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Plague & Poison
The Barefoot Healer Volume II

The Barefoot Healer Series

Death & Magic

Plague & Poison

Dust & Water (forthcoming)

Chapter 1

Adramal knelt by the old man's body and closed her eyes. That cut out the sights of death – the staring eyes, the unkempt hair, the shrivelled and rat-gnawed flesh. She couldn't do anything to block the smell. Her stomach fluttered and then settled. That was one thing to be said for working in the City Watch – if you stuck with it, you got tougher. Not so long ago, the mere thought of being this close to such a disgusting corpse would have had her wanting to puke. Now, this poor fellow was just another part of her job.

She focused her attention inward, calming the surface of her mind to the smoothness of a still pond. A familiar, reassuring sequence of abstract thoughts came together in the space she'd cleared. Magic gathered from the corners of the room, eager to obey.

To her mind's eye, the shape of the old man's body appeared as a soft white glow, fuzzy and indistinct. It had no bright spots, which would have signified recent wounds to his flesh. She tried not to form any opinions about what that meant – not even to allow any feelings about it, not yet. She let go of the spell's thoughts, and it frayed and fell apart, as if it had never been. She paused and took a few shallow breaths, drawing in as little of the foul air as possible. Opening her eyes, she cast another spell. This one might give more information than the first, but she had to touch the corpse for it to work.

She hesitated. What if he'd died of something contagious?

Well, what if he had? She had a job to do. If she caught the disease, she could work out a cure before it got too bad. She shuddered as she touched his forehead. Her spell revealed the skull, as if she was touching it and not the worm-eaten flesh above it. But the messages from her fingertips about what they were really touching were strong enough to interfere with the information the spell presented. It was as if the man's flesh was flowing like mud around her fingertips, exposing the bone, then reforming when she moved on. She squirmed and put more power into the spell, drowning out the sensations of his flesh.

She found no injuries to his skull or neck, nor his arms, ribs and legs. She let go of this spell and cast another that showed the major organs. Maggots wriggled in most of them, well along their way to devouring him. A cough forced itself through her lips. Acid burned at the back of her throat as she pulled her hands away, panting. She fought the urge to see whether anything had stuck to her.

“Are you all right, Lady?”

Sighing, she let go of the spell and turned to face the Watchman who stood in the doorway. He was barely older than her, in the Watch no more than a year. From the way he fidgeted, he was as anxious to finish here as she was.

“This is definitely the worst I've seen,” she said. That wasn't true, of course. But she couldn't tell him about that. Couldn't tell anybody. “We're nearly done. Help me turn him over so I can check his spine.”

The Watchman's lip curled, but he marched smartly over to the corpse, then grabbed the old man's shoulders and jerked him into a sitting position. The head lolled, and Adramal feared it would snap off. She took the corpse's bare feet, and together they turned him onto

his front. Adramal knelt by him and cast the required spell.

She found no injuries, but two of the vertebrae felt closer together than they should – perhaps the disc between them had slipped out of place. That would've been painful, to the extent that he might have been grateful for the release death brought.

“Good afternoon, Sergeant. How are you getting on?” Adramal didn't look around. The newcomer cleared his throat and said, “Sergeant Adramal?”

She jumped to her feet, suddenly sweating. “Sorry, Sir.” She still hadn't got used to having a rank. “We're done here.”

Captain Tagahra nodded. “How long has he been dead?”

She shrugged. “Hard to tell, Sir. Bodies rot fast in this heat. I'd say half a fortnight, but that's a guess at best.”

“Any opinion as to cause of death?”

“Almost certainly natural, Sir. No broken bones or wounds to the flesh. He's decomposed enough that I can't tell if there was any damage to the organs. I can't rule out poisoning, but given what we know about him, he wasn't wealthy or important enough for anybody to bother. His liver seems smaller than normal for his age, so he may well have been a heavy drinker, which could have contributed to his death.”

“I noticed a smell of strong liquor when I came in,” said Tagahra.

Adramal blinked. “How can you smell anything apart from him?”

“You'll come to recognise the different odours. Go and find Elishar and ask him to remove the body.”

“Yes, Sir,” she said.

“I'll see you back at Headquarters, then.”

Much later, Adramal sat at a table in the refectory of the Watch building. A pile of slates covered the table – reports about her activities over the last few days. A half-eaten meal lay somewhere under them. Almost everyone else had gone home. She would have liked to do the same, but Captain Tagahra had insisted she catch up on her record-keeping.

She yawned and sat back. The stink of death filled her nostrils. These days it was seldom absent. Before Tagahra had offered her a job in the Watch, she would never have believed how many people could die every day in a city the size of Kyer Altamar. And Tagahra insisted she examine every one of them, to see if a wizard had been responsible. He didn't share her certainty that Shendar was dead. She couldn't blame him, given the complete falsehoods she'd told him about how Shendar had died. But what else could she have done? Lelsarin had told her to keep quiet about it. And one way or another, Lelsarin always got her way.

Memories of the Temple haunted Adramal's nightmares. Shendar argued with the stone servant of Zorian, trying to convince it that Adramal was its master, returned from death in a new body. The servant didn't believe her, not for a heartbeat. It pointed at her and said, *Enough*. Shendar vanished, dissipated into millions of motes of glittering dust. Despite her best efforts to wash it off, Adramal thought some of that dust still clung to her.

Why not tell Tagahra what really happened? That way she might get to finish the day's work before sunset. He'd never believe her. Zorian was a story, long ago and far away, something to frighten naughty children. *Do your chores or I'll send you to Zorian's tower! Finish your supper or I'll feed you to one of his servants!* But he was real enough for Shendar to kill seven people in his name.

If she told Tagahra the truth, he'd either think she was mad, or he'd know she'd lied to him earlier. Both were grounds for dismissal from the Watch.

And would that be such a bad thing? It would be a relief not to go to bed exhausted every night. More than that, purges wouldn't be such torture. In the few fortnights since coming to Kyer Altamar, she'd used more magic than in the year before.

“Sergeant?”

She looked up to see Watchman Morakh. She'd known him a little longer than most of the others. Before she joined the Watch officially, she'd worked for them undercover to catch Shendar, and Captain Tagahra had sometimes sent Morakh to meet her when he was too busy to go himself.

"Going home?" she said.

"Not just yet," he replied. "A few of the lads are going to *Enlorgar's Rest*. Care to join us?"

With an apologetic smile, she held up a slate. "I need to finish this."

"Does anyone ever read those?"

"Captain Tagahra does." She sighed. "I'd like to come, but you know beer interferes with my magic. And I don't fancy being the only sober person in the tavern."

"I understand," said Morakh. She thought she heard disappointment in his voice, as though her presence would have made the evening something special.

"Some other time, maybe," she said. But she knew if she didn't go with Morakh and his colleagues one day soon, they'd stop asking. She didn't have the luxury of being choosy about whom she accepted as friends. "Would you mind fetching me some water, seeing as you're standing?"

"Of course." He went through the doorway to the kitchen and returned with a tall wooden cup.

"Thank you." She took a gulp and cleared some room for it on the table.

"I'll see you in the morning then, Sergeant."

She picked up the chalk and resumed writing. After a few words, it slipped from her hand. *I should go to bed*. She bent to retrieve it and fell off her chair. Vexed, she tried to get up and found her limbs wouldn't move. The pain from hitting the floor faded to a curious numbness.

A shadow fell across her. "Sergeant! Are you all right?" Morakh's voice sounded a mile distant. She couldn't speak. "Can you hear me?" He grabbed her under the arms and lifted her back onto her chair. He stared into her face. "Sergeant Adramal! Can you hear me? What's wrong?" His voice was calm, but his eyes betrayed fear.

Adramal went through the techniques for keeping her own fear at bay. Her mind seemed unaffected by whatever had happened to her. She knew of only two things that could cause such complete and sudden paralysis. She hadn't sensed any magic being used, which had to mean...

A spell slotted together. This one wasn't as familiar as some, and she'd never cast it on herself before. She forced herself not to rush: if she made a mistake, she might not get another chance.

A heavy warmth settled in her chest and spread to the rest of her body. Pain followed it – sharp in her knee and elbow where she'd fallen, dull under her arms where Morakh had held her. She let go of the spell, ready to cast another if need be.

Her heart galloped. Her chest heaved as she drew a breath that felt like hot sand. A fit of coughing seized her. She doubled over, and Morakh struck her between her shoulder blades. She raised a hand to try to tell him to stop, but he kept hitting her. Her throat burned, and hot liquid dribbled from her lips. The coughing stopped, and so did Morakh's blows.

"I'm sorry, Sergeant. Did I hurt you?"

She sat up straight, breathing slowly. Her skin tingled all over, as if she'd jumped into a freezing lake. She touched her face, and her fingertips came away stained yellow. Morakh took a cloth from his pocket and wiped away the worst of the mess.

"What happened?" he said.

She considered her answer. The prospect of speaking seemed like a long journey across unfamiliar territory. "I think," she said. Her voice sounded like something that had been buried and dug up a fortnight later. "I think I was poisoned."

Chapter 2

“How are you feeling?” Captain Tagahra said from the door.

Adramal twisted, seeking a more comfortable position in the bed. “I think I’ll live, Sir.” She tried to smile. Her face seemed not to obey her. “This is becoming a habit, isn’t it?” After the panic had subsided, Tagahra had insisted she spend the night in his spare room, rather than her own lodgings. She had stayed here to recover from the injuries she’d received at the end of her first mission for him.

Grimacing, the Captain flopped onto the chair by the bed. “I had Nathvorbanhin, our apothecary friend, test the water. The barrel had been poisoned with kakhtalor, a rare plant from the Empire. A few drops of its tincture will kill a man. There was enough in the barrel to finish off the entire garrison.”

Adramal shifted again. She’d barely slept – unfamiliar pains had kept flaring all over her body, just long enough to wake her.

“A good thing it was just me, then, Sir.”

“Perhaps not. A couple of hours before, the cook boiled some vegetables with water from the same barrel. Nobody complained of any symptoms.”

“Boiling would destroy the poison, though, wouldn’t it, Sir?”

“Not kakhtalor, apparently, which makes it much sought-after among the Imperials.” He took a deep breath. “That would suggest the poison was added not long before you drank, perhaps by someone who knows you prefer water to beer.”

She swallowed carefully. Her throat still hurt. “Are you saying this was an attempt to kill me, specifically?” She wanted to run and hide somewhere far away. *Not much chance of that. I’d barely make it down the stairs in this state.*

Tagahra sighed again. “I’m sorry. I can’t rule it out at this stage.”

“Then... then do you think Shendar’s family are behind this?” Adramal was the only witness to Shendar’s death – the only human witness, anyway – and she’d told everyone Shendar drowned in the river. Of course the body hadn’t been found, despite extensive searches, and her family made no secret of their belief that Adramal was less than innocent.

“That’s the obvious assumption,” said Tagahra. “Captains Polkarn and Eriakh are questioning her relations who live in the city. The only problem with blaming them is that kakhtalor is ridiculously expensive. Nathvorbanhin reckoned the amount in the barrel would’ve cost upwards of ten thousand crowns. That would pay the entire Watch for a season or more. Shendar’s family doesn’t have that kind of money to throw around. And the stuff is hard to come by even if you can afford it. It seems a lot of trouble to kill a Sergeant in the Watch, even if they do blame you for the death of one of their own. If they want you dead, there are much simpler and cheaper ways to do it.”

“So what are you saying, Sir?” said Adramal. “That this *was* an attack on the entire Watch, and they got the timing wrong?”

“That,” he said heavily, “or you have more powerful enemies than either of us thought.” He stood, his shoulders sagging. “Do you feel like eating?”

A fit of coughing tore at her throat. "I think I could manage something, Sir."

"I'll send the maid up with some stew. If you'll excuse me, I have some awkward questions to ask."

When she heard him close the front door, she sank back under the blankets. Enemies didn't come much more powerful than Zorian.

Adramal calmed her mind, as if to cast a spell, and thought, *Lelsarin? Are you there?*

No answer came. That wasn't especially unusual – Lelsarin seldom appeared when called. She'd said she was taking a rest after Adramal had escaped from the Temple. Adramal had thought she'd meant a few days, but she'd been gone from Adramal's mind for nearly three fortnights now. While she was there, she'd done little but grumble and snipe, but Adramal found herself missing the girl-thing's company. What if Lelsarin never came back? If she was still alive, she would presumably return when she was ready, and if she was dead, there was nothing Adramal could do about it. How could something without a body die, anyway?

In spite of her fears, Adramal slept better that night, and woke towards the end of first watch. After breakfast, she felt strong enough to try some magic, and examined her lungs and muscles. They were still weak, but she judged there would be no permanent damage – she'd managed to force the poison out of herself before it could do any real harm.

She spent the rest of the day alternately dozing and staring at the ceiling. She wished she could be out in the city, hunting whoever had done this. Even examining corpses would've been preferable to lying here, sweating and shivering. In the evening, Tagahra told her he had no leads as yet. The Watch building had been almost empty when she was poisoned, and nobody who admitted to being there had seen anything suspicious. Tagahra's colleagues had managed to speak to two of Shendar's relatives, both of whom had excellent alibis.

The next morning, Adramal persuaded Tagahra that she was fit to return to duty. He insisted on sending a team of six strong, heavily-armed men with her, with orders not to let her out of their sight. She wasn't sure whether she or they were more embarrassed when she needed to use the privy.

At the end of the day, Tagahra summoned her to his office. He said, "We've spoken to the other members of Shendar's family who live in Kyer Altamar. All of them have alibis for Yisea's Day and the night of it."

"Are you saying you don't know who poisoned me, Sir?"

He sighed. "I'm afraid so. I'll keep looking, of course, but I'm not hopeful of finding the culprit. Would you like to stay at my house again tonight, or would you rather return to your lodgings?"

She swallowed to moisten her throat. "I'm not sure I'd be safe there, Sir."

"I'm not sure anywhere in Kyer Altamar is safe at the moment."

"Then perhaps the sensible thing to do is keep moving."

Tagahra nodded. "Tell a couple of your guards to escort you to an inn."

In the corridor, Adramal picked the two toughest-looking men and dismissed the rest. She still found it unnerving that Watchmen obeyed her immediately and without question.

Outside, it had started to rain. "Soon be autumn," said one of the men.

"A nice change from this blasted heat – begging your pardon, Sergeant," the other said.

She stood at the top of the wide staircase that led down from the building's entrance, trying to decide which inn to go to. She could be gone for a while. "First we'll go to my lodgings to pick up some spare clothing." *And everything else I own.* She'd already paid the rent for the fortnight, and the landlord had made it clear he didn't give refunds. She could leave a note for him.

Her lodgings were in a large brick building in the north-east of the city – not quite the poorest part, but not for want of trying, Tagahra had said. Near the ground, the bricks retained

their natural beige colour, but higher up, the soot from countless chimneys had darkened them.

Adramal pushed at the door – locked again. The landlord claimed he always left it open until halfway through fourth watch, but either he had a different idea of “fourth watch” from everyone else, or another person had a key. She put a hand on the lock and turned to the men.

“I trust you won’t arrest me for doing this?”

“Doing what, Sergeant?” said one, pointedly looking the other way.

“It’s not illegal to break into your own home,” said the other.

She knew this lock well enough not to need to sense its structure. She touched the point on the door closest to the bolt and cast a spell that allowed her to manipulate it. Probing the darkness, her magic sought a cold, hard flat surface. She found it at the edge of her range – wood was more difficult to see through than flesh. She flicked her fingers, and the bolt moved in sympathy. The door swung open a few inches, and she let go of the spell, panting heavily.

“Are you all right, Sergeant?” said the first man.

Adramal nodded, too exhausted to speak for the moment. The poison must have weakened her more than she thought.

“Wouldn’t it be simpler to ask your landlord for a key to the front door? I’ve got one for mine.”

She took a deep breath. “And where would be the fun in that?” She pushed the door open further, but the man stepped in front of her.

“You’d better let one of us go first.”

Adramal hesitated. If she was right about who – or what – was trying to kill her, these two couldn’t protect her. If they were lucky, their nerve would break and they’d run away. But what if she was wrong? The Kreztalin that had destroyed Shendar had no need of poison.

“Go on,” she said reluctantly.

The Watchman drew his sword and edged the door open. Once it was wide enough to admit him, he jumped inside and swung his sword into the space behind the door. Adramal tensed, expecting to hear the weapon connect with something, but no sound came. He took a few steps down the corridor.

“There’s no one here,” he said.

Adramal entered, with the other Watchman behind her. The corridor was as she remembered – and why shouldn’t it be? – just wide enough for her to touch both walls with her arms outstretched, plaster falling off those walls in chunks, a narrow staircase near the door leading to the top floor. A candle flickered in a holder on the newel post. Her imagination peopled the shifting shadows with Kreztalin and the nameless monsters from her purges.

“Check under the staircase,” she said.

The first man did as she asked, saying, “It’s clear.”

“My room is upstairs, fourth on the right.” She fished the key from her pocket and handed it to him. They ascended the stairs in single file, Adramal in the middle, the steps creaking under their feet.

At the top, the remains of the daylight filtered through a window at the far end of the landing. The first man motioned Adramal and the second man to stay put. He walked carefully to Adramal’s door and listened for a few moments. He turned the key slowly and silently, and then raised his sword and kicked the door open.

“Do you do that at home, Watchman?” said a man inside the room.

“Sir?” the man said, plainly baffled.

“Is Sergeant Adramal with you?”

“Y-yes, Sir.”

“Then send her in, and keep guard outside.”

The Watchman came back on to the landing and beckoned her.

Wondering if it was wise, Adramal went to her door. Sitting in her only chair was a man, old but still strong, dressed in a more elaborate version of the uniform she wore – Yebran, the Commander of the Watch.

Surprised, she took half a step back. “Sir? What are you doing here?”

“Come in, Sergeant, and close the door.”

She did as he asked, and then stopped, startled, when she saw another person sitting on the bed.

“Father?”

Chapter 3

Adramal's father stood and held out his arms. She shrank from him at first – it didn't do to display emotion in front of an officer – and then gave in and let him embrace her. After a moment, she put her arms around him, something she hadn't done for many years.

"Someone's trying to kill me," she whispered, her eyes prickling.

"I know. That's why I'm here."

She let go of him and looked into his eyes, questioning.

"I got your letter." Magic passed over her, like a gentle breeze. "Now we can talk without being overheard." He sat on a corner of the bed. She felt guilty for not having a chair for him. Then again, she was hardly ever here except to sleep, and these two were the first visitors she'd had.

"Would you oblige us with some light?" said Father.

Adramal calmed herself and allowed the necessary thoughts to form. She was always self-conscious performing magic in front of him, as though he could look into her mind and see any sloppiness in the thoughts' shape or timing. She still recalled his anger over her first few failures at this spell, almost the simplest thing a wizard could do. She closed her eyes to hold back tears...

"Nice place you've got."

She opened her eyes, blinking in the unexpected brightness of the light above her shoulder. She took in the cracked plaster, the uneven floorboards, the rotting window frame, as though seeing them for the first time.

"It's a flea-pit," she said.

Father grinned. "Bigger and cleaner than the first room I had in Kyer Altamar. I was surprised when Yebran told me he'd given you a job, but I suppose there are worse ways to earn a living." He patted the bed next to him. Hesitantly, she sat down. "Now, Yebran has told me the official version of how you came to be a Sergeant in the Watch, which will save you the bother of pretending that's what really happened."

Her mouth hung open for several moments. Then she snapped it shut and turned to Yebran. "Sir, I must apologise –"

"Damn right you must!" Yebran replied, his face reddening. "Does your oath of office mean nothing to you? Lying to a superior officer goes against everything the Watch stands for. I ought to –" Father held up a hand, and Yebran abruptly fell silent.

"We agreed to be gentle, remember?" said Father. "If she thinks you want her head on a pike in Zemil Square, she's not going to tell you anything."

Yebran's shoulders sagged. "Very well."

Father said, "I know you're lying about what happened to Shendar – or not telling us everything – because if she confessed to the murders, she would've told you the meaning of the symbol she carved into the victims."

Adramal sighed. "She didn't tell me. But only because I figured it out myself." Even that was a lie. But she hoped she wouldn't have to tell them about Lelsarin.

“And what does this blasted symbol mean?” said Yebran.

Father replied, “It represents something that should not have been forgotten.”

“What?”

“Zorian.”

Yebran gave him a pitying look. “You’re not still obsessed with that load of horseshit, are you?”

To hear someone else speak Zorian’s name was unexpectedly reassuring – evidence that she hadn’t just imagined the events in the temple. “Zorian exists, Sir,” she said. “Or at any rate, a... a creature exists that acknowledges him as its master.”

Father gulped. “What sort of creature?”

“Shendar called it a Kreztalin.”

His face fell. “Describe it.”

“It was man-shaped, about seven feet high and very thin, made of a glossy black material. It didn’t have a face, and it didn’t move much. I thought it was a statue at first.”

“That’s a Kreztalin,” said Father. “How many were there?”

“I saw only one.”

He sighed. “That’s something, I suppose. But it means you’re in even greater danger than I thought.”

“Why?”

“The Kreztalin don’t leave Zorian’s temples – not since Zorian was vanquished, anyway. To get close enough to one to see they have no faces, you would’ve been inside the temple. People who go into one of Zorian’s temples don’t come out again. You were allowed to escape, and I’d say that means they think they can use you.”

Adramal’s light wavered. Her throat had gone dry. “What could I possibly do for them?”

“I don’t know. Why don’t you tell us what really happened with you and Shendar?”

“I told the truth up to where Shendar and I crossed the river. But she didn’t try to kill me on the north bank. She marched me through the forest.”

“At night?” said Yebran.

“Yes, Sir. There’s a temple in the middle of the forest – a huge cylindrical tower. It’s a ruin, though the lower levels seem to be largely intact.”

“Did she say why she was taking you there?” said Father.

“She didn’t, but I assumed I’d meet a similar fate to the other seven people she killed.” And that was still a lie. Lelsarin had said not to say anything about her. But Lelsarin had been gone since then, and there was no guarantee she was ever coming back.

“Did you say this building was a temple?” said Yebran.

Father nodded.

“Which God is it dedicated to? It doesn’t sound like any design I’ve heard of.”

“That’s because it isn’t,” said Father. “Zorian was a God.”

Adramal was about to ask how he knew, but then remembered Lelsarin’s warning to be careful who she told about Zorian. Father was trustworthy – well, if he wasn’t, all hope was lost. But she had no idea whether she could trust Yebran with what she knew.

“Ridiculous,” said Yebran.

“It is a... minority view,” Father said with a wry smile. “But Shendar evidently subscribed to it. The killings have many of the characteristics of sacrifices. I wonder what she hoped Zorian would give her in return.”

“You don’t barter with a God,” said Yebran.

“She said she was descended from House Gilmareth,” said Adramal.

Yebran snorted. “Her and a hundred other pretenders, I shouldn’t wonder.”

“I’ve never heard of them,” said Father.

“They died out around the middle of the fourth century,” said Yebran. “Every decade or

so, someone pops up claiming to be their missing heir. I'd be surprised if there's anything left of their fortune now, though I think they're still entitled to a seat on the King's Council. Whether the other Houses would stand for it is another matter."

"Shendar's plans were rather more ambitious than that," said Adramal. "During the First Regency, Prince Sathim was engaged to be married to House Gilmareth's foremost daughter."

Father frowned. "I take it he married someone else in the end, then."

"Yes. Shendar thought if he'd married the other woman, House Gilmareth would still exist, and she might well be its leader. She thought if she could bring Zorian back, He would make her Queen."

"Ridiculous," said Yebran.

Adramal quailed. "It's true, Sir."

Yebran blew out a long breath and gazed at the ceiling. "No, I can believe it. People kill for all sorts of absurd reasons, and I thought I'd seen them all. But to kill seven people over a... a three-hundred year-old grudge that no one else cares about... it seems, well... not so much ridiculous as pathetic."

"Pathetic, maybe," said Father. "But also very dangerous. So what happened when you reached the temple?"

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. They mustn't suspect she was lying about what happened next. Let them think the memories troubled her. They did trouble her. "A Kreztalín appeared a few minutes after we entered. Shendar told it she'd come to... to bring Zorian back. It said she wasn't capable of such a feat." Father nodded. "It said she wasn't worthy to serve Zorian – that she wasn't even fit to be a sacrifice to him. Then it pointed at her and she – she wasn't there any more." Her breath caught in her throat. "There was just a cloud of glittering dust. Some of it stuck to me, like being jabbed with hot needles."

"I've read about that," said Father. "From what I can make out, there are two spells – one to turn the victim to stone and another to shatter the stone. I didn't think it was that fast, though, or that thorough."

"I saw my opportunity and ran," said Adramal. "The temple doors started to close, and I only just scraped through them." She touched her upper arm. "That's how I got this."

Father went pale. "Are you sure? It wasn't from something else?"

The light from Adramal's spell flickered. "Of course I'm sure."

"Let me see."

She rolled up her sleeve. The wound had healed, leaving only a thick white scar, a horizontal line from the middle of her biceps to the edge of her triceps. He touched it, and she felt magic probing at the scar, like a stiff brush being dragged over her skin. For a moment, she was back in the temple, heart hammering, every muscle aching, as she ran for the closing door.

"You need to leave," said Father.

Panting and sweating, Adramal opened her eyes to see a light in the middle of the room. Her light spell had failed, and Father had cast one of his own. The scar felt like hot iron. Father and Yebran loomed over her, and it was hard to say which looked more troubled.

"Gods, Alesin," said Yebran. "What did you do to her?"

"The wound allowed magic from the temple to enter her body," said Father. He sounded like a judge pronouncing a sentence of death.

Adramal closed her eyes, feeling light-headed. Strong arms caught her as she fell backwards, and lifted her to lie on the bed.

"Will she live?" said Yebran.

"Yes," said Father, "though she might wish otherwise. The spell can't have been very strong to begin with, and I think the healing process has flushed most of it out, but there's enough left to cause concern."

“What does this spell do, then?” said Yebran. Her father took a deep breath, but before he could speak, Yebran added, “In layman’s terms.”

“Essentially it’s a beacon. I’ve heard we all look the same to the Kreztalin, so if they want to find her, the spell will make her stand out.”

“And why would they want to find her?” said Yebran.

“I don’t know,” said Father, “except that it can’t be to kill her.”

“So you don’t think they were behind the poisoning?”

“The Kreztalin have no need of poison.”

“Not even to frame someone else?” said Yebran.

“That’s possible, I suppose,” said Father. “But we already have one good reason to get her out of the city. We don’t need another.”

“Where are you taking me?” said Adramal.

“Not taking you,” said Father. “Sending you. I can’t go with you.”

In a way, that was a relief. Her father was next to impossible to live with, and she didn’t imagine he’d be any easier to travel with. But still she asked, “Why not?”

“I have other things to take care of.” He smiled awkwardly. “Besides, you’ve proven you can take care of yourself – among people, anyway.”

“So where am I going?” said Adramal.

“Salmar,” he said.

“Salmar?” said Yebran.

“Specifically Vannharial.”

Yebran spluttered. “You’ve gone soft in the head if you think that’s a safer place for an apprentice wizard – your own daughter – than Kyer Altamar.”

Father sighed. “We have no choice. We need to keep her away from the Kreztalin until their spell wears off. Their power is concentrated around Zorian’s temples, which are dotted all over the land. But Zorian never built any temples in Salmar. Their westernmost coast is barely a day’s sailing from us. Zorian could easily have conquered them, but He never tried.”

“How do you know?” said Yebran.

“Because the Salmarians don’t frighten children into obedience with stories of what He’ll do to them,” Father said with a sarcastic smile. “Since Zorian’s temples are everywhere on the mainland, the ocean must have stopped Him from entering Salmar. Vannharial has its own dangers, but it’s no more dangerous than here.”

“You seem rather too willing to stake a young woman’s safety on a lot of ‘shoulds’ and ‘mights,’” Yebran said. “Besides, there’s the matter of her having broken her oath of office.”

“She told the truth in all substantive matters,” said Father. “Shendar is every bit as dead as you believed her to be. Adramal just lied about how it happened. In both versions of her story, it happened outside the city, where the Watch has no authority. And the Kreztalin, being servants of Zorian, are effectively priests. The Watch has no authority in religious matters.”

Yebran gave him a stern look. “She lied. I can throw her out of the Watch for that. The only thing stopping me is that you seem to want to punish her more than I do.”

“Will you two stop talking about me as if I’m not here?” said Adramal.

Yebran raised an eyebrow in her direction. “Do you share your father’s belief that these... Kreztalin have something undesirable planned for you?” he asked.

She licked her lips. “It would seem a logical conclusion, Sir.”

“And do you believe that if you go to Salmar, the Kreztalin won’t be able to find you?”

“I hadn’t given the matter much thought, Sir.” The next words seemed to stick in her throat. “I defer to my father’s expertise.”

“Alesin, how long do you expect her to have to stay in Salmar?”

Father scratched his nose. “Hard to judge. Let’s say the start of winter.”

“Six fortnights?” said Adramal.

He shrugged. “Seven, just to be sure.”

Yebran blew out a long breath. “Tagahra’s not going to want to let you go for that long.”

“He managed without her before she arrived,” said Father.

“You’re not the one who’ll have to tell him. And what’s she going to *do* in Vannharial for all that time?”

“She’s clever. She’ll think of something.”

Adramal gawked at him. “So you’re just going to abandon me there?”

Yebran rested his chin on his hands. “There is one place we can send her in the city where she won’t be in any danger from the Salmarians.”

“Oh yes?” said Father.

“How good are you at reckoning, Sergeant?”

Surprised to be addressed directly, Adramal replied, “Um, fairly good I think, Sir.”

Father bristled. “She can do calculations in her head that most clerks would need a slate for.”

Ignoring him, Yebran asked, “And you learned about the practices of commerce at Kyturil, am I right?”

“A little, Sir.”

“Are you planning to set her up with a bookkeeping business?” said Father.

Yebran smiled. “Not quite. But I think we have a plan.”

Chapter 4

Adramal stood on the stern of the ship, the *Star of the East*, facing into the breeze. If she squinted, she could just make out the rounded hills of the Centadorian coast. Having the wind coming at her allowed her to pretend she wasn't crying. *How could they? How could he?*

She had never liked her father much, and as far as she could tell, the feeling was mutual, but she would have expected him to at least *pretend* to be concerned for her wellbeing in front of Yebran. They'd hurried her down to the docks and bundled her onto the first ship bound for Vannharial. It wasn't even a passenger ship, so she had to sleep on top of the bales of cargo – wool, mainly, to judge from the smell. She might as well be part of the cargo herself, for all the say she had in what was happening to her.

Her father had given her a purse of Salmarian coins, containing the equivalent of about twenty Centadorian silvers – enough to keep her going, he'd said, until she had a chance to visit a money-changer. And how had he known she was going to need it?

Almost as an afterthought, as the crew had been retracting the gangplank, he'd spoken to her by mindspeech. *Be careful with your use of magic. The Salmarians dislike it even more than our priests do. They might have passed a law against it since I was last there.*

At least the weather had been good so far, and she hadn't suffered any seasickness, though it had taken her a while to get used to the way the ship rolled and pitched.

"Hello. First time at sea?"

She turned to see an old sailor, grey-bearded and gap-toothed, smiling at her.

"You speak Centadorian," she said, surprised. The ship was a Salmarian one, with an all-Salmarian crew.

"Most of us do – some better than others. It's a useful skill when you spend your life going back and forth between Salmar and Centador."

"I see." She wiped her eyes. The wind whipped her hair over her face, and she brushed it away. "You're right, this is the first time I've been to sea. How can you tell?"

"Everybody stands on the stern first time, looking at where they came from, wondering if they'll ever see it again. My name's Saikinn, by the way."

"I'm Meldoran," she replied. It had been the first thing that came into her head when Yebran told her she had best not travel under her real name.

"So what brings you across the Gulf to Salmar?"

"I'm going to be a clerk in the Centadorian Embassy in Vannharial."

"That's nice."

"I was wondering," she said. "I don't know much Salmarian. Would you be willing to teach me some?"

"Of course."

"When can we start?"

"Now?"

She nodded.

“Utanshla’ Groleya,” he said. “That means ‘good morning.’”

Saikinn taught her for the rest of the watch, when he had to go on duty. The lesson resumed in the middle of the afternoon and continued until dinner. He seemed pleased with her progress. The language was easier than she’d expected – what he’d taught her of its grammar had a lot of similarities to Centadorian, and a good many words were the same, or close to a related word in her own language. What would probably trip her up was that a lot of idioms were different. The phrase he’d given her for “good morning” literally meant “may Groll smile upon us” – not the sort of thing most Centadorians would think of asking for, and certainly not something a wizard would ever say.

They agreed to continue the lessons the next day, and Adramal went to her makeshift bed among the cargo.

In the middle of the night, she jerked awake, momentarily unsure of where she was. She’d dreamed of riding on a horse that was carrying her towards a castle. The animal plodded on tirelessly, but their destination never grew any nearer. A candle – no, a lantern – flickered in the distance, conjuring phantoms from the darkness. A light spell began to form in her mind. But no – there was no need for that. The person she must pretend to be for the next season or so couldn’t do magic. The spell frayed and fell apart, harmlessly.

The scar on her right arm stabbed at her. She clapped a hand over her mouth to stop herself crying out, and the pain faded.

It worried her that the scar flared up only after she had woken. If the pain had caused her to wake, that would be understandable. But now she could believe the scar was a beacon to draw Zorian’s servants to her.

Adramal lay down on the bales of wool and pulled the blanket over herself. The wind didn’t reach down here, but the ocean was cooler than the land. She considered staying awake to see if the scar hurt again. But if the Kreztalin were searching for her, what could she do about it that she wasn’t doing already?

The next morning, All Gods’ Day, Adramal went up on deck to find the ship completely out of sight of land. The sky was cloudless, and the swell of the sea barely noticeable. It seemed as though the ship wasn’t moving, just rocking back and forth in the same spot. A few gulls hung in the sky, as if suspended on wires.

A couple of men scampered about among the sails, adjusting ropes and canvas to take best advantage of the wind. One of them shouted something. She’d learned enough to decipher it as “Sail ahead to port!”

She looked at the horizon ahead, squinting against the sunlight that glittered on the wavetops. After a moment, she glimpsed a white rectangle in the distance.

Saikinn climbed out of a hatch. “Good morning, Lady,” he said in Salmarian.

“Good morning,” she replied. She thought her way through what she wanted to say. “There is a ship ahead to port.”

He looked in that direction. “So there is. Centadorian, I’d say.”

“How can you tell?”

“The shape of the sail. The sides are straight. Ours are wide at the bottom and narrow at the top.” He looked at the ship again. “She’s coming this way. We should pass her within the hour.”

Saikinn’s prediction proved accurate. The other ship was smaller and more box-like than the sleek Salmarian vessel. She – Adramal had not discovered why ships were perceived as female – seemed to wallow, as though overloaded. When Adramal mentioned this, Saikinn said, “They tend to carry more than they should, though I’ve heard they roll like that even when they’re empty.”

“Why’s that?”

“I don’t know. I think our ships are just better-built than yours.”

Adramal frowned.

“We *have* been making them for a lot longer than you.”

“Why are the people on the other ship looking away from us?”

“Because we’re looking away from them.”

A glance at their own crew confirmed this. “And... why are we doing that?”

He gave an embarrassed grin. “I can’t really put it into Centadorian. And I haven’t taught you enough Salmarian to explain it either.”

She wondered if it was something to do with the Siege of the East, a long period of slow, brooding conflict between the two countries that Komarth, one of the teachers at Kyturil, had insisted she learn about. She’d thought it long finished, but evidently, for some people at least, it was part of the present.

“That reminds me, though,” he said, switching to Centadorian. “Something I should’ve mentioned yesterday.” He looked at her sidelong. “Are you married?”

“That’s none of your business,” she spluttered.

“Sorry – I didn’t mean it like that.” He seemed to be blushing, but his tanned skin made it hard to be sure. “Your hair.”

“My hair?” she said, now confused as well as offended.

“In Salmar, a woman ties her hair up when she marries. After that, the only person who’s supposed to see it down again is her husband, in their bedroom.”

“Oh...”

“And there are places – and Vannharial’s one of them, sorry to say – where young men see a woman with her hair loose and assume she’s fair game.”

Adramal began to understand why Yebran had been so reluctant to allow Father to send her on this journey.

“So if you want those sorts to leave you alone, tie your hair up when you’re out. Our women have all sorts of fancy ways of knotting it together, and they can pull on the right part and it all falls down.” He smiled wistfully, perhaps remembering a woman who’d done this in his presence. “But it works just as well to tie everything behind your head with a bit of cord – keeps it out of your eyes in the wind, too.”

“I see. Thanks for the warning.” She went below deck and tried to work out how to tie her hair. Tying it was actually the easy part. Tying it so it wouldn’t fall down a minute later was harder, and tying it so that she could untie it without cutting the cord was harder still. But after half an hour or so, she felt she’d mastered it sufficiently to see if her handiwork would withstand the wind. It did, and it was a relief not to have it whipping about in her face.

In the afternoon, they sighted land to port – white cliffs with dark green hills behind them. Their destination, the Salmarian capital Vannharial, lay on the eastern side of Toros, the island they’d just seen, so they would follow the coast for the rest of the journey.

Over the next few days, sightings of other ships became more common. Whenever they passed a Centadorian ship, the crews of the two vessels averted their gaze from one another. A few ships were built of a paler wood than the Salmarian and Centadorian ones, but were crewed by men with darker skin than any she had seen. These, she learned, were from the Anorene Empire, far to the south. They did not look away from anybody.

Saikinn continued her lessons in Salmarian, and by the end of the voyage, she was able to carry on a conversation about most everyday things. What he taught her grew further from Centadorian as the days went on, and she guessed he’d started with the easy parts. He said she had a typical Centadorian accent, but the people she was likely to meet were used to hearing it.

On Arveth’s Day, four days after leaving Kyer Altamar, Vannharial became visible as a white smudge on the horizon. Over the next few hours, the smudge resolved into buildings, made mostly of stone. The city was much larger than Kyer Altamar, easily two or three miles across, and was built mostly on the north bank of a river. Steep hills rose behind the city, mainly given over to farming.

The sea near the city teemed with vessels of all sizes, jostling for position. The *Star of the East* stopped some way clear of the mêlée, but near to several other ships that had also halted.

“Why have we stopped?” she asked Saikinn.

“Waiting for a berth,” he replied. “Ships with passengers go first, then ships with cargo that’ll rot, then ships with cargo that doesn’t rot. That’s us.”

“But I’m a passenger,” she said.

Saikinn explained that, while any Salmarian ship could carry passengers if the captain was willing to take them, only ships that were registered with the city as passenger vessels – and paid for the privilege – were considered as carrying passengers for the purposes of deciding who had priority for a berth. They were apparently entitled to this even if they had no passengers on board for a specific voyage. The *Star of the East*, meanwhile, would be anchored here for the rest of the day, and probably most of tomorrow as well. Adramal fumed, but soon realised there was nothing she could do about it. It wasn’t as if she particularly wanted to be in Vannharial anyway.

About once an hour, a ship to starboard of them would weigh anchor and sail into the docks. Newly-arrived ships anchored on the port side. Adramal counted twelve ships ahead of them in the queue.

Around noon on the next day, they reached the head of the queue and got under way. They changed direction several times, and Adramal noticed pairs of buoys that marked out a route for them to follow. At last they reached the dock, just north of the river.

“May the winds and tides be always in your favour,” Saikinn said as Adramal set foot on the gangplank.

“Oh. I’m not going to be sailing for... some seasons, at least.”

He grinned. “That’s just something we say when we won’t see someone for a long time.”

“I see. Then I wish the same to you.” On the dock, she felt in her pocket for Yebran’s letter. She checked that her hair was securely tied at the back of her head, and made her way to the landward end of the dock.

People and horses thronged the street, and she wondered how she would get across it. She spotted a bored-looking man on this side, standing next to a horse and chaise, probably waiting for someone important from one of the ships. While he had nothing better to do, he might as well help her.

“Good afternoon, Sir,” she said. “Can you tell me the way to the Centadorian Embassy?”

He blinked in surprise. “I’m afraid I can’t.”

“Oh. Well thank you anyway, Sir.” She began to turn away.

“But I can take you there for three coppers.”

Frowning, she turned back to him. “How can you do that if you don’t know where it is?”

“I know where it is,” he said with a cheeky grin. “But if I tell you, you’ll walk there, and I’ll be three coppers short.”

“And why would you take me?”

“Because it’s my job,” he said, exasperated. “Haven’t you ever heard of taxis?”

“I’m afraid I haven’t.”

“You’re Centadorian, aren’t you?”

“I am.”

“Figures. I’ve heard you’ve got nothing like this over there. Here’s how it works.” He pointed to a bronze badge that dangled from the front of the carriage’s roof. It bore a symbol of a wheel surrounded by wings and lightning bolts. “You see a cart with a badge like that, you stick your arm out and the driver takes you anywhere in the city. It’s three coppers, or

four if you cross the river. Make sure he's showing the badge, 'cos there's a few rogues who'll try to charge you more. The badge proves he's licensed by the city, and they can take it off him if he doesn't obey the rules. So, d'you want me to take you to the Embassy, or d'you want to hang around for someone who'll tell you where it is for nothing?"

"Do I pay you now, or when we get there?"

"You're supposed to pay me before we start, but I'll let you pay at the Embassy, just so you can see I'm not joshin' you. Besides, you do try to run off, you aren't going far with all that rubbish on your back."

Adramal weighed the options. Travelling by "taxi" would be a novel experience, and if it turned out to be a scam, she could stun him and make her escape on foot.

"Let's go," she said. The journey was more pleasant than she expected. The horse was a calm, sure-footed animal. Unlike other vehicles she'd ridden in, the wheels of the chaise were not fixed directly to its body, but attached to flexible pieces of curved metal that acted as springs, smoothing out bumps and potholes.

The smell of the city reminded her of Kyer Altamar. The odour of rotting fish was more noticeable here, but overall, the smell wasn't as strong as she'd become used to, perhaps because of the steady wind that blew towards the sea.

The streets, with a few exceptions, were quite wide, and laid out on a grid, parallel or perpendicular to the waterfront. This was a marked contrast to Kyer Altamar, and everywhere else Adramal had lived, where streets wandered in whatever direction they pleased. "Are all Salmarian cities like this?" she asked.

"I wouldn't know. Never been anywhere else."

The buildings were constructed largely of white or pale grey stone, and tended to have large windows and roofed entrances that jutted into the street. She'd seen this style before, at the Salmarian Embassy in Kyer Altamar. Above the windows were long strips of darker stone, carved with what she supposed must be scenes from history or scripture.

Although the streets were crowded, they were able to move at a respectable pace. It took Adramal a while to realise that everybody was going the same way. Furthermore, pedestrians kept to the edges of the street, while vehicles had the middle.

They turned a corner, and abruptly the buildings changed from stone to wood and brick, seeming older and scruffier. "I think there was a big fire in the middle of the city," the driver said when she asked about it. "Long time ago now. This was as far as it got. Everything here is older than the fire, and everything behind us is newer."

They had been travelling for perhaps a quarter of an hour altogether, when they stopped outside one of the wood and brick buildings, larger than most. "See?" said the driver. "It works." Sure enough, a sign over the door said "Centadorian Embassy." She handed over three coppers from the purse Father had given her. The driver carried her pack as far as the door and drove off.

She knocked on the door. After a few moments, it was answered by a young man in a brown uniform.

"Good afternoon, Sir," she said. "I've come about the clerk's job."

He sniffed and looked her over. "From Centador, are you?"

"Yes, Sir. My name is Meldoran of Kyer Altamar."

The man switched to speaking Centadorian. "Well, Meldoran, I don't know who told you there was a job here, but you've been misinformed. Good day."

As he began to close the door, Adramal said, "Wait – I have a letter for the secretary – Kynar?" With a frown, he let go of the door. She gave him the letter, and he eyed it carefully, as though it might be a forgery.

"You'd better come in," he said.

Chapter 5

The lobby, naturally small and gloomy, was made more so by the presence of many potted plants. Most reached over Adramal's head, and she wondered how they'd grown so tall. Magic, or the simpler expedient of growing them elsewhere?

"Wait here," the servant said, before disappearing into the vegetation.

She searched for a chair, not finding one. A painting on a wall, partly hidden by leaves, caught her eye. It showed a ruined castle on a river – quite possibly Kyturil. Yes – there were the five-cornered concentric walls, the marsh on one side of the castle, and the forest on the river's opposite bank. A lump formed in her throat. She couldn't think of that place without thinking of Perinar and how he'd abandoned her. Bad enough that he'd rejected her, but he hadn't even had the decency to tell her to her face that he didn't love her any more.

"The secretary will see you now."

Startled, she let go of the leaves and turned to see the man who'd let her in. She followed him through a door at the back of the lobby and along a corridor. He knocked on a door with "Secretary" written on it.

"Come in!" called a woman. The man opened the door and motioned Adramal inside.

The woman sat behind a desk in a large room, a neat pile of slates on either side of her. She was perhaps thirty-five, with a round face and long brown hair, fastened in a bun, and wore an old-fashioned gown of plain white linen with a blue silk sash. One wall was occupied by a set of filing cabinets. A large glass window looked onto an ornamental garden. The other wall was blank except for a small portrait of a stern-faced young man. From the fact he wore a crown, Adramal guessed he was the Centadorian king.

"Meldoran," the woman said, with a half-hearted smile. Just in time, Adramal stopped herself from turning round to see who the woman was addressing. "Please sit down." Adramal took one of the two chairs in front of the desk. "Bring us some refreshment," the woman said to the servant, who waited in the doorway. He bowed and closed the door.

The woman glanced over Adramal's letter. "I am Kynar, Secretary to the Ambassador of His Majesty King Mekrinom III. In the presence of anyone who isn't on the staff, you address me as 'Secretary Kynar' or 'Secretary.' We don't insist on much formality among ourselves, so you may address me as 'Lady' if no visitors are around."

Adramal leaned back. "Does that mean I've got the job... Lady?"

Kynar sighed and tapped the letter with the back of her hand. "This is a... very unusual request. Commander Yebran, being an old friend of mine, is calling in a favour. That's not unusual, by itself. He wants me to shelter you under diplomatic privilege until the start of winter. That's not unusual, by itself. He also wants me to give you a job as a clerk in our accounting department. And *that's* not unusual, by itself. Most of the Lesser Houses send us the children who aren't going to inherit, to try to make them useful in some way. But put it all together, and it's not so much unusual as unprecedented." She sat back and steepled her fingers. "Now, do you know what diplomatic privilege is?"

Adramal half-closed her eyes, recalling the definitions Yebran had drummed into her on

the way through Kyer Altamar to the docks. “The Embassy and its grounds are Centadorian territory, so Centadorian law applies to them. Anyone with diplomatic privilege who is accused of a crime under Salmarian law must be presented to the Ambassador, who decides whether the accused has any case to answer. If she does, a trial is held under Centadorian law. Only if the accused is found guilty, she is handed over to the Salmarian authorities for a trial under their law.”

“Good,” said Kynar, smiling. “So many young clerks seem to think it means they’re allowed – encouraged, even – to break everyone’s laws. But you see the problem?”

“I’m afraid I don’t, Lady.”

“Diplomatic privilege essentially means you’re subject to Centadorian law while you’re here. It discourages the Salmarians from harassing you when relations between the two countries aren’t going as smoothly as we’d like. But you were already subject to Centadorian law in Kyer Altamar. And I assume you didn’t have the Vannharial Watch trying to arrest you there.”

“No, Lady.”

“So what protection does diplomatic privilege give you that you couldn’t obtain simply by staying at home?”

Adramal’s chest tightened. For what felt like too long, she didn’t answer. “I... I must ask your forgiveness, Lady, if I seem evasive. Yebran sent me here because he thinks someone in Kyer Altamar is trying to kill me.”

“Oh? And who is this someone?”

“He doesn’t know.”

“And why does he think this mysterious someone is trying to kill you?”

“I was poisoned on Yisea’s Day.”

“You look remarkably healthy, considering that.”

“I was fortunate that a skilled healer was nearby.” No need to mention she was that healer.

Kynar harrumphed. “I have to wonder why he sent you here. There are surely plenty of safe places closer to Kyer Altamar.”

Adramal shifted uncomfortably. The Secretary was getting too near the truth. “Perhaps Yebran feels he can trust you, Lady.”

“He can, but I’m sure there are others in Centador who are just as trustworthy.” Before Adramal could think of an answer, Kynar said, “Those refreshments are taking a long time.” She went to the door and motioned Adramal to come with her. “You can leave your luggage.”

Kynar led Adramal out to the garden at the back of the building. The plants were laid out in rows according to the colour of their flowers, giving a fair approximation to a rainbow. An awning was attached to the wall of the building, sheltering a patio paved with the white stone she had seen so much on the way here. A round wooden table and four chairs occupied the middle of the patio, and Kynar indicated that Adramal should sit. She then went back indoors.

She’s never going to agree to Yebran’s request. Adramal was tempted to cut her losses and climb over the fence, to disappear into Vannharial. There was bound to be a village nearby that needed a healer, or even just another pair of hands to help bring in the harvest – somewhere she could be safely anonymous until the start of winter – or longer.

Footsteps made her look up. The servant who had allowed her into the building approached, carrying a tray. Kynar followed with a couple of slates. After setting the tray on the table, the man bowed and retreated into the building.

“My apologies,” Kynar said, sitting next to Adramal. She gestured to the tray. “Help yourself.” They had a cup each of a thin, pungent wine and a plate of small honeyed cakes to share. Adramal despaired of having to drink wine, but reminded herself that the person she was supposed to be would relish it.

Kynar produced a piece of chalk from her gown. She wrote something on a slate and passed it to Adramal. “What does that say?”

The slate was about a foot square, somewhat larger than Adramal was used to from Kyturil. “The oak disposes of its leaves at the first breeze of autumn, but the pine stays verdant even in the most frigid depths of winter.” She gave Kynar a puzzled look.

“A lot of people who come here wanting to be clerks can’t read – or not that well, anyway.” She gave her the chalk. “Write this – ‘A diplomat must tread carefully, lest the sound of his footsteps offend.’” Adramal wrote the words and handed the slate to Kynar. “You have an unusual hand, but perfectly legible.”

“Thank you, Lady.”

“Can you reckon compound interest?”

“I can.”

Kynar returned the slate. “Principal one hundred royals, six payments, five percent interest. What’s the total repayment?”

Adramal wasn’t sure what a royal was, but she cleaned the slate and calculated for a few minutes before announcing, “One hundred and thirty-four royals, Lady.”

Kynar checked her arithmetic and said, “Very good.” Nibbling at a cake, she put the slate back on the table. “From your accent, I’d say you’re not from Kyer Altamar.”

“No, Lady. I’m from the west.” There was no point in trying to hide that.

“How long were you in the capital?”

“Half a season.”

Kynar sipped at her wine. “You make enemies quickly, then.”

Too true.

“What news from home?” said Kynar. “Has the cattle brand murderer been caught yet?”

Adramal’s heart sank. Kynar had gone straight to the topic she least wanted to talk about. “Cattle brand, Lady?”

“You hadn’t heard? I’d got the impression the city was talking about nothing else. This killer stripped his victims naked and marked their stomachs with a symbol, the same way a farmer does to his cows.”

“How revolting.” Adramal put down the cake she had been about to eat. “I heard the Watch caught someone they thought was a murderer, but she was killed resisting arrest.”

Kynar set her cup down heavily. “She? Do you know her name?”

“I’m afraid not.” And why had Kynar asked that? Did she think the murderer might have been someone she knew?

They talked of Kyer Altamar for a while longer and then returned to Kynar’s office.

“I think we can find something for you to do,” Kynar said.

Adramal sat back and breathed out heavily. “Thank you, Lady.”

“I’ll need to clear it with the Ambassador, but I’m reasonably sure he’ll agree. I’ll have to tell him what you told me, but you can trust him not to tell anyone else.”

Adramal couldn’t help thinking that if Kynar had to portray the Ambassador as trustworthy, that probably meant he wasn’t. Still, she wouldn’t be asking him to keep any secrets, beyond the half-truths she’d already told the Secretary.

Kynar took her to one of the guest rooms. It was austere, but had everything Adramal needed, and was clean and warm. Adramal undressed and flopped into bed, grateful to be lying on something that didn’t roll.

The following morning, Kynar told her the Ambassador had agreed to her request. She tried to look grateful. The room where the clerks worked was a low, dingy place with shelves all around the walls, crammed with books, scrolls and loose papers. It reminded her of Kyturil’s library, but less well-organised. Three people sat at a table in the middle of the room, writing by the light of a lantern that hung from a hook in the ceiling. A pity she wouldn’t be able to illuminate the place by magic. That would save them a fortune in oil.

“This is Meldoran from Kyer Altamar,” said Kynar. “She’ll be working with you for the next season.” She introduced Adramal to her new colleagues – two women, Omalin and Shankarn, a few years older than Adramal, and Tolmeth, an old man. “She doesn’t have lodging arranged yet, so one of you can take her to the agent in the lunch hour.”

“Lodging?” said Adramal. “I thought... the guest rooms.”

The clerks laughed. “You’re not a guest any more,” said Tolmeth.

They found her some work – checking invoices from suppliers against the Embassy’s records of what had been ordered to see whether they matched. Those that agreed went into a box that meant they were to be paid. Those that didn’t went into a different box, to be checked again and, if necessary, queried with the supplier. It was a straightforward task, similar to what Eskalyn had had his class doing in Kyturil. They worked in silence, speaking only when Adramal needed help. After about a watch, they stopped for lunch – weak beer and some little cakes like Kynar had served yesterday.

Omalin took Adramal to the lodging agent, who worked in a large building a couple of junctions away. The building had been divided into many small rooms, and the agent, a short man with a well-groomed beard, worked in what Adramal thought was surely the smallest of them. The wooden partitions didn’t reach all the way to the ceiling, which allowed conversations to drift in from adjacent rooms. Shelves had been fastened to the partitions, and the large boxes that these held threatened to bring the walls down.

Adramal let Omalin do the talking, partly because of her greater skill with the language and partly because Adramal wasn’t sure how this process was supposed to work. She’d found her room in Kyer Altamar by asking other Watchmen and knocking on the doors of houses they recommended, until she found one that had rooms vacant and was neither too expensive nor too dirty. This fellow, as far as she could make out, had lists of all the landlords in the city, with descriptions and prices of their rooms. It should’ve been simple to find a match, but he and Omalin talked for a good ten minutes, waving their arms and raising their voices.

They suddenly stopped, and Omalin turned to Adramal and said, “We’ve found somewhere. It’s about half an hour’s walk from the Embassy, top floor, ten silvers a fortnight – that’s about twelve in Centadorian money.”

“And... is that a good price?” said Adramal. It was half as much again as her room in Kyer Altamar, and further from her place of work.

Omalin sighed. “I wouldn’t have mentioned it if it wasn’t. There are cheaper places, but they’re further away or in rougher parts of town. This is the only one that’s available now.”

“I see. Where is it, then?”

“Have you got a silver?”

“What for?”

“The agent’s fee, of course.”

Adramal gawked. “That’s steep for ten minutes’ work.”

“How much time has he saved you? A day? Two?”

Reluctantly, Adramal handed over a coin. She and Omalin took a taxi to the lodging house, a rambling wooden building that looked to have been extended at least twice.

The landlord took them through a maze-like arrangement of creaking staircases and gloomy landings to a narrow room with a bed and a cupboard. The window looked on to a similar building opposite, almost close enough to touch. The door didn’t open fully, as the end of the bed was in the way. At least the bed was fairly comfortable, and long enough for Adramal to lie straight.

“Will you take it?” said the landlord.

If this was the best the agent could find, smaller and dearer than where she’d stayed in Kyer Altamar, she’d hate to see the worst. But it was only for a season. Maybe less, if Yebran and Tagahra caught the poisoner. “Yes.”

Omalin and Adramal walked back to the Embassy, to help her fix the route in her mind.

After a few minutes, Omalin turned to her and asked, “So where are you really from?”

Adramal’s heart skipped. “I’m sorry?”

“I’ve never met anyone from Kyer Altamar who sounded like you.”

“Oh. I’m from the west originally. I lived in the city for half a season.”

Omalin nodded and gave a patronising smile. “And how did you swing a posting to Vannharial without completing any of the clerical training?”

Adramal tensed and readied a spell to stun her. But no – she’d remember it when she woke up. Better just to run.

Omalin stepped in front of her and leaned forward, hands on her hips. “I studied hard to pass the examinations for the service. My whole family worked and saved to afford the tuition. It’s taken me *eight years* to get this far. If I keep working hard and don’t make too many enemies, I might just become a senior clerk by the time I have to marry and leave the service.”

Adramal took a step back. “I don’t understand.”

“Obviously not,” Omalin snorted. “It’s easy for people like you, isn’t it?” She fluttered her eyelashes. In a squeaky voice, she said, “Oh, Papa, I’d love to see Vannharial.” Much deeper, she said, “Certainly, child – I’ll write to the Ambassador and tell him to give you a job.”

Adramal almost laughed with relief. Then she thought that the sort of person Omalin thought she was would be offended by such insults. “What did you say about not making enemies?”

Omalin quailed.

“I’ll overlook your rudeness. This time. But I have a very long memory. And you have no idea who owes me favours.”

They walked the rest of the way in silence, avoiding one another’s gazes. Omalin seemed to be trying to hold back tears. But it was her own fault, wasn’t it, for jumping to conclusions about why Adramal was here, and then letting envy get the better of her? And Adramal hadn’t actually lied about what she could do. Nevertheless, she hated herself for blundering into this woman’s life and making her afraid of something that would never happen.

Chapter 6

When Adramal had been in Vannharial for about a fortnight, she found herself shivering on the way to the Embassy. Autumn was beginning to bite. In the lunch hour, she decided to buy some warmer clothes, as she'd brought none from Centador. The choice was more than a little overwhelming. Kyer Altamar had two markets; Vannharial had at least ten. A few enquiries revealed that she was most likely to find what she wanted in the King Atharr Market, the furthest from the Embassy and the only one south of the river.

She waved down a taxi outside the Embassy, surprised at how quickly she'd become accustomed to being able to do that – the small carriages were everywhere. As the taxi drew nearer the river, traffic became denser and slower. He drove onto a wide stone bridge, jammed with carts and people, and with tall wooden buildings clinging to either side. The usual discipline of vehicles in the middle and pedestrians at the edge broke down as soon as they were over the water. Everyone seemed to be yelling at someone to get out of the way, and was in turn being yelled at by someone else – mainly because half the traffic was trying to get into or out of the buildings.

“Most of those look as though they'd fall into the river if you gave them a good shove,” Adramal said, pointing to the buildings.

The driver laughed. “Every few years, one of 'em does. You can still see the wreck of the last one. Just as well the water's not very deep here.”

She was pleased the driver hadn't asked her to repeat herself. She still had a strong accent, but her command of the Salmarian language had come a long way. “Why build in such a dangerous place?” she asked, raising her voice above the din. “I didn't think Vannharial was short of land.”

“We're not, but everybody wants to be near all the people they trade with. And I think it's something to do with tax. Most times you see someone round here doing something that doesn't make sense, it's because it saves him money on his taxes.”

On the south side of the river, the tone of the surroundings took a downward turn. Buildings tended to be in worse repair than those in the north. Streets were narrower and made sharp turns. People were scruffier. The taxi – or perhaps Adramal – attracted several stares as the driver shoved his way through the traffic.

Adramal slid down in her seat, trying to make herself less obvious. She wondered if her enemies in Kyer Altamar had followed her here. They wouldn't dare attack her at the Embassy, but in this part of the city, she was just another foreigner. She shuddered as she glimpsed three or four men brawling outside a tavern. It would be easy to send a few people like that to rob her and have them “accidentally” stab her too.

“Is it safe round here?” she asked the driver.

He turned to her, surprised, though whether at the question or her slouching she couldn't be sure. “Wouldn't have come otherwise. Though I wouldn't hang around after dark. Tell you what – pay me another four coppers and I'll wait for you outside the market.”

“If you don't mind,” she said, “that would be helpful.”

“I don’t mind – saves me goin’ back empty.”

The market was outdoors, like those in Kyer Altamar, but the awnings and umbrellas that sheltered most of the stalls gave it more of an air of permanence. The stalls, too, seemed to be bolted down, in contrast to the small carts that most people sold from back home. They huddled so close together that she couldn’t walk between them without brushing against things hanging from rails. The degree of specialisation surprised her. Not only was this a market mainly for clothing, but most stalls sold only one type of garment.

The odd thing, considering how noisy Vannharial was, and how pushy most of its inhabitants were, was that hardly any of the traders hawked their wares or tried to draw her to their stalls. She bought a woollen cloak from one stall, slate grey with crimson edges, two bright yellow tunics from another, a black skirt from a third and two pairs of thick socks from a fourth. She would normally have avoided the more conspicuous colours, but everyone else seemed to be wearing them, and she supposed this would help her blend into a crowd.

She headed back to where she’d left the taxi driver. She’d been here the better part of an hour already, and had spent a good deal more than she intended. Salmarian traders liked haggling even more than their counterparts in Kyer Altamar, but were much less willing to give ground to make a sale.

“Lady! Over here!”

Adramal turned to see a short person, darker-skinned than anyone she’d met before. It took her a moment to decide that the speaker was female. She stood next to a little handcart, much like those favoured by the Centadorian traders, decked with what Adramal took to be oddly-shaped pieces of jewellery.

“You have such lovely hair,” the woman said. Judging from her accent, she definitely wasn’t Salmarian. The vowels were clipped, and the Hs were rough, as though she had something caught in her throat.

“Thank you,” said Adramal. She tried to take care of her hair, but no one, not even Perinar, had ever called it lovely.

“Such an unusual colour.” The trader smiled.

“Many people have black hair where I come from.”

“Oh? And where is you come from?”

“Centador.”

“Oh. We is both is long way home, then. I comes from Akhtar.”

“Where’s that?”

The trader pointed behind her. “Many fortnights. Beyond the little moon. Anoren.”

The Anorene Empire wasn’t literally beyond Angaris. Maybe she meant beyond where it rose or set. But it explained her skin colour.

“Anywhere, your hair makes all the men stare, no?” She widened her eyes, opened her mouth and slowly turned her head as though watching someone walk by.

“Not really, no.” Since coming to Vannharial, she’d worn her hair in a ponytail or plait during the day. So far it had worked – she hadn’t had any unwanted attention from men. Maybe this woman didn’t know the Salmarian custom – her own hair was cropped close to her scalp.

The woman smiled again. “Well, I cans be fixing that. No needs pray to Yisea.” She gestured to her wares. “These go in your hair – hold it in place – make it sparkle.” She picked up an item, a silver fish about the length of Adramal’s thumb. For the eye, it had a little blue gemstone, and its tail was made of brass. She mimed putting it on the side of her head, and offered it to Adramal.

It wasn’t as heavy as it looked. It had a fine texture, resembling scales, and details of gills and fins were clearly visible. She turned it over to see another piece of silver, fastened near the head, that would allow the whole thing to grip her hair and hold it away from her face – very useful in a place as windy as this.

“Comes from master in Molkolin. He pray to Tanshalm – even Kharadar. He learns for twenty years to make that in two days. Others is from all over the Anoren – Akhtar, Veriln, Nomiro – that one from Valagontazni. You is liking?”

“It’s very pretty, certainly,” said Adramal.

“Good, good. Now, you is saying yourself, something so pretty, come far away, must be expensive, no?” She waved an arm in the general direction of some other traders. “Anyone else here, they wants two silvers – maybe three.” She tutted. “Greedy. I sell for tiny bit more than I pay.” She held a finger and thumb close together. “I sell many – the others, they don’t like that.”

“How much?”

“One and half.”

That was more than she’d paid for both tunics. But it *was* a very pretty piece of jewellery – and practical too, not like the necklace Perinar had bought her. She turned it over in her hand a few times and then reached for her purse.

Someone shouted, and a big man dressed in blue darted from behind the cart to grab the trader around the waist. A heartbeat later, a heavy pair of hands landed on Adramal’s shoulders and tried to push her to the ground. She dropped the clothes that she’d bought. She ducked and twisted, trying to escape, but her assailant kept a firm grip.

“Don’t struggle,” he growled. “You’ll only make it worse for yourself.”

She stopped moving and readied a spell to stun him. The only place she could be sure of hitting him was his hand, so she’d need a lot of power to be sure the spell worked. Two more men approached, one from either direction, also dressed in blue. Their clothing resembled a uniform, but she didn’t see any markings to indicate which organisation they belonged to. She hesitated, wondering whether to risk magic in front of hostile witnesses. The spell frayed and slid away from her. The man who held her slipped an arm around her waist, pinning one of her arms to her side.

“Good work,” said the older of the newcomers. All the men had swords at their belts. The man who had seized the trader was now tying her hands. The woman was still wriggling, talking loudly and rapidly in what Adramal guessed was Anorene. Adramal strained to look over her shoulder, seeing only another stall. All escape routes were blocked. She could stun two people at once, but not with only one hand free. Better to see what these men wanted.

The man who had spoken reached into his coat and pulled out a metal triangle, which he flashed at Adramal and the trader. This meant he was a priest of Groll, which in turn meant that using magic would be just about the worst thing she could do. The triangle was a raskarim – a symbol of his authority and a focus for his spells.

“I am a Sergeant of the Vannharial Watch,” the priest said. Why did he have a raskarim, then? Priests in Kyer Altamar were forbidden from holding any position outside the Church of Mathran. “You are compelled by law to answer my questions truthfully, on pain of a dozen lashes.”

To the trader, the sergeant-or-priest said, “Is this your stall?” The woman didn’t answer. “Do you have an import licence for any of these items?” He gestured to the jewellery. “Or any receipts for border duties or excise?” Still the woman didn’t reply. “Then I’m placing you under arrest for stealing from the people.” She snarled and spat at him, hitting his shoulder. He didn’t flinch – doubtless many suspects did that. “And for assaulting an officer of the Watch.”

Adramal relaxed, just a little. These men weren’t looking for her specifically. She’d just been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The Sergeant turned now to Adramal. “Have you bought anything from this criminal?”

She gulped. “No, Sir.”

The man who held her said, “Sergeant, I saw something in her hand.”

“Show me,” the Sergeant said.

Trembling, Adramal opened her hand to reveal the silver hair grip. The Sergeant snatched it from her and compared it with the other items on the stall. “You’re under arrest for assisting a criminal.”

What? Kyer Altamar had a similar offence, but you had to do a lot more to be arrested for it. “Sergeant, I hadn’t paid for that item. I was considering whether to buy it when your man grabbed me.”

“It was in your hand when he took hold of you. That’s what counts.”

Adramal took a deep breath. “In that case, Sergeant, I wish to inform you that I am a Centadorian subject.”

The Sergeant sneered. “You live in our city, you live by our laws.”

“Sergeant, I am employed at the Embassy of His Majesty King Mekrinom III.”

Suddenly the Sergeant didn’t look so sure of himself. The man who was holding her loosened his grip.

Adramal calmed her mind, as if she was about to cast a spell. She had to get the words right, otherwise they might refuse her request. “Under Article Eight of the Second Treaty of Pethranarr, I claim diplomatic privilege and request that you release me, or else deliver me to the Centadorian Ambassador at his residence in Yathrell Avenue, to be tried under Centadorian law.”

The Sergeant nodded nervously. The man who was holding Adramal let go of her.

“May I see your diplomatic exemption, please?” the Sergeant said. “Just to be sure.”

From her pocket, she took the folded piece of leather containing the paper that repeated, in much more flowery language, what she had just said. He opened it and studied the paper before giving it back to her.

Clearing his throat, the Sergeant said, “I’m very sorry about that, Lady. You’re free to go, but please remember it’s illegal to buy from a trader who doesn’t have a licence.”

Adramal relaxed, but said, “How do I tell if they have a licence?”

The trader kicked the shin of the man who held her. He flinched, but didn’t release her. “Why you be letting her go?” she demanded. “She is guilty as me!”

“Oh, so you do speak Salmarian,” the Sergeant said to her. “Anyway, Lady, traders are supposed to display their licence, like that one.” He pointed behind Adramal, and she turned to see a palm-sized brass plate, covered in writing, that hung from a nail on the stall. It resembled the ones the taxis carried, and she guessed the principle was similar.

“We’ve been catching a lot of traders without licences lately,” the Sergeant continued. “If you don’t see one, you should ask the trader to show it to you. If he doesn’t have one, then don’t buy from him.” He examined the hair grip again. “She told you the eye was Molkolin blue, did she?”

“No,” said Adramal, not understanding.

He scratched it with a thumbnail and showed it to her. The blue colour was a thin layer on top of clear glass. “A cheap fake. If a bargain seems too good to be true, Lady, it usually is.”

“I see. Thank you for the advice.” Adramal stooped to pick up the clothes that she’d dropped. “If that’s all, I’ll bid you good day.”

The Sergeant bowed and stood aside. Shaking, she headed for the edge of the market. The Anorene trader’s yelling and cursing carried for quite some distance. Adramal sighed with relief when she saw the taxi still waiting for her.

“Did you find what you wanted, Lady?” the driver asked when she climbed on board.

“Yes, though I nearly didn’t make it back here.” As they drove off, she told him what had happened.

“It’s about time the Watch did something to stop those thieving bastards,” the driver said. “Good job you didn’t buy anything off her – if they were that cheap, I’ll bet you a piglet they were smuggled in – probably fall apart inside a fortnight.”

“The Sergeant said they were fakes.”

“Molkolin blue, eh?” He gripped the reins tighter.

“He mentioned that. What is it?”

“It’s a colour they add to glass in the Empire. Very popular down there. It’s supposed to be a colour inside the glass, but the fake stuff just has it painted on. And of course people want fancy jewellery and stuff to show off, but most of them can’t afford it. But then the Empire starts sending us their cheap stuff. And our jewellers are losing money with people buying all the foreign muck, so the King slaps a tax on foreign jewellery, to make it more expensive than ours. And that works for a while, but then the Empire starts smuggling it.”

“You seem to know a lot about this,” Adramal said carefully.

“My younger brother,” the driver said. “Works as a scribe for one of the small jewellers off Temple Lane. The master was talking about closing the shop and going to work for one of the big fellows. Can’t afford to keep it going. He’d take his apprentices with him, but not my brother. The big jeweller’s got enough scribes already.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” said Adramal.

The driver grimaced. “Yeah, well, ‘sorry’ don’t pay the rent.”

Chapter 7

Adramal woke and craned her neck to see the strip of sky at the edge of the shutter. It had no pink anywhere, so she guessed it was time to go to work. Yawning, she sat up and scratched herself – she suspected she wasn't alone in the bed. After dressing, she drank some water from the jug, and splashed some on her face. She fastened her hair in the impractical but fashionable way that Shankarn at the Embassy had shown her.

Feeling ready to face the city, she touched the shutter and cancelled the spell that held it closed. Probably the spell was unnecessary, but it was as well to keep in practice while she wasn't supposed to be capable of magic. The overcast that had settled over the city a few days after she arrived showed no sign of shifting – the winds were too weak to move it. Three fortnights had passed since then – halfway towards the end of her exile. The grey sky didn't help her mood, but meant anyone following her from Kyer Altamar would have trouble sailing into the city.

Clambering over the corner of the bed, she held her stomach in to avoid disembowelling herself on the doorknob. She cancelled the spell that held the door shut and turned the key in the lock. With her feet sticking into the corridor, she perched on the edge of the bed and pulled her boots on.

In the corridor, as usual, she wondered whether it was worth locking the door. *A burglary might shame the landlord into making the rent more reasonable. But he'd probably expect me to pay for the repairs.* She locked the door and pocketed the key.

In the filthy street outside, a few spots of rain touched her face. Sighing, she entered the tavern next to the boarding house for breakfast.

By the time she found a vacant table, a serving boy was there already with a bowl of soup and asking if she wanted her usual slice of buttered bread and cup of milk to go with it. She said yes, and he quickly returned with them. The locals naturally ate a lot of fish. For the first few days, she'd found this enjoyably different from what she was used to, but had since tired of the saltiness and the little bones. The Salmarians seemed not to understand that someone might want to eat something without fish in. This soup was the best compromise she'd found – fish chopped into little cubes, boiled and then mixed into a thick mash of barley.

If I'm supposed to stay out of sight, is it time to find somewhere else to eat, now that these folk recognise me? Someone as tall, thin and dark-haired as her must surely stand out in a city of short, stocky blondes and redheads.

Outside, the spots of rain had turned into a fully-fledged shower. She'd have to buy a raincoat before finding somewhere new to stay. Shivering as the water trickled down her back, she made her way to the nearest main street, darting from overhang to doorway. She glimpsed an empty taxi going her way and waved to the driver.

"The Centadorian Embassy, please," she said as she climbed into the vehicle. The driver waited for her to hand over the three coppers before flicking the reins.

She leaned back in the seat, as far out of the rain as possible. Her eyes half-closed as the

blurred forms of buildings slid past. She was surprised, therefore, when she noticed a knot of young men standing on the pavement, crowded around something on the ground. She gasped as she realised it was a person.

“Stop!” she told the driver.

He gave her a sceptical look, but brought the horse to a halt.

“Wait here,” she said.

“Best not get involved, miss,” the driver said. “Could be dangerous.”

“They’re not robbing him,” she said. “They’re trying to help.”

“Let them. I ain’t hangin’ round.”

She climbed down from the taxi. The rain was heavier now. The horse walked on as soon as her feet touched the road. “Hey!” she called to the men. “What’s going on?”

One of them said, “Our friend collapsed a few minutes ago.”

“Maybe I can help. I have some skill in healing.”

The men parted as she approached. Despite the rain, their clothes were almost dry, and she guessed they’d just come out of a tavern. She knelt by the fallen man, who lay on his right side, wrapped in a grey cloak. His breathing was rapid and shallow. He was sweating, but as she touched his neck to find his pulse, she found his temperature to be normal. His pulse was strong and regular – odd, given his sweating and breathlessness, but it was too soon to form an opinion about what it meant.

“Hello,” she said. “Can you hear me?” He gave no sign he could. “I’m here to help.” She looked up at his friends. “What happened?”

“We were walking down the street, and he coughed a few times and fell over.”

“Is he injured? Has he been in a fight?”

“No.”

“Is he drunk?”

“He had two pints last night.”

She was at a loss as to what could be wrong with him. She gathered thoughts for the spell she intended to cast. Her father’s parting words echoed in her mind. *Be careful with your use of magic. The Salmarians dislike it even more than our priests.* But this man needed her help. Besides, if she was subtle, no one would know it was magic. The spell came together.

Adramal touched the man’s head, checking for fractures, not finding any. A low moan passed his lips. She touched his neck, finding that intact. She ran her fingers down his spine, again finding nothing wrong. Tutting, she cancelled the spell and cast the one she used for examining the major organs.

She put her hand over his heart. The way it squirmed under her touch repelled her, and she almost pulled her hand away. *You’ve been prodding at corpses too long.* The heart was healthy. She checked the lung on that side. It too was healthy. She began to hope the ailment was nothing worse than a bang on the head as he fell.

She moved her hand to the other side of his chest and found something hard and angular under his clothing – an oddly familiar shape. Instinct told her she should be somewhere else. She began to stand.

The man’s hand shot from under his cloak to grab her wrist. Startled, she fell backwards. Other hands gripped her under the arms and pulled her to her feet. The fallen man stood up. With a sneer, he took out the thing she’d found – a triangular metal pendant, with its bottom line wavy and reaching past the corners. Several of his friends had produced similar pendants. They were priests of Groll, and she’d walked right into a trap.

Adramal clenched her teeth and tried to break free. The priests held her firmly.

“You should’ve driven on,” said the one who’d been on the ground. “You’re under arrest for heresy.”

Chapter 8

Adramal leaned against the back wall of the cell, took a breath, and stepped forward. One pace, two, cut the third short to avoid hitting the gate. It held a spell – too strong for her to break – that burned if she touched it. Stare through the bars at the blank wall opposite. Listen for the footsteps of the guard on his round. Turn on the spot. Step forward. One pace, two, cut the third short to avoid bumping into the wall. Repeat until the guard came to bring food or take away her waste, or tiredness persuaded her to curl up on the thin, threadbare mattress.

She was the only person being held here, as far as she could tell. The prison was a single large room, partitioned into cells by iron grilles. The only light came from a lantern near the staircase that led up to the rest of the temple.

She wasn't sure how long she'd been here. Several days, but probably not as much as a fortnight. No one from the Embassy had come. She wondered if they knew where she was, or if they'd even noticed she was missing. For that matter, the priests hadn't been particularly attentive either. The leader of the group that had captured her had come here a few hours after she was locked up and told her she would face trial for heresy against Groll. He refused to tell her anything more, and she hadn't seen him since. The guards never spoke at all.

Turn, lean, step, two, cut the third short. Too big to cross in two paces, too small for three. It could almost have been built deliberately to annoy her. The irony was that it was bigger than her room in the boarding house, and warmer too.

She sat on the mattress and stretched her arms. The scar on her right arm ached – the dull pain of over-exertion, not the sharp pain that – she assumed – meant the Kreztalin were seeking her. She hadn't felt that since the night on the ship. She wished, if only for a moment, that the Kreztalin would come for her. At least that would put an end to the boredom.

In the distance, a gate opened and closed. Two people came down the staircase. The first was one of the guards, carrying a lantern. The other was obscured by a heavy cloak.

"You have a visitor," the guard said, as the second person threw back the hood of the cloak.

"Kynar!" Adramal gasped. She smiled and got to her feet, full of hope. "Don't touch the gate."

"They told me there's a spell on it," said Kynar. "How are you?"

Adramal sighed. "Bored and lonely, most of the time. Sometimes very angry that they can do this to me." *And sometimes blind with tears, but there's no need to tell her that.*

"I understand. I'm so sorry. I've been trying to see you ever since I heard you'd been arrested, but Groll's priests are even more bureaucratic than Mathran's."

The guard returned to the staircase and stood there with his arms folded.

"What day is it?" Adramal asked.

Kynar blinked. "All Gods'." She'd been here ten days, then. "We're doing everything we can to get you out."

"I told the priests I have diplomatic privilege," said Adramal. "They just laughed."

Kynar nodded sadly. "Diplomatic privilege applies only to secular law."

"You might've told me that."

"I've been in Salmar seven years, and this is the first time the priests have arrested one of our staff for heresy."

Adramal sat down, drew her knees up under her chin and wrapped her arms around her shins. "So what happens now?"

"You'll have to stand trial in the Temple." Kynar peered into the adjacent cells. "Are there any other prisoners here?"

Adramal shook her head.

"If a new one comes in, be careful what you say to him. Prisoners will sometimes tell the guards what other prisoners have said, in the hope of getting a lighter sentence. Though the priests tell me the evidence against you is overwhelming anyway. Six witnesses say they saw you using magic. Is that true?"

"I was trying to help a man I thought was ill – a man whose friends told me he was ill. How can that be wrong?"

Kynar sighed. "It's not wrong in Centador, but we're not in Centador."

Adramal looked up. "How did they know I'd be on that road that morning? There can't be many wizards in Vannharial, given the sort of welcome we get, and I was careful not to use magic in front of anyone else. It hardly seems worth a priest's while to hang around in the hope of catching a wizard. It was raining, but their cloaks were almost dry. So I can't help feeling somebody must have told them about me. And who would have reason to suspect I might be a wizard?"

Kynar scowled again. "I don't like what you're implying, Lady." She looked aside for a moment. "Soon after you arrived, I made some enquiries. A woman matching your description arrived in Kyer Altamar at the start of the summer. She became an apprentice at Kyturil, just before that school closed. After that, she took a position in the Watch, but disappeared, around the time you boarded the ship to come here. This woman's name wasn't Meldoran. There was an apprentice of that name at Kyturil, but she didn't look like you."

"So someone at the Embassy found that letter and tipped off the priests." Until now, Adramal's chief suspect had been Omalin, in revenge for humiliating her when they'd found somewhere for Adramal to stay. But she'd hadn't been able to work out how Omalin knew she was a wizard. Somebody in the Kyer Altamar Watch had been another possibility, but she'd been unable to think of a reason why such a person would attack from a distance rather than when she was nearby.

"I'm confident my correspondence hasn't been tampered with," said Kynar. "Why didn't you tell me who you really are?"

Adramal thumped the mattress, wincing as her fist connected with the stone beneath. "Because someone in Kyer Altamar wants me dead!"

"Why did you go to Kyturil?"

Adramal massaged her hand, resisting the temptation to use a spell to numb the pain. It would fade soon enough. "The Watch asked me to enrol there. They thought the cattle brand murderer might be one of the teachers."

"Gods," whispered Kynar.

"And as it turned out, she was. Her name was Shendar. I caught up with her, and she tried to kill me too. She took me to the river to make sure my body wouldn't be found for a few days. We fought, and she slipped in the mud, and fell into the river and drowned."

"And now her family are trying to kill you in revenge."

Adramal sighed. "That's the obvious conclusion." *Obvious and wrong.* "Unfortunately, on the night I was poisoned, all the members of her family who were in Kyer Altamar had excellent alibis. And my Captain told me the poison that was used is far more expensive than they could afford."

“So you’ve made an enemy of someone wealthier than Shendar’s family.”

“So it would seem.”

Kynar was silent for a few moments. “It’s possible that this person may have learned of my enquiries and worked out where you are. In that case, this situation is partly my fault. I should’ve told you what I knew, but I hesitated. Yebran trusted me to look after you. I didn’t want to scare you into running – that might have put you in even greater danger.”

“Yes,” said Adramal, “you should’ve told me. I wouldn’t have run. Not immediately, anyway. But there’s no point fretting over might-have-beens. Do you know what’s likely to happen at my trial?”

“I’m afraid you’ll almost certainly be found guilty, given the number of priests who saw you using magic.”

Adramal gritted her teeth. “So what sort of punishment will I get?”

Kynar tutted. “It’s hard to say. The priests don’t normally charge foreigners with heresy – they think we’re too ignorant to know any better. When a Salmarian does it, the sentence is normally a fine or a few lashes.”

“Why don’t they get it over with, if they’re so sure I’m guilty? I’d take a whipping now, if it meant I could leave this place.”

“Brave words,” said Kynar, shaking her head. “But there are rules that have to be followed. The fact you’re a foreigner makes following them more important than usual. They don’t want to give us any cause to complain that you’ve been treated unfairly.”

“Unfairly?” Adramal jumped to her feet and crossed the cell. “Unfairly!” She pointed to the staircase, and her hand struck a bar. Too late, she pulled away. The spell pounced on her, as if she’d stuck her hand in boiling water. She staggered backwards.

“Quiet over there!” shouted the guard.

“Are you all right?” said Kynar, worry lining her face.

Adramal waved her hand as though to cool it, even though she knew that would make no difference. “The pain only lasts a few minutes,” she said, grimacing. She held up her hand. “See? No marks. I’m sure they’re pleased about that. But to say you might complain I’m being treated unfairly – those blue-robed bastards set a trap for me. They lied about who they were, they lied about one of them being sick, and they encouraged me to try to help him. If that’s not unfair, I’d like to know what is. Don’t their blasted holy books tell them to help people less fortunate than themselves? That’s exactly what I was doing! *They* should be the ones on trial for heresy!”

The guard trotted over. “I said be quiet.” To Kynar, he said, “You have to go now.”

Kynar took a few steps away. “I’m sorry,” she told Adramal. “I’ll try to come back soon.”

It was only much later, when the guard had extinguished the lantern for the night, that Adramal wondered if her enemies in Centador had heard of her incarceration, and if so, whether it suited them to have her in a place she couldn’t leave.

Chapter 9

Kynar did not return the next day, or the day after. The day after that, Groll's Day, the guards brought someone else down the stairs, half-carrying the newcomer between them. They bundled this person into the cell next to Adramal and left.

The newcomer was a man – that much she could tell from the beard. He crawled onto the mattress and lay on his back, breathing raggedly.

"Hello?" said Adramal.

The man sat up with a jolt and gasped in pain. He stared at her and spoke, rapidly and indistinctly.

"I don't understand," she said. "Please speak slower." His features seemed typically Salmarian – strong jaw, blunt nose, small deep-set eyes – though his hair was a good deal longer than most men she'd seen here. His body was muscular and tanned. The dark mark on his cheek might have been dirt or dried blood – the low light made it hard to tell.

"Forgive me, Lady. I said these people must truly be barbarians if they imprison a woman in such a dark, airless hole."

So their treatment of me would be acceptable if I was male? "Are you Salmarian?"

"Yes, Lady." His accent was different from those she'd heard so far – the vowel sounds weren't as distinct from one another as she'd come to expect.

She reached for the cup the guard had brought a few hours ago. A little water remained in it. "Drink," she said. "This might be all you get today." The gap between the bars was just wide enough to pass the cup through. He gulped the water down and returned the cup. The left sleeve of his tunic had been torn off to make a bandage for his forearm. She decided the stuff on his face was probably blood.

"I come from Voltroth, a village on the north coast," he said. "This is my first time in the city – and my last, if they let me go."

Adramal sighed. "You might be here a while. I've been here for a fortnight. A friend came to visit a few days ago and told me I'd probably be punished and then set free, but it hasn't happened yet."

"You're not from the city either, are you?" he said.

"No. I come from Centador." From his puzzled look, she guessed the name meant nothing to him, so she added, "It's four days' sailing west of here."

"My name is Nevgalyn."

She hesitated, mindful of Kynar's warning about prisoners gossiping to the guards. "I'm Meldoran. Why did the priests bring you here?"

"I came to beg for aid for my people."

"Why?"

Nevgalyn took a deep breath. "There is a plague in our village."

Adramal tensed and then relaxed. Apart from his wounds, he didn't seem sick. And if he infected her, she'd use magic to heal herself, heresy or no.

He tilted his head. "Most people make the sign of Groll and then run when they hear

that.”

She shrugged. “Not many of us worship Groll in Centador.”

Nevgalyn laughed. “Why don’t you run away without making the sign, then?”

“Firstly, there’s nowhere to run to, and secondly, I’m a healer.”

“We could use your help. We had a healer, but he was one of the first to die.”

“I’m sorry,” said Adramal. “How many are affected?”

“There were about two hundred of us before the plague started. When I left on Mathran’s Day, thirty-one had died and about fifty were sick. I got here yesterday. Before I could find anyone to help, the priests arrested me and said I was committing ‘vagrancy,’ whatever that is. They said plague was a judgement from the Gods, and it wasn’t my place to try to stop it.”

Several times, she had to ask him to speak slower and explain unfamiliar words. “Bastards,” she muttered when she finally understood. Aloud, she said, “What are the symptoms of this plague?”

“People find it hard to move. Their legs are... heavy. Then the same happens to their arms – they get weak and clumsy. After about a fortnight, they lie down and... don’t get up again. Nobody gets better.”

A plague that killed everyone who caught it sounded unusual – there were always at least a few patients who recovered on their own. The infection rate sounded odd too – most plagues affected more than two-fifths of the population.

“Anything else?” she said. “Does their skin change colour, or do they have any sores? Do they cough anything up? Do they have a fever?”

“They sometimes cough up blood,” he said, “but none of the other things.”

Adramal frowned. “It doesn’t sound like any plague I’ve ever heard of.”

Nevgalyn took a deep breath. “My mother caught the plague half a fortnight before I left. The day before I left, my sister didn’t want to get out of bed.”

If the disease followed its usual progression, his mother was almost certainly dead by now, and it was doubtful he would find his sister alive when he got home. “I’m sorry,” Adramal said, trying to put aside thoughts of her own mother.

“Would you be willing to help us when you get out of here?”

“Are there any priests in your village?”

“No,” said Nevgalyn.

“Did the plague kill them?” She felt smug at the thought that they probably deserved it, and then guilty for being happy at anyone’s death.

“No. We only had one, and he died several years ago. We asked for someone to take his place, but no one came. Then we stopped asking, because Groll seemed to be looking after us just as well as He ever did. Until now.”

“You said it took you nine days to reach Vannharial,” said Adramal. “I didn’t think Toros was that big.”

“I didn’t sail here. I walked over the middle.”

“That sounds dangerous.” She’d heard that the interiors of most Salmarian islands were inhabited mainly by wild animals.

“It was.” He held up his bandaged forearm. “I blundered across a she-wolf protecting her cubs.”

“I should examine that,” she said, feeling bad for not having done so sooner.

“It’s almost healed.”

“The plague may have weakened you. The wound is more likely to become infected.”

“I didn’t catch the plague,” he said.

“Let me be the judge of that.”

Reluctantly, he put his arm against the bars and let her untie the bandage. He’d made a good job of fastening it, considering he’d had to do it one-handed. Underneath were three

closely-spaced gashes. She got him to turn the arm this way and that to make the most of the light. She badly wanted to use magic to make light of her own, or inspect his arm for deeper damage – or just heal the wound and be done with it.

“You’re right,” she said. “They’re fairly clean cuts, and they’re healing well. I don’t think you have the plague. I’d normally say the bandage could come off now, but this place is too dirty.” She retied the bandage, covering the wound with the part that wasn’t stained with his blood. “So why did you walk across the middle?”

He scowled. “Because the Navy is blockading our harbour, and they said they’ll shoot anyone who tries to leave.”

Adramal gawked at him. “Barbarians,” she whispered.

“That’s what they always do, apparently. If they let people leave, the plague might spread to other place. Our village is in a little cove, with high cliffs on three sides, and I climbed the cliffs to escape. The Navy thought that was impossible, so there were no guards there.”

“Clever,” she said.

He gave a glum nod. “What brought you to Vannharial, then?”

She took a deep breath, wondering how much of the truth to tell him. He might change his mind about wanting her help if he knew about Shendar and how her family blamed Adramal for her death. Or should she offer some simple lie about wanting a change of scenery?

Before she could speak, the gate at the top of the stairs was unlocked. A guard came down, followed by three priests with their raskarims out. The four of them approached Adramal’s cell. Two of the priests clutched their blue robes, lifting the hems clear of the floor.

“Get up,” said the priest who wasn’t holding his robe. “Your trial is about to begin.”

Chapter 10

The guard tied Adramal's hands behind her with a heavy chain. Upstairs, they passed several priests coming the other way, and stopped in front of a large iron-bound door. Kynar sat on one of three chairs outside it, and jumped to her feet as soon as she saw Adramal.

"This should all be over soon," Kynar said. "Do you want me to act as a translator?"

It hadn't occurred to Adramal that she might need one. "Yes please."

"They'll tell you what you're accused of, and ask whether you're innocent or guilty. As I said, the evidence against you is overwhelming, so I strongly advise that you plead guilty. If you plead innocent and they find you guilty, your punishment will be twice as severe as if you admitted guilt to start with."

"I see."

"Don't speak unless someone asks you a question, and when you do speak, be polite and don't raise your voice."

The door opened, and a priest emerged, wearing a more decorated robe than the three who had brought Adramal. They bowed to him, and he acknowledged them with a flick of the eyes. He turned to Kynar and said something Adramal didn't understand. Kynar responded with something else Adramal didn't understand. He went back into the room, and everybody followed him.

The room, much to Adramal's surprise, was triangular. They'd entered at one of the corners. Rows of benches lined the left and right walls. Sunlight came through slit-like windows along the top of the far wall – welcome and yet blinding after so long in near-darkness. Below the windows hung a silver-coloured symbol of Groll, tall as a man, and below that was a parapet with three high-backed chairs. The sound of the door closing reverberated through the room.

The priests stood just out of arm's reach, raskarims at the ready, seeming to dare her to try something. She might stun two of them and escape the room before the others could react, but what then? Another door opened and closed, and Adramal heard footsteps. Three men who looked as though they'd been kept in a cupboard for the last decade appeared on the parapet. Adramal supposed they were the judges. The priests around Adramal bowed to these newcomers, as did Kynar. Adramal self-consciously copied them.

The judges sat down, and the middle one spoke. The only word she understood was 'Meldoran,' the name she'd been using. She didn't hear her real name, and she hoped that meant the priests hadn't discovered it. If they hadn't, whoever had betrayed her must be at the Embassy. Her doubts about whether she could trust Kynar resurfaced. But what choice did she have?

Kynar said to Adramal, "The judges asked your name, residence and profession."

"Meldoran, a clerk at the Centadorian Embassy," said Adramal. She gave the address of the lodging house where she'd been staying.

With Kynar translating, the judge said, "Meldoran, you are accused of heresy against the Eternal Church of Groll. The heresy took place in the second hour of Rakeloth's Day of

the nineteenth fortnight of this year, at the junction of Therilarn Avenue and Chandler Street. You intervened in a gathering of six of our number, one of whom had been taken ill. You disrupted his brethren's attempts to treat him and, by use of illegal magic, knowingly and recklessly endangered his life. Do you plead innocent or guilty?"

Adramal's heart sank. She touched Kynar's elbow.

"What is it?" said Kynar.

"I can't plead guilty to that."

"Why not?" said Kynar, surprised.

"Because it's not what happened. I was trying to help."

"That's obviously not what it looked like to them." Kynar sighed. "You're going to be found guilty no matter what. They'll bring those six priests in, and every one of them will say exactly the same thing. The only question is how big a fine you'll have to pay."

"I'm innocent," said Adramal. "I won't stand aside while they slander my good name."

Meldoran's good name, you mean.

Kynar sighed again. "The Embassy won't pay the fine, you know."

"I wasn't expecting it to."

"If you're quite certain...?"

"I am."

Kynar turned to the judges. "The accused wishes to plead innocent."

Two of the judges frowned. The one on the right smiled, as though relishing a challenge, and said, "Call the witnesses."

The priest in the decorated robe bowed to the judges and left the room. The judges murmured amongst themselves as Adramal shifted from one foot to the other. Why make her wait? Surely everybody had other things to do?

"Can we tell my side of the story?" she whispered to Kynar.

"Not yet," Kynar whispered back. One of the judges gave a disapproving glance.

"Things have to be done in a certain order. The witnesses against you speak first, then you present your defence."

So they waited, as sweat trickled down Adramal's back, and fear and hunger gnawed at her. Eventually, the priest in the decorated robe returned with three others in tow and said something to the judges. Kynar said to Adramal, "These are the only ones he could find. The other three aren't in the Temple."

"Does that mean more delay?"

One of the judges spoke.

"They're happy to proceed with these three," said Kynar. "They'll call the others only if there's a dispute that needs them."

A judge said something that sounded like a question. The witnesses turned to Adramal, seeming surprised to see her. "She is the heretic in question, Most Holy," said one of them. The other two agreed.

The judge asked the witnesses to tell him what had happened.

The priest who had spoken first said, "Brother Dakhrall had fallen ill in Therilarn Avenue, near the junction with Chandler Street. My brethren and I assisted him. While we were doing that, the accused barged up to us, knocking me out of the way."

"Liar!" Adramal shouted. "You asked for my help!" She strained at her bonds, wanting to hurt this smug ferret.

A judge said something that sounded like a rebuke. Kynar touched her shoulder, making her jolt. Adramal tried to rein in her anger. She'd just done two of the things Kynar had warned her not to. Kynar spoke to the judge, sounding contrite, then turned to Adramal. "They can punish you for that sort of thing, even if you're innocent of the main offence. I trust that will be the last such outburst?"

Adramal nodded and looked down, partly to hide the dampness that gathered in her

eyes. She hadn't felt this humiliated since Father had chastised her for fighting with another girl, nearly ten years ago.

The witness continued with his lies. "The accused put her hands on Dakhrall's chest and used magic to try to kill him. As soon as we realised what she was doing, we drew our raskarims and subdued her. We took her to the Temple to await your mercy."

The second witness spoke. Kynar translated, "They were walking along Therilarnn Avenue early in the morning, with Dakhrall at the back. You jumped him from behind and wrestled him to the ground."

Staring at the priest, Adramal then whispered to Kynar, "Do I even look physically capable of that?"

Kynar held up her hands. "It's what he said." The priest spoke again. Kynar said, "They heard Dakhrall cry out and turned to see you strangling him. They drew their raskarims and used stunning spells to subdue you, and then brought you to the Temple."

Adramal whispered, "That completely disagrees with what the first one said. One of them has to be lying."

The judge on the right rapped on the table. "Be silent."

Kynar whispered back, "I'm sure the judges have noticed that, but you can point it out when it's your turn to speak."

Now the third witness spoke. Kynar said with a wry grimace, "According to this one, you struck Dakhrall down from across the street and ran off. One of them stayed with Dakhrall while the other four chased you. They cornered you in an alley and stunned you." The priest gave Adramal a satisfied smile.

"Are they having a contest to see which of them can get away with the most outrageous lie?" said Adramal.

The judge on the right spoke again.

"Now it's your turn to speak," said Kynar. "Speak slowly, so I can translate properly, don't be rude, and keep your temper."

Adramal took a deep breath. *Keep your temper. Forget about their lies. Just concentrate on what really happened.* "Sirs," she said. "On the morning of Rakeloth's Day in the nineteenth fortnight, I left my lodgings to go to the Centadorian Embassy. It was raining, so I took a taxi. On Therilarnn Avenue, I noticed these three men and two others standing at the side of the road. They surrounded a sixth man, who lay motionless on the ground. I asked the taxi driver to stop so I could help. He advised me not to." She scowled. "I should've listened to him, shouldn't I? I got out of the taxi and went over to the men. They were dressed in everyday clothes, with nothing to indicate they were priests. If I'd known they were, I'd have walked on.

"I asked what had happened to the man, and they said he collapsed a few minutes ago. I knelt by him and cast some simple spells to diagnose his illness. They didn't find anything, because there was nothing wrong with him. As I began to stand, he opened his eyes and grabbed my wrist. The others drew raskarims from under their clothing. That's when I realised I'd walked into a trap." She looked at the three witnesses, hoping for signs of guilt or disbelief. They merely seemed bored. "Wizards are forbidden from killing with magic, because we believe it tears a hole in the world, allowing magic to leak out. Most of us don't like to cause non-fatal harm either – the most I've ever done is to stun somebody who meant to hurt me. Since wizards' magic is illegal here, I'll take whatever punishment you give me. But these three and their colleagues lied to make me commit a crime, and they've lied to you today about what happened. Even if you don't believe me, their accounts all contradict each other. At least two of them must be lying. And if not two, why not all of them?"

"Is that everything you wish to say?" said the judge.

"It is, Sir."

He addressed the priest in the decorated robe. "Take her back to the cells. We will

deliver our verdict in due course.”

Back in the gaol, Nevgalyn jumped to his feet when he saw her. “What happened?”

She flopped onto her mattress, raising a hand to ask for silence. After taking a few moments to collect her thoughts, she told him about the trial.

“So they’re not letting you go?”

“Not yet. I don’t know what my punishment will be, even.”

“How can those sharks expect to get away with such shameless lies?”

She shrugged. “I’ve heard priests like to present a united front to the outside world. Maybe the judges are yelling at them right now.”

Nevgalyn mirrored her gesture. “We can hope. Are you still willing to help my people once you’re released?”

“Of course.” She stuck her hand through the bars. After a moment, he pressed his palm to hers. She wrapped her fingers around Nevgalyn’s rough, calloused hand and held on as though she would fall if she let go.

A guard came down the stairs, followed by the priests who had escorted her to the trial. Adramal got to her feet, heart pounding, and they took her back to the courtroom. The judges had left. Kynar paced anxiously around a small section of the floor, as though on a leash. After a few minutes, the judges returned.

With Kynar translating, the judge on the right said, “We have reached a verdict. In view of the prisoner’s reckless endangerment of the lives of those favoured of Groll, her insistence on pleading innocence in the face of overwhelming evidence of guilt, and her blatant lies before this court, we have no choice but to impose the most severe penalty.” Kynar hesitated. Adramal tensed, wishing this could be over and done with.

The judge spoke – only a few words this time.

“What?” exclaimed Kynar. She stepped forward. A priest moved in front of her. “You can’t do that!” Kynar spoke with the judges, becoming more and more agitated. The judges remained calm.

Adramal touched Kynar’s elbow. “What’s going on? What’s my punishment?”

The secretary turned to Adramal, eyes wide, breathing ragged. “I-I couldn’t believe it at first. I thought I’d misunderstood – that was why I asked him so many questions.”

Still. Calm. “Just tell me.”

Kynar rubbed at her eyes, and then threw her arms around Adramal. Her voice hoarse, she croaked, “They’ve sentenced you to death!”

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