

Steven J Pemberton
Death & Magic
The Barefoot Healer Volume I
Free Sample

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Chapter 1

Apprentice Adramal washed the blood from her hands and stood up. The spell fussed around her as it dissipated, white tendrils retreating like mist before the sun. The young farmer she'd just healed stared at his forearm, poking at where the gash from the ploughshare had been.

"A miracle," he whispered. "Thank you."

Adramal tutted. "We don't do miracles here. Only magic." She dipped a cloth in the water bowl and handed it to him. "Clean yourself, then rest for about a watch." She gestured to the row of mattresses at the far end of the infirmary, where several of the morning's patients were recuperating. "After that, you can go home."

He sat up, looking ready to wrestle a bear as he scrubbed his arm. "I feel fine. My wife will be waiting for me."

Adramal shook her head. Most patients were like this the first time they'd been healed by a wizard. "You feel fine *now*. The spell uses some of your reserves of strength to speed the healing." She must've drawn out more than she needed. Judging the right amount was a skill she still needed to master. "That's what's rushing around your body at the moment. It'll wear off soon, and you'll probably fall asleep."

"Ah. Wouldn't want that to happen on the way home, would I?"

"No." She covered her mouth to hide a yawn – the spell had taken a good deal of her own strength too. "Would you excuse me, please? I have a class to go to. If you need anything, just ask any of the other apprentices."

Adramal walked past the rows of beds towards the door. The infirmary was quiet – only about a third of the places were occupied. A faint white haze hung over the scene – the remnants of all the spells that had been cast here today. The teachers said it was a sign of her skill that she could sometimes see magic without needing a spell of her own to sense it, but Adramal found it annoying, like someone dropping a veil over her face at random intervals.

At the door, Adramal met Teshan, one of the teachers and a member of the Academy's Council. She was a kindly old woman, in charge of the healing classes, and the closest thing Adramal had to a favourite among the staff. Adramal smiled and nodded to her, and stood aside to let her enter.

Teshan didn't smile back. "I was looking for you. Would you come with me, please?" She strode across the square towards the side where the teachers' houses stood.

"What's this about, Lady?" Adramal asked as she followed.

"A private matter," Teshan said without looking back.

At those words, something – Adramal tried not to think of it as *someone* – stirred at the bottom of her mind. *I don't like the sound of that*, it said. The thing resembled a girl of about eight, tousle-haired and barefoot. It wore a grubby dress and clutched a crude wooden doll. Adramal had no idea what the creature really was, but its appearance made it hard not to think of it as "she." She had wandered uninvited into Adramal's mind when Adramal was eight, which perhaps accounted for her apparent age. She deflected or refused to answer questions about herself, giving only a name – Lelsarin. She had told Adramal not to tell anyone else

about her. Since she seemed not to be harmful, and was occasionally useful, Adramal respected her wishes.

I doubt it's anything you need to worry about, Adramal replied. *Probably another of the village girls has found out the hard way how babies are made.*

Teshan always smiles when she sees you.

You think I've broken a rule, then?

Maybe. What day is it?

Sujas. Lelsarin frequently claimed not to know what day or even what fortnight it was, saying she preferred sleep to observing the details of Adramal's life. And yet she often spoke in response to something Adramal had just witnessed, suggesting that she observed a good deal more than she admitted.

Then in that case, no, said Lelsarin. *Sujas' Day is Galbreth's turn to be punished for breaking rules no one told him about.*

Very funny. Go back to sleep.

They passed Teshan's house and stopped outside the one Adramal shared with her father. The interior was dark – Father would be teaching the second-year apprentices this morning. Teshan gestured for Adramal to enter. She did, wondering if this might be some complicated trap. But no – Teshan was a strong enough wizard to have no need of subterfuge if she wanted to restrain or punish an apprentice.

"Make light for us, please," said Teshan as she came in.

Adramal took a deep breath and sought a calm place within her mind. Familiar thoughts came together, interlocking like the pieces of a puzzle. Magic could not be forced to obey, only guided in the right direction. She'd taken a long time to learn that, as all apprentices did – *doing without trying*, a teacher had called it. Father, of course, had expected her to come into the Academy already knowing most of what they taught in the first couple of years, as if knowledge could be inherited. The spell's final thought clicked into place, and a fist-sized ball of white light appeared at Adramal's shoulder.

Teshan sat down, as if this was her house, and Adramal merely a guest. She indicated the other chair – the one Father normally sat in. Reluctantly, Adramal pulled it out from the table. It had moulded itself to his shape over the years, and felt as though it was trying to shrug her off.

"I want to talk to you about your future at the Academy," said Teshan.

Adramal's stomach clenched. "My future?" she croaked, surprised at how dry her mouth had suddenly become.

Teshan leaned over to pat Adramal's hand. "It's nothing like that. Well – perhaps it is. It's about your father. It's no secret you don't get on with him."

Adramal relaxed. "That's like calling snow a bit cool."

Teshan gave a little smile. "Several of the Council, myself included, were opposed to your becoming an apprentice here."

"Just because she's a wizard's daughter doesn't mean she'll be a good wizard herself," Adramal said, repeating the words Father had relayed to her after his first failure at getting her admitted at the age of nine. Even now, a few apprentices thought she hadn't earned her place.

Teshan nodded, and a shadow crossed her face. "We were wrong about that. But we think his desire to make you the kind of wizard he wants is preventing your being the best wizard you can be."

"My apprenticeship will be over in two years, and then I can do whatever I want." She'd considered going east or south to find a village that needed a healer, though she had a nasty suspicion Father would insist she stay here and marry the strongest male apprentice.

"Someone in Kyer Altamar has established another school for wizards."

Adramal sat back, blinking. "They have?" Almost by definition, there was only one. Another would be like a second sun.

"The Council has decided to send you there." She took a piece of paper from an inside

pocket, folded and sealed. "This is a letter of introduction for you to present to their Council."

"Oh." Adramal folded her arms. Fear and hope rolled over her, like clouds gathering before a storm. Their confused tangle wrapped around the spell in her mind, pushing and pulling it apart. Her light went out. As she calmed herself to cast the spell again, Teshan made a light of her own.

Teshan leaned forward, a concerned look on her face. "Don't you have anything to say? I thought you'd be pleased."

"I..." Adramal toyed with a lock of her hair. Black, like Father's. Why did she have to look so much like him? "I suppose I am, it's just... unexpected. And... Kyer Altamar. It'll take two seasons just to get there."

"More like two fortnights," said Teshan. "A traders' caravan will pass through here later today. You can ride with them to the Aglos, and then a barge will take you downstream to the city. They'll be glad to have a wizard with them, especially one as good at healing as you."

"Don't I get any say in the matter?"

"No," Teshan said with a wry grin. "You and your father are a problem that's vexed the Council ever since you started here. It seemed the only solution was to separate you, but that wasn't possible. Now it is, and we're not going to let either of you get in the way."

"I see. Somehow I don't think I'm the one you'll have to convince."

As if on cue, a voice within Adramal's mind shouted her name. Moments later, she heard someone running towards the house. The footsteps stopped, and Father stood in the doorway, leaning on the frame, panting hard. His thoughts sounded inside her head. *There you are. Why didn't you answer? I've just heard some... some unbelievable news.*

Adramal looked at him impassively, waiting for him to remember his manners and start speaking aloud.

"Alesin," Teshan said, standing up, "I trust you've been informed of the Council's decision?"

"Yes, I—" He looked at Teshan, seeming to notice her for the first time. His eyes glistened in her light. Had he actually been crying? Adramal couldn't remember ever seeing him weep – not even when Mother died. He took a couple of paces towards Teshan. "How could you do this to me? To us? How dare you?"

"Alesin," said Teshan with a weary sigh, "this matter is not open for discussion. You've had five years to convince us you were right. The Council has been extraordinarily patient with you, but our patience has run out."

"But... Kyer Altamar, of all places," said Father, his fists clenching. "The headquarters of the Church of Mathran."

"They've obviously weakened since you were there. Otherwise the local wizards couldn't defy them so openly by founding a school. And Adramal has done very well in the self-defence classes."

Father opened his mouth to speak, and then seemed to think better of it. His voice echoed within her mind. *So this is goodbye, then. I hope you'll come back and visit some day, when your apprenticeship is over.*

Adramal stood up. "Farewell, Father." Although she had long looked forward to being able to say that, she was surprised to feel a lump in her throat.

He embraced her roughly, pinning her arms to her sides. *You could do me the courtesy of mindspeaking, just this once.* His breathing was ragged, the side of his face damp against her neck. She couldn't help but admire his strength. Most wizards couldn't hold even a simple spell together when they were this upset, never mind one as complex as mindspeech.

It couldn't hurt, just this once. She smoothed over the surface of her mind, clearing a space for the spell to come together.

Again, farewell, she said. *I'll try not to get on the wrong side of the priests, and I'll remember what you and the others have taught me.* As she spoke, Lelsarin stirred at the bottom of her mind. She'd have to keep the conversation brief, for fear that Father would

notice her.

Be careful, her father said. I couldn't bear the thought of losing you. I – I know I don't do a very good job of showing it, but I'm proud of you. Your mother would've been, too.

What else was there to say? She cancelled the spell and pushed herself out of his arms.

"I... my class will be wondering where I am," he said. He turned and left, walking like a mourner at a funeral. Adramal watched him to see if he'd look back. He didn't.

"I should start packing," she said. "The caravan will be here soon." She looked around the half of the house that was hers. Packing wouldn't take long. Strange to think she might never see this place again. She doubted she would miss it.

Chapter 2

Adramal took her leave of the barge crew and stepped onto one of the wharves at Kyer Altamar's western docks. Beside the wharves stood a row of tall wooden buildings – warehouses, a man on the barge had called them. Their height rivalled the tallest trees that grew near her home. She shouldered her pack and walked along an alleyway that led past the nearest warehouse and into the city proper. Nobody on the barge had known exactly where the school was, but they'd thought it would be easy to find someone who did.

The alley opened onto a broad, cobbled street, crowded with horse-drawn wagons. The horses stood patiently as burly men transferred goods between the wagons and the warehouses. Adramal gasped – she'd never seen so many of the animals in one place. The wind shifted, slapping her in the face with their smell. Crowded into such a small space, they bordered on overpowering. She placed a hand over her mouth and nose as she hurried past them.

At the end of the street stood a large wooden building with a little barrel hanging over the door. This, Adramal recalled, meant the building was a tavern – a good place to obtain information, the barge crew had told her.

The tavern's interior was a long narrow room, with a row of booths running along either side. Quiet conversation reached her from further in. Smoke from candles lingered among the rafters, and a strong smell of beer hung in the air. Adramal hesitated. The crew hadn't said anything about beer. Like any intoxicant, it interfered with a wizard's ability to perform magic, and so the teachers at Thuren had warned her to avoid the stuff whenever possible.

As Adramal considered whether to leave and find someone in the street to ask for directions, a man who'd been sitting in one of the nearer booths approached her, smiling.

"Hello there," he said. "Looking for someone?" He was a short, sun-browned fellow, a little older than her. Like most of the men around here, he had a moustache but no beard, making him look half-naked. She tried not to stare; men back home grew a beard as soon as they were able.

"Um, looking for something, actually." Her voice cracked – she hadn't realised how dry her mouth was. What was there to be nervous about?

He raised his eyebrows. "You're a long way from home."

He must mean her western accent. A couple of the barge crew had teased her about it. "I've come from Thuren."

"Where's that?"

"Two fortnights' journey upriver. I'm looking for an... academy for wizards."

He gazed into the distance for a moment and then said, "Kyturil?"

She shrugged. "I don't know what it's called. I just heard there was one in the city. Do you know where it is?"

"No, but I know someone who's sure to know." He gestured to the booth where he'd been sitting. "Why don't we order some food and drink and then I'll see if I can find him?" They sat on benches fixed to the walls of the booth, facing each other across a small table.

Adramal stretched, trying to work out the stiffness from being cooped up on the barge.

“My name’s Smirak,” the man said.

“I’m Adramal.”

A middle-aged woman in a stained apron ambled up to them and said, “What it’ll be?”

“My friend here is hungry and thirsty,” said Smirak.

“It’s pigeon pie today,” the woman replied. “Three coppers. Beer is a copper a pint, or two for best.”

“I’ll have some of the pie, please,” said Adramal. She tried not to let her dismay show. The notion of paying for food was foreign to her – indeed, before leaving home, she’d never needed to handle money at all. She had coins worth about fifty coppers, which weren’t going to last long at this rate.

“What sort of beer?” asked the serving woman.

“Could I have water instead, please?”

The woman stared at her as if she’d asked for the still-warm blood of a newborn baby.

Smirak said, “Maybe it’s safe where you come from, but the water round here is a shortcut to the Fields of Plenty.”

Adramal frowned. “The fields of what?”

“Do your people not worship Mathran, then?”

“Oh,” said Adramal. “I see. You could’ve just said it’ll make me sick.”

“That’s if you’re lucky. So, what’ll it be – beer or best beer?”

“What’s the difference?”

“Best beer is stronger,” said the woman.

“And I think it tastes better,” said Smirak, “but not everybody agrees.”

“I’ll have beer, then, please,” said Adramal.

“Best for me,” said Smirak. From a pocket he produced two small coins, which he tossed to the serving woman. The woman looked expectantly at Adramal. She fumbled for the purse at her belt. She took a handful of coins and counted out four of the copper ones. The woman accepted them and walked out of sight, towards the back of the room.

“You didn’t answer my question,” said Smirak.

“Which one?”

“Do your people worship Mathran?”

It might be safer to lie. But she’d already shown herself to be ignorant of a basic part of the doctrine. If she answered yes, he would doubtless press her on further points of Mathran’s teachings, and quickly expose her deception.

“I’m a wizard,” she said. “Well – an apprentice, which is why I’m looking for the school.”

He frowned, evidently not seeing the connection.

“Wizards acknowledge the existence of the Gods, but we don’t worship them.”

“Oh.”

The serving woman returned with a tray bearing two heavy mugs and Adramal’s pie. Adramal tasted her beer, finding it stronger and maltier than she was used to. She felt a twinge of resentment at the way Smirak seemed to have accepted without comment a concept she’d taken a fortnight to wrap her thoughts around when she started learning magic – that there existed thirteen immortal beings, immeasurably more powerful than any human, and yet humans didn’t have to acknowledge Them as masters. On the other hand, she should probably be grateful for his lack of curiosity – a discussion of wizards’ attitudes towards the Gods would soon come round to the fact that most wizards believed They didn’t deserve to be worshipped.

Smirak sipped at his beer. “How long have you been in Kyer Altamar?”

“I got here today.”

“How many spells do you know?”

She frowned. “That’s not really a meaningful question. We learn formulae that have specific effects, but the teachers encourage us to vary them according to the needs of the

situation.”

His blank expression told her he hadn't understood a word.

“It's like asking a bard how many rhymes he knows.”

“Oh.” He drank some more of his beer and leaned forward. “Would you mind showing me some magic?”

“Why?”

“I've never seen a wizard do spells. I was wondering what it looked like, that's all.”

Adramal tried not to scowl. He didn't know any better. “It's not a... a plaything for entertaining people. I trained as a healer. I use magic only when I need to.”

“It doesn't have to be anything fancy.” He took the fork from her plate. “Could you lift this without touching it, for instance?”

“I could, but I don't see why I should.” She held out her hand for the fork, and he returned it to her. “Besides, metal is one of the harder things to influence by magic.”

“I understand.” He sat back and took a big gulp of beer. “It's just... there's lots of people around these days claiming to be wizards who aren't. This fellow I'm going to see owes me a favour, and I wouldn't want to use it up for the sake of someone who wasn't...”

“The real thing?”

He nodded.

Self-consciously, Adramal picked up the candle from the other end of the table and blew out its flame. There was still plenty of light from the other candles, but this would make the demonstration more effective. She closed her eyes, calmed the surface of her mind and cast the simplest spell she knew.

She opened her eyes. Nothing had happened.

“I...” She stopped herself before she could apologise. If he'd never seen wizards' magic, he wouldn't know the spell hadn't worked. She shoved her hands under the table to wipe her sweating palms on her skirt. This was worse than the tests at the end of each year to see whether she'd learned enough to advance to the next class. She'd always passed those, but now it looked as though she might fail a test that ought to be much easier.

She tried the spell again. Light bloomed at her shoulder, much brighter than usual.

Smirak looked aside, squinting. “You might've warned me.”

“Sorry,” she said, and cancelled the spell.

Smirak drained his mug and set it on the table, shaking his head and blinking rapidly. He slid along the bench, out of the booth. “Wait here. I'll go and find my friend.” He jogged out of the tavern.

Adramal held a fingertip near the candlewick and cast a spell to relight it – no point in using her own strength to illuminate the surroundings when she had a ready-made source of light. She then turned her attention to the pie. It would have stretched to feed two people back home. A soft, flaky crust concealed a thick gravy with chunks of meat and two or three unfamiliar vegetables. She ate slowly, as it was quite hot, and sipped at the beer to cool her mouth.

Halfway through the pie, she put her knife and fork down, and gazed into the smoke that curled among the rafters. This wasn't how she'd imagined her first day in Kyer Altamar, but so far, it hadn't been as bad as she'd feared.

She glanced behind her at the door. Smirak was taking his time. She supposed it could be difficult to find someone in a place where so many people were crowded together.

An odd sound reached her – boots on the floorboards, but multiplied, as though echoing in a cave. She turned to see half a dozen men approaching. All wore long green cloaks and tall green hats. They moved as one, their feet striking the floor in unison. Adramal was so preoccupied with this new phenomenon that she barely noticed the man at the front point to her and shout, “Stay where you are!”

If he felt the need to say that, he probably meant to harm her. She grabbed her pack and ran for the other end of the room, hoping to find another exit.

One of the men spoke – an unintelligible smear of sound. Adramal got the impression

of something rushing towards her, as insubstantial as the air but much stronger. She fell headlong as the spell wrapped itself around her ankles like creeping vines. Before she could think about getting up, the men had surrounded her.

The man who had shouted at her held a diamond-shaped piece of dull steel, about two inches across. A loop of cord hung from one corner, and a smoothed-off emerald was set in the middle of it. Adramal knew enough of priests and their ways to recognise the object as a raskarim, a symbol of the priests' authority and a focus for their magical power.

"What do you want with me?" she said. "I've done nothing wrong – I've only just arrived here."

"Then why did you run?" said the priest. Without waiting for an answer, he added, "Hold out your hand." Adramal didn't move. "I'm accustomed to being obeyed," he said, grabbing her wrist. He pressed his raskarim against her palm and spoke a few words.

Pain coursed up Adramal's arm. One moment it was like being immersed in boiling water, the next like being stabbed by a thousand needles, then like being crushed under a falling tree. Her father had taught her a defence against spells like this. If only the pain didn't make it so hard to remember...

The priest let go of her, and the pain vanished. Gasping, Adramal stared at her hand and arm. They were unmarked.

"She's a wizard," said the priest. He hung his raskarim around his neck.

"How can you tell, Most Holy?" asked one of the other men.

"The spell would render a normal person unconscious," the priest said. "Where's the informer?"

"Here, Most Holy," said Smirak. The priest turned to him. Coins clinked as they changed hands. Smirak gave her the briefest of glances, no emotion showing on his face. The priest laid a hand on the top of his head and spoke softly. Then aloud, he said, "Go, with Mathran's blessing." Smirak scurried out of the building.

The priest turned to look at Adramal. To his men, he said, "Bind and blindfold her. We're taking her to the Temple."

Chapter 3

At last, they stopped walking. Someone guided Adramal to sit, and then untied her hands and removed the blindfold. She was on a rough bench in a small, dingy cell – probably underground, to judge from the number of steps they'd descended to get here. The floor, ceiling and three of the walls were made of large stone blocks, wet to the touch. In place of the fourth wall was an iron grille with a gate in the centre. In the corridor outside, a torch provided a flickering orange light, silhouetting her captors. One of them took a large key from under his cloak and locked the gate.

"There's been a terrible mistake," said Adramal, holding out a hand towards them.

"Shut up," said the priest whom the others addressed as Most Holy. He lifted his raskarim. "There are other spells. Spells where the pain doesn't stop when I take this off your skin."

Adramal leapt from the bench and shook the bars. "What's going to happen to me?" she demanded. "At least tell me what I'm supposed to have done wrong!"

Most Holy outlined a rectangle in the air with his fingers. He then held his hands with the palms facing Adramal, and brought them together, in imitation of a pair of curtains closing. Magic crackled through the metal of the gate, stinging Adramal's fingers and forcing her to let go.

"What shall we do with this?" said another priest, holding up Adramal's pack.

"Give that back to me!" she shouted. "There's nothing you'd want in it."

"You have no further use for it," said Most Holy. The priests left.

Adramal sat down and buried her face in her hands. The echoes of the priests' footsteps had not quite faded when she started to cry.

I should've made more effort to get on with Father, she thought. It's my fault the Council threw me out. I should never have come to Kyer Altamar. I could've stopped anywhere along the river – found a village with an old wizard – persuaded him to take me on as his apprentice. Or just found a good man to be a wife to. Maybe that's all I'm fit for. Now I'll never know.

Yes, all right, Lelsarin said. Enough of the self-pity.

Adramal dried her eyes and tried to steady her breathing. If you have any suggestions for getting me out of this mess, I'd be glad to hear them. Otherwise, go back to sleep.

Do you really need my help with that sorry excuse for a lock? asked Lelsarin.

I'm sure Most Holy knows how easy these locks are for a wizard to pick, Adramal said. That'll be why he put a spell on the gate as well.

Even you could break that pathetic little charm, said Lelsarin.

Your confidence in me is touching. But if I get out of this cell, then what? This place is crawling with priests. I'm bound to be recaptured inside two hundred heartbeats.

Well, said the girl-thing with a shrug, if you think they're going to kill you anyway, what have you got to lose? She turned and stomped back into the darkness.

If I die, you die with me.

No answer came. Adramal wondered if it was true. Lelsarin had got into her head –

presumably she could get out again if she wanted to.

Sighing, Adramal rose and looked through the gate. To the left, the corridor continued straight for as far as she could see. To the right, the direction that the priests had gone, it turned a corner about five yards away. The torch that provided the only light was in a bracket on the wall near this corner. She listened carefully, hearing only the slow drip of water from the ceiling and the hiss and crackle of the torch. She checked all her pockets. Most Holy's men had made a very thorough job of searching her. She'd have to do this the hard way, then.

Standing in the middle of the cell, she slowed her breathing and half-closed her eyes. A familiar sequence of thoughts went through her mind, almost of their own accord. At Thuren, she'd practised this spell every day for three fortnights, until she'd feared she'd never be able to think of anything else. Now, it was just one of many, a single tool in a well-equipped workshop. She opened her eyes.

The spell that Most Holy had put across the grille was now visible. Each bar of the grille and gate was surrounded by flickering light – green for Mathran, rather than white for a wizard. Other green lines crossed diagonally, where no bar was, reinforcing the spell. No such light came from the stones. Adramal took that to mean the cell hadn't been built to cage a wizard.

She could probably shatter the spell by hurling a lot of power at it, but that would make a great deal of magical noise, like tipping a shelf full of crockery onto a stone floor. She'd have to dismantle it.

Fortunately, the spell had weak points – gaps of about a finger's width where the green lines didn't meet at intersections. It was tempting to think of these as a sign that Most Holy was not as strong as he appeared – or at least, not as thorough. But the flaws were more likely to be deliberate, put there to make it easier for him to cancel the spell when he needed to open the gate. He would insert magical force into the gaps and pull to make them wider. Past a certain point, the stress would make the spell collapse. Adramal planned to do the same thing, only much more slowly.

One of the gaps was near the lock. Thoughts danced through her mind, and the gap grew to the width of her hand. She let go of the thoughts. The gap remained, and she released a breath.

She put her fingertips on the lock. Another set of thoughts came to her, and she felt the shape of its parts under her hand. As she'd hoped, it was a simple contrivance, one she could've picked without magic, if she'd had a bit of wire to work with. She cast another spell – this one more familiar than she would've cared to admit – and drew her fingers across the lock. There was a scrape and a clunk. She nudged the gate, and it swung open a few inches, moving silently on well-oiled hinges.

Adramal allowed herself a small amount of satisfaction. She identified the rest of the gaps in Most Holy's barrier and considered which to pull apart next. If she concentrated on the lower half of the gate, she could crawl out on her hands and knees. She knelt by a wall and measured the height of her shoulders against it – about two-thirds of the way from the floor to the lock.

She widened the gaps one at a time. Each gap was progressively more difficult, like lifting heavier and heavier weights. Sweat dripped from her. Tonight's purge would be torture, but she could live with that, as long as she was out of the Temple when it happened.

At last she had a big enough hole. She pushed the gate open. Panting, she crawled out and leaned against the opposite wall of the corridor, wiping her forehead with her sleeve.

Lelsarin? Can you hear anyone coming?

The girl-thing yawned. *I would've said if I had.*

She wished she could find Lelsarin's words reassuring. The girl-thing had keener hearing than her, but didn't always use it. Adramal couldn't figure out how that worked, since Lelsarin's perceptions came through Adramal's senses. If Adramal didn't hear something, Lelsarin shouldn't either. But it had saved her trouble and embarrassment more than once, so she didn't question it too much.

Which way now? The branch of the corridor with the torch was presumably the more travelled one, and thus more likely to lead out of the Temple. Adramal walked slowly in that direction, trying not to let her feet make any noise.

As she passed the torch, a chill washed over her, from front to back, as though she had walked under a waterfall. *Idiot*. It had to be a warning spell, to tell the priests if anyone moved past that point in the corridor.

She hurried round the corner. After ten yards, the corridor became a staircase that led up. Footsteps came from ahead – several people, running. Adramal froze. The footsteps stopped.

“Careful, men,” said a voice. “She didn’t trigger the ward on the cell gate, so she may be more powerful than we thought.”

Adramal smiled. If they were afraid of her, she might only have to disable one of them to escape. She stood at the bottom of the stairs with her back flat against the wall. One of the priests spoke. Shards of magic went past her, like a swarm of wasps – a barrier spell being broken. Adramal readied a spell of her own, forming all but the last thought. Somebody fumbled with a key, and a gate swung open.

The priests came down the steps two abreast, leaving plenty of room on either side. Adramal tensed. The spell chafed within her, wanting to be let out to complete its purpose. When the priests were halfway down the stairs, one of them shouted, “There she is!”

She sprinted up the stairs. As she passed the last pair, she grabbed the shoulder of the nearer one and completed the spell. He went down like a sack of carrots. She didn’t dare look back, but from the sounds that followed, he must have knocked over most of the others.

A grille like that of her cell stood at the top of the stairs, with an open gate in the middle of it. She ran through. Behind her, a priest recited a spell. It rattled the gate and passed her harmlessly with a breath of wind.

The corridor curved to the right and came to a T-junction. This new corridor was paved with a lighter stone than the cell. People approached from the left-hand passage, so she took the right.

Before she’d gone more than ten paces, two more people came out of a side passage ahead of her. As she tried to dodge them, one of them raised a hand. Powerful magic seized Adramal’s ankles and shoulders and slammed her to the floor, face-down. Pain jabbed at the arm that was trapped under her. She struggled to get up, but the magic locked her in place, too strong to oppose. She heard more people running towards her.

The pain and paralysis stopped. Then another spell grabbed Adramal under the arms and jerked her upright. It turned her to face the priest. He was much older than the first priest who had captured her, and his green cloak was edged with golden symbols. A few wisps of white hair clung to his freckled head. His heavy jowls lifted in a sneer.

“Most prisoners aren’t this keen to meet me,” he said. His voice rasped, like a knife being sharpened on a whetstone. “But you’re not most prisoners, are you, Adramal?”

Chapter 4

The old priest and his assistants dragged Adramal to a stone-walled room on a lower level, bare except for a metal stool bolted to the floor. The other man skulked in the shadows. He was dressed differently from the priests, so she assumed he wasn't one of them. One of the assistants brought candles and distributed them among sconces that hung on the walls. The other assistants made Adramal sit on the stool, her back to the door, and manacled her hands and feet.

The assistants trooped out, closing the door behind them. When the reverberations eventually faded, the old priest walked slowly around Adramal. He stopped in front of her and leaned forward, blocking what little light the candles provided. "So, Adramal," he said. "Welcome to our Temple."

Adramal fought to control her breathing. She tried not to show any sign of the fear that surrounded her, like a tide submerging a sandbar.

"I am Marik," the priest said, "beloved of Mathran, Head of the External Inquisition. I have some questions. You will answer them, truthfully. If you don't, there will be consequences – immediate and painful. Do you understand?"

Adramal strove to hold back tears. She could only nod.

Marik leaned closer, a hand to his ear. "Maybe I'm going deaf in my old age. Will you answer my questions truthfully?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"Good." He straightened up. "We found a letter in your possession, introducing one Adramal, an apprentice wizard, and recommending her as a student to the governing body of the establishment known as Kyturil."

Sweat filmed her skin, though this room was even colder than the cell she'd escaped from. Itches formed, none of them in places she could reach.

"Where are you from?" Though she couldn't see his face, she thought he leered.

"Th-Thuren," Adramal said. That was in the letter. Did he think she didn't know what it said? That she'd stolen it, perhaps?

"I've never heard of it," said Marik.

"It's a-a village in the west of Centador," she said, "two fortnights' journey upstream on the River Aglos f-from here."

He gave a little snort, as though he thought there was no such place. "Have you been to Kyer Altamar before?"

"N-no."

"When did you arrive in Kyer Altamar?"

"This aft-this afternoon."

"How did you travel to the city?"

"I was a passenger on a barge that carried wool."

"What was its name?"

Adramal hesitated. She hadn't bothered to learn that fact. It might have been useful when trying to find the barge again after going ashore, but she recognised the crew.

“What was it called?” Marik stepped closer. “Do you expect me to believe that you travelled on a barge for two whole fortnights without learning its name? Maybe you didn’t know that barges have names. Maybe you were never on a barge. What else are you lying about, wench?” He raised a hand, and Adramal shrank from him. She lost her balance and fell off the stool. She cried out as one of the manacles twisted her wrist and dug into her lower back.

“I don’t remember what it was called,” she whimpered, trying to sit up straight.

“Very convenient,” said Marik, folding his arms.

“It’s the truth, I swear it.”

Marik pointed a finger at her. She screamed as pain stabbed her thigh, making her keel over.

“We’re wasting our time, Most Holy,” said the other man.

Marik lowered his hand, and Adramal’s pain ceased. “My priests captured her,” he said. “She’s mine to interrogate as I see fit.”

The man replied, “The King ordered the City Watch to carry out this investigation.”

Adramal gulped. The King? What had she got herself mixed up in?

“The Watch Commander put me in charge,” the man said. “Therefore she’s my responsibility.” To judge from his voice, he was much younger than Marik.

Marik gazed at the man for a few heartbeats, as though wondering whether to inflict pain on him too. Then he said, “As you wish.”

“Sit down, Adramal,” said the other man. Chains clinking, she stuck out her elbow to help herself rise into a kneeling position. At least the floor in this room was dry. With her hands tied behind her back, just keeping her balance felt like an achievement. She clambered onto the stool.

The man approached, halting just behind Marik. He was a small, neat fellow of about thirty, with blond hair and a carefully-trimmed moustache. “I’m Captain Tagahra of the Kyer Altamar City Watch. We’ve brought you here because we think you might know something about some crimes. If you’re innocent, you’ll be free to go.” He crouched in front of her, well out of reach of her feet. His heavy brown cloak parted at his waist, revealing a well-tailored pair of breeches.

“What can you tell me about Ulmakh of Amagar?” he asked.

Adramal blinked in surprise. “I’ve never heard of him.”

“What about Karis, son of Volmord?”

“I’ve never heard of him either.”

“Sorentil, the wool merchant?”

Adramal shook her head. From the corner of her eye, she saw Marik lift his hand. Quickly, she said, “I’ve not heard of him.” Marik relaxed.

“Kimynon, the banker?”

“No.”

Tagahra frowned. Adramal tried not to let her hopes rise. “I suppose it’s none of my business,” she said, “but what have these men done?”

Tagahra jumped to his feet. Adramal’s shoulders sagged. That had been a stupid question. “Done?” he said. “Nothing, as far as I know.”

“Oh,” said Adramal.

“They’re dead,” said Tagahra.

Adramal gasped.

“Murdered,” said Tagahra.

“What?” said Adramal, nearly losing her balance again. “You can’t think I had anything to do with—”

Marik cut her off with, “By wizards’ magic.”

This time Adramal did fall off the stool. She stared wide-eyed at Marik. This had to be a sick joke.

He held her stare, his gaze seeming to burn into her. Eventually, she looked away.

“Impossible,” she croaked.

Marik laughed – a short, fierce sound, more like the bark of a dog. “That’s what you tell the masses, isn’t it? ‘Wizards are forbidden from killing with magic.’ Horseshit.” He spat, as though the words had left a bitter taste.

“I didn’t kill them,” she said. “I trained as a healer.”

“Meaning you know all about the frailties of the body,” said Marik. “And where to interfere for the greatest harm.” He grabbed her upper arm and raised his fist. Adramal shied away.

“Stop,” said Tagahra. “Beating her isn’t going to help. I think she’s telling the truth.”

Marik let go of her. Adramal looked at Tagahra, not daring to hope.

“What makes you so sure?” said Marik.

Tagahra counted off items on his fingers. “The informer said he saw her step off a barge that had just arrived at the inland wharves. Your men said they’d never seen her before. The letter is addressed to the Council at Kyturil. And she’s Alesin’s daughter.”

Marik snorted. “The letter *says* she’s Alesin’s daughter.”

“Alesin is my father, Sirs,” she said. She hated to acknowledge that, but if a family connection could get her out of this mess, then for once, she would be grateful for it.

Tagahra studied her face. “You have to admit she does look like him. Same hair colour –”

“Show me a westerner who doesn’t have black hair,” Marik interrupted.

“Same colour eyes, same nose, same chin...”

“Alesin always wears a beard,” said Marik. “Who knows what his chin is like? The rest could be changed with magic.”

She wondered how they knew what her father looked like. He’d never said anything about being anywhere near Kyer Altamar. And she’d never known him to leave Thuren for more than a few days at a time – not nearly long enough to come here.

“Do you detect any magic altering her appearance?” said Tagahra.

Marik scowled. He took his raskarim in one hand and passed the other over Adramal’s face. A spell poked at her skin, as if a horsehair brush was being dragged over it. “No,” he said. “But we’re not ready to bring in the harvest just yet. Sit up, wizard.” She did her best to comply. “Maybe this will jog her memory.”

Marik stepped back from both of them. He took the raskarim from around his neck and held it by the cord at arm’s length. With the index finger of his other hand, he traced a small circle around the raskarim. Where his finger had passed, the outline of a circle appeared in green light. Eight short lines grew from the edge of the circle, making the whole resemble a child’s drawing of the sun. The light twisted, like braided water in a stream, as if the magic itself protested at being forced into this shape.

Adramal stared at the symbol, unable to look away. A high-pitched sound seemed to come from it, filling Adramal’s hearing. The sound burrowed into her mind, as though it wanted to shake the foundations of her sanity. She tried to put her hands over her ears, and cried out when the manacles halted her movement.

“Stop it!” she shouted. “Take it away! You’re sick!”

Marik passed his hand in front of the symbol, and it evaporated. He and Tagahra showed no obvious ill-effects. The sound continued. Only now did Adramal realise that it came not from the symbol, but from Lelsarin. The girl-thing was screaming, as if that was her sole reason for existing.

“You see, Captain?” said Marik. “She knows what it is.”

Lelsarin, what’s wrong? It’s just a bit of magic. Nothing to be afraid of. The screaming continued. Adramal shuddered. She’d never known Lelsarin to react like this to anything.

Adramal panted for several moments, and then found the breath to speak. “I’ve never seen it before.” Lelsarin’s noise made it hard to be sure the words were coming out right.

Marik gave her a pitying look. “Do you really expect us to believe that?” He put the raskarim around his neck. “Why are you so afraid of it?”

“I-I’m not af-afraid of it.”

“Liar!”

Tagahra held up a hand. “You’re afraid of something, though, aren’t you? Or someone? Maybe you know who drew that symbol, and you’re afraid of that person.”

She shook her head. Lelsarin still screamed. “I don’t know anything about it. And what’s it got to do with those people you said were murdered?”

“How dare you profane those who now dwell in the Fields of Plenty?” Marik demanded. “You know perfectly well what the connection is.”

Tagahra sighed. “We found that symbol burned into the flesh of each victim.”

Adramal stared at him, disbelieving. Within her mind, Lelsarin’s screams grew louder.

Tagahra rubbed his chin. To Marik, he said, “Didn’t you say killing a man by magic takes a lot of power?”

“I did,” said Marik, as though he now regretted making that statement.

“If she’s still an apprentice, she wouldn’t be strong enough, would she?”

“The letter *says* she’s an apprentice,” said Marik. “And it *says* she’s seventeen. She looks more like twenty-five.”

“Twenty, at the most,” said Tagahra. “Her apprenticeship can’t have finished yet, unless she started very young.”

“I started at twelve, like everybody else,” said Adramal. Her father had wanted her to start younger, but the Council had refused him permission.

Marik folded his arms and gazed into the distance.

“I don’t think she knows anything,” said Tagahra. “We should let her go.”

“I want to see how powerful she really is,” said Marik.

“All right,” said Tagahra. “If you find that she isn’t powerful enough to have committed the murders, will you release her?”

“I will. The spell I must cast is part of our Church’s Greater Mysteries. Therefore, Captain, I must ask you to wait outside.”

Despair threatened to overcome Adramal. Doubtless Marik intended to say she was far more powerful than she really was – or kill her, and say she attacked him. Tagahra would never know he’d lied.

Tagahra left the room. Marik blindfolded her with a strip of dark cloth. Adramal became acutely aware of beads of sweat trickling down her back. Her sense of balance went astray. The stool seemed to tilt, as though trying to throw her off.

Marik stood in front of her, his breathing the only sound in the room. Her stomach clenched. Would it hurt, to be killed by magic? Would it be over quickly, or would he drag it out?

“Don’t try to resist,” he said. “It won’t stop me finding out what I want to know, but it will make the process more painful.” She heard him moving. His spell must be one that was activated by gestures. That was why he’d blindfolded her – not out of mercy, as was done to criminals about to be executed, but so she wouldn’t know what the spell did until it was too late to defend against it.

She tried to think of a spell that might protect her, if only for a few heartbeats – long enough to sell her life dearly, instead of just letting him take it. Five years of training deserted her as fear devoured rational thought.

Marik put a hand on the back of her head. His other hand pressed the raskarim to her forehead.

White light, stronger than the sun, surrounded her. It faded into darkness, more absolute than that imposed by the blindfold.

Adramal looked down. She saw her body – how? She was standing. The chains on her wrists and ankles had gone, but her limbs seemed not to be interested in obeying her.

Am I dead? Was he merciful?

Marik stepped from behind and faced her. Adramal gasped. “What’s happening?” she said. “Where am I?”

He smiled, in a much friendlier manner than before. “This is where your memories are kept,” he said. “Or it soon will be, anyway. Don’t be afraid – no harm will come to you.” He made a series of small rapid gestures. A deep chill crept over her.

Scenes from Adramal’s life played in front of them, as though painted on a wall. Most were fragmentary, over too fast for her to identify. Those she did recognise seemed insignificant – eating breakfast, walking between lessons at Thuren, playing with a doll. Then came a period of night – not the absolute darkness of the present surroundings, but a near-blackness edged by distant, flickering torchlight.

That’s the inside of our house at Thuren, Adramal thought. I must have been lying awake in the dark. What possible interest could that hold?

“That will be all,” said Marik. “I’m about to cancel the spell, and you’ll be back in the interrogation room. You may have forgotten to breathe, so don’t panic if you feel as though you’re suffocating.” Adramal wondered why he was suddenly so concerned for her well-being.

Marik snapped his fingers, tilting his hand as he did so to point at her. Everything went dark again.

Adramal’s lungs burned, and she took a shuddering breath. It rasped in her throat, as if she’d swallowed sand. Sweat stuck her clothes to her skin. Every muscle ached from tension. Metal bit into her wrists and ankles. Marik untied the blindfold, and torchlight jabbed at her eyes.

She tried to steady her breathing. *Slow, calm. A wizard’s breath is the most important part of her magic. If it’s not under control, nothing else will work.*

Marik opened the door. “Please come in, Captain.”

Tagahra entered and hurried to Adramal’s side. “Are you hurt?”

“She’s just winded,” said Marik.

“I was talking to her,” said Tagahra.

“I’ll be all right,” she said, almost convincing herself.

“I have performed the necessary spell,” Marik said. “Her power is insufficient to kill a man.”

“Then she’s innocent.”

Marik nodded. “I hereby release her into your custody.”

“I think you’ll find,” Tagahra said stiffly, “that she was already in it.”

Marik summoned one of his assistants, who unlocked the manacles on Adramal’s feet. She swayed when she stood, but soon recovered her balance.

The priests and Tagahra took her through narrow, deserted corridors to a side exit, where a priest unchained her wrists. Another approached with her pack and purse. He held them out to her, as though afraid to come too close.

“Make sure everything’s still there,” Tagahra suggested.

The pack had obviously been searched: nothing was where she’d put it. The letter of introduction was at the top, its seal broken. Her purse contained the right number of coins.

“Good day, wizard,” said Marik. “Don’t let me see you again.” She and Tagahra stepped into the alley outside, and the door closed.

Adramal stared at the door. She hadn’t yet adjusted to the idea of still being alive.

A discreet cough sounded behind her. She almost turned to look at Captain Tagahra before realising that the noise was inside her head.

Well, well, well, said Lelsarin. That was a very strange bit of priests’ magic. Greater Mysteries, indeed!

You’ve lost none of your gift for understatement, Adramal replied.

And, said Lelsarin, I know it’s not your fault, under the circumstances, but I think he saw me.

What? No one can see you, unless I choose to mindspeak.

Maybe his birth name is “no one,” then.

“Adramal?”

This interruption came through her ears. She turned to face the source. "Yes, Captain?"

He gave her an embarrassed smile. "I'm very sorry about all of that. When you said you'd arrived in the city today, we should have checked that straight away. Then we could have released you."

"Oh," said Adramal. She wasn't used to people in authority admitting mistakes. "I... I suppose there's no lasting harm done. Am I free to go?"

"Yes," said the Captain. "Of course. Is there anything I can do to help you?"

"You could tell me where Kyturil is," she said.

He blinked, seemingly surprised that she didn't already know. "It's not actually in Kyer Altamar."

She stepped back. Had she come all this way for nothing?

"I mean, legally it's part of the city, for taxes and so on, but it's outside the city walls. It's on the river bank, about eight miles downstream."

If it was on the river, it should be easy to find. But she asked, "How do I get there?"

"Leave the city by the Salthes gate," he said. "Anyone can tell you where that is, or just follow the wagons going east. Stay on the road for about two miles. Then there's a dirt track that leads off the road. It skirts the edge of a marsh, so be careful. Kyturil is a big stone fortress. Mostly it's a ruin, but the wizards have settled in a part in the east that's still intact."

"Thank you," said Adramal. She walked to the end of the alley. The street that it joined was wider and cleaner than those she had seen earlier, but not as busy. There were no horses, only people, better-dressed than before. She shuddered as a priest of Mathran passed, but he didn't look at her.

She checked the position of the sun: just above the rooftops. She wouldn't reach Kyturil before dark. "Do you know of a good inn nearby?"

"There are several within a few junctions," Tagahra said. "Let me take you to one."

Adramal frowned. That was how this misadventure had started. "Just tell me where it is, please."

Tagahra looked thoughtful for a moment. "The nearest would be the *Cob and Pen*. Its sign has two swans." He pointed along the right-hand branch of the street. "It's at a junction of four streets."

She lifted her pack.

Tagahra said, "I'd appreciate it if you don't repeat what you've heard today. It's common knowledge that those men have been murdered, but I'm trying to keep it quiet that magic was involved. I'm sure you can imagine the public reaction to that news."

She nodded and turned to leave.

"There is one other thing," Tagahra said.

She gulped and put the pack down. "Yes?"

"You said wizards are forbidden from killing with magic."

"We are."

"Why?" he asked. She made no answer, and he added, "I'm not trying to catch you out in a lie. I'm genuinely curious. I mean, the King's Law forbids everybody from killing another by any means. Why do wizards need a prohibition of their own?"

Still Adramal hesitated. To share this kind of knowledge with one who wasn't a wizard... it wasn't exactly forbidden, but it certainly wasn't encouraged. "Because it would make a hole in the world."

Tagahra looked puzzled. "A big pit? Like a well? We didn't find anything like that at the sites of any of the murders."

"It isn't a hole you can see," said Adramal. "But a wizard can sense it. I suppose a priest could too, if he knew what to look for."

"And what's so bad about a hole?"

"It allows magic to leak out of the world. Magic is everywhere, but nothing creates it – not any more, anyway. If magic leaves the world, you can't get it back. Without magic, wizards can't cast spells. So in killing with magic, we'd be harming ourselves."

“So hypothetically,” said Tagahra, “if all the magic leaves, then what?”

“My teachers weren’t sure,” said Adramal. “Some thought all spells would stop working. Others said it would mean the end of the world.”

“I see. When you go to Kyturil, I’d appreciate it if you could keep a lookout for anything that might help me to catch the killer.”

She stared at him. “You want me to spy on them?”

“I don’t mean for you to put yourself in any danger,” Tagahra said. “But if you come across anything suspicious, I’d be grateful to know.”

She nodded. “If there’s nothing else, I’ll bid you good day, Captain.”

“Actually, there is something else. I’m surprised Marik didn’t mention it. We found coins totalling forty-seven coppers in your purse.”

Her hand went to her belt, and she stepped back.

He gave a wry smile and stroked his moustache. “This isn’t Vannharial. I’ve no intention of relieving you of them. I was just wondering how long you expect them to last at Kyturil.”

Adramal frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“The fees are twenty-five silvers a fortnight.”

Fees? No one had said anything about fees.

“Sorry,” he said. “I just thought the letter would’ve mentioned if you had a bank account, or a relative paying for you. It’s none of my business. Good day.” He turned left, heading away from where he’d said the *Cob and Pen* was.

Adramal shook as she walked towards the inn, fighting an urge to run.

Chapter 5

Adramal walked past the *Cob and Pen* without seeing it, and had to backtrack. The front of it was barely wider than the door, and was jammed between two other buildings. She pushed the door open, finding a long passageway with another door at the end. Talk and laughter came from ahead.

The inner door led to a large, well-lit room, where customers sat around small tables. A few of them near the door glanced at Adramal when she entered, and then returned to their conversations. They were paler than most people, and she tried not to stare. Their clothes, mostly in blue and grey, appeared to be stiffened and stretched with wires around the forearms and chest, making Adramal think of pigeons. Everything looked newer and cleaner than the first tavern she had visited. Doubtless their prices were higher. She eased through the crowd to the counter at the back, where the landlord, a gruff, stocky man, was serving beer from a barrel.

“How much are your rooms?” she asked.

He looked her up and down, making her acutely aware of how out-of-place she must seem here. “On your own, are you?” He managed to make it sound like a crime. “How many nights do you plan on staying?”

“Just one.”

He frowned, as if only people who were running from the Watch or the priests did that. “Eight coppers if you don’t mind sharing if someone arrives later, or twelve for a room to yourself.”

The notion of sleeping in the same room as a stranger was quite off-putting, so Adramal said, “I’ll have a room to myself, please.” Twelve coppers was more than a quarter of her money, but it was only for one night.

He called through a doorway behind him. A bored-looking girl, a couple of years younger than Adramal, came out. The landlord told her to serve customers while he helped their new guest.

He lit a candle from one on the table, and took her through a door that led to a rickety staircase. Boards creaking under her feet, she followed him up to a gloomy landing. Several doors led off this, and he opened one, revealing a long narrow room with a shuttered window. A bed stood under the window, big enough for two people. Near the door was a washstand with a candle, a bowl and a jug.

The landlord accepted her coins and told her to come down to the bar if she needed anything else. “Breakfast is served in the bar for an hour after dawn,” he added, before going back downstairs.

She held her fingertip near the wick of the candle. A familiar spell made it catch light. She bolted the door and put a spell on it to help it resist unwanted entry. She did the same with the shutters. Gaps between them and the window frame allowed the last of the daylight to peek in.

She picked up the jug, which held a clear liquid. A spell confirmed that, despite Smirak’s assertions, it was safe to drink. She downed a big gulp of it, gasping in between

swallows.

Adramal sat on the edge of the bed. After a few heartbeats, she pulled off her boots and lay down. The mattress was deliciously soft after two fortnights of sleeping on the barge's wooden deck. She put her hands behind her head and watched the patterns of light and dark that the candle made on the ceiling. The patterns blurred.

Wizards don't cry, she told herself, blinking. She hated weeping and the weakness it betrayed in her. Emotions interfered with wizards' magic, and so wizards had methods of putting them aside whenever they might need to cast spells. But feelings could not be denied indefinitely.

Come on, then. Let's get it over with.

She opened her thoughts to the feelings she had held at bay in the Temple. A groan passed her lips as the emotions pounced on her, like a pack of wild dogs fighting over a piece of food.

She ran headlong down a dark corridor, unable to see more than a few paces ahead. Something big and fierce lumbered after her, growling and roaring. She crashed into a wall. Pain screamed in her arm. She'd reached a turning in the corridor. Gasping for breath, she started running again. She saw the next corner just in time to turn. Whatever was chasing her drew nearer. She wanted to fight – she could tear that thing apart with her bare hands. But no – it was bigger than her – stronger. Her legs burned as she forced herself to run faster. She slipped on something wet and foul-smelling. Arms flailing, she skidded and smashed into a wall. She turned to face the monster. No escape. She raised her fists. Her body folded in on itself as the creature took her whole in its jaws. Bones bent and then snapped.

Left tibia. Right ulna. Third cervical vertebra. I'm dead.

Adramal opened her eyes and relaxed her grip on the blankets. Her heartbeat slowed to something like normal. She took several slow, deep breaths. Her muscles ached, as if she really had been running. Sweat had stuck her clothing to her skin.

Purges always seemed to take hours, but she saw from the length of the candle and the position of the deepening twilight on the wall that only moments had passed. She stood up and flapped the hem of her tunic to try to cool herself.

Fear or anger, said Lelsarin. *Fear or anger. Why do you insist on accepting both at once? It might be faster, but purges would be much easier if you dealt with them in turn.*

How many times have I told you I don't have a choice?

About as many as I've told you that you do. Lelsarin dangled her doll by its feet, as though about to drop it from a great height. *Still, I'm not the one who'll go mad if she over-exerts herself. You might even be better company that way.* She let go of the doll and dived to catch it, vanishing out of Adramal's thoughts.

Don't go – we need to talk.

There was no answer. She still wasn't sure whether Lelsarin could hear her when she was out of Adramal's conscious mind: sometimes she jumped in fully aware of Adramal's recent experiences, and sometimes she didn't know what day of the fortnight it was.

Adramal stomped around the room, working the aches out of her muscles. She should find out more about these murders that Marik had been so excited about. A wizard couldn't have killed those people – not with magic, anyway. And Marik should know that. Why did he insist otherwise?

Priests at best mistrusted wizards, and at worst detested them. The feelings were largely mutual. Was Marik, or the Church of Mathran in Kyer Altamar, waging an undeclared war against wizards? Did he think that by blaming wizards for the killings, he would discredit them, or make the citizens fear them?

And then, what of the symbol Marik had shown her? She'd said she knew nothing about it, but that wasn't quite true. She knew one thing – it terrified Lelsarin.

The girl-thing sat cross-legged at the edge of Adramal's mind, her head bowed, half-heartedly playing with her doll. The way she had reappeared at the thought of her name told Adramal she had been listening this time.

So what can you tell me about that symbol? Adramal said.

Lelsarin gave a barely-perceptible shrug.

You screamed. A lot.

It's just a bit of magic, you said. Nothing to get excited about.

Then why did it affect you the way it did?

Lelsarin made no response.

Adramal took a few deep breaths. *In the nine years you've been riding around in my head, I've never known you show any emotion stronger than mild annoyance – usually because you say I'm keeping you awake. What was different today?*

The girl-thing shrugged again, a more definite movement this time. *Lots of things were different. First day in the big city, first time handing over money, first time staying at an inn –*

Don't duck the question. Something's wrong. What is it?

Lelsarin jumped to her feet and threw the doll down. *You know nothing about me!* She stomped off into the darkness.

Adramal sighed. There was no point calling after Lelsarin. She would come back when she was ready.

From her pack, Adramal took a small book, *A Natural History of the River Aglos*, a parting gift from Councillor Teshan. She turned to the back pages, the ones the bookbinders left blank for notes, and carefully tore one out.

The priests had done a thorough job of rearranging the pack, and it took her some time to find the other thing she wanted – a flat wooden box containing pens and bottles of ink. The priests had opened at least one of the bottles, judging from the stains on the inside of the lid.

She took the bowl and jug off the washstand and rested the paper on it. She dipped a pen into an ink bottle and wrote –

Tergrith's Day, Eleventh Fortnight. Beloved Father, I trust you are well. I am in good health. I arrived in Kyer Altamar this afternoon following an uneventful journey. Tomorrow I will go to Kyturil to seek admission. Your loving and dutiful daughter, Adramal.

She tried not to laugh at how hollow the phrases “beloved Father” and “loving and dutiful daughter” sounded. Still, they might give him a clue that there was more to this letter than met the eye. She blew on the ink to dry it, and then wiped the pen clean and took up another one. This time, she did not dip it in the ink, but instead cast a spell on it. The tip glowed with a soft white light. She held the tip a finger's width above the paper and wrote over what she had already written –

Four prominent men have been murdered in the city. The priests say a wizard did it. A symbol was burned into each corpse – a circle with eight lines radiating from it.

The writing hung in the air, like tame fire. Should she say that she knew about these murders only because she'd – briefly – been accused of them? He didn't need to know that. She lifted the pen, completing the spell, and the writing faded. Now, only a wizard who knew the spell – or a high-ranking priest with a lot of time to spend unravelling it – would be able to read her words.

She folded the letter, addressed it, and dripped wax from the candle along the edge to seal it. She considered giving it to the landlord, but she couldn't be sure he wasn't in the pay of the priests – or that he wouldn't throw it into the fire at the first opportunity. Best to take it to the docks and give it to a barge that was going back upriver. The crews would all be asleep by the time she got there, and the city might be dangerous at night. She would go first thing in the morning.

She slept fitfully – noises from downstairs kept her awake, and memories of Marik and Tagahra refused to let go of her. Eventually, daylight outside made sleep impossible. She cancelled the spell that held the shutters closed. It was soon after dawn, and the street was all but deserted. She dressed herself and splashed a little water from the jug on her face.

Smells of cooking drew her down to the bar. A big man dressed in furs sat at one of the tables, his back to her, eating noisily. The landlord greeted her and went into the kitchen. He

came back with a large bowl of porridge and a cup of milk on a tray. She took the tray up to her room.

As a child, she had thought porridge was sand and tree bark, mashed up in warm water. Time had not improved her opinion. She stuck the spoon in and endured the meal. At least the milk was fresh. That took away the worst of the gritty after-taste, and some water from the jug on the washstand took care of the rest.

In the streets, her heart skipped whenever she saw a priest – or anyone in green – but no one seemed interested in her. She found her way back to the docks without difficulty. The barge she had travelled on was still there, loading a new cargo to take upstream. A sign on the side of the vessel said it was called *Ox of Kalkarak*, and she wondered how she could have not noticed such a distinctive name. She gave one of its crew the letter for her father, along with two coppers to ensure he took good care of it.

She walked to the Salthes Gate, in the city's eastern wall. A crowd pressed around it – people, carts and animals. The cause of the blockage appeared to be a cart with a wide load of logs. The driver seemed not to be used to tight spaces, and Adramal thought he would move the cart faster by pushing it himself. She took her place in the queue and tried not to think about how vulnerable she was if a priest happened to be nearby.

She followed the cobbled road out of the gate, going in a straight line to the east. It widened to accommodate two carts side-by-side. Grass grew knee-high on either side. Traffic soon thinned out: she passed a cart or a group of people every few minutes. A man in a heavy green cloak on a white horse trotted past, shouting, "Make way for Lord Valbruk's messenger!" Who Lord Valbruk might be, she had no idea, but everyone else made an effort to step aside, and she thought it best to do likewise.

A mile from the city, a jumble of dark shapes became visible over the horizon. That, she supposed, had to be Kyturil. She followed the road for a mile more, until she came to the dirt track Captain Tagahra had told her about. The track continued the line of the road, while the road itself turned sharply to the south-east. She wondered if the road had led to Kyturil at one time, and then the route had been changed. The track showed footprints and wheel-ruts, but none recent, if she was any judge.

"Hey!" said a voice behind her. "Trying to get yourself trampled?"

She turned to see an old man, hunched on the driving seat of a cart that was piled high with bulging canvas sacks. The ox that pulled the cart regarded her with the placid indifference that only oxen had truly mastered.

There was plenty of room for the cart to go around her, but she stood out of its way. When it had gone past, she turned back to Kyturil, squinting against the mid-morning sun. Even from this distance, it looked huge.

What are you waiting for? murmured Lelsarin.

There's a murderer on the loose, said Adramal. And if Captain Tagahra is right, there's a very good chance he's living over there.

And if Captain Tagahra is wrong? said Lelsarin.

Are you willing to take that chance?

You surprise me, said Lelsarin. You have many faults, but I never thought cowardice was one of them.

So you're not afraid of a wizard who kills with magic? That thought terrifies me.

Lelsarin didn't answer.

To say nothing of twenty-five silvers a fortnight. The money in my purse would buy about a day and a half's teaching there. Adramal turned to look south-east, her gaze following the line of the road until it lost itself among trees and low hills. Near to where she imagined the road lay, a thin line of smoke rose.

Good enough, she thought.

She started walking, her heels clicking on stone.

Chapter 6

Adramal walked at a steady pace throughout most of first watch. The land was almost flat, and the hills ahead never seemed to get any closer. She remembered the rugged, varied landscape around Thuren, with a different view every hundred yards. She had never expected she would miss any of it, but the memory of picking out their house as she followed the winding path down the hill to the north of the village, or watching the sun set behind the mountains in the west, made her heart ache with homesickness.

Get over yourself. That's not your home any more.

Lelsarin re-entered Adramal's thoughts. *Be honest, now. You hadn't thought of that place as home for years. Not since Mother died, probably.*

Adramal stumbled and nearly fell. She stopped to wipe something from her eye.

There's no shame in admitting you miss her, said Lelsarin. So does everyone else who knew her.

Adramal started walking again. Traffic became more scarce. She wondered whether she should stop to rest. *Maybe at the next mile marker, she told herself. She had walked for longer than this before now, but never with such a heavy load on her back.*

Various parts of her body competed for her attention, each with its own ache or pain. The soles of her feet ached. Her left heel chafed against her boot through a hole in her sock. Had she been in so much of a hurry to leave Kyer Altamar that she couldn't have gone to the market to buy a new pair? Her lower back hurt from the weight of her pack. The edges and corners inside it seemed to have multiplied since leaving the city. At least the sun was now high enough that it was no longer in her eyes. As if to compensate, though, it was hot enough to make her sweat.

She slipped the pack off and flopped into the grass at the side of the road, sighing with relief. Wincing, she eased her boots and socks off. Blood oozed through broken skin on her left heel. She touched the wound and cast a spell to make it whole again. Her head felt as though it would split with the effort of holding the spell long enough for it to work.

It's just that I'm not used to doing magic when I'm so tired. Should've practised more when nothing depended on it.

Noises came from further along the road. A horse whinnied. A man shouted. Something struck stone. A flock of starlings shot up from a field. A tense silence descended.

"Help!" A man's voice, stricken with fear. She jumped to her feet and sprinted towards the sounds. She'd gone a hundred yards before she realised she'd forgotten to put her boots back on, or pick up her pack. There was no time to go back now.

After another hundred yards, she saw a riderless grey horse. Beyond that, a man knelt by a figure lying on the ground. He shouted "Help!" again.

"Coming!" she shouted back. The man turned his head and waved to her.

As she drew closer, she saw that the fallen man lay on his side, curled up, his right hand clutching his left forearm. Blood seeped from under his hand, and his face was contorted in agony. The kneeling man looked on, perhaps paralysed by shock.

"What happened?" Adramal asked.

The kneeling man replied, his voice shaking, "Something jumped out from behind the mile marker, and his horse spooked."

"All right, stay calm," she said. Easier said than done, when her own heart was pounding and her breath rasped in her throat. "I'm a healer."

The prone man whimpered something that sounded like, "Hurry up."

As she crouched beside the injured man, the other said, "Where are your shoes?" Suspicion entered his voice.

"I stopped to rest back there," she said, gesturing over her shoulder. "I'd taken my pack and boots off when I heard you yelling. Tell you what – why don't you go fetch them, while I see what your friend needs?"

He mounted the horse and kicked her into a gallop back along the road.

Trembling, Adramal knelt by the injured man. This was the first time she'd tried to heal a stranger – someone who didn't know the limits of her power, and who might have unrealistic expectations of what she could do. What if she failed?

Be here now, she told herself. *Worry about failure if it happens, not before.*

"Where are you hurt?" she said.

"All over," he moaned.

"Is anywhere worse than anywhere else?"

"My arm. Like a knife."

"All right. Let me see." She gripped his right wrist and eased the hand away from his forearm. Her heart jumped into her throat at the sight of so much blood. But the cuts seemed shallow. "That looks worse than it is. It just needs to be cleaned and bandaged."

The man glanced at the wound and sucked at his teeth. "I've had cuts before. This is like – like fire inside my arm."

"It might be broken." She reached for his arm, ready with a spell that would encourage the two halves of the bone to start knitting back together. Then, memories of lessons clicked back into place. *If the horse threw him hard enough to break his arm, I should check first whether his spine is damaged.*

"Can you move your fingers like this?" she said, waggling hers in front of his face. He did so with his right hand, without apparent effort. "Good. What about the other hand?" His left hand flapped about like a bird caught in a trap, and he cried out.

"What are you doing? Why are you hurting him?"

Adramal turned to see the other man, sitting on his horse. She'd been so engrossed in her work that she hadn't heard the horse approach. The rider stared at her as though her mere presence was an insult. Her pack hung from a projection on the front of the saddle, and the man held her boots in one hand.

She swallowed and said carefully, "I'm trying to work out what's wrong with him."

He looked down his nose at her. "Nurfadel would have had him on his feet by now."

"Nurfadel's dead," said the injured man. "Or hadn't you noticed?"

The rider snorted, as though Nurfadel's demise was Adramal's fault too.

"She knows what she's doing," said the injured man. "Go find my horse." The rider passed Adramal's pack and boots to her, and galloped off down the road.

"Sorry," the man murmured. "He's angry with me more than you – clumsy baby brother." He grinned. "He's only a year older, but you'd think he was my father, the way he nags me."

"I see. Can you move your feet? Tilt them up and down, like that." He did. "That's good. And what does your father think of your brother bossing you?"

The man shifted, perhaps trying to shrug. "Who knows? He's been dead for years."

She gulped. "I'm sorry." *Stupid girl. Just get on with making him better.* "All right. I'm about to make you sleepy. It's just to ease the pain while I do the rest of the work."

She took several slow, deep breaths. *Be here now.* Fear tapped at the doors and windows of her mind – fear of failure, fear of making the man's injuries worse, fear of what his brother would do if that happened. She barricaded the weak points, leaving only one,

through which her power would pass out of her and into her patient.

She touched the side of his neck and cast a familiar spell. His eyelids fluttered and then closed. His body relaxed.

She pressed her hand over the cuts on his arm, squirming at the warm stickiness of his blood, even though it meant the wounds were already closing. She cast another spell to help the process. When she lifted her hand, small dark flakes came away with it.

Now, she cast a third spell. She felt the back of the man's left hand, and the spell revealed the bones, as if she was touching them directly. All were intact. She slid her hand over his wrist and moved along the ulna – slowly, so that the sharp points of the break wouldn't hurt her too much when she found them. She closed her eyes to quell the faint nausea that usually accompanied this spell.

She came to the break. It was clean, without any shards. She allowed the spell to lapse. Fear came at her again, but she sidestepped it, leaving it to flounder in the dark depths of her mind.

"Your arm might feel hot for a moment," she said. He didn't respond. She gripped his forearm on either side of the break and pushed the two parts of the bone together. He inhaled loudly. She cast a spell that would make the bone start growing back together, and was relieved when she felt heat beneath her fingers. She touched the side of his neck to check his pulse. It was fast, but that was to be expected. She cast another spell to reverse the drowsiness she had induced earlier.

The man rolled onto his back, and then opened his eyes and sat up. He looked at his forearm, and then at her, disbelieving. Gingerly, he probed at the sealed cuts.

"Don't touch it," she said. "The bone is in one piece again, but it'll take a few days to heal completely."

"Only a few days? That's a miracle."

Heat rose in her face. "It was a clean break. You've been lucky."

"Lucky to have met you." He smiled and gazed at her. Only now did she take a proper look at his face. When it wasn't twisted in agony, it was quite handsome – firm and smooth, with mischievous green eyes. She guessed he was a few years older than her. Like most men in these parts, he wore a moustache with no beard. Unlike most, it suited him.

"Can you stand?" she asked. He did, quickly and easily. She stood too. "Can you move the fingers of your left hand?" He waggled them about.

"You must be a wizard."

She gasped and took a step back. He had a knife at his belt. Why hadn't she noticed that before now?

His face fell. "Have I said something wrong? I'm sorry. It's just – I thought – you know – only wizards could heal that fast. I've never met one, but I've heard wonderful things about them."

She relaxed, but kept her eyes on his knife.

"Are you a wizard, then?"

Sort of. Not any more. No.

"Yes." He was too near the truth for her to lie or dodge the question.

He smiled. "I should introduce myself. Chavaen son of Kelbur, brother of Balvor, at your service." He gave an exaggerated bow. "And in your debt. What's your fee?"

"I..." She had no idea what would be considered fair in these parts. Too low an amount could cause as many problems as one too high. "What would Nurfadel have asked?"

He laughed. "Nurfadel couldn't have done that."

"He couldn't set a broken arm?"

"Oh! He could, I suppose, but not as well as you." He waved the arm around. "Look at that – doesn't even need a splint."

She cringed at the thought of him shearing the joint she had made. "Actually, a splint would be a very good idea. You know – just in case."

"Oh. Well, you know best, I suppose."

“Shall we see if your brother’s found your horse?”

They set off along the road. Adramal shouldered her pack, although Chavaen tried to persuade her to let him bear it. She agreed to let him carry her boots, as her feet were still sore.

Soon they caught sight of Balvor. He was on his horse, leaving a field to come back onto the road, and leading a brown horse by the reins. “I knew there was nothing wrong with you, nursemaid.”

“Nothing wrong?” said Chavaen. “My arm was broken!”

“Yes, it certainly looks like it.” Balvor aimed a kick at his brother, who skipped out of the way. “So go on – what did she really do?” He gave Adramal a salacious look, making her wish she could sink into the gaps between the cobbles.

“I... I’m not really sure,” Chavaen said, looking into the distance. “I felt sleepy, and she... she touched me, and my arm felt hot.”

Balvor’s eyes widened, as though he was scandalised. “Tell me more.”

Chavaen gave Adramal a questioning look.

“I had to touch him for the magic to work,” Adramal said.

“Magic. Is that what youngsters call it these days?” He sighed. “A word of advice, Lady. My little brother’s not nearly as innocent as he appears. Yours won’t be the first heart he’s broken, and it won’t be the last.”

Adramal’s mouth hung open. How could Balvor misunderstand the situation so completely?

“She’s a wizard, you idiot!” said Chavaen.

“A wizard,” said Balvor. “She doesn’t look like one.”

“You were expecting someone ten feet high, with iron skin, who breathes fire? Wizards look like everyone else – that’s the whole point.”

“Whatever you say,” said Balvor with a shrug. He turned to Adramal. “Well go on then. Impress me. Do some ‘magic.’”

I should start by making your horse throw you. She couldn’t help adding, *And hoping you break more than just your arm.*

“No?” said Balvor. “I guess she’s not a wizard, then.”

“She healed my arm. Isn’t that enough for you?”

Balvor shrugged. “You were howling in pain, and now you’re not.”

“So you’re saying because you didn’t see it, it didn’t happen?”

Balvor turned his horse around. “Let’s go home. We’ve wasted enough time already.”

And at least half that was your fault, she thought. She wiped the dirt from the soles of her feet and put her boots back on.

“We could at least take Adramal as far as home,” said Chavaen. Balvor rolled his eyes and handed the reins of Chavaen’s horse to him.

“Where’s home?” said Adramal. The prospect of listening to these two arguing for days was about as appealing as consumption.

“Four miles that way,” said Chavaen, pointing along the road. “A village called Darund-Kerak. That plume of smoke is from the forge.”

She could tolerate these clowns for four miles, she supposed. After that... “Does it have an inn?”

“Of course,” snapped Balvor.

“Our mother owns it,” said Chavaen. “She’ll let you stay for free.” Balvor frowned. Chavaen mounted his horse and held out his hand to Adramal. She hesitated. Might this be another trap? But she couldn’t imagine anyone being so determined to catch a wizard that he’d break his arm in the process. She accepted Chavaen’s hand, and he helped her to mount behind him.

She had never ridden a horse before, and the way the animal swayed from side to side was quite alarming. Was this some sort of divine punishment for wanting Balvor to fall off? If she fell and broke something, would she be able to control the pain long enough to heal

herself?

After a while, she got used to the horse's rhythm, and her fears subsided. This was certainly faster than walking, but she'd swapped one set of aches for another. Muscles on the insides of her thighs were making their presence felt. Her back hurt from leaning forward to hold onto Chavaen. The breeze, made stronger by their movement, chilled her hands. Her pack was as heavy as ever, and somehow chafed even more.

On the other hand, she had never been this close to a man before, either, apart from her father. There was something reassuring about Chavaen's warm, solid strength. He would make sure she didn't fall.

She must have dozed off from the exertion of her magic, because the next thing she knew, Chavaen was patting her hand and saying, "We're here."

Chapter 7

Large wooden buildings with tiled roofs stood on either side of the road. To call this place a village seemed rather an insult – the people of Thuren would have considered it at least a small town. There was no sign of Balvor – she supposed his horse had gone faster with only one rider.

A gaggle of children surrounded the horse and bombarded Chavaen with questions about the stranger riding with him. One boy asked, “Is she a princess? Did you rescue her from bandits?”

Chavaen laughed and said, “The lady’s tired. Save your questions.” He took a couple of coppers from his purse and flipped them into the air. As the children scrambled for them, he nudged the horse onwards. They passed two men using a big saw to cut a tree trunk into planks. People waved from the street and from the doors of their houses. Chavaen waved back, and Adramal self-consciously did likewise.

“And here’s home,” said Chavaen.

They had stopped outside a rambling, two-storeyed inn, whose sign showed a jumping rabbit. Chavaen dismounted and helped Adramal down. She took several moments to recover her balance – her feet seemed suddenly too close together to stop her from toppling over. A boy came out of a stable at the side of the building and took the horse’s reins from Chavaen, who tossed a coin to him.

Chavaen led Adramal into the inn’s bar-room. The room was larger than that of the *Cob and Pen*, with fewer tables. Balvor sat at one near the back, talking with a small, thin woman. When she saw the newcomers, she stood and hurried over to embrace Chavaen. Then she let go of him and put her hands on his shoulders.

“Hello, Mother,” he said, smiling.

“Are you all right?” she said, her face creased with worry. “Balvor said you’d had an accident...”

“I fell off my horse and broke my arm,” he said nonchalantly.

“Balvor!” she said, spinning to face him. “You said it was just a few cuts!”

“I said all I *saw* was a few cuts,” said Balvor.

The mother relaxed and turned back to Chavaen. “If your arm *was* broken, young man, believe me, you’d know about it.”

“It’s true. This woman healed me,” he said. “She’s a wizard.”

The mother stared at Adramal. Doubtless she too thought wizards were iron-clad fire-breathing monsters. Sweat dripped down Adramal’s back, stinging the areas where her clothing and her pack had rubbed against her.

“But she looks so ordinary.” The mother put a hand to her mouth. “Begging your pardon.” She wrung her hands and looked to Chavaen. “Besides, who ever heard of a wizard helping anyone but their own?”

Adramal frowned. That was certainly not what Thuren taught. She took a deep breath and stood straighter. *Be here now*. “Lady,” she said, “I’m not sure the word ‘wizard’ means the same thing to you that it does to me, but that’s what I am. Your son did break his arm,

about four miles up the road. I happened to be passing, and I healed him by magic. If that means I'm not welcome here, then I apologise for intruding, and I'll take my leave of you now." She took a couple of steps back.

The mother held up a hand to indicate Adramal shouldn't move. "You certainly sound like a wizard. Which means we're in your debt." She pursed her lips, and Adramal suspected she was trying to calculate the amount of the debt, to the last copper. "Would it suit you to stay here as our guest – free of charge, of course – until, say, Mathran's Day?"

Adramal gasped. "I – I'd be delighted."

Chavaen took her pack – using the arm that hadn't been broken, she noted – and led her upstairs. The room he showed her was larger and more airy than the one she'd stayed in last night, with two beds and a dining table. He put her pack on one of the beds and indicated that she should sit.

"I'll bring you something to eat," he said, before going back downstairs.

Adramal eased off her boots, loosened her clothing, and stretched out on the other bed. She put a spell together to ease her tired muscles, and sighed as the tensions of the road drained out of her. She was tempted to snuggle under the blankets and stay here for the afternoon, but Balvor's remarks about Chavaen not being as innocent as he looked persuaded her to stand up. As she walked around the room, wondering how long her money would last if she had to pay to stay here, there was a knock at the door. She opened it to find Chavaen, bearing a tray of food. He put it on the table and pulled out a chair for her. As she sat, he sat on the opposite side of the table.

He'd brought her a whole pigeon, cold and seasoned with pepper and garlic, together with a bowl of warm mashed vegetables. He took one of two tall mugs. She sipped at the other one, finding that it contained beer, stronger and sharper than what she'd consumed in Kyer Altamar yesterday.

"Is the water safe to drink here?" she asked, thinking she'd better get his disapproval out of the way.

His mug stopped halfway to his mouth. He frowned. Did he think she was insulting the brewer? "Of course."

"Then could I have some, please? Beer interferes with my ability to do magic."

"Oh! I see." He went downstairs, taking her mug with him. She picked at the meal until he came back, carrying the same mug. He'd filled it with water, though it still smelled of beer when she drank.

"How did you become a wizard?" he asked.

She finished chewing and swallowed. In Thuren, it was considered to rude to say anything that could wait until the meal was over. "My father is a wizard, and teaches at a school for them."

"You don't talk like people around here."

She explained where she was from.

He took the tray and the empty plate and mugs downstairs. She stood and stretched, debating whether it was worth unpacking. A few moments later, she heard someone running up the stairs. She froze. Before she could decide whether to use a spell, the door was flung open. Chavaen stood there, looking as though he'd had a shock.

"Would you mind coming downstairs? Our elders would like to see you."

Wondering what she'd done to merit such an honour so soon after arriving, Adramal followed Chavaen down to the bar-room. A group of eight men and women sat around one of the tables. They didn't look particularly old, and she supposed something other than age was the criterion for membership. When they saw her, they stood up and bowed, some with more skill than others. Taken aback, Adramal stopped at the foot of the stairs. No one had ever bowed to her before.

A dumpy woman stepped forward from the group. "I'm Hispar, leader of Darund-Kerak. Are you Adramal?"

"I am."

“Do you always go around barefoot?” asked one of the men.

Adramal looked down, realising she’d left her boots in the room. Hispar gave the man a disapproving look. “Is it true that Chavaen broke his arm on the road this morning, and you mended it?”

“Yes,” said Chavaen, “and she made an excellent job of it.” He banged his forearm on the banister. “See? Good as new.”

Adramal winced at the sound. “I told you to rest the arm for a few days. But yes, I did heal him.”

“Good,” said Hispar. “The elders would like you to become our healer, taking the place of old Nurfadel. There will be a trial period of one fortnight. Do you accept?”

Adramal’s mouth opened and closed several times without any speech emerging.

“Perhaps we should show her Nurfadel’s house,” said one of the other elders.

Nurfadel’s house was on the other side of the village. It was built in the same style as the other dwellings, but was round rather than square, and larger than most. The windows had been boarded up, and a heavy bar placed across the door.

Inside, a musty smell told Adramal the house had stood empty for a long time. Beneath the damp and decay were scents of flowers.

“Lower your eyes for a moment,” she said. A familiar, comforting spell went through her mind. People gasped as a fist-sized globe of white light, much brighter than their candles, appeared over her left shoulder.

The interior was one large room, bigger than her father’s house. It had four windows, equally spaced, and so could always be lit during the day. A hearth lay in the middle of the floor, with a smoke hood in the ceiling above it. That seemed primitive, but she supposed it allowed heat and light to reach all parts of the room.

On one side of the house was a bed with a bare mattress. Shelves filled with a great number of small jars and cloth bags took up most of the space opposite the door.

Adramal approached the shelves, and the floral scents became stronger. She picked up a bag, raising a cloud of dust. She turned it over in her hand. It wasn’t labelled – nor was anything else on the shelf, as far as she could tell. She sniffed at it. *Lavender? Lilac?* Certain plants were useful in treating certain diseases and injuries, but she knew almost nothing of the specifics. What would be the point?

A pair of books at the back of one shelf caught her eye. She moved things aside, evicting a couple of spiders. She jerked her hand back, and the light flickered. But it was all right – the spiders weren’t one of the poisonous varieties. She took a moment to reinforce the light spell.

The first book was a herbal, all about plants and their medicinal uses. The other was about anatomy. Adramal had studied the subject extensively at Thuren, but doubtless this book would be helpful as a reference. She put the books back on the shelf.

“Do you like the house?” asked the man who had suggested bringing her here. She thought she might have seen him before, but wasn’t sure where.

“It’s very... agreeable.” She tried to imagine herself living here, not entirely succeeding.

“Good,” said the man. “If you decide to become our healer, I’ll give you the house and everything in it.”

Adramal stepped back, bumping into the shelves and rattling the jars. Her light wavered – more than with the spiders. “That’s... very generous.”

He shrugged. “I tried to sell it, but the others thought that if it was occupied, we’d never find someone to take my father’s place.”

Adramal’s eyes widened. “You’re Nurfadel’s son?”

“Yes,” he said, as though surprised she didn’t already know.

“Did your father not teach you his art?” said Adramal.

“No. I’m a carpenter. I know as much about healing as a sheep knows about sewing.”

Now she remembered why she recognised him – he was one of the pair she’d seen

sawing wood that morning.

Hispar said, "Nurfadel built this house with the money he earned in his first two years here."

"Oh," said Adramal. What did she expect? That the other villagers had built it for him out of gratitude for how he'd helped them?

"He could ask as much as a silver for his services," said his son. "And I mean no disrespect to his memory, but I've heard your healing is much better and faster than his."

"Oh..." If there were enough patients, she might be able to save up enough money to go to Kyturil after all.

"Do you accept the role?" said Hispar.

Adramal took a deep breath. "I do."

Hispar held out a hand to Adramal. "Then welcome, Healer."

Chapter 8

Adramal lifted her hands from the boy's thigh and took several deep, shuddering breaths. She wiped the sweat from her forehead. The boy looked as exhausted as she felt.

The boy's mother sat near the doorway, anxiously watching. The boy had drifted into a light sleep. Adramal had stimulated his body into hastening its natural healing processes, and this had used a lot of his reserves of strength. His breathing was shallow but regular. She touched the side of his neck to check his pulse, finding it normal.

"I've finished," she said. "He'll be fine." Her voice seemed to come from a great distance. She hoped she wasn't shouting to compensate. "His broken leg has started to heal, but it'll be weak and painful for some time. Keep him in bed for three days, and make sure he doesn't go running or climbing trees for a fortnight after that. I'll visit you on Shadrakh's Day to check on his progress. Send for me if you notice anything unusual before that."

The mother gazed longingly at her son for a few heartbeats, and Adramal wondered if the woman believed her. Then she whispered, "Thank you. What is your fee?"

Adramal swallowed. "Whatever you can afford," she said. The woman stared at her, as though suspecting some trick. "Really," said Adramal.

"I... I have a joint of salt beef in the ice house," the woman said. "I was saving it for a special occasion. We'd be honoured if you would eat with us tomorrow night."

"The honour would be mine," said Adramal. "But I'm dining with Hispar then." Tomorrow was the end of Adramal's trial period here, and at the dinner, Hispar would confirm – or so Adramal expected – that the appointment would be permanent. "I'll come on Arveth's Day. Besides, if we wait until then, I think your son will have recovered enough to appreciate the meal properly."

"Then we'll expect you in two days' time. Thank you." The mother lifted her son, resting his head on her shoulder, and stood up with an easy strength.

Adramal's chest tightened at the memory of how her own mother would sometimes carry her to bed like that. She hoped he would be a lot older before he had to face a loss like hers.

The room seemed to spin, and Adramal closed her eyes to try to counteract the sensation. "I need to rest," she said. "If there's anyone waiting outside, would you ask them to come back at the start of third watch?"

Adramal heard the door open and close. It was tempting to lie down on the floor, but she knew she'd wake up stiff and irritable. Outside, the mother spoke with someone, though Adramal couldn't make out the words. She crawled towards the bed. Nurfadel must have been short even by the village's standards, since Adramal couldn't lie straight on it. She'd meant to ask Nurfadel's son to make a bed that fitted her, but she'd been so busy that she hadn't got around to it.

She had just clambered onto the bed and made herself comfortable when there came a knock at the door. She wanted to tell the caller to go away, but speaking seemed too much of an effort.

The door opened, revealing the boy's mother. "Begging your pardon, healer, but there's

a man here to see you. He says he's come from the city."

He could have come from Pethandril for all Adramal cared. She pulled a blanket over herself.

"He's got a horse," the mother added, as if that would convince Adramal to see him.

A man spoke. "Adramal? Remember me? Captain Tagahra."

Adramal sat up, seeing the Captain silhouetted in the doorway. "Yes," she said, "I'm afraid I do. What makes you think you're welcome here?"

The Captain turned to the mother and pressed something into her hand. "See that we're not disturbed," he said. Startled, the woman gave an awkward curtsey and left, closing the door behind her.

"Are you the miraculous healer everyone's talking about?" he asked.

"I heal by magic, not by miracles," Adramal said. "And I wouldn't know if people are talking about me. I've barely set foot outside this house in the last fortnight."

"Word of your powers has already reached Kyer Altamar," said Tagahra.

"Hardly surprising, since it's only half a day away." The room spun again. It took a great deal of determination not to lie down. "There's a queue."

"That woman told them to leave."

"Because I need to rest," said Adramal.

"I haven't come to be healed. I need a favour."

She stood up. "I don't recall owing you one."

"If it wasn't for me, your head would be on a pike in the marketplace by now."

Adramal yawned. "You didn't come here to remind me how nice you were to me."

He took a step closer and looked around as though searching for eavesdroppers. "The cattle brand murderer has struck again."

"Cattle brand?"

"Did I not say that's what the citizens are calling him? That symbol Marik showed you was cut into the body."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

Tagahra raised his eyebrows. "That's a much milder reaction than what you gave last time."

She yawned again. "Excuse me if I don't wail and beat my breast," she said, "but I've just healed a boy's broken thigh-bone, and before that, a dog bite that had begun to go septic, and before that, a bad toothache, though the tooth will probably have to come out anyway, to say nothing of a dozen cuts and bruises – I can't believe how careless these people are – how any of them are still alive after having no healer for a year I'll never know – and if I don't lie down within twenty heartbeats I'll just fall down." She sat on the bed and leaned against the wall.

"Marik says wizards' magic was involved in the killing," he said.

Adramal yawned. "Well, he would, wouldn't he?"

"I don't like having to take any one person's word for anything. I'd like an independent opinion."

"There are lots of wizards at Kyturil," said Adramal. "Why don't you ask one of them?"

"They refused to talk to me."

Hardly surprising. "I'll come to the city in the morning, then." She ought to take the opportunity to gather information to pass back to Thuren. And she might help to stop Marik and his friends spreading their slander.

"The priests say the... residue – of the spell fades within about five watches of its being cast," said Tagahra.

Adramal gulped. "That long?" Once a spell had served its purpose, the magic used in it would fade back into the surroundings, until no trace of it remained. The more powerful the spell, the longer that took – but she'd never known anything over a couple of hours. "I would've thought the effort of controlling a spell like that would kill any wizard who tried to

cast it. Or if it didn't, the purge afterwards would drive him mad."

"Are you saying I should be looking for five dead wizards?" said Tagahra. "Or a single mad one?"

"A wizard who goes mad isn't a wizard any more."

"Five mad wizards, then? Or ex-wizards, or whatever you'd call them?"

Adramal yawned again. "Who knows?"

"Anyway," said Tagahra, "The victim was killed in the fifth or sixth watch last night. So if you're to be any use, you need to see the body by sunset, or at the latest, the end of fourth watch tonight."

Adramal shook her head – slowly, so it wouldn't fall off. "I'm too tired to walk to the end of the street. Ten miles into the city is out of the question."

Tagahra smiled. "We came in a wagon. I made sure to leave a seat for you."

The wagon was a large four-wheeled vehicle, pulled by two horses. A driver sat at the front. Two men in blue uniforms occupied the back, leaving seats in the middle free for Tagahra and Adramal. Once everybody was settled, Tagahra said, "Drive on."

Adramal had finally begun to doze off when Tagahra shook her, saying, "We're here." She was not used to riding in wagons, and was now sore all over as well as wanting to sleep. Tagahra held her upper arm as she stepped down to the ground.

They had stopped outside a small house in a deserted narrow street. The sounds of the city that Adramal had noticed during her first stay in Kyer Altamar were subdued and distant. Today was All Gods' Day, when people were supposed to refrain from doing anything that could wait until tomorrow, but the hush seemed unnatural.

Two men stood guard outside the door of the house. They wore the same uniform as the men who had accompanied Adramal and Tagahra on the way here – blue surcoat over chain mail, leather on the arms and legs, and a round iron helmet. Each held a spear and had a short sword at his belt, and a shield slung over his shoulders. They held their spears across the doorway.

Tagahra nodded to the guards. They lifted their spears, and one of them opened the door. Adramal sniffed the air, catching smells of mould and decay, of a building not lived in for some time, and then meat left too long over a fire, to the point of burning. Tagahra crossed the threshold and motioned Adramal to follow him. "The room is as we found it."

She stepped into the house. A little light entered from a window that looked onto the street. In the middle of the floor, where the light was brightest, lay a pale, naked corpse. It was male, and very hairy, except for the stomach, which looked to have been shaved. The symbol that Marik had shown her had been carved into the bare flesh, maybe a hand's length across.

Adramal had time to notice this much before her guts squirmed. In reflex, her hand clapped itself over her mouth. Acid burned in her throat as she pushed her way out onto the street. She passed Tagahra's men before vomit splashed from her lips. She fell to her knees and leaned forward. She winced, and retched a few more times, but nothing further emerged.

"Are you all right?" said Tagahra, offering his hand. She waved it away and wiped her lips. One of Tagahra's men held out a square of cloth and a small pewter flask at arm's length.

She took a sip from the flask and grimaced when she realised it held beer. She took a little more and swilled it around her mouth to try to remove the acid taste, and then spat it out. The man stared at her as though not swallowing beer was heresy.

"It interferes with my magic," she said. She scrubbed her mouth and nose and gave him the flask and cloth. "Is my face clean?"

"Yes, Lady," he said, obviously surprised at being spoken to.

"Then let's finish what we started."

"Are you sure you'll be all right?" said Tagahra "I just... assumed you'd seen corpses before."

She turned to him. "It's not that I have a weak stomach. I was just... startled." *Startled,*

she thought, *as if you didn't have ample opportunity to prepare yourself for what you knew you'd see.*

Adramal forced herself to cross the threshold and take a few paces into the room. For the moment, she did her best to ignore the body, instead taking in the surroundings. The room was about twenty feet square, devoid of any furniture. The walls were bare brick. Scraps of plaster hung on in corners, beneath encroaching cobwebs. An uneven staircase led to an upper floor. There was an ill-fitting door in the middle of the back wall. To judge from the chinks of light around its edges, this led to the outside. She returned her attention to the corpse.

It – he – lay on his back, legs straight, arms by his sides, as though laid out for cremation. He bore a few scars from blades, but they were old, long healed. Apart from the abominable symbol cut into his stomach, there was no sign of recent injury. Nor was there any blood on the floor around him. He seemed at peace, as though sleeping.

What did you expect the impossible to look like? she asked herself.

“Don’t disturb me until I speak again,” she said. Without waiting for an answer, she closed her eyes and slowed her breathing. Years of training took over as thoughts slid into place. She opened her eyes, and she saw.

The symbol that had been burned into the victim’s flesh shone before her, almost too bright to look at. Everything else became dark by comparison. The symbol was not green, as priests’ magic would be, but white. That had to mean...

“No,” she whispered. Then louder, “No.” Her spell fell apart, and she sank to her knees. She closed her eyes. An after-image of the symbol stayed with her.

“What have you found?” Tagahra said.

Adramal opened her eyes, half-expecting to see the symbol still dancing before her. Her hand shook as she pointed in the general direction of the victim. “A-a wizard c-carved that.”

“Well, well,” he said.

Adramal curled up on the floor, as her world gently collapsed around her.

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