

Sample Chapters of *Stone & Silence* *The Barefoot Healer* Volume IV by Steven J Pemberton

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Chapter 1

Captain Tagahra of the Kyer Altamar City Watch sat in his office, working his way through the foot-high stack of slates that represented the observations and actions of his Watchmen over the previous day. They told of the usual two or three fights broken up — a stray child reunited with his grateful parents — a complaint about excessive smoke from a smithy — a costermonger to be escorted to a hearing to answer charges of selling short weight.

On the bright side, he hadn't come across any reports of more unexplained disappearances. But neither had anyone come forward with any information about the ones that had already happened. He made a note to have the patrol check the smithy again in a fortnight, and another to ask Commander Yebran to recommend that the City Assembly authorise a general inspection of all traders' scales and measures.

There was a hesitant knock at the door. When the door didn't open after a couple of heartbeats, he called, "Who is it?"

"Peri... Watchman Perinar, Sir."

"Come in."

The door opened to reveal the Watch's newest recruit, a satchel hanging from his shoulder, looking as though he might bolt at any moment. His hand went to his forehead, as though to brush his fringe out of his eyes, and then he seemed to remember his hair had been cut to regulation length, and dropped his hand to his side.

"Don't fidget, Watchman," Tagahra said.

"Sorry, Sir." Perinar shoved his hands behind his back.

"And don't speak unless it's necessary. I assume you've heard my orders unless it's obvious you haven't. Now, report."

"I, uh, came to see you about the disappearances from the Inland Docks. I've read the Watchmen's reports and the witness statements —"

Tagahra cut him off with, "That was what I told you to do. When I give a man an order, I assume he carries it out." He gestured for Perinar to sit in the visitor's chair.

Perinar swallowed nervously as he sat. "The victims all disappeared from dwellings in the streets immediately behind the warehouses, at night or early in the morning."

Tagahra waved a weary hand. "Watchman Perinar, I am your Captain, not one of your teachers."

“Yes, Sir,” Perinar said, clearly not understanding.

“Which means you don’t need to tell me things I can read for myself in my men’s reports.”

Perinar glanced at the two stacks of slates on Tagahra’s desk. “Do you read all the reports, Sir?”

Tagahra smirked. “It’s safe to assume I do.”

Perinar cleared his throat. “Well, Sir, five of the six people arrived in the city quite recently — within the last year.”

“So if someone is abducting them, he might be targeting people who wouldn’t be missed for some time after they’ve gone.”

Perinar smiled, perhaps pleased to have finally said something that hadn’t earned him a rebuke.

“I might have thought they’d simply had enough of city life and decided to go home,” Tagahra said, “except that we’ve had so many in such a short time, and no one saw them leave.”

“The dwellings of two victims showed signs of a struggle,” said Perinar, “but none of the doors or windows had been forced. That would suggest the victims knew the abductor, but I obtained lists of their, ah, known associates, is that the term? None of the names matched.”

Tagahra leaned back, gazing at a spot on the wall just above Perinar’s head. “What about the known associates of the other victims?”

“No names in common there either, Sir.”

“Really?” Tagahra straightened. “Six people living that close together, there’d surely be someone that more than one of them is friendly with.”

“The lists were, ah, rather short, Sir.”

Tagahra nodded. Given that the victims had come to the city to work and hadn’t been here long, it stood to reason they wouldn’t know many people. “A wizard could’ve opened the locks without needing a key.”

Perinar shifted awkwardly in his seat.

Tagahra paused, suddenly aware of the possibility of needless offence. “I’m not pointing my finger at any particular wizard, but it is something you learn how to do, isn’t it?”

Perinar glanced at his hands in his lap, as though wondering whether to confess something, then raised his head and stared straight at Tagahra. “It’s not something I was ever taught, Sir, though I was only in my third year when the school closed. I don’t believe Master Degoran would have included such a thing in the later classes.”

Tagahra leaned back again. “I saw Sergeant Adramal do it. Twice.”

“Oh. Well, I don’t know what they teach at Thuren.” He paused. “Where is Adramal these days, Sir?”

Tagahra had thought Perinar would never work up the courage to ask him that. The two young wizards had been smitten with one another at Kyturil, though the fires had cooled when they’d been apart, and they’d broken things off shortly before Adramal had joined the Watch. Tagahra wondered what she’d ever seen in him, but perhaps women from the western wilderness had lower standards than the ladies of Kyer Altamar. Perinar had gone home, but had evidently had second thoughts, as he’d returned to the city a few fortnights later, not long after Adramal had fled to Salmar.

Tagahra considered answering Perinar’s question with, *You’re not authorised to know that*, but that would only make him more determined to find out. He settled for, “I don’t know,” which, he realised, wasn’t really a lie. Yebran had told him she’d gone to Salmar, but

hadn't said whereabouts in Salmar.

"So," said Tagahra. "A wizard might've used a spell to open the doors of the victims' homes. He might also have used a silence spell to cover any sounds of a struggle."

"That wouldn't explain why no one saw any of the victims disappearing, Sir."

"It was night," said Tagahra. "Everyone else was asleep."

"Not everyone, Sir. The first disappearance was just before dawn on Nerupar's Day. Four people who were on their way to work at the docks passed by the building in Regent's Row where the victim lived, over the course of perhaps half an hour. None of them saw him leave."

"Maybe he went out the back."

"That building doesn't have a back exit, Sir," said Perinar.

"How do we know the time of his disappearance, anyway? He could've spent the night somewhere else."

"At about the same time as those four were passing the building, Watchman Kerekh and Watchman Ethkarn met two men in Tharl Street, heading towards the Western Market. One of them appeared to be very drunk, and the other was supporting him. The drunk man's description matched our missing man."

Tharl Street and Regent's Row were only about a hundred yards apart, so the drunk could well be the victim.

"Odd for someone to be that drunk so early in the morning," said Tagahra. The taverns closed halfway through fourth watch, and the long autumn nights should give plenty of time to sleep it off. "Why do you say he *appeared* to be drunk?"

"His movements were consistent with drunkenness, Sir, but neither Watchman smelt any drink on him, and his face was white, not red. The other man said he was taking him home."

"Did they find out which tavern he'd been in?" said Tagahra. "The landlord shouldn't have let him get into that state."

"They didn't ask, Sir, as they weren't certain that he was drunk."

"Any idea who the sober man was?"

"They didn't recognise him, Sir. I checked the description against files, but didn't find any likely matches. They said he spoke with an unfamiliar accent."

"It'd be worth circulating his description to the rest of the Watch," said Tagahra. "And ask Kerekh and Ethkarn to come and see me at their earliest convenience. I have an idea what that accent might sound like."

"What might that be, Sir?"

"I want to see if it's anything like the way Sergeant Galbreth talks."

Chapter 2

Adramal lay curled up on her bed in the ship's cabin, staring at the wall. Father had let her have the bigger bed, but it still wasn't long enough for her to lie straight in.

She shifted slightly and felt a dampness on the pillow. She hadn't even realised she'd been crying. That had happened a lot lately.

"How could he?" she whispered.

Lelsarin wandered into Adramal's thoughts. Since Shomnakh Enkhyar, the well in Molkolin, had restored her memories, she now appeared all the time as a grown woman, calm and serene in a flowing green dress, not a petulant child in rags and dirt.

He was being paid, obviously, said Lelsarin. A lot more than you, I imagine. It wasn't that he didn't like you — you were just in the way of what his employer wanted.

You're not helping, Adramal replied.

It's no different from what that informer in Kyer Altamar did, or whoever betrayed you in Vannharial.

They didn't worm their way into my life — my heart — my — She clutched at her belly, wanting to be rid of the monster growing within her.

You don't know for sure you're pregnant, said Lelsarin. It'll be at least a fortnight, probably nearer two, before the baby — if there is a baby — is big enough for a sensing spell to show it.

Something's changed in me.

That's just worry and anger.

Easy for you to say. There were ways, she'd heard, to end an unwanted pregnancy, none reliable, and most unsafe for the mother too. But she couldn't do that to a child — a baby — innocent of any wrongdoing. Couldn't snuff out a life before it had even started.

The first definite sign would be a missed period, of course. Hers were normally quite regular, and the next one wasn't due for another seven or eight days, by which time they'd be nearly in Kyer Altamar. Could she cope with that much doubt and uncertainty?

The door opened, and a wizard's light filled the cabin. "Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you," said Father.

"I wasn't asleep." Adramal dried her eyes and sat up.

Father's hair and beard were in disarray from the wind. "Studying the grain in the planks, then?"

"Something like that."

"We should be passing Laskeron in an hour or so," he said. "Do you want to take a look? The cliffs might be visible already." On the outward journey, the ship had passed Laskeron at night, so they'd missed seeing it.

She shook her head.

"Is something bothering you?" he asked. "Apart from the obvious, I mean."

Her worry must be blatant indeed for Father to notice it. "What's 'the obvious?'"

The creaking of the ship's timbers abruptly stopped — Father had cast a silence spell. "Zorian, and how we're going to defeat Him without that staff Lelsarin seems to think we need. Has she had any more luck with the meaning of the message from Shomnakh Enkhyar?" The message, supposedly Adramal's purpose in life, showed the conception and birth of a son, but contained a lot of sensory detail beyond what Adramal might be expected to perceive in those circumstances.

"She said it must be a code," said Adramal.

"So we need to find the key." He sat on the edge of his bed.

"Where do we even start looking? Someone who'd hide a message in the smoke inside a chimney might choose anything."

Father stroked his moustache. "I've sent and received a few coded messages, and the keys are always things that both people know, but no one else does — or that's the ideal, anyway."

"So the key is something that only Shomnakh Enkhyar and I know?" said Adramal.

"What knowledge did Shomnakh Enkhyar know you possessed?" said Father. "It didn't have much time to study your mind between when you drank and when the message was revealed to you."

“So the key might be something that was obvious in my mind at the time?”

Father nodded.

“Something I was thinking about?”

“Or something you witnessed.”

So just relive that day in your memory, said Lelsarin.

Adramal lay on her bed and recalled that day and night — realising that Galdrakh was planning something for the Succession Ball, being squeezed into her dress, waiting to be admitted to the Governor-General’s palace, trying to warn someone — anyone — about the plot, realising Lakhshram had been working for Galdrakh all along, sneaking into Akhmar-an-Terash, drinking from the well, swimming through the tunnel to the Governor-General’s palace, nearly drowning on the way there, being captured by the Kreztalin, being marched through the gardens and up the back stairs to meet Kerevash. She recalled her feelings — nervous when drinking, curious and confident at the start of her swim, then increasingly terrified when she thought she was going to die, relieved and exhausted when she broke the surface of the other well in the grounds of the Governor-General’s palace, afraid after her capture, but also alert for any chance to escape.

She waited a few moments for insight. Nothing happened. She sat up, shaking her head.

We don’t know how specific the key has to be, said Lelsarin. *Maybe you have to remember in a lot of detail.*

Adramal repeated this for Father’s benefit and added, “But the creature didn’t know how good my memory is.”

“It knew you’re a wizard,” said Father, “and that needs a good memory.” He cancelled the silence spell and stood up, stretching. “I’m going up on deck for a while. Laskeron should be in sight by now.”

“I think I will join you after all,” said Adramal. “It’s not as if I’ve anything else to do.”

On deck, they leaned on the port railing as the pale sandstone cliffs of the Melinandish coast slid past. Adramal glimpsed a ship astern, heading away from them. The only sounds were the calls of seabirds, the fluttering of the rigging and an occasional shouted order. The cliffs gradually became lower and more weathered. They saw more ships and boats, most of which were sailing towards or away from a gap in the cliffs.

As their ship drew level with the gap, Adramal saw that it was the mouth of a broad river. The cliffs rose above the river in a series of narrow terraces, on which the city was built. Many of the buildings were multi-coloured towers, and a good number of these overlooked the ground of the terrace above. On top of the left cliff stood a wide shallow dome, decorated with swirling patterns in weather-faded reds and yellows. Adramal guessed that was the Temple of Imil, as it resembled the one in Molkolin.

Two bridges spanned the river. The lower was a broad stone structure with three arches on the level immediately above the water. The higher lay further upstream, a thin wooden suspension bridge on the level above.

“It’s very pretty,” Adramal said, “but it doesn’t strike me as a practical place to live. Imagine if you lived inland on the top terrace and had to go to the shore on the other bank, and realised you’d forgotten something when you got there.”

Father smiled. “I don’t think the Melinanders have a word for ‘practical.’”

Adramal shivered in the breeze, and Father put an arm around her shoulders. The wind dropped, and the sounds of the rigging disappeared. She resisted the temptation to look behind her, knowing he’d cast another silence spell.

“So what other knowledge does Shomnakh Enkhyar have in common with you that no

one else would possess?” he asked.

“What if it’s a spell I have to cast? As you said, the creature knows I’m a wizard.”

Father wagged a finger. “What I like about that is there’s no uncertainty over how detailed or intense the thoughts have to be to unlock the code.” When you cast a spell, the component thoughts had to be shaped and timed precisely, and any particular thought that could be used in a spell was either there or not. “It would also provide some protection against Kerevash seeing the key in your mind,” Father continued. “If he told you to cast the key spell, you could’ve made a deliberate mistake with it. So which spell is it? It can’t be one you use often — or not one you’ve used since you received the vision, anyway.”

She counted off spells on her fingers. “There was the advanced shield Lelsarin showed me, while I was swimming through the tunnel. There was the spell that detects magic, while I was sitting in the Governor-General’s bedroom, to try to see what Kerevash was doing to him. Then there was the shield I normally use, when Elector Galdrakh attacked me, and a few times after that. Lelsarin used her shield a couple of times, and tried to stun one of the Kreztalin — that spell’s different from the one we use on people. After I left the bedroom... a fire spell to light a candle, the usual stunning spell on a guard, mindspeech to try to talk to you, and healing for your arm.”

“And since we left Molkolin?” said Father.

Adramal gazed into the distance. “It’s odd that I have to stop and think about it. I haven’t used as much magic on this whole voyage as I used in those few hours. I’ve used mindspeech several times, of course, so you can hear Lelsarin, fire to light the lantern once or twice, and a sensing spell when that sailor claimed to be dying a few days ago, though I didn’t need to heal him.” He’d just banged his head on a beam when badly hung over, so Adramal had told the first mate to let him sleep it off and dock his pay.

“Is that all?” said Father.

Adramal nodded.

“There was one spell I thought would be the first you’d mention.”

Adramal frowned, then held up a finger. “Light.”

“The first one every wizard learns.”

“It couldn’t be that simple, could it?” she said.

Father shrugged. “It’s worth a try.”

They returned to their cabin — a wizard’s light was almost invisible in daylight, and they didn’t need any sharp-eyed sailors wondering what they were doing.

She sat on the bed and took a few slow breaths. It was one of the simplest spells, but she couldn’t help feeling self-conscious with Father watching as she cast it. She was almost surprised when the familiar fist-sized ball of white light appeared a foot in front of her. She squinted at it — she hadn’t appreciated how dingy the cabin truly was.

“Well?” said Father.

Before Adramal could answer, the light exploded. She had time to realise her skin was burning before she fainted.

“Adramal! Are you all right?”

She opened her eyes, blinking in the light — Father’s, not hers. He leaned over her, worry lining his face. Joints protested as she sat up. Her head and the top of her back ached — she’d fallen against the cabin wall.

“What happened?” He sat down next to her.

“My light... it’s never done that before.”

“Really? It just vanished, and you fainted.”

“No, it... it exploded.”

Father shook his head. “It disappeared, the way they always do.”

“I felt the heat,” she said. “My face.” Only now did she realise she had no pain there. She touched her cheek. The skin was smooth, unblemished.

“That’s an odd way to tell you you’ve found the key.”

We haven’t found it, said Lelsarin. The memories are still the same as they were.

Adramal relayed this to Father.

“Oh. Then why bother doing it?”

It might be meant as a clue that we’re on the right track.

Father winced once Adramal had repeated this. “The Diplomatic Service were experimenting with what they called chain ciphers. You encode a message with one cipher, then encode that ciphered message with *another* cipher, then another, and another, as many times as you like. The idea is to make it harder for an enemy to break the code.”

“It sounds very time-consuming,” Adramal said.

“It is, which is why they decided not to do it in the end.”

“So why are you telling me this?”

“Because the Diplomatic Service was limited by a man’s ability to calculate without making errors, and his tolerance for boredom. As far as we know, Shomnakh Enkhyar doesn’t have either of those limits.”

Adramal said, “So the message could’ve been enciphered five times, or ten.”

“Or fifty, or a hundred, meaning we have to find that many keys,” said Father. “And until we’ve found the last one and turned the message into something we can understand, we won’t know how many more keys there are.”

“When are we due in Kyer Altamar?” Adramal asked.

“Pethandril, or maybe Sujas.”

“Then we’ve got ten or eleven days to find the keys.”

Chapter 3

Someone knocked on Tagahra’s door. He opened it to see Watchmen Kerekh and Ethkarn, both stocky middle-aged fellows. They saluted him in the over-precise manner of men who weren’t sure why someone who wasn’t their commanding officer had summoned them.

He stood aside to let them enter, and they saluted again when they saw Sergeant Galbreth, who nodded politely in their general direction. Galbreth had arrived in the city with the first group of wizards from Thuren, not long after Adramal’s sudden departure. Tagahra had wanted to find a replacement for her, and Galbreth had been happy to take on the role. He had completed his apprenticeship, and so was a stronger wizard than her, but seemed dull-witted by comparison. Tagahra had often had to tell him what spells to cast, to the point where it seemed he knew more about magic than the wizard, at least insofar as it pertained to catching criminals.

Kerekh and Ethkarn stood at attention, looking straight ahead, waiting for orders. “At ease,” Tagahra said. “I want to ask you about a report you filed on Nerupar’s Day — suspected drunkenness and public nuisance.”

The Watchmen gave one another an uncertain look, then their gazes snapped back to the wall opposite.

“You’re not in any trouble,” said Tagahra. “I just want to clear up a few points.” He picked up the slate that held their report and read from it. “In the first hour, you were patrolling along Tharl Street and encountered two men. One appeared to be very drunk, while the other appeared sober and was supporting him. You questioned them to determine their business and see whether they needed any help. Yes?”

“Yes, Sir,” said Kerekh.

“Now, you say the sober man spoke with an accent you didn’t recognise.”

“Yes, Sir,” Kerekh repeated. “Like nothing I’ve ever heard. I had to ask him to repeat himself a couple of times.”

“I thought he wasn’t even speaking Centadorian at first, Sir,” Ethkarn added.

Tagahra nodded. “Can you tell me what he said?”

“I don’t remember exactly, Sir,” said Kerekh.

“Roughly, then.”

Kerekh frowned and tugged on his beard. “I said, ‘Is your friend all right?’ and he said, ‘Yes, he’s fine,’ and I said, ‘He looks like he’s had too much to drink,’ and he said, ‘I’m looking after him,’ and I said, ‘You take him straight home now and put him to bed — make sure he doesn’t cause any trouble along the way,’ and he said, ‘I’ll do that, Watchman — that’s what friends are for, isn’t it?’”

“Thank you,” Tagahra said. “Sergeant, would you repeat the words Watchman Kerekh attributed to the sober man, please?”

Self-consciously, Galbreth obliged. Tagahra had briefed him about what he’d ask him to do, and had told him to speak as naturally as possible, but he still sounded ashamed of his accent.

“Did he sound like that?” Tagahra asked.

“No, Sir,” Kerekh replied.

“Oh.” Tagahra had been certain the sober man would turn out to be from Thuren.

“Sir?” said Ethkarn. “I don’t like to go against another Watchman’s word, but, ah, to my ears at least, that fellow sounded a *bit* like the Sergeant.”

“How much is a bit?” said Tagahra.

“Hard to say. You’re from the west, aren’t you, Sergeant?”

“I am.”

“How far west?” said Ethkarn.

“Two fortnights by barge up the Aglos.”

Ethkarn pursed his lips, as if he hadn’t thought anywhere in Centador could be that far from Kyer Altamar. “In that case, I’d say this fellow sounded as though he was from four fortnights west. Maybe even six.”

“That would put him over the other side of the mountains,” Galbreth said with a slight smile.

“Something else...” Ethkarn scrunched up his face, as though squinting into the sun. He turned to Kerekh. “Again, sorry to be disagreeing with you, pal, but... what you said wasn’t what he said.”

Kerekh looked him up and down. “I did say it wasn’t exact.”

“You got what he meant, but those weren’t the words he used. He had a lot more big words in there, like a priest.”

Tagahra’s eyes widened. “You think that’s what he might’ve been?”

“I don’t think so. It was more like... you know when the mummers do *The Ox of Kalkarak*, and the bit where the priests are making their plans, and the audience laughs at

what they say, even though no real priest would say things like that, but to an ordinary person, it sounds like the way they talk.” He paused, scratching his cheek. “Sorry Sir, I’m not explaining this very well. It was... it was how someone might think a priest talked if he’d never heard a real priest, but only the mummers pretending to be priests.”

“I think I see what you’re trying to say,” Tagahra said, “though I’m not sure whether it helps matters.” There weren’t many priests in the west of Centador, so somebody from there who wanted to imitate one might well have to rely on second-hand knowledge. But if the sober man had wanted the Watchmen to think he was a priest, why not dress as one? That would’ve been much more convincing.

Tagahra gestured to the door. “Well, thank you for your time, Watchmen. You’re dismissed.” Once they’d gone, he asked Galbreth, “Can you get a message to Councillor Sethraim by mindspeech?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Tell him I want him to gather the wizards together so Kerekh and Ethkarn can have a look at them.”

“Sir, you don’t seriously think one of them — one of us — is responsible.”

“You could’ve said the same of Shendar a few seasons ago. The fact that the two Watchmen disagreed on what this man said suggests magic was at work.”

Galbreth half-closed his eyes. His lips fluttered in silent imitation of speech, then stopped. This repeated a few times, and then Galbreth opened his eyes, blinking as though startled by where he found himself. “Message sent, Sir.”

“Good,” said Tagahra.

“Mindspeech doesn’t convey emotion particularly well, Sir, but he didn’t sound very happy.”

Chapter 4

When the wizards arrived at the Watch Building, Tagahra asked them to assemble in the refectory. He told Kerekh and Ethkarn to stand just inside the door to see if they recognised any of the wizards — or if any appeared to recognise them. A dozen had answered the summons — seven men and five women, mostly middle-aged with a couple of apprentices.

“I thought there were more of you in the city,” Tagahra told Sethraim, once they were all gathered.

“The rest are in the Marchwood, Captain,” Sethraim replied. This man, the leader of the Council at Thuren, looked exactly as Tagahra had expected a wizard to look before he met one — ancient, yet tall and majestic, with long flowing hair and beard. Any mummers’ troupe would’ve jumped to offer him the part of Darikel in *The Death of Zorian*.

“What are they doing there?” said Tagahra.

Sethraim smiled. “I don’t believe you’re authorised to know that. Ask Commander Yebran, if you must.”

“Would you ask them to come here, please?”

“I can’t release them from their duty.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Sethraim replied. “They’re not leaving the forest.”

Tagahra glared at Sethraim, wondering whether to find Yebran and ask him to overrule the wizard. But no — Tagahra had a hunch at the moment, nothing more. He needed the

wizards' cooperation more than he needed to show authority over them.

"Then we'll go to the Marchwood once we're done here," he said.

With a slight nod, Sethraim answered, "As you wish, Captain."

To the wizards, Tagahra said, "Were any of you in Tharl Street around dawn on Nerupar's Day?" They said no or shook their heads. "You didn't stop to assist someone who might have been drunk? You didn't meet a couple of men from the City Watch who wanted to know what you were doing?"

Before they could respond to his last question, Sethraim interrupted with, "I hope you're not implying, Captain, that any of us were engaged in unlawful activity."

"Just let them answer the question, please, Councillor." Tagahra gave him another hard stare. Sethraim held his gaze, unblinking, then nodded to the other wizards. Again, they all replied in the negative.

"Thank you," Tagahra said. "Now, I'm going to ask each of you to repeat a sentence. I want you to say it in your normal voice, as naturally as possible. The sentence is, 'That's what friends are for, isn't it?'"

"What do you hope to achieve here, Captain?" Sethraim asked.

"At the moment, Sir, I just want to establish some facts."

"You've already established that none of us were in Tharl Street on Nerupar's Day. So whoever you're looking for isn't here. And why are you so interested in who was helping a drunk, anyway?"

"If nobody ever lied to me, Councillor, my job would be very easy." Tagahra held up his hands to head off a heated reaction. "I'm not accusing anyone here of lying. Just pointing out that I don't know yet if anyone's doing it."

Reluctantly, the wizards each uttered the required sentence. Most of their accents sounded similar to Galbreth's, with one from Kyer Altamar, and one that might be from somewhere near Salthes.

Once everyone had spoken, Tagahra asked them to excuse him, and beckoned Kerekh and Ethkarn to follow him to the lobby.

"Well?" he asked them.

"I'm very sorry, Sir," said Kerekh, "but none of them looked like the fellow we saw, or sounded like him." Ethkarn agreed.

Tagahra sighed. "Well, that's one more possibility ruled out. Sometimes investigations are like that — you have to try every route until you find the right one. And sometimes you don't find the right one. Go and see if Sergeant Yanmar will let me borrow you for a visit to the Marchwood."

They saluted, though not before Kerekh's eyes widened and Ethkarn's jaw clenched. Tagahra didn't blame them — if someone ordered him to go into the Marchwood, he'd wonder if they were mad or had a grudge against him. He returned to the refectory and told Sethraim the other wizards were free to leave. Sethraim agreed to take him, Kerekh and Ethkarn to see the other wizards in the Marchwood. Within a few minutes, the two Watchmen came back and confirmed that Yanmar had released them to Tagahra's command for the rest of the day.

Tagahra found a spare Watchman and took everyone to a small wharf at the edge of Zemil Square, where the Watch kept a dinghy. Kerekh and Ethkarn rowed them across the river to the north bank, attracting concerned looks from other boatmen who realised where they were going. Once Tagahra, Sethraim, Kerekh and Ethkarn had disembarked, the spare Watchman rowed the boat back to its mooring place. The return journey was much faster

than the outward one — and if Tagahra was any judge, not merely because the boat was four men lighter.

They stood on a bare, silty beach that stretched out of sight upstream and downstream. A hundred yards back from the river, the Marchwood began, dark and silent. All the trees were the same height, as though someone had cut down the younger ones at the edge of the forest.

He could see why Shendar had brought Adramal here to kill her. Nobody with any sense went into the Marchwood — not willingly, anyway. As a boy, for a dare Tagahra had stood in the shadows of the outermost trees, until the screech of a crow had sent him running for home, head full of imaginary monsters. When his father found out, he'd given him the worst beating of his childhood.

But that was a long time ago. He was a Captain of the Kyer Altamar City Watch now. He'd faced dangers he couldn't have dreamed of when he was fleeing from the trees, the jeers and taunts of the older boys ringing in his ears. He had one of the most powerful wizards in the world with him. So why did he want to turn round and summon the rowing boat?

"I'd recommend you keep as quiet as you can," Sethraim said.

"Why's that, Sir?" asked Tagahra.

"If you keep quiet, you won't have to find out. I'd also suggest not touching anything. The main camp is about two miles away." Sethraim trudged towards the trees, his boots leaving deep prints in the sand.

"You heard the man," Tagahra said to Kerekh and Ethkarn. They followed Sethraim, their faces indicating they'd much rather be sitting in a tavern.

When they crossed the edge of the forest, passing among the trees, something changed, like moving from one room to another in a building. Tagahra needed a few moments to work it out — the sound of the river had vanished, as though Sethraim had cast a silence spell. The ground crunched slightly under their feet, like fresh snow. There was little undergrowth, as if someone was keeping the paths clear. But who, if nobody lived here?

Tagahra kept noticing glints in the corner of his eye, like sunlight reflecting off metal, but when he turned his head, he saw nothing that could have caused them.

Sethraim tensed at the sound of a twig snapping, and glanced behind him, scowling.

"Sorry, Sir," said Kerekh. Tagahra would've guessed he was the culprit, as he'd lived in Kyer Altamar all his life. Ethkarn had grown up on a farm, and so was more used to being in the wilderness.

After a few more yards, Kerekh whispered something to Ethkarn, who nodded nervously.

"Well go on, Watchman," said Sethraim, not looking round this time. "Share it with the class."

"I don't understand, Sir," Kerekh replied.

Tagahra tried not to smile, recalling his own education. "He wants to know what you said to Ethkarn."

Kerekh studied his boots for a moment, then looked straight at Tagahra. "All I said was, this place feels like walking into a house where someone's just died."

Sethraim harrumphed. "Truer than you know. But I'll thank you to save your observations until you return to the city."

As they walked on, Tagahra noticed small pieces of glossy black stone at the sides of the path. Their jagged shapes suggested they'd recently been part of something bigger. At first there was one piece every ten yards or so, but they gradually became more numerous and

larger. If they'd all come from the same object originally, it must've been truly enormous. He had an unaccountable desire to pick up a piece and examine it more closely. Was that just because Sethraim had told them not to touch anything?

Sethraim held up a hand, and everyone stopped. He turned to them and whispered, "The main camp is about a hundred yards further on. They're expecting us. I take it, Captain, that you want to go through that ridiculous routine of hearing the wizards speak?"

This was neither the time nor the place to defend his investigative methods, so Tagahra just nodded.

Sethraim stared into the distance for a moment, then said, "They'll do it." Tagahra guessed he'd been mindspeaking with the wizards ahead.

They came to a clearing, thirty yards across. In the middle stood two tents, each big enough for two people. A few pots and pans lay outside, neatly stacked. Sethraim stepped over a length of string that hung loosely between the trees on either side of the entrance. As Tagahra followed, he saw a couple of small crude bells tied to the string. The string continued right the way around the clearing. This was an alarm system, then. Who — or what — was it meant to warn against?

A young man emerged from one of the tents and waved to Sethraim. At first Tagahra thought this fellow was alone here, but then spotted two women and another two men standing almost motionless at equally-spaced intervals around the edge of the clearing. These four didn't acknowledge the newcomers — didn't seem even to notice them — and Tagahra supposed they were performing some complex magic that couldn't be interrupted.

"Where's Teshan?" Sethraim asked the man who'd come out of the tent.

"Still at her campsite," the man replied. "She —" He glanced at the Watchmen and fell silent. His gaze locked with Sethraim's for a moment.

"We'll call on her once we've finished here," said Sethraim. He paused. "Well go on then, Captain. Tell your men to examine the witnesses or whatever it is you brought them here for."

The young man stood up straighter, faced Tagahra and said, "That's what friends are for, isn't it?" His accent was the same as Sethraim's and Galbreth's.

Tagahra walked around the edge of the clearing, Kerekh and Ethkarn following. As they came within a few feet of each wizard, he or she said, "That's what friends are for, isn't it?" Their speech was flat and toneless, but their accents were unmistakably the same as the other wizards'. Their arms hung loose at their sides, and their eyes stared at nothing. Tagahra wondered what they were doing that required so much concentration, and then thought perhaps he'd rather not know.

"We're finished here," he said. "Thank you."

They left the clearing, heading deeper into the forest. "So I take it none of them was our man?" Tagahra said once he judged they were out of earshot of the camp.

"No Sir," said Ethkarn.

Tagahra shivered. The winter's first snow couldn't be far off. The sun was behind them now, already low in the sky. It sparkled off the stone blocks, which were now often the size of a pig or a goat. Whenever the splinters of light struck his eyes, his hand strayed towards the hilt of his sword. These were ideal conditions for an ambush, especially as the trees were closer together here.

After a mile, they reached another clearing, smaller than the first. This too had bells on strings around its edge. In the middle stood a tent, big enough for one person, or maybe two if they were friendly.

A woman stepped out of the tent. She was almost as grey and wrinkled as Sethraim, but moved with the easy grace of someone much younger. “Good day, Councillor.” Her accent was close to Galbreth’s. She gave Tagahra and the Watchmen a quizzical look.

“These are the Watchmen I mentioned,” Sethraim said.

“Don’t they have names?”

A scowl flickered across Sethraim’s face. “Captain Tagahra, and…”

“Watchman Kerekh and Watchman Ethkarn,” Tagahra finished.

Sethraim nodded to her. “This is Councillor Teshan, who teaches healing at Thuren.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Sirs.” She made a little curtsy.

“Likewise, Lady,” Tagahra replied, bowing.

“I understand you want to hear me say, ‘That’s what friends are for, isn’t it?’” She batted her eyelashes at Tagahra and repeated the words in a conspiratorial tone. He held her gaze, determined not to give her the satisfaction of making him break eye contact.

Sethraim coughed. “I’m sure your men can see and hear that the Councillor isn’t the person they’re looking for, so we can be on our way back to the city.”

Kerekh and Ethkarn made a show of studying Teshan’s face. Ethkarn had the decency to look embarrassed at having to do this.

“She’s not the suspect, Sir,” Kerekh said. Ethkarn nodded his agreement.

“Thank you for your co-operation, Councillor.” Tagahra bowed again. “We won’t take up any more of your time.”

“Oh.” Teshan pouted. “You only just got here. I mean, Sethraim told me why you wanted to see all of us, but I thought you might stay for a snack or a drink. You’re the first visitors I’ve had since Kharadar’s Day.”

“That’s kind of you, Councillor, but we’re very busy people. I’m afraid we don’t have much time for social calls.”

She looked at him sidelong. “Perhaps you should make some. It’s surprising what people will tell you if they think you’re interested in them.”

If he paid attention to every piece of gossip that came his way, half the city would be in gaol. But it didn’t do to irritate wizards needlessly. So instead he replied, “I’ll bear that in mind, Councillor.”

“Won’t you at least let me give you some cakes for the journey back?”

Kerekh responded with a smile that Tagahra took to mean cakes would be very welcome. Well, what could be the harm? If the wizards meant him or the Watchmen ill, they’d had plenty of opportunities already.

“That’s very kind of you, Lady,” Tagahra said.

Teshan practically skipped to the tent and ducked inside. She emerged a few moments later carrying a small cloth bundle. She unwrapped the top of it, revealing a stack of butter-coloured discs, slightly wider than her palm. She handed one to each of her visitors. “I baked them yesterday, so they should still be fresh.”

“We agreed no fires,” Sethraim said.

“There’s nothing in the forest, you goose. Or nothing that knows what fire means, anyway.”

Tagahra bit into his cake. It was so soft it almost melted in his mouth, coating his tongue with velvety sweetness.

“What do you think?” she asked once they’d finished.

Kerekh licked his lips and accepted the bundle from her, tucking it into a pocket of his cloak. “Lady, if you opened a shop in Kyer Altamar selling nothing but those, within a

season you'd be the richest woman in the city."

Teshan grinned at Sethraim. "I told you they'd enjoy them."

Before Sethraim could reply, the alarm bells jangled, then stopped suddenly. Tagahra's and the Watchmen's hands went to their sword hilts. Sethraim motioned them to be still. Teshan closed her eyes. Tagahra peered into the shadows, eyes and ears sharp for any movement. Several bells seemed to have rung at the same time. Were they surrounded, or was it nothing more than a gust of wind? He hadn't felt any breeze.

"It's gone," Sethraim said, though the fact he whispered this made Tagahra think he wasn't sure.

"What was it?" Tagahra whispered back. Nobody answered.

Sethraim jolted. A moment later, his lips moved inaudibly. He blinked twice, then stared at Tagahra. "Galbreth has just contacted me. He wants you to come back to the city, to the gaol."

"The gaol?" Tagahra couldn't think of any reason for his Sergeant to be there. If he'd arrested someone, they'd be held at the Watch Building for questioning. If a crime had been committed at the gaol, the gaolers were capable of finding and punishing the culprit — and if matters had got out of hand in that direction, Galbreth would've summoned people who were nearer. "Did he say anything else?"

"Only that it's urgent."

When was Watch business ever not urgent? "We're finished here anyway. Is it safe to leave?"

"As safe as this place ever is," Sethraim replied.

Tagahra turned to go back the way they'd come.

"Begging your pardon, Sir," said Ethkarn, "but I don't think it'd be right to leave the lady here unprotected."

Teshan gave him a cat-like smile. "Your concern is endearing, young man, but I wouldn't be any less protected than before you arrived, and I'm not as helpless as I look. If you were to come at me with that big sword, I wouldn't lay any wagers on your getting near enough to do any damage with it."

"Then we'll leave you in peace, Councillor," said Tagahra. They bowed and curtsied to one another, and Sethraim led the way back to the city. Tagahra tried not to show any relief at not having to stay. Whatever it was that had rung the bells, he didn't think swords would have stopped it had it been hostile.

Chapter 5

Tagahra arrived at the city's gaol as tenth hour was ringing. It was a small single-storeyed building in the shadow of the city's southern wall. It hardly looked big enough — or secure enough — to contain the hundred or so criminals it normally housed, but most of the cells lay below ground.

He gave his name and showed his badge to the guards at the gate. They checked with a superior before letting him in, which they hadn't done last time. He passed through a short tunnel into a room where a clerk sat behind a desk.

Galbreth sat on a rickety chair on the other side of the room. When he saw Tagahra, he jumped to attention and saluted smartly. The clerk stood and tapped on a door that was labelled *Head Gaoler*, then opened it and went through, closing it behind him.

“So what’s this about, Sergeant?” Tagahra asked. The gate leading further into the gaol was locked, with a guard inside and out. Until now, it had been open every time he visited.

Galbreth fidgeted, as if he’d rather be elsewhere. His eyes flicked to the gate. “Sir, there’s a... a corpse in one of the cells.”

Tagahra took half a step back. “Prisoners die all the time.”

“It... he... isn’t a prisoner, Sir.”

“Oh. A guard, then.” But they wouldn’t need to involve the Watch, unless they didn’t know who’d killed him.

“No, Sir. They have no idea who he is.”

“How did he get in, then?”

“They don’t know, Sir,” said Galbreth.

That wasn’t surprising. The son of a Lesser House had once told him the gaol employed people who lacked the imagination to be Watchmen, though Tagahra wasn’t sure which group the man had meant to insult.

“And,” Galbreth continued, “the prisoner whose cell it is has escaped.”

Tagahra was about to ask the prisoner’s identity when the clerk emerged from the Head Gaoler’s office, followed by the Head Gaoler himself. He was a short, chubby, balding fellow who, in Tagahra’s estimation, cared more for his dinner table and his bed than for the prisoners in his charge. The last time a prisoner had escaped, he’d seemed to regard the event more as a bureaucratic nuisance than a danger to the public. Now, though, he looked genuinely shaken.

“Captain Tagahra,” he said. “Thank you for coming. I’d hoped you’d be the one they sent.”

“Oh yes?”

“The escaped prisoner was one you brought in, name of Eskalyn.”

Tagahra’s eyes widened. “The wizard?”

“The same.” The Head Gaoler grimaced. “He must’ve come out through the gate, because all the windows are intact.” The windows, Tagahra recalled, were all barred, and the gaps were much too small for even a wizard to squeeze through. “But none of the guards saw him. The first anyone knew was when we made our rounds in first watch.”

Tagahra scowled. “So why did you wait two watches to call us? He could be thirty miles away by now.”

“We wanted to be sure he wasn’t hiding somewhere else in the gaol.”

“Gods help you.” To Galbreth, Tagahra said, “I assume you informed the Duty Sergeant to tell all patrols to look out for him?”

“I did, Sir.”

“Could he have used magic to stop the guards from seeing him as he left?” said Tagahra.

“As I’ve never met him, I don’t know precisely what he’s capable of, Sir,” Galbreth said with a frown. “I’d expect he has some ability to cast illusions, but he couldn’t make himself invisible. The guards would’ve seen *something*. And even if they hadn’t, they would’ve seen the gate opening.”

“They mightn’t have heard it, though, if he’d cast a silence spell. So if he could make them look the other way while he opened it...”

“Possibly, Sir,” Galbreth replied.

“So there are some similarities to the disappearances,” Tagahra said. “Do you think Eskalyn could’ve been our sober man — the fellow Kerekh and Ethkarn met in Tharl Street?”

“It’s hard to say, Sir. I’ve heard some wizards can make themselves look like someone else, but it’s tricky to keep it up for any length of time.”

“In low light, for a few minutes, in front of people who aren’t expecting it?”

“That would be easier,” Galbreth said. “But then why draw attention to himself with such an unusual accent? And if he escaped, what, nearly a fortnight ago now, why come back to gaol?”

Tagahra sighed. “I don’t know.” In fact, he had an idea about that, but didn’t want to express it in front of the Head Gaoler. To that man, he said, “I suppose we’d better have a look at your uninvited guest.”

The Head Gaoler nodded to the guards, who unlocked the gate. Tagahra and Galbreth followed him along a torchlit corridor. From behind came the sound of the gate being relocked, which made Galbreth wince.

Guarded gates led to other parts of the building. At the end of the corridor, a narrow stone staircase descended into the earth. The three of them went down in single file. The stink of unwashed bodies and human waste rose from the depths. At the bottom of the staircase was another locked gate with a guard in front. He unlocked it and allowed them to squeeze past him.

A damp chill hung in the air as they walked along corridors flanked by cells. Most were big enough only for one man, though some had room for two or three. Each had the appropriate number of rough wooden beds bolted to the wall, plus a bucket for waste.

The Head Gaoler seemed unsure of the layout of the gaol — he had to backtrack a couple of times. The prisoners who caught Tagahra’s eye seemed cheerful, even smug, as might well be expected if one of their number had escaped without apparently leaving any clues as to how he’d done it.

“How do you make your locks wizard-proof?” Tagahra asked.

“Lots of little parts,” the Head Gaoler said.

“Too fiddly for a wizard to manipulate,” Tagahra replied.

“Yes. And a cover that’s too thick for their fingers to see through.”

“Could a wizard bend the bars of the gate enough to get through them?” Tagahra asked Galbreth.

“We’ve thought of that, too,” the Head Gaoler said before Galbreth could answer.

“Oh yes?” said Tagahra.

“You’ll see.”

They turned a corner, and came to another corridor, a dead end, with a guard outside the last cell. As they approached, Tagahra glimpsed a naked man lying on the cell floor. That, he supposed, had to be the corpse. The other cells in this section were empty.

“Stand aside,” the Head Gaoler told the guard. From a pouch at his belt, the Head Gaoler took a square of metal with an emerald in the centre. It resembled a smaller version of the raskarims that the priests of Mathran carried. He pressed this into a square hole above the lock. Tagahra’s skin prickled, as it sometimes did when he stroked a cat. The Head Gaoler put the not-quite-a-raskarim away and nodded to the guard, who inserted a more conventional key into the lock and turned it.

“The priests put a spell on the bars that makes you sleep if you touch them,” the Head Gaoler said. “That square thing stops the spell from working for a minute. We’ve got two of them. One is normally on the duty officer’s belt. The other is kept in a locked box in my office. Neither showed any signs of having been tampered with. The cell is as we found it. Once we realised the man was dead, we didn’t touch anything. Didn’t even move the clothes

under the bed. I know how you Watch fellows don't like anyone disturbing the scene of a crime." He said it in such a way as to imply this was just a petty rule to make Tagahra feel important.

"Was anyone in the other cells along this section last night?" Tagahra asked.

"No," said the Head Gaoler. "The priests recommended keeping him away from the other prisoners."

Tagahra nodded. "Once we've finished here, I'll need to talk to the guards who were on duty last night, as well as any prisoners whose cells are on the route Eskalyn might have taken to get out."

"I doubt the prisoners will tell you anything, but I'll have a list drawn up."

"Thank you," Tagahra said, almost meaning it. He stepped into the cell, Galbreth following. "This is likely to take some time, so don't feel you have to stay."

The Head Gaoler gave a slight bow and departed.

"You'd best cast a light spell, Sergeant, so we can see what we're doing," said Tagahra.

Galbreth frowned, and a ball of fuzzy white light appeared over his shoulder. The guard spun round, hand on his sword hilt, then relaxed when he saw the cause of the sudden brightness.

"Are there a lot of criminal wizards around here, Sir?" Galbreth asked.

Tagahra sighed. "I was going to say no, but we've had three this year. All of them were teachers at the school that closed in the summer. Eskalyn was in charge of it, but he was convicted of embezzling from the school's funds. The second was blackmailing Eskalyn about the thefts. The third you know about — the cattle brand murderer."

"Do you think the embezzlement might have something to do with Eskalyn's disappearance, Sir?"

"Possibly," Tagahra replied. "Let's concentrate on the problem in front of us for the time being."

The corpse lay on his left side in the middle of the cell, facing the back wall. His legs were bent slightly, his left arm tucked underneath him, and his right arm stretched out in front of him. In other circumstances, Tagahra could have believed he'd died in his sleep. He was old, wrinkled like a carelessly dropped cloth, and almost bald.

Tagahra walked around the corpse, seeing no obvious injuries. The soles of his feet were relatively smooth and the toenails short, so he'd probably worn shoes or boots most of the time and not done much walking or standing. Tagahra crouched for a closer look at the face. It was hauntingly familiar, though that might just be because old age tended to smooth out the differences between people. He poked at the corpse's forearm. "Interesting."

"Sir?" said Galbreth.

"You see the skin on his arms is loose? That could mean he spent a long time hungry before he died. But, he shaved recently. The moustache is quite neat, and there's not much stubble. Which doesn't sit well with his being hungry."

"Why not, Sir?"

"If he can shave, he owns a razor. If he's got no children to look after him, and no money to buy food, he can sell the razor, or barter it."

"Maybe someone lent him the razor," said Galbreth.

"Possibly, but again, why not give him food instead?" Tagahra pivoted on the balls of his feet to reach out for the man's right hand. The fingernails were trimmed and clean, the skin soft — or as soft as a corpse's hands were ever likely to be. The tips of his forefinger and thumb had little calluses. Tagahra indicated these. "I'd say our man did a lot of writing."

“A clerk or a scribe, then. What’s that?” Galbreth pointed to something half-hidden under the body, glinting in his light.

“He’s holding it — we’ll have to turn him over to get at it.” Galbreth shuddered as he touched the man, evidently still not comfortable around dead bodies. Adramal had adjusted much quicker, after an unfortunate reaction to the first one she’d seen in the city.

“Ready?” Tagahra said. Galbreth nodded. “Lift.” The corpse was much lighter than an adult male would normally be, reinforcing Tagahra’s belief that he’d died hungry. The left arm flopped outwards, and the thing he’d been holding clattered on the floor.

“A raskarim?” said Galbreth.

Tagahra didn’t look. His gaze had fallen on the man’s chest. Over his heart was carved a symbol — a circle with eight lines radiating from it.

Chapter 6

“Sir?” said Galbreth. “What’s wrong?”

Tagahra glanced at the guard, who still stood with his back to them, staring at the wall opposite. “Silence spell,” he whispered, startled at how his voice shook. “Now.”

Galbreth frowned, but the sudden lack of background noise told Tagahra he’d obeyed.

“That’s the symbol you told me about, isn’t it, Sir — the... cattle brand murderer.”

Tagahra nodded. “Shendar.”

“I thought she was dead.”

“So did I. Adramal told me she drowned in the river, but her body’s never been found.”

“When did she drown, Sir?” said Galbreth.

“The middle of summer. Thirteenth fortnight.”

Galbreth moved to the side of the body for a closer look at the symbol. “That carving’s old, Sir. The skin has had time to heal. If Shendar did it, it might’ve been before she drowned.”

“A body that had been killed in the summer wouldn’t be in this condition.”

“No, Sir,” said Galbreth.

“Can you see whether the carving was done with magic?” said Tagahra.

Galbreth gazed at the corpse and closed his eyes for a few moments. “It wasn’t, Sir.”

“Probably not one of Shendar’s, then.” Did that mean they had another cattle brand killer? One who wasn’t a wizard? “Does he have any injuries?”

Galbreth closed his eyes and took a couple of slow breaths. The light went out, and the sounds of the gaol returned. As Tagahra’s eyes adjusted to the weak orange light from the torch further along the corridor, Galbreth muttered an apology. He sounded as though he wanted to swear.

“Just do what you need to, Sergeant.”

Again, Galbreth closed his eyes and took some slow breaths. He tilted his head down, so that if his eyes had been open, he would’ve been looking at the body. After a few heartbeats, he opened his eyes and shook his head vigorously, then closed his eyes once more. After a longer delay, he opened his eyes and gazed at Tagahra.

“That’s odd.”

“What?” said Tagahra.

“Let me check something.” Still facing Tagahra, he closed his eyes again. He nodded, then turned his head until he faced the guard. He then lowered his head to face the corpse for

much longer than the first two times. At last, he looked up, and the sounds of the gaol disappeared again.

“I cast a spell to detect recent injuries,” Galbreth said. “I used it on you and the guard because at first I thought I’d made a silly mistake with it. You’re both healthy, by the way.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Tagahra replied. “So can you see any injuries?”

“That’s what’s odd, Sir. The spell is a variation on the general one that detects magic, or more accurately, differences from the prevailing background —”

Tagahra cut him off with, “I don’t need the details, and I wouldn’t understand them if I did.”

Galbreth wrinkled his nose. “Well, Sir, it makes injuries show up as bright white in my, ah, mind’s eye. Any flesh or bones that haven’t been wounded appear pale white. The reason I thought I’d made a mistake with the spell at first was that when I cast it on the corpse, I couldn’t see anything.”

“And what does that mean?” said Tagahra.

“There’s no magic in him, Sir.”

“Adramal told me that when someone dies, the magic in their body gradually leaks back into the surroundings.”

“It does, Sir, but that’s not what I’m seeing here.” He pursed his lips, then held his hand at the same height as his waist. “Imagine this is the background level of magic — what’s in the walls and the floor.” He stretched his arm above his head, almost touching the ceiling. “The magic in a healthy person might be here. When they die, the magic in them slowly fades, until it reaches the background level.” He lowered his hand back to his waist. “But that could take years.” He tilted his head. “Did you know that’s why we burn dead bodies? To speed up the magic’s return to the surroundings?”

“I’d heard it was to help their spirit rejoin the Gods,” Tagahra said.

Galbreth shrugged. “It probably amounts to the same thing.” He moved his hand to shoulder height. “If Shendar had killed this man in the summer, he might have this much magic left in him. But what he actually has is down here.” He tapped his foot on the floor. “There’s nothing left to take out of him.”

“Could Eskalyn have done it?” Tagahra asked.

“Perhaps,” said Galbreth. “A wizard normally casts spells by drawing in magic from the surroundings. Sometimes he draws it from his own body, but that’s dangerous — it’s easy to take more than you mean to. It might be possible to take magic from another wizard if you knew how, and if they allowed you. But I’m struggling to think of a situation where that would be less trouble than taking it from the surroundings. There are — it’s difficult to explain — it’s as if there’s a wall between the inside and the outside of a person, and magic has to go over that wall.”

“And what if they don’t want you to take their magic? Can you take it anyway?”

Galbreth stared at him, horrified. His mouth opened and closed a couple of times. Then he jerked his gaze away. “Sorry, Sir — I don’t mean to be rude — it’s — it’s...”

Tagahra felt his face grow warm, and thought he’d better change tack. “Adramal told me once that killing someone with magic would leave a hole in the world.”

Galbreth nodded. “The teachers told me that too, but they were vague about what it actually means.”

“Do you see anything you could interpret as a hole?”

“No, Sir.” He scratched his cheek. “So maybe that means he was killed by some other method and drained of magic afterwards.”

“Or killed somewhere else and moved here later,” said Tagahra. “Though that raises the question of why nobody saw him being brought in. Let’s leave that aside for now. The raskarim means the deceased was probably a priest, and they grow more powerful with age. Someone as old as him would’ve been very difficult for Eskalyn to overcome.”

“Maybe he isn’t a priest, then,” said Galbreth.

“How did he get the raskarim otherwise?”

Galbreth shrugged. “Stole it?”

Tagahra snorted. “That’s about as likely as Polkarn buying the first round.”

“Then perhaps it’s a fake,” Galbreth said, his blush apparent even in the low light.

“Perhaps.” Tagahra picked it up. The weight felt like solid metal, not the tin-coated wood he would’ve expected a fake to be. “Cast your light again.”

Galbreth obeyed, and the emerald in the middle of the raskarim glittered in response. Tagahra tilted it this way and that, glimpsing a glow within the gem. He was no expert, but that suggested it was genuine, not coloured glass. The metal was smooth and dull, its edges and corners rounded — obvious signs of being handled and worn inside clothing for years. A loop of thick cord for hanging it around the priest’s neck passed through a hole in one corner. Unlike the Watch’s badges, it bore no official stamp, nor any marks to indicate who it belonged to.

He put the raskarim on a corner of the bed. “It looks like the real thing, insofar as I’m any judge. The Church will be able to confirm it.”

Tagahra turned to the bundle of cloth under the bed. Before touching it, he told Galbreth to sweep his light over that part of the floor. It revealed nothing but dirt and dust. Tagahra picked up the bundle. As he expected, it was a tatty shirt and pair of trousers, made of thin, undyed cloth. A length of rope threaded through holes in the waist did duty for a belt. A variety of stains indicated that the wearer didn’t wash as often as might be desirable, but none of the holes in the clothes had been made recently, so he hadn’t been stabbed or cut while wearing them.

Tagahra told Galbreth to cancel his silence spell, and spoke to guard outside the cell. “Are these clothes that a prisoner would wear?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“And which prisoner would’ve worn them?” said Tagahra.

“It’s impossible to say, Sir. They all look the same.”

“They must be Eskalyn’s, surely,” said Galbreth. “The Head Gaoler would’ve told us if any other prisoner was missing his clothes.”

“I wouldn’t count on it,” Tagahra said. “Anyway, thank you, guard. You may resume your duties.”

The guard returned to staring at the wall of the corridor. Tagahra put the clothes on the bed, next to the raskarim, and Galbreth re-cast his silence spell.

“So Eskalyn left here dressed as a priest,” Tagahra said.

“Assuming that’s what our man here is,” Galbreth replied.

“Why leave the raskarim, though?”

“He didn’t need it?”

“It’s part of the uniform,” said Tagahra.

“Maybe he knew it would harm him.”

Tagahra grabbed the raskarim and, before Galbreth could react, pressed it to the back of the wizard’s hand.

Galbreth breathed in sharply. His light flickered, but stayed active. Tagahra lifted the

raskarim, revealing nothing worse than a flush from the metal's cold touch. Galbreth scowled at him.

"Why'd you do that, Sir?"

"A raskarim doesn't do anything unless a priest is holding it and casts a spell," Tagahra said.

"You could've just told me."

"I can see you still have a lot to learn about priests. Sometimes it's quicker to demonstrate than to lecture."

Galbreth rubbed the back of his hand. "So why didn't Eskalyn take it, if it was safe for him to do so?"

"He would've had to lift it off the priest's neck to remove all the man's clothing. They tend to be worn under the outer layer."

"And he was in too much of a hurry to put it on himself," said Galbreth. "But no — it was in the priest's hand. If Eskalyn didn't have time to put it on himself, he didn't have time to put it anywhere else."

"The priest could've picked it up," said Tagahra. "Wanting the comfort of something familiar and sacred in his dying moments."

Galbreth gawked at him. "He-he'd had all the magic drained out of him. He couldn't have done anything."

"Could he have picked it up while Eskalyn was draining him?"

"Possibly. I don't see how Eskalyn wouldn't have noticed it, though."

"He would've assumed the priest was trying to cast a spell?" said Tagahra.

Galbreth nodded.

"Speaking of spells, isn't there one you use to detect the condition of the bones and major organs?"

Galbreth regarded the body like a child's accident he'd been told to clean up. "I don't think that's necessary, Sir. It's obvious how he died."

"The priests said the same about Shendar's victims."

Galbreth didn't move.

"Sergeant, if you want to make something of yourself in the Watch, you're going to have to overcome this fear of dead bodies you seem to have. This is much milder than some of the ones Adramal saw."

Galbreth stared at him, and for a moment, Tagahra thought he might refuse the order. Then he knelt by the body and put his hands on the priest's chest, over the symbol. Several moments passed, and the silence spell stopped. From the distance came the sounds of several people walking.

Galbreth's hands inched across the priest's chest and stomach. After a minute or so, he stood up. "The bones and organs are in the sort of condition I'd expect for someone of his age. The colour of the symbol looks like dried blood, but it's something else — I can't tell what. It's under the skin, and the skin's been cut and then healed naturally."

"A tattoo," said Tagahra.

"I don't understand, Sir."

"Some Zerimuni tribes mark their bodies like that. Don't ask me why, but that's what they call it. How can you be sure the cuts healed naturally instead of magically?"

"Magical healing often leaves no scars, Sir. Even when it does, they look different from natural ones."

"And I can't imagine a priest allowing a wizard to heal him," said Tagahra. "Do you

think there's anything else we can learn from the body?"

Galbreth started to shake his head, then replied, "No, Sir."

"Then let's find the Head Gaoler and —" He stopped as the Head Gaoler rounded the corner, three people following him. These three were dressed as priests of Mathran — under the circumstances, Tagahra wasn't ready to assume they *were* priests.

"Have you finished, Captain?" the Head Gaoler asked. "These fellows have come to remove the body."

For a moment, Tagahra considered stalling. If the newcomers weren't real priests, they might make a mistake that would reveal themselves. But the notion that they'd disguise themselves as priests to recover the body of a comrade who'd broken into the gaol and then died there was too absurd to be believable. He and Galbreth moved to the corridor to allow the priests to enter the cell. All three were quite high-ranking, judging from the symbols on their robes. The Temple wouldn't send people who were this important for the funeral of an ordinary man.

One of the lower-ranking priests retrieved the dead man's raskarim and touched it with his. He nodded to the higher-ranking priest, who took a deep, shuddering breath, as though trying to hold back tears, and drew his own raskarim from his robes. As he crouched by the body, Tagahra got a proper look at his face.

"I know you," Tagahra said.

"I rather doubt that," said the priest.

"One of my men arrested you in the Western Market last summer for pickpocketing."

The priest might have shrugged, though it was hard to be sure with all the folds of his clothing.

"Captain, have you taken leave of your senses?" the Head Gaoler asked.

"Guards!" Tagahra shouted.

The priest showed no response to the accusation, nor to the sound of heavy footsteps hurrying down the stairs. He simply uttered a brief blessing, commending the deceased's spirit to Mathran's protection. As half-a-dozen guards clattered into position to surround the cell, he stood, hands raised in surrender, a wry grin on his face.

"These men dressed as priests are impostors," Tagahra said, showing his Captain's badge to the guards to confirm his authority to give orders here. "Restrain them."

The guards hesitated, perhaps not believing anyone would dare impersonate a priest.

"I suppose you could say I am an impostor of sorts," the priest said. "Though my brothers are the genuine article. But if your memory is as reliable as it appears to be, Captain, you should remember why I still have all my fingers."

There *had* been something unusual about that case... Tagahra had been ordered to release the pickpocket. "You're an informer for the External Inquisition."

The priest gave a little mocking bow. "I'm going to have to resign from that job, though not because my face has become too familiar."

"Why are you dressed as a priest," said Tagahra, "and what are you doing here?"

"I'm dressed as a priest because I am a priest. My name is Mandel, and I'm the Head of the Internal Inquisition of the Church of Mathran in Kyer Altamar."

If this Mandel was an impostor, he was the most brazen one Tagahra had ever met. "I thought the Internal Inquisition didn't exist."

"For reasons I trust are obvious, we try not to draw attention to ourselves."

"Then do you know who our victim is?" said Tagahra.

For a moment, Mandel's composure slipped. He lowered his head and put a hand to his

face. Looking again at Tagahra, he said, “His name is Marik, beloved of Mathran. He is — was — the Head of the External Inquisition, and that means all of us here are in a deeper pile of shit than you can imagine.”

Chapter 7

When Tagahra returned to the Watch Building, he found a slate on his desk from Yebran, Commander of the Watch, ordering him to report to room four of the inn known as *Enlorgar’s Rest*, an hour after sunset. He recalled that was where Sethraim and the other wizards from Thuren were staying.

Tagahra finished work at sunset, then went home and asked his maid Kaldina for a light supper instead of the usual full dinner. He explained he was going out again later and wasn’t sure when he’d be back. She raised an eyebrow but said nothing. While she cooked, he changed from his uniform to civilian clothes. Yebran hadn’t mentioned disguises, but if this meeting couldn’t be held in the Watch Building, it seemed sensible to take at least basic precautions against being recognised.

Once he’d eaten, Tagahra left for *Enlorgar’s Rest*. The clear sky allowed the moons to give plenty of light, but made the streets cold enough to tempt him to return home. At least there was no wind at the moment. The inn was quite near, but he took a roundabout route to it.

Lanterns burned in most of the inn’s upstairs windows. Tagahra thought he recognised a wizard’s light coming from one room, which wasn’t going to help Sethraim and his colleagues be inconspicuous.

The barroom was almost empty, even allowing for the early hour. Tagahra considered buying himself a pint of ale, but thought he’d better not give the patrons any more time to observe him than they’d already had. He climbed the stairs next to the bar and knocked on the door of room four.

“Who is it?” said a man inside.

“Captain Tagahra.”

The door opened, revealing Yebran, who was still in uniform. So much for discretion. The place was typical of rooms in the city’s inns, though larger than most — both of the corners furthest from the door had a bed big enough for two or three.

Councillors Sethraim and Teshan sat by a brazier in the middle of the room. Two vacant chairs waited for Yebran and Tagahra.

When everybody was seated, Sethraim handed out cups and passed around a bottle of wine. “The water is safe to drink, but I assume our guests would rather not have to take my word for it.”

As Tagahra took the first sip, something changed in the room. After a heartbeat, he worked out someone had cast a silence spell.

Yebran swept his gaze over those present. “Not a word of what I’m about to tell you is to be repeated outside these walls.”

Sethraim cleared his throat. “I was about to say the same thing, but perhaps you’d better go first, Commander.”

Yebran frowned at him, then looked at Tagahra. “The first thing I need to tell you is that you’re to drop the investigation into Marik’s death.”

He’d feared Yebran would say something along those lines. “I take it that’s not because

the murderer has already been caught, Sir.”

Yebran sighed and shook his head. “Mandel came to see me. The Internal Inquisition is taking over the case.”

“They can’t do that,” said Tagahra.

“I’m afraid they can, Captain,” Yebran said. “They’re responsible for matters of discipline within the Church, as well as ‘moral and doctrinal rectitude,’ as he put it. Those terms are defined quite broadly.”

“I don’t see how that gives them the right to look for a killer, Sir,” said Tagahra, “unless they believe one of their own is the culprit.”

Yebran gave him a knowing nod. “Or they want to make sure *we* don’t find the killer, because that would cause more problems than his remaining at large.”

“I notice he didn’t tell you to stop looking for Eskalyn, Sir,” said Tagahra.

“No, he didn’t.”

“He doesn’t strike me as the sort of man to overlook a detail like that, which makes me wonder if he knows Eskalyn isn’t our man.”

“Or thinks we won’t find him,” said Yebran.

“Because he knows he’s already dead?”

“That’s the most obvious possibility. But he’s an escaped prisoner, which means we need to recapture him. And as far as we know, he was the last person to see Marik alive. As he’s a wizard, I imagine the Councillors here would be interested to hear what he might have to say about how Marik died.”

Sethraim and Teshan nodded.

Yebran sighed again. “The other thing I have to tell you is a much longer story, but it starts with Sergeant Adramal. I’m afraid, Captain, that I haven’t been entirely honest with you about her reasons for leaving the city.”

Chapter 8

Tagahra sat at a table in the refectory of the Watch Building, eating his lunch without tasting it. Captain Polkarn sat next to him, grumbling about his wife. Every time Tagahra thought he should perhaps get married, a few minutes’ listening to Polkarn disabused him of the notion. Kaldina provided most of the advantages of a wife and, as far as he could see, none of the disadvantages.

His thoughts kept returning to what Yebran had told him yesterday evening. On the night of Shendar’s death, she and Adramal had not stayed near the river, as Adramal had claimed, but had instead gone into the Marchwood to a vast ruined tower, where monsters called Kreztalin, made of living stone, plotted to resurrect Zorian, an evil God from ancient legend. These Kreztalin had killed Shendar for interfering with their plans, and Adramal had barely escaped with her life. She hadn’t fled Kyer Altamar because of her subsequent poisoning — which Tagahra had always thought an over-reaction to the apparent danger — but for fear that the Kreztalin would come after her.

The symbol tattooed on Marik’s chest was Zorian’s. According to Sethraim, that meant Marik had been secretly serving Zorian for years, and the Kreztalin’s plans to resurrect Him were much nearer completion than anyone had suspected. The wizards camped in the Marchwood were keeping watch on the tower to try to give some warning if the Kreztalin moved against the city. Sethraim had tried to put a brave face on matters, but it was clear he

didn't think the city stood much of a chance if they attacked.

Tagahra didn't know what was worse — that a member of the Watch he'd picked had lied to him, or that Yebran had known about those lies and hadn't told him at the time. He wasn't sure he believed in the existence of dead Gods, or stone monsters that could turn a person to dust in a heartbeat, but he could believe that other people believed in them, and were willing to commit atrocities in their names.

Polkarn's lips were still moving, so Tagahra shaped his features into a sympathetic expression and nodded a couple of times. He ate another mouthful of his pie. He'd sent a patrol out looking for Eskalyn, with instructions to inform Sethraim if they found him. Though if Eskalyn had been able to kill Marik, one of the most powerful priests in the city, without any sign of a struggle, he wouldn't have bet on the wizards' chances of being able to apprehend him.

What had Marik been doing visiting Eskalyn at that time of night, anyway? Why had he been visiting him at all? None of the gaolers or other prisoners had seen or heard anything — or not that they admitted, anyway. Eskalyn could have escaped at any time. So why had he waited until Marik arrived?

If Marik had been — the words felt odd in Tagahra's mind — beloved of Zorian, had Eskalyn killed him in self-defence? Then why drain the body of magic? Had he been trying to rid it of evil taint? As Tagahra understood it, magic was neither good nor evil. Those qualities lay in the minds of men. Had he been trying to hide something, perhaps? A wizard could deduce all sorts of things from the patterns in the magic that lingered in a corpse. Sergeant Elishar still liked to unnerve new recruits with tales of the Belgrin Poisoner, who burned his victims' bodies to make it less obvious that he'd poisoned them first.

Tagahra finished his pie and reached for his mug, realising when he picked it up that he'd already emptied it. He pushed his plate away, then noticed Watchman Perinar approaching, clutching a satchel as though unsure whether regulations permitted him to carry it.

"Captain Tagahra, Sir? Might I have a word?"

"Go ahead."

Perinar glanced at Polkarn. "Um, in private, Sir."

Tagahra stood, saying to Polkarn, "Would you excuse us, please?"

"Oh." Polkarn looked up, and Tagahra wondered whether he'd even noticed Perinar's arrival. "Good day, Captain."

As they climbed the stairs to the upper floor, Tagahra said, "You're supposed to salute when you approach a superior."

"Sorry, Sir," Perinar replied, hastily performing the gesture.

"It's a bit late now, isn't it? And you need to practice — a sloppy salute is worse than no salute." They reached his office and went in. Tagahra locked the door. "But you didn't come here to rehearse parade discipline. What was it you wanted? You can cast a silence spell if you like."

"I was never much good at that one, Sir," Perinar replied. "I need to concentrate so much on the spell that I can't pay attention to what people are saying."

"Oh. We'll just have to keep our voices down, then."

"It's about the disappearances around the Inland Docks, Sir. I think they mightn't have been the first." He took a few slates from his satchel and passed them to Tagahra.

They were copies of Watchmen's reports in Perinar's handwriting. Tagahra glanced at the tops of each and started to say, "There's no patrol code," before realising why that was. "These are from outside the city."

“A village called Netharn-Kerak, Sir, about thirty miles upriver,” said Perinar.

“I’ve heard of it. I wasn’t aware they had a Watch.”

“They don’t, as such. They have a Constable who comes in from Upper Harseth when they need him.”

Tagahra read the reports. It didn’t take long; he would’ve docked the pay of any man under his command who submitted something so scanty. Back in the spring, several itinerant labourers had disappeared from the farms where they’d been working. These people moved around a lot, but usually gave the farmer some notice, and usually didn’t travel more than a few miles at a time. Nobody would’ve thought it remarkable, except that eight labourers had disappeared in just over a fortnight.

“Do we know where these farms are?” Tagahra asked.

Perinar handed him another slate, on which he’d sketched a map of that part of the country. He’d marked each farm where someone had disappeared and noted the date next to each mark. Some dates were approximate, as some labourers had slept in barns or outbuildings, where the farmers might not see them every day.

“No obvious pattern,” Tagahra said. He looked at the reports again. “Ah... maybe I won’t dock his pay after all.”

“I don’t understand, Sir.”

Tagahra frowned, then realised he’d spoken aloud. “Thank you for bringing this to my attention, Watchman. See if you can find Sergeant Galbreth, and ask him to report to me.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Dismissed.”

When Perinar had left, Tagahra re-read the reports of the last two disappearances. They’d happened near Upper Harseth, and so the Constable had investigated soon after the labourers went missing. The farms were close together, near the river. A few days earlier, it had rained heavily, and the ground was still muddy in places.

At both farms, the constable had spotted some odd marks in the mud near the buildings where the labourers lived. Those at the first farm were square, about six inches on a side, and spaced like the footprints of a very tall, heavy man. They stopped after fifty yards or so when they reached a cobbled path. The marks at the second farm continued all the way to the river. They started as rectangles, about twelve inches by three, and gradually got shorter and wider, until they were six inches square. They stopped abruptly at the river bank, with no indication of where whoever or whatever had made them had gone next.

Sethraim had said the Kreztalin were man-shaped, but taller and thinner, built out of straight lines and flat surfaces. They could alter the shapes of parts of their bodies. So unless Sethraim knew about these reports and for some unfathomable reason had made up a monster to fit the traces left by someone playing a complicated joke, the Kreztalin were real.

Chapter 9

The ship took nearly a day and a half to sail up the River Aglos from the coast to Kyer Altamar. On the north bank stood the Marchwood, dark and silent. Somewhere among its tall pines was a Temple of Zorian, ruined but occupied by Kreztalin. And if Father’s and Adramal’s suspicions were right, the God Himself might well be there now.

On the south bank lay the region of Centador known as Sonharth, a land of plains and rolling hills, now covered by snow. The last time Adramal had passed this way had been at

night, and so she was surprised how few people lived here — it was rare to have more than one farmhouse in sight at the same time. And yet she often glimpsed smudges of smoke from settlements beyond the horizon. It didn't seem likely that the land a few miles from the river was more fertile than that next to it. Perhaps the locals still knew that danger lurked in the Marchwood, though she doubted they remembered the specifics.

When Kyturil came into view, Adramal needed a couple of minutes to recognise the old castle, half-buried under deep snowdrifts. The sun and Angaris, the near moon, lay on opposite sides of the sky, and Kyturil, caught between their lights, glittered like the crystals in the dathi-Kh'amin's caves.

That thought prompted memories of Nevgalyn — his quiet strength, how he'd helped her face her fears, the way he always seemed to know the right thing to do. The vision of making love with him interrupted those thoughts. She still had no idea what knowledge the vision really contained, nor any clue as to how to unlock it. After the curious result with the light spell, she'd tried every other spell she knew — or every spell it was safe to cast on board a ship — to no avail.

New snow was falling when the ship finally docked at the overseas wharves in Kyer Altamar. Father and Adramal disembarked as soon as the crew would permit it, and headed for the Watch Building. Within a dozen yards of leaving the ship, Adramal stopped being able to feel her feet. Cold winds sliced at them as they threaded their way through the city's twisting streets. Adramal shuddered as their route took them past the Temple of Groll and the Salmarian Embassy. But really, what could the Salmarians or their priests do to her? She had far deadlier enemies to worry about now.

To avoid being seen, they went into the Watch Building through the stables at the rear. Most of the horses had blankets strapped over them. As Father and Adramal approached the stairs, a Watchman with a lantern came down and stopped abruptly when he saw them. He raised the lantern for a better look.

“Sergeant Adramal!” He gave a crisp salute.

So much for a quiet entrance, Father said in mindspeech.

“Watchman Morakh,” she said, nodding in the way you were supposed to when someone saluted you. “I don't think you need to do that. I'm not sure I still have my commission.”

Morakh frowned, evidently puzzled as to how someone could not know whether she was a member of the Watch. “Everybody's been wondering where you were, Sergeant. The gossip was you were on some secret mission for Yebran.”

Should she let him believe that? “It's a long story. I hope to be able to tell it to you one day. This is my father, the wizard Alesin.”

Morakh bowed to him. “It's a pleasure to meet you, Sir.”

“Is Yebran about?” Father asked.

“That's not something the likes of me would know, Sir.”

“What about Captain Tagahra?” Adramal said.

“He might be around. Do you want to come up and I'll see if I can find him?”

They followed Morakh up the stairs and into the lobby, then to the upper floor and along the corridor to where the Captains' offices were. She'd forgotten how dingy the place was after her stay in Molkolin, where windows and doorways were as big as possible to help keep buildings cool. On the way, at least half-a-dozen people saluted or recognised her. There was no answer when Morakh knocked on Tagahra's door, and the Watchman hurried off in search of the Captain.

If I'd known you were this popular, I'd have sent him a slate, Father said.

After a few minutes, Tagahra approached, a troubled smile on his face. “Adramal! This is a pleasant surprise.” The absence of a rank when he greeted her seemed to confirm her suspicion that she wasn’t in the Watch any more. “I take it this is your father?”

“The wizard Alesin,” Father said. “We were hoping to see Yebran.”

“He’s not in the building,” Tagahra replied. “Can I help?”

“We came because we heard Marik’s dead, and Eskalyn escaped,” Father said.

Tagahra frowned, perhaps thinking they wouldn’t have come all this way only for that. “I was investigating both, but the Church’s Internal Inquisition took over regarding Marik’s death, and I’ve no new leads on Eskalyn.”

“The Internal Inquisition wouldn’t be involved unless they thought a priest killed him,” Father said, “or a priest was covering up for the killer.”

Adramal had never heard of the Internal Inquisition, though she supposed if there was an External Inquisition — which Marik had been in charge of — there had to be an internal one.

“The former doesn’t seem likely,” Tagahra said, “but the latter might be plausible.” He unlocked his office door. “Would you like to come in while we wait for Yebran? I haven’t had much to do these last few days. The snow seems to be keeping all the criminals at home.”

Tagahra’s office had changed little from when Adramal had last been here. The map of the city didn’t have quite so many pins in it as she remembered. A portable brazier stood in one corner, embers giving out a dull glow. He stirred the fire, producing a welcome wave of heat. He gestured for her to sit in the visitor’s chair and moved his own around to that side of the desk for Father. He hitched up one leg and sat on the edge of his desk.

“The message about Marik and Eskalyn came from Sethraim, head of the council at Thuren,” Father said.

Tagahra nodded. “He arrived in the city three fortnights ago, with two dozen other wizards.”

“Thuren must be practically empty, if the wizards who arrived in the autumn are still here,” Father said.

“They are. Galbreth’s working for the Watch now, in a similar capacity to Adramal.”

So she’d definitely lost her commission. But what did she expect? She’d left Kyer Altamar with no notice and no idea of when she might return — or even if she *could* return. Did she want to be a Sergeant again? Would the Watch take her if she did?

“A good choice,” Father said. “He finished his apprenticeship this year, and he’s a strong wizard — diligent and careful.”

Tagahra nodded. “A lot of the wizards are camped in the Marchwood, on the lookout for Kreztalin.”

“Kreztalin?” Adramal put a hand to her mouth. Her scar twinged, or was that just her imagination? “How do you know...”

Tagahra scowled. “Yebran told me what you two told him, the night you left the city.”

Adramal shrank in her chair, wanting a hole to appear under her. “I’m sorry I lied to you, Captain. I had my reasons.”

He shook his head. “Yebran explained that. If I’d found out the truth in the summer, I’d have demanded he expel you from the Watch, and probably put you on trial for dereliction of duty. But now...” He shrugged. “Though I do wish you could’ve told me what really happened to Shendar. We wasted a lot of Watchmen’s time looking for her body along the river banks.”

“If I’d told you that, I would’ve had to tell you the rest of it. Nobody would’ve believed I

killed her myself.”

“I suppose not.” Tagahra sighed. “Before this business with Marik and Eskalyn, I was looking into a series of unexplained disappearances. Evidence at some of the scenes pointed to the Kreztalín having taken them.”

“That might mean an attack by Zorian is imminent,” Father said.

“That’s odd,” said Tagahra, “because there haven’t been any disappearances for a fortnight and a half. They happen in spates of six or a dozen at a time.”

Lelsarin ambled into Adramal’s thoughts, in the too-casual manner that indicated she’d been listening to the whole conversation. *Ask him when the first snow fell.*

Adramal did as Lelsarin asked, trying to make it sound off-hand.

Tagahra stroked his moustache. “Two fortnights ago. Tergrith’s Day. Of course — their feet are a different shape from ours. They can change them a bit, but they’re still boxy.” He frowned. “Though they could just wear boots.”

From what I recall, said Lelsarin, *they’re not fond of the cold.*

Father said, “So are they kidnapping people to stir up trouble, or do they want the people for something?”

Tagahra shrugged. “I thought you were the experts on stone men and dead Gods.” He paused. “They wouldn’t be planning on sacrificing the people to Zorian, would they? The way His servants did in the legend?”

“Doubtful,” said Father. “Have you noticed anything the victims have in common?”

“They were mainly travelling labourers, working on farms and on the city’s inland docks.”

“People who wouldn’t be missed, in other words,” said Father.

“Exactly.”

“Which is an odd choice if you want to stir up trouble.”

“Then what else could they be but sacrifices?” Adramal asked. “Meant to bring Zorian back from the dead?”

“How would that work?” said Father.

“I don’t know,” Adramal replied. “Maybe they can drain the magic out of the victim’s body and transfer it to Zorian’s.”

Tagahra went pale. “Marik’s body had been drained of magic.”

“And there would’ve been a lot of magic in someone like him,” said Father.

“Then why leave the body where it was going to be found, if all the others were taken away?” said Adramal. “I assume you haven’t found any other bodies.”

“No,” said Tagahra. “Marik died after all the labourers had disappeared. Maybe he was some kind of crowning achievement — a final piece of the puzzle.”

“This was two fortnights ago, though,” said Father.

Tagahra nodded.

“Why isn’t Zorian here already, then?”

“Who knows? How long does it take to bring a God back from the dead, anyway?” He gazed at the ceiling. “It wasn’t that long ago that I would’ve found the idea of a God dying ridiculous, if not heretical.”

There was a knock at the door. Tagahra eased off the desk to answer it.

“Sorry to bother you, Sir,” came a young man’s voice. “I heard Adramal was here.”

Adramal’s stomach dropped at the sound. *Perinar?* She swung round on the chair and saw a Watchman standing in the doorway, holding a tray of food and drink. She hadn’t expected the uniform, and for a moment thought she was wrong. But there was no mistaking

that face.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

Chapter 10

Perinar gave that same awkward smile that had melted Adramal’s heart so many times at Kyturil. “I was going to ask you the same question, but seeing as you got in first —”

Tagahra cut him off with, “Watchman, this is neither the time nor the place for idle chit-chat. I presume those are the refreshments I ordered for my guests?”

“Um, yes Sir. Sorry Sir.” Perinar entered, walking as though he feared a floorboard might break under his weight. He put his tray in a space that Tagahra cleared on his desk. It held cups, plates, several slices of buttered bread and a wedge of cheese. He saluted Tagahra, and Adramal took a few moments to look him over.

His hair had been cut to the regulation length — above the ears at the sides and back, and half an inch above the eyebrows. Nobody had suggested she cut her hair when she was in the Watch — apparently the rule specifically mentioned men, saying nothing about women. Judging from the nicks on his cheeks, he’d shaved at some point in the past few days, and looked as though he might even be able to grow a proper moustache within the next year. He stood straight and firm — at Kyturil, he’d usually been at least a little hunched in on himself, as though expecting to be punched or kicked at any moment. The uniform was new. It was odd to see him in clothes that actually fitted. His chest and shoulders had filled out in the half a year since she’d last seen him, but he still seemed underfed. His face pointed straight ahead, towards the map of the city, but his eyes kept flicking in her direction, longing plain in them. She tried not to feel guilty at her pride over the fact that he was only a Watchman, whereas she’d started as a Sergeant.

“Dismissed,” said Tagahra, after holding him there much longer than was customary.

Now Perinar looked at her. “I finish work at tenth hour —”

“I said, dismissed,” Tagahra growled.

Perinar started for the door. Adramal held up a hand. “I owe him this much,” she told Tagahra. *Who are you trying to fool?* she asked herself. *You don’t owe him anything.* But she still had some unanswered questions. “When’s your next day off?”

He gave her a blank look, as if the concept meant nothing. “Tomorrow. All Gods.”

She tried not to shudder. That wasn’t what the day had originally been called. “Then I’ll meet you in Princess Park. Third hour. The south entrance.” That was where they’d met the day they came to Kyer Altamar — the day she’d found out Degoran had been murdered.

He gave her a grin. “Yes, of course.” He saluted Tagahra and marched out of the office, much more confidently than he’d come in.

They each took a plate and a couple of slices of bread. Tagahra distributed the cheese.

“I thought you were finished with Perinar,” Father said, once the young man’s footsteps had faded.

“I am,” Adramal replied.

“Then why agree to meet him?”

“Because evidently he thinks we’re not finished.”

“He was the one who broke it off, wasn’t he?” said Father.

“Yes.”

Father turned to Tagahra. “So what’s changed?”

The Captain gave a knowing smile. “Affairs of the heart are no concern of mine, unless there’s lawbreaking involved.”

“How did he come to be working for the Watch, anyway?” Adramal asked.

“He arrived in the autumn, asking after you. When we told him you’d gone, he applied to join us. Yebran said we could do with another wizard to help Galbreth, so we accepted him.”

Adramal allowed herself a small degree of satisfaction that the Watch needed two wizards to replace her, even though she hadn’t finished her apprenticeship. She nibbled on her piece of cheese, finding it mild with hints of fruit. It was typical of Sonharth, but seemed bland after all the pungent spicy food she’d eaten in Molkolin. The cup held water, mixed with just enough beer to make it safe. When she was last in Kyer Altamar, she’d have been afraid to touch it, for fear it would interfere with her ability to do magic. Now, after all the wine she’d drunk in Molkolin, she felt practically immune to the stuff.

“And how is Perinar getting on as a Watchman?” Father asked.

Tagahra blew out a long breath. “He’s a weakling and a coward, and his discipline’s sloppy — that was the best salute I’ve seen him do all fortnight. He’s not much use as a wizard — he can only manage to make light two attempts out of three. That’s the simplest spell, isn’t it?”

“Opinions differ,” Father replied, “but yes, it’s quite basic. He was in his third year at Kyturil, wasn’t he? I’d expect anyone who’d done three years at Thuren to be able to make light without any difficulty.”

“I don’t know if it’s fair to blame him for that,” Adramal said. “Kyturil had apprentices in the top class for magic who would’ve struggled.” She bit into the bread, grateful for the taste of butter after so long without it.

“But to make up for all that,” said Tagahra, “he has an astonishing memory for names, dates, places — almost anything that can be written down — and he can spot connections between them that no one else would see in a year of looking.”

Adramal nodded. She’d formed a similar opinion of his abilities at Kyturil. “He didn’t come here because he wanted to help you solve crimes, though, did he?”

“I doubt it, but I suppose that’s one of the things you’ll find out tomorrow.” He took a big gulp of water. “Anyway, where were we?”

“You were telling us about Marik and Eskalyn,” said Father.

Tagahra related the rest of what he and Galbreth had discovered and deduced about the dead priest and the missing wizard.

“So there’s been no sign of Eskalyn?” Father said once Tagahra had finished.

“His known associates in the city say they haven’t seen him or heard from him,” Tagahra replied. “His family is mainly in Salthes. I sent enquiries, but haven’t had any replies yet.”

“And you’re certain that Zorian’s symbol on Marik’s body was old — not carved at the time of death?”

“That’s what Galbreth said. So if it wasn’t carved by the killer to mark him as a sacrifice, what was it doing there?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea,” said Father.

Adramal thought Tagahra would surely see through that lie, but he said, “Galbreth said the pigment that formed the symbol was under Marik’s skin, so it must’ve been done with his knowledge. Even if he didn’t know what the symbol meant, he must’ve known it wasn’t one that the Church of Mathran uses.”

“What colour was it?” Adramal asked.

“Black,” said Tagahra, “and the edges were quite sharp. I take that as meaning it was

done in the last year or two. Yebran told me some Zerimuni tribes carve their skin like that, and the designs go brown and blurry with age.”

I'll bet your boots it was done with powdered obsidian, said Lelsarin.

So it would stay black indefinitely? Adramal asked.

Yes.

Adramal wondered how to slip this into the conversation, and then thought perhaps Tagahra didn't need to hear it just yet.

“The only reasons I know of to bear a God's symbol,” said Tagahra, “are to let people know you worship that God, and if you're a priest, to focus the power that worship gives you.”

Father nodded.

“If the symbol is under your clothes — under your skin, even — hardly anyone will know of your worship, which suggests that the symbol was a focus for power.”

“Possibly,” said Father.

“So how did Marik manage to worship Zorian and use His spells without his brethren finding out?”

“How do we know they didn't?” said Father. “The Church are a secretive lot at the best of times. A scandal like this could make them draw closer together.”

Tagahra nodded. “For that matter, how did Marik do it without Mathran finding out? A priest can't serve more than one God.”

“That's what the priests tell us,” Father replied. “I'm not sure Mathran would notice.”

Tagahra set his cup down on his desk. “Not notice that one of His most senior priests had betrayed Him?”

Father held up his hands. “I'm just speculating.”

There was another knock at the door. Tagahra answered it and accepted a slate from a Watchman. He read it, nodded, and handed it back.

“Yebran is out of town and isn't expected to return until tomorrow. Had you made any arrangements for lodgings?”

Father shook his head.

“Sethraim and the wizards who came with him are staying at *Enlorgar's Rest*,” said Tagahra.

“I know where that is,” Adramal said. “Watchmen often drink there after they've finished work.”

“Tell the landlord I sent you and he might give you a cheap rate,” said Tagahra.

Enlorgar's Rest was full of the wizards who'd come from Thuren, but the landlord shuffled them around to free up a room for Father and Adramal. They unpacked, and after a simple supper, met with Sethraim, the leader of the Council at Thuren. He'd arrived in Kyer Altamar while Father and Adramal had been out of the country. He and Father brought one another up to date on what had happened while they'd been apart. Adramal described the vision Shomnakh Enkhyar had given her, and their suspicion that the excessive detail in it concealed some knowledge that would be vital in the fight against Zorian.

“Your reasoning seems sound, Apprentice,” Sethraim said, “though until today, I would've considered the idea of an intelligent well ridiculous. I'm afraid I don't know anything about breaking secret codes. I'd be surprised if any of the other wizards do, but I'll ask them.”

“Thank you, Councillor,” said Father.

They went to their room and started to undress. Adramal shivered as she removed her

boots — the room had a brazier, but it hadn't been lit for long. She took a deep breath. There was no point in putting this off any longer.

“Father?”

He turned to face her.

“I've something to tell you.” Her fingers knotted. In spite of the chill, sweat trickled down her back. “I-I think I might be pregnant.”

For a long moment, he didn't reply. Her eyes prickled.

Then he said, “Oh.”

“Is that all you can say?” Damn it, she wasn't going to cry.

He came over and embraced her. Without thinking, she put her arms around him. He rubbed her back and rocked her gently as she gave in to her tears.

After a while, he eased away from her, keeping his hands on her upper arms. Her scar from the Temple of Zorian stung briefly, but she ignored it. Father's cheeks were dry, but his eyes glistened.

“I'd hoped,” Father said, then coughed. “I'd hoped that hearing those words from you would be a happy occasion. Lakhshram, I assume?”

She nodded, trying not to bristle at the implication that she might have had sex with someone besides him in Molkolin.

Father sighed. “Under other circumstances, I'd get on the next ship going south and flay him, then demand he support you.”

“Not marry me?”

Father's grip tightened. “I know you think I don't care about you, but I wouldn't want that ferret anywhere near you.”

“You said ‘under other circumstances,’” Adramal said.

“Well, I don't want to sound callous, but we do have much more important things to worry about. And if things go as I expect, one way or another this will all be over before you're too far gone to do anything useful.”

She scowled at the presumption that was all she was good for. She sat on the room's only chair. Father sat on his bed.

“How long have you known?” he asked.

“For sure? Since Shadrakh's Day, when — when my period didn't happen.” Had she really just said that to her father? She wanted to curl up into a ball. He showed no reaction apart from the barest of nods.

“I'd suspected since Pethandril's Day,” she added.

He paused, evidently counting back. “That was when the well gave you the memories. It can't have been more than a few days after you-you lay with him.”

There hadn't been much lying down involved, at least not on her part. “In the second scene from Shomnakh Enkhyar, after my son is born, my daughter comes in, and her skin is much darker than mine or Nevgalyn's.”

Father grimaced. “I can see why you left out that detail until now. But how could it have known? The best healers at Thuren can't tell for at least two fortnights.”

Adramal shrugged. “It knows a lot of things that are a mystery to us.”

“I assume you waited until now to tell me so that I couldn't turn the ship around to punish him.”

“Yes.”

He shook his head. “Don't think I'm not tempted. And if we survive the next few fortnights, I might well yield to that temptation. But at the moment, my concerns are keeping

you and the city safe.”

“And how do we do that when we’re up against a God?”