

Feast of Souls
Magister trilogy book 01
By C.S. Friedman

Acknowledgements

This book would not exist without the contributions of one very special person. I regret that I can't give you her real name. She lives two separate lives, you see, and the one I needed to learn about was a thing of shadows and secrets, so different from anything in my own experience that I did not feel that reading books about it was enough. I needed a real person, someone willing to share the darkest moments of her past with me, someone insightful enough to understand how those moments shaped her life.

Her clients call her Anna.

With rare candor and boundless generosity this lady opened her heart to me, sharing her memories freely— good ones and bad ones, triumphant and troubling, from the desperation that first drove her to sell her body to the rare moments of empowerment she snatched from a world of exploitation and abuse. Though her I came to understand the social and sexual dynamics that had molded my main character in her youth, and to make her real. Without Anna's counsel, such a project would have been nigh on impossible.

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Prologue

Imnea knew when she awoke that Death was waiting for her.

She had been seeing the signs of his presence for some time now. A chill breeze in the corners of the house that wouldn't go away. Shadows that seeped in through the windows, that didn't move with the light. The icy touch of a presence upon her skin when she healed the Hardings' little girl, that left her shuddering for hours afterward.

The mirror revealed little. Of course. It wasn't the way of witching folk to age and die like normal people. Hie fuel within them was consumed too quickly, like a fire into which all the winter's wood had been placed at once. What a blaze it made! Yet quickly gone, all of it, until it smothered in its own ash.

How long ago had the dying begun? Did it start in her youth, when she first discovered she could do odd things—tiny little miracles, hardly worth noting—or not until later? Did Death first notice her when she made tiny points of fire dance on the windowsill, with a child's unconscious delight (and how her mother had punished her for that!), or not until she reached deep within herself with conscious intent to draw strength from her very soul—from that central font of spiritual power that mystics called the *athra*—and to bend it to her purpose? When and where was the contract with Death sealed, and what act marked its closing? The healing of Atkin's boy? The calling of rain after the Great Drought of '92? The day she had

cleansed Dirum's leg of its gangrene, so that they wouldn't have to cut it off?

She was thirty-five. She looked much older.

She felt eighty.

Soon, Death whispered, his voice disguised as the whisper of falling snow. *Soon...*

With a sigh she fed some more wood into the stove and tried to stoke its dying embers to more radiant heat. It had been more than a year now since she'd last used the power. She'd hoped that if she stopped, some of her strength would return. Surely whatever internal energies created the athra in the first place could restore it to strength, if it was no longer used for witchery. But even if that were true, how much of her life was gone already? Each time she had used the magic to heal a child, cast out a demon, or bless a field against the onslaught of locusts, she had drawn upon her own life force for power. The supply wasn't endless. All the witching folk knew that. Just as the flesh became exhausted in time, so did the fires of the spirit bank low, smolder, and finally extinguish. Use the fuel for things other than staying alive and the fire would be extinguished that much sooner.

Yet how could you have the power to heal, and not use it? How could you watch a child turn blue before you and not clear out its lungs and give it life again, even if the cost was a few precious minutes of your own life?

Minutes had seemed like nothing in the beginning. What do young people know of time, especially when the power is pounding in their veins, demanding expression? By the time you became aware that minutes combine to make hours, and hours add up to days, and days to years... by then Death was already knocking on your door.

No more witchery, she had promised herself a year ago. Whatever time she had left, it would be her own. She had let the village know she wouldn't be able to do healing for them anymore, and that was the end of it. Let them hate her for it if they wished. It would be a poor answer to her years of service if they did, but she wouldn't be surprised. Human nature was remarkably ungrateful when it came to expecting sacrifice of others.

And already it had begun. She had heard the whispers. Every child that died of the pox now died because of her inaction. Every injury that led to death now was due to her callousness. Never mind that illness and injury were a natural part of life that only costly miracles could defy. Never mind that for two decades she had expended her own life-energy to provide those miracles. Never mind that Death was breathing down her neck now because of those very acts. This year she had turned them all away, and that was all that anyone seemed to care about.

Human nature.

She leaned forward over the fire, trying not to ask herself the question that all the witching folk did, in the end. *Was it worth it?* Too much danger in that internal dialogue. Answer no, and your last days would be filled with regret. Answer yes, and then your dying was your own damned fault.

Suddenly a knock on the door drew her from her reverie. Who on earth was visiting her in these final days, when all the town was treating her like a pariah?

She walked to the heavy oaken door and pulled it open. By the dying light of the winter day she could see two figures standing outside. No need to ask what they'd come for. One of the figures held a small bundle in her arms, and from its size and drape she guessed it to be a child, swathed in blankets. A pang of emotion stabbed her in the heart, guilt and anger hotly combined.

Isn't it enough that I refuse you in the marketplace, in the temple, in the very streets? Must you bring your sick ones to my very door, to be turned away?

For a moment she almost shut the door in their faces, but a lifetime's habit of hospitality proved too strong to overcome. Grunting, she stepped aside for the two to come in. By the stove's dim light she could see them better: a tall, gaunt woman, peasant-born, who had clearly seen better days, and a young girl by her side, hardly looking better. The kind you healed and sent home knowing that Death might claim them the next year anyway, from starvation or abuse or any one of the thousand things no witching power could heal. The girl had a hard edge about her, as if she had already seen the rotting underbelly of the world and become inured to its stink; it was a frightening look, in one so young. The woman... looked merely desperate.

"Mother," the woman began respectfully. "I'm sorry to bother you——"

"I don't do healing any more," Imnea said curtly. "If you want a cup of tea to warm you before you set on your way again I'll give you that. I might have a scrap of bread. But that's all."

She expected the woman to argue with her and she was braced for it. Gods knew she'd been through this before, a hundred times over, it seemed. But instead the woman said nothing, merely lowered a corner of the blanket wrapped around her child. The glimmering green pustules on his fevered face spoke volumes in that moment, before she covered them up again.

Green Plague. Imnea had seen it only once, years ago.

That was after it had claimed half a town. The witching folk had banded together then—an event as rare as the Red Moon that had shone down upon the effort—trying to burn away the infection not only from a handful of bodies, but from the village itself. It was said there were times in the old days when the Green Plague, sweeping through the land, had killed two out of every three people. That time it didn't. Maybe their efforts had helped stop it. Maybe the gods had seen so many witching folk offering up years of their own lives to heal others that they decided it was time for a single act of divine mercy to be granted. Or maybe Death was just too busy gathering up all the new contracts the witching folk had offered him that night to worry about spreading the convulsive disease further.

She didn't need to feel the boy's skin to know he had fever. Or to read his future to know the terrible suffering that awaited him if the disease went unchecked. It was a horrible way to die.

"I don't do healing anymore." The words lacked the conviction she wanted them to have. Damn these people, why did they have to bring the boy here, into her home?

"You have the power. They say you've healed this sickness before."

"And I don't anymore. I'm sorry. That's the way it is." Each word scored her throat like a hot knife as she forced it out. Didn't the woman understand what such a healing would cost her?

What gives you the right to demand my life?

The Plague would force the boy into seizures soon, terrible seizures in which he would scream out for water, but vomit up anything that was given to him. It would go on for days, if his family didn't put him out of his misery. And they wouldn't. They'd pray and they'd make offerings and they'd ask the gods to please, please make this boy one of the few who were strong enough to survive the Plague. And so he would suffer, endless days of agony, until all that was left was a desiccated husk from which the human soul had long since departed, begging unheard for the final mercy to be granted.

And then others would follow. The whole town, sooner or later. Maybe even Gansang itself, if the infection spread far enough. Very little could check the Green Plague once it had taken hold in a place.

He was still in the early stages. If she healed him now, if there were no others infected yet, the town might be spared.

Imnea turned away to stoke the fire. The new log wasn't catching. The embers were growing dim.

"Please," the mother whispered.

No bribes. No threats. No promises. Imnea was prepared to counter all those. But the simple heartfelt plea was none of those things, and all of them combined. Guilt stabbed like a hot blade into her heart. I should give her a knife and tell her to end it. For the child's sake. If she doesn't handle the body fluids when she kills him there's a chance it won't spread.

With a sigh she turned back to face the pair. They deserved that much, these villagers, that at least she would meet their eyes while she shattered their hopes. But it was the girl's eyes that caught her own this time, not the woman's. Clear eyes, remarkably so given the hollows of hunger and hardship that hung beneath them like dark moons. Green eyes, flecked with gold as if with fairy dust. Yet it wasn't color or clarity that made the girl's gaze so arresting as much as an indefinable *something*... as much out of place in these dim surroundings as a gleaming star would be.

Such depth, in that gaze. Remarkable in one so young. Imnea wondered briefly if she had the Power...

but only briefly. She had no time to worry about matters of Power, least of all to appraise the potential of some fledgling witch who would probably die of hunger and cold in the gutters of Gansang long before she ever found a suitable teacher.

Perhaps it was that thought which plucked at her heart like a harp string. Perhaps it was the memories of the ones she had taught, and the children she had borne, and all those people who had turned to her for healing or counsel or simply comfort, in her thirty-five years of life. Maybe it was something about the power that made her hear their voices now, begging her to help this woman... or maybe it was Death playing tricks on her. Trying to hurry her along, so that he wouldn't be late for his appointment with the next witch on his list.

Damn you to hell, she thought. *My life you can have, that was mine to give up, but not this boy's. Not yet*

In a voice as harsh as winter ice she said, "Give him to me."

The bundle was given to her wordlessly. It was lighter than it should be, she noted; mostly blankets. The child hadn't been big to start with, and the early stages of the Plague had probably stripped his bones of what little meat they'd had. Her own bones ached as she shifted his weight in her arms. *Poor child, poor child, at least if you live through this you can tend to any others who get sick. There's comfort in that.*

For a moment she shut her eyes. Just resting, gathering her spirit, letting the aches and pains of her premature aging settle into the background so that her rational mind was foremost. The gods hadn't taken that away from her yet.

/ wouldn't want to live through another Plague year anyway, she told herself. *One horror like that is enough for anyone.*

She began to hum softly, a focus for her witchery. She could sense the woman and the girl watching,

fascinated, as she prepared herself. If only she could show them what it felt like! If only she could share with another person—any person—the pain and joy and fear and exultation of such an act! For one of them to understand what the power was like, how terribly it cost her to use it, that would be worth everything. Because then her sacrifice would be understood. Then she would be loved for what she had given up, not hated for all the times she had failed.

At last, when the music was ready, when the room was ready—when the child and the mother and the time and the night outside and all the world were ready—she reached inside her soul to where the heart of all power lay. It was faint these days, so very faint, not the resplendent beacon of power she had discovered in her youth, but a much older soul, nearly exhausted now. It wouldn't have lasted another year, she told herself. And it would have been a cold and lonely year to live through, with all the villagers hating her.

Are you sure? Death whispered in her ear. *Very sure, Imnea? This time there is no turning back.*

"Go to hell," she whispered to him.

The warmth of her living soul filled her flesh, driving out the chill of the winter night. Then outward it flowed, into the boy. Clean, pure, a gift of healing. She shut her eyes, trusting to other senses to observe as it bolstered his own failing spirit, feeding strength into his athra, giving it focus. Fire burned along his veins and the boy cried out, but neither the mother nor the girl flinched.

The disease was strong in his flesh, rooted in a thousand places; she burned them all, drawing upon her athra for fuel and the boy's own soul for focus. Some witches said that a disease was like a living thing, that fought back when you tried to kill it; she thought of it more as a thousand living things, or tens of thousands,

that might fight or hide or burrow deep into the flesh for protection from such an assault. You had to find them all or the disease would come back later with renewed strength. How much of her life force had she wasted in her early years, learning that lesson?

The log in the stove hadn't caught; the fire was dying. Winter's chill seeped into the cabin and into her bones, and she let it. There wasn't enough power left within her to keep her flesh warm and heal the boy as well. Not that any witch with a brain would waste power on the former task anyway... not when there was wood to be burned. The power was too precious to waste on simple things. If only she'd understood that, in the youth of her witchery! A tear coursed down her cheek as she remembered the hundred and one little magics she could have done without, the tricks performed for pleasure or show or physical comfort. If she could undo them all now, how much time would they add up to? Would they buy her another week, another year of life?

Too late now, Death whispered.

Dying. She was dying. This is what it felt like, when the embers of the soul expired at last. She could feel the last tiny sparks of her athra flickering weakly inside her. So little power left. How much time? Merely minutes, or did she have all of an hour left to wonder if she had done the right thing?

"It is done," she said quietly.

The mother leaned down to take the boy, but hesitated when she saw his face. "He looks the same."

"His soul is clean. The pustules will drain within a day or two. He will be safe after that."

And you, his mother ... if you have caught this thing too, I am sorry, there will be no one to beg

for favors when the first signs show ...

She tried to rise, to see them out. Hospitality. But her legs had no strength, and her heart... her heart labored in her chest with an odd, unsteady beat, as if the drummer who had guided it for thirty-five years had stopped his music and left it to flounder.

She was cold. So cold.

"Mother?"

The eyes of the girl were fixed upon her. So deep, so hungry, so very determined. Drinking in knowledge as if it was the fuel her soul required. *See, child, what the power can do. See what happens to you when you use it.* There was no wonder in the child's eyes, or even fear... only hunger.

Heed this lesson well, my child. Remember it, when the power beckons. Remember the price.

"Come, child." It was the mother's voice, nearly inaudible. Imnea's hearing was growing dim; the world was an insubstantial thing, all murmurings, windsong and shadow. "Come away now."

Are you ready? Death whispered to her.

Imnea clung to life for a moment more. A single moment, to savor those dreams which had guided her... and to mourn those which had gone unfulfilled.

Then: *Yes*, she whispered. Voice without sound. *Yes, I am ready.*

In the stove the last embers of the fire sputtered and died, leaving the room in darkness.

Book One - Beginning

Chapter One

The market in Royal Square was always busy, but this day in particular the crowds were so dense that it was hard to get from one end to the other without being jostled nearly to death. Some said it was because the weather was perfect, a fine spring day flourishing beneath a nearly cloudless sky, inviting one and all to leave behind their winter solemnity and come squeeze fruit and prod chickens while dreaming of the best of summer feasts. Some said it was because the harvest had been good last year, which meant there were many things to sell, and many farmer's wives with money in hand ready to buy foreign delicacies.

Some said it was something else entirely.

The stranger stood at the edge of the crowd and watched the people for a long moment with a practiced eye. He was taller than most of the locals, and thin, with jet-black hair that hung down to his shoulders and eyes to match. His features were aquiline, cast in an exotic olive tone that spoke of foreign shores and mixed origins. More than one woman turned to watch him as he stepped forward into the crowd, which was only to be expected. Tall, lean, graceful in his movements, he had always attracted women.

He was dressed in a simple black shirt and breeches, and might have been judged a peasant in his Sunday best, or else a nobleman who had tired of all the extra layers which the display of rank required. A quick look at his fingernails—fastidiously clean—removed the peasant interpretation from

consideration. Seamstresses might notice the shirt was of unusually fine cloth, but it took a practiced eye to determine that, and the cut of his garments was not so expensive as to attract undue attention.

Sometimes even peasants wore black.

There were some who said that the crowds in the Royal Square gathered today not for gossip, not for trade, or for anything so mundane as market business, but simply to *be* there. For it was whispered that today a Magister from Anshasa would arrive at the palace with full retinue, and this was the closest that the common populace could get to the main gates to watch him arrive.

Anshasa. How many of the men here had fought in the great wars against that southern kingdom, how many of the women here had mourned the loss of father, husband, son in those conflicts? Though a tenuous peace had endured now for several years there was no love lost between the two nations, and the gossips who had so fastidiously digested and disseminated the news of the Magister's visit were at a total loss to come up with a reason why it was taking place. Surely it was all but suicidal—even for a Magister!—to journey to the heart of enemy territory with no more than a brief truce in an eons-old conflict to safeguard him.

The stranger gazed out upon the crowd, studying them as if they were all foreign beasts, and he a forester learning their ways. A gaggle of young maids in the livery of houseworkers passed him by, their bright eyes full of curiosity and flirtation; he smiled, which set them to giggling even louder. Predictable beasts.

He picked up a piece of fruit from a nearby wagon with the passing intention of eating it, then saw the bruised surface and put it back. Strangely, the woman behind him who picked it up in turn found it undamaged.

The wind had blown the blacksmith's fire into itself, and filled his tent with smoke. It shifted as the stranger passed, and soon the air was clear.

A chicken about to be beheaded died an instant before the blade struck its neck, and was thus spared both fear and pain.

A minstrel's mandolin, painfully out of tune, discovered its proper notes.

A pickpocketing child tripped and went sprawling in the dirt, his ill-gotten gains splayed out upon the ground for all to see.

A woman who, unbeknownst to her, had started the day with the seed of a deadly cancer in her breast, re-, turned home without it.

The stranger's journey brought him to a tent that was set apart from all the others. Talismans strung from the tent poles tinkled like windchimes, and a small but colorful sign invited visitors to enter and receive advice from a "true witch." He hesitated a moment, considering, then ducked slightly to clear the low door flap and entered. A heady incense filled the small space, which was decorated with richly embroidered throws and rugs. A woman sat behind a low table, upon cushions of silk embroidered with moons and stars, in front of a tablecloth of the same. Showmanship. There were cards laid out before her, and a sphere of flawed crystal, and a pile of runic stones.

"You wish your fortune told?" she asked him.

"That depends," he said. "Are you really a witch, or simply a performer?"

She smiled. She was young—she looked young—and a small bit of gold had been set in the surface of one of her front teeth. "That depends on what you pay me, sir."

He drew forth a handful of coins from his pocket as if he neither knew nor cared what they were, and cast them down before her. Gold glittered in the lamplight and caught the banners of afternoon sun that streamed through the tent's entranceway. She gasped in surprise and he smiled despite himself, certain that such a consummate performer normally prided herself on keeping such emotions to herself.

"Is that enough for the real thing?" he asked her.

She looked up at him, as if seeking understanding in his eyes. Another day he might have indulged her, but today he didn't, so he made sure that any witchery directed at him would slide off him like water from oilskin.

"What is it you wish to know, sir? And do you care which medium I use?"

Ah, the paraphernalia, the paraphernalia... was it just part of the show for this one, or a genuine focus? Some home-grown witches were ignorant enough that they thought they actually needed tools to draw upon their own soulfire. It never ceased to amaze him.

"You may use what you wish. And my question is..." He glanced out of the tent, to where the gossiping villagers milled and mingled. "The reception that the city has prepared for its foreign guest, is this a welcome in good faith? Or something less benign?"

She had been reaching out for the deck of cards as if she were about to use them, but as his words settled into warm scented air that hand withdrew, and she leaned back and studied him.

"You know I can't answer that, sir," she said at last. "If the king is keeping secrets then his Magisters are protecting them, and all the cards and crystals in the world won't get past their safeguards. And if I did learn such secrets, and passed them on to strangers for a handful of coins... then I wouldn't last very long in this city, would I?" She pushed the coins back towards him. "I'm sorry. Please take them."

There was hunger in her eyes, he noted. She wanted the truth but she dared not ask. It was always that way with the witching folk, for they could sense on a visceral level his true nature, yet did not trust their own instincts to name it.

"Loyalty has its own value," he said quietly. "Keep them."

He left the tent without further word. He was sure that as soon as he was out of sight she would pick up her cards again and begin asking questions about him. He did nothing to stop her from finding the answers this time. If she was willing to waste precious moments of her life searching out who and what he was, who was he to render that sacrifice meaningless?

Towards the far end of the square was a place where the merchants had not been allowed to set up their booths and tents. Drawing near to it, the stranger could see why. From this place the palace itself was visible—or more to the point, this place was visible from the palace. Gods forbid King Danton should gaze out his window and see dirty peasants going about their daily business! No, this close to the palace there was a promenade where the clean and well-dressed might take the morning air, while the local princelings gazed out of their windows and admired them from afar. Maybe one would even spot some young and tender lass dressed in her Sunday finery and sweep down from the palace to take her away to a life of wealth and leisure. So did the comely maidens hope, no doubt, as they strolled along the promenade on the arms of awkward youths in whom they had no real interest, dreaming of the day they would be noticed by someone better.

Today the press of crowds along the promenade was no less than suffocating, as peasants and tradesmen both strained to catch some sight of the great road beyond that led to the palace gates. That was where

the foreign Magister would ride, swathed in black silks, upon a black horse, and accompanied by the gods alone knew how many dignitaries. There had not been a state visit from Anshasa in as long as anyone could remember, and the gossips who thrived on royal trivia chattered as they made ready to receive him, ready to read meaning into every detail of his retinue's number, attire, and behavior.

It never changes, the stranger mused.

He watched for a while, but had no lengthy interest in the matter. After all, it was rumor, not royal announcement, that had gathered the crowd. There was the possibility that no grand retinue was coming at all. Hard for the peasants to grasp, with their innate awe of royal pageantry, and of course King Danton was known for putting on a great show at the slightest excuse, but that was not the custom in all places, and for one whose daily business involved the wealth and power of nations, such a procession might well seem a tedious display. Not to mention a hot and sweaty one. A true Magister was unlikely to relish such a show, the stranger thought, though he might send his luggage on ahead with all the trappings of royalty, to amuse the peasants and perhaps give vague offense to the king who was his reluctant host.

He continued his wanderings, across the great road and beyond. A packet of dried venison from one pocket stilled his noonday hunger, and when he reached a place where food was served he bought a flagon of mead to wash it down. He could have made it taste like a king's feast if he had wanted, but he was rarely so self-indulgent. As for his clothes, black though they were, they had accumulated by this time a patina of dust and sweat and would never be mistaken for a Magister's attire.

He could have cleaned them, of course. He didn't.

Around the back of the great estate, beside the great fence that guarded the king's property, he paused. It was quiet here, for the thickly forested hunting grounds beyond offered no good view of the royal habits. Fine for him. He called a bird to him—a hawk responded, strong of limb and elegantly feathered—and he whispered instructions into its ear, gave it a fine silver ring he had been wearing, and set it free. It soared over tree and stream and quickly was lost in the distance, winging its way toward the palace.

Minutes passed.

Half an hour.

He ate the last of his dried venison and reflected that he should have bought more mead.

At last there came a change in the air that he could sense before he saw it. A shimmering, a shivering, that echoed in his own soul, stirring the fires within. When the air began to ripple before him he was prepared, and when the field of ripples was large enough and steady enough for his purposes he stepped into it—and through.

On the other side was a vast, shadowy chamber, filled with black-robed men. The windows were narrow arrow slits that let in little light, and the vaulted ceiling and dark stone walls drank in the meager offerings of the only lamps in the room, a single pair set along the mantle of a man-sized fireplace.

The Magisters stood about a long table of dark wood, their chairs pushed back behind them. They were all ages, all races, all shapes... and all male. Of course. The nature of women didn't allow them to join such company.

The stranger looked about him, studying each in turn.

The few whom he knew received a nod of acknowledgment, but there were not many. Those who

frequented Danton's court were unlikely to visit the southlands, and Magisters of the southlands rarely braved these hostile latitudes.

"I am Colivar, Magister Royal of Anshasa, bound in service to his Majesty Hasim Farah the Most Merciful, scourge of the Tathys, ruler of all the lands south of the Sea of Tears." The northern language felt harsh on his tongue compared to the liquid resonance of his accustomed dialect, but he spoke it well enough to make himself understood. Little wonder the northerners did not revere poetry as his own people did; one could hardly scribe paeans to love in such a guttural and unsatisfying dialect.

"You are welcome, Colivar. If a bit early." The speaker was a man who had chosen to appear in the guise of a white-haired sage, though of course that did not necessarily have anything to do with his real age. His long beard was impressive, and as snowy white as the fur of a meticulously groomed cat.

"My luggage will be here on time."

A soft murmur of amusement that did not quite become laughter coursed about the room. Only the sage's eyes remained cold.

"The king might deem such levity offense."

Colivar shrugged. "I made no promise of pageantry for his amusement."

"And we made you no promise save safe passage to and from this place. Be wary of offending the one who rules here."

The one called Colivar laughed. It was hearty, heartfelt laughter that echoed freely in the vast chamber and set the dust to shivering off the window sills. "Hie king rules here? Truly? Well then you must be cutting the balls off your Magisters, for I don't know another city where men of power would stand for such a thing."

"Hush," one of the locals said, glancing toward the great oaken doors that guarded the room. "He has got ears, you know."

"And servants."

"And all of them have minds as malleable as clay," Colivar responded, "and we are the potters."

"Maybe so," the white-bearded Magister allowed, "but here in the north we pride ourselves on discretion."

"Ah." Colivar brushed at the dust on one shirt sleeve, then the other. "So do you plan to tell me why you have asked me here, against all the tide of morati politics, or does this mean I have to guess? Mind you," he said, his eyes growing hard for a moment, "you won't like my guesses."

The white-bearded Magister studied him for a moment, then nodded ever so slightly. "Perhaps introductions will make things a bit more clear. I am called Ramirus, Magister Royal of King Danton." He introduced two more men by his side, both members of the same company. "And this..." he indicated a swarthy man wrapped in a black burnoose and turban, "is Sev-eril of Tarsus."

The sardonic essence faded from Colivar as quickly as it had possessed him. "Truly? A Tarsan? That is a long and arduous journey, even for one who commands the soulfire. I am honored to meet one who has come so far."

"And Del of the Crescent Isles."

Colivar's brow elevated slightly as he nodded, acknowledging silently the distance and effort involved in that journey as well.

"Suhr-Halim of Hylis. Fadir of Korgstaat. Tirstan of Gansang."

The list went on. Names and titles in two dozen languages, from as many nations. Some of them were from places whose names Colivar didn't even recognize, and he had thought himself well schooled in all the known places of the world.

"Quite a collection of visitors," he said, when the introductions were done at last. There was no longer humor in his voice; it had given way to something colder. "I have never seen so many of us, from so many places, brought together. We do not tend to trust one another, do we, my brothers? So I assume there must be some pressing business that is truly extreme, for our brother Ramirus to have called us all here."

"If I said a threat to our very existence," Ramirus said quietly, "would that suffice?"

Colivar digested the words with the somber care they merited, then nodded.

"Very well," the Magister Royal said. "Then you shall come with me, and see for yourself."

And without further word he led his wary guest out of the dark chamber and into the heart of the palace.

Chapter Two

Ethanus remembers: Whoever is at the door will not go away. He's ignored their knocking for some time now, preferring not to be disturbed, but time after time they keep coming back. The knocking is soft but insistent, not harsh enough to anger him outright, and the attempts are spaced far apart, as if their purpose is not to force him to obey so much as to remind him that the visitor has neither left nor forgotten him.

At last with a sigh he rises from his studies, leaving behind the Chantoni hieroglyphics he has been working so hard to decipher, to confront whoever it is that thinks that he has time to waste on visitors.

It's a spring day, (*he recalls*) and as he opens the door a gust of pollen-laden air sweeps into his sanctum. Fresh, sweet, and brimming with life. He should have built the place with more windows, he notes mentally, and not been constrained, as he was, by concerns over heating it in the winter.

On his doorstep is a girl. Not quite a child, but thin and scrawny enough to be taken for one at first glance. That she's had a hard life is nothing he needs magic to discover; it is etched in the very outline of her features, in the way she moves, even in the way she breathes. So is the fact that she has defied her environment and thus far come out on top. Her eyes gleam with the cold determination that the poet Belsarius once called "the diamond glare," meaning that nothing can scratch its surface. Her face and hands are meticulously clean—probably scrubbed not an hour before—but the rest of her has the faintly weathered patina of one who is not truly intimate with cleanliness. Peasant stock, he guesses, city-born, and not raised gently or treated well yet trying nonetheless to present herself politely. Interesting.

Briefly he toys with the notion of binding enough Power to know more. But the habit is long gone and the temptation passes.

"Master Ethanus, Magister of Ulran?"

His expression darkens, and the passing interest he had in her quickly dies. "I no longer lay claim to that

title, girl, or any other." His voice is gruff, as befits her question. What, is this some little chit that wants a spell cast for her, and has trudged through the depths of the forest to find him here, in this place he built for himself precisely so that he might live undisturbed? Of all the things he might be interrupted for, that is by far the most annoying. "Go find a witch if you want help, there are plenty about."

He closes the door in her face and goes back to work. At least, that is his intent. But her small foot is in the doorway, and to his surprise he finds that he is not quite callous enough to crush it.

He glares at her. Diamond eyes, indeed.

"So it please you, sir," she says—and she bobs a bit, in what might have been a curtsy had it been done properly—"I have come to learn the ways of magic."

"Then like I said, go find a witch. I'm not a teacher."

Again he almost slams the door shut. He is hoping that if he looks like he really means it she will pull back her foot just in time, and he can close it. But she doesn't move, and he is not willing to cripple her—or to make the commitment to healing her—so with a sigh he resigns himself to finishing out the conversation.

"I don't wish to learn from a witch, sir. I wish to learn true sorcery."

With a sign of pure exasperation he says, "Well, you're a girl, so you can't. Now may I get back to my work?"

But the chit doesn't budge. Nor do the diamond eyes so much as blink. "And pardon my asking, but why won't you teach girls, sir?" The words are polite but there's a hard edge to her tone, as if that isn't the answer she wants and damn it all, she's going to stay here until she gets a better one.

With a sigh he opens the door, and crouches down slightly to meet her at eye level. "Because women can't master the power, girl. That's simple fact. You think others haven't tried? Their nature is not compatible with the demands of true sorcery. Many have tried, and they master the power as witches do, and die as witches do, of their own exertions. So it will be with you if you follow this course." He stood again. "Forget the Power. Live a long and happy life. That's my advice for you."

"Men do both."

"Yes. Men do both." But even the majority of those men who seek to become Magisters fail, he thinks, and are never more than witches. To try to do it alone, without training, all but guarantees failure, a short life grasping after a dream that only a precious few are allowed to attain, prematurely exhausted as the soulfire expires. Or sometimes, in the worst cases, success is attained... and brings madness in its wake.

To become a Magister is one thing. To understand what that is, and what one has become, and to accept it and go on living, that is another.

"So what is it in me that makes it impossible?" the girl demands. "Some female part? I'll cut it out."

At another time he might laugh at such ridiculous audacity, but her tone makes it clear she is deadly serious. "What," he challenges her, "take a knife to your gut and gouge out living flesh? At my command?"

"No," she says evenly, "I'll go to a witch and have them take it out, so that I don't die of it. And then I'll come back here and show you. And if you say there's another thing that's got to go, then I'll have that one taken out too. Until there's nothing left of me that a man would not have, and you are willing to teach me."

He steps back a bit, into the shadows of the small house, and gestures to the walls surrounding. "Look at this place, child. Do you see magic here? Is there one brick here laid with the soul's power, one piece of furniture sculpted by any vehicle other than human sweat and toil? I built this place myself, with my own hands, every inch of it, choosing it to be that way. Now you come to me for lessons? *Me?*" He shakes his head. "I admire your determination, but you've come to the wrong place. Go to the courts of Selden or Amarys and ply your arguments there; perhaps the Magisters will listen to you. Ethanus of Ulran is not a Magister any longer, and he does not teach. Not boys, and not girls who would cut themselves up and make themselves into boys."

The girl points quietly to a far corner of the room, near where the wall meets floor. "There."

"There what?"

"Power. You said there was none." The slender finger, with delicate crescent moons of dirt under the nails that have somehow escaped both soap and water, is insistent. "Right there."

He turns and looks where she is pointing, ready to deny the allegation, but with a start he realizes that she's right. Down there, in that very spot, the year of the great rains... all his fledgling masonry skills had proven unable to hold the groundwater at bay, so at last he had sealed the inside of the house against leaks. Just in that one place. The rest had been adequate as it was.

"And I'm not a child," she adds.

He looks back at her. Studying her more deeply this time than before, weighing not only her outer appearance but the fire in her soul as well. It is strong, very strong. A witch with such *athra* might last many years. A man with such *athra*... he might risk madness and death to join the ranks of the Magisters, and perhaps succeed.

And she has the Sight That is rare in anyone.

"What is a child?" he asks her.

The diamond gaze does not flinch. "Creatures that are sold on the street by their parents, to get the coin to make more children." She paused. "Adults sell themselves."

So cold. So very cold. Was it strength he was seeing in her, or an outer shell containing a battered soul which would shatter at the first real trial?

"Is that what you have come here to do?" he asks. "Sell yourself?"

"If I must," she says evenly.

If I were to imagine a woman with the spirit needed to become Magister, he thinks, to survive Transition and the aftermath, this is what she would sound like.

He lowers himself before her again. Eye to eye. Searching deeply for the things that are hidden behind flesh, hints of a soul so sheltered from a stranger's view that a man might search for years, he senses, and never catch sight of it.

"Have you ever made a flame dance upon a windowsill?" he asks softly. "Or called a lightning bug to your hand on a summer's night? Have things ever happened because you wished they would, or those who would hurt you gone away suddenly and no one knows the reason?"

The crystalline gaze is steady. "No, sir, because those things bring death. And I do not mean to die."

Yes, he thinks, that is what is required. A hunger to live, at any cost. That is the first thing and the last, besides which all other requirements are superfluous.

"And if I said that to cheat Death we must embrace Death?" he asked her. "What is your answer then?"

A flicker of a wry smile plays across her lips—plays there, and then is quickly gone. "That a lifetime of whoring prepares one for such bargains," she says evenly.

Yes. Yes, I suppose it does.

He stands straight again, noting that her foot is no longer in the door. There is no need for it any longer. She has intrigued him and she knows it. Maybe a city Magister would turn her away, having more important business to attend to, but a hermit in the woods who has devoted himself to study and reflection, who has sworn off all Magister's business till the end of his time on earth, and therefore has very little to do with that time, such a one might well be tempted to take on a girl apprentice, just for the challenge of it. Just for the mad, improbable, and utterly pointless challenge of it.

There are no female Magisters. Never have been. Never will be.

She waits. Silently. It is a good sign. Discipline is always a good sign.

Imagine if there could be one. What a stir it would cause! What a project that would be, to make it happen!

"What is your name, child?"

Her eyes flare a bit as she bristles at the title—as he intended—but her voice is still formal and calm as she answers, "I am called Kamala, sir."

"And if I turn you down, Kamala?" His voice is equally formal, equally calm. "If I say to you that I have sworn never to take on another apprentice—which in fact is quite true—and if I then say to you that there are reasons no woman has ever succeeded in mastering sorcery, and I know what they are, and you will be no exception, and I will not waste my time on you... if I say to you all those things, and then close the door in your face, what then?"

"Then I will make my camp outside your house," she answers. "And I will serve you in whatever ways I can until you change your mind. I will be as an apprentice would be, paying for his lessons. I will split wood for your fire, I will weed your garden, I will carry you fresh water from the stream every day by my own hands—by my own sweat and labor—and not use witchery to do those things, even though I probably could, until you agree to teach me how to use the power without dying. And every day you'll see me labor for you, and you will know in your heart that I won't ever give up on you, and in the end you'll teach me what I wish to know."

The diamond eyes sparkle defiantly.

Slowly he draws himself up to his full height, many a handspan over hers. Then he turns away from her. No smaller footsteps follow, nor is protest voiced. Good. He goes to the place where his tools are and chooses a heavy ax, one that only a large man might wield comfortably, and returns to the door. She is still waiting. Silently. Good.

He drops the ax at her feet, head first.

"Woodpile's in the back," he tells her.

Her foot is no longer blocking the door. He shuts it and returns to his desk. Turning up the wick on his reading lamp, he opens up the next scroll of Chantoni writing, pinning its corners down with river stones.

He does not start reading again until he hears the sound of splitting wood.

Chapter Three

The Palace of King Danton was of ancient stone, hung with tapestries that might have been bright and cheery once had age not bled their colors into one another, and sunlight faded the lot of them. No doubt they had some historical value, or perhaps were of sentimental importance to His Majesty; those were the only excuses Colivar could think of for allowing the dismal things to remain as they were a moment longer.

He stopped at one, a battle scene, and Ramirus allowed him the indulgence. It was a vast tapestry with hundreds of soldiers depicted upon it, and though the flags of the opposing armies had faded greatly, their colors could not be mistaken.

"The Battle of Coldorra," Colivar mused.

"I believe your people lost that one?"

Colivar shrugged, ignoring the bait. "They were not my people at the time."

He fingered a place in the tapestry where moths had nibbled at it; the faded and frayed threads had already begun to separate around the tiny hole. "And you do not repair this because...?"

"His Majesty wishes them left as they are. He likes it that they look old.' "

"Ah." Colivar nodded. "I see. I shall advise King Farah of that, should he wish to send him gifts in the future." He waited until Ramirus turned away and then tapped the flawed spot with his finger; the section of damaged cloth became whole again. *My gift to you, King of Coldorra.*

Ramirus brought him finally to a wing that was cheerier than most, with windows of human proportion that admitted a modicum of sunlight. That they looked out upon a courtyard could be assumed; Danton's penchant for defensive design would allow no openings so large in the outer walls. The whole of the palace was a strange mix of social center and fortified keep, as if the men who built it had been unable to decide what its true purpose was. Or perhaps it had simply existed for so long, and been used for so many different things, that its various purposes were layered over one another too thickly to make any one out clearly. Not unlike its royal master, Colivar mused.

Briefly he wondered what vast security measures that he had so casually sidestepped were present at the main gate.

A servant girl curtsied as they approached, not daring to raise her eyes to meet theirs. "Magister Ramirus. How may I serve you?"

"Is Prince Andovan in?" Ramirus asked.

She nodded.

"Is he well today?"

She hesitated, then nodded.

"We would like to see him."

She looked at Colivar. "Who shall I say—"

"That I have a guest is all you need say. He expects me."

She curtsayed again, then again while moving backward to a pair of wide oaken doors, and dipped again while easing the nearer door open and slipping inside.

"Prince Andovan is a young man yet," Ramirus said, "third in the line for the throne and therefore unlikely to inherit it. Nonetheless his health is of great concern to His Majesty, who has told us to spare no expense or effort in seeking the cause of Prince Andovan's current illness, or in affecting a cure." The Magister's eyes glittered in what might have been either disdain or amusement. "It was that command which allowed us to request your presence, and because of it he had no safe ground upon which to refuse us."

Colivar raised an eyebrow in curiosity. "You brought me here to cure the son of my enemy?"

"No. I brought you here to confirm what ails him." His expression was grim. "If it is what we think it is, no man can cure him."

The heavy door swung open. It was the girl again. She curtsayed. "If you will come in, Master Ramirus, His Highness will see you."

Colivar started forward, but Ramirus caught his arm. "Don't you think you should dress appropriately for this?"

"Does it matter?"

"Perhaps not in your realm." The word *uncivilized* was all the more apparent for not being voiced. "It does here."

Colivar shrugged. His own patron didn't much care what he wore so long as he got the job done, but the northlands were notorious for their love of "proper" protocol. With a sigh he passed a hand over his own garments, weaving enough of his power into their substance to clean them, press them, and—more significantly—exchange the faded and weathered product of the clothier's art for that perfect shade of black that only magic could provide. Oh, the dyers' guild had tried to produce such a color many times over down through the centuries, but even their best efforts could not provide a black stain permanent enough to stand up to sunlight without fading. Only magic could do that.

When his shirt and breeches were as dark as black cloth could possibly be, when the midnight perfection of them was so well set that not even the high noon sun could compromise it, he thought to himself, *These cheap tricks are the coinage by which life is bought and sold. Who shall pay the price for this one?*

Together they entered the prince's chambers.

The young man inside didn't look particularly ill so much as restless and annoyed. Prince Andovan was blond, unlike the king, and had clearly inherited his good looks from somewhere other than his hook-nosed, eagle-browed father. Colivar guessed he must have been a robust youth before the mysterious illness took hold of him, and an active one as well. The Magister made note of the hunting tapestries that lined the walls, the customized crossbows that hung beside the spacious window, and a collection of claws and teeth that were framed over the bed. *Likes to be outdoors, with the wind rushing in his hair, chasing down some poor animal that only wanted a quiet noontime meal* Colivar looked at the young prince again, more discerning this time. *That being the case, he is very*

pale, even for one of northern blood.

"Is this the southerner?" the prince asked. He brushed a lock of golden hair from out of his eyes as he spoke. It was the kind of gesture that maidens doted upon. "You spoke of bringing one here, but I still don't understand the reason."

Ramirus bowed his head slightly. "Master Colivar is especially accomplished in the healing arts, Your Highness. Your father gave me permission to bring him in as a consultant."

"I would think one of Farah's Magisters would have more interest in encouraging my death than delaying it."

"Highness." Colivar offered his most respectful bow. "Our countries have been at peace for years now. I am a messenger of that peace."

"Yes, yes, yes..." The young prince waved aside the argument as casually as he might have swatted at a fly. "Magister business, I'm sure, and I won't poke into it, but you will excuse me if trusting you about my person comes hard. Most of your countrymen would as soon stick a knife in my back as measure my pulse, I'm sure you know that."

As would I, Colivar thought, but as you said, this is Magister business.

"I have told him nothing of your situation, Highness." Ramirus' tone was the very essence of formality. "I did not wish to prejudice his inspection."

"Yes, well. My father trusts you. He knows the customs of Magisters better than I, so I will respect that. So." He looked up at Colivar. His eyes were a pale blue, clear in color, but the whites were faintly bloodshot; the color of sleeplessness. "What do you need from me, Magister? I warn you I've been poked and prodded by the best; you'll be hard pressed to come up with anything new."

"A few questions first. May I?" he asked, indicating a chair near the young man. He knew Ramirus was glaring at him as he sat down, but that was his problem. Colivar hadn't come many hundreds of miles to play standing courtier to the son of his country's great enemy. In Farah's domain he sat when he wanted to; he would not honor an enemy prince with greater courtesy than he offered his own.

"Tell me of your symptoms first," he said quietly. And he settled in to listen not only to the young prince's words, but to the shadow play of memory behind them.

The young man nodded. His expression made it clear that he had told this tale many times and was wearying of the repetition. "It began a year ago, nearly to the day. I had just returned from riding. Suddenly there was a terrible weakness... that is the only way I can describe it. Like nothing I had ever felt before." He paused. "My father was most upset. He called in Master Ramirus to look at me, but by then it was as if nothing had ever happened. My strength had returned in full, and the Magis-ter said there was no sign of any illness or bodily damage to correct."

"Tell me about the weakness," Colivar directed.

The prince drew in a deep breath and leaned back in his chair. "It was as if, all of a sudden, I was very tired. Not only in my limbs, but in my very soul. Not that I lacked strength per se, but that I lacked the desire to use it. I know that seems strange. It is difficult to describe, especially now, after so much time has passed. But that is how I recall the sensation."

"There was a servant who gave me a flagon of ale. I remember holding it, and being unable to bring it to my lips. Not that it was too heavy. It was too... pointless."

Colivar's expression grew progressively darker as the story was told. "Go on," he said quietly.

"That was all that happened the first time. Father made some offerings at the temple to assuage any gods that might be displeased with me, and said not to worry about it otherwise."

"But it happened again."

He nodded. "Yes. It was not nearly as dramatic, the second time... or the third." He sighed heavily. "These days I do not recover so quickly. The spells of weakness, the days of normal strength... they bleed one into the other, till I cannot rightly sense the border between the two. Sometimes the sun shines in my soul, and all seems well with the world. Sometimes... sometimes I cannot get out of bed. And I wonder if the day will come when I truly will never rise from it again."

Colivar could feel Ramirus' eyes upon him. He pointedly did not look up to meet them.

"Others have said it is the Wasting," the prince offered. He managed to say the word without fear, which said much for his courage. The mere name of that terrible illness would have most men wetting their beds.

"It may be that." Colivar kept his tone noncommittal, his own emotions under lock and key. "Or it may simply be some disease with a random pattern of remission and recurrence. There are many of them in the southlands."

Ramirus offered, "That is why I called Magister Colivar here as consultant."

The prince spread his hands wide in invitation. It was a graceful motion, infinitely polished, that almost disguised the fear lurking behind it. *Almost*. "What do you need from me?"

Colivar held out his hands. After a moment the prince realized what he wanted and placed his own in them.

Blood flowing through warm flesh, heartbeat steady, pulse weak but regular... Colivar let his senses flow into the flesh of the prince, tasting the essence of his life, assessing the purity of his mortal shell. There was no disease there, he noted. No sign of it at all. Yes, he had suspected that would be the answer, but it was such an undesirable answer he'd been hoping he was wrong.

Diseases could be cured.

Drawing more power from within himself, he looked deeper into the prince's flesh, seeking anything physical that might cause such illness: parasite, infection, unnatural growths, unseen injuries... but there was nothing. A broken bone that had healed long ago, with fragments of memories adhering to it: a fall from a horse.

And then, only then, he looked where he did not wish to look, for the answer he did not wish to find.

At the prince's soulfire.

It should have been bright, in a man this young. There was no excuse for it to be otherwise. To say that his spirit's fire was banked low and dying was the same as saying that this youth, this attractive and energetic prince, was in fact a doddering old man.

And yet it was so.

No disease could explain it. No injury, no tumor, no parasite.

Only one thing.

He looked up at Ramirus. The man's expression was dark. Now Colivar understood why.

"Well?" the prince asked. "See anything useful?"

Colivar let go of the young man's hands. And yes, now that he knew what to look for, he could see the signs of the Wasting all over him. It took everything he had to keep his expression neutral, so that the prince could not read his emotions. That was for his own protection, of course. If he knew for a fact what was killing him, there was no telling how he would react. Or how his father would react, learning of it.

You did not exaggerate, Ramirus, when you said we were all at risk.

"I must confer with my colleague," he said slowly. "There are some diseases in the south with like symptoms. We must speak on them before I can be certain of a diagnosis."

The prince exhaled dramatically in frustration, but nodded. One did not argue with Magisters. How like a young lion he was in his aspect, Colivar thought: bold, restless, independent. If a human enemy had struck at him, no doubt he would answer the offense as a lion might, teeth bared and claws unsheathed. Yet this illness was not a thing of leonine conflict but of secrets and shadows and mysterious causes; clearly it assaulted his pride as much as his flesh that he had not yet declared victory over it.

If the answer is what I think, my prince, there can be no victory.

Colivar was silent as Ramirus led him from the room. He almost forgot to bow on the way out. When the door was shut behind them he stood there for a moment, still as a statue, trying to absorb what he had observed and its implications.

"You see," Ramirus said quietly.

"He is doomed."

"Yes."

"And we—"

"Shh. Wait." Ramirus gestured for Colivar to walk with him back the way they had come. This time Colivar did not notice the dust or the faded tapestries. His thoughts were too dark and too focused for such trivia.

When they were far enough away that neither An-dovan nor his servants could possibly overhear them, Ramirus said, "Danton suspects the truth. But he trusts me to provide a diagnosis, and I have not yet made it official."

"If it's the Wasting..." Colivar breathed in sharply. "There is no cure."

"Yes." Ramirus nodded grimly.

"And that means one of us is killing him. A Magister."

"Yes," Ramirus said. A muscle along the line of his jaw tightened. "You see now why I brought you all here."

"When Danton finds out the cause—"

"He will not." His expression was grim. "He *cannot*"

"But if he does—"

The Magister Royal raised up a hand to warn him to silence. "Not here, Colivar. This business is too private for open spaces. Wait until we have returned to my chamber, where there are wards to keep away eavesdroppers. The others wait for your input."

"And you?" Colivar challenged him. "Do you wait for my input as well?"

Ramirus looked at him. The pale gray eyes were unreadable. "The enemy of my king would not be here if I did not value his opinion," he said quietly. The narrow lips quirked into something that might, ever so briefly, be called a smile. "Do keep it from going to your head, will you?"

Chapter Four

Ethanus Remembers: She stands in the doorway, an amalgamation of opposites. Fiery red hair like a corona of flame framing a face whose strength has seeped out into the night, leaving behind the visage of a ghost. Slender frame, wiry and strong, now moving with the hesitancy of age, as if every step takes effort. Motions that are normally lithe, like the motions of a cat, now made uneasy, as if somewhere between mind and body a vital connection has been severed. Every step is conscious, now. Every movement takes effort. The sheer strain of living has marked her youthful face as it marks the face of ancient peasants. A welcome mat for Death.

Soon, he thinks. It will be soon.

"I looked within myself as you taught me," Kamala says softly. "Even that is harder, now."

"What did you find?"

"A faint spark, barely alight. Heatless. Dying."

He nods.

"You are driving me to my death."

"Yes," he says. "That is the process."

"Yet you tell me nothing of what I am to face."

"Experience has shown that telling an aspirant the truth gains him nothing, and puts secrets at risk unnecessarily. Therefore you will proceed in ignorance."

"Don't I need those secrets to survive?"

Her gaze is the one thing about her that never changes, never weakens. Diamond eyes. He meets them with brutal honesty. "No book learning can help you now, Kamala. The part of your soul that is to be tested soon is a creature of instinct, that will not benefit from intellectual knowledge. Giving it facts will gain it nothing. Some believe it even hinders the process, by distracting it from the business it must focus on.

"I have prepared you as best I can. Soon you must go off alone, to that place where Death will seek to claim you. The key to defeating him is something you must discover on your own, else it has no value." He paused. "Trust me. All other ways have been tried by Magisters, and this has proven the best for training."

And no woman has ever won that battle. Or chosen to come back, once she knew the price.

"This is how it is always done, then?"

"Yes."

"With you?"

He tries to remember that far back. "Yes. Though I was not as headstrong an apprentice as you, and I probably annoyed my Master a good deal less."

She gives him a wry smile; for a moment her face seemed young again. "Not like your house hasn't benefited from my presence."

Fair enough, he thinks, and he smiles despite himself. In his quest to find new things for her to work on he'd let her have free rein with the house. The walls veritably vibrated now with the residue of powers awakened and bound to their substance, and the result was something far more elaborate and refined than the crude stone structure he had built for himself so long ago, if not always to his taste.

If you die I will need to start chopping wood again.

"No woman has ever survived this," she says quietly. Her tone makes it clear it's a question... and it's the first time she has ever asked such a thing directly. He is about to give the easy answer when he hesitates and thinks suddenly, *No. She deserves the truth. At least that much, to take with her into Transition*

"No woman has ever been presented as a Magister." He picks his words slowly, carefully, not wanting to say too much. That is always a danger. An apprentice who learns the truth might react badly. There are a few on record from the early days, when teaching was different, who bolted and ran as soon as they were informed. One almost got away before his Magister hunted him down, and was going to spill the precious secrets he had learned to all the townsfolk, as an act of misguided philanthropy. It was a wake-up call to the sorcerous community. No one takes such chances now. "It is generally said that none of them survive Transition. I am not so sure anyone knows this for a fact. A percentage of those who gain the power of a Magister are driven mad by the process, and must be destroyed by their teachers. It may be that women have gotten that far. No one speaks of failed apprentices."

"Why are they driven mad?"

He shook his head with a faint *tsk-tsk* sound. "Now now, Kamala. You know I'm not going to tell you that."

"That's on the list of things I'll understand when I get there."

"Yes," he says.

Soon. Very soon.

She sighs, and the unbrushed corona of her hair sends a few red tendrils down across her eyes. She pushes them aside with a careless hand, not much caring what it looks like as long as it stays out of her way. Her casual disregard for her own appearance should have resulted in a less appealing creature than what stands before him, he reflects. But Nature is cruel that way, and will resign the princess in her ivory tower to a lifetime of paints and curling irons trying to mimic that natural beauty which, in a moment of whimsy, she granted a peasant-born whore. Kamala's lean and athletic frame might not please men seeking dumplings in the cheeks of their women, but any man who values the spark of fire in womankind,

whose desire to possess is aroused by independence, who is drawn to fierceness rather than languid beauty, will surely find her maddening.

If she ever walks among mortal men again, he reflects darkly. That has yet to be seen.

"So what is my lesson today, Master Ethanus? Or does it even matter anymore? Shall I simply move the clouds about, back and forth, until my athra is exhausted?"

She voices the question lightly but he does not answer her lightly. His eyes fix upon her with a sudden and disarming solemnity. Her tentative smile flickers out like a candle flame in a gust of wind.

"Yes," he says. "Move the clouds."

He sees her tremble, but she voices no questions. Good. She understands.

She goes outside. He follows her. Twilight has come and the sky is a resonant blue, agonizingly beautiful, that shivers black about the edges. The clouds are misty ghosts that gather about the face of the full moon just above the crowning of the trees. A perfect night for such an exercise.

He watches as she takes her place in the center of the clearing, facing the moon. He can sense her reaching inside herself to the source of all power, a process she once described to him as "turning one's soul inside out." He can see how much effort it takes her to do it this time, and how weak the result is. Her life force is nearly exhausted, burned out in a handful of years by magical exercises designed to empty her soul of all its natural strength at an unnatural pace. She is young still, strong in body, but almost lacking in that inner fire that keeps a human body alive. Tonight... tonight that last precious spark will go out. And if she is lucky, if she is strong, if she is above all else *determined* ... something else will take its place.

Whether she can endure living with that *something* is another question entirely.

With a grace that seems more ghostly than human she raises up her hands to the heavens, as if she would implore the clouds to move of their own accord. It is not an easy task he has set her, for despite the showy tricks of witches in drought season, weather is hard to manage. One must take the power in a single human soul and weave it into the very substance of the earth and sky, until no star shines and no breeze blows without that soul shivering in resonance. Then, and only then, can one alter small parts without unbalancing the whole.

He sees her take a deep breath. He wonders if it will be her last.

He did not plan to watch her any more closely than this, using the eyes of his earthly body and no more. But the bond between apprentice and master is strong even in mundane arts, and a thousand times stronger among those who share the secrets of soulfire. Without need for conjuring a Magister's sight he can see her power arching upward into the heavens, a blast so pure, so brilliant that for a moment it blinds him. What potential she has, his fierce little strumpet! He watches with satisfaction as she weaves her power into the substance of the wind, noting the skill with which she binds each separate layer of the heavens to her will, so that when she bids the clouds to move there will be no single wisp left behind. How well she has learned the arts of the witching folk! If only she would give way to reason, and save herself while there was still time_____

But it has been too late for that for a while now, and even as he forms the thought he sees her falter. Only a shiver at first is visible, along her outstretched arms, but inside her he knows it is as if ice has suddenly filled every vein. He remembers it from his own Transition. He remembers what kind of panic takes hold of a man's soul when the spark of life that has burned within him since birth sputters like a dying candle.

He remembers the prayers one voices—useless!—as if any god who has watched one squander one's power for years will feel sympathy for such last-minute regrets. The heart clenches in one's chest like a fist, as if fighting to keep hold of those last few precious drops of life. But by the time that moment comes it is too late. The mortal life has been consumed, and the figure of Death hovers over his newest charge, pausing but for one precious instant while the fires of the athra sputter into darkness—

He hears her scream. Not a sound voiced by her flesh, but an agonized howling of her innermost soul. It is at once defiance, fear, determination—raw stubbornness, which has always been her strongest trait. Yet even that is not enough now. *You must be willing to leave behind what you are*, he thinks, *and become something so dark and terrible that men would cringe in horror if they knew it walked among them. And you must choose that course of your own accord, without being shown the way; you must want it so much that everything else is cast aside.*

Does a man truly cast aside everything? he wonders. A woman must. Nature has prepared her to bring life into the world and nurture it, and the very essence of her soul is shaped to that purpose. Such a soul cannot manage Transition in its natural state, nor survive the trial of the spirit that will follow. Can Kamala strip herself of all that the gods gave her in making her a woman, can she hunger for life so desperately that the lives of others are as nothing to her? It is a trick men are born to, for Nature has fashioned them for war, but women must learn it unnaturally.

You were meant to bring life into the world, he thinks. *Now, to survive, you must bring death.*

She is on her knees now, shaking violently as spasms of dying engulf her soul. Ethanus can hear her desperation screaming out across the heavens. He even hears his name, voiced as a prayer—a plea for the information she needs to survive—but he makes no answer. Each student must find his own way to the Truth; that is the Magister's tradition. To do otherwise may bring weaker students through Transition safely, but it cannot make them fit for what comes after.

Forgive me, my fierce little whore. And forgive the gods, who have decreed that all birth must be agony.

And then—

He can sense it in her. A sudden awareness of something outside herself. Beyond the clouds, beyond the wind, beyond the parts of the earth that man has given names to. A source of power outside herself, like but unlike the athra whose flow trickles to a stop within her soul. She grasps at it but it eludes her. *No!* she screams. *I will not fail!* Another spark takes its place and she focuses her will upon it, desperate to lay claim to it before her flesh expires. Ethanus can taste her determination on his tongue, the sudden elation of understanding. This, this is what she was meant to discover—this foreign spark that is not soulfire, but might be bound and made to take its place. Why did Ethanus not simply tell her that? Why has he not taught her the tricks she needs to tame it? Now she must wrestle with Death even as she races to weave a link between herself and this distant power, so strong that no force wielded by man or god can ever sever it.

And he knows it before she does, when she has won. He knows because he has watched other apprentices expire at this point, consumed at the very threshold of immortality. In them the final sparks within their own souls had died before they could claim this new power, and Death had dragged them screaming into oblivion. In her... the ice within her veins cracks... the strangled heart dares a new beat... the breath that has been all but choked off by the force of her trials draws inward once again, bringing warmth to her lungs. He knows before she does because he knows what signs to watch for. She... she knows only that awareness of a foreign power throbs within her now like a second heartbeat, and that her flesh draws strength from it, easier with each passing breath.

When she is sure of what she has done, and sure it cannot be undone, she looks at him. There are tears in her eyes, red tears, for her body has squeezed forth blood in its exertions. *How appropriate*, he thinks. There were tears in his own but he wiped them away before she could notice. He does not want her thinking to question what emotions spawned them.

"I live," she says, and in that phrase are captured a thousand things unsaid. A thousand questions.

"Yes," he responds. Answering them all.

"I am... Magister?"

He gazes at her for a moment. Loving her, as he had not expected ever to love. *Look one last time upon her in her innocence*, told himself, *for you are about to destroy that innocence forever*

"You may use the power as you will," he says quietly to her, "for whatever purpose you like. You will not die. You have learned to draw your athra from other places, other sources. So it shall always be for you. When one source fails, you will find another. No Magister who truly desires life has ever failed to do so."

"Then what?" she said. "What's wrong? You spoke of a trial. Is that over?"

For a long moment he just looks at her. Fixing in his mind the picture of what she is now, before (the Truth makes her into something else. A creature of legend, by virtue of her sex. A creature of darkness, by virtue of her choice.

"But one more thing," he says. "One final lesson."

She waits.

"Know this, Kamala: that there is no source of athra in all the universe which can sustain you, save that which is contained within the souls of living men."

The distant clouds move across the face of the moon. The clearing is dark and silent.

"Now," he says, "you are a Magister."

Chapter Five

"So" Ramirus said- His voice echoed in the vast chamber like a ghost's cry in a crypt. "Prince Ando-van is dying. And a Magister is responsible." He spread his hands broadly to indicate the room, its occupants, and all that their presence implied. "You see now why I have called you here."

The one called Del made a sound in his throat that might have been a cough, or it might have been derision. "I see that the gods have played a cruel joke upon your royal patron, Ramirus. But truly, are you so surprised? Transition doesn't give a devil's ass about race, age, or station. It stands to reason that sooner or later a member of a royal family would be chosen. For myself, I'm only surprised it didn't happen sooner."

Ramirus' voice was low, as a wolf's warning growl is low. "You do not understand."

Colivar expended considerable effort not to smile. The subject matter was somber, true, but it was still a pleasure to see the Magister Royal of his enemy scorned in front of so many witnesses. A small reward for a long and dusty journey. "If I may..." He awaited Ramirus' nod with the gallantry of a courtier. "The issue here is not whether Andovan is dying, which none of us truly cares about, or even if a prince of

Danton's realm is dying—which *most* of us do not care about—but rather, what men will do in the course of that dying. Yes?"

"Precisely," Ramirus said. He nodded toward the two lamps on the mantle, forcing their wicks up higher. It was minimal compensation for the loss of the day's sunlight, which could no longer manage the narrow angle required to work its way into the chamber. In truth, the dark wood and unpolished stone of the room's vast interior made it feel as if night had already fallen; Colivar could not have guessed what the hour was. "We all know what the Wasting is in truth, and we know how hard the Magisters have worked to obscure that truth from outsiders. How many of us have not contributed toward that goal, at some point in our careers? Not granted an extra bit of fever to a sufferer, so that he might seem to be in the grips of a true disease? Or given him pockmarks or festering wounds or something else that might cause men to attribute his loss of strength to some more *natural* cause?"

"Centuries of such tricks have caused men to believe that the Wasting is exactly what we say it is—a fearsome disease, no more, no less. Even doctors, while mourning the failure of their most effective concoctions, do not search for other causes... they merely waste their days seeking some new philter or paste that will grant the sufferers comfort. While we, knowing the true cause, know that there is no comfort to be had. Once the soul of a Magister has begun to drain a man of his mortal energy there is no end to the contract that is possible, save his death."

"Well," Colivar said casually, "there's also the option of his just not using the power any longer, but it's unlikely any Magister would agree to such a thing, merely to save a life."

Ramirus nodded. "Precisely. And in this case it is no peasant we are talking about, content to die in obscurity in some mud hut while the world goes on about its business without him. This is a royal prince. He is guarded by a cadre of doctors as fierce and determined as Danton himself. There is not a cure on earth that will not be tried on him, and its effects cataloged in minute detail. There is not an expert on disease who walks this earth who will not be found and brought here, whether of his own free will or against it. Already his sire has said that there are to be no limits in money spent or risks taken to save the boy—and that may well be our undoing."

"Money can't buy a Magister's secrets," Kellam of Angarra said dryly. "And without that, they're not likely to guess at the truth."

"Are you so sure?" Ramirus demanded. "Are you so very sure? Thousands of years of folklore and superstition have attended this disease—witches on their deathbeds have been less than a hair's breadth away from discovering the truth—ignorant and drunken louts offer up paranoid ramblings in their cups that sound fear-somely accurate to peasant ears—how much will you wager that now, with a king willing pay for every stray rumor, those things will not gain a patina of respectability, and perhaps be investigated?"

"There are natural creatures that feed upon the athra," Del said. "No reason for anyone to think men are involved."

Ramirus' eyes narrowed; the snowy brows gave him an oddly feral expression, like that of an owl whose territory has been befouled. "Your education is lax, my brother. There is only one creature that is known for a fact to feed thus... and none of *that* species has been seen in the lands of men for centuries. The rest are tall tales we have created, attaching them to illnesses and conditions that have other causes, to obscure our own nasty habits. How well will those tales hold up, once a man of Danton's estate directs all his wealth and power toward investigation?"

"Sickness attacks the body," Lazaroth muttered. "A Magister attacks the soul. Any witchling worth her

salt can tell the difference—if there's reason enough for her to be looking for it."

"So," Colivar said. A smile flickered across his face before he could stop it. "Kill the prince. Problem solved." He glanced at the fading sunlight. "Just in time for dinner, too."

"Not an option."

"Why?" His dark eyes narrowed ominously. "Danton needs him? The country needs him? Those are mighty *political* concerns for a Magister, Ramirus."

Ramirus scowled. "And your suggestion isn't? What kind of bonus do you get from your royal master if you come home with word of Andovan's death, Colivar? Much less the news that you caused it."

"Gentlemen." It was Kellam. "No offense, but we *are* discussing the survival of all our kind, yes? I myself don't give a rat's prick who sits on what throne or how many sons he has, in the face of that." He turned to Ramirus. "Colivar may annoy you, Ramirus, but that doesn't mean he's wrong. Tell us why the boy can't die. And by the way, dinner isn't a terrible idea. Most of us have been traveling since daybreak."

Ramirus scowled, but he did go so far as to reach out to the bellpull that hung by the fireplace. Hospitality was hospitality. He waited until the faint, fearful knock of a servant sounded upon the heavy oak door and called for him to come in. A young boy did so hesitantly, clearly fearful of entering the Magister's domain.

"A cold supper for my guests," Ramirus told him. "Have the bell rung when it is ready." He raised an eyebrow in Colivar's direction as if curious whether he would trust the local food, or the local servants, but with a dry smile the Anshasan bowed his graceful acceptance of the offer. There was even a faint arrogance about the move, as if he were daring Ramirus to do something unworthy of a host, that he might be caught at it.

Don't dare me to kill you, Ramirus thought. *No man is proof against that much temptation.*

Not until the door was locked again and the boy's footsteps had faded from the hall beyond did Ramirus speak again.

"The problem," he said quietly, "is this. Should we move against the boy openly or even covertly now, the chance of discovery is great. Danton already has witches attending him, and several are marginally competent. How much effort does it take to trace such action? Any one of us could do it. Odds are one or more of them can do it."

Colivar shrugged. "Kill the witches."

Ramirus glared. "Have you no better advice than this? That all should die?"

"Magisters. Magisters." It was Del. "This is unseemly." He turned to Colivar. "Your tone ill befits a guest, brother."

"The manners of the south," Ramirus muttered.

"And *you*." Del's eyes narrowed as he turned to the Magister Royal. "You let this go on way too long. We should have held this discussion *before* Danton brought witches into the picture. Then we could have killed the boy with no repercussions and chalked it up to some accidental cause. Now..." he glanced back at Colivar, then to Ramirus again. "Now things are... complicated."

"Exactly," Colivar agreed. His eyes gleamed darkly in the lamplight.

"Heed me well," Fadir said. He was a husky man, broad-shouldered and muscular; not for the first time, Colivar wondered if he had been a warrior in the days before he found his power.

Feast of Souls

"In my lands this would never have happened. In my lands I never forget the line we walk, that we must never stray from. If someone threatens Magister secrets, they die. That is the Law." He met Ramirus' eyes straight on. "I agree with my brother. You waited too long." Then he looked at Colivar. "But what's done is done, yes? Now we must deal with this mess as it stands. And perhaps, when it's over with, set guidelines for our brotherhood in the future that such things will not happen again."

"Agreed," Colivar said.

"We must find out who is responsible," the one called An-shi mused.

"Perhaps," Kellam said quietly, "it is one of us."

"No." Ramirus shook his head decisively. "Do you not recall upon my invitation to you, I asked if any had claimed a new consort within the last two years? Even allowing for those who might have lied in their answers..." a faint smile flickered about the corners of his mouth "... none were even close."

"And better to lie about a more recent Transition, if one is to lie at all." Colivar mused.

"Exactly."

"So it is none of us," Fadir said gruffly. "What do you propose, then? Use the power to trace the link, find out who's eating the boy? You know that can't be done. Anyone trying to work his sorcery on a consort risks being dragged into the link and eaten himself. A piss-poor way to go out of this world, I say. Not how I intend to end my life."

"And what if we do find him?" Del asked softly. "I will not kill a brother for the sake of any morati." The reference to those who lacked the power to extend their own lives brought sneers from several around the table.

"Nor I," others agreed; a chorus of rejection. "Gentlemen." Ramirus' tone was even and firm. "That is why I brought you here, yes? So that the greatest minds that have ever mastered the athra might seek a solution together, and perhaps come up with better answers than a single Magister could manage."

In the distance, muted by stonework corridors, a bell rang.

"I believe, gentlemen, that is your dinner. I suggest we take refreshment and then retire, and meet again on the morrow to compare our thoughts, and seek a solution to this unpleasant situation together."

"Your servants seem impossibly fast," Colivar remarked. "Do you employ witches in the kitchen now?"

Ramirus glanced at him. Of the score of emotions glittering in his aged eyes, disdain was the most obvious. "I had food laid out in advance, of course." He shook his head and tsk-tsked softly. "You would do well not to underestimate me, Colivar. For some day it may be more than dinner at stake, yes?"

The night was quiet, humid and warm but not beyond tolerance. The two moons held vigil at opposite ends of the sky, lighting a marketplace that would play host to its share of whores and wastrels until daybreak. A mere human could not see them from the palace, but it took little effort for a Magister to adjust his vision, making it possible.

Ramirus stood at the edge of the ramparts, staring out into the night. Colivar watched him from a distance at first, cloaked by the shadows of the eastern tower, then moved forward with a deliberate footfall, one meant to be heard. The white-haired Magister nodded slightly but did not turn away from whatever he was watching.

Colivar took a place a respectful distance away and gazed out over the ramparts himself. It was a pleasant view in the warm, sticky evening, shadows dancing in the woods surrounding the palace and the sound of distant voices carried faintly from stragglers in the marketplace beyond. The smell of trees was thick and lush, unfamiliar to his senses. Rain was a precious commodity in the south, with monuments of sculpted stone more common than this wet and wild indulgence. Colivar was not yet sure how he liked it.

When it became clear that Ramirus had no intention of addressing him, he spoke first. "You know what they would say about you in the south? 'He feeds camel dung to family.' "

Ramirus glanced at him. "I remember when you dressed in northern furs and spent your time cursing the habits of glaciers." He looked out over the ramparts again. "I liked you better then."

"The god of chameleons has blessed me with a rare adaptability."

"A fickle god, as I recall."

"He asks little for worship, save that I live each moment for what it is, and do not cling to the past. While you, my brother, never change." He chuckled softly. "Though the beard was very impressive during the Balding Plague, I must admit."

"And each night cost someone precious minutes of his life, that I might keep it." He stroked his beard lovingly, as if it were the milk-white skin of a courtesan. "I like to think it was a woman."

Colivar looked up sharply. "Can you tell when you draw upon a woman for power?"

Ramirus shrugged. "I like to imagine that I can. The natures of men and women are so distinct that surely it must be reflected in their athra. But how can one ever know for certain? As consorts they live and die anonymous lives, faceless to us even in their dying, and our best guesses as to who and what they are can never be confirmed. Sometimes I wonder if we could do what we do, if it were otherwise."

He looked at his guest with eyes that were remarkably young for being framed in aged flesh. That, too, was a lie. "Why are you here, Colivar?"

He said it softly. "Why does the boy's life matter so much to you?"

"I told you. In our meeting."

"Camel dung."

Ramirus sighed and gazed out again at the night-shrouded landscape. "Your manners really are execrable. I don't know how King Farah abides you."

"You know the best road for us is one that ends in the boy's death. All your fancy northern words can't obscure that fact. So what, then? Why this song and dance to convince us otherwise?"

A muscle tightened along the line of Ramirus' jaw, but he said nothing.

"Shall I guess?" Colivar pressed.

"If it entertains you to do so."

"I think you are afraid."

Ramirus' expression darkened, but again he made no answer.

"Afraid of what, though? That's the question. Not physical harm, I'm sure. When is the last time anyone dared to assault a Magister? No, it must be something else. Something more... subtle. Politics, perhaps? Oh, but the great Ramirus would not stoop to get involved in morati politics..."

He said between clenched teeth, "You overstep your bounds, Colivar."

"I?" He bowed, a bit too expansively to be sincere. "I am but a weary traveler, traversing the dusty miles to give counsel to my colleagues. You are the one who summoned me here. Some might call it ill courtesy to do that, and then offer nothing better than half-truths and evasions."

"Some might remember where they are and guard their tongues, lest they give offense."

"My mere presence here is an offense and you know it. One can only imagine Danton frothing at the mouth when you first suggested it."

A faint, almost imperceptible smile quirked the corner of his mouth. "No, he did not quite... froth."

"You think I don't hear the guards slinking about my door like furtive rats, playing eyes and ears for him? I'd put on a show for them if it wouldn't burn out my current consort faster than I like."

"What do you expect? He is a king, you are his enemy's servant. Surely such actions do not come as a surprise."

"Does he really think that spies will help him? Does he really understand so little of what we are that he thinks he can sneak up on any of us?"

"Perhaps I play a more subtle game than you do, chameleon. Perhaps my patrons, unlike yours, are granted no more than a shadow of the truth."

"Perhaps."

"It is hard to kill a Magister, but not impossible. And I have known a few who were indeed 'snuck up upon,' when their attention was elsewhere." He turned his gaze to Colivar once more. "Do not underestimate Danton. Other men have done so, and they are feeding the worms."

"Magisters?"

"Not that I know of. But I have seen him drive a witch to her destruction. It was... disturbing."

"She must not have been very skilled."

"On the contrary, she was most impressive, while she lived. He played a subtle game with her, encouraging her to see enemies in every shadow. She burned herself out in a fortnight guarding against them, never knowing that he was the cause." He paused, then added thought-fully, "I wondered if she might not make Transition, despite her sex. She had the spirit for it. Wouldn't that have surprised him!"

"Not likely the moons will shine upon such a day."

"No," he agreed. "There are some boundaries that nature will not allow to be compromised."

He turned back to the forest, clearly meaning to signal Colivar that the conversation was at an end.

"And the boy?" Colivar pressed.

Ramirus sighed. "Is a royal prince. With all the complications that come of such a position. Nothing more."

More out of curiosity than need, the black-haired Magister sent a tendril of power questing toward Ramirus, to taste the tenor of his lie. The power slid neatly off him, garnering nothing. Of course.

"I think you are afraid," he repeated quietly. "I think you fear that if Andovan dies you will be blamed. Not for having caused his illness, but for having failed to cure it."

"People die of disease all the time. The Wasting is notoriously difficult to cure. It would be no fault of mine."

"Yes... and I am sure Danton is the understanding type, who will respect that answer."

The muscle along Ramirus' jaw twitched again.

"And what if Andovan should die of some other cause? A stone falls from the ceiling of his room, let us say, and strikes him on the head. Why then, the blame would still fall upon you, wouldn't it? Surely the Magister Royal should be able to foresee such things and forestall them! That is truly why you won't let us act, isn't it? That is why we risk this dangerous course, wherein all our secrets might be laid bare."

"What if he does blame me? He cannot do me harm. Though he may imagine otherwise."

"Perhaps not, but you could lose this plush position of yours."

"Then there will be others. What Magister has ever lacked for patrons?"

"When you have failed Danton Aurelius, King of all the High Countries? His word has power, Ramirus, far beyond the reach of lesser monarchs. And if he were to condemn you now as a failure—or even worse, as a traitor—with all the volume attendant upon his rank, you would not be finding a perch as comfortable as this one for a long, long time. Of course," he mused, "there are always petty chieftains in the desert who might be willing to harbor an incompetent Magister. Provided he doesn't go too close to their sons. Or their goats. Do you like the desert, Ramirus?"

"Your tone is insufferable," he muttered.

"Of course, there is another solution. Kill the boy first, and then, if the father causes trouble, kill him as well. Ah, but then the kingdom would fall to his firstborn, that strutting moron Rurick, and revolution would probably soon follow—yet another fine thing to have upon your record as Magister Royal when searching for your next appointment." He chuckled softly, a dark and humorless sound. "No, Ramirus, I would not want to be in your sandals right now, to be sure. Your reputation is about to be dashed to pieces, and all you must do to save it is convince a dozen or two Magisters that they should hunt down one of their own kind for you. And then do what? Kill him? Lock him away for the decades it will take Andovan to die naturally? Or have you come up with some solution so novel that Magisters haven't yet thought to forbid it?"

"It is my hope," he said, picking his way through the words slowly, carefully, as if each one must be formed perfectly or it would fail in its purpose, "that once we find the one responsible, we will be able to find a way to break the bond between them. He will only need seek another consort then, and Andovan will be free." Colivar applauded softly. "Excellent, Ramirus. You make that sound almost reasonable. Never mind that such a thing has never been done before—"

"It has never been attempted."

"But you will still need allies, to convince the others. Yes?"

A white eyebrow arched upward, incredulously. "You are offering that? Do I hear aright? Or did I drink too much mead with dinner, and it addles my brain?"

"Depends upon the price."

"Ah..." He nodded approvingly. "Ever the vulture, Colivar."

"We are all of us vultures. Else we would have died long ago."

"True enough."

"The word of an enemy has especial value to you in this. For when the others see that even Colivar is backing you, even the one most likely to wish you harm, that will carry more weight than the tepid support of friends, yes?"

The corner of Ramirus' mouth quirked upward in a brief, dry smile at the mention of "friends." As if there could ever be anything between Magisters besides respectful rivalry at best, and at worst... at worst that rivalry gone sour, competition become something so dark and fearsome that the morati dared not even dream of it.

Anything to pass the centuries.

"So what is your price?" Ramirus asked. "I take it you have one."

Colivar spread his hands wide. "I am a reasonable man. Some minor favor, perhaps. A word whispered in King Danton's ear, at a moment when he seeks advice."

"A small enough thing," he said dryly. "I take it you have some particular advice in mind?"

Colivar stroked his goatee with lingering pleasure; in more sensitive company it might have been judged a parody of Ramirus' own mannerisms. "I was thinking perhaps... Auremir."

Ramirus breathed in sharply. "Now you do overstep your bounds."

"Such a lovely port city, don't you think? Apparently Danton does, for I hear he means to war against its masters and take control of it."

"Ah, so your master has interests there. Good to know."

"My *patron* is not at issue here."

Ramirus raised an eyebrow. "Indeed? Are you a player in morati politics now?"

"Men die. Even princes. It is always wise to have interests that do not depend upon the good will of a single monarch... or even of a single nation."

"Very true. If not traditional Magister philosophy."

Colivar smiled darkly. "You will find I am far from typical."

"So I begin to see... and this port? You will want it for yourself?"

"Not at all. It serves me well as it is now, a tiny free state surrounded by enemies. I merely have concern that if one of those enemies should upset the balance of power in that region..."

"... it would be very bad for morati politics."

"Exactly."

"And one must always be concerned for them."

He bowed his head respectfully. "You understand my position, then."

"I understand you ask a lot," he said quietly. "Auremir is one of the most valuable ports in the Free Lands. If Danton were to have his eye set upon such a jewel—note I say *if*—it would be very difficult to dissuade him."

Colivar spread his hands suggestively. "Equally difficult to save a Magister's reputation, once such a powerful prince had fixed his royal mind upon his ruin. Yes?"

There was a long, long, silence. Finally Ramirus turned away from the ramparts, away from Colivar. A rising wind whipped his black robes about him like bat wings as he moved. "I do not see that it benefits Danton at this time to claim Auremir," he said quietly. His voice was devoid of any emotion though his aura blazed with it. "I shall advise him accordingly." And with those words he strode toward the tower, willing its heavy door to open before he reached it so that his angry stride need not be interrupted.

For his own part, Colivar bound enough power to make sure that Ramirus couldn't hear him laughing as he left.

Chapter Six

Ethanus Remembers:

It is hard to concentrate on translating ancient runes this evening. Hard to concentrate on anything.

She is restless.

Sometimes he imagines he can feel her in his soul. It is a strange and disconcerting sensation. Intimate, on levels where he is not accustomed to intimacy. Is it this way because she is a woman? he wonders. Does the bond between master and student become something more when one half of the equation is feminine? Or is he just seeking excuses to feel close to her, to avoid admitting the truth for one night more: that she is a Mag-ister now and will soon hunger for all the things that come with that rank. It is as inevitable as the summer rains and the winter snow.

"Master Ethanus?"

He looks up and sees her in the doorway. There is an odd stillness in her today; not a gentle stillness, but tense, anticipatory. He has seen similar stillness in a cat, while it paused to decide if it would eat a mouse or play with it.

Is this the day? he wonders.

She waits upon his pleasure as always, her habits as much that of servant as student. He rolls up the scroll that is before him and stands, stretching briefly. Outside it is twilight, with the moon already risen, and a faint chill that hints at autumn beneath the mask of summer warmth.

"Come," he says, "let us walk."

She falls in by his side easily, her long legs adapting to his pace. She follows him in silence down the path their feet have worn into the wooded brush on so many other nights, past deer that are just setting to their evening meal. Kamala has fed them often—a strange charity in one who now thrives upon the death of her own species—so they perk up their heads at her passing, as if to ask if today is a day when treats will be dispensed.

But no, tonight she is preoccupied, and he can feel the questions stirring inside her, as if fighting over which one will be voiced first.

Beyond the path, up the side of a rocky hill, is a promontory that gives a magnificent view of the sky and the surrounding forest, which he has used as the setting for many lessons. Now he leads her there yet again, and she stands beside him on the shelf of granite, while all around them the creatures of sunlight give way to the denizens of the night in a thousand rustling, chirruping exchanges.

They stand in silence for a few moments, sharing the beauty of nightfall.

"Why did you leave Ulran?" she finally asks.

He sighs heavily.

"If you do not wish me to ask, I won't."

"No, it isn't that. You have a right to know."

He sighs again, and rubs his forehead between two fingers. "The King of Ulran—Ambulis, his name was, Ambulis the Fourth—asked me for fireworks. You know, the kind that morati can make with black powder. Only he wanted something larger, something..."

He shakes his head. "He wanted what black powder could not provide. A spectacle that would not only fill the sky with light but awe his people with its sorcery. A spectacle so beyond morati means that all would know that a Magister had created it, a Magister who served his will..." His voice trails off into the darkness.

"And you refused?" she asks.

"No." He says it quietly. "I did not.

"It is not so easy to deny a king when one is Magister Royal. One grows accustomed to the easy luxury of the life, and to the nearness of power, to the manipulative games that are possible from such a station, but there is a contract inherent in such a position, that one is there to do a king's will, and short of defying the Magisters' Law, one is expected to comply with all his requests.

"The Law sets its own limits upon us, of course. Morati can never discover the source of our power, for if they did they would war against us with all their strength, and the earth would soon be drenched in their blood. Therefore we strive never to use our power in ways that would draw attention to our secret, and the death of too many consorts in one night would do just that. So we set our own limits on how we will use the power, and we give kings false reasons for those limits. Ironic, is it not? For if it were not for the Law we could obtain all that we desired with a wave of the hand, and not need kings at all."

He shakes his head slowly, remembering that night.

"I could have said no. I did not.

"I told him to gather all the supplies he would need were he to put on such a show himself. That angered him, for it seemed to him that I was refusing to honor his command, but of course I wished everything done by natural means that might be, to lessen the cost. And so he gathered fireworks made by the masters of the art, the best that a king's gold could buy, muttering complaints about the cost all the while.

"I could not say to him. *Gold is cheap, lives are not.* I could not give him any reason he would accept, save that it was the way of Magisters, our custom not to do for kings what they could do for themselves.

"Those were tense days, filled with anger on his part, dissembling on mine. I remember wondering if I had made the right choice in coming to this position. Wondering if any convenience that a king might offer us was worth the price.

"Then the day came. It was the celebration of a military victory, and the streets of the capital city were thronged with people. Any roof that seemed strong enough to bear the weight of men was holding more than its capacity in spectators, and I admit that I strengthened more than one, when I feared they were about to give way. Several Magisters had come from the outlying lands and were offering entertainment to the nobles while I prepared myself, and I remember watching them like a hawk from the corner of my eye, knowing that any one of them would unseat me if he could, perhaps because he truly coveted my position, perhaps just for sport."

"For sport?" she asks.

It is rare she interrupts him thus. But he can sense the hunger that is behind the question, her need to understand this alien creature called "Magister Society." *As if the very phrase itself is not a contradiction in terms* he thinks; words that attempt to conjure unity in the ranks of those who are too suspicious of each other to ever share anything, save what is necessary to guard their great Secret.

Soon, he thinks, soon she will leave me.

"We have no adversaries worthy of note outside our own ranks," he tells her. "The morati are creatures of death by their very nature and so they cannot be a challenge to us, merely... an inconvenience. A Magister need do nothing to combat a morati adversary, save wait. Choose another project, sit out a century, and Death provides certain victory. Where is the challenge in that? What is the point in indulging in such conflict, when the resolution is known from the start?"

"And so the centuries pass us by, and we know that but for our terrible Secret we could have anything we want, without limit, and our consorts die in steady pageantry, paying the price for our power and we become cold, inhuman things, because Magisters who are too human perish of their own compassion. And in the end nothing really matters except those who share the same Secret, master the same power, and suffer the same dark restlessness.

"So I saw them all there, my brothers, my rivals, and I knew that any one of them would bring me down if he could, merely because it would be a challenge to try it. They knew what I had been asked to do, of course; the whole kingdom knew. They surrounded me like vultures about a corpse, watching... waiting... hungering..."

He shook his head as if to banish the memories.

"And so the festivities began. The sun set and it was a dark night with no moons; the king had scheduled it thus deliberately. There were so many drunk revelers in the great plaza and beyond you could become intoxicated just by breathing in the air that wafted up from them, bright spirits in parti-colored costumes that flitted in and around the visiting Magisters like drunken moths, and the king beside me, drunk on his own power, on anticipation of the spectacle to come, and all the glory that his reputation would accrue

from it.

"And then it began. The morati explosions first, bursting upon the twilight sky. How magnificent they were! Yet still not enough for this king, who wanted men not only to celebrate his military victories, but to be awed by his sorcerous connections as well. And so after I had let the crowd grow accustomed to that spectacle, I lent my assistance to the efforts and increased the display tenfold in brilliance, in color, in motion... I conjured a thin mist throughout the heavens that reflected back the light of each explosion, so that color filled the skies as in the grandest of lightning storms. I wove the streamers of light into patterns that became something else, and then something else again... a woman's smile, a soldier's halberd, the coat of arms of the king. Night became day beneath my ministrations, yet even the most glorious sunset would have been hard pressed to compete with my spectacle, and even the drunken moths below stopped beating their wings, their beer and ale forgotten, as they gazed up in wonder at what their king had provided for them.

"And then... it happened. As I had known it would. You cannot redesign the heavens without great price, and even with a young and healthy consort such a thing would have been risky at best. As it was I was calling upon more athra than my consort could spare, and his death shot through me like a spear of ice, shattering my concentration.

"It is not normally such a sudden thing, or so disarming, but when one is in the middle of a major undertaking, it is quite terrifying. So much so that Magisters will go out of their way to drain an exhausted consort in privacy, in advance, rather than risk a new Transition in the middle of an enchantment. But that kind of murder had never been to my taste, and now I was paying the price.

"The light in the heavens was lost to me. My life nearly was as well. In desperation my soul struck out into the night—now made dark as my conjurations faded—seeking a new source of soulfire. In that instant, that terrible instant, all my rivals knew what had happened. Of course. They had been waiting for it, holding their breath with each new display, hoping that such a moment would come. It is the only moment a Magister is truly vulnerable, in which a man might take his life... or attempt something worse.

"I do not know the name of the sorceries that were launched at me then. Perhaps subtle things, that would only have left barbed hooks in my soul to answer to another's power in the future; perhaps less subtle things, meant to cripple or maim on levels no morati would ever see. We are a cruel people at heart, and nothing inspires cruelty more than a rival's helplessness. Meanwhile the morati world was blind to our drama, wondering only why the pretty lights had ceased, and when they would begin again.

"At last, gasping, I succeeded in claiming a new consort, drank in its athra like a desert traveler might gulp down fresh water, and drove back all those forces that were accosting me in the darkness. I think I won. Who knows? Maybe there is something still left in me from that time. Maybe some tie between myself and some rival remains... how can I ever know for sure? There is a reason we fear being around other Magisters when we change consorts... and reasons other Magisters wish to be there when it happens.

"That is why they had all come, of course. They knew, when they heard the spectacle advertised, what the cost was likely to be.

"At last I managed to come to my senses and take control of my body again. Blinking, I saw King Ambulis standing over me. There was rage in his eyes.

" 'Have you failed me, Magister?' His voice was pitched low so the crowds below would not hear it, but I knew that my rivals did. 'The sky is dark, and I do not remember ordering it so.'

"Wearily I got to my feet and turned my attention to the night again. Below me I could see the pale faces

of the visiting Magisters watching my every mood. The crowd was drunk, oblivious, screaming for more pretty lights. My head pounded from where it had struck the railing when I fell, and inside me fear was like a coiled serpent in my gut. What might my rivals have done to me, in that moment of Transition? What might they do in the next one, if Ambulis drove me hard enough to necessitate another one?

"Well?" my king demanded.

"And so I drew the life force from my new consort, alighting the night with his soulfire. A glorious display of pure death, which only the Magisters understood for what it was.

"Someone is dying for this, I thought, as my conjured lights lit up the sky. Not for martial conquest, or to create something for posterity, or even to conjure some minor luxury that I would like to possess. Someone is dying for this man's pride. Is he worth it?"

He pauses. "I left the next morning. And have never looked back."

"And have you found peace here?" Kamala asks softly.

He stares off into the night for a long time before answering.

"The woods are tranquil," he says at last. "My needs are few. My consorts die of old age, mostly... a bit sooner than they might have otherwise, but not so soon that people remark upon it. And there are no black-robed predators surrounding me, waiting for the first sign of weakness. Yes, I suppose that is peace, as a Mag-ister measures such things."

Now it is her turn to be silent. He does not need to look at her face to know what she is thinking; it is thick in the air about her.

"It's not enough for you, is it, Kamala?"

She says nothing.

"It would not have been enough for me, when I was young."

Emerald eyes stared out into the night, unblinking. "I have had dreams of late. Strange dreams." She bites her lip for a moment, remembering. "I think they are... of my consort."

Ethanus stiffens. "That is not possible."

"So you have taught me."

"What do you see in these dreams? What makes you think it is him?"

"Not a face. Nothing that specific. I just... feel a presence. And I sense the link between us. I know what he is. But I can never make out *who* he is." She looks up at him. "Is there any way to make the dreams clearer? I try nightly, but with no success."

He whispers it. "You don't want to do that."

She does not argue with him—she never argues—but her eyes blaze with a headstrong defiance he knows all too well.

"Kamala, listen to me." He takes her by the shoulders and turns her to face him. "That way is death, do you understand me? The gods were merciful when they declared that our consorts should be faceless entities, their identities unknown to us. If they were otherwise, how could we do what we do?"

"Have you never wondered about the ones that sustain you?" she whispers. "It seems to me a natural curiosity."

"Kamala..." He chooses his words carefully, knowing her stubbornness for the iron thing it is. If he cannot make her understand the whys and wherefores of Mag-ister custom it is unlikely she will respect them. "We are not human any longer, not as the morati measure humanity. We live on stolen energies, fueling a life that has long since gone cold within its own core. If there ever comes a moment when you doubt your right to claim those energies, when you regret what you must do, the link will break, and you will die."

"Do not ask for his name. Do not try to dream of his face. Please. You must trust me in this."

"Do you think the dreams are real?" she persists. "Do you think if I saw his face in them it would be the real thing? Or only a fantasy of the sleeping mind, conjured by my curiosity?"

Ethanus shakes his head, his lips tight. "I don't know. It is said that once some Magisters tried to gain knowledge of their consorts through sorcery, but all those efforts failed; no man has ever succeeded in discovering who he was bound to, by any means... but those were *men*." His voice lowers to a whisper, hardly louder than the night breeze, but as charged as lightning. "You are something new, that has never existed before. Maybe the rules will be different for you. Maybe a woman cannot kill a man without wanting to know his name. That doesn't mean it is a wise thing to seek it."

"Maybe that is why they died," she says quietly. "The other women. You said some of them might have come through Transition in the past, and died afterward."

"A speculation of mine, no more."

Her expression is grim, determined. "I do not intend to die."

"Then do not seek this knowledge."

"I have come this far already. Knowing a man's face will not kill me."

"Kamala—"

The glittering eyes are fierce. "Do you doubt me, my Master? Do you think I would give up this life—this *eternal* life—for fear of killing a single man? Do you think there is that much softness in me?"

He chooses his words carefully. "I think that when they hang criminals they put hoods on them for a reason. It is easier to kill a man you do not know."

"An executioner who falters loses a day's pay at most. A Magister loses his life. I know the difference."

How defiant she is! How sure of herself! It is a quality he has remarked upon since the beginning, the sheer stubbornness of one who survived so much adversity in her youth that she cannot imagine herself being bested by anything. It has been her armor against trials thus far, but it is a flawed armor. Those who do not acknowledge that dangers exist cannot prepare to face them.

You are not yet proven as a Magister, he thinks. Not yet gone out into the world, to be tested against your peers. Until that happens you are no more than an exercise in potential, a Magister's odd experiment... and the gods alone know what will happen to you when the others learn you exist.

"I am not your teacher any longer." The weight of the words upon his conscience is massive, but they

must be spoken. "I can give you advice now, but no more. As you trusted me once, I ask that you trust me now. You have barely set your foot upon this new road and neither you nor I know where it leads. Do not let your soul be lost to distraction. Keep to the path that is charted and safe. There will be time enough later to take chances."

Her eyes blaze with fire but she says nothing. He sighs heavily, knowing the look. For all of her discipline and obedience in matters of apprenticeship, she remains at her core what she was the first day she arrived on his doorstep: an angry, abused child, determined to take the world by the short hairs and force it to give her what she wants. And now she has the power to do so.

Gods help you when you start demanding what the world does not wish to give. And gods help any Magister that tries to get in your way.

"For now," he says quietly. "Promise me that."

There is a long, long silence. Before her Transition he would have known how it would end. Now... now there is no way to predict her.

"For now," she says at last. Her voice is solemn, but the fire in her eyes makes it clear just how short a time *now* might be.

She turns from him and starts her way down the rocky hillside, into the shadows of the forest.

He lets her go, in silence.

Chapter Seven

The Wind picked up just as the market was shutting down; its touch set the talismans about the witch's tent to tinkling, an odd and random music to herald the coming of night.

The witch called Rakhel counted the few coins in her purse and sighed. She hadn't earned much today, but that was to be expected. People didn't come to consult an oracle when their lives were going well, and the recent rains and seasonable weather had made the locals more than content. Crops were rising high and spirits with them—what need had such people of a witch's prognostications? Even the usual diseases of harvest season seemed to be avoiding the city this year, as if all of nature were determined that the city's witches should go without work.

And so it was doubly fortunate for her that the foreign Magister had visited her a short while ago. His generosity would see her through a dry season and she was grateful for that, even if she did shudder each time she handled his coins. Dark omens clung to them in a faint patina that morati eyes would never see, but she had been gifted since her birth with the ability to see what others did not, and she could not mistake it. Was that something of the man's own unique resonance, a personal darkness, or some quality that attended him as Magister? She had never been close enough to any other Magister to know. After feeling his coin, she hoped she never was close to one again. The sense of it was not right, not... not *human*.

The cloth hanging over the doorway of the tent stirred suddenly, as if something other than wind had stroked it. Startled, she looked up, and hurriedly put the handful of coins deep into her pocket. "Yes?"

The voice was male, and as smooth and fine as a deep-hued ale. "Is it beyond the hours of service?"

"Not at all," she said. "Please come in."

She stood, that she might greet her visitor properly, and smoothed her embroidered skirts down about her.

A man drew the flap aside and ducked slightly to clear the low entrance. He was a tall man, handsome in an indefinable way that had as much to do with the quality of his spirit as any trick of the flesh, and he moved with the easy grace of young adulthood. His clothes were plain but the quality of their cut was noteworthy, and though he wore no golden ornaments to proclaim his wealth, her Sight could pick out the shadows of past treasures that had once adorned him.

He piqued her curiosity, enough that she dared a whisper of true magic to know who and what he was... and her breath caught in her throat when the answer came.

Her knees folded beneath her, and before she spoke a word she lowered her head to the floor. "Your Highness."

"No need, no need," he told her. "Please, get up."

She did so, and was reassured by the half-smile on his face. It was comforting, even if her Sight could make out unnamed shadows that lay behind it.

"You know who I am?" he asked.

"A prince of the Royal House."

"Andovan. The name is Andovan."

Her heart beating wildly, she nodded. "Prince Andovan. You do me great honor, my lord. How may a humble witch serve Your Highness?"

He looked about the tent's shadowy interior, taking in its trappings. No doubt the brightly embroidered silks and talismanic ornaments which so impressed the usual customers of the marketplace were less impressive in his sight, as he had been raised to silken garments and probably played with precious gemstones like they were a child's marbles. But he did not seem displeased, and when his eyes fixed on her again she felt a shiver that had more to do with his maleness than any thought for the difference in her station.

"Rakhel—that's your name, isn't it?" He gestured toward the cushions she had set up for guests. "May I sit?"

"I... yes, my lord, of course." She hated herself for being flustered. *Imagine he is nothing more than a customer.* As he lowered himself to the thick cushions she hooded her eyes and tried to shut him out for a moment, to reclaim her professional demeanor. But inside her chest her heart was pounding. First a Magister, now a prince. What were the gods planning for her these days, that they sent her such distinguished visitors?

She could have unraveled that secret, of course, had she truly wanted to. She had the power. But it would be a complex undertaking, and the price would be high. It was easy to part with a second of your life to learn a man's name; it was another thing to offer up years of your existence for a single fragment of knowledge.

Perhaps the Magister would tell me, she thought. *Perhaps if I found him and asked him, he would be willing to use his power to help me.*

But that would make her indebted to him, and if there was anything that witches were taught from the

cradle, it was never to owe anything to a Magister.

"You don't mind if I call you by your name, do you?"

She blushed slightly as she lowered herself to a cushioned seat opposite him, with the silk-draped table between them. "No, my lord. Though I'm surprised you know it."

His smile, faint though it was, brought sunshine into the tent. "Your skill is renowned among the city folk. They say your talent is genuine, which few can claim."

His words mirrored those of the Magister but a few days before. "I have the Sight, my lord. Sometimes more than that, if more is required."

"Then you may indeed be able to serve me," he said. The smile faded and an odd, guarded quality entered his tone. "Will you See for me, Rakhel? As witches See?"

"Of course, my lord, but—" Startled, she stumbled over her words. "Do not... I mean... the Magisters..."

"You mean, I have the Magister Royal at my beck and call, and gods know how many black-robed visitors right now so why don't I go to them for help? Is that what you meant to say?"

She bit her lip and nodded slightly.

He looked down for a moment, no doubt musing over what knowledge might be shared with a commoner, witch or no. Finally he said, "The Magister Royal serves my father first and foremost, and tells him what he wants to hear. As for the rest, they are strangers to me, and their masters are rivals to my father." His eyes were blue, misty blue, like the sky just before a rainstorm. "Which of those should I trust, Rakhel? Which of those will give me an honest answer?"

"I see," she whispered.

"You..." His blue eyes were fixed on her with mesmeric intensity; she could not have looked away had she tried. "You'll tell me the truth, won't you? Even if it's not what you think I want to hear? I'll pay whatever such service costs, Rakhel. I'll see you never want for anything in your life, if you are true to me in this."

It took her long seconds before she could respond. That long to still the wild beating of her heart, and to be sure she could speak without fear resonating in her voice. "Of course, my lord." Her voice was a whisper. "It is an honor to serve you."

What truth could there be, that such men would hide it from him? What would they do to her if she got involved in Magister business? Her hands trembled in her lap; she hid them quickly in a deep fold of her skirt, hoping he wouldn't notice.

"What is it you want of me?" she whispered.

The blue eyes, misty as a morning sky, studied her for a moment. A woman could lose herself in such eyes, she thought... if the woman were not a witch, and the man not a royal prince, and the business between them not likely to be a dark business, rife with razor-edged secrets.

"I have been ill of late," he said quietly. "The Magisters pronounce it a disease beyond their healing, but I know what healing feels like, and none of them have even tried. Ask them why and they scatter like deer before the hunter's horn. I've seen the look in their eyes, Rakhel. They know more than they're telling me."

A prince learns to recognize such things."

He leaned forward over the table. "Tell me what afflicts me. Give it a name that I might call it, and I swear to you, though it be that of the Devil's Sleep itself, I will reward you for your honesty."

For a moment she could not answer. Her heart was pounding too loudly. There were too many traps here, too many potential pitfalls; which one would swallow a witch whole?

Then she forced herself to draw a deep breath—to re-

member to breathe—and told herself, *This is not Dan-ton*. The High King was infamous for taking out his rage upon those who brought him bad news. But this one? She had never heard anything like that about Andovan, or any implication that he was cruel or unjust. Women who talked about him tended to whisper and giggle in the shadows, and men just scowled and pretended not to notice his existence.

She bound a bit of power to read his intentions... and yes, he was telling her the truth, he wished only honesty. And hungered for answers so fiercely that she could taste it.

"I am no Magister," she said quietly, "but I will do my best for you."

He nodded.

She reached out her hands. He understood, and placed his own in them. She turned them palm upward and for a moment simply studied the patterns etched across his palms—a callus here, a slender scar there, the marks of an archer and woodsman and hunter who cared little for the perfumed niceties of court.

Then she looked deeper.

As soon as she entered his flesh she could sense the weakness in him. It was an odd kind of weakness, one that seemed to have no source, yet anywhere she looked the signs of it could be found. The flow of his blood was like a stream in midsummer, narrow and hesitant, its course clearly marked for a more powerful current. Yet there was nothing choking off its flow that she could find. The drumbeat of his heart was odd, strangely muted, yet she sensed no malfunction within it. The very muscles themselves seemed to lack in youthful resiliency, but there was no cause for that either: not disease, not parasite, not inborn flaw that she could find, not anywhere.

Then she looked at his soulfire... and gasped.

Low, so low! Like a bonfire dying, its last feeble embers shrouded in dust. As soon as she touched it she could feel its terrible *wrongness*, and she knew that here was the heart of his illness, its name if not its cause.

It was said among witches that one should never gaze too closely at the soulfire of a stranger, lest it sear one's soul to ashes. Yet it was impossible not to look. She had heard of conditions where the soulfire would expire before its time, but had never had the chance to study such a thing herself. Could the athra be healed like the body was healed, by correcting the cause of its weakness? If she could probe deeply enough to find out what had caused this, could she make him whole? It was said that witches were better at healing than Magisters, that their nature was better suited to that art; might it be that she could succeed where all the king's ministers had failed?

Trembling, she wrapped her special senses around the dying flame, tasting its essence. Deep inside it she could sense a spark of true heat that might perhaps ignite the whole anew if she prodded it, but the outer boundary was a wispy, shadowy realm that already tasted of Death. It was as if he was already an old

man, dying, but without any cause of the flesh to show for it. Yet there must be a cause somewhere, she thought. Men did not die for no reason.

Gathering her will together, drawing on the strength of her own soul for power, she gazed even deeper into the heart of the dying prince. Beyond the outer boundaries of the soulfire where strangers should hesitate, into that central core of the soul's strength, where all living energies were born—

And she sensed something then. Something rooted within the prince's weakened soul, that led... elsewhere. In all her years of witchery she had never felt anything quite like it, nor even heard rumors of such a thing. The soulfire was by definition self-contained, and among the morati never extended beyond the bounds of flesh; yet here was something that undeniably led *elsewhere*, outward from his flesh, to... what? Where did it go, this tenuous connection, that had no solid conduit to lead it? Fascinated, she drew upon the full strength of her power to taste its true essence, to learn its name—

And the breath was sucked out of her lungs by a crushing force that seemed to come from all directions at once. Instantly she tried to draw back from the prince's soul, but could not; it was as if some invisible power had grabbed hold of her and would not allow her to leave. Even if he had been a master of the athra the prince could not have done it himself; no, there was something else connected to him, someone else connected to him, and the witch could feel that alien will wrapping itself about her own essence, tendrils of power like hungry snakes piercing deep into her flesh, seeking the tender soul within.

She screamed. It was a horrifying, empty sound, even in her own ears. Maybe Andovan moved in response, or maybe he just stared at her in amazement. She could no longer control her own senses enough to observe him. Something had gotten hold of her soul and was drawing it out of her body, leaving the flesh behind like an empty carcass. She struggled against it, but to no avail; her soul was as a fish caught in a net, spasming helplessly as it was drawn up into the suffocating air. Black stars danced before her inner vision; she tried to scream again but the breath would not come.

"Rakhel?" She heard the voice as if from a great distance, and could not respond. Was it Andovan talking to her, or her friends from the market? Her screaming must have brought many. "Rakhel, what is it?"

The world was growing dark now, her struggles less intense. The fire within her that would fuel greater efforts was weakening, its substance drawn out of her flesh by that terrible alien power. It was hungry, terribly hungry, and it tore at her essence the way a starving animal tears at raw meat. She could feel herself bleeding out into the night, into the cold, eternal darkness of Death that beckoned to her.

Desperate with dying, she tried to reach out to the source of the assault. To go forward with strength, instead of struggling to hold back.

And then she saw.

And she knew.

"She's killing you!" she whispered hoarsely. The words echoed strangely, as if from a great distance. Was she speaking them aloud? The picture came to her of a slender young woman with hair like a corona of fire about her pale face. She tried to send the image to Andovan, but her power was weak and she had no way to know if she succeeded.

A roaring filled her ears then as the last of her athra left her, drawn out by that same merciless hunger that was devouring Andovan. She no longer had the strength to resist it, or even to try. Slowly her eyes shut, closing out the last of the worldly light. Slowly her inner senses waned, as the flame of her soul banked low, shivered weakly, and then began to dim.

I'm sorry, she whispered. Soundless words, lost in the dying. *I'm sorry*. As if somehow the act of dying was her fault. As if somehow it should merit apology.

And then the last of her athra was gone, and there was only darkness.

Chapter Eight

She is *killing him*." Ramirus said it slowly, then stressed the first word anew. "*SHE*."

The pronoun hung heavy in the Magister's conference chamber, surrounded by knife-edged silence.

Finally Del spoke. "It could be a witch that's responsible for this, somehow. Maybe that's what the seer meant."

Fadir nodded. "It is not impossible to imagine that some quirk of the power might exist that would allow a mere witch—"

"To what? To draw upon the soulfire of another?" Lazaroth's expression was dark. "If that were the case she would be a Magister, plain and simple. Is that not the very definition of our kind?"

"Perhaps this illness isn't truly a Wasting," Fadir persisted. "Perhaps it's something that appears similar, but stems from another cause."

Ramirus' gaze was narrow and dark. "Andovan suffers from the Wasting. There is no doubting that."

"No." Colivar's tone for once was brooding and thoughtful rather than derisive. "It was the Wasting, without question. I examined him myself."

"So that means there is a Magister involved, yes? And we are back to the same problem."

"Perhaps some woman was the initiating factor..."

Severil snorted. "In what sense? Do you suggest someone convinced a Magister to take Andovan as consort? If so she's more adept than any of us, since I myself have never heard of any Magister able to dictate who his consort would be... or even to discover its identity after the fact."

"So what are you suggesting—a female Magister?" Lazaroth's tone was harsh and derisive. "I for one find the idea quite insane."

"Agreed!" another responded, and a third muttered, "Impossible!"

Fadir nodded curtly. "If such a thing could exist we'd have learned of it long ago."

"There are many possibilities here," Ramirus said evenly. "Including, of course, that the witch who spoke to Andovan may simply have been wrong. Or perhaps another female intends to do the prince harm, and she picked up traces of that intent instead of the true cause of his illness. An equal threat, having nothing to do with his current... condition." He sighed, and for a moment weariness flickered across his white brow. "Of course, even if that were the case, the damage has already been done. Danton knows of the interview, which means that probably half the gossips in the castle do as well, so it will soon get out beyond that. Andovan has the Wasting and a witch caused it... that is a bad connection for people to be making, even if the exact details are in error."

"Someone tried to bring a woman through Transition once, didn't they?" Kellam asked. "I seem to

remember hearing something about that."

"Someone always tries," Colivar responded. "When they think they find the right candidate, or the right method of training... or else they just get bored. It never works." He chuckled coldly, a sound utterly with-

out humor. "Women apparently don't have what it takes to devour human souls."

"What about that one down in the Free Lands?" Se-viral asked. "That... what do they call her... the Witch-Queen?"

"In Sankara," Ramirus supplied. Colivar noticed Ramirus' eyes turn to him, suspicion suddenly dark in their depths. Had he only just realized that Sankara bordered on Auremir, and that in keeping the latter city-state out of Danton's hands, Colivar was effectively protecting Sankara itself? If so, the black-haired Magis-ter observed, the stress of the situation with Andovan was clearly making him sloppy. The old Ramirus would never have missed that.

Colivar shrugged. "She's a witch. Powerful, ambitious, dangerous as all the hells combined... but still just a witch."

"You know her." Ramirus' tone was an accusation.

Again he shrugged. "She has a standing invitation to any of our kind who pass through her domain to partake of her hospitality. Have you never been down there yourself, Ramirus?" Colivar shook his head in mock disapproval. "You really should get out more often."

"I've been down there," Kellam said with a dry smile. "She tried to bed me."

"And you said no?"

"I hear that's not so easy to do," Thelas offered. "I hear she has potions that can turn a man's mind to whatever she desires."

"I hear she collects the balls of Magisters as keepsakes."

And she likely has taken all of you for lovers, at one time or another, Colivar thought, though none will admit that fact to all the others. Of all the Magisters in this part of the world, he suspected that only Ramirus had no concourse with Sankara's ruler. Did the Magister Royal recognize their banter as the misdirection it was, or did he genuinely not know how many of his brothers had ties to Sankara? The latter seemed unlikely. But then, these were unlikely times.

"Brothers." Lazaroth's voice was firm. "We are forgetting the real issue here, are we not?"

"Are we?" Ramirus said softly. His eyes were fixed on Colivar. "I am not so certain of that."

Colivar shrugged again; his face was pointedly devoid of any expression another man might read.

"Investigate her if you like. I tell you now I don't see anything she would stand to gain from the illness of Danton's third son... he is unlikely to inherit much of anything with Rurick strutting around, but by all means, seek the truth."

"Would you care if I did?" Ramirus said softly. "Would you care if that truth were... not favorable to her?"

Colivar's eyes were hard and cold, the gaze behind them as black as a moonless night. "Siderea

Amines-tas is morati," he said shortly. "Her lifetime is no more than the blink of an eye compared to ours. The shifting of a vagrant breeze that greater winds will swallow. It matters little when that breeze expires, in the face of greater storms. We who mold the storms know that."

"And we don't yet know she is the one responsible for this," Kellam pointed out. "Or have any more evidence than the simple fact she is powerful enough among morati to draw our notice."

"And she is also a suitable target for Danton's ambitions," Fadir reminded them. "Let us not forget that, shall we?" He turned to face Ramirus. "Those of us outside Danton's domain have taken note of his political ambitions. Sankara would be a jewel in any conqueror's crown. I for one would take it poorly to be dragged into an investigation whose true purpose was discrediting a morati rival to your wretched royal house."

The snowy brows drew together in fury. "Do you accuse me of manipulating this brotherhood for morati politics?"

"Please!" Lazaroth raised up a hand sharply between them. "We're not children here, nor are we fools. There's not a Magister on the face of the earth who has not manipulated his fellow Magisters for the sake of some morati prize at one time or another. Let's not waste time pretending it is otherwise."

"Indeed," Severil noted. "If the morati didn't amuse us, if their political games didn't keep us occupied, why then we would have nothing to concern ourselves with but each other... and I for one would go stark raving mad."

A dark amusement glittered in Colivar's eyes. "Yes, we are piss-poor company for one another, are we not?"

From a shadowy corner of the room, Suhr-Halim said quietly, "What attempts have been made to seek more information on this mystery woman?"

"You mean using sorcery?"

He nodded.

"Too much danger in that," Kellam said. "If Andovan suffers from the Wasting, as our host claims, any attempt to trace the cause by sorcery would be a fatal enterprise. As it appears to have been for this witch he consulted."

"Witches die," Colivar pointed out. "Usually in the midst of some magical enterprise, since that is ultimately what kills them. Has anyone confirmed exactly why this one expired? Or are we all just making assumptions?"

Silence fell over the table.

Feast of Souls

"Well then." He leaned back in his chair. "I think that should be the first order of business."

"Are you offering your services?" Ramirus asked him.

The black eyes glittered in the lamplight. "I would not presume to step forward in a matter you are obviously well qualified to handle. Some Magisters might deem that an insult, yes?" He chuckled softly. "Far be it from me to insult anyone."

"There are means that can be applied without undue risk," Suhr-Halim pointed out. His accent was more noticeable than most, with a lilting rhythm that hinted at vast expanses of desert sands beneath golden sunsets. "To examine the prince's fate in a general sense, to seek knowledge of his past associations... if this woman is significant to him she could surely be found there. It would not be a dangerous undertaking so long as one did not seek to trace the consort's bond directly."

Lazaroth looked pointedly at their host. "Ramirus, this is your affair, I assume you would be willing to attempt this?"

The challenge hung thickly in the room's still air for a moment. Colivar resisted the urge to either bait Ramirus or come to his rescue. The first would have been excessive at this point and the second simply out of character. Instead he waited, which was a kind of challenge all by itself.

Finally the white-haired mage said quietly, "I will attempt it." His voice was low and even but the look he shot Lazaroth was murderous. Colivar repressed a smile of amusement. Yes, there were ways to seek out such information without running the risk of getting sucked into a consort's bond, but Ramirus had never been the innovative type and it was doubtful he would come up with anything truly creative. Perhaps when enough nights had passed that the Magister Royal became embarrassed over his lack of progress, Colivar might suggest a few. For a price, of course.

My, the game just gets better and better.

"Then it is decided." Lazaroth pushed his chair back, scraping its wooden legs noisily against the stone floor. "With no offense to this company, I see no reason to continue with this discussion until our host has completed his investigation. When he has done so, hopefully we will have some real facts to deal with, not just sorcerous fairy tales about hypothetical creatures." He looked around at the other Magisters, his lips quirking slightly in what could only be distaste. "Frankly, the company here... wears thin."

He bowed slightly to Ramirus as he left, a formal gesture not one inch deeper or more sincere than strict protocol required, and left the room. After a moment, with similar leavetaking, Fadir followed. Then Thelas. Then Kellam.

At last there were only Colivar and Ramirus in the room. Colivar was still comfortably ensconced in his chair, and remained in that position as the Magister Royal's cold, steely gaze fixed upon him.

"If I ever find out you were part of this," Ramirus warned, "or that this Witch-Queen of yours was behind it somehow and you knew about it—or even suspected it—so help me gods, Law or no Law, I will have your head. Do you understand me, Colivar?"

"I am as much in the dark as you are," the black-haired Magister responded. "And equally anxious to find out the answers. This matter threatens us all, does it not?"

For a long moment Ramirus just stared at him. Perhaps he was secretly binding power to read Colivar's intentions. If so, Colivar was confident in his own defenses. No man walked into a meeting of Magisters without first making sure that his own mental armor could not be pierced.

He wondered how many of those present had been probing for each others' secrets even while they spoke of other things. What a tapestry of power must have been woven this night, connecting all the Magisters like the sticky strands of some vast spider's web! He almost regretted he had not joined in the game himself, for the sheer entertainment of it. But he much preferred reading men by subtler means—some might say by *morati* means—and he had never cared for working superfluous sorcery in the company of his own kind. Yes, in theory the Magisters were all here under a flag of truce, but he did not wish to wager his life on how well that truce would hold should one of them fall into that defenseless

state which accompanied Transition. A thousand spells might be woven about a man in the instant it took him to claim a new consort, and Colivar had no intention of inviting such an assault while he was surrounded by his fiercest rivals.

Imagine what it would be like, he mused, // we really could control that bond! Imagine what it would be like if a Magister could cast loose his current consort at a convenient moment, before its athra was completely ex-hausted, and so choose the time and place of his next Transition.

Would we spare their lives then, if we could? Or simply choose the moment that best suited our own convenience, with no thought for the ones we were destroying? If it was no longer necessary to kill a consort to stay alive, would we continue to do so out of habit? Or not even care enough to question it?

The questions were oddly disturbing. But they were also a novelty, and novelty was always welcome in a Magister's life. When one lived as long as Colivar had, divorced from all the normal rhythms of human life, one understood that the greatest danger lay not in the treachery of rivals, or even the possibility of sorcerous mishap—it lay in boredom, and the tricks a human mind might play upon itself when it had no outside matters to occupy its attention. *No fear of that now*, Colivar thought dryly.

Chapter Nine

As soon as Ethanus saw the woodpile, he knew. It was stacked twice as high as usual, with a neatness rare even for Kamala. The pieces had been fitted together with almost artistic grace, like the interlocking stones of the wall they had built around the house so long ago, and the ends butted up flush against an imaginary plane, each one exactly the same length as the next.

He wondered if she even knew she had done her work differently that day... or the reasons for it.

He did.

She was waiting inside. Like the woodpile she was neat and tidy, her normally wild hair tamed to a simulacrum of civilized style, her clothing scrubbed clean of any hint of labor or exertion. Her wide eyes fixed on him as he entered, and he reflected for a moment upon how very beautiful they were, and how much he was going to miss looking at them. Even her fingernails were clean; that was the first thing he had taught her to do, back when he had finally accepted her as a student.

"Master Ethanus—" she began.

But he raised a hand to quiet her. "I'm a bit thirsty, Kamala. Are you? It's a dry day."

He walked by her and went to the fireplace, where a kettle was waiting. It was far easier to focus on something else now, something that had no feelings attached to it, so he fixed his attention on the kettle. He peered inside to see steam rising from the surface of the water within and nodded his approval. He reached for two ceramic cups from the shelf and set them to one side, then fetched the box of herbal tea he kept by the mantle. He put one pinch in each cup, put the box away, and took tip the kettle. He poured hot water over each portion, slowly, watching the dried leaves swirl in the current.

All in silence. Trying not to think. Trying not to feel.

At last, when the ritual was concluded, he brought the cups to where she sat and handed her one. The tiny leaves bled color into the water slowly, gracefully, and the aroma of the herb filled the small house

like perfume.

"So it is time for you to leave me," he said quietly. Not a question.

She bit her lip for a moment, staring silently into her teacup, then nodded. "I've learned so much from you, Master Ethanus. And from this place. But there are things I cannot learn here."

He grunted softly and sipped his tea. It was safer not to say anything.

"You could come with me," she offered.

They both knew the answer, so he said nothing, just drank his tea in silence.

Why is this so hard? He wondered. By the time my other apprentices left me I was practically ready to throw them out of the house. Why is this one so different?

When she finished her tea she swirled the leaves about in the bottom of the cup and studied their pattern. That was the Seer in her, playing at witchery. From where he sat he could see a simple circle. The wheel of fate. *Time passes, things change, all things have their proper moment.*

"The power burns inside me like fire," she said quietly. "Some nights I think it will consume me if I do not give it an outlet."

"You know the danger in that."

She nodded.

"You must be master of the soulfire, or you will become its slave."

Outside the sun was beginning to set; a random shaft of light flickered in through the window to illuminate her red hair briefly, like a halo, then was gone. Ephemeral beauty. Too wild to be that of an angel, too perfect to be anything less.

"You are a child of the city streets," he said quietly, "of the reeking mob with all its tensions, of casual violence and hot tears and the clamor of multitudes living in despair. You left those places to gain the power that would enable you to survive them. Now you have it and it stands to reason you would want to return. To test yourself."

She nodded.

"I fear I have given you very little to help in that regard." He drank the last few drops of his tea and set his cup aside. His own leaves huddled damply in the bottom, an uninspirational lump. "Perhaps you should have sought out something better than an old hermit for your teacher."

She came to where he sat and knelt before him. Her warm hands took his own in a loving grasp. The long, slender fingers were calloused at the tips, marked by past labors she was too proud to disown. She could have any skin she wanted now.

"You," she whispered, "have given me life, and power, and the hunger to devour all the knowledge the world has to offer. What more could I ask from any teacher?"

"I have not prepared you well for the outside world."

"Ask rather if the world is prepared for me."

Despite himself he smiled. "The Magisters will not welcome you."

Mischievous energies flashed in her eyes. "And I have made myself welcome before, where men did not desire me to be. Yes?"

He sighed, catching her fingers in his own and squeezing them tightly. "Don't underestimate them, Kamala. Men who exist in a private world without women do not take well to its invasion. Not to mention that your very existence puts a lie to much of what they have been taught about the power. And proud men do not like to be corrected."

The proud eyes glittered defiantly. "Are you suggesting I hide from them?"

"You? Never." A faint smile creased the corners of his mouth. "Just... be careful. Be discreet. You can be discreet, can't you? Pass as a witch for a while, at least until you get your bearings. Don't let them know something new has come into the world until the announcement can be made on your own terms." He paused, and when she said nothing, "Will you promise me that?"

"As much as fate allows me to control such things," she said quietly.

"They will put you to tests once they know. Tests they intend you to fail. Tests that will draw blood from your very soul." His eyes met hers and held them. "They will *want* you to fail. You must understand that. Your very existence upsets the order of the world as they have been taught it. Once they acknowledge you as Magister they may no longer seek your life—that goes against the customs of our kind—but anything else is fair game. And if they can prove to themselves that you are not truly a Magister, but an imposter, a witch with no more than a few fancy tricks and pretensions of grandeur, then they will hunt you in earnest for the sheer sport of it."

The diamond eyes narrowed slightly. Her tone became solemn. "My teacher... I was sold on the streets before my adult teeth came fully in, and I survived it. I lost my mother to the Green Plague soon after that, and also my home, and I survived it. I have seen such trials and known such cruelty as I will not speak of, and been tested against the darkest, most base instincts of mankind... and survived it all." She stroked his cheek gently with a calloused finger; the corners of her mouth quirked into a smile. "What makes you think I can't handle a passel of Magisters as well? Maybe I, too, would enjoy the sport."

He caught up her hand in his own and squeezed it. For a moment there was something in her eyes too tentative for words that held his own gaze captive. For a moment—just a moment—she was a woman before him, and all the barriers he had placed between them so that they might function properly as student and teacher ceased to exist. He was suddenly very aware of her body—the warmth of her hand within his own, the faint scent of pine wood that clung to her fingertips, the rise and fall of her breath—and of a question in her eyes that was all the more powerful for not being voiced.

No, not a question. An offer.

Remember me, they seemed to say, *for all I have been to you. And more.*

Slowly, carefully, he put her hand down and released it. A faint sheen of moisture remained upon his palm, perfumed with her sweat. He resisted the urge to raise up his hand nearer to his face, to breathe it in.

Already it seemed to him that her presence was fading from the house and for a moment he wanted nothing more than to drown himself in it so that he would never forget her.

And then the moment passed, as such fantasies do, and he shook his head ever so slightly, answering

them both.

"You were my most gifted—and exasperating— student. And I will always think of you as such."

"That is not Magister tradition," she said softly.

"No," he agreed. "It is not."

He took a ring off his finger. It was a thin silver band given to him many years ago, one of the few adornments he had kept when he left Ulran. He put it into her hands and folded her fingers over it. "With this you can speak to me if you have need, and even come to me, without having need to drain an army of men dry of athra to do it."

"And we are not to be rivals? Antagonists?" Her eyes were teasing but her tone held a note of uncertainty in it; which of the two spoke for her heart? "Is that not Magister custom also?"

"It is," he agreed. "And the morati world would be a lot better off if it weren't." He picked up the two teacups and rose from his seat, swishing them about one last time to see if the leaves within had any final messages to offer. "However, as I am already an exception to the rules by living as I do, and as you are one by your mere existence, I don't think breaking another rule is likely to upset anything." He raised an eyebrow and looked back at her. "Or that you would give a damn if it did."

She grinned at that and the fire blazed in her eyes and the stolen heat of her soul warmed his face like a bonfire.

Yes, he thought, with an ache in his heart, it is time for

you to go. A fire that bright would burn down any house that tried to contain it.

May the gods help the Magisters if they make an enemy of you.

Chapter Ten

Midnight. The breeze had stilled long ago and summer's heat lay heavy in the courtyard. The guards spoke little as they exchanged places, new soldiers taking up the pole arms and banners of the old in preparation for their turn at vigil.

Atop the keep, at the uppermost ramparts where only the royal family ever wandered, a figure stirred. The guards might have seen it if they were looking up, but they were not. Their job was to see that no enemies attempted to scale the building to the height where narrow walkways flanked by crenellated walls might facilitate invasion. That was the theory, at least. But as no enemy had ever gotten past the outer walls to attempt such a thing the reality of their service was somewhat more mundane, and the captain of the guard sighed heavily as he anticipated yet another night of prodding would-be lovers out of the nooks and crannies that the royal servants persisted in using for their trysts.

The captain's eyes scanned the shadows below even as the figure above him moved, ghostly smooth, to the edge of the highest rampart. Had the captain looked up he might have seen the flash of blond hair in the light of two gibbous moons, and perhaps his heart might have caught in his chest for a moment as he realized who the figure must be. Only one member of the royal line had hair that color.

But he did not look, and the figure was eerily silent, so the motion went unnoticed.

The figure above was dressed in dark colors, like a man who did not wish to be seen or disturbed. He appeared from nowhere, it seemed, as if drawn from the substance of shadow itself, but the moonlight solidified him as he climbed to the highest point the castle had to offer. It was an archer's nest atop the north tower, one of four narrow structures that marked the cardinal points of the structure.

There he stood for a moment, silent and still, as if contemplating what was to come. Or watching the guards below, perhaps, waiting for a moment when there were no men near the base of the tower.

When the moment came he spread his arms as if to embrace the night, and if anyone had been close enough to see his face, they might have seen fear flicker across it, a fleeting and furtive shadow.

Then he jumped.

It was a long drop to the stone walkway below. The impact was sharp and short and bloody, and brought the guards running with their weapons drawn. The captain was among the first, crying out the alarm as soon as he saw the body. His heart was like ice in his chest, imagining what Danton's response would be if he thought he had failed in his duty—he feared the High King more than he feared any enemy—but years of training made him capable of focusing on the moment at hand in spite of everything. *Sound the alarm. Search the grounds.* The body had clearly fallen from above, which meant from within the castle itself. *Make sure there is no enemy hidden inside, seeking another victim.*

Then one of his men turned the body over, far enough to reveal what was left of the face, and the captain froze. One side of the face had been crushed by the impact, but there was enough left whole to allow for identification.

Andovan.

Those inside the castle were stirring now, responding to the alarm. Lamps flickered to life in the narrow arrow-slit windows as voices shouted orders within. After a moment the great bell in the south tower started to toll, warning all who sheltered within that there was an enemy at large. Let those who were capable take up their swords, and those who were not lock their doors and wait for word.

The captain stood by the body of his prince, trembling slightly in anticipation of Danton's rage, wondering if perhaps his career as a Royal Guard was about to come to a bloody and unpleasant end.

"Sir?"

He blinked twice, then looked toward the guard who had addressed him and nodded for him to continue.

"He's got something in his hand."

The captain looked down at the body once more. Indeed it did seem there was something clasped in An-dovan's hand—crumpled paper with writing on it—a note perhaps?

"Shall I take it up, sir?"

"No." He said it quietly, in the manner of a man who knows the next hour is going to be bad, and what is on one piece of paper will not make it better. "Leave it for His Majesty to deal with." Ramirus would be checking the castle for intruders even as they spoke; it was the kind of thing best done by Magisters. If there was an intruder, Ramirus would find him and deal with him.

If it was one of the foreign Magisters—as it well might be—that could take some time. The captain had never been happy about having so many strangers within the castle, least of all the type that could walk through walls or strangle a man with a thought. What if one of them was responsible?

Only when all that was done would the gates be opened. And the High King Danton—who was called Danton the Fierce, and Danton the Cruel, and sometimes Danton the Unforgiving—would come to see the bloody remnants of his royal seed, and would decide what was to be done.

My Father—

Forgive me.

I know the name of my illness, though none will speak it aloud. I know the manner of death that awaits me, the growing weakness that turns a vital man into an invalid by stages, and I know that none can cure it. I know that at most I have a few years left of life, while my soul's fire flickers and dies within me, leaving me no more than an empty husk of flesh into my last hours.

Forgive me, father, that I choose a swifter death this night. Forgive me that I choose to be remembered by you as a prince in the prime of his life rather than as a dying shell of a man who lacked the strength to leave his bed. Forgive me most of all that I did not seek your counsel in this, for I knew that you would forbid me such an act and cling to hope until time had drained me of the last of my living energy and left me to die that terrible death.

There is no hope. Not for this disease. A thousand generations of men have declared it so, and even these many Magisters you have brought here cannot make it otherwise.

Forgive me, my father. Remember me for what I was before I died, and take comfort in the time we had together, for it was precious while it lasted.

Now the gods have decreed that time is to be ended, and no man may stand against their word.

Andovan

King Danton was not a gentle man at the best of times. Now, with his swarthy countenance distorted by fury, grief, and utter shock, he could have stood among the demons of the nether gates without drawing notice. Indeed, in his current mood they might have been hesitant to stand too close.

No mortal man dared approach him. No man dared speak. Not even the Magisters who flocked about the scene like curious carrion-birds—some of them quite literally, having chosen bird form as the safest means of overseeing the scene in the courtyard.

Even Ramirus was silent. The greatest Magister of the greatest human kingdom knelt by the side of his prince's body, weaving what magics he could to determine the cause of the tragedy. It was a dangerous undertaking, given the risk of connecting with a Magister's consort, even as a corpse. For all he knew the bond between Andovan and his killer had left some anchoring trace in the prince's soul, and if in seeking answers he were to make contact with that conduit, he might well become food for that unnamed Magister himself.

All of which could not be explained to Danton, of course. The only concepts the High King understood were outrage, failure—and blame.

"Who did this?" he demanded. "Who did this to my own flesh and blood? I will have his head!"

The Magister Royal spoke quietly, hoping his tone would help calm the man, knowing in his heart that it wouldn't. "I do not see any signs that force was used on him, Majesty. There are no traces of violence on the body, save his own final act." He looked up at the king. "I can tell you no more from his body. I am sorry. The power we draw on is a thing of life, and once life has left the flesh there is little left to be analyzed."

Danton made a sound low in his throat that might, in a lion, be deemed warning growl. "I don't want your excuses, *Magister*. Only answers."

Ramirus' jaw tightened as he regarded the body again. There was no answer he could give Danton that would satisfy him, he knew that, but failing to provide answers at all was an even greater risk. "Despair clings to his body like a shroud," he said at last. "Not the despair of a single moment; that would have dissipated by now. This is something longer lasting, something of more significance." He stopped at that. No need to state the obvious.

A flicker of pain—or was it anger?—crossed the High King's brow. "My son was a strong man. Not a coward. He would not have let a *disease* defeat his spirit."

He would have if he knew the source of that disease, Ramirus thought. *If he understood that he had been reduced to the status of milk cow in some Magister's herd.* "What is in the note, Majesty?"

The dark eyes fixed on Ramirus with unabashed hatred. For a moment it looked like Danton was about to say something, but finally, with a snort, he simply passed it over.

Ramirus read. He kept his expression steady as a stone as he did so, aware that not only Danton was watching but also Magisters that he might consider enemies.

Then, when he had finished, he drew in a deep breath and read again. Binding a whisper of soulfire to learn the essence of the letter—who had written it and why—tasting the tenor of the words, judging their truth.

It seemed the whole courtyard was frozen while he did so. Even the birds did not stir, waiting for his judgment.

Finally Danton had had enough. "My son did not write these words," he said hoarsely.

"I am sorry, Majesty." Ramirus' voice was a whisper. "He did."

"Then they were forced upon him." The dark eyes narrowed suspiciously. "One of *your* kind took control of him, perhaps. There are enough of them here now, yes? And some hardly friends of my throne. Do you know for a fact it was not one of them? *Can* you know that?"

Ramirus drew in a long, deep breath before responding. The truth of the letter was clear, and it was a truth Danton would never accept.

"There is no sign of coercion about this paper," he said finally. "The words that are written here came from his heart, which no man controlled, and flowed through his willing hand to the paper. Nowhere is there trace of any other motive or cause." He looked up at Danton. "I am sorry, Majesty, but that is the truth."

With a roar the High King snatched the letter out of his hand. "*You!* I bade you cure him. Did you do that? I ordered you to *protect* him! Is this what I receive? Is this the service you promised me when I offered you patronage?"

"Majesty—"

"*SILENCE!*" In a fury he looked about at the birds, his dark eyes piercing through them as if he knew who each and every one of them were and what they were thinking. One of them stepped back a bit as the malevolent gaze fell upon it, a motion more human than avian.

"These!" Danton cried. He pointed at the birds. "I want them out of my kingdom! You understand? These and all those that came with them. Playing at consultation while my son's spirit died within him. Did you laugh about that in the shadows," he demanded of the birds, "while he wasted away? Perhaps some of you helped my son along in his despair? What a crowning glory to take home to your own masters, Danton's own son destroyed!

"And *you*!" His eyes were black as he faced Ramirus again, his face red as a demon's. "*You* invited them here. *You* showed my son to them as one would show a freak in a carnival, so that they might report my weakness to their masters, then sat back while he was dying and did nothing. *Nothing!*"

Danton drew in a deep breath; the guards who had gathered were holding theirs. "Hear me now, Ramirus. You are cast out of my presence, now and forever. I will give you such time as it takes a mortal man to walk to the borders of my kingdom, and after that, if you dare set foot in my lands again, may the gods have mercy upon your wretched soul."

He turned his eyes from the kneeling Magister, with a totality that made it clear he was dismissing not only his presence but his very existence. "You!" he said to the captain. "Bring my son's body inside."

As the guard scurried to obey, Danton cast a last malevolent look at the sorcerous birds surrounding him. "You will all be out of this city by dawn," he growled. "And gods help you if you delay."

It was later than midnight, but not yet dawn.

The moons were near setting, and their light showed but dimly through the thick woods that surrounded the city. A small hooded lantern set on the ground shed a bit more, still not enough to make out more than shapes and shadows in the meager clearing, mere fragments of description:

A man on a rock. Still, still as the rock itself. Waiting.

A staff in his hand. A horse nearby, tethered in the darkness.

A traveler's pack, canvas and leather, with a roll of woolen blankets affixed to the nether end.

After a moment there was a rustling in the trees surrounding him. Most men would not think twice about such a sound, assuming its cause to be the wind, or perhaps some small animal rummaging for food. This man knew the sounds of the forest better than that, sensed its wrongness, and marked its significance. Leaning down, he picked up the lamp beside him while his other hand loosened the hunting knife at his belt, just in case.

A figure stepped into the clearing. He was dressed all in black, and his long hair glistened like a jet waterfall in the lamplight. He gazed into the lamp for a moment, then made a small gesture with one hand; the light changed direction, so that it no longer shone directly in his eyes.

"You are wary tonight," the newcomer said.

"Should I not be?" Andovan put the lantern back down. "You're still an enemy of my father's, Colivar; that much hasn't changed."

"With nothing to gain now from your death, Highness."

"Don't call me that." His voice was grim, determined. "Prince Andovan is dead. Let him rest in peace."

The dark eyes glittered. "As you wish."

Andovan stood, hoisting his travel pack to his shoulder as he did so. "It went as planned?"

"Exactly so."

"Then I shall see the man's family receives the money that was promised before I go."

"It has already been seen to."

Andovan looked at him sharply. "You are thorough, in matters of death."

"I am always thorough," Colivar informed him.

The prince drew in a deep breath and savored it for a long moment, as if sorting out all the tastes of the forest air. "So now I am free to travel, as my father would never have allowed. Free to follow what clues the gods will vouchsafe me, to find this witch of yours___"

"Hardly *mine*, your... Andovan."

"My father would have killed them all, you know. Slaughtered every witch within reach, in the dim hope that the right one would die. He is like that."

"There is no guarantee she is in his kingdom at all. You know that."

"He would have done it anyway." Andovan sighed heavily. "I'll be surprised if by dawn he does not find someone to blame for something enough to have his head."

"And thus the great respect that neighboring mon-archs have for him."

Andovan's expression darkened. "Take care with your words, Magister. He is still my father."

"Of course. Forgive me."

"He believed the ruse completely?"

"Why should he not? The peasant who took your place looked just like you, thanks to my art. He went to his death willingly, thanks to your bribery. The suicide note was genuine, written by your own hand, expressing your own true thoughts. What flaw was there for even a Magister to find?"

"Yes." He muttered, "Truly, I would rather die by my own hand than waste away a cripple in some royal bed."

"You have chosen a dangerous course, you know that. The sickness will progress. Its worst episodes will come without warning. Toward the end there will be no clays of strength left to sustain you."

He said between gritted teeth, "*I will not die in bed.*" I lie, with a heavy sigh, he asked, "How long do I have?"

The Magister hesitated. "There is no way to know that. I'm sorry. But once the symptoms become this marked... not generally long."

"A few years."

Colivar's eyes glittered, black onyx in the moonlight. "At most."

"Very well." Standing up, Andovan hoisted the pack onto his shoulder. He wore simple clothing, not the silken raiments of a prince but the layered, earth-toned wools of a commoner. Dressed thus he appeared

to be but a simple traveler, not a prince of the blood who was raised to wealth and privilege.

He just might pull it off, the Magister thought. He had done all he could to support the young man's quest, weaving spells that would draw him toward the one who had claimed him as consort. At least that was the theory behind it. In truth such a thing had never been tried before, and he could not test its efficacy nor strengthen its power without risking that the magical link which bound the two would claim him as well. And of course he could not explain to the young man who he sought, or what she had done; the prince was a homing pigeon, nothing more. A compass point to serve Colivar in his own quest for information.

A woman of power, the Magister mused. *That is worth the experiment, is it not? Worth even a bit of risk to have that answer.*

"Be out of the kingdom by dawn," the prince warned him. "Don't test my father in this, Colivar; he's killed those with the power before."

"I am aware of that, your... Andovan." He bowed respectfully. "But I thank you for the warning."

"Not Andovan. Not any longer. I shall have to come up with something else, yes?" The prince paused. "How odd it is, that we let go of our accustomed lives with little more than a night's planning, but abandoning a name, that simple set of sounds, takes longer."

"To change a name is to change a life," Colivar said quietly.

"Yes," the prince whispered. "Just so."

He did not speak again, but set his foot upon the packed earth and began to move westward, his movement silent: a hunter's step.

But you are not the hunter in this quest, Colivar thought. *Merely ... bait.*

He waited until the dim glow of the prince's lantern could no longer be seen, then drew the power of borrowed soulfire about himself and took on wings. Long wings, black wings, that beat at the forest shadows for strength, to bear him in a direction that was not home. Not yet.

Westward.

Somewhere in the world, unnamed, unseen, his own consort weakened.

The two moons set soon after.

Book Two - Quickening

Chapter Eleven

"Mother?" The young boy blinked as he regarded the empty street. It was still filled with all the normal smells of life—greasy smoke seeping out of kitchen windows, the reek of emptied chamberpots outside residences, spilled beer and vomit soaking the mud outside the tavern's side door—but other than that the place was empty. Eerie in that emptiness. The young boy stumbled a few steps forward, the word trembling on his lips. "Are you here?" he whispered. A lock of blond hair, crudely trimmed, fell over his left eye; he pushed it back with a grimy hand. "Hello? Is anyone here?"

He had fled the place earlier in the day, with his father's rage bellowing behind him. He'd spent the afternoon playing on the moors, making mud-fortresses with tiny grass soldiers to fight vegetable wars at his bidding. The last one had been to rescue a comely maiden from the grasp of an ogre. The ogre had beaten the woman, not once but often, until her younger brother had run off and raised an army to avenge her. They had defeated the ogre and dragged him off to be stamped to death by all the soldiers. By the time the sun had begun to set a circle of earth had been beaten down flat by their campaign, the grass ogre had been torn to pieces, and the boy felt marginally better.

Only marginally.

By now his father would have left the house or passed out, and his mother would be dressing bruises for all the family. It was safe enough now to risk a return, at least long enough to get some food. There wasn't much in the house—a few scraps of old bread, a few cubes of old cheese—but he was hungry enough now that he'd eat anything. His mother would scold him for running away that morning, but not severely. She understood. She'd run away too, if she could.

"Hello?"

The stillness in the street was eerie. It was more than a question of everyone being indoors, though that was certainly strange enough. Or that they were all so quiet he couldn't hear a single voice through the thin walls and tiny windows. But there was something more to the scene that bothered the boy, on a level he could not have given words to. It was the way that animals are sometimes bothered by unnatural things, that makes them want to tuck their tail between their legs and run. He felt like that.

As he walked down the street, calling out names in a trembling voice, he could feel the hair on the back of his neck rising. He fought to be brave. He had already run away once that day, and now that he was coming home he was ashamed of his former cowardice. Surely mere silence, no matter how mysterious, could not make him run away again.

But someone should have been in the street. Surely!

Skittish as a wild rabbit, the boy made his way slowly down the silent street. Nothing was moving. By now he would have expected a dog to come around sniffing after him, or, or... something.

Nothing.

He passed a lump of horse excrement on the street. It wasn't all that old, and had a host of flies gathered around it like greedy peasants at a feast. The sight of it struck such sudden fear in his heart that the young boy almost turned and ran without even knowing why. But he forced himself to stand his ground, telling himself that mere flies and feces could not harm him, and trying to put a name to the fear that was slowly becoming a cold fist around his heart.

"Hello... ?"

He passed by the town's small tavern. It wasn't much of one, really, but it served well enough to sell cheap ale to the men who called this place home, and such tidbits of food as the dusty coinage of weathered peasants might buy. In deference to their business the owner dumped his waste in a narrow alley between houses rather than out in the street like most others. The boy caught sight of the refuse pile as he passed by... and then stopped, and came closer, and stared at it. Again he was filled with a sense of wrongness so instinctive, so utterly animal in its tenor, that he nearly turned and ran. Again he forced himself to stand his ground and tried to figure out what it could be about a mound of rotting garbage that would make him so afraid.

And then he realized what it was.

There were no rats.

He looked back at the street behind him. None were there either, though the small gray creatures should be slipping out of their hiding places this time of the day, daring a moment or two in the sunset's growing shadows to grab a bit of refuse before all their brothers came out to fight for their share of human filth. Their presence in the town was a normal backdrop to human activity, something that women cursed vehemently but no one had any hope of stopping.

There were no rats now.

Not in the street, not in the shadows, not nosing through the fresh garbage... none at all.

He took a few steps back, and inadvertently stepped in a mound of horse droppings. The flies rolled off its surface like tiny black marbles. Dead. They were all dead.

"Mother?"

Panic gripped his small heart. He began to run. Not away from the town, as all his better instincts were screaming for him to do, but down the street, past the main section of the town, to where small houses were scattered along the dirt road, each with its own mound of rat-free, insect-free garbage.

"Mother!"

The birds weren't singing either, he noticed breathlessly as he pulled up before his house. Nor were the insects buzzing. Wrong, wrong, it was all wrong!

He pounded on the front door until it gave way before him. No voice answered his cries. He upset a stool as he staggered inside, tears of fear running hot down his cheeks. No one noticed the stool careen across the floor, or lifted a leg to get out of its way, or cursed at him for knocking it over.

Next to the coarsely hewn table in the middle of the small common room sat his mother. She was slumped on the bench with her head resting on the table's surface beside a dried-up piece of bread. Her expression was almost peaceful, if you could overlook the morning's bruises; had the boy not just made enough noise upon entering to wake the dead, he might have thought her merely sleeping. His little sister, however, had slid off the bench beside her and was huddled on the floor like a broken doll. A small piece of bread had rolled out of her hand, and come to a stop by the hearth. There were a few small black bits nearby that might once have been insects. They weren't moving now.

The air in the small room was stifling. For a moment the boy's chest tightened up and it was hard to breathe, as if the very stillness of the place had a mind of its own and was sucking the life out of him. By sheer force of will he forced himself to move, to look in all the tiny corners of the house where small, frightened children might hide. There he found another body, that of his youngest brother, barely an infant. The body looked peaceful for once, not screaming its hunger and frustration out to all within hearing as it had done most of the time when it was alive. Whatever had taken the people in this house, it had done so with such stealth that no one saw Death coming.

Was that what had happened in the rest of the small town? Was every house like this one, peopled with corpses?

He felt bile rise up in his throat and knew that he was about to vomit, not from sickness but from fear. Out of habit he turned to the door and started toward it, fearing the beating his father would give him if he soiled something in the house. But then he saw a shadow of movement outside, and in his sudden stunned

wonderment he forgot about vomiting altogether. Even the sourness in his stomach receded, and the worst of the fear with it.

Motion. There was motion! That meant that something out there was alive, right?

He stumbled to the door, afraid that whatever it was would be gone by the time he got there. But no, it was out there in the street, a flying thing about the size of a bird, and as he came to the door it approached him and hovered right in front of his face, its bright wings beating quick patterns in the dying sunlight.

If he had seen it from a distance he might have called it a dragonfly, for it had the long slender body of one, and its translucent wings fanned out in the same grace-

ful pattern. But it was far too large to be a dragonfly, or any kind of insect, and its head was more like that of a lizard than an insect. Or maybe a snake. The body was supple, a deep blue-black that reflected the sunset in glints of purple, and its flesh seemed to quiver as the matching pairs of slender, gossamer wings beat the air, holding it in position right before his face. What beautiful wings they were! All blues and purples, translucent as stained glass, flashing iridescent in the sunlight. Their motion was rhythmic, hypnotic, and despite his fear the boy felt himself drawn into them, unable to look away. From somewhere in the distance he was aware of two black eyes gazing at him, and perhaps if he had looked directly into those eyes he might have felt a new terror take hold, sensing the nascent intelligence in their depths. But he didn't. His eyes were fixed wholly on the jeweled wings and the play of the dying light upon their moist and glittering membranes.

He had been afraid of something, hadn't he? Something in this town. He struggled to remember what it was, but the memory slid out of his grasp like a wet eel. What a beautiful thing this creature in front of him was. He wondered if it had a name. What if it didn't? What if he was the first person ever to see one? What if he told his mother about it, and she said that no, it had no name... could he choose a name for it then? Would people call this strange thing whatever he chose?

His mother...

From somewhere in the dark recesses of his mind a memory surfaced. Just for a moment, but it was enough to make him step back.

The creature followed him. Its bright wings glittered as it crossed the threshold into the shadows of the house.

Mother?

He moved back again. The back of his leg hit the bench suddenly and he nearly fell. Reaching out a hand blindly to where the table should be, he hit it with a force that sent the items atop it clattering to the ground. The sound jarred him out of his trance and he looked around just in time to see his mother's corpse collapse onto the floor, like some twisted, broken doll.

"NOOOOO!"

The thing was between him and the door. He didn't care. He covered his head with his arms and just ran in that direction, praying he'd prove stronger than it was. He didn't dare look at it again. As he passed through the space where it had been hovering he braced himself for some kind of attack—did it have fangs like a real snake?—but it made no effort to stop him. A moment later he was out in the street, running faster than he had ever run in his whole life. Now, it seemed, he could sense motion in the shadows—glittering motion, hovering wherever there were dead things—but he didn't stop to look. If he

did they would get him too, he knew that now. Like they had gotten his mother. His sister. And everything else in the small town____

Not until he was nearly a mile away did he stop running and then it was only because the pain in his legs was so bad he couldn't go on. It was nearly night by then, and it seemed to him as he collapsed on the ground that the shadows were alive with twilight-colored insects that glittered and bobbed as they surrounded him. He sobbed as he gasped for breath, one arm held before his eyes, trying to remember what prayers you said when you wanted a god to come protect you. But the words wouldn't come. No words would come. It was as if the strange creature had stolen his voice, didn't want him to pray for help.

Slowly, inexorably, night descended.

Chapter Twelve

Gansang was smaller than Kamala remembered it. Dirtier also, with a scent of decay that she had never noticed as a child. Or maybe it had just never bothered her back then. Now it was a rank smell that seemed to seep into everything: the clothes she wore, the food she ate, even her very skin. She kept binding soulfire to scrub her person clean of it but it kept coming back. Or maybe such a thing was beyond the power even of Magisters, a primal condition of the place that sorcery could not cancel out. If you made the stink of a city go away, would the place itself disappear?

All her years with Ethanus she had dreamed of nothing but Gansang. Coming back to it in triumph, no longer an adolescent whore to be trod underfoot but a sorcerer of the highest order who could weave it a new fate as casually as most men ate their breakfast. But now that she was here—now that she was a Magister in truth—she realized such a task would not be so easy. Like the art of moving clouds, the fate of a city was too complex a thing to be managed casually. Each part of it fit into all the others like a grand puzzle. Move one piece and a thousand other fates would tremble; remove one altogether and something even darker might take its place.

Obliterating the entire place was always an option, of course. And she felt a sudden thrill that radiated from the core of her soul to her fingertips at the knowledge of what she could do if she wanted to. She could bring the whole place crashing down, all its dirty streets and its thieves and its whoremasters with it, until there was nothing left but a vast mound of stinking debris. Many consorts would have to die for her to do that, of course, but then, men would die beneath the rubble too, drowning in the very filth and degradation they had once delighted in. Such a move was measured in death.

There would be justice in such an act.

Night fell early in the narrow streets, tall buildings of aged wood and crumbling plaster blotting out the light of the sun long before it had actually set. In the premature dusk the scavengers of the city stirred to life, rats and humans alike. The beggars who thronged the streets in the sunlit hours had slipped away into alleys and cellars to count their bits of coin, and thieves and whores took their place, taking up stations in the larger streets and outside taverns, waiting like wolves for the weak and the helpless to make themselves known so that they could be separated from the herd and devoured.

/ am not one of you any longer, she thought, nor prey for you, but something else. Something new. Something that stands apart from the world and watches, untouched by human bloodshed or tears

She still wore the clothing she had adopted in Ethanus' domain, more like a boy's attire than anything a

respectable city woman would wear. The high boots and tight-fitting leather jerkin were black in color, not sor-cerous black but dark enough to suggest shadows and secrets. With her flame-red hair tucked up into a cap she could pass for a boy at first glance, though anyone who bothered to look closely might have second thoughts about the matter, which suited her just fine. She hated women's clothing with a passion, and when her mother was alive they had argued often over whether or not she had to wear it. She hated the bondage of skirts about her legs, and hated most of all the way they dragged in the mud and the muck, so that all the city's foulness flapped about her ankles as she walked. Once as a girl she had taken a table knife and cut off her own muddy hem, turning her dress into a sort of ragged tunic. She'd been beaten for that by her mother, soundly beaten, but it had been worth every blow.

Now... now she was free to do as she pleased. And if any man took issue with it, let him say so to her face, and he would bear the consequences.

Her mother brought them to Gansang shortly after Kamala's brother had recovered from the Plague, hoping for opportunities that the small town of their birth could not provide. The city had chewed her up and spit her out, but not after forcing her to sell her two children to whatever buyers would have them. Kamala did not hate her mother for what she had done to them, though neither did she forgive her. Her feeling was more of an emptiness, a void of human emotion. She wondered how she would greet her mother if she found her in some alleyway now, if she would acknowledge her as her mother or just pass by in disgust, as she would a stranger. But it was all just empty fantasy. The woman was long since dead, claimed by some disease of the gutters, and Kamala... Kamala had chosen a new road, one that hopefully led to better places. Or at least to cleaner ones.

Like a stranger now she walked through the city of her youth, like a ghost, touching nothing, seeing all. The natives gave way to her, and though she thought she saw fleetingly in aging eyes here and there the shadows of people she'd known in her youth, no one spoke to her. They did not know her. Poverty and the reek of failure aged men prematurely, so that she no longer matched the generation she had left behind. The girls who had once stood on a street corner with her, shivering against winter's cold as they sought to bare enough flesh to interest passing travelers, were now as lined and aged in their faces as her mother had been in that time, broken spirits and utter lack of hope etched into their very flesh. Unrecognizable.

And still men paid for them, Kamala thought darkly, because in the end whoring is not about pleasure but about degradation, the pleasure not so much a thing of the flesh as a triumph of power—the certain knowledge that your coin can buy a human being, can render her at your mercy for a few brief minutes. Oh, the fancy lords of the Hill might favor delicately painted ladies, and treasure those courtesans who dallied with them in the shadows of the court while servants played music and burned sweet incense, but here in the poverty-ridden district called the Quarter a man's pleasure had as much to do with the heartlessness and the anonymity of the act as any "higher" calling. Why else would anyone buy a child?

The anger came over her then in a rush, and with it the memory of despair. *It is over now*, she told herself. *No man can ever do that to you again*. For a brief moment she toyed with the idea of using her power to protect those who were still following that road, but the moment passed quickly. There were too many of them in the world for the efforts of one Magister to make a difference, and in a twisted way, it seemed wrong to drain the life of one morati just to save another.

Magister morality is a tangled thing, Ethanus had said. For the first time she understood what he had meant.

As night's humid miasma settled upon the streets she felt the first pangs of hunger. For a moment she fumbled for her purse, out of habit. She still had the few precious coins she had carried with her as a child, back when she had fled the city to seek a better fate. Now... now they were little more than

adornment, a weight in the purse that hung at her belt to make her look normal. A Magister needed no money.

She passed by a few of the Quarter's taverns, waiting until she found one where the smell of beer and cooking spices was stronger than the reek of human sweat. It took a while. The places were small, usually on the first floor of narrow buildings, but she found one on a corner that had enough air coming in to at least mix up the smells, if not banish the fouler ones entirely.

(The forest had smelled sweet So sweet. Especially after a rain, when you could hear the insects rustling under newly washed leaves in search of hidden drops to drink.)

There was a beggar at the door but she pushed past him without a second glance. She'd seen enough beggars in this city counting their coin after a good day's take to know what fake wounds and feigned deformities were worth. She had pity for a child tied up in rags to engender sympathy, because usually his cuts and welts were real—parents didn't mind cutting up the young ones, or even gouging out an eye occasionally, if it made their misery more profitable—but grown men made their own choices, and few of the beggars went hungry.

(And for a moment she remembered her brother, the scabs of the Green Plague broken open again and again

by her mother until they scarred, because scars were worth money, and the rage welled up inside her, and the memories began to stir from that dark place where they lay hidden, like some deadly serpent coming forth from the shadows ...)

"Here for dinner, lad? You've almost missed the serving."

Startled, she looked up. Yes, the words had been addressed to her. In the shadows of the place the speaker could not see details of her person, and so had simply accepted the tale that her clothing told.

"Yes, er... thank you." She coughed, wondering if they took her for a young enough "lad" that her voice would pass muster, or if she should disguise it. The sudden thrill of the subterfuge made her toes curl. "I'll take what you've got." She jingled her purse, to make sure the man understood she could afford the meal. As if money mattered.

The place was dark and dusty and filled mostly with men ending a day's labor—or avoiding one. Their hands were stained with grit and their nails were black and Ethanus would have never received them in that state. A slight smile quirked her lips at that thought, remembering her own unwashed condition as a child. Most residents of Gansang believed that washing too often would do them harm. Given that the Quarter had been built out over what was once a salt marsh, and was known for the sluggish channels of brackish water that coursed through it, that might well be an accurate assessment.

She took a table in the far corner where the shadows gathered and sat with her back to the wall. A few minutes later a wooden plate and tankard were brought to her. The latter had something brown in it with froth on the top. The plate held a greasy meat pie, with far more onions and garlic than meat. She pulled out a coin from her bag and held it for a moment, winding the power around it until she was satisfied it felt right, then offered it. She watched, breath held, as he took it up and studied it in the dim light, then nodded and offered her change. She also watched as he put it into his own deep pocket, where other coins jingled. Good. By the time the enchantment wore off and its true denomination was apparent, it would be mixed in with all the others.

She released a breath she had not realized she was holding and felt some unnamed tension ease its grip on her heart. She had used the power since leaving Ethanus, but that had been in private. This was the

first time she'd actually used it to fool someone.

Minds are easier to manipulate than matter is to conjure, he'd taught her. Learn the art of illusion and you lower the risk of Transition in an unfriendly place.

She leaned back and sipped her ale. It wasn't terrible. Neither was the meat pie, though it had seen fresher days. From her shadowy corner she watched the men who jostled and argued over the rough plank tables and remembered the days she'd been afraid of such men. Back then, their size and strength meant power. Now the real power was hers.

At whose cost? The words slid into her brain as she drank the warm ale. What manner of man is fueling my petty thieveries? Giving up his life so that I can eat a warm meal?

She shook her head, trying to shake loose the tenacious thought. Ethanus had warned her time and time again about such meditations. *A Magister cannot afford to care about his consort, he taught her. The moment he does—the moment he doubts his right to claim that life for his own needs—the bond between them will snap and the Magister will become what he rightfully should have*

been at the instant of his first Transition—a shell of flesh without the spark of life inside. A corpse

I do not "care," she thought stubbornly. I am just... curious.

A sudden rise in the volume of the male voices caught her attention. Apparently two men had had too much to drink, and were now indulging in what men always did when they were drunk—fighting. This argument had something to do with which of them a serving girl preferred, though judging from her frightened eyes and the way she'd just pulled her shift back in place over her chest, she'd be happy if both of them forgot she even existed.

Should I do something to help her? Kamala thought. The fact that she even had such an option was novel in and of itself. Usually she had to sit back and watch while women were abused, with nothing but the angry heat in her veins for comfort. But even if she chose to act, could she do anything that would matter? She could lay these men flat on the table with her power, and ten minutes later a new pair would take their place and be grabbing at the same woman, expecting that their penny's worth of ale had brought them the right to treat anything with breasts like a whore. The cause was not something sorcery could fix in a night; it had to do with poverty and frustration and the fact that when a man's blood rushed to his loins it left his brain empty.

So it was in the First Age of Kings, she thought darkly. So it will always be.

At least they were fighting with each other now, and seem to have forgotten the woman. Kamala winced as one of the scuffed wooden tables overturned with a bang—judging from its condition, this was not the first time—and decided that she'd had enough dinner. Others were joining in the fight now, as men often did when they had nothing useful to do with themselves. Bloodshed as entertainment. Kamala pushed her chair back and stood, seeking a safe path out through the fracas. Something small came flying in her direction but she deflected it reflexively, and then skirted the nearest wall to head towards the door. She had to push her way past a few patrons who were too intent on watching the skirmish to notice her trying to get by them. Some of them were even placing bets on the fight... not on who would win—that was too simple—but who would come out most bloodied, most bruised, or most humiliated.

She hated them all in that moment. She hated them and the world they came from, the tangle of alleys and slums that had made them the wretched creatures that they were, the reeking foulness of the place of her childhood and all the people who inhabited it. She hated them so much that the power stirred within her

like a venomous snake uncoiling, and she had to choke it back with all her strength to keep it from breaking loose and devouring them all.

This is not my world anymore.

The thought was an ache inside her as she made her way out into the warm night air. Not that this putrid city was anything to pine for, and not that she would desire a place among its inhabitants... she had become something that was not quite human any more, and had less in common with the thieves and whores of the Quarter than they had with the rats who scoured the filthy streets, but it was disconcerting to suddenly realize that she belonged *nowhere*. Ethanus' woods had been peaceful, but they were not *hers*. This place had become an alien thing. There was a restlessness inside her that she did not even have a name for, something born of power and pain, that was too vast for these simple environments. She hungered... for what? What manner of home would satisfy her? What kind of people could she call kin in her new and transformed state?

This was her reverie when the door to the tavern suddenly slammed open behind her and a knot of men stumbled out into the muddy street. A wave of drunken breath spiced with stale sweat preceded them in a powerful gust, and for a moment it was all she could do not to vomit. Had she truly never smelled such things in her youth, or had she simply been so accustomed to the odors of men that she never thought to notice them? She had to bind a bit of athra to keep from being ill as she turned away from the tavern, thinking that what she needed right now was to get as far away from this place as she could—

—but a hand fell on her shoulder and turned her around, yanking her doublet and shirt open as it did so. Precious metal buttons went flying as the garment tore open down her chest, baring the inner curve of one breast.

"See?" The man who had grabbed her gestured unsteadily toward those watching. He was a burly man whose clothing smelled faintly of urine; a fuller, most likely, who'd be up to his elbows in piss whenever he stopped drinking long enough to work. "I told you it was a girl!"

Kamala felt the snake uncoil a bit more in her gut. Dangerous, very dangerous. These men did not have a clue what manner of fire they were playing with.

Exerting all of her self-control, she put out a hand and called the lost pieces of her costume back to her. The buttons flew up to her hand. A couple of men gasped at the display of power but the majority were too drunk to recognize the move for what it was. A warning. She turned to leave but a meaty paw yanked her back, this time almost hard enough to pull her off her feet.

"What's the matter, witch? Our company not good enough for you?"

One of the younger ones snickered. They were starting to surround her now, some deliberately, some blindly following in a drunken haze.

Apparently one of them still had a bit of gray matter left that had not been saturated by alcohol. "You don't want to fuck with a witch..."

"Heil we don't! Haven't you heard where the power comes from?"

"I hear they can fry a man's rod with their nether parts."

"I hear they won't, 'cause it costs them in life force. Isn't that true, witch-girl?" A grimy hand caught her under the chin; she batted it away with a sharp blow. "Witchery's safe enough to do little things, but the big things aren't worth dying for, are they, sweets?" He smiled, a grotesque expression that bared a

mouthful of broken teeth. "You don't want to waste all that life force, do you?"

One of the men grabbed her from behind. He pulled her hard, intending to knock her off balance. She knew the move well and instinctively braced herself, even while the serpent within her gut screamed to be set loose.

Control the power. Don't let it control you.

A man at her side grabbed at her arm. She wrenched herself free with the help of the power, but barely in time. Another reached for the neck of her doublet, his grin reeking of rotten teeth and alcohol. Too many, too fast! Too many hands, too many directions to focus! The power only worked as fast as she could give it form, and even as she drove back one attacker another moved forward, all part of a tidal wave of stinking, leering male flesh that threatened to engulf her—

And then, without warning, the power surged up in-side her, raging with such force that it left her breathless. It was wildfire that roared through her veins, fear and defiance and hatred searing her flesh as it burst forth from her, enveloping the drunken crowd. Hot magma rage, twenty years in the making. A child's terror. A youth's pain. A woman's outrage. Kamala shook as it poured through her, but it was more powerful than anything she had ever conjured before and she could not control it. The force of it blinded her, turning everything in her field of vision a bright red—blood red—and as the athra burned through her veins she thought she could feel the pulse of the distant heartbeat that was driving it. Laboring now, as the life poured out of her consort like blood from a wound. No man could lose so much athra and not feel it. Was he dying? Was Transition going to take her here in this filthy street, with enemies surrounding her? For the first time since leaving Ethanus' home she felt fear gripping her. How much was too much? What did a man's Me translate to when measured in such doses as this?

And then, after what seemed like an eternity of burning, the roaring flames of power quieted and went still. The knot in her chest loosened and she found herself able to breathe again. Blinking, she forced the redness from her vision and struggled to focus on what was around her, not yet sure if the power had actually done anything, or simply been the magical equivalent of a scream of rage.

The street was silent. The men weren't standing around her any longer. She blinked, struggling to see clearly.

There were things on the ground. Man-sized. She must have struck them down with the power, all of them.

Hearing a gasp behind her, she whipped around and saw a young boy staring at her. His eyes were wide in fear—or horror?—and as soon as she looked at him he turned and ran from her, stumbling as he did so.

What...?

Then she turned back, and her eyes focused at last.

She saw.

Bodies. Crushed bodies. Parts of bodies. Bodies like broken dolls that some giant's hand had smashed. One man had been frozen in the act of screaming; his countenance was charred black as if burned by hot cinders, surreal. Another lay twisted in ways no human body should ever be twisted.

You must never let the power rule you, Ethanus had warned.

She ran. Sickness welled up inside her with numbing force as she stumbled away from the carnage, not

caring where she went as long as it was somewhere far away from that terrible place. All the fire that had been in her veins was gone now, replaced by an icy terror. *What have I done?* She could hardly think straight. Getting away from those bodies was all that mattered to her. Getting to a place where the walls weren't spattered with blood and the reek of drunken terror didn't hang in the air. Where the serpent of destruction inside her didn't hunger for yet more death, so palpably she could taste it.

At last, exhausted, she stopped running. Her legs were so weak they could barely support her weight any longer and she lowered herself into a trembling half-crouch, gasping for breath as she tried to absorb what had just happened to her. Images of broken bodies crowded about her like ghosts, even when she closed her eyes. What had she done? What *was* she now, that she was capable of doing such a thing? She knew what Ethanus' answer would be, but imagining it spoken in that utterly calm voice of his drove home by contrast the meaning of the words on a level she had never really understood before.

You are a Magister.

Shaken, exhausted, she lowered her face into her hands and did something she had never allowed herself to do before, not in all the years she had lived in this city as a child.

She wept.

Chapter Thirteen

The day was stormy and black, which suited High King Danton's mood perfectly. He had been that way ever since throwing Ramirus and his black-robed vultures out of the domain. In the outer world, of course, sunshine occasionally managed to creep through the clouds and brave the narrow windows of his castle. In his inner world there was no such light.

Right now the sky outside was almost as dark as twilight, and rain pattered on the outer walls in irregular patterns that promised to drive him mad. It was just another irritant in a long list of many. The tithe from Cori-alanus was days late, which had fostered the usual rumors: insurrection, a sickness of the gut was working the rounds of the castle soldiery, the Inamorand succession had been put in doubt by accusations of infidelity, making the whole western border potentially unstable—the list went on and on.

All of which would have been no more than that, simply annoyances, had he had a Magister to help him deal with them.

He had interviewed five Magisters to replace Ramirus. He had not been happy with any of them, not enough to make them Magister Royal at any rate, though he had accepted three into his service for distant regions. A Magister Royal for a High King must have more than witchery at his fingertips; he must understand the way of politics, he must comprehend the ebb and flow of human aggression and be adept at manipulating men's passions, and above all else he must share the High King's hungers, his dreams, his hopes. Thus far none had proven himself by those standards and Danton was growing more frustrated each day. Who would have thought that the traitor Ramirus would be so damned hard to replace?

It was one thing to throw all one's Magisters out of the palace in theory, but it was another thing to actually have to do without them day after day. He was discovering that the hard way. If he wanted a letter sent to the far border of his kingdom these days he had to send the damn thing by mounted messenger, no matter how important it was, or how much speed mattered. Or he could try to use birds, stupid brainless things that they were, hoping they would deliver their messages to his agents and not to the enemies that surrounded them. So it was with all the other conveniences that Ramirus had offered and which Danton had taken for granted. He was a Dark Age king now in all but name, limited to the reach

of his own flesh and the power of his voice, just like it had been in those barbaric days.

Which would have been all fine and good if all his rivals had to suffer the same deprivations, but of course they didn't. The most pitiful domains on his border had their own Magisters Royal, and no matter how incompetent those men were as sorcerers, they were still better than what Danton had right now. He could not move against his enemies or discipline his vassals or even flex his royal fist in warning without knowing he was out-

powered by the weakest of his rivals... and his subjects knew it, too. It was only a question of time before someone took advantage of that and moved against him.

Curse the gods of the First Age of Kings for this wretched luck, and all the damnable Magisters with them! Had ruling an empire been this complicated back then?

"Your Majesty?"

He looked up, dark brows scowling. "Yes? What is it?"

His servant bowed. "A visitor has arrived. He gives his name as Kostas. He says you will wish to see him."

"Kostas? I don't know the name."

The servant said quietly, "He wears black, Majesty."

"A Magister?"

"So it would appear."

Interesting. Perhaps the storm had swept in something useful after all.

He nodded curtly. "Very well. Send him to my audience chamber. I will meet him there."

He must be from far away, if Danton had never heard of him. The High King prided himself on knowing all the local Magisters and their peculiarities. Or perhaps Kostas was simply a new name taken by some sorcerer who was thinking of leaving his current master for better employ. If so, Danton would allow him the anonymity for the time being. A rival's Magisters were always worth courting.

The audience chamber was a room that Danton maintained especially for such meetings. It was a cold and comfortless chamber walled in rough-hewn stone, whose dark floor and shadowy vaulted ceiling always gave off the impression of being damp, no matter how dry the day was. To mortals and Magisters alike it was a challenge, albeit in different ways. Mere humans were forced to present their petitions in the midst of that cold, unwelcoming space, while the High King peered at them from his throne like a hawk staring down its prey. It was amazing how much could be learned about a man in such a setting. As for Magisters, most of them worked their sorcery upon the space as soon as they entered, subtly or otherwise. One of them had actually dared to conjure himself a chair—a chair!—to mirror the High King's own. In this manner they no doubt thought they would please him, or—in the case of the last—at least make a clear statement about what they perceived the proper relationship between king and Magister to be. Instead of missing the very obvious point about what manner of relationship *he* expected.

He had but a minute to settle onto his reception throne—a heavy wooden piece built at the start of the Second Age, now so heavy with paint and reapplied gilt that he sometimes wondered if any of the original wood still existed—before the wide doors opened and his servants ushered in his black-clothed visitor.

He was a curious-looking man, which sparked Dan-ton's interest immediately. Magisters might reshape their flesh in accordance with any desire, and therefore one could learn much from the body they chose for themselves. Usually it was something dramatic, or at least memorable. Some chose young faces, unmarked by any human hardship; others, aged ones so wrinkled with experience that to gaze into their hooded eyes was to step into ages past. Some chose horrific forms, as a warning to others that access to limitless power had made them something other than human; others sculpted themselves masks of such beauty and perfection that the gods themselves must surely be jealous.

This one... this one was remarkably ordinary, Dan-ton thought. And that was an interesting choice.

He was a slender man, whippet-thin, and his black clothes fit close to his body, accentuating that slenderness. His frame was angular and everywhere that flesh showed, bone was plainly visible beneath it: in his face, where harshly angled cheekbones gave him a hungry aspect; in his neck, where lines of tendon and muscle stretched tautly from jawline to collarbone; in his hands, which had the aspect of coarse gloves fitted over a jagged armature. His face was weathered in the way that peasant skin became weathered after a lifetime of fighting the elements, the texture of it coarse and reddened. He reminded Danton of an arctic fisherman he had once seen, whose face had been scored by salt-laden winds and frigid ocean spray every day of his life. There were lines in this man's face also, sharp lines, harsh lines, and it did not seem to Danton that they had been put there for any artistic purpose so much as earned through time, in a purely human manner.

Interesting.

The Magister took a few steps forward and spared a glance to take in the room. His eyes, Danton noted, were the gray of a storm-laden sky, and his hair a shade of brown so unremarkable it must have been natural. It was shoulder length, with ragged edges that said plainly he cared little for fashion. Most interesting of all were the scars that marked his face. That they were old scars was plain, and they had healed as much as scars ever did on their own: a few parallel sharp lines across one cheekbone, perhaps claw marks; a puckering below one side of his jaw. There was a scar right at his hairline from which the hair grew white and coarse, and he had braided it so that it hung down over his shoulder in a sharply defined streak. They all looked like natural scars, Danton noted, which was interesting; why would a man who was capable of healing any wound choose to bear the marks of past injury?

Then the gray eyes fixed upon him and for a moment they held him transfixed; he could sense the raw power behind them, and depths of an existence no single lifetime could contain.

"High King Danton." The Magister bowed. "It has come to my ears that you seek a man of power for your court."

"My last one displeased me," Danton said bluntly. "I banished him."

It was a challenge, plain and simple. Most kings lived in constant fear of displeasing one of the black-robed sorcerers, and spent as much time trying to keep their Magisters Royal content as they did ruling their kingdoms.

Which is why they were the weakling princes they were, Danton thought, and he was... something more.

Some of the others candidates he'd interviewed had dared to comment upon his actions. A few had not offered open response, but their eyes made clear their displeasure.

But this Magister nodded his acceptance of the order without hesitation or comment. The gesture was eloquent in its simplicity, and Danton did not fail to catch the message behind it: *This is your kingdom.*

Not even a Magister may tell you what to do in it.

A good start.

"I have interviewed many," he said curtly. "None pleased me."

"The world is full of fools," the Magister observed. "Having power does not make them otherwise."

A faint smile quirked the corner of the High King's mouth.

"I am called Kostas," the Magister offered. "Though if it pleases you to call me something else, that can be arranged."

"Humility is unusual in one of your calling."

He shrugged. "Humility is when a man submits to those things which have value to him. Submitting to those things which do not have value is simply... expedience."

"And your last royal position was...?"

"Alas, I have not held such a post before." The gray eyes shimmered darkly, like thunderclouds before a storm. "Is that a requirement?"

"No. But it is... unusual."

"I have felt no need."

"And you do now?"

He shrugged. Like all things about him it was a sharp gesture, all bones and angles. "My interests change. The politics of this region intrigue me." He smiled slightly; it was a cold and predatory expression. "I am told there is no better seat to observe them from than beside the throne of a great king."

Danton ignored the flattery. "And is that all you wish to do? Observe?"

The stormy eyes glittered. "That is the custom, is it not?"

It was a good answer. The five who had come before him had tried other ones and had been dismissed. Three had attempted to pretend they had no interest in "morati" politics. Two had been honest. Neither had a place in his court.

Of course any Magister who applied for this royal position had an interest in politics. *Of course* he hoped to manipulate the High King, and through him the fate of an empire. To pretend otherwise here, in this chamber, was to accuse Danton of being a fool. And that he was not. He was many things, many hateful things, things that men cursed and women wept over, but he was not a fool.

He was beginning to think this Magister might suit him.

"Tell me of my kingdom," he challenged.

"Strong at its heart, as a lion's heart is strong," the man replied. He cocked his head slightly, like a bird regarding its prey. "But vast, and in its vastness, vulnerable. With a Magister's art such a territory is easily maintained, but you have lacked that for a fortnight now, and the strain is showing."

Danton's dark brows gathered about their center like angry stormclouds. "Tell me about it."

"What need I say that you do not already know, High King? It is no secret that the greater the size of an empire, the harder it is to safeguard its periphery. In times of prosperity it means little if there are mountains between one district and the next, or swampland that would hinder an army's passage. The Magister's art can overcome such obstacles with ease but without the hand of sorcery to ease passage, these are barriers that circumscribe armies. And nations."

For a long, very cold minute Danton just stared at him. It was impossible to read the Magister's expression, and that was a surprise; Danton was adept at reading men.

Finally he rose and strode to a sideboard. That he turned his back on the visitor was quite deliberate: *I do not fear you or your kind*. Beneath the narrow table, on the shelf beneath, handful of heavy scrolls lay waiting. He took one out, removed the ribbon that bound it, and unrolled it across the table.

The scroll unrolled fully and remained flat on the table afterward as if pinned down by weights; Kostas had not missed his cue.

Danton gazed down upon the map of his kingdom in all its vast, terrible glory. It was the single greatest empire since the Second Age of Kings had begun, or so his court historians had assured him. He had long since crossed barriers that his ancestors would have regarded as impassable, at least for armies; that was what the age of Magisters had brought to kings. Nations were unified under Danton Aurelius that had never been unified be-

fore, and if it took a strong and sometimes brutal hand to keep them unified, so be it.

There had been witches in the First Age, of course. But a witch only had so much life force to work with, and convincing one to part with all of his supply for a single military campaign was nigh impossible. Geographical features that were impassable in the First Age tended to stay impassable, unless you put knives to the throats of a hundred witches and forced them to serve your cause. Which might work for one project, but tended to leave you short of witches for the next one down the line.

Now things were different.

That was not to say that Magisters always applied their power as liberally as a royal patron might like. Apparently there was some sort of code governing how much they might exert themselves, and when, and more than once Danton had cursed a Magister who had refused to extend himself for a chosen project. They claimed it had something to do with the balance of spiritual forces in the heavens and the inherent stability of the universe... but rat piss to all that. He was sure there was something more to it, but apparently no mere morati king could get it out of them.

He watched as the lean Magister moved quietly to the table and gazed down at the map before him. How like a lizard's visage the man's profile was, Danton noted, not with displeasure so much as curiosity. One could almost imagine a forked tongue darting out of that narrow mouth, testing the air for sound as well as smell.

"Defreest stirs," the Magister mused quietly, "and the provinces beyond. Corialanus to the south, but you know that, I am sure. These..." He swept a hand across the small row of provinces that edged the kingdom on the west, some of whom had negotiated semi-independent status long ago. "These are agitated, but it means little. Unless they unify they are no real threat."

"My father put their cities to the torch last time they tried that."

"I am sure they have not forgotten."

Danton looked up at him sharply. "So what would you advise, that you should become my counselor? What would *you* do, if all this was yours?"

There was a double challenge in the words.

They gray eyes narrowed. For a moment the Magister was silent, studying the map. "Prepare an army against Corialanus," he said at last. "It stands between you and the Free Lands and as such will hamper your expansion into that region unless it is securely controlled. They will start testing you soon, to learn your limits—"

"They have already begun," Danton muttered.

Kostas nodded. "Then move against them before they are ready for it, and give them your answer. Without mercy."

"And to the north?"

"Distract them. Give them something to focus their attention on that will not require an army, nor divide your supply lines." The stormy gray eyes met his; their depths were so cold that Danton shivered despite himself. "I can do that for you, High King."

"How?" he demanded.

"Fearsome tricks. Legends of demons, and worse. Things that will have them arming against the shadows themselves, rather than turning their attention south to your border. Humans are easily manipulated through fear, High King... and my kind is adept at such games."

"Few of them admit it so openly," he said quietly.

"Yes..." A faint, cold smile flickered across his face. "You will find that I am... atypical."

"So you favor my expansion?"

"It is the natural condition of a great state to expand, Your Majesty."

Danton snorted. "Not all of my advisers agree with you. Some claim the kingdom has reached its natural limits—whatever that means. They warn me that any power spread too thin will, in time, collapse."

The stormy eyes glittered. "All things collapse, High King... in time. The greatest empire of the First Age was no more than dust a millennium later. The greatest empire of the Second will someday be the same. Against such a heartbeat of existence politics are played out, the ebb and flow of human hungers driving them... no different than among animals, really, save that we clothe our instincts in prettier raiments, and sometimes use words in the place of teeth and claws. And sometimes... not."

The gray eyes fixed on Danton; power stirred visibly in their depths. A lesser man might have quailed, but the High King knew the importance of standing his ground, particularly in such an interview; the statements made this night would establish what Kostas would be to him for as long as they both walked the earth.

He met the eerie gaze without flinching and said, "Go on."

"We are beasts at heart, every one of us, though clad in more fragile flesh than most beasts. We play games of 'civilization' and pride ourselves on having created things like poetry and music, but inside we are as territorial as wolves. The desire of the ruling male to expand his hunting range, to control

resources, to spread his seed as far as possible, are drives born of primitive animal hunger... whether he expresses it by pissing on trees that were marked by a rival or sending forth a royal army to rape the neighboring domain, the end result is the same.

"That the hunger is strong in you is clear from your history. That you are capable of doing it justice is equally clear. Few men can claim both."

"Few Magisters speak in such terms."

"As I said, I am not typical."

"Those who are I have sent away."

The gray eyes glittered. "Perhaps that was wise."

Danton studied the man again, noting every feature of him, tasting his essence through the inspection. It was his gift to be able to read the hearts of men, even those of seemingly unlimited power. This one was... hungry. Just as hungry as the kings he spoke of, or the beasts that howled for blood within men's souls. It was a dangerous hunger, to be sure, and rarely were a Magister's true motives anything that a king might understand. But Danton had figured out Ramirus well enough to control him, and had manipulated his kind adroitly enough to insult two dozen of them and survive it—a feat most monarchs would not even attempt—and now, he thought, he would learn to control this one. For no matter what this Kostas had experienced, no matter what the taste of unlimited power had done to him, no matter what secrets immortality had whispered into his ear, he was, at his core, human. That, Danton had learned, was the secret of the Magisters that they tried to veil with mystery and legends. A tiger, no matter how powerful, could never become something other than a tiger. So it was with men. They might change their bodies at will, and even live forever, but they were still men.

He turned back to the map and regarded his territory once more. Finally he brought down a finger to rest upon the border of Corialanus. The bloodred ruby in his ring glittered darkly as he moved it along the River Kest to the heart of that troublesome state.

"So," he said quietly. "Let me hear what my Magister Royal would advise___"

Chapter Fouteen

Shadows, shadows are all around. At first Andovan cannot make out any shapes among them, only random patterns of mottled unclarity, and then they resolve, slowly. He sees trees, outlined darkly against the night sky. A woman, among the trees. She is wrapped in blackness, clothed in blackness, so that nothing of her is visible. Moonlight picks out cool highlights along the jagged evergreen branches, but it cannot reach her.

She is watching him, he knows that. She is always watching him. He can feel her gaze upon him and it tastes of death. He screams his protest with all his might It is an empty yell, impotent, that leaves his body like smoke. He shuts his mouth but cannot stop the flow. More and more smoke follows, and as it leaves him he grows weaker and weaker. He struggles to turn away and run from her, but he cannot.

The woman waits, silent, eternally patient. There is no sign of emotion in her, but she puts out one pale hand and the smoke comes to her like a tame dog... and then she wafts it toward her mouth and begins to breathe it in, absorbing his strength, his life while the evergreen shadows watch all

in silence...

* * *

Andovan awakened suddenly. A cold sweat was upon his brow, and for a moment he just lay there, grateful to be back in the world of real things, freed from the harrowing nightmare.

It was not the first night he had dreamed of the shadow woman. In fact he had done so every night since Colivar first laid the spell upon him, that sorcery which would supposedly draw him toward the source of his illness. Toward his would-be killer.

He saw her every night, but he could not make out her face.

He screamed at her each night, but did not know her name.

The nightmare was worse each time he dreamed it, the pain of his dying more real. Did that mean that Co-livar's sorcery was working, and he was getting closer to her? Or was it a warning that the life was draining out of him like sand through an hourglass, and he had very little time left before all searches were ended?

/ will find her, he told himself. It was his morning mantra. *I will win my life back, whatever it takes, and make her pay for what she has done to me.*

He tried to move, to get up out of bed, but a sudden blinding pain forced him to fall back, gasping for breath. His limbs felt like lead, and his head felt as if it had been split in two. For a moment he just lay there with his eyes closed, trying *to* master the pain. Trying to remember what had caused it. But the memory would not come, and when he opened his eyes he saw a ceiling overhead that was unfamiliar to him. He turned his head painfully to one side—the motion took several long minutes, his head throbbing hotly with each new inch gained—and he realized the rest of the room was likewise unfamiliar. Some sort of crude log construct, artlessly patched with mud and straw, that he had never seen before.

Where in the gods' names am I?

Then the throbbing gave way to a sharper pain at the side of his head, and he managed to raise up a hand to feel for the source, though it seemed to him his hand was made of lead. Bandages. There were bandages. Wound around his head. Coarse linen, from the feel of them, one or two layers, tightly wrapped. He pressed his fingers against the fabric, seeking more information. The source of the pain was a spot over his left temple, and fire pierced through his skull when he probed there. Over that spot, soaked into the bandages, was a thick paste. He thought at first it was half-dried blood, but when he drew his fingers away to look at them he saw crumbling bits of herbs in a white, vinegary-smelling paste. Some kind of healing salve, most likely. So... someone had taken care of him. But who? And where was he? What had happened to him?

He tried to sit up but his body would not respond.

So instead he tried to remember. That at least allowed him to shut his eyes, which was a small mercy. Even the small bit of light seeping through the small windows was painful to him.

There's sour ale in his stomach, food too old for human consumption, peasant fare at its worst refusing to be digested. He walks back toward the woods, thinking he would rather make his bed in the wild tonight than rely upon the hospitality of strangers. One more night in an ill-kept hovel, with the smells of a chamberpot filling the place and the accumulated reek of a lifetime's sweaty labors closing in about him, and he may well become sick with more than the Wasting. No, the

forest is clean and fresh and the ground has provided a bed enough nights during his hunting expeditions that it will seem like home tonight. Perhaps he will even puke up his vile

dinner and then can catch himself something fresh to take its place. The sunlight is not completely gone yet, which means the nocturnal animals will be coming out to look for forage or prey...if he is lucky he can find some deer... hunting would refresh his spirit, he thinks, and his stomach would certainly welcome the change of fare.

How long does he walk, towards that hidden place where he left his horse tethered, before he realizes that footsteps are shadowing his own? He stiffens, not unlike deer when a hunter approaches. Then for a moment he pauses in his walking, reaching for one of the leather straps of his pack as though he would adjust its weight on his shoulder. There are no footsteps when he stops to listen. Of course, for they ceased walking when his own did. But he can sense the people who are behind him by the odors they exude, and he can hear their shallow breathing. The fools probably think they are being silent, Andovan muses. But he is used to stalking game far more stealthy than any human can possibly be, and his nose is as finely tuned as a wolf's. By animal standards they are making enough noise to scare off a deer at thirty paces, and even a wolf with a headcold could not miss that reek.

He starts walking again, listening now for the false echo of matching footsteps behind him. Yes, there is no mistaking it. Slowly, carefully, he brings his right hand forward, to the hilt of the hunting knife he always wears at his belt. They will wait for him to get to the edge of town, he guesses, where they are unlikely to have witnesses to whatever it is they are planning to do. Such is the way of cowards and thieves. His horse is sheltered in the woods just beyond; he had approached the town on foot. Do they know he has a mount? Will they wait until he reaches it before making their move?

Briefly he wonders if Colivar might have betrayed

him, getting him away from the castle so that he might be assassinated without consequence. But no, that makes little sense. Andovan has done nothing to offend the southern Magister, and besides, it would have been just as easy for Colivar to kill him that night at the castle, after they had made arrangements to fake his death, as now. Why wait? And use such crude human tools, when sorcery could do the trick in perfect silence?

Besides, Colivar wants something from him. That much is patently obvious. Ostensibly it has something to do with the woman that is killing Andovan—that much he told the prince—but Andovan is willing to bet there is much more to the story than he is being told. Magisters never confide their true purpose to morati, every prince worth his salt knows that for a fact. And as for anyone else being behind this... in theory they all think he is dead now. So no one is going to send out assassins after him. Least of all sloppy, smelly assassins.

He walks slowly down the muddy road, his senses alert for every clue they can pick up. He estimates that his trackers are maybe ten feet behind him, no more. If he turns quickly and steps forward he'll be upon them before they know it. Boars do that sometimes when you hunt them, and they are deadly adversaries for it. One almost gored him when he was younger, teaching him that lesson.

He begins to turn, grasping the bone handle of his knife tightly—

—and suddenly a wave of sickness comes over him. It is like the attacks he has had before but also unlike them. This attack is a hundred times more powerful than those paltry weaknesses, and

it turns his legs to jelly beneath him without warning. For a moment the whole world swims before his eyes like a dream gone mad, and it seems he lacks even the strength to breathe. He falls forward onto his hands and knees, dropping

the knife in the mud as he does so. Not now, not now! What is happening? The worst of his attacks have never been like this before. Not here! He can hear footsteps coming toward him, swiftly now, and he struggles to reach out for his knife, but his hand is like a dead thing that has neither feeling nor strength and it will not obey him. It is as if all the vital tissue has been sucked out of his flesh, leaving him trapped inside a shell with no sinew inside. I refuse to give in to this! Other times he had been sick sheer determination won the day, for his strength of will is no small thing, but this time the weakness is so terrible he cannot manage the slightest triumph over it. The arms and legs that are holding him up begin to fold, even as his vision begins to blacken. Figures move in from the surrounding shadows but he can no longer see them. For the first time in many, many years he is truly afraid.

I am going to die, *he despairs*. Not upon the horns of my prey or by the teeth of an angry predator, as it should be, but upon the blades of cowards while I lie sick and helpless before them.

How has he ever offended the gods so terribly, that they would do this to him? He tries to voice a howl of indignation but no sound comes from his throat. He senses something being swung at his head but he cannot dodge it... and then the night explodes in a veil of stars and the last of his consciousness pours out of him like hot blood, leaving him at the mercy of the predators...

For a long time after the flow of memories ceased he lay still, trying to absorb it all. Though he was not generally the kind of man who gave way to fear, this was a different manner of beast than a wild boar, or even a maddened lion. This... this *disease* did not care if he was brave or not, it was not affected by plans or preparations, and it struck from the shadows when he was least prepared for it. This time he was lucky he was not dead. A well-equipped traveler lying helpless along the roadside was an open invitation to theft and assault, or even slavery if the wrong person came along. He was clearly alive, there were no chains upon him, and someone had tended to his wounds, so the worst had not happened... but he might not be so lucky next time.

If the disease had progressed to the point where it would take him thus, without warning, perhaps this journey was indeed more than he could handle.

His mouth tightened at the thought; the bandaged spot on his head throbbed painfully. *No*.

Friends sometimes joked with him that he was not Danton's son in truth. He lacked his father's coloring, his harsh features, his casual brutality, and nearly all the other qualities that were generally considered trademarks of Danton's lineage. He understood the jokes that were made about that and smiled and laughed along with his cohorts. But there was one area in which An-dovan was truly his father's son, and that was his stubbornness.

He had gone out into the world with no royal name, no family ties, limited supplies, and no real sense of how his quest was to begin, just the stubborn determination to seek out the person who had caused his weakness, and an unnamed and untested spell that would allegedly help him find his way. He was doing that despite a weakness that sapped his very strength and left him, occasionally, as helpless as a babe. Nothing in that picture had changed now. Any idiot knew that the symptoms of the Wasting grew more and more pronounced as the end drew near. He'd never heard of anyone losing consciousness from it like he did, but it was not beyond imagination's reach. Very well. If that was the newest symptom, then he would deal with it. But he was Danton's son, and he would not abandon his quest simply because of an illness of the flesh. No matter how debilitating that illness was.

"You are awake?"

It was a female voice that spoke, gentle and perhaps a bit hesitant. He tried to raise himself up on his elbows to see its owner, and came near to managing the task. As he looked about he could see the room he was in more clearly. It was a small room lined in split logs, and patched with handfuls of mud and straw, inexpertly applied. He lay on one of many straw pallets near a cold fireplace; four others were currently unoccupied. Through a small window on one side daylight sent teasing streamers that trapped the room's dust in glimmering rays, allowing him to see a few primitive tools hanging on iron hooks, a pile of dingy blankets, old pottery jars by the fireplace that once must have been gaily painted, now relegated to a cruder life. The whole of the place was dismally poor, but it was clean, and the rushes covering the floor smelled fresh. That spoke well for someone.

Then he saw the girl. She was young, not quite a woman yet, but with a prettiness that promised to become more than prettiness as she matured. Her clothes were patched many times over but clean, and her hair had been brushed till it shone. That was rare in any peasant's home.

Blue eyes. She had blue eyes. They reminded him strangely of his mother's. Was there northern blood in her?

"Are you all right?" she asked.

He managed to nod without his head splitting in two, which was a small miracle. Then he managed to smile slightly, an even bigger one. "As opposed to the alternative of being dead, yes, I suppose I feel well."

"My brothers didn't think you would live."

"The gods were merciful, then... and perhaps, my nurse skilled."

She blushed, which confirmed his guess.

Little do they know who or what they saved, he mused.

He managed to sit up. She helped him halfway though, so he was not yet sure he could manage it alone, but even that qualified triumph over weakness and pain bolstered his spirits considerably.

"What is your name, lass?"

Maybe it was something in his tone that made her lower her eyes briefly, as if she sensed the rank he had been born to. Or maybe... maybe it was maidenly modesty. She was still young enough for that to be the case, though among the poor such a state rarely lasted. Pretty young virgins were worth too much coin on the open market to be kept away from it for long.

"Dea, sir."

"Dea." He smiled, though it hurt his face. "Please don't call me *sir*." Her deferential manner concerned him. Was it so obvious he was not a townsman? That was something to address when he took to the road again. Maybe it would keep him from getting robbed and nearly killed a second time if he could pass for a peasant more successfully. "My name is—" He hesitated, trying to remember back past the pain to the one he had chosen. "Talesin."

"Talesin." She smiled. My, she would be a beautiful one when she filled out, if the world did not beat her down first, and crush the natural innocence which gave her smile such charm. Which it probably would.

With a sigh he tried to rise to his feet, and to his surprise, managed it. Evidently his body had resigned itself to living and decided to cooperate with him at last. "Where are your brothers? I assume they rescued me?"

"I found you. They brought you here. They said..."

Fezsf of Soufs

She hesitated. "They said that you were well-born, by the look of you, and that maybe there would be a reward to be had, if you survived."

There would be if they knew who to tell about it, he thought wryly.

"My hands are calloused," he pointed out, showing her where a lifetime of riding and hunting had left its mark. "Is that well-born?"

"Your fingernails are clean," she pointed out, showing him. "And trimmed to the shape of fine crescent moons, not worn down by labor."

He chuckled. "So they are."

And so I shall have to learn to chew my nails. Though if I had done so before this, I would have been left for dead by my mercenary benefactors. A curious irony, that

"Tell me of what you know," he said. And, "tell me how long it has been."

"I found you last night, as I left the town. You were lying facedown by the side of the road, where carriage wheels might strike you. Your face was covered in blood and your clothes..." She blushed ever so slightly and looked down. "Your clothes were half removed, as though someone had searched through them."

No doubt looking for treasures to steal, he thought. He was lucky his attackers had not needed a new wardrobe. "Go on."

"I went and got Viktor, my brother, who brought the others. They brought you back here, and fetched supplies for nursing. They thought you were going to die, but I... I could see the strength in you."

"So it has been only one night?"

She nodded.

He felt about his person, feeling for all the various things which had once been stored on his body. All of it was gone, of course. Anything the thieves did not take his benefactors would have.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"If I am standing and talking, I am well enough." Actually the *standing* part was a bit hard, but he wasn't going to tell her that. "Whatever trail remains is growing cold."

"Trail?" She blinked. "You mean you are going after them?"

"It seems the thing to do, does it not?"

"But your injuries... you need to rest..."

He shook his head. "I can go after them now and take my chances, or take time to heal and lose any hope of finding them. After all," he said, meeting her eyes and smiling, "I can hardly reward you and your brothers if all my coin is gone, can I?"

He reached up to feel the bandages again, and then, with a wince, peeled them from the wound. The flesh beneath was crusted with dried blood, but it felt sound enough. The pain was now reduced to a hot throbbing that blazed behind his left eye. He had survived worse.

He looked about the stark room, searching for tools that might serve his purpose. At last he saw a length of hemp rope coiled in one corner, which he gathered up. Then he went to the fireplace, where he removed the long iron bar from which a stew kettle depended, setting the kettle aside.

"I will need to borrow these, is that all right?"

Eyes wide, she nodded.

"Come then," he said. "Take me to where you found me."

There were no clues at the site. Of course. A muddy road leading to the only inn within miles must be so scarred from wagon wheels, horseshoes, and passing boots he would have been hard pressed to pick out a single human footprint, much less know which one mattered to him. He settled for checking the surrounding brush for any items of his possession that might have been left behind. He had hoped they might have missed his knife, but apparently not.

He sent the girl away, then. He did not want to put her at risk.

A short distance from the road he found his encampment, surrounded by dense enough brush that he had hoped his attackers would not realize it was there. No such luck. His horse was gone, along with his saddle packs and all the supplies they held. Fortunately he always hid his most valuable possessions when leaving a camp unguarded, and a brief foray into the surrounding woods showed him that his hiding place had gone undiscovered. At least he had some coin now, though he would have traded all of it for a good knife. The next time he would have to hide one with his valuables, in case of a repeat of this dismal experience.

Are you sure you want to hunt them? he asked himself. *They are many, you are one. They will be armed, you have only household implements. They will be well-rested and healthy, while you—*

A muscle along his jaw clenched tight. It was an expression eerily like Danton's. He felt like Danton in that moment—stubborn, cold, determined. His father's strength flowed through him... and his mother's.

You are a hunter, he told himself. *One whose prey does not expect him to strike. There is power in that.*

It was surprisingly easy to pick up the trail starting from his encampment. They had led his mount away on foot—probably arguing over who would get to ride him—and that had left sharp crescent marks scored in the damp earth, a perfect marker. The hoofprints led away from the small town, which told Andovan that his attackers had not been locals, but rather itinerant scum who preyed upon legitimate travelers and then moved on. Good. He followed their trail moving quickly, qui-

etly, straining his senses to the utmost. Shortly he found a mound of horse droppings that he judged to be at least half a day old, which told him that it had been some time since his attackers had passed this way; but night had been approaching when he was attacked, and with luck they had made camp not far from here and were only just stirring now.

Silently, silently he moved, a ghost among the trees, his passage as soundless as an owl's flight. All those skills that allowed him to sneak up on a hunter's prey were now doubly valued, being turned against men. As it should be. They had the advantage of numbers, weapons, and condition. He must have the advantage of surprise.

It was possible that his head still hurt, but he was too wrapped up in the hunt now to notice it. It had been like that the day a boar had gored his side as well; his mother had raised bloody hell over it, but he hadn't even noticed the blood streaming from his flesh until his quarry was brought down.

Soon he caught the scent of a stale campfire on the wind, and he knew he had found his quarry. He circled wide around the area to where the breeze favored him, and let the scent guide him while he scanned the early morning woods for the sort of terrain that would favor a thieves' encampment. They had left him for dead and probably did not expect pursuit on his behalf; nonetheless they would have taken basic precautions and tried to place their campsite where passing travelers would not notice it. They would probably set someone on watch while they slept as well, and though it was dubious they would keep that up once they were awake, he watched closely for signs of a lookout.

At last he saw the sort of place he himself would have chosen for a blind, a gap in the trees where sunlight had encouraged a thickening of underbrush, which in turn provided a dense screen some ten yards wide, obscuring what lay beyond. He crouched behind a tree trunk and just watched the camp for a while, alert for any sign of human activity. It seemed now that he could hear voices from just beyond it, intermittent, the kind of sounds one made when doing something other than talking. He could pick up the scent of dying smoke, now, and human scents as well. After a moment longer, seeing there was no movement in the blind—guessing that such men would not be disciplined enough to remain perfectly still on watch as soldiers might—he crept forward carefully, placing each foot so that he made no rustling noise, broke no twigs, gave no warning.

At last he found a place where he could see beyond the screen of foliage. They had camped there, all right; four of them, with his horse tethered nearby. There were no other mounts present at the moment, though if they had his gold they'd be able to buy some at the next town along the road; robbing Andovan had improved their fortune immensely. They were as he had guessed they would be, coarse and grimy men dressed in a catch-all medley of stolen bits and pieces of clothing, occasional treasured trinkets glittering from beneath shirt and jerkin, perhaps as trophies.

Two were just beginning to gather their things, while another smothered the fire that must have recently served to heat food or drink for them. He watched them closely and decided they were more brutes than professionals: men who had learned that a pack of four working in unison could take down the strongest prey with no need for complex planning. That was good; such a group was unlikely to be prepared for a stealthy assault.

Andovan's head throbbed hotly for a moment, reminding him of his own weakened condition, but he was too focused upon his prey to let it bother him. With care he lay down the rope he had brought as he had planned,

taking care to move quietly, freezing when there was not enough noise in the camp to cover his own movements. But the thieves were not watching for trouble. They were joking now about some woman they'd shared in a distant town, which apparently was the reason they were not anxious to stay in the vicinity. An-dovan's jaw clenched tightly as he crouched down in the brush to watch them, waiting for the moment that must surely come, if they had just broken their fast.

And soon it did. Laughing, the tallest of the men made some crude comment about female sexual habits and then moved into the brush surrounding the camp, one hand reaching under his shirt to loosen his

clothing. Andovan knew the thief would be but a moment at his business and must be taken swiftly. Fortunately for him the man had eaten well the night before, and had something more substantial than piss to offer to the gods of the woods; Andovan came up behind him like a cat while he crouched, and had his arm around his neck before the man even knew he was there. It was a less effective move than crushing his head with an iron bar would have been, but it was quieter; Andovan's muscular arm choked the man's windpipe before he could utter a sound, bending him upward and backward so that he had no purchase on the ground. He had choked a mountain lion that way once, though the claws had raked him dearly in the process; at least this time he could grab his quarry's wrist and keep him from getting hold of any kind of weapon.

The man was enough of a fighter that he did not struggle wildly, but tried to strike at his attacker. But Andovan's grip was uncompromising, and the kicks and blows that were offered were but weak things, with no power to dislodge him. After a few minutes the struggles ceased. Andovan held on, still, until he felt that special, eerie limpness which meant that life had left the flesh. Then he let the body down, slowly, lowering it to the ground with care so that it made as little noise as possible.

All was quiet, if not utterly silent. He braved a glance back through the brush, parting the leaves until he could catch a glimpse of the clearing. The men were too busy chattering among themselves to have heard him. That meant he had a few moments to prepare himself. He searched the body quickly, cursing under his breath when he saw the man was unarmed. He'd have given much for a knife right now. Hefting the iron bar he'd borrowed, Andovan slipped back to the spot he had prepared nearby, and then waited, listening carefully.

Finally a man's voice called, "Tomas?"

There was a pause, then another came to his ears. "... should be back by now."

"Tomas?"

Only silence.

"Damn it all, has he gone off somewhere?"

"Could be an animal got him—"

"Well then we'd have heard it, wouldn't we?"

"Like you ever stop chattering long enough to hear anything."

"Like you ever shut up long enough to listen."

"Tomas!"

Andovan let out a groan then. It was hopefully that kind of groan which any man might utter, devoid of the kind of tone or detail that would identify its owner.

"Ah, damn!"

"Tomas, you hurt?" Andovan said nothing. "Shit, man, I told you to watch where you walked. Probably another damned snake."

"Probably bit him on the prick this time."

Cursing under his breath, one of the men began to head into the brush, near where Andovan was waiting,

calling for his lost friend. The fugitive prince could not have asked for better. He fell back behind the bulk of a tree trunk, letting the man pass by him before he swung the iron bar at the back of his head. The sound of the impact cracked through the forest, silencing whatever discussion was going on in the camp. As he had meant it to.

"Fuck a whore!" one of the men swore, then both grabbed their weapons and started to run toward where the sound had come from.

Andovan moved, and this time moved noisily. They heard him first and then they saw him, and quickly turned their steps in his direction. That was fine with him. He dodged an obstacle and then came to an open place where combat would be easy; then he turned and feigned fear as his enemies came running toward him—

And neither of them looked down. Andovan's hemp rope caught the first at the calf and brought him crashing to the ground. The second caught on just in time to dodge the rope, but tripped over the legs of his fallen comrade and went down right on top of him.

It was no fight at all, really. Not with the iron bar giving Andovan the advantage of superior reach, its heft cold and hard enough to steal a man's consciousness in a single blow. It felt good to exert himself, to lose himself in battle, however brief, and feel the blood rushing through his veins at full strength, like it had in the old days. The Wasting might have weakened him, but he was not yet helpless.

When they lay there before him, bloody and still, he raised the iron bar yet again. And hesitated. One good blow to each would put them out of their misery forever, if he had not done that already. Doubtless there were men and women who would thank him for removing such beasts from the realm of human affairs.

But.

Killing a man in cold blood was not the same as killing him in the heat of battle. Cutting the throat of a man was not the same as slicing that of a deer, where the latter might serve for meat and clothing. Andovan had never shied away from killing before, but never before had he had a man's body lying blood splattered and helpless at his feet like this.

They *should* die. They deserved to die. They had hurt enough people that their deaths should be applauded.

He gazed down at the two bodies for a long time.

I am not a judge, he thought at last, lowering the iron bar.

He tied them with strips of cloth torn from their clothing, so that if they did awaken while he was busy with their camp they would make enough noise to warn him. Otherwise he would leave them to the mercy of the woods... which meant to the mercy of the gods. Of course, if the deities of these woods were anything like the deities of the northern woods, they would be dead soon enough. Already he thought he could hear small animals stirring in the underbrush, drawn by the smell of fresh blood. Soon other creatures would arrive, bigger and meaner creatures, and the thieves would have bigger things than him to worry about.

He gathered up their supplies, searched out the few treasures they had hidden among their things, broke what weapons he did not care to take with him, and rode his horse back to the road, where soon the muddled track obscured all signs of his passage, making for a trail no man could follow.

One of the brothers was at the log cabin when Andovan returned, and the girl as well. Now that the sunlight fell lull upon the structure he could see that it had once been well made, but time and inexpert repair had allowed it to fall from grace. This family had neither built it nor purchased it, he guessed, but simply moved in when opportunity afforded. Perhaps they had even killed the family that owned it in order to take possession.

He looked into the eyes of Dea's brother and saw in them that same spark which, under the right circumstances, might have him toasting the rape of women alongside thieves and brigands in the woods. For a moment his hand tightened on the handle of his knife, and the line of muscle along the line of his jaw clenched tight. Then he forced both to relax.

"I am Talesin," he said. "I understand I owe you much."

The others' eyes glittered greedily. Andovan saw him glance at Dea, who turned her face away from him shyly. No, not shyly. Hiding something. Andovan felt a knot tighten in the pit of his gut. Had one of them struck the girl? Perhaps over the items he had borrowed, believing them simply stolen, blaming her for their loss? Was she hiding a fresh bruise from him?

He felt sick inside. And angry. He wanted to kill them all.

"Here." He pulled a heavy purse from his belt: ill-gotten gain from the thieves, a bag of coins and bits of jewelry and even some lady's embroidered fan. It was not enough to make the brothers rich men, but it would keep them comfortable for a long while. "Accept my thanks."

He handed the bag to one of the brothers, who hefted its weight and marked the clinking of small metal bits within, and grinned. "Always pleased to serve your lordship," he said.

Andovan tried to meet the girl's eyes, but she would not oblige him. Still her far cheek was turned so that he could not see it.

You cannot strike a man who just saved your life, he told himself. No matter how much he deserves it.

He reached into his jerkin, into the smaller purse that was hidden there, and pulled out a handful of his own coins. It was a goodly fraction of what he had brought with him and its loss would make his journey that much harder, but that could not be helped.

He held up the coins in the sunlight, letting both of them see their golden luster, the finely minted impressions of Danton's own face on one side, Gwynofar's on the other. He wondered if they would notice the resemblance.

"The girl's maidenhead is mine," he announced. "I am paying for it now. I will relinquish my rights if she marries honorably, but if she does not, her virginity is mine to take, or not to take, at my whim." He handed the coins to her brother and thought he saw the man flinch as he did so. Good. He had slipped unconsciously into what his father called an imperial tone, and even if these people did not know his true rank, they could sense his innate authority... and his utter conviction backing it. "If you dishonor my rights, if you sell her to another, or allow her to be taken against her will, I will come back and hunt you down. All of you. Like I hunted those men. Like I hunt animals."

He pulled out the iron bar from the straps of his pack and cast it to the ground by the side of the doorway; it stuck upright in the soil like a spear, quivering. The rope followed afterward, its coils marked with spatters of blood.

"Do not forget," he warned.

He would have liked a private moment with the girl, one last minute for a gentle and tender farewell, but he sensed that the brother was not about to leave them alone and let that happen. So he had to settle for one last glance into her blue eyes—filled with such doubt, such wonder, such painful gratitude—and a nod that bade her make the most she could of his gift, for he could not return to help her again.

The world is a harsh place, he thought, and men are like animals, who will devour their own.

His heart heavy, his head pounding in pain again, he mounted his horse and turned its nose to the west, and began to ride once more.

Chapter Fifteen

The High Queen Gwynofar was dressed in black. It was not the black of the Magisters, pristine and perfect, the stuff of shadows magicked into cloth, but a simpler fabric, like that a commoner would wear. There were many layers of it and each one was torn, as the custom was in the Protectorates, garments ripped each time a mourning cry was uttered until all that was left was a ragged fringe. Her fingers played with the tattered edges as she walked, and she whispered prayers to the gods of her homeland, wondering if they could even hear her in this place. Sometimes the Protectorates and their gods seemed so far off they might have been in a different world entirely... or perhaps they were just a dream from which she had not yet awakened, and she would soon discover that her memories had no real substance at all.

She was a delicate woman of northern stock, with skin so fine and white that slender blue veins could be glimpsed coursing beneath it, and gently curling hair of a soft yellow that stirred in the slightest breeze. In her own homeland she had been considered beautiful, in an ethereal sort of way, but it was no secret that Danton Aurelius preferred more substantive stock for his bed,

and most of his local bastards reflected the earthy whores that mothered them. Even her own sons, born out of royal duty, looked more like Danton than like her, and she could well imagine his coarse, hook-nosed seed laying down the law in her womb, terrorizing each fledgling infant into accepting his features *or else*. If so, only one son had defied him. Only one child had taken after her instead, defying his father to manifest his mother's pale essence.

And now he was gone.

In Andovan she had seen the windswept snowfields of the far north, the deep fjords and pine-crested mountains of her birthplace, the glimmering Veils of the Gods as they swept across the evening sky, a sight of such terrible beauty that they drove one to one's knees in prayer. Andovan. His eyes were as blue as the northern skies in summer and she had wept to see them, missing her homeland so terribly she could hardly bear it. He was *her* child, the only thing here that had been truly hers, the one thing the ancient gods had given her to make this terrible banishment tolerable.

Now gone.

Her slender white fingers tore at the hem of her gown again, rending another few threads to bits.

All about her the blue pines of her homeland bristled, brought to this place at great expense by a king who was not ungenerous with coin, even if he was tight-fisted with his affection. Their close ranks hid the surrounding stone walls from view, so that if she half-shut her eyes she might imagine herself home in

truth, wandering free in the mountains as she had done in her youth, and not in some fortified courtyard, a prisoner of royal security.

She had brought in northern craftsmen to train the trees, as was the custom in her father's lands, carving their trunks in the likenesses of her ancestors and then leaving their bark to heal, so that it appeared they had morphed themselves naturally into such images. It was said you might know the favor your family spirits held you in by how the blue pines thrived once they bore such images, but here in the south such trees were foreigners to the land, and the harsh sun and the dense clay soil conspired to make them feel unwelcome. Or so she told herself. It would be a terrible thing indeed if these stunted trees truly reflected how her forbears felt about her, and she refused to consider it.

Danton... he gave little more than a passing nod to the ancient gods, which suited a land that had never known the harshness of the northern winter, and a people that had never offered their devotions in thigh-deep snow before the Spears of the Wrath. Danton's people were not raised believing that if they failed to do their duty for even a night the whole of the human lands might be swallowed up by a second Dark Ages, and the Second Age of Kings would become what the First Age had... a thing men knew only from the tales in history books centuries later, and by the melodious laments of minstrels. Such men could be careless with their lives and with their gods, and forget the ancient traditions. She did not have that freedom.

In the center of the courtyard she had commanded a circle of spires to be erected, irregular stone monuments carefully carved and smoothed and polished till they rose like some vast monster's teeth from the ground, towering well over her head. It was commanded that no drop of water that fell upon the spires should find purchase, but rather each must run swiftly down the surface to the bottom without interruption, and so she had ordered them sculpted thus, each in its own twisted, sinuous form. They were eerie, especially when one stood inside the circle of them. Danton hated them. But she was the daughter of a Lord Protector, and he knew the obligations that came with such a heritage. Here in this private place, in this proxy circle of Spears, she might prick her finger and offer up a drop of her blood to the Wrath of the gods, promising to maintain her family's ancient contract with those who had saved mankind from utter devastation. So did the blood of the First Age of Kings, running in her veins, guarantee the prosperity of the Second Age. Danton understood that. He might not believe in the legends behind the custom, but he understood.

The thin bone pin was but an inch from her fingertip when she heard a sound behind her. That was unusual, in this place. Guards rarely followed her here, finding the place eerie and discomforting, trusting to the high walls and the King's land beyond to protect her. Even her own children found the place disquieting, and while they had come here when they were young to attend her devotions, they rarely did so now, preferring to wait until she had returned from her worship if they had need to speak with her. Andovan alone had come here without prompting, as if recognizing that the place was his as much as hers. She had often reflected upon the fact that he alone truly understood his heritage, and its terrible burden. *You are of the blood of the Protectors*, she had said to him, stroking his blond hair as he stood beside her in the Circle of the Wrath as a young boy, *and if the time comes when the world must be tested again, then so you shall be called to the task, and you must be ready to serve.*

Now he was gone. And her other sons—her strutting, proud peacock sons—gave no more than a token nod to northern tradition. She had no doubt that if the Wrath failed and the Souleaters returned to feed upon men, they would seal themselves in this keep with their father and send out commoners by the thousands to die in their name rather than risk their own blood in battle. So had the kings of the First Age done in their own time, the legends said, all but a precious few. And they had paid a terrible price for it.

The trees behind her rustled. She turned, the tattered silk of her gown's hem brushing at fallen needles. A

man's figure moved from the shadows into the moonlight of the clearing, and as he stepped between the twisted spires and became fully visible she let out a small yelp of surprise and then rushed into his arms.

"Rhys! I had thought you had forgotten me—"

"Shhhhh. Quiet, little sister. You know that is nonsense."

She held him, trembling, and she wept a little. But they were tears of joy rather than pain and he knew them for such, and so he simply held her while they flowed. At last she moved back from him, drying her eyes with a sleeve on one side of her face, allowing him to brush away the tears from the other with his fingers. It was a freedom she would have allowed very few men.

"You came with a retinue?" she whispered.

He nodded. "Father wouldn't have it otherwise. I left them at Danton's table to eat themselves into oblivion."

She rubbed her reddened nose with a dampened sleeve. "How did I not know, then? I should have heard of your coming—"

"Unless Danton agreed to keep it a secret so I might surprise you." His pale brow furrowed as he studied her, seeing the signs of her pain. "You see? He is not so unfeeling. He understands that sometimes you need what he cannot give."

She hugged him again, hugged him long and hard, and perhaps wept a bit more. He just held her quietly and let the tears flow.

He was a tall man, a handsome man, with hair so pale that in the moonlight it seemed it might have been sculpted out of freshly fallen snow. It had been curly in his youth, like hers, but he wore it in the style of the Guardians of the Wrath now, tightly twisted into dozens of slender braids that hung down straight to his shoulders. Moonlight played upon the tokens of rank and fortitude that had been bound to the braids in front, making them glitter like captive snowflakes. His skin was pale, like hers, but his frame was stockier, his broad shoulders hinting at a much more formidable wench for brood-mother than the delicate lady who had borne Gwynofar. In truth Gwynofar knew Rhys' mother was no such thing, rather a mere slip of a girl who had caught the Lord Protector's eye one winter evening and kept him warm till the sun rose. But the gods had visited her with fertility that night and apparently meant to bless her bastard child as well, for he had won favor with the Lord Protector, indulgence from his lady, and friendship with the true-born daughter of their household, the golden-haired Gwynofar.

Now... now Rhys was anything but a child. Gwynofar held him at arm's length and studied him. Was it possible he had grown so much since she left, or did she just feel smaller in this foreign place? They were both much older than they had been when they had played in the woods together, making offerings to the wild pines as if the whole northern forest was their personal domain. He wore the uniform of a Guardian now, which spoke of some important promotion, but she didn't know enough about the various ranks and initiations of the secretive order to know how to read his advancement, or to interpret the various charms that glittered about his person. The scar that had been made when he first joined the Guardians was no longer red but a livid white, and it coursed diagonally across his cheek like the war paint of some Dark Ages barbarian, drawing attention to his high cheekbones and cool gray eyes.

You are of the blood of the First Kings, as I am, she thought. You bear the same burden the Lord Protector does, at least in half. If the Wrath fails us, if the world is put to the test, you will stand on the battlefield beside the Protectors, while Danton and his children will shiver in their beds like frightened pups.

No, your burden is even greater than ours... for my birth was contracted by kings, but yours was decreed by the gods themselves. They have some special purpose in store for you, my half-brother, and I pray for you nightly, for the whims of the northern gods are rarely gentle or pleasant things.

"You came here just to see me?" she asked.

"To see you, bring you news, bring back news of your welfare. Father won't admit it, but he's worried. He knows how you felt about Andovan." He picked at the tattered silk on her shoulder, biting his lip softly as he offered his own silent prayer to her mourning. "So what really happened?" he said at last. "No one is telling us anything of consequence. Least of all the High King's messenger. *We regret to inform you that Prince Andovan of House Aurelius, son of the High Queen Gwynofar, grandson of the Lord Protector Stevan of House Keird-wyn, is dead by his own hand. It is our custom in such cases not to hold a state funeral* Hardly informative."

She sighed and wrapped her pale arms around herself, trying to make the words come without tears. "He had the Wasting. Danton did not want to admit it, but everyone knew. He even brought Magisters here to study him, to try to discover some other diagnosis." She shrugged stiffly. "But they could not, for there was no other cause. So... I have told you of his nature, Rhys. He hated sitting around and waiting for decisions to be made, he always hungered to be active, independent... it was eating him alive, to know he would die an invalid. So one night he decided he would not let that happen." She shivered and lowered her eyes; a tear trembled on the pale lashes. "He didn't even tell me," she whispered. "I'd have thought he would have. But maybe he was afraid I would try to talk him out of it."

"Would you have?" he asked softly.

She bit her lip for a moment. "I don't know, Rhys. What hope could I give him? The Wasting has no cure. It's a terrible death, especially for a youth who hated so much to have to sit still for anything. Still I would have... I would have thought he would want to talk to me first... I would have wanted to say good-bye, at least."

She turned away, toward the Spears. The night was silent.

"You didn't come with the mourners father sent," she whispered. "I'd hoped you would."

"I had duties."

She nodded, accepting that. As much as she would have valued Rhys' company when Andovan died, his standing as a royal bastard might have sent the wrong message had he been included in the formal Deathcall. Danton disdained his own bastards and did not want them having any illusions about royal inheritance, thus he did not encourage them to attend his court, as was done in some other places. If Rhys had come with the Lord Protector's official mourners Danton might have deemed it an insult.

A short time later, however, and by himself, to pay a social call upon his half-sister—that was acceptable. Danton was probably relieved that someone else was taking on the burden of comforting her. Gods knew he was no good at it.

"So tell me news of home," she begged. "Good news, please."

A shadow passed over his face. She felt her own heart skip a beat. "Rhys?"

For a long while he was silent. Finally he said, "The signs are ominous. I would be lying if I told you otherwise. I am sorry."

She straightened her back. She was a Protector's daughter, and must meet such trials with resolute

strength. "Father hinted at such," she said quietly. "But he would not give me details." She put a hand on his arm. "I know I can trust you to be honest with me, yes?"

His eyes met hers. How deep they were, how dark in the moonlight, glittering like ice on the surface but shadowed with black secrets behind that. *He is truly a Guardian now*, she thought. She watched him as he struggled with himself over which secrets to keep and which to reveal, weighing his various obligations one against the other. That, more than anything else, told her how terribly wrong things were.

"What would you say," he asked finally, "if I told you I had touched a Spear?"

"I would say that if the Guardians deemed it necessary—"

"I don't mean with the Guardians." He placed his hands on her shoulders. "Alone, Gwyn. No Guardians to flank me, to lend me strength, no Magisters to steady my hand... nothing."

She drew in a sharp breath. "That is... that is... not possible."

"So we are taught," he said quietly.

"When was this?"

"Early this spring. I was near to the edge of the forbidden lands, returning home, trusting to my horse to keep to the proper path. Animals are even more sensitive than we are to the power of the gods; he would not have turned northward without a spear prodding his flanks. Or so I thought. But at one point I looked up, and there in the distance I saw a black spire outlined against the horizon. He had brought me that close to a Spear, that I could see its shape clearly." He paused, his expression grim. "Horses will not do that of their own volition, Gwyn. Not ever. They fear the Wrath even more than demons do, and we often have to leave them behind when we approach the Spears, lest they go mad from terror. But this time, the horse I rode did not even seem to be aware it was there... no more than he would be aware of any natural pinnacle of rock.

"That close to a Spear I should have been able to feel its presence, yet I could not. I should have been able to hear the screaming that emanates from the root of it, where the earth lies scarred from its terrible wound... I should have instinctively felt the urge to flee at any cost, and had to fight that urge with all my strength even to gaze upon the thing. But it was not so this time. So perhaps, I told myself, my first impression was mistaken. Perhaps this was not a Spear after all, but some natural monument in the same form. That was a simple explanation, and a far preferable one to my mind.

"I turned my horse toward this oddity of nature, determined to examine it. Yet as we came closer I began to feel what I had expected, the touch of the gods upon my spirit... only weaker than it usually was. Weaker than it should have been.

"I knew then such fear within my soul as I cannot describe to you. If this was a Spear in truth, why was it so weakened? I tried to urge my horse forward, to test it, but at that point he would go no farther. At last I had to leave him behind. Yet even so he was not so frantic as beasts normally are that close to the edge of the Wrath. It was an ill omen.

"As I came closer to the spire, picking my way across the earth, I could feel the Wrath envelop me at last. Ah, you do not know what it feels like, Gwyn, to be in such a state without sorcery to support you! The nearest I can describe it to you is that it is like standing in a terrible storm, where you must lean into the gale merely to keep your footing. For every step you take forward, the wind might drive you two back. So it was with the Wrath as I approached, for the power of the gods' fury by its very nature drives back all living creatures. Yet despite the terror in my heart I knew I had to go forward, to learn what

details I could, that I might report them to my order."

Gwynofar nodded solemnly, captivated by his tale. In her youth she had strayed as close to the ancient spires as a simple maiden might, but the maleficent power of the Wrath had forced her to flee like a frightened deer from their proximity. Later, as daughter of a Lord Protector, she had been given a role to play in the annual sacrifice, and in the company of Magisters had come even closer to the monuments, but even sorcerous rituals were not enough to protect one from the gods' ancient magic entirely, and she remembered shivering to the core of her soul even then, wanting nothing more than to get the ritual finished so that she could go home.

To walk up to one of the ancient monuments by oneself, to *touch* one... that was a thing she could not even imagine doing.

Rhys continued. "Against that gale I forced my way to the foot of the spire itself. It was a vast and twisted thing that towered overhead as high as the turrets of father's keep. I kept expecting the gods to crush me like an insect for daring to come so close, but they did not. And at last, may they forgive me... I reached out and touched the cold stone surface." His voice dropped to a whisper; his eyes glittering like ice in the moonlight. "I *touched* it, Gwyn. And then suddenly I could hear all the voices that had been silent before: the screams of the earth god whose sacred flesh had been ripped open when the Spear first fell, the howls of all those men and beasts whom the Wrath had possessed down through the centuries, the roar of all the demons that had thrown themselves against that malevolent barrier, failing to break through... their screams poured into me like a black whirlwind when I touched the stone, and I fell to my knees, overwhelmed... and I think that had my hand not fallen from the spire at that moment, I would have been swallowed whole by that terrible screaming, and never returned to you."

She saw him shudder in the moonlight. It was an uncharacteristic gesture for him, and as such it sent a chill through her heart.

"But Guardians do touch the Spears at other times," she said softly. "Do they not?"

"Aye, when they need repair, when wind and ice have threatened to crack their surface, then we must mortar them freshly, and seal them against winter's ire... but the men who do that are of the blood of the Protectors, whom the gods have fortified for just that purpose, and they do not go alone. I am only that on my father's side... barely enough to approach it in their company."

He touched a hand to the underside of her chin, gently. "You, sweet queen, possess what this humble bastard lacks. You could face the Wrath directly and not back down, if you needed to."

She shuddered. "Don't even suggest that."

"Why? The time may soon come. If it does, all those who bear the Protectors' gift must play their part in defending the world, else we may witness the Second Age of Kings fall to madness and barbarism, as the First Age did."

"Do you believe that?" Her voice was a whisper. "Do you say these things to frighten me, or do you honestly believe that the Wrath is about to fail us?"

"Gods willing it will stand strong forever," he responded solemnly. "Riders have been sent out to inspect the other Spears and find out what the situation is; it will be months before we have the larger picture. Be grateful the summer is upon us now, at least, so that such travel is possible. In the meantime I am a Guardian, and must be prepared for the worst. As you must, being of the Lord Protector's blood."

Perhaps sensing that the moment had become too intense—perhaps regretting he had brought such

thoughts to one in mourning—he glanced back toward the keep. "So tell me of other news. Danton is vile-tempered as usual? Rurick still a strutting ass?"

Despite herself she smiled. "Choose your words carefully. Rurick will be High King someday."

"Aye. Gods help us all." He ran a hand through his braids, which set a few of the tokens bound in it to tinkling. "What of your Magister Royal? I take it someone new has replaced Ramirus? He has not shown his face since I arrived."

Her expression tightened. It was a reflexive reaction, beyond her control, like the instinctive hissing of a cat. "Kostas." She nearly spat the name. "Gods curse the day that vile creature came into our house."

He glanced back at the keep again. "Are you not worried—"

"He never comes here. He disdains these" —she indicated the spires—"and the *northern superstition* they represent. Indeed, sometimes I come here just to escape him. He has left his mark all over the keep like wolf piss. Sometimes I feel like I should bathe just to get out the stink."

Rhys blinked in surprise. "I've never heard you speak like that of a man before. What has he done to earn such venom?"

Her eyes flashed angrily. "Taken all that is worst in my husband and encouraged it to new excess. Ramirus was a temperate man, a fit counselor for a High King. Kostas is a snake. No. Worse than a snake. He is a pestilence, an infection. Ten minutes in his presence and Danton is raging like a bull in season, desperate for some enemy to gore, or else perhaps a rival to mount. Ramirus knew how to calm him. Kostas... Kostas does not even try. He seems to take pleasure in Danton's rage." Quietly Rhys said, "Is that all?" Startled, she asked, "What do you mean?" His eyes glittered darkly in the moonlight. "We have known each other a very long time Gwyn. Granted we do not see each other often these days, your duties and mine being what they are, but I think I know you well enough to know when things are not right. Even the reasons you offer me do not match the hatred I sense in your heart. There is another cause beside these things, clearly." When she did not answer him he prompted gently, "Is there not?"

With a sigh she turned away from him; her pale hand reached out to rest upon the surface of the nearest spire, as if she might draw strength from the gods through such contact. "I do not know," she said at last. "With any other man I could capture his essence in words and be content. But Kostas—my feelings about him defy the bounds of language, my brother. It is... it is a sensation almost animal in tenor, that comes upon me when I am in his presence. Like the deer mouse must feel when the shadow of a hawk passes over it. I want to run, or I want to strike at him, to see his blood flow... I want to do *something* other than pass courtly pleasantries and pretend nothing is wrong when everything in my soul cries out to drive him from my castle, away from my home and my family, at any cost..."

She stared off into the darkness for a moment. "Sometimes I have dreams," she whispered, "in which I come to him while he sleeps and slit his throat. Or I stab him in the heart, so that his blood spurts out across my hands... and it is ecstatic. In those dreams he is not a Magister at all, but something... something else, that I cannot give a name to. Something that I know must be destroyed at any cost."

"When I awaken from those dreams that feeling remains with me for a time. I must struggle to hide it from him, and yet... yet... he *is* a Magister, beyond question. He serves my husband as dutifully as Ramirus ever did. And if he is cruel at times, if he manipulates Dan-ton's darker instincts for some private purpose, or even just for his own amusement... that is what men become when they live centuries beyond their natural lifespan. I have met enough Magisters in my days as queen to know that. And I accept it, as must all royals who rely upon their sorcery." She wrapped her arms around herself and shivered. "Why is this one different, Rhys? Why can I not accept him as I did all the others?"

Gently he came up behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. When he saw she did not pull away he drew her gently to him, until she rested her head against his chest. "You bear the blood of the Protectors in your veins," he said softly. "There is a magic in that we do not understand, save that we know it was given to us by the gods to protect us. Trust in it to guide you."

"They think we are ignorant savages, you know." Her voice was fierce with bitterness. "They will never say it to my face, not even Danton, but I can hear it in their silence. Superstitious savages with strange blood rites who worship rocks and talk to trees, like the men of the Dark Ages did. Danton would never have asked for my hand if had he not feared that the Lord Protectors would look askance at his northern ambitions... this marriage bought him a border treaty that lets him swallow up other nations at his whim, provided he leaves the Protectorates alone." She sniffed. "Apparently he did not mind wedding a *barbarian* for that."

"It is the fate of royalty to be bartered for treaties."

he said quietly. "Especially the daughters of royalty. You know that."

She shivered against him as if she were cold; he wrapped his arms around her. "I know," she replied.

He kissed her gently on the top of her head and sighed. "Ah, Gwyn. I wish I could stay with you longer than a few days. You need to be with your own people for a time... more than even I guessed. But I cannot."

Silently she nodded. "I understand. I have my duty as Protector to be sold into foreign lands, to safeguard my father's domain... you have a duty to see that the Wrath never wavers." She sighed. "Had you not told me that tale before I might beg you to reconsider... but with that in mind I cannot."

"We are both creatures of duty, yes?" Gently he released her. "Not a thing I expect a 'civilized' king to understand."

Despite herself she smiled faintly, sadly.

"I will ask Father if he can send you more servants from home," he told her. "You need the comfort of your own language, and to be surrounded by those who do not need to be taught your customs. Servants whose silence is only silence."

"I would not ask that of him, Rhys."

"I know, little sister. You are far too proud... and far too stubborn. That is why I will ask him for you."

He knelt down in the moist bed of pine needles that covered the ground and picked out a slender white object from among them, where she had dropped it. It was made of bone and carved with figures in an ancient style, of creatures whose names had long ago been forgotten. "You were going to make offering."

"Yes."

He handed the pin back to her. "So tell me then. Will the gods accept the sacrifice of a halfbreed?"

She put her hand over his and gazed into his eyes.

They no longer seemed dark but comforting, familiar. "The gods will welcome the offering of a Guardian," she told him gently. "And I that of a brother."

In the light of two moons, in the circle of House Kierdwyn's ancestors, they offered up a drop of blood

to each of the stone spires in turn, and prayed that the world would not be destroyed a second time.

Chapter Sixteen

"You are the witch from the tavern?" Startled, Kamala turned around. She half expected it to be some sort of local authority addressing her, backed by members of the guard perhaps, and as she turned she braced herself to let loose such power as was necessary to keep them at bay, but it was only a single man, and one not even carrying weapons. She blinked, surprised, but no guards appeared. Nor was there anywhere nearby for them to stage an effective ambush.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "And why do you ask me this?"

Truth be told, he looked less than happy about being there, in one of the worst neighborhoods of the Quarter, and he glanced back over his shoulder repeatedly as he spoke to her, as if expecting an army of thieves and whores might descend upon him at any moment. When his woolen cloak parted once Kamala could see flashes of fine silk clothing, but he quickly grabbed the edges of the cloak and wrapped it tightly about himself, denying her any more insight. No doubt that was the reason there were beads of sweat running down his face; it was a warm day to be wearing such a wintry wrap.

"My master sent me to search you out. He said..." He hesitated. "He said, 'look for a tall girl dressed like a boy, with hair as red as the Hunter's Moon, for that is how they have described her, they who were at the place.'"

"Who is your master?" she demanded. "And what makes him think this is a witch he describes?"

He pulled at the neck of his woolen cloak, allowing the sweat to trickle down inside the collar, and glanced back down the narrow street once again. "It is said by those who were there at the time that this woman stood single-handed against a gang of ruffians and killed them all, and must either therefore have witchery of her own, or have as a patron someone of power."

Kamala cursed inwardly. She had hoped no one would put two and two together after her little adventure, but that was apparently too much to ask. It was her own fault. She should have stayed behind to watch the aftermath of her battle, to take what steps were necessary to guard her anonymity, but all she had wanted then was to put as much distance between her and the slaughter as possible. Now she was paying the price for that choice.

This meant she would have to leave the city soon. Not because she feared what the local elite would do if they found her—they rarely gave a damn what happened in the Quarter or muddied their silk shoes trying to fix things—but simply because this was not the way she had wanted to begin her new life.

Of course, she thought to herself, you could just wear women's clothing for a while. No one would recognize you then.

He was still there, silently waiting. The servant of a nobleman, waiting on her. The thought was oddly pleasing.

"You did not answer my first question," she pointed out.

"Of course." He glanced back over his shoulder once more—there was still no one closing in on him from behind—then bowed to her. How odd it felt, to receive such a gesture as if she were some highborn lady! "My master is Pahdman Ravi. No doubt you have heard his name." He waited for an answer. She blinked and said nothing. "He wishes me to extend his hand in greeting to the lady of power, who has

helped clean the streets of his city of some of its more bothersome vermin, and to suggest to her that he may have business that would be of interest to her, if she would do him the honor of attending upon him to hear it."

She had never heard the name of Ravi, but she could guess what it was associated with. Likely it was one of the many ambitious merchant houses that swarmed about the political heart of the city like flies on fresh dung. Many such houses owned property in the Quarter, and periodically a name would arise suddenly like foul gas from a swamp when some brothel collapsed beneath its own weight, or when a building project ill-suited to time and tide blocked the waters that drained the city of refuse, turning the summer air into a thick soup of rotting garbage.

She bound enough soulfire to determine that there was no malicious intent inherent in the invitation. That *this* man knew about, anyway. His master was another matter.

"What does he want with me?" she demanded.

He bowed slightly. "I am not privy to that, my lady." There was ever so slight a hesitation before he spoke the title, as if the word was sour on his tongue; it pleased her in a darkly perverse way that a creature more accustomed to stone-paved roads and silk hangings had been ordered to address her thus. "Perhaps if you will accept my master's invitation, he will explain it to you himself."

She bit her lip and considered. All her childhood instincts warned her against trusting such an invitation.

Ravi might be impressed by her power but he still regarded her as vermin. Class distinctions did not disappear just because one had power, though a subtle man might dance around them carefully if it suited his purpose.

Then the truth struck her.

He does not know what you truly are. He has no clue as to your origins. You are a clean slate, a cipher, and he will know of you only what you allow him to know.

She glanced down instinctively at her hands and noticed how clean they were. It had been a long time since the ingrained dirt of the Quarter had stained her pores and marked every crease in her flesh; Ethanus had seen to that. How many other signs of peasant birth and harsh use were no longer apparent? What would a wellborn man who had no more information than the ambiguous *she killed some men in the Quarter* think of her?

It was a heady thought.

She remembered the moments right before her fight. The frightening discovery that though soulfire was nearly unlimited in its potential, it still took time and concentration to use, and that that could mean vulnerability. She also remembered the warnings Ethanus had given her, especially about Transition: *When your current consort dies you will be helpless, as you must concentrate upon seeking another. That state lasts only a moment, but if you are in the presence of enemies at the time, a moment can be enough.* Being a Magister might help keep her safe, but it was not proof against all possible threats.

But.

She also remembered the feel of the power coursing through her, so awesome in its rage that no man could bridle it. Like some vast creature bellowing its fury from inside her soul, so magnificent and powerful that it made her giddy. It made her hungry. It made her want to test herself against the world.

What have you to fear from this Ravi? He does not know what you truly are, so he can hardly set a trap for you.

The servant was waiting. He would wait all afternoon if she so decided. So had he been ordered, clearly.

That was what decided her.

"Lead the way," she told him, in her most imperious voice. "I will meet your master."

She had never been to the Hill before, save for one brief journey by her mother's side, when the woman had sought a better price for her daughter's virginity than the small town of their birth could afford. Even at that young age Kamala had been acutely aware of how out of place they were there, how vast and impenetrable the cultural barrier was that divided peasant from gentry, and how clear it was to everyone on the other side of that divide that she and her mother had not crossed it. She could see the scorn in men's faces as they passed by, the disgust with which they acknowledged her mother's offer of peasant flesh to serve their pleasure, as if she was serving them food at a feast and had offered them a plate of rotten meat.

She remembered trembling all that day, in fear and shame, until her mother had declared the day a failure and brought her back to their ramshackle home in the Quarter. At which point Kamala had fled to a secret place beneath one of the wooden walkways, a dank cubbyhole suspended above the brackish tide where only a child might fit, and stayed there until hunger finally forced her to return to the world at large.

Later her most precious commodity had been sold to a dark-skinned tourist from the southern kingdoms whose skin was redolent of musk and sweat and who considered every natural orifice of a young girl fair game for his pleasure. It could have been worse. She knew of young girls so debased in their breaking that they drowned themselves rather than live with the shame of it. Though she sometimes wondered if their experiences had really been so much worse than hers, or if the girls were simply not as strong as she had been, did not cling to life with the same fiery passion, willing to do whatever it took to stay alive, knowing that *tomorrow* could not be better if one failed to survive *today*.

No man would ever touch her like that again.

No man or woman would ever profit again from the sale of her dignity.

May hell claim anyone who thought otherwise.

The streets of the Hill were paved in stone, not out of necessity—unlike the rest of Gansang it stood high above the water table—but to distinguish it from the muddy roads and mildewed wooden walkways of the poorer districts. The very air Kamala breathed seemed to be cleaner here. Drier. Overhead she saw towers soaring into the sky, expanding upward rather than outward, making the most of that small bit of prized real estate. Slender bridges joined them one to another so that a nobleman might visit neighbors without ever setting foot upon the earth; silken curtains fluttered in hundreds of windows like brightly colored birds. The lowest levels of the towers had been given over to merchants, and their wares filled shop after shop with jewelry, fine leather tack, polished knives, and bolts of silk as sheer as a spider's web. Kamala wanted more than anything to stop and look at everything, to run her fingers over the treasures of the rich and powerful, to drink them in with all her senses, but the servant would not pause for such indulgences. To him this display was commonplace, merely one more thing to hurry past on his way to more important affairs, and if she paid it more than a passing bit of attention she would be revealing more than she should about her origins.

You can have any of this that you want, for a bit of power. Pay for it with false coin or simply take it, as you please. Later, at your leisure.

He brought her to a gray stone tower with a crest engraved on the heavy oaken door. Servants opened it from the inside before her guide even knocked. They seemed to know who Kamala was—or at least they knew that some sort of important guest was due—for they ushered her past with lowered eyes, in which she almost did not see the passing glance of disapproval for her weathered attire.

It was clean inside. Very clean. You could not keep a house this clean in the Quarter no matter how hard you tried; the mildew alone would defeat you. The stone walls had been painted an unblemished white and the windows along the stairwell were large, inviting in the sunlight. Noting the lack of dust anywhere, hearing the flurry of servants behind her as they rushed to sweep up the dirt she had left on their stairs before their master noticed it, she guessed he was likely a cruel man whose servants lived in fear that the slightest speck of dirt would displease him. Or perhaps he was the sort of man so unnerved by disorder that he must exert total control over every aspect of his environment. Or perhaps both.

He was waiting for her in a room that was bigger than the entire house she had been born in. Most of the space was empty, wasted, with a single ornate table with finely carved chairs set by the fireplace at the far end. He nodded as she entered, acknowledging her presence with requisite politeness but no particular humility. Overhead... overhead there were murals of the most extraordinary design, covering the top third of every wall. In each was depicted some scene out of mythic history—the birth of the Huntress in one, the destruction of the Souleaters in another, the founding of Gansang in a third—with eerily lifelike figures the size of living men. Yet it was not that which made the display so remarkable. It was the man who stood before her, who was depicted in each and every mural, not as a participant in the scene but rather as a tourist passing through it. His painted image seemed to show little interest in the events depicted, but rather looked outward toward the viewer in the manner of formal portraiture, turning the most dramatic events of human history into no more than a backdrop for his presence. Goddesses were born, Souleaters lived and died, but the eye was drawn to him.

It was the most astonishing—and expensive—display of human ego she had ever seen.

So this is what men do with money when they are not wasting it on whores.

The man whose face was so meticulously reproduced above them was perhaps thirty years of age, and his clothing betrayed the same meticulous attention to detail that she had noted in the maintenance of his abode. The layers of heavy silks that he wore and the gold rings which adorned both hands made it clear he had money and wanted others to know it. His long robe was embroidered with some sort of heraldic motif—likely a family device, she thought—and was clasped loosely below his waist with a belt of figured gold and rubies. He was not a bad-looking man, overall, though the long curls of his black hair looked like they came from a hot iron rather than nature and his carefully plucked eyebrows were a tad effeminate for her taste. But she was hardly one to criticize such things, with her own close-cropped locks and boy's attire.

They took each other's measure for a long silent moment, and she could see one plucked brow arch a bit as he took note of the dust that clung to her boots. No doubt he was concerned that she might spread some of it about his whitewashed home if she moved. *Well*, she thought dryly, *that is what happens when you summon someone fresh from a brawl in the Quarter. Take it or leave it.* With a long stride she crossed the room toward him, not a little amused that as she did so she probably left a wake of dust stirring behind her. Serendipity.

"I am Pabdmán Ravi," he said. This close to him she could smell his perfume, a faintly cloying sweetness, like that of sugared fruits." Welcome to my house."

She met his gaze with brazen frankness. "You don't even know my name, do you?"

One corner of his mouth twitched slightly. It might have been a smile. "You did not give it when you arrived. Not that my men could discover." He reached back behind him and pulled a braided cord that hung upon the wall; its upper end disappeared into a hole leading somewhere else.

"You can call me Sidra." She said it in a tone that implied there was more to her name than that, but she wasn't yet ready to share it all. It seemed appropriately pretentious.

"Very well." A servant appeared, replete with a tray holding two silver goblets and a decanter to match. He brought it to them and set it on the table, then backed, bowing, from the room. Ravi did not acknowledge his presence in any way, but when the servant was gone he uncapped the decanter, poured an inch of something thick and syrupy into each goblet, and gestured again for her to take a seat at the table. "From the vineyards of Seraat. Sidra." He raised his cup to her. "To your... power."

Her eyes fixed upon him, she sipped the offering. It tasted as syrupy as it looked and coated the tongue like the aftermath of a hangover. With a whisper of effort she applied enough soulfire to change it into something more palatable. Her eyes never left his. Her faint smile never left her lips.

You had the test all wrong, Ethanus. It is when you can steal someone's life merely to improve a cup of wine that you know you are truly a Magister.

"Your servant said you wished to speak to me."

"Yes. Please, make yourself comfortable." He gestured toward the chairs again; after a moment she lowered herself onto one of them. He sat opposite her, set his goblet on the table, then steeped his fingers thoughtfully, as if musing over exactly what to say. It was a bit too studied a move to read true; she guessed that he had rehearsed these words in private many, many times.

"I heard of your fight in the Quarter," he said finally. "Impressive use of power, that."

She shrugged, but said nothing.

"Witches rarely indulge their power thus."

"Witches don't like to be raped," she said curtly.

Ravi chuckled his amusement at the image. Kamala felt a knot of distaste rising in the back of her throat, and fought it down with effort. *Don't underestimate this man*, she warned herself. *The fact that he looks and acts like a strutting peacock may simply mask the heart of a wolf...*

... or more likely a vulture.

"And yet," he said, "there are many witches who would submit to such an assault rather than waste a precious portion of their life essence. Am I wrong?"

An easy denial rose to her lips... and died there. Was he right? Did the most powerful women in the world lie down in the mud and permit themselves to be used like whores because by defending themselves they would hasten their own deaths? The thought was sickening. And yet probably true. She knew that in the core of her soul even as Ravi spoke the words.

/ would rather die than live like that, she thought. And she looked up at Ravi and for a brief moment saw the intelligence that glimmered behind his painted eyes. *He knows that.*

"Go on," she said quietly.

He leaned forward on the table. "You have so much power, so much potential, you can do things most men do not even dream of... yet you are shackled by necessity, unable to shape the world like the Magisters do because of the cost, unable to alter your own fate except in tiny fragments. It's never enough for you, I am guessing. Never as much as you would like." He leaned back again, his hands folding before him; his sharp eyes never left hers. "Am I wrong?"

"You do not know who I am." She said it quietly. "Or what I truly want."

"Perhaps." He did not seem disturbed by her chill response, but took up his goblet and sipped from its contents as casually as if he were sharing an amiable dinner drink with an old friend. This was also a well-rehearsed move, she sensed. "Let me tell you then what I would offer to another woman who had your power, but perhaps wanted... different things. I would say to her, come into my service, and I shall give you all the things you dare not conjure for yourself. I will clothe you in silks and adorn you in jewels, and set before you all manner of delicacy in food, wine... even bring you men, women, boys, as you please, to serve your pleasure. Speak of a desire and my house shall do its best to provide it. Whisper a need and all my staff shall come running to attend upon you."

She raised an eyebrow. "And in return?"

"In return?" He shrugged. "Only such small services as might be needed now and then by a businessman such as myself. The turning of a mind. The easing of a contract. The cultivating of favor where mere diplomacy could not manage it... or perhaps an occasional error in a rival camp, if that is required."

Feast of Souls

She drew in a breath very slowly, very carefully. Words and emotions were a wild storm within her; she had to pick her way through them carefully to find the proper path. "You understand the power that fuels witchery is one's own life."

"I understand that spells have a cost, yes. I would not offer to pay you so well for them if it were otherwise." He leaned back across the table again, intending the motion to seem relaxed, but the hunger in his eyes was undisguised. "Give me those few minutes' worth of service, and I will make of all the rest of your life a thing other women will envy. Or if that does not tempt you, then state your price. I will meet it, and more."

He was offering her a Magister's contract, but he could not possibly know she was a Magister. All he knew was that as a witch she was free with her power, seemingly unconcerned with the ultimate cost of wielding that magic. Willing to die young if that meant she might indulge herself now.

It was an assessment so opposed to what Kamala truly was, so totally and absolutely wrong, that for a moment it left her speechless.

"You are so sure I have a price," she said at last.

The answer was in his eyes; he did not have to voice it. A merchant's answer: *Every man has a price.*

Wordlessly she rose and turned away from the table. She did not want him to see her expression right now. The indignation, the disgust, burned too hotly in her to be disguised... but would he even recognize those emotions if he saw them? Would he understand the cause? In his mind he had done nothing wrong. He was just playing the same game that the rich and powerful had always played with the lower classes. Money could buy anything, including human life. Why not apply it in this case?

"You would make me your whore," she muttered.

At night he dreamed dark dreams, sometimes terrifying dreams, filled with demons who tore the living flesh from his body to feast upon, succubi who drained all the strength of his manhood, and worse. He awoke from those nightmares in a cold sweat, trembling. Part of him wished the dreams would stop, but another part of him, desperate for answers, clung to them even after waking, turning every detail over in his mind like a child turning over stones at the beach, looking for tiny creatures scuttling beneath. Yet there was no meaning he could find in them, beyond a simple expression of his fears. Certainly no clues that would help him find the source of his illness, if such a person existed.

Open grasslands gave way to badlands, whose maze of twisting ravines marked the westernmost border of Danton's territory. He had to hire a guide to get him through, a local who knew which routes would not circle back on themselves or terminate in a dead end at the brink of some serpentine canyon. The traveling was hard and his horse was tired and it was not until they reached the other side and his guide left him, that An-dovan realized exactly where he was.

Mountains reared skyward to the west of him, glowing an eerie red in the late afternoon sunlight. This was the Blood Ridge, supposedly named for the red maples that covered its lower flanks, lending the whole range a crimson cast. At least that was what Andovan had been taught back home. But out here the locals assured him the name came from something else entirely, and commemorated the brutality of Danton's troops when they first entered the region. It was a border marked in blood, they said, and the gods had turned the trees themselves red so that the children of those the High King murdered would never forget.

If they had realized that Andovan was of Danton's line they would probably have added his blood to the mix.

Now, standing in the shade of a vast maple whose leaves were like dark red hands grasping at the sunlight, he felt a sense of mixed exhaustion and awe. This was the end of his father's territory, the gateway to lands beyond. Which meant that the woman he sought was in a place where the Aurelius line had no authority. Was she perhaps some distant enemy of his father's House, working ill upon Danton's line? He could think of no other reason for a person so far away to have given him this disease. If that was indeed what had happened.

If my dreams are true, she is out there. I will find her.

A large hawk circled overhead as he made his camp, its brown wings gleaming in the dying sunlight. By the time Andovan had seen to his horse's needs and his own and then settled down to sleep, it had flown away.

That night he dreamed of his quarry.

Dark, the streets are so dark; the narrow towers press close, crowding out the sunlight. On the streets below them a beggar boy crouches, his pale skin crusted over with half-healed scars from some past plague, his eyes bloodshot and hungry. Beside him a woman stands, gaunt and desperate, begging the nobles who pass by for the spare change in their purses, crying out that she has a virgin daughter of pleasing aspect, if lust moves them more than pity. Then the image fades and the street is clean and the woman was never there at all, save perhaps in his dreams.

Overhead a single tower looms, a surreal structure devoid of any doors or windows, save at the topmost level. Near to it a dozen lesser towers stretch their necks upward like ducklings attending their mother, curtains fluttering like agitated wings. The breeze coming from the west is a foul thing, redolent of rotting fish and algae, the noxious vapors of a stagnant swamp. It seems out of place in the dry and pristine streets.

Amid the towers a woman walks, and he knows it is his quarry as soon as she appears. He tries to cry out, to get her to turn toward him, so he can see her face and learn her name, but the weakness within him is suddenly too great, the words die in his throat, and he falls gasping to the cobblestoned street.

Now, now, she is turning toward him at last, and he looks up at her. Why? he demands of her silently, unable to draw in enough breath to form the words. But his vision is fading, the Wasting is claiming him, and everything goes black just before he can see her face...

He awoke shivering, his body drenched with cold sweat. For a moment he felt as weak as he had been in his dream, and panic overcame him. He struggled to his feet, needing to prove to himself that the dream had not truly sapped the last of his strength. When he managed to get himself upright with no greater difficulty than the night before the wild beating of his heart began to slow a bit, and he managed a few long, measured breaths, trying to steady his spirit.

It was a dream, Andovan. Worse than some others, but likely not the last nightmare you will have on this journey. Are you so weak of heart that mere dreams can unman you now?

Did she know he was searching for her? The dream would imply so, but he was reluctant to read that much meaning into it. Nightmares were more often the simple product of a sleeper's own fears than any prophetic vision, and this one was certainly cast in that mold.

But the towers... how strange they were, all clustered together... surely they had some meaning. What was the significance of the tower without doors? Why was the smell of a swamp so pervasive? And who was the beggar woman who so clearly did not belong in that place, that disappeared when he looked at her?

He wracked his brain and came up with nothing, and finally, with a sigh, broke off a piece of cheese from his supply and ate it, letting the sharp flavor drive the remembered taste of swamp muck from his mouth.

And then he remembered.

Gansang.

It was built in the marshes of the western delta, on walkways and stilts set over what had once been thriving wetlands. Shoreside it was said there was one section where the bedrock was solid, and it rose in a crest above sea level just far enough to escape the flood plain. The nobles lived there, of course. Andovan had been taught about Gansang as a child. Taught that a city is a living thing, and as with any living thing, if its growth is frustrated in one direction, it will expand in another. The nobles of Gansang could not expand outward without moving into the marshes themselves, and so they had expanded upward instead, building towers that were taller and finer than any others on earth—or so they claimed. Andovan had been told the story by his tutor when he was a young boy. It had seemed unreal to him then. But now... Gansang was due west of him, if he remembered it right. Which meant that he had been head-ing in that direction all along. Could that be where Co-livar's sorcery had been driving him? Was his would-be killer there at this very moment, might he surprise her there if he moved quickly enough?

Gansang was on the other side of the Blood Ridge, he recalled. Not a day's ride past the western foothills.

Feeling more confident than he had in a long time, Andovan pulled his tightly rolled maps out of the saddlebag, and by the light of a single moon began to plot the journey to Gansang.

Chapter Eighteen

Come in, my dear." The tattered edges of Gwynofar's silk gown fluttered like the wings of a black angel as she entered the chamber. Her clear eyes took in everything at a glance: her hawk-browed husband in a carved wooden chair, black eyes squinting in what he doubtless believed was an expression of affection; the Magister Kostas in tight-fitting ebony robes sitting upright in a cushioned chair opposite him, tracking her every movement like a hungry bird; the fireplace behind them, cold due to the summer's heat, with its polished silver mirror over the mantle. In it she could see herself, pale of face and dusty of hem, a mere ghost of a presence compared to the aggressive and powerful men who had called her to audience.

There was no chair set out for her, she noticed. Doubtless Kostas' idea. As always his presence made the bile rise in her throat, and she had to swallow hard to smile with requisite royal politeness as she curtseyed to them both. Then, disdaining to meet Kostas' eyes, she fetched a chair for herself and sat, daring her husband's disapproval to do so. But a small smile played on Dan-ton's lips, which told her she had guessed correctly. He liked it when she had spirit, providing it was not him she was defying. Other subjects would die for the same gesture.

"You summoned me, Sire?"

"So I did." He reached for the flagon of wine by his side and poured out a third goblet full, then offered it to her. She accepted it gratefully, using it to wash down the lump in her throat that Kostas' presence had conjured. The Magister Royal watched the exchange impassively, utterly still but for his eyes. Like a spider's, she thought. She half expected a spider's quick movements out of him the moment she touched the wrong string of his web. "Kostas expressed an interest in the religious beliefs of your homeland. I thought it better coming from your lips than mine."

Gwynofar nodded politely, as if conversing with Kostas was not an unpleasant task at all. She knew what Danton thought of her religion—"rock worship," he called it—and he had probably meant this audience as a courtesy to let her explain things herself. He knew she disliked Kostas—she had never lied to her husband about that—but he had no idea how deep within her soul the revulsion was rooted, how hard it was to be in his presence long enough even to exchange niceties.

Nonetheless, she was queen, and that meant learning to hide her true feelings, no matter what the cost.

She forced herself to turn to the Magister and meet his eyes without flinching. He must never suspect how much she hated him, she knew that, or how much she feared him. You must never let a Magister sense your fear. So she forced her voice to be steady and soft, even casual, as she asked him, "So what do you wish to know?"

His voice was a low hiss, the kind of sound you would expect out of a lizard or a snake, not a man. "Tell me of the Lord Protectors."

She glanced at Danton, who nodded. "They are the leaders of bloodlines founded to maintain the Spears of the Wrath, to guard against its weakening, and to stand in the front lines of battle should those protections fail us."

"Gods save us from a woman's recitation," Danton interrupted. "You start at the end of the story when he does not even know the beginning yet. Tell him of the war itself... yes, Kostas?" He glanced at Kostas, who said nothing; his eyes were fixed upon the High Queen with an intensity that made her skin crawl. "That would be best, I think. The end of the war, the coming of the Wrath... that is what he wants."

She nodded. "As you wish, Sire."

She drew in a deep breath and tried to ignore Kostas' stare. "Long ago, in the Dark Ages, when demons roamed the earth freely, feasting upon human souls, there gathered a band of the witching folk. These alone had resisted the power of the demons enough to remember the First Age of Kings, and they believed that man could be restored to his rightful inheritance if the vile creatures were destroyed.

"It was decided that they would seek out those last few warriors who still had the spirit to fight—for you must understand that the demons' magic robbed men of all aggressive instinct, so this was no small thing—and they would launch a final campaign against the enemy. Not to kill the demons in the lands they had invaded, the ruins of the First Kingdoms, for all efforts to do that before had failed. Rather they would attempt to drive them to the far north, to the lands of ice and snow, where the kingdoms of man had never taken root. For it was believed that the deep cold weakened them, and perhaps in such a place they would become feeble enough that men might destroy them at last."

"Tell me of these demons," Kostas said quietly. His eyes upon hers were like a lizard's, cold and unblinking; she dared not look at them directly, lest her revulsion show.

"It is said they were born of the souls of corrupted men who feared entering the lands of Death, yet who might remain in the world of the living only by feeding upon the souls of others. They took on the forms of great flying creatures with wings so vast and black they cast shadows upon the earth beneath them as they flew. It is said that their gaze could turn a man to stone, so that no warrior could stand before them. Many armies tried when they first appeared, and many stone monuments remain to bear witness to their failure."

"But this time would be different," the Magister offered.

"Yes." She glanced at Danton. He believed in some of this, she knew that, though he did so in the manner of his own people, preferring to believe the demons were merely fearsome beasts and the tales of their supernatural powers no more than legends. Yet *something* had ended the First Age of Kings and plunged mankind into spiritual and intellectual darkness for the span of ten centuries, she thought stubbornly. No man doubted that. And *something* had then killed all the invaders, so that the Second Age of Kings could begin. No man doubted that either. Why was the tale of a sorcerous war less credible than believing mere beasts had been the cause?

"There are many tales told in the north of the witches' quest to find the few remaining heroes among men. If the Lord Magister has interest in that. . ." Kostas gestured with a short wave of one bony hand that he did not. "Some believe the gods aided the witches in their search, for otherwise it would surely have been impossible. At last they succeeded in finding a handful of warriors whose spirits were resistant to the demons' power, seven men in all, to whose banners others would flock in order for an army to be mustered."

She was remembering the epic tales of her childhood now, offered up by minstrels before a roaring fire in the darkness of the northern winter. It was hard not to fall into their cadence, or offer up half-remembered fragments of their songs, as she tried to distill centuries of speculation and myth into a few simple sentences for Kostas' consumption. In truth as a girl she had been more interested in the tales of the exciting search for the Seven Heroes and of the magical exploits that were said to attend them, but that was clearly not what Kostas wanted to hear, and so she skipped over it.

"All the witching folk who existed in that day came to fight by their side, for the gods had revealed to them in dreams the importance of this battle, and they knew that mankind would rise or fall based upon their efforts. Terrible war was waged across the whole of the earth then, not merely with weapons, but with sorcery as well. In all the places where great kingdoms had once stood, the bodies of fallen soldiers were now strewn, some torn to bits by the claws of their enemies, some whole in body but with their

souls rent by the demons, their ghosts howling in agony. The bodies of countless witches lay beside them, empty shells from which the life had been drained as fuel for magic. The whole of the earth had become a place of blood and death, and those who could not or would not fight fled and hid trembling in holes like rats, lest the enemy find them and devour them for strength.

"In time the seven great warriors and their armies drove the demons to the far north. Ice froze upon their wings then, and it robbed them of strength, just as the Seers had foretold. Yet even such an advantage could not turn the tide of battle completely. The blood of countless men was spilled in that great battle, rivers of it churned to scarlet mud beneath the soldiers' boots. Long summer days began to give way to the darkness of winter as the fighting went on, and the armies of men knew then that they were not strong enough to carry the battle to conclusion by themselves, not before the Great Night enshrouded all the northlands in darkness."

In the springtime, maidens of the Protectorates would make themselves garlands out of the crimson daisies that grew in the northern plains, which the legends said had once been white but were stained with the blood of heroes. She still remembered the look on Danton's face when he first caught sight of her in her wedding dress of that same arterial color. Why? she had wondered. Was not the color of courage and sacrifice suitable for weddings?

"So the witches offered up their lives in final sacrifice," she whispered, "if the gods would free mankind from the Souleaters and let the battle be won. And the gods heard them, and accepted their offer."

Kostas stiffened slightly. He seemed to be listening to her more intently than before. With his long thin limbs, staring eyes, and bony edges he reminded her of nothing so much as a praying mantis about to strike.

"The gods forged spears out of lightning and cast them down into the earth one after the other, in the midst of the battle, between the demons and the men. They struck in a line that stretched across the snow as far as the eye could see. The blood of the earth gushed upward where they pierced, and was frozen into fearsome spires many times the height of a man as it struck the air. The Wrath blazed forth from each earthwound, so terrible in its power that no living thing would go near it, nor could any living creature pass between the spires without going mad.

"The demons to the north fell back shrieking in fury, for they knew themselves bested. It is said the whole of the night sky blazed with fire, then, and veils as red as blood flickered from horizon to horizon. The soldiers killed those few demons that had been caught on the southern side of the barrier, and then an army of witches—the last ones living—crossed the Wrath to hunt down the last of the creatures. Trapped in the winds of the icy north the demons were truly helpless, they believed, and might be destroyed at last."

How could any outsider understand what it was to be born in a land that still echoed with the cries of that great war? The demons were still out there, or so the priests taught. If the Wrath ever faltered and the battle resumed, her kin would be in the front ranks. Even the women. That was their duty.

She thought of Rhys and the other Guardians, traveling from spire to spire along the edge of the Wrath, braving its terrible power to inspect the frozen fountains of earth's blood, to repair them if necessary, and to lend the strength of their prayers and their offerings to the gods who maintained them. For if and when the demons did return, the Wrath was the only thing standing between them and the fertile, civilized southlands, and not Danton and all the High King's armies could muster a defense against them if it faltered.

"This is why," she concluded, "when the Second Age of Kings began, there was no sorcery. All those

who could work the soulfire had been sacrificed."

"Tell me of the Protectors' bloodlines," Kostas said quietly. "Their... special powers." His tone had not changed, nor was their any change in his demeanor... yet the question cut into her soul like a knife. She had felt such things before with Ramirus, when he used his power to read the truth behind her words. It was chilling to think this hollow-faced Magister was weaving his power about her now, but she kept any sign of the knowledge from showing on her face as she responded while hating him silently for daring to touch her with his sorcery, an invasion so unclean and intimate it felt like rape.

Yet even while she hated him she wondered why it was so, and she remembered Rhys' words in the courtyard: *The reasons you offer me do not match the hatred in your heart.*

The King's hounds do not like the new Magister either, she told herself. *They do not have to know why.*

"They are descended from the surviving leaders of the great battle. The priests decreed that those bloodlines should serve as kings in the north, and so they have, ever since." She paused, watching him closely. "What more do you wish to know?"

"It is said the gods gave them gifts, is it not? Special powers that would help them protect the world against the demons, should they come again. At least that is the rumor."

Like a deer catching scent of a hunter, she stiffened. *This is the question he wished to ask all along*, she thought. *This is why he called me here, rather than letting Danton tell him tales of my people.*

It made her wary. It made her want to hide the truth. "There are many rumors, my lord."

"Superstition," Danton snorted.

She blushed and looked down in what she hoped would seem to be feminine embarrassment; sometimes with men that could deflect suspicion. "Perhaps, Sire."

"You have not answered my question," Kostas pressed.

She shrugged, attempting to make it seem like the matter was of little import to her. "It is the duty of the Protectors to guard the Spears, hence it is said that the gods granted them the ability to approach them more closely than the common man is able to. I do not know if you would call that a 'gift,' Lord Magister. They are fearsome things, and only those bound by duty would ever wish to be near them."

"Perhaps," he said quietly. "But it is said the blood of the witches runs in your veins."

She felt her heart skip a beat, and drew in a slow, measured breath to keep her outer aspect calm. If his power was focused upon her now she could not lie to him, but neither did she wish to give him the whole truth. "I do not know what legends you have heard," she told him. "Some claim that seven witches survived to become the wives of the great generals, to bear them their firstborn sons. Some claim that the power of all the witches who died was absorbed into the land itself, and that the first Protectors were bequeathed luck in their name. But the first generations are long dead now, Lord Magister, and witchery is not a thing inherited along with a father's name, nor transferred by the telling of tales."

"She is not a witch herself," Danton said. "If that's what you are asking after. Ramirus made sure of that before we were wed."

Now Gwynofar flushed with genuine embarrassment. "Magister Ramirus—?"

"I ordered it," Danton told her. He cut any protest short with a wave of his hand. "What did you expect? I was not about to take a wife from a family of some enchanted race. And you are rumored to be that, you know it." He looked to Kostas. "Apparently the gods promised the Protectors something like, *if and when you need the power you will have it*. Whatever that means." He chuckled softly. "Gods are nothing if not obscure, yes?"

"So it seems," the Magister said quietly.

"Well the Lord Protectors have built an empire based upon such legends, and I respect that. But you'd best look elsewhere for your enchanted races, Kostas. My wife is as pure blooded as Protectors come, and Ramirus assured me she had no more witchery about her than any other noblewoman." He looked at Gwynofar. "I'm sorry, my dear, but you know that's the truth."

Acknowledging the point with a nod did not require her to answer. Without an answer, Kostas' truth-sensing magic had no hold on her.

She nodded. "Is the Lord Magister satisfied, then? Or does he need anything more from me?"

It was impossible to ask the question without meeting Kostas' eyes. A shudder ran through her as she did so. Their pale gray substance, not dissimilar from Rhys' in color, seemed utterly unlike anything human in their essence, and for a moment she imagined she could see dark things slithering in their depths, hungry things, ready to swim down the conduit of his gaze to feast upon her soul the moment she gave him an opening. Or else ready to celebrate her weakness if she looked away. So though it took every bit of fortitude she had, she did not look away. His unblinking eyes held her for a moment, then two, then a small eternity, testing her mettle. Finally he said, "No. You have given me enough," and looked back to Danton. She did not even hear what he said then, but breathed a secret sigh of relief that the contest had not lasted longer. She was a strong woman, despite her fragile seeming, and doubly strong in the kind of moral certainty that came of being a Protector, but staring down a Magister, even of the ordinary kind, was a contest few people ever won.

Danton drank again, this time draining the goblet. Had he filled it yet again? If so he was drinking more than usual today; that was not a good sign. "I told the Magister there was little substance to your myths. But he insisted upon hearing them. Now then Kostas, you have heard the fairy tales, yes? For what they are worth." He nodded toward the door, waving absently in Gwynofar's direction. "You may go, my dear." Even as she rose obediently and curtsied, it was clear that his attention was already elsewhere, and she dared to breathe a sigh of relief to be officially released from the interview.

Not until she was safely on the other side of the heavy oaken doors did she pause to lean weakly against them, to draw in one long, shivering breath, and to wonder, *What was the purpose of that?* For the one thing that Ramirus had taught her was that all things had purpose to a Magister, and rarely were their intentions of the sort that a mere mortal might guess at.

But try as she might she could not untangle the twisted knots of it all, and at last with a sigh she returned to her rooms, where at least she could put thick doors between herself and the new Magister Royal, and try to forget the unclean touch of his sorcerous scrutiny.

Danton grunted and poured himself more wine. "Well? Did you get the information you wanted?"

Kostas nodded slowly.

"If you ask me it's all patent nonsense. Myths written by men who wanted to assure their place in history. All dynasties inherit such tales, or else must create them later."

greatest effort could she make him out at all, and she could see no details of his person. Another looked almost youthful, and eventually he made his way down to the main floor and spoke to a few of the guests—though most stayed well clear of his path—but his presence was without warmth, and he allowed no one to touch him. Another had taken up station on a balcony opposite Kamala's, and at one point she looked up to find him staring at her with an intensity that left her shaken. He had a deep scar running down one cheek that had healed badly, twisting the surrounding flesh like some grotesque sculpture, and when at last he moved she could see his long robes rippling as if stirred by a breeze though no breeze was present. *You may know a Magis-ter by the flesh he chooses to wear*, Ethanus had told her. What kind of man could adopt any appearance he liked, yet preferred such a twisted, damaged countenance?

The fourth Magister appeared so old and fragile it was hard to believe he was a living creature; that was a show of power all its own, she realized, intended to make the morati aware of just how ancient a sorcerer he might be. Like his youthful counterpart he eventually descended to the main floor of the great hall to greet several of the morati; like the other he offered his hand and cheek to no one, encouraged no false intimacy, tolerated no foolishness for the sake of polite society. These men were soulmates to her spirit, she thought, playing by their own rules, and she hungered to meet them, to begin the process that would win her acceptance as one of their kind. But she did not know how to begin. She'd been spoiled by Ethanus, and had perhaps assumed that the others of his kind would be equally approachable... equally human. But these black-robed creatures seemed like a different species altogether, and she was beginning to realize just how difficult it would be to strike the right note when she finally presented herself to them... and how badly things might go if she failed.

Take your time, she told herself. *You have as many lifetimes as you need to work this out*. But the words echoed emptily in her soul, where the fire of restlessness blazed with mortal heat.

Your lack of patience, Ethanus had warned her, *will be a greater danger to you than any enemy*.

A party of revelers was making its way up toward where she knelt; drunken voices promised a more aggressive invasion of her space than she was in the mood to deal with. Looking about for some convenient path of exit, she spied a small door leading outward from the next balcony over. The sudden thought of fresh air and a moment alone to gather her thoughts was appealing, and she hurried along the staircase that led from her current perch to that exit.

It was a small door, and a mere whisper of power was sufficient to unlock it; she opened it and peered out into the twilight. There was a bridge beyond, a narrow thing, clearly not intended for grand processions but for more private use. It probably led to a subsidiary tower owned by the Savresi, permitting them to come and go without drawing attention to themselves. Whatever its intended purpose, its position out of sight of the crowded walkways near the main entrance of the tower promised a few moments of peace and solitude, a welcome respite.

She stepped through and let the door close behind her, moving out onto the bridge, into the fresh night air. There were torches burning at both ends of the bridge but none along its length, and azure shadows danced before and after her as she walked to the middle of the bridge, sighed, and leaned against the rail.

Her spirit was tired, she realized. Tired of letting strange men kiss her hand, strange women kiss her cheek, the things that were expected of her here. She had once sworn she would never let a stranger touch her, and now she had let dozens of strangers do so. She smiled at jokes she did not think were funny, admired jewelry she did not think was beautiful, and endured the suggestive comments of men whose brains were clearly in their codpieces. And all the while the Magisters watched, disdaining such social games, aloof and independent. She hungered to be one of them. No... she *was* one of them. She

Was Colivar's spell that strong? Would he, when he arrived—

—*black fury engulfing him, turning to fire, molten hatred*—

He gasped, clinging to the saddle with both hands lest he fall—

—*black hatred, fury, I WILL NOT KNEEL! stone shatters, twilight screams*—

He could not breathe. A wave of dizziness overcame him and despite the best of his efforts he could feel himself losing his grip. And then his horse reared up in fear, sensing the wrongness of the moment, and he was falling, falling—

—*plummeting into blackness, blood-filled, shards of stone and screaming, screaming*—

He managed to fall free and roll, far enough that his mount did not trample him, but it was all that he could do, and pain shot through his shoulder—

—*and hits the bottom and does not move, broken black-robed doll, FIGHT ME FIGHT ME FIGHT ME!*

Gasping, he struggled to remain conscious. This was by far the worst attack he'd had yet, and he was terrified that if he gave into it he would never wake up again. But it was not only weakness that assailed him this time, but a fearsome storm of images and emotions pouring into his brain with a hurricane's force. Was all this really happening somewhere, these images he was seeing, or had the nightmares taken hold of his waking mind as well? Was his illness driving him mad?

The towers of Gansang fell. He saw them fall. Slowly at first, their upper stories shattering one after the other, balconies and balustrades crumbling, silken curtains catching fire as they fluttered to the ground like dying birds... then a rumbling shook the earth and the broad, solid bases of the towers split, fire licking outward between their stones. It was as if he were there on the street himself, watching the destruction, too fascinated— too horrified—to run. Chunks of granite and marble and concrete and wood rained down like hailstones, but there was nowhere to take shelter. Nowhere to hide. The ground buckled beneath him as the towers fell, one after the other—all save the surreal tower in their center, without doors or windows, that stood strong and tall, a sentinel overlooking their destruction.

And he knew with sudden despairing clarity why he was seeing this vision, what it must surely mean. If he had been stronger he would have cried out in rage at the heavens, cursing the gods for their cruelty, but as it was he was too weak to do anything more than whimper his anguish as the visions slowly faded from his sight, giving way to utter exhaustion and a weakness so terrible he wondered if he would ever be able to move again.

She was gone. No longer in Gansang. He had lost her...

And then the final tower faded, and there was only darkness.

Chapter Twenty-One

There was a bath waiting for Gwynofar when she returned to her bedchamber after her meeting with Danton and Kostas. Apparently her maidservant Mer-ian had grown accustomed to the fact that she liked to bathe after meeting with the Magister and had anticipated the request. On another day that might have bothered Gwynofar—it meant she had been less than perfect in hiding her true feelings about the man—but the truth was that right now she was too tired to care. Her body and soul felt as if hordes of

roaches had been scuttling across them, and experience had taught her that soap and water would at least make the physical sensation go away. The rest—the rest just took time. Kostas' foul presence was something she had to digest and then purge before she could be free of it.

She smiled gratefully over the bath, glad for once not to have to be giving orders. She knew that if the older woman ever did guess just how much Kostas disturbed her she would never speak of it to another soul. Such loyalty was rare among the High King's staff, but Mer-ian was of northern blood, Protectorate born and raised, and had come to this land in Gwynofar's own retinue. Her first loyalty was to the Lord Protector's bloodline and to the gods that were their patrons, not to this castle full of iconoclastic foreigners, no matter how fierce and feared its royal master might be.

Gwynofar let Merian help her off with her black gown and the thin chemise she wore beneath it, then lowered herself gratefully into the iron-bound tub, letting the late summer heat seep out of her flesh into the cool fresh water. Sprigs of rosemary and summer mint had been sprinkled into the water, and the smell helped open her pores and relax her mind. The soap was likewise perfumed, and after holding it to her nose for a moment she began to rub it languidly along her skin. The smells reminded her of the world she had grown up in, always filled with the scent of fresh bread baking in the great ovens and the sound of children's laughter. So different from this dank place. No one ever seemed to laugh here except her husband, and his laughter was deemed by many a thing to be feared. With a sigh she sank down deep into the perfumed bath, letting images of the past comfort her as the knotted tension in her body began to give way.

It made no sense, really, this need she had to scrub herself clean after leaving Kostas' presence. But whatever the foulness it was that she sensed within him, it seemed to cling to her skin like a skunk's smell afterward, and she never felt right until she had washed it away. Ah, would that mere soap could cleanse the spirit as easily as it cleaned the flesh! She leaned forward and let Merian attend to her back, ordering her to rub harder when her first gentle strokes failed to banish the Magister's perceived stink. Yes, she knew in her heart that it was all nonsense, this fantasy of hers, but it gave her some small comfort to indulge it. She could not make the Magister leave her life in fact, but in the privacy of her bath she could banish him from her presence. Soap had that power at least.

Why do you hate him so much? Rhys' voice whispered in her mind. Why does he make you feel so unclean?

I don't know, my brother. I wish I did.

"Shall I wash your hair?" her maidservant asked.

She nodded, and shut her eyes as Merian began to remove the ivory pins that held the twisted blonde coils tightly against her head. There was some noise in the hallway beyond the chamber's door, but Gwynofar put it out of her mind. Her other servants knew enough not to bother her when she was bathing, and they would doubtless waylay anyone who would seek to do so.

A long coil of blond hair slipped down onto her shoulder and she began to stroke it with a soapy hand, drawing it into the perfumed water, separating the strands—

—and the door swung roughly open then, and Merian's gasp made Gwynofar look up.

High King Danton stood framed in the doorway.

"My... my lord?"

He strode into the room as if it were his own, this sanctuary which was hers, this private room which he

flowed, murmuring curses against the High King that would have gotten her executed on the spot, had they been witnessed. Gwynofar felt too weak to silence her. At last Merian helped her back into the tub, where she scrubbed her down with soap and gentle caresses, as one would an infant. But soap could not cleanse her spirit of the pollution that had taken root inside her, and several times Gwynofar almost vomited, remembering the sight of her husband's body streaked black with that foreign sorcery. Was that inside her now, riding Dan-ton's seed like some ghastly stallion, into the secret recesses of her body? If not, why had she seen it? What was its purpose?

And then, late in the night, when moonlit shadows shivered across the bed, creeping along the body of the battered queen, the gods of the Protectors whispered the truth in her ear. Just as they always did with the daughters of their most favored race, a gift they had granted to the women of the Protectors' bloodlines many, many centuries ago.

There will be another child, the gods whispered to her, in that moment when sleep fell upon her. Already he makes ready to draw strength from your flesh in order to grow. Can you feel him inside you yet? Does he stir your maternal loyalty?

"Is it a true child?" she whispered into the darkness. "Or something else? Please tell me!"

But the gods, as always, choose what questions they wish to answer... and this time there was only silence.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The Sky was pitch black, with a pair of crescent moons facing in opposite directions. They were the color of freshly spilled blood, and the sky that backed them had no stars or other natural features, but was lightless and empty for as far as the eye could see. The dark pines beneath them glittered as if with dew, but it was not the time for dew, and teardrops of ice hung suspended from every needle, as if the trees themselves had frozen in the act of weeping.

It was an impossible landscape from start to finish and therefore, Ethanus reasoned, a dream.

There was only one person walking the earth these days that would send him a dream. He was pleased that she had taken his lessons to heart so well, and designed a setting that would alert him to its nature, but he was disturbed by the tenor of her creation. The moons in particular looked more like wounds in the sky than natural spheres. It was a small detail, but it worried him. Dreams were a strangely insightful medium, that reflected in shadows and hints the condition of the soul that created them. These signs, if they truly reflected the state of Kamala's soul, were anything but reassuring.

After a moment the shadows parted and a figure approached him. It was draped in a long black cloak, the hood drawn forward so its face could not be seen. For a brief moment Ethanus wondered if his assumption about the dreamcaster's identity had been incorrect but the figure reached up and pushed back the hood, and Kamala was revealed to him. She was pale and drawn and had deep circles under her eyes, such as might come of exhaustion or grief. Her clothing was streaked with black and in tatters, yet another reflection of the torment within. Bad signs all around.

"Kamala?"

Her voice was a whisper, hoarse as if from crying. Surely his fiery pupil could not have been crying! "Forgive me, my master." She lowered her eyes in a rare gesture of submission; wrong, all wrong. "I know it is not the custom for students to seek council after they have left their mentor—"

You stand outside the Law now. That fate cannot be shared with another.

She bowed her head respectfully. The gesture reminded him of when she had first come to him, a fiery and determined child ready to take on the world. *And now you have done so*, he thought. *Was it worth it? Do you, when the shadows of doubt draw too close, regret the course you have chosen?*

It was more of a rhetorical question than a real one. If ever she truly regretted becoming a Magister her soul would lose the strength it needed to fight for continued life, her consort would break free of his bond, and she would die. The fact that she still walked the earth bore witness to her continued commitment.

"I am sorry to come to you now," she whispered. "I know you must break the Law even to talk to me—"

"No, I have broken no Law."

He met her bright eyes with his own, willing all the strength he could into his voice, that she might partake of it and refresh her own spirit. "I had a dream, nothing more. It is hard to tell dreams from reality, sometimes." He paused. "This was an odd dream, for I imagined that an old student of mine returned to me and revealed that she had broken our Law, and then asked for my counsel. Of course she would not do that, for she knows our ways. And I would not give my counsel to one who had killed a Magister."

She nodded. Her eyes glistened. There were no tears this time. That was good.

"Besides," he said softly, "The moons were at odds with one another. So how could it have been real?"

"How indeed?" she whispered.

For a moment she just stood there. The trees groaned softly in the breeze; a single frozen teardrop fell to the ground and shattered there. He had the sudden desire to take her in his arms, to kiss her gently on the forehead, as one might with a child. To give her comfort. But it was not his way... nor was it hers.

"Thank you," she whispered. No louder than a breath. Then she drew the cloak's hood forward over her head once more, and with it the shadows of the night, until she became one with them, and slowly faded from his sight. He stood there until she was wholly gone, silent and unmoving, savoring the last moments of her presence, wondering if he would ever see her again except in a dream. While overhead the bloodred moons grew pale and silver even as she vanished, and the pines beneath them shed their frozen coats and the world became normal once more.

Except for the ache in his heart, more terrible than any earthly wound could ever be.

Go with the gods, he thought.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The Palace of the Witch-Queen glowed like a beacon in the sunlight, its outer colonnade almost too bright to gaze upon directly. One could see it from miles away, perched on a hilltop overlooking the port city of Sankara, an elegant monument set against a backdrop of soft clouds and the rich turquoise of a late summer sky. Peaceful, Colivar thought. It always looked so peaceful.

The wind had been quiet for three days when he arrived, so the harbor below was filled with ships of all kinds, awaiting passage through the Narrows to the eastern seas. From the cliff-top gardens they looked like a flock of white birds perched upon the water, bobbing gently with the rhythm of the waves.

He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it softly again. "And you, my lady, are known to flatter whichever sorcerer is by your side in terms so pleasing we do not care if there are others waiting in the shadows."

She laughed softly. "Ah, but you would not wish to have me all to yourself, would you? For then I should become demanding, and perhaps expect loyalty in turn."

"And we cannot have that," he agreed.

The young girl returned, and the two of them fell silent. Colivar noted that she kept her eyes low as she set a silver tray on the table before them, as if she was not worthy of looking directly at her superiors. That too was a desert custom. He wondered if it was a habit natural to the girl, or something Siderea had asked her to do while Colivar was present.

When she was gone the Magister leaned back on the couch, watching as Siderea poured him a portion of the bloodred cordial. "So what do the barbarians gossip about, these days?"

"That the High King Dan ton is mad, and threw all the Magisters out of his domain."

He chuckled as she handed him a glass. "All too true on the latter count, I am afraid. It was quite a scene. The madness... that is not news."

"They say that another Magister has come to serve him now, one called Kostas, and he is a mystery to all of you."

Colivar shrugged. "No Magister seems to have heard the name before, or recognizes the body he wears. Which in itself does not mean very much. We can change such things as easily as other men change their clothes."

"But most do not do so, yes?" She sipped from her own glass and then reclined on the couch beside him. The layers of her gown parted over one leg, baring sleek copper skin. "Magisters seem to enjoy their reputations."

"Aye, most do," he agreed. He sipped the cordial, and nodded his approval as it slid warmly down his throat. "He is welcome to Danton as far as I am concerned. The man has been mad from the cradle."

Fensf of Souls

"But his madness has made him powerful, and men are drawn to power."

He smiled slightly, running his glass along the line of her thigh. "And women are not?"

She sniffed. "I would rather bed an iguana."

"Interestingly," he noted, "that is how I have heard this Kostas described. Perhaps you should add him to your collection."

"You do not think he is dangerous, then?"

"All Magisters are dangerous, my lady."

"I meant Danton."

"Ah." He stared into the deep red depths of his glass, considering an answer. "Danton has always been dangerous," he said at last, "especially to princes who are in the way of his expansion. But I think perhaps

two of the chairs, binding enough power to clean the dust off them first. "Please, sit, relax." He offered him one of the pewter cups. "We are a far flight from Anshasa, and travel is dusty business."

Colivar accepted the cup but did not drink from it. "A good helping of news is all the refreshment I seek. The death of a Magister is not a common occurrence."

"No, thank the gods, it is not."

"Who was it?"

"He called himself Raven. Yes, after the carrion bird. I think he used other names before that, but he was the secretive sort and rarely shared information about himself. And in Gansang we have learned not to pry into each other's affairs." He sipped from his own cup, and nodded his approval of the chilled ale within. "Some say the name captured his essence. I believe it fell short."

"I know the man. And I've heard him called much worse things."

"At any rate, the true ravens have him now, or at least his ashes."

Colivar looked startled. "You burned him?"

"Had to. Otherwise we'd have had every treasure hunter this side of Sankara scouring the city for his bones. Did you not know that the secret of a Magister lies in his magical flesh, and that after death his powers can be claimed by any witch who—well, I will spare you the process. Those are the tales, anyway, and since a dead Magister only comes along once in a lifetime, we decided not to test how many might believe in them."

Colivar nodded. "Wise."

"He fell from a bridge," he said, gesturing with his cup, "a curiously mundane end for one of our kind. He was following a woman at the time, some witch that Lord Ravi had found in the foulest district of the city, cleaned up, and was passing off as a lady. He introduced her as Sidra. No information has been found regarding the woman or the name, apart from what little bit Ravi himself knew; it is as if she appeared out of nowhere."

"Where is she now?"

Tirstan's eyes glittered darkly. "If you were alone with a Magister and he died, would you remain in that place one minute longer than you had to? Whatever sort of witch she is, she had enough power to call all her personal possessions to her when she left, so we have nothing to trace her with." He took another swallow of the ale. "All this we learned afterward, of course; that night, all anyone knew was that she was a mystery and Ravi believed she had power. Those were reasons enough for any Magister to show interest in her. There are also rivalries between the great houses here in which some of us have vested interest; Lord Ravi showing up with some sort of magical prize on his arm was a direct challenge to those who did not wish him moving up in the ranks." He sipped from his cup again. "And witches, of course, must be taught their place. Many reasons for a Magister like Raven to show an interest in her. None of them shed any light on the matter of his death."

"You questioned Ravi about her, I assume?"

"Of course. The information I give you comes from him. Apparently he heard news of some fight a witch was involved in down in the Quarter and took the chance that anyone who would throw her power around like that might also be interested in a little social advancement. For a price."

resident, but it was clear that most of his efforts had gone unappreciated. The fine gold toilet items on the marble-topped vanity were untouched, bottles of unguent unopened, flasks of perfume still sealed. Colivar picked up a comb and studied it closely.

"Not a single hair of hers anywhere," Tirstan informed him. "As I said, she either destroyed such things as might be used against her, or else she called them to her later that night. Nothing was here by the time we came to search."

A pile of finely embroidered silk garments lay neatly folded on a chair near the window, probably in the same position they were in when they were first delivered; she had never even looked at them, Colivar guessed. "Not as vain as her host assumed she would be," he said quietly. Then he looked up at Tirstan. "Do you know where she might have kept her personal things while she was here?"

He indicated a leather-bound trunk set in the darkest corner of the room. Colivar went to it and lifted the heavy lid. It was empty.

"Not so much as a speck of lint left behind," Tirstan said. "You're not the first to look, you know. What do you hope to find that we did not?"

Colivar knelt by the trunk. Propping the lid open, he reached down into the dark space within until his hands pressed against the bottom of it. "If she called her things to her, as you suggest, there should be some trace of her witchery here."

"Yes," Tirstan agreed. "And there is not."

Colivar looked for it himself, drawing enough athra from his consort to alter his senses so that he could detect such things. But the interior of the trunk was dark. His questing hands felt nothing. As Tirstan had said, there was not the faintest trace of witchery present. If she did indeed have the power, it had clearly never been used on anything inside the trunk.

Tirstan picked up a perfume bottle from the vanity, took note of the fact that the seal was intact, and put it back down. "Magister Tamil has suggested that perhaps she was not a witch at all, but secretly served one of our kind. That the power she had called upon in the Quarter was not her own witchery, but rather the sorcery of her patron. Perhaps it was not even an accident that she was attacked that night, he has suggested, but rather the whole scene was staged, to draw the right kind of notice and win her noble patronage. As it did." He shrugged. "It is a curious theory, and not the kind of game a Magister usually plays, but it would explain why she left no signs of her own power behind her."

No witchery had been used on the bridge either. Colivar recalled him saying that. Only sorcery, pure sorcery.

"That is one possibility," he agreed.

There was another one, but he would not speak its name yet. Not until he was sure.

Slowly he reached his hands into the trunk again, running them along the bottom. This time he did not look for witchery, but for something more subtle. Not for the hot, fiery residue of mortal magic, but for the cold, whis-pery touch of true sorcery. Not for life force sacrificed in passion or need but power coldly stolen, wielded by men who were no longer alive in their own right, who could no longer leave the kind of hot imprint on the mortal world that was the birthright of living creatures. To the morati world, the powers of witches and Magisters seemed all but identical; to one who truly understood them, however, they were as distinct from one another as life and death.

civilization was nearly obliterated?"

"I have heard the High King is mad," Sulah offered. "That the death of his son unhinged him, awakening a hunger for bloodshed that no amount of violence can slake."

"He was always mad," Colivar said, "but for a while he had a man of reason to guide him. Now that man is gone."

"Ramirus?" Fadir asked. Colivar nodded.

"I rather had the impression you did not approve of him."

"I despised his master. That is not the same thing."

"Do you think Danton is fool enough to do something like this? To invite these... these abominations, to return?"

Colivar's eyes narrowed; the black gaze was unreadable. "The High King is a fool, but not that kind of fool. It takes no genius to understand that if the Dark Ages come again, it will affect all domains, all princes... all Magisters." His hand unconsciously stroked the stake beside him, as if trying to coax more information out of its bloodstained wood. "My guess is that someone is using him. Someone who knows what these things are, and thinks they can serve his purpose."

"Or someone who only *thinks* he knows what they are about," Fadir offered, "and therefore imagines he can control them."

"Just so," Colivar whispered. Once more his gaze unfocused, fixing on some dark and distant horizon.

"Can we tell him?" Sulah asked. "Tell Danton? Or his Magister, perhaps? If, as you say, he would never support such a plan, maybe knowing what these creatures really are would cause him to rethink his plan."

"And who will tell him that?" Colivar asked sharply. "I am counted among his enemies for my alliance with Anshasa; most of the other Magisters who might dare to tell him the truth were banished from his realm when Andovan died. Who do you imagine can go to this High King bearing words he does not wish to hear, and make him listen?"

"Ramirus knows him," Fadir said quietly. "He would know how to get through to him."

Colivar exhaled sharply. "Yet another one who treasures my counsel."

"The reason for your conflict with him is over now. And there are others who can make that journey in your place."

Colivar looked up at him. "You are offering?"

"I will seek out Ramirus, yes. And tell him what is happening, and ask him how Danton is best handled."

"He is best simply killed," Colivar muttered, "but our Law does not allow that."

Fadir nodded. It was customary among the Magisters that once one of them had made a contract with a prince, that prince was not to be assaulted directly by any other of their kind. It was a frustrating handicap, at times like this, but one that had been proven necessary back in the days when there were no rules. "Who serves him now?"

"Someone named Kostas. There is no history to the name, at least not that anyone has been able to

Before Andovan could get over his surprise and answer, another guard clapped that one on the shoulder. "What do you care? I hear your father sodomizes pigs."

"I hear your mother suckles them."

"I'm all right," Andovan told them. "Really."

The black man snorted. "Demons feed on liars, s'maar. You look like death. Go sleep for an hour, you will thank me. Food will not come for at least that long."

He had other things to do, he wanted to say. A woman to follow. Enticements to whisper. A private corner to be found somewhere where he and she could talk quietly, without half the caravan gathering round to listen and make ribald jokes about it.

But even thinking about doing those things made his head hurt. The man was right. He needed to rest a bit before doing anything else. An hour would do it.

Somehow he found the place he had been assigned to sleep, and the worn straw mattress that had been set aside for him. Then he lay down and shut his eyes and finally, gratefully, surrendered to exhaustion.

Someone woke him up later in the night to bring him food and drink. One of the black men. He couldn't see which one it was, in the darkness, but he was grateful.

He dreamed strange dreams in which he was surrounded by men from the caravan. He was standing naked among them, but no one seemed to notice. For some odd reason that pleased him.

He did not awaken again until morning.

It was wet and dreary when they left the next day, with a fine mist that hung heavy in the air, soaking everything that was exposed to it. Kamala thought Netando might ask her to banish it, which would have put her in the awkward position of refusing his first request. Ethanus had taught her to have a healthy respect for the long-term ramifications of weather-work, and besides, no real witch would be willing to expend the kind of energy it took to banish rain, especially just to make traveling more comfortable. But apparently Netando understood that, for though he looked pointedly at the dismal landscape ahead and then at her, as if giving her the opportunity to volunteer her services, he said nothing about it.

In such conditions the scouts and the guards had less than perfect visibility, so Kamala took up her station beside the driver of Netando's coach rather than inside, where it was dry. She could have caused the rain to pass to either side of the coach, leaving her and the driver protected, but again, no real witch would waste her power like that. So she settled for a subtle spell to keep the wool of her cloak dry while she drew the hood forward over her head, a one-time application of sorcery that was minimal in its cost, and focused her special senses on the road ahead.

Talesin looked miserable, though he was trying hard to hide it. The dreary weather seemed to sap his energy even more than usual, and she could see what a strain it was for him to maintain a facade of strength in front of the other guards. She had wanted to take him aside the night before and seek the cause of his weakness—there were few things she could not cure for him, if she set her mind to it—but Fate had been unobliging. *Tonight*, she promised him silently. *Whatever your illness is, I will find the cause and deal with it* She owed him that much for the little girl he had saved... especially now that she understood he had not been strong enough to defend himself in the Third Moon, should any of the men have chosen to challenge him. It was, all things considered, a rather remarkable display of courage.

He was not a man used to being weak, she guessed that much. He had the instinctive body language of

one who was accustomed to his own strength and took that strength for granted. She was intrigued by the contradictory mystery of it, and oddly pleased by the sparkle in his eye as he touched a finger to his forehead in leave-taking as a gentleman might, before riding off into the mists ahead. Why had he not sought her out the night before? Had she misread his intentions? She had waited for hours to see him, had stayed up long into the night amid interminable tales of battles won and financial markets conquered, just on the chance he might come to the inn to find her, but he never appeared. Later she took a walk in the courtyard to see if he was there, in the shadows, but the shadows were empty, too.

She could not ask after him without revealing more about the two of them than she wanted the others to know, so in the end she had simply retired to the room she'd been assigned. There were several other men from the company in it. Netando had seemed less than certain she would accept that, but she knew the hostel was being strained to capacity by the double caravan, and besides, it meant very little to her who was sleeping in what room. She had wrapped such spells around her person that the others would persist in seeing her as a boy even if she suckled a babe in front of them. She even tested the matter by taking off all her clothes and standing in the middle of the room when it was her turn at the wash basin. One of the men made a crude joke about the pubic hair of young men—it made no sense to her but was clearly some kind of traditional male humor—but no one else even looked at her twice. It was an odd rush of power to fool them so easily, trivial but pleasing.

In the morning there was no chance to seek out a private rendezvous, only time to eat, cast a quick divining to see if anything was waiting outside the gates to devour them (nothing was), and then each man took up his station again, with her at one end of the company and Talesin at the other.

They followed a road along the crest of the ridge for several hours, while ahead of them the thickening mist obscured any sight of the coming terrain. After a time Netando ordered the scouts in close, knowing there was not much that human eyes could accomplish in such a fog. Witchery was another thing. Kamala knew from the maps Netando had shown her that they would soon be flanked by steep mountains, at which point their road would turn downward, into a network of valleys and seasonal riverbeds that connected the few navigable passes. It was in this region that the danger of assault was highest, particularly in those narrow passages where the caravan must spread out thinly, and where the danger of flash floods was as pressing in this season as any threat bandits had to offer. Checking for floods was an easy thing for her, as the one that might threaten them in an afternoon was clearly in the making that morning, and might easily be detected. Not so with human intentions. Divination was the most difficult of all the sorcerous arts, as one could only foresee the possible outcome of fates that had already been set in motion, but she made a good show of it. If someone was planning to strike at Netando's caravan in specific, and had made plans accordingly, she might be able to catch wind of that. If it was anything less specific she was not so sure... but there was no reason Netando had to know that.

They stopped for a brief rest break at midday. Netando's retainers quickly erected a few large canopies, so that the travelers might have a break from the incessant drizzle. At least the surrounding mountains now offered a partial shield against the wind. Ursti's men made doubly sure of the oilskin covers over his wagons, beneath which precious spices and perfume stuffs huddled in their wax-sealed caskets, aromas dampened by the fog.

Soon they were moving again, and as if to mark the event, rain began in earnest. Kamala kept one sorcerous ear attuned to the movement of distant groundwater, and at one point suggested Netando lead the caravan to higher ground. He obeyed her without question. It was an odd feeling of power, to direct the lives of men so casually. But it was also tiring to need to be so perpetually alert to everything around her, not only the possible movements of men in the distance but the fall of rain, the shifting of mud... after hours of travel she had to fight to keep her focus.

He disappeared then, or seemed to. More likely he was still on the terrace, simply cloaked from her sight. In her current state there was nothing she could do to affect such sorcery, or even to detect it.

She waited for a time in silence, to see if some other surprise would manifest itself, but nothing did. At last she knelt down, wary, to retrieve the small object the visitor had left behind. It was a narrow silver ring, unre-markable save for the odd stone set in it: a cabochon gem of the deepest blue, that swirled with rainbow sparks when the light fell upon it.

Was there really hope for her? Or was this some new and cruel game of the Magisters? There was no way to know.

Cursing softly, praying secretly, the Witch-Queen returned to her guests, uncomfortably aware that a spark of hope had taken root with her... and dreading to find out what might be required to nourish it.

-End Book one Scanned and proofed by Winterborn