

Chapter One

A stiff east wind was blowing, bearing the scent of salt and decay from the beaches beyond the city wall. Such a breeze was chilly and uncomfortable, but it could bring ships into port quickly, cutting travel time, and that might mean happy merchants looking for laborers to unload their cargo. Captains and owners pleased by a quick passage tended to pay well, so Emmis of Shiphaven trotted up New Canal Street with an eye on the sea, watching for any inbound vessel, rather than following his usual morning routine of a stroll up Twixt Street to Shiphaven Market. If that unseasonable wind dropped, leaving ships becalmed in the bay, any hope of being overpaid by cheerful merchants would drop with it.

The richest cargoes were usually landed at either the Spice Wharves or the Tea Wharves, across the canal in Spicetown, but the Spicetown dockworkers had their own little bands and brotherhoods, and Emmis was not particularly welcome there. The Shipping Docks and Long Wharf in Shiphaven were more informal, if only because the work wasn't as steady; nobody there would mind an extra pair of hands.

He reached the mouth of the canal and walked out on the seawall, peering out through the tangle of masts and yards at the Spicetown docks, trying to see whether any ships were running before that lovely wind. He shaded his eyes and gradually swiveled his head to the left.

There! A ship with red and gold sails, hauled over on the port tack, a long multicolored banner streaming from the mizzen. She looked to be southern-rigged, which meant she was from somewhere beyond the river-mouth at Londa in the Small Kingdoms, and she was clearly heading toward Shiphaven, from the look of it steering for either Pier Two or Pier Three.

Emmis turned and trotted west along the seawall to Pier One, where he cut over to the street; he kept a careful eye out to sea, watching the ship's approach.

Pier Two, he decided. Even with the strong wind, then, he didn't need to hurry; he would be there before the ship came in. He slowed his pace to an easy amble.

The ship was starting to reduce sail now, slowing for her final approach. Emmis watched with mild interest, seeing how well the crew handled their duties - that might tell him something about how he might get the most money from them for the least work.

They did well enough; the mainsail was furled quickly enough, without any corners flapping free. The jibsails came down smoothly, then the topsails, until only the topgallants were still drawing.

When the vessel finally neared the dock, out past the elbow in Pier Two, Emmis was seated comfortably on a bollard, waiting. Rather to his surprise, no one else had appeared on Pier Two; presumably the other Shiphaven laborers had all either already found work elsewhere, or decided to stay inside, out of the wind.

Emmis stood as the ship came gliding slowly in, and raised a hand. A crewman stood in the bow holding a line; seeing Emmis's signal, he nodded and began swinging the rope, building momentum. When he flung it Emmis was ready and waiting; he grabbed the painter and threw a loop around the bollard he had been sitting on, securing it with a neat half-hitch.

Then he trotted toward the stern, where another crewman was readying another line.

A few moments later the ship was secured alongside the dock, sails furled and gangplank out. Emmis waited by the plank - he knew better than to board any ship without explicit permission from its master, and as yet he had not spotted this vessel's captain. The man at the wheel wore the same faded

white blouse and blue kilt as any other sailor, without so much as a hat to set him apart, and Emmis assumed he was merely the helmsman.

There was no sign of a pilot, which might be why the ship was here rather than across the canal in Spicetown; the Newmarket sandbars could make getting to the eastern wharves tricky. The more experienced foreign navigators often made the approach themselves, rather than paying a pilot's fee, but no one here looked very experienced. Judging by the visible excitement among the crew of this vessel, Emmis doubted most of them had ever been in Ethshar of the Spices before.

Then a hat appeared amidships, rising above the coaming of the main hatch - a large black hat trimmed with a red satin band and a magnificent plume. It was followed by the head wearing it, and the rest of its owner, climbing up the ladder from the deck below.

Emmis watched with great interest as this figure emerged.

He was rather short, with dark hair and a brown complexion; his beard appeared to have been trimmed recently, but had clearly not taken to the idea and bristled unevenly. He wore a red velvet coat trimmed with gold braid, black piping, and gold buttons, and below the coat were fine black breeches. Coat and breeches both had the look of new and unfamiliar garb.

His boots, when they finally appeared, were well-made and, unlike the rest of his attire, well-worn.

Several of the sailors - not all, but probably a majority - bowed to this person as he stepped over the coaming onto the deck. Emmis did not go that far, but he straightened up respectfully.

The man in the red coat waved a brief acknowledgment of the bows, then stamped toward the gangplank.

As he approached Emmis continued to eye him with interest. The foreigner was at least forty, perhaps over fifty, though his hair showed only the faintest hints of gray. He had the slightly saggy look of a man who had once been fat but had lost weight, not from healthy exercise but because he wasn't eating well. The fancy clothes fit him well, and had obviously been tailored for him recently, but he didn't look entirely comfortable in them.

He paused at the gangplank and looked along the pier, from the seaward end to the warehouses on East Wharf Street. He took note of the sailors who had secured the lines, of the handful of other workers finally making their way out from shore, and of Emmis, standing there ready.

"Who are you?" he demanded, speaking Ethsharitic with a slight accent.

Emmis did bow now. "Emmis of Shiphaven, at your service," he said.

The foreigner marched across the gangplank and stepped off onto the pier, then turned to face Emmis.

"Do you mean that, or are you being polite?" He had an odd way of drawing out certain consonants; Emmis did not think he had ever heard this particular accent before.

Emmis blinked. "My services are indeed available," he said. "For a reasonable charge."

The foreigner cocked his head to one side. "We will decide later on what is reasonable, but you're hired."

Emmis smiled. "To do what, my lord?"

The stranger did not smile back. "Don't call me that," he snapped. "I'm not a lord."

Emmis wiped his own smile away. "My apologies, sir. I saw them bow."

The foreigner waved that away. "Apology accepted." He turned and shouted, "Fetch my baggage!"

Two of the sailors hastened to obey.

"Come on," the foreigner said, beckoning for Emmis to follow him toward shore.

Emmis did not move. "Sir?"

The foreigner stopped and turned. "Yes?"

"You have not yet told me what my duties are to be, nor my pay. I can't consider myself employed until I know more."

The foreigner nodded. "A reasonable..." He seemed to grope for the right word without finding it. "A reasonable thing," he said at last. "Od'na ya Semmat?"

Emmis blinked. "What?"

"You don't speak Semmat?"

"I never heard of Semmat."

He nodded. "Trader's Tongue? Ksinallionese? Ophkaritic? Thanorian?"

"I've heard of Trader's Tongue, and maybe know a few words," Emmis said warily. "If you're looking for a translator, I might be able to find you one..."

"Ah!" The stranger flung up a hand. "There! You see? You know your duties!"

The little knot of other laborers had reached them; the foreigner waved them past, toward the gangplank, where the sailors welcomed them aboard and began directing them. Brass-bound trunks and leather handbags were starting to appear on the dock, lined up beside the gangplank.

"No, sir," Emmis said. "I don't know."

The foreigner sighed. "You live here, yes? In Ethshar of the Spices?"

"Yes. I was born here, over near Olive Street." He gestured in the direction of his parents' home. "And I live behind Canal Square."

"You know the city well?"

"I suppose so, yes."

"Then I hire you! To know the city for me. To tell me what I need to know, and take me where I want to go."

"A guide? You want to hire me as your guide?"

The foreigner smacked himself on the forehead with the heel of one hand. "Guide! That's the word. I couldn't think it. In Semmat it's almit, in Trader's Tongue it's elfur, and I could not remember the Ethsharitic. Guide, of course. Yes."

Emmis hesitated. He did not particularly like the idea of showing this overdressed barbarian around the city's sights; he would probably want to see the Arena and the Wizards' Quarter, halfway across town, and might be upset that he couldn't meet the overlord face to face. He would perhaps want to poke around parts of the Old City that Emmis did not care to visit. And people from the Small Kingdoms were notoriously stingy, unfamiliar with the prices charged in the big city...

"I will pay a round of silver a day," the foreigner said, interrupting his thoughts. "To start."

"Ten bits," Emmis said automatically. "To start." Apparently this foreigner wasn't stingy, as a daily round of silver was generous to the point of extravagance, but that was no reason not to dicker.

Only after he had responded did Emmis realize what he had done.

"Done!" The foreigner held out a hand.

Emmis grasped it, surprised to be doing so, though the thought of all that silver stifled any regrets. "May I ask your name, sir, and what brings you to Ethshar?"

The foreigner's mouth quirked upward. He turned for a moment, and pointed out several other workers. "You, you, you, and you! Bring those bags - my guide here will tell you where. And... Emmis, you said?"

"Yes, sir."

"Get that one," he said, pointing to a leather traveling case, "and lead the way to a reasonable lodging."

"For one night, or a longer stay?"

"One or two nights, for now."

As he picked up the leather bag Emmis considered which inn might be willing to give him the best commission without overcharging his new employer too grotesquely. He heaved it up on his shoulder - it was heavier than it looked - and began walking toward land.

The foreigner fell in beside him. "As for my name and purpose," he said, "I am called Lar Samber's son, and I am..." He cleared his throat. "...I am,

by appointment of the Imperial Council and of the Regent Sterren of Semma, the ambassador plenipotentiary from the Empire of Vond to the court of Azrad VII, overlord of Ethshar of the Spices and Triumvir of the Hegemony of the Three Ethshars."

Emmis almost dropped the bag. "Ambassador?" he said.

"It's the right word, isn't it?" Lar said worriedly. "I practiced saying all that so much..." He shook his head. "I have no knowledge what 'plenipotentiary' means; Sterren didn't think there was any such word in Semmat, but he said it was important. He said 'ambassador' was the Ethsharitic for *espovoi*, a messenger from one ruler to another."

"That's what it means," Emmis agreed. He glanced back over his unencumbered shoulder to see a line of laborers hauling Lar's other luggage, but no sign of any other retinue. He would have expected an ambassador to have an entourage of aides and underlings, especially an ambassador from an empire. Admittedly, Emmis knew that Vond was a very young empire, having only been formed two or three years ago, and not really very large, but still - one man, unaccompanied?

"Did you bring your family, sir?" he asked.

"Don't have any," Lar replied. "No staff, so you can stop looking. Just me, my belongings, and my orders - and enough of the Imperial Treasury to hire you, and to pay my expenses for some time. And you'll forgive me for saying this, but since I have only just met you I think I must - the money is well hidden and carefully warded, with the most potent protective spells the Empire's wizards could find, so don't think you might rob me."

"Oh, I wasn't! I assure you, I wasn't!" Emmis said hastily. Then he smiled. "But I would have soon, so it's just as well you warned me," he said.

Lar smiled back.

"Emmis, my new friend," he said, "I think this is the beginning of a long and wealthy... no, not that word. A long and profitable relationship!"

Chapter Two

The Crooked Candle was not the best inn in Ethshar, nor the best inn in Shiphaven, nor even the best inn on Commission Street. It was, however, fairly close to Pier Two, and known for its generously-sized rooms. From the top floor one could even, if one leaned out the right window far enough, glimpse the sea to the north, and Shiphaven Market to the south.

"I don't expect we'll stay here long," Emmis said, as he dropped the last of the smaller bags atop the largest of the trunks. "You'll want somewhere closer to the Palace, won't you?"

"Will I?" Lar asked, apparently quite sincerely.

Emmis blinked. "Well, I thought so," he said. "I mean, aren't you here as your country's representative to the overlord's government?"

"Yes, I am," Lar agreed. "Among other things."

"The government is in the Palace, and that's at least a mile from here, through some crowded streets and on the far side of the canal. I'd think you'd want somewhere closer. I don't know if you can afford a place in the New City, but something in Spicetown or the Old Merchants' Quarter ought to do."

Lar smiled at him. "Emmis, friend," he said, "those names mean nothing to me. I don't know anything about your city. Lord Sterren tried to explain some basic facts, but we didn't talk about the names of streets. It was easier to let me come here and learn it for myself. You say it's a mile to the Palace?"

"At least. You'd go across Shiphaven Market, then down Twixt Street to Canal Square and out Upper Canal Street, then turn right on Commerce Street and go south to one of the main streets in the Old Merchants' Quarter - that's the part of the city southeast of Shiphaven..."

"What's Shiphaven?"

Emmis's mouth opened, then closed. He swallowed, took a deep breath, and

started over.

"This part of the city, at the west end of the waterfront, is called Shiphaven. It extends from the New Canal in the east to the city wall and the overlord's shipyards in the west. Everywhere you've gone since you got off your ship has been in Shiphaven."

Lar nodded. "Do I really need to know this?"

"I don't know," Emmis said. "I think it would be useful, certainly, but I don't know whether you need it."

"People refer to these portions of the city often?"

"Yes, of course!"

"Very well, then. I'd never before been in a city large enough for such things to matter, but I saw from the ship just how large Ethshar of the Spices is. I'll believe you when you say this is important. You were telling me how to get to the Palace from here?"

"Yes," Emmis said. "I was. You'd go through Shiphaven Market - you saw that, I think - and southeast along the full length of Twixt Street, which runs from Shiphaven Market to Canal Square."

"Is Canal Square in Shiphaven?"

Emmis hesitated, considering the question, then turned up an empty palm and said, "Yes." It really didn't seem worth explaining that Canal Square was almost where Westgate, Shiphaven, Spicetown, and the Old Merchants' Quarter met, when really, it was in Shiphaven. "It's not a square, though. It's triangular."

"Of course. Go on."

"From Canal Square you'd take Upper Canal Street east to the first corner, and turn south on Commerce Street," Emmis continued. "That goes into the part of the city called the Old Merchants' Quarter."

"Is there a New Merchants' Quarter, then?"

"Yes, but that's farther south, you don't go that far. You turn east off Commerce Street before you get there."

"I see."

"Then you have a choice, though. You can go east on Warehouse Street, or Cheap Street, or Bargain Street, or High Street. High Street isn't the shortest route, but it would probably be fastest; you certainly don't want to go any farther than High Street."

Lar nodded. "How will I know when I see High Street? Are there signs, perhaps?"

"No, of course not," Emmis said. "You just know. Or you could ask someone." He paused and thought for a moment. He had never really paid any attention to how he recognized the familiar streets, after living all his twenty-two years in the city, but obviously there must be landmarks of some sort. "Or... well, it's called High Street because it runs along a bit of high ground. As long as you're going uphill on Commerce Street, you aren't there yet. If Commerce Street starts to slope down, you're past it."

"Ah! How reasonable. Say more."

"You walk east on High Street until the third fork - the first one is Cut Street going off to the south, and then Old Merchant Avenue goes off to the north, and then next after that is where Merchant Street cuts diagonally across High Street, and you turn northeast on Merchant Street, along the foot of the hill. You'll see the mansions and garden walls of the New City on your right, along Merchant Street, with the Old Merchants' Quarter on your left - you can't miss it."

"The New City is on the hill you mentioned?"

"Yes. You might have seen it from the sea, before you came ashore."

"I might have, yes. It's part of Ethshar of the Spices?"

"It's right in the middle of Ethshar of the Spices!"

"But it's called the New City?"

"Yes! Because it's newer than the Old City, but most of the city is even newer."

"Ah. So, I am on Merchant Street - what then?"

"Then you just walk down Merchant Street to Palace Square, and there's the Palace on the other side of the Grand Canal, across the bridge."

Lar nodded. "Tell me something, Emmis," he said. "How do you remember all that?"

Emmis's mouth opened, then closed. He stared at the foreigner in bafflement.

"Never mind, then," Lar said, with a wave of his hand. "You know the city well?"

"Parts of it," Emmis said. "Don't ask me to find my way through Fishertown or Newgate."

"What if I wanted to find a warlock?"

"Oh, Warlock Street is in the Wizards' Quarter. There are a few warlocks elsewhere, but that's the easiest place."

"And where is the Wizards' Quarter?"

Emmis sighed. He had just known the foreigner would want to see the Wizards' Quarter. "You follow the directions I gave you before, but instead of turning on Merchant Street you stay on High Street right through the New City, over the hill to Arena Street. You turn right on Arena Street and just keep going, past the Arena. If you get to Southgate you've gone too far. Once you're in the Wizards' Quarter just read the shop signs and notice boards until you find warlocks."

"It's more than a mile?"

"Three or four miles, I'd say. Arena Street is long."

"All inside the city walls?"

"Yes, of course."

Lar shook his head in amazement. "A city this size is hard to believe!"

"It's the largest in the World," Emmis said, with a touch of civic pride. Then his natural honesty compelled him to add, "Although some people say Ethshar of the Sands might be larger."

"I think you were right. I won't stay in this... house? No, this inn. I won't stay in this inn for long. Can you find me a place between the Palace and the Wizards' Quarter?"

"I think so," Emmis said warily.

"I will be talking to several magicians."

"I thought the Small Kingdoms had their own magicians."

Lar grimaced. "Yours are better," he said. "Much better."

"I thought the Small Kingdoms didn't like magicians."

"That's why yours are better."

"Oh." Emmis could hardly argue with that. "But then why do you want to talk to them?"

Lar sighed. "Emmis," he said, "sometimes we must do things we don't like. But also, the Empire of Vond is not like the other Small Kingdoms. It was created by the Great Vond, who was a magician from Ethshar, and it is ruled now by Lord Sterren, who came from Ethshar. We have different ideas from our neighbors."

"Oh," Emmis said. He chewed his lower lip to keep himself from frowning, hoping that he looked thoughtful rather than disapproving.

He hadn't really known how the Empire of Vond had come about. A couple of years ago stories had started arriving of someone conquering a dozen or so of the Small Kingdoms and uniting them, but Emmis didn't remember any mention that the conqueror came from Ethshar.

Ethsharites weren't supposed to meddle in the Small Kingdoms. Everyone knew that. When the first three overlords had created the Hegemony of the Three Ethshars after the Great War they had deliberately excluded certain other lands. The Baronies of Sardiron were excluded because they carried the lingering taint of the old Northern Empire; the northern coasts, Tintallion and Meroa and so on, were excluded because they were too cold and empty to be worth bothering with.

And the Small Kingdoms had been excluded because they were a bunch of madmen and fools, always bickering among themselves, a source of nothing but

trouble. The people of the Hegemony prided themselves on their common sense, and common sense was obviously in short supply in the Small Kingdoms. Emmis had seen that for himself in talking to sailors from the Small Kingdoms. He had heard Kushinese speak scathingly of Amessans, Amessans denounce Meyans, Tantasharites insult Londans, Imryllirionese abominate Morrians, and to him and the other Ethsharites all those various nationalities were indistinguishable. Oh, a Perelian might be a little paler than an Ashthasan, a Mergan might have a slightly different accent than a Weidamonite, but really, they were all barbarians alike compared to the good people of Ethshar. Their major redeeming feature was that they were so fragmented they were harmless, far more interested in squabbling among themselves than bothering Ethshar.

And Ethshar left them carefully alone, so as not to risk becoming a common foe they might unite against.

At least, that's what the old men on the docks had told Emmis, and when he had asked his father, the old man had shrugged and said, "I suppose there's some truth to it."

Yes, the Empire of Vond had united about a dozen of the Small Kingdoms a few years ago, but it was far off on the southern edge of the World, at the other end of the Small Kingdoms, and the conquests had stopped after a few months, so no one in Ethshar had paid very much attention to it - but maybe they should have.

This man, this ambassador - why had he really come to Ethshar? Why did Vond need an ambassador? Emmis was fairly sure that most of the Small Kingdoms didn't bother with such things.

And why was this Vondish ambassador so interested in magicians?

"Should I look for an inn on Arena Street, or do you think you might want to rent a house, or even buy one?" Emmis asked. "How long do you expect to stay in Ethshar?"

"I don't know," Lar replied. "Rent a house, perhaps?"

Emmis nodded. "Then I'll start looking," he said. "And you can stay here until I find one."

"That sounds good," Lar said. He took off his hat and tossed it on the bed. "That sounds very good."

"How big a house do you want? Will you have a staff? Are more of your people coming?"

Lar's mouth quirked.

"No," he said. "Just me. You're my staff."

"Oh." Emmis frowned. "Well, do you want others? A cook? A housekeeper? Will you be entertaining often?"

Lar turned up an empty palm. "Emmis," he said, "I don't know these things. I have never been in Ethshar of the Spices before today. I have never been an ambassador until this journey. In the Small Kingdoms ambassadors are given rooms in the royal castle, and attended to by the castle staff. They do not have their own cooks or housekeepers. A secretary, perhaps, or an aide. But my regent tells me this is not how it is done here - ambassadors do not live in the overlord's palace, but in the city. Very well. I did not bring a secretary or an aide. You are my aide. I am paying you very much money - I am not a complete fool, I know that even here ten bits in silver a day is not reasonable. I am paying you so much so that you will figure these things out for me. I can spend... well, I have a certain amount of money, and no more. I will pay you what I have promised, and I can pay for some more than that, but I cannot be..." He paused, groping for a word, then rephrased. "But I must be reasonable," he said. "You must pay for much from the money I pay you."

Emmis could hardly complain about that, since Lar was quite right that ten bits a day was outrageously generous, but it did call for an adjustment in his plans. He had been imagining himself as the head of a grand household high in the New City, but now it did not sound as if the ambassador's funds would stretch that far.

Well, he would make do.

"You don't know how long you'll stay?"

Lar shook his head. "No. I have instructions from Lord Sterren that I must follow, and when that is done I can go home. I don't know how long that will be. Perhaps a month, perhaps a year, perhaps a life."

"What is it he wants you to do?"

Lar smiled crookedly. "I am not to tell. Perhaps when I know you more."

"That makes it difficult for me to help you."

"I know. For now, do what I say, and we will see what happens."

Emmis turned up a palm. "All right. You want a place between the Palace and the Wizards' Quarter, appropriate for an ambassador but not too expensive. What else?"

"You must make an introduction to the overlord. Lord Sterren does not want me to be secret, even if my instructions are." He sighed. "He didn't want me to try to be secret. He didn't think I could do it, here in Ethshar."

Emmis looked at the gaudily-dressed foreigner, with his sun-darkened complexion and curious accent. He would certainly not pass as a native Ethsharite.

"And he wanted me to be able to speak for the Empire of Vond, if need is, not just ask questions," Lar continued. "So I am an ambassador, not a spy."

"You want an introduction to the overlord." Emmis frowned. "I'm just a laborer, sir; I've never met the overlord."

"You are an ambassador's aide. That should be enough."

"Maybe," Emmis replied. "Maybe."

Chapter Three

The guard on the bridge listened politely. When Emmis had said his piece there was a moment of thoughtful silence; then the guard said, "A Vondish ambassador?"

"Yes."

"And he wants an audience with the overlord?"

"Yes."

The guard glanced up over his shoulder at the golden marble walls of the palace. "I suppose that seems reasonable," he said. "I'll pass the word, but it may take some time to get an answer. Can you come back tomorrow, about this same time? I should have an answer for you by then."

"You can't find out sooner?"

The guard turned up an empty palm. "I might," he said. "I don't know. It's not an emergency, and so far as I know it's not a standard situation where there are procedures in place. We do see ambassadors sometimes, from Sardiron or Tintallion, but I don't know just how that works. They usually have appointments made in advance."

"Well, that's what I'm trying to do, make an appointment," Emmis protested.

"Yes, but they usually do it with an exchange of letters, or with magicians sending messages, they don't just walk up to the door here."

"I didn't know who to address a letter to!"

"Well, I don't, either, but the ambassadors we've had here before apparently do," the soldier explained. "So I'll have to find out, and let you know, and I don't know how long it will take, so could you please come back tomorrow?"

Emmis sighed. He started to turn away, then stopped. He took a deep breath, and turned back.

"Am I doing something wrong?" he said.

Startled, the guard said, "I don't think so."

"I'm not making some horrible mistake in protocol, or being rude somehow?"

"No. I really just don't know the procedure."

"Keeping an ambassador waiting like this doesn't seem right, somehow, so

I thought maybe I'm doing something wrong," Emmis explained. "I mean, I'm new at this; the ambassador hired me as his local guide on a whim, and I haven't had any training at all, I'm just making it up as I go. If there's anything you can tell me about how I should be doing this..."

The guard looked at him helplessly. "Honestly, I don't know," he said. "The only time I've seen any ambassadors, they've shown up on the bridge and said they were expected, and sure enough the names would be on the daily orders, so I let them in. I'm only a sentry, not some sort of official."

"But you've never had a... a diplomatic aide come up to you like this? Or heard any of the other guards talk about it?"

"No. Never."

"Then I'm probably doing it wrong." Emmis sighed again. "Well, thank you. I'll be back tomorrow morning, then." He turned away with a polite nod, and this time kept going, ambling back across the red stone bridge, past the two outer guards and into the plaza beyond.

Perhaps he should have spoken to a magistrate, he thought, instead of the palace guards. At least he hadn't followed his original plan of marching down here with the ambassador in tow, expecting to be admitted immediately. What's more, he had found a house for rent just off Arena Street, and he had found it in less than a day. It wasn't actually in the New City, where the lords and ladies lived if they didn't live in the Palace itself, it was, if the truth be told, in Allston, but it was almost in the New City, and not all of Allston smelled of fish or sawdust or glue. Emmis hadn't smelled anything inappropriate when he inspected the property, and the wind hadn't seemed to be in an odd quarter.

So now it was back to the Crooked Candle to report to the ambassador. With any luck they could be settled into the house on Through Street by nightfall. He trotted across the plaza and through the midday crowds to Merchant Street, then up the gentle slope to High Street.

This whole business still didn't seem entirely real; he kept thinking it would all turn out to be a prank, or a misunderstanding, but then he felt the bulge in his purse as it slapped against his thigh, listened to the jingle of silver as he walked, and told himself that at least the money was real. If Lar turned out to be a madman rather than an ambassador, or if the overlord had him cast into a dungeon as an enemy of the Hegemony, at least Emmis would have something to show for it.

He turned right onto High Street, into the Old Merchants' Quarter, and hurried on, ignoring the calls of hawkers and the scent of herbs and spices, eager to return to the familiar streets of Shiphaven.

Half an hour later he marched through the taproom of the Crooked Candle, ignoring the rather sparse lunchtime crowd, and climbed the three flights of stairs to the ambassador's room on the top floor.

The door, which had been standing open when he left that morning, was closed; he hesitated, then knocked.

No one answered, and all his worries about fraud or insanity, which he had been able to hold at bay until now, suddenly tumbled in on him.

"Lar? Sir?" he called, as he rapped on the wood again. He tried the latch, but the door was locked. He groped for an appropriate title for an ambassador, and called, "Your excellency?"

Still no response. He dropped his hand to his purse - the possibility that those coins weren't really silver at all, but some lesser substance enhanced by a bit of magic, had finally occurred to him. He frowned.

If that was the case, well... all he had really lost was a day's work, give or take a few hours, and a little of his self-respect. He could stand that. At least he hadn't bragged about his new job to anyone; by the time he had gotten Lar settled in the Crooked Candle, answered hundreds of questions about the city, discussed rents and wages, and carefully gone over the plans for today, he hadn't felt like talking to anyone else. He had eaten supper with Lar downstairs here, then gone back to his attic room in the tangle of uncertainly-named streets behind Canal Square, where he had looked over the

foreign silver carefully, gotten out his best clothes to air overnight, and then gone to bed early, so as to get an early start today.

He had spoken to his landlady in passing, on his way up to his room, mentioning that he had a new job that might force him to move out, but he didn't think he had told her anything that would embarrass him. He hadn't run into any of his friends or family.

And today he had breakfasted with the ambassador here at the inn, then set out on his business. He had not told the owner of the house in Allston who his employer was, merely that it was a foreigner with business at the Palace.

He had told the guard at the Palace the whole story about the Vondish ambassador, but he could live with that.

"Are you looking for the man with the red coat and the fancy hat?" someone asked.

Startled, Emmis turned to find a young woman standing at the top of the stair. "Uh?" he said.

"The foreigner with the plumed hat," she said. "Are you looking for him?"

"Yes," Emmis answered.

"He went out about an hour ago. I'm not sure when he's coming back, but he left all his things, so I'm sure he'll be back eventually."

Emmis glanced at the locked door, then back at the young woman, who, he realized, was wearing a beer-stained white apron and had her hair tucked up under a mobcap. "Oh," he said. "Do you work here, then?"

"Sometimes. My uncle owns the inn, and I help out when he's short-handed."

"You're sure he'll be back?" he said, nodding toward the door.

"He didn't take his belongings, so I'd say so, yes."

Emmis's hand squeezed his purse; the silver, if it was really silver, was still there. And the girl said Lar's luggage was safe inside the room.

Lar was probably real after all, and he had been worrying about nothing. The ambassador had surely just gone out on an errand of some sort, perhaps to buy a few things in Shiphaven Market.

Not that Emmis had seen him when he had passed through the market a few minutes before. "Did he say where he was going?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No. Not a word."

For a moment Emmis stood silently staring at her, trying to think of something useful to ask her, but nothing came to mind.

The girl stared back. "The other foreigners might know something," she said at last.

Emmis blinked. "Other foreigners?"

"Downstairs, eating lunch," she said. "Four of them."

"Are they Vondish, too?"

She turned up both palms. "I have no idea," she said. "I just know they're foreigners from the way they talk."

"Oh." He took a final look at the locked door, then said, "Could you introduce me, perhaps? My name's Emmis of Shiphaven."

"Of course. My name's Gita, by the way. Come on." She turned and beckoned, and led him back down to the common room.

The four foreigners were three men and a woman, seated at a large table to one side of the room. The woman was middle-aged and full-figured, wearing a white blouse embroidered in two shades of blue; the men wore brown cloaks with hoods thrown back. All four had the dark hair and dark complexions common in the far south, but were otherwise unremarkable.

Gita took his hand and led Emmis directly to them.

Emmis was unsure what they had been doing when he first entered the room, whether they had been talking amongst themselves or not, but the moment Gita started toward them they had all turned and stared silently at her approach, and at Emmis behind her. That did not strike him as entirely normal behavior, but after all, they were foreigners, and couldn't be expected to have any manners.

Then the woman smiled at him, and while she was at least a decade older than he was and no great beauty to begin with, that at least made him feel less like an intruder. "Gita, my dear," she said, speaking Ethsharitic with a truly barbarous accent, "is this the young man you told us about?"

"Annis, this is Emmis of Shiphaven," the innkeeper's niece said with a curtsy, and Emmis suddenly found himself thrust forward, and his hand released.

The three men still hadn't moved or spoken, but the woman waved at a vacant chair. "Have a seat, Emmis of Shiphaven!" Her accent was thicker than Lar's, but Emmis did not think it was the same; she spoke her vowels through her nose. While she was obviously from the Small Kingdoms, he didn't think she was from the same one that had produced the Vondish ambassador.

There was clearly something going on here that he didn't understand, but none of these people looked particularly dangerous, and no one was likely to do anything violent here in a public house. Warily, keeping his eyes on the woman, Emmis sat down.

"I am Annis the Merchant," the foreign woman said. "I hope you don't mind that I sent Gita upstairs to see if you would join us."

Emmis gave the innkeeper's niece a quick glance, but she was hurrying away toward the kitchen, carefully not looking at him.

"Ah," Emmis said. "You did that?" Gita had done an excellent job of getting him here without mentioning that she had been sent to find him.

"Yes. And of course you want to know why."

"Well, yes."

"Of course. You would be a fool not to wonder, and I'm sure you are not a fool." She smiled again. "Are you?"

Emmis did not care to answer that. "Who are you people?" he asked. "What do you want with me?"

"I told you, I am Annis the Merchant. These three are, if I have the names right, Neyam, Morkai, and Hagai, all of them from Lumeth of the Towers."

The three men shifted at the sound of their names, and it occurred to Emmis that they might not understand Ethsharitic. They gave no sign they were following the conversation. Emmis did not think he had ever heard of Lumeth of the Towers, which meant it was almost certainly one of the Small Kingdoms. Emmis did not know much about the lands outside the city walls, but he was fairly sure he had at least heard a mention of every nation outside the Small Kingdoms, from Kerroa to Shan on the Desert, or from the Pirate Towns to Srigmor.

But he hadn't heard of all the Small Kingdoms simply because there were too many.

"And where are you from?" Emmis asked. "You don't sound Vondish, and I notice you said they were from Lumeth, not we are."

"Ah, not a fool at all! I am from Ashthasa, on the South Coast."

Emmis had heard of Ashthasa, and even met a few Ashthasan sailors, and now that she said the name, her accent did seem to fit, and her coloring was dark enough. She might be telling the truth.

One of the Lumethans said something in what sounded like Trader's Tongue, and Annis made a quick, brief reply. Emmis thought she was telling him to shut up until he had been introduced, but Emmis's command of Trader's Tongue was almost as weak as he had told Lar it was, and Annis spoke Trader's Tongue with that same thick Ashthasan accent she had in Ethsharitic, so he was not at all sure of his interpretation.

"They don't speak Ethsharitic, do they?" he asked.

Annis smiled at him again. "If they do, they won't admit it," she said. "I take it you don't speak Trader's Tongue? Morkai wanted to know what we were discussing, and I said we were still on introductions."

That matched what he had heard reasonably well. "Shall we get beyond the introductions, then? What did you want with me?"

"To the point. You are working for the Vondishman? The one in the red coat and plumed hat?"

Emmis wondered whether the woman was exaggerating her accent; if she knew the Ethsharitic word for "plumed" she had to be pretty fluent.

"He hired me to find him a residence, yes." Emmis didn't see any reason to admit to more than that.

"Ah, is that where you were today?"

"Yes."

"Did you find him one?"

"I did. Why do you want to know?"

She leaned back in her chair. "Do you know where Ashthasa is?"

"You just told me - it's on the South Coast, in the Small Kingdoms."

"But do you know where it is relative to the Empire of Vond? And how big it is, and how big the Empire of Vond is?"

"No," Emmis admitted.

"Our entire eastern frontier is with the Empire," she said. "It was our border with the kingdom of Quonshar, until the Great Warlock conquered Quonshar three years ago, together with all the lands beyond. Where there were once eight other kingdoms along the coast to the east of Ashthasa, there is now only the empire, reaching from our border to the very edge of the World, and Quonshar is merely the westernmost province of Vond. There are more than a dozen other provinces in the empire, and while Quonshar is one of the smallest provinces, all by itself it's larger than Ashthasa. If the empire should decide to extend its borders ever so slightly, my homeland would vanish, and become Vond's eighteenth province; we could not possibly resist them effectively."

Emmis glanced at the three silent men.

"And Lumeth of the Towers - well, it's inland, not on the coast. It's one of the larger lands in the Small Kingdoms, though of course it's nothing compared with the Empire of Vond, or the Hegemony of the Three Ethshars. A few years ago it bordered on nine other kingdoms; four of them are now provinces of Vond, and Lumeth is half-surrounded. If you were to look at a map of the empire - you know what a map is?"

"Yes," Emmis said. "I've seen maps."

"Good. Well, if you had a map of the Empire of Vond, you would see that it's shaped a little like a half-moon, with the sea and the desert around the curve to the south and east, and the rest of the Small Kingdoms to the north and west of the flat side. Except that the border isn't straight. There's a piece broken off the western tip - that's Ashthasa. And there's a bite out of the middle - that's the southern part of Lumeth. So they're worried about the empire just as my own people are."

"Oh," Emmis said.

"So we are all very, very interested in everything the empire does, and when the Imperial Council and the Regent send an envoy to Ethshar of the Spices, well, naturally, we want to know who he is, and what he's doing, and why. I am telling you this openly to save time; I could have made up some elaborate story, but why should I? You have no ties to Vond, and we are not asking you to do anything terrible. We just want to know whether you can tell us anything about why this Vondishman is in Ethshar."

Emmis glanced at the three silent Lumethans, then looked Annis in the eye.

"What's in it for me?" he asked.

Chapter Four

Emmis had never greatly concerned himself with ethical issues. Unloading freighters generally did not present a lot of difficult moral choices.

One of the rules he and the other dockworkers lived by, though, was that you finished the job you were on before you took another one, even if the new employer offered higher pay. Walking off one job to start the next meant you weren't trustworthy, weren't reliable.

And you didn't steal from the people who hired you. That was even worse. A thief who got caught would never work on the waterfront again.

But if the captain left you sitting on the dock while he got the paperwork done or dickered with a buyer, there was no rule that said you couldn't answer a few questions for interested merchants, or that they couldn't give a hard-working young man a copper bit or two in exchange for telling them just how many planks of planed hickory, or crates of tarragon, you and your fellows had really hauled out of the hold, even if it didn't match what the owner claimed he had available.

It wasn't as if Lar had told him anything important, after all. In fact, Lar had specifically refused to tell him just what the actual purpose of his stay in Ethshar was, and if Lar was keeping that secret, then presumably anything Lar had told him was not secret.

So why not pick up a little extra money while he waited for the ambassador to come back from wherever he had gone? That was what Emmis told himself while Annis and the three Lumethans argued in Trader's Tongue.

He kept an eye on the front door as they bickered; if Lar should walk in just then, Emmis wanted to be ready to put some distance between himself and the four foreigners. He also listened, though, while trying not to let on that he could understand about one word in five of the debate.

The Lumethans seemed to find his willingness to talk to them suspicious, while Annis appeared to be arguing that it was plain old Ethsharitic greed, that Ethsharites would sell their own children if the price was right. They also seemed to disagree as to whether the costs should be split two ways or four, by country or by individual.

And there was the question of how much to offer him, up front or in installments - Emmis did know all the numbers in Trader's Tongue, and was reasonably pleased by what he heard.

Finally, Annis turned back to him and said, "Two rounds for what he's told you so far, and another round for every new item you bring us."

"Silver?"

Annis looked genuinely shocked. "Gods, no!" she said. "Just copper!"

Emmis turned up a palm. "It was worth asking." It hadn't really been, as far as any honest doubt might be concerned, but it did make plain to these four that while Ethsharites might be greedy, they weren't cheap. He had also understood enough of the Trader's Tongue to know that two rounds was the opening bid, not a final offer - for one thing, he was fairly certain that they had compromised on a three-way split, and eight bits didn't divide by three. "Perhaps half a dozen rounds?"

"For a little conversation?"

"Four rounds, then?"

"We'll meet you halfway. Three rounds to start, a dozen bits for each additional item."

That was what he had expected. "Good enough," he said. "Though perhaps some items might be worth more? After all, isn't your entire kingdom at stake?"

"They might be," Annis conceded.

"Buy me a beer, then, to moisten my throat while we speak, and you have a deal."

Annis beckoned to Gita, mimed gulping beer, and pointed at Emmis. Gita nodded, and bustled away.

That done, Annis folded her hands on the table and leaned forward. "Now, lad, tell us about the Vondishman."

"Until my beer gets here and your money's in my hand, tell me first what you already know, so I won't waste your time. How did you know to talk to me? How did you know he was here at all?"

Annis smiled, and reached down to her purse as she said, "Our governments keep an eye on things in the Vondish ports, of course, and your man didn't make any secret of his departure, or where he was going, so Prince Sammel invested in the services of a magician, who located the Vondishman, and

the Prince sent word to me that I'd find him here at the Crooked Candle." She dumped a handful of copper on the table, and began counting out eight bits. "I came here and waited, and sure enough, there he was at breakfast this morning, and there you were with him, and that was when I decided I wanted to talk to you, and paid Gita here..." She nodded toward the serving girl, who was just then lowering a tray of well-filled beer mugs over Emmis's shoulder. "...paid her to bring you to me." She pushed the little pile of coins across the table, and Emmis began counting them into his own purse.

"And them?" Emmis paused in his counting and gestured at the Lumethans, who were digging into their own purses for their share.

"Oh, they showed up later this morning, and started asking everyone stupid questions in Trader's Tongue or Lumethan or Gajamorish, and I'm sure you can guess how helpful that was. You'd think Lumeth could have found someone who spoke Ethsharitic! Anyway, I talked them into joining me so that they wouldn't alert the entire city with their babbling."

Emmis nodded, and watched the Lumethans push forward a stack of coins.

"So how did you meet the Vondishman, and why did he hire you?"

Emmis took a swig of beer, and began describing how he had met Lar Samber's son, and what had happened thereafter.

It didn't take long, since after all, most of their time together had been spent in Emmis teaching Lar a few things about Ethshar, rather than Lar saying or doing anything that would interest the Prince of Ashthasa, or that might concern whoever was in charge of things in Lumeth of the Towers. He had barely finished his first beer when he ran out of things to say.

He glanced at the Lumethans, who had listened to all this without giving any indication they understood a word of it. They were being very patient, Emmis thought. They probably trusted Annis to relay the important parts after Emmis had left.

"Ambassador," Annis said, leaning back in her chair and staring at him.

"Yes," Emmis said. "Ambassador plenipotentiary."

"But he's interested in magicians."

"Warlocks in particular."

"How do warlocks concern an ambassador?"

"I have no idea. Didn't you say, though, that the Empire of Vond was created by a warlock?"

"It was. By Vond the Great. That's where the name comes from."

"What happened to him? Is he still running things?"

Annis shook her head. "No. He flew away to the north and never came back - but he might return someday, which is why the empire has a regent instead of an emperor."

"Flew off to...? Oh." Suddenly the history of the Empire of Vond made sense.

Emmis didn't know much about magic, and what he did know mostly came from idle conversation with sailors and dockworkers, so he knew more about wind elementals and propulsion spells than he did about love charms or any of the more usual enchantments - not that he could be sure any of what he knew was accurate; seafarers' gossip was not exactly famous for its reliability. He knew sailors didn't think witchcraft was good for anything but healing, that wizardry was the best way to help a vessel cross the sea, that ships passing near the Pirate Towns often carried demonologists to defend themselves.

He knew that sometimes warlocks would take ship heading south, bound for anywhere in the World that was farther away from Aldagmor.

There was something in the mountains of Aldagmor, sixty leagues north of Ethshar, that gave warlocks their power - and after they had used a certain amount of that power, demanded they pay for it with their lives. The warlocks named it the Calling, and any warlock who heard it felt an irresistible compulsion to go to Aldagmor. Some walked, some rode, but most flew. Nothing could hold them, once they heard the Calling; they would use their magic to shatter locks or chains, burst any bonds, in their desperation to make that journey to Aldagmor.

And none of them ever came back.

No one knew what was out there in the mountains; no one had ever come back from there, not since the Night of Madness when warlockry first appeared, a few months before Emmis was born.

Sane warlocks resisted the Calling as long as they could, and the farther they were from Aldagmor, the longer they could hold out. Every old sailor had a tale or two about warlocks who had fled to the Small Kingdoms or the western coasts, trying to put more distance between himself and whatever it was that was summoning them.

The Empire of Vond, if Emmis understood the geography correctly, was at the far end of the Small Kingdoms, on the southern edge of the World and the edge of the Great Eastern Desert. It was, in fact, as far from Aldagmor as it was possible to get in that direction.

This Vond the Great Warlock must have gone there trying to escape the Calling, and built himself an empire for some reason, perhaps just as a distraction, but then the Calling had gotten him anyway. He had gone to Aldagmor, and would never come back - but the people he left in charge of his empire didn't want to admit that, so this Sterren of Semma person called himself "regent" instead of "emperor."

Annis didn't seem to realize that. She had said that Vond might return someday, but as Emmis understood it, that wasn't going to happen. Warlocks didn't come back.

"If the ambassador is looking for warlocks here in Ethshar, do you think it might be Vond himself that he's looking for?" Annis asked. "Could the Great Warlock be hiding in the Wizards' Quarter?"

"Um?" Emmis had been lost in his own thoughts, and had to think a moment to realize what the Ashthasan was asking him. "Oh. No, I don't think so."

"He was from Ethshar."

"Yes, but I don't think he came back here." If she didn't know about the Calling, or thought it was reversible, he didn't see any reason to explain it to her. It wasn't any great secret in Ethshar, and if the news had never reached Ashthasa - well, in that case they clearly didn't have any warlocks there, so she didn't need to know.

But Emmis now had an idea what Lar's secret mission might be. If the Empire of Vond had been created by a warlock, and that warlock was gone, maybe the ambassador was here looking for a new warlock. There were certainly plenty of them in the city, and any who had reached the nightmare threshold, the point when the Calling had started to trouble their dreams but had not yet affected them when they were awake, would probably be very interested in a trip to the southern edge of the World.

What did the empire need a warlock for, really?

Annis had apparently followed a similar line of reasoning, because at that point in his thoughts she said, "Do you think the Vondishman might be looking for another warlock?"

"I don't know," Emmis said. "He might be. Is there some important magic that they need done?"

Annis turned up both palms. "Who knows?" she said. "The Imperial Council does not exactly send bulletins to all its neighbors."

One of the Lumethans asked her a question in Trader's Tongue before Emmis could think of anything more to say. Annis replied, giving Emmis time to mull over his theory.

If the empire had sent Lar to fetch them a new warlock because Vond had been Called, they presumably had some use for a warlock. Their first, Vond himself, had apparently used his magic to conquer the seventeen kingdoms that now made up the empire named for him.

So did this mean they wanted a new warlock so they could expand the empire further? That was probably what Annis and the Lumethans would think; they were already worried about a new wave of Vondish conquest.

Emmis thought that if he were going to embark on a career of magical conquest, he wouldn't use a warlock. Yes, the Calling meant that eventually he

would go away and you would have the empire to yourself, but what happened if the Calling got to him in the middle of a battle? Your magical support might suddenly fly away on you, which would probably not do anything to increase your chances of living a long and happy life as emperor.

Witches weren't powerful enough to be conquerors, and generally had fairly strict rules about what they would and wouldn't do, in any case. Theurgists couldn't do anything the gods considered evil, and while the gods' standards sometimes seemed arbitrary, conquering other countries would almost certainly involve violating them. Demonologists - well, demonologists were scary. You couldn't trust demonologists, or the demons they more or less controlled. A demonologist might decide that he'd make a better emperor without you, or one of the demons might decide you looked tasty. Scientists and herbalists and ritual dancers and all the other minor schools of magic - well, people considered them "minor" for a reason.

No, if Emmis were going to take up conquest, he would hire wizards. Wizards didn't have to argue with gods or demons, they had all the magical power one could want, but the Wizards' Guild wouldn't let them be rulers themselves, so you didn't need to worry about being deposed by your magicians. And if they got out of hand in some lesser way and the Guild wouldn't intervene, you could cut off the supply of the ingredients they needed for their spells - a wizard without his bottles of dragon's blood and boxes of mummified toads wasn't any more of a threat than a witch.

Of course, the Guild might not allow them to take the job in the first place.

Emmis glanced around the room to see if there were any wizards around; he didn't seriously intend to ask about Guild rules, but he was just wondering...

And there was Lar in the door, heading for the stairs. The hat was unmistakable.

Emmis got to his feet so quickly he almost knocked over his chair. "Time to go," he said. "My money?"

Annis pushed over the remaining coins, and Emmis snatched them up before hurrying after his employer.

"Your excellency!" he called, shoving the coins into his purse.

Lar turned at the foot of the stairs. "Oh, there you are!" he said.

"I've been waiting here for some time," Emmis said.

"Oh? I went out to see the city. I went to the market, and to the docks to see the ships. I'm sorry if you were worried."

"Oh, I wasn't worried," Emmis said. "Just eager to get on with things. I found you a house to rent, over near Arena Street."

Lar smiled, and started up the stairs. "Good," he said over his shoulder. "And a meeting with the overlord?"

"Well, that's a little more difficult," Emmis said, following Lar up the stairs. "I have to go back tomorrow and talk to the guard at the palace again."

Lar glanced back at him, and Emmis quickly added, "But I'm sure we'll manage something."

"I am the representative of an empire," Lar said. "I know it isn't much of an empire compared with the Hegemony of Ethshar, but still, it would be reasonable for the overlord to see me."

"I know, I know!" Emmis said. "And he will, I'm sure. It just may take a while to arrange."

"But you have a house?"

"Yes. We can move you in this afternoon, if you want, though of course you'll have to pay a month's rent first."

"Of course."

"I didn't hire a wagon for your things because I thought you might want to see it first," Emmis added. "I mean, you weren't very specific in your instructions, so you may not find it suitable."

"Oh, I'm sure it will be reasonable," Lar said.

"I'd be happier if you looked it over before bringing everything."

"If you want." They had reached the top floor, and the ambassador was reaching for the key on his belt.

"By the way," Emmis said, glancing back down the stairs, "I thought you might want to know - there are some other foreigners here asking about you."

Lar stopped, key in hand, and turned to look at Emmis. He cocked his head to one side, and his hat tipped, looking as if it was about to fall off.

"Are there?"

"Yes," Emmis said. "I talked to them while I was waiting for you."

"And what did you tell them?"

"That you are the Vondish ambassador, and you hired me to find you a house to rent."

"You said nothing of warlocks?"

"What is there to say? You haven't told me why you want to meet warlocks."

"These foreigners - do you know where they are from?"

"Lumeth of the Towers and Ashthasa, they told me."

"Ah. G'dye zas." He turned his attention back to the door, sliding the key into the lock. A moment later he had it open and had stepped inside; he gestured for Emmis to follow him.

Emmis obeyed.

The ambassador looked up at him, then leaned back out the door, looked both ways, and closed it, gently but firmly. He tossed his hat on the bed, then turned back to Emmis.

"How much," he asked, "are they paying you to spy on me?"

Chapter Five

Emmis didn't bother pretending to be shocked. "A fair price," he said.

"Do you really need to know exactly?"

"If I am to match it, yes."

"Why would you need to match it? You already hired me, and you're paying me far more than they are."

"You did not tell me about them to start the bidding?"

"No. I told you because it's your business, and I work for you."

Lar cocked his head to one side. "Then you won't... I don't know the words. Dargas ya timir?"

"You're my employer," Emmis said. "I'm working for you. I'm also letting them pay me for talking to them, because you didn't tell me not to, and nothing you've told me seemed to be a secret. If there is something you want me to keep secret - well, you can always just not tell me, or we can agree on a price at the time. Some secrets I wouldn't charge for; others, well, I hope you have plenty of silver. If you're planning to assassinate the overlord, and you're fool enough to tell me, I don't think you could carry enough silver to keep me quiet. If you don't want me to tell them what you ate for breakfast, well, I'll throw that in for free."

"And what if I want to know what they said?"

"Oh, I think that's included in my salary."

"Ah. Then tell me."

Emmis did, as best he could recall.

Lar listened intently, then asked, "She thought Vond might be here, in Ethshar?"

"So it would seem."

Lar did not immediately reply, but Emmis saw his expression and said,

"Yes, I know that's impossible. I've heard about the Calling."

"Do you think the Lumethans really didn't understand Ethsharitic?"

Emmis turned up a hand. "I never caught them out, but maybe they're just

good at hiding it. Does it matter?"

"Probably not." Lar sighed. "What I would really like to do is to simply go and tell them the truth. The regent and the Imperial Council do not want to expand the empire any further, and my business here has nothing to do with Lumeth or Ashthasa."

"Why not tell them?"

"Because they wouldn't believe me. After all, if we were planning to conquer them, wouldn't we say we weren't?"

Emmis had never given the matter any thought, but now that Lar pointed it out, it was obvious. "Oh," he said.

"You could tell them," Lar said thoughtfully.

"Why would they believe me?"

"You're their paid informant, aren't you? They want to believe you." Then he shook his head. "But you're right, they wouldn't. Not completely."

For a moment the two men stood silently; then Lar turned up a palm. "Well, we'll let that go for now. You may sell them any information they want, for now - I don't think you know anything I want to keep secret. If that changes, I'll tell you."

"Thank you."

"Now, you found me a house?"

"Yes. It's just off Arena Street, between the Palace and the Wizards' Quarter."

"How far is that from here?"

"Ah... two miles, perhaps?"

"You know, I'm really not inclined to walk that far and back to inspect it. You found it reasonable?"

"Well... yes, I suppose. But I would really..."

"I trust you. We will need transportation for my belongings."

"Yes," Emmis said, hesitantly. He would have preferred that Lar not trust him quite that much, as he hadn't really even looked inside the house. But he could hardly argue that Lar needed to have less faith in him when he had just confessed to selling information to his employer's enemies - or if not actual enemies, at least people who had no reason to wish him well. "If you're sure you don't want to look at it first..."

"I'm sure."

The next half-hour was spent making plans, and after that Emmis trotted up to Warehouse Street to hire a wagon, a team of oxen, and a driver. Lar had suggested hiring a flying carpet or some other magic, but Emmis had quoted a few prices that convinced him otherwise.

Of course, Emmis had made those prices up; he had no idea what a magician would charge, but he knew what teamsters charged for the use of a wagon, and he knew that nobody in Ethshar would ever hire a magician instead of a teamster for this sort of hauling. Lar might not have any great interest in keeping his presence a secret, and might be eager to meet magicians, but Emmis couldn't believe he would want to make himself a laughingstock and a target for swindlers. Paying a wizard or warlock to move a few trunks would label him a rich idiot, and rich idiots inevitably attracted people eager to make them a little less rich.

When he rode the wagon down Commission Street, Emmis found Lar waiting outside the inn with his luggage and a dozen hirelings he had recruited in the Crooked Candle; loading the wagon took just a few moments with so large a crew helping. The driver, who ordinarily would have considered it part of his job to assist, barely had time to get down from his bench before all the baggage was being shoved over the sides; he decided he would do best to step aside and let the pot-boys, dockworkers, and serving wenches earn their copper bits. He stood back with Emmis, calling advice.

"Push it up to the end!"

"Not on top of that one, you'll squash it!"

"Here, shove it under the bench."

When everything was securely stowed and Lar was distributing the

promised coins, the teamster climbed back to his place and looked down at Lar and Emmis.

"There's room for one up here. The other will have to ride in back, on the load."

Lar looked up from his dwindling handful of money at Emmis, who immediately said, "I'll ride in back. He's the boss here."

"But you're the one who knows where we're going," Lar pointed out.

"Well, yes," Emmis said, "but I can give directions from the back."

"Of course you can," the driver agreed. "Up you go, then, sir, and the young man will ride in back. It's comfortable enough, sitting on a trunk."

Lar hesitated. "Will we be able to hire people to unload it when we get there?"

Emmis hesitated, and before he could reply the driver said, "Where are you going?"

"Arena Street," Lar answered, one foot on the step up to the bench.

"Allston," Emmis said. "On Through Street, just off Arena."

"Ah." The teamster scratched his beard. "Don't know the neighborhood."

Lar looked alarmed. "But you can take us there?"

"Oh, of course I can! I just don't know who you'll find looking for work there - Allston's a chancy sort of place, different from one block to the next."

"A... what?" Lar frowned. "I don't know that word, 'chancy.'"

"Don't worry about it," Emmis said, vaulting up over the side. "We can unload it ourselves, if we need to."

"Of course we can! Come on up, sir!" The driver reached out a hand.

Lar still did not look happy, but he took the proffered hand and clambered onto the bench.

Once he was securely seated, the teamster shook out the reins and called to the oxen, who began plodding forward. The wagon, which had settled into the street under the weight of its load, jerked free and began rolling up Commission Street.

Emmis watched the city roll by, casting frequent glances at the backs of his employer and the driver. In Shiphaven Market Lar seemed to flinch every few seconds as merchants waved their wares at him, or children scurried in front of the oxen, but there were no collisions or other misfortunes. The Vondishman's hat wobbled so much he eventually took it off and held it on his lap.

When at last the wagon emerged onto Twixt Street, Lar turned and leaned over the back of the bench. He beckoned to Emmis.

"Yes, sir?" Emmis said, leaning close.

"Was there some reason you hired oxen, rather than horses? This trip will take hours!"

Emmis blinked in surprise. "About an hour, I'd say. Horses? Horses can pull wagons?"

Lar blinked back at him not merely in surprise, but in shock. "Of course they can!"

"They don't here in Ethshar," Emmis said.

"I can explain that, sir," the driver said over his shoulder. "Couldn't help overhearing." He tapped at his ear.

Lar turned, listening.

"Horses are more expensive, take more care than an ox," the teamster said. "Can't haul as heavy a load. And they don't like the crowds and noise."

"They're faster," Lar said.

"Oh, yes, they are," the driver agreed. "And that's part of why they aren't welcome inside the city walls. A horse can trample and kick and do all manner of damage if it's upset, it can run away with a cart, where with a team of oxen - well, it doesn't happen. You saw those kids in the market; if I were driving horses some of them might've been stepped on, or started the horses rearing. I've heard a few folks use horses for hauling outside the walls, where it's quieter, but here in the city you won't see them pulling a serious

load. Rich folks ride them, of course, but that's different, if they get thrown off it's just their own bones that get broken, not anyone's cargo, and you don't have wagon wheels bouncing off the walls on either side of the street. And they use them to pull their fancy carriages, but that's just for show."

"But oxen are so slow - what if you're hauling something a long way?"

"Well, if one's in as much of a hurry as all that, I suppose you'd hire a magician, not a horse. You'd need a few rounds of gold, though. And really, what is there in Ethshar that you'd need to move as quickly as that? A good team of oxen will get you anywhere in the city between breakfast and supper - no, not supper, lunch. Southgate to the shipyards, Crookwall to the lighthouse, I'd wager there's not a run that you couldn't finish in three hours with a good team."

Lar did not look convinced, but he turned forward again.

They made what Emmis considered good time, up Twixt Street and through Canal Square, where Lar seemed astonished by the sight of the New Canal, though Emmis couldn't imagine why - surely they had canals in the Small Kingdoms!

The wagon had minor difficulties in negotiating the turn from Upper Canal Street onto Commerce Street, almost running over the flowers around the corner shrine in order to squeeze past a pair of arguing merchants, but otherwise the journey progressed without incident, the oxen plodding on peacefully through the crowds while the driver hummed quietly to himself and Lar stared at the buildings on either side, looking at the signboards and the window displays, hearing the cries of hawkers and the arguing of customers, smelling the hundred smells of the city - most prominently allspice, turmeric, smoke, seawater, and decay.

Emmis had plenty of time to think as he rode, and he spent it considering his current position.

He was an ambassador's aide. He still didn't understand exactly how he had gone from freelance dockworker to being a diplomatic agent, but it seemed to have happened. The job paid well, and didn't seem terribly demanding, but Emmis couldn't help wondering whether there was something he was missing. Why was he being paid so generously? Why hadn't Lar brought a whole entourage with him from Vond? Was there something dangerous about this job? What was his real mission?

For that matter, who was Lar? Why had he been chosen as ambassador? As Emmis understood it, and nothing the palace guard had said had prompted him to doubt this, ambassadors were traditionally chosen from the nobility, from surplus princes or the sons of courtiers, while Lar had insisted he wasn't a lord of any sort.

He should have asked these questions sooner, he thought, but he wasn't accustomed to asking any questions at all beyond, "What's it pay?" and "Where did you want this one?" Working the docks generally didn't require a great deal of introspection.

This diplomatic aide stuff, though, brought a seemingly-endless supply of questions and mysteries. For example, who were Annis and those three Lumethans? Oh, they were government agents, obviously - spies, to be blunt - but why those four people in particular? How had they gotten to Ethshar? Had they followed Lar's ship, and arrived just after him? Emmis didn't recall seeing any ships at the docks that looked likely to have brought them.

And what sort of idiot would send spies who couldn't speak Ethsharitic? The Lumethans must be feigning ignorance.

If so, they did it well.

The wagon turned onto High Street, where the traffic moved a little more quickly; on Commerce they had traveled faster than the crowds, but here they were slower, even though the oxen maintained the same steady pace. The street was broader, the buildings on either side higher, and it smelled a little better - less decay, and a bit of incense and cooking oil.

"I can't believe the size of this city," Lar muttered, as he stared at

the street stretching ahead of them. "How do all these people eat?"

"Wagons bring in food from the farms, ships bring it in from farther away," the driver said. "And magicians keep it fresh. Boats out of Fishertown and Newmarket and Seacorner bring in fish, the beachfolk dig clams, plenty of people keep a few chickens. We get by."

"It's amazing."

"It's Ethshar."

They rolled on through the crowds, across the Old Merchants' Quarter, across the broad diagonal of Merchant Street, then up the slope into the New City.

There were no more shops here, of course, just grand houses behind their lavish facades or imposing walls and fences. Lar seemed impressed.

"Is this where the overlord's family lives?" he asked, as they passed the first cross-street.

The driver snorted. "Not a bit of it," he said. "They live in the Palace, of course. These are for the rich, not the powerful - merchants and wizards and the like who have so much money they don't need to work for more. Or their heirs. Mostly, anyway - it's not all houses." He jerked a thumb over his left shoulder. "There on the corner of Coronet Street is where the Council of Warlocks meets, for example, and some of these others are clubs and secret societies and so on, as well."

Lar, who had been slouching comfortably against the back of the bench, sat bolt upright so suddenly that he knocked his hat from his lap, and almost overbalanced as he snatched at it to keep it from tumbling onto the street. "Warlocks?" he said.

"The Council of Warlocks, yes. But they don't let outsiders in - if you can't open the locks with magic, you can't get inside. I'm told there aren't any keys anywhere."

Emmis frowned. "If you want to hire a warlock, sir, you'll want to go to the Wizards' Quarter," he said, pointing ahead and to the right.

Lar glanced at him, at his pointing finger, then back at the walled yard and tall mansion on the corner of High Street and Coronet. He made a noncommittal noise.

Emmis didn't like the sound of it.

He had never had any dealings with the Council of Warlocks, and didn't want to. He had heard of it, and as he understood it, it wasn't exactly a social club. The Council existed to keep warlocks in line; if a warlock cheated you, or harmed you without cause, and wouldn't make it good, and you pressed your complaint long enough, it would reach the Council - and the warlock would either make it good, or never be seen alive again.

It worked the other way, as well. If you wronged a warlock, and for some reason he couldn't handle it himself, and word reached the Council - well, you might survive, but it wasn't at all certain you'd be happy about it if you did.

The Council existed because all the guardsmen and magistrates in Ethshar couldn't be sure of defeating or punishing a really powerful warlock, but a dozen other warlocks could.

A good wizard might be able to, or a demonologist, but magicians, like most people, preferred to deal with their own kind. The Wizards' Guild handled the wizards, the Council of Warlocks handled the warlocks, the priesthoods looked after theurgists, there were supposed to be secret societies that watched out for witches, and so on.

And the smart thing for everyone else to do was to stay well out of their way.

Emmis decided he would have to explain this to Lar. The silly foreigner probably just didn't have much experience with real magicians; the Small Kingdoms were said to be rather short of them.

Lar finally turned his gaze forward again as the wagon bumped across the shallow ruts of Center Avenue and started down the eastern slope.

A few minutes later they were on Arena Street, and Emmis had to devote

his attention to directing the driver around the corner onto Through Street and up to the right house.

As they pulled up, Emmis eyed the place critically. It had seemed big and luxurious that morning, but now, after riding through the middle of the New City, it seemed rather modest by comparison with the mansions they had passed. It was two stories, with a yellow brick facade, nine broad, well-glazed windows, and a grand green door. A shrine to an open-handed goddess in a green robe and golden tiara was built into the wall just to the right of the entry, but the offering bowl at her feet was cracked and held nothing but dust. The upstairs shutters were all closed, and in need of paint; the downstairs shutters were in varying positions and states of disrepair.

Lar glanced at the shrine and said, "I'll want to have a theurgist look at that."

Emmis nodded. "The landlord may know one. I'll fetch him." With that, he vaulted over the side of the wagon and headed for the owner's home, three doors up the street.

"And see about someone to help us unload," Lar called after him.

"Of course, sir," Emmis called back. Then he stopped and turned. "Is this satisfactory, then?"

"Oh, it will do fine. Go get the keys." Lar waved a hand at him.

Emmis bowed, and hurried on.

Chapter Six

The landlord provided three nephews and a neighbor to help with the baggage. By nightfall everything had been transferred from the wagon to the house, and the driver had been paid and dismissed.

The house had five bedrooms, all upstairs, one at each corner and one at the back, overlooking a courtyard shared with half a dozen other homes. The front rooms were the largest, so one of those was designated the ambassador's bedchamber and the other his study. The center-rear bedroom was the smallest, so Emmis claimed that for himself.

The whole place was badly in need of dusting, and although the landlord's promise of complete furnishing had been kept, the furniture left a great deal to be desired. The upholstery on the velvet sofa was stained and split; the dining room table had only three chairs, one of which was broken. Even the pieces that were undamaged were sparse and cheap.

Emmis concluded that this explained the reasonable rent the landlord had been willing to accept, and that he should have inspected the inside, as well as the outside, before agreeing to terms. He had certainly known to demand to see his own room back in Shiphaven before committing to renting it, two years ago, but it had seemed presumptuous to insist on anything of the sort with so fine a place as this.

He would know better next time.

Lar grimaced at the sight, but then said, "Well, I will try not to entertain any guests until you've fixed the place up."

Emmis started to protest that he had no intention of fixing anything up, but then he remembered his position. He had signed on to do whatever Lar needed done, and it appeared that would include refurbishing this makeshift embassy.

Besides, he should have inspected it. "Yes, sir," he said.

"I'm ready for supper. Is there any food in the kitchen?"

Emmis had already checked. "No."

"Is there an inn nearby?"

"Yes. We can either go north toward the Old City, or southeast toward the Arena."

"The Wizards' Quarter is south?"

"Yes."

"Then south it is."

"The Palace is north, next to the Old City."

"South," Lar repeated.

"Yes, sir."

This fascination with magic wasn't healthy, Emmis was sure, but there wasn't anything he could do about it, especially since the ambassador's secret orders apparently required him to investigate magic. Accordingly, he waited as Lar locked up the house, then led the way around the corner and up Arena Street.

He caught a glimpse of a robed figure at the corner, apparently watching them as they emerged. He couldn't be entirely sure, since Through Street was unlit and the torchlight from Arena Street was behind the other man, but he thought it might be one of the Lumethans; naturally, they would have followed the wagon, or found some other way of locating the ambassador's new residence.

The possibility that they were using magic to track Lar - not merely hiring it, but using it themselves - occurred to him. If the three of them were magicians, perhaps that was why the government of Lumeth had sent spies who didn't speak Ethsharitic. Their magic would be more important.

They might have used magic to transport themselves to Ethshar in the first place, too. That would explain how they had arrived so soon after Lar's ship.

When Lar left the door, the robed figure ducked around the corner, out of sight, and Emmis did not worry about him further. He didn't mention it to Lar, for fear he might make a scene; Emmis was hungry, after all the hauling of luggage, and did not want anything to delay his supper.

Unfortunately, finding that supper proved more of a challenge than he had expected; Through Street was entirely residential, and while Arena Street had its share of shops and businesses, they weren't selling food. The pair ambled several blocks along the torchlit avenue without finding an appropriate establishment, and he and Lar were within sight of the Arena itself by the time they finally found an inn Emmis considered suitable. The Pink Pig seemed to cater more to the neighborhood drinkers than diners or travelers, but the landlord had no objection to selling the two men pork chops and stewed carrots with their beer.

"I didn't notice any magic shops on the way here," Lar remarked, as they waited for their meal. "Though it's hard to be sure at night."

"I don't think there were any," Emmis said. "The Wizards' Quarter is the other side of the Arena, past Games Street. A few magicians have their businesses in the Arena district, but mostly on the side-streets."

Lar stared at him silently for a moment, then shook his head. "This city is so big!" he said.

Emmis's hunger had affected his temper, and he retorted, "You know, there's a reason we call them the Small Kingdoms, and it's not that Ethshar is so very huge."

"You said this was the largest city in the World," Lar replied.

"It is," Emmis admitted, "but not by much. Ethshar of the Sands and Ethshar of the Rocks are almost as big, and the bargemen tell me that even Sardiron of the Waters is..." He caught himself before telling an outright lie. "Well, Sardiron is bigger than anything in the Small Kingdoms, anyway. The Tintallions, Shan on the Sea - it's not that Ethshar is immense so much as that you're used to tiny."

That led to an awkward silence, and Emmis looked around the room, rather than meeting Lar's eyes. Searching for some sign of their food provided an obvious excuse, but it was when he turned his gaze away from the kitchen, toward the door to the street, that something caught his eye.

The light was better than it had been on Through Street. That was definitely one of the Lumethans sitting at the table in the front window. Emmis thought it was the one who Annis had introduced as Hagai, and he was fairly certain it was the same man who had watched them leave the rented house.

At this point saying something would no longer delay their food, so

Emmis leaned forward, putting his fist on the table with the thumb pointing at the Lumethan.

"By the way, we're being followed," he said.

"What?"

"We're being followed. By one of the Lumethans I met this morning. He's sitting at the table in the window, in the brown robe."

To Emmis's surprise, Lar did not immediately turn and stare at the Lumethan. He cast a quick glance at the door to the street, then looked back at Emmis. "You're sure?"

"Yes."

"He wasn't here before us?"

"I saw him back on Through Street, when you were locking the door."

"But you said nothing until now."

"I was hungry. I was afraid you'd want to do something stupid."

Lar smiled a tight little smile. "You have interesting... I don't know the word. Interesting reasons for things."

"I'm just an honest laborer," Emmis protested. "If you want someone clever, you hired the wrong man."

"Oh, I don't think so. I think you're clever enough. So we're being followed."

"Yes."

"Did he follow the wagon from the Crooked Candle, do you think?"

Emmis turned his fist over and opened it to show an empty palm. "I don't know," he said. "He might have known where to go from something I told Annis."

At that point a rather sweaty boy of twelve or so appeared with a platter; he set it down and pushed two plates of pork and carrots onto their table. Lar handed him a coin, and boy and platter vanished.

Emmis promptly started eating. Lar stared at him for a moment, then followed suit. Neither spoke until Emmis's plate was empty. Then the younger man straightened in his chair and said, "I think his name is Hagai, but I'm not sure."

Lar looked up from spearing his last lump of carrot. "Is he watching us?"

Emmis glanced in the right general direction, then back at Lar.

"I think so. I'm not certain. He's being casual."

"But he's still there."

"Oh, yes."

"You think they're worried that I'm going to bring a new warlock back to Vond? That we're going to use more magic to start conquering our neighbors again?"

"If I had to guess what they're worried about from what they told me, yes, that's what I would guess."

"That's almost funny, really."

Emmis blinked. "It is? Why?"

"Because of my real mission." He glanced toward the door, and toward the table in the window where the Lumethan was sipping at an empty beer mug. Then he turned back to Emmis, looking tired and thoughtful. After a pause, he said, "I'm going to trust you, Emmis. If they're following me and watching me, I'm not going to be able to keep all my secrets anyway, so I'm going to tell you a few things. If the Regent doesn't like it, he should have sent more people or used some magic to make my job easier."

"All right," Emmis said. "What is it?"

Lar leaned forward. "My mission is to make sure that more warlocks don't come to Vond," he whispered. "Vond the Warlock was a monster, a killer, and we don't want another one. I'm here to convince the Council of Warlocks to forbid their people to set foot in the Empire, or if I can't do that, I'm to hire other magicians to keep warlocks out."

Emmis considered that for a moment, then leaned forward himself and whispered, "Why is that a secret?"

Lar snorted. "Because if warlocks who are worried about the Calling find

out that we're trying to keep them out, what do you think they'll do?"

"I don't know; what?"

"Well, some of them will try to get into the empire before we can stop them. Remember, Vond is a long, long way from Aldagmor."

"But the Calling got Vond himself, didn't it?"

"The Calling got Vond, yes, but only after he built an empire single-handed. He was using more power than any warlock I ever heard of, probably more than anyone since the Night of Madness. If a warlock settled in Vond and didn't assume he was safe, if he was careful, if he didn't go carving palaces out of bedrock and throwing entire armies around, he might live there for years before he was Called - and we don't want that."

"Why not?"

Lar looked at Emmis as if reconsidering his earlier remark about Emmis's cleverness. "Because," he said, "when he does hear the Calling, what's he going to do?"

"Fly off to Aldagmor."

"Yes, but before that - when he's hearing the Call, but hasn't yet given in to it."

"I don't know," Emmis said, annoyed. "I've never met any warlocks like that."

"They go crazy, Emmis. They do magic in their sleep. They lose their tempers and smash things without meaning to - including people, or maybe entire villages."

Emmis had, in fact, heard stories about warlocks gradually going mad as the Calling overwhelmed them, but there was a flaw in this theory.

"If Called warlocks are so dangerous, why haven't they smashed Ethshar?" he asked. "We have plenty of warlocks here."

"Maybe because something keeps them in check," Lar said. "Such as other magicians. Which we don't have in Vond, really." He hesitated. "And there's more to it, but that part really is secret. Just believe me when I say we don't want any warlocks in the empire, ever again."

"Well, why don't you just tell the Lumethans that?" He gestured in the general direction of their uninvited companion.

"Because we don't want any warlocks to find out, remember? The Lumethans might not believe us, and even if they did they might just decide it would be amusing to see what happens if they send a dozen warlocks across the border. They don't like us and they don't trust us, and I don't blame them."

"How are you going to convince the Council of Warlocks to forbid their members to go to Vond when you can't tell them why?"

Lar threw up his hands. "I don't know!" he snapped. "I'm just doing what Lord Sterren told me to do as best I can, and no, it isn't as simple as I'd like."

Emmis was still struggling to make sense of the situation. "There have been warlocks around for more than twenty years, though, so this can't be a new problem," he said. "How many have gone from Ethshar to the Empire of Vond?"

Lar looked uncomfortable.

"Well... two," he said. "That I know of."

"Two? Two?" Emmis sat back. "That's not exactly an overwhelming number, you know. If you're so far from Aldagmor, why haven't there been hundreds?"

"I don't know that, either," Lar said. "That's another thing I'm supposed to find out when I talk to the Council of Warlocks." He glanced at Hagai, then blinked. He stole another look at the Lumethan.

"How loud have we been speaking?" the ambassador asked quietly.

"Not very loud," Emmis said.

"So he couldn't have heard us?"

"Not unless he's a witch."

"Oh, for... witches could hear us?"

"Well, of course. Their magic enhances all their senses - they can even hear unspoken thoughts, sometimes, if conditions are right. And while he isn't

one, because we'd see him doing it, a wizard somewhere could be watching and listening with a scrying spell and we'd never know it."

"Zag i mar!" Lar swore. "Magic!"

"You think he might be a witch? Or they might have hired a wizard?"

"Why not? Mar i zag!"

Emmis tried to be reasonable, tried to keep Lar from becoming too obviously upset. "But you don't know," he said. "Yes, if he's a witch he could hear us, but we don't even know whether he understands Ethsharitic! He claims not to, after all, and why would he lie about that?"

"To make himself appear harmless!"

"But, sir, really, if they wanted to, they could hire a wizard to find out what instructions the Regent gave you in the first place. I mean, unless you had protective magic preventing it. You can't keep secrets for long once magicians are involved, not if there's someone with money who's determined to find them out."

"I doubt there's a wizard anywhere in the Small Kingdoms who could scry that well," Lar said, in tones of disgust. "Wizards who are any good at what they do can do better than living in a kingdom a few miles across, where the only people with any money to spend on magic are the ones who call themselves kings, and where they can't get half the ingredients they want for their spells. Witches, though - we do have witches. They like little villages and scruffy peasants."

"They could hire a wizard here," Emmis pointed out, amused that Lar knew the Ethsharitic word for "scruffy." "They wouldn't need to have one back in Lumeth. It probably wouldn't even need to be a wizard. I'd guess that a theurgist could find out about your mission, too. Maybe even a sorcerer, or a scientist."

"That's probably true." Lar sighed. "You know, I retired a couple of years ago; I had a little money put aside, and I was going to just live quietly, minding my own business. Then Lord Sterren got worried about other warlocks, and he didn't trust anyone else to deal with it, so here I am. I'd much rather be back home tending my garden."

Emmis had no useful comment to make about that; he thought gardening sounded horribly boring, but he wouldn't want the ambassador's job, either. He looked down at the plates, both now empty. "Shall we head back to the house?" he asked. "There's still plenty of unpacking to do."

"No," Lar said. "We came this way to eat for a reason. We're going to the Wizards' Quarter for a look around. And if our robed friend follows us, well, so be it." He pushed back his chair and reached for his purse.

"As you please," Emmis said. He didn't see what visiting the Wizards' Quarter at this hour would accomplish, but he was in no hurry to haul boxes hither and yon.

Together the two men ambled out the door of the inn, and turned south, toward the Arena. When they had gone half a block Emmis glanced back over his shoulder.

As he had expected, Hagai was following them, fifty feet back.

Chapter Seven

The Arena was unlit; the next show was not scheduled until the first of Newfrost, more than a sixnight away. Even so, Lar was visibly impressed by the vast dark shape that loomed above them as they passed.

The notice boards on the corners were lit, though, with two lanterns hung above each of them. They stood out all the better against the blackness behind them.

"What's that?" Lar asked.

Emmis explained. "Didn't you see the one in Shiphaven Market?" he asked.

"I didn't," Lar admitted. "There was so much happening there!"

"Don't they have notice boards in Vond?"

Lar shook his head. "Most people in the Small Kingdoms can't read." He looked at the tangle of messages and advertising tacked to the rough boards. "Do you think there might be anything there about warlocks?"

Emmis turned up a palm. "Openings for apprentices, perhaps." He glanced over his shoulder at Hagai, who was hanging back, trying to blend with the other pedestrians and not doing a very good job of it. "Stopping to look would be awkward for our friend."

Lar grimaced. "I wouldn't want to be rude. Perhaps another time." They strolled on past without stopping.

The incident got Emmis thinking as they walked, though. If Hagai was a witch, he ought to be able to do a better job of not being noticed. Witches could usually sense what other people were going to do before they did it; the good ones could allegedly actually hear people's thoughts. If Hagai was a witch then he surely knew he had been spotted, but he was still pretending to be just another passerby.

So he probably wasn't a witch.

He might be some other sort of magician, though.

Emmis wondered whether he should say any of this to Lar. The ambassador had said witches were fairly common back where he came from, though, so he ought to be able to figure it out for himself.

Or perhaps not. Just because witches were common didn't mean Lar knew anything about them.

He had not reached a conclusion by the time they crossed Games Street five long blocks later.

"This is the Wizards' Quarter," he said. "The next cross-street is Wizard Street. Warlock Street is a little further on."

"I see," the Vondishman said, looking around with interest.

In most respects this stretch of Arena Street was much the same as the rest - a broad avenue of hard-packed dirt lined with three- and four-story buildings, most of them stone for one or two floors and half-timbered above, with tiled roofs and assorted gables and overhangs. Balconies were common but not universal. Large torches were mounted in brackets at every corner, providing light; Emmis knew the city guard replaced those daily, as they usually burned away to nothing somewhere between midnight and dawn. Many of the ground-floor doors had signboards or lanterns or both above them; many of the windows were big, many-paned things holding displays of one sort or another. Some were lit, while others were not - not every magician stayed open for business this late.

North of Games Street the window displays had generally been of fabrics, or furniture, or kitchenware, or other commonplace goods. Here, though, they were a little less ordinary. One window held strangely-shaped bottles of multi-colored liquids, while another displayed only a dusty stuffed dragon - a mere baby, perhaps seven feet from the tip of its nose to the tip of its tail, and a wingspan Emmis judged to be no more than ten feet, though it was hard to be sure, since the wings weren't extended. A third held nothing but a dinner plate that was inexplicably sending up an endless shower of sparks, a spray reaching perhaps a foot high, and that changed color every few seconds.

One did display kitchenware, in the form of a teapot and half a dozen cups, but the teapot was ambling about on stubby little china feet.

Several windows had no displays at all, just velvet curtains.

And some held cards listing spells offered for sale, often in runes so ornate they were hard to read. A few of these glowed without need of any visible light source. Lar stopped to read one of these cards, and Emmis stopped beside him.

It was a fairly modest list - Fendel's Rune of Privacy, the Spell of the Spinning Coin, the Greater and Lesser Spells of Invaded Dreams, Eknerwal's Preserving Spell, Fendel's Infatuous Love Spell - concluding with, "and Many Diverse Others."

"That's a wizard's shop?" Lar asked.

"Yes," Emmis replied, even before looking up at the signboard over the door that announced, "Edarth of Ethshar, Master Wizard."

"What about that?" The Vondishman pointed at a shop window illuminated by a glowing sphere about a foot in diameter. The globe was surrounded by a dozen gleaming constructions of crystal and metal ranging from a thumb-sized amulet to an open-work contraption the size of a large dog, none of them with any recognizable purpose.

"I think that's a sorcerer," Emmis said.

Lar stared for a moment, then turned away shaking his head. "We don't have anything like that in Vond!"

The two of them continued down the street, with Emmis occasionally looking over his shoulder to be sure Hagai was still there, and soon reached the corner of Warlock Street.

"There it is," Emmis said, gesturing.

Lar frowned. "It's dark," he said.

Emmis had to admit that he had a point; where about half the shops on Arena were lit, almost none on Warlock Street were. "I suppose they don't want to work as late," he said. "You know the proverb - working on Festival means good money but it's bad advertising."

"Bad what?"

"Advertising." Emmis sighed. "I don't know the word in any other languages. Signs, notices, things like that."

Lar looked confused. "I don't think that's a proverb back in the empire," he said. "At least, I can't place it."

"Maybe not."

"And it isn't Festival for months, so I don't..."

"Never mind," Emmis interrupted. "Just forget it. All I meant is, warlocks don't seem to work late. I suppose they don't need to; they don't need to pay for any ingredients, or buy herbs, or appease any demons."

"They still need to buy food and pay taxes, don't they?"

Emmis grimaced. "Honestly, I'm not sure. There's a rumor that warlocks can live on their magic, like someone with a wizard's bloodstone, and if I were a tax collector I don't think I'd press a reluctant warlock very hard."

Lar's expression changed. "And... well, they try not to use more magic than they must."

"Yes. The more magic they use, the sooner they're Called."

Lar walked along Warlock Street and looked over the unlit signboards and darkened windows, with Emmis tagging close behind, while Hagai hung back, apparently still unaware that he had been spotted.

There were no stuffed dragons or crystal structures here; most of the windows held nothing but shutters or black curtains, though Emmis supposed that might be different by daylight. The signboards mostly simply gave the proprietor's name. Some appended the word "warlock," but none claimed any further title; no one here called himself a master.

"Not very informative," Emmis remarked. "Perhaps we should come back tomorrow."

"Tomorrow I am to meet with the overlord, am I not?"

"I don't know," Emmis said. "Tomorrow I talk to my contact at the Palace, and find out whether he's arranged anything."

"Ah." Lar stopped in front of one of the handful of illuminated shops, where a card stood in the window. "ISHTA OF FRESHWATER," proclaimed the large runes at the top. Beneath, smaller, elaborately-curved runes added, "Healing a Specialty - man, woman, child, or beast. Antiquities Restored. Porcelain & Other Valuables Repaired."

"It would seem at least one warlock works late," he said.

Emmis made a noncommittal noise.

Lar marched up and tried the door; it opened with a light push, and he stepped inside. Emmis reluctantly followed.

They found themselves in a good-sized, well-lit room where half a dozen people were clustered around a table at one end.

"...told you, there's a piece missing," a woman was saying. "See, right there?"

"No," another voice said, a male one.

"It's tiny," replied a third, one that sounded like a child.

"Yes, it is," the first agreed, "but it's definitely missing, and if I replace it out of thin air I can't guarantee it'll match perfectly."

"But we'll never find something that small!" a fourth voice said - another woman, Emmis thought. "Someone's probably stepped on it and crushed it, or the cat might have eaten it!"

"I can make a replacement," the first woman said. Emmis was fairly certain the voice was coming from a black-clad figure, presumably Ishta of Freshwater. "I just want you to understand that it may not be exactly as it was before. Without the original piece I can't just rebuild it, I need to make a new piece, and since I never saw the missing bit, it may not match exactly."

"You can't use your magic to make it match?" the man demanded.

"No. I'm a warlock, not a wizard. I can move and shape things, down to the very tiniest particles, and I can see and feel things you cannot, but I can't simply make the damage unhappen. A wizard probably could, with the right spell, but it would almost certainly cost you more than my fee." She glanced over her shoulder at Lar and Emmis, then turned back to her customers. "Why don't you discuss it, and I'll be right back?" Without waiting for an answer she turned and left the table, striding briskly toward the two men just inside her door.

She was short and a little thinner than average, with a pointed chin and dark, piercing eyes, and she wore her waist-length hair loose. She stopped a few feet away and looked up at the new arrivals. "Yes?"

"Hello," Lar said, as Emmis inched back to make it plain that he was not in charge. "I had a few questions I was hoping you could answer."

"Then ask them," the woman said.

"You're Ishta the Warlock?"

"Yes."

"I have a grandson of an age to be apprenticed," Lar said. "We were thinking of sending him to Ethshar to learn warlockry."

Ishta held up a hand and glanced back at her customers, who were whispering amongst themselves. "That's a subject that deserves my full attention. Let me finish with these people, and then we can discuss it."

"As you please."

"You can't even see where it's missing!" one of the other women shouted, before Ishta could say anything more; the warlock turned and glided back to the table.

Emmis bit his lip; Ishta had glided back, her feet an inch or two off the floor, rather than walking. Any doubt about whether she was a real warlock had just vanished; only a warlock could fly so casually.

And any thought of asking Lar whether he really had a grandson vanished, as well - warlocks were more sensitive in certain ways than ordinary people. That didn't necessarily mean Ishta could hear a whisper from across the room, but it might.

"Just fix it," the man said. "If it isn't perfect, we'll worry about it then."

"Very good," Ishta said. "I'll have it for you by midday tomorrow."

"You can't do it tonight?" the child's voice whined.

"Tomorrow," Ishta said firmly. "Now, if you will excuse me..." She began herding the entire party toward the door.

Lar and Emmis stepped hastily aside as a middle-aged man, a middle-aged woman, a young woman, a youth, and a boy of perhaps ten were marched out onto Warlock Street. Ishta closed the door behind them, then turned to the ambassador.

"Would you care to sit?" she asked, gesturing toward chairs near the table.

"Thank you," Lar said, with a partial bow.

A moment later the three of them were seated, Ishta and Lar facing each other, while Emmis was slightly to one side, next to the table. Emmis took the opportunity to study the object on the table, obviously the item Ishta had promised to repair.

It was an elaborate ceramic sculpture of a tree, about two feet tall, with a girl seated in the branches and a young man standing below and looking up at her, all delicately painted in colors a little brighter than nature. The level of detail was astonishing; the tree's leaves were individually modeled, veins painted on each, and tiny ripe fruit hung from the branches here and there. The girl's hand, clutching at the realistically-textured tree bark, had every fingernail clearly depicted; one of her sandals hung loose, while the other was secure. The man's clothing was so carefully done that Emmis thought he could count the coins in the purse on his belt.

"Their cat knocked it off the shelf," Ishta said, following his gaze. "I've put it back together, but if you look, there's a bit missing just here." She pointed at the girl's right ear. Sure enough, half the earlobe was gone, and a curl of hair behind the ear was snapped off short. "I'll have to conjure that out of dust in the air. It's not all that difficult to find the right material, but blending it in smoothly and getting it just the right shape will be tricky."

"Oh," Emmis said.

She smiled at him, then turned to Lar. "Now, you said your grandson was looking for an apprenticeship?"

"Yes," Lar said. "He says he wants to be a warlock. I don't know where he got the idea, since there aren't any warlocks in Semma, but he's very sure."

"You're from Semma?" She glanced at Emmis.

"I am," Lar said. "Emmis isn't. He's my wife's cousin's son; they live in Shiphaven. Emmis is my guide."

"Where is Semma?"

"In the Small Kingdoms, far to the south, near the edge of the World," Lar replied.

"And your grandson is there?"

"Yes."

"But he would come to Ethshar?"

"For his apprenticeship, yes. But we thought he would come back when he's a journeyman."

Ishta nodded. "I haven't trained any apprentices," she said, "but I'm ready to try."

"You're a master warlock?"

"We don't..." Ishta hesitated. "We don't have formal ranks like wizards or smiths, but I'm qualified to train an apprentice."

Lar looked uncertain - though Emmis recognized the expression as feigned, and hoped that the warlock didn't. "Is there a Guild? We don't - we have no warlocks in Semma, we don't know how it is. I heard about a council..." His voice trailed off.

"The Council of Warlocks isn't really a guild. It doesn't set standards for taking apprentices."

"Ah."

Emmis pretended to study the tree again as he listened.

This was educational, he thought. He hadn't known whether the Council set standards or not.

"We do have several questions," Lar said, after a moment of awkward silence.

"Of course," Ishta said. "Feel free to ask. There will be an initiation fee, but no other charges. If the boy proves completely unsuitable the fee will be refunded, but that's quite rare; perhaps one applicant in a hundred, if that, is unable to become a warlock. If our personalities prove incompatible after initiation, I will arrange for another warlock to take him on in my stead - he can't be sent home or put to another trade, as the process

of becoming a warlock is irreversible.* You understand that?"

"I do now," Lar said.

"You may have heard that among wizards, apprentices who are found unfit by the Wizards' Guild are killed. I don't know whether that's true for wizards, or for any of the other magicians, but rest assured, warlocks don't do that. Warlockry has its dangers, certainly, but we don't intentionally kill even the most incompetent apprentice."

"How... how reasonable," Lar said, clearly dismayed by the turn the conversation had taken. Emmis didn't think he was faking this time.

"You said you had questions?"

"Yes! We live in Semma, as I said, and there are no warlocks there..."

"You said that."

"Yes. Well, that's my question - why are there no warlocks in Semma?"

Ishta blinked at him.

"I mean, is there a reason there are no warlocks there? Would Kelder not be able to come home?"

"I don't see why not," Ishta said. "That is, I don't know what your local laws are, but there's no reason I know that a warlock couldn't live there."

"But then why aren't there any?"

"I don't know for certain," Ishta admitted. "You must understand, I was only six on the Night of Madness, and only became a warlock when I was twelve, years afterward, but I've heard stories. I don't know whether they're true."

"What sort of stories?"

"What I heard was that after the Night of Madness, before things settled down again, all the warlocks in the Small Kingdom were killed or exiled. The kings and lords thought they were too dangerous, too unpredictable, so they killed any they could catch and drove the rest away."

"Some places, yes," Lar said. "I remember some of that. I don't think it happened in Semma."

Ishta turned up an empty palm. "If Semma is far enough to the south, perhaps there were simply no warlocks there to begin with."

"But wouldn't some have moved there?"

Ishta frowned. "Why?"

Lar was visibly discomfited. "The thing - the Calling. I have heard about that, and isn't it worse farther north?"

Ishta sighed. "You know about the Calling?"

"Yes. I've heard that it draws warlocks to the north, and is weaker the farther south one goes."

She shook her head. "It's not north or south," she said. "It depends entirely on how far you are from a certain spot in Aldagmor. You're right that it would be weaker in the southern Small Kingdoms, but the stories haven't made us feel welcome there. When warlocks flee the Calling we usually go west to Ethshar of the Rocks, or Tintallion of the Isle, not south. And most of us don't flee. There is no safe place anywhere in the World, and most of us prefer to stay in our homes and fight it there, with our friends around, not go running off into the wild somewhere to live among strangers."

"The Calling can be fought?"

"To a point." The warlock appeared uncomfortable saying this. "I'm told it can help to have other warlocks around, which is another reason not to flee to your Semma. You understand, though, this isn't something we discuss freely with outsiders."

"Of course, but if my grandson is going to hear this Calling someday, I want to know about it."

"He may never hear it, if he's careful. I have been a warlock for sixteen years, and haven't heard it at all yet. I use my magic to do delicate, small-scale work precisely because it's sheer magical power that attracts the Calling; the things I do require intense concentration, but very little raw energy. You won't see me flying about the streets, flinging magic around."

Emmis remembered how she had glided across the room without touching the floor, but said nothing, and tried to let his face show nothing. She might not even know she had done it, and he had no idea how she would react if he mentioned it.

She was not yet thirty, and she was using magic without realizing it. She might not have heard the Calling yet, but Emmis would not have wagered a copper bit on her chances of reaching sixty.

"I see," Lar said, with a quick glance at Emmis. "Let us suppose, though, that we were to apprentice him to a less cautious warlock; what would happen if his master was Called before he turned fifteen?"

"Oh, another warlock would take him on to complete his training. It's happened, I won't deny it. But I'm safe enough."

"And if he made journeyman, and then came home to Semma, he would be less... I don't know the Ethsharitic. The danger would be less?"

"A little, yes. And his magic would be weaker, as well, though it would strengthen with use."

"Would it?"

"Oh, yes. The more magic a warlock uses, the more power he has available. It's very tempting - but yielding to temptation means the Calling, so we resist."

"Your magic - what does it do, exactly?"

"Oh, at the most basic level, warlockry is just the ability to move things without touching them. But it can be used in thousands of ways, because we also have the additional senses to let us perceive what things really are. Everything around us is made up of smaller things, of tiny particles, and we warlocks can sense where they all are, and we can see how to move some of those particles and not others. We can create heat by moving anything, even the air, against itself; we can make light by... by pushing the air inward; we don't really have the words to explain it. I can heal wounds by making the edges flow and grow back together; I can repair broken things by making the space between the pieces go away. I can cure some diseases by killing the tiny little creatures in the blood that cause them, or by drawing out poisons. But really, it's all just seeing what's there and moving it into the places and shapes I want it in."

"You can teach my grandson how to do this?"

"I can change something in his head so that he will be able to do it, yes. That only takes a moment, and then, once he can hear the power and draw upon it, I will train him to use it safely and effectively. That training will last the three years of his apprenticeship."

"And after that, he can come home to Semma?"

"Or he can stay here in Ethshar, as he pleases, yes."

"There's no reason he couldn't come home? The Council of Warlocks wouldn't object?"

"They wouldn't object. Why should they?"

"I don't know. It just seems odd that there are no warlocks in Semma."

Ishta turned up an empty palm. "It just happened that way."

"I see." Lar pushed his chair back and rose; Emmis hastily followed suit. "Thank you," Lar said, bowing.

"You're quite welcome. Will your grandson be coming to see me, then?"

"We'll need to discuss it amongst the family."

"Of course." Ishta got to her feet as well.

"Thank you again. We'll be going."

"Of course," she repeated.

A moment later Lar and Emmis were out on the street, marching back toward Arena Street. Emmis looked around, but Hagai was nowhere to be seen.

He probably got bored, Emmis thought. He had no way of knowing how long they might be in the warlock's shop.

"I think I'd like to talk to a wizard next," Lar said.

"I thought we'd be going home," Emmis said.

"Wizard first," Lar said.

Emmis looked back to see Ishta's door close, and a moment later her window went dark.

He sighed. "Wizard Street is that way," he said, pointing.

Chapter Eight

"We've passed a dozen open shops," Emmis said. "Was there something specific you're looking for?"

"Yes," Lar said. "I want a wizard who answers questions."

"You mean a seer?"

"Something like that, yes."

Emmis looked up at the signboards above the doors ahead. "TARISSA the FAIR," read the nearest, "Love Spells & Potions, Aphrodisiacs." The next announced, "KARDIG of SOUTHGATE, Curses Cast & Removed." He had to admit neither of those sounded very promising.

They were walking east on Wizard Street. It was late enough now that most of the shops were dark, the signboards unlit. "Perhaps we should come back in the morning," Emmis suggested.

Lar shook his head. "Tonight," he said.

"Why? Why is it that important? You said you could take as long as you needed for whatever it is you're doing."

"Yes, but tomorrow someone may be following us again."

Emmis blinked. "What?"

"That Lumethan is gone - hadn't you noticed?"

"Well, yes," Emmis admitted.

"You told them I was interested in warlocks, and I wasn't talking about anything very secret with Ishta in any case, so I didn't mind him following us there. He's welcome to anything he can learn from her. What I want to ask a wizard is a little different, and I don't want the Lumethans to know about it, so when we left Ishta's shop and I saw that he was gone, I knew I want to talk to a wizard tonight, before the Lumethans come back. They won't expect me to visit two different magicians about two different things in the same night - that's why he didn't stay, I'm sure. He probably went to tell the others that they should talk to Ishta tomorrow."

"Why didn't he stay to talk to her tonight, then?" Emmis asked. "I know she put out the lamp, but he left before that. He didn't wait around to talk to her after we left."

"Because he doesn't speak Ethsharitic, remember?"

"Unless he does."

"Even if he does, he probably wants to... I don't know the Ethsharitic word. Shichak. He wants to talk to the others before he does anything."

"Confer?"

"Probably. That sounds reasonable."

"So you want to talk to a wizard while we aren't being followed. Are you sure you want me here?"

Lar turned and looked Emmis in the eye, considering. Then he said, "I may ask you to leave. We will see. And you are not to tell the Ashthasan anything about this."

Emmis nodded. "Fair enough," he said. "But I don't see many shops open here. Perhaps we should try a side-street. Or must it be a wizard? Witch Alley is just over that way." He pointed to the north.

Lar frowned. "I think a wizard would be better."

"As you please, then." Emmis scanned the shops ahead. "Perhaps there?" He pointed.

"What does it say?" Lar said, peering into the gloom.

"I think the name is Kolar the Sage," Emmis said. "The one with the big blue eye?"

"Ah." Lar nodded.

A moment later Emmis tried the Sage's door, only to find it locked. He

hesitated, and looked up at the sign again, and then at the window.

A lantern hung on the bracket beside the sign, illuminating it, and the candle within the lantern still had an inch or two of wax remaining. Black velvet curtains were drawn behind the window, but a crystal ball stood on an iron tripod between the curtains and the glass, and glowed faintly blue.

"Maybe he just forgot to douse the lantern," Emmis said.

"The ball is still glowing," Lar said.

"That may be permanent, not something he can turn on and off."

"Wouldn't he be careful about leaving the lantern lit, then?"

"Sir, while I understand you're impatient and want to get on with your job, and that it would be better to do it while Hagai isn't following us, it's getting late, and if this Kolar were really a powerful seer he would have known we were coming and would be ready and waiting for us."

Lar turned to stare at Emmis. "Are there really wizards who do that?"

"There are magicians who do it, certainly," Emmis said. "My mother consulted a witch once, named Sella, who did that - the minute she stepped into the shop, before she could say a word, Sella was there with her answer ready."

"Knock again," Lar said.

With a sigh, Emmis obliged.

This time, though, someone answered; they heard a voice call faintly, "I'm coming!"

The two men waited, and a moment later the lock rattled, the latch lifted, and the door opened.

"Come in, come in!" said the young man inside, swinging the door wide and standing aside.

Cautiously, Lar and Emmis stepped in.

"Have a seat, please!" their host said, gesturing toward a maroon-upholstered couch.

"You're Kolar the Sage?" Emmis asked.

The wizard looked down at himself, then smiled at them. "Yes, I am," he said. "I hope you'll pardon my appearance; I was just helping my wife put the twins to bed."

Emmis supposed that did explain why he was wearing an ancient homespun tunic with an impressive collection of stains on it, rather than any sort of wizardly robe, as well as why his hair was a tangled mess, and why he had been slow to answer the door. It was perfectly reasonable, really. Still, Emmis would have had far more faith in the man's ability if he had been waiting at the door, in a proper robe - or if he were a decade older; the man wasn't much older than Emmis himself.

"Twins?" Lar asked.

"A boy and a girl," Kolar said with obvious pride. "A year and a half old."

Lar nodded, and settled onto the couch.

Emmis did not sit, but took up a position beside the couch, instead.

Kolar pulled a chair up and sat down facing them across a small, dark wooden table. "Now, what can I do for you?"

"I have a question I want answered," Lar said. "Well, several, really, but we'll start with one."

"Yes?"

"Can you answer it?"

"Almost certainly," Kolar said. "At a price, of course. The exact means used, and the exact price, will depend on the nature of the question."

Lar hesitated, then said, "This is the question: What made the hum that Vond the Warlock heard when he came to Semma, and exactly where is it?"

Emmis glanced at Lar. He had no idea what that meant.

Kolar stroked his close-trimmed beard. "That may be two questions," he said. "And the answers to both of them may be ambiguous. Where and what is Semma?"

Lar grimaced. "Semma was one of the southernmost of the Small Kingdoms,

the one that Vond conquered and used as his base in creating the Empire of Vond. The empire's capital is still there."

That answered some questions Emmis had had. He had wondered why Lar had told Ishta he was from Semma, rather than Vond; presumably he was simply being more precise.

"Ah, I see," Kolar said. "And that answers my next question, as well, about who Vond was. Now, about the hum..."

"I can't tell you that," Lar said, cutting him off.

"Nothing? Not even whether you know whether there was only one?"

"There was a hum that Vond heard in Semma that no one else heard, and he heard it for almost his entire stay there. That's the hum I mean."

"That only he heard? Interesting."

"You would do better not to ask much more," Lar said. "Can you answer the question?"

Kolar frowned. "Vond the Warlock, you said? Has he been Called?"

"Yes."

"Then we can't use necromancy; Called warlocks don't leave ghosts. And we can't ask him as if he were alive, so all the dream spells and compulsions are out of the question. I can't quite see how the Spell of Omniscient Vision would help, either. That just leaves Fendel's Divination - well, of the spells I know; there may be others I'm not aware of. Hmm."

"Fendel's Divination?" Emmis asked.

Kolar nodded, still stroking his beard. "I have the ingredients, and the spell itself only takes a little over an hour, but the exact wording of the question is crucial. I'll want to work on it overnight. Can you both read?"

Lar and Emmis exchanged glances. "Yes," Lar said.

"Forgive me, but - you read Ethsharitic? I can't help noticing your accent."

"Yes, I read Ethsharitic. Not very fast, but I can read it. It's the official tongue of the Empire of Vond, you know, even if none of us grew up with it."

"Good. Then you might want to be here for the spell itself - the answer will be written in smoke, in mid-air, and it'll be easier for me if you read it yourself, and I don't need to worry about writing it down before I forget."

"You're sure it will be written in Ethsharitic?" Emmis asked. "Lar, here, speaks Semmat as his milk tongue."

Kolar blinked. "Well, it always has been before," he said. "I believe it depends on what language I used in my book of spells, not what the client knows."

"And you're sure that it will work?" Lar asked. "It will answer the question?"

"If the spell works properly, and the question has an answer, and there's nothing interfering, then it will answer the question."

"And will the answer be useful?" Emmis asked.

"Oh, that I can't say," Kolar said, spreading his hands. "I have no idea what this is about. Your master here says Vond heard a hum, but I don't know whether he really did, or whether it's significant. If the spell says the hum came from an insect lodged in Vond's left ear, will that be useful?"

"It would be an answer," Lar said. "Better than nothing."

"All right, then. For a round of gold, I will devise as foolproof a phrasing of your question as possible tonight, and perform Fendel's Divination in your presence tomorrow to give you an answer."

"A round of gold?" Lar stood up. "No."

"Six bits."

"Two rounds of silver."

"Seven."

"Four."

"Six."

"Five."

"Done. Five rounds of silver. Three in advance, two on completion."

"One in advance."

Kolar sighed. "All right. One in advance."

"It may not be both of us who come," Lar said, as he reached for his purse. "One of us may have business elsewhere."

"As you please."

"You understand that I am not asking about the nature of the hum, but about its exact source, and I will not pay for information about its nature."

Kolar nodded. "You want to know the nature and location of the source, not of the hum itself. Yes." He hesitated. "Do you want to know about its duration? Might it still be going?"

Lar blinked. "Oh, it's still going. We know that. We just want to know the source."

"Ah. I see."

"I hope not. It would be better to not ask more than necessary about this."

With that, Lar and Emmis took their leave.

"That went well," Lar said, as the wizard's door closed behind them.

"I suppose," Emmis said. "You did bargain him down by half."

"I meant that we were fortunate to find someone who could perform the spell I need."

"You're assuming he actually can," Emmis said.

"So is he," Lar said, "or he wouldn't have agreed so quickly to only one round in advance. He's so sure it will work and he'll get the whole payment that a day's delay doesn't matter."

"Or he just wants us to think that."

Lar looked annoyed.

"So some time tomorrow, if Hagai is following us again, we'll split up?" Emmis asked. "And whoever he doesn't follow will come back here for the spell."

"Yes."

"And if no one's following us, we'll both..."

"No," Lar cut him off. "Then I'll come alone. There are some other questions I may want to ask."

"Oh," Emmis nodded. "I need to talk to my contact at the Palace tomorrow, in any case."

"You can do that first. We have all day."

"Oh," Emmis said again. "Are we going back to the house now?"

"Yes."

"Good."

It had been a very long, wearing day, and Emmis was looking forward to putting it behind him - not that tomorrow would be entirely free of problems, he was sure, what with the divination spell and talking to the guardsman. For the next several minutes he walked quietly beside his employer, pointing out the correct direction when they reached Arena Street.

The streets of the Wizards' Quarter were mostly empty now; the few stragglers were hurrying along, most of them wrapped in their cloaks against the fresh breeze blowing from the northeast. Emmis had no cloak or coat, but the wind was not so very cold, really - just enough to keep them walking briskly, not dawdling. Emmis folded his arms across his chest for warmth, hugging his woolen tunic to himself.

Lar, of course, was wearing his red velvet coat and fancy hat; he was fine.

Several of the torches on the street corners were beginning to gutter and die; the shops were almost all dark, while many of the rooms upstairs showed lights. The lesser moon shone brightly pink among the stars overhead; the greater moon was not visible.

"Will you be able to find the right shop tomorrow, if Hagai follows me?" Emmis asked as the pair turned the corner onto Arena Street.

"I think so," Lar replied. "Left from Arena onto Wizard Street, then it's on the right. Kolar the Sage."

Emmis nodded. "This hum Vond heard - it has something to do with his magic? Or with his empire?"

"Don't ask," Lar said.

Emmis frowned. "If it's such a secret, why did you bring me along?"

"In case I needed advice. I'm a stranger here, remember?"

"Do you really have a grandson named Kelder?"

"Not that I know of, named Kelder or anything else."

"You just wanted to know whether there was some reason warlocks don't go to Vond?"

"Yes."

"You're lucky that warlocks can't tell lies from truth the way witches can."

"Yes, I am."

"So do you think that's all it is? That the Small Kingdoms killed their warlocks on the Night of Madness?"

Lar turned up an empty palm. "It might be. I don't really remember any such killings in Semma, but I did hear about some in Ksinallion, and maybe elsewhere."

"Semma never had any warlocks? No one was affected?"

"A few people disappeared on the Night of Madness, just as they did everywhere," Lar said. "But I never heard of any warlocks after that, until Vond came." He glanced at Emmis. "Do you remember the Night of Madness?"

Emmis snorted. "I was still in my mother's womb. No, I don't remember it."

"Ah, you're younger than I thought."

"So you're here to find out about this hum, and why warlocks haven't been fleeing into your empire to escape the Calling - why did that need an ambassador, instead of a trader?"

"Because I'm also here to make an alliance with the overlords, if I can," Lar said. "That's not just for show."

Emmis nodded.

"Is Ethsharitic really the empire's official language?" he asked. If it was, he thought, it was odd how many holes there were in Lar's vocabulary.

"Well, officially, yes. It was Vond's native tongue, and he didn't want to bother learning any others, and after all, we had seventeen or eighteen languages to deal with. In practice, Semmat and Ksinallionese and Trader's Tongue are probably used more."

"I see." That did explain the matter. "That should make it easier to deal with the overlord, I suppose."

"I suppose," Lar said.

They walked on without further conversation. Emmis glanced up at the lesser moon as it sank behind the rooftops, then lowered his gaze and hunched his shoulders against the north wind.

Chapter Nine

Emmis slept late, and barely had time to make a trip to Cut Street Market to stock the pantry before he had to head for the plaza to find the palace guard he had spoken to.

He wasn't entirely sure that Cut Street was the closest market square; he did not know his way around Allston yet. He did, however, know where it was, and what he could expect to find there. That was enough to send him hurrying across the New City, his purse at the ready.

He got several sacks of provender back to the kitchen on Through Street, but had no time to do more than set them on the shelves before hurrying to the Palace. He had eaten a few tidbits at the market, but not had a proper breakfast, so he was hungry, but he tried not to think about that as he trotted down Arena Street.

The outer guards let him pass, and the guard at the door waved. "There

you are!" he said, as he began fumbling under his breastplate.

"Here I am," Emmis agreed, as he came to a halt.

"Here," the guard said, handing him a folded parchment.

Emmis accepted it, and looked it over.

It was large and stiff, folded and sealed with red wax. Ornately-drawn runes on one side read, "To his Excellency the Ambassador Plenipotentiary of the Vondish Empire."

"What is it?" Emmis asked.

"I don't know," the guard said. "I asked the captain who you needed to talk to, and he said he didn't know but would find out, and this morning he told me to expect a paper, and an hour later a messenger gave me that, said it was from Lord Ildirin, the overlord's uncle."

"The overlord has an uncle?"

Emmis regretted the words as soon as they left his lips; he remembered watching the funeral rites when the old overlord, Azrad VI, had died, five years before, and he remembered asking his mother who those old people standing around the pyre were, and being told that some of them were Azrad's brothers and sisters. She hadn't known which was which, or any of their names except Lady Imra, and Emmis hadn't been close enough to really see their faces in any case, but she had been quite sure they were the dead man's siblings.

Which meant, of course, that they would be the present overlord's aunts and uncles.

The guard did not seem troubled by Emmis's apparent ignorance, though. "Two of them, actually," he said. "Lord Clurim and Lord Ildirin. There used to be a third, Lord Karannin, but he died eight or nine years ago, before the overlord's father."

"So is this Lord Ildirin in charge of ambassadors, then?"

"As I understand it, old Lord Ildirin is in charge of whatever he wants to be in charge of that no one else is handling. I think the captain called him a minister without portfolio, whatever that means."

Emmis looked down at the parchment.

He had no idea what it said, but if it came from the overlord's own uncle then it deserved respect. He peered at the wax seal, which was stamped with the three ships at anchor that were sometimes used to represent the city, encircled by what were probably intended to be bay leaves. There were no runes, no name.

Still, it looked very official.

"Did he say anything?" Emmis asked.

"Just to give you that when you came back."

Emmis still hesitated. He was tempted to open the parchment right then and there, but it wasn't addressed to him, it was addressed to Lar. He would deliver it to the ambassador still sealed.

"Thank you," he said, and turned away.

Back at the house he looked up and down the street, but saw no sign of Hagai or the other Lumethans. He was unsure what that meant. He took a final glance around before stepping inside, then closed the door carefully behind him.

He found Lar rummaging through the kitchen, putting some of Emmis's purchases in the cabinets and setting others aside to make lunch. He glanced up as the younger man entered.

"Do I have an appointment with the overlord?" he asked, as he set a loaf of bread on a cracked cutting board and looked around for a knife.

"I don't know," Emmis said. He held out the parchment. "This is for you."

Lar turned, paused, then accepted the document. "What is it?" he asked.

"I don't know," Emmis said again. "Lord Ildirin sent it in response to your request for an audience."

"Lord Ildirin? Not Lord Azrad?"

"Lord Ildirin is the overlord's uncle. He handles certain matters for Lord Azrad."

"Ah." Lar studied the inscription and the seal, then broke it open and unfolded the parchment.

Emmis stood and watched as the ambassador read. As he had told Kolar, Lar read Ethsharitic slowly; once or twice he seemed to stop completely, and his lips moved as he worked out a difficult word.

At last he finished and looked up at Emmis.

"Well," he said.

"Well, what?"

"Did anyone tell you what this is?"

"No," Emmis said, slightly annoyed, and wanting to tell his employer to get on with it.

"This is a request for credentials and a protocol," Lar said.

Emmis frowned. "What's a protocol?"

"I was hoping you could tell me," Lar said with a grimace. "For that matter, what are credentials?"

"Oh," Emmis said. "That's... that's the papers that prove who you are. A letter from your regent, maybe?"

"Oh, I have those! That's right, I had forgotten - Lord Sterren did teach me the word. That's all right, then. But a..." He squinted at the parchment. "...a written protocol for the establishment of relations between our nations?"

"May I see it?" Emmis asked, reaching for the parchment.

Lar handed the document over.

Emmis puzzled over it; the runes were unnecessarily florid, as was the language. Still, he thought he understood it. He read it through twice, then folded it up and handed it back.

"He wants you to write up an explanation of what you want from the overlord," he said. "You're to send that, along with your address here and some proof that you really were sent by the Empire of Vond, to the Palace, and once Lord Ildirin is satisfied that you are who you say you are, and that you're here as a friend, he'll see you in person. If that goes well, then you can see the overlord."

Lar considered that, then nodded. "It's a start," he said. "It's reasonable." He turned back toward the counter. "Have you seen a bread knife around?"

In the end they hacked the bread into chunks with Emmis's belt-knife, as the kitchen had not come equipped with any cutlery at all. They ate an improvised lunch while standing at the counter - the kitchen had no intact chairs, and eating in the dining room seemed like more trouble than it was worth.

As they ate they planned out the afternoon, and discussed what would go into Lar's protocol. Lar, it was decided, would go back to the Wizards' Quarter and observe Kolar's spell, assuming that Hagai or another Lumethan had not turned up, and would then return to the house and begin writing out his explanation for Lord Ildirin. Emmis would go back to Shiphaven to collect the rest of his belongings from his rented room, and to let his family know where he was now living. He might also make sure that Hagai had gotten back to the Crooked Candle safely, and when that was done he would then return to the house and set about putting it in order and supplying it with such essentials as bread knives and kitchen chairs. A theurgist to inspect the doorway shrine could wait a day or two; Lar was fairly certain they would be making further trips to the Wizards' Quarter.

"You could find one yourself when you're there today," Emmis said.

"I would prefer to have my guide with me for that," Lar replied.

Emmis nodded. "All right." Then he stood and brushed crumbs from his tunic. "I'll go now, if you don't mind," he said.

"Go," Lar said, with a wave.

Emmis went. There was still no sign of anyone watching the house.

He reached his old residence behind Canal Square without incident, argued with his landlady for half an hour before finally agreeing on how much

he would pay to settle his account, gave her the agreed-upon sum, and then climbed the narrow stairs for one last time.

He did not really have much to collect here; he had lived simply, and had never really intended the room to be his permanent home. His clothes could all, with moderate effort, be stuffed into a duffel bag that could easily be carried over one shoulder; his food supplies and such personal belongings as quills and candle-stubs all fit in a second and final bag, this one a fold-top leather satchel. The furnishings, including the linens, had all come with the room, and would stay with it.

He took a final look around, to be sure he had everything he wanted, and the window caught his eye. He crossed the fraying bit of rag rug and opened the casement, then leaned out cautiously.

The cry of seagulls reached him, faint and distant, as did the salt smell of the sea. Wood smoke, spices, and decay were a stronger scent. Off to the left he could see through a gap between the houses to sunlight sparkling on the New Canal; below him was the muddy courtyard where the neighborhood well stood at one end, the privies at the other, and half a dozen unbreeched children played between. Strings of laundry hung from the eaves of a house in the southeastern corner, providing a little bright color to the courtyard - most of the houses here were roughly two hundred years old, and darkened by centuries of smoke and weather.

This hadn't been a bad place to live, he told himself. Did he really want to give it up for the back bedroom on Through Street?

He had never expected to live in Allston. He had always assumed that if he ever left Shiphaven it would be for somewhere exotic, like Tintallion of the Isle, or someplace luxurious, like the New City. A big yellow house in Allston, just off Arena Street, had not been anything he considered.

But that room was no more permanent than this one had been. It was a place to stay while he earned money, until he knew what he wanted to do, and where he wanted to live. It was somewhere out from under his parents' roof, to prove he could stand on his own feet.

This room had been somewhere he could bring a Spicetown whore, or that drunken sailor woman who had taken a fancy to him, or the chandler's daughter who had shared his bed for a month before running off to Ethshar of the Sands; it wasn't somewhere he would bring a wife or raise a child.

The room on Through Street - well, any whore he brought there would probably come from Camptown rather than Spicetown, but otherwise, it was much the same. The sights and smells outside the window might be less familiar, but that didn't really matter.

Eventually he wanted a place of his own, a place he could settle in for good, but this wasn't it, and neither was the house in Allston. The ambassador's money, though, would bring him that much closer to someday finding it.

He closed the window, hoisted the duffel onto his shoulder, picked up the satchel, and left, closing the door behind him for one last time, and dropping the key in the landlady's waiting palm.

He trudged out of the alley, then across Canal Square and up Twixt Street. He turned left on Olive Street and made his way west a few hundred yards. There he paused, looking at the house his parents shared with two other families.

He had grown up here, with his two younger sisters, and with the seven kids of the other two families, though most of them had moved out now. The ten of them had all played together as children, and had been almost like a single family, instead of three. When he had been younger everyone took it for granted that he would eventually marry Azradelle the Tomboy, from upstairs, officially merging two of the three.

It hadn't happened, and no one still called her that. Now she was Azradelle of Shiphaven, married to Pergren the Pilot, and the mother of twins. They lived in a flat on Cinnamon Street, over in Spicetown, and had for a couple of years.

His behavior at their wedding was one reason he had moved out and found himself the room behind Canal Square - living in the same house as Azradelle's parents and younger siblings had been too uncomfortable after his spiteful drunken speech and... well, and other things.

It had been foolish, really; he hadn't wanted to marry Azradelle himself, and Pergren was a nice enough fellow, but somehow he hadn't been able to keep his mouth shut. He had felt cheated when she chose Pergren. It was completely unreasonable, and he knew that, he had known it at the time, but all those years of taking her for granted, combined with too much oushka, had somehow made him lose interest in being reasonable.

It was probably just as well Lar didn't know about that little episode.

He shifted the duffel, then climbed the stoop and knocked on the front door.

His father would probably be working over at the warehouse, and his mother was probably in the courtyard out back, but he was hoping one of his sisters would be within earshot. Sharra was in and out, despite her new husband, and Imirin had moved back after completing her apprenticeship.

Sure enough, the door opened, and Imirin peered out.

"Emmis!" she shrieked. "And you have luggage - are you coming home to stay?"

"No, no," he said. "I'm moving to Allston, and I wanted to let everyone know where I'll be living. Who's here?"

"Just me in the house. Mother's out back. Allston? What are you doing in Allston? There aren't any docks there!"

"Let me come in and put these things down, and I'll explain."

Imirin jumped aside. "Come in, come in!"

A few minutes later he was in the courtyard, explaining his new job to his sister, his mother, and half a dozen of the neighbors.

"Is he a warlock?" Kluréa the Seamstress from next door wanted to know. "I heard that everyone in Vond is a warlock."

"No, he's not a warlock," Emmis assured her. "I don't think he's any kind of magician, and I know he's not a warlock. He says there aren't any warlocks in the empire any more."

The question got him thinking, though - might Lar be a magician of some sort? He hadn't said so, had shown no sign of magic, but that didn't necessarily mean much, given his secrecy on certain subjects. Emmis was fairly sure the Lumethans were using magic of one variety or another, so why wouldn't the people of Vond? He would ask Lar about that when he got back to the house.

When at last he had answered everyone's questions about his new job, his new home, and his new employer - most of the answers were variations on, "I don't know yet" - the women took turns bringing him up to date on the local gossip. Imirin was trying to raise enough money to open her own shop, but so far was making do with operating a small still in the basement and selling her products to the local inns; Sharra was still furnishing her new home and living on her dowry and her husband Radler's earnings. Azradelle was expecting another child in a few months, her brother Kelder was keeping company with a merchant's daughter from Westgate, their sister Irith was still apprenticed to the old sailmaker on Shipwright Street but not happy about it, and so on.

Imirin insisted on giving him a sample of her latest batch, which seemed to make some of the neighbors nervous; presumably they remembered what a few cups of oushka had done to him at Pergren and Azradelle's wedding. Emmis limited himself to drinking perhaps half the small sample, just so no one would worry.

He had to admit that it was excellent oushka. Imirin's master had taught her well.

"Imirin the Distiller," their mother said proudly. "Doesn't that sound fine?"

Emmis agreed that it did, and carefully didn't mention any of the cognomens his youngest sister had had as a girl, before she lost her stammer and baby fat.

Finally Emmis was able to pry himself free, collect his baggage, and depart, making his way around to the west, then down Captain Street to Shiphaven Market, and along Commission Street to the Crooked Candle.

He stepped inside, and was immediately spotted.

"There you are!" Annis cried. "Come here, Emmis, and talk to me!" She pulled out a chair.

She was seated alone at a table in the back corner, facing the door. There was no sign of the Lumethans.

He hesitated. He had come here to see her, but he had not been prepared for quite so loud and enthusiastic a greeting. Gita the tavern wench was watching from the kitchen door, Annis' shout having caught her attention.

Somehow, Emmis had expected spies to behave with a little more circumspection. Still, this was why he had come, to talk to the foreigners. He crossed the room, and settled into the chair Annis had indicated, lowering his two bags to the floor by his feet.

Annis smiled at him. "So you've come to tell me what the Vondishman is up to?" she asked.

"Something like that," Emmis acknowledged.

She dismissed it with a wave. "You needn't bother," she said. "We already know all about it."

Emmis blinked at her. "You do?"

"Yes, we do. We talked to that warlock, that Ishta, this morning - Hagai took me down there to translate. She told us all about Lar's grandson."

"Oh. Yes."

"And we're agreed on what we'll have to do. It's drastic, but we don't have any choice."

Emmis did not like the sound of that at all. "Drastic?"

"I would say so, yes." Her smile vanished. "You don't object, do you? It will save hundreds of lives in the long run. I know he's paying you, but you don't owe him any loyalty, really. Not with something like this."

"Object to what?" he asked warily.

Annis stared at him, then looked to either side.

The inn's taproom was largely deserted; it was too early for the supper crowd. Emmis and Annis sat at one table, three sailors sat at another at least twenty feet away, and a man in a blue tunic was apparently passed out drunk in one corner. Gita was out of sight, presumably in the kitchen. No one else was visible.

Still, Annis leaned forward and whispered.

"Assassination, of course."

Chapter Ten

For a moment Emmis desperately hoped that Annis did not speak Ethsharitic as well as she thought, that she had said the wrong word. There was something very strange about coming here after visiting his family, abruptly going from happy gossip about weddings and babies and jobs and apprenticeships to this foreigner cheerfully talking about assassination.

"You want to kill him?" he asked. "Why?"

"Because he's building an army of warlocks!"

Emmis stared at her in astonishment. "He is?"

"Yes!" She looked baffled by his surprise. "You were there, you heard him talking to Ishta - he wants to send his grandson to Ethshar to learn warlockry, then bring him back to Vond. And I'm sure it's not just the one grandson; he probably has a dozen children ready for training. If it were just one, wouldn't he have brought the boy with him? No, he's making arrangements for several, we're sure of it."

"Even if he is..." Emmis stopped. Lar wasn't making arrangements to provide his empire with a dozen warlocks, so why argue about what it would mean if he did?

"Why else would they want warlocks? They're going to expand again. They're probably going to try to conquer all the Small Kingdoms!"

"I don't think so," Emmis said, but he didn't sound convincing even to himself.

He was trying to remember what Lar had said about revealing this. Was his real reason for consulting Ishta a secret? He remembered that Lar said these people wouldn't believe the truth even if they heard it, and Emmis thought that was probably right, but shouldn't he at least try?

No, he was fairly sure that Lar had said it was secret.

"He hasn't said anything to you about this plan for conquest?"

"He hasn't said anything about any plan for conquest!" Emmis replied. "He said the Empire of Vond was big enough as it is, and they aren't planning to expand any further."

"Then he's lied to you."

"How do you know that?"

"Well, what else would he want these new warlocks for?"

"I don't know - building roads, maybe, or healing the sick. What makes you think warlocks are only good for fighting?"

"Because that's how the empire used Vond, of course."

"I think you mean that's how Vond created his empire, don't you?"

"It's the same thing. The empire is still there, even if Vond himself isn't - and you know, we still don't know where he went, or whether he might come back. Maybe this ambassador is recruiting Vond's new staff, for when he returns."

"He isn't going to..." Again, Emmis stopped in mid-sentence. He didn't really know whether Vond might come back someday; no one did. While no warlock had been known to return from Aldagmor at any time in the last twenty-two years, no one knew why, or what was really going on. For all Emmis knew, they might all come home tomorrow.

But that wasn't the way he would have bet it.

"Why do you keep assuming he wants several warlocks? How do you know this isn't just personal business, trying to find his grandson an apprenticeship?"

"Even one would be too many! Besides, he treated it as official business. He brought you along. We think it's clearly part of a war plan."

"But isn't it a tradition in the Small Kingdoms not to use magic in your wars?" he asked.

"It was before the Great Warlock came along, yes. He ruined that." The bitterness in her voice startled Emmis. "The empire uses magic."

"They did before, yes, but Vond is gone."

"Why would that matter? The Imperial Council is his heir. If they didn't intend to follow his path, why haven't they broken up the empire, and let the seventeen provinces go back to being seventeen kingdoms?"

"Well, but that's hardly the same thing!"

"That's what their envoys say, but why should we believe them?"

"This is ridiculous. One man talked to a warlock about an apprenticeship for his grandson, and you're convinced it's the first step in a campaign to conquer the World!"

"Probably just the Small Kingdoms," Annis said. "They know they couldn't fight the Hegemony - you have thousands of magicians here."

"There are magicians in the Small Kingdoms!"

"Some, yes, especially in the north, along the Great Highway - but an army of warlocks could defeat most of them, and the rest would probably flee. Don't forget, Emmis, we saw what Vond did. He smashed entire armies. He summoned storms out of a calm sky, and built his palace by pulling stone out of the ground with a wave of his hand. A dozen warlocks like that would be enough to defeat Ashthasa and Lumeth in a day, all the Small Kingdoms in a year."

"But most warlocks aren't like that! They hear the Calling before they have that kind of power!"

"Vond didn't."

Emmis frowned. "So he was a freak..."

Annis shook her head. "No," she said. "We think it's something about Semma that's different. Warlocks are more powerful there."

"That doesn't make any sense," Emmis said, but as he spoke he remembered what Lar had asked Kolar. That hum that Vond had heard - was that somehow related to his abnormally powerful magic?

Was that why the empire really didn't want any more warlocks?

"Listen," he said, "we have hundreds of warlocks here in Ethshar, and they don't cause any trouble. Why are you so sure they'd be a problem where you live?"

"You have all the other magicians to keep them under control," Annis said. "You have the Wizards' Guild, and the witches and sorcerers and demonologists and the rest. And for that matter, you have the other warlocks; they aren't all united in a single cause."

"So why do you think..."

"We can't risk it!" she snapped. "If the nobles of the empire have their own children trained as warlocks, that's completely different from anything anywhere else!"

"So you're going to kill the ambassador? How do you even know that will stop them?"

"We're going to kill this ambassador, and anyone else from Vond who tries to talk to warlocks, or to make an alliance with the Hegemony. The empire is quite strong enough without Ethshar's help."

Emmis blinked. "You know, I don't think the overlord would like that," he said.

"Why would he care?"

"You mean aside from generally not approving of murder? You're trying to cut off his communication with another country!"

"But he hasn't had any communication with the empire - why would he care when that doesn't change? After all, isn't he called Azrad the Lazy?"

Emmis stared at her. "No, he isn't," he said. "That was his father. Azrad VI was called 'the Sedentary,' yes, but he died five years ago. The present overlord is Azrad VII, and he doesn't have an agreed-upon cognomen yet - my sister Sharra calls him 'Azrad the Hard to Classify.' But he isn't lazy."

Annis looked distinctly disconcerted at that, but quickly regained her composure. "Still, why would he care what happens to troublemakers from the far side of the Small Kingdoms?"

"Because they're trying to talk to him, and he doesn't like being interrupted!" This didn't seem real to Emmis, talking like this. He had heard people talking about killing someone on occasion, but it had always been in a fit of anger, over a theft or a woman or some personal wrong, and it had usually been when they were very drunk. He had never heard someone calmly explain that someone was to be killed over politics, as if murder weren't important. It was hard to believe she was serious.

If she was serious, though, he would have to do something to stop her.

"So what sort of assassination are you planning?" he asked.

"Planning? It's done. Or happening, anyway. I wouldn't have told you otherwise - I don't trust you that much. Neyam hired someone."

"What?"

"Well, yes! Hagai couldn't do it, he's a theurgist, and I wouldn't know how to find an assassin, but Neyam..."

Emmis leapt to his feet, knocking over his chair. "Where are they?"

"Where are who?" Annis asked, startled.

"Neyam and his assassin! I have to stop them!"

"No, you don't," Annis said. "Sit down. Don't be silly."

"Yes, I do," Emmis said. "It's murder! Where are they?"

"I don't know. The Lumethans are doing this, it's not my idea - well, mostly not..."

Emmis turned away and ran out the door onto Commission Street, where he

turned left and headed for Shiphaven Market at a trot. If he had been certain where he was headed he would have run, but he wasn't sure yet. Should he just go to the house in Allston and warn Lar?

That assumed it wasn't already too late. He hoped it wasn't already too late. He had sat there listening to the Ashthasan madwoman far longer than he should have, he told himself. He should have run to help as soon as she mentioned assassination.

But it hadn't seemed real. People didn't talk openly about such things! Hadn't she realized that Emmis worked for Lar, that he liked Lar? Did she think that just because he had taken her money, he had no loyalty at all to his employer, not even the basic consideration he would give any human being?

He couldn't imagine thinking like that.

The market was uncrowded this time of day, and he was able to make it through and onto Twixt Street quickly. He picked up his pace; he still didn't know whether he was heading to Allston or the Wizards' Quarter, but either way, he would have to cross the Old Merchants' Quarter and the New City to get there.

A little belatedly the possibility of recruiting help among friends and family in Shiphaven occurred to him, but he immediately dismissed the idea; there might not be time, and it would just sound so ridiculous to them, running halfway across the city to stop an assassination!

He broke into a run, even though he knew he couldn't maintain it all the way to Allston.

He was almost to Canal Square when he realized he had left all his belongings on the floor of the Crooked Candle. He cursed, but did not slow down.

He did slow down in Canal Square, though, as the crowds were thicker here. He almost tripped over a small child, brushed awkwardly against a woman, and had to slow to little more than a walk as he squeezed past a clump of people at the south end.

Kolar had said his spell would take an hour, and it was perhaps half an hour's walk each way between Through Street and the wizard's shop; allow a little time for other matters, and the ambassador still would have needed no more than three hours to complete his errand and return to the house to begin writing his protocol. Emmis glanced up at the sky, trying to estimate how long it had been since he had headed back toward Shiphaven. The sun was hidden behind rooftops to the west as he jogged down Commerce Street. How long had he spent at the rooming house? How long with his family? The walk back had taken almost an hour all by itself...

He was fairly sure he had been in Shiphaven for hours. Lar might already be dead.

This might be partly his fault, he thought as he trotted up the slope toward High Street. If he hadn't talked to Annis, she and the Lumethans might not have been so quick to decide Lar had to be killed.

Or they might have been even quicker - who knew? They had been following Lar in any case. He hadn't told them anything about planning conquest. He hadn't told them anything about apprenticing to warlocks; they had heard that from Ishta. It wasn't his fault.

Still, he felt somehow responsible. He turned the corner onto High Street and broke into a run again.

As he crossed Merchant Street into the New City he began worrying about what he would do if he encountered the assassins. He was big and strong, but he had no training in how to fight, no weapon except his belt-knife. He glanced at the headquarters of the Council of Warlocks as he passed, and wished he had a warlock to help him - or any kind of magician, really.

And he hoped that the assassins Neyam had hired were just thugs, and not magicians. There were magical assassins, he knew that; some demonologists were said to specialize in assassination. Warlocks could kill without a trace, and it was rumored that some of them would do that for a price. Wizards were picky about who they killed, but they, too, had lethal magic at their command.

Witches never killed anyone, so far as he knew, and he had never heard of ritual dance causing anything much worse than a headache. To the best of his knowledge the gods no longer answered prayers to kill people under any circumstances, so priests and other theurgists couldn't be assassins. Herbalists had a wide variety of poisons on hand, everyone knew that, but he couldn't see how anyone could use those against Lar. Scientists, well, who knew what scientists could do?

And sorcerers - during the Great War, Northern sorcerers had been the subject of nightmares and terrified whispers. No one knew how many of the horrible old weapons modern sorcerers might still have hidden away.

Emmis tried to remember all the other kinds of magic he had ever heard of. Most of them seemed harmless - prestidigitation and prophecy and the rest had no obvious lethal applications - but who knew what a clever magician might do? He estimated that at least half the schools of magic could definitely be used for assassination, and except for theurgy he couldn't be sure any of them were entirely safe.

Annis had said Hagai was a theurgist, so he was relatively harmless; he might have used his magic to help find Lar, but beyond that, Emmis didn't think Hagai was anything to worry about. Neyam, though - was he a magician, too? If so, what kind? Or the third Lumethan, whatever his name was - he could be anything.

Morkai, that was it.

He made the turn onto Arena Street, and almost collided with a woman eating a sausage. "Sorry," he said, a little breathlessly, as he pushed past her.

If the Lumethans had hired magicians to kill Lar, Emmis didn't think there was anything he could do. It took magic to fight magic. That was why the Small Kingdoms had banned using magic in their endless little wars; it would have made their regular armies useless, and you couldn't trust magicians. They weren't reliable. They might change sides, or decide they wanted to be in charge themselves, or they might simply die, and then where would you be, if your entire military depended on their magic?

The sun was almost down, the shadows stretching the full width of the avenue, the sky starting to darken when he turned onto Through Street and slowed to a stop, panting.

The yellow house was still there, unchanged. The door was closed. The street was largely deserted; a cat sat in a neighbor's window, a woman several doors down was pattering with her doorway shrine, and a man sat slumped against a stoop, apparently asleep.

There were no obvious assassins to be seen, no ominous sword-wielding figures in black cloaks. There was no brown-robed Lumethan, either. But there were dozens of places where they might be concealed, in doorways and alleys or behind corners - not all the houses were built directly against one another, or with their facades aligned.

Cautiously, Emmis crossed the street to the door of the rented house. He fished the key from the purse on his belt, thanking whatever gods or fates might be responsible that he hadn't left that on the floor of the Crooked Candle with all his other belongings.

The door was locked, just as it should be, and the key turned in the lock, just as it should. He opened the door slowly and carefully, and looked inside before stepping through, making sure there was no assassin lurking there.

Then in a sudden moment of inspiration he turned, and found the man from the stoop not asleep at all, but on his feet, belt-knife drawn, and hurrying across the street toward him.

Emmis snatched his own knife from his belt and stepped backward into the house. He slammed the door in the other man's face, but before he could latch it he heard footsteps.

He whirled, the knife in his right hand raised, just in time to duck a swinging blow from a walking stick. The stick smacked into the wall above

Emmis's head, and he heard plaster crack.

There was a stranger in the house, a tall, thin man in a dark blue tunic and black wool breeches, his black beard trimmed to a point, his raised hands wielding a black and silver cane like a club. As Emmis took this in, a wooden cap fell from the end of the stick, revealing a sharp steel blade at least six inches long - the weapon was now as much a sword as a club.

Emmis dived at him, keeping his head down, below that sword-stick, and butted the intruder hard, sending them both tumbling backward onto the bare wood floor. They landed with Emmis on top, and he reached out his left hand, fingers spread, and grabbed his opponent's face, shoving it back so that the stranger's head hit the floor hard.

Then he scrambled over his dazed opponent, got back to his feet, and ran toward the back of the house.

He was not here to fight; he didn't know how to fight, not really. He had been in a few brawls in bars or on the docks, but he was no fighter, not really. The one thing he knew which had stood him in good stead here so far, was to do the unexpected - if someone came at you, go at him as well, don't retreat. Don't hesitate - better to do the wrong thing quickly than the right thing too late.

And the other rule he used in fighting was that when you get the chance, put anything you can between yourself and your foe - doors, furniture, or just distance. Don't try to beat anyone, just try to get away.

With that in mind, he didn't look for a weapon, or turn to face the man with the stick; he just ran to the back door and out into the courtyard.

A few of the neighbors were there, and glanced at him as he ran out of the house, stumbling across the little back porch and down the single step onto the hard-packed earth. A half-formed thought of shouting for them to call for the guards crossed Emmis's mind, but he let it go unheeded as he sprinted toward one of the narrow passages leading out of the courtyard to the streets.

Lar was not dead yet, he was sure. The assassins wouldn't have been lingering in and around the house if they had already murdered their target. He wouldn't have been hiding from them. That meant he hadn't yet returned home. The assassins had been lying in wait, expecting him any moment, expecting their unprepared victim to walk in, completely unaware of any danger.

At least, Emmis hoped that was what it meant.

And they had gotten Emmis instead, a younger, stronger, more prepared opponent, and he had survived their initial attack.

But that meant that the would-be killers would be more prepared now, as well. It was more important than ever that Emmis find Lar first, and warn him.

The more heroic thing might be to stay and fight, to try to take the assassins out of action somehow, but Emmis was no hero. He had no idea how he might single-handedly defeat two men, especially not when one of them had that diabolical sword-stick.

He didn't even know whether there were just the two. After all, neither of them was Neyam of Lumeth. There might be a whole gang lurking around Through Street.

Emmis squeezed through one of the narrower alleys and emerged onto an unfamiliar street; he paused for only a fraction of a second to get his bearings, then turned and headed for Arena Street, hoping that he had enough of a lead that the two assassins would not be able to follow him to the Wizards' Quarter.

Chapter Eleven

Emmis saw no sign of pursuit. He attracted a few stares as he ran headlong down Arena Street, but no one seemed to be following him, or taking more than a casual interest.

Still, when he reached the Arena district he turned left onto Camp

Street, as if he were heading for Camptown to fetch guardsmen. Once he was around the corner he slowed to a walk and straightened his clothes, trying to look like an ordinary townsman out on business, rather than a fleeing lunatic.

He was not going to Camptown, though; he turned right on Hawker Street, past the Arena, and picked up his pace, hoping as he did that Lar was not walking down Arena Street, a few blocks to the west, as he did. He was assuming that the ambassador was still in the Wizards' Quarter, that his business there had taken longer than expected, or he had decided to do something else after Kolar's spell was done. Emmis he was hoping he could find him before he went home and ran into the assassins.

It was a good thing that Lar was so easy to spot, with that red coat and big hat.

Emmis turned right again, across the entry plaza at the south side of the Arena, past the notice boards - and no, Lar was not there reading the notices, nor was he visible in the crowds on Arena Street.

Emmis frowned, and then ran and jumped, pulling himself up on a cornice on the face of the Arena so that he was hanging from the stone three or four feet off the ground, his feet braced against a pillar, as he peered up and down Arena Street.

There were hundreds of people in sight, male and female, young and old. Dozens of them wore hats, from the bright little caps of the fashionable ladies to the battered, broad-brimmed straw hats of farmers in town for the day, but nowhere did he see a big black hat with a red satin band and a curling white plume.

He also didn't see a tall man in a blue tunic, carrying a black and silver stick; that was a relief. He wished he had gotten a better look at the other assassin, but his only clear impression was that the man had been nondescript, wearing tunic and breeches of some ordinary color like brown or gray.

He dropped back to the ground, hoping he hadn't drawn too much attention, and hurried on along Arena Street.

Ten minutes later he was on Wizard Street, knocking at the door of Kolar's shop.

This time Kolar was wearing a proper wizard's robe when he answered the door, a flowing floor-length black garment with bands of midnight-blue velvet on the sleeves. A rather elegant blue velvet cap adorned the wizard's head.

"Ah, the assistant!" he said, before Emmis could catch his breath. "Did Lar forget something?"

"He was here?" Emmis demanded. "But he's not now? When did he leave?"

Startled, Kolar said, "I don't really know. Some time ago. Is there a problem?"

"Yes," Emmis said. "Did he say where he was going? Because he didn't go back to the house."

"Well, no - he was going to try another wizard first, and if that didn't work out, perhaps a witch."

"What?" He blinked. "Why does he need another wizard?"

Kolar sighed. "Because the spell didn't work," he said. "I performed it twice, with the wording we agreed upon, and both times it felt just fine, but there was no answer to his question."

Emmis frowned. "How do you mean, no answer?"

"I mean, the smoke didn't form runes, just meaningless swirls. It certainly wasn't any sort of writing I know, and I'm reasonably fluent in three dead languages, as well as Ethsharitic. Lar said it wasn't anything he knew, either, and he apparently knows half a dozen tongues."

"But how can that happen?" Emmis asked. "The spell went wrong?"

Kolar shook his head. "I don't think it did," he said. "I told you last night that Fendel's Divination would answer the question if there is an answer and nothing interfered. It didn't answer, so if there's an answer, then something interfered."

"But what? What could have interfered?"

Kolar turned up an empty hand. "How should I know?"

"Because you're a wizard! Knowing these things is your job!"

Kolar shook his head again. "It's not like that," he said. "Knowledge isn't free. Magic interferes with other magic, and trying to find out exactly which magic is interfering can be difficult and dangerous. Nobody's paying me to make the effort or take the risk."

This was frustrating, but Emmis realized it wasn't really important. "All right, fine," he said. "Then you don't know what went wrong, but you sent the ambassador somewhere else. Where did you send him?"

"I suggested he try Imrinira of Sabar, over on Stopped Street," Kolar said, pointing vaguely in a direction Emmis thought was east.

Emmis had never heard of Stopped Street, and its name did not make its location obvious. "How do I find her?" he asked.

"Turn left at the next intersection - well, it's Stopped Street in both directions, but Imrinira's shop is to the left. There's a very long block, then you'll cross Flight Street, and it's the fourth shop on the left."

"Thank you." He turned, and hurried up the street.

Kolar's directions were simple enough, though they hadn't mentioned how much Stopped Street curved, and a few minutes later Emmis was knocking on the shop door beneath a sign that read "IMRINIRA THE MAGNIFICENT: Truths Uncovered & Fantasies Made Real."

Only while he was waiting for a response did he glance at the broad shop windows on either side; he almost wished he hadn't. The creatures milling about in the displays were no part of any fantasy he had ever had, except perhaps in nightmares - multi-colored, many-legged things that flickered and shimmered in very discomfoting ways. Some of them were undeniably beautiful, particularly the winged ones, but they still weren't anything he cared to encounter.

He looked up, to avoid watching the things in the windows and to be sure he had not imagined that the lanterns illuminating the sign were still lit, and noticed how big the building was. Four stories high, and wider than most - if Imrinira owned the entire place she was obviously doing well for herself.

He knocked again.

The door finally opened, and a young man peered out - a youth, really, perhaps sixteen or seventeen. "May I help you?" he asked.

"I'm looking for my employer," Emmis said. "I was told he came to consult with Imrinira of Sabar, at this address."

"Your employer?"

"Shorter than me, red velvet coat, fancy hat? I'm not sure what name he would have given."

"Oh, yes. He called himself Lar the Ambassador. Speaks with an accent?"

"Yes. He's Vondish. Is he still here, by any chance?"

The youth shook his head. "No, I'm afraid he and my mistress went to consult with Zindr e the Pale."

Emmis wanted to scream with frustration. He had been hoping that they were in a back room somewhere. "When?"

"Oh, I couldn't say exactly. Less than an hour."

"Where can I find this Zindr e, then?"

"In Witch Alley, of course. You go back that way, turn right on Flight Street, then take the first left. I'm not sure which shop is hers, but the alley isn't that long."

"Thank you." Emmis turned and ran - he did not want to give Lar time to look for yet another magician after this Zindr e.

He found Witch Alley easily - he had seen it once or twice before, though always entering from the other end - and Zindr e's name was plain enough on a signboard, but the shop was dark, the curtains drawn. He stared at the locked door, then stepped back to look up, hoping to see a light in the witch's rooms upstairs.

"If you're looking for Zindr e, she's talking to Sella," someone said.

Emmis turned and found a man perhaps twice his age standing behind him,

leaning on a stick. Not a slender black-and-silver stick, but a rough wooden one, little more than a tree limb trimmed to the right length.

"Thank you," he said. "Where...?"

The man pointed down the street.

As Emmis trotted farther down Witch Alley, looking at the signs, he took comfort in the fact that Lar had still been alive and unharmed when he and Imrinira left her shop an hour or so ago, and that if he, Emmis, was having this much trouble catching up, then any assassins would have an equally difficult time of it.

"SELLA THE WITCH, Diviner & Seer," he read, and this shop had lamps lit and the door open. He hurried up to it.

Before he could cross the threshold, though, a thin, black-haired girl of fifteen or sixteen appeared in the door.

"Hello, Emmis," she said. "I'm Teneria of Fishertown, Sella's apprentice. Come in, please; we've been expecting you."

Emmis stumbled in surprise. "You have?"

Teneria didn't smile. "We have," she said. "Diviner and seer - it says so right on the sign. Would you like a cup of tea?"

Emmis's mouth twisted wryly. "You don't already know?"

"I'm just the apprentice, not the seer," she replied. She stepped aside. "Come in."

Emmis obeyed, and found himself in a cheery shop that could have belonged to either a witch or an herbalist - dozens of bunches of dried plants hung from the overhead beams, and the shelves along the back wall were cluttered with bowls, mortars, alembics, glass balls, jats, and bottles. A teapot and sugar bowl stood on a small table in the center of the room, surrounded by cups; the table in turn was surrounded by half a dozen overstuffed chairs, most of them occupied.

Lar was sitting in one of the chairs, a teacup in his hand; his hat and coat hung on a coat-rack by the fireplace.

Three women sat in the other occupied chairs. One was a plump, rosy-cheeked woman of fifty or so, in a green tunic and flowered skirt; she was seated facing the door and smiling broadly at Emmis and Teneria. To her right sat a tall white-haired woman in a dark red wizard's robe; to her left was a tiny little woman in black.

These were presumably Imrinira, Zindré, and Sella, but Emmis was unsure which was which, though he supposed the woman in red was probably Imrinira.

"Come sit down," the woman in the green tunic said. "I know you don't want any tea yet, but honestly, Emmis, you don't need to be in that much of a rush. Sit down, and we'll explain matters to you. They won't find you here."

"Go on," Teneria said, giving him a gentle shove.

"Don't your feet hurt, after all that running?" the middle woman asked.

Emmis had not allowed himself to notice that, but now that she mentioned it he became aware that yes, his feet were a little sore. He was accustomed to doing plenty of walking and lifting, but not so much running. Reluctantly, he shambled to one of the two empty chairs and lowered himself into it.

This whole performance was exactly the sort of thing he had half-expected from Kolar, and not received. Now that it was actually happening, though, he found it very uncomfortable.

"You know why I'm here?" he asked, as he settled onto the worn upholstery. There was a faint click behind him, as Teneria closed the front door.

"You're here to warn the ambassador here about people who are looking for him," the middle woman said. "They're trying to kill him, I think?" She set down her cup. "I'm Sella, by the way. This is Zindré, and you've already guessed Imrinira."

"It's good to see you," Lar said. "Now, who's trying to kill me?"

Emmis glanced at Sella. "She hasn't already told you?"

"I didn't know," Sella said. "All I know about the matter is what I've seen in your mind. I knew you were coming because every morning I use my magic

to learn who will walk through my door in the course of the day, but I can't see every detail of what will happen, only who will come. Until you arrived and I heard your thoughts, I had no idea just what warning you were so eager to deliver."

Emmis gave a nod, accepting her explanation, then turned back to Lar. "The Lumethans hired assassins," he said. "Annis of Ashthasa told me they had, and I hurried back to warn you. Two of them were waiting at the house when I got there, one inside and one outside, but I managed to get away, and I came here to find you."

He might ordinarily have hesitated before revealing all this in front of strangers, but Sella had already made clear that she could hear everything he thought, so there was no point in trying to keep secrets. The other two might not be quite so gifted, but they were magicians themselves, and could undoubtedly find out if they wanted to.

"They hired assassins?" Lar replied, visibly shocked. "Why?"

"Because they believed what you told Ishta," Emmis said. "They think you're sending your grandson to be apprenticed to a warlock. And they think there must be others, as well, and you're going to create an army of warlocks, to replace Vond and expand the empire."

"I don't have a grandson!"

"That's not what you told Ishta, remember? Hagai followed us there, and then went back with Annis as his interpreter and talked to Ishta, and they all believed your story about a grandson."

Lar frowned thoughtfully. "Oh," he said. "Did you tell them the truth?"

"No! I didn't tell them anything! I didn't know what I was allowed to say. And I only spoke to Annis, the Lumethans weren't there, and they'd already hired the assassins."

"They really hired assassins?"

"They really did. A tall man with a blade in his walking stick, and another one I didn't get a good look at."

"And they're waiting back at the house we rented?"

"They were last I saw, yes."

Lar looked at the magicians. "I didn't expect anything like this! Do you have any suggestions?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," the wizard said. "Who is Ishta, or Annis, or Hagai? What does this have to do with Vond the Warlock, or the Lumeth Towers?"

"Does it matter?" Zindré asked. "Obviously, you need to tell the city guards. They'll take care of these assassins."

"And don't go back to the house until after you have spoken to the guard," Sella added.

"But my sword is there," Lar said.

Emmis and Imrinira said in unison, "You have a sword?"

"Get the guard first," Sella told him. "Then get your sword."

"There were just these two?" Zindré asked Emmis.

"I only saw two," Emmis said. He was oddly reassured by how swiftly the witches had accepted his story. Everyone knew that witches could tell truth from falsehood - well, at least the witches who were good at their job - and Sella and Zindré clearly thought he was telling the truth.

"Any sign of magic?" Zindré asked.

"Not that I saw. The outside man pretended to be sleeping, and the inside man had that stick with the blade on the end, but I didn't see any magic. Nothing glowed, or moved in ways it shouldn't."

"Do you think they were Demerchan?" Lar asked.

"What?"

"Demerchan is a cult of assassins that operates in the Small Kingdoms," Sella explained. "I've never heard of them doing anything here in Ethshar of the Spices, though."

"How could I tell if they were this... whatever it is?"

Sella and Lar exchanged glances.

"I don't know," Lar admitted.

"It sounds to me as if the Lumethans just hired a couple of thugs from the Hundred-Foot Field," Imrinira said.

Emmis shook his head. "The one with the stick was too well dressed for that. The other one, maybe."

"How would anyone from the Small Kingdoms know how to find assassins to hire here in Ethshar?" Zindré asked.

"Annis said Hagai is a theurgist," Emmis said. "Maybe he asked a god."

The others exchanged frowns. "Would a god tell him that?" Lar asked.

"I don't think so," Zindré said. "But I'm no priestess. If he phrased his question right, maybe he could get an answer."

"They've been paying a tavern wench for favors," Emmis said. "Maybe she knew of someone."

"That could be," Zindré agreed.

"Does it matter?" Sella asked. "As long as there's no magic involved, and the assassins aren't working for the overlord, the guards ought to be able to handle it. Just go to Camptown or the Palace and tell someone."

Emmis nodded. "I think she's right."

"For now," Lar said. "But if they really want me dead, they'll hire someone the guard can't stop. The stories say ordinary guards can't stop Demerchan, or they could hire a magician."

"Well, we'll just have to convince them they have no reason to kill you!" Emmis said.

For a moment no one spoke; then Lar asked, "How?"

Chapter Twelve

The conversation trailed off after that, and a few minutes later Lar and Emmis were turning the corner onto Games Street, bound for Camptown to talk to the guards. On either side they saw broad, open doors into gaming halls or card rooms of one sort or another; the murmur of voices and the smell of oushka reached them.

"Is it far to Camptown?" Lar asked.

Emmis turned up an empty palm. "I don't know," he said. "I've never been there."

Lar glanced at him. "Never?"

"Never. If I needed a guardsman, I could find one in the shipyards or the markets, or the towers at Westgate, or the Palace. Camptown's the far end of the city from Shiphaven."

"Then why are we going there?"

"Because it's closer to here," Emmis said. "We aren't in Shiphaven, we're in the Wizards' Quarter. We could have gone up to Southgate, but that's the opposite direction from the house. If there were a show at the Arena, we could find guards there, and it would be right on our way, but there's no show. So Camptown seemed best. Or we may just find a guard along the way."

"Maybe I should just buy another sword and defend myself," Lar muttered.

"You could," Emmis agreed, "but the guards are paid to protect the city, and that includes you, so why not?" He pointed. "Besides, it looks like we won't need to go all the way to Camptown."

"Hm?" Lar followed the pointing finger. "Is that a guardsman?"

Emmis threw his employer a baffled glance. "He's wearing a helmet and breastplate, isn't he? Of course he's a guardsman!"

"But his kilt is bright red, and he doesn't have a sword!"

The man in question was standing in front of one of the shops, holding a smaller man against the wall by the front of his tunic. He wore the yellow tunic, red kilt, and polished breastplate and helmet of the city guard, and a businesslike truncheon hung from his leather belt.

"Well, of course it's red," Emmis said. "What other color would it be?"

"Green. Don't Ethsharitic soldiers wear green kilts?"

"Not that I ever saw. I think the idea is to have them stand out in a crowd."

That was certainly happening in this case; a small crowd was gathering around the guardsman and his prisoner, though they were being careful to stay well out of reach. The guardsman's bright uniform definitely stood out - as did his height, as he was a very large man. Emmis was a big, strong man himself, but he did not think he would be any match for this fellow.

"They did in the old pictures."

"They haven't in my lifetime. And they hardly ever carry swords on the street."

He and Lar kept walking as they talked, and were now drawing within earshot of the soldier.

"...won't mind if we take a look in your purse, then?" The guard's voice was a low rumble, but not angry or hostile.

"I had that money when I came in!" the man pinned against the wall protested.

"Would you care to tell a magistrate that? With a witch in the room?"

"I don't... why should I? I just stopped in to see what the game was like! You have no business making these unfounded accusations!"

"Well, if I'm wrong, I'll apologize very politely, and give you two bits from the beer fund for your trouble. If I'm right, and these two young men who pointed you out to me are telling the truth, well, then you'll be right there in front of the magistrate, who can decide whether to make additional charges for wasting his time and costing him the witch's fee."

The pinned man stared up at the guardsman's smiling face, then slumped. "You'll let me go if I pay back the money?"

"Hai, I don't want to waste the magistrate's time any more than you do," the soldier rumbled. "I'm sure these players will be reasonable. I do understand the temptation, believe me - they should know better than to leave their stakes out in plain sight, unguarded, like that. They probably thought that it would be safe enough there in a respectable gambling hall, with me standing by the door, and as it turns out it was, but still, it was asking for trouble. Which I would tell the magistrate when he figured up his fee."

"All we want is our money," someone called from the door of the shop. "If we get it back he can go."

"There, you see?"

The thief lifted his purse. "I had seven bits of my own," he said miserably.

The guardsman released his grip on the man's tunic. "We'll leave you four, if that's all right." He reached for the purse.

"Three bits to avoid a flogging?" someone called from the crowd. "What a bargain!"

"Good enough," the thief said. He handed over the little leather pouch.

"You should probably stay out of this gaming house for a few sixnights," the guardsman said, as he spilled coins out onto his hand - mostly copper, but Emmis saw the unmistakable glint of silver, as well. The soldier plucked one triangular copper piece from the little pile and popped it into his own purse, then counted out four more and returned them to the bag, which he handed back to its owner. "In fact, I'd be careful about this whole block. I'm sure you understand."

"Yes."

"Then you can go."

The guard straightened up, and watched as the thief turned and ran, past Emmis and Lar. Two young men burst from the shop door and trotted over eagerly. The soldier turned and dumped the remaining coins into the first man's outstretched hands. "You two split that up," he said. "And I'd

recommend playing somewhere else tonight."

"Yes, sir," the pair chorused.

That business attended to, the guardsman started to turn away, but Emmis reached out. "Excuse me, sir," he said.

Startled, the soldier turned, one hand falling to the truncheon on his belt.

"I'm Emmis of Shiphaven," Emmis said, "and this is Lar Samber's son, from the Empire of Vond, and we could use your help. Someone's trying to kill us."

The guard frowned. "Why?"

"It's a political thing, from back home," Lar said. "I never thought they would dare try anything here in Ethshar!"

The guard studied Lar's hat, which was definitely not anything he would normally see on the city streets - certainly not on Games Street, at any rate. "You're sure?"

"Sure of what?" Lar asked.

"That they're trying to kill you."

"Yes!" Emmis said. "They broke into our house, and one of them took a swing at me with this... this sword-thing."

The guardsman stared at him for a moment, then glanced back at the door of the gambling hall. He sighed. "Wait here," he said. He turned and marched to the door, where he bellowed inside, "Hai, Kelder! Send someone up to the camp and tell the Lieutenant I'm investigating a break-in. You're on your own until either I get back, or he posts a replacement - but don't worry, I'll take it as a personal insult if anyone tries anything while I'm gone. A very personal insult. And you all remember what happened to Terrek when he insulted me."

There was a muffled chorus of acknowledgment; then the guard turned back to Lar and Emmis. "Let's go," he said.

Lar hesitated, looking up at the guard's face, then over at Emmis, as if asking him a silent question.

Emmis had no idea what the question was, so he merely looked impatient, and gestured for them to go.

They went.

The three of them headed west on Games Street at a brisk pace; as they made the turn onto Arena Street, Emmis could not resist asking, "What did happen to Terrek?"

"They think he'll be able to walk again by Festival," the soldier said. "Sooner, if he can afford a magician to heal his legs. Which he can't, after paying for the other damage."

Emmis decided he didn't need further details.

"As long as we're telling each other things, suppose you two tell me what happened to make you think someone's trying to kill you."

Lar and Emmis exchanged glances. Then Lar said, "I think this one is for you to tell."

Emmis sighed. "Lar, here, hired me as his local guide, right on the Shiphaven docks, as soon as his ship tied up," he said. "I found a house he could rent, in Allston - that's where we're going. He's here representing the Empire of Vond in... well, in things I don't know about, as they aren't my business, but apparently some of Vond's neighbors aren't happy about it. I met these four foreigners at an inn over in Shiphaven, and they paid me to tell them what he was up to, and I didn't see that it could do any harm." He hesitated.

"I didn't mind," Lar said. "He didn't know anything secret."

"So I talked to them, and then I saw one of them following us when we were in the Wizards' Quarter last night," Emmis continued. "And today I was back at the inn, the Crooked Candle on Commission Street - I'd been visiting my family in Shiphaven, and stopped in, and there was one of the foreigners, the Merchant she said her name was, from Ashthasa, and she told me they'd hired an assassin to kill Lar. I ran back to the house to warn him, even

though I thought it was probably too late, but it wasn't, because his business in the Wizards' Quarter took longer than anyone had expected. And when I got to the house, these two men were waiting for me, one on the street out front, and one already inside the house, and when I opened the front door they both came for me. I got inside and slammed the door before the one on the street could get in, and then ducked when the one inside swung his walking stick at my head. And the end came off the stick, and it had a knife-blade inside, but where I'd ducked under it I was able to knock him down before he could stab me and run out the back door and slip away. Then I came to the Wizards' Quarter to find Lar, and then we started along Games Street to Camptown, and found you."

"You said the house is in Allston?"

"On Through Street, half a block northeast of Arena."

"So how long ago did this attack take place? That's a bit of a walk."

Emmis suddenly realized he had no idea what time it was. He looked up; the sky was dark enough for the first stars to be appearing, but neither moon was visible, so he couldn't use the lesser moon's crescent to estimate the hour. "The sun hadn't set yet when it happened," he said.

"Then it's been a good hour, at the very least," the soldier said.

"Chances are that whoever it was fled the place long ago."

"Oh," Emmis replied. He had to admit that the man was probably right.

"But they might come back," he said, "or they might be watching the house."

"That's true, and one of your neighbors might have seen something, so I'll come take a look, but I'm not expecting much to come of it. If it's true your foreign friends have hired assassins, I'd suggest you keep a very good watch. Hire yourself some bodyguards, perhaps. Maybe sleep somewhere else for a few nights."

The three walked on in silence for a moment as Lar and Emmis considered this. As they neared the Arena Lar said to Emmis, "Maybe we should find you a sword."

"What? I'm a dockworker, not a soldier!"

"You've got the build of a fighter," the guardsman remarked.

"A brawler, maybe, not a swordsman! I've never held a sword in my life!"

"No one's expecting you to take up fencing," Lar said. "I just thought it might discourage intruders."

"You do look like a fighter," the guard agreed. "Usually, that's all it takes. No one wants to take on a man with a sword - you can't tell by looking whether he knows how to use it or not."

"You aren't carrying a sword," Emmis pointed out.

"That's because I don't want to kill anyone," the soldier replied calmly. "If the red kilt and breastplate aren't enough to warn someone off, a sword probably wouldn't do it, either." He patted his truncheon. "A whack on the head with this will take a man down, but he'll probably still be able to get up the next morning, and I won't have to apologize to his grieving family. Not to mention I'm less likely to get blood everywhere. And it's easier to use in a crowd."

"You could carry both," Emmis pointed out.

"Then I'd have to think about which to use, and there are occasions when taking time to think about anything is a bad idea."

"Not to mention the cost," Lar said.

"Not to mention that," the guardsman agreed, with a nod and a smile. "Or worrying about bumping into things with it, or whether someone might get it away from me while I'm using the truncheon. If I were posted along the wall, at any of the city gates, I'd have a sword, but on Games Street it just isn't a good idea."

For a few paces the conversation dropped, but then Emmis said, "The man in the blue tunic has a sword. Or a stick with a blade, anyway."

"Blue tunic? You got a good look at this fellow, then?"

"Reasonably good," Emmis said. "It was a bit shadowy and it all

happened quickly."

"So what did you see?"

"Curly hair, pointed beard, blue tunic, black breeches, black boots, tall, thin, a bit hollow-cheeked. That's about all."

"What about the other one?" Lar asked.

Emmis shook his head. "Nothing," he said. "Brown tunic, I think, but it might have been gray. Hair and beard could have used trimming. That's all."

"Any idea how one of them got inside the house?"

Lar cleared his throat. "I may not have locked the back door," he admitted.

The soldier grimaced.

"He's a foreigner," Emmis pointed out.

"You aren't," the guardsman said. "You should have warned him!"

Emmis accepted the criticism silently.

"Were your attackers foreign?"

Emmis spread his hands. "I have no idea," he said. "They didn't say anything, so I didn't hear any accents, and they didn't dress any differently than we do. They could have been brought in, or they could have been hired here, I don't know."

The soldier cast a quick glance at Lar's velvet coat and elaborate hat, but did not comment. Instead he asked, "You said you talked to the foreigner who hired them?"

"Well, I talked to a foreigner. She said it was one of the others, a Lumethan named Neyam, who did the actual hiring."

"Could you find either of them again? The woman you spoke to, or the one who did the hiring? Would you know them if you saw them?"

"Oh, I'd definitely recognize her. Neyam, maybe not - I only saw him once, and he had a hood up. But Annis the Merchant, the Ashthasan, absolutely, I'd know her if I saw her. We spoke at the Crooked Candle, in Shiphaven, north of the market; I don't know whether that's where she's staying." He frowned. "If she isn't there, I wouldn't know where to find them."

"How determined to you think these people are?"

Emmis turned up a palm. "I don't know," he said.

"How much money do they have?"

"I don't know that, either. Some. They paid me generously, but they dickered about it."

"So if this first attempt fails, do you think they'd try to hire a magician to finish the job?"

"Oh," Emmis said, feeling his guts twist.

"They might," Lar said. He and Emmis exchanged glances.

"Then you'll need to talk to a magician yourselves about some protective spells," the guardsman said.

"That would be reasonable," Lar agreed.

All three fell silent for the next few blocks, in fact none of them spoke again until they turned onto Through Street.

When they rounded the curve, though, Emmis said, "Oh."

Lar said something long and nasty-sounding in Semmat.

The guardsman grinned broadly. "Well, it's been awhile since I've seen a real torch-bearing mob!" he said.

It wasn't really much of a mob, Emmis thought. There were only a little more than a dozen people standing in the street in front of the yellow house, and only four or five of them had torches.

"In the name of Azrad VII, overlord of the city and triumvir of the Hegemony of the Three Ethshars, what's going on here?" the guardsman bellowed, striding forward. Lar and Emmis hastened to follow him.

A dozen voices replied at once as the entire mob surged toward him. The guardsman held up a hand for silence, then chose a man in the crowd.

"You," he said. "What's going on?"

"We don't know!" the man answered. "Earlier today someone came running out the back of that house, and then a man with a sword came running out after him, and another man was at the front, and they all left the doors standing open and ran off. Someone got the landlord, because we couldn't find the tenants..."

At this point he was interrupted by several voices as various people pointed at Emmis and Lar and shouted, "Those two!" or "There they are!" or similar phrases.

"I'm the landlord," someone else said, stepping forward, and Emmis was relieved to see that it was their landlord, and not some further complication. "We thought one of my tenants might have been murdered, or kidnapped."

"We searched the house," the first speaker said, "but we didn't find anyone in there, or any blood or anything, so we talked it over and sent someone to fetch a guardsman from the Palace, and then we were waiting for you, and here you are."

"Except I didn't come from the Palace," the soldier said. "These two found me on Games Street." He turned and looked at the house.

The front door was still standing open. Emmis wondered how many of Lar's possessions had disappeared so far. His own, of course, were probably all gone, left on the floor of the Crooked Candle.

"That's the place?" the guardsman asked.

"Yes," Emmis said.

"Show me what happened."

Emmis nodded. He borrowed a torch from one of the neighbors, since of course no one had lit any candles, and led the soldier inside.

"I was right here when they came at me," he said, pointing. "I slammed the door behind me, and ducked, and the man's stick hit the wall..."

He held up the torch, illuminating a small gash in the plaster of the wall, right at head-height.

"Then I ran into him, and got up and ran out the back, and around through the alley, and then I went to find Lar."

The guard looked at the damaged plaster, then at the floor. He bent down and picked up a black wooden cylinder with a silver cap on one end; it was split lengthwise on one side, a narrow crack that was still fresh, judging by the color of the wood. "What's this?"

"That's off his walking stick," Emmis said. "It hid the blade on the end. It must have come off when it hit the wall."

"He didn't retrieve it? Sloppy."

Emmis turned up an empty palm.

Just then there were shouts from the street; Emmis and the guardsman turned and peered out the door.

Two more guards had just arrived, accompanying one of the neighbors, a woman Emmis vaguely recognized from the courtyard. Lar and the landlord were going to greet them.

"Well," the soldier from Games Street said. "We're all here now, I'd say. Shall we have everyone in for a cup of tea?"

Chapter Thirteen

It was almost midnight by the time the last question had been answered and the last visitor herded out the door. The three soldiers had all read Lar's credentials with interest, and shown him great respect thereafter. Lar had declined their offer to post a guard overnight, on the grounds that no one would be stupid enough to try again after all this fuss, but he had closed the shutters very firmly, and checked the locks on the doors very carefully. He had also unpacked his sword from the bottom of a trunk, and inspected it carefully before sheathing it and hanging the scabbard on his belt.

Emmis had been interested to see that this was not a fancy nobleman's sword intended for display; it was a serious, workmanlike weapon, with a blade

of smooth gray steel and a simple black leather grip.

Finally everything was secured, leaving only Lar and Emmis in the house, looking at one another.

"I'm going to bed," Lar said.

"What about the protocol?"

"It will have to wait until tomorrow. I'm exhausted."

"And what happened in the Wizards' Quarter today? Did Kolar give you your answer?"

"That can wait until tomorrow, too. Good night, Emmis."

"Good night, sir."

He watched as the ambassador shuffled wearily to his room, entered, and closed the door behind himself. Then he stood in the hallway by the head of the stairs, listening to the faint sounds of the city outside - even at this hour, it was not entirely silent.

This was his city, even if it wasn't Shiphaven. This was still Ethshar of the Spices. People here did not casually hire assassins to kill their enemies, and then admit it to strangers. What kind of place was Lumeth, or Ashthasa, that those foreigners would even consider assassinating someone who had done them no harm? What kind of people were they, that Annis would admit her part in this crime to him, and apparently expect him to do nothing about it?

Emmis wasn't a fool, and he didn't consider himself particularly naive. He knew that people sometimes murdered each other in Ethshar. He had seen a few of them hanged for it. He knew that thieves sometimes stabbed people to death in dark alleys, that burglars sometimes killed victims who woke up at the wrong time, that the poor homeless beggars in the Hundred Foot Field sometimes killed one another over nothing, that drunken brawls sometimes ended in a death or two, that feuding magicians sometimes went too far, that even lovers' quarrels could turn lethal.

But to hire a team of killers because someone talked about apprenticing his grandson to a warlock - that was insane.

At least he knew he hadn't imagined it - the neighbors had seen his attackers, and there was the mark on the wall, and the broken cap from the sword-stick. The guards had believed him. They took word back to their superiors at the Palace and in Camptown. They would look for Annis and the Lumethans, and when they found them they would see to it that the foreigners didn't try anything like this again.

And it might help get Lar his appointment with the overlord. This incident would demonstrate that the ambassador was someone important enough to worry about.

He still hadn't written that protocol, of course.

He would write it tomorrow. Emmis frowned slightly; what would he do, while Lar was writing that thing? Did he need to stay around, to correct Lar's Ethsharitic? The ambassador usually seemed capable enough with the language.

Emmis paused. Did he need to stay around at all? He hadn't signed on to fight off assassins. He could just quit, and go back to Shiphaven, and work on the docks. He could find another room somewhere.

But all his belongings were lost; landlords would look on that with great suspicion. He could get his sisters and neighbors to vouch for him, but still, it wouldn't look good.

Besides, what would happen to Lar if he did that? And the Vondishman paid better than any shipowner or merchant who had ever hired Emmis.

And Emmis wanted to know what in the World was going on, with these magicians and assassins and mysteries!

He would stay, he decided. At least for now.

And with that settled, he finally went to bed, leaving his clothes carefully draped across the furniture to air out, since he had no others to wear.

The world looked very different in the morning sun, after a night's rest, and Emmis was almost cheerful as he dressed. His tunic hardly smelled at

all, despite the sweat-stains, but he still told himself he would have to wash it soon, and he would want to buy another at the first opportunity. Tailor Street was just three blocks to the east; he had never bought anything there, but earning ten bits a day in silver, he could afford it now.

He ambled down to the kitchens, seeing no sign that the ambassador was out of bed yet, and set about assembling a suitable breakfast. He had the fire hot and had just put the teakettle on when Lar appeared in the doorway.

"What do we have?" he asked.

"Boiled ham," Emmis replied. "Or sardines, if you prefer."

"Ham will do fine."

A few minutes later they were sitting in the dining room with mugs of tea and plates of ham; there were still no chairs in the kitchen.

"Good tea," Lar remarked. "Much better than the herbal stuff Sella makes."

"What happened in the Wizards' Quarter yesterday?" Emmis asked. "Did you get your question answered?"

Lar shook his head. "No. Kolar's spell just made a... a nothing, a mess."

"Swirls, he called it. But what about Imrinira?"

Lar set down his mug and turned up a palm. "She couldn't help much," he said. "She tried a few things. Mostly the Spell of the Eighth Sphere."

"What's that do?"

"It makes runes appear in a black crystal sphere," Lar said. "But it can only answer yes-or-no questions, and not all of those. It did tell us that strong magic was interfering with Fendel's Divination, that it wasn't anything Kolar did wrong, but any time we tried to ask it a question about... about the hum itself, rather than about Kolar's spell, the reply was so hazy we couldn't read it. The magic was interfering again."

"Ah."

"So we went to see Imrinira's friend Zindr , to see whether witchcraft might work where wizardry didn't. They have an agreement - when Imrinira needs witchcraft she goes to Zindr , and when Zindr  needs wizardry she goes to Imrinira. But Zindr  couldn't do anything with this, so she took us to Sella, who was expecting us. She said that witchcraft wasn't going to help very much, but that other magicians could answer all my questions, and some of them were wizards - I just had to ask the right people the right questions. But then she called her apprentice in and whispered to her, and said that you would be along in a moment, and then you were, and you know the rest."

"Oh." Emmis considered this for a moment. "So what did Imrinira say, when Sella said that magicians could answer your questions?"

"She said that she couldn't, but that if the interference came from a protective spell of some kind, then the wizard who cast it could probably tell me why it's there."

"Does it come from a protective spell?"

"I don't know." Lar picked his mug up again. "I didn't get a chance to ask her about that."

"So are you going to go back and ask more questions?"

"Not right away," Lar said. He sipped tea. "I need to think about what questions to ask. And I need to write that protocol."

Emmis nodded.

"Besides, my first trip to the Wizards' Quarter got assassins sent to kill me," Lar added. "Who knows what will happen if I keep going back?"

"What more can happen?" Emmis asked. "They're already trying to kill you."

"They might do a better job of it."

"How?"

"Hire magicians. Or Demerchan."

"Perhaps you should get some protective spells of your own," Emmis suggested. "Talk to a theurgist about that door shrine - it might be useful."

"It might. But first I need to write my letter to Lord Ildirin."

Emmis sighed. "Please yourself. I suppose I could see about buying some decent furniture while you do that, and I do need more clothes."

"You left yours at that inn in Shiphaven?"

"Yes. So I'm sure they're long gone."

"Not necessarily. Might the innkeeper have kept them for you?"

Emmis frowned. "I doubt it," he said.

"I think you should go back and ask. I'd be interested in knowing just how quickly Annis disappeared after you ran out of there, too."

"I still can't believe she told me they were going to assassinate you!"

"Oh, they think everyone in Ethshar is a cold-hearted mercenary. I'm almost surprised she didn't try to hire you to kill me."

Emmis's mouth opened, then closed again.

"Really, people in the Small Kingdoms have no idea how a place like Ethshar can exist," Lar said. "It's too big for them to comprehend - the stories say there are a million people in Ethshar of the Spices alone! I don't think there's a one of the Small Kingdoms with more than thirty thousand people in it; the Empire of Vond might have a quarter of a million, at most. And there's all the magic here, and three overlords instead of a king or council..."

"People mind their own business," Emmis said. "It all works out."

"Yes, exactly! People mind their own business, so Annis thought you wouldn't care about me. I'm not one of your countrymen."

"But you're my business," Emmis said. "You pay me. You live here."

"But I have no family here, no connections. You haven't sworn fealty to me, we don't serve the same king."

Emmis stared at him, baffled. "So what?"

"You see? We think differently in the Small Kingdoms!"

"But you said she thought I wouldn't mind because I'm Ethsharitic!"

"Yes. She doesn't understand Ethshar. She sees that you people here don't have the family ties and hereditary positions and binding oaths that connect people in the Small Kingdoms, so she thinks you don't have any connections. I know better - you have your neighbors and your friends and your family and the people you do business with, masters and journeymen and apprentices are all linked, there are the guilds and districts, and when all is said and done you're all Ethsharites together. You have far more connections than we do; they just aren't as strong or as obvious, but they're strong enough. That guardsman we brought here last night - he came with us just because you asked. You aren't a nobleman, or any of his kin, or a member of the guard yourself, you're just an Ethsharite, and that was enough."

"Well, yes, of course," Emmis said. "That's their job, to guard the city and keep the peace."

"In Ashthasa, where Annis is from, a soldier's job is to do as he's told by the prince and his officers," Lar explained. "Helping out an ordinary citizen isn't something he does without orders."

"Barbarians," Emmis muttered under his breath.

Lar heard him, and smiled.

"They think you are barbarians, with your messy, disorganized way of doing things and your lack of a proper hereditary hierarchy."

"'They'? Not 'we'?"

"Oh, I know better than that. I might have never set foot in Ethshar a sixnight ago, but I'm not stupid. I've talked to Lord Sterren, and other travelers, and I know no place could be as big and rich and powerful as the Hegemony if it was really disorganized and barbaric."

"But this isn't obvious to everyone?"

"No, it isn't. You'd be surprised."

"Barbarians," Emmis said again.

"Different," Lar said. "And you should go back to the inn and see whether anyone can tell you anything about Annis. Maybe you can find out whether there are any more assassins on their way, or where she found the two you met last night."

"Why does it matter where she found them?"

"It's a useful thing to know where one can hire assassins."

Emmis didn't like that; the clear implication was that Lar might want to hire a few himself. "Who were you thinking of assassinating?" he asked.

"No one," Lar replied cheerfully. "I just like to know what's possible."

"I don't work for people who hire assassins."

"I'm pleased to hear that."

Emmis glared at his employer. Lar finished his tea.

"I'll order furniture," Emmis said.

Lar shook his head. "Visit the inn. Seriously. You might learn something useful. And if your belongings are still there, you'll save yourself a great deal of effort and money."

"Would they still be there in the Small Kingdoms?"

"They might be, they might not. It would depend on the inn. Try to be back by early afternoon, to take my papers to the Palace."

"I can do that," Emmis acknowledged. He started to rise.

"And while you're doing that, I can go back to the Wizards' Quarter and try to find a good theurgist."

"About the door shrine?"

"That, too."

"About your mysterious hum."

"Yes."

"Someday I'd like to know what that's about."

"So would I - but I know what you mean. Eventually I may tell you."

"But not today? Not now?"

Lar studied him thoughtfully for a moment, then said, "All right."

Emmis sat down again. "You will?"

"I will. It may help you know what to ask at the inn."

"I'm listening."

"You understand that if you tell anyone, I will have you killed? And I won't waste time with street thugs; I'll hire a demonologist."

Emmis hesitated. "You will?"

"Yes. If a warlock, any warlock, finds out what the Empire is worried about, there will be deaths, and yours will be one of them."

Emmis considered that.

It wasn't fair, really - making it clear just how important and dangerous this was made it irresistible. His curiosity was going to drive him mad if he didn't ask.

He would just need to be very, very good about keeping his own mouth shut.

"Go on," he said.

Lar sighed, and began.

"Four years ago," he said, "Sterren, Ninth Warlord of Semma, came to Ethshar and hired some magicians to help defend Semma against her neighbors, Ophkar and Ksinallion. King Phenvel of Semma was an idiot, and had managed to antagonize both his bigger, more powerful neighbors at a time when Semma's own army was in terrible shape, and Sterren thought the only way he could survive the coming war was by breaking the tradition against using magic."

"All right," Emmis said. So far this didn't sound like any great secret.

"Well, as you might guess, most of Ethshar's magicians weren't interested in going to fight a war at the far end of the Small Kingdoms, but he found a few, and one of them was a warlock named Vond, who had started to hear the Calling and was desperate to get farther away from Aldagmor."

Emmis nodded.

"Semma was so far from Aldagmor that at first Vond wasn't much use. In fact, he was stricken with headaches. He said they were caused by a buzz, or hum, that he heard constantly, that never went away."

That seemed mildly odd, but not like any great dangerous secret. "So

you want to find out why he had headaches?"

"No, no, no!" Lar waved that absurd notion aside. "You know something about warlocks, yes?"

"A little."

"You know that their power comes from a sort of voice they hear in their heads?"

Emmis frowned. "Well, not exactly a voice..."

"No, not exactly a voice. Vond called it a whisper, and said that the Calling began when you started to understand what it was saying."

"Really? I hadn't heard it that way."

"That's what Lord Sterren told me," Lar said, turning up a palm. "That there was this sort of whispering, muttering voice, or collection of voices, that warlocks drew their power from, and when they drew too much power, the whisper began to gain power over them."

"It could be," Emmis admitted. "But it isn't really a voice. There are images, aren't there?"

"I'm no warlock, but I think so, yes. Still, it's like a voice, sort of."

"Magic," Emmis said, with a wave. "It doesn't have to make sense. So it's a whispering voice that makes images, and that they draw power from. All right."

"And in Semma, Vond got headaches because of a horrible buzzing in his head that never stopped. Can't you guess what happened?"

"No." Emmis had an uneasy suspicion where this was going, but he wanted it spelled out.

"Vond discovered he could draw power from the hum, instead of from the whisper. And he thought he could use all the power he wanted without worrying about the Calling, because the buzz didn't have any words or images in it, it was just this constant flow of energy he could tap into."

A second source of magic that warlocks could use - that was a secret worth worrying about, Emmis had to admit. But it still didn't seem all that terrible. "But he got Called eventually, didn't he?"

Lar nodded. "Yes. Eventually he used so much magic, and grew so powerful, that the whisper could get at him right through the buzz. But the buzz, or hum, or whatever it is, never tried to affect him."

That would make it more appealing for a warlock, certainly. "Was this hum coming from Aldagmor, too?"

Lar shook his head. "No," he said. "We think it comes from Lumeth of the Towers."

This was beginning to fit together. "So you really do want to conquer Lumeth, to control this power source?"

"Gods and demons, no!" Lar said. "Didn't you hear me tell you that we don't want any warlocks in the Empire? We don't want to control this second Source."

"We want to destroy it."

Chapter Fourteen

Emmis ambled along High Street, mulling over what Lar had told him.

It all made sense, really. Vond the Great Warlock had been as much a menace to his own people as to anyone else, and the Imperial Council really didn't want anyone taking his place. They liked being in power, with no emperor to answer to - apparently Lord Sterren, the Regent, was an easy master to deal with.

So they didn't want any warlocks in the Empire, and most particularly they didn't want any warlocks who might be able to hear the Lumeth Source, as well as the Aldagmor one. That explained why Lar had gone to see Ishta, why he had asked what kept warlocks out of Vond.

They wanted to know exactly what and where the second Source was, so

they could destroy it. And they didn't want any warlocks to know anything about it, because they assumed, with reason, that warlocks would want access to this second source.

The Source in Aldagmor was obviously more immediately dangerous; everyone near it had simply vanished on the Night of Madness. Apparently they had all heard the Calling, man, woman, and child. A little farther away there had been survivors initially, but they had all become warlocks, and were either murdered by frightened neighbors, or Called not long after. Even now, anyone venturing too deeply into that area would be Called, even if he or she had not been a warlock. The southeastern half of Aldagmor was now uninhabited, as a result.

Lumeth wasn't depopulated. There were no warlocks there. There were no areas where people vanished, or where people acquired magical powers. It wasn't obvious exactly where the second Source was, or how Vond had been able to "hear" it when no one else had.

So Lar had asked Kolar where Vond's "hum" originated - and Kolar hadn't been able to tell him.

Lar was interested in where one might hire thugs and murderers because the Empire might want to hire a few and send them into Lumeth to smash that mysterious source, wherever and whatever it actually was.

He was also worried that the Lumethans might have found out that they had an immensely powerful source of magic in their country, and might be looking for ways to use it against the Empire. The Empire was just as worried that Lumeth might invade them as the Lumethans were worried that the Empire might invade them. That the Empire had at least a dozen times the population really wouldn't matter if the Lumethans learned how to use that magical power.

That was one reason Lar had insisted Emmis return to the Crooked Candle - to find out anything he could that might tell them what the Lumethans knew, or didn't know.

That was pretty much all that Lar had actually told him, but Emmis thought he had picked up hints that there was another element at work. He remembered that Lar had said there had been two warlocks in Semma since the Night of Madness, and there had been vague implications that Lord Sterren took a personal interest in this whole situation.

Emmis could see two ways this might work. Lord Sterren might be the second warlock, and hiding it, or he might know who the second warlock was and be afraid of what he or she might do. The second warlock might be a family member, or a close friend, or a sworn enemy - or perhaps the princess Sterren was reportedly planning to marry.

If it was Sterren himself who was a warlock, would he really want the Lumeth power source destroyed?

He might; after all, Vond had come to a bad end.

But if he had the same sort of unchecked magical power Vond had had, why didn't he use it? Why keep it concealed? Was he that afraid of the Calling?

Or was he, perhaps, that frightened of the Wizards' Guild, which had forbidden magicians to hold high office?

That made sense. And if the Lumeth source was destroyed, well, Vond was so far from Aldagmor that he'd hardly be a warlock at all, would he?

It could be any of those; Lar hadn't said, and Emmis didn't know. Lar might not know either, for that matter. Emmis did believe, though, that Lar intended to track down the Lumeth source and see that it was destroyed.

Emmis thought that was probably a good idea. He was no geographer, but if there was a previously-unknown and unused source of warlockry in Lumeth of the Towers, its range presumably extended in all directions, just as the one in Aldagmor did. Lumeth of the Towers was northwest of Semma and the Empire of Vond.

And Ethshar of the Spices was northwest of Lumeth. Emmis was not at all sure of the distances involved, but he thought it was possible that the Lumeth source might be entirely too close for comfort if warlocks all learned how to

use it.

Better for all concerned if no warlocks ever heard about it.

He turned from High Street onto Commerce Street, and noticed a few interesting shops - the house in Allston really did need more furniture, and kitchen supplies, as well as ordinary things like candles, lamps, and oil.

Perhaps he would go back by way of Bargain Street, rather than High, and see what he could find. Then at least this entire trip wouldn't be wasted.

The truth was that he did not expect to find anything useful in Shiphaven. He was sure his belongings must have been stolen; if they hadn't been he would almost be disappointed, as it would mean the thieves of Ethshar were not living up to their reputation. And surely, the foreigners must have all fled by now, and there would be nothing worth learning at the Crooked Candle.

But Lar had sent him to check, so he would check. He was being paid to do what he was told.

He pushed quickly through Canal Square without stopping to look at any of the merchandise on display. This was not much of a market; the better goods wound up in Shiphaven Market or the shops of the Old Merchants' Quarter, and Canal Square got the leftovers, the bits of this and that that had been discarded by the successful merchants and salvaged by scavengers, the items pilfered from cabins and cargo holds by sailors, the things that thieves had been unable to fence elsewhere.

It occurred to Emmis when he was three blocks down Twixt Street that perhaps he would have found some of his own former possessions offered for sale there - most of what he had had was not likely to bring any real money, which meant it was just the sort of merchandise that someone might try to sell for a few bits in Canal Square.

Well, it wasn't worth turning back at this point. He strode on, across Shiphaven Market, past the farmers, fishmongers, and recruiters, into Commission Street.

And there he stopped, twenty yards from the Crooked Candle.

There were guards at the inn door, two of them, trying to look casual, as if they just happened to be lounging there.

Emmis didn't believe that for an instant. Guards did not lounge on Commission Street. It wasn't on the way from any of their usual posts to anywhere they would need to go. If guards were needed on the Shiphaven docks or at the shipyards they would be sent from Westgate and would come down Shipwright or Captain Street, not Commission. If there had been a disturbance in Shiphaven Market, as sometimes happened, they would lounge in the market itself, not on Commission Street. If it were evening, and the guards were planning to get a drink when they went off-duty, it might have just barely been possible, but in the morning?

So they were watching the Crooked Candle.

Which meant there was no chance at all that Annis or the Lumethans or the assassins would be there. The foreigners weren't that stupid.

Why were the guards being that stupid? Wouldn't it make more sense to have a few men out of uniform inside the inn, ready to pounce if one of the foreigners or assassins came in?

Well, that wasn't Emmis's problem. He already knew coming here was pointless, but Lar had told him to go to the inn, so he would go to the inn. He marched forward.

At the door of the inn he paused; the two guards were watching him closely, but neither of them had said anything or reached for a weapon. These two, he noticed, were wearing swords, as well as bearing truncheons, which meant they were definitely not simply ordinary guards varying their patrol.

"Is there something going on?" Emmis asked, pointing to one guard's sword.

"Nothing that concerns you," the soldier replied.

"It's all right if I go inside?"

"We won't stop you, but mind your own business."

Emmis nodded, and stepped through the door into the inn's common room.

A third guard looked up at his entrance, and Emmis was startled to realize that he recognized this one. This was one of the two who had come up from the Palace last night to investigate the attempted assassination.

A white-haired old man was seated at a table just behind the guardsman, speaking intently with someone Emmis recognized as the innkeeper, who was sitting on the opposite side of the table. The innkeeper's face was toward Emmis, and he looked worried; the old man was facing away.

A few customers were scattered about - very few; Emmis counted four. Gita was serving one of them a mug of beer. No one else was in sight.

The familiar guard looked at Emmis, then tapped the old man on the shoulder. "My lord?" he said quietly.

The old man cut off whatever he was saying to the innkeeper in mid-sentence and looked up. "Yes?"

"My lord, Emmis of Shiphaven just came in."

So much, Emmis thought, for any hope that he might be able to get a quiet beer and slip away unnoticed.

The old man turned and looked at Emmis. Emmis stood where he was and smiled politely. He had no idea who the old man was, but anyone addressed as "my lord" was not someone he wanted to antagonize.

"Ask him to join us," the old man said.

The guardsman stepped forward, and Emmis came to meet him. "I heard," he said.

"I'll have to ask you to give me your knife," the guardsman said.

Startled, Emmis drew his belt-knife and handed it over, hilt first. Whatever was happening here, the soldier was taking it seriously; ordinarily no one even thought of a belt-knife as a weapon. Disarmed, he approached the table cautiously, and took a chair under the watchful gaze of the guard and the old man. The innkeeper was too busy looking confused and miserable to pay any attention to Emmis; he just stared ahead blindly as the young man settled into his seat.

"Hello," Emmis said. "I'm Emmis of Shiphaven."

"My name is Ildirin," the old man said. He did not offer a hand or make any other polite gestures, but his gaze remained focused on Emmis.

Ildirin. The guardsman had addressed him as "my lord." The age was about right. Emmis swallowed. "The overlord's uncle?"

"Yes."

That explained why the inn was being guarded. "I am honored."

"We have been discussing your contention that this man has allowed people to hire assassins in his inn."

"Oh." Emmis threw the innkeeper a quick glance. "Well, I don't know that the actual hiring took place here, but one of his guests did tell me her companion had hired assassins, and sure enough, I was attacked in my employer's home as soon as I got back there."

"I can't possibly be expected to know everything that people do here!" the innkeeper burst out.

"So you said," Lord Ildirin replied dryly. "And I have acknowledged the truth of your claim. Nonetheless, it would behoove you to tell me everything you have ever known, every whisper you have ever heard, about the four foreigners who slept under your roof."

"But I don't know anything," the innkeeper wailed. "They paid every day, in good coin, and then yesterday afternoon they all departed hurriedly. They settled their bill and took their things and they were gone!"

"And you can't tell me anything they said, anything they ate, anything they drank, anyone they met, anyone they declined to meet."

"No! I mind my own business and let my customers mind theirs!"

Lord Ildirin nodded, and turned to Emmis. "And you? Can you tell me any more?"

"A little," Emmis admitted.

"Then do."

Emmis blinked, then began describing how Gita had first brought him to meet Annis and the three Lumethans.

Lord Ildirin stopped him.

"Gita?" He glanced at the innkeeper.

"My niece," the innkeeper said.

"She's over there," Emmis said, pointing.

Lord Ildirin gestured to the guardsman. "Fetch her." Then he turned to the innkeeper. "You may go, but do not leave the premises."

"Why would I leave? It's my inn!"

"'Why' does not concern me. Just don't."

"Yes, my lord." The innkeeper slid from his chair and fled to the kitchen.

A moment later Gita took the chair her uncle had vacated. "My lord," she said, with a bob of her head. Then she turned to Emmis and said, "I have your bags."

Emmis blinked in surprise. "You do?"

"Yes. When I saw you run out I asked Annis what was going on, and she said it wasn't anything but she would be leaving, and I saw the bags and asked if those were hers - I thought she might have already packed - and she said no, they were yours, you'd left them, so I put them aside for you. They're in the scullery, in the locker with the special china."

"Thank you!" Emmis felt a rush of relief. He had not been looking forward to replacing his lost belongings, and now he wouldn't need to.

Gita smiled warmly. "You're welcome," she said.

Lord Ildirin cleared his throat. The others turned their attention to him.

"If you would be so kind as to explain how you came to introduce this young man to the foreigners...?"

"Oh, well, we had this Ashthasan woman here, she said she was waiting for someone, and then the day before yesterday she asked about another foreigner who was staying here, a man with a plumed hat and red coat, whether I knew anything about him, and I said I'd seen him and his assistant. She seemed surprised he had an assistant, and asked if I could arrange for her to speak to him without the foreigner knowing about it..."

Emmis sat and listened silently as Gita explained, and as Lord Ildirin backtracked and went over her entire story in relentless detail, asking her question after question.

Then Lord Ildirin started on him, asking him to describe his conversations with Annis, then the encounter with the two would-be assassins, and then backing up to how he had first met Lar Samber's son.

The interrogation went on and on, and Emmis began to become nervous. He glanced at the angle of the sunlight outside, and finally said, "My lord, the ambassador wanted me back not long after noon, so that I could bring his papers to the Palace."

"I do not think you need concern yourself with that," Ildirin replied. "After all, who is it you would be presenting those papers to?"

"Ah - yes, of course. To you. But I don't want him to worry about me; after all, there are assassins..."

"Yes." Ildirin looked up over his shoulder, then beckoned to the guardsman who still stood there.

"Yes, my lord?"

"We're done here for now. Send for the carriage, fetch the other two in, and tell the innkeeper that we will be taking his niece with us, to assist us further. She will be compensated for her time. And tell Zefna."

"Yes, my lord." He hurried toward the door.

Ildirin turned back to Emmis and Gita. "You two will come with me. One of the guards will accompany you, Gita, while you fetch Emmis's belongings from the scullery."

"Where are we going?" Gita said.

"The Palace?" Emmis asked.

"No," Ildirin said. "Through Street, in Allston, to talk to the ambassador.

Chapter Fifteen

Emmis had never ridden in a carriage before. He had rarely even seen a carriage; he doubted there was a single person living in Shiphaven who owned one. He wondered where Lord Ildirin kept his; he had never noticed anything like a stable or carriage barn connected with the Palace.

He had wound up facing backward as he rode, seated next to the guardsman, facing Lord Ildirin, with Gita diagonally across from him. The coachman and the other two guards were riding somewhere on the outside of the vehicle, where Emmis couldn't see them.

It was slightly disorienting, riding backward; he could not recall ever having done it before, as wagons usually didn't have any reversed seats. And they didn't have any seats upholstered in velvet like these, either, or lace curtains over glass windows. This was an adventure, riding in Lord Ildirin's coach - though it meant he wouldn't be making any stops on Bargain Street.

Gita was staring out the window, wide-eyed, as the carriage rumbled up Commerce Street; Emmis thought she looked more terrified than excited. Lord Ildirin was quite composed, his hands folded in his lap, his eyes closed; he appeared to be resting.

Emmis glanced sideways at the guardsman, but he looked bored, and not inclined to talk.

Emmis wondered who Zefna was. He had been hustled out to the carriage and had not seen who else the guard spoke to. From Lord Ildirin's phrasing it didn't seem as if Zefna could be any of the guards, or the coachman, or the innkeeper; who else was there?

He coughed, hoping the guard would take an interest.

Instead, Lord Ildirin's eyes opened. "Your pardon, Emmis," he said. "I was contemplating what I've learned today."

"Of course, my lord," Emmis said hastily. "I didn't mean to disturb you."

"But you're bored and curious, and after the better part of a mile, the novelty of riding in a nobleman's carriage has worn off. I entirely understand, young man. I could continue questioning you, if you like."

"Oh, that's all right," Emmis said hastily. Lord Ildirin's interrogation had been exhausting.

"Or perhaps there are questions you would like to ask me?"

"Ah..."

"I can always simply decline to answer, should you pry into inappropriate matters, and I think I would find it amusing to learn what you consider worth inquiring about. Ask away, sir."

"Ah... who is Zefna, my lord?"

Lord Ildirin smiled. "A person in my employ," he said. "Someone adept at listening without appearing to, watching without being seen, and gathering information without being noticed. He is residing in the Crooked Candle at present, alert for anything of interest."

"A..." Emmis had started to say, "A spy?" but caught himself in time. "An informant?"

"You could call him that. An observer. The common term would be a spy."

So much for tact, Emmis thought. "And he's staying at the Crooked Candle in case the foreigners come back?"

"Or in case anyone else comes looking for them, yes."

Emmis nodded. "I'm surprised to see you taking such an interest in all this, my lord."

"Oh?"

"I wouldn't have thought a single attack would attract the attention of someone as highly placed as yourself."

"Ah, but this is more than a single attack. It is a political matter, and one that may be of great interest to my nephew and the other triumvirs."

Emmis blinked. "Why?" he asked. "It's just another squabble among the Small Kingdoms."

"No, it is not," Lord Ildirin said, raising his hands and touching the tips of his index fingers together to form a point. "In two regards, it is not. Firstly, it involves the Empire of Vond, which is a new thing in the land we call the Small Kingdoms. For more than two hundred years, the number of nations there increased - at the end of the Great War there were perhaps eighty of the so-called kingdoms, though in fact several did not actually have kings, and five years ago, when my brother died and my nephew became overlord of this city, there were two hundred and four. Two hundred and four, Emmis, in an area perhaps a third the size of the Hegemony. That's a totally absurd number. There was no point in trying to maintain diplomatic relations with all of them, or to regulate trade with them all - there were just too many to keep straight, and their alliances and feuds and rivalries shifted so quickly that there was no possibility of maintaining any coherent policies toward most of them. We dealt with them as necessary, particularly those on our own border, or with operating ports, but for most the best we could do was to simply ignore them. We had treaties and agreements with Morria and Lamum and the like, but Azdara or Thuth might as well have not existed at all. If we did try to develop a policy, borders would shift, civil wars erupt, and we might well find ourselves facing two or three kingdoms where there had been one before. It was hopelessly unmanageable. We had despaired of it."

He leaned forward, and stared Emmis straight in the eye, as he said, "And then Vond the Warlock came along, and conquered Semma and Ophkar and Ksinallion, and the next thing we knew seventeen of the Small Kingdoms were combined into the Empire of Vond, and we had gone from two hundred and four to one hundred and eighty-eight. For the first time in recorded history, the number of governments in the Small Kingdoms, in Old Ethshar, had decreased. For the first time."

"Oh," Emmis said.

Ildirin sat upright again. "We want to encourage this trend. Oh, we don't necessarily want all of Old Ethshar reunited; that might pose a challenge of an entirely different sort. But reducing the number from hundreds to dozens - that we would welcome. So we are very interested indeed in seeing what's to become of the Empire of Vond, on that count alone - and that's without even mentioning that it is ruled by an Ethsharite, and that the official language of the new government is Ethsharitic. We have hopes of dealing with Lord Sterren and his Imperial Council on a rational basis, untroubled by ancient feuds, byzantine family ties, absurd border disputes, irrational traditions, and the general barbarity of the region." He turned up an empty palm. "We may, of course, be wildly over-optimistic about this - but we certainly don't want to see the first Vondish ambassador to our city assassinated before we have even met him."

The carriage jerked and bumped just then as they rounded a corner; Emmis glanced out the window and saw that they had turned onto West Warehouse Street. It would never have occurred to him to take this route, but the coachman presumably knew what he was doing. Perhaps the horses didn't like the slope up to High Street.

Then he turned back to Lord Ildirin. "You said there were two things?"

"Yes." Ildirin nodded. "The other one is much simpler. The attack took place here, in Ethshar of the Spices. We don't allow that. That's been one way we handled all the two hundred-some Small Kingdoms, by imposing a very firm set of rules. One of those rules is that the Hegemony is neutral, that they shall not bring any of their thousands of petty squabbles here. We don't care whether the Imryllirionese think the Korosans are all demons in human guise, or the Korosans think Imryllirion is the Northern Empire reborn - here, in Ethshar, they will all treat each other as human beings, equal in rights and virtues, or we will either expel or hang them all, Korosan and Imryllirionese

alike. They don't need to like one another, but by all the gods they will respect one another while they are within our walls, and they will obey our laws, or they will pay for it. If this Ashthasan, or these Lumethans, had hired an assassin in Hend or Ghelua or wherever he took ship to kill the Vondish ambassador, we would not be pleased, but we would do nothing. If they had hired a demonologist to sink his ship somewhere in the Gulf of the East, we would make no real protest. But once he set his foot on our docks, he was under our protection, and they either knew that, or should have known it. And for them to attack you, as well - an Ethsharite, in his home city - well, that privilege we reserve to our native-born scoundrels, and forbid to these imported troublemakers."

"All right," Emmis said. "So you're serious about finding out what happened and punishing those responsible."

"Yes."

"But then why are we here? Why are you, personally, my lord, questioning people in Shiphaven and Allston? Why not hire magicians to tell you where you can find the Lumethans and the people who attacked me? I know the magistrates call in magicians sometimes - why didn't you?"

Ildirin smiled, and ran the fingers of his left hand through his long white beard. "Once again, there are two reasons," he said. "I did not choose to involve any magicians because this is a political matter, and I do not care to attract the attention of the Wizards' Guild or the Council of Warlocks to it. I do not want either of them, nor any of the other magicians' guilds, meddling in this. The possibility that the Wizards' Guild will decide that the existence of the Empire of Vond violates the prohibition on magicians in government, due to the way it was created, and that the Empire must therefore be destroyed and its seventeen provinces restored to their former independence, is not as unlikely as I would like. I do not want the Council of Warlocks to decide that they are Vond's rightful heirs and therefore should rule the Empire, under the terms of their own rules on Called warlocks. Most particularly, I don't want both of these to happen simultaneously, as the resulting conflict between the two orders of magic might well destroy the World. Magicians do talk to one another, and so I prefer not to involve any magicians in this investigation." He grimaced. "At least, not yet. I may resort to magic, should the matter prove intractable by other means."

"That's one reason," Emmis acknowledged. "What's the other?"

The old man's smile returned.

"I was bored," he said. "I thought that investigating this would be entertaining."

"You like asking all these questions?" Gita asked, startling the men. Neither of them had noticed that she was listening, but she had indeed turned her attention from the window to her host.

Ildirin turned to her. "Why, yes, my dear, I do."

She shook her head in amazement. "I don't like answering them!"

"Well, answering them is rather different," Ildirin replied.

"I don't know anything about warlocks or treaties or the Small Kingdoms."

"But you know what happened in your uncle's inn," Ildirin pointed out. "I already know about warlocks and treaties and the Small Kingdoms, so I don't need anyone to tell me any of that, but I do not know what's happened in the Crooked Candle these last few days, so I want you to tell me."

"I've told you, though!"

"Indeed, you have been very cooperative, but I suspect there are details that could be of use to me that you have not yet revealed, details that you know but do not realize could be of use. You may not even know you know them. So I ask questions, in hopes of stumbling upon these things that seem to you to be the most utterly mundane, boring, trivial, and irrelevant facts, but which might reveal to me entire vistas of possibility I had not considered - or that may instead close off doors that I had thought were open, and save my men hours of wasted effort in their pursuit of these criminals."

Gita stared at the old man, baffled, then threw Emmis a quick look.

Emmis turned up an empty palm. Ildirin's manner of speaking was a little hard to follow sometimes, but this last speech had been clear enough, and Emmis could not see how to make it much plainer.

"He thinks you might not realize some little detail is important," Emmis said, when Gita appeared unsatisfied with the gesture. "Something that will tell him where the guards can find the assassins. Some name they mentioned, some little thing they were carrying, something."

"I don't know anything like that!" Gita insisted.

"Perhaps you don't," Ildirin said soothingly, "but perhaps you do, and careful questioning may discover it."

"But I don't."

Ildirin sighed. "Then think of this as your chance to ride in a fine carriage, and perhaps visit a house in Allston, and spend more time in this pleasant young man's company, and be paid a round for your trouble."

"A round?"

"Eight bits. Yes."

"In copper? Not iron?"

Ildirin snorted. "Girl, I am the overlord's uncle. I haven't even seen an iron coin in the last twenty years!"

"Foreign sailors try to use them sometimes," Gita said. "My uncle gets furious if I accept them."

"As well he should," Ildirin said. "They haven't been legal currency in the city for more than two hundred years."

"We use them on the docks sometimes," Emmis said. "For gambling, when we don't want to risk real money, since we do get them from foreigners sometimes and they aren't accepted anywhere."

"Interesting," Ildirin said. "I hadn't known that." Then he focused on Gita. "Did any of the Lumethans try to pay with iron?"

"No," Gita said, and the questioning that had gone so long at the inn was begun anew in the carriage.

The nobleman switched back and forth between Gita and Emmis, trying to ferret out new details. Emmis did his best to answer Lord Ildirin's questions, but also looked out the windows every so often, trying to identify the route they were taking.

They rolled along Warehouse Street, almost into Spicetown, and then turned onto Moat Street, before turning again onto North Street, which brought them out onto the plaza in front of the Palace. It would never have occurred to Emmis to take so northerly a path, but it did avoid any sort of upgrade, and of course Lord Ildirin would be accustomed to routes that led to and from the Palace.

They did not stop in the plaza, though, but rolled across it at a stately pace as people hurried out of the path of the horses, and out the southeast corner, up onto Arena Street.

Here at last was an upgrade they could not avoid, but it did not seem to trouble the horses or the coachman; the carriage rolled on, unhindered, up Arena Street.

Lord Ildirin's questions were finally slowing, to Emmis's relief; he really could not see any significance in whether or not he had noticed the length of Hagai's fingernails - which he hadn't - or in some of the other details Ildirin was now asking about. He was relieved that Ildirin's questions had never approached too closely anything Lar had told him not to repeat; the old man seemed to be focused entirely on what had taken place at the Crooked Candle, or on his encounter with the two assassins, and not interested in why Lar had come to Ethshar.

And then, rather than asking another question, Lord Ildirin gestured toward the guardsman sitting beside Emmis and said, "This is Ahan, by the way. He will be accompanying you on your errands."

"What errands, my lord?" Emmis asked, startled.

"Whatever errands your employer sends you on; I want you out of the

house while the two of us speak. The coachman will be escorting Gita back to the Crooked Candle, but I assume the ambassador can find something more constructive for you to do."

"You're done with us, then?"

"For the present."

"And have you figured out who the Lumethans hired to kill the ambassador, or where they might be found?"

Emmis regretted the snide words even as they were leaving his lips, but apologizing would probably only make matters worse; he let the question stand.

Lord Ildirin smiled at him - not a nice smile this time, not like his previous expressions. "Not yet," he said. "Have you?"

"No," Emmis said. "I'm just a dockworker and guide. I don't investigate anything."

"Of course." Ildirin glanced at Gita.

"I just help out my uncle!" she said. "None of this has anything to do with me."

"And I just help out my nephew," Ildirin said. "It seems a better use of my time than sitting around waiting to die."

Gita looked at him nervously, then turned away.

The exchange made Emmis uncomfortable; he looked out the carriage window just in time to see them negotiate the turn onto Through Street.

"We're here," he said.

Ildirin glanced out. "So we are," he said.

A moment later the carriage came to a halt, and three of the four inside passengers debarked at the front door of the rented house. Gita started to climb out as well, but Lord Ildirin held up a bony hand to stop her.

"You will stay in the carriage, please," he said. He reached for his purse and counted out eight bits; she crouched in the door of the coach, waiting, as he did. Then he held out the handful of money.

She cupped her own hands, and he poured the coins into them.

"Thank you, my lord," she said.

"You're welcome," he said. Then he called to the coachman, "Take her to Shiphaven Market and leave her there, then come back here and wait for me."

"Yes, my lord."

One of the two guards who had been riding on the back of the carriage had jumped down; the other remained in place. While Emmis and the disembarked guard unloaded Emmis's two bags, Lord Ildirin took a moment to whisper instructions to the man on the carriage, then turned away.

The coachman shook the reins, and the carriage rolled away, leaving Emmis, Lord Ildirin, and two guardsman behind. Emmis lifted his baggage, delighted to have it back. He wondered whether anything might be missing. He peered after the carriage, hoping for one more glimpse of Gita; she had saved his belongings for him, which had been kind of her, but it didn't mean he didn't think she might have gone through a few things and perhaps appropriated an item or two. She was pleasant enough, but he didn't trust her.

"Now, to meet with this ambassador," Ildirin said, and the four of them turned toward the big green door.

Chapter Sixteen

Emmis glanced sideways at the guardsman.

Lord Ildirin had said the man's name was Ahan, and had assigned the guardsman to accompany Emmis to the Wizards' Quarter. He had insisted that Emmis go away while he discussed matters of state with the ambassador, and Lar, after his initial surprise and reluctance, had agreed.

"It's nothing you'd be interested in," he had said.

That might well be true, but Emmis still resented being ordered out of his own new home. He had insisted on taking the time to put his miraculously-recovered luggage in his own room, with the door securely locked.

He had also insisted on a few words with Lar before allowing himself to be escorted out the front door.

Escorted he had been, though. Emmis and Ahan had then walked from Through Street up Arena to Wizard Street, and in all that time the guard had not said a word.

The other guardsman, the one Emmis and Lar had found on Games Street the night before, had been chatty and reasonably friendly; this Ahan, though, seemed to feel that talking on duty violated proper procedure. Even smiling seemed beyond him.

Emmis could not decide whether that was a good thing or a bad one. It meant that he didn't need to explain anything, and could rest his voice after Lord Ildirin's long interrogation, but it also made him a little nervous. What was the man thinking, behind those expressionless features?

It probably didn't matter, Emmis told himself. Lord Ildirin had told Ahan to accompany Emmis, so Ahan was accompanying Emmis; he hadn't told Ahan to do anything else, so far as Emmis knew, so Ahan presumably wasn't going to interfere in any of Emmis's business.

Of course, if Ahan weren't along, Emmis might have gone somewhere other than the Wizards' Quarter. The house still needed more furniture and kitchenware, and another trip to the market to replenish the pantry would not be a bad idea.

But trying to dicker with carpenters or farmers with a soldier standing at his shoulder did not appeal to Emmis. Magicians would be less intimidated, and he really did want to talk to a theurgist about that doorway shrine; even if he couldn't work in any other questions, it would be good to settle that.

And other questions were certainly a possibility. Lar's instructions, when they had discussed Emmis's intentions, had been interestingly vague, probably because Ildirin and two guards had been within earshot. Lar had agreed that the shrine needed to be identified, and the proper treatment of the idol therein determined, but then he had added, "And of course, if anything else comes to mind, you could ask the theurgist about that, as well."

"Anything else?"

"Yes - whatever you think we might need to know."

"Ah," Emmis had said.

That could cover a very broad range of subjects indeed, from Annis the Merchant to the towers of Lumeth, from Vond the Great Warlock to hiring assassins. Emmis wasn't sure just which of those questions Lar most wanted answered, but he couldn't very well ask with Lord Ildirin and his men there.

"You'll need to pay, of course," Lar had said, handing him a purse.

Emmis had not yet looked inside, but he had felt the surprising weight of that purse, and he suspected he was carrying a couple of rounds of gold - far more than the cost of identifying a shrine. Which made the guard's presence a little more reassuring. Ordinarily Emmis was perfectly capable of defending himself from the city's more unsavory residents, but a purse full of gold was a considerably greater temptation than he usually offered.

Ahan's presence might make it difficult to ask any really interesting questions, but Emmis intended to try.

They passed Wizard Street, then Sorcery Street, then the mysteriously-named Gaja Street, and Ahan had still not said a word. Emmis glanced down Warlock Street, wondering if he might catch a glimpse of Ishta, but he did not.

Then finally they reached Priest Street, where he turned right - and stopped.

Ahan almost ran into him, but still said nothing.

"Do you know any of these people?" Emmis asked, with a gesture at the signs and shop-fronts.

"No," Ahan said. "Should I?"

"You never bought a prayer, or consulted a god's oracle?"

"No. My mother did when I was a child, but she dealt with an old man in our own neighborhood, she didn't come here."

Emmis sighed, and looked along the street again.

Theurgists were a little different from most other magicians; it wasn't always the magician's name on the signboard. Many of the signs instead announced the name of a temple or shrine, such as the Temple of Divine Peace, or the Sanctuary of the Priests of Asham.

Emmis had no idea who or what Asham was - perhaps a god, perhaps a high priest, perhaps a place, or a cult or, for all Emmis knew, a rock someone had decided was holy. He did not want to take the time to find out what Asham was, or what sort of divine peace might be offered; instead he looked further, hoping for more informative names.

Kirsha the Immaculate didn't sound especially promising, nor did High Priest Senesson of Southmarket. The Temple of True Healing at least gave him some idea what services it might provide, but was not what he wanted.

He began walking down the street, looking at the window displays - unlike the other streets, many of the buildings here didn't have ground-floor windows, but some did. He ignored shrines and fountains and altars; those didn't tell him anything. Many of the businesses were quite elaborately decorated, with gods and goddesses painted on doors or panels, with glittering tapestries hung in windows; bright enamel and gleaming gilt were everywhere. Shrines were common on most streets in Ethshar, but here they proliferated wildly, with idol-filled niches seemingly every few feet, sometimes two or three built into a single wall one above the other.

Amid all this gaudy spectacle one shop caught his attention, and he stopped.

It was indeed a shop, rather than a temple, with a relatively plain wooden door painted purple, flanked by largely-empty display windows curtained with maroon velvet. If not for the signboard Emmis might have thought the proprietor was some other sort of magician entirely, since after all, there was no law saying that only theurgists could operate businesses on Priest Street. It was merely custom for the various sorts of magician to sort themselves out into individual streets, and several streets did mix multiple varieties.

This shop was so plain in comparison to its neighbors that it seemed to belong somewhere else entirely - among the warlocks, perhaps.

The sign above the door, however, read CORINAL THE THEURGIST, and a gilt-edged placard in the left-hand window proclaimed, "Practical Prayers for Many Purposes: We Can Summon More Than A Score of Deities!" Smaller print at the bottom added, "If We Cannot Aid You Directly, We Offer An Inexpensive Referral Service."

That sounded like exactly what Emmis needed. He crossed the street and tried the door.

It opened easily, and he peered in to what appeared to be a deserted study. Three high-backed chairs were arranged around a low table, and the walls beyond were lined with bookshelves. Although it was full daylight outside most of the room was dim - the curtains were drawn. An oil lamp was burning in a bracket above the table, however, casting a pool of light.

"Hello?" Emmis called.

A head suddenly appeared around the side of the chair most nearly facing away from him, as a white-haired old man turned to look at him.

"Oh, hello, there," the old man said. "Come in!"

There was a thump as he closed a thick book, another thump as he set it on the table, and by the time Emmis and Ahan had stepped into the shop the old man was rising from his chair and approaching them, hand extended. He was short, but solidly built, despite his obviously advanced age.

"I'm Corinal," he said. "How can I help you?"

Emmis blinked at him. "This looks more like a library than a magician's shop," he said.

"I like to read," Corinal said mildly.

Emmis nodded. "Of course," he said. "But you're a theurgist?"

The old man smiled crookedly. "It says so on my sign, certainly, and

wouldn't it be foolish to advertise that if it weren't so?"

Emmis shook the offered hand, and returned the smile a bit sheepishly.

"I had a question or two," he said.

"Questions I can answer, or questions requiring divine assistance?"

"Probably requiring divine assistance," Emmis said.

Corinal nodded. "I'll see what I can do to get you your answers, then."

He glanced at Ahan, who had closed the front door and was now standing with his back to it. "Might I ask one of my own first, though?"

"I... yes, of course," Emmis said.

"Why is this soldier here?"

Emmis turned up an empty palm. "Ask him," he said.

Corinal turned to Ahan. "Well?"

Ahan cleared his throat. "Lord Ildirin has ordered me to accompany this man wherever he goes, to guard him against attack, to prevent him from committing any illegal acts, and to report back on his actions."

"Bodyguard, jailer, and spy, all on just two feet, then?" Corinal asked. "And why does Lord Ildirin care what becomes of him?"

"I do what I'm told, sir; I didn't ask why."

"This is Lord Ildirin, the overlord's brother... no, I'm sorry, the new overlord's uncle?"

"Yes, sir."

He turned back to Emmis. "Do you know why Lord Ildirin has decided you require such attention?"

"Because I work for the Vondish ambassador to Ethshar, and stopped an assassination attempt on him yesterday."

"Oh, really? That's charming! Honestly, I'm delighted to hear that. A Vondish ambassador, you say? From that upstart empire south of the Small Kingdoms?"

"Yes."

"And Lord Ildirin thinks the assassins might decide to retaliate against you for your interference, or perhaps you're secretly working with the assassins, or perhaps there aren't any assassins and this is all part of some complicated scheme you're involved in, or all of these at once, and so he's assigned this fine fellow to follow you around and make your life difficult until he's more nearly satisfied that he knows what's happening?"

"Something like that," Emmis agreed.

"And you've decided to come ask me your questions anyway? Then you have nothing to hide?"

Emmis grimaced. "I haven't done anything wrong," he said. "And I thought I'd have an easier time dealing with you with this guard at my elbow than I would trying to dicker with cabinet-makers and cutlers."

"You are wise beyond your years, young man. Come in, sit down, both of you, and tell me what you want to know." He gestured toward the chairs.

A moment later the three of them were seated around the table; Emmis could see that the book Corinal had been reading was entitled *The Pursuit of the Shatra*. He had no idea what a shatra was, or why anyone would pursue one; the book looked very old.

"Now, what did you want to ask me?" Corinal asked.

"Ah. The ambassador has rented a house on Through Street in Allston, and the house has a shrine by the door. We wanted to know whose shrine it is, and what would be appropriate for us to do with it."

"Oh, an easy one. That's exactly the sort of question best answered by Unniel the Discerning, goddess of information about theurgy, sorcery, and certain other topics. I can summon her for half a round of silver."

Emmis automatically said, "I'll pay two bits," but in fact he was relieved. As magical prices went, four bits in silver for anything was a bargain.

"Three bits in silver and one of copper," Corinal countered.

"Three silver bits," Emmis said. "No copper."

"Don't expect me to be so flexible on more difficult matters, should

any arise," Corinal said, reaching up for something from one of the shelves. "Unniel is easy, though, so you have a deal. Tell me about this shrine, and just where it is." He pulled out a thin book that had a quill inserted in it like a bookmark, set it on the table, then reached up again and found a small bottle of ink.

"It's on Through Street just a few doors east of Arena Street," Emmis said, watching as Corinal opened the book and laid it flat on the table. The right-hand page was blank; the left-hand one had a few illegible words hand-written at the top. "It's a yellow house we rent from Kather of Allston, and the shrine is just to the right of the front door."

Corinal uncorked the ink bottle, dipped the quill, and began writing in the book. "Go on," he said.

"The idol is a goddess - or a woman - in a green robe and a golden crown. Her hands are down and open, as if she's giving something, but she isn't smiling. There's an offering bowl at her feet, but there's nothing in it but dust."

"I think I know this one without even asking," Corinal said, nodding. "You can have my guess for two bits, or I'll ask the goddess Unniel for you for three."

Emmis hesitated, then said, "I think you'd better consult the goddess."

Corinal scribbled another few words, then looked up from the book. "And what else did you want to ask me? If anything else is in Unniel's bailiwick, I might as well ask her everything at once."

"You can do that?"

"Of course!"

Emmis glanced at Ahan. "I had several other questions, actually, but I don't think any of them have anything to do with theurgy or sorcery."

Corinal also cast a glance at the guardsman, then grinned, his thinning beard seeming to spread itself wider as he did. "Would you like to drive Lord Ildirin mad with curiosity, then?"

"What?"

The theurgist turned the book to face Emmis, then handed him the quill. "Write your questions here," he said. "I'll sort them out and give you a price, and you won't need to say a word this fine soldier will hear."

Emmis looked from Corinal to Ahan.

"I won't stop you," Ahan said. "And I won't try to read it, because I can't read very well. But I'll tell Lord Ildirin about this, and he may not like it."

"Well, we'll have all the questions written down for him, won't we?" Corinal said. "He can come and pay me for them. Not for the answers, of course - you know the rules about customer privacy."

"I'll tell him some of the answers myself, if he wants them," Emmis said. "I want to know who the assassins I fought were, and where we can find them, and where the three Lumethan spies are..."

Corinal held up a hand. "Write it down!" he said. "Write it all down."

Emmis lifted the quill and looked at Ahan, who turned up an empty palm. "I won't stop you," he repeated.

Emmis nodded, dipped the quill in the ink, and began writing.

The list took a surprisingly long time. As soon as he had finished one question, he thought of another, and another.

After a few moments of watching his customer scribble, Corinal had picked up *The Pursuit of the Shatra* and resumed his interrupted reading.

Ahan simply sat and waited, and in his meditative silence looked more like a theurgist than did Corinal.

Chapter Seventeen

There was a sudden feeling of pressure, as if the air itself had become heavier; Emmis's ears ached. A golden light appeared in the crack beneath the

door to the theurgist's inner chamber.

"It would seem the spell worked," Ahan remarked, startling Emmis. The guardsman was not in the habit of speaking unnecessarily, but he had volunteered this comment without any prompting at all.

"Not necessarily," Emmis said. "He made something happen, but it might not be the god he wanted."

"True." Ahan nodded.

Emmis could not think of anything more to say, so the two fell silent again, and sat waiting in Corinal's parlor - or rather, Emmis sat, and Ahan stood.

The strange pressure in the air persisted, as did the glow, though odd shadows sometimes moved in the golden light. Emmis was not sure whether he could hear faint voices through the door, or whether he was imagining it; he certainly couldn't make out any words. He was tempted to get up and put an ear to the closed door, but Ahan's presence deterred him, and the knowledge that there was probably a god or goddess on the other side, and that the deity would know he was there, was downright intimidating. From what little Emmis knew of the attitudes of the gods he didn't think the god would mind, but there was still something disturbing about the idea.

He and Corinal had, after some dickering, settled on five silver bits for any answers Unniel could provide to the long list of questions Emmis had written, regardless of how many that might be, so long as it was three or more. Two questions would cost four bits, and one would be just the three he had paid in advance.

Emmis would then have the option of paying Corinal to invoke another god to answer questions Unniel could not, and Corinal had therefore appended a final question to the list: "Which gods or goddesses may best be able to answer any of the questions above that you have not answered fully?"

Any other invocation would cost more; Emmis fully understood that. He patted the purse Lar had given him; he had quietly counted its contents while Corinal had been preparing to invoke Unniel, and knew that it held three rounds of gold. That ought to be enough for almost any god in the pantheon.

And they might need almost any god in the pantheon; Emmis had let himself be carried away by the opportunity, and had asked questions about assassins, Annis, Hagai, Neyam, Morkai, the Empire of Vond, Vond the Warlock, Lar, Lumeth of the Towers, Ashthasa, warlockry, warlocks, Lord Ildirin, Azradelle the Tomboy, Gita, his luggage, swords, cookery, kitchen supplies - he had never consulted a theurgist before and might never have the chance to consult one again, so he had gone a little overboard.

He wondered what Corinal thought of some of those questions; Emmis wondered just how much of a fool he had made of himself. He stared at the closed door, trying to imagine what was on the other side. What did Unniel look like? The traditional idols always showed goddesses as beautiful women, usually tall and thin and inhumanly perfect, but otherwise human in appearance. Was that right, though? He had heard that it was not, that goddesses were hard to look at, hard to see clearly; they were somehow both there and not there at the same time. The painters and sculptors had no way to represent them accurately, so they did their best to depict what they could see.

If he flung open that door, what would he see? A tall, glowing woman, or something else entirely? Why did the gods never appear in public? Why did theurgists work behind closed doors?

He should have put those questions on the list, he decided, with a wry grimace.

He realized, suddenly, that he did not know how long he had been staring at the closed door; something strange had happened to his sense of time. He turned and glanced at the curtained windows, and saw that no daylight was visible through them.

The voices he hadn't been sure he was hearing had stopped, and the pressure in the air was lessening; his ears were ringing.

Then the golden glow vanished, and he heard footsteps. He rose from his seat.

The door opened to reveal Corinal silhouetted in perfectly ordinary lamplight. He stepped out into the parlor, smiling wearily. A trickle of blood was seeping from one nostril into his beard; he held the book where Emmis had written his questions in one hand, and a sheaf of paper or parchment in the other.

"Well, that was interesting!" he said, a little too loudly. "I have never before had Unniel's company for so long. She found your list of questions rather challenging, I think." His voice cracked a little on the final phrase.

"Are you all right?" Emmis asked, suddenly concerned for the old man.

"Oh, I'll be fine," Corinal said, waving him away. "Let us just say that the presence of the divine can be wearing on us mere mortals."

Suddenly feeling guilty that he had apparently endangered the theurgist's health, and perhaps his life, for a few bits in silver, Emmis said, "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"You can step aside and let me sit down, my boy. I've been chatting with Unniel for fifty-odd years now, ever since I was an apprentice; I've nothing to fear from her." He grimaced. "However, I normally only speak with her for a few minutes at a time, no more than a quarter of an hour, while you, sir, with your infernal list, kept her occupied and in my study for half the afternoon."

"I'm sorry..."

"Don't be," Corinal interrupted, as he settled onto a chair. "It was most instructive!" He dropped the book on a table and lifted his sheaf of paper. "Let me tell you some of what she said, though I won't promise this is in any particular order."

Emmis glanced at Ahan. "Couldn't I read it, perhaps?"

Corinal shook his head. "I scribbled it down as quickly as I could, and I doubt you could read it. My handwriting is not one of my more impressive accomplishments." He lifted the papers. "Your doorway shrine is, as I suspected, an idol of Piskor the Generous; as long as that house is under her protection, no one within its walls shall starve, and all drinking water therein shall be pure and wholesome. To maintain her blessing you should place a copper bit in the bowl at least once a year; if it's stolen, that's fine, the goddess will consider it well spent. Should the goddess intervene directly on your behalf, extending your food supplies or cleansing your water of disease, you may be called upon, through dreams or other divine messages, to perform certain minor services on her behalf for the poor and unfortunate of the city - distributing food in the Hundred-Foot Field, perhaps. Nothing too onerous. You do not want to shirk these duties, should you be summoned; not only will Piskor's protections be withdrawn, but you will find your neighbors becoming hostile."

"Thank you," Emmis said.

Corinal glanced at his papers.

"Hagai of Lumeth was able to locate Lar Samber's son at any time, and in fact can still locate Lar at any time, by means of a blessing bestowed upon him by the god Aibem. It would seem this Hagai is a moderately-accomplished theurgist himself, though I flatter myself that I'm his better at the art. At any rate, as long as the blessing lasts Hagai can see an unnatural glow in the sky above Lar, no matter how near or far he might be, and he can simply follow this glow to locate our dear Vondish ambassador, at any time of day or night."

"I... he can do that?" Emmis asked.

"So it would seem. It's a good stunt, really; I've never encountered it before. I suspect someone in the Small Kingdoms only recently stumbled upon the idea." He cleared his throat. "On all your questions concerning Azradelle of Shiphaven, Unniel refers you to the goddess Mazhom. Since Mazhom is the goddess of courtship, I think you can guess what the tenor of those answers is likely to be."

Emmis felt himself blushing.

"On the subject of warlockry, Unniel declines to say anything useful at all, except that she knows of nothing in Lumeth that has any connection with warlocks. In every other question on your list that relates to warlockry, she insists that there is some great misunderstanding of what's happening, one so profound that she cannot explain the truth to humans in an even remotely intelligible fashion. People have been trying to get the gods to explain warlockry ever since the Night of Madness, and it just isn't coming across."

"That seems strange," Emmis remarked.

"Yes, doesn't it? Nonetheless, it's so, and the gap in understanding is so great that Unniel can't even suggest another god we might consult on the subject." Corinal shook his head. "Even the gods have their limits."

"And the other questions...?"

"Well, Unniel has no idea where any of the foreigners can be found; she suggests consulting Aibem, who is obviously capable of locating specific individuals, as Hagai's little spell demonstrates." He shuffled the top sheet of paper to the bottom and peered at the next page. "She did know how the three Lumethans got to Ethshar so quickly, though - by means of a spell called Hallin's Transporting Fissure. That took them from Lumeth to Ethshar in a matter of minutes."

"I never heard of it," Emmis said. He glanced at Ahan.

"Neither have I," the guardsman said. "I have little to do with magic."

"If it got them here that fast, it must be powerful magic," Emmis remarked. "Is it wizardry?"

"Probably. Unniel offered no details; you'd best ask a wizard if you want to know more about it." Corinal glanced at the papers. "Annis the Merchant was already in the city, and was contacted by means of the Greater Spell of Invaded Dreams."

"More wizardry?"

"That one I am familiar with; yes, it's wizardry." He turned to the next paper. "You asked what in Lumeth is guarded by protective spells; she reports that the list is relatively short. Several rooms in the government fortress they call the New Castle have wards and protections of one sort or another, the castle itself has a few spells on it, and the various entrances to a miles-long tunnel used by the Cult of Demerchan are all booby-trapped in various ways. Of course the famous Towers themselves are massively guarded by every sort of magic, dozens of spells, on all three of them, and a few assorted diaries, spell-books, lock-boxes, and the like have protective runes, wardings, and such."

"A tunnel used by the Cult of Demerchan?" That was interesting; Lar had mentioned them. They were assassins - and they were active in Lumeth. Did that mean anything?

"So she said. She gave no further information."

Emmis nodded, and considered the rest of the list. Spell-books and important government offices, yes, but...

"Why the towers? Why do they have so many protective spells? They aren't just pre-war ruins, then?"

"As it happens, you asked what the towers are, and Unniel answered, after a fashion, and that might give us a clue. She said that the towers are sorcerous talismans, the oldest and greatest sorcery in the World."

Emmis blinked. "Sorcery?"

"So the goddess tells me, and it's our understanding that the gods cannot lie. Their answers are sometimes misleading, but they don't actually lie."

"They're talismans?"

"So she says."

"But... they're towers. Fifty or sixty feet high, aren't they?"

"Three hundred feet high, actually. You asked that, too."

"Nothing is three hundred feet high," Emmis protested.

"The towers of Lumeth are."

Emmis had trouble comprehending that. He knew that the big towers in Westgate were no more than sixty feet, and they were huge. The lighthouse at the end of the eastern breakwater was perhaps ninety feet, and the Seacorner watchtower was said to be a hundred or more, and that was so tall that it took a brave man to climb it. Courage aside, Emmis had heard that some of the largest soldiers were excused from serving there for fear their weight would cause it to collapse.

And the Lumeth towers were three times that height?

Of course, they might be much, much larger at the base; they would have to be. But that made the other point all the more unbelievable. "And they're talismans?"

"So she says."

"But - talismans are mostly little things, things a person can carry. I've seen a few on the docks, and none were too big for a man to lift. Unniel says there are three of them three hundred feet high?"

"Indeed she does. I must confess, Emmis, I hadn't realized you were so interested in this particular subject; you didn't seem to emphasize it on your list."

"I hadn't realized I was, either," Emmis said. "Not until you told me they were sorcerous. So are there sorcerers guarding them?"

"Not that Unniel mentioned; she said they have many powerful protective spells, but they were mostly put there by wizards, not sorcerers."

"Why would wizards be guarding sorcery?"

"I have no idea, and Unniel did not happen to volunteer any information on the subject. Perhaps you should ask a wizard."

"Perhaps I should," Emmis agreed. "Or a sorcerer. What do the towers do? I mean, a sorcerer's ordinary talismans can find things, or talk to people far away, or knock down buildings, or answer questions, or a dozen other things - they're magic, and they're all small enough to carry. What kind of magic could possibly call for a talisman three hundred feet high?"

"According to Unniel, they keep out poisons."

Emmis blinked, and stared at Corinal. "They do what?"

"She says they keep out poisons, poisons that surround the entire World."

"What poisons?"

"I have no idea. She did not trouble herself to explain further, and at that point I was simply trying to get through your list before my eardrums burst, or I choked on my own blood, so I did not ask for more details. I thought perhaps you would know."

"Me? I'm a dockworker. I don't know anything about sorcery or poisons or any of this!"

"That's unfortunate."

Emmis grimaced, then glanced at Ahan, but he had already turned up an empty palm, signifying ignorance. Emmis turned back to Corinal.

"It seems as if there's a lot of wizardry in Lumeth," he said. "That transporting whatever-it-is, and the protective spells on the towers, and all that. Isn't that more than most of the Small Kingdoms?"

"I wouldn't really know," Corinal said. "I agree, though, that it does not accord well with the popular image."

"And where does that tunnel go? Why are there assassins there?"

"That was not on your list of questions; shall we start compiling a new list, to present to Aibem or Bellab or Mazhom?"

Emmis considered that for a moment.

He certainly had plenty of questions - Unniel's responses had raised almost as many as she had answered. On the other hand, Corinal said none of the gods would give useful answers about warlockry, and that was the topic Lar most urgently wanted addressed. Consulting Mazhom at all would be a waste of time; Emmis knew that Azradelle was no longer any of his business, and nothing could come of asking a god to confirm that. This Aibem might be useful in locating the assassins before they could make another attempt...

"Wait a minute," he said. "Didn't I ask whether there would be further attempts on the Vondish ambassador's life?"

"Ah, yes, thank you for reminding me!" Corinal shuffled through his papers. "You did indeed ask that, and Unniel denied any foreknowledge on the subject; she claims to be unable to see the future except when it's inevitable, and this is not such a case. However, she also said that there had been two assassination attempts, rather than the one you mentioned; the second involved a wizard's spell called Fendel's Assassin, which was performed earlier today." He looked up from the scribbled notes. "I'm sorry, I really should have mentioned that one sooner, shouldn't I?"

Emmis stared at him. "Yes, you should!" he said. He snatched up his purse and started toward the door.

A heavy hand fell on his shoulder.

"Pay the magician," Ahan said.

"But he said..."

"I heard him. But the ambassador may already be dead, or the spell may have failed, or it may not strike for days, and not paying a magician is a very bad idea."

Emmis stared at Corinal. "Do you know anything about this Fendel's Assassin?" He fumbled with his purse as he spoke.

"Not a thing," Corinal said. "Assassination is something I try to avoid. Perhaps..."

"...I should ask a wizard. Yes. Thank you." He finally found the coins he wanted, and thrust them at Corinal.

"Thank you," the theurgist said, accepting the handful of silver. "And I wish you the best of luck in dealing with... well, whatever it is you're dealing with."

"Thank you," Emmis said, as he pulled tight the drawstring on his purse and ran for the door. "If you know a good deity to pray to for me, I would appreciate it."

He was outside the shop by the time he finished the sentence.

Ahan was close on his heels, and the two men sprinted up Priest Street together.

Chapter Eighteen

Emmis's breath gave out two blocks north of the Arena, and he slowed to a trot. This was the second time he had gone running across the city to warn Lar of an assassination attempt; he really hadn't expected it to become a habit.

Ahan slowed beside him. Emmis threw him a glance. "I don't suppose you could run on ahead?" he asked.

"I was ordered to accompany you."

"You don't think this situation might justify bending those orders a little?"

Ahan looked at him, then turned his attention to the street ahead again. "If I were still just another guardsman, it certainly would justify some reinterpretation, but I'm not. I'm one of Lord Ildirin's elite escort, and we have very strict instructions - we are to obey Lord Ildirin exactly, unless doing so would endanger Lord Ildirin or the overlord himself. No one else. We get a very generous bonus every sixnight, and stretching my orders in the slightest would probably mean losing that. I have three younger sisters and a widowed mother living on my pay, and I'm sure you know that an ordinary guardsman's pay is not going to support the five of us comfortably."

Emmis did indeed know that. Guards generally slept in a barracks free of rent, and were fed at the city's expense, not to mention being provided with their uniforms, but their actual pay, while steady, wasn't all that much. An unmarried soldier, with no one to look after but himself, could live on it well enough and even save up a tidy sum, but add a family and everything

changed. They couldn't sleep in the barracks, or charge their meals against an innkeeper's taxes. That was why most guards didn't marry, or found other work when they wed.

He considered asking why Ahan's mother and sisters didn't have any other means of support - even if none of them could find paid employment, didn't any of the girls have apprenticeships or husbands?

But that was really none of his business. Perhaps they were ill, or crippled, or under a curse. If Ahan thought he had to wait hand and foot on Lord Ildirin to keep his family out of the Hundred-Foot Field, it wasn't Emmis's place to argue.

"Oh," he said. He sighed, and picked up his own pace.

Ahan matched him, and the two ran on, drawing stares from the crowds on Arena Street.

Emmis was panting by the time they rounded the bend on Through Street and came in sight of the yellow house. Two guardsmen were standing on either side of the front door; they straightened, suddenly alert, at the sight of Emmis and Ahan.

"Any trouble?" Ahan called.

"No," one of them replied. "Why?"

"The theurgist..." Emmis had to stop and catch his breath; he gulped air, then said, "The theurgist told us that an assassination spell has been cast on the Vondish ambassador."

The door guards exchanged glances.

"You'd better go in," one of them said, reaching for the latch.

A moment later Emmis and Ahan were in the parlor, where Lar and Lord Ildirin were seated comfortably on either side of a small table, drinking tea. The two officials looked up.

"And what brings you two back here, looking so concerned?" Lord Ildirin asked.

"I talked to a theurgist, my lord," Emmis said. "Corinal, by name. On Priest Street. He consulted a goddess called Unniel the Discerning, and she said that someone had cast a spell called Fendel's Assassin on the ambassador."

Lar went pale.

Lord Ildirin's eyebrows rose. "Did he, indeed?" He glanced at Ahan.

"Yes, my lord," the guardsman said. "Exactly as Emmis says."

"Did the theurgist inform you of the method Fendel's Assassin intends to use?"

Emmis blinked at him. "What?"

Ildirin sighed. "Fendel's Assassin is a well-known spell; it summons or creates an invisible being that will make one attempt to kill the intended target, and only one attempt, using a method specified by the wizard who cast the spell. Strangling is the most common means chosen, since it requires no special weaponry - the creature's claws are strong enough to do the job. Sometimes other methods are specified to make it look like suicide, or to cast blame in a particular direction, but the need to smuggle in weapons can be very inconvenient. The assassin itself can apparently pass through solid walls, while weapons cannot." He shook his head. "The spell hasn't been used in years, to the best of my knowledge, but it's a common way for the Wizards' Guild to dispose of its enemies."

"How can we stop it?" Emmis demanded. Lar turned his full attention to Lord Ildirin, obviously just as interested in the answer as was Emmis.

"Well, it would help if we knew the method," Ildirin replied. "And the time and place, if the wizard specified those. We need merely prevent the one attack from succeeding, and the assassin will dissipate, vanish from the World without a trace. Suppose the spell was cast with instructions to strangle my friend Lar in his bed at midnight tonight; well, we need merely ensure that he is not in his bed at midnight, but here in this room, and at a minute past the hour the creature will cease to exist."

"I think I see."

"And if the creature was instructed to whack Lar's head off with an axe, but we ensure no axes are available, or if we somehow turn the blow aside..."

Lar shuddered, and Emmis interrupted, "Yes, I understand, but how do we know...?"

"Your theurgist gave you no clue? No mention of anything?"

"I didn't give him time," Emmis admitted. "The moment I knew a death-spell had been cast I came running back to warn you."

Ildirin nodded. "A natural reaction, but perhaps unfortunate in this instance." He turned to Lar. "Is there any particular method of assassination preferred by the people of Lumeth?"

"There is, but I don't know the word in Ethsharitic," Lar said, a bit unsteadily. "Nagrop - a... a thin cord around the neck."

"A garotte," Ildirin said. "Charming. And easily improvised, if they haven't just told the beast to use its claws."

"How fast does the creature move?" Emmis asked. "How soon could it be here?"

"Oh, it probably is here," Ildirin said. "It could be in the room with us right now, listening. It's far faster than any human."

Emmis stared around the room - and noticed Lar and Ahan doing the same, though Ildirin did not. Lord Ildirin obviously recognized the foolishness of looking for something you know is invisible, but Emmis had still hoped to see some sign.

"If it's already here, why hasn't it made its attempt?" Emmis asked.

"I couldn't say," Ildirin replied. "I presume some condition has not been met. Either a time has not yet come, or His Excellency is in the wrong place, or perhaps the creature was told to attack him when he's alone, and he's been in my company for most of the afternoon."

"Well, is there any way we can find out which it is?"

"In fact, there is," Ildirin said thoughtfully. "If I could just remember..."

"Remember what? A spell? A warding?"

"The creature has its own appetites," Ildirin said. "I believe there's a way to bribe it."

Emmis felt a wave of relief, but then recalled that just because a way existed, that didn't mean they would be able to use it in time. "Do we need a wizard?" he asked.

"No." Lord Ildirin frowned, and stroked his beard. "I knew this; Lorret the Mage mentioned it to me years ago, after Lord Habuk used Fendel's Assassin to kill Lady Asseyr. It's... something sweet. The creature likes something sweet."

"Honey?"

"I believe so, yes."

"We don't have any," Emmis said. "I bought a few things for the pantry, but no honey."

Ahan cleared his throat.

Lord Ildirin looked at him. "Yes?"

"Zhol generally keeps a bag of honey drops handy," Ahan said. "He likes to suck on them while standing guard."

"Go fetch him, then!"

Ahan turned, then hesitated. "Am I done escorting Emmis, then?"

"Yes, yes. At least for now."

Ahan bowed slightly, then marched out.

"Who's Zhol?" Emmis asked.

"One of the guards at the door," Ildirin replied. "I hope candy will do; the creature may insist on liquid honey. We shall see."

"I hope so," Lar said. "I must say, I don't like this. The idea that there is an invisible creature lurking here, waiting to kill me, is... is... gharget. Shalbet. I don't know the Ethsharitic."

"I'm sure it must be, whatever those words mean," Lord Ildirin said.

"Still, it could be far worse. You know it's here, and you have the opportunity to stop it, and once stopped, it's over. If your foes had hired a warlock, you would already be dead. Had they been willing to pay their wizard more, and had they the means to ensure you triggered it, they might have used the Rune of the Implacable Stalker, in which case the creature would never give up so long as you lived. I am sure there are other more lethal spells of which I am unaware, as well. And if they had approached a demonologist - well, the options there are plentiful, and all of them quite hideous."

"You are not comforting," Lar said.

"But really, my friend, that you are still alive now bodes well," Ildirin insisted.

"It's still not comforting," Lar retorted. "What if the creature is to kill me when I finish my tea? What if sunset is the time? The shadows I see through the window are getting very long." He looked at his cup, and carefully set it down on the table with half an inch of liquid still undrunk in the bottom. "And even if we stop this one - I hadn't expected them to try again! I don't understand why they think they must kill me. Paying a wizard - the next time maybe it will be a demonologist!"

"There won't be a 'next time,'" Ildirin said. "At least, not unless they're very quick about it. Because this is a violation of Ethsharitic law, and an affront to the overlord. I had treated the previous attack as an amusement, something I could use to entertain myself, but that was because I had not thought they would try again, and certainly not that they would use magic. Now I know better. They have escalated to magic; we shall return the favor, and we have access to far more powerful magic than anything a few travelers from the Small Kingdoms are likely to possess, or to be able to purchase. If we can deal with this immediate threat, the next step will be to call upon Ethshar's magicians to find and capture those responsible. If they meant to prevent an alliance between the Empire of Vond and the Hegemony of the Three Ethshars, they have utterly failed in their purpose; I will be informing my nephew at the first opportunity that it is essential we aid your empire in any way we can."

"Thank you, my lord," Lar said, visibly somewhat relieved - but only somewhat.

After all, Emmis thought, the invisible creature, Fendel's Assassin, was still around. "So you can bribe it to go away, and not harm the ambassador?" he asked.

"No," Ildirin said. "I'm afraid that's not possible. The original spell binds it more strongly than anything we can do. But we can coax it into telling us what it's required to do, and perhaps we can find a way to prevent it."

"Perhaps?" Lar said, tensing again.

"Perhaps, yes. There's no certainty to be had here, your Excellency. We will do what we can."

"But... but..." Lar struggled to find the words to express his dismay, and failed.

Then Ahan reappeared in the doorway, holding out a handful of golden lumps. "My lord?"

"Ah, Ahan!" Lord Ildirin said. "Hold those out, just as you have them, but be ready to close your fist instantly."

Ahan obeyed, looking about nervously.

"Now, creature of magic, wizard's weapon, if you hear me - speak, answer our questions, and you shall have the honey!"

"Honey!" a strange voice said, a low, slow, hissing, rumbling voice unlike anything Emmis had ever heard before. He still could not see the creature, but the voice seemed to be coming from directly behind Lar. The ambassador started in his chair at the sound of it, and whirled around, peering desperately about.

He saw nothing.

"Tell us, then, what your instructions were," Ildirin calmly demanded.

"Find him, wring his neck as he sleeps." A horrible noise that might have been a tittering laugh followed these words. Emmis's skin crawled.

"Nothing more than that? Not, perhaps, as he sleeps in his bed?"

"Wring his neck as he sleeps. Nothing more. Honey?"

Lord Ildirin did not look entirely satisfied, but he nodded to Ahan.

"Give him the honey," he said. "Quickly."

The guardsman hurried forward, holding out the candies, then stopped in front of Lar's chair, unsure exactly what he should do next.

The creature answered that for him, as about half the honey drops vanished from his palm, rising a fraction of an inch and then fading into nothingness with a ghastly slurping and crunching; Ahan snatched his hand away, spilling the rest to the floor, and Emmis thought he saw blood on the guard's fingers.

The candies rattled and bounced on the floor, and then something unseen shoved Ahan aside, Lar's chair jerked the other way, and the honey drops vanished, one by one, from where they had fallen. Each disappearance was followed by an obscene sucking sound.

Ahan made a wordless noise of pain and unhappiness as he clutched at his hand; Emmis could definitely see blood seeping between the fingers now.

"Impatient, isn't it?" Ildirin remarked. "Ahan, go see to your hand, and we'll want to have a healer look at it, very soon, to make sure the thing's claws weren't poisoned."

Lar was twisted in his chair, looking around; it seemed to Emmis he was having a great deal of difficulty with the idea that the monster was really completely invisible.

"What about the ambassador?" Emmis asked. "I mean, yes, I'm concerned about Ahan's hand, but it's my employer the thing intends to kill!"

"Well, he doesn't need to worry about a thing so long as he stays awake," Ildirin said. "It has orders to kill him in his sleep. So as long as he's awake, it won't hurt him."

"It hurt Ahan," Emmis pointed out.

"Only by accident," Ildirin said. "It had earned its pay, and we weren't fast enough in delivering it."

"I was...!" Ahan began, then stopped, obviously deciding it wasn't worth the argument.

"Go tend to your hand," Ildirin told him again.

"There's clean water in the kitchen," Lar said. "Some of it should still be warm from making the tea."

"Thank you," Ahan said, and turned. He walked unsteadily out of the room.

"Maybe I should go with him," Emmis said uncertainly.

"He's a grown man," Ildirin said. "And a strong one with a good wit. He can manage, I'm sure."

"But if it's poisoned..."

"Yes." Ildirin tugged at his beard, then leaned back in his chair.

"Creature, we gave you honey," he called at the ceiling. "Is your touch poisonous?"

"Sharp, oh so very sharp, but not poison," the hideous voice said. "A hand will heal cleanly." After a moment's pause, it added, "More honey?"

"Alas, we have no more," Ildirin said. "Thank you, though, for your cooperation."

"No honey?"

"No honey."

"Wring his neck as he sleeps." It tittered horribly.

Lar shuddered.

"I wouldn't think you'll find it easy to sleep any time soon," Ildirin remarked.

"But I must sleep eventually!" Lar shouted, his voice cracking.

A thought popped into Emmis's head, but he caught himself before speaking aloud. The creature was listening, after all.

"So we'll have to find a way to send this thing away before you do," Ildirin said.

Emmis could not restrain himself further. "What if he dies first?" he asked.

Both older men turned to stare at him.

"What?" Lar said.

"What if you die before you go to sleep?"

"I hardly see how that would be an improvement," Lord Ildirin remarked dryly.

"Creature, what would happen if the ambassador died without going to sleep?" Emmis asked the air.

"More honey?"

"I don't have any, but I can fetch some by tomorrow noon," Emmis said.

"You swear? Honey, for me, by noon?"

Emmis was uncomfortably aware of how many things might go wrong, how many ways he might be prevented from abiding by his promise, what horrible things the creature might do if he failed to deliver, but he said, "Yes, I swear. My oath on it."

"Then I tell you, one cannot kill the dead. When he is dead, whether by my hand or not, I am free," the monster's voice said. "Honey, by noon."

"Emmis, what are you doing?" Lar demanded. "What are you talking about?"

Emmis ignored him for the moment, and addressed the overlord's uncle.

"Lord Ildirin, you said you had powerful magic available. Magic that can turn a man to stone?" He carefully did not add, "And back?"

Lord Ildirin stared at him for a moment, then smiled.

Lar, uncomprehending, looked back and forth between them.

Chapter Nineteen

Ithinia of the Isle, senior Guildmaster in Ethshar of the Spices, was startled by the knock at her window. She looked up to see a gargoyle's familiar face beyond the glass, peering in at her upside-down. "Fang?" she said. "What is it?" She rose and opened the casement, letting the lamplight from her study illuminate the creature's carved gray features. It was hanging down over the eaves, dangling from the roof.

"You have visitors," the gargoyle said, in a voice like stone grating on stone. "Half a dozen of them are standing in the street, outside your door."

"At this hour?"

"Three of them are soldiers."

Ithinia frowned. "Was the overlord there? Or anyone in wizard's robes?"

"No, mistress."

"I haven't heard the bell."

"They did not ring. I saw them standing there arguing, and I thought you should know."

"Thank you, Fang. Return to your post, now."

"Yes, mistress." The stony creature turned and pulled itself up into the darkness, on its way back to its perch on the southeastern corner of the roof.

Ithinia set aside the letter she had been reading, straightened her robe, and strode out into the corridor - and then the bell did ring. Whoever was at the front door had finally gotten up the nerve to announce themselves.

She swept down the front stairs, wishing that she had some sort of spell ready to make her entrance a little more impressive, but she hadn't been expecting anyone and hadn't prepared anything. She waved and spoke a certain word, and the front doors swung open.

As the gargoyle had said, there were half a dozen people standing on her little porch, all of them male - three guardsmen, two strangers, and one

familiar face.

"Lord Ildirin," she said, as she reached the entry. "What brings you to my door at this hour?"

"Oh, it's not so late as all that, Guildmaster," the old man said. "We've come directly from our supper to ask your aid."

"I hadn't thought it was a social call," Ithinia said tartly. "Would you care to come in, and introduce your companions?" She stepped aside, and gestured for them to enter.

"Before I do, Guildmaster, might I ask how many you see in our company?"

Ithinia stopped and looked the little group over carefully. "I take it 'six' is not the correct answer?"

"While I cannot be entirely certain, I believe there is a seventh," Ildirin said. "Are there protective spells on your home that would prevent Fendel's Assassin from entering?"

"There aren't any such spells anywhere," Ithinia snapped. "Not any practical ones, anyway. Do you mean you have one of those things with you? Who is its target?"

"I am," the stranger in the fancy hat said.

"I trust you have put your affairs in order?"

"No," the man said. "I hope it won't be necessary." He spoke with the accent of the southern Small Kingdoms.

"I take it that's why you've come to see me? You've wasted your time; there's no sure defense against Fendel's Assassin, no simple countercharm."

"He thinks he has a way to stop it," Lord Ildirin said, nodding at the other stranger, a young man in ordinary Ethsharitic clothing.

"Does he? What method was it told to use? I assume you've determined that."

"It's been ordered to strangle him in his sleep," Ildirin said.

"And I suppose you want a potion to keep him from sleeping? Really, Lord Ildirin, you hardly needed to trouble me for that - and in any case, it won't work, not for long; most wakefulness potions wear off after a sixnight or so.

"My dear Ithinia, I am not so great a fool as that," Ildirin said, drawing himself up to his full height. "We came here because we need powerful magic quickly, and did not want to waste time asking around the Wizards' Quarter until we found someone capable of it, not when your home was so close at hand. There are also certain political matters that I wish to discuss with you, in your role as a leading representative of the Wizards' Guild in Ethshar of the Spices, once my friend's inconvenience has been dealt with."

Ithinia had to admit to herself that that sounded interesting. "And what is this magic you seek, then?"

"Petrifaction. We want you to turn Lar Samber's son to stone."

The wizard considered that, and a smile spread across her face. "I see," she said. "That's quite clever, really." She nodded at the young man in acknowledgment. "I take it that Bazil's Irreversible Petrifaction is out of the question, though, and you'd insist on Fendel's Superior Petrifaction?"

"In what way is it superior?" Ildirin asked.

"It's easily reversible," Ithinia explained.

"Yes, that would indeed be what we had in mind."

"The ingredients are simple, and I believe I have them all on hand, but it takes perhaps three hours to prepare," she said. "And the reversal will require me to smash a crystal goblet, so of course I must insist on compensation."

"Of course! The city's treasuries will cover all costs."

Ithinia stared at him for a moment, then looked at the foreigner. "Who is this person, then? Lar someone, you said?"

"Lar Samber's son," Lar said, with a bow and a tip of his hat.

"Ambassador plenipotentiary from the Empire of Vond."

Ithinia frowned. "Vond?"

"The union of seventeen of the most southerly Small Kingdoms, my lady," Lar said.

"My title is Guildmaster," Ithinia told him. "And I know where Vond is, and how it came to be."

Lar bowed a silent reply.

"I'm not sure I should be preventing his assassination," Ithinia said. "The Wizards' Guild does not meddle in politics without good reason."

"Oh, but please, Guildmaster!" the young man burst out, startling her. "Lar doesn't mean anyone any harm; it's all a misunderstanding! The Lumethans wouldn't try to kill him if they knew the truth!"

Ithinia turned and stared at him. "Oh? And why don't they know the truth, then?"

"Because they won't believe it," Lar said; Ithinia thought he was deliberately not looking at the young man as he spoke. "We told them we mean them no harm. We told them the Empire will not expand. They don't believe us."

"I really don't care whether they have reason to assassinate him or not," Lord Ildirin interjected. "I won't have them doing it here, in my city!"

"Ah," Ithinia said, amused. "Your city. Does your nephew know it's yours?"

"May we come in and discuss this, or are you going to refuse us outright, here and now, and cause me great personal annoyance?"

"Fine. Come in, then," she said, stepping aside and gesturing toward her little-used parlor.

Four of the six men trailed in - Ildirin first, then Lar, then the young man whose name she had not yet heard, and finally one of the three guardsmen. The other two soldiers took up posts on either side of the door, facing out toward the street.

Ithinia waited until the others had entered, then looked at the two remaining. "You don't need to stay there," she said.

"Lord Ildirin's orders, Guildmaster," one of them replied.

"Look up," she said, pointing. "I have gargoyles watching over me; what do you think you can do that they cannot?"

"Nothing, Guildmaster, but I have my orders."

Ithinia shook her head. "Foolishness," she said. "This is all foolishness." She closed the door and followed her guests into the parlor.

All the men but the young one had all taken seats; Ithinia indicated a chair for him, as well, but remained standing herself.

"Now," she said, "let me make sure I have this right. You want me to turn this Vondishman to stone to protect him from Fendel's Assassin. You've spoken with the killer?"

The men exchanged glances; the young man, who was now perched on the edge of a chair, said, "That's right. Ahan gave it honey drops, and it answered questions."

"Honey drops?" She blinked. "Interesting; I thought it required the pure substance. Honey drops contain other things, do they not? Or are they merely cooked-down honey?"

The men exchanged glances. "I... I don't know, Guildmaster," the young one said.

Ithinia nodded. She should have expected that; most people didn't pay attention to ingredients the way wizards did. "And it said. . . ?"

"It said it was going to wring Lar's neck while he slept, but that if he was dead, it wouldn't bother."

"And you think it will see petrification as death."

The young man suddenly looked very uncertain. "Isn't it?"

"I think we would all agree that Bazil's Petrification is fatal, but Fendel's is reversible, which is generally not considered a characteristic of death."

The look of dismay on the faces of both the young man and the Vondish ambassador was almost comical.

"That doesn't mean your scheme won't work," she quickly reassured them.

"The assassin will undoubtedly have its own standards - isn't that right?" She addressed this last to empty air.

Nothing answered. Lar looked around the room warily.

"It said it wouldn't answer any more questions without more honey," the young man volunteered after a few seconds of awkward silence. "I've already promised to give it more by noon tomorrow. I swore."

Ithinia turned to consider him more carefully. "It agreed to that?"

"Yes," the man said. "You wouldn't happen to have any honey I could give it, would you?"

"You should send one of those soldiers you have wasting their time outside my door to fetch some, I would say."

"Oh. I thought that... well, isn't it used in some spells?"

"What's your name, young man?"

"Emmis of Shiphaven, Guildmaster."

"Well, Emmis, I do indeed have honey in my possession, but why should I give it to you?"

Emmis glanced at Lord Ildirin, then turned back to Ithinia. "To save time?"

"Your time, not mine. I am not interested in giving you the idea that you can make yourself at home here, or impose on me at your convenience. You will have to find your own honey elsewhere."

Before anyone could reply Ithinia thought she heard a faint growl. She remembered suddenly that the conjured assassin was almost certainly in the room, listening; it apparently didn't like being told it had to wait for its treat.

But it was constrained by the enchantment, she knew; it couldn't act of its own choice outside very narrow limits. Until it had carried out its assigned task it couldn't deliberately harm anyone else unless they got directly in the way of its attack on its intended target, and once its task was performed it would be banished back to whatever other realm it had come from - or perhaps to nonexistence; no one had ever bothered to determine whether the thing had any independent reality outside Fendel's spell.

For a moment she considered getting out a jar of honey and asking the assassin a few questions of her own, but this was clearly not the time or place.

"So, my lord," she said, turning to Ildirin, "you want me to petrify this man, and see whether that's enough to protect him from Fendel's Assassin. And you said you had other concerns?"

"Yes. I want his would-be killers found and apprehended. I want to know why they think it's acceptable to murder people here in Ethshar. I'm sure you have magic capable of that."

"I'm sure I do. What I am not sure of is why you expect me to use it in your behalf. You know the Guild does not meddle in politics."

"I know the Guild only meddles in politics when it suits you to do so," Ildirin retorted. "I remember well how the Guild meddled in my brother's handling of the Council of Warlocks some twenty-odd years ago. I came to you, rather than going to the Wizards' Quarter, in part because you were closer, and in part because I know you are an exceptionally powerful wizard and could almost certainly do everything I ask, but most of all, because this is political, and I suspect you have the authority to act where lesser wizards would not, and can meddle without worrying about being punished by your superiors in the Guild."

"If you think I have no superiors, you're sadly mistaken," Ithinia retorted. "However, I am indeed granted considerable discretion. Explain to me, then, why it is in the Guild's interest to keep this Vondishman alive."

"As a start, to maintain the overlord's goodwill," Ildirin said. "Remember that this assassin was sent by a wizard, so one of your Guild members is already meddling in politics, presumably for pay. You would merely be countering that meddling. We are not asking you to guard the ambassador from mere human assassins, but only from one provided by one of your fellow

magicians."

"You could buy a protective spell in the Wizards' Quarter. You wouldn't need to tell anyone why."

"And is there a protective spell that works against Fendel's Assassin?"

Ithinia smiled wryly. "I prefer not to answer that; the Guild sometimes finds Fendel's Assassin useful."

"Well, then! There's your benefit to the Guild - do you think we couldn't coax an answer out of another wizard if we offered enough money?"

Ithinia's smile broadened. "I remember now why I like you, my lord. Very well, I'll petrify your friend, for an appropriate fee, and when the assassin is gone I will restore him to life. Anything beyond that will wait; I'll have time to think while I perform the spell, and you'll have time to marshal your arguments."

"Thank you, Guildmaster," Ildirin said, nodding in lieu of a bow.

"You are welcome to wait here," she said. "I assume you all know better than to go anywhere in a wizard's home uninvited, but this room and the entry hall will be safe enough. If you prefer to leave my home, feel free, but be certain you have returned no more than two and a half hours from now - if the Vondishman is not here, the spell will be wasted. I'll make sure the door allows you back in."

"Thank you, Guildmaster," Ildirin repeated.

Ithinia nodded in reply, then turned and swept out of the parlor.

She paused just out of sight, though, rather than proceeding directly to her workshop, and listened.

She did not really know whether the assassin was in fact present, or for that matter, whether anyone had actually sent it after the Vondishman at all. Lord Ildirin was not above attempting some sort of complicated deception, and of course the others might have somehow fooled Ildirin. She would want to check a few things before working Fendel's Superior Petrification.

She wished she had more servants around - not human ones, but magical - so that she could set them to spy on her guests, but at present the only ones she maintained were her four gargoyles. Little Kirna came in to help during the day, but she had gone home to her aunt well before these men showed up, and an eleven-year-old human girl might not make an ideal spy in any case.

So Ithinia stood in the hallway, listening.

"My lord?" she heard Emmis ask. "May I send one of the guards to buy honey?"

"You would prefer sending my guard to making the purchase yourself?" Ildirin's voice replied.

"I think that I should stay near Lar, my lord. We don't want to confuse or anger the creature, and it has business with both of us now."

"That's reasonable," the Vondishman said. "And who would trouble us here, in a wizard's home?"

"Good points all around," Ildirin agreed. "Very well, then, you may go ask one of the guards to buy honey."

"I could go," said a deep voice Ithinia had not heard before. She assumed it was the guardsman; she would not expect the assassin to sound so human.

"I want you here," Ildirin said. "Emmis, send Zhol - he probably wants to replace the candies he gave us, in any case. If he questions your authority, send him to me."

"Yes, my lord." Ithinia heard the rustle of Emmis rising from his chair, and started retreating down the hallway; it would not do to be seen eavesdropping. She stepped through the workshop door, then turned for a final glance.

Emmis had emerged from the parlor, but he had not gone directly to the front door; instead he was peering down the hallway, obviously looking for her.

That was interesting. Ithinia opened the workshop door and stepped back into the hallway. She beckoned to the young man.

Emmis glanced over his shoulder into the parlor, then hurried down the hall toward the wizard.

"Guildmaster," he whispered.

"Yes?"

"There's something I'd really like to talk to you about. In private."

"Oh? And this is more urgent than saving your friend from Fendel's Assassin, or keeping your own oath to the killer?"

Emmis glanced nervously toward the parlor. "Maybe not," he admitted. "Could we talk later, then?"

Intrigued, Ithinia nodded. "I think that can be arranged," she said.

"But right now, you have honey to buy, and I have a spell to perform."

"Thank you, Guildmaster." Emmis bowed deeply, then turned and hurried toward the door.

Ithinia watched him go, and realized that she had no idea who the young man was, or why Lord Ildirin had brought him along. He was clearly involved in all this somehow, as his vow to provide the assassin with honey demonstrated, but just what was his role here? Was he working for Lord Ildirin? Had he been one of the would-be assassins who had changed sides?

Well, she had promised to speak with him later, and her questions could wait until then. Right now she had Fendel's Superior Petrification to prepare, and that was a very enjoyable spell, with plenty of energy involved, but no nasty smells or especially ugly manifestations. Like any high-order spell it was dangerous - old Berakon had snapped off a couple of his own fingers when he fouled the Petrification up, many years ago - but it would be fun, all the same. What was life without a little risk?

And she really wasn't sure whether it would work to deter the assassin, or not. She would want to use a very hard stone, just in case the assassin tried to wring the Vondishman's stone neck; the usual recipe might only produce sandstone, which would not be safe. Granite would be good, or perhaps basalt...

She closed the workshop door behind her.

Chapter Twenty

Emmis glanced uneasily out the parlor window. How long did it take to buy a jar of honey? Zhol had been gone for hours, surely. Even Lar and Lord Ildirin had apparently run out of things to say; in fact, Lord Ildirin appeared to have dozed off in his chair, though Emmis would not put it past the old scoundrel to be faking.

Lar, of course, was still wide awake, with Ahan keeping a close watch to make sure he stayed that way.

A sound from the hallway brought Lar, Ahan, and Emmis alert; Ildirin slept on, untroubled. Emmis rose and peered around the doorframe.

The front door was still closed; he turned the other way to see Ithinia approaching, a crystal goblet in one hand and her wizard's dagger in the other.

The wizard spotted Emmis. "Is the ambassador ready?" she demanded.

"Yes, I think so," Emmis replied, glancing over his shoulder at Lar. The Vondishman was rising from his seat.

"I'd prefer he not be sitting when I do this; I'm not sure how much he'll weigh, and I don't want him to break my chair."

"I'll tell him," Emmis said, turning.

"I heard," Lar said. "Ahan, would you please wake Lord Ildirin?"

Emmis stepped aside and let Ithinia pass by him into the parlor; as he did, he glanced at the front door.

What had happened to Zhol and his honey? If the petrification spell was ready, then it must have been almost three hours since the guardsman headed off toward Cut Street Market, and it couldn't be more than a dozen blocks away!

But right now, he wanted to see the spell. He had never seen anyone turned to stone before. There were statues here and there around the city that were rumored to have been alive once, the work of a magician rather than a sculptor, but Emmis had no idea whether any of those stories were true, and he certainly hadn't observed any of the transformations.

And he wanted to see what Fendel's Assassin did. He wanted to be there to help if something went wrong.

So he turned away from the door and followed Ithinia into the parlor.

Lord Ildirin was blinking in his chair, still a bit fuddled; Ahan was standing beside him with his bandaged hand on the hilt of his sword. Emmis would have thought the truncheon would be more appropriate, as Ozya, the guard on Games Street, had explained, but Ahan seemed to think otherwise. Perhaps Lord Ildirin's special guards followed different rules.

Lar was standing in front of his chair, looking pale - the long wait, the knowledge that the invisible assassin was after him and probably in that very room, the prospect of being petrified even temporarily, obviously had the Vondishman scared. Still, he stood straight and unflinching, facing the wizard. He had left his hat on a small table, though; he was probably worried that the plume would shatter if turned to stone, Emmis thought.

Then he grimaced at his own foolishness. The man had taken the hat off hours ago, not long after they first arrived, because there was no reason to wear it in Ithinia's parlor. Worries about the plume had nothing to do with it.

Guildmaster Ithinia was standing facing the ambassador; her fine white robe had acquired gray smudges here and there, especially on the lower part of each sleeve, but still looked quite elegant. She stood as tall as Lar, Emmis noticed - tall for a woman.

In her right hand she held a dagger, point down - an old dagger, the blade darkened with age, the edges shaped into odd, subtle curves by countless sharpenings, the leather grip visibly worn and shaped by use to fit Ithinia's hand. The dagger had been elegant once, if not extravagant, after a fashion Emmis had seen occasionally in family heirlooms at least a century or two old. This knife had clearly been around for a long time, and seen heavy use; Emmis wondered if it was a legacy from some beloved ancestor, or whether its age gave it special potency.

In her left hand was a crystal goblet that held perhaps half a cup of something brownish. The goblet was of good quality, but appeared new and unremarkable; Emmis knew he could find a hundred like it in the Old Merchants' Quarter.

"Are you ready, Lar Samber's son?" the Guildmaster asked, in a loud, carrying voice.

Lar swallowed. "I am," he said.

"Then let us see what Fendel's Assassin makes of this!" She swung her arms together, the left dropping below, the right rising above, and plunged the dagger into the goblet.

The instant the tip of the blade touched the brown liquid Lar straightened up as if stung. His pale face turned unnaturally gray - not the gray of terror or ill health, but the gray of stone. His hair followed a split second later, and then his clothing, and then Lar was gone, transformed into a lifeless statue.

The transition was soundless, and for a moment the room was silent as Emmis, Ithinia, and Ildirin all stared at the petrified foreigner.

Then Ithinia pulled the dagger out of the goblet. She turned and set the crystal vessel down, very carefully, on a table, then pulled a cloth from her sleeve and wiped her dagger clean. She looked around the room.

"Is he... Is the creature still here?" Emmis asked.

"Yes," Ithinia said. She held up the dagger, and Emmis could see that the tip was glowing faintly blue, as if catching blue light from some unseen source.

"Why?"

"Did you give it the honey you swore you would?"

"No, not yet."

"Perhaps it wants its honey, then," Ithinia said. "Or perhaps it doesn't think he's dead."

"But - but he's stone!"

"Granite, to be exact." She eyed the statue thoughtfully. "But he's not really dead, and I'd guess the killer knows it."

"Well, it does now," Lord Ildirin said, annoyed. "You just told it!"

"Oh, it never believes anything a human says about such matters," Ithinia said, unconcerned. "That's to prevent anyone from tricking it, from talking their way out of assassination. It has its own standards."

"But he's stone!" Emmis protested. "It must just be waiting for the honey I promised it."

Ithinia shook her head. "Let me try something," she said. She reached into a pocket of her robe and brought out something Emmis couldn't see, pinched between thumb and forefinger. She stepped up to the statue that had been the Vondish ambassador.

Emmis wanted to shout at her to get away, lest she break it, but he knew that was absurd. She was a wizard - not just a wizard, a Guildmaster, whatever exactly that meant. She surely knew what she was doing.

And Lar was stone now, anyway - what could hurt him?

Ithinia flung the pinch of whatever it was into the statue's motionless face and said something, words that not only weren't Ethsharitic, but didn't sound as if they should be coming from a human throat at all. She gestured, an odd twisting motion that ended with her fingers spread wide, palm up, then said one final alien word.

Again, silence fell, as everyone stared at the statue.

Then they all heard, very clearly, the sound of claws scraping on stone.

The scratching continued for what seemed to Emmis like an eternity; he stared at the statue's throat, watching worriedly for a mark on the hard gray stone.

He had thought the creature would consider Lar to be dead, but obviously that hadn't happened. It hadn't even thought he was sleeping, but now it did, now that Ithinia had done whatever it was she had done, and in accord with its instructions the monster was trying to wring Lar's neck.

Just one attempt, Lord Ildirin had said - but how determined an attempt? Would the thing keep trying until it did gouge the stone? What would that do when Lar was restored to life?

Then at last the scratching stopped, and Emmis let out his breath. He hadn't realized he had been holding it.

"There," Ithinia said. "It's done." She held up her dagger again, and frowned.

The tip was still glowing blue.

"It wants the honey Emmis promised it," Ildirin said.

"So it appears," Ithinia agreed. "That's inconvenient. I don't think it would be wise to turn Lar back to flesh while the assassin is around. Ordinarily it would only try to kill him once, but ordinarily it would vanish if that first try failed."

"What if it succeeded?" Emmis asked.

"Oh, then it would report back to the wizard who summoned it. Then it would vanish."

"How can you tell whether it's vanished?" Ildirin asked. "It's invisible!"

"There are ways," Ithinia said, gesturing with her dagger. "I'm not the only one who knows simple detection spells. Fendel's Assassin has been in use for centuries, and there's been plenty of opportunity to experiment with it, and learn just how it does and doesn't work."

"Then why hasn't anyone ever tried petrification before?" Ildirin demanded. "Emmis is a clever lad, but surely there have been other clever

people involved in all that experimentation!"

"Of course there have," Ithinia retorted. "Someone may have tried Fendel's Superior Petrification before, and I just hadn't heard of it. Or it may be that the particular combination of circumstances we have here has never arisen when someone clever was around, or it may be that the victims found equally clever and more effective ways to deal with the killer. As I said, there are no certain defenses against Fendel's Assassin, but there are a dozen ways around it if the wizard casting the spell hasn't been careful in his instructions. The Cloak of Ethereality, for example, would probably be more useful than petrification under most circumstances."

Emmis turned to stare at the wizard. "Then why didn't you use that?" he said.

"You didn't ask," Ithinia said. "Lord Ildirin wanted me to use Fendel's Superior Petrification, so I used Fendel's Superior Petrification." She turned up an empty left palm. "Besides, there would be difficulties with the Cloak of Ethereality in this case; the circumstances are not quite the usual situation. And just for my own curiosity, I wanted to see whether the Petrification would work - which, as you saw, it didn't, until I also cast a simple sleep spell, Felshen's First Hypnotic. You should be glad that the assassin wasn't told to smash in your friend's head with a sledgehammer - I doubt even granite would hold up to that. And you might want to thank me for taking the trouble to use granite - white marble is the standard stone for this spell, and it's not clear whether that would have survived. Sandstone is even easier, and the Vondishman's head would not still be attached if I had used that."

Emmis swallowed. "Thank you, Guildmaster," he said.

"Now, I would suggest you give the thing its honey. Didn't you send one of the guards to get some?"

"He hasn't come back yet," Emmis said.

Ithinia was obviously surprised by that. "Where did you send him? Southgate?"

"Cut Street Market," Emmis told her.

"Cut Street?" She shook her head. "They close early this time of year, and I'm not sure you'd find honey there in any case. Southmarket or Westgate would be better, if you insist on a proper market, or if you want somewhere closer, one of the shops in Allston or the Merchants' Quarters."

"Oh," Emmis said. "I didn't know."

"Apparently Zhol didn't, either," Ildirin remarked.

"Or something happened to him," Emmis said.

Ildirin cocked his head. "Zhol is one of my guards; he's carrying a sword and a club and knows how to use them both. What would happen to him on the public streets?"

"I don't know," Emmis said. "But he hasn't come back, and it's been hours."

"Perhaps he came across some matter that required his attention," Lord Ildirin said. "A disturbance he felt it necessary to deal with, for example."

Emmis glanced at Ahan. "Would he do that, though? I mean, would he intervene, instead of going on with his errand?"

"He's a human being, and a guardsman; who knows?" Ildirin said, showing an empty palm.

Emmis looked uneasily at his petrified employer. "Guildmaster," he said, "are you sure you can't spare me any of your own honey, so that we can get on with this business?"

"Quite sure," she said. "I checked my supplies; I have scarcely a spoonful remaining, as it happens. In fact, I would appreciate it if you could buy a jar for me, as well."

"Oh," Emmis said.

"There's a wizards' supplier named Tanna on Ginger Street, in Spicetown, who carries a dozen varieties of honey," Ithinia said. "She's expensive, of course, but if you need honey made from a particular flower, or by a particular strain of bee, or whatever, she's the best source."

"I just need ordinary honey, don't I?" Emmis said. "I'll try the Old Merchants' Quarter. It's a bit closer."

"As you please."

"I would suggest you leave immediately," Ildirin said. "Before everyone's in bed."

"Now?" Emmis stared at him. "But everyone is probably already in bed! I was thinking it could wait until morning - I do have until noon..."

"I do not want your petrified friend cluttering up my parlor all night," Ithinia said.

"And I'd like a chance to speak to the Guildmaster in private," Lord Ildirin said. "If all else fails, there are all-night sweet shops in Camptown, for the whores and soldiers, and you could buy a bag of honey drops."

"Oh." Emmis looked from Ildirin to Ithinia and back; neither face seemed welcoming. "All right, then, I'll go."

"Hurry back with the honey," the wizard said.

"Zhol might be back any minute."

"Or he might not," Ithinia said. "Go."

"Can't you find him, with your magic?" Emmis asked.

"That's a good question," Ithinia said. "I may find out while you're gone."

Emmis sighed. "Yes, Guildmaster."

A moment later he stepped out the front door onto Lower Street, and shivered - the night air was chilly, and a sharp breeze was blowing from the east. Emmis thought he could smell the peculiar and distinctive odor of the Old City on the wind.

The remaining guard on the door, a man called Shakoph, gave him a worried look. "What's going on in there?" he asked.

"The spell worked," Emmis said, "but we need that honey to make the creature go away."

"Zhol isn't back yet," Shakoph said. "I don't know why."

"I know," Emmis said. "And we'll worry about that once we're done with the ambassador's assassin, but right now I need to go find honey somewhere."

Shakoph looked along the empty street, and up at the overcast night sky. "Good luck with that," he said.

"Thank you," Emmis said. He turned west, and headed toward the Old Merchants' Quarter at a brisk trot.

He had gone about a block, just past the intersection with Old East Avenue, when he heard voices behind him. He glanced over his shoulder.

Someone was talking to the guard at Ithinia's door, a man in a nondescript dark tunic; it was hard to see details in the faint, patchy light that came from the windows and lampposts.

It wasn't Zhol, Emmis saw - just some passerby, probably curious about what a guardsman was doing there. Nothing to do with Emmis or Lord Ildirin or the ambassador, surely. Emmis turned west again.

He had gone another five blocks and turned the corner onto Merchant Street when he heard the footsteps behind him. He paused, and looked around.

Merchant Street was lit by well-spaced torches, much as Arena Street was on the other side of the New City, but it was largely deserted at this hour - Emmis thought it must be almost midnight, and most merchants and their customers were long since abed. A cart creaked faintly in the distance, down toward the Palace and the Grand Canal, and far up the slope to the south he could hear a woman's laughter, probably coming from an open window somewhere.

And in the shadows of Lower Street, where he had just come from, he could see a tall, thin figure carrying a walking stick. Emmis frowned.

Then the figure stepped out into the torchlight of Merchant Street, and Emmis got a good look at him - tall, thin, curly hair, pointed beard...

"You!" he said, backing away.

"Me," the man with the sword-stick said, raising his weapon.

"You cost us a good job," the would-be assassin said, approaching Emmis warily and keeping the exposed blade of his stick pointed at Emmis's heart. "We could have lived half a year on what that Lumethan madman was paying!"

Emmis tried to think what he could do. Charging the man here in the open street, the way he had in the entryway of the house on Through Street, wouldn't work; there was plenty of room for him to dodge, and he would be charging directly onto the point of that sword-stick.

He could turn and run, yelling; he might be able to outrun the man, and shouting might rouse someone to his aid. His attacker was tall, though, and those long legs might mean speed. Emmis had eluded him before, but the circumstances had been rather different.

Still, flight seemed like the best choice - but then he heard a sound behind him. He turned to see a man in a brown tunic emerging from Coronet Street, a man who held a dagger in each hand.

The other assassin. He was trapped between them.

Emmis drew his belt-knife; at the very least he didn't intend to make this easy for them. He turned his back to the wall of the nearest shop, glancing quickly back and forth between his two foes.

The tall one with the stick was moving in quickly, blade raised to strike; Emmis readied his own knife to attempt a parry.

And then the stick suddenly snapped in two, and the attacker stopped in mid-lunge in an utterly unnatural fashion. The piece of stick with the blade went spinning harmlessly aside, and the handle was ripped from its owner's grasp.

"Honey!" a hideous voice growled. "He has promised honey! No harm must come to him until he has kept his vow!"

The tall man staggered back, stunned; on the other side the man in the brown tunic said, "Magic!" and turned to run.

Emmis hesitated for only an instant, then stepped forward and grabbed the disarmed man's tunic with one hand, while his other held his belt-knife to the man's throat. Behind him, he heard running footsteps fading as the other man fled.

"Keep your hands well away," Emmis snapped, pressing his blade hard enough to indent his foe's skin, but not to draw blood. "Don't try anything - and if your friend doubles back, you're a dead man."

"All right," the tall man said. "All right!"

"The thing that broke your stick is called Fendel's Assassin," Emmis growled, pushing his face up close to his attacker's. "It's still here, watching and listening, and it can rip a man's head off with its claws."

"I believe you!" He clapped a hand to his face, and Emmis noticed for the first time that he had a fresh gash on his cheek, half-hidden by his beard. The creature's claws must have slashed him there.

Emmis shuddered. "Now, who are you, and why did you attack me?" he demanded.

"Kelder of Newgate - I swear, my name's really Kelder. Some foreigner was in the Hundred-Foot Field looking for someone who could kill this Vondish ambassador, and Tithi and I, we've been trying to make a name as bonebreakers, so we volunteered for the job, but then you turned up instead of the target and stirred up the neighbors and we ran for it before the guards showed their faces."

"So why are you here?"

"You cost us a job! The foreigner in the robe wouldn't pay us, or give us another chance - he even tried to demand the earnest money back, said he'd hire a wizard instead, that magic was more reliable than a pair like us. We've got our reputation to think of; we had to kill you and the Vondishman, and anyone else who got in the way, or no one would ever take us seriously again. So Tithi followed you to Lower Street, then fetched me, and we were trying to pick you all off one by one. We followed that guard to see what he was up to

and then ambushed him on his way back, and then you came out next and we..."

Emmis suddenly felt sick. "What guard?"

"The one who was at the door earlier."

"You mean Zhol?"

"How would I know his name? He was a guardsman. Breastplate, red kilt - he had a sword as well as his club, but he didn't have time to draw it, I got him in the throat from behind while Tithi had him distracted."

"You killed a guardsman?"

"I told you, we were trying to make a name for ourselves!"

The sick shock Emmis had felt at the news of Zhol's murder was turning to fury. "Oh, there's a name for people who kill guards, all right! The name is idiot! You kill a guardsman, you've made ten thousand sworn enemies who won't rest until they see you hanged!" He pressed his knife harder, and drew a thin line of blood. "Where'd you leave him? You're sure he's dead?"

The man's terrified expression suddenly changed, and the hand that had been held to his cheek suddenly dropped to Emmis's wrist; the other hand, which Emmis had stopped watching, came up in a fist and slammed into his belly.

Kelder, if that was really his name, was strong for someone so thin, but six years working on the docks had made Emmis strong by any standard; the punch to the gut hurt, but he did not double over, and the grip on his wrist was not enough to loosen his hold on his belt-knife. He pulled with his left hand and pushed with his right, trying to force the blade into the man's neck.

But then something else moved. As Kelder drew his fist back for another blow, his arm twisted unnaturally to the side, and Emmis heard bone snap. Kelder gasped in agony.

"No harm must come to him until he has kept his vow!" the creature's voice repeated.

Kelder let out a sob of pain and rage and tried to step back, but Emmis was still clutching his tunic. He released his hold on Emmis's wrist.

"Please," he said.

"Where is he?" Emmis hissed, still holding his knife to the other man's throat.

"What's going on here?" a new voice demanded. Emmis turned his head - not far enough to take his eyes entirely off Kelder, but enough to see who was speaking.

It was a guardsman, not one he recognized, in the familiar red kilt and gray breastplate; he had his truncheon in hand. He carried no sword, but a small tin lantern hung from his belt, the mark of a night watchman.

It wasn't lit, though - Merchant Street had enough torches that it wasn't needed.

"This man says he killed a guard," Emmis said. "I'm trying to get him to lead me to the body."

"What's wrong with his arm?" the guardsman said, eyeing the pair warily.

"I broke it," Emmis said.

"He didn't break it!" Kelder said. "His invisible monster did!"

Emmis glared. "Does that matter? Guardsman, he says he killed one of Lord Ildirin's elite guards, a man named Zhol, and I want him to lead me to the body. Zhol may not be dead; he might need help!"

"I didn't kill anyone!" Kelder announced. "This man attacked me!"

Emmis sighed. Kelder's instinct for self-preservation had obviously kicked in, and he had realized that if he admitted to killing Zhol he would indeed be hanged.

"He slashed my cheek and broke my arm and held a knife to my throat!" Kelder embellished.

"Guardsman, he attacked me," Emmis said. "And I'll be happy to accompany you to a magistrate and let him and his hired magicians sort it out."

"I don't have time for that," Kelder insisted. "I'm a respectable

citizen of Ethshar, and this ruffian broke my arm! I need a witch!"

"A witch can tell who's telling the truth," Emmis suggested.

For a moment Kelder's expression slipped from pain and righteous anger to guilty terror; then he caught himself. "I'm sure," he said. "But right now I need someone to set my bones, or heal my arm. Perhaps a warlock or a wizard would do?"

"What was that about an invisible monster?" the guardsman asked.

"It's called Fendel's Assassin," Emmis said. "It's a long story, and Zhol might be lying somewhere bleeding to death."

"This Zhol's a guardsman?"

It finally registered with Emmis that this particular guardsman was not exactly quick-witted, or at any rate would never qualify for Lord Ildirin's escort. "Yes," he said, "and this man knows where he is." He turned to Kelder. "And he had really better tell us now where Zhol is, or I'll tell the invisible monster to break his other arm."

Kelder looked worried, but did not reply immediately, so Emmis added, "I think the monster would also like to know that Zhol had the honey I had promised it."

"Honey?"

The guardsman started at the inhuman voice that came from empty air. Then Kelder was torn from Emmis's grasp and dragged upright until his toes barely touched the ground. "Tell!" the creature said.

"Aggkh!" Kelder said.

"Perhaps you should lower him so he can talk," Emmis suggested.

The guardsman frowned at Emmis. "You're a warlock?"

"No," Emmis said, exasperated. "I'm not any sort of magician, but I did promise this thing the honey that Zhol was carrying. Now, where is he?"

"Alley!" Kelder said, as the grip on his throat loosened. "Alley near Southmarket!"

"Lead the way," Emmis said, sheathing his belt-knife.

"Wait a minute..." the guardsman began.

"We don't have a minute!" Emmis shouted. "Zhol could be bleeding to death!"

Kelder suddenly crumpled to the ground as the creature released him.

"Lead," that ghastly voice said.

"Lead," the guardsman agreed. "Come on, you." He prodded Kelder with his truncheon.

Kelder screamed as his broken arm folded under him; Emmis started back, but the guardsman reached down and grabbed the fallen assassin by the shoulder and hauled him upright. "Which way?" he demanded.

Kelder whimpered, and pointed.

The three men - and presumably the invisible monster, though Emmis couldn't be sure of that - made their way through the late-night streets, with the guardsman supporting the reluctant Kelder, who directed them down Merchant Street to Cut Street Market.

They saw a few people as they walked, but always at a distance; the few who noticed the three men generally took one look at the guardsman hauling a captive and decided they would rather be somewhere else.

The market, when they reached it, was deserted and dark - hardly surprising, as Emmis estimated it must be about midnight by now.

"He came here first," Kelder explained, "but of course everything was closed, so he went down Embroidery Street. Listen, I really think..."

"Shut up," Emmis told him.

This, he realized, was not at all the most direct route to Southmarket, or presumably to where Zhol was; instead they were retracing the route that the guardsman had taken, with the pair of would-be killers following him. He didn't bother to protest, though - having gone as far out of their way as Cut Street Market, the route from here was probably about as direct as one could get in Ethshar.

As they marched south on Embroidery, and then turned east on Carriage

Street, Emmis kept urging the other two to go faster. "It's his arm that's broken, not his leg," he pointed out.

"I'm in pain!" Kelder protested.

"So is Zhol, if he's still alive."

"I don't think he is," Kelder said, with a wary glance at the guardsman's face.

Emmis glared at him. "You better hope Zhol is still alive," he said. "It's the only way you'll escape the noose."

Kelder looked unconvinced; he clearly thought he and his partner had killed Zhol. Emmis still held out some hope, though; the pair were obviously not very good at their job, or much of anything else so far as Emmis could see, so they might well have misjudged how effectively they had dealt with Lord Ildirin's guard.

When Carriage Street dead-ended in a T intersection in a neighborhood Emmis had never seen before they turned south again for a block, then east, then south on what Emmis thought might be an unfamiliar stretch of West Avenue, which curved down the slope to Southmarket.

"Shouldn't we have my arm tended to first?" Kelder whined.

"No," Emmis said. "Would you rather worry about your arm, or your neck?"

Kelder just whimpered in reply.

Emmis wondered whether Kelder was really suffering as much as he appeared; he knew the man was a liar, but surely he had the sense to see that his best chance of survival was finding Zhol alive, and would understand that dawdling was counter-productive.

Or was it, from Kelder's point of view? Perhaps he was hoping someone would intervene on his behalf - his partner Tithi, for example.

Or the Lumethans. Emmis frowned, and started looking around more carefully at the alleys and rooftops. Tithi probably didn't have the nerve to attack two grown men, even if he didn't think the invisible monster was still around, but he might have had the nerve to find the Lumethans and ask for their help.

Hagai was a theurgist, and the other two might be magicians, as well, for all Emmis knew. They might be a real problem if they did come to Kelder's assistance.

Southmarket, when they finally reached it, was as dark and almost as empty as Cut Street Market had been; a few stalls stood along the sides, but all were securely closed up for the night, with heavy bars and sturdy shutters guarding whatever might be inside. There were parts of the city that stayed bright and active all night, but they were in Camptown or Westgate, not here in the respectable neighborhoods of Southmarket and Freshwater.

"This way," Kelder said, pointing east.

Emmis began to wonder if the scoundrel was really leading them to Zhol at all. Perhaps this was all a diversion of some sort? Were Tithi and the Lumethans and an assortment of hired thugs besieging Ithinia's house even now, trying to kill the ambassador?

No, that was absurd, Emmis told himself. No one would attack the home of a powerful wizard - well, no one but an equally powerful magician, and Emmis doubted that any of the Lumethans qualified. When he had met them at the Crooked Candle they simply hadn't had the air of authority, of power, that high-order magicians always seemed to have.

But even so, he wondered what was happening back on Lower Street. Was Lar still a stone statue in Ithinia's parlor? Were Ildirin and Ahan and Shakoph worried about Zhol and himself? What had Ildirin wanted to discuss with the Guildmaster?

Kelder had led them out of the market and up Circus Street - Emmis remembered it from a long-ago day when he and his sisters had met up with a friend's cousins in Freshwater, then cut through Southmarket on the way to a performance at the Arena, the eight of them laughing and teasing one another.

It looked very different by night, but he still recognized it.

But then they turned north onto... Canal Avenue, was it? Emmis wasn't sure.

"There," Kelder said, pointing. "That's the alley. Tithi lured him in and I stabbed him."

The guardsman started to say something and to shove Kelder forward, but Emmis ignored them and ran to the narrow opening Kelder had indicated.

The alley beyond was almost totally black; there were no lit windows, no torches, no moonlight, and the dull glow reflecting off the overcast did little to help.

"I need a light," Emmis said, peering into the gloom. "Give me your lantern."

"It's not lit," the guard said, as he awkwardly unhooked it from his belt, using just one hand because his other was still locked onto Kelder's shoulder.

"I'll manage." He took the lantern, then fished in his belt-pouch for flint, steel, and tinder.

As he knelt in the mouth of the alley, struggling to strike a light, he listened closely, hoping to hear breathing in the darkness around the corner, breathing that would mean Zhol was still alive.

Even better, perhaps, would be if Zhol was not there at all, if he had recovered enough to make his way out of the alley to find help - but if he wasn't there, how would they find him? If there was no sign he had been there, would that mean he had recovered, or that Kelder had lied?

Then the tinder caught, and he opened the lantern and carefully held the spark to the wick within. It caught, and light flared up.

Emmis lifted the lantern high, and peered into the alley.

Zhol was there, lying face-down in the dirt - and in a pool of dried blood.

There was no question at all - he was dead.

Chapter Twenty-Two

"You really killed him," Emmis said, as he approached Zhol's body with the lantern held high. "You bloody, pox-ridden fool, you killed him!"

"I told you," Kelder mumbled from behind. His voice sounded weak and strained, presumably from the pain of his injury, but Emmis suspected that was exaggerated. Broken arm or not, Emmis was sure the murderous fool was looking for a chance to escape, and probably hoped to lull the guardsman into carelessness. He had undoubtedly retraced his steps, rather than coming here directly, to give himself more time to find a way to slip away - or to give his allies more time to find and free him.

And he had probably shown them where the body was as a distraction or delaying tactic, as well. He must have known Zhol was dead.

Emmis had hoped to find Zhol still with a spark of life in him, but surely no one could lose that much blood and live - and that was ignoring the visible, ragged, no-longer-bleeding hole in the back of Zhol's neck, and the general appearance of the corpse. Zhol looked far more definitely dead than did the petrified Lar, back in Ithinia's parlor.

For one thing, Emmis was fairly sure that some of the marks on Zhol's outflung hand were rat bites - rat bites that hadn't bled, meaning they were inflicted after death.

That was not a happy thought. His mouth tightened.

"You did that?" the live guardsman demanded.

"I told you," Kelder repeated feebly.

"Then you're a dead man. Come on, we'll find a magistrate."

"At this hour? Couldn't I... go home, for tonight, and you..."

"Come on!" the guard insisted. "And you, too, as witness!"

Emmis turned, startled. "Me? But I need to get back to Lower Street! Lord Ildirin and Guildmaster Ithinia are waiting for me!" As he turned, the

lantern-light sparkled momentarily off something; Emmis paused, and tried to locate the source of the glitter.

The lantern's light was dim and uneven, but he spotted it quickly - a glass jar lay on the ground, half-hidden by a pile of weathered rubbish. Emmis stooped.

"Lord Ildirin?" the guardsman said. "What are you doing there?"

"I was helping Lord Ildirin negotiate with the Vondish ambassador," Emmis said.

"No, I mean what are you... what do you have there?"

Emmis picked up the jar; it was cracked, but had only leaked a little, and still held at least half a pint of thick golden liquid.

"He bought that in Southmarket," Kelder wheezed. "We thought it might be... I don't know, something else, even though we saw him buy it, but it's just honey. I wanted to keep it anyway, but Tithi threw it against the wall and cracked the bottle, so I left it."

"Honey," Emmis said bitterly. "Zhol died for this." He held up the jar and said, "Assassin, here's the honey I promised you."

"Honey!" The jar was snatched from his hand, the brass lid ripped off it, and for a moment it hung in the air, glittering in the lantern's light. Then the honey vanished with a loud sucking noise, and the empty jar fell to the alley floor and shattered.

"Was that enough?" Emmis asked.

Nothing answered.

Well, he told himself, either it was enough, or the creature was being difficult - perhaps its mouth was full. Either way, there wasn't much he could do about it.

"We need to get you to a magistrate," the guard said.

"What about the body?" Emmis asked.

"We'll come back for it."

That wasn't right, Emmis knew it wasn't right, he was utterly unwilling to leave Zhol's remains lying there, but it took him a second to think of what he should say to explain this to the guard.

Then it came to him. "There are rats here," Emmis pointed out.

The guardsman hesitated.

"You don't need a witness," Emmis said. "You heard him admit he killed him. He led us to the body. And if there's any doubt, the magistrate can ask a witch, can't he?"

"Witches cost money," the guardsman replied doubtfully. "The magistrates don't like spending money. But - you want to stay here?"

"No," Emmis said. "I want to take the body back to Lower Street with me. Lord Ildirin is waiting for us; Zhol was one of his personal escort. Lord Ildirin and Ahan and Shakoph will want to know what happened to him, and they'll know who to tell that he's dead."

That was all true - and it occurred to Emmis that they might want to talk to Zhol's killer, as well. After all, he had been hired by the Lumethans; he might know something useful.

"I don't know," the guardsman said.

"He's trying to trick you," Kelder said weakly. "He wants to steal this man's body."

"Why would he want to do that?" the guard asked, puzzled.

"To sell the parts to wizards, probably," Kelder suggested. "Don't they use soldier's hearts in some of their spells? Or a hand that's held a sword?"

"Not that I ever heard of," Emmis said. "Look, it's really late - wouldn't you need to wake up the magistrate, once you found him?"

"Yes, but that's... it's part of the job."

"But it's not as if anyone's waiting for you to bring this killer in," Emmis said. "Why don't we all go talk to Lord Ildirin?"

"Don't listen to him! What if there isn't any Lord Ildirin? It could all be a trap..."

Emmis stared at Kelder. "What kind of a fool are you?" he asked. "If he

takes you to a magistrate you'll be hanged tomorrow. If you come with me, Lord Ildirin may keep you alive much longer than that, for questioning. He might even make you a deal for your life."

Kelder's mouth opened, then closed again, and he twisted his head to look at his captor.

The guardsman was clearly thinking hard.

"I can't keep my hold on him and help carry the body," he said.

"I'll carry the body," Emmis said. "I'm a dockworker, I'm good at carrying things."

"To Lower Street? That's all the way on the far side of New City Hill."

Emmis sighed. "I know," he said. "Maybe we'll meet someone on the way who can help."

The guardsman nodded. "All right, then," he said. "That's what we'll do."

"Just take me to the magistrate and get it over with," Kelder muttered.

Emmis stared at him, and a realization struck - he had thought about it before, but had been too intent on finding Zhol to really think about it. "His partner," he said. "That man Tithi. He's trying to get you alone, away from me and the invisible monster, so his partner can ambush you and set him free. Or if not his partner, maybe the Lumethans who hired them."

The guardsman gave Kelder a sideways glance. "You think so?"

"I do!"

"I wouldn't... I don't know what you're talking about," Kelder spluttered. "What partner? I don't..."

"The one who lured Zhol into this alley," Emmis said.

Kelder glared at him, started to say something, then winced. "Can we just find a magician, or even a doctor?" Kelder said. "My arm feels as if it's going to fall off."

"Fine," Emmis said. "There's a wizard at the house on Lower Street. We'll take you there." He handed the guard the lantern and turned, ignoring Kelder's half-formed protests, then knelt by the body, and hesitated, suppressing a shudder.

He had never picked up a corpse before. An unconscious man, yes, when that idiot Karn tripped over the hatch coaming and fell into an empty hold, and Emmis had been the one they sent down to haul him out, but never a corpse.

He told himself it wasn't so very different, though. He grabbed poor Zhol under each arm and heaved the body upright, trying not to think about how utterly cold and limp it was, or how sticky the blood was, then turned it and hoisted it onto one shoulder. "Come on," he said, staggering slightly as he started walking.

The three men, Emmis, Kelder, and the guard, marched up Canal Avenue - or rather, Emmis trudged under the weight of the body, Kelder shuffled along reluctantly, and the guardsman marched. Despite Emmis's burden, it was Kelder who slowed their progress; he clearly didn't want to go anywhere, and Emmis thought he caught the killer glancing down various alleyways along the way.

He was looking for Tithi or the Lumethans, Emmis was sure.

There was no sign of Fendel's Assassin, and Emmis was fairly sure the creature was really gone, but he did not want Kelder to know that, and occasionally directed a remark to the invisible monster, to keep Kelder uncertain.

Emmis also kept an eye on Zhol's sword; it was still in its scabbard, hanging from the dead man's belt, and Emmis made a point of keeping it untangled. If Tithi did jump out of an alley at them, Emmis wanted to be ready to drop the corpse and snatch the sword from its sheath.

Tithi did not appear, nor did anyone else; the street was dark and deserted, the windows on either side mostly shuttered and the torches at the intersections burning low. Canal Avenue was a surprisingly direct route from Southmarket to Lower Street, a walk of perhaps a mile or so with no need to change course, much faster than going by way of Cut Street Market, but it did lead directly over the largest hill in the city, and even a mile was a very

long way when carrying two hundred pounds over one's shoulder. Emmis had to stop to rest more than once, switching the body to the other shoulder at each break.

"Once we're past New Cross Street it's all downhill," the guardsman mentioned at their first such stop.

"I know," Emmis said. That fact was small comfort; the body was heavy at any angle. And the weight wasn't the only problem; he was always uncomfortably aware of exactly what he was carrying. Something deep in him wanted to get away from the corpse, not carry it. Emmis thought that was some part of his mind reacting to the smell; while there was no real reek of corruption yet, the odor was subtly but definitely not that of a living man. And of course, the skin was horribly cold to the touch.

He wondered what time it was; the sky was too cloudy to be any help, even if he remembered where the moons ought to be this time of year. The emptiness of the streets implied that it was very late indeed - and seemed a little unnatural, as most of Shiphaven was never this quiet; there were always a few drunken sailors or desperate whores staggering about.

He wished the guardsman could help with the weight, but he knew that wasn't possible; he was busy enough keeping Kelder upright and moving. Emmis wondered just how bad a break Fendel's Assassin had actually inflicted, and how much pain Kelder was really feeling; he certainly wanted everyone to think he was suffering unbelievable agony.

They crested the hill and started down through the New City; Kelder was growing steadily more agitated. Emmis doubted this had anything to do with his injury; he thought that Kelder had expected a rescue attempt before now, and was beginning to realize that his partner had deserted him and he was really going to be hanged.

At High Street, as Emmis had half expected, Kelder made a break for it, but not at all in the way Emmis had anticipated; he did not simply tear loose from the guard's grip and run for it. Instead he pretended to stumble and thrust out a leg, tripping Emmis.

Emmis struggled to remain upright, but with the weight on his shoulder it wasn't possible; what was possible was to twist as he fell, so as not to knock down the others, and to drop his burden so that he would not be trapped beneath it. He landed hard, catching himself on his elbows.

"Are you...?" the guard began, turning to see what was happening.

Then Kelder's elbow rammed into the guard's side, and the soldier flinched - not much, but enough to loosen his grip, which allowed Kelder to turn, and to swing his knee up, obviously aiming for the soldier's groin.

The guardsman was not that stupid; he twisted away from the blow, but let Kelder's arm slip from his grasp. Then Kelder was free and running west on High Street, toward the Old Merchants' Quarter.

The guardsman let out a wordless bellow and charged after him, pulling his truncheon from his belt.

Emmis made no attempt to join the pursuit; he lay sprawled on the hard-packed dirt of the street, catching his breath, his face inches from the pale, cold neck of Zhol's corpse. He closed his eyes, and wished he could close his nose; the smell of Zhol's dead flesh was definitely disturbing.

This was, he thought, the worst night of his life, even worse than the night of Azradelle's wedding. Lar might be paying him more than he had ever imagined he would earn, but it wasn't enough to make this worthwhile.

He rolled over and sat up.

People were shouting somewhere on High Street; a woman screamed. This neighborhood was apparently not as deserted as the other side of the hill. Emmis put his hands to his temples, brushed his hair from his eyes, and looked west.

People were struggling; in the dim light he could not see exactly who they were, or what was happening. A blade flashed. Then an arm rose, holding a truncheon, and came down hard, and the struggling stopped.

Emmis swallowed bile, and began the process of getting back on his

feet.

By the time he was upright and ready to take another look the scene on High Street had changed; two guardsmen were dragging a limp figure toward him, while a small crowd watched from a safe distance behind them. As they approached Emmis heard an unfamiliar voice ask, "What about him?"

The guard who had accompanied him to and from Southmarket replied, "I think he's all right; he says he works for Lord Ildirin. We were going to meet someone he knows on Lower Street - a wizard."

"If this man killed a guard, shouldn't he go to the nearest magistrate?"

"He said Lord Ildirin would want to question him."

"What? Who said?"

Emmis saw the guard on the left nod toward him. "He did."

"Well, I hope they aren't in any hurry about questioning him; you hit him pretty hard."

"He was asking for it."

"Then I'd say he got it. Was it you who broke that arm?"

"No, Emmis did that." Again, the guardsman nodded toward him.

"Good for him."

Then the trio, the two guards and the unconscious Kelder, reached the intersection of High Street and Canal Avenue. Emmis could see that the stranger carried a lantern on his belt; the night watch was earning its pay tonight.

He also held a long, narrow-bladed dagger in his free hand - definitely not anything the city watch would issue. Kelder had probably had that hidden somewhere.

Emmis was glad he hadn't kept it somewhere readily accessible; if the assassin had pulled that when they were grappling back on Merchant Street, matters might have gone very differently.

"Emmis of Shiphaven, this is Gror Grondar's son," the familiar guard said.

"Good to meet you," Gror said.

"Thank you," Emmis said. Then he turned to the other. "I never got your name."

Gror laughed as the other said, "Arnen of Freshwater." Arnen cast Gror an angry look.

"Arnen says you're taking these two to Lower Street."

Emmis nodded. "To Guildmaster Ithinia. Lord Ildirin is waiting for Zhol and me there."

"Guildmaster? Which guild, the wizards?"

"Yes."

"Then we don't want to keep her waiting, do we?" He shifted his grip on Kelder, glanced down at Zhol's corpse, then looked at Kelder's face. The prisoner's jaw was hanging open, a thread of drool trailing down one side of his pointed beard. His eyes were closed.

Gror turned back to Emmis, and jerked a thumb toward the body on the ground. "You carried that all the way from Southmarket?"

"Yes."

"Seems to me you've done your share of the hauling, then. Arnen, can you take this one?"

Arnen mumbled something, and a moment later he had Kelder slung over his shoulder while Emmis helped Gror heave Zhol's corpse onto his shoulder.

And that was how they covered the final three blocks to Ithinia's door, where Ahan and Shakoph hurried to their aid.

Chapter Twenty-Three

"Is Fendel's Assassin gone?" Emmis asked, as he sank into a chair. Ithinia held up her dagger, which gleamed in the lamplight, but only

with the natural sheen of polished metal. There was no blue glow. "So it would seem," she said. "It carried out its assignment and you gave it the honey you had promised, so it should be."

"Good." While it was true that the creature had defended him from Kelder, the thing made Emmis nervous. "So will you turn Lar back, then?"

"In a moment. When Lord Ildirin returns."

Emmis nodded. Ildirin was out on the street with the guards, discussing what was to be done with Zhol's body, and with Kelder; Emmis had been sent inside to rest.

He certainly needed rest; it had been a very, very long day. He wanted to curl up somewhere and go to sleep; a bed would be first choice, but at this point he wasn't picky and would happily settle for a reasonably clean floor. A chair in the parlor would be more than adequate.

But he wanted to see Lar alive again, first. He glanced at the statue that had been his employer and frowned.

"Will the counter-spell take as long as the original spell? Maybe I could take a nap..."

"What? No, of course not! It just takes a moment to reverse the spell."

"It does?"

"Yes, of course. There's no way I could do another three-hour spell tonight - it would be dawn by the time I finished it. I'm not as young as I used to be, and I have no intention of staying up that late."

Emmis refrained from pointing out that it was already ridiculously late. He leaned back in the chair.

The next thing he knew, Ahan was shaking him awake.

"Lord Ildirin thought you would want to see this," the guardsman said.

"I... uh..." Emmis sat up, trying to clear his head and wondering how long he had been asleep. It was still full night outside the parlor window, so it couldn't have been terribly long.

Ahan, Ildirin, and Ithinia were standing around Lar's petrified form; Ithinia was holding the crystal goblet she had used in the petrification spell.

"Ready?" she said.

Ahan moved from Emmis's side to a position behind the statue, ready to catch Lar if he started to fall. Emmis blinked; it seemed as if he should be doing something more than just sitting there, but he was still too bleary to think what it might be.

"Give me your truncheon," Ithinia said, holding out her free hand.

Ahan drew the weapon and passed it over. Ithinia accepted it, hefted it, and nodded. Then she crossed the room and stood behind a small marble-topped table. She set the goblet on the table, and raised the guardsman's club.

Emmis expected her to pause and speak an incantation, but she did nothing of the sort; instead, without any ceremony, she slammed the truncheon down on the goblet, smashing the delicate crystal to glittering splinters and sending droplets of brown liquid spraying across the room.

Emmis started. "What..."

Then a sound caught his ear, and he turned to see Lar, no longer stone and entirely normal in appearance, slumping into Ahan's waiting arms. Emmis had been so muzzy, and so focused on Ithinia, that he had completely missed the transformation.

But he hadn't been that distracted; it must have been almost instantaneous.

He got to his feet, wanting to help, but Ahan seemed to have the situation under control; Lar was blinking as if awakening.

"Oh, my," the ambassador said, straightening up out of Ahan's grasp. "Oh, that was strange!"

"Are you all right, sir?" Emmis asked.

"Yes, I'm fine." Lar brushed at his sleeves as if removing dust, though there was no sign of any that Emmis could see. "Is... is it gone? The assassin?"

"It seems to be, yes."

Lar put a hand to his throat. "My neck..."

"It tried to wring your neck," Emmis said.

"Did it?" Lar took his hand away and looked at his spread fingers, apparently checking for blood and finding none, but Emmis could now see several long red scratches on the Vondishman's neck - none of them deep enough to bleed, but probably enough to be painful.

"Indeed it did," Lord Ildirin said. "Though only after our lovely hostess had cast a sleeping spell on you."

Emmis would not have thought of Ithinia as "lovely," but he supposed Ildirin was being polite - or perhaps his age gave him a different perspective.

"Is that what she did? I thought it was just the... the end of the first spell."

Emmis noticed the phrasing, and guessed that Lar was not confident enough of his Ethsharitic to use the word "petrification." "What was it like?" he asked.

Lar shuddered. "Everything went black. I was... I couldn't feel anything at all. The world just faded away. It was as if I was floating in total darkness. But I could hear a little - just a little. I heard you ask if the creature was still here, and I heard Ithinia say that it was, that it wanted its honey and didn't think I was dead. She said I was made of granite, but I felt as if I wasn't made of anything."

"And then what?" Ildirin asked.

"And then... I fell asleep. And I woke up as Ahan caught me, just now." He brushed at his hair nervously, then felt his neck again. "What happened? How long was I... was I...?"

"Hours," Ithinia said.

"It's a long story," Emmis added.

"Well, I wish someone would tell me that story!"

"Of course you do," Ildirin said, "And I would be delighted to oblige you." He settled onto a chair facing Lar. "Have a seat, your Excellency, and I will tell you the entire tale. And then perhaps we can stop imposing on the Guildmaster's hospitality and take to our beds; I think any further business can wait until another day."

"But the Lumethans - have you caught them?"

"Not as yet, but we do have the man who young Emmis encountered in your home."

Lar blinked, and sank into a chair; Ahan stepped back, taking up an unobtrusive position against the wall by the door. "Tell me more," the Vondishman said.

"Well, as you are aware, the petrification spell worked perfectly..." Ildirin began.

Emmis sat back in his chair and closed his eyes as he listened.

It all seemed to be working out, he thought. The magical assassin was gone, the human assassin captured. The Lumethans were still out there, and that man Tithi, but with Lord Ildirin and Guildmaster Ithinia involved, that surely wouldn't be a problem. Lar was safe, at least for now.

Poor Zhol was dead, and that was horrible, but Emmis had hardly known him, and a guard's life was inherently dangerous. One of his killers was caught, and the other almost certainly would be.

The mysterious source of magical power in Lumeth of the Towers was still unidentified, and there was still the mystery of just what those sorcerous towers were and why wizards were protecting them, but those problems seemed far less immediate.

Ildirin's voice was oddly soothing. Emmis was no longer really listening to the words, but just the tone.

And then he woke up, and opened his eyes, and saw an unfamiliar ceiling above him.

He was lying in a bed - a good bed, smooth and warm and comforting,

just soft enough - and staring up at a gilt-and-plaster ceiling that depicted spiral patterns of golden stars on a gleaming white background.

Emmis had never seen that ceiling before, he was quite sure. He turned his head.

The rest of the room was equally unfamiliar. He was in a fair-sized bedchamber decorated in white, red, and gold, lying in a large and luxurious but oddly uncanopied bed, beneath a snowy white sheet and a red satin quilt. Two tables topped with white marble stood on either side; one held a white-and-gold bowl and pitcher.

This was, Emmis thought, by far the nicest place he had ever woken up in his life, and that was including not just the rented embassy on Through Street, but the bed of that shipowner's silly daughter on Flood Street - though the company had been better there, as he was quite alone here.

He must have dozed off in Ithinia's parlor, while Lord Ildirin had been telling Lar what had happened - or perhaps Ithinia had used her sleep spell on him, though he really doubted any magic was necessary to explain it. Was this room in Ithinia's house, then? He threw off the covers and sat up, swinging his feet over the side of the bed.

His boots were gone - or rather, now that he looked, they were on the floor by the bed, rather than on his feet. He was still wearing his own familiar tunic and breeches, though, with traces of Zhol's blood still smeared on his shoulders, and his socks were still in place. That was reassuring, and fit his theory nicely. He slid off the bed and stood up, then pulled aside the red-and-white draperies and peered out the nearest window.

Lower Street. He was in Ithinia's house, and judged the room to be directly over the parlor. For a moment he wondered whether the wizard had somehow lifted him right through the floor, but then he decided that was silly; why would she do that, when she could just have someone carry him up here?

He looked at the light; the sky was still overcast, making it hard to judge the hour, but it was clearly long past dawn, and probably around midday.

"Emmis of Shiphaven?"

Emmis started; he hadn't heard the door open, but a young woman was peering in at him. "Yes?" he said.

"The Guildmaster will see you now, or if you prefer, I can bring up some breakfast first."

Emmis considered that, then said, "Breakfast would be very welcome, thank you." After all, he had not eaten since supper the night before, and he had not exactly been resting on silken cushions all night. Food sounded like a wonderful idea, and this would give him time to compose his thoughts.

The door closed.

Emmis found the chamberpot under the bed and used it, then pulled his boots back on. He was just taking another look out the window when someone knocked on the door.

He opened it to find the girl had returned with a tray; she pushed past him and set it on the unoccupied bedside table, then curtseyed and left, closing the door behind her before he could think of a single thing to say.

The tray held beer, bread, and sardines - not his usual breakfast, but satisfying enough. A napkin was provided, as well. He ate enthusiastically; when he had finished he wiped his mouth and hands, and was trying to decide whether he should wait or find his own way downstairs when another knock sounded.

He opened the door, expecting to see the serving girl again, but instead found Ithinia standing there. He quickly adjusted his stance and bowed.

"Guildmaster," he said. "I'm honored."

"You have no idea," she said wryly, stepping into the room. "I don't even let my own servants sleep in my house. Now, you said you wished to speak to me in private?"

"Yes." Before he could say anything else, though, the serving girl

appeared behind Ithinia. She slipped past her mistress to collect the breakfast tray.

Emmis and Ithinia stood silently while she bustled out, closing the door behind her.

"I'm surprised you use human servants," Emmis remarked. "She is human, isn't she?"

"She is," Ithinia said. "Her name is Irith the Brisk, and she's from Fishertown. I could create magical servants, of course, and I do have a few - you may have noticed my gargoyles, I'm rather proud of them. But for household tasks, I've generally found hiring ordinary people more convenient. They're better at understanding what's needed, they aren't prone to odd restrictions in what they can do or where they can go, and they don't make guests nervous. Now, your business?"

"Are Lar and Lord Ildirin still here?"

"They left long ago, taking their guards living and dead with them, not an hour after you fell asleep, though they're both expected to return this afternoon. I had plenty of time to talk to Lord Ildirin last night, while you were out dodging assassins and the ambassador was petrified, but there are still several matters to be settled and spells to be performed."

That disturbed Emmis. While it wasn't part of his official duties, he felt that his job included protecting Lar, and he couldn't very well do that if the ambassador left him sleeping here while he went roaming the streets in the middle of the night. "Why didn't they wake me?"

"I think they wanted to speak privately with one another. And I allowed it - encouraged it, actually - because you wanted to speak privately with me. Which you are doing now, though to very little purpose as yet."

"I'm sorry," Emmis said. "It's something I heard from a theurgist yesterday." He blinked in surprise at his own words - had it really just been yesterday that he spoke to Corinal?

"Oh?"

"Guildmaster, why have wizards put protective spells on the towers in Lumeth? The theurgist said there were several very powerful protections on them, but the towers themselves are sorcerous in nature, not any sort of wizardry."

Ithinia froze, staring at him. Then she demanded, "What do you know about the towers?"

"I... not much, just what the theurgist told me. There are three of them, and each one is a sorcerer's talisman hundreds of feet high..."

"Why was this theurgist telling you about them in the first place?" Ithinia snapped, interrupting him.

"Well, I asked. He consulted the goddess Unniel for me..."

"Why did you ask?"

"Because... I can't tell you."

"What? Why not?"

"I swore I wouldn't."

That was not literally true; he had merely accepted that Lar would have him killed if he revealed too much. Ithinia did not look as if she was interested in explanations at the moment, though.

"You swore."

"Yes." He didn't hesitate; it was only after the word had left his mouth that he found himself wondering whether he was absolutely sure that wizards couldn't always tell truth from falsehood the way witches could.

"Oaths have power, you know."

"I know."

"That was why the assassin lingered after its attempt had failed - your oath gave it the power to stay."

"I know."

"You need to be more careful what oaths you swear and what vows you make, Emmis of Shiphaven."

"Honestly, I don't swear them lightly, Guildmaster."

"So you swore not to reveal something, and that something led you to ask a theurgist about the Lumeth towers. Didn't he want to know why you were asking?"

"Not as long as I paid him, no. And I asked him a lot of questions; I don't think that one stood out particularly."

"But he told you that the Wizards' Guild has been warding the Lumeth towers for centuries."

Emmis blinked. "No. He told me wizards were protecting the towers. He didn't mention the Guild or how long it had been going on."

"He told you the towers were sorcerous, though."

"Yes. Which just seems... I mean, talismans hundreds of feet high? Holding back poisons?"

"He told you that?"

"Yes. And that they're guarded by wizards' spells, powerful ones. And I thought that since you're a Guildmaster, you might know why they're guarded that way."

"I do - but why do you care? I know the ambassador is concerned about a possible war between Vond and Lumeth, but what does that have to do with you, or with the towers?"

"Well, because... I can't tell you all of it."

"What can you tell me?"

Emmis grimaced; he knew he should have been ready for this interrogation, that it hadn't been realistic to think Ithinia would answer his questions without asking her own, but he wasn't ready. He was making it up as he went along.

"I think... I'm not sure," he said, "but I think someone may be planning to destroy the towers, and I wanted to know just how much trouble that would cause."

"Destroy them?"

"Yes. If they can."

"They probably can't, but still - who is this? Who is insane enough to attempt anything like that?"

"I can't tell you."

"Young man, you are being extremely annoying."

"I know. I'm sorry."

She stared at him for a moment, then sighed.

"All right," she said. "I'll tell you what I can, and when I'm done, you tell me as much as you can. Agreed?"

"Agreed," Emmis said, relieved. "That's perfect."

"Oh, it's anything but perfect, but it will have to do. Sit down; this may take awhile."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Emmis sat on the bed; Ithinia took the room's only chair.

"At the dawn of time," she began, "the universe, unable to contain so many opposed forces in its original compact form, tore itself in half. One piece became Heaven, home of the gods, the realm of light and..."

"I know this," Emmis interrupted. "The gods in Heaven, demons in the Nethervoid, and the leftover bits in between formed the World. What does this have to do with Lumeth?"

"As we wizards tell the story, this middle realm wasn't just left over; it was where the gods and demons collected the impurities they cast out of their own realms. All the good that had been in the Nethervoid was put here, and all the evil that had been in Heaven. Gods and demons watched as it all combined to form a new place, and were amazed to see it was possible for something to exist that was such a blending of light and dark, of good and evil - after all, hadn't the universe itself just ripped apart because it couldn't hold both? But this new creation didn't show any sign of repeating

that.

"So they wanted to see what else it could do."

"And they created people," Emmis said. "Yes, I know. I learned all this when I was a baby."

Ithinia calmly continued, "But the middle realm was such a mess, such a disorderly collection of cast-offs, that nothing could live in it."

Emmis had been going to say more, but he stopped and closed his mouth. This wasn't part of the traditional creation story.

"So the gods and demons used all the forces at their disposal to make it habitable - or at least make the part of it we call the World habitable. We don't know how much they left a poisonous wasteland, but they raised up an immense plateau in the middle, where they divided land from water and cleansed the air above. And they did this using all the different powers that we now call magic - the power of the gods made the sun and set the cycles of days and years in motion, and the power of the demons made decay and death so that the World wouldn't ever be overwhelmed by its inhabitants. They used the chaos outside the universe to make life - we call that kind of power wizardry. They used witchcraft and dance and song and all the other magics to get everything just as they wanted it."

"Warlockry, too?" Emmis asked.

"No. Warlockry didn't exist; it's new. Which is why we weren't sure at first it was really a kind of magic at all, when it appeared twenty-two years ago. It must have come from somewhere beyond the universe, somewhere in the chaos."

"Oh."

"So no, they didn't use warlockry. But they did use sorcery. Sorcery draws on order the same way that wizardry draws on chaos, so the gods and demons used both, to keep a balance. They used sorcery to make air that could be breathed. The original gases that had covered the World were poisonous fumes; I'm told that if you go to the edge of the World and look over, you can still see them covering the wastelands below. They're said to be greenish-yellow and very unpleasant."

Emmis blinked. He had never heard of anything at all beyond the edge of the World.

"The thing about sorcery," Ithinia said, "is that it uses talismans. That's inherent in it; the power it uses, a force the sorcerers call gaja, must have a physical core, or it dissipates and stops doing whatever magic it's supposed to be doing."

"And the towers in Lumeth..."

"Are the talismans the gods and demons created more than five thousand years ago to make the World's air breathable."

Emmis stared at her for a long moment, then said, "Oh."

"And the Wizards' Guild has been guarding them for as long as the Guild has existed, to make sure that nobody is ever stupid enough to damage them. We like being able to breathe."

"Oh," Emmis said again.

"So now, if you don't mind, just who is being stupid enough to risk sucking the air from the entire World and leaving it all a poisoned wasteland?"

"I can't tell you," he said.

She glared at him. "You do understand that if they're destroyed, the air will be deadly poison here in Ethshar, don't you? It won't just affect the Small Kingdoms."

"Yes, I understand that. I'm trying to think what I can tell you."

"You're working for the Vondish ambassador - is it Vond that's planning to destroy the towers?"

"Vond went off to Aldagmor years ago."

"Not the warlock, the empire."

Emmis hesitated.

"It is, then," Ithinia said, disgusted. "Why?"

"Well, I don't know for certain that they're going to try. I'm sure you could convince them not to."

"Why would they even consider doing something so insane? And how do you know about it?"

"They... I'm not saying it's the empire, all right? I never said that. But the people I'm talking about know there's a source of magical power in Lumeth of the Towers and they want to destroy it so it can't be used against them, and I think the source they're looking for is the towers."

"You think?"

Emmis sighed. "Yes. I was... a wizard was hired to identify the source, and said he couldn't, because there's magic interfering, so I asked a theurgist to tell me everything in Lumeth that had protective spells on it, because I thought that would narrow it down, and he told me that there are protective spells on their government palace, and on a tunnel the Cult of Demerchan uses, and on a few personal things like spell books, but most of all on the towers. They've got a lot of protective spells on them. So maybe this magic source is in the Demerchan tunnel, or in the palace, but I'd expect to find protective spells on those anyway, and it seems more likely that the mysterious power source is these gigantic sorcerous talismans. Which would explain why the source has been so hard to identify."

Ithinia stared at him silently for a moment.

"A source of magical power, you said?"

"Yes."

"The towers aren't..." She stopped and frowned. After another moment of thoughtful silence she said, "If anyone asks, I cast a spell on you that forced you to tell me this. You resisted as best you could, but of course you were helpless against high-order wizardry."

"Of course," Emmis quickly agreed.

"I won't deny it. Just as well if everyone thinks we have such a spell handy, and that we're ruthless enough to use it on innocent bystanders."

Emmis blinked, hesitated, then asked, "Don't you have such a spell?"

"Not really, no. I wish we did. We have a few spells that could get answers to specific questions, but they aren't entirely reliable. Witches are much better at that sort of thing, but I'm never going to tell anyone the Wizards' Guild had to ask witches for help." She sighed. "Though if you stop cooperating, I will ask a witch for help. Which would be awkward for all of us."

"I'm trying to cooperate, but I promised never to reveal certain things, and it's understood that if certain people learn them my life is forfeit."

"Am I one of those people?"

"No, but... no, you aren't. But I'm not sure I want to trust my life to you; I hardly know you."

Ithinia smiled crookedly. "I can understand that. If you think about it, though, you're already trusting your life to me, just by being here. I'm the senior Guildmaster in this city; if you died here, or simply disappeared from this house never to be seen again, nothing would be done about it."

Emmis bit his lower lip. The wizard was speaking the truth, and he knew it.

"Is there anything more you can tell me? For example, why does someone think there's a source of magical power in Lumeth in the first place?"

"They know it's there. It's been used."

"I am clearly going to need to have some long conversations with His Excellency."

So much, Emmis thought, for his job as Lar's aide. That hadn't lasted long - four days [Note to self: check chronology for second draft], was it? Four very busy days, but still, just four days. He sighed. The lie about an enchantment might save his life, as he didn't think Lar was a bloodthirsty man and Ithinia wasn't a warlock, but his job was as good as gone.

"So this magic - was it Vond who used it? Was that how he became so

powerful before the Calling took him?"

Emmis stared at her, not answering, not even refusing to answer, but just sitting on the bed.

"And someone's worried it will be used again? But why would the Empire be worried about that? They're the ones who know how it's done."

Emmis turned to look at the window, to make it harder for the wizard to read his expression.

Ithinia leaned back in her chair and folded her hands behind her head. "Ah, but the actual source is in Lumeth of the Towers, you said. Which Vond never conquered. So maybe whoever or whatever stopped him is still there, and the Empire is afraid it will emerge and undo everything Vond did. Maybe that's it, and it wasn't Vond's power source at all."

The clouds seemed to be thinning, Emmis thought; the sky outside the window was brighter than before. The sun was starting to break through.

"But... is it a war with Lumeth they're worried about? Is that why the Lumethans are hiring assassins, because they're expecting a war? That's not what Ildirin told me."

Emmis decided he could respond to this. "The Lumethans think Lar came to Ethshar to hire magicians for the Empire to use against Lumeth, and they wanted him dead before he could do that," he said.

"Did he come to Ethshar to hire magicians for the Empire to use against Lumeth?"

"No. At least, not that way; the Empire doesn't want a war. But Lumeth and Ashthasa don't believe that."

"The Small Kingdoms have a code against using magic to fight their wars. And Vond broke that code, so they think his Empire is outside all law and custom, even with Vond himself gone."

"I think that's it, yes."

"How do you know Lar hasn't lied to you, and the Lumethans aren't right?"

Emmis stammered, then turned up his empty palms. "I believe him," he said.

"But you have no proof."

"No. But everything he's told me makes sense, more sense than the idea that the Empire wants to hire magicians to conquer all its neighbors."

"So the Lumethans think the Vondish are planning to invade with magical aid, while the Vondish think the Lumethans are going to use magic against them. Is that right?"

"I... I think you should ask the ambassador."

"I will. But I'd like to have it straight in my own mind first. It's always more impressive if I already know the answers, and appearing impressive is part of my job as Guildmaster."

Emmis decided not to reply to that.

"So the source of this dangerous magic is in Lumeth," Ithinia continued, staring at her guest. "And the Vondish want to destroy it so it can't be used against them, which seems to imply they can't use it or control it themselves, while the Lumethans - they don't know about it, do they? Or they would use it, and they wouldn't be worried about the ambassador hiring a bunch of journeymen from the Wizards' Quarter."

"I don't know whether they would really use it," Emmis ventured.

"They're hiring assassins here in Ethshar. They'd use it."

"Well, maybe."

"And you think the source of this magic is the Towers."

"Yes."

"So it could be sorcery. Maybe there's a way to use the Towers as a weapon? Poison the air, perhaps?" She frowned. "I never heard of anything like that happening in Vond's wars of conquest, though. So perhaps it isn't sorcery. Wizardry, then? Is there some way of turning the spells protecting the Towers into a weapon?" She shook her head. "I can't see how that would work."

"Fendel's Assassin defended me from an attacker," Emmis pointed out. "Spells can work in ways that aren't obvious."

"You're talking to a master wizard, boy. Don't teach a fish to swim. I know most of the spells on the Towers, and I can't see how any of them would apply."

"Oh."

"And of course, Vond was a warlock. He had other magicians with him in Semma, two wizards, three witches, and a theurgist, but he was a warlock. So was..." She stopped. She stared at Emmis for a moment, then lifted her gaze to the ceiling. She unfolded her hands and lowered her gaze again.

"That's what you can't tell me, isn't it?" she said. "That was how Vond became so powerful. He found a way to use some of the magic from the Towers for warlockry. So the Vondish are worried that if he could do it, other warlocks could, too. And they don't have any way to control them. The certain people who mustn't find out aren't just the Lumethans - it's the warlocks. Because if they didn't go conquering empires and building palaces out of bedrock and tearing up the edge of the World, they could live there for years without being Called."

Emmis grimaced. "That enchantment you put on me - it's a very powerful one, right? I never stood a chance."

"Oh, absolutely, my poor child. You couldn't possibly have resisted." Ithinia got to her feet. "Why didn't the Empire just outlaw warlocks, then? Oh, because that wouldn't look right when Vond, their founder, had been a warlock. It would just serve to notify Lumeth and Ashthasa that something was up."

"Guildmaster? Why do you keep secret what the Towers really are?"

"Oh, it's not exactly secret," Ithinia said. "We just don't advertise it. We don't want people prying at them. Yes, I see the similarity - if you don't want to draw attention to something, you don't make it a forbidden mystery, you just don't mention it. All the same, I think I'll want to have a word with the chairman of the Council of Warlocks, whoever it is at the moment, and remind him that the southern Small Kingdoms are a bad place for warlocks, and anyone fleeing the Calling should look to the west instead."

"That would be... I think the ambassador would appreciate that."

"I'm sure he would. I'll tell him about it. Right now, though, I think you should go back to your place in Allston and pack a few things."

"Pack... what?" Emmis blinked. "Oh, I think Lar will give me time to find a new place back in Shiphaven."

"Shiphaven? We aren't going to Shiphaven."

"What? Then... 'we'? Where are we going? Who is 'we'?"

"You, and Lord Ildirin as the representative of the Hegemony of the Three Ethshars, and His Excellency representing the Empire of Vond, and me, representing the Wizards' Guild, and I think we'll need to track down those spies you met, Annis the Merchant and the three Lumethans, and bring them along."

"Along where?"

"To Lumeth of the Towers, of course." She smiled at him, and touched the ancient dagger she wore on her belt. "And maybe to Ashthasa and Semma, as well."

"But - why? I don't understand."

"It's simple enough," she said. "The Wizards' Guild guards the Towers, and the enmity between Vond and Lumeth threatens them. Therefore, the Guild will put an end to that enmity, even if it means wiping out every living soul on both sides."

Emmis's mouth fell open.

"Come downstairs now. We have an ultimatum to deliver." She opened the door and stood waiting for him.

The preparations took longer than Ithinia's words had led Emmis to expect - and probably longer than Ithinia herself had expected.

The afternoon's meetings with Lar and Ildirin went smoothly, so far as Emmis could tell; he was sent off while they were taking place, and did as Ithinia had suggested, packing a bag for a few days' trip to the Small Kingdoms.

Or rather, what he thought might be appropriate. He had never been to the Small Kingdoms. He had never wanted to visit the Small Kingdoms. Ithinia, however, did not offer him a choice. "You started this," she said. "You're coming."

When Lar returned to the house on Through Street that evening, accompanied by four guardsmen, Emmis met him at the door. "What happened?" he asked.

"We're going to Lumeth," Lar replied, bemused. "Ithinia insists. She says that if Lord Ildirin wants the assassination attempts to stop, they must be stopped at the source. She's planning to leave in a day or two."

"That's... interesting," Emmis said. "Do you think she knows anything about..." He glanced at the guards. "...about who's behind the assassins?"

"We'll talk upstairs," Lar said.

A few minutes later, after posting the guards at the doors, they did exactly that, taking seats in the ambassador's study.

"Did you ask the Guildmaster about the source of the hum?" Emmis asked.

Lar shook his head. "No," he said. "I don't think I want her to know anything about it; she frightens me. She isn't anyone's hireling; she has her own goals, and they may not match ours. But Lord Ildirin has brought her in to stop the assassination attempts and keep peace between Vond and Lumeth, and I think she can help with that."

"I see," Emmis said, hiding his unhappiness. He had hoped that the ambassador had brought Ithinia into his confidence; it would have simplified matters.

"Lord Ildirin had that man Kelder questioned this morning, by a magistrate and two witches," Lar continued. "He'll hang tomorrow, but in exchange for his cooperation Lord Ildirin let a warlock heal his arm, and the witches calmed him. He'll be burned on a proper pyre, not left to rot."

Emmis shuddered.

"He named his partner, Tithi Salman's son," Lar added. "Ildirin has magicians and soldiers tracking him down now, as well as those three Lumethans and the Ashthasan merchant."

"That's good," Emmis said. "Isn't it?"

"I think so," Lar said. "But Lumeth and Ashthasa are going to be our neighbors for a long time; we need to be careful how they see us."

Emmis nodded.

After a moment, Lar asked, "That theurgist you visited - the one who told you about Fendel's Assassin. Did he tell you where the hum came from?"

Emmis hesitated. "Not exactly," he said. "He said the Towers are gigantic sorcerous talismans, so it might be from those, but he didn't say definitely."

"The Towers." Lar nodded. "I thought so. Sorcery, is it? That might be it. Interesting."

Emmis waited for Lar to ask the next question, to give him a chance to say more, to explain about the Towers and why he had spoken to Ithinia, but the ambassador said nothing more.

And then the moment had passed, and Emmis couldn't bring himself to say anything more about it. The rest of the evening was uncomfortable; Emmis had to watch everything he said, lest he reveal some part of his conversation with Ithinia best left unspoken. He went to bed early, claiming to still be tired from the previous night's adventures.

And in the morning there was Zhol's funeral, which Emmis and Lar attended as Lord Ildirin's guests. Because Zhol had served honorably in Lord

Ildirin's escort the ceremony was held not in Camptown, as most city guard funerals were, but on a terrace overlooking the Grand Canal, between the Palace and the Old City. The pyre was built right on the edge, where the flames reflected in the murky water of the canal, and the event was well attended - not only were dozens of guards present, and a score of Zhol's kin, but much of the city's ruling elite; Lord Ildirin had seen to that. The overlord himself, Azrad VII, plunged the torch into the waiting kindling to light the blaze that would free the dead man's soul to ascend to Heaven.

Emmis did not dare approach Azrad, but he did take a good look at him. The overlord was a heavily-built man in late middle age, his hair gray and thinning, but his face still relatively smooth, his stance still strong and upright. Although he must have weighed fifty pounds more than the slender Ildirin, the family resemblance was plain.

"I didn't expect to see him here," Emmis whispered to Lar, as they watched the flames spread across the pyre. "Even if Zhol was chosen for Lord Ildirin's escort, he was still just a guardsman, after all."

Lord Ildirin, on Lar's other side, heard; he leaned over and replied, "The man served honorably, and died performing that service. His family deserves to see that my family respects him for it. My nephew understands that."

Chastised, Emmis said nothing more.

And that afternoon there was the hanging. Emmis talked his way out of attending that, but Lar and Ildirin did not. That left Emmis sitting alone in the makeshift embassy on Through Street, and he busied himself cleaning and straightening - though he wasn't entirely sure why he was bothering. He was fairly sure that after this planned trip to Lumeth, if it happened, he would no longer be Lar's aide and guide. The truth would come out, that he had given Ithinia the hints she needed to guess Lar's secrets.

Still, hauling furniture around was a good way to keep himself occupied.

Once again, the evening was uncomfortable. Emmis found Lar giving him puzzled looks every so often during the awkward silences, as if wondering why his aide had suddenly turned sullen and uncommunicative.

Emmis wished he could just tell Lar everything, but he couldn't bring himself to begin. If Lar had asked questions Emmis thought he would have eventually worked his way around to a confession, but the Vondishman did not seem to have any questions to ask.

The following day Emmis removed himself from the house at the first opportunity and spent every daylight hour roaming the city and talking to tradespeople, seeing that the Vondish embassy would be properly furnished and the kitchen well-stocked. He resisted the temptation to visit the Wizards' Quarter or Camptown; he had passed that responsibility on to Ithinia.

Of course, Corinal probably still had several answers to questions that were purely personal, but Emmis was in no mood to deal with those, not when the Guildmaster intended to ship him off to the Small Kingdoms at any moment,

That night Emmis dreamed he was back in Ithinia's home, where the wizard instructed him, "This is the Spell of Invaded Dreams. You and your master are to be at my door by noon tomorrow; if you aren't here on time, I will send my gargoyles to fetch you, which will not be pleasant."

He awoke with a start, unsure whether the dream had really been a magical message or not. At breakfast, though, Lar said, "Did you have a dream about Ithinia last night?"

"Yes," Emmis admitted.

"Her door at noon?"

"Yes." He was relieved; if they had both dreamt it, then it had been a sending.

"She could have just paid a messenger two bits."

Emmis turned up a palm. "She's a wizard," he said.

Lar nodded, and took another bite of cheese.

Noon found the pair turning the corner from Arena onto Lower Street,

with the guards Ildirin had posted surrounding them. Emmis had expected to see the street much as usual, with a handful of people going about their business, but instead he found a throng already waiting at Ithinia's door.

Lord Ildirin's coach was there, with Lord Ildirin and several others still in it; a dozen guardsmen were gathered around it. Standing between the coach and the door were a handful of strangers; three of them were wearing elaborate robes and were presumably wizards, while one wore the white and gold garb of a priest, another the red and black attire of a demonologist.

Above, on the eaves, two gargoyles were moving about, staring down at the crowd, though neither appeared threatening.

"That's a lot of magicians," Emmis said.

"And a lot of guards," Lar agreed, glancing at his own nearest escort.

Then the doors swung open and Ithinia appeared, resplendent in a blue and white robe far more ornate than the relatively plain robe Emmis had seen her wear before. "Welcome to you all!" she called, her voice seeming unnaturally loud and clear. "If you will all follow me, please?" She stepped out into the street, closing the door behind her, and led the way around one side of the house and along a narrow passage - a passage open to the sky but too clean to be called an alley, the walls gleaming with fresh yellow paint and the floor paved with brown bricks.

The entire crowd followed her, the guards helping Ildirin and the other passengers out of their coach; Emmis did not wait to see who the old man had brought with him, but hurried after the wizard and found himself surrounded by magicians as he marched through the passage into the wizard's garden.

Lar caught up to him as they emerged onto a pleasant little terrace. "Who are all these people?" the Vondishman asked in Emmis's ear, gesturing at the magicians.

"I have no idea," Emmis replied.

They were clustered in one corner of a tidy little garden, and at first Emmis wondered why the leaders hadn't moved further in, to make more room.

Then he saw the gargoyles.

The things appeared to be carved of ordinary gray stone, except for the fact that they were moving. Each stood about five feet tall - or rather, crouched about five feet tall, as neither stood remotely straight. Both had claws and fangs and wings, but the details were very different from one to the other; one of them had so many fangs, and such large fangs, that it seemed unable to close its mouth at all.

Emmis had seen the gargoyles on the front of the house, and had seen that they were animated, but looking up at such monstrosities from twenty feet below did not have at all the same effect as seeing them six feet away from you on the ground. Their threatening appearance was much more immediate when they were on the same level.

He glanced up at the back of the house, and sure enough, there were empty niches on either corner that were surely where these two normally stayed.

Then Emmis glanced over to see Lord Ildirin hobble around the corner, followed by his guardsmen dragging several others; Emmis turned to stare as he saw who else had been in the nobleman's coach.

Annis, the Ashthasan merchant, was there, with her hands bound behind her. And beside her was Hagai, the Lumethan theurgist, who not only had his hands tied, but who had a gag in his mouth. His hooded robe was open, the hood flung back. Behind them were the other two Lumethans, hands bound, hoods back, mouths gagged. All four had been disarmed, their belt-knives removed.

And behind the four foreigners was an ordinary-looking Ethsharite in a drab brown tunic, with his hands tied and his ankles hobbled; it took Emmis a moment to recognize him as Tithi, Kelder's partner in crime.

"What are they doing here?" Emmis whispered to Lar.

Lar turned up a hand. "I don't know," he said.

"Thank you all for coming!" Ithinia called, as the last of the crowd squeezed into the garden. "I'm sure many of you have questions, but I prefer

not to take the time to answer them. I think all will become clear as events progress. I am about to perform a spell called Hallin's Transporting Fissure - some of you are familiar with it, some aren't. I think it will be obvious why it could not be done inside my house, and why I thought it unwise to do it in Lower Street. I will ask you all to follow me; these gargoyles of mine will bring up the rear and make sure we all arrive safely." She gestured toward the two monsters. "I must warn you, do not attempt to turn back, for any reason - the results could be very unfortunate. If you feel it necessary to pause to catch your breath or steady yourself, that should be safe enough, but do not turn back. Is that understood?"

A mumbled chorus of yeses and several nods seemed to satisfy her.

"Good," she said. Then she pulled a wooden flute from her sleeve, held it to her mouth, and began to play.

It was an odd little tune, mostly a pleasant enough melody, but with certain notes that seemed off and out of place, notes that served to transform the cheerful ditty into something strange and uncomfortable. The wizard played through a dozen measures, more or less, and then held the final note.

It grew louder and louder in a way that would not have been possible for any natural sound, adding deeper and deeper undertones, until it seemed as if the earth itself was shaking.

And then the earth really did shake as the garden before Ithinia's feet vibrated, humped up, and split open like an overripe fruit.

"Gods!" someone said.

The opening in the ground widened, becoming a crevice three or four feet wide and fifteen or twenty feet long. Emmis stared in amazement as Ithinia, still holding that impossibly-sustained note, stepped forward into it.

She held the flute in place with one hand, still blowing, while her other beckoned for her guests to follow her as she descended; then she began playing a tune again - not the disconcerting one she had played before, but a sprightly little melody with many trills.

Most of her audience simply watched at first, too surprised or nervous to move, but the other magicians followed her down into the opening in the earth, sinking slowly out of sight as if walking down a flight of stairs.

Then one of the gargoyles spoke, in a voice like stone grinding on stone - and, Emmis asked himself, what else would it sound like? "Go," it said.

That seemed to break the tension and everyone began moving forward, with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Tithi and Annis seemed especially reluctant; the Lumethans, oddly, appeared more resigned than frightened. Emmis found himself somewhere in the middle of the line marching into the rift, with a soldier ahead of him and Lar behind him.

When he reached the opening he was not particularly surprised to see that there really were stairs leading down into the earth, carved from the soil of the garden. Something was wrong with the perspective, though - the stairs seemed to go on forever without ever reaching the far end of the rift. He could see and hear Ithinia far ahead and below, still playing her flute, and then the other wizards, and the theurgist and the demonologist behind them, then Lord Ildirin, and a few guards, spaced along what seemed to be a hundred yards of earthen steps that somehow fit into a twenty-foot trench.

Then he put his foot down on the first step himself, and it felt as if the World twisted beneath his feet; the midday sky was somehow behind him, more than above him. He tried to ignore the disorienting effects of the magic as he marched on down into the earth.

"Oh, gods!" Lar said behind him, as he, too, took that first step. He muttered something more, but it was in a language other than Ethsharitic that Emmis did not understand.

The warning against turning back had been a good idea, Emmis thought as he walked, because there was a wrongness to these stairs that made him want to turn and flee. He wondered whether there was really any danger, or whether

Ithinia had said that to ensure that all her desired guests arrived at their destination.

He wasn't about to test it; there wasn't really room to squeeze past Lar and the others to get back out, and it was entirely possible that the Guildmaster had spoken the simple truth when she said it was dangerous.

Then a shadow blocked out the sunlight and Emmis glanced back to see that the gargoyles were entering the fissure - the entire party was now on the stairs.

Those stairs were changing. It was not that the one he stood on was any different from those above and below it, but that from where he stood they all appeared to be altered now. Instead of packed earth, the steps were stone now, and the slope was much shallower, and they weren't level - he felt as if he were walking forward on the edges of the steps, rather than walking down on their tops.

The walls on either side were stone as well, rather than earth, though he had been unaware of any change, and when he looked back they appeared to be stone all the way, there was no transition.

And then everything shifted again, and he was walking up a flight of steps, and the daylight behind him was gone entirely but he could see daylight ahead, where Ithinia was emerging from the stone tunnel into the midday sun.

If he could have picked up his pace Emmis would have done so, but the guardsman in front of him was trudging on at the same steady march he had maintained all along.

Finally, though, Emmis found himself climbing up a set of stairs in the middle of a broad paved plaza, where a crowd formed a large circle around the new arrivals, giving them a wide berth. Ithinia stood on the stones a few feet from the rift, playing her flute.

This was no plaza that Emmis had ever seen before, he was sure of that. One side was completely dominated by a tall and forbidding fortress of gray stone; the other five - yes, five; the plaza was hexagonal, like Hempfield Market, but larger and more regular - were lined with shops and tall, narrow houses.

On the side opposite the fortress the gaps between buildings, and the mouths of the streets, gave a view of empty air - there was obviously a slope on that side dropping away rapidly from the plaza. To either side of the fortress, streets climbed up a gentle slope. This plaza, whatever it was, was partway up the side of a large hill.

The architecture surrounding the plaza was subtly unfamiliar; the clothes worn by the observers weren't quite right, either, though Emmis had seen such garb before, on visitors from the Small Kingdoms. This was not in Ethshar of the Spices, he was sure. It was presumably somewhere in Lumeth of the Towers.

He stepped out onto the stone pavement - made, he saw, of the same stone as the tunnel walls - and moved to one side, to allow those behind him to emerge.

No one spoke as the guards and their prisoners climbed up out of the fissure in the pavement. When the gargoyles emerged, though, Emmis thought he heard gasps from the surrounding crowd.

Then Ithinia ended her tune with a final flourish, and slipped the flute into her sleeve; the instant the music stopped a loud rumble sounded, and the opening in the pavement closed itself up. As the two sides met the stones merged, leaving not the faintest crack; there was no indication that there had ever been a fissure.

Both the newly-arrived travelers and the watching natives murmured at this sight. Emmis wondered how they were to return to Ethshar; had Ithinia brought the materials to perform the spell again?

The wizard paid no attention to the closing fissure, though. Instead she raised her arms above her head and faced the fortress, looking up at a small enclosed balcony where a handful of men were standing.

"Lords of Lumeth of the Towers!" she shouted, her voice ringing out

clearly. "Listen to the judgment of the Wizards' Guild!"

Chapter Twenty-Six

Emmis blinked. Judgment?

The people on the balcony seemed equally confused. "Who are you?" one of them shouted back. Another appeared to be translating for a third.

The Guildmaster lowered her arms. "I am Ithinia of the Isle, and I speak for the Wizards' Guild - let my companions attest to my authority!"

The other three wizards stepped toward her, facing the balcony. The oldest-looking of them announced, "I am Serem the Wise, from Ethshar of the Sands, and I say that Ithinia speaks for the Guild."

The youngest in appearance - though it occurred to Emmis that appearances could be very deceptive in the case of wizards - then called, "I am Kaligir of the New Quarter in Ethshar of the Rocks, and Ithinia speaks for me and the wizards of my city, as well."

The third said, "I'm Zikel Thurin's son of Sardiron of the Waters. Listen to her."

"Shei Lumethis!" someone shouted; Emmis assumed it meant "Speak Lumethan!" The wizards ignored it.

"Satisfied?" Ithinia called.

"Couldn't you speak Lumethan?" another voice from the crowd asked, speaking Ethsharitic with a thick accent. "Not everyone speaks Ethsharitic!"

Ithinia kept her attention on the balcony.

"We will hear you," one of the others on the balcony called back. "Shall we retire to the audience chamber?"

"No. We will speak here and now, before all these people," Ithinia replied.

The men on the balcony stirred uneasily at that, but did not argue. "What is this judgment, then?" one of them asked.

"You have abused our gifts," Ithinia said. "You have used magic we entrusted to you, magic intended for the Guild's purposes, to send spies to Ethshar." She gestured toward the three bound Lumethans. "Your representatives have hired assassins, such as this one." She pointed to Tithi. "You have antagonized the Hegemony of the Three Ethshars - this man accompanies me as spokesman for his nephew Azrad VII, Overlord of Ethshar of the Spices, Triumvir of the Hegemony of the Three Ethshars, Commander of the Holy Navies and Defender of the Gods." She turned her hand toward Lord Ildirin.

"What does the Guild care about Ethshar?" demanded the man who had first asked her who she was.

Ithinia glared at him. "I'm not done," she said. She gestured toward Lar. "And this man is Lar Samber's son, ambassador plenipotentiary from the Empire of Vond to the court of Azrad VII, and the reason you have done all this. He speaks for Lord Sterren, Regent of the Empire."

Lar bowed.

"And the rest of them?" the man on the balcony asked. "Who are these soldiers?"

"These are the men of Ethshar's city guard, brought to ensure that our prisoners remain prisoners, and that no assassin troubles any of my party. The gargoyles are my personal attendants. That young man is Emmis of Shiphaven, Lar's aide. Bragen the Black, our demonologist, and Radler the Divine, our theurgist, are here to show that the Guild does not stand alone among magicians in this; and Annis the Merchant, of Ashthasa, conspired with your spies, and is here as the unwilling representative of Prince Sammel."

"You seem to have been thorough," one of the lords replied.

Ithinia nodded an acknowledgment.

"And what are you all here for?" another lord asked.

"To keep you all from doing something monumentally stupid," Ithinia replied. "You are concerned that the Empire of Vond intends to continue its

expansion, and that your lands would be a natural target for such an expansion, and you have committed crimes in order to prevent that. I am here to inform you that there will be no such expansion. The Wizards' Guild will destroy the Empire entirely should any Vondish soldier set foot across Lumeth's border with hostile intent."

That sent a stir through the crowd. Emmis glanced at Lar, and saw that he did not look dismayed in the least by this threat; instead he looked relieved.

"You should have known that we have interests in your kingdom that mean we would not allow you to be overrun," Ithinia continued. "We did not teach Morkai of Crooked Hill how to use Hallin's Transporting Fissure out of sheer generosity, or to aid you in sending out spies. But you are also concerned that another mighty warlock like the Great Vond might arise in the Empire, and that we would not interfere with other schools of magic. I hereby inform you that the Wizards' Guild will require the Empire to forbid entry to any and all warlocks, and will do everything it can to prevent any warlocks from taking any Vondish person as an apprentice. Furthermore, I have brought Bragen and Radler to assure you that the Guild will not act alone in this - we will see to it that demonologists and theurgists will aid in enforcing this decree. And Lord Ildirin can attest that the Hegemony of the Three Ethshars will join in, and will not allow warlocks to take ship for any port in the Small Kingdoms south of Londa. The Council of Warlocks has agreed to this, as well."

Lar was not merely relieved now, but smiling.

"It would seem this dreadful 'judgment' of yours is entirely in our favor," one of the Lumethan nobles called back, as one of the others hastily translated Ithinia's words into Lumethan for the two who appeared to know no Ethsharitic.

"Oh, no," Ithinia said. "It is not. Because all these demands will apply to Lumeth of the Towers, just as they will to the Empire. Any Lumethan agent who sets foot in the Empire unasked does so on penalty of death; if a single Lumethan soldier crosses the border without imperial consent, this city, and everyone in it, will be slaughtered - men, women, and children. No spies, no assassins, no saboteurs shall be sent, or all your lives are forfeit. Nor shall you knowingly aid any other kingdom that attempts to subvert or attack the Empire."

The men on the balcony did not reply to that; after a moment's silence Ithinia continued. "Likewise, we did not bring a representative of the Council of Warlocks with us because the practice of warlockry is hereby forbidden in Lumeth of the Towers. The crime of warlockry shall be punishable by immediate execution. If there are any warlocks within your borders they have three days to leave, and they are to go as far and as fast as possible - we will not allow them to take refuge in Shassala, Gajamor, Calimor, Eknissamor, Yaroia, Zenda, or Kalithon."

Emmis was not sure just where those places were, but he glanced at Lar again, and discovered that the Vondish ambassador was grinning broadly. "That's every kingdom bordering Lumeth," Lar whispered. "It's half the Empire's northern border!"

"If you're worried that the Empire is planning to attack you," Ithinia concluded, "you will find a wizard and inform the Guild. You will not undertake any action on your own. Is that understood?"

The party on the balcony exchanged looks, but except for the running translation no one spoke at first. Then Ithinia waved a hand and pointed at one of them; his beard burst into flame.

"I said, is that understood?" she shouted.

"Yes!" one of the men called back, as two of the others used hands and sleeves to smother the burning beard.

Then Ithinia turned and beckoned to the guards holding the Lumethan prisoners. She grabbed the first by the back of the neck and forced him to his knees on the pavement in front of her.

"I return to you Hagai of Lumeth, who is guilty of espionage and

conspiracy to commit murder in Ethshar of the Spices. Because he was acting in your service the Hegemony of the Three Ethshars and the Wizards' Guild will allow him to live, but he is never again to set foot outside Lumeth's borders." She flung the bound theurgist down onto the stones of the plaza and left him lying there as she moved on to the next.

"And this is Neyam the Witch, who was sent to hire thugs in the Hundred-Foot Field. One of his minions has already been hanged, and the overlord's magistrates had him flogged yesterday, but he was permitted to heal himself, and he, too, we will allow to live, so long as he remains within your borders."

She flung him down as well, and grabbed the third man. "Finally we have your wizard, Morkai of Crooked Hill, who the Guild had entrusted with certain magic intended for use in guarding the ancient towers for which your land is named, and who used one of those spells not to summon aid in an emergency, as was intended, but to transport himself and his companions to the dunes south of Ethshar of the Spices, so that they might spy on the Vondish ambassador. He then used his membership in the Guild to call upon the services of a fellow wizard, Felder of Arena Street, in summoning Fendel's Assassin and directing it to kill the ambassador. Because he is a wizard, the overlord delivered him unscathed into my keeping, for the Guild to deal with; he, too, is confined to Lumeth of the Towers for the remainder of his life, and for his abuse of the privileges granted him, he is hereby cast out of the Wizards' Guild." With that she shoved Morkai aside and held out a hand.

One of the Ethsharitic guards had obviously been told what to do; he passed her a knife, one that looked ordinary enough but that Emmis supposed must be Morkai's wizard's dagger. Ithinia took it, and touched it with her own knife; violet fire flared up briefly from both blades.

Then she threw it to the ground and signaled to the guard, who knelt, picked up the knife, and thrust its point deep into one of the cracks between paving stones, so that it stood upright.

Then he bent it until the blade snapped off.

Morkai screamed through his gag, and fell writhing on the stone, startling Emmis - and all the other observers, apparently, except the other wizards.

"What's going on?" Lar asked, his smile gone and his face pale. "Why is he doing that?"

"It must be a spell of some kind," Emmis said, turning up an empty palm. "The knife was enchanted somehow."

"She didn't tell us she was going to do that!"

"He tried to kill you, sir," Emmis reminded him.

"Yes, but..."

"I'm sure Neyam screamed when he was flogged."

"No, he didn't. Witches can block their pain."

Emmis frowned. That seemed to defeat the purpose of the flogging.

It wasn't his responsibility, though.

Ithinia had turned back to the balcony, and as Morkai's screaming subsided to a whimper she announced, "That concludes our business here, for the present." Then she pulled a wooden flute from her sleeve and raised it to her lips.

Emmis blinked; he was quite sure that she had put the flute in her right sleeve after their arrival in Lumeth, but she had just drawn this flute from her left sleeve. He leaned forward, trying to get a better look at it.

It wasn't the same flute; he was sure of it. This one was lighter in color, and when she began to play the tone was slightly different.

It had the same effect, though. When she reached that final note and held it the sound seemed to echo and re-echo, and the stone pavement shook beneath their feet, then with a great rumble it rippled and split open. A slate skidded off a nearby roof and shattered on the pavement.

"I thought we would stay here tonight!" Emmis whispered to Lar. "I mean, we came all the way to Lumeth, and after half an hour we're going back

to Ethshar? I didn't even get to see the famous towers!"

"I don't think Ethshar is where we're going," the ambassador replied. Startled, Emmis asked, "It's not?"

"I don't think so."

Then Ithinia was leading the way down the steps, and Lar and Emmis followed the crowd descending into this new fissure. Emmis decided not to ask any more questions, since he would see soon enough where they were going.

He glanced back as they were entering the rift, and saw the three Lumethan magicians still sprawled miserably on the pavement; they were not accompanying the party to whatever its new destination might be. Annis the Merchant was still being escorted along, though.

This time the passage stayed stone the entire way, but changed hue, from gray to a off-white. Once again, they emerged into sunlight in the middle of a public square. This time, though, Emmis could smell the sea and hear the cry of gulls overhead; he began to think that they were indeed returning to Ethshar, just not to Ithinia's garden.

Then he looked around, and knew that whatever this place was, it wasn't Ethshar of the Spices. The buildings surrounding them were white or golden yellow, gleaming in the sun, without a trace of red brick or dark timber anywhere. The air was warmer than it had been in either Ethshar or Lumeth.

Again, when the gargoyles bringing up the rear had emerged from the chasm, Ithinia concluded her tune and the fissure rumbled and closed.

Again, a crowd had gathered, but stood well back from the newly arrived strangers.

"Prince Sammel of Ashthasa!" Ithinia called. "Come forth and hear me!"

"This is Ashthasa?" Emmis whispered.

"I suppose so," Lar said. "I've never been here before."

This time they had a wait before at last the doors of a large white building swung open and a young man in gaudy green-and-gold robes emerged, attended by half a dozen spearmen in gleaming golden helmets.

Again, Ithinia and the other wizards introduced themselves, Lar, Lord Ildirin, the theurgist, and the demonologist. Then Ithinia had Annis dragged forward.

"This woman," Ithinia announced, "conspired with three Lumethan agents who attempted to assassinate the Vondish ambassador to Ethshar of the Spices."

The man in the elaborate robes replied, "Not by my orders; I assigned her to watch the ambassador, not kill him." He spoke Ethsharitic well, better than any of the Lumethan lords.

"I didn't try to assassinate anyone!" Annis protested - unlike the Lumethan magicians she hadn't been gagged, since she had no magic to call upon. "I just didn't try to stop it! And I told Emmis, who did stop it!"

"Then I see no crime," the prince replied. "Why have you come here so dramatically?"

"To inform you that your concerns about Vondish expansion are groundless, and warn you that you are not to interfere in the Empire's trade negotiations with the Hegemony. And to return you your spy, who is no longer welcome in Ethshar of the Spices."

"You are saying that the Wizards' Guild will guarantee that the Vondish Empire will not attempt to extend itself into Ashthasa?"

"We are saying that the Wizards' Guild will guarantee that the Vondish Empire will not attack Ashthasa without provocation, nor will we permit the Empire to use warlockry against any of its neighbors under any circumstances. We would suggest, however, that you do not provoke the Empire."

"I am not a fool, my lady," the prince replied. "Even without magic, the Empire could swallow Ashthasa in mere hours; we will not provoke them. Thank you for your assurances!"

He and Ithinia exchanged bows.

Then a guardsman cut Annis' bonds and gave her a shove. She took a few steps, then stopped to turn and glare at the Ethsharites. No one paid her much attention as Ithinia drew a flute from her sleeve.

This time Emmis had been watching closely. He knew she had put the flute that had brought them from Lumeth to Ashthasa in her right sleeve, yet she drew this one from her left. And it was chased in silver, where the others had been plain wood.

How many flutes did she have in there?

Again, she began to play; again, the music behaved unnaturally, the ground shook, and a fissure opened.

Emmis waved to Annis as he marched into the waiting passage; she waved back.

Then he had once again turned that strange corner onto the magical staircase, and was on his way somewhere - perhaps back to Ethshar, perhaps somewhere else.

He didn't bother asking Lar where he thought they were bound; they would find out soon enough.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The sun seemed even brighter here than it had in Ashthasa, even though it was now well down the western sky and the walls of the houses and shops were a slightly darker shade of golden-yellow. Once again they had emerged in a public square, but this one was hard-packed earth, rather than being paved with stone, and appeared to have little in the way of city around it. A white marble palace loomed over them on one side, while the other three sides of the square mostly had just a few open-fronted shops shaded by brightly-colored awnings. A broad road led out of the square directly opposite the doors to the palace, and Emmis could see that it led, perhaps half a mile away across a valley, to a castle built of dark red stone, looking like something out of a picture book about the Small Kingdoms.

Well, that was reasonable enough, since they were presumably somewhere in the Small Kingdoms. Emmis could not see how they had any business anywhere other than Ethshar and the Small Kingdoms, and this definitely wasn't Ethshar of the Spices.

"Semma!" Lar exclaimed, as they climbed up out of the fissure.

"Is that where we are?" Emmis asked, looking around. The crowd here was smaller than the ones that had gathered in Lumeth and Ashthasa, which seemed peculiar; wasn't this the heart of an empire, where the others were little more than city-states?

"Yes!" Lar said, pointing. "That's the Imperial Palace, where the Council meets, and over there is Semma Castle, where the Regent lives - and where I live."

That was interesting; Emmis studied the castle. It didn't look terribly appealing. He noticed it had a rather sprawling village clustered around it, where the palace only seemed to have this one square's worth of homes and businesses near it. "I would have thought the Regent would live in the Imperial Palace," he said.

Lar turned up a palm. "He doesn't like being that close to the Imperial Council."

That struck Emmis as slightly odd, but then, much of what Lar had told him about Lord Sterren seemed a little odd.

The gargoyles clambered up out of the fissure, and Ithinia lowered her flute and tucked it into her right sleeve. "We have come to address the Imperial Council!" she proclaimed.

The crowd murmured, and someone opened the palace door and slipped inside.

Lar bestirred himself and hurried to Ithinia's side, with Emmis trotting after him. "They may not be in session," the ambassador said.

"I know that," the wizard replied.

"And the Regent may be in the castle, over there."

Ithinia turned to glare at him. "Yes?"

"Should I go see if he's there?"

"Your Excellency, I would think that an earthquake splitting open the market square and allowing a party of magicians to emerge would draw his attention, wherever he is."

"Well..." Lar could not really argue with that, and subsided. Emmis thought the ambassador was just eager to get a good look at his home, now that he was unexpectedly back here.

The door of the palace opened again, and a youth in a black-and-silver tunic emerged and ran across the square, circling around the visitors and heading full-tilt toward Semma Castle.

"We could go inside," Lar suggested. "The Council doesn't make anyone wait out here in the sun."

Ithinia turned to glare at him. "If I wanted you to play native guide, Your Excellency, I would have asked you."

The palace doors opened again, but this time both valves swung wide, and a soldier in a red-and-gold uniform emerged. He saluted Ithinia and the other wizards, then cleared his throat.

"Lady Kalira, Chancellor and Vice-Regent of the Empire of Vond, welcomes you and invites you all to come inside and be made comfortable." He spoke Ethsharitic with only a very slight accent, less than Lar's.

"We have come to speak to the full Council," Ithinia replied.

"The full Council is not here, honored visitor. A messenger has been sent to the Regent, but at present only Lady Kalira and three other Councillors are in attendance."

Ithinia frowned, then turned to confer quietly with the other wizards. As they spoke, Emmis noticed the soldier staring at Lar. He had the expression of someone trying to figure out where he knew a face from.

He also noticed that Lord Ildirin did not look happy. Despite his vigor, Ildirin was a very old man, and they had been doing a great deal of standing around in the sun; Emmis thought he was probably exhausted.

One of the other wizards - Serem, was it? - pointed to Ildirin just then, and Ithinia nodded.

Then she turned back to the messenger and said, "We will accept the Chancellor's invitation, with the understanding that our business here is not private, and that members of the public must be admitted."

The soldier bowed. "This way, please," he said, and turned to lead them in.

Almost the entire party from Ethshar - all of it but the two gargoyles, who took up posts on either side of the palace doors, and the four prisoners who had been left behind in Lumeth and Ashthasa - followed him, through a grand entrance hall and around a corner into a large and luxurious drawing room equipped with a goodly assortment of chairs, sofas, and settees.

"Please, make yourselves comfortable," the soldier said. "Lady Kalira will be here shortly, and Lord Sterren should be on his way."

Emmis was happy to take a seat and give his feet a rest; Lar settled beside him, then leaned over and asked, "How did Ithinia find out about..." He hesitated, glancing around to be sure no one was listening. "Did you tell her we wanted to prevent warlocks from coming to Vond?"

"No," Emmis said. The settee suddenly seemed a bit crowded and much less comfortable.

"Did you ask her to do any of this?"

"No," Emmis said. He twisted in his seat. "Didn't you? You and Lord Ildirin were talking to her - I thought this was your idea."

Lar shook his head. "No, we just asked her to help us locate and capture the assassins. Which she did. And we asked her questions about protective spells. But we didn't ask for the Guild to help this way."

"Did you ask her about..." It was Emmis's turn to glance about. "...about the hum? The source?"

"No. She frightened me. I didn't want to trust her that much."

"She frightens me a little, too," Emmis admitted.

"So what did you tell her?"

Emmis considered that, then said, "I didn't really tell her much of anything. I asked her a question, and then she figured everything out."

"Do you think that was magic?"

In fact, Emmis was fairly certain no magic had been used, that Ithinia was just smarter and better informed than she had any right to be, but he turned up a palm. "I don't know," he said.

"What was the question?"

Emmis shifted uneasily. "It was about something the theurgist told me in the Wizards' Quarter," he said. "Corinal said something about wizards guarding the Lumeth Towers, and I asked her why they do that."

Lar cocked his head. "Did she tell you?"

"Not really," Emmis lied.

A few days ago, he knew, he would have happily explained everything to his employer; even now, he wasn't sure why he was holding anything back. The events of the last few days, though, had taught him that information was power - and that there was power in withholding information, as well. Knowledge, once shared, couldn't be taken back. And partial information was dangerous. A few apparently harmless facts had sent the Lumethans into a panic and set assassins on the ambassador's trail; a few words here and there had let him save the ambassador from those assassins. The magicians in the Wizards' Quarter charged high fees for answers to questions they didn't understand, while Ithinia seemed to have figured out half the World from being asked a question. Questions and answers, facts and mysteries, could lead in any number of unexpected directions.

Emmis was not sure what Lar would do with knowledge of the Towers' origins and purpose, so he was not about to give it.

"Are the towers the source of the hum?" Lar asked.

"I don't know," Emmis said. "They might be. I didn't mention the hum to Ithinia." He hesitated, then added, "Whatever they are, the Wizards' Guild doesn't want anyone interfering with them - that's why they're doing all this, to protect the towers. I really, truly wouldn't want to be anyone who threatened those things."

"Ah," Lar said. He looked thoughtfully in Ithinia's direction.

Just then there was a small commotion at one side of the room and a woman entered, a tall woman with aristocratic features and dusky skin, wearing a gown of dark red embroidered in bright red and gold - though not embroidered terribly well, Emmis thought when she got close enough for him to see her clearly. She was escorted by two more soldiers, in red kilts and brown leather breastplates.

The Ethsharitic soldiers all stood ready at the sight of this pair, but the woman between them ignored that. "I am Lady Kalira," she announced.

"I am Ithinia of the Isle," the wizard replied, rising from her chair. "I am here as the chosen representative of the Wizards' Guild."

"You want to address the Imperial Council?" She spoke Ethsharitic with a thick accent.

"Yes."

"I am sorry. Only four of the seven councillors are in Semma; the others are in other parts of the Empire, on business, and will not be back for some time. I have sent for the Regent, and he should be here shortly; are the five of us enough? I can send messengers to get the other three."

"That won't be necessary," Ithinia said. "The five of you will suffice."

Lady Kalira blinked, and leaned toward one of the soldiers. "G'dyas 'suffice'?" she murmured.

"Golishye," the soldier muttered back.

She nodded. Then she smiled at Ithinia - not a very convincing smile, one obviously owing more to protocol than to any sort of warmth - and said, "Will you join us for dinner?"

Ithinia looked around the room, at the five other magicians, the

Ethsharitic guardsmen, at Lar and Emmis, and finally at Lord Ildirin, who was sitting straight in his chair, but whose papery skin was red from the sun. "We would be delighted," she said. "And perhaps something to drink, while preparations are made?"

"Drink? Of course," Lady Kalira said. "I will see to it." She turned, gesturing to her escorts, and the three of them marched back out the way they had entered.

Emmis watched them go. "Who is she, exactly?" he asked Lar quietly.

"She is Lord Sterren's second in command," Lar explained. "She is head of the Imperial Council, and runs everything in the Empire that Sterren doesn't want to bother with."

"So is it Lord Sterren or this Council that's actually in charge?"

Lar sighed. "The Council says it's Lord Sterren. Lord Sterren says it's the Council."

Emmis turned to look at his employer. "You're serious?"

"Yes."

"I thought the custom in the Small Kingdoms was to fight over who got to rule, not over who didn't have to."

"It is. But the Emperor didn't want to be bothered with all the details, so he named Lord Sterren his chancellor and let him run things. Lord Sterren said it was too much for him to do alone, so he made the Imperial Council. They were all chosen to be people who knew how to run things but who didn't want to rule; Vond did not want to worry about being overthrown by the Council."

"Oh."

"When Vond went away, Lord Sterren named Lady Kalira as his successor and resigned as chancellor. The Council wanted someone else in charge, so they made Sterren Regent. Now they argue about who is in charge." He turned up a palm. "They agree on almost everything else."

"Why don't they just resign?"

Lar sighed. "If the Regent resigns the Council will declare him guilty of treason. If any councillors resign without the Regent's permission he won't bother with calling them traitors, but he might hang them. So they stay."

"It's ridiculous. Can't they find someone who wants to run the Empire?"

Lar looked at Emmis pityingly. "Would you want someone in charge who wants to be an emperor? They lived under Vond. They saw. No one wants that again."

"But it wouldn't be a warlock!"

"Does that matter?"

"Um." Emmis didn't have a good answer for that. After all, the overlord wasn't a warlock, but his authority was still fairly complete. In theory he ruled because he had the consent of the city's people, but in practice the people were never asked; the overlord could pretty much do anything he pleased. If he ever went mad, or turned out to be incompetent or evil, the other two overlords would remove him - that was the whole point of having a triumvirate rule the Hegemony, so that one bad ruler wouldn't ruin the whole thing - but he could undoubtedly do a lot of damage before that happened.

The Empire of Vond didn't have a triumvirate, or any pretense of popular consent.

"So you didn't say anything to Ithinia about warlocks?" Lar asked, startling Emmis.

"No. But when I asked about the towers' magic she figured out that since I'm working for you, the Empire must be concerned about magic, and the Empire's only important magic was Vond's warlockry, so she put it all together and decided that warlocks mustn't be allowed in Lumeth or Vond."

"Reasonable. She's a smart woman."

"She's a wizard."

"Wizards aren't all smart, Emmis."

"She's a Guildmaster."

"Well, yes, you have a point there."

And that was when the door swung open and a line of servants carrying trays appeared, bringing an assortment of beverages. The two men put their conversation aside to join in the refreshments.

Emmis had just finished a mug of amazingly bad, unpleasantly warm beer when the door opened again and a young man, about his own age, wandered in.

He was dressed in black, with silver embellishments on his shoulders and cuffs - simple but elegant. His hair had been trimmed by someone who was very good at trimming hair, but it, too, was very simple. Back in Ethshar Emmis would have taken him for the son of a noble or wealthy family; here he wasn't sure what to make of him.

Lar, however, had apparently recognized him instantly, and was bowing deeply. Hesitantly, Emmis bowed, as well.

"Who is he?" Emmis whispered.

"That's Lord Sterren," Lar hissed back.

Emmis blinked and almost fell; he jerked up awkwardly out of his bow.

"That's the Regent?" he said. "But he isn't any older than I am!"

It was only when the entire room fell silent and a dozen eyes turned to stare at him that Emmis realized he had spoken aloud. He felt himself redden, but he refused to look away or apologize; he had simply stated the obvious.

Lord Sterren looked at him, obviously amused.

"I'm Sterren," he said, stepping over and holding out a hand. "And yes, I'd say we're of an age, you and I. Who are you?" He spoke Ethsharitic like a native - in fact, Emmis thought he would have sounded right at home in Westgate or the Old Merchants' Quarter.

Emmis took the hand in his own. "Emmis of Shiphaven," he said. "I'm the ambassador's aide."

"Are you? Then you're on my payroll?"

"I suppose I am. Ah... what's the proper way to address you, my lord?"

"Whatever you like. 'My lord' is fine. Care to earn your pay by introducing me around?"

Emmis bowed. "I would be honored." He turned, looked at the gathered magicians and soldiers, then added, "If I can remember everyone myself, that is."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

At dinner Emmis found himself seated between Guildmaster Ithinia and Princess Shirrin of Semma, who he was informed was Lord Sterren's fiancée. She was a lovely young woman in her late teens; Emmis thought she was perhaps a bit young for Sterren, but that was the Regent's concern, not his.

She also had a tendency to giggle that Emmis did not find endearing, but perhaps Lord Sterren did.

Sterren was seated on Ithinia's other side, and for the first part of the meal the two of them spoke at some length. Emmis was not deliberately eavesdropping, but they weren't being particularly quiet, so he listened to their discussion between sips of wine.

His earlier beer had convinced him to switch to the grape at dinner, and he was glad he had; the vintage, he was informed by the wine steward, was a fine one, from Dwomor. Emmis knew very little about wine, but he knew this one tasted very good and went well with the pastries and roast chicken he was served.

As they ate Ithinia explained the Guild's demands to Sterren, and the Regent seemed very pleased with them.

"No invasions either way? We can't touch Lumeth, and they can't touch us?" he asked.

"Exactly. We'll have journeymen putting up wards all along the border in a sixnight or so."

"And you've given Ashthasa assurances we won't invade?"

"Unless provoked. We don't intend to interfere with your right to

defend yourselves."

"I'm delighted to hear it. I don't suppose you could talk to the kings of Kalithon and Nushasla?"

"I'm afraid you'll need to do your own diplomacy there, my lord."

"And Shassalla, and Hurla, and Trozdossa, and Ethirillion?"

Ithinia spread her hands, a fork in one of them. "Not our concern, my lord. Though we have declared warlocks unwelcome in Shassalla and Kalithon."

"As well as in Lumeth and throughout the Empire."

"And in Gajamor, Calimor, Yaroia, Zenda, and Eknissamor."

Sterren smiled crookedly. "I'm not even sure where all of those are," he said. "It's taken me three years just to learn our eighteen provinces and our eight neighbors."

"They're Lumeth's neighbors. Well, Eknissamor doesn't actually share a border with Lumeth, but it's close enough to the north that we included it."

"That's a great relief, and you will have my full support. If any of the Imperial Council object, I'll be happy to remove them."

"I trust that won't be necessary."

There was a pause then as both took a moment to eat; then Sterren remarked, "I tried to contact the Guild three years ago, you know, when Vond was still here. I sent a wizard named Emner to find you."

Ithinia nodded. "Emner of Lamum. He reached us."

"You didn't do anything, though," Sterren said. Then he added, "Did you?"

"Not much," Ithinia admitted. "We were fairly certain that Vond would solve the problem himself, just as he did. We did have a few words with the Council of Warlocks, though, to discourage emigration in this direction."

"Well, thank you for that much."

"We spoke to the Chairman of the Council a little more vigorously a few days ago," Ithinia continued. "Quite vigorously, in fact. And the Council owes us a debt from twenty years ago, when Azrad VI attempted to outlaw warlocks entirely, so they profess themselves eager to cooperate. They understand that no warlocks are to set foot within twenty leagues of Lumeth."

Sterren nodded. He glanced around, then lowered his voice.

Emmis tried hard to listen without appearing to do so.

"Do you know," Sterren asked quietly, "where Vond got his power?"

"Do you think," Ithinia murmured back, "that we would tell you if we did? You, in particular?"

"I would only want to know so I could stay away from it!" Sterren retorted.

"Well, you know it's in Lumeth," Ithinia said. "And if you set foot in Lumeth, we'll kill you. It's nothing personal. And if you think you can protect yourself against wizards, well, we've sent word to the Cult of Demerchan."

"Is it those towers?"

Emmis was just as glad he couldn't see Ithinia's expression as she replied; the tone of her voice was quite bad enough. "Didn't I just say we weren't going to tell you?" She spoke in a low tone that seemed to be coming through gritted teeth. "But I will tell you that the towers are a large part of why we've taken an interest. The Guild has reasons of its own to want those towers preserved, and we have safeguards in place - but a warlock of Vond's abilities might be able to get through those safeguards, and might be mad enough to try, so we intend to ensure that there will never again be another warlock of Vond's abilities. Which means you, my lord, more than anyone else in the World, would be well advised to not ask any more questions about anything in Lumeth."

So Lord Sterren was the other warlock, Emmis thought. That was interesting - though it probably didn't matter anymore.

He sipped his wine and turned to smile at Princess Shirrin.

A few minutes later, as the chicken bones were cleared away and plates of iced fruit set out, Ithinia turned to Emmis.

"I suppose you heard everything the Regent and I said," she said.

"Well, most of it," Emmis admitted.

"You wouldn't have, had I been concerned about your trustworthiness," the Guildmaster said.

"Thank you," Emmis replied.

"You did well, bringing back Zhol's body. And you showed good sense dealing with Fendel's Assassin."

"Thank you," Emmis repeated, throwing Shirrin a quick look, but she was entirely caught up in a lively conversation in Semmat with the man on her other side.

"I hope you didn't mind being dragged along on this trip; I suppose your presence wasn't really essential, but it did seem as if you were the one who started the whole thing."

"Oh, I don't mind at all, Guildmaster. It's been very educational." He hesitated, then added, "I would like to know how many more of those flutes you have up your sleeve, though."

Ithinia smiled at him. "Just one," she said. "The one that takes us full circle, back to my garden in Ethshar."

"So each flute..." Emmis hesitated. "How do they work? I never heard of this Transporting Fissure thing until a few days ago, but it seems as if they could be awfully useful."

"They can be," Ithinia agreed, "but they're also very difficult. Each flute can only work once per enchantment, and it must be purified before it can be enchanted again. It's a seventh-order spell that takes hours to prepare - in fact, I had to use time-distorting spells to prepare these four in the two days I had. You need... well, there's no reason to go through the ingredients list, but rest assured, my boy, it's not a cheap spell, nor an easy one. And determining exactly where the passage will come out - that's tricky, as well. Not to mention that if I had played a single wrong note it wouldn't have worked right, and of course the fissure closes up again the instant I stop playing."

"But still..."

"It's not exactly subtle, either," she continued, before Emmis could finish his sentence. "It's noisy, and effectively causes a small earthquake at each end. And there are places it just can't go - some where the magic doesn't work, or the terrain won't allow it, but even in ordinary places, if you try to come out in a building that isn't big enough you'll bring the whole thing down around your ears. Generally speaking, we prefer other methods. One of the best takes roughly a full year to prepare, but once it's done it can be used indefinitely. It's instantaneous, completely silent, easy to hide - much nicer than Hallin's Transporting Fissure."

"What would happen if you played a wrong note?" Emmis asked, glancing at the sleeve he believed held that fourth and final flute.

"That depends," Ithinia said. "We might just come out a few feet away from where we planned - or a few miles. Or the passage might be too narrow, or not solid enough, and if it crumbles while you're inside it you can fall out of the World entirely."

"Oh," Emmis said. He swallowed.

"Don't worry," she said. "I always have to go in first, after all - if there's any danger, it'll probably get me before you even take the first step. And I didn't get any notes wrong on the first three, did I?"

Emmis acknowledged that she had not. Still, his enthusiasm for the journey home was somewhat dimmed, and he was relieved there would be no other stops along the way.

He was also glad Ithinia hadn't told him any of this before they walked through the first three fissures.

"We gave Morkai of Crooked Hill an enchanted flute twelve years ago," Ithinia said, as she scooped chilled melon from her plate. "To use if anything ever threatened the towers and he couldn't contact us by other means." She thrust a well-filled spoon into her mouth.

"So he was working for the Guild, and he betrayed you?"

"Not exactly," Ithinia said, pulling out the empty spoon. "He was a member of the Guild, like every wizard, and because he lived right below the towers we asked him to let us know of any threats, and we gave him the flute. We had plenty of spells in place to warn us of trouble, but a human observer may work when magic doesn't. He wasn't working for us, in the sense of having any regular duties or being paid; he just had instructions to let us know if anything went wrong, and we gave him the flute and a few other things to that end."

"He lives near them? I didn't even see the towers while we were there," Emmis griped.

"The New Castle was in the way," Ithinia said. "If you had gone around it you would have been able to see the tops of the towers in the distance; they're a few miles northwest of the city."

"That fortress thing?"

"That's the New Castle, yes."

Emmis nodded. "I was surprised you didn't do anything more to Morkai," he said. "I mean, if he betrayed the Guild's trust, and then hired an assassin..."

"More?" She put down her spoon and turned to stare at him.

"Well, you broke that dagger, and obviously that hurt him somehow, but..."

"Emmis," Ithinia interrupted, "there was a piece of his soul in that dagger. We destroyed it. He'll never get it back. He'll never be able to perform magic again - not any magic, so far as we know, and certainly not wizardry. He'll never again be whole."

After an awkward moment of silence, Emmis said, "Oh." He suddenly took an intense interest in slicing the pear on his plate.

That, he thought, explained that. Changing the subject, he asked, "Are your gargoyles getting any supper? Do they need to eat?"

"What, Glitter and Old Rocky? No, they're fine; they live on magic."

That led to a harmless and interesting discussion of animation spells, and the odd uses some people put them to, and the rest of the meal passed cheerfully enough.

After dinner there were introductions and speeches, and all the Vondish nobles present were officially informed of the Wizards' Guild's ultimata, which they accepted happily. There were toasts proposed, and Emmis found himself drinking rather more of the Dwomoric wine than he had intended.

Finally, though, servants appeared to escort the guests to their quarters for the night.

"We're staying?" Emmis asked, as the travelers gathered by the door to be sorted out. He had somehow missed that decision.

"Yes," Lord Ildirin told him. "Ithinia says we'll leave for home in the morning."

Emmis nodded happily. He turned to Lar. "I'll be glad to get back to Through Street, won't you?"

Lar frowned uneasily. "Actually," he said, "I won't be going back. My job in Ethshar is done - as much by the rest of you people as by me, but done. Tonight I'm going back to my own room in Semma Castle, and I'm staying there. Lord Sterren agreed."

"Oh, but..." Emmis stopped.

That was that, then. His brief career as a diplomatic aide was coming to an end. It would be back to the docks, loading and unloading cargo, for him.

"And I just got the embassy properly furnished," he said.

"You can live there if you want," Lar said. "But I'd think somewhere closer to the water would be more reasonable."

Emmis shook his head. "I can't afford the rent there, even if I wanted to," he said.

"Yes, you could," Lar said. "But Shiphaven or Spicetown would probably

be better."

"I think you misjudge how much a dockworker makes," Emmis said. He wondered whether his old room near Canal Square might still be available.

"Dockworker?" Lar sounded genuinely puzzled.

Emmis let his annoyance into his voice. "Yes, dockworker. What did you think I did for a living?"

"I know you did," Lar said, "but didn't Lord Sterren or Lord Ildirin talk to you?"

Emmis blinked. "Talk to me about what?"

"They agreed you would be the best man for the job," Lar said.

"Yes, we did," Lord Ildirin interjected, coming up behind him, "but we hadn't spoken to him yet."

Emmis turned to the old nobleman. "About what?"

"About your new job, should you accept it." His mouth twisted wryly. "I had reservations about your age, but Lord Sterren pointed out that he's been Regent for more than two years now without causing any disasters, and he's no older than you are. The ambassador and Guildmaster Ithinia both consider you trustworthy enough for the position."

"What position?"

"Customs inspector. It will be your responsibility to ensure that no warlocks board any ship bound for the Vondish coast. You will have guardsmen working under you - I'm not sure how many, we'll see how it goes - and will be given full authority to search any vessel in Ethsharitic waters, from Shiphaven to Seacorner."

"But... warlocks?"

"You will employ magicians as needed; we can discuss your budget for that later."

"I..."

"Your experience on the docks should be very helpful," Ildirin continued. "I'm sure you know a good many tricks about hiding things aboard ship."

"A few," Emmis admitted.

"And your pay will be six bits a day, in silver."

"A round," Emmis said automatically.

Ildirin smiled a humorless smile. "Six bits," he said. "If it works out well for a year, perhaps it will increase to seven."

"Six bits," Emmis agreed. "Thank you."

That was when a footman in red and gold appeared and said, "Lord Ildirin? Your room is ready."

"We can continue this discussion in the morning, my lad," Ildirin said. "I'm sure it will work out well for all concerned." Then he turned and followed the footman down the corridor.

Emmis watched him go.

"You could stay here, if you want," Lar said. "I don't know what Lord Sterren has planned for me, but there's plenty of work for a talented young man."

Emmis glanced at him, startled. "No, thank you, sir. I'm an Ethsharite."

"So was Sterren, and look where he is now."

"I think being a customs inspector sounds far more appropriate for me, sir."

"As you please, then." He held out his hand. "I know where my room is, and I don't need an escort to get there, so I'll be going now. May you live long and well."

Emmis took the hand. "If you're ever back in Ethshar..."

"I'll make sure to see you."

Emmis watched the Vondish ambassador walk away, until a footman with an abominable accent said, "Emmis of Shiphaven? Your place is ready."

Emmis smiled. "I'm sure it is," he said.

Epilogue

Emmis looked around the room with satisfaction.

It wasn't especially large, but he didn't really need a lot of space; his work was out there on the docks, not here in his office.

The view from the broad bay window overlooking Sea Street was magnificent. It faced out toward the westernmost of the Tea Wharves, and toward the harbor beyond; to the left he could see across the New Canal to the Shiphaven docks, while to the right, beyond the three Tea Wharves, were the Spice Wharves, extending out of sight around the curve of the waterfront. His front door, down one flight, opened around the corner on Tea Street; from there a right turn would bring him back to Sea Street and the Spicetown waterfront, while a block away to the left was a fork where the right-hand branch led across Bridge Street to Shiphaven, and the left pointed him directly toward the Palace and Lord Ildirin.

In the office itself he had a chest of drawers to keep his records in, and a big oak desk, and a few comfortable chairs, where he could interview anyone who wanted to emigrate to Vond. He had never had his very own office before; he liked the idea.

The bedroom at the back, overlooking Tea Street, wasn't really much bigger than the one he had had behind Canal Square, but it was closer to the ground and far less drafty.

So far, he liked his new job. There wasn't really all that much to it yet, since there weren't that many ships bound for Vond, but the Empire and Lord Ildirin both said that would be changing.

He had had some reservations about working in Spicetown, but in the end that had come to nothing; Azradelle and Pergren had more or less forgiven him for the incident at their wedding, though he still didn't expect any dinner invitations, and as long as he wasn't loading or unloading cargo the Spicetown dock brotherhoods had no objections to his presence.

The journey back from Semma had gone smoothly. Ithinia had not missed a note, and they had emerged safely back in her garden. Tithi, the only prisoner who had been brought back, had successfully pleaded that he personally had not actually killed anyone, despite his aiding Kelder, and had thereby avoided hanging, but it would be some time yet before he recovered from the three floggings he had received instead. Emmis had a suspicion that when he was healed, Lord Ildirin intended to use the man as an informant - Tithi really did have a remarkable ability to go unnoticed and look unimportant.

Shortly after his return Emmis had spent a day in Corinal's study, going over the rest of those answers Unniel had provided; he intended to go back with a few more questions once he had everything settled here. He was carefully not pursuing anything about the Lumeth towers or the second source of warlockry, but some of the other topics were still of interest, and his brief travels had started him wondering about a few other things, as well.

Some of it was even relevant to his work.

He was just turning toward the door when a knock sounded.

That was unexpected; Ahan wasn't due back for hours. He opened the door.

Gita was standing on the landing.

"Hello," Emmis said, startled.

"Hello," she replied.

For a moment they stood silently staring at each other; then Gita said, "May I come in?"

"Of course!" Emmis stepped aside and ushered her in, settling her in one of the chairs. Then he took his own seat behind the desk. "What brings you here?" he asked.

"I'm tired of working for my uncle," she said. "I don't want to wait tables at his inn any more."

"Ah," Emmis said. "Were you thinking of moving to Vond, then?"

She cocked her head. "No. Why would I do that?"

"I don't... well, then why are you here?"

"I went to see Lord Ildirin," she explained. "I thought perhaps I could get a job in the Palace. In the kitchens, maybe." She shook her head. "Did you know that half the palace servants have been there for generations, and the other half is orphans from the Hundred-Foot Field? Some of those people can trace their ancestry to Azrad the Great's personal staff, and others don't know who their own mothers were, let alone any of their other ancestors."

"I didn't know that, no," Emmis said, puzzled.

"But Lord Ildirin said that you might need an assistant."

Understanding dawned.

Emmis looked at her, at the round face and generous bosom, and remembered how she had carefully saved his belongings for him when he had run off without them. He didn't really know her, but he thought he might enjoy changing that.

"So you want a job?" he asked.

She nodded.

He smiled. "I think we can arrange something," he said.

She smiled back. "I'd love that," she said.

And Emmis was fairly certain that neither of them was only discussing employment.

- end -