

STONE MAIDEN
ANN AQUIRRE



Stone Maiden
by Ann Aguirre

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Part I: THE MAID'S QUEST

SALT AND BONE

Cahra, the reign of Izzat Aban

Sweat rolled down her face onto her neck. Wiping it away, she continued scrubbing with an implacable determination that would have been majestic had it been applied to a different task. Her hands had lost all feeling in the scalding water, so she used them imprecisely, chafing the soiled sheets until both her skin and the stains were removed. Mechanically, she lifted them out of the water, wetting the front of her dress. She pinned the laundry on a cord stretched between two desiccated trees, and it billowed around her like an encampment of Bedu tents.

A radiantly fair, slim, and lissome girl came through the arched doorway of the terra-cotta house. The houses were delicate and round, three domes connecting the disparate wings. Five builders spent months etching the clay, layering and shaping with fresh earth before baking the masterwork to glossy completion. As the girl crossed the yard her hair blazed the polished gold of her father's goblets.

"Have you finished the lot by yourself?"

"No sense in another servant ruining her hands as well, Lavedi Immelia." Without apparent bitterness, Muir held them out for inspection.

"I knew that last batch of soap was too harsh. Come, I'll get you some of the crown-oil cream that works so well."

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"Yes, Lavedi." Muir's face turned slightly toward the ground in the semblance of servitude—all she'd known—but despite her best efforts at repression, a rumbling sound came from her stomach.

"You haven't eaten today?"

"No, Lavedi."

The lavedi made a noise with her tongue and teeth. "Come inside."

From the laundry line, they passed a copse of scrubby trees and the small garden that Muir tended because she liked to grub in the dirt. Inside the house, it was immeasurably cooler. Both women paused by the door to slide out of their shoes, and then continued into the living area. Textured, whitewashed walls and colorful pillows were the mainstay of the room, punctuated by low tables draped with sumptuous fabrics.

Ever impatient, Immelia tugged at Muir's damp sleeve. "The cream is in my room. And while we are there," she added in a near whisper, "we shall speak of the messenger. You must tell me everything you know."

Of course, Muir thought with a wry smile. Any kindness that the lavedi performed would not come without a price. Wordlessly, she followed her lady into a large room, large for the size of the house. It was dim and quiet—no windows allowed the heat of the day inside.

The bed, no more than six inches off the floor as custom dictated, was draped with soft, sleek fabrics, diaphanous and cool, in rippling, bejeweled hues. The floor was baked sand honed smooth by magic long ago and sprinkled with rugs

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woven from the beautiful fur of the lykos and also, it was whispered, the raven-black hair of a princess who had once been Immelia's rival. Most naturally, Muir did not mention the latter.

Instead, she studied her favorite tapestry, hung on the north wall. Its panels depicted how Minau the Healer found the Lord of Death gathering souls in the great waste—a lover's tale, shared on starless nights. The tapestry was very old and beautiful; and, in the way of ancient things, it had its own magic. Sometimes, late at night, when she sat beside the lavedi's bed, Muir even thought she saw Kaveh weep.

"The messenger," Immelia said, holding the ointment just out of reach.

Muir squared her shoulders. If she were caught lying, the lavedi would cut out her tongue. She weighed her options: fear of the lavedi against her terror of the izzat. "Your father has been secretive lately. I fear something is brewing again in middle Raton."

Raton was the land governed by the izzat, divided into three separate regions. Muir knew that strong cities such as Inay gave only token respect to Izzat Aban and she had heard whispers of dissent as she passed open doors.

"That is foolishness," Immelia said sharply. "Father quashed their little rebellion. Nothing more can possibly come from a pack of goat-herding scum."

Muir regretted her words. Though she was hopelessly ignorant of most political matters, she knew enough to understand what the trouble was: those subsistence farmers had been supplied with good weapons and incited to riot by

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the merchants in Feroz. But with Lavedi Immelia, talk of war was difficult since her only brother, Drens, had given his life back to the earth only last summer in quashing the revolt. Immelia had loved him with a dark and unparalleled passion and had often stayed with him until the early hours of the morning, creeping back into her own room like a thief. On this affair Muir had no opinion; she merely grieved that her mistress suffered.

"You're right," Muir murmured, submission coating her voice like the thickest honey.

Sighing, Immelia made rare amends for her snapping words. "Now that Drens is gone, Father will have to remarry or we will have no izzat."

Muir nodded gravely, for the succession was no laughing matter. Without a leader of direct descent, the country would break into a civil war unmatched in recent memory. "You must think about a husband, Lavedi. It will be hard for you to give your keys into the keeping of the izzat's second wife."

Immelia's exquisite features hardened, becoming pale and dangerous, akin to the death masks their ancestors had worn long ago when the gods were still free. "I will never wed," she spat, slapping Muir with one slim hand. "A curse on you for suggesting such a thing. I will never suffer a man to own me and make me his creature, a she beast to breed his young."

Muir did not rub her cheek. It would only earn her another slap and would not assuage the stinging pain in her face. Tomorrow she would bear a red mark, for Immelia's hands were deceptively strong; she had worn those five slender

fingers imprinted on her cheeks before—and once around her throat.

Her fear of the lavedi overcame caution; it could not be much longer until Izzat Aban revealed his scheme to his daughter, and Immelia would assume, rightfully, that Muir had known it since the messenger's arrival three days before. Punishment for secrecy was far worse than anything she might endure now.

"The izzat is arranging a marriage for you," she whispered. "He has selected for himself a second wife, one younger than you, and he wishes you settled before these rites."

A groan came from Immelia, and she hung her head for a moment, her ivory skin almost green. Shortly, her pain passed into a howl of rage. Out of long habit, Muir folded herself double on the cool floor, her head tucked beneath her arms. Pottery smashed, fabric tore, and all the while the lavedi screamed until her lungs sounded near to bursting, her throat raw with betrayal and rage.

And because Muir was not truly a person, only a vessel in their service, she heard the secrets. Secrets she possessed in abundance, for the high house of Izzat Aban was full of them.

"Father, I curse your name for breaking faith with me! To deceive me on the very night your son was burned! One taste, you said, and I need never leave this house. Your queen, you said, in all but name. I curse every rock and tree, every mote of dust. I curse this place to die—nothing shall ever grow—I will salt your *bones*, Father!"

Then predictably, blows rained upon Muir's back, head, neck, and the curve of her spine; and soon after, kicks came

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hard and vicious, landing most often on her ribs. But Muir knew the pattern and protected herself as best she could, bearing the attack until it blew itself out. And when she heard the lavedi collapse, sobbing on her many-cushioned bed, she crawled over to her, ignoring the pain in her side.

Muir came beside her and touched her hair and waited.

Immelia curled into her, seeking her arms like a child. "I will leave this house," she whispered, "and never return. I will go away and become a man's thing, a vessel for his use, and I will lose myself. I must leave my people, and when I die, I will be burned on alien earth."

"I am sorry, Lavedi," Muir said quietly. "But in the end, we all walk the same road, away from what we know."

"Hold me a moment longer and tell no one of this."

Because her secrets were infinite, and to serve was the sum of her soul, Muir did this as she did everything, calmly and with quiet strength.

"Kiss my mouth," the lavedi said, and because Muir had not yet unearthed her own will, she did this thing also in the dark stillness of the afternoon.

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THE DARK PATH

Dressed in her fair skin and golden hair, Immelia stretched on her silken bed like a cream-fed cat. "You have pleased me," she said in a voice thick with lassitude. "When I leave, I shall take you with me, and I exempt you from my curse on this place. Tend your garden, for it may be the last time. And, Muir"—she smiled wickedly—"do not forget the salve."

Muir said nothing; it was not in her to feel joy at such tidings. Impassiveness was bred into her bones. Anointing her hands with the balm, bought so dearly, the soreness faded, though the cracks and blisters would not heal so quickly. Indeed, they would probably never heal since she did laundry each week, ravaging her skin with harsh soap and scalding water. But even before she reached the age for such grueling tasks, her hands had been brown, thick, and rough, without beauty or grace, much like Muir herself.

As she left the room, customary restlessness prodded her. If she spoke of it, Lavedi Immelia would tease about the whisperings of earth spirits. But it was an intensely private thing—insofar as she had secrets of her own—and she gave these feelings no voice. The earth spirits had all been silenced long ago and were worshipped no longer. That she heard them—the quiet, dying voices—marked her, and only the gods could know if this was for good or ill. But the gods had all been trapped long ago.

There was a still, thick silence in the house that spoke of waiting, of patient men behind closed doors, the first storm

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spent. Though it was still morning, Muir had already completed her day's work, and the garden patch next to the kitchen called her. Several weeds had sprung up—she sensed them—and her vegetables pleaded for water. At this point in the season, they could not really spare it—even the izzat must abide by household rationing from the city waterhouse. Muir knew where she might draw some, however; Ar Cahra was inhospitable only to the ignorant.

Within minutes, Muir emerged from her small room swathed in her white djellabah. She carried round throwing stones and a small knife in her pocket, and a spiked club hung across one shoulder. As well as two pails with lids, she took some wrinklefruit and a skin of water in case her secret spring was dry. Some two hours' walk from the sanctity of the high house, the well had never let her down, but there was no point in taking chances. Ar Cahra had swallowed many travelers, bleaching their bones into beautiful ivory, which was used for jewelry or carvings for the izzat. If she saw something special, she would bring it home, and she might be rewarded with an extra day in her garden.

Thus encouraged, she drew the hood of her djellabah around her face so that only her brown eyes, the color of marbled agates, were visible, yet protected against the wicked wind. Just yesterweek, old Fegrub drank too much sweetmash and wandered out to seek ivory wearing only his small clothes; next morning, he was dead, flayed as neatly by the winds as any hunter could wish. Only the very foolish or the very skilled would journey into Ar Cahra in the heat of the

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day, but Muir counted herself among the latter. She treated the land with respect and received the gift of life in return.

Humming a little as she walked, she scanned the white dunes, unamazed by the bleakness of the landscape. She kept on course by marking familiar landmarks; here a jagged red stone, there a stand of stunted trees. To the left and right, from the corners of her eyes, she saw things that were not and could not be, so she ignored those, murmuring a word of thanks for the heat miracles.

The winds kicked up, making progress difficult, and as precious sweat ran down her shoulder blades and back into her djellabah, she thanked the land for the challenge. Wayfarers rarely stumbled across Erathos, the Well of the Red Soul, blundering around the borders and dying before they reached the interior. Ar Cahra was demanding, but Muir reached the spring intact.

The only exception to the consuming sand, a strange green tree flowered nearby, doubtless nurtured by the hidden spring. The oasis was unassuming, a ruby gem that shimmered with a crystalline heart. She heard the reassuring hiss of water lapping against the red stones that formed the lip of the well. Before she filled her waterskin, she thanked Ar Cahra for her safe travel and for the bounty provided her. The waves of the too-lively water smoothed to a quiet ripple, as if someone had skimmed a coin. Taking two sips from her waterskin, she poured the rest into Erathos.

"I do not come empty-handed," she said aloud. Next, she buried a wrinklefruit in the sand beside the red stones. "I bring food, Erathos. I petition you for your gifts."

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A sound came from the depths of the well. The silky white sands beyond the crimson stones were eerily still, but Muir sensed that Erathos welcomed her.

“Thank you. I will return your gift to the earth, and your generosity will not be wasted.”

Muir filled her containers and then her waterskin, confident the courtesies had been observed. She scooped some water into her hands, trickling it over her face and down her chest. How did Erathos keep the water so cold? Pausing in the shade of the tree with its curious, heart-shaped leaves, she popped a wrinklefruit into her mouth and took a small sip of water, liking the way the pulp swelled in her mouth, becoming plump and sweet.

With two full containers, her return trip would be tiring, but she grinned in anticipation, her strong, white teeth flashing against sun-kissed skin. Her garden would sing as she poured the liquid over it and it worked its way into the thirsty roots. Before she left the sanctity of the well, she skimmed the environment with a keen eye, looking for predators who would steal her water. At the thought, Muir fingered the club that lay heavy across her back, the spikes just sharp enough to prick through the fabric of her clothes.

No marauders—the winds were calm, and Erathos said nothing.

But farther east, opposite the path home, she saw a prone, humanoid form through the silvery heat.

“Must I?” Muir asked, looking at the angle of the sun and her full buckets. She received no answer—only the sense that her action was expected. Grumbling silently, she requested

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that Erathos guard her belongings, and she received a watery assent.

It took mere moments to reach the still figure. Stooping to see what assistance she might offer, Muir froze. This man was definitely an outlander, the like of whom she had never seen: alabaster skin, silver-blue hair, pointed features, elongated eyes. *No Cahrani, this.* Even Lavedi Immelia, who took care to stay out of the sun, could not boast such white skin. Muir knew a noble when she saw one, assessing his elegant hands and expensive raiment. Was he a madman then, braving Ar Cahra so ill prepared?

She found his skin inhumanly hot, but no sweat broke the poreless surface. No hair grew anywhere but on his head; even his chin was smooth. The man's ears were narrow, not quite pointed, cheekbones sharp with hollows beneath, lips long and sculpted. His strangeness disturbed her, and somehow she knew Ar Cahra could not claim him, though it could hurt him badly.

He was taller than she had first thought—much taller than the average Cahrani male—and it was a struggle to heft him over her shoulder. As she staggered back toward the well, she began an old chant, old nearly as time itself. “With the sun as my spine, I will not fall. With the earth as my arms, I will not fall.”

After a few repetitions, she felt the strength pour through her, and she was able to cover the distance without faltering. Erathos did not often require service; in fact, Muir could not recall the red soul ever doing so.

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As gently as possible, she laid him beside the well, loosening his black clothes, finely made of some supple material for which she had no name. A diamond pendant with a cobalt heart caught the light. "Erathos, I have brought him to you, but I'm afraid what I know of healing may hurt him."

She felt as if the ground trembled beneath her, and the well water roiled, wetting the crimson stones. "Erathos seems to feel I will not harm you," Muir told the stranger, more to bolster her own confidence than from the belief he would reply. "I trust it is so."

First, she must soothe his dry, fiery skin, but it might be dangerous to expose him to the sun. Inspired, she asked respectfully, "Erathos, may I use your waters? The sun is high overhead, and I must cool him."

This time the answer was much stronger—a sibilant yes—and before her eyes, the water swelled nearly to the top. Despite the smothering heat, a chill ran up her back, and she wondered if her protracted presence, the repeated use of red soul's name, had somehow empowered it.

She found it effortless to lower him into the water. Her belly resting on the stone rim, she gripped his shoulders, bathing him. She held him there until some of the heat spilled from his skin into the living water. When she saw that her goal was accomplished, Muir drew him up. The well surrendered him, the water withdrawing.

Uncertain of the courtesies, she thanked both Erathos and Ar Cahra. She knew if anyone overheard, they would think her mad, honoring the old ways.

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She noted her patient's skin was still much warmer than her own, but perhaps it was a vagary of his race. She could not find pulse or breath, yet surely the red soul would not allow her to foul it with carrion.

Water, then. She set her waterskin against his mouth, stroking his throat as she might a weak and injured hound's. He swallowed, once, twice, and she knew her instincts had been correct. Now food. Soaking a wrinklefruit until it was nearly bursting with juice, Muir broke off a piece and rubbed it against his lips. The sweetness interested him, and he opened his mouth for it. Popping the flesh into his mouth, she rubbed her finger along his cheek, prompting another reflex—chew and swallow.

This continued until the fruit was gone, and Muir gazed despairingly at the waning sun. She was forced to spend the night in Ar Cahra with only this sick outlander for company; if the predators did not get them, she would be beaten when she returned and perhaps turned away as untrustworthy. Yet Erathos asked it.

As the sun plunged in the west, the chill evening wind sprang up, and she cursed. She had neither blanket nor tent. Already, the man was shivering in his wet clothes. Soon he would shiver more; legends said the sands at night frosted with ice that glittered like diamonds, though no sane person ventured out to discover the truth of it.

Knowing there was nothing else for it, she draped the length of her djellabah over them, made voluminous for just such a purpose, and took him against her, trying to warm his larger mass. He resisted her closeness, his body unyielding.

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Watchful, she lay beside him, listening to the winds and watching the thick, star-spattered sky above her. *Erathos might have no concept what it was asking*, she reflected. *I should leave him and go home, provided I survive that long.*

Even as she thought it, she knew she wouldn't. Erathos would use its magic to protect them, and from what she had seen, the red soul's power was formidable. But more than that, she felt a bond with the outlander. The savior became responsible for the one rescued until he returned the courtesy and his soul passed back into his own keeping. So must it be, for her urge to protect him was strong. Curiously, she touched his hair. It clung to her fingers, silkier than any fabric Lavedi Immelia had ever purchased.

The howl of a lone lykos arched into the bowl of the sky, soon answered by the bay of its brethren. *They know we are here*, she thought. *Only time will tell if they can breach the sanctity of the well.*

Sleep whispered in her ears and scabbled at her eyes, but she did not submit. If death approached with sharp teeth and yellow eyes, she wanted to face it, and more, to fight it. Tentatively, she put an arm behind her, ensuring that her club was within easy reach. Neither she nor the stranger would make an easy meal, Muir vowed.

The man beside her stirred, his head restless against the sand she'd mounded for a pillow. For some moments, he moved searchingly, and then he seemed to notice her. She watched his silvery lashes flicker against moon-pale cheeks. His eyes opened. Such eyes she had never seen: silver, blue,

green, luminous, and snapping with the slitted pupils of a snake.

He looked at her with such an expression, cold and puzzled. That must be what she saw in the sharp lines of his exotic face.

"Cahrani?" he said, his voice like nothing she had heard, liquid, rippling, sending a pleasurable chill through her. Surely he was a prince of some distant land. "*Q'tak serrat, falrii q'tet sulin et, s'srua?*"

"I am sorry," she murmured. "I do not speak your tongue."

Propping himself on one elbow, he looked around, his strange, glittering gaze taking in the expanse of sand and sky. Then his eyes returned to her. "Cahrani?" he repeated, more insistently this time.

Through the peculiar inflection, she picked out the word, and though she was not sure if he meant her or the desert, she nodded once. One of his elegant hands brushed her temple. A shiver ran up her spine, and she felt a surge of elemental power, like the earth she loved, the sun she respected.

Then, in that same purling, silken voice, he said, "You need not fear me."

The tender, mortal phrase the Daiesthai had used since the sun was young, the phrase that paralyzed their victims, should they have knowledge of such ancient lore.

Muir did not. She smiled at him, showing her strong white teeth, touching his cheek with one rough hand, surprised to the point of awe that he had taken her language from her

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mind. His magic was beyond the bounds of any she had seen or heard of or even dreamed.

Because her awe was so great, she fell immediately into the role to which she had been born. "Are you hungry? Do you thirst? Only tell me what you wish, and I will provide it."

His face registered confusion, if his features reflected emotion as she knew it. "Strange child," he murmured. "Who are you?"

"I am called Muir."

"'From the wasteland.' You are aptly named."

Startled, she gazed at him with eyes that would have been bovine brown had they not been so intense. The art of naming was sacred, but most no longer practiced it. She had heard of it only through Taate's tales.

"Your wisdom is honored," she said cautiously.

He paused, tilting his head as if listening to unheard voices. "The name is the only wisdom, and I do but repeat it. I am called Rodhlann."

Tasting the name, she wrapped her mouth around it, and the meaning came, sharp and biting. "'Famous.' Not yet," she said, "but you will be. You also are aptly named."

From there, they repeated the ritual, and the introduction was complete. Muir felt a tug, as if his easy passage through her had left echoes of him. He seemed to sense it as well.

"You have sought to bind me?" His narrow features drew in. He didn't look angry; rather, he looked sad, somehow tragic, the weight of a thousand ancient betrayals on his beautiful, alien face.

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She shook her head. "I do not know the art," she said, serene in the truth of her reply. At that time, it was truth, after a fashion.

"You sing to the green shoots and they grow. You enter into a compact with the red soul. You walk Ar Cahra in the heat of the day, and I am to believe you are without magic?" He pinned her with shifting, iridescent eyes.

The absolute sincerity of her confusion framed her reply, defending her better than any words, and she put a hand against his forehead, finding the skin far too warm.

"You are still not well," she muttered. "Try to sleep. I'll stay awake until morning, then I'll guide you to the izzat. I'm sure he will be able to help you."

"I doubt that," he said with unmistakable melancholy. His tone changed, becoming gently skeptical. "You have no questions? No wishes? You will guard me through the night and ask for nothing in return?"

What a strange land he must come from, Muir thought. "Of course," she said simply. "The red soul requested it of me, and long have I taken from it for my garden. There is much honor in repaying such a debt."

"Honor," he repeated, as if he had not heard the word before nor tasted the inherent concepts.

Nodding, she suppressed a twinge of anxiety. Muir realized his apparent docility indicated weakness. She perceived his distaste in every stiff muscle that curved so reluctantly against her.

He relaxed at once. "My apologies," he said with a bright, lethal courtesy. "I had not realized it was so obvious."

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On some level, she registered that he heard her silent voice the same way she heard the quiet cries of her vegetable patch, the sibilant spirit of Ar Cahra, and the low groan of the earth. Muir had no sense of violated privacy, for her sense of self was small, a weak and underdeveloped thing. She knew she was a vessel to be used as the izzat saw fit. It was this conditioning, along with her intuition, that guided her to make the correct answers to the most dangerous questions.

Almost compulsively, she touched his cheek again, finding it much the same. Perhaps that was his body temperature; some of her anxiety drifted away, like sand into the wind.

“Why do you do that?” His face was so white and smooth, wan beneath the patterning silver of the moon. His rippling voice sounded more sweetly melodic than unexpected rain. It was a pleasure merely to let it fall in her ears.

“To see if your skin is less feverish. I thought you might have sun poison ... I put you in the well to cool you.”

But that was only a partial truth; she could neither resist nor control her helpless fascination with his alien beauty—elemental in some senses, yet so refined that he was as akin to her as a diamond to a clod of earth.

His lashes fluttered down, and it was like a blow to lose sight of his eyes. Muir took it as a warning; there was something dangerous in his splendor. To keep herself awake, she smoothed his hair away from his brow, as she would anyone's in her care. For secret reasons of his own, he let her.

For some time, she soothed him and watched the desert in silence, but the lykos seemed to have loped off in search of

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easier prey. Not until the stars had traveled halfway across the sky did she become aware that Erathos whispered insistently beside them, striving to be heard. *The red soul in you he needs ... red soul.*

"The red soul?" she repeated aloud.

Then she saw herself cutting her hand while chopping vegetables for stew. Blood—the red soul. It made an eerie kind of sense, and she wondered precisely how Erathos had earned its name. She took her small knife and sliced the tip of her longest finger, pressing so the blood did not spill.

"Rodhlann," she whispered, pronouncing his name carefully. "The red soul has prescribed a cure for what ails you."

His eyes flickered open, giving her the impression that he did not sleep. He only rested. "You wish this?" he asked, a strange inflection in his voice that could make a bard weep. "You give this?"

"The red soul..."

"No." For the first time, his tone altered, expressing a rough, unpleasant emotion. "*You wish this? You give this?*"

"Yes," she said unhesitatingly.

If something so simple could heal him, she would be selfish to withhold it. Perhaps the salt was necessary to him or something else she could not identify. She offered her hand.

When he slipped her wounded finger between his lips, it was the most exquisite blend of pleasure and pain she ever experienced. His mouth drew strongly, and the rush of blood

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sent dizzying sensations through her. She put her free arm around him, wanting something solid to hold on to.

With each surge of his lips, he pulled her closer—not a physical movement—until she saw through her closed eyes, knowing what he knew. So many things she did not understand; a dark place with others like him, most like beautiful statues. *Stasis. Pain. Timeless sorrow.* She began to cry, blind with yearning and a loss that was not her own. The precious tears slipping from her cheeks onto the sands below. Ar Cahra accepted the gift.

The images whirled too fast for her to comprehend them; she had a vague sense of understanding how he had come to be here—in this desolate corner of the world—and then it was gone, lost in the swirling tide of memory. Amazing that one man could have so many stored away.

When he drew his lips away, she cried out, the loss that profound. Hardly knowing what she did, she offered her hand again, and he shook his head almost tenderly. “It would make you ill, though I thank you.”

Radiance cloaked him now like a fine mantle; he looked like a god, though they no longer walked the world. If he had appeared so in the sands, she would have feared to touch him. Muir had the vague thought that she ought to roll away. Surely, he would not take kindly to being clutched by a grubby Cahrani maid. He touched her cheek lightly, and ecstasy pierced her like a sword.

“Little Cahrani,” he said softly. “Little Muir, you have the kindest heart I have ever known.”

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She lay passive, his memories shifting in her mind. Erathos grant them protection, for she was not certain she could even lift her club.

“What is it that you lack?” she asked, barely conscious that she did so.

He sighed—the wind sifting through a harp. “Many things. Most of which I could not explain to you.” Then curiously, “Why would you ask such a thing, little maid?”

Haltingly, she tried to clarify, but she could not articulate what she had seen and felt. After one quick touch of his elegant hands, he understood without the aid of her faltering explanation. Somehow, she knew he was troubled by it.

Almost to himself, he said, “It is not customary. *Q'tak seraf et findo?*”

What have I done? Muir did not know why she understood his words—only that she did.

She had no answer for him, and they lay together quietly until the sun rose in the east and cast its light across the sands. As far as she knew, she was the first of her tribe to live through a night in Ar Cahra. Surely they would honor her for that.

Suppressing the fear that she would receive a cold welcome, she uncoiled herself from where she had curved around him in the night. Politely, she offered him the waterskin, then the wrinklefruit, before she broke her fast. Just as politely, he declined, watching her with infinite, amused patience.

When she was done, she began to walk, leading him in the direction of her city of Ballendin. The silence between them

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was strange but not uncomfortable, for he had no need of words and she had never learned to speak her thoughts.

When they entered the city, a great cry went up, first from the old woman gathering water at the public well—at first a glad cry—that a missing daughter had returned home. It seemed a miracle of sorts and one that might be gladly told around the wells in many other towns. Her cry was passed from woman to man to child and on again, following them through the packed mud of the street.

“Muir has returned! Returned! Returned from the waste alive!”

She felt herself being pushed through the crowd, as glad hands patted her back and hugged her close. No more could she see the stranger; she could only glimpse a sea of faces, some smiling, some puzzled, and others blank.

And then it all went dark, for the oldest one came out of his house, rubbing the grit of sleep from his eyes, and sent up a scream of terror that spooked the birds from nesting on the roofs, sent them spiraling in a loud cacophony of wings, a flapping, windswept sound. An echo of the oldest one's scream.

“Afreet!” he howled from his toothless mouth. “An afreet from the wastes, an afreet to devour us all, as they did before the sun fell and the earth burned black. We all shall pay its price!”

Rodhlann stopped and stared at the man with apparent curiosity. “Old one,” he said in a tone that was quietly mocking, “you cannot be speaking of me.”

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Taate—the oldest one—fell upon his knees and wept, promising his service and his soul, for only the promise of mercy that he might be spared, if the others were not. Soon, the glad tidings ceased making their way through the city, and darkness was in the crowd, firing the urge toward human sacrifice that lingers, unacknowledged, unawakened. Like an arrow, the news of the afreet went soaring through the town, all the way to the high house. In a matter of moments, the townsfolk surrounded Rodhlann, most on their knees and pleading.

A mob was howling near the center of town, and Izzat Aban and his daughter, Immelia, came with evil in their eyes. The izzat was a short, sturdy man with the bright, dark eyes of a bird, a full beard, and a curved belly. In his loose and brilliant robes, he called to his people, a ringing voice out of keeping with his size. “Be silent. Be not afraid. I know the old ways. I know how our people used to appease the afreets.” He paused, drama in his face, for this was the stage of life—the moment for which he had been born. “Today she burns.”

Buffeted by the crowd that had torn her from the stranger, Muir cringed when the izzat jabbed his finger in her direction. A rumble went through the crowd, a hiss of disbelief, for it was that great a rarity that a person was burned alive. This was the most grievous of penalties; in Cahra there was very little wood, and the burning was wickedly slow.

At first Muir did not understand, staring into the crazed faces of people she had known all her life. Everywhere she looked, expressions were implacable or even eager. Hungry. Lavedi Immelia did not meet her eyes. After the hot silence

that met Aban's words, the cry of affirmation went up. "A burning! Yes! A burning for the afreet!"

They seized her.

Taut with tension that superseded fear, she did not struggle as her marbled-agate gaze searched the crowd once more, seeking mercy and finding none. Muir did not look to Rodhlann for aid. She went quietly to the meat curer's shop, the only place where enough wood was stored. Her dumb terror showed in every movement, even if she would not protest.

"You cannot imagine I will allow this girl to die for her kindness," Rodhlann murmured, and his voice broke over the city like a clap of thunder, though he had barely whispered the words. "You wicked children, do you want a burning? Then you shall have one."

Gently, without violence, he spread his arms, and a flash of light rained down so bright and hot and quick, they hardly felt it as they died. The houses stood empty and unharmed, as if waiting for the families to come home again.

But they never would, and Ballendin was no more.

Bewildered, Muir looked around, seeing the sheen of the half-melted sands beyond the city. The power of it was beyond anything she could conceive. She was unharmed, like the buildings, as if she were of the very clay herself.

She fell to her knees before him.

"Sayyid," she whispered—only that—and bowed her head.

"Rise," he said, lifting her with his hands.

Ecstasy pierced her at his touch, laced with fear and devotion, as a dog loves a kind master. She felt no grief; it

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was too soon. She did not really understand. But her feet were already on the road that everyone travels, away from what they know.

"Why?" she asked. "I am only a maid."

"You have a gentle soul." His answer was unsatisfactory, but she was too awed to press him. "And you will be lonely if you stay here."

With unerring instinct, she said what he most wanted to hear, he who had known neither loyalty nor honor, nor even imagined their existence until a predictable betrayal flung him into the hellish pain of Ar Cahra. "I have served only one master in all my life, and now that he is dead—"

"By my hand," he interjected smoothly without inflection. His face was wickedly, inhumanly beautiful, serene and without remorse.

"Who shall I serve but the one who slew him in my name? Who else might protect me from certain, shameful death in exile?" She pledged herself to him, her vow etched in earth and copper.

He nodded, and together they passed through the empty streets, past the inn and the tavern; past the smithy, its forge silenced for all eternity. Muir dipped her head, hiding her face within the cowl of her djellabah. Her rough brown feet were barely visible beneath its white folds. She felt very small.

She did not weep, not even when she saw her garden, black with the expanse of glassy melted sands beyond. With a distinct chill, she remembered Immelia's curse. The lavedi should have framed her words more carefully—*only* Muir had been exempted. Immelia had forgotten to protect herself. She

glanced at Rodhlann. Had Immelia summoned him? Did rage have that much power?

Her look melted into unconscious entreaty, a child's simple longing. "May I ask a boon, sayyid?"

"Ask."

"There is a particular tapestry in the high house. It tells of Kaveh and Minau—"

"I knew him," he said, his mind so far away that she saw it going.

He knew them. Such a simple statement, and so incomprehensible that she merely stared with wide and puzzled eyes. The legends of her life, and he *knew* them.

"The tapestry cannot be as old as I thought, then," she said. "But I would like to bring it with us, if it pleases you, sayyid."

"It pleases me," he answered quietly. "Take it, and as we travel I will tell you the truth about Kaveh and Minau. Shall you be the first to learn the secrets of your race? It will mean power, but there is risk."

"I will be the first," she told him, smiling with an innocent, incandescent hunger she sensed he could assuage.

And so Muir followed Rodhlann onto the road everyone travels, away from what they know.

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SANDWALLS SHIFTING

The runner arrived before dark. When he entered the city, he was covered in sand and dust, gasping fit to explode his heart. He had set a new record this day, covering the distance between Ballendin and Inay in less than three days. He checked the bone tube within which he carried tidings from Sha'al-izzat Nadiv. Inside the tube was a counteroffer for the hand of Lavedi Immelia. The sha'al-izzat negotiated for his oldest son, who couldn't be dragged away from his hawks and horses long enough to write such a thing himself.

Of course, Tah was blessedly ignorant of these undertones, for he was only a boy, at whose base the love of a baby sister defined him. He had just passed his sixteenth summer and was, not surprisingly, brimming with his own importance. Formally, as when Sha'al-izzat Nadiv asked for him by name, he was called Malak Tadit, though he had a small sister at home who still sucked her fingers and called him Tah. His name meant "one who runs," and it was generally agreed that he had been born to this calling. Certainly he believed himself to be the smartest and the fastest messenger in the sha'al-izzat's service. Only one of those things was true.

Consequently, he was at the center of Ballendin before he noticed anything was wrong. It was only when he passed the waterhouse that his stride faltered into stillness. All around, the city sat inhumanly quiet—no signs of life, though all the buildings were intact. Fighting a rising tide of fear, he

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continued onward to the high house of the izzat. In that place, he found only silence for a welcome.

Duty drove him harder than fear, sent him through a few houses of the town, all empty, every last one. All the pots, jugs, and jars—the food, clothes, cushions, and tapestries—were eerily intact. It was as if the vacant buildings waited for their occupants to return with unknowing patience. Yet a strange film of ash had settled over everything, and by the time he realized that within the last week Ballendin had died, the sun was already hiding behind the far hills, too late for Tah to begin the journey home.

In that place of the dead, he lit no fires, and it was a cold night. Neither did he remove any of their forsaken treasures, nor did he consume their food and drink. His people had passed a little way beyond such fears, but he still did not touch their sacred things. And in the morning, he ran for home.

His whitened hair told its own tale.

The record he had set was of no account; he broke it on his return to Inay. It was long past dusk when his feet pounded the last mile toward the Sun City, the stars guiding him on this moonless eve. The ice had already begun to form on the sands, and he heard lykos howling in the hills behind him. Certain death awaited any in the wastes at night.

He had not eaten in the last sunrise, and his water had run out some five hours before. Only his will and his fear kept him running, and his great heart. When he saw that the ivory gates were already closed, he could have howled in despair, howled as the lykos were howling from dune to dune.

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With both fists, he pounded on the bones, making very little sound. Raw throat notwithstanding, he called for the guards as loudly as he could. When the shout he was capable of summoning proved no more effective than his fists, he put two fingers in his mouth and whistled, shrill, piercing, undeniable.

"Go away," a guard said irritably. "We may not open the gates until dawn."

"In the name of Malak himself, open this portal. Malak Tadit, first messenger of Sha'al-izzat Nadiv, commands you. I have news that cannot be denied."

A strangled oath came from within the walls, terror and awe blended into one unholy utterance. No one had invoked the messenger's right since Malak himself had run for the first izzat, some four hundred cycles before. It was a testament to the guard's good education that he recognized it at all. Bron was the youngest son of endless generations of younger sons, and there was nothing for him but the military. That by nature he was a studious, peaceable man made no impact on his options.

Wheels and pulleys screamed into the quiet night, alerting residents near the gate that something was amiss. One by one, people crept out of their homes to see what mischief occurred under the cover of darkness. Women with babies at their shoulders, men holding bread knives gingerly, unfamiliarly, in case war had come calling.

At length, Bron finished opening the gate, never dreaming that of all men's words, his would be remembered.

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With great solemnity and near-dead ritual, the guard said, "In accordance with the messenger's ancient right of passage, I have obeyed your command in the name of Malak. On pain of your immortal soul for the sin of false invocation, what news have you that demands such desperation?"

"Ballendin has gone the way of all earth," Tah gasped, and then a great dark hole opened up and swallowed him.

* * * *

When he awoke, Tah screamed at the sight of two huge dark eyes peering at him, the whites generously veined in red. Once Tah realized that the eyes belonged to a face with all the requisite components, including a mouth fanning him with garlic and wine-tainted breath, he relaxed against the cushions.

The manservant recoiled, removing his breath to a more tolerable distance. Fighting a wave of nausea, Tah struggled upright and accepted a cup of wine. It was burgundy, thick with pulp. In the whole of his life, he had never tasted anything so good.

Without speaking, the man took the goblet away when it was empty and wiped Tah's chin as if he were a baby.

Placing a tray across Tah's lap, the servant said, "Eat."

Though somewhat lacking in book learning, Tah was by no means a foolish boy and set to shoveling the delectable meal into his mouth, marveling that he had been carried into the high house, laid on the sha'al-izzat's very cushions, and fed his best food and drink. Not to mention being served by one of the sha'al-izzat's slaves.

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Seeing that his instructions were obeyed, the other man left, presumably to inform someone that the messenger was now awake and ready to explain his shocking revelation at the gate. Tah did not speak when the servant left, his mouth blissfully crammed full of gala leaves stuffed with shredded ocksa and mortomi peppers. He sighed with pleasure when the seeds burst open on his tongue.

The candied dates were sweeter than any he'd ever eaten, the roast emu more tender and succulent, the vegetables steamed to perfection. The only thing that would make this experience more perfect was a scantily clad dancer, ready to do indecent things at his command. Grinning foolishly, he gulped a slab of brown bread smeared liberally with rich white cheese.

On the low table next to his bed of cushions, a whole carafe of excellent wine awaited his pleasure, but Tah felt a twinge of sorrow as he inhaled the meal, sorrow that so many should have to die for him to receive such luxury. After a while, he felt uneasy. It was a well-known fact that a condemned man might have all his requests granted on the eve before his death. Men had been impaled atop the bone gate for lesser offenses than the tidings he carried.

That thought in mind, the rich food suddenly swelled and sat in his stomach like a fat toad, until he felt he might be sick. He set the platter aside and placed the cup beside it, folding his hands in his lap to conceal his nervousness.

It seemed like hours before the curtain parted again, revealing the tall, spare figure of the sha'al-izzat's oldest son. Tah's dark eyes widened to the point of nearly popping out of

his head; he never dreamed anyone so important would come to hear his tale. He tried to rise to present an elegant obeisance, but his feet tangled in the cushions, crossed, and tripped him. He landed hard, banging his chin solidly on the floor.

So Tah met Ksathra Z'ev ibn Nadiv for the first time on his hands and knees with blood trickling down his chin.

"While such deference is flattering," Z'ev said in a deep voice, "it is not necessary. Rise. No free man need abase himself in my presence."

With somewhat less grace than his speed as a messenger implied, Tah clambered to his feet, pushing the tasseled pillows and silken throw aside. He had been lucky he only split his lip.

"This honor is beyond any I have known," he said shakily. "Only tell me what the sayyid commands, and I will see it done."

Sayyid was an honorary title, meaning "master," and it should have been doubly flattering to Z'ev, who possessed no real power of his own, only what scraps the sha'al-izzat chose to bestow on him. Instead Z'ev's eerie eyes, amber like a bit of poor-grade crystal, lit from within, and he laughed.

"I trust you will now fall on your knife, should I ask of it you." He laughed louder, as the blood rushed from the boy's face, leaving him sick and pale. "Forgive my macabre humor, Malak Tadit. I am interested only in your tidings."

So saying, Z'ev limped farther into the room, revealing the disability that kept him most often on horseback. Hesitantly, then with greater animation, Tah explained what he had

seen: the empty houses, the abandoned possessions, the half-melted sands beyond the buildings, and the strange ash that coated it all.

"You must return with me," Z'ev said at last. "There may be a few there yet who need our aid. Sleep tonight and regain your strength. We'll leave on the morrow."

"Begging the sayyid's pardon," Tah blurted, "but they are all dead, and the dead need no one. Please, ksathra, reconsider this course. No good can come of it."

Z'ev stood tall and straight as a spear, his eyes boring into the messenger with fierce precision. "No free man need abase himself in my presence," he repeated, "because I decree it, but neither shall I suffer my will to be questioned. I shall make you shorter by a head, young Tadit, should you err this way again."

Tah hung his head, feeling grateful that it was still upon his shoulders. Most members of the high houses did not bother with warnings, and had he so offended Ksathra Japhet, he would already be atop the bone gate, a lesson for other foolish messengers.

"May I go home?" he entreated. "The quarters here are beyond what I deserve, and I do not wish to seem ungrateful, but my mother and my sister will be—"

"To say nothing of the rest of your family," Z'ev finished, smiling. "Go now, if you feel able. Who knows when you will see them again?"

That particular statement did nothing to calm Tah's fears, but having already made the mistake of questioning Ksathra

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Z'ev, he would rather die on the road, his fear silenced for eternity, than to doubt his lord's wisdom out loud again.

Tah bowed himself out of the room, quite a feat considering he was unfamiliar with his surroundings. The curtain across the doorway nearly tripped him, but he made a quick recovery. If he was to consort with greatness, he certainly hoped he would get better at the niceties involved. Z'ev followed him every step of the way, exacerbating his nervousness, but the ksathra was only intent upon summoning the mute waiting outside, instructing him to escort Tah to his familial residence.

With a few concise gestures of his long-fingered hands, Z'ev spoke with the mute, and then said for the boy's benefit, "This is Harb. He knows that your will is mine and that he is to protect you to the borders of death and beyond. For your part, messenger, know that any insult dealt to my servant is an insult to me and shall be treated accordingly."

One more thing to make Tah nervous in a day already fraught with uncertainty and tension—the mutes were abnormally large and, of a necessity, silent. Other qualities made them disturbing company, for their silence extended well beyond their tongueless mouths.

It was rumored that the sha'al-izzat's mutes could walk on eggshells without breaking them, tread paper without making it rustle, slide through water without causing a ripple. It was whispered that even under the pain of the most terrible tortures, they made no sound, no gargling screams, not even the slightest groan. These stories sent shivers down Tah's spine, and he knew the mutes were not simple house

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servants. Their existence served a much darker purpose in the realm, though Tah could not even guess at the ancient magic involved in their creation.

Tah was summarily dismissed, and he was left to walk into the shadow-soaked night with his large, silent companion. Though it had been less than a week since he'd seen his family, it seemed much longer. He was very much afraid Sagireh might already be asleep, curled on her side with one fist stuffed in her mouth. If that were the case, her midnight curls would lie against her brown cheeks like ribbons of fine satin, and the fluffy cushion she rested her head on would be soaked with drool.

His feet knew the route from the high house without his needing to think about it, which was just as well. Fatigue washed over him in waves, like the ocean he'd once seen. He stumbled once, his much vaunted speed and grace decimated by the trials of the past week. A large hand steadied his arm, and then withdrew, and Tah found it all the more disturbing.

He wondered if the mutes ever felt lonely or isolated, unable to speak with anyone except their own kind or someone who had troubled to learn the hand language. After a moment, he decided he was being foolish. Such giants, the men who comprised the stuff of legend with their silence and lethal strength, would not suffer from such a basic human ailment. And so he said nothing, merely continuing westward through the city toward the trade district where his family lived.

The two moons were both in the sky tonight: one fierce and crimson, a warlike crescent, the other a perfect circle,

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radiant in her ascension. Sahen was on the hunt tonight, chasing the white purity of Anumati through the sky. The red hunter had made her his prey through a thousand human lifetimes, though what they said to each other, passing in the perfect stillness of eternity, was fathomed only by mad prophets and dreaming children. It was said when Sahen caught Anumati and made her his own, the lovers would spiral down in a pillar of fire and end the world.

At that moment, however, Tah was not thinking of anything so profound. His mind was in his belly with that delectable meal, in his pocket where he had hidden a cache of candied dates for Sagireh, and finally, definitively, some distance across town with his family. Tah was especially proud of his father's house, enough to remark on it just as they came into the street where it was located. "My father is a carpenter," he said, offering a smile. "You will have seen nothing like this before."

Not surprisingly, Harb did not reply, his large hands swinging quietly at his sides like sleeping raptors. Perhaps there would be no business for them tonight.

But it turned out that Tah was right. Of course it was not as grand as the high house, but once inside, it was more than just a simple clay dwelling. In the middle of the roof, a rectangular opening was cut, covered in clear glass.

"To get the glass, my father did a thousand free hours of work for the glazier, but it was worth it. The lofts above are staggered to make the best use of the space below the roof. The sun light was my father's special design. It keeps us warm during Behrid by gathering the light and storing it in

the walls. For the Haar, he's designed a covering made of skins that keeps the inside cool. The rooms are all circular, which also maximizes space."

Tah looked expectant for a moment, then he bit his lip. "Sorry," he said, ducking his head, as he went farther into the house. "I am nothing but a stupid boy at times, despite all the miles I have run for the sha'al-izzat."

Though Harb did not speak and Tah knew nothing of sign, the mute made one gesture, clearly dismissive, and they continued into the large room at the center of the house in search of Tah's family.

Like any other common room, there were several low tables and many cushions scattered around, separately and in groupings for the socially minded. The rugs on the burned-clay walls depicted scenes from ancient times: Kaveh and Minau, Sahen and Anumati, and countless others. Those vibrant colors, patterns so delicately woven that the figures looked lifelike, created a lump in Tah's throat, for he never felt he had come home until he entered the gallery of tales.

"Tah!" his mother exclaimed, rising from the purple cushion where she sat, plump legs folded neatly beneath her robe. She hugged him tightly around the neck. Despite her pride in him, he knew that she feared the next time he sprinted away from her would be the last. "Look at you, wicked boy. Coming home to your family wearing half the dust of Cahra's roads. I'll draw some water for you to wash." Then when she saw that the white did not wipe off his hair, she took one step back, then another. "Tah, your hair—"

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"Hasna," his father said quietly, inclining his head toward Harb's tall figure. "You will shame Tadit in front of his guest."

Only then did she seem to notice Harb. Tah wondered what his family would do, unexpectedly finding a tiger in their midst.

"Forgive my discourtesy," she murmured, taking Harb's hand. "It has been nearly a week since I saw my son. Please accept the hospitality of our house."

To Tah's amusement, his mother managed Harb as she managed everyone. Soon, the mute was seated on a pile of soft cushions, holding a cup of wine.

An old man shuffled in, his feet tucked into soft slippers. His beard was white and long, nearly to his waist, neatly trimmed for all that. His face was a brown and wrinkled nut, with two bright red eyes set amid the folds of skin. All up and down his arms were terrible scars—burns. Tah knew his grandfather was no simple elder but an elemental priest of fire, much too old for the rigors of the road.

Tah knelt before him and offered his hands, not rising until the old man patted his head and laughed at him with kindness. "Back again, I see, safe and sound. It is good to see you, Malak Tadit. You make us all very proud, messenger."

"Many thanks, Moukib Faruq," Tah said formally.

Tah understood the naming rite as well as anyone—Moukib Faruq was the "last of the wise prophets," and there was much to be learned from him. Instead of learning, he declined an offer of food from his mother, whose name meant "beautiful." The accuracy of it echoed in her clear skin,

though her face was too well padded with flesh and she no longer possessed the shape of a young girl.

"You're leaving us again tomorrow?" Frowning, Hasna shook her head.

Tah knew that she was worried about his grandfather's prediction—that the next journey would be one from which he would not return. Or if he did, it would be through fire, smelted into something alien and aloof. For seven days and nights, Tah's grandfather had eaten nothing and sat contorted on his mat, breathing smoke and watching the flames, arms immersed in the fire like a sacred offering. For seven days and nights, he had done this, and so he claimed that he knew the road his second-generation son would walk. Tah had dismissed the warning with the confidence of the very young.

"I cannot help it," Tah said, casting an anxious look toward where Harb sat just beyond the circle of light, isolated in a pool of shadows. "I am only the vessel of the ksathra's will. It is his to command and mine to obey."

"This is understood. You need not explain your duty to us. Your mother is only worried about you, for all I constantly reassure her." Ammar Kasim smiled at his wife.

With snapping red eyes, Moukib Faruq watched his grandson. "Make us proud," the old man whispered, somehow saying more than he said. "This is your hour, Malak Tadit. Go as the sun's friend, that your feet find safe passage home."

Clapping his grandson on the shoulder, he shambled out the way he had come, muttering about the brittleness of his old bones. He did not say good-bye and left no ashes when he burned like a meteor into the night.

"Tah?" All eyes turned toward the small girl stumbling toward him, her hands fisted and digging at her eyes. "Tah's home!" she repeated accusingly.

With a boyish whoop, he darted forward and scooped her up, whirling her around in his arms. "I'm home," he murmured into her soft baby curls. As always, she smelled of the lemons their mother used to rinse her hair. "Just look what I've brought for you, all the way from the high house of the sha'aal-izzat."

Excited, she wriggled in his grasp, arching back to look at him. Both of them ignored their mother's feigned huffs of protest, her words of caution, "You'll spoil the girl rotten, Tah—you will." Hasna watched her youngest daughter stuff candied dates into her face with all the refinement of a grazing goat. "Failing that, you'll make her sick, and I'll be the one looking after her tomorrow when she's crying for you." As soon as she said it, a sad hush fell, as they were all reminded how transient this reunion was, and she chattered on with false brightness, "Or maybe you'll just drop her on her head. You'd like that, wouldn't you, silly girl?"

"Funny head," the child whispered, pointing. "Tah has a funny head, like grandfather."

Then Sagireh gave a muffled giggle as her brother planted a smacking wet kiss on her cheek and then dangled her upside down. Like the children they were, they played together a little longer, their laughter falling like sunshine into the dimly lit room.

* * * *

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Like the lykos who find fire both brilliant and terrible, circling eternally in the shadows as they howl their fear and disappointment into the night, Harb watched this family, his black eyes following their every movement with fierce and hungry intensity, his keen ears registering every nuance of their speech. He did not miss the moment when little Sagireh fell asleep in her brother's arms, nor when Hasna shifted on her cushions and leaned a little heavier on her husband's knees. It was alien to him and fearsomely beautiful.

Much later, when the conversation had subsided into silence and each left, one by one, to seek their beds, Harb was left in the common area, having declined an offer of a room to himself. His lot was not to sleep in peace or comfort, not for any of the days of his life. His destiny was to watch and listen, guard and kill, then finally to die.

Night sat heavily on his shoulders as Sahen chased Anumati farther toward the horizon. With his unnaturally sharp senses, he heard the members of the family, the noises of their sleep, the sound of their breathing, the turns they made upon their mats. He should have heard the woman in the hall, but he did not. None of his other senses detected her, even as she stood within his sight.

"Grace to you," she said simply, and folded herself beside him, much nearer than he considered good judgment. He read no wariness in her face.

She was only a little more than a girl, though older than Tah, and wore the face Hasna must have shown the world when she was young: strong bones, gold skin, liquid dark

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eyes, and a fall of raven hair. Her form was slim and demurely robed in black.

In case she was more than she seemed or knew less than she should, Harb indicated his mouth, one quick, clean motion. It was more concession than he usually made.

"I know what you are," she said bluntly. "It has no bearing on why I am here."

He only stared at her, no question evident on his face or in his inscrutable eyes. If he was curious, it was impossible to judge him so. She would either elaborate or she would not, and she would go away, leaving him in peace.

"My name is Melek," she began, for the beginning was always the naming rite, "sister to Tah, daughter to Kasim and Hasna, and I am dead."

At this Harb showed some surprise. His expression of it, however, was less than profound. He blinked at her, once, and waited for her to continue.

"Not dead in truth, as you can see me sitting here. But dead to the world and dead to my husband, whom I left and disgraced my family." She sighed and folded her hands in her lap, tucking them into her robe. "But neither am I here to confess my secrets. I am here to plead your protection for my brother."

Why? It was a quick, clean motion, and she should not have known its meaning.

A strange look came over her face, and her liquid gaze clung to him with fierce directness. "Because you are powerful. Strong. Because I love Tadit and I want him home again."

You risk much to gain nothing. The ksathra has already made your brother my concern. The signing was longer this time, more complex, and pointless, because she would not understand it.

But she did. Closing her eyes, a long sigh whistled up from her chest and between her teeth. She slumped, possibly in relief. *Ksathra Z'ev is a good leader,* she replied clumsily, when she looked at him again.

Who taught you? The curiosity was uncharacteristic, but Harb could no more resist inquiring than he could change his nature.

"A guard in my husband's household," she said softly. "He was ... kind. I learned to read better than I learned to execute it. My fingers have been broken. They ... ache."

She must have gotten to know her guard well, if he'd taught her to read sign—and shared with her how much his caste loathed being called mutes, as if they were deformed in some way. Mutes were made—not born—and chosen by some arcane means that was as much chance as science. He did not know what to make of Melek, who spoke of her guard with more warmth than was wise. Harb stared at her, black eyes unblinking, waiting for her to leave. Instead, she stretched like a cat, some indecipherable emotion in her wide eyes.

"You are beautiful, like a blade," she murmured, as if she were not aware that women did not say such things to a sword arm of the sha'al-izzat.

You should heed the stories, he signed, the gestures abrupt. *I am not tame, nor am I to be wholly trusted.*

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"I never dreamed you were," she replied. "But I am Melek the Dead, sister to first messenger Malak Tadit, daughter of Kasim and Hasna. I have no fear left in me."

With an expression more resigned than lewd, she drew her robe up, exposing, inch by tantalizing inch, the golden curves of her legs. Harb stared at her; he had never seen a woman's thighs.

None of the unveiled mysteries riveted him, however. What transfixed his gaze was the ugly mass of purple scars, clustered low on her abdomen. *Who has done this?* he asked, before he could stop himself.

"My husband," she said in a bland voice. "When he gouged our babe from my living body and pronounced me unfit to bear his son. Not content with this, he also removed my woman's organs, the ones that enable me to bring forth children. It is the deepest mystery why I survived. Or if I did."

I am sorry.

Unclenching her hands from her robe, the folds swished around her feet, covering her secrets. "Do not be." Melek looked at a cushion, avoiding his gaze for the first time. "There is little left of me and certainly no fear, for I have looked on true evil. But you—you are a good man and I will remember you."

As silently as she had come, she left the room, the dark folds of her robe sweeping the floor behind her. Harb sat in troubled stillness until both Sahen and Anumati had left the sky and the house stirred with the noise of an awakening family.

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BLOOD BONDS

As masters went, Rodhlann was surprisingly undemanding; in fact, he asked nothing of her except a little blood each morning. In the village, she had known her place, her service as routine as the eternal promise of sunrise. Muir suspected he had taken her along with him as impulsively as a small child places an interesting pebble in his pocket and views it later with gentle perplexity, having forgotten its fascination.

They had been on the road five days before she asked him where they were going. She had not outwardly questioned his behavior in leading them to strange places, digging beside a pointed rock or breaking open a fossilized sand lizard to see what was inside. If his behavior puzzled her, she certainly did not speak of it. The silence between them had continued almost uniformly unbroken, thus he seemed properly startled when she finally spoke. Perhaps, amid the sea of thoughts that comprised his mind, the idea of her voice had been lost.

"Where are we going, sayyid?"

"Can you read the sands?" he asked contemplatively.

"Right now, we are headed toward Feroz, but that is not to imply Feroz is our destination."

To say Muir did not understand him is like saying the cat does not understand why the mouse runs away. Plainly, the cat does not comprehend the foolishness of the mouse any more than the mouse understands why it must die.

The name he spoke, a province within her own country, was vaguely familiar to her; old Taate might have spoken it

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once within her hearing. She could neither read nor write. Ignorance was her chief facility, and at that time, she wore it like a bright robe. The world of her senses, this was what she knew. To hold something in her hand was to define it; to taste, touch, see, smell—in these ways, she could know a thing, its properties and values. In this way, she began her magic.

It was a slight magic to be sure. But as sages have always said—and this she knew instinctively: wisdom is learning the proper names for things. Her senses were acute, like those of a young animal, uncluttered with an excess of thought, and she listened to them exclusively. With instincts to match her senses, it is only one step further to explain why Muir heard the ebbing voices of the earth, the trapped spirit of Dharani. Be sure that she heard them; they had guided her from her earliest days. Rodhlann spoke true about her magic: her noontime walks in Ar Cahra, her compact with the red soul. Anyone else would have fallen short, and the penalty for such failure is death.

For a time, it was a fine thing to travel with him and see more of her country. The rainbow-hued sands, the dry rivers, the white dunes, the carmine rocks, and the glass flats; the beauty of it overwhelmed her. At night, she lay on her side, curled in her djellabah, feeling a bit like a child for whom the trip away from home has lasted too long.

Regular concerns like the search for food and water did not enter his mind. After a few days, she grew used to his absentminded gestures, summoning provisions for them out of nowhere. She did not wonder if others might be going

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without—if he had by some art stolen from those who needed the supplies more than they did. Instead, she drank the wine and ate the food, feeling a little like a lavedi herself. It had been exactly seven days since she had done anything useful.

The two of them walked, and Muir did not question his apparent reluctance to deprive someone of pack animals in the same way he did provisions. All she had was what she carried, the tapestry and the same things she had taken on her visit to Erathos. It seemed very long ago now, and there could be no returning.

Sometimes she touched her sharp knife and her throwing stones for security, reassuring herself with their familiarity. The weight of her club was comforting. She had no idea whether she would find any of the items useful.

She did not question the speed at which they traveled, often walking for hours unharmed during the killing heat of the day. Perhaps one of his casual gestures sheltered them somehow. After having witnessed, however uncomprehendingly, the death of great Ballendin, having watched him bring food and water into being where there had been nothing, she did not believe there was anything he could not do.

On the ninth day of their journey, he growled an unfamiliar word and stopped on the road, turning to gaze at her with obvious malevolence. Too awed to be offended, she folded herself to her knees and stared up at him with intense brown eyes, waiting with perfect stillness. The lavedi had often beaten her for imagined faults, using her body as a convenient source of expiation. If she had thought about it at

any length, Muir might have decided she did not particularly enjoy it, but it had been a regular part of her life for so long that she could not imagine any other existence.

In a moment the malice left him, and he flowed into a sitting position beside her, staring at her. "You are perfectly servile, are you not?" It was a rhetorical question; it must have been. She did not know what "servile" meant, but she smiled, seeing she had pleased him. "Interesting," he continued, "that humans should have perfected that when they've learned nothing else."

Seeing that the remaining rancor had evaporated from his exquisite face, she continued to smile, encouraging his speech with her silence.

"I am looking for something that was lost a long time ago, even by my recollections. An unimaginable length of time by your reckoning."

He paused as if waiting for her response, so she gave one. "You believe it may be part of Ar Cahra by now?"

His look was mildly intrigued, as if one of his favorite hounds had displayed a useful if untaught trick. "Why would you surmise as much?"

"Digging beside the pointed rocks. Breaking open the sand lizard. Ar Cahra is jealous of anything not itself and it always seeks to swallow what it cannot destroy."

"You speak as if the waste were alive," he murmured, but it is possible his voice contained the slightest shading of unease.

"It is," she answered, her eyes widening as if he had just confessed to raving lunacy. Not that there was aught she

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could do about it or would have considered doing. An oath was an oath, and he her master, until Kaveh gathered one of their souls to his great basket. "Can you not hear the voices?"

It was beyond her comprehension that he, who could call the lightning down and summon food and water in the heart of the waste, could not hear the voices of the earth. She thought he mocked her; and for the first time, a flicker of anger rose beneath her skin like one heated pinprick.

He sat back on his haunches, vague attention sharpening into calculation. "You hear Dharani?"

The name meant nothing to Muir, so she stared at him with blank, dark eyes. Suddenly, she remembered that she was not supposed to confess such a thing, and found herself torn between the desire to please him and the urge to lie. Unable to sort it out, she said at last, "I know Dharani not, but Ar Cahra speaks to me."

"What does it say, little maid?" He gentled his voice and stroked her cheek with a fingertip.

Awful pleasure ravaged her, and Muir began to feel wary of his touch. It was insidious and sly, worse than Lavedi Immelia's angry tantrums, worse than pain. Muir's alarm sprung from the resistance of earth to change, for it was then that she first tasted yearning. And though she could not have articulated as much, she longed to feel his touch as more than a faithful hound.

After long moments, she answered without eloquence. "They tell me where it is safe to walk and sleep. Of pure water and shade." She thought before continuing, "And they sigh for lost days."

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It was the best she could do, and Rodhlann seemed to recognize as much. Above, the sun dipped beneath the blindingly white hills, tired with its sailing. At sunset, the sand shimmered like ground glass, and Muir knew it to be as lethal. On the next rise, the lykos bayed at the ascent of Sahen and Anumati. The silver maid turned huntress tonight, impassioned in pursuit of her red lord.

“Have you ever spoken with them in turn?”

Awed, Muir looked at him through a dark fringe of her hair, unkempt from the long days in the desert. “Why would they listen?”

“For the same reason they speak to you.” Rodhlann stared into ruby clouds, bruised cobalt and violet with the dying of fierce light.

Muir accepted it without question. If he said it, then it was true. Her loyalty was absolute. “What should I say to them, sayyid?”

He fixed his gaze once more on the maid's face. “Ask them about the lost days, little one. If a city was swallowed by the waste, long ago.” His words rang with loss so profound that there were no words.

It echoed inside her, a hole large enough to lose herself in, and she stared in incomprehension, some seedling self whispering, wanting to comfort him. Not because he compelled it of her but because he was powerful, bewilderingly beautiful, and tragic in a way she could not understand. He sat quietly beside her, his pale hands like swans against his thighs. And since he held the silence, she

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did as well, more afraid of displeasing him than she was of dying.

Are you there? Muir felt fairly foolish, but it was her nature to obey.

I have always been here, came the immediate reply.

Startled, she turned her agate-brown eyes to Rodhlann, who watched the horizon, oblivious. Pleasure purred through her at the acknowledgment, and it was her second step along her road. Left to her own devices, she might have asked any number of questions, or none at all, but he'd told her what to say; and as it was her first task in his service, she did not mean to fail.

Is there a hidden city from the lost days?

There is.

Will you show me?

I will.

There was simplicity and grace in the exchange, and try as he might, Rodhlann extracted no detail other than her account. Parts of her were closed to him; there were no shields as he might encounter in a more sophisticated mind, yet he found he was unable to discern what else she knew.

"We should stay here until morning," Muir said, once he ceased his efforts to steal secrets of which she was scarcely aware.

In silence broken only by the whirring of insects and the distant howl of the lykos, she ran a whetstone along the edge of her blade, throwing sparks. There was no wood for a fire, not that her companion seemed to note the chill in any case, and Muir herself adapted with the ease of one without the

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concept of discontent. She did not think of cold or hunger. In truth, she did not consider her own comfort at all; she simply was, elemental as the earth. After a time, he stopped her motion with a gesture, and she put away both implements.

The dark bowl of the sky glittered with crystal fragments, and to occupy herself, Muir named them silently. The tales she knew, although none touched her so fiercely as the story of Kaveh and Minau, though if pressed she could not have explained the ache that hollowed her belly when she thought of them. That night, she stared up at the twin stars with the rapacious hunger of an unfed intellect, the light falling like knives into her brown face.

After a long while, her gaze fell, taking in the wash of darkness over distant dunes, then she dug inside her bag for a waterskin, offering it first to him, then drinking some herself. She ate a few pieces of dried fruit, which he declined, as they were sticky and none too clean.

Muir wrapped herself in her djellabah and went to sleep easily, like a weary dog. Nothing troubled her; she suffered no inner conflict and certainly no regret, for she had never done anything that was her own choice. Perhaps, as he gazed down on her sleeping form, Rodhlann entertained a moment of doubt about what he would do to her. About gifting the double-edged burden of will and awareness. But it was no more than a moment, less than a heartbeat to him.

In the morning when she woke, he said, "Guide me to the buried city, little maid, and I will share the truth of your stories along the way."

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Muir smiled at the prospect, for the silence had begun to weary even her. Made of small courtesies, she gave him the waterskin first, and then offered him the fruit. At first he waved it away, but as she started to eat, she noticed that nothing appeared to take its place. Though he ate sparingly in comparison to her, he usually took a little blood and food at breakfast and only water the rest of the day. Rodhlann seemed as surprised as she by the absence of new provisions. And for the first time, Muir experienced a flare of unease. They were ten days into the waste, ill prepared.

Leaning forward, he trickled the sand through his fingertips. "It seems I must share what remains," he murmured and ate the dried fruit with only a whisper of distaste at its stickiness.

Muir no longer followed him blindly. Instead, she listened to the voices whispering directions on the wind. The earth spirits guided her, and she accepted that he was deaf to their quiet whispers.

Sunset found them at the foot of a natural rock wall; the dying sunlight glinted off its bloodred surface. Muir turned her face from the fanned whorls that seemed as if something pushed desperately against imprisonment. Behind them lay the sand sea, rich with refracted hues; before them lay a vertical climb. To either side, the dunes rolled, broken only by scrubby patches of brown grass or clusters of cacti.

Their water sloshed in her bag, a tepid trickle that would not last through the following day, even on half rations. Though Muir had done as Rodhlann asked—she had listened to the voices—they proved unreliable, guiding her deeper into

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the waste than anyone had ever traveled. There was no food or shelter within miles, and her belly gnawed at her backbone.

Anger prickled as she studied her master through sticky lashes. This one obviously did not understand the master-servant relationship. While he might use her as he pleased, scream at her or beat her, he was *not* supposed to allow her to come to lasting harm. And there seemed no other likely outcome here, unless he merely tested her trust in him.

"Will you call our supper?"

"The sand is ... dead to me." The words sounded as if she'd pulled them from his mouth with pliers.

The chain about his neck glimmered like quicksilver, and he spun the pendant with one fingertip. Muir recognized a diamond; she had cared for Immelia's jewels all her life, but this gem seemed to have been filled with a dark and viscous fluid that drank the light. The filigree of the necklace whispered of alien lore, and she looked away, hungry in a fashion unrelated to the cavern of her belly.

"Then what will we do?"

Rodhlann gave her an inscrutable smile, and his strange gaze slid over her shoulder. "We are about to find out."

Slowly, she turned. Where there had been only empty sand a moment before, now stood a ring of silent warriors, painted like ancient caves. They might have been bronze statues but for the flicker of their eyes. The last light glinted off their long-handled spears, as the sun hid its face beneath the far horizon. Her knees trembled; she ached with hunger and exhaustion. The terror was too much.

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"The Bedu do not take prisoners," she whispered.

"Will you truly die for me, little maid?" He managed to make the question both weary and mocking, and his words hardened her weakness into steel.

Muir slid her club from the leather loop and planted herself before him.

The Bedu leader stepped forward. Around his corded neck, he wore a leather strap strung with ivory, its pallor eerie against the mahogany of his skin. Muir felt the cold settle into her bones, the sands behind the tribesmen leached of all hue by Anumati's silver purity. Sucking a deep breath, she hefted her club and tested its solidity against her palm. Their only hope lay in impressing the nomads with their courage; her master's silence did not bespeak fear or valor, only deep weariness. Echoes of Rodhlann remained with her; his despair swelled until she found it hard to focus on the immediate threat.

"I am Ghazi," the man said, spinning his spear between his palms. "You face a Bedu hunting band. Will you die bravely or will you plead with me?"

"Ghazi," she repeated. "'Conqueror.' How many bones have you trod to dust, great one? How much blood runs beneath your feet?"

"Rivers," he replied with a feral smile. "Oh, but I honor your spirit, brown one. I will make of your brow an eating bowl."

Muir knew that was a compliment, although it chilled her blood. Her role had changed; she was without schooling for

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this circumstance. Her heart battered her sternum like a caged songbird, but she braced her feet and readied her club.

At a gesture from Ghazi, the others melted closer, toying with them. The Bedu scented blood, and only blood would serve. Despite her humility, Muir did not wish to die in the shadow of the red rocks. There was so much she had yet to see—so many stories her master had promised to share. Devotion warred with fear. *I saved his life, and he has saved mine. We both are free.* If she ran, she might survive. No one possessed a better chance of gentling Ar Cahra.

No. She was blood and honor bound. While her master's face had changed, Muir's heart had not.

Her eyes blazed. "With the earth as my arms, I will not fall."

Her whisper startled the Bedu; they paused three paces from her and exchanged uneasy looks. A superstitious people, they doubtless did not know what to make of this strange meeting, where a woman would both speak and fight for a man.

"Save your voice for screaming," Ghazi growled.

Ghazi lunged with his spear. With speed she hadn't known she possessed, Muir's club connected, hammering the blade into the dry ground. The weapon twanged in the silence, its shaft vibrating.

"With the earth as my arms, I will *not* fall," she repeated—and the Bedu seemed to feel the tremor of response from the ground itself. "Come one, come all, I will not fall—and I am weaker than my master. We have left Ballendin an izzat's

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tomb. You may choose life by offering us hospitality, or here your bones return to dust."

Her knees knocked, and the enormity of the bluff threatened to turn her stomach, bile bubbling at the back of her throat. Ghazi stared at his talon, buried in the hard soil. His indecision seemed to move his men; they shifted behind him, lowering their weapons. Muir saw that none of them would meet her eyes.

"It is true," one whispered. "Ballendin has gone the way of all earth. We met a caravan on the road to Feroz."

Even the Bedu did not murder merchants; they were not foolish enough to kill the only souls both brave and greedy enough to deal with them, providing luxuries the Bedu could not plunder themselves. The tribesmen, too, were the only source of pure lykos hide, a skin tough and resilient enough to tan into the finest armor in the land, buttery leather rich and smooth.

Rodhlann chose that moment to step out of the shadows, and Anumati's rays silvered his fair hair, his features in sharp and distinct pallor. He studied Ghazi for a moment before saying, "My servant never speaks anything but the truth. The time has come for you to choose."

She knew he was powerless; he could not call down the lightning or even conjure a cup of water. Standing in starlight, he was an elegant wraith, hardly a threat to the heavily muscled men with their sharp spears. Yet they knew him, or at least the legends, because the smallest whispered, "Afreet!"

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"Peace, Shunnar." Ghazi offered both his hands, palms down, in an ancient gesture of respect, bowing once. Muir knew his Bedu pride would not permit him to acknowledge fright, so the war leader took refuge in the old ways. He addressed his words to Rodhlann. "I am honored to offer you the hospitality of my house."

Sensing that her pivotal role had passed, she stepped back, and Rodhlann startled her when he caught her shoulder. His touch lanced her with heat, provoking the inexplicable urge to wrench away. An embryonic thing, her will shivered in its sleep.

"We accept," Rodhlann said softly. "I have questions, Ghazi, and perhaps I will reward you if you answer them."

"I give you the names of my men: Jibril, Kadin, Riyad, Shunnar, and Ferro." Ghazi indicated each, who nodded solemnly in turn.

Shunnar was the shortest of the hunters; he stood only half a hand taller than Muir. He looked very young—it was probably his first journey so deep into the waste, and from his white-knuckled grip on his weapon, he feared it might be his last. Jibril was the oldest; his skin was weathered dark like a strip of dried meat, his tufted brows thick and white as goose down. Jibril studied Muir as intently as she studied him, running her solemn gaze over the triple tier of scars etched into his cheeks. There was a melancholy air about the elder that made Muir want to pat his arm in consolation.

A warrior in his prime, Kadin ran his fingers over the haft of his weapon; his almond eyes gave him a hooded look the other warriors did not possess. Kadin inclined his head

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mockingly, and Muir went on memorizing their faces. Riyad was thin but only a hand shorter than Ghazi. She thought he probably scouted; he had large eyes that darted without seeming to miss anything. Ferro was a man of middle age with strong shoulders, a paunch, and smile lines that intersected the ritual marks on his face.

Like most Bedu, they had broad features, wide noses, and mobile mouths equally suited to smile or snarl. To a man, they were shaved from head to toe, their skin painted in ochre and earthen hues, careful geometric patterns that spoke of their lineage and mission, if one possessed the lore to read it.

Sadly, she did not. Muir tried to remember what she had heard of the Bedu—she had learned much in silence, passing by open doors or serving the izzat with such subtlety that he forgot she was present. She had learned more still by visiting old Taate, now dust in Ballendin's streets, but none of her accidental lessons had included more than horrifying tales of Bedu cruelty.

"We hunt," Ghazi said. "We run at night like our prey, and we sleep during the day. If you would be Bedu, you must run."

Muir felt the lightning flicker of Rodhlann's luminous eyes and heard his unspoken question: *Are you strong enough?* They had already walked the day long in the hot sun; she was weary and thirsty. She thought the question, however, might better be applied to her master. Muir would do whatever she must.

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Nodding once, she offered their waterskin to the war leader. "What we have, we share willingly with you, brothers. What we have, we share, and may flame take the one who breaks our peace."

With somber care, Ghazi poured the tepid trickle into his own container, symbolic of their joined paths. "Your eating knife."

She gave it without hesitation and he sliced his palm, returning the stained blade. Silver Anumati gave the rocky ground a hallowed air; his men showed no more emotion than the stones behind her, but Muir understood the required response. She carved a shallow line into her hand. Ghazi clasped it and squeezed to the point of pain, the mingling fluid stinging her raw skin. Dizzy, she hardly noticed when Rodhlann steadied her, as he watched the ritual with detachment.

The Bedu leader painted a rune on her brow, his breath hot against her skin as he exhaled to dry the blood. Muir sealed her hand against the side of her stained djellabah, eyes wide. Amazement warred with exhaustion. *I have spent eleven nights in the waste. I have become Bedu. What wonders more shall I live to see?*

"Your blood is mine," Ghazi murmured. "And those who seek it must come through me."

"And me," said Shunnar, somewhat uncertainly.

Each tribesman intoned the two words that encompassed Muir and Rodhlann in legendary Bedu protection—ferocious loyalty no outlander could claim. Until now.

"To the last man," the hunters added as one.

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A chill shivered over her, sifting fine sand over the pocked terrain. Sometimes Muir sensed moments of portentous power, and this one groaned with the weight of it. Two outlanders become Bedu; before this night, she would have thought that first the stones would weep.

"What do we hunt?" her master asked quietly.

Bone flashed in the shriveled nut that was Jibril's face, a smile that set Muir's teeth on edge. "We blood the boy tonight. We were hunting lykos when we found *you*. Are you strong enough to bring down a beast?"

"Do not ever doubt," Rodhlann murmured, "that I am strong enough."

They ran.

After a brief respite, in which they shared water, wrinklefruit, and jerky, they ran, bare feet thudding against the hard-packed earth. The grueling pace taxed Muir more than Rodhlann; in his sleek black raiment, he ran like the lykos himself, long-limbed and elegant. Her own gasps rang in her ears, and she trailed the men, unable to keep pace even with Shunnar, who filled her open mouth with his dust.

"Silence," Kadin hissed. "The pack is near and you pant like thunder!"

Angry exhaustion pricked her. *I am not born Bedu—I am only a maid.*

In the oblong shadow of the rocks, they crouched while Muir tried to catch her breath. The great waste lay behind them. Before them, the foothills of the Arkyrie Mountains sprawled in stony splendor, black obelisks bathed in quicksilver. Scrabbling claws echoed across the valley, and

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the first cry split the night, the eerie howl that owned the night. Soon, its brethren answered. *Born of Kaveh's brow, from infinite grief ...*

She had never seen one wild. When hunting was bad, the lykos foraged in Ar Cahra, feeding on fallen birds or beasts of burden that had perished along the caravan route between the seven cities. They usually hunted the steppes abutting the great waste, occasionally ranging into the foothills to take down bigger prey.

"An entire pack," Ghazi whispered. "They do not hunt—tonight, they feast. The old ones have blessed you, Shunnar. You will have more hearts than you can eat, more blood than you can drink."

"And more skins than you can carry, young one." Jibril gave his brilliant smile, a blur of dark with a white heart.

"You drink the blood of your enemies?" Braced on hands and knees, Rodhlann mimicked the posture of his hosts, but he could never be mistaken for one of them.

Watching him, Muir thought that his skin glimmered like the ivory about Ghazi's strong neck. Such pallor should have been burned red as the stones of Erathos by now, but it was not. The inconsistency troubled her, another vague anxiety to writhe amid inchoate longing and homesickness. She wanted to unroll the tapestry and trace the aged textures and muted colors of Kaveh's face; she did not want to be gathered into his basket—she wanted the familiarity of his sharp features.

Sorrow was not permitted. She was Bedu—she was ... whatever her master made of her.

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"Lykos only," Ferro answered briefly. "The lykos are strong; we claim their power. We use the remains of our human enemies—in Ar Cahra, the only sin is waste."

I will make of your brow an eating bowl.

"I will return," Riyad whispered.

It was the first time he'd spoken—so near, his voice made Muir's club hand twitch. The lean hunter blended into the dark, and as he slipped over the rocky rise, he seemed to vanish; only a shiver of movement here or there gave away his progress, even though she tried to track him with her eyes.

Rodhlann's stillness gave away nothing of his thoughts as she glanced at him, wondering what he would do. She'd never seen him draw a weapon—staff or blade. How would he hold his own among these fierce fighters? If he did not strike a blow in his own name, he would lose face. And though the Bedu did not know that her master was reft of power, dissipation of their awe could not be wise or healthy.

Clenching her hands on the haft of her club, she tried to still her trembling fingers. Muir tried to tell herself it was only weariness, but the truth forced its way up, painful as birth—she was afraid of facing the lykos. Again, she formed the silently plaintive refrain *I am only a maid*.

Some signal came, so subtly slurred into the night noises that she missed it, and the Bedu melted into motion as one, stalking over the open ground. Keeping her body low, she followed in a hunched run. Muir knew her best hope was to watch the Bedu and try to mimic them.

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As she crested the rise, the spectacle stole her breath—awash in starshine, the dark lykos fur had a low sheen. Her first impression was of feral grace. About half the height of a man, the creatures possessed long torsos and strong legs, tipped with extended claws with which they were digging at a fallen mountain lion. Two beasts snarled over the dead predator's entrails, growling as they dug in their back claws, refusing to share. The rest ripped at the feast, gorging with long snouts full of razor-sharp fangs.

She glimpsed large yellow eyes before the wind turned, and though the lykos wallowed in blood, the stench of humanity permeated the coppery air. First, the largest lifted its head, sniffing, and then it loped toward them, calling its brethren with a growl. Impressions became fleeting as the hunters formed a protective circle, fighting shoulder to shoulder to prevent the lykos from getting at their backs. Muir found herself sandwiched between Kadin and Shunnar, who looked almost as frightened as she felt.

The boy's jabs looked halfhearted, even to Muir, who knew the lykos could not be permitted to spring. Their haunches were strong enough to knock down an ox. *Eight of us, and ten of them*, she thought. *I will not live to see another sunrise*. Behind her, someone screamed, bubbling with blood, sound forced through savaged vocal cords.

Muir landed a glancing blow on the lykos snapping at Shunnar's thigh, knowing Kadin could hold his own. The tall tribesman laughed as he lunged, peeling a strip of bloody flesh from another beast's spine, and its yowl of pain sounded almost like a human child's. At the cry, Shunnar missed badly

and broke stance, staggering to his knees as the beast avoided his blow.

Ghazi shouted, "Close the circle!"

As one, the Bedu hunters tightened the ring, leaving the boy to be devoured. The lykos turned from Muir with a snarl and launched itself at the fallen youth, who scuttled backward on hands and feet. Shunnar had lost his spear. Muir smelled his urine on the wind.

Instinct drove her. The whites of Shunnar's eyes gleamed wildly in the dark; he saw his death hurtling toward him with slavering jaws. Muir made a sound in the back of her throat and threw her club, striking the creature soundly on the rump. Her blow did no permanent damage, but the force turned the lykos aside, so it landed hard on its flank, instead of on Shunnar's chest with fangs poised to tear out his throat.

She did not look at Kadin as she broke formation, though she heard the hunter curse. "Close!" he roared, impaling another lykos and twisting his spear to shred its guts.

Shaking itself, the lykos nearest Shunnar sprang to its feet, glancing between the two with its eerie yellow eyes. Now neither Muir nor the boy had weapons. Her club lay several hands behind the beast, and the spear rested near Shunnar, though he seemed to lack the presence of mind to use it. *I am only a maid*, she thought for the third time, as fear turned her insides liquid. For a moment, she feared she would shame herself as Shunnar had done, but then pain obliterated thought as the lykos leapt. Muir tried to throw herself to the side, so it couldn't completely pin her, but its claws sank into

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her shoulder as she turned, raking bloody runnels in her flesh.

She screamed and tried to twist away from its snarling mouth. *Must keep it from my throat, must keep*—Crushing weight stole her breath, and agony washed her vision red. Noise, motion, and then a spear spiked through the back of the beast's neck, narrowly missing Muir. A hot spurt of blood ran across her lips, and the creature tried to howl, bruising her with its death throes.

Before someone lifted the dead weight and smothering fur, she knew she would see Shunnar standing over her, wet with his first kill. Winded, she lay on her side, her back scored and throbbing. Grit abraded the wound through her torn djellabah, and she panted like a tired dog, too sore to stand. Nearby, Ferro said a prayer for the dying, whose names she did not hear—perhaps she numbered among them.

Kadin came to tower over her. "That was the most foolish thing I have ever seen. You are dumber than a mountain goat, girl."

Shutting her eyes against the blurred vision of the tall tribesman with a crimson corona—that was surely blood trickling into her eyes—she must have drifted, because the next thing she knew Rodhlann was crouched before her, his moon-pale face patterned in silver and blood. He stroked her cheek lightly, but she felt only the uncommon heat of his fingertips, not the unnatural ecstasy that alarmed her.

"You are quite mad," he said in a peculiar tone. "You would die for anyone, wouldn't you, little maid?"

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Muir opened her mouth to answer and instead fell into the stars.

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FOOL IN FOLLOWING

The farewells had been quick, much quicker than was reasonable, but Kasim and Hasna held their cautionary words to a minimum. They spoke of love and pride and reunions. With great regret, Tah left his home without seeing his grandfather again. The whole family feared, though they did not speak of it, that Moukib Faruq had chosen his own road back into the Cycle, and that he would not be seen again.

In daylight, Harb looked even fiercer. Carven, jagged face with glittering black eyes, head shaved smooth except for the shiny black topknot fixed in place by a band of hammered gold. The muscles of his massive arms rippled beneath his skin, smoothly oiled savagery. Powerful forearms, wrists banded with bronze, hands that could easily span a man's neck and snap it, yet imbued with peculiar grace, perhaps from long cycles of signing. His armor was both ornate and functional, leather embroidered with silver and gold thread, the ksathra's emblem marking him.

The early risers of Inay gave them a wide berth, seeing the hawk emblazoned boldly on Harb's armor, a desert hawk silhouetted against the killing sun, one talon extended toward its prey. Tah was hard pressed to match Harb's pace, not without running. He was loath to do that, for it was a long journey back through the wastes to dead Ballendin.

Inay stirred to life, women seeking the wells in the streets behind them, gossiping with each other, scolding their children. Rarely, a peal of laughter reached them. The sun

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began to heat the red clay buildings, and Tah heard the calls from the market. To a stranger, all the buildings might look the same, but not to him, because this was his home and he had inherited his father's eye.

Uncomfortable with constant silence, he pointed out features of each building to Harb. "This one has a stove in the kitchen—that one, a private well. This one has its own garden behind the walls—that one was built with shoddy materials. It will fall before Behrid."

As they came up the wide street, the Path of Hope, with its many trees and flowers proclaiming the prosperity and goodness of the sha'al-izzat, Harb's face held an odd expression. It was beyond Tah to fathom it, and he fell silent out of respect.

In the morning sunlight, the sha'al-izzat's palace—so might it loosely be named—burned golden with promise, its spires and domes a challenge to any foolish enough to doubt his power. Its stones were all precious and hard won. The palace was the only building in Inay not made of clay.

Tah touched his pack with a hint of apprehension. He had never traveled in such august company. In truth, he never traveled with anyone. He had run the length of the continent to all the provinces: Dareh, Kansbar, Feroz, Majeed, and Shapa. He had been to every capital city, each with its own grandeur. He had run to farming towns, nomad encampments, and villages so small they had no names. Once he had even been graced with the honor of running to a city on the coast; he had seen the ocean. His nervousness subsided a little. Such amazing things he had seen and

distances traveled. He'd been in the sha'al-izzat's service just over two cycles.

Before they reached the palace, the gates swung open and Ksathra Z'ev rode out on a magnificent chestnut stallion whose flanks gleamed red where the sun struck them. House servants led two horses behind him. Tah assumed one was for Harb and the other for a guard he had yet to meet.

"Mount up," Z'ev said, adding quietly, "I've persuaded the guard Bron to silence with a chancellorship. As yet, my father and Japhet know nothing of this. But let us make haste, for it will not be long before the other high houses get wind of Ballendin's fall."

Harb swung up with fluid grace. His horse was a spirited black with long legs and a deep chest, bred for endurance as well as speed.

With exaggerated patience, Tah folded his arms and waited for the tardy guard, silently vowing he would keep up with these horses if it killed him.

"Get on your horse, Malak Tadit. The day will not wait forever."

He jumped a little at the ksathra's gentle words, not believing at first that he wanted him to ride. Doubt burst over him like a flash of his grandfather's firedust. He did not know how. From his first moments, his life had been dedicated to running, then later, training to run for the sha'al-izzat. If he tried to sit atop this beast, he would be flung a great distance and smash his head open like an overripe melon.

Worse than that, he also came to the realization that he and Harb were the ksathra's only guards. He swallowed once,

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his breakfast scolding him from the depths of his stomach. Willing to split his skull in the ksathra's service, Tah hauled himself onto the horse. She was nice and quiet, a sort of yellow-brown, and she didn't protest his ungraceful weight.

As if he knew perfectly well what he was doing, he wiggled his feet at her sides and gathered part of her mane in one hand, as he saw Harb and Ksathra Z'ev doing. A different guard saluted them as they left the city. Three of them rode forth from Inay, the bone gates closing behind them more thoroughly than they knew.

The path was pressed stone and baked sand, fused by some unimaginable heat. Tah did not know anything about the construction of these ancient roads. The horse did much better on the flat stone, the hooves ringing a rhythmic passage. Ksathra Z'ev and Harb rode some fifty feet ahead of him, both disgustingly graceful atop their mounts despite the bruising pace. Tah jounced and jogged, totally out of sync with his horse's movement, until he was afraid all his teeth would be rattled loose.

The road wound first through the scrubby bushes and trees that grew along the banks of a tiny tributary of the river Omintago. As they rode past, the water was sluggish and opaque, lazily making its way to the place where it joined the rest of the river. A lizard sunning itself on a flat, red rock stared at Tah with one unblinking green eye, then turned away, slipping into the warm, dark water. From somewhere behind them came the sounds of a desert hawk screeching, the high and desperate cry that signals death, the triumphant howl of the lykos hunter, and then there was silence.

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Insects whirred all around but did not bite them; instead, they tormented the horses. The morning air smelled of rising heat, sand, and sweating equine flesh. On and on they rode, away from the city and the river and into the wastes. To the north and south was mile after mile of sand, beautiful with the multiplicity of hues, red, gold, brown, white, swirling around them in the wind, settling here or there, moving on just as quickly. There was nothing alive here. Only the lykos, the bravest and fiercest predators, ventured into the interior when hunting was bad, searching for carrion to supplement their diet.

Distracted by the unfamiliar perspective, Tah lost his sense of direction. He followed the others blindly, jolted until his entire body ached. Sweat soaked his tunic and salt crusted in all his tender crevices. He could feel the sores forming.

By the time the sun burned directly overhead, the wind died until there was barely a grain of sand stirring. The insects quieted, an ominous hush, and still the three pounded westward underneath the cloudless azure sky. Tah no longer felt his legs, but the numbness seemed a blessing. He focused on the most basic principle—staying atop his horse and keeping his eyes focused on the riders ahead. Soon he thought nothing at all.

* * * *

Up ahead, an argument had raged silently for the better part of an hour. Harb preferred to converse only with those who could sign; it did not remind him as pointedly of his inability to reply aloud. *I like it no better than you, but if we continue at this pace, we will kill the horses. What good to*

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reach Ballendin this night, if all are dead, our horses dead, and we have no way back across the waste?

As to that, we have only the messenger's word, Z'ev returned. I do not think we dare lose the time in camp. The other houses will be riding this way as well.

None of their capital cities are closer, nor do they have our advantage of time, Harb responded with impeccable logic. And if we do not camp tonight, I cannot guarantee our safety, he added with a finality that bespoke his true place in the expedition.

I will select a suitable place and time to rest, Z'ev signed, appeasing his dignity with this small victory. With a slight nudge of his heels, he pulled a little ahead, presumably to scout for such a location.

By the time the sun sank behind the jagged mounds of rock and sand, casting endless shadows that gradually faded into darkness, they were nearly to Ballendin, only an hour or two more. But the horses, for all their great desire, were close to the edge of their reserves. They had come too far, too fast in the brutal heat, with only the most cursory breaks for water and rest. It was beyond time to stop.

Z'ev pointed some distance to the west, beyond the road. *There, he signed. A good place.*

Harb narrowed his eyes against the darkness, then nodded once. By this time, Tah was barely conscious from heat and exhaustion, worn down from his week of running, then this grueling journey on horseback. With no instruction from him, his mount followed the others—perhaps sensing that the long day was nearly at an end.

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Riding about half a mile into the sand, the riders finally came to a stop beside a well. The area was clean and well tended; no carrion or bones marked it as a poison spring. Bloodred stones, shimmering like rubies, like nothing any of them had ever seen, ringed the outer surface. Lacking man-made structure or any sign of civilization, the raw look of the well and the swirling darkness of the water made them all a little nervous. But perhaps it was only night in the wastes and their deep weariness.

Harb stared for a moment at the tree before swinging down from his horse, telling it to drink and forage with a pat on its rump. Tah watched the other two and attempted to mimic them, but his stiff legs refused to cooperate, pitching him headfirst onto the sand. Winded, he lay there a moment, his ears ringing, and he stared up at the brilliant night sky, a blue so rich it was nearly black, ringed with red and purple. The stars were out, a rich spattering of light that accompanied Sahen and Anumati across the sky. There were stories about the stars as well, but he was too tired to think of any.

He was just thinking about getting up when Harb lifted him into a sitting position and offered him a waterskin. The guard stood watching him drink for a few moments, then turned toward Ksathra Z'ev, the two of them starting a conversation that Tah could not understand. He was too weary to care, though, and closed his eyes, letting the night wind cool his burning skin.

Dinner was a simple meal of hardtack, dried meat, and sweet black wine. Mechanically, Tah stuffed the food into his

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mouth, long unused leg muscles burning with a fierceness that left him limp. It seemed to him the water in the well was a little too restless for nature; the wind barely stirred its surface, and yet the well burbled and hissed. Shuddering a little, he looked toward the other men.

As if feeling his gaze, Ksathra Z'ev looked over, breaking off whatever he was signing. "You return to the land of the living," he observed unnecessarily. "We hoped the food and wine would refresh you."

"Very much," Tah answered. "I fear I am not an accomplished rider."

"And I am not an accomplished runner," the ksathra said kindly, an oblique reference to his disability. "We can only be what we are, no more, no less."

Not knowing how to respond, Tah only smiled and took a deep pull from his wineskin. It had been watered but tasted wonderful to him.

"Harb was pointing out the constellations," Z'ev explained. "He knows quite a bit about such things."

With graceful gestures, Harb pointed out each star and named it; the ksathra repeated its name aloud for Tah's benefit. The well hummed beside them, and if Tah had been pressed, he would have said it was a pleased sound. Until Harb pointed due north, and he made a peculiarly intertwined series of gestures.

"Kaveh and Minau. The protective star—two stars, actually, fused by some unknown power—of lovers and travelers, who are often the same." Before the ksathra had even finished saying the names, before the hiss of his breath had died

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away, a strange sound issued from the well, a voice somehow cast in water, and a huge wave crashed upward and drenched them all.

Shuddering, Tah shook himself like a dog and clutched his wineskin, still young enough to face the unknown with a façade of bravery. Not bothering to wipe his eyes, Harb went to the rim of the well; he knelt and cocked his head to one side. Every fiber of the guard's being bespoke intense concentration; he bowed his head for a moment in silent respect. Presently the keening subsided into a gentle hum and Harb turned toward the others.

Very strange, he signed. *It is a night for stories, I think. Would you hear of Kaveh and Minau, young messenger?*

Shall I speak for you? Z'ev offered without hesitation; he had given his voice to his guard on more than one occasion. Harb sometimes pined for the art of the jahnu, the storyteller, practiced by his family for generations. The ksathra had been signing almost as long as he had been speaking; the heir to the throne of Inay had never gone anywhere without a mute guard.

Tah drained his wineskin and nodded his head. It was a pleasant thought, listening to the ksathra speak the words that Harb etched into air.

“The story begins a long, long time ago, as all true tales do, when the gods were still free. Kaveh, Lord of Death, and his eternal enemy, Jyotish, Mother Goddess and giver of life, still roamed the earth. All the other gods and goddesses lived as well, rich in power, well loved by the humans they had created: Dyausa, god of Sun and Sky; Muni, goddess of

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Mystery and Silence; Raktim, god of War; Shashida, goddess of Water; Altair, god of the Wind; Bela, goddess of Destruction; Animukh, god of Fire; and Dharani, goddess of Earth. There were others, of course, though their power was less, and they have since gone the way of all earth, passing finally even from our living memory.

“Yes, my friends, even the gods and goddesses are not exempt from the great Cycle, the Cycle which Sahen and Anumati set in motion so long ago, then abandoned for their evening games.

“But this story is not about any of them. I have promised to tell you of Kaveh and Minau, and this I shall do. You shall have the story precisely as I heard it from my father, and he from his father, and so on. Such is the art of the jahnu, which I may never practice, save for the grace and generosity of my lord Z'ev.

“Listen, young Tadit, listen and learn of your world.

“Minau was beautiful. Though legends may disagree as to what she looked like—raven hair or gold, fair skin or dark—there is no disagreement that she was the loveliest of her people. She was a desert flower from a desert tribe. Perhaps our own—who can say for sure? She came from wealthy parents and was an only child. Though she was sought after by every marriageable man, she showed no interest. She claimed to have had a vision that marked her for the goddess Jyotish, and she swore on her own life that she would honor no man before the goddess nor would she allow any man her virtue.

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"Whether it was a true vision or merely an attempt to remain in the safe comfort of her father's house, again no one can say. But Jyotish was a jealous mistress with ears that reach far, and so it came to her attention that in the desert country a young girl had sworn herself into service. This pleased the goddess, for it is not often that a maiden chooses to walk the harsh, demanding path of the goddess, devoid of family or friends.

"Jyotish sent a sign to Minau's village, one that could not be denied. Here we have some disagreement again, some jahnu say a huge white bird came to the town and spoke the maiden's name, others insist that her name was written with fire on a stone near the well. I honor the oldest telling of this tale, and so shall you hear it.

"Some distance outside the village, a tall green tree grew. It was very beautiful and survived long seasons in the desert without any source of water. For many generations, it had been honored as sacred to the goddess. It flowered annually, then bore a sweet-smelling golden fruit, poisonous to any foolish enough to eat it. Unless that person was protected by the goddess and thus claimed by her.

"It came to pass that a certain young man, whose name has been lost, grew tired of waiting for Minau and her wealth. A cunning boy for all his youth, he devised a plan that would benefit him no matter the outcome.

"He wagered with his friends that he could get Minau to willingly eat from Jyotish's tree. They laughed at him and called him a fool, but soon enough they took up his bet. The following day, he went to the town council and stated his

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case. He had proposed marriage to Minau some time ago yet she kept putting him off with her excuse about the goddess. Was it so unreasonable of him to want some proof of her claim?

“His words were so sly and persuasive that many of the townsfolk found themselves in agreement, having sons, brothers, or cousins who had been refused with the same evasion. And so it was decided that Minau should be tested.

“Not surprisingly, she quivered and cried at the thought of the poison tree, but at the base of things, she was a proud girl and she thought she would rather die than be exposed as a liar. And so Minau went willingly to the tree. She ate the fruit and fell immediately into a deathlike sleep. The cunning boy collected his money from his friends, the rest of the rejected suitors hid smiles of vindication, and her bereaved parents carried her home for burial.

“Before they reached their house, however, she sat up and looked about, the world suddenly clearer and brighter; and she saw things that no human eyes were bred to see: earth spirits, water spirits, spirits of fire and air, and spirits of the dead. It was as if she had been reborn. Her parents wept with gladness at seeing her wake and held a celebration the like of which the village had never seen.

“Gladness turned to sorrow, though; only days after the feast, it became apparent to them all that Minau was not the same. Her words were strange and cryptic; she spoke of finding the face of the goddess, spoke of spirits no one else could see. And so she left her home to seek Jyotish, dressed

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only in a simple white robe, her slim, soft feet going over sharp rocks as if they were the softest mosses.

"It is not recorded how long she wandered the desert in her white robe, seeking what no priestess before her had found. Her link with Jyotish protected her, so she suffered no grievous harm, though she grew brown and strong like Jyotish's tree.

"At length, she came to a spring surrounded by rocks on all sides. The water looked deep and clear, but as she came closer she saw there were many bodies around it, some fresh, some bleached to bones, some animal, some human. She sighed a little; for she was thirsty and it was obvious she could not drink.

"As she paused there, a man came from between two sharp red rocks, a man so beautiful she caught her breath, forgetting momentarily about her vow to the goddess. He was darkness distilled to its essence, every pool and shade of shadow feathered into the layers of his hair. Sorrow etched him like a knife; his eyes were midnight, his expression infinite compassion and infinite tenderness as he gathered bones into his basket. For several long moments, she watched him, unable to look away from his unearthly grace. He seemed very surprised to see her, and even more surprised that she saw him.

"It is not known what they said to each other there in the wastes beside the poison spring. But day waned to night and back to day again, and Kaveh did not leave her. By this time, she knew who he was quite well, and that his touch was certain death, but still she lingered. On the second night,

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Kaveh claimed her body for his own, the Lord of Death touched for the first time by love.

“Their ecstasy shook the stones, for she was strong and shielded to some extent by Jyotish, and she gave him much pleasure. Perhaps she would have been strong enough to survive Kaveh's love and transcend her own mortality, but Jyotish scented the spilling of her maiden blood and in killing fury claimed her due for that broken oath. The poison from the fruit, rendered impotent by Jyotish's will, flared into violent life and snuffed the brilliant flame that was Kaveh's love.

“Young messenger, such a howl has never been heard before or since. It is said that from Kaveh's throat the lykos sprang that night, born from a mad and desperate grief. The Lord of Death believed he had killed his own beloved and sat for two human weeks, keening his loss into the night.

“Dyausa, god of Sun and Sky, hid his face all that time in honor of Kaveh's anguish. Shashida made titanic waves that pounded the earth in sympathy, Altair created gale-force winds that smashed the birds from the sky, and Animukh sent a rain of fire to show his commiseration. Before it was done, Bela had destroyed three cities in his name and Dharani opened a chasm in the earth.

“Raktim suffered great discontent through it all, for the people were too terrified to make war, sure the world was ending, and he could feel his power waning. Together with Muni, whose silent heart was tortured by the screaming mortals, Raktim went to the Lord of Death and begged to him to take up his basket again. If war was needful, Raktim would

help him, but surely Jyotish was the enemy, not the pitiful, cowering humans in their huts.

"And so the *drusauht*, god wrath, ended. Jyotish and Kaveh became bitter enemies, whose mutual hatred lasted until the day of their confinement.

"But that, young messenger, is another story."

"I thought she was called Minau the Healer," Tah said finally, more impressed than he let on. The odd starts and stops as the ksathra sought the right words had not marred the power of the story. "You never covered that part."

"It would ... make the story too long ... and ruin the rhythm of it," Z'ev translated, watching the guard's hands. "The key to telling a good story ... is to concentrate on one aspect at a time. Minau was a healer. Before she ever left her village ... she knew something of herbs. As she traveled ... she performed miracles ... in the name of the goddess. I will tell you of them another night."

"I would like that," Tah murmured, rolling himself into his blanket. He lay there looking at the twin stars until he fell asleep.

* * * *

The next morning a hard ride was not necessary. With the horses rested, they would reach Ballendin in a little over an hour, and even if Tah had spoken true, food and water should be accessible. Neither Harb nor Z'ev shared Tah's compunction about stealing from the dead.

They broke their fast on horseback; at least Ksathra Z'ev and Harb did. In the cool of the morning and with no great distance to travel, Tah refused to get on the horse. He

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stretched, carefully working out the soreness from the day before. He knew he could run with them until they reached the city. At first, Z'ev argued, never having seen Tah run. In the end, he yielded.

The black and the chestnut started the day at a breakneck gallop, full of grass that grew around the well and the clear, cold water. Tah knew that the ksathra did not believe he could keep up, not with the finest racing steeds in the sha'al-izzat's stable.

As always when a run began, Tah drew in a deep breath and blew it out of his mouth, thinking of the fastest animal he knew, the lykos. Blood pounded through his veins as his strong legs pounded against the road. He did not think of impossibility, only of speed, and his lithe form seemed to fly alongside the horses, taking strides so graceful and quick that he barely touched the earth.

When Z'ev saw the messenger's feat, he looked at Harb. *There is surely magic in this*, he signed. *How long do you suppose he can keep this up?*

Until his heart explodes, Harb returned, no smile breaking the darkness of his face. In the morning sun, he was a quiet island, untouched by the ksathra's awe. The prospect of the boy's demise did not seem to faze him, and he drew a little ahead to scout the terrain for danger. His hands had been too long idle.

With a laugh of sheer delight, Tah passed the ksathra and ran with Harb's black, which seemed to find the boy an affront and put on more speed. There was no losing him, however, and with a glow about him, nearly white in its

intensity, the boy passed that horse as well, setting the speed for the last leg of the journey.

Before the sun had truly warmed the sands, the three closed on Ballendin, its buildings rising in the distance, utterly unexpected in this vast expanse of nothing. Remembering its empty streets and houses, Tah's joyful stride faltered a little, then he pressed onward, determined to show the ksathra his mettle.

As they entered the city, it was eerie in its silence. No gates had ever been built, or any other martial defense. None would dare to ride against the sacred city, against Ballendin, where the izzat lived more simply than many of his underlings. His power was so absolute that he did not trifle with exterior displays. Though well-built and richly appointed, his house was not as elaborate as one would expect, given the standards set by the sha'al-izzat in Inay.

The houses were all of clay, laid out in circular fashion around the city waterhouse. A business district came first, taverns and inns, a silent smithy, a store that had sold carven bits of ivory and fine fabric, a greengrocer, a tanner, and a weaver. All the tradesmen were gone now, their market street empty save for their ghosts and the signs that proclaimed their commerce swinging vainly in the wind. Past the vacant shops were vacant houses, some doors still ajar as if awaiting a family's return.

Z'ev could not help the dread that settled in his stomach like molten metal; he could not imagine the power that could wreak such complete annihilation. Riding through the city, Z'ev found Tah had spoken true: the silence, the ash, the

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absence of scavengers, and the utter dearth of any sign of life. Laying a hand on his talon, the ancient spear that embodied the power of House Fouad, he allowed his horse to wind through the streets toward the high house.

Z'ev stared at the ruined garden beside it; the sandy soil was melted into rough and bubbled glass. Prodded by an impulse he could not name, he dismounted and went to that small corner of earth, chipping off a piece of glass and stowing it in his pack.

Harb watched him impassively, Tah with a touch of fear, then they followed him into the high house. It was cool and dim inside, a testament to the dead architect who had designed it. Passing through all the rooms—some for pleasure, some for sleep, some for eating and dancing—Z'ev came at last to the room where Lavedi Immelia had slept. The chamber was haunted by a hint of her perfume, and Harb flared his nostrils, disliking the dead woman's scent.

Cushion upon cushion lined her silken bed, and clothes were scattered about as if she had been a careless girl or perhaps dressed that last day in a great hurry. Jewels of all shapes and sizes littered the rug-covered floor—rubies, diamonds, emeralds, topaz, aquamarine in every imaginable hue, set into bracelets, necklaces, and earrings. Whatever else had been her lot, she had not wanted for fine things.

Harb, whose destiny it was to notice such things, pointed out the blank spot on the wall, the missing link in a series of exquisite tapestries. The significance was obvious to them all, though the guard spelled it out:

Someone left this place alive.

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SHARDS OF SEEKING

Outside Inay, Abrim the Wicked heard the news first. Runners came the third day after Ballendin's demise, and they bore the tidings gladly, along with the treasures of the dead city. Corrupt messengers, they were, and sold their hoard as well as their news to the highest bidder, which was, of course, Abrim.

He had only one son, a sickly child who provided him small satisfaction and a great fear that the merchant empire he had carved from the bones of his enemies would collapse with his own passing. Thus, he collected information and doled it out to those he felt sure would be suitably grateful.

That morning, he stuffed himself with pomegranates and covered his comeliest concubine, Yolante, leaving her a quivering husk upon the floor. She despised him and had been destined for a great marriage before her father's fall. Fortune granted that he, Abrim, was placed to catch her before she joined her sire in the fire. In most cases, Abrim found suttee extravagant, if not distasteful.

That afternoon, runners came, their arms laden. He bought it all, from the tiniest whisper of news to the gauze curtains that once graced Lavedi Immelia's chamber.

Long hours passed while Abrim worked on the knotty problem of where to peddle his information for the most reward. Then a slim, shifty fellow scuttled in under cover of darkness, providing the last piece of the puzzle. No one else possessed his knowledge, and the price for which he sold it

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set him up for life. However, it must be noted that his throat was slit shortly after he left Abrim, who was not named wicked for nothing. Evil was a separate entity, a thing apart from him. It acted on impulse and explained not its deeds, though he invariably profited from them. In fits and starts, he was capable of great kindness but also the most inexplicable violence.

He knew that Yolenthe loathed him because in the beginning he had been gentle, soothing her maiden fears. With warm brown eyes and an oiled beard, he was a handsome enough man of middle age. If he had not claimed her, suttee would have been her only option. By degrees, he seduced her, training her to want him. And in the beginning, he gave her pleasure. But he was Abrim the Wicked, and once her body learned to like him, he taught her unwholesome things, depravities that tarnished her spirit even while she craved more.

Ah, but she is lovely, Abrim thought as he entered her rooms later that night. *Skin gold as Inayan wine, eyes so dark they shimmer blue.* Even her bones were exquisite, all delicacy; he had recently shaved her entire body to see more of them, while she shivered in terrified arousal.

With Yolenthe, he felt peerless excitement, provoked by her singular blend of animosity and desire. In her mind, she hated him with the ferocity of a tigress, but her body betrayed her night after night, weeping, melting, and finally dying, at least metaphorically. Literal death would not come until he tired of her completely. Not prone to self-deception, Abrim knew it was his mastery over her that excited him.

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Should she ever attain self-control, her reign as the jewel of his house would end.

Her lips were still swollen from his attention that morning, and he smiled at her, a display that stirred no response. "Hello, my dove," he said in the voice that made her shiver. "We will make a journey tomorrow, so pack your pretty things."

Yolanthe merely nodded and slid to her feet, the musical chimes about her ankles singing her enslavement. Watching her pack, Abrim found himself stirred by her air of subservience, knowing it to be a sham. Because within her breast beat a heart so strong, she had found a way to do what all others had not—retain a citadel of resistance that was untainted, no matter what he did to her body. Physical battles against her he won, sometimes with cruelty, sometimes with pleasure that left her panting, but Yolanthe always kept that quiet part of herself in reserve. He could not touch *her*, and it was the challenge that called him to her again and again.

Limber and slim, she danced for him when he demanded it, wearing only her skin. Abrim asked it not because he found her nudity titillating but because he loved the hot humiliation that ran beneath her skin. She had not been trained as a *hour*; she was meant to be someone's honored wife, unacquainted with the joys of the flesh. He enjoyed her undoing all the more.

Lazily, he let his dark eyes wander the curves of hip and breast, the play of muscle beneath her skin. "I have not

eaten," he said, when she was done, and pushed her into the nest of bright cushions.

Tonight, wickedness writhed in him like a serpent, so he gave her a taste of the man she'd loved as a virgin new to his house. Despite herself, her small breasts peaked beneath his kisses, and Yolante moaned. In darkness that writhed with shadow shapes, scented with incense, she opened herself to him unwillingly; he stormed her stronghold in the worst way—with gentleness.

Later, he decked her in Immelia's gems because it diverted him to dress her in a dead woman's things, knowing her horror when he told her would be profound. And it was. Yolante shivered like one accursed, raking her nails along her skin. Her huge eyes accused him. "Dark things will come of this," she said in a small voice. "This will not profit you, sayyid."

"All things profit me," Abrim returned, eating a fig from her concave belly. Then he poured a chalice of pak between her thighs and she forgot her dire predictions with terrible reluctance.

* * * *

The next day, his caravan loaded with tomb treasures of Ballendin and accompanied by guards, they set off for Inay. Yolante stared over her shoulder in hopeless longing. In the morning sun, the pale walls glimmered like pearls, though the city was many miles from the sea.

It was a four-dusk journey from Feroz, but by switching animals along the way, they pared it to three, and by nightfall, they passed through the bone gates. Knowing his

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politics better than most, Abrim settled his entourage at the grandest of the residences he owned—the House of the Lemon Blossoms.

With the sha'al-izzat, appearances counted for everything, and, in truth, circumstances a few cycles earlier dictated that Abrim withdraw in disgrace, securing his interests elsewhere before he dared show his face in Inay again. Now, the merchant came bearing tidings that would not only assure his return to power in this city but also most likely tighten his stranglehold in the north.

Giving Yolante a tight smile, Abrim gowned her with Immelia's best, crowning her with the gems of the high house, their topaz and tourmaline motif unmistakable. When he forced her to confront her reflection in the mirror, her lower lip trembled.

"Listen, my dove," Abrim said too quietly, "for I will not tell you again. Tonight, you accompany me on the most important errand of my life, and if you fall short, I shall not be the one inflicting punishment upon you. We go to the high house of Sha'al-izzat Nadiv. Surely even you understood what that portends."

"You are giving me away?" she asked, her face pale beneath gilded skin.

"No, stupid girl. You are a prop in a larger drama."

Past the silent walls and empty market, their bearers carried them, as the sha'al-izzat permitted no beasts of burden to befoul the main streets. Up the Path of Hope they traveled, Yolante in ignorance and Abrim in anticipation; she drank in the warm spice of exotic flowers—jasmine and

oleander, Minau's mist, and Kaveh's breath—while he finalized his presentation.

When they reached the palace, shimmering faintly golden even in darkness, a mute guard stopped them with an imperious gesture. Despite his own fearsome and deserved reputation, Abrim could not restrain a shudder. These man things were unnatural, so implacable ... incorruptible. It made him nervous to be judged by one over whom he possessed no influence.

“Sha'al-izzat Nadiv expects me.”

Abrim ignored the contempt glistening in the sentry's dark eyes. In truth, the mute's role was to intimidate those who possessed no business within the palace walls. Leaving Yolante with the master of chambers, Abrim strode through opulent halls as if he were inured to such luxury, though the grandeur astounded even him. Here, priceless tapestries, there, a free-flowing fountain complete with silver fish and precious gems. The floors themselves were tiled with ground gold and chased in silver. Farther along, he met a woman lovelier than any he'd seen in his life, including sweet Yolante.

“They expect you in the courtyard,” she said, her speech carrying a strange slur.

Despite his wealth, Abrim had never ventured farther than the Arkyries, although he contemplated it, walking behind the viciously curved maiden with fiery hair. Her skin was like cream. *Oh yes, she is rare.* After a moment, he collected his thoughts. *Doubtless, they would like to see me distracted, and that is why they sent her.*

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Beyond the next turn, it was as if giant hands had lifted away the roof, opening the palace to sun, moons, and stars. A garden grew, and through it a miniature river ran, man-made and sparkling with exotic life. The scent of blooming bushes overwhelmed him, and it took a moment for him to see more than the nude statuary scattered throughout.

Silver light bathed everything, and despite his definitively prosaic vision of the world, Abrim found himself charmed. Following the bright-haired guide, he came at last to the circle wherein the sha'al-izzat held court. Beside him sat his youngest and—rumor had it—favored child, the beautifully petulant Japhet.

Without hesitation, the merchant made obeisance, sinking to one knee where he lingered longer than was strictly necessary. He understood protocol to a fine point; he had invented some of it. Abrim rose only at a gesture from the sha'al-izzat.

"Abrim, it is always a pleasure." Nadiv smiled, showing many teeth, which was a reason for pride, since he had passed more than three score cycles and owned more white hair than dark. "A pity you remained away so long."

Both men knew it was not his choice that prompted departure, but the merchant felt generous, knowing how valuable his tidings were. "I have lost much sleep over it myself," he admitted. "But now I come to you bearing gifts."

That was the cue for the master of chambers to announce Yolante. Despite the overwhelming opulence of the palace, Abrim thought the sha'al-izzat was near enough to his second childhood to be intrigued by the prospect of presents. The

concubine entered with her chin tilted and her shoulders straight, as Abrim had instructed her. Consequently, she moved like the dead lavedi whose things she wore.

Nadiv squinted at her, seeming perplexed by the sight of the bald beauty before him. It was Japhet who identified her costume first, the special tricolor silk woven only for Immelia and the diadem of tourmaline and topaz. "By the bound gods," he murmured, sloughing his indolent pose to approach. "These are Lavedi Immelia's things," he pronounced in a voice loud enough that all sycophants could hear.

Surprise mapped new lines on Nadiv's face, then they withered back to menace. "You had better explain yourself, Abrim. I am in no mood for games."

Stepping forward, the merchant hardly noticed how Yolenthe huddled in his shadow, for she had served her purpose and served it well. Silence fell like a velvet drape as they all awaited his response. It was in his hands now.

"I imagined as much, sayyid, so I will be brief. Some days ago, an unscrupulous man came to my house, bearing news whereby he hoped to profit from misfortune. I knew you would not permit such a miscreant to live, thus I executed him in your name. His passing words were these: Ballendin has fallen to an unknown enemy and Ksathra Z'ev rode from your gates all in secret the morning after he received word. Why he chose not to disclose his actions to you, I cannot speculate."

At best, Abrim gambled. It was possible that Nadiv knew all, although it seemed unlikely that he would have permitted

his heir to ride into danger with only one mute and a young messenger as his escort. Thus, Abrim balanced their fortune on blade's edge. While a shocked sound growled through the crowd, the merchant removed the jewels from Yolante's head along with the rest of Immelia's personal effects.

"He said he would be with his hawks," the sha'al-izzat said in a terrible tone. "*Z'ev lied. To me.*"

While fury built in Nadiv's rheumy eyes, Abrim took the treasure to Japhet and placed it carefully in his arms. "I know your families were on the verge of being united by marriage. Perhaps your brother was so grieved that he was not thinking clearly when he departed. Surely he meant no harm by his secrecy."

The merchant's onyx eyes said exactly the opposite, and Japhet gave him a hard smile in reply. "Time will tell. Nonetheless, we appreciate your alacrity in bringing this matter to our attention. I am sure my father will reward you richly."

"I have done well in recent times," Abrim answered, his expression bland. "The opportunity to serve the sha'al-izzat is all I desire."

Sharp as volcanic glass, the young man grasped his aim at once. "Then something suitable shall be arranged. Many of my father's advisers are aged, Abrim, and we need fresh blood. When it is settled, I will send word."

Content with his night's work, Abrim bowed himself out and Yolante followed, walking on his shadow. Once the guards escorted the parasites from the pleasure garden, Japhet went to his father's side.

"What shall we do?" he asked, though he already had the wheels in motion.

For some cycles now, he had been the covert power behind the throne, while his father grew feeble and his brother hid himself in the desert, ashamed of his infirmity. If Japhet himself had been born imperfect, he would have severed the heads of those who dared malign him and sliced hamstrings at random, so others might see how he felt.

"A bounty on him," Nadiv replied at once. "He is a traitor to the city and to me. I will not see him until he is in chains before the executioner."

"It shall be done, *sayyid*." Beneath his breath, Japhet added a word that was less complimentary, for he had grown tired of pandering to the old man.

"I will have his head for the wall, will I not?" The smile Japhet gave him in answer was truly awful. Then his father continued, "I must compel you to spend some effort in siring an heir. Will you promise me?"

Assent cost him nothing. After a little more discourse, Japhet turned his father over to his servants, who would drug him into a stupor that should last for several days, while he handled compensation of the suspiciously humble merchant. At last, he made his way through the cloying perfume of the gardens into his more austere chambers, where Husayn waited with a carafe of wine.

He was a pretty youth of no more than fifteen with a hairless body and a narrow face. His liquid eyes identified him as bovinely stupid, but intelligence was not a quality Japhet courted.

"Did it go well?" the boy asked, pouring some local gold into a silver cup inlaid with topaz.

Japhet remembered that topaz was alleged to detect poison, not that he believed Husayn capable of such a scheme, which was the reason he preferred idiocy in his lovers. Relaxing into the tasseled cushions that were his chief concession to comfort, he slanted a look upward, somewhere in the youth's general direction.

"Well enough," he allowed, swallowing the golden wine. Tentative as bird wings, Husayn's hands settled on Japhet's shoulders, kneading away hours of compressed annoyance. After a long while, he sighed, shifting to draw the slave into his arms. "You are very good at that, *rafiq*."

"I am good at other things as well."

Japhet took his cue and fell back, groaning, until doves cried beneath the eaves the next morning.

* * * *

A woman in heavy black veils and robes led a donkey past her toward the market, two weeping children beside her. Sibal loathed that custom. The woman's eyes, all that was visible of her face, were red with weeping, and so her bereavement must have been recent with no males in her late husband's family to marry her, leaving her and the two children without means of support. Two beautiful children, a boy and girl of five or six cycles, twins perhaps, a rarity. They would fetch a high price. By her gait, the other woman seemed to hope to hurry the farewell. The children had wept until their eyes were red as blood, swollen to the point of pain.

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She knew where the other woman was going. And why. Once she sold her children, she would wander the waste for sixty days and if she survived that long, she would cast herself into the fire. When the rains came, she would certainly perish, a burden no longer.

Sibal refused to die quietly. She felt no sympathy as she passed the small tragedy, only rage. An urchin stepped toward her, perhaps misjudging the color of her chador in the dying light. Then his eyes widened, before he scurried to one side, instinctively snatching up his wooden bowl, scattering the few coins he had collected, and darting into an alley barely large enough to breathe in.

She crossed the footbridge, sacred to lovers who tarried here, twined around each other like clinging vines and allowing the cooling mist from the rushing river to light softly on their skin. The bridge was beautifully arched with crossed stone lattices, painted in brilliant scarlet, sapphire, and emerald. Lilies choked the water beneath the bridge, their green stems growing around the wooden base.

A body would not sink well here.

Sibal remembered stories of children who tried to cross beneath the bridge in hopes of finding some legendary treasure there—and drowned in shallow jade water, clutched in the lily roots. She was neither young nor innocent, and she did not believe in fabled treasure. Crossing, she left the graceful ascension of minarets and the wide roads lined with flowers trying to escape the walled gardens in which they were grown. Sibal passed into the crowded buildings and bright tents that marked the way into the warren.

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Doves rustled in the eaves, settling into their nests. She heard them as she traveled the dark street; she imagined them squabbling over a bit of stolen naan. The air was still and heavy, redolent with the jasmine claiming a broken wall. Pausing before a lit window, she held the scrap of parchment closer to her veiled face, the flickering illumination playing tricks with the directions scrawled upon it.

She was following the instructions to the letter and made a left onto the Street of Swallows. The demarcation between city and pale was clear, where pearly Anumati kissed the dirt streets. From the corner, she studied the low maze of baked huts that housed most Inayans. Darkness hid most of the refuse and vermin that scurried about the labyrinth spread before her.

Her tortuous route led deep into the soiled streets of the maze, where women did not usually walk abroad at night. Those who had homes and families tended them; others stood in clusters, selling more than glances with kohled eyes and gestures of their hennaed hands. But even the prostitutes turned from her.

The pervading musk of bodies and filth vied to overwhelm her through the veils, and she sealed a hand over her nose as she picked her way between two huts into an alley too narrow to truly deserve the name. Her instincts screamed at entering the derelict building. While she appreciated the need for caution—they were plotting treason, after all—she felt the chill settle into her bones. Reaching the relative shelter of the doorway, she tapped twice, paused, then tapped once more, as she'd been instructed.

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The delay could not have been longer than a heartbeat, but it seemed stretched by the perceptible eddies of hidden life all around her. Then the door swung open just enough to allow a single eye to glint out at her in appraisal—dark, with glimmers of light.

“Golden?” a man's voice asked, rough and muffled by distance and old wood.

“As the sunrise,” she returned, per the parchment, though to her mind, sunrise was hardly ever as much golden as pearl pink, touched with sienna and umber. “I am here to see Qutuz,” she continued. “I received an invitation.”

“Join us, then ... and close the door if you would. We would not wish to be interrupted.”

Her veils whispered as she eased past the guard toward the stirring shadows. She felt her heart beating faster, but she did not acknowledge fear. Among so many other things, it was dead to her—she had become a blade, forged in fire and panned of all but purpose. Through the filmy fabric, the world had a hazy air, softening the squalid room, but continued movement in her periphery increased her sense that the gloom surged with dark and hungry things. Still, she forced herself to progress in even strides, focusing on the sound of her slippers over the earthen floor, until she found herself no more than five paces from Qutuz.

A censer on the uneven table smoldered chadra ushak, a pungent spice imported from the coast. Doubtless it was meant to conceal the stench of rat droppings, mildewed naan, and spilled pak. The goat-fat candles only increased the

miasma of fumes that made her eyes water; for the first time, she felt grateful for her chador.

"You enjoy torturing those who would join you?"

"I never enjoy torture. Unlike Othman." The rough voice gained a face, as Qutuz leaned from behind the old desk into the diffuse orange glow cast by the censer—he gestured to the hulking manservant behind her. Qutuz's countenance laid claim to sixty cycles. His dark eyes were almost cheerful, as his smile was not—a broken thing of stained teeth and parched lips.

"Dubai gave you my name?" She found it difficult to believe that the man sitting before her orchestrated the insurgent faction from this disgusting hovel.

He enjoyed a leisurely swallow of pak. "He supplied a name, not your own. We function in such a way that even if you are caught, you can tell them nothing of *our* work. Should you return to this place tomorrow, you would not find us." Qutuz laced his fingers, gnarled claws fit for grasping. "So. It would seem you have more reason than most to hate the sha'al-izzat's rule. Would you bring down the entire regime or merely one member?"

His smile widened as his eyes slid over her, as if wondering what might be hidden beneath the veils—and why. She would not recoil, as he must surely desire—and almost, she turned, except for the weight of a vow and the unwholesome specter of Othman. "At *least* one," she said quietly, "although I would not weep to see them all burned."

"Excellent." Tapping his forefingers together, he studied her.

"Dubai said you would ask four questions?"

Qutuz spoke carelessly, only a slight intonation marking it as other than a pleasantry. "Four—and if you answer well, I will assign you your first task. Else ... I fear Othman will show you to the door. Eventually." Again, he smiled, but with humor gone from his glinting eyes.

If the candlelight had been less faithless and her chador less concealing, he would have seen the color leave her face, the gold yellowed like old paper. Something in his once-strangled voice, though it was too dim to see any scar about his throat, sent grave fingers scrabbling down her spine.

"I am ready." Her voice was firm.

"What skills do you bring me?"

"I can travel areas denied to men—and few will dare to interfere with me. I know a little of poisons and much about pain. And I will do whatever you ask of me, so long as it brings me closer to my goal."

"That much is true," he allowed, "or you would not be here. The pretty Japhet is not kind to conspirators in Inay, and Dubai would not have been permitted to bring you into the fold, if we were not already certain of you. But a woman of *Hamra Sehkit* ... I would have thought your shame too great to allow you free movement."

Hamra Sehkit—red silence. By wearing the scarlet chador, she admitted her guilt. The tattoo on her brow proclaimed her as anathema, so she could not go freely on the street without the veils, but the humiliation they had tried to burden her with had blossomed into iron resolve. Her offense had not

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been dire enough for burning, though sometimes she wished it had.

"I wear the veils because I would be slain in the street, otherwise." She closed her eyes, shutting away the pain of children who followed her, spitting and throwing stones. "But I do not believe in their power to dishonor me."

"A strong heart," Qutuz said, rising for the first time. She was surprised to see that he was only a palm taller than she—she'd imagined that Qutuz would be fourteen hands high and breathe fire. Instead, he wiped greasy fingers on his aba and flicked his hands dismissively at Othman. "I will not need you, *akbar*."

The hulking servant returned to the door with an aura of sweat and olive oil, and in the ginger light from the censer, she saw his face for the first time. Though steeled to such things, she recoiled instinctively from his lipless face, misshapen nose, and protuberant eyes.

"What happened to him?"

"You have little right to ask." His smile of shards flashed as he limped toward the round window, where Sahen bathed him in bloody light. "But I will answer. Othman is a botched mute." Turning, he must have heard her sharp inhalation, because he added, "The sha'al-izzat's magicians did that to him. Most die of failed transmutation, but Othman was angry—and he is strong. He survived to tell his story and join my cause."

Sympathy stabbed through her, and she strangled it. She did not want to care about anything but her purpose. "Perhaps he will tell me, one day. If we live so long."

"Anything is possible." From his tone, Qutuz did not think it likely. "And now your second question—Will you steal for your allies?"

"Yes." She did not even need to consider it. Theft would be the least of her crimes, and no one would want to sully their hands to search her.

"Question the third—Will you kill for the rebellion?"

She suddenly realized that she was throwing her lot in with the lowest of the low—those who fought because they had nothing left to lose. *So be it.* "In battle or in silence, it makes no difference." Her voice was cold as infidelity, and the days before she became *Hamra Sehkit* seemed only a distant dream. "Only one task remains to me," she answered. "I will not care what I do, so long as I accomplish it."

"You have passed all the hurdles thus far," he said. "Now for the last—Will you die for us?"

There, she paused. In that scrabbling silence, she heard Othman stir, eager for her to fail this final test. And she had the sudden, almost feverishly lucid thought that he was the dark and hungry thing she'd feared—and the world entire was his pit.

"No," she told him, half fearing that Othman would swoop out of the dark. "I have said there is one thing I must do. It does not include dying yet."

"Welcome, Sibal." Qutuz laughed quietly, like fingernails raking the walls of a tomb. "We have no desire for fanatics; we need living soldiers and spies, not dead heroes."

"Set my first task then." The chador brushed her lips in the only kiss she would ever receive.

"You will retrieve an item from the House of the Lemon Blossoms—a delicately filigreed ring with an oval topaz. Many cycles ago, the concubine Zubaidah used it to rid herself of the Wine King." He used the common soubriquet for the sha'al-izzat's grandsire, whose sole claim to nobility had been his blood. "She burned for three days."

"A poison ring?" She wondered who would use it. When and on whom? She managed not to ask, knowing it was better if she operated in ignorance.

"Wise of you," Qutuz murmured. "The history is as significant as the item itself. We do not care how you get it, but obtain it within a ten day and pass it to Dubai in the market, near the stall of Killios the sweetmeat seller."

She knew the ring would be used to kill someone, probably one of the sha'al-izzat's ministers, if not the ruler himself. The legendary Qutuz—Tortoise of Inay—had been maneuvering for a quarter century, never rushing, always moving with cautious skill. Despite hunts that spanned the entire city, sometimes closing it quadrant by quadrant, the guards had never taken him.

"Why have you not brought them down before now?" She bit her bottom lip, sorry that she had asked.

"There must be something to take their place," he told her quietly. "If we pull the existing order down without equipping and educating the people to handle the responsibility, we will merely exchange one set of tyrants for another. Have no fear, Sibal. When the time is right, you will see the House of the Lemon Blossoms burn and Abrim the Wicked along with it."

Sibal smiled.

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INTERREGNUM

Beneath the ground, the dream lines ran like webbed gossamer, but the art of riding them was all but lost. Indrina stroked the diamond pendant at her throat, and it rang a light note in response, attunement that allowed her to draw numen for the small magic that remained to her. Pulling power had its price—too many *Daiesthai* had paid it, immolated in energy. Each channeling wore runnels in frail flesh, pathways that could no longer safely conduct the vim—and Indrina knew her own limits. Her days of great enchantments were done.

With a faint sigh, she passed through the double arch into the echoing mouth that led away from the Weeping Wall. A mortal's breath would have caught at the loveliness of the passage, but the bright frescoes of flowers that had passed from all but artistic memory were familiar to her, and she was heartsick. Her feet carried her instinctively up the spiral stairs that led to the lattice of aerial walkways.

She had no eye for the lacy stonework; a contradiction, perhaps, but the *Daiesthai* had once possessed the souls of poets entwined with the hands of master masons. The walls seemed too delicate to support the tiered balconies, bedizened with rosettes and whorls reminiscent of the sea. Minarets and towers in glimmering hues, rock etched and glazed, melted and twirled until it resembled a spun-sugar confection more than a city, a place as bright as her heart was dark.

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Eristorne echoed with its emptiness. It was the last of their great cities, and it, too, would fall, not to a conquering army but to vanity and attrition. *All our work.* The pain overwhelmed her, and she had to pause, leaning against a scrolled balustrade overlooking the empty plaza. There had been no children in a hundred cycles, not since Melusine strangled her last born in a fit of madness.

But it is better so, better that it be lost than perverted beyond recognition. All things pass away.

What Rodhlann sought to do was wicked beyond all redemption; he would topple the rhythm of the world with a mongrel that carried human taint. *I had to stop him. Our line must remain pure.*

Remembering her first betrayal cut like knives. Like any other, Rodhlann had enemies, but she had never thought to number herself among them. Once, they had all ridden the dream lines to waypoints at the far edges of the world, but even that gift passed beyond their grasp. Rodhlann was last to own enough strength to travel so, holding fast to himself inside the maelstrom howling around the lines. Since she could not persuade him of his folly and did not possess the power to follow, she'd had no choice but to queer his journey.

If Ar Cahra did not kill him, the Bedu would.

Indrina studied the dead diamond. Moments before, she had plucked it from the Weeping Wall. She did not like the *vav* below the city, a place of tiered wells and mysterious vibrato that resonated in the nerves. The walls themselves were worth an izzat's ransom, inlaid with turquoise, topaz, and tourmaline, and graven with runic patterns decipherable

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only by historians who had long since gone to the void. The Weeping Wall was a sacred monument to a half-forgotten achievement, the binding that buoyed the *Daiesthai* one step from divinity. Where they faltered and would die.

It has all gone so terribly wrong.

She stroked her fingers across the gem's facets. Rodhlann's note of attunement rang different from her own; she'd watched as the shimmering indigo heart first lost its luster and then went totally inert. Now it even felt heavier in her hand, a glass bauble filled with coal. Its twin, hanging at her brother's throat, was no more than a millstone about his neck. Her head hung heavy for a moment before she tucked the focus into a pouch at her waist. She knew what she had done to him—he was now helpless, unable to draw numen that nourished the earth. Tears froze in her icy eyes, crystalline as the charm about her neck. She did not weep.

The second betrayal was always easier than the first.

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MIRAGE OF HOME

Muir awoke to divine softness and the feverish throb of her wounded shoulder. Pushing up from the fur rugs contracted her shredded muscles—she collapsed, feeling the pull of stitches in her skin. Her bleary gaze swam about the tent, which, other than the stink of goat, was remarkably clean. Brightly patterned rugs and bags hung from the three walls, and the seven support poles were wound with rope. Fur covered the hard-packed dirt, and the sun's rays trickled in, pooling on a large bone bowl and a clay carafe. Something smelled good. Her stomach rumbled, but she could not decide how she would feed herself, lying flat on her empty belly.

"Let me help you." The voice made Muir crane her neck until she glimpsed Shunnar sitting before the open tent face.

So saying, the boy unfolded to his feet, lifting her with more strength than she would have previously credited him. She steadied herself with her good hand, regarding him solemnly through a matted nest of black hair. Grit abraded her cheeks—someone had removed her ripped djellabah and tended her injury, but days of hard travel remained encrusted on her skin. She knew she was gray with dust; her scalp itched with it. She wore someone's spare robe, and it would take some effort to make it clean again.

"My thanks," she murmured. "Will you—" He handed her the bowl before she could finish.

"Yakneh and tannouri bread. Eat."

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Delicious—meat, onions, and rice, simmered in delectably tangy yogurt. She devoured the food clumsily, one-handed, scooping bites with the flat bread. From the carafe, she scented fermented milk, but Muir was not certain she should be drinking anything so potent.

“Have you anything besides pak?” Her cheeks heated as she made the request, as if she were a lavedi, not merely a maid. “I have not had it often....”

“I might fetch you some cardamom coffee or green mint tea.”

“Tea, if it would not trouble you, Shunnar.”

“I will return,” he answered.

Even from her limited vantage, it seemed clear that the Bedu had been entrenched here for some time. Black tents woven of goat hair and billowing linen dotted the view. Behrid approached, so the wealthy families would soon need to put away their thin white tents. The herd animals—camels and goats—had worn paths in the earth, traveling to and from the tiny tributary of the Omintago she saw sparkling in the distance. The land was rough with scrub—olive, ocher, and tawny hues contrasting with the boundless blue sky. Framing the vista, the foothills of the Arkyries loomed like bronze giants crowned in mist.

Passing Bedu gave her strange looks, and she felt unutterably alone. Muir had never been so far from Ballendin, whose streets she knew, where the rhythms of life felt as natural as her own heartbeat. For the first time, she ached for her small room in the clay house; and she twisted her neck carefully, searching for her battered pack. If she had lost the

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tapestry, the last link to home, she might very well weep. There—she spotted the bag hanging on the far wall; its bulk seemed to indicate that none of her small treasures had been stolen, though she lacked the energy to check.

When Shunnar returned with a copper kettle, she managed a smile, although she did not feel cheerful. “My thanks,” she murmured, as he poured the mint tea into a small clay cup.

She curled her fingers about it; the warmth felt good. Outside, the sun had not hit its zenith, and Haar was passing, yielding to chill Behrid. Sweet and steaming, the liquid soothed her parched throat. She sighed. The boy settled himself adjacent to her, placed to refill her cup, and she needed only to shift a little in order to study him. By his expression, he loathed serving her; she could only conclude he had been set the task by someone above him in Bedu hierarchy.

“Now,” said Muir, “what must you say to me, Shunnar?”

His wide, dark eyes gave him the look of a startled animal. He dipped his head, but he was fully shorn; a man now, he had no unkempt locks to hide his face. The realization seemed to surprise him. Bare of paint and in the full light of day, he looked even younger than she had initially judged him—perhaps no more than thirteen.

“I owe you my life.” He did not look pleased with the debt. “If not for you, I would have been culled for my cowardice, and my shame would have cost my father his position. No ameer would be permitted to lead the tribe with such an unworthy son. Bad seeds grow into bad fruit.”

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In saving Shunnar, she'd proved once again that instinct served her better than thought, but by the boy's sulky lower lip, he was not particularly pleased with his salvation. "You owe me nothing," she told him gently. "You saved me when you slew the lykos. It would have killed me, if not for you."

"Feh!" He spat, then refilled her cup with a care she found comical, considering his ire. "Your master was already upon us. If I had not struck, *he* would have. I did not rescue you—I only shortened your mauling."

"And so you are tasked with serving me?"

"It is disgusting," he pronounced. "One day, I will be the ameer—and I must wait upon *you!* A maid."

Muir managed not to smile, mainly because of the throbbing of her shoulder. Her left arm felt swollen and bruised; she cradled it close to her body as she studied Shunnar. "How long will you be in my service?" she asked finally.

"Until you release me," came the churlish response, "or I save your life."

She contemplated the oddity for a moment; she, who had once been a slave in a high house, now possessed a servant of her own—a noble Bedu scion. Finishing the tea, she shook the cup back and forth to signal that she wanted no more. The boy put aside the copper kettle, folding his hands in his lap in semblance of patient humility.

"Tell me what happened between your killing the lykos and this morning." The intended question resounded as a demand, and Muir blinked, rubbing at her sore arm. She had never heard that imperious quality in her own voice—she had

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never made a decision before choosing to break formation last night, and she could not help but think that the ripples of that choice would be felt for some time.

"We drank the blood and ate the hearts, and we burned Jibril where he fell, brave until death."

She felt a pang at learning that the old hunter had been the disembodied scream echoing across the bowl of the sky. Though the Bedu could be unspeakably cruel, she found a certain grandeur in their pride. Waiting for Shunnar to elaborate proved fruitless—moving the youth to speak was like pulling stones through a sieve.

"Was he the only loss?"

"Only?" The boy arched both brows, staring at her down his sharp nose. "Jibril's loss was grievous, but it was his time." At her sigh, he went on reluctantly, "But no one else went to hunt beyond, if this is what you ask."

"It is. How did I come to this place?" Muir glanced about the tent, lingering on the poles that supported it. "I have no memory of the journey."

Shunnar snorted. "Small wonder, sluggard. Your master carried you."

Wonder broke like sunrise in the waste, a sudden explosion of light that spilled into her eyes. Confusion shivered in its shadow; she did not understand why Rodhlann would exert himself on her behalf. The concept of self-worth strained against a lifetime of conditioning, and the barrier cracked just a little, a tiny fissure that might permit a new idea to squirm through.

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"If you have something to numb this," she gestured, "I would welcome it. I also need to wash."

"I will send my sister Khali," he muttered.

A short while later, she received her first visitor, a lithe golden-skinned girl, who bore a jug of water, scented oil, and bright cloths. "I am honored to help you," she told Muir. "My brother shows bad grace, but my mother and I are so pleased. We have never known an earthspeaker who would fight."

"Earthspeaker?" Puzzling over the word distracted her from embarrassment. She had washed in the city waterhouse with other women, but she'd known them all since birth. Combined with her injury, Muir felt altogether alien, a stranger to herself.

"Rodhlann has told us that you hear Dharani—spirit voices of earth and stone. Your gift is rare, and rarer still is one who will lift a weapon to defend another. The Enadi"—Khali named another nomadic clan—"have an earthspeaker; she is old, and she only communes for great gifts."

"Great gifts?"

"Animals or jewels, ivory or gold. The Enadi earthspeaker does not use her talent lightly. She says it takes a great deal out of her."

That sounded wrong to Muir, who had never noticed any need for effort in listening to the voices, no more than speaking with Khali, for instance; but before she could say as much, the girl washed Muir's breasts, seeming to linger on her nipples. Muir wanted to bat away the questing fingers, but it seemed impolite; and she had washed Immelia's body

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in such a way a thousand times, thoughtlessly stroking her in places she knew brought the greatest pleasure. It felt different to receive such caresses. Without grasping what was missing, Muir knew she did not want anyone's hands on her out of obligation. The girl seemed to notice Muir's discomfort, and Khali's touch became brisk.

Though Khali had draped cloth over the dividing rope, blocking the view of curious passersby, the wind blew through the fabric, and it felt unnatural on Muir's brown skin. But the girl had gentle hands, and cleanliness felt good. Humiliation melted beneath the warm oil, followed by salve that numbed her savaged shoulder. With Khali's help, Muir struggled into a Bedu dress, dyed rich blue from the isatis that grew on the banks of the river Omintago. She belted the garment at her hips and found it comfortable, if less protective than her djellabah, but decidedly more feminine with its loose sleeves and full skirt. By the time Khali combed oil through Muir's dark hair and plaited it in neat coils, Muir felt almost presentable.

Finally, Khali fastened a leather cord about Muir's neck, strung with a delicately etched opal amulet. "It identifies you," she explained. "If other clans encounter you once you have left our shade and water, we must let them know that you belong to the Bedu."

Leaving was the last thing on Muir's mind—full of delicious yakneh and tannouri bread, her wound tended, she felt slothful, almost ready to curl into the nest of cushions and furs that had been her first glimpse of the Bedu encampment. Muir smiled her thanks at Khali, who took away the dirty

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dishes when she departed. She left the red-and-black woven rug hanging over the rope, both as windbreak and as a buffer from prying eyes.

Muir was just beginning to think of lying down when someone pushed through the makeshift door. Narrowing her eyes against the sudden shift in light, Muir recognized the silvery sheen of Rodhlann's hair, hanging ragged to his shoulders. His pallor seemed more marked this morning, contrasting with the vertically striped aba he wore over a black linen shirt and sherwal trousers gathered to his thin waist with an embroidered sash.

I am a maid, she reminded herself, *not a lavedi*. Muir tried to struggle to her feet, off balance from her weak shoulder. Stillling her with an upraised palm, he folded onto the rugs beside her, resting his forearms on his knees. The weary curve of his spine made her want to touch him—he was unimaginably ancient and awash in secret lore, but in that moment, he was merely tired and far from home.

"I am sorry," she said quietly. "I have been told you had to carry me last night. By helping the boy, I have failed you, sayyid."

He sat up then, pushing the gleaming hair away from his face. "You failed me by almost dying, little maid. Whether I like it or not, I need you." When he closed his eyes, she felt the loss, watching the gossamer of his lashes against his pale cheek. His next words came as a furious whisper. "More than you need me."

Remembering that he could no longer work the mighty magic that had stunned her in Ballendin, she bit her lip. She

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wanted to ask, but she was afraid of angering him. His words simmered in her skull for a moment before she realized their import.

"Why do you need me?"

Luminous as the dawn, his eyes opened and studied her face with livid intensity. "You hear the voices, Muir." It was the first time he'd called her more than *maid* or *girl*, and her name, spoken in such melodic tone, made her feel like a person, more than a tool for his use. "The Bedu tell me that there was an ancient city in the Arkyries, not in Ar Cahra, as I had thought."

"You have spoken with the ameer?"

"All night," he answered. "I come to you from his tent. His questions were many, and his answers few. These Bedu do not know as much about their world as I hoped."

When he rolled his shoulders, she wondered if her weight had hurt him. Muir thought of rubbing away the ache—she would have done it for Immelia without hesitation, but she was starting to feel that the balance had shifted. To touch him seemed a gesture of delicacy and nuance, not to be undertaken lightly. Instead she folded her hands in her lap, waiting for him to continue.

"My research was incomplete," he was saying. "I am no scholar ... most of our scholars are ... gone. I intended to travel the dream lines from Eristorne to Shapa, where I thought to ask the dreamers about the city's location. They are an old sect and sometimes stumble onto arcane paths without realizing the value of the knowledge. I thought one of them would guide me, but—" Breaking off, he pinched the

bridge of his nose. It was a human gesture, one that did not sit right upon him, but the indication of exhaustion was unmistakable.

Muir silently finished the sentence. *But instead I found Ar Cahra and you.* She hardly knew where to begin her questions. It felt a little strange, being in a position to ask them, but once unleashed, her curiosity burgeoned. Dream lines? Dreamers? The stitches in her shoulder pulled when she shifted toward him—the tug cautioned her. No matter how things had changed, she remembered enough of his initial distaste not to reach out. He was not an injured beast or even a wounded Cahran; he was beyond need of her touch. She must remember that, although it was becoming harder.

“My promise to serve you binds me still,” she said quietly. “But I would welcome learning our goal—why you seek the city and what you would have of me.”

“The Daiesthai are dying.” His voice was muted as he made the pronouncement, somber music threaded throughout. The word was strange to her; she mouthed it, tasting its phonetics. Rodhlann traced an invisible pattern against his black trousers. “Our numbers dwindle, and I seek a way to ... reverse a gift that has become a curse to my people. I am not a god, Muir, though I saw such supposition in your eyes, days ago. I was a palace guard, though there are no noble houses left for me to defend.”

His hands stilled. “And there are those who would turn me from my purpose. The future of the Daiesthai is more than my life and certainly more than yours. What I would have of you is simple. I will use your gift. In coming days, you will

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think me cruel—and I am. I will not care if you bleed your life out on the rocks after I am through with you, but you *will* live until I have found what I seek.”

“You have promised me stories,” she said then, “and I have heard none of them. Will you keep your pledge, Rodhlann?”

“Breaking that vow would cause me no unrest,” he told her. His smile was a ghost of shadow, not substance. “Will it matter to you?”

Old instincts surged—what answer would satisfy him most? But ... among the Bedu, she was a person of importance, both in gifts and deeds. “Pleasing me has become vital,” she realized slowly, “because I must go from here willingly, or not at all.”

“The Bedu fear me.” Rodhlann narrowed his canted eyes, his velvet amity falling away to reveal the iron beneath. “And they will not defend you, for fear of what I might do. Do not deceive yourself, little maid. Though I am willing to treat with you, I will not cede control entirely. You still owe me your life, and you *will* do as I say.”

She shook her head, trying not to be moved by the shattered quality he struggled to conceal. “You carried me away from certain death, and for that I thank you. But there are quiet means of rebellion. Without my eager compliance, your endeavor will fail.”

She remembered vital information withheld from Immelia by other slaves or secrets whispered in the wrong ears. Though not practiced in sabotage, she had learned enough to make Rodhlann's life uncomfortable. She knew he lacked the

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power to punish her, except with a good beating—and that was such a familiar threat that it held no horror. Bruises faded, cuts healed, and even bones mended.

"It is such a small thing," she went on. "Why would you quarrel over stories?"

He seemed to realize the triviality at the same time, although he did not appear to like the awareness. His beautiful mouth compressed as he regarded her, tapping his forefinger against his thigh. "I liked you better before," he muttered. "You were less—"

"Less aware? Less—"

"Less *willful*."

"When you said you would share the secret stories of my race," she said quietly, "did you not imagine it might involve altering the way I think?"

"I was *lying*," he bit out. "I did not expect to need you, girl—I thought you might be useful. I meant to dangle these mythic parables like a carrot before an ox."

His words stunned her; Muir felt vaguely surprised at the rich texture of the hurt spiking through her. It had a different depth than a blow, and there was no curling away from it. She had mistakenly gathered the impression that she mattered; in her *na&luml;veté*, she could not fathom otherwise why he had carried her.

Her eyes burned, agate with an angry topaz heart. "And when you had what you wanted of me? When I had done everything you asked of me—with nothing granted in return—what then?"

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"I owe you nothing. Unless you have forgotten, you owe me your allegiance for delivering you first from those who would have burned you in Ballendin and later from the Bedu, who would have allowed your carcass to be devoured had I not saved you and then called it a brave death over carafes of pak!"

"No!" Muir gathered her skirt in her hand and maneuvered herself to her feet. The sensation was heady, looking down on him. She paced. Prickling pain exploded into full-blown fury—the first real anger she had ever known. "Everything"—she swallowed hard to force the words out—"that has happened to me, happened because of you! I rescued you from Ar Cahra, because I owed a debt of honor to Erathos, but I *cannot* understand why it wanted to save such a wicked thing as you. I brought you to Ballendin, and they wanted to kill me for it. Everyone but me knew you as a wretched, accursed monster!"

Rage replaced lethargy as he sprang up, all predatory intent. Over soft rugs that caught at her feet, he stalked her—around the poles and about the tent until he pinned her between two heavy bags on the far wall. She fell back, stumbling, at the wild radiance of his eyes.

"Wretched and accursed, am I?" he snarled. "And still you would learn from me? Then take this as your first lesson."

He seized her.

Muir flinched, hiding her face in the crook of her good arm. Her heart hammered in her ears. She wanted to fall at his feet and plead for forgiveness, but her will had hardened until she could not make her knees respond. His livid features

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burned beneath her eyelids, the icy shine of his eyes and pale skin pulled tightly over his sculpted bones. Drawing a shaky breath, she waited for the first blow.

“You think I will beat you?” His hands dropped away from the tender flesh of her upper arms, and she rubbed the sore spots, opening her eyes one at a time. Muir shook her head, wondering at his strangeness. His weariness had returned. At such proximity, he looked more ill than tired, too weak to sustain enduring wrath. A long lock of platinum hair fell into his eyes, and he did not bother to brush it away. “I am a liar, little maid. It has always been to my advantage to be so. But that is a paradox, is it not? You may believe me or not, as it pleases you, but I will not hurt you. If I wanted to do so, I have had abundant opportunity.” He gave a bleak, haunted smile that twisted the lines of his mouth.

“No, your first lesson is this—accountability. You cannot blame me for your circumstances. You made your choices, as I made mine. If you are unhappy with the results, you have only yourself to blame for basing your decisions on some backward system rooted in obligation instead of self-interest.”

Muir gave a half nod to indicate her understanding. She could have chosen not to help him; she could have chosen not to accompany him into the waste, although what she would have done alone in dead Ballendin did not truly bear much contemplation. In turn, however, he could have opted not to accompany her—he could have chosen not to strike down the city or carry her to the Bedu village. It was becoming hard to track the debts; obligation had evolved.

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"By my accounting, there is no more debt," she said then. "I tally the count at two and two—I saved you in the waste, and you saved me in Ballendin. I redeemed your life again by standing down the Bedu hunters, and you redeemed mine by carrying me back to the encampment. We both are free—and if we continue together, it will be as..." Muir paused, for she truly did not know what to say.

His sulfurous look revealed that while he detested her assessment, he could not dispute its accuracy. "Friends?" he supplied mockingly.

"How is self-interest making you help your people?" She ignored his derision—as unlikely as it seemed, she had won. And Rodhlann was too tired to flare at her again.

He demonstrated as much by collapsing on the fur rugs where she had slept. "The desire to perpetuate myself," he said on a silver thread of sound. "I do not want to be the last—I do not want all I am to pass into the void." His eyes seared her; it was like looking at Kaveh's basket, a delicately woven thing full of bones. "Eternity has an awful knell."

She shivered, wondering what this quest would require of her. Taken to its most basic level, he wanted a child; it was an odd quest for immortality, which he apparently already possessed—or near enough that she could not fathom the difference. Instinct moved her to sink down beside him, fanning the blue fabric about her knees. Arms folded beneath him, Rodhlann lay on his back as if gazing at stars instead of the seams of the black goat-hair tent. She tentatively smoothed the silky strands away from his marble-pale brow,

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as she'd done that first night. He bore the gesture with impassivity, watching her with his iridescent eyes.

"You are more than weary," she said with certainty. "What can I do?"

"I am dying. And you can do nothing, save find Maksoor Balad for me."

Dying—*no*. She would not believe it. "There must be something—"

He sighed, letting his blue-veined eyelids drift shut. "Explanation will take a long while, but I am sure you will grant me no peace until you are satisfied."

"Am I so stubborn?"

"You are becoming so."

Muir chuckled reluctantly, running her gaze over his gaunt face. He had the look of an alabaster icon, and when she traced his brow, she expected to feel chill stone, not the feverish heat of living flesh. "I will listen," she said. "And learn, gladly."

With two fingers, he lifted his pendant—the diamond with a dark heart. "This should be indigo, like your dress. It is ... attuned to another charm in Eristorne, where the last enclave of the Daiesthai means to pass quietly into eternity. Including my sister. I have enemies, Muir, and thus, I told no one but Indrina of my enterprise. But—" He paused, the weight of his grief seeming to make it hard to speak. "Someone must have ... forced my intent from her, as I have been deprived of the ... vitality that sustains me. We are not naturally so long-lived—it was a gift we stole, among so many others. What

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you witness now, little maid, is the weight of time bearing me down. It will not be a pretty death or an easy one."

Muir realized that the loss of "vitality" he mentioned was probably why he could not work his conjurations, but she found she could not wound him with the question. "Is there no way to stave it off? Nothing you can do to reverse the—"

"I have a choice," he said quietly. "It always comes to choices, does it not? I may try to survive long enough to return to Eristorne—and to dodge whatever enemy lies in wait—in order to try to find my focus and replace it on the Weeping Wall. Or I may try to locate the lost lore to create a new life that will carry something of me."

"And you choose ... ?"

"I am weary." His words broke her heart because she knew what he would say; his despair filled her soul with stones. "I have had enough of life, but I am a vain enough monster"—he gave a half smile in using her word to describe himself—"to want to leave a bit of myself behind. And perhaps, to be remembered when all the rest are gone, if they will not see the value of what I do."

"You cannot just—" She felt a fool; if it were so basic, he would not need to quest after forgotten secrets.

"Shortsighted, treacherous, and vain," he murmured. "No, I cannot just. We have lost that simplicity in taking up other gifts."

"The blood?"

He opened his eyes, looking perplexed, until he remembered. "I was born with the hunger—my mother was among the first to embrace the change. Daiesthai alchemists

found that processing it with smaller quantities of food facilitated longevity and made for more efficient—" Pausing, he reached for a fur. Though the sun was fully risen, she saw that he trembled. "But I cannot explain properly. The terms would be strange to you, and I have forgotten most of what I knew. And in the end, it does not matter."

"But..." Absently, she rubbed his hair between her fingers, so silken that it seemed spun of moonlight. He was a creature of stars and dawn, etiolated but beautiful in a way that hurt her when she saw her brown hand against his pallor. "I want ... to understand."

In a smooth motion, he rolled onto his side, propping his head on his hand. The movement disturbed the cured fur, so she covered him, as he mused, "Perhaps ... perhaps even if I fail, little maid, you shall be my monument. Will you remember and speak of me to your young?"

"I could not forget." Muir forced the words through a clotted throat. She found it hard to imagine a future where she was settled, brooding babes as Immelia had once railed against. As her mind expanded, she recoiled against the overwhelming possibilities. "Do not speak so," she added quickly. "You may have given your life up, but I have not. Perhaps there is a way both to save you and bring forth the child you desire."

"And who will grant the wishes of the afreet?" His mouth twisted with the irony.

"I will," she said—and the ground itself seemed to shiver in response.

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GHOSTS WHO WALK

Midnight had a texture like the rasp of loose sand beneath his nails. As Tah scraped his fingers against the clay floor, he listened to a lone sign clattering outside. The wind moaned at the walls of the high house, and he wished once more that Ksathra Z'ev had listened to his half-hearted protest against staying the night. The first time he had been alone, but he had not touched anything—he had not disturbed the treasures of dead Ballendin.

His companions had feasted richly on rice and stewed meat, finished with fruit from the izzat's kitchen: white marula, juicy cactus pear, and crimson pitaya. While they sat licking their fingers in the dining hall, Tah had retreated to the kitchen. He did not want to watch them argue silently about their course.

When the wind began to moan, the boy wrapped his arms about his knees, cold despite the heat from the earthen oven where he had cooked their meal. His stomach rumbled, and doubtless Ksathra Z'ev would say he deserved to be hungry for being so stubborn. Tah had chosen to eat the dried meat and stale naan from their packs, although it scarcely filled a corner of his growling belly.

The rooms between him and the older, presumably wiser, members of their group felt eerily empty. Now that the flames were dying, he thought he smelled the heavy olibanum of the dead princess, a scent that clung to throat and nostrils like a suffocating hand. The chill increased, and his limbs went

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numb. Lethargy stole over him, and as his hands struck the floor, leaden, the perfume intensified. Through dazed eyes, Tah saw the sickly haze roll forth. He knew it was wrong—terror made his heart throb in his throat. The boy wanted to run, but somehow he could only watch the tendrils, delicate as death, winding about his limbs: clammy fingers on his face and neck, where they lingered, tightening. He felt his breath—his life—slipping away.

Finally, finally, he began to fight, thrashing against the unseen force, but he was all but swallowed in the mist. Here he would die, and then so would the others, as would all who tarried in this place. She was hungry, merciless, and so full of rage that Tah felt it like a hammer at his flesh. As his vision washed red and he saw stars, the earthen oven hissed.

A colonnade of smoke poured forth; with some small corner of his mind—the rational part that was cowering—Tah wondered if he might be dreaming. The room was so full of vapor that his eyes stung; he tried to rub them, but the pressure on his hands had not relented. The plume of smoke pierced the mist with a susurrant—and as cold met heat, there came a sound like thunder.

At that moment, the boy heard a voice, so faint as to be almost inaudible. "Go. To stay is death. Inay is death. Go."

His pulse pounding like a wild thing, he tried to run and found he could, albeit clumsily, like one whose limbs are asleep. Tah stumbled through a gallery of precious artifacts, overturning a priceless inlaid table in his haste. As he reached the dining hall, he fell, landing on his belly in a pile of cushions. Ksathra Z'ev and Harb stared at him, and then the

mute melted to his feet. His blade was in his hand before Tah saw him draw it.

"Trouble, young messenger?"

"We must go," he blurted. "There was a woman in the kitchen, made all of mist. I was filled with cold while she strangled me, but then my—my—" He knew how it would sound, but he said it anyway, his voice trembling. "My grandfather came in a column of smoke and he struggled with her. He said we must not return to Inay. Collect your things—we must go. Now! Before she overpowers him."

Whatever Z'ev might have said was forestalled by a fluid gesture from Harb. And though the ksathra seemed skeptical, he said at last, "Harb tells me that your grandfather was a priest of fire. Are you certain you were not dreaming, Malak Tadit? There is no shame in having a nightmare in a strange place."

Was he sure? No, not quite, but sure enough not to want that she thing to suck the life from him as he slept. "I am positive," he replied, not sounding as confident as he would have liked.

Harb signed again—he had not sheathed his weapon. Then the bronze giant strode through the gallery toward the kitchen. Tah wanted to charge after him, shouting, but he knew that this was the man's role.

Z'ev stood, looking weary, and lifted Tah's chin. "I am sorry I did not believe you."

"What ... what is it?" He was not sure he wanted to know.

"A black bruise about your throat."

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Touching his neck, Tah felt the tenderness—one small piece of evidence of an otherwise outrageous tale. The boy collected his pack; unlike the others, he had not removed anything. He slung it over his shoulder and stood bouncing on the balls of his feet. In all honesty, he was surprised to see Harb return from the kitchen, impassive as ever. The big man gestured toward the door, and it was the only cue Z'ev needed.

Once they passed into the blood-dark streets, the wind bit at them. It, too, was angry, full of dusty teeth. His uneasiness swelled, and glancing at Harb, he saw that it was merited. The signs banged in unison; it reminded the boy eerily of an invisible army, striking their blades against their shields.

“The well offered us sanctuary before,” Z'ev said. “Perhaps it is our best option. Harb has said that we should take nothing from this place.”

Tah had said that earlier, but the older men had laughed at him. He'd seen the derision in their eyes. *They think I am foolish because I am young*, he thought. *I will show them. When they least expect it, I will cut their throats and drink their blood.* For a moment, he drowned in impotent rage, fury so vast that it filled every corner of him. Then—because it so clearly was not his emotion—he battled it back. The effort left him shaking.

“If they cannot harm our bodies,” he said thickly. “They will try to take our minds. Please, we must go.”

The other two men shared an inscrutable look, but they increased the pace, rounding the second dome where they had tethered the horses. Copper hung heavy in the air, and

the earth was churned as if from a struggle. Without touching it, Tah saw that the sandy soil was wet.

"They fought." Z'ev knelt, but the mute snatched him back. When the ksathra frowned at the guard, Harb made two concise gestures. "We must take care, lest whatever maddened them should also infect us. I should have known."

"Come," Tah insisted.

Running was nothing new to him, and though he was sorry that the other men had lost their beloved animals, he wanted to put many miles between himself and dread Ballendin. Then Tah realized how much walking would tax the ksathra; his lame foot would slow them significantly. It would take at least four hours to reach the well, perhaps longer if Z'ev had to stop and rest.

The other two men argued. By the set of his jaw, it was obvious even to Tah that the ksathra was furious with Harb, who was probably offering to carry him. The messenger's right leg jumped, like a hound dreaming of the hunt. *Come!* he wanted to shout. *If he can do it, let him bear you. Dignity is not life.*

At last they reached some compromise, and the party set off, visibly crippled. Tah ran at a quarter of his usual speed, and the night was cold. His hands throbbed with it, making his bones ache. His lips felt chill and parched—their texture reminded him of the thing that had almost claimed him.

The journey was achingly slow, and during the last hour, Harb lifted the ksathra onto his back, as if Z'ev were a child begging a ride. By the man's grim expression, he hated the necessity, but his misshapen foot was so swollen that he'd

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removed his boot. Tah found he could look at the infirmity without wincing after the first glance, and awe filled him when he realized the man did not even have a foot, as such. Instead, the ankle was thick and twisted with four tiny toes splayed at unnatural angles. The boy ran ahead before he could betray himself by gaping further.

By the time they reached the refuge of the well, even Harb showed signs of strain—his breathing labored and his stride leaden. The cold had numbed them all; they were a far cry from the confident group that had left this place that morning. Shivering, they huddled beside the well like nesting birds. Tah felt grateful for Z'ev's warmth at his back and he was sure their leader felt likewise about Harb. After a time, the weight of their blankets provided sufficient comfort, and they slept.

* * * *

Harb awoke shortly before dawn. The horizon seethed with sullen orange light, and as he rolled silently to his feet, he ached. Palace life had softened him; he was no longer accustomed to such feats. Once he could have borne a man for days and suffered not even a twinge as a result. But he was not as young as he'd once been, and Z'ev was a considerate master; he did not force Harb to train relentlessly. Z'ev's kindness might kill them all. Concern had driven the ksathra from the safety of Inay, against Harb's better judgment. But Harb's role was not to make decisions, only provide advice and ultimately follow orders.

So he found himself staring up at the red sky before it was fully light, his shoulders throbbing like a rotten tooth. He

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tapped Z'ev on the arm and relayed his most pressing concern. The older man rubbed his eyes, found his boot, and winced when he saw he could not put it on.

"We have another problem," the ksathra said, rousing the messenger, "the storm moving in from the southeast."

The boy groaned and sat up, looking at Harb as if for guidance. Sometimes the guard found the young one's trust unnerving—he was bound not to harm Z'ev, but the rest of the world was subject to his impulses, imperfectly contained. Harb found a whetstone in his pack and began honing his blade.

"There is no breakfast." Tah appeared to wish someone would contradict him, but Harb only shook his head and indicated the well.

Water would keep them alive for several weeks, although none of them had enough extra flesh to stretch it into months. The boy sighed and filled his waterskin with the air of one who felt it was merely prolonging the inevitable. Wetting his mouth, Tah shook the sand from his djellabah and stared at the strange tree growing nearby. "Why are you not a date palm?" he asked it.

"Breakfast is the least of our worries. We have no shelter, and your grandfather warned us against returning to Inay."

Both Harb and Tah glanced at Z'ev, who was cutting his spare blanket into strips to wrap his bad foot. Their leader had apparently abandoned hope of wearing his boot and was making the best of a bad situation. Harb knew a flare of pride as he answered, *We should heed the warning. Moukib Faruq saved us in Ballendin.*

"I want to learn sign," Tah said, as the ksathra repeated the words for the boy's benefit.

"If we live so long, messenger, I will teach you. We must consider our options quickly—first, we must ride out the storm. But where?"

As Harb blew the dust from the whetstone off his weapon, an eerie wind whipped his topknot into savage disarray, and Tah stared at the guard as if he thought him the god of gales. Harb scowled, and the boy's eyes skittered away.

"Perhaps we can dig. The well must be made of stone—"

"If we dig, we will suffocate." Z'ev spoke softly despite what Harb saw as rank idiocy. "We have neither the time nor the materials to construct a proper shelter."

Harb knew his companions didn't hear it—sandstorm approached as a note blown through hollowed bird bones, a mournful sound that invoked in him more alarm than he had known since the magicians had come for him at his mother's house. He shoved away the memory. No more was he that boy who spun smooth stones in the city's dust.

In the well. His gestures were sharp enough that Z'ev clambered down with a liquid whisper, his trust absolute. The ksathra clung to the rim of the well with his fingertips, but Harb shook his head. Reluctantly, the other man let go, bobbing weightless in the water. Above Z'ev's head, the stones were wet—his weight ought to have raised the water level, but it had not. Harb could not reflect on that logical failure, however. His mouth was dry with fear, his tongue lined with sand. Already the air spun with it, scouring his skin.

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Failure to protect the ksathra was not an option; the mere possibility caused him physical pain.

If his charge died, it would kill him.

You too, boy. The messenger understood the jerk of Harb's head. Their provisions would not survive a soaking, but the storm would scatter them to the four corners of the world. *So be it.*

Duck beneath the water if I provide insufficient cover.

With this final instruction, Harb lay down atop the well, his face burrowed in his arms. He made an imperfect seal; he was not broad enough to cover it in entirety, but perhaps he could save the other two. It was also possible his weight would prove inadequate against the storm's strength—that he would be sucked into the funnel and spun into a broken bag of hair and bone. He feared as much; mutes knew pain and dread, along with every other emotion, but these were subsumed in the larger compulsion to protect one's charge, mired in the violent urges summoned from animal past. Hunt, hurt, kill. These impulses he knew well.

He shuddered as the wind struck, howling about him like a mad afreet. The sand sliced like knives, his armor sloughing away. Harb had no sounds for anguish—they had been taken from him like so much else, but he wept, silent tears that nursed the earth. Beneath his arms the ground shifted as if it might give way—and he sank his hands deep, until he hit the packed clay beneath, hard and cool. Stone bruised his upper thighs as he wrestled the wind.

Eyes burning with grit, he saw colors, pain arrayed in majestic hues, a crimson starburst for each score of his spine,

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a white-hot explosion as his topknot tore away. Harb felt a hot gush down his neck and knew no more.

* * * *

He roused to the sound of cursing.

"You stupid son of a mountain goat!"

Water trickled down his cheek and Harb struggled to open eyes that appeared to be swollen shut. He heard the fear in the ksathra's voice, however; he felt the tremor in the other man's hands. The guard was laying facedown in the sand, and the storm seemed to have passed.

Messenger? The weak flutter of his own fingers alarmed him. Blinded, Harb was not sure he had formed the word correctly until Z'ev said, "The boy is well enough—better than you."

Harb closed his ears to the furious words that followed, knowing they welled from relief. He had saved Z'ev's skin, despite the maimed meat of his own back. It would scar. His scalp throbbed dully, blood drying in sticky, sandy streaks. He tried to force his lids up, but the inflammation was too great. Ground-in grit abraded his eyes; his tears could not wash it away.

He signed his appreciation for the cool water on his brow, and the languid twitch of his fingers assured his attendants that he was not dying beneath their care. As if from a distance, he heard the other two arguing. Harb knew a moment of dreamy surprise; he had not expected the messenger to possess so much courage.

"I must run for help," the messenger was saying. "I am trained to survive, even in the waste. So long as I have

water, I will be able to reach any city you name. Only speak your will, sayyid, and I will set forth this very day."

"And what will become of us if you fail, young Tadit?"

Z'ev is always patient, the guard thought drowsily. If not for his master's tether, Harb would have beaten the boy for his folly.

"I..." The messenger's hesitation made it clear that he had not considered failure.

Young men are always invincible ... until they discover they are not. Harb could not recall being so young. Wet with ghastly transformation, recruits passed from the indifferent hands of the sha'al-izzat's magicians to the cruel grasp of the Serask. It was hammered into all guards—with rod and fist and boot—that there was always something quicker and stronger. *One moment of laxity could mean your master's death. Look me in the eye, dog.*

The memory of Dhul Bakr gave Harb an unpleasant twinge, even at twenty cycles' distance. *Wretched weapons, I shall hone you. You are tools, and I will make you fit my hand. You will be fired in fury and tempered in blood.* As Serask of the Elite Guard, the old man would live in legend, long after his spidery fingers twitched their last.

"You cannot go," Z'ev said with gentleness that did not diminish the finality of his words. "I am crippled—no, I *am*." Harb could not see the messenger's instinctive protest, but he liked the boy better for it. "It will be at least a day before I can walk—and even then, I will not be able to go far. If you leave us, young Tadit, you will find only corpses when you

return. Harb is injured, and without proper care or nourishment..."

Infection was a real possibility, and Harb's entire body shuddered with a different pain, brought on by fear of dying—leaving Z'ev with only the boy for protection. *I can walk*, he signed. *I can carry you*. His arms trembled as he shoved against shifting sand; excruciating pain shot through him, bursting in bright spirals beneath his swollen lids.

"On your belly, guard! I command it."

He fell like a pregnant ox.

"What will we do?" Tadit sounded less eager and more fearful.

"You must hunt," said Z'ev. "You've been trained to survive in the waste, and you are the only able man among us." His words were salted faintly with irony, but Harb could picture the boy's hubris at the comment.

After a moment's pause, Tah spoke. "I should be able to find lizards. They will be tough and gamy—"

"If they sustain us, I will not complain."

He heard the shuffle of preparation, and his spirit rebelled against the weakness that left him dependent on his crippled master for care. Harb knew he should be hunting, not that peach-cheeked youth. Inhaling sharply through his nose, he did not wince as Z'ev peeled the damp cloth from his back.

Must keep it covered, he signed, *or the dune flies will lay eggs in my flesh*.

Newly wet and cool, the makeshift bandage returned to soothe his skin. The other man held a waterskin to his lips,

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and Harb managed a few swallows. "A grotesque death. I am safe enough for now ... try to rest, my friend."

Harb closed his eyes and drifted.

* * * *

A woman's scream startled him from sleep.

Reflex took over. Despite blistering agony, he faltered to his feet and felt blindly for his blade. The gummy seal on his lids broke, allowing a glimmer of moonlight that hurt his eyes. His vision was blurred, and it took him a moment to spot his master, sitting a few arms from the well. The messenger stood beside the strange tree, looking frightened. As well he might, for in his hand was a newly cut branch.

Harb smelled the sap running from the jagged cut; it had a coppery tinge not unlike blood, although it also mingled with the aroma of green wood. He knew by their faces that he alone had heard the cry; his fierce lunge had startled them, not a woman's anguish. And he realized with the weight of stones whose tree the messenger had despoiled. Jyotish might be impotent after long cycles without prayer or offerings, but she was not mute. She knew the harm that had been done to her last faithful servant.

"Night terrors?" Z'ev asked, seeming to ascertain that the guard could see him. "Your back? I regret that we have nothing to ease it."

Harb could not stop staring—a severed limb from the Goddess Tree. He knew sin when he saw it, although priests no longer sermonized. The gods were dead, were they not? If not dead, then long departed—only the elements heeded the blandishments of mankind.

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Lead settled in his stomach; the feeling was unfamiliar, but he recognized it as dread. To the others, his recounting of Kaveh and Minau was a bedtime tale, no closer to truth than legends of afreet that haunted the waste. But Harb had been reared at his father's knee until the age of six—when the sha'al-izzat's magicians came for him. He did not want to remember the weeping boy he had been; until that moment, he had known he would one day practice the art of the jahnu like his father, and his father before.

His last words had been, "Father, help me!"

But there was no salvation. A gentle storyteller had no recourse against magicians with dead eyes and implacable hands. Their pale, dry mouths chanted arcane words of binding and transformation to melt young bones and cast them anew. Harb was more than a man now; elemental magic shored his sinews. And there was honor in guarding a worthy charge, though it was not the path he would have chosen for himself.

A night terror, he agreed, swaying. What is the boy doing?

"He is about to cook our dinner. Sit with us if you can and we'll discuss our course."

I can sit.

After the initial pain, the position was no worse than lying prone. Harb watched the messenger cut a second branch, and a third; the cry was not repeated. The boy chipped the green wood with his eating knife, building a fire with painstaking care. Perhaps they had hope of surviving after all.

The first plume of smoke came with a hiss, but perhaps it was merely a trick of Harb's blurred vision that he saw

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shadow shapes struggling within its gossamer mist. Faces loomed and leered as the messenger charred his lizard, oblivious. The others did not see how close they walked to the veil this night, where beasts of myth slavered for a chance to chew their warm flesh and fill their mouths with blood.

Dread built as Harb forced himself to look away from the fire. Z'ev was saying, *We must learn why we cannot return to Inay, but I know of no way to do so unless we return.*

He shook his head, clearing his eyes with a quick hook of his thumbs. Such vigor smarted but it cleared his vision so that he felt less helpless. He did not care to repeat the afternoon's heroics—the reminder left him hardly able to sit upright.

It is hard to know what the spirits have seen, Harb signed.

This much is true. In the sparking light from the fire, Z'ev looked weary, a man more full of regret than hope.

Do not fret. As long as there is life, there is hope.

Z'ev agreed this was so with a faint sigh, and the three ate the charred lizard that the messenger had snared in the waste. Harb cleansed his fingers in the sand and sat long into the night. His lot was to watch, and he watched the waning fire with the caution of one who suspected a murderer in their midst.

In the morning, the others were amazed to find that the deep wounds on his back had already scabbed over. An uncanny constitution numbered among the gifts that had been bestowed upon him in equal measure for those taken. They broke their fast on the meager remnants of the dune lizard, scarcely more than a morsel for each of them. Harb

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knew that the boy in particular could not go on in such a way. Tah ran long miles with unbelievable speed, but he also consumed an unearthly amount of fuel to keep his body running. The messenger would fall first.

That day, Tah ranged farther and brought back two cactus pears, withered with nocturnal chill, and two dune lizards. Harb helped him skin the reptiles, wondering if he could cure the skins and attempt to repair his armor. Preliminary inspection convinced him he could not; it would take lykos leather and a skilled armorer. Philosophically, Harb discarded them.

The Serask's first tenet stayed with him: *What cannot be altered must be endured*. He had learned not to wince when the messenger sawed the limbs from the goddess tree, though he felt like a mute witness to an unspeakable crime. But they needed the heat; they needed a cook fire the second night as well.

What cannot be altered must be endured.

Oddly, he remembered Melek's scars—and her grave dignity in the naming rite. *Melek the Dead*. She had taken a quiet pride in the appellation, as if her suffering put her beyond ordinary cares. And perhaps it did. If she were his sister, he would have killed the man who had injured her so. But then, murder was his trade.

It would be unusual if he killed without enjoyment; bloodlust came with transformation. Harb felt startled to identify budding curiosity—given time, he would have asked the girl about the guard who had taught her to sign. It was vaguely unsettling for him to think another guard capable of

forming a ... friendship with one to whom he was not directly bound. It seemed to signify some lack ... that he had no such relationships. Until encountering Melek, he would never have imagined it possible.

Shaking his head, Harb shared the tale of Minau's first miracle, and Z'ev articulated the story ably enough, even if his words were not precisely placed as a trained jahnu. As Harb intended, it distracted the other two. The guard felt like the only adult among children; he felt sure that he alone grasped the gravity of the situation.

Z'ev had been cosseted all his life, partly because he was lame and partly because he was the sha'al-izzat's heir. The two factors together meant that he had been protected more than most. Harb had spent a four-hand of cycles keeping him from harm, both physical and otherwise, but his spotless record was now blemished.

As the ksathra stopped speaking, the fire hissed. *No, she would not like hearing of Minau.* For a moment, the guard thought of Jyotish and pictured the contours of her foxy face. His father had owned a collection of ancient scrolls, handsomely inked in a lost technique. In Shapa and Feroz, the old tomes depicted Jyotish with a round belly and mammoth breasts to suckle the world, but she would remain the trickster goddess in his eyes, loosely linked to hyena and desert fox. His father had told him the old tales, day after day, until he knew them by heart, repeating them in a high, pure voice while his mother muttered and counted kels in the next room.

I meant to learn what happened to them, he remembered. I said I would be the first Jahnu to discover what became of the gods.

Certainly you will, my son. I expect great things of you. His father had hugged him and taken him to the market, where he'd spoken the tale of Kaveh and Minau for the first time. He had done it flawlessly at the age of five, an unprecedented feat of memory.

I expect great things of you. His father's words haunted him, because he remembered the quarrel that preceded the arrival of the sha'al-izzat's magicians. Harb remembered his mother's fury as she said, "You will make him into a nothing for some woman to support, just like *you*, Wadi. A teller of tales—it is a dying art, as the gods are dead. I will not have it. I tell you, I will *not*."

The magicians came for him the next day. Harb had wondered if she had sold him. He was not permitted to visit them during his training, and after long cycles apart, he had mostly lost the desire to learn how they fared. He was a different creature now; better that they did not see the whole.

Smoke stung his eyes. He chewed on the charred lizard and did not listen to his companions. Tonight their voices hurt him. Perhaps it was his injury, but for a moment, Harb felt an aching desire to return to his mother's house and sit at his father's feet. He cursed in silence, cursed the magicians who had stolen his ability to speak, the magicians who had made him more and less than a man.

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The fumes smelled strange, more than the night before, and it made him dizzy. He slept without intending it, and his dreams were odd—the scraps of fruit and dry meat sat uneasily in his stomach. Harb woke to the soreness of his back and the heavy gloom of an overcast night in the waste. When Sahen stalked or Anumati hunted, the light was nearly bright enough to read by, but tonight the lovers were sulking, hiding their faces beyond a high veil of cloud.

It was cold as a broken vow; he saw his breath as he shifted closer to the fire ... burning, although the wood was long gone. Harb froze and looked first for Z'ev, who slept the peace of the innocent; the boy drowsed likewise, perhaps lulled by the same soporific fumes that had taken the guard. The ground itself burned, though the face that came, blurred in feathery ether, was not the one Harb expected to see.

Moukib Faruq? He sketched into the night air.

The priest's voice sizzled like water on an ember. "Forgive an old man—I must be brief. Your path lies in the foothills west of Feroz. Z'ev must reach the Arkyries, or Japhet will take the throne.

"Before the third sunset on the Sun City, Nativ will name Z'ev traitor," the priest whispered, faint and fading. "Your role is pivotal, sayyid's guard. There is an encampment of Enadi within two days' walk. Tarry not, or they will move on. Find them and they will help you." The vague visage shivered into mist.

Harb stared into the ashes, as if expecting them to light once more or perhaps give him a glimpse of Jyotish. It was a night for miracles, where even a dead goddess might whisper

secrets to one who still half believed. But even the winds were silent now.

In the morning, the guard told his companions, Tadit's grandsire brought tidings; *We are betrayed in Inay. Eat what we have and fill your waterskins. We will find help nearby.* The boy did not immediately seem to grasp the enormity—they were named traitors and would be hunted until a patrol brought back their heads for the bone gate.

For the first time since Harb had known him, Z'ev truly looked old. Sunlight picked out the silver in Z'ev's beard and at his temples, and the pain of the past few days had carved new lines. The ksathra had always been spare, but privation had rendered him gaunt. He had the look of a seeker now, an ascetic who believed poverty and abstinence were the keys to enlightenment, except that he lacked the zealot's glitter in his eyes.

You no longer even look like a guard, the ksathra signed, after a short silence. Harb had not considered the alteration of his appearance, but he supposed that without his house armor and topknot, he might pass for a battered mercenary. *I never thought it would end this way,* Z'ev went on. *I am sorry.*

A flare of pain made Harb respond sharply. *All things change or pass away, sayyid. As long as I draw breath, you will go on.*

The ksathra made no response, his hawkish silhouette given grotesque proportion where it flowed over uneven terrain. Tah muttered as he packed their scant belongings. Harb knew the messenger was frustrated because he could

not understand their private conversations, but he could not concern himself with a boy's curiosity. Let Z'ev continue to deal with him.

"Let me have your knife," Z'ev said to the runner.

As Tah handed it over, Harb felt his entire body coil. If Z'ev were mad enough to harm himself, Harb would bind his master and bear him on his own bloody back. The ksathra smiled as he intercepted the look. *Fear not, Harb. What I do, must be done.*

His alarm intensified, but he forced himself to remain still. Quietly, the older man put the dagger to the shaft of his talon and began sawing off the seal that marked him as a noble scion. The weapon's ornately etched blade bore their house seal, the hunting hawk. From hand to hand, the house of Nadiv ibn Abbas ibn Fouad had passed the heir's talon to the eldest son. If a younger sibling proved able to take it by force or cunning, then he ruled in his brother's stead, usually executing the disfavored heir to prevent confusion. But *no* one could ascend as sha'al-izzat without the heir's talon.

Evidently Tah knew that much of succession, for he gaped, looking as if he could not get enough air. Harb studied Z'ev with new interest. The action showed ruthlessness that the guard had not thought he possessed.

"I have need of a walking stick," he said briefly. "Traitor they name me, and so, traitor I am. They will not take the heir's talon, even from my corpse." His smile flashed sharp and wolfish. "I will bury the blade where none but me shall ever find it, and we will go from this place."

It is wise.

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"I am afraid," said the boy, at last. "Dark things will come of this, sayyid."

"Dark things have already come." He looked distant but resolute. "And it is left to us to check them."

The fires take those who stand against us. Harb's words should have been an empty threat, but when Z'ev spoke them aloud for the boy, they echoed with the weight of prescience. They shared a look of somber intent, knowing it would come to war.

Quietly, Z'ev buried his legacy, and they started for the Enadi camp as three different men.

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STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

He was worse.

They had spent the last two days feasting, but they could not linger another, or Rodhlann would lack the strength to leave. Constant rest and the healing salve had strengthened Muir so that she felt well enough; but as she healed, Rodhlann weakened. That was why she had come. It was time to say farewell, but she did not want to sit through another feast or listen to more words of gratitude. And she certainly did not wish to take Shunnar as her slave.

Muir meant to keep her promise; they *would* locate the lost city, but first they had to find a way to sustain Rodhlann. Honor was alien to the Daiesthai, but her word meant everything to her. For such a long time, what she held in her mind was the only certainty. All else could be taken from her—time in the garden, the knife she had fashioned, stones she had collected—all allowed her by the will of the izzat and, more capriciously, Immelia.

Odd how one decision had created so many ripples, but as the Bedu feasted her, and Shunnar served, Muir flowered. Women came to ask her advice: was the time right to marry, would the child be a son, or was a husband cheating? Once the questions began, there was no stopping them, and Muir was amazed.

She clung to awareness of her own importance as she waited in the ameer's tent. Two old women wove at the

ground loom outside, watching Muir with dark, solemn eyes. They would doubtless report the visit to Shunnar's mother.

"Father will see you now," Khali said, folding back a panel.

Muir realized he had kept her waiting on purpose. In truth, she was the only person who might ask to see the ameer and not be denied, apart from Ghazi, and even his power was limited to martial matters. She gathered the Bedu dress and folded to her feet; she had grown adept at maneuvering in the voluminous skirt, but she would be glad to have her plain djellabah back.

Passing into the inner sanctum, she smelled incense that mostly covered the faint scent of goat. The carpets scattered over the ground were softer and more richly embroidered, as were the cushions, but other than that, Muir could not detect any difference between the ameer's tent and her own. Shunnar favored his father, although the man's expression was considerably less petulant.

"Khali, some tea for our guest." The ameer smiled and gestured for Muir to join him. "What may I do for you, speaker?"

The muffled noise of a passing herder made it difficult for her to think, and then she remembered. "We must go," she told him. "We have enjoyed your hospitality, but with your permission, I would leave quietly."

The ameer frowned. At last, he said, "It does not please me. Your companion may go where he will; I doubt we could hold him. But you ... you have a gift that would bless us, and our paths are already joined. How else can Shunnar repay his debt to you other than by giving you strong sons?"

Strong sons. The idea of lying down with that sulky young man made her lips twitch. The boy would be appalled if he knew that his father offered him to one to whom he disparagingly referred as "only a maid." But there was no denying the tangible power of the offer; his son would one day govern the Bedu. As an earthspeaker and Shunnar's first wife, Muir might attain impressive authority. The prospect was tantalizing.

She hesitated.

Muir had never considered babies. If the izzat had decreed it was time for her to give him another house slave, she would have complied. But she had never desired children because they could be taken from her; she had never *allowed* herself to desire. Part of her wanted to belong—the Bedu would protect her, and in turn she could guide them using her gifts. She was undismayed by the prospect of Shunnar as a mate; he was young enough to be malleable.

"Are ... are there no other arrangements that would be disrupted?"

The ameer paused. Beyond the cloth partition, Khali hummed as she prepared their tea. The older man steeped his fingers, and Muir suspected it meant that matters were not so simple as he had made them seem.

"Nothing ... binding," he answered. "A boyhood promise. Shunnar will come to see that this course is the best."

Fortunately, she was not required to choose. If Shunnar's affections were already engaged, she could not be paid enough to take on a boy who was both sullen and heartsore.

"I am sorry. If Shunnar has spoken to another, I cannot stay."

"He is only a boy!" He blustered. "What does he know? I will see that—" Khali chose that moment to arrive with their tea. It made Muir think the girl had been listening, as the interruption could scarcely have been better timed. The ameer scowled as his daughter carefully poured the hot water into clay cups, creating a mist of mint that mingled pleasingly with the incense. "That will be all."

Muir smiled as the girl bowed herself out. "He has spoken elsewhere," she repeated. "It would dishonor this good house to disregard Shunnar's promise. Most revered sayyid, I am not meant to call you father. I again entreat permission to depart."

"He would have given you fine sons." By his grudging remark, Muir knew she had persuaded him: "But how can I let you go when my son owes you such a debt?"

"I am Bedu," she said slowly. "And do we not say, 'Shade and water until we meet again' instead of 'farewell'?"

He gave her a foxy look, as if he knew her intent. "We do."

"Do we not say this because we believe all Bedu will meet again..."

"If not in this life, then in the next," the ameer finished. "You have been busy learning our ways, speaker. Such hunger for knowledge speaks well of you."

Muir smiled and lowered her chin to hide her delight. His approval meant much, for it was new. Izzat Aban or Lavedi Immelia might have spoken well to a cup for holding pak

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before praising Muir; it would have seemed the same to them—complimenting a thing for serving its purpose.

“I have been happy here, but I have promises to keep.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “To your master. I know not how he came to bind a speaker to his will, but that is best kept between you two. That first night, we talked while Sahen stalked, but I could not lift a word from that one unless he willed it. Bad for Bedu to meddle in the affairs of the afreet.”

She could have corrected him; she could have told him what she knew. Except for Rodhlann, the Daiesthai had vanished into legend, only one step removed from gods.

But he was not a god, and he was dying as she dallied.

That thought spurred her to drink her tea in a single swallow and shake the cup to signal she wanted no more. “I would have my djellabah, a full waterskin, and two-hand days’ worth of provisions.”

“I will see to it.” As she rose, the ameer studied her.

“Most revered ameer...” She paused, thinking of the other earthspeaker Khali had mentioned. “Have you ever met another speaker?”

“Apart from you?” He tilted his head. “I have met several who claimed the talent, though none born Bedu in many cycles.”

“Oh.” She knew her tone revealed her disappointment; she had hoped to find someone to teach her how to sustain Rodhlann through the difficult journey to Maksoor Balad. He could not possibly survive the trek in his current condition. Even the Bedu had begun to whisper that he was ill.

"What do you need from another speaker?" Falil asked gently.

"Knowledge."

"Hmm." The ameer rose. He was a tall man with long arms and legs that gave him a gawky look, though she had seen him with a talon in his hands, practicing the forms. Leadership had not dulled his skill with a weapon. "What—Ah, it is better if I do not know. Rarely, a speaker is born with other gifts to balance an inconstant bond with the spirits. I have heard that the Enadi have such a one."

"Do you know where the Enadi make their camp during Behrid?"

Crossing his arms, the ameer stared down his nose at her. "Certainly we know, but you will not find a warm welcome among the Enadi. Although we do not actively hunt them, the Bedu have made many of their brows into eating bowls."

"I will not forget that I am Bedu," she told him quietly. "But if the Enadi have the knowledge I need, I must go to them."

He sighed. "Seek Ghazi then. As war leader, he knows the location of all camps within a two-hand day's hunt."

"Shade and water until we meet again." Muir bowed, palms up. The ameer was a worthy man, and it did not wound her newfound dignity to deliver the obeisance. She nodded to Khali as she strode from the tent. The day was bright but chill; she narrowed her eyes against the light. *Worthy*, she thought. *Who am I to make such a judgment?* Muir felt little shame for the subservient creature she had been, although

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the behavior seemed alien to her. *There are lives within lives, and I have been born anew.*

In the days since Muir's arrival, the wealthy Bedu had prepared for Behrid, reluctantly folding away their lightweight white tents and replacing them with the heavier black ones. The vista changed almost overnight from easy flow to tightly furled fabric, reinforced with skins. Now the women hurried to finish drying the meat and fruit that would sustain the tribe when it was cold. Hunters would spend much of Behrid in a large black tent, practicing their forms.

The cycle would begin anew with hunting of lykos and trade with merchants, who came only at the beginning and the end of Haar—travel through the waste was difficult at any other time, particularly for a sizable caravan. Muir knew the convoy was due to arrive in a few days; it was all Khali had talked about at the last feast, and the girl couldn't understand why Muir would not wait.

"They are coming from Feroz for the last of our hides," Khali had explained.

Then the dancing started, and Falil had prodded his sulky son to invite Muir to join him. She had wondered why a slim, doe-eyed child spent the entire evening glaring at her, though the girl's revenge came in the form of bruises where Shunnar's grip had hurt her arm. He was *such* a boy; she felt glad she would not have the training of him.

She looked a moment longer at the changing face of the camp, and then walked on, wishing for her djellabah. Already the wind cut deep; she could not imagine traveling at the height of Behrid. It looked as if she had no choice, however.

Shunnar intercepted her outside Ghazi's tent. The boy seethed as he stared at her, but then he usually did. "I am told you are leaving. I will *not* go."

"You will not," she agreed. "I have already spoken with your father."

Shunnar looked dubious but delighted, and then bitterness took over. "My *father*. I do not know how things were done in Ballendin"—he made the name sound like a curse—"but my father does *not* have the power to erase my obligation to you."

"He has not tried to do so. He says you will give me strong sons." If the boy were not so belligerent, she probably would not tease him so. Muir felt her lips twitch; his expression was priceless.

His mouth worked, but he made no sound. Then he managed, "I—I ... and *you*? I am pure Bedu and you are a dirty Ballendish bint—"

"Hold your tongue, lest you find it sliced from your mouth."

In the twilight, Rodhlann looked like a wraith, his pale face dominated by his glittering eyes that were the only living part of him. They snapped like fire, the scintillant colors too vibrant for his wan splendor. He wore a black burnoose over his shirt and sherwal trousers though the worst weather had not yet arrived. Muir knew the frailty the voluminous garment concealed. Shunnar could probably beat him to the ground with one hand, but Rodhlann maintained an air of dangerous indolence where he leaned against the tent support.

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The boy turned and bit his lip as if he did not wish to apologize. "I am sorry," he muttered. "I should not have said that."

"You should not harbor such dark thoughts either," Rodhlann said softly.

Shunnar's dark face acquired a green tinge. "Sorry. S-so sorry. I am m-merely angry, sayyid. I have already promised myself elsewhere, and now I d-discover my father has given me t-to her. No matter *what* I do, I will have no honor."

A suggestion of a smile played at the edges of Rodhlann's mouth as he regarded Muir. "Will you mate with this one? I see nothing wrong with him, save his bad temper."

The boy blushed and dropped his eyes; boys spent most of their waking hours training to hunt. Since Shunnar had been blooded, he *could* marry, but traditionally, he would wed a girl his own age, and they would perfect the art of making babies together. A Bedu warrior only married an older woman if her husband was slain—the widow wed her husband's closest male relative, no matter his age. If she had passed beyond childbearing, she joined the weavers who worked the ground looms.

Muir saw the young man glance up through his lashes, studying her intently. Rodhlann had apparently piqued Shunnar's curiosity, and she cursed in silence. She had served at the high house in every capacity, and Shunnar was young enough to be tantalized by the idea of forbidden delights.

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Cutting Rodhlann a sharp look, she said gravely, "I have declined your father's offer, as there was prior claim. I would not sully your honor, Shunnar."

He seemed slightly disappointed, as if he had been considering the allure of gratification. "But that does not answer the debt."

"It does not," she agreed. "But you will have the chance to repay me. Shade and water until we meet again."

"You have ... been grace itself, and I apologize for my bad manners. I owe you my life—and my honor. Many thanks, most revered speaker." Those were the only sincere words she heard from the boy, and then he turned, weaving among the goats that a herder was leading to the stream for a last drink at sunset.

"That one has a lot to learn." Rodhlann pushed away from the support at last, and she saw he was unsteady on his feet. "He half wanted you to take him at the end."

Muir closed the distance between them and put her arm about his waist; his weight gave her no pause. He had grown used to her handling, although she did not believe he liked it. His arm about her shoulders felt light as a river reed.

"That was your doing," she murmured. "The word 'mate' conjures a potent vision."

"He will learn not to be governed by lust."

The power to retort was new, and she savored it. "You wish it still had the power to rule you."

His step faltered as she guided him into Ghazi's tent; it was spacious, though lacking the soft touches that would indicate the existence of a wife. Rodhlann slid her a hooded

look, and she wondered at his expression while he studied her, his thoughts running like a river behind his eyes.

"You *will* learn not to push too far. I hope the lesson is not over painful."

Oddly, Muir felt sure that he had not spoken his thoughts, and she frowned. How could she know that? But there was no mistaking the thread of melancholy that laced his voice; she was coming to know its nuances better than her own.

"You need me to survive ... and to find Maksoor Balad."

"I detest you," he growled, as they pushed through the second flap to Ghazi's inner sanctum. Rugs dotted the ground, and a fire burned low in the earthen oven. "Why are we here?"

"To learn where the Enadi camp during Behrid. I hope their speaker will be able to help us."

"Help us?"

"Help *you*. There must be a way to restore your strength." Muir did not voice her deepest fear.

He laughed then, the bleak sound of wind in dry leaves. "If you depend on these savages to save me, little maid, I will die before the end of Behrid. And you will be alone."

His words inspired in Muir the first terror she'd known since the threat of burning. She belonged with Rodhlann, if not *to* him. Without him, she would be directionless, and worse—alone. The idea made her stomach sweat. When he took her from dead Ballendin, he had set her course, and she did not know enough of the world to alter it. Rodhlann was regarding her with a half smile, as if he knew her thoughts. She *hated* that look.

With a shake of her head, she stepped forward. Ghazi sat in a circle of cast light, eating his evening meal with a square of naan. The war leader arched a brow, setting aside his bone bowl. His dark features reflected curiosity as he took in their near embrace—Muir knew that the hunter judged the gesture affectionate, probably to their benefit, as the Bedu detested weakness. The tribe left their deformed young in the waste rather than squander resources raising them, and she did not wish to contemplate what they would do with a dying afreet.

"To what do I owe the honor of this visit?" The hunter did not rise. Instead he offered them a seat at his fire with a flourish of his hand.

Muir accepted the invitation without delay. She had grown adept at assisting Rodhlann, and when they were both settled, she said, "The esteemed ameer said you would be able to tell us where the Enadi make camp during Behrid."

"I will not ask why you wish to know," Ghazi said. "It must be presumed that the ameer has already tried to warn you against a casual visit." At Muir's nod, the war leader fetched a precious piece of papyrus and mapped their route. "It is two hands days to their camp, if you travel at hunting speed."

Hunting speed. She knew a tremor of dismay, remembering the dead run that created such a terrible stitch in her side. Rodhlann had sustained the pace better than she, but he was weaker now than he had been even a few days ago.

She bit her lip. "Is there a faster route?"

"Not overland." The war leader regarded her, his head canted as if in perplexity. "Our tribes both camp near the

river during Behrid, and you might cut several days off the journey by traveling on the Omintago, but—”

Rodhlann spoke. She would never grow used to the music of his voice; its sorcery awoke a new ache every time. “How would we accomplish this?”

“*But* we have no vessel, and the Bedu are not skilled in watercraft.” The war leader slanted an annoyed glance at the man tinted in ginger light. In the glow from the oven, he resembled a creature of legend—an afreet who offered mortals their hearts’ desire, only to twist granted wishes into torment.

“Can you give us directions for traveling by river?”

“It is a waste of time, but I can.” So saying, Ghazi did.

Although anxious to get Rodhlann back to the privacy of their tent, she made courteous conversation for a few moments before saying, “Many thanks.”

Rodhlann stood unaided and gave the hunter an inscrutable smile. “You’ve helped more than you know.”

After he had gone, Ghazi said quietly, “Your union will bring forth a thing unfit to walk in either world. Shunnar, at least, would give you human sons.”

Not bothering to correct the misconception, she pushed to her feet, covering her confusion with motion. The truth was so complex as to defy explanation, so she merely nodded.

“Sometimes we must simply follow our path to the end.”

“And sometimes we must know when to turn.”

Muir paused, one hand on the fold of the woven curtain. “If there is something you would say to me, I ask that you do so plainly. I do not have an ear for subtlety.”

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The war leader rose, looking somber. "Your course is foolish, and I dislike losing a tribal asset.... We have not had an earthspeaker in more years than I can recall."

"You seem certain I will not return."

Ghazi shrugged. "You are bound to an afreet."

His words summed up the uncertainty of her position; she belonged nowhere, committed to Rodhlann's whim, but the Bedu valued her no more than the izzat. The only difference was that they would use her gift instead of her strong back.

"We will see," she said softly. "Shade and water until we meet again."

The sun had gone when she stepped from the tent, and she turned her face toward Sahen and Anumati, staring at the red hunter and his silver mistress. The light slanted into her eyes in a chromatic veil, streaking her perception of the stars. Out of habit, she found Kaveh and Minau before walking on. Her breath showed in smoky wisps as she passed through the settlement. Everyone was already indoors, cleaning up after the evening meal—even the goats were huddled beside the herder's tent, as it was not yet cold enough for them to sleep inside. From the eastern end of the encampment, she heard the distant strains of Jibril's daughters singing of his death, a chilling and wordless ululation. The Bedu funeral song would continue for another two-hand days.

Rodhlann had already kindled the fire in the oven by the time she returned, or someone had tended it in their absence. He sat as close to the warmth as he could manage without being burned, his slender hands fanned before him. The dry dung blazed brightly and with surprisingly little odor; Muir

knew that the key to its efficiency was the salt the Bedu applied prior to kindling it with straw. All Bedu girls knew how to prepare the cakes, letting the sun do its work during Haar so the tribe would have enough fuel to withstand the frost of Behrid.

He spoke without looking at her. "Did he convince you to stay?"

"No." She sat beside him, smoothing the folds of her dress. "How are you able to know Shunnar and Ghazi's thoughts without—"

"I do not need a special gift to see what most humans are thinking. Such transparent animals." His voice was clipped.

The implicit scorn roused her, and she sent him a snapping look that he didn't see. "This *animal* is going to save your life."

"Better an animal than a monster, wouldn't you say?" Rodhlann glanced at her then, an unfathomable look from lucent eyes. His smile was shaded with dark dreams.

Muir grinned reluctantly, hating that he could disarm her so. "Have you eaten?"

He shook his head, delicate as the wings of a dune fly. Muir suspected his sting would prove as fierce. "I cannot."

Her heart skipped a bit because she believed him. "Can you take a little blood?"

"Not without food, little maid. One without the other will make me ill, but I cannot keep anything down." His mouth compressed, revealing how much he hated detailing his weakness.

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Urgency made her feel edgy; she wanted to sharpen her eating knife, but the sound irritated him. "We will leave tomorrow, but we cannot go overland." It was not a question; she knew he was not strong enough to walk so far. "We must find a way to make the water carry us."

"A pity your gift does not allow you to speak with the river." By his wry tone, she knew it was a jest.

He stared into the oven—what he saw there might have been obvious even to one who was not filled with his resonance. Muir glimpsed the images too, the dying flicker of immortality, the vestiges of his life. His fingers were cold when she covered them with her own. She knew a terrible delight when he folded his hand over hers, silently, not acknowledging the gesture.

"Perhaps," she said, "perhaps it *does*. And if not the river, the stones."

"What do you propose?"

But Muir would not answer. She needed time to think the idea through, time to develop confidence in her gift, but she had only this night. The Bedu would rumble about her departure if she did not go immediately. Soon enough, their good intentions would evolve into her permanent captivity, ostensibly for her protection, but largely for the status of the tribe.

After he curled onto the pallet, she covered them both with skins. It should have made her sweat, so close to the fire, but Rodhlann stole her heat. The warmth bled from her skin to his, where it slipped away. She put an arm about him, and they nested like two matched bowls.

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The hiss of the oven had nearly lulled her to sleep before he spoke again. "Do not let me devour you. For I will, given the chance. But do not let me."

"A monster that gives warning. You are not so wicked, I think."

"I *am*. A serpent may be handled safely when its fangs are gone, but that does not take away its urge to bite."

"Is that what you wish, Rodhlann? To bite me?" When she touched his hair, he put his head into the cradle of her palm. He did not answer her question.

"I loathe you," he whispered.

"I know."

* * * *

In the morning, the Bedu women gathered to watch her on the banks of the Omintago. Muir knew she looked mad, searching and sifting in the water. She wore her patched djellabah once more, their bags arrayed around her. Rodhlann studied her, wrapped in a burnoose against the biting wind. After about an hour, she found a light rock riddled with holes. She curled her fingers about it and closed her eyes. The stone was young, and it remembered the journey from the fiery mountain into a stream that joined the lazy Omintago, as all branches eventually did.

Are there more like you nearby?

The little stone seemed sure there were, so Muir made a game of it, promising the Bedu children a blessing if they helped her seek, and by lunchtime, she had an enormous pile. She ate a bowl of rice hastily, scooped with damp fingers. Bedu hunters paused in their practice to see what

lunacy she was about, and they stood with their women, a dark circle of mystified curiosity.

She spoke the benison over the little ones and made a pass over their heads. Whether her words carried any worth, she had no idea. This was where she lacked confidence in her gift—the earth had always spoken freely, but she had never tried to mold it to her will. Silently, Muir added a little prayer as she lifted the first two small stones, pressed them together and told them, “Join.”

Kadin laughed. She recognized the hunter's derision, but the sound faded as the Bedu saw the seam where the two stones were slowly melting together, a motion so slow and fluid as to seem a mirage. Except that when she turned the stone in her hands, there was one where there had been two. It was slow work, but no one questioned her. She sat, her assurance growing as she set one stone after another, eyes closed for concentration.

Her head began to ache, but she persevered, feeling strength and unity through her fingertips. The stone did not mind being crafted into something greater; she sensed its pride as small whispers coalesced into a strong voice.

Khali's murmur roused Muir from near trance. “I never thought to see a shaping. What is it?”

She opened eyes that stung with light and saw the thing she had created. It was rough and unstructured, but most of the tribe looked alarmed by its existence. “A watercraft,” she said. “Or it will be.”

“Of *stone*?” Shunnar lost his awe enough to snort. “You may have power, speaker, but you are not very clever.”

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Rodhlann studied the formation as the Bedu melted away, losing interest in the spectacle. "This will float for a short while," he told her. "But you knew that. How will you keep the water from filling the holes and sinking it?"

Muir did not wish to respond, knowing it would sound absurd. She rubbed her aching eyes with sore fingertips. "I will ask it to try not to," she whispered. "And I will ask the stone to try not to let it."

He did not laugh. Perhaps having watched her persuade the stone to a new form, he did not doubt her ability. "My life is already in your hands." He offered a mordant smile. "It will not matter if I wither or drown."

I cannot answer that. She merely smiled. With the observers gone, she felt more comfortable with the shaping; and under her stroking palms, the stone slowly shifted. Muir imagined it as clay, and so it went—until she had fashioned a flat-bottom craft capable of carrying two.

What do you will?

The question startled her, but the stone had become much stronger under her hands. *I need you to repel the water. It would pull you down and wash you to nothing—take the form I gave and make it dust.*

There was a ponderous silence, lengthy by her standards. *We do not wish to be dust. We will do as you ask.*

Muir rose then, wincing at the stiffness of her knees. She had been sitting for a long time, and in the chill of early Behrid, such stillness was bad for the joints. *This is how it will feel to be old,* she thought. Glancing at Rodhlann, she

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wondered—he had said the weight of time was bearing him down. Did that include such pain?

She trudged to the water's edge, peering into its murky depths. It was an overcast day and the sun behind a veil of clouds. The diffuse light prevented her from seeing into the Omintago, apart from the shallow water at the bank. Closing her eyes, Muir paused and tried to extend her senses, but it did not feel natural. She had no affinity for water; she recognized that immediately. The Omintago was lazy, recoiling as she prodded it. The river had not encountered anything able to reach it in a long time, and it hissed at her, the water roiling. But the brook was too sluggish to sustain outrage, the current flowing back into sloth.

Go. The languid response reminded Muir of a sleeper waving away a fly, and doubtless that was how the river felt.

I ask a boon—Erathos would want you to help me.

She felt the way it perked, eddies swirling near her feet. *Erathos ... yes. I know Erathos.* The sun dipped further toward the horizon as she waited. She wondered if it had gone back to sleep. In its way, water was every bit as slow as earth.

Erathos knows you. What do you desire?

Try not to take us.

It burbled with pride and vanity; she knew it did not want to allow their passage, but in the end, it acquiesced, because that was the easiest course and it could babble of its own munificence, although only Muir understood it. Her entire body ached as if she had been walking Ar Cahra at the height of Haar—her eyes felt swollen, and when she glanced at

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them, she saw that her fingertips were raw. Rodhlann gave her the waterskin and she drank, savoring the lukewarm liquid.

When he spoke, she heard an unfamiliar inflection in his voice. "The Bedu will sing for generations of the speaker who sailed away on a ship of stone."

She shook her head at the thought. "It grows late. We should see if this craft will bear us—now, before the Bedu return."

They loaded their belongings, and he helped her push the vessel into the shallows. It was surprisingly light and hit the water with a hiss. She caught her breath as she waited to see if it would sink, but river and rock avoided each other. She scrambled up and Rodhlann gave a final shove before accepting her hand.

He landed hard on his side, his legs dangling in the water, but she pulled him up. As the current carried them past a bend in the river, she saw Khali crest the rise, only to stop short. Despite her weariness, she smiled and lifted a hand to the startled girl. Would anyone believe her story? *Unlikely*, she reflected, settling as best she could. She had created the craft knowing little about buoyancy, but it seemed her design would suffice.

The rocking motion made her stomach queasy, and she closed her eyes, unsettled by the water all about her. Their vessel was no happier, as she had forced it to a purpose to which it was not naturally suited; it complained in a low monotone like a fly buzzing about her ears. The sun dropped behind the hills, and they were far from the Bedu

encampment, alone on dark water reflecting broken images of Sahen and Anumati.

Things swam in the river: serpents slithered off the banks and trailed after them before deciding they would not make an easy meal. Larger creatures bumped the vessel with lazy curiosity, and the raft listed. Terrified, Muir huddled at the center, trying to will away her aches, and she must have dozed.

As Anumati chased Sahen, Muir became aware that Rodhlann shivered in his damp burnoose—his dying body could not warm itself. Small good it would do to have come so far only to have him perish of cold. His fingers had stiffened until he could not manage the ties himself, but he was too proud to speak, and she had been too self-absorbed to see his plight.

She removed the clammy garment, wrapping herself about him, and then she layered clothing and blankets atop them both. She hesitated over the tapestry rolled at the bottom of her bag; in the end, she left it. Instead of warming him, Muir felt as if she were freezing, too. Her heat bled into him, but the chill did not abate. If it were not for the livid glitter of his eyes, she would think he had already died. She trembled as the force of mortality hit her. The precipice became clearer than the murky river carrying them toward the Enadi camp. She saw how close he was to final passage, and if she were not careful, she would fall with him.

"It is too far," he whispered. "Just let me go."

"No. We can do this, but you have to help me. You must want it."

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Muir felt him uncoil inside; she saw him reach for her where their spirit selves crouched at the edge. And when she opened her eyes, he had turned in her arms, his frigid face against her neck. It was the first time he had treated her as more than a fur rug. She thought he would say he loathed her again; she did not expect appreciation. But he surprised her.

“Before humans walked the land, before the rivers dried and the sands blew, before the seasons dwindled into Haar and Behrid, there were three elder races—the Daiesthai, whom your people call afreet; the Jinun, also known as the djinn; and the Sut, who were dying even as my people came forth. It is their secrets we seek.”

“Will you tell me of them?”

“I will.”

The first story of creation lulled her to sleep.

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SHADOWS AND SEPARATION

Three ragged travelers reached the nomad camp by the end of the second day. Kejmeh, a man with a face like a dented copper pot, told Tah over a welcome meal that it was fortunate they had arrived when they did, as the Enadi were moving in the morning. Tah filled his belly and tried to look knowledgeable as Kejmeh talked about the dangers of traversing the waste. The boy had run many miles as a messenger, but most of his missions had been along safe routes, regularly traveled by merchants and their guards. Although he was theoretically trained for survival, hunting lizards had been the first practical application of his skills.

Tah was not altogether happy with his companions. Harb and Z'ev had stripped his uniform of all house insignia at the well, and here they'd traded it away for common clothing. Z'ev gestured sharply when the boy protested, the only instance in which he departed from the role of the humble seeker. Now they all sat in nomad robes, looking as wild as their hosts.

The night was cold, but thankfully they had been offered quarters with an elderly woman who did not mind sharing the space. Her family was gathered around the oven, scraping the last of the lentil stew—Kejmeh looked nearly as withered as his mother from long hours of tending the herd in the hot sun. Tah listened to the talk with half an ear, as he brooded over their circumstances. *Why didn't they listen to me? I*

begged Ksathra Z'ev not to go to Ballendin, and he threatened to make me shorter by a head.

Although he was not a fastidious boy, he felt offended by his attire. It went against all his training not to identify himself as a sha'al-izzat's messenger. But then ... he was not a messenger anymore, was he? Tah supposed he served the ksathra, but even he no longer occupied a place of power in Inay. He had spat upon four hundred years of history when he took Tah's knife to the haft of his heir's talon. Tah shuddered; the boy had imagined the wood sounded like the groan of the ksathra's anguished ancestors.

What are we now? Nothing. Fugitives. A mute without topknot or armor, an heir to nothing, and a messenger who serves no one.

He sighed and chewed on the stale naan. Even the bread tasted different here; he suspected it had been prepared several days ago. The entire camp reeked of goat, and the woman smiling at him over the oven possessed a ruminant aroma herself. The Enadi were a dark people, darker than the citizens of Inay. Tah didn't like the way the goat woman was studying him; he recalled little about Enadi traditions—he had never guested with them before, but he knew he didn't want to warm her pallet. *If she was a little younger, perhaps, or had less hair on her arms ...*

Kejmeh had asked him something. Tah glanced at the other six occupants of the tent, all vaguely tinged by the coppery glow from the oven. Only Harb seemed uninterested in Tah's chagrin. "I am sorry," he said. "I was not listening."

The old herder merely shrugged. "I asked if it was a hard journey. All of you look weary and battered."

He paused, because he couldn't remember what lies the ksathra had told. For a moment, he couldn't recall his fictional name or where they were from. He didn't know if he was supposed to admit that they'd survived three nights in the waste or speak of the strange well they had found off the caravan route. His eyes shifted—Tah knew he was a bad liar. His mother had told him so time and again, so he finally just nodded.

"All journeys are hard," the old woman pronounced. Tah could not think of her name. "Especially for the young, who have not become used to leaving things behind."

Z'ev nodded with conviction, which Tah found insulting. The messenger had adapted as well as anyone possibly could to having his world turned inside out. To having dead things try to suck the life from him. To cold and privation. To sandstorms and being hunted.

Hunted.

At last the truth began to sink in. He could not go home. Never again would he sit in the gallery of tales, propped against his mother's knee. No more would he spin with Sagireh or read her a story before she lay down to sleep. No more would he surprise her with presents after a run. He would never see Melek, or the girl he had been watching secretly in the market, the girl with eyes like amber. *I never even spoke to her, never learned her name.*

His annoyance turned to grief; it weighed on his soul like stones. And soon, the grief swelled into something larger. *I*

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have endangered them. No. Z'ev endangered them. I did not even want to go. I did my duty and it has cost me everything.

He wanted to speak up; he wanted to ask his companions how dire their straits were. Tah felt like a sleeper who had awakened from a nightmare, only to find that reality was worse than dream. But he was not lost to all discretion. Instead he simmered silently, listening to the others talk.

"We have fed you," the goat woman was saying. "Now you must prophesy. Will we reach our Behrid camp unharmed, or do the Bedu lie in wait? Should we alter our route?"

Z'ev regarded the woman, looking blank, and despite his tension, Tah could not help but smile. This much he knew from his travels. The ksathra was garbed as a seeker, so the Enadi expected him to repay their hospitality with divination. Z'ev should have a set of lykos teeth, which he would rattle in a special clay cup and then toss out. Sometimes seeker predictions came true, but Tah suspected it was more a result of their travels than real prognostication.

Though he did not feel particularly charitable toward his companions, the boy spoke up. "Regrettably, my uncle's knowing-bones were stolen during our journey. Perhaps we can offer you a tale, instead?"

"Stolen." Kejmeh shook his head and sighed. "What is the world coming to when a seeker cannot travel safely? Was it the rebels? We said they would turn to thievery when the merchants stopped funding them."

His words meant little to Tah, but he sensed the sharpening attention of his two companions. Harb leaned forward and Z'ev clasped the boy briefly on the shoulder,

responding, "Well said." The Enadi did not seem to realize that the ksathra had dodged the question. "These rebels you mention..."

The old herder seemed happy to be led. "Last Haar, the merchants in Feroz sent supplies to the angry farmers in middle Raton. Heard that from a caravan leader who was robbed by the izzat, though he called it a levy."

"Probably to please his daughter," said Z'ev. Tah reflected that this was likely, considering the treasure that lined the floor of the dead princess's chamber. "But instead of dealing with the rebellion himself, he sent his son."

Kejmeh nodded. "And lost his heir. It was a bad season for us. The revolt interrupted our trade, and we were worried the caravans wouldn't reach us before Behrid. We were very low on salt."

Even Tah knew that was bad. *No salt, no fire.*

"You're glad the conflict has passed?" Z'ev asked.

That's a foolish question. Who would want to prolong a war?

"I would not say it has ended," the old woman said, stirring the embers in the oven. The air of the tent grew perceptibly warmer with her industry. "The farmers have nothing to return to. So they are soldiers now, whether they wanted it or followed someone else away from home. They will fight as long as there is one man standing."

Her words echoed with odd resonance. Tah felt a sudden and piercing empathy for the faceless men who eked out an existence, hunting in the hills. The revolt had barely flickered on his awareness when he was running messages to Shapa. If

he had thought on it at all, he might have felt contempt for those who had no loyalty to their ruler. Now he wondered why they felt the need to fight. So he asked.

Kejmeh answered him with more patience than most. "You are new to the road, I see. Well, you'll learn much, traveling with your uncle. The farmers rebelled because they do not own their land. Because they grow food they cannot eat."

"You know a great deal," Z'ev observed, eating a third piece of naan.

Kejmeh shrugged. "We travel. The herders in the caravans always want to talk over carafes of pak. It is a hard life in some ways, but at least what we have is our own."

"They need a leader," the old woman murmured. "And proper training."

Kejmeh shook his head. "It will not happen. The guild must have called it a loss, or they would have sent aid by now."

Everyone agreed this was true with a somber nod, and the women cleared away the dirty bowls. Talk of politics seemed to be making the goat woman restless—not for the first time, Tah felt her eyes on him, as if he were a choice sweetmeat. He accepted the honeyed date she offered, though; she was ugly, but he couldn't resist the treat.

Eating the fruit thoughtfully, he realized that the soldiers had nothing to rebel against. The izzat was dead, and Ballendin was no more. Could they go home or had others been given their land to work? If they did not own it, he supposed that was so. With the izzat dead, who *did* own the land? His heart sank when he realized this was very likely a bone of contention. How many houses in Inay would leap at

the chance to increase their holdings? Would the merchants in Feroz feel the same? Arable land was more valuable than gold, so it seemed likely. So many questions—and he could not ask them. He was sure they were not supposed to mention Ballendin, at least not to reveal that it had been destroyed. Harb caught his eye and shook his head slightly. The boy frowned at the guard; he *knew* not to bring it up.

“You mentioned a tale,” the goat woman said, settling onto the rug.

It took Tah a moment to realize she was speaking to him. He blushed as he answered, “I am sure my uncle would be happy to share one.”

He wouldn't look at Z'ev, but Tah felt the mute's hard look. Despite the grim circumstances, he wondered how they would manage, for the Enadi would certainly find it strange if Z'ev paused at odd moments and conferred with his guard, as they had done in telling of Kaveh and Minau. That night seemed impossibly long ago now.

“As your hospitality certainly saved our lives,” the ksathra said, “I am pleased to offer one of my poor tales. What is your preference?”

Harb shifted, resting his upturned palms against his thighs. The pose gave him a vaguely meditative air, but Tah saw annoyance flash in the man's eyes. He'd suspected that the guard had no use for him, but this confirmed it—whatever the relationship between master and mute, there was no room for anyone else. *I do not need his approval.* But it stung a little, knowing that his skills were unappreciated and he himself,

unwelcome. Tah then remembered how the guard had saved his life and sighed.

The old woman ate a candied fig. "Tell us of the old days."

"You always want to hear about the old days," her daughter grumbled. "Tell us something with handsome warriors and fearsome beasts."

"Perhaps," said Z'ev, "I can accommodate you both."

Kejmeh laughed. "Then you are a better man than I."

Sitting back, Harb looked a little more relaxed, and Tah wondered if he would fight on a perceived injury to the ksathra's dignity, not just his person. What would it be like to command such loyalty, even when there was no power to back one's orders? He did not see that Z'ev was any better than himself, now that he had buried his heritage in the waste.

"Most know the tale of Kaveh and Minau..." Z'ev assured himself of his audience with a glance. At their nods, he went on, "But few know what happened afterward. It is this tale I shall tell you.

"After his love died, the world was in ruins. Mountains erupted in fire and cities fell. Two of the gods begged the lord of death to take up his basket again, and ... he did. Kaveh was handsome. No woman would deny it, although priests erected hideous icons in his name. But the women saw him coming with his basket. They dared not speak his name, lest they draw his eye—and his attention was death, as they had learned from poor Minau—so they called him the peddler. 'The peddler comes,' they would say, gathered around a village well. 'The peddler comes for my old mother, but not for me.'

"So it went for many years—the women saw him but not the men."

"If I saw him, I would go willingly," the Enadi crone cackled.

"But..." Kejmeh's sister was frowning. "People still die. How can they die, if the lord of death is no more?"

Tah bit his lip against a snicker—he had never seen the ksathra look so nonplused. Harb's fingers flickered where they rested against his thighs.

"If I answer that now, it will ruin the rhythm of the tale."

Kejmeh sighed. "This is why I cannot find a husband for you, Zillah! You ask too many questions."

Zillah scowled at her brother and asked Z'ev to continue.

"One wealthy lavedi saw him ... and coveted him. Her husband was old and feeble, and his other wives minded her children. The lavedi saw Kaveh come and go, taking the aged and infirm. She watched and her longing grew. At first she wished the lord of death would come for her old man, so she might marry his handsome son by his first wife, long cycles gone. But as time passed, she thought less of her handsome stepson and more of Kaveh. She thought Minau was weak, and how lonely the lord of death must be."

Tah found himself reluctantly interested, as he leaned forward with the rest of the listeners. "What did she do?"

The ksathra cut him a sharp look, but he continued the tale. "She dressed in fine robes, painted her eyes with kohl and her nails with henna. When she was sure she looked her best, she drank slow poison, knowing he would come for her. And as he did, she drank the antidote swiftly.

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"'What is this?' Kaveh asked. 'You are not dying.'

"'I wanted to speak with you, sayyid, and I was not sure how else to call you.'"

Z'ev paused and took a sip of pak, then continued. "She was a handsome woman, but Kaveh's heart was hard and he felt anger at her ruse.

"'You must know it is bad fortune to summon the lord of death.' Kaveh fixed her with his ebony stare. 'I must collect a soul before I leave this place.'

"'Do you not desire me?' she asked. 'I am strong enough to be your bride.'

"'I have a bride. Her name is Minau, and I am waiting for the cycle to bring her back to me.' She wept then for she could not believe he was refusing her, but her tears did not move Kaveh. 'I will punish you by taking your husband from you, so that you will know my loss.'

"The cunning lavedi sobbed louder and pleaded with the lord of death, as she did not want him to know how well his punishment pleased her. If she could not have the handsome Kaveh, she would take her stepson instead. Her old husband passed into Kaveh's keeping that same day, and she grieved beautifully. The other wives spoke kindly of her devotion. But when it came time for her husband's burning, her wicked stepson said, 'Poor thing, she cannot carry on without my father. I could not ask such a broken woman to be my wife. She had better go in the fire with him, so they will be together forever.' Somewhere, Kaveh laughed. And that was the beginning of suttee."

"A tale well told." Kejmeah finished his pak and stood up. "But if you will excuse me, my wife will be wondering what has become of me."

As her brother stood, Zillah said, "She is probably hoping you have fallen down a ravine."

"Feh." The herder shook his hand at her. "And this is why I cannot find you a husband."

"I do not want a husband. And you are lucky we have visitors, brother, as I permit *no one* to speak to me so."

"Enough, children!" The old woman spoke as if Zillah and Kejmeah were younger than Tah, who could not hide a smile. "You"—she pointed at Kejmeah—"help our guests settle in the other room." At her words, the three weary travelers pushed to their feet, banished to the other side of the woven hanging, a space that would have their shoulders touching, should they all lie on their backs. "And you"—she frowned at Zillah—"finish putting up the lentil stew. It needs to be in a crock with a lid or the dune flies will get it."

After settling them with spare blankets, Kejmeah departed with a bow and a smile. The women's side of the tent rustled with activity, and then the night was silent. Beside him, Tah's companions were talking silently, and he could not understand. He had never felt such longing for his family; worry gnawed at him. Were they well? Did they think he was a traitor? *Will the sha'al-izzat hurt them because of me?* That question kept him awake long into the night, and by the time Anumati chased Sahen toward morning, he had made a choice.

The boy was gone when Harb awoke. *Fire take him, I promised I would look after him.* His vow lacked the weight that would make it painful, but his conscience gave Harb an unpleasant twinge. He'd kept Tah from physical harm, but he had not taken any interest in him otherwise. Where could the messenger have gone? A sense of foreboding overtook him.

Jostling Z'ev, he woke his master. *Tah is gone.*

The other man blinked as if trying to focus on Harb's flickering fingers. *Gone? Gone where?*

If I knew, I would not have awakened you.

That startled the sleep from Z'ev's eyes and he sat up, immediately reaching for their supplies. Two waterskins remained, along with most of the provisions they had purchased the day before. The ksathra sighed. *He does not mean to come back.*

Did the little thief take your moneybelt?

He is not a thief, merely— He paused, searching through their things. *He is a thief! Only left us four kels ... Fire take it, this complicates matters considerably.*

Harb closed his eyes against the sting of regret. *This is my fault. If I had been on guard, this would not have happened,* he signed.

And if you had not allowed yourself the healing sleep, you would still be gravely wounded. Z'ev touched the new skin atop the guard's bald head. There would be a scar, but the flesh had already sealed, enabled by the deep sleep Z'ev mentioned. *There was no danger—no reason for you to stay awake. You could not have known he would do this.*

You are too kind. His implacable expression did not reveal how much the failure hurt.

We will manage.

Harb knew the plan they had outlined the night before had become significantly more difficult. Without those kels, it would be impossible to arrange a meeting with the leader of the merchant guild. Such things required coin for bribes to assistants and underlings, which they now lacked. In fact, as they looked now—in rough desert robes—they would be fortunate to get a word with the guard who manned the door, and nobody would believe Z'ev was a dispossessed noble, dressed as a seeker. New clothes would cost them; so would a bath and a good barber.

Do we still travel to Feroz to convince the guild to try again with its peasant army? The guard tried not to reveal his distaste.

Z'ev nodded. *Our army, my friend. The old woman said they needed a leader, and now they have one. You shall provide their training. We will yet make Japhet weep—it will merely take longer than we thought.*

They were forced to invent a reason for Tah's absence, but the story about sending the boy ahead to ready a place for them in Feroz seemed to satisfy the old woman's curiosity. The four of them broke fast with the remainder of the lentil stew and the last of the stale naan. Z'ev paid once more with a tale, and Harb managed not to scowl at the way the older man butchered it. *He has been only half listening to me,* he thought; though to be fair, the art did not run in the ksathra's veins. *I suppose he makes a fair showing, for one untrained.*

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"It has been a pleasure staying with you."

Both Harb and Z'ev bowed as they prepared to depart. Zillah was nowhere to be found, and the old woman was mixing dough in a red clay bowl—she did not speak as they went out. Kejmeh met them near the livestock pen; his goats followed him as if his tuneless whistle mesmerized them.

"You are leaving us? But the road calls you. We Enadi are much the same, though we take our families with us, and we do not move *quite* so often."

Z'ev nodded and looked as if he would respond at length. Harb knew it would do them no good if a patrol coerced their destination from the herder. *Not that it would take much*, Harb thought. Kejmeh was the most gregarious of all the Enadi they'd met, although most of them had been snug inside their tents the night before, when the three stumbled wearily into their camp. Only the herder had been outside, still tending his animals, but he had been glad to guide them to his mother's tent.

They spent one of their precious kels on a broken-down old mare that Kejmeh said would likely end up in stew. He seemed sure that the mare had wind enough to carry Z'ev to Feroz, however, so Harb helped his master onto the horse, and led the animal over the rutted track that widened as it traveled north, joining with the good merchant road leading to the city. The ksathra rode well, so they made good time, even with Harb on foot.

The pale dunes gave way to scrubby grass and a plain pocked with loose stones. Sagebrush grew along the road, marked with strange piles of rock. The way they were

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arranged looked to Harb like graves, but Z'ev was deep in thought, so the mute did not break the silence with the observation.

At noon they paused for naan and dried meat, then traveled on; and by the time the sun dropped behind the far hills, they reached a safe campsite underneath a khi tree. Harb cut open seed pods and gave the nectar to the horse. According to the Enadi, they were perilously close to Bedu hunting grounds, so they did not light a fire. They huddled together for warmth, and the mare dozed on her feet, after grazing on withered yellow grass. Harb lay awake, staring into the darkness. His compulsion would not let him sleep. He listened to Z'ev's deep breathing and wondered what would become of him.

* * * *

In the morning, they resumed the journey. So it went for two days; they saw nothing more dangerous than lizards digging into the ground to doze through Behrid. Harb grew edgy as he walked; he needed to train, but he had no choice. The horse would stop if she could not see his back, and there was no stick large enough to make her run.

At the end of the third day, the sky was midnight blue with longing for the lovers, faintly edged with sienna and scarlet. Harb knew they were close, however, so they did not pause. One by one the stars came out in tiny cuts of light. He had rarely seen them look so pristine. By the time Sahen showed his bloody face, the two saw the pearly gleam of the city walls.

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The mare was wheezing, and Z'ev seemed pained by the sound. She would have to be put down. She had served them faithfully and her reward would be a quick death.

Feroz, he said, indicating the distant rise of blocky buildings. *Should I do it now?*

Z'ev closed his eyes, and for a moment, Harb thought he would weep. Yes, the ksathra was kind, which explained why they were both homeless and poor. Kind souls did not fare well in Cahra; they wound up tending other men's doors. But Z'ev surprised him. When he met the guard's gaze, his look was steady, if full of regret.

I would not have her suffer.

Z'ev slid off the mare's back and rubbed her mangy flank, and then he limped toward the city. He had made the decision, Harb thought, but he would not watch. Harb turned then, and as the animal stared at him, he thought perhaps she knew ... and she bent her neck. With both hands, he grasped her head and twisted. The snap was quick and clean; she could not have felt much pain. She fell with a heavy sound and the rustle of dry foliage.

Harb stood staring down at the carcass, taking no pleasure in this kill. It had been a necessary task but not an enjoyable one. When he turned, he saw Z'ev staring at him.

"I knew you were strong," he said at last—and Harb knew he spoke to distance himself. "But I do not think I ever realized..."

He knew the look. It was the look Inayans gave him when he left the palace grounds; it was a look of fear mingled with dark curiosity, a look that wondered if he was a beast as well

as mute—incapable of higher thought. If he were safely caged, they might gather to poke him with sticks. Z'ev had never seen him perform as he was meant. *Until now.*

You should not have turned. Should not have watched. He did not shift his hands, however. His regret simmered, unexpressed.

A feeling rose in Harb, something like sorrow, something like loneliness, except so far past them as to resemble a drowning swimmer waving from the water. He had traveled with Z'ev to the port once and stared into the dark maw of a sea that would not permit ships to sail upon it—and he had felt the same sickness that he did now, except he could not turn away. He could not fall back. The guard knew he would see this same look from Z'ev for the rest of his life.

There was nothing to be done with the mare's body, so he strode on. Lingering would not change the circumstances; all choices led to branching paths, and sometimes one simply had to walk. He had learned he would not always like his road. Life was often hard and seldom kind. Z'ev would learn that as well, soon enough.

The first lesson came at the gate to Feroz. It was a fearsome thing of pressed khi wood, built to withstand a siege. All around it, caravans camped, some empty, some loaded with trade goods from the other six cities—spices from Shapa or garish woven rugs from nomad camps. The scent of ripe cactus pear and broken khi pods permeated the night air. Someone had kindled a fire, and the drunken traders were singing of dead gods.

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Z'ev argued with the guard, apparently finding it hard to remember that he was only a humble seeker. Announcing his heritage would grant them immediate admission, but Harb felt certain that they would be sent to Inay in chains, unless they carefully contacted the right parties. He hoped that the ksathra realized as much.

"The gate cannot be closed to all travelers," Z'ev was saying. "Surely you make an exception from time to time...."

The guard grinned, showing black and broken teeth. Harb's entire body coiled. The sha'al-izzat would never permit someone so unsightly to greet visitors at the gate. But this was Feroz, where the kel was king.

"I might be able to smuggle you in," the man said. "For a price. Otherwise, you can wait with the rest of the late arrivals. You'll want to rise early, though, as it can take a long while, if the traders reach the gate before you. Unless you pay for preferential treatment..." He paused, looking them over. "Feh. I doubt either of you has a copper kel to scratch with. Away with you both."

Z'ev's eyes kindled, and he drew himself up, looking every inch a ksathra, despite his rags. Frowning, Harb shook his head, but the older man was already speaking. "Will one gold kel be sufficient to gain us entry?"

Fire take it. Harb ground his teeth, a muscle ticking in his jaw. The accursed warden would remember them now; how many seekers came in from the desert with a gold kel and a personal guard? With his fresh scars and obvious musculature, Harb could not be mistaken for anything else. *We'll be lucky if we're not taken up right now.*

But the gate warden's greed far outweighed anything else. "A gold kel, oh yes. My apologies, honored sayyid. I took you for a filthy nomad. But perhaps you travel in disguise ... what better way to keep from being robbed than for none to know you carry anything worth stealing?" The man chuckled as his manner became so oily that Harb was surprised he did not leave a trail. "This way—step quickly before anyone notices."

He led them to a small door beside the gate that allowed for the changing of the guard, then he guided them into the city, where he snatched the kel but did not dare to bite it. Harb almost smiled. Did the man think he had been given djinni gold that would melt by morning? He wished that were so.

"Enjoy your stay," said the broken-tooth guard, as he slithered back to his post.

You are going to get us killed. He did not reveal his annoyance as he signed. They set out from the gate, going north along the main street, dark as spilled Shapan wine. Z'ev glanced at him, staring down his hawkish nose, but Harb was not feigning subservience. *Though you are no longer a valued heir, my compulsion to protect you remains. But you will make my task impossible if you do not listen to me.*

The stone buildings all looked the same; Harb could not tell one from the other, and already he felt slightly closed in. Many of them were more than one story, dwarfing the street. *This is not natural.* Harb paused on a street corner, letting Z'ev catch up.

"Your compulsion..." The other man's brow knit, and Harb realized he had not known.

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He sighed. *I am bound to look after you, sayyid.*

Z'ev regarded Harb with young eyes in an old face. *Can I free you?*

His entire body shuddered at the thought. It was horrible to contemplate, being free to sate his urges in blood. Any blood, all blood, anything that could run or struggle or fight. He felt his heart thud in anticipation; it was all he could do not to salivate.

I beg you not to try.

The older man considered for a moment, seeming to realize what Harb thought. He must be remembering the mare. And he only said, "I will try to listen to your advice. Let us find somewhere to stay, old friend. Thanks to my pride, we have only two kels with which to work a miracle."

And when Harb heard the word *friend* again so unexpectedly, he knew it would require no compulsion for him to willingly follow this man into fire.

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RETRIBUTION'S SEED

Since Abrim's exile, the House of the Lemon Blossoms had stood empty, gathering dust. The abode was more horizontal than its neighbors, a place of open galleries and a terraced garden where a lemon tree grew beside a small pond. It was a graceful thing with a trunk that seemed too slender to support the upraised weight of limbs, bedizened with glossy green leaves. A boy played beneath it, a thin child with a foxy face and nervous eyes. Abrim sighed as he strode along the stone steps—when Isa saw his father coming, he flinched, dropping his marbles with a dull thud. He had the luxurious lashes of a girl and eyes liquid with fear like a startled gazelle.

"You have done no wrong," Abrim said with what he felt was admirable patience. "I have only come to visit you before I go out for the evening. What have you learned today?"

In truth, Abrim despaired of the boy; his wits and health both seemed sorely lacking. Isa could not speak without stammering, and he preferred rolling marbles for hours to any substantive amusement Abrim offered. The child's response to his tutor was about as indifferent—though Isa was six, he still could not read or write.

Isa stared up at Abrim with timorous eyes. "F-four a-a-and thr-three m-make s-seven," he managed.

"How clever." The child flinched as if he expected his father to strike him, but Abrim had given up on beatings, as they yielded no improvement. "Stay with Yolante and do not venture out of the garden. Do you understand me?"

"Y-yes, sayyid."

Abrim stalked back into the house. He did not bother seeing his concubine, as she knew very well that he would flay her alive if she allowed harm to befall his heir. He had not built his empire with blood and bone only to see it totter in Isa's hands. If fate was kind, he would get a son from Yolante, a strong boy who could see the beauty of what his father had built, capable of acting with shrewdness and cruelty when necessary. Because Abrim did not intend that his line should remain merchants. One day, he was sure House Abrim would number among the great houses.

He had made his fortune in silks and spices and less reputable herbs outlawed in Inay. They had discovered that too much marja—whether chewed, smoked, or eaten—interfered with coordination, leaving many workers unable to provide for their families. Unlike the temporary lapse caused by pak, the damage was permanent. One could always tell who had abused it by their lurching gait and flailing arms.

But Inayans still came to him for the bitter leaf, as it produced a wild euphoria that quickly became addictive. Abrim was foremost a businessman, and he saw no reason to let the interdiction on marja interfere with its profitable trade. Somehow, Nadiv had discovered the secret endeavor and had confiscated his property, all but the House of the Lemon Blossoms, which Abrim had wisely put in his brother's name. He had not mentioned as much to his brother.

Fate had delivered the power to return to Inay after long exile, and now that he was firmly in Nadiv's favor once more, he would lay the plans for the fall of House Fouad. The old

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sha'al-izzat probably did not even remember stealing ten years' work from Abrim, ten years of careful planning gone in the wave of a palsied hand. No, he doubted Nadiv remembered, but he did. And Abrim never forgave a wrong.

He called for his bearers and stepped into the ornate sedan, but he did not pull the curtain. The merchant wanted his enemies to see not only that he had returned to Inay but also that he was a valued member of Nadiv's council. It would be interesting to see who scurried for cover and who called upon him tomorrow.

"Adviser Abrim," he said aloud, as the bearers passed women in black chadors and workers in dun tunics.

A beggar spat at them, and Abrim would have liked to cut out his tongue, but he did not want to be late for his first council meeting. They passed along the Path of Hope, the trees withered with the chill of Behrid. The inner city was beautiful. Nadiv, or perhaps Japhet, was meticulous, employing a squadron to keep the street neatly swept. Beyond the second gate and to the east, the crumbling clay hovels were a vile warren that the guards did not patrol. Even without the maze, Feroz was a cesspool in comparison, but he had made a second fortune there, dealing in deeds darker than the sale of marja.

The palace. "Set me down here," he instructed, and he stepped onto the gleaming stones of the imperial walkway.

His bearers nodded, and Abrim did not think again of them as he strode past the mutes who had apparently been advised not to interfere with him. The fire-haired maiden awaited him

just inside the main foyer, and he managed not to gaze around with acquisitive interest.

"I will show you to the council chamber," she said, hardly breaking stride.

Abrim fell in behind her, studying her leather-clad back. She must be someone's favorite if she was permitted to range freely through the palace garbed in a way that better befitted a guard. He felt the heat of interest kindling, but he doused it. Lust had no place in his dealings here. Besides, she spoke like a savage; doubtless he would have difficulty distinguishing her cries of pleasure from those of pain.

She did not knock, pushing the door open and announcing him by saying, "Abrim."

"My thanks."

He realized Japhet had not been exaggerating when he had said that many of Nadiv's advisers were old and infirm. As Abrim came into the chamber, he appraised the tapestries and the carpets, the glazed blue vase that held fresh flowers so late in the year. Perhaps out of respect for its collective joints, the council sat around a large table fashioned from darkly polished khi wood. Apart from Nadiv and Japhet, there were eleven other men present, and at least half of them were dozing in their chairs, snowy beards flowing onto their robes. Nadiv slept as well, though not with the others; he occupied an ornate, cushioned chair placed near a censer. Abrim heard the uncertain rasp of his breath even across the room.

"Ah, you have arrived. Now the meeting can begin." Japhet did not look pleased, however, and his tone was anything but welcoming. "Please join us."

Abrim did so, taking the only vacant chair. "Perhaps the meetings should be held earlier."

Japhet glanced at the somnolent advisers and his jaw clenched. "All the messengers have returned, so I have a full picture of the day's progress. That is not always the case in the morning."

And it is easier to do as you wish, then tell a group of shamed old men that they approved your actions. Abrim understood Japhet's motives, and he permitted himself a thin smile. "As you will. What do we discuss tonight?"

He read the younger man's irritation. Japhet was not accustomed to *discussing* anything, but the rules had changed. Perhaps he had meant to make Abrim another silent, nodding head in his father's employ. Abrim had no intention of proving so cooperative, however, and he certainly needed to learn all he could of his enemy's plans. Before Japhet could answer, a knock sounded at the door.

"Enter."

The man who strode in bore the emblem of House Fouad on his armor. He had sharp features, sharper eyes, and a pocked face. He bowed before saying, "I am ready to report, sayyid."

"Splendid." Japhet did not introduce him to Abrim, and the merchant sizzled at the slight. *You are worse than your father, arrogant dog.* "I would have your news, then."

"All patrols have returned but one." One of the advisers grumbled in his sleep, and the commander paused, as if not wanting to wake the old man. *They have been running Inay for years.*

"Which one?"

"The squad you sent to Ballendin has not returned, sayyid."

Japhet must have heard the hesitation in the other man's voice as well. "Tell me *all*, Suliman."

Abrim marked the man's name and face. Though it was unlikely he could subvert one of Japhet's loyal men, one never knew when such information might prove useful. Abrim watched the commander closely but detected only slight anxiety in his bearing.

"One man *did* return, sayyid." The soldier looked almost ashamed. "Full of wild talk of spirits that would drain your life. He shook so badly as he tried to speak that he almost swallowed his own tongue. 'Gone, all gone but me,' he kept saying. 'She'll come for me, she will.' We could get nothing sensible from him."

Abrim spoke for the first time. "I hope you executed him."

"My apologies," Japhet said. "Abrim, this is my right hand, Suliman. I suspect he has already done so."

The commander nodded. "I do not tolerate failure, sayyid. If you had seen him, you would agree that death was a kindness."

"Doubtless your sentence was kinder than one I would have imposed." Japhet gave a smile that looked even grimmer on such a handsome face. "But what we have

learned of Z'ev? The sha'al-izzat's health is ... uncertain—I *must* have the heir's talon."

Did he understand that inflection correctly? Abrim found it difficult to credit that Japhet would talk so casually of murdering his father. What if one of the old advisers awakened or was only pretending to sleep? The merchant smiled at the boy's confidence; it could so easily be turned against him.

Suliman shifted his weight, and Abrim knew that meant he did not have good tidings. "I am sorry, sayyid. We know nothing of him."

"Nothing," Japhet growled. "A full complement of Elite Guards cannot locate two men—one of them *lame*—and a boy."

The soldier lowered his head. "I am sorry," he repeated.

Abrim liked that he did not make excuses—and there were many legitimate reasons why his men had not located the fugitives. The waste was wide, and there were countless holes where men might hide. Consider the trouble the izzat had had in Ballendin, trying to root the rebels out of the hills of middle Raton. Even with Inay's help, there remained pockets of resistance. If they could not find the remnants of a ragtag army, how were they supposed to find three men who had good reason to disappear?

"My brother has hardly been out of the palace in his life," Japhet was saying, "and his guard is similarly inexperienced. That leaves their survival in the hands of one green runner. Check every oasis and nomad camp. By now, I expect you

will find their corpses, but you *will* find them, or I will have your head for the bone gate instead!"

"Yes, sayyid." Suliman bowed from the room, looking as if he expected to have his head separated from his shoulders before the door closed behind him.

"You showed admirable restraint." Abrim's opinion of Japhet improved. He had expected the young man to indulge in a fit of temper, but he showed good sense in sparing a loyal man.

"Suliman has always served me well. But my patience has its limits."

"How grave is your father's illness?" Abrim maintained a bland expression, and he was rewarded with a flicker of Japhet's eyes. Oh, he was good—a worthy opponent for one so young—but Abrim had learned to read his enemies, knowing to a copper kel how much a buyer would pay for a luxury or addiction.

"Grave enough," said Japhet. "And he is old. One never knows."

Abrim permitted himself a small, secretive smile. "So true. Please tell me how I may assist during this difficult time."

He watched Japhet pace the length of the room. So much stone, buffed to a high shine, with a fourth wall of glass panels that made the chamber seem suspended in the gardens. It was a glazier's marvel, and Abrim could not help but wonder whether the artisan had ever been paid. A worthwhile thought—he made a mental note to inquire about merchants and guildsmen who had recently worked for the

sha'al-izzat. Disgruntled men might reveal anything, if assured of anonymity.

The vista interested Abrim enough that he stood and joined Japhet. As he reached the window, he recognized the garden where the sha'al-izzat held court, weather permitting. He studied the lanterns flickering like demon lights. Silence did not trouble him, so he let it build, stirring only when one of the old men grumbled in his sleep, slipping farther down in his chair.

Japhet sighed. "They will be awakening soon and will want a summation of the meeting, which they will then pretend to recall with perfect clarity." His gaze sharpened on Abrim. "You were the first to have tidings of Ballendin ... and you brought them directly to us. I must deduce that you have many ... contacts, a web one might even say."

Yolanthe had called him a spider more than once, poisoning everything he touched, so Abrim smiled as he nodded. "I do have a number of associates, many of whom are well placed to share information. I am known to pay well for such tidbits."

"Then *that* is how you may help me. Make it known that I want Z'ev, alive or dead." The man was almost too pretty to be so cruel, but the hunger in his dark eyes was unmistakable. Some lusts simply could not be sated. "You are a wealthy man, honored Abrim, but I will bestow power on you beyond your wildest dreams if you bring my brother to me."

How amusing—he thinks to buy my loyalty. And if I did not loathe the blood in his veins, he might even succeed.

"Perhaps a demonstration of good faith would be in order."

Japhet's upper lip curled. "One might have thought a place on the council was sufficient, but if it will move you to urgency, I will be delighted to comply." His tone said precisely the opposite. "What pleases you best, revered Abrim? Gold? Perhaps you would enjoy running the counting house. Collecting taxes? Or perhaps you would like to select the sha'al-izzat's concubines? Many of them require extensive examination before one may be certain they are worthy."

Abrim felt a flare of distaste. *Greed and lust*. Japhet thought to appeal to his baser instincts to avoid yielding a larger prize. He had more kels than he could ever spend and Yolante to give him sweet release whenever he desired. Silently, he shook his head, his dark eyes intent.

"You are a canny one. I have a judiciary appointment, if you care to hold a man's fate in your hands—"

For an instant, Abrim felt slightly tempted, but he was after a larger reward. "If I agree to use my web"—he gave a small chuckle at the word—"to find your brother, I want you to name me First Councilor."

Japhet forced a smile. Abrim knew Ar Cahra would freeze before the heir of House Fouad willingly installed a merchant as First Councilor, the only man on the council with the power to make policy if the sha'al-izzat was incapacitated. Precedent demanded the First Councilor be the head of the second house in Inay. If Japhet displaced the incumbent without designating his heir as replacement, it would cause great unrest in the noble houses. Furthermore, Nadiv was *already*

incapacitated, and if Japhet ceded this position to Abrim, he would lose the complete control he had enjoyed.

But he needs my help. This will measure his desperation.

Even from his vantage at the window, Abrim heard the insincerity in Japhet's voice. "After you locate Z'ev, perhaps—"

After, you will have me killed. Do you really think me so credulous, young one?

"Not perhaps. Not after. If I agree to help you, you will call an assembly and announce my ascendance. If you must create a new house and add it to the registry in order to placate the other nobles, then you will do so. Otherwise, I will mind my affairs and offer advice as the other councilors do, and you can solve this dilemma with your own resources."

Abrim felt the weight of Japhet's loathing. Before, the young man had merely thought him an annoyance, but Abrim had trapped him between the fire and the sea. He folded his arms, prepared to wait, even until the old men awakened. It was the greatest gamble of his life.

"Very well," said Japhet in a voice like rusty blades. "I will sign the nomination. You will need an artisan to design your crest, and if you have household guards, they must be outfitted properly. It will be your head if you shame Inay."

"I am well able to afford the best," he told Japhet smoothly. "And I am so pleased that we have come to an understanding. Though you may wish to proceed with all speed ... as your father's health is so uncertain." He let that sink in, masking a smile. Now he knew Japhet was wondering

if that had been a veiled threat. Just how dangerous *was* Abrim? *More than you know, boy. More than you know.*

"I will care for him tenderly. You need not concern yourself."

The merchant also knew just how far to push before giving something back. "So reassuring. Now ... perhaps you would be kind enough to tell me more of the rare creature that led me here."

Abrim knew Japhet believed he had been handed a leash. "Fionne? She came to us from a Ferozi slave trader. He claimed she had washed up on the northern coast, starving, filthy and near death. It took them half a cycle to teach her to speak like a human, and she killed four men with her hands and teeth before they realized she could not be broken for bed sport. But another might succeed where they failed...."

The possibilities were intriguing, not least of which was the implication that there were other tribes across the impassable sea. Abrim considered the need to develop transport for exploration. The populace of Raton had long considered themselves alone, apart from whispers of afreet and djinn. If they could traverse the sea, the trade potential was staggering. Legend said his people had done it long ago, before the weather shifted and the tides turned, breaking any vessel that set forth.

Though he knew he was being baited, he could not resist asking, "Whose is she?"

Japhet smiled. "She belongs to my father.... Sometimes she fights for his amusement. Fionne is a match for any man."

"For a mute?"

"No ... we would not have her marred. She is lovely to look on, even if she is savage as a lykos cub and twice as cruel."

"Sometimes the greatest joy of a treasure is in its possession."

The two men shared a look of complete accord, and Abrim suddenly knew why he disliked Japhet, apart from his blood. The young man reminded Abrim of himself, although he had never been so pretty.

"She refuses complete possession, but I choose not to take her by force. I would not enjoy bedding a woman if it required four guards to hold her."

This young man was more dangerous than Abrim had thought—there was no wanton brutality in him. His decisions were practical. When it benefited him, he could be merciless, but he had also shown he knew when to spare the stick.

"Have you tried to entice her? Gentleness is the most disarming of weapons."

"I have no time to waste on a recalcitrant slave," Japhet growled. "I have more pressing matters."

"Yes, the siring of an heir. I can see that a slave, no matter how rare, would not be suitable. I ... have a lovely concubine I would loan you, if none of the sha'al-izzat's please you."

Could he share Yolenthe before he tired of her? He could, if it meant having an ally in the sha'al-izzat's household. But the way she professed to despise him, would she work for him? She would, if she wanted to buy her freedom. That was

the hold he had over her, the promise he would one day let her go.

"The golden beauty?" Abrim thought he detected a hint of interest in the young man's voice, although his pretty face revealed none. "Does she come from a respectable house?"

"I would offer nothing less." The merchant summarized her tale, careful to paint a flattering portrait of how he had saved her from the fire.

"Many thanks. I will certainly consider it, although I am sure any of the palace girls will suit well enough. They would not be here, if they were not the sweetest cream."

Nodding, Abrim knew relief that his concubine was not leaving. The merchant realized then that he must rid himself of Yolathe before he became too fond of her. Affection was a liability, and he would not pay its cost again.

He resumed his place at the table as the old men awakened, and Nadiv demanded Japhet's attention like a querulous child. Abrim experienced only one flash of regret—when the First Councilor heard the decision to revoke his office, he turned rheumy eyes about the room. The blue mists were so thick over his eyes that Abrim doubted he saw more than shadow shapes, all turned inexplicably against him. Then Abrim knew a moment of remorse; his feud was not with House Ohed, though perhaps from this day the descendants of House Ohed would have a quarrel with House Abrim.

"But ... but if I am no longer fit to serve—" the old man paused, as if hoping someone would dispute his words—"should my son not take my place? How has Ohed so grievously offended that my whole line must pay?"

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Japhet's look would have melted sand into glass, but Abrim met it steadily. His course was set. "You have not erred," Japhet said at last, "but Abrim has recently done the sha'al-izzat, and indeed all of Inay such a great service, and will be of such aid in the future, that this is the only suitable reward."

The First Councilor sighed. "This is a dark day for House Ohed."

None of the other advisers protested on Ohed's behalf. Perhaps he was an unpopular man, or more likely, they could *not* speak when they believed they had already approved the decision. Japhet had conditioned them well, and Abrim wondered if Japhet was clever enough to slip a soporific into their tea before each meeting. It did not seem beyond his scope.

The session adjourned shortly thereafter, and Abrim received no congratulations. He expected and needed none. The seeds were sown, and bitter fruit would flower.

Japhet followed him into the corridor, where Fionne waited. "Show the First Councilor out," he instructed quietly, "after you walk with him in the garden."

A test? Did Japhet suppose he would try to seduce her, or would the maiden try to charm him instead?

Abrim looked forward to finding out.

* * * *

An elderly couple dwelled next to the House of the Lemon Blossoms, a potter and his wife. Sibal knew he had passed the business over to his son some years ago, and now the old man tended the flowers in his small courtyard throughout

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Haar. Once she would have greeted him and they would have shared a cup of mint tea. Now he stared at her, a livid omen as she traveled the stone walk that led around his modest abode. Sibal felt his eyes like spiders on her back as she settled onto the fine clay bench beside the wall.

She waited until he had lost interest, and then she took a small knife and pried the mortar away from a loose brick, the dust flaking orange against the flame of her chador. It was chilly, but the walls broke most of the wind. Cold was nothing in Inay, compared to the weather in the waste. Glancing up, she saw the sanguine sky—the world entire bled through the filmy veils.

The brick came free, allowing her to peer into the courtyard at the House of the Lemon Blossoms. Sibal set her brow against the gap and saw the lemon tree first. Then she saw the boy—unremarkable and small for his age. Even through the veils, she could tell that his expression was intent.

Sibal watched.

Impossible to say how long, because she had become a master at stillness, an expert at clearing her thoughts lest she go mad reflecting on her loss. But the sun had fled and Sahen was rising when a woman passed into her field of vision. She was wrapped against the wind; she wore black like a widow, but her shaven head kept Sibal's attention. *Such shame*. She felt a flicker of empathy; she, too, knew what it was to suffer at a man's hands. She, too, knew shame, although she wore her own emblazoned on her brow.

The woman spoke gently to the child, who smiled up at her and collected his marbles before darting into the house. She glanced around the withering garden as if she suspected she were being watched. Sibal was never sure what prompted the impulse, except that the wall tempted her to reach out. There was a seductive quality in its privacy.

Sibal spoke. "Grace to you."

The other woman started, glancing around with the air of a startled gazelle. She resembled the child in that way, as if both were accustomed to sudden harm. As she seemed to realize the voice came from the other side of the wall, she approached, dragging her feet with each step.

"Who is there?" Her voice quavered. She sounded very young, younger than was decent, but Abrim had not been named wicked for nothing. "Kamila? It does not sound like you..."

The potter's wife.

"My name is Sibal." A small lie, and one that would remind her of her purpose. Nothing else mattered. As soon as the other woman answered, Sibal began to plan how she could use her. She drew away from the small gap, both hands clenched on the clay brick. Without Anumati, the night was probably too dark for the other to see the color of her chador, but she did not want to take unnecessary risks. "I am a visitor."

"That is very kind of you. Their daughter no longer comes as often as she once did, and they are lonely. I hear Kamila singing in sorrow when she tends the flowers."

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She is lonely, too. It was the only possible reason why she would linger at a brick wall, speaking to a stranger when night slithered about the sky.

"That is the way of daughters," she said softly. "When they have their own children, they forget their mothers."

"I—I am Yolathe...." The woman spoke in a rush, as if to combat her uncertainty. "Oh! A stone has come loose."

"So it has."

"I can see the clay water jugs that Ubad was working on earlier. His pieces are very fine."

Sibal turned to look; the vessels looked sturdy to her, although not special, but she agreed with Yolathe, hoping to encourage more conversation. She was not disappointed—the girl talked a little more about her neighbors before saying she must go.

"I will visit tomorrow," Sibal said. "Perhaps I will speak with you again."

Replacing the brick, she retraced her steps along the walk. The city whispered, mothers with their children, the aromas of pungent peppers and roasting meat wafting in the air. They were warm scents, redolent of homes—they reeked of loss. She had once supervised a kitchen with two servants to do her bidding; she had once tasted sauces before pronouncing them fit for her husband's table.

She no longer had a home. To be Hamra Sehkit was living death—and while there were those who had sheltered her, despite the interdict, she could no longer deceive herself. Her work for Qutuz would endanger them; she could not expose dear ones to harm. She had brought her fate upon herself;

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her sin was dark and would never wash away, dark as the fabric of the chador that marked her.

Sibal found her way back into the warren where she had first met Qutuz. She did not dare return to that particular building, but there were dozens like it, infested and loathsome with things that hissed, slithered, and crawled. Locating a corner that was mostly dry, she lay down and stared into the darkness. The dark folded in on itself, and she slept.

* * * *

She returned the following day, as the sun sank in fiery hubris, clutching the horizon with empyreal tendrils that made it seem desperate for a last glance. Sibal honored it until it faded from view, and then she tugged free the brick. The bench felt cold against her thighs, even through her chador. Such garments had not been intended for extensive wear. Most women took their own lives, rather than go in shame. Running her nails along the surface, the clay scraped hard enough that she felt their tips dulling, powder that blew away with a puff of her breath.

Kamila was cooking ocksa peppers and spiced emu; her stomach rumbled in answer. It had been at least a day since she'd eaten a proper meal. She supposed she would need to get used to theft, as most stallkeepers did not shout over a small crime from someone who did not exist. Over the wall, a sandpiper sang from the lemon tree.

You are a long way from home, little one.

But however the bird had come all that way from the port, it made Sibal feel a little less alone. She cleared her mind,

trying not to think about how much she wanted Yolante to come. The short moments of conversation had warmed her better than an hour by the oven.

Sahen rose and Anumati showed her virgin face. The light was gorgeous, even filtered through her veils. It fell in radiance, dappling the stones. At last she rose, stiff and cold and full of regret. She raised her hands to replace the brick and saw Yolante's eyes. They were beautiful, large, startled, and soft as velvet.

"You are still here," the woman whispered. "I was not sure you would be. Isa was fretful tonight and did not wish me to leave him until he fell asleep."

Isa. The child. Her heart cramped with yearning. "You love the little one?"

"As if he were my own."

Sibal sat back down. She did not think Yolante had seen enough to alarm her, or she would not linger. "He is not your son?"

"No ... I have no children. And..." The other paused, as if wrestling with the words. "I will not."

"Not have children? Why?" Sibal had thought all women wanted babies, beautiful brown-eyed babies with peaches in their cheeks. Babies with fat little fingers and night-dark curls.

A baby I cannot see or hold. She was not as numb as she'd thought; the pain came back. There were some wounds that never healed, some wounds that merely crusted over with all the poison and raw flesh festering beneath.

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Yolanthe sighed, the sound almost lost in the wind whispering in the dry leaves. "I—I cannot say."

She wanted to prod, but she knew it was too soon. So she merely said, "I will return tomorrow, if you wish to talk of it then."

They spoke a little longer of the weather before Sibal said farewell and trudged into the dark to forage a withered cactus pear and burnt naan the baker had thrown out. She shared it in the alley with two bright-eyed rats that studied her with twitching whiskers. Then she trudged back toward the warren where she had made her bed, a nest of rags discarded by the poor.

At Crackjar Street, she turned left, nearly stumbling into a knot of young men celebrating with a jug of badly fermented pak. Its stench reached her at two arms away—drinking it would probably make them ill. She ducked her head and tried to hurry past, but the tallest thrust his arm out, catching her veil.

Sibal spun, knowing a throb of fear. There was so little they could do to her that had not already been done—and yet, the terror began as a small pulse at the base of her throat. They could take her life, and she would have failed. She tried not to shift, holding herself still under the leader's mocking gaze.

"Are you pretty beneath all this?" he wondered aloud, tugging at her chador. "Come celebrate with us. We will be good to you."

Did he not know what the garment meant, or was he too steeped in pak to care?

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"Please let me go," she whispered.

Sibal was not afraid to beg. She had no pride—no woman in a scarlet chador could walk down the street with a vestige of it. No, Sibal was not proud; she was merely determined. And she was determined not to die on Crackjar Street.

"You should not," another said uneasily. "It is forbidden to touch a woman of Hamra Sehkit."

"You are an old woman!" The tall one cried. "Who will know?"

"It is death to lay with me, but come, if you are so eager for its embrace. Come, who will be the first?"

Perhaps it was the chill wind, or the silver and blood cast by Sahen and Anumati, but Sibal did not look an earthly creature but a monstrous thing, full of dark magic. Through the veils, she caught a glimmer of herself in their eyes. Fear slid in behind the pak and gnawed into their bones.

"W-what did you do?" the smallest one asked.

Sibal smiled, and the wind whipped the blood-dark fabric against her teeth. "I murdered my love."

They ran. Lurching like marja heads, they ran, stumbling over broken bricks and fallen walls, shells of abandoned buildings. She watched them go. *I am the worst thing on these streets.* She whistled and the two rats came, scurrying to snatch the crumbs of naan.

* * * *

She sat in the potter's courtyard each day, and he never watched her again. She simply was not there for him, as the edict demanded. Ubad was a good citizen; he did not question the sha'al-izzat's law. In those days, she came to know

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Yolanthe well. Sibal learned the soft tread of the other woman's feet and the uncertain silence before the girl whispered, "I am here."

They spoke of good sauces and bad naan, of dark dreams and haunting melodies, of sunsets and fresh lemons. They spoke of children and happiness, but they edged around sorrow. Yolanthe never suggested she visit the house directly. Sibal felt sure Abrim did not permit his young concubine any company.

On the eighth day, Sibal did not visit—it was hard for her to stay away, but she needed Yolanthe to miss her. She must acquire the poison ring soon, or she would fail in her first task. Sibal did not think Qutuz dealt kindly with those who failed him—Othman could serve no other purpose.

Yolanthe was waiting for her, scratching at the loose brick. "You did not come last night."

Sibal smiled as she slid it free. "I know." She took her seat on the bench and heard the skip of Yolanthe's breath. The other woman had been crying. Sibal's smile faded. "What is the matter?"

The words came in a rush. "Abrim was home tonight."

And he hurt you. This was the perfect opening, but it was not as easy as she wanted it to be, manipulating a girl she could not help. She was only a voice on the wrong side of the wall.

"He is a wicked man," she whispered. "I am sorry."

Silence. The sandpiper had flown, or died; it was too cold. Sibal hoped he reached the sea. Above, the sky lapped at the city walls, a dark palette pierced with silver needles.

"You ... know Abrim?" For the first time, Yolenthe sounded scared as well as wary. Tears seemed to clog her throat.

"I *hate* Abrim." Sibal did not have to feign the feeling. She wished Abrim into the fire; she wished him staked and left for dune flies.

"I hate him ... and I love him, too. He saved me ... and sometimes he is kind."

"And sometimes he hurts you." The only affirmation came in silence. Sibal sighed. How could she ask this poor creature for aid? If Abrim discovered the theft, he would kill her.

Yolenthe spoke at last, a thread of sound. "And sometimes I wonder what I have done to deserve such shame."

"A man who humiliates a woman for his pleasure is less than dirt." She spat beneath her veil.

"You sound ... as if you have been hurt, too."

This time it was Sibal who closed her eyes, Sibal who needed a moment to steady her breath. Yolenthe was a sister of her soul, a sister in suffering, although the girl had not sinned so grievously or fallen so far. And Yolenthe touched her—made her remember. Her words tore the skin off old wounds, time and again.

"Yes," she whispered. "I have been hurt."

Sibal felt a touch against the fabric of her chador and when she opened her eyes, she saw a slender hand questing through the gap. Her chest hurt as she slid back her sleeves and folded Yolenthe's hand into her own. The warmth was exquisite; she had not been touched in years. And she who had called herself a weapon felt tears start in her eyes, flowing hot as blood down her cold cheeks.

"Please," said Yolanthé. "Please do not weep, my friend beyond the wall. Because I do not wish to start again."

She composed herself, but she did not let go of the other woman's hand. "I must ask you to do something for me."

"What can I do?"

Such simplicity, such trust. Sibal ached that she was not worthy of it. "Abrim has a ring...." She described it as Qutuz had done.

"I know it." Yolanthé sounded uneasy, as well she should, and her fingers twitched in Sibal's grasp.

"You must get it for me as soon as possible. Abrim intends to do something terrible with it." Not the worst lie, as he probably would—one day. The girl hesitated. "Please, Yolanthé. Lives depend on your actions."

"Very well. If I am to do it, I must get it now, before I lose my courage. He has gone to a council meeting and will not be home for some hours."

Yolanthé pulled her hand free with a final squeeze, and Sibal listened to her retreating footsteps with a growing sense of dread. *What have I done? What if he catches her? What if he blames her?*

Time passed like cold honey, and she raked her nails to dust against the bench. At last, she heard the rustle of Yolanthé's return, and Sibal pressed her face to the gap like an excited child.

"Are you well?" She should have asked if Yolanthé had the ring, but she cared for Abrim's concubine.

"I am. It was easy!" The woman sounded almost ... excited. "They are all asleep."

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She put her hand through the space, and Sibal took the ring, wrapped in one of Abrim's scarves. Hiding it in the folds of her chador, she smiled. *Success. Abrim is the most careful of men, and still I have bested him.* She kissed Yolante's fingertips, and the other woman caught her breath.

"Thank you, dear Yolante. You are a brave soul, and you have done more good than you know this night."

"You will ... Will you come again?"

Sibal considered. She had what she needed—there was no reason to return. "I will be here tomorrow," she whispered, "if you wish to speak."

* * * *

The city's heart beat all around her in each swell of the passing throng. Here, an old woman sold woven rugs—there, a little boy curled his arm tight against his side, the other hand extending a bone bowl. Impossible to say if his arm, twisted so, was a legitimate infirmity or a clever trick by a professional beggar. Beyond the wall, where all manner of pitiful and penurious creatures gathered in degrees of despair, the stalls were arranged like the fan of a bird's plumage.

Bitter smoke from the pipes mingled with the sweet scents of the broken fruit and wilting flowers. Over the top of each individual scent came the blended aroma of spit-roasted meat and humanity. The swell of voices came in waves, a symphony of sound that belled according to the haggling stage each merchant and customer had reached. The sun slanted down across the clay buildings. Cold wind stirred the

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gritty dust in the streets, spurring a vendor to wipe her eyes and curse fluently, as it seemed her pastries would be ruined.

His dark eyes deep within his walnut of a face, an old man sat quietly in the shade beside a tent, his gnarled fingers idly working a sharp file over a stone. The sound was subtle but inexorable. As Sibal approached, his file continued its grating progress back and forth across the rock, though it was impossible to tell if some shape was being coaxed from its blocky form or if it was being sawed in half by a man of diabolical patience. Sibal placed the wrapped ring in his offering bowl, and he palmed it without seeming to pause.

"Someone will be pleased with you." His voice carried startling resonance within the frailness of his chest, visible beneath the thin and dirty robe. His file continued its path, torturing the stone with every pull of his bent, brown fingers, and the residue carried away by the odd gust of wind. "But at what cost?"

"The merchant has *many* enemies. He does not know I am responsible."

There was no pause in the eternal scrape of metal on stone, a sound calculated to peel away comfort from nerves, and his dark eyes sharpened. "Men who have never lost do not lose well." His next words seemed a complete non sequitur as he held his rock to the sun. "Wisdom in age. An old woman said once, me, I would live until I sawed through this stone. And here I am. Even yet." At such close range, there was an obvious crevice carved into the surface, but no more than a man's thumb width. Impossible to estimate how

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much longer it would take to scrape the rest away, ten times the size of what had been accomplished.

"Then you have a long life ahead, Dubai. How long will I live?"

"If I were a wicked man, I would say, 'Until you saw through this stone.' And rid myself of the burden." A smile plucked at the corners of his thin mouth as his gnarled fingers resumed the symphony of abrasion. The flutter of wings overhead made him turn his sharp eyes upward, his smile becoming more than a suggestion as a brown bird settled its talons into the roof of the tent, drawing an oath from the tent's owner.

"I want to know if I will live long enough to complete my task."

Pungent wind stirred the fabric behind the old man, rustling the tent so that colors played along his face in brief refraction, a tiny, broken rainbow. After each burst, a hush seemed to accompany the stillness before the crowds surged on their way, the haggling continued. Somewhere, a baby wailed.

The old man met her veiled gaze for the first time, a deeply searching look that seemed to melt the filmy fabric. "No, Sibal. I am afraid you will not."

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INTERREGNUM

Indrina stared down at the silent street. Empty temples and vacant villas greeted her somber gaze. The Pillars of Wisdom shone bright as the sun, flashes of light from the four cardinal points. Parks and courtyard gardens bloomed, growing naturally instead of by a dead master's careful infusion of numen. There was a little activity in the eastern quarter, although she could not see it from the temple district; House Mandilor still raised animals for blood, and three brothers supervised the southern farms. Someone still milled the grain and baked the bread.

So perhaps not every Daiesthai felt the weight of extinction.

Eristorne was a city without walls; in youthful arrogance, they had shaped a shimmering dome about its opalescent beauty, a monument to their might that could not be pierced by mortal means. Even rain did not fall on the City of a Thousand Stars, unless the Matriarch willed it. But the shields failed as their power waned. Now the city sat undefended, although it was so far from human settlements, past the waste and the mountains, so far past caravan routes and charted land that no conqueror had ever brought an army to its gleaming streets.

If one should come, there was no militia to defend it. Once Eristorne teemed with activity—slaves bearing messages from one house to another and intrigue layered upon intrigue. Now their people numbered less than four hundred. The space

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dwarfed them, even as their power dwindled. It was not fitting that a people who were once so great should live so quietly, eking out an existence instead of living with glamour and grandeur. Indrina knew that only one thing remained for the Daiesthai—to go gracefully into extinction, as the Sut had done before.

We were so sure we could find a way to reverse the effects of channeling, so sure we could strengthen our weak flesh.

But one by one, the best scholars and scientists lost their hope; and without hope, progress was impossible. As the houses fell to madness and desperation, low-caste guards and bearers gleefully seized power, exercising it with the unschooled elation of small children. And were immolated, ecstasy burned into the blackened husks of their faces.

I brought Rodhlann low, the only one of us to whom strength yet remained. Is it any wonder we are dying? Grief rose in her like a strong wind, sweeping her toward despair. Indrina had loved her brother, as much as a priestess could love anyone.

I must see where he fell.

That much power remained her. She turned from the balustrade and glided into the temple. It was dark within; she was the only living soul in its halls, but she heard the whispers of those who had passed into the void. They had left their bodies behind, an eerie gallery of statues. Indrina passed through their ranks, remembering as she went.

Her slippers made no sound on the floor, dark marble veined in red. Her pale robes billowed in contrast; the open courtyard doors allowed the wind to moan behind her in

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crevices and corridors, an elemental lament. It was a vital companion, one that prevented her from yielding to the desire to sit with her stone brethren until she joined their number— all struggle, all pain, all desire melting away. That was the seduction; nothing was the most powerful temptation of all.

She reached the altar, a stone dais with beveled sides, inlaid with gems. In the gloom, it shone with its own radiance, power imbued over years of use though there were no more acolytes. Indrina alone remained as the last initiate and high priestess. On the altar sat a silver bowl, glazed with light and etched with shimmering runes. It was oblong and the water within was murky, herbs floating on the surface. The vaulted ceiling swam with shadows as she raised her hands over the witching bowl.

“Living water let me see ... one who was dear to me.”

Indrina shuddered at the influx of power; even a small amount flowed painfully, reminding her how close she was to final immersion. Her body felt frail and taut. As she focused, the water rippled as if something woke, and the opacity began to clear.

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Part II: THE MAID'S FATE

BLOOD PRICE PAID

On the sixth day, the raft refused to bear them farther. It gave notice by sinking slowly in the river, and Muir put her hands in the cold, sluggish water to navigate toward the shore. Slippery things grazed her skin: she recognized the scale of fish and small things that nibbled at her fingers—she hoped nothing larger took an interest in the taste of her. Rodhlann tried to help her, but his hands trembled like those of an old man who should be dozing before a fire.

But the Omintago had promised not to take them, so its current swirled them lazily into the shallows, where Muir leapt from the raft and scraped her palms trying to shove the craft onto the rocky bank. The water was cold about her calves, and the soaking hem of her worn djellabah added to her discomfort. As she heaved, she felt a strange foreboding, as if unfriendly eyes watched them put ashore. Rodhlann settled some distance from the river, muffled to his ears in burnoose and blankets.

Once he was safe, she compared her map to the landmarks nearby. *The two teeth and the khi tree, scarred by lightning. You did well, she told the raft. We are within a day's journey.*

And what shall be our reward?

Muir paused, staring at the stone. It seemed she had done more than coalesce small whispers to a strong voice; she had

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also woken its will. *What do you wish?* In answer, she saw a monolith rooted near the Omintago, a way point for travelers.

I can do this, but I must honor another pledge first. I will return.

We have your word.

Another promise that must be kept—sometimes Muir felt she was drowning in them. How had it come to this, that so many fates hung upon a former maid? She sighed and turned to Rodhlann. “The Enadi camp is close. Can you walk?”

He rose with the brittle grace of an old bird. “I can walk.”

The morning was sharp, faintly edged in mist. Muir had never been so far north; the sand gave way to scrubby grass, brown with Behrid. The plain beyond the river was full of loose stones, stunted trees, and outcroppings of sharp rocks that looked as if they had been knifed into the ground by giant hands. A gray sky promised that it might rain, an occurrence so rare in Ar Cahra that she could count the occasions during her lifetime on her hands.

The sun managed to pierce the clouds, its rays falling in a golden lattice over the ground. They walked for a while, and she glanced at Rodhlann, absorbing his wan beauty and the care of his steps. This was his last reserve, pulled less from strength than will. If they did not receive aid from the Enadi, he would fall.

And what will I do then?

They continued onward, passing a house-owned farm that did not thrive. Its outbuildings were dilapidated and its fields failed. The soil cried out to her. What aid she could give, she did not know, but she paused and knelt to let some dry red

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earth trickle through her brown palm. Rodhlann was watching her as if he still did not know what to make of her, and his breath was labored, so she hurried on. She could not tarry over dying dirt.

They did not pause for meals, as Rodhlann could not eat and Muir had urgency in her blood. She saw the distance pervading him; even as he made himself put one foot before the other, he drifted farther from his moorings. Muir took his hand to call him back and he turned his head slowly, looking almost startled to see her. She wondered with a whisper of terror what sights beyond the veil met his dying eyes.

It did not rain. By the time the sun faded behind the clouds, nightfall came like the gradual dimming of a lamp. At last, they reached the Enadi camp. Muir saw the tents and wagons strewn haphazardly about, herd animals bleating outside their tender's tent, quite unlike the almost fanatical precision of the Bedu site. She removed her Bedu amulet and dropped it into her bag, where it landed atop the tapestry with a soft thud. Neither she nor Rodhlann looked Bedu, so there was no point in antagonizing the Enadi. She half-carried him into the camp, the nearest Enadi settlement, and was greeted by a man with a pocked copper face.

"Your companion is ill?"

Because the herder looked so alarmed, Muir worried that she might be turned away from fear of contagion. "No," she said. "I'm told you have an earthspeaker here, a worker of charms." At his nod, she went on. "Please hurry. My friend's illness is not physical."

"A curse?" The man spoke as he led her toward a large tent on the outskirts of the camp. "My sister is the closest thing we have to a speaker. She works in charms and curses, and sometimes she claims to hear whispers from the earth."

Rodhlann went slack in her hold. *Fire take it, not now. We are almost there!* Muir grunted and dug in her feet; she was a short woman, but not a delicate one. Mouthing the old words, she pulled the necessary strength and heaved him over her shoulder. The herder gave her a strange look, but she did not have the breath to explain. They pushed through the flap into the tent.

"Zillah! There are some travelers who—"

"I know, Kejme." The woman was homely, but she had the kindest eyes Muir had ever seen. "I have been watching them for days, and I know more of them than you. I have work—go!"

The herder went, grumbling. Muir had no more than a moment to take in the earthen oven and woven rugs before Zillah was helping her lay Rodhlann down. She knelt beside him—his hands were cold in her grasp.

"Can you help him?" she asked, aware of desperate gratitude that the woman seemed to know of their problem.

"I can," Zillah said. "But it will require a sacrifice from you."

"Whatever must be done."

"There is a tenuous bond between you two already—I do not know how it came to be. But be very sure, for if I complete it, you will be closer than lovers. And there is something you must know before—"

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"Can you not see he is dying? Do it!"

Something in Muir's gaze must have shaken Zillah because she turned without another word and began gathering her implements. She took lengths of virgin white wool and strands of black and said, "Lie beside him."

Muir could not see what Zillah was doing but she felt the wool being wound and knotted about her limbs, pulled so tight that she knew it would leave marks. Zillah murmured and circled, weaving the two of them into a sentient tapestry, and Muir felt the energy shimmering about them. Whatever else this woman was, she was no impostor. The current shimmered and burned; this thing being pulled together of disparate parts had power. Fear fused with discomfort and worry gnawed the whole, worry that she had been too late, worry that she would be alone.

After a time, Muir was able to discern the whispered chant. "Bind white wool doubled in spinning on his bed, front and sides, bind black wool doubled in spinning on her bed. On her left hand, left hand to right—let two be one. Let enter no evil spirit, nor evil god, nor evil fiend, nor robber sprite, nor incubus, nor succubus, nor sorcery, nor witchcraft, nor magic, nor spells that are not good—bind white wool to black white wool to black that they may not lay their heads apart, her hand to his, his to hers, his feet to hers, hers to his, and two become one. Two ... become ... one!"

Muir screamed as she felt her scalp separating from her skull.

The world went out.

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No. That was the wool draped over her eyes. She lay still, trying not to disturb the work Zillah was completing. Once the initial pain passed, she realized her scalp was still attached, but Zillah *had* yanked a lock of hair out at the root. Muir felt a small, hot trickle at the crown of her head, and she twitched with the urge to assess the damage. She closed her eyes, trying to think of something pleasant. She felt another pinch at her shoulder, realizing that Zillah had removed the stitches from the wound that had healed.

"There." Zillah sounded weary.

Within moments, she freed Muir, who sat up, rubbing at the bruises already forming. She touched her head gingerly and found the bare patch to be quite small; the hair had just been removed with great force. The light hurt her eyes, and she felt exhausted, as if she had just run many miles. Almost afraid of what she might find, she leaned over and looked at Rodhlann's face. Already untied, he was beautiful and still, an alabaster icon lacking life. Terror seized her.

Then his eyes opened.

"What have you done, little maid?" Something in his tone made her cant her head; it was soft and ... stunned?

"I am not certain." Muir glanced at Zillah, who was placidly preparing three cups of tea. "How do you feel?"

Rodhlann sat up unaided. Already he looked stronger, his movements more sure. His sculpted mouth twisted as he replied, "Almost ... human."

"Perhaps now you are ready to hear me," Zillah said, serving the drinks, "to learn the nature of your sacrifice. And what my payment must be."

Payment. Muir's heart sank. The kindness Muir had seen in Zillah had been replaced by something else, something like ambition or avarice. They had not even discussed a price, but of course Zillah had not worked the charm for free. What did Muir have of value, apart from the tapestry? She could not part with that; the mere thought gave her an awful pain. *My throwing stones or my knife?* Her club had been lost when she fell, hunting Iykos. So only the Bedu amulet, and that would get her killed among the Enadi.

Instinctively, she shifted closer to Rodhlann. Just a twitch, but he put an arm about her shoulders— *Warm, he is warm again.* Not the fever heat that had so alarmed her near the red soul, but more natural warmth that felt comforting. It was the first time he had reached for her in such a way, and he looked bewildered by the gesture. His echo within her magnified; before, she received only glimmers of his emotion, but now she felt the conflict in him—need to keep her close vying with vague repugnance at the desire.

"Speak, woman. It is clear I am bound, and I would hear the whole."

Zillah caught her breath—and Muir knew how it felt, hearing his voice for the first time. Yet its cadence had lost some of its mesmeric quality to her ears, not that it was any less euphonic. His eyes still had the power to fix her like a serpent with a mouse.

"Drink your tea and I will tell you," said Zillah.

Despite her anxiety, Muir obeyed, and she couldn't restrain a small smile when she saw Rodhlann do the same, at first hesitantly and then with greater appreciation. She knew he

was surprised that it stayed down; he had been able to take only water for the past ten days. The awareness bemused her when she considered it, but she knew it for truth—he had become as transparent to her as he'd once been unfathomable.

"It's good," he said slowly. "Might I ... have you some naan? I am ... hungry."

Hungry. He was *hungry*. Delight exploded in a starburst within her. At a nod from Zillah, she pushed to her feet, and then swayed. *Odd*. She located the basket of naan and took a piece for herself. Zillah declined, but Rodhlann finished three squares in as many bites, looking particularly savage. She had never noticed that feral quality to his features until this moment. Would he need blood to accompany the bread? And what would Zillah's reaction be if he did?

"You have not been bound in the way you mean, afreet. You are not compelled to do my bidding. Your friend bade me save you without hearing first what it would demand of her." Zillah shook her head. "Such loyalty is rare. But if I had taken the time to explain, you would not be eating all my naan."

Rodhlann slid Muir a hooded look, but she knew what was behind it now: puzzlement. He did not understand her—no more than she had once understood him. Muir wondered at the change.

"What ... what was my sacrifice?"

"Half your life," Zillah said, and then sipped her tea.

"I don't understand."

Zillah lowered her clay bowl. "The afreet had lost whatever magic once sustained him. If he was to survive, he must be

fed. You have given him your life in place of energies more arcane."

"That is why I feel weak."

"So it is, because you share one life between you. That means you will not have your allotted fifteen but a mere seven and a half hands in cycles."

Seven and a half hands in cycles sounded like a long time, but Muir was not sure how old she was. The prospect of a shortened life did not alarm her, however, as she had always lived under threat of death, if she displeased Immelia. Being free was worth so much, free from beatings, free to *choose*—she must count the cost worthwhile.

"Will the weakness go away?"

"I do not know." The other woman lifted her shoulders, rippling the fabric of her brightly patterned robe. "Perhaps. And if it does not, you will likely grow used to it and find it hard to remember feeling any other way."

That much was certainly true; one could adapt to anything, given time. Muir smiled. "Is there anything else I should know?"

Zillah seemed faintly disappointed, as if she wanted more reaction—dismay or regret, perhaps. "This charm—" she held up an intricately braided talisman, coarse black strands woven through platinum silk; Muir glanced at Rodhlann and saw the bloodstain on his crown"—represents your bond, and as long as it is safe, the bond will remain intact. To unmake it, you must burn the hair and scatter the ashes. And know that the afreet must have another source to sustain him, or he will perish."

You will be closer than lovers....

Muir began to understand, and she was afraid to look at Rodhlann. His silence had a brooding air, although he should be exultant that he had stolen a few more cycles in which to realize his dream. She swallowed the last of her naan and drank down the tepid tea. The dregs at the bottom of the clay bowl left a sharp aftertaste, quite apart from the mint aroma, but she chewed them anyway. Absently, she judged that they had plucked the leaves too late in the year; frost was already in the green, so they had dried bitter.

"Our fates are inextricably linked then," he said at last.

"One cannot live without the other," Zillah answered.

Muir felt Rodhlann's fingers flex against her shoulder; he found one of the myriad bruises that the knotted wool had left. Her wince drew his attention, and he released her.

"Does this mean we cannot be separated?" The quiet question defied her ability to interpret it. Becoming aware of her increased perception, he had apparently tightened his thoughts.

"It is not impossible," Zillah told him, "but it may be unpleasant. In truth, these questions have no answer because, while I remember the rite as told by my grandmother, I have never been able to perform it ... because I lack the power. If the link had not already been partly formed, I would not have been able to help you."

Remembering gave Muir a forbidden thrill; he had passed through her mind and fed from her. Now it seemed they had done so near a place of power. *Erathos*. Would she ever learn the secret of the red soul?

"Then there is only the matter of payment." Muir met the other woman's look squarely. "I have gifts as well. Perhaps—"

"No." Zillah was already shaking her head. "I will take your Bedu amulet. Nothing less."

So many questions snapped awake, jostling for prominence. How did Zillah know about the amulet? Why did she want it? Could Muir give it away and survive another encounter with the Bedu? Would she meet the Bedu again? In the end, it did not matter, so she reached reluctantly into her bag and withdrew the pendant. It sparkled in the light from nearby lamps, breaking tiny rainbows over her palm.

"Will you tell me why you want it?" she asked.

Zillah poured herself another cup of the bitter tea, looking pensive. "It will do no harm. I want the path you did not choose, Muir of the earth."

Rodhlann's attention sharpened; she saw the distance recede. "You see the branches of fate?" It was clear he found that difficult to credit, as he glanced about the rough tent, a simple thing of raw wood and skins, filled with crude clay vessels and the occasional bit of burnished bronze.

"I see what might have been. Muir will not live among the Bedu; she will not claim the destiny that might have been hers. It is worthy; among the Bedu, she would have risen higher than any woman has before. She would have molded Shunnar to strength and wisdom and guided them from savagery. But she chose another path."

"And you believe you can usurp her destiny?" Rodhlann's voice was salted with skepticism.

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Zillah gave a tranquil smile. "I know I can. If I come bearing the amulet, they cannot harm me. And once I have settled there, they will admire my gifts. While they are not the same as hers, I will be valued. I will have *respect*." Something darker still flashed in her black eyes.

Her stomach muttered. Muir wanted something more substantial than naan, but she hated to interrupt. And she *was* curious. "Why do you want to leave your people?" It was an impossibly hard thing to do. Muir knew—she had done it, but Zillah was making a conscious choice, harder still.

"Here ... I am the herder's ugly sister," Zillah said quietly, "the hag no man would take to wife. I am the witch and worker of curses. Among the Bedu, I would be a revered speaker, for they have not had such a one in many cycles. You are Bedu sworn in blood; you do not need an amulet to keep you safe among them. Tales pass among them even now of the speaker who shapes the stones and travels with an afreet. Any tribe will know you—the hunters gossip like old women."

Muir chuckled. "I have noticed. Then you are welcome to it, for you will receive more value from it than I."

"How do you know so much of us?"

Both women glanced at Rodhlann, but it was Zillah who answered. "I felt the power in Ballendin. It ... hurt. So I looked for its source. I will not bore you with my methods." Her rather grim smile made Muir feel sure she did not want to know. "Your daily summoning made it easy for me to observe your progress ... until you stopped. I know now that you had

no choice." Muir thought the woman looked faintly sympathetic. "But then I began to sense another source...."

Me. It was strange to think of herself as possessing power, anything that might be detected over distance. But Muir was a speaker, truer than Zillah, though the other was schooled in old charms. "And you were able to watch us again?"

Zillah nodded. "I hoped you would come to me. I have wanted that amulet from the moment the girl gave it to you."

Muir studied the Enadi speaker for a moment, realizing that Zillah's need was greater than her own. She knew a moment's dismay, wondering what else she must sacrifice before being free of her promise to this man—and then she saw Rodhlann. In the coppery glow from the censers, he looked real, more than a chimera spun of moonlight and dreams. *He* was the reason she had left her home and crossed into strange lands. She laid the talisman in Zillah's palm without regret and received the charm of moonlight and ebony hair in return.

"When you go among the Bedu," she said, "watch for one named Ghazi. He is strong and handsome, but he has much to learn."

A glimmer of amusement registered in Rodhlann's eyes, and Muir shared a smile with him.

"Is it so?" Zillah canted her head. "Then I must ask for him when the ameer offers me a boon. And ... I would value hearing of Bedu ways, if you would join me for a meal."

"That would be welcome," Rodhlann murmured.

Nodding, Muir followed the other woman into the inner sanctum, more richly appointed with braided rugs and woven

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hangings, an array of copper pots, and beads carved in bone. Rodhlann followed, ducking to avoid the netting strung above the support poles. He appeared to puzzle over it and Zillah followed his gaze. "During Haar, we sometimes sleep beneath the stars. It keeps the dune flies away."

Muir shuddered, for she had seen the unlucky ones. Dune flies were drawn to blood and fresh dung. If they were allowed to light long on the skin, they would lay their eggs near an open wound and the tiny larvae would burrow deep, feasting on blood and flesh until they grew into insects large enough to sting their way out. The exit wounds they left behind invariably festered, a slow and purulent death.

Either he did not know the nature of dune flies or he was made of sterner stuff, as Rodhlann seemed unmoved. He folded himself onto a red rug, creating a startling contrast with his platinum hair and black burnoose. For the first time in days, he removed it, and Muir felt heartened. He had not been able to warm himself for more than two hand days; it seemed the charm had truly saved him, for whatever time remained to Muir. Then she felt a pang, because he would no longer want her near. But it seemed a small price.

They ate lentil soup and more naan, finishing with bitter mint tea and sweet figs. Muir found the tea much improved after discreetly soaking her fruit in it, and she saw with sideways glance that Rodhlann had followed her example. Something about his expression made her chest feel tight. She couldn't read it, but his face alarmed her, the way he watched her ... almost with appetite. He had said the Daiesthai must have a little blood with their food or they

would become ill. And yet he seemed not to be ill so much as ... she did not know.

But his regard unnerved her.

Still, she managed to make conversation with Zillah, who seemed hungry for company. Zillah said that her mother was staying with Kejmeh, the herder, for Behrid—and indeed would prefer to remain with him and his family, but felt obligated to keep Zillah company at least part of the cycle. “Not that I want her to return,” the woman muttered. “We fight all the day and she will not stop telling me I must do this or that to make myself more pleasing to a man.”

“It was not so among my people,” Rodhlann said. He had been listening so long in silence that Muir had almost forgotten his presence. “Marriages occur to build power, not because one found another ... pleasing.”

“There are entire cities of afreet?” Zillah's eyes widened, and for the first time, she looked startled, though she had handled his presence otherwise with aplomb.

“Not any longer,” he told her quietly.

Muir did not like the whiteness about his mouth. She knew the look—it meant he suffered, though she had always seen the expression when he was weary. So she spoke, telling Zillah of Bedu customs and rituals and sharing anecdotes of the tribe. Talking of pretty Khali and sullen Shunnar, fierce Ghazi and proud Kadin, Muir experienced an odd longing; it was like homesickness, except the Bedu camp had never been her home.

Her home was gone, haunted by dead friends and neighbors. Culpability hit her as an iron rod. *So many died*

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because of me. I brought him there. She had not called the lightning but she had brought the storm.

Absently, she answered Zillah, but sorrow was swelling in her eyes and throat. She had come far enough from that place to know what she had lost as well as gained; Muir learned the anguish of looking back. She retained the presence of mind to inquire about a speaker's gifts, but Zillah knew little. Her grandmother had been the last true speaker born to the Enadi, and she had barely been able to hear the whispers of the earth, let alone shaping as Muir had done. Muir surmised that Zillah's grandmother, recently passed, must have been who Khali had meant.

She heard Rodhlann thanking Zillah for her hospitality, and Muir followed them beyond the curtain. Guilt was a new burden; she had never known the sting of bearing the weight of her deeds. Even the illusory freedom she had enjoyed, wandering Ar Cahra with Immelia's blessing, had been balanced with knowing she must return—the laundry waited and vegetables in the kitchen. There were pots to scrub and meals to prepare. But no longer; Ballendin was no more ... and she suddenly realized how many had died to save her life. So many elders and babes—Muir could not justify the cost.

I was not worth it.

"I will sleep in the other room," Zillah was saying as she laid out some spare things. "Make use of rugs and cushions as needed."

Muir nodded blindly and dropped into a nest haphazardly arranged by her hostess. Rolling onto her side, she burrowed

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deep into her djellabah. Tears stung her eyes, and her throat felt clotted with aching breath; if she moved, she might shatter. Rodhlann touched her shoulder and she twisted away. He was the last creature she wanted; he had done such evil in her name and given her the awful gift of awareness.

"I know the sound of your dreams," Rodhlann whispered. "You are not sleeping."

"Fire take you," she managed to say.

"I would ask something of you first."

"Can you not let me be for one night? What *else* could you possibly want of me?" Her anguished whisper mingled with the hissing of the oven.

She felt herself pulled out of her cocoon; his hands were implacable although not cruel. But she fought him; fury lent her strength and she came from the djellabah like a spitting cat, dark hair in a woolly wreath about her head. Muir sank an elbow into his sternum and he grunted; she tasted blood when his hand covered her mouth, though she did not know if she had bit him or if her lip was split. He wrestled her close.

"Enough!" In that moment, she hated him. He was not even out of breath. Rodhlann put his pale face close to hers—in the gloom of the tent, he gleamed like a pearl. "I must know—*why* was it so important that I live?" Muir turned her face away. He had both arms around her, her wrists in one hand, so her only option was passive resistance. She would not answer, and she felt the moment his temper began to fray. "I will not ask nicely again, girl. Tell me *why*!"

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"Because if you did not," she cried at last, "it would all be for nothing. We would fail. And all those lives, for nothing! Nothing ... I cannot have it.... I *cannot*."

"Ah." There was a wealth of understanding in the syllable, and incredibly, she felt his hold soften, no longer restraining her. "You feel the weight of it."

"Yes." Muir closed her eyes, but tears fell in searing salt that stung her lids and left tight patches on her cheeks. She held a sob until she feared her chest would burst.

"I will give you a gift, then." At first she thought he meant the delicate touch of his hands in her tangled hair; she felt his fingers sift through the coarse mane to curl into the nape of her neck. The contact made her breath catch, and then Muir realized he was speaking. "The townsfolk would have burned you, and I chose what happened next. This is not yours to bear—let it go."

"No, I—"

"Let it go." She had not known he could sound so gentle. With a shudder, she did.

But she wept. Muir wept for the lost, for futures that would never come to pass and destinies abandoned. She wept for empty streets and vacant homes, for fallen friends and lost childhoods. Rodhlann held her against him, hands in her hair. His lips rested warm and light as moth wings against her brow until the storm passed.

"How could you?" she finally whispered. "All those people ... how *could* you?"

A lengthy silence met her words, and then he answered, "It is less to me, for humanity is ephemeral. I have seen

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empires rise and fall in the glimmer of a Daiesthai witching bowl. I have *slept* longer than Ballendin had been your kind's sacred city. But I will say, little maid, that I did not mean to slay them all."

She had not expected that. "Then why did you?" Muir pushed away long enough to glance at his face, pale as ancient marble pillars but less etched.

Rodhlann sighed and brushed a strand of hair away from her face. She felt threatened by his tenderness; his loathing was easier to bear. "I have said that I was a house guard ... that means I was not schooled in ways of power. When the houses began to crumble, old roles ceased to matter; the masters were the first to fall, destroyed by numen only they fully understood. I learned as much as I could, but I am self-taught. I called too much power in Ballendin ... caused more harm than I intended."

He had actually admitted an error. "You only meant—"

"To destroy the mob. There was nothing to gain by destroying the entire city."

She did not delude herself; Muir realized that he would sack hundreds of human cities if they stood between him and his goal, but she felt a little better, knowing he was not wantonly cruel, not beyond her understanding. Her breath sounded ragged to her own ears and her throat felt raw; she could not remember crying even as a child. One must first understand sorrow.

Now she did.

"Do all your people have such power?"

"To pull numen?" He guided her back into the cushions. "This is so, but without guidance the results can be disastrous. I am lucky—many low-caste Daiesthai lost their lives in their first attempts."

Rodhlann poured a little sand on each of the censers and the smell of burning glass filled the tent. Soon the gingery light gave way to utter darkness—not even Sahen's bloody light pervaded the fine seams. On the other side of the hanging, Muir heard Zillah's breath, and she hoped the Enadi woman was not listening. Oddly, she did not wish to share this moment with anyone. Then he startled her for the second time, lying down beside her, close enough that their shoulders touched. Muir noticed that he smelled faintly of chadra ushak, probably from the incense he had snuffed.

"You can sleep wherever you wish now," she said softly. "You have no need of my warmth."

Silence.

He did not stir for a long while, and she began to think he would not reply until he whispered, "I have grown ... accustomed to you, little maid." Her eyes were sore and her throat ached from holding the loudest sobs, but his words made her smile. They were much closer to affection than she had ever dreamed she would hear. "You ... perplex me."

"I do?"

"You do," he affirmed, rolling onto his side. "I understand self-interest. I understand the call of ambition. I do *not* understand your sense of ... honor. Obligation. And I have given it much thought."

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"Why?" Muir turned onto her left side to face him. "I am doing as you wish. Why does it matter what moves me?"

"Because," he said, "among my people, one never helps another unless there is profit in it. Thus sometimes the worst enemies find common cause. So in the beginning, I understood. You came because you needed my protection. And then—"

Everything changed. And now, I have this ache that is full of you.

The quiet built between them, oddly charged. She could not think how to reply; in truth, there was no answer. What she felt was stronger than anything she'd ever known, more than servile admiration and passionate as hate. Muir smiled slowly—and touched his cheek. Rodhlann caught her hand, and she first thought he would pull it from his face, but instead he wrapped his fever-warm fingers about hers. Hesitantly, as if wrestling impulses he did not comprehend, he set his fingertips against her jaw.

The contact seared her, awakening an echo of the awful ecstasy his touch once evoked. She knew that had been a result of pulling numen, but she could not explain the building heat. With any other man, she would call it desire; she had known flickers of it in her service in the high house, but nothing to this. Rodhlann studied her with an almost hungry look, his beautiful mouth half parted.

And she remembered.

"Do you need a little blood?"

He seemed much struck by the question, his brow furrowing. "I ... no. Odd—the food has not made me ill."

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"Perhaps ... sharing my life makes you more human."

"Perhaps." Muir had never heard him sound quite so uncertain. "Would ... I do not even like you, but ... I would sleep as we always do."

Except he drew her into his arms, so she felt the heavy thump of his heart against her back. Heat threatened to consume her. Muir knew he sensed it too—perception resounded between them. He had taught her sorrow, but she had done something even crueller. She had taught him yearning when there was no outlet, for his people had passed beyond such things.

"Will you ... tell me of the great houses and your life as a guard?" She took an unsteady breath.

His chin rested against her tangled hair. "You'd think I might have infinite memories," he said musingly. "Oddly, it is not so. It blurs, and then fades. One ... forgets. I stood in silence outside the palace doors. The last day, there was an assembly within ... over our last great work..." He shook his head. "It is gone."

"Rodhlann..."

"Yes, little maid?"

"I loathe you."

She felt him smile against the back of her head. "I know." They set out for Maksoor Balad the following day.

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THE WAY OF ALL EARTH

The runner rubbed ashes in his white hair and soot on his face. He did not want to attract the gatewarden's eye more than necessary. Since fleeing the Enadi camp, Tah had run almost constantly, pausing only for short breaks to take a little naan or water. He had not slept for several days and the world had a slightly distant air. But he retained enough sense of self-preservation to approach the bone gate during the day and with a knot of other travelers. There was more activity than usual: many caravans stalled for inspection and old fire rings showed that this had been the case for at least one night.

As soon as he stepped up, he knew there was trouble. A guard stood to one side, carefully scrutinizing everyone who passed into Inay. Tah's heart pounded faster. *I had to come. If I am no longer a messenger, then I must see to my family.* He straightened the ragged robe and followed the queue as it moved. The merchants in front of him complained bitterly about standing in the cold, and he found he could not help but listen.

"If the fruit were not rotting in the wagons even now, I would let Inay starve and take the goods on to Shapa."

"This is absurd. Ten sha'al-izzats are not worth this much of my time!"

Tah glanced at the men before him. One was short and thin—the other tall and round. Both had well-oiled beards and

balding pates. The tall one said, "Has all of Inay been sealed, then?"

The short one nodded. "I hear the sha'al-izzat was assassinated. I cannot learn more from the guards, not even for five gold kels!"

"In truth?" The other man sounded astonished. Tah could see only their backs. "In Feroz, you could have bought yourself a throne."

"Bah, these guards care more for their heads than gold. Japhet will be as bad for trade as was his father, mark my words."

Nadiv was dead.

Things were worse than Tah had thought. Ksathra Japhet must be desperate by now to acquire the heir's talon—the other houses would be snarling at his heels like lykos scenting blood. And it was hard to say what Japhet might do if he were cornered. Tah's anxiety swelled. He *had* to get his family out of Inay. But how? He whispered a prayer to whatever gods might still be listening to spare his kin.

The line moved slowly, and the sun had passed the summit of the sky before he reached the gate. Tah tried to imagine how a young nomad would behave coming to the city for the first time, and then he gawked, pretending not to hear the guard as he stared up at the colossal gate.

"I *said*, what is your business here, desert rat?"

He had not even thought of that, and the guard was staring with a black expression. "Buying salt," he said.

"Buying salt, *sir*."

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Tah nodded quickly. He continued gaping at the towering walls, but he felt the man's eyes on him for longer than he liked. The temptation to break and run was strong. However, he knew that was one sure way to be taken up, so he stood fast, holding himself a breath from panic during those long moments. At last, the guard said, "He's clear. We are looking for three anyway. Enjoy your time in Inay, rat. You'd do well to learn about bathhouses while you're here!"

The other guards laughed, but Tah ignored them. All he cared about was finding his family. As soon they waved him through, he ran, being careful not to reveal excessive speed. The city was in a state of controlled chaos with patrols of Elite Guards all over the place. Tah had no idea what they sought, but he hoped it was the sha'al-izzat's murderer instead of a young messenger.

Keeping his head down, he slunk along the city wall and wove between knots of frightened citizens. The market was closed, and silent women at the well gathered water in terracotta jugs. Nearby, more soldiers stood watching them, and Tah realized that something besides the sha'al-izzat's assassination had torn through Inay. But how to ask without drawing attention? Then he realized his role provided the perfect reason; if he had come into the city to buy salt, he would need to know why the market was closed ... and when it would reopen. *Who should I ask, though?*

As he slid a quick glance over the frightened faces, he decided he couldn't inquire near the gate. But their fear added to his own near terror, so he quickened his pace away from the eastern gate. There must be fewer soldiers in the

city proper; these were surely just for show, preventing whoever had slain Nadiv from escaping Inay. His heart beat faster than the cadence of his feet as he rounded the corner onto the Street of Swallows. And strode straight into fire.

No. Not quite, but the warren *was* burning, as much as clay could burn. Piles of rags and refuse smoldered, making the air almost unfit to breathe. The scent of scorched earth pervaded the day's chill; the wind tasted smoky in his mouth. Four soldiers were beating an old man with cudgels, and watching the beggar weep, Tah realized that nothing would ever be the same.

"You know something about Qutuz," a guard growled. "It's not too late, old man. Tell us where he hides, and we'll take you to a healer."

"I know nothing," the old man wept. "Nothing!"

He no longer cared about what or why; all that mattered was his family. Perhaps once he found them, he could arrange transport to Feroz. There might be a merchant who would pay well for an Inayan trained runner. How he would accomplish all this, he had no idea, but Tah told himself it was possible. Despair would defeat him before he passed through the warren.

"Please, have pity..." The beggar reached out a hand as Tah passed, and he heard the crunch of bone when a soldier's cudgel smashed the old man's fingers. It hurt him to walk on, pretending he had not seen the plea in the cloudy eyes. His jaw hurt with the effort to hold his protest. *I cannot save him. I am only one.* But he remembered the beggar's face, dark

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and seamed, a scarlet trickle running from his slack mouth.
White hair matted with clay and blood.

Fearing he might be followed from the gate, he dodged and hid among the broken buildings and fallen walls. The scent of jasmine made him feel ill, mingling with the smoke from so many small fires. Children had been murdered here; he stumbled onto their wasted bodies. He had hardly known such children existed, living feral in the warren, starving and filthy. They, too, had been beaten to death, broken, twisted things with staring eyes and swollen faces.

Tah stared at the heap and then vomited, a hard rush that left him unable to stand for a moment. Swallowing bile, he wiped his mouth and stumbled on, his feet remembering when *he* forgot the way. Here and there, he saw pockets of resistance, knots of Inayan poor who had taken up sticks and stones and were driving the guard away. He kept to alleys and shadow until at last he reached the crumbling wall that separated the maze from the rest of Inay.

He ran for the trade district.

Tah no longer cared if his speed attracted attention; he *hoped* the guard was too preoccupied with what appeared to be a small revolt to scrutinize him. Fear coalesced with dread to form a greater whole. Inay as he had known it was no more—and perhaps Z'ev had known what would happen, or at least suspected. But Tah could not spare another moment to wonder how the ksathra fared.

The fighting was less here, but many merchants had closed their storm shutters or rolled up their awnings or folded their tents. For the first time in his memory, there

were no children playing, no women gossiping as they swept the street before their doors. Such silence gave him pause, and he studied the still street for a long moment. It reminded him of the air just before the storm had stripped the skin from Harb's back. Tah knew a flicker of guilt, thinking of the mute—he had not repaid him well by stealing most of their coins and leaving them in the Enadi camp.

After careful observation, he decided it was safe and stepped out of the shadows falling long around the corner. Tah darted across the street and between two dun buildings up to the familiar lines of his home. No lamps were lit within, and his heart shuddered in his breast. Japhet was killing Inay in his search for his father's murderer. It would be kinder to let people grieve without making it impossible to buy food or earn a few kels.

Strange. The courtyard gate was securely latched. Tah thought it would certainly draw more attention if he scaled the wall, so he circled the house quickly and entered by the front door. But as soon as he stepped within, he feared he was too late.

Shards of his mother's cherished collection, even the expensive cobalt glass, crunched under foot. His home had a faintly smoky air, as if censers had recently been extinguished, and even with the skylight above, Tah could scarcely see through the gloom. Familiar furnishings took on monstrous lines in the dark. He knew he should leave at once, but he could not force himself to do so. Tah had to see all the damage; perhaps amid the wreckage, he might find a clue where his family had gone.

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Deep inside, he knew they had not gone of their own volition. His mother would never have permitted her treasures to be left behind, let alone for them to be trod back into sand. Further in, it was worse—all the plates and bowls were smashed, and the hangings from the gallery of tales were rent with knives. That was when hope died.

Ksathra Japhet had taken them.

And Tah's grandfather had known what would happen; Moukib Faruq had provided warning. *If only I'd asked him what I should do ... if only I had not been such a coward in Ballendin ...* But *if only* was a coward's lament and would change nothing of his current circumstance. Grief would not be contained as easily as guilt—despite many miles traveled and wonders seen, Tah felt tears rising in his eyes, a child crying for his mother in the dark. If it had not been so sad, it would have been funny, for it was true. As he touched a broken piece of pottery, he remembered lying with his head in her lap as she sang to him.

A small voice chided him. *You must go. If they are held at the palace, you can do nothing for them. If they have already been executed, then you can still do nothing. Do what you do best—run!* Tah could not quarrel with the sense of the advice, however, so with tears slipping over his dirty cheeks, he crept through the house. He wanted something of his mother's, something that still bore her scent, to take with him. Along with the sliver of blue glass, it would be all he had left of his home.

His parents' room was in shambles, their pallets slashed to shreds. Such seething malice made him wince, and he felt

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glad it was too dark for him to see whether their blankets were bloodstained. Tah could not allow himself to think of Sagireh or Melek, else he would go mad. As their brother, he should have protected them ... and it seemed he had brought the blade down upon their necks.

Searching quickly in the dark, he found a scarf that smelled faintly of the oil his mother used when she braided up her hair, so he tucked that away as well. Turning to go, he heard a soft sound, a rustle, as if mice had gotten in his mother's good chest. Tah remembered without wanting to how proud she had been of that chest—crafted in khi wood and bound in bronze, it was the most precious thing they owned.

By then, he was not thinking clearly, but he could not bear the idea of vermin chewing on his mother's things. So he flipped the lid open, armed with the little scrap of glass, which was probably just sharp enough to give the rats a nasty scratch. Instead of rodents, though, he found Sagireh. She was curled in a ball, and the fabric below her reeked of urine. Hard to tell how long she had been hiding there, but her face was filthy and she was thinner than he remembered.

“Come out, pretty one. Tah is here.”

At first he thought he had been too late—but then she stirred, peered up at him with eyes that shone in the dark, and launched herself into his arms. She was nothing but hair and bone in his hold, a dirty, stinking bundle, but he had never held anything so dear in his life. His tears ran into her greasy hair, damping her scalp.

"Bad men came," she whimpered. "I'm so hungry, Tah. Mama shoved me in there and told me to hide and not to come out until she came for me. I waited and waited and waited ... but she never came. I want Mama!"

"I know," he said softly. "I want her, too. But we must go, Sagireh. It is not safe here. I do have this for you, though...." He rummaged long enough to locate some dry meat and stale naan that had sustained him during the run from the Enadi camp. The child tore into the food, making him think she had been near starving. Another day and he would have been too late. He gave her some tepid water in sips, knowing too much would make her ill. "There. I promise we'll have more later ... but we really must go."

"Are we going to find Mama and Papa?"

"Perhaps one day," he told her. "For now, I must get you somewhere safe."

Sagireh was a warm and welcome burden in his arms as he stepped onto the street. She held fast about his neck, her dirty cheek against his shoulder. He had not lost everything, not entirely—he had managed to save this little one who was dearer than his own life. She shivered. The night was cold, and he wished belatedly he had brought something in which to wrap her. He was all but numb to the chill; grief and loss had rendered him impervious to lesser discomforts. Now he just needed to decide where they should go.

Tah glanced up, judging the angle of Sahen and Anumati. In their half phases, both were uncertain of their passions, neither hunting nor fleeing, but enjoying a rare moment of celestial accord that also made the night glimmer with blood

and silver light. They washed the trade district, giving it a strangely foreboding air—on this building, a crimson stain and on that one, an argent tracery, as if an alchemist had been spilling potions.

“Did you truly think we would not watch this house, messenger?” The low voice made him shudder, even as Tah realized that the shadows had discharged soldiers, worse than ichor from a purulent wound. “Just in case you were *this* foolish.”

Oh, Sagireh, no.

His sister screamed, and the boy did what he did best. He ran.

But they had encircled him and he couldn't risk Sagireh. Tah fled back inside the house, but with his sister shrieking he couldn't think. He knew she wouldn't go quietly back into the chest, and he couldn't flee at his usual speed, carrying her. He bounded through the foyer and through the gallery of tales into the dining hall. Tah heard them right behind him, cursing and crashing into urns and tables that the previous patrol had overturned. Scrabbling with the latch cost him precious moments, and all the while Sagireh sobbed as if her heart were breaking.

“This way! He makes for the garden gate!”

He dashed into the small courtyard; his mother's flowers had died from lack of care, and the foliage made a rasping sound beneath his feet as he fled. *I must save Sagireh.* Tah snapped back the bolt on the iron gate and swung it wide. His sister clung to him so tightly that he saw stars as he darted into the alley that led to the next street. But Tah could

already hear the boots of soldiers rounding the corner and coming up behind him through the dry leaves.

I'm sorry, little one.

Running would only prolong the inevitable. Balance and focus were key aspects of a runner's discipline—and even Sagireh's weight would alter his stride. Enough to let the guards capture them. At that moment, Tah learned the face of despair; it was a small girl looking up at him with liquid eyes that glimmered with moonlight.

The soldiers closed in on him. Tah pressed himself against the wall behind the garden gate, one hand sealed over Sagireh's mouth. Fortunately, the girl had wept herself out and lay shuddering in his arms. A group of men passed close enough for him to smell the garlic on their clothes, and the stale naan swam in his stomach.

"Search by quadrants—he cannot have gone far." That voice again, the low voice that sounded so grave.

"As you will, Suliman."

Through the slits in the gate, he saw a woman standing beneath a lamp, the crimson sheen of her chador highlighted by Anumati's pure contrast. Tah closed his eyes, hating what he must do. But as he had failed, perhaps a dead woman could care better for a living child. He waited until the footsteps receded a little, and then darted from his hiding place. The guards were still nearby; he heard them curse as he ran.

He thought of the lykos and his mother's face to get the needed burst of speed; he saw the falling rays of Sahen and

Anumati through a blur of tears. And then he realized the heavens also wept for him. Behrid rain began at last.

The woman seemed startled as he thrust Sagireh into her arms. "You must take her! The guards are close. Her name is Sagireh—" His voice broke. "And she likes candied figs."

"Tah!" Sagireh roused from near stupor and held out her arms. Tears left shiny streaks on her face. "Tah, no! Don't leave me!"

"I have him! Suliman, this way!"

He turned to see four soldiers staring at him from one street over. Tah looked at Sagireh one last time, struggling in the woman's hold. And he knew they would not get away if the guards gave chase. If he sacrificed them, Tah knew he had a chance of eluding the patrols. Shuddering, he closed his eyes.

"Please ... *run*."

The boy did not see the woman nod as she fled into an adjoining alley, because he turned back toward his pursuers. And he waited as they came for him, dark phantoms gaining features as they drew near. Tah clung to the hope that Sagireh might survive, no matter what was to come. Suliman, the leader of the patrol, shackled him at leg and wrist, and stood staring for a moment, rain sluicing down his pocked cheeks.

"You do not look so clever," the guard said, "or terrible. But that is for Ksathra Japhet to decide. Come along, traitor."

His chains sang as they prodded him through the streaming rain and up the Path of Hope, where judgment waited.

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* * * *

Sibal stared at the child.

The little one had wept until she had no more tears, and she slept uneasily, two fingers in her mouth. Sibal had hardly left her crouch against the far wall since depositing the little girl into the nest of rags she usually occupied. Not for the first time, she cursed herself. Her hovel provided scant amenities, and the child would freeze when Behrid truly flexed its icy fingers.

I should not have taken her. I do not have the means to care for a child.

But refusing had been beyond her. For one who thought she was beyond the cares of humanity, she had found herself too moved to demur. Just before she had run, she'd glimpsed the resignation in his face; he had known he would not win free and she ached for him and the little one he loved so dearly.

It was also dangerous for Sagireh to be with her. The interdiction on all contact with women of Hamra Sehkit did not allow exceptions. For violating the ban, the child's life would be forfeit. Sibal sighed. She needed to think of a solution before sunrise; she would have a harder time eluding patrols during the day.

Sibal wrapped her arms about her knees and tried not to think of how cold she was or how hungry. She had not managed to scavenge the day's banquet before the acrid-smelling predicament was handed her. And on a deeper level, holding the child hurt because it was yet another pleasure

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denied her. The dead might approach the fires of the living, but the flames invariably burned.

She thought for too long; she sat in that position until the chill bit into her bones. But at last, she knew there was only one place she could take Sagireh, one hope of refuge, if she was not to die for breaking the ban. The irony twisted her mouth into a bitter smile.

Putting the task off would make matters no easier, so she pushed to her feet like an old woman. The movement pained her—she would be lucky if she did not start losing limbs, rotting away bit by bit. Once she was sure of her balance, she lifted the girl, who nestled close with a moan. She hesitated only a moment before lifting her chador and settling the child against her chest. The warmth felt achingly good, but more important, it would protect Sagireh from casual observers. No patrol would look long at Sibal if she gave them no reason to suspect her. Sagireh's stench added to her own, and she knew a moment of hysterical amusement when she realized the guards might be able to track them by scent.

Progress was slow and difficult. She had to hide twice from guards who were hunting in the maze, and the scent of charred flesh lingered in the cold air. In the distance, she saw plumes of smoke, pale as breath against the night sky. Inay was burning in sections, though it was small comfort that most of the clay homes would not catch. Sibal realized that it could be worse; the guards were turning the homes of suspected rebels or sympathizers into giant ovens. The victims could choose a slow death by roasting alive or flee

into the hands of Ksathra Japhet's men. Neither fate would be pleasant.

It took longer than she would have liked to creep out of the warren. Outside the maze, progress was swifter, and she had to hide less. But tendrils of light flickered beyond the city walls; Sibal's heart thundered as she opened Ubad the potter's garden gate. The first time she passed through here, she broke the latch so she would always be able to visit Yolante. And the potter had either not noticed or he chose to leave it unrepaired. Perhaps he felt a good Inayan should not acknowledge damage caused by a woman of Hamra Sehkit either. More likely, his eyes were bad.

But she felt glad the gate was open as she stepped into the dark courtyard. Sagireh whimpered, and Sibal cupped a hand over the back of her head partly to comfort and partly to muffle the sound. She hurried as best she could with such an awkward weight clamped to her chest, but when she reached the bench where she always awaited Yolante, she wondered if she could truly ask the other woman to do this.

How can she hide a child from Abrim? Sibal closed her eyes as Sagireh shuddered in her sleep. *Poor little one. Your world has been torn asunder, and I am afraid your road will not grow any easier.* Taking a deep breath, she slid free the brick. It was later than usual, but Yolante seemed to possess a sixth sense as to when she had arrived. And soon Sibal heard the whisper of the other woman's robes as she passed over the dormant flowers of the garden.

"You are here at last," the concubine whispered. "I have heard how bad it becomes outside these walls. I worried about you."

She paused, wondering if it would prove more troubling to Yolante if she knew the truth. "It ... is dangerous. Rebels are attacking patrols in the warren, and guards put their homes to the torch. I know not what Ksathra Japhet will do, but it looks grim. I think before it is done, we shall see a new house ruling Inay. I believe House Fouad's days are done."

"I know," Yolante said, surprising her. "Abrim tells me some of what he does there in the palace. He stays there long hours, making plans with Ksathra Japhet."

"Is he home now?"

Yolante chuckled softly. "I could not come to meet you if he were home, my dear friend. That one sees betrayal behind every bush."

Was it her imagination, or did Yolante sound ... stronger? Less afraid, less tentative. "One who has done such wickedness has cause to look behind him."

"Perhaps ... but he has also done good things."

That surprised Sibal so much that she sat down on the bench, instinctively tightening her hold on the sleeping child. If Sagireh cried out now, so much could be lost. "What do you mean?"

She heard Yolante sigh. "He saved me from the fire, Sibal. I wish ... I could hate him, but it is not so simple. My father's caravan was lost in Ar Cahra ... and we were left with nothing. He died a broken man, owing many debts. And I had

no family who would take me, no suitors who wanted a bride who could not bring them as much as a copper pot.

"At my father's burning, I was full of such rage and terror. I watched him burn, knowing I must soon join him. I heard the whispers; they wanted me to go willingly and with loving grace, but I could not. I watched his face char and curl and I could *not*."

"Yolanthe..." Aching, Sibal put her hand through the gap, where the other woman caught it. "I did not know."

"And then ... there was Abrim, watching me. My heart skipped. There was no hope for me—how could there be? But ... he wanted me. He paid my father's debts; he bought my *life* that day. How can I hate him?" She sounded anguished.

"That story," Sibal said softly, "would be beautiful beyond bearing ... and might make me believe in love again, except that he ... hurts you. What I see is a man who has found a woman to own, a *thing* instead of a wife."

Yolanthe gripped Sibal's hand more tightly. "Please," she whispered, "spare my illusions. They are all that keep me sane."

"He is an evil man. If you would know *how* wicked ... ask him what became of his bride."

"Certainly he had a wife." Yolanthe sounded astonished, as if she'd never suspected but now realized she should have known. "He has a son—"

"Isa, whom you love."

Sagireh moaned.

"What is it? Are you hurt?"

Here was the perfect opportunity, but Sibal found herself reluctant to relinquish the child, reluctant to imperil Yolante. She knew better than anyone how dangerous Abrim could be. *It is the best solution*, she reminded herself.

"No," she said at last. "I am not hurt. I have a little girl with me." She told the other woman about the confrontation with the guards, and then added, "I have no one else, Yolante, or I would not ask this of you. Can you house her as a servant's child?"

A long silence met her request. At last, the other woman replied, "I ... think so. The house is large and Abrim leaves the running of it to me. If I give the girl to one of the maids to look after, it should be well enough."

"Will they betray you?"

Yolante paused, seeming to consider. "The best I can do for the child is tell the others I wish her trained as a maid. If Abrim asks, I will be able to reply that I am providing him the best service by having his staff prepared from a young age."

"If she stays with the maids, he will not notice her."

She let go of the other woman's hand. Sibal felt an odd twinge as she clambered onto the bench; the top of the wall was still an arm above her head, but she managed to lift Sagireh high. The child stirred, opening her eyes when she felt the cold wind. Sibal shut hers in turn against the terrified nature of that look; she knew she looked monstrous in her chador.

"Bad things will happen if you cry," she whispered.

"The bad men will come?" The little girl found her voice, hoarse with tears.

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"Not if we're quiet. You must jump off the wall ... that way. A woman waits to catch you. She will see that you have a warm bath, food to eat, and fine cushions for your rest. All will be well, Sagireh, I promise."

"Will Tah come for me?"

Sibal ached. "If he can."

Let the child adjust to her other losses before facing this one.

"Are you ready? It grows late ... and I have much to do before dawn." Through the gap, she saw Yolenthe plant herself firmly. The woman was uncannily beautiful, even wrapped against the winds of Behrid.

Sibal gave Sagireh a little push, and she heard Yolenthe catch the child with a muffled thud. "There are no words..." she said. "But one day, I will find a way to show you what you mean to me." Tears swam in her eyes. Yolenthe made her weak, but at the same time, she made Sibal more human. She had forgotten so much about gentleness.

Yolenthe reached through the space in the wall, seeking, and Sibal kissed her fingertips. "If you stopped coming," Yolenthe whispered, "if I lost you, I would die. I thought I knew loneliness before, but it would attain new meaning without you."

Sibal was not sure what moved her then, but she wanted Yolenthe to have something of hers, a token against isolation. She owned only a silver hairpin. The tip was needle sharp, and she had kept it, thinking it might serve as a weapon. The little treasure had belonged to her mother, so she was not

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eager to part with it. But she passed it to Yolanthé, who had both arms wrapped about Sagireh.

"Here ... keep it and think of me." Through the gap, she saw Yolanthé smile, an expression of such sweetness and purity that Sibal felt ancient in comparison. "You're both shivering. Go now—take care of the child. I will be here tomorrow."

Sibal replaced the brick and left the potter's courtyard, lighter in body and spirit.

* * * *

They had tortured him.

News spread quickly in the warren. Even without the market as a center for sharing information, the women spread the news among themselves, gathering water at the well. Knots of would-be rebels passed the word, and children carried it further, running far and wide with awed whispers. One of the traitors had been captured.

Sibal heard it via Dubai, who had been savagely beaten by the patrols. He no longer carried messages for Qutuz; she received word from another source. But with the recent riots, even Qutuz had been quiet. She'd heard he had gone to ground, as the patrols were even more determined to capture him. Japhet must know that if he couldn't even put down dissidents in the Sun City, he had no hope of consolidating his claim as sha'al-izzat.

She had found the old man near death, returning from her visit to Yolanthé. And tending Dubai kept her hands busy for three days after she left Sagireh. Today, she had learned indirectly—from a man who stopped to speak to Dubai—that

the messenger had been tortured by Dhul Bakr, the Serask of the Elite Guard.

The old beggar lacked the use of his hands, but he managed to hold the rock he had been carving for as long as anyone could remember. Crumbling clay walls supported his bent back, and he did not seem to mind the fetid earth that made his bed. Sibal felt vaguely guilty that she could not offer better care. His hands were going to heal crooked unless someone fetched a bonesetter, but that seemed unlikely, not to mention unwise.

"The world changes," the old man murmured through broken teeth. "Soon you will not need to wear that chador any longer."

"If they do not find Qutuz."

Dubai nodded. They both knew that the Tortoise of Inay was a symbol of the insurrection. So long as he was free, the rebels knew hope.

"They will not. He has been hiding longer than you've been alive."

She paused, studying the old man. "You know something...."

His battered face registered alarm. "I know nothing. And better for you to know nothing as well. Stay away from the patrols, Sibal, and say nothing of Abrim's ring."

"Was that what they used to kill the sha'al-izzat?"

Dubai slid down and rolled onto his side, giving her his spindly back. "The execution is today," he said. "Will you go?"

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She closed her eyes against squalor and privation, against pain and ugliness. The images burned into her thoughts did not abate. "I think I must."

"Then I will rest."

The old man did not ask if she would bring food. Dubai had an impervious dignity; no hardship greatly altered his demeanor. And she had asked around—no one could remember when the old man had not sat near the sweetmeat seller's stall, carving his stone and spinning tales for children. Some said he was jahnu, one of the last. He was certainly old beyond measuring and deserved greater respect than to sleep in the rat's nest Sibal called home. She pulled a tattered shawl over him before she left.

There was no need for her to hide in making her way to the east gate—the patrols were not interested in a woman in a scarlet chador. Most likely, they had conditioned themselves not even to see her. Sibal had grown accustomed to the spontaneous parting of the crowd when she passed, although it once had stung her. Today, it was merely convenient, allowing her to surge to the front, where a dais had been raised.

Already the executioner waited in his yellow hood—the color told the throng that a traitor was being put to death and that he was not worthy of burning. His head would be mounted atop the bone gate to be eaten by birds, and the rest of him would molder in the ground, food for worms. Her stomach turned a little at the thought. The headsman leaned on his axe. Out of respect for tradition, his muscled bronze arms were bare, and he must be freezing. Sibal wondered

how he felt. Did he take pleasure in the severing of flesh and the crunch of bone, or was it merely work to him, like making a pot or weaving a rug?

It could not matter to the boy being led onto the dais in chains. Sibal twisted to get a better look at him and saw that the gossip had, for once, been accurate. He had been so badly beaten that his entire face was black and blue, his eyes swollen almost shut. She ached that she could not speak a few words of comfort, at least tell him that his sacrifice had not been in vain. Sagireh was safe.

Tah could barely stand, and the soldier accompanying him jerked on his chains. A hiss came from the crowd, and Sibal soon became aware that her fellow onlookers were not so much seekers of the macabre as a large group of rebels and sympathizers. Guards seemed to realize as much at the same time, closing on the scene to stand with hands on their cudgels. And worse still, the sha'al-izzat's magicians stood watching from the city walls. Sibal knew a shiver of horror at the sight of them—wizened men with white mouths and hungry eyes, as if power had sucked all the juices from them. This scene could turn ugly ... and even a woman of Hamra Sehkit might die.

Swallowing hard, she stood her ground, keeping her eyes firmly on Tah. And as if he felt her gaze, his head swung around. Perhaps, perhaps it was foolish, but she nodded, thinking she would be able to tell herself his last moment had been spent in relief rather than dread. She thought he smiled, though it might have been a grimace. His poor mouth was split in two places.

The sky was heavy overhead. Any moment, Behrid rains might drench them and wash away the blood. At last, Suliman stepped onto the dais. The occasion was either not worthy of Ksathra Japhet or he wisely feared emerging from the safety of the palace. If the rebels saw him on open ground, they might not care how many lives were lost in the attempt to send him beyond.

"Here stands Tadit, ibn Kassim!" Suliman shouted. "Former messenger to the sha'al-izzat, traitor to the Sun City and all her citizens! We will make him pay for his crimes!"

A growl rose from the crowd, only to be mingled with a cheer. So not all stood with Qutuz; Sibal glanced around. Unlike the others she was not buffeted by pressing bodies and jabbing elbows. A small space was maintained around her; she almost smiled at the thought of someone being shoved into her. The executioner raised his axe, as Suliman forced the boy's head onto the chopping block. Bile rose in her throat, but she could not look away. And she was actually glad of her veil.

"What shall we say of you, messenger, who has shamed the honor of the profession? What can you say to justify what you have done, turning from the sha'al-izzat who clothed and trained you?"

The din dropped until Sibal heard the breathing of the man nearest her. They were all eager to hear what the boy would say, if he could force a sound past his battered mouth. She felt only distantly aware of the chill through her chador, the rough ground beneath her feet. *If only there was something I*

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could do. This moment was unbearable. She wished she had not come.

“Say ... I died for love.”

The entire crowd sighed.

Through her red veils, Sibal saw Suliman cue the headsman before the romantics in the mob charged the platform. Two soldiers pressed the boy's head down, and then they backed away. In the end, she could not watch the final blow—she looked back in time to see his head roll. Suliman seized it by the hair and held it aloft.

“Let this be a lesson to any who doubt the power of House Fouad!”

Someone groaned. An old woman wept.

All around her, Sibal heard the whispers. “For love. He died for love....”

At last came the rain, but it could not wash away the stain of innocent blood.

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ARRIVALS AND AGREEMENTS

They had been in Feroz for more than two hand days.

By night, Harb and Z'ev slept in the shadow of closed tents. There was no city guard, so beggars were troubled less. By day, the two plied the storyteller's trade in the market. They spent one kel on bread and dried fruit, knowing it would sustain them for many days. With their final coin, they bought an offering bowl, as all jahnu once possessed. And so they settled onto the city's underbelly, drawing first only the attention of children, who came hesitantly to sit at Z'ev's feet.

Those days were a revelation to Harb. Without house insignia or topknot, he was only another man—a silent one to be sure, but a man, not a beast. Sometimes, the urges swelled in him painfully. He would see someone passing in the distance and fire rose in his belly. He felt himself tensing with anguished anticipation. But—and the magicians had not told him this—the more he lived among other humans, accepted as one of them, the easier it grew not to think of them as prey. He smiled at the children who sat at his knee without terrifying them.

Z'ev's delivery improved daily—he no longer set Harb's teeth on edge. The tale of Kaveh and Minau was a particular favorite, and Harb was forced to admit that even he could not better Z'ev's recitation. The older man no longer watched the subtle flicker of Harb's fingers.

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The streets were hard-packed dirt that turned to mud during Behrid rains. Thus far they had been lucky, and the cold season had been unnaturally dry. Harb did not imagine anyone would be eager to hear tales if the weather turned foul. But the weather remained mild, and a boy told his father of the storytellers in the market. And on an errand for his master, the man stopped to hear a tale, and then left a silver kel in the bowl. The scribe told a colleague of the jahnu in the market and the next day, two more men came and left silver in the bowl. Z'ev smiled at them through his ragged beard, and Harb marveled at Z'ev's dignity. Here was the ksathra of Inay, heir to the sha'al-izzat, begging with tales for coins from merchants and clerks. Yet there was no rancor in him. Z'ev was truly a kind man—and Harb began to think that kindness was not as much a weakness as he'd been trained to believe.

The buildings were built of stone in Feroz, quarried from cliffs that overlooked the sea. As they slept outdoors, huddled together for warmth, Harb could not be certain, but the structures looked hard and cold, devoid of comfort. Some had been whitewashed to give them a pearly gleam, matching city walls of paler stone. And some in the slums had been patched with red clay or gaily painted. Harb preferred the artisan's district, with the smell of burning sand and molten ore. The heat was palpable when he passed the smith's forge, a bronze giant who worked bare-chested even in Behrid. He watched the man a moment, allowing Z'ev to catch up. The water hissed as the smith plunged the weapon into a tub.

I could do that. I am strong enough.

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How tempting to think of ordinary work, an ordinary life. He wished he could grow a beard—he could oil it like other men and eat olives by the dozen. A woman who would nag him? Children? Here his fantasy puffed to mist like that wreathing the smith's head. He was not an ordinary man; such comforts were not for him.

“Do you need a blade?” the smith called.

Harb shook his head and fell in step behind Z'ev, who was beckoning him. Their corner at the market might be taken if they did not hurry. The city was loud compared to Inay, hawkers shouting everywhere in the streets. City clerks sold peddler permits by the dozen, and Harb had to shake his head as he walked. No pies, no pastries, no strands of beads. No, no pretty bronze bracelets or glass figurines.

The time they spent in Feroz was the closest Harb had ever come to contentment. Though their offering bowl only contained a few silver kels at the end of each day, Harb did not mind. He was near the road he would have chosen, if the decision had been left to him.

But such peace could not last.

A rich merchant left them a whole gold kel, and then walked away wiping his eyes over the tale of Kaveh and Minau. In each telling, it grew in power, affecting its listeners more profoundly. And if Harb were not a rational man, he might have wondered if he felt Kaveh stirring somewhere deep, awakening at the repeated invocation of his name. Cold wind made him shiver as he glanced at Z'ev. The older man had been marked more than he by their ordeals. His beard

was now almost entirely silver, his raven hair shot through with gray streaks.

We have enough for a bath, Z'ev said. New raiment. Once we look more presentable, we will be able to get a meeting with a merchant's assistant. I have been asking quietly ... and we must find a man called Pelit.

We will need money yet for bribes. He will not aid us out of goodness.

Z'ev gave a wry smile. *There are none in Feroz who would.*

On the way home that evening, they did their shopping, clothes and boots to start anew. They returned to their corner thrice more and spent the nights in a kindly peddler's tent. For a copper kel, he let them sleep beside the oven. The weather was turning, so neither Harb nor Z'ev could cavil at the expense.

As the temperature dropped, their listeners thinned, and soon they were down to one little girl. She had no coins to give, but she came to listen daily.

On the last day, the small one came and sat expectantly, her hands folded. She was a quiet child with hungry eyes. Z'ev had taken to sliding her coppers when he thought Harb was not watching, but he did not condemn the gesture, even though it lacked pragmatism. She never asked for a certain story, never spoke at all. And her silence made him curious. Perhaps she too was mute, a quirk of nature, not intent. She was neither as dirty as some urchins nor as thin, but she ran freely enough for him to think her parents must be too weary with work to care where she went.

What will become of her once we are gone?

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Tell her, he signed to Ze'v. Tell her we return no more.

Z'ev spoke the words and Harb saw the bitter disappointment in her eyes, but still she did not speak. Instead she drew closer to the guard and pressed a string of tattered beads into his palm. Their eyes met and he was reminded of a feral cat, then she sprang away, losing herself in the thinning crowd. He tried not to mind when they packed up their things. It was time to visit the bathhouse and the barber.

Time to continue the quest.

The sky was threaded silver overhead, heavy with clouds. The weather was colder in Feroz, though not so biting as in the waste, where there were no walls to break the wind. Harb had learned to like his dun desert robes, so as he strode toward the bathhouse with their bundle of new clothes, he felt a small pang of regret.

Within, the stone building was crowded, men of all ages waiting for their turn in one of the bathing chambers. The air was sultry, scented with oils and hot mint tea. Young boys scurried with armloads of towels—most of them were doe-eyed and pretty. Harb knew that one might request more than a bath at such places, but Z'ev declined the offer with a slight shake of his head. The older man paid in silver and they followed a small guide through an archway into an open room that was already half full of bathing men.

Though he had heard of such wonders, Harb had never seen the sunken baths of Feroz. Several stone basins were recessed in the floor, each large enough for three men to share. Water flowed and drained at a constant rate, by some

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magic or engineering that was beyond his reckoning. As Harb glanced at his master, he saw the older man's discomfort—and he remembered Z'ev's crippled foot. He had little sympathy for shyness, but he suspected Z'ev's reluctance stemmed more from fear of being recognized.

"Bathe wherever you like," the boy said over the hiss of the water.

He left them two towels and two slices of plain soap; they had not paid for anything more elaborate. If they were to afford bribes, they could not waste coin on silken robes or chadra ushak. Z'ev hesitated as Harb bent to pick up the supplies. Then after a moment, Z'ev started toward an empty tub at the far corner of the room.

Harb did not wait for Z'ev—he set down all the bundles he carried and stripped off the desert robes. The water felt good, if almost too hot. He spared a moment to wonder how it was heated and then he settled onto the stone shelf to relax. Perhaps it helped when Harb closed his eyes, but soon enough, Z'ev joined him in the bath, his infirmity hidden by water and steam. Weeks of hard living began to wash away.

Voices rose and fell around them, almost indistinguishable from the sounds of the water, and the noise lulled him. He might have even dozed. A splash nearby made Harb snap alert, but when he opened his eyes, he saw an old man had joined them. His beard was fully white and his sunburnt scalp was as bare as his own.

"Nothing like a hot bath, eh?" the old man said, settling himself with a groan.

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Harb nodded, glancing at Z'ev as he did so. He did not seem unduly alarmed so Harb made himself relax, but the prickles did not entirely go away. Part of him felt threatened by this wizened old man, though he could not have said why. He reached for the soap and began to lather his chest.

"So what do you do?" the elder was saying to Z'ev.

And that would be the danger.

"I am a storyteller," said Z'ev.

And Harb smiled, for it had become true as much as anything else.

"A jahnu? How splendid! You are one of the last, you know...." He rambled on for a few moments about the dying art, and Harb felt a twinge, knowing that he had failed to keep the tradition alive. But he had not been able to escape the magicians, though he'd certainly tried. "I know your offering bowl is packed away, but I will pay well for a recitation of Jyotish and the greening of Maksoor Balad."

The guard felt Z'ev's sharp look. He could not recall the last time he'd told that tale. In fact, he was not sure Z'ev had ever heard it. Few remembered the lost city's name, let alone the story of its origin—how Jyotish had taken a place of dust and death and made it bloom, a green paradise for the Sut. Fewer knew the tale of how Maksoor Balad had perished, buried in molten rock that Animukh had brought from the mountain in answer to Kaveh's loss. Harb studied the old man more carefully, but could detect no hint he was more than he seemed.

I know the tale, he signed carefully. Would you try?

At last Z'ev said, "I appreciate your offer, honored sayyid, but I am here to relax, not work, no matter how I enjoy the storyteller's art."

"Ah, I understand," the old man answered. "I hope I have not intruded?"

"Not in the least."

It was clear to Harb, however, that the ksathra felt the same prickle of threat toward their uninvited companion. Z'ev followed Harb's example, taking the soap to wash himself quickly. They finished the hygienic portion of the bath, but it became clear that departure might prove something of a challenge. The old man showed no inclination to leave the hot water until every bit of him was as withered as his face, and Harb somehow knew Z'ev should not show his crippled foot, not with this one near.

"Much better," the elder sighed. "This is the only bearable part of Feroz, you know."

"You are not a native of this city?"

"Hardly! No, I hail from the Sun City. There is nothing like a sunset over Inay."

"I have heard that," Z'ev said.

"But the dead gods only know when I may go home again."

Harb traded a look with Z'ev, who then deftly solicited more information. "But why, honored sayyid? Funds cannot prove an obstacle for you?"

The old man snorted. "Feh, no. But the city gates are closed—none go in or out. Had you not heard? The sha'al-izzat was murdered."

For a moment, the guard feared his master would faint. All the color left his face, and Z'ev looked quite ill. Fortunately, the old man was busy searching for his scented soap and did not notice. Harb did not know exactly what Z'ev would be feeling—grief perhaps? He had lost his own father so long ago that it was hard for him to remember. Harb then knew a strange moment; he had become the last certainty in Z'ev's world—in some ways, perhaps ... his only friend. That perception startled him.

“That is ... grim news,” the ksathra said at last. “The people must be starving.”

“And dying. The last caravan that arrived from Inay said it looked as if there would be a revolt, much worse than the little one in middle Raton.”

Z'ev soaped his beard again. The lather hid his expression and Harb commended the subterfuge with a flicker of his fingers. Then Z'ev changed the subject, speaking through the white foam. “I wonder, honored sayyid, do you know of a man called Pelit? We have business with him.”

“Pelit ... strange that you should mention him. My cousin's son dealt with him just last week—” The old man began a rambling discourse on the minutiae of those transactions, until Harb felt sure his entire body would wither into wrinklefruit. Harb drifted, letting the hot water buoy his heavy limbs and did not attend the other two again until Z'ev prodded him with his good foot. Sharp toenails dug into his thigh muscles and he opened his eyes to glower at his master. He was startled to find that the old man had already departed.

We are to seek Pelit at the teahouse at the corner of Lily and Desire. Harb knew enough about the city streets to realize that the teahouse offered more lavish entertainments. Pelit was a man of extravagant tastes, then. That might be turned to their advantage. Men with expensive vices always needed to finance them. As they climbed from the bath and dressed in new garments, Z'ev continued, *I recognized him as he was leaving—that was Lidiq of House Ohed. If he were not half blind and we so altered, he would have recognized us.*

Harb's stomach lurched. How had his senses become so dulled to danger that he had been able to doze in its proximity? But then, such behavior had probably been the best way to escape the situation unscathed. Was his response instinctive then, or had his training failed him? Harb felt a throb at his temples and knew he could not puzzle it out. Higher thinking had not been part of his education.

They left the bathhouse and strode through the reddening afternoon light, the sun blazing over the dark hills like the smith's forge. The buildings cast long shadows over them, and the wind was lightly scented with spice when it swept past. The lights glimmered, lamps and candles in distant windows. Overhead, the stars started nudging the bloody sky toward the smooth, dark velvet of nightfall, and two birds in a nest on a nearby rooftop trilled a dinner call to wayward fledglings.

The streets were not well traveled after dark, and they had gone a way from the bathhouse and the calling birds before Z'ev signed, *Lidiq said the proprietor is ... something of a character.*

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Harb had only a moment to ponder that before following the older man into the gold-lit interior of the teahouse. A raised stage dominated the back of the front room; the heavy aroma of strong mint tea mingled with perfume and smoke, broken by the occasional tendril of pungent mist, rising from intricately carved inhalers and water pipes. Tapestries lined the walls; curtains leading to smaller rooms, as customers and serving girls and boys moved past them.

The ceiling rose at least forty hands above them at the center of the room, and lightly etched columns supported the balcony tier barely perceptible in the gloom. But the noise was muted, almost reverent ... only the strains of some stringed instrument and pipes drifted easily throughout the room, carrying where conversation did not. Dark rich reds and deep gold and tan hues dominated, the oil lamps' soft lights doing much to enhance the intimacy of the place.

One of the boys detached himself from his post near the door and disappeared through the violet veils near the stage. And as the two men stood a moment, letting their eyes adjust, the crowd parted neatly on a murmur. Plump, beringed hands outstretched, this man glittered like a jewel, his dark eyes lined with kohl, coming to neat points at the corner of each eyelid. The caftan he wore was emerald silk, enough to stitch a pavilion tent. His lips were wet and red as rubies.

"Welcome to my house," he said, "where every pleasure may be yours."

The host led them in anything but silence to the nearest stair, a graceful spiral of stone and smooth wood leading

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upstairs. His commentary was liberally sprinkled with bits and pieces of news—not gossip, he assured them over a plump shoulder—of the important deals that had been struck at his tables.

“We do not need every pleasure, merely a few moments with a man named Pelit. I would be grateful if you sent him to us, if he visits this evening.”

Their host accepted a silver kel as payment for his vigilance and assured them he would send Pelit to them before allowing him to visit the back rooms. They sat at a small table near a corner of the balcony with an unobstructed view of the main entrance and most of the floor below. Filigreed screens of silver and some dark wood flanked them. A curtain, bearing an almost abstract pair of lovers, covered the doorway. The warm glow of two oil lamps provided more than adequate lighting for the small alcove; a small water pipe and other accouterments for jaded tastes awaited their pleasure on a small ledge against the balcony railing.

Harb would have signed his shock, but the amusement in Z'ev's eyes stayed him. The guard had not known such men existed, soft and painted.

You should see your face, Z'ev signed. In some ways, you are as innocent as Tah, old friend.

The arrival of a lovely dark-eyed girl bearing a tray set with a silver pitcher, beaded with water, and two beautifully etched chalices, forestalled Harb's reply. She placed her burden carefully on the table, and then turned as if to go. But Z'ev dipped one hand into his purse, the other set lightly on

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her arm to hold her a moment before producing a coin, swiftly pressed into the girl's palm.

"Keep this for yourself, and do not spend it on baubles or hair combs. Put it toward the price of your freedom before you come of age." Then he released her, turning back toward Harb, and the girl slipped away, as if the exchange had not occurred.

Z'ev was a kind man, and Harb had never been prouder to serve him.

Once they met Pelit, an eager, nervous man with damp hands, they arranged an appointment with him for the following day.

* * * *

They set off for the elaborate rose stone building in the heart of the business district. Guild headquarters were grand enough to house a nobleman, but instead of expensive, artistic furnishings, the space was filled with messengers and clerks rushing here and there, men scratching away at papyrus with pen and ink. Tables and crates overflowed with cured skins and tanned hide, perfume and incense, bolts of silk, and glazed ceramic pots. As Harb was looking around with some bewilderment, Pelit beckoned them from an archway.

They followed, passing from the frantic activity into an oasis of calm, filled with blooming plants and green foliage. Somewhere distant, Harb heard the rush of water. But commerce also took place here at its higher levels. Men in rich brocade and silk sat taking tea and striking deals, or

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planning to break another's business. As they stood, another man came forward, a short fellow with silver side-whiskers.

"I am Sidiq. Come, let us retire to my private office. Pelit tells me you have a matter of the utmost import to discuss."

The master merchant's office was a wonder of framed glass and colored panels. When the sun cleared the clouds, it illumined the room with a shimmer, painting everything in scarlet and cerulean. Both Z'ev and Harb declined offers of refreshment; tension had settled into their shoulders and the lines of their mouths. If Sidiq declined to help or worse, all would have come to naught.

Harb studied Z'ev, wondering how he would make the request. There was no easy way to ask for money. But Z'ev surprised him. "I am Z'ev," he said, "exiled son of the murdered sha'al-izzat of Inay. I understand that trade has suffered grievously at my brother's hands. I am here to beg funding for the resistance. I mean to take the Sun City, and it would behoove you to back the winning side."

Silence met these words.

Harb listened to the pounding of his own heart, expecting at any moment to need to seize the small blades concealed in his loose tunic sleeves. But then the master merchant said, "It is good fortune that you came to me. There were many who contributed to the first rebellion, but I sent the caravans with supplies. I sent instigators to rouse the discontented farmers. And now Inay is starving. Merchants in Feroz are going into the fire for bad debts they cannot recoup without the market in Inay. I think we have much to talk about, noble Z'ev."

It took two days.

The master merchant wanted some stiff returns for his investment. Sidiq kept Z'ev signing contracts and trade agreements for most of that time. Harb feared that the people of Inay would wind up with a different form of tyranny—ruled by the kel instead of a king. But then, it would be up to them to change their circumstances. Living in poverty was not quite the same as living beneath the threat of the axe.

"I will need something with which to reward these men," Z'ev told the master merchant.

Sidiq nodded and they began to discuss that as well.

At last, Sidiq was satisfied with Z'ev's guarantees of free trade. The shrewd little despot finally said, "I will send one caravan of equipment and provisions and one of my informants, who will guide you to their last known encampment. It is up to you to turn whatever's left in those hills into an army. If you fail, I never knew you."

Z'ev smiled wearily. "I expected no more. Where shall we meet your caravan captain?"

"The south gate at sunrise."

"We will be there. Thank you, honored sayyid."

The master merchant gestured dismissively. "Keep faith with me and I will be rewarded."

As they passed from the merchant guild into the morning light, dizzy with lack of sleep, Harb signed, *I hope you have not traded away one tyrant for another.*

As do I, old friend. Z'ev sighed. *But sometimes one might simply choose what seems the lesser devil and hope for the best.*

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It seemed to Harb that they had spent a lot of time in the hands of lesser devils, but he followed without complaint, as ever.

* * * *

Harb had one errand before he could leave Feroz, before he could ride away from the glimmering city walls without looking back. He searched the city square and the small side markets; he searched the alleys and the peddler stalls, but he never found the silent girl with feral eyes. He'd wanted to give her their remaining coins, but instead he purchased a bit of silken thread to tie her beads about his wrist. He had been saving his bronze bracers out of some inexplicable compulsion; it hurt him physically to think of selling them. But he was able to leave them now, tied in a bundle of rags in a back street near the main market. The guard wore the beads proudly, symbolic in a way he did not comprehend.

* * * *

They met the caravan captain at the south gate, while the sun played a peeking game from the far hills. The sky was pink and silver as they rode from Feroz, not gloriously, but hidden in the hollow bottom of the wagon, along with the weapons and ammunition. Harb in particular found the confinement painful, as he needed to fold nearly in half to give Z'ev enough space. Travel jarred them hard enough to leave bruises, but the caravan captain had assured them it was necessary.

Harb did not know how he would stand several days of this, eternal night all around, the stench of garlic above, and the weight of a hundred blankets preventing his escape. It

was worse for him because he could not see to sign. He had not been so powerless in many years. He felt the frightened boy stirring within, the boy who had fled the sha'al-izzat's magicians and hidden for two days in the barrack cellar because he could not remember the way home.

They had jerky and tepid water within reach and were allowed up once a day to squat beside the road, while the others glanced about with frightened eyes. He did not know how much the others knew, but at least one seemed to understand the danger. Apart from Harb and Z'ev, there were four more men—two drivers and two guards. One slept while the other was on duty, and the wagon rarely stopped its jolting motion.

So when it did, inexplicably, Harb jolted awake with horror crawling on him like spiders. He heard muffled voices and pressed his ear to the side of the wagon, enough to make out some of the words. His heart surged into his throat.

"Where are you bound?"

He recognized the Inayan accent at once. If the master merchant's men could not be trusted, Z'ev would be taken and Harb would die here. He trembled, needing to rend the wood, explode into light and motion. To make their blood run, fell all of them for daring to approach. Harb bit down on his hand, trying to hold still. His need was devouring; he had strangled it so long.

"For Maresh," the caravan captain said. "Bearing blankets and spices."

Straining, Harb heard the huffing of at least twenty horses some ways off. By the dead gods, an Elite Guard patrol had

intercepted them. Harb could taste their blood in his mouth already, feel it hot and sticky on his skin. He shuddered, knowing the desire did not reflect his true power. He had no hope of prevailing against a squadron.

"A strange journey for Behrid," the Inayan said. "The mountains are difficult in the cold, in the rain. Why do you choose to come now, I wonder?"

Need turned to nausea; it was all Harb could do not to thrash like a dying beast. And then he felt Z'ev's hand, warm on his arm. A light touch, but it helped him. The darkness lost some of its threat, the need some of its teeth. Harb breathed through his open mouth.

"The feathers of the aerie birds are much in demand," the caravan captain said. "Wives and concubines wear them in their hair, brightly dyed. And the villagers in Maresh hunt the birds for food. They do not know the value of the feathers. They will trade them away cheaply for garlic, beads, and blankets."

There was a pause as if the interrogator sought guidance from another, and then, "Dhul Bakr says the stink of magic taints your wagon. We will search it."

Dhul Bakr. Matters in Inay were grim indeed if the old spider had been roused from his nest, no longer instilling terror and blind obedience in young mutes. The Serask of Inay had hardly stepped from the training yard for more years than Harb could recall. His presence now only added to his dread.

"As you wish, honored sayyid, but you'll find only a simple charm against thieves."

The captain must have produced it, for after another silence, the Inayan said, "Dhul Bakr is satisfied. You may go."

Harb's heart thudded in his ears, drowning the sounds of the patrol as it thundered away. He felt for Z'ev and gave him a crushing hug, the only way he could thank him for being a beacon in the dark. Then he felt Z'ev etching words against his forearm: *Soon. Free, soon.*

* * * *

The rebel camp was in the Arkyrie Mountains. What met Harb's eyes as he crawled from the wagon, sore as if he'd been beaten for a whole hand of days, seemed rather too pathetic for the name. Desperate men with hollow cheeks and starving eyes drew weapons, although they nearly lacked the strength to wield them. He had no idea what the troops had been eating, perhaps each other. The place stunk of human waste and despair.

The captain of the caravan spoke quietly with one of the soldiers and then began unloading the wagon. Harb felt the weight of eyes on him before the tired rebel in stained robes strode over the rocks, the cold wind revealing the gauntness of his limbs. Open sky and vast mountains behind him made him look diminished even more than starvation.

"So ... you would bring us a second chance," the man said. "Tell me why I should not have you killed for taunting us with the most hateful thing of all—hope."

Z'ev squared his shoulders, his eyes gleaming in the dying light. "I am Z'ev ibn Nadiv of House Fouad, exiled heir of the murdered sha'al-izzat. By my father's blood, I will take the

Sun City from my brother, and I will deed land to those who stand with me. I *will* have my due."

Harb knew a moment of pride. His master possessed a fierce dignity, even in a loose merchant tunic and straw in his beard. Harb stepped forward, studying these men like a smith weighing the purity of his ore. Yes, he could temper them, though some of them might break before turning to harder alloy. Most were already strong, having weathered two seasons as fugitives in the harsh mountains.

"I am Marid ... and we would be more likely to stand with you if you had brought food instead of weapons, revered ksathra." The rebel possessed a faintly mocking air, and Harb glowered in response, taking a step forward before Z'ev put a restraining hand on his arm.

"We brought food," Z'ev said. "Wrinklefruit and dried meat, rice and pak. We hoped you had chosen a place near water. Warm blankets and spearheads. My guard, Harb, said there should be a few trees to make green hafts. He will teach your men all he knows of warfare—yours will be the first company to learn the secrets the Serask imparts to the sha'al-izzat's mutes."

"The dead gods have mercy on us," Marid whispered, "but I cannot refuse. My men are dying. Give us a few days to regain our strength, and then I will turn the troops over to you. Our fate is in your hands."

Harb gazed over the sea of frightened, starving faces and heard the whisper of doom.

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SPEAKING DREAMS

Muir kept her promise to the stone boat.

It took her two full days. By the time she had finished, her hands were scraped raw, but a monolith stood watch along the Omintago, a new wonder for those passing on the way north. Rodhlann sat in silent vigil, observing her with an expression she found curious. He did not chide her as she stepped away from the stone for the last time. Instead, he bandaged her hands with damp cloth and drew her beneath the folds of his burnoose to watch the light fade from the sky.

Zillah had given them enough supplies to reach the next village, a knot of huts populated with goats and old men, as she had described it. In exchange for their silence regarding her plan to join the Bedu, Zillah had summoned her grandmother's spirit to ask about the entrance to Maksoor Balad. While Zillah was not a true speaker, she owned other gifts, such as coaxing secrets from the dead. Although she was not able to give them complete directions, the map she drew was better than nothing.

Now they sat quietly before the Omintago, watching the cold, dark water that gave back only glimmers of light from milky Anumati. Sahen sulked, hiding his face high above rose-tinged clouds. The sky burned at its edges, crushed violet and blood melting into cobalt. Across the river, the plains stretched the mountains at their back. Nothing out here could break the wind, so they huddled together at the

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base of the monolith, sharing warmth in hopes of surviving the night.

* * * *

"It will be a difficult journey," Rodhlann said the next morning as they broke fast on naan and humus.

Muir licked her chapped lips and winced. "I know."

"You have already done enough.... I would not stop you if you chose to leave."

She glanced at the desolate spot where they had first crawled from the river and gave him an edged smile. "When you offer to free me, the alternative is always worse than staying with you."

His look seemed laced with irony. "Perhaps that is why I mention it only at such times."

"I will see this to its end," she told him quietly, "whatever that may be."

Rodhlann nodded. They shouldered their packs, he bearing their blankets and she, provisions. The only additional weight they carried was the tapestry; Muir was sure Rodhlann had forgotten it, or he probably would have insisted she leave it behind. It would have been more practical to clear out the space in her battered bag, making room for more food, further limited by other supplies such as a lamp and oil. She sloshed as she walked, laden with several full waterskins. Though Zillah had promised there would be water running down from the mountains, easily located, Muir found that difficult to credit, having grown up in Ar Cahra.

The village was precisely where Zillah had said it would be, nestled at the foot of the mountain they must ascend. Its

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denizens were stunned and awed by Rodhlann, but were too backward even to have heard of the afreets. Instead, they feasted him as a powerful lord and Muir repaid them by crafting trinkets out of stone, as her hands had now healed, her slave's calluses giving way to scars. They stayed two nights in the village, resting in the headman's hut. On the third morning, they strode toward the winding trail.

"You do not want to climb the mountain," the headman tried to warn them. "Only spirits of cold and death live there. Many go up to hunt, and none come down again."

"We do not have a choice."

Muir nodded as they set out, hoping they would know the way into the city when they saw it. Zillah's grandmother had mentioned a hidden way, a stone corridor; Muir had been frustrated the spirit could not be more clear. A light rain fell, dampening their clothes. Already, the stones were slick and a little icy as they climbed. Behrid rain would turn to sleet higher up, making progress more difficult.

"What happened to the city?" she asked, picking a path over sharp rocks.

"It has become part of the mountains," he answered, his breath wreathing his head. "Long ago, the Sut were as the Daiesthai are now, a dying race clinging to ancient ways. They lived in the Arkyries when the mountains were young and full of fire. One of these mountains spat molten rock over Maksoor Balad, where it has remained hidden ever since."

"Who were they?"

"People of the stone," he told her after a moment. "As the Daiesthai are air and the Jinun, fire."

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"Was there another elder race ... of the rain and sea?"

Rodhlann seemed to reflect, helping her over a rough place in the path. "Perhaps. If there was, I have forgotten them."

While she considered the possibility of a lost race, they ascended until the air thinned and it grew difficult to breathe. Muir's chest burned and she felt dizzy, wondering if she could survive up here. She was used to heat; the cold seemed to eat into her bones, making her tremble from head to toe. Overhead the sky was gray as a widow's face. It seemed strange to Muir that the sun looked smaller from such height. Surely they were closer to it—should it not be near enough for her to glimpse his smile? But he was a mere wink of light in the clouds, when he had sometimes seemed a burnished bronze giant in the desert.

Her chapped mouth burned and she licked at it to ease the pain. The moisture helped momentarily, but by the time they found a place to camp the first night, she tasted copper from her cracked lips. She shivered and could not seem to get a proper breath, light-headed and nauseous as if the world spun beneath her.

"It's climbing sickness," she heard as if from a distance, and then Muir felt his hands, oddly gentle, lowering her into a nest of blankets near a shallow rock overhang. She wanted to protest his departure; she saw a dark blur as he went, and then it was only wind and stone, whispering voices clamoring at her, until she felt a stark pain building in her temples.

So much earth, so much ...

She lost the light.

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Muir awoke to the rich aroma of roasting meat. Breathing was less difficult if she remembered to do it slowly. He had, he told her, found a few stunted trees for firewood and had managed to stun an aerie bird long enough to wring its neck. A more delicate woman might have grimaced at the sight of the little creature pierced through the throat and charring in the flickering flames, but all Muir could think was how good the tender flesh was going to taste. Her mouth filled with hot juices as she pushed herself upright. The movement made her head swim, but she focused on Rodhlann, wan and beautiful across the small campfire.

Silently, he grasped the bone handle of her eating knife and split the bird neatly down the center. "Careful, it is very hot."

The warmth felt good as she cupped her hands over the bird. It had been several days since they'd had fresh meat. Even in the village, the stew had been made from jerky—and no matter how long it was cooked, she could always tell the difference. But the fowl was delicious, faintly gamy but full of flavor. She devoured her half without speaking and then licked her fingers. As she did so, she noticed that he was eating with equal greed.

"You said climbing sickness. Will I feel better tomorrow?"

"I would like to promise that you will," he said slowly, "but I cannot. You may adapt, or you may feel awful until we come down from the mountain."

Muir paused, for she had been testing him, and it seemed he truly had changed. The old Rodhlann would have promised

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anything in order to keep her moving toward his goal. If nothing else, she had taught him truth.

She smiled. "If you are still hungry, we have a little naan and humus left. We should eat it before it goes bad."

He smiled as she drew out the cloth-wrapped flatbread and the small ceramic pot. Muir stood and rounded the fire, sitting beside him to help scrape the pot clean. Their fingers brushed as they ate and she caught him studying her in the firelight. What did he see? In the high house, she had been far too busy to stare at her own image in Immelia's glass, too busy to learn the lines of her own face, and her travels since had provided no opportunity.

"I once lived so," he realized aloud, looking up the dark mountain, and then out over the precipice, down the way they had come.

"You remember something?" The grease from the bird had soothed her sore lips, and she took care not to lick them as she waited for him to reply.

"Fragments. I remember traveling after our last great work. Eristorne was doomed; I remember ... feeling sure of it. Such shame I wanted to escape. I lived in the mountains alone ... the aerie birds are sluggish in the cold, easier to hunt. I drank their blood and nearly starved that first season." He shook his head, lucent eyes coming back to the reality that held him.

"While Eristorne fell into chaos and the untrained seized power, you retreated?"

"It sounds weak," he said quietly, "when you put it that way. I cannot remember why I had to go. Perhaps ... it will

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come if I do not focus on it. We have a long walk tomorrow. Let us settle against the mountainside with the fire between us and whatever may come."

Rodhlann could not tell her how he remembered the trick, but he had earlier placed four large flat stones near the fire, and he now laid them against the back wall of their makeshift shelter. The stones were warm and he layered a single blanket over the top to keep them from burning her skin. Then he tended the fire, as the wind blew ashes over them until Muir felt sure they both must be gray as the rain-laden sky.

He settled behind her without awkwardness. In the cold, it made sense to share heat, and though neither would admit it, they had become accustomed to each other. Muir felt glad at the weight of his arm across her waist—for the first time, she was not alone, as she had always been, trapped in circumstances not of her choosing. And though she had seldom known hardships as profound as those that accompanied this journey, she could not regret trading comfortable captivity for the danger of the wide world.

"Were you lonely?" She asked the question after a lengthy silence, having contemplated why he might have fled Eristorne. It seemed strange to her, forgetting so many things, but it must be the cost of such a long life.

"I think ... I might have been." His pale fingers twirled a coarse lock of her dark hair. "I have been so many throughout the cycles—a carefree child in my mother's garden; a young man training to join the house guards; a dutiful soldier minding the doors at the palace; a hermit and a

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wanderer; a prodigal brother, who returned home to find Eristorne on the edge of the abyss; a monster from the waste—”

“You were never a monster.”

“No?” He sounded almost amused, and Muir felt a hot prickle in her cheeks. “Then what am I?”

The answer came to her, allowing her to salvage her dignity. “If we succeed, a father.”

“A father,” he repeated in a voice to make the heavens weep. “I will owe you my very soul, if you give such a gift to me.”

Muir wondered fleetingly what else she would sacrifice in granting his wish, but she said only, “I will remember that.”

She slept fitfully and dreamed of argent water surging against dark rocks, dreamed of his pale body over hers, lightning in her skin. Muir awoke, knotted inside, with his silver hair silken on her cheeks, his breath mingling with hers. In a heartbeat, she knew his dreams had mirrored hers, leaving him more bewildered than she.

He traced the curve of her cheek with a fingertip, a feathery touch that learned the arch of her brow and the slope of her nose. “We could,” he whispered. “The longer I am with you, the more I remember. There can be no issue, but...”

“It is only Zillah's charm,” she made herself say. “Closer than lovers, she said.”

He hesitated, and Muir closed her eyes again. She would not show need—it *was* only Zillah's charm. She hated him,

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truly she did, and never more than when he said, "I am glad you cling to reason, little maid. I seem to have lost my way."

She understood and could not nurse the grudge she wanted to form in self-defense. Beneath their bond, his yearning must repulse him, much as Muir would feel if she found herself lusting after a goat. *Even if it was a talking goat* ... She shook her head irritably and forced herself back to sleep.

* * * *

Two days later, Muir felt sure she had never been so miserable, not even after confessing to another's crime to save a kitchen girl the weight of the lash. Muir had received a flogging and the wounds had festered. She'd nearly died of fever, but at least she'd been warm. Her nose felt as if it might fall off, and her face was too numb for her to feel it at all. She'd lost sensation in her hands and feet the day before, and to make matters worse, Rodhlann had not been able to find any dry wood for a fire.

Dry meat and the last of the stale naan had comprised their dinner the night before and breakfast that morning. Her stomach moaned in protest, but she could do little but follow his uncompromising back. As the final sour note in the cacophony of ill luck, Muir could not seem to make out what the earth voices were saying. So much stone surrounded her that her head was filled with ghostly whispers, all murmuring bits of nonsense or ancient gossip.

Halfway up the mountain, Rodhlann lost his patience, snapping, "This is the one thing / cannot do, Muir of the

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earth. If you cannot find the city, we may as well go our separate ways."

"It is not the *only* thing," she muttered, "or we would not be up here."

His silence was sharper and colder than the mountain air.

They pushed on, Muir staring at the lean line of his back. She had hurt him; once she would have marveled that she had the power, but the bond had changed much between them. She knew his weaknesses instinctively now.

Her temples throbbed with the effort to comprehend the constant whispers, like ragged nails scraping the back of her head. She followed, silently cursing her lack of skill, until she found herself fixing on one more than the others. *Up*, it seemed to be urging, *up, close now ...*

"I am sorry," she told the wind, but it flung her words back and he did not hear.

Exhausted and cold, she lost track of how many steps she took, how many times she stumbled and nearly fell over a sharp rock. The easy trail was long behind them. They climbed in truth now, seeking handholds in slippery stone, places to wedge their feet and lever their bodies upward, against the very desire of the mountain, it seemed.

Then as she pulled herself onto the next ledge, she came face to muzzle with a thing with brown fur and glowing eyes, a thing that hissed and sprang at her. Muir screamed and felt herself clawing at air. The stones spun at her head as she fell into nothing, and then she hit mountain. Her nails tore as she dug at slick, unforgiving stone; she gathered momentum, plummeting, shredding her back. There was no ledge

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beneath—from there, she would tumble another several hundred arms before breaking on the slope beneath.

She sobbed as she felt herself falling again—terror clawed at her throat. And then she felt a painful snap at her shoulder as her belly struck rock, knocking the wind out of her. Muir forced herself to look up and saw a pale hand wrapped about her wrist, a hand that seemed almost too delicate to hold her. Trembling, she dug her feet against the stone and tried to scramble up, whimpering as she heard the rocks crumble away. The wind moaned as if in sympathy, even as its icy fingers scabbled at her sore back.

“Be still,” he growled, “or I may drop you.”

Fear showed in the tight line of his mouth. Her weight had to hurt him, for he had lost his numen-imbued strength, but he managed to wrap his other hand about her wrist. Rodhlann lay on his stomach and arched his back, straining to draw her up. At first, it seemed he could not succeed—his entire body locked in an inhuman arc. He had no purchase; she wanted to whisper he should let her go ... and suddenly she knew how he must have felt, desperate and helpless on the river.

She licked her sore lips and ground her knees against the rock face. “You will not let me fall.”

At those words, she felt his determination bear fruit, first by fingers and then hands. Muir got her elbows on the ledge and half crawled, half fell forward, *not* down. He was shaking by the time she tumbled into his arms.

She clung; he held her.

Moments later, she realized she was still in one piece, though her belly was scraped raw and her back was afire with

cuts and bruises. She glanced up at him and saw he had hurt his face, a jagged slice marring his left cheek.

"You dove after me," she realized. "You would have died for me."

"I would die *without* you," he snarled back. "You forget, little maid, I am the leech that feeds from you. Your clumsiness nearly killed us both. That was only a mountain kit, hunting aerie birds before nightfall. If you had any sense, you would have seen it was trying to *escape* you."

"If I had any sense, I would have stayed with the Bedu. Or the Enadi ... or left you to die in Ar Cahra," she returned sharply. "I think it has been safely proven that I have no sense, Rodhlann, else I would not still be with *you*. I have given up half my life for you and never heard a word of thanks. In fact, as I recall, you were *angry*."

"I have never loathed anyone as I loathe you," he muttered.

"I know."

But he held her more closely and they did not try to climb farther that day.

"I fear I may have ruined us both, though," Rodhlann said eventually, after her heart had stopped leaping in her ears. "I lost my pack in the fall."

The bedrolls and blankets.

Muir closed her eyes against a wave of panic. How could they survive the cold? *Think*, she told herself, closing out the whisper of the icy mountain. *We have not come so far only to fail. Think ...*

The tapestry.

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She knew an almost painful reluctance but drew it from the safety of her bag, exposing it to the elements, but she told herself it was their best chance of surviving the night. If they found the entrance the next morning, the stone corridor—a cave?—should be substantially warmer than the mountainside. The tapestry was tightly woven and should provide enough protection to see them through. But her hands still shook as she seized it.

“I think we will be well enough,” she said, “if we stay close. This will help.”

Rodhlann seemed startled. “I thought you'd lost this days ago ... or left it behind.”

“Some things are too important to abandon.”

As the tapestry encircled them, she felt a shock of heat, inexplicable but welcome. It left residual tingles in her skin, filling her with lethargy. Her mind swam, and then she experienced a painful twist, followed by a sense of dislocation.

And then the world disappeared.

It returned gradually as she strained to see through the gloom, but it was not the world she knew. Instead of a desolate mountainside, she stood in a valley full of flowers, overlooking a crystal-clear pool. Animals for which she had no names played in the meadow, showing no fear. A wet nose burrowed against her palm and she stroked the creature's muzzle. Muir felt the first tremor of fear when she saw that the pale, dainty hand was not her own.

A dream?

She reached up to touch her face and hair and found her nose too narrow, the hair too soft. When she pulled a lock

forward, she saw it gleamed golden. *Not me. I must be dreaming. But who am I?* Although she possessed no memory of falling asleep, she told herself not to worry. Their recent ordeal had been enough to make anyone wish to escape—this idyll was probably for rejuvenation.

Just when she had resolved to enjoy the dream, so she could awake refreshed, she saw him.

And she knew who she was.

"Kaveh," she whispered, for he could be no other.

He was the night, darkness distilled to its essence, and so beautiful it hurt to look at him. His eyes shone like stars and she was deathly afraid he would touch her and that she would not want him to stop and she would then die in her sleep, failing Rodhlann who had become a phantom to her.

"Minau," he answered, a black-velvet voice embroidered in gold. "Muir. You, who have always been mine ... I awake to find our time so fleeting ... again. But I have waited eons for you. I can wait a little longer."

She closed her eyes against his glamour. "I ... am not Minau."

"No," he agreed softly. "But you were. We are always moonlight and darkness, we two."

Her breath hitched. She would *not* believe him. It was inconceivable that she had once worn a legend's skin—that her spirit had once breathed with Minau's mouth, a mouth so sweet it had enchanted Kaveh himself.

"There is much I must explain before the night passes. When you awaken, it will be on the mountainside, not with me. Come." He offered his hand and she took it, for she could

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not help herself, and she gasped at the heat that passed between them. The lord of death should be cold and grim, not so exquisite that she wanted to lie down at his feet and never rise again. "So much Rodhlann does not remember ... because of me."

"He said he knew you."

"All Daiesthai did," he told her simply. "After their sorcerers stole the secret of immortality, I became a welcome guest in their cities. There was no work for me. This was before their last great act ... hubris so profound that it altered your world."

"What did they do?" Muir felt his urgency as they hurried toward the pool. Whatever he needed to impart, it must be soon or she might awaken.

They stopped at the edge of the water, where it lapped against soil that glittered as if with ground diamonds. The sky glimmered with unearthly light, a thousand broken rainbows given back through beveled glass. Kaveh turned, taking both her hands in his, and his touch made it difficult for her to think. She was remembering fragments, glimmers of another life—she could almost see Minau's face.

Kaveh did not wait for her questions; he probably knew them better than she. "That last day, I came as an honored guest. The others—because the sorcerers had done their research well. They knew what offerings would be irresistible and arranged them with precision. One by one, we came: angry Jyotish, silent Muni, fierce Raktim, bright Dyausa, mysterious Shashida, wild Altair, vengeful Bela, blazing Animukh, and quiet Dharani. One by one we came and

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accepted our tainted gifts. The binding began as we weakened. Some of us fled, pulling fragments of ourselves into hiding. They stole the rest of our power—but it is a curse to them. Our numen permits them to pull divine energy unrestrained, but they are not strong enough to hold the power. And now they are dying.”

“Rodhlann guarded the door that last day ... and you took refuge in him?”

“And have mostly slept,” he said. “I never wished to harm him, only to survive.”

“His desire for a child ... is that his or yours?”

A fleeting smile curved his mouth. “What think you, my jewel?”

When he spoke the endearment, she remembered—and it hurt, a thousand lashes born of longing and anguish. She had borne a basket as well, hers full of gathered herbs and his full of bones, his black and hers golden as an emperor's chalice. He had known her as mortal long before she guessed his nature, and the sun smiled hot and sweet over them as they spoke. The jahnu were wrong, though; there was no great waste in those days, no poison spring. Ar Cahra was so much smaller—the world had been different. But she had been lonely then, as now, finding Jyotish difficult and cruel.

Muir remembered his allure; she had known it was wrong, known she should not ... but the hunger he evoked was greater than anything she'd known, more powerful than her vow to a sour-faced goddess who never gave. It grew difficult for her to think—she wanted this dream to turn down that

forgotten road, wracking her with the same exquisite joy some tellers still spoke of.

But he had not come to visit her as a lover—no, he must teach. And so she made herself consider his question. “I think you do not want to be lost. You fire the survival instinct in him. Are there others who found similar shelter?”

“Shashida ... she has spoken to you all your life, Muir who was Minau.”

Besides Dharani of Earth? Muir knew a moment of bewilderment—and then she understood. “Erathos?”

He smiled as he brushed a lock of silken hair away from her cheek. “You have always been clever, my golden one.”

“But how is it that the world goes on without the gods?”

It was a good question and one that made him pause, as if considering his words. “If you set a kel spinning on a table, it spins for a while, even unattended.”

“And our world is now ... in an unguided spin?”

“Exactly so. The balance has been lost. I have—*most* of us have lost the will that once made us divine. I am but a shard now, an echo of a dream. But our power remains harnessed, instead of being allowed to nourish the world.”

“Do you mean...” She paused over the question. These were such grandiose matters, fallen into the hands of a former maid. “That the world itself is endangered?”

“In time,” he answered quietly. “It will not be dramatic ... and will take many human lifetimes. The land ... will merely continue to become exhausted. The sweet water will continue to dry up without the numen to replenish it.”

“Then I must find a way to release it.”

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"I knew you would say that." Kaveh gave a fleeting smile as he drew her close. "The journey will take you to the last Daiesthai city, Eristorne. Now watch the water. I must show you." Long moments passed. She wanted to turn her face away, but the lord of death was implacable and held her fast. "You will come from Maksoor Balad into despair—and only you have the power to alter it. When the time is right, you will know what you must do."

"Why me?" Such horror she had seen. Muir trembled and hid her face in his shoulder. "I am *no* one."

He cupped his hands on her cheeks and eased her head back. His eyes were full of dusk and starlight. As his lips met hers, pleasure spiked into pain; she ached with it. Memories swelled, as she remembered joining with him on the stones. *Always moonlight and darkness, we two.* She swayed and he steadied her, pressing six crimson petals into her palm. "You are my bride, Minau-who-was," he said. "And I will wait until the cycle brings you back to me." Kaveh touched her temple and whispered, "Fly."

I cannot lose you again—I will not survive it.

I give you no more burdens than you can bear, my jewel.

She fell into crystalline water, her heart a living flame in her chest, until she struck mountain and awoke with her eyes full of frozen tears.

* * * *

Rodhlann did not remember.

Muir felt vaguely surprised as she struggled upward. Things should have been different; he should have *known*. But Rodhlann was the same distant, faintly sardonic

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companion he had always been. She might have been convinced she had imagined it, a fever dream summoned by longing and misery, if she had not opened her hand to find those withered petals. Now they traveled safely at the bottom of her bag, along with the tapestry. Neither rain nor soil had marred it and she had begun to think it indestructible, a thing beyond mortal harm.

That morning, she had traced Kaveh's woven features with obvious tenderness and then glanced up to find Rodhlann staring at her with a peculiar expression. He'd cleared his throat and said, "Let us see if we cannot do better today."

Absurdly, she felt a profound sense of loss. She was weary, hungry, and heartsore, as if a lover had died. The fragments of Minau-who-was drove her mad—she had once known how to heal wounds and cure diseases, once possessed secrets Jyotish imparted only to her priestesses, but she'd lost all of it; only echoes remained. In a way, she wished Kaveh had not awakened at the tapestry's touch; she wished herself as oblivious as Rodhlann.

Nodding, she fell in behind him and tried to focus. They were close. She had known as much the previous day, before her fall. And she felt stronger, almost as if the dream had tempered her failing resolve. As she walked, Muir studied Rodhlann, seeking signs of Kaveh in him, and then did not know who wanted whom.

We are always moonlight and darkness, we two.

They climbed for half the day without speaking, and Muir made herself close off the ache, listening to the strongest of the voices. *Now. Turn now.*

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She came up against a wall of solid rock. Frustrated, she rubbed her temples with fingers cold as the wind howling in the crags and hollows below. To her weary ears, it sounded like a miserable child. She wished they had come better prepared, wished they had more food, wished so many things. Muir sank down on the stones and was not sure she could climb another step.

"Are we near?" Rodhlann sounded as exhausted as she felt.

The fall had taken a great deal from them both, bruises and scrapes adding to the pain of the journey. His cheek healed raggedly and would scar, marring the perfection of his features, and his lips were chapped as well, but there was no grease to rub on them. She'd told him not to lick them, but received only a mordant stare in response.

Her head throbbed. "We are ... I think."

"You think," he repeated, his tone laced with mockery. "I think we shall die up here. I must have been mad to believe you could do this ... grant the wishes of the afreet."

Why had she ever thought his voice beautiful? He carried Kaveh in him; why must she have such a great love and a great hate bound into one man? Muir considered how much she loathed him for a moment, before replying, "If it is so easy to understand the voices, then why do *you* not listen to them?"

His eyes flared with points of light and his raw lips tightened. "If I could, I would not need you, little maid."

"Yes, you would ... *leech*."

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For a moment, she thought he might strike her, despite his promises, and she drew back against the mountain. Even jagged stone seemed more welcoming than his taut, white face. And then she knew—it was not anger in his luminous eyes. Stabbing blind, she had wounded him; the truth could always bite deep.

“I cede the dispute,” he said at last. “You are cruel, little maid, and I could almost take pride in my influence, were it not for the way you sharpen your tongue on me.” But she felt no pride at having won. Instead, it felt like loss when he turned from her. “We will rest here. I have no inclination to go further this day.”

Things can hardly get worse. She slept like an ember at his back, missing the warmth of his arms. In the morning, she saw what the voices had been trying to tell her. Muir groaned and jostled Rodhlann until he acknowledged her with a muttered oath.

“I have found the entrance,” she whispered, running a nail along the fissure in the stone. “But I fear only dune flies may journey on from here.”

He sat up, his platinum hair spiky at the crown of his head. “No! This cannot be....”

“Did you think it would be a vast cavern or an immense marble door?”

“Please,” he said quietly, then fell silent, as if grieving.

Muir could not goad him further, not when she saw the broken slump of his shoulders. She ached with the weight of the journey, the weight of promises, and the threat of failure.

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And she found herself making another vow. "I will find a way," she whispered. "I will move the mountain for you, if need be."

Rodhlann looked up slowly, touched her red lips with a pale fingertip, and gave her Kaveh's smile.

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GENEROSITY'S LASH

Japhet stared out over his father's garden.

He heard the impatient breathing and creaking chairs behind him, but he could not afford to show weakness. From beyond the palace gates, he heard the chanting voices. "Qutuz! Qutuz! Qutuz!" Weapons echoed, clang of steel on steel, as besieged guards battled back wave after wave of rebels inflamed to suicidal frenzy, breaking themselves on the walls, running onto the waiting spears of the Elite Guard. He lived in fear that soon numbers alone would drag down his loyal soldiers. The rebels had a new hero—in executing Malak Tadit, Japhet had made him a martyr. Now the rebels wore slivers of blue glass in the boy's honor, as one of them had seen a shard fall from his dying fingers.

Nothing had gone as Japhet had planned in months, and his back was to the wall. He had not expected the search for Qutuz to take so long. He had not expected it would take so long to locate his thrice-cursed cripple of a brother. His pact with Abrim, however profitable in the short term, had alienated the other houses; and while he would like to charge others with his mistakes, Japhet knew he had only himself to blame.

His position was tenuous. Husayn, his lover of four years, had died the previous week, tasting a bowl of soup brought from the palace kitchen, startling Japhet from his comfortable assumption that fortune favored him and that it was only a matter of time until his people produced the heir's talon. As

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he stared into the glass, he faced the fact that he might never acquire it—Z'ev might have been wise enough to hide or even destroy it. Japhet had not known his brother possessed that much steel; it was the kind of decision he would have made.

At last he turned, looking at twelve faces, some no older than his own. After his father's death, his councilors had abdicated one by one. "This is no longer your father's city," they had said. "We acknowledge our day has passed."

In truth, it had been a shrewd maneuver, effectively robbing him of the control he had enjoyed for the past five years. Nadiv's death could not have been worse timed, for Japhet's plans were completely in disarray. Quiet cunning had slain both Nadiv and Husayn, and Japhet found himself afraid to eat anything, fearing his tasters might have turned against him or were secret dissidents dedicated to toppling House Fouad. Japhet knew he was starting to see plots behind every bush, but caution had kept him from dying like his father, wheezing for breath and with his tongue blackening in his mouth.

"Councilors," he said at last, "we will hear from my commander, Suliman, and then Dhul Bakr will be joining us with a report of his search for Z'ev."

He hoped Suliman had some good news. Japhet took his father's chair, raised slightly above the others, and tried to look comfortable there. The truth was, he saw his father's ghost all around him, still dozing here as if he did not even know he was supposed to have passed beyond.

The commander strode into the council chamber, bowed once to Japhet and once to the council, then said, "I fear I

have grave tidings, sayyid. I will allow Naji to tell his own story as best he can."

An uneasy chill ran over Japhet's skin as the council stirred in their chairs. More grave tidings—he could hardly bear more. The city was slipping through his grasp. *You cannot show weakness.* Japhet made his face like stone and watched the guard's progress into the chamber; he scuttled more than walked, as if he feared being attacked from behind.

"You may speak," Suliman told him. "Make it brief."

He was a greasy individual, much in need of scouring, and he had not tended his beard in many days. The man did not meet any eyes as he spoke; instead he studied the floor. "I barely escaped with my life," he mumbled. "My entire company was lost. We were searching the foothills of the Arkyries, for we received a tip that Z'ev might have taken shelter there."

A tip? Japhet found Abrim with his eyes, and the older man nodded slightly as if to say, *My contacts work for you, Japhet.*

Suliman prodded the man with an elbow. "What kind of company?"

Japhet already knew the answer, for he had recognized this man, and the shiver became a full shudder of dread. "Second squadron, Elite Guard," the man whispered. "I was their interpreter."

The council rumbled, young men leaning their heads together to whisper with alarm. Japhet knew precisely how they felt, for what worldly danger could destroy an entire company of mutes? In a rare moment of accord, all agreed they did not want it marching on Inay.

"When did you flee, Naji?" Suliman was an asset; he invariably knew what questions Japhet wanted asked. "And what happened up to that point?"

Naji drew a deep breath as if to steady himself. "We were riding through the hills. I heard nothing, but our leader said an ambush awaited us over the next rise. He had ... a way of knowing such things. But the other guards felt it was only common hill bandits—and what hope had they against the second squadron of Inayan Elite Guard?" Naji still sounded almost numb with disbelief. "We rode on, alert but not alarmed."

"What then?" Suliman prompted.

Japhet leaned forward, like most of the council. Only Abrim looked composed, almost uninterested, but Japhet did not doubt he was noting every detail. The rest of the advisers shifted uneasily in their chairs, tapping fingertips or crinkling paper they had brought to the meeting in hope of looking more important.

"The hills ... came alive. There was no enemy to fight, but our men were injured. Wounds opened as if by themselves—bones broke, throats split wide—" Naji shivered and licked his lips like a nervous cat.

"And you fled," Japhet said quietly.

"Not before they all died," the guard whimpered. "All."

"This is a grievous loss," said Yasir of House Ohed. "It will take twenty cycles to train replacements for those guards."

The other advisers nodded gravely, as if Yasir had spoken with great wisdom, instead of making an idiotic and unnecessary observation. His council was made up of

beardless boys and middle-aged men who had been content to live in their father's houses until forced into a political world for which they had no training. None could offer substantive counsel, yet they made a habit of balking at his every move, simply because of his decision to add Abrim to their number. But, in fact, the merchant had proved to be his chief ally, to his great surprise; and on several occasions, Abrim's advice had salvaged a potentially disastrous situation.

"How is it that you were spared?" Suliman seemed to study the interpreter closely, but it was impossible for Naji to grow more frightened. He was already shaking like a palsied old man.

"Sorcery," a councilor muttered, and the rest nodded.

They are sheep, content to be led. Looking at them, Japhet felt physically ill. He made himself sit a little straighter, maintaining the stone face Abrim had taught him. In a few months Japhet had learned more of imposing his will from the merchant than Nadiv had taught him in his whole life. Abrim nodded infinitesimally—with approval, Japhet hoped. Though he had initially loathed the way Abrim had blackmailed his way onto the council, Japhet had come to admire the neatness and the audacity of the scheme. He hoped to be able to manipulate others as deftly, one day.

"Not sorcery," said Abrim lazily, rising to pace around the table with a look that Japhet recognized. He almost felt sorry for the interpreter. "You did not stay to watch them die, did you?" Naji's mouth worked and he glanced about as if seeking refuge from the First Councilor. "And why would you?" Abrim gave a gentle smile. "If whatever foe lurking in the hills was

too powerful for the Elite Guard, what hope had you against them?" Naji nodded hesitantly and seemed to relax. "No, the better question would be: Why did they choose to let you go?"

"To bring us word," Japhet realized aloud.

Abrim flashed a wider smile, full of sharp teeth and wolfish approbation. "An excellent assessment, sayyid. If my people were correct when they informed us that your brother had taken refuge in those hills, then I must conclude this is his warning to you: 'I am coming.'"

Japhet's hands tightened on his knees. He hated Abrim's dramatic flare; there was no reason those words should sound so ominous. "A surprise attack on one squadron," he said dismissively. "He has no hope against the entire Elite legion, against the Sun City itself."

"No?" Abrim strode to the window, and all eyes followed him. Sometimes, Japhet thought, it was almost as if Abrim ran the council meetings. "Have you forgotten your history so soon, honored sayyid? How did House Fouad come to reign over Inay, some three hundred cycles past?"

"A rebellion," he muttered.

"And a peasant army," Yasir put in.

Japhet had never thought he would miss his somnolent council, those graybeards dreaming silently in their chairs. He missed their bleary eyes and confusion. His life had been so much simpler when Nadiv was alive, though it scorched him to admit as much.

Abrim was nodding. "One must always hope for the best and prepare for the worst."

"A creed that has profited you greatly over the years," said Mossan of House Dasim.

The merchant smiled. "All things profit me. I have learned to invest wisely."

"At the cost of others."

Japhet snapped his gaze back to the councilors. Suliman stood with the terrified Naji, but Japhet would not intervene. The others already took Abrim for his pet monkey—he would not give them further fuel for the fire. Abrim spun from the window, his eyes black as pitch as he stared down the length of the table, and finally his hard gaze settled on Yasir of House Ohed.

"If you have a quarrel with me," Abrim said very quietly, "then you may seek me in private. I ask that you not waste the council's valuable time with a personal matter." Japhet felt a cold claw scratching at his neck. Looking at Abrim was like staring into the heart of murder. Yasir pulled back in his chair and looked as if he might soil himself, then he shook his head. He slumped when Abrim finally turned from him to regard Naji once more. "And so, that leaves the matter of what to do with this one. As I see it, sayyid"—he folded his hands neatly and smiled—"we have a problem regarding his ... disposal. On one hand, he brought us valuable tidings, which should be rewarded. But on the other, he abandoned his comrades, an act of vile cowardice."

"Truly a conundrum," Japhet said, tapping one fingertip lightly on the arm of his chair. "What say you, councilors?" It was amusing to watch them shift uneasily in their chairs. None was accustomed to deciding the fate of others, for all

their protestations. Over the years of strong Fouad rule, the other houses had grown soft, more accustomed to spending their days choosing silk for their robes than governing the Sun City. Japhet smiled. "Then I present this solution. As a reward, I offer one night with any of my father's concubines."

A few councilors perked up, mostly the beardless boys. One—Japhet thought it was Sardi of House Gerah—said, "A lavish prize, sayyid, one any man might envy."

And Najji was smiling, although he soon would not be. "I leave punishment in the able hands of my commander."

Suliman grinned. Japhet knew Suliman ran toward cruelty, but he pretended to be unaware. If Najji survived whatever Suliman had in store, he would not be the same afterward. Najji went, wailing and dragging his feet, in the arms of two burly guards. Japhet caught a glimmer of a smile on Mossan's lips. Perhaps that one, a man with a long beard and curly black hair, might have some steel in him.

He made a mental note to get to know the councilor better and then said, "Please call Dhul Bakr. I would hear his report next."

The old spider came, shuffling his feet beneath a gray robe that hid most of time's depredations. Bakr's face could not be so easily concealed, a topographical study in cunning and cruelty with its pale, thin lips and blue-veined lids, eyes like embers sunk deep into the yellow paper of his face. Looking at him, Japhet felt vaguely startled that the man did not burst into flame—he was a dead thing of sere leaves and dry sticks, like a needlebug waiting with awful patience for its next victim.

"You summoned me, sayyid?"

Japhet shuddered. Even the Serask's voice sounded of the grave. "I would hear of your search."

Dhul Bakr clasped his hands within the loose sleeves of his robe, where his long yellow nails clicked against each other like the chitin of insect shells. "I am sorry, sayyid," the Serask murmured. "We had them.... We were so close I could taste it." His pink tongue slithered out to wet his pale lips. "But we lost them in Feroz."

He glanced at Abrim, who still stood near the window. The merchant merely smiled, giving Japhet no hint as to how he ought to handle the situation. An execution was clearly beyond his reach here. The Serask was almost untouchable by the sha'al-izzat. Dhul Bakr was the closest thing Inay had to a high priest; he saw omens and called down ill luck in addition to molding the boys into steel-sinewed mutes who evoked terror in all who looked on them.

"How did you lose them?" Questions were safe. He would be judged thoughtful instead of reckless, although he wanted to leap from his father's chair and rattle the old man until his yellow teeth clacked.

Dhul Bakr is nervous. Japhet realized that as he heard more clicking from the sleeves of the man's robe. *Restless hands.* His moment of amusement was fleeting, however, as he realized *he* would likely have to deal with whatever had the power to unnerve the Serask. Japhet swore silently. *Why did I ever want to rule?*

"The guard Harb removed his shackles."

No one, not even Abrim, understood the import of that pronouncement. Seeing the bewilderment on his councilors' faces, Japhet did not mind requesting clarification. "Why is that significant?"

The Serask drew a rag-wrapped bundle from the shadow of his robe, and Japhet braced himself for some grisly trophy. But the light shone on a pair of simple bronze bracers. Japhet had seen similar ornaments on every mute in the Sun City. He arched an inquiring brow.

"At the time of their dedication to the defense of the izzat, who is no more, and the sha'al-izzat—" Bakr inclined his withered head toward Japhet "—we shackle them, a compulsion, if you will, to maintain their service. These bands also allow us to track them if one should go missing, as Harb has done. It should not be possible for him to remove them. It should have killed him."

"Perhaps it did," said Yasir.

Mossan was nodding. "Perhaps those were cut from his wrists by a thief."

"A thief who then wrapped his treasure in rags and hid it in an alley near the market?" Dhul Bakr studied the two councilors as if considering how best to redistribute their parts.

"That would seem highly improbable," Abrim agreed.

"So it seems the guard managed to remove them himself." Japhet stood then, pacing the length of the council chamber. He found himself standing before the wall of relics, remnants of his house's glory—a death mask of Fouad's face with its weathered lines, a staff that once belonged to the first

Serask, a spear taken from the dead hand of the last to oppose House Fouad. "What does that mean, Bakr?"

For a moment, the only sound in the room was the labored breathing of the Serask, rasping like jagged metal over rock. "It means," he said slowly, "that the power of his compulsion is weakening."

"His compulsion?" Mossan asked the question before Japhet could. He cut the man a sharp look, but in truth, he did not mind.

"The mutes would be ... dangerous, if they were self-willed—able to make their own decisions, choose their own paths. We generally bind them first to the defense of the izzat, then the Sun City, and finally to one master. All these layers of compulsion prevent them from acting against us. It seems at least in Harb's case, the magic failed us."

"Could the Elite Guard in Inay join the revolt?" Sardi might be young and easily distracted by the thought of concubines, but he grasped the threat more quickly than any other councilor.

Japhet nodded his approval, even as he noticed Abrim smiling. The Serask considered the question before replying, "If their compulsions wane as well ... it is possible. I have nothing more to report, sayyid." His nails clicked more rapidly and Japhet felt his flesh crawl. "I think I must study the Elite Guard to be certain Inay does not face a threat more dire than from peasants."

"Go," Japhet told Bakr. "Send word when you know something more."

The old spider shuffled from the room. Everyone breathed more deeply as the guard shut the door behind him, and then Japhet faced his councilors once more.

"So. My brother gathers an army, and our mutes may soon break free of the fetters that keep them compliant to our will. Rebels riot in the streets, and soon we shall starve if I do not reopen the gates. Do I state our situation frankly enough?"

Abrim smiled. "Your candor is painful, sayyid."

There was a moment of silence, as the council collectively realized he awaited a sensible response. Finally, Yasir cleared his throat after sharing a secretive glance with Mossan. "We feel that much of the threat to Inay would be eliminated, if you stepped down as heir to the title of sha'al-izzat."

Japhet arched a brow, drawing strength from the relics behind him—evidence of his ancestors' greatness. "And who would govern, Yasir? You?" Japhet gave a caustic smile. "If you have the steel to take Inay from me, then do so. *Now.*" He paced forward, stopping before the man's chair. "Name your weapon, Yasir. There will be no guards called. Take my father's chair if you are strong enough ... but you will not do so without bathing your feet in blood."

"I ... did not intend to imply that I am fit to rule in your stead," Yasir muttered. "I only thought to find a way out of a dangerous situation."

Spineless cur—full of fury until a bigger dog shows its teeth. Japhet curled his lip as he spun away, staring hard at the councilors at the table. "Z'ev is coming. Do you truly think he will stand down if he sees another in my father's chair? Do you?" He met their eyes one by one and saw them look away.

"And the rebellion is a problem for all of us. Do you think they will not plunder your homes and rape your women? Do you think they do not covet your lands and titles? They cry out for equality, but if they could, they would trample their brothers into dirt to live as one of us. Do you think the mobs—the Elite Guard can scarcely contain them!—are coming for me alone? Our best chance lies together. The Sun City has always been held by strength, and it shall always be so. If you do not have the courage to stand with me, tell me now."

Sardi spoke first. "I am with you, Sha'al-izzat Japhet."

He felt fierce pride then. The whispers came at first slowly and then with more conviction. Yasir was the last to add his voice. In the face of unknown evils, the nobles had chosen as Abrim had predicted they would. Japhet began to think the merchant possessed some sorcery that let him peer into the human mind.

"A wise decision." Benevolence cost him nothing. With a few words, he had bolstered his position with the nobles while feeding their fear of the rebels and Z'ev. "When we meet again, I hope to have good news for you. Until then..."

The councilors took their cue and filed from the room, their misgivings quieted for the moment. And when all had gone but Abrim, the merchant said, "You handled that well, sayyid. I would have expected more bloodletting from you."

"I have learned a great deal from you," Japhet returned honestly. "There are more subtle ways to instill fear in your enemies."

He felt the weight of Abrim's eyes before the merchant spoke. "I wish..."

"What?"

Abrim shook his head and smiled faintly. "Nothing, young sayyid. Our course is set and wishes will not alter it. Do you need me for further discussion?"

Japhet shook his head. "Seek your concubine, as I know you have been wanting to do."

Abrim looked almost shy—the expression sitting oddly on his shrewd features. "I ... yes. I should send her away before I grow too fond of her."

"It is too late for that, you old devil."

Abrim went, chuckling.

Tendrils of smoke curled up from the lamps as the servants extinguished them. Japhet paused in the doorway to salute his father's ghost; he had told no one of these visitations, lest they judge the new sha'al-izzat mad, but the old man remained in his chair even after the servants had gone, a silver-gray wisp that gave a little light. Nadiv stared at his son with holes where his eyes should have been, and Japhet felt again the guilt because he had failed to find his father's killer.

Japhet felt no grief—he might have even murdered the old man himself, if he had failed to die in a timely fashion. But blood must have blood; he must find the one who had poisoned Nadiv's tea, or he would know no peace.

It seemed unlikely that he would know peace in any case.

His boots rang quietly on the marble floor, as he strode to his private chamber, where he would spend half the night poring over reports from Suliman's subcommanders.

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He missed Husayn. Whatever the youth's faults, he had known when to be silent, when to pour the tea, and when to stand behind Japhet kneading away the day's tension. Never again would Japhet hold him or feel the tremor of his limbs, never look into the intense darkness of his eyes. As he opened his door, he wondered if it had been worth it.

"You look weary."

Japhet spun. There was no mistaking her strange, slurred accent, but he arched a brow as Fionne came like walking flame from between two alabaster pillars. Her presence gave him pause; he neither liked nor trusted her, but he always felt a quiet throb when she passed, scented with chadra ushak and her own superiority.

"It has been a long day," he allowed.

He did not step back as she advanced, although he sensed strangeness about her. But something in the green fire of her eyes made his palms sweat, and he clasped his hands behind him.

"And a difficult one," she almost purred. "But you prevailed ... won the nobles over against the odds." She was very close; she had backed him against the wall beside his chamber door.

He had not been with a woman, since sneaking a night with his father's favorite, many cycles past. Husayn had been safer in myriad ways. He felt a curl of heat when she pressed herself against him. She was strong and lush, all that a woman should be—and with a hint of danger that made his blood sing. Fionne was fierce and unbroken to bedsport; she could slay a man with her teeth. Japhet had made the slaver

tell that story twice; how she had been found dressed only in her wild hair and milky skin, her mouth wet from her kill.

"If I invite you in, will you murder me in my sleep?" Japhet gave her a lazy smile, hoping to belie his impatience for her answer.

"Do you dare discover the answer for yourself?"

"At this point," he murmured, "I have very little to lose. Will you be private with me, Fionne?"

She swept past him through the open door and gazed with apparent approval over the austerity of his quarters. "I thought it would be softer. More—"

"Trinkets? I fear you err gravely, judging by appearances."

"Sometimes, appearances speak truly." Fionne passed among his things, touching a weapon here, a carefully placed statue there. "But I was mistaken in you. This is all for balance. All these things are arranged for your defense. This—" she indicated a stately icon—"could shield you from a blow, and this could be overturned to slow an enemy. I had not expected such craft."

He inclined his head. "What have you learned from Abrim, Fionne?"

"He is your ally," she answered. "From what I have been able to determine. He is canny, though, and does not easily speak his mind. He is full of flattery, but I sense he means none of it. He would not bed me if I wanted him."

"Do you?" He felt an uncomfortable twinge.

She turned with a feline smile, showing teeth. "You sound almost jealous, sha'al-izzat. I wonder why."

"And you, more provocative than usual. I also wonder why."

"I would not touch you," she said softly, "when you were Nadiv's boy. But you are no longer that pretty child. I tire of fighting for the amusement of your guests. How soon before you weary of it as well and give me to another? I can do better in your bed, can I not?" She seemed almost melancholy for a moment. "In my land, a woman seizes power by strength of arms. But I am far from home—and here, I can only advance on my back. So be it, Sha'al-izzat Japhet. I shall please you like no other."

He paused as a house slave entered, bearing a platter of fresh fruit and hard white cheese. Steam rose from the silver kettle and the scent of strong marjoram coffee permeated the chamber. Japhet watched Fionne as the servant withdrew; there was a peculiar tension in her bearing. Crossing the room, he pulled the door across the arch. It was decorative, carved and sculpted with open floral patterns; he vaguely remembered his mother asking for something lighter, something that made her feel less confined. In silence, he poured coffee into two etched silver bowls and he took a slice of fresh pitaya, studying her a moment longer.

"Do you want me?"

The question surprised her. He saw the sudden arch of her brows, the frown she could not quite hide. But she startled him in turn. "Does that matter, Sha'al-izzat Japhet? House Fouad has always taken what it pleased."

"It matters. I am not my father," Japhet said quietly. "I am not a gentle man, but neither am I a cruel one."

"Tales around the palace speak otherwise."

Japhet smiled, for she sounded nervous. She had probably expected to be flat on her back within moments after making her offer. He pressed the coffee cup into her hands, cupping his hands lightly over hers just long enough to make certain she would not drop it. It had been a long time, but he remembered Abrim's words; sometimes the best way to disarm a woman came through tenderness.

His voice became softly chiding. "I did not think you would believe everything you hear, Fionne. Will you have fruit or cheese?"

She shook her head almost reflexively, and when he turned away, he felt her eyes tracking his movements as he strolled toward the window. "I have been your father's captive for three cycles, Sha'al-izzat Japhet. I have seen enough to know that your favorite brand of diplomacy used to be beheading."

"Petty cruelty will make me a tyrant," he told her, "not a great ruler. Abrim has taught me that I have it in me to be more."

"Then you have much to thank him for."

Perhaps her words were ill meant, but he nodded gravely as if he had not heard the caustic edge. "In fact, I have." She was fierce as a lykos, and he wondered if her lust would be as wild. He did not mean to bed her until she would give him more than submission. It would be an incomparable triumph, making a roaring mountain kit purr.

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Fionne sipped at her coffee, seeming nervous for the first time. "Why ... did you invite me to be private with you, if you do not mean to make me your concubine?"

"You go about dressed as if for war." He turned and found her closer than he remembered. He touched the leather of her bodice, touched her cheek lightly. "I do not have in mind to *make* you ... anything, Fionne. But I would welcome your company if you have no other plans."

"Not to mate? Just ... speak?"

He might have asked her to paint herself blue and dance for his council, for all the amazement reflected in her green eyes. "Are you never lonely, then?"

To his great surprise, her large, feral eyes took on an overbright sheen. "I have been three cycles a slave to an old man's whim, so far from home that I have no hope of ever returning. The very air I breathe smells wrong—the language savage and sibilant. And you—you ask me—if I am never lonely. You are a fool, Sha'al-izzat Japhet. And you may take my head for saying so."

Japhet smiled. "I do not want your head, if it does not come with the rest of you."

"But you just said we are not going to mate!"

Such outraged bewilderment. The evening was not going at all as she had planned, and it pleased him to see her discomfiture. "Not tonight, Fionne. I did not say never. I appreciate your company, as I have been missing Husayn."

Candor might have been a mistake; perhaps she read the admission as weakness. He knew a moment of dismay as her

eyes narrowed. "You prefer boys? That is why you will not bed me?"

"Husayn was dear to me." It was not entirely a lie. He *had* become fond of the slave, after the boy learned to hold his tongue. "But it was not my choice. I was not permitted to take concubines while my older brother remained the heir. House Fouad must take care where it sows its seed." He touched a finger to her lips, hot as pressed silk. "Do not assume you have been judged unworthy, my flame. I do not feel the time is right."

When she did not bite his hand, he considered himself to have made some progress. The truth was, he did not want her grudging bitterness in his bed. If she came to him, he wanted her mad with need before and languid after.

She stepped back and finished her coffee. "When will the time be right?"

"After you have learned to trust me."

Fionne gave a hard smile. "The waste will freeze first."

"Let us start with a single step. Remove your armor." Had a woman's face ever reflected such utter horror? But she stood like a lamb at the chopping block while he unfastened her laces, revealing sweat-stained linen beneath. She was smaller than he'd expected under the padding, with an impossibly tiny waist and broad hips. "Now bring the platter and come to bed. I would hear of your homeland."

More bewilderment, but again, she did as he asked. Japhet drew her close, knowing she hated the vulnerability of her position, but Fionne seemed to enjoy speaking of what she

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had lost. The heat of her body and drone of her strange slurred voice set him spinning, dreaming.

More territory to conquer, more people to rule.

Japhet saw himself on a throne grander than any before, silver inlaid with precious gems and a crown of hammered gold. *The impassable sea will prove an obstacle ... but perhaps the magicians know a way.* He would start planning how to take her homeland as soon as he settled matters in Inay, as soon as he conquered Fionne.

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INTERREGNUM

She hated what she must do.

The shame might kill her if the pain did not. Her witching bowl had shown her ... and Indrina no longer possessed the power to prevent her brother from fouling the purity of their kind. She knew the time had come to call what remained of Eristorne's rulers. With a heavy heart, she left the dead temple, where she spent most of her time lighting candles in rituals of which even she had forgotten the meaning. Down the open stone stairs and out into the empty plaza; she remembered when this square teemed with messengers and merchants, all in gleaming house colors, gilded with insignia and gems as walking icons for their patrons.

Now only the wind dwelled among the statues and the fountains, whispering of days long gone. She could not stop or her resolve might falter. She went along on foot; there was no need for carriages any longer. Goods came into the city by wagon—how prosaic. The knot swelled in her throat.

When she reached the city's heart, she climbed to the top of the tower, dizzying spiral stairs that gave her a stunning view of the City of a Thousand Stars, now being extinguished one by one. Indrina closed her eyes and saw her brother's face.

She rang the bell.

At first none responded. The bell—that should have sent soldiers pouring onto the walls with arms ready, wizards and priestesses into position in the towers to defend the city—was

answered only by silence. And then they came, wrapped in faded silks and puzzlement, faces pale as alabaster. The Daiesthai had always been a beautiful people, and so they were even in dying. She studied them with varying degrees of fondness: Portiol, Darilia, Bedryn, and Melusine the Mad—even she came with her red eyes and streaming hair like a creature from a child's picture book, more spirit than form.

Indrina waited until they assembled, the ten who were all that remained of the great houses. Taking a deep breath, she hoped her voice would remain steady. "It is with a grave heart that I have called you."

"I trust you would not have done so without sufficient cause." Portiol was short and always bore an expression of pervasive melancholy that even a smile could not erase.

"They come," Melusine was whispering. "They come. And they will tear it all down. Who will lift it up again? They come...."

Indrina ignored the madwoman out of long habit, although her words sent spiders of dread skittering down her spine. "I need your aid to prevent a terrible sin against our people." All movement stopped; she felt the gathered weight of their focus. "It will not be easy, for we must pool our remaining power. I will not lie—some may not survive it. But this ... this shall be our last great work, and it must be done."

Melusine laughed, her red eyes holding a rare but lucid light. "Do you think to stop the world from turning?"

"I merely seek to stop what should not be."

"And what is that?" asked Bedryn, a sylph whose hair changed color according to her mood.

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Indrina remembered that she had shared Rodhlann's bed before he fled the city on the dream lines. She wondered how Bedryn would feel about slaying a former lover, if it would hurt more than betraying a brother. The pain was distant, as if it belonged to someone else. In the end, duty was all a priestess had. She had been preserving Daiesthai ways longer than her memory reached.

"Some of you may have noticed that Rodhlann has gone again...." She paused, taking in the nods from those who heeded more than their secret sorrows or petty pleasures. "He has a purpose in his wandering this time—he would retrieve a Sut ritual that would allow him to bring forth a child from the Garden. It could not be pure Daiesthai, whatever else it is. I ... tried to stop him myself ... and failed. Now I must beg your help. One last work to preserve what we are."

Bedryn tilted her head, birdlike, and her particolored locks only added to the impression of plumage. "I will help you," she said, "because I have always wanted to kill him for leaving me." She smiled brightly, like a child.

She is mad, too, if not raving. The others added their assent, some with less conviction than others. Melusine leapt atop the stone lip of the tower and danced, her white hair streaming in the wind, while Portiol regarded her with his sad, quicksilver eyes. *Perhaps it would be best if this ritual consumes us all. Our time has passed—let the end come as a conflagration, then.*

Indrina told them what she planned.

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ANCIENT DUST

Some promises should never be spoken.

Despite her brave words, Muir possessed no notion how they would reach Maksoor Balad. This was a mountain, not a few weights of stone. Gray, all was gray from the pale, mourning sky to the charcoal rock looming as far as the eye could see. She still felt the clawing of the whispers, shaking her concentration. Cautiously, she ran her fingers over the crevice, no broader than a beetle's back. It was cold to the touch, slick with the sleet that numbed her cheeks. Rodhlann did not complain, but she knew the cold ate into his bones, worse than desert heat. Cold was closer to dying, as nerves went dead and pain melted into pressure. In a bizarre way, she was grateful to the chill for relieving the throbbing bruises on her back and belly. Now she had only to work a miracle ... or they would die.

Not force. She did not have the power to coerce the stone. Persuasion might be their only hope.

Muir wet her lips and then regretted it as she felt the tissue freeze. The next warmth would see her bleed, but she could not worry about it. Closing her eyes, she shut out the trivial rumbling of loose stones and the yelping of pebbles. She must hear this mountain. If she could wake it she did not think she would mistake its voice. The power might well split her mind, but she could not let herself dwell on failure. Rodhlann sat like a statue in his burnoose; Muir knew he had given up hope. His despair weighed on her like more stone,

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almost more tangible than the possibility that danced just out of reach.

Lightly, she ran her fingertips over the crevice, learning its ridges and feathered fractures, and almost at once, she sensed a tremor in the depths—the awakening of a sleepy giant. She felt its layers and the lapping where molten stone had cooled. Her thoughts muddled as she felt a snap, the pain of the split, formed so long ago when the earth shuddered in its sleep. *Kaveh, this happened because of Kaveh.*

She felt tender and full of regret, for she remembered dying, although not the madness that came after. The shard of Minau-that-was felt only a kitten's vanity at the devastation following her loss, but Muir was a deeper soul, seasoned with other lifetimes. With a wry smile, she whispered the other back to sleep as the mountain awoke beneath her hands.

"Let me in," she whispered.

The stone shuddered.

Through her worn shoes she sensed the vibrations that began in the belly of the mountain, spiraling outward, and Muir steadied herself against the rock face. There were no handholds, but she felt certain it would not try to shake them down; this was more like a stretch after a long nap. She did not look at Rodhlann; his icy skepticism would only weaken her belief that she could do this. And she needed every scrap of faith.

"All the way."

Another hard tremor, and two stones fell from above, crashing against the slope in small, elemental explosions.

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Rodhlann fell back, finding shelter beneath a shallow ledge nearby, and again she probed the fissure with her fingertips. *Wider. It is definitely wider.* Her fingers slid in up to her knuckles.

Residual shocks tingled through her toes, up her spine, and lingered at the nape of her neck. Deeper she pushed, but it felt smooth and warm, very little resistance. The stone trembled around her and gave way, falling in chips about her feet. *Arm. Shoulder. Chest, thigh.* And she was through, sliding sideways against rock that somehow didn't abrade her battered back or belly.

Within, to a dry darkness that purred with warmth against the contrast of the frigid wind.

Aftermath was harsh.

She did not realize how much energy she had spent, how much power had burned through her in those dreamlike moments, but then her knees stopped holding her and she went down hard. The darkness swam with golden needles and she put her head back against the rock, hoping there was nowhere else to fall. Muir closed her eyes, finding the dancing lights more distracting than the red-tinged dark behind her lids. Distant movement did not alarm her. It must be Rodhlann, and if it was not, if they had come so far to be eaten by a cave beast, she did not have the strength at the moment to object.

She heard the crunch of his step as he came behind her through the narrow passage. "It seems you have made good your promise. More than I expected."

"You are most welcome."

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"The feat was not only for me, little maid. You would have frozen along with me." He folded down beside her and took possession of her scarred hands.

"What are you doing?" It would not have hurt him to show some appreciation, but she was too tired to argue with him, so she remained quiescent as he studied her palms.

"Making sure you haven't reopened your wounds. The shaping at the Omintago caused quite a mess."

A mess. Her eyes snapped open, as she felt the first spark of real indignation—two layers of skin, blisters, and blood and he called it a mess? She opened her mouth to growl at him, only to be quelled by the warmth of his mouth against her palms.

She licked her sore lips and tasted blood.

"What—"

"I cannot see," he told her quietly. "But I taste no injury. It seems you are well enough." And he let her go, though she felt the heat of his fingers for several heartbeats.

For a moment, she considered hitting him on the head with a rock. But instead, she turned her attention to the close space about them. Echoes of the mountain still sounded in her mind, lending size and form to the indistinct shadows and mounds of stone. The fissure was a gash of light against the smooth stone of the cave wall. Echoes and deeper jet hinted of at least two passages leading out, but the piles of stone and dust that rose almost chest high in places might hide any number of others.

She was hungry, but at least they had not lost their provisions along with their blankets. Muir rummaged in her

pack, finding dry meat by touch. They broke fast in the gloom, washing the bland meal down with brackish water carried all the way from the Omintago. The plentiful streams Zillah had promised had never quite materialized, although sometimes Muir had thought she heard them, burbling on the other side of the mountain.

"Well. We are stuck until you recover enough to go on. To pass the time, why do you not tell me something of ... you, little maid."

The jerky stuck in her teeth and she almost choked. "Of me? Are you ill?"

His eyes gleamed in the half light, a translucent sheen that was all colors and none. She saw his pearly pallor more clearly than he could see her, and Muir felt a slight throb of satisfaction. It was good to have the advantage for once. But she let the quarrel go; she was still weary, and she did not wish to provoke him, as his anger often proved exhausting.

"No," he murmured. Even when he filled her with ire, she could not help but soften at his voice. It was the best of him, filled with whispers of music. "But ... it has occurred to me that I know so little of you. I have indulged your questions; it seems apt that you should do the same."

Muir shifted; she smelled herself in the ragged djellabah. It was a wonder he could bear her within an arm's length, but then he was less than sweetly perfumed himself. Perhaps the odors canceled out, or perhaps he was used to it.

In the closer air of the cave, she had been reminded of how long it had been since she felt clean. One could hardly count wading in the Omintago as they put ashore. She

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sighed, resting her palms on her knees. Her fingertips felt more sensitive, as if she could count by touch alone each thread in the complex weave.

"What questions have you, then? I have asked you of specific things, never just asked you to ... speak as you would."

She saw the ghostly glimmer of his teeth. "I gave you context, did I not? I know too little even to know what to ask."

"You must always have the last word."

He did laugh then. "Always."

"As you will, I do not care." Muir knew she sounded petulant. He probably could not see the smile she was biting back. "I served in the high house. From childhood, the kitchen is all I remember. I worked for the cook, washing pots as soon as I was old enough to hold a rag."

"No family?" She felt the brush of his fingertips, an absent gesture that confirmed his attention, in twirling a coarse lock. He touched her when he was not thinking about it, and she relished it, moments of peaceful pretense when she could believe he was wholly Kaveh, wholly the lost lover who swam in him.

"None that I know or that claimed me. My life was work, Rodhlann. I knew no more. I lived to serve, first in the kitchen and then in the laundry. And when I was old enough, I was given to Lavedi Immelia."

"Immelia ... the one whose chamber floor was strewn with jewels. From which you took the tapestry. Is she also the one who—"

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The world rocked.

A dusty mist rained down on them, followed quickly by larger chunks of stone. The rock floor felt as if it were tilting; and Muir scrambled to her feet, trying to catch her balance. Rodhlann snatched up their last remaining bag with one hand and steadied her with the other.

“Go!” he shouted over the groaning earth.

Muir darted for the onyx-dark suggestion of a passage, away from cold air and gray light. His breath puffed behind as they ran, dodging the crushing fall of heavy rock. The ground beneath them shook; then came a roar, as the mountain mended the wound she had made. There was no way back; they would have to go forward.

“We'll need to light the lamp.... We cannot go in darkness.”

“Cannot—or should not?” She heard the wry humor in his voice.

Muir smiled, glad he could not see her face. Though she would never admit it, she liked his jests, even when they turned on her. “Should not. Help me find the oil and the sparker.”

Their hands brushed as they fumbled in her bag, running fingertips over wrapped packets of dry meat and fruit, week-old naan, the sin-soft weave of the tapestry, and the cool metal of the lamp. She pulled back almost reluctantly, as there was a certain pleasure in sharpening her other senses.

He had a flask in hand and uncapped it, locating the reservoir by touch and close peering, but not before pouring oil over her fingers. It was cold and gelid, warming on her

skin as she tried to scrape it into the lamp. No more fuel than they possessed; they could not afford to waste any.

"I'll kindle it. You might burn your hands."

His unexpected concern made Muir raise both brows, as Rodhlann created sparks striking flint against steel, as much of magic in that moment as he had ever worked. The tiny explosions of light gave his sharp, fair face inhuman radiance, a blue-violet corona sparking in his platinum hair. And then the flame caught, held steady to create a warm circle that pushed back the shadows. They sat as a bright island in the dark.

"We should go," she said at last. "There is no telling how far we must travel ... and another tremor might make this our tomb."

"I follow you," he answered gravely. "And I have said that only once before."

"When?" She asked the question over her shoulder, as she guided them into the right-hand passage. It was an arbitrary choice, but they had to start somewhere.

For all she knew, she was leading them to a quick death into a sudden pit, but it was better than starving in the dark. Managed carefully, their food would last another hand of days, the light only half that long. Things became clearer when survival was precarious at best. She had lost her desire to quarrel with him.

The whispers were less cacophonous here, more like the quiet rush of the lazy Omintago, omnipresent but demanding nothing of her. She had heard tales of fish who swam so long

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in black waters that they lost their eyes, so she closed hers and tried to imagine herself flowing toward their goal.

He paused and then she heard the whisper of his tread behind her. The silence thrummed so long that she had almost forgotten her question, and then he answered, "When I took the oath to become a palace guard."

Before she could respond, the quality of the silence shifted subtly. Where she had faced darkness, she now heard echoes: the susurrus of space, connected by threads of almost palpable emotion. The mountain spoke, if she were still enough to listen.

They walked on in silence with Muir keeping herself oriented by trailing her fingers along the left-hand wall of the passage. She was not certain how far ahead the turn was; the stone and the lack of light bewildered her sense of direction. In fact, she was not even sure what she was being guided toward, whether her goal was the same as the mountain that had swallowed them.

That was a sobering thought. Who knew what it wanted her to see? Perhaps some very old rock formations or jewels born out of its molten heart?

During the odd moments when she opened her eyes, she found the shadows thrown from behind her even more distressing than the dark. The shapes seethed against the stone walls, giving motion to fear she tried to suppress. She made the left turn, keeping her palm on the wall.

They passed through open, seemingly natural rooms with loose flat stones. The passages turned with astonishing regularity, but she found herself wending a path at right

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angles, progressing directly, if slowly in a concentric pattern, she hoped, toward Maksoor Balad. Muir would not let herself dwell on the other possibility—that they were hopelessly lost.

And then she came to a widening of the way where a sharp turn was not possible. Instead the cavern was roughly octagonal in shape with passages leading off in six different directions. When she next opened her eyes, she realized she could not feel the right way, and panic bubbled in her belly like bad pak. In the next moment, she realized the darkness was unbroken—Rodhlann was gone, the lamp along with him. And she was alone in whispering silence that had become subtly less welcoming.

Her first impulse was to call out.

But she choked it, knowing the echoes would confuse any reply she might receive. And there was also the chance that something unpleasant might see fit to reply, something she could not see slithering in the dark. A shudder crawled over her. Muir took a steadying breath that hurt her lungs. *Alone. Here.*

Apart from those walks in Ar Cahra when she had felt connected with the whole world, she had never been alone. The high house had teemed with activity. Demands from Lavedi Immelia and the izzat rang from dawn until the sun dropped beneath the far hills. And even then, sometimes she had sat a nodding vigil beside her lady's bed, a human charm against wicked dreams. Never alone, no, she had never heard her own breathing magnified by darkness and the smothering weight of stone, a mountain that suddenly seemed ravenous, a thing of appetite instead of a benevolent giant.

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Retrace your steps and you will find him.

She held her composure by a fraying thread. It was hard to know where she had come from in the dark. Fright would not let her hear or know. *That passage.* Hardly a certainty, but she thought it was the right choice, so she began retracing her steps, making right turns where she had made left. The cold stone abraded the pads of her fingers as she pressed much harder than she had on the way in.

Curse him, why could he not keep with me? Anger was good; it helped focus her on something other than the panic she strove to master. Nothing came through the bond—no terror or even anxiety, so he must be well enough. *For now.*

The dark was heavy with the sound of her breathing, magnified by the rock. It came back to her as faintly monstrous, as if other creatures lay in wait. Hard to say how long she walked, her heart throbbing in her ears, but then she made another turn and found him waiting in a pool of weak yellow light. She hated his composure.

Rodhlann sat propped against the slate wall, his hands folded in his lap. He had dimmed the lamp to a glimmer, so as to use the least amount of oil, so she could not even chastise him about that. When he caught sight of her, he shot to his feet.

"I wondered if you would come back. Or if you would be able to find me." Her ire vanished. He was better at keeping his emotions from flooding him, more practiced at shielding what he did not want to reveal. But his voice could not hide the truth—he had been every bit as frightened as she. And

she had neither the heart to chide him nor the courage to wrap her arms about him.

"Try to stay close," was all she said.

He did. Muir felt his breath on her neck as they walked back, though it was difficult to tell landmarks when it was all dark stone and swarming shadows. She missed the stars and sanguine Sahen, gleaming Anumati. The air tasted dry and dusty, inhaled through her open mouth; and she tried not to think of dying so deep in the earth, no wind to bear her ashes up.

The return to the branching ways did not seem to take as long before. But there she paused, glancing back at Rodhlann. "Do you have an inkling? I lost the way, here."

He shook his head. "I leave it to you. My ability to navigate is limited to open ground where there are stars to guide me."

"I know the feeling." She sighed and stared into the gloom.

Muir tried to concentrate, but the warmth of his hands on her shoulders startled her. At first she thought he would turn her to face him or speak, but there was only the gentle pressure of his fingers, curling into her muscles. It felt good—and she was surprised—until she realized he intended to relax her to aid her focus. Even knowing his motives, it helped; she felt the tension melting, as she entered an almost soporific state. The whisper became clear again, beckoning her into the right-hand passage.

"You have it," he murmured. At her nod, he gestured for her to precede him and then she felt him fall in close behind again.

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The passage led for some distance relatively in the same direction and then it turned sharply, widening into a cavern so impossibly vast that at first she thought they had come out into a very dark night. It was like stepping into an abyss, their light swallowed utterly in shadow. Her stomach dropped a little, since she could not find a way to mark their passage—no walls to touch, no ceiling in sight.

Muir jerked to a halt, afraid she would guide them into a pit, and then Rodhlann took her hand. His clasp was warm and dry—certainly his palms would not sweat with nerves as she felt hers doing. She wanted to pull hers free and wipe it on her battered djellabah, yet refused to give him the satisfaction. It was hard to know what the bond gave away to him; he certainly gave no hint.

She inched forward, feeling with her feet along the outer edges of the light their lamp gave. And she shuddered, seeing the narrow lip of earth that held them. The stone sloped sharply, but there was earth here too, growing some fetid fungus that did not like light. In fact, the lichens seemed to shrink as they approached, quivering away from the wan radiance.

“Wonder if we could eat them.”

His white teeth flashed in a sardonic smile. “Probably not the wisest course, little maid.”

“I know.” She edged along the stone rim, which looked decidedly odd to her, almost as if made of masonry. “But I am so tired of dry meat and naan. If—when—we get out of here, I will have yakneh and hot tannouri bread, heaps of

fresh figs, and mint tea with honey, eat black olives until my lips glisten with their oil."

"You make my mouth water," he said, almost with surprise. "This journey has given me such an appetite. The palace chef in Eristorne made pastries so light they seemed spun of wishes and air, melting on the tongue."

She moaned. Her stomach snarled in response, and with a sigh, she fished out a square of naan with her free hand. Muir took a savage bite before offering it to Rodhlann; his expression was odd as he ate from her fingers. Despite the precariousness of their perch she remembered her dream. Wondered if he remembered his. They edged along carefully, still hand in hand, until the ledge ended in a straight stone wall.

"Oh no..." *Please, not another mountain to open.* She did not think she could bear it.

"Put out your hand." His voice contained sudden urgency, and she complied without thinking, touching the rough rock. He held the lamp closer, adding a golden circlet to dun gray. "What do you see?"

"The stones have been set." Muir drew a shuddering breath, hoping. Hoping.

"With incredible precision." Rodhlann smiled with triumph, elation, and something else as he nearly squeezed the breath out of her with his free arm. "This wall was built by the people of the stone. None before or since have mastered the craft so, building without mortar, their walls so clean that not even time itself can level them."

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"We have found Maksoor Balad?" She had hardly dared imagine it.

"I think..." he said slowly, "we have been in Maksoor Balad for some while. This is certainly the inner courtyard, near the palace, the last line of defense in a siege. I studied our old maps. The Sut were a private people ... and Maksoor Balad was a city of walls and mazes, designed to bewilder invaders."

"Or those who would come searching for their secrets."

He smiled faintly. "Truth, little maid. But I am oriented now. Unless the disaster changed much of the city's design, I should be able to lead from here. You ... you did well."

"How was it that you had a map of the city's design but not its location?"

A tug on her hand forced her to start walking, as he answered, "There was ... a fire in our archives. Many records were lost and that, among them. I mourn in truth thinking of how much knowledge was lost. And our historian along with it."

She knew, suddenly more clearly than he, how the flames had blazed up as their wizards struggled to contain Animukh, strained to bind the fire god into serving as a Daiesthai focus. How all of Eristorne shuddered and seemed as if it might fall. Children had wept and hidden in the—

"Little maid." He touched her cheek, looking almost worried. "I have found the way in."

"Refill the lamp ... it is flickering."

He performed the task at her request, studying her more closely as the light came back. "What troubles you?"

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She gave him a weary smile. *Too many things*, she wanted to say. *It was easier to serve*. "What if we cannot find the ritual you seek? And once we do, what then? Have you thought of how we will get out again? We cannot return the way we came."

Rodhlann paused, his shadow falling over them. "Would you have reassurance from me, Muir of the earth? You have taught me not to lie. So. If we cannot find the scroll, all our efforts will have been in vain. And if we fail to find another way out, our bones will mingle with the dust of the Sut."

She almost missed the glib liar who would promise anything. The man who stood before her offered no comfort or surety, but she followed him anyway through the arch that led onto a cobbled walk. It was eerie here in the city, locked in perpetual night at the mountain's heart. Their tiny lamp was no more than a flicker against the lapping darkness, but they forged forward, shapes coming clear out of the gloom, sometimes suddenly, startlingly.

Muir stared up at the statue in awe, taking in the blocky build and stern features. "Who is he?"

Rodhlann knelt, touching an inscription, before shaking his head. "It does not give a name, but I suspect one of their kings."

"Their people would have known..."

"None expect to be so forgotten, the elder races least of all." He sighed and pushed to his feet. "This ... this is what will happen to the Daiesthai. Perhaps not buried, but ... lost. And eons from now, should some traveler stumble on the City

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of a Thousand Stars, our language would be lost, our deeds forgotten. It is a fire in me.... I cannot let it be."

His wan face seemed sharper in the contrasting light, his eyes gleaming feral silver, leached of other hues. But she was not afraid; his fervor made her smile. "If there is any chance of success, I will gamble on you," she said softly. "We have come so far, faced so much, that it seems impossible we could fail now."

"Guard your tongue." There was laughter in his purling voice, but also legitimate warning. "There may be old spirits in this place, spirits that begrudge our living warmth. And your boasting may wake them."

Muir shivered. "Do—do you mean that?"

He said only, "Stay close, little maid," as they passed deeper into the ancient ruin.

The city was impossibly intricate, full of geometric anomalies and carefully balanced stones, some so precarious it seemed as if a whisper might dislodge them. But Rodhlann assured her it was safe. Those were examples of Sut art and architecture, he said. She nodded, glancing back over her shoulder. In the distance she heard running water and it emphasized the pressure in her bladder. But she did not want to lose sight of him and certainly did not want to go on someone's grave. That would seem calculated to rouse whatever spirits might linger here.

So she hurried after him, squirming as he strode across what might have been a city market. Even countless ages after the last Sut had passed from these streets, the glimmering lamp found echoes of their grandeur. "This whole

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place has been shaped," she realized aloud, kneeling to touch the floor. Rodhlann paused beside her, as they both admired the intricate mosaic: shimmer quartz and iolite, mingled with obsidian, emeralds, and rubies that caught the light in bloody bursts, all smooth as silk, shaped into flagstones.

"That is ... astonishing," he said at last. "We have other wonders in Eristorne—the whisper walks and the garden of sorrow, where flowers bloom without the sun—but nothing like this."

"There are no hands that could equal it now."

They shared a look of regret and loss that such artistry should have been forgotten. He sighed. "I know. This ... *this* is why we must succeed. We have not always been a wise people, but the world is impoverished when—"

"An entire way of life is lost."

"Yes. Come, Muir. We are at the end of our quest. Let us not delay it any longer." His words hit her like a club, leaving her winded and staring at his lean back.

She had to hurry to catch up, suddenly feeling anew all her bruises and scrapes. What would she do when there was no reason to follow him, when he needed her no longer? There would not be a place for her, a grubby maid, in his native Eristorne, of which he spoke with equal measures of rue and yearning. Abstract and distant future suddenly loomed before her, terrifying with its uncertainty.

I could return to the Bedu. They would welcome me even without the amulet. She almost looked forward to seeing them all again, seeing if Zillah had made it safely and whether she had managed to leash Ghazi. *You would have to*

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marry Shunnar, if the ameer offers him to you again. But she had traveled enough that even marriage did not sound so dreadful. Her bones ached for a warm oven she might call her own, where she could make yakneh for her family, free of petty tyrants and constant danger. It would not be so bad when he left her.

Muir ran after Rodhlann, wishing that were true.

She followed him through a maze of ancient walls and buildings he did not bother naming, only occasionally having to pause and retrace their steps when the scar of ancient destruction blocked the streets in rubble and dust. It was soon after one such detour that they reached yet another courtyard.

They made their way around until they found the main gate, an elaborately carved arch supported by two columns. Deeper darkness swallowed the light of their small lamp, leaving them to draw closer to each other. Rodhlann led the way; she could only follow.

The library was still an awesome sight, even after the palace exterior. Row on row of stone shelves, seemingly as delicate as the scrolls they housed, aspired to the sky. Or at the least to the ceiling lost in darkness above. Several walkways wound their way about the chamber, three and more man heights above them. In the shadows beyond their lamplight, Muir thought she could see the crumbled remnants of a staircase leading to them.

Muir gazed about, open-mouthed, while Rodhlann searched bone tube after tube, careful with their lamp not to

harm the ancient, fragile parchment. But discomfort turned at last to pain and she could sit still no longer.

"I must find ... a pot."

He glanced up, frowning. "You—oh, there should be a water closet nearby. The Sut had stone aqueducts and running water. A marvelous people. I wish I could carry this place with me. It is maddening to know all this lore is trapped here, no means of retrieval."

"I thought you were a soldier, not a scholar."

"Hm?"

It would seem he is more the latter than the former, now.

"Never mind. I will return presently."

She took their small lamp, as Rodhlann was using a Sut marvel unearthed in another room, a beautiful artifact that resembled a blown crystal rose on a silver stand. At their touch, it shone from blossom to base, providing ten times the illumination one might expect from something its size. Rodhlann had spent quite some time examining it, trying to determine what made it work, before finally beginning what would prove an exhaustive search.

Wending through the towering stone maze, each with slots full of bone tubes, organized in some system known only to the long-dead curator, Muir tried not to imagine things crawling after her in the shadows. She could not distract Rodhlann, or he would never find what he sought. Her pivotal role had passed; it was his turn to shine. Here, she could not help him. She was illiterate.

At last she found the closet he had mentioned, peculiarly designed with two large circular openings in the floor. Muir

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stared at them for a few moments before deciding they must be pissing holes—convenient, if somewhat awkward. She squatted and as she groaned at the release, she knew a bizarre sensation, as if she'd dreamt this very moment. *What a strange, strange thing to foresee ...* and then she knew; it had not been her dream at all but what Kaveh had shown her in the crystal pool.

When the time is right, you will know what you must do. Kaveh had blessed her with his kiss, given her the means, the last reserve of his power.

"Now? So soon and while we are here?" She sucked a shuddering breath and tried to picture the amulet she had given Zillah, as the Enadi woman was her best hope. "Send them to us," she whispered with all her force of will. "Send them *here*." Muir tried to build the scene from memory, but the details had blurred. Only time would tell if the Bedu knew the Arkyries well enough to find a spot twice viewed through other eyes.

She finished, wishing she had something to clean herself with, and as she looked down at herself in distaste, she saw spindly fingers reaching for her ankle. Muir screamed, kicking the lamp over as she bolted. Gray wisps of cold and hunger with dark holes for eyes and knotted limbs surged after her. And they were fast, so very fast, as they bounded after her. Screaming could not help her, but she might alert Rodhlann in time. Pray to dead gods he had found what he was looking for, pray to dead gods that she was right—that her dream of Kaveh had contained enough warning to save them.

"Rodhlann, Rodhlann!" she shouted. "They come!"

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He appeared like a wraith with his arms full of scrolls. "Muir, what—" And his voice died, as they would die, if they did not flee.

"Run." For once he did as she asked without questioning her, shoving the scrolls into her bag as they ran. She did not need to look back to feel them swarming like a cold wind. An eerie howl echoed through the gloom, permanent twilight but for the bright beacon Rodhlann carried. "Drop it or put it out," she gasped, "or we are doomed."

"Raksavu," he whispered, "here. This should not be."

"Run, curse you."

The raksavu gained, sending icy tendrils along her spine where their grasping fingers nearly touched. Muir panted as Rodhlann growled, "We cannot outrun them. Hunger drives them. They want our lives to feed their own—"

With reluctance it seemed, he bought them another breath by hurling the glowing rose over his shoulder. The raksavu hissed and fell back as the crystal exploded into smaller glowing fragments, which died slowly, lengthening the shadows once more. But they were already running again, not waiting for the creatures to get clear.

They rounded a corner, fleeing blindly. "Can we hide?"

"They seek by heat. The only certain way to mask it is to die." Rodhlann sounded as desperate as she'd ever heard him. These things were enough to put a tremor in his voice, his beautiful song of a voice.

"Soon enough, I am afraid." Muir heard again the rush of water and with a fevered glance, saw they were near another water closet. She turned and glimpsed the gray swarm edging

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past the closest turn, some looking dark about the edges,
weeping wounds from where the light had burned them.

When the time is right ...

"I am sorry," she whispered and pushed Rodhlann down a
pissing hole.

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BURNT OFFERINGS

It was a beautiful day to die.

Harb crawled forward on his belly, too troubled to admire the view. Sharp stones dug into his elbows and he took care to breathe shallowly through his nose, as the air was cold enough to give away his location. Below, the land rolled—hill after hill in ochre and coppery clay, rich layers of brown and slate. Tall rocks provided adequate cover so long as he was still. Overhead, the sky was pale blue, delicate as the veins in a woman's wrist, creamy about the edges. It would not rain today.

The Omintago glittered in the distance, a serpentine road that turned back the sun's rays in lazy flares. Near the water, the dun and umber of tired soil yielded to the olive of scrub and withered citrine reeds. Nothing in the vista could hold his gaze; instead he fixed on the moving forms in the distance—wagons and horses, men milling about in Inayan colors, glimmering bronze and gold.

Too many.

He knew they could not win. Japhet had sent a full legion to deal with them, complete with three squadrons of Elite Guards. Supply lines snaked behind the army caravan, impressive in its magnitude. In all his years of service, Harb had never seen such an assembly of force. In a sense, it was complimentary. Japhet took them seriously.

But their army was weak and green, largely untested apart from small sorties in which they surged from the hills to

eliminate Inayan patrols. They had taken two Elite squadrons with a little luck and some good ground cover, but they could not prevail against such a host. Japhet's sweeps had finally borne fruit—he had captured one of their men, and a farmer could not be expected to withstand the Serask's methods.

It was only a matter of time before the Inayan scouts found their camp. Harb had known the odds when he followed Z'ev, but it no longer mattered. They would die ingloriously, not even a footnote on the scrolls historians wrote of Japhet's reign. Knowing he could learn nothing more, Harb crawled back the way he had come, not daring to stand until he was well away. And then Harb ran. These tidings could not wait.

As he entered the rebel camp, he knew despair. Z'ev would perish here, and he could not prevent it. Pain blossomed in his chest as if he had taken a wound. But he made his report with his customary impassivity, allowing Z'ev to relay what he would to the subcommanders.

Not surprisingly, Z'ev told all, risking desertion or panic among his troops. He seemed to study the exhausted faces staring back at him for a moment. Then he added quietly, "None of us wanted this. You—you wanted a new plow, Sashim. And you, Otekh, you wanted better for your family. And here we all are."

He knows their names. It struck Harb suddenly that Z'ev had not been simply building loyalty among his men as he spoke and ate with them. He was genuinely interested, genuinely concerned. Harb knew there was no kinder man than Z'ev, but suddenly, he was curious how that had come

to be so. After guarding him for nearly four-hand years, Harb realized he did not know Z'ev at all.

"If there are any of you who feel you have a better chance alone, you may take a few days' worth of provisions and start for Feroz. You may make it if you avoid the roads and do not travel in great numbers. But remember, wayfarers are rare during Behrid and the hills have their own dangers."

Madness. A man could not lead with gentleness and mercy. It stank of impotence. As Harb considered that, he also realized that he had never known Z'ev to take a lover, and he had spent nearly every moment standing patiently outside his door. Curiosity was a foreign emotion, but he felt it burgeon like a desert blossom.

"Should we starve in Feroz instead of the hills?" Otekh asked quietly.

"We are farmers, sayyid." Another man—Harb thought it was Otekh's son—spoke, looking much older than his years. His eyes were dark in his withered face. "All we want is a little land to work and a fair share of what we grow."

Marid stepped forward. The former leader of the rebels was an intense young man, nearly as tall as Z'ev and just as gaunt. His black eyes burned with a zealot's light, a fire that only blood could quench. "What they are saying, sayyid, is that we have been pushed as far we can bear—even a cornered rat will fight. Here, we will stand with you and mayhap fall. We have nothing left to lose."

There was not a single dissenting voice.

Z'ev studied them all a moment, and then his dark face creased into a smile. Watching him, Harb felt that proprietary

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pride again, as if he had some reason to feel so. "You are all brave men." Z'ev spoke loud enough for all to hear, not loud enough for the wind to steal his words and cast them wide. "And I am honored to plan this battle with you. But first, let us feast."

They ate as if there were no tomorrow. And perhaps there was not.

"Our only hope is surprise," Z'ev said much later, rubbing his lean belly. "We will strike tonight while they sleep. They have camped beside the river, so you will be able to take some of them from the banks. Make them cross. They will be easier to kill in the water. Take as many as you can, but do *not* stand and fight. Patrol leaders should fall back in different directions. Scatter if you must. One man is harder to find than twenty."

And do not lead them back to camp.

Z'ev nodded and spoke Harb's warning aloud. "I invite you to rest between now and nightfall."

The words had a peculiar finality that made Harb's throat burn. More than ever, he wished he could speak a few words to these men who were so brave even when there was no hope. They must all know they went to die, but they were determined to do it well. He sat still and quiet, his large hands on his knees. There was no fire—everything had been eaten cold.

Z'ev rose as if he would retire to his tent and then sat down again. Sahen hunted this night, stalking the slim maid through the forest of stars. There was just enough light for Harb to see his hands. *You do not rest?*

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Z'ev shook his head. *We need a sentry. It should be me. Always, always you take on more than is asked of you. No man ever had a better friend.*

Harb turned his face up to the stars, bathing his battered features in the pure radiance. If he was ever to understand this man, he must ask now. There might be no more opportunities. *This is not what you wanted for yourself*, he signed quickly, before he could change his mind. *But what would you have had instead?*

Z'ev sighed and straightened his crippled foot. The guard knew it hurt him in the cold; these months outdoors must have caused him constant pain. *Sometimes, one cannot have what one wants most. And learns instead to take contentment instead of joy, stealing such moments when they are not freely given.*

Harb wished he had heard those words aloud, wished he could listen to the cadence of the other man's voice. *Cryptic. You are becoming a jahnu.* He had expected a simpler response, perhaps about a loving wife or a houseful of boisterous children. In their close contact, he had come to think Z'ev an uncomplicated man, his silences born of a placid mind. And now, in this final hour, he wondered at what complexities, what mental workings had whirred inside the quiet ksathra.

I am sorry, old friend. I do not mean to be. As a boy, I wanted most to run as other children did. As a man ... I have loved unwisely, loved one who cannot return my devotion.

Harb felt a stab of outrage—or was it envy? He could not form such attachments, even though others like him

apparently could. The scarred woman, Tah's sister, passed briefly through his mind. If he lived, he would need to apologize for failing to safeguard the boy; he had an idea that it would prove a difficult encounter. But the suggestion that *anyone* would refuse his master was unacceptable. *She is another man's wife? Concubine?*

The other man regarded him, as if weighing his answer. *We are of unequal caste. There can be no love where there is compulsion.*

Compulsion; Harb formed the word mentally because it had resonance, and then he arched both brows. *He cannot mean ...*

Z'ev was smiling faintly. *As Marid said, there is nothing left to lose. You were beautiful when they gave you to me,* he signed slowly. *Strong and fierce and brimming with the need to protect me. I will never forget how I felt when you drove away the dogs of House Ohed. They had been torturing me in the garden.*

Harb drew a sharp breath, for he remembered, too. Rage had nearly blinded him—the dogs had been lucky he had not torn their heads from their necks, lucky he had paused to take the sayyid somewhere safe. The guard recalled carrying Z'ev; he had been a thin young man, only a few years older than Harb. He stared at his hands; they were a soldier's hands, scarred and hard as pressed khi wood. He had no doubt he could learn to please the ksathra with them, but it would only be another task to him. So much, *too* much, the magicians had stolen from him.

Then ... would you ... shall I ...

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No, you are my beloved friend, Z'ev signed at once, not my body servant. But you asked, and I answered. Now, we go on as we always have done until we reach road's end.

Sleep now. I will watch over you. Harb felt relieved to let the subject go, hot with discomfiture and yet achingly pleased, too. People did not love their blades—and yet Z'ev saw something more in him, more than Harb himself had even glimpsed.

Harb settled in, considering their best hope of survival. It suddenly seemed more important than ever to protect Z'ev, the only person to see him as other than a beast since he had been taken from his mother's house.

All his senses were tuned for intruders, and yet he was still surprised. They melted from the dark as if they were one with it, not even a whisper having given away their location.

Ten men stood, hardly dressed for such harsh weather, oddly painted. Harb had never seen their like, the ochre patterns swirling over bronzed skin. One was barely more than a boy—his ritual cuts still looked raw—one was aging fast, and the rest all seemed to be in their prime, regarding him with intense stillness that told him each was poised to spike a spear through his throat.

"I am Ghazi," one said, low. "You face a Bedu hunting band, come to pay a debt. One time only, we will lend our strength to you savages. If our paths cross again, I will slay you with great joy."

Harb regarded them without blinking and then nudged Z'ev with his knee. Without a speaker, this meeting would prove frustrating, and Ghazi did not look as if he possessed much

patience. The ksathra yawned and rolled onto his side, squinting at the strangers' ankles. Awareness seemed to crash in on him, and he tried to scramble to his feet. Harb caught him easily, set him upright, and then drew him to his full height. It pleased him that the largest of these Bedu was forced to look up at him. In a few concise gestures, he repeated Ghazi's words, and was not surprised to see that Z'ev looked as puzzled as Harb felt.

"You speak of debt," Z'ev said. "Who would have you repay them by helping us?"

"My wife, Zillah, who came bearing our amulet, and before her, the speaker who traveled from the dead city across the waste with the afreet. We pay our debts, even when we do not like it."

The dead city? Afreet? Harb sought Z'ev's eyes and found the other man staring with equal intensity. They had set out so long ago to find out what had happened in Ballendin that they had almost forgotten the initial reason for the journey. Tension coiled Harb's muscles tight.

"This ... afreet..." Z'ev spoke carefully, as the Bedu might spring at any moment, and Harb did not doubt they were every bit as dangerous as the lykos they were reputed to hunt. "What did it look like?"

"Skin white as goat's milk," the young one replied, speaking for the first time. "Hair pale as moonlight, thin and tall. Eyes of a serpent."

Harb shuddered involuntarily, for the boy had indeed described an afreet. He could confirm it from jahnu lore, nothing a backward nomad should have seen or known.

Nodding at Z'ev, he saw his dawning shock. "She travels with an afreet who destroys cities ... and yet she would help us."

We must accept whatever aid is offered. Tell them what we plan.

Z'ev did. And Ghazi listened with attention, occasionally nodding. No one offered hospitality. Even though the Bedu proclaimed themselves allies, Harb knew they would be happier slaying every sleeping soldier in the camp. When the ksathra finished outlining their tactics, the Bedu war leader said, "It is not bad, for savages. Better thought out than one might expect. But I can improve upon it." He knelt then and began sketching in the dirt with the sharp point of his spear. "Most of my band will assemble here. I will send my two best stalkers into the camp to set it afire. When they try to flee into the river, we will cut them down from the opposite bank. If they try to flee into the hills, your men will take them here—" he dug a divot "—here, and here. If all goes well, we will cut their numbers in half with minimal losses."

Harb stared. The man's arrogance was beyond belief. Even an Elite squadron could not hold that bank against so many. He said as much, sharply, and Z'ev softened his objection when he repeated it aloud. "You will lose at least two men," the ksathra said gently, "putting their camp to the torch. Your plan is sound in some ways, but it does not allow for the sheer size of their force."

"You have never fought with the Bedu," Ghazi said with some hauteur. Despite the circumstances, Harb found that almost amusing. "Riyad has already thoroughly explored their

camp. In fact, he stole four skins of wine, three knives, and a roasting bird."

He studied the thin man with greater interest and thought he received a flicker of a smile in response. *We should try it. They are taking all the risks ... and if we succeed, we might actually have a chance of making it out of here alive.*

Z'ev flashed a wolfish smile. *And from here, the Sun City. Perhaps we will make it home yet, friend.* "Try to fire their supply wagons. Men will desert without food to eat much faster than if you merely burn their tents."

Ghazi's answering grin looked feral in Sahen's bloody light. "For savages, you have a good grasp of tactics."

The ksathra laughed quietly. "I might say the same of you."

"It would not be ... wise." Ghazi paused a moment before chuckling softly. "Give me enough soldiers to match my numbers and as many spears as they can carry. We will hold the bank as long as is necessary."

Harb did not reveal his skepticism. When Z'ev glanced at him, he nodded slightly. It was a small loss, and in warfare such sacrifices were reasonable even if the entire force was lost. He did not elaborate, however, as he felt certain that Z'ev would not agree that any of his men were expendable. And that was where Harb's position became vital—he provided the required bridge between ideals and pragmatism.

"Very well," said Z'ev. "I will let my men know."

One by one, the militia crept from their tents and assembled by company, looking more like soldiers than Harb had ever seen them. They were dressed in rags and tension,

but for the first time, their shoulders were straight. It was too dark for him to see their eyes, but he did not think he would glimpse fear. These men were beyond it.

"First company, led by Otekh," Z'ev said. "Take your post southwest of the enemy camp. Do not engage unless they come upon you. Hold that hill, do not advance...."

So it went—the ksathra clarified positions and plans, and then sent the men out for their last stand. Eventually only Harb and Z'ev remained, flanked by the Bedu and their requested cohort.

"A wise decision," the tallest warrior said. "You will be safest with us."

Suddenly, Harb realized that two of the Bedu were gone, the one called Riyad and the oldest of them. He had not seen them leave, and for the first time, he felt a flicker of hope that Bedu prowess might equal their conceit. Ghazi led them down the incline, a careful lope that had them on all fours most of the time. Progress was difficult for Z'ev, but Harb could not offer assistance and he knew it. If Z'ev would lead, he must do it on his own terms, under his own power.

They stopped near a ledge that formed a small waterfall, where the Omintago first emerged from underground. Until that moment, Harb had not realized they were so far north. His skin crawled at being so close to the enemy without engaging them, but he knew his role was to stand beside the ksathra, literally his last line of defense. Z'ev was the rally in point, the banner that must not fall. Without his leadership, the unified rebellion would splinter into the terrified farmers they were at heart.

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Harb found a spot some distance from the river atop a gentle rise from which they could watch the preparations. All seemed quiet, though the Inayan sentries still seemed to be patrolling regularly. Harb shook his head. They should have been the first to go. As he studied the enemy, men labored nearby. It took two trips, two nerve-rending trips, back and forth from camp to supply all the spears the Bedu had requested.

And even then, the Bedu war leader did not look pleased. "You have no more? Well, it cannot be helped. Stack them so you can toss them to us quickly," Ghazi was telling a frightened-looking boy, too young to wear a beard. His seasons in the hills had marked him. He had ancient eyes in a starving face, all cheekbones and blade-sharp nose, and he was short, coming no higher than the Bedu's waist.

What can they be planning? Harb signed. Z'ev shook his head, eyes riveted on the orange flames now licking in the distance. The whinny of terrified horses split the night as they bolted from their makeshift pens. Men cried out in pain and terror, chaos spreading like a fever. Not only the wagons burned; the tents also seemed to have been doused and went up with ferocity apparent even from this distance. Harb heard Japhet's commanders shouting for order; and about half the Inayan common guard listened, falling into their usual lines. He could not help the pride he felt when he glimpsed the Elite Guard methodically trying to put out the fires with the speed for which they were renowned.

The rest of the Inayan troops ran screaming and burning toward the river—and that was apparently what the Bedu had

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been waiting for. At first, Harb thought them mad, as they strode boldly up the bank, forming a human wall at the water's edge. *They will be cut down.* Their shoulders did not quite touch as they raised their spears and hurled them in unison. The first wave of Inayan troops fell with a hiss, as the water drowned both bodies and flames.

"Spear!" Ghazi shouted, and the farmers' cohort seemed to grasp their role at last. Each man took up a position behind a Bedu warrior, and tossed him a new spear. The Bedu launched another wave. The youngest missed this time—that is to say, his blow pierced a burning Inayan's belly, instead of spiking him through the throat. Outside an Elite Guard training yard, Harb had never seen such precision.

The Bedu fell into a rhythm as mesmeric as it was destructive. Watching the enemy fall, watching the harvest of corpses clogging the slow waters of the Omintago, Harb felt a resurgence of need, and his fists clenched. He found himself bouncing on the balls of his feet, a hound straining at its lead. The stench of charred flesh filled the night. Everywhere, from all directions, he heard screaming, though he had no way of knowing how their side fared.

The Bedu were inhuman, cutting down wave after wave—now unwounded soldiers were determinedly trying to cross, certain that the greater force lay on this side of the river. If the Bedu fell, it would be a slaughter—ten farmers and Harb against the gathered might of Inay. Pain spiked through his temple, and he suddenly wondered why he had trusted Z'ev's life to a group of painted strangers. But even the hale troops fell, almost as one, unbalanced by the current long enough

for the Bedu to launch another volley. If it kept up, the army would be able to cross on the backs of their dead. He watched the corpses float, some tangling in reeds near the bank, eyes wide and mouths running with river water.

They did not have an infinite supply of spears. Perhaps half of what they had started with remained. But neither did the Inayan commanders have an unlimited number of soldiers. It was dark and with the fires smoldering all about their camp, they probably could not discern the group's numbers. Wisely, they stopped sending their men across the river.

"Pity," Ghazi said. "That complicates matters."

More than complicates them, Harb told Z'ev grimly. *When dawn comes, they will see how few we are, and they will send enough to deal with us.*

"We have weakened them considerably," Z'ev said. "I hope our troops on the other side have fared as well."

Sounds of battle reached them, echoes in hills and hollows, though their immediate area was quiet and secure. *What now?* As Harb framed the question, Riyadh and the old stalker melted back into view. The thin hunter was now eating a wedge of white cheese, doubtless filched while they fired the camp. Despite his tension, Harb felt his lips twitch.

Amusement died quickly as silence fell in the camp across the Omintago. He could not even see motion; they had taken cover. The Bedu had slain easily four times their number, but the size of the Inayan host would defeat them. Harb felt sudden certainty about what would occur at dawn: the army would see that it was "besieged" on all sides by a very small

force. It would split, both parts more than large enough to annihilate the rebellion.

It was later than he'd realized.

The horizon seemed pale, lightening in threads like the frayed edges of a seeker's robe. Harb drew his blades. As soon as the Inayan commanders could see what they faced, they would send common ground troops after them. Loss of life would not matter to them. They would know that if enough men were sent, some would make it, and then would send some more. Until the resistance was cut down.

Z'ev glanced his way as he heard the ring of the drawn weapon. His weapons had not been used in many months. It was more than time he wet them.

You think ... this is the last moment, do you not? Z'ev signed.

Harb smiled slowly, feeling something close to tenderness for the man he had guarded for so long; then he went to stand beside the Bedu, who were still staring grimly across the river. Already, the Inayans stirred, edging closer to the bank. The sky was their enemy as well, showering them with milky light.

"We did not know when we ran at the speaker's request that repaying our debt would mean so many Bedu lives," Ghazi said, staring across the black water. "With a Bedu band the size of yours ... we might take this battle. But you lack so many things—poorly trained and equipped. We cannot win."

Z'ev limped up beside them, apparently judging it too late for caution. "You knew that all along, did you not?"

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Ghazi flashed a grim smile. "Certainly. But our stand here has bought your men some time. Perhaps they will do some good, out there."

It was a weak hope and one Harb would not hang their lives on. His heart nearly stopped when Z'ev spoke next. "You may go and consider your debt paid. We have fared much better with your help. There is no reason why you should fall with us."

The Bedu war leader opened his mouth as if to reply, but the young one held up his hand. "I will answer for the Bedu," he said sharply. "I am Shunnar, heir to the ameer. No savage can discharge my debts. I owe my life to a Ballendish earthspeaker, the last from that city, and she called me here. *Only* she may send us away."

"He is young." Ghazi looked pleased. "But he speaks for all Bedu. We always kiss our wives and children before we leave, always drink and feast as if each hunt may be our last. We are ready, if this is our day."

"Well enough." Z'ev stepped forward a pace, gesturing. "They cross now ... they have seen us. I am honored to have known all of you, some longer than others. You are all brave, brave men." And he took up his walking stick like a staff. Half the heir's talon would see battle for the first time in three hundred cycles.

Harb felt a tug at his tunic, and he glanced down to see the small rebel with the ancient eyes. The boy must know he could not speak, though none of the farmers had ever made an issue of it. Perhaps they did not know the significance.

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The boy whispered, "I have been fighting for the last three cycles. Levy men took our farm and murdered my mother, my sister. I went with my brothers into the hills. But I always thought ... *always*, that one day, I would go home again." There was a distance in the boy's eyes now, as if he peered through a veil. "But I will not, will I?"

Harb almost snapped the boy's neck himself—he hated telling him the truth almost that much. Slowly, Harb knelt until he was on eye level and then shook his head. All the tension went out of the boy, as if acceptance was easier. The young soldier turned and took his post.

"Spear!" Ghazi shouted, and the Bedu began scything anew.

* * * *

But the Inayans were canny and determined this time. They spread out along the river. The Bedu could not cut them all down, and the supply of spears was dwindling rapidly. Soon, they were down to one spear for each man, so they fell back. At last, Harb would fight, but there was no pleasure in it. His blood should be singing—he should be shaking with anticipation—but instead his mouth was dry, and he tasted bitterness, as if he had been chewing marja.

"To defense," another Bedu called, and they formed a circle.

The other soldiers followed, wedging themselves between the Bedu. "Whatever happens, do not break the circle. If one man falls, we do not falter—we close the gap. Leave just enough room to swing your spears." Ghazi glanced around sharply as if to ascertain they understood.

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The ksathra stood quietly, his staff ready, as the Inayan troop ran for them. Harb had not wanted him to fight, but he knew Z'ev would not want the shame of dying without raising a weapon in his own defense. Harb discarded his blades quickly; there was no room for elaborate maneuvers in this formation. The Bedu had seemingly perfected the art of efficient slaughter—methodical block, thrust, and twist. It was almost amusing to watch the stunned surprise on the Inayan soldiers' faces as they fell.

Except that this fighting style required a great deal of physical strength to punch past Inayan armor. The Bedu possessed it as did Harb, but the farmers did not. One by one they dropped. Harb saw blood-spattered faces all around him, heard the gurgle of punctured throats, the screams of pain drowned in blood, the clang of metal on metal, and smelled the stench of fear and urine. He worked on reflex, trying not to stumble over the mounded dead. His arms ached, shoulders burned. He was too old.

Z'ev must be holding his own, somehow, bludgeoning those who spun his way, for if he fell, so would Harb. He heard the crunch of bone as the young Bedu beside him pierced the sternum of a surprised Inayan trooper. Another hunter swore at the boy for his bad aim, though Harb had been fairly impressed that he hadn't lost his weapon between shaking the dead man off his spear and lunging at the next.

Multiple cuts all over his body stung with sweat. He had not been aware of receiving them. Killing was easy. But Harb came to himself as the sun peeked over distant hills, still just

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a golden crescent. Only a little longer until full day, until certain death.

His limbs were lead, and he could hardly lift his spear. How many had fallen? They were only ten now; one of the Bedu lay before him with his throat cut, spear still in hand. And still the Inayans came. Despair wore the uniform of House Fouad, as the Elite Guard began to cross the Omintago.

Then the mountainside exploded, rocks raining down on the Inayan troops, followed swiftly by two plummeting forms. The enemy spun in the water to dodge the falling stones just long enough for Harb to see that the two in the river fled something worse. Creatures poured like gray death from the gaping hole—shivering, seething things with knotted limbs and glowing eyes that swarmed down the rocks, grasping, clawing at anything that moved. He only had to see one soldier blacken, wither, and die screaming before he snatched Z'ev and ran.

The Inayan soldier he'd been fighting gave chase halfheartedly, and Harb heard his sudden shriek as a *thing* took him. He cursed his inability to speak, as he tossed Z'ev over one shoulder, ignoring the protest of his abused muscles. He knew some Inayans were in the water. At the moment, it had to be safest, and the Inayans were the least of his worries. The creatures floundered in the water, ungainly, semipermeable. And still they gave chase. Harb swam out, dodging terrified foot soldiers and puzzled Elite Guards. He sank down until only their nostrils were above water, waiting out the feast he heard all about them, horrific

even muffled by the water. And then one found them, raking the river with its claws.

It seemed they would drown instead of dying in battle. Making peace with it, he took a deep breath and forced Z'ev down. It wasn't until he was sinking that Harb realized he should not have been able to do it. In effect, he was drowning his master, saving him from a worse death, assuredly, but—

The thing above them exploded in a column of rancid smoke.

Up.

They broke the surface together, gasping, to take in the utter devastation. Harb had one arm about Z'ev, who had lost his staff. Corpses floated all around them, some grotesquely bloated from a night in the water and others shriveled into husks, as if all the juice had been sucked from them. The air was heavy with the stench of sulfur.

Harb helped Z'ev crawl onto the bank, where they both collapsed. Nearby, he saw the boy with the old man's eyes, dead. He was staring at the sky, eyes wide as saucers. The ksathra's hands shook as he signed, *Status?*

He actually smiled. *Alive.*

Good news.

And then he saw the afreet.

It was a bedraggled thing, weak and thin, with hostile, chromatic eyes; and the girl beside it looked no better, her skin wrinkled from her time in the water. Her dark hair was an explosion around a plain, round face. She had a withered arm, drawn up close to her body, but her agate eyes were stern and angry, as they bore into his.

"Where are the Bedu?" she demanded with a sharp Ballendish accent. "I sent them to aid you, and you have seen them all slaughtered?"

He had some questions, but before he could ask Z'ev to pose them, the ksathra nudged him sharply in the ribs. "Just because we are exhausted and beaten does not mean the war is over, my friend," he said, pointing at the ragged remnants of the Elite Guard pouring from the river to surround them.

"Curse you all." The woman snarled. "It will take more than an army to stop me now. You *will* let us go."

She actually expected the Inayan Elite Guard to stand down. If he could have laughed, he would. But Z'ev was studying her with unusual intentness. "You must," said the ksathra suddenly. "You must let her go. Can you not recognize the last heir of Izzat Aban?"

A bluff? He could not ask Z'ev, for the other Elite Guard would understand the question, no matter how he phrased it. The girl herself did not react, staring at the Elite Guards as if expecting their immediate compliance. They did stop advancing, and there was a flurry of motion as they argued among themselves. A commander would have advised the officers but most of the officers had been devoured.

At last, a small man stepped forward. "Izzat Aban had only one daughter, named Immelia. Can you prove this is she?"

"Can you prove she is not?" Z'ev smiled slightly. "But in any case, this is not Immelia. Aban had only one legitimate daughter, Immelia of the golden hair and sharp temper. But this woman could be Aban made over again. She has his chin and his mouth, his stature. I am *certain* she must be his

child, perhaps from a concubine or house slave. As the last of her line, she is the only hope for uniting Cahra again, and you cannot harm her without endangering yourselves.

Furthermore, when the noble houses in Inay see that you have brought a royal to them in chains..." He let his voice trail off ominously.

That much was true. The layers of compulsion prevented the Elite Guard from harming any of royal blood, any from a ruling house. More frantic signing—the Elite Guard did not excel at independent thought. It was generally not required of them.

The small man spoke again, this time to the girl. "Are you of Izzat Aban's house?"

"I lived there all my life."

Frighteningly clever. Harb's admiration for Z'ev rose. When he failed to win by force, he would try guile. "Who but the izzat's daughter would merit escort by an afreet? And—" Z'ev limped over to the woman, who drew closer to the silent afreet "—I am sure she would wish the protection of one who knows the Sun City, the *rightful* heir, during her journey."

"We must go to Eristorne," she whispered. Only Harb was close enough to hear. "I do not want to go to Inay. And they will never accept that I am the izzat's heir. I was a *slave* there."

"Do you want to live?" Z'ev spoke through his tight smile. "Play along, or you will die here with us, as conspirators."

The resistance seemed to go out of her as she glanced at her companion, who nodded slightly and rested a pale hand on her dark head. "Very well," she said louder. "I will travel to

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Inay with you." And then, softly, "Do you truly think we have a chance?"

"Do not worry," the ksathra whispered. "There are rebels in the city, too. If we can win these Elite Guards to our cause on the journey..." He let that sink in. "If you act the part, they will *want* to accept you, to have peace again. And belief is its own magic."

"Then ... we will travel together," said the small interpreter for the Elite Guard, "with you four as our honored guests."

Harb hoped the journey would not involve chains.

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CHAINS OF PEACE

The road wound down, a brown ribbon under a leaden sky. Their way followed the river, through ochre and olive hills. Muir could see in the distance where the scrubby vegetation of the plains yielded to the pale sands. Travel through the waste would test their strength—she hoped her companions were prepared.

All around she saw the puffs of breath from other wayfarers. It was strange to travel in such a large group. Most of the Inayans had been slaughtered by the raksavu—only the Elite Guard remained, and then only half of the number that had traveled out, according to their interpreter. They had picked up a few of Z'ev's men who had had the sense to take cover in the river or flee. Many of the horses had been butchered, as the raksavu feasted indiscriminately. The grotesque spectacle would haunt her for the remainder of her days. Only the sun's bright rays had saved them, since the monsters could not stand the light.

No one had tried to confine her. Where would she run? The ground was almost all open, nowhere to hide. Their circumstances baffled her. Why had they survived so much, only to be taken by the Inayans? And, why had the one called Z'ev chosen to name her Aban's daughter. Did she truly resemble the dead izzat or was it merely a ruse to save their lives? She sighed, rubbing at her withered arm.

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"It hurts you?" Rodhlann fell into step beside her, still reeking of the foul water where they had hidden for what seemed like an eternity.

Muir glanced up at him, knowing that his skin crawled. "A little. Mostly it is ... cold, as if it is asleep. I rub it ... but the feeling will not come back."

"I am devouring you," he said quietly. "And you promised you would not let me."

She heard the crunch of rock underfoot as she weighed her response. And then she smiled. "No, I said that a monster who gave warning could not be so wicked."

Rodhlann had been mostly silent since they had joined with the Inayans, even for him, and she had wondered what preyed on his mind. He gave her a thin smile in acknowledgment before saying, "If we are ever free to travel to Eristorne, it may be ... difficult. The raksavu are not natural to Maksoor Balad, Muir. Someone *sent* them ... and such a summoning requires incredible power. I cannot think of anyone who could have worked it alone, not even among the Daiesthai, not any longer."

"You think they have all turned against you?" She did not state the obvious—that the raksavu had been sent to stop them, kill them, with casual disregard for whoever else might be harmed.

"Perhaps." He sounded inexpressibly weary. "If I had not already taken so much from you, I would call a halt here. My vanity is not worth feeding at this cost."

Not your vanity. Kaveh, who does not want to die when you perish. Would he take refuge in Rodhlann's children,

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generation after generation, unable to touch the world but unwilling to let go? As much as Minau-who-was had loved him, Muir found the idea terribly sad.

"We cannot quit," she told him. "I have not granted your wish yet."

"You have already done more for me than I should have asked. I would stop, before I take all you are."

Too late.

She gave him a wistful smile. "Sometimes one can only walk a road until its end, Rodhlann. So ... let us walk." Without looking to see if he followed, she quickened her pace, falling in behind some weary-looking rebel soldiers.

It was a hard march.

Many of the supply wagons had been destroyed by Bedu-born fires, and there was little game to be found along the road. Merchant oases found themselves hard-pressed to accommodate their needs, as the trouble in Inay had caused trade to be sporadic. Hunger and sickness plagued them, and Muir found herself playing the role of nurse. She saw Rodhlann mainly at night, when he would seek her in silence, his face pale as moonlight, and draw her into his arms. He spent his days walking beside the limping Z'ev, answering the man's questions and perhaps posing his own. Men shied away from the one they named afreet, although hardship inured them even to Rodhlann's strangeness.

The ancient road wound through the Arkyries and over the foothills. It was dead country during Behrid, the sparse vegetation yellowed with the cold. Even the insects were silent, and the lizards had burrowed deep to sleep through

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the season. Only the Omintago remained wakeful, whispering as she walked of its beneficence and beauty. Such a vain river, the Omintago, but perhaps it had cause, as all its brothers and sisters had dried long since, evaporated into distant clouds that rarely gave back rain.

Then they parted ways from the river, passing deeper into the waste. At night, the sands shone, glimmering with frost. They camped beside the road most evenings, too weary even to set up tents, for those who still possessed them. The rest huddled together for warmth, rebels and Elite Guards mingling freely, lest more of one side freeze, thus leaving the other advantaged. And when the journey was nearly done, they paused near Erathos. Strange to return so close to home, when home was no more. Ballendin lay a few hours in the opposite direction, but only ghosts awaited her there.

Just under twenty-hand soldiers and Elite Guard watched while Z'ev dug around the stones, reclaiming something, but Muir strode to the edge of the well and then knelt to peer into its depths. "Shashida," she whispered. "I know you. I ... remember. Is there anything I can do?"

The water stirred and made an almost wistful sound, rising toward her hand. Ridiculous to believe she could comfort the echo of a goddess, but Muir was full of odd conceits and even more unusual talents. A light touch on her shoulder made her start; Muir spun and tried to straighten in one motion, tangled her feet in her djellabah, and teetered on the edge of the well.

She sighed as Harb steadied her with a large hand, studying her with intent dark eyes. He did not look like the

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other Elite Guards; he was older and more worn, clad in a ragged merchant's tunic and loose trousers, and he wore no bracers. He made a scooping gesture with his hands and then flicked them upward. She tilted her head, before guessing, "It is safe to drink the water. She does not begrudge it."

He nodded, turned, and signed to Z'ev, who relayed the information to his soldiers. The men lined up to fill their waterskins; it had been some while since they left the Omintago and all were down to a few brackish swallows. After a brief rest, they continued toward Inay, whittling away the distance while her uncertainty swelled. *Act the part, and they will want to accept you*, Z'ev had said. But she had only Immelia as an example of how an izzat's daughter behaved. And Muir thought the men might murder her on the road if she spent the journey barking orders.

They made camp some distance from Inay. Overhead, the sky was the color of crushed plums, gauzy clouds hiding Sahen from sight; Anumati was only a sliver of herself, casting a diffuse light that softened everything. Muir sat near Rodhlann, chewing the last of the jerky and naan, purchased at the last oasis. Quite unexpectedly, Z'ev, Harb, and the small man who acted as the interpreter for the Elite Guard joined them. Another of Z'ev's men—Muir thought his name was Marid—sat down quietly nearby. None lamented the lack of a fire, though she would never again take for granted warm food or a comfortable pallet. She thought her spine must have permanent dents from sleeping on stones.

A screech broke the night, and a shadowy form dove from the heavens. She flung herself down, protecting her bad arm,

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only to find the men chuckling at her. A golden bird lit on Z'ev's wrist, digging its talons enough to prick the skin; she suspected it would have taken the arm off anyone else. There, it sat quietly, tilting its head from side to side.

Z'ev read the message it bore, then crumpled the stained parchment in his fist. "It seems I still command some loyalty in Inay. Harb, you remember Bron, the guard who manned the gate the night Malak Tadit brought us word of Ballendin? He has managed to hold his chancellorship and has been sending reports with the hawks in hope one might find me."

The interpreter looked oddly somber. "What is the city's status, Ksathra Z'ev?"

Muir had noticed that the man, while tacitly in charge, had begun to defer more and more to the exiled ksathra. She had to admit, he cut an imposing figure. Even in his stained and ragged robes, with his untended beard and wild silver-shot hair, he possessed a certain presence that made one want to follow him. His smile was full of melancholy, but his eyes burned like the sun through topaz.

"The market has been closed for several days, at least at the date of this message. Rebels fight openly in the streets, and the maze has been fired. Food riots have broken out, and Japhet has been hounded into the palace. I have no way of knowing what has happened since."

Rodhlann wound an arm around her shoulders, as if the civil unrest could harm her from such distance. "What do you plan to do?"

"An excellent question." The ksathra looked pensive. "We lack the numbers to reclaim Inay by force ... unless you plan on eradicating the resistance as you did in Ballendin?"

She sensed Rodhlann's amusement. "Muir would be unhappy if I repeated the offense."

She wondered when her approval had become paramount ... and then she remembered. He did not have the power any longer, but he did not want their enemies to know. Right now, assumption of his strength kept the two of them safe, along with the matter of her "royal" blood.

"I am uneasy with this conversation," said the interpreter. "I serve Ksathra Japhet, who will soon be the sha'al-izzat. I must turn you over to his judgment, Ksathra Z'ev, as little as I may like it."

Harb stirred, but Z'ev waved him to stillness. "Will you serve him, even when he does not hold the heir's talon? The relic has been broken, but I still hold the seal, proof enough of my right to rule. Japhet could not even keep Inay in order after our father was murdered. How will he keep the other cities in check? As soon as they hear, Kansbar, Majeed, Dareh ... perhaps even Shapa will make plans to annex us. House Fouad has kept Inay independent for three hundred cycles, but that will end if we do not act."

The interpreter shifted, feeling for his waterskin, and drank as if he wanted something to do with his hands. Muir could not remember his name. "We are ... only a small part of Japhet's force," he said at last. "What can we do?"

She knew he was weakening. Z'ev must have sensed it as well, for he went on, "We bear the heir's seal, and one from

Aban's house. Our claim is far greater than Japhet's. If you stand with me, perhaps the other Elite Guards will join us. Without their support, he cannot win. Who is the leader of the rebellion, Isik?"

Isik. She repeated it silently so that she would not forget again. The small man considered for a moment. "There is one whom they call the Tortoise of Inay. He has been responsible for most of the dissidence in the city, acts of terror and vandalism before open revolution."

"Getting word into the city could prove difficult," Rodhlann murmured, and all eyes turned to him.

"My plan hinges on many variables." Z'ev smiled then. "I will send a message back to Bron, asking him to speak with the commander of the Elite Guard. I will also ask him to try to get a message to this Tortoise, asking him to meet me. The best way to manage organized resistance is pacification; and they will be more likely to deal with me as I lack Japhet's bloody reputation."

Assuming the bird is not intercepted, assuming this man Bron can, under such difficult circumstances, in a city torn by civil war, carry out Z'ev's instructions. Muir still was not sure what her role was, other than initially keeping the Elite Guard from murdering Z'ev. Perhaps she and Rodhlann would be free to go soon. The idea cheered her. As if he sensed her thought, he slid her a half smile and cupped her shoulder.

"I want what is best for Inay," said Isik slowly. "I want the gates reopened and trade reestablished. I want the artisans crafting again. Do you truly think you can restore peace without the loss of more life?"

For the first time, Marid spoke up. "If anyone can unite the factions, Ksathra Z'ev can. We have followed him from the hills, from certain death to what should have been our last stand, and some of us walked away to follow him still. With respect, good sayyid, I must beg you to weigh your choice before refusing out of blind obedience."

"Let me sleep on it," Isik said at last, "and in the morning, I will relay what you have said to the Elite Guards. Perhaps I will let them decide who they serve."

She saw Harb's well-concealed surprise. How the world was changing when bound men were asked to choose their masters. Muir considered that and smiled.

Shortly thereafter, the men began to seek a warmish place to pass the night, Marid going to huddle among his brothers of the soil while Isik sought the company of the Elite Guards. She stayed Z'ev with a touch to his forearm and Harb waited with him, as Rodhlann did her. That made her smile widen. *They are our shadows, one dark and broad, the other pale and lean.*

"I would know," she murmured, "what you mean to do about me. I do not wish to pretend any longer than I must."

"Who says it is pretense? You *do* resemble the izzat, though only he could have confirmed if you are his get."

She sighed. "I have promises to keep, Ksathra Z'ev. They do not involve Inay."

"I am afraid they do now. You are responsible for what became of Ballendin, indirectly responsible for what has happened in Inay." His eyes glittered in the dark. "You must take responsibility, see that all is made right."

Awareness exploded in on her. So many had died because she had helped Rodhlann in the waste, and were dying still.

"Will my presence truly make a difference?"

"People cling to the familiar," Z'ev told her. "And you represent transition. Inay will be a little different, with us ruling in conjunction with a council chosen by the people, but at this point, I think it is the best we can hope for. Otherwise, we will be annexed and one of the other cities will march to conquer. A Majeedi ruler will not have Inay's best interests at heart."

With us ruling ... Those words resonated, and she licked her dry lips, then wished she hadn't. Her chest suddenly tight, she understood what Z'ev required of her—and it seemed a high price—but when she considered all the deaths, Muir wondered if justice was not being served. She had gone from one form of servitude straight into another. The trappings might be different, but the result was the same. She was no longer free to choose.

Rodhlann tensed. "You would keep her against her will to settle a debt not of her making? Use her to create a false peace?"

"It is not a false peace, if it is lasting." Z'ev sighed. "All this is moot until we hear from Bron or the alliance. Now, all we can do is hold our position here until my hawk returns, where we at least have fresh water."

The guard followed Z'ev when he limped away. Muir watched them both for a moment before mounding some sand for their bed. They had only the tapestry and each other for warmth, so they came together naturally, her head on his

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chest. She heard his heartbeat deep and slow through the bone cave of his ribs. He was thin; this journey had honed him even as it had hardened her. There was no softness between them, just heat and need.

"He would have you marry him to keep the peace." Her hair muffled Rodhlann's furious whisper. "This, he would not admit, but he finds you a fitting mate. Thinks ... you will not be cruel about his crippled foot with your wasted arm. Arrogant dog blesses fate for delivering you into his hands."

She closed her eyes, rubbing her left arm. So cold, so very cold ... the raksavu's grasp had felt as if sleet were seeping into her bones. "I am the last of Aban's house, if not his blood. I will have to answer the debt."

"Then you have given up on accompanying me to Eristorne," he said quietly. "So be it. I have the ritual. Perhaps I can persuade another Daiesthai to perform the rite with me." He did not sound hopeful, however, merely inexpressibly weary.

"No! No ... I will go. I'll find a way, but..." Muir paused, tilting her head to see his wan, beautiful face. If she closed her eyes, she could envision it detail by detail. "I did not know you meant me to work it with you...."

"It takes two," he whispered. "Two kinds of blood, two willing souls. Perhaps another Daiesthai could work it successfully with me, but I am afraid ... that the child might be pure Daiesthai, unable to have children of its own. I want ... to bring my people back toward natural ways. We have strayed too far, lost the rhythm of the world. And I want—" He fell quiet, seemingly unable to articulate what he felt.

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She sensed his bittersweet yearning to keep something of her with him. Muir knew a stab of anguish. How could she leave him? They had borne so much together, and she was incomplete without him. Zillah had been right; they were closer than lovers.

"This too will pass," she murmured, stroking his lank silver hair away from his brow. "All things go the way of earth. Nothing stands—not joy, not pain."

"Your comfort is lacking." But he was smiling, even if the look seemed to hold greater sadness than she could have dreamed. Perhaps that was merely a trick of the night, painting shadows where he felt none. "Bright dreams, little maid."

She expected him to say he loathed her, almost wanted to hear it, but the rest of the night passed in silence, then in the black velvet of sleep.

* * * *

In the morning, Isik gave the Elite Guards' decision. The shift in allegiance was scarcely noticeable, as they had followed Z'ev faithfully almost from the first. Muir could not blame them, as the tall man radiated such implacable will, such fire in his strange amber eyes, that one felt almost compelled to obey him.

She did not let herself think of the future. Instead, she spent her days circulating through their makeshift camp around the well. It looked a little like a nomad village, except more ragged and poor. Had so many ever taken refuge in the waste? To her knowledge never. Only Shashida's residual power granted them sanctuary. Those who camped the

farthest from the small goddess found themselves harried by the lykos, who came stalking over the hills. They spent their nights listening to Z'ev relate the tales that Harb spun into air, and if their food had not been growing short, she might have almost enjoyed the respite.

On the third day of waiting, no hawks came—but the Bedu did. Muir ran to them, shouting, when she saw Ghazi, Shunnar, and Kadin. Her face fell when she realized they had lost Riyad and Ferro, perhaps others. The three did not enter the camp, but waited for her to join them past the strange tree that had once been sacred to Jyotish.

"You will always be Bedu," Shunnar said in lieu of greeting, "but we cannot allow you to return to our camps. You travel with savages, asked us to die in their names. We consider our debt paid and will not see your shadow again."

"You traveled all this way to tell me so?" she asked wonderingly.

Ghazi grinned. "That ... and your group makes good lykos bait. We have more skins than we can carry."

"Shade and water until we meet again." Muir knew the greeting was wrong; she would not see these men again in this life and perhaps not even in the next.

Shunnar seemed to share her sadness. He had grown much from the boy who had trembled so at his first hunt. "Shade and water *always*, speaker."

They ran, and she watched them until their figures had dwindled into nothing, three more grains of sand in the dry sea. Rodhlann found her standing at the edges of the camp and touched her shoulder. These days, he knew her sorrows

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almost better than she. She turned into his arms, not thinking of the absurd picture they must present.

"Another door closes," he said into her hair.

"Just so." After a moment, she pulled away with a half smile. There was work to occupy her hands, better to labor than think.

* * * *

The hawk never returned, but on the fifth day, a rebel complement came across the sands, looking lost. Muir had never expected them to respond, let alone in such numbers. They had sent perhaps half the amount currently encamped near the well, and the Tortoise of Inay himself led them. He resembled the creature for whom he was named, a short man with dry skin, broken teeth, and a rounded back. But he had clever eyes, darting everywhere at once, making judgments. Qutuz left most of his men nearby and entered their camp as if he did not fear them. And perhaps he did not.

Z'ev met him, offering what little hospitality they possessed—bitter mint tea and rice, as the dry meat had run out the day before. They withdrew into the relative warmth of one of the few salvaged tents. Perhaps intentionally, they sat in a circle, where none seemed to be set above another. Rodhlann was to her left and a stranger to her right. Harb and Z'ev sat across, closer to Qutuz, who cupped his tea as if the circumstances were not unusual in the least.

"Welcome, citizens." The ksathra performed the introductions, and Muir nodded as he indicated her.

"I had heard your brother meant to hunt you to ground," Qutuz said. "It would seem he has proven as inept at that as at other aspects of rule."

Z'ev smiled. "Such as keeping the peace in Inay?"

"Precisely." The rebel leader folded his hands.

Of their group, only Z'ev and Qutuz seemed comfortable with speaking freely, so she left them to it; it seemed others shared her reticence. She studied the monstrous hulk guarding the Tortoise; the man, if he could be so named, seethed, twitching as if to unheard suggestions. He made her nervous, and she drew a little closer to Rodhlann.

"I must say, I am surprised and honored that you came yourself. We had heard that the city was closed."

"It is, to most." The Tortoise sipped some of his tea, wetting his pale, dry mouth. "I travel lesser known ways, the chief reason I have never been taken in Inay. When the searches grew too intensive, I went elsewhere."

"Cunning." Muir could almost see Z'ev storing away the information, for a day when he might have to fight this man. She could not imagine it would ever come to that, however, or Qutuz would not be volunteering so much information.

"Your men are starving here," the rebel leader said then. "Let us pare this matter to the bone. You want to treat with me—and I would know how it benefits the people."

She sensed Rodhlann's surprise. Without knowing how she knew, she realized such a matter would have taken days of verbal thrust and parry among his people, talks that possessed layer on layer of implication, before anything substantial was accomplished. Once again, she marveled at

such patience, even while being glad of Qutuz's directness. But perhaps the rebels did not have the luxury of time, either.

"I think I will like dealing with you," Z'ev said, smiling. "Let me speak plainly, too. Your resistance leaders, however skilled at agitation, have no skill in administering a city the size of Inay nor with keeping the other cities at bay. The civil unrest has probably already come to the attention of Darehan and Majeedi rulers. Perhaps they make plans to march on Inay even now. You need a strong house to keep their teeth from Inay's throat. House Fouad has shown its strength for the past three hundred cycles."

"The glory of House Fouad is tarnished," Qutuz countered. "The people will not accept a return to what was. They have suffered and struggled too much. I have promised progress and I *must* deliver it."

"There will be change," Z'ev said at once. "I am not my father or my brother. I have already signed free trade agreements with Feroz, limiting levies and guaranteeing there will be no seizures. These amendments will allow Inayan citizens access to more goods; and I will permit an open market, no more guild-set prices. I am also willing to be guided by a council chosen by the people. As their leader, I am sure they would want to see you as First Councilor, along with eleven of your wisest men."

"All excellent reforms..." Qutuz looked thoughtful.

Muir felt her eyes growing heavy and she laid her head against Rodhlann's shoulder. Though he shifted her closer, she knew he was absorbing each detail with care. Her own

interest in such matters was negligible; she had never even been to Inay.

"Then what keeps you from allying with me? We seem to hold many of the same goals."

"Partly," said Qutuz, "because I sense you are a desperate man, Ksathra Z'ev, and desperate men will do things they would not ordinarily do, such as lie and cheat. Tell me this: Do you *truly* care about the people? Do you consider me your equal?"

Silence.

Muir roused at the question, feeling the same tense interest as everyone else. She studied Z'ev's face but could receive no hint of what he might say. Finally, the ksathra said, "Yes ... and no." The Tortoise's monstrous guard sat forward, but Qutuz stayed him. "I care about the people, now. But I will not lie—I did not always see their need. I did not travel among them. I had not looked in their eyes or broken bread with them. And I do not consider you my equal, honored Qutuz, because while I was born to privilege, I did nothing with it, not until I was cast from my father's house. Whereas you have rallied men to your cause, you have agitated for change. You are the better man.... I am come too late, trying to make amends."

The rebel leader puffed visibly with pride. Z'ev was a wizard with words. And Muir knew then that the alliance would come to pass. It might take several hours more of talking over bitter mint tea, but Z'ev had them; he had found the right place to stroke.

She fell asleep before they were finished.

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And awakened to find herself alone with Rodhlann, cradled in his arms. Night had fallen and they had been left alone in the tent, an unusual courtesy, as Z'ev generally claimed it for himself, as it was the least ragged of the surviving shelters. Muir raised herself up enough to ascertain that he was not sleeping, but was staring up at the seams with the same fascination he had shown on another night, long ago in the Bedu camp.

Something troubled him. Almost she did not ask, but in the end her concern was greater than her trepidation. "What is it?"

"They completed their plans," he said quietly. "Tomorrow we march for Inay ... and they will synchronize an assault on the palace and the gates. Qutuz believes that the other Elite Guards in the city will choose to follow Z'ev, leaving Japhet vulnerable."

She touched his cheek. "But that is not what bothers you."

"No ... they spoke of you, next."

"What did they say?" The night smelled of rain; she did not envy those spending a final night outdoors, if the heavens wept icy tears.

"You will be a safeguard for Inay, being from Aban's house, from dead Ballendin. I am not sure of the details, but the other cities owed some allegiance to Ballendin? To the izzat? They hope that your presence will establish Inay as the new sacred city. You are crucial to their schemes."

"That is absurd!" she said. "No one will believe I am royal born. It is—"

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"Once Inay is secure," he said, "they mean to teach you ... bearing and manners. You will suffice, then. And the representatives will come to see you from Majeed and Dareh, Kansbar and Shapa, to see the valiant empress who fought beside her crippled husband, fought for the good of the common man. They are shrewd men; it is a moving tale, and history is always writ by the victors."

Fate pressed her down. She owed a debt that must be paid with peace, even if it cost her freedom in paying it. "I will still come with you to Eristorne," she whispered unsteadily. "But ... I think I will not be able to stay."

His voice was cool, opaque as the Omintago. "I never asked you to."

"No ... you never did."

In the distance, she heard the lykos howling, born of Kaveh's grief.

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SWEET JUDGMENT

They had been fighting in the streets since dawn. Each hour, the battle seemed to push closer to the palace. All his advisers had fled, and Japhet had given up expecting intelligence from his officers. Most were in hiding or had gone over to the resistance.

Past the clear glass of the window, late morning light lapped at the floor, shades of blush and gold dappling the pale marble tiles. The room was cool, but Japhet's skin burned wherever it touched Fionne. She was a fire he could not quench. He wished he had enough time to love her again, but they had stolen the last moment, while he gloried in her scent of chadra ushak and musk, taste of wine and salt and hopeless dreams. He had to let her go.

But Japhet cradled her closer, his face against her hair. The color licked like flame, but the crown of her head was cool and silky against his mouth. Another moment and he would open his arms. She was not asleep. She knew how precarious his hold on Inay had become. He could not help himself, though, craving a few more moments with her. Soon, Suliman would come to take her away, smuggle her from the city. She had come too far, faced too much, to die for being the sha'al-izzat's foreign whore.

A crash against an inner door made Japhet start. He had wondered when they would breach the walls. Rebels all but held the city now; he had made the decision to try to parley, but when they sent his messenger back in bloody bits, he

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knew they would accept no concessions, no promises to amend his policy.

He had gambled and lost.

His sight had been forever fixed on future glories and had failed to see the immediate danger stalking his city until it was too late. Without leadership and intelligence, the city guard might fight on like a headless serpent, but the battle had been lost.

Regret was futile.

Japhet ran his knuckles over the curve of her cheek, the delicate line of her jaw. Her eyes opened. Fionne's eyes were green as few things in Raton were. Once he might have said hard and sharp as glass, but her gaze now held other shades. The fierce one looked as if she might weep, and he feathered a caress at the corners of her eyes.

His lips met hers in a bittersweet kiss, tasting the golden wine she had been drinking and the salt of tears she would not shed. "You must go," he whispered. "I would have you safe, if I can do nothing else for you. Rise and dress, bright fire. I will not see you again, I think."

"You kill me with kindness." She sounded choked. Hard and strong, she would not break, and Suliman would look after her, one of the few men to whom Japhet would entrust her. He pushed her from the warm nest of cushions.

Silently she belted his generous gift of kels about her waist and then dressed. For the first time, Fionne would leave her armor behind, as it would mark her as too different from the other women. She might go unnoticed, dressed in robes and veils, if she kept her eyes down. Some from as far north as

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Dareh had pale skin like hers. Japhet watched her, aching. He donned a robe at random, suddenly very aware of the woven fabric against his skin. Such things had become precious, his time to note them limited.

Suliman rapped twice on the false panel and then stepped into the room. The stone had been shaped for that passage so many generations ago that the lore had been lost. All that remained of magic was hoarded by the magicians, but they, along with Dhul Bakr, had gone to ground. Presumably, they would offer their services to whoever emerged triumphant.

She paused, her face grave and still. "I will not forget."

He had no words for her. "Take good care of her," he told Suliman.

His commander nodded gravely and took Fionne's arm, leading her toward the sha'al-izzat's private egress. She did not look back.

One final glance around; Japhet knew it could not be much longer. He heard them smashing expensive china and glass, chopping at priceless khi doors, doors that had been gilded by master craftsmen, inlaid with chrysolite and beryl, shimmering bits of malachite and lapis lazuli. They knew no artistry, this mob, possessed no sense of history or beauty. Treasures that nourished the soul would be sold for a pittance on the market in Feroz.

Beyond the stone lattice, he heard the ring of weapons. *Close now.* Japhet saw the shadows of the two Elite Guards positioning themselves before his mother's pretty gate, even as it groaned; for a moment it even seemed that training and loyalty might hold against the mob. Until the first spear struck

past a defense too slow for so many ... and the second fell soon after, bathed in blood. Crushed by sheer numbers, the last bastion fell.

The door exploded into splinters and his chamber filled with rebel soldiers. Abrim came behind them, and Japhet closed his eyes for a moment. So much regret; he might drown in it. They would execute the older man, too, though he had only been in power a short time.

"They took you, too? I am sorry ... you should have fled."

The merchant smiled strangely, and for the first time, Japhet noticed that he did not seem to be in custody. He stood *with* the rebels. At a gesture from him, the resistance stood back. "Who do you think fed them their information?" Abrim asked gently. "They have not beaten your guards, Japhet. Twice this number could not win against the Elite. No, I led them safely through the palace, safely to *you*."

Rage swelled in him. "Why? Under my rule, your power was unequaled in Inay!"

"You were Nadiv's favored child." Abrim's smile this time showed teeth. "His life would not have been enough for what he did to me—and someone else anticipated my aim. So I would have his seed. I will burn House Fouad from this earth."

"Whatever he did, I had no part of it."

"You were glad to rule through him, using his fondness to impose your petty cruelties. I made you better than you were, sha'al-izzat Japhet. I give ... and now I take away."

Abrim flicked his hands and the rebels seized Japhet. *He does not know about Fionne*, he thought. None would know

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Japhet had sent her from Inay; his silence was the only protection he could provide. As the rebels shackled him, Japhet glared over his shoulder at the smug merchant with the oiled beard.

"Traitors always get what they deserve," he growled.
"Always. Watch your back, Abrim."

* * * *

Abrim strode away from the palace courtyard, a small smile playing about his lips. Japhet's expression had been priceless. The streets were too clogged for bearers so he had to walk all the way from the palace back to the House of the Lemon Blossoms. It seemed a small price to pay, as he had succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. Away from the palace, away from the Path of Hope, his home had escaped all of the damage, all of the looting, even though he owned as much in the way of wealth and treasure as the nobles who were falling to the axe.

He was eager to return home. Now that he had eased the burning ache for vengeance that had consumed him for the past ten years, he felt lighter. Free. There was another wound, but that one had healed until he no longer suffered the worst of it. Redress for that injury had come immediately, although it had not been as harsh as he would have liked.

In all honesty, he knew Yolenthe comprised the reason for his unusual cheer. She too had been different of late, content in his house. And contrary to his expectations, he found he liked her better that way. She had climbed into his affections like a creeper vine, twining herself through him until he could

no longer toy with the idea of giving her away or having her killed.

The sun smiled down on him, strengthening as the day aged. Behrid had lost some of its teeth; it was no longer chilling to travel on foot. He flashed his blue glass splinter at rebel patrols as he passed—that had become their identification badge—although they were now calling themselves the New Inayan Guard. That was the way of things; when a group challenged the establishment and won, they *became* the establishment. And soon enough, the rebellion would find themselves subject to the same greed and corruption that had riddled the noble houses.

Abrim did not care for any of that. He had signed documents from Qutuz, authorizing the sale of marja in Inay once more, and soon he would make gifts of it to key leaders. He would rule Inay soon enough without the inconvenience of having his power acknowledged. Earlier, he had stepped down as First Councilor, making way for eager young men with fervid eyes. They had blessed him for his covert service to their cause, and Abrim had smiled graciously. Zealots were almost always as stupid as they were stubborn.

He passed into the artisan's district, waving to those who recognized him. Passing the potter's gate, Abrim saw the old man staring blankly into space. The aged would have the most trouble adapting; very suddenly, the world had changed.

Past his neighbor he went, through his own gate, and into the House of the Lemon Blossoms. Calling out, he walked from room to room, blind to the opulence he had built from

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nothing. Instead he sought his concubine. And found her in the courtyard garden, spinning stones in the dust with his young son. Isa was laughing, but the sound died as Abrim strode up the walk.

Even that could not detract from his pleasure as he took Yolante's hands. Today he would tell her he planned to marry her. How well she had done for herself, this woman he had saved from her father's fire. In the afternoon sun, she was golden. Her hair had grown back, sleek and dark against her beautiful head. Today she wore it up, the strands secured with a silver pin. Abrim smiled as she kissed his cheek.

"You are home early," she said quietly. "Each day I wonder if you will return."

He smiled at her. "You need not fear for me. All things profit me, my dove." Lately, he had almost come to believe that boast. Everything he touched turned to gold, especially Yolante's dappled skin. "Play on, young Isa," he told the boy, who looked startled at his tone.

Her hand was warm where it rested in his, and she went with him, eagerly it seemed. He was hungry for her, could hardly wait until they reached the luxurious chamber appointed for her use. Kissing her throat, her cheeks, he was gentle as he eased her onto the cushions, gentle as he lifted her robe, and her soft cry startled the doves from the eaves.

Afterward, he cradled her in his arms, sweat cooling on his skin. "I would marry you," he whispered. "You are a good mate, Yolante, and I would keep you close."

She paused only an instant before saying, "Would you ... tell me what happened to Isa's mother?"

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Abrim drew back to stare into her face, but the shifting light from the curtains defeated him. Her expression told him nothing, as her eyes were wide and dark as Shapan wine. The sun striped her face with shadows from the barred window. He had given this girl everything; she wore silk today, richly brocaded in gold, and her slim fingers were weighted with jewels.

"Why do you ask?"

"I am curious about the one who came before me."

Although her voice was no more revealing, he thought he understood. She was jealous, wondering about his affection. He smiled.

"It is an ugly story, Yolathe, but I will share it, to prove I care for her no longer. She was unfaithful to me." Despite himself, his mouth tightened as he remembered. "I trusted her. Gave her every luxury, every pleasure. In truth, I ... adored her." It was a weak word for the obsession he'd felt, the consuming fire. He would never love another as he had his first wife. "I worried about her so that I procured an Elite Guard for her protection, *not* an easy task for a merchant. It cost much in the way of kels *and* favors...."

He shook his head. "Had him sent all the way to Feroz to guard her. She did not want to leave her family when we had to flee Inay. She was ... unhappy. And I was forced to work long hours, trying to regain what I had lost. Trying to give her *more*, to make her happy...." His fists clenched, despite himself. "And while I was away, she spent more and more time with her *guard*. He could not speak, was scarcely human ... and yet she ... she..."

"You are hurting me," Yolenthe whimpered.

Abrim glanced down and saw that he had curled his hands about her arms, bruising her tender flesh. He made himself let her go. "I am sorry, my dove. After all this time, I am still angry, when I think of her. She ... lay with him, touched him ... while she was great with my child, near her time." He shuddered at the memory. "I found them, together."

"How did you punish her?" Yolenthe drew him closer then, and Abrim rested his head on her breast. It was easier to speak with her warmth as a buffer against the pain. Speaking of this was not easy; it was the first time he had done so. He had wanted to bury the failure as he wished to bury his wife, the accursed she-devil.

"Cut Isa from her body ... I wanted her to die. She *deserved* to die. But she was strong—she lived to face her trial in Feroz."

"Sleep now," Yolenthe finally whispered. "You deserve ... rest."

"I knew you would understand. And I know you will never betray me so, my dove. Our sons will be strong and brave. House Abrim will be great."

Abrim rose enough to kiss her tenderly, limbs languid in the aftermath of pleasure. Then he lay down again, head on her chest, letting the old pain go. As dark velvet filled his mind, he knew a silver-sharp flare at the back of his head—and then nothing more.

* * * *

Sibal stood with Qutuz on the palace walls, looking over the city. Even while the worst of the fighting raged, she had

never truly thought they could win. And they probably would not have, not without Ksathra's Z'ev's distraction at the bone gate and not without the betrayal from within. *Abrim. How I loathe him.* It would take years to rebuild the damage; Inay was charred about the edges, still smoldering in places. The beautiful Path of Hope had been ransacked, its flowers and trees uprooted, and the villas lining it plundered.

"You promised me I would see him burn," she said without looking at the Tortoise of Inay. "You said if I served the resistance faithfully—and I have—that I would see him burn and the House of the Lemon Blossoms along with him."

She no longer wanted to see the house in flames, not when it held so many who were dear to her. But the kernel of bitterness remained. Her debt to Abrim had not been paid; it would *not* be paid until he was dead.

"Sibal," the old man said, "sometimes new alliances are necessary. I did not plan this uprising with such care, only to have it fail."

"Then deal with him as a traitor. He betrayed Japhet and the nobles, and he will betray you. The man is a snake—he *cannot* be trusted."

Qutuz sighed, as if her insistence wore at his patience. Behind them, in the shadow of the walls, Othman stood like a silent warning, but Sibal would not allow herself to be intimidated. If Qutuz meant to rule by force and with threat of execution for speaking one's mind, then they had only traded tyrants. The world was washed with blood, and not only from her chador.

"The city is still too unsettled," he told her gently. "I cannot start by executing any but nobility. Our faction is divided as well, with those who would wrestle with me for power. It would weaken my position to execute the one whom the rebels are calling the savior of the cause."

"Abrim?" She knew she sounded skeptical.

Could anyone truly be so gullible? Sibal wished she trusted Qutuz, but the truth was, the wily old devil was every bit as dangerous, every bit as deceptive as Abrim. She hated her own impotence; while Qutuz might balk at executing Abrim for his own reasons, she doubted he would feel over guilty about ridding the world of a woman of Hamra Sehkit.

Qutuz nodded, his eyes fixed on the executioner with an expression she might almost name avid. The axe fell again and the crowd in the plaza cheered. Another house scion had been cleft, head from neck. She could not hear the thud, but she saw the courtyard stones run with blood, in the garden Nadiv had loved. His fountains had been smashed, the statues shattered. So much beauty, so much *history* had been lost. Sibal felt a hot prickle, almost shame, at having helped to bring such tragedy to Inay.

"You may remove your veils, you know. Who will accuse you now? The victor always writes the laws. And I am curious as to the identity of the Red Death, Sibal of Hamra Sehkit."

She shook her head. "I will wear them a little longer."

To his mind, apparently, the matter of Abrim was closed. "As you will. Tell me what else troubles you, then. Your silence is restless."

"The purge troubles me."

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"Did you *truly* believe it would be bloodless, Sibal?"

"But all of them? Even the children?" She had watched until she thought her heart must wither in her breast; she felt vaguely amazed that she still knew pain.

"Would you have them grow into bitter men who sow the seeds of insurrection?" He gave her a look that chilled her blood. "Would you have them topple the new order for old? That is the way of things. We must clean with a scourge like fire."

"And who benefits?"

"The people," the old man said. "I am their voice and their blade. I will not fail them."

"And," she murmured, "this is the only way you could ascend to the high council of Inay."

He opened the door that led to the courtyard stairs, tilting his head as he heard the people shouting, "Qutuz! Qutuz!" His guileless smile as he stepped into the crowd weighed on her soul. She watched him for only a moment before passing back through the door into the palace proper; unless it was inescapable, she did not want to travel through the bloody remnant of Nadiv's reign, did not want to see the weeping children and women with terrified eyes in their soiled silks. Perhaps, perhaps if she did not look at them, they would not haunt her dreams.

Closing her eyes, she paused, one hand on a gilt-edged table. If the resistance had failed her, if Qutuz would not honor his promise, there was only one thing she could do. She heard again Dubai's response when she'd asked if she

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would live long enough to complete her task. *No, Sibal, I am afraid you will not.* So be it.

Resolve hardened her spirit. It did not matter if she died; a woman of Hamra Sehkit could not call herself alive anyway. She left the palace after visiting Japhet's weapon room. The rebel patrols did not bother her as she passed down the plundered Path of Hope; even they apparently felt a suspicion of dread at the sight of her bloody veils, hiding unknown grotesquery and sin. Flowers had been yanked from the ground and lay withered with exposed roots. What could flowers have to say about who ruled Inay?

This was the last time she would visit the House of the Lemon Blossoms—and Sibal knew a stab of regret. So many dear ones she would never see again. *I am a blade and I must not fail.* She would die in the attempt; Dubai had promised as much, and the old man was seldom wrong. He had gone from her hovel one day while she was foraging for food. Sibal was not sure if he had taken up his old post by the sweetmeat seller's stall, but he had *not* gone to Qutuz. Dubai had spoken no words of disapproval, but she had sensed he was no more pleased with the reports of resistance cruelty than she.

She actually smiled, the wind blowing the fabric against her teeth, when she saw that Abrim's house was intact. The man's luck was positively uncanny. Sibal pushed open the garden gate, telling herself she did *not* feel a throb of fear at the thought of seeing him again. There was nothing he could do to her that had not already been done, no part of her that remained pure and unscathed.

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It was twilight, and she expected to see Yolenthe passing lightly through the garden to await her by the wall. She *wanted* to see her, perhaps for a last moment, a final farewell, but she did not, and in the end, that was probably best. Her hands trembled a little as she clung to the shadows, slinking like the assassin the resistance had made of her—the Red Death. So much blood, her hands would never wash clean, never clean enough to hold a child.

She stared up at the house. The sun had fallen from sight. Sahen and Anumati were yet to rise, so the evening was dark, hardly enough light for her to keep from stumbling over her chador. The windows all had bronze bars, such a gilded cage Abrim had built for those he loved and also probably to thwart his many enemies. Perhaps the best thing would be to wait until he retired for the night. She hoped he would be alone, as she did not want to murder him while Yolenthe slept beside him.

So she bided her time, waiting until she saw the lamps being extinguished, and then she waited a little longer, before worrying the lock on the garden door. It had a loose catch as she recalled, and Abrim did not come this way enough to notice, to have it repaired. Or so she hoped.

Success. It clicked open, and she slid through the darkness into the beautifully opulent dining room. Abrim had eaten many of his meals here, particularly early in the day, because he had liked the way the sun shone in from all angles. But away from the city streets, it was dark and still.

Until someone kindled a lamp.

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She froze, straining to see through the veils. Yolante stood in a house robe of buttery yellow, her hair down around her shoulders. Her eyes were red with weeping. For a moment, Sibal forgot why she had come, as she crossed to the other woman. She put out her hands but Yolante did not take them—of course she did not.

I am a woman of Hamra Sehkit, anathema and unclean.

"I know why you have come," said the concubine, softly. "But you are too late."

Stopping two paces from her, Sibal felt her mouth go slack. *Too late? What did that mean?*

"What has happened, Yolante?"

"Abrim died in my bed. It would seem his heart gave way."

The concubine set down the lamp on the low table nearby and as she folded gracefully onto the cushions, Sibal saw the glint of the silver pin in her hair. Suspicion prickled at the back of her mind, and she sat down beside Yolante before her legs gave way.

"He was a strong man," she said. "Are you certain?"

"His heart stopped beating." Such a cold smile curved the other woman's beautiful mouth. "And you ... Sibal, you have lied to me, I think, and perhaps used me as well. Will you remove your veils?"

It had been so long since she had appeared without them, and then, only in the privacy of her family home. Reluctantly, she pulled away the headdress, her black locks falling wildly about her face. The brand was only half visible—she had tried to grow her hair to hide it.

"I am sorry," she whispered, studying Yolante's wine-dark eyes. In this light, they almost seemed to hold a purple hue.

"You befriended me because you wanted me to get Abrim's ring ... and you gave it to the resistance, to sneak poison into the palace. Did they use it to murder the sha'al-izzat?"

Sibal pushed her hair from her eyes, feeling the scar beneath her fingertips. Raised and blackened, it was impossible to conceal entirely. "I will not lie—that *was* the reason I first came ... and as to the latter, I do not know, but I suspect so. But afterward, it was not the reason I returned."

"Abrim told me what he did to his first wife. You are she." There seemed no point in denying it, so she nodded, and Yolante went on, "Isa's mother. The guard ... you loved him? And Abrim was cruel to you?"

Numb, Melek closed her eyes. *This* was what Dubai had meant then; she knew an almost dizzying sense of relief. Sibal of the resistance, Sibal the Red Death had perished, and the time for secrets past. It was impossible for her to believe that Abrim was dead as well. "I was very young when I married Abrim. And for a time, he was a tolerable husband. He indulged me in return for certain bedroom games. But he was never a good man, and his marja trade cost us everything. We had to flee the city in the night. My family, my friends ... all lost.

"And Abrim became convinced that enemies lurked behind every tree, assassins in the shadows. He sent for an Elite Guard to watch over me. I was angry ... did not want Bahir near me at first. He frightened me. And then I became curious at his silence, his stoicism. He would obey my every

whim, my every childish desire without a flicker of response. Abrim was away more than he was home, feverishly trying to regain what he had lost. He did not listen when I told him we had enough, that he should just enjoy what we had.

"So I spent more and more time with Bahir. Nights, days, and he taught me to understand sign. I was with child and ill much of the time. He was ... gentler than one would expect in such a man. I did come to love him."

"Abrim said he found you together."

Melek closed her eyes. "He did. I was in bed, lying in Bahir's arms. He had been rubbing my back...." She did not want to remember what came after—and in truth, it was a blur of anguish and screaming. Bound to protect her, Bahir had died, his mouth open in abject agony, when he took what should have been her mortal wound. The trial in Feroz was not much clearer; she had been weak and near death when they made their judgment. "My grandsire spoke for me ... he took me back to Inay, for burial he said. It seemed inevitable I would die."

"But you did not."

"No," she said with a weight of grief. "I did not. I have outlived all I love. Mother, father, brother, lover—"

She did not hear the other woman move, but she felt the warmth of Yolante's arms. "Not all," the concubine whispered. "Your child lives. I have cared for him as best I could, under Abrim's boot. And I am still here, unless you lied when you spoke to me at the wall."

"I spoke nothing but the truth, there. You are ... very dear to me, Yolante. And I am sorry, so sorry that I used you ...

sorry that I lied. I do not much like the woman I have become." Shuddering, Melek laid her head on the other's shoulder. It had been so long. So hard to believe it was over. She could be Melek at last, if she remembered what that woman had been like.

"I loved him in a way," the golden woman said finally. "He saved me. And sometimes he was kind. I did it for ... you. Because you reminded me ... I merit more. Want more. I understand madness ... and grief, but he did not deserve to live; he knew no remorse."

The darkness lapped around the lamp, a shallow golden pool against the tide of night as she sought words. Each phrase seemed inadequate for what this woman had done. "I would have done it myself, Yolante."

"You should not *have to*." Yolante paused. "All this is ours now. I have been looking into his affairs all afternoon.... Abrim never made any provision for his property, so possession is law. Will you ... stay?"

"He made only enemies. None will question his death, although they may laugh if you say he died in your bed." She kissed Yolante's fingertips lightly. "I will stay, my dear friend, until the sun falls from heaven. Can I—can I see him?"

"Isa? Let us check on him. I wonder if his birth ... haunts him. He has such dreams...."

The tears ran hot down her cheeks, and Yolante smoothed them away with gentle fingers. It was incredible; Melek would, at last, hold her son in her arms. Even as a powerless woman of Hamra Sehkit, she had saved her small sister. Sagireh might not remember her, but Melek could tell

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her stories of Tah, who had died for them. Abrim's widow and his concubine took the lamp and went hand in hand from the morning room, with the light as their only witness.

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DREAM LINES

Imprisonment did not become sweeter, even when the bars were gilded, even when she was allotted an entire suite, richly appointed with tapestries and jewel-toned cushions. The walls were white stones that glimmered as if with diamond dust; the floors richly veined marble, blushing rose and gold, cool beneath her feet. Two arched windows filled the rooms with light, and the sills were deep enough for her to sit on, if she climbed up. The casement swung open beyond the bars, letting her scent the scattered fires.

Hung with white filmy veils, her bed was ornately carved khi wood with a stuffed mattress. It sat much higher off the ground than she had ever seen; in Ballendin, even the izzat had slept on a bed no more than a hand off the floor. Muir spent a few moments studying it, tracing the etched palmettos and cartouches, before remembering that she did not want to be here.

More treasures caught her eye—a looking glass so pure that it gave back her own image without a waver. Even Immelia's had not been so fine, and she wondered how Inay had come to enjoy so much luxury. She studied herself gravely, not much liking the look of the woman with the withered arm. *I am filthy.*

Her first exercise of power was to request a bath.

Muir expected a maid to help her with the oil and the scouring, the removal of so many weeks of accumulated dirt. She was startled when four servants arrived with the copper

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tub full of steaming water. Sweet-scented herbs floated on the surface, and she inhaled deeply, savoring the rich scent of chadra ushak. Immelia had used a few drops sparingly on her throat when she felt amorous. This bath was an incredible indulgence for a simple maid. And then she remembered—she was the last of Aban's house, the last from Ballendin.

“Shall I bathe you?” a young girl asked.

Shaking her head, she waited until the servants bowed from the room, stone-faced when presented with such a filthy excuse for a princess. The thought made her smile as she stepped into the steaming water. It almost hurt a little, and her skin blushed immediately, although her bad arm only felt a slight tingle. It was a thing of leather and jerky, not living flesh at all. She sighed and let it slide into the water.

On the lip of the tub rested a slice of scented amber soap; she brought it to her nose and smelled jasmine. It had grown near the city waterhouse in Ballendin, blooming early in Haar. She remembered gathering the tiny yellow flowers to distill the essence into perfume for Lavedi Immelia, the least cloying scent she ever wore. Sighing, Muir forced away the memories and examined the other offering. They had also provided a pot of viscous liquid to cleanse her hair. Sniffing, she detected honey and lemon and perhaps eggs. The maid had promised it would make her tresses gleam like a raven's wing. Muir chuckled at the unlikely thought.

After the indulgence of the bath, she stood naked, touching the fine robes they had provided. It seemed almost indecent for her to wear them; they were so rich—emerald-silk brocade with gold embroidery at cuffs, throat, and hem

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and the veils in gauzy green, providing an almost sultry frame for her face. Muir donned them reluctantly; they had taken all her own things, probably to be burned. They would not want anyone to know she had come from Ballendin barefoot and wearing a slave's tunic and a filthy djellabah.

Muir knew, as she stared at the stranger in the mirror, that she had never looked more beautiful. The wide sleeves hid her ugly arm and all her scars; only her agate eyes peered back at her, anxious and unaltered. Matching vert slippers seemingly spun of silk and wishes had golden laces and curled toes. They were no more comfortable than they looked.

She had not seen Rodhlann since marching triumphantly up the pillaged street that Z'ev called the Path of Hope. Through the bars of her gilded cage, the sky pulsed with low, gray clouds, darkly veined with an unwholesome thread of purple, the suggestion of a rotten bruise going to the very heart of the fruit. Slowly, Behrid made way for Haar, as Raton possessed only two seasons—hot and cold.

On the mosaic wall, quatrefoil windows allowed her glimpses of the courtyard. Perhaps nurtured by the sha'al-izzat's magicians, the garden was unseasonably lush. Muir's gaze lingered on the walled oasis with the cobalt-inlaid fountain as its heart, whispering water giving back jade reflections. The bronze statues glimmered in the twilight, adorned with verdigris. It was so lovely that she ached, knowing that the maids had quietly turned the bolt.

They did not come for her until dark had fully fallen.

A silent maid escorted her to the banquet hall, where Z'ev awaited her, along with several strangers, Harb, and an immaculately garbed Qutuz. Finery sat strangely on the Tortoise, but he looked delighted, full of jollity. When she arrived, Z'ev took her hands in a manner she could only describe as proprietary. It was not until she was seated on her cushion at the long, low table that she realized Rodhlann was missing.

Muir seethed while they ate. The meal was delicious, but it sat heavily in her stomach. She had never eaten such rich fare—roast emu, saffron rice, wine-spiced figs, and baked vegetables, finished with strong marjoram coffee and honey-almond cakes. Conversation flowed around her; she did not participate, although she nodded at the right moments. Doubtless, Z'ev's guests formed the opinion that she was sweet-tempered and demure, when the truth was, she was too angry to trust her voice.

When everyone had finally gone, she asked the ksathra tightly, "Where is Rodhlann?"

"He chose to dine in his room." Z'ev smiled down at her. "Perhaps he felt uncomfortable about sharing a table with so many strangers. Who can fathom the mind of an afreet?"

I can.

As Zillah had predicted, she began to feel anxious about their separation, consumed by a gnawing need to see him. "May I visit him?"

"I know you are weary." He replied as if she had not spoken. "I trust your quarters are satisfactory. Please let me

know if you need anything that has not been provided for you."

Rodhlann. And freedom.

At a gesture from Z'ev, one of the maids hurried over, ostensibly to show Muir back to her quarters, but she knew the implication was more ominous. Though she was not shackled, she was a prisoner. The ksathra had made up his mind to use her, and none of her desires would stand in his way. He might be a good man—she did not know him well enough to say—but he was not a flexible one.

Fear gnawed at her. What had they done with Rodhlann? Certainly she would know if any permanent harm had befallen him, but lesser injury— More likely, they thought to weaken her attachment to him via separation. She could not let that happen, could *not*. Their bond was the one true thing that remained to her. They had burned her things, all but the tapestry for which she had wrestled a disapproving maid, and they would erase her history, building her anew out of whispers and innuendoes. No outright lies would be spoken; she respected Z'ev's finesse, but others would believe she was royalty, Aban's daughter instead of his last house slave.

No other choice presented itself, so she followed the slim woman back through cloying opulence to her assigned quarters. A bronze lamp had been lit, beautifully chased with silver and gold, etched like the bedposts. On the low table beside it, the maid left a silver ewer full of cool water and a matching chalice in case she grew thirsty. Once she had been incarcerated for the night, Muir yanked off her silk slippers; her toes were red where they had pinched. The hated

headdress was next to go, and she hurled it away in exasperation.

"You did not enjoy your evening?" Rodhlann spoke from the veiled shadows, startling her.

She crossed the room in an instant, found him reclining on the silk coverlet, arms crossed behind his head. Muir wanted to seize him, hold him, but such gestures had never been easy between them, less when she needed it so much. Her breath hitched as she ran her eyes over the pearly pallor of his face. He too had bathed and was wearing traditional Inayan robes, no more out of place on him than the Bedu sherwal trousers.

"It was awful," she said simply. "I ... worried about you."

He gave her a lazy smile, propping himself up on an elbow. "They will not harm me, little maid, but..." His shoulders lifted in a shrug. "I do not care to advance their cause. I will not be used as an accessory."

Z'ev had said that the presence of an afreet as her companion would add to Muir's consequence. Of course Rodhlann had declined to be so used; his pride would not stand it, though he lacked the power to punish their captives for the presumption. His impotence must burn now more than ever.

"We must find a way to leave this place," she told him quietly. The mattress dipped with her weight, shifting him toward her. "But I know not how we shall manage it. The longer we stay, the more sure I am that Z'ev will not allow me to keep my promise to you."

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"He does not care about your honor." He sat up, subtly putting distance between them until his back was to the wall. "That one cares for Inay as another might a wife or child. The city is his jewel, one he almost lost, and thus doubly precious. He will sacrifice you to it."

"I know." She closed her eyes. There was no respite from the guilt, though; Z'ev had awakened Ballendin's restless dead, the loss echoing in her heart and mind even she saw their accusing eyes. Rodhlann had persuaded her to lay the burden down, but the ksathra made her take it up again. "But how can we get away? I am watched all the time ... and the journey will take *so* long. He would hunt us all the way to Eristorne."

Muir listened to his breathing, his silence, before he reached for her, as she had wanted but did not know how to seek. Against her hair, Rodhlann spoke in tones of shadowed velvet and moonlight. "The dream lines would take us there, if I possessed the means to open the way." Words salted with bitterness.

In that moment, drowning in the moonbeam of his voice, she felt the rush of epiphany, and Muir knew a sense of branching paths, spiraling possibilities. "You cannot pull numen ... have lost your focus—"

"There is no need to state the obvious," he said sharply.

She shook her head, intent on following the torturous thought to its conclusion. "But ... *we* are bound. You know how to pull, but cannot.... Could you..." Nervously, she pleaded at the front of his robes, before he stilled her fingers

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with one hand. "Could you pull from *me*? Enough numen to open the way? Do you need power to travel?"

His answer came slowly. "No, once in the lines, we travel by memory, strength, and will. What you propose ... the art is not unknown, but I have no training in it. Since our masters perished, all who have tried paid ... a high price. I am afraid I might misjudge. Might draw too much."

Muir touched his cheek, made him meet her eyes. His dread showed only in the whiteness beside his tight mouth. "I would die, trying to keep my vow to you."

"Curse you," he whispered, and only that, for a moment. "Close your eyes, then ... and listen to my voice. There is only my voice, and nothing outside it. My voice is your world. There is nothing beyond and nothing after." His hand felt soft as silk, rough as sand as he covered her eyes. He whispered on, lower and lower until she needed to strain to hear him over her own breathing. "Follow my voice, to your center, little maid. Follow my voice into darkness."

And then, even her breathing stopped. A bright pinpoint of light appeared ... illusion, delusion. It mattered not; it beckoned. She cast herself forward, as if diving through night-painted waters, toward the light. And found her lungs burning, as she felt herself drowning in the dark. His voice kept her from blind panic; only that, ever that.

The world was wrenched away—and there was a horrific moment of nothing, beyond and between, until she pushed through, wet with the sweat of a second birth. Behind them, within a haze of crystal and light; and above them stars brighter than any seen outside the dream lines, floating gems

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of a million facets, singing their own songs of existence in a sky of deep blue-black and ribbons of mist that defied colors' names. An eternity of stars, shaped by dreaming mortal minds into the images of heroes and beasts.

Tearing wind, and the crystal tones of the stars above ... and the spread of clouds far below them, a boiling white sea shining within its depths. A sea of moving patterns of light and shadow spread beyond their vision, unbent by any horizon, white and swirling in three directions. And all about them, bone-chilling cold cut through their skin and into nerves ... deep space, the edge of existence. Chilling void made movement necessary for two who stood on the boundary of forever.

They could not speak, but Rodhlann gripped her hand tightly, as if preparing her. Shift ... and loss of solidity; her senses rushed, and she went blind. Spinning chromatic matrices formed, tearing away in patterns she could neither process nor understand. Silver. Gray mist. Radiance and painful velocity; Muir felt as if she were melting. She focused her will on Rodhlann's hand.

There.

She sensed him striving to fix their position within the maelstrom. Another landscape ... flickering, the passage back—a twist through the core ... and they flashed through darkness and swirling mist, past no distance, all distance. Their flesh shuddered as one, as the world returned, Sahen's bloody light and clouds in the quotidian sky. Stars regained their customary constellations. Muir found Kaveh and Minau with profound relief, her entire body wracked with nausea and

cold sweat. It would have been *much* easier to run the whole way, if not as fast.

"Are you well?" She became aware of his anxious hands cupping her face, warmth there, where she was so cold. Rodhlann pulled her close, almost compulsively, and she listened to his heart hammering for a while before she was able to nod. Her bones ached, as if she had aged, and then she found with her fingertips the faint webbing around her eyes.

Her nerves seethed with stimulus, but she managed to open her eyes after a moment. Muir was not sure what she had expected, but it was not this shadowy space all around her, dusty and cluttered with books, discarded scraps of paper, and blotches of dried ink. The hulk of desk and chair nearby gleamed with Anumati's pearly light, her kisses tracing the sharp angles of the wood. Beneath Muir's feet, the carpet was frayed and of indeterminate color.

Rodhlann saw her shock and lifted his shoulders in a shrug. "I left suddenly," he told her with a faint smile, and she actually laughed. He paused as if savoring the sound and began sorting through flasks and vials on the tall shelves that lined the far wall. "Ah, here," he murmured, tucking an item into his robe, and then he led her toward a vaguely rectangular shape. "They may be waiting for us ... better to be safe."

He pushed a heavy tapestry out of the way, enveloping them both in a musty cloud. The pane was streaked with dirty shadows, barely lighter than the heavy darkness within. With a protest of wooden hinges, Rodhlann pushed open the

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latticed windows. And Muir glimpsed the wonder that was Eristorne.

No lamplight in the wending streets; the city should have been dark as the night blanketing it, touched only by the silver and blood lights falling from the heavens. And yet it glowed, tiny twinkles like captive stars. No walls, but arches and spires in rose, silver, and alabaster, colors that lit the sky. Empty plazas stretched with quiet fountains, tiered towers delicate as the spun-sugar pastry Muir had once helped to bake in the izzat's kitchen. With arched windows, oriel windows, all without shutters to let in the wind, for Eristorne was a city built to sing, striving toward celestial music. As she listened, she heard it, zephyrs ringing different notes through the stones. Yet it rang somber, hollow, too much space housing too few.

Walkways connected the tallest towers, a quicksilver web that seemed far too fragile to support their weight as Rodhlann led her into the wind. Out into open space they passed, at the mercy of the wind, and she understood why he had called them the whisper walks, for the gossamer bridge seemed to murmur as they crossed. She peered at the beautifully sculpted buildings beneath them, each unique in adornment and structure but all glimmering with the fey lights—the reason Eristorne was known as the City of a Thousand Stars.

“We must go beneath the city into the *vav*,” he was saying. “It is best if we go quietly. There may be ... resistance, and I would prefer to accomplish our aim before facing my enemies.”

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Though he did not speak it, she knew he was worried. Even if his foes possessed only small magic, it would still put Rodhlann at a disadvantage. How many might come for them? Muir wished she were not too nervous to ask.

She sighed as she stepped onto the solidity of stone. The vista was even more breathtaking, for they stood atop the tallest tower within sight. A filigreed staircase wound around the exterior, down further than darkness permitted her to see, but she followed him, hand on the railing in case vertigo unbalanced her.

The wind was gentle here, almost balmy, and she wondered as she descended just how far she had come. The unsteadiness finally left her knees, but rented rooms in her heart. She was not certain what lay before them or what she must do. As they stepped onto the smooth tiles of the public walk, her hand crept into Rodhlann's. He slanted her an inscrutable look but laced his fingers through hers without remarking the gesture.

"Will they ... will they know we are here?"

Shrugging, he said, "Perhaps ... if they were watching. But it is not certain."

Nothing is.

Instead she asked a question she was certain he could answer. "What is the *vav*?"

"Where all the city fountains meet, an underground chain of wells, where each flows into each. The water sings.... Come, let me show you."

Muir spun like a child, admiring the surrounding spires and distant domes. The tug on her hand hurried her along the

empty street, a reminder of their mission. But she drank it all in—the house sculpted like a bud about to bloom, a crystalline tower glowing with jeweled hues. It was hard for her to remember that they were in danger with such beauty all around. But even an excess of splendor wore on the senses; by the time they reached their destination she felt numb, bewildered by all she had seen.

She came barefoot to the temple of Eristorne, an alabaster edifice with smooth pillars. The wind sang a soulful lament as they passed into airy space, full of filtered light. Beyond the nearly translucent walls, she glimpsed dark balconies and looming arches. The ceiling was lost in shadow, but she saw still figures nearby.

“Are they ... worshippers?”

“From long ago,” he answered quietly. “Daiesthai who chose the void ... and let the winds take their vitality. It is they who sing in this place, such haunting echoes.”

“Oh.” She did not know what more to say, realizing she trod through an ancient tomb.

Dark marble was cool beneath her feet as she followed him up the main aisle, past the gallery of statues that had once lived and loved. Muir shivered and clutched Rodhlann's hand a little tighter. Such a long way for a maid to travel, such wonders had she seen.

They came upon an altar; a silver-beveled isle that glowed with its own light, shimmered with faceted gems for which Muir knew no names. An artifact of fey beauty, but the sight of it scraped against her raw nerves; this thing had been used

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in witchery for ages longer than Ballendin had been sacred to Raton. The portent of its purpose made Muir fall back a step.

"Indrina should be near, if they have not hurt her..." he murmured, and seeming to sense her confusion, added, "my sister."

"I am here, dear brother." The fluting voice came from one of the galleries above.

"Indrina, I was worried about you, little flower." Muir knew the endearment, though he had never spoken it to her. And she felt vaguely surprised at the open tenderness in his voice. "Come down."

Muir realized suddenly that she was hearing through his ears. They were no longer speaking Cahrani, but the meaning was not lost to her. She owned enough fragments of him, filtered enough through their bond to understand his tongue, though she knew she could not speak it. A woman of ice and ivory emerged from the darkness, and Muir felt the lash of Indrina's contemptuous gaze. If she had ever doubted, his sister confirmed it—there was no place for her in Eristorne. *It is well*, she told herself, *that destiny calls me elsewhere*.

"You have been away too long," the Daiesthai woman said softly. "And your adventures have marked you." Indrina touched his scarred cheek. "But it is good to have you home. Did you succeed?"

"I did." Rodhlann patted the side of his robe, full of numerous concealed pockets and probably all the scrolls from Maksoor Balad. "We will go down shortly, but first..." He drew Indrina into his arms, where she lay her head on his shoulder, sighing. "You look frail. Have you been working?"

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"I know I should not, but some things are too important to let go." Over Rodhlann's shoulder, she glimpsed a strange expression on Indrina's face. "I love you, brother."

And Muir saw the shimmer of a knife.

Without thinking, she knocked the weapon to the ground, ring of metal on stone. The other woman's wrist felt as brittle as bird bones in her grasp. Indrina struggled, but Muir held firm as Rodhlann spun, glancing between them with puzzlement. He knelt to pick up the dagger gingerly, frowning at his sister.

"Who has made you do this, little flower? I will deal with them, I swear to you." Grim darkness roiled in his serpent's eyes.

Indrina strained away until Muir feared the woman would snap her own wrist. "Tell your creature to release me, Rodhlann. Does it understand you? I cannot bear it."

Rodhlann nodded at her; Muir knew he wanted her to let his sister go, though she was not sure it was right or wise. But she complied, stepping back. Indrina skittered back against the altar, her gaze darting between them. Rodhlann still held the dagger, spinning it between his palms so that it caught the light.

"Now tell me," he said quietly, "who sent you to do his bloody work? What hold, what could possibly force you to this?"

"I acted alone, brother. Or did, until the very last. Bedryn perished ... and Portiol, all but myself and Melusine. I am alone again in a dead temple with the stench of your creature and my own failure."

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"No..." Rodhlann shook his head, and Muir felt the spike of anguish that pierced him. He did not want to believe, not even as Indrina confessed. "*You sent me to die in the waste, stole my magic, and set the raksavu on me? Why?*"

"What you do is wrong, brother. Our purity is all that remains to us—it *must* not be despoiled. Like all who came before us, we must go with grace and dignity to final silence. You, you would rage against it, tampering with order and perfection. I could not let you make an abomination of Daiesthai blood." Her lilting voice grew bitter. "But I have failed ... and you will now do as you please."

Muir wanted to comfort him, but she knew she could not stand it if he recoiled, ashamed to be touched by her before his sister. Still Rodhlann studied the knife in his hands, perhaps seeing it wielded by one he loved. "Do all the others feel so, all Daiesthai?"

"I need not ask them. I am the last priestess ... I am their voice."

"Indrina..."

"No! I will not hear your vanity. We are a great people fallen low. The others eat coarse bread dipped in sheep's blood and have forgotten that we were ever anything more, dwindling, dwindling, into a hollow-hearted city of bakers and herders of goats. I will not have it!" Like moonlit ice, her patrician features burned against the dark; she trembled in her fervor. "But know that I will strike at the child's heart if I cannot stop you. It shall not be safe as long as I live."

He snared his sister's wrist, swift as a dune snake, and spun her into his arms. Indrina fought him a moment,

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struggling as best she could in his embrace before surrendering. Or accepting. He held her thus a moment, his hand stroking her hair. Then he sank her own dagger into the base of her skull.

Muir stood motionless as Rodhlann lifted his sister in his arms and laid her on the altar. He took his focus from around her neck. There were no words for the currents of sorrow running through him, no gestures to suffice. She feared if she touched him or spoke, he might shatter. Like the statues his ancestors had become, he stood, staring at his sister's skin. She became porcelain and alabaster, a dead thing of supernal beauty as her voice joined the wind's lament.

In a rusty voice, he said at last, "To the *vav*, then, that all this has not been for nothing."

She followed him past the altar through a high arch leading to half-concealed stairs. Down they went into moist darkness, scented with earth and greenery. He lit several lamps and set them back into their niches, and then she saw for the first time the marvel he had mentioned in Maksoor Balad.

An underground oasis with the rock turned to soil, a magnificent mosaic of gemstones, culminating in an immense stone wall studded with diamonds, some dead and others shimmering with an indigo heart. The Weeping Wall—and she saw why it was so named. A curious cobalt liquid trickled slowly, like tears, softening the rock into fertile loam that nurtured the profusion of flowers. Each without names she knew, all blooming in fistful scarlet and spiky violet, tall

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cerulean tower flowers with jonquil hearts. She had never seen such splendor, lush in a way the world without was not.

In the distance, she heard the rush from where the fountains flowed together into the tiered wells. The wind sang even here, quietly with the water. She watched as Rodhlann counted the diamonds until he found a certain hollow and replaced his focus on the wall. And within moments, the heart of the charm he wore around his neck kindled, pulsing with vitality.

He was home; he had restored his magic, only needed her for a short time longer. Soon, she must return to Inay, soon now. *But first ...*

"What must I do?"

"Come ... this way." He sounded weary, his sharp face haggard. Rodhlann led her through the sunless flora to a pool near the base of the Weeping Wall, the tears of the rock giving the water an iridescent sheen. "Here..." His mind was far away, his heart closed to her as he drew the robe over his head. Beautiful, he was beautiful, pale and lean, sculpted with a strength and delicacy she had never seen in a mortal man. Muir glanced away, feeling as if she intruded on a private moment—and yet her presence was compulsory, as he could not do this alone. "We will need to disrobe," he added in a scholar's tone.

His mournful abstraction made it easier for her to bare her brown skin to the humid air, bare her back with its raised welts, her withered arm, broad hips, and sturdy thighs. "I am ready."

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"All you must do is follow me with a willing spirit." As they stood skin to skin, moonlight and khi wood, she felt him twining tendrils of power about them. Muir felt as if the very air coalesced into pure energy, warming perceptibly all around. At once she felt easier, less self-conscious. "And share a little blood, first to paint the bonds, and then to finish the rite."

"I have never balked at offering whatever you needed of me. I will not start now."

Her words seemed to pull him, both in physical and emotional proximity. "No ... you fed me, led me ... when I had only dreams and despair."

A small silver dagger and a cupping bowl appeared in his hands; she should not have been surprised, but all the wonder came rushing back. For a moment she was again the astonished slave, gaping at her master as he drew the knife down his palm. Muir felt only a small sting when she did the same; it was a good blade, sharp and clean. His blood ran thin, more like mulberry wine than her quickly clotting crimson.

Their hot fluids trickled over the bowl's argent slope, and she found herself fixing on the contrast as he spun the vessel between his palms. Mulberry and crimson met, mingled, and swirled to a new hue, deeper and richer than either had been separately. The *vav* felt warmer, as if fires had been kindled nearby. Muir looked up at him with heavy eyes, silent and expectant.

Rodhlann drew a vial from the robe he had cast aside, adding a few shimmering drops of oil to the mixture. "I am

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the soul of the world, giver of life and heart of creation. From me all things flow and to me they must return. Let my song ring in all hearts ... hear it and rejoice, for all rites of love are mine, each to each. From ignorance lead us to knowledge, from darkness lead us to light, and from certain death grant us immortality."

And then he dipped two fingers into the bowl; she felt his touch in her core, even as he left imprints on her brow. The heat increased, sweat beading on her skin to mingle with the copper and musky oil. Distantly, she remembered she must follow him, so she too wet her fingertips, marking him with twin fingerprints. He drew a line down her nose to her throat, and the caress awakened sleeping nerves that began to pulse with rhythms older than the tides.

Her bones seemed to go fluid; she felt herself begin to sway, feeling music through her soles. The stones and water sang to them, and all were one. She marked him as he had her, with heat and tenderness and need. Hands on skin now, mutual, without thought—his words melted into a low sound, not quite a melody, not quite, painting patterns from throat to breast and chest and belly, and beyond. They found the points of power without knowing how they knew. Her skin blushed and tingled, and she felt a rising, burgeoning rush, greater than herself.

She was Minau and Muir; he was Kaveh and Rodhlann and all lovers who had come before. Greater, more radiant than themselves, they strained closer, touching only with their hands, and conscious of forces elemental that demanded more, straining toward release. Incandescent desire blazed

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from him to her, back again, heated through the lenses of their eyes.

He groaned as she touched him with hot, slick fingers, lost the wordless chant, but she took it up without dropping one cadence. Where he ended she began, a single seamless thread of need. The vibrato increased beneath her soles, seeming to keep tempo with their hearts. Sweat gleamed silver on his pale skin and he trembled as she did, given wholly into alien magic.

The bowl fell from his hands as he pulled her close. Muir knew a moment of shock before his mouth took hers, hungry and demanding. She wanted to yield to him, allowing him to devour her as he had once warned. Her skin burned. *Too much.*

Behind her, the Weeping Wall shuddered and split. The resultant rush threatened to burst her skull, but Rodhlann's hands and mouth held her fast against him, heat against heat. They shuddered as one, rolling away from falling stones and the brilliance of Daiesthai diamonds. *Release, release.* The sound of bird wings filled the *vav*, rustling, rushing upward and away. *Free*, she heard the water whispering, *free*. It seemed oddly tinged, more cerulean than she recalled, and when she swirled trembling fingers in its depths, it felt warm as human skin.

"We ... failed?" she asked unsteadily, hardly knowing whether to reach for him or try to drown herself in the shallow pool.

"No." Rodhlann sat up and opened his palm to show her a tiny blood-red seed. Seeing her bewilderment, he held it to

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the light, and if she narrowed her eyes, she could almost make out the outline of a head within. "Our child will be the first garden born ... and the last hope for all Daiesthai."

She felt an almost crippling sense of awe when she helped him plant the new life they had made. Awed and desperate, when she thought of leaving both of them. "Will it grow quickly?"

Almost in answer to her question, the first green shoots rose. She sat naked in the Garden of Sorrows with Rodhlann, amid the wreckage of the Weeping Wall, beside a shimmering blue pool and watched their child grow. They watched late into the night—none came to disturb them, none felt the collapse, or perhaps thought it safer not to investigate. Shortly before dawn, he pulled her into his arms, where she slept naturally and without dreams.

Closer than lovers ...

She awoke to find a strange new plant, larger than she was tall, that bore a creamy bud, tightly furled. "It has grown well," he whispered, handing her the now-stained robe she had worn from Inay. Muir donned it without complaint, and he offered her a breakfast of wafer-thin cakes and yellow fruit that tasted sweeter than sin. He wore black again, the same fabric that had so amazed her so long ago. It suited him, but he did not look like the Rodhlann who had borne her company so long. He was a fine, foreign lord, belonging to Eristorne, not to a grubby Cahran maid.

"What will become of the other Daiesthai? Will they sicken as you did without your focus?"

"I think not," he said slowly. "I think ... that we have released what gave us such great power. Some flowed into the pool, which leads to the fountains and the wells. Enough ... to sustain us, though not enough to make us fearful sorcerers."

The gods—we set them free. In that moment, she realized she had kept all her promises. Her heart fell; there was nothing holding her here, and obligations awaited her in Inay. "Then ... I am ready to go."

His sorrow for his sister had not abated, and she felt the pain swell higher as he asked, "Do you not wish to see him ... her? Hold our little one in your arms?"

She turned from him, not wanting him to see the bright gleam of tears. "It would be harder for me to leave then."

Z'ev would send an army after her; she knew he would not let her go. He had made up his mind that she owed a debt for Ballendin, and Muir could not stand the thought of soldiers in Eristorne, despoiling it as Inay had been. Though she had not seen the Sun City before the war, she saw the aftermath, how beauty had been lost.

I will not bring conquerors to these streets, will not be the one to destroy the City of a Thousand Stars.

But after all they had shared, she wanted him to ask her to stay. Muir told herself she would possess the fortitude to refuse. Rodhlann did not ask.

"Perhaps ... one day," he said in a mournful voice of silk and silver, "one day you can return. I will ... speak of you."

It hurt, but of course he would take it calmly. She should not have expected a declaration of affection from one who

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had always professed his loathing. *I was a tool to him, and he is ready to lay me aside.*

Muir drew a shuddering breath; the air was warm and moist, gentle in her lungs. "When I return to Inay, I will burn the charm, or you will die when I die—"

"No. Nourished by the living spring, I can share *my* life with you. Allow you a longer span than any human knows. A small gift—let me give it." As if he could not help himself, he took her hands in his, kissed her fingertips. "I ... would know that you are well."

Her eyes burned. "The child will need a mother. I do not mind." But she did, she did.

His face went white and still, and then he gave her Kaveh's smile, full of eternity and sorrow. "I have a bride ... and I am waiting for the cycle to bring her back to me."

The tears fell. She could not stop them; they trickled hotly down her cheeks, stinging her skin. "You remember. Rodhlann, you ... you remember...."

"Since last night ... since he left me ... I remember. What you were to me. What you are. And what will never be."

She smiled through the salt. Muir had never grown used to the sorcery of his voice—and her ache at its loss would never abate. Reaching up, she brushed her lips lightly over his, touched a lock of his platinum hair.

Always moonlight and darkness we two.

"Open the way," she whispered, "before I lose the will to go."

"You can ride the lines alone?"

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She nodded, not trusting her voice. The tapestry awaited her in the ksathra's opulent prison, and she knew it better than her own face. Its call would guide her well enough. But if he asked her, she would stay and be damned to conquerors and kings, be damned to debt. He did not speak. And thus, she chose the road everyone travels, away from what they know. Muir felt the twist through her core of open space and howling colors full of cold.

Rodhlann reached for her too late, as she shimmered through, away from him, toward the burden of golden bars.

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