healer we've been talking about.'

'Good evening, Terrel,' Jarvik said.

'Hello,' the healer replied, wondering how he was supposed to respond to the slight smile on the colonel's face. In the end he did and said nothing, still trying to collect his wits. He had met Jarvik before, but on that occasion the colonel had claimed to be a merchant named Kjolur.

#### Chapter Twenty-Six

Afterwards, Terrel was never quite sure why he did not confront Jarvik about his imposture. At the time it was an instinctive reaction. Initially, he was too astonished to do anything. And then he realized that the colonel must have foreseen the possibility of their meeting - his own lack of surprise indicated that he knew Terrel had survived his adventure at Whale Ness - and would therefore have been ready to counter any accusation. And what, if anything, was Terrel to accuse him of? For all the healer knew, it might be common for military officers to play other roles in life, and there could be any number of legitimate reasons for his adoption of a different name and identity.

Pingeyri and the others might well be aware of Jarvik's trading voyages, and challenging him would serve no purpose. In the end Terrel did nothing, but decided to wait and see what happened.

Apparently unaware of the foreigner's internal quandary, Pingeyri had gone on to introduce several other soldiers. In his preoccupation, Terrel instantly forgot all their names, but he did note that neither Tofana nor any of the other wizards were present. He wasn't sure whether to be relieved or disappointed about that.

'Tell me, Terrel,' the general said once the preliminaries were over, 'how would you like to become one of the greatest heroes of our time?'

'Me?' The offer rang alarm bells in the healer's head.

'The gods brought you here,' Pingeyri claimed. 'That's true, whether you believe it or not. You have a role to play.'

'In the war?'

'What else?' the general responded, sounding as enthusiastic as ever.

Terrel wanted to reject the idea outright, but he held his tongue, wanting to know more before committing himself. He was not surprised when Jarvik entered the conversation.

'I'm told you're familiar with some of the legends surrounding Savik's Whale,' he said, with an ironic smile. 'What you may not know is that those tales are connected to another, equally ancient set of prophecies concerning the Peacemaker.'

For a moment Terrel thought that sounded more hopeful – but then he discovered what the Peacemaker was, and how it was destined to bring peace. As Jarvik explained about the legendary sword, and the way it would make whoever wielded it invincible, Terrel saw that such peace would be won only by wading through another sea of blood.

'Legend has it that the blade can only be found on the very rare occasions when the Red Moon is full and all the other moons are new,' the colonel went on. 'But there's another possibility, one that is linked to the whale. The reason this is not generally known here is because the tale originates in the Gold Quarter, and the omens within it are usually thought to favour them. However, with careful study, the original texts can be interpreted in several ways.'

Where have I heard that before? Terrel thought wearily.

'In essence,' Jarvik went on, 'it seems possible that whoever arrives in the way you did has a particular advantage

in trying to locate the sword, in that you'll be able to see it whenever the Red Moon is full, regardless of the phases of the others. You would do this, and I'm quoting the actual text here, by "reading the far crystals" with "eyes like slivers of ice". That seems particularly appropriate to you, don't you think?'

Terrel now understood some of the comments that the Gold soldiers had made at the time of his emergence from the stone whale. To them he had indeed been a figure from legend.

'A convincing case can be made that whoever helps you find the Peacemaker will be victorious in the war,' Jarvik added. 'And now that you're one of us ...' The colonel spread his hands in a gesture that said he didn't need to spell out the implications.

'I'm a practical man by nature,' Pingeyri declared. 'Normally I'd be wary of such fantastical notions, but even I can see the possibilities here. Sometimes the best weapon a soldier has is his mind – and sometimes it's his greatest weakness.'

'That's absolutely true,' Jarvik said. 'Although Raufar and his men performed their duties with admirable efficiency when they rescued you, in retrospect it's a pity that one or two of the Gold soldiers didn't escape from Whale Ness. Then they could have been rejoicing at your arrival, believing it to be an omen of their forthcoming victory – and when we revealed the true relevance of your coming, the effect upon their morale would have been devastating. As it is, we'll have to start from scratch. But the beauty of it is, we'll be

using the Gold's own revered sources to make our case.'

'But none of it is true,' Terrel objected.

'Are you sure?' the colonel asked.

'Even if it isn't, enough of the enemy will believe it to make it true,' Pingeeyri added.

'But the way I arrived was an accident,' Terrel said. He was no longer sure that he believed his own claim, but he was horrified by the thought of being the catalyst for another round of violence.

'From what I've heard, it was a remarkable set of coincidences for a simple accident,' Jarvik remarked.

'The gods don't always make it easy for us, eh?' the general rumbled, provoking smiles from several of his fellow officers.

Terrel didn't know what to think now. Remembering Kjolur's role in the events leading to his arrival at Whale Ness gave the colonel's words a double-edged meaning - while his motives remained as obscure as ever.

'How do you know so much about the Gold legends?' he asked.

'Such things predate the war,' Jarvik replied. 'If you know where to look, the references are easy enough to find. Most wizards keep libraries of books and documents, the contents of which are better kept from the public until the right time.'

It was a plausible answer, but could just as easily be yet another lie.

'How will you plant the story with your enemies?'

'There are always ways of allowing information to leak out,' Pingeeyri answered. 'You needn't worry about that.'

'When they find out what's happened, won't the Gold try to take me back?'

Terrel asked. This disturbing idea had just occurred to him.

'We'll make sure that doesn't happen,' the general assured him. 'You'll be protected until it's time for you to play your part.'

'And afterwards?'

'Afterwards, no one is going to threaten you,' Pingeeyri declared confidently.

'What exactly are you expecting me to do?'

'Come with us to Hvannadal. And then on to the Lonely Peaks.'

Terrel had been expecting something of the sort. The fact that the general was intent on going to the one place on the island that the healer needed to reach might represent his only opportunity of heading towards his own goal.

'Why there?'

'The legends all agree that that is where the Peacemaker lies,' Jarvik replied. 'Buried deep within the ice.'

'Then how ...'

'We may have little chance of actually retrieving it,' the colonel cut in, 'but just the idea that we might - especially after what will have happened at the springs - will be more than enough to strike fear into the hearts of our enemies.'

'And who knows,' Pingeeyri said, 'you might even succeed. And then there'd be no stopping us.' The gleam in the general's eyes betrayed the fact that he was probably imagining wielding the sword with his own hand.

'There'll be no stopping us either way, General,' Jarvik said. 'We have the chance to lay all the heresies to rest, to prove to the gods that we are worthy of claiming the final victory. We must not waste such a chance.'

Pingeeyri nodded, then turned to the healer.

'So, Terrel, are you with us? Will you lead us to the Lonely Peaks?'

Terrel could see no alternative. This was his chance.

'Yes, General,' he replied. 'I will.'

To Terrel's frustration, he was not told anything more about the forthcoming operation or, more importantly, about when they were due to leave. As soon as he'd agreed to the general's request, an attendant had escorted him from the castle's central complex, leaving the soldiers to continue their planning. However, the prospect of being taken to the Lonely Peaks, even if the circumstances were less than ideal, had given Terrel a little hope. But he was still bothered by the many unanswered questions about

the enterprise, especially about the mystery over the dual identity of Kjolur or Jarvik - or whoever he really was. His true purpose - and the motives behind it - was now even more obscure than when Terrel had thought he was just a merchant. There were many legends connected with Savik's Whale - and the colonel seemed to be an expert on such things - so had his supposed help had a specific goal in mind? Did he really think that Terrel would be able to find the mythical sword? And none of this explained how Kjolur could have foreseen what would take place at Whale Ness. Had he just been taking the chance that something would happen, hoping to take advantage of it later, whatever it was? It would have been a huge gamble - but one that seemed to have paid off after all.

Terrel wanted to be able to talk to Jarvik on his own, but he knew this was unlikely to happen unless the colonel himself decided upon a meeting. As Terrel had already discovered during his unsuccessful attempts to locate Tofana and others, when someone did not want to be disturbed, there were plenty of places within the vast fortress that could be made inaccessible. Indeed, the only person he could be reasonably sure of seeing whenever he wanted was Latira. Since her emotional confession, they had been a little wary of each other, their friendship kept at a superficial level. But she was still his best informant, and the obvious person to ask whenever a new question occurred to him.

On this occasion he found her in her own domain, the kitchen located at the base of his tower. She was preparing food which would provide him - and several others - with

their evening meal. His offer to help was politely refused, but she didn't seem to mind his watching as she worked.

'Has something happened?' she asked. 'You look puzzled.'

'I was called to see the generals,' he told her. 'They want me to go with them on the campaign.'

'I thought they probably would. Do you mind?'

'I don't think I have much choice. I can't stay here for ever.'

Latira nodded, but said nothing.

'Do you know anything about a man called Jarvik?' Terrel asked.

'No,' she said, then frowned. 'Who's he?'

'He's a colonel from the Red Quarter.'

'There are a lot of them here now. Everyone thinks it's because the generals want to co-ordinate a big campaign this season, across the whole island. But I haven't met any of them.'

Some time later, Terrel couldn't shake his impression that there had been something slightly odd about her response - the initial denial, then the question as an afterthought, followed by vague generalizations. Yet logically there was very little chance of her knowing anything about a newly-arrived soldier from the far side of the island, and he told himself that he was imagining things.

One of his other unanswered questions was about what the wizards had been up to recently, but the next day, during one of his aimless walks around the castle, Terrel happened upon a scene that told him more than he really wanted to know.

Entering a courtyard he had not visited before, he saw a party of servants - wearing stained clothes and with masks covering the lower part of their faces - busy collecting a large amount of ash that had been scattered over the paved yard in separate heaps. The debris was being swept into buckets or sacks and then transferred to a wooden-sided cart. When Terrel peered in to the cart he felt bile stinging his throat, and he broke out in a cold, queasy sweat. Mixed with the pungent grey ash were several human hands and a few boots, with stumps of blackened flesh protruding from them. It didn't take much imagination to realize what must have happened to the enemy prisoners who had been brought to Saudark.

Tofana's experiment had obviously been repeated many times, and if she was allowed to get her way, the gruesome results would soon be duplicated all over

Myvatan – and presumably on an even greater scale. This thought kept Terrel feeling nauseous for several hours.

Much later in the day, after a number of futile attempts to find someone he might be able to talk to about the wizard's vile research, Terrel was returning to his own lodgings when he was met by a somewhat flustered-looking Latira.

'There you are!' she gasped, sounding relieved. 'Vatna wants to see you.'  
'Good.'

'You're to meet him on the ground floor of Well Tower as soon as you can.'  
'All right.' Terrel hesitated, trying to remember which of the many towers this was.

'Go across the West Courtyard, past the kennels, then take the corridor that has the carving of Jokulsa's marker in the lintel stone,' she told him. 'That will lead you to the tower.'

'Why there?' Terrel wondered aloud.

'I don't know. I'm just passing on the message. I got it some time ago, so you'd better hurry.'

Terrel followed her directions, and entered the tunnel below the sign that matched the pendant he wore – and the brand on Vatna's arm. He surmised that the Well Tower – presumably named for a source of water – was probably connected to the magian's art, but he hadn't been this way before and didn't really know what to expect.

The passageway was only dimly lit, and the paving underfoot was rough and uneven, suggesting that it was little used. At one point, Terrel stumbled and almost fell. Recovering, he couldn't help noticing that it was very quiet here, with no sign of the bustle that characterized much of the castle. Even the dogs, many of whom had been barking when he'd passed their compound earlier, were silent now. Then, somewhat to his relief, he heard Vatna's voice from up ahead.

'Come on, Terrel. You're late. You're going to want to see this.'

The healer hurried on, stepping into some shadows that created a patch of darkness in the corridor. He knew at once that something was wrong, and tried to pull back, but his limbs would not obey him. It was like walking into a blanket of cobwebs. The thick grey mass filled his eyes and throat, making him blind and dumb. His head swam. And then everything went black.

He woke to find himself tied to a chair, his arms and legs strapped tight. As he blinked, trying to clear the cobwebs from his mind, fear stabbed through him. He had no idea who had done this to him, or why, but being so helpless was terrifying.

The only light in the room came from a small high window. Late afternoon sunlight was falling from it directly on to his face, half blinding him, and making the

rest of the chamber all but invisible – an arrangement that was obviously deliberate.

Terrel sensed movement in the shadows. There were several people in the room with him, but he couldn't see any of them. He tried to speak, but his tongue felt as if it was made of coarse wool, and no sound emerged from his lips.

Before he could try again, a woman's voice drifted out of the darkness.

'Welcome back, Terrel. You do realize that if you ever look likely to actually find the Peacemaker, we're going to have to kill you.'

Chapter Twenty-Seven

'I've no wish to find the sword,' Terrel stated truthfully. 'This war is not my concern.' His voice was no more than a croak, but he was rapidly recovering his wits. His captors' threatening statement meant that they knew what the generals were planning. So who were they?

'Then what is your reason for being here?'

'I'm just a traveller.'

'You're also a liar.' The accusation was made with complete confidence.

'What's the real reason?'

'Sometimes you can't avoid your destiny,' Terrel said.

'That's closer to the truth,' his interrogator conceded, 'but it's not exactly very informative, is it? Does your destiny tell you there's something you must do on Myvatan?'

'Yes.'

'What?'

'I don't know yet.'

'Don't lie to us, Terrel. It's pointless.'

'I'm not lying.'

'Yes, you are,' she insisted, with a touch of anger. 'You give yourself away every time. What is it you're here to do?'

Terrel didn't answer, wondering if he was truly as transparent as his adversary claimed.

'Are you a spy?' she asked abruptly.

'No.'

'Does your task have anything to do with the war?'

'No.' His answer provoked an exchange of whispers, though Terrel couldn't hear what was being said.

'Then what does it concern?'

'You wouldn't believe me if I told you,' he answered wearily.

'Try us.'

'You want the truth?'

'Of course.'

'All right,' Terrel replied, making up his mind, and finding an almost vindictive pleasure in the thought of sharing what he knew about the island's strangest resident. 'I came here looking for a creature that by any normal standards doesn't exist, but which is nonetheless enormously powerful. And unless I do find it, the consequences could be disastrous, not just for Myvatan but for all of Nydus.'

There was a prolonged, expectant silence after he stopped speaking. Terrel guessed that the others in the room were waiting for his interrogator to pass judgement on his claim.

'He's telling the truth,' she said eventually, barely able to conceal her astonishment. 'Or at the very least he believes what he's saying. Tell us more about this creature.'

Having begun, Terrel saw no point in refusing to elaborate. They could either decide that he was telling the truth or that he was quite mad. Either way, it would hardly make his current predicament any worse. He described the elemental's peculiar appearance as best he could, then explained something of the incredible powers it wielded. There was a lot more he could have told them, but he stopped there, knowing that even his brief introduction had given his invisible audience a lot to take in.

'So you've met its kind before?' his questioner asked.

'Yes. Three times. On each occasion I was able to make a bargain with the Ancient which prevented a serious upheaval.'

'And you need to do this again here?'

'Yes.'

'Because of the prophecy?'

'Yes.' Terrel couldn't recall mentioning the prophecy during his questioning, but he'd spoken about it several times since he'd arrived in Myvatan, and his captors clearly had access to a great deal of information.

'Do you know where the creature is?'

'The only clue I have is that it may have been responsible for the volcanic eruption near the centre of the island a few years ago.'

There was another silence as the implications of his statement sank in.

'So you wish to go to the Lonely Peaks?' his interrogator said, sounding oddly pleased.

'Yes. That's why I agreed to go with the army. It's my only chance of getting there. But I have no interest in finding the sword.'

This comment prompted another whispered conference between his captors. The sun was slightly less bright now, and he could just make out several shadowy

figures, huddled together.

'Can we trust you, Terrel?' their spokeswoman asked as they drew apart.

'You tell me,' he replied. 'You seem to know whether I'm telling you the truth or not. The real question is, why should I trust you? You've kidnapped me and tied me up, and you don't even have the courage to show your faces.'

The woman laughed uneasily.

'Of course we could just kill you now and be done with it,' she remarked.

'What purpose would that serve?' he shot back. 'I've already told you I've no interest in finding the sword, if that's what you're afraid of. What do you want from me?' He was aware of being under intense scrutiny, but he also sensed the group's uncertainty. He wondered again who he was dealing with, and what they hoped to achieve.

'That's not an easy question to answer,' their leader said eventually. There was an odd inflection to her words, and a new suspicion grew in the healer's mind.

'That's not your real voice, is it?' Terrel had used the glamour to enhance his own voice in the past, but that had simply been to make it sound louder or more impressive. He had never thought to use it to disguise his voice or imitate someone else.

'It wasn't Vatna who called me, was it?' he asked. 'Who are you?'

There was no response. He had not really expected any, but now something else occurred to him. In the past he had limited his use of psinoma to learning new languages. Prying into another person's mind had always seemed an unforgivable breach of privacy, but on this occasion he felt it could be justified. He might at least learn the identity of the people who had abducted him, and thus alter the balance of power a little.

Initiating the telepathic contact was easy enough. It was simply a matter of intent. Reaching out with his own thoughts, he began to delve into the other consciousnesses in the room.

There was an instant response.

'What are you doing?' a different woman cried out in alarm. At the same time Terrel felt his questing thoughts turned back, blocked by a shield he could not penetrate.

Knowing that his efforts had been discovered, he stopped, feeling guilty.

'What's going on?' the first woman asked.

'Nothing,' the other replied quietly. 'Nothing. I'm sorry. Forget it.'

So, Terrel thought, these people have someone who can not only detect psinoma, but also prevent its use. They have an interesting range of talents between them.

'I'm sorry,' he said, then decided to turn the tables on his captors if he could. 'I've answered all of your questions as best I can. It's time you answered some of mine.'

'We can't tell you who we are. Not yet, at least.' His original interrogator had taken charge again.

'Then at least tell me what it is you want from me.'

'Very well.' She seemed to have come to a decision of her own. 'The generals want to use you as a weapon. That's the only thing they understand. In a way we want to do the same, but with a very different end in mind.'

'What end?'

'This war has gone on long enough. We want peace.'

'Peace?' Terrel queried incredulously. This was not the response he had expected.

'For everyone,' she confirmed. 'Regardless of their allegiance.'

Terrel looked down at his bound wrists and flexed his muscles against the straps.

'For people who are so peaceable,' he remarked, 'you have a funny way of treating someone who's on your side.'

'Are you on our side?'

'Yes. This war is an abomination. I would gladly work with anyone who genuinely wants to put a stop to so much pointless bloodshed.'



His words provoked another series of whispered exchanges, then his interrogator spoke again.

'You have to remember that our aims are considered treasonous. We'd all be executed if we were discovered. We have to be sure of you.'

'Will you help us?' the second woman asked. Her voice sounded familiar.

'Why should I believe you?' Terrel asked. 'This could all be a trick.'

'The generals would not bother with such subterfuge,' the first woman said.

'If they even suspected you of betrayal, you'd be dead by now. As it is, they might find your presence useful. On the other hand, we need you.'

'Why?'

'Not all legends are steeped in blood. You can help us write a different ending. Your presence signals a time of change, hopefully for the better. If you agree to assist us we'll do all we can to make sure that comes true.'

'I only have your word for that,' Terrel pointed out. 'You seem to know when I'm telling the truth. I don't have that skill.'

'Perhaps you do,' the second woman put in.

'What do you mean?'

'Look into my mind. That's what you were trying to do earlier, wasn't it? I'll let you this time. You'll find the truth there.'

'He's a mind-reader?' her companion asked.

'Of a sort. Though he seems ashamed of it.'

'Are you sure this is wise?'

'No. But I'm willing to give it a try. He has a point, you know. Why should he trust us? This would at least show that we're being honest with him.'

'But won't it tell him who you are?'

'He already knows. Don't you, Terrel?'

'Yes,' he admitted. He had suspected it for a while, and the recent exchange had confirmed his impression.

'So I have nothing to lose,' she concluded. 'He could betray me now if he wants to, unless we convince him otherwise.'

'Or we make sure of his silence another way.'

'No! I won't have another death on my conscience.'

'Even if that death saves thousands of lives?'

'Even then. Besides, as you said yourself, we need him

to have a chance of saving all those lives.' There was a long pause.

'All right,' the interrogator said at last. 'But be careful.' Terrel felt the barrier around one of the group dissolve.

Very gently, he began to search for the truth in Tegan's mind.

He was so engrossed in trying to pick his way through the labyrinth of the magian's thoughts that when something thudded against the door of the room and pushed it open, Terrel was unable to understand what was happening. Half-seen movement, several shouts and a ferocious growling all combined to disorientate him completely.

Moons, this feels good! Alyssa declared. Whose throat do you want me to rip out first?

No one's! Terrel replied hurriedly, seeing for the first time the large dog that contained her spirit. They're friends. He had seen enough in Tegan's mind to be sure of that now.

Friends don't tie you to a chair, she responded. She was standing foursquare to the group, her hackles bristling as she displayed a fearsome set of teeth. Having been taken completely by surprise, Terrel's captors were cowering against the wall of the room. However, it would surely not be long before they realized the intruder was alone, and that together they should be able to overcome a dog. As if in response to that thought, Terrel caught the glimpse of a knife blade being drawn from its scabbard.

'The dog won't hurt you unless you try to harm her or me,' he told them.

I wouldn't be too sure of that, Alyssa said, anger pulsing through her words.

Sit down, Terrel pleaded. This is important.

With every sign of reluctance, Alyssa lowered herself onto her haunches, although she still eyed Terrel's captors suspiciously, and a deep growling rumbled in her throat.

'Is this Jax?' Tegan asked. She was clearly aware of Tofana's mistaken impression concerning the time Bezylum's body had been usurped.

Alyssa snarled angrily at the suggestion.

'No, it's not,' Terrel said.

'You have some interesting allies,' his interrogator commented.

'I do, don't I,' the healer agreed, feeling a little more at ease now. 'But don't annoy her. She's not always so obedient.'

Very funny, Alyssa grated.

'I think this meeting has served its purpose,' the woman said. 'We should be going.'

'How do I contact you again?' Terrel asked, knowing they still had much to discuss.

'You don't. We'll be in touch with you. Don't approach Tegan unless you have a good reason for doing so.'

'Fair enough. Are you going to untie me now?'

'The rest of you should leave,' Tegan said decisively. 'That way I'll still be the only one at risk if we're wrong about him. I'll set him free once you've all got away.'

There was a pause while the others considered her suggestion.

'What about the dog?'

'She won't be any trouble.'

Don't bet on it, Alyssa muttered venomously. Are you just going to let them walk away?

They're acting honourably.

Now, maybe. But not earlier. Tying you up wasn't-

It's all right now, he cut in, sensing the pent-up fury in her waiting to be unleashed.

'Go on,' Tegan urged.

There was a shuffle of movement as the others left. After a while, the magian stepped forward into the light, looking understandably nervous under Alyssa's feral glare. She loosened the straps and retreated into the shadows. Terrel freed himself, stretched painfully and rubbed his aching limbs.

'I'm sorry it had to be this way,' Tegan said.

'It's all right. I understand.'

'I'll go now. Will you wait here until I've had time to get clear?'

Terrel nodded.

'Thank you. Go carefully, Terrel,' she said in parting. 'You hold my life in your hands now.'

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The ghosts need to see you, Alyssa said as soon as they were alone.

Terrel was delighted by the news - and relieved.

So they got away all right, he said, remembering the abrupt end to their last visit.

Yes. Alyssa seemed unconcerned. Is this a safe place? Or should we move?

I'm not sure where we are. Terrel explained how the dark cobwebs had enveloped him.

More magic?

I can't think what else it could have been.

It's interesting that Jax didn't try to take over when you passed out, don't you think?

I hadn't even thought of that, Terrel admitted. Maybe he did. I mean, how would I know? The idea horrified him.

The people who tied you up would've noticed, Alyssa pointed out. I'm sure fax was never here, so don't worry about it. Let's just be thankful for small mercies. Now, are we staying or going?

Terrel moved the chair over to the barred window, then climbed on to it so that he could look outside. They were not in Well Tower itself, but in a

nearby annexe built against the outer wall of the fortress. It was a part of the castle he had not visited before. Stepping down, he went to the door and peered out into the corridor. It was empty and utterly quiet. I didn't see anyone on my way in here, Alyssa volunteered. They hadn't even set a lookout.

It seems deserted, Terrel said. Perhaps no one uses this section.

Why not? It seems sound enough.

Maybe it's haunted, he suggested with a grin.

Then it's just what we need. The dog growled in what Terrel hoped was its equivalent of laughter.

It's as good a place as any, he agreed. What about you, though? Will anyone notice you're not in the kennels?

Don't worry about that, she said dismissively. I can take care of myself.

You like being a dog, don't you.

They're stupid, but trained to obedience, so it's easy for me. And having the strength of this brute suits me at the moment.

You really would have torn their throats out, wouldn't you?

Oh yes, she replied enthusiastically. If you hadn't been such a spoilsport. Terrel wasn't sure how serious she was. In her own body, Alyssa had been the most gentle of beings, delicate and otherworldly, but whenever she took on the form of an animal she also inherited some of their characteristics. Even so, such eager belligerence made him feel uneasy. Was it possible that she had been infected by Myvatan's warlike obsession? He knew she would do anything she could to protect him, but her rage and readiness to resort to violence had seemed out of proportion to the situation. Terrel had the feeling that it had been touch and go as to whether she heeded his warning not to attack.

Well? Alyssa asked, impatient now. Do I call them here or not?

Go ahead. I need to talk to all of you, especially' about what just happened.

The three ghosts flickered into existence before he had finished speaking.

They all looked slightly flustered, as if they'd been taken unawares, and Muzeni even seemed to be out of breath.

A little notice would have been appreciated, my dear, the heretic grumbled.

Stop whining? Alyssa growled. Just get on with it before you're all blown away again.

Muzeni looked taken aback by her aggressive tone, but he did not respond.

You're in a good mood, Elam remarked Shall I fetch you a bone to chew on?

Not unless it's one of yours, she retorted.

There was never much meat on my bones, Elam said, unabashed. Even less now, I should think.

Terrel felt a sudden pang when he realized that his friend had been dead a few months short of eight years, and that his bones presumably lay in an unmarked grave somewhere within the grounds of Havenmoon. The fact that Elam could talk about such things with his usual flippancy was a good sign, but with Alyssa in her present mood the ghost was playing with fire.

Let's get on, then, Shahan said quickly, evidently recognizing the situation.

There are people here who want the war to end peacefully, Terrel began. I've just met some of them, and-

Never mind that, Muzeni cut in tetchily. Have you been able to establish where the Ancient is? Alyssa's criticism seemed to have made the old man grumpy.

Not for certain, Terrel replied, but it seems it might be in the central ice-field.

I thought you said- Shahan began.

Let him finish, Alyssa snapped.

That area of the glacier is called the Lonely Peaks, Terrel

went on, uncomfortable with the obvious tensions within the group. The main reason I think it's there is because a volcano erupted in that region a few years ago, and that's when the sleepers here first started appearing. What's more, the meltwater from the eruption was very potent magically.

But the elementals hate both water and its magic, Muzeni objected, glancing at Alyssa to see if she was going to tolerate this interruption.

I know, Terrel said. Here's what I think happened. Alyssa told me your theory about the Ancients moving up towards the surface of the planet quite recently – in their terms, at least. Isn't it possible that in doing so, this one actually caused the volcano to erupt? The problem was, it didn't know it was underneath a huge quantity of ice. The fires would have melted a vast amount, and the elemental itself may have been inundated. It could be that in trying to protect itself, it inadvertently lined up the water, in the way that the wizards do here.

But it failed, Shahan suggested, and that was enough to make it ill, or drive it mad.

It sounds plausible, Muzeni conceded.

But not very encouraging, Elam added.

There's one more thing, Terrel said. You remember you told me about some creatures who were supposed to act as bodyguards to the Guardian?

The ice-worms?

Yes. I've found out a little more about them. They really do live inside glaciers – and if they're supposed to protect someone, he 'd have to be near a glacier too. The only thing is, ice-worms usually travel alone and you said they were in a group.

That's what the text indicated, but it's a minor point, Muzeni decided. This is certainly the best evidence we've come up with so far.

So how are you going to get to these Lonely Peaks? Elam

asked. I don't suppose they have a Race of Truth here, do they?

There is a way, Terrel replied. It's not ideal, but as far as I can see, it's my only chance. The army here is going to mount a campaign soon to some springs at a place called Hvannadal, then push on to the Lonely Peaks. They want me to go with them.

Excellent! Elam exclaimed.

Why? Shahan asked.

This is where it gets complicated, Terrel said. He went on to tell them about various legends, and about the fact that he was supposed to be the one to find a mythical sword. It's called the Peacemaker, which is a bit of a sick joke, because– He stopped, aware of the strange expressions on the faces of the two seers.

The Peacemaker? Shahan queried.

Yes. Why?

That name's mentioned in the new part of the Code, Muzeni explained. We thought it referred to a person.

If it's a sword, it puts a completely different complexion on several passages, Shahan added.

Why did you think it was a person?

Because the text tells of him speaking to the whole island, Muzeni replied.

Which doesn't make a lot of sense if it's a sword, Elam added helpfully.

The wording is ambiguous, but I never expected this, Shahan admitted. When you mentioned the people here who wanted an end to the war, we assumed the Peacemaker was one of them.

No. In fact, the last thing the people I just met want is for me to find the sword. They threatened to kill me if I did.

Not very friendly of them, Elam commented.

Tell us about these . . . what do we call them? Muzeni asked. Rebels?

The Holma, Alyssa said, making one of her rare contributions. It means the underground. That's what they call themselves.

Terrel glanced at the dog, wondering how Alyssa could know that when he didn't. It had not been one of the things Tegan had allowed him to see in her mind. Well? Muzeni demanded irritably.

They want me to help them too, but for a different purpose, Terrel began, then went on to tell his allies all he knew about the underground – which turned out to be remarkably little.

So you don't know who these people are? Shahan said when he had finished.

Apart from Tegan, no.

More to the point, you 've no idea how they plan to achieve their goal of a just peace, Elam commented, his scepticism plain.

No, I don't, Terrel admitted. But they have to be a better bet than the generals!

Did they believe you when you told them about the Ancient? Muzeni asked.

I think so. They seemed to know when I was telling the truth. The curious thing was, I got the impression they were pleased that I wanted to go to the glacier – and yet it certainly wasn't because of the sword.

And you don't know how they want you to help them? Shahan queried. No. They said they 'd be in touch.

The real question, Muzeni stated dogmatically, is whether co-operating with them will give you a better chance of reaching the elemental. You'll be playing a dangerous game.

You might find yourself caught between them and the generals, Shahan agreed.

Given the choice, I'd rather go with the underground,

Terrel said. Tegan at least seems genuine in her desire for peace, and I have to assume the others are too. But I know what my priority has to be.

Good, Muzeni said, dismissing the subject. Do you have any other news for us? Have any of the clues from the Code become any clearer?

At least one of them has, Terrel replied grimly. I'm pretty sure I know what 'beware the fire within' means. He went on to tell them about Tofana's demonstration, and about his more recent discovery of the gruesome remains in the castle courtyard. As he spoke he was aware of some surreptitious glances between the ghosts. He kept expecting one of them to say something, but no one did. The worst thing is, he concluded, / think I was the one who showed her how to make someone burn up from inside.

Why should you think that? Shahan asked.

Tofana said that the first great secret of wizardry was recognizing the magical potential of water, and it seems the last great secret was the way in which all water – even that inside people – can be linked up. Apparently, something I did showed her that.

That's an unfortunate coincidence, Muzeni said heavily.

Now are you going to tell me what's going on? Terrel said, dread coiling in his stomach like a malevolent snake.

There have been some unexplained deaths on Vadanis, Shahan revealed. From what you 've told us, the cause was the same as those here.

The snake wriggled, making Terrel nauseous.

Only the extremities were left, the seer went on. All the rest was reduced to ash.

Was it Jax?

There's no proof, Muzeni replied, but I don't see how there can be much doubt. Terrel swore in dismay. It was clear now what ideas Tofana and Jax had discussed.

There have always been legends about fire-starters, the heretic added. People who could make their enemies' hearts burst into flame inside their chests . . . but until now it's been no more than that.

No one knows who the first victims were, Elam said, taking up the story, but they died in Betancuria while Jax was there. And there were some earth tremors in the region at the same time. As far as we know, Jax didn 't interfere with the Ancient on his latest visit, but we can't be sure because we're having to rely on second-hand gossip. In any case, he's been back in Makhaya for several days now.

The latest victim was anything but anonymous, though, Shahan said.

Who was it? Terrel asked.

His name was Remi. He was the Empress' chamberlain. As always, the mention of his estranged mother made Terrel prey to several different emotions – all of them unpleasant.

It caused quite a sensation in court, Shahan added. Adina was wild with rage and grief.

There were rumours that Remi was rather more than her servant, Elam said.

No one was able to explain the fire, the seer went on. His body was completely destroyed, yet when they found him in his apartment, nothing else was damaged. Even the furniture next to his body was barely scorched.

Do you think Jax killed him deliberately? It's possible, Muzeni replied. It was common knowledge that the two of them didn't always see eye to eye. But it's also possible it was just a random act, to prove he could do it under everyone's noses and get away with it.

Terrel thought that both explanations sounded plausible. The prince was vindictive, but he was also vain, and delighted in proving his superiority to those around him.

The healer already knew his twin to be capable of murder.

It's like another plague, he groaned. Against all the odds, his homeland was being affected by the events in Myvatan.

Not really, Shahan said. This is Jax's doing, not the elemental's. It's spread there because of his link, nothing else. If we stop him, the threat goes away. Unless he teaches others how to do it, Terrel pointed out. Like Tofana 's doing here.

I don't think he'll want to do that, the seer argued. He 'd rather keep the fun for himself.

I don't see him being much good as a teacher, Elam concurred.

So how do we stop him? Terrel asked.

No one had an answer to that.

We'll work on it, Elam promised eventually.

It wasn't much, but Terrel knew it was all he could expect. The ghosts were very limited in the ways they could affect his world.

Do you think it's connected to the 'sacred' water he took from the spring at Tindaya?

Probably, Shahan answered.

Could you or any of the other sleepers help? Elam asked Alyssa.

Some parts of the palace are forbidden to us, she replied, but I'll see.

We're getting off the point again, Muzeni muttered. As long as Jax doesn 't interfere with the elemental, what he does is of limited concern. There are more important matters to deal with here.

Terrel loathed the idea of his malignant brother having access to such lethal power, but he had to grant that the heretic was right. That was a problem for some time in the future, and he tried to bring his thoughts back to the present. The mention of Tindaya inevitably reminded him

of the Code, and of the lines the ghosts had quoted on their earlier visit.

You remember the inscription about a city beneath the sea? he said. Well, it features in local legend too. It's called Akurvellir, and it wasn't drowned, it's just lost. Careless of them, Elam remarked.

Something called the sacred flame went out at the same time as the city disappeared, Terrel went on, ignoring the interruption. It was in a place called the Circle of Truce, and it needs to be relit for the war to end. But no one knows where it is, Elam responded. Brilliant. Unless the underground think they've found it, Muzeni suggested.

Could it be near the Lonely Peaks too? Shahan said. Under a sea of ice?

If it is, there's no way anyone could find it, Terrel replied. The glacier's been there for hundreds of years. He remembered Tegan saying 'That's just a dream', and wondered what she had meant.

We'll look at the text again, Muzeni promised. And see if we 've missed something. Is there anything else?

Just one curiosity, Terrel answered. The merchant who sailed here with me is also a colonel from the Red Quarter, under a different name. He's the one who suggested I went to look for the Peacemaker. I've no idea what he's up to.

It was clear from the ghosts' expressions that they were none the wiser.

Have you got any news for me? Terrel asked. We've covered most of it, Shahan replied, but there is one other thing we found in the new section of the Code. It seems to indicate that either the Guardian or the Mentor will be helped by a wizard.

I can't see how it could be Tofana, the healer said. It's connected somehow to the starlight family, the seer added. I don't suppose you've learnt anything more about that? Terrel shook his head.

How clear is the translation? he asked. Could it be 'magian' instead of 'wizard'?

It's possible, Muzeni conceded. You think it could be Tegan?

Yes. Or maybe the other woman in the Holma, the one who questioned me.

Well, it's worth bearing in mind, Shahan said. It's possible that not all the wizards are potential enemies.

They were silent for a while.

Are . . . Are things any easier here? Terrel enquired tentatively. For you, I mean.

We may have overcome some of our difficulties, Shahan replied. Our opportunities are still limited, but—

At least we don't seem to be making things worse now, Elam completed for him.

Thanks to you, Muzeni said, nodding at his young colleague.

I do what I can, he declared.

But you're still not going to tell me what it is? Terrel asked.

We can't.

Some things you have to discover for yourself, Alyssa said.

Terrel glanced at her.

Do you know what it is? he asked suspiciously.

Hedges look different from the inside, she replied.

What? Even for her, this reply was unusually bizarre.

You need to go soon, Alyssa told the ghosts.

Is the wind coming? Muzeni's concern was obvious.

Yes.

Then we should go while our dignity remains intact, the heretic said. Goodbye, Terrel.

Good luck, Elam added, as all three faded into thin air. Do you have to go too? Terrel asked Alyssa. No. In fact, I won't be able to for a while. I'll come back to your lodgings.

Are you sure? he asked in surprise. Alyssa bared her fangs. Who's going to stop me? she asked.

### Chapter Twenty-Nine

It was growing dark by the time Terrel got back to his own tower, Alyssa trotting at his side. He'd made a halfhearted attempt to find Vatna — and had failed — but in any case, he was reasonably sure that the magian had not been involved with his abduction. During his wanderings, Terrel had received a few odd looks, but no one had challenged his right to be accompanied by a hound. Most people had merely given the pair a wide berth.

Just as they were about to start the long climb up the stairs, Latira came out of her own quarters. When she saw the dog she flinched, her eyes wide with fear.

'It's all right,' Terrel said. 'She won't hurt you.'

Alyssa sat down, and let her tongue hang out of the side of her mouth, her head tilted slightly. Latira edged forward again, reassured by the dog's apparently placid demeanour.

'Where did she come from?'

'I've no idea. She's just adopted me. You don't mind, do you?'

'No. No, of course not. The handlers might be puzzled, though. Do they know she's gone?'

'I'll explain in the morning if there's a problem,' Terrel assured her. 'When Vatna sent for me, did he give you the message himself?'

'No. It was a soldier. I didn't know him.'

Terrel was not surprised.

'I thought it was unusual,' Latira added, 'but the magians do use Well Tower sometimes. Did you find him?'

'No. He wasn't there.'

'Perhaps he was called away on military business.'

'I expect so.'

'Have you been to see the generals today?'

'No.'

'So there's no news, then? About when you'll be leaving, I mean.'

'Not yet,' Terrel confirmed. 'I'd like to know that myself.'

Latira nodded.

'I'd better get back to work,' she said, glancing uncertainly at the dog again.

As the maid returned to her own domain, Terrel and his companion set off up the stairs.

She's a good actress, isn't she? Alyssa commented.

What do you mean?

She was one of the people in the room. One of the Holma. Are you sure? Did you see her?

Not very well, Alyssa admitted, but I'd have known it was her even if it had been pitch black. This nose works even in the dark, and all you humans have a different stink.

Terrel was still digesting this news when they reached his room.

Would you be able to tell me who the others were? he asked as he sank down on the bed.

If we meet them again, yes.

That could be very useful.

Glad to be of service, she said, though she sounded dispirited.

Are you all right? Terrel asked.

This place puts a strain on me, she admitted. Never quite knowing when I'll be able to come or go.

Well, I'm glad you're here.

Me too. Do you mind if I sleep for a bit?

Of course not. He was disappointed, and would have preferred to talk, but he knew she had to husband her resources whenever she occupied an animal.

Terrel watched her as she rested. Every so often the hound's body would twitch slightly, and he wondered what images were being conjured up by a brain that had been possessed by another spirit. Alyssa claimed never to remember her own dreams, even though she could often 'see' other people's, but would that still hold true while she was a dog? He kept hoping that she just needed a short nap and would wake up soon, but Alyssa drowsed on, and Terrel eventually began to speculate on his latest discoveries - running through the events of the day and then re-evaluating some of his earlier conversations with Latira. Now he knew she was a member of the Holma, it seemed clear that she had been feeling him out, testing him in some way. Right from the first she had probably been trying to assess whether he'd make a suitable recruit for her cause. There were so many questions he wanted to ask her, but he recognised the need for caution. He considered her a friend now, and the last thing he wanted was to put her in any danger.

Then Terrel wondered about who else might be involved in the underground movement. He had his suspicions, but unless he could arrange for them to meet Alyssa's latest host, he had no proof. The one thing he was sure of - despite Muzeni's attitude - was that he would help them if he possibly could. It felt right.

It was only when he recalled Alyssa's earlier advice about not trusting his own instincts that his doubts returned.

The dog woke up briefly when Latira arrived with the evening meal. She wolfed down the food that had been brought for her, and then - to Terrel's disappointment - lay down again and seemed to go straight back to sleep.

'She was hungry,' Latira exclaimed, glancing at the empty dish. 'Unlike some people, I see. Is something wrong?'

Terrel had not touched his own dinner.

'No, it's fine.'

'You haven't tasted it yet.'



'You're an excellent cook, Latira,' he said. 'Among other things.'  
'What other things?' Her smile seemed a little forced.  
'I don't know what I'm talking about. Ignore me.' He began to eat.  
'Let me know if there's anything else you want,' Latira said, then left the room.

The hound opened one eye.

I see you 're working your charms on older women now, Alyssa teased him.

Don't be ridiculous! he shot back. There's nothing between me and- He fell silent, aware that this time Alyssa really was asleep.

A small part of Terrel remained aloof from the dream, watching as if it were an episode from someone else's life. Outside his room he knew that the Red Moon was several days past its peak, but here it shone in its full glory. When it shifted into the shape of a sword - as he had known it would - he saw it through the eyes of a warrior. What else could this be but the Peacemaker, a weapon

forged by the gods? He saw it cut a swathe through a human field, harvesting lives as though they were no more than ears of wheat, a crop of blood and pain. But this time, even as they fell, the bodies of the slain burnt away to ash.

The endless bare plain came next, as it had done before. It was just as bleak and joyless, but it was no longer empty. The vast space was crowded now, not with people but with swirls of light. Terrel soon realized that these twisted shapes were ghosts, and he knew they were the spirits of dead soldiers. This was the Great Plain - but it was not a place of ease and plenty where heroes took their well-earned rest. This was a realm of torment and hopeless regret. Why are you wasting time here? Go back to the battle. I was enjoying that. This is not your place, Jax.

Oh, it is now, the prince replied casually. I can do anything I want. And you can't stop me. I know I'm playing with fire, he added, laughing. That's what makes it so much fun.

No good will come of this, Terrel told him.

Good? Spare me the lecture, please.

Being a fire-starter will rebound on you in the end.

A fire-starter? Jax mused, trying the word out for size. I like that. It has a nice ring to it.

I'm serious, Jax. This isn't just fire you're playing with. It's evil.

Yes, the prince agreed happily. I know!

A sound from the outside world intruded then, breaking the hold of the dream.

Until next time! Jax called cheerily.

The noise was repeated as Terrel opened his eyes, shrugging off the miasma of sleep as best he could. The

dog also raised her head and looked at the door. The knocking came again, louder this time.

'Come in!' Terrel called, rubbing his eyes. He expected it to be Latira, and was wondering why she was rousing him so early, but it was not the maid who entered.

'I'm sorry to wake you,' Yarek said, 'but I need to talk to you and there isn't much time.'

'Why? What's happening?' the healer asked, wondering if the long-awaited campaign was finally about to get under way.

'Tofana's scheduled some new tests for this morning, and I'm supposed to take part.'

Terrel did not have to ask what sort of tests the apprentice was talking about.

'You don't want to?'

'No! It's horrible. You saw what happened to Dayak. How can I do that to anyone?'

'They can't force you to take part,' Terrel said, sympathizing with the boy's distress. Asking anyone to become a fire-starter was bad enough, but at Yarek's age it was barbaric.

'But if I don't, she'll send me home. I'll have to become a soldier, and then . . .' He faltered, momentarily distracted by the presence of the dog. Alyssa had just risen to her feet and was staring at the newcomer. When she didn't do anything else, Yarek found his train of thought again. 'I was hoping you could help me . . . find a way to make it . . . impossible for me to do it.'

'How? I don't know enough about the process.'

'But you were the one who showed Tofana how it was possible,' the boy pleaded.

'You must have some idea.'

'Couldn't you pretend to be ill?'

'The magians would know I was lying.'

'Perhaps I could say I need you to help me with something,' Terrel ventured.

'That's good,' Yarek responded, brightening a little. 'What?'

'I don't know yet.'

What about long-distance healing? Alyssa suggested silently. The army would have to be interested in that.

Go on, Terrel said, pretending to think.

If fire-starters can harm people from a long way away, why shouldn't you be able to heal them?

Yes! And Yarek's the obvious one to help me because I healed him before.

Perfect. You're a genius.

As well as mad, Alyssa agreed modestly.

'Have you thought of something?' Yarek asked hopefully.

'I think I have,' Terrel replied.

After the apprentice had dashed off to ask permission to join Terrel, the healer sighed.

Do you think distant healing is really possible?

That was an unpleasant dream, Alyssa said, ignoring his question.

I know, he said, thinking back. I had a similar one not long ago.

Not yours, she corrected. The boy's.

It hadn't blown away? Terrel knew that the afterimages of a dream - which only Alyssa could see - faded after a while, like clouds dispersed by a breeze.

No. It must have been very vivid.

What was it about?

There was a soldier shouting at him - I think it might have been his father - but his voice didn't make any sound so Yarek couldn't hear what he was saying. It made them both very unhappy.

He's had that dream before, Terrel said. Does it always end with the boy killing himself in a huge explosion? Alyssa asked.

Terrel spent the time before Yarek's return thinking about his own dream. If his vision had not stemmed purely from his own imagination, and thus bore some resemblance to the reality of the situation, then the Great Plain was far from being the idyllic afterlife imagined by the people of Myvatan. It was a place of endless grief and agony - and in that world there was no mitra to dull their perceptions. But if this was true, he couldn't tell anyone. The only consolation for people like Latira was to believe that their loved ones were at peace. The truth would be too cruel. However, it made Terrel more determined than ever to bring the war to an end.

He also realized that there had been something missing from the dream, and it took him a while to work out what it was. When he did, he wasn't sure what it meant. In the earlier version, the one he'd had at the pyramid, the battle had involved not only the Peacemaker but also a wizard - a wizard with Yarek's face. He had not appeared this time. It was also a curious coincidence that on both occasions the boy had been the one to wake him from his nightmare.

Belatedly, he thought to ask Alyssa if Yarek was a member of the underground. No, she replied. At least, he wasn't there yesterday.

He'd be an ideal recruit, Terrel thought. And the Holma must need all the help they can get - especially if it comes from someone with magical talent.

Nevertheless, he decided not to broach the subject directly, but to wait and see if it arose naturally.

He's dangerous, Alyssa added unexpectedly.

Dangerous? Why?

He has more power than he can control, she answered simply, and Terrel could not persuade her to explain further.

Yarek returned, flushed and breathless, obviously overjoyed that their ruse had worked and that he'd been given permission to miss the trials.

'Where shall we start?' he asked eagerly.

Terrel was taken aback.

'I didn't really mean . . .' he began. 'It was just an excuse to keep you away from the tests.'

'But it could work, couldn't it?' the boy asked, obviously disappointed.

'I've no idea. And I'm not sure—'

What else have you got to do today? Alyssa asked, cutting him off. There's no harm in trying. It might even come in useful one day.

Terrel gave in.

'I suppose the first thing we should do is find someone who's sick,' he said aloud.

'We can ask Latira,' Yarek said. 'She knows most of what goes on in the outside world.'

Latira directed them to one of the servants' quarters, where a cook was suffering from a fever. Once they'd located the dormitory where she lay, they stayed outside while Terrel tried to contact the woman's waking dream. He met with no success, so they tried a different approach. Yarek went in to see the patient, holding her hand, and Terrel attempted to complete the link through him - again with no success. Finally Terrel went in to visit her himself. At the touch of her hot skin he was immediately aware of the problem, and knew he could cure her of the infection easily enough. He held himself back, however, and went

outside again to repeat the attempt now that he had a feel for her dream. This time there was a fleeting contact, but he couldn't achieve anything worthwhile from even that modest distance. Disappointed, he went back inside and became a normal healer again.

It was only when he had finished, and the cook was thanking him profusely, that Terrel realized - to his dismay - that at some time during the morning the dog had left him. Alyssa had not said goodbye, and he couldn't believe that she'd just go without a word. But if she still inhabited the hound, why had she wandered off?

Knowing that the trials would be over now, Yarek left Terrel to his own devices that afternoon and the healer resumed his aimless existence, walking around the castle whose outer regions were becoming more and more familiar. He felt restless and dissatisfied, and longed for something to happen to point him towards the future -while at the same time dreading those developments. A dull, cold rain began to fall, matching his mood and driving him to seek shelter. Eventually, feeling chilled, tired and hungry and with no sign of Alyssa - either at the kennels or anywhere else - he returned to his own tower. Once there, enticed by the smells of cooking, he looked into Latira's quarters. She saw him and beckoned him inside.

'Why don't you eat here with me this evening?' she said. 'It'll save me having to carry it all the way up to your room. And you look as if you could use some company.'

Terrel accepted the invitation gratefully, wondering whether she would try to get him to talk about the underground. He was half inclined to tell her that he knew of her involvement, but decided to keep that knowledge to himself for the time being. As it turned out, Latira showed no interest in talking about the war - or peace - and was more curious about the healer's day. They chatted amiably about trivial matters and, for the first time in a long while, Terrel began to relax, enjoying her company and the comfortable surroundings. The meal increased his feeling of wellbeing - Latira was indeed an excellent cook - and even Alyssa's continued absence no longer bothered him quite so much. After all, he told himself, she had always

been a law unto herself, and on Myvatan her movements were circumscribed by other factors too. She would return when she could. When they had eaten their fill, Latira produced a jug of hot liquid. The steam rising from it was fragrant with spices and honey.

'Would you like some?'

'What is it?'

'Melcras. My grandmother used to say that after a cup of this you could crawl through a snowdrift and not feel the cold. I still make it using her recipe.'

'There's no mitra in it, is there?'

'No, nothing like that.'

'No alcohol?'

'No,' she replied, with a touch of impatience. 'Do you want some or not?'

'Yes, please.'

Terrel's first cautious sip convinced him of one thing. Melcras was delicious. The next increased his admiration for Latira's grandmother. It was only after he had finished his second cup that he realized he'd made a terrible mistake. Terrel woke the next morning in unfamiliar surroundings. He had a dull headache, a raging thirst and a queasy feeling of uncertainty in the pit of his stomach. He shifted

slightly in the bed, realizing he was naked beneath the sheets - and then saw that he was not alone. Latira lay beside him, still sleeping peacefully.

As he was struggling to grasp what had happened, a dog appeared in the doorway of the bedroom.

Do you still claim there's nothing between the two of you? Alyssa asked bleakly.

Chapter Thirty

It wasn't me! Terrel cried, sitting up in bed. It was Jax! But the hound - and Alyssa - had gone.

Terrel stared at the empty doorway in an agony of indecision. Surely she couldn't believe ...

'It wasn't me!' he called aloud, hoping the dog's keen ears would pick up his plea.

Beside him, Latira stirred in her sleep at the noise and Terrel froze, not wanting her to wake. Alyssa did not come back.

After a certain point Terrel could remember nothing of the events of the previous night, but he was in no doubt as to who had taken advantage of his insensibility - and some of his dismay turned to anger. Jax had already cost him the full use of his limbs and, although his twin had not been directly responsible for the loss of his birthright, his injuries must surely have been part of the reason for his parents abandoning him. The prince had also made Terrel's life difficult on several occasions during his travels. But if his brother caused him to lose Alyssa's love, that would be an act of malice far worse than anything that had gone before. The twins' mutual enmity had never been in doubt, but until that moment Terrel had not actively hated Jax. He found himself clenching his fists, the good hand curled into a ball, the crooked fingers of the right twisting into a rigid claw. For all that Terrel loathed violence, if Jax

had been in front of him at that moment, he knew he would have tried to kill him.

And then the healer remembered when, a very long time ago - in another life, it seemed - he'd had a vision of his own death. Terrel had been on the top of Mount Tindaya, the sacred site at the heart of Vadanis, when a second world had been superimposed upon his own. In that world he had seen himself, several years older, with another man, who wielded a sword. The fatal blow was about to fall when the vision ended but now, at last, Terrel knew who the malevolent presence was. If the chimera had been genuinely prophetic, he would meet his twin one day - but it would be Jax who would do the killing.

For a few moments the cold remembered dread of that meeting overwhelmed him, but then he forced himself to set such thoughts aside. As he had told himself many times before, the future would have to take care of itself. He had to

deal with the present.

You haven't lost Alyssa yet, he assured himself, hoping this was true. She'll understand once you explain what happened. But what if she never comes back? a smaller, traitorous part of his brain added.

Whatever had happened in the night, Terrel had not been responsible. But he had been the one foolish enough to drink too much melcras. After his experiences in the past, he should have known better – in spite of Latira's assurances that the drink would have no intoxicating effect. That was just one of the mysteries he was faced with now. Glancing at the woman in the bed, Terrel was filled with a mixture of emotions. He had begun to think of her as a friend, and although he already knew she was keeping a secret from him, there had seemed nothing false about her kindness and generosity the night before. On the other hand, the suspicion remained that she had done this deliberately. But if that was the case, why had she done so? During the course of his travels, Terrel had occasionally found that some younger women – those close to his own age, like Esera and Ghadira – thought him attractive, although he still didn't understand why. His strange eyes and crooked limbs were more often a source of fear or revulsion, but the women had seemed to overlook his odd countenance. After all, that was only his outer physical appearance, and Terrel was wise enough to know that there were other factors involved in human attraction. He just wasn't sure what they were. However, no one of Latira's age had ever shown any signs of a romantic attachment to him. Could she really have plied him with melcras with the intention of seducing him? Might she have had some ulterior motive? Had she even known about Jax? And if so, what had she hoped to achieve by giving the prince the chance to take over? Perhaps the whole thing had just been an accident. Part of Terrel wanted to wake Latira and ask her all these questions, but part of him also wanted her to stay asleep so that he could avoid the one question uppermost in his mind. What exactly had happened between them?

In theory Terrel knew the ways of men and women, but in practice he was still an innocent. The guilt that was consuming him was based on guesswork. It would be ironic if he was technically no longer a virgin but couldn't remember anything about the experience. It hadn't been him. And yet, if – as seemed likely – something had happened, it had been his body. As far as he could tell, nothing felt different, but he had no way of knowing whether this was significant or not. As a healer, he had never been able to explore his own waking dream, so there were no discoveries to be made that way. He knew the only solution was to find the courage to talk to Latira.

And then he remembered an earlier occasion when Jax had been able to usurp his consciousness, and Ghadira's response to his question. 'You don't remember?' she had teased him. 'That's not very flattering, you know.' Terrel had found the nomad girl's romantic interest in him both awkward and perplexing, but at least he had been aware of it. With Latira he'd had no inkling of any such involvement – beyond Alyssa's earlier jibe about 'older women', which now haunted his thoughts. Had he really done anything to encourage Latira to believe that he'd wanted this?

Then an even more bizarre – and mortifying – thought occurred to him. If, as a result of their encounter, Latira became pregnant, who would be the father – him or Jax? That was something he didn't even want to think about.

'Moons!' he breathed, holding his head in his hands. 'What a mess.'

Beside him Latira shifted, then sighed, and he tensed, wondering if she was waking up. A moment later her eyes opened and she looked at him. For a few heartbeats her face was a mask of incomprehension, and then something in his expression must have amused her, because she laughed briefly. Then she became still, her gaze unreadable once more, and Terrel had no idea what she was thinking.

Without a word, she slipped from under the bedclothes. Terrel looked away quickly when he saw that she too was naked, but Latira took no notice. Pulling on a robe, she walked from the room.

'Latira?' he said awkwardly. 'Please, wait. I—'

She did not even pause in her stride and, for the second time that morning, Terrel was left staring at an empty doorway. No one wants to talk to me, he thought dismally. He looked around and realized that he had no idea where his clothes were. He couldn't see them anywhere. By this time he was so unnerved that he simply stayed where he was, pulling the blanket up around him as the chill of the morning seeped into his flesh. He heard various noises coming from the kitchen, and then there was a period of quiet before Latira eventually returned to the bedroom door. Her face had a pinched look now, and her gaze was cool, measuring.

'Do you want some breakfast?' she asked.

The mundane nature of her question made Terrel want to laugh, but he controlled himself and shook his head.

'What happened last night?' he asked before she could leave again.

'You tell me,' she replied shortly.

'I don't remember,' he admitted, feeling the colour rise in his cheeks.

'Oh, very funny,' she muttered sarcastically. 'You didn't have that much melcras.'

Terrel couldn't tell whether Latira was offended or simply irritated by his query.

'Why did you let me drink that stuff?' he asked. 'I asked you if—'

'It's only honey and a few herbs,' Latira exclaimed. 'It keeps you warm and helps you relax. I thought you'd enjoy it. How was I to know . . .' There was no mistaking her annoyance now.

'What?' Terrel prompted.

'Nothing,' she snapped. 'Are you going to stay in bed all day?'

'I don't know where my clothes are,' he told her, knowing how pathetic he must sound.

Latira sighed, her exasperation plain, and disappeared. When she returned, she tossed the healer's clothes on to the bed and withdrew at once.

'I see you've made yourself at home,' Vatna remarked, replacing her at the entrance to the room. The magian was grinning. 'If I'd known, it would have saved me a climb up the tower.'

Terrel's humiliation was complete.

Vatna had been sent to inform Terrel of a meeting with Pingeyri. As the magian led the healer into the general's staff room, Terrel saw at once that it was an important gathering. Not only were all the senior officers present, but they had been joined by Tofana and three other robed figures – who he assumed were wizards – and a number of their attendants. Captain Raufar and several of his lieutenants were also there, standing stiffly to attention. And in another corner of the room, Jarvik stood with a group of soldiers whose uniforms identified them as coming from the Red Quarter.

'Gentlemen ...' Pingeyri began, then corrected himself. ''Ladies and gentlemen, this is Terrel, the seeker of legend, who is to lead us to the Peacemaker.'

Terrel's thoughts were still in turmoil from the events of the previous night, and finding himself the centre of intense scrutiny only increased his unease.

'He's also the one who enabled me to trace the lines used by the fire-starters,' Tofana added, glancing round at her colleagues. 'We may need his help to identify the specific pattern sequences once we get to Hvannadal.'

'I thought such things were within the competence of your magians now.' The woman who spoke wore a scarlet cloak, marking her as a visitor from the other side of the island. She was older than Tofana, but her mist-grey eyes were shrewd and the tone of her voice was faintly accusing.

'For simple chains, yes,' Tofana replied, unperturbed. 'But the springs will present a far greater challenge. It will

require a combined effort. That is why you and I – and our esteemed colleagues – must accompany the expedition, Varmahlid.'

The Red wizard nodded slightly in acknowledgement, but her expression remained neutral. Terrel wondered briefly whether there was any rivalry between Tofana

and her counterpart.

'Can he protect himself on the battlefield?' one of the other wizards asked. 'We wouldn't want such knowledge to fall into the hands of the enemy,' the fourth added. Both women wore black, but their deference to Tofana was clear when she answered their joint query.

'He will be protected,' she stated confidently. 'By magic, and by force of arms if necessary.'

'Captain Raufar and his men have been assigned to escort him,' Pingeyri said, rejoining the conversation. 'That seems appropriate, as they were the ones who rescued Terrel from the Gold when he first arrived on Myvatan. I have no doubt that they are up to the task, especially now they're to be joined by your own trainees.'

'Which of the fire-starters will accompany them?' Varmahlid asked.

'Hraun and Jauron,' Tofana replied, beckoning to a group of men who stood behind the wizards. Two neo-mancers stepped forward. Terrel thought that they looked perfectly ordinary, and it was hard to imagine them killing in such a horrific manner.

'If all goes according to plan,' Tofana added, 'they'll be among the first to put the new process into effect at Hvannadal.'

'What exactly are we going to do there?' Terrel asked, finding his tongue at last. 'Why are the springs so important?'

'In order to destroy his victim, a fire-starter must first establish some sort of contact with him,' Tofana explained. Her expression was almost rapturous now, and she was clearly enjoying the opportunity of displaying her ingenuity to such an audience. 'Water provides the easiest way of forging such a link - you've seen that for yourself- but at least some of the patterns have to be known in advance. A certain amount can be learnt from observation and experience - our neomancers have made considerable progress even in the short time we've been in Saudark - but the advantage of a place like Hvannadal is that the lines within the water there are distinctive, extending beyond the normal spheres of influence. Once we've been able to study the springs at first hand, and identified these unique patterns, it will be possible to create the greatest chain any of us has ever seen. Every man who has ever used the healing pools there - virtually all the White Quarter's soldiers - will be linked to it, and when we set the fire in motion it will be passed from one to the next until every one of them is destroyed.'

The enormity of such a massacre rendered Terrel speechless with horror, but Tofana's evident delight was mirrored on almost every other face in the room. Even Varmahlid was smiling now. Glancing at her and the other wizards, Terrel could not imagine any of them helping him, but the hint from the Tindaya Code would have to be followed up if possible.

'The great adventure is about to begin,' Pingeyri declared. 'We march north at first light tomorrow!'

#### Chapter Thirty-One

The castle was in ferment as the army prepared to leave, and Terrel felt like a piece of driftwood, floating aimlessly upon a sea of human endeavour - not part of the enterprise, but not wholly separate from it either. Like it or not, his fate was entangled with that of the soldiers now.

He had begun by looking for Alyssa in the kennels. The hounds had been in a state of high excitement, perhaps sensing that they too would soon be needed. Their barking had lessened slightly when Terrel was nearby, but his search had been fruitless. So many of the dogs looked the same, and the healer couldn't tell if the animal Alyssa had occupied was back among them. He'd questioned some of the handlers, but they were too busy to pay him much attention, and their answers were of no help.

Still hoping that Alyssa had not abandoned him, Terrel had then begun a haphazard search of the rest of the fortress, even returning to the empty section near Well Tower, but there was no sign of her. Eventually realizing that if they were to meet again it would be by her choice, Terrel returned - with some reluctance - to his own quarters. Though he dreaded the prospect, he

knew he must talk to Latira. He owed her an explanation, and he was hoping that in return she would answer some of his questions.

When he reached her apartment at the base of the tower, he found the outer door standing open. He went in, hoping to find her in a better mood than when he'd last seen her, but the woman sitting alone at the kitchen table was not Latira.

'I thought you'd come back here eventually,' Tegan remarked. 'Shut the door, will you?'

Terrel did as he was told, feeling a mixture of nervousness and excitement. Now that the long-awaited campaign was about to get under way, it made sense for the Holma to contact him again. He took the chair Tegan indicated.

'I don't think we need to tie you to it this time,' she commented with a slight smile.

'I prefer it this way,' he replied. 'I don't--'

'Will you betray us, Terrel?' she cut in abruptly.

'What possible reason could I have for betraying you?'

'Just answer the question. Please, it's important. Would you ever knowingly betray us?'

'No.'

'And do you genuinely want peace for Myvatan?'

'Yes.'

Tegan twisted round in her seat and addressed the apparently empty room.

'Well?'

For answer the slatted door to Latira's pantry was pushed open from the inside. Colonel Jarvik emerged from his hiding place and nodded to the magian.

'He's telling the truth,' he stated. 'You were right to trust him.'

Terrel was not entirely surprised that the soldier who was also a merchant was playing yet another role. It made perfect sense that the underground would need informants within the military hierarchy, and Jarvik was clearly a man used to subterfuge. The fact that he had now chosen to display his own trust in a foreigner by revealing his secret allegiance was a promising sign - and a list of questions was already forming in Terrel's mind.

'What's your real name?' he asked, picking the first one that had occurred to him.

'Jarvik is the name my parents gave me, but I've had several others in my time.'

'What would you have done if I'd told the generals about a merchant called Kjolur?'

'My twin brother, you mean?' the colonel answered with a smile. 'He's the black sheep of the family. No one's quite sure what he'll do next.'

Reminded of his own twin, Terrel wondered briefly whether Jarvik was telling the truth, but soon dismissed the idea. The soldier's smile told its own story.

'Why do you travel?'

'For the same reason you do.'

Terrel thought about that for a few moments.

'Because you had no choice?'

'That's how it felt to me,' Jarvik confirmed. 'I knew there was something out there, waiting for me.'

'And have you found it?'

'Perhaps.'

'Something to help your cause?'

'Actually, before I started travelling I didn't have a cause. Before I set sail I never questioned the war. I didn't even know there were people here opposed to it, let alone an organization like the Holma. Leaving Myvatan helped me to clear my mind - and in the process I discovered some things about myself, as well as the outside world. My hidden talents came to the fore, so to speak.'

'Was one of these talents the ability to tell whether someone's lying or not?'



Terrel asked, wondering at Jarvik's earlier certainty.

'No. I have that ability, but there's nothing strange about it. It's the result of many hours of study and training. Anyone can do it if they have the patience to learn, and eyes that know what to look for.' 'You can see the truth in someone's face?' 'And the lies,' the colonel said. 'It's all there in the minute changes in their expression, their gestures and mannerisms. Some are better liars than others but no one can hide such changes completely. Most are entirely involuntary.'

'You're trusting me with your life on the basis of tiny signals in my face?' Terrel said, finding it hard to come to terms with this idea.

'I'm very rarely wrong,' Jarvik told him. 'Especially when someone is confronted with a direct question, as you were just now. But I have to admit, it wasn't my judgement alone. When Tegan allowed you to look into her mind, it was not entirely a one-way process.'

Taken aback, Terrel glanced at the magian. She kept her eyes lowered, as if she was ashamed of her actions, and when she spoke her voice was quiet.

'I didn't mean to trick you,' she said. 'I can't initiate such contacts, but I can sense them and block them if necessary - and once one is made I can see a little ... of your thoughts.'

'She saw nothing to make us doubt you are genuine,' Jarvik concluded for her. 'The little test today was just for confirmation. We have to be careful, you understand.'

Terrel nodded. He had felt nothing during the contact with Tegan, had not been aware of any probing into his own mind, and he could not help wondering how much she had discovered. He was very glad now that he had chosen to tell the truth during his interrogation. That memory triggered another realization. 'Is one of your talents the ability to change your voice?' he asked Jarvik, who smiled but said nothing. 'It was you who mimicked Vatna, wasn't it? And you were the woman who questioned me. Do you use the glamour?'

'I don't know it by that name, but I can disguise my voice. It's an ability I was born with, apparently, but it took the teaching of an old man to make me realize it.'

'An old man?'

'Yes. He was a pedlar I met on my very first trip abroad.'

'Was his name Babak?' Terrel asked, remembering his own mentor in such matters.

'No, it was Kaisek. It's a word from an ancient tongue no one speaks any more. It means--'

'Let me guess,' Terrel cut in. 'It means "the king"?''

'You are a scholar,' Jarvik exclaimed in surprise. 'How did you know that?'

'Intuition,' the healer replied. 'I ... Never mind, it's not important. Is changing your voice your only talent?'

'No. It seems I am also a prophet. Of a sort.'

With those words, several things began to fall into place.

'You knew that if I went to the sculpture I'd be seen by the soldiers there.'

'I knew it was a possibility,' the colonel admitted. 'I can't control what I see. The visions come upon me in flashes. It was frightening at first, but I've learnt to accept them for what they are - glimpses of things that will happen, or might happen.'

'Othersight,' Terrel whispered.

'What?' Jarvik looked puzzled.

'Do you know what prompts these visions?'

'Not really. I think the lunar alignments play a part, but there's more to it than that. They only started once I left the island.'

Terrel was forming his own theory about that, but for the moment he wanted to return to more personal concerns.

'So you're the one who persuaded Ostan to take me to Whale Ness?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

Jarvik and Tegan exchanged glances.

'You expected me to die, didn't you?' Terrel said. 'You sent me there, knowing that!' The realization made him doubt the worth of his new allies.

'I did,' the colonel admitted. 'It was a mistake, and I'm sorry for it . . .'

'Thanks a lot,' Terrel muttered.

'He didn't have all the facts,' Tegan explained, 'and his vision hadn't told him the whole story. He saw it as an opportunity for peace and acted accordingly.'

'Peace? By getting me killed?'

'But you weren't killed,' Tegan pointed out. 'You're here now, and we all have an even greater opportunity because of it.'

Terrel couldn't argue with her logic, though the earlier deception still rankled.

'And I'm supposed to trust you now, am I?' he said. 'Or are you planning to get me killed the next time an opportunity arises?'

'You're worth a lot more to us alive now than you would have been dead,' Tegan told him earnestly.

'I don't blame you for being angry,' Jarvik added. 'I'll try to explain if you'll let me, then you can judge for yourself.' Taking Terrel's silence for assent, he went on. 'As you know, I've always been fascinated by legends,' and one of the tales that's always been associated with Savik's Whale is that an arrival such as yours would be a harbinger of a time of change.

Interpretations vary, but I'd always hoped it meant there'd be an end to the war.'

'And you were prepared to sacrifice me for that?'

'Yes,' the soldier replied bluntly. 'The death of an innocent martyr would have been a very powerful symbol on which to build our case for peace.'

'Then why did you try to deny your involvement in my going ashore there?'

Terrel asked, more curious now than angry.

'I had to distance myself, in case you were captured rather than killed. I didn't want Kjolur to become too well known.'

Terrel digested this argument, finding that he could accept it with relative calm.

'A time of change could mean anything,' he said. The phrase was already familiar to him from other occasions in his travels, and he had found Jarvik's use of it oddly reassuring. 'What made you think it would be your interpretation that was believed?'

It was Tegan who answered.

'That's where the Holma comes in. We've been waiting a long time for the chance to send a message to all Myvatan - and this was the starting point.'

'One legend among hundreds?' Terrel queried sceptically.

'Yes, but a very powerful one,' she replied. 'All four quarters have their own versions.'

'And we had something else to lend credence to our message,' Jarvik put in.

'Something more than just an old story.'

'And what was that?'

'This.' The colonel took something from his pocket and held it up between his thumb and forefinger. 'It may not look like much, but it's the last part of a puzzle I've been trying to put together for a long time.'

The object he was holding was a slim metal cylinder, no bigger than his little finger. The surface had the dull sheen

of much wear and tear, but as Terrel peered at it, he could see faint markings that seemed familiar. He picked out representations of a fish, a whale, a bird, and a bolt of lightning, and he had no doubt that somewhere he would find the other three symbols the nomads had used for their oracle, and which he had also seen elsewhere. He felt a tingle of excitement, certain that this must be part of his own quest too.

'What is it?' he asked quietly.

'It's a container,' Jarvik replied. 'The vial is important, but only because it's proof that what's inside is genuine.'

'And what's that?'

For answer, the colonel unscrewed the top of the cylinder, then tipped the contents out onto his palm. A translucent red stone slid out. It was faceted like a crystal, tapering slightly towards one end before coming to a sharp angular point. Within its delicate, jewelled depths, something small and bright glowed like a trapped snowflake.

'This is the last and most important stone in the circle of flame,' Jarvik said reverently. 'It's said that it was made from a drop of the moon's blood that fell to Nydus from Bvandir's comet and then froze within the ice. With this, you have a chance to rekindle the flame that once burned within the Circle of Truce.'

'Me?'

'Yes. You were the one whose arrival signalled the time of change.'

'Can I hold it?' Terrel asked, wondering how so small a stone, no matter how curious or beautiful, could be so powerful.

'Of course.' Jarvik handed the crystal over, then watched as Terrel's expression changed from interest to astonishment. Tegan cried out a moment later and the colonel's mouth fell open in disbelief.

As the fingers of the healer's good hand had closed around the stone, the small imperfection at its heart had begun to shine more brightly than before. In the space of a heartbeat the glare became so intense that it was hard to look at it directly, and the whole room was bathed in a brilliant, rose-coloured light.

#### Chapter Thirty-Two

Terrel was so mesmerized that he hardly felt the internal trembling, but in the next moment, when everything in the kitchen began to shake, he recognized it for what it was. In a reflex action that he could not have explained rationally, he put the crystal down on the table, where its light faded instantly, but the vibration went on.

Even though it was clearly a relatively small tremor, the earthquake raised the usual primeval fears in Terrel, and he was very glad when it died away. Both Jarvik and Tegan seemed to have taken the disturbance in their stride, and Terrel reminded himself that such things were common enough on Myvatan. What had happened with the stone was not. The islanders were both staring at the crystal. In the still silence, their faces shone with the memory of its brief radiance.

'How did you do that?' Jarvik breathed. 'I didn't do anything. It just happened.' 'But . . .'

The colonel was staring intently at Terrel now, his expression betraying utter astonishment. The healer could understand the other man's amazement. He didn't know what had happened either. He wondered whether the invisible star he carried within him had somehow reacted with the stone, but he couldn't see how or why it should have done so. There had been no eclipse – and he certainly wasn't inside an elemental.

'It's a sign!' Tegan declared, her eyes bright. Jarvik shook his head, and for once Terrel thought he glimpsed a little of the truth within the soldier's eyes. It was a truth that made what had happened all the more surprising.

'It was a sign,' Tegan repeated, eager now. 'We're going to find it. The real one!' She glanced at Jarvik, and Terrel saw the hope in her face – and knew that neither he nor the colonel would say anything to crush her newborn faith. Tegan had just moved one step closer to the fulfilment of a dream.

'I think you should put the stone away,' Terrel said. He had presumed all along that Jarvik and Tegan would have a plausible reason for the three of them to be meeting like this, but it would be better if their alliance remained known only to their friends – and he was worried that the burst of light might have attracted some unwanted attention.

Jarvik picked up the crystal and held it for a moment before sliding it back into the metal container and stowing it away in his pocket. His face still betrayed his confusion, but he was trying to hide it now.

'It is a sign, isn't it?' Tegan asked, sensing the uncertainty around her. 'We were right about Terrel. This proves it.' She turned to the healer. 'Did you

see anything? Were you able to read the far-crystals?'

Terrel shook his head.

'I don't know what you mean. All I saw was this room.'

The magian looked disappointed, but then seemed to convince herself that all was not lost.

'It's not time yet,' she said. 'And we're not in the right place.' She looked to Jarvik for confirmation.

'You're right, of course,' he said, recovering his composure.

'How did you come to have the stone?' Terrel asked. 'I came across it on my latest trip abroad,' the colonel replied. 'At the time it seemed just like a chance encounter, but I think there was more to it than that. Fate – or perhaps the stone itself – was guiding me.'

'So you had it with you on board the Skua,' Terrel said, remembering the casket in the merchant's private cabin. 'Yes. I would have shown it to you then if I'd known ...' 'Why was it in a foreign land when it was supposed to have fallen on Myvatan?'

'Long ago, the guardians of the Circle of Truce saw that war had become inevitable,' Tegan replied. 'They thought the only hope for the future was to hide the sacred artefacts so that they would not be tainted by the madness of the conflict. So some of them travelled from these shores.'

'And neither they nor any of the things they took with them were ever heard of again,' Jarvik said. 'Until now.'

'It's strange,' Tegan went on. 'When Kjolur sails to the south, it's under the pretence of looking for new weapons for the war. What he's actually brought back could bring peace.'

'And the sooner the better,' the sometime merchant declared. 'You heard what Tofana's planning to do. It's appalling.'

'We can't let her do this!' the magian exclaimed, her own revulsion clear.

'The springs at Hvannadal, you mean?' Terrel queried.

'Gods, yes!' Tegan cried. 'What she's done already is bad enough, but that would be catastrophic'

'You'd better tell Terrel what's been happening,' Jarvik said.

The magian took a deep breath, preparing to relive unpleasant events. When she began speaking she kept her

voice neutral, as if she could only bring herself to talk about such things by shutting down her emotions.

'As you know, the Wizard has been busy training fire-starters. At first she was hoping they'd be able to use the water inside any human body to kill from within. That way, the neomancers would be able to pick their targets at will. But it didn't work, because the chains weren't always complete and the lines weren't accurate enough. There were some dreadful accidents, where the whole process reversed itself and it was the fire-starter and not his intended victim who burned. At other times they killed the wrong targets, and sometimes the experiments spiralled out of control so that everyone close by was in danger. Even when the fire-starters were unharmed, some of them have been driven half mad by what's going on. The gods know what would happen if we ever let such men loose on a real battlefield. They could just as easily end up slaughtering their own comrades as the enemy.'

'Which is why Tofana reverted to an earlier plan,' Jarvik put in.

'The worst thing is that this plan might really work,' Tegan went on. 'If we do manage to get hold of Hvannadal's secrets, the chain will almost form itself. Any magic nearby will start it off and trigger the internal fires. In effect, the White neomancers will kill themselves and all their companions. It's a nightmare, the ultimate perversion of wizardry.'

'And if it works at Hvannadal,' the colonel added, 'there's no reason to suppose it won't work at any of the other enemy water supplies.'

'That's what Tofana intends,' Tegan confirmed. 'The problem is, the wizards on the other side aren't stupid. They're bound to find out what she's doing, and try to use the same thing against us. Imagine the pools here being turned into a deathtrap.'

The horror of such an enormous increase in the scale of violence was not lost on any of them.

'Tofana claims that if we time it right, we can wipe out all the enemy wizards and magians before they realize what's going on,' Jarvik said. 'Or at least before they get the chance to retaliate.'

'All of them?' the magian exclaimed in disbelief. 'She can't possibly believe that. By its very nature, the process will go out of control as soon as it's initiated. We won't be able to tell where the chains will lead.' Tegan's forced calm had deserted her now.

'I'm not defending Tofana,' Jarvik told her. 'I'm just reporting her reasoning.'

'And the generals believe her?'

'They believe her because they want to. If she's right, and they take Hvannadal, they'll become the last great heroes of the war, the ultimate victors. Who's going to argue with the chance of having such a place in history?'

'Even if it comes at the price of thousands dying, in the most horrible manner imaginable?'

'They're the enemy. They deserve to die.' Tegan's disgust at such justification almost overwhelmed her. Controlling herself with some difficulty, she went on, enunciating her words with unnatural precision. 'It could be even worse than that.' 'What do you mean?' Terrel asked. 'Ultimately, all the water sources on Myvatan are linked. If the subverted lines spread, we could all end up burning. Every man, woman and child on this island would be destroyed.'

They were silent for a while, each of them contemplating the prospect of Myvatan being turned into a gigantic funeral pyre.

'So the question becomes, how do we stop all this from happening?' Jarvik said eventually.

'Is there any way you could sabotage Tofana's efforts?' Terrel suggested.

'I've done what I can to slow her progress down,' Tegan replied, 'but it's not enough. And if I do anything too obvious, she'll just get rid of me - probably in the next round of tests.' She shuddered at the thought.

'No,' the colonel decided. 'We must stick to our original plan.'

'What's that?' Terrel asked.

'The underground has been working towards a single goal for several years now.

The only way we can see any hope of peace returning to Myvatan is if we rebuild the Circle of Truce - a place where old enmities can finally be set aside. If we do that, Tegan and her colleagues could turn all their magical resources to doing good, rather than finding ways to promote destruction. If that happened, the benefits would soon become clear to everyone. But to persuade people to give it a fair chance, we need them to believe it's what the gods want, what is meant to be. That's where the legends come in.'

'It's not going to be easy to overturn centuries of hatred.' Terrel had seen the vile results of other, much shorter wars, in other lands, and knew the terrible difficulties the Holma faced.

'We know,' Jarvik admitted. 'The war is so entrenched in our way of life that it's going to need something spectacular to change the way everyone thinks.'

'And that's where you want to use the Circle of Truce?'

'Exactly.'

'But I thought Akurvellir has been lost for generations.'

'It has,' the colonel conceded 'but we don't really need to find the city. The flame is all we need. That was - is -

the true heart of the place. Then we can build a new Circle of Truce.'

'But wasn't the flame extinguished?'

'That's what most people think. We're going to prove them wrong.'

'How?'

'By finding it in the ice and lighting a new torch,' Tegan replied. 'Bringing it out into the open again.'

'But—'

'The whole thing may just be a myth,' Jarvik explained, 'but it's a myth a lot of people believe. Whether we find the real thing or not is almost irrelevant.' He glanced at Tegan, but she remained silent. 'The flame will be a tangible sign that the war is supposed to end, that the ancient schism can be healed. Why should it matter where it comes from? In this case, the end really will justify the means.'

It was the kind of dishonesty Terrel could approve of, but he still didn't understand how it could be done.

'Can you really do it?' he asked.

'With your help, I'm sure we can,' Jarvik replied. 'The problem is, we have to do it before Tofana's let loose at Hvannadal. Anything else is just too appalling to contemplate.'

'So we have to get Pingeyri to change the order of the campaign?'

'Precisely. That's where you and the Peacemaker come in. It gives us the perfect excuse to go to the Lonely Peaks and "discover" the flame. We have to convince the general that it would be worth his while to have the sword before he goes to the springs. Any ideas?'

'Not at the moment,' Terrel said, beginning to consider the problem. 'It's hard to see how one weapon could make much of a difference.'

'It doesn't exist, of course,' the colonel said. 'At least I hope it doesn't.'

'And if it did, we certainly wouldn't want anyone to find it!' Tegan added fervently.

'But its mythical status would make the man who wields it invincible, because all his comrades – and his enemies – would believe that he was. The sword's attraction for Pingeyri is not in doubt.' Jarvik smiled ruefully. 'What we need is an excuse to go looking for it first. Then we'll just happen to find something else.'

'Do you know the timing of the campaign?' Terrel asked.

'Nothing's been set in stone yet,' the soldier replied. 'There are just too many unknown factors in a military operation of this size. The only thing I know for sure is that Tofana wants to be at Hvannadal when the White Moon is at its strongest. That's the opposite of normal tactical logic, but it means that the magic of the springs will be at its most potent – and so the chain reaction will be even more powerful.'

'On the other hand,' Tegan said, 'if you're going to pretend to look for the Peacemaker, you'll need to be on the glacier at the full of the Red Moon.'

'So where does that leave us?' Terrel realized he had taken little notice of the lunar configurations recently. This was unusual, and he wondered at his own indifference.

'At present, the White Moon is three days short of new,' the magian told him.

'So it will be full nineteen days from now.'

'That's probably too soon,' Jarvik stated. 'We'd never be able to get there in time, unless the White choose not to defend their territory at all. And that's hardly likely.'

'So we should have until the next full, at least,' Terrel concluded.

'Yes,' Tegan agreed, 'and in the meantime, the Red Moon will be full some seventeen days before that.'

'Then it fits,' Terrel said. 'From a logistical point of view, it would make sense to go to the Lonely Peaks first.'

'You can argue that way,' Jarvik conceded, 'but Pingeyri seems set on Hvannadal. We need to persuade him to change his mind. I'll do my best, but he's stubborn when he's got his heart fixed on some great adventure, so if there's any other avenue you want to pursue, do whatever you can.'

The colonel was about to say something more when he was interrupted by a sharp double tap at the door. All three of them froze. After a short pause, the knocking was repeated, first three times, then twice again. Tegan and Jarvik relaxed at what was obviously a prearranged signal, and the magian hurried across to let the newcomer in. It was Myrdal, and as soon as he was inside, the adjutant and Tegan embraced. Such was the intensity of their kiss that, as far as they were concerned, there might as well have been no one else in the

room. Terrel found himself staring, then grew embarrassed at his own curiosity and looked away. On the other side of the table, Jarvik smiled and gave an apologetic shrug.

'They're not the only ones who have given up a great deal for the cause,' he said quietly, 'but in the end not even war or magic is going to keep those two apart.'

Terrel nodded, but he couldn't find the words to express what he was feeling. He could imagine much of the couple's story now, but his thoughts had flown to Alyssa – and whether they would ever experience such a reunion. Seeing Tegan and Myrdal together made his memory of the events of the previous night even more bitter.

'Enough, you two,' Jarvik called amiably. 'You're embarrassing our guest.' After a brief exchange of whispers, the lovers disentangled themselves and crossed to the table.

'Are you going to help us?' Myrdal demanded without preamble.

'Yes. I'm going to do everything in my power to help you.' As he spoke, Terrel couldn't help wondering what the reaction would have been if his answer had been different. He knew too much to remain free – unless they trusted him.

'You know all my secrets now,' Tegan said, emphasizing this point.

'But you're still going to search for this elemental of yours?' the adjutant queried.

'Yes, I have to.'

'You think it's become an ally of the old dragon of the volcanoes?'

'Perhaps it is the old dragon,' Tegan suggested. 'That would explain a lot.'

Terrel was considering this idea when Myrdal spoke again.

'The general wants you,' he told Jarvik. 'One last meeting to discuss strategy.'

'I'd better go, then,' the colonel decided. 'We're pretty much done here for the time being. We'll be in touch, Terrel.'

'Good luck.'

'Thanks. We may need it.'

After Myrdal had snatched another kiss from Tegan, the two soldiers left together. For a few moments the magian looked bereft, then she turned back to Terrel, a determined smile on her beautiful face.

'Latira will be back soon. She's one of us too.'

Terrel nodded, not wanting to reveal that he already knew this.

'It's good that the two of you have been getting on so well,' Tegan remarked.

'She's made me very welcome,' Terrel replied awkwardly.

'I should go,' the magian said. 'Tofana might be wondering what I'm up to.'

'Can I ask you something first?'

'Of course.'

'Is Yarek a member of the Holma?'

'No. Not yet, at least. I know how he feels about the war, but he's too unreliable.'

'I think he could help us.'

'We'll see,' she said. 'Don't tell him anything, will you?'

'No. I can keep secrets too.'

'I'm sure you can.' Tegan walked over to the door, put her hand on the latch, then hesitated. 'You will find the flame, you know. The real one. Jarvik was just trying to make sure . . . Never mind.'

I'll do whatever I can,' Terrel promised.

'Once you're at the Lonely Peaks, you could even ask your elemental to help us.'

'I'm not sure that would work,' he replied, 'but if I get the chance, I'll try.'

'Having a dragon on our side could be useful,' Tegan added, and smiled.

### Chapter Thirty-Three

The three newest recruits to Raufar's troop were staked out naked on the half-frozen ground. To Terrel, who was watching with a mixture of distaste and morbid fascination, they looked very young, no more than boys. Their bodies

were pale in the flickering torchlight, and they were shivering as much from fear as from the cold. Far above, the White Moon, almost full, silvered the scene with its frigid radiance.

The initiation ceremony was almost over now. The young soldiers had already been forced to endure various humiliations in silence, and this was their final test – though neither they nor Terrel knew exactly what it would entail. The rest of the onlookers did, however, and their sadistic amusement was plain. They had all had to undergo the same sort of trial on the eve of their first trip into an enemy quarter – and having survived the experience, and been accepted into the warriors' brotherhood, they saw no reason why others should not have to do the same.

Terrel could only be glad that he had not been included in the evening's entertainment. He was effectively a member of their company now and, apart from a brief incursion into the Gold Quarter on the way back from Whale Ness, he had not ventured into enemy territory either. However, no one had suggested that he join the initiates, either out of respect for his supposed talents or uncertainty about his standing within the troop, given that he was not a proper soldier – and a foreigner to boot.

Captain Raufar had not taken an active role in the proceedings, and had just watched impassively as his lieutenants went about their business. Terrel had gathered that the military authorities officially disapproved of such rituals, but were prepared to turn a blind eye to them as long as they remained private, within the various units of the army. No outsiders would be allowed inside the troop's section of the camp until the ceremonies were over.

Terrel watched as Pjorsa poured a sticky brown mixture from a bucket, covering each of the trio in turn. The healer had no idea what the noxious substance was, but he did not have to wait long before its purpose became clear. The circle of spectators parted and Narvat and Stykkis returned, each leading several of the dogs that were used to pull the baggage sleds. The hounds were straining at their leashes, eager to start, and as soon as they were released they leapt forward and began to eat the mixture, licking it from the novices' skin with long, rough tongues. The snuffling noises they made were horrifying in themselves, and the expressions on the victims' faces revealed their terror, especially when the dogs' fangs moved close to the more tender parts of their anatomy. Yet still none of the initiates made any sound. At first they could not help squirming, trying to avoid the hounds' attentions, but eventually they realized that their ordeal would be over more quickly if they kept still. And so they lay rigid, eyes screwed shut, breathing in erratic gulps, while the onlookers laughed and shouted out various helpful comments. Finally, when the last specks of food had been licked clean, the dogs were led away. The three young men were untied and helped to their feet, amid much laughter, back-slapping and words of congratulation. They were allowed to dress, and steaming cups of melcras were pressed into their trembling hands. All three recovered their spirits quickly, soon joining in with the good-natured banter and smiling with relief. The gathering dispersed to make preparations for the evening meal, for the night's rest – and for the next day, when the serious business would begin.

The huge encampment was situated close to the border with the White Quarter. It had taken more than half a median month to get there – much longer than Terrel had expected – because an army of such size was a cumbersome entity, and could only move at a fraction of the speed a single company could have managed. In all that time Terrel had hardly seen anyone outside the company to which he'd been assigned – and had found this increasingly frustrating. There had been no further contact from the Holma, and no one in Raufar's troop had given any sign that they might be a member of the secret organization. Terrel understood that as they moved into enemy territory the various units would split and go their separate ways, and he knew he was running out of time. Nor had there been any sign of Alyssa or his ghostly allies, and this left him feeling more alone than ever. He could not believe that Alyssa would really have abandoned him – but if she had, she couldn't have picked a worse time.



Adding to his anxiety was the fact that General Pingeyri had proved intractable about his plan of campaign, and would soon take his land-based forces into the mountain passes that led to Hvannadal. That he would do so on a day when the White Moon was full was an act of bravado of which the entire army seemed to approve. The very fact that they were to scorn the chance of waiting a mere two days until their own Dark Moon would be full was in itself a challenge, both to their foes and to their own warrior mentality. Terrel felt sick at the thought of the violence to come, but there seemed to be nothing he could do to prevent it. He just had to go where fate took him, and keep his own goals in mind. It seemed that if he were ever to reach the glacier - and the Ancient - he would have to go to Hvannadal first. His last night in Saudark had been a confusing time. After Tegan had left him he had waited for Latira, but she hadn't returned, and eventually Terrel had gone out on an errand of his own - reasoning that he would be able to talk to her later in the evening. He had gone to see Eskif, hoping that the brigadier's promise of help still held good. It had taken him some time to track his quarry down, but after several arguments with harried adjutants, he had finally been ushered into the room where the senior officer and his son were poring over several maps.

The two men had smiled when they saw their visitor, and made him welcome, but as soon as Terrel raised doubts about the wisdom of the military operation, the brigadier had become as stubborn as the general would subsequently prove to be. Once the matter of the lunar configurations had been dismissed as irrelevant, Terrel had not been able to give any plausible reason for them going to the Lonely Peaks before Hvannadal, and Eskif had informed him - with feigned regret - that even if he wanted to change Pingeyri's mind, he would not be able to do so.

Terrel had then tried to point out some of the possible dangers of Tofana's intended course of action. This had met with a more sympathetic response - with Eskif admitting that he didn't really like the plan, because it relied on 'too much wizardry and not enough soldiery' - but in the end the conclusion had been the same. When Terrel had asked if the brigadier would at least try to get Pingeyri to question the true nature of Tofana's new magic, Eskif had pointed out that the general was his commanding officer, and Tofana the most powerful wizard on Myvatan. Only a fool would try to come between those two. It seemed that everything had been decided.

Returning to his own tower, Terrel had again waited for Latira, but she had been nowhere to be seen and so he had climbed the stairs to his own room, and finally, late into the night, fallen into a restless sleep. His mental turmoil over what Alyssa had seen - and what she might believe had happened - made it impossible for him to relax, and his dreams were a mixture of fragmentary and disturbing images.

The next morning there was still no sign of Latira, and Terrel had begun to worry about her mysterious absence. But then he had been swept up in the preparations for his own departure, and kitted out with new, warm clothes and a backpack containing the equipment he would need - to which he had added his own few belongings. Before he had known it, he had been leaving Saudark, wondering whether he would ever see Latira again. Having no command of Myvatan's written language, he hadn't even been able to leave her a note, and he fretted about all his unanswered questions.

A few days later, he had discovered - quite by chance - that she was in fact travelling with the army. The unprecedented presence of various wizards and their retinues had meant that unusual measures had had to be taken for the provisioning of the army. To that end, various servants were travelling with the soldiers. It was possible that Myrdal had been in charge of such arrangements, and had chosen Latira in order to have another member of the Holma on hand, but Terrel had no way of knowing this for sure. He had made several attempts to locate her during the march north, but he had not even caught a glimpse of her.

The journey itself had been an extraordinary experience, and if he hadn't been

so preoccupied with other matters, Terrel would have wondered at the things he had seen. Travelling with the main army - a second force had headed southwest from Saudark to the ports, whence they would complete the journey to the White Quarter by ship - their route had taken Terrel through a landscape that he could only ever have dreamt about. He'd trudged across vast snowfields, some of which would not melt even at the height of summer. He had seen vast glittering mountains in the distance, and walked beneath great cliffs of blue-white ice as the troops skirted the edges of the glaciers. He'd crossed ravines that he had first thought to be rivers, but which he had discovered were fissure lines, where the skin of the planet was thin and cracked, revealing some of the power within. In places steam rose from these fissures, while in others there were bubbling masses of scalding mud, and he had even seen one place where the underground heat had produced small lakes of hot water inside caves made entirely of ice. Most surprising of all were the many small settlements that clustered around these fissures, taking advantage of the energy within and defying the dangers of living on such unstable land. In times of earthquakes it was not uncommon to see flames and smoke rising from the crevasses, and the opposite banks often shifted, so that any bridges and crossing places had to be repaired almost constantly.

Terrel had also seen many strange rock formations, with several enormous boulders balanced with seemingly impossible precision on top of much smaller stones. This had

reminded him of Savik's Whale, and he wondered whether it had been carved from one such formation. In other places, outcrops of bare rock were scored with straight lines, which he had been told always ran precisely north-south, and were thus a useful aid to navigation in open country. At first he'd assumed that these were man-made, even though it had seemed a huge and, for the most part, pointless undertaking to carve so many lines. However, Raufar had told him that the marks had been made by the gods - to show that even the land beneath men's feet was theirs to do with as they wished.

Elsewhere there were signs of mankind's influence on the terrain, including some that appeared to be almost unimaginably ancient. The jumbled, eroded ruins of long-dead buildings - it was impossible to tell whether they had been fortresses, temples or mere dwellings - lay at various points along the route. When Terrel had asked about them, he'd been told that no one knew who had built them or what had happened to the builders. None of the soldiers seemed to care one way or the other, but the healer had seen similar evidence of vanished civilizations during his other travels on Nydus, and the implications of their existence continued to intrigue him.

Something else preyed on his mind as they travelled, and that was the sense of madness and evil that seemed to pervade the entire island. As Elam had pointed out, it was stronger in some places than in others - for no discernible reason - and in a way, that made it harder to bear. If it had been constant, like an unvarying background noise, it would have been easier to ignore. As it was, Terrel would often find himself feeling better or worse without knowing why, and it seemed that even staying in one place was no guarantee of constancy. The strength of the invisible forces also varied with time - and Terrel couldn't help wondering

whether it was fragmented in the same way as the 'wind' that made it impossible for his spectral allies to remain with him at times. If that was the case, it would be another indication that the insanity of Myvatan was linked to - or even caused by - the elemental.

Once that thought had become fixed in his mind, Terrel had begun to notice something else. At the times when the madness was at its lowest ebb, he had become aware of other presences in the air. Initially, these had been no more than half-seen flickers at the edge of his vision, but as he'd grown accustomed to them he had begun to see them a little more clearly. Even so, it had taken a long time before he was able to convince himself that they really were what they seemed. These ghosts were not like his allies from home, but were twisted, malformed shapes that were only occasionally recognizable as

human forms. None of their features were ever clear, but their torment was. They writhed and gesticulated, often close to some of the soldiers, as if they were trying to get the living to listen to them. If that was the case, they were failing. It was obvious that Terrel's companions could not see them, and even he could hear nothing of what he imagined were the ghosts' shouts and screams. If these tortured wraiths had a purpose in pursuing the people of the healer's world, then – like Yarek's father in the boy's dream – they were meeting with a complete lack of success.

At times they seemed to be everywhere, clamouring silently for attention or just drifting hopelessly by on an invisible breeze, and Terrel had to try to block them from his vision to keep from being driven to distraction. The phantoms were superimposed on the real world but separate from it, and he found their presence unnerving. He understood now why Alyssa had said that there were 'too many' ghosts on Myvatan. The fact that they matched the images from his own dream about the Great Plain – and the futility of that dreadful place – convinced him that they were the spirits of soldiers, but there was no way to help these lost souls, or even to make contact with them. Terrel's new awareness made him long more than ever to talk to his own allies again. He was reasonably certain now that this must have something to do with the problem in the ghosts' world – the reason for Elam's insistence that they ought not to be on Myvatan. But if that was the case, why would their presence have made the situation worse? And if that was true, how had Elam solved their dilemma?

'You've done well,' Raufar said as they ate their evening rations. 'Some of my men didn't think you'd be able to keep up.'

'Some of them resented having to watch over you, is what the captain means,' Pjorsa put in.

'I can be strong when I need to be,' Terrel said.

'So we've seen,' Raufar conceded. 'But the real test starts tomorrow.'

'It's been pretty easy going up to now,' Stykkis observed with a grin.

'And this is the last night the army will be together,' the captain said. 'Is there anyone you want to see before we go?'

There were a few smiles and sidelong glances exchanged between the soldiers then, and Terrel realized that his liaison with Latira must have become common knowledge. There were other people he dearly wanted to see as well, but she was the only one he could admit to.

'You mean I'm free to visit whoever I want?' Until then, Raufar and his men had taken their bodyguard duties very seriously. Terrel had never been left alone, and had not been allowed to move outside the company.

'For tonight,' the captain confirmed. 'Just make sure you're back by the last bell.'

Terrel got to his feet at once.

'He's in a hurry!' Narvat remarked, provoking some ribald laughter.

'Need someone to hold your hand?' Pjorsa enquired. 'We wouldn't like you to get lost on such an important mission.'

Terrel realized that he did indeed need some guidance. The camp was huge; he could wander around for hours without finding the person he was looking for.

'Latira's assigned to the wizards' caravan,' Raufar said, taking pity on him. 'Over there, on the other side of that ridge.'

'Thanks.' Terrel set off, trying to ignore the advice that was shouted after him, and began to thread his way between the rows of tents. However, he had not gone very far before he felt a hand on his arm.

'I was just coming to see you,' Jarvik remarked casually. 'We need to talk.'

#### Chapter Thirty-Four

'Is it safe to talk here?' Terrel asked, glancing at the various groups of soldiers they were passing. Some of the men were boisterous while others were quiet, their faces showing no expression.

'Everyone reacts differently to the prospect of battle,' Jarvik replied, 'but I doubt any of them will be paying us much attention. Some of us find it hard to keep still, so walking round the camp is natural.' They had set off again,

though with no particular destination in mind.

'You're not afraid we'll be overheard?'

'Not really. We should try not to say anything ... foolish. But if we keep moving no one will hear too much anyway. As I said, they have their own concerns at the moment. If anyone saw us trying to hide away somewhere, that would look odd, but like this we're just part of the crowd.'

Terrel still felt nervous, but he had little choice but to heed the colonel's advice. They did need to talk, after all.

'Is the general still determined to stick to his plan?'

'Yes. We've tried everything we can to persuade him otherwise, but he won't be budged. Tofana's eager to get to the' springs and test her theories, and together they've got their minds made up.'

'So what are we going to do?'

'We have some ideas,' Jarvik told him, 'but it's probably best if you don't know the details just yet.'

'But—'

'There's still a chance we'll be able to change things,' the colonel said, cutting off Terrel's objection. 'But if we can't, and we have to go to the glacier after the springs, then we'll just have to make the best of things.'

'It might be too late then.'

'Let's hope not. In any case, I don't want you to worry about that. Your job is to make sure that whenever we do get to the Lonely Peaks, you make the discovery we need.'

'Should I try to persuade Raufar to go there instead of Hvannadal?'

'No. The good captain would never disobey a direct order from the general. And besides, we need your discovery to be witnessed by as many people as possible, not just one company. The more public the event, the more weight it will carry. There'd be little point in you going off on your own. You see what I mean?'

Terrel nodded.

'We have to put on a show,' he said.

'Exactly.'

'And that's all it will be, isn't it? A show.'

'Perhaps,' Jarvik admitted. 'Does that bother you?' When Terrel did not answer, he went on. 'Whatever the reality, it's the effect that's important. I thought we agreed on that.'

'We do. It's just

'You can't afford to be half-hearted about this,' the colonel said earnestly.

'None of us can. Too much depends on it. So, are you with us?'

'Yes,' Terrel replied, pushing his doubts aside. 'Of course.'

'Good. Then you'd better take this.'

Terrel felt the cold metal of the cylinder being pressed into his hand. He took it and quickly slipped it into a pocket, out of sight. He couldn't help glancing around to see whether anyone had noticed the transfer but, true to Jarvik's prediction, no one was paying them any attention. Even so, it was a while before his racing heartbeat returned to normal.

'You're the one who's going to have to use it,' the colonel said. 'I'll be there with you if I can, but who knows what'll happen between now and then, so it's best if you keep it. Just don't open it until the time is right.' This last instruction was accompanied by a grin.

Although he had no intention of doing so, Terrel couldn't help smiling at the thought of the stir he would cause if he removed the stone now and filled the night with its rose-tinted radiance.

'I'll save it for the show,' he promised.

'Good decision,' Jarvik commented.

'I can't guarantee it'll work again, though,' Terrel added. 'After all, it's a fake, isn't it?'

The colonel's stride faltered momentarily, and he didn't answer straightaway.

'What makes you think that?' he said eventually.

'There are some lies even I can see on your face.'

Jarvik considered this statement for a while, then evidently made his decision and became businesslike once more.

'The container is genuine,' he said. 'I'm certain it came from . . . the right place. I was drawn to it by forces I don't understand even now, and you can't imagine the joy I felt when I found it - or my disappointment when I realized it was empty. Try as I might, I couldn't trace the stone. The trail had gone cold and I was running out of time.'

'So you found something to replace it.'

'Yes. I bought the stone you have from a market trader in Barkarillia. It's just a pretty bauble roughly the right size and colour. At least I thought it was, until . . . That's why I was so surprised when you . . . did what you did.'

'Thank you,' Terrel said.

'What for?'

'For trusting me with the truth.'

'Promise me you'll keep this to yourself,' Jarvik pleaded. 'We're dependent on faith if we're to succeed - and it can be a fragile thing sometimes.'

Terrel was aware of that, just as he was aware that faith could also be incredibly strong at times. Given the right circumstances, belief could overpower truth. Even so, he was worried about the way the falsehoods seemed to be multiplying. The stone was false; the underground had no genuine expectation of finding the real Circle of Truce; and the flame they were to rekindle would in fact have little in common with the original fire. And they were going to the Lonely Peaks under the pretence of looking for something else entirely. Out of such base components, Terrel was supposed to construct a 'show' that would bring peace to a land ravaged by a bitter civil war for nearly four centuries.

'I won't tell anyone,' he said, thinking of the hope he'd seen in Tegan's eyes.

Jarvik looked relieved.

'Do you really not know why we saw what we saw?' he asked.

'I've no idea.' This was only a half-truth, but it seemed to satisfy the colonel.

'Do you think it might have absorbed power from the vial somehow?' Jarvik asked.

The same thought had occurred to Terrel, but he had no way of telling if it might be true. And that still wouldn't explain why the stone had reacted to his touch and no one

else's. The healer had wondered about the fact that the burst of crystal light and the barely acknowledged earthquake had occurred simultaneously. If the glow had been connected to his amulet, then it was possible that both phenomena were linked to the elemental - and that the timing had been anything but coincidental. But quite what that would mean was beyond him.

'It's possible,' he said. 'Let's hope so.'

'I should get back to my own unit,' Jarvik said as the first of the three signal bells rang. 'Is there anything else?'

'Are you aware of the effect mitra has?' Terrel asked.

'Yes. It wasn't a coincidence that my abilities came to the fore when I left Myvatan. After I returned it wasn't hard to work out why.'

'Is there any way to counteract it?'

'Some of our friends are working on a solution, but it's everywhere. You've seen that for yourself.' Jarvik waved a hand at a steaming cauldron, from which the unmistakable scent of the herb was drifting into the night. 'It actually does do some good - helping people to breathe more easily when the air is thin, combating the effects of cold - but no one seems to realize the effect it has on people's minds. I'm surprised you picked up on it so quickly. We can't destroy the stuff. There's just too much of it. And breaking the habit of its use will be a long-term project. We can't afford the time. For now we'll just have to avoid it as much as possible.'

Terrel wondered if the friends Jarvik had mentioned were magians like Tegan, and whether their solution would involve magic, but that was something he didn't feel able to discuss in the open. For the moment, it was enough to know that the Holma were aware of the problem.

'One last question,' he said. 'Is there a wizard among our friends?'

Jarvik shook his head.

'I wish there was,' he said, 'but that's the last place we should be looking for help.'

After he and the colonel had parted company, Terrel resumed his search for Latira – but was intercepted once more. Initially he did not recognize the captain who was pacing up and down, but as he passed by, the soldier looked up and his face betrayed first surprise then an eagerness the healer didn't understand.

'Terrel! I didn't expect to see you again here.'

'Hello, Kopak. Are you well?'

The brigadier's son glanced at his fingers.

'Very well, thanks to you, but . . .' He hesitated.

Terrel could see that his former patient wanted to talk, but time was getting on, and if he wanted to see Latira and still keep his promise to Raufar, he had no time to waste.

'There's something I have to do,' he said. 'I'd like to stay and talk, but—'

'Please, I've got to tell you something,' Kopak said urgently. 'It won't take long.' And then, as if to contradict himself, he fell silent.

'Well?' Terrel prompted. 'What is it?'

'Something's changed inside me,' the captain whispered. 'Ever since you healed me. For the first time in my life I've been having doubts about the war and the reasons for it. Nothing makes sense any more.' His eyes were haunted now.

'When you came to ask my father for help, I found myself agreeing with everything you said, and since then I've been trying to persuade him to change his mind. I haven't been able to, but I'm still trying. I think in his heart he knows you're right, but he won't admit it, even to himself. If only he'd go to Pingeyri, I think it would have some effect. He's one of the few men whose opinion the

general respects. Do you still think using magic at the springs will lead to disaster?'

The confession had come out in a rush, as if it had been bottled up for too long, and Terrel was intrigued now.

'I'm sure of it,' he replied. 'Thank you for trying to help me. Do you think my healing was somehow responsible for your own change of heart?'

'It must have been,' Kopak said, his eyes flicking from side to side as he tried to check that they weren't being overheard. 'I can't believe I risked my life for what turned out to be a useless piece of intelligence. I was lucky you were there to save me.'

'Maybe it wasn't luck. Maybe it was meant to happen.'

'And that's not all,' the captain went on. 'Ever since then, I've found the taste and smell of mitra revolting.'

'Really?'

'Yes, it's odd. Do you know why that's happened?'

'I'm not sure. But you're right to avoid it. And keep working on your father.'

'I will,' Kopak promised. 'Is there anything else I can do ... to help you, I mean?'

'Not that I can think of at the moment.'

Some of the soldier's fellow officers were approaching now, and it was clear their conversation would have to end. In any case, Terrel was not prepared to reveal the existence of the Holma, and decided instead to tell one of the underground that the brigadier's son might be a suitable recruit.

'I hope we get the chance to talk again,' Kopak said quickly.

'Me too,' Terrel agreed. 'Good luck, Captain.'

'And to you,' Kopak replied, then turned to his comrades.

Terrel went on his way, wondering about what he had

learnt. If his efforts really had been responsible for the changes in Kopak's attitude - and for his aversion to mitra - then there had to be a chance that he could use his healing again to the same end. He had no idea how or why it had happened, but the possibilities it raised were interesting. For instance, what if Pingeyri was to fall ill and Terrel was called upon to heal him? He was still speculating on this when he found himself entering the wizards' section of the campsite.

'I didn't think I was ever going to see you again,' Latira said.

'I haven't had the chance to contact you,' Terrel replied. 'I thought you were avoiding me ... after what happened.'

'I was at first,' she admitted. In the pale moonlight Terrel could see that there was no anger or resentment in her eyes, just a deep and weary sadness.

'Will you tell me about that night?'

'You really don't remember?'

'No.'

'That's hard to believe, you know.'

'It's true, though. In a sense I wasn't even there.'

Latira nodded, apparently accepting his claim.

'I know about Jax,' she said. 'I didn't then, but I do now. Tegan explained it to me. It was him, wasn't it?'

'Yes. I'm sorry.'

'I'm sorry too. I shouldn't have given you the melcras. I didn't think--'

'That doesn't matter now,' he cut in. 'Will you tell me what happened between you and Jax?'

'It wasn't all Jax though, was it?' she asked. 'Earlier on, when we were just enjoying ourselves, you were comfortable with me, weren't you?'

Recognizing he need for reassurance, Terrel smiled.

'Too comfortable, as it turned out,' he said ruefully. 'You're my friend, Latira. Whatever happened, that hasn't changed. I hope you can still think of me in the same way.'

'I can. I mean, I do.' She looked embarrassed now. 'There was a time when I thought you might become more than that.'

'I love someone else,' he said gently. 'She's a very long way from here, but I'm going back to her one day.'

'So now you want to know if you've remained faithful to her?'

Terrel was about to object, to argue with her assumption, but the question had an awkward ring of truth to it that he could not deny.

'Yes.'

'Will you answer me one question first?'

'If I can.'

'Did you know then about my real allegiance?' She lowered her voice as she spoke, even though there was little chance of their being overheard. They were sitting together on one of the rocks on the ridge that Raufar had pointed out earlier, and the nearest tents were some distance away.

'Yes,' Terrel said. 'Is that important?'

'It is to me,' she replied softly. 'Not to anyone else. We were playing an elaborate game with each other, weren't we?'

Before Terrel had a chance to answer, the second of the evening's bells rang out, piercing the night with its clear call.

'Not all of it was a game,' he said as the reverberations died away.

'You certainly seemed willing enough to come to bed with me,' Latira said, 'but I suppose that was Jax, not you.'

'Yes. I'm sorry. What happened next?'

'Nothing.'

'Nothing? We didn't sleep together?'

'Sleeping was all we did - apart from talking, of course.'

A great weight seemed to lift from Terrel's shoulders. No matter how much he had told himself that what Jax had done with his body was not relevant, he had known that it was. He tried to hide his relief, not wanting to hurt Latira's feelings any more than he already had, but it was obvious that he was only

partially successful.

'Happy now?' she asked. The melancholy in her voice made him feel ashamed of himself.

'No,' he said. 'I mean . . . I'm glad Jax didn't take advantage of you.'

'I wanted him to, you idiot!' she exclaimed. 'Being rejected like that doesn't feel nice, no matter who you're with.'

Terrel didn't know what to say to that. In the end all he could do was apologize again.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I'm not very good at this.'

'Ah, well. At least you can tell your girl that you're still as pure as freshly fallen snow.'

'I'm surprised Jax didn't . . .' he mumbled awkwardly, stung by her dismissive sarcasm.

'I don't suppose I was up to his standards.'

'That can't be true. You're beautiful—'

'Don't insult me by lying, Terrel,' she snapped. 'We've had this argument before. Remember?'

'I'm not lying. Beauty isn't just what's on the outside. Look at me. I'm hardly the world's most perfect man, and yet—'

'I wanted you,' Latira finished for him. 'Point taken. But you weren't there, remember? Some of the things you — he — said weren't very nice, and some were downright bizarre. I thought at one point you were going mad.'

'Can you remember what he said?'

'Do I have to?'

'It would help me understand, but if you'd rather not . . .'

'Now that I've told you this much, I might as well tell you the rest,' she said resignedly. 'He was keen enough to start with, but then something changed. I've no idea what. He said, "Get away from me. Leave me alone." At that point we'd already got undressed and got into bed, so I was very confused, as you can imagine. I asked what he meant and he said, "Not you. Him." Was he talking to you?'

Terrel shook his head.

'No,' he said. 'I think it was someone else.'

'Someone else? Gods! How complicated does it get in there?' she responded, gesturing at the healer's head.

'It's a long story,' Terrel replied. He was now reasonably sure that it was Elam who had somehow prevented Jax from following his natural instincts. 'Go on.'

'By then I didn't know what to think, and he wasn't paying me much attention. We'd drawn apart. He muttered something like, "Leave her out of it", then glanced at me and made a horrible face, as if I was something that had floated up from the bottom of a pond when the spring ice melts. I got quite scared and asked him what was going on. He told me it was nothing, but then he said, "I'd kill you if someone hadn't already beaten me to it." I'd have run away then, but he reached out and caught hold of my wrist. The last thing he said was, "I can't do this. I'm going to sleep now." And that's exactly what he did.'

'I'm surprised you stayed,' Terrel commented.

'So am I,' she said, shaking her head. 'I probably should have gone, but once you were asleep you looked so harmless and I felt safe again. I was tired, and I'd had quite a

lot of melcras too. It just seemed like too much effort to get out of bed. My bed. The next thing I knew it was morning and, well, you know what happened then.'

Yes, Terrel thought, but you don't. Once again he saw Alyssa looking at him through the dog's eyes and then walking away. Latira had been asleep at that point, and he wished he'd had the courage to wake her so that Alyssa could have heard the truth.

'What are you thinking?' Latira asked.

'I'm just sorry you had to go through all that,' he replied, evading the question.



'I've had better nights,' she admitted.  
They were both silent for a few moments.  
'While we're on the subject of Jax,' she said eventually,, 'I gather he has some skill as a weather-mage. Is that right?'  
'Yes.'  
'But you don't?'  
'No.'  
'Tegan wants to know whether you'd be willing to let us use Jax's power against Tofana if it becomes necessary.'  
'Let him in deliberately, you mean?'  
'Yes.'  
'I'm not sure about that.' In truth the prospect was horrifying. 'How would you control him?'  
'Tegan thinks she might be able to guide him.'  
'But when he tried to oppose Tofana before, he came off worst,' Terrel pointed out. 'She sent him back to the healing pools.'  
'Yes, but he was on his own then. There'd be others helping him next time. What do you think?'  
'I don't like the idea at all,' he stated truthfully, 'but I might consider it as a last resort.'  
'Fair enough. I'll tell Tegan.'  
'Will you tell her something else?' Terrel said, and went on to describe his encounter with Kopak. 'He might be a useful contact.'  
'He might at that,' Latira said, nodding.  
There was another pause then, with each of them wondering whether they should return to their respective tents. But there were still some unanswered questions between them.  
'When you told me about your past,' Terrel began hesitantly. 'About Hallen and the baby . . . was all that true, or were you testing me?'  
'I lost my husband and our child exactly as I told you,' she replied bleakly. 'But it's true, I was hoping to find out what you thought, to see if we could risk trusting you.' She laughed without mirth. 'It's funny, really. If you'd made love to me, at least you wouldn't have had to worry about becoming a father. But then you already knew that.'  
In fact Terrel had forgotten that the miscarriage had left her barren.  
'Do you still want a child?' he asked softly.  
'You have to find a man first,' she said caustically. 'That's how it works.'  
'But if you did,' her persisted, 'would you want a child?'  
'What's the point of wishing for something you know you can't have?'  
'Perhaps you can.'  
It took a few moments for the implication of his words to sink in.  
'You could really do that?' she asked eventually. 'Are you that good a healer?'  
'I've done it before,' he replied. 'And my healing skills are stronger than they were then.' In fact, when he had made it possible for Ysotel to conceive Kerin's child, he had not even been aware of what he was doing. It had been an instinctive, unconscious act.  
'I'm not sure,' Latira said.  
'It's up to you.'  
'What would I have to do?'  
'Just let me hold your hand for a while,' he said, and left it at that.  
After a few moments, without another word being spoken, Latira stretched out her hand. Terrel took it in his own, and fell into the waking dream. As he had hoped, the problem was easily solved - a simple matter of moving various lines and shadows back into their proper pattern - and after only a short time, he released her fingers.  
'Now what?' she asked.  
'It's done,' he told her, smiling at her evident disbelief. 'And for what it's worth, I believe you will find someone worthy of loving and being loved by

you.'

There were tears brimming in Latira's eyes.

'If you'd talked to me like that in bed,' she said softly, 'things would have gone rather differently.'

'Can we still be friends, even so?' he asked, smiling.

'Yes. Though after tonight I don't suppose we'll ever see each other again.'

'You're not coming with us?' he guessed.

'No. I'm going back to Saudark with the rest of the servants. The army will cater for itself from now on.'

'So this is goodbye.'

'Yes. Farewell, Terrel. You're already a hero in my eyes. By the time this is over, all Myvatan will be looking at you the same way.' With that she kissed him lightly and vanished into the night.

Terrel watched her go with a lump in his throat, but content in the knowledge that their reconciliation was com-

plete. As he walked across the camp, the third bell rang, as if to remind him that it was now time to look ahead, not back.

Chapter Thirty-Five

'I can't hold it,' Hraun reported breathlessly.

'Keep trying,' Raufar ordered. 'Where's Jauron?'

'I don't know.'

'He's wandered off again,' Narvat said disgustedly.

Raufar swore under his breath. Above them the sky crackled and sparked, dark swirls of cloud rolling back and forth.

'How long before Stykkis gets there?' the captain asked, raising his voice over the increasing tumult.

'Too long,' Narvat replied, glancing first at the human battle on the slope of the pass, then at the magical conflict overhead.

'Shield roof!' Raufar yelled, and the men around them reacted in unison, leaving their various positions and gathering round their commander. 'On the ground, Terrel. Now!'

The healer did not need telling a second time. He had seen the troop perform this manoeuvre before, and knew that his role was simply not to get in the way. Flinging himself down, he felt the darkness close in around him as the soldiers moved to their assigned places - kneeling for the most part, their shields held above their heads to form an overlapping shell that covered them all like the carapace of a giant reptile.

Their defences were in place just in time. As Hraun's efforts were finally overcome by the enemy neomancers, hailstones the size of a man's fist plummeted from the

storm clouds, crashing into the shield roof, which shook and almost buckled under the assault but did not break. The noise below was almost deafening.

'Let me know when you can do something!' Raufar called to Hraun. The neomancer was lying on the ground close to Terrel, recovering from his earlier efforts.

'Does this count as an emergency?' Narvat asked.

'Not yet,' the captain replied.

The significance of the question was not lost on Terrel. The fire-starters - like Hraun - had been ordered not to use the new technique in battle until they reached Hvannadal. The only exception would be in a dire emergency - anything that threatened Terrel's life or his capture. The general was determined not to give the enemy any warning of what was coming, and as a result, the neomancers in Raufar's company had only used conventional magic so far.

'They won't be able to keep this up for long,' the captain added, 'and in any case, Stykkis may well interrupt them soon. We'll stick it out for now.'

Raufar's assumption was proved correct shortly afterwards. The barrage of hail relented, and he was able to give the order to break ranks and resume the ground attack. However, as had happened several times before, the enemy forces chose to withdraw rather than fight a pitched battle - and this left the Black troop with no way of venting their frustration. Even the sortie led by Stykkis

had only managed to engage a small number of the opposing troops, and casualties on both sides had been light. Terrel was grateful for that, but he shared the soldiers' misgivings about the progress of the campaign. 'They seem to know what we're doing before me do,' Raufar grumbled. 'They're one step ahead of us the whole time.'

The captain and his lieutenants, together with Terrel and the two neomancers, were gathered round the camp-fire that evening.

'Then why aren't they trying to stop us?' Pjorsa asked. 'All they do is harry us for a while, then run away.'

'Perhaps they're just trying to annoy us,' Narvat suggested.

'In which case they're succeeding,' Pjorsa growled. The war of attrition was not what the soldiers were used to, and it had been grating on their nerves for some days now.

'But we must focus our anger,' Raufar warned. 'We don't want to do anything stupid just because the White are behaving like cowards.'

'We might have been able to have a decent fight if we'd all been doing our jobs properly,' Stykkis said. He did not look at Jauron, but everyone knew who his remark was aimed at. 'As it was, we didn't have time to get to them and they were able to take cover.'

'What exactly were you doing at that point, Jauron?' the captain asked.

'Weakening the were-cloud,' the neomancer replied wearily. 'Do you think your shields would have held against it if it had struck at full force?'

'You were supposed to be making it possible for us to break through to their positions,' Stykkis said.

'Those were your orders, neomancer,' Raufar concurred. It was not the first time Jauron had disobeyed a command, but he always seemed to have a good reason for his actions. Nevertheless, his waywardness had not endeared him to his comrades.

'I understood that the healer's safety was paramount, Captain,' he replied, with the habitual touch of arrogance that had done nothing to curb the resentment the soldiers felt towards him.

'So it is,' Raufar responded, 'but it's not for you to decide how best to do that. I command this company, and the next time I tell you to do something, you do it. Understood?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Good. We all have to work together. It's not going to get any easier from here on. We'll hit the ice road tomorrow.'

The captain was referring to the high point of the mountain pass which had been chosen as their route into the interior of the White Quarter. Apparently this was not a true glacier but an area of highly compacted but unstable snow, which grew in size each winter as another layer was added to its depth.

However, in spring some of these layers were prone to shear off, creating explosive avalanches and patches of a type of snow – like a frozen quicksand – called skelf. The prospect of entering such a region was unnerving, and the soldiers were well aware of the challenges they would face there.

'You think we'll come under attack?' Narvat asked.

'We have to be prepared,' Raufar answered, 'so we'll pick our route carefully, but my guess is no. The terrain will be as difficult for the White as it is for us, and the only way they could set up an effective ambush would be to camp there overnight. I don't think that's something they'd be prepared to do.'

'What about magic?' Stykkis asked. 'They could have left traps for us.'

'We can take care of that,' Hraun stated confidently. He had clearly been embarrassed by the behaviour of his fellow neomancer, and wanted to demonstrate that they were still a valuable part of the team. 'There are always telltale signs left by residual magic'

'Good,' Narvat said. 'The ice road is not a place where you want to spend too much time.'

'It could be worse,' Pjorsa remarked. 'We could've been assigned to the ships

in Hofnar Fjord.'

There were nods of agreement all around, and even a few grim smiles. Terrel knew that operations by sea were not popular with most soldiers – who were reluctant to trust themselves to the unpredictable mercies of the wind and tides. He had been treated to several gruesome tales – vast blocks of ice collapsing into the water from glaciers, swamping any boats nearby, or miniature icebergs called ivu that propelled themselves from the sea and flew through the air at random, and of dark whirlpools pulling sailors down to an icy death.

Such prejudices had not been helped by rumours that the troops who'd been sent into Hofnar had been driven back or even annihilated. Since they had entered the White Quarter, news from other parts of the campaign had been infrequent and probably unreliable. It came in the form of messengers from units in neighbouring regions, whenever their commanders wanted to co-ordinate their tactics, and as a result any reports from as far away as the northern coast were necessarily several times removed from their original source – and thus quite possibly inaccurate.

'We don't know for sure what's happened there,' Raufar pointed out. 'What we do know is that the Red army will be well inside the quarter by now, so the White aren't going to be able to concentrate all their efforts on us.' The invasion from the east was not directed towards Hvannadal, but was supposed to create a diversion, allowing Pingeyri and his forces to converge on the springs. 'As far as we know,' the captain went on, 'we'll be meeting up with our other units near the target soon enough. Then the fun will really start.' 'Let's hope so,' Pjorsa muttered.

'Have you thought that the White might want us to go to Hvannadal?' Stykkis asked. 'That could be the reason they keep using these hit-and-run tactics.'

'We're being led into a trap, you mean?'

'It would explain a lot.'

'Even if that's true,' Raufar said, 'and I don't believe it is – we have a few surprises for them, don't we? Let's just do our job, and let the generals worry about stuff like that.'

The discussion ended on that decisive note, and the soldiers dispersed to make their preparations for the night. Terrel made his usual rounds, tending to any of the company who had been injured or who were ill. Although many of the men had been suspicious of him at first, his attentions were always welcome now, and Raufar's troop had adopted him as one of their own – which was a singular mark of honour for a civilian. They were under orders to keep Terrel safe, and they had all realized that he had an important role to play in Pingeyri's strategy. But it was the fact that he willingly used his talents for their benefit that had done the most to hasten his acceptance. The novelty of having many of their ailments cured in the field had earned him the soldiers' gratitude and respect. And regardless of the fact that he hated their bloodthirsty attitude to both the enemy and to the war in general, Terrel had come to admire the company, both for its discipline and its camaraderie. He'd already been impressed by several acts of selfless bravery that seemed to come naturally to the warriors, and he knew that, should the necessity arise, they would risk life and limb to protect him. He was grateful for this knowledge, but it made him feel uneasy when he thought about his true intentions, his real reasons for being there – which the soldiers would have considered treasonous. Terrel was still hoping that there might at least be one member of the Holma in the company, but if there was, he hadn't given the healer any sign of his

presence. Ever since the campaign had begun in earnest, Terrel had – in one sense, at least – been on his own.

Crossing the unmarked border had been a strangely anticlimatic event, but now, after several days in the White Quarter, it had become clear why the frontier territory had been undefended. The enemy had evidently preferred to wait and fight at places of their own choosing. Of course the movements of such a large

army could not be kept entirely secret, but the worrying thing was that, as Raufar had pointed out, it did indeed seem that their foes were able to anticipate the invaders' every move. If their own progress was anything to go by, the campaign as a whole would be moving much more slowly than expected. On the other hand, because of the defenders' tactics, casualties had been fewer than forecast – much to Terrel's secret relief.

Now, for the first time, it occurred to him to wonder whether the underground had members inside the White or Gold Quarters. If so, what lengths would his own contacts be prepared to go to in order to avoid a magical catastrophe, and to gain their own objectives? Would they really betray their own side in the war? And if that were the case, how would it affect what was going to happen at Hvannadal? This was another aspect of his situation over which Terrel had no control. Together with the constant uncertainty about what each day might bring, it meant that he spent his time living on a knife-edge.

As he curled into his bedding, sheltered beneath the canvas of his tent, Terrel knew he would have to set all such considerations aside. Whatever else lay ahead, the one thing he knew for sure at that moment was that he needed the solace and restorative powers of sleep.

The whale was the size of an entire country. As it swam it piled up waves as big as mountain ranges, the foam at their crests mimicking snow. Water spouted from its blowhole in a massive fountain, reaching towards the stars, but its eyes were fixed straight ahead, its cavernous jaws opening ...

Terrel tried to scream as he was sucked into that monstrous darkness, but choking liquid filled his mouth and throat, flooding his lungs with an acid chill.

In the silence the night turned red. Bodiless now, he looked around for the sword, but it was nowhere to be seen. This time it remained hidden, even in his dreams. Yet it was still a malevolent presence, waiting to be brought to the surface.

Abruptly, Terrel found himself looking down from the sky as the great pendulum swung across the ocean, marking time in the slow heartbeats of the world. Was it Myvatan or Vadanis? He couldn't tell the difference any longer. He looked more closely, peering inside the skeleton of stone, and saw an entire city frozen in ice: palaces and castles, towers and warehouses, walls and streets, all held captive by the unyielding magic. All movement, all warmth extinguished. How could a flame, any flame, burn in such a place?

Terrel fell back into the red gloom – and then he was in the ocean again, left in the churning wake of the great whale, just as he had been left behind by his homeland when he'd been exiled from Vadanis.

#### Chapter Thirty-Six

Terrel woke feeling utterly homesick, but he had no time to indulge in self-pity. The nights were short now, and the troop was already gearing up for the next stage of their journey. The healer stirred himself into action, even though his sleep had afforded him little rest. Not wanting to dwell on the dream, he pushed his thoughts in the direction of the day ahead, only to find that this made him nervous. Despite what Raufar had said, Terrel thought that the ice road sounded like the perfect place for an ambush.

The first sign that anything was wrong came when one of the scouts flanking the main party broke the silence. The order for quiet had been imposed because – as Raufar had explained – under certain conditions, any loud noise might set off an avalanche. The company were adept at moving by stealth when necessary, and were able to communicate by sign language. But circumstances sometimes dictated a more immediate response. The lookout's cry brought no movement of snow, but although the bitter wind carried his words away, the urgency and fear in his voice were unmistakable.

Terrel knew that Raufar and his lieutenants routinely studied and analyzed whatever terrain they were passing through, noting possible places of shelter and defensive

positions, as well as identifying natural dangers and the most likely spots

for their enemy to be hiding. However, on the ice road there appeared to be little or nothing to see. The white plain was virtually featureless, stretched out in a wide saddle between two jagged peaks of broken, impassable stone. Any irregularities were confined to gentle undulations – where the wind had sculpted humpback drifts – and minor changes in the texture and luminescence of the snow. The snow itself varied from a coarse granular crust that seemed quite dull to a smooth, shiny surface that was as hard and as brittle as glass – but as yet there had been no sign of the dreaded skelf.

As usual, Narvat had been in command of the scouts. He had been leading the main party himself, and as soon as he heard the warning cry, the lieutenant began directing the people around him. Raufar deployed men as best he could until they were able to discover the nature of the threat. Pjorsa, who was Terrel's self-appointed protector, pulled the healer down so that they were kneeling in the lee of one of the drifts. The expression on the soldier's scarred face was serious as he scanned the plain, but there was also a glint of anticipation in his eyes.

'Don't worry, healer,' he whispered. 'There's no way they can get to us without us seeing them first.'

A few moments later, the enemy came hurtling over the curved horizon ahead of them. But it was not soldiers Raufar's troops were about to face. It was a fast-moving wave of dense and blinding fog.

'Together. Spear length!' the captain yelled, heedless of the dangers of avalanches now. His more pressing concern was to prevent his entire company from becoming dispersed in the mist. As a group they could still defend themselves. Apart, they could be picked off one by one by enemy raiders. For Terrel, everything after that happened in a disorientating blur. As the fog enveloped them, all but his closest companions became invisible, and even those nearby were little more than shadowy outlines. Raufar's voice drifted out of the murk.

'I thought you said you could deal with this sort of thing.'

'This is different,' Hraun replied. 'Something's . . .' The rest of the neomancer's response was lost as shouts were heard in the distance, followed by the clash of steel. The fighting had begun.

'Stay here,' Pjorsa ordered, then disappeared in the direction of the noise. A moment later Stykkis loomed up out of the mist, his sword in hand.

'This way,' he hissed. 'Follow me.'

'Pjorsa told me to stay here.'

'You can't,' Stykkis stated flatly. 'We're moving. Let's go.'

Until then Terrel had had no trouble with his footing but now, as they set off, his boots seemed to slide or sink unpredictably with each step. It was as if the water vapour in the air was also making the snow beneath his feet slippery. He was part of a silent phalanx of soldiers, each man keeping the distance between him and those to either side to a minimum, while still giving themselves space to use their weapons if necessary. The sounds of combat were coming from several different directions now, but as yet the actual fighting remained invisible. It occurred to Terrel that in the severely reduced visibility it would be difficult to tell friend from foe, and in such confused conditions it would be easy to panic. But Raufar's men were better disciplined than that. They moved on steadily and with purpose.

Thunder crashed overhead, its rumbling echoes shaking the ground, and then, without warning, the fog lifted, swept away by a sudden gust of wind that shredded the layers of mist and scattered the remnants over the mountainside. After the grey gloom, the daylight was almost blinding, even though a thick blanket of high cloud shrouded the sky.

The soldiers exploded into action, sprinting in different directions in response to their officers' commands, or reacting to the obvious needs of their comrades. Terrel found himself more or less forgotten, left to fend for himself, and in the blur of activity he didn't know which way to turn. In the end he simply crouched down, hoping to make sense of what was going on about him.

Although it soon became clear that this was the most serious encounter of their campaign so far, Terrel was at a loss to tell how the Black troops were faring. He could already see places where the snow had been stained red with the blood of the fallen, but it was impossible to know which side was winning the fragmentary battle. The very fact that their foes had prepared such an ambush - both magical and military - in such a place was an indication of their serious intent, and they had had the element of surprise on their side. But Raufar's men were seasoned warriors for the most part, and Terrel was in no doubt that they would prove difficult to overcome. Until then he had not considered what he would do if he was captured by the White forces - and even now, when the possibility was rather more immediate, he was no closer to a decision. In any case, his first priority was simply to stay alive. Ultimately it did not matter who won Myvatan's war; it was his own mission to find the elemental that was paramount.

A series of urgent shouts drew his attention to the fact that four miniature tornadoes - each one whirling snow up into its twisting, cone-shaped vortex - were weaving their way down the slope from the northwest. Their progress was erratic, and even though the danger they presented was obvious, Terrel couldn't see how any of the neo-mancers - on either side - could hope to use such inaccurate weapons effectively. Soldiers of both sides were running to avoid them, with a few of the more unfortunate being caught and flung aside as if they were rag dolls. It soon became clear that staying where he was was no longer an option. Although the whirlwinds were constantly veering in different directions, the general line of their progress was towards Terrel. Just as he had reached this conclusion, and was wondering which way to go, Stykkis reappeared at his side.

'We've got to get you out of here,' he said, breathing hard. Blood stained the sleeves of his uniform as well as his blade.

'Are the tornadoes ours or theirs?' Terrel asked.

'Theirs. Come on.'

They ran, crouching in case they became targets for any enemy archers, and reached a hollow whose only occupants were dead. The two men had evidently killed each other with simultaneous spear thrusts. Stykkis ignored them, allowing himself only a few moments to study the latest developments of the battle, but Terrel couldn't help staring. The White soldier could not have been more than nineteen years old, and the expression frozen on his face was one of surprise rather than pain. His opposite number was Kavika, the man Terrel had met at the healing pools. He had been restored to health in an almost miraculous fashion then, but there would be no way back from this injury. His enemy's spear had buried itself in his heart. His end had been quick - he had hardly bled at all - but the frost that was already forming on his eyelashes and on his beard made Terrel shiver, sickened by the senseless waste of young life.

'This is a mess,' Stykkis muttered. 'I can't tell what's going on. What do Hraun and Jauron think they're doing?'

The four tornadoes had now coalesced into one much more powerful entity. Everywhere it went - and its movements were still wholly unpredictable - the tornado whipped up a series of miniature blizzards, filling the air with spikes of flying ice. Such was the disruption it had caused that the fighting between the two forces had taken second place to the soldiers' efforts to avoid the howling menace.

'Raufar's trying to regroup our men,' Stykkis said. 'We'll circle round ... Let's go.'

Terrel followed the lieutenant, happy to leave the macabre tableau of the hollow behind. They skirted round the area where most of the fighting had taken place, climbing on to a slightly higher level of the plateau. In doing so, they were coming closer to their objective of rejoining the main body of the company, but they had also exposed themselves to view from the entire battlefield. That fact had deadly consequences a moment later when a volley of arrows whirred through the air around them. Terrel threw himself to the ground

and escaped unscathed, but one of the bolts caught the lieutenant in the side, burying itself deeply in the flesh beneath his rib cage. Terrel crawled to his aid.

'You have to go on,' Stykkis gasped through clenched teeth.

'I can't leave you like this. Let me—'

'No. This ... is not ... good.' The soldier's strength was fading fast. 'If you stay here all you'll do ... is get... yourself killed.' As if to emphasize the point, another

arrow thudded into the ground nearby, but the healer still hesitated. 'Go,' Stykkis whispered, then fell silent, his eyes already filming over.

Terrel got to his feet and ran. At the same time he became aware that the tornado was no longer screaming, and that the battle had been rejoined in earnest. However, he also saw that a group of his comrades were making their way towards him, and was heartened both by that and by the fact that no more arrows were coming his way.

His feet thudded against hard-packed snow, his lopsided gait propelling him towards at least some measure of safety, but in the next step he overbalanced and fell headlong, only to land on snow softer than any pillow. He skimmed along the surface, white crystals flying up around him, blind once more. When he came to rest, he tried to get up, but there was something wrong with his limbs. None of them could get any purchase on the snow beneath him. He felt himself sinking, and fear jolted through his entire body as he realized what had happened. He had stumbled into a patch of skelf.

Petrified now, he tried to remember what the soldiers had told him to do if he ever found himself in such a predicament. Keep still. Don't struggle. But that was easier said than done. Moving will only make you sink faster. He concentrated simply on breathing, blowing flakes of snow from his nose and mouth. The white stuff around him was like nothing he had ever come across before. It was incredibly fine, almost powdery, and it was dry — except where a few grains had melted against his skin. It supported his prone body, but he couldn't feel it. It was as if he were weightless, floating on some sort of liquid rather than lying on the ground. Perhaps I can swim out, he thought, but as soon as he tried to move, the skelf shifted and slid around him, making him think of quicksand. You couldn't swim in that.

His only hope was that the soldiers would recognize his peril and come to the rescue. The last thing he wanted was for any of them to blunder into the same trap and be sucked down too, but perhaps they'd be able to reach him from the edge with a spear, or throw a rope to him. He tried to see where they were, but his eyes were too close to the surface, and he couldn't see much. He tried to call out, to attract their attention and to warn them, but he was lying face down; the powder muffled his voice, and the movement of his chest set the snow quivering again. There was no response. All he could hear was the sougning of the wind. Even the sounds of warfare seemed to have been silenced now.

Then, at last, he glimpsed someone walking towards him. He was about to cry out in warning again when he realized it would not be necessary, and his relief turned to amazement. The skelf would present no threat to this visitor — because he was a ghost.

Elam glided effortlessly over the treacherous surface and looked down at his friend with a slight smile on his face.

What are you doing down there?

This isn't ordinary snow. It's like quicksand. I can't move.

Elam laughed.

Really? You get yourself into some awkward spots, don't you?

It's not funny, Terrel said, angry now. Is anyone coming to help me?

The ghost looked around.

Not that I can see.

Where's Alyssa?

Who? Elam asked, then grinned. Oh yes, the one you always dream about. I don't think you'll be seeing her any more.



What do you mean? Terrel was both confused and alarmed now, not only by what Elam had said, which didn't make much sense, but also by the way he'd said it. His voice didn't sound right. They 've stopped fighting, his friend reported, glancing round again. He sounded almost disappointed. Perhaps I should start another set of tornadoes. Another set? Terrel wondered, then the truth came crashing into his brain like an avalanche. In spite of appearances, this was not Elam. It was Jax.

#### Chapter Thirty-Seven

The implications of his twin's presence made Terrel's head reel. Jax was obviously now capable of travelling independently, and of changing his appearance - but the healer was too preoccupied with his own situation to dwell on what that meant. He had realized that in spite of his efforts to keep still he was sinking gradually, so that now he was having to crane his neck back in order to breathe. He kept hoping the soldiers would come, but there was no sign of any of them. What had happened to the men who had been heading towards him?

The cold was beginning to seep through his thick clothing, but there was nothing he could do about that. He was about to drown in snow - and he was effectively alone. There was nothing Jax could do to help him, even if he'd wanted to - which was in itself very unlikely. But he was currently Terrel's only link with the outside world, and perhaps he could somehow use him to attract the attention of his human companions.

What are you doing here, Jax?

No fooling you is there, brother? the prince responded sarcastically. And I thought this was such a clever disguise. He was not looking at Terrel as he spoke, his attention focused elsewhere.

Are you watching the soldiers?

Jax didn't answer, but a small shiver ran through his spectral frame and his borrowed eyes shone with delight.

What next? he asked himself.

An ominous rumbling sound reached Terrel's ears, and the skelf around him trembled. He felt his hips sink a little deeper, his legs submerged now. Soon, as the angles changed, his whole body would begin to slide into a frozen grave.

Will you help me? he asked desperately.

That did get Jax's attention.

Help you? he said incredulously. All this time you 've been trying to keep me away, and now, when you can't stop me, all of a sudden you want my help?

That's rich.

Why are you here? Terrel asked. Why here exactly?

I've got to keep an eye on you, haven't I? the prince replied. / must give you some credit, brother. I rouldn 't have even known about this place if you hadn 't come here. You 've no idea how much fun I've had.

Terrel could believe it. As a weather-mage, Jax was, in effect, a natural neomancer. He was, quite literally, in his element - and Tofana's tuition had evidently made the place even more attractive. But something he had said had given the healer an idea.

I was the one who led you here, he said, grasping at the flimsiest of straws. If I die, that link will be lost, won't it?

Jax shrugged, apparently unconcerned, but there had been a flicker of uncertainty in Elam's eyes.

I don't think so, he said. Tofana-

But you can't be sure, can you? Terrel persisted, cutting him off. Do you want the most exciting part of your day to be your studies at court?

At least I won't have to listen to you moaning any more, Jax muttered, but there was no conviction in his tone.

Terrel was still sinking, albeit very slowly. Only the upper part of his head was now completely clear of the surface. His mouth was already blocked, and he was having to breathe through his nose.

Last chance, Jax. I haven't got long.

What am I supposed to do, anyway? The prince sounded petulant now.

Terrel was seized by a sudden, terrifying inspiration.

Start a tornado, he said. Right here.

For a few moments Jax just stared at him.

Do it! Terrel ordered.

After a moment, he sensed the first few wisps of powdery snow being picked up by the nascent spiral breeze, and then felt the wind grow rapidly in strength. After that he had no time to speak, or even think, as the world around him went mad. Even if he'd been able to keep his eyes open, there would have been nothing to see except a white blur. The noise levels rose to a howl that made him think of the karabura – the black sandstorms of the Binhemma-Ghar – and primeval forces robbed him of any control over his own body. He had hoped that he'd simply be thrown aside, out of the skelf, but in fact he'd been caught up in the heart of the maelstrom, surrounded by swirling powder, buffeted and twisted this way and that. At times he seemed to be turning cartwheels, at others he spun round like a top, and all the while he had no idea which way was up or down. It was like being punched by a hundred fists all at the same time, while his limbs were almost wrenched from their sockets by invisible hands and his clothes were nearly torn from his back.

At last the tornado abated a little, but to Terrel's dismay he felt himself not being tossed clear but falling. It seemed that Jax's efforts might succeed only in burying him even deeper. Then he landed with a jarring thump that knocked what little breath he had left out of him, and

he realized that he was now lying on solid ground. When he was finally able to open his eyes, he found he was at the bottom of a deep hollow. The sky above was cross-hatched with streamers of white as the tail end of the tornado blew itself out. The whirlwind hadn't moved him at all, but it had emptied the skelf out of the depression he had stumbled into, dispersing it to fall as a harmless dusting of snow across the whole expanse of the ice road. Terrel was gasping for breath, battered and bruised, and it felt as if he had strained every muscle in his body – but he was alive.

He looked up to see Jax smiling down at him from Elam's face. He tried to stand up, but his legs gave way beneath him and he sat down again with a bump, groaning as pain shot through his whole body. He decided to stay where he was for the time being. Now that there appeared to be no immediate danger to his life, he decided to try to persuade Jax to answer a few questions.

Why did you choose to look like that? he asked.

He's been annoying me for a long time now, the prince replied. And I thought it'd be a good joke.

Terrel recalled the last time Elam had 'annoyed' his twin, and was grateful to his friend.

I can choose what I look like in this form, Jax nodded, but it's easier if it's a shape you know.

Where's the real Elam? Terrel asked, wondering whether the prince's borrowing of the ghost's shape had had any effect on his friend.

How should I know? his brother replied with a touch of irritation.

Did Tofana teach you how to do this?

She gave me a few hints, but I worked most of it out for myself

So you can come here any time you want to?

Yes. Does that bother you? Jax's malevolent glee was plain to see.

Not at all, Terrel lied. I was hoping you could.

Why? his twin asked suspiciously.

There'll be an opportunity soon for you to have some fun and help me at the same time.

Why should I help you? Isn't saving your life enough? Jax asked. What more do you want?

Tofana's planning to do something at a place called Hvannadal, and I want to stop her.

Magic? the prince queried eagerly.

Of course. What else would a wizard be doing?

Then why should I want to stop her?

Because if she succeeds it will mean the end of the war, the end of everyone on Myvatan - and quite possibly the end of all magic here. There won't be any left for you to use then. He was exaggerating the risks - or at least he hoped he was - in a deliberate attempt to worry Jax. The prince would not care about the people of the island, but any threat to his own pleasure might spur him into action. Of course, I'll understand if you don't want to oppose her, he added.

What do you mean?

She beat you last time, after all.

She did not! Jax stated angrily.

Then why did you end up back in the healing pools?

I just got tired. That happens after a while.

If you say so, Terrel goaded him. Still, as I say, it's no disgrace to be afraid of her.

I'm not afraid, Jax claimed. I'll show you. Then his expression changed, becoming arrogant again. I know what you're doing.

What? the healer asked.

Trying to trick me. We 're so alike sometimes.

Terrel wanted to deny that assertion, but he had more important things on his mind. All he could hope was that his twin would respond to the challenge he had thrown down, even though the prince had discerned his motives.

It's strange that all the wizards here are women, he remarked, hoping to play to Jax's misogyny, but his twin was no longer paying any attention. He had suddenly been surrounded by the flickering shapes of wraiths who had arrived silently and unannounced. Their intentions were far from clear. At first Terrel thought they were attacking the foreign ghost, and indeed Jax was flailing about, trying to ward off their unwanted attentions, but they seemed to be doing him no harm. After a few moments of this ungainly dance, Terrel began to suspect that the wraiths did not regard the newcomer as an enemy, but simply as an object of curiosity, perhaps even of hope. They continued to cluster round the prince, distracting and annoying him.

What is this? Jax muttered. Go away!

Terrel remembered Elam's comments about the ghosts 'just being there' making things worse on Myvatan, and wondered whether Jax was unwittingly doing the same thing. The wraiths were clearly drawn to him, but now they seemed to be becoming more and more agitated.

I have to go, Jax stated abruptly. He sounded weary as well as frustrated now, and Terrel guessed that his earlier exertions had used up most of his strength - and that he, like Alyssa, would need to return to Vadanis to 'rest' before long. It was reassuring to know that there were limits to his brother's power. However, thinking of Alyssa prompted another memory, and there was a question Terrel needed to ask before Jax left.

What did you mean about not seeing Alyssa again? he said hurriedly.

Oh, it seems she's got the idea that you betrayed her, the prince replied, with a malicious grin. Can't imagine why. I think this one's been trying to tell her the truth, but he can't find her. He was still waving his arms at the wraiths, but his image was fading now, his voice growing fainter.

As Terrel watched his brother leave, he almost wished he hadn't asked the final question. The answer implied not only that Alyssa was still angry with him, but also that there was more trouble between his allies. It had always been Alyssa who found the ghosts before - or at least Terrel had assumed it to be that way round - and the fact that she had chosen not to contact them raised the awful possibility that she did not intend to lead them to his aid. And that meant she really might have abandoned him -which was the worst punishment Terrel could imagine.

He was still considering this dreadful prospect as the wraiths drifted away and a new set of visitors took their place. Raufar and Pjorsa came scrambling

down the side of the hollow, while several other soldiers watched from the rim.

'Gods, he's alive!' Pjorsa exclaimed.

'Are you hurt?' the captain asked as he came to a slithering halt beside him.

'A bit,' Terrel replied. 'Nothing serious.'

Pjorsa shook his head in amazement.

'You have a charmed life, healer,' he said.

Terrel was not sure he agreed. At that moment it felt more as if he was cursed.

'It was odd,' Raufar said thoughtfully. 'The White didn't seem to know what was going on either. Their neomancers must have produced the whirlwinds, but it didn't seem to do them much good.'

'It was a mess,' Narvat agreed. 'Both sides lost a lot of men.'

Terrel was listening to the discussion, but not taking an active part. He could have told them who had really been responsible for the tornadoes, but to do so would have raised more questions than it answered, and he did not feel up to that. He was in pain and very weary, having dragged himself to the other side of the ice road along with what remained of the company. They were still high enough in the mountains for there to be snow lying in places, but for the most part there was solid earth beneath their feet now - and everyone was thankful for this. But the mood in the camp was sombre. They had left over twenty men behind, including Stykkis, and quite a few more were struggling with injuries. Terrel had used the last of his flagging energies to do what he could for them, until Raufar had ordered him to stop, pointing out that they still had a long way to go and he did not want Terrel exhausting himself.

'After the whirlwind died away,' the captain was saying now, 'the White were about to renew their attack when one of them burst into flame. After everything else that had happened it was just too much for them, and they ran off. Then the avalanches started, which meant we couldn't pursue them.'

'It also cut us off from where you were,' Pjorsa added. 'Or we'd have been with you a lot sooner. Not that I'd have been too keen to end up where you did.'

'I've never seen anything like it,' Narvat said, his amazement still obvious even some hours after the event. 'Are you sure you're not a neomancer?'

Terrel shook his head, but said nothing.

'Well, whoever or whatever was responsible, it probably saved your life,' Raufar said. 'I'm not sure we'd have been able to pull you out of the skelf in time, especially after the avalanches had made so much of the terrain treacherous.'

It was clear that, for the soldiers, the whirlwind that had surrounded Terrel was just one more inexplicable event in a day that had contained several, but none of them mentioned having seen any ghosts or wraiths.

'Did one of our fire-starters kill the White soldiers?' Terrel asked quietly. He had noticed the deep hole in the snow, which had been melted by the heat of the deadly fire. Where it had refrozen it was discoloured with ash, but there was nothing left of the man except for a few scorched fragments at the bottom of the pit. He still found it hard to believe that any human being could be reduced to such insignificant remains.

'I presumed they must have done,' Raufar answered. 'And I tore them off a strip for disobeying orders, but they both swear blind it wasn't their doing.'

'Can you believe them?' Pjorsa asked. 'Jauron's not exactly reliable, is he?'

'No,' the captain agreed, 'but on this occasion I think he's telling the truth. It's a mystery.'

Terrel's suspicions were confirmed. Jax had been responsible for this as well. He wondered whether the victim had been chosen specifically, or simply picked out at random.

'Who else can it have been, though?' Narvat asked. 'Unless the enemy have worked out how to do it too.'

'If they have, they're not very good,' Raufar said. 'It was one of their own men that burned.'

'Maybe it was a mistake,' Pjorsa suggested. 'I've heard rumours of things like that happening to some of our neo-mancers in Saudark.'

'Yes, well, we shouldn't pay too much attention to rumours,' the captain said. 'We've got a job to do. If all goes according to plan, we should meet up with the units from the Krafla Pass tomorrow, or the day after at the latest. After that it's an easy run to Hvannadal.'

'Let's hope it's easy,' Pjorsa said.

'We're through the worst now,' Raufar assured him. 'After today we ought to be able to cope with anything, eh Terrel?'

The healer could only nod absently. His heart was so full of foreboding he couldn't bring himself to speak.

#### Chapter Thirty-Eight

Things did not go according to plan. After several unintentional detours, the troop finally reached the agreed rendezvous point, but there was no one there to meet them. Narvat swore they'd got the right place this time, but there was no sign of any of the other units.

'Could they have got here earlier and gone on?' Pjorsa asked.

Raufar shook his head.

'They'd be disobeying orders if they did,' he said.

'Not if there'd been a signal.'

'We'd have seen it too,' the captain replied. 'Besides, there'd be some sign of a camp here. No one's passed this way recently.'

'You think they've been driven back?' Narvat said.

'All of them?' Raufar muttered. 'I doubt it. It's more likely they've been delayed like we were.'

Listening to him, Terrel wondered if their commander's response was genuine or simply expedient. The idea that all their nearest allies had been defeated would be bad for morale. No one had mentioned the other possibility – that the other units had been massacred – but he could tell by the expressions on the soldiers' faces that the thought had occurred to them.

'I'll send scouts to the entrances of the other passes,' Narvat said. 'See if we can find out what's going on.'

'Do that. In the meantime, we wait and make the best of this.' Raufar looked around. 'We should investigate that valley down there.'

'I'll go,' Narvat said.

'Go carefully,' the captain advised. 'If it's as fertile as it looks, they're not likely to have left it undefended.'

The lieutenant went to organize the various scouting parties, and left Raufar and Pjorsa to oversee the setting up of the camp. They had chosen the spot for its defensive advantages – the approaches could all be guarded by a relatively small number of sentries – but the position offered little comfort. Set on a small triangular plateau, and surrounded by boulder-strewn escarpments, it was exposed to wind and rain. Even though there were only a few hours of darkness now, and the snowfields were behind them, it still promised to be a cold night.

Since their last encounter, three days earlier, they had seen no sign of any enemy forces, but they were alone in unfamiliar territory, and the future of the campaign was uncertain. Even for men hardened by many years of war, it was a nervous time.

As the sun set, Narvat returned with news that seemed too good to be true, and Terrel was not surprised when Raufar treated it with some suspicion.

'There is a village,' the lieutenant reported, 'but it's been abandoned. Not a single person to be seen. At first I thought they'd retreated to the tower – it's a good one, solid stone, no windows until the third floor – but that was empty too.'

'You're sure?'

'Absolutely. The ladder was still in place. We were able to walk right in. They'd even left some grain and other stores inside.'

'This doesn't sound right,' Raufar declared. 'It must be a trap.'

'If it is, I don't know how they're going to spring it. We checked all the

approaches and they're clear. Even if the White did reappear, we'd be able to get away in plenty of time.'

'Magic?'

'Hraun was with me, and he says there's nothing unusual.'

'Poison, then?' the captain suggested, still looking for the danger he felt sure was there.

'Hraun checked the well and some of the other stuff,' Narvat replied. 'He says it's clean. Most of the crops haven't even been harvested, so it's difficult to see how they could have been poisoned. There are even some goats and pigs still in their pens. Give me a foraging party first thing tomorrow and we can be feasting by midday.'

'This is insane,' Raufar grumbled, still not convinced. 'What are they playing at?'

'Maybe the White army's already retreated,' Pjorsa said, 'and the villagers knew they wouldn't be able to defend themselves, so they left in a hurry.'

'Without their livestock? Or their stores?'

'Perhaps they were ordered to leave,' Narvat suggested.

'That would only make sense if it was a trap,' the captain said. 'But from what you tell me, there's no indication of that.'

'And if it isn't, we'd be fools not to take advantage,' Pjorsa commented. 'The men would feel a lot better for a bit of roast pork in their bellies.'

Raufar could not deny the truth of that. The campaign had already lasted longer than anyone had foreseen, and a chance to replenish their dwindling supplies was unquestionably attractive. Even so, his doubts persisted.

'What do you think, Terrel?' he asked, turning to the healer.

'Me?' Terrel couldn't hide his surprise at being consulted. 'I've no idea.'

'You don't have any feeling about this? One way or the other?'

'No.' He wasn't sure what Raufar was getting at.

'All right,' the captain said, turning back to Narvat. 'I want a close watch kept on the valley through the night. Tell the lookouts to report anything they see. Anything at all. I'll decide in the morning.'

'I'll organize it,' the lieutenant replied. 'Are any of the other scouts back yet?'

'No,' Raufar answered. 'Which means no one else is close. For the time being, we're on our own.'

The next day brought more definite news. Narvat and his foraging party had a successful - and uneventful - return to the valley, and the food they brought back was very welcome. After the short rations of the previous few days, the midday meal did indeed seem like a feast. While he still couldn't fathom the reasons behind the villagers' actions, even Raufar was now prepared to enjoy the benefits of their withdrawal.

They were still savouring the meal when one of the scouts returned from a neighbouring pass with the news that another company would be joining them soon.

'Did you make contact?' Raufar asked.

'Yes, sir.'

'Whose troop is it?'

'Captain Hosak's.'

The name sounded familiar to Terrel, and he remembered that Hosak had commanded the squad that had escorted him from Saudark to Tofana's pyramid.

'Casualties?' Raufar asked. 'About the same as us, as far as I could judge.'

'Did you see any enemy activity while you were out?' 'No, Captain. Not a thing. And Hosak's men hadn't seen any sign of the White for the last three days either.' 'Good man. Get some food and rest. You've earned it.'

'This is the strangest campaign I've ever known,' Hosak concluded. 'What the White are doing makes no sense.'

The two captains, together with their respective lieutenants and neomancers, had spent some time discussing their progress. The newcomers' story matched Raufar's in most respects. Although they too had been harassed and delayed by their elusive foes, there had been no serious engagements. Even though the

enemy seemed to be aware of what the Black forces were intent on doing, they had made no concerted effort to stop them.

'Their tactics are strange,' Raufar agreed. 'Have you had news of any other units?'

'Not for some time, and what we heard wasn't much better than rumour. According to some of the troops to the west of us, the landing at Hofnar didn't go well, but I've no confirmation of that. And some of the units we're supposed to meet up with have apparently got themselves lost or turned back.'

'I find that hard to believe.'

'Me too,' Hosak said. 'I'm just reporting what we were told.' He paused, apparently weighing up his next words. 'The only other thing we've heard sounds even more dubious. There've been some rumours about treason - that someone has told the White exactly what we're planning to do.'

'That's ridiculous!' Raufar exclaimed. 'No one would contemplate such a thing. And in any case, it would

make what the enemy have been doing even more absurd.'

'Agreed. It's probably just a stupid joke that someone took too seriously.' Terrel wasn't ready to dismiss the idea so readily. He was still wondering whether the Holma might have betrayed Pingeyri's plans for reasons of their own. If they had, he wished they'd let him in on the secret - and on what such a move was supposed to achieve.

'There's another reason why this campaign is different from any we've been on before,' Narvat remarked, when it became clear that the captains had completed their initial discussion.

'What's that?' Hosak asked.

'We've got wizards with us this time.'

'Surely you're not suggesting that they're responsible for any of our misfortunes?' Hraun gasped.

'I'm not suggesting anything,' Narvat replied, remaining calm in the face of the neomancer's outrage. 'I'm just stating a fact.'

'The lieutenant has a point,' Hosak commented.

'And the White must know about it by now,' Raufar added. 'Perhaps they're waiting until they can get their own wizards involved.'

'They want us to go to Hvannadal?'

'Yes, but at a time of their choosing. That would explain why they've been trying to delay us rather than drive us back.'

'If that's the case,' Narvat put in, 'then I can't help wondering what they might have waiting for us there.'

'Whatever it is, they'll be no match for Tofana,' Jauron stated with a confident smile. 'Get us there and we'll finish the job.' Unlike his fellow neomancer, he had not been angered by the captain's theory.

'Are you sure of that?' Pjorsa asked. 'If they do know what we're planning, then their wizards will have made arrangements to counter our magic'

'Not this magic,' Jauron claimed.

'We saw one of them burn, don't forget,' the lieutenant persisted. 'That means they must know something about it.'

'Not necessarily,' Hraun said. 'That could just have been a random chain. Their neomancers were clearly incompetent. They couldn't even control their own whirlwinds.'

'Are you telling us you can become a fire-starter by accident

'You wouldn't mind them having some fancy new sort of crossbow if all they could do was shoot themselves with it,' Jauron remarked.

'They could get better,' Pjorsa pointed out. 'It took your lot a while to get the hang of it, so I've heard.'

Hraun's face darkened at the suggestion, but Jauron merely smiled.

'Don't worry,' he said. 'When we're done, this is going to be the end of the war.'

'Just as long as it's not the end of us too,' Pjorsa replied. 'I can face a warrior's death, but I don't want to get turned into a pile of ash.'

'Then you'd better make sure you stay behind me.'

'Enough!' Raufar declared, as the two men locked stares. 'We're soldiers. We'll follow orders. That's an end of it'

The ensuing silence was finally broken by Terrel.

'There is an alternative,' he said tentatively.

'What's that?' Raufar demanded.

'If you're in doubt, we could go to the Lonely Peaks before heading for Hvannadal.'

Although the soldiers were obviously shocked by this idea, no one spoke, and Terrel seized his chance.

'We're among the units furthest to the east, aren't we? So we're closest to the glacier. If we were to find the Peacemaker before we got to the springs, no one would be able to stand against us.'

'We could only do it if we don't get the signal to advance,' Raufar said after a few moments.

'You're not seriously considering this?' Hosak exclaimed. 'It would be tantamount to desertion!'

'Not if it leads to victory,' Terrel said.

Hosak looked at him, measuring the foreigner anew.

'You've made quite a reputation for yourself since we last met,' he said. 'But you're wrong about this.'

'How can you be so sure?'

'The Red Moon was full last night.'

Terrel had been hoping that no one would point that out.

'Even so-' he began, but Hosak cut him off.

'And there's no guarantee you or anyone else will ever find the sword.'

Terrel was about to say something more, even though he already knew the cause was lost, but their discussion was interrupted by the hurried approach of one of the sentries.

'There's movement in the valley, Captain,' he reported breathlessly.

The soldiers instantly set about readying themselves for battle, all thoughts of future plans set aside. However, an hour later, the news came that the latest arrivals were their allies. Two more companies of the Black Quarter were now close by, and the tension in the camp eased once more.

Terrel was woken during the night by the sound of another report being made to Raufar.

'Sorry to wake you, Captain, but the sentries have seen a signal flare over to the west.'

'What colour?' Raufar asked quickly.

'They think it was green, but it was too far away to tell for sure.'

'Then there'll be another. Get more men on watch now. We need to be certain.'

Terrel crawled out of his tent and looked around to see that Raufar had done the same. He was wrapping himself in a cloak while watching the western horizon. Not wanting to disturb him, Terrel found a vantage point on a nearby rock and waited.

A short time later, the healer saw a small flame rise into the sky, trailing a faint line of sparks. It was much closer than the earlier one had been - as the various units passed the message along the line - and when the flare exploded, the vivid green colour was unmistakable.

'That's our answer,' Raufar told the soldiers around him. 'We've got the go-ahead. We begin the final push for Hvannadal tomorrow.'

#### Chapter Thirty-Nine

It was the size of a mountain, but it wasn't like any mountain Terrel had ever seen. He stared in amazement, as did everyone around him. And like everyone around him, he wondered what it meant.

The way it shimmered in the air, the way it was there and not there at the same time, reminded him of the dome over the doomed palace in Talazoria. But this was a quite different shape. It was a glittering, three-sided pyramid - like the upper level of Tofana's home when she had made it transparent in order to watch the neomancer trials. But this pyramid was huge; it covered an entire city and a good part of the plain around it. The walls and towers of



Hvannadal were visible inside, but they looked as if they were being seen through a thin layer of sunlit gauze. It made the place seem otherworldly, as though it was an image from a dream.

The awed silence of the soldiers with Terrel was an indication that they were as unnerved and as mystified as he was. No one had ever seen anything like this before, and to have come so close to their objective only to be faced with such a vast and unknown power had rendered them all speechless. Glancing at his companions, Terrel saw that even Raufar was temporarily at a loss. The captain clearly knew that he ought to be doing or saying something - to reassert his authority, and to remind his men of their military discipline - but, like all the others, he was too surprised to do anything but stare at what lay ahead of them. In the end it was Pjorsa who broke the silence and the spell that had been cast over them. 'Savik's teeth,' he growled. 'They must be terrified of us if they've gone to the trouble of building that thing.'

With those words the mood began to change. To Terrel's amazement the soldiers became warriors once more, their confidence renewed and their fears forgotten. Raufar snapped out of his reverie and began to issue orders. Before long, jokes and laughter were being exchanged, and the pyramid was being viewed as just another challenge in the war that was the all-consuming passion of their lives.

It had taken them almost half a median month to complete the journey to Hvannadal. They had met with little or no resistance from enemy forces, with the White defenders apparently melting away before any serious fighting could take place, but this had only reinforced their suspicions that they were being lured into a trap. Because of this, Raufar and the other commanders had proceeded cautiously. They had all been aware that they were supposed to launch the final assault on the springs at the full of the White Moon. This gave them plenty of time, and they did not want to make a mistake at this stage. They had made contact with other units as they'd gone, taking satisfaction in the evident suc'cess of the generals' plan, until they'd arrived at the present positions with two days to spare before the date set for the attack on the city.

Terrel had been aware of the army massing all around, but as yet he hadn't seen anyone other than the men from Raufar and Hosak's companies. He had hoped to be able to talk to some others - especially to Jarvik, Tegan or Myrdal - but he had no idea where they were, and he couldn't just wander around what might soon become a massive battlefield. Raufar had sent messengers to General Pingeyri, requesting orders and hoping for news, but that had been before the ghostly pyramid had formed - spreading up and out from its apex as though it had been buried beneath the plain and then raised into the air by some unimaginable force. As yet there had been no response and, in the absence of any other duties, Raufar had set his men to making their camp as secure and comfortable as possible. The soldiers had been in the field for a long time now, and although the fighting had not been as fierce as might have been expected, the journeying and constant watchfulness had taken their toll. They were all glad of a chance to rest for a while.

Eventually, in the long twilight that preceded the few hours of true night, a deputation arrived from Pingeyri. A colonel Terrel did not recognize called Raufar and Hosak together for a briefing. The other newcomer was Vatna, who evidently had plans of his own.

'It's good to see you again,' he told the healer. 'Are you well?' Terrel nodded. He was about to say more, but the magian was clearly in a hurry.

'Good,' he said. 'Come with me.' He set off again without waiting for a response.

'Where are we going?' Terrel asked as he fell into step beside him.

'Pingeyri's summoned a council of war,' Vatna replied. 'He wants you there.' The general's command centre was based in the largest tent Terrel had ever seen. It was bigger even than Algardi's family home. This reminder of the

nomad elder

who had died while Terrel had been in Misrah made him wonder briefly how things were going in that beleaguered land, but he was given no time to dwell on it now.

Pingeyri acknowledged their arrival, and waved the newcomers to one of the unoccupied rugs that were laid out on the floor. Other members of the council of war – most of whom were familiar to Terrel – were already seated in a ragged circle. Junior adjutants were moving among them, serving drinks, but apart from that little seemed to be happening. The general himself was engaged in a quiet conversation with Myrdal – one of the faces Terrel had been glad to see – who was kneeling behind his master. The expression on Pingeyri's face was a mixture of concern and displeasure, and the exchange ended with him dismissing his adjutant with an angry gesture. As Myrdal stood up, he caught Terrel's eye and nodded almost imperceptibly. Terrel returned the greeting in a similar manner, then looked away quickly.

As he sat down, he scanned the other faces in the tent. Tofana sat next to her fellow wizard, her normally expressive face now impassive. Varmahlid had her crimson cloak wrapped around her bony shoulders, and was staring into space, ignoring everyone around her. Several magians were hovering behind their mistresses, but to Terrel's disappointment Tegan was not among them. Flanking Pingeyri were Eskif and Davik, and there were several officers the healer did not recognize. Although two of them wore the insignia of the Red Quarter, Jarvik was not present.

The general cleared his throat.

'Now that we're all here,' he said, 'we can begin again.'

Again? Terrel thought. He found it hard to believe that the discussion had been delayed for his benefit.

'I want to know what that thing is,' Pingeyri stated forcefully, as he turned his gaze on the wizards. 'What it means for us. And I don't want any high-flown theories. I want facts.'

'I've already told you-' Tofana began.

'Then tell me again,' the general said belligerently. 'But this time in words I can understand.'

The wizard's emerald eyes shone menacingly in the lamplight, but Pingeyri was clearly in no mood to be intimidated.

'It's a projection of Onundar's pyramid,' Tofana replied tersely. 'A simulacrum. It has no substance, but it has power. It's similar to the shields your neomancers use in the field.'

'Similar, but not the same?'

'Correct, General,' the wizard, conceded. 'This is different not just in scale but in scope. The screen here not only offers physical, protection against invasion or weather-weapons, but it also has magical potency.'

'Are you telling me magic can't get in either?'

'That's a somewhat crude way of putting it,' she told him, 'but in essence it's the truth.'

'Magic can't get out either,' Varmahlid put in before Pingeyri had the chance to react to the jibe. 'While it's there, you need not worry about being attacked by Onundar or any of the enemy's neomancers.'

'Then what good does it do them? Why lure us here just to create a stand-off?'

The idea that they were being led into a trap had obviously occurred to Pingeyri, as well as to his company commanders, but the general's bewilderment made Terrel wonder whether this might be what the underground wanted. Had they somehow arranged a situation where the conflict at Hvannadal turned into a stalemate, hoping that Pingeyri would give up and head for the Lonely Peaks instead? If that really was the case, it must mean that they had influential friends among the people of the White Quarter.

'There is something my colleague hasn't mentioned,' Varmahlid said, looking at the general and studiously ignoring Tofana's warning glance. 'It's possible the shield is designed not only to stop magic but actually to repel it, so that any assault upon it would rebound on the attackers.'

'You have evidence of this?' Pingeyri demanded.

'Yes. In—'

'It was an aberration,' Tofana cut in impatiently. 'My colleague is wrong to draw such an inference from an isolated case.' The friction between the two wizards was obvious now.

'What happened?' the general asked bluntly.

'While we were investigating the shield, one of our fire-starters spotted a group of enemy soldiers spying on us from within, and he reacted like a soldier, not a magian. He thought he had isolated the chain that would destroy them, but instead he destroyed himself

'He burned?'

'Yes,' Varmahlid confirmed. 'As did three more of our neomancers who were nearby.'

'He made a mistake,' Tofana admitted. 'The pyramid may well be distorting chains, but it proves nothing.'

'It's not exactly encouraging, though, is it?' Pingeyri snarled.

'We need to investigate further,' the wizard muttered.

'Rather more carefully,' Varmahlid added.

'Is that why the White kept retreating?' Eskif asked. 'Do you think they're expecting us to defeat ourselves by pointless attacks on this thing?'

'If they are, they're seriously underestimating our intelligence,' Davik commented. 'How long did they think it would take us to stop once we realized the risks?'

'Which brings me back to my original question,' Pingeyri said. 'What good does this shield do them?'

'Their generals aren't stupid,' the brigadier replied. 'They must be planning something else, or they'd never have left so much land undefended.'

'What can they do from inside that thing?' another officer asked.

'It's not just that,' Pingeyri went on. 'They won't be able to feed themselves for much longer. All their summer provisions are out here — with us! We can supply ourselves indefinitely, but they'll starve by the autumn.'

'That raises the question of just how many people really are in Hvannadal,' Davik said. 'I've had reports that some White units haven't retreated, but slipped between our lines and let us go past.'

'Yes, yes, I've heard the same thing,' the general snapped. 'A few small companies may well be behind us, but we saw most of them heading for the city. They still won't be able to survive a siege of more than a short month.'

'So they must be planning something else,' Eskif repeated.

'Not necessarily,' Tofana responded. 'If they've found out about our new magic, this could be a desperate attempt to avoid a catastrophic defeat, to buy themselves a little more time.'

'Time for what?' Pingeyri asked.

'Reinforcements from the Gold Quarter?' Vatna suggested.

'No. We have that covered,' Davik replied. 'If they were going to send a force big enough to make any difference, we'd have known about it by now. As it is, they couldn't get here in time.'

'Unless Hvannadal has already been prepared for a long siege,' Eskif put in.

'They may have been stockpiling supplies.'

'You saw their fields,' the general exclaimed, waving a large hand to indicate the plain around them. 'The crops weren't even harvested. They'll have to come out and fight eventually. All we have to do is starve them out.'

'Just how long are we prepared to wait?' the brigadier asked.

'How long do you think they'll be able to maintain the pyramid?' Davik asked, looking at the wizards. 'It must be a huge drain on Onundar's resources.'

'Undoubtedly,' Varmahlid agreed, 'but the structure appears stable.'

Maintaining it now it's in place may be relatively easy — and Onundar has a ready supply of power in the springs.'

'I'm confident we'll find a way to break it down eventually,' Tofana added stiffly.

'And in the meantime, our enemies inside will be growing weaker,' Pingeyri

concluded. 'It looks as though we could be here for a while, gentlemen.'

'We do have an alternative course of action.'

The voice had come from the shadows behind the general, who frowned at the interruption. Myrdal stepped forward, his face drawn and pale. Terrel had the feeling that the adjutant had already raised this alternative and been rebuffed, but the Holma must be desperate by now, and the young man was risking the general's wrath in order to try once more.

'I've already told you that's out of the question,' Pingeyri said angrily.

'With respect, General, all I'm suggesting is switching the order of our plans. We can't do anything here as long as the pyramid is in place, but there's nothing to stop us searching for the Peacemaker now.'

'Myrdal has a point,' Eskif said quickly, before the general could respond. Pingeyri glanced at his colleague in surprise.

'If the army sits around for too long, waiting for something to happen, morale will suffer,' the brigadier went on. 'At least going on to the Lonely Peaks would renew their sense of purpose.'

Terrel was delighted by this turn of events. It seemed that Kopak might have finally persuaded his father to change his mind. Nevertheless, it was soon evident that it was going to take more than this to convince Pingeyri.

'We have all the purpose we need right here,' he stated firmly. 'We didn't come all this way just to give up at the first obstacle.'

'Then perhaps we could send a separate party to the glacier,' Myrdal persisted. 'That way—'

'No!' the general roared. 'I've had enough of this, Adjutant. Do I make myself clear?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Good. We're here now, and we'll stay here. All of us. Hvannadal is our primary objective, and I have no intention of setting off on what may prove to be a wild-goose chase. Nor do I intend dividing our forces again. We've learnt that lesson.' The vehemence with which he spoke silenced any opposition and quashed Terrel's hopes. Pingeyri looked around at everyone in the tent, his gaze finally coming to rest on the healer.

'What do you think about all this?'

Terrel had been wondering why Vatna had brought him to the meeting, and was taken aback by the sudden question. He had never understood why Raufar had sought his opinion — and now the general was doing the same. The healer had the feeling that the consequences of his words might be far-reaching.

'I believe I ought to go to the Lonely Peaks,' he said carefully. 'That's where my destiny lies.'

Pingeyri's face darkened at this, but he kept his temper in check.

'I think you have a part to play here too,' he said, watching Terrel closely.

'Do you have any feelings about the pyramid?'

'It's as much a mystery to me as it is to you,' the healer replied.

'So you've no—' the general began, then broke off abruptly and glared at the nervous-looking soldier who had just entered the tent. 'What do you want?'

'I'm sorry to interrupt, General, but I think you ought to come and see this.'

'Now?'

'Yes, sir.'

Muttering darkly to himself, Pingeyri got to his feet and followed the man outside. Everyone else did the same, and Terrel was one of the first to join the general in the open air. The sun had just set, leaving the cloud-patched sky a deep shade of cobalt blue — but there was something strange about the stars that shone faintly in the heavens. It took Terrel a while to realize what was amiss, and when he did he could hardly believe it. The stars were the wrong colour — flecks of gold rather than silver — and some of them were beneath the clouds. And there were lines . . .

By then, Terrel — along with most of the others — had recognized the truth. A second, even more colossal pyramid was now in place, its outer edges extending well beyond the plain on which the army was camped. Even though it was dwarfed by the new structure, Onundar's shield was still there. And they were trapped

between the two.

#### Chapter Forty

During the next two days the atmosphere among the soldiers grew increasingly tense. While the wizards, together with every magian and neomancer, were fully occupied in investigating the pyramids, there was little anyone else could do. The officers tried to maintain a sense of purpose by enforcing sentry rotas, and by despatching men to forage – plundering the abandoned fields and farms – but such tasks offered little distraction. The general preoccupation with what was happening about them was natural enough, and rumours spread rapidly through the ranks.

The results of the wizards' enquiries became common knowledge almost as soon as they confirmed them for themselves. There were no official announcements, but in so fraught a situation there was no way such things could be kept secret. In any case, most people were quite capable of guessing the results. Everyone assumed that the inner pyramid was Onundar's creation, and it didn't take much of an intuitive leap to predict that the larger shield stemmed from Reykholar, the Gold Quarter's most powerful wizard. Her whereabouts were unknown, but the flecks of colour in the massive structure were almost as good as a signature.

Details of the exact nature of the pyramids were harder to come by, and so the gossip was often vague and sometimes contradictory, but some facts did emerge clearly.

Both barriers were physically impassable, which meant that the army was effectively imprisoned. Retreat – or a diversion to the Lonely Peaks – was no longer an option. It also meant that a military attack on Hvannadal was impossible, and that the enemy forces within the city were similarly restricted. Excavations soon established that the shimmering planes extended below the ground, so it was impossible to tunnel their way out.

Of even greater significance was the fact that the pyramids also formed barriers to magic. After the earlier misfortune of one of their number, the fire-starters had been forbidden to use their deadly skills. Although several other neomancers had made cautious efforts to employ more conventional weather-weapons, their experiments had been unsuccessful. The space behind the two shields remained unaffected, and on several occasions the destructive forces had been turned back on their creators. Swirls of snow, whirlwinds and bolts of lightning had caused havoc, and all such attempts had quickly been halted. As far as anyone could tell, magic did indeed rebound from the screens, but it did so in an almost random manner, striking anywhere within the area they enclosed. Not only that, but in a few instances the spell somehow repeated itself without any further prompting from the neomancers, so that its influence spread far and wide. What was more, even when it splintered in this way, each separate occurrence – each freezing downpour or crash of thunder – seemed to be just as violent as the original. It soon became clear that the release of any substantial quantity of magical energy would be potentially disastrous, possibly even to the point of destroying everything and everyone trapped between the two pyramids.

Terrel took no part in these investigations, and no one came to tell him anything about the results. Like the

soldiers around him, he had to rely on gossip and intuition. But there was one indisputable fact that soon became obvious to everyone. No magical skill of any kind was necessary for this; simple observation was enough to see that the white pyramid was growing larger while the gold one was shrinking. This meant that, at ground level, the two impenetrable shields were moving closer together. Although the movement was ponderous, no more than a few paces per hour, the Black army was slowly being squeezed into a smaller and smaller area – and if the process continued they would eventually be crushed in a gigantic vice. The trap they had walked into was being sprung.

Terrel woke to his third day outside Hvannadal. He had slept for only a short time, and his slumber had been too full of dreams to grant him much rest. As far as he could tell, there had been nothing significant in his visions, and

the vague but disquieting images soon slipped from his mind as he looked up to the sky, and then towards the city. Both pyramids were still in position. All around him men were talking in whispers, and although their military training was preventing a complete breakdown of discipline, it was obvious that an air of fear was beginning to dominate the general mood. Panic lay just below the surface.

The night that had just passed had seen the full of the White Moon, marking the time when Tofana had planned to attack the springs. That was impossible now, of course, but there had been some hopeful speculation that the enemy forces might choose to take advantage of this favourable alignment to launch an attack of their own. To do so, they would have had to lower their shield – but nothing had happened, and the soldiers' hopes had been dashed. All they could do now was wait, and pray that the gods – or their own wizards – would help them to find a way out of the mess they were in. Naturally enough, Terrel shared their concerns – his life was at stake, after all – but he had an additional set of worries. Apart from the fact that he was unable to make any progress in his own quest, he was desperate to know when – or if – he would see Alyssa again. Even discounting Jax's assertion that she would not be returning, Terrel was convinced that she would be unable to get through the outer pyramid. And this meant that the ghosts – the advisors he'd relied upon at crucial moments throughout his journeying – would not be coming either. Any perils he was about to encounter would have to be faced alone. Terrel was looking around the encampment, thinking that he ought to get some breakfast, even though he had little appetite, when his attention was caught by a disturbance some distance away. A group of soldiers had gathered, and the sound of their voices drifted over the sluggish, early morning air. They seemed to be asking a series of questions, the volume rising as they competed to make themselves heard. Terrel finally realized that their increasingly vociferous demands were being directed towards an outsider, someone who had just arrived, but he couldn't see who the newcomer was. More soldiers were heading towards the spot now, while others were watching the scene with some interest.

Eventually the situation was resolved when Raufar strode across, shouting with the voice of authority. His men fell silent and parted to let their commander through, and then Terrel saw who had caused the commotion. He got to his feet at once and moved closer.

'I don't have any news for you, Captain,' Tegan was saying when Terrel came within earshot. 'You will be told of any developments through the normal chain of command. And I don't appreciate being jostled in this manner.'

'I'm sorry, Magian,' Raufar replied, motioning his men to move a little further back. 'It won't happen again.'

'Thank you.' Tegan's expression softened. 'I wish to speak to Terrel, the foreign healer. He was assigned to your company, I believe. Is he here?' Raufar glanced round and saw Terrel, who had stopped a few paces away.

'He is,' he said, pointing.

Tegan nodded and made her way towards the healer. Raufar went with her, and when several other soldiers moved to join them, the magian stopped in her tracks.

'It will be a private conversation, Captain,' she stated, employing her haughtiest tone.

'As you wish,' Raufar said, and turned away. 'Give them some space,' he ordered.

The soldiers obeyed, and Tegan joined Terrel. They sat down next to the nearest campfire, far enough from the rest of the company to be sure of not being overheard. Even so, Terrel was uncomfortably aware that they were the subject of a number of sidelong glances. Tegan did not speak immediately, and the expression in her clear blue eyes was bleak.

'Is this as bad as it seems?' Terrel ventured.

'It's worse,' she whispered, then seemed to make a determined effort to pull

herself together. 'How much do you know about what's been happening?'

'Only the common gossip.'

Tegan nodded, taking a deep breath. Her hands were shaking slightly.

'For once the rumours are probably right,' she said. 'All the chains and lines between the two pyramids are getting increasingly twisted and distorted. If we're not careful, the water could even become too dangerous to drink soon. And we can't do anything at the moment without making things worse. What little we are trying is just making it more and more dangerous.' She paused for breath, trying to calm herself. 'We've made some progress in slowing down the movement of the shields, but we're a long way from being able to stop them altogether. The pressures that build up between them are just too great. The only other slightly more encouraging news is that we've discovered some possible weaknesses in the structures - at their corners. We may eventually be able to exploit this, but even if we do manage to break through, Tofana is still intent on corrupting the springs. We can't let her do that. It'll be the end of everything.'

'Can't you make her see the risks she would be running?'

'She won't listen. I've tried and tried, but ...' Tegan shrugged.

'Then can you stop her?'

'Not on my own, no. But I may have help.'

'Who from?'

'I haven't had a chance to talk to her directly, but I know Varmahlid is worried. She may well have been looking into the same theories I have.'

Terrel immediately wondered whether this might be the wizard who - according to the Tindaya Code - was supposed to help him. It seemed like a distinct possibility.

'Of course the whole thing is academic unless we get out of here,' Tegan added. 'I don't suppose you have any ideas about that?'

Once again Terrel was surprised by someone asking for his advice.

'I haven't a clue,' he replied. 'A lot of people seem to think I know what I'm doing, but this is all new to me.'

'You see the future.'

Terrel was bewildered by this response.

'That's what everyone thinks, anyway,' she told him. 'Ever since you emerged from Savik's Whale-'

'I didn't see any visions then, and I haven't since,' he protested.

'Are you sure?'

'I think I'd have noticed.'

'Perhaps,' Tegan conceded, then lowered her voice. 'Do you still have the stone?'

'Of course.' Terrel was tempted to tell her that the crystal was a fake, but something made him hold back. Belief might still be important to the Holma's cause.

'Let's hope you get a chance to use it,' Tegan said.

Not knowing how to respond to that, Terrel remained silent.

'I don't know what to do,' the magian whispered, the depths of her misery suddenly apparent. 'Everything is so ...'

'You could talk to Jarvik,' he suggested. 'Do you know where he is?'

'Jarvik was killed three days before we got to Hvannadal.'

It took Terrel a few moments to recover from the impact of her words. The underground were effectively leaderless now.

'I'm sorry,' he said, knowing it was an inadequate response.

'That's not all,' Tegan added, her voice almost cracking. 'I can't find Myrdal.'

'What do you mean, you can't find him? Surely-' 'I can't get in to see the general, and his staff are all tight-lipped. No one seems to know anything.' She was trying to keep her feelings under control but it was costing her a great deal. 'Something's wrong.'

'We don't know that,' Terrel said. 'He could have been sent out on a mission.'

'Where to? No one can get out of here, remember? He's vanished. After all this, if we . . .'

She looked down, unable to complete the sentence.

Terrel wanted to reassure Tegan, but he knew that anything he could say about Myrdal would only provide false comfort.

'The person I love is on the other side of the world.' He wasn't sure why he'd said that. The words had simply formed themselves in his head.

Tegan looked up, fighting back tears.

'But I've never doubted that I will see her again one day,' Terrel said, with as much conviction as he could muster.

'I have to keep believing,' Tegan whispered after a while.

'It's all we have,' Terrel confirmed.

They sat quietly for a while, watching the flames of the fire.

'I should get back,' the magian said eventually. 'Tofana will be wondering where I am.' She got to her feet.

'Keep trying to change her mind,' Terrel advised as he too stood up.

'I'll do what I can.'

'There's no love lost between Tofana and Varmahlid, is there?' he added. 'That could be your opportunity to—' He broke off as Tegan suddenly glanced up into the sky, the expression on her face changing from surprise to horror in an instant. Following the line of her gaze, Terrel saw that a patch of the gold pyramid far above them was glowing rather more brightly than the rest of the shield around it.

'What is it?' he asked.

'A fire-starter,' Tegan breathed. 'Some idiot is trying to ... He could kill us all.'

A scream split the air then, followed by several panic-stricken yells. Looking for the source of the noise, Terrel saw a bright flame in the distance — and knew that this was no ordinary campfire.

Chapter Forty-One

'Come on,' Tegan said, tugging on Terrel's arm. 'We've got to get away from here.'

'I thought it could rebound anywhere,' he said as they began to run.

'It can, but the most likely place is close to the source.'

'Shouldn't we try to stop them?'

'Too late for that.'

Ripples of terror were flowing through the encampment now, and Tegan and Terrel were not the only ones running. Most of the soldiers were trying to get as far away from the fire as possible, but the magian was cutting across their paths, angling towards the inner pyramid.

'Where are we going?' Terrel gasped.

'The pattern was high up,' Tegan replied. 'That means it's most likely to strike nearer the outer wall. The further in we go, the safer we'll be.'

Eventually they came to a halt, only a few paces from the shimmering white plane. When Terrel had taken a close look at it on a previous occasion, he had been almost mesmerized by the complex swirls within the transparent gauze, but this time he could see that the movement had become more agitated, making the patterns impossible to follow.

They were both breathless as they turned to look back. Almost immediately they spotted two more unnaturally bright fires, and dark wisps of smoke. There was movement everywhere, though much of it seemed to be without purpose. The panic that had been simmering beneath the surface of the camp was out in the open now.

'Gods!' Tegan breathed, looking up.

Four new patches of light were blossoming on the outer pyramid. Terrel stared at them in horror, knowing that the fire-starter's magic was dividing and spreading.

'It's being amplified with each reflection,' Tegan whispered. 'I knew this would happen eventually.' The dread in her voice chilled Terrel to the core.

'I don't understand.'

'The lines are so distorted now, they're beginning to double back on



themselves. The magic's feeding on itself.' .

Terrel was still not sure he understood, but the consequences were becoming more apparent by the moment.

'How do we stop it?'

'We can't.'

'There must be something—' He was silenced by an enormous crash of thunder from high above them. Looking up, he saw storm clouds gathering under the apex of the outer shield, lightning flickering within the ominous mass. Down on the ground, more flames were burning. Squalls of hail and sleet battered men and uprooted tents, whirlwinds shrieked, and the ground seemed to shake beneath their feet.

'It's set them all off,' Tegan explained miserably. 'All the spells we tried to use earlier are coming back at us, but stronger than ever. If the fire-starter's chain doesn't kill us, the other weapons will.'

'Can't you do anything?' Terrel asked, terrified by the resignation in her voice.

'Anything we do to try to counteract it will only make it worse,' she explained, 'multiplying the effects even faster.'

As it is, we haven't got long. The two pyramids are acting like mirrors, reflecting everything back and forth, over and over again. Sooner or later everyone in here will be caught up in one strand or another. This whole area will be pulverized.'

Fire burst in the air above them and the ground shook again, emphasizing the magian's point.

'It's just a matter of time now.' Tegan's expression was desolate as she turned to look at Terrel. 'There's nothing we can do. I'm sorry it had to end like this. The only thing I can hope is that the war truly will be over now. That way, at least our deaths won't have been in vain.'

The healer stared at her, then at the appalling scene all around them. It reminded him once again of Talazoria, where he and Aylen had been trapped inside the dome as the palace tore itself apart. But this time there would be no giant bird to rescue him. Even so, he could not afford to give up hope as Tegan had done. He knew that even if this catastrophe did end the war on Myvatan, the consequences of his failure to reach the elemental would eventually have far greater and more disastrous results for the whole of Nydus.

'We can't let this happen,' he muttered.

Tegan shook her head, but could not speak. She was crying now, and Terrel knew that she was bidding her own farewell to the world, and to Myrdal. He was about to try to shake her out of her morbid acceptance of fate when a soldier came running over to them.

'What do you want us to do?' Pjorsa rasped.

At first Terrel thought he was speaking to Tegan, but the lieutenant was looking directly at him.

'I don't know,' he said helplessly, his mind returning to Savik's Whale, and to the moment when the leader of the Gold troops had asked him the same improbable question. 'Do you know who started this?'

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Pjorsa's scarred face distorted into a scowl. 'That filthy idiot Jauron,' he replied. 'Raufar got to him fast enough, but it was already too late.' 'Is he dead?'

'I'm not sure. The captain flattened him all right, but he might just have knocked him out.'

Terrel turned to Tegan and took her arm. 'If we can get to Jauron, would you be able to read the lines? Reverse whatever he did?' The magian shook her head.

'It's too late. There's nothing we can do now. Look.' Chaos was engulfing the entire region, growing more violent with every moment.

'Then we'll have to break the mirrors,' Terrel said. 'So the magic isn't contained.'

'There's no way to do that. We've tried everything.' 'Are you sure? What if we were able to attack one of the wizards responsible for the pyramids?'

'They're on the other side,' Tegan said wearily. 'There's no way of reaching them.'

'Have you thought of something?' Pjorsa asked hopefully. 'I can get some men—' 'This isn't a job for soldiers.' The first inkling of an idea had indeed just occurred to Terrel, sparked off by the reminder of his arrival on Myvatan.

'Stay here with Tegan, will you?'

Pjorsa nodded, though he and the magian both looked confused. Terrel knew he had no time to explain now, even if he could. He had not seen into the future when he'd been at Savik's Whale, but it was possible that he had heard it. He turned and walked towards the barrier, sensing its pulsating power. There was no way he could pass through it, but someone with a little less substance might be able to. And there was one 'ghost' who might be able to come to him without Alyssa's help. The thought of what he was about to do made Terrel feel sick, but desperate measures were called for. More people were dying as every moment passed, and the situation was deteriorating rapidly. Do it! he told himself.

Summoning the glamour to no purpose was something he would not have dreamt of doing in any other circumstances, because it left him vulnerable. But that was precisely what he wanted now. Turning his eyes blue was something he had done many times before, but this time, just to make sure the invitation was received, he turned his hair green as well. He heard Tegan gasp and Pjorsa swear explosively, but he paid them no attention because a spectral figure had just materialized next to him. Although at first glance it looked like Elam, the healer knew it was Jax. The prince had made some changes to the image, giving his muscles greater bulk and making himself a hand span taller. His clothes were much finer too, and a sword in an ornate scabbard hung from his belt.

You called, master? Jax said, in his habitual mocking tone, then looked around at his new surroundings. Immediately his eyes lit up and he laughed. Now this looks like fun!

Hello, Jax.

Need my help again, do you? the prince asked, eyeing the mayhem all about them.

You could say that.

Why should— Jax began, then stopped. What's this? He was staring at the transparent wall of the pyramid. Before Terrel could answer, Jax stuck out a hand and pushed it into the barrier. To the healer's delight it passed through without any apparent harm. The prince shivered, then laughed. That tickles.

Can you go all the way inside?

Jax stepped through the shield as though there was nothing there, his passage simply leaving a few ripples in the flecks of white light.

Interesting, he muttered. What city is that?

It's called Hvannadal. There's a wizard there who's more than a match for you, so you 'd better not go too close.

Another dare? Jax asked, smiling. I've learnt a few things since the last time, you know. Tofana won't get the better of me now.

It's not Tofana. Her name's Onundar.

You want me to stop her too?

Yes.

Why?

Because if you don't, everyone here will die. Including me.

Jax thought about that for a few moments, then grinned. Seen through the shield, his ghostly face was even paler than before.

Do you know where she is? he asked. No, don't bother. I'll just destroy the whole city.

No! Terrel cried. There are thousands of people in there.

But it was too late. Having accepted the idea, there was no stopping Jax now.

Even as Terrel watched, the first swirls of dark cloud began to form inside

the white pyramid, and streaks of lightning crashed down on the tallest towers of Hvannadal. Several small whirlwinds sprang up, each growing rapidly as they moved towards the city until they struck with the force of a tornado.

Jax! Stop this. You only need— Terrel fell silent, realizing that his twin was not listening. He could only stare in awe at the forces he had unleashed.

'You have the gods on your side, healer,' Pjorsa commented, coming up beside him.

'How did you do that?' Tegan exclaimed.

It was clear that neither of them could see Jax, but

Terrel guessed they might have seen the shift in patterns as the prince moved through the barrier.

'I don't know,' he said, unable to think of a plausible explanation.

'You must have opened a portal somehow,' the magian reasoned, 'and some of the magic here leaked through.'

'What happens now?' Pjorsa asked.

Inside the white shield, the storm was growing in size and intensity with extraordinary speed. The violence of Jax's assault was so strong that some buildings were already collapsing.

'I don't understand how it's happening so fast,' Tegan replied, 'but the pyramid's reflecting the magic inside over and over again. Onundar will have to release it or the whole place will be destroyed.'

'Then we'd best be ready for a fight,' Pjorsa concluded eagerly, and ran off. Terrel was still watching Jax, who was adding to the tumult and almost dancing with glee. The lightning strikes were coming in clusters now, shattering roofs and setting parts of the city on fire, even as deluges of rain and ice flooded other sections. It was a scene from darkest nightmare, from the end of the world.

Guilt threatened to overwhelm Terrel, and he could only hope that Onundar would recognize the inevitable and dismantle the pyramid before everyone in the city was killed. Hundreds of people must have died already, and the fact that he was responsible for their deaths weighed heavily on the healer. Even if he had been able to persuade Jax to stop, the weather-weapons he'd invoked had taken on a life of their own now, feeding on their own devastating power. Beside him, Tegan had been rendered speechless by the spectacle, but a scream from nearby - on their side of the

barrier - made them both realize that their situation, while not as bad as that of the citizens of Hvannadal, was still grave.

'She has to—' Tegan began, then gasped as in the blink of an eye the inner pyramid vanished.

In the next instant the storm within spread out, freed from its unnatural constraints. This added another ferocious element to the chaotic ferment beneath the outer shield, but Terrel saw that the gold barrier was shifting and weakening too.

'It's going!' Tegan exclaimed, confirming the healer's impression. 'You did it!' She flung her arms around him, even as thunder echoed above them and an icy wind tore at their clothes.

'It'll dissipate now,' she said as they drew apart. 'All of it. It may take some time, but . . .' She broke off once more, no longer staring at the tortured sky, but at what was happening on the ground.

Terrel soon saw what was alarming her. All that was left of the Black army was now on the march towards Hvannadal - at the same time as huge numbers of people were pouring from the city. The soldiers were back to a world they understood, and the massive pitched battle that Pingeyri had always wanted was about to take place. But as it turned out, this was not the most pressing of Tegan's worries. Her magian's senses had warned her of something else.

'Tofana's going to do it!' she gasped, sounding distraught once again. 'After all this, she's still going to do it. She's insane!'

'The springs?' Terrel asked.

Tegan nodded.

'How do we stop her?'

Want me to do it? Jax asked, appearing at Terrel's side.  
His face - Elam's face - was flushed with an unholy pleasure.  
Can you?

'Can I what?' Tegan asked.

'You heard that?' Terrel said in amazement.

'What?' she mumbled, looking confused. 'I thought . . .'

There's another wizard trying to stop her, Jax commented.  
Varmahlid?

Stupid old crone's doing it all wrong though, the prince added. She doesn't stand a chance.

'What's happening?' Tegan cried, putting her hands over her ears. 'I keep hearing things.' Fear sparked in her eyes.

'It's me,' Terrel told her. 'My thoughts. Shut them out, like you did before.'  
'But . . .'

'Please, Tegan. This is too complicated to explain now.'

'There's someone else, isn't there?' she said, then nodded and turned away.

Tofana killed her, Jax said, his tone betraying doubt for the first time.

Tofana's the one I really need you to stop, Terrel said. Can you- But he got no further, because just at that moment his internal trembling began. The tremor struck a few heartbeats later, but it was like no earthquake the healer had ever experienced before.

Wide cracks split the entire plain, quickly widening into deep, jagged trenches that belched clouds of steam and smoke. Tegan and Terrel had both been thrown to the ground by the initial impact, but now, as the earth shook and growled beneath them, they recovered sufficiently to be able to look up and see the first of the walls of flame burst from the newly-formed ravines. The conflagration spread rapidly until the whole area was divided by sheets of orange fire.

As Terrel watched, beyond terror now, the old dragon of the volcanoes rose from the flames of the nearest fissure and looked directly into the healer's eyes.

#### Chapter Forty-Two

The sense of madness in the dragon's eyes was overwhelming, and Terrel felt all the boundaries of reality slipping away from him as he stared into the smouldering fires of those twin orbs. It took a considerable effort of will to stop himself from falling into a dream from which there would be no escape. Wings of flame rose and fell, a cavernous mouth opened in a volcanic roar, and talons of fire gripped and shook the banks of the ravine. But it was the eyes that told the story. Terrel had seen their like before - and he knew who had made them. The realization triggered a remote contact, real but fleeting, and he sensed the Ancient's surprise. But the link was lost before he could even attempt to use it - and in any case, there was nothing he could have said. In the face of such demented fury, his healing skills were useless.

The dragon slid back into the crevasse, and was lost among the flames and the lava that bubbled and flowed in its depths.

'Did you see?' Tegan yelled over the roar of the continuing earthquake. 'Was it real?'

'Real enough,' he replied, wondering if she'd been shown the same thing he had.

He was watching the progress of the lines of fire now, as they burned their way across the landscape. He wasn't sure what the elemental was trying to do, but it was obvious

that its actions were out of control. There was no pattern, no purpose to the latest devastation. It was the reaction of a madman - of a madman with more power than sense. The existing fissures were still widening, and more were opening all the time. Terrel had no doubt that the upheaval was spreading far beyond the plain. Myvatan was literally tearing itself apart.

'Did he do this?' Tegan asked. 'The other person, the one I can't see?'

'No. This came from the creature I told you about, the one I'm supposed to find.' He looked around, wondering what had happened to Jax, but his twin was

nowhere to be seen.

'Why's it doing this?'

'I don't know.'

'Perhaps it wanted to help you,' she suggested. 'Perhaps all this was meant to stop Tofana.'

Terrel was on the point of denying her assertion, but then it occurred to him that the elemental might have taken such drastic action in part because of Tofana's magic and its intimate connection to water. However, he couldn't afford to spend much time analyzing the motives of a being who was undoubtedly insane. His more pressing problem was how to ensure that he and Tegan survived.

The ground was shaking less now, and the healer managed to get to his feet. He was about to offer his companion his hand when he saw one of the soldiers' sled dogs racing towards him, trailing a broken leash. Its fangs were bared and its eyes shone red – giving it an almost demoniacal look – but something stirred deep within Terrel at the sight, and his burdens suddenly all seemed lighter.

Alyssa? he called tentatively, as the hound covered the last few paces in a series of athletic bounds before coming to a slithering stop.

Shape it, Terrel, she responded. Shape it!

What? He had no idea what she was talking about.

Hurry! There's a reason for this. Change the pattern!

What pattern!

The fire, the tremor, all of it, Alyssa urged. You can shape it.

I don't know what you mean.

Make it work for you, she snarled, angered by his hesitancy. Separate the things you need from those you don't.

You 're the only one who can trace the patterns from the elemental, Elam added. You can shape them too.

The ghost had appeared next to the panting dog.

Is it really you? Terrel asked, staring.

Who else would it be? Elam replied, with a puzzled frown. You haven't got any time to waste. The Ancient's already done most of the work for you. You just have to finish the job.

I don't– Terrel began, then was struck dumb as Jax reappeared in his amended version of Elam's shape.

The two phantoms stared at each other. Elam's face registered stark astonishment, while the prince burst out laughing. Alyssa growled deep in her canine throat.

What happened with Tofana? Terrel demanded quickly.

Oh, I don't think you need worry about her any more, Jax replied casually.

The springs are safe?

I'm not sure I'd go that far, the prince said, glancing at the nearest flame-filled crevasse, but Tofana's not going to touch them. In any case, she can't even get to the city now.

What's he doing here? Elam asked, recovering from his shock.

Saving everybody, Jax replied smugly. It's a tough job but someone has to do it – and none of you were faring too well, were you?

Terrel! Alyssa screamed in his head. Stop wasting time. This was the pendulum. You 've got to–

But the rest of her words were lost in an unearthly howling. Both Elam and Jax – who until that moment had been unaffected by any of the storms raging about them – were suddenly caught in a strong wind, their clothes and hair flapping. That's not meant to happen, Jax exclaimed. What's–

We have to go! Elam shouted above the gale. Do what you can.

The two spectral figures vanished, blown away by the elemental wind, and the dog, its fur standing on end, ran away, barking furiously.

Alyssa? Terrel called, stumbling after her. Alyssa! But it was no use, and he knew it. Alyssa had gone.

'Are you all right?' Tegan asked. 'Was that the dog from Saudark?' Terrel didn't answer. He was too busy wondering just what it was he was supposed to do. Alyssa and Elam had evidently risked a great deal to pass the message on to him, but what they wanted him to do seemed impossible. Even if the earthquake did originate from the elemental, how was he supposed to influence it?

'It's like a wind,' Tegan murmured. 'Do you feel it?'

Terrel glanced at her.

'What?'

'There's a force here, pushing . . .'

'There is,' he told her, 'but not in this world. Can you feel it?'

'Something.' She had climbed to her feet now, and was looking around. 'In here.' She tapped the side of her head.

'Will you let me . . .'

 He hesitated.

'Look inside?'

'Yes.'

'Will it help?'

'It might.'

Tegan held out her hands and Terrel took them in his own, smiling in an attempt to reassure her. He didn't really know what he was looking for, but the magian's waking dream was a strange and wonderful realm, and he fell into it easily. The ghost wind was a moving shadow, an ephemeral presence that neither he nor Tegan could grasp properly. He had to make do with fleeting glances whenever it slowed down enough to become visible.

'The Black Moon,' Tegan whispered, her voice echoing in a distant world.

Terrel saw it then – the Dark Moon that had always haunted his dreams and his daydreams, his birth and his destiny. It was the ultimate source of the wind, the end of all the strands. And he could see them clearly now.

Delusions clawed at him with a dragon's talons. But he could see past them.

The pattern was clear because there was no pattern. No reason, no order, just fury and the need to lash out. But even though the dragon was insane, it was nonetheless learning from these events. There was cunning within the madness. He could see now.

In the world of men, Terrel recognized what was needed – the roads and barriers, the swords and shields, the magic and the chains. He saw how to treat them, how to expel the diseases, cauterize the wounds. He was a healer again.

He heard a scream and then Tegan's voice, but he couldn't understand what she was saying. He had done all he could. Darkness claimed him.

It was dark when Terrel awoke, but this time the darkness was outside him – and it was not complete. The bloody

crescent of the Red Moon floated overhead, encircled by a necklace of stars.

Love or war? he wondered. Waxing or waning? He felt too weary to even think about it.

And then he remembered. Alyssa had come back to him. They may not have had any time to talk, but she had not abandoned him. That simple fact flowed within him like a beacon, illuminating other, less welcome memories.

She had risked a lot simply by being there. In spite of her protestations about being protected, Terrel knew that sleepers could die. He had seen Vilheyuna's life end at the shaman's stone in Qomish. Certain kinds of magic could make them vulnerable, and there had been so much magic all around the pyramids. The fact that she had come to him anyway was proof of the importance of the message she had brought, but it must also have meant that she thought him worth the danger. That meant she still loved him. Didn't it?

He slept again, hoping. And dreamt about walking down a corridor of fire.

'He's coming to.'

The voice was familiar, but it didn't belong in his dream. Terrel opened his eyes and saw Yarek looking down at him.

'Did I help?' the boy asked eagerly.

'Help?' Terrel rasped.

'I was trying to help you get better,' Yarek explained. . 'Like you showed me. But I'm not sure I was doing it right.'

Terrel was too confused to know how to respond, but he was saved from having to answer by the arrival of Tegan and Vatna.

'How are you feeling?' Tegan enquired solicitously. 'Is there anything you want?'

Terrel sat up. He'd been lying in the open, wrapped in blankets. He asked for and was given a drink, which hurt his parched throat but made him feel as though he were at least partially alive. Looking around for the first time, he saw the rough terrain on which they were camped, and the mountains beyond.

'Where are we?'

'The Grundar Hills,' Vatna replied. 'About six miles north of Hvannadal.' 'North?' Terrel queried, struggling to make sense of this development. It was the last direction he would have expected them to take, leading them even further away from their home quarter.

'We didn't have much of a choice about the way we went,' Vatna explained. 'The earthquake saw to that.'

A corridor of fire, Terrel thought, as he felt other memories stirring into life.

'How much do you remember?' Tegan asked.

Terrel saw the dragon's eyes again, and decided there were some things he did not want to remember - but there were some gaps he needed filling in.

'Most of it,' he said. 'What happened after I collapsed?'

'We all got out of there as quickly as we could,' Vatna replied.

'The earthquake ended the battle before it began,' Yarek added, not bothering to hide his satisfaction at this outcome.

'The curious thing was that the fissures could almost have been designed to separate the opposing forces,' Vatna went on. 'Hvannadal is cut off now, and our army's been split into sections. Most of them were able to head back south, though, so they should be able to get home. Unlike us.'

Did I do that? Terrel wondered, recalling Alyssa's frantic advice. Was it possible that he'd directed the course of the fissures to prevent the battle taking place? He couldn't believe it, but nor could he quite rule it out. He glanced at Tegan, whose insight had guided his efforts, but she just smiled, saying nothing.

'Not that I'm complaining, mind you,' Vatna continued, oblivious to the silent interchange. 'The fact that so many of us got away at all was a miracle.'

'There's never been a tremor like that before,' Yarek put in, clearly eager to join the conversation. 'No one knows why it happened, but it must be some new sort of volcano. You can see lava flowing in the bottom of most of the ravines.'

'And it's extended way beyond the plain,' Vatna added. 'The mountains haven't been so badly affected, but the upheaval even got as far as the sea.' He pointed to a nearby hilltop. 'You can see out over Hofnar Fjord from up there. There's a new volcanic island growing off the coast.'

'As far as we can tell,' Yarek said, 'Hvannadal was the centre of the earthquake, but it probably spread over all of Myvatan.'

'For a while it was as if the whole island was trying to tear itself apart,' Tegan remarked.

Does she know? Terrel asked himself. Does she think / stopped Myvatan from being destroyed?

'As it is, it's just even more divided than usual,' Vatna said. 'It's settling down a bit now, but most of the fissures are still impassable - and probably will be for some months at least.'

'Did any of you ... see anything in the flames?' Terrel asked tentatively. His three companions exchanged glances.

'What did you see?' Vatna asked.

'A dragon.'

'So did I!' Yarek burst out. 'It had black scales that reflected the flames like armour, and its eyes were yellow. But no one believed me.' He subsided

abruptly then, glancing at Tegan as if wondering whether he'd gone too far. 'It's not that we didn't believe you,' she told the apprentice, 'but it was difficult for any of us to tell what we were seeing in all that confusion.' 'I could have sworn I saw a flock of geese at one point,' Vatna said, nodding. 'Which makes no sense at all.'

'Everyone saw something different, it seems,' Tegan concluded.

Like Mlicki's darkness, Terrel thought. The nomad boy, who was to become a shaman, had enveloped two warring tribes in his vision. What they had seen had reflected their own concerns – and their own futures. An elemental had had a hand in that encounter too.

'What did you see?' he asked Tegan.

'Just flames,' she replied, but her eyes would not meet his, and he didn't need Jarvik's special skills to know that she was lying.

Thinking of the dead colonel reminded Terrel of the underground, but Vatna's presence meant he couldn't discuss such things with Tegan yet.

'What happened to Tofana?' he asked instead.

'Something very strange,' Vatna replied. 'She and Varmahlid were in dispute about what they intended to do once the pyramids collapsed, and apparently the argument got out of hand. The only thing we know for sure is that Varmahlid is dead.'

Terrel frowned at this confirmation of the news Jax had brought. If Varmahlid had been the wizard who was supposed to help him, she hadn't done much good.

'By then everyone was turning against Tofana,' Vatna went on. 'Even her own magians were shocked by what she'd done, and Eskif finally persuaded Pingeyri to forbid her to corrupt the springs. But she was determined to go ahead anyway, on her own if necessary. She would have done so too, I think, if it hadn't been for the tornado.'

'It was blue, and it gave off sparks!' Yarek exclaimed.

'Strange as it may seem, that's what I saw too,' Vatna admitted. 'No one had ever seen anything like it before, but everyone assumed it was some sort of new weather-weapon. I mean, if they could produce those pyramids ...' He paused, as if trying to organize his thoughts. 'No one's really sure what happened after that, but Tofana definitely didn't get the chance to go to Hvannadal. And soon afterwards the fissures cut the city off from all of us.'

'Is she dead?'

'Probably,' Vatna replied, 'but no one's seen her since then, alive or dead. Either way, she'll have been completely humiliated. She was supposed to be the most powerful wizard on Myvatan, and yet she was swallowed up by another's tornado. I don't think we need worry about her any more.'

This repetition of Jax's words ought to have been reassuring, but Terrel did not find it so. It was yet another reminder of the terrible price that had already been paid for their escape. He tried to tell himself that the eventual outcome had been the best he could have hoped for, and that many lives had been saved, but it still didn't assuage the guilt he felt about all those who had died.

'How do you know all this?' he asked.

'I was in the wizard's company,' Vatna said. 'So were most of the command staff'

'Then how did you get here?'

'Captain Raufar is a very resourceful officer. He and his men pulled most of us out of there when the rest had turned and run. He saw the way out when no one else could. I'd be dead now if it weren't for him. And then we found ourselves with no choice but to retreat up here.'

'Who else is here?'

'Pingeyri, but he's wounded.'

'When you feel up to it, you might be able to help him,' Tegan put in.

'Eskif is here, and his son,' Vatna went on. 'Davik. A few magians. Most of the rest are men from Raufar's company. There are about a hundred of us in all. Not much if the White ever regroup and decide to attack, but I think we're safe enough for the time being.'



'Any fire-starters?' Terrel asked.

'Not that I know of. Why?'

'Just wondering.'

'You should rest,' Tegan said, looking concerned. 'All this talking is wearing you out again.'

Terrel did indeed feel very weary, but he didn't think he could sleep now.

'Are there any dogs with us?' he asked.

Vatna and Yarek were obviously puzzled by his question, but Tegan answered at once.

'A few. Shall I bring them to you?'

'No. Not now.'

Alyssa would come to him when she was ready. He had to believe that.

Terrel had been wrong about his ability to go back to sleep. He sank into a dark void, and left even his dreams behind.

#### Chapter Forty-Three

Once word got around that the healer had recovered consciousness, he received several visitors, but the one constant in his world was Yarek. The boy seemed to have adopted the roles of nurse, servant and protector. He tended to Terrel's needs, brought him food and drink, and made sure that he was not disturbed when he needed to rest. He also acted as his patient's informant, telling him about the latest news in the camp.

Terrel learnt that Yarek had played no active part in any of the battles around Hvannadal – either military or magical – and that he had been terrified throughout. His depiction of the fire-born dragon was nothing like the healer's recollection, while others had apparently seen completely different visions. These included flying fish, giant insects, and a ship under full sail – all of them composed of flame. Although Terrel had no doubt that the elemental had been involved in creating these illusions, he was also certain that their form had been shaped by the minds of the people who had seen them. What he couldn't understand was just what the Ancient was trying to achieve with such displays.

Having been concerned with local matters for so long, the contact had forcibly reminded Terrel that he had to concentrate on his own goals now. His impression that the elemental had been learning from their previous encounters was worrying, because there was no telling what it might do next. With apparently unlimited reserves of power at its disposal, almost any knowledge could be turned into a weapon to be used against humanity. In some ways the earthquake had been a crude method of attack, but Terrel had unwittingly shown it how such things could be targeted with more precision. If the creature ever felt threatened again, its response might well be more accurate and deadly. Given that Terrel still had the journey to the Lonely Peaks ahead of him, this was not an encouraging thought.

Time became a blur. Terrel did not want to sleep, but he had little choice in the matter. Days seemed to run into one another – in part because the night had now been reduced to a short period of twilight. The season of light would begin soon, when the sun would not set at all for two median months. For a foreigner like Terrel this was a disconcerting prospect, but it had the advantage that the temperature remained relatively high. The soldiers had only been able to bring some of their supplies and equipment with them on the retreat from Hvannadal, and if the weather had been colder, it would have meant even greater hardships.

'We're doing all right,' Raufar said on one of his visits. 'The foraging's not as easy as it was down on the plain, but we won't starve. And if we have to defend ourselves we have a good position here. The magians ought to be able to cope with most enemy magic, even if they're not trained neomancers.'

'What happened to them?' Terrel asked.

'Hraun was killed. Jauron's missing, but we're pretty sure he's dead too. In any case, after what happened down there I don't think any of us are too keen on using magic

at the moment. If we can defend ourselves, that'll be enough for me.'

'It was a mess, wasn't it?'

Raufar laughed.

'That's putting it mildly,' he said. 'From a military point of view it was very nearly a disaster. If the pyramids hadn't come down when they did we'd have been wiped out. As it is, the army's been split up and forced to retreat in a dozen different directions. My guess is that most of them will be heading for home by now – and we'll follow eventually. Then we can get ready for the next campaign.'

Terrel couldn't believe that the captain was thinking about returning to the war after everything that had happened.

'We might have to wait until next year,' Raufar added resignedly. 'Mind you, the White can't be in much better shape. The quake stopped us from getting to Hvannadal, but the storm and the fires did most of the job for us. My guess is the springs won't be much use to them now, even though Tofana got herself killed.'

'It's just a scratch,' Pingeeyri muttered impatiently, trying to shake off Terrel's attentions. 'Go and help someone who needs your skills.' The general waved at the other men in the tent.

'I will,' the healer replied. 'Just as soon as I'm sure it's not infected.' The jagged gash ran from behind Pingeeyri's left ear, down his neck and shoulder, and into the flesh of his upper arm. The encrusted wound looked hideous, but as far as Terrel could tell, it was healing as well as could be expected. The general's helmet, which was topped with metal bat wings, lay beside the bed. It was severely dented, and Terrel suspected that if it had not absorbed a good

part of the blow that had injured its owner, Pingeeyri would have been among the dead on Hvannadal plain.

'You'll do.'

'Thank you,' the general said gruffly. He was too stubborn to admit that the healer's ministrations had eased his pain, but the relaxation in his face told its own story. 'Now go and make yourself useful.'

Terrel did as he was told, moving among the wounded who were lodged together regardless of rank in the best of the salvaged tents. He had taken up such duties as soon as he was physically capable of doing so, and even now Yarek trailed around after him, making sure he did not overexert himself.

That night, Terrel found himself alone with Tegan for the first time since they'd fled into the hills. She was in a sombre mood and it wasn't hard to divine the reason.

'No news of Myrdal?'

'Actually there is,' she replied, 'but not the sort I wanted.'

'Oh. I'm sorry.'

'He's not dead,' Tegan said, correcting Terrel's natural assumption. 'Or at least not as far as I know.'

'Then what's happened to him?'

'I finally got Kopak to talk to me. Myrdal was arrested before the battles even began.'

'Arrested? What for?'

'Treason.'

Terrel quickly looked around to make sure that they could not be overheard.

'No one here knows what happened to him,' Tegan added, 'but if he's caught now, the chances are they'll execute him on the spot rather than bother with a court martial.'

'Do you think he told the White what we were planning?' Terrel asked quietly.

'I don't know. It's possible. It's also possible he just said some stupid things to the wrong people. He couldn't stand the way the war just kept on getting worse. Having to play a part in it was tearing him apart. Still, I can't worry about that, can I? If we're ever to achieve peace, we've got to carry on with whoever is left.' Her brave words were hardly convincing, but Terrel admired her for remaining resolute.

'Are there any other members of the Holma here?' he asked.

'A few, but no one who can exert much influence. You and I are the best hope.'  
'What about Eskif? I get the feeling he might be open to persuasion, especially if Kopak's on our side.'

'I'm not sure. They're still soldiers, don't forget, and you know what they're like. Most of them are looking forward to getting back to some proper fighting.' Tegan shook her head in disbelief.

'You still think finding the Circle of Truce will do the trick?' Terrel asked.  
'It's our only hope.'

'Then we'd better persuade the general to head for the Lonely Peaks.'  
'Easier said than done right now. No one's going anywhere for a while yet. But you're right,' she added. 'It's what we should be working towards. And you need to go there for your own reasons, don't you?'

'It's what I have to work towards,' Terrel agreed.  
Tegan nodded. They had not discussed everything that had happened on the plain, and Terrel had the distinct impression that the magian didn't want to. Her life was already complicated enough, and there were some things she simply preferred not to know.

'But you will still help us, won't you?' she queried anxiously.  
'If I can, yes.' He wished he could just have agreed, but he was too honest for that – and Tegan accepted his answer in the same spirit.

'None of us can do the impossible,' she said.  
'What will happen now that Tofana's gone?' Terrel asked.  
'One of the other wizards will take over her role.' Tegan didn't sound as if she cared very much about that. 'They'll go on as best they can, just as the army would have gone on if Pingeyri had been killed.'

'You're not looking for a promotion yourself, then?'  
The magian glanced at him quickly, then laughed when she saw his deliberately innocent expression.

'No,' she replied, with heavy emphasis. 'I'm not.'  
Terrel was pleased to see her smile. It might only be a brief light moment in the midst of such horror, but it was worth a great deal nonetheless.

'Can I ask you something else?' he said, hoping to take advantage of the lift in her mood.

Tegan nodded absently.  
'What did you really see in the flames?'  
'Nothing,' she replied immediately, then amended her answer when she saw that he did not believe her. 'It's not important.'

'Tell me. Please.'  
Tegan looked at him as if weighing up her options, then sighed.  
'It was a sword,' she said. 'As tall as a castle tower, and made out of flames the colour of blood.'

The visitor Terrel had most wanted to see came to him after they'd been in the Grundar Hills for several days.

She had taken the form of a merlin, a small falcon, that skimmed over a nearby ridge and landed neatly – with a rapid flickering of wing feathers – on a pointed rock. Once the bird was no longer in motion, its hunched stance and blunt, curved beak gave it a pugnacious look, while its mottled plumage helped it to blend in with the upland landscape. But Terrel, who had been dozing after another healing session and had only seen the last part of her approach, was not concerned with outward appearances. Even if he hadn't been able to see the ring – which was looped around one of the merlin's legs – he would have known that Alyssa's spirit was contained within the bird's slight frame.

Can you stay this time? he asked quickly.  
I'm the wrong person to ask, she replied. I'll stay as long as I can.  
Until the elemental makes it impossible, Terrel thought, resolving to make the most of whatever time they were granted.

Then we can talk, he said. / need to explain.  
Explain what?

Terrel couldn't tell whether she genuinely didn't know or was simply trying to punish him.

About what happened with Latira, he said.  
Oh, that, Alyssa said dismissively. Forget it.  
Once again Terrel was unable to fathom her attitude.  
Don't you want me to tell you what happened?  
You 're growing up, Terrel. Things are bound to happen.  
But it wasn't me! he burst out, alarmed by the resignation in her tone. It was Jax. And even he didn 't make love to her.  
I know.  
For a few moments Terrel was too stunned to respond.  
You know? he said eventually.  
Yes.  
Have you always known?  
No. Elam told me some time later. I'm sorry I misjudged you.  
When he had imagined this conversation, it had never occurred to Terrel that it would include Alyssa apologizing to him – and now that it had happened he felt horribly guilty.  
I'm sorry I let you down, he said. / should never have let myself get into such a mess.  
Even as Jax, there's a part of you that's still you, she told him. That's why Elam was able to intervene successfully.  
Terrel heard her words, but they did not register immediately. When they did, he didn't want to believe them. If Alyssa's assertion was correct, it meant that he was at least partially responsible for some of the things his twin had done – or could perhaps have prevented them altogether. It was another heavy weight for his already overburdened conscience.  
It won't happen again, he said quietly.  
It doesn 't matter.  
Yes, it does! he exclaimed. It's you I love, Alyssa. You know that, don't you?  
Yes.  
I was miserable when I hurt you, when I thought you weren't coming back.  
You really thought that? she asked, sounding genuinely surprised.  
Yes.  
Then we 're even, aren 't we? Alyssa told him coolly. Don't we have anything else to talk about?  
How can you be so calm about this? Terrel demanded.  
She did not answer immediately. When she did, her words brought him a mixture of pleasure and pain.  
I love you, Terrel. Never doubt that. It's just that in our current situation I'm not sure love is enough.  
Don't say that! he cried. It has to be. We haven't got anything else. And we will be together again one day, I swear it.  
This time it was Alyssa who paused before responding.  
I have to keep believing, she said at last, unknowingly repeating what Tegan had said a few days earlier.  
We both do, Terrel said. Don't give up on me, my love. None of this would make any sense if you did.  
I'm not sure it makes much sense anyway, she commented, but there was a lighter note in her voice now, and Terrel's spirits began to rise. It was time to move on.  
Are the ghosts coming? he asked.  
The merlin glanced about, apparently testing the air. Then, without another word being spoken, three spectral figures appeared, glowing faintly in the thin sunlight. They too looked around quickly, taking in their new surroundings, before Elam broke the silence.  
Jax isn 't here, is he?  
No.  
That's a relief. I nearly died of shock when I saw my face on that slimy little worm. Elam grinned, letting Terrel know that his choice of words had been deliberate.  
What was he doing here? Shahan asked.

It was the only way to break through the pyramids, Terrel replied. We could all have been killed otherwise. I didn't have any choice. Are you sure? Muzeni queried.

What else was I supposed to do? Terrel asked, feeling defensive now. There's always a price to be paid for such aid, the heretic informed him. I'm aware of that. I just couldn't think of any alternative. And I didn't see you rushing in to help.

What's done is done, Shahan said placatingly. What's important is where we go from here.

You haven't made much progress towards the Lonely Peaks, Muzeni observed. You think I don't know that? Terrel declared angrily. I can't just march up there on my own.

It's possible you may have to.

Thanks a lot. Is all your advice going to be so useful?

Calm down, both of you, Shahan told them forcefully.

In the silence that followed the seer's intervention, the merlin chattered softly.

Sorry, Terrel said quietly.

I apologize, Muzeni said. We're all a bit on edge at the moment. He glanced round again, and Terrel wondered what he was looking for.

Tell us what's been happening since we last met, Shahan said.

The healer did his best to describe his recent exploits in as succinct a manner as possible. He told them about the Holma's plans, confirming their speculation about Akurvellir and the Circle of Truce in the process, about the campaign - including the time when Jax's uninvited arrival had saved his life - and about the various battles at Hvannadal. The ghosts were obviously relieved that Tofana's plans for the springs had been foiled, and were very interested in the fact that, with Tegan's help, Terrel had been able to sense the elemental wind and, through that, influence the creature's other actions. I'm still not sure I really did change the direction of the fissures, he concluded, but it felt as if I did.

Maybe Tegan's the wizard who's supposed to help you, Shahan argued.

Either way, I think you should persuade her to stick around, Elam commented.

That sort of talent could be very useful.

The real question is how soon you'll be able to persuade the people here to go to the central glacier, Muzeni said, single-mindedly pursuing their main aim.

I'm not even sure it's possible yet, Terrel replied. The fissures are still burning. We may be stuck here for some time.

Let's hope not, Elam said. Everyone seems to have a reason to go. Pingeyri wants to find the sword, and the Holma want to rediscover the Circle of Truce.

Or pretend to, Terrel corrected him. All they need is to make people believe the flame's been rekindled. But they've suffered a lot of setbacks, and I'm not sure they're ready to go through with it at the moment.

Show us the stone Jarvik gave you, Muzeni requested.

Terrel looked around to make sure no one was watching, then slipped the metal cylinder from his pocket.

The container's genuine, he said as he held it up for them to see. But the stone's a fake.

You told us that already, Elam said. I'd like to see it anyway.

I'd rather not. If it glows again, someone's bound to notice.

Fair enough, Shahan said, and Terrel hid the vial away again. Elam frowned, but said nothing.

What's going on in Vadanis? Terrel asked. Has Jax killed anyone else there? Not that me know of, Muzeni replied.

He's probably getting enough excitement on his trips here, Elam remarked. He hasn't been back to Betancuria either, which is good.

What about the Code? Have you been able to make sense of any more of it?

Not really, Shahan admitted.

We're getting nowhere, Muzeni said, his frustration plain. It's all so vague and contradictory.

The only new thing is a reference to something that 'blinds the eyes from within', the seer added. We think it might refer to mitra. Apparently there is a way to counteract its effects, but we can't work out what it is.

Something about mud, if you can believe that, Muzeni said, shaking his head. But we can't find anything that seems to be connected with the Ancient here, or the Lonely Peaks, Shahan concluded.

Don't forget the pendulum, Alyssa put in.

What about it? Muzeni asked. Those passages make even less sense than the rest.

It's important, that's all, she said, sounding defensive.

Why?

Alyssa did not answer, and the merlin seemed to hunch even lower on its perch. They're coming, Elam warned.

Who?

Elam moved his head slightly to indicate what he meant, and Terrel turned to look.

Wraiths? A group of the tormented phantoms were drifting up the slope below them.

If that's what you want to call them.

You can see them? Alyssa queried.

Terrel nodded.

We can hide ourselves better now, Elam told him, but they always find us in the end.

Can they harm you?

No, but we can harm them.

In that moment Terrel understood what Elam had meant when he'd said that the ghosts shouldn't be on Myvatan.

We make things worse for them just by being here, his friend added, confirming the healer's intuition.

Even though they hadn't 'moved on', Elam and the seers were still whole, recognizably human and with the ability to act purposefully – unlike the wraiths.

We should go, Shahan said sombrely, watching the approaching company.

Goodbye, Terrel, Muzeni said. Get to the Lonely Peaks as soon as you can.

I will.

And don't let Jax make you do anything stupid, Elam added with a grin.

The ghosts vanished before Terrel had a chance to respond to that. He looked at Alyssa, wondering how she was feeling now.

I'll keep believing, she said quietly, answering his unspoken question. And then, to Terrel's great disappointment, the merlin flew away.

To Terrel's immense frustration, it proved impossible to keep his promise to Muzeni. By the time it was determined that the company was fit enough to move, Raufar's scouts had discovered that all routes out of the hills were blocked by fissures. These were not burning as fiercely as they had done at first, but they still presented a formidable barrier to progress, especially for a large group of people. Although they could go a certain distance in several directions, they'd soon be forced to turn back, and so it was decided that they should stay where they were for the moment. The land around them was reasonable for foraging and hunting, there was no danger of their being attacked, and during the continuous daylight of summer the weather was mild. After several discussions, most of them instigated by Terrel, the group came to the conclusion that – if there was time, and when a route became passable – they would head in the direction of the central glacier. But no one other than the healer seemed in any hurry to set off.

A month passed, and during that time Terrel saw nothing

of Alyssa and the ghosts. He hoped this was a good sign. If they'd been desperate, he told himself, they would at least have tried to visit him again. Even so, his own impatience was building to an almost unbearable level, and on several occasions he considered simply heading east on his own. But his nerve

failed him each time – and common sense allowed him to justify his decision to stay. But then news came that was to change the attitude of his companions. Pingeyri had been up and about for a while now, but Terrel still went to check on him every other day, and the healer was with him when the messenger arrived. The soldier was filthy, his uniform torn and scorched, and he was clearly close to exhaustion, but he would let no one tend to him until he had made his report.

'I'm not sure what to make of this, General, but I thought you should know. Tofana was seen in Nordura a few days ago. She was heading towards the Lonely Peaks.'

'What in the blazes would she be wanting there?' Pingeyri responded.

The Peacemaker? Terrel thought. Or Akurvellir?

'Well, whatever it is,' the general went on, 'I'll wager she's up to no good.' The wizard's mutinous behaviour at Hvannadal had soured his opinion of her.

'That's not all, sir,' the soldier went on. 'There's also a report that a company of the Gold are already on the glacier.'

'Right,' Pingeyri said, his decision made. 'Can you show us the way you came?'

'Yes, General. It'll mean going a long way round, and it's difficult in places, but it should be possible.'

'Good man. It's time we started getting active again.' Pingeyri began bellowing orders to various officers, then turned to Terrel. 'Well, healer,' he said. 'It seems you're going to get your wish after all. We're going to the Lonely Peaks.'

PART THREE

THE LONELY PEAKS

Chapter Forty-Four

'Look out!' Even as he yelled Raufar was running, reaching Terrel in two long strides, and the two of them went down in a heap just as a boulder that would have crushed the healer bounded past. The fall knocked the wind out of Terrel and he lay there gasping, his heart hammering against his rib cage as he watched the rock tumbling down into the gully below.

'That must have been a mistake,' Raufar muttered as he scanned the ridges above them.

Even Terrel could see that they were in a terrible situation. The entire company was trapped on a rough trail halfway up one side of a ravine, and if their enemies held the high ground then they would be vulnerable. Everyone was crouching now, making the most of whatever cover they could find. Voices echoed across the canyon as sightings were reported – confirming that their foes held the advantage.

'Pjorsa!' Raufar called, beckoning to his lieutenant. 'Get over here.'

The soldier arrived, moving rapidly in a crouched position.

'Take some men and see if you can get around their flank,' the captain said, pointing up the valley. 'If we have to stay here they'll pick us off one by one. We need to keep them occupied while we try to move.'

Pjorsa nodded and scuttled off.

'Thank you,' Terrel whispered, having finally managed to get his breath back.

'Don't thank me,' Raufar replied, still looking up the steep slope. 'If you get yourself killed, even by accident, we're all dead.'

'What do you mean?'

'It's you they want,' the captain told him. 'Haven't you worked that out yet? They could have overrun us several times if they'd been prepared to slaughter anyone in their way. They didn't, because they want you alive. But if you get killed anyway there's nothing to stop them massacring the rest of us.'

Terrel wasn't sure he could believe what he was hearing. He'd been aware for some time that the soldiers were especially protective towards him, but he'd assumed that this was simply because, as an adopted member of their company, he was one of those least able to look after himself in battle.

'Why me? How do you know this?'

'I don't know it,' Raufar answered, 'but it's the only thing that makes any sense – and it does make sense when you think about it.'

'Not to me it doesn't.'

'Look. Ever since we left the hills, they've been dogging our footsteps. That's not surprising, given that we're in enemy territory, but they've missed several chances to kill us all - and that's not like the White.'

'But they did kill some of us,' Terrel objected. To his distress, Lieutenant Narvat, Colonel Davik and the magian Vatna had all been among the recent casualties.

'Yes, but only those who were isolated,' Raufar said. 'When they could pick their targets and make sure they weren't killing the wrong person.'

'Me?' the healer queried, still finding it hard to accept.

'Yes. And it's not just the White we're facing. Every unit we've come across has had someone from the Gold army with it. According to their legends, the man who comes from Savik's Whale is a harbinger of their great victory. In their eyes, you're a prisoner here and they're trying to rescue you. They're quite prepared to get rid of the rest of us, or capture us if it's easier, or split us up and drive us away - just as long as you end up with them. It's the only thing that explains their tactics.'

'But why me?' Terrel persisted. 'What am I supposed to do for them?' Raufar shrugged.

'Perhaps they want you to find the sword - if that's really what you're planning to do up there.'

The doubt inherent in the soldier's words gave Terrel pause for thought. He didn't see how Raufar could know the truth, but he was an intelligent man, and in this war everyone's motives were suspect.

'I don't really care,' the captain added. 'The fact that they want you is enough for me. Whatever it is, we're going to make damned sure you don't fall into their hands.'

This sounded ominously like a threat, and Terrel wondered what lengths Raufar would be prepared to go to in order to keep his word.

'How do they even know I'm here?' he asked, still trying to find a fault in the captain's theory. 'You killed all their soldiers at Whale Ness.'

'I'd like to know the answer to that myself,' Raufar said grimly. 'The White seem to have known far too much about all our plans.'

'You really think they're after me?'

'Yes.'

'If you're right, then you'd better get as many people as close to me as possible,' Terrel said. 'If the White won't risk killing me, then it'll provide some protection for the rest of you.'

'I'm aware of that, but it's difficult in this terrain.' The company was strung out along the trail, with little room for manoeuvre. 'For the time being, we stay here. And keep your head down.'

Their journey from the Grundar Hills had been beset by troubles right from the start. At first Terrel had been tempted to compare it to the Race of Truth - a voyage into the most inhospitable regional imaginable - and crossing various fissures had reminded him of the Valley of the Smokers. But he had soon been forced to revise his opinion. This trek was no mere race; there was no code of honour among these adversaries. This was war, and the perils they faced were not just the natural dangers of climate and landscape but also the murderous efforts of other men.

Although there had been several battles, their losses had never been serious and they had always been able to move on. They had faced both White and Gold forces, and because the enemy had neomancers among their number, Pingeyri and his men had often been at a considerable disadvantage. The magians among them, including Tegan, had done their best. In theory they knew how to defend against weather-weapons, but in practice they lacked the instincts and reactions of trained warriors. Terrel had witnessed heroics and tragedy, savagery and sorrow. He hated the violence as much as ever, but he'd learnt an even greater respect for Raufar and his company. The constant daylight had at least allowed the soldiers to keep watch even during the quiet hours, but the season of light was coming to an end now, and the possibility of night raids



would soon become an additional worry.

On top of that, they were moving through unfamiliar country, with all the pitfalls that entailed. The land itself was in turmoil, and there were tremors nearly every day. Most of them were minor, and none seemed to be directed at the travellers, but they all represented new dangers -especially when the group was close to any of the fissures that ran across the landscape at irregular intervals. In all, the delays had been so bad that after almost a median month they had still not reached the edge of the central glacier. Under any other circumstances, going on with their quest would have been regarded as madness, but Terrel had no choice in the matter, and for the rest the situation was normal. The war was mad.

Their journey had been beset by troubles, but now it looked as though it might be coming to a premature end. It was clear that on this occasion their enemies had an almost overwhelming advantage in both manpower and position. However, the Black forces were not about to give up without a fight. From their own position, Terrel and Raufar had difficulty following what was happening elsewhere, but occasional glimpses of movement allowed the captain to make an educated guess.

'Pjorsa's almost there,' he said with some satisfaction, 'and the rear group are climbing too.' His expression changed as he squinted into the distance. 'Gods, Pingeyri's leading them himself!'

Terrel knew that the general was not the type of man to issue orders from a position of safety if he had any choice in the matter, but this latest exploit seemed particularly foolhardy. The route his party was taking was steep and difficult, and led straight towards the enemy position on the rim of the gorge.

'What's he trying to do?'

'I'm not sure,' Raufar replied, 'but they'll provide a diversion if nothing else.'

'Even if they all get killed?'

'Even then,' the captain confirmed. 'And it'll give us a better chance to avenge them. Time for us to move. Come on.'

Terrel followed as Raufar ran along the trail, directing the others who were left in the main group. Their enemies made no move to attack, but before long sounds of fighting could be heard from above - both ahead, where Pjorsa was, and from the general's sortie. The remainder of the company was urged to move faster, in the hope of being able to escape from the ravine and negate their foe's advantage.

As he stumbled over the rough terrain, Terrel saw that Raufar and several other soldiers remained between him and the enemy at all times, and he felt both grateful for and guilty about their vigilance. Without knowing where they'd come from, Terrel then found Tegan beside him, and Yarek at their heels.

'Do you know what's going on?' the magian asked breathlessly.

'Not really.' He still couldn't accept that so many people were taking such terrible risks simply to protect him. 'I'm just doing what I'm told.'

They ran on until a shout from behind made them hesitate and glance round.

'Keep going!' Raufar told them, then peeled away, calling orders to his men. The sounds of fighting came closer.

The decisive moment in the battle came not because of some clever strategy or any special display of courage or tenacity, but from the intervention of blind chance. Unlike any of his companions, Terrel knew that the tremor was coming before it struck, but he was unable to do anything about it, and his warning cry was lost in the uproar of combat.

The earthquake put a stop to the fighting because it suddenly became difficult for anyone to keep their feet, let alone swing a sword, but within moments everyone was aware of a new danger. Boulders like the one that had nearly hit Terrel, and a host of smaller stones, began tumbling down the sides of the gully, crashing and splintering as they went. Most people tried to find a sheltered place and crouched down, hoping to remain safe, but Terrel and his

companions were a little way ahead of the main group now, and in a relatively exposed position halfway across a small ledge. All three of them were terrified, not knowing what to do for the best, when Kopak appeared in front of them, waving urgently.

'There's a cave up ahead!' he yelled. 'Quick!'

The urgency in his voice broke the spell that had paralyzed them and they ran on, following him up a small scree slope and into a dark opening. Almost as soon as they were inside, a great roar of stone deafened them as an avalanche swept over the ground they had just crossed.

'That was close,' Kopak gasped, his face sheened with sweat.

The other three could only watch in awe as the landslide rumbled past them. They knew that if they'd been only a few moments later, they would have been crushed to death.

'Did it hit the others?' Tegan asked, trying to see through the cloud of dust that was rising into the air.

'I think most of them are on the far side,' Kopak replied. 'Let's hope so, anyway. There are some falls over there, but nothing compared to this.'

'Will they be able to reach us?'

'There's no telling yet. We'll know once this has calmed down.' Although the tremor was over now, rocks were still falling, and the air was full of debris.

'How did you know the cave was here?' Terrel asked.

'I was with Pjorsa when he went forward. We spotted it on the way. I was going back to report to Raufar when the quake hit.'

A red glow filtered through the dust that now filled the valley.

'What's that?' Terrel wondered.

'The quake's reopened the fissure at the bottom of the ravine,' Yarek guessed. The boy sounded afraid, and Tegan put an arm round his bony shoulders. He looked up at her in surprise, but didn't move away.

'It's a pity you couldn't have given us a bit more warning,' the magian said to Terrel. 'If we'd been in the right position, we could have used this to get away.'

'You knew it was coming?' Kopak exclaimed.

'Yes, but only a few moments before. There wasn't time to do anything.'

'So the legends were right,' Yarek concluded. 'You are a seer.'

'No, not really.'

'You came from Savik's Whale,' the apprentice said, as if this proved a point.

'Are you really going to find the Peacemaker?'

'I've no idea,' Terrel said, conscious of the different attitudes to their mission within the small group. 'Right now I'd be glad just to see our way out of this cave.'

By the time the dust settled, the enormity of what had happened had slowly become clear. The avalanche had gouged out a new ravine and cut them off from the rest of the company. Its sides were sheer, and around the edges and at the bottom it looked treacherous, with many smaller rockslides still tumbling down the slopes. Although they could see some movement at the far side, it was too far away in the misty atmosphere to tell who it was or what they were doing. No one wanted to risk calling out in case they gave their position away to the enemy.

'Even if it is our men,' Kopak said, 'there's nothing much they can do.'

'They probably think we were killed by the avalanche,' Tegan said quietly.

'There must be a way round it,' Terrel said.

'Yes, at the top,' Kopak agreed, 'but it would take a long time, and we've no idea what's happened to the White troops.'

'Then what are we supposed to do now?'

'Go on?' Tegan suggested tentatively.

'Just the four of us?'

'Perhaps some of the others will catch up eventually,' she said. 'And we do have a job to do.'

'I don't see that we have much choice,' Yarek stated. 'Waiting here won't do

us any good, and the trail's the only route out. We have to go on, for a bit at least.'

Kopak nodded, approving of the boy's common sense.

'We can review the situation once we're out of this place,' he said, looking down at the smoke and occasional bursts of flame coming from the bottom of the canyon. 'The sooner the better, I'd say.'

No one argued. They set off, scrambling down to the trail and continuing along it to the head of the valley. They made good progress for a while, but then – as they emerged from a narrow defile – they found the path blocked by a patch of rubble. Climbing over the heap was a frustrating business, and when they finally reached the other side and regained solid ground, they took a moment to catch their breath. It was then that a sharp noise made them all jump.

'Don't move!'

The unfamiliar voice cracked like a whip, and all four of them froze. Several soldiers with white epaulets stepped out from their hiding places. All but one carried crossbows, which were trained on the quartet. The exception was the man who had spoken, and who was clearly in charge of the group.

'Now this is a surprise,' he said as he studied his prisoners. 'We–'

Kopak yelled something unintelligible and his hand went to his sword as he began to charge. The blade was only halfway out of its scabbard when the bolt thudded into his chest, sending him sprawling to the ground. By the time the sound of Tegan's scream faded away he was dead.

'Anyone else want to be a hero?' their captor asked, then looked directly at Terrel, his expression changing rapidly.

'Is it him?' one of the other soldiers asked.

'Look at those eyes,' the officer replied. 'What do you think?'

Chapter Forty-Five

Tegan moved forward slowly, and the Bowman who was covering her tensed.

'What are you doing?' their leader snapped.

'I'm collecting his tag, Captain. You'll allow me to do that, surely?'

After a moment he nodded and she knelt to retrieve Kopak's chain. When she stood up there were tears in her eyes, but they were given no time to mourn the brigadier's son. Under the watchful eyes of the soldiers, they were taken up a path that twisted its way to the top of the incline. There they were met by a much larger group of men, who regarded the prisoners with a strange mixture of curiosity and antagonism. Almost immediately the captain ordered the entire company to move off, but one of his lieutenants queried the decision – pointing out that many of the Black soldiers were still at large in and around the ravine.

'Forget them,' the captain replied. 'They're not important. He's what we came for.'

'Then do we need the other two?'

'A woman and a boy in a war party? I think they might be of interest too, don't you? Let's move!'

'Where are you taking us?' Terrel asked. They had been walking for over an hour now. All his

earlier questions had been ignored, but this time the captain turned to look at him and grinned.

'Nordura,' he said. 'There's someone there who wants to meet you.'

'Who?'

'You'll find out soon enough,' the soldier replied, and then returned to his former obdurate silence.

Terrel remembered that Nordura was where Tofana had been seen, and he wondered if perhaps she hadn't made it as far as the glacier after all. But he couldn't understand why the White forces would be co-operating with an enemy wizard. He glanced at Tegan and saw that she was frowning, perhaps considering a similar puzzle.

At their camp that night, the three prisoners sat a little way apart from the soldiers as they ate the food they were given. During the march they had been watched closely, by neomancers as well as by ordinary guards, and the soldiers

had not relaxed their vigilance once they'd come to a halt. One of the neomancers – who, unlike the rest of the company, wore the colours of the Gold Quarter – sat staring at the trio with an almost manic intensity.

'What's he doing?' Terrel asked quietly.

'I've no idea,' Tegan replied.

Once the meal was over, a soldier came to collect their bowls. He displayed the now familiar combination of interest and enmity when he looked at them, but he flinched slightly when he took Terrel's dish, and the healer saw another emotion flicker briefly across the young man's face before he moved away. Why should he be afraid of us? Terrel wondered. What did he think I was going to do?

He was distracted then as he saw that the sky had turned a pale shade of green. At first he thought he was hallucinating, and wondered if their food had been poisoned, but then he realized that he and his two companions were now imprisoned beneath a magical pyramid, a miniature version of the structures at Hvannadal. Instinctively, he glanced over at the Gold neomancer and saw that the man's eyes were closed, his head bent forward in concentration.

'They're not taking any chances, are they?' Tegan commented. She nodded in the direction of their guards. In spite of the barrier that enclosed their charges, the soldiers were still watching them closely, their bows close at hand.

'It's like a tent,' Yarek remarked, studying the faintly glowing shield. 'A magical tent.'

'Well, at least we shouldn't get wet if it rains,' Terrel said.

Tegan smiled.

'Could you break us out of here?' she asked softly. 'If you needed to?'

'I doubt it,' Terrel replied. 'And I don't think we'd get far even if I did.' He indicated the bowmen.

'They wouldn't kill you. Not after going to so much trouble to capture you.' She had obviously reached the same conclusion as Raufar.

'But they might not have the same scruples about you two, and I'm not prepared to risk that.' Then, wanting to change the subject, Terrel asked, 'Who do you think it is who wants to meet us?'

'It could be Onundar,' the magian surmised. 'Or maybe some of their generals.'

'Or Tofana?'

Tegan shook her head.

'No,' she said. 'I know she was supposed to be in Nordura, but that wouldn't make any sense.'

'Unless she's changed allegiance.'

'Never.' Tegan sounded absolutely certain. 'It would make a mockery of her whole life's work.'

'That sort of hatred doesn't just change sides,' Yarek added.

They both looked at the boy.

'She wanted all the White to burn,' he explained. 'There's no way she'd work with them now.'

'He's right,' Tegan said.

'I suppose we'll just have to wait and see,' Terrel concluded. 'Do you know anything about Nordura?'

'Just that it's a city about the same size as Saudark,' the magian replied.

'It's important because it's the furthest inland of any major town in the White Quarter.'

'So it's near the glacier?'

'Yes. And it's also quite close to the Red border. Hence its strategic importance. That's all I know about it.'

'They have mud baths there,' Yarek told them. 'For healing.'

'Really?' Terrel said, his interest piqued.

'How do you know that?' Tegan asked.

'It was in one of the old books at home. I mean, at the pyramid. The real one. Tofana's.' He was becoming increasingly flustered.

'I didn't know you had access to the wizard's library,' Tegan remarked.

'No one minded,' Yarek said defensively.

'Because no one knew?' the magian queried mildly.

The boy didn't answer.

'What else did you find out?' Terrel asked, remembering his own voyages of discovery in the old library at Havenmoon.

'About Nordura? Not much.'

'What does this mud do?'

'It's like the pools. Only . . .'

'Only thicker?' Terrel suggested.

Yarek smiled.

'I suppose so.'

'Do the White soldiers use mitra?' the healer asked Tegan, who looked surprised by this sudden change of topic.

'Yes. Everyone in Myvatan does. Why?'

'Just thinking. It's not important. What do you suppose will have happened to Raufar and the rest?'

'We know that some of them survived, at least,' Tegan said.

'Do you think they'll come after us?'

'That depends on whether they know we survived. If they do, it's possible they might follow our trail, but if they think we're dead they'll probably head for the nearest friendly territory - which would be the Red Quarter - or try to make it back over the mountains and home.'

'I suppose us getting caught was a good thing in one way,' Terrel reasoned.

'They let the others go,' Tegan agreed, nodding. 'Doesn't help us. much though, does it? The gods know when we'll ever get the chance to go to the Lonely Peaks now.'

When they reached the city of Nordura three days later, a strange, faintly sulphurous smell hung in the air. Outwardly the buildings looked very similar to those in Saudark, and the fortress - which stood on a hill, with a commanding view over the town and the surrounding countryside - could almost have been built from the same plans as its counterpart. Terrel was not surprised when they were led in through the castle's main gates.

'I guess we'll find out who wants to see us soon now,' he said to Tegan as they entered the courtyard. Time would prove him wrong.

Terrel had been imprisoned before, but never in such luxurious circumstances.

In all but one respect he and his two friends were treated like honoured guests, with servants to bring them food and tend to their needs. The three captives were housed in quarters built round a quadrangle that was open to the sky, and where a few small fruit trees and some flowers grew. All they lacked was any news of the outside world - and the freedom to leave their lodgings. Armed guards patrolled both entrances to the enclosed garden, and the doors and windows of their rooms all faced inwards. However, the main obstacle to their freedom was the transparent screen of a pyramid that enclosed the entire complex except for brief periods when the servants needed to enter or leave. As hours turned into days, and still nothing happened, Terrel's frustrations grew. He spent a lot of time talking with Tegan and Yarek about what they ought to do, but they weren't able to come up with any solution to their problem. The only people they saw were their attendants, who were obviously under strict instructions not to talk to the prisoners about anything other than their household duties. Terrel persisted in trying to get some news of events beyond the gold-flecked pyramid, but he got nowhere - and short of threatening them with physical violence, he didn't know what else to try. At Tegan's suggestion he tried to initiate contact through psinoma, but the servants' minds were shielded somehow, and he soon gave up the attempt - feeling shame as well as annoyance at his failure.

A month passed and night returned to Myvatan,

although true darkness only lasted a short time. And still nothing happened.

No one came to see them, and no one would even tell them who they were supposed to be waiting for. Although they were living comfortably, Terrel

thought that if this went on for much longer he would go mad. Increasingly drastic ideas filled his mind as he dreamt about escaping, but he knew they wouldn't work. Even if he summoned Jax again, and succeeded in removing the pyramid, the chances of their finding their way out of the castle and the city were slim. The White soldiers might not have wanted to kill him, but if he and his companions tried to escape there was no telling what could happen. As Tegan pointed out, their best chance of leaving was to do so with their captors' permission.

'You never know,' she said. 'They might send you up to the glacier with one of their own companies.'

'To find the sword?'

'Why not? Pingeyri thought it was a good idea. Their generals might too.'

'So we just find the Circle of Truce with them instead,' Terrel said hopefully.

'You do,' Tegan corrected him. 'I don't think Yarek and I would be allowed to go with you. We're the enemy, don't forget.'

'I'm not going without you.'

'We'll see. It may never happen, anyway.'

'If they do want me to do something like that, why are we being kept waiting here?'

'I've no idea,' the magian admitted. 'I'd still like to know who we're waiting for.'

'I think I could dismantle it,' Yarek said. 'The pyramid?' Terrel exclaimed.

'Yes.'

'Really?' Tegan queried. 'How could you do that? Whoever's producing it is outside.'

'It's not a question of who, it's how,' the boy replied. 'I think I can match the pattern and then unravel it from within. Do you want me to try?'

Terrel and Tegan looked at each other, both wondering what Yarek's efforts would achieve. Even if he were successful, they would still be inside the fortress, with guards all around them. And beyond that lay a hostile city. Any freedom that they might gain would probably be shortlived at best, and if their captors realized that it was Yarek who had destroyed the shield, the boy might suffer as a result.

'We'd need to know what would happen after the pyramid was gone before we try anything,' Terrel said eventually.

'I agree,' Tegan said. 'We must think about what we want to achieve, make a plan.'

'So, no, Yarek,' the healer concluded. 'Don't do anything yet.'

Disappointment warred with relief on the apprentice's face. Terrel guessed that formulating a theory and actually putting it into practice were two very different things. Yarek looked frail enough as it was, and the effort involved in what he was proposing might well exhaust him and make his own escape impossible. And Terrel had meant it when he'd said that he was not going to leave his companions behind.

'I'm very impressed, though,' Tegan added. 'How did you work out what you needed to do? Will you show me?' 'If you like,' Yarek said, looking pleased now. Terrel left them talking, and walked around the courtyard. Looking up, he saw a bird circling high above the pyramid and wondered – for the thousandth time – when

he would see Alyssa again. She had not appeared at any time during the journey, and now that he was hidden behind another magical screen he wasn't even sure that she'd be able to locate him. It was one more frustration among many.

Telling himself to put such negative thoughts aside, he tried to think of ways that Yarek's new discovery might be useful. For instance, if he spotted Alyssa outside the barrier, could the apprentice open a gap for her to come through? It would be worth asking him, just in case. And "if-

The healer's musings were interrupted then by an internal trembling that he had come to know all too well over the last few months. He yelled a warning to

Tegan and Yarek, but they were already out in the open, sitting near the centre of the garden, so that when the tremor struck they were in no immediate danger. The earthquake was a minor one, shaking the fortress for no more than a few moments, and Terrel remained on his feet throughout. However, at the end of it, an image had been seared into his memory, and it was this that made his legs give way beneath him.

He found himself sprawled on a paving stone, with his head spinning and his stomach churning. He tried to fight back the nausea and work out what had happened. It had been a message, he had no doubt of that, and he was almost certain it had come from the Ancient. But he couldn't decide why the elemental had chosen to contact him, or how it had managed to do so. In the end, though, none of that mattered. What was important was to know whether it had been real or not. He tried to tell himself that it was just an illusion, but he had seen too many instances where glimpses of the future were possible to discount the notion of prophecy out of hand.

'Are you all right?' Yarek asked, coming up beside him. 'You look very pale.'  
'I'm fine,' Terrel lied. 'It was just the tremor.'

The boy nodded, but did not seem to be wholly convinced. Tegan joined them. 'That was odd,' she remarked.

'What?' Terrel asked, looking up. He still didn't trust his legs enough to stand.

'The tremor made the pyramid flicker. Why would it do that?'

'I don't know.'

'Maybe whoever built it was caught off guard,' Yarek suggested. 'Their concentration might have slipped.'

They couldn't come up with a better explanation, and Tegan and Yarek soon forgot the incident. Terrel speculated privately about whether it might have been the elemental's influence that had caused the shield to tremble, but once again he was unable to come to any conclusions.

That night, Terrel fought against his need for sleep for as long as possible. He knew that as soon as he closed his eyes he would once more see the imagery that retained the power to terrify him. He had seen himself writhing in agony as flames poured out of his body, first from his chest and then from his mouth and eyes.

#### Chapter Forty-Six

Terrel was lying on his back in the garden, gazing up at the unnatural colour of the sky, when it turned blue again for a few moments. He assumed that a servant was coming in, but a gasp of surprise from Tegan made him look round. The newcomer wore an ornate cape that glittered in the filtered sunlight, and there was an aura of power about her that left Terrel in no doubt as to her status. He stood up as the wizard walked over to him. On the other side of the quadrangle, Tegan and Yarek had also got to their feet, but their visitor ignored them, her liquid brown eyes fixed upon the healer.

'My name is Reykholar,' she announced.

'I'm Terrel.'

'I know who you are,' she replied. 'But I'm curious about what you are.'

'I'm a healer,' he said, giving the only answer he felt comfortable with.

'For a healer, an awful lot of death and destruction seems to follow in your wake.'

'That's not my doing. Or my intention.'

'What is your intention?'

'I have none.'

'You don't talk to dragons, then?'

Terrel didn't know how to respond to that.

'I've been told a great deal about you,' the wizard said,

'but little that makes any sense. One of the things I've heard is that you were responsible for what happened at Hvannadal, and that you enlisted the dragons to help you do it.'

'Dragons are mythical creatures. They're not real.' 'Oh, I wouldn't say that,' Reykholar remarked casually. 'What did you do at Hvannadal?'

'I tried to stay alive. Like everyone else.' 'Is that all?' 'Yes.'

'Well, then, you succeeded. Unlike many others.' Her steady gaze did not disguise the fact that she knew he was lying, and Terrel began to feel uncomfortable, wondering if she could read his thoughts.

'So you weren't responsible for breaking the pyramids?' she asked. 'No.'

'And you didn't cause the earthquake?' 'I'm a healer. I can't command that sort of power. Do you think I'd still be a prisoner here if I did?' Reykholar nodded, acknowledging the point. 'I think you'll find you're being treated rather better than most prisoners,' she said.

'I'm aware of that,' Terrel responded. 'Everyone here seems to think I'm some character out of a legend.'

'The child of the sea,' the wizard said quietly. 'Born of Savik's Whale.'

'Something like that.' 'But you don't think so.' 'I've no interest in your war.'

'Then why have you been fighting with the Black army?' 'I haven't. I've been travelling with them. They gave me no choice.'

'Why was that?'

'They had the idea that I might be able to help them find a sword called the Peacemaker.'

'And can you?'

'How should I know? I'd never heard of it before I got here.'

'Why did you come here? Not many foreigners risk approaching our shores.'

'I'm a traveller. I go where I like.'

'And where destiny takes you?'

'Perhaps. We could all say that, couldn't we?'

Reykholar smiled for the first time, the skin around her eyes crinkling into a hundred tiny lines. It made her seem more human, a little less intimidating. Her hair, appropriately enough, was the colour of pale gold, and was cut quite short. She could not have been much more than thirty years old, but her eyes seemed considerably older, and the mind behind them was clearly formidable.

'You took a long time to get here,' Terrel remarked, feeling it was time he asked some questions of his own. 'Why was that?'

'Travelling on Myvatan has been difficult since the Hvannadal earthquake.'

'Even so, we've had to wait over a month.'

'Was there something you would rather have been doing?' she asked innocently.

'I don't like being cooped up.'

'That's understandable,' the wizard conceded, 'but I didn't want to entrust the job of talking to you to anyone else. And I needed time to recover my strength.'

'You were responsible for the outer pyramid at Hvannadal.' It was a statement rather than a question, and Reykholar nodded her head in acknowledgement. 'I can see how that would have exhausted you,' Terrel said. 'Is that why Onundar hasn't come to see us?'

'My colleague has been in a coma since the city was attacked.'

Terrel didn't even attempt to conceal his surprise.

'I don't believe it was the storm that caused her downfall,' the wizard went on. 'What happened to the springs must have affected her deeply. They were her pride and joy, after all.'

'What did happen to them?' the healer asked quickly, hoping that Tofana's efforts had not been successful.

'You don't know?'

Terrel shook his head.

'There was so much magic all around them that the waters became corrupted,' Reykholar said, and the healer's heart sank. 'The balance of such things is delicate.'

'The pools don't work any more?'

'No. In fact, the waters now harm anyone who immerses themselves.'

'How are they harmed?' he asked, fearing the worst.

'They don't burn, if that's what you're wondering,' she said, surprising him again. 'They simply develop fevers, and their wounds become infected.' The



wizard looked at him thoughtfully. 'We know about the fire-starters. You can't keep that sort of thing secret for long.'

'They're nothing to do with me. They're Tofana's creatures.'

'Really? I was told you were the one who showed her how to use the technique.'

'No! Such things are hateful to me.'

'Your friends have no such scruples,' Reykholar said, glancing over at Tegan and Yarek, who had kept their distance but were watching the encounter closely.

'Some of them,' Terrel conceded, 'but not these two. They feel as I do.'

Reykholar looked doubtful, but did not question his claim.

'Do you have any news of Tofana?' Terrel asked.

'Why would you be concerned with her now?'

'Because she may still be trying to initiate a further stage in her magic, one that would be catastrophic for all Myvatan.'

'Tell me more.'

Having raised the subject, Terrel did not feel he could stop there, so he explained as much about Tofana's plans – and their possible repercussions – as he could.

'You think she might begin these chains from another location now that Hvannadal's no longer an option?' the wizard asked.

'It's possible. Do you know where she is?'

'She's made herself a little nest, an eyrie really.'

'Where?'

'Among the Lonely Peaks.'

'Reykholar said that Tofana's set herself up inside the glacier,' Terrel reported later. 'In a cave or something. And the place is well protected, apparently.'

'But how can she survive there?' Yarek asked.

'No one knows.'

'More to the point, what is she doing there?' Tegan said. 'Do you really think she's still working on the fire-starter chains? I know she can be pretty single-minded, but this is extreme, even for her.'

'There are lines in ice,' Yarek reminded her. 'Perhaps she's hoping to use them.'

'Turn the whole glacier into a weapon, you mean?' the magian exclaimed. 'Gods, what an appalling thought. What's Reykholar planning to do to stop her?'

'She didn't say,' Terrel replied. The Gold wizard had left without giving him any clue as to her intentions, and without answering any of his questions about the prisoners' fate.

'My guess is she's going to consult with the generals here before she decides what to do next.'

'Do you think their plans will include you?' Tegan asked. 'Or us?'

'I expect so. They wouldn't have waited so long for her to see us if they didn't think we were important.'

'So we may yet get to go to the Lonely Peaks,' Tegan surmised.

'What are you really planning to do up there?' Yarek asked.

Terrel and Tegan looked at him in surprise.

'I'm not stupid,' the apprentice added. 'I know you don't really plan to look for the sword. That was just a story to tell the generals. So what's the real reason?'

Terrel nodded, tacitly agreeing that the boy deserved the truth, and Tegan told him about the Holma and their plans. Yarek could hardly contain his delight.

'I'll do anything I can to help,' he said eagerly.

'There's something else I have to do there,' Terrel added, then told his own tale – or part of it at least. By the time he had finished, Yarek was practically bursting with excitement.

'This is like something out of an old book,' he exclaimed. 'And I'm in it!'

'Real life is a lot more dangerous than books,' Tegan told him.

'I know, but this is amazing. I never thought I'd get the chance to do

anything important in my life. Do you really think we could put a stop to the war for ever?'

'I do,' Tegan replied firmly, smiling at his eagerness.

'And help Terrel at the same time?'

'I don't see why not.'

'Do you think I'll get to see the Ancient?' Yarek asked, returning his attention to the healer.

'I can't tell you that,' Terrel said. 'Before we can do any of this, we have to get out of here.'

Although they all hoped Reykholar would return with more news, she did not come that day, or the next. Or the next. Terrel fretted, though he tried to remain outwardly calm for the benefit of his companions.

'Something should be happening by now,' he muttered. 'They can't still be talking.' Knowing that the wizard was there had stripped away the last of his patience. 'What are they waiting for?'

'I wish I knew,' Tegan said.

The two friends lapsed into a pensive silence. They were sitting in the room where the magian slept.

'You're thinking about Alyssa, aren't you?' Tegan said eventually. Now that they had grown comfortable in each other's company, they could often read the other's mood.

'Yes.' Terrel had told her about his love, but not about the way she visited him during his travels.

'It must be hard, being so far away.'

'There are harder things,' he said, thinking of Myrdal and the uncertainty surrounding his fate.

Tegan nodded solemnly.

'Tell me about the two of you,' Terrel said quietly.

The magian didn't need to be told who he was referring to.

'We've known each other since we were children,' she began. 'We were both different, and we knew it. I think that's why we became friends, to avoid the ridicule of all the others. I'm not sure when friendship turned into something more. It just happened. One day we were playing games, the next we . . . ' She paused, her pale skin darkening a few shades. 'I'll never forget the first time he kissed me. It seemed to last for ever.' She smiled at the memory, her eyes seeing another time, another place. Then she came out of her reverie and glanced at Terrel. 'He was due to go into the army soon after that, and so we spent every moment we could together. And then my talent was discovered, and it became inevitable that we would both be going away. So we made a pact, to get ourselves into positions where we might be able to do some good, to seek out other people who thought like us, but most important of all, to remember that we would be together again one day.' There were tears in her eyes now.

'You will be,' Terrel said.

'How can you be so sure?'

'I can see the future, remember?'

'You don't believe that.'

'In this case I do. If—'

He was interrupted by an excited cry from the courtyard. Moments later Yarek burst into the room.

'The pyramid's changed!' he declared. 'There's all sorts of ripples in it.'

'Do you know what's happening?' Tegan asked, wiping her eyes.

'No, but there's something else too. The guards outside the entrances are lying on the floor. They look as if they're asleep.'

'All of them?' Terrel queried. 'In the middle of the day?'

'Come and see for yourself.'

A few moments later, all three of them were looking out through the tunnel that led to the outside world. On the other side of the magical barrier that blocked the far end, two soldiers lay sprawled on the ground. A little further away, one of the servants was also lying on the flagstones.

'What's going on?' Tegan whispered.

'I don't know,' Terrel said, 'but I think we ought to find out, don't you? Yarek, do you still think you can break through the pyramid?' 'Yes,' the apprentice said confidently. 'It's already becoming unstable. It should be easier now.'

'Then go ahead.'

Yarek closed his eyes and held his body perfectly still. In front of them the shield shimmered and buckled, then simply vanished. Tegan cried out in astonishment and Yarek opened his eyes.

'I did it,' he murmured, then swayed on his feet. His companions moved quickly to support him, but after a few moments he shrugged them off. 'I'm all right,' he said.

'Well done,' Tegan said. 'That was incredible.'

'Ready to go?' Terrel asked.

'What are we waiting for?' Yarek replied, grinning weakly.

They went forward, and Terrel knelt beside one of the fallen guards.

'This isn't natural sleep,' he reported, once he'd had the chance to investigate the man's inner dream-world. 'I'm not sure what it is.'

'Some sort of sickness?' Yarek suggested.

'Is it like the sleepers in Saudark?' Tegan asked.

'It's like that, but not the same. I can't put my finger on it, but ...'

Terrel stood up and looked around. He couldn't see any movement anywhere. 'I wonder how many others have been affected like this.'

An hour later they had at least a partial answer to that question. As they made their way through the fortress, everyone they saw was fast asleep.

Chapter Forty-Seven

'It's as if the time of hibernation came upon them unexpectedly,' Tegan said, 'so they had no time to prepare.'

'But there's still almost three months to the time of darkness,' Yarek objected.

Having discovered that there was no one to stop them, Terrel and his companions had climbed on to the outer battlements of the castle, and were now looking out over the rest of Nordura. An unnatural stillness enveloped the scene below, and they could see people lying in several of the streets. Nothing moved, and the only sound was the gentle wuthering of the breeze. The entire city was asleep.

'What if the whole island's like this?' Yarek whispered. 'What if we're the only ones left awake?'

While they'd been exploring, they had discussed the reason for their being the only ones unaffected by the bizarre occurrence. The obvious answer was that the pyramid, which had until recently imprisoned them, had also protected them somehow – which implied that whatever had induced the mass sleep had been magical in origin. The question of who was responsible was less easy to answer. The similarities with the sleepers led Terrel to wonder whether the elemental had been involved, but he couldn't work out how or why its interference should have taken such a strange form. The other leading candidate was Tofana, of course, but Tegan didn't know of any magic commanded by her former mistress that could have produced such an effect. A third possibility – and one which brought Terrel out into a cold sweat – was that the Ancient and the wizard were somehow working together. The idea of the creature's almost limitless power harnessed to Tofana's malevolent designs was almost too appalling to contemplate, and yet there was some evidence to suggest that this might be the case. Much earlier, Terrel had sensed that the elemental had learnt from events at Hvannadal, and the 'message' it had sent the healer implied that it knew about fire-starting. The inner dreams of the people of Nordura, and the fact that Tofana was now on the glacier – in reasonably close proximity to the creature – also pointed to a possible collaboration. But there was no way of telling whether such an alliance had been agreed upon willingly by both parties, or whether one was taking advantage of the other. Either way, Terrel knew he had to put a stop to

it.

'When do you think they'll wake up?' Tegan asked.

'I don't think it'll be any time soon,' Terrel replied. 'All those I've tested are deeply unconscious.'

'But whatever caused it is no longer happening,' the magian reasoned.

'Otherwise we'd have fallen asleep ourselves as soon as the pyramid was gone. So presumably it'll wear off eventually.'

Terrel nodded.

'We'd better take advantage of the time we have, then,' he said. 'Let's gather what we need and get out of here.'

After such a long period of enforced idleness, it took Terrel a few days to get used to travelling again. Although he was able to ease the stiffness in his companions' limbs each night, Yarek's tentative efforts to do the same for the healer failed, and so Terrel was forced to bear his aches and pains on his own. He did this gladly enough – it was something he was used to, after all – because it was the price he had to pay to be moving closer to his goal.

However, Yarek did succeed in another enterprise which made their progress rather more comfortable. With Tegan's help and encouragement, he developed his own technique for building a protective shield over them, creating this magical 'tent' whenever they were in need of shelter from the weather, and thus allowing them to sleep at night in reasonably secure circumstances. Once it was set up, he could maintain the barrier even when he was asleep, but the price he paid was to wake the next morning feeling weary and uncomfortable. Because of this, they usually tried to find other means of ensuring their safety, taking advantage of whatever refuge the countryside offered.

For the most part, they avoided any human settlements. Once they had got a few miles away from Nordura, it had become clear that other parts of the island had not been affected in the same way, and they'd seen the locals going about their normal business. They had even spotted a company of the White army on the march, but had managed to remain undetected. There was no way of telling whether their escape had been discovered, and therefore whether anyone was looking for them, but as fugitives they could take no chances.

Eventually they reached the rim of the giant glacier, only to be faced with the problem of how best to go about climbing on to that forbidding expanse of blue-white ice. The frozen cliffs that they first came to were too high and too sheer to scale, so they had to move around the border, looking for an easier approach. In this way they discovered a 'valley' between two vast protrusions of ice, which enabled them to walk several miles closer to the heart of

the glacier while remaining on solid ground. The gently sloping defile narrowed to a point as it climbed, but at the far end the buttresses of ice seemed smaller and less steep than any they had seen before, offering the hope of access to the Lonely Peaks.

That night they camped near the foot of the glacier in a small rock cave. They had not seen another human being since the previous day, and in such a remote spot they decided that it would be safe to light a fire. Now that they were almost surrounded by ice, the air was permanently chill, and the warmth from the flames was welcome. They ate some of their carefully rationed food, and then settled down for the night.

'Do you want the shield?' Yarek asked.

'No,' Terrel replied. 'We're sheltered enough here. Save your strength for tomorrow.'

Tegan nodded her agreement, then glanced at the healer.

'Do you still have the stone?'

'Of course.' Terrel took out the metal vial and showed it to her.

'Do you think it'll lead us to the Circle of Truce?' Yarek asked.

'I hope so.' Terrel was more concerned with finding both the elemental and Tofana, but he wasn't ruling anything out.

'Not going to be much of a show though, is it?' Tegan commented. 'With just

the three of us there to see it.'

'That doesn't matter,' Yarek claimed. 'Once the flame is relit, no one will be able to deny it.'

The magian smiled at the boy's earnest confidence.

'Whatever happens, it will make a difference,' Terrel agreed, as he wrapped his blanket around him and tried to find a comfortable position on the uneven floor of the cavern.

'There's something odd here,' Tegan said a little while later.

'What?' Terrel asked anxiously.

'Like the wind I felt at Hvannadal.'

So Alyssa and the ghosts won't be coming to help us, Terrel thought. He'd been hoping to see them again at some point during their journey, but if Tegan's intuition was correct, they would not be able to reach him. The elemental wind wasn't going to hurt them, though, so his fears subsided.

'That won't bother us,' he assured her. 'Let's get some rest.'

The last thing Terrel saw before he fell asleep was the slim crescent of the Amber Moon, only a few days old, framed in the entrance to the cave.

It was still dark when Terrel woke. While he'd been asleep, the cold of the glacier had seeped into his limbs and he sat up, shivering, and rubbed his arms to warm them. The fire had gone out, and its ashes gave off no heat. Even though he had only slept for a short time, his brain felt dull and foggy, and it was a few moments before he was able to make out a faint red light coming from outside the cave. He assumed that this was the first pale glimmer of dawn, and wondered about waking his companions so that they could be ready for an early start. But Tegan and Yarek were still fast asleep, and he didn't have the heart to disturb them. Terrel was so cold now that going back to sleep himself was out of the question. He yawned and stretched painfully, still feeling less than fully alert. Outside the cave's entrance the sky was full of dark clouds, but a wind-blown gap allowed him to see a few stars, and then revealed the Amber Moon. Terrel blinked, knowing that something was wrong, but even as clouds obscured his

view again, he was certain he had not been mistaken. The Amber Moon had been full.

I must still be dreaming, he thought. But if he was dreaming, then it was in an uncomfortable realm that mimicked the real world with uncanny accuracy. He decided to wake the others, to see if they were part of the illusion, and he was on the point of reaching over to shake Tegan's shoulder when he stopped short. What if he wasn't dreaming? What if the Amber Moon really had been full? That would mean he'd been asleep for nine days, which wasn't possible. Unless ...

Fear trickled into Terrel's heart like icy water. He got to his feet, pulling the blanket around him, and tiptoed over to the mouth of the cave. The Amber Moon chose that moment to reappear, sliding majestically into another gap within the fast-moving stream of cloud. It was indeed full, and it looked real. What was more, the scene illuminated by its soft light had changed almost beyond recognition. The valley was now coated with a thick layer of snow that glistened like pale gold in the moonlight. In addition, both sides of the valley were blanketed by a dense veil of fog, and the red glow he had seen earlier was coming from these mist banks.

Terrel's fears froze into icy certainty. There was no way these changes could have occurred during the course of one short night. The mysterious malady that had been inflicted upon Nordura had claimed them too.

'This is crazy,' Tegan muttered. 'The sun should have risen by now. The night is lasting way too long.'

'And it shouldn't be this cold,' Yarek said.

Terrel's companions had woken of their own accord about an hour after the healer. At first they had dismissed his theory that they had been asleep for nine days, but

when they'd been presented with the evidence of their own eyes, their certainty had crumbled – and now they were being forced to consider an even

more outrageous possibility.

'What was the Red Moon's aspect when we fell asleep?' Tegan asked.

'Just past full,' Yarek replied. 'About three days past, I think.'

'And what is it now?'

The boy glanced up again. They had been watching the heavens for a long time, but the clouds granted them only fleeting glimpses of the sky above.

'It's in the last part of its cycle,' he said. 'It'll be new tomorrow, probably.'

'And the White?'

'It'll be new in a few days.'

All three were capable of the calculation that followed, but it was Tegan who put the inevitable conclusion into words.

'The Amber Moon has been through another two cycles,' she said. 'We haven't been asleep for nine days. We've been asleep for two months.'

Later, when the sun finally rose, they discovered that it was not just the snowfall that had transformed the valley during their long slumber. New fissures had opened up on either side, with lava flowing silently in their depths. This was what was producing the clouds of steam, as the ice and snow around them melted in the heat.

'It must have been quite an earthquake to produce this,' Tegan said, looking down into the red glow of one of the crevasses. 'How could we have slept through it?'

They moved away from the edge, and trudged back through the snow towards the cave. As they did so, the day's cold reasserted itself.

'It's as if we've missed autumn and gone straight from summer to winter,' Terrel grumbled.

'It's always a short season,' Tegan said, 'but it's never gone by that fast before.'

'We'll have to look for a place to sleep soon,' Yarek said.

At first Terrel didn't understand what the boy meant, but then he realized that the time of Myvatan's hibernation – the two months when the sun never rose – was only a few days away. It made the tasks that still lay ahead of them more urgent than ever.

'Do you think it was deliberate?' Tegan asked.

'What?'

'Us sleeping for so long, the fissures, all of this. Do you think someone was trying to delay us? Or have we just been unlucky?'

'I've no idea,' Terrel admitted.

'Was it the elemental?' she went on. 'I remember feeling something just before we went to sleep.'

'If it is, the chances are we've just been unlucky. Its power is erratic,' he replied, thinking of the unpredictable nature of the wind that blew the ghosts away, and of the tremors at Hvannadal. 'But if Tofana's got something to do with it, she might have been trying to target us specifically.'

'You think it's her doing?'

'It could be.'

'Then why let us wake up again now?'

'Maybe she's done all she needs to do. Or perhaps she can't control the spell all the time. I don't know. Anyway, this is all just speculation.'

'If it was all accidental,' Yarek put in, 'the pattern of the fissures is quite a coincidence.'

'Why?' Terrel asked. 'What do you mean?'

The apprentice pointed to the upper end of the valley, where steam rose from the base of the glacier.

'Unless I'm very much mistaken,' he said, 'the two fissures intersect up there. There's only one way out of here now, and that's to go back the way we came.'

Terrel and Tegan stared, but they both knew that the boy was right. They had been cut off from the Lonely Peaks by a moat of fire.

'Unless you fancy wading through molten rock, of course,' Yarek added.

## Chapter Forty-Eight

'We have to go back,' Terrel said.

They had returned to the cave and were packing up their supplies. Although some of their food had gone mouldy, most of it still seemed edible.

'If we retreat now, we'll never get up there in time,' Tegan said. 'The dark will be here.'

'We haven't got any choice,' Terrel said. 'There's no way to cross the fissures.' They had climbed to the top of the valley to see the point where the two lava flows split apart. The rivers of fire emerged from beneath the glacier in a smooth, continuous stream, then divided to run down both sides of the valley.

'I know,' Tegan muttered, her frustration plain. 'I just wish we knew what Tofana was doing. If we have to wait till next year to get up there, we could be too late.'

'Having slept so long now, maybe we won't need to hibernate,' Yarek suggested.

'I wouldn't like to stake my life on that,' the magian replied.

'I might not be affected by the hibernation,' Terrel said. 'Perhaps I could go on alone.'

Tegan frowned, but before she could say anything more they were interrupted by a muffled roar from outside.

'Earthquake?' Yarek queried doubtfully.

'I don't think so,' Terrel replied. He hadn't experienced any internal trembling.

The rumbling continued, and the three friends went outside.

'There,' Yarek said, pointing to the glacier above the steam clouds at the head of the valley.

'The heat's melting the outer edges of the cliff,' Terrel decided. 'It's falling into the fissure.' As they watched, more huge chunks of ice broke away and disappeared into the mist.

'Could it fill the gap?' Yarek asked hopefully.

'No,' the magian answered. 'You saw how hot it was down there. The ice will melt almost at once.'

Vast billows of steam were erupting now, emphasizing her point and obscuring the view even more.

'Maybe if enough ice fell in, we might be able to get across,' the boy persisted. 'Could we use magic to increase the size of the avalanche?'

'We could try,' Tegan said, 'but I still don't think it would do us much good. The fallen ice would still be much too unstable for us to use.'

Listening to the crash and roar of the exploding cascade, Terrel was forced to agree with her.

'Come on,' he said. 'The sooner we start, the sooner we'll have a chance of finding another way in.'

He set off, his boots sinking into the ankle-deep snow, only to come to a halt a few paces later. A large animal was bounding across the valley towards them. It looked like a cat, but it was huge, and its powerful legs propelled it along at breathtaking speed. Its fur was pale cream with grey markings, like smudges of ash.

'It's a snow leopard,' Yarek breathed, caught between terror and awe.

'Don't move,' Tegan said quickly. 'If we run, it'll chase us down easily. Our best chance is to shout as loud as we can. We might be able to frighten it away.'

'It won't attack us,' Terrel stated calmly, his spirits rising.

'How do you—' Tegan began, then stopped.

You 're going the wrong way, Alyssa told him. They won't be able to keep the bridge in place for long. She came to a skidding halt, her large paws scattering snow.

A bridge?

At the head of the valley. Can't you see? But you must hurry.

'Come on,' Terrel said to the others, who were still staring at the beast in silent amazement. 'Yarek was right. We are going to get across.' He began to

run, and after a moment's hesitation, his companions followed. The snow leopard padded alongside, matching their pace with ease.

Who are they? Terrel asked as he ran.

What?

You said they won't be able to keep the bridge in place.

Does it matter? she asked impatiently. They're risking their lives to help you. Isn't that enough? Just make sure their efforts aren't in vain.

Terrel stumbled on, the weight of his pack making him even more clumsy than usual. Ahead of them they could hear – but not see – more ice falling. He plunged into the cloud. To begin with it felt both cold and clammy, but it rapidly grew warmer. Half blind now, they slowed their pace until they came out above the rim of one of the fissures. Below them the lava was still flowing, red hot, but there were darker patches within the stream now, marking the places where some of the rock had solidified once again. Further up the crevasse there was an area where ice-boulders were falling continuously, hissing as they crashed into the fire. The lava flow there was darker in colour and moving sluggishly.

'This way,' Terrel gasped, following the snow leopard.

Looking across at the glacier wall, he thought he saw movement within the ice, but assumed this was either meltwater or a trick of the light. However, the illusion persisted, becoming more noticeable as they drew closer to the site of the avalanche. Something was loosening the ice deliberately, causing huge blocks to break away and tumble down into the fissure. He could pick out several of them now, each one glittering like moving crystal, half hidden beneath the surface of the glacier – and Terrel suddenly realized that he knew what they were. The ice-worms had come to his aid.

'It's working!' Yarek shouted. 'The gap's filling up!'

Terrel peered ahead through the mist and saw that the boy was right. At the point where the avalanche had been at its heaviest, not all the ice was melting instantaneously. Some huge blocks lay across the ravine, forming a jagged, shifting causeway across the blackened and smouldering lava. It was still impossible to imagine crossing such dangerous terrain, but as he watched, even more ice landed on top of the pile, adding another layer to the frozen pontoon. Moments later there was movement inside the fallen boulders as the ice-worms burrowed into their construction. As they did so, the various sections of ice seemed to shift and coalesce, freezing together into a single, continuous span that linked the two mist-enshrouded banks.

Now? Terrel asked silently.

Now, Alyssa confirmed.

Following the snow leopard, Terrel set out to cross the bridge between the clouds.

'No going back now then,' Tegan remarked, looking down from the top of the glacier.

Far below them, the valley was still wreathed in fog, but they could see enough to know that the bridge had melted and fallen into the fissure again. The ice-worms were nowhere to be seen, but their efforts had served their purpose. The glacier seemed quite stable again, and although the climb had been arduous, it had been relatively straightforward.

The snow leopard was still with them, and although both Tegan and Yarek glanced at it warily every so often, they seemed to be getting used to the creature's presence. For once, Terrel found that he didn't need to talk to Alyssa immediately. He was still thinking about what had happened, and relating it to the various prophecies in the Tindaya Code. According to that ancient text, the ice-worms were supposed to act to protect the Guardian – which implied that having Terrel and his friends reach the glacier somehow worked to the Ancient's advantage. This was encouraging, if a little hard to fathom. And now that they had crossed the bridge between the clouds, Terrel was in no doubt that he was on the right path.

He turned round to look out over the seemingly endless expanse of the glacier.

It was a frozen sea that stretched to the horizon, broken only by a few



distant mountains that jutted up from the plain like isolated ships adrift on a great ocean. It was his first view of the Lonely Peaks, and he understood now how they had got their name.

'You have some strange allies,' Tegan remarked. 'Few people have ever seen a snow leopard this close, let alone been led by one.'

'Don't forget the ice-worms,' Yarek added. 'What you made them do was incredible.'

'It wasn't my doing,' Terrel said, glancing at Alyssa.

'Well, they don't usually behave like that for their own amusement,' Tegan commented.

Are you going to spend the whole day talking? Alyssa enquired. Or are you going to do something useful?

Thank you for getting us across, Terrel said.

It was their idea, not mine.

The ice-worms?

The sleepers here.

Understanding dawned with her words. Just as Alyssa had commandeered the snow leopard, so the sleepers of Myvatan had taken over the bodies of the ice creatures -and come to the travellers' rescue.

'We have more allies than you know,' he said aloud. 'Let's go.'

Contrary to Terrel's first impressions, the surface of the glacier proved to be anything but flat. It was pitted and uneven, with moulds and hollows, ridges and grooves, and occasional deep cracks running down into the ice that glowed with an eerie blue light. Some of these crevasses were large enough to force the travellers to make detours, and their progress was slow and erratic. When they had been collecting their equipment in Nordura, Tegan had insisted on taking some curious implements which could be fitted on to the soles of their boots, surrounding them with jagged teeth, and Terrel had now begun to appreciate their value. Without the extra purchase on the ice, he would have been slipping and sliding with every step.

'Where are we heading?' Yarek asked.

'I don't really know,' Terrel replied. 'Just towards the mountains.'

The snow leopard was still keeping pace alongside them, and Terrel took comfort from her presence, but in contrast to most of her visits, neither of them felt the need to talk all that much. Alyssa's mood was tense and serious, and it seemed that she had seen little of the ghosts since the last time she had joined him on the unknown road - and as a result she had brought no news or advice from Elam or the seers. She also appeared to know what had happened to Terrel recently, even before he told her about his various adventures. But all she seemed to care about was the fact that they were finally on the glacier now, and that the end of their quest was in sight.

The day proved to be very short, with the sun barely rising above the horizon, and so they were forced to carry on walking long into the deepening twilight. Finally, when constant flurries of snow began to make their progress even more hazardous, they called a halt. The snow leopard loped off into the gloom. Alyssa's parting words had reassured Terrel that she would rejoin him as soon as she could, but he still hated to see her go. He watched the animal until it was out of sight, then turned and saw that Tegan was looking at him.

'Will it come back?' she asked quietly.

'I hope so,' Terrel replied. Alyssa had been with him during all his previous encounters with the elementals, and he certainly wanted - and needed - her to be there this time.

Without waiting to be asked, Yarek created a pyramid around them, and they settled down to wait out the darkest hours and the storm that was brewing. A blizzard was soon whipping past their camp, but the magical shield kept the travellers dry and relatively warm. It even provided a little illumination in an otherwise pitch-black night.

'I hope this eases before morning,' Tegan said, watching the swirling snow.

'Or we'll be stuck here.'

'How long can you keep the barrier going?' Terrel asked.

'As long as we need,' Yarek declared confidently. 'All the work is in setting up the patterns. After that, maintaining it is easy. There's a lot of power here to draw on.'

'In the ice?'

'Yes.'

'Do you think you could maintain the pyramid all the way through the long dark?' Tegan asked.

The apprentice looked rather less sure now.

'Maybe,' he said cautiously.

'It's just that I'm not sure we'd survive up here if we were forced to hibernate without some sort of protection,' the magian explained. 'And we've no idea how long this is going to take.'

'Let's deal with that when we have to,' Terrel said. 'Right now we need to get some sleep.'

The storm blew itself out during the latter part of the night, and left the sky clear. First the stars and then the Amber Moon cast their beguiling radiance over the scene, reminding Terrel of a very different desert. The baking sand and dust of Misrah had often appeared beautiful in the varied moonlight, but, like the ice, they could be deadly too.

The improvement in the weather made all three of them eager to push on, and they set out as soon as the pre-dawn glow gave them enough light. They had gone no more than a mile when Terrel came to an abrupt halt and stared ahead. Beside him, both Tegan and Yarek let out gasps of surprise. A few hundred paces away, a black pyramid was growing out of the ice. It rose and expanded just as the shield had spread out to cover Hvannadal, but this structure was opaque, its lustrous surfaces reflecting the light of the newly risen sun.

'Tofana!' Yarek whispered.

'It has to be,' Tegan agreed.

For a few moments none of them moved, but just stared at the wizard's eyrie.

'What should we do?' Tegan asked. 'Try to go around, or face her?'

'If she can do that,' Yarek said, 'we can't match her magic'

'And I don't think she's going to let us just slip by,' Terrel said.

He yawned suddenly, then glanced at his companions. Yarek's eyes were already closed, and Tegan was swaying unsteadily on her feet. Terrel tried to call out, to tell Yarek to build their own pyramid, but his tongue would not work, and then he realized that it was already too late. The boy had slumped to the ground.

The last thought that passed through the healer's beleaguered mind before sleep engulfed him was that they were going to have to face Tofana now whether they liked it or not.

#### Chapter Forty-Nine

When Terrel awoke, he had no idea how he had come to be where he was or how much time had passed. But as soon as he was able to look around he was certain of two things; he was deep beneath the surface of the glacier, and he was inside the black pyramid.

He was alone in a chamber of ice, its walls sculpted into smooth curves by the passage of meltwater that had long since flowed away, leaving behind an underground labyrinth of sinuous beauty. It ought to have been dark, but the walls glowed blue with an inner luminescence. It ought to have been deadly cold, but although everything around him was indeed frozen, the air within was mild enough for Terrel to know that he could survive in such an atmosphere. Which made it all the more surprising that the only sound of running water came from some distance away. The walls of his cavern were dry.

Although it seemed that he was in no immediate physical danger, and there was nothing to stop him from leaving the chamber by any one of the three narrow passageways that led from it, he was under no illusions about his situation. He, and presumably Tegan and Yarek, were Tofana's prisoners. This was her lair, and within its boundaries - as at the stone pyramid near Saudark - she could do anything she liked. However, there was no point in simply staying

where he was and waiting for her to decide his fate. In such a predicament, doing something – anything – was better than remaining passive.

Terrel stood up and listened for any sounds of activity. He heard nothing except the muffled drip and splash of water and so, on impulse, he chose the tunnel that seemed to lead towards that. In places the winding corridor was so narrow that he had to turn sideways in order to slide through, and at one point he had to duck his head to avoid a cluster of icicles that hung from the ceiling. When he brushed against one of them it rang with a pure musical note that seemed to reverberate throughout the maze of ice. The frozen world was a place of extraordinary complexity and a strange, hypnotic beauty, and under any other circumstances Terrel would have been lost in wonder. But he was too concerned with finding his companions – and with the inevitable confrontation with Tofana – to appreciate his surroundings.

Eventually he came to a much larger cavern, and the end of his search. Tegan and Yarek were sitting meekly on the floor near the centre of the echoing chamber, and Tofana – resplendent in a black cloak that was rimed with glittering frost – stood over them, obviously in complete control of the situation. At the far end of the cave a cataract of water fell through a wide opening in the roof and disappeared into a hole in the floor that plunged even deeper into the glacier. From where he stood, the noise of its passage made it impossible for Terrel to hear what the wizard and her former assistants were talking about.

All three of them turned to look at the newcomer as he stepped forward. A small measure of relief showed on Tegan's face, but Yarek's expression remained taut and fearful. Neither of them spoke, and it was left to Tofana to greet him.

'Come and join us!' she called above the hiss of the waterfall. 'Now that you're all here we can begin properly.' She sounded eager, almost gleeful, and even from a distance Terrel could sense the madness in her emerald eyes. As he moved towards her, he felt a mixture of dread and determination. He swore to himself that, even if the wizard was invincible here, he would not go down without a fight. He could only hope that both Tegan and Yarek would show the same resolve.

'Sit down,' Tofana commanded when he reached the others.

'Are you all right?' he asked his travelling companions as he obeyed.

'I'm fine,' Tegan replied, with a welcome touch of defiance in her tone.

Yarek just nodded.

'I have no intention of harming them,' Tofana assured him. 'They may be misguided, but their talents are too valuable to waste. As are yours, Terrel.'

'You really think we would use our talents to help you?' he said.

'You won't have any choice,' the wizard replied, with a smile as cold as her new home.

Terrel's dread intensified. Tofana might be insane, but that did not mean she was without intelligence. Although her logic might be skewed, her cunning was undiminished.

'You've all learnt some new tricks since we last met,' she remarked. 'But you're no match for me. Please remember that.'

Her captive audience remained silent, and Tofana's thoughts seemed to be wandering as she gazed up at the arch of ice far above them.

'I do miss the mustelas,' she murmured eventually. 'Especially Bezym.''

Tegan and Terrel exchanged a glance, wondering if there was any way they could take advantage of the wizard's evident distraction, but before they could do anything their captor looked down again, businesslike once more.

'I should have come here long ago. You don't need things like this.' She gestured contemptuously towards the travellers' packs, which lay at her feet.

'All you need is magic, and this place is the source of the greatest power I've ever encountered. And here, at this very spot,' she added, stabbing a finger towards the floor, 'is the most potent concentration of all. From here I can do anything.'

Terrel recalled Yarek saying that there was a lot of power in the ice, and if a mere apprentice was able to draw upon it, it was hardly surprising that a wizard could do so too.

'Soon it will be lined up,' Tofana went on. 'All the chains, all the patterns. And all at my command.'

The whole glacier as a weapon, Terrel thought, remembering an earlier conversation. It had been a nightmarish possibility then; it seemed it was a reality now.

'So what are you going to do?' Tegan asked.

'End the war.'

'How?'

'My plan at Hvannadal was a good one,' Tofana said. 'It just didn't go far enough. I can command all the chains from here. I simply have to separate out those that lead to our enemies. Then they'll burn – all the soldiers, all the wizards and magians, everyone.'

'Everyone?' Terrel queried in horror.

'The entire population of the two quarters,' she confirmed enthusiastically.

'That's barbaric!'

Tofana shrugged.

'They'd do the same to us if they had the chance,' she said. 'It's the nature of war.'

'That's not the point,' Terrel began, but Tegan overrode him.

'You'll end up killing your own people too,' she declared.

'Nonsense, my dear.'

'Chains within water can't be divided so neatly,' the magian persisted.

'Varmahlid knew that. That's why she opposed you.'

'She was a foolish old woman,' Tofana stated complacently.

'No. She was right. If you do this, every person on Myvatan will burn. It won't just be the end of the war. It'll be the end of everything.'

'You're being tiresome now, child,' the wizard said. 'I don't expect you to understand. Just watch and learn. It's Terrel who'll be helping me.'

'Me?'

'I'm just going to borrow a little of your mind to guide the chains. I could do it myself, but this will be so much more elegant. And please don't think you can resist,' she added, as the healer shook his head. 'I can do it after sending you to sleep if necessary. It's just that you'll miss all the fun that way. Jax wouldn't want you to do that, now, would he?'

Mention of his twin confused Terrel for a moment, making it impossible for him to think clearly.

'Will he be coming back any time soon?' Tofana asked. 'He'd enjoy this, don't you think?' Without waiting for an answer, she reached inside her cape and took something from a pocket. 'Before we start, there's just one question I'd like an answer to. What's this?' She held up a small metal cylinder.

Reflexively Terrel's hand went to his own pocket, but of course the vial was gone. Beside him, Tegan let out a cry of dismay.

'The container is interesting,' Tofana commented. 'Quite old, I think, with some residual power. But this ...' She tipped the crystal out on to her palm.

'This is just a worthless trinket. So why were you carrying it with you?'

Terrel chose not to answer.

'Perhaps you can show me,' she suggested, and tossed the stone to Terrel, who caught it in his good hand.

Immediately the pale speck within the red began to glow, becoming brighter by the moment until the entire cavern was stained pink.

'Very pretty,' Tofana observed, her disdain obvious. 'Is that supposed to prove anything?'

But then a deep growling, that seemed to come from the ice all around them, made her hesitate. The floor of the cave shook as the tremor passed, and the glacier rang like a giant bell. Terrel was suddenly aware of another presence in the chamber, remote but watchful, and from her expression, he guessed that Tegan felt it too. Whatever else it had done, the crystal's display had

attracted the attention of the elemental.

Although Tofana had seemed to regard the interruption as irrelevant, evidently used to the pyramid protecting her from earthquakes, she had lost her train of thought. She stared at the ceiling again, muttering unintelligibly to herself, reminding Terrel of some of the lunatics who had been incarcerated with him at Havenmoon. He looked round at Tegan, hoping that they could use the wizard's reverie to their benefit, when he was distracted himself by yet another unexpected occurrence. Several wraiths were drifting into the cavern, apparently drawn to the light that was still streaming through his fingers. It was clear that

none of the others could see them, but one of the ghostly figures seemed more interested in Yarek than in the crystal.

'What's going on?' Tegan whispered.

'I'm not sure.'

The independent wraith wrapped itself around the boy, and as it did so Yarek's expression changed from fear to amazement. He still couldn't see the phantom presence, but something had obviously told him it was there.

'We should begin,' Tofana announced, her voice sounding very loud in the echoing space.

At the same time another voice, much quieter and sometimes indistinct, was sounding inside Terrel's head, but he knew at once that it was not speaking to him.

You were never a coward. Don't even think ... could not have come this far . . . time to believe . . .

Terrel realized belatedly that he was overhearing the wraith as it spoke to Yarek, and a glance at the boy confirmed that he was hearing it too. Tears were filling his eyes now, and sadness combined with joy on his young face.

'What's the matter with him?' Tofana muttered, glaring at the apprentice.

'Never mind. He's not important.' The wizard turned back to Terrel. 'Now, are you going to cooperate, or must I destroy you too?'

'Why should I help you?' the healer asked, stalling for time.

'Because it'll be much easier for you if you do, and the end result will be the same in any case.'

. . . can't let her do this ... all be in torment. . .

The words flitted through Terrel's mind even as the other wraiths clustered silently around him, seeming to bask in the rose-coloured light.

'Come, Terrel,' Tofana said impatiently. 'The White

Moon is beginning a new cycle. This is a time of change. Shall we play our part?'

'No. I want nothing to do with your vile schemes.'

Tofana frowned, then shrugged.

'That is regrettable. You had interesting potential, but if that's the way you choose to go, so be it.'

Arcs of silver-white light crackled through the air between them, like miniature streaks of lightning, and Terrel felt pain searing through his head and heart. There was nothing he could do, no way to defend himself. Tofana had been right; he was no match for her. She would use whatever she wanted and then discard him like an empty husk. He was blind to all but the pain now. Far away, he heard Tegan screaming, and beyond that another voice, calm but insistent.

... you did it before . . . don't be afraid . . .

The wizard's sorcery was burning Terrel from the inside, and he realized that that would be his eventual fate. Once his usefulness was over, he too would become a victim of the greatest fire-starter of them all. He struggled against a power too strong to comprehend, knowing that his resistance was merely a futile gesture, but unwilling to yield. His agony grew worse.

Tofana laughed.

'It begins!' she cried.

'No!' Yarek's voice cut through the spell, and Terrel forced himself to open his eyes.

'Oh, please,' Tofana exclaimed scornfully. 'What do you think you 're going to do?' She tried to swat the apprentice aside as if he were a troublesome insect.

But Yarek would not be dismissed so easily. He had stepped between the wizard and Terrel, disrupting the pattern of white light. It danced around him in swirls and jagged shards, but instead of simply trying to divert the link, Yarek had accepted it, drawing it into himself. Terrel felt his own torment lessen, then fall away.

'You made this mistake before, boy,' Tofana snarled. 'Would you destroy yourself in trying to save another?'

'To save a friend,' Yarek whispered, 'yes, I would.'

'This is pointless,' the wizard told him. 'All you can achieve is a slight delay - and your own death.'

'So be it,' the boy grated, his voice thick with pain.

The silver inferno redoubled in ferocity, and once again Yarek made no effort to avoid it. Instead he seemed to reach out to Tofana, almost in supplication.

'What are you doing?' Tegan screamed. 'You'll--'

The rest of her words were lost as Yarek yelled, a wordless howl of agony and triumph. The lightning was flaring back and forth between him and Tofana now in an unbreakable loop. And it was growing more powerful with every repetition, spiralling out of control.

For the first time, uncertainty registered on the wizard's face, and as the realization of what was happening came to her she was caught between fury and fear. She increased her efforts, trying to destroy her enemy, but that only accelerated the process, turning the centre of the cavern into a coruscating storm of magical energy. She tried to pull back, but it was too late. She was trapped in her own web now.

'Fool!' she spat. 'You think this will save your friend? It will kill us all unless--'

'Be quiet!' Yarek roared, then turned to look at Terrel with the eyes of a dragon. 'I can start it, but you and Tegan have to maintain it. Can you do that?'

'Do what?' Terrel asked, squinting into the blaze.

'I can do it,' Tegan said. 'You were an excellent teacher, Yarek.'

'Good.' The apprentice turned away.

Amid all the chaos, a small oasis of calm sprang into being as a miniature pyramid formed, enclosing Terrel and Tegan. The magian took Terrel's hand in her own, and closed her eyes in concentration.

'Help me,' she whispered.

The healer sank into her waking dream, hoping that she'd be able to take whatever she needed from him. He had no idea what was going to happen, but it was clear that they needed the pyramid in order to survive. Outside its walls, the magic was spiralling to greater heights of frenzy, still feeding on itself.

'What about Yarek?' he asked.

Locked in her own battle, Tegan didn't answer. Leaving himself open to her, Terrel turned his attention to the outer world and saw that both Tofana and Yarek had become creatures of flame, each shining like a miniature sun. Alyssa had once told the healer that Yarek had 'more power than he can control', and what was happening now was proof of just that. The former apprentice might well have found a way to defeat his one-time mistress by using the wizard's own sorcery against her, but he was going to pay a high price for his victory. In trying to save Dayak he had made himself ill. This time he would die. And what was more, the boy knew it - and was going ahead anyway. Of all the acts of courage Terrel had ever witnessed, this was the most selfless, and he could only watch in awe and admiration - and anguish. Now he knew the identity of the wizard who had been destined to help him. His own dream had been prophetic - but in a way no one could have foreseen.

Outside their shield, the focus of the battle shifted. Entangled in a trap of her own making, Tofana was still struggling, but to no avail. She had

staggered towards the far end of the cavern, trying to distance herself physically from her tormentor, but he had simply followed her - and so had the magic. ... come with me . . . this is just the beginning . . . a release for both of us... together . . .

The faint voice drifted from the maelstrom, and even though Terrel could no longer see the wraith, he knew it was there. And he knew who it was.

'Now!' Yarek cried, and launched himself at Tofana. 'Welcome to my dark dreams!'

Their collision created a new whirlwind of fire and light, but it also took them both to the edge of the precipice where the waterfall disappeared into the lower reaches of the glacier. As Terrel watched, aghast, they toppled over the rim and vanished amid the cascade. The brightness of the magic went with them, leaving the cavern in relative gloom, and it took the healer's eyes some time to adjust.

'Is it over?' he asked, his voice hoarse.

'No,' Tegan whispered, her hand still gripping Terrel's. 'It's out of control. When the end comes, you'll know it. Yarek took them down there in the hope of protecting the rest of the island, but I don't think it's going to work.'

'What do you mean?'

He was answered by the glacier itself, as all around them the ice cracked and shattered and then hurled itself into the sky.

#### Chapter Fifty

It was like a dream of flying, but this was happening in the "waking world." The pyramid was spinning into the sky with the frozen debris from the explosion, while inside, still clinging to each other, Terrel and Tegan were tossed from side to side. Although the experience was disorientating, they were weightless, moving so slowly that no harm came to them. Terrel had long since given up trying to understand what was going on around him. He could no longer tell which of the pyramid's four sides were the roof and which the floor, and he didn't know whether they were going up or down or sideways. All he could do was watch the chaos beyond the magical barrier and hope that Tegan could somehow keep them safe. She still had her eyes shut tight, in her own sleep-like trance, but through the link between them Terrel knew that she was awake - and lost in the demands of the task Yarek had bequeathed her. He lent what support he could, but did not interfere in case he disturbed her concentration.

It was hard to believe the scale of the devastation that the magic had caused. Terrel saw irregular blocks of ice, some of them the size of a small house, go sailing by, turning lazily in the air as if they weighed no more than a bird's feather. Elsewhere, smaller shards moved faster, flashes of blue or white, or flurries of tiny pellets like hail. Occasionally the scene glittered with a brief crack of

lightning or a glimpse of sunlight, but for the most part it was like being at the centre of a giant storm, marooned in its dark and relentless fury. Without the barrier, they would have been torn to shreds in moments.

'I can't do this any more,' Tegan gasped. 'The patterns are unravelling.'

'Keep trying,' Terrel urged. 'Take whatever you need from me.'

'We don't have the strength,' she whispered. 'It's hopeless.'

The pyramid bucked and swayed, and Terrel saw ripples in the surface where impacts from the ice were testing the shield.

'Don't give up,' he said, and reinforced the message through the link between their dream-worlds even as he sought ways of bolstering her fading resolve.

'Yarek sacrificed himself for us. We can't let that have been in vain.'

'It's no good,' Tegan groaned. They had both reached the end of their reserves now, and even Terrel was forced to recognize that fact. But he fought on, railing against fate, determined to resist to the last. Outside the pyramid the ice storm battered at their sanctuary, its clamour rising to a howl of victory as the shield buckled and began to collapse.

'I'm sorry,' Tegan breathed.

But in the next moment they were wrapped in a cocoon of silence. The walls of the pyramid were strong again, and the storm's rage was impotent once more. Terrel was stunned by what had happened, and when he glanced at Tegan he saw that she was wide-eyed, as shocked as he was by their reprieve. It was only then that he realized where the new source of power had come from. In contrast to all its earlier actions, the elemental was now helping them - feeding a tiny fraction of its own limitless strength into the shield and protecting them from harm.

'Why's it doing this?' Tegan asked. She too was obviously aware of the Ancient's intervention.

'I've no idea.' Terrel didn't know whether their rescue had been a deliberate act or simply an accidental byproduct of the elemental's whim. He wasn't even sure if it had fed its power directly into the pyramid or if he and Tegan had 'shaped' the energy to their own purpose, as they had done at Hvannadal. 'But I'm not going to argue. Can you make sure the patterns don't unravel?' Tegan nodded.

'It's easy now,' she said. 'Yarek really was an excellent teacher.' And his sacrifice won't have been in vain, Terrel thought, hearing the catch in the magian's voice.

'Is this really happening?' Tegan whispered, staring for the first time at the tumult outside their refuge.

The healer knew that she neither needed nor expected an answer to her question. He shared her amazement, and when at last a space began to open up around them - so that they could make some sense of their surroundings - the sight that greeted them was even more incredible.

They were floating on the wind, far above even the tallest mountains. All about them the ice was still flying, spreading out into a fragmentary roof that covered the whole island before plummeting back towards the land. The impact of the larger boulders would be violent, but most had broken up now and would fall as hail. Directly beneath the pyramid the air was clear, and the two friends could see that a huge area of the glacier had simply been torn away and hurled aside, leaving only the bare rock that had lain beneath it for centuries - and it was towards this that they were slowly descending.

'The lines are still there,' Tegan said.

'What?'

'In the ice. The chains that Tofana was going to use are still there, even though it's all in pieces now.'

'Could what she started still work?' Terrel asked in alarm.

'No. She's gone. No one will burn. But we could use the lines.'

'What for?'

'Healing. The ice is going to fall over every part of Myvatan. You could use it to break their reliance on mitra - like you did with Kopak.'

'I can't do that,' Terrel protested. He was already weary beyond belief.

'Maybe you can,' the magian told him. 'There's more than enough power here. Use that.'

Terrel hesitated, recalling Alyssa's advice that longdistance healing 'might come in useful one day' - and also remembering the reference in the Tindaya Code to something that 'blinds the eyes from within'. When the ice melted, even if that was not until the following summer, some mud was bound to be formed - and sooner or later everyone would be affected by the water.

'I don't know how,' he confessed.

'See through me,' Tegan said. 'Like you did before.' Their hands were still clasped together, a mutual anchor in this strange, shifting realm.

Terrel closed his eyes and slipped into her waking dream, instantly sensing the Ancient's immense influence. He followed its trail - and saw the chains, each drop of water linked to the next, each ice crystal joined to an infinite array of others within the expanding remnants of the glacier. For the first time he knew what the links were, what they meant, and he saw how to use them. From that moment on, his healer's instincts took over, shaping the patterns within the ice as he did within his human patients.



Images filled his head – of mudslides, pools and newly formed streams, of water being drawn from a well, crops growing – and he felt a sense of release, of fulfilment. He withdrew, utterly spent. He had done all he could.

When he opened his eyes again, the pyramid was still drifting down towards the area from which the glacier had been cleared. It was several miles across, and most of it was simply bare rock, but there was something at its centre.

'What's that?' he asked, fighting vertigo as he looked down.

'The ruins of a city,' Tegan replied, her voice a reverent whisper. 'It's Akurvellir.'

The closer they came, the more detail they could make out. The pyramid's unnatural flight was gradually taking them to the centre of the ruins. The sky was darkening now, and they could see a light burning in the heart of the city.

'It never went out,' Tegan breathed. 'All we had to do was bring it back into the open.'

The joy and wonder in her voice left Terrel with nothing to say, and so he simply watched. The flame was still far below them when it suddenly flickered. For a while it was impossible to tell what had happened, and they waited nervously, but then it became clear that the flame was still burning and that there was now a second light, rising up towards them like a stream of tiny white sparks. As it came closer, Terrel saw that the radiance consisted of two intertwined spirals, like twin galaxies. As they passed by the pyramid and continued up into the night sky, a voice sounded in Terrel's head.

... make use of the far crystals . . . bring the sword to its resting place  
...

And then another voice, younger than the first.

My dark dreams were right, Yarek said. For just a little while I was the greatest wizard in all the four quarters. Farewell, Terrel. Farewell, Tegan. Remember me.

And then they were gone, their starlight dwindling into the infinite darkness. Terrel watched until they were lost among all the other constellations – starting a journey he could not even begin to imagine. He wished them well, and knew he would have no trouble obeying the boy's final request. Reunited now, Yarek and his father would be in the sky for ever, and whenever he looked up, the healer would see them and remember.

It was only when he glanced at Tegan and saw the tears running down her cheeks that Terrel realized he was crying too. They smiled briefly at each other, dabbing at their eyes, before another matter demanded their attention.

'Look\*' Tegan said hoarsely, staring down at the city below. 'It's the Circle of Truce.'

At the centre of the ruined city lay an amphitheatre, and at the centre of that lay a large uneven boulder. It reminded Terrel of the shaman's stone in the Great Circle at Qomish. Did this rock fall from the sky too? he wondered. The flame they had seen earlier was burning at the top of the boulder, and now that they were only a short distance above it Terrel could see thin veins of colour in the rock. But here they were red, not green as they had been in Qomish.

With the gentlest of bumps, the pyramid finally came to rest on flat ground next to the boulder. A moment later it vanished, leaving Terrel and Tegan to struggle to their feet. They were no longer weightless, and the simple act of standing up was almost beyond them. After all their exertions – and now that the elemental was gone – they were sorely in need of rest, but for a few moments they just stood and stared at the flame. They understood now why Tofana's caves had been at the centre of the glacier's potency. They had been directly above the sacred site, a focus for all the magic of the centuries. To be standing in such a place was awe-inspiring, even for Terrel, and he could only imagine what Tegan must be feeling. She was looking at her dream made real.

'Jarvik always said he wouldn't live to see this,' Tegan said quietly. 'It was one of his premonitions, I suppose. But it didn't stop him working towards

it.' She continued to gaze at the serene white fire. 'I can hardly believe it's happened.'

'He knew you wouldn't let him down,' Terrel said. 'And wherever he is now, he knows about this.'

'On the Great Plain?' the magian said. 'I hope so.'

Terrel could have said more, but he chose not to. It was obvious that Tegan could not see the ghost who stood beside them, transfixed by the flame. His shape was slightly distorted, but he was still recognizable. Jarvik had been right. He had not lived to see the Circle of Truce. But he was seeing it now anyway, and the healer and the ghost exchanged the briefest glance of understanding. That was all they needed.

'Come on,' Terrel said. 'We'd better find shelter and get some rest.'

'But we have to—' In the act of turning to face him, Tegan staggered and almost fell.

'It can wait. You won't do anyone any good if you collapse from exhaustion.'

After a moment's hesitation she nodded, her shoulders sagging, and the two friends helped each other from the amphitheatre, leaving the Circle of Truce to the guardianship of a ghost.

Neither of the travellers knew exactly how much time passed before they were able to recover their strength, but several short days and long nights went by in a haze of

utter weariness. They woke every so often for just long enough to force themselves to eat a little food from their packs before succumbing to sleep again. Eventually, when they were able to leave the stone-built cellar that had been their refuge, Tegan studied the sky and groaned.

'The sun's going down already. That means there's only a day or two left before the long dark. We'll have to hibernate here.' She had been hoping to spread the news about the re-emergence of the Circle of Truce before the island's winter sleep, but it was too late for that now.

'I may not have to sleep,' Terrel said. 'If I can stay awake, I'm going back to the glacier once you're settled.'

'In the dark?' Tegan queried, obviously horrified by this idea. 'On your own?'

'I have this,' Terrel said, holding up the red crystal which still glowed every time he touched it with his left hand. 'I won't have to worry about meeting any soldiers. And I still need to find the elemental.'

'And the Peacemaker?'

'No one's going to need that now, are they?'

'I suppose not, but didn't the voice say—'

'I heard it,' Terrel cut in. 'But this is a place of peace, not war.'

Three days later the sun failed to rise, and Tegan could not stay awake any longer.

'I'm never going to see you again, am I?' she said, her eyelids drooping.

'Maybe not,' he replied. 'That's one part of the future I haven't seen.'

'The legends were right. You brought a time of change.' Her eyes closed.

'Goodbye, Tegan. Good luck.' Terrel kissed her cheek gently, but she didn't seem to notice.

'Goodbye, Terrel,' she murmured.

Once he was satisfied that the magian was fully asleep, and as well protected as possible, Terrel hefted his pack and set out into the darkness. So far, it seemed that he was not affected by it as the islanders were. In fact he felt wide awake, refreshed by his long rest and eager now to resume his quest. He made the most of any moonlight, and used the crystal only when he had to. Long before he reached the new boundary of the glacier, he was aware that he was being followed by a shifting number of wraiths, and he was reasonably certain that it was the stone's light that drew them to him. Although they did not interfere with his progress in any way, their presence made him nervous. Climbing up on to the ice proved less hazardous this time, but once he was on that frozen plain, his self-imposed task seemed daunting. The Lonely Peaks were only shadows in the far distance, and even with spikes on his boots the footing was often treacherous. What was more, he dared not ever risk sleeping

in case he was caught by the need to hibernate. If that happened, he would surely freeze to death. As it was, as long as he kept moving, he was comfortable enough. The crystal seemed to give off heat as well as light, warming him from the inside. He suspected that the stone had somehow rekindled the star he carried within him – and he hoped that this would lead to some form of communication with the elemental, as it had done in the past. He sometimes felt as if the Ancient was watching him as he crept ever closer to its lair, but he was never able to establish a direct link.

For all his efforts, the mountains never seemed to get any closer. By now he was light-headed from lack of sleep, and his provisions were about to run out. How close do I have to get? he wondered despairingly as he trudged on.

As far as he could judge from the passage of the moons and stars, four days passed in this manner. And then he began to hear voices. At first he thought it was a delusion, brought on by the darkness, the gnawing cold and his own exhaustion, but the sound persisted and he was eventually forced to admit that it was real. As he came closer, he recognized it as a man's voice, raised in song. The words sounded like gibberish to Terrel, but that was insignificant compared to the fact that someone else on Myvatan was still awake. Could it be another foreigner? And if so, what were they doing on the glacier?

Drawn by the need for answers, Terrel headed towards the source of the noise. When he found him, the man was sitting with his back to the healer, rocking to and fro as he sang the same phrase over and over again, varying the tune and his inflection each time.

'And so the comet sailed away. And so the comet sailed away. And so . . .'  
The refrain halted as the singer became aware of Terrel's faltering approach. He turned round and looked at the healer with the red-rimmed, hollow eyes of a madman.

'And so the comet sailed away,' Jauron sang.

Chapter Fifty-One

'Are you from the comet?' Jauron asked.

Terrel shook his head, not knowing how to respond to such a question – or how to react to the neomancer's presence.

'What are you doing out here?'

'I'm still awake,' Jauron stated proudly.

'I can see that. Don't you want to sleep?'

The neomancer's mouth worked, and he blinked several times, but instead of answering he pulled up the left sleeve of his jacket. For once the sky was clear and the White Moon was just past full, giving enough light for Terrel to see the puncture marks on Jauron's forearm. Several of the wounds were scabbed over but others were still fresh, with blood oozing out. It didn't take much imagination to work out how the neomancer had been keeping himself awake.

'I'm waiting for the comet,' Jauron said, pulling his sleeve down again and glancing up at the sky. 'Wrong one,' he added mysteriously. 'Not ready yet.'  
Something had happened to the neomancer. His incoherent ramblings, and the fact that he showed no sign of recognizing Terrel, made that obvious. The healer's best guess was that the perils of becoming a fire-starter, combined with the traumatic events at Hvannadal, had unhinged his mind. Lack of sleep had probably completed

the process. The rather pathetic creature Terrel saw before him now bore little relation to Jauron's former self. The man Terrel had known previously had been confident to the point of arrogance, and dangerously self-centred.

'It's here somewhere,' the madman said, waving his arms about vaguely.

What is? Terrel wondered, then realized that he knew the answer. But before he could say anything, Jauron gestured towards the large pack that lay beside him.

'Do you want some food? I have plenty.'

It was the first coherent thing he'd said so far, and the offer was tempting, but Terrel still hesitated. He didn't want to get involved with a lunatic, and yet his own supplies were running very low. Jauron waited, then smiled suddenly.

'I could make a fire,' he said. 'If we had anything to burn.'  
'No,' Terrel said quickly, 'but I would like some food.' He moved closer and sat on the blanket that was already spread out on the ice.  
Jauron watched as Terrel ate, but did not join him. Now that he had stopped moving, the healer had begun to feel the bitter cold sink into his body, but he was reluctant to use the crystal to warm himself because he wasn't sure how the neomancer would react to its light. In the end he slipped his hand inside his pocket and held the stone there, hoping that the thick material would conceal the glow. Jauron sighed then, but gave no sign of noticing anything unusual.

A little while later, feeling better for both food and warmth, Terrel became aware that there were wraiths hovering all around – keeping their distance so that they were only on the edges of his vision, but filling the night with a nervous watchfulness. Jauron seemed quite relaxed now, and was clearly unaware of the phantoms' presence.

'I have to go. Thank you for the food.' Terrel got to his feet and shouldered his pack. Jauron got up too, hurriedly stuffed the blanket into his own pack, and looked at Terrel expectantly.

'Which way?' he asked.

'Are you sure you want to go with me?' Although the healer had anticipated this development, it was still unwelcome – complicating his already unpredictable situation.

Jauron nodded eagerly.

'The Red Moon will be here soon,' he said. The sly look in his eyes indicated that he thought he was being clever.

'I'm not–' Terrel began, then changed his mind. 'I'm going to the Lonely Peaks.' He set off without further ado, knowing that he could not stop the neomancer from following him, but hoping he'd either lose interest or fall behind. Jauron did neither, matching the steady pace that Terrel set and seeming quite content.

They walked in silence for the most part. Terrel was in no mood for conversation, and although Jauron glanced up at the sky occasionally and made a few remarks about comets and the moons, he didn't seem to expect any response. However, Terrel was aware of a growing sense of excitement in the neomancer, and when a faint red sheen covered the glacier, he understood why. The Red Moon had risen, and it was full.

After a while, as the moon rose higher into the sky, Jauron became agitated. Eventually he could contain himself no longer.

'Why don't you look?' he burst out.

Terrel ignored him.

'Why don't you look?' he repeated more loudly.

'What for?' the healer asked, feigning ignorance.

'The sword! The Red Moon is full now.' Jauron gestured at the sky.

'But none of the others are new,' Terrel replied. 'Isn't that what you need to find the sword?'

'Not for you. You came from the Whale. You have a piece of the comet. Use that.'

So he does recognize me after all, Terrel thought, realizing that Jauron might not be quite as mad as he seemed.

'The war is over,' he told him. 'No one wants the sword.'

'The Wizard does. She told me. If I bring it, I'll be her favourite.'

'No.'

'Yes I will!' Jauron shouted, stamping his foot like an angry child.

'Tofana's dead,' Terrel stated bluntly.

The neomancer screamed then, hurling imprecations at the healer and shaking his fists. Terrel did his best to ignore him, and simply trudged calmly on across the ice until eventually the tantrum subsided. A mass of thick cloud was now streaming in from the southwest, smothering the moon and turning the dark day almost black. Terrel was forced to move more slowly, but he refused to stop altogether. Some time later Jauron spoke again, and this time his

voice had lost its aggressive tone and become an ingratiating whine.

'Use the stone. Why won't you use the stone?'

Terrel had been wondering about doing just that, and realizing that his unwelcome companion already knew about the crystal made the decision easier. Practical considerations overrode his instinctive reluctance and he took the stone from his pocket, bathing the surrounding area in light that mimicked the recently shrouded moon.

'Comet light,' Jauron said approvingly.

Moving ahead more easily now, Terrel once again noticed that there were wraiths nearby, matching his

course. He remembered Elam's reaction to being told of the crystal, and the fact that he had seemed to be worried about it. Could it be that the stone somehow harmed the wraiths? Terrel had only begun to see them after he had made it glow for the first time, so it seemed possible that there was some connection, but he had no idea what it was.

He was still wondering about this when a gap in the clouds allowed the Red Moon to illuminate a small patch of ice ahead of them. As they moved towards it, the two 'sources of red light came together. But instead of coalescing, they seemed to be in conflict, producing a rippling pattern of intersecting curves which gradually resolved into a series of concentric circles, spreading out from a point like the ripples from a pebble thrown into water. Terrel was mesmerized by the spectacle - but then he was seized by a sudden dread. His immediate reaction was to put the crystal away, but it was already too late for that. Jauron was running ahead, tossing his pack aside as he headed for the centre of the circles.

By the time Terrel caught up with him the neomancer was on his knees, clawing at the glacier with his bare hands, although the healer could see nothing within the ice to warrant his efforts. And trying to dig in such a manner was the mark of a man who was truly insane.

'What are you doing?'

'It's here. It's in here. Down there.'

'There's nothing there. And even if there was you're never going to reach it.'

'It's here,' Jauron insisted. 'I have to.'

Terrel shrugged.

'You do what you like. I'm going on.'

The expression in the neomancer's eyes changed then, a new and evil cunning rising to the surface, and in the next instant Terrel felt his skin crackle, his hair begin to stand on end. He felt a burning sensation deep inside him as his blood began to simmer. Belatedly, he cursed himself for eating the other man's food. That had provided the link the fire-starter needed. As Terrel instinctively resisted the assault, he saw Jauron's ability to inflict pain and death on others as a kind of sickness. And he knew how to deal with sickness. But although he was able to halt the progress of the destructive reaction inside his own body, to hold it in abeyance, his adversary showed no sign of relenting, still pressing home his attack.

'Stop this, Jauron,' Terrel gasped through the pain.

The neomancer did not reply. Far from stopping, his efforts grew more feverish in their intensity, and Terrel had to fight even harder. His heart felt as though it was about to explode, and his skin was radiating heat into the cold air, drenching him with sweat as waves of agony washed through him. At last, realizing that he couldn't continue like this for much longer, Terrel admitted to himself what he had subconsciously known all along. The only way to stop Jauron, to heal his sickness, was to turn the magic back upon its creator - just as Yarek had done with Tofana. The link worked in both directions.

'Last chance, Jauron,' Terrel grated. 'I don't want to hurt you.'

But the madman paid him no attention and so, fighting back his horror, Terrel turned the fire-starter's fury on himself. Jauron's face registered momentary surprise before he screamed. Fire burst from his chest, incinerating his clothing in an instant, and a moment later flame? poured from his mouth and

eyes. Terrel's own torment died at the same time as the neomancer. As Jauron fell forward, his body continued to burn from within, the intense heat making the ice crack and spit. Steam rose along with foul-smelling smoke, and Terrel turned away in disgust. Appalled at what he had done, even in self-defence, he staggered a few paces and then sank to the ice, holding his head in his hands. I'm a healer, he told himself. Not a murderer. The fact that he'd had no choice, that he would have died if Jauron had not, didn't lessen his guilt or his revulsion at the abuse of his gift.

'I'm a healer,' he said aloud, talking to the air. 'A healer.' And I'm the only person awake on this entire island, he added silently, suddenly overwhelmed by loneliness.

There was an eerie stillness all around him, as if the glacier was waiting for something. Still adjusting to the after-effects of the fire, the ice cracked loudly, the only sound now that the wind had died away. Terrel stood up and forced himself to go and look at the body of the vanquished fire-starter. All that was left was a shallow pit containing a thin pile of wet ashes. As always, it was hard to believe that such pitiful remains had once been a human being.

Fractures in the ice radiated out from the scene of the blaze, and refracted in one of these Terrel saw a blur of colour that looked out of place. As he peered more closely, the image slowly resolved itself into a recognizable shape. Jauron had not been completely insane after all. The Peacemaker was there, still buried deep, but just visible.

Terrel told himself that the sword was irrelevant, that it was a relic from a time of war that he hoped was over now, and he was about to turn away and continue his journey when the internal trembling warned him that an earthquake was on its way. On the glacier there was nowhere to hide, so he just braced himself as best he could and waited. He could see it coming towards him like a solid wave, the

surface of the ice buckling and throwing small chunks into the air as it passed. The vibration reached him through the soles of his boots well in advance of the main tremor, and as the rumbling grew ever louder, he knew he was in trouble. He was unlikely to escape such violence without injury – and in his situation, even a twisted ankle could prove fatal. He was just beginning to panic when he heard Alyssa's voice again. Shape it! Change the pattern. You can shape it. But he didn't have Tegan with him to guide his efforts this time – and the Dark Moon was as remote as ever. He tried to remember what he had done at Hvannadal, tried to recapture his understanding. It was there in places, fleeting glimpses of the truth, but there were too many shadows now. I'm a healer, he thought, but it was hopeless.

The earthquake struck.

When Terrel came to, he was lying on his back with one leg twisted under him. Every part of him seemed to ache, but when he gingerly tested his limbs, nothing seemed to be broken or sprained. He had survived. He had no idea whether his faltering efforts had achieved anything, or whether he had just been lucky, but he didn't really care. All that mattered now was that he could go on.

As he picked himself up, he saw that his immediate surroundings had been drastically altered by the quake, making his own escape even more remarkable. Jagged boulders of ice had been piled up in places, while crevasses had opened in others. There was no sign of Jauron's remains, and Terrel decided that the fire had probably\* weakened the structure of the glacier, making the disruption in that spot much more severe.

He was looking around for his pack when his eye was caught by something at the bottom of one of the newly

opened cracks, and he knew at once what it was. What should I do? he thought. If I leave it here, someone else might find it. Now that the Peacemaker was at least partially exposed, anyone might stumble across it, even without the assistance of the Red Moon. In due course, the glacier would probably close

over it again, but Terrel wasn't sure he could risk that. Jauron had hoped to use fire to reach it. Others might have different ideas, and the spot was marked now.

After deciding that rather than leave the sword where it ' was, he would take it himself, Terrel clambered down into the narrow crevasse. It was a tight squeeze, but he was determined, and forced himself on until his target was in reach. I can destroy it in a lava flow, he thought. Or hide it at the bottom of the ocean. But when he finally grasped the hilt of the Peacemaker, all such ideas vanished in an instant.

In that moment he felt the towering strength of a thousand men, and a righteous fury arose in him that scoured away all doubt. He was invincible. He wanted to march out against his enemies, to the glories of battle. He wanted to feed his ravenous hunger for blood. He wanted to kill.

A small voice of reason urged him to release his grip on the sword, but the pull of its spell was too powerful. His fingers tightened in place as he dragged the rest of the blade from the ice, and struggled back up to the surface of the glacier. He held the sword aloft in triumph, saluting the Red Moon - and then found himself at the centre of a swirling tornado that came from another world.

The wraiths had converged upon him, flocking around him in a silent, multi-coloured storm. There were hundreds, thousands of them - and they were no longer content to keep their distance. Terrel struck out at them with the sword, flailing wildly and pointlessly. He could not harm them, and the movement only seemed to agitate them even further. At length, driven wild by their unwanted attentions, Terrel had enough sense to realize that it was not him they were drawn to. It was the sword. He flung it to the ground and stepped back. Sure enough, the wraiths clustered round the blade, fighting to get close to it.

The healer was himself again, only half remembering the thoughts and desires that had ruled him while he held the sword, but appalled nonetheless. He knew now that he should never have touched the Peacemaker, never brought it out into the open.

The wraiths were still mobbing the sword, like a swarm of bees round a particularly fragrant flower, but as Terrel watched he noticed something extraordinary. Each one dipped towards it only once and then floated away, leaving the frenzy behind. The contrast between the nervous agitation of those who were still arriving and the calm, almost languid movement of those who had had their turn was marked.

Terrel sat down to watch, bewildered by the performance. He had no idea what their actions meant, but he couldn't look away. He was transfixed, his own problems forgotten, and so failed to see the gyrfalcon until it landed next to him on the ice. Startled, he looked at the newcomer, then saw the ring around one of its powerful talons and knew that he was no longer alone.

Alyssa! he exclaimed joyfully.

This isn't a game, she said, and something in her voice made him suddenly afraid.

I know that. Are you all right?

I will be when we 're finished here, she replied.

But you 're not- at the moment? he queried anxiously.

This time Alyssa ignored his concern, turning predator's eyes to watch the wraiths.

Do you know what's going on? Terrel asked.

It's in the world again, she replied. You have to take it with you.

The sword? No. It's horrible-

It was, she cut in. Not any more.

With a final flurry, the last of the wraiths had touched the Peacemaker and were drifting away into the darkness. A sense of peace descended on the scene. Go and take it, Alyssa said. We have to get going.

Terrel did as he was told, reluctantly wrapping his fingers around the hilt.

He braced himself for the assault, which duly arrived - but it was different

now. This time he saw the entire history of the war, the reality of it, from the pain of every wound to the grief of every widow and orphan. There was no glory in this picture of battle, no heroes, just the enormity of its evil and injustice. The images were so powerful and so numerous that he was completely overwhelmed. For a few moments – which felt to him like several hours – he was held captive, and when he was released Terrel felt his heart swell with sorrow, even as he began to understand what had happened.

With no mitra to repress them, all the memories, all the feelings of an unjust and pointless war had returned to mock the spirits of the dead soldiers, turning them into wraiths. The Great Plain was indeed a place of endless torment. But now the phantoms had found a use for the Peacemaker, infusing it with all their pain, their guilt and longings. In doing so they had not only eased their own tortured existence, but had changed the sword from the ultimate weapon of war to an instrument of peace. The irony was that now the blade really did deserve its name and reputation. The man who wielded such a sword would never be defeated in any battle, because no man who had touched it would ever go into battle again. Any man who had seen what Terrel had seen would look for another way to settle his differences with his enemies.

Terrel knew now what he had to do with the sword, but he had another duty to fulfil first. The gyrfalcon flew up into the air in readiness, and Terrel turned to look out over the red glacier before setting off towards the Lonely Peaks.

#### Chapter Fifty-Two

Terrel found that time seemed to be travelling even more slowly than he was. Although he had not yet been affected by the need to hibernate, he hadn't lost his fear of it completely, and for that reason he had allowed himself to doze for only a few minutes at a time, secure in the knowledge that Alyssa would wake him if necessary. In effect he had been awake for several days now, and the lack of sleep was making him desperately weak. He was dragging himself over the glacier by pure willpower, and mentally he felt dazed and almost delirious at times, close to the madness that had claimed Jauron. On top of that, the constant darkness was grimly depressing. Terrel longed for sunlight, to feel its warmth upon his face and to be able to see clearly once again. He felt trapped in a never-ending night, which seemed to close in upon him with every step he took.

The only reason he was still able to summon up the strength to go on was because Alyssa was with him. Without the continued presence of the gyrfalcon circling above him, he would almost certainly have given up. Whenever he faltered, she would fly down and chivvy him out of his stupor, renewing his resolve simply by being there. Yet even in their companionship there were moments of unease. Once again, Alyssa was less talkative than usual, and Terrel worried that she might be ill. She

refused to discuss it, and this left Terrel to speculate – and worry – on his own. Thinking back, he realized that it had been the same when she'd been in the snow leopard, which meant that if she was ill, she could have been sick for some time. Terrel's healing instincts made him want to tend to her, but she wouldn't let him, and so there was nothing he could do about it.

At the beginning of their journey he had talked a good deal, telling her about everything that had happened to him recently. She had listened, apparently taking it all in, but had not really offered any comments of her own or answered any of his questions. She hadn't even seemed particularly interested in the Circle of Truce, and when Terrel expressed the opinion that at least now there was a chance of peace on Myvatan, and asked whether she thought it might have been one of the 'tests' that he'd been expected to pass every so often, her response had been evasive and noncommittal. When in turn he had coaxed her to talk to him, she'd had little to tell him, and what news there was did nothing to raise his spirits. She had confirmed that the ghosts wouldn't be able to join them – something Terrel had already guessed – because as they drew closer to the elemental the dangers to his allies became ever



greater. There were gaps between the gusts of alien wind, but these were too erratic to be used safely, and if the ghosts were caught unawares, the consequences would be horrible.

The only other information she gave him concerned further unrest on Vadanis. The Emperor had apparently fallen ill with a mysterious fever - some said he had never fully recovered from an earlier brush with plague - and Jax was now ruler in all but name, to the dismay of most of the court. The Empress Adina was openly at odds with the prince, and loyalties were divided in the council of seers.

As always, hearing about his estranged family stirred mixed emotions in Terrel, but on this occasion such distant events seemed irrelevant, and he was able to view them without undue anxiety. The Floating Islands were a long way away, and it was the fate of Myvatan that concerned him now.

Terrel wanted to stop and rest. His pack had been replenished from Jauron's supplies, and because the sword was strapped to it too, it was much heavier than before. He allowed himself to set it down on the ice every few hours, but whenever he came to a halt, the thought of sleep became desperately tempting, and the unrelenting cold began to stiffen his limbs and make his thoughts even more sluggish. He knew this was another reason why he couldn't afford to go to sleep properly. Even if he did not fall into the hibernation, an ordinary night's rest could still prove fatal if his blood began to freeze as Kopak's had done. Terrel might simply fail to wake up - and even if he did, he would not be able to heal his own maladies.

He looked up, taking comfort from the sight of Alyssa's wings slicing through the gloom, then turned his gaze ahead once more. In front of him, still several long miles away, was the largest of all the Lonely Peaks. It had the same conical shape that Terrel had seen from the Skua, but this volcano was much bigger and much older than those newborn islands. From afar, the top of the mountain looked flat, but the healer knew that he was actually seeing the rim of a huge crater. Even in the subdued moonlight, it was possible to see smoke rising from the peak, and occasionally a dull red glow gave testament to the fires that were raging within its massive walls.

How close do I need to get? Terrel wondered, gazing at the forbidding scene.

If this truly was the home of the

elemental - and both he and Alyssa were certain that it was - communicating with it was going to be incredibly difficult. All three of his earlier meetings with the creatures had involved being taken inside them, but he didn't see how that could be possible here. The volcano would surely kill him even if the Ancient did not. How was he supposed to make contact? Could he do so from a distance? He knew that this might be possible during an eclipse, but there was no chance of that happening here. The sun wasn't even going to rise for the next two months.

There were times when Terrel felt some sort of fleeting connection through the star that he carried inside him. He was using the red crystal almost all the time now, both for light and warmth, and it seemed to react with the amulet sometimes, adding its radiance to the stone. The other elementals had been fascinated by his talisman, which he had carried with him all the way from Tindaya. They referred to it as 'the spiral', and it was one of the reasons he had eventually been able to win their trust. However, the contacts here were so brief and so uncertain that they were effectively useless. Terrel was about to ask Alyssa whether she had any ideas, hoping to draw her into conversation at least, when all action, all thought, became meaningless.

Even by the standards of Myvatan's interminable night, the darkness that enveloped the healer now was profound. The elemental had come to him.

Terrel had encountered various forms of insanity on many different occasions, but there had never been anything that even came close to the horror of the world he entered now. His previous meetings with the Ancients had all begun in an atmosphere of suspicion and doubt, even enmity, but had then changed over a period of time to gratitude and even to a type of friendship. With this entity there was no chance of any such

conclusion. The creature was consumed by rage, boiling over with malice and a vindictiveness that went beyond all reason. Terrel's initial entreaties were swept aside with swift and brutal contempt, leaving him stunned and terrified, defenceless against the violent barrage of images that crashed down upon him. He saw the Ancient rising towards the ice-bound surface of the planet, finding what it thought was a safe haven within the heart of a dormant volcano, only for its luck to run out when an eruption melted the glacier above it, inundating the entire area with meltwater, steam and silt mud. As the ghosts had surmised, it was this water that had driven the elemental mad, distorting its energy patterns to such an extent that Terrel knew he would never be able to heal them. To make matters worse, its futile attempts to protect itself had unwittingly provided the wizards of Myvatan with fresh sources of the magic that the Ancients abhorred – and their subsequent use of this power had confirmed and strengthened the elemental's hatred of mankind. Terrel was shown several atrocities from the war, simultaneously experiencing both human terror and the entity's revulsion.

The healer had no idea how long the bombardment went on, but it felt like a lifetime. And even when it ended he was granted no relief. All the earlier encounters had been, in essence, an exchange. The Ancients had tested him, probing him in ways that seemed almost gentle now. But this one had attacked him with its own history, and now, rather than seeking out the healer's truth, it was simply taking what it needed, ripping memories and knowledge from Terrel's mind. Images flickered briefly, many of them going by too quickly for him to comprehend. But, with dizzying speed, he did glimpse water gushing from the blowhole of a stone whale, the ghosts, Dayak burning, Latira's room bathed in pink light, several battles, Tegan cowering amidst the storm at Hvannadal, the explosion in the ice-caves, and Jauron's eyes as they burned. And then it was over and he was back in the moonlight, standing with shaky legs on a frozen sea.

I didn't have the chance to do anything, Terrel said. There was no question of it even listening to me.

You've still got to try again, Alyssa told him.

Terrel was sitting on the ice, leaning against his pack, with the gyrfalcon standing in front of him. After his recent experience he'd had no choice about resting – his legs had no longer been capable of supporting him. He wasn't sure he'd ever be able to walk again. The exhaustion he felt was both physical and mental, but it was the utter hopelessness of his task that caused him the most anguish, and Alyssa's insistence that he carry on took him close to breaking point.

I can't heal that! he cried. It's impossible.

Maybe not, she conceded, but there's something else you have to do.

What?

I think the Ancient learnt more from the events at Hvannadal than we realized. What do you mean?

Yours may not have been the only mind it was interested in. Tofana was there too, don't forget, and it's my guess it went on learning from her afterwards. And in return it gave her access to some of its powers, Terrel reasoned, nodding. But she's dead now. That threat's gone, at least.

I'm not so sure. What if the elemental decides to do some fire-starting of his own?

You think it can? he asked in alarm.

I'm sure it can, she replied, but I'm not sure it knows exactly how to go about it yet. Which is why it needs you.

Me?

It could have killed you just now, Alyssa pointed out. But it didn't. I think it's still learning.

From me? But—

Tofana got the idea from you.

Yes, but I'm a healer, not a fire-starter.

They're the opposite sides of the same coin. I think the elemental knows that,

and is going to combine its own power, Tofana's ideas, and your knowledge of the lines inside human beings to get rid of them.

That's terrible! Terrel exclaimed – and then remembered the 'message' he'd been sent while he was imprisoned in Nordura. I saw myself burning, he whispered. / thought it was a threat, or a warning. But perhaps it was a sign of intent.

Maybe it was a trial run, Alyssa suggested, testing how you reacted, trying to learn your secrets before the real attack.

I don't know what my secrets are!

Perhaps that's a good thing.

That's why I'm still here?

That's why I think it still needs you, Alyssa confirmed.

Belatedly, Terrel realized why the elemental had saved him and Tegan by reinforcing their failing shield as it protected them in the explosion above Akurvellir. It wasn't because it thought of them as allies, or from some intimation of friendship, but because it knew it wanted to use Terrel – as Tofana had tried to do – to build the chains that would allow all the people of Myvatan to burn. Alyssa's theory suddenly made a lot more sense.

So the threat hasn't gone away? he said, feeling sick now. Myvatan might still become a giant funeral pyre.

It's worse than that.

Terrel stared at the bird, wondering what could possibly be worse than the annihilation of an entire race.

The chains don't stop at the coast of Myvatan, Alyssa told him.

Chapter Fifty-Three

It took a little while for Terrel to absorb the significance of what Alyssa had said.

You can't mean ... he began, then fell silent.

Think about it, she went on. The oceans are made of water. And there are all sorts of other links if you know where to look. Through you, through me, even the ghosts. Everyone who ever came to Myvatan from another land, Jax has even taken fire-starting back to Vadanis. And then there's the elementals themselves. They're the greatest links of all. If the Ancient here gets its way, all of Nydus will be doomed. So you have to stop it.

But how? The dismay Terrel felt at the realization that his homeland was under threat once more made it difficult for him to think straight. The sheer scale of the impending massacre was almost impossible to comprehend, and the fact that his own life was one of those under threat hardly registered at all.

There's a chance it might listen to you, Alyssa told him. You may not be able to heal it completely, but your bargain with the others must surely count for something.

Terrel knew she was right. No matter how reluctant he was to admit it, he had to go on – even though the enormity of the task ahead threatened to overwhelm him.

Good and evil, Terrel thought as he trudged on towards the volcano. How do you explain the difference between

them to a creature who's insane? And how am I even supposed to get close enough to try.

It occurred to him then that one possibility might be to leave his body behind, as he had done when he'd become the double-headed man at Makranash. But there was no cliff here for him to jump off, and even if there had been, he was far from sure that this Ancient would save him. Besides, he'd been guided by an oracle then, and he'd had Alyssa and Vilheyuna to advise him. He had none of those things now. Alyssa had been silent since they'd resumed their journey, even though he'd tried to talk to her several times. For a moment he thought of trying to kill himself another way, trusting that Alyssa had been right – that the elemental still needed him, and so would prevent his death. Although the idea appalled and terrified him, how else was he supposed to separate his spirit from his physical form?

He was about to put the idea to Alyssa, hoping to coax her into responding,

when a fluttering in the darkness above him made him look up. It was immediately obvious that there was something wrong with the gyrfalcon, and the sight of its uneven, laboured flight made Terrel's heart lurch.

Are you all right? he called.

It's beginning, she said, her voice made hoarse by pain. Don't wait. You have to do it now.

Do what? he asked, teetering on the edge of panic.

Their magic doesn't vanish just because they're asleep, she told him as the bird struggled to remain aloft. We've been doing this all wrong. You can use the dark dreams. A last convulsive effort from the gyrfalcon's broad wings only succeeded in slowing its descent a little. The bird crashed on to the ice, skidded, then came to rest, lying on its side.

'Alyssa!' Terrel screamed, running towards her.

You need to sleep, she murmured as he reached her. I can't help you any more.

Terrel knelt by the crumpled form and stretched out a hand. But before he could touch her the ring vanished, and the bird, fully revived, rose in alarm and flew away - shrieking its protest as it went. The healer watched its powerful flight with a heavy heart, distressed by this proof that it was Alyssa who had been suffering, not her host.

Truly alone now, he stood up and saw that long tendrils of white light were snaking out from the sides of the mountain. They moved like tentacles, searching in wide sweeps, and he knew that he was their prey. Don't wait. He also knew that if they found him, he would be helpless to prevent the massacre. We've been doing this all wrong. But there was nowhere for him to hide, nowhere to run. It was just a matter of time. You need to sleep.

Terrel lay down on the ice and closed his eyes, wondering if he would ever open them again.

He knew in the next instant that he was no longer alone. There were dreams upon dreams upon dreams here, all separate strands of the same whole. At first it was overwhelming, and he could make no sense of anything, but he was gradually able to pick out individual threads within the gigantic tapestry, and to see which would be useful. But that, he knew, was for the future. Right now he had work to do.

He moved without effort into the heart of the volcano. All around him, molten rock bubbled and spat. The air was full of smoke and poisonous gases, and the heat and noise were terrifying. But none of these things touched him. They could do him no harm. He had entered the dragon's lair. Now all he had to do was face that fearsome beast.

The elemental's initial reaction to his presence was one of surprise, followed quickly by pleasure, then confusion. As the shifting darkness swallowed him, Terrel felt the Ancient testing this new, disembodied form of life, searching for the things it wanted. For his part, the healer simply waited, knowing that his own beliefs, his memories and knowledge, would be there when needed. He couldn't hide anything, and there was no point in trying. All he could hope to do was persuade the elemental that its intentions were wrong, based on false premises, and that his own convictions were genuine.

He sensed the frustration around him, and knew that even in spirit he was a healer first and foremost. The Ancient was looking for a way to use him to kill, for the opposite side of the coin - and it couldn't find it. Without his physical body there was nothing for the fire-starter's chains to latch on to, no starting point for the lines of death. Frustration grew into anger, and the demands upon Terrel's strength became more acute. His thoughts were shredded before he could assimilate them, his dream-vision blurred, and a great roaring thundered in his ears. And yet he held firm, knowing that this was now a battle of wills, not strength.

Abruptly, the dream shifted, and Terrel saw the crystal city so familiar to him from many previous nights. As he expected, it was smashed, almost unrecognizable, reflecting the madness he knew he could never heal. But he looked for a way to do something anyway, to make his point, and found an even greater opportunity. He recognized one of the formations within the broken

structure. It bore the\* imprint of Tofana, of the knowledge she had bequeathed to the Ancient. His first instinct was to smash it, to destroy it as so much else had been destroyed, but he held back, unable even now to deliberately harm a patient. I am a healer. He concentrated, gradually restoring that small part of the city to the way it had been before, erasing the wizard's influence from the elemental's memory. He met no resistance - probably because his actions were so completely unexpected - but he knew there would be a reaction once his meddling had been discovered. When he'd finished he drew back, hoping that what he'd done was enough - and found himself in the midst of an inferno. He was back inside the volcano, where great plumes of fire were being hurled into the sky. The Ancient had realized, too late, what Terrel had done, and because it had been robbed of its ability to destroy its tormentors, its fury had turned inwards. It was still irretrievably insane, but it had lost the skill of fire-starting - and with Tofana dead, there was no way it could ever learn it again. Terrel's knowledge, such as it was, was useless by itself, and the elemental knew it. All it had left now was revenge. Terrel had thought that the barrage he'd endured during his first encounter had been bad enough, but this time it was a hundred times worse. Images of unbelievably gruesome violence were piled one on top of the other, so that he could not escape or even try to lessen their impact. Sickened and despairing, his mind reeled under the onslaught, as he wondered whether it would ever end. He knew that he was being shown humanity at its most depraved, the natural world at its most deranged. Everything here was corrupted, everything was vile. And just at the point when he was thinking that it couldn't possibly get any worse, the elemental sought to drag him down into the pit of madness with an image from his own personal nightmare. Alyssa stood before him in her own form - something he'd been longing to see for more than eight years - but this was not the girl he remembered. This Alyssa was shrunken and wrinkled, drained of water and life, her sunken eyes like smouldering coals. As Terrel watched in horror, she crumpled even further, then burst into flames, screaming in agony. Within moments, the image of his love had been reduced to a mere pile of ash. Although he told himself that this was just an illusion, it still filled him with despair, and he couldn't help believing that some part of it must be true. He wondered if the elemental here could use its lunacy, its evil, to affect the real Alyssa back on Vadanis. Such thoughts were an invitation to madness, but there was no way he could avoid them, no way to forget what he had seen. It was the Ancients who protected Alyssa and the other sleepers in their seemingly defenceless state, and if that protection had not only been withdrawn, but turned to such terrible enmity, then the prospects for all of them were bleak. Unexpectedly, Terrel found refuge in another dreamworld. He didn't know who was responsible, but the islanders were with him again, allowing him to recover a little of his strength and composure. The elemental sensed their presence too, and hesitated, watchful now. I am a healer, Terrel said, taking advantage of this brief respite. I can help you. Even as he spoke, he knew his own certainty of failure made the plea pointless. In spite of its deranged state, the Ancient could tell that he was lying. But now, instead of renewing its frenzied assault upon his mind, it turned back to the physical world. Robbed of its weapon of choice, it was reverting to another - one that it needed no help in understanding. The mountain growled and shook. Intolerable forces were building up within and below the volcano. Terrel knew that when the eruption finally came it would be vast, so violent that it might devastate all Myvatan and wipe out the entire population. Even if it didn't, it was certain to melt most, if not all, of the glacier. The water that produced would undoubtedly drive the elemental even deeper into insanity - and he dreaded to think what might happen then. He would not be there to see it, of course - his own body would

be the first to be destroyed – but at that moment he was not thinking of himself. He couldn't bear the thought that now, when for the first time in centuries the island had a genuine chance for peace, all their efforts might have been in vain. Something had to be done to stop the elemental, and because it was clearly beyond reason, it would have to be done from the outside. Their magic doesn't vanish just because they're asleep. You can use the dark dreams.

He felt them, waiting, uncertain. In a sleep so deep that no dreams would normally come to the surface, he was an interloper, his spiral light a focus of attention. They were all aware of him. All he had to do was tell them what was needed, shape their dark dreams to his own purpose.

The wizards stepped forward first, then the magians and neomancers, all working in unison for once. As the volcano exploded, spewing lava and deadly clouds into the air, the pyramid formed. It was flecked with all the colours of its creators – black and white, red and gold – so that it shimmered with the light of all the moons. The shield was in place only just in time. Still caught in the centre of the mountain's rage, Terrel saw a fountain of fire streak past him only to meet the impenetrable barrier above. Infernal forces rebounded upon themselves, destroying the volcano's massive walls and turning the entire area into a chaotic blizzard of flying rock, searing flame, and great surges of lava and smoke. But it could not escape, confined by the pyramid – which not only refused to let the fire out but also prevented any water from going in.

The dream ended for Terrel as he opened his eyes. He was back in his own body, on the open glacier again, but the pyramid was still there. He stared at it in awe, unable to believe that such primeval fury could have been contained by such a seemingly flimsy structure, or that he had been inside its walls. The eruption flared and shuddered, pulses of orange, red, grey and black swirling across the triangular surfaces, marking the patterns of the incredible turbulence within.

Terrel had no idea whether the volcano was now simply reacting to the forces that had been released, or whether the Ancient was driving the process on to even greater extremes of violence. But there was no sign of it stopping or even slowing down. Time passed, and Terrel remained hypnotized by the spectacle, wondering which side would yield first. He got his answer when cracks began to appear near the edges of the pyramid, and its sides began to bulge slightly towards the centre. It seemed that Myvatan's magic was not equal to the sustained rage of the elemental. It would surely not be long before the Ancient broke out of its prison and unleashed its fiery venom upon the world.

Terrel was at a loss, exhausted, knowing that he'd done all he could. The cracks spread out further, in jagged orange lines. The ice beneath his feet shook, as if in anticipation, and the healer was certain this was one tremor he would not be able to control. He found himself clasping the red crystal in his hand, willing the amulet into life. He didn't understand what he was doing; he had just acted on instinct. But then the air was filled with a vast, wordless rumbling that made the noise of the eruption seem feeble by comparison. It was a sound Terrel had heard before, at Tindaya, when he had been no more than a boy. But on this occasion, as then, it shook him to the core, leaving him breathless and deafened. And now, as then, a second, less cavernous note was added to the roar, as if in response to the first. However, this time a third voice was added to the ear-splitting chord. And then a fourth.

Terrel had no idea what it meant until he saw the spiral light blazing from his clenched fist. Then he knew that he had called upon the greatest link of all. The other elementals had come in answer to his silent plea. And they had come not to save him, but to protect their sick brother.

The pyramid became stable once more, reinforced by power beyond imagining, and then the monstrous noise died away, and the amulet's glow faded. Inside the magical shield the eruption also declined rapidly, until it was as dark inside

the pyramid as it was outside.

Terrel knew it was over at last. The eruption had been contained, the elemental had come to no further harm because no ice had melted, and even though he had not been able to heal its sickness, Terrel had ensured that it could not take its revenge on humanity by using Tofana's repulsive methods. The healer had not been able to renew his bargain with Myvatan's Ancient, but it seemed that it still held good with the others, and that would have to be enough. This stage of his quest was complete.

And then he remembered the gryfalcon's fall and Alyssa's tormented farewell, and all his relief turned to doubt and grief. Even without the grotesque vision he had been shown, he knew that she was seriously ill. It was possible that she was dying, or even dead, and if that was the case, there was no point in his going on. After all these years, Terrel's main reason for surviving, for fulfilling his quest, seemed to have gone. Utterly exhausted, and depressed beyond belief, he simply had no resolve left. I can't help you any more. His job was done. The Guardian would have to do without the Mentor's services from now on. It was over.

Terrel lay down where he was and did not even feel the deadly cold of the ice against his cheek. In the next moment he was alone in a dark and dreamless sleep.

He woke to see a dozen Amber Moons floating in the sky above him. He blinked, but they remained, each one a perfect glowing circle. Memories filtered back into his consciousness and he groaned, wondering if he had died and was in another world. He felt comfortable and warm, but if he was a ghost that might not mean very much.

He moved a little, encountering more resistance than he'd expected, and the Amber Moons shifted and jumped, some of them breaking apart and then reforming. There were even more of them now. Shaking his head as if to clear it, Terrel discovered that he was lying on something soft and pliable. Looking round, he could see nothing except a dark mist, which seemed to swirl in a peculiar manner as he moved. There was obviously something wrong with his eyes.

He stretched, trying to get up, only to find that he was surrounded by the same peculiar substance that he was lying on. It hemmed him in on both sides, and lay as a ceiling only a little way above him. Here and there it caught the light of the moons, so that it shone like transparent crystal.

Terrel began to struggle wildly, panic making him imagine that he was in some kind of bizarre grave, that he'd been buried alive – and his movements produced a most startling and terrifying effect. The ceiling and walls of his coffin began to move too, sliding in different directions as though they were alive.

A moment later the healer felt a draught of freezing air on his face, and his eyesight came back into focus. There was only one Amber Moon in the sky now, and he was still in his own world. Then the surface he was lying on began to move again and he sat up, thoroughly unnerved. What he saw then was almost beyond belief.

He was surrounded by ice-worms. Two of them had burrowed beneath him so that they were providing him with a living mattress, while others – those who had now glided away – had covered him like a blanket, leaving only enough space between them for him to breathe. When he'd first woken up, he had been looking at the sky through one of these creatures, and its crystalline form had broken the light of the moon into several different images. The most surprising thing was that, in spite of their icy appearance, the worms were not cold. Their outer skins gave off an appreciable amount of heat, and the flesh beneath, while being firmer and more elastic than human muscle, was still very much part of a living creature.

Terrel's first thought was that they had been taken over by sleepers again, in order to help him, but he realized almost immediately that this was not the case. The ice-worms were themselves, nothing more. Quite why they had chosen to protect him like this – to save his life – was a mystery.

Clambering off his living bed, Terrel saw that his pack and the sword were still there. He also saw that the mountain had been blasted out of existence. Only a blackened plateau remained, from which a little smoke was rising. The pyramid had gone. Perhaps it wasn't over yet.

It seemed that, whatever Alyssa's fate, his own road was not being allowed to come to an end. He had to go on, to be with her again, whether she was alive or dead. He

had to know for sure. And in the meantime, he had other tasks to complete. The ice-worms seemed to be in no hurry to leave him, and he sensed in their presence an unspoken question, an offer of further assistance should he need it. He shouldered his pack, then placed a tentative hand on the nearest creature. Sensing its eagerness, he threw a leg across its broad back, sitting astride it as if it were a horse.

The worms began to move even before he told them where he wanted to go.

#### Epilogue

In one of the last of her dark dreams, Tegan saw a man with strange eyes and a light in his left hand. He came and looked at her, gently kissed her forehead, and then vanished. She wanted to speak to him, to ask him who he was and what he was doing there, but then the dream moved on and she forgot all about him. The flame-bright sword was taller than a dozen men. It shone like a beacon in the darkness, waiting to greet a new dawn.

When Tegan woke, the sword was still there. It towered over her, a beacon not just for her but for all the people of Myvatan. She stared in wonder, seeing that the burning image stemmed from a real sword, a blade of solid, burnished metal which was now embedded in the sacred rock, next to the rekindled flame. She knew then that they would have the 'show' that Jarvik had wanted, and even though she did not yet know how it would work, she understood that the Peacemaker would play a central role in the event. Unaware of the multitude of ghosts who waited all around the Circle of Truce, and of one of their number in particular, she wished that her friend and former comrade could have been there to see the drama unfold.

The generals came first, together with all their senior officers. Pingeyri was one of those Tegan recognized, but there were others too, from all quarters of the island, watching each other warily. The beacon had vanished by then, its purpose achieved, and the real sword was lit only by the newly-returned sunlight and by the flame that had always burned at the heart of the Circle of Truce. All the soldiers saw it, but none dared approach – until finally Eskif strode forward and climbed up on to the rock. In one hand he held a tag that had been given to him by Tegan, the magian who was already been called the Priestess of Akurvellir, and with the other he grasped the hilt of the Peacemaker. Conflicting emotions ran across his face, but he seemed moved rather than surprised by the experience. The sword did not budge, and the brigadier stepped away with tears in his eyes. As he did so, there was movement in the great unseen gathering of wraiths that had clustered around the amphitheatre. One of their number changed shape a little, and then faded away beyond any sight.

One by one, all the soldiers approached the sword. Each one tried to pull it from the stone, but it was immovable, as if the blade had fused with the rock itself, and each one of them returned, defeated – and a different man. As they did so, more and more of the wraiths regained their human form. They were still ghosts, but they were whole again, and free to move on from the world. The Great Plain was no longer their prison.

This process went on for several days, and the sun rose higher and shone brighter with each passing day. Just as the Tindaya Code had predicted, the Peacemaker was speaking to the whole island. And when the procession finally came to an end, everyone knew that Myvatan's seemingly endless war truly was over.

The sword was not the only thing that affected the atmosphere of change. All over the island, most mitra plants had died during the winter, and those that had survived were soon dug up and destroyed, now that everyone had developed



an inexplicable aversion to the herb.

It had also been discovered that the healing pools no longer worked, and so the magians were using their talents to find other methods of healing people. Some of the wizards had begun to devise ways of making people's lives better, rather than inventing new means of destruction. And, for the first time in three hundred and seventy years, a Great Conclave was convened.

Myrdal came last, after all the fuss was over and the peace confirmed. He came to Akurvellir, guided not by any beacon but by love. His reunion with Tegan was perhaps the most joyous moment among many inside the Circle of Truce, and everyone who witnessed their embrace understood that destiny had brought these two together - and that now nothing would keep them apart.

One of these onlookers was unseen by anyone else there. He was the last of the ghosts, and he had been waiting just for this moment. Jarvik smiled then, and turned away to begin his own journey.

The most notable absentee from the Circle of Truce during all these events was the one who had done most to bring them about. By the time Tegan and Myrdal were locked in each other's arms, and Jarvik was on his way to another world, Terrel had embarked upon a voyage of his own. His ship was already some days out of Port Akranes, on its way south. He had not waited to see the results of his efforts for one very good reason. He was going home.