

# Sample Chapters of *Dust & Water*

## *The Barefoot Healer*

### Volume III

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### *Prologue*

The Elector Galdrakh threaded his way among the narrow streets, counting the turnings to be sure he wouldn't lose his way. *A different meeting place every time. Even I'm not that cautious.* Of course, Galdrakh had countless advisers, servants, men-at-arms and general hangers-on who could be relied on to keep out eavesdroppers, whereas this fellow had... four men in hooded grey cloaks. *And the horse. Don't forget the horse.* It still surprised him, in a place that used four-legged transport less than just about anywhere else in the Empire, how many stables the city possessed.

He stepped around a pile of rubbish, steaming in the heat. Every time he thought he was getting used to the stench of the Warren, it slapped him in the face again, reminding him he didn't belong here. He glanced behind, confirming that his guards were still following at a discreet distance. They were dressed in the right sort of clothes, but they looked out of place, as if they'd rather be back in their barracks. They weren't the only ones.

At last, he stopped outside a wooden building that seemed barely big enough for the five men, never mind the horse. The Temple of Rakeloth stood a few doors down, so he wasn't that far from where he'd started. He guessed he'd been given a deliberately roundabout route to shake off followers.

Galdrakh took a deep breath and lifted his fist to knock. The door looked as though it might fall off if he struck it too hard. He rapped out the agreed-upon pattern — that too, was different every time.

The door opened almost immediately. One of the hooded men stood there. Galdrakh craned his neck to look at him and hesitated. This was the first time he'd seen one in daylight, and he could've sworn there was nothing under the hood. The man raised an arm, motioning him to enter, and the sun glinted off a flat surface in the middle of the hood.

*Idiot. It's just a black mask.* He brushed past the man and into the building. The door swung shut behind him. A deep orange light, like a candle but somehow darker, came from further back in the room, suggesting its contents rather than illuminating it. He looked around for the other cloaked men, not seeing them. They had a knack of staying out of sight until they were needed. He heard nothing, not even the noises of the street. It took more courage than he thought he had not to turn and run.

"I would not harm you, Elector," came a voice from the far end of the room. It seemed to echo, as though the speaker was in a much larger space. "At least — not without good

reason.” The man spoke with refined precision, in a slight accent that Galdrakh couldn’t place.

“Sh-Shadrakh be with you, too, Kerevash,” replied Galdrakh, hating the shakiness in his voice. Was the man just a shrewd guesser, or could he really read minds? From head to foot, Kerevash was clad in metal armour, so black that it seemed darker than the shadows. Spikes projected from each joint, curved and twisted like horns. The helmet resembled an upturned bucket, with a narrow slit for the eyes. The man never removed any part of his armour, even in the height of summer when three slaves with fans hadn’t been able to keep Galdrakh cool.

Kerevash’s horse, almost as black as his armour, stood next to him, eyes glistening. Galdrakh had thought horses were skittish creatures, prone to whinnying and neighing, but this animal was silent, and motionless but for the occasional flick of its ears or swish of its tail.

Kerevash said, “The Revenue Service will raid one of your warehouses before dawn on Kharadar’s Day.”

A chill stole over him. Not because of the raid — those happened almost every fortnight now, and were no more than a minor nuisance even when he didn’t know about them in advance — but because of the confidence with which Kerevash spoke. He could’ve been talking about the sun rising tomorrow.

“Which one?” said Galdrakh.

“My informant believes the target will be Ash-Herak or Ash-Tanabe. Kelstakh will make his final decision as close to the time as possible. Apparently he suspects one of his staff is in your pay.”

“Only one?”

“Also, Pyram is bluffing about being in negotiations with another supplier. If you lower your price by perhaps five percent, he will accept.”

“I’d suspected as much, but it’s useful to hear it from someone else.”

“I have given you something of value,” said Kerevash. The orange light grew dimmer, and the room seemed to shrink. “Now it’s your turn.”

One of the cloaked men approached. He might’ve been the one who opened the door; they all looked the same. He extended a gloved hand, offering a slate. Galdrakh accepted it. The man leaned forward in an approximation of a bow, and then withdrew with a loping gait that made it hard to be sure whether he was walking forwards or backwards.

Galdrakh squinted at the slate. The writing resembled... not exactly that of a child or a foreigner, but of someone who wasn’t used to the Imperial script. The lettering was stiff, and Galdrakh wondered if the cloaked man had kept his gloves on while writing. Some of the forms looked quaint, as if the man had learned from the most ancient book he could find.

“It is a list of resources we require for the next stage,” said Kerevash.

“I can see that,” said Galdrakh. “Some of these things... they’re not going to be easy to obtain.”

“I am willing to cover any extra costs you incur.”

“It’s not a matter of cost. I mean, a copy of *The Decrees of Emperor Valekhna*? You do know he’s been dead over two thousand years? And that later Emperors have amended or revoked every one of his decrees?”

“I did not summon you here to give me a history lesson, Elector. You need not concern yourself with my reasons for needing any of those items.”

“Well, the nearest copy of that book is probably in Akhtar. It’ll take a fortnight and a half to get it, assuming my man there can persuade the owner to sell it.”

“Then our plan will be delayed by a fortnight and a half.”

“No!” Galdrakh took a step forward. The cloaked man moved to block his path. A second one came from the other side, faster than should have been possible. Galdrakh held up his hands and retreated, head bowed. “I mean, I’ll make every effort to get it sooner.” He stopped himself from clenching his fist. They shouldn’t be able to order someone like him around. If anyone else dared to speak to him like that, he’d have them flogged — if they were lucky. But the results would be worth every insult — if the plan came together on time.

“Good. There is one other matter. The last batch of dust was insufficiently pure.”

Galdrakh gulped. “We agreed one pound in twelve.”

Kerevash didn’t answer immediately. Did he wear a helmet so that his silences couldn’t be interpreted? “There have been... difficulties in the refinement process. Henceforth, the purity must be one pound in six.”

“Out of the question,” Galdrakh spluttered. “The priests have already caught at least four miners trying to smuggle dust onto the spoil heap. We don’t need to give them any more reason to come looking for us.”

“Then find more miners who can be bribed.”

“Anybody who’s willing to help already is. I’m paying them more than they earn in a fortnight for each pound they bring out.”

“In that case, the priests will have to be persuaded to be less zealous in their inspections.”

That took a moment to sink in. “Bribe a priest of Tanshalm? Are you serious?”

“Blackmail is another possibility.”

“You’re mad,” Galdrakh whispered.

“Many have said similar things,” Kerevash replied. Galdrakh thought he heard a hint of amusement. “Some men are difficult to persuade, but I have never yet encountered one who could not be persuaded at all. Unless you raise the purity to one pound in six, our plan will not finish on time.”

Galdrakh sighed. Always it came back to that. “I’ll see what I can do. There might be another way. Is there anything else?”

“That is all.”

“Then I’ll bid you good day.” As Galdrakh turned to the door, he said, “Actually, there is one other thing — my aunts are trying to get the house back.”

“Why is that a problem? You said that your uncle bequeathed it to you. They have no claim on it.”

“They say my uncle made a codicil to his will that leaves it to them. Some of their men might try to interfere with what you’re doing there.” Galdrakh wasn’t sure what Kerevash was doing at the house, which suited him — the less he knew, the less he could tell the Governor-General or the other Electors, should they become curious.

“Strange that they have said nothing about it until now.”

“They said they were going to hire an advocate to find it.”

“Then they do not possess it.”

“Yet.”

“It would seem prudent to ensure that they do not come to possess this codicil.”

“I have a couple of people I can give that task to,” said Galdrakh.

“Good day, then.”

Outside, Galdrakh blinked as his eyes adjusted to the daylight. His guards emerged from doorways and alleys and followed him as he set off home. He would need a long bath when he got there — not just to wash off the dirt and the stink of the Warren, but to get rid of the

feeling that Kerevash, not him, was the one running this circus. Something about the man — no, *everything* about the man — made his skin crawl. But he had no choice. Without Kerevash's help, Galdrakh stood no chance of becoming the next Governor-General.

## *Chapter 1*

Adramal and her father left the ship almost as soon as it had moored at Molkolin's north docks. They had sailed non-stop from Vannharial, a journey of over a fortnight, and both were eager to be out of what amounted to a wooden cage. A sailor offered to show them where they could hire a taxi, which they accepted.

The sailor led them along a wide street that headed inland. A breeze blew towards them, but within a dozen paces, Adramal found herself sweating — even though it was autumn now, Molkolin was as warm as she'd ever known Thuren to be. What must this place be like in summer?

Adramal tried not to stare at all the dark-skinned people they passed. She'd seen a couple of Anorenes in Vannharial, but hadn't been prepared for a whole city of them. They tended to be short and stocky, and almost all had black hair. Mostly they wore a loose one-piece garment that reached to their elbows and knees, some plain white, some decorated with geometric patterns. A few, mainly those with burdens, wore only short trousers or a loincloth.

The sailor stopped before a group of small carriages in a line in the middle of the street. In front of each carriage stood a bare-chested boy — no, a man, but clean-shaven. Where did they find the time to manage that? Each wore a padded leather harness around his chest and shoulders. Startled, Adramal realised that each harness was attached to the carriage behind it, meaning that the men pulled the carriages.

“Where are the horses?” she asked.

“They pull the heavier loads,” the sailor replied. “Most of the streets are too narrow or crowded for them.”

The man at the head of the line spoke impatiently to the sailor in a consonant-heavy language.

“It's the Centadorian Embassy you want, isn't it?” the sailor said. Father nodded, and the sailor answered the man, who held up four fingers. “I don't suppose you've got any Anorene coins?” the sailor said.

Father and Adramal shook their heads. Adramal mopped her forehead with her hand — even when she wasn't moving, sweat dripped from her.

The sailor sifted the contents of his purse. “I can give you... eight leshats for a Salmarian silver.”

“What's a leshat?” said Adramal.

He held up a thin copper disc, the design worn nearly to illegibility. “The fare is four of these.”

Father handed over the requested coin and received the eight leshats. He gave four to the driver, who motioned them to stand aside. When they'd done this, the driver pulled the vehicle forward a few paces, then adopted a half-sideways, half-backwards gait that let him turn almost on the spot. He gestured to the carriage, and Father and Adramal took off their rucksacks and stepped over one of the traces to get in. The carriage wobbled as they sat down — it was little more than a chair, just wide enough for two, with a wheel on either side. There was a board at the front for resting their feet on, and a piece of white cloth suspended

over their heads provided some shelter from the sun.

The driver leaned forward, straining at his harness. For a moment, Adramal feared he couldn't pull two people, but then the carriage started moving. It was slower than walking, but at least Adramal had stopped sweating now. If she ignored the thought that the seat might collapse under them, the sedate pace was oddly relaxing.

Being a head or so above the pedestrians gave her a good view of the surroundings. The buildings on this street appeared to be mainly shops. Most were built of large blocks of pale yellow or brown stone. Few of the windows had shutters — she guessed that somewhere this warm had little need for them. Many shops had guards outside, some armed with swords, more with long knives or clubs.

At first Adramal thought there were no side streets, and then she glimpsed a patch of daylight through what she'd assumed was a door. Evidently, it was an alley where the buildings on either side continued over the top of it. As she looked, she saw more like it.

The street narrowed, to a width that would be considered a lane in Kyer Altamar or Vannharial, and yet it carried just as many people as it did further back. The taxi stopped amid the crush, and Adramal gripped her rucksack more tightly, mindful of the risk of someone snatching it. She was about to warn Father when a loud tut from him made her look in his direction.

Adramal gawked as a couple of bare-breasted women squeezed past the taxi, going in the opposite direction. Between them they carried a pole with a dead goat slung from it. The woman at the back returned the stare, and Adramal realised this was the first Anorene apart from the driver who'd paid any attention to them. Evidently the locals were much more used to seeing pale-skinned people than she was to seeing them. The blockage ahead cleared, and the taxi moved on.

"I'd heard the Imperials had no shame," Father muttered, "but I hadn't thought about what that had to mean."

"Would you like to carry that much weight around in this heat, dressed like we are?" she asked. The taxi took a turn to the left, into a wider street.

"Don't tell me you approve," he said.

She scowled. "I didn't say that. I wouldn't do it, but I can see why some people would want to."

They crossed a large square, then a bridge over the river. They headed upstream along a broad avenue on the south bank, and then dove into a twisting maze of streets and alleys. From the occasional glimpses of the sun, Adramal guessed they were going roughly south-west.

After about twenty minutes, the taxi stopped in front of a high wall with an open gate in it. Painted above the gate were the words *Centadorian Embassy*. Underneath that was a sequence of squares and triangles, joined together by lines, with loops and hooks hanging off them, which Adramal guessed said the same thing in Anorene. Father and Adramal got down from the taxi, which scooted off almost as soon as their feet had touched the ground.

They passed through the gateway to a paved courtyard with tall trees around three edges. The trees had no branches low down, and a cluster of long fronded leaves at the top.

The embassy was a large round building, made of the same pale yellow blocks as most of the others in this city. The guards outside let Father and Adramal pass without comment, and they went through the open doors into a tall, wide atrium.

Corridors led off the atrium, and a staircase at the back ascended to a landing that ran all the way round the room. Everything looked new and expensive. Shafts of sunlight formed

diamond shapes on the tiled floor. Looking up, Adramal saw square holes in the ceiling, with shutters that could be raised or lowered by a system of rods and gears fastened to the ceiling and wall.

A young sun-browed Centadorian man sat behind a large desk in the middle of the room. He rose to greet them, smiling. He wore the same long loose white garment as almost everybody else Adramal had seen here. “Good morning, Sir, Lady. How may I assist you?”

That was a much friendlier welcome than she’d got in Vannharial.

“I’m the wizard Alesin,” said Father, “and this is my daughter, the wizard Adramal.” She wasn’t, strictly speaking, a wizard, as she hadn’t finished the apprenticeship, but she’d done more magic in the last year than many people twice her age.

“We are honoured by your presence,” the man said, though Adramal fancied she heard a note of scepticism in his voice. She wondered if they got many visitors claiming to be wizards in the hope of being given food and shelter.

“We need to see the Ambassador,” said Father.

The man’s face took on an apologetic look, doubtless much-practised. “I’m afraid that won’t be possible, Sir. He’s a very busy man. I can make an appointment for you. The earliest free slot is on Pethandril’s Day.”

Six days from now. Adramal had hoped they’d be gone by then. Father approached the desk and leaned forward as though wanting to whisper a secret.

“See that this gets to the right person,” Father said, pressing something from his pocket into the man’s hand. The man looked at it, eyes wide, and rang a little bell on the desk. He put Father’s object on the desk as though it burned him. It proved to be an oblong piece of brass or bronze, covered in writing, although Adramal couldn’t read it from where she stood.

After a minute or two, another man emerged from one of the corridors. The first man shrugged in the direction of the piece of metal and flicked his eyes in the visitors’ direction. “The wizards Alesin and Adramal,” he said.

The newcomer picked up the piece of metal and said, “Would you come with me, please?”

Father and Adramal followed him along a different corridor to a little room without a door. A couple of couches stood against the walls, and a low table occupied the middle. The man motioned them to enter. “Wait here, please. I shouldn’t be long, but help yourselves to wine and cakes from the cupboard if you like.” He left them, continuing along the corridor.

Adramal sat on a couch, finding it firmer than she liked. On the table were a couple of ornaments of blue glass, one a seated bird, the other a flat leaf like those of the trees outside. Father opened a tall cupboard in the opposite corner and took out a bottle and a couple of cups. He poured a small measure into each and handed one to her.

“What now?” she said, sipping the wine. The stuff was thin and all but tasteless. “This has been watered.”

Father took a mouthful of his and shook his head. “Typical Anorene, I’d say. Just strong enough to stop it going bad in the heat.”

“What did you give that fellow? I mean, apart from something that makes strangers jump to do your bidding.”

He smiled. “One of the rewards for helping to broker the peace treaty with the Zerimuni a few years back. It’s a token that high-ranking members of the diplomatic service carry.”

“So you’re a diplomat?”

“No, I just get treated like one when it suits me. Mostly it means I can go to the front of the queue to see important people.”

“Perinar said he thought you deserved a baronetcy.”

Father stared at her before clapping a hand to his mouth and swallowing. With a grimace, he said, “That never occurred to me. I mean, the King would probably have granted me one if I’d asked, but what would’ve been the point? You’ve seen the way the Lesser Houses squabble among themselves, but if I’d tried to become one of them, they’d have banded together against an intruder. By staying as an outsider, I get some of their privileges when I need them, and they ignore me the rest of the time.”

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner? I could’ve found that useful when I was trying to catch Shendar.”

“It’s not a title, so it’s not hereditary. Besides, you’ve always been determined to do things on your own, in your own way.” He grinned. “Would you really have wanted my name opening doors for you?”

Adramal sighed. “I suppose not.”

The man who’d taken the diplomat’s token returned. “Sir, Lady? The Ambassador will see you now.”

Father drained his cup and, with a knowing smile at Adramal, placed it on the table. She finished her own wine, trying not to gag on it — taken all at once, it was like vinegar. The pair of them followed the man to the end of the corridor and up a staircase, then along another corridor that led towards the back of the building. The sun made the same diamond pattern on the floor as in the lobby.

At the end of the corridor was an open door with a guard on either side. The man nodded to them and walked past. Father and Adramal followed.

In the middle of the room, behind a large desk, an old man sat bent over a slate, writing slowly. Several windows in the wall behind him looked out over a garden built in a set of terraces. The air was warmer here, and Adramal tried not to fidget as sweat trickled down her back. Against one wall, where other offices would have had a bookcase or a row of filing cabinets, was a set of shelves crammed with ornaments of blue glass.

The old man glanced up and gestured to a row of chairs in front of the desk. Father and Adramal sat, though the man continued to write. Eventually, he set his chalk down, slid the slate into a drawer and looked at them, plainly bored. He was paler than most of the people Adramal had seen here, and she guessed he spent most of his time indoors.

The man who had brought them here said, “His Excellency Danberel, Ambassador from His Majesty King Aglodar III to the Governor-General of Molkolin.” A pause, then, “The wizards Alesin and Adramal.”

The Ambassador nodded and said, “Bring refreshments.” The man left. The Ambassador pushed Father’s token across the desk towards him, and Father put it back in his pocket.

“Alesin,” murmured the Ambassador, squinting at him. “Heard of you. Didn’t think you’d come this far south. Didn’t think you had a daughter. What d’you want?”

“An introduction,” said Father, “and a little smoothing of negotiations, should that prove necessary.”

The Ambassador raised his eyebrows, and Adramal guessed he’d expected Father to request much more. “An introduction to whom?”

“One of the Exalted Guardians of the Temple of Imil.”

He showed no surprise at that, even though they were probably the least likely people to want an audience with. “Any in particular?”

“I’d thought they were all equal.”

The Ambassador shrugged. “Met a couple at society dinners. Tedious fellows. Don’t live

in the same world as us. Can't imagine why anybody would willingly talk to one."

"I didn't say I was willing," Father replied.

"I'll make the arrangements." He picked up a blank slate and wrote something on it. He squinted at Father. "They'll want to know why you want to meet them. Nosey lot, Melinanders."

The servant returned with a tray of wine and little cakes. When he'd finished dishing them out, the Ambassador handed the slate to him, saying, "Cipher clerk." Adramal sipped at her wine, finding it stronger than what she'd had downstairs, which reinforced her suspicions that the first bottle had been watered.

When the servant had left, Father said, "I think you'll find that if you tell them who wants to see them, that will be reason enough for them to say yes."

"As you wish." The Ambassador ate a cake in one bite and took a big gulp of his wine. "Probably take a few days to settle everything. Where are you staying?"

"Nowhere as yet," said Father. "We arrived today."

The Ambassador gobbled another cake. "Might as well stay here then. Easier for them to find you."

"That's very kind of you, Sir. Thank you."

"Least I can do for a man of your stature," the Ambassador said, without a trace of irony. He looked in Adramal's direction, seeming to notice her for the first time. "Daughter's a wizard too, you say?"

"She is, Sir."

"Didn't think wizarding ran in families." He drained his cup and refilled it.

"It doesn't, Sir, but the characteristics that allow a person to become a wizard do tend to be inherited, such as intelligence, determination and self-discipline."

"If you say so," the Ambassador said, swallowing a cake in one bite. "Word of warning — wizardry's legal here, but wouldn't advise doing it in public. Locals are broad-minded but not *that* broad-minded, if you know what I mean."

"I see," said Father heavily. "Thanks for the warning."

"So — what news of Centador? Have they caught the cattle brand murderer yet?"

## *Chapter 2*

Father and Adramal spent the rest of the day relaxing and recovering from the journey. She kept thinking the floor was swaying under her, as it had for the last fortnight or more, and had to remind herself that wasn't supposed to happen.

They were given adjacent rooms on the north side of the Embassy, sparse but clean and comfortable. Like most of the rooms in the building, the doorways had no doors and the windows had no shutters. Instead, a curtain-like arrangement of vertical strings threaded with beads hung in front of each of them. A servant explained that these were common in Anorene settlements — they helped with ventilation, and the city was rarely cold enough for people to seal themselves indoors. Doors and locks were reserved for rooms that contained valuables.

"Do you have such a room here?" Adramal asked.

"We do, Lady," the servant said. "Do you wish to store anything in it?"

She hesitated. Did she have anything worth stealing? She had no idea what thieves in this city found attractive. Did she have anything she didn't want to lose, or couldn't afford to



replace? The contents of her purse, her pens and inks — and the necklace Perinar had given her. Her eyes stung.

“I — not at the moment, thank you.” She stood there, determined not to wipe her eyes, as the servant bowed and walked away.

Father came in as Adramal was unpacking and glanced at her rucksack. “I was going to tell you not to bother doing that.”

“How long do you think we’ll be here?” she said.

“We could be on a ship the day after tomorrow.”

“There’s bound to be a queue to visit the well.”

Father sighed and sat on a chair. “You’re still not keen on the idea of drinking from it, then?”

The more she thought about it, the less she liked it. “I don’t like the idea that Lelsarin may have drunk from it in a former host.”

“Has she remembered anything more about that?”

Adramal took a tunic from her pack, shook it out and put it in the chest. “Not that she’s seen fit to tell me, no.”

“Does it not bother her that you might go mad if the well recognises her?”

She picked up another tunic. “Apparently not, seeing as she can just move to a new host if I become unsuitable.”

Father stood and placed a hand on her shoulder. She shrugged it off. “I don’t want your sympathy.”

He stepped back, and she threw the tunic into the chest. “If you cared about my well-being, you’d never have brought me here.”

“You’re being unfair. There’s more at stake here than just you.”

She sat. “We know the Kreztalin let me go because of Lelsarin.”

“Yes, but we still don’t know why.”

“And do you really think that drinking from a well that’s supposed to reveal my purpose will tell us that?”

Father shrugged. “It’s the best hope we’ve got at the moment.”

“And what do we do if it says my purpose is to be a healer, or to marry a — a Salmarian and have a dozen children?”

“Those are very good purposes,” Father said with a forced smile. “I’d be more worried if it said your purpose is to destroy Zorian.”

Once they’d finished unpacking, Father and Adramal ate dinner in the refectory. As they were still tired from the journey, they went to bed early. It was still hot, so Adramal lay on top of the blankets.

In the middle of the night, she jerked awake, sweating. Outside, a high-pitched scratching repeated — an insect? That wouldn’t have woken her, would it? A pale, steady glow, like a wizard’s light, but yellow instead of white, came from the landing. Mopping her forehead, she sat up, fighting the urge to cast a light spell. She held her breath, listening intently for any out-of-place sounds, but heard nothing.

*I didn’t mean to wake you, Lelsarin whispered.*

*That was you?*

*Yes. Go back to sleep.*

*Why did you wake me?*

*It’s not important. I said I didn’t mean to.*

Adramal swung her legs over the side of the bed and flapped the hem of her nightdress to

try to cool herself. *The times you've woken me "accidentally," it's always turned out to be something important. Now tell me. I'm not going back to sleep until you do.*

Lelsarin sighed and cradled her doll. *I couldn't sleep.*

*Is that all?* After a moment, Adramal added, *You never have trouble getting to sleep. Not that you've told me, anyway.*

*No, never, until now. It's like blowing out a candle. I tried to sleep just after you got into bed, and couldn't. I must've tossed and turned — metaphorically speaking — for about an hour, and then I... well, I got frustrated and... I kicked something I shouldn't have.*

*Why can't you sleep, then? Is it the heat?*

*No. I don't receive your perceptions unless I want to.*

*Then what?* said Adramal. *Are you nervous about what'll happen when I drink from the well?*

*I'm not sure. It's a... a general feeling of unease.*

Marvellous, Adramal muttered.

*It's like that feeling you get when you're walking in the woods and you know there's a wolf nearby, even though you can't hear it or see it.*

*I shouldn't think there are many wolves around here — nor woods, come to that.*

*You know what I mean,* said Lelsarin. *Or that time you told me about Sergeant Elishar collaring a pickpocket out of a crowd in the Western Market, even though he hadn't seen him steal anything.*

*He said something about the fellow just looked wrong,* said Adramal. *So what is it about my mind that looks wrong?*

*Nothing about your mind. And I shut myself off from your senses, so it can't be the lumpy mattress or the noisy insects.*

*Magic, then?*

*It must be.*

Adramal stood up — slowly, so as not to be caught by surprise if she bumped into anything — and cast the spell that detected magic. Predictably, it revealed nothing. She edged over to the doorway, to see if she could spot any spells that had been used on the landing. The yellow glow came from a fist-sized glass jar in a sconce on the wall near the stairs. Her spell overlaid it with a sky blue halo. So there was priests' magic in it. Not recognising the colour, she didn't know which God the priest served.

*I'm sure I've seen those things before,* said Lelsarin, *but that wasn't what woke me. I heard someone clinking glass out here about an hour ago.*

*Hadn't we better get out of here, if there are priests about?*

*If they'd come looking for wizards, they wouldn't be leaving light pots lying around.*

*Is that what they're called?* said Adramal.

*Yes. I think you can buy them ready-made.*

*What a waste of magic.*

*The Imperials are a lot richer than people in the north. I imagine that rubs off on guests.*

Adramal sighed and turned around. By now, her eyes had adjusted to the near-darkness, and she could see her way clear to the window. She held the strings of beads aside. Outside, a scattering of stars peeked through gaps in the clouds. Points of yellow and orange light from fires and lanterns flickered — many more than she'd seen in Kyer Altamar or Vannharial.

Her spell showed a gauzy haze of sky blue ahead and slightly to the left — the same colour as surrounded the light pot. *That must be a temple,* she said, shifting her position back

and forth in an unsuccessful attempt to pick out the outline of the building.

*Agreed, said Lelsarin, but that's not what's bothering me. It's more like... more like an absence of magic.*

Adramal gulped and let go of the beads, wincing as they rattled back into place. *You mean like those holes in the world Marik was obsessed with?*

*No — you would've noticed your spells becoming harder to cast. It's as if someone who's very good at magic is trying hard not to let anyone else see that he's that good at it.*

*What?* Adramal cancelled her spell and shuffled back to the bed. *You can't detect somebody not using magic.*

*The same way you can't detect a pickpocket who's not picking pockets, said Lelsarin. Or the same way you can't detect a wolf that's not ripping your throat out.*

Adramal lay down. *You know perfectly well it's not the same thing.*

*I wish I was young enough to know everything. Sweet dreams.*

## Chapter 3

The following morning, Kharadar's Day, Father woke Adramal. "A clerk's just told me that the Ambassador forwarded our request to see an Exalted Guardian of the Temple of Imil. He didn't know when they're likely to respond."

Yawning and stretching, Adramal sat up. "We'll need a translator when this Guardian fellow turns up." Neither she nor Father spoke Melinandish. "Do you think we can trust any of the staff to do it?"

"They won't need to. If the Exalted Guardian doesn't speak Centadorian, he'll bring someone who does."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Melinanders value doing things more than achieving things. A Melinander would rather spend a lot of time doing something he hadn't done before and fail or do it badly, than a little time doing something he'd already done and succeed or do it well."

"And how does that relate to knowing that we won't need to find a translator?"

"Anybody at the Temple who speaks Centadorian will jump at the chance to practice with a native speaker."

"How can you be sure they'll be any good at it? One of the teachers at Kyturil told me Melinanders give jobs to the person who most wants them, not the person who's best at them."

Father grimaced. "I think he was being a little unfair. If two people are equally good at a job, whichever of them wants it more will get it."

"And what's with this 'Temple of Imil' business?" Adramal said. "Why isn't there an Imil's Day in the calendar? For the same reason there isn't a —" She broke off as Father put a finger to his lips and glanced towards the doorway. Of course. The bead curtain wouldn't block their voices — an eavesdropper could probably hear them from the other end of the corridor.

"Imil isn't in the calendar because he — it — isn't a God."

"Oh. Then why does, ah, it have temples, then?"

"I think that's just the word we use because there isn't a proper equivalent in Centadorian. Imil is some sort of vast entity that sits outside the world, watching it. Melinanders believe that when they die, their souls go to Imil, and their memories become

part of it. A lot of them call themselves Seekers for Imil, rather than Melinanders. The richer and more varied their memories, the better Imil likes them, which is why they're always happy to volunteer for anything they haven't tried before."

"That sounds a... a strange way of judging the worth of someone's life," Adramal said.

Father shrugged. "No worse than judging them by how good a sailor they were, or how many enemies they killed on the battlefield."

After breakfast, Adramal returned to her room. A few minutes later, a man's voice came from the doorway. "Mistress?"

Someone stood on the landing, just outside the bead curtain that hung across her doorway. Adramal pushed the curtain aside to see that the caller was a servant.

"Mistress? You have a visitor."

Adramal frowned. Who knew she was here?

"She's Melinandish. She gave her name as Quirilyan, a Guardian of the Temple of Imil."

"Oh. I wasn't expecting her so soon."

"Shall I ask her to come back later?" he asked. When Adramal didn't answer right away, he added, "Second watch, perhaps, or tomorrow?"

"No, I... I'll see her now."

The servant bowed and went downstairs, returning soon after with a middle-aged woman following. She wore a long robe dyed with abstract swirling patterns of red and yellow, and a small white skullcap, fastened with a leather strap under the chin.

"Will you be requiring refreshments, Mistress?" the servant asked.

"I've just eaten," Adramal said.

Quirilyan said, "Thank you, but I expect this will be a short visit." She sounded similar to the other Melinanders Adramal had heard — vowels drawn out and blurred into one another. The servant bowed and left.

Adramal sat in one of the chairs and gestured to the other.

Quirilyan didn't sit. "I understand you wanted to consult someone from the Temple."

"One of the Exalted Guardians," Adramal replied.

"I am not yet Exalted," Quirilyan said, "but will take you to one who is if you help me."

"What do you want?"

Quirilyan looked down, clasping her hands in front of her stomach and then stuffing them into deep pockets. She raised her head. "I have heard you are a gifted healer. We have someone at the Temple who I think might benefit from your skills."

Trying not to show any expression, Adramal replied, "Who told you about me?"

"A man called Rakbanorath."

"Oh." She'd almost forgotten about Kyturil's odd apothecary, who'd preferred to hear about her life in Thuren rather than healing and magic, and who gave his patients what they expected, not what he thought they needed. "He never saw me healing anybody."

Quirilyan smiled. "Then I will have a new experience to tell him about when I next see him."

Puzzled, Adramal said, "I mean, he may have exaggerated what I can do."

"I doubt that really matters. Our healers have given up on this person."

Adramal jumped to her feet. "What are we waiting for?"

Frowning, Quirilyan motioned her to sit down again. "He is not in danger of death. They simply do not believe they can do anything for him."

"What's wrong with him?"

"He... he..." Quirilyan gazed into space and waved her hands. "I have not the words in

Centadorian. Will you come to the Temple and see him? Please?"

For several moments, Adramal didn't answer. This was how her last misadventure had started — trying to help someone who seemed to be sick but wasn't. Then she said something she'd thought she would never say again.

"Let me check with my father."

Father was in his room, reading a book. Adramal asked him to cast a silence spell, then explained Quirilyan's request.

"You're right to be cautious," Father said. "Melinanders aren't noted for subterfuge, but someone else could trick this woman into helping with a conspiracy if he could convince her it'd be an exciting new experience."

"But apart from them and the Embassy staff, who knows we're here?"

He snorted. "You could've asked the same question in Vannharial and heard the same answer, and look where that got you." He closed the book. "I tell you what. I'll come with you."

Normally, she would've resented the implication that she couldn't look after herself, but the thought that Quirilyan might be an unwitting puppet rattled her. She nodded her assent.

They met Quirilyan downstairs, and she took Father and Adramal along a straight street that led west from the Embassy. There were fewer people about than yesterday, and they tended to wear more clothing. Adramal noticed at least three couples holding hands, although if Father saw them too, he didn't say anything.

After about ten minutes, they came to the Temple of Imil, at the other end of the street. The building was a broad low dome of sandstone blocks, about fifty yards across, painted with swirling designs in bright colours — mostly reds and yellows, like the robes that Quirilyan wore. Near street level, the colours had faded to pastels. A man in a plain yellow robe sat under a parasol, outside an arched tunnel that led into the building. A woman came out of the tunnel and dropped a coin into a tall stone jar next to the man.

Quirilyan and the man spoke briefly to one another in Melinandish — a trilling language in which each utterance sounded like one long word.

Father and Adramal followed Quirilyan into the tunnel, which sloped down below ground level. Smaller tunnels branched off it. Little clay sconces cast the same yellowish light Adramal had seen on the landing the night before. The light didn't flicker in the breeze, nor did any smoke rise from the sconces. Adramal glanced into one, seeing no fire, only a little pile of glowing powder.

They came to a large round chamber with a domed roof supported by many pillars. More of the yellow lights were dotted about, some fixed to pillars, some on waist-high stands. People stood or sat or knelt, singly or in twos and threes. About half of them wore robes like Quirilyan's, some red and yellow, but mostly all yellow. Some murmured or chanted softly, but most were silent.

"What are they doing?" Adramal whispered to Father.

"Telling Imil what they've been doing, I think."

At the right-hand edge of the chamber, an old man leaned against a pillar, staring into the distance.

"This is Tulthan, our best healer," Quirilyan said. She spoke to him in Melinandish, and he nodded to Adramal and Father. The three of them followed Quirilyan around the edge of the chamber, past more corridors, and down one about a third of the way round. They stopped outside a room from which the yellow light spilt so brightly that for a couple of heartbeats, Adramal couldn't see what was inside.

A shaven-headed young man in a yellow robe sat cross-legged on a woven mat in the middle of the floor, playing distractedly with a set of painted wooden blocks. The light came from a dozen or so little bowls of the priests' powder, arranged in a circle around him. He didn't look up at his visitors.

"His name is Brenyar," whispered Quirilyan. "He disappeared about a fortnight ago, and then he wandered back into the Temple yesterday. He did not seem to be injured, but is... different. He knew where his room was, but he recognised nobody, and seems not to understand most things that are said to him."

"That sounds as though he's lost his memory," said Father.

Adramal tried not to scowl. Since when did Father know anything about healing? But he was probably right. "I don't think I'm going to be able to do anything for him. I'll take a look, but I don't know much about how the mind can go wrong. Even the best wizards are reluctant to touch it."

Tulthan approached Brenyar and slowly crouched in front of him, outside the circle of light. He spoke softly to him, but Brenyar paid no attention, continuing to move the blocks around. Tulthan placed a hand on Brenyar's, stopping him from completing a movement. Brenyar looked at him blankly and then shrugged off Tulthan's hand and returned his attention to the blocks.

"What's he doing?"

"We do not know. Well — the blocks are a child's puzzle that we use for teaching our writing system. I think he was working on a better way of teaching with them before he disappeared."

"Do the blocks say anything?"

Quirilyan shook her head. "Only nonsense."

"Why has he got so many lights?"

"He took them from elsewhere in the Temple when he returned, and he resisted when we tried to take them away."

"So he's afraid of the dark," said Adramal.

"It would seem so."

"Was he afraid of it before?"

"I believe not."

"Does he remember anything else?"

Quirilyan spoke to Tulthan, who stood and answered her. "It is difficult to tell," she said. "The only thing he will say to anyone is, 'I want not to talk to you.'"

"How odd," said Adramal.

"More odd is the fact that he never says it more than once to any one person."

"So he recognises faces — or remembers who he's seen before."

"Yes. He seems to know the layout of the Temple — he knows where the kitchens and the privies are, and he found himself some clean clothing yesterday. Other than that and the blocks, he seems not to be interested in anything or anybody. He minds not being touched, as long as you stop him not moving the blocks around."

Adramal walked around Brenyar, outside the lights, seeing no obvious injuries. A blow to the head could cause memory loss, but that usually put itself right within a few days. She knelt in front of him, out of arm's reach. She had no reason to think he might be violent, but best not to take chances. Closing her eyes, she calmed her mind, and familiar, comforting thoughts came together, assembling almost of their own accord. She opened her eyes, hoping to see any major injuries below Brenyar's skin. There was nothing — though since the spell

detected physical problems, it might not show anything wrong with his mind.

As she moved to cancel the spell, she caught a glimpse of a flickering glow behind his eyes, its colour shifting through the rainbow. Before she could study it more closely, it was gone.

Brenyar set down the block he was holding and looked straight at her with an indifferent stare. It was so unexpected that she lost the spell and had to thrust a hand out to stop herself from falling over.

“I do not want to talk to you,” he said, in clear, precise syllables. Then he returned his attention to the blocks, as if nothing had happened.

“That was Centadorian, was it not?” said Quirilyan.

“I, uh, yes,” said Adramal, standing up. Of course he’d spoken Centadorian — if he’d said it in Melinandish, she wouldn’t have understood him.

“That is odd,” said Quirilyan, “because before he disappeared, he spoke not a word of it.”

## *Chapter 4*

Adramal stared at Brenyar for a moment, then turned to face Father and Quirilyan. “He spoke with a Kyer Altamar accent. He wouldn’t sound like that if he’d been learning the language for a fortnight.” She paused, wiping her forehead with the back of her hand. “I’m going to check his head and neck for injuries. I need to touch him to do that, so... be prepared to restrain him if he gets violent.” She would normally use a stunning spell if that happened, but he was so different from her previous patients that she wasn’t sure it would work.

She laid her hands lightly on top of Brenyar’s head and tensed in anticipation. He didn’t react. Touching a hairless head felt odd, like warm stone. She took a slow breath and cast a sensing spell. Carefully, she slid her hands around the top and back of his head, finding nothing out of the ordinary. She refocused the spell to let her sense his brain, suppressing a shudder as her fingers told her she’d dipped them into a thick fish stew. She tried not to tense as she moved through the different regions and parts of his brain. Although she was only looking, she’d never quite got over the thought that a careless twitch of a fingertip might cause irreparable damage. She saw no injury, but as she probed deeper, her fingers brushed over something small, hard and ridged. Startled, she nearly lost the spell. She made a grab for the small object but couldn’t find it. After floundering for a few heartbeats, she gave up and lifted her hands from his head.

“I can’t see any injuries,” she said. “It’s possible that he’s been driven mad. But there’s something that doesn’t belong — it felt like a small walnut.”

“How did it get in there if he’s uninjured?” said Father.

“Maybe he swallowed it,” said Quirilyan.

Adramal shook her head. “I don’t think it’s real. That’s just how my magic perceives it. Maybe that’s why he suddenly knows Centadorian.”

“Then what is it?” said Father. “A spell?”

Adramal shrugged. “I saw a flash of light when I checked the rest of his body for injuries. I presume it’s the walnut, or whatever it is. But if it was a spell, it would’ve been steady, and it would’ve stayed the same colour — this kept changing.”

“Can you do anything for him?” said Quirilyan.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with him,” Adramal sighed. “And I don’t know how to work that out. So anything I tried probably wouldn’t have any effect, and might make him

worse. I'm sorry."

"We understand," said Quirilyan. "You have done what I asked. I will take you to one of the Exalted Guardians."

She led them back to the Temple's central chamber and out along another spur, to a room with a large window that looked onto a vegetable garden. In front of the window were two oversized armchairs. In one of these sat an old man, who wore a robe similar to Quirilyan's, more red than yellow, but no skullcap. He slouched, staring at the garden. Quirilyan spoke in Melinandish. The old man sat up straighter and looked at the newcomers with bright eyes.

"This is Gethmar," said Quirilyan, "one of the Exalted Guardians of the Temple of Imil in Molkolin."

"My daughter has a question," Father said, "which I believe can be answered only if she drinks from Shomnakh Enkhyar."

It wasn't really her question, but they didn't need to know that. At the mention of Shomnakh Enkhyar, Gethmar leaned forward and looked straight at Father. He started speaking even before Quirilyan had finished translating Father's words.

"I'm afraid that will not be possible," said Quirilyan.

"Why not?" said Father, his head turning from one to the other. "Is there some protocol we need to follow? I thought it was open to everybody."

"It was. Not any more."

"Oh."

Adramal tried to keep her expression neutral, not sure whether to be relieved or angry. Had they come all this way for nothing?

"Experiences are available to all," said Father. "Isn't that one of your main principles?"

"All who are competent to receive them," said Quirilyan. "But it was not our decision. Shomnakh Enkhyar lies underground, and above it is a house belonging to Galdrakh, one of the city's Electors."

Adramal shuddered, and quickly gave a little yawn to try to hide the fact. When she and Father had first discussed Shomnakh Enkhyar, Lelsarin had wanted to know whether it was under a big house. Perhaps many large houses in this city had private wells, but nevertheless, it seemed an odd coincidence.

"Until two fortnights ago, Galdrakh allowed Seekers for Imil and a small number of Seekers for Others to make pilgrimage there. But then he closed the house to us without notice, and without giving a reason."

"Have you spoken to him since?"

Quirilyan gave a little laugh, like birdsong. "He is one of the most powerful people in the city. He barely acknowledges our existence. We lodged a protest as soon as we heard the news, but have had no response."

"It's... very important that Adramal drink from the well," said Father.

Quirilyan smiled. "That's what Seekers for Others always say."

"Do you think we might be able to get in... unofficially?"

Adramal tried not to gasp. Surely that was heresy?

Quirilyan translated the question for Gethmar, and the two spoke for thirty heartbeats or more. Gethmar tutted several times. "We know not what your magic can achieve," said Quirilyan, "so it is difficult to judge. But the house has high walls on all sides, and the gate is guarded day and night. That is not an experience I would care to accept."

"I see," said Father. "I might be able to persuade the Ambassador to put some pressure on this Galdrakh."



“We would be very grateful,” Gethmar said through Quirilyan.

“But if that doesn’t work, may we have your blessing to try to visit the well ourselves?”

“You need not our blessing,” said Quirilyan. “Shomnakh Enkhyar belongs not to us. Seekers for Imil merely find it more useful than most people.” Gethmar said something else, which Quirilyan translated as, “If you need our assistance interpreting what the well tells you, just ask.”

“Is it likely I’ll need your assistance?” Adramal said.

“Sometimes — perhaps three times out of four — the well speaks very clearly. Sometimes it presents puzzles that take a lifetime to solve.”

Father nodded. “One other question — I’d heard that a Centadorian wizard called Lelsarin might have come to Molkolin some years ago, and might have visited the well, or tried to visit it. Do you know anything of her?”

“We recognise not the name,” said Quirilyan. “A Centadorian wizard would be memorable in these parts. When might she have been here?”

“Between 487 and 495.”

Quirilyan shook her head. “I know not the Centadorian calendar.”

Adramal said, “That’s between eleven and nineteen years ago.”

“That was before I came to this Temple.” Quirilyan spoke to Gethmar. “Gethmar was here, but recalls no such person. We will enquire of the other Seekers.”

“Thank you,” said Father.

“What does she look like?” said Quirilyan.

“She was...” Father gazed into the distance for a moment. “About this tall.” He held a hand level with his mouth. “Five and a half feet. Maybe five and three-quarters. Medium build. More stocky than my daughter, but less than you. She had dark brown hair, grey eyes, full lips and a little turned-up nose.”

“You say ‘was,’” said Quirilyan. “Is she dead?”

Father sighed. “I’d heard reports of it, but I don’t know if I believe them.”

“How old was she when she was here — if she was here?”

“She was nineteen when I last saw her, nineteen years ago, so eleven years ago she would’ve been twenty-seven.”

“Was there anything else?” said Quirilyan.

Father shook his head.

“Thank you for the experience. If you wish to speak to us again, send word to the Temple.”

On the way back, the street was busier than when they’d come. For a few moments, they were stuck behind a taxi, with people coming the other way. The taxi moved on, revealing a young couple in a doorway, kissing passionately. The woman noticed Father and Adramal staring and, though Adramal couldn’t be sure, seemed to smile.

“Disgusting,” Father whispered.

She tugged his sleeve. “We’d better leave them to it.”

A dozen yards further on, Father muttered, “What are they thinking, carrying on like that in public?”

“We already know they do things differently here,” Adramal said. “It’s obviously more tolerated here than in Centador.”

“The sooner we’re out of here, the better.”

When Father and Adramal returned to the Embassy, Father told the clerk on the front desk that they wanted to speak to the Ambassador. The pair of them went to Father’s room.

She flopped onto the bed, grateful for something to absorb some of her sweat. Father poured some water into a mug for her and put it on the stand by the bed, and then poured another for himself.

“You could’ve tried to heal that Melinandish fellow,” he said, taking a sip.

Adramal forced her jaw to unclench. “Of what? Not wanting to talk to anybody?”

“If they think we’re helping them, they’ll be more inclined to help us access the well.”

She sat up. “And if I killed him or crippled him, because I guessed wrong about his illness? At least that’ll prove I tried, won’t it?”

“Then you could... pretend to cast spells.”

“Pretend?”

“There’s nothing to see when you heal somebody,” he said. “They’re not going to know that you’re not really using magic.”

“You want me to lie to them?”

With a shrug, he replied, “If that’s what it takes to gain their cooperation.”

She stood, hands on her hips. “We’re supposed to be on the good side. If you want someone to lie for you, ask a priest.” She stomped out of the room.

Towards the end of first watch, Father took Adramal to see the Ambassador — evidently he’d made an appointment while they were apart. Father explained the situation with Elector Galdrakh denying access to Shomnakh Enkhyar, and asked whether the Ambassador would be willing to raise the matter with the Elector.

“Can’t do that,” said the Ambassador, not looking up from the slate he was writing on.

“Why not?” said Father.

“I’ve no direct contact with the Electors. Meet the Governor-General every even-numbered Mathran’s Day. Usually his secretary, most of the time. Can try, but expect he’ll tell me to jump in the sea. It’s Galdrakh’s house, so Galdrakh’s decision.”

“How does that work?” said Father. “The Governor-General’s in charge of the city, isn’t he?”

“In theory.”

“So he can order Galdrakh to let the Melinanders back in.”

The Ambassador sighed and lifted his gaze to meet Father’s. “Doesn’t work like that. Governor-General runs the place, but Electors put him there. Can take him out again if they don’t like how he’s running the place. He won’t want to meddle in an Elector’s private affairs.”

“Can we approach Galdrakh ourselves, then?” said Father.

The Ambassador snorted. “Brass tokens don’t work with the locals — only gold ones. Be this time next year before you’re talking to his secretary’s secretary.”

“Very well,” said Father. “I’d be grateful if you could mention it next time you meet the Governor-General, even if you don’t think it’ll do any good.”

“Of course.”

Outside the Ambassador’s office, Father said to Adramal, “I think it’s time we saw this big house for ourselves.”

“First we need to find out where it is,” she replied.

The Embassy had a small library at the back of the ground floor. Unlike most of the rooms in the building, it had a strong wooden door, and the windows were barred. The heavy scent of flowers drifted in from the garden outside.

A clerk showed Adramal and Father to a chest of long, flat drawers. From one of these he took a map, about six feet by four, which he laid on the sloping top of the chest. The map

showed Molkolin, and was in colour and quite detailed, depicting individual buildings in many of the streets. Oddly, a large part of the bottom right was blank, a featureless grey blot. The rest of the city looked crowded, so Adramal had trouble believing the area was genuinely empty.

“This is the best map we have of the city,” the clerk said. “Do either of you read Anorene?”

Father and Adramal shook their heads.

“I can translate for you. What do you want to know?”

“Where are we?” said Father.

“The Embassy is here.” He pointed to a spot in the south-west, about halfway between the river and the city wall.

“Where’s Akhmar-an-Terash?” That was the house on top of Shomnakh Enkhyar.

The clerk indicated a spot in the middle of the city on the south bank of the river. “It stands on Vadukh Square, just west of Ryndrovokh Palace — that’s the Governor-General’s residence.”

“What’s the quickest way to get there?” said Father.

“If you don’t mind walking, you can do it in about a quarter of an hour. A taxi is more comfortable, but slower, and you could be waiting a while for one.”

“Then could I borrow a slate and chalk, please, to copy the route?”

Once Father had written down the directions, he and Adramal walked to Vadukh Square. Akhmar-an-Terash occupied a long narrow plot, only a corner of which looked onto the square. The Governor-General’s palace lay to the right, surrounded by a wall of gleaming white stone.

*I’ve been here before, Lelsarin said. That building on the other side of the Governor-General’s palace is the Hall of the Electors, and the one to your right that looks like a tree trunk is a Temple of Shadrakh.*

The Temple was a tall, wide cylinder of cream-coloured sandstone, with hundreds of tiny windows all round it. *Doesn’t look like the trunk of any tree I’ve ever seen, said Adramal.*

*Hmph. I must’ve seen one, then, said Lelsarin. Or else I’m remembering how someone else described it.*

Akhmar-an-Terash stood well back from the street, looming over a high wall of dark grey stone, which was partially covered with some climbing plant. Several armed men stood guard outside the gate, through which Adramal glimpsed more men patrolling.

“That’s a lot of men to be guarding an empty building,” she murmured.

Father’s voice sounded inside her head. *Agreed.*

*Is that necessary?* she said. *I doubt many people around here speak Centadorian.*

*More than you might think. And do you not think people as pale as us, talking a funny language, stand out here anyway?*

*I suppose you’re right, she said.*

*So — it doesn’t look as though we’re going to get in the front door. And the Governor-General’s house is bound to be more heavily guarded than this place, so we should forget about climbing over the wall on that side.*

A narrow street ran alongside the house on the left. Gaps showed between the stones of the wall, where some of the mortar had crumbled away. The climbing plant was less common here, and Adramal guessed it grew only where the sun could enter from adjoining streets.

*Here looks as though we could climb over, said Father.*

*Nevgalyn would make short work of it, she said, but I wouldn’t care to try.*

*We'll send to Volthroth for him, shall we? By the time he gets here, we might've found a ladder.*

Adramal cancelled her spell before she was tempted to say something rude about how she would've been happy to stay in Volthroth with Nevgalyn. Father scowled — breaking off a mindspeech spell like that was rude in itself.

Even as longing tugged at her, she knew Volthroth wasn't a realistic proposition. She — or she and Lelsarin, rather — had killed a Farasto, one of Zorian's most trusted and powerful servants. Three more of them were still at large, and she doubted they'd let their comrade's death go unavenged once they heard of it. Staying close to the scene of the crime would've been the worst possible course of action.

Two-thirds of the way along the wall, the climbing plant followed a large depression. This proved to be an iron-bound wooden gate, wide enough for a cart.

Adramal cast her mindspeech spell again. *This is probably the goods entrance.*

*It looks quite solid, but see if you can find out whether it's locked or barred.*

*Why me?*

*You're better at sensing spells.*

*All right. Keep watch.*

She let her mindspeech spell lapse. Trying to let go of the impression that half the city was watching, she put her hands on the gate halfway up the left side and cast a sensing spell.

The plant felt like thick cobwebs under her fingers. She deepened the spell's focus, pushing into the wood. Dead matter was harder to see through than living. The gate also felt like cobwebs, but thicker and stronger, as if the spiders had spun their webs from string.

As she pushed further in, the cobwebs abruptly stopped, and she almost fell over at the sudden lack of resistance. She pulled the spell back in, hunting the far side of the wood. These things were difficult to judge, but she guessed the gate to be about three inches thick.

She eased her hands up as far as she could comfortably reach, not finding anything she recognised as metal. She returned to the halfway spot and worked her way down. After about a hand's breadth, the wood became much thicker, then returned to its former thickness. A little experimentation confirmed that the thicker part extended horizontally across the gate and at least a little way past its edges — the stones of the wall were opaque to her magic.

"I've found the bar," she said.

"Someone's coming," said Father.

Adramal let go of the spell and stretched. She fought for breath — even in the shade, the heat was sticky, and it had been a while since she'd used that much magic in one go. She heard wheels rumbling and bare feet slapping the cobbles, and turned to see a taxi heading towards them. It slowed down as it approached. The driver paid them no attention, but the passenger, a round-faced old man, glowered at them as though they'd crawled out of a midden.

*Look as though you have a right to be here,* Lelsarin whispered.

*Easy for you to say,* Adramal replied. Would the old man challenge them to explain themselves? Did he live in Akhmar-an-Terash? No — if he was going into the house, he'd use the gate at the front.

The taxi trundled past them and turned into one of the side streets. Almost as one, Father and Adramal sighed with relief. With help from the driver, the man clambered out of the taxi and hobbled up a short flight of steps to the door of a house.

"Let's get out of his sight," said Father as the man fumbled with the lock. "He could be there a while." They ambled to the end of the street, where a low wall blocked access to the

river. Adramal peered over the wall as Father kept a lookout. A couple of barges drifted downstream.

“Can you see anything of the house?” Father asked.

“Not really. The river curves back towards us. There’s a jetty that might connect to it — oh. The part nearest the house has collapsed.” She heard the distinctive sound of a taxi behind her.

“The old fellow should’ve got indoors by now,” said Father. “Let’s go and finish checking the gate.”

Adramal examined the right side of the gate, finding three thin strips of metal fastened to it. These, she supposed, must be the hinges, meaning that, since she hadn’t found a lock at the other side, there wasn’t one.

A shout from above made her look up. A guard’s head and torso poked above the top of the wall. Her stomach flipped. Surely he hadn’t detected the magic she’d been using? The guard growled something in Anorene and pointed aggressively to the side street where the taxi had deposited the old man.

“I think he wants us to leave,” Adramal muttered.

Father smiled and waved to the guard, apparently not having heard her. “Good morning, Sir. Lovely weather for it. Thank you kindly.” He gave a little bow, then turned and headed calmly towards the street that the guard had indicated.

Adramal followed, trying to measure her paces. “What was all that about?”

*With a bit of luck, he’ll think we’re just a couple of simpletons who took a wrong turning. With a bit more luck, he won’t bother to mention it to his superior.*

Adramal noticed that all the houses along this street had short flights of steps leading up to their front doors — a defence against the river flooding? In mindspeech, she told Father what she’d detected about the gate.

*We’d best forget about getting in that way, then, he said as they reached the junction and turned out of the guard’s sight. The bar’s probably too heavy to lift, and the gate’s been shut so long that all sorts of rubbish might’ve piled up on the other side of it. He took out the slate with the map he’d copied.*

*Back to the Embassy?* said Adramal.

*Not just yet. I want to see where the house looks over the river.*

*The jetty’s broken.*

*But if there was somewhere for boats to moor by the house, he said, there must have been a way to get into the house from the river.*

*Which might’ve been bricked up.*

*Or which might not have been.*

They looped back to Vadukh Square and left it by a long, broad street that led to a narrow bridge. Taxis and the occasional horse crowded it, mostly going the opposite way to Father and Adramal. Eventually, they reached the north side, where a rickety wooden staircase led down to a pavement along the bank. The water lapped at the pavement’s edge. A row of houses ran parallel to the river. Most were only a single storey, as if out of deference to the grandeur opposite. A few people strolled along the pavement, seemingly out walking for the enjoyment. Nobody paid Father or Adramal any attention.

Adramal had been right about the jetty — all but the part furthest from the house was missing. A few solitary posts leaned at sorry angles nearer to the wall of the house. Where the jetty would’ve met the wall was a gate which, as she’d predicted, had been bricked up.

*Back to the Embassy, then?* she said to Father.

*I suppose so. Wait, what's that?* Where he pointed was a dark semicircle in the wall at the water's edge. *The top of a gate, do you think?*

*Could be. But why put it where it's liable to flood? Wait — it's below ground level on that side.*

*Perhaps it leads to a secret jetty under the house,* said Father.

*It can't be very secret if we can see it from here.*

They ambled back towards the bridge. Adramal tried to look as though she had a right to be there — as if she strolled this way every morning with her father. She kept expecting a guard to look over the wall of Akhmar-an-Terash and shoot an arrow at her.

*I wonder if it's connected to the well?* Father said.

*If it is, the river water and the well water are mingling — which makes it hard to see why the Melinanders think the well is special.*

*Melinanders believe all sorts of strange things,* he said, smiling.

*Let me rephrase that, then. It makes it hard to see why we should believe the well is special.*

*Fair point. Hey, there's another one.* The wall of the Governor-General's palace had a partially-submerged entrance, this one with a bronze gate blocking it. The House of the Electors, next to the palace, had two adjacent entrances.

*Maybe it's a standard feature of houses on the river.* They came to the bridge and carried on under it. It creaked under the weight of all the traffic, and Adramal was glad to be out from below it.

The houses downstream of the bridge were smaller than those upstream, and mainly sheltered behind a low wall. None had gateways onto the river, as far as Adramal could tell.

*I think we've found out everything we're going to,* Father said. *Let's go back to the Embassy and see if they have a plan of the house.*

## ***Chapter 5***

Father and Adramal made their way back to the Embassy, where Adramal was completely unsurprised to find they didn't have a plan of Akhmar-an-Terash.

"Perhaps we should ask Quirilyan about it," Adramal said.

The man outside the entrance to the Temple of Imil recognised them with a broad smile. "You want Quirilyan?" he asked in halting Centadorian.

"Yes," said Father.

The man turned and shouted something through the arch. Adramal stood under the parasol, grateful for a little relief from the heat.

After a few minutes, a younger man came out of the building. He bowed to them, tucking his arms in by his sides. He pressed the heels of his palms together and curled his fingers forwards, as though trying to measure the diameter of a pole. Adramal had no idea what this gesture meant — it reminded her of the awkward greeting she'd had to give to the teachers at Kyturil. She decided to respond with a simpler bow.

The man said something in Melinandish, then, "Please come with me," in Centadorian. They followed him into the tunnel, through the crowd in the Temple's central chamber and out via a corridor on the right, which rose gently and curved to the left.

From ahead came a sudden cheer, then the sound of running feet. Several children rushed towards them from around the bend and then past them. The corridor levelled off and passed

a couple of oval windows on the right. Two more children, much quieter than the others, came out of a doorway on the left, followed by a middle-aged man. Adramal guessed the room was a classroom, and a tiresome lesson had just finished. Their guide stopped outside another doorway with a bead curtain across it — the first Adramal had noticed in the Temple. A yellow glow came from within. He parted the beads and glanced into the room, and then stood aside and gestured for them to enter.

The room was small, and all its corners were rounded, as though it had been hollowed out by water. Quirilyan sat in the middle of the floor on a mat embroidered with the swirling red and yellow designs that were so common here. She held a slate in her hand, reading it by the light from a sconce of the glowing powder. Part of the wall behind the sconce had been painted white to reflect more light into the room. Quirilyan looked up and smiled.

“Adramal and Alesin,” she said. “It delights me to see you. Please, come in.” She spoke to the man who’d brought them, who bowed and left.

Father and Adramal sat on the mat, and Quirilyan gave them each a little cup of water. Adramal cast the spell to check whether it was safe to drink. From the corner of her eye, she noticed white sparkles — Father performing the same spell, though a good deal less subtly. She sipped the water, which had a faint metallic taste.

“Why do you seek this experience?” said Quirilyan.

“You mean, why have we come here?” said Father.

Quirilyan nodded.

“We spoke to the Ambassador,” said Father, “and asked him to raise the matter of Shomnakh Enkhyar with Elector Galdrakh.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful,” said Quirilyan, beaming.

“I wouldn’t get your hopes up. He doesn’t actually know Galdrakh, and he thought he’d have about as much chance of seeing him as you do.”

“Oh.”

“But he has a meeting with the Governor-General next Mathran’s Day, and he promised to mention it then.”

“I doubt that will do much good,” said Quirilyan. “The Governor-General has little real power.”

“So we’d gathered,” said Father.

“Was there anything else?”

“We went to look at Akhmar-an-Terash this morning. You were right about the high walls and the guards. But we noticed a gate in the wall on the river side, half under the water.”

“A prayer dock?” said Quirilyan.

“A what?” said Father.

“Is that how you say it in Centadorian? It is for cargo that otherwise has not a prayer of getting in or out.”

“I see,” Father said with a forced smile.

“It allows a boat to be loaded or unloaded away from prying eyes. All the large buildings along the river have at least one. You might get into the house that way, but it is certain to be guarded.” The light flickered, then dimmed abruptly. Quirilyan tutted and pulled out a little pouch from a pocket. She started to push herself upright and then sank back down to the mat. “I am sorry.” She held out the pouch to Adramal. “Would you mind topping up the bowl, please? Just drop a pinch in and stir it around with your finger.” Adramal’s doubt must have been plain even in the gloom, for Quirilyan added, “It is perfectly safe.”

Adramal took a pinch of coarse grey powder from the pouch. She sprinkled it into the scone, which contained a finer powder, still faintly glowing. Where the two powders met, yellow points glowed, almost too bright to look at. Cautiously, she poked a finger into the mixture, ready to jerk away should it prove too hot. But it was barely warm. She stirred it, spreading and diluting the light.

“Do you have this not in Centador?” said Quirilyan, noting Adramal’s puzzlement as she returned to the mat.

“No,” said Adramal.

“The priests of Tanshalm supply it. It is expensive, but it lasts much longer than a candle, and is much safer.”

“How do they make it?” said Father.

“They will tell us not. They worry we will make it ourselves for half the cost, I imagine. Now, where was I?”

“The, ah, prayer dock,” said Father.

“Oh yes. It was probably sealed off years ago, to be honest. The sisters would not have bought so many supplies that they would have to come in by boat.”

“Sisters?” said Adramal.

“Two old spinsters who used to live there. They occupied the rear of the house with a few servants. The rest of the building was empty. They were relatives of Galdrakh, as far as I know.”

“You say ‘used to,’” said Father. “Did they die?”

“I know not,” said Quirilyan. “I never saw them, and I hardly ever saw the servants. But if they have died, that perhaps explains why Galdrakh has closed the house.”

Father nodded. “Assuming for a moment that we could get into the grounds of the house, and could avoid being seen by the guards, how would we reach Shomnakh Enkhyar?”

Quirilyan smiled. “I wondered when you would ask that.” She closed her eyes and leaned back. After a moment, she shook her head. “I can see the route in my mind, but if I try to describe it, I know I will become muddled. Let me see if I can draw you a picture.”

She picked up her slate, and then Father handed her the one he’d copied the Embassy’s map onto. “You can use the back of that.”

Quirilyan took a piece of chalk from a pocket and started to draw. After a few false starts, she produced a picture that reminded Adramal of a stylised tree, broad at the bottom and tapering to the top, with branches and leaves all at right angles.

“The entrance to the well is... here,” she said, pointing to one of the “leaves” near the right-hand edge of the map. “We usually go in through the front door.” She pointed to the bottom of the drawing. “But there is another entrance in the same wing, and if rains, we go in through that, so as not to traipse mud everywhere.”

“Does it ever rain here?” said Adramal.

Quirilyan raised an eyebrow. “Wait until the new year. There is a staircase that leads down to the well, with a gate at the top. That was always open when I visited, though I think it reached not the ceiling, so you could probably climb over it. There is another gate at the bottom, and then you come to the well. That is in a room, maybe twice the size of this one. The well itself is a pool in the middle of the room.”

Lelsarin had thought the well was in a big cave, which that room didn’t sound like. But if she’d been there, it was at least eleven years ago, and measurements were hard to judge in low light.

“Customarily,” Quirilyan continued, “a Seeker goes down to the well alone. She kneels



at the edge of the pool and scoops up a handful of water to drink. She waits for understanding, then goes back up the stairs.”

“Have you drunk from the well?” said Father.

“Yes,” said Quirilyan, as though he should have known.

“And what did it tell you your true purpose was?”

Quirilyan scowled as if to make a sharp retort, but her expression quickly softened. “That is a question a Seeker for Others asks not a Seeker for Imil. Or a question a Seeker for Imil feels not obliged to answer, at any rate.”

“I see,” said Father. “I apologise.”

“I accept your apology.”

“Something I’d heard about the well,” said Adramal, “is that it’s not wise to drink from it more than once.”

“I would not recommend drinking more than will fit in your cupped palm,” Quirilyan replied.

“Is it true that you go mad if you do?”

Quirilyan sighed and gazed past them for a moment. “Every year, one or two people ignore the warnings — mostly Seekers for Others, I have to say, who disliked what the well told them. And after every... incident, some of us at the Temple call for Seekers for Others to be forbidden from visiting Shomnakh Enkhyar. I held that view myself at one time.”

Adramal repeated, “Do you go mad if you drink more than once?”

“I would use not that word,” Quirilyan replied. “But they are... changed. Changed in ways that they might not have wanted. I saw a sailor who became terrified of being in small spaces, so he could no longer travel on ships. The worst was a priest of Sujas who started blaspheming whenever he was out of doors. He said he had no control over it, but his Temple expelled him — more, I think, because he had visited Shomnakh Enkhyar than because he was insulting his God.”

“I wonder if that’s what happened to Brenyar,” said Father.

“Perhaps,” said Quirilyan, “but how would he have gained entry to the well, when you said you could not?”

Father shrugged.

“It’s worth finding out whether he drank from the well before it was closed,” said Adramal, “or if he told anybody about wanting to drink.”

Quirilyan nodded.

“So,” said Father, “why did you change your mind about admitting... Seekers for Others?”

“It would have punished the many who behaved responsibly for the actions of the few who did not. And in practical terms, as own not the house or the land, we cannot prevent people from visiting the well.”

“Why don’t you own the house or the land?” said Adramal.

“The well was here before the city. Seekers for Imil found it long before the Imperials came this far north. We built a settlement, just enough to sustain a small Temple next to the well. When the Anorenes arrived, they claimed all the habitable land in the region, and pulled down our Temple to build the monstrosity that stands there now. They thought the well was just a source of water, like any other. When enough of them had gone mad that they realised it was something different, they allowed us back in, and we have been using it ever since. Or had been using it, anyway.”

Adramal finished her water, and Quirilyan asked, “Was there anything else?”

“Did you find out anything about Lelsarin?” said Father.

Adramal tried to keep her expression neutral. It still felt odd to hear Lelsarin’s name spoken aloud — as if the girl-thing hadn’t been entirely real before.

“I have spoken to some Seekers who were here when she might have been,” said Quirilyan, “but none remember her. There are a few others I could ask, but I am not hopeful.”

“I see,” said Father. “Well, thank you anyway. I imagine we’ll be in Molkolin for a while, so let us know if there’s anything we can do for you.”

“I appreciate the offer.” She stood up, slowly, as though fearing injury. “Let me show you out.”

“We can find our own way,” said Father.

Quirilyan waved her hand dismissively. “I need the exercise. And the Seekers need to see me at least occasionally, to know I have dropped dead not.”

They retraced the route they’d taken to reach Quirilyan. Father dropped a coin into the jar outside the door. Surprised, Adramal did likewise.

“Well, that was a pleasant waste of an hour,” Father muttered once they were out of earshot.

“Do you have any better ideas?” said Adramal.

“Not at the moment, no.”

## Chapter 6

In the middle of the night, Adramal jerked awake again. Lelsarin stood in the middle of her thoughts. *That feeling of unease is still there.*

*And what do you want me to do about it?* said Adramal.

Lelsarin paced up and down for a few moments. *Stand up.*

Muttering obscenities, Adramal did as she was asked. It was dark now — the light pot on the landing had gone out or been removed.

*Turn through a circle, slowly.*

Adramal complied.

*Once more.*

Again, Adramal obeyed.

*And again, but turn the other way this time.*

Adramal stomped her way through a third circle.

*No need to be like that,* said Lelsarin. *It’s hard to be sure, but I think this fellow who’s trying hard not to use magic — if that’s what’s causing it — is somewhere to the north. Any idea what’s in that direction?*

*Most of the city,* said Adramal. *Melinand. Centador. Salmar.* To herself, she added, *Nevgalyn.*

*Very funny.*

*And a little closer than any of that, a window.*

*So?*

*So, stone blocks magic. Maybe you think this whatever — whoever — is to the north because that’s the way the window faces.*

*It’s an absence of...* Lelsarin fussed with her doll. *Go out to the landing.*

*Now?*

*If I wanted you to do it next fortnight, I'd have asked you next fortnight.*

Adramal cast a faint light spell and went out to the landing, about half of the distance between her doorway and the stairs. She glanced at Father's doorway, seeing no sign of activity.

*Once you're sure of your footing, said Lelsarin, cancel the spell.*

*Why did I know you were going to say that?*

*Because I can't sense the absence of spells if you're busy running one.*

Adramal sighed and let go of the spell. For a moment, the darkness was as deep as that of the dathi-Kh'amin's tunnels, and then her eyes started to pick out gaps and edges. She waited for the magic to fade back into the surroundings and started turning.

*Not yet, said Lelsarin. Give it a bit longer for the balance to restore.*

*You can't possibly sense the remnants of the spell now.*

*You let me be the judge of what I can sense, young lady.*

Adramal stood there for several dozen heartbeats, trying not to swear, before Lelsarin finally told her to start turning. In the near-darkness, the surroundings seemed to shift and twist. She had to stop halfway through the turn, for fear she'd lose her balance.

*Keep going, said Lelsarin. When Adramal didn't move, the girl-thing added, It might help to close your eyes — shut out conflicting messages.*

Adramal did as Lelsarin suggested and resumed her turning. *That's better, but the trouble now is that I can't be sure when I've done a full circle.*

*I don't think that matters. Keep turning.*

Worse, Adramal thought, she might wander off the spot and into the wall — or down the stairs.

Light stabbed through her eyelids. She staggered, recovering just in time to stop herself falling.

Father stood in his doorway, a ball of light over one shoulder. "What *are* you doing?"

Adramal took a couple of deep breaths. "I... I couldn't sleep."

"So you thought you'd practice some dance steps?"

"Something like that," she mumbled.

"In the dark." He sighed. "Why don't you come to my room and tell me what's really going on?"

They sat down, and Father poured some water for her. She took it, surprised at how thirsty she was. He gazed at her expectantly.

"It's Lelsarin," she said. "She feels uneasy about something."

Father's light flickered. "Like when she was sensing the Temple of Zorian in the Marchwood?"

"No, this is much milder."

"Is she there now? Can I speak to her?"

Adramal cast a mindspeech spell. *Be my guest, she said to Lelsarin.*

Lelsarin fidgeting, playing with her doll. *The best explanation I've got is that it's like someone who's very good at magic trying not to reveal that he's good at it.*

Father rubbed his chin. *He could just, you know — not cast any spells.*

*That's what I said, said Adramal. Lelsarin started spouting curds about wolves in the undergrowth.*

*There are spells that can conceal another spell, said Father, to make it look as though it isn't there.*

Adramal had heard of these, but hadn't learned them — they were taught in the last two

years of apprenticeship, which she hadn't completed. *But then the concealment spell would be visible, so you'd know there was another spell behind it.*

*If you're good at it, said Father, the concealment spell is weaker — I mean less obvious — than the spell it's hiding, so you can hide it behind another concealment spell, which is weaker again, and hide that behind another one, and so on, until a powerful spell is invisible even when you're standing in the middle of it.*

*I never knew that, said Adramal.*

*Well, there aren't many wizards who can keep half-a-dozen spells going at the same time.*

*What about a priest? said Adramal.*

Father shrugged. *Possibly.*

*What about several priests? said Lelsarin.*

*Yes, that would work, he said.*

*What might they be concealing? said Adramal.*

*Something they don't want other priests to know about? said Lelsarin. Because they wouldn't know about you or me.*

*Then it's probably not something we need to worry about, said Father. But I'm curious to know if you can figure out where it's coming from.*

*That was what we were trying to determine when you interrupted us.*

*And what did you determine? said Father.*

*North, Lelsarin said. It's definitely coming from the north.*

*How precise can you be about the direction? he said.*

*Four or five points of the compass, maybe, said Lelsarin.*

*So, not very, in other words.*

*I'd like to see you do better, Lelsarin snorted.*

*You're covering half the city, said Father.*

*That's what I said, Adramal said.*

*Any idea how far away it is?*

*Not really, but I'm reasonably sure it's in the city, or not very far outside — otherwise I would've noticed it on the ship.*

*Can you tell what colour it is? said Adramal.*

*I don't perceive magic like that, said Lelsarin. And even if I did, this magic is probably too faint to see its colour.*

*If it's priests who are concealing something, said Adramal, wouldn't the spells be in a temple?*

*That seems a reasonable assumption, said Father. His expression told her he wanted to kick himself. I noticed a temple a few junctions north of here.*

Adramal went to the window and cast the spell that sensed magic. A faint patch of sky blue appeared in her vision, and she pointed to the building that it overlaid. *That one? It's sacred to Tanshalm.*

White tendrils materialised in the air outside and snaked past her as Father cast a spell of his own. *That one.*

*That isn't the source of the concealment, said Lelsarin.*

Father sighed. "We can check the Embassy's maps in the morning."

After breakfast, Father and Adramal went to the Embassy's library and asked to see the big map of the city again.

"Where are the nearby Temples?" Father said, once the clerk had laid the map on top of

the chest of drawers.

The clerk gave him a curious look, perhaps aware that priests and wizards didn't get on, but pointed out some buildings within about a mile of the Embassy — Yisea, Tergrith, Nerupar and Mathran. As Adramal had suspected, the one she'd noticed while trying to locate the source of Lelsarin's unease was sacred to Tanshalm, Goddess of crafts. It was also the only one even vaguely to the north of the Embassy, and Lelsarin had decided it wasn't the cause of the problem.

Adramal studied the map more closely, using the compass rose to check the direction of Akhmar-an-Terash from the Embassy. It was almost exactly north of here.

A little later, the young Melinandish man who had taken them to Quirilyan yesterday came to the Embassy. "Quirilyan wishes me to tell you that one of our Seekers remembers something about Lelsarin, and that you may call whenever is convenient for you."

They followed him to the Temple, where Quirilyan took them to a room about the same size as the one where Brenyar had been staying. This had a low bed and a table at which sat a long-haired middle-aged man in a red robe. He rose to greet them.

"This is Yangrenarn," said Quirilyan. "He was one of the Temple Guardians at the time Lelsarin was here."

"Was?" said Father.

"He — ah — lost interest in the position," said Quirilyan. Adramal wondered if this was a euphemism, but Quirilyan continued, "There's no point in asking someone to keep doing a job she doesn't enjoy — especially not if someone else wants to do it."

"So," said Father, "what can you tell us about Lelsarin?"

Quirilyan translated the question and answer. "She was here eleven or twelve years ago. She said she was a wizard, although he never saw her perform any magic."

"Why did she come to the Temple?"

"She visited several times over a couple of seasons. Initially she was curious about Imil and the Seekers' way of life. Then her interest focused on our history and legends."

"Any specific ones?" said Father.

The man shook his head. Father sighed.

"Do you know where she was staying?" said Adramal. "Or what else she was doing in the city?"

"He knows not," said Quirilyan.

"Wasn't he curious about her?" Father said. "What happened to seeking out new experiences?"

Quirilyan raised an eyebrow. "Not all Seekers are equally interested in all experiences."

"Did she ever come here with someone else?" Adramal asked.

"She always came alone."

"Does he know where she was before coming to Molkolin? Or where she went after that?"

The man shook his head again after Quirilyan translated the questions, then said something. "He says when last he saw her, she visited three or four times over a fortnight. He had the impression she would come back after the last visit, but she never did."

"And of course he didn't have any means of finding out where she'd gone," said Father. To Adramal, he said, "Any more questions?"

She asked Quirilyan, "Did you find out whether Brenyar had visited Shomnakh Enkhyar? Or tried to?"

"His friends tell me he has not, and he said nothing about visiting before he disappeared."

Father and Adramal thanked the Melinanders and left.

*I don't remember that Yangrenarn fellow, Lelsarin said once they were in the street.*

*Do you remember doing any of what he said your host — if she was your host — was doing?* Adramal asked.

*Afraid not.*

Adramal relayed this to Father.

He sighed. "It's not all that surprising after so many years. But those were good questions you asked."

"Thank you," Adramal said, surprised by this unexpected praise. "I picked up a few pointers from the Watch back in Kyer Altamar — mainly Captain Tagahra."

"A pity he isn't here, then."

"You think he'd be any better at making Yangrenarn remember what he's forgotten?"

Father looked at her sidelong. "You should know better than most that things you can't remember aren't always lost."

Shortly after they returned to the Embassy, Father came to Adramal's room. "Apparently the tailor wants to take our measurements."

Adramal hadn't known the Embassy had one, but followed Father to the tailor's workshop at the back of the first floor. The tailor was an Anorene man, grey-haired but lively, who fussed over them with a tape measure for a few minutes, writing a long string of numbers on a slate.

"Does the Embassy do this for all of its guests?" Father asked.

"Only they who faint in the heat," the tailor replied. He stuck his tongue out of the corner of his mouth and fanned himself with his hand, as though thinking they might not have understood him. "Your clothes, they are too heavy for the city."

Father nodded.

The tailor stepped back, running his gaze over them, then checked the numbers he'd recorded. "For you, Sir, I have spares I adjust tomorrow morning. For you, Lady, very sorry, I must make new clothes tomorrow, ah, evening."

She hadn't expected he'd have anything on hand that could be altered to fit a woman as tall as her. "I'm used to it. I'll come back tomorrow evening, then."

As Adramal was waiting to fall asleep that night, Lelsarin wandered into her thoughts. *It's strange, the girl-thing said.*

*What's strange?*

*I'm not getting that uneasy feeling any more.*

*I thought it was subtle enough that you didn't notice it unless you looked for it.*

*Well, I'm looking for it now, and it's not there.*

*When did it disappear?*

*I'm not sure. Sometime today, obviously.*

*What does it mean?* said Adramal. *I thought you might be detecting Shomnakh Enkhyar, but that can't have gone anywhere.*

*Maybe it has,* said Lelsarin. *Maybe Galdrakh decided to drain it. And if I was detecting it, wouldn't the feeling have been much stronger when you were outside the house yesterday?*

*You tell me.*

*Or maybe tonight it just feels good about being a well.*

*How can a well feel anything?* said Adramal.

Lelsarin shrugged. *If the well is really Imil's presence in this world, maybe it's absorbed some pleasant experiences recently.*

*Speaking of minds, said Adramal, do you have any thoughts about what I saw in Brenyar's head?*

*Well, I don't think it's another Immortal, or whatever your father thinks I am.*

*How can you tell? Have you ever met another one?*

*Not that I remember, said Lelsarin.*

*Then how do you know what one would look like to my magic?*

*Minds are... it's difficult to explain... more spread out. Fuzzier. That thing was too small and hard-edged. It seemed to have a unity of purpose that minds don't.*

*I can be single-minded when I have to be, said Adramal.*

*For the few heartbeats you need to cast a spell, yes. But there's a lot of other stuff going on further down, looking after things like breathing and posture and digestion.*

*Digestion? I've never had to think about that.*

*My point exactly, said Lelsarin. It's like... like a wharf. The only part that people see or care about is the deck at the top, because it's the reason for having a wharf, and the wharf's no use without it. But there's all the pillars and joints and foundations under the water. If you take those away, the deck collapses.*

*And what's that got to do with Brenyar? Adramal asked.*

*If what you saw in his head was another mind, it's a mind that's like the deck of a wharf without pillars and foundations.*

Adramal was silent for a moment, pondering what that might mean. *You don't think it could be a Farasto, do you?*

Lelsarin smirked. *If it was, its first words wouldn't have been nearly as friendly as, "I don't want to talk to you."*

The next morning, around the start of second watch, a servant came to Adramal's doorway. "Lady? You and your father have a visitor."

Adramal rose from her chair. "Who is it?"

"I am not familiar with the caller, Lady, but he gave his name as Lakhshram, an advocate."

"I've never heard of him," said Adramal.

"Shall I tell him you do not wish to see him?"

"That sounds... rather rude." She couldn't afford to make any new enemies.

"If you would like the time to find out more about him, I can tell him you are unavailable, and suggest he return tomorrow."

Tempting... *unavailable* wasn't quite a lie, but wasn't quite the truth either. "No, I'll see him. What does he advocate, anyway?"

"I don't understand, Lady."

"You said he was an advocate. So he must be an advocate of something."

The servant gave a smile that Adramal thought rather patronising. "In the Empire, the term refers to a person who advises people on matters of law and, when necessary, represents them in legal disputes."

"Oh. What would someone like that want with us?" She hoped she or Father hadn't broken a law without realising it.

"Visitors don't usually inform servants of their reason for calling, Lady, and it's not our place to enquire."

"I see. Then — then please tell him I'll be down in a few minutes."

The servant nodded — not bowing, Adramal noted — and left.

Father was already there when Adramal entered the meeting room, talking to a tall, young

Anorene man with close-cropped hair. Father wore some of the new clothes the tailor had made for him. He had a loose-fitting one-piece garment of blue-grey cloth, thin enough for his underwear to show. She doubted he was very happy about that. Instead of a belt, a scarf-like strip of darker blue material was tied around his waist.

When their guest saw her, he stood and bowed. "This must be your lovely daughter." He spoke Centadorian with a mild accent, much less pronounced than Quirilyan's.

As the man spoke, Father looked over his shoulder at her, and she guessed he'd wondered who the man was talking about. "My daughter Adramal," he said.

"Delighted to meet you," the man said, bowing again. He moved with an easy grace, and his clothes, although as baggy as everyone else's, somehow accentuated the shapes of his body.

"This is Lakhshram," said Father. "He said we may be able to help one another."

Lakhshram waited for Adramal to sit next to Father before resuming his seat. A jug of wine had been placed on the table, along with three glasses. Lakhshram glanced at these. Adramal gave Father a questioning look.

"Apparently," he said, "the custom in Anoren when men and women dine together is that the women start first."

"Oh." Adramal felt her face warm as she picked up the glass nearest to her and took a sip.

"Is it good?" Lakhshram asked, smiling.

"I suppose so," Adramal said, flustered. It was the same watery stuff that the servants gave them every day. "It tastes all right. I'm not fond of wine, really — it interferes with a wizard's magic."

"My apologies," said Lakhshram. "We have a saying in the Empire — 'Good wine leads to good negotiations.' Please don't inconvenience yourselves for my sake. I'm happy to drink ale instead."

"Ale interferes with magic too," said Father.

Eyes wide, Lakhshram asked, "Then what do you drink?"

"Water," said Adramal, "as long as it's clean."

"I shouldn't think there's much of that in Molkolin," said Lakhshram.

"No," said Father, "which is why we're drinking wine. We don't expect to have to perform any magic today — unless your proposal calls for it."

Lakhshram drank some of his wine and leaned back in his chair, as though savouring the liquid. He swallowed and set the glass back on the table with a smile. "I understand you're interested in the well that the Melinanders call Shomnakh Enkhyar."

Adramal gulped. Her hand shook, nearly spilling her wine.

"Who told you that?" said Father.

"I know someone who knows a few of the Guardians at the Temple of Imil."

Father gave him a look that suggested he didn't believe this.

Lakhshram shrugged. "In a city this size, everyone knows everyone else's business."

Molkolin was a good deal bigger than Kyer Altamar, where Captain Tagahra had lamented how difficult it was to keep track of everything that was going on. But she guessed Lakhshram wasn't talking about catching criminals.

"Elector Galdrakh owns Akhmar-an-Terash, the house above the well, and has closed it to everybody," Lakhshram said. "I'm here as a representative of Galdrakh's aunts, the Ladies Doshanbe and Movathre. They lived in the house until Galdrakh evicted them a few years ago. They hired me to help them get it back. If they succeed, they'll reopen Shomnakh Enkhyar."



“And I presume you want our help in getting it back?” said Father.

“You presume correctly, Sir. The house belonged to Yarl, the ladies’ older brother. He died about five years ago, and they thought he would leave the house to them, but his will bequeathed everything he owned in Molkolin to Galdrakh.”

“That’s the end of the matter, then, surely?” said Father.

“Not quite,” said Lakhshram. “Yarl made a codicil to his will, stating that they would have the house and Galdrakh would have everything else.”

“Then why does Galdrakh still have the house?” said Adramal.

“Because the codicil has been lost,” said Lakhshram.

“And you’d like us to find it,” said Father.

“The ladies will pay handsomely if you do.”

“Let’s leave payment aside for a moment,” said Father. “Why do you think we can help?”

Lakhshram frowned, evidently not expecting this question. “You’re wizards. You can do magic.”

“We can,” Father said with a grimace, “but it doesn’t work like that. This... codicil — it’s a piece of paper, I take it?”

“It is.”

“So you were thinking we could just wave our arms and chant some mystical phrases and —” He snapped his fingers. “It would just fall into your lap, is that right?”

Lakhshram held up his hands. “I beg forgiveness if I have offended you, Sir.”

“It takes a lot more than that to offend me. But I don’t think we can do anything for you that any other person couldn’t.”

“What have you tried already?” Adramal asked.

“I have a list of places where the codicil might be,” Lakhshram said, “and people who might know where it is.”

“But you haven’t looked in any of them, or spoken to any of them,” said Father.

“Not yet, Sir.” Lakhshram smiled awkwardly. “I took the case the day before yesterday, and it was the sisters’ idea that I speak to the Temple Guardians. Perhaps it would help if you met the sisters. They can explain the problem better than I can.”

“Even if we find this codicil,” Father said, “Galdrakh isn’t going to give up the house without a fight.”

“He’s a wealthy man. The house is less than a hundredth part of what he owns.”

“Then why hasn’t he given it to them already?”

“He will, if they can prove it’s rightfully theirs.”

“Yarl died five years ago, you said?”

“He did.”

“Then why hasn’t the codicil been found already?”

“The sisters weren’t certain that it existed, and have only recently started looking for it.”

“I don’t know,” Father said, swirling the wine around in his glass. “Anything involving legal documents takes seasons, if not years, to resolve, and we can’t afford to stay here that long.”

Lakhshram smiled. “Justice moves more swiftly here than in Kyer Altamar, Sir. The sisters obtained a judgement from the Petty Court saying that if they could find the codicil, the house will be theirs the day after.”

“The Petty Court?” said Father.

“I think that’s what you call it in Centadorian,” Lakhshram said. “It deals with disputes

between citizens that fall entirely within the province. There are other courts that deal with matters that involve other provinces, or the churches, or the nobility.”

“We might as well go and visit the sisters,” Adramal said to Father. “It could be fortnights before we get an audience with Galdrakh.”

Father frowned, and she guessed he hadn’t wanted Lakhshram to know they were trying to see Galdrakh.

“I doubt you’ll ever get an audience with him,” said Lakhshram, “over what he considers such a small matter.”

“All right,” said Father, draining his glass, “we’ll come with you.”

## Chapter 7

Lakhshram summoned a taxi to take Father and Adramal to the Ladies Doshanbe and Movathre, and followed in another. The ladies lived on the north side of the city, near the wall, on the top floor of a large crumbling building.

A small elderly maid opened the door and motioned them into the gloomy interior. The room was warmer and more muggy than Adramal had come to expect from Molkolin. The maid squeezed through a curtained doorway, and Adramal heard voices from beyond it.

“I told them I might be returning with you,” Lakhshram murmured. “Evidently they didn’t believe me.”

“What’s the problem?” said Father.

“They’re trying to find somewhere for you to sit down. I should’ve mentioned this before — don’t comment on how cluttered the place is. They moved here from Akhmar-an-Terash, and brought as much as they could with them.”

The maid returned, carrying a candle, and said something in Anorene to Lakhshram.

*I suppose we also shouldn’t remark on why they’re not using those little pots of glowing powder,* Father said in mindspeech.

“Follow me,” said Lakhshram. “And try not to knock anything over.”

They passed through the curtain. At first, Adramal thought they were walking along a corridor with bumpy walls, until she glimpsed a book jutting into the passage and realised that the “corridor” was merely the gap between two sets of shelving. These sagged under the weight of unidentifiable junk.

The “corridor” emerged into a space scarcely larger than Adramal’s room at Kyturil, hemmed in by shelves, chests, boxes and objects whose purpose Adramal couldn’t begin to guess. She glanced around, not seeing a wall or window anywhere.

“Welcome,” said a frail voice.

Startled, Adramal turned to the voice’s source. Two old women sat side by side at the far end of the room — so still that in the low light, Adramal had taken them for odd-shaped pieces of furniture.

“Please, be seated.” One of the women gestured to three mismatched wooden chairs in front of them.

Adramal, Father and Lakhshram did as requested. Adramal’s chair creaked alarmingly as she eased into it. The maid disappeared into the space between a cupboard and what looked like a statue of a soldier, taking the candle with her.

Lakhshram spoke in Anorene, then said in Centadorian, “The Ladies Doshanbe and Movathre.”

“So these are the wizards who are going to find our brother’s codicil,” said the lady. She spoke Centadorian with a stronger accent than Lakhshram, but readily understandable. From among the junk came clattering and what sounded like swearing. The other lady said something petulant in Anorene. Lakhshram replied in the same language.

“I’m sure our guests would prefer the courtesy of being addressed in their own tongue,” said the first lady. “My sister and I share the mind on this issue.”

The maid returned, bearing a tray with some wine and the candle, which she placed on a low wobbly table beside the ladies. Adramal caught a flash of pain in the maid’s eyes as she bent, and guessed the ladies were working her long past the age when her children should have been looking after her. She poured five small measures of wine into tall blue glasses that could hold much more, and then retreated out of sight.

The lady gestured to the glasses. Self-consciously, Adramal took a glass and tasted the wine.

“Is it good?” the lady asked.

Adramal nodded. It was thicker and sweeter than what they served at the Embassy, but beyond that, she didn’t feel competent to judge.

“My daughter and I are wizards,” Father said, speaking more slowly than usual, “but I’m not sure how we can help you. We can’t simply make this codicil appear.”

“We know what wizards can do,” said the lady. “That is why we sent for one — or two, as the case may be. As you can see, our supposition is not what it was, and it grieves us that our nephew denies us our right.” Her tone scarcely varied as she spoke, and she remained almost motionless.

“So where is the codicil?”

“We do not know exactly. We have tried the various depositories of legal documents throughout the city, but none of them have it. Possibly our nephew has hidden it.”

“If he knows where it is,” said Adramal, “why wouldn’t he simply destroy it?”

The lady’s eyes widened. “It is — it is a sacred text. He — he...” Her breathing became rapid. Her sister produced a little fan and waved it at her face. She gulped at her wine, and this seemed to calm her. “Excuse me. I forget you are not of us. Even our nephew would fail to intervene with a legal document. It is blessed in the name of Shadrakh. To tamper with it is to risk damnation.”

“Oh,” said Father, plainly not understanding.

“You are wondering why a smuggler would not destroy a piece of paper?”

“Smuggler?” said Father. “I thought we were talking about your nephew.”

“We are. Everyone knows he is involved in smuggling dust.”

“Dust?” said Adramal, thinking she’d misheard, or that the lady’s imperfect command of Centadorian had led her to pick the wrong word again.

“Yes. Tanshalm’s Dust.”

“I still don’t understand,” said Adramal.

“It’s one of the ingredients for Molkolin blue,” said Lakhshram.

“Ah — I’ve heard of that.”

“This colour is Molkolin blue,” said Lakhshram, holding up his glass.

“We’ve seen it,” said Father. “The Ambassador has a shelf of it in his office.”

“As does almost everyone else in Molkolin,” Lakhshram said. “There are mines further inland. All the dust comes through Molkolin before it’s sent elsewhere in the Empire, and it’s heavily taxed. One of Galdрах’s businesses transports it, but it’s common knowledge that he moves more than he pays for.”

“Why doesn’t the Governor-General stop him?” said Adramal.

The lady didn’t answer, but gave a slight lift of one corner of the mouth that might have meant *That’s what I want to know, or Do you think we haven’t tried that?*

“He’s an Elector,” said Lakhshram. “They band together. If the Governor-General makes their lives too difficult, they’ll replace him with someone they like better.”

“I wonder why you bother with a Governor-General,” said Father. “It seems the Electors are the ones with the real power.”

“It has been remarked upon,” Lakhshram replied. “The Governor-General is concerned with the day-to-day running of the city. The Electors are supposed to take a longer-term view, but most of them are more interested in enriching themselves. Galdrakh is only the worst of them.”

“If legal documents are blessed,” said Adramal, “does that mean they have a spell on them?”

“Exactly so,” said Lakhshram.

“So if the codicil has been hidden somewhere — somewhere that doesn’t have a lot of other legal documents — a wizard could find it by sensing magic.”

“She could.”

“Except,” said Father, “that neither of us read Anorene, so we wouldn’t know if we’d found the codicil or some other document.”

“We know that,” said the lady, “which is why Lakhshram will accompany you in your searches.”

“We’ll start by finding the priest who blessed the codicil,” said Lakhshram. “He might have some idea where Yarl put it.”

“Why can’t the priests find it for you?” said Father.

“We asked them,” said the lady. “They were not interested in helping us.”

Lakhshram added, “They take the view that once they’ve blessed a document, what the owner does with it is his affair.”

“Do you wish to take the commission?” said the lady.

“If we get the house back for you,” said Adramal, “will you allow the Melinanders to visit the well again?”

“Of course. We always welcomed them when we lived there.”

Quirilyan had said she never saw the sisters, but now wasn’t the time to argue. “Do you know why Galdrakh closed the well?”

“We do not,” the lady replied. “We have not seen our nephew for many years, and our only compact lately has been through advocates.”

“How much are you willing to pay us to look for this codicil?” said Father.

“We pay for results,” said the lady. “We will give you ten hokhats when you start, as a gesture of goodwill. If you find the codicil within a fortnight, we will pay you a hundred hokhats, or fifty if you find it after that. We will also pay reasonable expenses. If the court accepts the codicil and returns the house to our name, we will pay you a further two hundred hokhats.”

“And if the court doesn’t accept the codicil?” said Adramal.

Again, the lady lifted the corner of her mouth. “Then we will assume it is a forgery, and will have to demand that you return all the money we have paid you.” She sipped at her wine.

Father’s voice echoed in Adramal’s mind. *Do you think we should accept? It seems to be our only chance of getting into the well,* she replied.

*And the money might come in useful.* Aloud, he said, “We accept.”

The lady looked over her shoulder and called in Anorene. After a few minutes, the maid emerged from the gap she’d disappeared into, a folded piece of paper in her hand. With a complicated curtsy, she handed the document to Father.

“We took the liberty of repairing a banker’s draft, in anticipation of your agreement,” said the lady. “You may cash it at our bank, Madhmosh’s, or deposit it in your own account. Report your progress to Lakhshram. You need not trouble us again until you find the codicil. You may leave now.”

“I’ll take you to the bank,” said Lakhshram, “and then back to the Embassy. We’ll start our investigations tomorrow morning, if that’s acceptable to you.”

“Certainly,” said Father.

The bank was about ten minutes’ walk to the east — quicker than trying to find a taxi, Lakhshram explained. It occupied a tall, narrow building at the corner of a square. Inside, the tellers sat on high chairs in barred cubicles along one side, while the customers queued along the other.

Soon, it was their turn. Adramal and Father followed Lakhshram to a stone-faced young man. He studied the banker’s draft as though it was a complicated puzzle, and then slid off his chair and passed through a heavy door at the end of the line. He came back a few minutes later with a small pouch, which clinked as he passed it through the bars to Lakhshram.

Lakhshram handed the pouch to Father, saying, “Let’s find a taxi to take you back to the Embassy.”

Outside, Lakhshram took them to the nearest junction, where there was a pole with a stylised picture of a taxi hanging from the top. “One should be along in a few minutes. I’ll call for you tomorrow morning. Let me give you my card, in case you need to contact me.” He took a small box from a pocket and handed Father a piece of card from this.

“What is it?” Father said.

Lakhshram frowned. “Ah — I was forgetting you don’t read Anorene. It’s just my name and the address of my office, so you know where to send a message box.”

“A message box?”

“Do you not have a postal service in Centador?”

“What’s a postal service?”

Lakhshram stared at him, then shook his head and looked away. “My apologies. It’s just — I can’t imagine living without post.” A taxi approached and stopped at the pole, and the driver gave them an expectant look. “I shan’t keep you,” Lakhshram said. “The staff at the Embassy can explain how it works if you need to use it.”

The sun was setting when Father and Adramal reached the Embassy. In the lobby, a middle-aged woman — probably Anorene, to judge from her skin colour — paced the floor in front of the clerk’s desk.

“That’s them,” the clerk said to her.

The woman hitched up her dress and scurried over to intercept Father and Adramal. “You is healer?” she said in awkward Centadorian.

From the way Father breathed in, Adramal guessed he wanted her to deny it, but the clerk had already given the secret away. Slowly, she nodded.

The woman sighed with relief and clasped Adramal’s upper arm. “Come quick. My husband — he is not husband.”

“I don’t understand,” said Father. “Does he want to leave you?”

The woman stared at Father and repeated, “He — is — not — husband.”

“Do you mean he’s changed?” said Adramal.

“Yes!” The woman took a couple of steps towards the door. “Come!”

Adramal’s scalp tingled. *I don’t like the look of this, Father said in mindspeech. It could be a trap.*

*You’d think they’d find someone who spoke better Centadorian in that case.* “How has he changed?” she asked the woman.

“He goes away. Tanshalm Day. I not find him. Look everywhere. Today, he come back. He not talk me. He eat, he drink, he talk only one thing.”

“What did he say?” said Adramal, though she could make a good guess.

“He talk — he say... Like this.” The woman assumed a neutral expression and gazed into the gap between Adramal and Father. “I not want say you.”

*I thought that’s what he’d say, Adramal said to Father.*

*So you reckon he’s got the same illness as that Melinandish fellow?*

*Brenyar? Yes.*

*Then you’ll be wasting your time going to see him.*

*No two patients are exactly alike. This one might teach me what I need to heal Brenyar.*

Even as she said that, she knew she was baking chaff.

“Come!” said the woman. “Quick!”

## Chapter 8

The woman took Father and Adramal south to a large building that huddled under the city wall. Several doors led off the entrance hall, and Adramal guessed it had been built as a single home but later split into apartments.

The interior of the woman’s apartment was divided into two rooms, one leading to the other. In the first room, a lumpy mattress lay in each corner. A baby slept on one, and four children sat playing on another, little enthusiasm apparent for whatever game they were trying to distract themselves with.

The woman spoke to the children in Anorene. They glanced briefly in Adramal and Father’s direction and then returned to their game. The woman shrugged and took them through the curtain into the other room. The wall that divided them looked thin enough to collapse if anyone leaned on it too hard.

The husband-who-wasn’t-a-husband sat at a rickety table in the middle of the room, an array of cutlery and crockery before him. The arrangement looked to be deliberate — here, the tips of two knives touched, making a right angle, while there, a spoon lay on top of a bowl, across the diameter. Every few heartbeats, he moved one of the items, as though trying to solve a puzzle, or perhaps just make a prettier pattern.

“That’s just the sort of thing Brenyar was doing,” Adramal said to Father.

“I give you wine,” the woman said, “but he take all cups.” She picked up the nearest cup from the table. Without moving his head to look at her, the man snatched it from her and returned it to its place.

“I saw someone like this at the Temple of Imil,” said Adramal.

“I know,” said the woman. “He Melinand. Temple say I fetch you.”

“Did the Temple tell you I couldn’t help him?”

“Yes. But I try everything else.” She gripped Adramal’s forearm. “Please. Please. I do anything. We work you — all us. One year.”

Adramal pulled her arm free. “I don’t want you to work for me.”

“Two year.”

“I just want to help your husband.” Adramal moved to his side, so that the table wouldn’t block her view. Now that she was closer, she realised that some of the things she’d thought were cutlery were actually carpenter’s tools — a hammer, a drill, a small saw. A larger saw stood propped against the wall behind him. She cast the spell that detected injuries. As she expected, it showed only cuts and bruises. Adramal stood behind the husband, then put her hands on his head and relaxed.

Without turning to look at her, the man said in perfect Centadorian, “I am not Nysbanskel, and I do not wish to talk to you.”

“Nysbanskel is his name, is it?” said Father.

“Yes,” said the woman.

“Let me guess,” Adramal said. “He didn’t speak Centadorian before he left.”

“No, he not.”

“So why do you speak it now?” Adramal muttered. She slowed her breathing and cast a spell to let herself sense the inside of his head.

As expected, she found no injuries in the warm, squishy interior, but within a few heartbeats, her fingers happened across a walnut-like object, just like the one she’d found in Brenyar’s head. This time, it didn’t slip away from her, but squatted there, a hard shell opaque to her magic.

*I have an idea*, whispered Lelsarin. *Try mindspeaking with it.*

The very concept of mindspeaking with — well, it wasn’t necessarily an inanimate object, but something that wasn’t provably alive — was alien to Adramal. But at this stage, she’d try almost anything. She cast the spell and directed her mind’s voice towards the object. *Hello. Can you hear me?*

Immediately, the object answered, *I am not Nysbanskel, and I do not wish to talk to you.* Startled, Adramal nearly lifted her hands from Nysbanskel’s head.

*Who are you?* said Lelsarin. *What are you? Why don’t you want to talk to us?* Almost before Lelsarin had finished speaking, the object slid out from under Adramal’s sensing spell. Adramal fumbled around for a few moments, fearful of damaging things, before giving up and cancelling both spells.

“Well?” said Father.

“He’s got the same thing in his mind that Brenyar had. But this one stayed around long enough to mindspeak to me.”

He stared at her, open-mouthed, before asking, “What did it say?”

Adramal snorted. “What do you think?”

“He might’ve learned that bit of Centadorian in the five days he was missing, but there’s no way he’d have learned enough magic to mindspeak.”

“Rakbanorath told me the Melinanders have no wizards.”

“Even if they did, he’s too old to start learning now. Which means...”

“This thing in his head isn’t him.”

The wife gasped. Evidently she understood Centadorian better than she spoke it.

“I don’t think it’s dangerous,” said Adramal.

The wife combed through her husband’s hair, poking and prodding his scalp.

“It’s not something... physical — something real. It’s... thoughts. Memories.”

“Not understand.”

“I don’t think *I* understand,” said Adramal. She sighed. “I can’t do anything for him.”

The wife gawked at her. “You haven’t done anything.”

“I don’t know what’s wrong with him, so I don’t know how to make him better. I’m sorry.”

Tears stood in the wife’s eyes. “Do something. Please.”

Adramal swallowed past the lump in her throat. “There’s nothing I can do.”

Gesturing to the other room, the wife said, “My children. Alone, I — I not feed them and stay here.”

The tallest child looked old enough to be doing some useful work, but now wasn’t the time to suggest that. Maybe he was working already. “Can the Temple help with money?”

The wife snorted. “They poorer than us.”

Adramal dug into her purse for a handful of the silver coins she’d got from the bank. “Perhaps this will help.”

Father frowned at her and said in mindspeech, *I wouldn’t recommend that. Tomorrow morning, every beggar in the city will be queueing up at the Embassy.*

The woman accepted the coins and sank to her knees. “Thank you. I pray for you.”

“Don’t tell anybody else about this.”

*As if that’s going to do any good,* said Father.

“I tell nobody,” said the wife. “Thank you, kind lady, thank you.”

On the way back to the Embassy, Adramal kept her hand on her purse, expecting everyone they passed to beg for money, but they reached the building without incident.

“So what do you make of that?” Adramal said as they climbed the stairs to their rooms.

“We’re wasting our time,” Father replied.

“Pardon?” She paused at the top of the stairs and looked back at him.

He ascended the rest of the steps before answering. “You said yourself, you can’t do anything for either man.”

“Only because I don’t know what’s wrong with them. I thought you might have some ideas, since the thing in their heads seems to be magical.”

Father shook his head sadly. “There are too many mysteries in this world for you to investigate all of them. Besides —” He glanced downstairs at the lobby, where the clerk was tidying his desk. He lowered his voice. “We’re going to be busy with other things starting tomorrow. We need to concentrate on what we came here for.”

After dinner, Adramal went to her room and changed for bed. The evening was still warm, so she lay on top of the blankets.

*Lelsarin?*

*Yes?*

*That’s the first time in seasons you’ve come when I called.*

*I come when you call. Just not always right away.*

*Very funny. So do you have any more ideas about what those things in Brenyar’s and Nysbanskel’s heads were?*

*Not really.*

*Why do they tell everybody, “I don’t want to talk to you?”*

*Lelsarin fidgeted with her doll. Fairly obvious, I would’ve thought.*

*If they didn’t want to talk to anybody, don’t you think they’d say that, or “Go away,” or “Leave me alone,” rather than telling every individual they don’t want to talk to them?*

*Quirilyan said Brenyar says it only once to each person, the first time they try to talk to him,* said Lelsarin.

*Which implies there’s somebody he does want to talk to.*



*So why doesn't he say who that is?*

*Maybe he doesn't want the others to know, said Adramal.*

*Then why doesn't he go looking for that person? But I'd be more concerned about why two of these creatures have sprung up in the same fortnight within a couple of miles of each other. I'd bet my boots they've come from somewhere nearby, and there are more where they came from.*

*You don't wear boots.*

*I might start. In the meantime, I'll bet yours.*

*Charming.*

*You're welcome. Good night. Oh, by the way — the concealment spell — assuming that's what the feeling of unease is — it's back again.*

*Oh, said Adramal. Are you sure it was gone yesterday?*

*As sure as I can be of anything.*

*Then it can't be the well.*

*Or the well's in a bad mood again, said Lelsarin.*

*Do you need me to do the... the silly dance again?*

*Lelsarin smiled. No, I've figured out how to determine the direction myself. It's definitely to the north.*

*That doesn't make any sense, said Adramal. If it's something in a Temple, why would the priests move it somewhere out of your range and then move it back to the same place?*

*Who knows why priests do anything? Yesterday was Yisea's Day, wasn't it?*

*Yes.*

*Maybe Her followers like to spread Her love around on Her day.*

*You mean Her love is something they keep locked in Her temple the other thirteen days? Stranger things have happened.*

## ***Chapter 9***

Adramal woke from a fitful sleep to realise someone was shaking her. She opened her eyes to see a servant — the same one who'd been patronising to her the day before.

"Lakhshram is here, Lady."

She gulped and sat up. "What time is it?"

"First watch, second hour."

Much later than she would've liked. "Tell him I'll be downstairs in a few minutes."

"Certainly, Lady."

Adramal splashed some water on her face, then got dressed as quickly as she could. She shuddered at how much she was sweating already. It didn't feel natural for a north-facing interior to be so warm this early in the day.

Downstairs, Lakhshram and Father were waiting in the same room as yesterday. A little tray of breakfast lay on the table.

"My apologies for disturbing you," said Lakhshram. "In the Empire, we rise earlier than in the North, to do as much work as we can before the heat of the day becomes too great."

"I'll try to remember that," Adramal said, a piece of bread halfway to her mouth.

"We'll start by calling on Jinerlsh," said Lakhshram. "He was Yarl's preferred priest for blessing documents for many years, so he should know whether this codicil exists."

"I thought you were sure of that," said Father.

“The sisters are sure of it,” Lakhshram replied with an embarrassed smile. “Out of their hearing, I can afford to be a little more objective.”

“We took this commission on the understanding that the document was definitely somewhere in the city,” said Father. “If you’re telling me something different, we may have to reconsider.”

Lakhshram sat up straighter. “I’m not saying it doesn’t exist, Sir. Just that I’m not certain of its existence in the way I’m certain of the existence of, say, Shadrakh or Tanshalm, or your charming daughter.”

Adramal blushed. “I don’t think anyone’s ever called me ‘charming’ before, Sir.”

“Then the men of Centador must not appreciate what beauty stood in their midst.”

“That,” said Father with a hint of a growl, “or they keep their appreciation to themselves.”

They finished the meal in an awkward silence, and then travelled to the Temple of Shadrakh in Vadukh Square, Father and Adramal in one taxi, Lakhshram in another.

“It’s just occurred to me,” she said after a few minutes, “I still haven’t picked up my new clothes.”

Father sighed. “They’ll still be there when we get back.” He plucked at his arm. “I just hope they’re a bit less revealing than these. No wonder the locals are all over each other.”

Their taxi came to the Temple entrance, and they got out. Adramal glanced up at the hundreds of small windows, trying not to shudder as she imagined a priest looking down at her from each one. A wide tunnel led into the Temple’s interior, and an iron fence from floor to ceiling divided this into two halves. At the mouth of the tunnel, two complicated iron cages, one on either side of the fence, blocked the width of it.

Lakhshram stepped into the cage on the right. What Adramal had thought was the gate was actually in the middle of the cage — a vertical pole with three sets of horizontal bars along its height. He pushed on one of the bars, and the pole rotated, allowing him to pass through to the other side of the cage. He turned and beckoned them.

Adramal hesitated, fearful that the pole wouldn’t turn all the way for her, or that her dress would get caught on the bars. An impatient grunt came from behind her, and an Anorene man shoved past her and went through the cage.

“Not particularly holy behaviour,” Father muttered.

“What do you expect from the God of money?” Adramal said.

“He’s the God of commerce,” said Lakhshram, “not just money. Just push gently on the bars and proceed at your normal walking pace.”

Adramal took a deep breath and did as Lakhshram advised. The pole resisted turning at first, but then moved smoothly. It stopped after a third of a turn, wobbling slightly, and she stepped out of the cage.

Lakhshram smiled. “You’ll get used to it.”

“Why such a complicated mechanism?” Father said as he came through. “Haven’t these people ever heard of doors?”

“Doors would block the flow of fresh air,” said Adramal.

“It’s partly that,” said Lakhshram, “and partly that.” He pointed to something at the top of the cage, above where the people came out. Adramal squinted at it. It was a metal box about the size of her fist, with four little brass squares on the front. Each square bore what she assumed was a character from the Anorene script. As she studied it, another person came through the cage, and the rightmost character changed. She glimpsed a rod that emerged from the back of the box and connected to the pole in the middle of the cage.

“It counts how many people have come in,” Adramal said.

Lakhshram raised an eyebrow. “Very good. The cage is wide enough for only one person at a time, to ensure the count is accurate. There’s another counting box on the exit cage, so at the end of the day, they know how many worshippers have come in and gone out.”

“Why would they want to know that?” said Father.

“The God of commerce likes counting, I suppose,” said Adramal.

A woman came along the other side of the tunnel and stopped in front of the cage. She dropped a coin into a slot at the top of a narrow pillar that stood next to the gate. When it stopped clattering, she stepped into the cage and pushed the bars around to exit.

“Indeed He does,” said Lakhshram, “but He likes counting money more than people.”

“So what happens if you don’t have the money to get out?” said Adramal.

“They make you work or say prayers to the value of the coin,” said Lakhshram.

“Prayer has a price?” said Father.

Lakhshram shrugged. “Why not? Everything else does, according to Shadrakh.”

They walked along the tunnel. Adramal’s skin tingled as they passed under an arch near the end of it.

“You felt it too?” Father murmured.

“Felt what?” said Lakhshram.

“A spell to keep out intruders,” said Adramal, “or warn the priests about them.”

“There’s nothing to worry about,” said Father. “It can’t tell what we are unless we use magic.”

They emerged into a space that must have taken up almost the whole of the Temple’s interior. The sunlight from all the windows made the tiled granite floor resemble the surface of a lake. The walls were honeycombed with little rooms, open on the side that faced inward. Most of these were occupied by a priest sitting at a desk. Some of the priests had a guest or two, but most worked alone. Staircases curved around the walls from the floor to the top, and narrow bridges crossed the diameter of the building on each level. How could anyone bring themselves to go up there? Even looking at the rooms made her stomach flip.

Lakhshram headed for a ring of desks in the middle of the floor. Father’s and Adramal’s footsteps echoed as they followed him. He spoke to a clerk, who consulted some slates and gave him a small object, then pointed to somewhere above and behind him.

“We can see Jinerlsh now,” Lakhshram said. “He’s on the second level. They put the older priests lower down, so they don’t have so far to climb.”

They ascended the nearest staircase in single file. It looked wide enough for two, but Adramal hoped they wouldn’t have to pass anyone. She kept her eyes on Lakhshram’s back, distracting herself with observations of how his arms and shoulders moved under his robe.

As they reached the first level, Adramal glimpsed a flash of yellow light in the room they were passing. She turned to see a priest lift his raskarim from a piece of paper, which he handed to a woman who waited in front of his desk. Of course — the magic of the God of commerce would have to be the colour of gold, wouldn’t it?

Now that she knew what to look for, she noticed a faint, shimmering haze of the same colour out of the corner of her eye — a reinforcement spell inside the walls? When she turned to look straight at it, it seemed to slide away. It must have been cast as the Temple was being built, which would make it a nightmare to maintain.

On the second level, they passed a couple of empty rooms and stopped in front of one occupied by a frail old man, silhouetted by the light from his window. Lakhshram bowed to

him and showed him the object the clerk had given him — a small brass token.

“This is Jinerlsh, beloved of Shadrakh,” said Lakhshram.

Jinerlsh motioned them to sit, although he had only two chairs for guests. Lakhshram gestured to Father and Adramal, who sat. The desk was covered with papers and slates. A faint breeze rustled the papers, and Adramal wondered how the priest stopped them fluttering out of the room and falling to the floor below.

The priest lifted his raskarim by its cord — a tall outline rectangle divided into a stack of four short wide rectangles. He mumbled a brief prayer, and the raskarim glittered, just a little more than could be explained by its slow turning in the light.

Lakhshram made the introductions and explained why they were here. He had to repeat himself a few times, as Jinerlsh seemed rather deaf. Eventually the priest stood up and shuffled over to a chest of drawers. He remained there for some minutes, leafing through papers, and then returned with a few words and a shake of his head.

Frowning, Lakhshram said, “He says he has no record of blessing a codicil for Yarl.”

“So someone else blessed it?” said Father.

“He must have done. But unless we can find out who that was, we won’t find it here.”

“Why not?” said Adramal.

With a sweep of his arm, Lakhshram gestured to all the little rooms behind her. “The record could be anywhere in the Temple. And considering this isn’t even the largest Temple of Shadrakh in Molkolin...”

“Isn’t there an index?” said Father.

Lakhshram pursed his lips, as though thinking this was the most ridiculous idea he’d ever heard.

“I see,” said Father. “Then we should check whatever other leads you might have.”

“We should.” He gave the priest some coins, and the priest wrote something on a slip of paper and handed it to him — a receipt, Adramal supposed.

“Who are we visiting next?” said Father on the way back down to ground level.

“I’ll tell you outside,” said Lakhshram. They returned the brass token to the clerk and went back to the tunnel with the cages. “It’s a leshat to get out,” Lakhshram said, dropping a coin into the slot. He pushed the bars and passed out to the street.

Father took two of the copper leshats from his purse, the smallest and least valuable of the Empire’s coins, and gave one to Adramal. He put his coin into the slot and passed through the cage.

Adramal hesitated in front of the cage, fearful that she might be trapped. How could a contraption of iron and brass know when a coin had been given to it? Evidently it did, somehow. Her hand trembled as she inserted the coin into the slot. For a moment it stayed there, seemingly stuck, but with a nudge from her, it clattered into the tube. She pushed at the bars. They wouldn’t budge. Magic and panic rose within her.

“Try again,” said Lakhshram.

Taking a deep breath, she obeyed. This time, the bars moved, and she was able to leave.

“You need to wait for the coin to fall all the way,” he said. He lifted a hand as though to rub her shoulder, but a glance from Father stopped him.

They walked a little way around the square, to where a short line of taxis waited.

Lakhshram spoke to the driver of the first vehicle, who nodded and indicated that Adramal and Father should get in.

“I’ll be right behind you,” Lakhshram said.

“It’s hard to believe they don’t have an index of everything,” said Father, once they were

underway.

“Perhaps they don’t get many requests that would need one,” Adramal replied.

“And I hate to think how long it would take to create one if they were to start now.”

After about ten minutes, the taxi stopped in a quiet residential street. The driver turned and gestured for them to get out, which they did. With a good deal of pushing and pulling, he turned the vehicle round on the spot and went back the way he’d come.

Adramal looked down the street, seeing no sign of Lakhshram. “You don’t think that fellow brought us to the wrong place, do you?”

Father shrugged. “If Lakhshram doesn’t show up, we’ll go back to the Embassy. That’s where he’ll look for us if we get separated.”

She wondered how they would find their way there, seeing as they were a couple of miles from it and neither of them spoke Anorene. The street joined a busy road, and she glanced up at every sound of wheels going past.

They’d been waiting about ten minutes when a taxi stopped at the junction. Lakhshram jumped out and hurried towards them. “I’m so sorry. I got stuck in the traffic. I called out to your driver to wait, but he didn’t hear me.” He strode to one of the nearer houses and pulled on a rope that hung from the ceiling of the porch. In the depths of the building, a bell rang.

“This is the house of Erbitakh, an advocate,” said Lakhshram. “He’s retired now, but I understand he did a lot of work for Yarl.”

“So he might have written the codicil,” said Adramal.

“He might.”

As they waited, Adramal noticed that the windows were all above head height and blocked by metal grilles. Idly, she wondered whether they were to keep the public out or the occupants in.

The door opened to reveal an elderly man in what looked like a uniform. He gave a little bow and spoke with Lakhshram for a few moments.

“Erbitakh isn’t here,” said Lakhshram. “We’ll have to make an appointment.”

The servant motioned them to enter, and led them to a small room off the main hallway. A sofa and two padded chairs crowded around a low table. He invited them to sit and produced a bottle and some blue glasses from a cupboard in the corner. He poured some wine into one of the glasses and offered it to Adramal.

Still unused to this ritual, she accepted the glass and sipped the wine. It had a bitterness that invited her to spit it out, and she wondered if she was supposed to refuse it. Would the servant be offended if she did? Was this a test, to determine whether they were the sort of people his master wished to see?

Lakhshram said something to the servant, who nodded and filled glasses for him and Father. They drank, and the servant topped up Adramal’s glass. He placed the bottle on the table and left.

“I’m sorry about that,” Lakhshram whispered. “Erbitakh is noted for serving cheap wine to visitors, but I didn’t realise it was quite that bad. The bottle must have been sitting in the sun for a year.” He tilted his head back and drained the glass in one. “Excuse my manners, but that way, it mostly misses your tongue.”

Adramal took a bigger gulp than before. Somehow it tasted worse than the first time.

The servant returned with a large open book. Giving a little bow, he spoke to Lakhshram.

“The earliest Erbitakh can see us is fourth watch on Tergrith,” Lakhshram said. Three days from now.

Father nodded. “It’s not as if we have anything else to do.”

The servant took a short wooden stick from inside his robe and wrote something in the book. Adramal tried not to stare — she'd wondered where his pen and inkwell were. He waited while they finished their wine and showed them to the front door.

“Are you hungry?” said Lakhshram as they neared the junction.

“A little,” said Adramal.

“Not really,” said Father, “but if it gets rid of the taste of that wine, I'm starving.”

Grinning, Lakhshram took them across the main road and to a tavern in a side-street. The place was crowded — it took them several minutes to find a table, and longer still to attract the attention of a serving boy. He didn't ask what they wanted — he brought them a platter of flat bread, cut into thin strips, together with three bowls of mush, one white, one crimson, one brilliant green. Another boy followed with a clay bottle and three wooden mugs. Lakhshram handed the first boy some coins. The two of them bowed and left.

Lakhshram picked up a strip of bread and dipped it in the white mush. He gestured to the platter as he folded the strip and ate it in one bite. Father and Adramal copied him. The bread was chewy, the white stuff practically tasteless. Adramal took another strip of bread and dipped it in the green stuff.

“That's bshthreth,” Lakhshram said. Seeing that the name meant nothing to her, he added, “I wouldn't take that much to begin with.”

Frowning, Adramal scraped some off on the edge of the bowl and bit about half of what was left. For a moment, she tasted nothing. Then something stabbed her tongue, like a dozen wasps. She sucked in a breath, but that just spread the sensation to her nostrils.

“Swallow, then chew on this,” said Lakhshram, offering her another piece of bread.

Eyes watering, she did as he said. The pain gradually faded as she chomped on the bread. “Why?” she asked.

“You get used to it,” he said, smiling. “It's supposed to ward off evil spirits.”

“There's no such thing,” she said, wondering if he'd heard of the Farasten.

“I know.” He gestured to some of the other patrons. “But try telling them that. The men here sometimes have contests for who can eat a bowl the fastest.”

“Only the men?”

“Women are allowed to take part, but most of them are too sensible.”

It occurred to her that a wizard could numb her mouth and win without any pain. “What's the prize?”

“Free ale and wine for the rest of the night.”

“I won't be entering, then.”

“Really?” he said, feigning surprise.

“Is the red one safe to eat?” said Adramal.

“Yes, it's quite sweet.”

She tried it, finding small chunks of an unfamiliar fruit in it.

“So, is there anything we can do while we wait for this Erbitakh to see us?” said Father.

“We can check the legal depositories,” said Lakhshram.

“I thought the sisters had done that,” said Father.

Lakhshram gave a lopsided smile. “Without wishing to denigrate them, it's a job for an advocate. I'll do the initial searches by myself, and bring you in if I find something. If you're seen in the depositories, that will attract a lot of attention.”

“Which might get back to Galdрах and convince him to move the codicil,” said Father.

“Just so.”

They finished their meal and left the building by a side entrance. Within sight of the main

road, four scruffy young men stepped out of an alley, blocking their path. They carried thick, heavy blades, somewhere between a long knife and a short sword. Adramal glanced behind her, seeing only a dead end.

## *End of Free Sample*

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