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JOSHUA PALMATIER's
THE THRONE OF AMENKOR:
THE SKEWED THRONE (Book One) THE CRACKED THRONE (Book Two) THE VACANT THRONE
(Book Three)

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This work is dedicated to
my mom, Beryle Palmatier.
(Pronounced like pearl, but with a B.)

She gave me and my brothers
the strength to accomplish anything
we set our minds to,
and the ability to dream big.
I hope I've made her proud.

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future.

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with all the stresses and joys that such a struggle encompasses. Here's to all the future struggles to come.

If you'd like to find out more about the Throne books, and other projects, check out my webpage at www.joshuapalmatier.com or my LiveJournal at jpsorrow.livejournal.com.

Part I
Amenkor

Chapter 1

I stood in the middle of a field of wheat, the bristly heads of grain pattering against my outstretched hands. The breeze that rippled through the stalks tugged at my hair, at the folds of my sweat-stained shirt. In the moment before dawn, the world was quiet, expectant.

Then, far ahead over the fields, near the road that snaked down from the city of Venitte into the hills, a flare of light lit the darkness. Harsh and orange, the fire arched up into the sky, and I felt a tug of grief, a pain that bit deeper every time I felt it, still new and raw and fresh. It twisted in my chest, burned at the edges of my eyes, but I clenched my jaw as I watched the fire crest, begin a long descent, fall down and down— And explode among the trunks of olive trees. In the burst of light when it struck, I saw an army marching through the fields. A moment later I heard screams, faint with distance.

The pain in my chest writhed.

I'd moved before I'd made a conscious decision to move, pushed through the wheat toward the road. As I plowed forward, grain rattling against my legs, catching, holding me back, more fire bloomed and I marked its source, marked my targets. Then I reached the road, broke into a sprint, the screams from my fellow Venittians among the olive trees growing louder. Heart thundering in my chest, I stretched out with my mind, drew the Threads around me, wove them tight, bound them, twisted them, prepared. Ahead, the screams intensified, grew heated, broke into a rumbling roar of challenge and hatred and fear as the two armies met. Sunlight touched the surrounding hills and fields with a patina of gold, although I didn't need the light. Through the Threads, I could see everything. The Venittians charged through the low, flattened branches of the olives, fire lancing out, roaring through their ranks, leaving behind charred bodies and burning trees, and in the backwash of light . . .

The Chorl—skin tainted a faint blue, like winter sky, tattoos black in the dawn, faces contorted with rage. The Chorl—curved steel swords raised to the sky as they screamed in a harsh, ululating language.

The Chorl—who had killed my wife and two daughters.

Cold, hard-edged rage tingled through my skin, rippled out on the Threads I'd bound around me, and I slowed as I came at the battle from the side. No need to run. There were plenty of Chorl to kill. They'd invaded the Frigean coast two weeks before, invaded the city of Venitte. They'd come from the western sea with no warning, had attacked the port and overrun a significant portion of the city before anyone had known what was happening.

But the Chorl themselves were not my targets. I would have attacked with the rest of the Venittian army if they had been. No, the attack was a diversion, the army bait. I wanted the Adepts, the ones wielding the Threads, the ones who'd thrown the fire that had killed so many in that initial attack on the city.

The ones who had killed Olivia, who'd killed five-year-old Jaer and her older sister Pallin.

I slid past the first of the Chorl, moving slowly, calmly, their piercing howls surrounding me as they tried to surge forward to the front of the battle. They broke around me as if I were a stone in their currents, not consciously realizing what they were doing, the Threads shunting them to one side while concealing me from their sight. I angled toward the back of their forces, focusing on the source of the fire that still arched up out of their

ranks. The Chorl thinned. The road ended, and I was once again among wheat, the stalks trampled into the earth, broken and shattered. Ahead, a Chorl woman in a mud-splattered dress wove the Sight into a tight, blazing fireball and hurled it high into the air, her face strained with effort, sweat streaming down her cheeks, down the cold blue skin of her throat, where corded muscle stood out in stark relief. She was surrounded by ten Chorl warriors and two Chorl priests. The warriors were dressed in a riot of colors—blue, red, orange, green—over crude leather armor. Their eyes were locked on the battle behind me, their bodies tense, hands on the hilts of their swords. The priests were dressed in vibrant yellow-and-red robes and wore necklaces of shells. One carried a scepter of some type of reed and feathers. All of the men were covered in tattoos; on their faces, their necks, their hands. The woman wore five earrings in each ear, the gold glinting occasionally through the long strands of her black hair. She had no visible tattoos whatsoever, her skin flawless.

I slipped through the ring of warriors without them noticing, one sidling away from me as I passed, and halted in front of the woman, looked up into her dark eyes, a surge of regret passing through me that there was only one Chorl Adept in this attack. This close, I could smell her sweat, could hear the priests chanting under their breath on either side of her, could feel the tension coursing around me on the Threads. It reeked of fear, of blood, of trampled wheat.

I glared up into the woman's face.

Someone like this had stood on the Chorl ships that had entered Venitte's harbor and attacked the fishing and trading ships, catching them unaware. Someone like this had flung fireball after fireball up onto the cliffs and houses that surrounded the harbor, had flung the fireball that had killed Olivia and Jaer and Pallin.

Jaer. I felt again her charred skin as I clutched her small body to my chest, felt it flaking off beneath my touch.

Only five years old.

The pain stabbed into my chest again, and tears seared the corners of my eyes. The queasy rush of emotion closed off my throat with the hot, sickening taste of phlegm, and I flung out my arms to both sides, gathering more Threads to me as bitter rage flooded my mouth, stained my tongue. I could kill them all with a touch of my hand, could stop their hearts in their chests. They'd drop to the ground, dead before they even knew what had happened. I could send invisible needles of pain into their skin and flay them where they stood. I could call down lightning from the clear morning sky, or open up the earth beneath them and bury them alive. I could kill them all in a hundred different ways, using any or all of the Five Magics.

I chose fire.

In the moment before I ignited the Threads I'd woven around them all—the priests, the warriors, the Adept—the Chorl woman tensed. Through the tears blurring my eyes, I saw her frown, a fireball half formed before her. She sensed something. A ripple on the Threads, a disturbance on the ether. Or perhaps she'd heard the sob that had escaped me.

It didn't matter. I didn't give her a chance to react.

I let the fire loose, roared as I ignited the Threads that bound the twelve Chorl men and the Adept together. A roar of grief, of pain that would never end, formless and harsh and guttural. Eyes clenched shut, I felt the shock of the priests and warriors and the woman in the single breath before the fire struck them, before it consumed them, flinging them back with its force, scorching through clothing, through flesh, through bone, as the fire that had charred the flesh from Olivia and Jaer and Pallin had done. I poured all of my sorrow into it, all of my rage, all of the feelings of uselessness and despair I'd felt in the last two weeks as the peace of the Frigean coast collapsed under the Chorl onslaught. And when I felt the last breath of life flee, when the thirteen charred bodies lay around me in a grisly circle, I collapsed to my knees, panting, head bowed, tears still streaming down my face, hands

clenched in fists at my sides.

Because the pain still beat with my heart. It burned through my veins, prickled in my skin.

I sobbed.

I should have died with them. I should have died protecting Olivia, my body shielding her from the fire, not the other way around.

I lifted my head, stared at the blackened bodies, felt the rage boil up again, bitter as ash, then turned to gaze up into the lightening sky.

It wasn't enough. It would never be enough.

I stood slowly, rage settling around me. A calm rage filled with nothing but grief. With nothing but visions of Olivia on the veranda, held in my arms. Of the scent of her hair, the smoothness of her skin. Of the sounds of Jaer and Pallin shrieking in delight as they played around us.

I turned, cloaked in memories, and waded into the Chorl forces from behind, trailing fire and death behind me.

I woke with a gasp and an ache in my chest like a hand gently crushing the life from me. I tasted hot, fresh tears, realized that I'd been crying as I slept, my muscles stiff with tension, my body drained, overwhelmed by grief. But not my own grief. Someone else's. The man in the dream; a man I knew.

Cerrin.

I dove beneath the river, hope surging forward, the dark room before me shifting subtly, becoming gray and partially visible with the Sight. I could see the edges of the bed I slept in, could see the settee where the Servant Marielle instructed me in writing and math, could see the tables and chairs and the bowl that contained water so I could wash my face. A breeze blew the curtains back from the doors leading out to the balcony, scented with ocean salt and spring night. The balcony overlooked the city of Amenkor. My city, for I was the Mistress.

And we'd survived the winter . . . and an attack by the Chorl.

But at a cost.

I closed my eyes, reached out on the river toward the Skewed Throne, toward the symbol of Amenkor's power. Cerrin had been a part of the throne, one of the personalities that had been trapped within it, one of the original seven Adepts that had created the throne almost fifteen hundred years before, when the Chorl had first attacked. If I'd been dreaming of him, had lived out one of his memories, then perhaps . . .

The hope that quickened my heartbeat died.

The throne wasn't there. I couldn't touch it, couldn't feel it enfolding me with its power.

Because it was dead. Because I'd destroyed it in order to save Amenkor from the Chorl. From their leader, the Ochean.

I opened my eyes, pushed myself up and to the edge of the bed with a sigh. The tightness of grief in my chest had receded, but not much. I knew I wouldn't sleep anymore, so I rose and moved across the room to the curtains, stepped out onto the balcony.

As in the dream, the sky overhead was just beginning to lighten with dawn. If the balcony had faced east, I would have seen the eastern mountains lined with golden light.

Instead, I stared down into the husk of what once had been Amenkor, watched the details of the damage done by the Chorl attack emerge as the sun rose. The watchtowers at the ends of the juts of land that protected the harbor were nothing more than heaps of broken stone. The Chorl had destroyed them first, stone and debris arching up and out into the darkness: our first warning that the Chorl had arrived. I shivered at the memory, at the raw power it had taken to destroy them. So much power it had left vortices in the eddies of the river for days afterward.

Then the Chorl's black ships had knifed into the harbor, where they'd been met by the trading ships, and the real battle had begun. What ships remained from that attack were anchored off the shattered piers, both Amenkor and Chorl ships alike. In their haste to retreat, harried by Amenkor guardsmen and

militia, the Chorl had left some of their own ships behind. Small boats ferried men to and fro between them even now. The wharf itself had been utterly destroyed when the Chorl drove their ships into the docks. From there a clear path of destruction wound upward, from the wharf up through the lower city, through the twisting streets, through the marketplaces, to the gates of the outer wall of the palace. Buildings had been consumed by fire, stone walls collapsing under the heat. Hastily constructed barricades had been breached, the chairs and tables and crab traps used to make them tossed aside. The Chorl had destroyed everything as they came, might have razed the entire city in their fervor, but they'd been intent on reaching the palace, on reaching and seizing control of the throne.

They'd almost succeeded. The gates to the three walls that surrounded the palace had been breached in the span of an hour, the Ochean and the Chorl Servants—the women like me that could wield the river; the women Cerrin had called Adepts in the dream—had blown the gates apart. Only Eryn, the previous Mistress, had been able to slow them, and only then with my help.

I stared down at the jagged holes in the three walls, tasted again Eryn's desperation to hold against the combined strength of the Ochean and her Servants. They'd linked their powers somehow, so that the Ochean's power had been augmented by her Servants.

We'd never had a chance.

But we'd prevailed in the end. After I'd killed the Ochean—and in the process destroyed the throne—Captain Catrell, Keven, and the rest of the guardsmen and militia had driven the Chorl back to their ships, had driven them back out to sea. The Chorl had retreated, and hadn't been seen since.

On the balcony, overlooking the blackened buildings and streets of Amenkor, I straightened, felt a tightness in my chest. We'd survived the winter, the late winter planting ready to be harvested in another few weeks, the early spring planting already in the ground. The shipment of grain from the northern city of Merrell—promised to us at the beginning of winter—had finally arrived over the treacherous northern road. The Dredge was intact, left untouched by the Chorl, as well as the eastern portions of the city.

We were wounded, but we'd survived.

I knew the Chorl would be back. They wouldn't stop attacking the coast, couldn't stop. Because they couldn't return to their homeland. I'd seen it destroyed through the Ochean's eyes when she'd attempted to seize control of the throne. The Chorl had simply retreated to the Boreaite Isles off the Frigean coast. To regroup, to plan. They couldn't stay on the Isles forever. There were too many Chorl for the islands to support.

But for now, the fact that we'd survived their initial attack was enough.

I took one last long look out over the charred city, plans already forming in my mind. We'd had two weeks to burn the dead, to grieve, to clean up and take stock, to begin drilling the citizens in their own defense in case the Chorl returned. It was time to start building again.

"No, no! Take the reusable stone over there. The rest pile up on the side street so that we can cart it off later." Avrell shook his head, one hand on his hip. The other arm was tied up in a sling across his chest, his shoulder hurt during the attack on the walls. The First of the Mistress, Avrell oversaw the administrative details of Amenkor, which included its rebuilding.

He turned as he heard my escort's approach, his posture stiffening, becoming more formal as he raised one eyebrow in question. He would have folded his hands inside the sleeves of his dark blue robes if he could have, but the sling wouldn't allow it. "Mistress? How may I help you?"

"Actually," I said, "I came to help you." I reached down and picked up a chunk of shattered stone, what had once been part of the outermost wall of the palace. We stood where the gates had held the Chorl at bay . . . for approximately ten minutes. Weighing the stone in one hand, I glanced around at the jagged edges of the wall to either side, at the debris that lay in a fan spread outward from where we stood into the outer ward. I could see how much force had been behind the explosion in the pattern of stone, could see where

the stone arch over the gates had collapsed in upon itself once the wall had been breached. Buildings to either side of the wide street leading up to the palace had been shattered in the blast, walls caved in, windows and doors nothing but gaping, empty holes. One entire building had sagged inward, on the verge of imploding. It reminded me of the Dredge. Except this damage was new, fresh. The pall of dust still hung in the air, the broken stone sharp with edges. On the Dredge, everything would have been coated with the slick ruin of age, would have reeked of decay, would be worn smooth with defeat.

A narrow corridor had been cleared through the debris immediately after the attack, to allow access between the city and the palace, but other than that, everything lay where it had fallen.

I turned back to Avrell with a grunt. "And I brought helpers." I motioned to Keven, my personal escort, and the remaining guardsmen behind me. They shifted in surprise, until Keven gave them a harsh glare.

"You heard the Mistress," he barked. "Let's move some stone! Arcus, you take the left, I'll handle the right. Move, move!"

I grinned as Avrell's eyebrows rose in surprise, then reached down and picked up a few more chunks of stone, moving to toss them into the discard heap. All around us, the men and women of Avrell's work detail paused in surprise as well, then grinned as the guardsmen joined them. They'd gotten used to the guardsmen being in the city since the attack.

Avrell watched until he was satisfied the two groups were working well together, then turned back to me, taking up a position halfway between the pile of stone I was digging into and the heap that would be carted out into the city.

"You shouldn't be doing this," he said in disapproval.

"Why not?" I gasped, straining as I hauled a stone a little too heavy for me to the reusable heap.

"Because you're the Mistress."

I snorted. "And . . . ?"

Avrell pursed his lips but didn't answer.

I motioned to Avrell's work detail. It was composed of only fifteen men and women, all of them still lean from the harsh winter, most from the lower city—the portion above the wharf but below the walls. I knew there would be other work details like this one spread throughout the city. Catrell would be at the wharf, overseeing the cleanup there; Nathem—the Second—would be doing the same on the Dredge, which had been left mostly untouched, and in the lower city. Darryn was in the marketplace, training any citizens who would come in the basics of swordsmanship and self-defense. "You need the help, Avrell. And we don't have enough people to let anyone rest." I paused as the words sank in. "How bad is it? Do we have anything other than estimates yet?"

He frowned as he glanced around at those working. "Nothing precise. But at this point I don't think we'll ever have anything precise. We lost almost half of the militia in the attack, mostly men from the Dredge. Darryn's men."

I grimaced. Darryn had been a dispossessed mercenary, relegated to the Dredge when the White Fire had scoured its way across the city and sent the trade routes into a death spiral, cutting off his source of income as a guard-for-hire. I'd gone against Baill's and Catrell's wishes and put him in charge of the militia after he'd helped quell one riot and interceded in another to save Avrell's life. But Captain Baill had ended up betraying us to the Chorl, and Catrell had changed his mind after training with those from the Dredge for a few weeks.

And Darryn had done well, keeping those on the Dredge alive as best he could, protecting the warehouse and kitchen we'd set up there to feed them. During the Chorl attack, he'd led the Dredge in a raid on the Chorl's flanks, had kept the Chorl out of the slums altogether.

Since then, the people of Amenkor had been calling him Lord of the Dredge. Not the most gratifying title, but fitting. It was also the reason he'd been chosen to teach the citizens how to fight. They already trusted him, and he could relate to them better than Catrell.

"And what about the people? What about the guardsmen?" I asked.

"There were casualties among the people, but it's hard to judge how many. If we include the Dredge, we never had a viable count to start with. We lost some to starvation, others to disease, and then the Chorl arrived. . . ."

I stopped hauling stone, caught Avrell's gaze. "How many?"

"Three to four hundred. Maybe more."

I winced as if punched in the gut, the sensation similar to the pain that Cerrin had felt over the loss of his wife and daughters. Similar, but not the same. Not as visceral; not as deep.

"And the guard?"

"A third of the men died in the attack, about eighty overall."

I lowered my head a moment, closed my eyes, then straightened and returned to sorting stone. I'd known the losses had been bad. I'd watched the columns of oily black smoke rise from the stockyards to the east of the city, where the bodies had been taken to be burned to prevent the spread of disease. Some of those burned had been Chorl, but not all.

The smoke had marred the sky for four days.

"What else?" I asked, shrugging the grisly image aside.

"We've cleared the majority of the streets between here and the wharf as you directed. I have men inspecting the watchtowers now, to determine what's necessary to make repairs there. The engineers are already arguing about how to repair the three gates and the walls."

"Good," I said.

"May I ask why?"

I halted, wiped sweat that had mixed with grit and dust from the stone from my forehead. My shirt stuck to my back, my hair lying in sweaty tendrils across my forehead and neck. "What do you mean?"

"Why rebuild the watchtowers, the walls, when we know the Chorl can destroy them so easily?" he spat, his free hand motioning toward all the debris, his face twisted into a scowl. He shifted where he stood, unable to look at me.

"Why waste the effort?"

The bitterness shocked me, and hidden behind that, the fear.

Then I remembered. He'd stood on one of these walls during the battle, had watched the Chorl approach, had felt the wall crumbling beneath him.

And he'd been helpless, unable to do anything but choke on the dust and escape before the shattered stone crushed him.

"Because," I started to say, then hesitated. Avrell needed more than a flippant answer.

I moved toward him, caught his gaze, held it, my expression stern, harsh.

"Because the Chorl will come back, Avrell. And the Chorl—the warriors themselves—can be stopped by the walls, by the watchtowers and the gates. The Ochean and the Servants destroyed the walls last time, and the Ochean is dead."

"There will be another," he said hoarsely.

"But we'll be better prepared for her and the Chorl Servants next time. With Darryn's training, the citizens will be better able to defend against the Chorl warriors. I've learned a few things about the Chorl and their Servants since then. And I intend to learn even more."

He heard the emphasis I placed on the last sentence. His brow creased in confusion, then smoothed in comprehension.

We'd found more than the dead in the debris of Amenkor. But only a few knew about our captive—Keven, Eryn, Avrell, Catrell, and Westen, the captain of the Seekers; the Seekers and Servants who guarded her; and the guardsmen who had found her, of course.

Avrell's eyes searched mine, and then he nodded.

"What about the wharf?" I asked, brushing dust off of my clothes.

"The engineers and carpenters say it can be rebuilt easily, in comparison to the rest of what needs to be done."

"Good. Have them start on that as soon as they're ready."

"And where are you going?" he asked as I moved toward Keven.

"To visit Erick," I said, and then, my voice laced with hatred, "and after that, our . . . guests."

There were two guardsmen outside the door to the chambers I'd had Avrell set up for Erick, one of them a Seeker. He nodded as I approached, murmured, "Mistress."

"Tomus," I said. I knew all the Seekers by name; had trained with them under Westen's direction. "How is he?"

Tomus didn't need to answer, I saw it in his eyes and felt something grip my heart and squeeze.

I dropped my gaze, not willing to let Tomus see the pain, then straightened my shoulders with an effort and stepped past the two guards to the door. I heard Keven following, almost ordered him to wait outside . . . but Erick had chosen Keven to take his place as my personal guard after I'd sent him on the trading ship we'd used as a lure to draw the Chorl out of hiding. It had been a trap, one that those on the ship hadn't been expected to survive.

And only one of those on the ship had.

I stepped into a room harsh with sunlight, glanced sharply toward the servant inside, to the healer Isaiah who'd been assigned permanently to Erick's care, the same healer that Borund had found to help William when he'd been stabbed by Charls' men. Isaiah met my gaze without flinching, stood abruptly behind the desk where he'd been sitting, one hand keeping his place in the book he was reading. He was thin—we were all thin after the winter—but his was a natural thinness, not one brought on solely by starvation. A slim build, narrow face, sharp features. Lanky brown hair peppered with gray fell down over the narrow glasses he wore for reading. He was dressed like a merchant's apprentice: white shirt, brown-cloth breeches, shoes rather than boots. Except, unlike an apprentice, his breeches were tied off at the knees and beneath those, visible from shoe to knee—

I halted. "What are those?"

Isaiah frowned, caught off guard. "What are what, Mistress?"

"Those," I said, motioning toward his legs.

He glanced downward, still frowning. "Ah. You mean my stockings."

"Stockings?"

"Yes," he said, a little sarcastic. "Something to cover my legs when I wear shoes instead of boots. To keep warm."

"They look . . ." Stupid, I almost said, but caught myself, fumbling for something else instead.

Isaiah raised an eyebrow and waited, shifting where he stood.

I was saved by Erick, who sighed heavily and stirred.

Both Isaiah and I looked toward the bed, and both of us moved at the same moment, Isaiah unconsciously placing a small rectangular stone in the book to hold it open. We went to opposite sides of the bed, Isaiah leaning forward to scan Erick's face, reaching for his wrist to take his pulse. The servant assigned to assist Isaiah moved up beside him, a damp cloth in one hand; I felt Keven halt behind me.

I stared down into Erick's face and tensed.

Erick's gray-brown hair lay matted to his head with sweat, his skin held a sick pallor I'd seen on the Dredge a hundred times. Those who'd looked like this had been avoided by even the deepest denizens of the slums, the threat of disease on the Dredge a constant fear. He was covered in scars—on his face, on his chest and arms and shoulders—most of them old, achingly familiar to me after days upon days of training with him, but some were new, given to him by the Ochean, by Haqtl—the leader of the Chorl priests—and by the priests that had tortured him to find out about the Fire. A Fire I'd placed inside of Erick so that I could see who attacked the ship we'd sent as bait. In the process they'd learned of the Skewed Throne.

And that had led them to Amenkor.

My hand itched, fingers opening and closing into a fist. I wanted my dagger, wanted its weight in my hand, wanted the comforting feel of the handle pressing into my skin. I wanted to hunt, to kill, the instinct trained into me

by Erick on the Dredge. But I choked the instinct down, tasted bitterness and blood as I did so, and swallowed hard.

"What's wrong with him?" I asked.

Isaiah shook his head. "I don't know. He should have healed completely by now, at least in body, if not in mind. He should have woken, should be conscious. His wounds have healed a little, but not as they normally would have, and the fever, the tremors . . . He should have healed. It's as if something is actively stopping him from healing."

The servant brushed Isaiah's arm, and he took the proffered cloth, wiping the sweat from Erick's brow. Erick moaned, the sound long and low and torn. Isaiah grimaced, then caught my eye.

"I'm not certain there's anything else I can do."

I heard the dry bitterness in his voice, saw the grudging defeat and despair in his eyes. He'd been dealing with Erick for the last two weeks, first down in the back room of a tavern on the wharf, where Westen had stowed Erick after retrieving him from the Chorl ship where he'd been held captive, then later when we'd moved him up to the palace. At first, Isaiah had been optimistic, claiming Erick would be awake and moving around within a week. But then, after a week had passed, after ten days . . .

Erick began trembling, shudders running up through his body, his arms flopping at his sides, dead white and lax. It hurt to watch, hurt even more when Isaiah and the servant reached out to control him and he cried out, face twisted with pain, tears squeezing from the corners of his eyes. I felt an invisible hand clench around my throat, felt my lungs burn as Erick's trembling intensified, his cry escalating into a scream-

And then the trembling stopped, Erick's body falling back to the bed, his scream cut short, breath escaping in a long, wheezing sigh.

Isaiah, hands on Erick's shoulders, weight leaned into Erick's chest, hesitated a moment, then drew back. "I just don't know what else to do except wait."

We stood a moment in silence.

Then I said, "Keven, catch me."

As I dove for the river, I heard Keven say, "What?" Then I Reached for the Fire inside of Erick. I hadn't tried to Reach inside anyone since destroying the throne--there'd been no need--but now I wanted . . . no, needed . . . to know whether Erick was suffering. And so I Reached for him.

Except it wasn't as easy without the power of the throne behind me.

I gasped as I hit a wall, as if something were trying to hold me back, to keep me from stretching outside my body. But I gathered all of my anger--all of the pain of watching Erick day after day in this state, all of the guilt I felt for sending him on a mission in which I knew he might be killed--I gathered all of that emotion into a sliver-thin blade and thrust it through the wall, pierced it with a sharp pain, and then I sped across the short distance to Erick, to the Fire that burned in his soul as behind I heard Keven curse and catch my body as it sagged and fell-

And then I was inside Erick, and the pain . . . the pain burned.

I writhed beneath it, drawing the Fire up higher around me, blocking the pain out, separating myself from Erick, until I huddled inside the Fire, completely free, gasping. The pain had been unexpected, because there was nothing, no wound, no visible reason why Erick should be in such pain.

But he obviously was. And perhaps from here, I could figure out why.

As the last of the burning sensation faded, I gathered myself, then Reached out and touched the Fire, let its protective flames relax, let what Erick felt seep inward so that I felt what he felt. But slowly.

I hissed when the pain first touched me, crawling across my skin like a thousand stinging ants. I held the pain constant, until I'd grown used to the sensation, and then I relaxed the Fire even more. The prickling of ants increased steadily, penetrated deeper, until it felt like a heavy blanket of needles, hot and piercing, just beneath the skin.

And then the pain leveled out. It still seethed against Erick's skin, but it

no longer grew in intensity.

I drew in a ragged breath, held it a moment, then released it in a sigh. I felt Erick's chest rise and hold, heard him sigh through his own ears. His heart pulsed in his chest, strong and steady. Here and there, through the blanket of needles, I could feel smaller aches, recognized the places where he'd been cut while being tortured, where there were wounds that were not healing as fast as Isaiah expected. But these wounds were minor. His body was trying to fight the stinging needles, trying to heal that pain instead. But it couldn't. There was nothing tangible for it to heal. It was pouring all of Erick's energy into a hopeless battle.

I turned my attention away from Erick's body, began searching for Erick himself.

I found him curled in upon himself in the deepest recesses of his mind. He lay huddled, trembling slightly, but not moving. This was how I'd found him on the Chorl ship, the pain inflicted upon him so great he'd retreated into himself, shut himself off from the world.

And his situation hadn't improved much since then. We thought we were healing him. And we had to some extent. His muscles no longer felt bruised, no longer hurt from kicks and blows. His chest and neck no longer ached from screaming. He'd healed a little.

But not enough. Because the pain hadn't stopped.

I drifted down beside him, reached out and brushed his forehead, a gesture he'd done to me a thousand times since he'd first found me on the Dredge, vomiting over the dead body of the second man I'd killed.

His body hitched at the touch and I leaned in closer.

Erick.

Another hitch. The trembling halted a moment, then resumed.

Erick, it's Varis.

Erick shuddered with a sob, his body pulling in tighter upon itself, his emotions twisting—regret, defeat, tenderness, and sorrow. Disappointment. But not with me. With himself.

He thought he'd failed me.

I felt my own heart clench, felt something hard and hot lodge in my throat. I stretched out, enfolded myself around him, pulled him in tight. And everywhere our essences touched I sent out comfort, sent out relief, sent out joy that he was alive. It pulsed through me, the same joy I'd felt when I'd first found him, only this time devoid of all the accompanying rage. I'd expelled that rage when I'd cracked the throne, when I'd released its power and destroyed the Ochean.

You haven't failed me, I whispered, sending the sentiment through the contact, pushing it forward. You've never failed me . . . Father.

Erick sobbed, something inside him releasing. I held on, letting the emotions flood through him, letting them flow outward and away.

A pang of guilt bled through me, and I felt tears burn my own eyes. I should have come sooner, should have checked on him sooner. I should have tried to reach him here, through the Fire.

No.

I stilled, pulled away from his essence. He still curled in upon himself, but the trembling had stopped and the sobbing had quieted. The tenderness and sorrow remained, but the regret, the defeat and disappointment, had been replaced by weariness.

His eyes were open, focused on me.

No. You came soon enough.

I shuddered, swallowed against the hardness lodged in my throat. I couldn't speak.

Varis. His voice caught, edged with pain. His eyes closed as he winced, then opened again, his essence hard and intense. A Seeker's essence. An assassin's essence. Make it stop, Varis. Do whatever you have to do, but make it stop. Then his eyes closed and he retreated. Back into himself, back into the protective shell he'd hidden behind since the trading ship The Maiden had been

captured and he'd fallen under the Ochean's and Hagtl's control.

But he no longer felt as tense.

I retreated back into the Fire, the sensation of the stinging needles fading, then pushed myself up and out, catching a flicker of my body slumped over into a chair hastily pushed up to Erick's bed before I fell back into myself.

I gasped, felt tremors sinking into my arms even as I drew in a breath, tasted the salt of my tears on my lips. "Gods!"

"Mistress," Keven said, stepping forward smartly, kneeling at my side. I tried to raise a hand to my face, to scrub away the last sensation of burning skin I'd pulled back with me from Erick, to wipe away the tears, but I couldn't lift my arm. "Mistress, are you all right?"

"Give me a moment," I said. Reaching for such a short distance, for such a short time, had never been this taxing.

I grimaced. Because of the throne. I'd used more of the throne's power as support than I'd imagined in the last few months. I'd come to rely on it. I'd have to be careful. I could overextend myself without thinking, counting on the throne to supplement me when the throne no longer existed.

"Here."

I glanced up, even the simple act of lifting my head difficult.

The servant held out a cup of tea, the scent from the steam intoxicating. I smiled, took a sip from the cup as she held it up to my lips, the tea sending warm tendrils of energy down through my limbs. The tremors in my arms quieted. The servant nodded as I found the strength to take the cup from her. Behind her and Keven, Isaiah fidgeted, his thin features pinched with worry.

"What did you find out?" the healer asked, voice curt.

Keven glared at him, but he didn't seem to notice.

"He's in a lot of pain," I said.

Isaiah frowned, brushed past Keven to lean over Erick's body. "What kind of pain? Where's it coming from? I couldn't find anything broken internally, no shattered bones except the rib that I've already reset. Is it his liver? His spleen? Something bleeding internally? What about—"

"It's none of those things," I said weakly, and suddenly I remembered the Chorl ship, remembered finding Erick in excruciating pain, body crumpled on the floor of the Ochean's shipboard chambers, the room rocking gently with the waves. I remembered prying open one of his eyes, taking in the folds of silken cloth hanging from the walls, the pillows that covered the floor, all shades of blues and greens and gold.

And I remembered the Chorl priest who had guarded him. The man had goaded Erick, thinking it was Erick looking out through those eyes, not me. And when the priest had seen my rage over what they'd done, seen that rage reflected in Erick's eyes, he'd reached forward and done something on the river, something I couldn't see, something I could only sense.

The blanket of burning needles had covered Erick then, and with a touch by this priest, that blanket had erupted into molten agony— agony that had almost killed Erick. The priest had brought Erick to the edge of death . . . and then had backed off, had released whatever pressure he'd applied to the river, and the pain had subsided.

My eyes darkened, and I caught Isaiah's gaze. "It's the river," I said, and Isaiah's brow creased in confusion. "The Chorl did something on the river. That's what's keeping Erick from healing. They've cast some kind of spell over him."

"Can you break it?" From Keven and Isaiah both, short and sharp.

I stood, felt the others step back. All except Keven, who shifted forward to my side, in case I needed the support. But the weakness had passed. I set the cup of tea aside and moved toward the bed, sinking beneath the river as I went.

Carefully, I searched the river around Erick from head to toe, feeling his essence in the eddies and flows as I looked, breathing in the pungent scent of oranges that I associated with him, with safety. . . .

Then I shook my head.

"I can't even sense it, whatever it is."

"Which means what?" Isaiah this time.

I frowned. "I don't know." And then I thought of the guests currently residing in the palace's prison, of one guest in particular. "But I know someone who might."

As we left Erick's chambers, I told Keven where I intended to go. His brow creased with disapproval, but without a word he motioned one of the escorting guardsmen to gather a few extra guards to accompany us.

"You should also summon another Servant," he said, catching my eye briefly as we moved. "Just in case."

I shot him a dark look. "I can handle it."

He grunted. "She almost escaped the first time she woke. She laid out three guards before we even knew she'd regained consciousness. If Marielle hadn't been there . . ."

"I know," I said, thankful that Marielle had been there. I bit my lip, was about to concede to Keven's advice when Eryn, the previous Mistress, rounded a corner twenty steps away. She wore a simple white dress, embroidered at the cuffs and neck in blue and gold. Soot stains marred it from the knees down and the edges of the sleeves. One black handprint was clearly visible on the front, as if she'd clutched her left side. She halted when she saw us approaching and smiled.

"Good," she said, matching our stride and falling into step beside me. She smelled of ash and sea salt. "Exactly who I was looking for. I went down to the wharf with Catrell and his group and have news from the engineers looking at the damage." She paused and frowned when Keven and I turned right at the next corner and began descending to the lower levels of the palace. "Where are we going?"

"To visit our prisoner," Keven grumbled, although he'd relaxed somewhat now that Eryn had joined us.

"Which one?" When no one answered, Keven's expression only tightening, her lips compressed into a tight line. "Alone?"

"Not anymore," I said, suppressing an irritated sigh. "What about the wharf?" Before she could answer, she broke into a violent fit of coughing, enough that she was forced to halt, one hand pressed up against the wall for support, the other clutched over her stomach. Keven and I traded a glance, but knew that Eryn would only wave us away if we tried to help her. Since the collapse of the innermost wall—the wall Eryn had held for a short while against the Ochean and her Servants with the help of myself and the throne—Eryn had felt shooting pains in her stomach, had had coughing fits like this one. The healers could find nothing wrong, but I'd been lurking inside Eryn during the battle, inside the Fire I'd placed inside her just like the one I'd placed inside Erick. I'd felt the damage when the Ochean had thrown her power against the invisible shield Eryn had erected to protect the wall. I'd felt the tearing pain, the taste of bile and blood at the back of my throat. And I'd choked on the dust as her shield failed and the wall began to crumble.

Something inside Eryn had been damaged in the process, something that didn't seem to be healing. But unlike Erick, this damage was internal, as if something inside had been bruised.

And it wasn't getting any better.

We gave Eryn a moment to collect herself as the hacking coughs ended, the silence awkward. She waved us forward again, her face twisted into an impatient grimace, as though she hated the fact that the coughing couldn't be controlled.

"The engineers say," she began again, her voice rough, "that the wharf is in better shape than it looks. The Chorl rammed the docks, but for the most part the damage was confined to the planking, not the pilings and supports. Catrell should be able to clear away the splintered planking and have it replaced within a few weeks. The wharf will be as good as new."

"And what about the ships?" We'd descended another level, the texture of the corridors changing. Above, in the palace proper, the walls were mostly white

or an eggshell brown, like sand, except for the inner sanctum where the Mistress' chambers and the throne room were. There the walls were the gray stone used to build the original palace thousands of years before. It had grown as Amenkor grew, the original outer walls subsumed in the expansion. Here, the eggshell walls had given way to gray stone again. We were within the confines of the original palace, but deeper. Much deeper than I'd ever been before, even deeper than when Westen, the captain of the Seekers, had led me down here to test me, and later train me.

"Regin says—"

"Regin?"

Eryn's eyes grew grim. "Yes, Regin."

"What about Borund?"

She sighed. "Borund hasn't come out of his manse since the Chorl's attack." My eyes narrowed. I knew why. I'd watched as Borund fled the wharf, the Chorl overrunning the docks. But we needed every able-bodied man if we were going to recover fast enough to face the Chorl again with any chance of winning. "I'll deal with Borund. What did Regin say?"

"That the crews of the ships are working as fast as they can to repair the damage, and to upgrade the ships' defenses. They're also checking out the Chorl ships left behind, looking for weaknesses, for ways to defend against them if they attack again. He has three trading ships that are seaworthy already. He expects two more can be made seaworthy in the next week. The rest are going to require longer to repair."

We drew to a halt in front of an unobtrusive door. Unobtrusive except for the two guards that stood outside, both Seekers I knew. They nodded as we approached, stepped to either side of the door. They radiated a constant tension, their stances deceptively relaxed. I felt myself slipping into the same posture, my hand brushing against the handle of my dagger without thought. All of the guardsmen in Keven's escort had tensed; word of what the prisoner had done when she first woke had passed through the guards like wildfire.

They'd been caught off guard before; they didn't intend to have it happen again.

"What about the other prisoners? The thirteen Chorl warriors we captured as they retreated?" Eryn said abruptly. "Would you like to check on them?"

"No," I said. "Not now."

Eryn stiffened at the curtness of my tone, at the rage even I could hear at its edges.

"Should I remove the warding?" she asked. Her voice had dropped, become guarded, and as I slipped beneath the river, the world graying around me, I breathed in the sweat of fear, sensed her wariness and knew she had already raised a protective shield around herself, had readied it to extend to the guardsmen if necessary.

"I'm ready."

I saw the currents of the river roil as she reached forward toward where the protective warding that shielded the room had been tied off earlier and twisted the eddies, releasing the warding.

The reaction from inside the room was instantaneous, the door crashing inward on its hinges, wood cracking into stone, a blade-eddy-swift and deadly-slicing out from the interior darkness—

But it met the barrier I'd placed across the door, the blade-eddy shunted harmlessly to one side.

Someone inside the room shrieked in frustration, tried to slam the door shut, but I held it open with minimal effort and moved into the opening, Eryn a step behind.

Using the river, I could see the room, could see the corners, the rough stone of the walls, the straw pallet and chamber pot to one side. A wooden platter that had contained food—bread and cheese and water—sat beside the pallet, barely any crumbs remaining. The Chorl had been starving as well; no food had been wasted this past winter. And standing against the far wall, body tensed,

one hand thrust forward, palm flat, chin lifted in arrogant rage—

A Chorl Servant.

The hatred I tasted was instantaneous and bitter, tightening inside my chest like bands of iron, making it hard to breathe.

Behind, I heard Keven order torches brought forward, the room flickering in the new light, revealing the Chorl Servant's long black hair, her stained green dress. Her posture didn't change, her nostrils flaring as her glance darted around the room, following the guardsmen as they positioned themselves behind Eryn and me. But she didn't attempt to use the river, or what Eryn called the Sight.

Her fear filled the room, reeking of piss and rotten fish. She'd been confined to this room for two weeks. The palace Servants brought her food, cleaned the chamber pot, changed the straw in her pallet. No one had attempted to speak to her after that first day.

We'd had other things to attend to.

Now, I glared at her across the expanse of the small room, thinking of the destruction in the city below, thinking of all of the men and women who had died, thinking of Erick. I clenched my jaw at the defiant look in her eyes, at the cold tension in her blue-tinged skin, and the iron bands around my chest tightened. The rings in her ears, four on each side, glinted in the torchlight.

"What have you done to Erick?" I asked, voice hard.

Confused shock radiated from Eryn, tightly controlled, an emotion I only sensed on the river. The other guardsmen shifted, edged forward as their own shock slid into anger.

The Chorl Servant sensed the change, her eyes darting once toward the guardsmen, then back to me. She didn't understand what I'd said, didn't understand the coastal language. But she could sense the rage.

Uncertain, the scent of her fear spiking, she lashed out with the river. I slapped the eddy aside, moved forward with two sharp steps, and wrapped my hand around her throat, shoving her back against the stone wall, my hand squeezing. Her skin felt smooth beneath my grip and I could feel her blood pulsing beneath my thumb, beneath my fingers. She cried out, swallowed against the pressure I'd put against her windpipe, gasped. Her hands clawed at my grip, and she choked something in her own tongue that sounded like a curse. Her black eyes blazed with hatred, but, aside from the hands clawing at my arm, she didn't struggle.

I could squeeze, cut off the flow of blood in her jugular until she passed out. Or I could shove my palm forward, crush her windpipe and kill her.

"What did you do to Erick?" I repeated.

"Varis," Eryn said behind me, her voice calm, reasonable, yet filled with disapproval. "Varis, she can't answer you. She doesn't know what you're saying."

I ignored her, focused completely on the Servant, on her blue-tinged skin. Skin that stoked the rage, fed it as images of the attack on the city flashed before my eyes, images of fire, of the watchtowers exploding, of ships and buildings burning, walls collapsing. Because of these people. Because of her. My jaw clenched and I squeezed, cutting off her breath.

Her eyes flew wide. And for the first time I saw true fear beneath the arrogance, beneath the hatred.

And I saw something else as well.

She was younger than me. Fourteen perhaps, maybe younger.

The age I'd been when Erick had first found me on the Dredge.

My intense hatred stumbled, faltered. The muscles in my forearm relaxed imperceptibly. The urge to wring an answer from her surged forward, almost overwhelming—

But it halted at her fear. A familiar fear. An instinctual fear.

I relaxed my grip and she heaved in a strained breath, the hands that had tightened on my wrist loosening. Then I pulled back, let her go.

She slumped against the wall as I turned, gave me a hate-filled glare that I

chose to ignore.

"You won't get anything from her by threatening her," Eryn said quietly but harshly as I approached the door.

"I agree," Keven said, motioning the rest of the guardsmen out into the corridor. "What do you want us to do with her?"

I halted, frowned as I turned to watch the Seekers close the door behind us, catching a glimpse of the Chorl Servant through the opening. She still huddled against the far wall, her shoulders now slumped, her hand massaging her throat. The arrogance lay over her like a cloak, like a shield, but the defiance . . .

I recognized the defiance.

I drew in a short breath, reset the warding over the door, then said, "Move her somewhere close to my chambers."

"What for?" Eryn asked.

I caught her gaze. "We need to teach her our language. I want to know what they did to Erick. And I want to know how to end it."

Chapter 2

"MISTRESS' TITS!" Eryn expelled a frustrated breath and opened her eyes. Her gaze immediately found mine. Sweat beaded her brow and tension etched the corners of her mouth and eyes, her lips pressed into a thin line. "I'm sorry, Varis. I can't find anything at all. I can sense something, but . . ."

My shoulders tightened, even though I'd been expecting the answer. "Show me." She nodded, and then we both dove beneath the river. The world faded to gray, background noises softening, melding into a hushed wind, until the only thing in focus was Erick lying on the bed. I could feel Isaiah and his assistant in the background, blurs of gray on the general world of gray, could sense the guardsmen outside the opened doorway, but I pushed all of that to the side, concentrated on Eryn's presence as she manipulated the river over Erick's body. The eddies shifted beneath her touch, and I edged forward, following her movements.

"Whatever it is," Eryn said, her voice brittle beneath the river, distinct and sharp, "I can sense it best right here."

The eddies indicated a region just over Erick's heart, above a small puncture wound in his chest, its edges a purplish red. I grunted. "The Fire I placed inside Erick is there," I said. "Are you certain you aren't sensing that instead?"

Eryn's lips pursed. "I'm positive. I can sense the Fire as well, even though I can't see it. It has a different flavor, a different taste." She paused, her brow creasing in thought before she continued. "I'm not surprised the two are located in the same position, though. The heart is a focal point, a source of great energy. It would make sense to connect something of power—like the Fire, or this . . . this blanket of needles—to such a source."

I frowned, pushed forward on the river to where Eryn had indicated and tried to sense what Eryn sensed. "I don't feel anything."

Eryn leaned over Erick's body. "You're in the right area. You can't feel it? It's like . . . like a strand of spider's silk brushing against the back of your hand."

I closed my eyes, let myself sink into the sensations of the river where I hovered. The currents flowed around me, soft and soothing, pulsing with the beat of Erick's heart, flush with warmth. Beneath, I felt the steady heatless flame of the Fire I'd placed at his core. I could smell the lavender soap used to wash the sheets of his bed, could smell the musk of his sweat beneath that, along with the scent of oranges. I let the scents enfold me, comfort me for a moment, and then I opened myself to the river, relaxed into its flow, searching. . . .

Nothing but Erick's presence. Nothing but the stench of Eryn's increasing concern. No spider's silk brushing against skin. No tingling from some layer of the river I couldn't see. No taste. Nothing.

I rose with a sharp jerk. "I can't feel anything," I said, the words curt.

Eryn reached across Erick's body and touched my arm. My hands were gripping my upper arms tight across my chest, and with her touch I could feel how tense my shoulders had become. "We'll find some way to break this, Varis."

The words were meant to be reassuring, but Eryn hadn't felt Erick's pain, hadn't heard him plead for me to end it. I'd warned Isaiah to touch Erick only when necessary, since any prolonged contact made the pain worse. But he was still in pain. And Isaiah had no idea how long Erick could remain like this and survive. He thought having me come to visit, having me talk to Erick through the White Fire as I'd done before, would help, but . . .

I didn't know how to respond to Eryn's touch, so I shifted away slightly and gazed down into Erick's face. "What about the Chorl Servant?"

Eryn's hand dropped from my arm. "Keven says that she's finally stopped destroying everything in her new rooms. He thinks it's safe to see her."

I caught Eryn's gaze. "Then let's go."

As we left Erick's rooms, I sent one of the servants to the kitchen, then gathered my escort around me as we moved down the corridor. It had taken a full day to figure out how to rig the wards around the new room so that the Chorl Servant wouldn't be able to use the river to subdue the guards. Since she could use the river herself, the wards had to be set so that she could not unravel them from inside the room. A variation of what Eryn had used on the Dredge to keep the denizens of the slums away from the food she'd stored in the warehouse there had been used on her cell. However, these rooms were much larger, so the ward had been expanded and layered. It felt weaker than the previous ward, but so far it had held. As a precaution, we had the other true Servants in the palace standing watch along with the Seekers in shifts.

If the throne were intact, Cerrin could have shown me how to make the warding more stable. He could have shown me how to combine the Servants' powers as the Ochean had done during the attack on the palace, when she'd destroyed the walls. Or, more likely, I could have done the warding myself, with the power of the throne behind me.

But I'd destroyed the throne before he—or any of the Seven that had created it—had had the chance.

We halted outside of the Chorl Servant's new rooms, the guardsmen exchanging nods with the two Seekers on duty before fanning out to either side. The Servant on duty—a blonde-haired young girl named Trielle—stepped to the right side.

"We'll have to start working with the Servants to figure out how the Chorl combined their strength with the Ochean's to bring down the gates," I said as we waited. "We need to learn how to do that ourselves, and then figure out a way to protect against it."

Eryn nodded. "I have some ideas about that. We can start experimenting during the training sessions in the gardens. And perhaps, if you can get her to talk . . ." Eryn nodded toward the warded chambers.

Before I could answer, the servant reappeared carrying two oranges. I took them both, noting Eryn's raised eyebrows and questioning look, then said, "I want to go in alone. Stay here with Trielle, in case I need you. Set the wards up again after I'm inside."

"Very well."

I slid beneath the river, the scent of the two oranges sharpening. Eryn reached forward and loosened the warding and I stepped through to the door, the warding drawing closed behind me. Taking a deep breath to steady myself, to steady the hatred that rose instantly when I thought of the Chorl and of Erick, I pushed through into the inner room, expecting an instant show of force from the Chorl Servant—an attack, a shriek, something.

Instead, I found her standing at the far side of the room, back to a wall, still in the same sweaty green dress she'd worn during the attack, the stains of soot and ash and crumbled stone clear in the sunlight. The room lay in shambles, the bed canted to one side, one leg broken, the mattress torn, straw flung throughout the room. The two chairs had been reduced to flinders.

Feathers from shredded pillows drifted about the room at the slightest draft.

The curtains from the two windows hung listless, the material ripped and ragged at the edges, lying in rumbled heaps on the floor. Anger rose, sharp and sour at the back of my throat, but I ignored it, didn't react at all, didn't allow myself to react.

On the far side of the room, I felt the Chorl Servant's smug satisfaction falter. Her back stiffened with the same arrogance she'd hidden behind before. Her head rose. I remembered that arrogance in the Ochean. Except, in the Ochean, it had been part of her personality. The Chorl Servant before me wore it like a shield, to hide what lay hidden beneath. I'd seen behind the shield for a brief moment before, when I'd held her in the choke hold. I'd seen that she was not so different from me . . . or at least what I had once been on the Dredge, before Erick found me.

"I see you've been busy," I said, my voice calm. I stepped into the room, closed the door behind me, felt the Chorl Servant tense, felt the river gathering around her defensively. I didn't react to this either. I moved to one of the windows, looked out onto northeastern Amenkor, out over the three walls to the lower city, the River, and the Dredge, my back turned toward her. She hesitated, the river swirling around her uncertainly. Only a thin slice of the harbor could be seen from this vantage, part of the northern edge, where the land was too rocky and sheer for a wharf. I wanted her to see the portion of the city that had not been significantly damaged by the Chorl, wanted her to see that they hadn't harmed us as much as she might have thought.

I set one of the oranges down on the edge of the window opening, kept the other in one hand, then turned.

"My name is Varis," I said, watching the Chorl Servant closely. I didn't expect her to understand, and she didn't, her brow creasing in confusion. Or perhaps consternation at the tone of my voice. "I'm the Mistress of Amenkor." I motioned toward the window, toward the city beyond.

The Chorl Servant sniffed in disdain, but her eyes were uncertain. Dark eyes, almost black, like her hair. I drew in a deep breath and recalled something I'd learned a long time ago on the Dredge:

The eyes are everything.

A moment later, her gaze, holding mine with determination, flicked toward the orange I still held in my hand and the corners of my mouth twitched.

"Varis," I said again, then held the orange up with one hand. "And this is an orange."

She stared at the proffered orange, her chin tilting upward. Her nostrils flared, and after a moment I could see that she trembled. But not in rage. With a quick gesture, I dug my thumb into the tough skin of the orange, the sharp tang flooding the river as sticky juice coated my fingers. I peeled the orange deftly, the scent strengthening as images of Erick surfaced in my mind, images I thought I'd forgotten: of him on the Dredge, handing me that first sack of food, his voice soft as he told me there was more where that came from if I helped him find marks in the slums; of him training me in the decrepit courtyards, barking orders or bursting out in laughter as I did something unexpected, catching him off guard. Scents had been everything on the Dredge, and I'd associated oranges with Erick. A good scent; a safe scent. Strong and thick and sweet.

Orange peel fell to the floor, and when I finished peeling it, I jabbed my thumb into the orange's core and pulled the fruit apart, selected a piece and ate it, spitting the seeds out into my hand and setting them on the window's ledge.

Only then did I look up at the Chorl Servant again. She watched me closely, a frown touching her lips, her head still held high, bruised neck exposed. But she was breathing deeper now, her eyes latched onto the fruit. She'd been fed only bread, cheese, and a few portions of meat for two weeks. It was better fare than most of those on the Dredge had had all winter. Even if she didn't know what an orange was, I was betting that the scent of fruit would be familiar.

I'd learned more from Erick on the Dredge than simply how to use a dagger. I broke another piece from the orange, the Chorl Servant's mouth twitching, and ate it as I began to pace before the two windows. A slow pace, thoughtful and nonthreatening. "I know why the Chorl came to Amenkor," I said, talking slowly as I ate, even though I knew she wouldn't understand. I tried to keep the anger out of my voice, the hatred that rose so readily when I thought about the attack on Amenkor. It wasn't easy. "The Ochean wanted the throne . . . or rather, she wanted the Fire and thought it was contained in the throne. But the Fire didn't come from here. It came from the west." I paused, frowned out the window at the city. "Do you know where the Fire came from? Do you know what it was, what it was meant to do?"

I turned back, caught the Chorl Servant's expression, and sighed. "I suppose not. If the Ochean didn't know, why should you? But it's an interesting question. I haven't had much time to think about it. I didn't care much about it on the Dredge—there wasn't a reason to care, knowing where the Fire came from couldn't help me survive. And after I became the Mistress, there were more pressing matters. But now . . ."

I paused, took another bite of orange, then shrugged. "It doesn't matter." I caught the Chorl Servant's eye, saw her stiffen at the look. I wasn't trying to hide the anger anymore. "You do know things I need to know, however. Such as how to combine the powers of the Servants, how to link them. And I'm betting you know something of what's been done to Erick. So . . ." I pulled another sliver of orange from what remained in my hand and held it out to her, forcing most of the anger out of my voice with effort. "Have a piece of orange."

She hesitated, her eyes narrowing in suspicion. But the scent of the orange was too strong. Edging forward, she raised one hand tentatively toward the fruit.

In one quick move, she snatched it from me and retreated, scowling. For a moment, I thought she wasn't going to eat it. She glared at me instead, defiant, the orange clutched protectively in one hand.

Then her stomach growled.

She dropped all pretense and stuffed the orange into her mouth, juice dribbling down her chin.

The sight sent a strange shocking ache through my chest. This is how I must have acted when Erick first brought me food. Starved, desperate, almost feral. I remembered how grateful I'd felt, and later, how ashamed, even though there had been nothing to be ashamed about.

My anger—at the Chorl, at the Ochean, at what they'd done to Erick and to the city—faltered, and I frowned. This woman wasn't responsible for those events. She'd been trapped by circumstance, just as I'd been trapped by circumstance on the Dredge. Until Erick found me.

I didn't move when she finished the slice of orange, then edged around behind me to take the one I'd left on the window's edge. Instead, as she began to peel the skin as I'd done, I moved toward the door.

When I reached to open it, she spoke.

"Ottul."

I halted, turned back.

The Chorl Servant stood between the two windows, back straight, the peeled orange held close in one hand. She held my gaze steadily for a moment, eyes blazing, and repeated, "Ottul."

Then she faltered, her gaze dropping in uncertainty.

I opened the door, saw Eryn, Trielle, and the guardsmen shift forward out of the corner of my eye, then turned and stepped through, Eryn releasing the warding long enough to let me pass.

"Well?" Eryn asked.

Still unsettled, no longer certain how I felt but unwilling to let the anger go, I said, "I think her name is Ottul."

I stepped into the hall of the merchant's guild, Keven and my escort of guardsmen at my back, and felt a shudder pass through me. The room was empty,

weak sunlight slanting down through the narrow windows onto the marble floor, dust drifting in the beams. The entire building smelled of age, of dryness and death.

The merchant Alendor had decimated the guild in his attempt to take over trading with his consortium, an attempt I had helped to stop. But not before he and his allies had killed off a significant portion of the merchant class itself. Of the three remaining merchants of power, one had been discovered hoarding food during the past winter and had been stoned to death in the market square by the people of Amenkor after I'd passed judgment on him. The second, Regin, had unwillingly agreed to my seizure of all of the supplies in Amenkor in order to keep the citizens of the city from starvation. And the third . . .

I scanned the murky interior of the once thriving guildhall, found William seated at a table in the far corner. My heart clenched as it always did when I saw his tousled brown hair, his white apprentice's shirt vibrant in the beam of light that illuminated the scattered sheets of parchment he worked on. Since the battle, since I'd watched William charge into the midst of the attacking Chorl on the wharf, I'd seen William almost every day either at the palace giving a report on the cleanup in the city or the status of the dwindling supplies, or in the city at a work site, overseeing the clearing of the debris from the streets or the removal of the dead.

But I wasn't here for a report. At least, not a report about the city. William didn't hear our approach until I'd halted before the table. Then he looked up with a start. He stood instantly, his chair juddering back as he lurched to his feet.

"Varis! I mean, Mistress," he added, his gaze darting toward the guards where they'd settled into position at a distance. "I didn't know you were coming." "I didn't send word that I was coming."

"I see." His brow creased in confusion as he tried to decide whether this was a formal visit, or a friendly one. He opted for formal, his stance shifting slightly, his tone changing. "What can I do for you?"

I sighed. "I came to speak to you about Borund."

"Ah." His hands fell to the table and he dropped his gaze.

"William." When he didn't look up, I rounded the makeshift desk and caught William's shoulders, forced him to look at me. "William, I need to know what's happening with him."

"You know what happened with him," William said, shrugging out of my grip, his voice angry. "Everyone knows! He ran on the wharf. When the Chorl ships hit the docks and the rest of us charged into their ranks, he turned and fled. He left us there to die. He left me there to die!"

The bitterness of William's words, loud and harsh, echoed in the recesses of the room. He held my gaze a long moment, long enough so I could see the pain in his eyes, a pain he'd hidden the last few weeks, a pain he'd kept hidden even from me.

But then he spun, turned his back on me, and stalked away, toward an alcove containing a few chairs and a small table with a plant.

I hesitated, caught Keven's questioning look, but shook my head and headed after him.

"He never meant to run," I said to William's back, letting my own anger tinge my words.

"How do you know? You weren't there."

"Yes, I was."

William's shoulders tensed and he turned. "What do you mean?"

"I was there, inside the White Fire I placed inside of him. I was watching through his eyes when the Chorl ships hit the wharf. I watched as he dragged you down behind the barricade when they struck. I watched as the Chorl spilled down from the ships and swarmed the docks. I watched as you led the charge into their ranks, and I watched when Borund turned and fled. I saw it all. I felt everything that Borund felt."

His eyes widened. "You did? But then, why didn't he stay and fight? Why didn't

you make him stay and fight?"

"Because . . ." I began, but then ground to a halt. Because I could have stayed and made Borund fight. I could have seized control of his body through the Fire, could have forced him into the Chorl's ranks. I'd wanted to, the sense of betrayal as Borund fled sharp. But I couldn't stay. I was needed in the palace, to fight the Ochean, to stop her, whatever the cost.

But William didn't want a rational reason. He wanted to know why Borund had betrayed him, had abandoned him.

I sighed, heavily, pushed my own anger at Borund back.

"He couldn't stay, William. He couldn't. His fear was too great. He tried. He honestly tried to stay and fight, but the fear overwhelmed him. I felt it overwhelm him."

William held my gaze a long moment, the hope that I'd give him a reason fading.

When I reached for him, to touch his arm as Eryn had touched mine earlier, standing over Erick, he flinched away as I had done. I let my hand drop. He winced at the gesture. "I'm sorry, Varis, but . . ." He lowered his head, loosened the tenseness in his shoulder with visible effort, then caught my gaze. "How's Erick?"

I stilled, and he must have seen the answer in my eyes because he reached for me. And unlike before, with Eryn, I let him draw me in close, let him hold me. I breathed in the clean scent of his shirt, smelled the hint of fresh straw beneath on the river.

"He's not getting any better," I said, and was surprised at how rough my voice sounded, how thick. "And neither Eryn nor I can do anything for him."

"What about Isaiah?"

I shook my head, rested it against his shoulder for a moment, then drew back, even though his warmth was comforting. "Isaiah's done what he can, but he can't help with this. The Chorl did something to him using the river."

William's brow creased. "And you can't fix it?"

I gave a short, barking laugh. "I can't even sense it."

On the far side of the hall, a door opened and three other apprentices—two of Regin's and one who had worked under the hoarder Yvan—stepped into the room, their voices carrying in the dusty silence. William took a step back from me, separating us. The moment of closeness broke.

When the other apprentices moved on, William asked, "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know." I thought of Ottul, hesitated as I wondered whether I should tell him about her. But I'd moved her to the upper palace. Word would be spreading soon enough. "We captured a few of the Chorl in the attack, including one of the Chorl Servants. I'm hoping we can find out how to heal Erick from her."

William's eyes widened, but before he could begin questioning me about Ottul, I asked, "Where's Borund?"

William snorted, his anger returning in a heartbeat. "He hasn't left the manse since the attack, hasn't even left his study. He isn't working, isn't doing much of anything. All he does is drink. I've never seen him like this before." I shuddered. Because I had. He'd done the same thing after William had been stabbed, when we weren't certain that William would survive. Locked himself in his study, drunk himself into a stupor.

Until I'd made the offer to kill Charls for him.

I winced.

"He needs something to do," I said. "He needs something that will give him purpose again."

"Like what?"

I shrugged, letting some of my own anger slip free again. "I don't know. Something that will make him active again. In the guild, in the city. We can't afford to have the guild brought to its knees simply because he's feeling sorry for himself. I need him. Amenkor needs him. He's one of the few remaining people of power left in the city. But if he's going to be of any

help, I need him to be visible to the people, and I need him to be stable." William glanced toward his table, toward the stacks of parchment he'd been working on. "What about ships?"

"What do you mean?"

"We lost most of our trading ships to the Chorl, when they were attacking them in the trade routes and later when they struck the city. All Regin has been complaining about lately is the fact that the guild can't operate effectively unless we have ships to trade with. We can't rely on the roads. Shipping overland isn't fast enough. Why not have Borund rebuild the ships we've lost? He can even help with the financing. I've seen his ledgers, I know how much he's worth. He can probably underwrite at least five ships, perhaps more, depending on what size and scale you're talking about. It will give him something to do other than drink. It will give him a chance to redeem himself."

I stared at William. Then, impulsively, I leaned forward and kissed him. A light kiss, startling me as much as him.

Before either of us could react, I spun away. "Come on."

With a start, he followed me back toward Keven, the remaining guardsmen straightening as I approached. "Where are we going?"

"To Borund's manse."

I felt William halt, felt the coldness radiating from him as I turned. William shifted awkwardly under my gaze. "He ran, Varis. He left me there to die. I can't forgive him. Not yet. Not that easily."

I felt my jaw clench, but nodded.

Then I turned and left the merchants' guild, Keven and my escort in tow.

"Master Borund will see you now, Mistress."

Gerrold, Borund's manservant, spoke the words formally, but his eyes were alight, completely ignoring Keven and the escort of guardsmen that surrounded me. He motioned us into the main corridor, leading us down a familiar hall toward Borund's study.

I breathed in the scents of Borund's manse as I followed Gerrold—polished wood, the dust of parchment, the faint scent of bread baking. I didn't see Lizbeth or Gart, the two other servants Borund kept around the manse, but the rooms we passed and the halls themselves brought enough of their own internal ache from memory. I hadn't been physically in the manse for months, for what felt like a lifetime, but I had come here in spirit using the throne when searching for the stolen food. I'd had a purpose then, hadn't allowed myself to let the memories affect me.

But now they came unbidden. I wanted to be harsh, didn't want the edge I felt over Borund's cowardice to be blunted, didn't want his betrayal of William to be lessened, but I was suddenly assailed with the taste of butter, with images of Lizbeth dunking me beneath the water in my first real bath, of William laughing at something Borund had said and Borund grinning, casting me a furtive look to see if I was laughing as well.

And then Gerrold halted before Borund's study. Before opening the door and allowing me in, he said, "Please, Mistress. Do something to help him."

He stepped aside and walked away, not allowing me to respond and without announcing my arrival.

I stared through the open door, smelled the alcohol, the staleness of the room, and grimaced. It reminded me of the depths of the slums beyond the Dredge.

Without turning to Keven, I said, "Wait here." Then I entered, closing the door behind me.

The windows were closed, the shutters drawn, faint sunlight visible at the edges. In the shadows, I could see the large desk, ledgers scattered haphazardly to one side, sheets of parchment sticking out from the edges. Various shelves and tables held more ledgers, a few plants, and other simple artifacts from locations all along the Frigean coast—an intricately carved pipe from the southern islands, fossilized leaves and shells embedded in stone, a feather-and-bead headdress from Kandish across the eastern mountains,

a vial containing the blue waters of the far northern Taniecian lands. A large rug covered the floor before the fireplace; a great sword hung above the mantel.

Among all the ledgers and artifacts were empty bottles of wine. A few were tipped to one side, others contained a few fingers' worth of liquid, but by the smell of the stagnant room, they had clearly turned.

Borund sat behind his desk, one hand clutching the stem of a glass. Another bottle sat close at hand, already half empty. He glared at me over the desk, brow furrowed, face flushed and angry. He hadn't shaved recently, and his eyes were bloodshot and puffy.

"What do you want?" The words were spoken in a gravelly, hoarse voice.

I squinted into the dimness of the room, crossed my arms over my chest, feet a shoulder's width apart. A soldier's stance.

"What do you want!" Borund barked, his free hand slapping down onto his desk with a hard crack as he surged to his feet, not quite stable.

I didn't flinch, didn't move. I met his eyes, met the rage there with a steady gaze, and said simply, "You ran."

He jerked back, face contorted with shock as if I'd reached out and slapped him, the reaction magnified by his unsteadiness.

I walked across the room, set my own hands down flat against his desk, felt the stickiness of spilled wine beneath my palms, and leaned forward, directly into Borund's face. His eyes widened, the rage gone. The reek of stale, used-up liquor came thick on his breath, had been ground into his skin. He looked ten years older than he was, his flesh hanging on his bones, the wire glasses askew on his nose.

"I was there," I spat, letting all the rage I'd felt in that moment come through in my voice. "I watched through your eyes as the Chorl ships rammed the docks, watched as William took up the battle cry and led the Amenkor men over the barricade to meet them. I watched as you stood there, staring, unable to move, and I felt your heart falter.

"And then I watched you run. I watched you abandon William to the Chorl." Horror widened Borund's eyes further. His mouth opened, then closed. Opened again. "I—" he began. I could see his pulse throbbing at his throat, in a blood vessel on his forehead. Sweat coated his skin in a thin sheen. His gaze darted away, searched the room in a panic, and then settled back onto me. "Oh, gods," he whispered.

And then he collapsed back into his chair. Tears streaked down his face, and his body shook with silent sobbing. "I couldn't," he heaved, voice strangled, barely there. "I couldn't. I tried. I tried to turn back. But I just kept running. I didn't even know where I was going." His face contorted. "I'm sorry, Varis. So very sorry."

The emotion on his face was too raw, too visceral. I pushed back from the desk, an empty wine bottle on its side shifting position at the motion. I stared down at it a long moment, thought of William, of what Borund's cowardice had done to him. I glanced around at the rest of the bottles throughout the room, and then I moved to one of the shaded windows.

I stared at the material of the shade—deep red, suffused with sunlight from behind—and said, "Then do something about it."

Borund's sobbing caught. "I can't," he said viciously, the anger aimed at himself, his voice thick with phlegm. "The attack is over. There's nothing I can do to change it now."

"You can't change what happened," I said. I reached up and pulled the shade back, sunlight spilling into the room with a harsh glare. Borund sucked in a deep breath at the light, almost a hiss, but I ignored him, moved to the rest of the windows and jerked all of the shades aside, opening the windows, fresh air spilling in with the sunlight, sharp with spring and sea salt.

I turned to face Borund, hands on my hips. "But you can attempt to redeem yourself. For me. For Amenkor, which needs you now more than before Alendor and his consortium, more even than before the Chorl arrived. But especially for William."

Guilt flashed across Borund's face and he slumped even farther back in his seat. "William," he whispered.

I took a step forward, halted. I no longer felt the seething rage over his cowardice on the docks, but I was still angry. It would take more than a few words and some sobbing to change that. Like William, the forgiveness wouldn't come easily.

"You've lost him, Borund."

Borund stared at me from across the room, mouth open, one hand raised to shade his eyes against the sunlight, as the words sank in. "H-How?" he finally stammered. "How can I redeem myself? There's nothing—"

"You can build ships," I said, cutting him off. "Lots of ships."

"Now that the wharf is repaired, we can begin working in earnest on the repairs to the surviving ships," Regin said.

We stood at the edge of the wharf, people streaming around us, mostly workers hauling rope and carting wood out to the ships tied up at the docks to either side of us. But there were some fishermen, crab traps slung across their backs, their skin tanned into a thick hide, their hair bleached by the sun. There were also shopkeepers from the upper city; peddlers and hawkers; the dark-skinned Zorelli that made up the majority of the ships' crews; and one or two others from outside the main coastal regions. All these people had survived the winter in Amenkor and were trying to start anew. Sailors bellowed from the rigging, and crew called back and forth across the decks, the sounds accompanying the creak of the new planking beneath our feet and the slap of waves against the wharf's supports. Birds wheeled in the air—gulls and terns, one or two pelicans—their shrieks blending into the general noise. The scent of fish and brine clung to the air, the breeze coming in occasional gusts from the ocean. At least seven ships had been brought in to the docks, most still with damage to be repaired.

"When will the first ship be ready to send out?"

Regin snorted. "We could send out a few trading ships immediately, but none of them are equipped to defend themselves against the Chorl. Their captains aren't exactly leaping at the chance to leave the relative safety of the harbor."

"Not even to trade to the north?" So far, there had been no evidence that the Chorl were ranging farther north than Amenkor. All of the attacks on trading ships last summer had come to the south, between Amenkor and Venitte, along the main trading routes between the two sister cities.

Regin shook his head. "Not even to go north to Merrell. They're waiting for us to upgrade their ships, or to finish repairing the warships the Chorl left behind so that they have an escort ready to defend them."

I turned to look toward where three of the Chorl ships were also docked, their decks swarming with carpenters and engineers. Regin looked in the same direction.

"Our carpenters are drooling over them," he said. "I've already sent a few to check them out in detail. They seem to think they can adapt them somehow. Something to do with their construction." When I gave him a questioning look, he shook his head. "Don't ask. I'm a merchant, not a shipwright."

I wasn't either. In fact, I'd never even been on a ship. Gutterscum from the Dredge typically never made it down to the wharf. Most never made it across the River that separated the slums from the lower city.

That was changing though. There was less of a divide between the city and the slums now.

"How long before we can provide the trading ships with an escort?" I asked.

"By the end of the week. We should have three of the Chorl ships ready to go by then. If we send one with each trading ship, that should allow me to send two ships and Borund one."

At Borund's name, I tensed, frowned. Even though I'd spoken to him two weeks before, had practically ordered him out of his stupor, I still felt anger boiling beneath the surface. I'd seen him on the docks, had seen him in the warehouse district taking stock of his supplies. But I hadn't seen William and

Borund together yet, had met with William repeatedly. I hadn't mentioned Borund, and William had carefully sidestepped the issue whenever it came up. Borund hadn't proved himself yet. And I hadn't forgiven him.

"He was raised to be a merchant, not a warrior."

I turned to meet Regin's eyes, startled. He watched me with calculated intent. I suddenly wondered where Regin had been during the attack, wondered what he had done. He'd been assigned to one of the barricades in the lower city, but I'd lost track of him during the attack, too caught up in events to watch everyone.

But Regin had changed. Before the attack, he'd hated me, hated how I'd seized control of the food and supplies, how I'd set up the kitchens and warehouses. He'd helped me only grudgingly as I tried to feed the city.

"Borund should have stayed to fight on the docks," I said, my voice level. "He should have stayed with William."

Regin didn't waver. "Not everyone was made to fight. Not everyone was built for survival. Mistress."

Regin held my gaze a moment more, then looked away.

"In any case, William has handled all of Borund's affairs since the attack, while Borund was . . . otherwise occupied. And he's done a splendid job of it. Since Borund and I are the only surviving members of the merchants' guild of any consequence, I was thinking of making William a full merchant in his own right, perhaps a few of the other apprentices as well. The guild needs to begin recovering from Alendor and his consortium. What do you think?"

I thought of William charging into the advancing Chorl, sword raised awkwardly before him. I thought of my first excursion to the middle ward at William's side, saw his face as he gazed longingly at the merchant shops and manses that had lined the streets, and smiled. "I think he'd like that."

Regin grunted, a faint smile touching his own lips. "And I think he'd like you to come to the ceremony." At my frown, he gave me a knowing look. "And I need to go see to my own estates, which are still in total disarray after the past winter. I assume that now that winter is over, and the city has survived, all of the merchants have free access to do their usual business? No more joint warehouses? No more communal kitchens?"

"No. The merchants' guild is free of the palace. But I do intend to keep the warehouse and kitchen running on the Dredge. They need it."

Regin raised an eyebrow but said nothing except, "Mistress."

He gave a slight but respectful bow, then moved off, a few waiting apprentices and personal bodyguards closing in around him as he merged with the crowd on the docks. My own escort moved in closer, Keven coming up to my side.

"Good news?"

"More or less. Trading ships should be ready to leave by the end of the week."

"Then might I make a suggestion?"

I turned to him, somewhat surprised. "What?"

He motioned to the people milling around us. "We just barely survived a harsh winter, were attacked by an invading force, and we've done nothing since but clean up, repair, burn the dead, and drill the citizens in case of another attack. Can't you feel the tension?"

I frowned, and for the first time took note of the faces of everyone around us, of their haggard appearance, the set of their shoulders. As if at any moment they expected the facade of normality to cave in, revealing a horde of Chorl behind it.

And if I slid beneath the river, I could feel it as well, a trembling beneath the calmness of activity. The citizens of Amenkor were holding together through sheer movement, keeping themselves busy so that they didn't have to think, to feel.

"We need something to celebrate besides mere survival from the attack," Keven said.

"Such as?"

"A festival to celebrate the launch of the first trading ships, perhaps? It doesn't have to be a huge event, but . . ."

I gave him a narrowed look of doubt. "I suppose we could spare a little extra food for a festival."

Keven grinned. "I'll let Avrell know immediately."

Behind Keven, I saw the crowd part, Captain Catrell moving forward, trailing an escort of his own, including Darryn. Catrell was dressed in the full armor of the palace, having been promoted, taking the place of Baill as the head of the palace guardsmen. He was a short man, Darryn at least a foot taller, and carried himself with a sense of serious reserve.

Darryn was dressed like any other denizen of the Dredge, except that beneath his somewhat used and frayed clothing he wore leather armor and carried a sword. He'd been offered Catrell's old position as captain of the regular guard, but had turned it down and remained captain of the militia instead, insisting that he'd be more useful on the Dredge . . . and that full armor would only isolate him from the people. Since he was training them to defend themselves from another Chorl attack, no one had argued with him. He came forward a step behind Catrell, a smirk on his face.

"Mistress," he said, half mockingly, bending at the knee with an exaggerated bow.

Catrell gave him a sidelong frown, then nodded himself. "Mistress."

"Captain. Lord of the Dredge."

Darryn snorted. "At your service, of course."

I signaled Keven, the escort shifting position to open up a path through the crowd as I led Catrell and Darryn down the wharf toward the southern jut of land that protected the harbor. The two captains fell into step to either side, their own entourage melding with mine.

"I wanted to discuss Amenkor," I began, and both Darryn and Catrell became instantly intent. "In particular, what more we need to do to defend it against another attack. I know that you're training anyone with a will in the marketplace so that the citizens can defend themselves if necessary, Darryn, and that you're also training the more formalized militia, but there has to be something more substantial that can be done."

Catrell frowned. "You're certain that the Chorl will return?"

"They'll return. If not here at Amenkor, then somewhere else on the Frigean coast. Marlett, Temall, Venitte—any of the southern cities are under the Chorl threat. Merrell to the north as well, to a lesser extent. The Chorl will be desperate. Their homeland has been destroyed, and there are too many of them to remain on the Boreaite Isles for long."

"So what can we do?" Darryn asked.

We'd reached the end of the wharf, were passing now through the trailing edge of the warehouse district, coming up on the wall that branched out from the inner walls of the city and ran down the full length of the narrow strip of land that struck out into the water. The crowd had fallen behind, most of the city's activity centered on the wharf and the ships there. I stared up at the wall. Here, it was barely twice my height, its main purpose to keep an eye on whatever ships might be approaching the city from the ocean on the far side.

"We need to warn the coast, the southern cities especially," Catrell said, angling along the wall to where a small gate allowed access to the heights.

I nodded. "Avrell has already sent dispatches overland, since no ships have ventured out of Amenkor since the attack."

"But it could take weeks for them to arrive," Darryn protested. "By then, the Chorl may have already struck somewhere else."

"I know. It's the best we can do at the moment."

Both Darryn and Catrell mulled this over as we climbed the stairs to the top of the wall, emerging into a stiff breeze from the ocean. Patrols ran in regular intervals along the wall, the guardsmen taking a moment to acknowledge our little group as we passed before turning back to their scrutiny of the ocean and the search for sails and the possibility of the Chorl's return. We were headed toward the remains of the watchtower at the end of the jut. I wanted to see the damage. Before the attack, I'd ventured out onto this wall only once. It had been at the limits of the throne's influence, and had been

extremely uncomfortable, like knives digging into my gut, so I hadn't returned.

But now that the throne was dead . . .

I shoved the thought aside.

"What do you have in place right now?"

Catrell drew in a breath, then exhaled as he shook his head. "The losses from the attack, and those guardsmen that disappeared along with Baill, were significant. But I've set up watches along both walls in case the Chorl decide to return. Since the watchtowers were destroyed in the battle, I've set up warning bells down the lengths of both walls as well. If any foreign sails appear, they give warning to the city, with a second set of signals once the danger of the ship has been established. Darryn has been drilling the citizens on what each signal means, and what they should do in the event that a ship does approach. Most will head to the walls and the palace, although anyone with training or who can pick up a weapon is supposed to help defend the harbor."

"That covers the ocean approach," Darryn cut in abruptly. "What about to the east? An attack from land?"

Catrell grimaced. "That's harder to defend. Aside from the walls surrounding the palace, there are no defenses to the east. We haven't needed them. The eastern portion of the city—the stockyards, the tanneries—"

"The Dredge," Darryn added sharply.

Catrell nodded in agreement. "—they're all exposed. Along with all of the fields and farms, of course. I've set up scouting patrols along both the northern and southern roads, a few along the eastern route as well. The southern approach is the most easily defended, since the terrain is such that they'd have to climb a cliff to reach the edge of the palace in that direction. But the northern and eastern routes . . ." He shrugged.

"The good news is that most of the citizens of Amenkor have moved inside the walls of the palace or into the outskirts of the slums along the River," Darryn said into the silence. "With the lower city between the wharf and the palace mostly destroyed, they've had to find somewhere else to go. A significant portion of them should be protected by the walls if someone does attack by land, and with enough warning, those on the Dredge should be able to make it to the walls in time. There's not much we can do about the outlying farmland. All of that is at risk."

"Haven't the patrols here and on the roads stretched the guardsmen thin?" I asked.

"Yes. But since the battle we've had a significant surge in men and women interested in the militia."

Darryn nodded. "Many of those come from the Dredge. They may not be skilled with a sword, but they make up for it with nastiness and determination." A tight, proud smirk lit Darryn's face.

"Many of those who joined the militia before the attack have been shifted to the regular guard to fill the gaps, since they had some minimal training already. The rest have already started training under Darryn and his men." Catrell shrugged. "There's not much more that can be done."

We'd reached the end of the jut and halted, were now staring down at the remains of the watchtower. The wall, slightly shorter here than in the city, abruptly ended, stone jagged at the edge where it dropped down into a shallow hole. To the right, waves crashed onto the natural stone of the jut, slapping into rock with a hollow booming sound, spray hissing upward, errant wind blowing it into our faces occasionally, my hair flying about my face. I licked my lips, tasted salt and sand.

Three weeks before, there had been a tower here. A short tower, only two levels, but enough to give the guardsmen a greater view of the ocean.

Now, there was nothing but a crater littered with shattered stone and twisted wooden beams. One wall of the tower had slid to the side, a fan of stone tumbling down to the greedy ocean below.

I felt again the surge of power that had wrought such destruction. Felt it

like a thud to my chest. Slipping beneath the river, I could still sense the disturbance in the eddies and flows around me.

Without releasing the river, I turned away from the debris, away from the ocean and the wide open threat that it represented, and looked to the city. I could see the masts of the ships at the docks, could make out movement along the wharf, even though we were too distant for me to pick out individual people. Skiffs darted back and forth across the bay, and other fishing boats bobbed on the waves closer to the tower, men leaning over the edge to haul up traps from the harbor's bottom. And beyond, rising up from the water's edge and outward from the River's mouth, buildings and streets, a charred husk just above the wharf where the Chorl had landed, the palace to the south, the Dredge to the north.

I watched the activity near the wharf for a long moment, noted the empty berths at the docks.

"No," I said finally. "There is something else that can be done."

Both Darryn and Catrell frowned.

"What?" Darryn asked.

I motioned to the harbor, to the city beyond. "We can build another wall."

"It will bankrupt us," Avrell said.

"What, the festival? It's a little too late for that. It's already started."

Avrell clenched his jaw and visibly controlled himself. "No, not the festival. Building the wall."

I paused in my preparations to frown at him. We were waiting in the antechamber to my bedroom, Avrell seated while I tucked the folds of my shirt into my breeches. Isaiah had removed the bandage keeping Avrell's arm immobile a few days before, declaring his shoulder healed. "What do you mean? Just build it. We have stone available in the quarry to the north, wood in the forests to the east. We have plenty of laborers in the city; just recruit people from the Dredge. The carpenters and engineers are practically begging to get started."

"Yes, but all of that requires money. Money that we don't currently have. Or at least, don't have enough of. We used a significant portion to gather enough food to get us through the winter. We have enough to continue paying the wages of the servants and guardsmen and to keep the palace running at a nominal level, but that's it. Spending our resources on the labor necessary to build the wall is out of the question, unless you have a cache of buried gold hidden somewhere in the slums that you haven't told me about."

I shot him a withering glare. "We need that wall. The Chorl attacked by sea the last time, because that's what they were used to. According to Catrell and Darryn, our most significant weakness at the moment is the unprotected parts of the city to the east, including the stockyards and the Dredge. We need some type of defense for that portion of the city. We can't rely on the Chorl giving us enough of an advance warning to get all of the people in those areas into the walls of the palace!"

"Then you'll have to figure out a way to fund their construction."

Before I could form a scathing reply, a knock came at the door, which opened a moment later to reveal one of the Seekers set to guard my chambers. "Marielle is here to help with your preparations, Mistress."

"I'm already done," I said.

Avrell's eyes shot wide open, and from behind the Seeker I heard Marielle say, "What?" She shoved past the bemused Seeker, who quietly shut the door behind her. Her gaze raked over my crisp white shirt and tan breeches, my boots, the dagger at my belt. She wore a pale green dress, tied at the waist with a swath of trailing blue cloth. "You can't possibly be thinking of wearing that to the festival."

I frowned in confusion. "This is what I always wear."

"Exactly."

Marielle stalked across the antechamber into the inner room, moving swiftly toward the wardrobe. "You must have something in here suitable to wear to this event."

I cast a surprised look at Avrell, whose face was now suspiciously neutral.

"Like what?"

"Like a dress!"

A knot of horror clenched in my gut, all thought of the problem of the wall forgotten. I followed Marielle into my chambers, Avrell a step behind me. "I don't have a dress. I don't wear dresses. I don't like dresses."

Marielle pulled back out of the wardrobe, a thin sleeping shift held up before her. She tossed it to the floor in disgust, then saw Avrell. "Eryn," she said. Avrell seemed to understand. With a quick nod, he vanished through the door. I heard the outer door open and close, followed by footsteps moving fast. Not at a run, but close.

I caught Marielle's gaze, held it, my face set in the sternest frown I could manage. "I don't wear dresses," I said, my voice hard, edged with the deadly intent most people identified with the Seekers. "I'm the Mistress."

Half an hour later, Eryn stepped back from straightening the folds of one of my sleeves and said, "There. What do you think?"

Marielle gave me a penetrating look. "It will have to do. We're already late. If we don't leave now, the ships will have to launch without us there to see them off or they'll miss the tide."

I stood stiffly, the dress feeling awkward against my skin. What skin it covered. Yellow, embroidered at the edges as almost all of Eryn's dresses were, it hung down to my ankles and was fitted at the waist, two servants having hastily measured, pinned, and stitched it to the right size. The sleeves were loose, the shoulders a little poofed, the neckline square. I could feel the air against my skin across my chest and shoulders. And my feet. Instead of boots or shoes, they'd forced me into some kind of sandal, but with many more straps.

The only concession they'd made was my dagger. Strapped to my forearm within easy reach, in a leather sheath Westen, captain of the Seekers, had given me, its weight was comforting.

I glared at the two through narrowed eyes and lowered my arms, breathing in the heady perfume they'd applied. "Are we finished?"

Eryn smiled, smoothing the creases of her own white dress. "I think so."

They herded me out into the antechamber, where Keven, Avrell, Nathem, and Westen waited. Catrell, Darryn, and Regin were already down at the wharf seeing to the last minute details of the three trading ships and their escorts.

Avrell drew in a sharp breath, began to say, "You look completely diff—" but then caught Eryn's eye and halted. Keven looked slightly stunned and confused, as if he didn't recognize me. Westen's only reaction was a raised eyebrow. They were all dressed formally—the guardsmen in maroon uniforms with glints of armor showing here and there; Avrell and Nathem in the deep-blue-and-gold robes of the palace.

"Let's go," I said curtly, not willing to acknowledge the nervous sweat that suddenly prickled the palms of my hands and back of my neck.

An escort of no less than twenty guards on horseback led the three carriages down through the cleared streets of Amenkor. It was the first time I'd ridden in a carriage, but the dress made it impossible to ride a horse as I usually did when moving through the city. I found it . . . bruising, the cobbles of the street rough, and remembered my first sight of a carriage, after killing Bloodmark and fleeing the slums, crossing the River to the lower city. I'd thought it strange, a room on wheels, so far removed from anything I'd experienced on the Dredge that I'd hidden deeper in the familiar territory of the alley until it had passed.

Now, I stared out of the small rectangular window and watched the alleys drift by. We passed through the wards, the broken walls, just now beginning to see signs of repair, glowing in the late afternoon sunlight. A few people still remained in the upper city, most obviously heading down toward the wharf and the festival. The windows and doorways of the buildings we passed were decorated with garlands of grass or boughs of pine and aspen from the forests,

tied with ribbons that fluttered in the light wind. Banners hung from poles erected at the corners of the streets, or jutting out from above shopkeepers' doorways. The citizens of Amenkor had leaped at the news of the festival, decorations appearing within hours of the general announcement. Then we passed into the lower city. I turned away from the heaps of rubble and charred buildings with a grimace.

"You saved the city."

I glanced up at Westen, seated across from me. He watched me intently, jostled by the rough ride. Keven and Marielle also rode with us, the others divided between the other two carriages. "Did I?"

He smiled. "Yes. Don't let anyone, including yourself, ever doubt that."

"But—"

"No," he said, cutting me off, shaking his head. "There is always a price—buildings, ships . . . lives. You can never escape that. You did what had to be done."

"But we lost the throne."

His smile faltered, grew grim. "Was there any other way?"

I turned back to the window, thought about those last few moments in the throne room, in the throne itself, as the Ochean attempted to seize control.

"No."

"Then the throne was part of the price."

We'd passed through the worst of the damaged streets, were coming up on the wharf. People were already crowded on the docks, and the carriage was forced to slow. Men and women danced, tankards and cups raised to the sky, laughter and screams combining into a low roar of frenzied noise. Someone slapped the side of the carriage, bellowed something slurred and unintelligible but obviously ribald into the window, then spun away, lost almost instantly. Marielle blushed and laughed.

I turned toward her, caught her gaze, and grinned as well.

Then we were at the wharf, the carriage drawing to a halt as the guardsmen pushed the riotous crowd back and Westen opened the door and helped me down. A cheer broke over us in a wave as Westen escorted me to the open area that had been cordoned off on one of the docks. Chairs had been brought down from the palace, along with tables now lined with platters of food, all set up on a raised platform. Music from at least three different sources merged into a cacophony of sound almost subsumed by the crowd itself, and somewhere someone was roasting a pig, the scent of sizzling meat and smoke making my stomach growl.

Regin, a few of his apprentices, Borund, Catrell, and Darryn were waiting on the platform.

Along with William.

My stomach clenched and I tensed, suddenly conscious of my dress, enough that Westen glanced toward me out of the corner of his eye. William straightened where he stood at Regin's side, as far from Borund as possible. I could feel the tension on the river between the two, saw Borund cast William a glance, then turn his attention toward the docks, toward the crowd. William was dressed in the crisp white shirt of an apprentice, with breeches and a plain long brown jacket; Regin must not have told him he was to be made a full merchant yet. Regin wore his own merchant's jacket—dark blue, riddled with the gold embroidery that signified his power within the merchants' guild, the symbols indicating what resources he traded. Borund's jacket was blood-red.

I gave Borund and William both a sharp frown.

Regin stepped forward. "We'll have to launch immediately, if we're going to catch the tide," he said. Behind him, I could see the crew of the trading ship lined up at the dock already getting ready to depart, men scrambling in the rigging, others releasing the ties to the dock. The two other ships had already pulled away from the wharf to either side, the refurbished Chorl ships that were to be their escorts waiting out in the harbor. "You should make your speech now."

I froze. "Speech?"

"You have to say something to the crowd," Avrell said. The rest of the group had come up behind us. "They'll be expecting it."

I turned back to the wharf, saw the docks lined with people, packed into the small space so tightly the guardsmen were having a hard time keeping them away from the platform where we stood. The entire city must have come, including those from the Dredge. I felt a hand seize my heart, felt fresh sweat break out on my forehead.

Someone touched my arm, leaned in close to murmur, "Make it short. It doesn't have to be complicated. Remember, most of them are already half drunk."

Eryn.

I pressed my lips into a thin line, not amused. Reaching for the river, I threw a net out over the crowd, as far as I could spread it. Not as far as I'd been able to in the marketplace when I'd condemned Yvan as a traitor, when I'd had the power of the throne behind me, but that hardly mattered. Only those closest to the platform needed to hear.

I stepped forward, and with a low murmur, the crowd closest grew quiet. The festival continued farther out, raucous and loud, but here, on the edge of the dock, it was dead quiet.

Raising both arms, using the net to project my voice, I said, "To Amenkor's survival."

There was a pause.

And then the crowd erupted into a deafening roar. Bells and horns from all sides of the harbor joined the tumult. Through the crash of sound, I heard the captain of Regin's ship bellow a command, turned to see sails belling out with the wind, a familiar sense of excitement seeping through me at the sight. I watched as the trader began to pull away from the dock, echoing the movements of the other two on either side. The roar spread along the wharf in both directions, subsiding only when the ships had cleared the pier and pulled out into the center of the harbor, the sun behind them, setting the clouds afire. The musicians broke out into a dance and the wharf degenerated into a seething mass of people dancing, drinking, eating, and celebrating.

I wondered how many of those from the Dredge were picking pockets. It's what I would have done, if I'd even risked coming down from the Dredge at all.

I grinned, the energy of the festival infectious.

William cleared his throat beside me. I'd felt him approach. His presence made my skin tingle.

"Nice speech."

I snorted. "Avrell is going to kill me."

"I know."

I turned, caught William's malicious grin, and hit him on the shoulder. I saw Borund behind him, watching his back with a strange expression on his face—hope and sadness and regret all mixed together—as he spoke to Regin. I glanced back toward William, who stood rubbing the spot where I'd struck him. "Borund's been busy."

William stilled, the grin vanishing from his face, his expression a wall.

"Yes."

I thought William would say more, but he stood staring out at the crowd.

Behind, some of those on the platform had begun to dance.

I sighed. "What do you expect him to do, William? He can't change the fact that he ran on the wharf. He can't change the fact that he left you."

"I know that." Tight. Angry.

"Then what more do you want?"

He held that anger in for a long moment, then heaved a sigh of exasperation.

"I don't know. I don't know what I want."

"Have you spoken to him?"

"I've done what needed to be done for the guild. I've done what he's asked of me. But we haven't spoken about that."

I nodded. I'd seen the two on the wharf, in the palace, knew that they hadn't.

"Maybe you should."

William didn't say anything. Far out in the harbor, the ships were passing

through the protective arms of land that jutted into the water, slipping out into the ocean, two of the traders turning south toward Venitte, the other heading north.

As soon as the ships passed from view, Regin broke away from Borund, headed toward where William and I stood. I straightened, William doing the same as he saw Regin's approach.

"Are you ready?" I asked.

Regin nodded, his expression neutral. "Whenever you're ready."

"Give me a moment, and then you can begin."

Regin nodded and stepped away, motioning Borund forward. William shot me a confused glance that I ignored, turning instead to face the crowd, reaching out again with the net I'd used before, capturing as many of those that surrounded the platform as possible.

Then I nodded toward Regin.

"Citizens of Amenkor," he bellowed, and I could feel his voice reaching out over the noise of the crowd, reaching all of those touched by the net. Those nearest quieted, those farther out too caught up in the celebration to care. On the platform, the musicians brought their song to a close, and those dancing slowed.

Regin waited until he thought he had most of the people's attention, then continued. "We have all survived a rough winter, and the attack of the Chorl, as the Mistress said. And during these past long months we've suffered significant losses. Many of us are still grieving. But we have survived. The wharf has been rebuilt. The streets have been cleared. And we have just sent out the first ships from our harbor since the attack!" At this a cheer rose from the audience, a cheer that spread outward from the platform and beyond the net I'd placed over them. Regin nodded, raised his hand to calm the sudden enthusiasm.

"But," Regin continued, and the crowd quieted grudgingly. "There is one more thing we can do tonight, something that will rebuild Amenkor's strength in a way that no mere stone, nor wood, nor sailing ships ever will. With the Mistress' blessing, Master Borund and I would like you all to participate in something that has traditionally only been done within the hallowed halls of the merchants' guild, something that has never been witnessed by those outside its halls before." Here, Regin paused, and those closest to the platform whispered to each other, the hush in stark contrast to the distant sounds of revelry. Everyone had stilled, had pushed a little closer to the platform itself.

Regin turned from the crowd, toward where William stood at my side, a slight smile touching the seriousness of his face, of his voice. "William Hartleton, apprentice to Master Borund, please step forward."

Stunned, William hesitated, then moved stiffly up to Regin's side. Regin gave him a small nod, then turned to the other waiting apprentices on the platform.

"Illum Forestead, Jack Trevain, and Walter Davvens, apprentices to Master Regin, please step forward."

All three of Regin's apprentices stepped forward as well, with a mixture of shock, elation, and confusion.

When all four were lined up before him, he said, now deadly serious, all traces of the smile gone, "As Masters of the merchants' guild, with all of the powers that the titles ensure, and with the approval of the Guild in its entirety, and that of the Mistress of Amenkor herself, I now rescind your status as apprentices of the guild . . . and declare you Masters of the guild in your own right, with all of the privileges and duties that the title entails."

Silence held for a long moment as the import of Regin's solemn words sank into the crowd . . . and then it erupted into cheers and thunderous applause. One of Regin's apprentices—Jack—seemed on the verge of fainting. As the applause continued, Regin motioned forward one of the servants from the palace. She laid a heavy box at Regin's feet, and Borund stepped forward. I let the net go as Regin pulled a dark blue jacket from the box and handed it to Borund. A few

silver-embroidered symbols stood out on the jacket. Regin pulled out another in a dark hunter's green with gold embroidery.

Borund stepped up to William, both standing straight, backs stiff, faces tight. Borund held out the jacket so that William could slip his arms through the sleeves, then met William's gaze.

I don't know what passed between them in that look, but I sucked in a sharp breath, held it. For a long moment, I didn't think that William would accept the jacket. His jaw tightened, his eyes on Borund's face, searching.

Then his gaze dropped and he turned, pulled off the plain brown jacket he'd worn to the festival, thrust his hands through the sleeves, shrugged the new jacket onto his shoulders, and turned back. Borund dusted off the shoulders, tugged the sleeves into the correct position, scrutinized the cut, the tailoring, the embroidery.

And then he glanced back up at William and I could see that he was on the verge of tears, that he barely held them in check.

He suddenly grabbed William and pulled him in tight, hugging him roughly. "I'm so sorry, William," he half sobbed, half choked into William's tense shoulder. "I'm so sorry I abandoned you at the wharf, and I know there's nothing I can do to change that, and I wish to all hells that there was. I wish that I could take it all back, relive the whole experience. I wish—" The rush of words caught in his throat and he pulled William in tighter, then released him, stepping back, scrubbing at the tears on his face with one hand, not able to meet William's eyes for a long moment.

But before William could say anything, before any of those on the platform could react, he caught William by the shoulders and looked him directly in the eyes. "You are the closest thing I have to a son, the closest I will ever have, and I am proud of that. I'm proud of you, William. And I will always be proud, even if you can't find it within yourself to forgive me."

Then he let William go, turned toward where Regin held out a second jacket—a bright yellow with dark red embroidery. He handed it to Borund, who moved to stand before Iillum, while Regin presented Walter with his own black jacket with silver edging.

As soon as the last two shrugged into their jackets and Borund and Regin stepped back, the crowd erupted into fresh applause. When this died down, the musicians broke into a lively dance.

All six merchants shook hands, congratulating each other, and then they broke apart, most heading toward the platters of food that had been laid out.

William moved toward me.

"Nice jacket," I said.

William laughed, then said accusingly, "You knew about this."

"I'm the Mistress," I said mockingly, mouth quirked. "I know everything."

He grinned, and it suffused his face, wrinkling the skin near his eyes. The wind tousled his hair, tugged at his jacket. A few months before, I'd thought he despised me, despised what I'd done as a bodyguard for Borund. A month ago, he would have flinched if I'd reminded him I was the Mistress.

The moment stretched. Around us, those on the platform had split up into pairs and returned to dancing. Torches were lit as the sun set completely.

"Would you care to dance?" William said suddenly.

I stilled, felt my carefree smile fade. "I don't know how."

"Oh." An awkward moment, and then, tentatively, "I can show you."

William held out his hand, his expression hopeful. To the side, I felt the other dancers swirling on the river, heard one of them cry out in delight as they were spun. The motion, the movement, drew me, even though fear roiled in the pit of my stomach.

I hesitated, trapped. But in the end, William's look won out.

He led me to the edge of the ring of dancers, pointed out steps, demonstrated the position of the feet and hands. I shivered when he placed his hands on my waist, showing me a lift, and then, all of his directions still a jumble in my head, mixed with the queasy warmth that had filled my gut at his touch, he took my trembling hands and began.

I stepped on his foot three times, tripped once. He caught me with a grin, and then I let myself relax, let myself forget that I'd never danced before, let myself sink into the river, into its flows, and suddenly it wasn't awkward anymore. It was like the Dredge, like slipping through the crowds of people without touching anyone, all about the eddies, the movements, the patterns. I slid along the currents of the other dancers, anticipated William's direction, let the rhythm of the dance take control.

Through the whirling motion, I caught Marielle's face, caught her significant look before she was spun away by Keven. Sometime later, Avrell and Eryn flashed by, Eryn laughing in delight.

Three dances later, William slowed to a halt as the music ended and the dancers broke out into applause. A gust brought another whiff of the roasting pork, and my stomach growled.

"I need a break," I said, gasping and sweaty. My heart pounded in my chest, as if I'd been practicing for hours with Westen, and yet I felt exhilarated, not exhausted.

"Very well," William said, face flushed, eyes bright.

We moved toward the food-laden tables. All along the wharf and on the remaining ships, lanterns and torches lit the night, the crowd spreading out into the lower city.

William handed me a glass of water, piled some forkfuls of shredded pork and some bread onto a platter, and led me off of the platform onto the dock, moving down its length. We settled onto some crates near its end and ate in silence, watching the distant movement on the wharf. Behind, I felt the presence of a few guardsmen—my ever-present escort—but I ignored them, didn't think William had noticed them at all.

"Catrell told me you intend to build another wall," William said when the platter held nothing but a few strands of meat and some crumbs, "one that surrounds the entire eastern part of the city."

"Yes." It came out brusque.

William hesitated. I felt his eyes on me. "What's wrong?"

For a moment, I considered shrugging it aside, not willing to let the palace intrude, but then I sighed. "Avrell says it's impossible. We don't have the money. Not after the past winter. Not after the Chorl attack."

"Ah." William lapsed into thoughtful silence, seemed almost to speak, reconsidered, then said quietly, "You have four new merchants now. Have you thought about asking them?"

I stilled in thought, but before I could answer, before I'd even had a chance to consider it, William continued.

"I know we haven't had a chance to set up our own houses yet, that we'll be starting out fresh. But typically our Masters, the merchant that we apprenticed under, will give us a gift, a portion of their own houses, something to get us started. It still won't amount to much, but at least it's something. Perhaps all of us together, all four of us, will have enough to help back the building of the wall."

I stared at William, at the mute appeal on his face, at the need in his eyes. He wanted to help, was desperate to help, but not because of the city, and not because of his new merchant house.

He wanted to help me.

"William," I said, then halted.

He shifted, set our empty plates set aside.

Then, I leaned forward and kissed him. A light kiss, but not the sudden, unexpected kiss I'd given him before, when he'd suggested Borund build the ships in the harbor. I felt his indrawn breath a moment before we touched, felt the trembling of his body, smelled his scent—straw dust from the warehouses, sea salt—strong and rich on the river.

Then I drew back, heard him sigh.

Before either of us could react, a harsh, urgent clanging of bells pierced the night, coming from the walls protecting the harbor. William turned toward the sound in consternation. I leaped to my feet, two guards appearing out of the

darkness at my side.

"What is it?" I asked, tension coursing down my arms, even though I already knew.

"A warning," one of the guards answered roughly, already motioning to the other guardsman, who took off back toward the wharf at a run. "Unknown sails on the horizon."

Chapter 3

Fear spiked on the wharf as word spread, the raucous celebration grinding to a halt. Masses of people broke away from the docks and headed up to the palace walls in a slow-moving but orderly tide as the warning bells fell silent. But just as many people scrambled to find weapons, joining the guardsmen on duty at the edge of the water, as they'd been drilled to do by Darryn. The river churned with mixed emotions—fear, despair, determination—and I felt myself harden under the tumult.

"Is it the Chorl? Did they attack our trading ships?" William asked, moving up beside me and the guardsman who'd remained behind to protect me. Tension ran off him in tendrils. Others approached as well, almost everyone who'd been on the platform, including Westen, Avrell, Marielle, and Eryn.

"I don't know," I said, but I pulled back the sleeve of my dress, ripping the fabric slightly as I exposed the sheath containing my dagger.

"All of the citizens have headed back to the palace," Avrell said. "For whatever good that will do. We still don't have gates."

"The guard is on the way," Westen added. "Catrell is organizing the men who remained and can fight on the docks."

We waited in silence, breath held, ears straining. The quiet was unnerving, the only light the torches and lanterns lining the docks and the bowls of flaming oil lighting the palace and the broken walls. Wind gusted from the ocean, tugging at my dress, my hair.

Then new bells broke the darkness and the guardsmen all around sighed in relief.

"Not the Chorl," Westen said. "A foreign trading ship." He frowned as the bells paused, new notes ringing out. "And it shows signs of damage."

I thought immediately of the ships we'd just sent out. Had they run into trouble already? But Westen had said the ship was foreign. And the incoming ship could have been damaged by many different things—a storm, pirates.

Yet, somehow, I didn't think so.

Had they encountered our own trading ships? Had they even seen them?

"It could be a while before the ship docks," Avrell said. "Should we head back to the palace?"

I hesitated. I wanted to know what had happened to the ship, and whether it threatened the trading ships that had left the port just over an hour before. But Avrell was right. It could be a full hour before the captain was ready to speak with me.

"Spread the word that it isn't another attack," I said, "but keep a contingent of guardsmen here at the dock, just in case." I caught Westen's eye. "I want to speak to the captain as soon as he's ready."

The captain of the Seekers nodded. "I'll escort him to the palace myself."

Almost two hours later, a page boy halted, breathless, in the open door of an audience chamber inside the palace.

"The captain of the Reliant is here to see you," he gasped a moment later.

At my nod, he darted away, leaving me alone with William, Avrell, Eryn, and Keven. Keven stood beside the section of floor where I'd paced the last hour, a solid beacon of calm. Not as soothing as Erick's presence would have been in the same place, but still calming. Avrell stood not far off, beside Eryn, who was seated to the side of the single table at the end of the room.

I'd asked William to stay, had seen Avrell frown in disapproval. But I'd ignored the First. With Erick barely alive, I found William's presence comforting.

"The Reliant?" Eryn asked.

Avrell frowned. "One of Lord March's ships, from Venitte, I believe. They must have left the city close to the first day of spring to have made it here this fast."

"Or been traveling with little cargo."

Avrell raised his eyebrows at that, and I felt a surge of irritation. I didn't understand what the comment might mean, but before I could ask, William said, "The trading ships can travel faster if they aren't loaded down with the weight of cargo."

I gave him a thankful glance, tried to ease the tension in my shoulders. Even with William and Keven in the room, I felt on edge.

Westen appeared in the doorway.

"May I present Captain Tristan of the Venittian ship Reliant, and Brandan Vard," Westen caught my eye, his face and voice impassive, his warning clear, "Servant of the Lord of Venitte."

Avrell and Eryn stiffened, Avrell's hand tightening on the back of Eryn's chair.

Then Captain Tristan stepped into the room. He wore the formal jacket of a captain, like the merchant jackets, but without the heavy embroidery to signify rank. A dark blue, like William's, it was banded with gold at the cuffs and neck, with gold buttons and red-and-gold-tasseled epaulettes on the shoulders. His mouth was pressed into a thin, grim line, the skin beneath his eyes dark with exhaustion.

Brandan Vard entered a step behind him, his face a schooled mask that did not successfully hide the last dregs of shock and horror beneath it. Slightly older than me, he wore a simple shirt and breeches, although the material was obviously of high quality. A large circular gold pendant hung from a chain around his neck, a domed and spired building emblazoned on the front. A familiar building. I frowned a moment, then remembered.

I'd seen the building from Cerrin's veranda, overlooking the harbor and channels of Venitte. Cerrin had looked toward the building when Venitte had been under attack by the Chorl the first time, had intended to go there to join the other six members of the Council, until his wife and children had died. It was the seat of power in Venitte.

My gaze shot toward Eryn and Avrell, but both were focused on Tristan, who'd moved to face Eryn. With a stiff but respectful bow, he said, "Mistress, I bring word of warning from Lord March and the city of Venitte. Although it would appear that it comes too late."

An awkward silence fell, broken only by a cough by one of the guardsmen who'd entered behind Tristan and Brandan. Tristan rose, brow knit in confusion.

I stepped forward. "I am the Mistress of Amenkor."

Comprehension dawned swiftly, no more than a flash across Tristan's eyes. He turned sharply and repeated his bow to me, more stiffly this time. "I deeply apologize, Mistress. We had not received word of your ascension in Venitte at the time that we sailed."

"When did you sail?" Avrell asked.

"Three weeks ago. We came directly here, without stopping."

Avrell glanced toward me. "I sent couriers to Venitte the moment you took the throne. They should have arrived well before the end of winter."

"By land or by sea?" Tristan asked.

"Both."

Eryn shifted in her seat. "None of the ships made it to Venitte, I assume?"

Tristan's expression tightened. "None."

"The only ship that returned after heading south was Mathew's ship," William said. "He didn't make it as far south as Venitte. He chose to stick close to the coastline, hitting numerous smaller ports, rather than going out into the main trade routes, those that the Chorl targeted."

Tristan grunted. "So you know of the Chorl?"

"We know of the Chorl," I answered, my voice dense with anger. Both Tristan and Brandan understood, however. They would have had to pass through the charred shell of the lower city to reach the palace. "They attacked Amenkor on

the first day of spring."

"But you managed to drive them back." It was a statement, not a question. And it held an undertone of respect.

Avrell shifted forward. "What about the couriers I sent by land? None of them arrived either?"

"None. We've had no word from Amenkor—from any port north of Bosun's Bay—since autumn."

"What happened?" Westen broke in.

Before Tristan could answer, Brandan—silent until now—stepped forward. "The Chorl. They've seized control of Bosun's Bay and the surrounding area."

No one in the audience chamber moved. I'd known that the Chorl could not stay on the Boreaite Isles for long, but I hadn't expected the expansion to the coastline to be so swift. Not after the attack on Amenkor.

But then the full import of what had been said sank in. The Chorl must have seized control of Bosun's Bay before winter to have halted Avrell's couriers. They'd already begun the invasion of the coast before coming here, or at least seized enough land to live off of during the winter. I didn't remember Bosun's Bay being in the Ochean's plans when I'd filtered through her memories while she was on the throne. But then I wasn't focused on what she might have done elsewhere; I was focused on her and what she intended for Amenkor.

Amenkor had been a distraction, the promise of the Fire and the throne's power too much for her or Haqtl, the leader of the Chorl priests, to resist.

But now, Haqtl and Atlatik, the captain of the Chorl warriors, must have returned to their original plan.

"How far away is Bosun's Bay?" I said abruptly, breaking the silence.

"A map!" Avrell snapped to one of the guardsmen at the door, "Find Nathem and have him bring a map of the Frigean coast."

"And find Captain Catrell," Westen added.

One of the guardsmen nodded and left immediately. Everyone else shifted closer to the table, William moving to my side, close enough I could feel him. I glanced back at Keven, who shook his head grimly.

"How did you find out about Bosun's Bay?" Avrell asked.

Brandan glanced toward Tristan, who nodded for him to answer the question. He straightened, one hand holding the emblem around his neck. "Lord March noted that a significant portion of our ships were being lost over the course of last summer. He sent out search parties. They discovered the Chorl on the Boreaite Isles and in Bosun's Bay just before the ocean became too rough to navigate for the winter."

"And you didn't send word?" Westen remarked, although it was clear he already understood what had happened.

"Of course we sent word," Brandan snapped, then stopped himself. His hand had clenched on the disk about his neck, but he forced himself to relax, to breathe. "We sent warning by land. Obviously, the Chorl had infiltrated farther inland than we estimated. They must have stopped our couriers."

Westen nodded.

"Is that how your ship got damaged?" Eryn asked. "Were you attacked by the Chorl?"

"No," Tristan said. "The Reliant wasn't part of the search effort, and we knew enough to bypass Bosun's Bay on our way here. The trade routes were a little trickier to sail through without meeting up with the Chorl, but we managed."

"Then where did you get attacked?"

Tristan met Westen's eyes squarely. "Just south of Temall."

Avrell swore.

"Did you meet any other ships on your way here?" I asked. "We sent a few trading ships south, with an escort, a few hours before your ship was sighted."

Tristan shook his head. "No. We didn't see anyone. But we were staying close to shore because of the damage we sustained. If your ships headed out into the trading lanes, we wouldn't have met."

At that moment, Nathem entered, a bundle of rolled parchment in his arms,

followed immediately by Captain Catrell.

"Nathem," Avrell spat, motioning his Second to his side, while at the same time Captain Catrell said, "What's going on?"

As Avrell and Nathem began sorting through the maps, William leaning forward to help, Westen answered. "The Chorl have apparently taken over Bosun's Bay, and Captain Tristan here says that he encountered the Chorl as close to Amenkor as Temall."

Catrell frowned.

And then Avrell cried, "Here," and slapped a map down on the table.

Everyone leaned forward, Nathem and William placing weights at the corners of the paper to hold it down, Avrell pointing with one hand to a location on the edge of the coast marked with a heavy black dot, script off to one side.

"Here's Amenkor," he said, to orient everyone. His finger followed the edge of the curve of coastland marked out in black, blue shading to one side for the ocean, greens and yellow to the other. "Here's Temall, about five days' south of here by ship. Another three days beyond that is Bosun's Bay." Both Temall and Bosun's Bay were marked with smaller dots.

Avrell's finger halted, but my gaze continued down the coastline, until it came to rest on Venitte, almost the same distance from Bosun's Bay as Amenkor. And, like Amenkor, it was marked with a large black dot, the city's name scrawled across the parchment in curved letters. It lay in a jagged cut in the land, like a tear at the edge of the paper, a large island filling up the space left open by the tear. Two channels of water surrounded the island, then sliced inland toward Venitte itself.

I thought about standing on the cliffs above Venitte's harbor, watching as the Chorl first attacked fifteen hundred years ago, shivered as their ships slid into sight through the channels on both sides of the island. I felt Cerrin's initial confusion, followed swiftly by horror and rage as the first volleys of fire arched up from the Chorl ships and fell onto the Venittian ships in the harbor and the houses perched on the cliffs.

William brushed up against me. I caught his concerned look, frowned, and shook my head.

"We ran into the Chorl ship just past Temall," Tristan said, bringing my attention back to the map, pointing to the ocean just to the south of the town. "About here."

Catrell frowned. "Just one ship?"

Tristan nodded, a note of irritation creeping into his voice. "One was enough to almost take us. If Brandan hadn't been on the ship . . ." He trailed off, and Brandan straightened slightly.

"I had to use the Sight to force them off," Brandan explained.

The tension that had spiked and then faded when Brandan had been announced escalated once again. A wariness that I could feel in all of the guardsmen in the room . . . and surprisingly, from Tristan himself.

Tristan seemed to be of higher rank than Brandan, and yet he feared the Servant. A fear that wasn't evident on his face, but could be felt easily on the river.

"I'm surprised you escaped at all," Westen murmured. And in his voice I heard the echoes of what Mathew, Erick, Lauren, and the rest of the doomed crew of The Maiden had endured when they were attacked by the Chorl. I'd forced everyone to live through those events using the throne, forced everyone to feel their desperation, their pain, their deaths.

Tristan's irritation escalated at the suspicion hidden in Westen's voice, in Catrell's gaze. A suspicion I felt as well . . . until I realized why Tristan's ship had survived, why Brandan's presence had turned the Chorl away when Mathew and his crew had never had a chance.

"Did the Chorl ship have any Servants?"

"What do you mean?" Brandan interjected.

The tension between the two groups heightened.

Drawing in a steadying breath, I said, "We sent out a ship of our own to find out why the trading ships had vanished. It was destroyed, completely, because

the Chorl ships it encountered had Servants aboard, women with the Sight who could control fire."

Tristan's eyes went wide, and he swore under his breath, his hand making a reverential motion across his chest that reminded me of the Skewed Throne gesture the people of Amenkor used when they saw me.

Brandan rolled his eyes. "No, they did not have any Servants on board."

"That we know of," Tristan added more seriously. I'd seen the same reaction at the mention of fire from almost every captain and sailor I'd met on the wharf. Brandan shifted, his brow furrowed, eyes locked on the map.

I frowned.

"If they'd had Servants on board," Eryn said, her voice hard, "they would have used them."

"It must have been a scouting party," Catrell said, diverting everyone's attention back to the map. "They must be interested in Temall."

"With good reason." Avrell leaned back from the map, his hand splayed on the table for support. "Bosun's Bay and the surrounding area may have had enough resources to keep them through the winter, but not through that and the spring as well. It's not that large of a port. Even if they began farming," he pursed his lips at this thought, the idea obviously striking an unpleasant chord with everyone from Amenkor, "they'd still need more resources. Temall is the closest option."

"What do you mean, 'if they began farming,' " Brandan said sharply.

"The Chorl aren't here to raid," I said. "The islands where they come from were destroyed. They need land, a place to live. They're here to conquer."

"And it appears," Westen said quietly, gazing down on the map, at the town of Temall, "that they're heading north. To Amenkor."

North. To Amenkor.

Westen's words from the night before echoed in my head as I made my way to my chambers to wash after a morning dealing with the daily disputes brought before the Mistress as well as the dispatches Tristan had brought from Venitte, with another visit to Ottul, whose almost daily lessons in the common tongue of the Frigean coast—a task I'd assigned Marielle—were advancing, if at a slow pace, and with training sessions both with Westen and the Seekers as well as Eryn and the Servants. My muscles ached from all the practice, my body weary from the exertion.

And from lack of sleep.

I was still dreaming. Of Cerrin mostly, but occasionally of some of the others of the Seven who had created the Skewed Throne. Not every night, and most not as vivid as that first dream of Cerrin attacking the Chorl Servant outside Venitte in the olive groves and wheat fields. But all of them were emotionally draining. I'd woken numerous times with tears streaking my face, a hard knot of grief buried in the center of my chest. Other times I'd jerked out of sleep in rage, usually after dreaming of Livian or Garus.

Except they weren't dreams, I thought as I entered my rooms, pulling off my sweat-dampened shirt, followed by my breeches, using the motions to stretch the tightness out of the muscles in my shoulders and lower back, wincing slightly. I poured water from the waiting pitcher into the basin on the table against one wall, soaked a cloth, and began to wipe the grit and grime from my face and body.

No, they weren't dreams. They were memories, with the same connection and intensity I'd felt when I'd been bound to the throne, the same realistic feel as—

I halted, washcloth held against my neck, staring off into the middle distance.

They were memories. Memories of the Seven and the Chorl attack on the Frigean coast almost fifteen hundred years before. Memories that, when I'd been connected to the throne, I would have been able to access if I'd wanted.

But the throne was dead. I shouldn't be able to access any memories now at all, except those that I'd relived while connected to the throne before the Chorl attack. These were new memories. They contained images and places and

people and events I hadn't known about when the throne was destroyed.

But I knew them now.

I tossed the cloth aside, dressed in the breeches and white shirt that had been laid out for me on the bed, and jerked open the door to the outer corridor, startling the guardsmen waiting there.

"Mistress?"

"Come with me."

I halted before the throne room door, laid one hand on the polished wood between the heavy bands of iron. The room had been closed off since the Chorl attack. I'd come a few times in the days after, to check on the throne, to touch it, to search for the faintest flicker of life in hopes of filling the cavernous hole where the throne had been inside me.

But when there'd been no flicker, no tingling beneath my touch after a few days, I'd abandoned it and hadn't come back. There had been no reason to come. I shoved, the heavy doors swinging open, and entered. The long room was dark, the light from the corridor touching the edges of the first set of columns that lined the sides of the walkway, but nothing farther. Guardsmen slid past me and began to light the torches to either side, the candelabra and bowls of oil scattered throughout the room. As flickering orange light suffused the room, I moved down the walkway, to the dais at the far end where the throne sat, a banner marked with the three slashes of the Skewed Throne on the wall above it. Ascending the three steps of the dais, I halted before the throne itself and shuddered.

The room felt . . . empty. The first time I'd entered, I'd been stalked. An energy, a presence, had filled the chamber, prickled against my skin, the voices of the throne manifest, whispering to me, rustling like autumn leaves against stone, unintelligible but there. And on the dais, the throne had shifted, warping from shape to shape, always changing as the multitude of personalities took control, the motion hurting the eyes. I'd hated it, hated the texture of the room, the feel.

But then I'd seized the throne myself, taken control of those voices, become part of that presence that had prickled my skin. Instead of itching, the presence had become a power, a living, pulsing connection that had extended throughout the city of Amenkor, a presence that throbbed in my blood, that I drew in with each breath.

Now, I reached out and touched the rough granite . . . and felt nothing. No whispering voices shivering through my skin. No thrumming of life, of the city, beating with my heart. The throne remained a single solid form: rough rock, a stone seat with a rectangular back, unadorned.

Except for a crack.

I reached out, traced the crack with one finger. As long as my forearm, from elbow to the tip of my finger, it cut through the back of the seat like a scar, starting at the top, on the left, and angling downward to its center. The emptiness of the room hurt, a pain deep and hollow. A pain as deep as what I'd felt when I'd found the white-dusty man's body on the Dredge, along with his wife, killed by Bloodmark to spite me. The pain trembled, threatened to break free as I pressed my palm to the throne, felt the grit of the stone against my skin, the pocks in its surface. I willed the stone to shift, to shudder, to change—

I felt Eryn enter the room behind me, felt her approach the dais and halt at the bottom of the steps.

"Anything?" she asked, and I heard an echo of my pain in her voice. She'd been connected to the throne far longer than I had.

I let my hand drop, drew in a breath against the thickness in my chest. I shook my head. "Nothing."

She sighed. "There's nothing you can do, nothing any of us can do."

"But I'm dreaming," I said. When Eryn didn't respond, I turned, repeated, "I'm dreaming, Eryn. I'm reliving memories from the Seven—Cerrin, Liviann, Garus, Seth, all of them. Memories that, unless I'm still connected to the throne, I shouldn't have."

Eryn's brow creased and she came one step up onto the dais before halting again. "But you don't feel anything when you touch the throne?"

"No."

"What about the city? Do you feel anything from Amenkor, any connection—" "Nothing," I said, cutting her off. "I didn't feel anything when I went out onto the jut to the watchtower either, and before, that was at the edge of my limits."

Eryn remained silent, but I could see her thinking, could see it in her eyes as she held my gaze.

"It doesn't make any sense," I said, breaking the heavy silence.

Eryn drew in a breath, glanced toward the immobile throne, then exhaled heavily. "Unless . . ."

"Unless what?" I said, too sharply.

"Varis," Eryn said, coming up another step on the dais, "the Seven created two thrones. You know this, you witnessed their creation. You were there. What if you aren't getting these memories from this throne, what if the two thrones were connected in some way and you're getting the memories—"

"From the other throne," I finished, the idea catching like fire in my mind. If we could find it, if we could use it to replace the Skewed Throne, if we could use it to defeat the Chorl again. . . . "But where is it? What happened to it once the Seven created it?"

I caught Eryn's gaze, saw her shake her head with regret. "I don't know." I thought about everything I'd experienced while connected to the throne, every memory of the Seven I'd lived through then, or dreamed of since. "It was intended for Venitte," I said urgently. "It was intended to help protect them from the Chorl—from any attacking force—just as the Skewed Throne was intended to help protect Amenkor."

"Then why didn't Venitte use it?" Eryn asked.

I growled in frustration, feeling as if the answer were at the tips of my fingers, that the memories were hovering just out of reach. "I don't know! Everything I remember of the Seven came from before the thrones were created . . . or from what the Seven experienced through the Mistresses of the Skewed Throne after it came to Amenkor."

"Because the Seven sacrificed themselves to create the thrones in the first place," Eryn said, nodding in understanding. "There wouldn't be any memories in the Skewed Throne for the Seven after that. There would only be the memories of the Mistresses who took control of the throne itself."

I felt some of my initial excitement dying down, doused by the realization that what I knew of the Skewed Throne wouldn't help. "So how do we find out what happened to the other throne?"

Eryn sighed. "I don't know. But there must be some record of what happened to it somewhere. Have Avrell and Nathem start looking through the archives. Perhaps they can find some mention of it in there. And you can ask Captain Tristan or Brandan Vard. They're from Venitte. If the second throne was truly intended for Venitte, perhaps they will know what happened to it."

I turned back to the throne, ran my hand across its surface once again. "If the Chorl are returning to Amenkor," I said, and let the thought trail off. The Skewed Throne was the only reason we'd survived the first attack. If we could replace it, before the Chorl attacked again . . .

North. To Amenkor.

I shrugged the ominous words aside, stepped back from the cracked throne. I hesitated at the top of the dais, then turned my back on the hollow emptiness of the room, and moved down the dais, Eryn falling into step behind me.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"To see Brandan Vard," I said. "I want to know what he knows about the thrones."

"And that should take care of the last of the petitions from Venitte's merchants' guild," Captain Tristan said. He took the sheaf of papers Avrell held out to him, checked the last few pages to verify that all of the marks and sigils were in place, and then tucked them into a large satchel. "I'm glad

to see that the guild here in Amenkor is recuperating. Four new apprentices have been raised to merchants in the last few days, so I've heard."

I didn't like Tristan's tone, caught Avrell's hooded glance as he made his way back to his seat in the small audience chamber, then looked to Brandan. But the Venittian Servant's gaze was locked onto me, waiting for my answer, so I turned back to Tristan. "Alendor and his consortium were rather devastating to the merchants' guild here."

Tristan smiled, his lips thin. "Yes, so I hear from Regin. He's somewhat defensive about the matter, although I gather that you played a role in . . . eliminating the consortium."

I frowned as his eyes narrowed, felt a subtle shift on the river as his attention focused on me. "Yes. I killed Alendor when it was discovered he was stealing Amenkor's food and selling it to the Chorl."

"You've killed many people, so I've heard."

I bristled, felt myself shift in my chair into a more defensive position.

"Yes."

Tristan's eyebrows rose. "I'm surprised you admit that so freely."

"I grew up in the slums of Amenkor," I said. "I killed to survive . . . and then to escape."

Brandan grunted, but Tristan didn't take his eyes off of me. "That explains . . . much." He reached to fill a glass from a decanter of wine. "Regin and Borund wouldn't say much about your past when I asked. Instead, they chose to defend your reign as Mistress. But the Lords and Ladies of Venitte, including Lord March, will be interested once they learn that there is a new Mistress in Amenkor—in you, in Amenkor's stability." He sipped from his glass and settled back. "They say in the streets that you are a Seeker."

Behind, I felt Avrell stiffen in outrage, but I leaned forward, met Tristan's gaze squarely. "I was trained by a Seeker on the Dredge. He taught me what I needed to know to survive. He taught me enough that I used it to escape to the upper city, to the wharf, where I became Borund's bodyguard. But I am not a Seeker."

Tristan said nothing, met my gaze without flinching. His brow creased as he considered what I had said, as he judged it, and in that moment I realized that he already knew everything I'd told him, that he already knew all about my past. He'd learned as much as he could in the past day, from Regin, from Borund, and from the people on the streets. And those people knew everything. I'd kept nothing from them.

Which meant he knew about the attack on the city as well, and the past winter. "What about Venitte?" I asked, letting my irritation at being tested tinge my voice.

"What do you mean?"

"You know about the Chorl, have known for at least a month, since your ship left port to come here three weeks ago. What has Venitte done to prepare for the Chorl?"

Tristan hesitated, until Brandan cast him a sharp look. Setting his wine to one side, he rested his elbows on the edge of the table between us, fingers clasped beneath his chin. "Since the first ships disappeared, and we began to suspect that their losses were from something other than bad weather or pirates, we've set up patrols at the mouths of the two channels leading in to Venitte. We've also established outposts along the coast and farther inland to the north, since none of the trading ships to the south of Venitte have vanished. But at the time that the Reliant left the port, the Chorl had made no attempt to attack Venitte directly."

"They were focused on Amenkor," Avrell said.

"Apparently."

"And what about the throne?" I asked, slipping deeper beneath the river so I could judge Tristan's reaction.

He frowned, honestly confused. "What throne?"

My gaze shifted toward Brandan, who'd tensed. He was no longer watching me. His gaze had fallen to his hands, his face blank. "At the time that the

thrones were created, there were two—one for Amenkor . . . and one for Venitte. They were created to protect the coast from attack, created specifically to defend against the Chorl. What happened to Venitte's throne?" Tristan snorted. "The throne of Venitte—the Stone Throne I believe it was called—was lost nearly fifteen hundred years ago. We've never used it. We've never needed it."

I turned my attention fully on Brandan Vard. "Is that true? Do the Servants in Venitte not use the throne?"

The Venittian Servant took a moment to gather himself, then said, eyes on me, "The Stone Throne vanished within ten years of its creation. The Servants in Venitte have never used it in their training. No one knows where it is, although many have searched for it over the years."

I didn't answer, my frown deepening. Because Brandan was telling the truth . . . but not the complete truth. He knew something more about the throne, I just couldn't figure out what.

"What about the Chorl Servants?" I asked. "How do you expect to defend against them?"

I'd asked Brandan, but it was Tristan who answered. "I don't know yet. Lord March and the rest of the Council doesn't know about the Servants as far as I know. We haven't encountered them. But if what you say is true—and after seeing the city, after hearing what the people of Amenkor suffered during the attack, I have no reason to disbelieve you—then we'll have to plan a defense against them."

"We have our own Servants," Brandan interjected. "We've been trained to fight as part of the military's Protectorate."

I almost snorted, but caught myself. "Amenkor had Servants as well. We barely survived. The Chorl Servants have changed since the attack fifteen hundred years ago. They've learned to combine their powers, to such an extent that, in order to stop them, I had to destroy the Skewed Throne itself. Are the Servants in Venitte ready for that?"

Brandan's eyes flashed at the tone of my voice. "How dare you—" he spat, leaning forward, but Tristan placed a warning hand on his arm to cut him off. He turned on the captain, but Tristan glanced down toward the gold medallion that rested on Brandan's chest, and after a tense moment Brandan settled back into his seat.

"The Servants in Venitte will have to be ready," Tristan said, a hard edge to his voice. "Now, Mistress, if you'll excuse us, we have business to attend to with the new guild members."

"Of course," Avrell said, rising as both Tristan and Brandan stood. They nodded as they left, and Avrell closed the door to the audience chamber behind them, turning immediately to me.

"Brandan knows more about the throne than he's letting on," I said immediately.

Avrell nodded. "I agree. And Tristan is more than a simple captain from the merchants' guild. He must have a connection to one of the Lords or Ladies of the Council. We'll have to be careful around both of them."

I stood, moving toward the door. "I need to know more about the creation of the thrones, about what happened to the Stone Throne and the Skewed Throne after they were created. With the Skewed Throne dead, the Stone Throne may be the only way to stop the Chorl when they next attack."

As Avrell opened the door and preceded me into the hallway, my escort of guardsmen waiting outside, he said, "I'll see what I can find in the archives. And I'll have Catrell keep a discreet eye on both Tristan and Brandan."

When Marielle first entered Ottul's room, a box of random objects in her arms, she found the Chorl Servant kneeling on a folded blanket in the middle of the room, body hunched down over her knees, hands cupped over her head. She rocked back and forth in the tucked position, a low, murmured chant barely breaking the silence of the room.

Inside the White Fire at Marielle's core, I watched through Marielle's eyes as she paused at the threshold, felt the warding being reset behind her.

Does she do this often? I asked through the Fire.

Marielle nodded, frowning. Almost always. And always facing the same direction: west.

What is she doing?

Marielle shrugged. I don't know. And I haven't worked with her long enough to find out.

I grunted.

Ottul suddenly stilled, her chanting cut off sharply. In a strangely fluid motion, her back curving upward, she lifted herself, sitting back onto her knees as she turned toward the doorway with narrowed eyes.

Her expression was fixed in anger, but tears streaked down her face.

When she saw Marielle, however, her anger faltered.

"Hello, Ottul." Marielle moved toward the table in the middle of the room, set the box down and began removing objects from it—a wooden bowl, a goblet, a scarf.

Ottul reached forward instantly for the scarf, but Marielle's hand closed over hers before she had a chance to draw away.

Both froze, Marielle catching Ottul's confused gaze. "What do you say?" she asked.

Ottul's brow wrinkled in angry annoyance, but then she sighed. In a tight growl, thick with accent, she said, "Hello, Mar-ell." Then, when Marielle didn't let go of her hand: "Pease?"

The plaintiveness of the tone twisted in my gut, touched something inside Marielle as well, for she loosened her grip on Ottul's hand, let her pick up the blue-green scarf. The material was fine, from the Kandish Empire across the mountains, and Ottul ran the scarf across her hands, her arms. She wore Amenkor clothing now, Marielle having persuaded her to give up the filthy green dress we'd found her unconscious in beneath the pile of collapsed stone. But her dress was coarse, not as fine as the scarf, and tan in color, accentuating her blue-tinged skin. The neckline was low enough that the edge of a tattoo could be seen just beneath her collarbone. That had been a surprise. I hadn't realized the Chorl women had tattoos, although I vaguely remembered seeing one on the Ochean. The men wore their tattoos openly, on the arms and face. The women seemed to prefer their tattoos hidden.

When Ottul drew the cloth up to her face, rubbed it against her cheek, Marielle reached out, slowly, and touched the four gold rings in Ottul's ears. Ottul jerked back, breath hissing out harshly through her teeth, a barrier slamming up sharply between her and Marielle on the river—
But when Marielle didn't react, she halted.

"What are they?" Marielle asked. "What do they stand for?"

Ottul frowned. The shield around her wavered, then dropped.

She stepped forward, one hand lifting to Marielle's ear. "You . . . no."

Marielle smiled. "No, I don't have any."

Ottul's frown deepened. Then she touched the first ring in her left ear.

"Ona," she said, and began to draw the river close about her, not as a shield, and not in an attack. Instead, she seemed to be playing with the river at random, swirling its eddies, pushing it this way and that, creating whirls, tightening it and releasing it.

Manipulating it.

She pointed back to that first gold ring and said again, "Ona."

The first ring indicates she can use the river—the Sight, I said through the Fire. That she's a Servant.

Marielle slid into the river deeper, began to manipulate it, and at the same time said, "Ona."

Ottul smiled, but tightly. A layer of sadness tainted the river, a whiff of emotion, strong and sweet and potent, like an onion. "Ona." Her fingers touched the second ring. "Ket."

On the river, Ottul pulled the currents of the river into a shield, the threads woven tightly.

Marielle did the same. "Ket."

Ottul nodded, touched the third ring. "Tora."

Releasing the shield, she drew a small bundle of the river into an outstretched hand, into a configuration the Servants in the palace had never seen before.

But I had.

I sucked in a sharp breath a moment before Ottul ignited the threads. Fire burst forth in her hand, a few inches above her palm, contained there, held there—

But not controlled. Not like the fire that had snaked its way across the deck of The Maiden and killed so many of its crew. This was simple fire. Ottul could call it, could perhaps hurl it toward targets so that it retained its integrity, but she couldn't force it to obey her will. I could feel the strain of simply holding it in her hand already; sweat beaded her forehead, and her concentration remained on her hands, on the flames.

I can't make fire, Marielle said internally, a twinge of worry snaking through her.

You could, I answered, if I showed you how, if we practiced. But for now— I slid through the Fire and seized control of the river through Marielle. Sensing my intent, she held out her hand, palm upward.

I drew the river close, spun the threads the same way Ottul had done, as I'd done through Cerrin's memories, only tighter, more controlled, and then I ignited them.

Marielle flinched when the fire sparked and bloomed in her hand. In a shaky voice, she said, "Tora."

I let the fire go, Ottul doing the same.

"And the last ring?" Marielle asked.

But Ottul turned away, moved toward the windows.

"What comes next, Ottul?" Marielle said. "Ona, ket, tora . . . ?"

Without turning back, Ottul said, "Qal." She hesitated, then said bitterly, "Ona, ket, tora, gal, etai, kona, u mer."

The words were angry, laced with hatred, with an undertone of fear and want I didn't understand. The scent of onion strengthened, until Ottul's shoulders slumped, the scarf still clutched in one hand forgotten.

Enough for now, I said to Marielle. Work with her on other things. But keep working with her. I need to know if she can help with Erick.

Marielle grimaced at Erick's name, then nodded, shifting forward to the box again, letting Ottul remain at the window.

I withdrew from the Fire, Reached back through the palace to the outer chamber of my rooms, slid into my own body with a heavy sigh. Exhaustion washed through me, arms tingling with sensation. I leaned my head against the back of the chair, eyes closed, waiting for the trembling to set in—

And noticed another presence in the room aside from the Servant set to watch over me while I Reached.

I lifted my head with effort, my strength drained, opened my eyes. "What is it, Keven?"

Face set in a serious expression, he said, "We have a problem."

"This is how we found them," Catrell said, his voice tight.

I stood in the doorway of the cell, one hand against the gritty granite of the wall to one side, still weak from the Reaching. The stench of death hung in the air, blood and piss and shit mixed with dampness and decay.

The Dredge. A rankness so familiar it barely turned my stomach.

But this wasn't the Dredge. This was a cell in the depths of the palace, where the thirteen Chorl warriors captured alive during the Chorl retreat had been kept.

Now, those thirteen Chorl lay slumped against the walls of the cell.

I stepped into the room, knelt down beside the nearest body.

The man's head rested against his chest at an awkward angle. I lifted it, felt the awful fluidity of the neck, the bones snapped, and set it back down gently. I glanced over the rest of the bodies, noted they still wore their Chorl clothing, the garish colors now blackened and stained with weeks of wear

and use. They'd refused to accept the clothes we'd offered them.

Catrell moved into the room behind me, crossed to another body, the Chorl's shirt black with blood.

"Most of them have broken necks," Catrell said from where he'd knelt. "Four of them killed themselves with this." He pointed to a thin spine jutting out of the man's chest over his heart, no longer than a knife, with no handle. "It's some kind of shell or bone. And there are inscriptions etched into it."

"Where did they get it?"

Catrell shrugged. "I don't know. One of them must have had it on him and we didn't find it when we searched them, when we took their armor, their weapons. Perhaps it was in a shoe, the lining of their clothing. Something."

"Are you certain it didn't come from one of the guards?"

Catrell stilled, hesitated, as if the thought hadn't crossed his mind.

I stepped around the body, came to within a few inches of Catrell's face. "Are you certain this was suicide, and not some guardsman taking out his anger over the attack on the city?"

He nodded. "Yes, it was suicide. We wouldn't have snapped their necks, wouldn't have killed them so cleanly. They would have been bloody and bruised and beaten. And none of us would have used a shell's spine as a weapon."

I frowned, glanced back at the bodies. Because he was right. The deaths were too clean to be revenge. And I'd never seen a knife like the one used to kill the last four Chorl.

But I didn't understand it. Why would they kill themselves? They'd remained in the cells for over a month. Why now?

Catrell hesitated—I could taste it—then asked, "What should we do?"

I sighed. "Burn them. Like the others. Like all of the dead from the attack."

As Catrell motioned the waiting guardsmen into the room and issued commands, I thought of Ottul.

I wasn't certain how she'd react, but I'd have to tell her. She was our only connection to the Chorl now.

"The left flank is beginning to fail!" Liviann screamed over the roar of a thousand clashing swords and bellowing men.

I spun my horse from the back of the melee, my armor spattered with blood and gore, my sword held high. Liviann stood on top of a low rise, overseeing the battle on the outskirts of the town of Rymerun. She was surrounded by an escort of guardsmen, all watching the field intently, runners darting back and forth, flags being raised and lowered behind them. The huge banners of Venitte snapped in the wind coming from the west.

"The left flank!" she screamed again, her voice amplified by the river so it could be heard, and then she pointed.

I turned, felt the line behind me surge forward, then back, felt the entire battle like a living thing, pulsing in my blood—

And then I saw the breach, saw the line of Venittian guards failing, struggling to hold.

But they couldn't. Because the Chorl were attacking with the help of their Servants. Servants who weren't supposed to be here.

I growled, kned the horse sharply, felt the animal's muscles tense and then surge forward and suddenly the wind was in my face, my eyes tearing, and I could feel the pound of the horse's hooves vibrating up into my torso, could feel the spike of adrenaline scorch through my chest.

"Cerrin! Wait!" Liviann yelled, true panic in her voice. "Gods curse you, wait!"

I ignored her, thrust her words away with a disdainful shrug. I could see the shifting of the battle ahead, could feel the energy of the Threads wrapping around me as I charged, shivered beneath the White Fire as it scorched along my arms, could taste the Lifeblood on my tongue. I drew the Sight around me, pulled the Threads in tight, felt the Fire building inside me—

And then I plowed into the faltering line with a hoarse, guttural, elemental roar, sword held high as I forced a path through the Venittian lines with the Threads, then descending onto the Chorl when I broke through to their forces.

My first swing lopped the Chorl warrior's arm off at the elbow. He screamed, a harsh, ululating cry, and then he was trampled beneath my horse's hooves, the animal stamping down hard, snorting, eyes wild with the scent of blood. I swung again and again, felt the blade sink into flesh, blood arcing up and out from the edge of the blade with each swing, and with each connection of steel to flesh I grunted, lips drawn back from gritted teeth, putting all the pain, all the grief, into each thrust. Steel clashed, men bellowed.

Then I felt the Threads shift, felt the Sight gather and release.

Men screamed, fire flared, heat shimmered on the Threads and dissipated, and I spun left. Hate surged inside me, muting everything else.

I wanted the Servants. I wanted their blood.

In the moment of distraction, one of the Chorl cut down my horse.

The animal shrieked, the sound piercing the thundering roar of the battle, and suddenly I was falling sideways. I spat a curse, felt the beast slam into the mass of men on my right, felt them stagger and give way, and then I was kicking free of the stirrups, still falling.

We slammed into the ground, the impact jarring through my bones like a hammer, rattling in my teeth, two Chorl crushed beneath the writhing horse's side, my leg free. . . .

But not completely.

Pain shattered upward as it was caught beneath the horse and the ground, white hot and seething. I roared, leaned up onto my elbow and pushed hard against the horse as it shrieked again, struggling, its weight rocking away. I dragged myself out from beneath its death throes through squelching mud, the ground already soaked with blood, my leg a dead weight. I realized I was sobbing, teeth gritted against the pain, the battle still roaring around me.

A Chorl warrior staggered out of the general fray, blood streaming from a shoulder wound. He saw me and grinned wickedly.

He managed one step forward before I released the fire.

He burst into flame, stumbled backward, arms flailing, body twisting until he fell over the dead horse's body and lay still.

Using the sword for support, point dug into the ground, I pulled myself to my feet, leg dragging behind.

More fire gathered through the Threads, this time from three different directions.

And they were all targeted in my vicinity.

I pulled up a shield at the last moment, gasped as the three fires hit, clutched tight to the sword as fire boiled around me, heat seeping through the shield, fresh sweat drenching me beneath my armor. I could feel the Servants shifting position, could feel them approaching as they narrowed their focus, searching for me.

They only had an approximate location, but it wouldn't take them long to find me.

Gripping the hilt of the sword tight, I drew my weight fully onto my good leg, then jerked the sword free of the earth and thrust it into the ground a step away, hopping forward. My leg twisted at the movement, fresh pain shooting up my body, but I choked the pain down, shifted, lurched forward again.

Another pulse and my shield hissed, a glancing blow, but the second shot was dead on, fire roaring up and over my head. Men in the battle around me bellowed as they were caught in the blaze.

Then the fire cleared, the smoke blown away by the wind, and I found myself facing one of the Chorl Servants.

I held her black eyes, saw her own protective shield drawn tight around her, so flimsy, so easy to circumvent with one of the other four Elements. Because these women were not Adepts at all, seemed only to be able to control the Sight, some of the Threads, but nothing more.

The Chorl Servant smiled, and I spat on the ground before her in contempt.

Her smile turned to rage. She raised one hand, the Sight gathering into a tight knot before it, and then her gaze shifted and her smile returned.

Four other Servants stepped clear of the battle still raging on all sides, two

with seven gold earrings in each ear, the others with no fewer than four.

I straightened. I'd assumed there were three of them. Three, I could handle, even with shields to protect them, even if they all wore seven rings.

But five . . . ?

I began pulling Threads to me, began strengthening my shield. My leg throbbed like a bitch, and I tasted death. Like blood and smoke mixed together on my lips.

Rymerun suddenly felt like a trap. The Servants had lured us here, the chance to take back the town too good for us to pass up, especially with the knowledge that there weren't any Servants here to protect the Chorl warriors. But that wasn't true. They'd remained out of the battle, hidden, until they were ready to lure me away from my position, away from Liviann. They'd changed their strategy; they were hunting us now, instead of the other way around.

All five raised their hands and I felt the gathering force. Grimly, I pulled my shield tight, began weaving Threads to circumvent some of their own shields. My shield wouldn't hold for long against the concerted effort of all five, but I could take a few of them with me.

They released and I cried out, stumbling down to my knee, weight full upon the sword. I felt my shield beginning to crumble, clenched my jaw, thought of Olivia, of Jaer and Pallin, and sent a sheet of fire out along the Threads. The force raging against my shield faltered as two of the Servants screamed and their attacks cut off as they were incinerated, but the damage had been done. I couldn't sustain my shield, felt it crumbling around me, felt the heat of the remaining three Servants creeping in, edging closer, closer.

I bowed down over the sword planted in the ground, the thought of death . . . calming. As the Servants' fires began to lick my skin, I smiled.

And then suddenly the fire ended, the focus of the Servants shifting elsewhere. With barked commands, fire arched out from my position, angled toward the hill.

Toward Liviann.

I surged up onto my leg, saw Liviann leading a charge of reinforcements down the hill. She deflected one of the fireballs, threw a jagged lance of lightning that sizzled into one of the Servants, body juddering as it absorbed the current—

And then the remaining two Servants bolted, vanishing into the ranks of the Chorl like smoke, lost among the seething men.

The reinforcements hit the line of Chorl like a ram, thrusting them back, away from my position. Venittian men streamed around me, on foot and on horseback, and then Liviann stood before me, enraged.

"You fool!" she spat. "You bloody fool! What's wrong with you? What in hells did you think you were doing? You were almost killed. We can't afford to lose any of the Seven. Not now."

"It was a trap," I said, and then the weakness brought on by the pain, by the effort to defend myself from the Servants, hit hard and I collapsed.

Liviann caught me, spat a curse. "We should never have come here. We should have remained back in Venitte, defending its walls."

Rage filled me. "No!"

Liviann snorted, lowered me to the ground gently, eyes already scanning the leg. I could feel her reaching for the Rose, could feel its warmth enfold her, begin to enfold me as she directed its power.

"No!" I repeated, and grabbed her upper arm, pulled her in tight, until I was certain I had her attention. "We had to leave Venitte, Liviann. We can't cower behind its walls and expect the Chorl to just leave. We have to stop defending and attack. If we don't, they'll never leave."

Liviann met my intensity with a doubtful frown. "You may be right, Cerrin," she said, voice hard. "But no one on the Frigeon coast will survive without the help of the Seven. You're too reckless. Olivia and your daughters are dead. You can't throw your life away over them. Not when we need you."

Then she turned her attention back to my leg and reached forward with the Rose

and its warmth embraced me—

I woke in my chambers in the palace. My leg throbbed, as if it had been crushed beneath the weight of a horse. I shuddered at the memory, at the horror of the carnage on the battlefield. I stared up at the cloth draped from the tops of the four posts of my bed, hanging down in supple folds, and let the raw emotions wash away from me.

As they did so, Cerrin's words sank in.

"We can't stay in Amenkor," I said to the empty room, my voice quiet. "We have to attack."

Chapter 4

"I AGREE. WE'LL HAVE TO take the battle to the Chorl eventually. Otherwise, we're simply a target to them. A vulnerable target." Captain Catrell gazed down the table toward me. Between us, Avrell, Eryn, Westen, and Darryn shifted in their seats. Keven stood behind me. "I've been meaning to approach you about this," Catrell continued, "but we've been so focused on repairing the wharfs and the gates that there hasn't been much time, or manpower, for anything significant. We're barely manning the walls as it is."

"So you're saying we don't have enough guardsmen?" I asked.

Catrell pressed his lips tight, one hand on the table before him. His thumb circled the tip of his middle finger as he thought. "Not at the moment. Not for an all-out assault on the Chorl's position."

"Then what?" Avrell asked. "We just sit here and wait for them to attack again? We need to cut them off, establish a boundary, something."

Catrell nodded. "But we can't do that right now. Darryn and I are training men as fast as we can. Once the current group is finished, we'll have doubled our numbers. And we've just started a new group of militia in training. We should have a formidable force in another month, an army that I wouldn't feel guilty about sending into battle against the Chorl." He caught Avrell's eye, then mine, face stern. "Throwing these men against the Chorl right now would only get them killed. It would accomplish nothing."

Silence descended, Catrell and I squaring off. I wanted to meet the Chorl head on. I was tired of sitting in the dark, waiting for something to happen. I wanted to take the offensive. I felt frustrated, powerless—unable to help Erick, unable to have ships repaired instantly, or walls and gates built. The fact that I trusted Catrell, knew that he was right, didn't help.

"However," Darryn said.

The word hung in the air, caught everyone's attention.

"What?" I asked.

"We don't have enough men to send out an army . . . but we could spare enough for a scouting party. If we do intend to meet the Chorl somewhere along the way, to make a stand, then we need to know where they are. We need information. Have they taken Temall yet? Where are their forces? Where is their supply train? How do they intend to approach us—by land or sea?"

Catrell was already nodding.

"We could send a ship southward," Westen said. "Land a party near Temall, see what the Chorl are up to. We know nothing about their forces—how many men, how many ships they have."

How many Servants, I thought grimly.

"Do it," I said. "Get a group together, as many as you can spare but not so large that the party will be easy to discover." Catrell and Darryn nodded. I could see Catrell already planning, his face set, brow slightly creased. "How long will it take?"

Catrell shrugged. "The men can be equipped and ready to go within a day. We can outfit one of the recovered Chorl ships in about the same time once the next one is ready to sail, probably another few days. But it will take about five days to reach Temall once they sail."

"Keven," I said, heard him step forward, "gather an escort. Coordinate it with Catrell and Darryn."

"What for?"

"Because, when the ship leaves for Temall, I want to be on it."

"Absolutely not!" Avrell barked, standing abruptly. Until now, he and Eryn had remained quiet. But now his face was suffused with a stubborn glare.

The others at the table shifted.

"What do you mean?"

Avrell must have heard the dangerous tone in my voice, but he ignored it.

"You can't go on this ship. The thought is ludicrous! Not so recently after an attack on the city. Not when the people of Amenkor are drawing all of their strength, all of their perseverance, from you. In their minds, you are the only reason we survived this past winter. You are the reason we survived the attack by the Chorl. If you leave now, with the city barely in the first stages of recovery, with the throne cracked and useless, it will strike everyone in Amenkor as abandonment, no matter what you tell them. No." He shook his head forcefully. "You can't leave. Not now, and especially not for something as simple as a scouting party."

I bristled, ready to argue with him, but glanced around at the other faces and realized that everyone at the table agreed with him.

But the need to do something, anything, burned in my arms and legs.

"Varis," Eryn said, and leaned forward, reached out to grip my forearm.

"Avrell's correct. Even without the throne, you are Amenkor. You became Amenkor this past winter, in the minds of its people. And you can still keep track of the scouting party using the Fire if Catrell is there."

I frowned, my gaze skimming over all of them one last time, looking for support, for an ally.

I didn't find one.

Even without the throne, I was trapped in the city.

"Fine," I said, the word curt, and still dangerous.

Keven sidled back into position behind me. An awkward silence followed, Darryn fidgeting restlessly.

"Mistress," Westen said, leaning forward. "Regarding the ship . . ."

I shot him a baleful look. "What?"

Westen's lips twitched with a smile; he was impervious to all of my dagger-sharp looks, he'd seen them all during our practice sessions. "I believe that Catrell should stay here. He's needed to train the guardsmen. However, I can be spared."

I stared at Westen a long moment. Seekers would make much better scouts than guardsmen, and could be used for other purposes once they were there.

"Yes," I said, and something in the tone of my voice must have changed because everyone suddenly relaxed, tension bleeding out of the room. "How many Seekers can we spare?"

"Enough."

I nodded. "Catrell, work with Westen. Let me know as soon as the ship is ready to sail."

"So you want us—all four of us—to help you build a wall around the entire city, is that it?"

I felt my jaw clench at the thick derision in Illum Forestead's voice, but forced the anger down. I remembered him from the ceremony on the wharf, when he'd been raised to full Master, remembered Borund holding out the bright yellow jacket with dark red embroidery that he now wore.

But I didn't remember this blatant arrogance.

Settling back into my seat in the audience chamber, I suddenly wished I'd called all four of the new merchants into attendance in the throne room. Even cracked, the throne would have lent me more weight than simply having Avrell and Keven at my side. I could feel Avrell's anger at Illum's temerity, a throbbing pulse of darkness on the river. "That's exactly what I want."

Illum snorted. "And what do we get out of it?"

Jack Trevain almost gasped, his look of horror only slightly more open than Walter Davvens' and William's.

"Protection," I said, before anyone else could respond. "Your assets would be protected from any further attacks if we had a wall enclosing the city. The

warehouses are already protected from a sea approach; however, they are outside of the current walls. They're vulnerable to a land attack." Illum frowned. "I can protect my resources myself, if necessary. What else can you give me?"

"Oh, stuff it, Illum," Walter suddenly spat. "In case you've forgotten, this is the Mistress of Amenkor! She drove the Chorl out of Amenkor. If not for her, you wouldn't even have any resources to protect. You wouldn't even be a merchant!"

"Most likely," Avrell added tightly, "you'd be dead."

Utter silence. But I could see that the thought wouldn't hold Illum for long. I could feel it.

"If you help fund the building of a wall—one that will enclose the eastern portions of the city as well as the Dredge—I will give you a portion of the land inside that wall."

All four of the merchants' interest piqued.

Avrell stepped forward and laid a sheaf of papers out onto the table of the audience chamber. "Our engineers have studied the surrounding land and have decided that the best place to build the wall is here, with three gates leading out of the city—one for the main road to the east obviously, and two others, here and here. The wall would connect to the existing walls of the palace here, above the southern cliff face and extend around to the wall along the southern jut of land leading out to the watchtower on the harbor."

"What about the River?" Jack Trevain said. He usually kept silent, letting the others speak for him, but once the plans had been produced, he'd leaned forward intently, brow creased in thought.

"Aside from the gates themselves, the River would be the most vulnerable part of the wall. We intend to build the wall over the River, with a metal gate that could be lowered into the River's bed in the event of an attack."

Jack nodded.

"What holdings would we get inside the wall?" Illum demanded.

Walter shot him a disgusted glance.

Avrell shoved the map of the wall's plans to one side, producing another map of the city as it stood after the attack. "A significant portion of the lower city was destroyed during the attack. We've divided up the worst sections into four parcels, all of which have a few buildings that remain intact."

All four merchants, including William, leaned forward over the new map, mumbling under their breath as they traced the allotments out. Avrell stepped back, arms crossed on his chest. Jack and Walter seemed impressed, their first low mutters escalating into excited whispers. William had already seen the map, had helped Avrell and me draw it up.

But Illum stood back after a long moment and said, "There's nothing in the middle ward here. It's all in the lower city."

Everyone in the room stilled. Jack and Walter kept their eyes on the table.

Keven took a single, meaningful step forward.

I stood, let my irritation furrow my brow as my eyes narrowed. "Are you saying the terms are not acceptable?"

Illum hesitated, fear flashing briefly in his eyes. He brushed at his straw-colored hair, glanced once toward the other merchants, then straightened. His eyes hardened. "I'm saying that the addition of a building in the middle ward—a building to house our new operations—would make the terms acceptable."

No one moved. I could feel Avrell willing me to say no, could feel Keven's disapproval like a hand pressing into my back.

But I thought of what Catrell had said, that the army wasn't large enough for us to meet the Chorl outside the city and expect a good outcome, that it wouldn't be large enough for such an attack within the next few months. We needed this wall.

And according to William, I needed the resources of all four of the new merchants' in order to build it. If I couldn't get Illum to agree . . .

I let the tension in the room hold for a moment longer, then said in a

dangerously flat voice, "Very well. Avrell will draw up the agreements and send them to the guild."

Illum nodded, a self-satisfied smirk flickering across his face as he turned toward the door. I felt the urge to draw my dagger, restrained myself with effort as Illum, Jack, and Walter filed out the door.

William lingered.

"You shouldn't have given in," Avrell said, moving to reassemble the pages scattered on the table.

"I had no choice," I said shortly.

"Next time, he'll want more."

"Next time," I growled, "I need to have more options."

Avrell didn't say anything, but he paused at the door. "I'll have Nathem start the work on the agreements right away."

When he left, I sank back down into my chair with a heavy sigh.

Silence reigned for a long moment, but then William stood. "Illum is an arrogant bastard."

I gave a short laugh, then caught William's gaze. "He reminds me of Bloodmark. Except he doesn't carry a knife."

William's expression sobered. Not many knew of Bloodmark, the first person I'd killed in the slums because I'd wanted him dead. Because he'd killed the white-dusty man and his wife, to hurt me. He hadn't been one of Erick's marks. But he'd deserved to die.

William looked up. "How is Erick?"

I shook my head. "The same."

When William didn't respond, I stood. I could feel William's sympathy and grief, knew he could do nothing to soothe the same ache I felt inside myself.

"In fact, I need to go see him now. Isaiah has me help feed him. I use the White Fire to get him to eat, since he can't feed himself. And for a little while, I take away his pain."

As I moved toward the door, William said, "I'll come with you."

"No!"

Ottul stamped her foot where she stood looking out over the eastern portions of Amenkor, her arms folded obstinately across her chest, her back rigid, her face contorted into a fierce scowl.

I almost growled in frustration, shot a glance toward Marielle, who stood behind me near the doorway to Ottul's room.

Quietly, Marielle said, "It started a few days ago. She's refused to work with me since. All she says is 'No!' and then stands there rigidly, like now, or falls into that hunched over position, moaning and chanting. Praying. I don't know what to do."

I frowned, turned back to Ottul.

Four days ago, I'd informed her of the captured Chorl warriors' deaths. It had taken a while to get her to understand, but when I placed the spine the last few warriors had used to kill themselves onto the table, she'd gasped and reached out toward it, almost involuntarily—

Then halted. Withdrawing her hand, she'd stepped away, turned her back on the table, on me. She'd muttered a single word, "Antreul," and then fallen silent, staring out over the city, trembling.

On the river, her grief had been thick, but not enough to overwhelm her fear.

Even as I tried to sort out the emotions that lay beneath the fear, she'd stepped back from the window, had curled up into the same kneeling position I'd seen before, her face already wet with tears, and started to pray. Her voice choked with phlegm, face twisted into a tortured look—like grief but not completely grief—she'd covered her head with her arms and begun to rock.

It was a reaction I'd expected . . . and yet it wasn't. I didn't understand the emotions that lay beneath the grief. I didn't understand the guilt, the self-loathing.

Antreul.

Now, I bit back the bitter, commanding words that leaped to my mouth, forced myself to relax, to think. She no longer cooperated with Marielle, and I

needed her to cooperate. Erick needed her to cooperate. I needed to trust her enough to let her look at Erick, to see if she could help with the spell placed on him.

But at the moment, I wanted to throttle her. I suddenly wondered if Erick had ever felt this way during the training sessions with me in the slums.

The thought brought a faint grin to my lips.

A gust of wind blew through the open window and Ottul closed her eyes, leaned in toward it, her long black hair fanning out behind her. She sucked in a deep breath and held it, savoring the fresh air.

I turned suddenly, moved toward the door behind Marielle, sensing by the prickling in my neck that Ottul was watching me from behind. I opened the door to the hall and spoke a few moments with Keven and the Servant Trielle, who was guarding the wardings. Keven frowned in disapproval, but nodded. Two guardsmen were sent, and all of those that remained tensed, glances passing between them.

I turned back to the room, to Marielle.

Ottul watched with blatant distrust from the window. But the distrust was tinged with curiosity.

"Do you know what's wrong with her?" Marielle whispered.

I shook my head. "No."

Without closing the door, I moved back into the room, halting two steps before Ottul. She didn't draw back. But her eyes narrowed.

"Then what?" Marielle asked, frustration tainting her voice. "What are you doing?"

"We," I said, "are going to go on a little . . . excursion."

Ottul scowled as she tried to figure out the words.

I smiled, even though my shoulders had tightened. Behind, I heard the arrival of the additional guardsmen Keven had sent for, felt Trielle unravel the warding to let them into the room.

Ottul's eyes widened, her arms coming down into a defensive posture, the river roiling as she prepared to fight. She hissed, the sound harsh with warning, like a gutterscum cat cornered at the end of an alley.

I didn't react, didn't prepare a shield or shift my stance.

After a moment, the guardsmen staying near the door, Ottul faltered.

"Follow me," I said, turning my back to her as I moved to the door. At its entrance, I glanced back, motioned her forward. "Come here."

She knew those words. Uncertain, she straightened from her defensive stance and shifted forward, her gaze flickering between the guardsmen to either side, to Marielle in mute question, then back to the guardsmen. She halted when one of them coughed, glared at him, then continued until she stood at Marielle's side.

The guardsmen closed in around us, Trielle still outside, ready to pull the warding back into place if Ottul showed any sign of attacking. Another Servant—Heddan, a young girl from the north, her straw-colored hair vibrant compared to Trielle's darker tangles—had joined her. I gave them both a nod, saw Heddan bite her lip. Trielle was older, close to my age, her face grim, her eyes locked on Ottul's every move. They'd all heard how hard it had been to capture and hold Ottul initially.

Keven waited in the hall. "Are you certain this is a good idea?" he asked as we began moving down the hall, guardsmen on all sides, the two Servants behind. Ottul kept close to Marielle. She tried to see everything at once, her neck craning to peer through the guardsmen ahead and to the sides while at the same time trying to remain out of sight.

"I have no idea," I said. "But she's no longer cooperating, and I need to know what's happened to Erick. We've run out of things to do while she's trapped in that room."

"I suppose."

I shot Keven a dark look. "We're taking her to the gardens where the Servants are training. If she can escape from all of us there . . ." I let the thought trail off, heard Keven grunt in agreement.

When we reached the gardens, Eryn had the Servants paired off and scattered throughout the paths among the newly leafed trees and bushes and the spring flowers. She was moving among them, barking out orders or correcting flaws. She saw us pause at the garden's entrance, but didn't immediately head over. As we waited, Keven motioned to the guardsmen, who spread out along the perimeter of the garden in both directions.

Ottul barely noticed. Her eyes had narrowed as soon as she saw the Servants, her back going rigid. She watched the practice session intently.

Breaking away from the last pair, Eryn came to my side. "Keven sent word that you were coming. I have them practicing shield placement and manipulation, something innocuous, since . . ." Her gaze flicked toward Ottul.

"Good."

"What do you want to do with her?"

I shrugged. "Let her watch. Keeping her in the room isn't working anymore. If we want her to cooperate, we're going to have to let her out sooner or later. Let's sit her down near the pool. Trielle and Heddan can watch her. I want to see what you've come up with regarding the linking of the Servants."

I caught Ottul's attention, led her to a small pool, a curved stone bench at its edge, and forced her to focus on my eyes. "Stay here."

When she gave a grudging nod of understanding, Eryn, Marielle, and I moved aside, leaving Trielle and Heddan behind to watch her.

"We haven't had much success with linking the Servants," Eryn said.

"Basically, we're working off the idea that the link is forged like the strength-draining conduit I and the Ochean used against you while sparring or fighting, except in reverse. So far, I've managed to get a few of the Servants to connect using such conduits, and to transfer their strength back and forth."

"But?" I prompted.

Eryn shook her head. "But even though they're supporting each other, augmenting each other's power, it still isn't increasing their strengths to the level that the Ochean and the Chorl exhibited. I don't think this is what they're doing when they forge a link."

"Show me what you've done."

"Gwenn."

One of the Servants halted her construction of a merged shield with another Servant, letting the currents of the river flow back into their natural paths, and stepped forward.

"Yes, Mistress. Eryn," Gwenn said, and bowed her head, fidgeting nervously. She was young, no more than ten, and practically seething with energy.

"The Mistress wants to see you and Marielle attempt a linking. As you've done during practice."

Gwenn groaned, but Marielle grabbed her by the elbow and stepped to one side, kneeling before her and whispering to her, hands on her shoulders, but not loud enough for me to overhear. Gwenn shot a glance toward me, eyes wide and terrified in her rounded face, then to the ground. Her hands clasped before her, she stared at the ground hard, then closed her eyes and drew in a short breath.

Satisfied, Marielle stood and stepped away, closed her eyes as well.

On the river, the flows between them grew disturbed, as if someone had reached forward and swirled them with their hands. Then I felt tendrils reach out from Gwenn toward Marielle, snaking forward and intertwining until they formed a thin conduit. When the conduit reached Marielle, it attached itself to a place near Marielle's heart, where I could see the White Fire I'd placed inside Marielle before the Chorl attack burning.

Marielle smiled in satisfaction. "Now form a shield, Mistress."

"What for?" I asked, already forming the shield before me. I noted that Eryn had stepped away, had deferred to Marielle now that she and Gwenn were linked.

"So I can show you how it works," Marielle said with a twisted smile.

I waited, shield in place—

And suddenly felt Marielle pushing at the shield from the far side. It wasn't

an attack, wasn't an edged blade or a punch of force, but instead a widespread gentle pressure that steadily increased, to the point where I felt myself unconsciously pushing back in order to keep the shield in place, a wall being held up by another wall.

"This is just me," Marielle said, her voice a little short with effort. "Now we'll add in Gwenn."

Before she'd finished, I felt energy pouring down through the conduit from Gwenn—

And I gasped, staggered as the pressure on my shield doubled, shoving me back.

"Enough," Eryn said.

Gwenn let the conduit go, and Marielle dropped the pressure against my shield. Both had satisfied expressions on their faces, although Gwenn's appeared more exultant than Marielle's. The older Servant reached out and ruffled the hair on Gwenn's head, an unconscious gesture that sent a pang through my heart.

Erick had ruffled my hair the same way on the Dredge.

Behind us, I heard someone snort.

Frowning, I turned and caught Ottul watching, her face twisted into a sneer.

As soon as she caught my gaze, the sneer vanished and she dropped her head, as if she were inspecting the reeds at the edge of the pool, or the little minnows in its depths.

"That felt fairly significant to me," I said, turning back. Gwenn looked crestfallen, her eyes on Ottul. "Why do you think the Chorl are using something different?"

"Because when we try to link more than two people together there isn't a subsequent doubling of the power for each person, as we saw from the Ochean and her links. When four of them were linked together—the Ochean and three of her Servants—the resultant force was around eight times the strength of just one. When we link four people together, we only get about four times the force."

"The difference is geometric, rather than arithmetic," Marielle broke in.

"When we link, we're only adding individual strengths together. When the Chorl link, their strengths are being multiplied together."

It sounded suspiciously mathematical. "So they're using a different kind of link." I tried to think back to the attack on the outer walls, as seen through Eryn's eyes. That was the only time we'd witnessed the Chorl actually linking, so that they could destroy the inner gates. They'd linked to destroy the watchtowers over the bay, but no one had seen that attack, only the consequences. "Do you remember seeing how they linked to destroy the gates?" I asked Eryn.

"No." Her voice was laced with regret. "I was too distracted trying to defend the gates to pay that close attention."

"So was I. They used conduits somehow, though. I remember seeing the conduits form. But it happened too fast for me to see details."

We both looked toward Ottul.

"She knows how to do it," Eryn said, and Ottul turned, as if she sensed that we were talking about her. "That's obvious now."

"Yes. We just have to figure out how to get her to tell us."

"I see you have a Chorl prisoner," someone said as I left the gardens where the Servants continued to train, Ottul still sitting beside the pool, watched by Trielle and Heddan. "Is she one of the Chorl Servants you spoke of?"

I halted, blinked at the darkness of the palace corridor, my eyes still dazzled by the sunlight of the gardens.

Brandan Vard stood at one of the open arched windows that looked out onto the garden a few paces down the corridor, the sigil of Venitte catching the light as he turned toward me. Light brown hair, bleached almost blond by the sun; brown eyes; narrow face with high cheekbones and a thin nose. I hadn't seen him since I'd questioned him and Tristan about the throne, hadn't really looked at him even then, too focused on learning about Venitte, about their preparations for the Chorl. But now . . .

"So, is she?"

I started, frowned at myself, then straightened. "Is she what?"
Brandan smiled, dimples appearing in each cheek. He nodded out the window, leaning back against the sill. "Is she one of the Chorl Servants?"

"Yes."

"And you let her watch your training sessions?"

"Not normally. Today is an exception."

Brandan looked over his shoulder into the garden. "She seems more interested in the fish in the pond than in the training."

I hesitated, then moved up to Brandan's side, felt Keven and my escort of guardsmen shift around me without coming close. Brandan seemed . . . different. Relaxed.

I wondered if it was because Captain Tristan wasn't here watching over him. I suddenly wondered what I could learn from him when he wasn't under Tristan's supervision.

Out in the garden, Gwenn had knelt down beside the pond, was pointing to something in its depths, Ottul leaning forward from the bench, listening to the girl's excited chatter. She couldn't possibly understand Gwenn's explanation, but she seemed to be concentrating more on the words than when Marielle tried to explain things to her in her room.

"Maybe I should have taken her out of her rooms earlier," I said with a frown. Brandan didn't respond, and when I shrugged and turned away from the scene in the gardens, I found him watching me, head tilted slightly. The intensity of his look sent a shiver through my shoulders, down into my gut. A pleasant shiver.

"I thought you would have left for Venitte already," I said, then cursed myself.

His eyebrows rose slightly, but he laughed. "Hardly. Tristan has business to attend to with the merchants' guild, especially now that there are four new merchants. He's kept busy the past few days, arranging shipments, learning what he can of the new Amenkor . . . and the new Mistress."

I frowned. "And what have you done?"

"Everything." He gave me a mischievous grin, then sighed heavily. He shook his head. "Nothing much, actually." I could sense the lie . . . but again it was tinged with truth. And on the river, he appeared both gray and red. "I was sent as a token of sincerity, a representative of Lord March and the power of Venitte, nothing more. Once Tristan delivered the message, my duties were done." A note of bitterness had crept into his voice. His hand drifted to the pendant hanging around his neck, tilted it this way and that in the sunlight. Then he shrugged, met my gaze squarely. "But it got me out of Venitte.

Sometimes, with the constant training, both as a Servant and Protector, it feels like I'm trapped in the city, never free to do what I want."

My gut twisted. I tried not to think of Avrell telling me—no, ordering me—to stay in Amenkor. The throne had trapped me here before, and now that the throne was gone, now that I was free, I found myself trapped anyway. By my role as Mistress.

And Brandan had seen me wince.

"Have you seen the city?" I asked without thought, trying to distract him, to turn him away from whatever he may have seen.

"No."

"Perhaps," I began, then hesitated.

I drew in a sharp breath, suddenly suspicious. But there was no taint on the river, only the smell of sunlight, of the sea.

Brandan was looking at me uncertainly.

I shrugged the vague suspicion aside. "Perhaps I could show you? I need to check up on a few things anyway."

Straightening, Brandan grinned. "I'd love to." He bowed his head, glancing up through the locks of his hair. "Mistress."

That pleasant little shiver coursed through me again. A shiver I distrusted, even though it intrigued me.

I turned to Keven, caught his warning frown. "Ready some horses."

We rode down through the two wards, pausing to inspect the reconstruction going on at each gate, Brandon shocked by the devastation and skeptical at my claim that the gates had fallen within the space of an hour, that in fact the entire attack had lasted no more than a day. Nathem, the aged Second of the Mistress, was overseeing the progress there and reported that everything was proceeding smoothly. The walls to either side were covered with scaffolding crawling with workers and engineers, ropes and pulleys hauling huge stones off of carts that had brought the granite from the quarry to the north of the city. The stone portion of the inner gates was almost completed, a rough arch beginning to sprout from the edges of the two rebuilt walls. Blacksmiths were already forging the iron that would bind the wood for the doors themselves. "And there was no way to stop them?" Brandon asked, disbelief still coloring his voice.

"The Servants were our only defense from the Ochean once she reached the walls. The army was useless. And Eryn and I didn't hold the wall for long." Brandon shook his head, brow creased in thought.

From the walls, I turned left, heading away from the main road down to the wharf that passed through the worst of the devastated city and moving east along the River.

As we passed into the industrial quarter, where the stockyards, tannery, and most of the blacksmiths and other tradesmen worked, I said, "You mentioned training as a Protector. What's that?"

Brandon barked laughter. "It sounds more interesting than it actually is. Those of us with talent—like the Servants you have here—are raised in the city, although we aren't as constrained as it appears you are here. We don't have to remain in the palace. In fact, we can roam throughout the city, which is much larger than Amenkor, maybe twice as large."

"The Servants leave the palace," I said, although now that I thought about it I realized that they didn't leave very often. Everything was provided for them in the palace; there was no need for them to roam the city. They'd probably spent more time in the city this past winter organizing and running the kitchens associated to the warehouses than they had their entire time here. And Venitte was larger than Amenkor? Twice as large?

I tried to imagine Amenkor spreading out along the River and up and down the coast, holding twice as many people . . . and couldn't.

"In any case," Brandon continued, "as Servants we, of course, have to train in the use of the Sight. We do that at the College, located in the heart of Venitte, inside Deranian's Wall. But all Servants are also required to take training as guardsmen as well. In fact, we train to be Protectors, guardsmen who have the honor and distinction of serving under Lord March's direct authority." He twisted the words honor and distinction.

"You don't make it sound as if it's much of an honor."

Brandon snorted. "It's not. At least not for the Servants. Most of the Protectors become Protectors by first training in the guard and then earning some type of distinction so that they are promoted to the Protectors. But for the Servants . . ."

"It's automatic," I finished.

Brandon nodded. "Most of the regular Protectors don't feel that we've earned our place. They think we should be part of the regular guard at first, and only made a Protector once we've proved our worth. As a consequence, the Servants tend to keep to themselves. Thankfully, the regular Protectors have a healthy respect for the Sight and aside from some rude comments and general ridicule they leave us alone."

I frowned. It sounded like living on the Dredge, where those that were alike banded together into gangs, keeping those that were weak or different apart, separated and ridiculed, until they formed a gang of their own.

Or until those that were different learned to survive on their own.

Or died.

"How many of the Servants are there in Venitte?" I asked.

Brandon didn't immediately respond, as if uncertain he should, or surprised

that I didn't already know. "About sixty."

"All men?"

"Of course. Any women that we find in or close to Venitte that we think can use the Sight are sent up here to Amenkor to train, just as you send the men down to us."

I nodded. Something was niggling at the edges of my mind, as if there were something here I was supposed to see . . . something I should realize. I concentrated on it a moment, but it slipped away.

"What about here?" Brandan asked. "How many Servants do you have in Amenkor at the moment?"

"Twenty-nine. We lost three during the attack, killed by the Chorl."

I didn't tell him that seven had died last year, when Avrell and Nathem had been trying to replace Eryn as Mistress while she was still seated on the throne and going mad.

We'd reached the edge of the blacksmithing section and as I dismounted, Brandan following suit, Keven sent one of the escorting guardsmen into the long open building that roared with the sound of bellows and the steady clangor of hammers on steel and anvil. I'd been forced to raise my voice to answer Brandan as we approached and now didn't even attempt to talk. I stood outside one of the open arches into the interior of the building as heat rolled outward, blowing the hair back from my face and turning my skin taut and waxy with sweat, sucking the breath from my lungs and making it hard to breathe.

Inside, heat distorted the air, men and boys moving among the seething coals and embers, sparks flying from white-hot metal as it was shaped, steam rising as pieces were dunked into waiting pails of water. Finished pieces—armor, swords, pikes, halberds, and daggers—lined the nearest wall. A few other unidentifiable pieces lay among these, parts needed for the gates, the reconstruction of the ships, or any of the other hundred projects scattered throughout the city.

Brandan's eyebrows rose as he saw the stockpile of weapons, but he said nothing.

The guardsmen Keven had sent returned abruptly with one of the blacksmiths: Hugh, the man huge, at least twice as wide as me and half again as tall. I watched him approach, feeling myself tense even though I was surrounded by Keven and the escort.

Which made it all the more disconcerting when the man suddenly dropped to his knee, sketched the sign of the Skewed Throne over his chest, and bowed his head down before me. "Mistress," Hugh murmured, his voice deep and pleasant, booming over the roar of the smithy, "it's an honor. You saved us all."

The noise of the smithy fell into a sudden lull.

Swallowing against the heat, conscious of all of those watching me, including Brandan, I reached forward and touched the blacksmith's head. "Thank you." Hugh rose, and the clamor of work rose again. As he stood, I could see the pockmarks of scars up and down his arms from the sparks of the fires. An old but vicious burn ran the length of his upper arm, pink and rough compared to the smooth heat-tanned skin around it.

"An accident when I was an apprentice," Hugh said in answer to my unasked question. He grinned. "It's nothing. What can I do for you?"

Drawing my eyes away from the burn, I shouted, "I came to see how things were progressing."

Hugh nodded, face becoming serious. "We should have enough to outfit the entire group of men currently in training. We've already started on the armor for the next contingent." He led me a little deeper into the heat of the forge, pointing to the stacks of completed armor, then moved on. "Avrell and Catrell wanted us to start working on some shields as well. Then there's the chain." He halted before a heap of huge linked ovals, each link as tall as I was, and as thick as my waist.

My eyes widened. I didn't think I could lift one of the links by itself, let alone several of them together.

"What's the chain for?" I asked.

Hugh grinned. "For the entrance to the harbor. Avrell and Regin think we can stretch it across the opening, hung close to the bottom so that it won't interfere with the ships. They want the ends to be connected to some heavy-duty winches inside the new watchtowers. Then, when the Chorl return" He mimed grappling with a winch, and in my mind's eye I could see the heavy chain, strung across the harbor, rising until it was high enough that it would impede incoming ships. "Like a gate for the harbor," Hugh finished.

"An ingenious idea," Brandan said, startling me. I hadn't realized he'd followed us into the ironworks.

Hugh nodded. "If we can get it to work."

It made me wonder what else Avrell and the others had been thinking up in the way of defenses.

"And what's all this," I said, nodding toward a heap of unfamiliar objects to one side.

"That is for Master Borund. For the new ships he's building."

Surprised, I waved Hugh back to work, the large blacksmith bowing before ambling off toward the fire, pulling on heavy work gloves as he went. I hadn't realized Borund had progressed so far. I knew he'd begun work on a portion of the wharf, redesigning it for his new ship-building operation, but other than that. . . .

I'd have to ask William about that.

Brandan and I carefully made our way back to the forge's entrance, mounted up, and headed back toward the center of the city. As soon as we were away from the tumult of the smithy, Brandan said, "Many of the people have made that sign on their chest as we passed them on the street." He mimicked the smith's gesture. "What is it?"

I shifted uncomfortably in my saddle, the horse snorting as it picked up on my discomfort. I hadn't noticed the people making the sign. "It's the sign of the Skewed Throne. Don't they have something similar in Venitte?"

"Nothing like that. The people of Amenkor revere you as more than a leader, almost like a religious figure."

I didn't answer. "Don't they treat Lord March the same way? Doesn't he have the Sight?"

Brandan gave me a strange look. "Lord March isn't one of the Servants.

Servants serve as Protectors, and our Master, Sorrenti, serves on Lord March's Council as an adviser, but Lord March isn't one of us himself. The other Council members would never allow it. Someone with the Sight controlling the Council . . . it could never happen. They would have too much power. Even Lord Sorrenti's presence on the Council is barely tolerated."

I frowned. "I don't understand. Lord March doesn't rule the city?"

Brandan snorted. "The Council of Eight rules the city. Lord March is the head of the Council, and has enough power that he can generally do whatever he wants. But he has to get the Council to agree, since they control the key interests in the city—the trade, the lands, the guilds. For anything significant, Lord March has to have their approval."

"But if the Council members control the land and the guilds, where does Lord March's power come from?"

"The Protectorate," Brandan said. "Lord March controls the Protectorate and the general guard. He controls the army."

We continued down to the Dredge, crossing over the River so that I could check on the kitchen and warehouse I'd kept running using the palace's resources in the slums. While there, I noticed that those that worked in the kitchen—mostly women and children—all wore white dresses similar to the ones the palace servants wore, and all of them bowed or nodded their heads to me, signing across their chests.

And the Dredge itself had changed. Near the River, some of the buildings had been damaged in the attack, but for the most part the slums had remained untouched by the fighting. However, the streets and alleys, niches and narrows, were all . . . clean. No heaps of piled stone and debris, blurring

the edges of the buildings and crevices. Cobblestones were still cracked underfoot, uneven and broken, but all the garbage and detritus I'd come to know while living in the slums had been removed. Part of it was because Avrell had used the old stone of the crumbling buildings in the slums as part of the reconstruction efforts in the warehouse district near the wharf, the stone cheaper and closer than stone taken from the quarry. But that couldn't account for all of it.

Then I noticed the militia, those men under Darryn's command who had taken it upon themselves to protect the kitchen and warehouse over the winter and who were now extending that protection to the rest of the slums. A rogue gutterscum thug—one not unlike what I'd once been—hovered near the entrance to an alley, watching those passing by on the street with sharp eyes. When he caught the militia man's eye, the soldier simply frowned, and without a word the thug vanished into the alley, moving on to better hunting grounds. The two militia men moved farther down the Dredge. Before passing from sight, I noticed that the Skewed Throne symbol had been hand-stitched to the front of their shirts.

As we crossed the bridge back into the lower city of Amenkor and began to head toward the wharf, I thought about what Eryn had said. Even without the throne, you are Amenkor. You became Amenkor this past winter, in the minds of its people.

"You're quiet," Brandan said.

I glanced toward him, noticed he was watching me carefully, realized he had been watching me carefully since the tour had first begun. I gave him a hesitant smile. "It's . . . different. It's not the same as when I lived there. It's cleaner. Safer."

Brandan turned to look back toward the Dredge, brow furrowed in thought.

"What about you?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Where were you before you were sent to become a Servant?"

Brandan fell silent, a troubled look crossing his face. For a long moment, I thought he wouldn't answer. But then he straightened in his saddle. "I was the fourth son of a shipwright in Venitte. My eldest brother was to take over my father's work when he died, and both of my other brothers were apprenticed to guilds as favors to my father. I was to be put to work as a regular hand on one of the ships as a favor to its captain." He looked down at his hands. "I would never have survived," he said, almost under his breath. "It would have killed me."

I'd seen the hands of those that worked on the ships, the harshness of their skin, sunburned into tanned leather, scarred and callused. Those men contained a roughness I associated with the denizens of the Dredge. Gutterscum, like me. Brandan—with his pale skin, his fine features and thin build—would never have fit in.

When Brandan looked up, there was a twisted smile on his face, and for the first time since the tour began, his expression was completely open and honest. "But they discovered I had the Sight after the first few hellish voyages. Sailors are a suspicious lot. They wanted nothing to do with me after that. Neither did the rest of my family. So I was shipped off to the palace." We continued down to the docks in an awkward silence, Brandan intently surveying the damage to the lower city caused by the Chorl, although he'd already seen it numerous times since his arrival. Once we reached the wharf, Keven and the guardsmen turned south.

"You captured a few of the Chorl ships," Brandan said as we progressed down the docks through the crowd of people, mostly dockworkers, Zorelli shiphands, and carpenters. Men swarmed the decks of the ships at dock, the pounding of hammers and the shouts of orders barked across the deck overriding almost all other sounds. Gulls and terns shrieked overhead, wheeling in the breeze, and water slapped against the ship's hulls.

He spoke as if he'd never mentioned his family, or how he'd become a Servant. After a moment, I said, "Once I killed the Ochean, the leader of the Chorl

warriors, Atlatik, ordered a retreat. We harried them all the way down to the harbor and in their haste they left a few ships behind."

"How many?"

"Five of the smaller attack ships, like those over there." I pointed to one of the sleek black ships still at dock. Two others were waiting for repairs, anchored in the harbor. "There were two others, but we sent them out as escorts for some of our trading ships."

Brandan nodded. "With the Chorl presence, we'll all have to have escorts for our trading ships. Either that or the ships will have to travel in convoys, to protect each other." He frowned. "That's going to affect trade pricing."

I was about to answer when someone ahead shouted.

"It's William," Keven said, sidling his horse closer.

And then William broke through the crowd on the dock and into sight. He was followed almost immediately by Borund and Captain Tristan, both locked in animated conversation.

"Varis!" William shouted again, one arm raised to catch my attention. "Varis!" He pushed forward, almost knocking people over in his haste, then suddenly seemed to notice the escort of guardsmen . . . and Brandan.

He drew up short, a dark frown passing over his face as his eyes flicked once toward me, then fixed on Brandan. "What are you doing?" he asked, the question directed toward me, his tone suspicious and strangely hostile.

"I'm giving Brandan Vard a tour of Amenkor."

"I see." On the river, I sensed William's hurt, as if I'd betrayed him somehow. As Borund and Tristan approached behind him, Borund nodding seriously at something Tristan said, William stepped toward me, positioning himself between Brandan and me. He raised a hand to steady my horse as it shied away, but his eyes never left Brandan.

"Mistress," Captain Tristan said, giving a short bow. "I hope that Brandan has not been monopolizing all of your time."

"I was giving him a tour," I said into the tension. "It was my idea."

"Ah, I see, very good." Tristan and Brandan shared a glance and Brandan shifted in his seat.

To one side, Keven coughed, his horse edging close enough it brushed up against me.

I didn't need the warning. All of the instincts I'd honed on the Dredge to warn me of danger had already begun to flare.

Borund cleared his throat. "Tristan and I were just discussing Amenkor's new fleet of trading ships. The one that I intend to build, anyway."

"The one you've already started building, you mean," Tristan said.

"Yes, well," Borund began, but William cut in.

"It will rival anything that Venitte has to offer," he said stiffly. "The ships will have a larger hold, so we can carry more cargo. And we'll be able to carry the cargo farther, without the need to stop into port as often." Borund shot William an irritated glance. "We have to get the ships built first."

"You seem to have a decent start," Tristan said, his tone dry. "And now, if the tour is finished?"

Brandan glanced in my direction, his eyes unreadable, but with a tinge of disappointment about his lips. "Thank you, Mistress, for escorting me around Amenkor." Then he dismounted, handing the horse's leads off to one of the guardsmen. William stepped out of his way.

Tristan turned to Borund. "I'll have the papers drawn up for your mark. And I'll want to discuss the terms on the tea from Marland at some point. I'm sure we can come to some kind of agreement."

"Of course, of course."

"Mistress," Tristan said.

I nodded and watched the two head off down the wharf, Tristan taking hold of Brandan's upper arm tightly just before they vanished into the crowd.

William turned toward me, straightening, suddenly cold and formal. "I don't think he ran into you by accident."

My brow creased in irritation, but before I could answer, Keven added, "Neither do I."

I thought about Brandan waiting for me outside of the garden entrance. He could have seen me there in the yard, working with the Servants. He could have hung around, waiting for me to finish.

A page boy suddenly appeared at Keven's side. He leaned down to listen, then straightened.

"Catrell sends word that the scouting party to Temall will be ready to depart on the evening's tide."

I stood at the end of the dock, the sun beginning to set on the horizon, the Chorl ship tied to the berth already mostly loaded, the contingent of guardsmen and Seekers that Westen and Catrell had worked out filing up onto the deck of the black ship. Westen stood beside me, Catrell on the other side, Keven and the rest of the guardsmen behind.

"How are your wife and son?" I asked.

Westen's eyebrows rose. "Not many know I have a wife and son," he said, clearly wanting to know how I knew.

I didn't answer.

He smiled. "They're fine. I said my good-byes earlier."

I nodded. Farther down the dock, the last of the guardsmen boarded. A bell clanged on the deck, orders issued, and dark-skinned Zorelli began untying the ship from the dock.

"You'd better board," Catrell said.

"I'll keep watch." I caught Westen's eye and he nodded, knowing that I meant I'd keep watch through the Fire I'd tagged him with before the Chorl attacked. I felt a twinge of worry, recalling how hard it had been to push myself into the Fire at Erick's core at first, about how it had drained me to watch Ottul through Marielle's eyes. I thought about mentioning it to Westen, but then thrust the concern aside. I needed to know what the Chorl were doing, how far they'd advanced toward Amenkor. This was the only way.

Westen must have seen some of the worry in my eyes, for he gave me a reassuring smile and said, "I'll return."

Then he moved down the dock and boarded the ship.

Chapter 5

Westen jumped out of the unsteady boat and splashed onto shore, seawater spilling down into his boots. He grimaced in distaste, slogging up onto the sand as groups of his men disembarked from three other boats to either side in the faint light of the moon and a few torches, another group already waiting for him—a scouting party that had been sent ashore the previous night.

"Report," he said, coming to a halt before the Seeker who led the party already on the beach.

Watching through the Fire at Westen's core, having Reached from the throne room of Amenkor with Marielle's aid, I recognized Tomus, the Seeker who had been guarding Erick's chamber. His dirty-blond hair gleamed in the light of the torches carried by the scouting party.

"No sign of the Chorl. We went south as far as the outskirts of Temall, but saw nothing. I don't think they've taken Temall yet."

"Good. We'll set up a temporary camp here then, restock the ship with water, whatever food we can find. Then we'll head south."

Tomas nodded, turned to pass the orders on.

Westen remained on the beach, hands on his hips. He watched empty water casks being off-loaded and hauled inland to the stream that emptied into the cove where they'd decided to make landfall. Torchlight glared orange on the waves, leaving a trail of fire from the sand to the black ship hidden in the inlet. A sea breeze brought the scents of salt and seaweed, the trees behind rustling. He grunted, satisfied, then found the nearest rock and took off his boots, pouring water from each before setting them aside to dry.

I pulled back from the Fire, feeling again that resistance I'd felt when I'd first attempted to Reach toward Erick. Piercing through the veil, drawing on

some of the strength fed to me by Marielle, I rose high, sought out the Fire that burned inside me in Amenkor, and skimmed northward.

I gasped as I entered my own body again, felt the tremors beginning in my arms before I'd managed to draw my first true breath, and silently cursed, felt Marielle releasing the conduit she'd used to link to me.

"Mistress?" Marielle asked, leaning forward, although I could hear weakness in her own voice. She laid a hand over my hands where they rested in my lap.

"I'm—" I swallowed, my throat dry. "—fine."

Marielle shifted where she sat on the top of the dais of the throne room, reaching for the tray containing a pitcher of sun-steeped tea and two glasses. I leaned back against the cracked throne behind me, let the tremors wash through me in waves.

The first attempt to Reach for Westen had come the morning after his ship had left the harbor. Overnight, the Prize had managed to get significantly far down the coast, but then the winds had changed and their progress slowed. That Reaching had been difficult. Far more difficult than any of the Reaching I'd done while using the Skewed Throne. It had drained me, to the point that it had taken almost an hour before I could stand and walk from the throne room. Eryn had pointed out that I didn't need to be sitting on the throne any longer, but I'd done almost all of my long distance Reaching before on the throne, because the throne had made it easier. Somehow, it felt wrong not to be in this room while Reaching outside the city, not to have its solid stone beneath me. Even if it was now dead.

I'd tried again the next day, the effects of the Reaching worse because Westen had managed to get farther down the coast. After that, I didn't think I'd be able to Reach again, that I'd have to wait for him to return to hear any news. But Marielle had suggested she link to me using the conduits, so she could share her strength with me, as Gwenn had shared with her in the gardens.

The Reachings since had been much less draining.

I lifted my hand, watched it tremble with the effort, then let it flop back down into my lap.

"I'm not sure how much longer we'll be able to remain in contact with Westen," I said, voice weary.

"Why?" Marielle handed over a cup of tea, which I managed to sip from without spilling a drop.

"The effects of the Reaching are getting worse, even with your strength added to mine. If he travels too much farther south, we won't be able to reach him."

"We'll just have to add Trielle to the link."

Marielle seemed utterly confident this would work, but I was doubtful.

"There has to be a limit, Marielle. We can't link all twenty-nine Servants together just for a Reaching."

"Why not? We know it works for at least five Servants. Why not more?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. Aside from the fact that it's impractical, I'd think that after a point adding another Servant wouldn't increase the strength that much."

Marielle shrugged. "You might be right. We haven't tried linking more than five Servants at one time. And besides, we know there's a more efficient way to link, the one the Chorl use."

I pushed up off of the throne, letting Marielle help steady me as I stretched my legs, the muscles and tendons popping.

"I hate this throne," I said, casting a vicious glare at the static chunk of granite behind me. "I liked my own version of it better. It didn't have a back to it, but it had armrests."

Marielle didn't respond, gathering up the cups and pitcher of tea, placing everything back onto the tray before accompanying me down the length of the cavernous throne room, heading back to my chambers.

"So . . . Brandan Vard seems . . . nice."

I glanced toward Marielle with a frown, caught her smiling at me knowingly.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, he seems . . . nice. That light brown hair. And those eyes! All of

the other Servants are talking about him. He's been wandering around the palace lately, watching us all as we train, sparring with the guardsmen in the yard. He's . . . well built."

"Hmm."

Marielle waited expectantly, eyes alight. "I heard there was an incident down at the docks," she finally prompted.

I scowled, thinking back to the tour of Amenkor, to running into William and Borund and Tristan. "Who told you about that?"

"Keven. It required a little . . . encouragement on Trielle's part to get him to talk."

I gave Marielle a look and she burst into laughter.

"So what happened? On the wharf."

We'd reached my chambers, passed through the antechamber into the inner rooms, and I slumped down into the settee, Marielle setting the tray aside. "Nothing. I'd run into Brandan in the hall outside the gardens and took him on a tour of Amenkor. We ran into William, Borund, and Tristan." It had been good to see William and Borund working with each other again. I could still sense some tension between them, and I didn't think their relationship would ever be the same as when I'd been Borund's bodyguard, but they'd reconciled to some extent.

I caught Marielle's expectant look, her eyebrows raised. "That was it."

Marielle snorted. "That's not what Keven said."

I narrowed my eyes. "What did Keven say?"

"He said that you were having a grand old time flirting with Brandan until you ran into William. And when William saw you with Brandan . . ." Marielle let the thought trail off.

"I was not flirting with Brandan," I said darkly. "I don't know how to flirt."

Marielle smirked. "I can help with that if you want. Keven also said that Tristan dragged Brandan off, and that he didn't think that you simply 'ran' into Brandan in the hall. He thinks Brandan was waiting for you, to find out more about you. And Amenkor."

I didn't say anything, thinking instead of William. He hadn't been to the palace as usual since the wharf, had avoided the palace altogether.

"I can understand why William would be flustered," Marielle went on. "You know he's interested in you. And then there was the festival, where you two danced with each other and then disappeared down to the end of the dock." The knowing voice had returned, smug now. "All kinds of rumors are going around about that."

"Nothing happened," I said. "We talked, and then I—"

I cut off abruptly.

"You what?" Marielle leaned forward.

Disconcerted, I said, "I kissed him."

Marielle's mouth flew open. "Oh, gods, you didn't?" When I didn't answer, she leaped out of her seat and clapped her hands together, suddenly a bundle of energy, circling the settee. "No wonder William reacted like that on the wharf! He thinks you're interested in Brandan! He's jealous!"

I flushed. "It wasn't that kind of kiss," I protested, but even I heard the weak lie in my voice. Irritated, I spat, "And why can't I be interested in more than one person?"

Marielle plopped herself down on the end of the settee, her excitement undiminished. "What kind of kiss was it?"

Suddenly extremely uncomfortable, I said uncertainly, "A . . . friendly kiss?"

On the Dredge, there were only two kinds of kisses: rough and deadly. The rough ones usually ended up in rape, the deadly ones in blood, for either the man or woman. Rape and death were indiscriminate on the Dredge.

But this hadn't been like that. This kiss—and even the light, quick kiss at the guildhall—had been different. Even thinking about it sent a warm shiver through my skin.

Marielle frowned in disappointment. "I don't think William took it that way.

And besides, you've been spending a lot of time with William since the attack.

Here in the palace, out in the city, at the guildhall. Everyone in town is talking about it."

"I still don't see why I can't be interested in more than one person," I growled, retreating toward anger. "What does William care if I talk to Brandan? I can speak to—and kiss—whoever I like."

Marielle shook her head. "I have a lot to teach you about men."

"I already know about men. I grew up in the slums."

"Oh, there's much more to it than that."

Someone knocked on the door leading to the antechamber, a guardsman leaning in a moment later. "The First of the Mistress is here to see you," he reported.

"Let him in," I said, a little too quickly.

Avrell stepped into the room, "Did you reach Westen? Where is he? What's happening?"

As he took a seat, Marielle reached for the used tray, casting me one last decidedly meaningful look before departing.

Knowing that Marielle and the rest of the palace were talking about me and William was one thing. But learning that the whole city had noticed, that they were probably talking about me right now . . .

I sighed. "I reached Westen. He's set the Prize's crew ashore north of Temall. It doesn't look like the Chorl have attacked Temall yet. He's going to begin moving south tomorrow."

"Good. Right now, Temall is our buffer zone to the south. The Chorl will have to take it before they can make an effective attack on Amenkor by land from that direction." He paused. "It took Westen a few more days to get down there than expected."

"He was being careful not to run into any of the Chorl ships," I said.

"True. But we need to know where the Chorl are and where they're headed. The sooner we know, the better."

I leaned back heavily into the settee and closed my eyes, feeling every ache and muscle in my body. "Was there something else, Avrell? It's late, and I'm exhausted."

Avrell hesitated. "You asked me to do some research in the archives . . . about the thrones."

I sat forward suddenly. "Do you know where the second throne is? What did you find?"

He grimaced. "Not much. Records were kept from far earlier than the introduction of the Skewed Throne to the city, but they aren't complete. Some have been lost due to fire or flood. Some have just disintegrated with age, even though we attempt to transcribe older documents when they begin to decay." He stood, began pacing before the settee, hands clasped behind his back. "The records that have survived from that time are, understandably, focused on the Skewed Throne itself, not its counterpart. But they do mention a second throne."

"Where?"

He paused, glanced toward me, brow furrowed. "It seems that the two thrones were created in Venitte by the Council of Seven."

I nodded. "Yes, the Seven Adepts. I was there when they forged the two thrones, in a manner of speaking. I was there when they died."

"And that's the problem," Avrell said. "They all died when they created the thrones, and they didn't leave very specific instructions on what to do with the thrones after they'd been created, or even how to use them."

"Because they didn't expect to be killed while creating them," I said sardonically.

"In any case, that left the decision about what to do with the thrones to those that found the Seven dead on the Council chamber floors. The intent of the Seven was clear: they'd created the thrones as a means to protect the coast from possible attacks by the Chorl, who'd been repelled at this point and had vanished into the western ocean, but who were expected to return. Here, I brought the journal of Patris Armanic, the Lord of Amenkor at that time."

"Lord of Amenkor?" I asked, as Avrell drew a heavy scroll from his pocket. He pulled the small table Marielle had set the tray of tea on earlier over to the settee. "Amenkor had a Lord?"

Avrell smiled. "This was before the Skewed Throne existed, remember. Amenkor had many Lords—and Ladies—before the throne arrived. In fact, we had a Council much like Venitte does now. But the arrival of the Skewed Throne changed all that. Not overnight, of course, but over the years the Mistress of the Skewed Throne came to be the single most revered power in Amenkor. The Lords and Ladies diminished, until there was only the First, and the leaders of the guilds, the most powerful being the merchants' guild. And all of that happened because one of the Mistresses—Torlette, I believe—managed to get the guard to back her and Lord Rathe when the other Lords and Ladies were weakened, effectively severing the last links of the council system."

He spread the scroll out on the table, handling the dry, yellowed parchment with the utmost care. Even so, flakes fell from the edges, the scent of dust drifting up.

Leaning over the sheet, Avrell squinted at the extremely fine print, then said, "Here."

I shifted forward. The scrawl of black lines on the page at first seemed illegible, nothing but curled scratches. But then I picked out a few letters, realized that they were elongated, as if they'd been stretched and thinned, and tilted to the right. Also a significant number of the words themselves had different spellings.

Struggling with the strange script, but becoming more excited the further I got, I read, "Returned from Venitte. After forty-seven days of heated argument, the August Representatives of the Frigean coast—including Lord Wence of Venitte, Lord Barton of Sedine, Lady Corring of Merrell, and Lord Iain of Langdon, among others—have concluded that the Council of Seven intended the Two Thrones for Amenkor and Venitte, being central to the Coast and the Heart of the Chorl Attack. Per this Agreement, Mistress Susquill and the Granite Throne have accompanied me upon my Return, the Stone Throne remaining in Venitte under Master Tyrrone's control. Mistress Susquill has been ensconced within the palace walls along with the Throne, and already her Presence, and the Throne's, is felt."

Avrell cleared his throat, cutting me off. "It goes on to describe how the Council here in Amenkor reacted to Susquill's arrival. They did not welcome her. From Patris' account, she was a strong but bitter woman, with a tongue to match. In essence, Susquill was the first Mistress of Amenkor."

"What about Tyrrone and the Stone Throne?"

"Apparently, a huge political war broke out in Venitte, the lords and ladies vying for power in the vacuum created by the loss of the Council of Seven, all fighting for position, for control of the Stone Throne. Tyrrone was not a political man—few of the Servants were at the time, because the Council of Seven, the Adepts, effectively ruled the coast—and he was overwhelmed. In the midst of the upheaval, he and the Stone Throne . . . vanished."

"Vanished?" I said, incredulous. I thought about the Skewed Throne sitting in the throne room even now. "How could it possibly vanish?" I asked darkly.

"It's made of stone, it would require ten men to lift it. And not everyone can touch it, only those with the Sight. How could it have been moved?"

Avrell began gingerly rolling the parchment back up. "I don't know, but they managed to get the Skewed Throne onto a ship and all the way to Amenkor, so . . ." He shrugged. "During the height of the political struggle in Venitte, the streets were no longer safe to travel at night due to the sudden rise in assassination attempts. The Stone Throne vanished from its place at the center of the Council of Seven's main chamber. And Tyrrone vanished with it. No one saw it being moved, and no one saw Tyrrone after that. The chamber itself was sealed by the Servants that remained."

"No one searched for it?"

Avrell snorted. "Everyone searched for it. It was the key to their safety from the Chorl! Or so they thought at the time. But remember, they'd just managed

to repulse the Chorl attack, were in the midst of political upheaval unlike anything they'd experienced in decades, and winter was hard on their heels. They couldn't afford to spend too much energy searching for the throne when each lord and lady had their own estate—and people and power—to protect. The deaths of the Seven created a huge power vacuum, and Venitte fell into total chaos for a period of years before it finally stabilized with the introduction of the Council of Eight to replace the Adepts. Other cities, such as Amenkor, didn't suffer as much from the sudden absence of the Seven. We already had our own Councils, who reported to the Seven when anything of significance occurred that could affect the entire coast."

I slumped back into the settee. "So the other throne is lost. We can't use it to defend against the Chorl Servants. We can't use it to replace the Skewed Throne." The little flare of hope I'd held inside since Eryn had brought the possibility of the second throne up in the throne room guttered and died. Avrell tucked the scroll back into his pocket, his motions thoughtful. "I didn't say that."

I glared at him. "You just said—"

"I said that the throne vanished. But I don't think it's lost. There are too many hints in the archives, too many vague suggestions and allusions to what might have happened to the throne for me to believe that it's completely gone."

Feeling the long day creeping up on me, I said impatiently, "Then where is it?"

Avrell drew in a deep breath, let it out in a sigh. "I have no real evidence to support this, but I think it's still in Venitte."

"That would make sense," Eryn said.

We stood in the middle of the throne room, both looking down the open walkway to the dais and the unnaturally static throne. I'd related what Avrell had told me a few days before of his search in the archives for the second throne. "Why?"

"Because of what you said: the throne is heavy. It would require a massive effort and extreme planning in order to move it. Which means that more than likely it wasn't moved far. And a huge risk was taken to move it anywhere at all, because anyone who touched the throne—even then, when there would have been at most a dozen personalities stored within it, perhaps as few as eight—could have been overwhelmed by its power. The effort to move the Skewed Throne safely to Amenkor must have been immense. Keep in mind that the Seven were Adepts, the most powerful men and women of the time. No one could control and manipulate the Sight as well as they could. But there were others that could use the Sight, others like us. The non-Adepts, those that were even then called the Servants. They were the ones who inherited the thrones. Perhaps—" But here something caught in Eryn's throat, and she began coughing. She reached out and clutched my shoulder, bending forward and hacking into her other hand, the sound torturous. I gripped her upper arm and shoulder, steadying her as it continued, until she heaved one final shallow breath and seemed to catch hold of herself.

She smiled as she straightened, her expression grim. "I thought it was getting better," she said, voice weak and hoarse. "I haven't had a fit like that in over a week."

"Maybe it is getting better, then."

"No." She shook her head. "Look."

She held out her hand, the one she'd used to cover her mouth. It was speckled with blood.

A strange numbing panic raced through me, tingling in my arms, my fingers, squeezing my heart hard.

"You have to go see Isaiah," I said. The words sounded distant, lost, as if the numbness had crept into my ears.

"No," Eryn said, that grim smile still on her lips. "There's nothing he can do. You know that, Varis. We've already tried."

She pushed away. I didn't want to let her go, my hand refusing to release her.

She held my gaze, her eyes calm, accepting. Accepting of what the blood on her hand meant.

I forced my hand to let go of her upper arm, stepped back. I suddenly felt cold.

"Now," Eryn said, voice cracking. "Let's check in on Westen."

I didn't move until Eryn made it halfway to the dais and the throne, my legs refusing to budge. And once I was in motion, it was slow, uncertain. The numbness remained, the sense of distance.

I sank onto the cracked throne. "Should you—"

"I'm fine, Varis." Stern, strong, commanding. The voice of the Mistress. I should have been comforted. I wasn't.

"There's another reason to suspect that the throne is still in Venitte," she said.

It was said to distract me, to turn me away from the speckled blood on her hands.

Our eyes met. She knew I recognized the distraction, and written in the lines of her face I saw the plea to accept it and move on.

I drew in a short breath, not quite ready to give in . . . but then I sighed. "What?"

Eryn nodded. "Think about the two thrones, and about the agreement between Amenkor and Venitte. Since the thrones were created, the two cities have been tied together, certain agreements between us upheld even when the cities themselves have been at odds."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that even when the two cities have been at war with each other—over trading rights, or land—we've always sent the female Servants to Amenkor to be trained, and the male ones to Venitte. Why? For that matter, why is there such a division between the sexes? Why do the females get sent here, and the males to Venitte?"

I frowned. "I don't know."

Eryn paced behind the throne. "I never thought about it before, but once you told me what Avrell had found in the archives, I began to wonder. We've never had a Master of Amenkor; it's always been a Mistress. Why? When any men touch the Skewed Throne, they die, whether they are Servants or not. I think the two thrones are split somehow, two halves of a single whole, one female and the other male. I think Amenkor ended up with the female version of the throne, and that's the reason the female Servants are sent here to train. The male throne remained in Venitte, so all the male Servants are trained there. Being close to the appropriate throne must somehow . . . accentuate the Servants' power."

"And the male Servants, like Brandan Vard, are still trained in Venitte," I said. "Which means the throne is still in Venitte."

Eryn nodded. "I find it hard to believe that the throne would simply vanish. It must still be in use, just not as openly as here in Amenkor. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if Brandan Vard knows exactly where the second throne is even now."

I thought about Brandan's dark blond hair, of his eyes . . . and of the way he'd hesitated before answering my questions regarding the Servants of Venitte. I'd thought at the time that it was because he'd expected me to already know the answers.

But maybe it was because he had something to hide. It would explain why everything he said felt like a lie—or rather, a half-truth, as if he were holding something back.

And it would explain why he wanted to know about me, about Amenkor and how it had survived the Chorl attack.

Perhaps William and Keven were right. Perhaps the few meetings I'd had with Brandan since he'd arrived hadn't been by chance.

"Now," Eryn said, drawing me back to our reason for being in the throne room, "let's check in on Westen."

I dove into the river, barely concentrating on what I was doing, my thoughts

scattered, jumping from Eryn, to the spots of blood on her hand and the pain she felt in her gut, to Brandan and the secrets he might hold, to my own churning unidentifiable emotions about William and the fact that it hurt that he hadn't come back to the palace to see me. But then I pushed up and out, barged through that thin veil that still tried to hold me back, and sped southward. Coastline surged by beneath me, a blur of motion, of half-glimpsed inlets and coves and rocky plinths reaching into the sea. Halfway to where I'd last contacted Westen, pinpricks of sensation coursed through my ethereal body as Eryn linked with me, flooding me with her strength— And then I saw the Fire inside Westen, smelled his scent— honeysuckle and dew—and I let the Fire enfold me, let my concern over Eryn and Brandan and William fade into the background.

I took a moment to look around through Westen's eyes—a cook fire in a copse of trees, heavy with the scent of smoke and sizzling meat, hidden in a depression of land, evening sunlight streaming through the branches in thin bands—and then I said, Report.

Westen froze where he sat before the fire, the sudden lack of movement so subtle and fleeting that none of the surrounding guardsmen noticed. I felt him grin through the Fire, then he turned and reached for the skewered rabbit on a spit before him.

We've skirted Temall and are now to the south, on our way toward Bosun's Bay. It didn't appear that Temall had suffered any major attack by the Chorl, although they are aware that there's an enemy force out there. They seal up the walls of the city during the night and have guardsmen on duty at all times. The outer city is mostly abandoned at dusk, but people still come out during the day to work in the surrounding fields. He bit into the rabbit and I felt hot juice dribbling down his chin, the gamy flavor of the meat flooding my tongue. He wiped at the dribble with one hand, chewing slowly.

I've sent a few men in closer, and it seems that the surrounding towns and villages to the south have also been attacked by the Chorl, mainly raids for food and supplies. But here's the strange thing.

He paused to sip from a flask of water.

What? I said impatiently. I was suddenly hungry.

Westen smiled, and I realized he was teasing me with the food.

Not all of the Chorl raids have been successful, he said.

What do you mean?

Westen set the flask aside, the rabbit forgotten.

It seems that on a few of these raids, the Chorl have met with some unexpected resistance.

Men from Temall?

No. These men attack from the forest to the east, hitting the Chorl raiders hard, pushing them back until they retreat . . . and then the men vanish. I thought at first they were bandits, but according to what the scouts have heard, the group is too organized for regular banditry, and they only take a portion of what the Chorl would have made off with, almost as if they consider what they take as payment for their services. Most of those that they've aided were more than glad to give up those few supplies in return for their protection.

I pondered this for a moment, but didn't see how it changed anything. I turned my attention back to Temall, to the Chorl threat.

Temall doesn't seem to realize how dangerous the Chorl are. You need to warn them.

Agreed. But I'm not certain they'll be willing to listen.

Be convincing, I said, voice hard.

Westen was about to respond when a guardsman stumbled into the hollow.

Westen reacted instantly, crossing the copse before anyone else had even moved. "Report."

The guardsman straightened, one hand clutched to his side. "Temall," he gasped, then swallowed, wincing, "is under attack. By the Chorl."

Adrenaline surged through Westen's body even as he barked orders, motioning to

the Seeker Tomus to join him. The fire was smothered, roasted rabbit removed from the skewers and stowed away with cold efficiency, the copse abandoned within ten minutes.

Moving swiftly, they pushed northward, angling to the west through the cuts and folds of the land, following the guardsman who'd brought the warning. Urgency bled through Westen, tingling in his blood as the group splashed through a stream, up over a ridge, the guardsmen behind grunting as the earth shifted out from beneath them—

And then the leading guardsman slowed.

Holding up a hand, Westen stopped. The group of forty guardsmen and Seekers ground to a halt behind him, most heaving at the sudden strain.

The guardsman they'd followed scrambled up another incline, then pointed. On the far side of the low hill, the ground swept down to a scattering of fields, a few lines of trees used as windbreaks and dirt roads between them. Then the land rose again, cottages appearing among the fields, and suddenly there were stone walls, only half as high as Amenkor's walls. A dry ditch had been dug around the entire enclosure at least three feet deep, the dirt removed from the ditch piled up at its edge, away from the wall, creating an embankment. The dirt appeared fresh, the ditch recently dug. A thin strip of land gave access to the gates, and a group of people—women and children mostly—rushed through the opening, a harsh bell ringing, muted by distance. I thought Temall was a port, I said.

Coming up along Westen's side, Tomus said, "Where's the port?"

"On the far side of the town," the guardsman answered. "The main portion of the town is encircled by the wall. There's an access road that leads down to the docks and harbor. There isn't much there—some warehouses, a few taverns, and brothels." He shrugged.

A blood-freezing scream sounded and everyone's attention turned toward the southern edge of the fields.

A group of men were struggling to hold the Chorl back. Only a few of the men wore armor and carried swords, the rest were in field worker's clothes, wielding hoes and shovels.

And they were outnumbered. There were nearly twice as many Chorl as Temall defenders. Even as we watched, the Temall line began to crumble, men shrieking as they fell, the Chorl's piercing battle cries a harsh counterpoint.

"Tomus."

Without another word, Tomus spun and descended from the hill, shouting out orders for the men to ready. Armor clattered and swords hissed from sheaths. Through the Fire, I felt the tension on the river double.

Westen glanced toward the gates, toward the group of women and children still trying to reach safety. "They need to close the gates," he said. Images of his own wife and son flashed through his mind and his jaw clenched. He pushed the thoughts away, his hand gripping the hilt of the dagger at his waist.

To the south, the Temall line staggered, then completely crumbled. Chorl began pouring through the breaches, heading straight for the gates. Someone at the gates noticed, and cries of terror echoed across the fields, the women and children surging forward.

Westen spat a curse, spun, shouted, "Tomus!"

"Ready."

Even as the group charged over the ridge, down into the fields, I could feel Westen sinking into the calm center I'd felt once before, during the Chorl attack on Amenkor. The center all Seekers sought. Devoid of emotion, cold and calculating, he let it wash away all thoughts of his family, focusing solely on the battle scene ahead. His gaze flicked over the Chorl ranks, estimated the force at well over a hundred, noted the riot of color in the clothing that the warriors wore, vibrant in the evening sunlight, noted the glint of light from the raised, curved swords, the blue skin, the darker blue tattoos on the warriors' faces.

And then his gaze caught the unmistakable blaze of yellow and another swath of dark green.

The Chorl had one of the priests with them.

And a Servant.

With Westen's men halfway to Temall's gates, tearing through a field of half-grown corn onto a road, the Chorl fell on the back of the stragglers trying to push through the still open gates. Cries of terror erupted into screams of pain and anguish, growing louder and louder—

And then suddenly Westen was there.

But the Chorl had seen us coming.

Westen drew to an abrupt halt ten paces from the edge of the Chorl line that had turned to meet us. He'd outdistanced the rest of the men from Amenkor. The leading Chorl warrior in the front ranks—tattoos curling across his face, even along the ridge of his nose—smiled.

Deep inside Westen, straining to keep myself from surging forward and seizing control of his body, I felt the last subtle shift at Westen's core . . . and he became utterly calm.

He smiled in return.

The Chorl warrior roared, a cry picked up by all of the Chorl surrounding him. On the river, I felt the rest of the Amenkor men catch up, felt them sprinting past as the Chorl roar changed cadence and the blue-skinned men leaped forward.

The leader of the Chorl was the first to die. As he charged, spittle flying from his dark blue lips, Westen sidestepped, drawing his Seeker's dagger in one smooth motion and cutting it across the leader's exposed throat. Blood sprayed outward, but Westen had already shifted, the Amenkor and Chorl warriors clashing with a sound that reverberated on the river. The taint of blood flooded outward, tinged with sweat and freshly turned earth and desperation. I felt myself reaching forward through the Fire, my emotions tangling with Westen's, my heartbeat trembling, quickening, then meshing until his heart and mine pulsed as one. We melded, the hours of practice I'd endured under his training over the last several months allowing me to anticipate his movements. Joining with him, I used the river, nudged him this way and that without ever fully seizing control.

He punched his dagger forward, the blade piercing through the Chorl warrior's blue-and-purple silken clothing, through the leather armor beneath, and into his heart. The Chorl gasped, a bubble of blood flecking his lip, and then Westen used the man's momentum to shove him aside, the dagger pulling free with a jerk. Westen's hand shifted, altering the grip on the hilt, and he cut to either side, left and right, slicing open an arm, the man shrieking, then sliding the dagger into another man's side, the man's back arching as his body toppled, all while Westen waded deeper into the confusion. Blades rose and fell, men gasping, crying out, cursing. Screams were cut short and blood flew from sword edges, splattering clothing, armor, skin, drenching the ground, and still Westen waded forward, thrusting bodies aside, trampling those that had already fallen. Through the roar of the battle, muted at the edges by the river, I could feel Westen's intent, could see his focus.

The yellow robes of the priest. The green of the Servant.

I narrowed the river down further, as I'd done on the Dredge, pushed it, used it to shove a path forward. A blade descended toward Westen's flank, toward an opening in his defenses, but I shunted it aside with a hastily raised shield, felt the startlement of the Chorl warrior as his sword struck thin air and skittered away, but Westen pushed forward again, the press of bodies that surrounded him swallowing up the warrior before he could strike again.

Westen's dagger fell again and again, glancing off armor, sinking into flesh, and then the bodies became too dense, too close together, and we ground to a halt, unable to slash at bodies that were pressed too tightly together.

"We can't get closer!" Tomus shouted at Westen's back. Two other Seekers had forged through the Chorl warriors with us, were guarding Westen's back.

"They're packed in too close!"

Westen snarled into the face of the Chorl warrior before him, the warrior sneering back.

Then, I felt power building on the river.

The Servant! I yelled. She's going to attack!

Fear lanced through Westen, and he bellowed, "Fall back!"

The gathering force on the river released. Heat streaked by overhead, a fireball searing past, trailing flames—

And exploded.

A concussive wave surged through the battle, anguished screams piercing the clash of metal, warriors pushing away from where the fireball had landed. The packed bodies around Westen loosened, and with a satisfied grunt he reached forward. One hand caught the sneering Chorl warrior by the throat, high up, near the jaw, the other reached around to the back of his head, still holding his dagger, and then with a wrench—

The Chorl's neck snapped. I felt the bones break through Westen's fingers, a crunch like a snapping twig, tingling in his skin. Then he let go, the body slumping back but remaining erect.

Another fireball released. Fresh screams arose, another wave pulsing out on the river and through the crowded men. Black smoke, in two separate columns, began billowing into the sky.

"Fall back! Fall back!" Tomus roared.

Desperate, the other Seekers withdrew, hauling Tomus and Westen along with them. The Chorl surged after.

"We can't hold them," Tomus spat. "There aren't enough of us."

"What about the gates?" Westen growled, slicing across a Chorl warrior's face, the man lurching back.

"Still open!"

Westen cursed. He fought a moment longer, considering, then said, "Fall back. At least a few more made it inside—"

A horn broke through the roar of the battle.

"What in hells?" one of the Seekers said.

Westen turned in the direction of the horn, squinted against the smoke and fading sunlight . . . and saw a band of a hundred men pouring over the top of the nearest ridge, the twenty at the forefront on horseback, charging, carrying a tattered black flag with some type of red symbol on it.

The attention of the Chorl shifted, away from the gates and from Westen's group toward the new threat. And then the leading horsemen of the new group plowed into the Chorl ranks to one side.

The Chorl line crumbled, then gave way as the rest of the force struck behind the horsemen.

The Chorl were shoved forcibly back from the gates.

Power built on the river, the taste of rage behind the effort, but this time I was distant enough from the source that I could see the river being manipulated, could gauge the direction of attack.

Reaching forward through the Fire, I flung a shield up a moment before the fireball was released.

The fireball hit the shield and exploded in midair, tendrils of flame skating down the shield's edge into the Chorl ranks themselves. Shock coursed through the river, from the Chorl Servant, from the Chorl priest, tasting of fear. As the Chorl forces were pushed back even farther, attacked now on two sides, I felt the Chorl leaders hesitate. . . .

And then another horn blew, this sound familiar: the sound of a shell being winded. Everyone in Amenkor had heard it when the second wave of Chorl ships had entered Amenkor's harbor, the Ochean's ship among them. It had sounded over and over as the ships rammed into the docks.

But this time, it only sounded twice, the last note fading. For a moment, nothing changed. . . .

Then the Chorl forces began to withdraw. They left a third of their men behind, either dead or dying.

"Do we follow?" Tomus asked. His breath came in ragged heaves, his face drenched with sweat, his dagger coated with blood. All of those around him looked the same.

On the field, the men who came under the black flag were harrying the Chorl as they fled.

Westen shook his head. "No. We don't know how many more Chorl there may be beyond the hills."

"But the others—" someone began to protest, motioning toward the other group. At the same time, the force beneath the black flag halted their pursuit, angling away, cutting across the fields in front of the walls, heading back where they'd come from.

The red symbol stitched onto the black flag snapped fully into view and everyone around Westen gasped.

Three slashes—one horizontal, two slanted vertically down and outward from that.

The Skewed Throne. The symbol of Amenkor.

Westen tensed, his gaze falling instantly to the figure on horseback in the lead.

The group was distant, but neither Westen nor I could mistake the man who led them.

"It can't be," Tomus said, his voice incredulous.

Westen grew grim. "It's Baill."

Inside the Fire, I felt rage envelop me.

Captain Baill, the man who had backed the consortium of merchants that had almost torn Amenkor apart, the traitor who had helped Alendor steal supplies from Amenkor during the past winter, handing the food over to the Chorl. He'd escaped the circular plaza in the eastern part of the city, escaped the trap we'd set for him, and he hadn't been heard from since.

I almost reached forward, almost seized control of Westen and ran after him, ready to make him account for all of his actions, had already grasped the river, had begun to twist it, when Tomus said, "But that doesn't make any sense. Why is he attacking the Chorl? Why is he helping Temall?"

"And why is he doing it all under the name of the Skewed Throne?" Westen said. He turned to Tomus.

The blond Seeker, blood matting his hair, looked stunned.

Behind them, the last of Temall's people entered the gates and a force of armed guardsmen streamed out after them, the man on horseback at the forefront heading straight for the Amenkor party's position. Westen stepped forward, still reeling inside over Baill's sudden appearance. The rest of the group ranged themselves wearily behind him.

The men from Temall halted ten paces away, the man on horseback—gray-brown hair and trimmed beard, brown eyes, and a stern expression on his face—eyeing Westen first, then the others.

"Who are you and where do you come from?" he asked, tone wary. His voice rumbled from his chest, grating like stone on stone.

"I'm Captain Karl Westen," Westen said, wincing slightly. The adrenaline was fading, the bruises he'd sustained during the fight beginning to throb. "We come from Amenkor, to warn you of the approaching Chorl."

The man snorted. "We know of the Chorl. Are you part of the Band?" He pointed with his chin toward where Baill and his group had vanished over the hillside.

Westen frowned. "No. We were sent by the Mistress. The Chorl have attacked Amenkor, and we believe the Chorl are on their way back. We have no idea who . . . or what . . . this Band is, even though they fly the Skewed Throne."

The man's eyes narrowed. For a long moment, silence reigned, broken only by the creak of armor and the clank of metal as the two forces fidgeted.

Then, the man raised his head, glancing over Westen's group.

"Well, Captain Karl Westen, I am Justaen Pyre, Lord of Temall. I thank you for your help with the Chorl attack, but your warning was unnecessary. We know of the Chorl, of their seizure of Bosun's Bay, and we've suffered under their raids for the last few months. But I can assure you that the Chorl have no interest in Amenkor." He paused, leaned forward in his saddle.

"They're heading south, toward Venitte."

Chapter 6

"VENITTE?" DARRYN SAID. He thought about this for a moment, then turned to the rest of those seated around the council table. "Then I guess we don't have to worry. Amenkor should be safe."

Avrell snorted in derision, Darryn shooting him a dark glare, but it was Captain Catrell who spoke first.

"Safe for now. But for how long? The problem was never where the Chorl were headed, it's the Chorl themselves. We're in as much danger with them conquering Venitte as we are with them coming straight for Amenkor. In fact, we're in greater danger."

More than Catrell even knew. I exchanged a glance with Avrell and Eryn. Both of them had reacted the same way once I told them what Westen had learned from Lord Pyre of the Chorl's movements, but for different reasons. Because of the second throne. If it was in Venitte, and if the Chorl gained control of it with the Skewed Throne destroyed . . .

"What do you mean?" Darryn bristled. "Why should we help defend Venitte against the Chorl when we've barely survived an attack by them already? We're still recovering. We can't afford to help them."

Everyone at the table grew taut with affronted anger.

Everyone except me. I understood what Darryn was saying. We'd learned the same instinct in the slums: survive at all costs. Which meant preserve yourself, don't worry about those you've left behind. If the threat has focused its attention elsewhere, slink off to hide and nurse your own wounds, forget about the next victim, thank the Mistress that you'd survived, and focus on making yourself stronger for the next confrontation.

But even in the slums I'd never been able to do that. Not after meeting Erick. Catrell glanced toward me, waited for a nod before continuing. Shifting forward in his seat, he said, "From a strategical standpoint, if the Chorl seize Venitte, they will have a base of operations that allows them access to virtually every resource they may need— food, lumber, stone—while at the same time putting them in easy reach of almost all of the sea trading routes. Right now, they have the Boreaite Isles and Bosun's Bay. The Isles allow them to raid the trading routes, but there's a wide swath of ocean between them and the mainland. They can't patrol that lane and expect to catch all of the trading vessels that sail through it."

"However, almost all trading routes pass through Venitte," Avrell interjected.

"It's a major port, more so than Amenkor when it comes to the shipping lanes. Amenkor is significant as a port, yes, but mostly as a stopping point for those tradesmen heading farther north by both land and sea and as a crossroads, with the pass to the eastern Kandish Empire. Even if lately the Empire has fallen unsettlingly quiet."

"They could use Venitte as a launching point," Eryn added. "It would give them the ability to stage an attack anywhere along the Frigean coast. So even though they aren't attacking Amenkor directly now, they would be able to launch an attack from Venitte in the future . . . and from a much stronger position."

Darryn leaned back in his chair. "I see."

But it was a grudging acceptance. I could still see the urge to lick wounds and thank the gods in his eyes, leaving Venitte to fend for itself.

Eryn must have seen it as well. "There are other reasons why the Chorl turning their attentions to Venitte is a problem," she said.

Avrell nodded. "Amenkor has a treaty with Venitte, an agreement that both sides have honored for hundreds of years. We're allied, which means that in the event of war, Amenkor must come to Venitte's defense, and they will come to our defense in return. If we'd had forewarning of the Chorl's intent to attack Amenkor on the first day of spring, Venitte might have been able to help us defend the city."

"But Venitte and Amenkor have fought each other before," Darryn countered.

"The Carter's War, and the Ten Year's War."

"Those disputes were between the two cities themselves," Avrell said. "This

threat is from outside. It's not a trade dispute, or a misunderstanding between the Mistress and the Lord of Venitte. This is an assault by a force that's invading the coastal region, the same force that prompted the alliance between the two cities in the first place."

"And there's a more significant reason we can't ignore the Chorl attacking Venitte," I said.

All but Eryn turned toward me. I could feel their eyes on me. Everything that Catrell and Avrell had said—all the reasons they'd given for going to the defense of Venitte—they were all true. But there was only one reason to keep the Chorl out of Venitte. A reason impressed upon me by the Seven when the Chorl were attacking Amenkor.

The second throne.

"When the Skewed Throne was created, there was another throne made, one just like the Skewed Throne, called the Stone Throne. I think that throne is still in Venitte. I think that's one of the reasons the Chorl are concentrating their attention there, rather than here in Amenkor. I don't know how they came to know the second throne is there, but I do know they came to Amenkor to seize this throne, the Skewed Throne. They came here specifically because of that. And now that it's been destroyed . . ."

I let my gaze fall on Darryn and Catrell, watched them stir beneath it. I thought of the priest who had tortured Erick on the Ochean's ship, thought of Haqtl, the priest who seemed to lead the Chorl priests themselves. I recalled the fervor in Haqtl's eyes when he realized there was a piece of the Fire of Heaven inside of Erick on the deck of the doomed ship The Maiden. It had been that fervor the Ochean used to get the Chorl to attack Amenkor, that had led Haqtl to the Skewed Throne. He'd only ordered a retreat when the throne had cracked. If he'd somehow learned there was another throne, another source of power . . .

And if Eryn was right, and the second throne was a male version of the Skewed Throne . . .

The Chorl seemed to be divided into three segments: the Ochean and her Servants; Haqtl and the priests; and Atlatik and the Chorl warriors. The Ochean had been destroyed, her power structure lost. Which left only Haqtl and Atlatik. And from what I'd witnessed through the Ochean's eyes before she'd died, the Chorl warriors followed the priests' advice.

Haqtl's advice.

"We cannot let the Chorl take the second throne," I said. "We're going to Venitte."

Everyone remained silent for a moment, and then Catrell nodded. "We will need to begin planning."

"Draw up a list of what you will need," Avrell said. "Nathem and I will handle it." At Catrell's nod, both captains of the guard rising and filing out, the First turned toward me. "You will have to speak to Captain Tristan and Brandan Vard about this. As representatives of Venitte, they need to know of the Chorl's intent, and our . . . offer to aid them."

I frowned, hearing the warning in his voice.

"You are planning on sending a military force—an army—into a foreign port," Eryn said. "You can't do that unannounced unless you intend to attack them. You need to ask for Tristan's sanction. He needs to accept your offer of help on Lord March's behalf."

"You may have to convince him," Avrell added.

I stared at them both, then sighed and turned to Keven. "Send someone for Captain Tristan and Brandan Vard."

"You wished to speak with me, Mistress?"

I motioned Captain Tristan to one of the seats in the outer rooms of the Mistress' chambers. He frowned, glanced toward Avrell seated to one side, and then settled himself while Marielle poured him a glass of wine.

"Where is Brandan Vard?"

"Occupied at the moment."

I nodded. "I have news of the Chorl that concerns both of you."

Tristan stiffened. The slight smile that had touched his lips faded. "I will pass on whatever information you have to Brandan Vard as soon as possible. What have you heard?"

I thought about Tristan leading Brandan away at the docks and wondered if Tristan would inform Brandan, but pushed the concern to the side. "As you may have learned, Amenkor sent a scouting party to Temall to determine the extent of the Chorl forces, their location and resources. I've had word from the party. It seems they have not yet taken Temall, that in fact they haven't begun to march toward Amenkor. It seems they have a different goal.

"They intend to march on Venitte."

Tristan became absolutely still, face a rigid mask.

But beneath the river, the currents roiled.

Tristan's eyes locked with mine. "I haven't seen any ships return, haven't seen or heard of any group of guardsmen returning from the south. How have you learned this information?"

I'd drawn breath to tell him of the Fire within Westen, but Avrell leaned forward.

"You are speaking to the Mistress of Amenkor," the First of the Mistress said.

"Suffice it to say that she is indeed in contact with the scouting party."

"Even with the Skewed Throne destroyed?" Tristan snapped.

"Even so," Avrell said coldly.

Tristan's gaze had never left mine, and in their depths I could see him reassessing me. The wrinkles at the corners of his eyes tightened, and his lips thinned. "Lord March must be warned. Immediately." He stood abruptly, bowed low. "Forgive me, Mistress. I must ready my ship for departure, leave on the next tide."

"Amenkor would like to extend an offer of help," I said. "Captain Catrell has already begun to assemble a force. We can escort you and your ship to Venitte."

"I'm . . . not certain that is necessary."

I shifted forward. "You are Lord March's representative. And it's my understanding that Amenkor and Venitte are allied, that Amenkor will come to Venitte's aid in case of an attack."

"But Venitte did not aid Amenkor this past winter when the Chorl attacked you."

"Because we had no advance warning," Avrell said. "If we'd known, we could have asked for aid. And, given our current relationship with Venitte, I'm certain that Lord March would have helped."

"We have experience with the Chorl, Captain Tristan. We've fought them once already, and won. It's in our own interests to keep them out of Venitte. Are you willing to turn down our aid?"

Tristan remained silent long enough I thought perhaps he would, but then he smiled tightly. "No. No, it would be foolhardy to refuse such a generous offer. On behalf of Lord March, the Council of Eight, and all of Venitte, I accept. Any aid you can offer would be greatly appreciated."

"Then I will have Captain Catrell coordinate our preparations with yours."

"Very well."

Bowing again, toward me and Avrell, he left the outer chambers, Keven closing the door behind him.

"He seemed somewhat reluctant," Keven said.

"No," I said, frowning. "He was hesitant. He wanted our help, he just isn't certain he can trust it."

"You are an unknown to him, Mistress. And he just agreed to allow Amenkor's forces inside of Venitte's walls."

I shook my head. "It's more than that. But I don't know what."

"Can you get all of that ready before the ships are set to sail?" I asked, handing over the list that Avrell had prepared.

"Of course," Regin said, glancing over it again with a frown. We were walking briskly down the wharf, gulls shrieking overhead, wheeling in the wind. "Trade caravans have started arriving from the north. Most of the supplies on the

list we already have or can get from them. Which ships are you intending to take?"

I motioned out toward the harbor, where one of Borund's trading ships, the Defiant, was anchored, two of the smaller Chorl ships nearby. All three had been refurbished and repaired, were simply waiting to be stocked and given orders. "The Defiant will be the main ship, escorted by the Spoils of War and," I winced, "the Booty."

Regin laughed. "I see a trend in the naming of the captured Chorl ships. Prize, Spoils of War, Booty . . ."

"Avrell was horrified with the last one," I said. "He tried to get them to change it—the Treasure or even just Salvage—but it had already stuck. Someone even painted Booty on the hull overnight."

Regin glanced down the length of the docks, turning serious. "That doesn't leave Amenkor many ships."

We paused. Two other traders were tied to the wharf, along with Tristan's ship; the last two Chorl ships were swarming with repair crews, having just been pulled in to berth. In the other direction, three docks had been given over to Borund and the construction of the new ships. Some type of scaffolding had been erected, carpenters working in a frenzy of activity.

"Borund is working as fast as he can," I said.

"But what about the defense of Amenkor while you're gone? What if the Chorl do return?"

Eyebrows raised, somewhat surprised at the concern in Regin's voice, I said, "Ships didn't seem to slow the Chorl down much last time. And William and the other new merchants have begun work on a new outer wall."

"True. But having no ships doesn't make me—or any of the other guilds for that matter—feel any more confident. And the wall will not be built overnight; it will take years to complete. You and Avrell are taking a significant portion of the army with you. No ships, an army composed mostly of recently trained militia . . . no, Mistress—it doesn't make me or anyone else comfortable."

"You'll have Eryn. She's staying here, along with a few of the Servants."

"It wasn't Eryn who saved us from the Chorl," Regin countered, eyebrows raised.

I frowned. "I can't stay behind, Master Regin. I can't just sit here in Amenkor knowing that the Chorl are going to attack Venitte." The words came out more vehemently than I'd intended, and something hardened in my chest, beneath my breastbone. Something hot and visceral. I needed to be active, needed to move. I couldn't simply sit in Amenkor and pass judgments on petty disputes while the Chorl destroyed the coast.

"A few months ago, you wouldn't have had a choice," Regin said. "The Skewed Throne would have kept you here."

I turned toward him, eyes wide. Because that was exactly it. A few months ago, I'd felt trapped in Amenkor, imprisoned by the throne. I'd resented it, especially since I'd just come to realize that there was more to the world than the streets of Amenkor, had only been able to withstand it because of the desperation of the city and then the attack by the Chorl.

But now the throne was dead. I was free, could travel beyond Amenkor and its boundaries. And I wanted to, the urge to explore like an itch beneath the skin, one that until now I couldn't scratch. That's why I'd tried to leave on the scouting ship with Westen, why I'd resented everyone arguing that I had to remain behind.

This time, I didn't have to stay behind. In fact, Avrell was insisting that I go. No Mistress of Amenkor had traveled to Venitte, to any of the coastal cities, because of the throne. Diplomatically, he said I had to go, as a show of good faith, and to emphasize the seriousness of the Chorl threat and Amenkor's allegiance to the treaty. And with me being inexperienced in the ways of true diplomacy, he felt he had to accompany me, to explain the intricacies of the politics involved in Venitte, to guide me.

To make certain I didn't screw up, I thought wryly.

But I didn't care about any of that. I just wanted out of the city. I wanted

to feel the deck of the trading ship rolling beneath my feet, wanted to feel the wind stinging against my face as we sailed, wanted to taste the salt of the spray kicked up from the bow of the ship cutting through the water. I'd dreamed about it since I'd first come down to the docks. An unidentifiable yearning at the time, because it had seemed impossible, but that had changed the longer I'd been around the wharf as Borund's bodyguard.

The yearning had grown, I just hadn't realized it until now.

"—just send these down to the warehouse, then," Regin was saying, and I returned to the conversation with a jerk.

"What?"

Regin grinned. "I said I'd take care of everything, have everything sent down to the warehouse for loading as soon as possible. And I think the merchants' guild needs to send William to Venitte, a representative to meet up with the guild members there, inform them of Alendor and his cohorts and what really happened with the consortium. And what's happening now with the Chorl of course. He needs to stretch his legs as a Master Merchant, needs to start making contacts. This is the perfect opportunity."

"I suppose so," I said. Me and William on a ship for two solid weeks, at the least. I could already feel myself tensing up. And not simply because we'd barely spoken to each other since the incident with Brandan on the wharf.

"Very good," Regin said. "Then if you'll excuse me." He bowed and headed off down the wharf, immediately calling over his apprentices as he moved, motioning toward the paper Avrell had prepared. Messengers had already been sent before he passed from sight.

"Where to now, Mistress?"

Keven had come up behind me. Feeling unsettled, I motioned toward the palace.

"I want to go see Erick."

Keven's face grew grim. "Very well."

I pursed my lips as we headed away from the wharf, winding up through the streets of the lower city, past stalls and warehouses, taverns and shops. I'd checked up on Erick almost daily at first, had spent hours inside the Fire at his core consoling him, comforting him, speaking to him. I'd managed to pull him up out of his self-imposed stupor enough to eat on occasion, but he always retreated from the pain eventually.

A pain that neither I nor Eryn could lessen. We'd tried, repeatedly. Tried to dampen it, since we knew we couldn't deal with the spell directly. A few of our tricks worked, but only for a short time, the seething needles that pricked Erick's skin returning, sometimes worse than before.

But it hadn't all been worthless effort. His other wounds—the burns, the nicks and bruises from the fighting on The Maiden and the subsequent mundane torture by the Ochean and Haqtl and the others—had healed. All except one, the circular puncture wound in the middle of his chest that Eryn had identified as the location of the spell placed on him. That wound was still angry, still raw. The fact that everything else had healed had kept everyone's hopes up for a while, Keven's included.

Not any longer. Erick had been lost for almost three months now. Hope was fading. I'd heard it in Keven's voice, could see it in the healer Isaiah's bitter eyes every time I entered Erick's chambers.

Perhaps it was time to see if Ottul could help. I hadn't called on her before because I couldn't trust her—still didn't trust her—but I was becoming desperate.

As we entered the Great Hall of the palace, the long corridor with the vaulted ceilings that had awed me when I'd first come to the palace to kill the Mistress, I said, "You don't have to come with me, Keven. You can wait outside."

For a moment, it was as if a huge burden had lifted from Keven's shoulders. He straightened, shoulders back, and relief flickered through his eyes.

But then he sighed and shook his head, his jaw clenched. "No, Mistress. Erick and I trained in the barracks together. We've known each other far too long."

I nodded, and then a movement far down the corridor caught my eye.

I slowed, felt the escort slow around me. Keven's brow knit in consternation, then relaxed.

Down the length of hall, on the left, near one of the numerous open doors that led to the interior halls and rooms of the palace, Eryn and Avrell stood together, conversing softly. Even as we slowed, Eryn shook her head, and I saw tears on her face.

Avrell reached up and, with a care that sent a tingling sensation through my chest, cupped a hand to her jaw and brushed the wetness away with his thumb. Eryn smiled, the contrast of tears and happiness terrible and wonderful at the same time.

Avrell leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead. When she glanced up into his face, he kissed her on the lips.

I suddenly thought of both of them, here, in the palace, Eryn trapped by the throne. I thought of them talking animatedly this past winter as we searched for the supplies Eryn thought she had hidden throughout the city, discussing parties and people, scandal and gossip. And I suddenly remembered being with each of them as they stood on the walls of the palace, the Chorl surging through the newly breached gates, stone crumbling around them, both hurt, both wounded, the world seeming to collapse in on them.

They'd thought of each other then.

I hadn't seen it, hadn't even noticed.

But now a hundred little gestures—a comforting hand here, a slight nod or smile there—flickered through my mind. A hundred little gestures now seen with completely new meaning.

And now, Avrell was coming to Venitte with me, while Eryn stayed here.

Far down the hall, Eryn began to cough, the sound painful to hear. She raised a cloth to her lips, while Avrell gripped her shoulder, his expression tortured as the fit worsened, as she tried to control it.

And suddenly it was too personal a moment to be seen by me, by anyone.

"Keven," I said, turning, but he was already directing me toward one of the arched doorways that led off of the main corridor, had escorted me through and into the hall beyond, the guards following, before either Eryn or Avrell noticed us watching.

"How long?" I asked, when I'd regained my breath, when the harsh hot stone in my chest had receded.

Keven looked at me as we walked, face troubled. "Off and on for years."

I thought about how I'd suspected Avrell of wanting to assassinate Eryn in order to seize the throne, thought of what pain it must have caused him to watch her sink into madness, to come to the decision that the only way to help her was to kill her, and felt sick to my stomach.

"Here we are, Mistress."

I glanced up, saw that we'd made our way back to the main corridor near the inner doorway, had passed through and were now in front of the door to Erick's room.

I drew in a breath, was surprised to hear it catch. Then I entered, Keven following close behind.

The room reeked of old sweat and sickness, of a body that had remained stationary for too long. I went to order the windows open, then realized that they were already open, that the reek I smelled came from the river.

I'd smelled the scent before, on the Dredge, and I felt my gut twist. It was the reek of despondency, of hope lost.

Of death.

On the far side of the room, at his desk, Isaiah looked up, his expression bruised and weary. "Nothing's changed."

"I know," I said. I moved across the room, pulled a chair up close to Erick's bedside. Reaching out, I almost touched his hand, almost gripped it in my own, but then remembered the invisible needles that would prick his flesh at the touch.

Withdrawing, I leaned back, tried not to sigh, blinked back the tears that threatened inexplicably at the corners of my eyes.

"Keven." My voice came out rough and thick. "Get Marielle. Have her bring Ottul here, with Trielle's help."

I felt him hesitate, sensed Isaiah's disapproval.

"Are you certain?" Keven asked.

I nodded. "I don't know what else to do. And we've waited long enough."

Keven didn't reply, just moved toward the door and murmured something to the guardsmen outside, then returned. I felt him at my back, felt Isaiah moving away from the bed, back to his desk. Both of their presences were comforts. But neither of them were the comfort I sought.

I wanted William. I wanted to feel his fingers twined in mine as I stood by Erick's bedside. I wanted his hands on my shoulders, as they had been the last time I withdrew from the Fire inside Erick, holding me, giving me strength. I wanted his touch.

Because the last three months had been hell. The last three months of staring at Erick's sickly pallor, at his sweat-drenched skin, at his flushed face. William had made it bearable.

And now William was gone. Over petty jealousy.

I hadn't realized I'd miss him this much.

Someone knocked on the door and Keven moved to answer it, opening it wide to allow Marielle, Trielle, and Ottul inside. The Chorl Servant moved uncertainly between the two Servants, stepping away from Keven, her gaze wary.

Then she caught sight of me and halted, anger flaring in her eyes.

Anger sparked deep down inside me as well. Narrowing my gaze, I said, "Come here."

Ottul hesitated, chin lifting in defiance—

But then something in that defiance crumbled. Grief flickered through her expression, and I thought of the hours Marielle said Ottul spent kneeling on the floor of her rooms, back hunched, rocking as tears streaked her face and she whispered guttural prayers. Grief that had started when she'd learned of the other Chorl captives' suicides.

With a glance toward Marielle, toward Trielle, Ottul stepped forward and bowed her head.

I drew in a deep, steadying breath, then said, "Look at him."

When Ottul didn't glance up, didn't move, I barked, "Look at him!"

Ottul started, her head snapping up, eyes flashing. Behind her, Marielle and Trielle flinched; Keven stiffened.

But Ottul looked where I pointed, looked at Erick. Her eyes flared again with heat, with hatred, but then her brow creased in confusion and she turned back to me.

"What did the Ochean do to him?" I asked. "Tell me what she did to him, and tell me how to stop it."

I could feel the tears burning at the edges of my eyes again. When Ottul didn't answer, I reached forward, grabbed her arm, and hauled her forward to the side of Erick's bed, felt her resist, her eyes wide. "Tell me what she did to him," I repeated, and then I tore open the shirt above Erick's chest, exposed the angry red mark above his heart.

Ottul gasped and jerked backward, one hand clutching at her chest, the other gesturing as words poured from her in a rush, short and sharp and clipped. My hand latched onto her upper arm again before she could flee and I dragged her to a halt. She fought me, tried to twist out of my grasp, fell to her knees, her voice cracking.

"What is it?" I spat. "What is it and how do I heal it? Help me!"

"No," Ottul whispered, then broke into her own language. Her eyes closed and she sank lower to the floor, collapsing forward, until I was forced to let her go or hold her upright. "No! Not help," she gasped, her terrified words degenerating into sobs. "Not help."

I stood back, all of the anger sapped from me, replaced by a dull sense of resignation. I watched as Ottul sank over her knees, her arms pulled in tight, hands clasped behind her neck. A protective curl, completely different from the kneeling position she used for prayer in her room.

She was frightened, had taken up a defensive posture, her shoulders trembling. I recognized it from the Dredge, arms and knees tight to protect the face and most vulnerable parts of the body from harm, that let the rest of the body absorb the blows.

Ottul expected to be beaten.

I felt Keven draw close behind me. "I don't think she's going to help."

"No. I don't think she can help. I don't think she knows how. But she's seen this before." My voice was lifeless. I drew in a deep breath, smelled Ottul's terror on the river, sharp with salt. "Take her back to her rooms."

I turned away as Marielle and Trielle moved forward, gathered Ottul up, and led her to the door. I listened as her sobs continued, interspersed with broken words, with gasps and moans. I could follow her movements, tremors reverberating on the river.

When the room had quieted, I sighed.

Then I dove deep into the river and pushed outward, toward Erick's Fire.

Hello, Varis.

I settled into the Fire, the seething pain from the needles piercing Erick's flesh a nagging intrusion in the background. A familiar intrusion now.

Erick.

I felt Erick's essence twist, felt him scrutinize me. What's wrong?

I'd thought I'd controlled myself before Reaching, but at Erick's words, layered with concern, with a vicious protectiveness that was meaningless where he now lay, trapped inside his own body, I broke.

The fear over Eryn's sickness, the despondency over Erick's condition, the fact that Ottul wouldn't be able to help, the turmoil over William and Brandan, the tender bitterness seen in the kiss Avrell had given Eryn—all of it welled up and surged forth in uncontrolled sobbing, all mixed together, all indistinguishable. A miasma of raw emotion that felt too large for me to hold. Erick responded by drawing me in, uttering nonsense words to hush me, rocking me back and forth as he'd done before, when I'd killed the fat man who'd snuck up behind him while he was taking care of another mark. Back then, he'd bundled me up in a blanket that reeked of grease and sweat while I cried hysterically, and he'd taken me back to my niche.

I smelled the grease and sweat of that blanket now, felt it enfolding me, smothering me . . . and I fought it back, pushed up and out of its comfort. I wanted nothing more than to let Erick hold me, to let him take the pain away, but not this time. I hadn't come here to be comforted.

I can't, I sobbed, thrashing away, the ache and turmoil melding over into anger. I can't help you, Erick. Eryn has tried, I've tried, and now even Ottul can't help you. I don't know how to help you, Erick! I don't know what to do! The admission tore something deep inside me, a pain that was visceral, almost real. A pain like that which had torn Eryn inside, that was tearing her up even now, that was killing her, visible only in the hacking coughs . . . and the speckled blood on her hands.

The pain sapped the last of my strength. I quit struggling out of Erick's comfort . . . and found that he was no longer offering it.

We sat in silence. I could hear my breath—his breath—echoing raggedly in his chest. As if we'd physically struggled, actually fought.

There was a distance between us, a gulf that felt as if it would never be breached.

Perhaps, Erick began, his voice strangely empty, lifeless. He hesitated a long moment, then continued. Perhaps there's nothing you, or anyone else, can do.

I didn't answer. Because I'd been thinking the same thing for the last month.

Ottul had been my last hope. I just hadn't been willing to voice it.

And because I didn't know where that left him, where it left me. I was afraid of where it left us.

What . . . should I do?

I didn't like the tentativeness in my voice. I could hear an unspoken possibility hidden behind the words, a possibility that I couldn't voice, that I would never have brought up, had never intended to bring up.

A possibility that apparently Erick had also considered.

End it.

My breath halted.

My gut instinctively clenched, screamed no, but I'd distanced myself from the roil of emotions, had fought them back.

I can't stay like this forever, Varis, Erick said, and I felt his anger as he voiced the unspeakable. But not the unthinkable. I can't live like this!

You've tried everything you could think of, Eryn's tried, Isaiah's tried, there's nothing left to try!

I thought of Ottul. Perhaps she'd misunderstood, perhaps she could help after all-

But I knew that wasn't true. I'd seen her reaction, had sensed her terror on the river. She couldn't fake that, couldn't hide it.

I could smell the death in the room.

Varis, listen to me. Erick reached out in the Fire. But not in comfort. He grabbed me, shook me, his anger palpable, his fury at what he had become bleeding into my essence like oil. You don't know what it's like in here, Varis. His voice was a vicious growl. I'm trapped in here! I'm trapped in here with nothing but memories! Memories like this!

And with a violent lurch, he dragged me in, dragged me into himself, past the barrier between us, the barrier that kept us separate from each other, that kept us distinct. I cried out, in denial, in shock-

And then I screamed. A hideous, roaring scream of pure and utter pain as white-hot fire touched skin. A scream that tore at my already raw throat, that went on and on as the iron spike pressed deeper in my thigh, searing flesh, muscle, tendon, the black stench of cooking meat filling the stone chamber. When the iron spike was removed, the man who'd held my naked body upright during the torture, hand entwined in my hair, another around my neck, body tight against my back to keep me from writhing, thrust me to the side. I landed with a thump on the sand-covered floor, wrenched my shoulder, my legs-tied with thorny vines-twisting beneath me. I barked at the new pain, but the throb in my shoulder was nothing compared to the sizzling heat from my thigh.

Arms tied so tight behind my back that my chest muscles screamed at the tension, I rolled until my forehead rested against the sand. It felt cool against my sweat-drenched skin, and I sobbed, sand blowing away from my face. A sandaled, blue-tinged foot fell in front of my face and I squeezed my eyes tight. Cloth rustled as the man knelt down beside me, a hand gripping my face, turning it harshly, squeezing until I snapped open my eyes, stared up at him through the blur of tears, of sweat, of blood.

Haqtl. The head priest. Black eyes. To complement the black tattoos that writhed on his face, stark against his yellow-and-red-banded shirt.

I sucked in a ragged breath, tasted blood on my lips, phlegm. Today would be a bad day.

Haqtl thrust my head back down into the sand, ground it in deep, grit getting into my eyes, sucked into my lungs as I tried to breathe, as he shoved harder, closing off the last tendrils of air. I struggled, began to kick and twist, thrashing my legs, the muscles in my chest reawakening with renewed pain, the white-hot patch on my thigh cracking open, blood trickling down my leg, but the struggles were weak . . . so weak. I'd been here for days, for weeks, each day the same, each torture unique.

But the worst days were with Haqtl.

I ceased struggling, and with a wrench, Haqtl lifted my head free, glared down at me as I spat blood and sand into his face. He didn't flinch, simply thrust me onto my back.

"Queotl," he barked, a phrase he'd repeated a thousand times during these sessions. He placed one foot on my chest, began exerting pressure. "Queotl!" The pressure increased, pain beginning to shoot through my back, my arms caught beneath me. The thorns from the vines used to tie them began to dig into flesh, into scratches that had finally scabbed over that morning after

days of abuse.

I began to roar, Haqtl pressing down harder, the thorns digging deeper, until the roar broke into wretched sobbing.

Haqtl's weight lifted. I rolled to the side instantly, released the tension in my arms, on the vines twisted around and around the muscles there.

"I don't understand you," I spat in anger, then rolled back again.

Haqtl glared down at me, face severe.

"I don't understand you!" I bellowed.

Without flinching, Haqtl stepped forward, barked something else, something I'd never heard him say before.

The Chorl behind him moved instantly, bringing forth a box. Carved of wood, riddled with curved icons like the tattoos on the Chorl men's faces, on Haqtl's face, the Chorl priest set the box down in the sand beside him and lifted off the lid.

From within, he withdrew a thin needle as long as his hand, the spine of some seashell or sea creature, and a clay bottle stoppered with wax. He pierced the wax with the spine, withdrew it slowly, then set the bottle back into the box. I jerked back when he stepped forward, a drop of liquid falling from the tip of the needle onto my skin. Where it landed on my chest, my skin burned, an agonizing burn that spread into the surrounding muscle, deep, deeper, like a thousand needles, as if my skin had literally caught fire.

And he hadn't even touched me with the spine.

I writhed to one side, sand spraying outward as I kicked, and Haqtl barked another command, the two Chorl warriors stepping forward. One kicked me in the stomach, then fell to my side with one knee planted on my chest. The other grabbed my legs.

Immobilized, I could only watch as Haqtl came around to my head, knelt beside me and raised the spine over my chest, over my heart. He glared down into my face, mouth set . . . and then he closed his eyes.

A blanket fell over me, a pressure that smothered me from neck to toe.

Haqtl began to murmur something, a whisper, barely audible.

And the spine began to descend.

I tried to struggle, felt the muscles in my neck tense as I willed myself to jerk free of the Chorl warrior's hands, as I commanded my body to move!

But the blanket that smothered me didn't slacken.

A moment before the spine touched the skin over my heart, before it sank into flesh, pierced skin and dug deeper, and deeper still, Haqtl opened his eyes . . . and smiled, his whispered chant falling silent.

And then I screamed—

And Erick thrust me back, pushed me from the memory with a roaring cry of his own, our two howls melding until we both broke at the same time, gasping into the trembling silence.

Still heaving, Erick said, more calmly than I expected, voice hoarse, ragged, That is what I'm living with. Those memories. That pain. That is what you're asking me to endure, over and over again.

Varis, I can't remain in this body. I can't live with it anymore. You need to set me free, Varis. You need to end it.

You need to kill me.

And then he released me, withdrew, left me sobbing again, my essence twisting in upon itself, unable to reach out for comfort, unable to find comfort within. Is this what it had felt like for Avrell, when he'd tried to free Eryn from the throne and finally realized his only way to save her was to kill her? Had he suffered like this?

I didn't know. I'd dealt with him for less than a year on a regular basis. He'd shown none of this pain when he and Borund had ordered the Mistress' death. But if he had felt this way, if he had felt this vicious scintillant pain, as if someone had knifed him in the gut, someone close, someone trusted, how had he survived?

Varis . . . please.

And I fled, pushed up and out of the Fire, collapsed back into myself with a

wrenching half gasp, half sob.

"Varis?"

A concerned hand fell onto my shoulder and I opened tear-blurred eyes. "He wants me to kill him, Keven. He wants me to end it."

Keven recoiled, hand jerking back from my shoulder, head snapping to look at Erick.

Erick's face was streaked with tears where he lay on the bed, but it was utterly calm. There was no emotion there. No tension around the eyes, no frown, no hint of a smile. Perfectly empty.

Except for the tears. Tears that I had most likely unconsciously forced him to shed as I shared his body, as I felt the pain inflicted upon him by Haqtl, by the Chorl.

When Keven turned back, I saw acceptance in his face. Understanding.

And with a strange horror I realized I understood as well, perhaps more so than Keven.

Because I couldn't even remain trapped in a city without rebelling, let alone remain trapped in my own body, trapped reliving those memories.

Death would be better.

And with that, the tears stopped. Suddenly, abruptly. Without even a hitch. Keven stood, his eyes never leaving mine. "If you won't," he said, "if you can't, I will. For Erick."

"No," I said, rising slowly. I could feel the weight of my sheathed dagger pressing into my back. "No. I'll do it."

Drawing the blade, I felt Keven nod and step back, heard a rustle of cloth as someone else stepped forward.

I was so focused on Erick, on his face, so expressionless, so devoid of anything I thought of as truly Erick, that I didn't acknowledge Isaiah until he gripped the wrist of the hand holding the dagger with the force and strength of iron and said, "I can't let you do that."

His voice, usually bitter and resentful, now reverberated with pure and utter resistance.

"You would defy me?" I asked, anger bleeding through the words, laced with pain.

"Yes."

"But I'm the Mistress."

He nodded. "I would defy even the Mistress over this." His eyes never left my face; his hold on my wrist never wavered. I could break that grip with a sharp twist, could kill Isaiah and Erick both in the space of two breaths, the potential hanging in the air between me and the healer like a living thing. Isaiah knew it, recognized it . . . and still he held me.

"There's nothing left to try," I argued, trying to break him, heard the tremor in my voice and forced it down. "You don't know what he's living through. You don't know what it's like. This is what he wants!"

Isaiah's eyes narrowed. "Sometimes, the patient—and those that are closest to the patient—are too blind to see. He is alive now, which means there is still hope. Mistress."

We glared at each silently for the space of a breath, for two—

And then I felt an unidentifiable surge on the river and the door burst open.

"Mistress!" someone shouted in warning.

With one quick turn, I broke free of Isaiah's gaze, ripped my hand free of his hold, and stepped in front of Erick's bed, Keven at my side an instant later, both of us facing the intruder at the door.

Brandan Vard.

"Venitte!" he shouted, stepping forward once, twice, the palace guardsmen that had been set to guard the door stumbling into the room behind him, kept at bay by some invisible shield, by the Sight. "They intend to attack Venitte—and you didn't tell me!"

"Mistress!" one of the stumbling guards barked. "We tried to halt him at the door, but—"

"Enough," I spat, cutting the explanation short. I could feel the effects of

the force Brandan used on the river, even if I couldn't see the manipulations myself. He truly was a Servant of Venitte. "What do you want, Brandan? This is not a good time."

Face twisted in rage, he growled, "You find out that the Chorl are going to attack Venitte and you don't warn me! I had to learn this from one of your servants? Amenkor and Venitte have an alliance!"

Trying to keep my voice level, I said, "We did warn you, as soon as we found out ourselves. We told Captain Tristan. He informed us that he would let you know immediately. Obviously, he didn't."

That brought Brandan up short. He spluttered for a moment, his anger spiking—And then, abruptly, all of his anger settled into a tight coiled ball. His stance shifted, stiffened, grew formal.

"I apologize for this intrusion. I will speak to Tristan—" he spat the captain's name, "—and find out why he did not feel it important to inform me of—"

He cut off, his gaze falling on Erick's prone form. "What's this?" Sharp, commanding, but without any of the anger of his earlier words.

"This . . . is none of your business."

We locked eyes. "That man is under a spell."

"I know that," I began.

And then realized what Brandan was saying.

Stepping forward, fighting against the hope that surged forward with the force of an ocean's wave, I asked, "You can see it? You can see the spell?"

"Of course."

"Can you break it?" Keven said.

Brandan frowned, uncertain now, confused.

Drawing a deep breath to calm myself, feeling the wave rising inside me, surrounding me, I tried to explain. "This man's name is Erick. He's a guardsman here in the palace, a Seeker, and my personal bodyguard. He was captured by the Chorl, and then rescued during the attack on Amenkor. But when we brought him back, we found this spell on him, one that none of us can see and only a few of us can feel. If you can see it, if you can break it . . ." Brandan hesitated, watching me intently, as if trying to decide whether I spoke the truth, if I was deceiving him, but then he nodded. "I can try." Without waiting for permission from Keven or the guardsmen, he stepped up to Isaiah's side of the bed, Keven and I moving to the other, and leaned over Erick's body. Slipping beneath the river, where the hope I was trying to suppress grew almost overwhelming, I felt the river shift beneath his probing. I couldn't tell what he was doing, but I could see the occasional consequences of his actions, like ripples on water caused by a fish hidden beneath the surface.

"It's some kind of shield," he muttered after a long moment, "layered close to his body, like a second skin. And it's secured near his heart."

"Yes." I thought about the needle that had been pressed into Erick's skin by Haqtl, about the burning sensation of the poison that had coated the needle.

"Can you remove it?"

Brandan glanced up. "No."

I almost staggered back, the wave of hope cresting, beginning to crash down, threatening to crush me.

But then Brandan added, nonchalantly, "But Zachari could."

"And where is Zachari?"

Brandan leaned back. "Venitte."

"We'll have to bring Zachari here," Keven said. "Quickly."

"There won't be enough time," Isaiah said, and his voice was calm, collected. The familiar resentful bitterness had returned. "Erick won't survive long enough for you to send word to Venitte, get Zachari on a ship, and get him back here. Erick's too close to death."

"Then what can we do?" Keven said in frustration.

I leaned over Erick's placid face. I reached out and brushed a stray lock of hair away from his closed eyes.

"We take him with us to Venitte," I said.

"Why couldn't we see it?" Eryn asked.

On the wharf, the four nearest docks were a torrent of activity, the two Chorl ships, Borund's trader, and Tristan's ship all being loaded at the same time, casks and crates winched up and overhead or hefted onto shoulders and hauled up planks. The lower city itself was a riotous mix of guardsmen, their families, hawkers, Servants, carts, horses, carriages, and sailors. I couldn't help thinking it was a gutterscum's dream. Easy marks, easy pickings.

"Because we're women," I said, turning my attention from the ships and docks to Eryn. "Brandan said that the Sight, and another one of the Five Magics he calls the Threads, are split into two sources—male and female. Essentially, the Servants of both Amenkor and Venitte are using both the Sight and the Threads when we manipulate the river, even though we think of it as only one source of power. But for the most part, whether or not we can see what each of us has done depends on our skill with both magics . . . and whether we're male or female. He can't see what we're doing when we manipulate the river any more than we can see what he does. Some can feel the other side of the magic, like you could feel the spell on Erick, but no one he knows can see both sides. "The spell put on Erick was placed there by Haqtl, not by the Ochean and the Servants. I know. I was there when Haqtl used the needle to pierce Erick above the heart and secured it. Erick showed me. That's why that wound won't heal when all of the others did. And since neither one of us can see the spell, we can't remove it."

"What if Brandan is lying? What if he's manipulating you for some unknown political reason? We know he and Tristan aren't exactly friends, we know that there's something else going on, and we have no idea what's at stake there. In fact, we have no idea what the political climate in Venitte is at the moment at all."

I thought about Brandan barging into Erick's chambers, about how confused he'd looked when he'd first spotted Erick. "I don't think he's lying about Erick. And I know he can see the spell. He described it and its effects too well."

"But he could still be lying about being able to remove it in Venitte."

I turned to Eryn. "I don't have much choice. Neither one of us can help, and with what he's told us, Ottul was never going to be of any use either."

Eryn shook her head. "I know. It's just . . ."

Farther down the wharf, a crate crashed to the planking and split open with a crunch, apples spilling out, the caged chickens nearby flapping in agitation, a goat bleating. The dockmaster bellowed in rage, dark-skinned Zorelli leaping to gather up the apples.

Avrell stood watching from the end of the dock, a dark frown on his face.

Eryn's brow grew troubled and she coughed once, the sound halfhearted and empty, almost like a habit now.

I glanced out toward the waters of the harbor. "Avrell can stay here. I can survive Venitte without him."

I felt Eryn's eyes on me, felt her considering, but then she sighed. "No. You need him more than I do. We've been separated before, by duty, by choice. This is no different."

Except it was. The blood-speckled white cloth Eryn kept tucked in her sleeve spoke of that.

But I didn't say anything. Because I thought I would need Avrell in Venitte.

"The carriages have arrived," Eryn said.

I turned back toward the city, caught sight of the three carriages as they drew up alongside the end of the Defiant's dock, the crowd being pushed back by Catrell and a slew of guardsmen. Most of those on the wharf weren't interested in what was happening on the docks themselves, too busy hugging and sobbing and saying farewell to loved ones as guardsmen and sailors loaded themselves onto the four ships, but when the occupant of the first carriage emerged, a hush overtook those closest, and a dark surge of hatred and resentment and fear coursed through the river.

"I still think you should leave Ottul here," Eryn muttered.

I didn't answer.

The darkness on the river swelled as Ottul was escorted down the pier toward us by four Servants and ten guardsmen. She hadn't caused any serious problems since that first attempt to break free after we'd found her, but I wasn't taking any chances.

She sensed the hatred on the river as well. Her eyes darkened, and that defensive arrogance settled into the lines of her face. Tossing her long black hair, she straightened, proceeding down the dock at a swift pace, as if she were being presented with honor, not guarded as a prisoner.

"Mistress," Marielle said. She, Trielle, Heddan, and Gwenn were the four Servants keeping Ottul under guard, Gwenn chosen because Ottul had bonded to her in some way during her excursions to the training grounds.

"The room has been prepared and is ready," I said.

Marielle nodded, the others following suit, and then they swept past, heading for the Defiant. I'd already put Ottul out of my mind, stepped forward now to the end of the pier and the second carriage.

Catrell and three other guardsmen helped Isaiah down from the carriage, then reached in to begin pulling out the carrying board that Erick had been lashed to for transport. He'd been made as comfortable as possible with pillows and blankets, but I still winced as they tilted him out using the handles built into the sides.

The fiery pain of the needles caused by the lashing, by the jostling movements, would be excruciating.

"Get him onto the ship and settled as quickly as possible," I said to Isaiah.

"Of course, Mistress."

As they moved carefully by, I dove into the Fire at Erick's core, sent him a surge of hope, of sympathy, but retreated quickly.

The pain was excruciating.

The third carriage carried William and Borund, both dressed in their formal merchant jackets.

"—and remember to give Master Tanser the contract for the casks of salted fish. You'll want to keep on his good side; he runs half of the silk trade to the southeast."

William rolled his eyes. "I know, Master Borund, I've dealt with him before."

"But not as a Master yourself. Make him deal with you respectfully, or he'll take advantage of you. Keep in mind, you're a representative of Amenkor, of its merchants' guild. Make them all treat you with respect."

William suppressed a heavy sigh. His gaze swept the docks, locked onto me for a lingering moment before glancing away, a troubled frown crossing his face.

Borund noticed. He settled an arm over William's shoulder and led him forward, leaning in close to mutter something in his ear. William shot me another furtive glance, mouth pressed tight, and then Borund slapped him on the back.

"Safe voyage. And beware of Master Handleford! He'll try to get you to wed one of his daughters!"

William ignored him, moving off down the dock without a backward glance to me or Borund, although I could see the tenseness in his shoulders.

Borund turned toward me. "And you," he said, voice dark.

"What?"

He placed his hands on my shoulders, his serious expression breaking into a soft grin. "Don't let his mood keep you away. He cares for you more than he's willing to admit."

When I frowned, he laughed and drew me in for a quick hug. I could feel him chuckling as he held me tight, then pushed me back. "I'll rebuild Amenkor's fleet, just you watch. It won't happen overnight, but I'll do the best I can."

We hadn't had much chance to talk since I'd stormed into his manse and commanded him to build Amenkor more ships, but I found I was no longer angry with him. Not over his inability to fight on the docks when the Chorl attacked, and not over what that had done to William.

And then orders were being bellowed all along the wharf, the four docks

steadily emptying as the last of the crates were loaded, the last of the guardsmen extricating themselves from their wife's or children's clutches, picking up their bundled clothes and possessions, giving one last lingering kiss, and then hurrying down the dock and up the planks onto the ships.

"Well," I said, about to turn toward the Defiant, noticing that Catrell had sent one of the carriages away, had come up to my side, waiting patiently beside Keven. The other two carriages waited to take Eryn back to the palace and Borund to his manse. Catrell would be on the Spoils of War, Darryn taking his place as captain of the guard in Amenkor.

Before I could say good-bye to Eryn, someone shouted, "Wait! Mistress, wait!" I frowned, everyone turning toward the distant shout. A woman, hair a light brown and eyes a startling green, waved from the edge of the cordon of guardsmen. She was vaguely familiar. A young boy was clutched to her side, his arms wrapped around her leg. The boy had the same hair as the mother— But he had Westen's eyes.

"Let her through," I said, and when Eryn turned toward me in question, I shook my head.

The woman rushed forward as soon as the guards let her pass, the boy letting go of her leg and grabbing on to her hand. She knelt before me, head bowed, and I thought she would have sketched the Skewed Throne symbol across her chest if she hadn't held something tightly in the other hand.

"Mistress," she said breathlessly, but before she could continue, I touched her gently on the head and motioned her to rise. The boy latched back onto her leg.

"What do you need?" I asked.

"Could you give this to him?"

She held out the object in her hand—a braid of hair, twined with ribbon and a sprig of honeysuckle.

I shot her a sharp look, wondering how she knew of Westen's scent. I could see where she'd cut the locks of hair from her head.

"Of course," I said, taking the braid from her.

She smiled, her face radiant.

I glanced down at the boy, who tightened his grip on her leg and swung himself backward, hiding behind his mother's form. "And who's this?"

Westen's wife rustled the boy's hair. "We named him Ash," she said, and I winced. My name, the name I'd forsaken on the Dredge to become Varis. But she didn't seem to notice, continuing with, "And I'm Nadeen."

At my back, I felt Keven shift forward. "Mistress, the ships are ready."

I caught Nadeen's eyes, saw the muted question she couldn't bring herself to ask.

"He's fine," I said. "And I'll make certain he gets this. I'll give it to him myself."

She didn't seem to know what to say, the fear and worry she'd kept suppressed so far beginning to break free. Taking Ash by the hand, she finally said, "Keep him safe," and then she backed off, drew Ash up into her arms, and slid back into the crowd.

"I had no idea," Eryn said after a long moment.

"He's kept it hidden well."

"Mistress," Keven said again.

"I know," I said, somewhat curtly. All along the docks, ties were being undone, one of the Chorl ships already edging away from the wharf toward the open harbor. "Let's go."

Catrell barked an order, the last of the guardsmen splitting into two groups, Catrell heading toward the Spoils of War, Keven waiting impatiently at my back. Farther down, I saw Tristan motioning the last of his men onto the Reliant, Brandan at his side sending dark glares at Tristan's back.

"Safe journey," Eryn said, when I turned back.

And then Keven and the escort led me down the dock and on board the Defiant.

A half hour later, I sailed out between the watchtowers of the harbor.

And out of Amenkor.

Part II:
At Sea

Chapter 7

"It's becoming harder to target the Chorl's Servants," Liviann said. "They've altered their strategy, have begun actively attempting to kill our own Servants in the field, as well as us." Here, she threw a heated glance toward me, toward my leg, held stiff and straight out before me with splints, elevated onto a stool. It still throbbed fiercely, even weeks after having been crushed under my dying horse. Some days more painfully than others. Like today.

We were seated in the wide round room known as the Council of Seven. Made entirely of black stone, the floor polished to a high obsidian gloss, the chamber stretched over fifty paces in diameter, seven pillars rising from the floor to the edges of the domed ceiling high above, rounded alcoves between the supports. Light glimmered in each of the alcoves—an ethereal light, pure white in nature, the work of Garus and Seth—and at the moment there appeared to be no entrance or exit from the room. It had been sealed off from the outside world.

In the center of the room, seven seats sat facing each other in a wide circle. Each seat was different, representing the personality of one of the Seven—a solid oak chair with arms for myself; a rounded cushioned ottoman, no arms, no back, for Silicia, so she could stretch out; a simple seat for Garus, no arms, but with a low back.

Liviann sat in a rigid chair made of ash, with a tall back and no arms. Almost like a throne. She'd arranged her dress so that the folds fell just so.

"Rymerun was a trap," I said. "An ambush. They caught us off guard. They won't do so again."

Liviann waved aside my comment angrily. "You should not have charged off on your own. The Seven are too important for the survival of the Frigean coast, especially now, with the Chorl."

"Enough," Garus spat. He rose from his own seat and began pacing behind it. "We've heard the argument a hundred times, Liviann, I don't care to hear it again."

"Yes," Alleryn interjected. "It's become tiresome."

"Tiresome!"

For a moment, it seemed that Liviann would launch into a tirade and I sighed, adjusting the position of my leg with a wince and a silent curse. But instead, Liviann abruptly calmed.

I frowned. She was more dangerous when she was calm.

"Do you deny that at the moment, with the threat of the Chorl hanging over the coast, that we—the Seven, and through us the Servants—are the only ones holding the Chorl back?"

"The armies of Venitte have been able to push the Chorl out of the city," Atreus said.

"But only because we and the Servants have been able to neutralize the Chorl Servants. Without their Servants, the Chorl are just men, just guardsmen. Every battle fought without us, without a Servant or Servants as part of our ranks to counter their Servants, has been lost."

Grudging silence.

Liviann leaned back into her seat. "At the moment, we walk a thin line. We've pushed the Chorl out of the city and the surrounding lands, and that took us over two years. With the help of Amenkor and Marlett, we've kept them out of all of the major cities, all of the major ports. But the Chorl have become entrenched now. We haven't gained any significant ground on them in months."

"Not for want of trying," Garus interjected with a low murmur.

Liviann ignored him. "The problem is the Servants, both theirs and ours."

"How so?"

Liviann turned toward Silicia, lips pursed. "We've come to an impasse. They

know of us and we know of them, of their capabilities. We were only effective against each other when everyone was an unknown. Since then, we've decimated their ranks by targeting them in battle when they weren't expecting such magical resistance. Their advantage in numbers has been destroyed. But they've changed their tactics, and now we can't simply charge in—" another swift glance toward me; a slight hardening of her voice, "—without the threat of an ambush. They've begun to defend themselves and we've lost our advantage. While they can't defend against the power of the Council members in particular, there are only Seven of us, not enough to effectively counter all of the Chorl Servants that remain. And our own Servants are vulnerable because they don't have use of all of the Five Magics; in effect, our Servants and the Chorl's are evenly matched."

"What are you saying, Liviann?" I said, irritated, suddenly tired of the discussion. The throb in my leg had become a steady pulse, worse in the hip. I wanted out of this chamber, wanted to retire to my room so I could soak my leg in hot water.

Reaching down, I began massaging my hip.

"I'm saying that the Seven have become indispensable. Venitte—the entire Frigean coast—can't afford to lose any of us or the balance that we've sustained so far will crumble. At the same time, I think something needs to change. We need to do something to upset the balance in our favor."

"But what?" Garus growled.

"If we can't risk ourselves," Seth interjected, "then we'll have to rely on the other Servants."

Alleryn scowled. "Yes, but as you say, Liviann, our Servants are at most evenly matched with the Chorl Servants. We'd be risking them with no guarantee of the outcome shifting in our favor. Linking them decreases their ability to protect our own armies, because we then don't have enough Servants to spread out over all of the units."

"And our Servants are indispensable," Liviann added. "We've all commented on the fact that there seem to be fewer and fewer Servants discovered on the coast every year."

"And of those found," Silicia said, "they have less and less power. We have not found a true Adept since Atreus and myself, and that was almost a hundred years ago."

Garus halted his pacing, his face thoughtful as he rested his hands on the back of his chair and scanned the Seven. "We need something that will shift the balance of power into the Servants' hands, something that will strengthen them, give them an edge over the Chorl."

"Yes," Liviann said. "And more. We need a way to preserve the knowledge that we possess, in case one of us is lost. Something that will allow us to pass our knowledge on to future Servants and Adepts. Something that they can use to protect the city against the Chorl, against any invader that threatens the coast."

I felt the weight of Liviann's words press down on me and with a sinking sensation in my gut realized all of the other Seven had turned toward me.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked warily.

Liviann stood, stepped toward me, but halted a pace away. "You are the Builder here, Cerrin. And you are the one most balanced in all Five Magics. Build something that will give our Servants an edge in battle. Build something that will preserve our knowledge, that will preserve us."

I hesitated.

She must have seen the skepticism in my face, for she stepped forward, placed her hands on the arms of my chair, and leaned in so close our noses almost touched. I could smell the perfume she'd used to cloak her sweat: lavender and mint, so pungent it made my nose twitch.

In a voice pitched so softly that I doubted any of the other Seven heard, she said, "Build something that will destroy the Chorl. For Venitte. For the coast. And for your wife and daughters."

Something deep inside my chest hardened and for a moment the pain in my leg

vanished, forgotten. I saw Olivia's face, her dark skin, her silky hair, smelled her vibrant scent—a sea scent, salty and sunny, overriding even Liviann's perfume—as I held her, rested my chin on the top of her head while she nestled back into my arms, feeling her warmth through my shirt. Like an echo, I heard Pallin's laughter, heard Jaer shriek with delight, and the bright, happy sounds twisted painfully in my chest.

Always the same memory: all of us on the veranda of the estate on the cliffs above the channel, a moment before the Chorl appeared, before they attacked. The last memory of us all together.

I drew back, focused on Liviann's face, close enough I could feel her breath against my skin. She'd used my wife, my daughters, to manipulate me, and I felt an urge to deny her because of that.

But my mind had already begun to plan, to build.

And Liviann knew it. I didn't even need to answer her. A smile touched her lips, there and gone, and she pushed back from my chair.

"In the meantime," she said, moving toward her own seat, "I think we need to be a little more aggressive with the Servants themselves."

"How so?" Garus asked in a low rumble.

Liviann sat down in her chair—in her throne—and arranged the folds of her dress around her.

"We need to send them into the Chorl camps and attack the Chorl there, not just on the battlefield. We need to make them assassins."

I woke with a cry as the ship lurched and the hammock I slept in swung wildly. I flailed around, disoriented. The sensation of falling closed off my throat and sent waves of tingling panic through my arms and fingers.

Then someone grabbed me, hissed, "Mistress," and when I recognized Marielle's voice, I ceased struggling.

"What's happening?" I barked.

In the darkness of the cabin that had been given over to me, Marielle, and Trielle, I felt Marielle shift away. "I don't know. I sent Trielle up to the deck to find out. It started picking up about fifteen minutes ago."

Even as she spoke, the ship rolled beneath us. The hammock swung with the motion, and I gripped the edges as a wave of sea-sickness washed over me. I'd been violently ill the first few days after we'd sailed, but I thought I'd finally gotten my "sea legs," as the crew of the Defiant said, usually through grins. Swallowing against the taste of bile, I tried to right myself in the hammock, managing to slip from it gracelessly just as a flame sparked and light filled the cabin.

The ship lurched again, and I heard water slapping against wood, the boards beneath us creaking. Marielle frowned as she hung the lantern she'd lit on a hook beneath one of the massive squared timbers low overhead. So low that most of the guardsmen and Servants had to duck.

Marielle looked pale, almost gray.

Before I could offer any reassurances, Trielle returned.

"Captain Bullick says that we're skirting the edge of a storm," she said, succinct and businesslike, but with a trace of excitement. "He doesn't think it will get much worse than this. He thinks we'll outrun it."

"I'd like to go up on deck," I said, and I saw Trielle's eyes light up.

Marielle almost moaned.

A half hour later, hammock stowed away and dressed in my usual white shirt and brown breeches, I climbed up the ladder with Trielle onto the deck into post-dawn light, having left Marielle behind in the cabin. Salt spray struck my face and I grinned, suffused with a strange energy. I stood a moment on the heaving deck, felt its rocking motion beneath me, my legs now adjusting to compensate for the sudden shifts, and let the wind gust over me.

Ahead, at the railing, Captain Bullick saw me and motioned me over.

"Mistress," he said in greeting. He held a long tube up to his eye, but after a moment he dropped it to his side, the tube sliding together into a more compact form. He wore the standard captain's uniform, a colored jacket like the merchants used, embroidered at the edges, because the captains were so

closely affiliated with the merchants' guild. Bullick's jacket was gray, with blue embroidery.

He stared at me with a slight frown. "I can't suggest you remain on deck, Mistress, not in such dangerous waters."

Not quite a command, I chose to ignore it.

"Trielle mentioned a storm."

Bullick grunted and motioned out across the water. "See for yourself."

On the horizon to the right—to starboard, I thought, chiding myself—black clouds billowed skyward, the ocean black beneath them, a roiling darkness illuminated only briefly by jagged blue lightning. I realized I could taste the lightning on the river, bitter and metallic. Putting a hand to the railing to steady myself, the wood shuddering beneath my fingers, I raised the other to shield my eyes from the wind.

"You can see where it's raining," Trielle said at my side.

"Where?"

Trielle pointed. "See where the lighter gray is slanting down near the cloud's edge? That's rain."

I nodded, picking out the diagonal cut across the darker gray of the clouds in the background.

For a moment, the crest of a wave blocked the view and I drew back, focusing on the ocean closer at hand. I gasped. "The waves!"

"Yes," Bullick said. "They're almost cresting higher than the deck. Which is why I suggest you stay below."

"But Trielle said you thought we'd skirt the storm."

"And so I still think, but that doesn't mean we won't see some rough seas. It's safer if you remain below, just in case."

As he spoke, the ship tilted up and over one wave and began to descend into the trough behind. I felt the motion in my stomach, the vile taste of vomit again at the back of my throat.

The Defiant slammed into the next wave, fine spray thrown up and over the prow, washing across the deck. Bullick didn't even turn to look, barely affected by the ship's motion at all, but deckhands were scrambling through the rigging, already adjusting the sails.

A small frisson of fear coursed through me, cold and electric. I remembered the storm Erick and The Maiden had been caught in, recalled the waves crashing over the deck. Men could be swept overboard.

And I couldn't swim.

"I think you're right," I said. "I'll wait out the storm below."

He nodded. "Very well."

His tone suggested the idea had been all mine, but it was satisfied.

"How much longer until we hook up with Westen and the Prize?" I asked.

"If the storm doesn't put us too far off course, we'll reach the port of Temall in another day."

Then he turned away.

As Trielle and I returned to the open hatchway and the ladder that led below, I caught a glimpse of the other three ships in our group—Tristan's Reliant, and the two Chorl ships. All three were off to the left, farther away from the storm, and all were beginning to turn toward the coast that could not be seen on the horizon.

"I wonder how they're faring," I said, thinking of Catrell. And of Brandan Vard and Tristan.

Trielle snorted. "Better than we are, I'm sure."

As I descended the ladder, I felt the Defiant change course, heading toward the other three ships.

The rough seas broke a little before dusk, and everyone spilled out from below onto the decks as soon as Bullick gave permission. The initial excitement tinged with fear had quickly worn into a sickening rhythmic monotony as the ship heaved, the single lantern allowed swinging back and forth in the cramped quarters. I'd spent the first few hours with Avrell and Keven, Marielle and Trielle in attendance, discussing the protocol and politics of Venitte, then

escaped to Erick's room where I helped Isaiah try to ease Erick's pain using the White Fire. The sudden movements and hard rocking of the ship aggravated the prickling needles on Erick's skin, since he had to be tied down to keep from slipping from his cot. I'd been forced to seize control of Erick's sweat-soaked body in order to make him eat.

But as soon as the ship calmed, I left Isaiah and Erick and joined everyone else on deck. I sucked in the fresh air, stretched cramped muscles, and only then realized that the close quarters below deck, the tight niches and small boltholes, reminded me of the Dredge and the slums beyond.

"Bullick says we were pushed far enough off course that we won't reach Temall until late tomorrow," Avrell said. He and Keven had approached me almost as soon as I emerged from below. "But at least we didn't lose any of the other ships during the storm." He nodded to where the three ships surrounded us, one of the Chorl ships just ahead, the Reliant and the second Chorl ship behind.

"Bullick seems to be a fair captain."

I shrugged. "He's too stiff and formal."

Avrell grinned. "You'll find most of the captains stiff and formal, then.

Ships require strict discipline."

"Worse than the palace?"

"Worse than the palace."

"Hmm." I made a face that forced Keven to chuckle.

Leaning onto the rail, I stared out at the faint edge of land that could be seen off the port side, gliding by smoothly under the light breeze. Too distant to pick out any details, it appeared more as a gray-green haze trapped between the deep, deep blue of the ocean coursing by beneath us and the lighter blue of the cloudless sky above.

"Here," someone said, and I turned to find William holding out the strange compact tube that Bullick had used earlier, before the storm. In the cramped quarters of the ship, we'd been forced to see each other on a daily basis—while eating, taking breaks on deck—but William had been cold, had averted his gaze, had mumbled something too low to hear as we passed each other in the narrow corridors. He hadn't given me the chance to start a conversation with him, let alone try to explain that nothing had happened with Brandan. I'd found his entire attitude irritating and, after the first few days, had avoided him as much as possible.

But now he stood before me, Bullick's device held out in one hand, a strange pleading expression on his face.

Our eyes met, held for a moment. I realized he was trying to apologize.

And then he dropped his gaze and sighed.

"It's called a spyglass," he said. "You can get a better look at the coast from here. Like this."

He pulled the tube out to its fullest extent, and I could see how the cylinders collapsed into one another. Raising the smallest end to his eye, he peered through it, stepping up beside me at the railing. I felt his shirt brush my arm.

"Mistress," Avrell said, and with a start I realized he and Keven had stepped back. With a nod, Keven trying to withhold a knowing grin, they wandered away down the deck.

Behind them, I saw Marielle and Trielle watching closely, Marielle leaning in to whisper something in Trielle's ear. Trielle laughed, the sound light and mischievous, and I frowned, thinking about what Marielle had told me, about what we'd discussed since, about me and William and Brandan, about kissing, about sex.

"Would you like to try?"

I turned back to William, felt my skin burning on the back of my neck as I realized he meant the spyglass and not . . .

"What do I do?" I said, accepting the tube in one hand, my voice short. It was heavier than it looked, and I realized there were lenses at each end, like the lenses on Borund's glasses, but rounder and thicker.

He hesitated, uncertain. Then: "Hold the small end up to your eye and point it

toward whatever you'd like to get a closer look at."

I did so, pointing the glass toward the land and closing my other eye as I'd seen him do. I frowned. "All I see is a blur of blue."

"You have to hold it steady. And I think you're still looking at the ocean. You don't have it high enough. Here, I'll help."

I jumped when he stepped up behind me, so close our bodies touched, and involuntarily pulled the spyglass away from my eye. The heat on my neck crept upward, but then his hands closed over mine, his arm reaching around me, and he pulled the glass higher.

"Ready?" he asked.

His head was next to mine, his mouth close to my ear. I could feel his breath against my neck.

I drew in a long breath. "I guess."

I didn't like how strained my voice sounded, but I swallowed and brought the end of the spyglass up to my eye, leaning back into William slightly as I squinted and closed the other eye.

"See anything?"

I couldn't breathe, let alone see anything. I felt my hands trembling, threw a curse at Marielle for putting vague, alluring thoughts into my head— And then a swath of green and tan interrupted the blurred field of blue through the glass.

I gasped and my arms tensed as I tried to hold the spyglass steady, all thought of sex, of my annoyance at William's actions on the wharf, of his curtness on the ship, gone as the green and tan settled down into a length of rocky beach and a fringe of pine trees, appearing so close I almost reached out to try to touch them. The branches of the trees thrashed in the breeze, and waves rushed onto the rocks in a boiling froth of white foam, accompanied incongruously by the sounds of the ship—calls from the men in the rigging, conversations on the deck, the clang of a bell signaling the hour and the constant shush of the ocean sliding by.

The juxtaposition of the noise of the ship against the expected but nonexistent sound of waves crashing onto a beach and wind singing in the trees felt eerie. It sent a shiver down through my spine.

William's hands dropped away and he stepped back, leaning on the rail beside me. I lowered the spyglass.

"How does it work?"

"The lenses," he said, then shrugged. "All of the ship captains use them."

I didn't remember Mathew, the captain of The Maiden, having one, but I hadn't spent that much time on board his ship. And what time I had spent aboard his ship had been within the Fire at Erick's core.

I turned back to the shore, looked at the far shore through the spyglass again. "So what happened at the wharf?"

I felt William stiffen, his presence on the river prickling. "What do you mean?"

I snorted, turned toward him, let some of my anger and irritation seep into my voice. "After that little incident with Brandan, after the tour, you barely came to the palace. You avoided me when I was out in the city, barely acknowledged me on the docks before we left."

"I was busy. With guild matters."

"Like hell. What about here on the ship?"

He shifted uncomfortably and I turned away in disgust, brought the spyglass back to my eye, even though I wasn't focusing on anything, wasn't even trying. William straightened, grew still. "It's Brandan Vard."

"What about him?"

A short silence. "I don't trust him. He's hiding something."

I almost sighed, disappointed. Because I was speaking to William the merchant now, not the William who had spent hours with me at Erick's bedside, not the William who had held me when Erick's condition had driven me to tears. "I know that, William. I just don't know what it is he's hiding. What it is that he's not telling me. Do you?"

"No."

When I held out the spyglass, he took it reluctantly, staring at it a moment before he met my gaze.

"I just don't trust him," he said forcefully, and I could see what he couldn't say in his expression. "You shouldn't be dealing with him. You shouldn't—" But he cut off abruptly, looked away, frustration and anger tightening his face.

"I have to deal with him," I said, reaching out to grip his arm. "I'm the Mistress of Amenkor, and he's a Servant from Venitte, a representative of Lord March."

That William knew all of this was obvious, but it didn't help him relax. Because that wasn't the real issue.

The light began to fade, dusk approaching.

William closed the spyglass and slid it into his pocket, turned.

"Varis," he began, but then he halted, unable to continue.

Varis, not Mistress.

Before I could say anything, before I had even begun to think, he stepped in close and kissed me.

The touch of his lips shocked me, sent something both warm and cold down into my gut, something both soft and harsh that tingled through the hands I'd raised to his shoulders without thought, something that simultaneously made me want to lean forward, wanting more, while pushing away in uncertainty, because I was still angry with him. Because the kiss was rough and thick and tender at the same time. I could taste it on the river, could taste the frustration, the jealousy, the intensity, like butter and brine combined.

And then it was over, William pulling back. My hands fell to my sides.

Then he was gone, heading back down below deck to his quarters.

I stood in the darkness on the deck, shivering. But not from the chill that the fall of night had brought to the air. I could still smell him in the air—the usual sweat and straw dust, as if he'd just come from a warehouse, now mixed with the salt of the sea.

If I'd been uncertain of his feelings before, even after seeing the drawing he'd done of me in his rooms, after the kiss in the guildhall and the kiss on the dock, he'd made his intentions clear now. Because unlike the first two kisses, he'd initiated this one himself.

I hesitated on the deck of the ship, then descended to my own rooms.

Marielle and Trielle were waiting.

"So?" Marielle said as soon as I entered. "What happened?"

"Nothing."

Marielle's mouth pursed in disappointment. "Maybe you should speak to Brandan more once we reach land. He seems to be a little more focused than William, a little more direct with his interest."

I caught Trielle's eye. She watched me with a slightly raised eyebrow.

She didn't believe me. She knew something had happened, she just didn't know what.

"Help me with the hammocks," I said, ignoring them both.

I needn't have bothered. There are no secrets on a ship, a fact I realized the next day as soon as I came up on deck and saw Avrell glaring at me.

"You could have been a little more discreet," he said curtly. "At least on the dock at Amenkor it was dark and you were out of general view."

I bristled instantly. If it hadn't been Avrell, I would have drawn my dagger.

"I didn't realize that was part of the First's duties."

Avrell stiffened. "Everything regarding the Mistress is part of the First's duties. Especially this!" He caught himself, forced himself to calm, turning out toward the ocean as it slid past, his jaw working. "You are the Mistress. Everything you do affects me, affects Amenkor. Every word spoken, every action taken . . . every kiss."

"You never seemed that concerned in the palace," I spat.

"We aren't in the palace anymore, Mistress," he answered coldly. "Everything you do is being watched and judged and commented upon now. Everything is being

reported to people you haven't even met." He motioned toward the Reliant, sailing behind and to the right, close enough I could see the shapes of men on the deck, could pick out Tristan in his captain's jacket. A spyglass glinted in the sunlight as he lowered it, turning away.

I couldn't be certain, but I thought Brandan Vard stood at his side.

I thought suddenly of what William had said, that Brandan couldn't be trusted, and my gut twisted.

"What do they care who I kiss?" I demanded.

"They care because perhaps they can use it against you somehow. We're headed to Venitte, Mistress, where politics can be deadly. Much more so than in Amenkor. The death and deception begun by Alendor and the merchant's consortium is nothing compared to what the Lords and Ladies of the Venittian court practice at, what they play at." He shook his head. "I should have warned you earlier, as soon as the Reliant appeared in our harbor. But I forgot you weren't raised in the palace, forgot you aren't—"

"The true Mistress?" I finished scathingly.

"I forgot you aren't trained to be Mistress," he said sharply.

We both fell silent, Avrell struggling to control himself while I fumed inside.

Even without the throne, even outside of Amenkor, I was trapped.

"You must always think before you act," Avrell finally said, his voice calm again. "Out of all the protocols, all of the warnings I've given you about Venitte, that is the one lesson you must learn. Someone is always watching. Nothing you do will ever be a secret."

I didn't respond, and after a moment Avrell turned and walked away, leaving me alone.

No one else approached all day, Servants, guardsmen, and sailors all giving me a wide berth. At one point, William appeared, started to head across the deck to where I stood at the railing, but Keven intercepted him, escorted him off to one side for a lengthy discussion that was mostly one-sided, William frowning through all of it. It must have been a lecture much like the one Avrell had given me, for William glanced toward me, toward the surrounding sailors and shipmates, and finally toward the Reliant.

A few hours before dusk, Captain Bullick announced we would be reaching Temall within the hour. "We have not seen any Chorl ships, but I would still approach Temall cautiously," he added, and behind him, in the rigging, I could see sailors, unfurling sails. A young crewman flashed flag signals to the other three ships. The Defiant listed beneath my feet, angling to port, toward shore again. We'd sailed out of sight of it, even with a spyglass, the night before. Within the hour, no Chorl ships in sight, we sailed into the port of Temall, almost everyone crowded into the prow of the ship, myself included, Keven and Avrell to either side, a cold formality creating a wall between me and the First.

I frowned as the Defiant rounded the break. "It's . . . small."

The port contained a single wharf with three docks stretching out from a rocky shore and only two other ships in evidence, a trader half the size of Bullick's at the dock and the Prize anchored in the bay. A few buildings—warehouses, a tavern or two, a scattering of small fishing houses not much more than huts—surrounded the wharf. A road led up a hill through a slightly denser clustering of houses, then to the gates of the outer wall. I'd seen Temall once before, through Westen's eyes, had known that it was a small port, but seeing it in person . . .

"Amenkor is three times as large," I added.

Avrell nodded, his attention on the people gathered on the wharf. "But at the moment, Temall is much more significant. It's the buffer between us and the Chorl. Because of that, we cannot afford to alienate Lord Pyre. We need him as an ally." His eyes narrowed. "I believe there's someone here to meet us."

I scanned those on the pier as Bullick brought the ship slowly in to dock, saw Westen and a small group from the scouting party—

And with them, Lord Justaen Pyre, with a large entourage of guardsmen.

My hand fell to my dagger. Suddenly, having Avrell at my side felt reassuring, rather than constraining.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

Avrell leaned back from the railing, folding his rank as First around him like a cloak. "Probably nothing more than that he wanted to greet us. Westen did forewarn him of our arrival, and he's never seen a Mistress outside of Amenkor."

But there was a hint of uncertainty in Avrell's voice, a crease forming in his brow as he spoke.

It took another twenty minutes to dock, the sun now low on the horizon. At Avrell's suggestion, I'd gathered an escort around me, composed of Keven and his chosen guardsmen, Avrell, Heddan, and Gwenn. I'd sent Marielle and Trielle to guard Ottul, relieving the other two girls. Both fidgeted nervously until Avrell reprimanded them with a curt word. After that, they tried to remain poised and respectful; only Heddan, the older of the two, was somewhat successful.

Bullick descended the plank first, accompanied by William dressed in his merchant's jacket, both speaking to the harbormaster before bowing at the waist before Lord Justaen, the words spoken lost to distance and the gusts from the ocean.

Then the two of them stepped to one side and Avrell descended to the dock. Keven nudged me to follow, moving up close behind me.

I suddenly wanted the familiar confines of Amenkor, wanted the back streets and alleys of the lower city, the halls and corridors of the palace, the crumbling narrows of the Dredge and the fish-gut smell of the wharf. I'd even take the uncomfortable reverence of the people as they sketched the Skewed Throne symbol on their chests and bowed as I passed them in the streets.

"Lord Justaen Pyre of Temall," Avrell said as he halted before the Lord's entourage. He did not acknowledge Westen or any of the men from Amenkor. "May I present the Mistress of Amenkor."

Outwardly, Lord Justaen didn't react at all, merely shifting his stance so that he could nod his head slightly. But on the river-

On the river, he gave a start of surprise as I stepped forward, a twitch of the currents, nothing more. He smelled of worry, of fear and wariness, like the smell of the air before a storm, wet and dangerous, none of which showed in his bearded face.

But he was gray. Not a danger to me personally. Not a threat.

"Mistress, I welcome you to Temall," he said, in the same calm but grating voice I remembered hearing through Westen's ears. "You are . . . not what I expected."

I wondered what he had almost said, but nodded in return. "Thank you."

His eyebrows rose at that. "As soon as we are joined by Captain Tristan and his guests," he said, motioning to where the Reliant was already tying up at the wharf, "we can head up to the keep. I've had a meal prepared."

"During which we can discuss the Chorl," I said.

Avrell frowned, but Justaen only nodded as if that were obvious. As the First continued the introductions, I glanced toward Westen, saw him shake his head minutely. I didn't understand what the gesture meant, thought about Reaching to ask, but realized I couldn't. If I did, I'd collapse on the docks, which would draw more attention than I, or Avrell, wanted.

So I settled back to wait, trying not to fidget like Gwenn, trying not to look at William even though I felt his eyes on me more than once, wondering what Keven had told him. The two Chorl ships remained in the harbor, not drawing up to the dock, but a small boat was sent out and a few of the guardsmen ferried over to join us, including Captain Catrell.

And then Tristan arrived, Brandan Vard in tow, and I felt the tension on the river escalate. Brandan kept his attention focused on Justaen, not once looking toward me

Tristan kept close to Brandan's side, as Avrell did to mine, his presence felt, watchful but silent, like a sentinel.

Lord Justaen led the group up through the gates of the outer wall and into the keep. Made of coarse granite, half again the size of the palace in Amenkor, it felt vaguely familiar until I realized why: this is what the palace in Amenkor had once been like. I'd felt this granite beneath my hand when I'd snuck into the walls and found the archer's niche that led to the inner chambers, had felt its grittiness as I scraped and squeezed my way through it to reach the throne room. This stone had been used on the original walls, walls that had been subsumed into the structure as the palace in Amenkor grew in size. In fact, all of the inner chambers had been constructed using the same stone—the Mistress' chambers, the throne room, the tower.

Temall's keep had the same general layout, but when we entered what I expected to be the throne room, I found instead a great hall lined with tables and benches for feasting, thick tapestries hung on all of the walls, banners hung from the pillars to either side. On the dais, instead of a throne, was a single large table, chairs on the side facing the room. Justaen led Avrell, Tristan, Brandan, Bullick, William, and me to the head table, the rest of the guardsmen and Servants taking seats on the benches throughout the room. Keven, Catrell, and Westen sat as close to my position as possible, Westen keeping watch over Heddan and Gwenn.

Seated between Justaen and Avrell, Tristan and Brandan on Justaen's far side, I felt lost, overwhelmed, and daunted. I'd never eaten in such a large room, among so many other people, and found my hand resting on my dagger for reassurance.

Avrell leaned over as soon as we were settled and said, "Eat first. Don't question him about the Chorl until afterward. Be careful with the wine. You aren't used to it. And try not to touch your dagger. It's not . . . polite." Before I could respond, Justaen rang a large hand bell on the table before him and suddenly the room was full of servants carrying large platters of food and pitchers of water and ale and wine. A woman not much older than me with hair tied back behind her head set a trencher before me, the heavy scent of smoked meat and spices assaulting my nose. Loaded with bread and cheese, the meat in a thick sauce surrounded with roasted vegetables, my stomach growling after over a week of mostly dry biscuits on the ship, I reached for a slice of bread and the butter, but felt Avrell's hand on my arm.

"Wait," he said, and his gaze flicked toward Justaen.

The Lord of Temall had not touched any of his food. Neither had anyone else in the room. He waited until everyone had been served, drinks poured, then he raised his flagon of wine and said, "To the visitors from Venitte and Amenkor," taking a sip.

Everyone in the room raised their own cup and drank; a murmur that could have been agreement but sounded mostly like grunts ran through the room.

Then Justaen set down his glass. That seemed to be the signal to eat, for everyone dug in, the roar of conversation filling the hall, worse than a tavern.

"Eat," Justaen said, motioning toward my platter even as he reached for a strip of meat for himself. "We'll have much to discuss afterward, but for now, enjoy."

I slathered a chunk of warm bread with butter, Justaen grunting as I bit into it.

I almost spit it out, choking, but managed to chew and swallow, coughing slightly. "It's not butter. It tastes different."

"It's apple butter," Tristan said from Justaen's far side.

I frowned down at the bread, then tried another bite, this time actually tasting it. Justaen watched closely, a dribble of the meat sauce staining his beard. I hadn't realized there were different kinds of butter, but now I could taste the flavor of the apples, sweet and yet tart, the texture a little different as well, creamier.

"I like it," I said.

Justaen smiled. "I'll make certain you have some for your ship," he said, then he raised his cup, sipped, and turned toward Tristan.

I glanced toward Avrell, who gave me a reassuring nod.

The meat was spicy, the sauce too biting by itself. I had to cut the spice by eating it with bread, leaving most of the sauce on the platter. I took careful sips of the wine, more used to water and tea, but still felt its effects by the time the meal had wound down. Justaen talked with everyone at the table at some point, but about nothing important—the voyage down from Amenkor, the storm, the latest trends in Venitte.

By the time Justaen pushed his chair back, the room falling silent gradually around us, night had fallen and my patience had worn thin. I felt anxious, my legs twitching beneath the table, my hand falling unconsciously to the handle of my dagger again before I realized and jerked it away. Avrell had resorted to shooting me occasional warning glances, which I ignored.

"If you would care to accompany me," Justaen said.

I stood without responding, everyone else at the main table following suit. We were joined by Keven, Westen, and Catrell, and a few guardsmen from Venitte as we were led to an antechamber off of the main hall.

Without preamble, settling himself into a chair behind a large desk, Justaen said, "What is it that you want?"

I felt myself stiffen at his tone, felt a subtle shift in the room as the guardsmen from Amenkor tensed. Without looking, I knew that a frown touched Avrell's face.

There were no other chairs in the room, only small tables with books and papers, casements with statues, a glittering dagger, a large tapestry taking up an entire wall. Nothing rested on his desk but a quill and bottle of ink. And a sword. Long and straight, sheathed and resting flat at the edge of the desk.

Aware that Tristan and Brandan were standing beside me, I felt myself loosen, my stance altering slightly into a position that I knew Westen would recognize. A guarded position, ready but wary, as if I faced an unknown foe.

"I want to know your intentions regarding the Chorl."

"My intentions," Justaen rumbled.

I frowned. "They've invaded the coast, taken over Bosun's Bay, a few days travel from here. They've already attacked Amenkor, are now, according to you, heading toward Venitte. What do you intend to do about it?"

Justaen said nothing for a long moment, his eyes on me. I slid beneath the river, felt the surge of emotions on the currents, tasted intense interest from Tristan, turmoil from both Brandan and William, a measure of hatred as well. From Westen, I got a strong sense of warning, and from Justaen— I drew in a sharp breath.

Anger and resentment, mixed with indecision, with doubt.

The roil lay heavy and thick, dense against my skin. I shifted beneath it, realized that he was now a mixed gray and red, where he'd been only gray before.

A possible danger. An undecided danger.

"Who are you to ask me?" he said.

"She's the Mistress of Amenkor," Avrell said in outrage.

"Is she?" Justaen spat, standing abruptly, one hand steepled on his desk. "The Mistress has always been the one who controlled the Skewed Throne, and from all accounts I've heard of what happened this past winter, the Skewed Throne has been destroyed. What is she the Mistress of now? What is it that she controls?"

Avrell stepped forward, but I halted him with a sharp, "No!"

Livid, Avrell backed down. I could feel the outrage from Keven and Catrell as well, even William. Only Westen seemed unaffected, as if he had expected this. I settled a heated glare on Justaen, found my hand resting on the hilt of my dagger and left it there. "I am the Mistress of Amenkor."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Tristan nod, felt him straighten.

Lord Justaen of Temall did not flinch, did not react at all.

"So it was you who sent the Seekers into my lands without permission," he said, his voice as deadly and as plain as mine.

"I sent them because we thought the Chorl had already taken Temall. We thought the Chorl were heading back to Amenkor."

"And did you send the Band as well?"

"No."

"They fight under the banner of the Skewed Throne. They are led by men that your Seeker," he motioned toward Westen, "tells me were once guardsmen of Amenkor."

"Yes. The leader of the Band is named Baill. He was once captain of the palace guard in Amenkor."

"But no longer?"

"No." I shook my head. "He betrayed us to the Chorl."

Justaen's face was suffused with doubt. "Then why is he here now, fighting against them? Why does he use the Skewed Throne as his call to battle?"

I shook my head again. "I don't know."

His eyes narrowed. He wanted to believe me, wanted to trust me. . . .

"No," he finally said. "Take your Seekers and go."

"But the Chorl—" Avrell began.

Justaen cut him off. "Temall will handle the Chorl on our own. We've managed to defend against them so far."

"Because you haven't seen their main force," I said. "Because at the moment they are only interested in your food, your resources. If they come . . . No. When they come, you won't be able to stand against them. If they seize Venitte, there will be no stopping them."

Justaen didn't respond.

Tristan stepped forward into the silence. "You will not help us defend Venitte?"

Justaen hesitated at his formal tone. "My duty lies in protecting Temall."

Tristan nodded. Motioning to Brandan and his guardsmen, he moved toward the door.

Avrell stepped up behind me, his intention to leave obvious.

"You will not survive," I said.

Justaen merely frowned.

"Come," Avrell said quietly. "He's made his decision."

I held Justaen's gaze a moment longer, then spun, letting Keven, Catrell, and Westen lead me through the door into the hall beyond. William followed close behind.

"Don't you have guild business to conduct with Lord Justaen? With his merchants?" Avrell asked as we headed down the hall, toward the main gates and the port below.

"I have no business here," William said curtly, and I could hear the lie in his voice, realized he was cutting those ties because of Justaen's insult to me.

"I tried to warn you at the docks," Westen said. "But we were never given the chance to talk."

"It doesn't matter," I said, anger like heat inside my chest. "But I don't understand. Can't he see the threat the Chorl represent?"

Catrell shook his head. "He thinks that if he presents no threat to them himself, the Chorl will leave him alone."

"Then he's blind as well as stupid," I spat.

"I agree," Avrell said darkly, "but there's nothing more we can do about it now."

We collected the rest of the Amenkor and Venittian guardsmen in the main hall, along with Heddan and Gwenn, both Servants' eyes going wide as they picked up on the tension in the group on the river, both suddenly quiet and formal. Within twenty minutes we were outside the gates of Temall, the Venittian group distancing themselves from us.

At the docks, the two groups split up.

Before breaking away, Tristan caught my attention, his gaze black. At his side, Brandan looked angry and concerned.

"You've cost Venitte an ally," the captain of the Reliant said, and then he

turned and headed toward his ship.

At my side, Avrell drew in a deep breath and let it out in a heavy sigh.

"That," he said, "was not an auspicious start."

Chapter 8

It's not an auspicious start, Eryn said, her voice grim through the White Fire at her core. Not only have you lost the support of Temall against the Chorl, you've isolated Tristan. And I think it's obvious now that he's more than just captain of the Reliant.

I felt a surge of resentment, tried to suppress it. Perhaps you should have come instead of me.

No, Eryn said quickly. It had to be you. Temall may have accepted me more readily, and I may have been able to gain some type of concession from him, but those in Venitte would not.

She seemed to sense that I was not consoled. You did fine, Varis.

I sent the Seekers along with the scouting party.

And everyone agreed with you. We thought the Chorl army had headed north. We thought Temall had already been taken. Perhaps we could have had Westen petition for permission, but that would have required exposing the ship to the port, and if the Chorl had already seized control . . .

I heard the truth of what Eryn said, but Justaen's dismissal still rankled.

What about the Band? What about Baill?

Eryn hesitated. As she thought, pain radiated upward from her stomach. Not a seething, prickling pain, like Erick's, but a slow, acidic heat. Occasionally, it would burn up into her throat, spilling over into her lungs, and the coughing fit that resulted would send daggers through her stomach muscles and her chest. I'd only been in contact with her during one such fit, and it had been enough to drive me behind the protective shield of the Fire.

I don't know what to think about Baill and his Band, she finally said, placing a hand against her side. She sat in an alcove outside the training gardens. Rain poured down outside the arched opening in a sheet, the breeze cool against her face. Perhaps the Chorl betrayed him in return. But it doesn't matter. At least he isn't actively working against Amenkor.

At the moment.

Eryn winced at my tone. At the moment.

What about Amenkor?

Eryn shrugged. No sign of the Chorl. Darryn continues to train the militia and seems to have adjusted well to being captain of the entire guard, although he continues to emphasize that it's temporary. The gates are finished, and we've begun work on the watchtowers, including placing the winch and chain across the inlet. The blacksmith, Hugh, is overseeing that, along with Nathem. The newest merchants have already broken land for the wall they intend to build around the city, but no stone has yet been laid. And Borund is moving along faster than expected on the ships . . . with the help of the Servants.

Here, an intense satisfaction coursed through her, overriding the momentary pain in her side.

What do you mean? I asked.

Eryn grinned. I went to Borund to ask if there was something that could be done to speed the process along. He didn't see how, but when I pressed him, we figured out a way that the Servants can help treat the wood to make it stronger using the Sight. They can also help with the shaping of the wood, both for the frame and applying the strakes to the frame. It's cut that part of the construction phase down by half. And Borund thinks that because of the increase in the strength of the wood, he may eventually be able to build bigger ships, ones with larger holds so that they can carry more cargo. That's . . . good. I didn't understand half of what she'd said. Even after spending time on Bullick's ship, I didn't understand half of what the crew said either.

Eryn shook her head in amusement. It is good. It means that we can produce ships faster than anyone on the coast. Borund has three ships already under

construction. They should be finished by winter.

I don't think the Chorl are going to give us that much time, I said.

Some of Eryn's satisfaction faded, and through that I could feel weariness. And pain.

I need to speak to Westen, I said, gathering myself for the Reach back to my own body.

Eryn heard the intent in my voice. She straightened slightly, her tone stern. Listen to Avrell, Varis. He knows more about Venitte and their politics than I do. He's been there, seen it firsthand.

I leaped out of the Fire, sending her a last surge of reassurance. Her shoulders sagged as I sped out up into the fury of the afternoon thunderstorm, the river in turmoil around me, but I could feel the pull of the Fire inside me, could feel the tethers that Marielle and Heddan had used to give me additional strength, and so I fought through the storm, passing out of the cold, dark clouds and veering southward over open ocean. Fire blazed white and frigid on the horizon ahead.

We'd departed Temall that night, once everyone had boarded or been ferried to their respective ships, including the Prize. There were now five ships in the group—three of the Chorl ships, the Defiant, and Tristan's Reliant. But we were entering the sea-lane between the Boreaite Isles and Bosun's Bay controlled by the Chorl. Bullick hoped that the number of ships in the group would discourage the Chorl from attacking, but at the same time it made us easier to spot and we were hoping to slip through unnoticed.

Catrell had suggested traveling only at night, hiding close to shore during the day, but Avrell said we needed to get to Venitte as fast as possible. The city needed to be warned, and the more time they had to prepare for the Chorl, the better.

After what they'd done to Amenkor, I'd agreed.

And then there was Erick and his condition to consider.

Before diving down into the Fire that blazed on the deck of the Prize, I did a quick scan of the ocean, saw nothing but the scattered formation of our own ships, the Reliant keeping close but with a visible separation between it and the Defiant. Then I settled into the Fire inside Westen.

What happened?

Westen didn't react at all. Not a muscle moved in his stance at the prow of the ship, the wind from the ship's passage full in his face. He held the lock of his wife's hair in one hand, the honeysuckle she'd twined with it now looking limp. I'd given it to him on the dock, before he boarded the Prize. Nothing, he said. Lord Pyre kept us confined to the keep after we helped defend the gate against the Chorl. Not prisoners, but our movements were restricted. He smiled thinly. Or as restricted as a Seeker's movements can be made. When you reported you were headed for Temall, I told him everything—the attack on Amenkor, our defenses, the destruction of the throne. I thought that once he knew, once he realized we were no threat, then he'd release us.

Instead, he kept us under tighter control.

Did you find out anything more about Baill? About this Band?

Westen shook his head, frowning. I saw them once more from the walls. They appeared out of the forest and took the road heading southward. It looked as if they were on the move. They had two wagons loaded down with supplies. A good-sized force. More than the hundred that joined the battle at the gates. Justaen says the force has been growing.

I grunted. The anger Baill's name brought forth was instant and harsh, but from all accounts he seemed to be helping Temall defend against the Chorl. Which didn't make any sense.

I don't trust him, I said.

Neither do I. The cold hardness that stilled Westen as he said this made me shudder. But he's out of reach for now. And Justaen has made his choice. Focus on Venitte.

I withdrew from Westen, surged across the sun-glittering ocean to the Fire inside myself, and heaved a heavy sigh, weariness falling over me like a

blanket. The trembling in my arms started immediately, and I sank back into the wooden folding chair I'd been sitting in as Heddan withdrew her conduit. Marielle held hers a moment longer, passing along more of her strength, and I smiled thinly in appreciation before waving weakly for her to release it. She did so reluctantly, motioning Heddan toward the waiting pitcher of tea, sun-steeped earlier on the deck of the ship.

"Amenkor?" Marielle asked, holding the cup that Heddan handed her to my lips so I could drink.

"Fine."

"And Eryn?"

I turned to where Avrell stood anxiously in the doorway. I hadn't noticed him as I skimmed across the water and into the ship, and I should have.

"Also fine," I said.

He heard what I did not say: that she was no better. For a moment, he seemed lost, the focus in his eyes internal, and strangely exposed. As if the facade had been lifted, what lay hidden behind revealed.

Then he returned, straightening where he stood. "Very well."

I drew breath as he turned to leave, not knowing what I could say, but he was already gone.

Marielle's expression as I settled back down was stretched tight with sadness.

"We should get you up on deck," she said briskly, her tone a little forced.

"No," I protested.

"Don't," she warned with a glare, already bustling around, shoving items into Heddan's hands to carry up to the deck. "The sea air will work better than the tea at reviving you."

After a half hour on deck, Marielle planting the folding chair front and center on the foredeck so that I could see the whitecaps on the ocean waves ahead, the horizon bobbing and dipping with the motion of the ship, I grudgingly admitted that Marielle had been right. Mood lightened, I ordered Ottul brought up on deck. She'd been confined to her small room since we departed Amenkor. With a frown of disapproval, Marielle went below, returning with the Chorl Servant, Trielle and Gwenn in tow to watch over her.

Ottul moved to the railing almost instantly, so fast that for a moment I thought she meant to leap overboard into the black water. But she merely stared down into the waves and the white spray from the ship hungrily, her black hair streaming out to the side, gold earrings glinting in the sun. She wore shirt and breeches, like almost everyone on board, except the Servants and Avrell. Gwenn joined her, and not long afterward they were both shrieking in delight, pointing over the ship's rail.

"What are they looking at?" I said.

Marielle shrugged.

With Marielle's help, I moved to the edge of the ship.

As soon as we arrived, something erupted from the water, no bigger than my hand, followed almost instantly by two others. They sailed through the air in a low arc, then splashed back down, disappearing into the depths in a flash of silver. Gwenn shrieked and clapped, jumping up and down at the railing a few paces farther down; Marielle gasped.

"What are they?"

"Fish."

It took me a moment to realize that Ottul had answered. In the coastal tongue. When I turned, the blue-skinned Servant was struggling to continue, scowling in concentration. Her hands waved in the air, her thumbs hooked together.

"Like bird," she said, making the flapping hand gesture again. Her voice was soft, tentative, but intent as she tried to find the right word. "Fish."

As she spoke, five more of the fish burst from the water next to the ship one after the other, flying through the air alongside the hull before vanishing. I could see an entire school of them below the surface, bodies flashing as they came close and caught the sunlight.

"Flying!" Gwenn cried out suddenly. She said something short and harsh, something in the Chorl tongue, and Ottul nodded in relief. "She means flying

fish," Gwenn said.

Ottul and I held each others' gazes a moment, her scowl of impatience gone. In its place, I saw not the arrogant mask she'd worn at first, not the obstinance that had followed, but a resigned gratitude, a tentative smile, touched heavily with sadness.

Then Gwenn grabbed her arm and pointed as two of the flying fish launched at the same time and she turned away.

"They follow the ships sometimes," Bullick said from the other side of Marielle. A bunch of the crew and a few guardsmen had come to the railing or climbed up into the near rigging to see what all the fuss was about. They had all steered well clear of Ottul. "Are you certain it's safe for her to be on deck?" Bullick added, nodding toward the Chorl Servant.

"No," I said honestly. "But I'm not sending her below just yet either." He grunted. "Very well."

Then he drifted away, barking something to one of the crew as he went.

I tired of the flying fish and made it back to my chair under my own power, Trielle and Heddan joining me. Marielle remained at the railing, where Ottul seemed content pointing out things to Gwenn, the two switching from the coastal tongue to Chorl and back again. Ottul seemed extremely familiar with the ocean and the ship, and much more comfortable on deck than she had seemed in the corridors of the palace.

Avrell commented on that when he and Keven joined us an hour later, both bringing their own chairs.

Keven shrugged. "That's not much of a surprise. You said they lived on a group of islands. They'd have to be familiar with the ocean and ships."

"You're right," Avrell said. He gazed at Ottul intently, but I could tell he was thinking of something else.

"What, Avrell?"

He started. "Nothing. Just wondering what that means for the Chorl attacking by land. If they're used to ships, to attacks from the sea, they won't be prepared for all the . . . subtleties of a land attack. Things like terrain and such."

"Especially the terrain around Venitte," Keven said. "We'll have to bring that up with Catrell."

Avrell and Keven fell into a discussion about the Chorl and tactics, while Trielle and Heddan chatted about the ship and some of the more interesting crew, Heddan giggling occasionally. I sat in silence, listening. William appeared on deck, but saw Avrell and wandered toward the back of the ship, disappearing below again after a short time. Afternoon slipped to evening, the sun sinking toward the horizon, creating a harsh gold band on the water. Light clouds appeared, scudding across the darkening sky.

And then one of the lookouts above yelled, "Sails! Sails off the port bow!" Avrell surged to his feet, shouted, "Ottul!" but Marielle and Trielle were already herding her back toward the ladder, Gwenn at her side, urging her to hurry. I hadn't even seen Trielle move. The Chorl Servant strained to see around them, eyes searching the water frantically, face intent, but she didn't resist the Servants either.

The crew reacted instantly, flying up into the rigging, ready for orders, while Bullick stalked toward the port side, his spyglass already out. He began scanning the horizon, face set into a frown, signals passing to the rest of the ships in the group. Sails were adjusted and the other ships began to draw closer, tightening the distance between us.

"I don't see anything," I said.

"On Bullick's left, about a handspan away," Keven said, his gaze fixed on the horizon. "It's almost lost in the sun."

I grunted as I spotted it, nothing more than a white speck. I wouldn't have noticed it if Keven hadn't pointed it out.

"The lookouts have sharp eyes," Avrell said.

Around us, Heddan had begun collapsing the chairs, readying to go below.

We all waited tensely as Bullick watched the far ship through his glass, two

crewmen waiting at his elbow for orders. Finally, he lowered the instrument. "It's one of ours," he said. A few of the crew around us exhaled held breaths. "A trader. They're moving away, heading north. They probably don't trust our colors, since three of our ships look to be Chorl."

He handed the spyglass to one of the waiting men, but did not move from his spot, his hands clasped behind his back.

The mood on the deck had been broken.

"Perhaps we should go below," Avrell said into the awkward silence, "and see what there is for dinner."

"Yes," I said. The tension hadn't yet unknotted itself from my shoulders. I could recall the attack on The Maiden too vividly—Laurens' death, the slaughter of the crew, Erick's capture—did not want to repeat that horror again.

We descended below deck, leaving Captain Bullick to keep watch at the rail. The mood on the ship did not improve over the next week. Everyone moved about with tightened shoulders, coming up to the deck at random intervals to stretch their legs and taste the fresh air. But they spent most of their time watching the horizon, searching for the telltale speck of white that signaled a sail or an approaching ship. Few stayed on deck for long, descending below again, preferring the cramped quarters and the thick air flavored with the scent of straw and the stench of animal waste from the hold. Tempers grew short, flaring up over small things—a muttered, half-heard word or a look. I tried to soothe the tensions using the river, tried to smooth out the currents and eddies, but it seemed to have little effect.

Bullick preferred having fewer of his passengers on deck. He kept a constant vigil, making corrections in the route in an attempt to avoid the more well-traveled lanes of the ocean. Twice, he adjusted the course because of sails spotted on the horizon. Both times, the other ship seemed more inclined to keep its distance. One of them Bullick identified as a ship from Merrell, moving south like us. The other he simply shrugged about when asked, too distant to get a good look.

I assumed it was a Chorl ship.

On the evening of the eighth day out of Temall, I came to the deck with Trielle and Keven as escort to find William at the railing at the prow, staring out into the dusk, the sun already set, the sky darkening from deep blue to indigo. A few stars pricked the blackness to the east, the moon not yet risen.

I frowned as I caught sight of him. We hadn't spoken since the night he'd kissed me, both of us rarely on deck at the same time, and then usually with Avrell present.

But not now.

"Wait here," I said.

Keven started to protest, his brow creasing in disapproval, but Trielle placed a hand on his arm and led him away, toward the back of the ship. She cast a quick glance over her shoulder as she went, whether in encouragement or warning I couldn't tell.

I focused on William's back. Suddenly, Keven and Trielle no longer present, I found myself uncertain. He hadn't seen me yet. It would be so much easier to retreat back to my cabin.

Disgusted with myself at the thought, I stalked forward, slid into place at the railing beside him without looking at him.

"You've kept your distance," I said, glaring down at the luminescent white froth churned up by the ship as it slid through the water.

I could feel William staring at me. He'd pulled back slightly, but his hands still rested on the wooden rail.

"Keven made it clear that Avrell wanted me to stay away," he said finally.

"And you listened to him?"

"Avrell is the First of the Mistress."

"But he's not the Mistress, he's not me. You should have come to ask me what I wanted."

William was silent a long moment. "What do you want?"

I stilled, only then realizing that I'd been tapping the rail nervously, something with talons clutching my gut. I wanted to reach for my dagger for reassurance but thought William might take it the wrong way, so I slid beneath the river instead, let the familiar currents wash over me.

Forcing the queasiness in my stomach to relax, I said, "I don't know."

A twinge of anger and disgust from William. And hurt. "I see."

He began to turn away, to silently storm off, and I felt a surge of anger as well.

"Wait," I said, the anger coming through in my voice. I sighed in exasperation. "I grew up in the slums, on the Dredge. I don't know much about how to handle all of," I waved my hand vaguely, "this. All I know is that on the Dredge, there's only survival. There isn't time for anything else. Sex is usually harsh and rough and violent and often deadly. There is no love, no romance, no courtship. It's usually over in five minutes and if you aren't lying dead in the shit in the back corner of the alley, you pick yourself up and move on."

"I see." Still affronted, but with a tinge of humor. It didn't help relieve my anger at all, but it was better than the pissed-off dismissal he'd given me before. "Are you interested?"

"In what?"

He shifted forward, leaned on the railing and caught my eyes, his expression serious. "In me. In me courting you, no matter what Avrell says?"

I frowned, but couldn't look away from his gaze. "Avrell never said we couldn't see each other."

A vague answer, but William nodded. "And what about Brandon?"

"There's nothing between me and Brandon," I said coldly. "I took him on a tour of Amenkor, nothing more. There's nothing to be jealous of, nothing to be worried about."

William tensed, as if ready to argue, but then forced himself to relax. He gazed out over the water. More stars had appeared, the sky almost completely black now, only a thin band of blue on the western horizon to starboard. He smiled suddenly.

"Then meet me here tomorrow, after dusk."

I glared at him skeptically. "Why?"

"You'll have to find out tomorrow."

I grunted, suspicious. I didn't like surprises. On the Dredge, surprises were never good. But a thrill of excitement coursed through me nevertheless, tingling in my fingers. "Very well."

I thought he'd leave then, but he didn't. We stayed at the railing as the quarter moon rose, lining the black waves with silver.

The next day seemed to last forever, and I didn't see William at all. Trielle had informed Marielle of the meeting the night before, and they spent most of the day gossiping about what William intended for that night, their suggestions growing wilder and wilder as the day progressed . . . and more and more ribald.

"We're on a ship, at sea," I said in disgust at one point. "He can't possibly come riding in on a horse. And why would he in the first place?"

Trielle rolled her eyes. "Hush, Mistress. We're only teasing."

They broke out in laughter.

As dusk fell, excitement slid over into apprehension.

"Stop pacing," Marielle said soothingly. Trielle had gone to watch over Ottul so that Heddan and Gwenn could sleep. "It's just William."

I shot her a glare, my hand kneading the hilt of my dagger. They'd tried to get me to remove it, just for tonight, but I'd refused.

Above, the bell that kept track of the time at sea clanged the hour. I halted, something hard shuddering at the base of my throat. I swallowed.

Marielle stood, drawing my attention. She gripped my shoulders and repeated, quietly, "It's just William," squeezing once before ushering me out of the cabin door.

I stood in the narrow hallway a moment, heard a bark of laughter from deeper in the ship, heard a low murmur of conversation from Erick's cabin and frowned, recognizing Isaiah's voice but not the other. But Isaiah had been acting as the ship's doctor since he came on board, so I shrugged aside the momentary concern and gathered myself together, heading toward the ladder and ascending to the deck above.

Bullick greeted me with a short nod as I made my way to the front of the ship, a few of the deckhands doing so as well. I could see William waiting there, a vague shadow in the darkness, outlined by the moonlit sea beyond.

He'd dressed in his formal merchant's jacket, the dark blue appearing black in the light, the silver embroidery leached of all color, the white shirt beneath a vibrant gray. He turned as I approached.

"Varis," he said, bowing at the waist formally.

My brow creased. "What are you doing?"

"I'm courting you," he said, then motioned to where two blankets had been laid out on the deck, along with pillows, glasses, and a bottle of wine. "If you'd care to sit?"

I hesitated, caught off guard by the strange formality of the situation, although I couldn't have said what I'd expected. But I sat down on the blanket, cross-legged. William sat as well, picking up the bottle of wine, uncorking it with an assured twist—he must have opened it earlier—before pouring out a glass for each of us.

Handing over my glass, he said, "It's Capthian red."

I laughed, took a careful sip, watching William's grin over the lip of the glass. Capthian red had been the wine Eryn had hidden in the palace stable, covering the entrance to the tunnel beneath the walls that Avrell had used to get me into the palace unnoticed. I'd never had any until now. It was tart and dry, better than the wine Justaen had served in Temall.

Taking a swallow, William set his glass aside. "Now, lie down."

My eyebrows shot up and he grinned.

"Trust me. Use the pillows to get comfortable. Here, let me help."

I shifted around on the blanket under William's direction, placing the pillows beneath my head, adjusting them until my neck no longer felt crooked. I could feel the planking of the deck beneath the thin blanket, the motion of the ship more pronounced lying flat like this. William rustled around beside me, his elbow digging into my side once. He murmured an apology, shifted around some more—

And then we were lying side by side, staring up at the stars. A few ropes and blocks from the rigging blocked our view, but here at the prow they were minimal. If I moved my head slightly, I could see the top of the main mast, could see the moonlight on the bellied-out sails and the lookout's post.

"Do you know anything about the stars?" William asked, his voice rising into the night. The sky was clear, the pinpricks of the stars bright, glittering against the blackness.

"No."

"I didn't think so. That's how we know where the ship is, where we are in relation to the coast. We use the stars to figure out our position."

"How?"

"We use a compass and an instrument called a sextant. And a lot of mathematics."

"Never mind, then."

I heard him chuckle and I hit him on the thigh. He quieted instantly although, on the river, I could still feel him grinning.

"There's a simpler way. Less exact of course, but still worthwhile if you need a reading of position." He pointed up into the night. "See that star? The bright one just off to the left?"

"Yes."

His arm fell. "That's called the Northern Guide. Since from this perspective the Guide appears to the left, that means we're actually headed southwest, away from the mainland and out into deep ocean. We'll have to change course

tonight."

I frowned, wiggling around to find a better position. "Why?"

"Because we're heading out of the sea-lane between the Boreaites Isles and Bosun's Bay. We passed through the most congested portion of it two days ago, but Bullick is playing it safe, taking us farther out to sea before turning back and heading to Venitte. If he doesn't turn back, we'll end up sailing into empty ocean."

I thought about this a moment, then said, "Except we know it's not empty."

"What do you mean?"

I rolled my head to the side so I could see William's profile in the darkness.

"The Chorl. They came from islands somewhere out there. The White Fire came from the west as well, and it didn't come from the Chorl. So there must be something more out there, something even beyond the Chorl islands."

"If there is, it must be fairly distant. Ships have sailed to the west, but they've either returned to report nothing but ocean . . . or they never returned at all."

"The Seven searched as well," I said, thinking back to what I'd learned from Cerrin and the Seven while connected to the Skewed Throne, to what I'd dreamed of since. "After the first Chorl attack. They found nothing."

"But we have larger ships now. They can carry more cargo, sail farther without the crew starving. And if we can find the Chorl islands, or other islands like them, use them as a place to stop and restock . . ."

I thought about Borund telling Eryn he could build larger ships using whatever technique the Servants had come up with to strengthen and shape the wood.

Perhaps, with the new ships, we would be able to find the Chorl's homeland . . . or what was left of it.

Perhaps we could find the source of the White Fire.

The thought sparked a desire to set sail immediately, a different kind of fire that burned deep in my gut, but I pushed the fire back. Nothing could be done about it at the moment.

But the fire didn't die. I could feel it seething deep inside me, throbbing with heat. Like the coals of a fire that had burned down, waiting for fresh fuel so it could reignite.

"What else can you tell me about the stars?" I asked.

William turned to look at me, brow creased, as if he thought I were simply humoring him. But then the creases smoothed out and he relaxed, settling back against his blanket. He pointed up into the night sky again. "Those three stars over there, the ones that form a triangle?"

"I see them."

"They're called Omarion's Tryst. . . ."

And with that all of the tension—over Avrell, over Brandan—drained out of the night.

The next day, I woke to find Marielle and Trielle hovering expectantly, eyes full of questions.

"Don't ask," I said, swinging out of the hammock. "I'm not going to say anything."

"But the crew of the Reliant won't say anything either," Marielle protested.

"Captain Bullick warned them off, and they're all keeping quiet, even the Zorelli!"

"And they're the worst gossips of the bunch," Trielle threw in.

"Then you'll just have to live without knowing what happened."

"Ooo, she's evil," Trielle said mockingly. "How have you managed to put up with tutoring her for the past eight months?"

"It hasn't been easy," Marielle muttered darkly.

The good humor lasted until we reached the deck, where Avrell, Keven, Captain Bullick, and William all stood in a cluster staring out behind the ship, their faces serious. I could sense the tension on the river the moment we emerged into the sunlight, knew that Marielle and Trielle sensed it as well. Their laughter cut off abruptly.

I slid up to William's side, shaded my eyes against the sun's glare. "What is

it?"

He glanced down briefly. "Two ships. They've been following us since dawn." "They're Chorl," Bullick said, lowering his spyglass and handing it off to Avrell.

"But they haven't approached?"

Bullick shook his head. "They're probably keeping their distance because there are five of us."

"Can we outrun them?" Avrell asked. He'd taken the spyglass and now held it up to his eye.

"No. Not at our current weight and not with these winds. The three Chorl ships might be able to, but not the two traders."

I glanced up at the sails. I couldn't see any difference in the configuration between now and earlier, but it did feel as if the ship were moving at a slower pace.

"Perhaps we'll get a chance to test out those modifications to the ship after all," Keven said.

Bullick grunted, then bellowed a command, men to either side scurrying below decks.

"What modifications?" I asked.

"Since The Maiden and the attack at Amenkor, we've tried to add a few additional defenses to the trading ships," Keven explained.

"Even if they do attack," Bullick said, "it will be hours before they catch up to us. No need to continue watching from the deck."

It was a clear dismissal, but no one moved. Avrell passed the spyglass to Keven as the crewmen began to reappear on deck, carrying buckets, ropes, grapnels, and a few large trunks.

William turned to me with a grimace. "And we were almost out of the sea-lane."

I ordered Marielle and Trielle below and told them to keep Heddan and Gwenn there as well. Trying to keep out of the way, I watched as the buckets were lowered and filled with seawater, then set aside on deck in case of fire. More trunks appeared, revealing hatchets and axes, swords and daggers, crossbows. Bullick disappeared for fifteen minutes, returned dressed in a more formal captain's uniform, including a sheathed sword belted to his waist. Keven, William, Avrell, and the guardsmen armed themselves as well. Signals flew between the five ships, the grouping reorganized since the Chorl ships had been spotted so that the two traders sailed close together in the center, surrounded by the three smaller defensive ships. I could see individual people on the deck of the other ships now, although they weren't close enough for me to pick out faces.

At noon, Bullick reported, "They've started to gain on us. I estimate three hours before they catch us."

A grim tension settled over the ship.

I wandered below deck, found Marielle, Trielle, Heddan, and Gwenn huddled outside Ottul's room, Gwenn curled up close to Trielle. In Erick's room, Isaiah was gathering together equipment, his pace methodical, his expression severe. He glanced up when I entered.

"Captain Bullick requested that I set up in the crew quarters," he said. "He expects casualties."

"Of course." I stepped to Erick's side. Isaiah continued collecting supplies behind me.

Erick's face was drawn, the grayness more pronounced now than it had been a few weeks before. His eyes looked sunken, the skin around them bruised almost black, and his breath came in long, ragged gasps.

"He's declining faster than I expected," Isaiah said, abruptly at my side. I jumped. "The rigors of traveling at sea are taking a toll. We need to get him to Venitte."

"I'm trying," I said. But I wasn't certain we could make it in time anymore. I stayed with Erick until Isaiah had finished setting up, but didn't dare reach for him. Not if the Chorl attacked. I might need my strength. Then, setting one of the crew to watch over him, I returned to Ottul's room.

"Gwenn," I said, squatting down beside her on the deck. Her eyes were strained with the effort of keeping her fear at bay, Trielle holding her protectively. "Gwenn, I'm going to need Marielle, Trielle, and Heddan up above, in case the Chorl ships have Servants on board. I want you to stay here and guard Ottul. Can you do that?"

She considered this a moment, then nodded, pulling slightly out of Trielle's embrace. "I can do that, Mistress."

Her voice was surprisingly calm and serious.

"Good," I said, and stood. Marielle and Heddan stood as well, smoothing out the folds of their dresses. Gwenn pulled out of Trielle's arms completely, and Trielle ruffled her hair as she joined us.

On deck, the Chorl ships were shockingly close. So close I could see movement on their decks, although I couldn't pick out individual people.

But I did catch a flash of green.

"They have Servants," I said, and a sickening stone of heat and anxiety formed in my gut.

"At least two," Avrell said. We'd moved to join the cluster of guardsmen and crew at the aft deck. "They'll catch us within the hour."

I frowned. "They seem closer than that."

"They aren't traveling much faster than us. We're using the same winds."

Battles at sea involved a lot of waiting, I thought. On the Dredge, the fight would have been resolved hours ago, daggers drawn and blood spilled. I didn't remember the fight on The Maiden taking this long.

But then I'd come into that battle after it had already begun.

I'd just drawn breath to comment on this when a panicked voice yelled, "Ho! Sails off the starboard bow! Coming in fast!"

"What!" Bullick bellowed from midship.

"Starboard bow!" the lookout yelled again, and glancing up, shading my eyes against the glare of the midday sun, I could see him gesturing sharply to the right. "Ships to the starboard!"

Bullick swore, began booming orders at the top of his voice, crew leaping to the rigging, others scrambling for weapons. Every-one's attention in the aft deck turned from the two Chorl ships trailing us to the starboard bow— And the four Chorl ships heading directly toward us, closing in fast.

"They drove us right into them," Keven said, respect mixed with grim horror in his voice. His hand rested on his sword hilt.

Sails snapped above, and the Defiant suddenly listed to port beneath us, all of the guardsmen on deck caught off guard, stumbling. To either side, all of the other ships in our group began turning as one.

"We aren't going to make it," Avrell said flatly.

And suddenly, power surged on the river, gathering quick and deadly, from the direction of the four new ships.

"Marielle!" I barked, but she and Trielle were already moving, already shaping the river into a tight shield, throwing it up and across the starboard side of the ship, covering the sails.

Fire arced out from the Chorl ships, shattered against the shield in a coruscating sheet of flame that rained down the barrier's length and fell harmlessly into the sea.

"Heddan," I said, "try to protect the Prize."

Heddan darted through the suddenly active deck to the prow, Westen's ship the closest of the defensive ships in front of us.

"Behind us," Keven said in warning.

I turned. The two Chorl ships had leaped forward, were almost within reach of Catrell's ship. The other two ships in our group— Tristan's Reliant and the Booty—were to port, away from the direct line of fire.

"They gained ground because we were forced to turn," Keven growled.

I stepped forward to the rail while sinking deep beneath the river. The world grayed around me, grew thick and dense, and I settled into the smooth, calm, focused power of a Seeker. Everything collapsed to a single goal, the details

of the ships behind the Spoils of War bright, brittle, harsh in the sunlight, the crew on its decks—dressed in the garish, vibrant colors of the Chorl—visible now, the green dresses of the Chorl Servants clear, one per ship. I focused on them, on their long black hair, on their cold blue skin, on their almost black eyes, so arrogant with power. And then I stretched out beyond the Spoils of War on the river, not quite Reaching, not quite separating from my body—

And with a cold precision learned from Westen and Erick, with a heartlessness learned on the Dredge, I slashed across the first Servant's throat with a blade-eddy.

She hadn't raised a shield. Blood flew as she fell back onto the deck, arms rising in belated shock, the Chorl warriors around her stepping away, stunned. Then they roared in outrage, the ululating cries weak and distant from the deck of the Defiant but hideously raw on the river, shuddering on the edge of the Chorl ship's deck.

I'd already turned to the second Servant, already readied the blade-eddy for another cut. But the Servant had been forewarned. She held a shield around her, the barrier almost glittering beneath the Sight. Her face contorted with raw hatred. With an outstretched arm, she seized the river and flung fire toward the Spoils of War.

I spat a curse, erected a shield, but not quite fast enough. The fire exploded over its edge and splattered down onto Catrell's ship, the guardsmen and crew of the ship leaping to the buckets of seawater as fire scorched the deck, caught in one of the sails. All flames were quenched within moments, my shield preventing the Chorl Servant from guiding the fires as the Servants had done on The Maiden, keeping her from sending it trailing out, seeking victims. But her rage grew. She began flinging fireball after fireball at my shield.

"Keven," I said, and heard the strain in my voice already. I wasn't used to directing the river from such a distance. Every encounter on the Dredge had been up close and personal, every battle with the Chorl in Amenkor confined to the gates or a single room.

Not over such a distance. The effort to stretch as far as Catrell's ship hurt. "Yes, Mistress."

"See if you can get Bullick to bring the ships in closer together. It will be easier to defend them from the Chorl Servants if he does. And see if you can pick off some of the Servants with crossbows!"

"I'll do it," William barked, and moved instantly toward Bullick.

Beneath my feet, I felt the Defiant shudder. I wondered how Marielle and Trielle were faring, but didn't dare look. I could feel the surges of power on the river behind me, could feel the heat as fire exploded on shield, knew that whatever Marielle and Trielle were doing, it was holding. Farther back, I could feel Heddan's shield holding steady as well.

Ahead, the second Chorl ship, the one I'd killed the Servant on, slid forward toward the Spoils of War, and I growled low in my throat. Keeping the shield steady from the Servant's relentless attack, I gathered the river into a spear and hurled it, following it with another, the effort causing sweat to break out across my forehead.

The first struck, wood splintering from the side of the ship, Chorl screaming as chunks flew up into their faces. The second tore a hole in the side of the ship, well above the waterline.

But the ship didn't falter. It began to draw up alongside the Spoils of War on the starboard side, the other ship coming up to the port. Chorl stood at the railing, ready with grapnels and rope to tether the two ships together, most with swords raised, screaming across the span of ocean between the two ships. Guardsmen on the Spoils of War roared back. A few crossbow bolts were unleashed, Chorl men falling back from the onslaught. I could see Catrell on the deck, talking to the pilot, gesturing frantically with his arms, strain written in the lines of his face—

And suddenly the wheel spun beneath the pilot's hands, the Spoils of War lurching to the left, away from the ship threatening to board.

Straight into the Chorl Servant's ship.

The two ships collided with a hideous crunch of cracking wood, men thrown to the decks on both ships with short cries. Groaning, the two ships ground against each other, the pilot fighting the wheel, and then they broke apart. On the Chorl ship, the Servant stumbled, the barrage of fireballs faltering. I dove into the opening, sliced hard across her arm, heard a biting cry as I tasted blood, coppery and thick, struck again with deadly swiftness, but encountered a shield.

And then the Defiant truly shuddered. I heard a sigh, felt the ship slow with a sickening motion, and glanced upward.

The sails were falling limp, whuffling as they went slack, men scrambling in the rigging to draw them in tighter.

"The bloody bastards stole our wind," someone close murmured.

I looked toward the starboard side, toward the other four Chorl ships. Three had pressed the attack, coming in from the side, one nearing the Prize, almost ready to board, the other two running parallel to the Defiant.

The fourth had fallen slightly behind on purpose, had swung around windward, their sails cutting us off.

Stealing our wind.

I spun to port, saw Tristan's ship and the Booty banking hard to starboard, coming in tight near the Prize and the Chorl ships near the front of the ship to help Heddan. Without warning, a blaze of pure white lightning lashed out from the Reliant, sizzling as it skated across one of the Chorl's hulls, leaving a trail of charred wood behind. I hadn't seen it form on the river, hadn't even felt the force gathering.

Because it had been formed by Brandan. I could see him in the prow of the ship, hands raised, wind tearing at his clothing, his hair. Face shuttered, skin creased in concentration, he ducked his head, narrowed his eyes— And another bolt seared across the ocean, glaring white on the black waves. But this time it skittered across a raised shield.

Fire exploded, jerking my attention away from Brandan and the Reliant. It washed up and over the rigging of the Defiant, heat pressing down through Marielle and Trielle's shield. I heard one of them cry out, realized they were holding off at least two Servants on their own. In the backwash of flame, I turned back toward the ships behind us.

And gasped.

We might have lost our wind, but the Spoils of War and the two Chorl ships hadn't.

And they were right on top of us.

"Keven!" I barked, and even as he spun, the Chorl ship carrying the Servant banked sharply left, pulling away from Catrell's ship. It skimmed the Defiant's port side, so close a few of the Chorl threw grapnels across the distance even though they were moving too fast to board, the metal hooks clanking on the deck, gouging the planks, guardsmen and sailors leaping out of their path before they caught the railing, ripping the sturdy wood from the ship. One hook caught in a sailor's calf, jerking him off his feet and dragging him across the deck screaming before it ripped free.

At the prow of the Chorl ship, the Servant had straightened, blood staining the left arm of her dress black and dripping from her fingers onto the deck. She glared across the distance as her ship slid past. Keven stepped up beside me, raised a crossbow and fired in one smooth motion, the recoil jerking his arm.

The bolt shattered against the Servant's shield, metal shards spraying outward around her, cutting into the Chorl at her side. The force of the impact thrust her back and I heard a gut-wrenching gasp of pain as she doubled over.

Keven spat a curse.

On the starboard side, Catrell's ship scraped the paint from the Defiant's hull, caught between Bullick's ship and the attacking Chorl on the far side, both ships squeezed between the Defiant and the other two Chorl ships. Amenkor guardsmen on Catrell's ship lined the railing, hacking at the first tethers

thrown from the Chorl ship, Catrell standing calmly next to the panicked pilot, crossbow bolts flying between all of the ships. And then all three ships were past—two to starboard, one to port—their sails momentarily slack as they slid into the path of the stolen wind, then filling again, the ships lighter, moving faster. The ship carrying the Chorl Servant had already begun to turn, readying for another pass.

Keven locked gazes with me.

"I didn't want them that close," I said.

Keven laughed, the sound strained.

"To the large crossbows!" Bullick suddenly bellowed, his voice breaking through the stunned moment. The crew on deck began running below, jumping down the ladders, Keven's guardsmen remaining above. He barked a command and two of the guardsmen hauled the still screaming sailor with the grapnel-sliced calf down to Isaiah, leaving a trail of slick blood behind. I heard the slap of wood against wood and leaped to the starboard side of the ship. Leaning over the rail, I could see six rectangular hatches being opened in the side of the ship, the doors clattering against the hull as a spiked steel point emerged through the opening. I frowned, recognizing the bolts from my visit to the blacksmith with Brandan.

Crossbows. Giant crossbows.

"The only problem with them," Keven said at my side, the smaller crossbow he'd used against the Servant still in one hand, "is that the other ship has to be close. You can't aim them worth shit."

I glanced up, saw the two Chorl ships bearing down on us from the front, Catrell's ship and the Chorl ship locked in battle with him blocking the view for a moment as they pulled ahead of us, then shoved myself back from the railing. Marielle and Trielle had held the Chorl Servants' attack at bay, but they couldn't do much about the ships themselves.

But perhaps I could. If the other Servants kept the Chorl occupied . . .

As one of the Chorl ships slowed and came abreast of the Defiant, I gathered the river before me into a spear, as before. But this time, my attention wasn't split between protecting a ship and forming the spear itself.

On the deck, I heard everyone's breath catch and hold. The tension hovered as the Chorl ships edged nearer. I could see the blue-skinned Chorl warriors as they shouted across the short span of water at us, a few grapnels thrown, but falling short. Marielle and Trielle's shield shimmered in the air between us, but it wasn't strong enough to push the ship back. The Chorl Servants on the two ships had halted their attack, the fire they threw threatening their own ship at this distance.

The air shivered with fear, with violence, tasting of blood, of smoke and fire, of sweat and sunlight and the sizzling crack of lightning from ahead. .

. .

And then Bullick bellowed, "Release!"

In the bowels of the ship, six triggers were pulled, and six giant crossbows released gathered tension with a shudder, the mechanisms recoiling. Six bolts flew; at the same time, I released the pent-up energy of the river and flung my spear.

Two bolts struck wood and shattered, digging a deep groove in the hull. A third had been angled higher, punching through the railing of the ship, slicing through the Chorl on deck with vicious speed, cutting a path through the warriors like a knife, leaving blood, body parts, and screaming men behind. The three others pierced through the hull with a hollow crunch of wood, strakes snapping and splintering outwards, wood shards flying in a deadly hail.

I'd aimed my spear lower. It shattered the hull as well . . . but below the waterline. Through the river, I felt water pouring into the breach and smiled with grim satisfaction.

Then Keven dragged me back from the edge of the ship. Grapnels were thrown as the wounded ship tried to tether itself to the Defiant. With their strange ululating war cries, the Chorl leaped across the distance, a few grapnels

catching, the ships edging closer together, hulls grinding, the Chorl now boiling over the edge into the guardsmen's swords and suddenly the river was thick with the reek of blood.

"They're taking on water!" I yelled over the cacophony of the battle.

"That will only make them more desperate," Keven replied. He and five others had formed a rough circle around me and Avrell, even though we weren't close to the actual fighting. "What happened to the other ships?"

I glanced ahead and to port. "Two of the Chorl are fighting with Westen and Catrell's ships, but they're drawing away. They still have wind. Heddan's protecting them with a shield, but Brandan's keeping the remaining Chorl Servant on those ships busy. The third Chorl ship, the one that came from behind that still has a Servant, is circling around. The one that stole our wind is still too distant to worry about."

"So we've only got these two to deal with."

Fire flared at the prow of the ship, but it came from Heddan. It arced out over the water and struck one of the Chorl ships attacking Westen, flaring up on the deck. Even as the first struck, Heddan sent another to the second ship. Lightning cracked across the air as Brandan pressed the attack.

And then I felt the shield around the Defiant falter. Eyes snapping back to the edge of the ship, I saw the guardsmen's defense around Trielle crumble, saw her fall back, disappearing in the jumble of men.

"Trielle!" I barked, and darted forward, my dagger drawn without thought.

Marielle struggled as Trielle's portion of the shield released, seized its edges and brought it back up, but she wasn't strong enough to cover the entire ship—

Fire flared, the Chorl Servants on the two nearest ships seizing the opening. Before I'd taken two steps, flame exploded on the foredeck, another hitting the aft deck, screams of pain erupting on both sides, someone shrieking as they ran for the edge of the ship trailing fire before leaping over into the ocean. Triumphant Chorl spilled through the crumbling line onto the deck of the Defiant, and suddenly we were surrounded on all sides, blades slashing, the rest of the deck lost to sight.

I sank deeper into the river, drew my focus so tight I could see only those around me, Keven, Avrell, and the guardsmen at my back blurs of gray, the Chorl red. So deep I could taste the metal of the blades as they spun. So deep the sounds of the battle were muted, grunts and screams and hisses shoved into a background roar of wind. The White Fire inside me flared higher and I seized on it, used it to direct my hand as I cut with the dagger, all of the forms I'd learned from Erick slipping back into place as if I'd never left the Dredge, all of the tricks Westen had taught me since melding with them, the Fire warning me of threats. My dagger sliced through a Chorl's shoulder, cut across another's face, punched through leather armor and into a side, blood slicking my hand. I punched with my free hand, pinched exposed muscle, gouged at eyes. I wrapped the river and the Fire around me, flowed with it as Keven and the guardsmen wielded their swords at my back, protecting Avrell. One of the guardsmen fell, gurgling, his throat cut; another staggered back with a gasp as one of the curved Chorl swords opened a gaping wound in his thigh, but the rest closed the gaps as Avrell dragged the wounded guardsmen into the protective circle. Blood slicked the deck, making the footing slippery— And then suddenly Keven spat, "Mistress' tits."

I spun, crouched low.

And saw Ottul scrambling out of the hatch leading down into the ship. I thought instantly of Gwenn, assuming Ottul had killed her in order to escape, felt hatred well up . . . then choke in my throat as Gwenn appeared next to Ottul.

Ottul stood up, looking odd dressed in Amenkor clothing when her own people were dressed in oranges, reds, greens, and blues all around her. She stared at the Chorl, a strange mixture of hope and fear clear in her eyes, on her face. Her eyes locked on the figure of the Chorl Servant on the ship tethered to the Defiant.

The two stared at each other for one breath . . . two . . . Ottul's eyes pleading.

Then the Chorl Servant on the other ship gestured across her chest, the action strangely formal, her eyes narrowing with hatred. Ottul reeled back as if punched.

Raising her hand, the Chorl Servant sent a shimmering, deadly wave of fire at Ottul.

A shield flew up at the last instant, Gwenn stepping between Ottul and the other Servant with a defiant expression twisting her mouth into a scowl.

Ottul hesitated, tears coursing down her face, then reached for Gwenn on the river.

A conduit snapped into place. Not a conduit like the one Eryn and the Servants of Amenkor had devised.

A conduit like the one used by the Ochean.

Gwenn's shield surged with power. But Ottul seized some of that power and sent a hammer of force toward the Chorl Servant.

It caught the Servant by surprise. Even as her shield crumbled beneath the blow, Ottul sent a dagger of force into the Servant's heart.

The Chorl Servant dropped dead to the deck.

Resting a hand on Gwenn's head, Gwenn herself immobile with shock, Ottul scanned the deck. Her eyes caught mine for a moment, and in their shining depths I saw total devastation, complete loss.

Then she looked away, found Marielle, and reached for her with another conduit.

Marielle's shield exploded with energy, reaching out to encompass the entire ship.

At the same time, the sails above ruffled and snapped, filling with wind.

I shot a glance toward the third Chorl ship, the one that had stolen our wind.

"It's withdrawing!" I shouted.

As the Defiant seized the wind—Bullick shouting orders, his captain's jacket dripping blood, William at his side—the tethers binding the Defiant to the Chorl ship snapped taut and the wood railings began to groan. The Chorl on the other two ships began to shout, those on the Defiant retreating toward their own ship, Keven and the guardsmen roaring forward, shoving them back. Wood began to splinter, and the Chorl broke, turning and leaping for the safety of their own wounded ship. With a final hideous crack, a chunk of the Defiant's railing and deck sheered away, plunging down to the ocean, still attached by the tethers to the Chorl ship. The Defiant shuddered as the wind caught fully, leaping forward, the Chorl ship falling behind as the water it had taken on through the hole in its hull dragged it down.

Cheers erupted on the deck of the ship, the last of the Chorl either leaping into the fast-moving water or being cut down by the guardsmen. Ahead, one of the Chorl ships blazed, Heddan's fire running out of control, and the second Chorl ship had banked away. The last ship—the one that had begun to turn, that carried the Servant I'd wounded—had turned and now fled into the open ocean.

"Should we pursue them?" Bullick asked, chest heaving, breath short. He wiped sweat and blood from his face, sword still drawn.

"No," I said.

He turned sharply at the sound of my voice, then spun to look in the direction of my gaze.

To where Heddan knelt weeping, Trielle's body clutched tight to her chest.

Chapter 9

Thirteen bodies lined the deck. Each had been wrapped in cloth, the same cloth used for the hammocks, then sewn shut, lead weights added to the lining so that the bodies would sink. Seven of them had been sailors, their shrouds sewn by their shipmates. Five of them had been guardsmen.

The last a Servant.

I stared down at Trielle's shroud, resting on a board with one end on the deck, the other tilted up onto the railing as, beside me, Bullick spoke a few

words, his voice loud, those gathered on the deck—almost everyone on board—silent. I didn't hear him, his voice nothing more than a murmur, the words meaningless. And yet every other sound on the ship rang clear, almost brittle in the quiet. The creak of wood. The rush of water past the hull. The thud of a wooden pulley against the mast. The flap of the flag above. The ship rocked on the ocean swells, and the breeze tossed my hair into my face, but I didn't move to brush it away.

Gwenn had sewn Trielle's shroud, silently weeping the entire time. Her stitches were perfect, for her hands had remained steady, even as the tears dripped from her chin and stained the cloth with dampness. Marielle had wanted to help, and Heddan, but in the end they'd left it all to Gwenn, helping Keven, William, and the remaining guardsmen deal with the shrouds for the fallen guardsmen instead, everyone subdued, everyone morose.

I hadn't realized how the rest of Amenkor looked upon the Servants, hadn't realized that—since this past winter, since the general population had seen the Servants on a daily basis, working in the kitchens and handing out food—the Servants had become almost as honored and revered as the Mistress herself.

But I could see it in their faces now, could see it in their eyes, in the way they bowed their heads. I'd seen it the day before, when the realization that one of the Servants had fallen had cut the elation of the Chorl retreat short, as smoothly and cleanly as if it had been an ax severing a tether.

Trielle . . .

For a moment, I felt her on the river, manipulating it, assured and precise. I sensed the mocking quality in her voice as she teased me about William, about Brandan, saw her lift an eyebrow in appreciation as a man walked past on the streets of Amenkor . . . or on the deck of the Defiant.

I heard her laughing.

Then I realized that Bullick had stopped speaking, that he'd leaned toward me slightly.

"Did you wish to say anything?" he said, in a low voice.

I glanced out toward those gathered on the deck, the guardsmen and sailors lined up at the feet of the thirteen shrouded bodies—their shipmates, fellow guardsmen, and friends. Avrell stood beside me. Keven, William, Isaiah, Heddan, and Marielle surrounded me, a wall of support. Gwenn remained below, with Ottul.

All of those on deck watched me, expectant. And beyond them, on the other two ships that had suffered during the attack—the Prize and the Spoils of War—I could feel the crews standing before their own dead, waiting for the signal, for the first body to drop from the Defiant into the ocean, so that they could do the same for those they'd lost.

Normally, I hated speaking in front of a crowd. But not this time.

I drew in a deep breath, slid beneath the river and threw out a net, stretching it toward the other four ships, even Tristan's, so that all could hear, no matter how softly I spoke.

"I was told once that there is always a price," I said, my voice rough and cracked. I didn't care. I sensed the shock from the other ships as they heard me, heard the murmur on the Defiant, the sudden shifting of feet. "I know this. I grew up on the Dredge. But sometimes the price seems too high." I looked toward the bodies, forced myself to gaze upon all of their shrouds, and then I lifted my chin, jaw tight, eyed all of those on deck, stared into all of their faces, into their tear-swollen eyes or their solemn grief. "These men and women paid that price for the rest of us. They paid to give us all safe passage to Venitte. Remember that when we pull into port. Remember them." Bullick stepped forward into the stark silence that followed, cleared his throat awkwardly. "With those words, we commit these bodies to the sea in the name of the Mistress. And for all of Amenkor."

A bell clanged, the sound harsh. A few of the guardsmen flinched; Marielle gasped; Heddan cried out, the sound short and sharp. Stepping forward to the first body—Trielle's—two sailors reached down, gripped the end of the plank

her body rested on and lifted, raising the end to waist height, level with the railing, then shifting and tilting it higher.

The sound of her body sliding from the plank forced me to close my eyes, the scrape of cloth on wood digging deep into my gut.

A momentary breath of silence . . .

And a splash.

The back of my throat grew hot with tears. I swallowed, choked down the sound of her body hitting the ocean, tasted phlegm, but forced my eyes open, staring unseeing across the deck as the plank shifted, as the sailors moved to the next body, hefted it up onto the plank. Marielle sobbed to one side, but I refused to look at her, knew that if I did, the carefully controlled living thing in my gut, writhing like a snake, would escape. I listened to the clang of the bell, the scrape and splash of the next body, and the next, saw the flash of tan as a body fell from the edge of the Prize to one side, and then I dove beneath the river, deep, let the river's wind take the sounds, dampen them so that I would not hear, let the world gray so that I could not see. I let the river be my refuge.

When it was over, Avrell touched my arm. He asked a question with his eyes, but I shook my head, the motion curt.

The gathering broke. Sailors moved back to their posts on deck, guardsmen drifted to the railing to look down at the waves, to where the bodies had vanished beneath the black surface, their mood somber. Bullick nodded to me before turning away, his expression tight, his grief controlled, hands clasped behind his back as he stared out toward the horizon. Marielle took Heddan's arm and led her below, Keven and William trailing after, William catching my gaze, face tight.

I came last.

Marielle left Heddan at our cabin, to let her rest and grieve in isolation, but she did not stay herself. Instead, Heddan settled, she followed the rest of us as we proceeded down the narrow corridor.

To Ottul's cabin.

When I opened the door, I found Ottul sitting on her cot, Gwenn cross-legged at her feet on the floor. She looked up when the door opened, the hand that held the brush she used on Gwenn's hair halting, dropping to her side. The other hand moved to rest on the top of Gwenn's head. A protective gesture. Gwenn stood.

"We heard the bells," she said, her voice weak, but steady. "Is it over?"

"Yes." I wanted to say more, could see that Gwenn needed more, but no words came.

Then Gwenn took the two steps that separated us and hugged me tight, her arms encircling my waist.

I stiffened, surprised. No one had ever approached me for comfort; no one had ever thought to.

I reached down tentatively and laid my hand on her head, as Ottul had done, saw Ottul's mouth tighten, her brow crease slightly. I felt Gwenn trembling, but she didn't sob, didn't cry. Her arms tightened at my waist instead. I pulled her in close, stroked her hair, as Erick had once done for me, and simply held her.

Then I pushed her away, gently, knelt down beside her, looked her in the eye.

"I need to speak with Ottul," I said. "You can stay if you want, or Marielle can take you back to my cabin." Which was what I had intended: for Gwenn to stay with Heddan. I hadn't intended to give her the choice.

Gwenn watched me closely a long moment. "It wasn't Ottul's fault," she finally said.

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

"It wasn't her fault. I heard the ship, heard the Chorl on deck. I thought I could help, but you told me to watch Ottul, so I brought her with me. . . ."

I glanced toward Ottul, her blue face impassive, her eyes on me, watching. No arrogance. No defiance. Something else lined her face, something I didn't recognize.

I turned back to Gwenn. "It's all right. I'm not going to hurt her. We're just going to talk."

Relief flooded her eyes. "Then I'll stay. I can help."

I hesitated, even then, stood. "Good," I said, and faced Ottul. Marielle gathered Gwenn to her, while Keven and Avrell, waiting stooped over out in the corridor, stepped into the room and to one side. The quarters were tight, almost too crowded with six people in them, but even as everyone shifted about, Ottul's eyes never wavered from mine. She didn't react at all, until everyone was settled.

Then, her eyes narrowed. In a voice hard as stone, weighted with importance, she asked, "You gave to sea?"

I frowned. I should have been the first to ask a question, not her. But she was talking, in the coastal common tongue, if haltingly and with strange inflections.

Her time with Gwenn had been well spent.

"I don't understand," I said.

"Dead," she said, motioning with one hand toward the upper deck. She'd remained above in the aftermath of the battle, as the bodies were laid out, both Amenkor and Chorl alike, as the deck was cleaned.

She hadn't been there when the Chorl dead were unceremoniously heaved overboard.

"You gave dead to sea?" she asked again.

I nodded, uncertain. "Yes."

"Good." Ottul relaxed, muttered something under her breath, a prayer, and lifted her hands, palms up, to the ceiling, head back, eyes closed. I thought she might have collapsed into the hunched position she'd used so often in her room in Amenkor, but there wasn't enough room here. She hummed something, not quite a song, more like a deep-throated phrase repeated over and over, and then she halted, opening her eyes and dropping her gaze back to me, dropping her hands to her lap, the brush she'd used to comb Gwenn's hair still in one hand. There was something different about her posture, something new.

And then I realized that she was no longer tense, no longer rigid. She'd relaxed, as if she'd been freed . . . or as if she had nothing left to fear.

"All Chorl given to sea," she said, the harshness gone, but not the intensity.

"All return to sea, or become . . ." she struggled a moment, then gave up, "become ankril. Cannot find Queotl."

"Ankril? Queotl?" I glanced toward Avrell and Keven, saw perplexed expressions on their faces.

"Lost," Gwenn said softly. "She's saying that you have to give the bodies to the sea, or the warriors become lost, that they can't find Queotl." She spoke to Ottul in the Chorl language a moment. "The ankril are those that are lost."

"And what is Queotl?"

Gwenn shook her head. "I don't know. 'Que' means fire. 'Otl' is like heaven. Fire-heaven?"

My eyes widened and I murmured, "The Fires of Heaven." I turned to Avrell and Keven grimly. "That's what the Ochean and the priest Haqtl called the White Fire."

"When they die, they must seek the Fires of Heaven," Avrell said. "From what she's saying, they can only find it if their bodies are 'given' to the sea."

"Where is Queotl?" I asked Ottul. "Where are the Fires of Heaven?"

Her brow knit in consternation, whether because she could not find the words or because the answer should have been obvious I couldn't tell. "Come from ocean. From west. Lives in east."

West. The direction the White Fire had come from. I tried not to show my frustration. Apparently the Chorl knew as little about where the White Fire came from as I did.

Except they thought it came from the ocean. Because they had seen it originating from the ocean, or because as far as they knew there was nothing to the west except ocean?

Thinking back to the rooftop on the Dredge, when the Fire had first appeared

over the water on the horizon and scorched its way across Amenkor, I could understand how they could believe it had come from the ocean. But somehow, I couldn't bring myself to believe that the ocean was its source.

And they thought it lived in the east? Is that why they'd come to the coast? Or was it because their history told them that we were here?

I sighed. I hadn't come down here to find out about the Fire.

I waved toward the deck above, hardened my own voice. "What happened up there? Why did you kill the Chorl Servant? Why didn't you try to escape, to return to your own people?"

Ottul straightened. A hint of the old arrogance returned, but it did not hold, faltering and crumbling until she lowered her head, a few strands of her long black hair falling before her face.

"I . . . cannot."

The words were almost unintelligible, soft and hoarse, full of a deep despair. And on the river I tasted sadness, the same pungent sweet onion I'd smelled before.

"What do you mean you can't?" Avrell asked.

Ottul jerked her head upright, her eyes red with withheld tears, but she could not meet any of our gazes, not even Gwenn's. "I am antreul," she said, no more than a husk of sound, her dark blue lips pressed together, trembling, shoulders slumped. "I am . . . Forgotten."

I leaned back, remembered the ritualistic gestures the other Chorl Servant had made, recalled the look of utter horror and despair on Ottul's face, the way she'd reeled back, as if she'd been physically struck.

"Why?" I said, although I thought I already knew.

Ottul met my gaze. If it had been any of the others who had asked, I wasn't certain she would have answered. "I am captured. I am . . . lost." She stumbled over the word, looked at Gwenn briefly.

The deaths of the other Chorl we'd captured in Amenkor after the attack suddenly made sense. They'd waited weeks to be freed, to be rescued, and then they'd killed themselves so that they would not be made antreul, Forgotten. Or they'd killed themselves because they already were in their minds.

"And why did you kill the Chorl Servant?" Avrell interrupted. "Because you were Forgotten?"

Ottul didn't answer, not in words. But she winced, and her eyes flickered toward Gwenn, before sliding away, back down to the floor, her head bowing forward again.

For a moment, I considered dismissing Avrell and Keven, speaking to Ottul alone, certain that she'd reveal more if the two men were not listening.

But then Gwenn stepped forward, moved to stand before Ottul. "I know."

Everyone in the room stilled.

"What do you mean, Gwenn?" I asked.

She turned toward me, her face intent, serious for a moment. But then she bit her lip, as if uncertain.

Ottul said something, reached out a hand to touch Gwenn's shoulder before turning away.

Gwenn relaxed, drew in a deep breath. "It's because of me. I remind her of her sister, and her sister was killed by the Ochean, by the other Servants."

I frowned, shot a glance toward Ottul. "I don't understand."

Gwenn stepped forward, speaking fast, voice filled with fury. "She's been telling me what they have to do to earn the rings in their ears, what they have to go through. It's horrible! It's nothing like what we do to train. They're forced into the temple once they know that they can use the Sight, taken from their families and hidden. And in the temple they get tested. If they can't do something—raise a shield, create a warding—then they're beaten, and beaten again the next day, and the next, until they can. And sometimes the beating is so bad that the Servant doesn't recover.

"Ottul said she went to the temple first, that she barely managed to gain the fourth ring, that it took her years to get that far. When she had passed ket—the second ring—they brought her sister to the temple. She'd prayed that

her sister wouldn't have the Sight, and she tried to protect her once she was in the temple, tried to help her—"

Gwenn broke off, reined in her escalating rage. "But she couldn't. One day, when her sister failed to reach ket, the other Servants beat her unconscious, left her on the sands. Ottul found her there—"

Gwenn broke off again, this time because she'd choked on her own tears. She tried to control them, almost succeeded. "She says that I remind her of her sister."

I turned to Ottul, her head bowed forward. "You were supposed to kill yourself like the other Chorl we captured, weren't you? Because you were Forgotten. Antreul."

Ottul flinched, but then straightened defiantly.

"She didn't because she hates them," Gwenn said. "Because they killed her sister."

But not completely, I thought. I'd seen the hope in her face when she'd come up on deck during the attack, the hope that perhaps the Chorl would take her back. Only after the other Chorl Servant had made that slicing gesture across her chest—and after they'd threatened Gwenn—had she retaliated.

I sighed. Suddenly the tension of the battle, the grief of its aftermath, the funeral on deck, were too much.

Turning to Marielle and Gwenn, I said, "Stay with her. See if you can find out anything more. Anything at all."

Marielle nodded, although I could see her own grief bruising the edges of her eyes. Exhaustion, and more.

Motioning to Avrell and Keven, I started toward my cabin but remembered Heddan, coming up short.

"Use mine," Keven said.

I nodded, turned sideways to slide past the steep ladder leading up to the deck, and pushed into Keven's cabin.

Even as Keven ducked through the door and closed it behind him, Avrell said, "She seems much more cooperative now."

"Something happened on the deck while the Chorl were attacking, when she came up from below with Gwenn. Did you see it?"

Avrell shook his head, but Keven grunted. "The other Chorl Servant did something, made some sort of gesture, as if she were drawing a blade across her chest."

"I think Ottul thought they might still take her back, but the other Servant cut her off. And then the other Servant tried to kill her."

Avrell's eyebrows rose. "So being Forgotten means death?"

"Apparently. That's why the Chorl warriors we captured killed themselves. And Ottul seemed willing to accept death at first."

"What do you mean? She retaliated. She killed the other Servant."

I shook my head. "No. She did nothing at first. She only intervened when Gwenn stepped between her and the other Servant, when Gwenn protected her, tried to save her. I think she killed the other Servant to save Gwenn. She's bonded with Gwenn, because she reminds her of her sister."

"So can we trust her?" Keven asked.

I shrugged. "I don't know. But she's cooperating because of Gwenn . . . and because she is Forgotten. There's no doubt for her now. Without Gwenn's intervention, I think she would have allowed the other Servant to kill her."

"But can we trust that? Is that enough?"

I shook my head. "No. Not yet."

Avrell straightened, grew more formal. "She could prove her loyalties, though."

"How?"

"She could allow you to put a portion of the Fire inside of her."

I stilled. "I could see what she was thinking, could seize control of her if necessary."

"Why can't you just put the Fire in her anyway?" Keven asked. "With or without her permission."

"Because she's a Servant. She can protect herself with a shield."

"And it would have more meaning if she gave her permission," Avrell added. "It would verify where her loyalties now lie."

"I'll have Gwenn explain it to her. See if Ottul would be willing. But not right now." I scrubbed at the tightness around my eyes, at the grief and pain and exhaustion.

"Do it before we reach Venitte, though. We need to be certain of her before we present her to the Council of Eight and Lord March." At my nod, Avrell sighed.

"At least she might be willing to help with the conduits you and Eryn are trying to construct now."

"She's already been helpful. She used one to help bolster Gwenn during the fighting, used it again to steady Marielle and protect the Defiant from further attack while the Chorl were retreating. Even if she refuses to help after this, I learned enough from those two examples that I can probably figure out how to form the conduits on my own."

"Then something good has come of this."

I slumped down into a folding chair, the long night recovering from the attack and readying to bury the dead catching up to me. But the heated grief that I had locked so tightly away during the funeral still seethed inside my gut.

"There is one other thing," Avrell said.

I sighed heavily. "What, Avrell?"

"Ottul said that all of those that are not returned to the sea are Lost."

"Yes. They won't be able to find the Fires of Heaven."

He nodded, his face grim. "It seemed to be . . . significant. To her, and I assume to the Chorl in general. Look at how intent she was that we'd given the bodies on deck to the ocean, even our own. Look at her reaction when you told her we had."

"So?"

He took a careful step forward. "Before this is over, we will more than likely have to deal with the Chorl, come to some kind of truce, agree to the terms of a treaty of some kind. As you said, they have no home to return to. We can't drive them back into the sea as the Seven did before. We can't expect them to live off of their own ships. They'd turn to piracy. The safety of the coast would be in constant jeopardy. In the end, we'll have to work with them."

I frowned. I hadn't thought that far ahead, hadn't considered what might have to be done if we managed to keep the Chorl out of Venitte . . . and away from the second throne.

But Avrell was right. The only other option would be to kill them all.

And that, even after the attack on Amenkor, even after the attack on the ships, wasn't an option I was willing to accept.

I turned my attention back to Avrell. "And?" I said, already not liking where Avrell was leading me.

He hesitated, in full First mode, his hands tucked inside the sleeves of his shirt. "Think about what we did with the bodies of the Chorl after the attack in Amenkor, what we did with the thirteen Chorl warriors who killed themselves after their capture."

My frown deepened. "We burned them—"

I broke off, shot a horrified glance toward Keven.

"Exactly," Avrell said softly. "How would you react if you found out the people that you were dealing with, the people that you were trying to form a treaty with, had desecrated your dead, had in effect kept them from attaining the Fires of Heaven?"

"Is she ready?"

"I think so," Avrell said, turning toward the closed door of Ottul's chambers.

"Gwenn explained everything. As far as she can tell, Ottul understands what we're asking her to do." He turned back, frowning. "Are you certain you want to go in alone?"

"You should at least take Gwenn with you," Keven interjected.

I shook my head. "No. This needs to be between just us."

Keven looked troubled, but both he and Avrell stepped aside.

"We'll wait out here," the First said.

I stepped forward, then opened the door.

Inside, Ottul and Gwenn looked up, the Chorl Servant seated, Gwenn standing before her. When Gwenn saw me, she turned to Ottul, hugged her, and murmured something to her in the Chorl language. Ottul smiled uncertainly.

And then Gwenn left, closing the door behind her.

As soon as the door slid shut, Ottul stood, stepped forward, and knelt before me. Bowing her head, she murmured, "Ochean."

I frowned, felt a shiver course through me. "I'm not the Ochean."

Ottul looked up. "You use Sight. You use Queotl . . . Fire. You rule ship, city, warriors. You Ochean."

I shifted uncomfortably. The thought that the Chorl would think of me as the Ochean, that they would associate me with the woman I'd killed in the throne room of Amenkor . . .

I shoved the thought aside. "I am the Mistress, not the Ochean. Are you certain you want to do this? You'll be betraying the Chorl, betraying your own people."

Ottul bowed her head again, her hair falling before her face, obscuring her. But I heard her voice, a low murmur, barely a whisper. But steady, not broken. Riddled with a pain I didn't understand, but certain. "I am Forgotten."

We stood in silence for a long moment.

Then I stepped forward, reached for the river, dove deep as I gathered it together, creating a hollow conduit that stretched out from the White Fire at my core toward Ottul. She remained kneeling, head bowed. She had not touched the river, hadn't raised a shield to protect herself. She was completely exposed.

The river smelled of fear, of tension, of sweat and the ocean. It tasted of anxiety, bitter and sharp on the tongue. But there was no deceit, no threat. Ottul was gray.

When the vortex I'd created touched her, Ottul gasped, but did not move. I forced the Fire down through the conduit. When a small portion had touched her, I severed the link with a blade-eddy.

Ottul gasped again, her head rising. She stared at me, tears at the corners of her wide, deep eyes. A profoundly reverential look, tinged with what she had lost. And I suddenly realized I had touched her with the Fire, with the Fires of Heaven. With Queotl.

"Mistress," she whispered.

I'd intended to reach for the Fire at her core, to feel what she felt, to learn the truth about whether we could trust her, but looking into her eyes, hearing that one single word, I realized that wasn't necessary.

The next few days on board the ship were somber and tense. Bullick had turned the group toward Venitte, expected to be at the port within the week, assuming the weather held. Everyone on deck kept a vigilant eye on the horizon, in a constant search for more Chorl ships. Even Tristan on the Reliant had turned his focus outward, no longer casting his spyglass toward the Defiant as often. Bullick kept the crew occupied by having them build new railings, the ship's carpenter concentrating on the structural damage to the ship's hull below deck. We'd taken more damage than it had seemed when first the Spoils of War had scraped past and then the Chorl ship had tethered itself to the same side. Nothing that the carpenter couldn't fix. Some of the guardsmen helped out, while members of the crew had the guardsmen show them a few moves with the swords and axes. Where before the battle the crew and guardsmen had kept themselves apart, they were now mixing, talking, cooperating.

Three days out from Venitte, on the aft deck, leaning on the rail and only half watching the churning wake of the ship, I asked, "What do you believe in, Keven?"

My ever-present guardsmen shifted awkwardly. Behind us, on the deck, one of the sailors had brought forth a fiddle, had begun to play a few strains of music, lonely and forlorn. A couple of guardsmen paused to listen.

"I believe in what everyone in Amenkor believes in," Keven said, after a long

moment of thought. "I believe in the Mistress."

I turned, expecting to find a mocking expression on Keven's face, a teasing glint in his eye.

But his eyes were steady, the lines around his mouth set and serious.

It brought me up short, made me shift stance, suddenly uncomfortable.

"You don't believe in the Skewed Throne?"

He shrugged. "The Mistress and the Skewed Throne are one and the same. The throne is simply a symbol of the Mistress' power."

"But the throne is dead."

"You aren't. And the general population of Amenkor never sees the throne. To them, it truly is a symbol, a gesture they make over their heart, a sign they see on a dead man's forehead after you've passed judgment and the Seekers have carried that judgment out. What is real to them, what they see practically every day, is you. You walk their streets, even going down to the Dredge, to the slums beyond. You stand on the wharf or in the market square and speak softly, yet allow everyone to hear, as you did on the ships here during the funeral. They see your power, have witnessed it with their own eyes. Don't think that word did not spread of the fight in the throne room between you and the Ochean. Guardsmen witnessed it. There are stories being told in the streets. To them, you are the power, and it's you that they—and I—believe in. Not a chunk of stone sitting in an empty room."

I turned back to the white foam of the wake of the ship, contemplated what Keven had said, the truth I heard in the simple statements, the conviction. And I thought about what I'd seen in Ottul's eyes as she stared up at me, the Fire now burning at her core.

It took a long moment before I could speak again, and even then my voice was raw and quiet. I couldn't bring myself to look at Keven's face, continued to stare down at the churning ocean, at the gentle swells.

"I didn't believe in the Mistress," I said. "Before. On the Dredge. I feared her. Or rather, I feared her guardsmen, her Seekers, because they were a danger to me, a threat. I had only contempt for her. She was . . . distant. She couldn't help me survive, couldn't provide me with food, with clothing, with warmth, so I despised her. But others on the Dredge did believe in her. They thought she watched over them, that she protected them. I'd find them in the alleys, whispering prayers to her, some even as they lay dying. But I had no time for her. I didn't understand the faith they put in her. I still don't understand it, even after becoming the Mistress myself, even after learning that in some strange way they were right. The Mistress does watch over them, just not as . . . personally as perhaps they thought. That's what the Seekers are for—to protect, to carry out justice."

I pulled out my dagger, stared down at its edge, hilt lying flat in one hand, the point resting against the tip of one finger of the other hand. A simple blade, no etching, no leather-wrapped grip. Just cold steel. I'd cleaned it thoroughly after the fight with the Chorl, as Erick had taught me, had washed the blood off as the sailors washed it off the deck.

"But even that small understanding didn't come until later. On the Dredge I didn't believe in anything. Not until I killed the man who tried to rape me. Not until Erick came. Then, I think I believed in this." I held up the dagger, grimly. A cloud scudded across the sun, casting the ship into shadow.

Otherwise, the blade might have glinted in the light. Even in the shade it appeared deadly, smooth and sharp and full of strength. And strength had been what I needed back then.

"But?" Keven said.

I could hear understanding in Keven's voice, as if he knew my answer already, as if he'd found the answer himself at some point.

And perhaps he had. He carried a sword after all.

"But then I killed Bloodmark." I glanced toward Keven, then away. Because I wasn't being honest, and I could sense Keven's frown, even though his expression was blank. I grimaced, sighed. "No. It wasn't Bloodmark's death that changed me."

"It was Charls'."

I thought Keven would condemn me, but he said nothing, merely nodded once. An acceptance, almost an approval.

"After that, I don't know what I believed in," I continued. "I relied on the dagger, to protect Borund, to survive, but I didn't believe in it anymore. I didn't feel the need to believe in anything, but I felt there should be something more, something . . . better." I struggled a moment more to express it, then let my shoulders sag.

"But now we've met the Chorl, have been attacked by the Chorl, because of belief. From what Ottul has said over the last few days, and from what I found out from the Ochean before I killed her, the Chorl believe in the White Fire, truly believe that the Fire is what they seek after they die."

"And I can understand why," Keven said softly. And now he was the one staring out over the water, his hands gripping the rail tightly. "It . . . had a presence. When it passed through Amenkor six years ago, I was on the palace walls, on patrol. But when it burned across the water, when it descended and touched me, I felt it . . . inside. Deep inside. I felt it burning there, felt it . . . judge me."

I shuddered, remembering the first man I'd killed, remembered his hand pressing hard into my chest as he fumbled with his breeches, as he readied to rape me. But the Fire had intervened, had burned down inside of me, exposed me, judged me . . . and somehow it had given me the strength to kill the man who I'd known would kill me in the end.

Then the Fire had left a part of itself behind, inside me.

And I suddenly realized that no one spoke of the Fire, of what it had done to them. Not to each other, as Keven had just done. It was too personal, too private, something that could only be shared with yourself.

Or the person you worshiped. Like a confession.

"The Fire is what brought the Chorl to Amenkor," I said. "The priests believed they would find the Fire there, because they could feel it burning inside of Erick. They tortured him to find out where it had come from."

I shuddered at the memory, at the white-hot pain of it, the blood and sweat and sand.

And at the look on Haqtl's face, the intense hatred in his eyes as he drove the spine into Erick's chest.

Keven shifted. "They came east, to the coast, in search of Heaven," he said. We thought about that in silence, the strains of the fiddle behind us shifting, the pace picking up, slipping from sadness to something a little more lighthearted, the music a strange juxtaposition to our conversation. Turning away from the water, Keven asked, "And what do you believe in now, Mistress?"

I didn't know.

Before I admitted this, Gwenn emerged from below in a rush. Eyes locking on me, she ran toward me, gasped, "Mistress! Isaiah says to come down now. Something's wrong with Erick!"

I found myself at the door to Erick's cabin without remembering how I got there. Inside, Isaiah and two sailors were struggling to hold Erick's convulsing body down onto the cot, Isaiah barking orders, both men crying out as Erick kicked and flailed, his arms and legs moving without real purpose. The sight sent a cold hard weakness into my legs.

"Gods," I murmured, "what's happening?"

Isaiah shot a black look toward the door.

"Help us!" he spat, and I surged forward, felt Keven at the door behind me. Then we were both pushing between the other two desperate sailors, a bruise already swelling up on one man's cheek. Both were panicked, one trying to hold down Erick's arms, the other his legs, Isaiah in the middle over his chest. As Keven and I slid into place, Isaiah retreated.

"Hold him so that he doesn't hurt himself!" he barked. "I need to find something for his mouth!"

Gasping, I snatched one of Erick's arms, but not before it struck the side of

the cabin wall with a hideous, meaty smack. He'd been bedridden, had weakened recovering from his weeks of torture even though his muscles had been exercised by servants, his legs and arms bent and stretched on a regular basis, but still his spasms almost ripped the captured arm free from my grip. I spat a curse that made the nearest sailor's eyes widen, heard Keven cursing under his breath at the other end of the cot, and then I shoved Erick's unruly arm down to his chest, leaned over it to keep it down, the sailor doing the same.

This close, I could smell oranges, could feel Erick's sweat-soaked shirt beneath my arms and chest, could hear his heaving, rasping breath, could feel it against my neck.

And then his back arched.

"Keven!" I cried as my grip began to loosen, to slide. Erick's legs were still free and he was using them to push upward.

"I'm trying," Keven growled. I shot a glance toward Erick's legs, saw Gwenn cowering in the door to the cabin over the sailor's back, hands covering her face, eyes wide and filled with terrified tears—

And then Isaiah returned and I spun back, his sharp face locked in a grim expression. "Hold him!" he barked, and Keven grunted, the sailor beside him at his feet doing the same. "I said hold him!"

"Put in the gods-damned stick!" Keven spat back.

Isaiah ignored him. Kneeling down beside Erick's head, he began to pry open Erick's mouth, Erick's jaw locked shut, the muscles in Erick's neck standing out in strained cords as he convulsed, arching back farther.

He began to tilt, rocking off the cot.

Everyone cried out, and then Gwenn shoved in beside me, arms extended, pushing Erick back, holding him in place.

"I can't—" Isaiah began.

And then all of the tension snapped out of Erick's body.

He collapsed back to the cot, everyone falling on top of him, but the seizure hadn't ended. His arm still continued to spasm beneath my grip. His breath still hissed in and out, far too fast. I could feel his heart shuddering, the beats irregular, and his body felt hot to the touch.

"Got it," Isaiah said, and I turned to see the stick he'd held slip between Erick's teeth.

A moment before another spasm hit. Erick bit down, hard, teeth sinking half an inch into the soft wood, almost snapping it in two.

Isaiah caught my eye. "More than one doctor's lost a finger that way," he said in a bland voice. Then his focus shifted, his frown deepening. "We have to get the seizures to stop. He'll kill himself."

"What can you do?"

His brows drew together in thought. Then: "Hold on."

I rolled my eyes, but tightened my grip on Erick's arm.

He turned to his small desk, rooted through a satchel, vials clinking together.

A moment later, he withdrew a thin glass tube filled with a clear liquid that looked like water.

Kneeling again, he pulled the cork free from the tube with his teeth, spat it aside, and said, "Hold him still."

All of us leaned our weight onto Erick's chest and legs, pressing him down to the cot. As we did, I wondered if this is what it had been like for Erick when he'd carried me back from the warehouse district, fire blazing behind him, the tremors from my overuse of the river coursing through me. Had he felt this terror, this pain?

Then Isaiah poured the vial into Erick's mouth around the stick.

It may have looked like water, but it reeked of the deepest depths of the slums.

Erick immediately choked, spit half the fluid back up through his clenched teeth, splattering me and Isaiah, but Isaiah didn't flinch, his hand massaging Erick's throat, forcing him to swallow.

And then Erick stopped breathing.

My heart skipped in my chest, halted.

And so did Erick's.

"Let him go!" Isaiah growled, leaping to his feet. "Let him go, let him go!"

I didn't react fast enough, too shocked to move, Erick's chest so still beneath my hands, so lifeless, I couldn't move. Isaiah gripped me by the shoulder and, with a strength I wouldn't have known his thin body possessed, pulled me up and away. The others jumped back from Erick's still muscle-seized, still breathless, body. Isaiah stood over him, his face intent, doing nothing, for one breath, two, so long I wanted to scream at him. Then he raised his arm, hand clenched into a fist, and brought it down sharply onto Erick's chest, right above his heart.

The force of the blow, the viciousness of it, halted me where I stood, halted everyone, Keven sucking in a sharp, shocked breath. I could feel his shock slipping over into appalled anger

He reached for his blade when Isaiah struck Erick again.

"What in bloody hells—" Keven began, his sword beginning to snick from its sheath—

And then Erick gasped. A harsh, tortured, indrawn breath that seemed ripped from the air.

Isaiah had raised his fist for another blow—oblivious of Keven standing behind him, hand gripping a hilt with white knuckles, two inches of steel bared—but now he paused. They both paused.

Erick heaved in another breath. Another . . .

Then he collapsed back onto the cot, no longer flailing, no longer convulsing. Silence held. No one spoke, breaths loud and ragged, chests heaving. One of the sailors coughed, raised a hand to wipe at his mouth, wincing as he touched the darkening bruise on his cheek.

After a long, tense moment, Isaiah lowered his arm. "I think it's over."

A strained tension bled out of the room with an almost audible sigh. Keven's blade slid back into place with a click, and Isaiah turned, as if he had just become aware of it. He cast Keven a derisive glare.

Keven did not seem contrite, anger still clear in his gaze. And his hand didn't leave the hilt.

"What happened?" I asked.

"He seized."

I drew in a breath, the fear of a moment before sliding into an anger similar to Keven's, but I held it in, forced myself to calm. "Why?"

"He's dying," he said bluntly. "He's been inactive for months. He's been tortured, is still being tortured according to you, and his body is giving up. If he isn't freed from this spell within the next few days, he won't survive, no matter what we do."

I held Isaiah's eyes, searched their depths, even touched the river.

What I saw there made me straighten, my jaw clenched.

Then I spun on my heel, moved down the corridor and up the ladder to the deck into early evening sunlight. I searched the crew, found Captain Bullick near the prow.

"Venitte," I said, without preamble, cutting off whatever Bullick had been saying to one of his sailors.

"Yes, Mistress?" he said, stiffening slightly in disapproval.

Only then did I realize my hand rested on my dagger.

"How long until we reach Venitte?"

"Three days."

I shook my head. "Erick doesn't have three days."

"But the Chorl—"

"I don't care," I said, my voice deadly. I could hear it, could hear the gutterscum in it, the street rat bleeding through. I could feel power building on the river, the currents riled. "Get us to Venitte in two days, no more." He straightened even further, nodded formally. "Yes, Mistress."

I turned, headed back to the hatch, to my rooms. Behind, I heard Bullick

exhale sharply, then bark orders.

Two days later, the Defiant approached the docks of Venitte in the dead of night, the ancient city that I'd seen only through dreams, through the memories of others, a blaze of light spread across the port mouth and distant hills, nothing truly visible. We'd entered the northern channel that led to the port an hour before, had watched the flames of torches from the manses and estates that lined the cliff heights to either side slide past in the darkness, had glided past lantern-lit ships on the black water, answering only those hails that were necessary. The Venittians had patrol ships out, guarding the entrance to the channel, and we were held up an interminable amount of time at first, the Venittian patrols unwilling to allow the three escorting Chorn ships through, even though it was obvious there were no blue-skinned Chorn on board, only Amenkor guardsmen. But finally Tristan intervened, using whatever influence he held in Venitte to get all five ships past the blockade and on their way.

I paced the deck, everyone—crew and guardsmen alike—staying well clear. I barely saw the lights that enthralled everybody else on the ship, merely glared up at the cliffs, the anger fueled by fear still seething inside me. I willed the ship to move faster as we emerged from the northern channel and headed directly for the port. I ground my teeth as the ship slowed to come in to dock, the crew leaping prematurely from the deck to tie the ship down in haste. Bullick had ridden them hard, still rode them as they lashed it into place, barking orders like a whip, the crew leaping to action almost before he spoke.

Then, suddenly, Bullick appeared at my side, dressed in his formal captain's jacket. "Wait here while I speak with the harbormaster and get permission to come ashore."

He turned without waiting for a response and stood at the edge of the deck until a plank was lowered and he could disembark.

I glared at his back until he vanished, then found Isaiah. He stood over Erick, who was tied to the plank we'd used to bring him aboard. The plank reminded me viscerally of the one used to slide the shrouded bodies of the dead into the sea, but I fought the image down. Marielle, Heddan, Gwenn, William, and an escort of guardsmen surrounded Erick, ready to leave as soon as Bullick gave his permission. The Servants stood guard over Ottul, even though I could sense the White Fire inside her.

"How is he?" I asked.

Isaiah shook his head. "He's had two minor seizures in the last four hours." I grimaced, shot a glance toward where Bullick had vanished, then out toward the other ships, fixing on the Reliant, pulling in to dock beside us. I narrowed my eyes. "Then he needs to be healed now," I said.

As soon as Bullick returned, nodding from the top of the plank, we disembarked and headed directly for Tristan's ship.

Tristan was speaking to the harbormaster when I approached. I didn't allow him to finish.

"I don't care what it takes," I said, my voice slicing through their conversation like a dagger, "but you will take me to see Zachari. Now."

Both Tristan and the harbormaster frowned. Tristan's gaze cut toward Avrell, expressionless at my side, toward Keven and the other two guardsmen standing behind me, their faces locked into dangerous lines, then toward the others, standing around Erick's prone form in a group at the end of the dock.

Then it shifted farther down the wharf, where a large contingent of guardsmen approached in formal lines, at least fifty men in all, banners flapping in the torchlight that blazed all along the pier.

"The Protectorate," someone whispered, and I turned to find Brandan standing behind Tristan.

Tristan relaxed, the release of tension subtle.

"That would be Lord Zachari Sorrenti," he said.

As he spoke, the Protectorate reached the end of the dock, broke into two groups. One surrounded the Amenkor contingent surrounding Erick. The other

continued down the pier toward us. They were heavily armored, steel reflecting the fire of the torches, flickering red and orange and yellow, carrying shields, swords cinched at their sides, helmets with stunted flaring wings on the heads of those in front. The surplices the leaders wore and the front of the shields contained a sheaf of wheat in gold on a blood-red background. The same symbol adorned the long thin banners.

The sigil of the Lord of Venitte, of Lord March.

"I believe that General Daerium is here to escort you and your party to your official estates," Tristan continued, "where you will stay until Lord March summons you."

I stiffened, felt the muscles at the base of my jaw tighten as I clenched my teeth. General Daerium's men encircled us, the general himself—broad of shoulder, nose broken at least twice, with a respectable beard trimmed neatly, dark hair, and eyes cold and severe—stepping forward.

"He's dying," I said flatly, but Tristan ignored me, turning toward the general and bowing. Behind him, I caught Brandan's sympathetic look, but the Venittian Servant, the gold medallion around his neck glinting, didn't intervene.

"General Daerium," Tristan said, before rising.

"Captain Tristan." The general's voice was deceptively soft, almost mellifluous. "I hope the voyage was uneventful."

Tristan grimaced. "Not quite. I must report immediately to Lord March."

"Of course. A carriage is already waiting." He gestured, and two of the Protectorate stepped forward crisply. "These men will escort you."

"Very well." Tristan glanced toward me. "May I introduce the Mistress of Amenkor."

The general's brow lifted in respectful surprise. He bowed, as crisp and formal as the actions of all of the men in the Protectorate. "I'm honored," he said, rising. He was half again as tall as I was, at least twice my age. "Lord March sends his regrets that he could not be here personally to greet you. He asked that I escort you to your residence, and that he will see you as soon as possible."

"I need to speak with Zachari—"

Avrell cleared his throat quietly.

I frowned. "—Lord Sorrenti. Tonight."

General Daerium's gaze flicked toward Tristan, his lips tightening, but he said, "I will send word to Lord Sorrenti. But it is late. I am not certain he will answer immediately."

I wanted to scream, to throttle Tristan and Brandan both, to draw my dagger and force them all to move, but I could feel Avrell's presence beside me, could feel him willing me to cooperate.

I drew a short breath, exhaled slowly through my nostrils, none of the tension in my shoulders easing. "Very well."

Daerium nodded. "If you will follow me?" He motioned with one hand down the dock.

I hesitated, the urge to argue, to fight, almost overwhelming, then stalked down the dock, Avrell, Keven, and the guardsmen following.

"What's happening?" Marielle whispered as we joined the group on the wharf, the Protectorate merging fluidly and then striking off down the wharf, leading us deeper into Venitte.

"They're taking us to an estate," I said, clipped and harsh.

"But Erick!"

I shook my head, didn't answer, couldn't bring myself to speak. Not to her, nor Isaiah.

Instead, I focused on Avrell, thought of what Eryn had said, that I should trust him, that he'd been to Venitte before, that he'd dealt with them.

"What should I do?"

He pressed his lips tightly together, his gaze focused on the general, on the Protectorate that surrounded us. "Nothing for now. They've made their wishes clear." Then he turned toward me. "This is not the reception I was expecting."

"Maybe I can do something."

Both of us turned toward William, dressed in his merchant's jacket.

"I'm a merchant, part of the guild," he said, straightening under our gaze, one hand smoothing the front of his jacket. A gesture I associated with Borund. "They have to respect the rights of the guild members. They've left Bullick and his crew at the docks; only you and the guardsmen are being escorted to the estate. Which means I should be free as well, as a guild member. To conduct business."

I turned a skeptical eye on Avrell, who shrugged. "It couldn't hurt to try." I glanced down at Erick, at his wan face, his bloodless lips.

"Go."

William broke away from the group, spoke a few words with the Protectorate escorting us, then slid through the opening they made and vanished.

I felt a pang as he left.

"Look," Keven said.

I turned, saw another large contingent of the Protectorate ahead. They were escorting the Amenkor guardsmen from the Chorl ships. I caught Catrell's eye, saw his dark frown, and motioned to him to cooperate.

He nodded, the frown not lessening, and passed the order to Westen and the rest of the Amenkor ranks.

"At least they aren't separating us," Avrell said.

I almost growled but controlled myself. I bit my lip as worry seeped into the anger.

"He will not survive the night," Isaiah said.

He did not need to say who. I shot him a hate-filled glance, one that the healer did not deserve, but he didn't react.

The Protectorate led us up through the streets of Venitte, over cobbles and flagstones, through wide open intersections with fountains or statues at their center. The water glinted in the faint light, barely visible, mostly sound, the stone figures of men and women, of horses and lions and other creatures at its center, etched in harsh, flickering shadow as we passed. Most of the streets were empty, too late for most of the citizens of Venitte to be out. Those few that were stepped out of the way as we approached, watching the procession with curious frowns. Most were men, dressed in shirts and breeches but with more buckles than there would have been in Amenkor. Many of their breeches ended at the knee, with stockings below, like those that Isaiah wore. The few women seen were dressed in loose clothing, the fabric hanging in subtle folds from their shoulders, tied at the waist, with long skirts and sandals, the look similar to that worn in Amenkor, but slightly off, the cut of the cloth different. They pulled their hair back and tied it or pinned it up using what looked like thin sticks.

The buildings were different as well, made of a gray-white stone rather than the gray granite, eggshell stone, or mud-brick of Amenkor, with more columns and detailed architecture on the outside, roofs peaked but low, the buildings themselves wide and short rather than narrow and tall. Windows were tall and thin, and arched at the top and bottom. Doorways were wide and arched only at the top. Most of the buildings had stone steps rising to the width of the building's front, many had rounded windows tucked into the peaks of the roofs. They reminded me of the buildings in the second ward of Amenkor, like the merchants' guild. Except here they seemed to be everywhere. And they were larger, squatting in their plazas and at the edges of the wide roads with the discernible weight of time over them. They'd been built ages before we arrived, and expected to remain ages after we departed.

I shuddered.

The Protectorate halted in front of a wall at least twice my height, before an iron-barred gate, the detail of the ironwork exquisite, curled into a pattern of vines. Through the bars, I could see another of the white-stone buildings sprawling around a small courtyard.

As someone moved to open the gates, General Daerium approached. "These will be your formal estates while you remain in Venitte. Household servants have been

provided. The barracks for your men are to the left, behind the main house, next to a small practice yard and the stables. If you need anything, please inform the Steward."

I placed one hand on Erick's arm. "And Lord Sorrenti?"

Daeriu's gaze dropped to Erick's pale face. "I'll inform him of your request, with Lord March's permission."

Then he spun, the men of the Protectorate parting before the open gates. With tight-lipped anger, I led the Amenkor entourage into the estate, moving swiftly across the circle of white stone between the gates and the stairs of the main building, noting the grass and night-shadowed gardens to either side, another path leading around the manse to the left. I could see a small group waiting at the top of the steps.

I halted before a thin man in tan robes and sandals, my hand on my dagger, my anger a shield before me. He wore a blank expression, his features dark, slightly exotic and sharp, with a narrow beard along his jaw and his hair cropped short, almost to his scalp.

He bowed. His gaze flicked once toward Ottul, then back to me. "I am Alonse, head of the household servants. For the duration of your stay in Venitte, I will serve you as your Steward in all things. Lord March has declared this manse Amenkor territory and has given it over to your use, Mistress."

"And can we leave?"

He straightened and gave a thin, pained smile. "Not as yet, Mistress. Lord March requests that you wait until he has had the time to formally welcome you."

It did not sound like a request.

I felt someone lean in close from behind, saw Alonse's gaze shift toward my shoulder.

"The Protectorate has left a . . . guard at the gates," Keven murmured.

"An honor guard, Mistress," Alonse responded.

I narrowed my eyes. Keven had spoken softly enough that Alonse should not have overheard.

"We need a room," I said. "One of our number is . . . wounded."

Alonse bowed, short and succinct. "Of course. Follow me."

He gave some unseen command to the rest of the staff behind him and they moved, some vanishing on unknown errands through the main door, others descending the steps to lead the rest of the guardsmen to the barracks. I saw Westen approaching.

"Captain Catrell is going to see that everything is in order in the barracks," he said, "then he'll join us in the manse."

"Good."

"He's not happy."

"I saw that on the docks."

Nothing more was said as Alonse led the entire group into the manse. The first room, a huge, circular foyer with marbled flooring, contained three doors and two curved flights of stairs to a second floor. Alonse ascended the stairs to the left into a wide hall branching left and right with small tables, potted palms, and huge urns set against the walls. The first door to the left opened into a room with a four-posted bed draped in filmy cloth, a cushioned bench at its foot, a settee, a few chairs, a table with fruit and a pitcher, and wardrobes against the walls.

"Will this suffice?" Alonse asked.

"Yes."

The four guardsmen carrying Erick's pallet moved to the bed, Isaiah and Marielle hustling to help.

"Can you send word to Lord Sorrenti?" Alonse's lips thinned and he drew breath to speak, but I cut him off in irritation. "Never mind. 'Lord March requests,' I'm certain."

Alonse frowned, the first true expression he'd shown since we'd met him in front of the manse. "Was there anything else?"

"Not right now."

"I could show you to your own rooms—"

He cut off as I turned.

"Leave."

He bowed and left, the doors remaining open behind him. Keven immediately stationed the guardsmen that had remained with us around the door and in the corridor beyond. As he did so, Catrell arrived.

Avrell, Westen, Catrell, and Keven converged on me. Heddan and Gwenn had moved to Erick's side with Ottul, helping Isaiah get him situated.

"This is not . . . encouraging," Westen said.

Catrell practically shook with fury. "We are an official envoy from Amenkor, with the Mistress in our company and an escort from Venitte itself. We should not have been greeted in such a manner. And now we are essentially locked within the walls of this manse, prisoners of Venitte!"

Westen shared a glance with me. Both of us knew that any of the Seekers could escape the walls undetected if necessary. But Catrell was correct regarding the rest of the guardsmen.

"I'm not concerned about that at the moment," I said. "We'll deal with it later. Right now, we need to figure out some way to get word to Lord Sorrenti. Brandan Vard said he was the only one in Venitte who could break the spell on Erick. And Isaiah says Erick won't survive the night."

"That only leaves us a few hours," Westen muttered, his voice calm although his brows creased in concern. "Should I . . . ?"

He trailed off. I knew what he was asking, thought about it a long moment.

But before I could come to a decision, Avrell said sharply, "No. You cannot allow the Seekers out of the manse. Look at what happened when you sent Seekers into Temall. Do you think Lord March will react any differently if he finds out that you allowed Seekers to roam the streets of Venitte without his knowledge? The repercussions to Amenkor would be devastating. Tristan has probably already informed him that you've brought them with you, and if not him, then General Daerium. That in and of itself will not go over well."

"He would never know that we'd left the grounds," Westen said.

"No! No, I forbid it!"

I raised one eyebrow.

Avrell spluttered a moment, then added, "Mistress."

But Avrell was right. Lord Pyre's summary dismissal still stung. And I still didn't understand his decision. I couldn't afford to make the same mistake with Lord March.

"The Seekers will remain here," I said regretfully. "Would you even know where to look for help, Westen?"

He shook his head.

"I didn't think so. We'll have to rely on General Daerium or William."

"Or Tristan," Avrell said.

I didn't answer, breaking away and moving to Erick's side. I reached out and gripped his hand. His skin was soft and cold and dry, his pulse thready. His breath came in long, drawn-out wheezes.

Marielle touched my arm in comfort, then stepped away, taking the other two Servants with her, leaving me with Isaiah.

I sat down on the edge of the bed and began to wait.

Time passed slowly, night bleeding toward dawn. No one spoke, the room filled with Erick's breathing, with the creak of a chair as someone shifted, the rustle of sheets as I moved from the bed to pace. The room had a window overlooking the front courtyard, the iron-vined gates. I watched the Protectorate guards in the torchlight at the gates until I couldn't stand it anymore and moved back to the bed. I ignored the glances that passed between Westen and Avrell, between Avrell and Isaiah, ignored the downturned mouths, the lowered heads of the Servants, Heddan's quiet sobbing.

And then, suddenly, William appeared at the door to the room.

Catrell leaped to his feet, hand on his sword. Avrell and Westen merely stood.

"He was the only one I could think of to turn to," William gasped, his breath short, as if he'd sprinted, the words half an apology, half a grimace. "But it

worked."

Behind him stood Brandan Vard.

And Lord Zachari Sorrenti.

Part III:

Venitte

Chapter 10

"LORD SORRENTI?"

He nodded, his eyes falling on me. Blue eyes, not the usual dark browns, hazels, or greens of the coast. And he had the same slightly exotic look of Alonse, the Steward, his black eyebrows narrowing to points, the same thin beard, but his hair was not shorn close to his head. Instead, it fell in waves down to his shoulders. He wore a pale blue shirt with light brown breeches and a dark gray sash. I could see glints of gold on his fingers and around his neck.

"Mistress. I was informed that you had a problem only I could address," he said, his voice smooth, no hint of anger in it or his expression.

But I could feel the anger on the river, and as I slid deeper, I straightened. Because I could feel his power, as weighted and predatory as the throne had first felt to me, but contained, controlled.

And because Lord Sorrenti was red.

His eyes narrowed as my stance shifted.

"Brandan has explained the situation. May I see the guardsman?" he asked.

I suddenly wasn't so certain, struck by the fact that Sorrenti was a Lord of Venitte, Avrell's warning that politics in Venitte were so much more deadly than in Amenkor. But there was no other choice.

I nodded.

Lord Sorrenti approached the bed. As he moved, I motioned quietly to Westen, felt the Seeker stand and shift into a position behind Sorrenti as the Lord leaned over Erick's prone form, as Sorrenti reached out and placed a hand over Erick's chest and closed his eyes. Catrell caught the movement, the warning, and he shifted as well, to stand near Brandan, who'd moved to Sorrenti's side. Keven, William, and I joined Isaiah on the other side of the bed.

"The threads are secured near his heart," Brandan said.

"I see them," Sorrenti said, without opening his eyes.

"And can you sever them?" I asked. Beneath the river, I could sense his presence on the river, could see the currents shifting as he manipulated them. He did not answer, frowning instead, his brow creasing, the anger I'd felt from him when he'd first arrived blunted, overtaken by curiosity. Everyone fidgeted as they waited except for Ottul, Marielle moving to touch Heddan's shoulder.

Then, abruptly, Sorrenti's eyes opened and he straightened, looked directly at me across the bed.

"The Chorl did this?" He did not turn, but I could feel his awareness of Ottul.

I nodded. "One of their priests. Their head priest, Haqtl."

He grunted, gazed down at Erick, then back. "I can break it, but it will be costly. In strength, in power. Is this guardsman's life worth that much to you?"

In Sorrenti's eyes, in Avrell's resultant frown, I saw that it would be costly in more ways than strength or power, but I did not hesitate. "Yes."

He lowered his head slightly. "Very well."

Then he placed his hand over Erick's heart again, closed his eyes. Beneath the river, I could feel energy build, could feel that heavy, feral power shift, the river shuddering beneath its force as it gathered. Sorrenti's face tightened, jaw clenching, lines of concentration appearing at the corners of his eyes, and still the power built, escalating, drawing tighter and tighter as he focused it. . . .

And then, it released.

I expected a shudder, a wave of reaction from the river that pulsed outward. But instead, I felt a narrow blade slice through the unseen threads of whatever spell had been placed over Erick, energy pouring through the blade as the incision was made, the river rippling, but nothing more. Sorrenti hesitated a moment, the gathered energy releasing, flowing back into its usual currents.

Then he pulled back.

"It's done."

His voice trembled, and his hands shook. He folded them carefully before him, so that no one else would see.

On the bed, Erick's ragged breathing softened. Tension released, muscles that had been held rigid against the pain relaxing. Subtle changes, but visible. Tears stung my eyes, and I found myself trembling. But, like Sorrenti, I hid behind a calm mask, my hands resting on the edge of the bed to keep them stilled.

"Thank you," I said, my own voice rough.

His eyebrow rose. "You've come at a dangerous time, Mistress. Proceed carefully."

Then he turned and left, the Amenkor guardsmen at the door parting before him. Brandan nodded toward me with an apologetic grimace, toward William, the motion a little perfunctory, then trailed behind the Lord.

As soon as they left, I turned to Isaiah, who'd already leaned over Erick, had already begun to examine him.

"How is he?"

Isaiah's bitter frown sharpened in irritation and I clamped my mouth shut, let him work.

When he stood back, he heaved a thin sigh. "He's better. His pulse is not as weak, and his breathing has improved." He caught my gaze and grimaced. "We'll know for certain within a day or two. He'll either wake up . . . or he won't." I nodded.

"What about Sorrenti?" Avrell said.

"I don't know. He was angry about something, and he was red." I caught Avrell's eyes, saw understanding there.

His lips pursed and he looked toward the door. "You owe him now."

"I know," I said. "But he came, he helped."

Avrell said nothing.

Erick woke two days later.

I stood in his room looking out over the city of Venitte, over the gray-white buildings that seemed to stretch forever, smoke rising from the nearest streets that wound upwards to the summit of the hill, where the domed citadel that served as the heart of the city's government stood, where the Seven had held their meetings when they had ruled, replaced now by the Lords and Ladies. And Lord March. But the citadel could not be seen from Erick's windows. His view opened onto the south, onto the stretch of buildings and streets that led to the southern cliff edges of the port and the manses there. Mixed in with the buildings were occasional splashes of green—gardens and orchards and olive groves. Every courtyard, including ours, contained an arched trellis, grapes and wisteria and other climbing plants hanging down into the pathway that it covered. I could also see part of the harbor, the water a lighter blue than that of Amenkor, and ships. Many, many ships, of all sizes, with differing numbers of masts and sails, triangular and square, all skimming across the water in the breeze.

The city was at least twice the size of Amenkor, the buildings grander, the harbor more active. Because while Amenkor was a crossroads, a meeting place for those crossing the mountains to or from Kandish through the pass, and a stopover for those on the roads running north and south along the coast, Venitte was the hub of the sea trade. The true merchants' guild resided here, controlling all of the trade to the southern islands, and all trade north, including the icy reaches of Taniece.

I glared out at it, at the "honor" guard of Protectors that surrounded the

estate, allowing Alonse and his servants from inside the manse through the gates, at their winged helms and tabards with the golden wheat on a blood-red field. They no longer allowed William outside of the walls either, after he'd brought Lord Sorrenti that first night.

"Their houses are designated using birds," Avrell said behind me, continuing a lesson that I'd already heard on the ship on the way here. "All except Lord March, of course. The Sorrenti crest is the heron, the Boradarn's the crane. The Casari use the egret—"

"Why hasn't he come?" I interrupted.

A momentary hesitation, then a sigh. "I don't know."

I turned from the window, from the warm breeze coming from the harbor. "We've been imprisoned in this manse for two days, without a word from Lord March. Or anyone else for that matter. Catrell is venting his frustration on the men, training them in the practice yard almost nonstop. Westen is doing the same with his Seekers, in a less conspicuous location. We're all restless.

"So where is Lord March?"

Avrell shifted in his chair, but before he could answer, Erick gasped.

Isaiah leaped up from the desk he'd had moved into the room, reaching Erick a moment before I did. William was a step behind me.

The first thing I saw was that his eyes were open.

"Varis," he rasped, his voice nothing more than a whisper, his eyes—those cold, calculating Seeker's eyes—searching and fixing on me.

Relief crashed down with the weight of the ocean, the wave overwhelming, crushing me, so sudden and unexpected I had no time to prepare. Tears scorched my eyes, burned as they washed down my face, and as I reached for Erick's hand, needing to touch him, I realized that I was sobbing harshly, my breath catching in my throat, hitching in and out even as I tried to control it. I tasted phlegm, wiped snot from my nose and tears from my eyes. But the months of worry, the weeks of dread, could not be controlled, and for a long moment there was nothing but Erick, his eyes, the scars on his face, his tremulous smile, and I was fourteen again, trapped on the Dredge, gutterscum, no longer the Mistress, and the fact that I was crying didn't matter. I felt Avrell and Isaiah withdraw slightly, respectfully if grudgingly, felt William lean forward, touch my shoulder in comfort.

Slowly, the crushing wave receded, and the painful hitching in my chest withdrew, leaving behind an ache that hurt worse than anything I'd ever experienced before.

Holding Erick's hand tight, I said, "I almost killed you." The admission brought a fresh surge of tears, the ache in my chest doubling. But I held it in, held it tight, grateful for its warmth. Grateful to William, who'd shifted up to my side.

"Hush, Varis. I know." He coughed, the sound painful to hear, but he smiled thinly. "I told you to, remember?"

I laughed, the sound half choked.

Isaiah now moved forward and coughed. "That's enough exertion for now, I believe." His tone was stern with disapproval.

I would have given Isaiah my darkest glare, threatened him with my dagger, but I could see the exhaustion in Erick's eyes, could see him struggling to stay awake, struggling to smile.

I made to rise, but Erick gripped my hand, harder than I thought possible. I leaned in close.

"Thank you," Erick whispered.

And then his eyes closed and his grip relaxed.

I waited a moment, stared down at Erick's face. His skin was still pale and drawn at the edges, but his lips were no longer bloodless and there was no longer a sheen of sweat on his forehead.

And he smelled of oranges, the scent tart and vibrant.

I smiled, then stood. I felt William behind me, felt his hand find my own, squeezing tightly.

When I turned, I saw Avrell at the main door to the rooms, speaking to a

messenger. His eyes caught mine and he straightened, suddenly formal, the First of the Mistress.

"Mistress," he said, "Lord March and the Lords and Ladies of Venitte are ready to greet you, if you desire."

Carriages were waiting in the courtyard of the estate, enough so that I could bring an entourage. I left the majority of the choices up to Avrell, but gathered Marielle, Heddan, and Gwenn to escort Ottul, and William to escort me. Keven and a few handpicked guards accompanied us, all in their finest armor. The Servants wore dresses in various shades of yellow, green, and red. I wore a crisp white shirt and breeches. And my dagger.

The carriages wound their way up the slope of the hill toward the council chambers. I could see the domed building through the window, the sun bright on the white stone, birds wheeling in the air above it, but then my attention was drawn downward, to the city, to the people.

Unlike the night when we'd arrived and been led to our estates, the streets were now crowded, the plazas thronged with women and children, the merchants' shops open. Bells clanged and voices rose in conversation, punctuated by laughter, and cries of greeting. Hands were shaken, hugs given, and everywhere, everyone was dressed in fine clothing, no wear, no frayed edges or oily stains. Pouches and bundles were worn openly, not clutched protectively or hidden from prying eyes, from nimble fingers.

Not like the Dredge. More like the upper city of Amenkor, within the wards. I shifted my attention, noted the guardsmen interspersed among the crowd. Not armored and stiff, like the Protectors. These were the general guardsmen of Venitte, with leather armor, the sigil of Lord March on their chest, carrying swords and watching the crowds with a sharp eye.

But there were no gutterscum, no pickpockets, no street rats.

"Where are the slums?" I asked.

"What?"

I turned from the window, faced Avrell. "Where are the slums in Venitte?"

"On the far side of the hill, to the south. It's called the Gutter. Why?"

"Because I don't see any gutterscum on the streets. No beggars, no street-talkers."

"This is the Merchant Quarter," William said.

"Where the richest and most powerful live and work," Avrell added. "I'm not surprised there are no gutterscum."

"Then why are there so many guardsmen?"

Avrell shifted to the window, gazed out on the passing markets, at the guards. Keven and William did the same on their side of the carriage. But no one answered, and Avrell looked troubled.

I slid beneath the river, tasted the air. "They're on edge. Wary."

"About what?" Keven rumbled.

I shook my head. "They're searching for something."

"The Chorl," Avrell said. "Venitte already knows they are out there. Lord March must have increased the guard's presence in the city."

And then the carriages passed through a high arched gate in an immense wall, thicker than the walls in Amenkor, higher. Marielle gasped, craning her neck to see the myriad multicolored banners that snapped in the wind at its height as we passed beneath the arch, heavy wooden doors to either side, the points of a metal gate hidden in the shadows above.

"Deranian's Wall," Avrell said.

The wall where the Seven and the citizens of Venitte had halted the Chorl the first time they'd attacked Venitte. I gazed out the window, following the curving line of the wall with my eye until it vanished over the edge of the hill to the south.

Men had died on this wall. Thousands upon thousands, both Chorl and Venittians alike.

It seemed too white in the sunlight. Too clean.

Twenty minutes later, the carriages ground to a halt at the base of the wide stairs leading up to the domed Council building, long banners attached to the

building and streaming down the walls ruffling in the breeze. An escort of the Protectorate stood in the plaza before the stairs, waiting. As soon as everyone had assembled, Keven positioning Ottul and the Servants in the center of the group, we ascended the steps, passed through another plaza surrounded by high columns, a rectangular pool of water at its center, and then through two massive open doors. The boots of the guardsmen echoed on the marble floor as we crossed the foyer into another room, the people on all sides inside the building pausing in their activities to watch as we were led across this second chamber, lined with huge urns and potted plants, to another set of doors surrounded by more of the Protectorate.

Words were exchanged, and one of the Protectors slid through the doors. And then we waited.

I exchanged an annoyed glance with Avrell, gazed out into the room, sank beneath the river and watched the flow of the people, the hurried pace of the young messengers, the more sedate walk of men and women conducting business. Two men were having a heated argument in the far corner, and all of the guardsmen radiated tension.

Then the doors opened again and another man, dressed in robes not unlike those worn by Avrell but burgundy and gold rather than the First's deep blue, approached.

"Lord March and the Council of Eight are ready to receive you now," the man said, and he motioned toward the open doorway.

Sudden fear gripped my stomach, and the palms of my hands grew sweaty. My hand drifted toward my dagger, but I snatched it away, drew my shoulders back, and nodded to the man in burgundy.

He led us into the Council chambers.

Lord March sat in a high-backed chair at the center of a group of tables set up in a U-shape that opened toward the door, the eight members of the Council split into two groups of four, seated to either side, all of them facing the center of the room. Behind each seat were more chairs, where pages and clerks sat, dressed in various forms of burgundy, awaiting the orders of their Lord or Lady. Above each seat hung a banner with the symbol of the house represented on it, all of them except Lord March's some type of bird, most with elongated legs, thin necks, feathered crests, and long, piercing beaks. The marble floor was patterned, the outside black, pierced by a circle of white rays, all of which sprouted from the curved wall behind Lord March. The curved portion of the wall was made of black stone, the surrounding walls gray-white granite, and with a start I realized I recognized what lay beyond the curved wall.

The obsidian chamber that Cerrin had called the Council of Seven, where the Seven members had met, had argued and planned.

And where they'd died creating the two thrones.

A shudder ran through me, a visceral ache as I recalled the Seven writhing beneath the throne's power, as I felt each of them die. It left the taste of ash in my mouth.

"Lord March," our escort said, bowing, "Lords and Ladies of the Council, may I introduce the Mistress of Amenkor."

I dragged my eyes away from the Council of Seven's chambers, away from the black walls and the taste of blood in my mouth, and focused on Lord March. He wore a black-and-burgundy cape lined with gold thread that rustled as he stood, his piercing brown eyes settling on me, holding me, capturing me. His brown hair was streaked with gray and hung down to his shoulders, but his trimmed beard—a fashion that seemed common in Venitte—was almost completely gray, making his eyes appear darker than they were. His face was lined with age, but like Eryn, it made him more powerful rather than feeble. And he radiated that power, his confidence in his position permeating the chamber, as thick in the air as the throne's power had been when I'd first stepped into the throne room.

Beneath his gaze—both intelligent and dangerous, almost a Seeker's gaze, but without the Seeker's fine edge—beneath his presence, I shifted, aware that I

was being judged, that an opinion was being formed . . . and that the opinion would decide everything.

The gutterscum came forward inside me, stiffened my shoulders, tightened my jaw. The same defiance I'd felt on the Dredge, when some carter had spat at me or tried to kick me; the same defiance that I'd felt when I'd first met the merchants of Amenkor as Mistress.

Lord March, like the carter, like the merchants, had no right to judge me. His head lowered at the subtle change. His eyes glinted.

But on the river, unlike most of the other Lords and Ladies, he was a mix of red and gray. He could be a danger to me, or not.

He hadn't decided yet.

"Welcome to Venitte, Mistress." His voice filled the hall, although he did not speak loudly and I could not sense any use of the river to augment it. "May I present the Council of Eight. Lords Sorrenti, Boradarn, Aurowan, and Lady Casari." He motioned to his right. Lord Sorrenti nodded more deeply than the others, but only by a fraction. His eyes revealed nothing, and he made no gesture indicating that we'd already met. Lady Casari smiled, the expression tight-lipped, almost bitter. They all rose as they were introduced. "And on my left, Lords Demasque and Dussain, and Ladies Tormaul and Parmati." Demasque frowned as he nodded, his eyes never leaving my face. Dussain was younger than all of the others by at least ten years, smiling as he stood and nodded. Both of the ladies' expressions were blank, although Lady Tormaul held my gaze as she nodded, before looking down at the table before her.

As soon as everyone had been introduced, the Council of Eight sank back into their seats. A few pages were immediately called forward with a curt whisper or sharp gesture and sent running.

Lord March's attention never left me.

"Captain Tristan has informed me and the Council of what transpired in Amenkor—of the Chorl attack on the city, of the damage you suffered, not only to the city, but to the throne." At this, the low murmur that had built as he spoke quieted, everyone watching my reaction. "From what he said, the damage to the port was extensive, and the fact that you are here—when no Mistress has ever been able to leave the city before—tells us how extensive the damage was to the throne."

I felt my jaw clench, thought of Lord Pyre's accusations in Temall, that perhaps I was not the true Mistress, that perhaps the power of Amenkor was dead. There was a hint of this accusation in Lord March's voice.

"I'm certain that Captain Tristan's report was accurate," I said, "but Amenkor survives. The inner walls have already been rebuilt, as well as the wharf."

"And the throne?"

I turned to face Lord Demasque, felt a flicker of irritation from Lord March at Demasque's interruption.

I gathered the power of the river around me, felt Lord Sorrenti stiffen, lean forward in sudden alarm, but I did nothing but make the river heavier around all of the Lords and Ladies, let them feel its pressure, like a weight upon their shoulders. Darkening my voice in warning, I said, "Amenkor is alive and well. Enough that when we learned that the Chorl were not advancing on us, but on Venitte, we traveled here to offer you our assistance."

All of the Council of Eight straightened in their seats, the clerks and pages behind them shifting uncomfortably. I let them squirm beneath the river's weight a moment longer, kept my attention on Lord Demasque, then let the river subside and turned back to Lord March.

"The Chorl cannot be ignored. They almost destroyed Amenkor. In a day. They've seized the Boreaite Isles, have seized Bosun's Bay, and when we left Temall, Lord Pyre said they were marching on Venitte."

Lord March's frown had deepened. "Captain Tristan informed me of what happened in Temall as well. He claims that your actions have cost us Lord Pyre's support."

The rebuke stung and my nostrils flared in defiance, aware that Avrell had shifted in warning at my side. But before he could caution me, I caught

myself. Taking a deep breath, I nodded.

"Yes. I thought that the Chorl had already claimed Temall, had already begun an advance on Amenkor, so I sent in Seekers as scouts without first seeking Lord Pyre's permission. He took offense.

"He also does not feel the Chorl are a threat. He is wrong."

Lord March considered the words a long moment in silence, as if trying to make a decision, his frown never wavering. But finally he nodded and leaned forward. "There are those on this Council," he said, "who believe that the Chorl don't exist, that they are simply a more organized band of pirates, that these pirates are using the old stories of blue-skinned sea demons to spread fear, to make their raids more successful." A note of derision had crept into his voice, and I sensed Lord Boradarn shifting in his seat, saw Lady Parmati frown out of the corner of my eye.

Lord March's focus shifted from me, toward Ottul. "But I see that you've brought proof that the Chorl are real."

Lady Parmati snorted. "She could be painted blue, made to look like one of the sea demons from legend."

"And risk us inspecting her? Here, in the middle of the Council of Eight?"

Lord March was no longer hiding his derision. "This is not one of your staged stories, Lady Parmati. These are not actors spouting words for you and your guests' entertainment. Are you going to publicly claim that the Mistress of Amenkor is lying? Do you doubt the word of Captain Tristan, of his entire crew? They fought the Chorl, on the trip to Amenkor and again on their way back. Their stories have already begun to spread through Venitte. And those stories are being verified by other captains, other merchants."

Lady Parmati tilted her chin up at Lord March's tone, at his almost visible anger, and her mouth clamped shut. A faint blush had crept up the pale skin of her neck, reaching the base of her curled black hair, piled high and kept in place with two pins. Her dangling gold earrings glinted in the light as she trembled in rage, her eyes narrowing.

But she did not respond.

Lord March's gaze raked the rest of the Lords and Ladies present. "Does anyone else wish to question the Mistress' intentions?"

Silence. Not even a whisper of cloth from the pages or clerks.

But on the river, I could feel the hostility. From Demasque and Parmati, their figures washed in red. Hostility toward me . . .

And toward Lord March.

Lord March nodded at the silence, leaned back as he turned to me. "Amenkor has always been an ally. Always, even if we have had our disagreements at times. But in this matter, I do not believe we disagree. From what you have told me, from what Captain Tristan has seen and experienced firsthand, I believe the Chorl are a threat. And if they are marching on Venitte, then we must prepare. I only regret that we could not come to your aid when the Chorl attacked Amenkor."

As he spoke, the hostility on the river grew . . . but not from all quarters.

Lord Sorrenti—a mixed red and gray—shifted entirely to gray, as did Lady Casari and Lords Boradarn and Dussain.

Lord March himself became almost entirely gray, with only a faint sheen of red remaining.

"There was no forewarning," I said. "There was no chance for Venitte to help us."

"As you say. But we have been forewarned about the attack on Venitte, and for that—now that the contention that the Chorl are nothing but bandits has finally been laid to rest—we are grateful. If you will excuse us, we must begin our preparations."

I frowned at the dismissal, almost turned and retreated, felt Avrell willing me to do so.

But I halted, Lord March noting the hesitation even as his attention began to shift.

He raised an eyebrow in question.

Allowing my annoyance to color my voice, I asked, "Are we still restricted to our . . . estates?"

Some of the Council stilled, breath caught at the tone of my voice.

But, for the first time since we'd arrived, Lord March smiled. "Of course not, Mistress. All of Venitte is at your disposal."

I nodded, then turned, passing through my entourage as they parted before me and out through the door.

I didn't begin trembling until the carriage had made it halfway back to the Amenkor estates, and as I let out my pent-up breath in a long sigh, Avrell leaned forward.

"That," he said, "went better than I expected."

"In what way?" I asked snidely.

A smile touched his lips. "You have your own style, Mistress. You're direct, and you don't hide your emotions well. In Amenkor, as Mistress, there's no one to question you, to censure you."

"You question me all the time."

"True. But you rarely listen."

I couldn't respond to that, noticed that Marielle, William, and Keven were studiously watching the passing city outside the windows.

"But here in Venitte," he continued, "you aren't the only power. You saw the Council today. I expected your style and Venitte's to clash."

"They did clash."

Avrell shook his head. "Not as badly as you think. Lord March did more than simply welcome you to Venitte. He announced to everyone on the Council that he recognizes you as the Mistress of Amenkor, with or without the throne. He announced that, whatever dissension there may have been in the Council before this regarding the Chorl, the dissension is now over."

"And he's announced war," Keven said.

Avrell frowned, but not in disagreement. "Yes, he has."

"Why the frown?" William asked. "Wasn't that our intent in coming down here? To warn Venitte? To prepare them for the Chorl?"

"He's frowning," I said in answer, "because not everyone on the Council of Eight is in agreement with Lord March."

Avrell stared at me a moment. "You've never been to Venitte, never seen the Councillors. What did you see in the Council chamber today?"

I thought back to the room, sifted through all of the emotions I'd felt on the river. Not as the Mistress of Amenkor, but as gutterscum from the Dredge.

"Lord Demasque and Lady Parmati," I said.

Avrell nodded. "Artren Demasque has always been a thorn in Lord March's side. He'd like more control of the trade routes to the southern isles. He'd like control of them all. And Vaiana Parmati wants control of Venitte itself, something her family has not had for generations. Once, her family ruled Venitte as the head of the Council, the position that Lord March holds now. She wants to reclaim that title. Who else?"

I shrugged. "Lords Sorrenti, Boradarn, and Dussain—and Lady Casari—were gray by the end of the meeting. The rest were mixed."

"Which means?" Keven said.

"Those that are gray are Lord March's supporters," Avrell said, "and no threat to Varis."

"The others are unknown. They may be a threat, or not, depending on what happens. It usually means that they haven't decided whether I'm a danger to them or not."

"Which means we need to be wary of them," Keven said.

"And we should have Lord Demasque and Lady Parmati watched." Avrell caught my gaze. "Lord March has given everyone from Amenkor leave to see the city. Including the Seekers."

I glanced out the windows of the carriage, saw that we had arrived back at the estates. "Westen will be thrilled."

"No!" Ottul stamped her foot on the grass of the gardens within the walls of the Amenkor estate in Venitte. "No, no, no!"

Before her, standing facing each other, Marielle and Heddan let the shields and the threads of the river around them relax, turning toward the Chorl Servant. "What?" Marielle said in exasperation. "We're doing exactly what you said!"

Ottul muttered something in the Chorl language, and Gwenn, sitting cross-legged beside me in the grass at the edge of the garden, laughed.

"What did she say?" I asked.

Gwenn giggled. "She said none of us would have survived in the Teotihuaca—the Servant temple in the Chorl Isles. She said we would have been killed for incompetence before we even achieved ket—the second gold ring."

I grunted. "Like Ottul's sister was killed?"

The smile fell from Gwenn's face. "Yes."

I reached forward and tousled Gwenn's hair. She ducked her head, grinning tentatively again. "Then I'm glad we aren't at this temple."

On the grass, Ottul had moved up to Marielle's side, her expression stern. "Like so," she said, and then she reached out on the river, pulling threads into focus as I'd seen her do on the Defiant during the battle. She made an impatient gesture at Heddan. The other Servant gave a start, then pulled a shield into place before her.

Once Heddan was ready, Ottul carefully began to weave the threads she'd gathered, muttering, "So, and so, and so!" while Marielle squinted in concentration. I'd seen Ottul do the same thing on the ship, and had thought I could mimic it without her help, but the first few sessions in the garden had taught me it wasn't as simple as it looked. It was a variation on the conduit that Eryn had designed in Amenkor, but the manipulation of the river was more complex. The threads had to be placed perfectly for the conduit to work. Conduit ready, Ottul attached it to Heddan's shield. The younger Servant gasped as the additional strength augmented her shield.

Then Ottul severed the conduit and stepped back. "Try!" Except it wasn't a request. Ottul made the single word a command, without any allowance for failure.

Marielle shot her a dark look, which was ignored, then pulled the river to her.

I watched Ottul for a moment, her arms crossed, back rigid, face set in a partial scowl. "She reminds me of Lauren," I said, under my breath.

Behind me, Keven heard. "Yes, she's a lot like Lauren."

I turned, caught Keven's gaze. For a moment, I could see a reflection of Lauren's fiery death on The Maiden in his eyes, could sense the grief I felt mirrored there.

Then Ottul barked again, something in her own language, and Marielle threw up her hands in frustration.

Before it could degenerate any further, a rumble of noise came from outside the manse. Keven immediately stepped forward, close to my back. All of the Servants turned in the direction of the entrance to the manse, hidden behind the corner of the building.

"What's that?" Gwenn asked, rising slowly.

"Men," Keven said. "Armored men. Marching."

I frowned and stood, motioned for Marielle to watch over Ottul, then headed toward the front of the manse. Keven and Gwenn followed.

When we turned the corner of the building, the group of Venittian guardsmen had reached the front gates, were passing by in line after line, sunlight glinting off of the winged helms of those in the forefront, off of the shields and armor of all of those behind. The sheaf of wheat on a blood-red field on their surplices and shields, on the banners that flapped in the breeze from the harbor, created a blur of vibrant color against the white-and-gray stone of the buildings, walls, and streets. As we moved to the gates, the Amenkor guardsmen that surrounded it watching the force as it passed outside, the noise of thousands of feet pounding the flagstones in step grew. Rank after rank of men, an entire phalanx.

And then they were gone, the backs of the rear guard trailing into the

distance. Dust rose in their wake, settling slowly.

"It would appear that Lord March meant what he said." I turned to Keven as the guardsmen at the gate relaxed. "Venitte is preparing for war."

"Hold this, Ilya."

The Servant before me held out her hand dubiously, and I dropped the circular stone into it.

She gasped, her eyes widening.

"What do you feel?" I asked.

Trembling, Ilya said, "I feel . . . power, Master Cerrin. As if I were linked to the other Servants, but without any conduits."

I smiled. "Good. Now, keep hold of the stone for a moment."

Ilya nodded.

I reached out with the Sight, felt the stone like a presence, somehow more dense than the surrounding objects, more real. And it drew me, pulled at me, like a whirlpool in water, tugging at me, drawing me forward.

Closing my eyes, I let myself be drawn into the vortex, let myself fall into it.

The sensation was strange, as if for a moment I stood on a precipice, looking out over a vast open landscape. Something held me back, a thin veil that was easy to pierce, nothing more than an irritating nuisance, like spider's silk. I brushed it aside . . . and then I leaped from the precipice.

Then I was inside the stone, the texture and smell of rock-gritty and rough-surrounding me. I could feel it pulsing, then realized that it wasn't the stone pulsing, but Ilya's blood pounding through her body, a hot, visceral thrum that reverberated in the stone she held. And more. I could sense her, could feel her, as if the stone—as if what I'd done to the stone—had created a field around it, one that could sense the Servant.

I frowned in thought, tentatively explored the field, reaching out from the heart of the stone, aware that the Servant's pulse was increasing. I could feel the sweat as it slicked her palm, could feel her heart throbbing in her chest.

And then I slid into her mind.

Through her eyes, I saw myself slumped back into my chair behind my note- and object-littered desk, my head sagging backward, my arms hanging over the wooden arms, as if I'd been knocked senseless and tossed into the chair. I could taste Ilya's fear, bitter, like ash in my mouth, could sense her indecision. She wanted to rush forward, to see what had happened, but her awe held her back. I was a Master, one of the Seven. She didn't dare approach me. Not that close, not that personally.

But I was slumped there, the posture not quite natural.

I frowned, took a step forward, leaned in closer. I didn't think I was breathing.

With a lurch, I drew back, realized that for a moment, somehow my own personality and Ilya's had meshed. I'd started to confuse myself with her, had actually started to become her, had stepped forward using her body, her flesh, her senses.

I shuddered, and at the same time, Ilya retreated, confusion flushing her face. Her gaze darted around the room uncertainly. She hadn't intended to take that step forward, didn't remember taking the step forward. Her grip on the stone increased, her heart rate jumping. She was on the verge of fleeing, to find help, to escape—

Don't. Everything's fine, Ilya.

She screamed and dropped the stone, my connection to her severed as sharply as if she'd cut me free with a knife. But it wasn't a clean cut. A few tenuous threads connected the stone to her as she fled. Through them, I could feel her panic, could feel the adrenaline racing through her body, could hear her heightened breath.

I studied the threads for a moment, thought about leaving them connected.

She'd obviously heard me through the stone somehow. Perhaps she didn't need to be touching it. Perhaps she'd been bound to the stone somehow, was still

connected, and I could still reach her.

I hesitated a moment, then sighed and severed the threads, letting her go. But she didn't vanish as I'd expected. Not completely. Something remained behind, trapped in the stone. A taste of her, of her essence. Nothing more than a hint of what she'd been, what she'd thought and experienced. A memory of her.

I pondered this for a moment, noticed that there was still a field of awareness around the stone, nothing more than a few feet. I wondered if I could increase that area. Perhaps if the stone were larger? Or perhaps if more people were involved in the stone's creation . . .?

Still thinking, I attempted to pull myself out of the stone, reach back toward my own body. For a moment, the draw of the stone, that inexplicable whirlpool, kept me in place. I frowned, exerted more energy, more focus—

And managed to escape, falling into my own body with a gasp, lurching forward from where my body had sprawled, smacking my knees into the bottom of the desk. I spat a curse, felt my heart thud once, twice, hard in my chest . . . and then I exhaled sharply, leaning forward to massage my throbbing knees. Laying my head down on top of my desk, I took a moment to simply breathe as exhaustion washed over me. I smelled the scent of dried flowers, of dust and stone, the pungent odor of oil from the lantern and the mustiness of old books and dried ink. But the scents were sharper, clearer, each one distinct, even though I was not using the Sight. In fact, everything had altered slightly. I could feel the stone floor beneath my feet, almost like a living thing, could sense the wood beneath my forehead, my skin prickling with the sensation. As if somehow it had all become an extension of my body.

The stone.

I jerked upright, pushed away from the desk, and began searching for the stone Ilya had dropped. I'd heard it bounce and rattle across the floor.

I didn't immediately see it.

I slid into the Sight, felt that same density, felt it drawing me forward, pulling me into its heart. But not as strongly as before.

I grunted, stepped up to the cabinet and bookcases against one wall and knelt. Reaching into the space beneath, I retrieved the stone . . . along with a few cobwebs and a lot of dust. I didn't allow the servants to clean the study.

"Master Cerrin!" One of my servants charged into the room, eyes wild. His gaze landed on the seat behind the desk first, saw it empty, and his eyes grew wider still, his mouth opening in shock. Then I stood, and he lurched back, hand moving to ward off evil before he recognized me and darted forward.

"Master Cerrin, are you all right?"

I waved him back. "I'm fine. Something neither Ilya nor I expected to happen happened, that's all."

He stepped to one side, hands wringing before him, clearly uncertain about what he should do. I ignored him.

The stone felt warm in my hands, but even as I gripped it tight I felt that warmth fading. Felt its strange pull fading as well, as if some shift in the Threads had upset the whirlpool and disrupted it.

And the stone . . . I would have sworn that the stone had been shaped differently when I handed it to Ilya.

"Cerrin?"

I glanced up, saw Garus dismiss the servant with a gesture. "What?"

"Nothing. Your servants seemed somewhat . . . concerned, that's all."

I sighed. "I frightened one of the true Servants. Ilya. She ran out of here in a panic."

Garus raised an eyebrow. "Does that mean you've made progress?"

I motioned Garus to a chair, settled back behind my own desk, and set the stone before Garus. He frowned down at it.

"What's this?"

I smiled. "Progress."

He picked it up, as dubious as Ilya, hefted it once or twice, then set it back down. "I don't get it. Are we going to chuck it at the Chorl? We already have

catapults, and they use much bigger stones."

"No. We're going to give them to the Servants. They augment their powers, so that they'll be able to overpower the Chorl Servants in battle without the use of conduits . . . or the presence of another Servant for that matter."

Garus grunted. "Which means we won't have to group the Servants together so that they can Link to overpower the Chorl Servants. We can spread them out more, cover more area, protect more of the army at one time." He nodded, brow creasing in thought. Garus had always been the most militant mind of the Seven—the Strategist, while I was the Builder.

He stared down at the stone a long moment, then turned toward me. "That might be enough to break the current stalemate." But his eyes narrowed with suspicion. "What's the problem?"

I didn't answer at first, thinking about the vortex the crafting of the stone had created, about how much effort it had taken me to break free . . . but then shook my head. "The problem is that the effects seem to be temporary. It doesn't last. And there may be some side effects I didn't intend."

"Such as?"

"Some kind of bond is formed between the stone and the Servant. I'm not sure why."

"Is it dangerous?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "It doesn't seem to be. And it may present a solution to Liviann's other demand . . . that we somehow preserve our knowledge."

Garus grunted again. "Then I don't see a problem."

I narrowed my eyes.

For Garus, preservation of knowledge was secondary to defeating the Chorl. Garus hesitated, then leaned forward, his gaze catching mine, his voice taking on a darker tone, a grim tone. "We need something to upset the balance, Cerrin. We've held it for two years, kept the Chorl at bay, relegated to a few coastal areas, a few cities. But I've just learned that they've taken Bottan. It's the reason I came down to see you. They've interrupted our supply routes south. If we don't regain those routes before winter . . ."

He trailed off. He didn't need to continue. I knew how low our supplies were, knew that we could not survive the coming winter without new supplies reaching the city.

He must have seen the understanding in my eyes, for he nodded, looked back down at the stone. "Can you make more of these?"

"Yes."

"How soon? And can you make the effect permanent?"

"I can have a dozen ready by the end of the week, another three dozen next week. But I don't know if I can make the effect permanent. I'll have to work on it."

He grunted. "Good enough." Setting the stone down in the center of my desk, he stood. "I'll inform Liviann."

I frowned at his retreating back.

Liviann.

It felt as if she'd seized control of the entire Council of Seven. Everyone reported to her. Everyone sought her approval.

Then, my gaze fell on the stone. Reaching forward, I picked it up.

How could I make the effect permanent?

It would require something more from me, something significant.

I closed my hand over the stone, held it to my chest as I leaned back into my chair. I sighed, closed my eyes as weariness coursed through me, and immediately the vision of Olivia enfolded me. The veranda, the smell of her hair, the heavy weight of the sunlight, my daughters' laughter.

My fist tightened on the stone.

Perhaps it would require something drastic.

Perhaps, to make the effects permanent, it would require something . . . truly permanent.

The dagger blade slashed across my field of vision, coming within a hair's breadth of nicking the bridge of my nose.

I grunted, kicked out hard toward Westen's chest with one foot, the river pulsing around me, the White Fire inside me leaping up in warning at the Seeker's slightest move. Sweat flew from my hair as I spun, my foot connecting with nothing but air. I used the momentum to carry me up and around, one hand raised to block Westen's downward thrust, catching his forearm and halting it, the tip of his blade hovering a handspan above my shoulder. The force of his blow knocked me down to one knee before him, and I hissed as my kneecap ground into the flagstone floor.

Here, in a secluded room in the bottom of the manse that Lord March had given us, the stone was older, grittier. I could feel its texture through my breeches as Westen put his full strength into lowering his dagger even further. Sweat dripped from his nose, his chin, his hair already matted to his head, his shirt sticking to his own skin.

But his face was calm. No strain showed there.

"Report," I gasped.

His dagger lowered an inch. Another. His arm began to tremble.

But he smiled.

"The Seekers have found nothing so far."

I frowned, almost absently gathered a portion of the river before me, and punched it into Westen's chest.

He barked at the blow, leaping back, one hand raised to halt the sparring match. I stood slowly, one brow arched in question as I wiped the sweat away from my face. We'd only been working for an hour. Westen usually worked me harder than that.

But now he shook his head, his expression serious. "We've been watching Lord Demasque and Lady Parmati for a week now. The Seekers should have seen something."

"What have the two been doing?"

"They spend most of the time either inside their own estates, or within the Council chambers. Lord Demasque has a preference for a particular . . . establishment situated near the docks. He usually stops on his way to his own estates on the northern cliff face of the channel."

"Conducting business?"

"Not that kind of business."

I nodded.

"And Lady Parmati?"

"She spends most of her time in the Merchant Quarter when not in the Council chamber itself, although she also has an estate on the northern cliff face, closer to the city than Demasque's. She's been to two of the other Lords' estates—Dussain and Aurowan—as well as to a meeting with Lady Casari."

"What are the meetings about?"

"The Seekers can't get close enough to find out. Or at least, I haven't ordered them to get that close yet. It would require . . . skill. And involves risk I did not think you were willing to take yet." He hesitated, then added, "The meetings are held at the heart of their estates. If Lord March—or any of the Council of Eight for that matter—discovered one of Amenkor's Seekers that deep inside one of the Council member's personal estates—"

I cut him off with a gesture and he subsided. "What about Lord Sorrenti?"

"Lord Sorrenti has done nothing unusual. But he is . . . more difficult to watch. He's a Servant. The Seekers are wary about getting too close. We know very little about him, only what Avrell was able to tell us from the few times he's been to Venitte. And the last time he came was almost ten years ago."

Westen hesitated. "Are you certain he's who we should be following?"

I thought back to Sorrenti's arrival at the Amenkor estate, thought back to his presence as he stood over Erick and removed the spell. Since then Erick had improved, to the extent that he currently sparred with the other Seekers. He hadn't returned to his self-appointed guardianship of me, leaving that to Keven still, but it wouldn't be long before he did.

"Yes. Lord Sorrenti knows where the other throne is. I could feel it the moment he stepped into Erick's room behind Brandan Vard. I could feel it in the Council chamber. He carried the weight of the throne around with him. He's the Master of the Stone Throne, and if he's here, in Venitte, then so is the throne."

For a moment, I considered telling him about the dreams—no, the memories, of Cerrin. Of the others as well, but it was Cerrin's memories that seemed the strongest. They'd become more visceral, more real. And somehow they were building, reaching out, drawing me in. Like the subtle pull of the stone that Cerrin had felt, luring him toward that vortex, that whirlpool of power. But instead, I said, "I asked a few discreet questions, had Avrell and William question a few of their associates here in the city. Lord Sorrenti hasn't left the city in the last twenty-five years."

Westen grunted, and we shared a significant look.

"As for Lord Demasque and Lady Parmati," I said, motioning Westen toward the doorway and stairs that led to the upper reaches of the manse, "perhaps the Seekers aren't watching the right people. The next time either one of them meets with someone—merchant, clerk, whore, anyone—have the person they meet with followed."

Westen nodded. "There is one other thing."

"What?"

"Word of the Chorl has spread throughout the city. It started at the wharf, because of the attacks on the ships, but the rumors have spread all the way to the slums. They're talking about the attack on Tristan's ships, on the arrival of our troops, of you. And have you noticed the sudden increase in Protectorate and general guard throughout the city?"

I nodded, thinking back to the training session with Ottul and the other Servants a few days before, of the phalanx of guards that had moved through the Merchant Quarter to the north. "I've seen it."

"The tension within the city has increased dramatically. The fear."

I heard the question Westen had not asked in his voice. "I haven't heard from Lord March or any of the Council since that first meeting. I don't know what they have planned, or if we're part of that plan."

Westen said nothing.

When we emerged at the top of the steps into the main part of the manse, the Steward Alonse was waiting with a tight, irritated frown. He, along with all of the other servants that had been provided with the manse, had been forbidden to enter the section of the lower rooms that I'd given over to Westen and the Seekers.

"Mistress," Alonse said. "You have received a request. Lady Casari asks that, if you are free, you join her on a cruise of the harbor."

"What do you think she wants?" I asked as the carriage that Alonse had arranged jounced over a rough spot in the road on its way down to the docks. Avrell reached out to steady himself, grimacing. He was dressed in the First's formal robes, dark blue with the eight-rayed gold sunburst around the neck. "I have no idea. But the fact that she requested a meeting when we haven't heard anything from Lord March or any of the other council members for the last week is encouraging. Especially since you said she supports Lord March."

I grunted, thought back to the meeting of the Council of Eight. Lady Casari had been short, barely taller than me, her skin a darker shade, almost olive in color, her hair and eyes dark, her smile bitter. She'd worn white, fringed with gray and a few startling patches of yellow. Her banner had been an egret in flight.

"She didn't say much at the first meeting."

Avrell snorted. "None of them did. They didn't know what to expect, from you or from Lord March. And they've had their own troubles."

"Such as?"

Avrell shifted uncomfortably, but when I drew breath to press him, he sighed and said, "They suffered a harsh winter as well. Not as bad as Amenkor, since they are the central port on the coast and they have substantial arable land

under their control—olive groves, wheat fields, and vineyards cover the hills surrounding the city on all sides—but the lack of goods was felt.”

I glanced out the window of the carriage, toward the large buildings sweeping by in the sunlight. “It doesn’t look like it.”

“That’s because we’ve kept to the Merchant Quarter.” Avrell hesitated, then grimaced. “This section of the city did not feel the brunt of the winter. However, the Venittian equivalent of the Dredge did.”

I turned from the window, and Avrell met my eyes without flinching. “They let the gutterscum starve?”

“They did not initiate any communal kitchens or warehouses, as you did, no. Riots broke out in almost every quarter of the city except the Merchant Quarter. The mobs were brought back to order by the Protectorate and the general guard combined. Harshly, and with force. There were . . . significant deaths in the Gutter, followed by disease.”

In a much quieter voice, he added, “If you had not been the Mistress, the same would have happened in Amenkor. It’s happened before.”

I turned away from him, felt anger simmering inside me, even though it was now too late to do anything about it. The dead were dead. But I knew Avrell was right. If I hadn’t forced the merchants to combine resources, hadn’t threatened them with starvation themselves, hadn’t made examples of a few of the hoarders with raids . . .

The carriage reached the wharf, skirting down the ends of the docks. I picked out the Defiant, one of the refitted Chorl ships tied next to it. The other two Chorl ships were anchored farther out in the harbor.

As we passed, I saw Captain Bullick standing on the deck, overseeing the repairs to the rigging, masts, and railings that had suffered damage during the Chorl attack. Half a dozen men were seated on planks that had been lowered over the side and were slapping fresh paint onto the hull.

Keven, seated beside me and utterly silent up till now, leaned forward. “He gave them shore leave as soon as Lord March let us enter the city. Looks like that’s ended. William’s been busy with his own affairs, but he’s managed to get Captain Bullick everything he needed to make the repairs.”

I nodded. I hadn’t seen much of William since the meeting with the Council. He’d been busy with merchant business, establishing his own contacts in the city for the future, distinct from Borund’s. And Westen had kept me busy with training, when I wasn’t working with Marielle, Heddan, Gwenn, and now Ottul. The Chorl Servant had managed to get Marielle and the others to link and share strength as the Chorl did, and now worked with them on how to call fire. But she couldn’t show them how to control it as the Chorl had on The Maiden. She hadn’t earned her fifth gold ring yet, didn’t know how to direct fire herself, only call it.

The carriage slowed, and I scanned the dock ahead. A ship was tied to the dock, a little smaller than the main Chorl fighting ships, with a single mast and sail, obviously meant for use only in the harbor itself. The Casari colors—white and gray-blue with a splash of yellow—flew at the top of the mast, the sail not yet raised. Men, no more than a dozen, all dressed in breeches and white shirts with the winged egret stitched over the heart, were preparing to depart.

Lady Casari was waiting on the dock already, accompanied by a covey of ten guardsmen.

And Lord Sorrenti.

I tensed, felt Keven stiffen as well. We traded a glance.

“Looks like we’ll have company,” he said. “I’m glad I brought a few extra guardsmen.”

Avrell leaned forward to peer out the window as the carriage drew to a halt, the crease in his brow deepening as he saw Sorrenti. “This is not going to be a simple tour of the harbor.”

We stepped down from the carriage into afternoon sunlight, the guardsmen Keven had chosen who had followed us in a second carriage falling into place around us. Sorrenti was speaking to Lady Casari as we approached, a frown etched in

the lines of her face. But as soon as we came within earshot, Sorrenti quieted, and Casari's frown vanished, replaced with a thin smile.

"Mistress," she said. "I'm glad you could join us. Lord Sorrenti and I felt that your welcome in Venitte was lacking and we thought we'd try to make amends."

"We aren't used to having the Mistress of Amenkor visit," Sorrenti added. I thought for a moment the comment was a subtle threat, but Sorrenti's smile was genuine. "Tell me, how is your guardsman faring?"

Lady Casari shot him a penetrating look, her lips tightening into a frown, but Sorrenti ignored her, kept his gaze on me.

"He's doing well," I said carefully. "I think he'll be fully recovered within the week. At least physically."

"Good."

He left it at that, and after an awkward pause, Lady Casari said, "Since this is your first visit to the city, we thought we'd show you the harbor sights." She motioned toward the ship as she spoke, and the entire group began moving toward the waiting plank. "I hear you arrived at night, and were rushed rather unceremoniously to your manse."

"Yes."

"Then you haven't had the pleasure of seeing the city from the water. It's really the best view." She flashed the same tight smile and I suddenly realized that was the only smile she ever gave—stiff and formal, as if smiling were unnatural to her.

"I beg to differ," Sorrenti said. "The best view is from the cliffs of the Isle."

Lady Casari's eyes darkened in irritation, but she didn't respond.

As we followed them onto the deck of the ship, Avrell leaned in close and murmured, "Sorrenti hasn't told her about his visit the night we arrived."

"No. And they certainly aren't friends."

"None of the Council members are friends." Avrell frowned, watching the two Council members as they led us to the side of the ship, where chairs had been arranged, along with a folding table set with a wide, flat-based ship's decanter, glasses, a tray of assorted breads and cheeses, and a clutch of grapes. "It's all a pretense," he added, turning to look out at the wharf. "For whomever may be watching."

I scanned the docks as well, knowing that somewhere out there, one of the Seekers—Tomus perhaps—was watching us. But the Seeker, whoever it was, wouldn't be able to follow Sorrenti into the harbor. . . .

And that was the point, I thought suddenly. No one could follow us. No one would overhear us except the guardsmen and the crew. This was a meeting, one made as private as possible, as secure as possible, nothing more.

Some of the tension in my shoulders bled away.

Neither Lady Casari nor Lord Sorrenti settled into the chairs, moving instead to the railing. The guardsmen dropped back, Keven and the Amenkor guardsmen following suit, leaving Avrell and me to join the Council members. Around us, the crew began raising the sail and untying the ship, the sail's material flapping fitfully in the breeze. The ship began moving away from the dock, joining the dozens of ships—large and small—already on the water.

"How do they keep from running into each other?" I asked, watching a trader bearing down on a small skiff. I felt certain the two would collide, but the skiff skimmed out of the trader's way at the last moment.

"Sometimes they do collide," Sorrenti said, "but for the most part it's survival of the fittest. The harbormaster has established a few designated lanes for shipping, but if a captain can't keep his ship out of trouble, he won't be captain for long."

As the captain of Lady Casari's ship maneuvered through the congested area near the docks, bells clanging from all sides, shouts passing from ship to ship, Lady Casari pointed toward the main city, as if this were an actual tour.

"You can see the domed Council chambers from here, of course," she said. "The

chambers can be seen from any point in the city or along the harbor. The long, rectangular building with all the columns along its front is the College, where Lord Sorrenti and the other Servants study their . . . arts. The building on the other side of the chambers is the official merchants' guild. Behind the chambers—you can see the shallow peaked roof from here, but nothing else—is Lord March's estates, which also contains an adjoining building for the Protectorate's use, mainly a barracks and training yard. And then there's Deranian's Wall." Her arm followed the undulating length of the wall as it separated the upper city from the lower, a clear demarcation of status.

"The Wall was the first line of defense when the Chorl attacked almost fifteen hundred years ago," Sorrenti added.

"I know," I said, and caught Sorrenti's eye. "I was there . . . in a manner of speaking."

He nodded in acknowledgment. "It was the only reason Venitte survived the attack. It was so unexpected—no warning, no hint that the Chorl even existed before their arrival—that the wharf, the lower city, the Merchant Quarter, everything between the water and the Wall fell within a matter of hours. It took that long for Lord Wence—the ruling Lord at the time, beneath the Seven, of course—to organize the army into a defending force and get the gates to the Wall closed. There were only three of the Seven inside the Wall at the time, the rest were outside in the city, or elsewhere on the coast. It's our greatest defense. Some say that if it falls, all of Venitte will fall with it."

"It's a wall," I said, thinking of the three walls that surrounded Amenkor's inner city and palace, of the additional wall that the four newest merchants had begun to build. "During the attack on Amenkor, all of our walls fell, and we still survived."

"But at what cost?" Lady Casari interjected, bitter and condescending. "Your seat of power?"

"At whatever cost was necessary," I said, harsh with warning.

"But this time," Avrell intervened smoothly, "you have been forewarned. What have Lord March and the Council done to prepare so far?"

Sorrenti answered, Lady Casari still bristling. "Since the meeting where Lord March laid to rest any last argument over the threat of the Chorl, he and General Daerium have mobilized the Protectorate as well as the general guard. The force on the Wall itself has been doubled. A significant portion of the army has been deployed to the northern reaches of the city. There are outposts farther out as well, now manned with horses for runners to give us advance warning of the Chorl's approach. All of the tower outposts along the two channels, on the Isle, and along the coast have been manned."

"And the Servants? The Protectorate and the general army will be able to defend against the Chorl warriors, but not the Chorl Servants or their priests, although so far we have not seen the priests actively participating in the fighting."

Sorrenti grimaced. "The general forces are too spread out for the Servants to fully cover them. Some of the Venittian Servants have been sent along with the main contingents to the north. Most of them have remained here, in the city, either on the Wall or with the units arrayed around the perimeter. But even so, it's going to be difficult to protect Venitte."

"Why?"

"Because the city has spread beyond the boundaries of the walls. There haven't been any serious threats from the surrounding lands for a long time. There's been no need to remain behind the walls, within their protection."

Catrell and Darryn had said the same thing about Amenkor.

Lady Casari stirred. "Lord March has asked us to formally request the use of your own guardsmen."

I nodded. "I'll have Captain Catrell report to General Daerium as soon as we return."

"General Daerium is eager to speak to him," Sorrenti said. "Your forces have fought the Chorl before. He wants to know what your captain has learned—about

how the Chorl fight, about how best to defend against them."

"They will attack without warning," I said, my voice dark, echoing all of the emotions I'd felt as I'd stood on the tower in Amenkor and seen the watchtowers destroyed, as I'd watched the Chorl ships pour into the harbor and begin their devastating rampage through the city. "They will attack with force. And they will destroy everything in their path until they reach their goal."

"And what is their goal here in Venitte?" Sorrenti asked.

Lady Casari snorted. "They want control of the port, of course."

I caught Sorrenti's gaze, locked onto it and held it for a long moment, my lips pressed tight. For a moment, he simply stared at me, nothing touching his face. And then understanding dawned, his eyes widening slightly, then narrowing as his body stiffened, as his mouth tightened.

The silence that had followed Lady Casari's statement suddenly registered and she frowned. "Why else would they come here, if not to seize the port, to control the trade routes of the coast?" she asked. When Sorrenti ignored her, she added, "Lord Sorrenti?"

His gaze still focused exclusively on me, Sorrenti said quietly, "It's not general knowledge. No one outside of Lord March and the highest ranking Servants know of it."

"Are you certain?" I said. "I believe the Chorl know of it. It's why they've come. It's why I've come."

Sorrenti seemed about to defend himself, but then the instant denial in his face faltered, grew troubled.

"Lord Sorrenti," Lady Casari said, voice heavy. "What are you speaking of?"

"Nothing of your concern."

"I'm a member of the Council of Eight! Everything in Venitte is of my concern! How dare you presume to keep—"

"Elina!"

Lady Casari broke off, her eyes hard, the muscles in her jaw clenching.

I stilled. On the river, beneath the surface tension between the two, I sensed something else. They knew each other, knew each other intimately. Enough for Sorrenti to use Lady Casari's first name, enough for them to understand each other without words. And while it was obvious that they were no longer friends, at some point in the past they had been. Had been something more meaningful as well.

"I will inform Lord March," Sorrenti said, voice calm but thick with warning.

"If he feels the Council members should be informed of the situation, then I will come speak to you immediately, but not before."

Elina Casari remained rigid for a long moment, then visibly forced herself to relax. "Very well," she murmured, and turned away.

The rest of the meeting was stiff and formal, Sorrenti pointing out different estates among the mosaic of red-tiled roofs on the cliffs as we passed, Lady Casari standing to one side. As we reached the mouth of the northern channel, the ship turned, circling back and running along the base of the southern cliffs after passing the point of the Isle, the huge island that separated the two channels. A large tower soared upward from the summit of the Isle's point, made of gray granite.

When we reached the docks, Lady Casari was the first one off the ship, immediately stepping into a carriage with her escort and heading off toward the upper city.

"She's not happy," Avrell said dryly.

Sorrenti shook his head. "She'll petition Lord March immediately. She likes to know everything that happens within Venitte. She doesn't like secrets." He turned to me. "And the existence of the throne is a carefully guarded secret. That's why I was so angry on the night you arrived. Brandan told me you had asked him about the throne in Amenkor. I thought you were here to expose it, for whatever reasons." He paused, then asked bluntly, "How did you know about the throne, Mistress?"

"I didn't." When I saw his expression darken, I said, "Not for certain. But

ever since the Skewed Throne was destroyed, I've been having dreams, memories of the Seven that I did not access while they were part of the throne, memories that I should not have. Eryn, the previous Mistress, and I thought that I might somehow be connected to the Stone Throne, that perhaps it wasn't lost after all.

"I had no idea that the Stone Throne was still being used until I felt you using it to heal Erick."

Sorrenti's lips thinned, but he nodded. "That . . . would explain a lot. Ever since you entered the city, the Seven have been . . . agitated. The throne senses you, is aware of you, but nothing like that has ever happened before, because no Mistress has ever been able to come to Venitte. The connection isn't strong enough to locate you, but it's strong enough to be felt." He paused, stared out over the water of the harbor for a long moment, then turned back.

"The Seven believe I should trust you. I know the two thrones were connected. I felt the loss of the Skewed Throne, even here in Venitte, felt the pain when it was destroyed. If what you say about the Chorl is true, if what Tristan and Brandan report about the battle in Amenkor and on the ocean on the way here is true, then the Servants of this city will be crucial in its defense. I'd like you to help us prepare. Your captain can help General Daerium and his men. I'd like you to help me with the Servants."

I straightened, stared directly into his blue eyes. "Of course, Lord Sorrenti."

With that, he nodded and gathered his own escort about him, vanishing into the crowds on the wharf.

On the dock, Keven, Avrell, and I watched him go.

"At least we now know for certain that Lord March and the others are taking the Chorl threat seriously and are preparing for it," Keven said. Then his gaze shifted. "It looks like someone's been waiting for our return."

I glanced in the direction of his gaze and saw William standing at the end of the dock, frowning.

"Let's see what he wants," I said.

"Captain Bullick noticed it first a few days ago and brought it to my attention," William explained as we walked down the wharf toward the dock that had been given over to Bullick and the rest of Amenkor's ships. The throngs of people were thick enough we'd elected not to use the carriages. "Since then, he's been keeping careful track of the trader's activities."

"And what has he seen?" Avrell asked.

"A pattern that doesn't make any sense." At Avrell's irritated look, he added, "I'll let Bullick explain."

We'd reached the end of the Amenkor pier. Catrell had left a contingent of guardsmen there to control access to the Defiant and the refitted Chorl ships, but we passed through the line unhindered, the captain of the force nodding and gesturing the Skewed Throne symbol over his chest as we passed, closing the line behind us.

We found Bullick in his cabin, a sparsely decorated room, not much larger than the cabin Marielle, Trielle, and I had shared on the journey down here.

Bullick sat behind a desk that could be folded up into the wall—nothing more than a board and supporting leg that fit into two notches in the floor—with a logbook before him, quill and wide-bottomed ink bottle to one side, the bottle set in a depression in the desk's surface so it would not shift around at sea. When a sailor announced our arrival, he folded up the logbook and set it in a waiting trunk.

As soon as he saw William, he said to the sailor, "Bring the Mistress and her guests some folding chairs, Byron."

"Yes, sir."

As we waited, he said, "I assume this is about Lord Demasque's trading ships?" William nodded grimly. "And what I've found at the merchants' guild."

Byron reappeared suddenly with another crewman and they set up the chairs, Bullick retrieving a ship's decanter and glasses from a cupboard and pouring

us all a finger's portion. It smelled like rum, something I'd only tasted once, on the trip to Venitte, and hadn't liked.

Handing the glasses around, Bullick took a seat. "I don't know if this will amount to anything at all, but since we were forced to remain aboard ship when we first arrived, there wasn't much to do except watch the coming and going of the ships."

"And what did you see?" I asked.

Bullick hesitated, as if still not certain he should say anything at all. But then he took a swig of the rum and leaned forward, his face intent. "Every port has a flow to it, a rhythm, ships coming in, unloading their cargo, loading fresh cargo, departing, all in steady patterns. There are fluctuations in the pattern—ships that arrive late because of storms, things like that—but in general it's always the same pattern: arrive, unload, load, depart.

"But a few days ago, one of the crew—one of the lookouts actually—noticed that one of the trading ships didn't fit the pattern. He came to see me about it. He said that about a week before, he'd noticed one of the traders pulling into berth, sitting high in the water, which means that they didn't have any cargo. That's unusual. Traders always have cargo. Captains don't remain in business long unless they're getting paid somehow. Their crews would mutiny. But this ship had no cargo. The lookout watched the ship for the next few days and nothing was unloaded during the day, and after questioning the other lookouts, nothing was unloaded at night either. However, on the last day, supplies were loaded aboard, and the next day the ship was gone. It had left during the night."

Bullick took another drink of the rum, set the glass aside. "My lookout shrugged it aside—this isn't Amekor after all; Venittian captains can ruin themselves as fast as they like as far as the crew is concerned, it improves our own business—but a few days later the same ship, the Squall, which flies the Stilt—"

"Lord Demasque's flag," William interjected.

Bullick nodded but didn't break his story. "—eased into its berth again . . . and did not unload any cargo. This is when the lookout pointed the ship out to me. We've watched the ship for the last few days."

"Let me guess," I said. "It loaded supplies and left the same night."

Bullick nodded. "That's when I contacted William. I didn't want to come to you until I had something more concrete to report. After all, it's Lord Demasque's business. If he wishes to lose money by running empty ships, that's his affair. But I thought it wise to have William look into it. And once we were allowed to roam the wharf, I had a few of my more trusted and discreet crew ask around."

"What did they find?"

"That the Squall has been doing such runs since the beginning of spring, only once or twice a month at first, but in the last month the activity has picked up. Sometimes they're gone for a few days, sometimes for a whole week or more. . . . And no one knows what they're up to. Their crew doesn't talk about it. In fact, their crew almost never leaves the ship when they're in Venitte. I've only seen the captain off the dock where they berth, and I've only seen the first mate go farther than the deck to speak to the harbormaster. It's damn strange . . . and suspicious."

Bullick shook his head and his gaze shifted to William, who sat forward in his seat and set his glass on Bullick's table.

"At Bullick's request, I went to the merchants' guild and looked into the ledgers. The Squall is indeed one of Lord Demasque's ships. In fact, it's owned by Lord Demasque, not by its captain, unlike most of the merchant ships in the harbor. Every shipment that comes in to Venitte, or leaves, must register a manifest with the guild, and that manifest is available to guild members. I looked up the Squall's manifests for the last few months."

"And . . .?" Avrell prompted.

William shook his head. "Aside from the supplies that are loaded before each departure, the Squall isn't carrying any cargo. As far as the guild is

concerned, and from all appearances on the docks, Lord Demasque is trading in nothing."

Avrell snorted. "He's doing something. We just haven't found out what yet." I turned to Bullick. "Can we follow the Squall somehow without being seen?" Bullick frowned. "No. Any attempt to follow in a ship would be obvious, especially on the ocean. Especially if we're using Amenkor ships. We're the only crews from Amenkor here at the moment."

"And we aren't here to trade," Avrell said. "Everyone on the docks on the night of our arrival saw us off-load guardsmen, not cargo. If we leave, Demasque will take note."

"Then we need someone else's ship, someone from Venitte."

I glanced toward William, who grimaced.

"The Reliant," he said. "Captain Tristan's ship."

I frowned. "I need to speak with Lord March."

"You have some time," Bullick said. "The Squall left for its current run two days ago. If they follow their most recent pattern, they won't return for at least two days, perhaps more."

"What is it you wish to speak about?" Lord March asked.

Avrell, William, and I had just been admitted into his personal study, a much smaller room than the Council chambers, but still twice as large as my own audience chambers in Amenkor. Inside the same building that housed the Council chambers, its floor was a mottled gray-blue marble, partial columns rounding out the corners, the ceiling covered in wide tiles that gave the illusion of sunlight breaking over the far horizon. Banners covered the walls to either side, bookcases and shelves against the wall behind our seats, which faced an immense oak desk, a large map spread out over the surface near me, the edges and far side covered with stacks of papers, quills, ink bottles, and wax for seals, all neatly organized.

As Lord March motioned us to take seats in the array of chairs before him, a page boy stepped up to his side and handed him a sheet, distracting him. At least three others were waiting with their own missives, two others sitting to one side, waiting for directions. Clerks seated at their own smaller desks were working to either side of the room beneath the banners.

Lord Sorrenti and General Daerium leaned over the map, arguing about something in a low murmur.

"I'm sorry," Lord March said, the page boy darting off to one side, toward one of the waiting clerks, paper in hand. The next started to step forward, but Lord March halted him with a gesture. "As you can imagine, it's been rather busy in the last few weeks."

I nodded. "Lord Sorrenti told me. I hope Captain Catrell and his men will be useful."

"Oh, they will be," General Daerium said, breaking off his discussion with Sorrenti. "Although at this point, aside from the Servant you brought with you, we have seen no sign of the Chorl at all near Venitte."

"Daerium."

The general did not turn toward Lord March, but kept his eyes on me, waiting for my reaction.

I frowned. "They're coming, General."

He lifted his chin, not quite in contempt, but said nothing.

I dismissed him, shifting my gaze toward Lord March. I didn't need to impress Daerium. I only needed to convince Lord March.

"Forgive my general," Lord March said, standing and moving from behind his desk. "He's a skeptical man. We have enough evidence to suggest there's some type of threat out there—ships lost, the report from Captain Tristan of the attacks at sea, other traders verifying sightings of strange ships. However, Daerium won't believe it until the Chorl attack and he can sink his blade into them." Daerium grunted. "Now, what did you need?"

"I need a ship."

Lord March's eyebrows rose in surprise. A ship was clearly not what he had expected.

From Lord Sorrenti's frown, neither had he.

"You have ships here in Venitte," Lord March said. "Why would you need one of mine?"

I shifted uncomfortably. My gaze flickered toward Sorrenti. "Because we've noticed something strange regarding one of the traders in the harbor. I'd like to find out what, but if I use one of Amenkor's ships, it will be obvious what I'm doing. I need to be more circumspect than that."

"Why?"

Meeting his gaze squarely, I said, "Because it involves one of your Council members."

He frowned. "I see."

For a long moment, he stared at me, considering. Then, he straightened.

"Daerium, have the guards clear the room, please."

Daerium shot him a mute glare, then motioned to the few guardsmen stationed around the room. They began herding everyone out of the room, the clerks protesting a moment as they tried to cap ink bottles or gather papers to take with them.

Within minutes, the room was empty except for William, Avrell, Sorrenti, Daerium, Lord March, and myself.

Lord March drew in a steady breath, then asked, "Which one?" His voice was heavy with command, with expectation. He thought he already knew the answer.

When I hesitated, he added, "I trust Lord Sorrenti and General Daerium with my life, Mistress. As you no doubt trust your First and Master William with yours."

I nodded. "Lord Demasque."

March and Sorrenti exchanged a glance. Daerium stiffened.

"Tell her," Sorrenti said. "It's obvious she has nothing to do with the current state of the Council of Eight. Why would she come here otherwise?"

"Do you trust her?"

Sorrenti's gaze fell on me, his mouth pressed tight. "I trust her, yes. And more importantly, the Seven trust her."

Lord March grunted. "Very well."

Daerium said nothing as the other two spoke, although it was clear by his frown that he did not approve.

Lord March turned back to me. "The threat of the Chorl could not have come at a worse time. For the past seven years, since just before the Fire passed through our city as well as yours, the Council of Eight and the entire region has been slowly destabilizing. I noticed it almost immediately, was forewarned that such might happen by Lord Sorrenti, who said that it happened the last time the Fire passed over the coast."

Sorrenti nodded grimly. "The last time, famine and disease spread all along the coast. At least half of the population succumbed to the Black Death in Venitte alone, perhaps more. There was drought all along the coast. Many starved. The Council at the time grew desperate as everyone tried to protect their own estates, as they tried to protect their own families."

"At least half of the Council was killed," Lord March said, "either by assassination or during the riots in the city. The disease in the northern quarter, the deaths, became so prevalent that at one point Lord Hagen—the ruling Lord at the time—set fire to the district in an attempt to contain the plague. The fire raged out of control, burning nearly half the city to the ground. All of this happened over the course of eleven years, finally escalating to the fire. A kind of madness."

"And we're seeing signs of the same madness again."

"What do you mean?" I knew of the madness of the first coming of the Fire, had witnessed some of it through the throne, through the eyes of the Mistresses of the time. I'd lived through that previous Mistress' rape and death at the hands of her own personal guard, her body left battered and bleeding on the steps of the palace promenade.

"Haven't you felt it in Amenkor?" Daerium asked, almost growling. "This past winter we had the largest shortages we've had in decades. Disease ran rampant

in the Gutter. The citizens rioted, had to be quelled by the Protectorate. They came close to overrunning the Merchant Quarter, almost set fire to the wharf."

"And the Council has begun to break down." Lord March's voice overrode Daerium's smoothly, the general settling back grudgingly. "Did you notice Lord Dussain? Richar Dussain?"

I frowned, thought back to my presentation before the Council. "The youngest Lord."

"He's the youngest for a reason. This past winter, his father was killed during one of the riots."

"An accident?" Avrell asked.

Both Lords turned toward the First.

"So it seemed," Lord Sorrenti said. "I do not believe so. The circumstances were suspicious, but nothing could be proven."

"In any case," Lord March continued, "since Lord Dussain's death—before that—Venitte has been unsettled. And it's only become worse. I can feel the tension myself, can sense it, even without Lord Sorrenti's advice." Here, he shared a hooded glance with me. He meant the throne, Sorrenti's connection to the city, the same connection I'd felt after I'd touched the Skewed Throne in Amenkor. As if the city itself were a part of me, part of the pulse of my blood, the beating of my heart.

"And now there's the Chorl," I said.

"And now the Chorl," Lord March repeated. "If they are out there, if they do intend to attack, I'm not certain the Council will be strong enough to stop them. Not in the current state of unrest. The Eight have already resisted helping Daerium with the placement of units throughout the city, have already resisted providing the necessary supplies. They're afraid—of what happened to Lord Dussain, of what the winter might presage. They're gathering their resources, attempting to protect themselves. And one of the most obstinate of the Council, the least cooperative so far, is Lord Demasque. Which brings us back to your request."

He shifted forward slightly. "Anything regarding any of the Council of Eight should be approached with great caution. I rule here in Venitte, but only by the Council's agreement, and the threat I bring by controlling the Protectorate and the guard. I warn you to tread lightly, because I may not be able to protect you if you step on the wrong feet." He paused, to let his words sink in, then asked, "What do you think Demasque is doing?"

"I don't know. But my instincts tell me whatever it is can't be ignored. And I didn't survive as long as I did in the slums of Amenkor without trusting my instincts."

Daerium snorted, but not in derision or contempt.

"I already know what Sorrenti thinks. What do you think Daerium?"

Daerium's eyes narrowed. "I think . . . that you should always trust your instincts."

Lord March nodded. "So, Mistress . . . what is it, exactly, that you need?"

"There she goes."

I turned to Brandan Vard in the darkness of the deck of the Reliant, Captain Tristan on Brandan's far side. Brandan looked out over the water, lit only by the lanterns of ships and the torches burning along the docks, but he wasn't squinting.

He didn't need to squint. He was a Servant; he could see the ship as clearly as I could beneath the river.

Captain Tristan could not. He lowered his spyglass, a frown touching his face.

"And you were right. The Squall's captain loaded supplies for a short voyage, perhaps enough for a week, but nothing more." He turned toward me. If not for the river, his face would be nothing but a pale shadow in the night. "Now to see where he's off to with so little cargo."

With that, he stepped away, already ordering his crew to make ready. They moved about the deck and rigging in relative silence. But they'd been expecting this since midafternoon, when the Squall had begun lifting barrels

and crates into her hold.

As the ship began to drift out into the harbor, the Squall just within sight ahead, I leaned forward on the railing, intensely aware of Brandan at my side. I hadn't seen him since the night he and William had brought Lord Sorrenti to Erick's room, but his presence still prickled my skin. I felt the urge to shift closer to him, could picture his light brown hair in the sunlight of the dock in Amenkor after our tour of the city, could see his smile before William and Tristan had arrived.

"I never thanked you," I said, trying to shrug the thoughts aside.

"For what?"

"For bringing Sorrenti to see Erick."

"Oh." He glanced toward me once, then away, back toward the night, toward the lights of the harbor slipping past in the darkness. "It was nothing."

I heard the lie in his voice. "Sorrenti wasn't pleased. He told me he wasn't happy with the fact that I knew about the throne here in Venitte. And William told me you risked a lot to get him to come."

Brandan shifted. "It was nothing."

I didn't answer.

Brandan turned to stare at me for a long moment. "What did William have to say about me coming on this little trip?"

I shrugged. "He wasn't happy. But he was there when Lord Sorrenti insisted."

"And what about you?"

I turned to face him. "It doesn't bother me that you're here."

He frowned. "I see."

It wasn't the answer he'd been hoping for.

I tensed, forced myself to stay at the railing and not walk away.

"Brandan, why do you think Sorrenti sent you?"

He didn't answer, a crease forming between his eyebrows.

I sighed. "You told Sorrenti everything—about me, about Amenkor. In particular, you told him I'd asked about the throne. I knew you knew more about the throne here in Venitte than you told me in Amenkor. I could sense it. You knew about the throne and were trying to keep it a secret."

"Yes."

"And when we were forming the crew for this outing, Sorrenti insisted that you come along. He insisted that you be sent to Amenkor in the first place."

"Yes."

I grunted. "You're not just a Servant from Venitte, are you? At least, not as lowly a Servant as you made yourself out to be in Amenkor."

I could feel Brandan's smile on the river, would be able to see it in the darkness if I turned slightly. "No. Sorrenti is the throne's Master, but there are a few Servants beneath him who are aware of the throne, of its existence. I'm one of those few. I was sent to Amenkor to find out what had happened to the Skewed Throne. Sorrenti knew something had happened; he felt it. But he didn't know what. None of the voices in the throne here knew, because it had never happened before."

"And why are you here on this ship? Why did he insist you be sent?"

Brandan turned directly toward me, his attitude shifting subtly, making him more confident. He didn't seem as young as in Amenkor, as naive. "I'm here as Sorrenti's representative, nothing more. Anyone on the Council will be suspicious of the activities of this ship if it doesn't have another council member's presence on it. And I'm here as additional protection from the Chorl, in case we run into more of their Servants."

The shift in his attitude was a little disconcerting. "And what about Tristan?"

"What about him?"

I frowned. "In Amenkor, he seemed to be in charge. He seemed to lead you around."

Brandan smiled, and I could see a little bit of the naïveté return. Perhaps it wasn't all a facade. "In Amenkor, he was in charge. He is Lord March's official representative. He's beholden to him." He shrugged. "I didn't lie to

you. I never lied to you, about anything. I was sent . . . to give his credentials a little more weight."

I considered this in silence for a long time. Then: "Lord Sorrenti seems to know a lot about the time surrounding the first Fire."

"He's been studying it since the second Fire passed through the city. All of the Servants in the College have."

"And what have you found out?"

He shrugged. "Nothing much. Nothing that isn't somehow brought out by the tales the street-talkers tell."

"Anything to indicate where the Fire came from?"

Brandan shook his head. "No. Except from the west of course."

I thought about Lord Sorrenti, about his eyes as he told me of the devastation brought on by the plague and the famine after the Fire had passed Venitte the first time. "What about its source? What its purpose was?"

"Nothing that we've found."

I didn't respond. Because I thought Lord Sorrenti had some idea of what the Fire meant. Maybe not precisely, but he'd known something more . . . Or suspected it.

The Reliant passed through the northern channel, the Isle and the torches at the height of its granite tower slipping by to the left, waves slapping against the rocky base of the cliffs. The ship began to shudder in the riptides, but continued steadily forward, the Squall ahead.

Then both ships passed out through the channel's mouth, past the line of Venittian patrol ships guarding the entrance, into the open ocean.

"Now we see where she heads," Tristan said. He'd rejoined us at the railing, along with Keven. A contingent of Amenkor guardsmen had joined the crew and were now scattered about the deck, mingling with a light force of Protectorate that Lord March had ordered to join us.

We waited expectantly, eyes on the lights of Lord Demasque's ship, just visible in the darkness ahead.

They continued straight ahead for a long moment, then began to turn north.

"Shouldn't we turn to follow them?" Keven asked, when Tristan didn't move.

"No. We'll let them think we're heading farther out to sea, for the longer trade routes, the ones that reach farther up the coast. Then we'll douse our lanterns and keep them in sight from the west. At least at night. Once it gets closer to dawn, we'll head back out to sea and try to pick them back up once night falls again."

Keven grunted in understanding.

Brandan and I kept watch on the deck for another hour, but then the initial tension bled away. I retired to my cabin, leaving Brandan on deck.

The next day the Reliant sailed farther out to sea, and we lost sight of the Squall. Everyone on board grew grim as the sunlight shifted overhead.

"We're passing into the inner trading routes," Tristan said, "where the Chorl are."

He doubled the watch.

Night fell, and the Reliant turned toward the west, angling toward the coast. Everyone not resting below or working in the rigging drifted toward the edge of the deck, eyes on the darkening horizon, searching for the Squall. An hour passed, darkness falling heavy and thick as clouds drifted by overhead, obscuring the thin moon, the stars. Tristan began pacing the deck, the corners of his eyes and mouth tight. The entire crew grew edgy, the tension prickling in the air.

And then Brandan whispered, "There."

At almost the same moment, one of the lookouts above shouted down, "Lanterns to starboard!" and was immediately hushed by practically everyone on board.

Tristan stepped up to the rail, spyglass out, as the crew scrambled to attention around him.

"I believe it's the Squall," the captain said, lowering the glass.

A sigh of relief whispered around the deck, but the tension didn't slacken.

We followed the ship through the night. Keven repeatedly suggested I get some

sleep, but I ignored him, until he finally quieted. No one else seemed inclined to rest either. According to the records kept at the merchants' guild that William had found, the Squall typically stayed out to sea for a week, which meant that they traveled at most three days up the coast before turning back.

Which put them a little over halfway to Bosun's Bay.

An hour before dawn, Captain Tristan approached me. "We'll have to turn back to sea, or they'll spot us. And if they make landfall during the day . . ."

"We won't know where," I finished.

I turned to stare out at the faint lights, clearer on the river than with regular eyesight. Tristan had been careful to keep his distance.

I sighed. "Do it."

He pressed his lips tight, turned to give the order, but one of the sailors at the railing suddenly gasped. "She's turning!"

Tristan's spyglass was out instantly. "Riley, hard to starboard. We have to get close to the coast before dawn."

"Aye, sir!"

"Won't they see us once the sun rises?" I asked.

Tristan grimaced. "That's a chance we'll have to take. The cloud cover will help."

I glanced toward the east, toward where the clouds were beginning to lighten.

Tristan began to pace, taking out his spyglass to check on the ship ahead, snapping it closed to pace again.

Keven joined us, and Brandan, both with dark circles under their eyes.

The sky lightened, the gray clouds rushing by overhead, low, threatening rain, turning the sea the color of slate below. The coast came into view, a dark band on the horizon, and the Reliant began a slow turn northward again.

Ahead, the lanterns on the Squall went out.

Keven muttered a black curse.

"Did they see us?" I asked sharply, stepping up to Tristan's side, the urge to rip the spyglass out of his hands and look for myself almost too great to suppress.

"Hard to tell," he said. "It could just be light enough they aren't necessary anymore." He sucked in a sharp breath.

"What?" I gripped the handle of my dagger hard, knuckles white. "What is it?" He lowered the spyglass, turned toward me. "They've turned inland. They're headed toward an inlet."

"Is there anything there? A town? A village?"

He shook his head. "Nothing on the map."

I scanned the distance, where Lord Demasque's ship couldn't be seen in the grayness, not by the naked eye, not without lanterns, and not using the river. I growled. "I need to get closer."

Tristan's lips pressed together so tight they turned white, but all he said was, "The boats."

An hour later, Keven, Tristan, Brandan, and I, along with an escort of ten guardsmen from both Amenkor and Venitte, slogged through the surf onto the sandy beach, two crew from the Reliant pulling the boats we'd used onto shore behind us, the Reliant anchored within sight.

"The inlet shouldn't be more than half an hour north," Tristan said.

I nodded, motioned the guardsmen, Tristan, and Brandan forward.

We ran up over the edge of the dunes, sand flying, and plowed through the grass and into the trees, turning northward.

Twenty minutes after that, sweat slathering our backs, rain hissing down in a heavy drizzle, we topped a low rise and stared down into the inlet.

Through the windblown downpour, the Squall lay anchored, sails tied down. Men swarmed along the beach, three boats already grounded, two more in the water, one heading toward land, empty, the other heading toward the ship, fully loaded.

Brandan gasped. Keven swore, colorful and harsh.

Tristan turned toward me, his face utterly expressionless. "Heavens help us."

They're working with the Chorl."

Chapter 12

Behind his desk, Lord March stilled, his face utterly expressionless. But his voice was not. It held a rumble, faint, as of distant thunder. Muted, but threatening.

"What did you say?"

Tristan shifted. "Lord Demasque appears to be working with the Chorl."

Silence, during which Lord March did not move, barely seemed to breathe.

I glanced toward Avrell, the First's lips pressed into a grim line, toward Brandan, who stood behind Lord Sorrenti. None of us were seated. We'd been ushered into the room as soon as we arrived, everyone else escorted out.

"If I didn't know you, Tristan," Lord March finally muttered, "I would call you a liar."

Tristan bowed his head. "I was there, Lord March. I saw them."

"What, exactly, did you see?"

"Lord Demasque's ship, the Squall, sailed north from the channel. They followed the coast for a day and half, along the standard inner coastal shipping lanes. We trailed them at night, headed for deeper waters during the day, and picked them back up the next night. Just before dawn, they turned into a well-known inlet, south of Bosun's Bay, near Fairview.

"We could not follow them into the inlet without being seen, so we anchored south of the inlet and put to shore using the long-boats. The Mistress, Brandan, and I, along with an escort of guardsmen, hiked to the ridge south of the inlet."

Tristan took a deep breath, loath to continue, but the pause was not long.

"The Squall had anchored in the water. Its crew was using boats to carry supplies from the shore to its hold. The Chorl lined the beach, to keep watch, and helped Lord Demasque's crew load the boats. Then, when all of the supplies on the beach had been loaded, they began carrying the Chorl to the ship itself."

As Tristan spoke, Lord March's eyes darkened. Now, the anger in his voice no longer distant, the threat no longer subtle, he asked, "How many Chorl?"

I shifted forward. "My personal guardsman counted at least a hundred and fifty. Along with three of the Chorl Servants and two priests."

Tristan nodded confirmation. "That agrees with the Protectorate's count as well. However, we did not remain long enough to see the ship sail. There may have been more."

"They must have been stacked on top of each other on that ship."

"Yes."

Lord March leaned forward, hands pressed flat onto his desk for support.

"There's more, or you would not look so grim, Tristan. Continue."

"We sprinted back to the Reliant and followed the Squall as closely as possible. They left the inlet near to dusk and we were able to follow them most of the return trip. We didn't want to lose them, didn't want to miss where they put the Chorl ashore."

"And where did they put their . . . cargo to shore?"

Tristan tensed, then answered in a thin voice. "They didn't."

"What do you mean? They must have put the Chorl ashore, they returned to the docks with nothing in the hold."

Tristan swallowed. "I mean, they didn't put the Chorl ashore before entering the channel. They passed through the patrols at the channel's mouth—they're one of the Council's ships, carried Lord Demasque's crest, so they were not searched—and the last we saw of them they were at anchor in the channel."

"Where?"

"Beneath part of Lord Demasque's outlying estates. On the northern cliff face."

Lord March remained quiet a long moment, his nostrils flaring as his jaw clenched.

Finally, his breathing slowed, he met Tristan's steady gaze and said, "The

caves."

Tristan nodded. "I believe so, yes."

"What caves?" I asked.

March's eyes flicked toward me. Then he thrust himself back from the desk, began pacing behind its length. "The channels— both the north and the south—are riddled with caves at their bases. Mostly, those caves are useless. The tide and the currents within the channels themselves make any attempt to sail into them treacherous at best. But that doesn't mean that desperate men—smugglers, pirates, merchants who wish to get goods into the city without paying the taxes—won't make the attempt. A significant portion have been successful.

"Lord Demasque must be using the caves to get the Chorl onto his estate without being noticed."

"They seem to have the passage timed so that they enter the channel at night," Tristan said. "They unload the Chorl and the supplies before dawn. Then the Squall sails into the harbor— empty—and no one's the wiser. No one has thought to ask the patrols when the Squall arrives, and as far as the patrol is concerned, the Squall is where it should be."

March grunted as he paced, head lowered, one hand stroking his trimmed beard, the other supporting his elbow. No one spoke.

Until he halted, abruptly, and looked at Tristan.

"This is a member of the Council of Eight. I cannot accuse him of treason. Not without proof. And the Council will not accept your word, Tristan. Or yours, Mistress." Here, he nodded toward me, his mouth twisted with regret, with anger. "The Council is too fragile at the moment. Such an accusation would rip it apart."

"I understand," Tristan said.

I felt a surge of anger, my hand dropping to my dagger. "But this means that the Chorl are already within your city."

Lord March nodded. "Yes. Hundreds of them. Perhaps thousands, if every voyage of the Squall has indeed carried Chorl within its hold."

"You cannot simply let this go," I spat.

Lord March's eyes narrowed. "This is not your city, Mistress." His voice was dangerous, almost a warning.

"No, it is not," I said, and met his gaze squarely. "But if the Chorl seize Venitte, it is not just your city that will be affected. The entire Frigean coast will suffer. Every city, every village, every inlet. Including Amenkor." I felt Avrell still beside me, felt his approval. But for the moment, there was no one else in the room except me and Lord March, nothing but his cold, dark eyes. Tristan, Brandan, Sorrenti, and Avrell had faded into the background, become gray. "Don't pretend that I'm not part of this fight, Lord March. There is more at stake here than the Council of Eight, more than even the loss of Venitte."

Lord March frowned at the harshness of my tone. "What do you suggest?"

I turned toward Sorrenti, who straightened. "You can find the Chorl. You can verify that they are at that estate."

He held my gaze a long moment, knew what I was asking. He had access to the Stone Throne, could use it to see the city, as I'd used the Skewed Throne to search for the person responsible for stealing food from the warehouses this past winter.

But Tristan was in the room, had already frowned, brow furrowed. Not everyone in the room knew of the throne, knew that Sorrenti controlled it.

Sorrenti bowed his head slightly, chose his words carefully, his voice laced with warning. "I'm sorry to say that my . . . influence does not extend that far, Mistress. Venitte is a much larger city than Amenkor. My reach is limited."

"I see."

I hesitated, then turned toward Lord March. "Then raid Lord Demasque's estate over the channel. Find the Chorl. Drag them before the Council of Eight and make your accusation then."

Lord March considered this in silence for a long moment, then laughed, the sound short and sharp, the grin that followed twisted. "I can't, Mistress." "Why not?"

"This isn't Amenkor. Unlike you, I am not the absolute power here. I can't order the Protectorate to raid a Council member's estate without at least a majority of the Council's approval."

"Then get it."

"Getting such approval isn't easy," Lord March said, voice rising. "I barely got them to agree to the existence of the Chorl, to allow the use of the Protectorate and the general guard to defend against them."

"Do it without their approval."

"I can't!"

"You are the Lord of this city," I insisted. "You need to do something to stop this!"

Lord March's palm slammed down onto his desk, ink bottles and ledgers rattling at the force of this blow. "This is not Amenkor! I don't have that power!" Everyone in the room grew still. In the silence following Lord March's declaration, everyone looked anywhere but at him, at me.

Jaw clenched, the muscles in his neck tensed, Lord March took a moment to collect himself. In a tightly controlled voice, he said, "I cannot use the Protectorate in such a fashion. Not against one of the Council members. It would destroy me."

And then Avrell, silent until now, stepped forward. "Then don't use the Protectorate."

Both Lord March and I frowned.

"What do you mean?" Lord March asked.

"Don't use the Protectorate—or the general guard—for the raid. You have Amenkor guardsmen at your disposal. We aren't under the Council of Eight's authority. We can raid Lord Demasque's estates without the Council's approval."

I nodded, my hand wrapping around the hilt of my dagger.

Lord March's frown deepened. "The Council would never allow it. They would never believe it. They would claim that you brought the Chorl with you, as you did with Ottul, your Chorl Servant, that you placed them on Demasque's estates to implicate him."

"Not," Lord Sorrenti said, taking a single step forward, "if there were representatives of the Council there to witness the raid. Brandan could represent my interests."

March shook his head, but the tension had drained from his stance. "The Council is aware of our ties, Lord Sorrenti. We would need someone else from the Council, someone not so closely allied to me."

Sorrenti nodded, hand raised to stroke his beard as he thought. "What about Lady Casari and Lord Boradarn? Their word would carry weight with the other Lords and Ladies of the Council. And everyone knows that Lady Casari and I . . . have had our differences."

Lord March grunted, shoved away from the desk. He strode back and forth, considering.

After a long pause, he turned back. "Very well. But General Daerium will have to approve of it, and will very likely wish to send his own observer. When do you plan on attempting this raid?"

"It will have to be soon," Tristan said. "We don't want to give Lord Demasque a chance to learn of the raid, nor the chance to bring in more Chorl. And we should do it before the influx of people for the Fete begins in earnest."

"What Fete?" I asked.

Everyone halted in consternation. Sorrenti broke the silence. "It's a five-day carnival. It culminates in a Masquerade in the Stone Garden, Venitte's central square, on midsummer's night. People from all along the coast come to celebrate it. They will begin arriving in caravans and on ships from regions all along the coast in another week. I'm surprised you haven't heard of it." I shook my head. "I grew up on the Dredge."

Avrell sighed. "I'm afraid that in our haste to depart, we did not come prepared for the Fete."

"I'll have Brandon put together what's necessary for your group."

"In the meantime," Lord March said, and all eyes turned toward him, "coordinate the raid with Daerium."

"The formations look good, General Daerium."

Daerium turned from his position at the top of the wooden tower overlooking the training fields of the Protectorate inside Deranian's Wall to see who had spoken. Distracted, his brow creased in concentration, he acknowledged Lord Sorrenti with a nod before turning toward me. Surrounded by guardsmen in the blood-red-and-gold regalia of the Protectorate, he grunted and motioned one of the runners closer. "Tell Captain Farel that his flank is falling behind. They need to move into position faster." As soon as the boy took off, he barked to the rest of the men on the platform, "Signal a reset. I want these men to move!"

Flags were raised, guardsmen waving them steadily back and forth, and on the field below—where at least four units were spread out between the barracks on one side and Lord March's personal estate on the other, including a group from Amenkor led by Captain Catrell—men broke and began marching back into their initial positions, dust from the trampled field rising into the air. General Daerium motioned for Lord Sorrenti and me to join him at the railing of the tower.

"It's going better than expected," Daerium said, almost grudgingly. "Captain Catrell has been helpful. He's explained the tactics used by the Chorl in the attack on Amenkor, in particular how they used their Servants to push through the armies to the city walls. And the Chorl Servant you captured has been invaluable."

On the field below, I saw Catrell pull the Amenkor guardsmen back, noticed that Marielle, Gwenn, Heddan, and Ottul were among the ranks.

"You're using the Servants in the training."

Daerium looked toward me, then back to the field. "It was Catrell's idea. And Lord Sorrenti's." He motioned to the field. "At the moment, the Amenkor unit is acting as the Chorl attackers. Your Servants are using their Sight to aid in the Chorl's advance, as they did in the attack on Amenkor, or so I'm told." He nodded toward the Venittian men. "I've incorporated some of the Venittian Servants into our own units in an attempt to counter the attack."

"While you were on the Reliant, chasing after the Squall," Sorrenti added, "I had your Servants meet with those here in Venitte, to explain how the Chorl Servants operate. It was . . . informative."

"What about Ottul?" I asked, watching her closely on the field below. It was easy to pick out her blue skin and black hair among all of the rest of the Amenkor guardsmen. "Has she cooperated?"

"More than I expected. More than your other Servants expected as well. But they say that since the last few days on the Defiant, Ottul's attitude has completely changed."

Since I placed the White Fire inside her. Queotl.

I saw again the reverent expression on her face—the sheer awe—and frowned.

"In our first few trials," Sorrenti continued, his mouth twisting into a self-derogatory grin, "she laughed at our attempts to mimic the Chorl. Apparently, we weren't being vicious enough."

"No," Daerium said. "It isn't viciousness. It's directness."

According to what Catrell has told me—and your Chorl Servant has verified—the Chorl move directly toward their objective. There is no strategy involved. No attempts to outmaneuver the opposing forces, no subterfuge at all. They have a goal, and they move directly on that goal, using whatever advantage they have available."

On the training field, all of the units were once again in place. A horn blew, and everyone on the tower platform tensed, moved to the railing to watch, their muted conversations cut off. The first horn fell silent. Orders were barked on the field below, banners raised, men fidgeting. Marielle and Gwenn

stood near the front of their ranks, near Catrell, with Ottul and Heddan farther out on either side. After a moment, I could pick out Sorrenti's Servants mixed among the Venittian ranks. Their uniforms were slightly different, the surplices longer, and they seemed to wear less armor. They also kept close to the front.

And then a second horn blew, a longer note this time, and Catrell's force surged forward, the men screaming. I gave a start, then realized they were mimicking the battle cries of the Chorl, their strange high-pitched ululations, and I smiled. I could see Catrell's sword raised as he charged, saw Marielle moving alongside him.

On the far side of the field, the Protectorate closed in, the central unit moving forward, the two to either side holding back slightly. They didn't charge, didn't break their ranks, the men moving in tight formation. Those in the forefront held their shields at the ready.

Catrell's advance was chaotic in comparison.

A moment before the two forces met, Marielle and Gwenn unleashed a rain of fire toward the central Venittian unit. I felt the gathered force release, fire arcing up over the battlefield, and felt a visceral twist in my gut as the attack on Amenkor flashed before my eyes, as I tasted the bitter moment when the first tower exploded, followed closely by the second. My hand fell to my dagger as the fire began to descend onto the Venittian ranks, as it dropped from the heights—

And then, to my side, I heard Sorrenti grunt.

The fire struck a shield, one that I had not felt form, but whose edges became apparent as the fire was shunted off to the side, out of harm's way. But the Venittian ranks beneath the shield faltered as the flames crackled above them, some men continuing the organized march forward, but many hesitating. A few raised their own shields up over their heads to keep the fire away, or to block off the heat that radiated down through the invisible shield the Venittian Servants had formed to protect them. Enough of them that the forward momentum of the Venittian army halted.

I could taste the army's fear, like blood in my mouth.

On one side, Daerium spat curses as the Venittian force halted, its initial precision crumbling.

The left and right flanks began to close in as Catrell's men hit the forefront of the Venittian's central unit. The front ranks collapsed, and Marielle and Gwenn shifted the focus of the fire toward the incoming support, joined by Ottul and Heddan on either side.

Daerium bit off another curse, motioned harshly toward the other captains on the tower, and another horn blew, calling the battle off.

"Fools!" Daerium spat, leaning heavily onto the railing as the battle scene below ground to a halt. "They know that the fires will be shielded by the Servants, and yet they still cower in fear!"

"Not all of them," I said.

Daerium turned to me with a dark look. "Enough to destroy the order of the unit."

I thought about what Brandan had told me in Amenkor, about how the Servants in Venitte were ostracized by the rest of the Protectorate. "It's because the regular Venittian guardsmen don't trust them."

"The Servants have never been integrated into the fighting force," Sorrenti added. "Not like this. They've always been kept . . . distant, sent to the College for research, left to train amongst themselves. You can't expect the army to welcome them with open arms when you yourself, and the captains of the Protectorate, isolated them."

Daerium's eyes darkened, but he didn't answer, turning his black gaze out onto the field. The river roiled, the silence on the tower suddenly cold. "What is it that you want?"

I looked toward Lord Sorrenti, who shifted forward. Ignoring the tension, voice carefully neutral, he said, "Lord March would like your approval of a raid on Lord Demasque's northern estates. A raid to be conducted by the

Amenkor forces, with a few representatives from the Council as witnesses." Daerium caught Sorrenti's gaze, straightened, giving him his full attention. "Why?"

"Because Demasque is working with the Chorl," Sorrenti said. "He has them hidden on his estate, and Lord March cannot risk sending the Protectorate onto a council member's personal estates."

"So he's sending Amenkor instead." Daerium's gaze settled on me and I felt myself stiffen. "You realize the risk he's taking by sending you? If the Chorl are not there, if this is a mistake, he will not be able to support you. He will lose some of his support and control in the Council."

"I know."

Daerium snorted, as if he didn't believe me. But he turned back to Sorrenti. "When do you plan on sending this raid to the estate?"

"Tomorrow night. Lady Casari, Lord Boradarn, and I will send representatives with the Mistress. Would you like to send your own representative?"

Turning his back to both of us in dismissal, gazing down on the training field, Daerium said, "Oh, no. I'll be coming along myself."

"There it is."

I looked to where General Daerium pointed, across a moonlit stretch of wheat fields, the stalks waving in a faint breeze, silver and gray. A road cut up through the field toward a low wall, an arched gate, three buildings behind—a small manse, a stable, and a larger storage building. The wall cut off a small section of land near the cliff face, ending abruptly at the edge.

There were lanterns lit within the manse in at least two windows. As we watched, someone carrying a torch moved from the manse to the stable. A servant.

I frowned. There should be more light, more activity. The manse was too quiet. Daerium turned toward the group of guardsmen coming up behind us, led by Westen and Catrell. All of them came from Amenkor except for five—Daerium, Brandan, Tristan, a man named Thad representing Lady Casari, and a woman, Sarra, from Lord Boradarn. The last two wore frowns.

"Are you certain this is the estate?" Thad muttered.

My hand kneaded the hilt of my dagger. His voice had a faint whine, and he hadn't shut up since we'd left Venitte.

"Yes," I said, tightly.

"It doesn't look like anyone's here except servants," Sarra said. Her tone was clipped, as if she hated being here, had been ordered here against her wishes. I cast Westen and Catrell a worried, irritated look. Westen shrugged. Catrell didn't respond at all.

I turned to look at the expectant guardsmen behind me, at their pale faces, nothing more than blurs in the moonlight, at the Skewed Throne symbol stitched onto their chests—red for the Seekers, gold for the regular guard—then back to the manse.

A prickling sensation coursed up my arms.

"Something's not right," I said.

"What do you mean?" Thad said sharply.

I shook my head.

"Then perhaps we shouldn't enter the estates," Thad said, even though I hadn't responded. "Perhaps we should return to the Merchant Quarter. This entire enterprise is a mistake."

My hand tightened on my dagger, and I turned to Thad, feeling a twinge of satisfaction when he stepped back a pace. "You're here to represent Lady Casari, at Lord March's request, not as a commentator. I'd advise you to shut up."

Thad snorted, but didn't answer, grumbling something inaudible under his breath, his eyes cold with anger.

Sarra frowned, but relaxed slightly when General Daerium said, "Let's get on with this."

I met his gaze in the moonlight, saw the challenge there, could feel it pulsing on the river. He didn't trust us, didn't trust me. But he'd come

himself, because he wanted to see Catrell and Amenkor's men in action, wanted to see how they fought, how they worked as a group, in real battle, not on the training fields. And he wanted to watch me. Lord March had accepted me as Mistress; Daeriu had not. He'd reserved judgment.

And he wanted to see the Chorl for himself.

"Very well." I motioned to Westen and Catrell, both of them stepping forward sharply. They'd seen General Daeriu watching as well.

"Mistress," Catrell said. Westen simply nodded.

"Westen, you and the Seekers go in first. Subdue the servants if you can. If there's any sign of the Chorl Servants or priests, come back immediately. Brandan and I will have to be at the forefront if they have Servants with them. Otherwise, we'll give you twenty minutes, then I'll send in Catrell and the rest."

Westen motioned to the other three Seekers and within moments they were gone, lost among the shadows in the wheat fields.

General Daeriu's frown deepened as he tried to pick them out in the darkness. He stepped up to take Westen's place, Brandan and the other two observers hanging back.

"There will be at least twelve servants in an estate of this size. Are four Seekers enough to subdue them all in such a short amount of time?"

"Yes."

Daeriu glanced down at me, at the utter conviction in my voice. I didn't look away from the fields, from Westen and the other Seekers' progress.

"They've reached the wall."

"How can you tell?" Daeriu asked.

"Because I can see them."

Daeriu grunted.

I caught Brandan's gaze in the darkness, saw him smile slightly and nod.

Ahead, the torch that lit the shuttered windows of the stable flickered and suddenly went out. For a brief moment, no more than a breath, a shadow appeared near one of the manse's windows and then it was gone.

Daeriu's breath stilled, held—

And then the light in the main manse died as well.

I heard Sarra mutter a mild curse, heard Thad whisper harshly to her, "And we let these men walk free in Venitte?"

I smiled. "Catrell?"

"It hasn't been twenty minutes yet."

I turned and he nodded, trying hard not to smile as well.

"I'll send them in now," he said.

I'd made my point to Daeriu, to Thad and Sarra as well. Let them report back to their respective Lords and Lady.

The guardsmen formed up around us, Catrell calling out orders as armor creaked, as swords were drawn, the rustle of over a hundred and fifty men getting ready for battle. Sinking deeper beneath the river, I felt their tension, their fear being channeled into heat, into sweat and readiness. Their breath caught on the air, someone coughing, another spitting to one side, but their faces were calm, almost anxious to begin.

Thad edged closer to Daeriu, eyeing the men with suspicion. Sarra cast him a sidelong look of disdain.

"Stay to the road," Catrell said.

And then they were moving, not running, but jogging down the road in the moonlight, a black shadow slicing through the silver of the wheat, heading straight for the gates of the manse.

As the last of the men passed, Daeriu muttered grudgingly, "Impressive."

I said nothing, focused on the estate below.

The force hit the gate and split, half surging forward toward the manse, the other half heading toward the storage building. A smaller force broke off and headed toward the stable.

The door to the manse was breached, men rushing inside. The stable door gave with no resistance, guardsmen charging into the room beyond.

On the rise, the entire raid happened in eerie silence.

Too much silence. I frowned.

"I don't see any Chorl," Thad said smugly.

I shot him a dark glare, but then men emerged from the manse. Catrell and Westen. I could tell by their stance.

"I think we can join them now," I said, and started downslope without waiting for the others, staying close to the road, paved in the manner almost all roads in Venitte were paved, with wide flat stones. I felt General Daerium follow, Tristan, Brandan, Sarra, and Thad not far behind, but I ignored them. "What happened?" I said the instant I passed through the gates of the manse. Westen and Catrell turned. The rest of the guardsmen were milling about in the open courtyard between the buildings.

"There's no one here, no Chorl, no supplies, and barely any servants," Catrell reported, his voice without inflection, although he was clearly troubled.

"We're searching the grounds now."

"I told you this was a mistake," Thad muttered.

I glanced toward Westen. "Did you find anything?"

"The storage building has been used recently. There are heavy gouges in the floor, obvious markings in the straw and dust that something had been stored there and moved within the last few days. Markings on the grounds indicate it was loaded into carts, but once the carts reached the road . . ."

He trailed off and I grimaced. There would be no markings on the road.

"What else?"

He frowned. "In the stables." Motioning us forward, he pulled open the stable doors, the musk of horses, straw, and dung wafting outward. Thad wrinkled his nose in disgust, raised one hand to his mouth, but when the rest of us entered without hesitating, he followed suit. A horse snorted and shook its head as we passed, coming to the edge of its stall, watching us with large dark eyes, but Westen headed to the back of the stable.

To an open trapdoor in the floor.

I moved up to its edge, stared down into its dark depth. I could see stairs leading downward, felt a breeze brush against my face.

A dank breeze, heavy with salt and the taste of the sea.

My nostrils flared. "Where does it go?"

"The Seekers followed it to the caves beneath the cliffs, all the way down to the channel. There's a dock down there, recently built, at least three boats tied there. And they found this."

Westen held out his fist, opened it to reveal a thin black cord, or rather, three cords twined together. Tied to the cords at intervals were shells of various sizes and colors, most smooth and mottled, a few spiny and sharp.

The necklace sent a visceral shiver of hatred through me.

I drew back, caught Westen's gaze, Catrell's, both of whom looked grim.

Anyone who had survived the attack on Amenkor knew what these were. The Chorl had worn them, on their wrists, around their necks, braided in their hair.

Like jewelry.

And the men who had tortured Erick had worn them.

Sarra, Thad, and Daerium leaned forward.

"What is it?" Daerium asked.

"A necklace," Tristan said shortly. "Worn by the Chorl."

Thad snorted. "And how do you know?"

Tristan met Thad's gaze. "Because I saw the Chorl wearing them when they attacked my ship."

"But there are no Chorl here," Sarra said skeptically, turning toward me. "How do we know your Seekers didn't plant this here?"

"You don't," I said flatly. "But we certainly didn't build the dock in the cave below."

Sarra grunted in agreement. She still radiated doubt, but there was a sheen of belief to that doubt as well.

"What about the servants?" Daerium asked suddenly. He'd leaned back from the shell necklace, turned now to Westen and Catrell. "Has anyone questioned the

servants?"

Westen nodded. "I did. They know nothing. In fact, all of them were sent to the estate yesterday morning. They said there was no one here when they arrived."

"And you believe them?"

"Yes."

Daerium nodded his head.

"Then we have nothing," Thad said shortly. "You've wasted our time and insulted Lord Demasque as well."

Then he turned and stormed out. Sarra hesitated, frowned down at the wide trapdoor, large enough to allow two men to climb up at once, large enough to heave a crate through, or a barrel, but then she left as well.

Brandan and Tristan stepped forward and watched them go.

"This is not going to go over well in the Council," Brandan said grimly.

"No, it's not," Tristan agreed.

I snorted. I could already feel the pit of my stomach churning with nausea. In rage, that somehow Lord Demasque had known we were coming, had moved the Chorl to another location. And in the thought that I'd have to face Lord March and the Council members with nothing to show for it except a braided necklace.

"But there is one thing."

Everyone turned toward the low, rumbling voice, toward General Daerium, who faced me.

"You've convinced me."

"It will require all of us, working together, to do what you want, Liviann."

The Council of Seven stood in the center of the obsidian chamber, clustered around two granite thrones. Liviann stood immediately before the two stone structures, a small smile touching her lips, a strange light in her eyes. Alleryn reached forward, tentatively, and touched the stone, her hand brushing down the rough granite. She frowned, trading a glance with her sister Atreus. A meaningful glance, although I couldn't tell what it meant.

"Why are the seats so blocky, so rough?" she asked.

"I wasn't trying for aesthetics," I said. "And you've seen the stones the Servants have been using to focus their powers. The stones change shape. The effect is relatively minor in the stone they use, but if we do this, if we actually attempt to create these two thrones, I think the effect will be much more . . . severe."

"Meaning?"

"I don't think they'll remain this shape for long."

Alleryn's frown deepened.

Liviann turned toward me. "When can we start?"

"Wait," Seth said. "We, as a council, haven't even decided whether we want to do this, Liviann. From what Cerrin says, this . . . procedure sounds dangerous. It doesn't even sound as if the thrones will be stable."

"And do we really need them now?" Atreus added. "With the stones that Cerrin created, the Servants have been able to upset the balance. We've spread the Servants out through the armies, managed to drive the Chorl out of all of our supply lines, pushed them back to a few of the coastal cities. Their own Servants are falling on all sides, to the point where they rarely risk them in battle anymore."

Liviann snorted. "But the Chorl aren't gone, Atreus. They've been pushed to the edge of the coast, yes, and we have Garus to thank for that. And Cerrin, of course. But that hasn't resolved the real problem—the Chorl themselves. They're hanging on to the coast—"

"We'll have them uprooted before winter sets in," Garus interrupted, cutting Liviann short.

"But will they be gone?" Liviann snapped. "No! They'll retreat. Back out into the ocean, back to wherever they came from. But they'll know that we're here, that we're vulnerable. They'll rebuild their forces, train new Servants, and they'll be back." She took a step toward Atreus, the youngest of the Council straightening, her chin up, nostrils flaring, not retreating beneath Liviann's

menacing step as the older Council member came a little too close. "That's why we need the thrones. Because this threat won't be ended when the Chorl retreat. It will remain. The Chorl will figure out a way to counter the effect of the stones and they'll be back."

Liviann withdrew slightly, ran her hand over the arm of one of the thrones, almost a caress. "This tipping of the balance in our favor is only temporary," she said, her voice more calm. The smile had returned to her lips, but now it hardened. "We have to protect the Frigean coast at all costs."

Seth looked as if he would continue to protest, his eyes black. He'd taken a step toward Alleryn and Atreus, created a subtle division between the members of the Council, Liviann, Garus, and Silicia on one side. I stood trapped in the middle.

Garus had seen the division as well. He watched Seth with a slight frown. They'd been partners for over forty years, had their arguments, their disagreements.

But never over something as incendiary as this. On the Council, they almost always agreed, as Atreus and Alleryn almost always agreed.

"We need the thrones," Garus said, to the whole Council, but he kept his focus on Seth, and there was an admonition in his voice, almost a warning. "The Frigean coast needs the thrones."

Seth stiffened. "We've survived without them. The Chorl will retreat. And they've managed to disrupt our supplies enough that the coming winter won't be easy. We should conserve our energy for surviving that. The Chorl won't be returning in force any time soon. We have time."

Garus drew in a deep breath, ready to argue, the intention clear—

But Liviann intervened. "Enough. I call for a formal vote."

Garus stilled, jaw clenching. "Very well. I think my choice is clear."

"And mine," Seth said.

Alleryn and Atreus shared another look. Atreus nodded, and Alleryn said, "The two of us oppose the creation of the thrones."

Liviann frowned, turned to Silicia. "And you?"

"I don't see where creating them now or later makes much of a difference. I vote to create them."

"As do I," Liviann said.

Everyone's gaze fell on me. All except Garus.

"It appears that it's up to you, Cerrin."

I stared into Liviann's eyes, saw the hunger there. She wanted the thrones, not to protect the coast, but because they would represent power. For the Council, of course, and she would die with the Council's name on her lips. But she wanted the thrones for herself. She wanted to rule the Council.

I knew I should oppose her, knew I should never have built the thrones, never have brought them before the Council, before her. The stones I'd created for the Servants were nothing compared to the thrones. The stones were temporary, could be wielded in the battlefield until their power was drained and then discarded. The thrones . . .

But I was tired. Tired of the Chorl, tired of the Council, tired of living with the harsh, ever-present ache in my chest. An ache that could never be filled, could never be alleviated, could never be broken.

Except by death.

The creation of the thrones would require a sacrifice, would require a death. Without it, the effects—like the stones the Servants now used—would only be temporary. Even with all of the Council combined, the thrones would not last beyond a year without a death to solidify the Threads, to hold them. And Liviann wanted the thrones to survive beyond that, wanted them to survive all of the Council member's deaths.

One sacrifice. One death.

I closed my eyes, felt the ache . . . there . . . beneath my breastbone. A pulsing ache, throbbing with every beat of my heart. An ache that felt warm with sunlight, that reeked of the flowers on the veranda above the sea, that grated with the sound of children's laughter.

I'm so very tired, Olivia.

I sighed, the sound heavy and long, and opened my eyes, felt the faint sting of tears in the back of my throat.

Drawing a slow breath, I said, "I am the Builder."

And what does Lord March say? Eryn asked, and even though she sat alone in the garden outside her own rooms, surrounded by sunlight, by large white-flowered vines and large-leafed shrubs, the sky above blue and cloudless, the air clear, she broke into hacking coughs.

Through the White Fire, I could feel the spasms as they shook her. Eryn's stomach tensed as the pain seared through her abdomen and into her chest, into her legs. A liquid pain that seemed to burn her very bones. I could feel her weariness through the pain, could feel her stubborn refusal to give in to it. When she finally quieted, the cloth she had held to her mouth was stained bright red with blood. Not dotted with tiny flecks, or even small spots. The cloth was saturated.

Eryn tried to hide it, barely even glanced toward her hand before she closed the cloth into a tight fist.

But I hovered inside her, had released myself enough from the Fire that I felt her wince, felt her jaw clench in mute acceptance and denial, hiding the cloth even as she straightened her shoulders, swallowed the taste of blood, of sickness. I heard her breath through her own ears, heard the harshness of it, the throaty, fluid denseness of it.

Well? she said, her inner voice harsh, layered with warning. She reached for her tea, sun-steeped, tried to smother the copper taste on her tongue, in her throat, with its bitterness.

Lord March has said nothing. I haven't spoken to him since we agreed to raid Lord Demasque's estate. I've asked for an audience, but have heard nothing.

Not from him, not from Lord Sorrenti, Tristan, nor Brandan.

Because it's a political disaster, Eryn said, slamming her glass down and fighting back another coughing attack. Not only did you find nothing, but you entered one of the Council member's estates with your own forces.

I had an escort, I said sharply. Members of the Council of Eight knew what we intended, what we expected to find.

And now they're all scrambling to lay blame, and you're their scapegoat.

They'll be trying to convince the other Council members that it was you who convinced them that Lord Demasque had hidden Chorl on his estate, that you tricked them into joining the raid, that they never believed he would do such a thing. Half of them are probably telling him they sent a representative because they knew it couldn't be true, that they were there to protect Lord Demasque's interests, not their own.

Lord Demasque won't believe them.

Eryn snorted. He won't. But he'll pretend that he does. And since you know the Chorl were there, since everyone on Tristan's ship knows it, he'll use their scramble to get into his good graces to discredit you even more.

But General Daerium believes the Chorl were there. He must have some influence on the Council.

Not when it comes to the Council of Eight. Eryn frowned. But he does have influence over Lord March. And if everything you tell me is true, Lord March believes you as well.

It was meant to be soothing, because even though I was only present in her mind, in the White Fire at her core, Eryn knew I was nervous. I kept running through the raid over and over in my head, picturing the silvered wheat, the manse, seeing the empty storage building with the traces of straw and dust where crates had obviously rested days, perhaps hours, before the raid.

And the tunnel. The tunnel to the caves, to the small dock, the water lapping up against the stone, the boats bumping against each other where they were tied. They'd even rigged a hoist, to get the heavier crates and barrels through the steepest parts of the tunnel and into the stable.

How long has it been since you slept? Eryn asked, the question casual, cutting into my silence.

I almost didn't answer. Then, grudgingly: I haven't slept well since the raid. Because of the raid? Because of Lord March?

That, and because of the dreams.

Dreams of the throne?

Yes. I hesitated. They're stronger than before, deeper, more intense. It's harder to withdraw from them afterward.

Because you're close to the second throne. Because you're under its influence there in Venitte. Sorrenti has already admitted that it's still there, that it's still in use.

I didn't answer.

Are they the same kinds of dreams as you were having here?

Yes. Cerrin's dreams mostly, about the previous attack on the coast by the Chorl. He's the one who designed the thrones. He's the one who sacrificed himself to create them.

Eryn grimaced. They all sacrificed themselves to create the thrones.

Yes, but that wasn't the intent. It should have only taken one sacrifice, according to Cerrin. He meant to kill himself, to escape his wife and daughters' deaths, to escape that pain.

Eryn stilled, suddenly thoughtful. But something went wrong?

I don't know. He thought that he'd die and that the others would continue ruling the coast without him. I don't think any of the others knew what he intended. I don't think he told them. They were already split about whether to create the thrones in the first place.

Eryn considered this for a long moment, lost within herself, then seemed to return.

You should return to Venitte, she said. Lord March will summon you shortly, I'm certain.

There was an undertone to her voice, something she wanted to keep hidden, something new that I could not quite sense, not without taking control of her through the Fire. Something to do with the Skewed Throne.

I thought about doing just that, taking control, just enough to find out what she'd been thinking . . . but then I relented. Because whatever it was also had something to do with her sickness, and that was a private pain, one that I already knew I could not help her with, even through the Fire. We'd already tried.

And so I retreated, pushed myself up and out of the Fire, up and out over Amenkor, the sight of the city—the walls, the outer city, the wharf with three ships at dock and five more under construction, the encircling arms of the harbor and the newly broken ground where the wall would be built—somehow calming. Then I sped south, along the coast, toward the pinprick of fire in the city of Venitte, where Gwenn and Heddan had linked themselves to me so that I could Reach this far.

As I sped over land, Venitte almost within sight on the horizon, I caught movement, caught the last vestiges of power as someone used the river. I slowed, glanced down at the ground speeding past beneath me—

And saw the Chorl, saw rank after rank of them, marching down a road, through rolling hills, spilling out onto the surrounding grassland, dotted with little copses of trees, the darker green paths of creeks. A huge line of supply wagons followed the army itself, stretching back into the distance. At the head of the army, riding on horseback, sat Atlatik, his face set, expressionless, the lower half of his left ear sliced off. The tattoos on his face stood out in the sunlight, and his eyes were fixed on the horizon.

On Venitte.

He was surrounded by other Chorl warriors on horseback, all of them uncomfortable astride their mounts, their faces set in scowls or grimaces. Four of these carried huge banners on poles, all four banners carrying the spined seashell that had been emblazoned on the Ochean's sails as she entered Amenkor's harbor. The banners were a variety of colors—green, gold, blue, and purple.

Behind this group were Chorl Servants, some trudging along the road in their

sandals, most seated or curled up on pillows and blankets in carts and wagons. Mixed in among the Servants were priests dressed in yellow shirts and brown breeches, carrying scepters of reed with brightly colored feathers and shells tied to them.

I didn't see Haqtl.

And behind them: Chorl warriors. Hundreds of them. Thousands. Their multicolored tunics vibrant in the sunlight, their dark blue tattoos harsh and clear against their lighter skin.

I gasped, felt my heart falter.

Then I spun and fled toward Venitte, toward the city that waited on the coast only three days distant, toward the Fire that burned in its Merchant Quarter inside of my own body.

I fell into that body, felt myself shudder, felt Gwenn and Heddan pull back their conduits as I heaved in a gasping breath, lurched forward, then fumbled as I tried to catch myself and my arms refused to move, tingling as if the blood had drained from them, already beginning to tremble with the use of the river.

I heard Gwenn gasp, felt her reach forward—

But it was Erick who caught me.

"The Chorl," I gasped, my voice hoarse, weak with disuse.

"What about the Chorl," Erick said.

And then I realized it was Erick who had caught me.

Erick, not Keven.

I stared into his face, at his slightly grayer hair, shocked, afraid to touch him, even though he already held my arms, too afraid to move for fear that he'd step back and leave me again.

And he grinned.

"Erick," I said, and then I was sobbing into his chest, trying to control it, but trembling from weakness, from the exertion of sustaining the river for so long, for so far. I breathed in the scent of his sweat, tasted oranges, acrid and sharp, on my tongue, smelled for a brief, bitter moment the warmth of fresh bread, flour, and yeast . . . and everything felt right, everything felt normal again.

Erick held me close, rocked slightly back and forth. I could feel his pulse through his shirt, could sense a lingering weakness there, the last traces of his illness, of his torture, knew that there would still be a harsh red scar on his chest above his heart, one that might never fade. But he was healing, had healed, would continue to heal.

And he was here. Awake. After all the long months.

Finally, after I'd calmed, I pushed away, my arms no longer weak, no longer trembling. It should have taken me longer to recover, even with Gwenn and Heddan there to help me; I'd been gone much longer than expected, had spoken to Eryn longer than I intended. But I shoved the niggling concern aside and focused on Erick. I looked him in the eyes, held them, searched them as I asked, "Are you back?"

He smiled, but it carried with it a layer of blackness, a bleakness that I didn't think would ever go away. Not after what Haqtl had done to him, not after what he'd endured at the hands of the Chorl. "Yes. Westen is satisfied with my recovery. And Isaiah has finally given me leave to return to duty."

"What about Keven?"

Erick's face went blank. "Would you rather have him as your personal guard?"

I gave Erick my harshest glare and his blank expression cracked, just a little. A flicker of mirth, that was quickly smothered and put back under control.

In a dead serious voice, he said, "Keven and I have agreed that you are far too dangerous a person to be allowed to run free, and so we've decided that we will both be required to guard you."

I punched him in the stomach and he doubled over, gasping, faking extreme pain. I knew he was faking because I'd barely touched him. Westen and the rest of the Seekers had taken him almost instantly after he'd been freed from the

blanket of needles, had brought him back from his deathbed fast. He'd seen the attack coming, had already shifted out of the direct line of the punch. When he saw me smile, he straightened. "Now," he said, truly serious this time, all humor gone from his voice, "what about the Chorl?"

"I saw them, on my way back from speaking to Eryn in Amenkor. They're just north of the city."

"How many?"

I sat back into my chair. "Thousands of them."

Erick's jaw set. "We knew they were coming. It was only a matter of time." Behind him, Gwenn and Heddan exchanged a look.

And then Avrell stepped into the door to my rooms, William a step behind, Alonse shadowing them both.

"Mistress," the First said, his voice anxious, "Lord March and the Council of Eight has sent a summons."

"What can I expect?" I asked Avrell as the carriage trundled through the streets of Venitte toward Deranian's Wall and the council chambers.

The First shook his head. "I have no idea. Lord March could side with you, or not. The other Lords and Ladies may side with you, or not." He sighed, grimaced. "At the very least, you can expect Lord Demasque to attack you, your credibility. And you can't use your dagger to defend yourself."

I turned away from him, the occupants of the carriage—Avrell, Erick, William, a few other guardsmen—falling silent. Avrell glanced toward Erick, who shrugged, but I ignored them, stared out at the city as it passed, my stomach churning. With anger, with anxiety, with fear.

After a long moment, I felt someone's hand enfold mine. I clutched at it desperately with both hands, breathed in William's scent on the river, drew in the comfort he offered. I turned toward him, caught his smile as he squeezed my hand, saw Erick's accompanying frown and quick questioning look toward Avrell beyond him, then turned back toward the window.

Outside, I could see the first signs of the upcoming Fete. Merchants had placed sheaves of grain above their doorways, tied ribbons to their signs or hung wreaths on their doors or in their windows. The hawkers and peddlers in the streets had shifted their wares toward the summer harvest, the first few squash appearing, bright yellow and deep orange, a few mottled with green spots. Tomatoes and cucumbers filled one cart. A woman stood at a street corner, a long thin basket tied to her back, the giant heads of vivid sunflowers sprouting from the top, their centers black.

Reaching for the river, I could feel the mounting excitement in the air. Like that in Amenkor before the festival I'd thrown to celebrate surviving the Chorl. But it was tainted, and I thought about what Tristan had said. That the rumors of the Chorl had penetrated the depths of the city of Venitte, that stories were being told of the attack on Amenkor, of the attack on the ships sailing out of the harbor, of the loss of Bosun's Bay and the Boreaite Isles. I could feel the uncertainty those rumors caused on the river, could taste the sourness beneath the anticipation of the Fete. It gave my nausea over the upcoming Council meeting a dagger's edge, and I swallowed its bitterness down as I settled back into my seat.

Then we passed into the shadow of the Wall.

The carriage pulled up to the same wide steps that led to the rectangular pool of water in the plaza surrounded by columns outside the Council building. There, a group of Protectorate greeted us, the commander of the unit bowing crisply.

"General Daerion sends his regrets," the commander said, straightening as Erick, Avrell, William, and the other guardsmen stepped out of the carriage onto the stone of the roadway. He caught and held my eyes. "He told me to tell you that Lord March sends his regrets as well."

I frowned, but before I could ask anything, the commander turned and barked an order, the Protectors on all sides re-forming around us as he led the way up the steps.

"What was that about?" Erick asked, stepping in close so that only Avrell,

William, and I could hear him.

"It was about the Council meeting," Avrell answered, his voice tight. "It's a warning."

"Lord March and General Daerion aren't going to support us," William added. I nodded.

And then we were inside the Hall itself, passing into the shadow of the foyer and through into its outer room. Erick's eyebrows rose as he took in the size of the room, the ornate marble flooring, the massive banners and detailed carving of the support columns, but he said nothing, his eyes falling to the people, to the clerks and pages, merchants and guardsmen that dotted the outer room. But none of these people were important, so in the end his eyes turned toward the two massive doors that led into the Council chamber, toward where the commander of the escorting Protectorate had paused, had turned to await our approach.

"The Council of Eight is already waiting," he said.

And then the doors opened and we were led inside.

I slid beneath the river as I passed through the doors. I thought I had prepared myself for what I would find there, but it still made me hiss. A sound so low that only Erick and Avrell heard it, and both of them knew instantly what it meant.

I felt each of them tense, felt Erick bristle and turn, his back slightly to me, facing outward, protecting me, his hands falling lightly to his side. A casual pose, but one deceptively calm. Avrell stepped forward, his chin high, shoulders back, meeting the hostile stares of the Council of Eight directly, protecting me as well, but in a different way, defiant and challenging. William stepped into his place at my side, his hand also falling to the sword at his side.

The Amenkor guardsmen that accompanied us reacted to Erick's, William's, and Avrell's stance, stepping up sharply on all sides, hands on hilts, creating a half circle with Erick and William on its inner edge, Avrell ahead, leaving just enough room for me to pass through its center.

I lifted my head, nostrils flaring for a moment, letting the river course around me. All of the council members were in attendance, watching me. Lord Demasque stood to the left, one hand reaching down toward the table, fingers resting there lightly. His jaw was set in indignant rage. Lord Sorrenti sat to the right, his face impassive. Lady Casari and Lord Boradarn both frowned, and Lady Parmati smiled. A spiteful smile, full of malice and triumph. Lord Aurowan and Lady Tormaul were quiet, and Lord Dussain seemed slightly confused, almost apologetic.

I ignored them all, let their emotions wash over me on the river as I stepped forward, through the opening between Erick and William, until I stood near Avrell's side but slightly ahead of him. I faced Lord March, noted Captain Tristan off to one side.

"Lord March," I said, without nodding. "The Council of Eight . . . requested my presence."

To one side, I heard Lord Demasque snort in disgust.

Lord March did not react at all. "We summoned you, yes. Lord Demasque has a grievance he wishes to make public and clear, against my recommendation." A few of the Council stirred at this, but Lord March ignored them all, turning toward Lord Demasque instead. "You may proceed, Artren."

Lord Demasque nodded sharply. "Thank you." He seemed oblivious to the warning in Lord March's voice. His entire attention was on me. Drawing a deep breath, gathering his rage around him, he began, "Three days ago, you and your guardsmen raided one of my holdings, an estate on the cliffs over the channel."

"Yes," I said.

It interrupted his flow. The muscles in his jaw flexed as he clenched his teeth. "Why?"

"I believe you know why."

"I want to hear you say it."

I shrugged. "Because you are working with the Chorl."

"No!" he spat, slapping a hand down on the table. "I am not dealing with the Chorl, as your raid clearly indicated. You found no Chorl on my estate, you found no smuggled goods, no blue-skinned demons, nothing! And yet you persist in maligning my name by suggesting that I am working with the Chorl!"

I waited until he'd calmed slightly. "We found a recently built dock, boats to transport cargo. And we found this."

From inside the sleeve of my shirt, I withdrew the braided strand of seashells. They clattered together as the braid unfolded, like beads.

Never taking my eyes off Lord Demasque, I said, "There were Chorl on your estate, Lord Demasque. Someone informed them of the raid, and they left before we arrived."

"Nonsense," Lord Demasque spat. "You have one of the Chorl in your party. She could have made that trinket so that you could plant it on my estate."

"And the dock?" Lord March asked. "The boats?"

Demasque spluttered for a moment, then muttered, "They were installed for my own pleasure, so that I could gain access to my manse without the need to come all the way in to port."

"I see."

Demasque stiffened at Lord March's tone, but gathered himself together. "All of that is beside the point. You were summoned," he said, spitting out the word, "here, Mistress, before Lord March and the Council of Eight, because during the course of your raid you not only maligned my name before the Council, spreading vicious rumors about me that you cannot prove, but you also damaged my property severely. My crops were destroyed, my servants were terrorized to the extent that they will no longer work for me, and the buildings on the property were damaged by your guardsmen.

"You overstepped your bounds, Mistress, if indeed you can be called such with the Skewed Throne destroyed by your own hands. This is Venitte, not Amenkor. You have no rights here. You are here at our mercy, at our whim. I request reparations for the damage that you have done, and a reprimand, if not formal expulsion from the city."

My jaw clenched and I felt rage boil up inside me, the urge to reach for my dagger so strong the muscles in my arm tensed with the effort to keep still, to not move. Not because he questioned my rule as Mistress, but because Lord Demasque lied. The servants had been taken before the guardsmen even entered the estate, the buildings had been left untouched. And only a small portion of the crops had been trampled when Catrell and the guardsmen descended upon the gates.

My gaze flicked toward Lady Casari, toward Lord Boradarn. Boradarn met my gaze steadily, his lips pressed thin, but Lady Casari stared down at the desk before her, brow creased, troubled.

I caught Lord Sorrenti's eye. He shook his head slightly, mouth grim.

And suddenly I thought of what Eryn had said, that they would scramble to lay blame.

And I was their scapegoat.

Feeling the rage burning deeper, settling into my bones, I turned back to Lord Demasque. My hand clenched on open air, the need to feel the hilt of my dagger stronger than before, but I flexed it, drew the hand into a fist, knuckles cracking at the tension, and forced the fist down to my side.

Dipping my head, narrowing my eyes, letting Lord Demasque see the anger in them, I said in a tight voice, "I . . . apologize. For the raid, and for any . . . damage my men may have caused to your lands."

Lord Demasque stood silent, his own eyes narrowing, then said, "That's not enough. You're a danger to Venitte's people, to the safety of its port. I want you out of the city."

"That's enough," Lord March said, his voice echoing in the chamber. "You overstep your bounds now, Lord Demasque."

Demasque glared at me, eyes black with intent . . . and tinted with smugness. He knew he'd won.

For a blinding moment, I was reminded of Bloodmark, of the gutterscum's viciousness, of his hatred.

Gutterscum always recognizes gutterscum.

I straightened, knew then that Demasque was a mark. It didn't matter that this wasn't Amenkor, that here in Venitte I wasn't Mistress.

I let my hand slide onto the hilt of my dagger, saw Demasque's gaze flicker, saw the skin around his eyes pinch, saw the smugness falter.

And then Lord March said, "Mistress."

I turned, dismissing Demasque with the gesture. But the anger and intent still burned inside me. "Lord." Terse and clipped, on the verge of being disrespectful.

Lord March frowned. I had not removed my hand from my dagger. "The Council will decide upon a sum for the reparations, which will be sent to you for your approval."

"And should I load my ships—my men and my Servants—and depart for Amenkor?"

He stilled, and on the river I felt his own anger, his own rage, not directed toward me but toward the Council, toward Demasque and Parmati.

Keeping his voice neutral, he said, "You may do as you wish."

I snorted, cast one last scathing glance around at the Lords and Ladies, saw Lady Casari flinch, saw young Dussain's bewilderment, then I spun toward Avrell, William, Erick, and the rest of my escort.

"We're leaving the Council hall. Now."

Erick barked an order, completely unnecessary. The guards were already forming up, closing in around me protectively as I stalked out of the hall, their eyes flashing hatred and derision to either side, making it clear that anyone taking a step toward me would regret it.

We passed through the outer room, clerks and merchants falling abruptly silent to either side, and then we reached the open air, sun glittering down on the water in the rectangular pool, banners snapping in the wind to either side. Ahead, General Daerium waited by the side of the water.

I slowed a moment, let my rage boil to the surface, then sped up. "You know Demasque lies," I hissed. "You were there."

"I know," Daerium said, resting his hand on the pommel of his sword.

"Then where were you? You could have confronted him in the Council."

Daerium's eyes flashed. "Lord March ordered me to stay away, and before you condemn Lord Sorrenti, Captain Tristan, and Brandan Vard, you should know he ordered them to remain silent as well."

"Why?"

"Because Demasque already has the majority of the Council on his side. Lord March can't do anything until we can prove that Demasque is indeed in league with the Chorl, and right now we have nothing but a string of shells and belief! We need something more!"

I clamped my mouth shut, stared up into Daerium's rigid face, realized that he was furious as well, that the hand that rested on the pommel of his sword had clenched.

I reined my rage in with effort, and stepped back a pace.

"We don't have much time to find it," I said tightly. "The Chorl are already north of the city."

Chapter 13

What do you mean they're north of the city?"

Daerium had gone completely still.

"I saw them," I said. "I saw them marching south."

Daerium glanced around, and for the first time I noted the Protectors who stood off to one side, obviously accompanying Daerium. But there were merchants and pages and clerks running to and fro as well, the pool a blur of activity.

"Come on," Daerium said abruptly, motioning toward his own men. "I'll accompany you back to your estate."

We descended to the carriages, Daerium opening the door and ushering Erick,

Avrell, William, and me inside, then glancing around the steps before climbing in himself.

He waited until the carriage was in motion before speaking, his voice deadly serious, his eyes locked on mine.

"What do you mean you saw them? How could you have seen them?"

"I used the river."

Daeriuon frowned in confusion, but then Avrell said, "What she means is that she used the Sight, the power that rules the thrones, that makes her a Servant."

Daeriuon nodded, the frown fading. But not far, and I recalled what Brandan had said on the ship, that the Servants of Venitte were Protectors, but that they were merely tolerated, not accepted.

Daeriuon might be the leader of the Protectors, might even be using the Servants of Venitte in his own units, but he wasn't comfortable with the Servants in general.

Shifting in his seat, Daeriuon asked, "What did you see?"

For a moment, I considered not telling him, the anger over Demasque and the Council still burning deep inside me. But I shook that anger aside. I didn't have many allies in Venitte. Daeriuon might be a grudging ally, even an uneasy one, but he was still an ally.

"I saw Atlatik—"

"The Chorl general," Erick put in.

I nodded. "He's the head of their army, the leader of the Chorl warriors. He was leading a march south toward the city. The army was being followed by a wagon train of supplies. He also had a group of Chorl Servants and priests with him."

"How far north were they? When will they reach the city?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. A few days, at a guess."

"Probably a little longer," William said. And then, when I looked toward him with a frown, he added, "The movement of the armies is controlled by their supply wagons. Atlatik can only move as fast as his food."

Daeriuon swore. "That's still within our outer outposts. We've heard nothing from them."

"Perhaps they haven't reached the outposts yet," Avrell said.

Daeriuon shook his head. "We expected a runner from the outermost outpost last evening, and he never arrived. That's not unusual, so we hadn't grown concerned yet. But with this news ..."

He trailed off into thought, the carriage jouncing and rumbling around us.

Then he glanced sharply toward me.

"Can you find them again?"

I nodded. "It requires a lot of power without the throne, though. I'd have to have help from the other Servants with me. And even then I can't sustain it for long." Not without a Fire to anchor me, like the one I'd placed within Eryn, and not for such a distance.

"Good." The carriage began to slow and he glanced out of the window, grimaced.

"I need to recall as many of the Protectorate as possible from the outposts.

Now, while there's still time to get them back to the city before the Chorl arrive. In the meantime, Lord March suggests that you and your men," he

glanced significantly at Erick, indicating the Seekers, "remain on the grounds. Lord Demasque will be looking for any excuse to push his request that you leave the city. Don't give him one."

When the carriage stopped, Daeriuon opened the door and left, stepping quickly across the open courtyard toward the gates, vanishing into the city streets beyond.

"He's kind of brusque," Erick said, stepping out of the carriage behind me.

I snorted.

"Are you going to listen to Lord March's suggestion?" Avrell asked.

I turned a blistering glare on him, but he did not flinch. "Find Westen and Catrell," I said.

"What for?" Avrell asked.

"I want to speak to Ottul. We need to find out what the Chorl are doing, and she may be able to help."

"I don't know," Ottul said, the shape of the coastal words somehow wrong coming from her mouth, clipped and harsh, with strange inflections.

I almost growled in frustration, glanced toward Catrell, who sat beside me in the chambers given over to the Servants and Ottul, toward Erick, William, and Avrell who stood behind us, then turned back to Ottul, Gwenn standing to one side. Marielle and Heddan were seated farther back. Westen had not been found yet, still on the streets of Venitte somewhere, watching Demasque.

"Perhaps she truly doesn't know," Catrell said. "She was captured in Amenkor, before the Ochean was killed."

"We aren't asking the right questions," Avrell said. "She won't know what the Chorl are doing now, but she might be able to tell us enough about the Chorl themselves so we can figure that out for ourselves."

"Like what?" I asked, impatience cutting the words short.

Avrell frowned, thought about it for a moment, his hands tucked into the sleeves of his official First's robes, then said, "We need to know how they'd react to the Ochean's death. We already know that there are three components to the power structure of their society—the Ochean and her Servants, Haqtl and the male Servants, and Atlatik and the warriors. We know that those three were in relative balance with the Ochean alive. What would happen once the Ochean was killed? How would the balance of power shift?"

Ottul had listened intently to Avrell as he spoke, but her brow was now creased in complete confusion. She looked toward me, bewildered.

"Gwenn, can you help?"

Gwenn sighed. "I can try."

She turned toward Ottul, screwed her face up in concentration for a moment, her expression so serious it brought a faint smile to Catrell's lips, and then she began speaking to Ottul in the Chorl language.

Everyone in the room shifted forward, almost unconsciously. Everyone except Erick. I could feel his anguish, knew that he trembled with it. Because of what Haqtl had done to him, what the Chorl had done to him. Since his return, Ottul had been kept in her rooms or at work with the male Servants and Protectors in Venitte. He'd only seen her at a distance. But now, up close, with her sitting in the same room . . .

He wanted to kill her. I could feel him fighting the urge, could feel him trembling with it. He'd barely controlled himself when he'd entered and seen her, didn't think he could control himself if he came any closer. I could feel the tension roiling on the river. He didn't want to trust her, a viscerally emotional reaction, and the only thing that kept him from following that urge was the knowledge that I'd placed the White Fire inside of her, that if necessary I could claim control of her.

I'd never seen him this close to losing control.

Ottul asked something, Gwenn answered, and then Ottul spoke at length, watching both me and Catrell, her gaze shifting back and forth, but staying mainly on me.

When she finally finished, Gwenn turned toward me. "She says that with the Ochean dead, the power would shift to Haqtl."

"Not Atlatik?" Catrell said sharply. "Not to the Chorl warriors?"

Gwenn shook her head. "No. Haqtl would take over, because she says the Chorl warriors believe in the gods, that they believe in the Fire of Heaven. She says that Atlatik will be forced to follow Haqtl because otherwise the Chorl warriors will rebel against him. They'll kill him and replace him."

"What about the female Servants? Won't a new Ochean be chosen?"

"Not right away. Ottul says there would be a battle." Here Gwenn frowned. "A ginset, where the most powerful of the remaining Servants who have gained the seven rings fight to see who will be the new Ochean."

"I doubt Haqtl would allow a new Ochean to be chosen given these circumstances," Avrell said.

"No," I agreed, thinking back to the memories I'd shared with the Ochean

before her death. "The Ochean and Haqtl were struggling for power even before their homeland destroyed itself."

"So Haqtl is in control," Catrell said, then caught my gaze. "If that's true, then why wasn't he with Atlatik and the Chorl forces moving south?"

"Because," I answered, "he's already here, in Venitte. He must have been part of the forces Demasque brought into the city."

"But where are they?" Avrell said in frustration. "If they aren't on Demasque's northern estates, then where did they go?"

I suddenly thought of Sorrenti. "I don't know. But they have moved. Perhaps Sorrenti will be able to find them now with the Stone Throne. If they've moved farther into the city, if they've entered its influence . . ." I trailed off, then turned toward William, who straightened. He'd been silent through most of the discussion. "Perhaps you can find them, through the guild. If Demasque is hiding a force here, maybe there's some trace of it in the guild's records." William nodded. "I can also look into what property he owns in the city, find out where he might be hiding Haqtl and a Chorl force of significant size." Catrell shifted, catching everyone's attention. "You realize that if Haqtl is in the city, with a Chorl force to support him, that it represents a fundamental change in the Chorl's tactics. They're no longer being as direct as they were at Amenkor."

"What does that mean?" Avrell asked.

"It means we won't be able to predict their strategy as easily," Erick answered tightly.

The room fell silent, the tension breaking a moment later when Steward Alonse knocked on the door and entered. His gaze flickered over everyone in the room before settling on me. "Mistress, Brandan Vard has arrived with a trunk from Lord Sorrenti. Should I allow him in?"

William stiffened, but I ignored him and nodded to Alonse.

Brandan entered a moment later, followed by two Venittian men carrying a large, heavy trunk made of a pale wood banded with metal. He paused a moment, nodded toward Avrell and Catrell, then motioned for the men to set the trunk down.

"Mistress," he said. "I hope I'm not interrupting?"

"We were just finishing, Brandan."

"I see. Well, Lord Sorrenti asked that I deliver this." He reached down to open the trunk as he spoke. "It contains the costumes you'll need for the Fete." Pulling out some of the contents, he added, "Here's your mask. And here's your costume."

He held up a blue dress—deep blue, like the ocean—and a white mask fringed with white feathers on top, glittering waves of blue spreading from the corner of the eyes to the edge of the mask.

I frowned, then stood and took the mask in hand and turned it over, noted the cord used to tie it in place around my head, then shoved it back into Brandan's hand.

"I don't wear dresses," I said flatly.

"What's wrong?" Brandan muttered, mortified. "Is it the color?"

Avrell sighed and shook his head. "It's nothing personal, Brandan."

Heddan and Gwenn had both risen and moved toward the trunk. They started rummaging through the contents. Even Marielle's interest had been piqued. Gwenn squealed with delight, sliding a beaked black mask over her head. A ruff of feather floated in the air as Heddan tied the mask in back. Her face was completely covered, nothing but her eyes visible, and even those were mostly in shadow.

With the black costume on that went with the mask, you'd never know it was Gwenn.

I frowned, watching Gwenn, thinking about the Chorl, about masks, about Haqtl and blue skin, then turned back to Erick, to Catrell, William, and Avrell, catching their gazes.

"I know when the Chorl are going to attack," I said grimly.

"During the Fete," Lord March said, his voice flat.

"Actually," Avrell responded, glancing toward General Daerium and Lord Sorrenti, standing to either side of Lord March on the stone balcony inside March's estate, "during the Masquerade on the last day of the Fete." From this vantage, I could see the back of the domed building where the Council of Eight met, the College where the Servants of Venitte studied barely visible to one side.

"It's perfect," Sorrenti said after a moment. "They're wearing costumes and masks to cover their skin, to hide the fact that they're Chorl. Which means they can move about the city freely, without attracting attention, because everyone else in the city will be in costume, most of them wearing masks. Even if the mask slips and someone catches a glimpse underneath, sees blue skin—" "They'll assume the person is wearing face paint," General Daerium growled. "Catrell is right. The Chorl have changed their strategy."

"Demasque's influence, no doubt," Lord March said.

"And Lady Parmati's." When I turned a questioning look on Sorrenti, he shrugged. "The masks, the costumes—that came from Parmati. She's always loved the theater."

"So what can we do to stop them?" Lord March asked.

"Cancel the Fete," I said.

General Daerium snorted, then fell silent when he realized I was serious. Sorrenti's face was utterly blank, but I could sense his amusement on the river. He leaned back and stared out toward the Council chambers, squinting at the harsh glare of the sunlight on its white-gray stone.

Lord March turned away from the view, toward me. "That's impossible."

I bristled at his tone, but caught myself, forced myself to relax. I was still upset over being left to defend myself at the Council meeting in front of Demasque, of being abandoned. "Why?"

March almost sighed. "Because the Fete isn't something I can control. It's tradition. There are too many people involved. Even if I attempted to call it off, to cancel it, it wouldn't be effective. The people of this city would rebel, they'd hold the carnival anyway, in defiance if nothing else."

"And it's not just restricted to the city," Sorrenti added. "The Fete is coastal. People travel from all reaches of the coast to come to it. Merchants come from Marlett, from Kent and Merrell, from Warawi in the southern isles, and the coastal cities beyond. Some of them rely on the Fete as their main source of income. If we cancel it—if that were even possible—they'd lose everything."

"But we have to do something," I said, and heard the frustration in my voice. I didn't try to hide it. "What about banning the masks? We'd at least have the chance to see their faces. The Chorl warriors all have tattoos. They won't be able to hide those without the masks."

March frowned. "We can try. But the people of this city spend months planning their costumes, in particular their masks. Even if we explain why we're banning the masks, that may not stop them."

"We can also use the returning patrols from the outposts to set up a perimeter around the city. They can search any carts traveling into the city. The patrols at the mouths of the two channels leading into the city have already started searching every ship that enters the harbor, whether they're owned by Council members or not." Daerium grimaced. "But if Haqtl and his force is already inside the city . . ."

"And they are." Short. Clipped. I turned to Sorrenti. "Have you used the throne to search for them since the raid on Demasque's estates?"

Sorrenti nodded. "As soon as I realized they'd moved. I tried to find any sign of their passage, searched every building within the throne's limits. I've even followed Demasque. Nothing."

"Keep looking," Lord March said. "The Fete begins in a few days. We don't have much time."

"It's Demasque's whore," Westen said as soon as he entered the outer room of my chambers in the estate.

Heddan glanced up from where she sat working on embroidery, made to set the

material and stitching aside so that we could have privacy, but I waved her back to work.

"What do you mean? And where were you?" I said from the window, where I could see the streets of Venitte crowded with revelers. The Fete had started. Raucous music erupted from the city at random intervals, faint this far from the main streets, punctuated by shouts, screams of laughter, bursts of ribald song. The people I could see from the window passing by the estate's gates were dressed in vivid colors, lengths of cloth streaming out behind them, some dressed in feathers. Their faces were painted to look like animals—mostly birds, the symbols of the Lords and Ladies of the Council, a few with long piercing beaks tied to their faces like a mask, but some looked like cats or dogs or some animal I didn't recognize. A few wore actual masks, feathered and strangely expressionless, even though Lord March had banned them. Most were decorated with swirls and random symbols.

The face paints looked like tattoos. And the garish costumes reminded me of the Chorl warriors' clothing.

I turned away from the window with a shudder, heard Erick shifting closer so that he could listen.

Westen took a seat close to mine. "I was following Demasque's whore. That's how Demasque has been sending orders throughout the city, controlling the movements of the Chorl and the Squall and all of the rest of it. She's the one who contacts the captain of the Squall when the ship is in the harbor. The captain met with her last night, on the edge of the Gutter. Tomus was following the captain."

"What did they discuss?"

"Neither Tomus nor I could get that close, not with the Fete starting. But the Squall has remained in the harbor since the raid on Demasque's estate. This morning, they loaded up with cargo and departed. According to William, who checked the lists in the merchants' guild, the ship is headed south, to trade with the Warawi in the southern isles. They aren't expected back for months." Alonse suddenly appeared at the door to the chambers carrying a tray with glasses and tea.

We waited in silence until he'd set the tea service out on the low table before us and departed.

"What about the Chorl? Have you found them yet?"

Westen, still frowning in the direction of the door, where Alonse had vanished, said, "No."

I swore. "They have to be in the city somewhere."

"They are," Westen said, turning back to me. "We just haven't found them yet. Demasque hasn't gone to meet with them, and neither have any of his contacts, including the whore."

"Then either he's waiting for the attention you've brought on him to die down," Erick muttered, "or whatever they have planned is already in place." I glanced toward him. "I don't think he'd wait to let things die down. He's too arrogant for that."

Neither of the Seekers said anything.

"Mistress."

All of us turned toward the door, and Alonse bowed his head.

"Lord Sorrenti is here," the Steward said. "He wishes to speak with you."

"Let him in."

Sorrenti halted in the door, looked at Erick, at Westen, then came forward.

"What does the Council of Eight want from me now?" I asked coldly.

Sorrenti stiffened. "Nothing, Mistress. They are even now arguing with your First on the reparations."

"And you aren't there?"

"No. I excused myself. I needed to speak with you." He hesitated, glanced toward Erick and Westen, toward Heddan, then said, "About the thrones."

The room was quiet for a long moment, and I narrowed my eyes. "What about the thrones?"

Sorrenti remained silent, body tensed, then sighed. "Daerium claims that you

saw the Chorl army, that you told him they were marching southward, were perhaps no more than a few days away. How? How could you possibly see them?"

"I was speaking to Eryn in Amenkor."

"How?" A note of frustration had crept into his voice, as if he thought I were lying.

"I Reached for her, for the Fire I placed inside her."

Sorrenti stilled. "I don't understand," he said. But it was clear that he suspected.

"When the White Fire passed through Amenkor seven years ago," I said, speaking quietly, slowly, "it left part of itself behind. In me. Since then, I've placed a small piece of that Fire into a few people, used it as an anchor for when I Reach."

"So you can Reach all the way to Amenkor. From Venitte."

"Not without consequences," Erick interjected, a warning in his voice.

I nodded. "And using the Fire I can speak to whoever it is I've tagged with the Fire."

He was silent a moment. "But there's more to it than that, isn't there? More than just speech?"

I nodded, thinking of what I'd experienced when Lauren burned to death on The Maiden, of Erick's torture at Haqtl's hands, of the cough that consumed Eryn even now. "Yes. Much more."

"You have multiple Talents—the Sight and the Fire and the Threads," Sorrenti said. Not a question. "What of the other two? Do you sense the Rose? Have you been touched by the Lifeblood?"

I shook my head with a grimace. "I'm not an Adept, Lord Sorrenti."

"It would have been nice," he said. And then he smiled. "I suspected you had access to the Fire based on Tristan's report, but it wasn't until Daerium said you were in contact with Amenkor that I—and the Seven—were certain."

"And what do you know of the Fire?" I asked. "What do the Seven tell you of it?"

He shrugged. "From my studies, from the voices of those who have touched the throne here in Venitte, and from the Seven, I know that the Fire is one of the five Magics, that at the time of the creation of the throne, the members of the Council of Seven could use it, because they were the last of the Adepts. Since then, there has been no Adept on the coast . . . and no one that we know of who could use the Fire, who could even sense it."

"Why? And if no one can use the Fire, where did the White Fires that passed through our cities come from?"

Sorrenti was silent for a long moment, then he shook his head. "No one knows. No one in the throne, anyway, not even the Seven."

But there was a hesitance to his voice.

I leaned forward. "What do they think?"

His expression hardened, then relaxed. "The voices—and those Servants here in Venitte that have been studying the records from the first Fire and before—believe that at one point there were many people on the coast who could use the Fire. Before it first passed over the city, there are even accounts of Servants who could use it, like yourself.

"But then the first Fire came.

"When it had passed, and when the madness that gripped the city in its wake had passed, those that survived found that they could no longer touch the Fire's flames. As if somehow the passage of the Fire through the city had quenched the source.

"For the next thousand years or so, no one on the coast has ever reported being able to use the Fire, to touch it, to manipulate it."

I stilled. "But now, since the second Fire . . ."

Sorrenti nodded. "Now, you can use the Fire. You are the first in over a thousand years."

"There must be others," Erick said.

Sorrenti glanced toward him, not quite frowning. "I'm certain there are, but they haven't discovered how to use it yet. Not like Varis." He turned back to

me. "I think that the first Fire somehow sealed access to the Fire away, dampened it to the point that it was almost extinguished—"

"And the second Fire released it," I finished for him, when he ground to an uncertain halt. "But who sealed it away? Who released it?"

Sorrenti shook his head again, his smile twisting. "Someone from the west. Our oldest maps, those from before the first Fire, from before even the Council of Seven, show lands to the west. Not just islands, but an entire continent. As large as our own, perhaps larger. There must be people there. They must have done it, for whatever reason." Then, in a softer voice, "But if they did seal it away and release it, they must be powerful indeed. A working powerful enough to send a wall of Fire all the way across an ocean that we cannot cross. . . ."

He trailed into silence.

I sank back into my seat, thought about standing at the railing of the Defiant as we sailed southward to Venitte, staring out across the black waves of the ocean, out toward the Chorl islands, toward what lay beyond. And I thought about the ships Borund was building in Amenkor's harbor. Stronger ships. Larger ships.

An ocean that we cannot cross . . . yet.

"Are we ready?" Garus turned to me, his expression tense, his mouth pressed into a stern frown. Behind him, Seth wore the same expression. They'd been bickering when they entered the room, still arguing over whether or not the thrones should be created. "Are you ready, Cerrin? You're the one orchestrating this."

"I still think that this is unnecessary," Alleryn muttered. "The Chorl have retreated, returned to the depths of the ocean."

"And you've turned half of the Servants to your side," Liviann spat, "even though we agreed that this was not to be discussed among them. There was no reason to get them involved, not until after the thrones were created."

Alleryn bristled. "I felt otherwise. So did Seth and Atreus."

"So you went against the Council of Seven's wishes," Liviann said in a harsh, mocking tone.

"No. I went against your wishes. You are not the entire Council, Liviann."

Liviann flushed with rage, one hand coming up. I didn't know what she intended, but I could feel her power building.

But before the argument—a tired argument, old and useless—escalated, Garus bellowed, "Enough!"

Atreus and I winced; Silicia cringed. The word echoed through the Council chambers, had enough power behind it that the cold white light of the fires Garus and Seth had set to illuminate the room flickered.

Liviann stilled. She kept her arm outstretched, and I saw it trembling, saw the struggle in her face as she tried to control herself. Her power throbbed around her, ready to be unleashed. Alleryn stood, back stiff, hands tucked into the sleeves of her dress. She had not brought her own power to bear, but I could feel its potential, hovering just within her reach.

The moment held, suspended, no one daring to breathe. . . .

But then Liviann's arm dropped.

I shot a glance toward Garus, toward Seth. We'd discussed Liviann's growing arrogance, her slow seizure of the Council. But Garus kept his eyes on Liviann, and Seth remained focused on Garus.

"Now," Garus said, even though the tension in the room had not faded, "are we going to remain civil and do this, or not?"

"Yes," Liviann said immediately, although her eyes narrowed.

Alleryn snorted in contempt, then looked toward me, her head rising slightly.

"Yes."

"Good," Garus growled, the warning in his voice clear. He turned toward me.

All of them did. "What do you need us to do, Cerrin?"

I straightened, a momentary trickle of doubt seeping through me. But it didn't last, smothered by the grief I'd carried for years, crushed under its weight.

Yet, a surge of excitement did survive.

I was the Builder, and I—we—were about to create something new, something powerful, whether it would be used against the Chorl or not. Drawing in a deep breath, my gaze settling onto the thrones that sat in the center of the obsidian chamber, I said, "We need to space ourselves out around the thrones."

Garus nodded. The rest of the Seven stepped back, spreading out, Liviann and Alleryn separating with a glare. I'd had the seven seats of the Council pushed back to the edges of the room by the Servants, so that only the two thrones remained in the center of the chamber. Two thrones, each made of granite, the workmanship harsh, blunt, utilitarian. There was no finesse in the stonework, no smoothed surfaces. Such niceties were worthless. They added nothing to the construct itself, no power.

And in the end, it wouldn't matter. The thrones would take whatever shape they wanted.

Whatever shape I wanted.

In the middle of the obsidian chamber, I reached forward, ran my hand over the rough granite.

"You'd better make this quick," Garus said under his breath at my side. "I'm not certain how long those two will remain in agreement."

"It won't take long at all," I said, withdrawing my hand.

Garus didn't hear the finality in my voice. Or perhaps he did hear it and chose to ignore it, as all of the Seven had ignored it for the last few months.

He stepped away, moved into position across from me, next to Seth, his partner. They did not speak, did not even acknowledge one another.

For a moment, I stood in the center of the chamber, the others arrayed around me. I met each of their gazes, nodded to Atreus, who smiled back tentatively. Silicia seemed bored. Alleryn barely met my glance, but Liviann smiled, head lowered.

I frowned at the look in her eyes. At its fervor, at its greed. Her need for the thrones, for their power, raised the hairs at the back of my neck and sent a shiver through my shoulders.

I almost ended the preparations.

But then I sighed, turned, and moved into position, Alleryn to my left, Silicia to my right. Closing my eyes, I reached out with the Sight, found the Threads of all of the others waiting. I drew them in, felt the Lifeblood coursing through them, felt it throbbing in myself, heated and liquid and vibrant. It suffused me, shuddering in my veins as I linked to the others, as I drew them close, felt their own blood rushing through their bodies, their power connecting with mine, doubling it, tripling it—

And then, their power coursing around me, I reached out, opened up conduits to the thrones, felt their solidness, felt their weight.

Throughout the chamber, the white lights that illuminated the alcoves dimmed. The entranceway that sealed us and the working from the outside world wavered, then held and solidified. I heard one of the others gasp.

"Are you certain this will work?" Liviann suddenly snapped.

"No," I said, but before she could respond, I let the power that I'd built—let the Threads that connected us all, the Lifeblood that coursed through the construct, the Sight that I'd gathered and the Fire that I'd pulled from inside me, from inside all of the Seven—release.

Instantly, the power doubled. The Threads snapped taut, threatened to break, and I heard Garus curse, heard the growl in his voice as he strengthened those Threads that connected to him. A backlash of power shuddered through the floor, trembling in my feet, but I held the complex construct tight, felt sweat bead on my forehead, felt the muscles in my body tense against the pressure. The floor shuddered again, and still I let the power build. If this was going to work, the power had to reach a threshold, had to peak at a certain level, had to be maintained—

I gasped as the Threads beneath my grip thrashed, rippled, and snapped as if alive. Pain shot down through my side, sharp and insidious. Reaching out, I

gathered more of the Threads to me, tried to splice them, combine them. Atreus cried out, Silicia began to gasp at my side.

And still the power mounted. Sweat ran down my face. My breath grew harsh, ragged with effort.

But we were close.

A pain began to grow in the center of my forehead. A stabbing pain, white-hot with intensity. A pain that was shared through the links, that intensified as each of the Seven experienced it, as we were each melded together through the construct.

"Cerrin!" Livian barked. "Stop this!"

"Yes," Alleryn shouted, panic tearing at her voice, shredding it. "Cerrin, halt it!"

Another stab of agony, this one deeper, cutting into my core, into my gut, searing through flesh, through bone. My teeth snapped shut, bit into my tongue, and the coppery taste of blood filled my mouth. I staggered, fell to one knee, the smooth obsidian floor sending a sheet of white-hot pain up through my thigh and into my spine.

And with that pain came a moment of clarity.

I can stop it, I thought, through gritted teeth, through the copper taste of blood. I could feel the vortex of power I'd built surrounding me, surrounding us all. I could sense every individual thread of force, could feel that force escalating toward an event horizon, a cusp that, once reached, I could not return from.

But we hadn't reached that cusp yet.

I can stop it right now. I can let the Threads go, release them all.

But then the grief would not end.

Olivia. Pallin.

Jaer.

Then Silicia cried out.

And at the same time, the monumental power that coursed around us, fluid and electric, reached its cusp . . . and slid over.

I gasped, my eyes snapping toward Silicia just in time to see her crumple to the floor, the Threads around her writhing, crackling with her power. Blood snaked from her mouth.

"No," I whispered. "It was supposed to be me."

And then the entire chamber shuddered. With Silicia's death, the power surged higher, grew suddenly oppressive and dark, almost black.

And with Silicia's death, every one of the remaining Seven focused their power on the thrones. It was too wild to release now. It would have to be contained in the thrones. It was the only way to stop it.

Fighting back the pain in my leg, in my knee, I staggered upright. Reaching forward, I forced the collected power into the channels I'd created, felt the others doing the same, all of them suddenly intent with purpose. The thrones throbbed beneath the concentrated channels. The Threads seethed, whipped back and forth, lashed and crackled with hideous abandon. Thunder rumbled through the room, followed almost instantly by another cry, the deep sound cut short. Across the chamber, I saw Garus stumble, his face a rictus of pain.

And then he collapsed, face forward, hitting the floor with a sickening, meaty thud.

No, I thought, despair washing over me, draining away the strength in my arms, piercing my heart.

Seth bellowed, a sound of horror, of denial and disbelief.

"The construct is too intense!" I shouted. "We have to control it! We have to contain it or it will kill us all!"

But before anyone could react, something slipped. The power rose higher.

And the funnels opened wide.

I gasped, the sudden draw of power intense, sucking the breath from me. I struggled against its pull—the same pull I'd felt from the stones after I'd created them for the Servants to use against the Chorl, a vortex that drew me in, except this was a thousand times stronger. I fought it, felt the others

fighting it as well, Atreus with a wild desperation, Liviann with arrogant strength.

But it was too late.

The vortex split, one snaking down and down to the first throne, touching the stone with a sizzling snap of energy I felt crackle through my skin. The second vortex touched, and suddenly it was as if my body had caught fire. My back arched as the energy of all of the Seven coalesced and flowed through me, my mouth open to the ceiling in a silent howl of anguish, of raw, hideous torture. Seth fell, seizures racking his body, his silk shirt soaked in blood, his heels juddering into the floor as his own scream roared through the chamber and bled into my own. Atreus crumbled without a sound, succumbing to the ferocious pull almost gracefully, the only sign of her struggle a spot of blood leaking from her nose, staining her too pale face.

Alleryn and Liviann held out the longest, both contorted in pain where they stood, both with grim faces, each intent on surviving longer than the other. Alleryn's dress grew spotted with darkness as she began to sweat blood. Liviann's hands were clasped in front of her, her fingernails piercing her skin, clenched so tight her skin was white, the veins standing out like purple bruises. They glared at each other across the room, the thrones between them, power pouring down between them, sucked into the thrones, saturating them, crackling and potent.

And then Alleryn fell.

Liviann collapsed a heartbeat later.

And then there was nothing but the thrones. Nothing but the grief, now a thousandfold worse than before. Nothing but the tears coursing down my face. Held in a vortex, the Threads that bound it together, the Fire that burned at its core, I had a moment to think, Olivia, what have I done.

And then the thrones swallowed me.

I woke with tears streaming down my face and my body tingling as if with residual energy. Cerrin's horror, his grief, washed over me, choked me, and I rolled to the side, reaching for the dagger beneath my pillow for comfort. My hand closed about its handle—

And then I froze.

Through the doors of my chamber, I could hear voices arguing, too muted to pick out any actual words.

I slid from the bed, dagger in hand, and shifted into the night shadows of the room, edging toward the door, back pressed against the wall. As I passed the window, someone screamed and my flesh prickled.

But the scream degenerated into laughter, faded.

I cursed softly to myself. It was the third day of the Fete, and even in the dead of night the citizens of Venitte celebrated.

And there was still no sign of Haqtl or the Chorl.

Edging forward, I slid through the open entrance to the outer receiving room, wound my way past the tables and chairs, and came up to the outer doors.

Breath held, I crouched, listened.

Keven. Arguing with Alonse.

Sighing, I stood and wrenched the door open.

Neither man jumped, but both of them spun, their hissed conversation cutting off sharply, already well on its way to hushed shouting. Keven's hand rested on his sword, his grip white. Two other guardsmen stood to either side of the door.

Blinking into the harsh candlelight of the hall, sensing Keven's disgust, Alonse's agitation, I said, "What is it?"

Alonse flinched at my tone, then bowed. "Mistress, the Protectorate—"

He cut off, and I narrowed my eyes. I'd never seen Alonse so upset. He'd always been perfectly calm, if disapproving.

"What is it, Alonse?"

He straightened, and with a supreme effort, calmed himself. When he spoke, though, his voice still shook. "General Daerium requests your presence immediately. The Protectors have found something."

"I didn't want to wake you," Keven said, "but he became insistent."

I nodded, noting the lines of tension in Alonse's face. His entire body seemed to be vibrating. "It's all right, Keven. Gather an escort." When Alonse sighed, tension draining from him, his head bowed as he murmured a prayer I couldn't hear, I added, "Quickly."

Alonse glanced up, his eyes dark, intent. "I've already summoned a carriage." Ten minutes later, I emerged from the estate, dressed in my usual white shirt, brown breeches, dagger within easy reach.

"I tried to get him to stay," Keven said as he held the door to the carriage open before me.

I frowned, stepped up onto the carriage's outer step, ready to ask who, then paused.

Alonse sat in the carriage seat, his eyes wide but his face set, jaw tight. "I have to come with you," he said in a commanding tone. Then he seemed to remember his station as Steward. "Please, you have to let me come with you." A sudden disquiet settled into my stomach. Somewhere, one of the Fete revelers cried out, the shriek—not quite laughter, not quite terror—smothered by a sudden burst of music.

"Very well," I said, then climbed into the seat next to him.

Keven traded a glance with me as he followed. Two more Amenkor guardsmen joined us.

And then the carriage moved, trundled out through the gates and into Venitte's streets. We passed a drunken group of men, staggering through the dark, bottles in hand. A lone reveler turned his head as the carriage sped by, the piercing beak of his mask startling, feathers sprouting from the mask above his eyes in a tuft of plumage.

"Do you know what this is about?" Keven asked Alonse. His tone was neutral, but Alonse stiffened.

"No," he said, but I could hear the lie in his voice. "Only that they found a body."

"Where?" I asked.

"In the Gutter," he answered grimly, voice thick with a sick dread.

I turned away.

The carriage ascended toward the council chambers, passed through Deranian's Wall, the celebrants crowding together in the the Merchant Quarter, then dropping away as we entered the heart of the city. But we didn't halt at the Council chambers, the carriage slipping past the huge domed building, revealing the smaller palace behind, where Lord March resided, and then from there the carriage descended again, down toward where the Wall curved around the inner city, separating it from the slums.

We paused as the gates on this side were opened, then slid through into the Gutter.

I leaned forward, toward the window, breathed in the air that came into the carriage. It smelled of piss and refuse, of decay and sickness, the scent becoming heavier as the carriage meandered down through the streets, farther from the Wall and deeper into the Gutter. The street was still paved with stone, but here it was dirty, the buildings to either side also stone, slicked with grime. I caught sight of a few of the people that lived here, a furtive glance from a huddled figure crouched at the base of an alley, a flash of movement in the gaping emptiness of a window, the shifty movements raising the hackles on the back of my neck . . . and touching off the Fire at my core, the white flames flickering to life, edged with warning.

It was the Dredge, only different. There was no crumbling mud-brick, only well-worn granite from buildings that had once been part of the heart of the city. And unlike the Dredge, there was no transition from the inner city to the slums, no slow descent into shit and degradation. The Wall sliced through the two sections of the city like a dagger, cleanly separating Lord March and the members of the Council of Eight from the gutterscum.

Settling back into the hard surface of the carriage's seat, the ride suddenly rougher as the vehicle ground over the broken surface of the street, I noticed

Alonse's grimace of distaste and smiled tightly. Turning to Keven, I said blandly, "It reminds me of home," knowing that Keven would understand I meant the Dredge. The Amenkor guardsman grunted. Alonse looked horrified. Then the carriage slowed with a jerk, halted abruptly. We stepped out into the shadowed darkness of a slum street in the dead of night. There were no candles here edging windows with warm light, no lanterns hung on street corners. Everything was black and gray, and I slid beneath the river without a second thought, breathed in the familiar stench, felt the familiar presence of people hunkered in corners and bolt-holes, watching us. And I felt the particular disturbance that told me where Daerium and the other Protectors waited. I moved before all of the guardsmen had stepped down from the carriage, heard Keven curse beneath his breath. Alonse followed at my heels, practically tripping over me. I shot him a glare that he couldn't see, noted his widened eyes, his quickened breath. I startled the Protectors, stepping out of the shadows at their backs without a sound. One of them barked an order, hand flying toward his sword, the others reacting instantly, clustering around Daerium at the end of the jagged alley. Daerium didn't even flinch, his gaze locking onto mine. It was not friendly. "You wanted to see me," I said, as Keven and the Amenkor guardsmen filtered out of the narrow at my back to either side. Alonse remained close, peering over my shoulder. "Yes," he said. "I wanted you to see this. I want you to explain it." He motioned toward the other end of the alley. I stepped forward, my shoulders tensing as I edged around the Protectors, their gazes hard, dangerous. The Fire licked upward, and beneath the river I could feel their own tension, their distrust. If I'd been the gutterscum I once was, I would have been contemptuous, but I wasn't, no matter how comfortable the Gutter felt to me, how familiar. Slipping past them, their presence behind me prickling my skin, I moved toward where Daerium had indicated, saw a body crumpled to the ground. The man lay on his side, knees tucked in slightly, back toward me. Even without the river I would have known he was dead. Had been dead for at least a day by the smell. Frowning, I knelt down by his side, glanced toward Daerium, toward the general's harsh face, stiff frown. "Do you know him?" he asked. Turning back, I reached out, touched the man's shoulder, and rolled him toward me. My eyes settled on the wounds first. He'd been stabbed in the chest, twice, the bloodstains on the clothing still damp. Ship's clothing. A white shirt, a fitted jacket, the embroidery hard to distinguish beneath the blood. My eyes darted up to the man's face, expecting to see Bullick, or one of the Defiant's crew— I heard Keven suck in a sharp breath, heard Alonse gasp. But it wasn't the man's face that caught my attention, that forced me to jerk back. It was the deep cuts in the man's forehead. Cuts in the shape of the Skewed Throne.

Chapter 14

I stood abruptly, turned on Daerium. "The Seekers didn't do this." "Who else could it have been?" he asked, almost snarling, his anger palpable, leaden on the river. I stepped toward him, let him feel my own anger, my outrage, the Amenkor guardsmen and the Protectors both bristling at the sudden movement. Daerium didn't stir. "I haven't sent the Seekers out to hunt," I growled.

"This is the second body we've found with the Skewed Throne carved into the forehead tonight. Do you expect me to believe that?"

"Yes," I hissed, my voice heavy. "I haven't sent the Seekers out to hunt, Daeriuun."

He drew a sharp breath in through his nose, held it, his eyes searching my face. I could see he wanted to believe me, that he needed to believe me. That's why he'd brought me here rather than simply had me arrested, so I could defend myself before word spread. But the body and its discovery was still too close, the smell of death still in the air. He hadn't decided whether he would believe me yet.

"Do you know who he is?" he asked.

I didn't need to look toward the mangled flesh of the man's face again. "No." With a sneer of disbelief, he said, "It's the captain of the Squall."

I started with surprise, glanced down toward the man's face. But I'd never seen him up close, had only watched the men on the Squall from a distance.

"That's not possible. Westen said the Squall left port a few days ago, with the captain on board, headed south, toward the Warawi islands."

Daeriuun grunted in contempt. "I don't think he's going to make it."

I spun back, eyes narrowed, tried not to draw the dagger that my hand now gripped with white knuckles. I felt as if I were under attack, but there was no one here to fight. "Who was the other man?"

Something in Daeriuun's eyes flickered, a flash of doubt. He shook his head, but when he spoke there was still a hint of sarcasm. "It wasn't a man. She was a whore on the wharf."

A sudden pit opened up in my stomach, full of bile, and I settled back onto my heels, hadn't even realized I'd shifted my weight to the balls of my feet.

Demasque's whore, the Squall captain . . .

Demasque was cleaning house.

And he was throwing the bloody bodies at my feet.

Daeriuun must have seen the shocked recognition in my eyes. He hardened, that moment of doubt fading. "Who was she, Mistress?" he asked, breaking through my shock. "Why did you have her killed?"

"It wasn't me!" I spat, and even I heard the hint of desperation in my voice.

I forced it down with a dry swallow, feeling the trap closing around me, the alley suddenly more narrow, more enclosed than before, the body of the captain a heavy weight at my back.

Taking a deep breath, I tried for a calm, reasonable voice. "Demasque killed her. My Seekers were following her, were following the Squall's captain as well. That was how Demasque passed information to the ship, by visiting his whore on the wharf and then having her take his messages to the captain."

Daeriuun hesitated. The muscles in his jaw clenched. His eyes flicked toward the dead body and his brow creased.

Gathering myself, I stepped forward, so close he was forced to look down at me. In a low, tight voice, I said, "I'm not stupid, General. If I'd wanted them dead, I wouldn't have announced the kills to the Protectorate or the Council by marking them with the Skewed Throne. You would never have found the bodies. And I wouldn't have gone after Demasque's minions. I would have gone after Demasque himself."

Daeriuun struggled a moment longer, then exhaled sharply, the breath coming out in a half-formed curse. He paced the end of the alley a moment, halted standing over the figure of the captain, the dead man's eyes staring up into empty space.

I hesitated, then moved to his side.

"He's cleaning up his mess," Daeriuun said, tight but thoughtful. Angry.

"Yes. And he's doing it in such a way as to hurt me as much as possible."

"If I didn't know what he said in the Council, if I hadn't been told of his lies . . ."

I didn't respond, my lips tightening. The bastard was clever. He'd done everything he possibly could to damage my credibility, with the help of some of the other Council members.

"I'll want to see the whore's body," I said.

Daerium grunted. Then he turned away from the captain's corpse, his face grim. "You know what this means."

I nodded. "Demasque doesn't need his network anymore. Whatever it is that he has planned, it's already been set in motion."

Before either of us could comment further, Alonse said, "His name was Bernard."

Both of us turned toward the Steward. He was trembling, and he couldn't take his eyes off of Bernard's body, off of the blood on the captain's chest and the gashes in his forehead.

Whoever had killed him hadn't been practiced making the mark. None of the Seekers would have left such ragged cuts.

Alonse sucked in a choked breath. "And the whore's name was Yvonne."

I narrowed my gaze, saw Keven shift slightly behind the servant, a few of the other guardsmen following suit. "How do you know?"

He must have heard the danger in my voice. With an effort, he dragged his gaze away from Bernard, toward me. "Because I knew her." He swallowed, wincing as if in pain. "Because I reported to her," he said in a dismayed voice. "She was one of my contacts."

I felt myself stiffen, watched as Keven's face grew rigid, the Amenkor guardsmen shifting forward. Alonse seemed unaware of them, his entire attention on me. He stepped forward, hands coming up in supplication, but Keven's hand clamped tight onto his shoulder, held him back. His grip must have been painful, but Alonse didn't react.

"You have to protect me, Mistress," the Steward pleaded. "He'll kill me!"

"Who?" Daerium barked. "Demasque?"

Alonse shook his head. "No. Haqtl."

I felt the name like a physical blow to my stomach, stepped forward almost without thought and grabbed Alonse by the throat. He jerked back from my rage, but Keven held him, and beneath my hand I felt him shudder, felt his blood pounding through his veins, felt his throat click as he fought down an outcry.

"What did you tell him?" I growled. When the Steward didn't immediately respond, I shook him, spat again, "What did you tell him!"

"Everything," Alonse rasped. "Everything I overheard at the estate."

"Did you warn Demasque of the raid?" Daerium asked from behind me.

Alonse nodded, and I involuntarily tightened my grip. The servant began to choke, his hands rising to grapple with my wrist.

"Did you tell him about the throne?" I asked, in a voice soft enough so only Keven and Alonse would hear.

Alonse couldn't speak, but through his increasingly desperate struggle for breath, I saw the answer in his eyes.

I released him, thrust him back toward Keven. But as soon as I let go, he collapsed to his hands and knees in the slick grime of the alley's center, coughing hoarsely, barely enough strength in his arms to keep himself upright.

I began to pace, thinking back to Haqtl standing in the throne room in Amenkor, seeing his placid face as he watched me kill the Ochean, recalling the hunger in his eyes when he'd seen the throne. And I remembered his cold fascination with the Fire inside of Erick after his capture on The Maiden, the visceral enjoyment he got out of torturing Erick afterward, his slow, twisted smile as he drove the poisoned spine into Erick's chest.

I caught Daerium's gaze. "He's here, in the city. We have to find him."

"We've already tried!"

"I know!"

I spat a frustrated curse, thought of Sorrenti, of the throne, but he'd already tried to find them as well, thought of the Seekers, but they'd been searching since the moment Lord March had released them from the prison of the estate. And now the Seekers wouldn't have anyone to track. Not with Demasque killing off his network of spies.

Except he hadn't killed off everyone yet.

I stilled, my eyes settling on Alonse.

He'd recovered enough to sit back on his heels, hands raised to massage his throat. He flinched when he caught my gaze.

"Where's Haqtl hiding?" I asked.

Alonse shook his head. "I don't know. I only met with Yvonne."

I narrowed my eyes. Beneath the river, I could tell he wasn't lying. He was surrounded in total defeat, the river shimmering with fear, with weakness, with regret.

"And where did you meet with Yvonne?"

"Near the wharf, the northern side. A tavern in the back streets."

I reached down, grabbed Alonse by the arm and jerked him into a standing position. He didn't resist, although anger flashed through his eyes, there and then gone.

"Take us there," I commanded.

The carriage pulled up to the edge of a flagstone-paved street not far from the wharf. A light rain had begun to fall, casting halos around the few lanterns still lit for the Fete hanging on posts on the street corners.

"That's it," Alonse said, motioning toward a sign hanging above the tavern's door. A marshland bird was painted on the sign, a fish caught in its elongated beak. "The Wishful Catch."

After Keven had shoved him into the carriage, he'd managed to gather himself together, regaining some of the arrogance he'd exhibited since the first time I'd met him on the steps of the estates that had become our prison. The returning arrogance had faltered only once, when we'd halted to examine Yvonne's body. Keven had made him come with us, had forced him to look at the body. She'd been left in an alley, just like the Squall's captain, blood staining her bodice, the material ripped at the seams, her breasts exposed. Her head lay twisted at an odd angle. As we'd stood over her body, the Protectors who'd been left to guard her waiting silently on one side, it had started to rain, the blood that congealed on her forehead where the Skewed Throne had been cut starting to trickle down into her hair.

Alonse hadn't been able to watch, had turned away, hands gripped tightly before him.

With a glance, I'd sent Keven back to the carriage with Alonse. I remained a moment longer.

Daerium had looked at me strangely, but I'd ignored him. Yvonne had had something I needed.

Now, in the carriage outside the tavern, I stared at Alonse, at the harsh facade he'd pulled over the terror I could feel churning inside him. He'd made no move to escape on the way over here, had said nothing, responding mostly with grunts.

But when he sat back in his seat and caught my gaze, he flinched.

"When did you last meet with Yvonne?" I asked.

He swallowed. "Yesterday."

I turned to Keven. "Hand him over to the Protectorate. We're done with him."

He nodded, and when I reached for the door to the carriage and stepped out into the rain, I found Daerium waiting.

"Where's Alonse?"

"We won't need him," I said.

Daerium's brow creased. "But I thought he was going to lead us."

I turned away. I'd already submerged myself beneath the river, had already scented the surrounding area. The rain tasted like iron, the sharpest scent, but beneath it I could sense the rest of the street. The grit on the stone, the smoke from the lanterns, the sweat from a hundred people. Old sweat and new. And the deeper I dove, the more the scents unfolded.

I turned away from Daerium, from his confusion.

I was no longer connected to the Skewed Throne, no longer had its power behind me, its force. But I'd learned how to track someone using their scent alone while still on the Dredge, had used it to track Garrell Cart, and later, Alendor's son, Cristoph.

And then I'd killed them.

But Garrell and Cristoph had been alive when I'd tracked them, their scents strong. I wasn't certain I'd be able to find someone who was already dead. I wasn't certain how long the scent would linger on the river.

I dove beneath the rain, beneath the smoke. I could feel the river flowing around me, could sense the entire street, the layers of scent like cloth, the oldest smells lingering but fading. I drew the oldest scents close. Normally, I couldn't distinguish between the scents, didn't even bother to try, all of them merging into a flat stench, a miasma of everyone who had passed by recently, but I wasn't searching at random. I needed Yvonne's scent, a scent that I'd found kneeling over her body. Diluted by death, but still there, faint.

Lilac and incense. Heady but still sharp.

If you knew to look for it.

I sucked in a breath through my nostrils, closed my eyes as I filtered through the rain, through the smoke . . . and caught it.

Opening my eyes, I pointed. "There."

Daerium frowned heavily. "How do you know?"

"Because I can smell her."

Daerium snorted, as if he thought I were joking, but he suddenly stilled at my expression.

"She entered the tavern from that direction," I said, pointing down the street, "and when she came out, she headed south, toward the wharf."

"How can you tell?"

"Because her scent is stronger to the south. Newer. To the north, it's fading." I hesitated a moment, then added with emphasis. "Fast."

He straightened, shoulders back. The longer he stared at my face, the more nervous his own scent grew. But he took the hint and, still uncertain, barked orders to the Protectors who had emerged from his own carriage.

Half of them swarmed the tavern. Daerium, with the other half, turned toward me.

"Lead the way, Mistress."

I ran, heard a few of the Protectors curse behind me as they tried to keep up, but I ignored them, focused on the scent, on the thread of lilac and incense, followed it down the street into the depths of the northern wharf, the buildings here closer together, the streets narrowing, beginning a gradual climb up the slope of the surrounding hills to the tops of the cliffs of the northern channel.

When the scent turned abruptly toward the cliffs, I halted, hesitated.

"What's wrong?" Daerium asked. His breath came in short gasps, but unlike some of the Protectors he was barely winded.

"I expected the scent to lead back to the brothel," I said, glancing at the cross street where we'd stopped. One stretch led down to the wharf, the other up a steep slope. "But she came from the cliffs."

"Maybe she went to see Demasque. That's where his estate is."

I shook my head. "Westen said she never went to his estate, at least not while the Seekers were following her."

"Shouldn't he have seen her get killed? Weren't they following her?"

I shrugged, brow creasing in irritation at his gruff tone. "I haven't spoken to him since she died. But the Seekers haven't been following her all the time. And they certainly weren't following the Squall's captain. We thought he'd left. Recently, I've had them looking for the Chorl directly, searching buildings. Discreetly."

I turned toward the slope, began trudging uphill.

Yvonne's scent didn't move in a straight line, zigzagging back and forth across the street, as if she were dodging people in the crowds. The pattern was strangely familiar, until I suddenly realized she'd been hunting marks as she moved, picking pockets or stealing from carts or unguarded bundles. But she never paused for long, her scent pooling the longest at the mouth of an alley. I could feel her watching the people, as I'd done a thousand times from an alley's mouth on the Dredge, searching for opportunity.

I smiled. Yvonne had been a thief. Gutterscum, just like me. But the smile faded as I recalled her mutilated face, her twisted neck, and broken body left in a back alley, hair matted with blood. As we moved farther up the hill, the buildings changed, shifted from the tightly packed, smaller taverns and warehouses along the wharf to wider streets with walled in courtyards and gated entrances. Small at first, nothing more than a patch of land between a wooden or metal gate and the main house. But the higher we ascended the wider the courtyards became, some open enough to contain gardens. The roofs shifted from wood shingles to red clay, patchy at first, some of the tiles missing. The grounds became better kept. The higher we went, the less Yvonne's path meandered. There wouldn't have been enough people for her to hunt effectively. The crowds would have been too thin, the few people traveling mainly servants on foot, with nothing worth stealing, or the rich speeding past in carriages or on carts. And then, the scent of lilac, of burned incense, began to tatter. I picked up speed, felt Daeriu note the change and grow tense beside me, the rest of the Protectors following suit. But no one spoke. I followed the scent as the thread thinned, dove deeper beneath the river until it grew stronger, tasted bile at the back of my throat, a sensation I hadn't felt since I'd overextended myself using the throne with Eryn, since destroying the throne to kill the Ochean. But I shoved myself deeper, nausea digging into my stomach. The scent strengthened and I pushed on, my arms beginning to tremble with weakness, my legs with the strain of running so long, so hard— And then the scent—even submerged so far beneath the river it felt as if it would smother me—died. I looked up, the last faint wisps of lilac trembling and dissolving away. . .

And stared at a gate. A side entrance to a walled estate. Letting the river go, choking down the sick taste of bile, I reached for the gate's handle and felt Daeriu's hand drop onto my shoulder, halting me. "What?" I snapped, spinning toward him. "She came from here, from within these walls." "We can't go in there," he said, his face a rigid mask. A general's mask. But beneath the mask I could see anger, carefully controlled. "Why not?" The muscles in his jaw worked as he drew in a deep breath. To calm himself, to steady himself. Behind him, the other Protectors stood warily as well, not quite looking at me. Meeting my gaze, his words heavy with meaning, Daeriu said, "Because that's Lady Vaiana Parmati's estate." "We knew Vaiana supported Lord Demasque," Sorrenti said calmly. He stood at the window of my personal chambers, looked out at the rain that had become a downpour, the clouds thick enough that it looked like it was night outside, not midday on the fourth day of the Fete. Sorrenti turned from the window with a frown. "Are you certain that the Chorl are hidden there?" "No, I'm not certain," I said irritably. I rubbed at my eyes, leaned my head back against the chair. Weariness enveloped me. I'd spent almost all of last night dealing with Daeriu and the bodies, then tracking Yvonne. Sorrenti didn't take offense at the curt tone. Instead, he sighed, glanced toward Daeriu standing opposite me, toward William seated in the chair beside me and Erick standing near the door. Erick had replaced Keven as my personal guard when we'd returned to the estate. "Then let me see if I can verify that." He moved to a vacant seat, sat down and closed his eyes. Within the space of a breath, his body grew rigid, back straightening, hands resting on the arms of the chair tightening on the wood. His face settled into a frown of concentration and his breathing slowed, as if he'd fallen asleep .

. . but then it slowed further, to the point where he almost didn't seem to be breathing at all.

A silence settled over the room, no one daring to move. But when it became obvious that Sorrenti wouldn't be returning anytime soon, Daerium shuddered, looked toward me.

"What's he doing?"

I caught his eyes, saw the wariness there, the suspicion and how uncomfortable that suspicion made him feel.

"He's using the throne," I said. "The Stone Throne here in Venitte. He's using the throne to see beyond Lady Parmati's walls."

The general spat a curse, paced away from all of us, toward the window, spun back. "If so few people know of the throne," he said, "how did Haqtl find out about it?"

I almost shrugged, but William suddenly shifted forward in his seat. "I can answer that. I'd been wondering how Haqtl—how any of the Chorl—managed to get in touch with Demasque or Parmati or any of the Council members here in Venitte. But then yesterday, while conducting business with Bullick and a few other merchants on the wharf, searching for anything that might lead me to where Haqtl is hiding, I saw Tarrence."

He turned to me significantly. I frowned, the name somewhat familiar.

And then I froze, felt fury seething upward inside me. I shifted forward on my seat. "Merchant Tarrence, from Marlett."

William nodded grimly. "He'd changed his appearance somewhat—shorn his hair short, wears a beard now, trimmed close. I almost didn't recognize him."

I swore. "It always seems to come back to Alendor and the damn consortium."

"Even after his death," Erick said from the door. I shot him a glance, but Daerium had stepped forward.

"Who is Tarrence? And who is Alendor?"

"You don't know?" William asked, confused, but then he sighed. "Of course you don't know. None of the messengers we sent after Varis seized the throne made it to Venitte. And we've been concentrating on the Chorl threat since the moment we arrived."

I grimaced. "Which means that the merchant guild hasn't been actively searching out the merchants that formed the consortium all this time, as we assumed."

"What," General Daerium said, voice tight, his patience worn thin, "consortium?"

I stared at him a moment, uncertain where to begin. "Before I claimed the throne, Alendor, one of the merchants in Amenkor, began forming a consortium, using a few merchants from Amenkor and others scattered up and down the coast. Tarrence was the consortium's connection in Marlett. They were attempting to take over all the trade in Amenkor, perhaps attempting to gain control of the Skewed Throne itself, but I . . . interfered."

"She kept them from eliminating the remaining merchants in Amenkor," Erick said, in a low rumble. There was pride in his voice, even though he spoke quietly. "And then she mastered of the throne itself, so that they could not use the ruling Mistress and her insanity as a mask for their own actions."

"But," Daerium said pointedly.

I forced myself to look away from Erick.

"But," I said, "by the time I'd taken the throne, Alendor and his consortium had fled Amenkor. We sent out warnings through the merchant guild, and I was assured by the merchants in Amenkor that if Alendor or any of his cohorts were found, they'd be punished."

"It wasn't until later that we learned Alendor had run to the Chorl. He, with the help of Baill, the captain of the palace guard in Amenkor, stole supplies from Amenkor during the winter and handed them over to the Chorl."

Daerium watched me intently, brow furrowed in thought. Then he turned to William. "And you think that not only Alendor but his entire consortium turned to the Chorl, helped them."

William nodded. "If Tarrence is here, then he—or someone else in the

consortium—probably initiated the contact between the Chorl and Demasque. Demasque controls the most significant trading fleet in Venitte. And he, like Vaiana Parmati has . . . ambitions.”

“He’s greedy,” Daerium said shortly, vehemently. “He’s been a thorn in Lord March’s side since Oliván Demasque—Artren’s father—died and Artren took over the business.” He looked at me. “That still doesn’t explain how Haqtl knew of the Stone Throne.” He glanced toward Sorrenti, still seated rigidly in the center of the room, barely breathing.

“If Alendor’s consortium brought Haqtl into Venitte for a meeting—with Demasque or any of the Council—I think Haqtl would have felt the throne. He would have known it was here.” I paused a moment, then added, “I did.” Daerium’s eyebrows rose. “Would all of the Chorl Servants know? Would the Chorl priests?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know, but I doubt it. If anyone with any amount of power could feel the throne, then it wouldn’t have remained such a well-kept secret for so long. I felt its presence through Sorrenti . . . and I think I only felt it then because I’d touched the Skewed Throne. I’m connected to both of the thrones somehow.” I paused, thinking back to the last time I’d Reached for Amenkor. When I’d returned, I’d recovered far too quickly, even taking into account the help of Marielle and the others using the links.

Perhaps I was more connected to the Stone Throne than I thought.

I shrugged the thought aside, turned back to Daerium. “Haqtl has felt the power of the Skewed Throne as well. He was there when I defeated the Ochean, when I destroyed the throne to save Amenkor. He may have recognized the power behind the Stone Throne, where the other Servants—both Chorl, Amenkor, and those here in Venitte—would not. Marielle hasn’t mentioned sensing anything unusual. Nor Ottul. If any of the Servants from Amenkor or of the Chorl could have sensed it, it would have been them.”

Daerium’s thin frown twisted. “But would Ottul have told you if she did?”

I thought of Ottul sending out a killing blow on the Defiant, of her in her cabin afterward and since, of her face when I placed part of the Fire inside of her. “Yes, I believe she would have.”

The general seemed surprised at how quickly I answered.

“But it doesn’t matter whether Haqtl knew back then or not,” I said. “He knows now. Alongse overheard us discussing the throne and reported it to Demasque.” Daerium snorted. “But does he know where it’s hidden?” He took a step forward. “Do you know where it’s hidden?”

I stilled, my face expressionless. I couldn’t honestly say I knew exactly where the Stone Throne was hidden—

But at the same time, I knew. I’d felt it, on more than one occasion. Its power was unmistakable. It permeated the area around it, made the river heavy with its presence.

I was saved from answering by Sorrenti. He gasped, sucking in a large gasp of air, noisily, as if he’d been holding his breath far too long underwater and had just surfaced. Everyone in the room turned, but only William jumped, startled. Erick and I had been expecting it; Daerium was too much a soldier to be surprised by something so trivial.

After the first deep breath, Sorrenti broke into a coughing fit, wheezing as he leaned forward, eyes watering.

Everyone waited silently, William moving to pour a glass of wine, setting it down by Sorrenti’s side.

As soon as Sorrenti regained marginal control, Daerium asked, “What did you find?”

Sorrenti took a sip from the glass. Eyes still red, he said weakly, “There’s definitely something hidden on Vaiana Parmati’s estate. I can’t see into an entire wing of the manse, nor the level below the main house. There’s some kind of warding in place.”

I stood abruptly. “We have to attack them. Now. Before whatever it is they’ve started by killing off their network of spies becomes an all-out attack.”

“No.”

The single word settled into the room like stone.

I turned to Daeriu, tried to smother the instant irritation from my voice with little success. "But you know they've already started moving."

Daeriu faced me, a solid wall, arms crossed over his chest, a pose that reminded me forcibly of Erick. "I know. But after what happened at Demasque's manse, Lord March will not allow the Protectors to search Parmati's estate, nor will he grant you permission to raid with the Amenkor guardsmen. He can't risk that again."

"But he's searching the Council members' ships!"

"That's different. He's searching all of the ships that enter the harbor, including those owned and operated by Council members. If he raids one of the Council members' estates, he's singling them out. Unless you have evidence that warrants the raid, of course. And smells and the Sight are not going to be enough to sway the Council."

I glared at Daeriu a long moment, but he didn't waver. Finally, I let the tension in my shoulders relax. "What about the Seekers?"

Daeriu didn't move. "What about them?"

"I've had them following Demasque and Parmati before this, but they've never risked entering their estates. We didn't want to push what grudging concessions Lord March and the Council had given us. But I can send them inside. They can find out what's behind the wardings, without being seen. I doubt the wardings have been set to keep people out, only to keep Servants from seeing in."

I glanced questioningly toward Sorrenti, who nodded in agreement.

Daeriu considered, taking enough time that I began to wonder if he would answer at all.

Sorrenti must have thought the same thing, for he suddenly said, casually, as if we were discussing the weather, "They could go in just to see if military action is warranted, perhaps bring us evidence, something more solid than a scent or the Sight."

Daeriu remained silent a few more moments, then exhaled slowly. "Any . . . action on your part cannot be approved by Lord March. And if the Chorl are hidden there, and if Lord March approves a raid based on what the Seekers see . . ." He trailed off into silence.

Erick stirred. "No matter what happens, nothing can be done about it today."

"Why not?" I said, already planning to send Westen and Tomus to Parmati's estate. I'd have done it even if Daeriu had not agreed. Because I knew that's where they must be hidden. Nowhere else made sense. And I was tired of Lord March and Venitte and all of its political maneuvering.

Erick nodded toward the window, toward the gray-black darkness outside, the rain that now came down so hard I could hear it roaring against the walls, against the roof above. A torrential downpour. Nothing could be done in such weather. Even with the river, I would barely be able to see three feet in front of my face.

"And tomorrow it's going to be next to impossible to get anything done,"

Sorrenti said, rising from his seat.

"Why?"

"Because it's the last day of the Fete," Daeriu growled. "Everyone anywhere near Venitte will be here, even with the warnings we've posted and the ban on masks and the searches at the outskirts of the city. And with the weather as it is now, everyone's remained inside, expecting it to break so they can enjoy the Fete tomorrow. The streets are going to be impossible to pass through. You won't be able to go anywhere in a hurry, and forget using a carriage."

"Besides," Sorrenti said with a tight smile, "as a visiting dignitary, you'll be expected to attend the Masquerade in the Stone Garden. All of the members of the Council of Eight will be attending, as well as Lord March." His smile widened as I frowned. "I'll send Brandan Vard as an escort. He can accompany you."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw William frown as well.

The moment the rain broke, halfway through the night, Keven woke me and I sent

Westen and Tomus out to Vaiana Parmati's estate.

I couldn't return to sleep after that. For a while, I Reached and tagged along with Westen, then withdrew when I realized it was tiring me too much. And I wasn't willing to call on Marielle or any of the Servants to support me, not for something so trivial. If I was connected to the Stone Throne, the connection wasn't strong enough to support such intensive use.

So I waited.

Not long after first light, the early signs of the revelers sounded from outside the estate's gates. Within an hour, the streets became crowded with people, all dressed in vivid costumes, almost everyone with a mask, but those few without one had faces painted garishly. More so than any of the previous days of the Fete, as if everyone had saved their most outlandish outfits for this last day.

For the Masquerade.

I snorted. So much for the ban on the masks. Or the warnings about the Chorl. The rest of my retinue gathered in my rooms, Marielle, Heddan, and Gwenn, Ottul trailing behind them. Heddan and Gwenn fidgeted with nervous excitement, both of them slipping quietly to the window after a few moments, pointing out particularly wild outfits as they passed on the street outside the gates.

Erick came to replace Keven, arriving with Avrell and William in tow.

And still no Westen.

All of them tried to start conversations, but they ground down into nothing, the tension in the room too high.

Then Brandan arrived, servants bringing in the trunk with the costumes.

"We won't be needing those," I said sharply.

"Some of you will have to wear them," Brandan said. He glanced significantly at Ottul. "With all of the warnings we've circulated through the city, she can't be seen in public. She'll need a mask. And I'd suggest that at least a few others wear masks or costumes so that she blends in more."

I hesitated, caught Gwenn's pleading look, Heddan's carefully neutral one, then nodded.

Both Heddan and Gwenn shot toward the trunk, Ottul following more slowly.

And then Westen arrived, Tomus a pace behind him. Both looked wet, clothes smudged with mud and dirt, a few strands of grass.

"Report," I said, although I could see that Westen's lips were pressed tight together with concern.

"We infiltrated the estate," he said quietly, stepping close. Both Erick and Avrell moved forward so they could hear. "There wasn't anyone there."

"What do you mean?" I said. "They have to be there. There's nowhere else in Venitte they could be."

"They were there," Tomus interjected.

"How do you know?"

"Someone was housed there," Westen said, shooting a glare at Tomus. "The entire wing was set up to house an army. Its rooms were lined with cots, recently used. It looked like a barracks, complete with a kitchen and dining hall. She could have housed over a thousand troops in there, and they'd never have to leave that wing. But they're all gone. I'd say they left an hour or so before we got there, probably while it was still raining."

"What about below the ground floor?"

Westen shrugged. "Supplies and numerous empty crates."

Erick swore and shook his head. "Whatever the Chorl needed for whatever it is they have planned."

"We know what they have planned," I said. "They want to conquer Venitte. They want the throne. We even know that they intend to attack today. We just don't know how they intend to do it."

"And we know that they intend to hide in the crowd using the masks," Erick said. "We'll have to alert Daerion that they're already on the move, that they're already mixed in with the crowds."

"Get Catrell," I said sharply, turning to Westen. "Get all of the guardsmen here in the estate ready and send them into the streets in groups. Have them

work their way up to the Stone Garden."

"Should they search for the Chorl as they move?"

I considered for a long moment, but I'd already made too many mistakes dealing with Lord March and the Council members.

"No. Forcing people to take off their masks would stir up too much trouble, and there are too many people on the streets. Just get them up to the garden as fast as you can."

"And what about you?"

"I'm going to the Stone Garden. Daerium is most likely going to be there. And if he's not, then either Lord March or Sorrenti will be."

He nodded, motioned to Tomus, and then they both left.

Erick sidled closer. "What about the others?"

"Tell William, Marielle, and Brandan as soon as you get the chance. But not the others."

"Not Ottul?"

I watched the Chorl Servant for a moment as Gwenn forced her to try on the blue-white mask that Brandan had offered to me. She stiffened at first, then relented.

As the mask fell down to hide her face, I saw a tentative smile.

I tried to recall if I'd ever seen Ottul smile before, but couldn't. It softened her.

I said, "Tell her. I trust her."

Thirty minutes later, we were all in the courtyard, the sun blazing down, the street outside a cacophony of noise as partyers yelled and screamed, horns and whistles blowing, tambourines rattling, the mass of people flowing upward, toward the central marketplace called the Stone Garden, a riot of color. Daerium had been right. There would have been no way to get a carriage out into the flow. Not without killing someone.

I watched as the gates were opened and a contingent of Amenkor guardsmen forced their way into the mass of people, their mostly brown uniforms marring the bright costumes like an ugly stain. Westen watched them go as the next group formed up, then saw me and moved to my side.

"I sent a group down to the docks to warn Bullick," he said, "but it's going to take forever for any of us to get anywhere."

"And what about you?"

"I'm coming with you."

I started to protest, but halted when I saw his expression. I'd seen it a hundred times during the grueling training sessions with him, in Amenkor and here in Venitte.

He wasn't going to back down.

"Where's Catrell?" I asked instead.

"He left with the first group. He thinks he knows where Daerium is. The general has the Protectorate scattered in large groups throughout the city, but with the Chorl force marching down from the north, he's likely going to be in the northern part of the city. That's where he's focused the majority of his defensive preparations."

I grunted. "Then let's go."

Erick barked an order and a group of Amenkor guardsmen formed up around us, hemming us in tightly. Westen, Erick, and Avrell stayed close to me; none of us wore masks. The rest came up behind, their masks making them seem out of place.

The gates were opened, and then we became part of the crowd.

Every instinct I'd learned and honed on the Dredge came instantly into play. I slid beneath the river as the entire group was absorbed and subsumed, Erick's careful arrangement of guardsmen broken effortlessly as they were shoved and shifted out of position. Beneath the river, I heard Erick curse, heard him barking orders to get everyone back into place, the scent of oranges strong. But it was useless. The stream of people couldn't be avoided.

And so I let myself merge with the eddies and currents around me, used the river to begin to nudge that person wearing a sun mask to one side, edged that

group of drunken men dressed like dogs to the other. Sinking deeper, I concentrated on the street ahead and behind, began drawing the guardsmen that were already straggling, already being separated from the group, back in. A moment later, I felt someone else enter the flow, and another. Marielle and—
And Ottul.

I cast a quick glance backward.

The blue-white mask turned toward me, nodded slightly, then returned its attention to the crowd.

I shuddered. I didn't like the masks, didn't like the denseness of the river, the thickness caused by too many people in such a tight area.

But we were moving toward the Stone Garden.

I settled back, began working with Marielle and Ottul to move us along faster, keeping everyone together, while at the same time keeping an eye out for any sign of the Chorl. Erick continued to bark orders, swearing occasionally under his breath, although he'd relaxed a little as well. We wound our way up through the streets, Brandan occasionally breaking in with directions, pointing out a route or a side street. The crowds thickened, then spread out as the streets widened, grew dense again as everyone converged on the central marketplace. A man blew a horn to one side. A woman shrieked, with raucous laughter. Another man—dressed like an ibis with a narrow beak and feathers tied to his arms in the shape of wings—towered over the crowd on long, thin stilts like legs, sauntering past.

And still no sign of the Chorl. No sign of the Protectorate or guardsmen or any of the Council members either.

We were three cross streets away from the Stone Garden when the White Fire inside me sparked into sudden life. Ahead, I could see the first of the hundred stone statues that had given the plaza its name—a huge hawk, wings spread up and out high over the crowd beneath it, talons poised, already extending to grasp its prey. Behind, I glimpsed a few of the other statues—the raised head of a phoenix engulfed in flames, the smooth curve of a dolphin in mid leap—

Then the Fire inside me flared in warning.

Without thought, I brought a shield up around myself so fast it felt as if I'd ripped it from the very essence of the river itself. It had barely formed—
And then something punched hard into my chest, a punch softened by the shield but still with enough force to fling me back into Erick, who grunted as he caught my weight. My vision wavered, my grasp on the river shuddering, beginning to loosen, to break apart, and I found myself struggling to take a breath.

Everything around me blurred. I heard Erick bellow an order, felt something soaking into my shirt on my chest, and still I couldn't breathe, couldn't force my lungs to work. The world began to blacken, shadow encroaching on the dazzling sunlight before me, on the faces suddenly leaning down over me, too bleary to recognize. The blue sky above began to burn with the sunlight, engulfed by whiteness, and I felt myself beginning to fall into it, to be consumed by it—

And then something in my chest tore, a wrenching pain that seemed to split my chest in two.

I arched backward, heard someone—Gwenn?—scream, rolled to the side and dry heaved onto the slate paving of the roadway, coughing and choking and retching all at once.

"Back off!" Erick shouted, and I heard a sword being drawn, heard fresh screams, this time from the crowd.

Taking their cue from Erick, the rest of the Amenkor guardsmen drew weapons as well.

The screams from the surrounding crowd tripled.

"Varis! Varis, are you all right!"

The retching ceased. Still coughing, I rolled onto my back again, blinked up into the sunlight, into the blue sky, into William's terrified face, Avrell's right behind, Marielle and Gwenn on the other side, tears streaking down

Gwenn's cheeks as she sobbed, her hands reaching forward but afraid to touch. Brandan moved in next to Avrell, his expression horrified. They'd all removed their masks, William's shoved up onto his head.

All except Ottul.

The expressionless blue-white mask stared down at me as well, above all of the others.

"Shit, she's bleeding," William muttered.

I glanced down, pain seething in my chest at the movement, and noticed the blood on my shirt. And something else.

I reached up and drew a splintered length of wood as long as my hand from a rent in my shirt. It snagged in the cloth, but I jerked it free.

The end of the wood was fletched with gray feathers.

An arrow.

The breath caught in my throat.

Someone had tried to kill me. Someone had tried to assassinate me.

Rage filled me, and I began to choke.

William snatched the remains of the arrow out of my hand, handed it off to Westen as he leaned in close.

The Seeker took one look at it, his body going still. He stood quietly a moment, then turned and scanned the crowd.

His eyes settled on something. His face darkened . . . and then went utterly calm.

Then he was gone.

William began picking more splinters out of my shirt, his hands coming away stained with blood.

But not coated with blood. Not saturated with blood.

"I need some cloth, some water," William said. Too calm. He swallowed, his face pale, his eyes too wide. Then suddenly: "Water! Can someone get me some damn water!"

"I'm fine," I whispered, voice hoarse. It hurt to breathe, my entire chest throbbing, but I reached up and grabbed William's hands, forced them to halt, forced him to look me in the eye. "I'm fine, William. I used the river to stop the arrow. It must have splintered. The bleeding's already stopped."

I felt William trembling, saw the panic in his eyes, panic barely held in check.

But then, abruptly, it receded.

He sat back on his heels. "I thought—"

I squeezed his hands, halted the words. "I know." Still hoarse, still raw with pain. I coughed again, weakly, tried a grin.

William smiled back. A smile touched with fear and worry, but a smile. A smile I remembered from the deck of the Defiant, in the darkness, when he'd pointed out the stars.

"Help me up," I said.

"I'm not certain that's a good idea," Avrell said. "The assassin . . ."

"Westen's handling it," I said, wincing as William helped me lean forward. I paused, knees drawn in tight, head forward, until the throbbing in my chest lessened.

All of them helped me stand.

I surveyed the street, saw it cleared of pedestrians for at least a hundred feet in all directions, the flagstone paving littered with broken horns, streamers, discarded masks, tufts of feathers.

But the panic hadn't spread far. Ahead, the crowd still packed the plaza of the Stone Garden.

I glared in that direction, the anger over the attack reasserting itself, my heart thudding in my bruised chest. I narrowed my eyes, stretched outward on the river, sensed the Fire inside Westen off to one side, moving away, fast and furious—

And felt another disturbance a moment before the screams started. Distant. Somewhere inside the plaza itself.

"What in hells?" Erick muttered.

The guardsmen on all sides shifted nervously.

Erick glanced toward me, but I shook my head. "I don't know. But let's find out."

He nodded grimly. I caught Avrell's eye and the First of the Mistress took Gwenn by the hand and pushed her behind him. Marielle stepped forward to my side, Erick on the other. William, Brandan, Ottul, and Heddan formed up behind Avrell and Gwenn, William borrowing a dagger from one of the guardsmen, Brandan doing the same, even though he could use the Sight to defend himself if necessary.

The rest of the guardsmen on either side, we stalked forward and forced our way out into the crowd thronging the plaza.

Beneath the river, I could sense the people's confusion, spikes of fear rising in those closest as they saw the drawn swords of the guardsmen, as they met the cold anger on the guards' faces. Unlike the mob in the streets, they gave way, allowed us to forge ahead. Unable to see over the heads of so many people crowded so close together, I extended myself forward using the Sight and felt Marielle doing the same.

Almost immediately, I found a center of disturbance, drew breath to point Erick in that direction, but halted when I felt another, farther away to the left, and another, on the outskirts of the plaza.

I hesitated only a moment. "Over there!" I shouted above the noise of the throng.

Erick glanced in that direction, brow creased in concentration as he searched. Then he nodded, bellowed an order to clear the way as he struck out, the rest of us tight behind him. We passed a statue of a naked woman with long hair standing in a pool of glittering water, at least three times my height; a snarling wolf, the detail of the bristling hair so fine I could feel the animal's hatred; a man, a crown upon his head, his hand reaching forward as if to grasp something from the air. . . .

And then we broke through the crowd into a cleared circle, Venittian guardsmen at its edge holding the people back.

In the center of the circle, Sorrenti sat beside Lady Casari's body, her head held in his hands in his lap, a look of utter horror on his face.

He glanced up as we entered the area and in a choked voice asked sharply, "Can you help her?"

I stalked forward, knelt at her side. Brandan followed, standing over Lord Sorrenti's shoulder.

An arrow protruded from Lady Casari's chest, the end fletched with gray feathers. Blood had soaked into her yellow dress, a thick, viscous red, so dark it was almost black. It pooled on the gray flagstone beneath her, had begun to spread to one side. Blood flecked her lips, speckled her too pale skin, dripped from one corner of her mouth.

I shared a look with Sorrenti, a look he couldn't hold. Sucking in a harsh breath, he glanced away.

"Mistress," Lady Casari muttered, her voice nothing more than a breath, trapped between panting, liquid gasps. Her hand reached out blindly, and I caught it, felt the chill that had settled there.

"Lady Casari."

Her head turned toward my voice, but her eyes were blank, staring out into nothing.

But when she felt my touch, her breathing abruptly quieted.

"I . . . should have . . . trusted you. . . . I should have . . . supported you. . . . In the Council." The words were painful, her face contorted with the effort, tears squeezing from the corners of her eyes. She began to heave.

"I'm . . . sorry."

And then her body slumped, chest collapsing without taking another breath, her head slipping to one side.

I held her hand a moment longer, then placed it lightly on her chest.

Sorrenti grew still, shoulders tensed. I thought for a moment he would break down and weep—

But when he looked up, it wasn't grief in his eyes. It was rage. We held each other's gazes for a moment, and then his eyes shifted down to the rents in my shirt, the bloodstains there. "They tried to get you as well?" he asked. For the first time, I noticed the blood staining the sleeve of his shirt, the ragged hole that had been torn there. Sorrenti noticed the glance and his eyes darkened. "They missed. The blood is Elina's." "I was forewarned by the Fire," I said. He nodded. "What happened?" I asked. When fresh screams broke out from a new direction, I added, "And what's happening now?" "Someone—" "The Chorl," Brandan interrupted. Sorrenti glanced up toward him, his face stricken. "They're here," I said, "in the marketplace, wearing masks. They'd already left Parmati's estate when my Seekers arrived. I sent a warning to Daerium, to the Protectorate, but I'm not certain they received it in time." Sorrenti paused to assimilate this. "They must be trying to assassinate all of the Council members—at least those that aren't allied with them." He looked down at Lady Casari's body, shifted, and laid her head gently down onto the pavement. "And for some they succeeded." "It's more than that," Erick said. Both Sorrenti and I looked up to where Erick stood over us. He nodded toward the north, mouth pressed into a grim line. "Look." We rose, turned northward, where the plaza looked out over the city, out toward the northern trading roads, Deranian's Wall curving off to the east. On the northern road, a mass of armored men poured down from the top of the hill into the city. Blue-skinned men, the banners of the Chorl flying high at the head of the army. And then, much closer, at the massive gates of Deranian's Wall, I felt a pulse of power, heard Sorrenti and Brandan gasp, Sorrenti taking a step forward— And the gates exploded.

Chapter 15

"LORDS PRESERVE US!"

I glanced toward the Venittian Protector on the edge of the crowd who'd gasped, noticed that all of the Protectorate surrounding Sorrenti, Brandan, and Lady Casari's body had gone rigid with shock. Even the crowd had quieted, all eyes turned toward Deranian's Wall, toward the chunks of wood and stone that were flying through the air, dust rising in an off-white cloud, wind taking it northeast of us. The only people not affected by the explosion were the guardsmen from Amenkor. Before the dust could completely clear, Sorrenti sucked in another breath, and this time even I felt the disturbance on the river before the pulse was released, even though I knew that those attacking the walls were not Chorl Servants, but Haqtl and his priests. The second explosion thudded across the distance, a huge block of stone hurtling skyward. But still the Wall didn't crumble. It was thicker than the walls in Amenkor, had withstood thousands of attacks before this. But it wouldn't last against the Chorl. Not this time. Because the Chorl had learned how to link. Confusion rippled through the crowd, through the stunned silence. People began to shift nervously, agitated. A thread of fear slid into the confusion, dark and insidious, tasting of metal. "Look!" the man on stilts and dressed as an ibis yelled. One feathered, winged arm pointed to the north, beyond the wall. "Someone's attacking the city!" Sorrenti shot the birdman a vicious look, turned to me to say something— And that's when the Chorl, an entire phalanx of blue-skinned warriors shrouded in the garb of the Fete, tore their masks free, garish robes flung aside to

reveal slightly curved sheathed swords. They filled the center of the Stone Garden, over a hundred of them.

When the leader drew his sword, the crowd broke.

In the space of a breath, the entire plaza exploded into motion. The man on stilts gave a sharp outcry as the people around his feet lurched away from the Chorl. Arms flailing, he toppled, vanishing from sight, trailing loose feathers. Through the sudden piercing screams of the Venittian people, I heard Erick bellow an order, felt the river surge with panic—an overwhelming blanket of raw emotion—felt Sorrenti take a single step toward me, Brandan on his heels—

And then the Amenkor guardsmen surrounded me, Erick and the others on the outside, a moment before the panicked crowd broke through Sorrenti's guardsmen and surged over us.

They struck with enough force to shove my guardsmen back, one of the men's elbows striking hard into my cheek. I hissed at the pain, felt an echoing pain from my chest where the assassin's arrow had struck, and then I was jostled into the guardsmen behind me, our bodies so close I couldn't move to draw my dagger, my arms crushed as the crowd shoved us this way and that, the close bodies stifling and hot, rank with sweat. One of the guards barked a warning, and I realized their swords were already drawn, the blades bare, but no one in the crowd listened. The people's faces were white, wide-eyed with fear, with tension, with unreason.

Within moments, I tasted blood on the river, close, felt something soft roll beneath my feet as I was pushed to the side, heard a guardsman curse. I glanced down and through the crush of arms and armor I caught a glimpse of a woman's face—long dark hair, skin pale with death, cat's mask cracked and askew, covering half her face—

And then someone shoved hard from the left, thrust me to one side. I lost my footing, began to slide down between the bodies of the guardsmen, down to the stone pavement where I'd be trampled like the cat-mask girl—

Someone grabbed my arm, hauled me upright. "I don't think so," Erick said.

His face was suffused with rage, turned outward, toward the Chorl, toward the insanity of the crowd, the raw fear breaking loose into chaos.

I felt my own anger surge forward in response.

"We have to get to the gates!" I yelled.

He shook his head, a sharp, hard movement. "We'll never make it! The streets are packed, the crowd's too panicked."

I cursed, took another elbow to the side with a wince, thinking frantically. Fresh screams from the direction of the Chorl split the air. Hideous screams. I heard the slickness of blades falling, felt the shiver as metal passed through air, struck flesh. More blood tainted the river, the scent of copper suddenly so thick I gagged.

The Chorl were slaughtering the people in the plaza.

"Where's Sorrenti? Where are the others? Avrell? Marielle?" Stupid questions. I could sense both through the Fire at their cores. Could feel them off to my right, closer to the Chorl than I was.

"Sorrenti's surrounded by his own guardsmen and Brandan. The others—"

Before Erick could continue, I felt another hideous surge of strength on the river near the Wall, felt the pulse of power before the grinding thud reverberated through the plaza.

And I felt the Wall give through the soles of my feet, felt the ground trembling as it fell.

Erick shot me a grim look.

"They've breached the gate," I said in response. "They're heading toward the Council chambers."

"How do you know?"

"Because that's where the Stone Throne is."

He caught my eyes, nodded. "What do you want to do?"

"We have to get to Sorrenti," I said. "We have to get to the throne before Haqtl touches it." His brow creased in confusion and I suddenly remembered he

hadn't been in the throne room when the Ochean touched the Skewed Throne, hadn't been there when we'd fought, when I'd collapsed and been forced to destroy it in order to survive.

But that didn't matter to Erick. He didn't need to know, not when the order came from me. The momentary confusion cleared, replaced by intent.

We began to shove back at the crowd, began to forge toward Sorrenti's position. We made slow progress. There were too many people in the plaza. No one was moving far at all.

Then I caught a glimpse of Sorrenti, of his dark hair, neat beard, his sharp eyes squinted in anger and desperation.

Reaching forward with the river, I shoved the few people between us and his guardsmen aside, clearing a path. Brandan turned defensively as the Venittian guardsmen cried out, hands raised. I couldn't see what he'd done on the river, but I could feel the prickling sensation of power against my skin, making the hairs on my arms and neck stand on end.

As soon as he saw me, recognized me, his hands lowered and he barked an order, catching Sorrenti's attention.

The two sets of guardsmen merged. Our forces doubled, they pushed back against the crowd, formed a rough circle of space to give us breathing room.

"We have to get to the gates," Sorrenti said immediately.

"We'll never make it. The crowd between here and there is too thick. Unless you know a different route."

Sorrenti scanned the plaza, swore softly beneath his breath.

"Where is Lord March?" I asked. "Daerium?"

He caught my gaze, concern flickering there for a moment. "Assuming he wasn't assassinated like Lady Casari, you mean?" he asked, but he shook his head. "I don't know. Lord March doesn't usually arrive at the Fete until later, so he may still be inside the Wall. Daerium would have been in the city somewhere."

"Would he—" I began, but then another thud rippled through the river, somehow more hollow, more distant.

I turned toward the sound with a frown, felt Sorrenti, Brandan, and Erick do the same as, belatedly, a whooshing roar echoed up from the harbor. Followed by another. And another.

Familiar roars. Ones I'd heard before . . .

"That's not coming from the Wall. Nor the northern part of the city," Erick said.

"It's coming from the channel," Sorrenti said. "From the northern channel."

And then I recognized the sounds. Not ones I'd heard before.

But ones Cerrin had heard, fifteen hundred years before, when the Chorl had first attacked Venitte. The sounds of the Chorl Servants' fireballs echoing within the walls of the channel as they destroyed the houses and estates on the cliffs.

I felt my chest tighten at Cerrin's remembered pain and loss, felt his sickening hollow grief clutch at my stomach, and I clenched my jaw tight against it, fought it back.

"The Chorl are attacking from the sea," I said. "They're coming up through the channel. And if they get through, they'll hit the port." I turned toward Erick. "The Chorl learn fast. They failed in Amenkor because they didn't seize control of the throne. They relied on a single assault from the sea."

"And they did not expect much resistance," Erick added. "They didn't expect you to be prepared."

I turned to Sorrenti, the tightness in my chest increasing with urgency, with the tingling need to move, to do something. "They're attacking on three fronts. They're trying to keep you occupied with the forces to the north and the ships coming in from the west, while the real threat—Haqtl and the priests—attempt to take the throne."

As the realization sank in, Sorrenti's face grew taut. His lips pressed together into a thin line and his shoulders settled.

"We can't do anything for the port," he said. "We have ships guarding the channels. They'll have to hold them off. And we can't help at the gates to the

Wall or to the north. We'd never make it there in time. We'll have to leave that to Daerium and Lord March, if they're still alive." He looked toward Erick. "But we can do something here."

Erick nodded.

"We have to get to the Council chambers," I said forcefully. "Haqtl will head straight for the throne. If he reaches it, if he touches it . . ."

Sorrenti frowned. "We'll never get a chance unless we can escape the plaza. And that won't happen unless we can clear out the Chorl and get the citizens of Venitte out of our way." When I didn't immediately agree, he added, "There are protections in place around the throne. It will take him time to get through those. Haqtl won't be able to simply walk in and find it."

I glared at him a moment in frustration. "Very well. But if Haqtl does reach the throne before we do, if he does touch it, you have to fight him, Sorrenti. Fight him as long as you can. And if you have to—"

He cut me off with a sharp gesture, a slash of his hand. "I know. The Seven have already informed me."

Then he turned toward his guardsmen, stepped over to the commander of the Protectorate, and began giving orders.

"We don't have enough men to defeat the Chorl here," Erick said quietly.

"There were over a hundred."

"But there weren't any Servants or priests that I saw," I said. "And we have Marielle, Heddan, Gwenn, and me. And Brandan Vard. And perhaps Ottul."

He snorted, shaking his head. But he didn't say anything.

I bristled, but reined in my irritation. He hadn't seen the Servants fight in Amenkor, hadn't seen firsthand what they could do. And he hadn't seen Brandan fighting the Chorl ships when they attacked at sea.

Then we were moving, pushing forward through the seething mass of the crowd as people tried to flee the death the Chorl wielded behind them. The guardsmen formed up into a tight wedge, Sorrenti, Brandan, Erick, and I at its base, as we cut through the press of bodies, toward the center of the plaza. As we moved, I pulled my dagger free, sank deeper into the river, Reached forward—And felt an eddy lash out, far to the right.

From Marielle's direction.

"Marielle and the others are already fighting the Chorl!" I shouted to Erick, motioning to the right, trying to be heard over the increasing screams as we drew closer to the slaughter. Erick nodded, the crowd pushing hard into the wedge, the guardsmen shoving back with enough force to topple a few of the people, their faces panicking as they slid underfoot. For a brief moment, the density of the crowd doubled, the scent of sweat and blood sharp.

And then the wedge broke through into the Chorl ranks.

The reaction was instantaneous. A ululating shriek pierced the air, shivered down my spine even though I'd heard it uttered a hundred times on The Maiden and in the streets of Amenkor. For a single moment, I saw Erick hesitate, draw back from the noise with a wince and a look of horror, of remembered torture—But then his face slid into the cold, calculating mask of a Seeker.

The mixed group of Amenkor guardsmen and Venittian Protectors lurched forward with a wordless battle cry, swords raised, and hit the blue-skinned Chorl with a force that I felt on the river, a strength that tingled through my skin, through my bones.

I sank into the sensation, wrapped its warmth around me, and stepped forward. A Chorl warrior lashed out with his sword. I forged a shield using the river, thrust the strike aside and plunged the dagger into his chest, above the edge of his armor, in and out, the motion sharp and smooth. Moving past his startled, tattooed face, his body falling to the side, I slashed through the next man's arm, felt the blue-purple cloth of his shirt tear, felt the dagger bite and score the hardened leather armor beneath. He shrugged the cut aside, grinning maniacally, thrust forward toward my exposed stomach.

But I'd already stepped aside, angled toward him, into the space alongside his sword.

His grin faltered a moment before my dagger took him in the stomach.

He slumped into me, shocked, and I caught him, spun him slightly before jerking my dagger free and letting him fall.

Behind me, I saw Sorrenti, his sword bare and bloodied. I saw the shock in his eyes, saw the momentary flicker of respect, of newfound wariness—

And then he turned, sword rising to meet another Chorl's attack. He caught the warrior's sword, metal ringing against metal, then thrust the man back.

I spun, dove back into the fight, thrusting forward, spinning back, slicing across arms, across thighs, across faces, feeling the Amenkor guardsmen and Venittian Protectorate roaring and cursing and dying on all sides. But the Chorl were dying as well, bodies making the footing treacherous, blood making it slick. I felt power gather and release on the river to the right, tasted Marielle's touch, Heddan's, even Gwenn's. Felt a wall of force being erected, but at our backs, and realized they were keeping the Chorl from attacking the remnants of the crowd, protecting the people as they tried to flee.

But there were too many Chorl. Over a hundred against perhaps a third of that. The Protectorate in the plaza had been scattered. We weren't a cohesive force. Behind the front line, the Chorl rallied, fell back to regroup from the sudden attack, and then they pushed forward in a concerted effort.

They shoved our defensive line back almost a full ten feet when they struck. The guardsman beside me cried out as he took a wicked cut to his arm. Gasping, he clutched the wound with one hand, staggered to the side. The Chorl moved in, grinning.

I sliced across the face of the warrior before me, forcing him to halt, and on the return slash I plunged the dagger into the other Chorl warrior's back as he bent over the injured guardsman. Wrenching the dagger free, I whirled, kicked outward with my other leg, and caught the Chorl I'd slashed across the face in the stomach and dropped him to the ground.

Sliding back into position, I felt a different surge on the river, saw blazing fire arc up and out, and felt something cold grip my throat, cutting off my breath.

The fire came down, trailing smoke—

And exploded in the center of the Chorl warriors.

Screams erupted, followed instantly by the acrid scent of burning flesh.

I grinned.

Ottul.

The Chorl's sudden press forward faltered. Into the hesitation, I felt the crackling release of raw power and lightning forked down from the sunlit sky, blindingly bright, edges tinged with purple, followed almost immediately by a tremendous crack of thunder that reverberated through the ground, through the air, pressing against the skin of my face. The lightning struck the Chorl line, danced down its length, men juddering as it touched them. An acrid bitter scent permeated the river, tasting of metal and rain, followed almost instantly by the black smell of burned flesh. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Brandan smile, a vicious smile of triumph, before his expression slid back into cold calculation.

The Chorl advance halted completely, and the guardsmen around us grabbed the advantage.

I pushed forward with them, dagger rising and falling, blood slicking my hands, my face, mingling with the sweat. Smoke burned in my nostrils as more fireballs arched out over the field, and lightning continued to sizzle down from the empty sky, its metallic flavor mingling with that of ash and char. I sank into the flow of the fight, into the eddies of the river, felt answering pulses from Marielle, Heddan, and Gwenn as the two forces drew closer together. Time slipped as I became lost in the rhythm—

Until someone touched my shoulder and I spun without thinking, dagger cutting in hard and sharp—

I scented Sorrenti at the last moment—the dry dust of ancient paper—nostrils flaring even as I readied for a killing blow.

I stilled, the effort to halt my motion sending a twinge through my gut, through my shoulder and upper arm. The dagger stopped a finger's breath from

his neck and he froze, head tilted away.

"It's me, Varis," he said. He had one hand outstretched, the one he'd used to touch me, but he withdrew it slowly. "It's over."

I glanced around, saw the guardsmen and Protectorate gathering close, some clutching wounds, others holding a fellow guardsman upright, all of them weary. Brandan held a hand across a nick on his forearm. Marielle led the rest of my entourage closer from the opposite edge of the plaza, Avrell and William at her back, the others behind, her face set, her clothes stained with blood and sweat. The sun stood almost directly overhead, and the plaza itself was empty of revelers.

Or almost empty. A few of the men who staggered or limped toward our position through the bodies of the dead weren't guardsmen. Some of the Venittians had thrown their masks aside and joined in the fighting.

I turned back to Sorrenti, pulling my dagger away carefully.

Sorrenti sighed and straightened, one hand rising to rub the skin of his neck where my dagger would have fallen. He left a smear of blood behind. Someone else's blood.

Behind him, Erick grinned.

Before Sorrenti could speak, a loud boom rose from the harbor.

Everyone turned.

There, in the deep blue water that flashed in the sunlight, shrouded by plumes of smoke, ships battled. At least two ships were burning, sails nothing more than sheets of flame. Even as we watched, fire arched up and out from a Chorl ship, shattering in the mast of one of Venitte's traders. A man fell from the rigging, clothes burning.

"Is that the Defiant?" Erick asked, coming up beside me. Any trace of satisfaction was gone from his voice, and I could feel the guardsmen and Venittian citizens gathering behind us, a row of grim faces.

I nodded. "And the three refitted Chorl ships that we brought with us."

"I think I see the Reliant as well. I can't imagine Tristan missing out on a sea battle."

I glanced toward Sorrenti. "The throne."

Sorrenti met my eyes, then turned toward the Wall, toward the gates.

Smoke rose from the northern city in thick clouds. Even as those on the plaza shifted to look, Avrell, Marielle, and the others from Amenkor joining me, a building collapsed, embers and cinders rising in a furious cloud, like crazed red gnats.

Closer, the Wall itself had been broken. Jagged white stone glared in the sunlight where the gates had once stood. I could see men on what remained, still fighting, throwing stones and cauldrons of oil and fire down onto those below, could hear the echoes of battle, faint but unmistakable, filtering through the streets and rising to the plaza. But the Wall had been breached. The sight sent a ripple of despair through all of the Venittians on the plaza, a shudder I felt on the river. Shoulders slumped, and faces grew pinched and tight. Swords lowered, grips loosening.

For a moment, the plaza was still, silent. A breeze gusted from the harbor, carrying with it the stench of smoke.

Then, from the distance, a horn rose, a long clear note that reverberated in the air.

Before me, Sorrenti's shoulders tightened and he straightened, listening.

The first horn faded, but it was answered by another, and another, coming from two different sections of the city.

Sorrenti spun toward me, and hope softened the harshness of his face. "Lord March, Daerium, and Lady Tormaul. They're outside the Wall. Daerium is headed toward the gates. Lord March and Lady Tormaul are headed toward the northern precincts."

"What about the gates?"

"Hard to tell," Erick muttered. "From here, it looks like they've already been taken, that there's only a token Venittian force trying to hold them back."

"But Daerium will have some of the Venittian Servants with his forces, as will

Lord March. If he reaches the gates . . ."

I glanced at the men around us, then swore beneath my breath. We had barely fifty men, counting Marielle's force and the citizens who'd joined us. And a significant number of those men were wounded. Catrell and the other Amenkor forces would be with Daerium or Lord March, would rally to the horns. And Captain Bullick and his crew were occupied in the harbor.

"We know Lady Casari is dead," I said. "What about the other Council members?" One of the guardsmen stirred. "Lord Aurowan is dead. I was part of his entourage. We stayed with his body until we heard the fighting."

"Lord Boradarn as well," someone else said. "He was killed as we reached the plaza."

"That's three of the Council members lost so far," Sorrenti said grimly.

"Perhaps more. I haven't heard any horns sounding for any of the others."

"I saw Lord Dussain being dragged by his men into the safety of one of the buildings," said one of the revelers who'd grabbed a sword and joined us. "He was wounded, but still alive."

Sorrenti nodded. I could see the tension in his face, the indecision.

Taking a small step forward, I said, "The throne."

He met my gaze with a glare. "The Chorr already control the gates of the Wall. How do you propose we break through with less than fifty men?"

I narrowed my eyes at the scathing tone in his voice, but said quietly. "I don't intend to storm the main gates. Let Daerium retake the main gates. We only need to get to the Council chambers, to the throne itself."

Sorrenti's brow creased in confusion.

"The Wall has more than one gate," I added.

Sorrenti's eyes widened in sudden understanding.

"The Gutter's gate."

Sorrenti gathered all of the guardsmen and Protectorate together, passing quickly through the ranks, inspecting all of those with wounds, ordering some to stay behind to protect those too badly wounded to go with us. All the while, horns sounded to the north, distorted by the gusting wind, mingled with the hollow fwumps of fireballs from the harbor to the west. At one point, both Sorrenti and Brandan stiffened, heads turning toward the north, eyes distant. After the space of a breath, they traded a glance, Sorrenti returning to the organization of his men. Brandan caught my gaze, answered my unasked question tersely, "The Venittian Servants have joined the attack."

Before I could answer, jagged lightning flashed down from the sky into the buildings to the north, followed by ragged booms of thunder. At this distance, the lightning was almost beautiful, without the crackling intensity and prickling sensation against the skin, without the metallic scent that made me want to sneeze.

"The main gates of the Wall are still silent," Brandan noted. "Daerium must not have reached them yet."

I nodded toward Brandan in acknowledgment. Then the group was ready.

"We have to move quickly," Sorrenti announced to the small group that intended to go, no more than thirty altogether. "Don't stray from the group. We're entering the Gutter, and if you get separated, if you get lost. . . ."

He trailed off, and those from Venitte stirred restlessly. The fear on the river smelled rank, and I shot a glance toward Erick, saw him raise an eyebrow, knew that he could sense the sudden tension as well. I'd grown up in the Dredge, had survived there, knew it to be dangerous. The Gutter had not seemed any different when Daerium had taken me there to see the Squall captain's and Yvonne's bodies.

But before either of us could comment, the group was in motion.

Sorrenti and a few of the Protectorate led the way, moving out through the detritus of the Fete-dropped masks, crushed paper horns, trampled streams of coiled paper and confetti—the bodies of the dead from the battle, and the watching faces of the Stone Garden. We left the wounded behind, at the base of a winged woman, her head bowed, eyes closed, her hands clasped before her, her wings shadowing those below.

We passed from the plaza into the streets to the south and east. Streets that were not as rich and well-appointed as those in the Merchant Quarter where the estate that I'd been given stood. These buildings were of a coarser stone, the architecture different, older, the style the same but with sharper angles, steeper inclines. We passed through a section where solitary columns dotted the streets and corners, supporting nothing—

And then the streets grew darker, the stone facades dirtier.

I could feel the transition in my blood, could sense it on the river. The streets were mostly empty, those that had been at the Fete and scattered by the Chorl hidden, leaving nothing behind but a few discarded relics, gaudy pieces of clothing or a shattered mug. The trampled bodies and slaughtered dead had been left behind at the plaza. But once beyond the street of columns, the texture of the emptiness changed. People no longer huddled behind closed doors and shuttered windows. Instead, they waited in shadows, in alleys and niches all along the streets. I could feel their eyes watching, could taste their discontent, their malice, like soured wine, vinegary and tart.

The others could sense it as well, for the guardsmen tightened ranks, the Protectorate sharing glances. Sorrenti looked back, to make certain we still followed, his eyes flicking over Marielle and the other Servants, over Brandan and William, Avrell and Erick, then back to the street.

The street darkened further, the buildings closing in, making everything dense, everything black, even though the sun could be seen above, the sky blue and nearly cloudless.

Then we turned a corner, passed from one side street into a much wider avenue— And there stood the Wall, the Gutter's gate, the huge wooden doors banded in metal, arching up to a point at least four times my height.

Here, in daylight, without a light rain pouring down, the gate seemed much more formidable and . . . solid than it had the night Daerium had brought me to the Gutter.

The group halted, gathering in a cluster in the middle of the flagstone street.

"What's wrong?" I asked, joining Sorrenti and noting his frown.

He didn't turn to look, his eyes scanning the top of the Wall. "There are no guards. Someone should have hailed us by now."

"Do you often get people approaching from the Gutter's gate?"

"No. It's the least used gate in the entire Wall. But there is always a patrol here."

"Then they've either been drawn away to the battle—" Erick said from behind us.

"—Or they've already been taken by the Chorl," Sorrenti finished. "In either case," and here he did turn, "we can't get through this gate."

I straightened, thought about Amenkor, about the attack by the Ochean and the attack here in Venitte by Haqtl.

"Yes, we can," I said, not even bothering to turn to Marielle, Heddan, and Gwenn to see if they were willing. I could feel them already moving forward.

"What—" Sorrenti began, but then he saw the other Amenkor Servants gathering behind me. His eyes narrowed and he swallowed his question. "We can't defeat the Chorl with less than thirty men!"

"Why not? What did you think we'd find here? An army?"

"I expected to get reinforcements here," he growled. "Men from the walls, enough to at least double our forces."

"There is no one here," I countered. "So we attack with what we've got."

Sorrenti snorted. "And get slaughtered! We'd never make it to within a hundred yards of the Council chamber."

"Then perhaps we could help."

Everyone in the party spun at the new voice, the Protectorate and the Amenkor guardsmen instantly circling us, creating a wall against the three men who stood in the street of the Gutter behind us. They were dressed in armor, but it was worn, used, sunlight catching in nicks and dents. Their surcoats were coated with dust and dirt from the road, stained with sweat and blood. Two of

the men wore their hair pulled back in a tight braid, tied and bound with twine. The third man, the leader, was bald.

The words had been uttered calmly, almost casually, the voice gravelly, like stone grating against stone. A familiar voice.

"Who are you?" Sorrenti demanded.

Then I saw the banner one of the men held, the pole tall, fabric tied to a crosspiece, hanging down and secured near the man's hands where he held it upright. And painted across the folds of black fabric in bright red—
The Skewed Throne.

My gaze flicked back toward the bald man, toward his face, partially shadowed by the banner. My nostrils flared, and in the depths of the river, I smelled him, recognized the presence, the flows that surrounded him, and I tasted the bitterness of betrayal.

The anger rose so fast and so sharp it felt as if it cut me from stomach to throat. With every ounce of that anger clear in my voice, I said, "Baill." Baill—former captain of the Amenkor palace guard—shifted slightly, his face now visible in sunlight. His jaw was set, not in anger, but in regret, in respect.

He closed his eyes, bowed his head. "Mistress."

I moved before I thought, dagger out, my body in liquid motion, slipping through the wall of guardsmen meant to protect me. But before I could pass beyond them completely, a hand clamped onto my arm, so hard I knew it would leave bruises, and brought me up short.

I spun to face Erick, barked, "Let go!"

"No," Erick said, short and simple. If it had been anyone else— Sorrenti, Marielle, perhaps even William—I would have cut them, forced them to let go by drawing blood.

But it was Erick.

He caught my gaze, held it. I could hear myself breathing, the air huffing through my nostrils, my jaw clamped down tight, mouth closed. I narrowed my gaze, the rage seething inside me, hot and visceral, tingling in my arms, in my blood. I could feel it on the river, radiating from all of those from Amenkor, from Marielle and Avrell, William and Erick himself. "He sold us to the Chorl," I hissed. "He stole our food, sold it to them. He betrayed us." Before Erick could answer, Baill said loudly, "I didn't betray Amenkor. Not to the Chorl."

Avrell snorted with contempt. "You sold our food—food we'd hoarded so that we could survive the winter!"

Baill shook his head, his eyes going hard. He stepped forward. "Yes! But I sold it to Alendor. He sold it to the Chorl, a fact I didn't learn until after you attacked us at the fountain during our meeting and captured him. He betrayed us to the Chorl. Not me."

"And we should forgive you because of that!" Avrell demanded contemptuously, on the verge of attacking Baill himself.

"No," Baill said. But unlike Avrell, his voice had grown quieter. "No. Because I did betray Amenkor to Alendor. And I betrayed you, Mistress. I did not think you could rule. You were gutterscum. I thought you would fail."

I shifted, felt Erick's hand tighten on my arm, his fingers digging in deeper in warning, but I ignored him. "You thought you could hand Amenkor over to Alendor, and when he seized power— as he tried to do with the consortium—you would gain control of the palace through him."

Baill straightened, back stiff, shoulders pushed back in defiance—

But then he sighed, drawn breath exhaled loudly. "Yes."

The admission blunted my anger. Erick must have felt it, for his hand relaxed its grip.

But he didn't let go. He knew me too well.

"I've hunted the Chorl since I found out what Alendor did," Baill said, voice hard, harsh with hatred. "I gathered together what forces I could—those guardsmen who helped me steal the food from the warehouses and were forced to come with me when I fled, some of Alendor's men, some of his mercenaries. I

used them to hunt the Chorl in Temall, and then when their armies headed south I hounded them down the entire coast, all the way here, to Venitte. I hunted them in the name of the Skewed Throne, in the name of the Mistress. In the name of Amenkor."

No one said anything, their anger still simmering on the eddies and currents. But now it was tinged with a thread of doubt. Grudging doubt, but doubt nonetheless.

Because Baill's words resonated with truth. A truth I could sense on the river, could feel, even though every part of me screamed not to trust him. I had never seen Baill working directly with the Chorl. Only with Alendor. And I had seen him fighting the Chorl in Temall, had watched him through Westen's eyes as he helped turn back the Chorl attack on the walls, using the Skewed Throne banner as his sigil.

Before I could respond to the silence, Sorrenti broke it himself. "You offer to help. But three more men will not change the situation."

Baill smiled. He motioned to the man on his left, the one not holding the Skewed Throne banner, and that man whistled, the sound piercing.

From the alleys and narrows behind them, from the empty windows and cavernous sockets of the doorways, men stepped forth. Not the gutterscum I'd assumed the watchers were when I'd sensed them on the river, but men in armor. Makeshift armor, as dented and nicked and dirty as Baill himself, the men with grizzled beards, hair tied or braided, eyes sharp, cold, and calculating. They formed up behind Baill and his two cohorts, shifting into neat ranks and files, no one speaking, only the rattle of armor and swords, the tread of heavy booted feet on flagstone, interrupting the silence. Over a hundred men emerged from the shadows, a few spitting to the side casually before taking their places, all of their faces pinched and drawn from the march down the coast, from the skirmishes they must have fought. And all of their gazes fixed on me. A few bowed their heads in short nods. Over half of them signed themselves across the chest with the Skewed Throne symbol.

And I suddenly remembered seeing Baill's forces leaving Temall, heading southward. Over a hundred men.

These hundred men. This Band.

Chasing after the Chorl.

"We are more than three," Baill said. He spoke to Sorrenti, but his eyes never left me.

I held his gaze, felt the guardsmen that protected us close in tighter as I hesitated.

I needed these men.

But the taste of Baill's betrayal lay like acid in my mouth. I couldn't trust him, couldn't trust his men, not after what he'd done, no matter what the river said.

I straightened where I stood, and felt Erick's hand fall from my arm, knew that he had reached for his sword. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Sorrenti watching me, uncertain. He didn't understand the situation, didn't know who these men were, didn't understand the extent of the betrayal. But he'd picked up on the tension, on the anger and hatred.

I drew breath to turn Baill away—

And Sorrenti gasped. A horrified, choked gasp. One hand reached up to his chest, fingers digging into the flesh above his heart. The other reached out toward me.

"The throne," he wheezed, eyes stunned, bewildered.

Then he collapsed. It was completely graceless. All animation, all tension in his muscles, simply ceased.

His body hit the grit-blackened stone of the Gutter with a heavy thud, his scabbard grating against granite, his arms flopping to either side.

A moment of silence followed—

And then his guardsmen cried out, their commander lurching forward and kneeling at his side with a curse.

But Brandan and I had moved faster. Brandan knelt next to his Lord on one

side. I knelt on the other, grabbed Sorrenti by the chin, jerked his head so I could see his eyes—
Wide open. Staring into nothing, into everything.
"What happened?" Brandan asked.
Sorrenti's commander replied, "He's barely breathing!"
I shot a glance at Erick as I sat back onto my heels, saw the same confusion in his eyes. He hadn't been in the throne room when the Ochean came, hadn't witnessed any of those events, hadn't seen my own collapse when the Ochean had touched the Skewed Throne.
"The Chorl have reached the Stone Throne," I said, and even I heard the deadness in my voice.
Erick's face hardened, the Seeker beneath slipping forward. He straightened where he knelt. "Then we have no choice. We have to take the risk."
Fresh anger spilled into the river. "I won't. We can't trust him. We can't trust his men."
"We have no choice!" Erick repeated, the teacher now, the man who had trained me on the Dredge. Curt, decisive, his tone suggesting there was no argument. I frowned, felt the argument forming anyway.
And then Sorrenti's commander interrupted.
"You mean those men," he said, his voice tight, filled with derision. "They're nothing but mercenaries! They haven't even given us a price!"
I caught his eyes, saw him flinch back. "Oh, they've asked for a price," I growled, turned meaningfully to Brandan. "A hefty price." My gaze flicked toward Baill. "They've asked for my forgiveness."
And I didn't want to give it. Even with every eddy of the river telling me that Baill was sincere. I didn't want to give it because Baill had betrayed me, had hurt me. And I didn't want to deal with him anymore.
Baill hadn't moved. None of his men—his Band—had. They watched in silence, but I could feel their hope on the river, their fear that I would refuse them, would turn them away.
They wanted redemption.
I rose, felt Avrell step up to my side, felt his presence like a wall beside me.
"Mistress," he said, then hesitated, began again, in a softer voice. "Varis. Think of the throne, of the coast, of the Chorl."
I turned toward him with a twinge of surprise. I'd thought he'd tell me what to do, that he'd order me to do it, as he'd ordered me to stay in Amenkor instead of going on the scouting mission, as he'd ordered me to come to Venitte.
Instead, he simply nodded. "It's your decision."
Then he stepped back.
I looked at Baill, at his men, felt Brandan kneeling beside Lord Sorrenti beside me. In the distance, I heard a reverberating thud, an explosion, whether from the water of the port or the northern quarters I couldn't tell. It didn't matter.
I moved, stopped a half pace before Baill, a little too close. The two cohorts to either side shifted, restless, but Baill didn't react, simply stared down at me.
And then, before I could speak, he knelt.
With a rustle of armor and cloth, every member of the Band knelt as well, most crossing themselves with the Skewed Throne, a few murmuring prayers, too softly for me to hear the words.
I stared out over their hunched bodies, their bowed heads, the black-and-red banner flapping fitfully once.
And then I said, "We don't have time for this. Erick! Work with Baill to organize the men. You!" Sorrenti's commander started as I pointed to him. "Gather up Sorrenti's body and bring it with us. Carefully!"
The commander looked toward Brandan, who nodded curtly as he stood.
"And what do you intend to do?" Avrell asked as the group kneeling behind me suddenly lurched into motion, Erick's and Baill's orders shattering the

silence, Sorrenti's men joining them, four squatting down by Sorrenti's inert body. Two of them threw his arms over their shoulders and lifted, his feet dragging on the ground beneath them.

"I intend to take care of the gate," I said, walking forward until I stood ten paces from the iron-bound doors themselves, the Wall looming above me, stone stretching out to either side. Staring up at its height, I barked, "Marielle, Heddan, Gwenn!"

When I turned, I found them already behind me, Erick ordering the rest of the men back. I frowned. Gwenn and Heddan stood to either side of me and slightly behind. Marielle stood two paces farther back midway between them, centered, directly behind my position. An array I recognized—the diamond pattern the Ochean had used with her Servants when she'd attacked Amenkor, when she'd shattered the gate in the last wall.

They'd already submerged themselves in the river. I could feel their power pulsing, felt a shiver as conduits slid into place.

Behind them, Baill's forces and those guardsmen that had survived the Chorl at the Stone Garden stood ready, William, Ottul, Avrell, and Brandan Vard among them. I caught Erick's gaze, Baill's, and said, "This is going to have to be quick."

"Then it will be bloody as well," Baill said in answer.

I nodded gravely in acknowledgment, then spun, flung my arms out wide to either side as the matrix of conduits that Marielle, Heddan, and Gwenn had formed snapped into place around me, touched me, and poured power into my body. An electric power, the force sizzling against my skin, wild and raw and ferocious, like the lightning that Brandan commanded, like the power Cerrin had called that had burned through him while creating the thrones. It surged up through my chest, up through my arms, pulsing with the beat of my heart, with all of our hearts as I forged it into a hammer, into a ram to beat down the gates. More energy than I'd ever handled without the throne to support me, more power than one person should wield alone. It tingled in my fingers, arced out from my hands in invisible sheets, flared higher and higher as it built, a coruscating field of light that I knew could only be seen by the Servants, smelling sharp and bitter, tasting of acrid smoke and the dry husks of dead pine needles, of sap and bark.

And when it felt as if I could no longer contain it, when it felt as if my body would explode with the contained power, I released it toward the gates, toward the Wall, with a wordless roar.

Chapter 16

The hammer fell with ponderous and invisible weight, and the gates shattered. Wood beams as thick as a man cracked with a dry snap, like tinder. Metal shrieked as it twisted, wrenched from stone, the torturous sound piercing the shocked cries of the men behind me, blending with my own roar of frustration, of sheer anger.

But the Wall—Deranian's Wall—the stone that had stood for thousands of years .

. .

The Wall itself resisted.

I had enough time to sever the conduits that fed the hammer, enough time to draw in a sharp breath, eyes widening in shock—

And then the backlash of power from the Wall, a shudder that rippled away from the gates in a wave, struck.

I flinched, flung my hands up before me, expecting the wave to hurl me backward into the mass of waiting guardsmen, expecting it to suck the breath from my lungs, to hit me with killing force because I hadn't had time to erect a shield to shunt it to the side. I heard Gwenn shriek, heard Heddan gasp in dismay, felt a dagger of guilt sink deep inside me for acting so rashly, for carelessly wielding a power I'd never controlled before—

But with cold smoothness a shield appeared, stretching from building to building across the Gutter's street, the river solidifying in the space of a breath. I felt the wave ripple up the shield's length, wash past overhead, its

horrible, angry weight pressing down on me like heavy cloth, smothering me, crushing me. I heard the horrifying rumble of stone as the buildings to either side took the brunt of the recoil of power and shattered beneath it, splinters of stone hurtling down into the street. I felt a sliver of pain as one nicked my neck, heard screams and groans from behind, tasted blood on the river. Dust filled the air, the grit cloying, and without thought I sucked it into my lungs, instantly began coughing, shielding my eyes against it. . . .

And saw Ottul, one hand raised, her eyes closed, their corners pinched against the strain of holding the shield as the wave of power washed overhead.

When the rumble of settling stone faded, she opened her eyes and her gaze fell on me. Lowering her hand, she bowed her head. The gold rings in her ears glinted with the diffuse sunlight. "Ochean."

I didn't respond.

To one side, dust beginning to settle, someone gasped, "Mistress' tits."

I shot the man a glare, then turned.

The gates stood open. One side hung by a twisted hinge, skewed inward, its center cracked and indented as if it had been struck with a battering ram the size of a wagon. The other door had been completely ripped free from the stone.

The Wall itself seemed whole. Only a few cracks had appeared in the outer edges of the arc, a chunk no larger than my head ripped free in one spot. The most serious damage had occurred where the iron of the hinges had been embedded in the wall.

And to the Gutter's buildings on either side. The backlash had collapsed the building on the right, and only two walls remained of the one on the left. They'd been reduced to heaps of rock.

"What happened?" Erick demanded, moving up to my side with Brandan.

"There's more to Deranian's Wall than just stone," I said flatly. "It protected itself."

"I wonder if the Chorl encountered the same thing at the main gates," Brandan said.

Erick's eyes narrowed as he took in the damage, then fixed on something on the far side. "There are bodies."

Something twisted in my gut, but before I could react, Erick had motioned the men forward. They surged over the strewn rubble, over the blocks of stone that had skittered out into the street, over the dust and shards of wood at the gate. After a quick glance to make certain that my Servants had survived—my gaze flickering over their somber faces—I followed, close on Erick's heels. The guardsmen fanned out on the far side. In the near distance, horns sounded. I could see the Council chambers, Lord March's smaller palace behind, the barracks for the Protectorate. Men battled near the main gates, jagged lightning occasionally punctuating the sky. Daerium's forces must have hit the gates while we were entering the Gutter. Smoke and dust rose into the air from that direction, and farther away, beyond the Wall to the north, where Lord March battled Atlatik.

But here, at the Gutter's gate, everything was quiet.

Because everyone that had been stationed at the gate was dead.

"They were killed hours ago," the commander of Sorrenti's guard said from where he knelt beside one man's body. The neatly trimmed beard of the dead man was matted with dried blood, the stain a flaky brown. He'd been stabbed in the neck.

Sorrenti's commander leaned back, his eyes flicking over the debris inside the Wall, over the bodies.

There were at least twenty within sight.

"I'd say they were killed when the battle first started, when the Chorl made their appearance in the Stone Garden," he said. Then he caught my gaze, Brandan's. "The assassinations of the Council members, the appearance in the Stone Garden, the elimination of the guards here—it must have been a coordinated attack."

"By who?" Erick asked. "Who killed these men if the Chorl were in the Garden

or at the main gates?"

Standing beside Erick, Baill shrugged. "Does it matter? Someone with forces inside the Wall."

"Demasque," I said, with certainty, with fury, even though I had no reason to believe it. "And Lady Parmati."

No one answered. But when a thundering roar echoed from the main gates, followed by battle cries, all of the guardsmen tensed.

"Where do we go from here?" Brandan asked.

I straightened. "The Council chambers."

All eyes turned toward the immense building, toward the battle raging in its courtyard, a seething mass of men, indistinguishable from one another at this distance.

"Then let's get moving," Baill said, and I could hear the grim determination in his words, could feel his anticipation of the coming fight on the river. It smelled of old blood, of sweat, and strangely, of fresh earth and loam.

Erick barked orders—the orders repeated by Baill's lieutenants at Baill's nod. And then we ran.

No one spoke, everyone's eyes fixed on the battle in front of the Council chambers. There was no need to speak. Everyone could see that the plaza in front of the building contained Venittian guardsmen, the Protectorate mixed with one of the Lord's or Lady's personal men. I couldn't tell which Lord or Lady, and it didn't matter. All that mattered was that the doors to the Council chamber were being defended by the Chorl, the area in front clogged with their brightly colored clothing, their fierce faces, the tattoos bold in the sunlight, their blue skin striking. They fought with a raw intensity, with no mercy, and unlike their attack on Amenkor, they fought in relative silence—no battle cries, no ululations. Because they didn't want to draw attention to this fight, to this battle. The real battle. Atlatik and the forces outside the Wall—the forces attacking to the north and in the harbor—they were the diversion.

Haqtl was the true threat.

If he took the throne, he would take the city.

And as we drew closer, as the screams and grunts of the men grew louder, clearer, as the clash of swords and armor became sharp and piercing, as the pool in the center of the plaza came into view and I saw it stained with blood and clogged with broken bodies, I realized it was going to be harder to get into the Council chambers than I'd thought.

Because on the river, power gathered, and fire bloomed, men shrieking as they fell back from the door, those closest to the building twisting as they were engulfed by flames.

I spat a curse, picked up speed, felt Erick and Baill, my shadows to either side, adjust to the new pace without thought.

"What?" Erick gasped. He wasn't winded, but his voice was tight and clipped with effort.

I shook my head. "Haqtl has Servants."

"Of course he does," Baill responded, his voice laced with condescension.

"They helped take down the gates."

I nodded, would have cursed my own stupidity if I hadn't been focusing on the doorway, on the Chorl, on the ebb and flow of the battle.

We were almost upon the rear of the Venittian forces. Bodies littered the street, the trampled gardens and grounds to either side.

Our forces pulled in tight.

"Straight to the doors," I said, narrowing my eyes. "Whatever the cost."

I sensed both Erick's and Baill's acceptance, didn't turn to catch their nods. Reaching for the river, gathering it before me in a wedge shape, I thought of what Baill had said at the Gutter's gate.

This was going to be bloody.

And then we reached the fringe of the fighting force, a battle cry rising from the men on all sides, a warning to the Venittians already fighting, most at the rear clutching wounds, faces haggard with shock.

I didn't wait for them to get out of the way. I pushed the wedge on the river forward, thrust the Venittian men to either side, heard them cry out as the wall of force I'd created hit them from behind and shoved. My forces plowed into the opening, the Venittians stumbling away to either side, or flung there.

In the space of one heartbeat, two, I found myself facing one of the blue-skinned Chorl warriors.

I'd already drawn my dagger, couldn't remember when. Without stopping, without even slowing my forward momentum, I slashed the dagger across his eyes, felt the blade connect with skin, grate against bone, heard the warrior scream as my other hand connected with his chest, grabbed the colored, silky cloth—purple and gold—and wrenched him out of my path, still alive but blinded. I had no time to think about him, the Chorl crushing forward. I took the next man in the gut, the dagger punching in and out in a single, sharp motion as my hand found the back of his head, pulled his body down and into the thrust and then shoving him down farther, to the flagstone underneath already littered with bodies, the white stone stained black-red. I heard Erick grunt to my left, tasted his blade on the river as it cut, as it slashed, felt myself sinking deeper and deeper into the ebb and flow as my dagger sank into a neck, slipped free smoothly, grated past ribs, pierced armor and cut sinew and muscle on arms, shoulders, faces. To the right, Baill bellowed, his roar filling the plaza, echoing against the walls. An answering roar came from behind, from the Band, from the Venittian guardsmen and the Protectorate, men surging forward. Lightning bit into the Chorl forces, plied by Brandan. I felt it on the river, had sunk so deep the entire plaza had coalesced into a single moving force with its own currents, its own tides. Like the ocean.

And like the ocean, I felt the Venittian forces behind beginning to swell, to build as they rallied and pushed forward against the Chorl.

The Chorl began to solidify in reaction. The Chorl Servants began to link, the conduits snapping into place with a visceral shudder.

Ottul barked out a warning, her voice behind, distant. Marielle shouted, "Mistress!"

I grunted as I shoved my dagger up into a Chorl warrior's arm-pit, his sword arm dropping limp to his side as he howled into my face, splattering me with blood and snot. Jerking the dagger free, I stepped back, let him fall, felt Erick take my place without pause, without direction, the motion smooth, practiced.

Marielle reached for me on the river, Heddan stretching out from the opposite side. All of the sessions in the palace garden at Amenkor slid into place as we linked.

Gwenn began to join the link, from farther back, near where Ottul's voice had come from, but I shook my head, even though she couldn't see, blocked her efforts using the river. I smelled her confusion, her disappointment, bitter, like smoke and ash.

"The Servants!" I shouted, not certain she could hear over the battle, over the screams and the clash of weapons. But her confusion faded.

Then there was no time. The Chorl Servants' power escalated . . .

And released.

Fire blasted upward, no longer targeted toward a single location. This fire spread out from the Chorl center in a wave, rising high over the Chorl warriors' heads, arching outward, cresting as the flames reached their peak and began to boil downward.

Down toward the Venittian forces, toward the Band.

I gazed up at the falling flames. Not a ball of fire like on The Maiden. A sheet of fire, falling like rain.

Men to either side screamed as they saw it, began to break the lines, to retreat.

Brow creasing, I drew from Marielle and Heddan and threw up a shield.

The fire struck; I gasped as it bore down, sank down to one knee, and gritted my teeth beneath its weight, hands flying up over my head, palms flat, as if I

were pushing against the fire myself. It sizzled as it met the shield, hissed in fury as it boiled up its length as the Servants that controlled it sought the shield's edges, until the entire front ranks of Venittians and the Band were covered in a seething, roaring blanket of fire. Men cried out, first in fear as they had on the practice fields, then in shock and wonder. Heat seeped downward, turned my face waxy, sweat dripping from my chin in a stream. The ranks that had a moment before been on the verge of collapse hesitated. And into the hesitation I felt the river form into a scintillant sliver of power, felt the dagger of force release.

Gwenn.

A scream erupted from the Chorl forces as the dagger struck. A scream of rage, of pain, and the power that fed the fire overhead jerked as one of the conduits was severed.

Before anyone could react, two more daggers flew into the Chorl forces—from both Gwenn and Ottul—followed by two more cries of pain.

The Chorl Servants couldn't defend themselves. They'd poured all of their strength into the fire.

The force behind the fire weakened. One Servant dropped out, her conduit cut, the energy shunted into a shield. Another held her conduit tight, in desperation, but another of Gwenn's daggers took her in the throat.

The awful weight of the fire overhead lifted. The flames shuddered as the power that fed them began to retreat, to pull back and regroup.

But they didn't retreat fast enough.

Lurching to my feet, I shoved my own shield upward and forward with a growl, tilting it—

And sent the retreating fire—its strength drained, the power that had controlled it dissipating—cascading down onto the Chorl warriors.

Screams pierced the plaza, instant and fierce, as fire rained down from above. Half of the Chorl forces were engulfed, the quarters too close and too packed for the warriors to retreat, to flee. They were trapped between the building and the Venittian forces.

The black smell of burning flesh, of charred, crackling skin, slammed into the river, drove me back a step as the backwash of wind from the feeding fire pushed against my face. Oily smoke rose, and the leading edge of Chorl broke. The Venittians and the Band hesitated a heartbeat, two . . . and then surged into the disintegrating line.

"The doors!" Erick barked.

I spun, immediately spotting the Council chamber's open doorway and the relatively clear path the fire had purged to it.

"Baill!" I barked, but he'd already seen it. With chilling precision, he stabbed the Chorl warrior he fought through the heart, shoved the body off of his blade, and barked, "Warren! Patch!" and nodded toward the door.

The two men he'd singled out whistled sharply, and suddenly Erick and I were surrounded by twenty bloody, sweating men, all from the Band, all with swords drawn, a few with obvious nicks or wounds, none of them serious.

"Mistress," Baill said, gruffly.

"Go."

The men surged through the break. Erick and I followed, stepping over charred bodies, some still on fire, past the last desperate struggles between the Venittians and the Chorl, past the fallen corpses of two of the Chorl Servants, their green dresses stained black with blood from Gwenn's daggers. We entered the grand foyer and huge inner chamber, Chorl wounded and dead lining the walls. Without asking, moving swiftly, Baill and the members of his Band cut the throats of those still alive, a few struggling to raise their swords, their wounds too grievous for anything but a token defense.

"Where to?" Baill asked as he cleaned his blade using one of the dead Chorl's brightly colored shirts.

I nodded to the inner doors. They'd been closed, but I could feel the power of the throne already, could feel its presence, could hear the faintest of whispers, a hissing of agitated voices, like the skitter of dead leaves across

cobblestones.

I shuddered.

The Band formed up to either side of the doors. Erick stayed at my side, his jaw clenched, his hand clutching his Seeker's dagger, the knuckles white. I tried to catch his gaze, but he was too focused on the doors, on the inner chamber.

At Baill's nod, Warren shoved against the doors, hard, the cords in his neck standing out with the effort.

Finally, he gasped and drew back, shaking his head. "It's barricaded on the inside."

Erick's brow furrowed, but before he could respond, before Baill could even turn, I said, "Allow me."

I gathered the river, saw the comprehension on the Band's faces a moment before they leaped back from the doorway.

The doors exploded, the tables and chairs that had been stacked against it on the far side splintering as they were flung backward, Lord March's desk scraping across the marble floor. Men shouted warnings, blue-skinned Chorl rushing forward toward the breach, but Baill and the Band raced into the new opening and met them.

Swords clashed, but I didn't watch the fight, barely noticed it on the river as the last of the Chorl's minimal force were killed, as the Band formed up on either side of the door.

Because the Council chamber beyond, where the Council of Eight ruled, had changed, had been transformed.

The banners of the Lords and Ladies still hung on the walls, but the tables and chairs the Council had used to preside over Venitte's affairs had been turned into a barricade at the door and were now scattered and broken around the room, Lord March's immense desk now shoved to one side by the blast, scarred and cracked. Where it had stood, where the far black wall curved outward into the room, the patterned marble floor radiating outward from the wall in triangular rays like a sun, now stood a pointed, open arch, a doorway that led—

I felt the visceral pain of death, of memory, slide through me, bitterly cold and torturously sharp.

Cerrin, I thought.

And felt an answering whisper from the throne, a momentary rise in the whisper of voices, like a gust of wind.

"What is it?"

Erick's voice slid through the memories that cut me, through the barely audible voices that froze me in place.

I turned my head, caught his gaze, saw the raw urgency there, saw the hatred. A deep, burning hatred that halted my breath.

And then I remembered, then I understood: Haqtl waited on the far side of the room.

Haqtl—the man who had placed the blanket of pain over Erick, had tortured him at the Ochean's command, had driven the spine into his chest.

I drew in a short breath, forced the anger that rose from Erick's pain to one side.

"It's the entrance to the true Council chambers," I said, and even I heard the rawness in my voice, rough, like stone grating against stone. "The Council chambers the Seven ruled from." I turned back to the opening and in a much softer voice, I added, "That's where they all died."

The archway that now stood behind Lord March's position, where he had presided over the Council of Eight, was filled with a white light that obscured what lay within. A light as bright as the White Fire that had engulfed the coast seven years before. I'd seen the doorway many times from the far side, through Cerrin's memories, but never from the outside. Yet even here, I could feel the throne, its force so much more intense than it had been outside. It filled the room, heavy and dense. I breathed it in with every breath, felt it touching me, the fine hairs on my arms prickling beneath it. I heard it circling,

tasted it against my tongue. Raw and powerful and angry.

And waiting.

No one moved. The Band shifted restlessly. I sensed their hesitation, their fear, knew that they could feel the throne as well, even if they couldn't identify it.

Drawing in a steady breath, I stepped forward, through the debris, across the chamber where I'd faced Lord March and the Council of Eight, where I'd faced Lord Demasque. Splinters and stone grit ground beneath my feet, cracking and popping as I moved.

I paused before the doorway, before the white light, raised a hand before me, felt its soft glow without touching it, recognized its frigid taste.

The Fire inside me pulsed with the same heartbeat.

Then I stepped into it.

The Fire slid through me, entered inside of me, the flames licking down deep, deeper, as deep as they had when the wall of White Fire blazed through Amenkor, when I was eleven and trapped beneath the hand of the ex-guardsmen I'd killed moments after the Fire had passed. I shuddered as the memory rose to the surface, as real and visceral as if it had just happened, as clear and penetrating as it had felt then. I trembled beneath the pain, beneath the terror, realized that I had trembled then, dazed, back grinding into the stone roof where I'd been thrown beneath the chill night air, beneath the stars as the man's hand pressed hard into my chest, forcing the air from my lungs, his hands fumbling with the drawstrings of his breeches, his voice hoarse, ragged with anticipation. I saw his rough, unshaven jaw, his feral eyes with grit at their corners, his dirty, splotchy skin, his matted chunks of hair. I smelled his rank breath, his musty clothing. And I tasted the cold steel of his knife, his dagger, forgotten in his haste, in his excitement.

Forgotten by him, but not by me. I reached for it—

And walked through the Fire into the chamber beyond, out of memory and into the Council of Seven. For a moment that felt like eternity I tasted that night, tasted that pain, that horror. . . .

And then the memory faded, and the Council chamber asserted itself.

It appeared exactly as I remembered it: obsidian walls, obsidian marble floor, domed ceiling as black as night. Ambient white light emanated from the surrounding walls as it had over fifteen hundred years before. Except this light seemed pallid, less vibrant. Aged. Seven seats filled the chamber, circling the outer edges, each one different, each one . . . personal; the seats of the Seven who had ruled from here, the last of the Adepts—Cerrin, Livian, Garus, Seth, Atreus, Silicia, and Alleryn.

In the center of the room sat the throne. The Stone Throne, hidden for fifteen hundred years.

It had never been moved, had never left Venitte. It had been hidden in plain sight.

And seated in the throne, surrounded by a covey of Chorl warriors and priests, sat Haqtl.

The warriors hadn't seen me enter. Their attention was fixed on Haqtl, on the strange, intent expression on his face, the tension there. The Chorl priest—the man who had tortured Erick, who had held him prisoner and kept him in constant pain even after we had rescued him—sat perfectly rigid, back straight, hands on the arms of the granite throne. His brow was creased, his hands clenched. Sweat stood out on his forehead.

Because the throne fought him. Because Sorrenti fought him.

I felt the energy in the room shift, felt Erick pass through the White Fire behind me, followed by Baill, Warren, Patch, the others from the Band. I turned as they entered, saw some of them grimace in distaste or shudder convulsively, wondered briefly what memories the Fire called up for them, but then shrugged the thoughts aside. They didn't matter. Nothing mattered except Haqtl and the throne.

And Erick.

As they fell into place behind me, I turned toward the throne and stepped

forward.

The motion caught one of the Chorl warriors' attention. He barked a curt warning.

With a flurry of commands and the clatter of armor, the group of men encircled the throne, swords drawn. But they stayed back from the throne itself, keeping a distance of at least three paces.

And then I noticed the bodies. Two of them, both Chorl, one a warrior, the other a priest. They lay against the marble two paces from Haqtl and the throne, their pale blue faces stark against the obsidian floor, their dark eyes wide with shock.

There wasn't a mark on them. No wounds, no blood. Nothing.

I narrowed my eyes, shifted my gaze to the leader of the men.

No one moved.

Not letting my gaze waver from the Chorl captain, I said, "You're outnumbered."

He didn't understand the words, but he understood the intent. His gaze flickered over Baill and the Band, settled the longest on Erick, then came back to me. He said nothing.

"Baill."

The ex-guardsmen of Amenkor nodded at the command in my voice. Face locked into familiar stony creases, he ordered the Band forward.

"Don't get too close to the throne," I warned as the Chorl tensed, those behind the leader readying for a fight. One of the Chorl priests waved his hand, sent something I couldn't see flying toward Baill, but I deflected it with a shield, Baill never flinching. The priest frowned, but at a look from the leader, he halted another gesture in mid-motion.

Keeping his eyes on me, the leader straightened, then lowered his sword.

Moving carefully, he and the rest of the Chorl stepped to one side, keeping their backs to the wall of the obsidian chamber, their swords toward us.

I turned my attention back to Haqtl, to the throne. Granite, like the Skewed Throne in Amenkor, and at the moment shaped like a simple chair. Fine lines, elegant, with subtle curves to the legs, to the arms and back. No ostentatious details, no real markings of any kind.

I could see Sorrenti sitting in such a throne.

"Are we in time?" Erick asked, and once again I remembered that he hadn't been in the throne room when the Ochean arrived, hadn't witnessed those events.

"Sorrenti is still in control," I said.

"How do you know?" His voice was rough, threaded with hatred, with a raw need, with remembered pain.

"Because that's Sorrenti's throne," I said softly, trying to calm him, to ease the tension I felt bleeding from him. And it was like blood, from a wound that had not healed, that perhaps would never heal. "If the throne starts to change shape, then we'll know Haqtl has begun to win."

He nodded. The hand gripping his dagger flexed as his attention shifted from Haqtl's face to the throne itself. "Then we need to kill him before that happens."

He started forward.

I sensed a sudden surge of anticipation from the Chorl, and my hand snapped out, latched onto Erick's arm. "Wait."

He halted. "What is it?" he asked, no anger, no doubt in his voice. But his attention never wavered from the throne, from Haqtl, and I could sense his frustration.

He wanted Haqtl dead, needed to see him dead.

I glanced toward the Chorl leader, saw his eyes narrow. Then I stepped in front of Erick, forced him to meet my gaze.

It was harder than I thought. And when he finally did look at me, I flinched back from the horror of memory I saw reflected there. I wanted to remove that pain, the terror that had bruised him, that I had sent him into by placing him on The Maiden, by putting him at risk.

But I couldn't. Instead, I swallowed, something hard clicking in my throat,

and said in as calm a voice as possible, "There's something surrounding the throne, a barrier of some kind. I can't see it, but it's there. I think it killed those two Chorl, the warrior and the priest lying dead on the floor." "It did," Baill said, his voice too loud, echoing in the chamber. "No one approached the Skewed Throne in Amenkor when someone was seated on it because they knew it would be their death. No one can get close. It's how the throne protects itself, protects the person currently in control." He glanced toward Haqtl. "Or trying to claim control. Otherwise, the person on the throne would be vulnerable."

Erick grunted, the skin around his eyes tightening. "Then how are we going to kill him?"

I thought about the Skewed Throne, about Sorrenti, about Cerrin and the rest of the Seven. I thought about the memories from fifteen hundred years before, of the death of Cerrin's wife and children, of the battles the Seven had fought against the Chorl and of their deaths here, in this room, as they created the thrones, as they forged them.

Memories I could not possibly have. Not with the Skewed Throne destroyed. But memories I'd relived nonetheless. Because of the Stone Throne, this throne. Because somehow I was connected to it, bound to it, as I'd been bound to the Skewed Throne. Bound to it by the Skewed Throne. Sorrenti had felt that connection. The Seven had felt it, even though they hadn't understood it. And I'd felt it, when I'd returned from speaking with Eryn, from Reaching, and had recovered far too fast from the effects of that Reaching.

I turned away from Erick, stepped forward, and this time Erick reached out to halt me.

"What are you doing?" he asked, his voice hard, like stone. Stern, but with a slight catch. Not the voice of a teacher, of a trainer.

The voice of a father.

"I'm the only one who can do this," I said. "I'm the only one who can get close enough. I think the throne will recognize me. I think it will let me pass the barrier."

His brow furrowed, his eyes darkening as they gazed down at me. He wanted to refuse me, didn't want me to take the risk.

"I can feel it, Erick," I added. "I can hear it."

His hand tightened a moment, the muscles of his jaw clenching, but then he relaxed, his hand dropping from my arm.

He said nothing. He didn't need to say anything.

I turned back, moved to within two paces of the throne, to where the bodies of the two Chorl had fallen, and then hesitated. This close, I could feel the barrier, like a thousand needles pricking the skin of my face, my hands, my arms and torso, a sensation not unlike the blanket of needles that Haqtl had placed over Erick and used to torture him. And I could feel the presence of the throne, throbbing, pulsing with my own heartbeat beneath that prickling sensation, could hear the whisper of the throne itself, calling me.

Dry leaves scraping against cobblestones.

I raised my hands toward the barrier, drew in a slow breath-

And then stepped forward.

Pain lanced down my side and I cried out, heard at a distance Erick cry out as well. Daggers sliced down the lengths of my arms, down my shoulders, down my chest, blades cutting into flesh, flaying the skin from me. I heard a howling whirlwind of voices, the dry whispers I'd heard before escalating into a screaming frenzy, a cacophony of glee and rage and torment, of pain and suffering. The daggers dug deeper, sank into muscle, edges dragging through sinew as the tips of metal neared bone, as the voices grew louder, as a single voice began to roar above all of the others-

And then abruptly the pain cut off. The daggers withdrew and, as I collapsed to my knees on the floor, panting, hands cupped over my head protectively, the single voice bellowing above all of the others slowly began to drown them all out. A voice I recognized. A voice I knew.

Cerrin.

When all of the voices of the throne had quieted, lost beneath his roar, he broke the battle cry off, let everything fall into silence.

I heard a struggle, raised my head far enough through the last vestiges of the pain the barrier had inflicted to see Baill and Patch restraining Erick at the edge of the barrier itself.

When Erick saw me move, his struggling ceased. But Baill and Patch didn't back away, didn't even relax. "Varis?"

Varis? Cerrin echoed.

I sat up, slid into a low crouch. A familiar crouch, one I'd used a thousand times on the Dredge. "I'm fine, Erick. It . . . took a moment for the throne to recognize me."

Sorrenti can't hold out much longer, Varis. You haven't got much time. Haqtl's almost seized control.

Help him, I growled. Stop Haqtl.

Do you think we haven't tried? Liviann demanded.

We've done all that we can, Cerrin interceded, a note of warning in his voice, directed toward Liviann. Haqtl is more powerful than Sorrenti. He paused a moment, then added, Haqtl can control the Fire.

Like me, I thought.

I rose from my crouch, shifted my grip on my dagger, took the single step to the throne and stood before Haqtl, before the Chorl priest who had brought the Chorl armies here, to Venitte, before the man who had driven the poisoned spine into Erick's chest with a slow, twisted smile and laid the blanket of needles over Erick's body.

My heart hardened.

Kill him, Cerrin said. But don't touch the throne. You were protected from the barrier because you were part of the Skewed Throne, but nothing can protect you from the Stone Throne itself, from direct contact with it.

I frowned. The throne had a back, protecting Haqtl from my blade. I couldn't cut him from behind, couldn't slit his throat. I couldn't stab him low in the back so that he'd die slowly, as I'd killed men before. And I wanted him to die slowly. I wanted him to suffer, as much as he'd made Erick suffer.

But my choices were limited.

I slid closer, leaned in toward Haqtl's strained face, toward his blue skin, his black tattoos, until I could smell him. Sea salt. Seaweed. The stench of rotting fish.

I wrinkled my nose in disgust.

And then Cerrin shouted, Varis! and I felt the shudder as the throne began to change, the feet of the throne rippling, the stone morphing into the shape of reeds. The other voices of the throne cried out in dismay.

And the intensity in Haqtl's face relaxed, that slow smile touching his lips. The same smile he'd used while torturing Erick.

I plunged the dagger into his stomach with a harsh, vicious grunt.

When his eyes flew open, shocked, I said, too softly for anyone else except Haqtl and the voices in the throne to hear, "For Erick, you bastard."

Then I wrenched the dagger to the side, twisted it, felt it cut free, and stepped back, blood dripping from my hand, from the tip of the dagger where it hung slack at my side.

Haqtl gasped. His hands flew to his gut as he hunched over, blood splashing, staining his breeches, his yellow shirt, pouring over his hands until they were black with it, until his blue skin and tattoos could no longer be seen. He sucked in a single, horrible breath, his lean becoming a tilt, the momentum carrying him forward. He bent over his own lap, blood beginning to slide down the legs of the stone throne, beginning to drip from the seat where it pooled beneath him. He tipped his head to one side, arms clutching his stomach now, his face contorted with pain.

But then it transformed, the pain sliding into hatred, into rage, his jaw clenching, protruding forward slightly. It made him look cruel, barbaric. His eyes flashed, and the intensity there, the raw emotion, reminded me of his eyes as he'd stood over Erick and tortured him.

"You . . ." he spat. Blood speckled his lips, drooled from the corner of his mouth.

And with that one word, filled with all of his hatred, all of his derision and anger, he died.

His body toppled forward, sliding from the throne in a bundle, his face hitting the obsidian floor first with a dull thud, then shifting forward as the weight of his hunched body pushed him downward.

He came to rest, arms still folded across his stomach but loosely, body slightly curved. Blood began to pool beneath him.

I turned, sought out Erick. I needed to see his face.

He stood, Baill and Patch beside him and slightly behind. He stared at Haqtl's body, his eyes impassive, empty. Lost.

To one side, the remaining Chorl tensed, raised their swords. I thought about those we'd held captive after Amenkor, about their suicides, about what Ottul had told us of the Chorl themselves, and knew that these would not surrender. "Baill," I said. "Try to keep as many of them alive as possible."

He understood immediately. Shoving Patch away from Erick, who didn't move at all, he barked an order to the rest of the Band. They closed in on the Chorl.

I heard the Chorl battle cry, the strange ululations, piercing and sharp, heard the subsequent clash of swords, but I didn't take my eyes from Erick.

I moved to stand before him, noted that the shield that had protected the throne while Haqtl sat on it was gone.

"Erick."

When he didn't respond, I reached forward and caught his arm with my free hand.

He flinched, his gaze dropping to meet mine.

He looked . . . haunted.

"Erick," I said, squeezing his arm. "This isn't over. We still need to stop the fighting in the city, the battle in the harbor."

For a moment, his gaze held, the haunted, empty look remaining, as if he hadn't heard me. But then he shuddered, the tremor running through his body.

He closed his eyes.

And when he opened them again, the emptiness had been shoved into the background, replaced by the coldness of a Seeker.

"How do you intend to stop it?" he asked.

I looked to where the fighting between the Band and the Chorl had ended—none of the Chorl had survived—and caught Baill's look.

"We'll need Haqtl's body."

We emerged from the Council building to find the Venittian and Amenkor forces searching through the bodies that littered the stone steps and the rectangular pool of water for survivors, slitting the throats of the Chorl and hauling the Venittians and those from the Band that had been wounded to one side, where Avrell and Brandan had organized a makeshift hospital. As soon as we exited into the early evening sunlight, Haqtl's body in tow, a cheer roared through the plaza.

Followed immediately by the dull thud of an explosion from outside the Wall, and a sizzling crack of thunder.

Avrell moved immediately to my side, William, Brandan, Marielle, and Ottul behind him. A gash ran across William's cheek, deep enough that it would leave a scar. Marielle and Ottul looked haggard and drained, but unharmed.

All of them looked weary.

"Where's Sorrenti?" I asked Brandan, before any of them could speak.

"Recovering," Brandan said, his tone grim. He pointed to where Sorrenti sat with his back against one of the stone columns surrounding the body-clogged and bloody pool. "He woke a few moments ago, but he's exhausted."

I remembered my own battle with the Ochean, remembered the sheer weariness I'd felt immediately afterward, and nodded. "What about Heddan and Gwenn?"

"They're helping with the wounded," Marielle said.

"We started triage as soon as the last of the Chorl were killed," Avrell added.

"Good." I scanned the people of Venitte, saw one of the Protectorate approaching, stepping carefully through the dead. "Baill, get the Band ready. We're heading toward the northern part of the city."

Baill moved away instantly, Warren and Patch following. Their piercing whistles broke through the moans of the wounded and the silence of the dead, the Band converging on the still standing black-and-red Skewed Throne banner. When the captain of the Protectorate drew close enough, I said, "The Chorl within the Council chambers are dead."

He nodded grimly, his eyes falling on Haqtl's body, which the members of the Band that Baill had left behind had dropped unceremoniously to the ground. "Daerium sends word that the Chorl at the gates have also been halted. Their priests and Servants caused massive damage in the first strike at the Wall, but he's managed to overwhelm them with the Venittian Servants." He shot a respectful glance toward Brandan, then continued his report to me. "He's finishing off the last of the Chorl resistance there now, but there is still fighting to the north and in the harbor."

"My men are forming up to head to the north. We'll join up with Daerium at the Wall."

Before he could answer, someone said, "Ethan."

Everyone turned. I frowned at Sorrenti where he stood behind Avrell and Marielle and Ottul. His face was tinged an unhealthy gray, but I saw no sign of tremors.

"Ready the men," Sorrenti said. "We'll be joining the Mistress."

The captain of the Protectorate nodded sharply, turned, then shouted an order across the plaza, men picking through the bodies glancing up.

I caught Sorrenti's gaze, but before I could speak, he bowed low and said, "Thank you. Haqtl had almost won. If you hadn't intervened . . ."

"I know." At his frown, I added, "The throne had begun to change shape."

He nodded. "But you were right. In the moments before he began taking control, I touched Haqtl through the throne. Demasque and Parmati were working with him. He'd promised Demasque control of the merchants' guild, not only here in the city, but for the entire coast. He'd promised Parmati rule of the city." He grimaced. "He never intended to keep those promises. He wanted the coast for himself, and he thought the throne—and the Fire—would give it to him."

"Is that enough to convince Lord March and the Council?"

His frown deepened. "Half of the Council is dead. But even then . . ."

I shook my head, turned away. I was tired of Venitte, of their Council. "Never mind. We need to take care of Atlatik now."

Within moments, the Band and the Protectorate had formed two groups at the edge of the plaza, the Protectorate under Sorrenti's command.

"What about the harbor?" Erick asked as I began to make my way through the plaza, my entourage following, the escort from the Band carrying Haqtl's body.

"I don't know. Let's see what happens to the north first."

He grunted.

As soon as I joined Baill, we headed out, Sorrenti and the Protectorate falling in behind us. We marched down through the streets and open gardens to the shattered gates of the Wall, gates that had suffered far more damage than we'd done to the Gutter's gate to the south. Here, the arch of stone above the gate itself had crumbled and lay in ruins across the threshold, bodies crushed beneath the massive stone blocks, dust, and debris. A phalanx of Protectorate held the entrance, but parted as we approached, revealing General Daerium, surrounded by a core of captains and male Servants.

Daerium turned. "Mistress. Lord Sorrenti." Blood dripped from a wound in his scalp, and his uniform of blood-red and gold was stained with sweat and blood and dirt. He didn't bother to wipe away the trail of blood on his face, his gaze falling onto Haqtl's body instead. He frowned.

"The threat in the Council chambers is gone," Lord Sorrenti said, "thanks to the Mistress and the Band."

Daerium grunted, taking in the black-and-red Skewed Throne banners behind me. He raised his eyebrows, but didn't comment. "We've secured the gates here."

"You should also send a force to the Gutter's gate," Sorrenti said. "That's how we got to the Council chambers. But we had to breach the gate as the Chorl did here."

Daeriu turned immediately, motioned to one of his captains without a word. A phalanx of men broke off from his forces and headed to the gate. "Anything else?"

Sorrenti shook his head. "Nothing but Atlatik and the force in the harbor."
"Good. Let's get moving."

Daeriu joined us, his captains returning to the army behind. We began to wind our way north through the Merchant Quarter, through streets littered with the detritus of the Masquerade, with bodies of guardsmen and citizens and Chorl. Furtive glances greeted us from the cracks in window shutters, a glimpse of a pale face that retreated quickly, nothing more. On the river, I could feel the citizens huddled within the buildings, could sense their fear.

Then the sounds of battle grew clearer, sharper. Baill and Erick exchanged glances, and the escort at my sides drew close, a ripple of warning passing back through the ranks. Daeriu's men tightened their formation as well, without a word from him, and Sorrenti's stance shifted.

I sensed a gathering of power ahead of us, felt it being released, heard the explosion of fire and the resultant reverberations on the river. I breathed in the bitter scent of the Venittian Servants' lightning, glanced skyward to see columns of smoke rising into the air—

And then we rounded a corner and the sounds of battle were suddenly too close, screams echoing off of the surrounding buildings, fire blazing from the cavities of doorways and windows, glass shattering in an explosion. Even as we halted, Erick and Baill pausing a pace in front of me, protectively, horns sounded and Lord March appeared on horseback, galloping straight for the Chorl, the Venittian army—mixed with the Amenkor guardsmen led by Captain Catrell—charging beside him. The Chorl answered with their ululating battle cry.

The two met with a thundering crush of bodies and the clash of metal on metal. The disturbance on the river sent a wave scudding past me with a gust of wind. At the same moment, lightning forked into the Chorl forces from behind, some of it deflected by Chorl shields, the bolts striking the stone of the buildings nearby, rock splintering and melting. Fire arched up and over into the Venittian forces, the screams of the dying piercing through the sound of thunder, the explosions, and the clash of steel.

I felt more than saw Daeriu and Sorrenti halt beside me.

"How are we going to stop this?" Sorrenti said.

I shook my head, frowning, then turned toward them both. "We need to show Atlatik, the Chorl captain, that Haqtl is dead. This entire battle—both here and in the harbor—wasn't the main thrust of the attack. If he knows that Haqtl has failed . . ."

Sorrenti nodded once, the gesture sharp and succinct. His color had improved during the march. "Then we need to catch his attention. His and Lord March's." Before I could ask how, he closed his eyes, drew a deep breath—And in the sudden stillness that enveloped us, the battle ahead somehow removed, I felt a gathering of power, an echo of a much greater force that tasted of the Stone Throne.

A rumble began to fill the air, a sound that shivered up from the ground, into my feet, vibrating in my bones. It increased, the rumble escalating into a low growl, the stone beneath my feet beginning to tremble, then deepening and growing further, until the ground shook.

Ahead, the two armies—Chorl and coastal—paused, men stepping back, glancing around at the shuddering earth, at the increasing roar—

And then, with a dry, hideous crack, the earth split.

Shards of stone flew skyward as the street where the two armies clashed suddenly lurched and splintered open, a jagged fissure—no more than a handspan across—ripping through the cobbles and buildings to either side. Men cried out, stumbled back from the opening, those closest to the crack thrown off

their feet. All of the fighting ceased, both sides stunned. As the stone shards began raining down on the men nearest the fissure, dust starting to rise, Sorrenti sagged to the ground. I shoved Baill and Sorrenti's guardsmen aside, knelt down beside him. Daerium joined me. Sorrenti tried to lift his head, failed, and gave me a weak grin. "I think," he gasped, coughing slightly, "you have their attention." I stood, slowly, heard Sorrenti sigh before he lost consciousness, then turned toward the street ahead. Men were picking themselves up from the ground, scrambling back to their own lines. All of them were looking to the south. Toward us. Toward me and Daerium, who stood at my side. Daerium looked shaken. "Sorrenti did this?" he asked, too low for anyone but me to hear. I nodded, then raised my head. "Erick, Baill," I said, and only then realized how quiet it had become, my voice overly loud. "Bring Haqtl's body." I moved forward, not glancing back to see who followed, aware that Erick and Daerium stayed with me, that Baill and part of the Band hastily grabbed Haqtl's body and closed in behind. I headed toward the banners marking Lord March's position, noted that Atlatik's own banners waited on the far side of the fissure opposite him. The Venittian men parted before us, the Amenkor guardsmen among them nodding as we passed, some signing themselves with the Skewed Throne, a few kneeling. They closed in behind us as we came upon Lord March and his own entourage, his men waiting, swords raised. He dismounted, his face bloody, beard matted with sweat and gore, his eyes black with anger. "What," he demanded harshly, as I halted before him, "have you done?" I didn't answer, bowing my head instead. "Lord March." "She's helped secure the Council chambers and the Wall," Daerium said into the silence. "And now," he continued, when Lord March's anger faltered, "she intends to stop the fighting here." His gaze fell on me, his breath coming out in short gasps through his nose. His hand clenched on the hilt of his drawn sword, his armor creaking. The horse behind him snorted and stamped a foot impatiently. He looked over his own men, over the winged helmets of the Protectorate, toward Catrell and his nearest captain, then came back to me. "You can truly end this?" "I can try, Lord March." When still he hesitated, I added, "Haqtl is dead." He grunted. "Then try." I tasted his doubt on the river, heard it clearly in his voice. But I turned toward the Chorl, toward the banners that marked Atlatik's location, and without another word walked past Lord March and his retinue. I crossed the emptied area between the two forces, feet crunching against flagstones, paused at the fissure Sorrenti had created, stared down at its ragged edge a moment, then stepped across it and slowed as I approached the Chorl line. No one but Erick and Baill followed me. I halted ten paces from the Chorl, glared at their front ranks, at their blue-skinned faces, at their dark blue tattoos, at the vibrant clothes they wore over their armor, now dulled and sullied with dust and blood and sweat. They watched me uncertainly, their dark eyes seething with hatred . . . and a little fear. And I suddenly realized they thought I'd created the fissure, that I'd made the earth quake. And they knew what that force could do. They'd seen their homeland destroyed by something similar, seen their island slide into the sea beneath its force. I'd seen it, through the Ochean's eyes in the moments before I destroyed the throne. I let them relive that memory for a moment, then drew in a deep breath and shouted, "Atlatik!" The Chorl forces tensed. I'd just drawn breath to shout again, when the group before me grew restless, men shifting out of the way as someone moved forward. Atlatik stepped through the front line, his bloodied sword held at the ready.

I glared into his eyes, remembered staring into them after I'd defeated the Ochean in Amenkor. He'd wanted to attack then, hadn't wanted to back down. But Haqtl had convinced him to retreat. I'd seen him a few times before, through memory—Erick's on The Maiden, and Alendor's on a deserted beach—recalled the tattoos that swirled across his face, more dense than those on the other men. The bottom of one ear had been cut off, and his nose had been broken, making his already flat face appear flatter.

He moved forward, came within five paces of me, two other Chorl flanking him. Erick tensed to my right, and Baill stepped forward on my left, both with hands on swords.

I tasted the tension in the air, bitter, like sap.

"What you want?" Atlatik growled, in broken coastal.

"It's over," I said.

Atlatik snorted, scowled, and spat to one side.

I smiled, then motioned the Band forward.

The men carrying Haqtl's body shuffled forward and dumped the corpse on the ground between us. Both of Atlatik's guardsmen stepped forward threateningly, but they halted once the corpse came to rest, head rolling to one side, his wound obvious.

Someone among the Chorl gasped, said something filled with dismay, with horror, a concerned buzz spreading outward from the voice, carrying back through the ranks.

Until Atlatik barked a command and everyone fell silent.

He looked at me, looked into my eyes, and I saw him standing in front of the reed throne the Ochean had used in their homeland. She'd known then that the warriors would follow the priests, had known that the warriors believed in them, in Haqtl, in what he said. In order to control them, the Ochean had worked through the priests, had manipulated Haqtl to get what she'd wanted. Seeing their head priest dead had already sent a wave of fear through the Chorl forces, a ripple effect that Atlatik couldn't hope to control. I could sense the unease of the warriors.

And Atlatik knew it. I could see it in his eyes, in the clenching of his jaw.

"It's over," I said again, more forcefully.

His eyes narrowed. His gaze flicked away from me, scanned Lord March's army arrayed behind me. Far in the distance, the battle in the harbor continued, its echoes dulled almost to nothing here in the streets of the northern quarter.

He had enough forces to defeat Lord March here. He might even be able to take the harbor.

But with Haqtl dead, he couldn't take the throne. Which meant he couldn't take the city, couldn't expect to hold it.

He turned back to me, and for a single moment, I thought he'd continue. Better to die fighting than to retreat; better to die than to concede defeat; better to die than be captured.

A sneer crossed his face. "If leave, you follow. You kill us."

I shook my head. "No. We'll let you leave, without fear of attack." Then I stiffened, let the river gather around me, let its menace enter my voice. "But you'll have to retreat to Bosun's Bay. And you'll have to stay there. Or we will attack you, we will destroy you."

His nostrils flared, his sword shifting in his grip. The men behind him grew restless.

In the end, he lowered his head. "We will . . . leave."

His voice was harsh. Grudging. Filled with contempt, with hatred.

I nodded. "Then leave."

He waited a moment, the muscles of his jaw twitching—

Then he turned, motioned with one hand, and shouted something.

A horn was blown—not the brass notes from one of Lord March's horns, but the deeper, throbbing notes from one of the Chorl shells. An answering horn sounded from the direction of the harbor.

The Chorl forces began to regroup, slowly, the Chorl warriors moving as

grudgingly as Atlatik.

Atlatik turned his head, stared down at Haqtl's body, his own still rigid with contempt.

Then he spat to one side, sneering, and snapped an order in the Chorl language.

A covey of Chorl warriors ran forward and collected the Chorl priest's body, lifted it quickly, but with reverence, and walked it back toward the Chorl line.

Atlatik paused, gave me one last, long, unreadable look—

Then turned and vanished into his own ranks.

"That was . . . interesting," Erick murmured.

I shuddered, a tension I didn't realize I'd felt releasing in my shoulders. My hand fell away from the handle of my dagger. I hadn't even noticed it had been resting there.

"Come on," I said, heading back toward Lord March and his retinue, toward General Daerium and the Protectorate. I halted before Lord March, felt the men around him shifting restlessly.

"The Chorl forces are retreating," I said. "They've agreed to go if you allow them to leave without being harried. They'll return to Bosun's Bay. You can try to slaughter them if you want, but they have more men than you, and they have their priests and their Servants—more Servants than you. Personally, I'd let them go."

Lord March sucked in a deep breath . . . then let it out in a heavy sigh.

"They've taken the Boreaite Isles, Bosun's Bay and the surrounding area. They have a foothold on the coast."

"Yes. And at the moment they've lost two thirds of their leaders. They've lost their homeland. They've lost a good portion of their men, first in Amenkor, and now here in Venitte."

"We'll have to deal with them eventually," Lord March muttered.

I thought about what Avrell had said on the Defiant on the trip to Venitte. The Chorl would have to be dealt with, eventually. We'd have to form a treaty with them, come to some type of agreement about land, about the trade routes between the coast and the Boreaite Isles.

"But not at this moment," I said to Lord March.

Lord March glanced toward the Chorl forces, a frown touching his face.

"If you attack them," I said into his silence, "you'll have to kill them all. Every last one of them—men, women, and children. They came to the coast to find a home, because they have no home left to return to. They're going to stay on the coast. You won't be able to drive them away."

Then, more forcefully, because he still hesitated, "You'll have to kill them all."

And with that, I turned away—

To find Westen waiting.

I took one look at his eyes and knew.

My would-be assassin was dead.

And then I saw the blood on Westen's shirt, the slashes in the cloth, and realized it was his own blood.

I raised my eyebrows and he frowned.

"It appears that the Chorl have their own Seekers," he said.

I stilled, thought of the assassinations attempted in the Stone Garden, thought of those that had succeeded, and sighed.

I began moving through Lord March's forces, leaving General Daerium and Lord Sorrenti behind. Within moments, my entourage was joined by Captain Catrell.

"Mistress," he said, the question clear in his voice.

"We're leaving," I said, voice tight. "For Amenkor. As soon as possible.

"I want to go home."

Epilogue

EMASQUE AND PARMATI "survived" the Chorl's assassinations, I said.

Through the Fire, I felt Eryn's contempt. What did they say? Where were they

during the battles in the city and harbor?

I snorted. They claim that after the attempt was made on their lives, they were forced to retreat to safety, that they never had a chance to help defend the city after that. There was too much chaos, too much confusion. And yet Lady Tormaul managed to join Lord March in the north. And Lord Dussain ordered his forces to engage the Chorl as well, even though he was wounded and could not join them himself.

I didn't answer. There was no need.

But my silence was noted. Eryn's attention shifted more closely toward me.

What have you done?

I pulled back from the Fire, drew myself in so tightly that nothing was exposed.

Eryn sensed the change.

What have you done, Varis?

I stiffened, frowned. What I've always done. What needed to be done.

Eryn sucked in a sharp breath, her body tensed with a reprimand, with a warning—

But the breath set off a coughing fit instead. Spasms racked her body, her entire chest aching, a sharper pain lancing up from her gut into her lungs, a piercing agony, as if someone were slicing her open from the inside. I reached out through the Fire, absorbed some of that pain into myself, tried to calm the spasms that set off the coughing. I tasted blood in my mouth as I became entwined with Eryn, as I merged with her, the blood thick, rolling over my tongue. I spit the taste of it—cold iron and bitter salt—into cloth, spit again, and again.

Until finally the fit subsided.

I slumped back into the chair, exhausted, my arms weak, my breath ragged, but short. I winced as I shifted, the pain in my chest lessening. Tears streamed from my eyes—tears of exertion, of resignation.

I lifted the rag clutched in my hand, opened it.

Blood. More blood than it seemed possible to cough up; not a mere speckling. And dark blood. Heart blood.

Eryn's blood.

I withdrew from Eryn's body, sank back into the Fire, and as Eryn took back control she let the hand with the bloodstained cloth fall to the arm of the chair.

Thank you, she said. For trying.

I didn't respond, didn't know how to respond. Because the fire in her stomach had not subsided, because the pain—that dagger slicing her open from the inside out—hadn't diminished even after the coughing faded.

We sat in silence, Eryn staring across her own chambers, across a room that felt empty even though a Servant waited to take care of any possible need. I should have left her, should have preserved some of the strength I was no doubt draining from Marielle, from Heddan.

But I couldn't. I couldn't leave Eryn alone. Not after what she'd done for Amenkor, what she'd done for me.

And eventually, she stirred, drew herself up straighter in her chair, became aware that I was still hovering within the Fire inside her.

When will you return to Amenkor?

Bullick finished the repairs to the Defiant after the battle in the harbor yesterday. He's loaded the ships with cargo—William's cargo—and we intend to head out today. Assuming there will be no interference from the Chorl on the trip north, we should reach Amenkor in roughly three weeks.

Eryn was silent for a long time.

Then: I'll inform Nathem and Darryn.

I frowned at the gentle dismissal, thought about remaining. . . .

But there was nothing I could do.

So I drew myself out of the Fire, pulled myself free, and found the glint of white burning to the south. With a last glance over Amenkor, over the city I hadn't seen in over four months, that I wouldn't see again for another three

weeks, I sped toward that glint of light.

I gasped as I entered my own body, felt Marielle and Heddan withdraw their conduits, felt Erick's presence behind me, the scent of oranges strong, felt Westen's presence as well, and opened my eyes—

To find Sorrenti seated in the chair opposite me, waiting.

I straightened in my seat, but did not nod in acknowledgment.

"Lord Sorrenti. You look . . . well."

He smiled tightly. "It's been a week since the attack, since the retreat. I've had some time to recuperate. The use of the throne was . . . draining."

I felt the ground shuddering beneath my feet again, felt the tremors in my legs, recalled the crack the stone had made as the earth split. "I can only imagine."

"The current story in the marketplace and on the wharf is that you caused the earth to shudder," he said.

"We both know that's not what happened."

"Yes, but I'd like to let the lie continue. No one saw the Stone Throne except for you and your men. No one heard us discuss the throne except your men and the few Venittian guardsmen and Protectorate who accompanied us to the Gutter's gate. The Stone Throne has been kept hidden for hundreds of years. I'd like it to remain hidden. I can keep the Venittian guardsmen silent. I assume you can do the same with your own men."

"Yes."

"Then let the rumors continue."

"Very well."

Sorrenti nodded, then stood. I rose as well.

"I wanted to thank you before you left. On behalf of Venitte, of course, but also on behalf of the Seven. If the throne had fallen into the Chorl's hands . . ."

"And is that a direct thank you?" I said, smiling tightly.

He grinned. "Yes. All of the previous Masters of the Stone Throne thank you, but, in particular, Cerrin does. He can still sense you, especially now that you've been close, within the Council of Seven's inner chamber itself."

But Sorrenti halted, his smile fading. He caught my gaze, held it, his expression intent, mouth pressed into a thin line that was not quite a frown.

"Have you heard?" he asked.

I tensed, felt Westen and Erick shift stances behind me.

"Heard what?"

"Lord Demasque and Lady Parmati," he said. "They were found dead, in their own bedrooms, on their own estates, their throats slit."

I didn't react, didn't flinch, didn't waver. My eyes never left his.

When it became apparent I wasn't going to answer, Sorrenti frowned. He looked toward Erick and Westen, lingering on the captain of the Seekers a long moment, then returned his attention to me.

"Lord March is waiting at the wharf for your departure, for a more formal thank you, and a more formal send-off. Along with General Daerium and the two other surviving Council members— Lady Tormaul and Lord Dussain." He nodded his head. "Have a safe journey, Mistress."

As soon as he left, Erick and Westen stepped forward, Marielle and Heddan rising as well.

"It's time to go," I said. "I'm tired of Venitte."

The breeze from the channel cooled the sweat on my brow as I stood on the veranda. Sunlight glinted off the waves of the harbor far below, ships gliding back and forth in relative silence. A few bells clanged, an occasional shout could be heard; but otherwise it was quiet but for the wind.

And a sudden shriek from Jaer behind me.

I turned, leaned back against the stone balustrade of the veranda as five-year-old Jaer came tearing out onto the wide patio, dodging around the chairs and table already set with a decanter of wine, a pitcher of water, glasses, and a tray of bread and fruit. Pallin—two years Jaer's elder—raced after her sister, her face screwed up in wrath.

Jaer flew behind one of the potted trees that shaded the veranda, the urn used as its base as large as she was. Pallin swore. "You little . . . When I catch you!" She darted left, and Jaer shrieked again, skipping around the urn, just out of reach. Pallin growled in frustration, faked a move right, but backtracked as Jaer fell for it and snagged her by the arm.

"Pallin!" Olivia barked, coming out onto the veranda carrying another tray of food—a haunch of mutton, already sliced. "Leave your sister alone."

"But, Mother, she singed off a chunk of my hair!"

I almost snorted in laughter, but managed to keep quiet.

"I don't care. We'll get one of the servants to trim it back later. For now, let your sister go."

Pallin considered, until Olivia gave her the look, lips set into a thin line, eyes slightly widened. In disgust, she pushed her sister away from her, Jaer collapsing to the ground a little too melodramatically. Pallin ignored her, stalking around to the far side of the table, as far from everyone as possible, so she could stare out across the channel and sulk.

Olivia set the tray of meat on the table, then wandered toward me. Her black hair glistened in the sunlight, and I reached up to caress the olive skin of her cheek. She smiled.

"Do you have to go in to see the Council?"

"You know I do," I said, reflexively. A sudden sickening sensation coursed through my stomach, a thread of dread, of warning.

I frowned, my hand halting. Taking Olivia into my arms, I kissed the top of her head, breathed in the scent of her hair.

She looked up into my eyes, pressing in close. "You should eat before you go. Stay with Jaer and Pallin for a while."

"I can't. The Council has important decisions to make."

"More important than me, than your children?" She said it lightly, mocking me.

"Hmm . . . you ask dangerous questions. More dangerous than the Council."

She laughed, but that sensation of dread, that acidic burn in the center of my gut, flared higher, and I frowned. I turned, looked out over the harbor, out into the channels, listening intently, expectantly.

Olivia's brow creased, her smile faltering. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know. It feels like something's supposed to happen. I keep expecting to hear—"

Explosions. The muffled sound of explosions against the cliffs. I expected to see fire arching up into the sky, shattering against the tiled roofs of the estates that lined the channels. I expected to smell smoke, taste ash, breathe in the reek of burning flesh.

Because this is what happened when the Chorl attacked. This was the day—that last day—that I'd spent with Olivia, with Jaer and Pallin, before the Chorl destroyed the peace of the coast.

Olivia felt my body tense beneath her hands. I knew because the smile faded completely, and she turned to face the channels, to face the harbor, one hand shifting to the center of my chest, resting there in concern.

We stood there in silence, Jaer and Pallin behind us, both at the table now, picking at the food, the fight over the singed hair forgotten. The wind rustled in the long, thin leaves of the potted plants. Somewhere, a seagull shrieked.

But nothing happened. There were no explosions, no fires, no deaths. Business continued as usual in the harbor below.

"Cerrin, what is it?" Olivia asked again, and I hated the concern that laced her voice, hated the fear.

Where are the Chorl? Where are the Servants, the priests, the warriors?

I glanced down, Olivia turning her head to see me, so I could see her face, her eyes, could smell the slight citrus scent of her perfume.

And then I realized, then I remembered.

This was the throne. This was the haven I'd created for myself. Not the haven I'd expected, and not built at the cost I'd expected, but a haven nonetheless. A retreat from the pain of this loss, this grief.

I relaxed, tension draining from me like water, sliding free. I reached up and brushed Olivia's hair away from where the breeze had pushed tendrils in front of her eyes, then cupped the back of her head.

"It's nothing," I said, and then I leaned forward and kissed the worry from her mouth, the wrinkles from her brow.

"So will you eat?" she asked as I let her go.

I laughed. "Yes, I'll eat. I'll stay here—with you, with Pallin and Jaer—all afternoon."

"But what of the Council? What of the Seven?"

I slid my hand into hers and pulled her to the table. "The Council can wait."

"Amenkor, dead ahead!"

Everyone on board the Defiant crowded to the edge of the deck at the cry, necks craning to be the first to see the escarpment and wall of the city, or the tower of the palace. When the vague shape of the land gave way to the jutting arms that enclosed the harbor, a cheer broke out, the voices of guardsmen and crew mingling. Someone started a jig, another brought forth a fiddle and began playing madly.

When the watchtowers came into view, I smiled, felt something tighten in my chest, sting my eyes.

Someone laid their hand on my shoulder, their arm across my back.

Erick.

We watched as the walls drew closer, and then he frowned. "Those are new watchtowers."

I laughed. "Yes, they are. A lot in Amenkor will seem different."

He grunted.

William came up on my other side and Erick's hand dropped from my shoulder. He gave me a meaningful look, then wandered away as William leaned on the railing.

"Mistress."

"Master William."

We caught each other's eyes, and I grinned and butted him with my shoulder.

And then we passed through the narrow inlet between the watchtowers. A tingling sensation coursed through me, and I sucked in a sharp breath.

Varis.

William straightened at my side, frowned. "What is it?"

I shuddered, shook myself. "I don't know. For a moment, I thought ..."

"Thought what?"

I looked William in the eye, saw the concern there, the frown that barely touched his mouth. "I thought I heard a voice. Eryn's voice."

William's frown deepened, but ahead, a clanging of bells began to ring out, spreading from the watchtowers up through the city. As the Defiant slid into the dock, the escorting captured Chorl ships waiting out in the bay, the noise grew. People lined the wharf, waving and yelling in welcome. I watched as a covey of guardsmen pushed through the crowd and onto the dock, led by Darryn and Nathem.

I frowned, my stomach clenching.

William gasped, and I turned.

"Look!" he said, and pointed toward one of the other docks.

A ship was berthed there, but it was unlike any ship I'd seen. Larger, its hull rising at least another man's height over Bullick's ship, and wider as well. And it carried more sails.

On the far side sat another, and in the docks beyond, even more. Only the two closest to the Defiant appeared finished, though. The rest were still being built.

"They're Borund's ships," I said, and smiled tightly. Because that sickening clench in my stomach had not receded. I tasted bile at the back of my throat, swallowed the bitterness, then steadied myself and turned back to the dock. Captain Darryn and the Second, Nathem, were waiting, their escort of guardsmen behind them.

I pushed back from the railing, felt William hesitate, then follow.

We met Avrell, Erick, Marielle, and Westen at the head of the plank.

Avrell looked grim.

I paused, almost reached out to touch him, but turned as the plank slapped down onto the dock, crewmen tying the ship down in a frenzy of activity. The crowd continued to roar, but the sound had dulled, had faded into the background. I'd latched onto Darryn's face, saw the control there, the tightness.

Bullick descended the plank, greeted Darryn, Nathem, listened a single moment, then shot a look back up toward me before stepping aside.

I descended the plank slowly, the sounds of the crowd receding even further, all activity on the wharf withdrawing, a numbness filling me, tingling in my arms, in my fingers, in my legs. A familiar numbness. A familiar pain.

As soon as I stepped from the plank onto the dock, I asked, "Where's Eryn?"

Darryn's jaw clenched, and I saw the answer in his eyes.

He didn't say a word.

"Take me to her."

He nodded, motioned toward the waiting carriages.

Nathem had laid her body out in the throne room, before the throne, surrounded by candlelight. A white shroud covered her, draped down the edges of the table, the shroud itself stitched in gold with the Skewed Throne symbol.

Beneath the cloth, her hands had been placed one over the other on her chest. Her eyes were closed, her skin pale and smooth. Her black hair pooled around her head like spilled ink.

"We found her here," Nathem said, his aged voice cracking with emotion. "At the base of the throne."

I stared down at her face, at the wrinkles that even death could not smooth, at the paleness of the skin, the lines of her throat, the chain of gold that someone had placed around it, at the gold-embroidered fringe of the white dress just visible at the edges of the shroud itself. I felt Nathem shift uncomfortably to my right, sensed Avrell to my left. No one else had accompanied us into the chamber except Erick and Westen, and they remained at the entrance, withdrawn, respectful.

I wanted to reach out and touch her, but couldn't. I didn't want to feel the coldness of her skin beneath my fingers, didn't want to feel the death there. Instead, I lifted my gaze to the throne, felt the heat of the candles against my face, smelled the bitterness of their smoke.

And then I stilled.

Because the throne was no longer cracked.

Even as I watched, it began to twist, the rough granite seat morphing into a chair with a short, straight back, no arms.

Garus' seat, from the Council of Seven.

I gasped, looked down at Eryn's face again.

"What did you do?" I whispered.

The throne shifted again, settled into a large round ottoman. Silicia's ottoman.

I stepped away from Eryn's body, circled the shrouded table, and mounted the three stone steps of the dais to stand before the throne.

I reached out to touch it, but hesitated.

Because I could feel it now, a presence, hovering in the room. Not as weighted as before, not as smothering, but it was there.

And yet, I couldn't feel it. Not as I had before.

Because it wasn't part of me. Because I wasn't part of it. Because this throne was vacant. No one controlled it. No one had claimed it. Yet.

I stilled, stared down at the stone as it began to warp yet again, becoming a river rock, worn smooth with water and age.

"She healed it," Nathem said behind me, voice quiet. "She said that she was dying, that there was nothing that could be done to save her, and so she wanted to try to fix the throne, to repair it. She said that you'd given her the idea, that you'd told her its creation required a life, a sacrifice. So she decided to sacrifice herself to heal it."

I let my hand drop to my side, turned to face out into the throne room, into the mostly empty chamber. I met Erick's gaze, Westen's. Their faces remained blank, their backs straight, hands resting lightly on the hilts of their daggers.

I shifted my gaze to Nathem, to Avrell. Nathem bowed his head. But Avrell met my gaze, his face wet with tears, mouth tight with grief.

"You are the Mistress," he said, his voice raw and thick. "You are Amenkor."

I stared into his eyes, into the sorrow there, into the pain.

And into the hope.

I turned back to the throne, reached out, hesitated again, for a single breath, for two-

And then . . . I touched it.

And in case you missed the first two novels of

The Throne of Amenkor,

we hope you enjoy these excerpts from

THE SKEWED THRONE

and

THE CRACKED THRONE,

both of which are available in hardcover

and paperback editions from DAW.

From The Skewed Throne:

VER one thousand years ago, a great fire swept through the city of Amenkor. Not a fire like those burning in the bowls of standing oil that lined the promenade to the palace, all red and orange and flapping in the wind that came from the sea. No. This fire was white, pure, and cold. And from the legends, this fire burned from horizon to horizon, reaching from the ground to the clouds. It came from the west, like the wind, and when it fell upon the city it passed through walls and left them untouched, passed through people and left them unburned. It covered the entire city--there was no escape, it touched everyone--and then it swept onward, inland, until it vanished, nothing more than a white glow, and then nothing at all.

It is said the White Fire cast the city into madness. It is said the Fire was an omen, a harbinger of the eleven-year drought and the famine and disease that followed.

It is said the Fire murdered the ruling Mistress of the time, even though her body was found unburned on the wide stone steps that led up to the palace at the end of the promenade. There were bruises around her throat in the shape of hands, and bruises in the shape of boots on her naked back and bared breasts. There were bruises elsewhere, beneath the white robes that lay about her waist in torn rags, the robe held in place only by the angle of her body and the gold sash of her office. There was blood as well. Not gushing blood, but spotted blood.

But the legends say the Fire killed her.

Fire, my ass.

Tucked into the niche set high in a narrow corridor of the palace, I snorted in contempt, then shifted with a grimace to ease a cramped muscle. No part of my body moved out into the light. The niche sat at the end of a long shaft that provided airflow into the depths of the palace.

Any blind-ass bastard could tell what had really happened to the Mistress. And the blind-ass bastard who killed her should have rotted in the deepest hellhole in Amenkor. There were quicker ways to kill someone than strangulation. I knew.

I drew in a slow breath and listened. Nothing but the guttering flames of the standing bowls of burning oil which lit the empty corridor below. The airflow in the palace was strong, gusting through the opening at my back. A storm was coming. But the wind took care of the smoke from the burning oil. And other

smells.

After a long, considering moment, I slid forward to the edge of the niche and glanced down the corridor in both directions. Nothing.

With one smooth shift, I slipped over the lip of the opening, dangled by white-knuckled fingers for a moment until steady, then dropped to the floor. "You, boy! Help me with this."

I spun, hand falling to the knife hidden inside the palace clothing that had been provided the night before: page's clothing that was a little too big for me, a little loose. But apparently it had worked. I was small for my age, and had no breasts to speak of, but I definitely wasn't a boy.

The woman who'd spoken was dressed in the white robe of a personal servant of the Mistress and carried two woven baskets, one in each arm. One of the baskets was threatening to tip out of her grasp. She'd managed to catch it with the other basket before it fell, but both baskets were now balanced awkwardly against her chest, ready to tip at the slightest movement.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Her face creased in irritation and anger, but her eyes remained focused on the baskets.

I straightened from the instinctual crouch and moved forward to catch the basket before it fell. It was heavier than it looked.

My hand brushed the woman's skin as I took the basket and a long thin slash of pain raced up my arm, as if someone had drawn a dagger's blade across my skin from wrist to elbow. I glanced at the woman sharply, tensed.

The woman heaved a sigh of relief and wiped a trembling hand across her forehead. "Thank you." After a moment to catch her breath, she motioned to the basket again. "Now give it back. Carefully!"

Relief swept through me. She hadn't felt the contact, hadn't felt the slash of pain or anything else out of the ordinary at all.

I set the basket back into the woman's arms, careful not to touch her skin again, the woman grunting at its weight. Then I stepped aside and let her pass. She huffed out of the corridor, vanishing around a corner.

I watched her receding back, then my eyes narrowed. I wasn't supposed to run into anyone, especially not one of the true Servants. No one was supposed to know I was here.

I'd have to be more careful.

I fingered the knife again, considering, then turned away, moving in the other direction, shrugging thoughts of the woman aside. She'd barely glanced up from her baskets, too intent on not dropping them. She wouldn't remember meeting a page boy. Not inside the palace. And there wasn't any time to spare, not if I was to get to the Mistress' chambers before dawn. I was in the outermost portion of the palace, still needed to get to the linen closet with the archer's nook, get past the guards at the inner sanctum. . . .

I shook my head and moved a little faster down the narrow corridor, running through the mental image of the map of the palace in my head, reviewing the timing. The incoming storm prickled through my skin, urging me on. I reached into an inner pocket and fingered the key hidden there.

I had to get to the Mistress' chambers tonight. We'd waited too long already . . . had waited six years hoping that things would get better, looking for alternate solutions. Six long years since the Second Coming of the White Fire, and since that day things had only gotten worse. Legend said that the first Fire had cast the city into madness. The second Fire had done the same. A slow, subtle madness. And now winter bore down on us, the seas already getting rough, unsuitable for trade. With the mountain passes closed, resources low . . .

As I turned into a second corridor, I frowned, with a hard and determined expression. We'd tried everything to end it. Everything but what legend said had worked the first time the Fire came. Now there was no choice.

It was time for the Mistress to die.

From The Cracked Throne:

"I think I'll go to the throne room."

Erick's face grew somber, his stance tightening with disapproval. "Very well."

"I just want to check on the city. Besides, I've been working with Eryn on controlling myself, and on protecting myself from the throne. I'll be fine." I knew from testing the throne on my own that I didn't need the throne to check on the city, that touching it wasn't required—I could sense the city even now—but touching it made sensing the emotions of the city as a whole easier. And right now all I wanted to do was relax.

Erick didn't look convinced.

In the throne room, at the sight of the amorphous throne shifting at the far end of the hall, my confidence faltered. But I straightened resolutely and walked down the central walkway, Erick at my back. He'd insisted on coming and, since the last time I'd used the throne I'd ended up unconscious on the dais steps in my own vomit, I couldn't argue with him.

At the base of the dais, I paused. Inside, I could feel the voices of the throne waiting, strangely quiet. I thought about Cerrin, who'd somehow escaped the Fire, and with careful deliberation I slid beneath the river and began to weave the protective net Eryn had drilled into me, trying a few of the alterations she'd proposed to help keep Cerrin and the rest of the Seven under control. Slipping deeper, I threw the net around the blazing sphere of White Fire that contained the voices at my core. The mostly quiet voices grew suddenly grim and disgusted and drew back from the wall of flame.

The net secured, I did another circuit around the sphere, searching for signs of the flaw that I knew must exist, but again I found nothing.

I turned to Erick. "I'm ready." I was surprised my voice was so steady.

He nodded, his stance alert.

Drawing a short breath, I moved up the steps and sat on the twisting stone.

Involuntarily, I winced, expecting the voices to come crashing down around me, smothering me as they had done before, now that they were close to their source of power. But while the same weighted blanket settled over, making the room feel more real, more dense, the voices barely stirred, only the intensity of their movements behind the Fire increasing.

I let my breath out slowly, let the pulse of the throne course through me.

Taking another moment to check the security of the protective net, I smiled at Erick in reassurance, then sank myself in the sensations of the city.

For a long moment, I simply hovered, the city spread out before me, as if I stood on the rooftop of the palace's tower staring down over its sprawling streets and tightly packed buildings. The roiling flow of the people's emotions washed over me in rhythmic swells, like waves. The scent of the waves was cool and smooth with tentative contentment. Winter had set in, the ocean was turbulent outside the bay, but here, in the harbor, where the River met the sea, we'd survived. Where before there had been a riot of apprehension, concern over whether there was enough food, uncertainty about the sudden change of power in the palace, and fear about the repercussions of the madness everyone suspected in the old Mistress, now there was hope that everything would turn out all right. There was food. They'd seen it in the warehouses, seen it being off-loaded from the ships, knew that if they were willing to work for it, the food could be theirs. Where before I'd sensed anxiety and despair, now I found industrious activity.

Not everywhere, of course. There was still a feeling of discontent near the Dredge. I focused on that part of the city, until I hovered over the Dredge itself, felt the people flowing down its streets and alleys.

I let the Dredge roll over me, then turned away. I'd done what I could for them. For now.

Next, I moved to the wharf, watched the workers packing fish in salt, rolling the barrels into storage. On the waters of the harbor, others were in small boats, hauling up crab traps, searching even though it was out of season. Still others were working in the rigging of the trading ships or on the decks, making repairs to rope and wood, pulleys and sails.

I stayed here the longest. The sailing ships had always intrigued me, even

before I'd begun working as Borund's bodyguard. While hunting for easy marks on the wharf, I'd often sit for hours watching the dockworkers unloading cargo, dreaming about what strange foods the crates and barrels could carry, of what I could steal if given the chance.

It had been impossible then to imagine that I could have boarded one of the huge ships and left with it, escaped the city entirely. At that time, all I knew was Amenkor. There was nothing outside the warren of the Dredge, the streets and alleys of the wharf and the lower city. But I suddenly realized that I could have escaped on one of the ships back then.

But not now. I was bound to the throne now.

I drew back from the wharf and the activity on the docks reluctantly, then turned my attention to the warehouse district. But even with the sense of regret I now felt, watching the people of the city had worked. I no longer felt so tense, and for a brief moment I'd forgotten about Eryn and the group that had probably already arrived in Colby.

Unconsciously, I looked out over the city along the southern coastline. Where the influence of the throne ended, the undulating flow of the river became listless. The river still existed beyond the city, but it didn't have the same power without the throne behind it, its scents and tastes weren't as vibrant. It was just the river, the same power I'd used to survive on the Dredge.

Somehow, with the full power of the throne flowing through me, that now seemed paltry. Even with what I'd learned practicing with Eryn, who even without the throne's supporting power could do more with the river—or the Sight as she called it—than I'd managed to learn on my own on the Dredge.

Far down the coastline, outside of the influence of the throne, something flared.

I frowned, turned my full attention south.

And caught the flicker of light again. A white light, far enough away that it could barely be seen.

But now that I had seen it I realized I recognized it.

The White Fire.

Without thought, I reached for it. But then Eryn's warning brought me up short, like a slap.

Frowning, I withdrew to the palace's tower in my mind, began to pace its length, casting furtive glances out toward the tiny blinking white flame, Eryn's warning echoing through my head.

It's too dangerous, her voice whispered from memory. Reaching like that, extending yourself out so far. . . . You could lose yourself, never find your way back.

And that had been when I'd tried to reach out to the Dredge.

This looked much, much farther away.

I drew to a halt at the edge of the palace tower, facing the faint white light. I'd spent a lot of time pushing the boundaries of the throne recently, stretching farther and farther out over its influence without letting the connection to my own body break.

But if I reached for this Fire . . .

Don't.

I jumped, felt a tingle of guilt sweep through me as if I'd blushed, then steadied myself, the guilt hardening into anger and a trace of fear as I drew in the sharp scent of that strange incense, as I recognized Cerrin.

He stood next to me on the edge of the tower, the wind from the ocean flapping in the tails of his coat, his very presence more solid, more real. Here, the yellow of his shirt was vibrant, his coat a deep, rich brown. His short beard was trimmed to a sharp point and his tawny eyes glittered with a hard intelligence . . . and a deep melancholy.

Why not? I asked

He shook his head. Because what Eryn said is correct. It is dangerous. It is foolhardy. It is stupid. More than you know have lost themselves by Reaching. But also because even if you can find your way back—which I doubt—you will be drained. And for what?

I turned away. How are you escaping the Fire? How are you escaping the net? We are the Seven. Almost fifteen hundred years ago we realized that we were the last of our kind, the last that had power—true power. The last that could wield all of the elemental magics. There was no one who would follow us. But we knew that someday there would be someone of true power again, and so we tried to preserve our knowledge. So we created the thrones—to preserve what we knew until it could be used again, and to protect the Frigean coast against those who would destroy it.

He looked out over the southern coastline. There is more magic than just the Fire. Or the river. Don't Reach for the Fire. It's too dangerous.