

Sample Chapters of *The Mirrors of Elangir* *The Schemes of Raltarn and Tomaz* Volume I by Steven J Pemberton

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Chapter 1

The old man lit his pipe with a taper from the fire. He sucked on it until the glow in the bowl had faded, and then blew a long stream of sweet-smelling, blue-grey smoke between Uncle Tomaz and me. He smiled, revealing crooked yellow teeth. “Of course, you know I have to report this.”

I tensed, ready to snatch the object we’d brought him. Uncle just smiled back, unperturbed. “But you’re not going to, are you, Yindrath?”

“I might yet, just to see the look on your face.” He sucked on his pipe again and blew a ring that ambled over Uncle’s head. “But the Peace might start poking their noses into my business, and that would never do. And if they confiscate this trinket, I won’t find out the truth behind it.”

“You don’t know what it is, then?” said Uncle, as though the man had insulted his mother.

Yindrath chuckled and sat back in his chair, adjusting his robe. “I have a good idea. I just don’t believe your account of how you came by it.”

“It’s the truth,” I said. “Dyareg’s sons asked us to clear out his house, and they said we could keep half what we made.”

Uncle scowled at me — he didn’t like it when I tried to help him tell his stories.

Yindrath tutted, though apparently more because his pipe had gone out. He relit it with the taper. Uncle’s jaw clenched, but we both knew there was no hurrying the fellow when he was doing this “smoking,” as he called it. When I’d first heard the term as a boy, I’d thought he was setting himself on fire. The war had made the leaves that he burned hard to come by, so he made them last. After a few more puffs, he set the pipe on the little table by his chair and picked up the object we’d brought him.

It was a circular mirror, about a foot across. The size alone made it valuable, but Uncle was convinced there was more to it than that. Yindrath held it with the back to us, which was made of metal so blue that it was almost black. The colour was perfectly even, with no variations I could see, making it look more like a hole than anything solid. When we’d found the mirror, I’d touched the back and felt nothing — it was neither hot nor cold, rough nor smooth. It was as if I’d simply halted the movement of my hand without being aware of choosing to do so. Yindrath tilted the mirror this way and that, causing the firelight to play over his face. The shifting shadows made him look like a monster from my nightmares, and I

repressed a shudder.

He laid the mirror on his lap. The glass and the silver — if it was silver — were smoother than any mirror I'd seen before. It had a surround of the same dark blue metal as the back, with six small rubies spaced equally. Between the rubies were inlays of gold lettering — at least, I assumed it was lettering. I could read Asdanundish, of course, and make sense of Brothric and had even started learning the Nuhysean alphabet, but these curling symbols were wholly strange to me. They also gave the only clue that the mirror might be the work of mortal hands, instead of having fallen out of Kashalbe's boudoir — a few of the curves had flecks of gold missing.

Yindrath took several slow, shallow breaths and cupped his hands together a foot above the mirror. His eyelids fluttered. I'd known he was good, but hadn't realised he didn't need words. He opened his hands.

Nothing was there. The old man frowned and cupped his hands again.

"I *told* you it screws with magic," said Uncle.

Yindrath lowered his hands and gave a smirk. "The wind blowing the wrong way screws with *your* magic."

Uncle snatched the mirror and stood up, carrying it to the other end of the room. "Try it now."

The old man shrugged and cast his spell again. When he opened his hands, the light that he revealed was weaker than a candle, and only the size of a pea. He gazed at it in mild annoyance, and then clapped his hands together, extinguishing it. "So there's a lot of magic bound up in that thing. That should make it easy for the Peace to find it. Which makes me wonder how it lay undetected in Dyareg's attic for so many years."

"I don't like being called a liar," said Uncle. He would never deny being a liar, just say he didn't like to be called one.

Yindrath sighed. To me, he said, "Fetch me the Elangic dictionary from the middle bookcase, third shelf."

Elangic? The mirror was in too good a condition to be that old, surely. I levered myself out of the chair's numerous cushions and went to the indicated spot. Several other dictionaries and glossaries were on that shelf, fat volumes that might break your toes if carelessly dropped. The Elangic dictionary was a pamphlet by comparison, barely the thickness of my thumb. I took it back to him. Uncle had propped the mirror against a vase on the table. Yindrath had transcribed the inscription around the mirror's edge onto a slate. He accepted the dictionary and started flipping through it.

Ten minutes passed, with the silence broken only by the sounds of Yindrath writing and turning pages, and the occasional pop from the fire.

"Can't we leave him to it and come back later?" I whispered.

"Come back tomorrow and I should've learned all its secrets," Yindrath said, not looking up.

"We don't mind waiting," Uncle said, grinding his teeth.

"Don't you trust me?" said Yindrath.

"I trust you like my cousin Tynan," said Uncle.

"Didn't he cheat you out of four thousand svara?"

"Like I said, I trust you like my cousin Tynan."

So we waited, as the fire burned low. At Yindrath's suggestion, I rebuilt it and set some red tea brewing. I preferred black, but most people couldn't afford to be choosy these days. When I'd poured it, Yindrath said, "I have a rough translation — nothing helpful, I'm afraid.

It just identifies the mirror as the property of some long-dead person from some faraway place.” He frowned. “Then again, he could’ve lived next door, seeing as hardly any of their place names survive. Fetch me the green box from the top of the right-hand bookcase.”

The box was leather-bound, about a foot square, and much heavier than it looked. Yindrath unlocked it with a key from his pocket and leafed through a pile of loose papers. He pulled out a sheet with twelve circles drawn on it, in three columns of four. Each circle had the numbers one to six written around it in a different order. “If I’m right about what this thing is, one of these will unlock it.”

I held my breath as Yindrath picked up the mirror and touched the rubies in the sequence indicated by the numbers around the top left circle.

Nothing happened.

He tried the next sequence. Still nothing happened. He muttered something that sounded rude and tried the next one. Still nothing. He tried all the rest, with the same result. He shrugged and offered the mirror back to Uncle. “Either it’s broken, or it needs a sequence that’s not on this list.”

“What’s supposed to happen when you have the right sequence?” said Uncle.

Yindrath shrugged.

“Couldn’t you just try all possible sequences?” I said.

Yindrath scowled at me. “It’d take weeks. D’you think I’ve nothing better to do?”

I quailed. “A few hours, at the most. There are seven hundred and twenty possible ways of arranging six objects — seven hundred and eight, now that you’ve tried twelve that don’t work.”

Uncle held the mirror out to me. “Don’t let me stop you.”

It was much lighter than something with that much metal and glass had any right to be. I still found it unnerving how bright and detailed the reflection of myself was, and how closely it mimicked every detail of my expression. I could count the flecks in my irises, and the short hairs under my chin, where I didn’t shave as thoroughly as I should. The rubies seemed to glow with a light not of the room, inviting my touch. Seven hundred and eight possible sequences might not take very long to test — but how would I be sure I’d tried all of them, and wasn’t repeating myself? Or maybe...

I showed the mirror to both of them. “Would you say one of these rubies is bigger than the others?”

“That one,” said Uncle, pointing to it, “but there isn’t much to choose between them.”

Yindrath agreed.

“Then if it’s the biggest, perhaps it’s the most important, and should be at the top.” I rotated the mirror accordingly. I asked Uncle to call out the first sequence. The rubies seemed to yield slightly under my touch. I got the impression this was deliberate, not a sign of age. Nothing happened. I tried the second sequence. Still nothing. I hesitated before trying the third.

A faint, high-pitched note came from the mirror, like a girl singing, and it vibrated like a beaten drum.

“Put it down,” said Uncle, fear lining his face.

Before I could obey, a blinding white light sprang from the mirror’s surface. The mirror slipped from my shaking hands and crashed to the floor.

“Goddess-damned idiot,” Uncle growled, moving towards me. I couldn’t bring myself to look at the floor — a priceless object, ruined by my carelessness. From the corner of my eye, I saw him bend to pick it up. He gasped.

“Look at this,” he said, taking the mirror to Yindrath. It still glowed with a white light, stronger than the light from the fire.

Yindrath gasped and muttered what sounded like, “Mazor guard us.” I hadn’t marked him as the religious type. He motioned me to join them.

Curiosity edging out shame and fear, I came over to them. Now it was my turn to gasp. The mirror no longer showed a reflection. What I’d thought was a simple white glow was a picture — a landscape, but none like I’d ever seen. The ground was a sweeping white plain, with jagged hills to the left, also white. The sky was a deep, cloudless blue. On the right, cut off by the edge of the mirror, was a grey walled city, broad and squat.

“Whoever painted this was good,” said Uncle, “though I don’t think much of his choice of subject.”

“It’s not a painting,” said Yindrath. “Somewhere, there’s another mirror just like this one, and what we’re seeing is what that mirror is looking at.”

“Ridiculous,” Uncle snorted. “Where would you find somewhere with white ground and white hills?”

“Far to the south,” said Yindrath, “or farther to the north. That white stuff is called ‘snow.’ It falls out of the sky instead of rain in very cold places.”

“And how would you know? You told me you’d never been further than Seltrakht.”

“Do you believe in the existence of dragons?”

“Of course,” said Uncle.

“Even though you’ve never seen one?”

I could see where this was heading, and grinned.

“Yes...” said Uncle.

“Then is it so hard to believe in the existence of something you’ve seen only in a magic mirror?”

Uncle scratched his beard. “I suppose not.”

“So,” I said, shifting from one foot to the other, “if we can see whatever that other mirror is looking at, does that mean someone who looks into the other mirror can see us?”

“Yes,” said Yindrath.

“How do we stop it, then?”

“The same way you started it.”

I took the mirror from Uncle. I’d expected it to be warm from his hands, but it still produced no sensation in my fingers, other than its weight. I touched the rubies in the same sequence I’d used to bring forth the picture, and it vanished as suddenly as if someone had slammed a door on it. I gazed again on my own reflection.

Uncle rubbed his chin and stared into the distance. I knew that look well — he was planning something. I just hoped *this* scheme wouldn’t end with us in court. “How much do I owe you?” he asked Yindrath.

“Five svara.”

“Five?!”

“If you can find another antiquary who even knows what that thing is, I’ll refund my fee,” Yindrath said.

Muttering, Uncle reached into his purse and handed over the coins.

Chapter 2

When we got home, Mara, our maid, came out of the porch to greet us, worry creasing her face.

“Something wrong?” Uncle asked.

She wiped her hands on her apron and glanced over her shoulder. “Shanu’s here.”

I clapped a hand over my mouth as my stomach flipped. I’d completely forgotten I was supposed to be having dinner with Shanu and her family today.

Uncle gave a wry grin as Mara stood aside to let me enter the house. “Good luck,” he said.

Shanu was waiting in the visiting room. Uncle used to tell me that was how we knew we were well-to-do, that we had a room specifically for receiving guests, not used for anything else. Except that now it was being used to store all the stuff we’d salvaged from Dyareg’s house — all the stuff we hadn’t thrown out immediately, anyway. Shanu sat on the edge of the couch, prim and upright, partly because she was a young lady and that’s how young ladies sat, but mostly because the rest of the couch was occupied by a stack of dented saucepans, a parasol stand, and a stuffed bear’s head. She gave me a smile that could’ve drawn blood.

“Raltarn. How delightful to see you. I’m so glad you found room for me in your busy social calendar.”

I held up my hands. “Shanu, I’m sorry, I got caught up in something and —”

She cut me off with, “Rather like I found room for myself in here amid all the clutter.” She stood and hitched up her skirt. I averted my eyes from her ankles and put the mirror where she’d been sitting. She went to the door, picking her way like a sandpiper over and among the obstacles Uncle had strewn in her path. Hand on the doorknob, she turned and asked, “What are you waiting for?”

“I’m sorry, I thought —”

“Well don’t think. Not as much, anyway.” She held out her other hand. I took it — that I didn’t have to think about. My stomach flipped again, but in a good way this time.

In the hall, we manoeuvred around Uncle and Mara. Shanu and Uncle exchanged pleasant greetings.

Outside, Shanu said with a little sigh, “You have a lot to recommend you, sweetness. I just wish I didn’t have to run after you all the time.”

“I said I was sorry,” I said.

“Well don’t. A gentleman never apologises.”

Because he never does anything he has to apologise for. My old schoolmaster’s words echoed in my head. I guessed that meant I wasn’t a gentleman.

I looked around for a taxi, not seeing one. Shanu tugged gently on my hand, leading me along the footpath.

“Do you want to walk?” I said.

“Don’t sound so surprised. It’s only ten minutes. Quicker than waiting for a taxi at this time of day.” Walking between our houses was quicker than a taxi at just about any time of day, but that wasn’t the point.

“How late am I?” I asked, not sure I wanted to know the answer.

“About a quarter of an hour.”

That wasn’t as bad as I feared, but still half an hour later than I’d have liked to be. At the junction of Coopers’ Street and Vintners’ Street, we had to wait while a column of soldiers marched across our route. They looked to be raw recruits, some of them younger than me. Many hadn’t quite got the hang of keeping step with their comrades, and kept bumping into

the man behind or in front of them.

One soldier, older and with a more certain pace than most, grinned and waved at Shanu. “I’ll kill a dragon for you, Miss!”

I gripped her hand tighter and forced myself not to scowl. How dare he be so familiar with a lady?

She returned a little smile and wave. “I very much doubt that,” she murmured when the column had passed.

“They’ll be doing well if they manage to kill one between them,” I said.

She nodded sadly. “My cousin sold his horse to the Army the other day.”

“I thought it was on its last legs,” I said.

“She, not it. They didn’t seem to care, and they gave him a third more than the knackers were offering.”

“No wonder you have to wait so long for a taxi these days.”

As we turned the corner of the street where Shanu lived, I slipped my hand out of hers — it wouldn’t do to be so affectionate where her parents might see us. Their house was at the end of the street, a quiet cul-de-sac. It stood on about an eighth of an acre, most of which was at the front, the better to impress the neighbours. The house was larger than ours — Uncle could probably have told you by how many square feet. When he’d first met her parents, he’d offered to redecorate their visitors’ room, which had gone down about as well as a dancing troupe at a Mazorean vigil. In spite of that, they’d agreed to our engagement, though they didn’t invite Uncle to dine with them any more than protocol deemed necessary.

“Relax,” whispered Shanu as she pushed open the gate.

I noticed my fists had clenched, and swallowed to moisten my throat. This never got any easier.

We walked up the path. It took a broad arc rather than going straight. That was a trick to make the garden seem bigger, Uncle had told me, by making you take longer to traverse it than if it was straight. They still had their shrubs and flower beds. Most of the people of Symeera had switched to growing vegetables, but Shanu’s parents were rich enough not to need to bother. I sometimes wondered if they’d noticed there was a war going on.

Shanu put her hand on the lock of the front door and whispered the spell to open it. A tingly warmth passed over me, almost like when we held hands. I loved seeing her do magic. Inside the porch, I cast a light spell while she locked the door. That was one concession to the war — since tallow had become more expensive, her family had stopped leaving lanterns burning in unoccupied rooms. I moved the light over my head to let her lead the way to the dining room at the back of the house. I held my breath as she opened its door.

Her parents sat at the far side of the dining table, silhouetted by the late afternoon sun that streamed in over the river and the west side of the city. Every time I ate dinner here, I wondered why they chose to turn their backs on this view — a thousand years of history spread before them.

“Sir, Lady,” I said, “I must apologise for our lateness. It was my fault —”

Shanu’s father cut me off with a shake of his head. He wasn’t interested in excuses. *A gentleman never apologises.* With a barely perceptible wave of his hand, he indicated that we should sit. He nodded to the butler, who pulled a rope hanging in the corner. Somewhere in the depths of the house, a bell rang.

Sweat trickled down my back as we waited. The door opened, and the butler — I’d never learned his name, in all the time I’d been calling here — accepted a tray of soup from the cook and distributed it to us. I thought it might be lark tongue, but I barely tasted it. We didn’t

speaking during the meal — that, I'd learned early on, was another distinction between rich people and the rest of us. They could afford to concentrate on doing one thing at a time.

The meal went on long enough that by the time the butler was serving the dessert, he had to cast a light spell to see what he was doing. Rich people didn't perform magic, as a rule — they had servants to do it for them. The dessert was something cold and crunchy that tasted faintly of lemons. I would've preferred to skip it, as it made my teeth hurt, but that would've been even ruder than arriving late.

Finally, the butler brought in a bottle of sweet wine and poured us all a glass. He placed the bottle at Father's elbow, then lit a candle in the middle of the table and left the room.

We sipped at our wine, and then Father said, "So, young Sir, it's nearly a year since you first proposed marriage to our daughter."

My head swam, as if I'd downed the entire glass. "Yes, Sir — a fortnight tomorrow. I was thinking perhaps a little celebration — with your permission of course — perhaps a boating trip on the lake —?"

"Before Shanu, the longest engagement in our family was ten months."

Oh. I tried not to bite my lip.

"We were curious to know how much longer you intend to keep our daughter waiting."

I glanced at Shanu, who appeared to be clenching her teeth. "I, I realise, Sir, it is inappropriate to, to test a lady's patience, but I wish to ensure that I can provide Shanu with the type of living she is — to which she is accustomed."

Father leaned back and drank some more of his wine. "Very wise, young Sir. But surely you recall that you said almost exactly the same words to me when you first requested my leave to promise yourself to her?"

I sipped at my own wine, willing my hand not to tremble as I put the glass back down. "I did, Sir."

"And what progress have you made towards that end in the eleven and a half months since?"

"I've accumulated about four hundred svara from investments and working in my uncle's business." To be honest, it was mostly from investments: Uncle got away with paying me a lot less than he would've anyone else, because he let me live rent-free and paid for most of what we ate.

Mother tittered. "Do you think you'll be living in a stable in Darmath?"

Father gave her a brief scowl. "I would have hoped to hear two or three times that sum. I cannot help but wonder whether your intentions towards our daughter are entirely serious — that is to say, whether you've been wasting our time." He lifted his glass.

I gulped. "Quite serious, Sir. I — I love Shanu with all my heart. I would —"

He set his glass down with a loud clink. "Love, young Sir, is a luxury you cannot afford. I want you to double your fortune in the next three months, or we will cancel the engagement."

I felt as though I was falling, and grabbed the edge of the table. I let go before I pulled the cloth off.

"Father, please," said Shanu.

"You've had more than enough time already, young Sir. I'm only giving you fair warning."

"He's a good man, Father," said Shanu. "I don't mind living somewhere... smaller and more remote." She glanced at me, as though hopeful she wouldn't have to make good on the promise.

“Three months,” said Father. “No more.” He stood, signalling that the conversation was over, and left the room, Mother following him. The butler spent a minute or two clearing the table. I handed my glass to him, still half-full of wine. That was rude, but I had no stomach for the stuff now.

Once the butler had gone, Shanu moved her chair closer and laid her hand on mine. My breath caught in my throat at the thought someone might come in and see us.

“I’m sorry, sweetness,” she whispered. Her eyes glistened. Evidently it was acceptable for a lady to apologise — even for things that weren’t her fault.

For a moment, I pressed my lips together to stop them trembling. “Did you know?”

With the tiniest shake of her head, she replied, “He told me this morning. It was horrible of him to put you down like that in front of Mother and me.” She sniffed. “I’ll try to persuade him to give you more time —”

I cut her off with, “Do you think I won’t manage it?” and immediately wished I hadn’t.

Shanu withdrew her hand and looked down, blinking. “If — if it was my decision alone — if it was just a matter of love...”

But it wasn’t, and it wasn’t. “The other day, my uncle said with summer nearly over, the action at the front should be picking up again soon. He was talking about buying a stake in some supply contracts for the army.”

Her body stiffened, and she stared at me. “Don’t say that to Father if he asks about your plans.”

I stared back. “Why not?”

“He’s just lost a lot of money on one of those contracts.”

“How?” I’d thought they were as certain as anything could be in these uncertain times.

“The White Dragons ambushed the wagon train.”

“Those traitors?” I said. “Why hasn’t the army hung them yet?”

A corner of her mouth lifted. “I suppose they have to catch them first. But they’re getting bolder. The train was only two days out of the city.”

I shuddered. That might mean an attack on Symeera itself was imminent — though I’d never heard of the White Dragons striking at settlements. Weak and cowardly, they’d stuck to stealing and destroying supplies that were *en route* to the front line.

“The insurance should cover his losses, though?” I said.

She sighed. “He expects so, but it could be months before they pay. And that’s not really the point, is it? These attacks could cost us the war.”

We talked of inconsequential things after that. Soon it was time for me to leave, to be sure of reaching home before curfew. We stood, sharing a brief, delicate embrace, and kissed one another on the cheeks.

“Sometimes I wish we didn’t have to be quite so well-mannered,” she whispered as she let go of me. “You look as though you need a bigger hug than it would be polite to give you.”

My eyes stung. “I’ll be fine,” I said, though I could’ve done with a hug like that. I bade her farewell and left the building.

Chapter 3

I reached our street just as the curfew bell rang, and trotted the rest of the way. No light came from any of our windows — Mara would have gone home already, and Uncle must be

in bed. I stood in the porch to catch my breath, still not quite believing the ultimatum Shanu's father had given me. I'd thought things had been going well — to be honest, I'd hoped her parents would help to support us for a year or so after the wedding.

Three months to earn as much money as I had in the last year. Could it be done? Not by clearing junk from dead people's houses, that much I knew. Four hundred svara would be a very good start to a household for most people. Did I really want such a grasping, calculating man as my father-in-law? No, but I had no choice. People had no influence over who their parents were.

I cast a light spell and went into the visiting room, trying to estimate how much we'd get for the stuff from Dyareg's house. Fifty svara, maybe, once our costs were taken out, split between Uncle and me. Perhaps seventy-five if we separated the valuable items and found more specialised buyers for them.

My gaze fell on the mirror we'd taken to Yindrath. That had to be worth something now that we knew what it did. If he was right that it was Elangic — and the workmanship and its enchantment seemed to confirm that — it had to be at least a thousand years old. How much could we get for it? I had no idea. On the one hand, it was rare, possibly one of only two in the world. On the other, it had little practical value except as something to see your reflection in. Unless...

I moved to pick up the mirror, and my light went out. I froze for a moment, then backed away, hoping I wouldn't trip over anything in the dark. I cast another light spell. This one was noticeably dimmer than the first. I went to the kitchen for a candle — Mara, being an indifferent magician, found them easier than making her own light. I lit it with another spell and retrieved the mirror, then went upstairs to my room.

By itself, the mirror was an ornament or a piece of art. But what if we had the other one of the pair as well? Two people could communicate at any distance, as quickly and easily as if they were in the same room. To get the other mirror, obviously I'd need to know where it was. It could be anywhere in the world, but there might be clues in the picture itself that would help me.

I removed the mirror from its leather case and propped it on my chair. I took a deep breath and touched the mirror's rubies in the sequence I'd discovered.

Straight away the snowy scene appeared before me. I gasped involuntarily at its brightness and sharp detail. Yindrath had said the snow meant it had to be in a high latitude. The sun had appeared at the left of the picture, fairly high in the sky, and I took this as meaning the other mirror was west of here. West and south would put it on an island in the Tian Ocean, or perhaps even the continent of Elangir. The latter made more sense, given the mirrors' provenance — perhaps in the days when Elangir had an empire, the emperor used these mirrors to stay in touch with the provincial governors.

The city looked deserted. Its walls might hide a multitude, but any inhabitants would surely light fires to keep themselves warm, and I saw no smoke.

I reached under the bed and pulled out a flat wooden box, disturbing a thick layer of dust as I did so. Mara never cleaned under there; perhaps she thought the past was better left buried. With a deep breath, I flipped the catches.

Inside, my father's navigation instruments shone as brightly as the last time I'd looked at them. That would've been a year or so after Uncle had come home and told me he was going to be looking after me from now on. Sight blurring, I set the box on the floor and lay on the bed. I'd thought I was done crying over Father.

I didn't see him all that often when I was a boy, but when he was at home, he packed in

more than other boys' fathers did in the whole time they were there. I still remembered how scared I'd been of the rhinoceros in the old Zoological Gardens, and how curious I'd been about the bears, sweltering under their fur. Then there were the fishing trips upriver, and the jaunts around the bay in Uncle Tomaz's rowing boat. Tomaz had done his best to raise me, but Father's death had dealt me a blow from which I'd never fully recovered.

Well, now I'd just have to do *my* best. I dried my eyes and lifted the contents of the box onto the table. Among the brass instruments were charts rolled up in leather tubes and a small thick book. The book contained tables of numbers, tide times for all the ports around Asdanund and most of those around Nuhys — a remnant of a simpler time. The charts were mostly of the seas around Asdanund. They looked odd, as the water was full of details — depths and currents, as far as I could tell — while the land was featureless, except for a few prominent hills and buildings. I found one chart of the known world, which showed the north and east coasts of Elangir and only the vaguest sketch of its west and south coasts. Under this was a thin brass plate engraved with a chart of the stars.

The largest of the instruments was an astrolabe, used to measure angles, mainly for determining latitude. That required you to measure the height of the sun above the horizon at noon, and it looked as though that time had already passed at the other mirror, so it would have to wait until tomorrow.

For longitude, most navigators preferred to use a declinometer, a complex apparatus of pendulums and balances that told you the strength and direction of the local magical field. You already knew your latitude from the astrolabe, so you looked up the field vector in a set of tables, and that gave your longitude to within about a tenth of a degree — roughly six miles, good enough for most work. But unless the mirror was much cleverer than I thought, I wouldn't be able to measure the field through it.

Where was Father's declinometer, anyway? I rummaged through the box, not finding it. He had only the one case for the tools of his trade, so why would that one instrument be missing? I might've assumed Uncle had sold it, except that there was no second-hand market in navigators' instruments. But worrying about that wasn't going to help me find the other mirror. I'd have to use the other method — calculate the difference in local time between the two places.

I had at least a few hours to wait before the stars appeared in the other mirror, and so went downstairs to brew some tea. As I sipped it, I tried to estimate what the pair of mirrors might be worth if we sold them. Couriers charged to deliver letters according to weight and distance. But the picture in the mirror had no weight, and could go halfway round the world as easily as down the street. On the other hand, you couldn't send messages wherever you wanted, only between the places where the mirrors happened to be.

Perhaps, then, instead of selling the mirrors to a couple of rich or important people, we could keep them and use them to send messages for other people. If we kept one in Symeera and put the other in, say, Darmath, letters could save a nine-day journey by sea — eighteen days for a reply to come back. We could then charge based on how long it took the scribes to copy a letter when they read it in the mirror. Even better, it would be much more profitable than sending a letter by ship, because we'd be paying only for two scribes, not the ship and its crew. I had no idea how many letters crossed the Sea of Mulkara every day, but given that it cost a svar and a half to send one, there was a lot of money to be made if we could do it faster. Of course, before we could start making money, I had to find the other mirror. I drank another two cups and headed back upstairs to watch for sunset.

Waiting made the time pass more slowly. I thought of Shanu — her smile, her laughter,

her soft voice — and wondered whether our first child would be a boy or a girl. A boy would be better for carrying on the family business, but she'd want to name him after her father, and I wasn't sure I could live with a reminder of that man in my house — our house.

Despite the tea, I dozed off a couple of times, but gradually the sun in the mirror sank towards the horizon, and the sky grew darker. A few stars were visible at the top of the sky, not enough for me to be confident of identifying them. The city showed no lights, reinforcing my belief that it was deserted.

I picked up the star chart and gazed out of the window. My room faced roughly east, and so was well-placed for seeing stars as they rose. The night was relatively clear, so I should see plenty of them. Buildings and hills obscured the horizon, which would delay my sighting of each new star by about ten minutes.

I knew a few of the main constellations, and gradually picked them out. There was the Tiger, which meant the one below it was the Dragon, upside-down, defeated but not dead — never dead. The ancients had better imaginations than me, or perhaps not as much to occupy themselves in the evenings. I wondered if they'd held meetings to discuss what to call the constellations, or if some fellow with nothing better to do had announced one day that he'd divided the stars into groups and come up with names for them. Had they thought he was mad? Or had they argued with him — “That group of four isn't a tower — it looks more like a shield.” “Don't be daft — our shields are round. Rectangular shields won't be invented for another five hundred years. It's a crab.” “A crab? That's mad.” “No madder than any of these other groups. Who ever heard of a tiger defeating a dragon, anyway?”

Eventually, the sky in the mirror was dark enough to pick out constellations. The first one I recognised was the fuzzy red patch known as the Camp Fire, much lower in the sky than I'd ever seen it. Father had mentioned that as you moved north or south, the stars shifted in the opposite direction, to the point where some disappeared under one horizon and new ones came in at the other.

I picked out the Tiger at the edge of picture, and now realised that I couldn't see the horizon in any direction. I wasn't even sure which way the other mirror was facing, though it must be more south than north, and more east than west — otherwise I wouldn't see any familiar constellations. I'd have to wait for the Dragon to rise over there and make a guess as to how high it was here. Better than that — I could use Father's astrolabe to measure the height of the Dragon here.

I struggled with the instrument's bulk to align it with where I'd guessed the horizon was, and then tilted the crosspiece to sight on the lowest star in the Dragon. How had Father controlled this monstrosity? It seemed to require three hands. The best I could manage was that the star was now between seventy and eighty degrees above the horizon, meaning that the other mirror was between five and six thousand miles west of here. I laid the astrolabe on the bed, rubbing my arms to ease some of the fatigue. I could scarcely contemplate such a distance — eight times further than from here to Nuhys. Even without bad weather or any obstacles to sail around, that was a four-month return trip. If we departed tomorrow, by the time we got back, Shanu would have had to accept another suitor.

Chapter 4

The following morning, Uncle had to wake me by banging on my door. I got dressed and yawned my way through breakfast.

“Did you not sleep well?” he asked me over the rim of his teacup. “Fretting over your beloved?”

“In a manner of speaking.” I told him about her father’s ultimatum.

Uncle rubbed his chin. “I always thought he was after us for our money, but I wouldn’t have expected him to be so obvious about it. This time yesterday, I would’ve told you to give up right away and deal with the shame of a broken engagement, as there wouldn’t have been any chance of earning as much as he wants.”

I yawned again and gave him an insincere smile. “But now you think we could find the mirror that pairs with our one and charge people to use them to send letters between here and Darmath, or maybe here and Sondis.”

Uncle frowned. “Actually I was thinking we might sell them to a couple of noble ladies to use for exchanging gossip. But yes, my boy — sometimes it pays to think big.”

I shook my head. “It’s at least five thousand miles away. Probably nearer six or seven. There’s no way we can go there, find it and return within the three months.”

Uncle waved his hand dismissively. “It doesn’t matter if it takes a year. When you come back, you can have your pick of Symeera’s eligible ladies.”

I scowled. “I’ve already picked. I can’t go gallivanting to the other side of the world on an expedition that might bankrupt us.”

“If you’re sure you want her and no one else, I’ll go and see if he’ll give you more time.”

If he agreed, our plan for the mirrors might yet salvage my engagement. If he refused, the engagement was gone either way, so I had nothing to lose now. But — “I’ll do it.” Half of my future happiness depended on marrying Shanu. The other half depended on keeping my uncle and her father apart.

“All right. I’ll see about chartering a ship.” He drained his tea and stood up. “And I shouldn’t need to say this, but not a word to anybody about the mirror.”

I went to Shanu’s house. The butler told me the family were visiting one of her father’s cousins and weren’t expected to return until tomorrow morning. I said I’d call again tomorrow afternoon.

Back home, I activated the mirror, and its glass went black. For a moment, I feared it was broken, and then I remembered it was still night in the other place. As I stared into the mirror, my eyes adjusted to pick out stars — fewer than I expected. Perhaps it was cloudy.

Without stars here, I couldn’t make my estimate for the longitude more accurate, and I couldn’t estimate the latitude until midday there — a good twelve hours away if I was anywhere near right about the longitude. I went in search of a hook for the astrolabe, or a length of metal I could bend into one.

In one of the smaller boxes of miscellaneous rubbish we’d taken from Dyareg’s house, I found a piece of thick wire about eight inches long. I measured it against the astrolabe to confirm my design would work, and then cast some spells to bend it into the shape I wanted. It was tiring work, and nowhere near as neat as a blacksmith could have done, but Uncle’s warning not to involve anyone else echoed in my mind.

I found a hammer and some nails, and bashed one of the nails halfway into the top of the window frame. I hung the hook over the nail and gingerly hung the astrolabe from it. My contraption held. I looked out of the window at the passers-by to see if any of them had noticed this strange apparition, but none had, as far as I could tell. People hardly ever look up. I took some sightings on the tops of nearby buildings for practice, and then put the astrolabe away.

Sunrise at the other mirror was much earlier than I’d thought it would be — around ten

o'clock here. I recalled hearing that at high latitudes, the length of the day varied greatly with the seasons. Here, we hardly knew what seasons were. I decided to try measuring the sun's height to work out how it was done. I determined that the sun in the picture was a fifth of the apparent diameter of the real sun, meaning that I'd have to multiply angles in the picture by five to get their real sizes. After much measuring and drawing and calculating, I was confident that I could find the angle between the sun and the horizon. Now I just had to do that at noon in the picture, when the sun would be at its highest. I wouldn't know that until it had already happened, so I decided to measure the sun's height periodically. From the kitchen, I fetched a miniature hourglass that Mara sometimes used to time the boiling of an egg.

I wasn't good at waiting. I fretted and fidgeted, noticing every little distraction, looking everywhere except at the hourglass. More than once, I missed a measurement and wanted to kick myself. But eventually, after I'd turned the hourglass more than a hundred times, I made a couple of measurements that were the same as the ones before. The next one was smaller, the next smaller still.

Breathless, I went through the calculations for the largest measurement and applied the correction for the ephemeris from Father's tables. Allowing for the fact that the astrolabe was marked only to the nearest degree, the other mirror's latitude was between sixty-five and seventy degrees south of the equator. Not as far as I'd feared, but still a good two thousand miles south of here — and still an uncertainty of about three hundred miles.

Did we really have any hope of finding the mirror in that much uncharted territory? We'd wander around the icy wastes until our food ran out, or some wild animal killed us. Shanu would never see me again — would never find out what had happened to me. She'd mourn for as long as was proper, then would marry someone else — someone her father approved of. I couldn't do that to her. It would break her heart, twice over. I'd stay here. Let Uncle go alone on his search for barrels of fish fur. But then I wouldn't be able to afford to marry Shanu — I didn't imagine for a moment that Uncle would give me any of the profit if I didn't go, even though without me, he wouldn't have a clue where to start looking.

The slow tolling of a bell pulled me out of my introspection — the Mazorean temple summoning the faithful to evening prayer. It reminded me that I hadn't eaten since breakfast. I wondered why Mara hadn't called me to dinner, before remembering today was her day off. Was it my turn to cook? If so, Uncle should be shouting at me to get on with it... no, he wasn't home yet. How long did it take to charter a ship, anyway?

I should make something to stave off my own hunger. Uncle could feed himself if he didn't come home on time. I picked up the mirror to conceal its picture when it occurred to me that I now knew the difference in the time of day between here and the other mirror. The Mazorean bell was rung by a mechanical clock, which was widely considered to be the most accurate in Asdanund. It rang at six o'clock, and noon had passed at the other mirror, so it had to be less than ninety degrees west of here. How much less? Two turns of the egg timer to realise noon had passed, a turn and a half calculating, probably another turn feeling sorry for myself... So how long was a turn of the egg timer? Long enough to boil an egg, obviously.

I hid the mirror under my bedclothes, then slipped the egg timer into a pocket and headed out to Kandar Square, from where I could see the clock. The last few stragglers were hurrying into the temple. The clock was marked in half-hour divisions, so I stood there until seven o'clock, feeling like an idiot as my eyes continually flicked between the clock and the egg timer. Secular clocks had mechanical figures that performed a little dance on the intervals

that they wanted to mark, but the Mazoreans, of course, considered that sort of thing frivolous. Even the bell had been a compromise between the traditional and progressive wings of the church.

I expected a Man of the Peace to ask me what I was doing, but apart from a few passers-by who gave me strange looks, nobody paid me any attention. The sand was about halfway through its eighth fall at the end of the half-hour. So one fall took about four minutes, which meant that noon at the other mirror had occurred about eighteen minutes before the bell rang. So local time at the other mirror was five hours and forty two minutes later than here, meaning it was... eighty-five and a half degrees west. Not quite a quarter of the way round the world, but not far off. I put the timer away and headed home.

By the right-angled triangle theorem, the other mirror was about six thousand four hundred miles away in a straight line, and doubtless much longer allowing for sailing along coasts. Father had once mentioned that ships averaged a hundred miles a day, so my estimate of two months to get there had been optimistic. Shoulders sagging, I turned around and headed for home.

Chapter 5

Uncle was in the kitchen when I got home. “Where’ve you been?”

I showed him the egg timer. “To see how long this runs for. I wanted to measure it against the clock on the Mazorean temple.”

He sighed. “You could’ve just asked Mara.” He took two cups from the cupboard and set them on the table.

“It’s her day off, remember? And she’d have just said ‘as long as it takes me to boil an egg.’” I filled the kettle and uttered the spell to light the fire under it. “So what happened down at the docks?”

“I can’t believe how much it costs to charter a ship for six months. I’m going to have to call in some favours. Most captains won’t agree to any voyage longer than three months.”

“You offered them a share of the profits?” I said.

“Yes, but we don’t know how much this thing is worth. And since I won’t tell them what it is, they want to charge me full rate.”

The kettle started to whistle, and I whisked it off the burner, placing it on the half tile that we used to let it cool. I poured the tea and handed him his cup.

He sipped his tea and sighed. “And you were right about them not wanting to search such a big area. They’ll sail to a specific point on the map, but if we don’t know exactly where we want to be, they’ll charge us for the time we spend wandering around — which could be longer than we spent getting there in the first place.”

“I’ve got some good news about that,” I said. I told him how I’d narrowed down the position of the other mirror.

“I don’t understand degrees,” he said. “Can you compare it to something I can understand, like the size of Symeera?”

I gave a hollow laugh. “If it was only that big, we’d have no problem finding it. Five degrees of latitude is about three hundred miles. Five degrees of longitude at that latitude is about a hundred and fifty miles. We have some idea of what sort of terrain we’re looking for, but it could still take us weeks to search that much ground.”

“Can you make the measurements more accurate?”

“I can try. It would help if I could see the eastern horizon.”

“I shouldn’t think there’s much chance of that around here. But keep at it. I’ll see about tapping a few people for support.”

Around noon the following day, I went to call on Shanu and her parents. The butler answered the door and informed me the family were having lunch. He asked whether I was willing to wait or wanted to come back in about an hour. I decided to wait — I didn’t have anything else I could be doing in the meantime. He showed me into their visiting room and brought me a glass of wine.

I sat in one of the overstuffed chairs and fidgeted, trying to get comfortable. Not for the first time, I wondered whether Shanu’s parents had deliberately chosen furniture for guests that looked attractive but was next-to-impossible to relax in. I sipped at my wine — not one of their better vintages, if I was any judge. My hand shook as I set the glass on the side table. I took a few slow deep breaths to try to calm myself. Maybe I should’ve let Uncle come instead. But no — I was the one pledged to Shanu. If anyone was going to rescue this situation, it should be me.

I gazed at the portraits of the family’s ancestors that hung on the wall. Once again, I was struck by how similar all of them looked. Apart from changes in fashions and hairstyles, I could’ve been looking at pictures of the same people across the centuries. I began to stand to take a closer look, and then the door opened. Startled, I sat down again heavily, rattling the wineglass.

Father entered, then Mother, then Shanu, and finally the butler, who carried a tray with wine for them. He circled around behind the chairs to bring it in from the other side as the family sat down.

“Greetings, Raltarn,” said Father. “I trust you are well.”

I licked my lips. This was how all our conversations began — nothing to fret over. “Thank you, Sir. I am well, and trust you are too. I trust your visit to your cousin was pleasant.”

A scowl crossed Father’s face. From the corner of my eye, I saw Shanu give a barely-perceptible shake of her head. My mind froze as I tried to think of something else to talk about.

“So, young Sir. What is your purpose in coming here?”

That was unusually direct of him. I took a gulp of wine to moisten my throat and steady my nerves.

“Sir, it concerns my engagement to your daughter. I’m about to embark on a business venture with my Uncle, which will make me very rich if it succeeds.”

He snorted. “If it succeeds. Your Uncle doesn’t have a spectacular record on that slate, does he?”

“And...” An itch had formed at the back of my neck. It would be the height of bad manners to scratch it. “It will take more than three months to show a profit. At least six.”

Father snorted again. “Why didn’t you mention this when last you visited us?”

“It’s... supposed to be a secret. I had to get Uncle’s permission to tell you about it. He’s worried someone else will get there first.”

“I don’t like secrets, young Sir.” With a cat-like smile, he added, “At any rate — secrets I’m not party to.”

I took another sip of wine, wondering how little I could get away with telling him. “We believe we have discovered the location of an Elangic artefact. If we can recover it, the right buyer will pay thousands.”

Shanu gasped.

“Oh?” said Father. “And where is this artefact?”

“I... I hope you’ll forgive my rudeness, Sir. Uncle won’t let me tell you.”

“Then can you tell me what it is?”

“No, Sir. I’m sorry.”

He tutted, reminding me of my old schoolmaster. He would ask me a long string of questions on a topic, each following on from the last, before revealing that my answer to the first question had been wrong, and so all the subsequent answers were wrong too. “I know something of the Elangic Empire. Their artefacts turn up all the time on the collectors’ market.”

My eyes widened. I’d had no idea.

“I could tell you what it’s likely to be worth — perhaps save you a lot of time and money.”

It was tempting, I had to admit. But Uncle had instilled just enough suspicion in me to make me say, “I ought to speak to Uncle before I reveal any more, Sir.”

“Very wise,” he replied with a bland smile. “If — *if* — this undertaking proves genuine, you will have the six months you ask for. But not a day longer.”

“Thank you, Sir,” I said, trying not to sag with relief.

He drained his glass and stood up. “You may discuss this matter further with my daughter, if you wish.” He left the room, Mother following him.

Shanu edged closer to me. “Is it true? You aren’t just trying to buy time?”

“Of course it’s true,” I said, bristling.

“So,” she whispered, glancing around, “what is it you’ve found?”

“Uncle told me not to tell anyone,” I said.

She pouted. “Don’t you trust me?”

I squirmed, hating to have my loyalties tested. “I do. But I don’t think Uncle does.”

“Fine.” She pivoted in her seat to turn away from me.

“I’m sorry,” I said. *A gentleman never apologises...* “This could be worth a lot of money, and... I don’t want to risk losing it before we even have it. The... artefact is a long way off — it’ll take at least a couple of months to go there, and as long again to come back.”

“So I won’t see you until next year.”

I frowned. “I suppose not. I hadn’t really thought about it.”

She sat up straighter than before. “You’re planning to abandon me for four months or even six, risking your life at sea to fetch something you can’t tell me about — and you hadn’t really thought about it?”

“I didn’t say it was overseas,” I said. “You shouldn’t assume —”

“Name me one place in Asdanund that takes two months to reach from here.”

I wanted to kick myself. “You see how easy it is to reveal information accidentally?”

“Do you really think I’d say anything?” she said. “I thought you admired my intelligence. Is this how you’re going to conduct your business when we’re married — keeping the simplest things secret from me in case I carelessly blab them to your rivals?”

“Of course not,” I said. “And this is hardly ‘the simplest thing’ — it could make my fortune.”

“Then,” she said, sniffing, “perhaps I shouldn’t keep you from your preparations.”

I finished my wine. “Will I see you for dinner tomorrow?” We took turns visiting, usually every third day.

“Perhaps.” She pouted.

“Why the uncertainty?”

She shrugged. “I might accidentally catch my foot in a rabbit hole and break my leg.”

“When was the last time you saw a rabbit hole around here?”

Shanu laughed and laid her hand on mine. “That’s how I know I love you.”

It had been over a year since she first spoke those words to me, but they still made my heart skip. “How?”

“I can’t stay angry with you for long.”

“Oh. Do you think you should?”

She laughed again. I stood and bowed to her.

“You don’t need to do that when no one else is watching.”

“Are you sure there are no spy holes?”

“Quite sure.” She rolled her eyes. “I made a thorough search for them on a wet afternoon last year.” She stood and turned her head a little from me.

I leaned forward, hoping neither of us had misjudged the distance, and brushed my lips against her pale cheek. The scent of her soap was more dizzying than any wine. “I love you too,” I whispered.

As I withdrew, she tried to follow, evidently meaning to return the kiss. Instead of my cheek, she kissed my bottom lip. Heart pounding, I staggered backwards, nearly tripping over a chair. We weren’t meant to do that yet — not until —

“Sorry,” she said. She didn’t *look* very sorry.

Shaking, I stepped sideways to the door. In the hall, I opened the front door, lingering on the threshold.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, then,” Shanu said. “It’s rather exciting, actually.”

“What?”

“Going to find this — this — whatever-it-is. Nobody in my family’s ever done anything that adventurous.”

Chapter 6

That night, I spent an hour or two watching the mirror for stars rising and trying to measure their heights here. I think I got better at it, but it was slow work — first to be confident I’d found the right star here, then to aim the astrolabe at it. Really, I needed somewhere I could see the horizon here. Somewhere with less haze and smoke would be nice too. That meant a tall building or a hill, but there weren’t many of either nearby, and staying out after curfew would present major problems.

I put everything away and went to bed. In spite of the late hour, I didn’t sleep well. I’d just begun to doze off when an unfamiliar sound woke me. It was dark — not even starlight. Instinctively, I put my hands together and whispered the words of a light spell. A ball of light blossomed.

“Kashalbe’s arse,” growled a voice.

I felt as though I was falling. The light went out.

“Don’t think about trying anything brave,” said the voice. “I can see you in your bed.”

“W-w-where else would I be at th-this time of night?” Gradually, my eyes adjusted, and I picked out some shapes. The reason I hadn’t seen starlight was because this fellow was crouched on the windowsill. My heart pounded. I tried to push the covers off myself, but they were wrapped around my legs. If I called for Uncle, would he hear me? If he did, would he

get here in time?

“Don’t be clever,” said the man. “I can see in the dark.”

I’d never heard of a spell that could do that. “What are you doing here?” I asked.

“You have something I want.”

“What is it?”

“You know perfectly well. Now hand it over, and I can be gone without having to hurt anyone.” Something glinted in his hand — a knife?

I untangled my legs from the bedclothes and sat up. “I’m sorry, I don’t know which object you mean. I’ve got a lot of things here.”

“Something you acquired recently.”

I stood up, my mind whirling. He hadn’t named the thing he’d come for. Maybe he didn’t know what it was. Maybe...

“It’s not here,” I said. “Uncle locks it away.”

“Don’t give me a barrel of fish fur,” the man said. “I know it’s in this room, because it’s interfering with my equipment.”

“Equipment?”

“You don’t think I was born with bat’s eyes, do you?” He tapped the side of his head. Now I noticed a bulge there, like a thick bandage or a severe bruise. “Now stop stalling and hand it over.”

“Who sent you?” Facing him, hands stretched out behind my back, I edged towards my table.

“Thinking of hiring me to steal it back?” He chuckled. “You couldn’t afford me.”

My calf bumped against my chair. Surprised, I stumbled. The chair fell over with a loud bang. My hand caught something on the table and pulled it clattering to the floor.

“Quiet,” he growled. “Make a little light if you must — just enough to find it.”

Trembling, I put my hands together and whispered the words. A tiny white dot appeared between my hands, like a fragile butterfly. It revealed a little more of the intruder. He was dressed entirely in black, with most of his face covered. What I’d thought was a bandage covered his eyes — a wide leather belt around his head, with a couple of brass rings over the eyes, each of them inset with a piece of glossy black stone or perhaps dark glass. How could he see anything through those? He remained perched on the windowsill, like a hideous overgrown raven.

“Hurry up.” He waved the knife at me. Why hadn’t he come into the room? Was he afraid of something here? Could I offer him something else, in the hope he’d think it was the object he was looking for? It was a big risk... but if we lost the mirror, I was good as dead anyway.

“All right,” I said. I turned around to face the table, expecting to feel his knife between my shoulder blades. My hands shook as I flipped the catches on Father’s instrument case.

“I heard it was smaller than that,” the man said.

My stomach lurched. “It — it was stored with a lot of other stuff. The previous owner didn’t real-realise what it was.” That, I supposed, was true enough. I picked up Father’s astrolabe and turned back to the man.

“How stupid do you think I am?” he demanded, grabbing the edge of the window frame and leaning forward. “That’s a—”

He got no further, as I flung the astrolabe at him. It struck him in the chest and he fell out of the window, limbs flailing. I stood there, dumbfounded, waiting for the thud of impact. It didn’t come. I heard a sound, but I was so shocked that I needed several moments to

recognise it — running feet, distant and getting fainter.

Mazor, what had I done? I strengthened my light and rushed to the window. Looking out at the street, I saw no one. I glanced down at the wall below the window. The hero in stories sometimes survived being thrown from the castle's battlements by grabbing the ivy as he fell... we didn't have any ivy. Then where in all the foetid hells was he? Even if the fall hadn't killed him, he couldn't have got up and run off straight away. Or had I been so stunned at my stupidity that he'd had time to recover?

There was no time to worry about such things. I retrieved Father's astrolabe from the floor and closed and barred the shutters. Then, clutching the mirror to my chest, I went to Uncle's room.

Uncle was livid when I told him about the burglar. Far from congratulating me on seeing the fellow off, he seemed to think it was my fault he'd come in the first place. I sat on Uncle's bed and let him pace the room, snarling and gesticulating, describing in graphic terms his views of the burglar and whoever had employed him, their respective relations and ancestors, and the torments he wished to be visited on them in the afterlife — and this one too, if he had his way. Gradually he calmed down to the point where we could discuss what we could do next.

"We should set sail as soon as possible," he said, sitting next to me.

"We still don't know exactly where we're going. I've narrowed it to about two degrees each of longitude and latitude, but that's still the distance from here to the north coast."

"Whoever's behind this is obviously well-funded, which probably means they're not going to give up after tonight. So the only safe place for us right now is at sea."

I shuddered at the thought of the sea being safe in comparison to anywhere.

"Can't you refine your measurements once we've set sail? You'll have plenty of time."

I shook my head. "The ship rolls too much."

He tutted. "You said something about needing to see the horizon."

"The eastern one, yes," I said, "so I can tell exactly how high above it a star is."

"Then this might be the opportunity you've been waiting for. Some of the warehouses on the waterfront have been unoccupied for a few years, what with the war hitting trade. I know someone who owns an upper floor on the Heron Dock that he'd be glad to rent out, and who wouldn't ask too many questions about what we wanted it for."

Not asking too many questions, I'd learned, was a valuable trait in Uncle's eyes — at least in other people.

"It has a big hatch that looks out over the docks, for the crane to lift stuff onto or off of the ships."

"Does it face east?"

He shrugged. "Would you rather stay here?"

"I suppose not."

"Shame about Yindrath."

"What about him?" I said, frowning.

"Well who else do you think sold us out?"

I put a hand to my mouth.

"What?"

"No — no, it couldn't be."

"Tell me."

"When I went to see Shanu's father — to ask for more time..."

"Yes?"

“I... I told him we’d found an Elangic artefact.”

He buried his face in his hands. “Goddess-damned idiot,” he mumbled. Looking up, he asked, “Didn’t I tell you not to tell *anybody* about it?”

I held up my hands. “I didn’t tell him what it was — just that it was Elangic.”

“That doesn’t make it any better. Anything Elangic is valuable enough to be worth stealing.”

I stood, hands on my hips. “Well what was I supposed to do? He’s threatening to call off the wedding because I’m not rich enough to support his daughter!”

Uncle patted my upper arm. “Then you’d better hope that hatch in the warehouse *does* face east.”

We barred all the shutters and barricaded the front and back doors. We spent what remained of the night in the dining room, curled up on blankets, as it was the room furthest from either door — not that I expected the burglar to use a door if he returned. I don’t think either of us slept — every slight noise, real or imagined, set us on edge. But the night passed without incident.

Soon after dawn, Mara gave me an almighty fright by hammering on the front door. When I let her in, she looked askance at the junk we’d piled up behind it, but she didn’t ask why it was there, and I didn’t proffer an explanation.

I struggled with breakfast — my thoughts still churned at how someone had tried to steal the mirror, and how I might have killed or badly wounded him. Mara asked if I was ill, or if something was wrong with the food, but I deflected her questions by saying I simply hadn’t slept well.

Uncle and I took a taxi to the house of the fellow who owned the upper floor of the warehouse. He wasn’t home, but his secretary accompanied us to the building, which was on the eastern-most of the docks.

As we walked towards it along the waterfront, I could see why this place wasn’t in use any more: it was falling to pieces. The whole area looked to be on the point of surrendering to the sea. We had to zigzag around holes in the decking and lumps of masonry that had fallen off the buildings. No ships moored here, and I doubted any had in a long time — all the bollards I could see were rusted, and the only crane had its jib broken. The sun was almost directly to our left, so the buildings on our right faced east — probably the only thing they had to recommend them.

The door of the warehouse we were to use had fallen off, or perhaps been kicked off — the hinges were twisted. The stairs to the upper storey creaked alarmingly. A good chunk of the floor up there had gone, and most of what was left was covered in feathers and bird droppings. At least it didn’t smell, so perhaps they weren’t roosting here now.

I went over to the hatch Uncle had mentioned. It was closed, but I squinted through a knothole. My heart lifted when I saw an unobstructed meeting of sky and sea. I turned to Uncle and the secretary, who stood some way off, arms waving and fingers pointing in what I recognised as intense negotiations.

I cleared my throat. To my surprise, both men looked at me. “We’ll take it,” I said.

Uncle and the secretary wrangled the details of the lease — “we have to appear to be doing things the right way,” Uncle had told me in the taxi. I went home to build a stand for the astrolabe. I found three long battens in our shed and nailed them together to make a tall narrow tripod, using a little magic to strengthen the joints.

I took the stand and the astrolabe back to the warehouse. A generous tip took care of the taxi driver’s grumbling about the awkwardness of transporting the stand.

When I entered the warehouse, Uncle had gone. I set up the astrolabe, and then opened the hatch. The hinges were stiff with rust and salt — I'd have to find some oil if I didn't want to risk snapping it off. I made a few sightings on hills and cliffs further along the bay, confirming that the stand worked. As there was nothing else to do before sunset, I went home to meet Shanu for dinner, leaving the stand behind.

Shanu arrived, in a taxi this time — she was dining with us tonight. When I embraced her in the porch, I thought she felt stiff, as if she didn't want to be near me. We sat in the dining room to wait for the meal, rather than the visitors' room — the latter was as cluttered as when she last came. We chatted about inconsequentialities for a while, as we often did — rich people could afford to take the time to build up to what they really wanted to talk about. Her conversation seemed less easy than normal, and she avoided meeting my gaze, instead fiddling with things on the table. Did she have a secret to hide?

I wasn't rich enough to waltz around. Not yet, anyway. I licked my lips and cleared my throat. "Shanu dearest, I need to ask you something."

She didn't speak. She just looked at me with big sad eyes.

"Last night, we had a-a burglar."

She gasped and put a hand to her mouth.

"It's all right," I said, reaching out to touch her shoulder. "He didn't take anything. I saw him off." I hoped she wouldn't ask for details. I wasn't proud of how I'd "seen him off."

Her eyes glistened. "Please don't cry, sweetness," I said. I didn't think I could cope with that. Sniffing, she rubbed her eyes.

"This burglar was looking specifically for the Elangic artefact," I said. Actually, he hadn't said what he was looking for, but what else could it have been?

"Oh no," she whispered.

"So of course I couldn't help wondering — I'm sure I'm wrong, but I have to ask for my peace of mind — did your father... you know — mention anything to anybody about it?"

Shanu stared at me. Her hand shook, as if she wanted to slap me. "You think my family consorts with-with common *thieves*?"

"I'm sorry. I-I didn't mean to imply... this fellow wasn't all that common, as thieves go. He had a gadget that let him see in the dark."

"I don't care if he had blue skin and webbed feet," said Shanu.

"I thought your father might have said something to one of his friends or associates," I said, "and they might have hired the burglar."

"That's just as bad," she said. "I won't sit here and listen to this ridiculous slander." She stood up, almost knocking over her chair. By the time I thought to call after her, she'd marched out of the room. I hurried into the corridor, just in time to hear the front door slam.

I leaned against the wall, trying to hold back tears. I could run after her, but what would be the point? Continuing the argument in public would only make things worse — and quarrelling under her parents' roof would be worse still.

I went into the kitchen to tell Mara that we would be two for dinner after all. She was plainly aching to ask me what had happened, but held her tongue. I sat in the dining room, staring at nothing. When Uncle came home a few minutes later, I explained the situation to him, my voice quavering.

He shrugged and said, "She'll come round. Women always do. You've given her plenty of reasons before now to leave you, and she never did."

I didn't find his words as reassuring as he evidently meant them to be. Shanu had said, more than once, that she couldn't stay angry with me for long, but this felt different. She'd

never stormed out of the house before. I'd never nearly accused her father of trying to rob us. Mara brought in the first course. I ate, not tasting anything. How could I have been so thoughtless?

It was too late to go to the warehouse and gaze at the stars — not that I had the heart for it tonight anyway. I lay in bed, too full of remorse to sleep, my thoughts chasing one another in never-ending cycles.

Eventually, I must have dozed off, as Uncle woke me by banging on my door. The sun was streaming through the gaps in the shutters, so it had to be at least a couple of hours past dawn. *Must be all the late nights you've been having lately*, I told myself, not believing it for a moment.

I spent the rest of the morning staring out of my window, hoping I might see Shanu returning. My stomach lurched whenever I saw someone who bore a passing resemblance to her. Each realisation that I was wrong brought more heartbreak than the last.

Eventually I accepted she wasn't going to come crawling back to me — or not yet, anyway. I gathered up the stuff I'd need — the mirror, Father's charts and instruments, my writing implements and the egg timer from the kitchen. I took some food from the kitchen and headed down to the warehouse. As I waited for sunset, I tried to write her a letter apologising for my behaviour and begging for her forgiveness, but the words refused to come together. I nibbled through the day, struggling to force food down my throat.

More than once, I gazed out of the hatch at the cobblestones of the dock. A quick step into the empty air, and my problems would be over before I knew it. Was I flattering myself to think Shanu would miss me? That she'd cry over me? Would she even come to my funeral?

Stop it. Even if Shanu could live without me, Uncle couldn't. Besides, the drop was no greater than from my bedroom window. A man had survived that. Knowing my luck, I'd injure myself badly enough to feel miserable for a long time afterwards, but not badly enough to kill myself.

Eventually, the sun set, and the stars became visible — brighter and steadier than from our house, as I wasn't looking through the smoke from other people's cooking fires. I activated the mirror and started measuring stars' heights. I'd done about twenty of them when I heard a door slam downstairs. I froze in horror, and my light spell went out.

Chapter 7

Several people were walking about and speaking downstairs. A faint, flickering light came through a hole in the floor — a lantern, not a spell. My pulse grew so loud in my ears that I thought they would surely hear it. Their accents were strange to me, and it took a while to work out what they were saying.

"I swear, I saw a light in the cargo hatch." This was a high-pitched voice, scarcely more than a child.

"Moonlight 'flecting off the sea, that's all," said an older man. "Gezel, how you doing with the Southside barrow boys?"

"Nearly two hundred kindarks this week," said a lazy, confident voice. "A couple of Peace saw me the day before yesterday, but I flipped 'em ten and they walked on."

"Solid," said the older man.

The conversation continued like this, with different people reporting what they'd done

and the older man — evidently the leader — praising them or chastising them accordingly. My mind whirled at the implications. Paying the Peace to ignore them? They must be a gang of thieves — what other sort of people would be meeting in an abandoned warehouse in the middle of the night? What would they do if they found me here? Beat me and take everything I had — if I was lucky.

I couldn't let them steal the mirror. Even to someone who didn't know its true nature, it was obviously valuable. I bent to pick it up — as slowly as an old man, fearing that they might hear even the creaking of the leather of my shoes. It felt suddenly heavy and cumbersome in my sweating hands, and I thought I would surely drop it. My hands shook as I touched the rubies to deactivate it. I eased it into its case and fastened the straps.

I picked up the slates on which I'd written my measurements and slid them into my satchel. I must have grown too confident that the thieves couldn't hear me — or too hasty to gather everything — because the last slate clattered against the others as I put it away.

The conversation stopped immediately.

I held my breath, praying they would think the noise was just the wind or a rat. They whispered for a few moments. Then the leader shouted, "We know you're up there! This is our ground! Come out and show yourselves!"

Still I remained motionless. Did I sense a little fear in his voice? He thought there was more than one person up here. I tried to think what I might use as a weapon. Why hadn't I thought to bring one of the kitchen knives with me? The astrolabe might disable one of the thieves, but what about the rest? And the stand I'd made for it was too big and heavy for me to wield effectively.

"Right, you've had your chance!" called the leader. "We're coming up to get you!" The lantern shifted away from the hole. Heavy feet trod slowly across the floor and started to ascend the stairs.

Magic — that was my only hope. If these thugs used lanterns in preference to a light spell even for a meeting when all they did was talk, there mustn't be a decent magician among them. I slung the satchel over my shoulder and cradled the mirror in my arm. What spell could I cast with only one hand free? Shaking, I walked nearer to the staircase, wondering if I might run past them.

A head emerged from the top of the stairs. It belonged to the dirtiest and roughest-looking boy I had ever laid eyes on. One of his hands gripped a knife, longer than any in our kitchen, while the other held the group's light. I saw now that this was not a lantern but a candle, and a plan started to form in my mind.

This youth asked me, in the most vulgar way imaginable, what I was doing here.

"I-I might ask th-the same of you," I said. "You're trespassing."

He stared at me as if I had two heads. Perhaps he wasn't used to the way I spoke. Three more followed him.

"Trespassing?" said one of the men behind him. "We don't trespass." This was the fellow I'd decided was their leader. "We go where we want. No one tells us we can't." As they came up the stairs and gathered at the top of it, I decided I'd been wrong about the boy. The three men were all dirtier and uglier than him. All had scars on their faces or their bare arms. Their clothes, none of which fitted, were torn and patched. All looked hungry and scrawny, but I had no doubt any of them could've beaten me in a fistfight. The leader and one of his henchmen carried knives, while the third had two hand-axes.

"This warehouse is the property of Markeshto of Kandar," I said, "and unless you have his permission to be here, you're trespassing." I edged nearer to them, needing to be in range

for the spell to work.

The leader gave me a curious look. “Are you him?”

I shook my head.

“You work for him?”

Again I shook my head.

“Then what’s it to you who this place belongs to? Me an’ me lads been coming here for years, not a squeak of bother, an’ suddenly you come along like Grand Mazor telling us we can’t have a cosy chat when we feel the need?” His tone was reasonable, as though he was the wronged party in this matter, but the threat in his stance was plain. He gestured to the hole in the floor. “You’d think if Markeshto of Kandar” — he managed to make the name sound like an insult — “was that worried ‘bout his belongings, he’d take better care of ‘em.” The men sniggered. “Anyway, you ain’t answered Trark’s question. Who are you?”

“I’m... no one important.”

The leader tilted his head and grimaced, as though I’d told an unfunny joke. “Well, Lord No One Important, I was thinking we could ransom you. But if your dad lets you come round here on your own at night, he obviously don’t want you back, so...” He shrugged, as though he’d come to this decision reluctantly and after much consideration. He flicked his wrist, using his knife to beckon the two men behind him. “Loosen his tongue. Maybe a few teeth as well.”

Worse than I’d hoped, but not as bad as I’d feared. I stared at them, trying to memorise where they all were and where I’d have to go to avoid them. I tried not to laugh. It was another problem of angles.

With my free hand, I made a sweeping motion towards the boy, as though scooping up sand to throw at him. I spoke a few words. A gust of wind passed me, and a moment later, the candle blew out.

I thought I’d heard the lowest depths of our language when the thieves first saw me, but they outdid themselves. I ran in what I prayed was the right direction. My elbow glanced off the boy. That probably saved me a broken leg or worse, as it slowed me down enough that I missed only the top step, not the two or three after it. My knee and ankle still felt as though they’d been hit with hammers. I scrambled down the stairs as fast as I dared. From behind me came scuffling and more swearing. I was nearly at the bottom before they started to follow me.

I hurtled out of the door of the warehouse, thanking Mazor and Kashalbe that the thieves had left it open — they mustn’t have thought anyone else would come here. I skidded as I turned to run along the wharf, narrowly missing falling into the harbour. I heard a thump and a cry of pain — one of them must have tripped over a bollard or a loose plank. But the rest sounded as though they were gaining on me, shouting and cursing.

I reached the end of the wharf, where I might have some chance of losing them in the narrow twisting alleys off the waterfront. The moon and stars provided just enough light to see by. Choosing turnings at random, I considered whether to cry for help. But this was the thieves’ territory — anyone who heard me was as likely to join the fight on their side as mine.

My lungs burned, and my throat felt like sand. With every step, my knee and ankle felt as though they were being stabbed. I couldn’t last much longer — I hadn’t run like this since I was a boy. My pursuers were stronger and faster than me, and knew the area much better. Recapture was only a matter of time. I should save my strength and surrender now.

But no — I’d humiliated them by escaping with the simplest of spells. If they caught me again, they’d kill me. I forced my aching legs onwards. Then I realised I couldn’t hear the

thieves' footsteps any more. Had I actually lost them? I risked a glance behind me —
— and collided with something hard enough to knock me unconscious.

Chapter 8

“Sarge? He’s coming round.” The speaker shouted but seemed distant.

I lay on my back on a hard surface. A steady white light hovered above me. I ached all over, but there were no sharp pains, which I took to mean I hadn’t broken any bones. Gradually the light resolved itself into the glow from a spell. It illuminated a man of about my age, leaning over me, who wore the uniform of the Peace.

“Sir, can you hear me?” the man said. “How are you feeling?”

“Where am I?” I mumbled, though I could make a good guess.

“You’re in the House of the Peace on Pepper Street.”

That was what I’d expected him to say. I began to sit up, wincing as the back of my head throbbed.

“Easy, Sir. Here, drink this.” He pressed a wooden cup into my hands and helped it to my lips. It held water, mixed with just enough beer to make it safe to drink.

I looked around. I sat on what seemed to be a wooden bed, bolted to the wall. There was a pillow but no mattress or blankets. The room was about eight feet square, with walls made of large stone blocks. I gulped as I saw the heavy iron gate that took the place of a door.

“Am I a prisoner?” I said.

The man glanced at the gate and smiled. “No, Sir. We didn’t have anywhere else to put you, that’s all.”

“What time is it?”

“About one o’clock in the morning, Sir.”

I heard footsteps from outside the room. An older man, also in the Peace uniform, appeared at the gate. “Can you walk?” he asked me.

“I think so.”

The newcomer nodded and said to the younger man, “Bring him to my office.” He marched off.

I eased myself off the bed, swaying as I tried to stand straight. The Man of the Peace put an arm around my shoulders. He smelled of sweat and polished leather. A realisation struck me. “Where’s the —” Just in time, I stopped myself from saying *mirror* — though they might well have opened the case. “Where are my possessions?”

“The Sergeant has them, Sir.” I leaned on the man as we walked a dozen yards down a corridor to stop at a door with a sign that read *Duty Sergeant*. The man knocked on the door and then opened it. The older man I’d just seen sat behind a desk, reading a slate by candlelight. He motioned me to a seat in front of the desk. My joints protesting, I sat down. I heard the door close, and looked behind me to see the younger man had left.

Not looking up from his slate, the sergeant asked, “What’s your name?”

I noticed this fellow didn’t call me *Sir*. I considered giving a false one, as I was doubtless in trouble for breaking curfew, but I was too groggy to keep my lies straight. “I’m Raltarn, son of Rathkarn of Sondis.” I didn’t expect this to impress him, and it didn’t.

“Where do you live?” he asked in a monotone, still not looking at me.

“Marsh Mill Lane, number seventeen — that’s near the main Mazorean temple.”

“I know where Marsh Mill Lane is. Do you live with your parents?”

“No, they’re both dead. I live with my uncle, Tomaz.”

“Why were you out after curfew?”

“I was running from a gang of thieves who wanted to rob me.”

Now he looked at me. Perhaps this was one of the rarer answers to that question. “Did they break into your home?”

I hesitated before saying, “No.” Uncle had impressed on me that the Peace assumed everyone they dealt with had done something wrong, and you didn’t give them any more help than necessary in figuring out what it was.

He put down the slate. “Then why were you running?”

I swallowed carefully. “I was in a warehouse on Heron Dock. My uncle had rented out the upper floor so I could make some astronomical observations.”

“Staring at the stars, you mean?” His scowl told me what he thought of people who could afford to spend time doing that sort of thing.

“Yes. It’s on the edge of the city — past the smoke of people’s fires. I found out too late these thieves use it as a lair.”

He gave a derisory snort. “Everyone knows that whole area’s riddled with criminal gangs.”

I leaned forward, sensing a chance to deflect his suspicion from me. “Then why doesn’t the Peace do something to clean it up?”

He too leaned forward. “How do I know you’re not a thief yourself? Running around after curfew, admitting to being in an area known to be frequented by thieves?”

I gulped and looked away. He bent down and lifted the mirror’s case onto the desk. I didn’t know whether to be relieved or terrified.

“That’s mine,” I whispered.

“Is it now?” He unfastened the straps and slid the mirror partly out, and then tilted it to show me. “I don’t know much about stargazing, *Sir*, but I wouldn’t have thought you’d need to check your hair was straight while you were doing it.”

My eyes squeezed shut, and my fists clenched. I knew the punishment for theft.

“Well?” said the sergeant.

“I can prove I was stargazing. I had a satchel. There were some slates in it. I’d written the names of some stars on them, and their positions.”

Keeping his eyes on me, the sergeant reached down again and brought out my satchel. He took a slate from it and studied it. “Now that you mention it, these could be names of stars.” He took a blank slate from a pile at the corner of his desk and handed it to me, along with a piece of chalk. “Can you write the name of one of them?”

I bristled at being asked to perform such a simple task, but then thought that a common thief wouldn’t know one end of the alphabet from the other. I wrote *Tip of Dragon’s Tail*, and for good measure, *Dragon’s Front Claw*, then passed the slate back to him.

The Sergeant studied both slates, his eyes flicking between them as though comparing every stroke of every letter. “The handwriting appears to be yours,” he said eventually. “So you’re either the cleverest thief we’ve ever caught, or you’re telling the truth about stargazing.”

I let go of a breath I hadn’t known I’d been holding.

He set down the slates. “But you still haven’t explained why you were carrying an unusually large mirror.”

I gripped the arms of the chair in an effort to stop myself from wiping my sweating palms on my trousers. “It belongs to me.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“Are citizens not allowed to carry their possessions around with them?”

“Of course. But I’m having a lot of trouble understanding why a citizen would want to lug such a heavy, delicate and valuable object around after curfew — which you’re still guilty of breaching, by the way.”

“I was indoors until the thieves forced me to run!”

Most men would have flinched at that outburst. He just banged his fist on his desk. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“Only that I trusted someone I shouldn’t have. The owner of the warehouse didn’t say anything about it being a thieves’ den.”

The sergeant snorted. “He probably couldn’t believe his luck that someone was actually gullible enough to rent it.”

“Is gullibility a crime now?”

“Don’t get smart with me, lad,” he said, scowling. “Unless you can give me a satisfactory explanation for what you were doing in the Narrows with such a valuable object at such a late hour, you leave me no choice but to detain you until I can be sure it belongs to you.”

“It does belong to me,” I said. “I’ve done nothing wrong except break curfew. That’s a fine. If I pay it, you have to let me go.”

He shook his head. “This is a rough area. It’d be irresponsible of me to let you out on your own at this time of night — and I can’t spare anyone to escort you home.” He gazed at me, inviting a response. Knowing I was beaten, I said nothing. He went to the door. The Man of the Peace who had woken me was standing guard outside. He told this fellow to take me back to “my” cell.

“Let me keep the mirror,” I said, as the man grabbed my arm.

For a moment, I thought the sergeant would refuse, and visions raced through my mind of having to explain to Uncle that I’d lost the key to a fortune. But then the sergeant shrugged and said, “It’s not as if you’re going anywhere with it.” He picked it up and followed us back to the cell. The Man of the Peace gave me an apologetic look as he locked me in.

I sat in a corner of the cell, out of sight of the gate, shivering at the touch of cold stone against my back. At first, I tried to stay awake, frightened that the Peace would steal the mirror if I fell asleep. Unexpected noises kept me from dozing off — footsteps, gates slamming, people shouting. Night in the city was busier than I’d ever imagined. But eventually, my head drooped, and the next thing I knew was the Man of the Peace shaking me.

“Sir? Your uncle’s here.”

Relief flooded me as I saw the mirror’s case still cradled in my arms. I stood and stretched, and then followed the Man of the Peace to the office where the sergeant had quizzed me the night before. Uncle Tomaz stood there, arguing with another Man of the Peace.

“Raltarn,” he gasped as he embraced me. “Gods be praised.”

Heart pounding, I put my free arm around him. I couldn’t remember the last time he’d invoked the Gods’ benevolence. Was he genuinely that relieved to see me, or was this a show for our hosts?

“Sir,” said the Man of the Peace, “would you please confirm that the object in question belongs to your family?” He looked older than the sergeant and spoke with a more educated accent. I guessed he was of a higher rank. Uncle took the case from me and laid it on the desk. He unfastened the straps and pulled out the mirror.

Uncle let out a heavy sigh. “This is ours.”

The man nodded. “Then I hereby release your nephew into your care, without charge and without blemish on his character.”

“Thank you, captain,” said Uncle.

“I’m still curious as to why he took something so valuable out of the house at night,” said the man, “but I suppose that’s between you and him now.”

Uncle gave the man a big grin and tousled my hair — something he hadn’t done in at least five years. He strode out of the building, and I hurried after him, clutching the mirror to my chest. It was nearly noon — much later than I’d thought. On the steps outside, he pulled the mirror out of my grasp and flagged down a taxi.

“Uncle,” I began, “I’m really sorry about all this. I must’ve caused you so much worry —”

He cut me off with a chopping motion of his hand. “Now isn’t the time or place for what has to be said.”

Chapter 9

In the taxi, Uncle spoke only to tell the driver we were going to Marsh Mill Lane. I could’ve coped with his shouting at me, but the silence was almost unbearable. More than once, I caught myself on the verge of telling the driver to stop so I could get out.

The driver dropped us at the end of the street, and we walked the rest of the way — I guessed this was so he couldn’t tell anyone which house we lived in.

Uncle set the mirror down at the foot of the stairs, more gently than I’d ever handled it. He held my gaze for several moments. I actually thought he might cry. But then he took a deep breath and said, “Dagoreth knows I haven’t brought you up as well as your father would’ve. But I thought I’d drummed *some* common sense into you. What in the name of all that’s holy were you doing running around after midnight — in the Narrows! — assaulting a Man of the Peace! I suppose I should be grateful you talked them into releasing you without charge.”

“Assaulting?” I frowned. “I bumped into him.”

Uncle’s expression said he didn’t believe me.

“All right, I... I ran into him.”

Still Uncle looked sceptical.

Heat rose in my face. “I was running from a gang of thieves.”

“What were you doing outside the warehouse?”

“They came inside! They were using it as a lair.”

Uncle’s fists clenched, and I took half a step back. Then he forced himself to relax. “We’re going to make some tea, and I’m going to do my best to pretend I haven’t spent all morning being worried sick about you. Then you can tell me what happened.”

More than once as I told my story, my teacup nearly slipped from my grasp. When I’d finished, Uncle made a few choice remarks about Markeshto, his secretary, the thieves and the Men of the Peace. “Though I would’ve given a few *svara* to see the looks on their faces when you blew out their candle.”

“You wouldn’t have seen anything,” I said. “That was rather the point.”

He gave a sad smile. “But anyway, we have to leave now. Too many people know about the mirror — too many people have a reason to try to steal it.”

“Now?” I said. “As in...”

“As in pack your bags. We can share your father’s old sea trunk. The ship’s ready. The captain said he’d sail if you knew your destination to within a degree, and you’ve got that now.”

“Oh.” I’d been so fixated on working out where we needed to go that I hadn’t given any thought to actually getting there. The possibility of departure had seemed remote and unreal. I gasped. “I need to tell Shanu.”

“Write her a letter. No time for long tearful goodbyes.”

“But —” Then I thought writing might be better. Saying farewell for such a long time in person would be painful even if I hadn’t nearly accused her father of trying to rob us. I went to my room and started writing.

I was still writing when Uncle knocked on my door an hour later to find out why I hadn’t come back down yet. When I told him I was looking for the right words to express my feelings, he tutted and said, “Best not varnish it, lad. Stick to the facts.”

I took him at his word, and wrote two sentences of explanation. I sealed the letter and started packing. It took us most of the afternoon to decide what we wanted and cram it into the sea chest. I wanted to take plenty of warm clothing, seeing as we were going to such a cold place, but Uncle persuaded me we didn’t have room for it. At last, less than an hour before curfew, we waved farewell to Mara, then dragged the chest into the street and flagged down a taxi. The driver grumbled about the extra weight and bulk, but quickly took us down to the western docks.

We drove past half-a-dozen large ships, unoccupied and silent in the gathering twilight. Ours had to be the small one at the end of the wharf, as it was the only one with any activity around it. Several sailors were moving boxes and barrels onto the deck, some running up and down the gangplank, a couple of them using a crane for the bigger items.

“Welcome to your home for the next six months,” said Uncle. “The *Silver Dolphin* under Captain Rymad, a hundred and eight feet long, two hundred and fifty tons burthen, whatever that means.”

“It’s a measure of how much cargo she can carry,” I said, “and it means she’s tiny.” Most of the freighters that crisscrossed the Sea of Mulkara were at least a thousand tons burthen, and many were fifteen hundred.

“It’s not as if we’re going to need a lot of room on the way back, is it?” he replied.

The sailors put the chest into a rope net and used the crane to lift it on to the deck. Uncle strode up the gangplank as they did this, but I hung back. The plank had no rails and it flexed under his weight. It wasn’t so much that I was afraid of falling off — I could swim well enough to stay afloat until someone pulled me out — as that I felt if I set foot on that ship, I’d never see Symeera or even Asdanund again. At the top, Uncle turned to me and shrugged.

I couldn’t very well refuse to go somewhere he had, could I? I shuffled up the plank. Behind me, a man shouted something that I chose to interpret as “Please hurry up.” The wood bounced underneath me as I walked the rest of the way.

Uncle and I had a cabin, which was a relief — I’d thought we’d be in with the crew. It had a window, more for ventilation than for light, and a hook in the ceiling for hanging a lantern from. The door looked solid and had a strong bolt. The place would’ve been just about big enough for both of us, except that the chest took up a third of the floor space, which meant there was room for only one bed. Uncle spoke to the captain — no small task, as the man had a hundred other things to do before we could sail — who wanted to know why the chest wasn’t in the hold, like all the other cargo. Uncle explained we couldn’t let it

out of our sight. He threw up his hands in exasperation and said he'd send the carpenter to see to the problem once we were underway.

We set sail on time, following the last of the sunlight towards Darmath, our first port of call, where we were due in about nine days. The ship's gentle rocking made me sleepy, but the thought of Shanu reading my letter kept me awake.

The carpenter was a small, jolly fellow, whose jangling toolkit announced his presence long before he knocked on our door. I cast a light spell to allow him to see what he was doing, and he fastened a couple of hooks into the walls for a hammock. I watched him, fascinated that the movement of the ship didn't disrupt his work. He hung the hammock and showed us how to get into and out of it. Uncle insisted I try first. I took off my shoes and jacket and stood on the chest.

Getting in wasn't too bad, though the thing swayed alarmingly. Getting out was much trickier, as there was nothing I could hold onto. I worried that I'd end up rolling out of the hammock and crashing to the floor, and then realised that was almost exactly what I was supposed to do. I swung my legs out of the hammock and allowed my momentum to carry me down, so that I half-fell, half-jumped to the floor.

"That's it, lad," the carpenter said. "You're a born sailor."

"I think we've just worked out who's sleeping where," said Uncle.

"You'll want to buy some candles," said the carpenter, "or some oil for your lantern."

"Why?" said Uncle. "My nephew's good at magic."

"I can see that, Sir, but magic don't work so good over deep water. Most spells take a lot more effort than they're worth at sea."

"Why's that?" said Uncle.

The carpenter gave a polite shrug and took his leave of us.

"I'd forgotten about that," I said. "The theory is that magic comes from the ground, so when you're at sea it has to come from the seabed, and travelling through the water makes it weaker."

Uncle frowned. "We're not likely to have to do much magic at sea, are we?"

"Maybe not, but the..." I glanced at the door. I jerked it open, hoping to surprise any eavesdroppers. Of course, no one was there. Blushing, I closed the door and bolted it. "The mirror interferes with magic, so the crew's spells might be even worse than usual."

"But if they know that spells are weak anyway, they're not going to bother attempting them."

I nodded, hoping he was right. Against my expectations, I slept soundly.

When I woke and went up on deck, we were sailing parallel to a rugged forested landscape to the north. Uncle and I ate breakfast with Rymad, the captain, in his cabin at the stern. Also present were the first mate, Gribekh, and the third mate, Suln. The second mate, Ingryn, who was also the navigator, was asleep, as he currently had the night watch.

"So," said Rymad, once we'd finished eating, "when are you going to tell me what we're looking for?"

"Not yet," said Uncle with a grin. "Maybe once we've left Darmath."

"It's nothing dangerous, if that's what you're worried about," I said.

"I didn't think it was," said Rymad. "You're paying me well, but not well enough to get into any fights."

When I went back on deck, I noticed that the ship had large crossbows mounted on a pivot, one each at the bow and stern. These fired wide bolts, two yards long, with barbed heads, and I shuddered at the thought of what one of those could do to a man. I wondered

why we needed them if we weren't planning on fighting. I spotted Suln on the poop deck, and climbed up there to ask him about them.

"They're mainly for shooting pirates before they come aboard, Sir," he said.

"Are we likely to meet any pirates?" Stories about them had seemed exciting when I was a boy, but the thought of encountering them in the flesh was decidedly unappealing.

Suln chuckled. "Not in these waters, Sir. When the Nuhyseans were attacking our merchant ships early in the war, the Navy started escorting them. They didn't kill many dragons, but they caught a lot of pirates, and I suppose that must've scared the rest of them into making an honest living."

"So are we likely to be attacked by dragons?"

He laughed again. "You are a worrier, young Sir, if you don't mind my saying so. Dragons can't fly over water — or not out of sight of land, anyway."

Of course. It was one of the reasons why the Nuhyseans hadn't won the war a long time ago. Nobody was sure if it was something in their nature, or a fear that they couldn't overcome, but if a dragon tried to fly to somewhere it couldn't see land, it would invariably fall out of the sky, drowning itself and more than likely its rider, if he couldn't unfasten himself from the saddle in time. Besides that, we were currently about nine hundred miles from Nuhy and getting further away with every minute — so if we saw a dragon here, it would have to mean that the enemy had overrun the whole of Asdanund within the last day.

Around noon, there was a short Mazorean prayer service on the poop deck. Rymad led it, as *Silver Dolphin* was too small to have its own priest. I mumbled my way through the responses, ashamed to realise how much I'd forgotten in the few months since I'd last been inside a temple. When the service finished, I turned to leave, and was surprised to hear Rymad utter the opening of the Kashalbean service. The two gospels were broadly compatible, of course, and there was nothing in either that said a man couldn't follow both, but it was quite unusual for anyone to do that nowadays. Obviously, a ship that didn't have a Mazorean priest wasn't likely to have a Kashalbean one either.

Over the next few days, as we continued due west, we saw no land except for the occasional small island. We passed a ship every few hours, going in the opposite direction. Once or twice, I glimpsed a ship ahead or astern of us, presumably also going to Darmath.

On the fourth day out of Symeera, we saw no land. There was another joint Mazorean and Kashalbean prayer service, this time led by Gribekh, the first mate. Oddly, he started with the Kashalbean service, and although I didn't recognise most of the crew yet, the men at this service seemed to be a different set from those who'd been at Rymad's.

On the fifth day, I realised that when you were on board a ship, unless you were one of the officers or crew, there was very little to do. My thoughts turned to Shanu. I wondered what she was doing and thinking. Did she miss me? Did her heart ache for me, as mine did for her? Or was she glad to be rid of me, after the way I'd besmirched her family's name? Was her father even now seeking a more fitting suitor for her? I wanted to tell Uncle to turn the ship around... but no. Quite apart from the fact that I couldn't marry her if I came back empty-handed, we needed the other mirror to be able to pay off the loans Uncle had taken out to finance the expedition.

We reached Darmath on the ninth day after we left Symeera. Docking took a lot longer than I expected, as the wharves had been built with little thought as to how ships might pass one another. I'd thought of the city as being a smaller version of Symeera, but it seemed nearly as big as my home. I asked one of the crew about it, and he said Darmath had grown quickly with the war — the Nuhyseans couldn't attack it, and it had become wealthy

supplying Asdanund with many of the goods and raw materials that used to come from Nuhy's and beyond. There hadn't been much time to plan its expansion.

We unloaded a few small items of cargo that Uncle had brought to sell, and started loading food and other supplies for the next stage of the journey. The latter, Uncle told me, was part of his plan for foiling spies. We'd brought enough supplies from Symeera to last until Darmath, so anybody watching us in Symeera would've thought we were only going as far as here. As well as that, supplies were a good bit cheaper here, and perishable food would be at least nine days fresher for not having to cross the Sea of Mulkara.

"I thought I might send a letter to Shanu while we're here," I said. "Something longer, to make up for the short one I had to send before we left." I gave him a knowing look, hoping I might make him feel guilty for forcing me to be so brief.

"You can't tell her where we are or where we're going," said Uncle, "or what we've been doing or what we're going to do, because someone might intercept the letter. So what's left to say?"

Trying to make Uncle feel guilty was like trying to set fire to a stone. Blushing, I replied, "That I love her, and I miss her, and I'm looking forward to seeing her again."

He looked at me askance. "She knows all that."

"And people wonder why you've never married."

In our cabin that night, we checked the mirror, to make sure everything was still all right at the other end. The sun was higher than it had been at this time of day, but that was to be expected, since we were further west now, and the difference in local time was smaller. Once, I thought I saw a smudge of smoke over the city, but Uncle convinced me it was probably just a low cloud.

The following morning, we departed Darmath. Just outside the harbour, we saw an Asdanundish ship lying at anchor. Its sleek lines, together with the large number of ballistas and catapults it carried, told me it was a naval vessel.

"Maybe there are pirates in these waters after all," I said to Suln.

"I'd have heard if there were," he said, squinting at it against the sun. "Odd."

"What?"

"She's not local, and she's trying to hide the fact. You see there at the top of the mainmast — there's a gap just below the Asdanundish flag? That's where the captain's personal flag would normally be."

"So if that was flying, you'd know where the ship came from?"

"Yes. And Mulkaran ships don't use catapults — a ship usually rolls too much to aim them properly, and if you're not careful with them, you just end up tearing holes in your own rigging."

"What's it — she — doing here, then?"

Suln shrugged. "I would've thought our boys had plenty to do defending our coast, but maybe there's some new threat we don't know about, and this captain doesn't want his enemy to know that Asdanund knows about him."

At Uncle's insistence, we sailed back east for a couple of hours, until we were out of sight of the city. We then turned in a wide arc to start heading west to Ash-Kalog. Ingryn, our navigator, estimated this stage would take eighteen days. I wasn't looking forward to landing there, although I knew my dislike of the place was irrational. I'd never been to it or met anyone who came from it, but its capital, Iseru, was where my father had died on a trading expedition with Uncle. As such, I couldn't shake the feeling that it was ill-omened.

We made good time for the first two days. Several times, I glimpsed a ship behind us, and

thought its sail plan resembled that of the warship, but I never saw it for long enough to be sure. I didn't see it on the third day, as we hit rough seas, and I stayed in the cabin most of the time. Rymad thought there might be a storm ahead of us, and he and the officers argued over whether to go around it or try to endure it. In the end, it didn't matter, because we ran into it.

On the morning of the fourth day out of Darmath, I was on deck, hoping the fresh air would counteract the queasiness I felt from *Silver Dolphin's* constant rolling and jolting. A sailor shouted at me to get below, and pointed ahead, a little way to port. That quarter of the sky was black with clouds that seemed to boil. Lightning crackled in their depths.

The storm bounced us around first for hours, then for days, slamming us against the walls and floor as a gambler would rattle dice in a box. Every so often it let go of us, seeming to wager everything on one last, desperate throw, and for a minute, or an hour, the sea would be calm, and I would think we had come through, and begin to wonder about eating, or patching up our wounds. Then another wave would crash onto us, and the cycle would begin again.

I lost track of time. Every so often, a sailor called on us, sometimes to bring food, but more often, I thought, just to see whether we were still alive. These fellows looked as wretched as I felt.

Uncle and I stayed in our cabin, leaving only to attend to our sanitary needs — which was seldom, as we couldn't bring ourselves to eat or drink much. The room became a black, airless hole. Lanterns posed too much risk of fire, and neither of us felt capable of attempting a light spell. Above the roar of the wind and the waves, I heard periodic crashes and screams, and imagined sailors being swept out of the rigging, or crushed by falling spars. Oddly, it never occurred to me that I might be drowned. The cabin was cold, but no water ever got in.

I rediscovered prayer, imploring Mazor to ensure we came out of the other side of the storm in one piece, until Uncle told me to shut up.

At last, the shaking and bouncing stopped for longer than usual. I heard a few muted cheers from above. Every part of me ached. My joints felt loose, as if I was a doll that a child had been trying to dismantle.

"Is it really over?" I asked Uncle. My lips stung as I spoke, and I tasted blood.

Uncle looked up from where he lay on the mattress. "Check the porthole," he croaked.

I crawled over to the chest. Against expectations, it had proven heavy enough to stay more or less in place. I wondered if the mirror had survived the battering from our other possessions. I dragged myself up onto the chest, so that my arms were lying across the top of it. I tried to force myself to stand, but my legs had no strength. The ship rolled, and I slid off the chest and onto the floor.

I was still there when a sailor came to the door to say the captain wanted to see us.

Chapter 10

Captain Rymad's cabin looked rather different from when I'd last seen it. The most obvious change was the large piece of sailcloth that covered the window, fluttering in the breeze. A lot of the fittings and furniture had been removed, and the walls bore many dents, some as big as my fist.

Rymad and the officers sat around his table, paler and leaner than before the storm. He invited us to sit, and passed around some cups and a bottle of wine. I poured myself as little as I thought would be polite — my stomach was still turning cartwheels.

"To our strength and courage," said Rymad when everybody had a cup. He and the

officers drained theirs in one. Uncle and I took a sip. The stuff was thin and bitter, probably not having been stored in anything like ideal conditions.

“Not, ‘and the mercy of Mazor and Kashalbe?’” said Suln.

“They had nothing to do with it,” said Rymad. “Though I’ll thank you not to repeat that sentiment in front of the men.” I tried not to show any surprise — I’d thought all sailors were religious, if not outright superstitious. “But that wasn’t why I asked our passengers to join us,” he continued. “We’ve come through the storm, with about as much damage as I would’ve expected. It was a bad one, but I’ve survived worse. Our most immediate concern is that we’ve lost eight men.”

“Goddess have mercy,” I whispered. I’d feared that people would end up dead because of these mirrors, but I’d never thought their blood would be on our hands — on my hands. If I hadn’t calculated where the other mirror was, we’d never have set out to find it. No — if I hadn’t been so inquisitive about how the mirror worked, I’d never have figured out the activation sequence, and we’d never have known the mirror as anything other than a pretty antique. Those sailors’ deaths were my fault, as surely as if I’d pushed them into the waves myself.

“They knew the risks when they signed on,” Rymad said with a sigh. “It’s a rare voyage across the Tian Ocean where you don’t lose at least one man. But we’re going to be short-handed unless we can replace them at our next port.”

“And where is our next port?” Uncle said.

Ingryn, our navigator and second mate, unrolled a chart and placed a metal ruler near one edge of it. “That’s our next concern. We’re about eight hundred miles south of where we should be. The storm blew us a good distance west, obviously, but I’m not sure how far west yet. My declination charts don’t cover us for longitude at this latitude, so all I can say is we’re somewhere on this line.” He tapped the ruler. “So we could stick to our original plan and head for Ash-Kalog, or we might be nearer to Krothtror.”

“Whichever is going to be quicker, surely,” said Uncle.

I looked at the chart, wondering what my father would have recommended. “Krothtror would put us nearer to the Canal, wouldn’t it? Since we have to go through that, it makes sense to set ourselves up for the next stage of the journey.”

“There’s not that much in it,” said Ingryn, “but yes, that’s sound reasoning.”

I tried not to sag with relief that I wouldn’t have to set foot on the land that had killed my father.

“So why do I get the impression,” said Uncle, “that you’d much rather head for Ash-Kalog?”

“Krothtror doesn’t have much in the way of civilisation,” said Rymad.

“That’s putting it mildly,” said Gribekh, the first mate. “They’re savages. Before the war, I was on an expedition the Mazoreans sent out to convert them. A dozen priests and acolytes went ashore. A week later, four of them came back, naked and bleeding. They wouldn’t talk about what happened to the rest.”

“Considering the attitude most Mazorean priests have to anyone who isn’t a Mazorean,” said Suln, “I can’t say I’m surprised.”

“So as long as we don’t try to convince them of the benefits of surrendering to Mazor’s mercy,” said Uncle, “we should be safe. Did we bring any glass beads to trade?”

Rymad harrumphed. “I think they’re sufficiently civilised to know the difference between glass and gems. They’ll want a good price for any materials we buy. And we’ll have to be careful how we deal with them, if we don’t want to end up like those Mazoreans.” Rymad

looked at the officers, as though inviting their support, and then gazed at Uncle and me. “This decision would be a lot easier if I knew what was at stake.”

“This ship and the lives of everybody on it,” said Uncle.

Rymad scowled. “Those are at stake even on a trip around Symeera Harbour. I think it’s time you told us exactly what you’re hoping to find in Elangir.”

“An Elangic artefact,” said Uncle calmly.

“The northern coasts of Elangir are littered with them — most not worth the bother of finding, never mind bringing back to Asdanund.” Rymad poured himself another cup of wine, pointedly not offering any to us. He drained it and set the cup on the table. The click was very loud in the sudden silence. He leaned forward, elbows on the table. “Let me put it this way. Tell me what you’re looking for that’s worth the lives of eight men and all the damage to my ship, or I give the order to turn about and head back to Mulkara.”

Uncle returned his stare. “You can’t do that. We have a contract.”

“Then I’ll see you in the commercial court in Symeera. But on this ship, my word is law.”

Uncle’s jaw clenched. To me, he said, “We need to discuss this.”

As we stood, still unsteady from the ordeal of the storm, Rymad said, “I wouldn’t spend very long discussing it, if I were you.”

Back in the cabin, I let Uncle curse and rant about Rymad and how nobody seemed to be interested in plain, honest dealing these days. He calmed down after a few minutes — the storm must’ve taken a lot of the fire out of him.

“So what are we going to do?” I asked.

He sagged onto the chest. “Nothing we *can* do. Only let Rymad drag us back to Mulkara and hope we can stay out of sight of our creditors long enough to get back on our feet.”

“I can’t believe he’d consider breaking the contract,” I said. “Ships and captains live and die by their reputations. When people hear that Rymad’s not a man of his word...”

Uncle sighed. “You sound just like your father. There was a time when that was true, but the war’s made cowards of more than a few of us. Unless we could prove it in court, it’d be our word against his. Without any profit from the expedition, we can’t afford to go to court, and even if we could, that’d make it easier for our creditors to find us.”

I frowned. “But Rymad doesn’t know that.”

“Maybe not. Or maybe he’s picked up enough of the crumbs to figure it out — maybe that’s why he’s threatening to break the contract.”

My throat went dry. “What about Shanu?”

“What about her?” He shrugged. “I’m sorry, lad, but this venture was always a big gamble. Best if she thinks you were lost at sea.”

I shook my head. “I can’t do that to her.”

“If you go back to Symeera now, her father will have you arrested.”

I wasn’t so sure of that, as it would be him who’d break our engagement, not me — but Shanu would be heartbroken either way. “Why can’t we just tell Rymad about the —” I stopped myself from saying *mirror*. “About what we’re looking for?”

He gestured to the door. I limped over to it and, as quickly as my tired arms would allow, snapped the bolt back and whipped it open. As I’d hoped, nobody was standing outside. I closed the door and refastened the bolt.

“Because,” whispered Uncle, “once he knows what it is, there’s a good chance he’ll pitch both of us over the side of the ship and claim it for himself.”

I gulped. “He’s not a pirate.”

“Are you willing to stake our lives on that?”

“The thing is no good without the other one.”

He tapped the chest and growled, “Which we happen to have right here.”

I sat down next to him, letting my feet dangle. “Unless you know the unlocking sequence, it’s just a mirror.”

“He’s not going to believe we’re dragging him halfway round the world for something that serves a lady’s vanity, is he?”

I stared into space, allowing my head to roll with the movement of the ship. “Unless you know the unlocking sequence...” I straightened up. “We can unlock it in here, in private, and show it to him to prove what it does. Then we bring it back here to lock it again.”

Uncle frowned. “That ought to convince him it’s valuable, but what’s to stop him killing us once we’ve found the other one?”

“Unless we tell him what we’re looking for, we’re not going to find the other one anyway.” I weighed the options. Which would I rather be — a live tortoise or a dead tiger? “If he doesn’t see us unlock it, he’s not going to know that anyone can do it if they know the sequence.”

“So?”

“So we tell him it only works for us — that it locks itself if we’re not in the room.”

Uncle grinned and clapped me on the shoulder. “I’ll make a merchant of you yet, lad.”

I took the mirror from its case in the chest, wondering whether it had survived the storm. It appeared unharmed. Holding my breath, I touched the rubies in the unlocking sequence. The picture from the other mirror appeared before me. It was night over there now — an hour or so after sunset, judging from the positions of the stars.

“We can use this to work out our longitude,” I said, wanting to kick myself for not realising sooner. “That’ll earn Rymad’s trust.”

“I’m not bothered about trust,” said Uncle. “I just want him to think we’re worth more to him alive than dead.”

I returned the mirror to its case. Doing that without locking it felt odd, like going to bed with my shoes on. When Uncle knocked on Rymad’s door, he made us wait for what felt like several minutes before calling, “Come in!”

Gribekh was there with Rymad, and another bottle of wine stood on the table next to the one we had shared.

“Might we have a word, Captain?” said Uncle. He looked at Gribekh, seeming only now to notice him. “In private.”

Rymad nodded to Gribekh, who left the room. “You’ve reached a decision, then.”

Uncle sat down without waiting to be asked. I hesitated, unsure of whether to follow his lead or insult our host. Before I could decide, Rymad gestured to a chair, solving the problem for me.

“What we’re looking for,” said Uncle, “is a device that allows messages to be sent across great distances.”

The captain smiled. “You’re sitting in one.”

“Instantaneously.”

“The Elangic mirrors?”

“You’ve heard of them?” I said. I’d thought they were secret. But then who had written the list of unlocking sequences Yindrath had held?

“Every few years, some idiot sets off on an expedition to retrieve one of them. Those who return always come back empty-handed.” He sipped at his wine. “You don’t strike me as an idiot, Tomaz. So what are you really looking for?”

“Perhaps the reason the ‘idiots’ never find one of these mirrors,” said Uncle, “is that they were made in pairs. Each one of the pair talks only to the other one. They use a lot of magic to send messages, so they won’t do it unless you use a special spell — a complicated and difficult one.”

“So that’s one of a pair, I take it,” Rymad said, gesturing to the mirror in its case.

“Yes,” said Uncle. “Show him.”

With a deep breath, I put the case on the table and eased the mirror out of it. My hands shaking, I turned it to face him. “This is what’s in front of the other mirror of the pair.”

“It looks like a painting,” said Rymad.

“Look closer,” Uncle said drily.

I laid the mirror flat on the table, and Rymad came over to study it. I kept one hand on it, though I doubted I could’ve stopped him from taking it off me.

“The detail is... remarkable,” he said. “I’ve heard of painters in Perakhandra who use a system of levers and pivots to scale down movements, so that when the hand moves three inches, the brush moves only one.”

“Can they make paintings that move?” said Uncle.

“I suppose not,” Rymad said. “It’s interesting that there’s nothing in this one that looks as though it ought to move.”

“What about the stars?” I said.

“Possibly,” he said, squinting. “The constellations look right, though I’ve never seen them so low in the sky.”

“That’s because the other mirror is at sixty-seven degrees south,” I said. “Here.” The ruler Ingryn had used to mark our latitude was still on the table, and I laid it across the mirror, from top to bottom. “Watch for a few minutes. You’ll see stars pass from one side to the other.”

Rymad did as I asked. I felt acutely self-conscious watching him as he gazed at the mirror, as though I was sitting for a portrait. Just as I thought I’d get an attack of the giggles, he whispered, “Mazor, it does move.” He straightened up and said in a more composed tone, “I can see why you wanted to keep this secret.”

“Will you give me your word,” said Uncle, “that you won’t tell anyone else about these mirrors, or where they are?”

Rymad seemed to be about to agree, and then said, “Do you know the longitude and latitude of the other mirror?” Before we could answer, he said, “Of course you do — that’s the position we’re sailing to, isn’t it?”

Uncle nodded. “Will you give me your word?”

Holding up a hand, Rymad said, “Hear me out. We don’t know exactly where we are. We can use this mirror to determine our position in relation to the other one of the pair. We already know where that one is, so we can locate our position. So before I promise to keep this secret, I’d like to bring Ingryn into our confidence.”

Uncle shook his head.

“I’ve known Ingryn for eight years,” Rymad said. “I’ve sailed dozens of voyages with him, and he’s one of the most trustworthy men I know.”

“The more people know about this, the more likely someone is to want to steal it. Raltarn can do the measurements.”

Rymad gawked at me. “A landsman? Navigate?”

I wanted to run away and hide. “My... my father was a navigator, Sir,” I mumbled.

“And did he teach you any of his craft?”

“A little, Sir.”

“Ingryn has been a navigator for fifteen years. I mean no slight on your character, but I’d much rather trust him than a...” He hesitated, and I thought he’d say *boy* or something ruder, but he concluded, “Someone who’s never been to sea before.”

“Who do you think worked out where the other mirror is?” said Uncle.

Rymad stared at me again, and then sagged. “Marvellous.”

“He measured and calculated for days to work it out,” said Uncle.

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Rymad muttered.

“It took that long,” I said, “because the angles are smaller in the mirror, so they’re harder to measure.”

Rymad harrumphed. “And how did you measure them?”

I explained how I’d done it, latitude and longitude. Against my expectations, he listened patiently.

“Well Sir, I may have judged you too quickly,” he said when I’d finished. “Some of your father’s skill may have rubbed off on you.”

I decided to take that as a compliment.

“Who is your father?”

“My father was Rathkarn of Sondis.”

Startled, Rymad said, “I must be getting old. I’d thought his son would be much younger. I was sorry to hear what happened to him. I sailed with him a couple of times — never knew anyone say a bad word about him. Anyway, it’ll be dark soon, so if you fetch your instruments, we can go up on the poop deck to make your observations. I’ll make sure no one else is there.”

I shook my head. “I don’t have any instruments — not any more.” I explained how I’d had to leave them in the warehouse.

Rymad tutted. “A navigator should never give up his instruments, but I suppose those were exceptional circumstances. I’m afraid this means we’ll have to bring Ingryn into our confidence.”

“What?” said Uncle. “Raltarn can borrow his instruments, surely.”

Rymad stared at Uncle, horrified. His fists clenched, and for a moment, I thought he’d punch him. Then he deflated. “You’re a landsman. You wouldn’t understand.”

“Navigators don’t borrow one another’s instruments,” I said. “It would be like... like...”

“Borrowing another man’s wife,” Rymad finished.

“Oh,” said Uncle. “Can’t you at least ask him?”

I cringed, imagining Ingryn throwing Uncle over the side of the ship when he heard the request.

“If I did,” said Rymad, “the best possible outcome is that he’d never sail with me again.”

Uncle frowned, perhaps still not believing him.

“Please, Uncle,” I said. “He’s not making this up. This is the only way we’re going to find out where we are. There isn’t a second-hand market in navigator’s instruments, in spite of how much they cost. Remember Father told you to — to give his instruments to me, even though you were short of money?” He hadn’t given me all the instruments, though — there was still the puzzle of what had happened to the declinometer. He couldn’t have sold it — who would’ve bought it?

Uncle nodded. “I thought I was just honouring a dead man’s wish.”

“You were,” said Rymad, “but it was much more than that.”

“Then I suppose we have to involve Ingryn.”

“Good,” said Rymad. “Be on the poop deck in half an hour.”

End of Free Sample

Thank you for reading. *The Mirrors of Elangir* is on sale now — visit www.pembers.net for details of where to buy a copy.