The Sleeping God
Violette Malan
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PARNO LIONSMANE STEPPED OFF the end of the ship’s gang-plank with deliberation. He and his Partner, Dhulyn Wolfshead, had only been aboard the Catseye for the four-day trip from the Isle of Cabrea, but it was enough for muscles to begin to adapt, and it wouldn’t do for people to see a Mercenary Brother uncertain on his feet. Parno headed down the pier to where Dhulyn stood with the horses, his big gray gelding Warhammer and her own spotted mare Bloodbone, rubbing their faces and caressing their ears while they became accustomed once again to the feel of land underneath their hooves.

The horses showed every sign of putting their sea voyage behind them. As Parno walked up, Bloodbone was snuffling Dhulyn’s shoulder, but both horses were alert, flicking their ears, bobbing their heads, and generally taking an interest in what was going on around them, as battle-trained mounts tended to do.

Dhulyn was doing the same, though in her own peculiar way. Still holding fast to the horses’ bridles, she was watching a group of children play a skipping game farther along the pier, not far from where she stood. Having had no real childhood herself, it had always seemed to Parno natural that Dhulyn showed a great curiosity in the childhoods of others. She smiled as he neared her, her eyes still watching the children’s game.

“I’ll tell her later,” he decided. The news he’d just learned from the Catseye’s captain was disturbing; just how disturbing would have to wait until the comparative privacy of their inn. There was a surprising number of people about in Navra’s harbor, considering most travelers were still waiting out the last of the winter storms.

“It’s the same rhyme,” Dhulyn said as he neared her. “That sweeping rhyme the children were singing in the street in Destila.”

“You sure? Those kids were playing a game with blindfolds.”

“Nevertheless, it’s the same rhyme, same cadence, same consonance. How do these rhymes and games get transplanted from one place to another?”

Parno shrugged. Dhulyn had spent a year in a Scholars’ Library before taking her final vows to the Mercenary Brotherhood, and she’d never lost the habit of making these scholarly observations. “Adults like you see them, I would suppose, and carry them home for their children, like new toys.”

“It would be interesting to trace the songs and the games back, try to find the point of origin from which they spread.”

“You think such a point could be found?” Parno said, smiling. His years with Dhulyn had taught him that many countries of the eastern continent told folktales and stories of amazing similarity.

“Unless it goes back to the time of the Caids, then it will appear to have sprung up everywhere at once.” Dhulyn shrugged one shoulder. “Ah well, a dissertation subject for some Scholar, no doubt. And, meanwhile, here we are back in the land of the Sleeping God.”

“The Sleeping God’s worshiped everywhere,” Parno said, taking Warhammer’s rein from her.

“But here, on the Letanian Peninsula, he is the first god, is he not?”

“The Brotherhood recognizes all gods,” he reminded her.

“And all gods recognize the Brotherhood.” She turned fully to look at him. “I told the first mate where to send our packs. Has the place changed very much? Do you remember the way to the inn you’ve been telling me about?”

“What do you think,” he said, grinning as he took a firm grip on Warhammer’s bridle.

“I think you got lost in our cabin last night.”

Parno swung, Dhulyn ducked, and the children looked over from their game, excitement plain in their faces—as was the disappointment when no fight broke out. Dhulyn, grinning for the benefit of the children, tilted her chin toward the end of the pier.

They led the horses away from the Catseye, dodging seamen and dock workers loading and unloading from the ships and fishing boats tied up along the pier. Warhammer and Bloodbone were spoiling for exercise, but the streets close to the docks proved to be so uneven that Dhulyn suggested they continue afoot. Parno was just leading the way down a narrow lane when his Partner froze.

“Did you hear that?” she said, her rough voice unusually loud in the cold air.

“The market?” Parno said dryly, bracing his feet as Warhammer, not as well trained as Dhulyn’s Bloodbone, shied slightly, pulling him forward.
Dhulyn held up one finger to silence him and listened again, eyes narrowed, head on an angle. Parno shrugged, wishing he’d worn his heavier cloak, and waited for Dhulyn to agree with him. The main market, if he remembered correctly, was off to the east, closer to the saltworks, but the barrows and stalls of the fish market, the one that served the docks and the ships, could be seen off to the other side of the pier they’d just left. Even this late in the afternoon, the buzz of the buyers and sellers, the calls of the merchants hawking their wares, even the sound of an optimistic flute, were still clear in the crisp air. But if Dhulyn thought she’d heard something else . . .

“There!” Dhulyn’s head jerked up and she swung herself into the saddle, urging Bloodbone with her knees into an opening between two houses, turning away from the docks. Parno was mounted and only half a length behind his Partner before Bloodbone’s tail disappeared from view.

The alleys between the houses and buildings in this quarter of Navra were none too clean, and the streets were not much better, Parno found as he followed Dhulyn out into a wider avenue. The freezing and thawing of early spring had heaved the cobbles and paving stones and left them slick underfoot. Even the dirt lanes were more than half slippery mud. Not the best conditions to be racing your horses, but Parno knew better than to argue with his Partner. He ducked an overhead sign with a swallowed curse. He was willing to wager practically anything he owned that it wouldn’t be her horse that went down as she rode it much too fast around the next tight corner.

And he still had not heard anything out of the ordinary.

The laboring breath and clattering hooves of their horses made enough noise that the few people they encountered had plenty of time to get out of their way. Market day it might be, but away from the market itself and the busy areas around the docks, most townspeople finished their business early in weather like this; the day was turning cold, and the sky promised snow. One tall old man, well-wrapped in a red wool cloak, looked up in surprise as Dhulyn Wolfshead galloped past him and called out angrily, not noticing the tattoos of their Mercenary’s badges, even though both she and Parno were bareheaded from habit.

They turned into a street of better-class houses, a few of them as much as four stories tall with the featureless lower walls that spoke of interior gardens or courtyards, or both. Not so fine as nobles’ houses, to Parno’s experienced eye these looked like the homes of well-to-do merchants. And suddenly Parno smelled smoke, and saw as they rounded yet another corner a three-story house with flames dancing in two upper windows that gave on the street.

Even now, he could not hear the sound of the fire, and he knew that Dhulyn—Outlander or no—could not possibly have heard it either. This burning house must have been some Vision she had Seen.

The usual crowd of people who gather out of nowhere at any sign of trouble were milling around in the irregular square in front of the burning building, but something was wrong—more wrong than just a house on fire. Parno frowned as he urged Warhammer forward. He’d seen many a mob in his time as a Mercenary, and this one wasn’t behaving normally. Those closest to the fire acted as he would expect, some craning for a better view, others pointing and yelling—shock and excitement both apparent in faces and stances. As for those farther away, far too many were standing far too still, hands hanging limp, heads all, as he now realized, at the same angle. And aside from some shoving, and what looked like a fistfight breaking out on the far side of the crowd, no one was doing anything. Not putting out the fire, not bringing water, not even helping to drag out furniture. In fact, two men seemed to be preventing someone from coming out of the house . . . Parno edged forward into the opening Dhulyn had made in the crowd just as a man put his hand on Warhammer’s bridle. Parno bared his teeth as the man looked up. His eyes widened when he saw the red-and-gold tattoo reaching from Parno’s temples to above his ears, and he backed away.

Closer now, Parno could hear the flames as they ate through the house wall, blistering the stucco to the right of the doorway. A woman at the front of the crowd threw a stone at the upper window on the left, screaming something Parno couldn’t make out.

Flames or no, Dhulyn rode Bloodbone right through to the front of the house, swung her leg over the pommel of her saddle, and jumped off, knocking the two men who’d been blocking the doorway sprawling over one another. The darker of the two sprang to his feet, a cudgel ready in his fist. Dhulyn stepped in close to him, knocked his arm away with her left forearm, brought her booted heel down sharply on his instep, and drew her sword from the sheath that hung down her back.

All without taking her eyes from the doorway.

A young girl burst out of the now unguarded door, but was choking too much to actually speak.

“Children upstairs,” Dhulyn called out to him as Parno drew rein beside her, using Warhammer’s size and wickedly rolling eyes to push the crowding people farther back.

“I’ll go,” he said, tossing her his reins. *Demons and perverts,* he thought, not for the first time thankful that he
didn’t See what Dhulyn sometimes Saw. Children. He pulled his feet from the stirrups and, steadying himself with his hands on the pommel, hopped up on the saddle until he was balancing on Warhammer’s back, wishing he was wearing something with more grip than his boots.

“Keep your eyes open.” He didn’t have to tell her to watch the crowd. She’d have noticed before he did that something was amiss.

Out of the corner of her eye Dhulyn Wolfshead watched Parno make the small jump that got his fingers hooked on the windowsill above them. The muscles in his arms bulged as he drew himself up, swung one leg over the sill, and was gone into the smoky darkness within the house.

“My lady.” It was the young girl who had run out of the doorway. “My brothers—”

“I’m not your lady,” Dhulyn said, “and my Brother’s fetching yours.” She glanced at the girl’s soot-marked face. “Where’s your people, then?” She’d known from her Vision the parents weren’t alive inside the burning building, she’d Seen that much, but she hadn’t been sure she and Parno wouldn’t be stuck looking after a passel of orphaned children.

As the girl said something in which only the word “shop” was clear, Dhulyn whirled, her sword knocking aside another stone that came hurtling at them. She turned her head and smiled her wolf’s smile at the thrower, an otherwise respectable-looking woman of middle years. The woman dropped the second rock—taken from her garden by the look of the dirt on it—and stepped back, pressing her lips together but lowering her eyes.

“Will none of you fetch water?” Surely there had to be some well or fountain nearby. Those closest to her shifted their feet, looking down and away from her searching eyes. Some drifted even farther off, one of them bumping into his neighbors in the crowd as if he couldn’t see them.

Dhulyn again smiled her wolf’s smile, and the people nearest her froze.

“I don’t know what you have against this household,” she called out, “but perhaps the neighbors might like to save their homes before they catch alight.”

It was like tossing a snake into a hen coop. Sudden curses and determined scurrying, the quicker slapping the slower into movement. Dhulyn laughed aloud. “Blooded fools.”

“It’s bad luck to help the Marked, Mercenary,” the stone thrower said, sharp nods punctuating her words. “Everyone knows that.”

“Is it so?” Dhulyn looked and, sure enough, there was a sigil next to the door that showed the house belonged to a Finder. She turned back to the woman, still smiling so that the scar on her lip pulled it back from her teeth. “If I find the one who helped them to this fire, they’ll learn what bad luck is.”

Bad enough they were going to Imrion in the first place, she thought, watching to make sure that the people moving through the crowd were bringing water and nothing else, if this was the kind of trouble she and Parno found before they even got there. For herself, she didn’t care, one country was the same as another, and work was work. But Parno had wanted Imrion, reminiscing constantly about his childhood there—far too much for any Mercenary Brother, let alone a Partnered one—until finally she’d given in. Looking down at the Finder girl’s tear-streaked face, Dhulyn hoped she wouldn’t curse the day she’d done so.

And she didn’t like the look of the crowd. She never thought much of town men—even country lordlings like Parno had once been showed more sense—but this bunch was stupider than usual. Why, half a dozen stood toward the back slack-jawed—one was even drooling—as if their wits had left them.

“Dhulyn!”

She looked up. Left-handed, she snatched a small bundle out of the air that turned out to be a little boy, continued the movement to lower him gently into his sister’s waiting arms. Dhulyn looked up again to where Parno stood leaning out of the third-story window, a larger child dangling in his scarred hands. Dhulyn could see the flames close behind Parno’s soot-streaked face. What was he waiting for? She took a breath to call to him, but something on his face stopped her from uttering a sound.

Even as he leaned out to drop the second child to safety, Parno froze, a finger of icy chill tickling up his back. He shivered despite the heat of the furniture burning in the room behind him. Every hair on his body stood up; even the tattoos on his temples seemed to itch. He resisted the urge to look around, feeling that someone was behind him, watching. He knew no one was there—no one could be there.

Only his eyes moving, Parno scanned the crowd. Many watched him, but there was nothing that should give him this feeling of . . . his stomach twisted. Someone, some thing, patting thieves’ fingers through his thoughts, probing his mind and soul . . . leaving darkness and confusion in its wake. Parno shivered, blinking, forced himself to take a breath, and another. Forced his breathing into the pattern of the Turtle Shora. In. Out. Forcing his thoughts—
Movement caught his attention and he saw a man in red robes with a brown cloak on the edge of the crowd, his eyes so green Parno could see them even across the square. The fire cast the man’s shadow over the wall of the house behind him. But it couldn’t be his shadow, it didn’t flicker in the fire glow like everyone else’s. Rather it was as still as a pool of ink, looming over the man in red and brown like a smudge, far too large to have been cast by such a small man.

Too large and too dark.

Parno shivered again, trying to shake off the feeling that somehow it was the shadow that watched him, dissolving his thoughts. He wanted to look away, needed to look away.

“Sir?” the boy had hold of his sword harness and was pulling on it. “Sir, the fire.”

Parno jerked and lowered his eyes to the child’s tear-marked face, dragging in a ragged breath of smoke-tainted air. Though the boy was no great weight, his arms trembled, and the sweat on his face was not from the heat of the fire. Dhulyn still waited below, her face a pale oval in the darkening square. Parno shook himself, held the boy out, and dropped him into her waiting arms.

A flicker of gold, high up on the wall, and with great effort he had the human whose eyes he used lift its head and look. Gathered his powers and felt. Sending his own essence like fingers tenuous as smoke, pushing into the human’s eyes, probing into the flame he thought he had seen. He smelled it all over, tasted it, felt it begin to give way, then harden again, regain its shape. Yet it was not Marked. He withdrew. It was only a blue flame after all, not the gold one he sought.

But now the humans around him were crying out, some were striking their fellows, others falling to the ground weeping, tearing at their own skin and faces. He retreated again to the man whose eyes he used, resting a heartbeat or so before gathering his strength for the leap back to his host, the shape in which his essence now dwell.

As he leaped, he saw again the gold flame, and he took one heartbeat more to look closer, to fix the flame’s human shape and human coloring.

There.

*She* was the one he sought.

“Parno,” she said, and felt him move to her left side.

“What’s wrong with them?” he whispered.

She shook her head, voice freezing in her throat. The people not helping to put out the fire seemed confused, many as if they did not know where they were. Some were rolling on the ground slapping at themselves as if attacked by bees, others fought each other, clawing at each other’s faces with stiffened fingers, seemingly unaware of the knives at their belts. Others were crying, rocking and holding themselves. One poor woman wandered as if blind, blood dripping from her nose and ears.

Some few of the unaffected were leaving the water brigade and going to the aid of one or another of the afflicted, and some of those were calming down, a few looking around them, as if trying to remember where, and perhaps who, they were.

“Should we do anything?” Dhulyn said, her sword still raised.

“Leave,” Parno said. “There’s a Jaldean here. He’ll see to them.”

Dhulyn nodded, even as she pressed her lips together. Which was stranger, she wondered, the behavior that was even now dissipating like smoke blown away by a breeze, or that the Jaldean priest—bewildered looking but otherwise sane—was only now coming to help?

Parno was putting the older girl up on his horse, and passing the smallest child up to her when what could only be the Finder and his wife in identical dark green headgear came pushing through the line of people passing buckets. A few people muttered and pointed, and one man made as if to approach them, but Dhulyn discouraged him with a hard look.

“Why haven’t you gone to the shrine, then?” the man called out, but he turned away, jaw and fists clenched, when Dhulyn jerked her head at him to be gone.

The wife went immediately to her children, but the Finder himself, after staring openmouthed, began to question those of his neighbors he found among the people passing the water. Dhulyn pulled him to one side and spoke, pitching her voice so only he could hear.

“Have you someplace else to go, Finder?”
The man focused his shocked gaze on her, responding to the touch of Dhulyn’s hand on his arm much like a nervous horse responds to the trusted touch of its handler, calming automatically and without thought.

“I don’t understand,” he said to her, a countryman’s accent under the polish of the Guild. “Why would they do this to me? I’ve always done my best to Find.”

“You didn’t Find my Jolda!” came a voice from a woman nearby.

Even in the uncertain light of the dying fire, Dhulyn could see that the Finder had gone pale. His lips moved, but in the suddenly increased noise she missed what he said. A stone came flying out of the crowd, and Dhulyn deflected it without a glance, stepping in front of the Finder, sword still raised. His wife took him by his arm and pulled him into the shelter of the horses, where Parno stood with the children.

“We can go to the shop,” the woman whispered to Dhulyn. Dhulyn nodded and backed away, her sword still held out in front of her.

“Let the Brothers take them,” someone else called out. “They’ll know how to deal with them.”

Dhulyn silently blessed the quick thinking of that particular person. So the Finder and his family had at least one friend in the mob. The slower wits in the crowd were happy enough to believe that she and Parno were taking theFinders under duress, and to let them leave with only jeers and sharp glances to send them on their way.

Parno leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “Are you sure there’s nothing . . .?”

“Nothing, good Mercenary, I swear. I’ve always given full value, never charged more than the Guild recommends. And I’ve done all I can to follow the new restrictions,” he said, rubbing his face with trembling hands. “The curfew was one thing,” he said. “And the dress code.” His gesture took in their headresses. “That was bad enough, but this . . .”

“What was that the woman said about Jolda?” Dhulyn asked.

Mirandeth shook her head. “That was a sad thing, but a thing no one could have helped. And it’s more than a year ago now. Mistress Fisher’s child. Everyone thought the willful little thing was just hiding herself as usual after an argument with her sister. She’d done it before, and this time the parents—the Fishers, as I said, they own three boats and the salting sheds down by the point—thought they’d let the stubborn little mite sulk and come home on her own when she got hungry instead of chasing after her as they usually did.”

“And so?” Parno asked when the wife fell silent.

“And so,” Grenwen Finder said, “the child choked on a bit of fruit she’d had in her pocket, and by the time they came to me to Find her she was long dead. The Fishers didn’t blame me—at least not then. How could they? I knew nothing of it ’fore they sent for me.” The Finder pressed his lips together before continuing. “I Found the body.”

“They didn’t blame us then, as you say,” Mirandeth said. “But it wasn’t more than two moons later that Mistress Fisher didn’t return my greeting in the market, and the stall holder told me that the Fishers were saying Grenwen hadn’t really tried to Find the poor child until it was too late.”

“Grief does strange things to people,” Dhulyn said. The daughter came out of the kitchen area carrying a round wooden tray with two glasses and two clay mugs. The way she handed the tray to the Mercenaries made it clear they were meant to take the more expensive glasses. Dhulyn breathed in the rich scent of ganje. She could use a stimulant, she thought, and so could the Finders. “It’s a hard day when an act of sensible discipline has the bad luck to result in such a tragedy, but they’d go mad if they blame themselves. Easier to blame you.”

“But to set fire to my home?”

“The Fishers didn’t fire the house, and you know it.” Mirandeth put her mug down on the table. “At least not by themselves.”

“Who then?” Parno said. “The Watch will want to know.”

“The Watch? What point in telling the Watch? Where was the Watch when my own neighbors . . .?” Mirandeth took a deep, steadying breath before going on. “You hear things, and you think ‘well, away in Imrion, anything can happen.’ But when my own friends and neighbors set fire to my house with my children inside. No,” she turned to her husband, “you know who put the idea into Mistress Fisher’s head that you were to blame for poor little Jolda, and who made sure the Watch knew nothing about the fire.”

“Tell us, then, and we’ll all know,” said Dhulyn.

The husband and wife exchanged a look that was equal parts fear and determination. Finally, the Finder nodded.

“This has all been since the New Believers came out of Imrion last year, spreading their teachings. Did anyone
see? Was there a Jaldean in the crowd?” he said.

Dhulyn was sure only she noticed the muscles in Parno’s forearms twitch. His lips parted, but he closed them without saying a word.

“There was,” Dhulyn said when it was clear Parno would not speak. “But what do the priests of the Sleeping God have to do with this?”

“Everything,” Mirandeth said, nodding. “The New Believers have been preaching against the Marked for months now, and after the earthquake last summer, and the bad harvest . . .

Dhulyn nodded, considering. The Marked had always made certain people nervous—those who were afraid of what they didn’t understand and couldn’t do themselves. In bad times, foolish talk in taverns wasn’t unusual. But since when would sober, reasonable, law-abiding citizens turn against someone who could Heal or Find or Mend?

“What’s different now?” she asked. “We’ve heard nothing of this, we’ve been away in the west, beyond Semlor, training with the armies of the Great King. The world’s a different place out there.”

“The world’s a different place right here, Dhulyn Wolfshead, let me tell you.” Mirandeth pressed her lips together and turned her head to the side, blinking.

“It seems it started,” the Finder took up the tale, patting his wife on her hand, “when the Jaldeans found a new artifact of the Sleeping God. I don’t know that anyone thought much of it. I certainly did not. They’ve found these things in the past, and for a while it makes people think a bit, reminds them the old gods are still with us, don’t you know, for all that many are heeding the teachings coming from the west.” The man swung his head from side to side. “When I first heard, I thought it a way to help the Jaldeans recruit more monks, to be honest. No harm in it.”

“Then they started calling themselves the New Believers,” Mirandeth said. “Started preaching on street corners instead of keeping to themselves in their hermitages and shrines in the old way. They came predicting danger and giving warning.”

Dhulyn raised her eyebrows. There was a way to catch the attention, no doubt about it. But Mirandeth hadn’t finished.

“They say the Marked are trying to awaken the Sleeping God before his time, and he’ll destroy the world.”

Parno fell back into his chair, his movement causing the ganje in his glass to slop out onto his knee. He didn’t seem to notice.

“I don’t understand,” Dhulyn said. “Wouldn’t the Marked be destroying themselves then?” None of the religions of townsfolk made any sense to her. There were three or four different sects that, as far as she could tell, called the same gods by different names—and she had respect for them all as often providing excellent reasons for war.

This time it was Parno who answered her. “The Marked have always been thought to have a special connection with the Sleeping God, maybe that’s supposed to save them.” He shook his head, “But—the Sleeping God’s supposed to awaken, and come to our aid if he’s needed. As indeed he’s done in the past, according to the Jaldeans themselves.”

“According to the Old Believers, yes,” Grenwen Finder said. “But now that’s all accounted heresy, and it’s more than your life is worth to say so in public, whatever you might think to yourself in the safety of your own home.”

The silence that fell lasted so long the Finders’ daughter came to the door of the back room where she’d been distracting her brothers. Dhulyn knew what they were all thinking. The Finders’ home had not turned out to be so very safe.

“Even so easily can people be turned against each other,” she said.

“But they aren’t . . .” Parno’s voice trailed away, whatever argument he was marshaling collapsing unspoken.

“People believe what bad harvests and earthquakes tell them to believe,” Dhulyn pointed out.

“They’ll allow as how we might be innocent enough by intent,” Grenwen said. “At least some will. But that changes nothing. Somehow we’ve perverted the gifts the god gave us, and our actions are awakening him.”

“So why did that man say you should go to the shrine?” Dhulyn asked.

“We’re supposed to go and be blessed by the Jaldeans, any of us who wish to keep our homes and livelihoods.”

“Willam Healer went, and no one’s seen him since,” Mirandeth said. “His family have sold off everything and disappeared, though I heard they have kin in Voyagin.”

Grenwen’s nod was slow and heavy. “I often helped him with his cases, Finding bad growths and infections for him, but now . . . I think William was one of the lucky ones. Of the few who’ve returned to their families, they’re no longer . . .” the man swallowed, “they aren’t Marked any longer.”

Dhulyn thought of the blank faces she’d seen in the square.
“That’s why the Watch didn’t come,” she said.

The Finder nodded. “I’ll lodge a complaint, of course. And they’ll listen to me, for now, even if they do nothing. There’s still plenty that don’t hold by the new beliefs. But many of them are starting to look the other way. It’s only a matter of time, until they’ll do more than that.” He blinked slowly, his brow furrowed as if an idea had just come to him. “I was contracted to Find a new salt deposit before winter set in, and the project was postponed. It’s past the time I should have heard, but surely they wouldn’t—” he looked up at the Mercenaries. “The good of the town . . .”

Dhulyn glanced at Parno and looked away. Surely they would, and both she and her Partner knew it. Common sense and the good of the town flew out the window when what a god wanted came in the door.

“And Zendra Mender’s gone—took ship for Berdana last week before the port closed to us—so you won’t be inspecting the aqueduct together as you always did. It wasn’t so bad before the Marked started coming here from Imrion, drawing attention to us—and I can’t believe I just said that.” Mirandeth covered her eyes with her hands. “We’re all Marked, there’s no Imrion and no Navra in this.” She let her hands fall to her lap. “But it does mean the Prince has closed the port to us, as a favor to Imrion. The last of many favors.” Her hand went up to touch her dark green headdress.

“So what then?” Parno asked. “Have you no other recourse? What says your Guild?”

Grenwen Finder shook his head. “There’s been no word from the Guildhall since the passes closed.”

The silence around the table acknowledged what they all knew. The Guildhall of the Marked was in Gotterang, Imrion’s capital.

“There’s always the Cloud People.” The daughter’s voice made her parents jump; she’d been quiet so long they’d forgotten she was still there. “The Clouds don’t believe any of this nonsense. They value the Marked.”

Dhulyn exchanged another look with her Partner. Normally, the Finders would be considered safe enough with the Clouds. Neither the Tarkins of Imrion nor the Princes of Navra had found any profit in trying to pull the Clouds out of the mountain range that lay between the two countries, and that the Cloud People considered their home. But when religious fanatics became part of the game, sensible policies were often thrown from the board.

Mirandeth was shaking her head. “Child. Can we go to live in a cave in the mountains like a pack of wolves or Outlanders? No offense, Dhulyn Wolfshead.”

“None taken,” Dhulyn said, carefully not smiling. “But if you don’t mind a bit of advice from an Outlander, consider what your daughter has said. Better to be a valued member of the wolf pack than the target and prey of civilized men.”

The Finder nodded. “There’s sense in that.” His face showing more color now, he turned to his wife. “My bowl, Mira, if you please.”

Mirandeth, a new light shining in her eyes, sprang to her feet and excused herself, returning from the kitchen in a moment with a small porcelain bowl. As wide as her two hands, its glaze was so pure a white that it seemed to glow in the fading light of the workroom. Grenwen Finder leaned back in his chair and allowed her to place the bowl directly in front of him on the tabletop. The daughter came close behind her mother, a pitcher of water in her hands.

Fresh spring water, Dhulyn knew, poured three times through clean silk. She cocked an eyebrow at Parno and leaned forward in interest. Grenwen Finder was a skilled Mark, indeed, if he could Find something as abstract as a safe place for his family.

The Finder poured a small amount of water into the bowl, handed the jug back to his daughter, and placed his hands so that his fingers rested lightly on the bowl’s edge. His breathing almost immediately became deep and steady, and the room grew so silent Dhulyn could hear the footsteps of a passerby in the street and the blood beating in her own ears. Then she could not hear even that, and it seemed that the world and everything in it had fallen still, stopped in its dance.

The Finder raised his head, and the world resumed.

“There is sanctuary,” he said, his voice a whisper as if the Finding had taken all his strength. “It is in the mountains. But the passes—”

“Should be clear enough for determined people on horseback,” Parno cut in. “And empty of everyone else. Have you beasts? Then fetch them and begin packing,” he added when Grenwen Finder nodded.

Dhulyn stood, placed her empty glass carefully on the table. “The first thing you should do,” she said, “is take those headdresses off.”

Without a word, Mirandeth reached up and unfastened the pin in the carefully folded dark green cloth around her head. She pulled the headdress off and revealed her hairless and tattooed scalp.
PARNO WATCHED AS DHULYN carried two cups of steaming ganje back to their table close to the fire at the Hoofbeat Inn. No one could tell by looking at her face, or watching the smooth way she moved, that they’d been up most of the night, sneaking the Finders out of Navra by an old way Parno remembered. The Hoofbeat hadn’t changed much since he’d seen it last. There were a few more cracks in the dark ceramic tiles of the floor, and the small bricks making up the ceilings that arched between stubby pillars were more worn and crumbling than he recalled, but the pillars themselves, and the walls for that matter, were solid and had been recently whitewashed.

“Your friend the innkeeper has heard tell of something like it,” Dhulyn said, putting down the cups and sliding in next to him. “He says it’s happened a few times at Jaldean shrines, during meditations.” Dhulyn shrugged, and lifted her cup. Parno knew perfectly well what she thought of townsman’s religious practices.

“Anyway, Linkon Grey tells me that this falling into a fit, this . . .” Dhulyn shivered, “whatever we want to call it, that’s where it’s happened before. Sometimes there are miracles, Healings and the like, and when that happens, the Jaldeans tell people they’ve touched the dreams of the Sleeping God.” She took a swallow of her ganje. “Most come out of the fits all right. Not all.”

“All that time in the Great King’s court I was wishing we were here, and now that we are, I’d give my best sword to be back with the Western Horde,” Parno said.

“Always supposing we’d be welcomed back.” The smile in Dhulyn’s voice matched the one on her lips as she threw him a sparkling glance. Parno grinned back at her.

“What was it you so carefully didn’t say, back there at the Finders?” she said, watching him over the rim of her cup. “When the wife asked was there a Jaldean in the crowd, you froze like a man caught in his neighbor’s bed.”

Parno’s throat closed like a fist, his smile melting away. He couldn’t tell her. She’d laugh at him. But she was his Partner. Who else could he tell? It would sit like a lump of poison in his gut if he didn’t tell someone.

“Spit it out, you blooded effete,” she advised him, her grin softening her words. “Stop trying to spare your dainty feelings.”

“While I was standing in the window with the second boy,” he began, his voice sharp as he pushed it past the tightness in his throat, “I had the oddest feeling of being watched.”

“Of course you were being watched.” Dhulyn’s blood-red brows made a small vee above her eyes. He pressed his lips together and shook his head. “Not like that, it was like . . . when you’re all alone in the woods, but you feel you’re not alone, and you look around and see nothing, but later you find a print and you know some beast’s been watching you.”

Dhulyn’s nod was slow. “There was no animal in with the mob—not that kind anyway.”

Dhulyn’s blood-red brows made a small vee above her eyes. He pressed his lips together and shook his head. “Not like that, it was like . . . when you’re all alone in the woods, but you feel you’re not alone, and you look around and see nothing, but later you find a print and you know some beast’s been watching you.”

Dhulyn’s nod was slow. “There was no animal in with the mob—not that kind anyway.”

Parno shook his head. “I think it was that Jaldean New Believer. Or maybe, maybe something that was with him. I felt . . . there was something I couldn’t see. Something that seemed to comb through my mind and thoughts and I couldn’t stop it.” Parno took a sip of his ganje to cover the trembling of his lips. “It made me feel . . . unmanned.” He couldn’t look up.

“Well, that’s saying quite a lot.” Dhulyn looked at him with eyes widened in pretended innocence. “Demons and perverts! I should have known I’d get no sympathy from you.”

“It isn’t sympathy you want, you blooded fool, and you know it.”

The tightness in his chest began to dissolve. “But you believe me?”

It made you sweat to tell me,” she said, reaching behind her to rub the small of her back with her fist. “I don’t need any other proof. Of course I believe you.”

Parno nodded, taking a swallow of ganje to hide his relief. He’d expected her to laugh, really laugh that is, not just tease him. Showed you that you never knew what an Outlander would do or say. And that seven years of Partnership doesn’t always tell you everything about your Partner.

There was something else, something he’d better mention now, while he still could. “Did you see what color his eyes were?”

Dhulyn closed her own eyes a moment as she searched through the images of memory until she could light upon the one detail—

“Brown,” she said.

That matched what he thought himself. “They were green when he looked at me,” he told her. “Glowing green like slices of jade stone with the sun behind them.”
Dhulyn raised her cup to her lips, made a face when she found it empty. Parno signaled the waiter, waited quietly while their cups were refilled. Dhulyn suddenly sat up straight, her eyes narrowing.

“Did you feel like crying?” she said. “Or striking yourself?”

“Ah.” He drummed his fingers on the tabletop. “You’re saying it was the Jaldean, all of it.” He picked up his fresh ganje and set it back down again without tasting it.

“Or whatever it was made his eyes glow green.” Dhulyn frowned, the fingers of her right hand braiding to form the sign against ill luck. “Some drug perhaps?”

“When did you See the fire?” he asked, using his nightwatch voice, soundless and almost breathless. When she raised her eyebrows at him without answering, he added, “You knew which alley to go down.”

She looked away and shifted in her seat. “This business with the Marked,” she began. “It makes no sense.”

Parno took a swallow from his cup. “You read too much poetry. This is all about power. The Jaldeans assert themselves at the expense of the Marked. When the Marked are gone, the Jaldeans fill the void.”

“Fill it with what? Promises and platitudes?”

“Fear and righteousness.”

“And meanwhile people die for want of Healers, starve for want of Finders, and go mad for want of Menders.”

“When did you See the fire?” he asked, using his nightwatch voice, soundless and almost breathless. When she raised her eyebrows at him without answering, he added, “You knew which alley to go down.”

“Not everyone, there’s few enough Marked that many don’t depend on them.”

“Not so many.” Dhulyn chewed on her upper lip. “Parno, my heart, remember that time you told the tavern dancer that I could See his future for him?”

“I remember what you called me,” Parno said, trying for a smile, “and what you told him about me. And I remember how sore I was in practice for the next few days.”

“I don’t think you’d better make that offer to anyone else.”

“I’d already thought of that.” Parno waited a minute before asking. “Did you See anything else?”

“Gotterang.” Her lips twisted as they named the capital of Imrion.

“No.”

Heads turned and a waiter hesitated on his way across the room. Parno lowered his voice again, shaking his head. “It’s back to the Catseye for us. Imrion is no longer the land of my childhood, nor even the land we left after Arcosa. Caids know, it’s not safe for you there.”

Dhulyn nodded, but so slowly Parno knew she was really saying no. “Ship’s gone,” she said. “Tide turned while we were with the Finders.” She looked up and gave him her wolf’s smile. “If any of the Marked are safe, it would be me. No one thinks to meet a genuine Seer, most people don’t even believe in them anymore. Besides, since when do we look for safety, my heart? We’re Mercenary Brothers.”

“I won’t lose you to the Jaldeans.” That was as plain as he could say it.

“And if I lose you?” Dhulyn set her cup down with a thump and looked her Partner in the eye, holding his gaze when he would have looked away. This was neither the time nor the place she would have chosen to speak on this subject, but surely she’d been silent long enough. Partnership was a life bond in the Mercenary Brotherhood. Or was meant to be.

“What do you mean?”

“A demon haunts you,” she said. “A demon from your childhood.” She waited two heartbeats, three, but Parno made no move to deny her words. “Shall I tell you how many times in the last year I’ve turned to you on the trail—or worse, on watch—and found you, wits abstracted, staring into the middle distance? Or how many times woken up in the middle of the night and found you awake, staring at the stars?”

“You never said anything.” Parno’s eyes held hers for a moment longer before falling to where his fingers were clamped around his own steaming cup.

“I waited for you to speak, and the word spoken was Imrion.”

“I never meant . . .” Parno heaved a deep breath. “It’s only that I began to wonder what became of my Household and I . . .”

“Spoke to me of Imrion.” Dhulyn leaned back in her chair, nodding. Of course, she thought. Time had softened whatever had made him leave his House and become a Mercenary Brother. But to tell her so, to ask her openly to return with him to learn what had become of his past—she smiled, a twisting of her lips. How could he ask this of her, who had no past to return to?

“This business of the Marked changes all of that.” Parno took a deep breath and released it slowly, pushing his
cup to one side. “Very well, I admit that I’ve wondered about my House, my father . . . but going there endangers you. If the Catseye is gone, then we’ll take another ship.”

“Do you hear yourself?” Dhulyn leaned forward, though her voice was already too low to be heard beyond their table. “You actually counsel the safe and the secure to a Mercenary Brother—to me? What next? I should open a book shop and die in my bed? We’re Mercenary Brothers. One day we’ll make a mistake, and someone or something will kill us. This is our truth.”

“It’s everyone’s truth,” Parno began.

“But we know it, and we don’t run away.” Dhulyn licked her lips. “We don’t run away.”

“In Battle,” Parno said.

“Or in Death,” she answered.

“Hot stones will be ready in a minute,” Linkon said.

Parno turned. “Sorry about the mess,” he said, jerking his head at the girl moving toward them with her broom and dustpan full of what had been two plates and a pottery mug.

“Not your fault, Lionsmane,” Linkon said. “Though I’ll have to replace them, and with no Menders the blasted potters are charging an arm and a leg. But not to worry, I took the price out of the man your Partner threw out the door. He should have taken no for an answer. If you didn’t want to work for him, you didn’t want to work for him. And I don’t blame you, if he was lying about the job.”

“Wolfhead’s good at spotting liars,” Parno said, “though your house cat would have known the fool was lying, come to that. Normally she’s more forgiving. His bad luck he pushed it a little too far at the wrong time, if you catch my meaning.”

“Oh, I catch it all right. My wife’s the same, though not much capable of throwing me out the door, for which I thank the Caids.” The man grinned.

Parno grinned back and didn’t bother to correct the man. Dhulyn wasn’t his wife, but there were few people outside of the Brotherhood—and even some within—who understood what it meant to be Partnered.

“Though I can’t say I’m surprised the man persisted,” Linkon continued, as he laid out mugs on the bar ready for spiced cider when it came hot from the kitchen. “There’s not so many Mercenaries in Navra at the moment, and for that reason, a word in your ear.”

Parno obliged the man by leaning both elbows on the bar, bringing his face within inches of the landlord’s. He’d once spent almost a whole winter at the inn, and had developed a friendship with Linkon Grey that even the passage of years did not change.

“Two of the Watch were in here last night, looking for a couple of Mercenary Brothers who’d helped some Finders yesterday.”

A chill traveled up Parno’s spine. Not Linkon, too. “People had set fire to a house with children inside it.”

Two red spots appeared on Linkon’s pale cheeks. “Don’t misunderstand me, Lionsmane, you did the right thing, though I wouldn’t say that to any and everyone.”

“Will this bring you trouble?”

“I was able to tell them, truthfully, that I’d not seen you—it was only your baggage was here all night. But they’ll be back. It may take a few days, most of the Watch is none too eager to jump to the Jaldeans’ orders, but like it or not, they’ll have to come around again, sooner rather than later. And then . . .” Linkon Grey pursed his lips and raised his brows.

“Oh, come, Link! We’re Mercenary Brothers, what can they do to us?”

Linkon shrugged, turned away to accept a cider jug from the kitchen boy, and turned back to pour out mugs for himself and Parno. He waited until the boy used a second jug to fill a tray of mugs and carry them off to distribute among the tables before leaning forward again.

“I don’t know, and I don’t want to know. It wasn’t so long ago the Marked were saying the same thing.” He frowned, brows pulled down, before meeting Parno’s eyes once more. “I like the Brotherhood. It’s always good to have some of you in the place. It brings custom and it keeps order, all at the same time. But it’s my family as well as my business I’ve got to consider.”

“I’ll get Dhulyn—”

“Nah, man, you’ve a day at least—more like two. As I said, the Watch will be in no hurry, so long as you draw no more attention to yourselves. But you’d be doing me a favor if you accept the next offer that’ll take you out of the
city."

Parno looked around, saw that there was no one close to them. "When did this business with the Marked start? The Wolfshead and I came almost without stopping from Destila," he added, naming the city at the far end of the Midland Sea. "Only changing ships at the Isle of Cabrea. The last time we were on the Peninsula, the Jaldeans were no more than harmless old priests."

Linkon looked into the depths of his cup. "You’ve been away to the west, you say, Lionsmane, but you’re from Imrion yourself, eh?"

"You know better than that, Linkon. We’re Mercenary Brothers, the Wolfshead and I, and that’s where we’re from."

The innkeeper nodded, tongue flicking out to the corners of his mouth. "Still. If it were anyone else . . ." He shrugged.

"The trouble wasn’t started by the old priests you remember, asking for alms at the shrines of the Sleeping God. It’s the New Believers who are preaching against the Marked."

"Any oppose them?"

"They say the Tarkin himself," Linkon answered, "but there’s a limit to what he can do."

"What’s he like, this new Tarkin? When Wolfshead and I fought with Imrion when they took the field against the Dureans at Arcosa, the old man was still alive."

"They say the son’s not the warrior his father was, but he’s no fool either. The High Noble Houses acclaimed him when old Nyl-aLyn died, and that says something." Linkon gave a sharp nod. "Still, in this new matter only a few of the Noble Houses have declared themselves one way or the other. It’s all the Tarkin can do to prevent an open breach between those as support the New Believers and those who would just as soon let be. The New Believers’re saying the Tarkin doesn’t see the danger—"

Linkon broke off as his younger daughter came out of the kitchen doorway with a tray of pies.

"Danger? From the Marked?" Parno cut in as soon as the girl was out of earshot. "How dangerous can they be? There’s not three in two hundred who are Marked."

"How many does there need to be to awaken the Sleeping God?" Linkon had lowered his voice still further. "I’ll tell you straight, since it’s you I speak to, Lionsmane, no good can come of any persecution of the Marked. It’s madness, pure and simple. But the whole of the West country was flooded last spring, an earthquake leveled Petchera in the summer—and there’s rumors the Cloud People are looking to break their treaty. Imrion’s luck has turned bad, you mark my words."

Parno laughed to cover the chill that had come over him, raising the hairs on his arms. "Why, Linkon, we’re Mercenary Brothers looking for work. Imrion sounds like just the place for us."

"Well, you know your own business best, but mark my words—"

A noise from the kitchen doorway made him turn again. "Ah, here’s the warmed stones for your Partner now."

Parno accepted the stones, heat palpable through their heavy coverings, smiling his thanks to the kitchen boy. He gave Linkon a we’ll-talk-later nod and made his way between the tables to the staircase.

"Gotterang," Dhulyn said, spitting out the word between gasps. "Gotterang." Her left hand lashed out, and closed on the air where Parno’s wrist had just been.

"I know, Dhulyn, I know," he said, using his voice to soothe where his hands could not. He shoved in the warm stone, lowered the blanket, tucked the edges under the pallet and sat back on his heels. He covered his Partner with the other blankets and both their heavy winter cloaks before raising himself to his feet, movements cautious and slow, and stepping back from the edge of the bed. He went only as far as the doorframe, where he leaned, listening. Eventually Dhulyn’s breaths came slower, took longer, as the valerian mixture he’d put into her cider took effect.

This would make twice she’d Seen Imrion’s capital. While that didn’t necessarily make her Vision more likely to come about—still it made him think.

"We go to Imrion," he said to her, voice still pitched to quiet and soothe. "And Gotterang the capital, no less. You are Senior, and you have spoken." It relieved him of the responsibility, he thought, but not of the knowledge that his had been the hand that placed out the tiles in this particular game. A demon, she’d said. And she was right. The demon of his life before the Brotherhood. Was his father still alive? His sisters?

When he’d found the shadow of his past would not let him rest, he’d persuaded Dhulyn, without telling her why, to come back with him to Imrion. More than ten years had passed, adding some height, and more than a little muscle
to the boy he had been. Time enough, and change enough, he was sure, to make him unrecognizable to any who might remember him.

Dhulyn pushed an arm out from under the blankets and began to hum. Parno cocked his head to listen more carefully. It was the tune the children had been singing on the pier. He found himself smiling. When his eye fell on the small arsenal of weapons he’d managed to take off her before she’d tumbled into the bed, his smile broadened.

“You’ll be safe enough, my wolf,” he said. Isn’t that what she’d said? Wasn’t that all any of them could say? They were Mercenaries, for Caids’ sake, not dancing masters. “The path of the Mercenary is the sword.” So went the Common Rule, and it was all any of them hoped or expected. There was a Mercenary House in Gotterang, he could find out what he wanted to know about his family there. And then they could be off, to where Dhulyn’s Mark would make no difference, no matter who knew of it. What’s the worst that could happen? They could die. Well, that was part of the Common Rule as well.

“I swear to you. Jaldeans or no, New Believers or Old. I swear by the Caids, if they still watch over us. You are my Partner and my life. Together. ‘In Battle or in Death.’ ”

The Brotherhood’s oath on his lips, he touched his fingertips to his forehead in salute, and turned to go back downstairs. He must see if Linkon had anything else to tell him.

THE MAN TRACES A LINE ON THE PAGE WITH HIS FINGER, HIS LIPS MOVING AS HE CONFIRMS THE WORDS. HE NODS, AND, STANDING, TAKES UP A HIGHLY POLISHED TWO-HANDED SWORD. DHULYN OWNS ONE LIKE IT, THOUGH SHE DOES NOT USE IT OFTEN. IT IS NOT THE SWORD OF A HORSEMAN. SHE CAN SEE NOW THAT HIS CLOTHES ARE BRIGHTLY COLORED, AND FIT HIM CLOSELY EXCEPT FOR THE SLEEVES WHICH FALL FROM HIS SHOULDERS LIKE INVERTED LILIES.

She cleared her throat. “How long have I slept?”

“You missed the midday meal,” he said, without pausing or looking up. “Though they’ve kept a plate for you by the kitchen fire. Are the stones still warm?”

She wiggled her hand down until she could touch the padded stone against her belly, and the one at the small of her back. The weight of her coverings—both their winter cloaks if she was any judge—made her nest warm enough that she had to rest her hand directly on the cloth-wrapped stones for a moment before she could detect a faint warmth. “Well, they’re not cold.”

“Not so bad then. You talked a bit at first, but you dropped off as soon as the stones began to warm you.” He stopped honing, but still avoided her eyes, testing the edge of the blade against the back of his thumbnail. “What do you remember of this morning?”

She shrugged. A most unsatisfactory movement when lying down. She shut her eyes again.

“Do you recall the man who said he was from the House of Sogenso?” Parno prompted. “The man you threw out the door?”

Dhulyn shut her eyes, wrinkling her nose. “Was it open?”

“As luck would have it.” The rhythmic sound stopped. “He said he was setting up a pilgrimage to the Mesticha Stone.”

“She winced again, squeezing open one eye. “One of the clay cups?” She seemed to remember a glass goblet on the table, and almost made the luck sign with the fingers of her left hand.

Sheopened her eyes. Parno sat relaxed, ankle over one knee, sword across his lap, his face in shadow. He had put the honing stone down on the floor next to his feet. She would have to make sure he did not leave it there.
“Did I . . . tell him anything else?”

“Told you something, seeing how it was with you. There’s something to tell, then.”

“He shouldn’t have touched me,” she said, halfway to an apology. “He’ll go to the Stone anyway, and he’ll die there. It will be quick,” she added. “And relatively painless.”

Parno swung his head slowly from side to side, lips pressed to a thin line. “Even if you’d said so, people would have taken it for a threat, not a Vision. As I might have done, once.” He released a deep breath and slid his blade into its sheath. “I got you upstairs, and Linkon had the kitchen heat stones for your pains, when they came.”

“And gave me valerian—don’t deny it, I can taste it in the back of my throat. You know it always makes me sick to my stomach.” Dhulyn rolled over on her back, pulled her knees up tight against her chest then released them, resting her feet flat against the mattress. “When did all this happen?”

“An hour or so after breakfast.” He rose and stretched, coming full into the shaft of sunlight. A golden man, tall, with warm eyes the color of amber. He had let his beard grow the last few weeks, and it had come in a shade darker than his sunbleached hair. His summer tan had faded over the long moons it had taken them to come from the Great King’s court, but he was still much browner than she would ever be.

Dhulyn rubbed at her temples and her eyes with the heels of her hands. Parno had taken off her shoes, her sword belts and sashes, but left her otherwise clothed. Long familiarity—they Partnered shortly after meeting on the battlefield of Arcosa—had taught him to touch her as little as possible during her time. In the beginning, coming as he did from the decadent north, he had seen nothing wrong with love-making during her woman’s time. A single experience had taught him that her people did not refrain merely from Outlander fastidiousness. It was then she had Seen the manner of his dying.

“Who else knows?” Parno said, tapping the side of his face next to his eyes when she looked at him with raised brows.

“You’re the only one I’ve told.” Dhulyn answered the question he’d really asked. She’d only told Parno himself when they talked of Partnering—not fair to him otherwise. And she’d only been able to tell him because she had Seen the manner of his death. Knowing the one thing that she must never tell him had left her free to tell him everything else.

At first he’d been delighted, thinking they’d soon be the richest Mercenaries in the Brotherhood. They’d know which jobs would be successful, and which would end in disaster, who would pay up promptly and honestly, and who try to cheat. He’d soon learned that she couldn’t use her Mark to answer specific questions, and when it did work, it wasn’t reliable and steady like the Finders or Menders he’d known, but so chancy and sporadic as to be more liability than asset.

“‘Course it wasn’t dangerous then, for others to know.”

“No,” she said. “Just no one’s business. I tell you I’m safe enough.” She thought for a moment. “Dorian knows, I believe. Though he’s said nothing.”

“You’ll be safe with any of the Brotherhood, I should think, let alone the man who Schooled you.”

Dhulyn nodded. For Mercenaries, the Brotherhood was their religion.

Parno leaned back on his cot and stretched out his legs in front of him, as far as the limited floor space would allow. “Linkon says the last rumors out of Gotterang before the Snow Moon closed the passes fit what the Finders told us. The New Believers are pressing the Tarkin for measures against the Marked, and he’ll either have to give in, or refuse outright and take the consequences.” Parno looked up from beneath his golden brows. “And, apparently, there will be consequences.”

Dhulyn turned over on her side again, this time propping herself on one elbow. The slanted ceiling—their room was under the eaves of the inn—prevented her from sitting up. “I’ve read of such things in the past, but if I hadn’t seen and heard it for myself, I’d find it hard to believe that people could be turned against the Marked.”

Parno nodded. “People can be persuaded to hate and fear what they don’t understand—even something useful and homey like a Mender or a Finder.” He shrugged. “Healers, though, that would take some persuasion.”

“There’s not so many Healers, however, even the books mention that. Though more than Seers, that’s certain.”

“I can remember talk of such things when I was a child,” Parno said. “The Market Dance at the Harvest Fair, they’d get someone to stand in the center to be the Seer, usually whichever young maid had been chosen Lady Harvest.”

“One of your sisters?” Dhulyn asked with a smile.

“When they could bully enough people into it,” Parno admitted, laughing. “Certainly no one ever expected a real
Dhulyn rolled over onto her back again. There had been a fair amount written over the years about the Marked, but what she had never yet found in any book or scroll was mention of her tribe. Her height and coloring marked her for an Outlander, but she’d met only one man who had seen her and instantly known which Outlander tribe she came from. How Dorian the Black Traveler knew of the Espadryn, Dhulyn never learned. All she knew was that he had taken her from the hold of the slave ship, put salve on her cut face, spoken to her in her own tongue, saying “come with me, and learn to kill whoever hurts you.” And she had gone with him, and learned. And somehow she had never asked whether Dorian also knew about the women of her people.

“If you’ll be all right,” Parno said, getting to his feet. “I have an . . . appointment.” Dhulyn saw for the first time that he was wearing his finest clothes, which at this moment meant his cleanest.

“And what are you using for money?” She looked up, and their eyes met.

“I need none,” he said. Now she could see his smile as well as hear it in his voice. “This one loves me.” He gave her a courtly bow.

“Your wenching will kill you one day,” she muttered.

Parno’s face drained of color and he clamped his jaw tight.

“Just an expression,” she said quickly, hauling herself up on her elbow again. Still pale, he continued to look at her, eyes narrowed, likely calculating whether she might be annoyed enough about the valerian to tell him the one thing she had promised never to tell. She held out her hand to him.

“Never, my soul,” she said.

He touched the tips of her fingers with his own, brushed the back of her scarred knuckles lightly with his lips. “In Battle,” he said. He gave her a more pronounced bow, and was gone before she could answer.

“Or in Death,” she said to the empty room.

Ah well, she thought, settling back into the warmth of the bed. He’d believed her; all to the good since she’d told him the truth. If only she could keep her temper. Her thoughts began to float with her return to sleep.

Never wanted to have the blooded Visions, she thought sleepily, and less so now. Unless perhaps something was going to show her why Parno so badly wanted to return to the land of his birth.

“I am.” Dhulyn looked up from the loose pages in her hands and smiled her wolf’s smile, the scar, normally too small to be seen in itself, pulling her lip up into a snarl. Parno did not trouble to hide his own grin as he watched the woman, already starting to seat herself on the stool across the table, unconsciously check her movement for a long minute before slowly setting herself down. She then looked Dhulyn Wolfshead sharply up and down, to show she had not been frightened.

Parno knew what the townswoman saw—knew what he had seen when he first noticed Dhulyn across a field of armored forms fighting and limp bodies fallen. A woman much taller than the average, hawk-faced, pale skin lightly damaged by the northern sun, beaded thongs tying back long hair the dark color of old blood. The hair had been permanently removed over each ear and the skin tattooed blue and green in her Mercenary badge. Tonight she was not in battle leathers, but dressed in loose wool trousers dyed a dark blue and gathered at the ankle above leather slippers. A tight vest made from scraps of silks and wool, and bits of leather, quilted together with ribbon and laces, left her arms bare as if she did not feel the cold. Armed, but not obviously, and not for war.

The woman would see an Outlander Mercenary. Nothing more.

“Hmph,” the townswoman nodded. “The landlord here has put out that you’re looking for work.” She looked pointedly around the tavern room. The place was almost empty. Linkon Grey was preparing for his late night by taking a nap, leaving his daughter Nikola in charge. It was early yet for drinking, though the supper hour was not so far off. The place smelled faintly of spilled ale, and not so faintly of the fish oil they used in the lamps. The townswoman’s eye rested longest on a table of young persons near the staircase, too friendly to be anything but professionals waiting for trade.

“Strange place to find a scholar,” she finally said.

“I’m a Mercenary, townswoman. Not a shopgirl.”

“And that’s well.” The woman placed her hands flat on the scarred tabletop. “For it’s a Brother I need. My name is Guillor Weaver.” That explained the quality of her clothes, thought Parno. “This is my fostering Mar.” A gesture took in the girl who stood close at her elbow. “I need a bodyguard and guide to take Mar north, to Gotterang.”

“Gotterang?” Dhulyn drew down her brows and shook her head minutely from side to side. “It would mean
crossing through the country of the Cloud People, and according to the treaty, caravan season doesn’t begin for almost another moon. Why not wait and send her then?”

Weaver shook her head. “We cannot wait, and we haven’t the coin ourselves, so early in the season, to send her round by boat. We’d take her overland ourselves, but we’ve no one to spare.”

“We’re not a caravan, the Clouds would likely let us pass unhindered. Still,” Dhulyn lifted her shoulders ever so slightly and wrinkled her nose. “Gollerang?”

Parno leaned back on his stool, pressing his shoulders against the wall behind him. He kept his face impassive, content to watch as his Partner did the haggling. Most people found debate with the Wolfshead’s cold southern eyes disconcerting enough that they were anxious to come to terms. That he and Dhulyn were looking for an opportunity that would take them southeast to the capital would, of course, go unsaid. Parno rubbed the left side of his nose with his right thumb, and Dhulyn blinked twice.

“What will you pay?” she was saying in a disinterested tone, fingers toying with the edges of her papers.

“I have enough for the expenses of the journey, but not enough to pay you, if you see what I mean. The people you take her to will give you your fee.”

Dhulyn lifted her brows and bared her teeth again.

“Slavers?” she said.

Without being aware that she was doing so, Weaver leaned away from the table. Parno touched Dhulyn lightly on the wrist with a finger. He knew that she had been a slave herself, though she rarely spoke of it. Knew, too, what kind of people buy children and youngsters, and to what use they put them.

Knowing nothing of this, the townswoman puffed indignantly, like all those who’ve had no personal contact with the trade.

“She’s no slave! Mar’s of our own fostering, orphaned of a House. We send her to her blood kin. It’s they who want her, having just learned of her, though don’t ask me how. And it’s they who’ll pay you for her delivery, safe and sound.”

Dhulyn looked at Parno, blood-red brows arched. Parno nodded. Very possible for a House of Imrion to have a minor Holding or even a Household in Navra. Distant kin, but kin nonetheless.

“And the girl wishes to go?”

Weaver glanced at the girl standing so sedately at her side. The young girl met her foster mother’s eyes steadily until the woman lowered hers and looked back across the table. “We would have kept her and happily, for she’s a fine worker—reads, writes, and is learning to clerk. But she has little of her own, and we have no wedding gift for her, not with three of our own to pay for. This is her own kin.” The Weaver seemed to be repeating a well-rehearsed speech. Perhaps there was someone at home—a son, maybe—who had needed to be convinced. House or no, the woman was content that the girl was going. “There may be property, there may be money for her. Caid’s know there should be,” the woman muttered, looking sideways at the girl.

Not by smile or change of expression did Dhulyn acknowledge how much the Weaver had unintentionally revealed. “I only wished to know if we must take her bound.” She tossed off the mug in front of her—hot sweet cider, no alcohol after the valerian—and handed it to Parno. He sighed and got to his feet, signaling to Nikola where she stood behind the bar.

“Thirty weights,” Dhulyn said. “In gold.” The Weaver gasped in outrage, and Parno stopped paying attention. He threaded his way between the empty tables, to where the girl was pouring out for him. Two men had come in while the Weaver had been talking and were leaning against the bar.

“I don’t care how well the Sleeping God sleeps,” the shorter man said in the careful diction of one who’s been drinking all afternoon. Nikola exchanged a look with Parno. “Turchara’s a good enough god for any sailing man. What I want to know is, why should they set their own prices? These are essential,” the man had some trouble with the word and had to repeat it, “essential services. We shouldn’t have to pay for them, and they shouldn’t be allowed to withhold them.” The man looked over and saw Parno for the first time—sure sign, were any needed, of just how drunk he was. “Not like they had to be Schooled, eh, Mercenary? No years hard training for them. They’re born with the Mark. It’s cost them nothing to get it, and look what they charge!”

“I’d lower my voice if I were you,” Nikola said, taking the cups from in front of the two men. “There’s a Jaldean at the door.”

The drunk who’d been speaking turned slowly in a great show of control, but Parno had to put out a hand to stop the man’s elbow from slipping off the bar. The doorway, as he’d known all along, was empty.

“Might have gone to report you,” Nikola said as she wiped off the bar. “Best be off home before he gets back with
a Watchman."

Parno watched as the man’s friend helped him out the door, before giving Nikola a wink and carrying the cider back to where Dhulyn sat with the Weaver woman. He put the Wolfshhead’s cup down in front of her and turned his attention to the girl he had no doubt would be their fare to Gotterang.

Even had he not been told, her heart-shaped face made it obvious Mar was no blood of the Weaver’s, and it was likely enough that she was indeed orphan of a House. She was already taller than the admittedly short towns woman, though manifestly young; she looked a marriageable age for a town girl if he was any judge—and he was. Unlikely that she would grow any taller, but she had inherited a good length of bone, regular features, good teeth, and abundant hair, though it did not shine much in the taproom’s lamplight. All testimony to good blood and good health. And what was more, sufficient luck to be fostered in a family which fed her well enough to let her keep these advantages.

“So we’re agreed?” Weaver was saying as she pulled a pouch from the wallet at her belt.

Dhulyn was still considering. Finally, she lifted her chin from her fist and held out her hand, palm up. “Give me your hand, girl,” she said. Parno tensed. What could Dhulyn be thinking? Better she didn’t touch anyone than to actually invite a Vision. Weaver looked at the young woman and nodded, but Mar was already holding out her square, ink-stained hand, palm down, for Dhulyn to take in her long scarred fingers.

“Are you afraid?”

“I am,” the girl said in a voice little more than a whisper. “But I will go.”

Dhulyn nodded, retaining her grip on the girl’s hand. Her pale gray eyes became fixed so markedly upon something over the girl’s shoulder that Mar turned around to see what it was. Dhulyn stared at nothing. Mar tried to pull her hand away. Dhulyn did not even seem to notice. Parno touched her foot with his under the table.

“She will need a pony,” Dhulyn said, finally releasing the girl’s hand without comment. “Forty silver weights and we are agreed.”

Weaver opened the small pouch, shook its contents into her hand and, coin by coin, counted out the forty weights. Most of the coins were the old minting, ship on one side, the old Tarkin’s head on the other, and dull with tarnish, but there were six gold pieces. Parno lifted his right eyebrow.

“It is enough,” Dhulyn said. Weaver drew shut the strings of the pouch and slipped it back into her wallet.

“When will you leave?”

Dhulyn looked at Parno. He knew that her bargaining had taken into account several things besides the price of a pony, the purchase of heavy clothing, and provisions for traveling. There was the lodging they already owed Linkon Grey—besides the packhorse they’d bought from him and the extra cot for their room. Linkon might be an old acquaintance, but Nikola had four brothers and sisters who had to be provided for. Parno lifted his left eyebrow.

Dhulyn turned back to Weaver. “Tomorrow.”

“I’ll leave her now, then,” Weaver stood up. “The letter from her kin tells where to go. You can read it yourself better than I,” the woman added with a nod to the pages neatly piled on the table. Dhulyn looked up quickly, astonishment replacing the amusement on her face. The expression on the girl’s face hadn’t changed.

“Stay, my good woman. If we’re to have charge of her now, then it’s not enough.” Dhulyn tapped the coins on the table with a long index finger. “You’ll have to pay for her lodging tonight, if you expect us to keep her here.”

Weaver chewed on her bottom lip. Mar looked away indifferently. A great sigh, and Weaver took another two copper coins out of the wallet at her waist and placed them with the rest on the table. Parno swept them all into his own pouch.

“Behave yourself, child,” the Weaver’s voice was gruff as she rose to her feet. “Let your House know how much we’ve done for you.” She did not offer to embrace the girl; her arms hung awkwardly at her sides. Parno caught Dhulyn’s eye and widened his own.

“I will, Guillor. I will.” The girl was soft-voiced, her tone neutral, or was there a hint of steel? Weaver nodded, but Parno suspected the older woman did not leave entirely content.

The young one sat down on the stool as soon as Weaver was gone, eyeing her present guardians like a new puppy caught between two veterans of the dog pack. Catching sight of Linkon behind the bar with his daughter, Parno roused himself with a sigh and went to explain matters.

Dhulyn’s gaze drifted idly sideways, until it was caught and held by a line on the pages before her.

“Why Dhulyn the Scholar?” the girl ventured finally in her soft voice.

Dhulyn glanced up. The girl was relaxed enough, seeming to have put the parting from her family behind her. Of
course, they were not her own family. Sun and Moon knew that could make a difference.

“Few soldiers can read.” Dhulyn smiled gently enough that the small scar did not pull back her lip. “And it’s pronounced ‘Dillin.’ I am called other things as well.”

“Dhulyn—” the girl broke off as the Mercenary held up her hand.

“You must not call me that,” she said gently. “Only my Brothers may use my name, and I theirs. You may call me Wolfshead, or Scholar, if you prefer. And Parno you must call Lionsmane, or Chanter. It is our way.”

The girl nodded slowly. “My family—my House, will pay well for my safe delivery,” she said. “That, at least, is the truth.”

“I believe it,” Dhulyn said, taking mental note of the qualification. So something else wasn’t the truth. Time enough to find out what, she supposed, when they were on the road. Her eyes strayed back to the tabletop. If they were leaving tomorrow, she must finish this book.

Parno dropped into his seat. Dhulyn blew out another sigh and looked up again. “Linkon says he has nothing else free,” he said. “And he’s already given us an extra cot for the room.”

Dhulyn shrugged. “I’ll take the cot, then.” The girl across the table started and then was still. Her tongue darted out to wet dry lips. Dhulyn stifled her laugh. “No need to look like that, girl. There’s no help for it, I cannot share a bed for two days at least. It’s a vow,” she added in answer to the girl’s unspoken question. “You’ll be as safe in Parno’s bed as you would be in your own. Safer. He won’t touch you himself, and he’ll kill anyone else who tries.”

Out of habit her eyes strayed back to her page, but she knew it for a lost cause.

“You’re too young for my tastes, child,” Parno agreed soberly. “I’ll put a sword between us if you doubt me.”

“What’s to do?” Dhulyn asked, surprised when the girl’s anxious expression did not change. “Are you virgin? And mean to stay that way? Has it importance, other than to you I mean?”

“It might. There’s . . . there’s to be a marriage,” Mar said, lowering her eyes.

“Oh, come now,” said Parno. “It’s only the High Noble Houses worry over such things, and, even so, it’s just until the birth of the heirs.”

Dhulyn drew in her brows and shushed him. “A marriage? Your foster mother didn’t mention that.” She was annoyed with herself for not getting all the information. Well, she knew now, and this could up the fee at the other end.

“She didn’t know.” Mar’s voice hardened, and she sat up straighter. She drew forth a letter from the bosom of her tunic and displayed the seal in the folds of parchment, lifted but not broken. “She can’t read, and she didn’t tell you everything, even of the things she does know. My name is Mar-eMar,” she said, putting the accent properly on the second syllable. “And my House is Tenebro.”

Dhulyn looked at Parno. His lips were pursed in a soundless whistle that changed into a toothy grin. Someone who didn’t know him well would think he was delighted.

Dhulyn was familiar with this kind of letter: a great deal of style and very little substance. Almost one third of the page was taken up by the titles and lineage of the woman who wrote (or who had it written for her, more likely) and of Mar-eMar herself, as the person addressed. The letter itself was quite short, stating that the family had just learned of Mar’s whereabouts and wished her to come urgently to the capital to occupy her place in the House. That was probably the marriage the girl had mentioned. Almost apologetically, a tone no doubt inserted by the clerk, mused Dhulyn, Mar was asked to bring with her any family possessions that might serve as proofs of her identity. What might such things be, Dhulyn wondered? She looked up to see Mar eyeing the bed dubiously.

“I saw a play once about a man and a woman who lay together with a sword placed between them,” the girl was saying. “And it was taken as proof that they were chaste.” She looked up at the Lionsmane, towering over her. “But I do not understand how it . . . how it prevents . . .”

“Lying between them? Well, no, perhaps that wouldn’t be proof of much,” said Parno, almost clucking in his imitation of an elderly uncle. Dhulyn smiled, her lip curling back over her teeth. “But then playwrights are not so very accurate. What do you think, Dhulyn? Shall you lay your sword between us?”

For answer Dhulyn unfolded herself from the window seat, reaching out for her sword where it lay still sheathed on the cot. She straightened, drawing the patterned blade out smoothly and in one motion thrust it, point down, into the straw and ticking of the mattress. Two feet of newly sharpened blade stuck out, quivering slightly, a fence post in the center of the bed.

“Do not brush up against it in the dark, my souls,” she said, laughing at the shock on the little Dove’s face. “It will cut you.”
“BUT YOU TOLD GUILLOR you would buy a pony.” The girl eyed their packhorse dubiously. It was a small animal, little more than a pony in size, but Mar was also small, and by careful repacking of their weapons into their own saddlebags, the spare horse could carry both the girl and the balance of the provisions they would stop to buy.

“I told her you would need a pony.” The corners of Dhulyn’s lips twitched. “Not that we would have to buy one.”

The girl stood still, blinking. “Guillor Weaver’s considered a shrewd woman, a hard dealer,” she said finally, halfway between admiration and annoyance.

“Nay, don’t be offended,” Parno said, chuckling at the look on the girl’s face. “Your foster mother’s reputation stands firm. But Mercenaries deal and bargain with all sorts, not just people buying cloth.”

“And we deal for our lives, little Dove,” added Dhulyn. “That makes us sharper.” When she was satisfied that the girl wouldn’t fall off immediately, Dhulyn nodded to Parno and they mounted their own horses. Both Warhammer and Bloodbone knew what packs meant, and were fidgeting, impatient to be off. How they’d feel after a day’s long riding in this cold weather was something else again.

Their first stop was the market, where, after buying a good supply of roadbread and dried fish, Parno and Mar waited with the horses while Dhulyn went to the book merchant’s stall. There she traded the three books she had finished—carefully rolled and tied into tubes—for a single new one, a copy of Theonyn’s poems bound into a traveler’s volume made of the lighter, imported paper instead of parchment, cut into pages and sewn into a binding of stiff leather. She could only afford the one book, and the poems would take longer to read than anything else of equal size.

“What is it, little one?” Dhulyn looked up from stowing her book. Mar’s fidgeting was enough to make the packhorse itself restive.

“Nothing, that is . . .” the girl hesitated.

“A heavy silence for nothing,” Dhulyn said.

“It’s just . . . I was wondering if I might be able to say good-bye to my friend Sarita at the weapons stall.”

“Who would stop you? We take you where you wish to go, do we not?” Dhulyn spoke lightly. No point in terrorizing the girl. “Never mind, my Dove. Slip down and go. The Lionsmane and I will wait for you over by that barrel.” Dhulyn pointed out an empty barrel holding up one end of a baker’s stall. There it would be possible for them to stand at least partly out of the way.

Mar glanced over at the weapons stall and nodded. “I won’t be long,” she promised as she hurried off.

“You don’t think she’ll run,” Parno said, watching the girl weave her way between early morning buyers and sellers.

“She hasn’t the look of it, no,” Dhulyn said, drawing down her blood-colored brows. “But then, we have a clear sight of the weapons stall from here, she won’t get far on foot, and we’ve our travel money to Gotterang in any case.” She smiled her wolf’s smile, and Parno threw back his head and laughed.

It was not possible for them to stand completely out of everyone’s way even so early in the day, but marketers tended to part around the two Brothers with little or no complaint. Mercenary badges often encouraged even the most unruly to mind their manners. They stood facing each other, their eyes drifting apparently aimlessly as they spoke, taking in all of their surroundings, never looking in the same direction at once.

“How is it,” Dhulyn remarked in the nightwatch murmur that would be unintelligible to any passerby, “that I have lived thus long without ever hearing the name Tenebro, since it makes even strong men pale?”

Parno bit back a curse. He should have known she would notice something. She would never have asked, but this was something he should have told her before. Caids knew, the middle of the market square in Navra was not the best place for his life story.

“What if I told you it was just a trick of the light?” he said, forcing a smile to his lips.

“You’d be lying.”

Best place or no, he had to say something; this might be the last chance they had to speak privately for the next half moon.

“I knew them.” He watched as her eyes widened and her mouth formed a soundless “oh” of comprehension.

“Will they know you?” She was asking more than if they would recognize him. She was asking whether there was danger in it if they should. There were many reasons a man might leave his Household for the Brotherhood. Blood duel was only one of them.
“Caids, not likely,” he said, making it sound as certain as he could. The difference between seventeen and thirty-one, he thought. A lifetime of change.

“You would tell me,” she said, turning to nod and smile as the kitchen boy from the inn passed close to them—marketing on his free day from the look of his good clothes.

“Of course,” he said, eyes flicking to her face. How could she doubt that he would fail to warn her of possible danger? They were Partnered, a sword with two edges.

“Any odds it’s not the same House?”

“I keep telling you, less poetry and more politics.” Parno snorted, relieved that she questioned him no further.

“Then why would I need you, my soul?” She reached out and punched him lightly, barely a touch, above his heart. “All the same family then?”

Parno twisted his lips to one side, resisting the temptation to squeeze his eyes shut. “The same House,” he said, indicating Mar with his eyes, “though not necessarily the same family. The Tenebros are one of the five High Noble Houses, the ones most likely to provide a Tarkin should one be needed. They’ve Households and Holdings of all sizes throughout the Letanian Peninsula. For the sake of influence, and courtesy, we’re . . . they’re all considered kin, though the blood runs thinner the farther away from the main branch. Just the same, every Household and Holding owes their allegiance there, and all are counted as House Tenebro. Both Householders and Holdings use the noble form of their names, as Mar-eMar was quick to remind us. But not the high noble form—”

“Which is?”

“The mirror reverse. If our little Mar was herself the House, or heir to that dignity, her name would be pronounced Mar-EE-Ram, not Mar-EE-Mar.”

“Ah, I’ve seen that in books, I should have asked you before what it meant.” Dhulyn gave herself a nod of satisfaction.

Parno shook his head. “It’s an odd time to send for the girl, having let her Holding lapse these ten years. There’s more to this than reuniting lost kin. The Tenebros are First Blood to the Tarkin himself. More important than that it’s difficult to be, though they were so once, and perhaps with these new troubles, they are trying to be so again.”

“I have read history, which you call politics,” Dhulyn said, frowning. “If I recall correctly, was there not a Tenebro Tarkin before Nyl-aLyn, father of the present Colebro Tarkin?”

Parno shrugged. “I think two reigns before his. It seems their luck turned bad. It began within the House itself, a generation or two back. Unexplained, or insufficiently explained illnesses, a disappearance or two. Then it followed as these things follow.” Parno shrugged again. “A battle lost here, an ill-advised marriage there, an assassination or so. The High Houses intervened, the Tarkin was put to the Ballot, and House Tenebro proved to have insufficient support to retain the Carnelian Throne.”

“They were not wiped out?” Dhulyn’s eyes narrowed and Parno followed her glance over his shoulder to where he could see Mar talking to her friend. A small flat object, which he recognized as parchment even at this distance, was passed between them. Was that a bit of green seal? The girl had more than the one letter then.

“Oh, no,” he said in answer to Dhulyn’s question. “Too numerous and too powerful for that, for all they’d lost the Throne. Some of the smaller branches, the Holdings, withered, it is true . . .” Parno’s voice dried in his throat, and Dhulyn looked sharply back at him, waiting with brows lowered for him to say something more. He shifted his eyes away, pretending to scour their surroundings for enemies. He wanted to tell her, he should tell her. But he hadn’t thought the pain was still so close to the surface that it could shut his throat.

“And Mar-eMar is a twig from such a branch, or so her letter seems to say,” she said finally, ignoring his silence. Bloodbone snorted and stepped back as someone nudged her from the far side. Dhulyn cocked her eye and smiled at a man in a painter’s stained work clothes who ducked his head and smiled in return before he dropped his own gaze. She ran her hand along Bloodbone’s neck until the mare quieted. “Which means that marriage is not just a wishful thought on the little one’s part. Here I thought she had listened to too many bard’s songs.”

“Not at all. The songs usually have some root in fact, swords on the bed notwithstanding. At these rarefied heights, allegiances can be tricky things, and it’s difficult to find someone of sufficiently noble blood who is not politically suspect, or who is not already too closely related for progeny. A country branch of your own family is ideal. In the old days it was not unheard of to begin such branches for that very purpose.”

Again their eyes locked. This time it was Dhulyn who looked away.

“Keeps the property together too, I shouldn’t wonder,” she said. “Now we know why Mistress Weaver was so sure we would be paid, and so anxious for the family to know of her good care.” Dhulyn’s eyes found Mar again as she moved through the stalls of the market making her way back to them. “Though why would the Weavers not
escort the girl themselves, if it comes to that?”

Parno nodded. “True, merchants aren’t known for giving away profit. They’re towns folk, though, let’s not forget,” he continued. “They would have had to hire guards anyway, and then . . .” He cocked his head. “Doing favors for the powerful is a chancy thing. Less reward for them this way, perhaps, but less risk, too.”

“More risk for us, you mean.”

They fell silent as they watched Mar wait for a boy driving a donkey with water jugs in its panniers to cross in front of her. Parno lowered his voice still further. “Dhulyn? When you touched her, what did you See?”

“I Saw our little Dove wearing a cloth-of-silver gown. Hand in hand with a line of dancers.”

“Her wedding, do you think? The wedding she expects?”

Dhulyn shrugged. “Rich and alive,” she answered. “It seemed like a good omen for us who are to be her guards. And I’ll tell you something else, my Brother,” she said. “If they were so very anxious to have her back in the bosom of the family, why did the Tenebros not send some trusted servants of their own?” She smiled her wolf’s smile. “Perhaps there’s more than bandits and Cloud People for us to be wary of.”

Parno shook his head. Whatever she might have guessed from his evasions, she was willing to let it drop, at least for now.

“Caids take you,” he said, “as if we didn’t have enough problems!”

Laughing, Dhulyn thumped him on the shoulder before swinging herself up on Bloodbone, leaving Parno to help Mar regain her seat on the packhorse. When they were both ready, Dhulyn led them north through the market and into the wide avenue that would become the Gotterang Road once it passed through the north gates of Navra. The streets were unusually crowded this morning, and when they were within sight of the town’s wall and the gates themselves, she saw why. Only one leaf of the heavy timbered gate was open, and the people, horses, and carts ahead of them had been formed into a line and were being stopped by the Watch before they were allowed to pass through. While Dhulyn was looking the situation over, one short man with a tinker’s pack on his back was escorted away to the guardroom while the others in line stood waiting.

Dhulyn checked Bloodbone, keeping the horse to a much slower pace than the animal wanted. Too late to get out of line and try a different gate—or a different way out of the city entirely. They were behind two farm carts and a small company of strolling players, and there wasn’t much room to maneuver. Dhulyn shrugged, making sure the sword lying along her spine was loose in its sheath. There were only five guards, and if worse came to worst . . .

Dhulyn spotted the helmet crest of the officer of the Watch, and even from this distance she had no trouble making out how his lips were thinned by a look of frozen displeasure. The very look, Dhulyn considered, of a man following orders he didn’t agree with. Give too many of those, and you could have a revolt on your hands.

And she’d bet her second-best sword that the Jaldean standing behind the gatemen had something to do with it. Looked as if they’d got the Finders out just in time—and perhaps they should have gone with them.

Casually, as if she were just checking the numbers in line behind them, she turned to look back at Parno. Mar and the packhorse were between them, but Dhulyn had no trouble catching his eye over the girl’s head. He scratched his left ear with his right thumb. So he agreed. Too late to change their minds. They’d have to see if they couldn’t bluff their way through.

Whatever it was that had the officer clenching his teeth, his men looked content enough, though there was none of the relaxed informality Dhulyn would have expected from gate guards in a country at peace. And now that she was looking for it, there was a tall fair guard having trouble hiding his smirk, grinning openly whenever he was sure that his officer wasn’t looking. Dhulyn smiled. That kind of discord spelled real trouble, and where there was trouble in the ranks, there was room for a good Mercenary to maneuver.

The two farmers and the traveling players passed through without incident, and Dhulyn pulled up as Bloodbone came abreast of the officer’s crest. The nearer guards gave ground, and the three farther away came closer, until there was a cleared circle with Dhulyn, Parno, and the girl in the center. Dhulyn glanced up. There were crossbow men at the top of the gate. Still, if Parno took care of the bowmen, she could manage the five guards down here before any others arrived. And from the wide-eyed look on the face of the nearest one, he knew exactly what she was thinking and believed it as well. If she hadn’t already taken money to make sure the girl was safe . . . She smiled her wolf’s smile at the officer.

“Step to the side, Mercenaries, please,” he said, staring steadily at a point just over her left shoulder. “Over there if you will.”

And if I won’t? Dhulyn didn’t say the words aloud. “But you know us, Officer.” She tapped her Mercenary badge with the fingers of an obviously empty hand. “Mercenaries of the Brotherhood. This young one’s Mar, fosterling of
the Weavers in Threadneedle Alley. We’ve been given the charge of taking her to her family in Gotterang.” Dhulyn was careful to keep her tone light, as if she were just gossiping, and the guard officer was just a friend.

The Jaldean pushed his way forward and laid his hand on the thin wool covering Dhulyn’s knee. “You go to Gotterang, Mercenary?”

Dhulyn bit down to keep from gasping as

flashed through her mind almost too quickly to see. It took all of her training and concentration not to flinch away from the Jaldean’s hand.

“We do,” she answered, pleased at how steady her voice was. “Would you mind stepping back, friend? You’re making my horse nervous.” Dhulyn took hold of Bloodbone’s mane in a special twist, and the mare tossed her head and brought her right fore hoof down on the Jaldean’s foot.

The officer suddenly looked away and Dhulyn was quick to draw in her brows and “tsk,” as Bloodbone continued dancing and rolling her eyes like a horse about to bolt. Nursing his foot, the Jaldean flicked his hand toward them and the officer, eyes now bright in his stiff face, acknowledged Dhulyn with the slightest of bows, and waved them through the gate.

As soon as they were through Mar’s packhorse fell into place at Dhulyn’s right hand of its own accord, even though Dhulyn was still having trouble with Bloodbone. When Parno took up position to Mar’s right, the girl looked from one Brother to the other.

“I don’t understand,” Mar said. “Were they going to stop us?”

“Seems like they meant to,” Parno said. “At least until they knew where we were going.”

“Almost makes you wonder why, doesn’t it?” Dhulyn said. Bloodbone was now perfectly calm, except for the head tossing that looked remarkably as though the animal were laughing.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this,” Parno said, turning back to stare at Navra’s wall.

Dark still came early at this time of year; the search for a place to spend the night began after the midday meal, which was roadbread and dried fruit eaten on horseback. It was obvious the town girl did not have the trick of eating the roadbread, and finally Dhulyn took pity on her.

“You’ll break your teeth, my Dove,” she said. “The stuff’s dense as bricks. Break off a small piece in your hands, or with your knife if your fingers aren’t strong enough,” she advised. “Then hold it in your mouth until it softens enough to chew.” Dhulyn watched to make sure Mar could manage before turning her attention back to the road ahead.

She’d learned on their first campaign together not to let Parno choose their camps. He always stopped too early, and so the journey took half again as long as was needed. Twice, Dhulyn turned down likely looking places without comment before settling on a hollowed clearing nestled in a small copse of half-grown pine trees.

“Toss you for it?” Parno dismounted and shook a cramp out of his left leg.

“No,” Dhulyn said, “you go ahead and set up the perimeter, I’ll help the Dove.” As with the roadbread, Dhulyn watched Mar before offering any advice. It didn’t take long to see that the town bred girl knew nothing about travel. She was clumsy with her bedding, shy about her personal needs and, Dhulyn sighed, no doubt useless as a cook. And how could she not be? Weavers were not known as great travelers. And those like Guillor Weaver traveled less than most, since her business was in a port town, and trade would come to her.

Not for the first time Dhulyn wondered what it would have been like to grow up with walls that did not move. Not a tent or a ship or the back of a horse. Where the same people were there every day.

“That is not the way,” Dhulyn said when she’d finished laying out her own bedding with Parno’s and turned to where Mar fumbled with hers. “First, if you put your bed there, you will lose the benefit of the fire.”

“But I’m closer to the fire than you are.”

“And I’m closer to this tall brush that will reflect the fire’s heat down on me,” Dhulyn responded. “Put your bedding here, next to ours. No, a good layer of these old needles first. You’ll find the ground quite hard enough the first few days, I’ll wager.”

The girl eyed Dhulyn’s own bed. “Don’t you have to sleep alone?” she asked shyly. “I mean, your vow?”

“My vow’s over, but I will be sleeping alone,” Dhulyn said, grinning. “I’ll sleep when Parno’s on watch. Then he’ll sleep while I watch. When it gets colder, the two not on watch will sleep together for added warmth.”
“Colder?” squeaked Mar.

“Colder as we move into the mountains, closer to the pass.”

Both women turned as Parno followed his voice out of the darkness, a skinned rabbit hanging from his hand. “Then warmer again once we’re through. That’s why we want to get through as quickly as possible.” Parno took in the campsite with a quick glance and nodded. “Who is cooking tonight?”

Dhulyn skewered the cleaned rabbit on a short iron rod and propped it between carefully set rocks close to the fire.

“There are traveling tools, then, for every thing,” said Mar watching closely. “Just like at home? Things to cook with and clean with?”

“Not so much cleaning on the road, as you’ll find out,” Dhulyn said, sitting down cross-legged within easy reach of the spit.

“Not that you’ll notice after a while, since we’ll all be equally dirty,” agreed Parno. “I once traveled without the benefit of cooking rods, pots, or skillets, however.”

“What did you do?” said Mar.

“Roasted rabbits, just like today,” he said. “But I used my sword for a spit.”

“Doubtless all it was good for,” Dhulyn remarked solemnly.

Mar shook her head, but Dhulyn saw the ghost of a smile on the girl’s lips and relaxed.

“How did you learn to do all of this? Find your directions by looking at the sun? Learn where to set up your camp? How to cook?”

“We have close to twenty years of Brotherhood between us,” Parno said. “Much of that time spent on campaign. Not surprising that we should know how to set up camp.”

“Are you so old, then? Old enough to have been Mercenaries all that time?”

“I have seen the Hawk Moon twenty-six times,” Dhulyn said, unsure what prompted her to answer in the Outlander’s roundabout way. “Parno, to be sure, is an old grandfather next to me.”

“Alas, too true,” Parno said, shaking his golden head. “And yet there’s no respect for my ancient bones and hard-learned wisdom.”

“You don’t look like town people,” Mar said. “I couldn’t guess your ages. I’ve seen the . . . the Hunt Moon eighteen times,” she added, smiling at the Wolfshead.

“Still not old enough for me,” said Parno lying back on the bedroll. “So you may rest easy. Wake me when the food’s ready, would you, young ones?”

Lionsmane was blowing on the embers of the fire, but that wasn’t what Mar had heard.

Movement caught her eye, and Mar saw sunlight flash on the edge of the blade before she saw the woman who wielded it. Suddenly she realized that the rhythmic sound was Dhulyn Wolfhead’s breathing. Little puffs of fog left her lips as she danced around the clearing where they camped. Mar had seen the City Watch doing this once, also early in the morning when she had been unable to sleep and had volunteered to fetch the early milk. Shora, it was called. A kind of mock combat that could be practiced alone or with others. But the City Watch’s practice was clumsy beside what Mar saw now. The Wolf-head’s every movement was precise, fluid and effortless, like the running and leaping of a deer, and with something of the deer’s grace and heart-stopping beauty. The swords moved faster and faster, the blades disappearing as the air around the Wolfshead blurred, until they abruptly took on form once more as she regained perfect stillness.

And the Wolfhead’s breathing never changed.

Mar released the breath she was holding, truly frightened for the first time since she had received the letters from Gotterang. Looking at the Mercenary woman’s cold face, it seemed that what Mar had agreed to do might be considerably more dangerous than she’d thought.

“Practice, practice, practice,” Lionsmane said in a comfortable voice. “And yet it was I who saved Dhulyn Wolfhead from death at Arcosa, the day we met.”

Mar turned her eyes away from the motionless Wolfshead, relaxing into the warm rumble of Parno’s voice. She looked again at the expression on his face as he watched Dhulyn. That’s why I’m safe with him, she thought with a sense of awakening even further. That’s why he says I’m too young. Because he can look at her like that. Mar took her bottom lip between her teeth. If Ysdrell had ever shown her such a look, she thought, she might have ignored her Tenebro letters, and none of them would be here—or would Wolfshead and Lionsmane be on their way to Imrion
just the same? As if he could feel her eyes on him, the Lionsmane shook himself and looked back at her.

“You’ve never seen the Shora practiced?”

“I’ve seen the City Watch.” She glanced back. The Wolfshead had lowered her blades and was automatically wiping them clean, though there was no blood on them. “But it wasn’t like that, exactly.”

“The difference you cannot explain is the difference between Mercenaries and ordinary soldiers. I know,” he added as she turned to him, “because in my time I have been both. The word Shora means patterns in the old tongue, the tongue of the Caids, as our friend there would be the first to tell you, and there are eighty-one of them. Each with at least three, but some with up to one hundred and eight separate moves. Shora for the sword—single-or double-handed—Shora for the knife, the dagger, the razor, the club, the stick, and the stone. Shora for the hands, feet, and head. For anything held in the hand, as well as for the hands alone. Shora for breathing, for smell and sight and hearing. I know the basic twenty-seven that all Mercenaries must know to be considered Schooled.” Parno Lionsmane shrugged. “Maybe a few others. The Wolfshead knows over fifty. If she lives, she will know them all, and she will School others.”

If she lives. Mar shivered, watching Dhulyn sheathe her weapons. The morning was colder than she’d thought.

IN THE AFTERNOON of the twelfth day, with the pass two days behind them, Parno stopped on a small rise and let the two women ride past him. Dhulyn pulled up her horse and halted Mar with a gesture when he did not follow them.

“What?” she called.

“Look at those clouds,” he said. Dhulyn turned in her saddle to follow the direction of his gaze. The sky was dark and heavy. “If that’s not snow, and soon, I’m a blind man.”

Dhulyn nodded, sighted back along the trail and bit her lower lip. Earlier that morning they had seen what might have been a herder’s hut off to the south of the trail, but Dhulyn had decided it was far too early to stop. They might pay dearly for that decision now. It wasn’t often she laid out the tiles and lost the game.

She looked around at the uneven landscape, rocky and full of pines, pockets of old snow drifted into spots the sun did not reach. “This part of the hills, we should be able to find some reasonably sheltered place,” she said, sighing. They were Mercenaries; they didn’t expect either rain or snow to kill them. If the weather were better, the long-lost Tenebro cousin would be traveling in the company of a merchant’s caravan, and she and Parno would be lucky to get guard’s wages for the same journey they were making now.

“As well we’re not twenty or thirty people,” was all Parno said.

The sky was turning ominously black when the tiles came up swords after all. What looked like a shoulder of hillside jutting out from among a small grouping of firs proved to be two enormous boulders, one partially leaning on the other to form a shallow cave where they touched.

“Plenty of shelter in those trees for the horses,” Parno said.

“And we can cut branches, layer them across the top, extend the shelter right out to here.” She indicated the point where the rocks were farthest apart. “With a fire close to the opening, we’ll stay snug and dry.”

“What odd shapes.” Mar edged the packhorse closer. “I’ve never seen rocks like this.”

“They are not rocks, little Dove.”

“What then?” Mar dismounted and, holding the packhorse’s lead, stepped closer.

Dhulyn brushed off a piece of dried lichen, revealing a remarkably smooth section of whitish stone. “Remnants of a wall, I’d say. Relics of the Caids.”

“The Caids.” Mar stepped back, putting her horse between her and the wall. “I thought they were spirits.”

Dhulyn looked sideways at the girl. “They may be, now. People do swear by them, it’s true. But the Scholars say that they’re an ancient people, long gone. Ancestors to us all, they say. It’s sure that everywhere I’ve journeyed I’ve seen their traces—bits of statues, places too flat for nature that must have been roads, odd formations of rock like these. There are even bits of books left from those times, though all I’ve ever seen were translated copies.” Dhulyn smiled, pushed Mar a little with her fingertips. “Don’t worry, my Dove, the place isn’t haunted.”

Mar nodded, but not as though she was reassured.

“Get the packs stowed,” Dhulyn told her, “then go and collect fire-wood while Parno and I cut branches.”

Snow began to fall as the two Mercenaries placed the last of the branches across the opening and Mar carefully
laid and lit the fire as Dhulyn had shown her. Large flakes and fluffy, the snow fell quiet and soft, and at first melted as it hit the ground. But long before they were ready for their suppers, it began to accumulate, thick and light as down.

“No point in setting watch,” Parno said. He crawled past Dhulyn deeper into the cave. “We’d neither see nor hear anyone coming.”
“Any sign of wind?”

“No, thank the Caids.” Parno grinned, touched his forehead with the tips of his fingers in the Mercenary salute. “That would be all we’d need.”

Dhulyn tucked Mar into the warmest corner, from where the girl watched with wide eyes as, after they had eaten their supper rations, the two Mercenaries took it in turns to unpack, testing and examining each item of their clothing, and each piece of metal, checking for signs of dampness or rust. Their bedding was already toasting in the warmth from the fire, and now cloaks and damp hoods were spread out as well.

Parno unwrapped and was assembling the pipes that gave him his nickname “Chanter” as Dhulyn checked over her book, and the few writing materials she carried. There’d been precious little playing—or reading for that matter—since they’d left that last inn, and Dhulyn had noticed that Mar had taken to calling them Wolfshead and Lionsmane, dropping their other nicknames entirely. She supposed it was hard for a town-bred girl to watch them at their daily Shora and think of them as anything but Mercenaries.

As Dhulyn stowed away the last of her belongings she gestured to Mar. “Come, my Dove, your turn. The damp will spoil your things if you don’t take care.”

Mar unpacked slowly, and it seemed to Dhulyn that the girl was shamed to display how little she owned, even to two of a Brotherhood known for traveling light. Her few pieces of clothing were well made of good, if plain, cloth, befitting the foster child of weavers. There was also a very fine pair of bright yellow trousers that Dhulyn eyed covetously, knowing they would never fit her. And a single glass bead on a strand of copper wire, more a child’s plaything than a piece of jewelry.

The girl’s writing supplies were the goods of a professional, not a hobbyist like Dhulyn. Four good pens, their nibs fresh and ready for trimming, and two bottles of differently colored inks, stoppered and sealed with wax. Instead of Dhulyn’s few scraps, Mar had several large sheets of parchment, not new, but carefully scraped clean. Shuffled in among these Dhulyn saw the green-sealed letters Mar had picked up from her friend in the market at Navra. Information from her House, it seemed, that Mar didn’t want to share.

Dhulyn flicked a glance at Parno, and he nodded with the barest inclination of his head.

“How much neater you keep your things than I do mine,” Dhulyn said, reaching out to touch the parchments Mar was shuffling back together. “Are you sure none of these have taken any damp?”

“Oh, yes,” the girl said, thrusting all the pages into the bottom of her pack before picking up the pens and inks with more care.

“I’m glad to see you take such care of the tools of your trade,” Parno said, solemn and sincere. “They’re proof to any who need to know it that you have the means to earn your own living. You have relative wealth and independence even without your noble House, don’t forget it.”

“What’s this last thing?”

Once again, Dhulyn reached out, and this time Mar did nothing to stop her from unwrapping an old cloak, worn, but still showing something of a vivid rose dye in its folds. When there were only a few layers of cloth left, Dhulyn pulled back her hands and let Mar, almost ceremoniously, finish unrolling what was clearly her greatest possession.

A bowl, shallow, perhaps as wide as two narrow hands, its exterior intricately patterned and glazed, colors glowing like jewels in the fire’s light. Dhulyn met Mar’s gaze and smiled, her own delight mirrored in the younger woman’s eyes.

“It is beautiful,” Dhulyn said simply. “May I?” Dhulyn said, reaching out to touch the parchments Mar was shuffling back together. “Are you sure none of these have taken any damp?”

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“It is beautiful,” Dhulyn said simply. “May I?” Mar passed it carefully into the older woman’s hands. Dhulyn turned it over a few times in her long fingers, measuring and weighing it unconsciously as she examined the patterns. Along the narrow base there were geometric shapes—lines, triangles, circles and squares—but on the upper edge . . . “I know these designs,” she said softly, “Look! Am I wrong? What’s this along the edge?” She held out the bowl at an angle, so the light fell clearly along its green-bordered rim.

“It’s forest creeper,” Parno said.

“No it isn’t.” Mar’s voice was quiet, matching her smile. “It’s a chain of people dancing. Isn’t it?” she added, looking across at Dhulyn.

The older woman nodded. “I believe so,” she said. “And in that case . . .” she turned the bowl upside down, the better to study its patterns. Squinting in the changeable light of the fire, she could see how the chain of dancers along the rim crossed over itself, as if in a country dance, and turned down, forming garlands around the body of the bowl and framing spaces which had been filled with small scenes. “Yes,” she said. “See here, there’s a woman, noble from her gown, laying out the vera tiles for a solitary game.” Dhulyn glanced up at Parno. “You’ve seen that posture a thousand times, my soul. And look at this old fisherman,” she turned the bowl slightly, “hanging up his nets,
checking for tears and snags. Look how his muscles stand out as he lifts them. And here’s a young boy walking back and forth along the rows in a vineyard, no doubt keeping the foxes out!”

“This one’s a man,” Mar said, tapping an image on the side of the bowl closest to her. “It must be a father,” she added, “he’s tossing up a small child and catching him again.” She looked up, a catch in her voice. “There’s a woman watching them, smiling.”

“What’s the last one,” Parno said. “I can’t make it out.”

“It’s a young woman again—no, a young man, and he seems to be holding a harp.” No amount of squinting brought out further detail. “Do you know, Mar?”

Mar shook her head. “I’ve always thought it was a mirror.” She took the bowl completely into her own hands and tilted it to catch the dying light of the fire on the final scene. “It’s been a long time since I really looked at this. I didn’t like to bring it out at the Weavers.”

“It’s a beautiful thing,” Dhulyn said. “Worth another look and then another. Do you know what you have here, my Dove?”

“I thought I did,” faltered Mar. “Now I begin to doubt.” Dhulyn’s heart warmed. It was easy for her to find a look tinged with fear on someone’s face. Only when people saw the Scholar and not the Wolf did she ever see this kind of warmth.

“It comes from my mother,” Mar said, “and her mother before that. The property of the eldest daughter of my Household. It’s my proof, if I need it, that I am Mar-eMar Tenebro.”

“Making it valuable enough,” Dhulyn said. “But it has other significance. A bowl like this is described in Tarlyn’s First Book of the Mark.”

“It would bring a good price,” Parno said putting his hand on Dhulyn’s wrist. “I marvel the good Weaver left it to you.”

“You mean she might have taken it?” The girl’s genuine astonishment caused the two elders to glance at each other and quickly away.

“Nay, child, she’s been proven an honest woman, even without this.” Parno put a comforting hand on the young girl’s shoulder. He ventured a glance sideways at Dhulyn. “You don’t think it could be . . . ?”

“What? Tarlyn’s bowl? Oh, Sun and Moon, no! The Book of the Mark, like these designs, goes back to the time of the Caids.” Dhulyn returned to her scrutiny of the bowl. “The silence made her look up into Mar’s stricken face. “Oh, it is real, little Dove. A Scholar’s artifact. But,” she shrugged. “It could not be Tarlyn’s bowl, is all. The designs are the true ancient ones, but the colors, see how sharp the blues and greens?” She traced her finger along the line of dancers. “These have been no more than five generations in use.”

“And that’s not ancient?” Mar’s eyes were wide with surprise. “My grandmother’s grandmother’s mother?”

“Ancient for people, assuredly,” Dhulyn said. “But a mere five generations is nothing as artifacts are judged. The roads and other objects the Caids have left,” she gestured around her at the walls that sheltered them, “are much older even than our oldest writings. Still,” Dhulyn caught Parno’s eye again. “Valuable as it is to anyone, it has a meaning for you and your House that it cannot have for any other.”

Mar took the bowl from the Mercenary’s outstretched hands and lowered it back into its wrappings. She did not see the Brothers share another glance over her head.

“Are you happy to leave them, then, the Weavers?” Dhulyn watched the girl’s face closely. This would make twice the girl had lost the only family she had ever known. Once upon the death of her own parents, and now again at this parting from her foster family. That she went to her own House, her own people, would be no great comfort, considering she had never seen any of them before.

“I think I would have had to leave anyway,” Mar said.

“How’s that,” Parno asked from where he sprawled. “There seemed to be enough business to need you.”

“Oh, yes,” Mar said. “They’ll have to hire another now, and someone not as well trained in their ways. But I think it would have come to that anyway.” She looked between their interested faces. “You see, the younger son asked for me.”

“Not in itself unheard of,” Dhulyn said dryly.

“No,” Mar agreed. “His father was not against it. He was willing to apply to House Tenebro for permission and dowry, but Guillor Weaver felt it might offend them.” The girl shrugged. “If he marries elsewhere, Ysdrell can bring money to the business and the family with his marriage. Until my letters came I was no one, with nothing. After that I was too much a someone.”
Dhulyn carefully ignored Mar’s slip. It remained to be seen what importance the number of letters had. It crossed her mind, however, to wonder whether the male Weaver had, in secret from his wife, contacted the girl’s House, and if this “urgent” summons to Gotterang was the result. “At least you do not sound brokenhearted, my Dove.”

“Oh, no. You see, that was the real problem. I did not want Ysdrell.” She added another stick to the fire and looked up again. “That’s why I would have had to leave.”

“A good enough reason,” Dhulyn said, feeling a knot of tension release. “So this is as good a way as any, and better than most.” And it explained why the girl was so ready to go to Gotterang.

“How do you get your names?” Mar asked as she knotted the ties on her pack. Dhulyn laughed. It appeared it was a night to ask questions, and not for Parno to play while she and Mar sang.

“Oh, different reasons at different times. Parno, for example—”

“I have the strength, the lordliness, and the beauty of a lion,” he cut in.

“And the smell,” said Dhulyn, and smiled as Mar laughed.

“What about you? You explained Scholar, but why Wolfshead? Is it because of . . . because of . . .”

“Because of the scar? Because of this?” Dhulyn smiled her wolf’s smile, lips curling back off her teeth in a snarl, but she made sure the eyes above it were smiling, too, and Mar grinned back at her, not in the least afraid. “Quite right, exactly because of that.”

Mar frowned, her head on one side, as if she was trying to picture Dhulyn without the scar.

“Do you mind it?” she asked finally.

To her own surprise, Dhulyn Wolfshead began to laugh. There was something about the young woman that made it easy to tell her. “Mind it? Why, it was my salvation. If I’d thought of it, I would have done it myself.”

“You’re just confusing the girl, Dhulyn, my heart,” Parno said. “Tell her what you mean.”

“Ah well, it was long ago, and the story means nothing to anyone but me,” Dhulyn said, drawing down her brows. “It’s the tip of a whip, not sword or dagger, that gave me this mark. The metal-coated tip of a whip clumsily applied that flicked ’round me and caught me on the face. That was enough to ruin me in my master’s eyes, so to the auction block I went. And from there to the slave trader’s ship, and from the slave ship to Dorian the Black Traveler. And from his hands, to this moment. And from this moment . . . to a new subject,” she said, seeing Mar’s stricken face.

“Tell me, little Dove, do you know a child’s game called Weeping Lad, or Weeping Maid?”

“I know one called Sweeping Man,” Mar said.

“Do you know other variations?” Dhulyn said. “We sang one when I was very young and I’ve been trying to remember the words.”

Late in the night, while Mar slept, Parno and Dhulyn lay wrapped in their bedrolls. They spoke so softly, lips to ear, that had Mar been awake, she would have been ready to swear they made no sound.

“It is a scrying bowl,” Dhulyn breathed into Parno’s ear.

“To See?” Parno asked.

“More likely to Find,” she said. “Did you not see how, though the outside is patterned with people and scenes, the inside of the bowl is a plain pure white? Like the bowl Grenwen Finder used in Navra? Only this one is much more costly.”

“Does the little one know?” Thus Parno avoided even the chance that Mar’s sleeping ears might hear and register her own name.

“There have been Marked in the family, Finders most likely, and someone knew it, for it to have passed so carefully, mother to daughter.”

“The Dove herself?”

“Not likely. She lost her parents early, but she would have noticed the signs when she grew old enough, as I did myself.”

Parno drew in a cautious breath. “Do we tell her or no? With things the way they are, it may be dangerous for her to have it. You won’t be the only one who can recognize it.”

“She’ll need it to show her family, if what she says of proof is true.”

Dhulyn felt Parno’s muscles tighten and then relax once more. “We might do her a great favor if we broke it for her,” he said finally.

Dhulyn pressed her forehead against his shoulder.

“But it’s so beautiful,” she finally said.
Dhulyn squeezed her eyes shut, tried to slow her breathing before it woke the others. Where was the courtyard? And who the child’s mother?

That morning she and Parno practiced the lengthy Bear Cub Shora while Mar watched wide-eyed from the entrance of their shelter. By midmorning the fog lifted enough that their campsite seemed to be in the midst of a clearing in the clouds. The midday meal, eaten outside of the shelter, where an outcropping—no doubt another piece of wall—provided dry seats, was accompanied by debate on whether it was worth continuing their journey, trusting to find another good shelter before nightfall, or to wait until the following day.

“It’s only been seven days since we left the inn at the crossroads,” Dhulyn was saying. “We won’t lose any time by waiting until tomorrow.”

“I didn’t say we should go on,” Parno said, sitting up to better make his point. “I only said that it’s been eight—”

Dhulyn held up her hand, the gesture sharply cutting through the Lionsmane’s lazy iteration of his point of view. He put his hand on the sword resting by his right side, and without the slightest sound drew it from its scabbard.

Mar opened her mouth, but before she could speak, Dhulyn efficiently gagged her with the hand that did not have a sword in it.

“Can’t shoot at us if they can’t see us or hear us,” Parno mouthed in a voice that barely carried to Mar’s ears. “Stay between.” Both Mercenaries stood now, facing away into the fog, crouched slightly forward, knees flexed. Mar slowly stood and looked between them, clearly not knowing what to do.

“Dhulyn?” Parno bared his teeth though his murmur could not support a snarl. “What say you, my heart?”

Dhulyn glanced over her shoulder at him. “Cloud People,” she said. “Victory or death, I’ll wager. And the choice won’t be ours.” She reached behind her, pulled a knife out of the back of her vest, and held it out to Mar; watched the Dove take it gingerly in her hand, and then grip it with more determination. Dhulyn gave the girl an encouraging nod.

“We’ll earn our pay. Don’t you worry, Dove.”

Parno had his own long dagger in his right hand, sword in his left. Dhulyn pulled her short sword from where her harness sat draped over a rock and, straightening, held it ready. Back to back with Mar between them they began to circle, Dhulyn twirling her two blades at random intervals. The silence was thick and so complete that she began to wonder whether her ears still worked, or indeed, whether there was anything out there that could make a sound.

And then movement—a shadow in the surrounding fog, became an arrow knocked aside by Parno’s sword, startling Mar into dropping her dagger.


Dhulyn stopped circling, though her swords stayed poised. “I am Dhulyn Wolfshead. Called the Scholar. I was Schooled by Dorian the Black Traveler. I have fought with my Brothers at sea in the battle of Sadron, at Arcosa in Imrion, and at Bhexyllia in the far west with the Great King.”

Parno called out, “I am Parno Lionsmane. Called the Chanter. Schooled by Nerysa of Tourin the Warhammer. I, too, have fought at Arcosa, and at Bhexyllia, and I fight with my Brother, Dhulyn Wolfshead.” Parno’s history would tell their questioner that he was junior to Dhulyn, Arcosa being his first battle as a Brother, and that since he fought with her specifically, they were Partnered. Would the Cloudwoman understand?

The voice called out again. “I have heard of you, Dhulyn Wolfshead, daughter of the Red Horsemen. I am Yaro of Trevel, once called Hawkwing. I, too, have fought with my Brothers. Now I fight with my Clan.” Parno glanced at Dhulyn and she gave him the smallest of nods. Both Mercenaries lowered their weapons.

Dhulyn remained alert as a handful of people, most carrying spears or bows, but with a few swordsmen to season them, stepped into the clearing. It was hard to tell exactly how many there were, and many seemed to have no heads, no faces, until Dhulyn realized they were wearing scarves or strips of cloth wrapped around their heads. Thick leather vests, worn with the fur or wool side next to the skin, left either arms bare to the foggy chill, or long-sleeved tunics of undyed homespun. Dhulyn grinned. She had learned the art of camouflage from an expert, but this impressed her.

One of the anonymous forms laid its spear on the ground and stepped forward, unwrapping its head covering as it neared them. From the quality of the voice which had spoken to them out of the fog Dhulyn expected an older
woman, and she was right. Yaro was short and thickset, her dark brown hair liberally salted with gray. The gold- and-green colors of the Mercenary’s tattooed badge had faded, but were still clear enough to be recognized in the misted light.

These were not Yaro’s only tattoos, Dhulyn saw, her eyebrows raising in surprise. On the left side of the Cloudwoman’s face was a tattoo of two feathers, the second partially overlapping the first, like the feathers of the Racha bird it symbolized. These were so old and faded that only a sharp eye would see them. Much clearer, and obviously much more recent, was the complete set of seven feathers on the right side of her face.

Dhulyn’s lips formed a soundless whistle as, glancing around for the Racha bird itself, she touched her fingertips to her forehead to echo Yaro of Trevel’s Mercenary salute. What could possibly be the meaning of the Cloudwoman’s Racha tattoos?

She glanced at Parno, but her Partner’s face showed no expression. Rare as it was for a Mercenary Brother to live long enough to retire, Yaro of Trevel, once Yaro Hawkwing, had clearly not simply retired. She had left the Brotherhood and returned to her own Clan. Dhulyn would not have thought such a thing possible, and her teeth clenched as she forced herself to pay attention, and to show no sign of the chill that squeezed her heart.

“Brothers, I greet you,” the tattooed woman was saying, “We are Clan Trevel. And the land where you stand, and for many days’ travel around us, is also Clan Trevel.” Dhulyn nodded. Like Imrion’s Noble Houses, the Cloud People used the same words to identify both the relationship of blood and the relationship of land. The group of people surrounding her made gestures of assent, and a few murmured. Yaro glanced quickly to each side and the murmurs died down. Several of the group followed their leader’s example and, downing their weapons, began to unwrap their own coverings. They were mostly young people, Dhulyn saw, with only two others nearing Yaro’s age.

“We are on the Life Passage of our young people, or I would welcome you to the shelter of our homes. However, for the sake of our Brotherhood, if not the Tarkin’s treaty,” here her words called out a few grins, “we give you safe passage.”

“No tribute?” one young man blurted out. His astonishment was clear in the squeak of his voice.

Yaro turned to the youngster, staring at him long enough that his wide shoulders squirmed under her scrutiny. “Tribute?” she said. “These are still my Brothers. You’ll be asking me for tribute next, Clarys.” Several of the others smiled, their teeth flashing white. The young man shifted his gaze, silenced but not satisfied.

“What about her?” he said, pointing at Mar with his chin. “She’s no Brother of yours.” This time all the people of Clan Trevel turned to look at Mar.

“She is in our care, Brother.” Dhulyn spoke only to Yaro. “We ask that you extend your courtesy over her as well.”

“I am content.” Yaro nodded.

“Well, I am not. And I see no reason to be. They trespass. You say we must let your Brothers pass—well and good. But this person who hires them can pay us for her passage.”

“And if she has nothing of value?” Parno said.

“Let us see this for ourselves,” suggested a more reasonable voice.

Dhulyn stood still, eyes locked on the young man who had started the trouble. She knew the type. Not so much younger than Mar herself the way time was counted, ready to be a man among his people, as his presence on this Life Passage demonstrated—but still a child in many important ways. Tall, broad-shouldered, and with the long arms so helpful to a fighter. But a little sullenness around his pretty mouth. A little poutiness to the bottom lip, and a top lip too ready to curl. A boy who thought well of himself and thought others should do the same. Trouble, in other words.

Parno touched Mar on the shoulder and then stood back, sweeping a mocking bow in the direction of her pack. Mar tried to nod at him curtly, but trembling spoiled the girl’s performance. Once more Dhulyn watched as the little Dove untied her pack. Again the scanty belongings were exposed, looking even more meager and ordinary without the magical glow of firelight to give them life. Even the bowl, when her hands, slowed by reluctance, were able to uncover it, showed its colors dully in the foggy light.

“Why should we not take that bowl,” Clarys said immediately.

He ignored Mar’s cry of protest, but Dhulyn did not.

“It is the only thing of her family that she has,” Dhulyn said. “Would you take from her the symbol of her Clan?” She tried to sound as reasonable as she could. As much as it soured her mouth to let people under her protection be robbed, she disliked unnecessary killing—a sentiment many of her Brothers found ironic. “This comes from the mother of her mother’s mother, and is not hers to give away. It can bring no good to any who takes it from her by
force.” The two older people in the group exchanged nods and murmurs of agreement.

But the boy Clarys also had his fellow, a stocky boy with a dark widow’s peak, to murmur in his ear.

“No good?” said Clarys mockingly, as Widow’s Peak nodded. “Why it would feed a family for a season, that bowl of no value.” More murmurs of agreement, but this time only from a handful of youngsters Dhulyn marked as the rest of Clarys’ admirers. If it came to a fight, would these others stand back? Dhulyn marked in her mind the position of the archer, and the three who still had spears in their hands.

And whose side would Yaro of Trevel be on?

Dhulyn turned to Mar. The girl stared fixedly at her prized possession. “Mar?” Dhulyn said, and waited until the girl looked at her. “How say you? Will you trade the bowl for your passage?”

“No good?” said Clarys mockingly, as Widow’s Peak nodded. “Why it would feed a family for a season, that bowl of no value.” More murmurs of agreement, but this time only from a handful of youngsters Dhulyn marked as the rest of Clarys’ admirers. If it came to a fight, would these others stand back? Dhulyn marked in her mind the position of the archer, and the three who still had spears in their hands.

“Is there some other way? Some of my other things? If I come to my House without it,” the girl said, tears filling both eyes and voice, “they may deny my claim.”

Dhulyn looked at Clarys, but the boy set his mouth firmly and folded his arms. “Idiots,” she said, under her breath. Time to put an end to this. She looked at Parno. The Lionsmane tilted his head to the right, as she’d know he would. The Wolfshead nodded.

“You are refused,” she said, looking directly at Clarys. “Thus far, this has cost you nothing but a wasted hour. I advise you to renounce your claim before it becomes more costly.”

“If she will not pay, then she is herself forfeit. We will take her.” Both Parno and Dhulyn moved to stand between Mar and the Clouds. Clarys stopped with his hands already reaching out for the girl.

A short, sharp silence as all waited. Dhulyn nodded again. “You’ll take nothing but my fist in your teeth,” she said evenly. “She is in our charge. Renounce your claim.”

Widow’s Peak nudged him and the young man cocked his head, his eyebrows raised. “Will you fight?” he challenged.

“I will.”

Several of the younger element in the group exchanged looks of triumph. The older ones looked on grim-faced, shaking their heads.

“Wait,” Yaro said, the authority of a Racha woman giving weight to her words. “Clarys, think what you do. This is a Mercenary Brother, not one of your cub pack. She has skills beyond what you can imagine.”

“No one can best me with sword or spear. You have said this yourself,” he said. “This is my Life Passage, my Hunt. This is the proof I choose.”

With her eyes shut, Yaro blew out a disgusted sigh. Not even a Racha woman could step between a young Cloud and his chosen Hunt.

Dhulyn shrugged. “First blood, then?” she said.

“No—” Clarys was silenced by Yaro’s upright hand.

“First blood is sufficient for a Passage Duel,” the older woman said.

“She insults me by suggesting it.”

“Don’t be stupid, boy,” Parno cut in. “In the Brotherhood we don’t maim. For us, it’s cut or kill.”

Clarys’ lips curled back from his teeth. “Then kill it will be, flatlander.”

Dhulyn was careful to address only Yaro—and to keep her voice businesslike. “He renounced his claim on the bowl when he offered to take Mar instead. It’s now his life for hers, are we agreed?”

Yaro cast a look around the group assembled in a shallow arc behind her. There were nods, a couple of shrugs, but none shook their heads. One or two even looked speculatively between Clarys and Dhulyn. Either the young man wasn’t as well liked as he thought, or these people didn’t know much about Mercenaries, Yaro’s presence notwithstanding.

“Agreed,” Yaro said finally. “You kill Clarys, you and the girl go free.”

“And if I kill the Brother, the girl is mine.” Clarys said.

Yaro didn’t bother to answer, cuffing a couple of the youngsters who had crowded close into clearing away packs and people to leave a space for the duel.

Dhulyn was already stripping off her outer clothing. Parno stepped in closer. “Give him every chance.”

“I’ve given him two chances already. Should I let him kill me?”

“Would you prefer that I fight him?”

“I’m Senior.” Dhulyn looked at him sidewise as she kicked off her boots. On this uneven ground, bare feet were
best. “And I thank you, my Brother, for your confidence in me.”

Parno rolled his eyes upward, calling upon the Caids to witness his frustration. “That is not what I meant, and you
know it, my most stubborn heart. You’ll mind killing him, and I won’t. Rudeness and stupidity should be properly
rewarded.”

Dhulyn shook her head and turned from Parno, indicating Clarys with the tip of her sword. “Ready,” she said.

Clarys stood already stripped and grinning, his friend Widow’s Peak still whispering in his ear. Dhulyn nodded
and lifted her sword. The boy fell into his stance, and her heart sank. His weight was too evenly balanced for this
rough terrain, she saw, and his right elbow stuck out too far from his body. If no one in his clan could best him, it
was because the boy had been making do with strength and length of reach, not skill.

Now that she saw him stripped for fighting, Dhulyn could more easily gauge the width of his shoulders and the
size of his wrists. He carried the longest possible sword, and that alone could have told her both of his strength and
of his vanity. She saw his eyes flick toward her own blade, and the way his full lips spread in a smile. She, too,
carried a very long sword, though not so long as his, and he probably thought it too long for her. And so it would
have been, had not years of practice made her wrists very nearly as steellike as the blade itself. The length and the
weight would not tire her. Many had already died from making that mistake.

As she lifted the point of her own blade in salute, Dhulyn fell automatically into the familiar calm of the Crab
Shora for the right-handed sword and uneven ground. Her heartbeat slowed, her breathing changed to match it.

Clarys began to circle her, and Dhulyn turned to follow him, her sword swaying lazily, almost as an afterthought.
She looked not at his blade, or his eyes, but the center of his chest. A movement of his shoulders signaled Clarys’
lunge at her unprotected side; Dhulyn knocked his blade up with a negligent tap and stepped half a pace to the left.
She sighed and parried two more cuts with casual flicks of her sword. As she thought, the boy was going for showy
high strikes only, counting on his strength and reach, and forgetting the lower half of the body completely. As they
continued to circle, Dhulyn kept track of Parno, Yaro, Mar, and especially Widow’s Peak in her peripheral vision.
She saw several of the Cloud People shaking their heads and felt like shaking her own. What were they about,
letting her kill this boy?

“Cry mercy, boy,” Parno coolly advised, in an echo of Dhulyn’s thought. “The Wolfshead will kill you like her
namesake kills a lamb.”

“She could not kill a—” Thinking to surprise her, Clarys broke off his circling and attacked without finishing his
sentence, coming at her from the side. But Dhulyn was not where he expected her to be. She had stepped inside the
reach of his sword and, mindful of Parno’s request, did not gut the boy immediately, but cut him neatly on the left
cheek with the tip of her blade. Too bad. Using the minor distraction of the conversation might have worked too,
Dhulyn thought as she cut him again on the right cheek—on someone who was not a Mercenary.

Dhulyn parried two more blows—both to her head—before Clarys began to breathe more heavily. He was used to
the fight being over by now. A few murmurs from among his followers indicated that they thought so, too. Yaro had
already turned away and was looking up into the clearing fog. Her Racha bird was coming.

“I have cut you twice,” Dhulyn said, fixing the boy’s eyes with her own. “I am satisfied. I ask you for the last time
to renounce your claim.” Pray Sun and Moon, she thought, he’ll notice he’s tiring and hasn’t killed me yet. Many
men will learn caution if you give them a chance.

But not this one. She grimaced as Clarys swung at her again, stopping the blow easily with her upraised sword.
Time to end this. “I salute your courage, Clarys of Trevel, if not your wisdom.” A twist of the wrist and Dhulyn
Wolfshead sent the tip of her spinning sword through the front of Clarys’ throat. He cried out then, the sound flying
outward with a spray of blood, though his mouth did not move. Dhulyn heard the meaty sound of his body as it fell
to the ground. Watched as his heart pumped its blood onto the stones.

The entire clearing was as silent as the fog.

“Are you content?” Dhulyn said, her breathing even, her sword still raised. She spun around as Parno’s dagger
flew past her, and pinned the sword hand of Widow’s Peak to his left side.

The boy went white, and looked down at his hand, mouth trembling, as Parno approached him and took hold of
the dagger’s hilt.

“We cut, or we kill,” Parno said, slowly drawing the blade free. There was, as Dhulyn expected, very little blood.
“You’ve been cut. Shall I go on?”

Widow’s Peak shook his head, squinting at the thin wound where the dagger’s blade had sliced between the bones
of his palm. He touched his side with the fingers of his left hand and drew them back lightly stained with blood. The
point of the dagger had barely nicked him. The boy looked from his hand to Parno, to the body of his friend. To
“We fight every day,” he said. “Clarys trained his whole life.”

“On the day your lives began,” Dhulyn said. “I had already killed.”

Yaro gestured, and two of her men stepped forward to pull the body away from Dhulyn’s feet. “Clarys of Trevel,” the Racha woman called out in a voice of proclamation, “has died during the trial of his Life Passage. His soul will rest content until the Sleeping God awakens and has need of him.”

“Not if the New Believers have any say in the matter,” Parno said, almost under his breath.

Yaro made a face and spit, carefully avoiding the blood on the grass. She turned to Dhulyn, a look of sheepish sympathy on her face. “He beat me once in practice,” the older woman said. She shrugged at Dhulyn’s raised eyebrows. “He wasn’t so much the rooster as he became.” She turned to watch Clarys’ body as it was carried off into the mist. The Cloud People would bear it away and bury it that night. “Still, he never seemed to notice that he never beat me again. Some won’t learn that there’s a difference between practice and killing.”

Dhulyn turned to look at her young noblewoman and smiled, her lip curling back, knowing her face was marked by Clarys’ fountaining blood. Mar turned away and was abruptly sick in the grass.

**Five**

“MANY OF THE OLD BELIEVERS have come to us, those from the cities, especially.” Yaro led the way down a steep and rocky path to a stream running along the bottom of a narrow vale. They were only over the ridge from the Caid ruins, but with the snow falling the previous afternoon, the stream had been easy to miss. Dhulyn followed closely, carrying the empty water bags and taking care not to crowd Koba, the Racha bird balancing on the Cloudwoman’s shoulder.

Koba cocked his head, and shook it slightly from side to side. “True,” Yaro said, in answer to some remark only she could hear. “Those who were content to stay in their shrines and hold their tongues were left there; especially the unimportant shrines, which held no relic of the god. But since the priest Beslyn-Tor has become head of the Jaldean sect—” Yaro stopped and turned to face Dhulyn. “You know there are others besides us Clouds who follow exclusively the Sleeping God?”

Dhulyn nodded. More than half the soldiers she’d fought with were followers of the warrior god, praying before each battle that if they should fall, they might sleep with him until they were needed again.

“Things have changed with the Jaldeans since Beslyn-Tor became their head, up there in Gotterang. They’re saying he’s been touched by the god, knows things he cannot know, and sees more than a man can see. And there are others who have been visited in the same way.” Yaro reached the water, and her Racha bird dropped off her shoulder to perch on a nearby rock. Yaro crouched at the edge of a small pool, dipping up the cold water into her hand and tasting it, smacking her lips with pleasure. “And there are many new priests now.”

Dhulyn set the water bags down next to Yaro, and passed the Cloudwoman the first one. “And what do they do, these new priests?”

“Preach against the Marked, as far as any of us can make out,” Yaro said as she maneuvered the opening of the first water bag under the surface of the pond. “This new heresy you say you’ve heard from the Finder in Navra—he reached us, by the way, we heard by Racha from Langeron—the Sleeping God must be kept asleep, our safety lies in his unbroken dreaming, and the Marked are the incarnation of evil in the world, trying to awaken the god and destroy us all. That nonsense.”

“But the armies would rebel—”

“And are being told they’re already the soldiers of the god, already fighting to keep the world safe.”

Dhulyn frowned, rubbing her temples with her fingertips. “We are more sensible in the southern ice,” she said. “The Sun and the Moon are always with you, the Weather gods, and the gods of the Hunt and the Herd.”

“We’re not so changeable here in the Clouds either.” Yaro exchanged her full bag for the next empty one. “We’ll keep to the old ways.”

Dhulyn waited until the third bag was filled, and then the fourth, before sitting down next to the Racha bird; Koba blinked at her companionably. Yaro pushed the stopper into the final water bag, dried her hands by running them through her hair, settled herself on a patch of last year’s grasses, and leaned back on her elbows, legs stretched out before her.

Dhulyn leaned forward. “You spoke of the old ways, Brother,” she said. “I must ask you...” She tapped her own face, indicating where the tattoos marked Yaro’s. The Cloudwoman lowered her eyes, nodding. After a moment she
looked up again, but not at Dhulyn, at her Racha bird. Koba turned his head, returning her look first with one eye, then the other, before nodding in turn.

Yaro sat up, crossing her legs and resting her hands on her knees.

“I lost my first Racha,” she said. Her eyes unfocused, as if she no longer saw the world around her—the stream, the pool, and Dhulyn Wolfshead—but the past. Koba left his perch next to Dhulyn and half flew, half hopped until he was beside Yaro, crooning deep in his throat, a keening sound. “I was very young, and I found him, you see, fallen from the nest.”

Dhulyn made a querying note in her own throat and Yaro glanced at her. “It does happen,” she said. “Rarely, but it happens. Perhaps too many chicks hatch, perhaps there is a shortage of food that season, and one chick or more is pushed or falls from the nest.”

“But the trial,” Dhulyn said. “I thought for the bond to form, there had to be a trial?” That was why bonding with a Racha was usually part of the Life Passage.

“I saved him from a wolf,” Yaro said. She breathed deeply in through her nose and, blinking, turned to the living bird beside her and smiled. Koba rubbed his hooked beak against her right cheek.

“That was considered enough of a trial, you see, and we were bonded.” Yaro cleared her throat. “We were two months together,” she tapped the faded tattoo of feathers on her left cheek, “when I fell ill of a brain fever. I was near death for days.”

Yaro looked up, and Dhulyn saw the young girl, and the young girl’s sorrow and loss in Yaro’s face. Her living bird pressed his head against her, and both closed their eyes for a moment.

“My Racha, my—” Yaro pressed her lips tight, as if she could not say the bird’s name. But, gaining strength from contact with her living bird, she opened her eyes and continued. “My first Racha died during my fever. I fell into what all who saw me thought would be the final sleep, but Sortera the Healer came.” Dhulyn looked up and Yaro nodded. “Two weeks before she was expected, she came and Healed me. But when I finally woke, I was alone, my bond broken, and that she could not Heal.”

Dhulyn cleared her throat but remained silent when Yaro again touched the faded tattoo on her left cheek.

“I believe it was the Healing that kept me from following my soul into death,” she said. “But I believe I should have died before ever Sortera came. My Racha gave me his life, and that is how I lived long enough to be Healed.

“I could not throw away his gift, but neither could I remain in the Clouds and see around me every day the space where my soul was not. So I went to serve the Sleeping God another way.” This time Yaro touched the green-and-gold tattoo above her ears. “I have no talent for scholarship, and I feared the meditative life, so I became a Mercenary Brother.”

Dhulyn nodded her understanding. Though she did not know where the belief originated, she knew the Clouds considered the Scholars, the Jaldeans, and the Mercenary Brotherhood to be three orders of the ancient priesthood of the Sleeping God, and therefore three disciplines open to any Cloud who chose to leave the mountains.

“In the Brotherhood I found another kind of bond; you will understand me, you are Partnered. But while I was Healed, still I was not whole.”

Dhulyn touched her own tattoo, her Mercenary badge, traced her finger along the black line that threaded through the colors. The line that showed she was Partnered. Did she understand? She had always believed in the bond of Partnership. But now, after Parno’s insistence that they return to Imrion, and especially after her Vision of his child—was it possible that he might leave her, leave the Brotherhood as Yaro of Trevel had done, and return to his House? Marry? Father children? Did this mean their souls were not one? She pushed the thoughts away. Today’s worry today, so said the Common Rule.

“One day,” Yaro was saying, “I found myself thinking again of my home, the color of the sky above the mountains, the smell of the pines. Alkoryn Pantherclaw, who is Senior Brother to us all here on the Peninsula, advised me to make a visit home.” Yaro looked at Dhulyn from under her lashes. “My coming was seen as the direct intervention of the god. My cousin Evela, who had been a toddling child when I left my clan, had become a young woman, a Racha woman. Two days before I arrived she had fallen ill. Of a brain fever.” Yaro leaned forward, elbows on knees. “My bond had been broken, and I lived. It was hoped I could help my cousin do the same. But it did not fall out that way.”

“Was the Healer . . .?”

“Arrived too late. This time it was my cousin who died, having given her soul to her Racha, who lived.”

Koba keened again, this time a throat-rasping cough that had almost the sound of a sob in it. Yaro rubbed Koba’s face with her hands, smoothing the feathers, somehow not cutting herself on the razor-sharp beak.
Dhulyn looked from woman to Racha and back again. “But that’s not possible . . .” She let her voice die away.

“So it was thought.” Yaro looked Dhulyn directly in the eyes. “The Healer came too late to save my cousin, but when she came, she had a Mender with her. They, Healer and Mender, saw that there were two of us, each with our broken bond—and so together they Mended us, and we were Healed.”

It had to be true. The bond was there, obvious. Real.

“You were Mended and Healed?”

Koba hopped up to Yaro’s shoulder as the Cloudwoman raised herself to her feet. “Together they did what neither could do alone. Koba and I were broken, sick at heart. Now we are whole.”

As she followed Yaro of Trevel and Koba the Racha back to camp, Dhulyn was conscious that she should feel honored by the woman’s confidence—and awed at the achievement of the Marked, Mender and Healer. But she went with her eyes cast down, paying special attention to her footing, struggling to keep her face from showing the churning of her thoughts. She found that, after all, she could not rid her mind of the other part of Yaro’s story. That part in which a Mercenary Brother left the Brotherhood, to return to clan and family.

When the trail they followed came close enough, Mar looked out over the silent and empty expanse of twisted rock and sand.

“It looks like a glassmaker’s pot,” she said. As she let the reins fall slack, the packhorse came to a stop. “But only the dirty bits they don’t use.”

“There are three such places in the Letanian Peninsula,” Dhulyn Wolfshead said. “But whether that means that the Caids had their principal places here,” the Mercenary woman shrugged, urging Bloodbone along with her knees. “The Scholars are still arguing over it.”

“But what happened here?” The packhorse followed Bloodbone, and Mar looked back at the Dead Spot over her shoulder. “What went wrong?”

“Only the Caids know,” the Lionsmane said from where he rode behind her.

“The knowledge was lost,” Wolfshead added, “like so much of what the Caids knew.”

“And perhaps for the best, if their knowledge could do this.” Lionsmane gestured with a wide sweep of his arm. Wolfshead shook her head, but Mar couldn’t tell if she disagreed.

Their Cloud escort left them when the road turned northeast once more, though Yaro’s Racha bird Koba soared high above them a while longer, paying special attention to her footing, struggling to keep her face from showing the churning of her thoughts. She found that, after all, she could not rid her mind of the other part of Yaro’s story. That part in which a Mercenary Brother left the Brotherhood, to return to clan and family.
golden-brown man beside her. “You’ll have seen many like Clarys?”

“I have,” he said quietly. “The first when I was much younger than you.”

“And killed them, too,” the girl said, her eyes returning to the back of the tall woman with blood-red hair.

“Yes,” he said more quietly still. “But that was later.” Mar glanced at him again, lowering her eyes quickly when he held her gaze.

“That’s not all that’s frightened you, is it?”

“I didn’t know if you were paid enough.” Mar cleared her throat. “I thought you might let them take me.”

“Fine bodyguards we would be,” Lionsmane said softly, “to let that happen. You needn’t worry about that.” He indicated his Partner with a tilt of his head. “Dhulyn might kill you herself, but she wouldn’t allow you to be taken and sold.”

“She might kill me?” Mar rounded on him, twisting in the saddle. Was he joking?

He shrugged. “No need to look like that. Anyone might kill you. Dhulyn’s been in slavers’ hands herself. Death is easier, she says. Not necessarily preferable, just easier. She was lucky enough to be taken from a slave ship by pirates when she was eleven, maybe twelve.”

“Lucky? Taken by pirates is lucky?”

“Of course lucky. She was first captured at eight, and no one takes an eight-year-old child to be a household slave.”

“What, then?”

Lionsmane looked sideways out of narrowed eyes. “A nice respectable family, the Weavers, eh? Did a good business but didn’t travel much?” He shrugged. “Ah well, it’s easier for the rich to indulge such vices. In certain circles, small children are sold as bedservants.”

Mar felt her face grow stiff. Lionsmane nodded at her.

“The pirate who took Dhulyn was the Schooler Dorian the Black. He recognized her as one of the Red Horsemen from the south and put a sword in her hand.” Lionsmane looked ahead once more to where Dhulyn Wolfshead rode, and Mar, released from the focus of his eyes, relaxed. “We are members of the Mercenary Brotherhood. Soldiers and killers by trade. But certain kinds of people we—she and I—will kill for nothing.”

Mar looked down, concentrating on her clenched hands.

“Now what?” he said.

“I’m happy to be free . . . and safe. But that boy died because of me. Wolfshead killed him so that he would not take my bowl.” She stopped, unable to complete the thought aloud.

But Parno Lionsmane was nodding. “There’s guilt in being the one who walks away, don’t I know it. You’re wondering whether you should have given him the bowl, and taken your chances with your House. You’re wondering whether your comfort is worth a man’s life,” he said finally. And you’re wondering,” he continued when Mar still did not speak, “what kind of person kills for a piece of pottery, and what kind of person asks someone to do that for her?” He shook his head, his mouth twisting to one side as if he would spit.

“Listen, little Dove, never think for a moment that Dhulyn did not save your life. He was ready to take you, that hot head boy—to sell or to slave for him, whichever took his fancy. We were past bargaining for the bowl by the time the swords were out.”

“I tell myself that,” Mar said. “But at the time I thought . . . I didn’t think . . .”

“You didn’t think she would actually have to kill him,” Lionsmane said. “You thought ‘this is real life, it’ll all end before the bloodshed.’ ” He sighed. “Mar-eMar Tenebro,” he said, “you did not kill Clarys of Trevel. His own people lifted no hand to stop him. He was given every chance to avoid his end, and he took none. The Cloud People are hard fighters, none better, but it would take three, maybe four of them to kill Dhulyn Wolfshead, and at that they’d have to trick her. It was Clarys’ own arrogance killed him, more than anything you did, or said. More, even, than anything Dhulyn did or said. No one else blames you,” he added when she did not reply. “And one day you’ll stop blaming yourself.”

Mar looked down at her clenched hands. Her head told her he was right—but her head had been telling her that for hours, and her heart felt no better for it. She wasn’t sure she’d done the right thing about the bowl—and she wasn’t sure she’d done the right thing about the letters. How much was she willing to trade to regain her noble life?

Nothing to be done, she thought, pulling her shoulders straight. Such is the way of things. Dhulyn did not have Parno’s natural warmth, his skill with people. Even when they saw him kill someone, he never entirely stopped
being “Chanter.” Parno’s childhood had been spent in a Household—why, he and the Dove were probably related in some distant and complicated way, Dhulyn realized, her heart skipping a beat. Small wonder they were comfortable together. Bloodbone tossed her head and snorted. “Easy,” Dhulyn said, knowing it was her own uneasiness the mare was feeling. Mar was not the only one on her way back to her own family, her own people. Only Dhulyn had no family to return to, and perhaps no people. And if she had? she thought, frowning. If she had?

“Parno,” she said, drawing in Bloodbone until she was riding knee-to-knee with her Partner. “What are the odds that in a capital city like Gotterang there should be no Mercenaries among the guards at the gates?”

“High, but not impossible,” her Partner replied. His eyes took on the faraway look that meant he was calculating. Dhulyn had first seen that look at Arcosa, where Parno had figured the enemy numbers by counting their cook fires. “I’d put us at about one in forty, in terms of Imrion’s soldiers. So, yes, there should be a few Brothers among the City Guard.”

“That’s what I thought,” Dhulyn said. “Yet I see no Brothers ahead of us.”

“They could be on another watch, or at another gate.”

“They could.” But somehow Dhulyn had a feeling they weren’t.

When they got close enough, Dhulyn examined the arched gates themselves with professional interest. They were two thirds the height of the walls, three man heights at least, and the rounded opening was wide enough for four horsemen to ride through abreast. She would give half a moon’s pay at campaign rates to get a look at the machinery that would shut the gates quickly across so large an opening. Had there been any Brothers among the guards, she might have asked for a viewing, but likely, as this was Gotterang, the Seat of the Tarkin, she would have been refused.

“Your business here, Mercenaries?” The guardswoman spoke with barely a glance at them.

“We escort this young lady to Tenebro House,” Parno said.

“Tenebro House, eh? I don’t suppose you’ll want to tell me what that’s all about?” the woman said, stepping forward.

“You suppose correctly, my friend,” Parno smiled.

“Coming from?”

“Navra.”

“Navra? Is the Pass open?”

“For military information, you’ll have to consult our House.”

“No need to get huffy, man. I was only asking out of curiosity.”

“It’s open enough for three people on horseback,” Parno said with a shrug. “If that’s of any use to you.”

“See any Cloud People?”

“Plenty of clouds, no people.”

“Some people have all the luck,” the guardswoman shook her head. A tall man in a crested helmet approached, and the woman questioning them drew herself stiffly to attention. “Two Mercenary Brothers, and their charge, to House Tenebro, Captain.”

“Very well,” the officer said. “Carry on.” He turned to speak to Parno as the guardswoman began to deal with the people behind them. “Dismount, please.” He waited, but none of them moved. Even Dhulyn would have been just as glad to be on her feet; the last two nights her bed had seemed to sway, and she’d been riding in her dreams. But Mercenaries didn’t get down off their horses for no reason.

“Except for those on City Guard business, and the Noble Houses, riding is not permitted in the city.” The Guard Captain had the air of someone who was repeating himself for the thousandth time. “You’ll go directly to your House,” the man stated flatly, biting off his words. “They’ll tell you what parts of the city you are free of, and what parts you’ll need business to enter.”

“My friend, we’re of the Brotherhood,” Parno said. “Since when are we to be treated like thieves and rogues?”

“I’m not blind, man. I’m not your friend. If you wish to enter the city, these are the conditions. If not, move away from the gate.”

“The young lady stays mounted, then,” Dhulyn said as she climbed down from Bloodbone more slowly than necessary. “She is of the Tenebro,” she said to the man’s lifted eyebrow. “Nobles, you said, may ride.”

The officer nodded brusquely and stepped back. “Your pardon, Lady. Would you like a guard escort? These two must go directly to their House to report themselves. It would save you time.”
“No, thank you.” Mar spoke quietly, but with some composure. “I am in no hurry.” That almost made Dhulyn smile again. From the look on the little Dove’s face, any delay would be welcomed.

“Very well, Lady.” The officer turned back to Parno and rattled off the directions to Mercenary House as the Lionsmane listened, gravely nodding as though every Mercenary did not know where every one of their Houses could be found. He gave Mar another sharp nod, almost deep enough to be a bow, and turned his attention back to his guards.

Parno followed Dhulyn’s example and dismounted, exaggerating his stiffness as much as possible.

“It used to be they waited for you to make trouble before they decided you were a troublemaker,” he said casually as they strolled through the gate, but loudly enough for the retreating officer to hear. Dhulyn laughed. It would have been out of character not to grumble, however false it may have sounded to their own ears. Dhulyn shifted her shoulders, feeling the knife resting in its harness under her vest. She had the oddest sensation that she was being watched. She turned around, but no one at the gate was following their progress, nor did they seem the focus of anyone’s attention. She stroked Bloodbone’s nose. The horses seemed quite content.

Still. “Parno,” she said, keeping her voice level and quiet. “Does anything seem odd to you?”

“Besides these blooded rules, you mean?”

“I mean something like what seemed odd to you that afternoon in Navra.” At this Parno gave her a sharp, comprehending look, and then frowned, concentrating within, rather than without.

“Nothing,” he said finally. “You? Any green-eyed priests?”

She shrugged. “No green eyes at all. Not now at any rate.”

“Careful it is, then,” he said.

“Can’t I walk, too,” she finally whispered to the Wolfshead, who was nearest.

“Best not,” the Mercenary answered in the whisper Mar had heard her use so often on the trail. “Dismounting would draw even more notice. Rest easy, we’re not so far from our House.”

Mar was more relieved than she could say when they finally rode up a crooked street, past a large archway through which she could see a vast square filled with stalls and kiosks, and finally, through a much smaller arched entrance into the courtyard of Mercenary House. A young woman whose dark brown hair was pulled back off her face with a leather thong, but not yet removed for her Mercenary badge, ran out to take charge of the horses. Lionsmane himself reached up to help Mar down.

“Make yourself comfortable here,” he said. “This youngster will see you get something to eat and drink.”

“There’s fresh cider,” the girl offered with a smile, “nice and hot, and almond cakes baked this morning.”

“There you are, little Dove,” Wolfshead said, rubbing Bloodbone’s nose before handing the bridle to the waiting girl. “Tell the House that Dhulyn Wolfshead and Parno Lionsmane are here.”

“Can’t I come with you?” Mar clung for a moment to Lionsmane’s sleeve.

“Sorry, little Dove. None but Brothers may enter further.”

Another smile, a touch on her shoulder, and Mar found herself alone. She took a deep breath and looked around her, oddly uneasy with the by-now-unfamiliar sensation of being alone.

The courtyard was as quiet and solitary as she’d always imagined Scholar Houses would be. No clattering groups of armed Brothers, no one practicing Shora, no horses, dogs, or chickens. Not even any raised voices from within, as there would have been at the Weavers’ home. Scattered through the courtyard were grapevines growing out of old ceramic urns, chipped and discolored with time. Spring was far advanced in Gotterang, and Mar could see the new growth of leaves along the tough old wood stems. Someone had strung cords across the courtyard high enough that they would be well above the head of even someone on horseback. When the heat of full summer struck here, the courtyard would be roofed in with cool greenery.

It was hard to imagine that this small garden oasis existed in the middle of Gotterang’s stone. It was harder still to imagine that any harm could come to those who lived here and used this garden.

“Are you the one come with the Brothers?”

Startled, Mar almost slipped on the cobblestones under her feet as she spun around to face the voice.

“Watch yourself, Lady, best you sit down. Days on horseback don’t make for steady footing, not on these stones.” A small boy, his shock of red hair escaping from a leather thong identical to that of the young woman who’d taken the horses away, stood near her with a tray containing a large cup full of what smelled like the best spiced cider Mar had ever smelled, and a small blue plate of almond cakes covered with a square of linen.
The boy smiled at her and, blushing, set down the tray on the end of the bench next to the studded door that had swallowed her friends.

Mar sat down and nudged the plate toward the boy. “I’m Mar,” she said.

The boy took her gesture for the invitation it was and sat also, helping himself to one of the cakes. “Nikko,” he said. “I’ve been here a month, and they’re sending me to be Schooled as soon as Dorian the Black puts into port, or there’s a Brother heading toward Nerysa Warhammer in the southern mountains, that is. They wouldn’t send me alone. Are you coming to be Schooled?”

“No,” Mar answered gravely, taking a sip of cider to clear her throat of almond cake. “I’m being taken to my House here in the city.”

“So it was you that came in with Parno Lionsmane and Dhulyn Wolfshead?”

“You know them?”

“Everybody knows them! Dhulyn,” Nikko blushed again as he called his future Brother by her name. “Dhulyn’s a Red Horseman, they say the last of her Clan, the others are all dead, but nothing can kill her, she killed a whole boatload of slavers when she was just a kid like me, and Parno, he freed the kidnapped heir of Bhexyllia and got decorated by the Galan himself and rewarded with a golden sword, which, of course, he gave to our House, because a real Brother doesn’t use such things.”

Nikko stopped to take a breath and another bite from his almond cake, and Mar fought to keep herself from smiling.

“So you want to be just like them when you grow up?”

“Oh, I’m not waiting until then. Alkoryn, our Senior Brother here, he says you can be a good Mercenary before ever you have a weapon in your hands. Alkoryn says a good Mercenary—” Nikko broke off and sprang to his feet, his previous blush seeming like pallor next to the dark color that now suffused his cheeks.

“We’re not supposed to talk to strangers,” he said, and ran off before Mar could reassure him that she wasn’t, exactly, a stranger.

Mar leaned back, smiling, against the warm stone of the courtyard’s inner wall. This was a sunny corner, and she could feel the tension seeping slowly out of her body. It was clear that Nikko had a case of hero worship, but it was also clear that his Brothers Parno and Dhulyn were forces to be reckoned with. Whatever House Tenebro wanted with these two particular Mercenaries, Mar felt sure that two such legends among their kind would prosper. Even if only half of what Nikko believed was true. Even if she didn’t tell them about the letters. Mar closed her eyes. Her head fell back against the warm stone and she slept.

Dhulyn eyed the man in the room with the kind of interest she would normally have given only to his books. She had never met Alkoryn Pantherclaw, but she had heard him described by Dorian the Black. Alkoryn had seen his birth moon some fifty times, she estimated, and had been a Mercenary longer than she herself had been alive. It had never been Alkoryn’s ambition to Command a House, but that was before he had taken the blow to the throat that had robbed him of his voice. A man whose orders cannot be heard loses his value as a field officer. Thwarted in his first ambition, Alkoryn had turned his attention to developing quieter skills. Though he was still considered a formidable warrior and tactician, even among a Brotherhood of warriors, Alkoryn Pantherclaw was now more often called the Charter, and, among other things, he was the chief mapmaker for the Brotherhood.

Alkoryn waited to speak until Dhulyn and Parno had drawn up chairs, and they had all been served with sweet cakes and hot cider mixed with a little ganje.

“Young man’s voice was rough and barely louder than a whisper. “How was Navra when you left it? What of the Pass?”

As Senior Brother of Imrion, Alkoryn Pantherclaw was, in effect, the Senior Mercenary for the whole Peninsula —should his authority ever be required by one of his Brothers. As such, he had a responsibility to collect any information that might touch upon his charge. He listened patiently while his junior Brothers told him of the dredging being planned in Navra’s harbor, the new salt mine, and the expansion of the evaporation ponds. He heard with some amusement their story of what had happened to them in Clan Trelven.

“So Yaro Hawkwing prospers,” the old man croaked. “I rejoice to hear it. Do we now have allies among Clan Trelven?”

“We might,” Dhulyn said. She glanced at Parno in time to see him nodding. “Perhaps if we sent them some acknowledgment. . . .”

“I’ll think what form it could take. I have my contacts with Clan Pompano, but we may have need of all the
Clouds if what I think is coming comes,” Alkoryn said dryly. He took up the ceramic jug of cooling cider and refilled the cups. Dhulyn saw that two knuckles of his left hand were swollen, but whether from old breaking or from arthritis she could not tell. “You came as bodyguards?” he continued as he set down the jug.

Parno exchanged glances with Dhulyn. She gave him a slight nod. “Not merely bodyguards, Alkoryn my Brother,” he began. He paused and took a sip from his cup. Dhulyn suppressed a smile. The way he was drawing out the moment, Parno should have been an actor, she thought, as her Partner blotted his lips carefully with the square of linen provided. “We have come to Gotterang as the guides and bodyguards of a Lady orphan of House Tenebro, no less. Any reason for such an exalted House to be gathering up their lesser kin?”

Alkoryn’s lips formed a silent whistle and his eyes narrowed. “She’s not the first, and that’s a fact,” he said. “My bones tell me this may be part of what I see coming,” he said. “Though I don’t know how.” He sat back, leaning his right elbow on the arm of his chair. “The Tenebroso is an old woman and gossip says she’s failing. The Kir, Lok-iKol, is a forward-looking man, and may very well be thinking to reestablish the Tenebro claim on lost lands. But that in itself is no reason to bring the girl here.”

“Mar-eMar feels there’s a wedding in the wind, and it’s true she has letters she hasn’t shown us,” Dhulyn said. “She’s not advantageous enough a match for the Kir himself,” Alkoryn said, taking a sip of his cider and returning the glass to the table. “Though there’s a cousin in the House, Dal-eDal, from an Imrion Household, not a Holding as is this Mar-eMar. A marriage there would be a way to increase the young man’s property without losing anything of value to the main branch. House Tenebro has had bad luck enough in the last twenty years or so; Lok-iKol has no cousins of his own generation left, they say, though there are some few of their children about, like this Mar of yours, and Dal-eDal himself, for that matter.” He glanced at his younger Brothers. “With things the way they are at present, it’s no bad idea for those in the Houses to put their hands on all their kin.”

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“The way things are at present?” said Parno. “Like these new regulations governing who may ride? This has some connection with the doings of House Tenebro?” Something in his voice made Dhulyn glance at him. Was he a little paler than before? What had there been in Alkoryn’s remarks to give Parno that stricken look?

“Perhaps only in the mind of an old Brother, but I’ve seen too much to be easy with the changes of the last few years—still less with those of the last few months.” Alkoryn took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “The riding law is just the latest, and unpopular as it is, it helps more than it hinders. There’s always trouble in a city,” he said. “The bigger the city, the more trouble. You’d think that people weren’t meant to live together in such quantities, but there, that’s a subject for another time.”

Dhulyn exchanged a look with Parno as the older man pushed his white hair back from his face with both hands. “It would be hard to pinpoint exactly when things began to go badly, or why it began, for that matter, but the normal incidents one expects in city life have grown more frequent, and more disturbing. More knifings and fewer fistfights, if you follow me. Associations and clubs are becoming gangs, and it’s not unusual now for a quarrel between two merchants to turn into a full-blown riot in a matter of minutes, or for groups to be set upon in the streets.”

Parno searched the tabletop for a moment before finding a relatively empty spot to set his glass down. “You could see something was off-center,” he said. “Even walking here.” He glanced at Dhulyn. “It’s been a few years since either of us were in Gotterang—before we Partnered—but there’s a bad feeling in the streets. I can’t put my finger on it—”

“Not enough children,” Dhulyn said, and lifted her blood-red brows as both men looked at her. “None playing games in the streets, anyway, and the people who were out, looking at each other sideways.”

Alkoryn nodded again. “You can see the tension now, those of us who know what to look for. The City Guards are always on the alert, and they’ve been taken to traveling in groups of five, instead of the usual pairs. The order restricting riding gives the Watch greater mobility, and lessens the chances of troublemakers getting away, but honest people feel it’s too severe.”

“Can’t make the nobles walk, I suppose,” Parno said. “That would make them more trouble, not less,” Dhulyn said, her eyes round and innocent in her scarred face. Both men smiled. “There was a riot in the Calzos district two months ago, and the City Guards were overwhelmed. The Tarkin sent the Guard from the Carnelian Dome and the crowd dispersed. There were delegations to the Tarkin after that and things looked to be getting better, but every time the violence dies down for a few days, something happens that starts it up again. Things are now at the point that only the presence of the Carnelian Guard will convince people to disperse.”
“Let me guess,” Parno said. “Something to do with the Marked or with these New Believers we’ve heard about.”

“What haven’t you told me?”

Parno looked at Dhulyn, and she nodded. “There was a fire in Navra,” she said. Alkoryn Pantherclaw’s face grew grimmer and grimmer as she told the story, and he was silent a long while when she finished.

“I did not realize it had spread so far. There have been fires here as well and, I think, worse things. Nor is there doubt in anyone’s mind that the new sect of the Jaldeans are behind it,” Alkoryn said. “But proving it’s a different matter. Even those who don’t follow the Sleeping God are being turned against the Marked, being told that they profit from the misfortunes of others.”

“Well, so do we if it comes to that,” Parno pointed out.

“Yes,” Dhulyn said. “But we risk our lives doing it; that may keep us safe a while longer.”

“Oh, in public and during the day the New Believers preach tolerance and understanding, pleading with the Marked to come to their shrines for guidance and cleansing.” The old man shook his head. “I see from your faces you’ve been told what this cleansing means.”

“All this turmoil, at least, should mean we’ll find plenty of work, once we’ve delivered our charge.”

“Don’t count your money yet,” Alkoryn said. “There’s been no new hiring of Mercenary Brothers for weeks, and some long in guard service have been let go.”

“All these problems, the City Guard confounded, and no work for Mercenaries?”

“Nothing overt has been either said or done,” Alkoryn said. “But again, this is nothing new in our history. There are changes coming, with these New Believers, and it won’t be the first time that as a Brotherhood we ride them out, rather than fight them out.”

“And the Marked?”

“We’ve a little something in hand for them, never fear. When you’ve finished with the Tenebro girl, I will have an assignment for you myself. But tell me, you heard nothing of this in the West?”

“Not in the court of the Great King,” Dhulyn said. “There are Marked there, of course, but very few, and well-respected.”

“As bad as it is here in Imrion, this whole eastern end of the world is like kindling awaiting the match. Kondria has warned the Tarkin that if there are any further attacks on the Marked, it will withdraw its embassy.”

“That means war.”

Dhulyn shot a glance at Parno. Was there worry in his voice?

“And if Kondria is drawn into a religious war with Imrion, their allies will follow,” Alkoryn said. The look he gave them was grave. “The Tarkin, and his hold on Imrion, is all that keeps the east from bursting into flame.”

“If the east is burning, it may attract the attention of the Great King,” Dhulyn said. “And bring the rest of the world into the conflict.” She frowned down at the table, tracing her finger along a shoreline drawn in deep sea green. She froze.

“With things so uncertain, perhaps you should consider moving your maps,” she said. Parno looked at her, eyebrows raised in inquiry, but she moved her head minutely, side to side.

“What Dorian has said of you is true,” Alkoryn said after a short silence. “Your intuition is superb. It is, indeed, part of my plan to move these records to a safer spot.”

“I would start moving them now,” Dhulyn said, gesturing around her. “I think you are so used to them, my Brother, that you don’t realize how much packing all this will take.”

“You may be right.”

“In the meantime, since Imrion is not yet at war, we’ll take the little Dove to Tenebro House . . .” Dhulyn let the words fade away as Alkoryn held up his hand.

“The day’s well advanced. Wait until morning and take no chances. And in the meantime, I have something here that may be of use, though it cannot leave this room.” He twisted in his seat and reached over the low back of his chair. Dhulyn automatically noted that the old man was still limber enough to perform such an action. After a moment’s hesitation he selected a bundle of thin parchments rolled together and tied with a wide blue ribbon. This he untied and spread the curling papers, turning brown around the outer edges, flat on the map that covered the table. Parno passed over several stone weights from his side of the table.

Floor plans, Dhulyn realized. Layer after intricate layer of floor plans.
“Incredible,” Parno murmured, pulling one sheet closer to his side of the table. The house was a maze. Halls that went nowhere, others that simply turned back on themselves, forcing the uninitiated to travel in circles, fake walls, secret passages, more stairwells than normally appear in a handful of buildings.

“Built in the time of Jorelau Tarkin,” Alkoryn said. “And reflecting the paranoia of that day.”

Dhulyn tapped the corner of one sheet, where the mark of House Tenebro was clearly drawn.

“How is this possible?” she said, smiling her wolf’s smile.

Alkoryn shrugged. “Over the years many Brothers have served as guards and instructors in Tenebro House. We have three there now, as it happens. For that reason, I will ask you to exercise the greatest care while you are on their premises.”

Dhulyn nodded, her eyes still on the plans. Mercenary Brothers might find themselves on opposite sides on a battlefield, but anywhere else they took care of one another.

She looked up from the drawings. “Is the old Bootmaker’s Inn still in business?”

Alkoryn nodded. “You might as well leave your horses here, however. You won’t be riding them, and it will save you their board.”

“Let’s hope that’s all we have to worry about,” Parno said, still studying the floor plans of Tenebro House.

Six

“DO I HAVE TO RIDE?” Mar asked from her seat on the windowsill. The Bootmaker’s Inn had been almost full, and they had ended up all sleeping in the same room, though not, this time, in the same bed.

Wolfshead looked up from lacing the cuff of her leggings. “Of course not, if you don’t wish it,” was all she said.

“Then I don’t wish it,” Mar said.

Wolfshead nodded, straightened to her feet, plucked her sheathed sword off the bed, and hung it on her belt harness. “Not that comfortable riding yesterday?” she asked.

Mar shrugged. “Maybe if I’d been dressed differently. I kept thinking people were looking at me and wondering what a girl dressed in a shop clerk’s worn-out clothing was doing on a horse.” She looked up to find the Wolfshead watching her, head tilted to one side.

“You’re not the Weaver’s girl anymore, that’s certain. But remember that nobility can insulate as well as expose.”

Mar looked down, nodding. She knew what the Wolfshead said was true. But, like so many things lately, it didn’t make her feel any better.

“Come,” Wolfshead said, her voice soft and kind. “There’s no harm in being a weaver’s girl for a little while longer.”

“All ready, then?” he said, turning toward them with a smile.

The innkeeper shook his head, grinning. “If I’d known you had a cousin of the Tenebros with you, I’d have charged you more for your room.”

“Why do you think we didn’t tell you?”

The man was still chuckling when Mar followed Lionsmane through the inn’s gated entrance out into a wide city street. The Wolfshead, for once, was bringing up the rear, with Mar safely tucked between them.

“It’s a long walk, as walking goes, from this quarter to Tenebro House. You’re sure you don’t want us to get you a horse?” Lionsmane looked back at her over his left shoulder.

Mar shook her head. “I’d rather walk,” she said. “I’d like to see something of the city.” They wouldn’t push her, she knew. They would realize that she was making delays out of nervousness. The Lionsmane was humming and whistling as if there was something about cities that brought out a spirit of fun in him.

As they walked, the narrow street crossed others and widened into squares every now and then, some with public fountains and others with neighborhood ovens. The business of the day had already started for many of the people, and setting aside the difference that sheer numbers meant, Mar saw much that was familiar to her. Shops, homes, and taverns being swept out, stalls being set up in the squares, and merchants laying out their wares. These were not like the large farmers’ market she’d known in Navra, but neighborhood places, where people came to do their marketing every day.

“Oh, look,” Mar said, as she turned aside to watch two women pulling strands of ever thinner dough from hand to hand, doubling and twisting the strands until they were almost as fine as hairs before hanging them to dry on racks
made of thin wooden dowels.

“Noodle makers,” Lionsmane said, stopping beside her. “Much more popular than rice or potatoes here. They say you eventually get tired of eating noodles, but it’s never happened to me.”

After a while the streets got wider, the market squares larger and noisier, and Mar began to wish for a horse after all. Lionsmane and Wolfshead moved through the crowd as if they were alone on the trail. Light glinted off the little beads and bits of metal woven into Wolfshead’s narrow blood-red braids. Mar glanced ahead at Lionsmane. They both seemed so relaxed, striding along bareheaded and empty-handed. Both had put away their traveling leathers and were dressed once more as Mar had seen them when they had first met. Both in loose-fitting trousers tucked into half boots, the Lionsmane in a light brown tunic embroidered with gold threads that caught and reflected the gold in his hair, the Wolfshead in her quilted vest, bright with beading and ribbons, her arms bare, her skin white in the chill morning air. For the most part the two Brothers smiled as they spoke to each other and to Mar, pointing out here a spotted horse like Wolfshead’s Bloodbone, there a seller of spiced rolls that Lionsmane insisted on buying, and pausing at one point to watch a group of children play a skipping game. But Mar noticed that the Wolfshead in particular scanned the people around them, as though she were looking for something or someone in particular, not just checking for possible danger. Mar followed one especially narrow glance at a redheaded man before she realized what it was the Wolfshead looked for.

*Red Horsemen*, Mar thought. *She’s looking for other Red Horsemen.*

The streets became more crowded as businesses opened and serious marketing began. Still, Mar noticed that people seemed to clear a path for the Mercenaries without being aware of it.

At one point she saw three people dressed in the dark green of the Marked. There were a few stony looks, but most of the passersby ignored them. With the crowds, entertainers appeared, and after so many days on horseback Mar was grateful for the rest stops, once to watch a particularly good juggler, and once a person who seemed to be swallowing swords. Mar turned for one last look as they continued on their way.

“How does she do that?”

“Sword’s dull,” Wolfshead said, as if that explained everything.

“Oh, and another thing . . .” Lionsmane was imparting a steady commentary on manners and protocol over his shoulder as they walked. Mar swallowed, her head was starting to spin.

“Parno, for Sun and Moon’s sake, leave the Dove alone. You told her all this on the trail, and she’s asked you all the questions she can think of. If she hasn’t memorized the eating tools by now, she’s not going to the next few spans.”

Mar flashed the older woman a grateful smile, hoping it didn’t look as stiff as it felt. Now that she was on the point of putting Lionsmane’s instructions to use, Mar was finding it vastly less entertaining than it had seemed on the road. And perhaps less to be wished for than it had seemed in Navra.

“Have we much farther to go?” Her feet hurt, and her legs weren’t used to walking. Part of her wanted to get there, to get it over with. Part of her hoped that this walk would never end.

Dhulyn was enjoying herself as much as she could in a city—fine places to visit, she’d always thought, but you wouldn’t want to live in one. They crossed a broad avenue and turned uphill, entering a sizable square where three streets met, and the corner of a warehouse buttressed against a half-ruined garden wall. Here, such a crowd had gathered that it almost blocked the passage through the area entirely. A man in red-and-brown robes was standing on what was left of the wall, raised above the crowd to about the height of a person sitting on a horse. Dhulyn wondered if this particular bit of wall had been chosen for just that reason. Get the people to see you as an authority, either noble or military.

And the man was a Jaldean priest, no doubt about it, though certainly the youngest one Dhulyn had ever seen. Hair and beard close-cropped. High forehead and a spot showing where he would be bald in a few years. A much older man in robes of the same colors stood on the ground near the speaker’s feet. Dhulyn slowed to let some of the people coming the other way pass by on her left side. She’d thought she’d seen a flash of green as the older man’s head had turned away, but she couldn’t be sure unless he turned back again. The crowd closest to the priests certainly looked slack-jawed and blank-faced, but they did not display any of the destructive behavior she and Parno had seen in the mob in Navra.

Mar’s hand tugged slightly on the front of Dhulyn’s vest as the press of people moved them farther apart, recalling Dhulyn to her charge.

“Just keep moving,” Dhulyn told her. “Keep your hand on Parno, don’t worry about me.” She smiled when Mar took hold of Parno’s sword belt before letting go of Dhulyn’s vest. Smart girl. It was hard to navigate in this big a
crowd if you didn’t know how. Easy to lose your nerve.

“Now there’s no doubt,” the young Jaldean was saying, “that the Caids knew how to awaken the Sleeping God. And there’s no one who has seen the Dead Spots, where the land is blackened and sterile, melted and fused like glass, who doesn’t know what happens when the Sleeping God awakes.”

Dhulyn raised her eyebrows, but kept her grimace from moving so far as her lips. She remembered, years before, walking through a market square with Dorian the Black, and stopping to listen to an old man, a Jaldean priest. All that old man had talked about was how the Sleeping God kept watch always in his dreams, ready to awaken and protect everyone from harm. She’d still been a child then—at least in some ways—with a child’s way of looking at things, and she’d wondered just how blooded bad things had to get for the blooded god to wake up and help people.

Today’s priest seemed to have come a long way from that.

“And we think—we hope—that knowledge has died with the Caids, but has it? I ask you, my friends, has it?” Several voices called out “no,” but the man continued as if he hadn’t been answered. “We can’t know for certain, and that’s the fact. But we can take precautions, we can take care.

“We don’t know that there are snakes in the grass, but we can thump the ground with our walking sticks as we go, to be safe. We don’t know that the Cloud People are going to rob the caravan, they say they won’t . . .” Here the man smiled and shook his head as if he could say a thing or two about that, and smiles and winks passed through the listening crowd as if they, too, knew something about the real behavior of Cloud People. “But we can hire guards to keep ourselves safe.

“Now, the Marked say they’re not trying to awaken the Sleeping God, that they don’t even know how. And many of you have Marked among your neighbors, kind, helpful people and they tell you they don’t know how to awaken the Sleeping God, and you think it must be true. You don’t see how they can be so dangerous and so wicked.” The Jaldean pursed his lips and nodded, as if conceding the point. “But we know,” his voice fell like a hammer, “that the Marked are the descendants of the Caids. Where else would their special talents come from, remember, talents that can’t be taught to all or any—talents that draw on the Sleeping God’s power, draining it, bringing him ever closer to wakefulness. No my friends, however kind and helpful they might be as individuals, as your neighbors, as your friends, the Marked are a danger to you, and a danger to themselves. They must stop. We must learn to do without their aid, their deceptive aid, in order to preserve the world. We must take steps to save ourselves. And to save them too! All they have to do is come to the shrine to be cleansed. All they have to do is come to the shrine to be cleansed, to be purified. Let us help them to keep us all safe . . .”

The Jaldean’s comfortable tone, the throaty murmurs of the crowd, died away as Parno led them slowly out of the square.

“Sometimes,” Mar murmured to Dhulyn, “they seem to make sense.”

“Yes,” Dhulyn’s tone was carefully neutral. “Yes, they do.” In public they were all tolerance and forgiveness, Alkoryn Pantherclaw had said, and Dhulyn saw what he meant. That’s what makes them so dangerous, she thought. Much of what was said seemed so logical, people tended not to question the rest. Dorian had always said to be careful of logic. While one was using logic on you, another was stealing your purse. Or slitting your throat. She met the eye of a man behind her, also trying to leave the square, who murmured something under his breath and shook his head, holding Dhulyn’s eye. She kept her face impassive, but did not turn away.

The streets became wider still, and better paved, with fewer people on them and no one, now, in the dark green of the Marked. Walls of undressed stone lined with the doorways of shops and workplaces gradually turned into unbroken whitewashed stucco. At one point bells started ringing the midmorning watch.

“Do you recognize that tune, my heart?” Dhulyn called out.

“I’ve heard it, certainly,” Parno said. “But I don’t place it.

Dhulyn began to sing.

Halfway through a second verse, their voices faltered as a burly man running to fat went past on a roan horse being led by a servant. He turned his head to watch them as he passed. The servant and the horse didn’t look. Dhulyn laughed and began to whistle the tune.

When they were still a street away from Tenebro House, Dhulyn called to Parno and drew her companions to one side.
“Well, little Dove,” Dhulyn said, the corner of her mouth lifting. “This is your last chance. Do we go on?”

The girl looked from one to the other. Parno raised his eyebrows but said nothing. Dhulyn hadn’t consulted him, knowing he would be with her on this. Better the girl should freely choose.

Mar nodded absently, her eyes focused somewhere between the two Mercenaries. She parted her lips, thought better of what she was about to say, and shut her mouth again. “What about your pay?” she asked finally.

“We’d want to be paid, rightly enough,” Dhulyn told her. “But in this case we’re not particular by whom. Plenty of work to be found in this city now that we’re here. For you and us.” Dhulyn smiled, no need for the Dove to know what Alkoryn had told them. “We could wait to be paid if you decide so. Or simply,” she said, her voice more gentle, “we can wait if you need time to be certain.”

Mar nodded again. She looked up, meeting Dhulyn’s eyes directly. “Suppose I go to my House, I might still change my mind,” Mar said.

“And you would have been paid, but not by me.” She grinned in response to Dhulyn’s wolf’s smile. “In the meantime, they sent for me, and I have come. There is no way for me to be more certain.”

Mar turned her head away. If it were possible, Dhulyn would have said that the girl’s pallor had increased. She looked almost green in the morning light. Dhulyn caught Parno’s eye, but he only shrugged, and set off toward Mar’s House.

Not any movement of face or body revealed Dhulyn’s alert interest. She had read that many of the older Noble Houses were doubled-gated, and the plans had shown her that Tenebro House was one, but she had never seen such a thing with her own eyes. There would be two walls, she knew, with a gate in each, offset so that forcing one gate could not force the other. Rather, attackers could be trapped between the inner and the outer wall, easy prey for anyone standing on the inner battlements.

Dhulyn looked with even more interest at the man who stood so calmly within the pass door. This would be the Steward of Walls, a House’s equivalent of the Captain of the Guard, a responsibility so weighty that once it had been accepted, he could never leave the House’s walls again. It was part of his undertaking to inspect any who entered the House for the first time. It was he who decided whether to open the pass door or gate. And at times he staked his life on his judgment, since the inner gate was opened only when he allowed it. Intruders might kill him, but killing him would not open the inner gate.

This Steward was a tall, lean man all arms and legs, dressed like a minor nobleman in soft woolen leggings tucked into short boots, linen shirt with wide sleeves and a blue silk tunic. A teal-and-black crest was sewn into the left shoulder of his tunic, the colors of House Tenebro. His dark hair showed some gray, and the skin had begun to turn to paper around his eyes. But those eyes were still a sharp crystal blue. He stood calm, his wide mouth faintly smiling, a man still hard. Had he been a Brother, he would have many years of good service still to give. The man took time to appraise Parno and Dhulyn, their Mercenary badges, their swords ready to draw, their proximity to their plainly dressed charge. His gaze lingered on Dhulyn. She could feel herself starting to smile. He did not seem surprised by what he saw, but then, he did not seem like a man who could be easily surprised.

“In what way can I assist you?” he said, inclining his head to Mar.

“I am Mar-eMar, a daughter of this House.”

Nothing changed on the man’s face. He would have seen that her clothes, while well made, were nothing more than serviceable by the standards of a Noble House, that those clothes had been seen plenty of recent service, and that she and her guards had collected a portion of dust walking in the streets. His face showed nothing of this. “You’ll forgive me, Lady,” was all he said. “I do not know you.”

Mar drew up her shoulders. “I am the daughter of the Lady TamuTam, who was the daughter of the Lady Wat-aWat, who was the daughter of the Lord Dow-oDow. I am summoned by the Tenebroso Lady Kor-iRok, who is my House.” Mar reached into the front of her tunic and pulled out the letter that Dhulyn had seen and read in Navra. Mar held out the parchment so that the seal could be seen.

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The man had started to nod long before Mar had finished her account. “You are expected and welcome, Mar-eMar Tenebro. I am Karlyn-Tan, your Steward of Walls. Pray, enter.” He bowed his head more deeply and stepped aside to let them into the space between the doors. The pass door closed behind them, and bars were thrown before the inner gates—a good five paces to the left—opened to reveal the interior courtyard.

As soon as the inner gates had closed behind them, what little street noise existed here so close to the Carnelian Dome faded completely. The courtyard was much larger than had seemed possible from the street, holding a fountain—dry at this time of year—as well as several small trees. To the left and right, doors and windows indicated
quarters built into the walls for the guards and outer servants who did not live in the House. Across the yard and up
three broad flagstone steps were the double doors of the House itself, elaborate carvings and metal inlays presenting
the emblems of the Tenebro. No hinges were showing. That confirmed the detail shown on Alkoryn’s plans. A
banner hung from a standard, indicating that the Tenebroso, the head of the House, was in residence.

The courtyard was large enough to seem uncrowded, though there were at least twenty people passing through it
as the two Brothers entered with their charge. A few of these were guards, but most were obviously servants of the
House, lingering to see who was coming in, looking for excuses to pause in their work. Even the children playing
with wooden balls in the far corner left off and came to see what the visitors were about. Unlike Karlyn-Tan, all of
these wore a kind of livery with the house colors of teal and black showing on collars and cuffs.

The Steward of Walls led them across the yard.

“You may wait here if you wish,” he said, turning to address Dhulyn and Parno. “You have Brothers within these
walls, and they can be summoned to attend you.”

“We are not yet discharged,” Parno said.

“Of course.” A slight bow. “In that case, I must ask that you leave your weapons here.” He motioned, and one of
the watching guards approached. Dhulyn smiled her wolf’s smile, drew her sword, and presented it with a flourish.
A broad smile passed over the Steward’s lips as he accepted her weapon with a bow. She could like this fellow,
Dhulyn thought. Only a special kind of man retained his sense of humor in this position. Parno handed his sword
without ceremony to the waiting guard.

The Steward waited a moment more, but neither Mercenary moved. “I’m afraid I must ask for all of your

Dhulyn’s own smile became more pronounced. “You could strip us naked, and still not have all of our weapons,”
she said, lifting her left eyebrow.

“My Lord, I would wager that was so.” Karlyn-Tan held her gaze with his very clear blue eyes as the people in the
courtyard gave up any pretense of passing through and began to gather more closely around them.

Parno coughed. Dhulyn gave him a sidelong look, but he was only gazing at her blandly. She shrugged and
nooded. They’d done this before, and they knew how to make a show of it—and that making a show of it would
enhance their reputation without frightening anyone. She and Parno began to shed weapons like a wet dog sheds
water. Between them they disposed of three knives, one almost long enough to qualify as a short sword, four thrust
daggers, and two wrist knives and five throwing stars. They paused. The crowd of House people began to whisper
among themselves.

The children crept closer still and poked at each other. Parno winked at the nearest, stroked his now well-
established beard, reached into the back of his tunic, and pulled out a silvered throwing quoit. Dhulyn rolled her
eyes to the heavens, as though calling on the Outlander gods of Sky and Rain to witness Parno’s foolishness. Parno
shrugged and smiled sheepishly, making the children giggle. The Steward grinned and said nothing. People in the
small crowd surrounding them muttered and Dhulyn heard the chink of coin. She reached over her shoulder with her
left hand, pushing it down the back of her vest as if to reach a bad itch, and drew out a tiny hatchet. Parno looked
thoughtful, drew four black metal tubes from the top of his boot and added them to the pile.

The Partners looked at each other. Parno frowned. Dhulyn shrugged, unbuckled the wallet at her waist and simply
added it, belt and all, to the pile. Parno nodded. They turned their attention back to the Steward of Walls, eyes wide
and innocent, hands clasped behind their backs, looking almost exactly as they had looked before. There were grins
and murmurs of admiration among the watching gatemen, and a small child whistled and started to clap.

“What, no maces, pikes, or longbows?” the Steward’s voice was dry, but his eye sparkled. Someone laughed
aloud.

“Awkward to carry through the street, don’t you think?” Dhulyn said, her eyebrows innocently raised. “It would
be better if these were not touched,” she added more seriously, indicating the collection of cutting edges and
sharpened points piled on the ground beside them. “Some have more edges than are apparent to the untrained eye.”

Still smiling, shaking his head, Karlyn-Tan handed Dhulyn’s sword to the young woman who had stepped
forward to assist him. “I doubt you would find many willing to try,” he said. “I’ll see that they’re kept safe.” He
gestured, and the young woman bowed.

When they turned once more to the House door, it was to find a plainly but richly dressed woman standing on the
bottom step, her House crest sewn into the left shoulder of her overtunic. Karlyn-Tan turned and stepped closer to
Mar. “Lady Mar-eMar,” he said. “May I introduce your Steward of Keys?” This was a small woman whose slimness
made her appear taller. The skin of her face was smooth and unlined, her hair completely covered by the
embroidered headdress that marked her position and status. Dhulyn looked closely at her. Tradition had it, Parno had explained, that the Steward of Keys could never leave the House itself. This lowest doorstep was as close as the woman would ever come to the world outside.

“Welcome, Mar-eMar,” the woman said. She bowed from the waist. “I am Semlin-Nor, your Steward of Keys.” Her voice was sharply rough, like metal that had been through a fire. “If you will follow me, I will take you to the Tenebroso.”

These two—no, three, that young girl in dusty clothing was definitely with them—were performing that old favorite, pulling improbable things out of their clothing. The slighter of the two conjurers, a red-haired woman—

Gundaron sucked in his breath, his hand going to cover his mouth. These weren’t conjurers at all, they were Mercenary Brothers; he’d seen the woman’s badge clearly when she twisted to pull something out from between her shoulder blades. A pair of Mercenaries being admitted into the House. One of them a tall, redheaded woman.

The Red Horseman. It had to be. Dhulyn Wolfshead herself, and much earlier than he would have expected. She and her Partner must be everything their Brother here at Tenebro House had said they were. And she was a Red Horseman; no one could be in any doubt about that. He could see her natural southern pallor from here, and no dye would get hair quite that blood-red color, even if a Mercenary Brother would trouble to dye it. He let his hands fall from his face and dragged in a lungful of air.

Finally, a chance to prove his theories. There’d been nothing new added to scholarship on the Marked since Holderon’s day. Nothing until now.

Gundaron rapidly reviewed the list of questions he would ask her. He was fairly certain the books he needed to refer to were still in the large workroom where he’d first assembled them when he’d learned of Dhulyn Wolfshead’s existence. His methods might be considered a bit unorthodox by the Libraries if they ever came to light, but the benefit to the body of knowledge was incalculable.

He blinked back to the present moment when he realized that the activity in the courtyard had changed. Karlyn-Tan had taken the hand of the young girl with the Brothers and was presenting her to Semlin-Nor. The girl was standing awkwardly, her hand looking stiff in Karlyn’s grasp, but she was acknowledging Semlin’s bow very bravely, very properly, like a frightened but well-brought-up child.

A chill threaded its way up Gundaron’s spine. *This* was the Lady Mar-eMar? *She’s just a girl,* he thought. *Younger than me.* He rubbed his mouth with shaking fingers. For some reason, when he’d told Lok-iKol about her, he’d imagined Mar to be an older woman. Unconsciously, he’d thought of her as a stout matron, rather like the cook’s first assistant, the woman who made those delicious pastries. A woman well able to look out for herself. Not this, this *child.*

Gundaron the Scholar found himself for the first time in his life hoping he was wrong, that the girl wasn’t a Finder after all. That no Jaldean would become interested in that bright, heart-shaped face and those eyes that showed dark blue even from this distance. His eyes moved to the Mercenary Brothers, and what was clearly a pile of weapons beside them on the flag stones of the courtyard. His plans would remove their protection from the girl. If he called out now—but it was already too late, wasn’t it? The gates were closed, the Brothers disarmed.

The wheels Gundaron had set in motion those long months ago couldn’t be stopped now.

An invading force which could only enter three at a time would be cut to pieces on the stairs.

Dhulyn glanced back at Parno and nodded, smiling. Like him, she had Alkoryn’s floor plans in her head, and was even more likely to notice a certain paranoid pattern.

They followed the Steward of Keys up the left staircase. Dhulyn walked immediately behind the woman, with Mar behind her, and Parno serving as rear guard. The hall at the top of the stair was narrow, and they continued to walk along in single file. Parno grinned after they had been led past the third window high up on a wall. From the outside, it would be impossible to tell which of these windows opened onto rooms and which into empty space. When he was a young boy in his Household, he had had a large wooden puzzle that could be put together into four different mazes. Tenebro House was like that puzzle, Parno realized, if you took all the mazes and stacked them, one on top of the other.

Finally, the halls they walked through widened, and the walls began to be covered by tapestries and paneling. They were shown through several carefully furnished public rooms, one blue with dozens of mirrors, one gold with groupings of armchairs, one dark enough that Parno couldn’t guess its predominant color, until finally the Steward of Keys led them up another narrow stone staircase and into a large chamber made small with furnishings. Its unseen floor was completely covered with rugs and carpets, piled to several thicknesses, and its walls were hung with more rugs and the same kind of embroidered cloths that had appeared in the halls. Parno thought the effect not unlike one
of Dhulyn's vests, only duller. The other parts of the House had been cool, the stone still retaining the cold of winter, as it would until summer truly began, but this room was noticeably hot.

Even without having seen the maps and floor plans, the Mercenaries would have known that they were now at no great distance from their starting point at the House doors. It was much too easy to get turned around in the heat of battle for any of the Brotherhood to have a poor sense of direction. No very careful observation was actually needed to tell them that they had been escorted around along the long way. Each had taken care to look about them as they went, had done their best to imitate Mar's wide-eyed awe. Their country-cousin act was wasted on Semlin-Nor, who did not even turn her head as she walked ahead of them, but Lionsmane and Wolfshead knew that there would be spyholes in the walls. The age of paranoia is never really over.

At first, all they could see in the room was a lean, dark-haired man standing with his hand on the back of a large chair. His age was probably half again as much as Parno's. He was richly dressed in dark blue, his fashionably short surcoat teal and black with an edge of deep red at least two fingers wide. When he turned his head to look at them as they entered, the light showed a well-healed scar on the left side of his face where someone had struck him with a mailed fist and taken out his eye. When that cold blue gaze turned in his direction, Parno shifted his own eyes away.

The man might have been considered good-looking before his disfigurement. But maybe not.

Parno at first thought him the sole occupant of the room, totally out of place amid the dainty padded chairs, the small stands, and the scattered tables with their carved legs. But gradually he realized that the chair over which the one-eyed man hovered protectively had an occupant. An elderly woman with a scroll in her hands sat in it, close to the brazier table whose quilted cover had been thrown back to expose the glowing coals within. The lady was small, thin, and elegantly dressed in stiff brocaded velvet. There was no gray in her golden hair, but her amber-colored eyes were clouded with age. Neither the one-eyed man nor the old woman seemed at all surprised to see them, though the Steward of Keys said nothing before ushering them in. Of course, their roundabout route had allowed someone else to reach this room ahead of them and prepare the way. Parno watched carefully, but he couldn't see that either of the Tenebros showed any special interest in the Mercenary Brothers.

"You are Mar-eMar," the old woman said in a voice low and still vibrant, though faded. "I am Kor-iRok."

As if there were any doubt, the mirror reversal of the woman's name declared her the Tenebroso, the House.

Without speaking, Mar bowed low to kiss the older woman's hand, but remained standing. Parno raised an eyebrow in approval. At least the child remembered some of what he had taught her.

"This is my first child, Lok-iKol."

The Kir. Bet you he's tired of waiting for his mother to die, Parno thought, as the man reached up to touch his eye patch in what was obviously an unconscious tic.

The one-eyed man bowed, but made no move to take Mar's hand, though as Kir, heir to the House, he might have had her kiss his hand as well. "I greet you, Cousin," he said. His voice was low, musical. Mar inclined her head, trying to imitate the motion the older woman had made.

Parno's eyes narrowed, and his mouth twitched. Dhulyn kept her face impassive and her eyes moving between the people and the covered walls. She'd be looking for the secret entrance the plans showed in this room.

"Mar-eMar will have the green room in the south tower, Keys," the Tenebroso said. "You may have her luggage and her maids sent there."

"The Lady Mar-eMar arrived without maids, Tenebroso." Semlin-Nor did not comment on the sparsity of Mar's luggage. "The two I have assigned her await in her rooms."

"You have come without servants? What possessed you?" The words lacked any emotion, but it was evident her indifference was a symptom of her true physical weakness, not her lack of interest. Her face was capable of expressing the patronizing dismay that her voice was not strong enough to convey.

"As you see, my Mother, I have nevertheless arrived safely." Mar addressed the old woman formally, as a member by blood of the House. The corners of Dhulyn's mouth moved.

"And these persons?"

"Of the Brotherhood, my Mother. My guides and guards. To be paid upon my safe delivery."

"Of course, of course." The Tenebroso searched the table at her side, sifting through numerous small ornaments, two books, several curling sheets of parchment, setting to one side two heavy bracelets, before finding a small pouch of embroidered suede. Dhulyn and Parno both recognized this dumb show, meant to underscore the Tenebroso's distance from such crass matters. Of course the woman knew exactly where the purse was. It would have been brought to her while they were being led around the long way. The Steward of Keys moved forward to take it from the Tenebroso's hand, before presenting it to Parno. He kept his eyes down, and his face lowered as he stepped
forward a pace to take it.

Dhulyn’s eyes flicked from Parno to the old lady seated at the table, and back again. There was something in the old woman’s face—something in the way the old eyes narrowed as she looked up at Parno, and in the way she so carefully did not look again. For an instant, it actually had seemed that the Tenebroso was going to forget herself enough to speak directly to a Mercenary Brother. But no, perhaps she was wrong, Dhulyn frowned, perhaps it was only Mar, after all, who drew the old lady’s attention.

Money in hand, Parno stepped back, but when they made no further move to depart, the Kir raised the eyebrow over the missing eye. Probably meant to strike terror into their hearts, Dhulyn thought, amused. Finally, she looked at Mar.

“Are we discharged, Lady?” she asked.

“What? Yes, yes, of course,” Mar cleared her throat, pink cheeked. “I thank you for your service,” she said, as Parno had taught her, “Mercenaries, you are discharged.”

“What did you think of the Mercenary Brothers?” Kor-iRok asked. Semlin was surprised enough to leave tidying the table, to turn and look at her House. Questions about the country cousin she might have expected, but about Mercenaries?

“The red-haired woman is very striking,” she said.

“Yes, that’s so. But it’s the golden-haired man I’m asking about. He has a mole near his right ear, the Mercenary badge does not quite cover it. Did you see it?”

“No, my House, I have to say I didn’t.”


Semlin knelt, laid her hand with the greatest gentleness on the old woman’s arm. “But, my Lady, he is a Mercenary now. He is no longer of this House.”

“He is Tenebro.” Kor-iRok’s colorless voice left no room for disagreement. “He is my blood. I will bring him back to us.” The old woman looked at her with the remains of what had once been a dazzling smile. “And you will help me.”

“Of course, my House.”

“Send for him tomorrow, when the Kir has gone to the Dome. Send for the Mercenary Brother Parno Lionsmane.”

“I greet you. I am Dal-eDal. My cousin, the Lady Mar-eMar, begs you to stay and take the midday meal with her, while she adjusts to her new House,” he said, his smile never changing and never touching his eyes.

Dhulyn glanced at Parno. “Tell the Lady we thank her,” she said. “But we cannot stay weaponless.”

The man inclined his head. “Of course. Now that you are guests, you can, of course, retain your swords. If you will follow me? Thank you,” he said to the page escorting them, “I will take charge of our guests for now.”

This was the cousin who lived in the House, Dhulyn thought, eyeing the golden-haired man with interest as he led them away. The form of his name—repeated Dal-eDal and not the reversal, Dal-eLad—marked him as having Household status, and not in line to inherit, as was Lok-iKol.

As they followed Dal-eDal down the passage, Parno locked eyes with Dhulyn. The corners of his mouth moved. Dhulyn shrugged. Of course the man was taking them by yet a different route. Anyone providing security would make maximum use of the tools at hand—and the mazelike design of this building, however archaic, was a first-class tool at hand. Karlyn-Tan had not impressed her as the kind of Steward of Walls who would overlook any aids to his security arrangements.

The passageway narrowed until they were walking in single file, Parno’s shoulders brushing the wall coverings to each side. When the passage widened again, Dal-eDal lengthened his stride slightly, his hand reaching out to the handle of a door at the end of the passage. He was three paces ahead of Dhulyn when she heard a soft snick and lunged forward, heartbeats too late. A thick, weighted net fell from the ceiling and clung to her, muffling her arms and dragging down her head. Dhulyn was aware that somewhere the scholarly part of her mind was registering shock—surprise that anyone, even in the middle of their own House, would attack Mercenaries unprovoked. But even as that thought arose, she was taking a steadying breath and bending even further, slipping the fingers of her left hand into the space between her right calf and her boot. Without hurry, without panic, she took out her moon
razor, a small rounded coin of metal, flattened and sharpened along one curve, and slashed at the net in front of her. The strands parted immediately and she stepped through the cut opening and moved to one side, her left arm arched above her head, her right poised with the moon razor. She felt Parno’s back against hers in the narrow passageway and knew that his arms were raised like hers, and his hands full of blades.

Another net fell and Parno cut through it. A third net fell before they could step from the cords of the second. A fourth while they were cutting the third. Dhulyn heard footsteps and braced herself, but the blow came not at her head or shoulders, but at her legs. She felt a hard arm around her thighs and, already off-balance, she went down in a tangle of cords and weights. She twisted and slashed. A high-pitched scream and the warm gush of blood across her hand and arm. She heard a wet crunch and Parno’s voice softly cursing.

She was raising herself to her feet, pressing upward on the weight of net that tried to crush her to the floor, when the ceiling fell on them.

GUNDARON THE SCHOLAR chewed the side of his thumb, hovering just down from where his room’s corridor met the wider passage leading to the great hall. He checked for the third time that he’d wiped all the powdered sugar off the scroll of the first act of Bartyn’s *Maid of the Forest*. When he’d finally found it, it had been behind his copy of the eighteenth book of the *Hahrgis*, under a plate of jellied sweets. He cleared his throat, as a little finger of guilt scratched at the back of his mind. Good thing his old tutor hadn’t seen that. Gundaron had never been tidy by nature, and in the two years since he’d left Valdomar, some of the Library’s meticulous discipline had faded. He was still careful with his books—mostly, he thought as he brushed at the scroll again—kept his ink pots and pens clean, even if the cats did play with them. But a plate of jellied sweets on the worktable, that would never have been allowed in Valdomar.

Voices. Gundaron straightened his tunic with a tug, tucked the scroll under his left arm, and walked casually toward the main passage. *Caids*, he cursed under his breath. There were three women coming toward him, not one. The two in front, bodices laced fashionably tight, sleeves uselessly long, were the Tenebroso’s youngest great-nieces, Nor-eNor and her sister Kyn-oKyn. Even here in the House they followed the latest fashion of carrying dainty handkerchiefs in the Tenebro colors, rather than showing those colors in their clothing. He’d known someone would be coming with Lady Mar, but he’d assumed it would be one of the lady pages, not these two giggling fools.

He inclined his head, as courtesy required, his lips parted, ready to return their greeting—then felt his ears blaze hot as they passed him with identical curled lips and heads turned away. Until yesterday they had at least acknowledged him, so that snub was not so much for his benefit as it was for the newest member of the House walking slowly behind her distant cousins—but not so far behind that she’d missed the little scene, worst luck. Mar-eMar wore a good gown made of fine wool, but even Gundaron could see that the sleeves were last year’s length. Instead of a laced bodice, Mar-eMar wore a tunic like an elderly woman would. A teal-and-black tunic with a thin red stripe on its half-sleeves, no dainty handkerchief for her. He wondered if she realized the clothing the gigglers had picked out for her was hopelessly out of date.

From the whiteness of her face, and the sharpness of the two dots of color on her cheeks, Gundaron suspected that she knew. He swallowed, all doubts suddenly gone.

“Uh, hello, Lady Mar,” he said, stepping forward. As he’d hoped, she stopped, hesitant, her eyes flicking forward to the backs of the two sisters who were leaving her behind. When she turned to look at him, however, Mar-eMar’s gaze was steady. Her hair was the exact shade of the rich brown velvety moss that grew in the Tenebroso’s rock garden, and her eyes were so deep a blue as to be almost black.

“Yes?”

Gundaron blinked. He cleared his throat again. “I am, ah, I’m Gundaron the Scholar. Gundaron of Valdomar.”

“Mar-eMar Tenebro,” she said inclining her head in a short nod. Gundaron thought she might have relaxed just a little.

“I was wondering—I thought—that is, can you read?”

Instantly, the red spots on her cheeks stood out like paint, and a muscle jerked in the side of her jaw as she clenched her teeth.

“Yes,” she hissed, barely moving her lips.

“Oh,” he said, in sudden understanding. “No. That’s not what I meant at all. I only meant to ask if you’d like something to read.” He held out the scroll he’d had under his left arm. “It’s a play, Bartyn’s *Maid of the Forest.*” When she didn’t move he said. “I have others, if you don’t like Bartyn.”
“A play? To read?” Suddenly her eyes seemed even darker, and she lowered them, looking away from him.
Gundaron swallowed, his throat suddenly thick, and held out the scroll. She took it without looking up again.
“Thank you.” If he hadn’t been watching her lips so closely, he would never have known she’d spoken.
“You’re welcome,” he said. He held out his hand, indicating the direction of the great hall. “Shall we . . . ?”
He’d get up early tomorrow and clean up his room, he thought, as she fell into step next to him. He would. Or if not tomorrow, the next day, for certain.

Strangely, watching them snub the Scholar Gundaron had made them less intimidating, not more. There was obviously nothing personal in their attitude toward her; they were snobs pure and simple, and working in the household of the best Weaver in Navra had taught Mar how to deal with those.

Under the guise of moving her goblet of watered wine, Mar managed to look down the table to where the Scholar sat, holding his fork very gracefully in his strong fingers. He was very fair, even his eyebrows showing almost white on his square face, and his eyes were a warm light brown. And obviously he hadn’t let the sisters’ treatment turn him into a snob and bully in his turn. Mar touched the scroll in the wide pocket of her gown. Perhaps, once she had read it, the Scholar would like to hear about her experiences with Dhulyn Wolfshead, who was also a Scholar, in her way.

There were others in the House besides Gundaron of Valdomar who were not of the same mind as Nor and Kyn. When she’d first come into the hall, Mar had looked around the table and found other intelligent and friendly faces. A young man whose golden hair reminded her of Parno Lionsmane had come to her before he sat down and introduced himself as Dal-eDal. But both he and the lady seated next to him, an older woman named Lan-eLan, were too far away for conversation. Gundaron was seated closer, and seemed to be looking at her every time she glanced his way, but he only smiled, blushed, and lowered his eyes. Eventually, he was taken up with the Kir, Lok-iKol, and didn’t glance her way anymore.

Mar forced herself to eat, taking small bites as the Lionsmane had instructed her, not that she could actually taste anything. The last time she’d felt this out of place she’d been six years old, her first meal at the Weavers after her Holding had disintegrated following the fire and the sickness, after the three months she’d spent at the Jaldean Shrine while they found her a foster family.

Where were you people then? Mar thought with a shock that made her put down her fork. Surely the Jaldean priests would have sent word to her House? They’d known who she was; it was one of the reasons it had been easy to foster her. But why hadn’t her House sent for her then?

“Sweetest, you don’t use a fork for this dessert.” Kyn-oKyn’s tinkly voice broke into Mar’s thoughts. “You use this special spoon.”

“Pardon me?” Mar turned to her left, making sure the edge of her napkin caught the plate of custard and cream that had just been put down in front of her, and tipped it neatly into Kyn’s lap.

“Oh, dear, I’m so sorry,” Mar said, as Kyn squealed and pages ran up with cloths. “How clumsy of me.”

“She has the bowl,” Lok-iKol said, when the servants had finished serving the dessert, his eye still fixed on Mar-eMar. “So the pages tell me.”

“Oh, the bowl in itself proves nothing,” Gun said as casually as he could. He and the Kir had had many conversations like this one—Caids, how many? he thought with a sudden and unexpected twist of nausea in his guts as he pushed the thought away—and he hoped he sounded just as objective and disinterested this time. Most of the Marked that he’d located for Lok-iKol over the past eighteen moons or so had been older, some much older than the Lady Mar. But they probably had families, too. Gundaron let his eyes fall again to his plate, pretending interest in the dessert as his stomach churned. That thought felt familiar, as if he’d had it often, but . . . he couldn’t remember thinking it before.

“There’s no doubt she’s the right girl,” Lok-iKol was saying, stroking his eye patch with his fingertips. Gundaron came to with a start, realizing with some shock that Lok-iKol was standing. He rose with as little fuss as he could manage. Fortunately, he was on the man’s blind side, and with any luck his lapse of attention would go unnoticed.

“She’s the very image of her grandmother,” Lok-iKol continued. “I remember the wedding very well. The Tenebroso had us all attend, even though she was only marrying . . .”

Gundaron waited a moment for the man to finish before he finally gathered his nerve and looked Lok-iKol in the face. What he saw almost made him look away again, but his scholarly habit of investigation was stronger than his fear. The Kir’s lower lip had fallen slack, and all the muscles of his face drooped. Only the scarred skin around his left eye was still stiff.
“Lord Kir?” Gundaron put up a hesitant hand; Lok-iKol much preferred not to be touched uninvited. Gun let his hand fall back to his side; he could see that, for all the slackness of the face and mouth, the Kir’s eye was sharp and clear.

And focused on Mar.

What does he see? Gundaron thought, that makes him look like this?

As if Lok-iKol could hear his thoughts, the man turned, oh so slowly, to focus his attention on Gundaron himself. In the slackness of his face Lok-iKol’s right eye was unnaturally bright, almost as though the man had a fever, and Gundaron could swear that instead of a clear blue, the eye glowed a brilliant jade green. Gundaron parted dry lips, about to call for a page, certain the Kir was having a brain storm. Then the green tint passed, the muscles in Lok-iKol’s face returned to normal, and his eye restored to its natural icy blue.

“You were saying?”

Gundaron cleared his throat, throwing a glance around the room. No one else seemed to have noticed anything; everyone’s attention was still at the other end of the table, where Nor-eNor had suddenly burst into tears. “I think it unlikely the Lady Mar will give us any interesting information,” he said, using the euphemism that allowed them to discuss their work in public. “Situated as she was, she would have had great difficulties in hiding it.”

“Nor, in Navra, would she have had reason to, I agree,” Lok-iKol said. “In any case, we need be in no hurry where Mar-eMar is concerned. We can examine her at our leisure.”

Gundaron nodded slowly, unable to explain, even to himself, his reluctance to let Mar-eMar be questioned by Lok-iKol and the Jaldean Beslyn-Tor the way other suspected Marked had been questioned. He looked down the table again and saw her bow to her cousins and walk up the other side of the long table to pay her respects to the Tenebroso before leaving the room. He’d have to think of something. Gun stepped back to allow the Lord Dal-eDal to pass between him and the table.

Of course the interrogation of the Mercenary woman would take some time, Gun considered, as he and Lok-iKol followed Lord Dal from the room. And the longer it took, the more time Gun would have to come up with a plan to help Mar-eMar.

Ignoring the throbbing in the back of her head, she tensed first the muscles of her forearms and wrists, then her calves and ankles, without receiving any encouragement. Her bonds were loose enough to let her blood flow, but tight enough to restrict her movements. For certain, not amateurs.

She could tell from the sounds of breathing that there was only one person in the room with her, and that it was not Parno Lionsmane. She let her eyes open the merest fraction.

Standing with his hand on a table a span in front of her was a fair-haired young man in a mixture of Scholar’s and nobleman’s dress, a short dark blue tunic over black hose instead of brown leggings, heeled shoes instead of leather half boots, and a bright enameled brooch where his Library crest should be. Dhulyn let her eyes open another fraction. The hand she could see looked soft and dirty, his tunic was too tight over his middle, and there was an incipient puffiness to his face. There were Shora for Scholars, too, Dhulyn knew, slow motion versions of the Mercenary Shora, designed for use by Scholars as exercise. From the look of him, the young man in front of her hadn’t practiced any for some time.

The sound of the door latch was followed by booted footsteps moving from wood to carpet, but Dhulyn couldn’t see who had entered the room without turning her head.

“My lord Kir, I found her like this.”

“As well you did not release her, the order was mine.” It was indeed the silky voice she remembered from the Tenebroso’s room. She should have known; only the Kir of the House could order two Mercenaries detained.
“I don’t understand . . .”

“Did you think that a Mercenary Brother would simply answer our questions because we asked them? Ah, your face tells me that you did. Very well. If you find that, after all, this worries you too greatly, you may leave.” Even her limited view showed Dhulyn the boy’s negative response. “I thought not. Shall we begin?”

The Scholar moved directly in front of her, leaning forward and peering into her face. Dhulyn opened her eyes. Behind him, the Kir Lok-iKol was sitting with one hip braced on the wooden table; from the look of its heavily carved legs it must be the match of her own chair. She smiled her wolf’s smile and the boy edged away from her. He licked his lips and lowered his eyelids.

“The One-eye’s name I know,” she said to him, “but not yours.”

The young man’s mouth twisted. He shot a glance at the Kir, but the older man had picked up a goblet from the dark wooden table and was drinking from it. His single eye regarded them over the silver rim of the cup. The Scholar looked back at Dhulyn. His mouth opened and the tip of his tongue sneaked out to poke at his upper lip.

“I am Gundaron,” he almost whispered. “From the Scholars’ Library of Valdomar.”

“I greet you, Scholar Gundaron,” she whispered back. “You are very soft and very puffy and the whites of your eyes are dull,” Dhulyn said with the greatest innocence and truth. “Are you sure you are of the House of Scholars?”

She grinned when the boy straightened quickly to attention and tightened his lips. He opened his mouth and shut it again. His tongue licked again at his parted lips.

“Best you let me go,” she said in her steadiest voice. “Are you certain what you want from me is worth the risk you take?”

The young Scholar shot a quick glance at the Kir. “Are you one of the Espadryn?” he asked her. “Can you see the future?”

Dhulyn drew back her head and knitted her brows, giving him her best confused look to cover the cold sinking of her stomach. It wasn’t all that difficult.

“My name is Dhulyn Wolfshead,” she said. “I’m called the Scholar. I was schooled by Dorian of the River, the Black Traveler. I have fought with my Brothers at the battles of Sadron, of Arcosa, and Bhexyllia. Parno Lionsmane is my Partner—and where is he by the way?”

Again, the boy glanced over his shoulder at the Kir.

“For the moment safe,” the One-eye said, “though if you do not answer our questions, I may be forced to injure him. Or worse.”

Dhulyn didn’t bother to stifle her snort of laughter.

“We’re Mercenaries, you blooded fool. We already know we’re going to die. Kill us, don’t kill us.” She shrugged as well as she could with her arms bound to the chair. “Save your threats for someone you can frighten. Here’s a threat for you.” She paused to give the word weight. “Pasillon.”

One-eye didn’t react, but the young Scholar paled even more, and his lips trembled. “Get book boy here to explain it to you.”

The Scholar turned to face the one-eyed man.

“My lord Kir,” he said. But One-eye didn’t even blink. In fact, Dhulyn thought he might have smiled, just for an instant.

“Pasillon is an empty threat, Scholar. The world has changed and no one will come for her, any more than they came for the others.”

_Others?_ Dhulyn pressed her lips tight. He had done this to other Brothers? Or just other captives? One-eye directed his words to the young Scholar, but his gaze never left Dhulyn’s face. “This one and her companion were seen leaving Gotterang by the north gate. Their Brothers will think that, having been paid for the delivery of the Lady Mar-eMar, they have gone vagabonding.”

Dhulyn kept her face impassive. One man, at least, would know exactly where they were, would not be fooled by any stories of the North gate, no matter how well witnessed. But was Alkoryn Pantherclaw likely to knock at the House Door and ask the Steward of Walls for his missing Brothers in time to do them any good? And if they were asking about her Mark, it wasn’t just their lives at stake here, and these people might, in fact, be able to do much worse than merely kill her.

“If she will not answer the easy way, then we must try the hard.” Lok-iKol stood and revealed a tray of small bottles with waxed stoppers and an apparatus in the shape of a glass funnel with a long, curving spout.

The Scholar’s eyes widened. “My lord, you can’t—”
“I have said you may leave, Scholar. Though I understood that this time, at least, you had questions of your own.”

The boy licked his lips again, looked at the door, looked at Dhulyn’s face. There was an armless chair next to the table. As if against his will, he sat down.

The One-eye picked up the funnel and edged around her chair. Dhulyn heard a sharp metallic click, and felt a pressure on the strap around her forehead, increasing as her head was pulled back and down until her throat was exposed, her mouth sagging open, and she could see behind her to where he stood at the mechanism, part crank, part ratchet, to which the strap around her head was attached.

“I advise you to relax,” the silken voice said. “I am going to use this tube to deliver some liquid into your stomach. If you struggle, I may miss and get your lungs instead. I advise you to be still.”

Briefly, Dhulyn considered struggling anyway, but with her head in this position, she couldn’t even keep her teeth clenched tight. It wouldn’t be poison—there were faster and easier ways to kill her, if that’s all they wanted. While she still lived, she could get out of this—or Parno could get her out. She closed her eyes, made all her muscles relax, and tried to concentrate on what she’d told Mar about the sword swallower.

“My Brother, I greet you,” she said formally. “I am Fanryn Bloodhand. Called the Knife. Schooled by Bettrian Skyborn, the Seeker. I have fought with my Brothers in the north, at Khudren and at Rendia. I fight with my Brother, Thionan Hawkmoon. The smaller arm bone is cracked, my Brother. Careful how you move it.”

“I am Parno Lionsmane,” Parno said. His voice came out in a stiff croak and he cleared his throat. “Called Chanter. Schooled by Nerysa of Tourin, the Warhammer. I have fought with my Brother Dhulyn Wolfshead at Arcosa and Bhexyllia. Is she with us?” He knew she couldn’t be. If she were in this cell, Dhulyn would be in his line of sight. But he had to ask.

“I’m afraid not, Brother,” Fanryn said. “With us is my Partner, Thionan Hawkmoon. Also Hernyn Greystone. But the one called Dhulyn the Scholar was not brought here.”

Parno nodded. “We’ll take it that she lives, then.” Mercenary lore always said one Partner would know if the other died, but Parno wasn’t sure he believed it. “How long?” he asked.

“A day and most of the second,” Fanryn said. “I thought you might wake up when I first bound your arm, but I had no such luck.”

Parno began the slow process of sitting up. Bruises and abused muscles had stiffened as he slept. When she saw that he was determined, Fanryn slipped an arm behind him and helped him settle his aching arm in a sling she had ready, evidently torn from her own tunic. He looked around him. Fanryn sat back on her heels, her Partner Thionan hovering over her shoulder. At a guess they were close to his own age. Both women were tall, though not so tall as Dhulyn, both with the catlike grace that comes of good training and better muscles. They might have been sisters, except for their coloring. Fanryn was as golden blond as Parno himself, while Thionan had green eyes and hair close to black. Even so, Parno had known of parents who had produced such disparate offspring.

The third Brother, Hernyn Greystone, was by far the youngest. A lanky boy with mousy brown hair, and a black eye that discolored most of the left side of his face. There was another pallet against the far wall of their prison, but the young Brother sat on the floor with his back to the wall, his arms wrapped around his knees.

The room itself was cool, the walls dry, made of large blocks of undressed stone. What debris there was was surprisingly clean, scraps of straw and chips of wood, as from packing cases roughly opened. Whatever this room had been originally—and the heavy door with the small barred opening suggested a cell—its most recent use appeared to have been as a storage room.

“Well, I’ve been in worse places,” Parno said, grateful for the steadying arm of Fanryn the Knife.

“All this is due to me.” Young Hernyn Greystone lifted his head off his knees. Thionan Hawkmoon shut her eyes and made an impatient sound with her tongue.

“You are here through my fault, my Brother,” the young man continued in the slightly righteous tone of someone determined to speak the truth, come what may. “You and the Wolfshead. They asked if I knew of a Brother, a tall woman with blood-colored hair. I knew of her, schooled by Dorian of the River as I was myself. So I gave them her name.”

Parno winced as he leaned forward. “Who are ‘they’? Who asked you these things?”

“Some of the guards here,” Hernyn said. “I thought them just curious. I meant no harm.”

Thionan made her impatient sound again. “There is always harm in flapping the tongue. I’m surprised you didn’t learn that with Dorian.” Her voice was unexpectedly deep and rough.
“Have done, Thio,” Fanryn said. Parno could tell they had tossed this bone back and forth many times already. “Anyone could go to our House and get the same answer. What harm could there be in repeating common knowledge?”

“I should have thought the answer self-evident.” Thionan spread her hands out to take in the walls around them. She shook her head and stalked all of three strides across their cell to seat herself on the other cot.

“Wait, wait,” Parno said. He tried to pat the air in front of him in a “calm down” motion, hissed in his breath, and bit down on a grunt. Hernyn buried his face again. Thionan stood up once more but was waved off by her Partner. “Sit still, my Brother,” Fanryn said. “I’ll have to bind that more tightly. Ask all the questions you wish, but for the Caids’ sake, sit still.” Fanryn folded Parno’s arm delicately across his stomach and began to tie it in place with strips of the same heavy cloth she’d used as the sling. The immobility of his arm made him more uncomfortable than the pain, but he did not protest. Mercenaries made the best surgeons, for obvious reasons, and he was not fool enough to argue.

“Perhaps you might start at the beginning,” he said. “I know, more or less, how I got here, if not why. What are your stories?”

“Simple enough,” Thionan said. “Straightforward guard detail. The Tenebros lost a few guards on caravan last fall. I think the Cloud People, wasn’t it?” She waited for her Partner’s nod before continuing. “Anyway, it’s hard to get good men in the city. If you’re in the country now, that’s different. You just promote some of your yeoman’s children, your farm boys who don’t care too much for farming, and there’s your new recruit. But here in the city—well, there aren’t so many extra pairs of hands here. The children of House servants rarely make good guards, even if they’re willing, and as for hiring outsiders—the questions come up, don’t they? ‘Why did you leave your last place of employment?’ People looking for a change aren’t the kind you want guarding your walls. And it’s too blooded dangerous to take some one else’s castoffs.”

“So they hire Mercenaries,” Parno said. There was nothing new for him in what Thionan was saying. Let her talk, he told himself. Let’s get comfortable with one another. He knew from the battles they’d fought in that he was the Senior Brother present—though that would change when they found Dhulyn—let Thionan give him her report. They would all feel better for a little ordinary discipline.

“So they hire Mercenaries,” Thionan agreed. “Specifically myself, my Partner and, not many moons ago, our Brother Hernyn here.”

“When did they ask about Dhulyn Wolfshead?”

Fanryn tied off the last strip of cloth and eased Parno back against the cold stone wall. “They never asked me,” Thionan said.

“Or me,” Fanryn echoed. “Though, I daresay, we might either of us have answered. In our Brotherhood, your names are well known.”


Hernyn shrugged and bit his lip. Parno sighed. They didn’t have time for the boy’s self-pity.

“Come on, man,” Parno said. “We’re all of us alive and, if we keep our heads, alive’s how we’ll stay. So snap out it, you sniveling brat!” Parno’s sudden roar popped the boy’s head up so fast he cracked it against the wall behind him. “We’re a council of war here. Stop wringing your hands and come be of some use.”

The boy looked at the faces looking at him. Thionan patted the cot beside her. Slowly, with a shy bewilderment, Hernyn rose to his feet and sat down with his Brothers. He gave a sharp nod and squared his shoulders.

“We were on watch one night,” he began. “Myself and two others of the guard.”

“Which ones?” Fanryn asked.

“The tall dark one with the broken nose, Rofrin, and Neslyn the Fair. Anyway, they were asking about how we live, the Brotherhood. Whether we marry and have children. Neslyn had just spoken for the son of the Steward of Keys, so there was much talk of such things. Everyone thought it would make a fine match—”

“When was this?” Parno said. Best to keep the boy to the point.

“Just over a moon ago,” Fanryn said.

“So they were asking about Mercenary customs,” the boy continued. “And I tried to explain about Partners.” Here he looked at the two women. “How it really isn’t a marriage, the way outsiders think, but that it’s a kind of . . . of . . .”

“Never mind, Hernyn,” Fanryn said, smiling. “We all know what it is.” Small wonder outsiders had difficulty
understanding Partnering, her glance at Parno and Thionan seemed to say, if even Brothers got tongue-tied and embarrassed trying to explain it.

“And so they asked about famous Brothers, and did I know any and I told them who I’d been Schooled by, Dorian of the River, the Black Traveler, because everyone’s heard of him. And I told them about some of the Brothers Dorian’s Schooled, Samlind the Nighthawk and Pakina Swifthorse, that I thought they might’ve heard of. And they asked me if I knew a Mercenary they had heard about, and Rofrin described Dhulyn Wolfshead.”

“They didn’t know her name?”

“No, but they described her pretty well, even the scar on her lip. But it was the coloring and the build that they knew best. Tall as a man, they said, very lean, fair skin, gray eyes, blood-colored hair. Good with horses, used maybe a sword, maybe an ax. And I knew her, how could I not, with both of us Schooled in the same place, by the same hand? I told them her name.” Parno could hear in Hernyn’s voice how flattered the boy had been by their interest, how proud to know someone, even in so indirect a way, who was known to them. Borrowing a little glory from his better-known Brothers.

“So they were looking for her, for Dhulyn Wolfshead? Her, particularly?” Thionan asked, breaking the silence before it could grow awkward.

Parno shook his head slowly. “Barring the scar, they might have been looking for anyone like her, anyone of her Clan—though from what she tells me, the Espadryn are no more. Just our bad luck that she was the one they found.”

“But what is it they want her for?” Fanryn asked.

Parno looked his Brothers in the face. “I do not know,” he said, lying with the strictest truth.

Thionan slapped her knee and stood up. “I’ve gone and forgotten,” she said. “Here, we’ve saved some stew for you, against the time you woke up.” She reached under the cot and pulled out a flat clay bowl, with another bowl turned over on top of it. “Hernyn ate a portion first to be sure it wasn’t drugged.”

“Optimistic of you,” Parno said, his stomach rumbling.

Good stew it was, too. Plenty of meat, if rather over seasoned for his taste. He’d paid for and eaten much worse any number of times.

“If this is the kind of food they give prisoners,” he said aloud, “this must be a very prosperous House.”

“Long as we don’t take it as a sign they mean to let us live,” growled Thionan. Hernyn curled back into the corner of the cot.

“Relax,” Fanryn said when she noticed him. “It’s not what they’ve got planned will decide our fates, but what we let happen.” She turned back to Parno. “What will Dhulyn Wolfshead do, my Brother? It’s my guess they’ve kept her alone—otherwise why not keep us all together—and if I’m right, she’ll have no one to share the food.”

“She won’t eat,” he said.

“But she’ll have to drink,” Fanryn pointed out. “She can go a long time without food, most of us can. But she’ll die quickly without water.”

“So they’ll drug the water,” Parno said.

“And then?”

Parno shook his head slowly, mouth twisted to one side. “That depends.” He wished he felt more confident about what he was going to say. His Schooling had not included any drug Shora. “Dhulyn knows the Shora for the fressian drugs,” he said. Both the older Brothers looked up at this. Most Brothers chose not to learn those particular Shora. As well as being one more way to die in Schooling, it diminished any future enjoyment a person might obtain from drugs. “And the iocain, too; plus one other, I think,” Parno told them. “If they give her one of the drugs using those bases, Dhulyn will manage.”

“But how can they do this?” Hernyn burst out. “With Pasillon . . .” His voice trailed off under the steady looks of his Brothers.

“Pasillon was long ago,” Parno said. “There are no longer thousands of Brothers who would come to avenge us.”

“A better question is why do this,” Fanryn said.

Parno nodded, more in response to the tone than the words.

He’d have liked an answer to that same question, himself, if only to be sure that it wasn’t the thing he feared. But what else could it be? Since it wasn’t him isolated, it had to be Dhulyn they were after. He didn’t see how Lok-iKol could have found out, but he could easily see why such a man, a man with political ambition, would want a Seer, if he knew where to put his hands on one.

What else would be worth so much trouble and risk?
“Have you been out of the cell yet?” he asked, more in an attempt to change the path of his own thoughts than because it would be useful to know. When his companions did not answer right away, but exchanged looks out of the corners of their eyes, he feared he did not have to look far for more to worry him.

“Well . . .” Fanryn scratched her elbow. “We were taken unprepared.”

“Unprepared? How did that happen?” Parno kept his voice carefully neutral, though from the silence of the other three, he hadn’t quite managed to keep the censure from his tone.

Fanryn shrugged. “Have you never taken service in a House, Parno? Things can look a bit different, you know.”

“Different, indeed,” Parno agreed, “if it means you can end up in a cell without the means of freeing yourselves.” He shook his head. No point in being delicate about their feelings. If it came to that, he’d been caught himself. For years, he’d chafed under what he’d always thought to be Dhulyn’s unnecessarily strict discipline. After all, he’d been Schooled the same way she had; all Mercenaries were. The three Schools might have different philosophies, as befitted their Schoolers—the nomadic Dorian the Black, the mountain-bred Nerysa Warhammer, Bettrian Skyborn of the western plains—but the Shora were the same, as was the Common Rule. If this kind of slackness actually did exist—and three Brothers in a cell without lockpicks seemed to say it did—maybe Dhulyn Wolfshead was less fanatical than he’d thought.

“Hold, Brother,” Thionan said, her hands raised, palms out. “We know. ‘A lazy Mercenary is a dead Mercenary.’ Believe me, we know. That’s not a lesson any of us will have to learn again. But telling us what we should have done doesn’t get us out of this cell right now.”

Parno nodded. The woman was quite right. Recriminations didn’t solve problems. “How did you get taken, if you don’t mind the question?” They all three exchanged another look. “It might be useful for me to know,” he added.

“They put something in our food,” Hernyn said, glancing at the stew bowl Parno had scraped clean. “It was just after you and Dhulyn Wolfshead came in with the young woman, that same day. Wasn’t it?” He turned to the two women.

“It was,” Thionan said. “A day, no, two days ago now. It was at the midday meal. They managed it the only way they could have, they put the stuff in the common dish. For the Caids’ sake, Parno.” Something of what he felt must have appeared on his face. “We’ve been here fourteen moons. We work for these people. We thought we’d be safe enough if we ate from the same dish as all the rest.”

“They must have knocked out seven other people just to get us,” Fanryn pointed out.

“And to confuse things,” Parno spoke his thought aloud. “No one could tell where you had gone or why.”

“True,” said Thionan. “But according to the keeper who was talking to us before he was told to hold his tongue, one of the people at table with us didn’t get up. I don’t know what they used on us—Fan says something called cyantrine—but apparently they risked poisoning their own people, just to make sure they had us.”

“What else could they do?” Parno said. “You would have known we never came out.” All four Brothers looked at each other. The word Pasillon went unspoken, unneeded.

“You’ll get us out, though. Right, Parno?” Hernyn asked. Parno saw the boy had color in his face and had lost his hangdog expression. Though there was still something doglike and devoted in his eyes. At least he seemed to have taken Parno’s advice to heart, and was putting his indiscretions behind him.

“Don’t see why not,” Parno said. “But let’s not rush ourselves. Getting out of the cell is one thing—out of the House another. I can’t leave without my Partner, so my first concern is to find her. Are we agreed?”

Fanryn nodded. “You’re Senior, Parno, so even if we didn’t agree—”

“Which we do—” Thionan cut in.


Eight

“SO, THIS IS WHAT you did when you were living in Navra?” Mar raised her head from the poem she was copying. She couldn’t tell which of her two new cousins had spoken. Their voices were very much alike, and now they both wore the identical wide-eyed look of innocent interest. The three of them were sitting on stone benches set around a stone table topped with small colored tiles that formed a picture of a flowering tree. The morning sun was bright, the garden protected, and here against the south wall it was warm enough for cloaks to be laid aside. A hard embroidered cushion protected her from the cold stone she sat on.

The question sounded polite enough, but in the last two days Mar had answered many questions that had hidden stings in their tails. Still, it was easier to answer with the truth.
“No,” she said, dipping the end of her pen—a beautiful thing, carved from a single piece of inglera bone, with a real gold point fitted on the end—into the marble inkwell. “The Weavers didn’t own any books for reading. I kept the accounts for their business. You know,” she added, determined not to let them make her feel ashamed, “lists of inventory, of customers, and orders, estimates for work, records of bills. That kind of thing.”

“But why didn’t the clerk do this work?”

There it was, the sidewise glance from one set of blue eyes to the other as Nor-eNor and Kyn-o-Kyn exchanged a not-so-private look.

“I was the clerk.” Mar looked back at her work just in time to prevent a large drop of ink from falling to the tiled tabletop. She bit the inside of her bottom lip. At the Weavers’ house, it would have been a serious and costly offense to waste ink and spoil table, paper, or parchment. Here, it would probably go unnoticed. But Mar wasn’t used to being here, copying poems instead of doing accounts.

“Ohhh.” Nor’s tone of enlightenment rang archly false. “So these weavers weren’t working for you, you were working for them!”

“I’ve explained it several times,” Mar said as innocently as the growing lump of unhappiness in her throat would let her. “Was I speaking too quickly?” She moved her eyes back to her work and kept them there until the two girls had gone off, their noses in the air.

The knots of tension in Mar’s shoulders loosened a little. Her moments of solitude had been few and far between since she’d been whisked out of the presence of the Tenebroso—and away, incidentally, from her friends the Mercenary Brothers—and rushed away to bathe and dress properly in time for the midday meal. Her own clothes had been taken away to be “laundered,” and she’d since had to be very insistent to convince the lady page assigned to help her that she wanted the clothes back. She wasn’t sure herself why she wanted the clothing, worn and out of place here as it was, she’d only known that she’d wanted something familiar around her. As for her new clothes, Mar was still not used to the sheer amount of them. The hose, the chemise, the long gown with close-fitting sleeves covered by the loose tunic in the House colors that was so clearly unfashionable when compared to the tighter bodices of Nor and Kyn.

Mar wrote three careful words on the parchment in front of her. She wished she didn’t mind looking poor and frowsy next to the glittering sisters . . . but she did. Would it scandalize the lady page even more if she were to ask for needles and thread with which to stitch her clothes into a more up-to-date look? Or was that a task some other servant was supposed to do for her? Mar sighed. This was an area which Parno Lionsmane hadn’t touched on.

“Those two couldn’t be more ignorant and foolish if they took lessons, and I hope you don’t let them bother you more than you can help.”

Mar jumped, startled into looking directly at the older woman sitting on the far end of the bench, where the sunlight shone on the embroidery she held in her lap. Mar had forgotten that Lan-e-Lan was even there. A widowed cousin-by-marriage Mar had been told, Lan was older than herself, but still young, small, and pretty, with smooth olive skin and thick dark hair.

“The Weavers were all I had,” Mar said. “I’m not ashamed of them.”

“If you were, you’d be even more foolish and more ignorant than those two.” Lan snipped off a hanging thread with a tiny pair of gold-handled scissors. “Do you think the Tenebroso can’t read and write? Can’t add up figures? Can you imagine how those two are going to be cheated by their servants, if we’re ever lucky enough to find Households for the conceited little half-wits?” Lan-e-Lan turned her embroidery over and frowned at it. “They wouldn’t know accounts from a country dance.”

Mar could feel her mouth hanging open with shock. Lan-e-Lan looked up and smiled, and suddenly Mar burst out laughing.

“Is there anything else worrying you, my dear?” Lan asked when the laughter had finally died away. “Anything important, I mean?”

Mar smiled at her older cousin. Somehow Lan’s sweet-voiced “my dear” was better than her formal name, but not as warm and comfortable as the Wolfshead’s gruff “my Dove.” Which reminded Mar of one of her worries.

“I didn’t get a real chance to say good-bye to the Mercenary Brothers who brought me here, and to thank them,” Mar said. “I was with them almost a moon, and they were dismissed so quickly . . .” Mar hesitated to ask anything directly. So far, at least, no further mention had been made of her part in bringing Dhulyn Wolfshead and Paron Lionsmane to Gotterang. Was it possible they were still in the House?

Lan’s dark brows drew together as she thought, head on one side. “Oh, yes, I remember seeing them. Most impressive, I must say, particularly the Outlander woman. I think they had a short interview with the Kir, but then
they left.” Lan smiled, turning her attention back to the embroidery in her lap. “Perhaps you could send a message to their House. It might catch them before they take their next assignment.”

Mar nodded, conscious of an unexpected disappointment; she hadn’t realized how much she was counting on their still being in the House. But either the Mercenaries hadn’t been wanted after all, or they’d turned down whatever work the Kir had offered them. No point in us all being stuck here. Mar blinked, half surprised and half frightened by a feeling she hadn’t admitted before.

“You still look a touch worried, Mar. Are you sure there isn’t anything else?”

“There is something.” Mar took a deep breath and looked directly at Lan. “I know the Tenebroso is . . . is very busy,” Mar substituted for the more honest but less tactful “very old” she’d been about to say. “But when would it be right to ask about the restoration of my Holding? And who should I ask? I don’t even know if the land still belongs to the Family, or . . .” Mar let her question trail away.

The older woman had recovered her poise very quickly, but not before Mar had seen the look that crossed Lan’s face.

“Well, it would be the Kir you should ask, though Dal-eDal handles a great deal of the House business for him just lately,” Lan said with her warm smile. “But you know what my advice is? Let it be for now, give yourself a chance to settle in. After all, it’s a great honor to be received in the House, and you don’t want to look unappreciative. I know you don’t feel so at the moment, but given the chance you might come to like it here, and you might prefer, as I did, to remain a part of this House.”

“Oh course,” Mar cleared her throat and forced her lips into a smile to match Lan’s. “That’s very sensible. I thank you for your counsel.”

And all was as it should be. Except that Mar had seen how Lan’s face had changed, how surprised she’d been by Mar’s question. Obviously, Lan-eLan had absolutely no idea what Mar was talking about.

When a servant came to call them in to luncheon, Mar was able to smile pleasantly, rise, and follow her cousin-by-marriage into the House. Not at all as if her whole world had just been turned upside down.

A GOLDEN-HAIRED CHILD IS RUNNING WITH A SHORT SWORD IN HIS HAND. HE TRIPS OVER HIS DOG AND CUTS HIS CHIN. . . .

From the taste in the back of her throat, and the way the inside of her head felt like a very large space, the drug One-eye had given her was fresnoyn. But from the way her hands and feet seemed so remote, the basis of the mixture was poppy, so perhaps there was not so very much fresnoyn in the mix. She began taking long slow breaths. Breathing alone would not clear the drug from her body as quickly as sleep or heavy exercise, but it would help somewhat.

Fresnoyn was a truth drug, and Dhulyn wondered how the Kir had managed to obtain a supply. Made from the mold which grew on the bark of a particular tree in the rain forests of the lands across the eastern sea, fresnoyn was ruinously expensive. She herself had trained with it twice while studying the poison Shora. She only hoped she could remember what she had been taught. Even though Dorian the Black had been given his particular supply of fresnoyn, he could not afford to waste any in extra training.

Dhulyn continued to breath deeply and slowly, and in her mind began a chant which, if she remembered it correctly, was intended to help channel her thoughts. She would have to answer with the truth, otherwise her skin would flush a deep red as the drug reacted to the lie, but clarity of thought would enable her to answer with the truth she chose.

“Dhulyn Wolfshead.” The silky voice had already said her name twice.

Dhulyn opened her eyes. There he was, right in front of her, the one-eyed son of a diseased inglera.

She smiled her wolf’s smile. One-eye pulled his head back. Dhulyn laughed. That was fun. She resumed her measured breathing. She could not really afford such tricks.

“Wolfshead,” he said. “Will any of your Brothers come for you?”

She considered the question for the space of a slow breath.

“Parno Lionsmane will come,” she said. That was easy, no more than the real truth.

“Parno Lionsmane is captive and cannot rescue you,” the Scholar said. “Will someone else come for you?”
“Yes,” she said, responding to the question and not the statement. “Parno will come,” she repeated. “He will always come.” That should do them, she thought, watching them exchange looks. What’s the best lie? A truth that won’t be believed.

One-eye nodded at the Scholar. “You see? So much for your fears of Pasillon.” The boy sat on the edge of the armless chair. His hands were at his mouth. Clearly, he was regretting his decision to stay, but even as she watched, his hands fell to his knees, and he straightened in his chair. His face relaxed, the frown of concentration melting away as his features grew slack, and his eyes glowed a soft jade green.

*There,* she thought, the hairs on her arms and the back of her neck rising, sure she was seeing what Parno had seen. Green eyes again. What makes your eyes so green, little Scholar?

One-eye had already turned back without, Dhulyn was certain, seeing what she had seen. She settled her face to show no reaction.

“Who are you?” he said.

Dhulyn smiled as softly as she could. There was only one answer to this. Clearly, they must have tried this only on the unSchooled, otherwise they would have learned to ask better questions. “I am Dhulyn Wolfshead the Scholar—” She stopped at the man’s abrupt gesture.

“And before?” One-eye leaned forward again in his eagerness.

Dhulyn drew her eyebrows together and pretended to have difficulty focusing on the Kir. Again, this one was easy. For Mercenaries there was nothing “before”—or shouldn’t be; she dragged her thoughts away from Parno. They had no history before they joined the Brotherhood, no country, no House, no family. When they received their badges, their real lives began. This was their truth.

“There is no ‘before,’ ” she said.

“What was your tribe?”

Now she did smile. “I am Dhulyn Wolfshead,” she repeated. “Called the Scholar—”

She saw his arm tense and braced herself for the blow, but One-eye did not actually raise his hand.

“The Scholar tells me you are Espadryn. What the common folk call the Red Horsemen.”

It was not a question, so Dhulyn did not have to answer.

“What do you remember of that tribe?”

Wrong question, Dhulyn thought as she shook her head and then pretended she couldn’t stop shaking it. All too easily done. Maybe the drugs were more effective than she’d thought.

“Nothing,” she said. Again the strict truth—if not all of it. She remembered sitting astride behind her father on the back of his horse. *A woman wearing leathers and furs, with her face completely wrapped in cloths, only her ice-gray eyes showing, leaning over to me from her own mount, adjusting the scarf around my face. That woman is my mother, that I know, but I never remember her face, only her eyes, peeping out between the wrappings of scarves. And never anything more of my father than his wide back in front of me. Of the tribe, nothing. Just my mother’s eyes, the color of ice. But warm, very warm. She shook herself. But of her band nothing, of her tribe, nothing. And Lok-iKol, Kir of House Tenebro, had asked no questions about her family.*

“I think you people must be insane,” she heard herself say in a bright friendly voice. One-eye glanced at the boy behind him but without noticing anything.

“The eighth book of the *Rhonis* tells of a city named Shpadrajh, so old that the book claims it dates to the time of the Caids.”

Dhulyn made a rude noise with her lips. “No one’s read the *Rhonis,*” she said. “Are you telling me you’ve read the *Rhonis?* There’s only—what, two copies of the *Rhonis* in the whole world.” What were they trying to prove?

“One of those copies is at Valdomar.”

“Really?” Dhulyn’s thoughts skittered down a path all their own. “Would I be able to come there and read it?”

Lok-iKol smiled. “Of course. If you answer our questions thoroughly, I’m sure I’d be able to arrange that.”

“What questions,” Dhulyn said, twisting her head and squinting her eyes at the green-eyed Scholar. “Blood, old One-eye’s ugly, isn’t he? I mean, uglier than a one-eyed person generally is, don’t you think? Listen, I’ve seen some ugly one-eyed people in my time, but really . . . What? Did I speak aloud?” Dhulyn grinned. “Sorry, my lord Kir. But really, you must own a mirror. I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know, am I? And you’re the Kir of a High Noble House, for blood’s sake—it’s not like you’re going to have any trouble getting lovers, is it? Oh, all right.” Seeing that she’d made the impression she wished to make, she stopped talking. This would teach them to give her drugs. Give her a headache, would they? “Sorry, what was the question?”
“Spadrajh was a city of Seers. Tall, red-haired people. Lords of Clans and Households, Great Houses, even Tarkins, even the High Kings when they still ruled in the north came to Shpadrajh or sent their First Children to speak for them, all asking for a glimpse of the future.”

“No,” Dhulyn said, throwing as much skepticism into her voice as she could. “Where are they, then?”

“The Seers began to tell of a coming plague and finally an ambassador of Kadrath came to find the city deserted, the Halls of Sight empty. Shpadrajh was no more. All felt that the plague they had spoken of had finally come upon them. But our Scholar here does not think so.” The One-eye gestured behind him without turning. “There is no plague that doesn’t leave bodies, bones, behind. He thinks they Saw something else and fled before it could destroy them. The first mention of your tribe, the Espadryni, comes after this time. The Shpadrajha had been nomads in their time, and it is his theory that when the thing they called the plague neared, the Shpadrajha abandoned their urban lives and returned to a wandering, reclusive existence. And so they survived until the present day, as the Espadryni.”

The space in Dhulyn’s head was suddenly larger, more echoey and very, very cold. And her hands and feet were cold, too, and she hoped her mouth would freeze solid before they asked her again the question she saw coming.

THE SCHOLAR GUNDARON, THIN AND DRAWN, STANDS WITH THE LITTLE DOVE, SHOULDER TO SHOULDER. THEY ARE LOOKING DOWN AT THE TOP OF A TABLE, BUT DHULYN CAN’T SEE WHAT THEY LOOK AT. A MAP? A BOOK? MAR MAY BE CRYING.

One-eye leaned toward her again, his knuckly hands with their long fingers grasping the back of her chair to either side of her head. Leaned forward until his face was only a few fingerwidths from hers. Dhulyn could see the hairs of his beard growing in crookedly where his face was scarred. Smell wine on his breath.

“I think you can see the future, what do you think?”

Dhulyn wanted to laugh, but was afraid it would not sound real. “I think you’re foolish and stupid, too, as well as ugly. Get your Scholar to read less and think more.” She had shaken her head. “If I could see the future, how could you have captured me? Why did I walk into this trap?”

She looked up to see One-eye still looking at her, the muscles in his face, still moving to focus two eyes, gave him a most peculiar squint. *Here it comes,* she thought.

“Can you see the future, little wolf? Can you?”

He was close enough to her. And she had an answer to give him. A true answer. “I can See your death,” she said finally, smiling her wolf’s smile. “But what does that prove?”

He reached out his left hand and stroked her cheek with the back of his fingers. Dhulyn opened her mouth to scream as images blasted their way into her mind.

A PLATE OF KIDNEYS CONGEALING IN SAUCE SITS ON THE TABLE, JUST TO THE MAN’S RIGHT. THERE IS A FORK LYING WHERE IT FELL FROM THE MAN’S FINGERS, AND A PIECE OF BREAD BROKEN OFF FROM A SMALL LOAF HAS FALLEN TO THE FLOOR. AFTER NUDGING THE MAN’S HAND ONCE MORE, THE DOG EATS THE BREAD.

Nine

MAR HAD LEARNED long ago that if you walked with a purpose, and nodded at the people you passed, everyone who saw you assumed you had business, and let you go without comment. She found that this was as true in Tenebro House as it had been in the streets of Navra. So far, none of the people in the passages, most wearing the livery of servants or guards, had done more than return her nods, and many not even that much. If anyone asked her, she planned to say she was looking for the Scholar to return his play, and she had it in her gown pocket for proof. But also in that pocket was a piece of drawing chalk she had pilfered from a box in Lan-e-Lan’s rooms after luncheon.

Every now and then she would make sure no one was looking, and chalk a mark low on the wall, pattern marks like weavers used to record how a pattern had been woven. Meaningless to anyone else, they would tell Mar which
passages led toward exits, and which deeper into the House.

She didn’t have a plan, exactly, but Dhulyn Wolfshead had once said that you should always be sure of the way out.

She had just backtrackered out of a passage that led only to bedrooms and was trying another turning when she saw there was someone sitting in the seat fitted into the window embrasure halfway up the passage on the right. She fixed a modest smile on her lips and prepared to stride purposefully by when recognition made her slow her steps.

“Gundaron,” she said, her heart beating faster. He was leaning forward, his elbows on his knees, staring at his clasped hands. He didn’t look up.

“Scholar.” Mar raised a tentative hand to touch him on the shoulder. He shuddered and straightened, showing her a pale face with dark circles under the eyes.

Gundaron blinked, for a moment not recognizing the silhouette, backlit by the branched candlesticks farther down the passage. Scholar, he thought, shaking his head and blinking again to clear the fog from his brain. This was Mar-eMar. He straightened. Had she asked him a question?

Mar motioned with her hand and Gundaron shifted over. The window seat was more than wide enough for them to share.

“I said, are you all right? You look very pale.”

“I don’t know,” he glanced around. “I must have dozed off. I . . . I don’t remember.”

“Did you hit your head? What’s the last thing you do remember?”

“Pasillon.” The word popped out of his mouth before he could stop it. “Oh, Caids,” he said, as the scene in the Kir’s workroom came spilling into his mind. What was he doing sitting here? How did he get here? The light spun, and he clutched at the hand Mar had placed on his arm to steady himself.

“Who is Pasillon?”

Could he tell her? Certainly he had to give her some reason for the fear he saw mirrored in her face.

“No a who, a what. When I was a boy, in the Library at Valdomar, I used to sneak downstairs, late at night when I was supposed to be asleep, to read the books we weren’t old enough to read yet.” He swallowed, and a smile’s ghost rested a moment on his lips. “There was one in particular, the Book of Gabrian, that told of Pasillon.”

Mar-eMar settled herself, half-turned toward him, her face steady and unsmiling.

“It’s a plain,” he said. “Far to the west of here and south, in the country that’s now Lebmuin. The plain has another name now, but when it was Pasillon, there was a great battle there, between two city-states, Tragon and Conchabar. It was Tragon that won.”

“I’ve never heard of them.”

“Practically no one has, but that’s not why people remember Pasillon.” Gundaron twisted to face her. “There were Mercenary Brothers on both sides—”

“Both sides?”

“They’re like Scholars, the Brotherhood, free of all countries, citizens of the world. And during battle—” All at once Gundaron was back in his midnight Library, shivering in the cold. Mar took his hands in hers and began chafing them. “During battle they’ll kill each other, if they come upon other Mercenaries on the opposing side. They think it’s the best way to die, at the hands of one of their own.”

Mar drew down her brows, nodding. “Yes, that’s what they would think.”

Gundaron took a deep breath and released it slowly. He could feel sweat on his upper lip. He freed his hands from hers and rubbed them on the smooth cloth of his hose.

“That day, the day of the battle at Pasillon, the lord of Tragon had been killed, or maybe it was his son—I only read Gabrian that one time, so I’m not sure. But, with this special grievance, the Tragoni fought harder and won.” Gundaron looked closely into Mar’s face, searching for the glimmer that showed she understood. “But their loss made it a sour victory. And the taste of it left them angry, so they chose to take no prisoners. The Tragoni killed the Conchabari as they fled, allowing no one to surrender.”

“Oh, no.” Mar raised her shoulders and drew her sleeves down over her hands.

“But the Brotherhood, the Mercenaries, they had no reason to flee. Their Common Rule says that those who fight on the losing side submit to the victors and are ransomed by their own Brothers. But not that day. Not at Pasillon. Blinded by victory, enraged by its cost, the Tragoni pursued their fleeing enemy and fell upon any who stood in their way. They did not see why a Mercenary badge should buy someone’s life.

“They’d forgotten they had Mercenaries on their own side. And those men and women were quick to come to the
aid of their Brothers. And then the real battle of Pasillon began.” Gundaron leaned back against the cold stone embrasure, eyes closed, looking back at the boy he had been, reading an exciting and forbidden book by candlelight when he should have been in bed.

“Exhausted, outnumbered,” he went on, “some injured, forty or fifty Mercenaries stood against more than five hundred. Gabrian describes how they stood back-to-back on a rise of ground and cut down wave after wave of enraged Tragoni until finally, long hours later, when the sun had set, three injured Brothers crept off in the darkness, leaving the rest to cover their escape. And finally, finally, the last Mercenary fell. The victors—the few Tragoni who were left, looked about them and shook their heads, thanking their gods that it was over.”

Gundaron blinked, and focused on Mar once more. Her eyes were wide, whites showing all around, and the corners of her mouth were turned down.

“Except it wasn’t over.” His voice dropped to a whisper. “The army of Tragon continued to die after that day. Not everyone, just the men who were there that day. Just the men who had killed Mercenaries. And the officers who did not stop them. And the lords who gave orders to the officers.

“People spoke of bad luck and the Curse of Pasillon, and many went to Healers and Finders and Menders, even Jaldean shrines, since they were soldiers, to see if the Sleeping God would cleanse them. The Healers saw no illness, the Finders found no poisons, the Menders nothing broken, and the Sleeping God slept on. But many shrines housed Scholars, and the Scholars saw that this was the work of the Brotherhood.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Don’t you see? It was the Mercenaries, the Brothers who escaped. They carried the story back to their Houses, and their Schools, and the Brotherhood acted, to teach everyone in the world that mistreated and betrayed Mercenaries would be avenged.” He looked away. “Will be. Still will be.”

“No, I understood that part. I don’t understand what made you think of all this now? Why you’re so frightened.”

He looked at her, licked his dry lips. Realizing that he could not tell her. Could not tell her of the look on Dhulyn Wolfshead’s face and the word Pasillon on her lips—Gundaron pressed his clasped hands between his knees to steady them.

“It was seeing the Mercenaries,” he said finally. “Not the tame ones who live here and guard the walls, but the strange ones, your Mercenaries. They made me think of it and I had a nightmare . . .”

The girl pressed her lips together, frowning. “Something else has happened.”

While her cousin Dal-eDal sat in his room and played vera with himself.

Dal didn’t even bother to sweep the tiles back into their box when a knock sounded at the door.

“Come,” he said, looking up from the pattern on the table and smiling his inquiry at the man-at-arms who came in.

“I don’t know how you knew it, my lord, but you’re right. The upper armory’s been unlocked and restocked, though nothing’s missing from the lower armory, and nothing’s been delivered from outside so far as I can find out.”

Dal tapped the tabletop with the tile in his hand, keeping his face impassive. “And the other matter?”

“I did as you told me, my lord, and asked in the kitchens. The Scholar and the Kir are using the big workroom, leastways food and drink have been taken there, and up to the small room in the north tower as well. But there’s something else, my lord. Lights and braziers have been taken down to the western subcellar, the wine rooms.”

Dal lifted his eyebrows, but slowly, careful to keep his excitement off his face. Lights to the wine rooms were one thing, but lights and heat? He sat back in his chair. Wine rooms indeed. Cells didn’t stop being cells because you called them wine rooms. Light and heat down there, that meant new prisoners in the old cells. And new, unaccounted-for weapons in the armory? That gave him an idea of who the prisoners were.

If he was right, if the Mercenaries were still in the House—what, if anything, was he going to do about it?

He knew what his father would have done, if Lok-iKol had left Dal’s father alive to do anything. Mil-eMil would have gone straight to the nearest Mercenary House with his tale of kidnapping and forced imprisonment. And not because he wanted to remove an obstacle to his own ambition—he’d had none, though Lok-iKol had never believed
it—but to protect the House. And maybe, said the voice of the little boy who still lived inside Dal, maybe just because it was the right thing to do.

What would my father do? he thought. Something more than stand back collecting information, that was certain. And what had happened to make him think of his father just now?

“Thank you, Juslyn, you’ve done well. Ask the Steward of Walls to be good enough to join me in the upper armory at his earliest convenience. I require his advice for a new sword.”

“Very good, my lord. Thank you, my lord.” The man-at-arms bowed his way out of the room, his crooked teeth showing in his wide grin.

Dal turned over the tile he’d set down and looked at it. The picture on its face was tiny, but unmistakable. A Mercenary of Swords. He sat up straight, concentrating on the tile. There had been something. Something that had made him think for a split second of his father. When he’d led the two Mercenaries through the halls to the trap point, something—a shiver of familiarity—about the man Lionsmane had triggered a thought, a memory. What had it been? He frowned, placed the Mercenary of Swords back into the olive-wood box and began sliding the others into his palm. No time to chase down stray thoughts now.

He closed the lid of the olive-wood box with a snap.

And if his one-eyed cousin was keeping four Mercenary Brothers in a cell and one in a nice room—when she wasn’t tied to a chair—what, precisely, could Dal do about it now?

A brisk knock, and Lan-eLan entered with a click of high heels. She shut the door behind her, leaning against the knob.

“Why knock if you don’t wait for me to say ‘enter’?” Dal said, good training bringing him to his feet. As usual, she ignored him. They’d long ago come to an understanding; a free exchange of information between them helped them both.

“Mar-eMar was told she’d get her lands back.”

Dal sat slowly, holding the edge of the table like an old man.

Lan nodded, a stiff smile on her lips. “She wondered, as innocent as you please, should she ask about it now or wait. I told her she should wait, of course, or speak to you.”

“Sound advice, in any case. Though she’d wait a long time. Do we even own the lands still?” Dal shook his head. It felt strange to know that once upon a time he’d been this naive himself. “Did she say what she’d done to expect this gift?”

“I gave her every chance to tell me,” Lan said, spreading her hands wide. “But the moment passed. She must have been asked for something...”

Dal thought he knew what Mar-eMar had been asked for—and what she’d brought. But why?

“I’ll find a chance to speak to her myself,” he said. “See what I can get from her.” Lan nodded and left as abruptly as she’d entered.

What was so important about these Mercenaries? Dal pushed his chair back from the table, stood, and picked up his box of tiles. He’d asked the Steward of Walls to meet him, and he’d better go. He could give the good Walls a nudge in the right direction. With luck, this affair might become his chance to finally do what his father had asked of him. Avenge his death. Stay alive himself.

Maybe the Mercenary Brothers would solve his problems for him.

Dal-eDal looked up from the dagger he was examining. “We’re alone, Karlyn, or will be if you shut the door.”

Karlyn took a step forward and let the oaken door, reinforced with strips of iron, swing shut behind him. Sturdy wooden shelves lined the walls, and low tables divided the floor space into long sections with clear pathways leading toward the far end of the room. A fine layer of dust covered innumerable pieces of weaponry laid out in orderly rows, everything from a gilded mace to a dagger small enough to fit in a glove. Many pieces were ceremonial, or so jeweled as to be almost useless.

“What’s this Juslyn tells me about a new sword? Are you sure you don’t want one new-forged?”

“I’m afraid I misled Juslyn slightly.” Dal was looking him directly in the face, but Karlyn thought there was something stiff and unnatural about the man’s smile. “It’s not so much a new sword I’m looking for, as a particular one. My father’s, to be precise. I seem to remember it was among the effects I brought from my Household.”

Karlyn started off to the left, heading for the far corner. “If it was, this is the place to look, right enough. Private blades—family blades that is, or anything jeweled should be along here.”
“Do you remember my father?”
Karlyn nodded, without turning around. “I met him once, just before I became Walls. A big man, golden-haired like a lion.” Karlyn turned to look more carefully at the other man. “Like you. You must look quite like him, though I won’t lie to you, I don’t remember his face. That would be, let me think . . . I’ve been Steward of Walls in Tenebro House for fifteen years, and served almost as many before that, since my father brought me here. So close to twenty years ago.”
“The Tenebroso never objected to your father bringing you?”
“Because he was her husband, you mean?” Karlyn shook his head. This was a question he’d answered many times over the years. “His children by other women did not affect the succession. And she liked me,” he added, seeing that it was Dal he spoke to. “Trusted me enough to make me Walls when old Norwed-Gor died, though my father was gone himself by then.”
“A man’s made Walls of a House as much for his judgment as for his skills,” Dal said. “I think we may have need of your judgment now.”
Karlyn heard Dal’s last words, but at first they did not register. He had reached the section of the tables where the swords were laid out in wooden racks, hilts first. He had stopped at a particular sword about one third of the way down the rack on the left. A sword lacking the patina of dust worn by those around it. A sword he knew.
Dal’s father might very well have had a sword like this one; forged by a master, perfectly balanced, sharp along the full bottom and back perhaps two thirds of the top edge. But this was not Dal’s father’s sword. Karlyn knew this sword. Knew the horsehead pommel, knew the very slight nick in the guard. He’d had this sword in his hands within the last three days. And if her sword was here, then the red-haired, gray-eyed Mercenary and her companion had not, after all, left Tenebro House two days ago—Karlyn-Tan struck his thigh with his fist and turned on Dal-eDal.
“What do you know about this?”
“Little more than you.”
“You helped him, don’t deny it.”
Karlyn saw Dal consider reprimanding him for his tone, saw the noble’s face relax as he changed his mind.
“My cousin the Kir doesn’t always leave me in a position to refuse when he commands—as you very well know.”
Yes, Karlyn knew. Dal had come to the House a frightened boy, hostage for the good behavior of his mother and the safety of his sisters. The women were gone now, dead or married off, but the habits of years were not so easily shaken away.
“I heard the same story as you. The Mercenaries gone from the guard after the incident of the bad food, as their Common Rule requires. Mar-eMar’s escort seen leaving Gotterang by the North Gate. I was relieved when I learned that they were gone.”
“Looks like your relief is short-lived,” Karlyn said. And mine, he added to himself.
Dal was nodding, as he brushed the dust off the sword next to Dhulyn Wolfshead’s with a fingertip. “Lok’s not impressed by the Curse of Pasillon, you know. He says the power of the Brotherhood has passed, and there are too few of them left in the world to pose such a threat.”
“He’s a great one for logic, is the Kir,” Karlyn said, his anger rising hot enough to burn his throat. “But logic’s a two-edged blade, and can cut both ways.” He hefted the Mercenary’s blade for emphasis. “Even in these times, people have a way of dying when Mercenaries go missing or abused. How’s this for logic? If their numbers are fewer in these years, would they not be all the more careful of each other?”
“What is so important that Lok would put the whole House into danger this way?”
Karlyn spat to one side. “It’s that snake spawn Beslyn-Tor behind this,” Dal’s head jerked up, and his eyes narrowed as he studied Karlyn’s face. “Did you think I didn’t know? I’m Walls, for the Caids’ sake. That poison’s been coming to the House for months now.” Karlyn laid the sword back down in the rack. He’d never regretted having to let anyone into the House as much as he regretted having to let in the leader of the New Believers. Not that he much liked the Jaldean’s underlings either. Hard to make out which was worse, bona fide poisonous snakes, or their tail-kissing followers.
“What will you do?”
This time Karlyn did not trouble to hide his disgust. “I am Steward of Walls of Tenebro House,” he said. “My oath, and my responsibility are not to you, Lord Dal, nor to Lok-iKol, nor even to the Tenebroso herself. My Oath is to the House. And it is the House I will protect.”
Karlyn-Tan swept by him so brusquely that Dal had to take a step back to keep from being shoved off his feet.
The hand that he put out to steady himself knocked against the rack of swords, setting the blades of some ringing like bells. The nearest blade was knocked from the rack entirely, its dusty tip rapping the tabletop sharply. This sword was marginally shorter than the Mercenary’s weapon, slightly curved and sharp on only the bottom edge. However, it, too, had an animal’s head for a pommel, this time, a mountain cat. One of the cat’s ears had been hammered flat, when the pommel itself had been used to strike a blow. Dal sucked in a breath, wrapped his hand around the cat’s head.

This was his father’s sword.

Blood. And. Demons. Dhulyn turned on her side, hugging herself in the feathery warmth of the bed. That was the Finder’s fire in Navra, certain sure, so why should she be Seeing that now? And as for the circle of women . . . Espadryni women. Herself older she’d Seen, many times, but never without her tattoo. Dhulyn blinked. Not herself without her Mercenary badge, but her mother.

Not the future, but the past.

Could this be the work of the fresnoyn? Or had she been having Visions of the past all along, and never known it? Dhulyn laughed aloud. No wonder the Sight had been of so little practical use to her—she’d have to look at each one more carefully than before. She squeezed her eyes shut. Perhaps the fair-haired boy she’d seen was not Parno’s child, but Parno himself?

Dhulyn shook her head and took another, deeper breath. She had no time to fully consider these questions now. First things first. They had looked for her, old One-eye and his leashed Scholar. Looked for her specifically because she was who she was . . . what she was.

Dhulyn’s eyes flicked open. Because the women of her Clan—no, of the Tribe were Seers. She frowned, digesting this information. So the Mark had not fallen on her from the clear blue sky, as she’d always thought. Her mother had been Marked as well, and the other women of her tribe. Seers all.

And I have seen your face, Mother.

Gone. All gone. Not just her mother, her father, aunts, uncles, cousins. Her Clan, and likely her whole Tribe. Everyone who might have helped her when her Mark came. Everyone who might have had some answers. Why hadn’t the Sight helped them?

Why hadn’t the Sight helped her? Kept her out of Lok-iKol’s hands? Dhulyn rubbed at the still-numb skin of her face. Had they asked her anything else? For a moment the smoky darkness, the face of a man turning purple as he choked to death threatened to rise again, but she gritted her teeth against it.

The Tarkin, she thought, remembering the color of his tunic and the golden circlet around his brows. The Tarkin of Imrion was going to be poisoned, by the Sun and Moon, and she knew who would gain by it. Though not for long. This was information she should take to Alkoryn Pantherclaw—if she could think of a way to explain how she came by it.

Dhulyn blinked. The important thing right now was escape. She pulled her hands out from under the warm covering and ran her fingers over her head. Contrary to how it felt from the inside, it was in one piece, though her scalp, like her face, felt numb. That was the fresnoyn and the poppy still in her blood. Her hair was untouched, neither unbound, nor cut nor shaved. She started to sit up and stopped abruptly, hissing at the throbbing of her head. This was not good.

She gritted her teeth. Pain or no, she had to get up, get out, find Parno. And all without finding herself again in that chamber, with the fresnoyn fresh inside her, when they’d thought of better questions to ask her.

The shape of the present room told her nothing. Alkoryn’s floor plans had shown dozens of squarish rooms. Heavy hangings covered the walls entirely, the only furniture her bed, and, just within reach on the floor, a glazed pitcher with a matching cup. She scrubbed her hands over her face and again ran her fingers over her hair, this time feeling carefully at the beads and baubles, ribbons and thongs, all intact, tied and woven through it. She touched the wire she was looking for and released a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding.

All right. She must put aside her fear, her anger, and be patient. Her Clan might be gone, even her Tribe, but she was not alone. As Dorian the Black Traveler had once promised her, she had a House, Brothers, a place to stand in the world. She would hold fast to that and she would not fail them. Nor would she fail herself.

As soon as this cursed drug wore off, she would find Parno. She would free him. They’d kill the One-eye. And maybe his Scholar boy as well. Then she and her Partner would return to their own House.
“Just these three more, my lord,” Semlin-Nor, Steward of Keys murmured, selecting another sheet of paper from the sheaf she held in her hands to place on the table in front of him. Lok glanced over the list on the paper before him, mentally comparing figures and amounts to what his Keys had already reported to him. He did not trouble to look up when the door opened.

“My lord Kir, the priest Beslyn-Tor—”

Lok raised his eyebrow as the Jaldean did not wait to be further announced, but entered the room before the page had finished speaking. Lok pressed his lips together, but stifled the major part of the annoyance he felt. His need for the services the Jaldean and his fanatic followers had been providing, and were still to provide, brought him to his feet, and turned what could have been a gesture of dismissal into a signal for Keys to bring another chair that his guest might join him at his worktable.

“It has been some days since I have heard from you, my lord Kir,” Beslyn-Tor said, standing in front of the chair brought for him.

Lok repressed another grimace at the sound of the Jaldean’s honeyed voice, the kind of honey that caught unsuspecting listeners in a golden trap. Surely the priest must know by now that Lok was anything but unsuspecting. He took up his pen and, leaning back in his chair, began to turn it over in the fingers of his right hand, making it dance down toward his smallest finger, and back again.

“I have not sent for you, Beslyn, no,” Lok said, deliberately using the diminutive of the man’s name. “But now that you are here, will you not sit?” Lok allowed himself a small smile. The chair that Semlin had brought forward for the priest was the very chair that Dhulyn Wolfshead had been sitting in. Two of the silk scarves which had been used to bind her wrists were still draped over the left arm. Lok lowered his eyes to the papers in front of him and without turning to her said, “Semlin, would you be so kind as to bring our guest some wine?”

The Jaldean’s raised hand stopped her when she had only half turned toward the door.

“I have very little time this evening,” the honeyed voice said. “I was the more surprised not to hear from you, Lord Kir, given the arrival of your recent guests.”

At moments like these, Lok welcomed the advantages of his injury. It was almost impossible to register any emotion at all—even when he wished to—and equally impossible to give anything away. So he could be certain that the shock that struck him like a blow to the heart at the priest’s words never showed on his face. Who among his household was selling information to the Jaldean?

“If our guest needs nothing, Semlin, perhaps you might return to your other duties?” The woman’s well-trained face remained expressionless as she made her courtesies and left the room.

“We have an agreement, Lord Kir.”

Lok turned to the Jaldean, setting his quill pen down to the right of the documents on his table. Beslyn-Tor was sitting on the forward edge of the chair, statue-still, as he always did. The man didn’t fidget, didn’t scratch, didn’t chew his nails or rub at his hands. It seemed at times as though he didn’t sweat.

“I have met my part,” Lok reminded the motionless man. And he had. Eleven Marked had been found by the Scholar Gundaron—though only nine had been turned over to the Jaldean. Until a moment ago, Lok would have sworn that Beslyn did not know about the Healer and the Mender secreted in the Tenebro summerhouse. But he also would have sworn the man didn’t know about Dhulyn Wolfshead.

“As I will meet mine. You will not sit on the Carnelian Throne without my help.”

Lok inclined his head in a shallow bow.

But once I’m there, he thought, that will be help I no longer need. Especially if he was the only person in the country—perhaps the peninsula—with Marked in his service. Especially if one of those was a Seer. The Jaldean was a fanatic and, like all fanatics, out of his depth when dealing with an equally ruthless but rational man.

“We have had some arrivals, as you say, but it is merely our cousin Mar-eMar, with her bodyguard.”

“And that bodyguard? I had heard one was an Espadryni woman.” A warmth lit up the jade-green eyes until they seemed almost to glow. “I have been given the benefit of your Scholar’s theories.”

Lok sat back and waved his hand in the air. “She answered the physical description,” he said, using his most reasonable tone. “But it is not so unusual. We were able to fully account for her background. She is not Espadryni.”

“You are certain?”

“As certain as we can be. We used fresnoyn in her food.”

The Jaldean nodded. “The chance of a Seer,” he said, so softly he might have been speaking to himself. “There are so few.” He raised his head and once more Lok had the benefit of his level jade-green stare. “It was necessary to
be sure.”

“I believe the woman and her companion have already left Gotterang,” Lok continued, once more picking up his pen.

“What of the Mesticha Stone?”

“According to my last report, the ship had left Navra on its way to the shrine on the Isle of Etsanksa to retrieve it. We cannot expect to hear again for some weeks.”

“He is a good tool, your little Scholar.”

“He is,” Lok agreed. “I could not part with him.” Certainly not, Lok thought, until I find out what you want with all these relics he’s located for you, and why the Mesticha Stone is so important.

“Are you sure you will not have some wine? Can I offer you other refreshment?”

Ten

IN THE MIDDLE of the first watch of the night, while most of the Household were seeking their bedrooms, Karlyn-Tan checked that he had his set of master keys hanging from his belt and set off down the corridors and passageways of Tenebro House. As he inspected the watch—something he did often, if irregularly—he could take the most roundabout and quiet route to the room that held the Wolfshead.

His first checkpoint was a young guardsman standing with a drawn sword in her hand, her back to a tapestry that depicted, in fading colors, a boar hunt. Word had it that the Tenebroso herself had worked the tapestry as a young woman, before the deaths of her two older siblings had made her Kir, and turned her attention to other matters. The tapestry hung at the apex of a long curving corridor, where the guard who stood before it could see down both sides.

“All quiet, Steward of Walls.” The young woman standing watch at the tapestry saluted with her sword as he passed her, giving her nothing more than a nod of acknowledgment. He knew her well, as he knew all of his own people. He even knew what special feat in practice had won her the honor of standing guard inside the walls and not out. The honor was always a coveted one, but especially on very hot nights when the stone walls gave some cooling to the House. Or on nights like this one, when spring’s cool drizzle misted the battlements.

The thought that Lok-iKol would endanger this young woman, and all her fellow guards as well as everyone else in the House—Karlyn’s hand had touched his sword hilt before he brought it back, relaxed, to his side.

Karlyn nodded to four more guards before he finally reached the room that held the Wolfshead. He waited for several minutes, listening and taking deep breaths, before he unlocked the door and stood on the threshold.

The first thing he saw was the bed placed against the middle of the far wall, and Dhulyn Wolfshead sitting cross-legged upon it, composed, and smiling merrily.

“It is Karlyn-Tan, Steward of Walls,” he said in a voice that would reach her ears without traveling down the hallway.

“I remember you,” she said. She still sat softly smiling, her blood-red eyebrows slightly raised. Suddenly, her smile broadened. “Have you come to release me, Steward of Walls?” she asked.

Karlyn took three paces into the room until he was no more than the length of a sword from the woman on the bed. He cleared his throat. “Yes.”

The look of blank astonishment on her face, though quickly masked, made the Mercenary woman look younger. “You surprise me, Steward of Walls. Did you not think that my Partner and I left the city through the north gate?”

Karlyn shrugged. “Wolfshead, that is the tale told in the House. But I have seen your swords and weapons hanging in the north tower armory.”

She raised her eyebrows a fraction and inclined her head once.

“I must ask something of you.”

Her lips twisted to one side. “You and everyone else in the blooded House.”

“Will you tell me what the Kir wants of you?”

The stony immobility of her face gave him his answer. Did not know, or would not say.

“Can you tell me at least whether it brings danger to the House—other than the danger you represent yourself?”

This time Dhulyn Wolfshead drew down her blood-red brows and pursed her lips. “That would be hard to say. He takes a great risk, I would judge, but whether it endangers the House . . .” Her frown deepened. “When you invade another’s territory, do you endanger your own?”

Lok was planning an assault on another House? Karlyn found himself nodding. Yes, that would fit. Perhaps even
explain the Jaldean.

“I will free you, Dhulyn Wolfshead. And in return, may I ask you to spare my guards? They are innocent in this.”

Dhulyn sat up straight, hands on her knees. She had rarely seen a man look as troubled as the Steward of Walls looked at that moment. The little muscles around his eyes and mouth were sharp with tension. As if he’d spent much time in thought before coming to her. But his request was sincere. That, Dhulyn was sure of. She had been right to approve of him when they had met at the gate. That he did not ask for himself, only for his men, showed his heart moved him in the right way. Dhulyn found she was glad of this. And that gladness surprised her, a little.

“Why should I do this thing, Steward of Walls?”

“I will set you free with my own hand, and give my word that my guards know nothing of your captivity,” he said.

“Someone must know.”

This closed his eyes, as a look of pain shot across his face. “None of my people, Wolfshead. I cannot speak for the Kir’s personal guard.”

“You have named the Kir,” she said, leaning forward.

“My oaths are not to the Kir,” he replied. “But to House Tenebro. That House is more than the Kir or even the Tenebroso herself. Like me, my people do not belong to the Kir, but to House Tenebro. They are innocent in this,” he repeated.

Again, he did not ask for himself. “Blade oath, Steward of Walls?”

“Blade oath, Dhulyn Wolfshead.”

A long moment passed. “I believe you,” she said finally. He bowed to her, but made no move to leave.

“I will leave the door open,” he said. “May I ask you to wait until the middle of the third watch?”

“What of this?” Dhulyn Wolfshead uncrossed her legs; as she lowered her bare feet to the floor, a heavy chain rang against the metal of the bed frame. Karlyn felt his stomach clench. He did not have the keys to that manacle.

“A hacksaw—” he began, already turning to the door.

“Wait.” He turned back. “You are an honorable man, and I will take your word in this as in the other. Go, lock the door behind you lest another come. Best you be able to say you do know not how I escaped.”

Karlyn-Tan gave the Mercenary a deep bow, and turned to the door. “One thing is certain,” Parno said. They had waited until the middle of the second watch to make their attempt on the door. He gritted his teeth and coaxed the bent-and-folded wire he had inserted into the lock a little to the right. Stupid lock was blooded stiff. And using his left hand was not making a hard job easier. Trial had shown, however, that left-handed or no, he was still better at lockpicking than the other three. He closed his eyes the better to feel the mechanism. “What I’d like to know,” he said through his teeth, “is how much the little Dove knew when we were looking after her on the road and making sure she wasn’t eaten by Cloud People.”

“Your coming was not just coincidence, you think?” Thionan said.

“Perhaps,” Parno jerked his head and young Hernyn eased in beside him. “Hold this just where I have it, my Brother.” Parno waited until the young man had slipped his hand into position and grasped the wire before moving his own hand away. The cracked bone made his right arm throb. “But it’s certain they were ready for us. Perhaps the little Dove’s an innocent bystander. And the letter we never saw a love note. It’s just that I’d like to know before I cut her throat.” Parno thought of Mar white-faced and vomiting after Dhulyn had cut young Clarys’ throat. It had taken days for that big-eyed look of apprehension to fade from the girl’s face. She had looked at Dhulyn the way one looks when one realizes that the house dog one cuddled in the evening was really trained to kill strangers who came uninvited. Had that pallor and those sidelong glances been no more than a performance? Or was it just that the girl had found it was one thing to act as lure, and another to travel with killers?

“The Lady Mar-e-Mar’s really a member of the House,” Fanryn said. She crouched on the floor near Parno, her back braced against the wall. “That much you may believe. They’ve been sending for cousins and second cousins and even more distant relatives since last planting season. Some stay, some go forth again.” She handed Parno the wire she’d finished bending for him. She’d been the one who’d helped him off with his boots. The pattern of beading around the boot tops still looked intact, but some of the beads were gone, worked into the dirt floor, and the wires which had held them on were picking the lock of the cell door.

A dull click, and the Brothers smiled at one another in satisfaction. Parno and Hernyn eased the door open a fingerwidth, and they all fell silent, listening. They quieted their breathing, waited with trained patience for one thousand heartbeats, before Parno slowly twisted the picks out of the lock. “There we are, my lords and ladies,”
Parno looked around at the three faces grinning back at him. “Off you go, Hernyn, and mind you don’t get caught. In Battle, my Brother.”

“Or in Death.” Hernyn gave Parno a grin of his own and snaked himself out of the door on his belly. Parno relocked the door. Always easier to relock than to unlock. A twist to the old proverb Dhulyn was always quoting, “easier in than out.” Too bad she hadn’t remembered it before they’d come into this place.

“He’ll be all right.” Parno hoped his words did not sound like a question. It was not something he could have said while the youngster was still in the room. Fanryn, Hernyn, and Thionan had matched fingers for the job and the boy had won.

“Oh, blood, yes,” Thionan snickered. “He’s new in the Brotherhood, but that makes him old for outsiders. You or I might see him, Parno; Fanryn here knows his smell and could track him by that alone. But none of these people will see him.” She tossed her head at the corridor on the other side of the door. “We used to go roaming at night—blood, during the day sometimes, and none of us were ever seen.”

Parno nodded. He would rather have gone himself, of course, but there was no way to convince the others in view of his injury. No way to explain the map in his head, if it came to that. And these three had more than maps in their heads. In their time in the House, they had been over the whole edifice several times, they’d told him. And it was from Brothers like these, Parno knew, that the maps he and Dhulyn were shown had come. They knew where every member of the household slept, and with whom, and what many of them looked like in their sleep. They knew where the chamber pots were kept and how often they were emptied; where the Tenebroso kept her jeweled gloves, and what kind of sweetmeats the tame Scholar kept under his bed.

Most important, they knew of the places that a prisoner like Dhulyn Wolfshead—someone who had to be kept secret from the rest of the household—might be hidden. According to Thionan, there were three small rooms that, going by their placement within the maze of Tenebro House, were without windows and had only one door. Thionan knew of at least one other visitor who had been kept in the room she considered most likely.

“Look there first,” she’d said to Hernyn. “You know the place I mean. Around to the left and down the short flight of stairs beyond the Kir’s suite. Across from the hallway that goes nowhere.”

“That’s not the place to start,” Fanryn had said, shaking her head. “You want to check that chamber next to the Kir’s suite first, the one he and the Scholar use for a workroom.” When the other three waited for her to go on she shrugged. “That’s where they question people. He should make sure she’s not there before looking for her cell.”

Hernyn had looked at Parno and waited for the older man’s nod. No one thought it odd that the man who knew the least about the House should be the one to decide. Even if he had not been Senior, Parno was Dhulyn’s Partner, the only one who could speak for her.

Parno sat propped on one of the cots while Thionan quickly put together what spare clothing and blankets they had between them to look like Hernyn was asleep on the other cot. They’d need all their luck and the bad lighting to fool anyone for long, Parno thought.

“How’s this look?” Thionan flopped herself on the cot along with the make-believe Brother and drew a length of twisted tunic around her own waist. Parno squinted, then began to laugh. By the Caids it did look like Thionan was sharing the cot with someone else. She rolled back up to a seated position and bowed her acknowledgment of Parno’s tribute.

“What shall we do to pass the time?” Parno said. “I’m no Scholar, but I know a good many tales, or I can sing.”

“A song by all means,” Fanryn said, leaning back and shutting her eyes with a smile.

Still, here in the heart of the House, surrounded by her people, the Tenebroso was evidently thought sufficiently well-guarded. And so she would have been, from any intruder other than a Mercenary Brother.

Not that Dhulyn wished to intrude upon her. She stood not quite in front of the closed door, the well-oiled hinges at her back. She tried not to think about time passing slowly and inexorably by. She tried only to listen to the breathing of the two women with her in the softly lit room, until she was sure they breathed at the same moment, as people who sleep together over long periods of time often do. If she needed to—and then the footsteps of the guards outside stopped in front of the door at her back.

Like a cat, Dhulyn walked quickly, softly across the room’s thick carpets to the interior door, keeping her footsteps timed to the breathing she felt more than heard, and slipped behind the heavy quilted curtain that marked the archway into the main bedchamber. She moved immediately to the right of the doorway and slowed her breathing, hoping her heart would follow suit and stop its hammering.

The Tenebroso’s room was so large that the small oil lamps placed one to each side of the doorway did very little
more than create deeper shadows. It had been a long time, evidently, since anyone other than Kor-iRok and her women had needed to navigate this room in the dark. Dhulyn heard sounds and murmuring voices from the anteroom and froze. After an eternity her heart resumed beating. Would they come into the Tenebroso’s room, or would they take it for granted that no one had been able to pass the lady pages?

More importantly, was this a routine check, or were the guards looking for her? Had someone found her cell empty?

Like her sitting room twenty paces farther down the hall, Kor-iRok’s bedroom was crowded with furniture. Little tables, stools, cabinets as tall as Dhulyn herself, some with open shelves and some with closed doors. Dhulyn edged over farther and squatted, adding herself to the shadow of a round table with thick carved legs. From here, she had a clear view of the large bed at the far end of the room. A small bedside table held a bowl of fruit and a light horn cup with a hinged silver lid to keep insects out of the drink. The Tenebroso Kor-iRok did not stir. The woman was warmly dressed and covered. At her age she would feel the cold more than would her ladies asleep in the outer room. Without cosmetics to give it color, the skin of her face was papery and pale. On a stand near the bed rested the elaborate golden-haired wig the old woman had been wearing when Dhulyn had first seen her, a gold, Dhulyn realized with a jolt, the exact shade of Parno’s hair.

More light entered the room as the curtain was noiselessly pushed aside. The rings must have been bound with cord to prevent them rattling against the curtain rod.

Wish I’d known that before, Dhulyn thought. One of the lady pages from the anteroom took a step into the bedroom.

“What is it, Jhes-iJhes?” came a whisper from the bed. Only years of discipline, and her teeth in her lower lip, prevented Dhulyn from making any sound.

“One of the guards in the west wing thought he saw something, my House,” the woman said.

Not me, then, Dhulyn thought.

“Well, there is nothing in here,” the papery whisper sounded once more from the bed. “Pray shut the door until the alert is over.”

“Yes, my House, sleep well.” The woman stepped out of the room, drawing the curtain closed as she went. Dhulyn heard the “snick” of the latch as the door she hadn’t noticed in the anteroom took a step into the bedroom.

“When did you know?” she asked, as she sat down on the edge of the bed. “They will take a few minutes to sleep again, and you will be more comfortable here.”

Dhulyn eyed the distance to the door, and turned to watch the old woman’s thin chest rise and fall. If she took a breath deep enough to call out, Dhulyn could stop her before any sound got farther than the edge of the bed. Though it was bad luck to kill someone so old.

“I did not want to be Tenebroso, you know,” Kor-iRok said as though she was continuing a conversation. “But my brother died, and then my sister. I had a daughter who died also, an elder daughter. Two months before her presentation day, dead of a fever. Young. I believed it to be natural; eventually, I learned differently. Now my time comes, though I am the only one who knows it.” She looked directly at Dhulyn, the force of her stare belying her words. “You may help me. Your coming is most advantageous. I fear I have less time than I had hoped.”

Dhulyn pressed her lips together. There was no doubt, not even any real sense of request in the Tenebroso’s voice. She was used to being obeyed, and she expected to be obeyed now. What help would the old woman need? And what would she do if Dhulyn did not provide it?

“I do not see how I may be of aid,” she said. “We do not kill people in their beds.”

“The only killing needed here will be done by me.” The old woman indicated the bedside table with a glance from her still bright amber eyes. Following that glance Dhulyn saw what she’d missed before in all the shadows of the place, a glass vial no longer than her smallest finger, and stopped with a waxed plug. Dhulyn pursed her lips in a soundless whistle.

“Grandmother,” Dhulyn said, finding herself instinctively reverting to the courtesy of her Clan. “I do not understand.”

“I will ask three—no—four things of you. First, unstopper the vial and hand it to me.” She waited. “I am ready
my child,” the papery voice whispered when Dhulyn hesitated. “More than ready.”

Dhulyn looked at the vial, at the old woman, saw the determination and certainty in the Tenebroso’s face. She picked up the vial. She wondered what kind of poison the old woman had decided on. She ran her thumbnail around the edge of wax and worked out the cork before placing it into the Tenebroso’s waiting hand. The old woman smiled, and tipped the contents of the little glass tube into her mouth. A small grimace of distaste, as when one takes a mouthful of sour wine, and then she held out the vial once more.

“I wish you to take this with you when you go.” The Tenebroso suddenly gasped and shut her eyes tight before blinking them open again. “I will not give him the satisfaction . . . I would not have him think I have killed myself because of him.”

No need for Dhulyn to ask who the man in question might be.

“That is only two things, Grandmother.”

“I would have you listen to my curse,” the old woman said. “Another’s ears will give it weight and power. And I wish it to fall upon him as heavily as might be.”

“You would curse your own Kir?” Towns folk. Who could understand them?

The old woman’s eyes must have been very accustomed to the darkness in her room for her to catch Dhulyn shaking her head.

“It is not what you think, Mercenary. I would curse him for killing my daughter, all those years ago. For killing his sister.”

“But your House . . .” She’d condemn her House to the chaos and turmoil that would follow the cursing of its Kir? Not that Dhulyn would stand in the old woman’s way. As far as she was concerned, a curse was just what the One-eye needed.

“The House will continue. I was afraid,” the old woman said in the voice of one confiding in a friend. “I thought I might have waited too long. Dal is not what I had hoped. He watches, but he does not lead. He hates Lok, but he cannot make up his mind to kill him.”

Dhulyn smiled at this insight.

“But now Par-iPar has come, as I arranged, and you will bear my message to him. He is strong. A true Heir. Now I may die content, cursing my son who robbed me of my daughter, and my House of its true Kir.”

Par-iPar? Dhulyn stared again at the golden wig, this time really seeing how exactly it matched Parno’s hair. Lok-iKol thought he was bringing her here for her Mark, and all along his mother was bringing the One-eye’s replacement. Parno. Parno was the heir. Not just a younger son of some Household of the extended House Tenebro, noble but unimportant. When this woman dies, my Partner will be heir.

“I am glad he has you, my dear. What a consort you shall be. What a House you will make between you. Carry my words to him, and my blessing for him and our House.”

Dhulyn let her mouth close, her words of refusal fading on her lips. It was too late for the old woman, let her die in peace at least. She managed a nod as she took the Tenebroso’s hands in hers and squarely met her bright amber eyes.

The woman’s pupils suddenly shrunk.

“Your death is here, Grandmother. Begin your curse.”

Eleven

THE ROOM WHERE the Kir of House Tenebro questioned his prisoners was, as Hernyn Greystone had expected, unlocked and empty. Though, perhaps, prisoners was too strong a word. After all, some of the people questioned had gone in smiling, had been given wine and dainty edibles before they came out, still smiling, restored to their normal routine. Others, Hernyn knew, had gone in and never came out again—at least not under their own power. What exactly distinguished guests from prisoners—and what made some remain guests while others became dead—had been beyond the concern of Mercenaries employed in the guard.

Lucky thing he was so good at the Stalking Shora. He’d had to dodge three people on his way out of the cellars alone, and there seemed to be an unusual number of the Kir’s guards patrolling the hallways.

Hernyn had been pleased and excited to find two Brothers already in the guard at Tenebro House when he signed up. Fanryn and Thionan were both older, but they’d treated him right, and he’d been careful to follow their examples, especially when it came to being discreet. “Nothing you see or hear ever leaves your eyes or ears.” That was Common Rule no matter who you worked for. The only people you ever told about anything you saw or heard
while on an assignment was the Mercenary House itself.

“Do nothing to lose trust and respect, or you’ll lose it for all your Brothers.” That was Common Rule, too.

And, Hernyn thought, a blush rising over him even now, he’d seen some very interesting personal behavior in the months that he had been in Tenebro House. Had even been invited to join—in—and by some most unexpected people. The Mercenary’s code prevented him from gossiping about what his old grandmother had called “that kind of thing,” even as it stopped him from discussing the routine security measures of the House. And the kind of people who went into the room he was going to now. Their names. Which ones walked out on their own limbs, and which ones did not.

He hadn’t needed the presence of his Brothers to remind him of the Common Rule. He just hadn’t expected it all to be so complicated. Because he’d gone and made a mistake after all. That he couldn’t have known it would be a mistake, didn’t make him feel any better. He should have known better. Because he’d been bragging. And he’d thought he’d been cured of that, long ago. The hard way. He rubbed the scar on his right forearm.

He crossed quickly to a window, let himself out into the cool night air. *Frost before morning,* he thought, using the finger- and toeholds provided by old and crumbling mortar to move up to a similar window on the floor above. No one bothered to latch these windows; they were too high up, and gave only on an inner courtyard.

When Rofrin and Neslyn the Fair had asked him about a Brother who was obviously Dhulyn Wolfshead, he’d told them *far* too much about her—everything he knew, in fact, and he’d known quite a lot. And he hadn’t told them to be helpful, or even to enhance the reputation of the Brotherhood; he’d told them to show off. And just as he’d been warned, showing off had brought trouble—had put another Mercenary Brother in danger.

The long corridor of the south wing took him past the first of Dhulyn Wolfshead’s possible prison rooms. The door stood open, a good sign the room was empty. Hernyn hoped that Dhulyn wouldn’t kill him when she learned what a fool he’d been, even though Parno had said that she wouldn’t.

A noise?

Hernyn held his breath and concentrated, exerting all the skill born in him from generations of desert hunters and honed to perfection by the Stalking *Shora* of the Mercenary School. Yes. Noises. Still a ways away, but possibly coming closer.

Hernyn eyed the next slot of shadow, marginally darker than the hall around it, created by a bit of uneven wall and a hanging that was just a handbreadth too wide. He took two silent steps and eased himself into its protective embrace.

An arm clamped around his chest, trapping his left arm at the same instant that a hand covered his mouth. He whipped up his right hand, aiming for where his captor’s eyes should be, and cracked his fingers against the stones of the wall.

“Quietly, my Brother,” the soft murmur in his left ear froze him. “Did no one ever teach you to make sure the dark is empty before you hide yourself in it?” The arms around him loosened but did not drop.

“Dhulyn,” he breathed. He had not realized he was holding his breath. He felt her nod, and relaxed against her. Suddenly he was acutely aware of her breasts and stomach pressed against his back and buttocks. He released his mind from the Stalking *Shora*. This was not the moment for heightened senses. If he moved away from her, he knew, he would be out of the shadow that hid them both. He was embarrassed to react to her physically, but more embarrassed at being so easily caught. It was like being back at School. He should have known better, he thought. Good enough to avoid ordinary people just was not good enough to fool another Mercenary. Nor was he particularly surprised that Dhulyn Wolfshead had stood in the shadow unseen by him. Outlanders were notoriously good at keeping hidden, and an Outlander with Mercenary Schooling, well, you’d need a Finder even to notice them.

Hernyn’s lungs refilled with air. “My name is Hernyn Greystone,” he said. “I was schooled by Dorian the Black. Parno Lionsmane, Fanryn Bloodhand, and Thionan Hawkmoon await in the cell of our confinement. I will lead you there.”

“I thank you for finding me, Hernyn. Is the Lionsmane well?” Dhulyn rested her forehead against the back of Hernyn’s shoulder. He could smell a faint odor of sweat, dust, and a sharp but not unpleasant herbal scent rising from her skin. He found himself thinking of a time that he’d had a bad fever while he was being Schooled. He’d been given a drink that had smelled the way Dhulyn smelled now.

“He is,” he replied. “His right arm bone was cracked, but Fanryn Bloodhand has seen to it. Come, I will take you to them.”

He felt the slow release of her breath. Some of the tension left her body.

“Weapons first,” she said. “Brothers second. Do you know where the north armory is?”
There. He could admit his Mark to himself, if to no one else. None of his usual methods, untrained and almost unconscious as they were, had helped him at all. He was here to try the only other thing he could think of. He gritted his teeth, squared his shoulders, and knocked.

“Just a minute,” came her voice from within, much more quickly than Gun had expected. It looked as though he was not the only one who’d spent a sleepless night.

The door cracked open, and a deep blue eye looked out.

“Lady Mar, I’m sorry to disturb you so early, but I have need of your bowl.”

“My bowl?” The door swung open, and Mar-eMar stepped back in invitation, one hand still on the edge of the door, the other holding the throat of her dressing gown closed. There were oil lamps burning in this outer room, and neat piles of folded clothing on the low chairs and the single brazier table, but he barely took them in as he scanned the surfaces for the patterned bowl. Could she be keeping it in the bedroom? He glanced from the girl, still standing with her hand on the open door, to the inner door leading to the bedroom.

“I’d only need it for a few minutes, I won’t harm it.”

“But why my bowl? There must be bowls in the kitchens you can use.”

“It’s—” Now that he was faced with it, Gun realized he had no idea what to say next. He hadn’t seen beyond the point at which he had the scrying bowl in his hands. It simply hadn’t occurred to him that he would have to explain what he wanted it for. He glanced over his shoulder at the open doorway, but there was no help there. When he turned back, Mar-eMar was watching him with her liquid eyes.

She had relaxed her hold on her dressing gown. The neck had fallen open and he saw that, under it, she was wearing not a night dress but a shirt and tunic. There was no fear in her face, just a calm query as she waited for him to answer her—and the certainty that he would.

“She’s very brave, he thought, taking a deep breath. She had to have been, to come all this way not knowing what waited for her. Braver than I am.

“It’s a scryer’s bowl, Lady Mar,” he said. “A Finder would use it to focus the Mark.”

Mar-eMar glanced into the passageway and shut the door.

“Are you sure?” She came toward him. “Dhulyn Wolfshead only said it was very old.”

“I’m sure. Please, my lady. I’ve lost something, and I—” Gun swallowed the sob that threatened to break out. She was from Navra, the Marked were still safe in Navra. She must not think him a coward, she must not. “I have to Find it.”

“You . . .?” Mar gestured without completing the sentence. “Please.”

She stared at him a moment longer and then turned to the pack that lay open on the round brazier table to the left of the inner door. She removed two rolled gowns, a pair of light brown sueded half boots, and finally the old thick cloth he’d seen when she’d shown the bowl on her arrival. As Mar-eMar turned back the faded folds of material, she looked once more at the door. Gun followed her glance and went himself to secure the latch. When he turned back, she had tossed the old cloth over a chair and set the bowl on the round table.

“Do you have water?” he asked. Without another word, Mar went into the bedroom and returned with a pitcher of water. Gun took it from her and, after moving the bowl nearer the edge of the round tabletop, filled it two-thirds full. He looked around and found Mar taking three folded tunics from a chair. He positioned the now empty chair in front of the bowl and sat down.

His Finding had always been most successful when he was researching. He placed his fingertips lightly on the edge of the table and leaned forward, keeping his back straight, his shoulders down. He was researching again, that’s all; all he had to do was relax.

Gun licked his lips. Research so often started with the printed page. A scroll, or book. The flame of the lamp cast little highlights on the surface of the water, standing out against the pure white of the bowl. A little like letters meticulously copied onto a page of parchment or paper. This was how he’d Found things. Hypnotizing himself with the ink and page. The water—

He walks faster, following the thin jade line as it rounds a corner into a narrower aisle. The aisle ends, opening into Lok-iKol’s workroom. Of course, this is where his memory must be. There. The Kir is bent over Dhulyn Wolfshead in her chair, her face frozen in that snarling smile. And there he is himself—Caids, how fat he’s become! —sitting in the other chair. Something has frightened him because he has his hands up to his mouth and his eyes are very wide open.
They are motionless as a painting, as if the jade-green mist that fills the room, the exact shade of the line he’s been following, is a kind of ice freezing them into stillness. But his memory is in there, it must be. He focuses, straining to move forward again, and the mist is sucked away, so suddenly that he takes an unintended step forward into the room just as sound and movement returns to the people in it.

Dhulyn Wolfshead stiffens and looks at where Gun sits in his chair, but she also looks at him now, right now, where he’s standing watching them all, and with a shock he realizes that she can see. That she saw him when they were all in this room together. She is a seer. Part of him feels triumphant. Her eyes shift and he follows the angle of her glance and sees himself at the door of Lok-iKol’s workroom, trying to work the latch. But he’s transparent, and his hands pass through the mechanism without affecting it. I don’t remember that. Gun looks back to where he was sitting and sees his body is still there, filled with a jade-green light, that makes his eyes glow green in his slack face.

Gun takes a step back toward the Library he has come from. He remembers seeing that green glow, that slack face, in Lok-iKol. With that thought images, memories, cascade through his mind and he remembers—for the first time—seeing the glow, but with no slackness whatsoever, in the eyes of Beslyn-Tor as the Jaldean has passed him in the doorway of this very room. And he remembers that the Jaldean has passed him many times, over and over. All those memories lost—taken, he realizes—until this very moment. And now that he has those memories again, standing there in his mind’s Library, Gun realizes there is a difference between the green glow when it is in Beslyn-Tor and in Lok-iKol, and that same difference—please, blessed Caids—is in himself as well.

There is something living inside Beslyn-Tor, he thinks, his Scholar’s mind weighing and assessing. He and Lok-iKol were tools only, something to look through, as a jeweler looks through a lens. Somehow the Jaldean priest, or the thing living inside him, has pushed Gun out of his own head, out of his own body, and that’s why he has no memory of this. He couldn’t remember what he wasn’t in his body to experience.

And Gun realizes something else.

This is what happened every time I left the room. All those people I’ve found for them. This interrogation, this torture, this is what happened to them.

At that moment the head on the body he’s not wearing begins to turn to him, and Dhulyn Wolfshead starts to scream, the sound a horrid tearing of the throat. Fear chokes him as he backs away, faster and faster, finally turning and beginning to run as shelves and tables of books and scrolls move to block the aisles between him and the image of the room, shutting it away.

Not that he will be able to forget it now.

At first he’d been relaxed, watching the water as though he were reading, eyes flicking back and forth. As the minutes passed, however, he’d become gradually more rigid, and now his grip on the table’s edge showed white knuckles. Mar leaned forward. He seemed to have stopped blinking. She took a firmer hold on his shoulder and shook him. It was only slightly better than pushing at a wall. She reached out and gently touched his face. The skin soft, the muscles under it rigid.

Mar shot a quick glance around. She’d have to hide all her packing before she went to fetch help. Whoever came would be sure to notice it and guess exactly what it meant. Her eyes returned to the Scholar. There was one more thing she could try. She picked up the bowl and dashed the water into Gundaron’s face. He sputtered, blinked, and shook his head.

“I didn’t know,” he said, clutching at her arm as he came fully awake. “I swear I didn’t know.”

“Of course not,” she said. The pressure of his fingers on her forearm made her wince. She gently pulled free and set the bowl back on the tabletop. “I take it you found what you were looking for?”

He started to nod, turned a pale green, and retched, gagging. Nothing came from his mouth but a thin line of saliva.

Mar ran into the bedroom, snatched up a towel from the washstand and brought it out to him. He disappeared into the towel, and for a moment Mar thought he wasn’t going to come out. When he did, he had rubbed some color into his face, and looked less as though he were about to faint again.

“Don’t tell anyone. Please.”

“What can I tell? I don’t even know what it was.”

Gundaron looked up, eyes wide. “No,” he said finally. “I meant don’t tell anyone I’m a finder.”

“I won’t.”

“Promise?” His voice was thick, giving weight to the childlike request.

Mar hesitated, but there was something in his face that touched her—something more than fear. She held out her
“Yes, I promise, but—do you mean no one knows?”

Gundaron rubbed his eyes with his fingertips, lowered his hands, and looked around the room.

“I wanted to be a Scholar. I wanted it so badly. I moved the sun and the stars to be allowed to go to Valdomar. And I’m good at it; I knew I would be. The best Scholar in my class. If they’d known I could Find . . .”

“You’d have gone to the Guildhall.”

He looked at her. “And now . . .”

Mar took the towel from him, shook out the creases and began to fold it. It wasn’t the Guildhall he’d go to now if the wrong people learned he was a Finder, but the Jaldean Shrine. “I’ll keep my promise,” she said. “I won’t tell.”

She sat down in the other chair, still holding the towel. “What was it you Found?”

A muscle jumped in his cheek as he clenched his teeth. “I Found what they’re doing here. Lok-iKol and . . .” his eyes shifted away, “and the others.”

Mar waited some minutes before deciding that Gundaron wasn’t going to say anything more. But as she rose to her feet, thinking to take the towel back into her bedroom, the Scholar spoke again.

“This was my first assignment.” He stroked the edge of the bowl with the first two fingers of his right hand. “The Tenebros asked for our best Scholar to write a history of the House, and the Seniors at Valdomar chose me, even though I was their youngest graduate. I’ve never been anywhere but home and Valdomar; I’d certainly never seen such a place as this. I was all alone here—”

Mar thought of the twin sisters Nor and Kyn and knew just how alone he had been. Suddenly she wanted to put her arms around him, stroke his hair, but she knew that if she did, he would stop speaking. And whatever it was he was about to say, he needed to say it.

“Then to have the Kir of such a Noble House take me into his confidence, treat me with respect . . .”

Mar lowered herself into her seat once more. His words and tone had the flavor of explanation, almost apology, and she waited for him to continue.

“There’s so much data in a Noble House’s archives,” he said. “The kind of private things that never get into the history books. Things that could help me with my personal researches and I was promised all the information I needed—”

He got up and moved the short distance between the table and the window, his steps small and abrupt. “I was so excited, I got so interested in what I was learning that I—I forgot to keep my distance.”

“Is that what you Found? Your distance?”

Gundaron licked his lips and Mar got up once more, this time to bring him a cup of water.

He took a deep swallow and gripped the cup tightly in both hands. “Yes. I think I can say that.” He took a deep breath. “I’ve stepped back and taken a good look at what I’ve been doing, and I don’t like what I’ve seen.”

Mar put her hand on his arm. Gundaron was the only person here who had been kind to her, really kind to herself. The only person who had never made her feel apart. “I’m sure whatever you’ve done couldn’t be all that bad,” she said.

The look of despair that passed over his face at her words almost frightened her.

“I’ve been Finding Marked for them,” he said, so quietly that Mar actually leaned toward him to be sure she’d heard him correctly.

“For whom?” The words came out in a hoarse whisper.

“Lok-iKol, for one.” What Mar thought must have shown on her face because he threw himself down at her feet and clutched at the skirt of her dressing gown. “I didn’t know, I swear I didn’t know. I thought it was just research. Families, bloodlines, how talents pass through kinships. I didn’t know about the Jaldeans.” He looked at the bowl. “I didn’t know until now. It’s memories I’ve Found.”

“But Gundaron, you’re Marked.”

“They don’t know!” He waved her words away. “I’m a Scholar.”

Mar shook her head. Surely it wasn’t possible. Surely it wasn’t possible that you could be so focused on your craft, on your research, that you could overlook what was being done with it. Surely you couldn’t feel so separate and apart from people just like yourself.

Families. Bloodlines. She looked from his face to the bowl on the table. Her bowl. Passed through five generations. A scryer’s bowl. A Finder’s bowl. A cold hand closed around her heart.

“That’s why I’m here,” she said. “That’s why they sent for me. And you—”
“I told him you weren’t,” Gundaron said. “I wouldn’t have let them—please, believe me.”

So he had known. Even if some of his memories were missing, to lie to Lok-iKol about her, Gundaron must have been aware that something wicked was happening, even if that awareness had been buried deep. Mar reached to push him away from the skirts of her dressing gown, but something held her back. What had he done, really? Found innocent people and, in return for certain promises and favors, arranged to have them brought to Tenebro House. Hadn’t she done much the same thing herself? In return for comfort, riches, her Holding restored, hadn’t she brought them Dhulyn Wolfshead and Parno Lionsmane? Hadn’t the Wolfshead killed a Cloudboy in the Mountains for her? Were her hands any cleaner than Gundaron’s?

She put her hands on his head, patted his rough hair.

“The Mercenary Brothers,” she said. “That’s why you’re afraid of Pasillon, because you—we—brought them here for Lok-iKol as well.”

He was motionless, but Mar saw in his face that it was so. She looked around the room at her folded clothing, her half-filled travel pack. Her instincts had been better than she knew.

“What can we do?”

“Go to the Tenebroso.” Gundaron got to his feet. “She’s the only person in the House more powerful than the Kir.”

“Will she stop him?”

“I’m sure she will.” But Mar saw the uncertainty cloud his eyes as he turned his head away. What odds the old woman didn’t already know?

A knock at the door startled them both.

Guilt, Mar thought. That’s what’s wrong with us.

Gundaron looked at her and she swallowed, straightened her dressing gown and, closing it once more with her hand to her throat, went to the door.

“What is it?” she called.

Okiron, Lady Mar.”

Gundaron motioned to Mar and she backed away, letting him open the door. Standing on the threshold was the boy page who served this corridor. He looked pale, and there were the marks of tears on his cheeks.

“What is it?”

“The House is fallen,” the young boy said, shock apparent in the reediness of his voice, “The Tenebroso Kor-iRok is dead.”

Mar felt her hands and feet go icy cold. Too late, she thought. We’ve left it too late. Is this Pasillon?

Dal-eDal looked at his cousin, the new Tenebroso Lok-iKol, and knew exactly how that felt.

The man who stood in Kor-iRok’s bedchamber with him, and watched with him while the Steward of Walls and the Steward of Keys examined the room and the tiny figure on the bed—when had the old woman become so small? —was Tenebroso now. Lok-iKol stood halfway between Dal-eDal’s post at the door and the bed on which the body of the Fallen House still lay, observing without apparent emotion as his servants performed their duties.

He is the Tenebroso, Dal thought, watching his cousin, and that means I am the heir. Though he was sure Lok was in no hurry to hold the ceremony that would acknowledge Dal, and change the format of his name. Even if there was no one closer to the succession until Lok married and produced his own First Born, his Kir. Dal tapped his thigh with his closed fist. That wasn’t strictly true, now that he thought about it. There was someone closer than himself to the succession. It must be fifteen years or more since that particular cousin—Dal glanced up at the ruin of Lok’s left cheek, his missing eye—had been Cast Out.

“A seizure of the heart,” Karlyn-Tan was saying. Dal-eDal turned his attention back to the bedside of the Fallen House. Karlyn-Tan rose from the bed, finished with his examination of the body. Semlin-Nor was bent over the Fallen House, making the body straight and covering it with the bedclothes until the lady pages would be allowed back in to tend to it. Both Stewards were in full formal livery, as was every servant and guard in the House by now. Karlyn even wore his sword.

“Are you certain, my Walls?” Lok-iKol’s beautiful voice was softer than usual. Was it possible that he actually had some feeling for the woman who had been his mother? At that moment Dal-eDal realized that he was taking it for granted that Lok-iKol had had his mother killed.

“I am certain, my House,” Karlyn-Tan said. “You may note the color of the skin, and the slight amount of froth on
the lips. There are no other marks or wounds.” The man looked up. “It would have happened during the second watch of the night, my House.”

Dal-eDal noted the emphasis on the formal titles absently. Everyone would be very sure to observe strict protocol for the next moon or so, until they had all had a chance to accustom themselves to the new regime. After that, the level of formality would depend on the wishes of the new Tenebroso.

Lok-iKol nodded. “Do you concur, my Keys?”

“I do, my House.” Semlin-Nor gave the heavy quilted bedcover a final tug and stepped back from the bed and its burden. “As the Steward of Walls has said, there is no mark or wound, no sign of struggle.”
“Poison?”

“None we can detect, my House,” the woman continued. “There is no change of skin color, the eyes appear normal. I would also say a seizure of the heart, my House.”

“Very good,” Lok-iKol said, though what exactly he intended by that was not clear, thought Dal. Dal watched his cousin slowly nodding, the man’s gaze fixed on the still figure of the woman who had been his mother, the head of his House, and perhaps, in these later years at least, thought Dal-eDal, the thwarted of his ambitions.

“That will be all, I think, for now,” Lok-iKol said. “Have her people prepare her. Dal, Cousin, may I ask you to send the proper messages?”

“Of course, my House,” Dal replied, inclining his head in a slight bow.

“I thank you all for your service.” It was so obviously a dismissal that Dal bowed again and gestured to the others to precede him out of the room. Perhaps Lok would like to check for himself, make sure the old woman’s really dead, Dal thought.

“Thank you, Mother,” he said, sitting down in the slipper chair next to the bed and taking an apple from the bowl on the bedside table. “The timing of your death could not have been more perfect.” In fact, if she hadn’t died in her sleep, he would have had to take measures himself. All his work, all his planning, had not been done to place his mother on the Carnelian Throne.

His mother gone, a Finder, a Healer, and now a Seer in his hands. A Mender located. Lok turned the apple over in his fingers, automatically noting the perfection of its skin. A Seer was the rarest, and the most useful of the Marked. Not to be wasted by giving her to the Jaldeans, watching her disappear or be ruined as others had been.

Let Dhulyn Wolfshead choose to stay, Lok-iKol thought. There must be some way to persuade her. There always was. She seemed to like the Scholar; perhaps something useful could come of that. Lok needed to know what was to come, if he was to perfect his plans.

In any event he had to act quickly. Beslyn-Tor’s unexpected visit had shown him that. Should he wait until the Jaldeans became too strong, he would never free himself of their hold. For it was in no way a part of his plan to become a puppet of the priests. Let them help him to the throne, and then they might find that the pursuers often became themselves the pursued. He knew how to use the Tarkin’s power, better than that soft-handed weakling who had it now.

“Up to your battlements, are you? I wish I had such a place to help me think. I’m afraid times like this will find me in the kitchen eating the sweetest thing I can find.” Semlyn-Nor’s tone was light, but her face never brightened.

“There are no times like this,” he said, getting to his feet.

“When I think that, but for an accident of birth, it might be you in there . . .” Semlyn shook her head.

“Rather an accident of marriage, wouldn’t you say?”

“Don’t look at me like that, Kar. There’s plenty in the House will be having these same thoughts just now.”

“Perhaps,” Karlyn acknowledged. “But you should not say them aloud, all the same.” It was a reflection of just how badly she was shaken that she said such a thing at all, he thought. Semlin had been very close to the Fallen House, and this would come harder on her than it would on him.

He patted his fellow Steward on the shoulder and left, directing his steps through the maze of hallways and stairs that would end with the room where Dhulyn Wolfshead undoubtedly lay wondering what had delayed her breakfast. This would be the perfect time to use the hacksaw blade that rested in his scabbard, alongside his formal sword.

This time Karlyn made no attempt to be quiet as he unlocked the door. He was not hiding anything from anyone. He pushed the door open slowly, and as it cleared the bed, his heart stopped.

The cell was empty, the chains with their manacles neatly coiled on the bed.

When his breathing had returned to normal Karlyn left the room, relocking the door behind him and headed to Dal-eDal’s rooms in the east wing. Dhulyn Wolfshead was gone, safe, and therefore his people were safe also—though Karlyn wouldn’t take odds on how long Lok-iKol might live. The man might as well be cursed.

And it was very unlikely he himself would ever see Dhulyn Wolfshead again.

He told himself that what he felt was relief.

Twelve
“YOU HAVE NEWS that will not wait?” Alkoryn Pantherclaw’s voice was as thin as paper. He lifted his blue eyes from their scrutiny of the map fixed to the top of his table, looked from Dhulyn to Parno and back again. “Tell me.”

Dhulyn stifled the impatient movement of her right hand before it became anything more than a tremor in her nerves. The captive Mercenaries had split up upon making their escape from Tenebro House, she and Parno taking one route while their Brothers took another. Besides being good strategy, it had given her a chance to tell Parno privately of Lok-iKol and her Visions. And given them the chance to prepare a report for their Senior Brother that did not mention her Mark.

She took a deep breath to steady herself as she began to speak.

And stopped.

She had never lied to a Senior Brother, never once since Dorian the Black took her hand in the hold of the slave ship. Neglected to tell things, perhaps, but lie? She looked over to Parno, leaning against the table to her right, saw concern mingling with fatigue in his face, clouding his amber eyes. Untold secrets hovered in the air between them, as well.

This was not what she wanted. This was not what the Brotherhood meant to her. I cannot have this. She sat up straight, hands firm on the tabletop, and hoped her judgment was not as clouded as Parno’s eyes.

She cleared her throat. “My Brother,” she said. “I bear a Mark.” From the corner of her eye, she saw Parno’s head jerk up an inch before he regained control.

Alkoryn’s fingers froze in their idle tracing of the lines of river and road. He lifted his hands from the map, sat up straight against the back of his chair, and let his hands fall to his thighs. When he had stared at her without speaking for some time, she continued.

“I am a Seer.”

Alkoryn struck his thigh with his fist. “A Seer. By the Caids, a Seer.” He looked at her sharply. “Does Dorian know?”

“I believe he does. But, Alkoryn, hear me.” She did not know the Pantherclaw well, but she had to hope so Senior a Brother would listen, would not let his obvious excitement rule his judgment. “My Mark is unschooled, untrained. No Guild trains Seers, at least none that I have ever found, and so my Sight is clouded, erratic, and . . .”

“Not to be relied upon?” Alkoryn’s whisper was dry, a little of the animation dying from his face.

“It shows me true Visions,” she said. “But not with regularity, nor in any way that allows me to plan.”

When Alkoryn looked at Parno, her Partner nodded. “It’s as she says. I could give you dozens of examples of true Visions, and perhaps twice when it’s been useful.”

“And that is why you’ve told no one.” Alkoryn placed his hands palm down on the tabletop. “Everyone thinks as I did, of how to use you, and doubts it when you tell them it cannot be done.” Had his glance been a blade, she would have been cut to the bone. “And Lok-iKol? This is what lies behind his actions? Does he know?”

“No more now than before. His Scholar told him that the women of my tribe might be Seers. It was enough for him to lure us——” she glanced at Parno, “—to lure me in.” Dhulyn leaned forward, resting her forearm on the tabletop. “My Brother, hear me. My news is of such weight——”

“Of course, of course.” The Pantherclaw picked up his cup of cider and drained it. “You have kept your silence too long to break it for trivialities. Pray, tell me what you Saw.” The hand that lowered the cup from his lips trembled.

“I have Seen the Tarkin Tek-aKet dead by poison,” she said in what she considered a remarkably steady voice. At least the shock and immediacy of the Vision had faded, though the images remained clear. “Men in Tenebro colors killing the guards of the Carnelian Dome. I have Seen the One-eyed Tenebro with the coronet in his hands, sitting on the Carnelian Throne. And I have Seen the Jaldean who stands behind him.”

“Allied with the Jaldeans,” Alkoryn said. “That in itself makes a degree of sense.” He looked up to meet her eyes. “Is it Lok-iKol behind this persecution of the Marked?”

Dhulyn shook her head. “That is more than my Vision can tell me.”

Parno cleared his throat. “He’ll have promised them something for their support.”

“Yes, I am more tired than I had thought. Your pardon.”

“What did you See?” Parno said. Alkoryn looked from Parno’s face to Dhulyn’s. “Carnelian Guards being pulled from their horses in the streets.”
Alkoryn shook his head, but not as though he did not believe her. “When the old Tarkin died,” he said, “and Tek-aKet his son was confirmed to follow him as Tarkin, Lok-iKol did not put his name forward in nomination, nor did he request a Ballot.”

“It would have been his mother, then, would it not?” Parno said.

“So it would, so it would,” Alkoryn nodded, rubbing the scar on his throat. “This is no time for me to be growing old.” The Pantherclaw sighed and drew himself up until he sat tall and straight in his chair.

“You may not have heard,” he said. “This morning brought news of the Fall of Tenebro House. The old woman no longer stands between Lok-iKol and the Carnelian Throne.”

“Then he’ll make his move.” Something in Parno’s voice made Dhulyn look up. The light coming through the window made his hair glow golden and warm. She saw the old woman’s false hair shine in the light of the oil lamps, and the Fallen House’s words echoed in her ears. Par-iPar has come. A true heir. She squeezed her eyes shut. I will have to speak, she thought. She charged me with the message.

Their Senior Brother was nodding gently, once again appearing to give his whole attention to the study of the map in front of him, his fingers softly stroking the parchment. Watching him, Dhulyn forced her lungs to release her breath, slowly, softly. Had everything now changed? Did she still have a Brotherhood? Or would her Mark, which set her apart from all others, set her apart from her Brothers as well? Dhulyn started to rise, froze as Alkoryn looked up.

“Three days ago you advised me to move my maps.”

“I saw them burning.”

“They shall be moved. Beginning today. As for what you tell me now . . . I wonder if I could ask a boon of you, my Brother,” Alkoryn said.

Surprised, Dhulyn lowered herself back into her chair. “Ask,” she said.

“Will you come with me to the Tarkin,” was Alkoryn’s reply, “and tell him what you have told me?”

Dhulyn’s dry lips parted, but she could no more speak than she could fly. With a thump, Parno returned the cup he still held to the table. Alkoryn spoke before either of them had gathered their wits.

“Not all of what you’ve told me, clearly,” the older man said. “But the portion which concerns him.”

“Is the Brotherhood in the Tarkin’s employ, that we would run to him with this news? We are not spies—” She held up her hand, hearing her own words, and worse, the tone she’d used. “Your pardon, my Brother, this is not mine to question. If you feel the good of the Brotherhood in Imrion demands the Tarkin be told what I have learned, then tell him.”

Alkoryn’s glance had drifted back to his beloved maps. “When I accuse Lok-iKol, I accuse Tek-aKet’s own cousin, even if not a very well-loved one. I think he would be the readier to believe this tale if he heard it from your own lips, my Brother. He may have questions only you can answer.” Alkoryn looked up at Dhulyn, fixing her with his cat’s eyes. “There is too much here we do not know. Lok-iKol wants the Throne—very well, there’s nothing new in political ambition, and war is what we deal in. But with the Jaldeans in the mix . . . if the New Believers gain much more power . . .” Alkoryn tapped the tabletop with his index finger. “What they do is genocide, not war; but it will lead to war, and worse, if they have the full backing of the Carnelian Throne.”

“Alkoryn,” Parno leaned forward before Dhulyn could speak. “May we think about this, my Partner and I? It is an unusual request, and touches her closely. We must think of a way to tell him without revealing her Mark,” he added when the older man hesitated. Dhulyn kept her face still, her features impassive. What was Parno up to?

“Certain you may,” Alkoryn said. He glanced over at the shaft of sunlight that angled into his office from the high window. “But if we are to speak to Tek-aKet, it should be as quickly as possible. Tonight, by preference. Will you give me an answer soon enough?”

“Certain we will,” Dhulyn heard her voice come out as little better than a croak. Whatever Parno wanted to say to her, he could say quickly. There should be nothing to stop them giving Alkoryn Pantherclaw his quick answer.

“And Parno?” They turned back at the door. “There is a Healer in the caves below the House—yes, we have been hiding the Marked and smuggling them out of the city; this was the assignment I had planned for you, my Brothers. Go to him and have your arm seen to.”

“What are you doing?” she asked him.

“You were about to say ‘no,’ ” he said, “and I wanted a chance to talk you.”

“You suggest I should tell my tale to the Tarkin?” Dhulyn punched at the stuffed straw mattress to find a
comfortable position on the bed. “What is Tek-aKet to me, or I to him?” She punched the mattress again, aware that her exasperation had little to do with the Tarkin.

“You told Alkoryn,” Parno pointed out reasonably, sitting down on the stool close to the bed.

Dhulyn rolled her eyes up to the heavens, though from this angle she was really rolling them at the heavy wooden bed frame. “That would be a little thing called the Common Rule, no? You remember the Common Rule, I suppose, my Brother?”

Parno stood and strode away from her to the window. He leaned his hands on the sill, looking out, before turning back to her. “Is it not also the Common Rule for us to be guided by the advice and suggestions of Senior Brothers?” Parno’s tight voice showed an increase of sarcasm and decrease of patience.

“And I am the Senior Brother in this room!” Dhulyn shot back. She sat up, thumping her booted feet to the floor and leaning forward, hands on her knees. “I repeat, what is the Tarkin to me? You call on the Common Rule, you question my obedience to it. Are you so sure it’s not your old loyalties which command here? You wanted to come to Imrion. You . . .” She stopped, suddenly aware that words which could not be called back were dangerously close to the tip of her tongue. But she was between the sword and the wall. If she spoke, she risked losing her Partnership; if she was silent, if she could not speak, she had already lost it. There was only one action to take.

“Are you certain you’re not willing to risk me in order to save your Tarkin?” Dhulyn stopped, suddenly breathless.

“How is he my Tarkin?” Parno stood facing her with his arms folded across his chest, the sunlight coming in the window making a golden aurora around him.

“You are more to the Tenebros than you let me suppose.” Dhulyn’s hands and feet felt cold, as if her pounding heart did not push her blood. “You’re not some third son of a minor Household. With the House Fallen, you are now the next heir. If Lok-iKol Tenebro is cousin to the Tarkin, what are you?”

He took two steps toward her, arms swinging to his side. “It’s not so simple as that. I was Cast Out!”

“The Mark is not something that you could leave behind—it’s not just a part of your life before. House Tenebro is. When I became a Mercenary Brother, I left it behind me. That’s the Common Rule, too.”

Dhulyn swallowed around a tight throat. Could it really be that simple?

“You were not hiding this from me?”

“I had put it behind me. True, I did want to see Imrion again, but everything else . . . I was Cast Out. That life is gone.”

Not hidden from her because too important to tell, but left aside because not important enough to mention. Dhulyn dragged in a deep lungful of air.

“We are beating each other with the Common Rule,” she said. “We are Partnered. I never thought we would quarrel in this way—never thought we could.”

“Never Saw it coming?”

Dhulyn looked up, Parno’s mouth was twisted to one side in the grin that woke her heart. “Tell me now,” she said, patting the bed beside her. “I will listen.”

Parno sat down next to her, slipping his right arm around her. “I am the son of Wen-eWen Tenebro——” She shifted to look at him but he held her fast. “No, let me speak. It will be easier. My father was the military commander for House Tenebro, and the much younger half brother of the woman who is now the Fallen House.”

“Was? This was the demon haunting you? Why you wanted to return to Imrion? To see if your father still lived?”

“I got my temper from him, though mine’s Schooled now. Lately, as I near the age he was then, I wondered if he managed to stay alive and well. If I am, as you say, the heir, then I have my answer.”

“Sun and Moon shine on him. Wind blow warm.” Dhulyn touched her fingertips to her forehead.

“And you are the One-eye’s cousin?” she asked, after a moment had passed.

“And the reason that he has one eye.”

Dhulyn twisted around to better see his face. He inclined his head. “You are my very favorite Brother,” she said, smiling.

“Save your flattery. It was an accident of temper, though afterward I wished I had done it on purpose. I had seen the Harvest Moon seventeen times, and we all met at another Household for a wedding. He was rude to my sister, and when I asked him to apologize, he baited me, not realizing, perhaps, how much better a fighter I was. I lost my temper and struck him, forgetting that I came from hawking, and wore metal gloves.” Parno shrugged. “He lost his
eye. He claimed that I had attacked him unprovoked. My father was left with no choice but to cast me out. If he had not done so, he would have lost everything, he and my mother, my sister. I came to the Brotherhood, to Nerysa Warhammer. And to you.”

“She meant for you to come, the Fallen House, she wanted you here.” In as few words as possible, Dhulyn told him about the old woman’s death. “The One-eye wanted me; but the old woman had her own plans all along. I was to tell you to be ready, that Lok-iKol had been cursed.”

Parno blew out a deep breath. “That is what has been bothering you? Not the fall of the Tarkin, but this? You thought I might turn back into a son of House Tenebro?” To her surprise, Parno grinned his old, loose grin and pulled her closer, resting his forehead for a moment against her hair.

“Forgive me. This is not the first time such a thought has crossed your mind since I began to speak of Imrion, and I said nothing. You came young to the Brotherhood, with nothing but pain and loss behind you, and it has been—as you have reminded me often enough—your whole world, your whole life. I came to the Brotherhood a man grown, with a world and a life behind me. So that though I am longer in the world than you, my heart, you are the Senior in Brotherhood. I know what you’ve thought. You’ve wondered if I value the Brotherhood less, because once I was of a House, because I once had family, servants, people to command, a place in an ordered life. You’ve thought, once or twice, that I would not have come to the Brotherhood had my life not undergone such a change by force.” He took hold of her shoulders, looking her in the eyes, his own clear under his golden brows. “Could I not say the same of you? Would you not even now be away in the cold south with the Red Horsemen, if they still rode? Tell me, what have you lost that I have not also lost?”

Dhulyn shut her eyes tight, only opening them again when Parno smoothed her brows with his thumbs.

“I am not a Tenebro. I am Parno Lionsmane, the Chanter. I was Schooled by Nerysa of Tourin, the Warhammer. Since we first met at the battle of Arcosa, here in Imrion as it happens, since you skewered that westerner who was trying to skewer me, I have been your Brother. And you mine.” The grip on her shoulders tightened painfully. “And you mine. You’ll have to kill me to be rid of me. And though I have no Sight,” he said, “I tell you that is not how it happens. Neither the Tenebros, nor even the Tarkin himself is the reason that I counsel you to speak.”

Her anger, and the fear that caused it, had drained away, leaving her limp, muscles trembling with fatigue. She leaned her forehead against his shoulder, breathed in his scent of leather and sweat. “Why should I speak, then? If not because you love him, then why?”

“Not because of the Tarkin, but because of the Jaldeans. You’re right. The Tarkin is just one person or another, and we’re Mercenaries. And if there’s war? What’s it to do with us who sits on the Carnelian Throne, besides more work and better pay?” He kissed her knuckles and placed her hand gently on the woven bedcover. He pulled his legs up beneath him and sat cross-legged, facing her from the end of the bed.

“I don’t say we should fight for the Tarkin, I’m saying we should fight against the Jaldeans.” From habit, Parno lowered his voice to a murmur that went no further than the bed they sat on. “You have never made any great show of your Mark—”

“Even if I wanted to, you know I cannot—”

“Hush for once and listen to me, woman.” The bare injustice of this silenced her. She was not the talker of the two of them, and Parno knew it. “The Mark is an old problem for us, one we might easily have lived with forever. The Jaldeans have changed that. Your Mark is now an active danger, not merely a nuisance. Where will we go, my heart, if the Jaldeans come into such power, here in Imrion?”

“Imrion is not the world—”

“Imrion is the seat of the old civilization, and there are many places which still look to it for guidance. And there are Jaldean Shrines everywhere besides Imrion, in the desert, even in the Blasonar Plains. How long until this New Belief reaches there?”

“Small shrines, a monk or two . . .” Even she could hear the lack of conviction in her voice.

“They were small shrines here in Imrion, if it comes to that,” he pointed out. “Look how they have grown.”

Dhulyn frowned. Parno was right. If what she had Seen came to pass . . . try as they would, they could not hide her Mark forever. And she would endanger Parno as well, not just herself. Perhaps even the rest of her Brothers.

“But my counsel to you would be the same, even if you were not a Seer. This killing of the Marked is wrong of itself. What tells us the Jaldeans will stop with the Marked?”

That brought Dhulyn’s head up again.

“The New Believers gather power and importance to themselves by turning the world against useful, talented people who provide a service for a fee. Can you think of any other groups of whom these things might be said?”
Dhulyn sat up straighter, put her hand on the hard muscle on Parno’s thigh. “The Scholars,” she said. “That’s obvious. But we also. The Mercenary Brotherhood is also such a group.” She pulled her lip back from her teeth. “In the Marked, the New Believers remove a source of competition, an alternate center of power. They make the people a sword, and once the sword is sharpened, they can use it to cut anyone.”

“True words, Dhulyn, my soul.” Parno nodded.

“We’re not so few as the Marked,” Dhulyn said. “And better armed than the Scholars.” She dragged her lower lip between her teeth. “But we’re spread thin, so thin. It would take some time to kill us all . . .”

Parno nodded. “But kill us all is how it would end.”

“No.” Dhulyn shifted away so she could look Parno directly in the face. She tapped the air between them. “You are right. It ends here.”

“So we will warn the Tarkin.”

“If we’re to die with swords in our hands, why delay it?” Dhulyn smiled. “You are wrong about one thing, however.”

“I am never wrong.”

“This time you are. It occurs to me, Parno, my soul, that it does matter to us which man is on the Carnelian Throne.”

“It does?”

“Yes,” Dhulyn let her lip curl back from her teeth. “It may be anyone except that one-eyed piece of snake’s dung. Anyone except Lok-iKol Tenebro.” She opened her eyes and looked at Parno’s grinning face. “I witnessed his mother’s curse, that twisted turd, I cursed him with Pasillon myself, and it’s Pasillon he shall have.”

Dal-eDal had spoken to his House in a practiced murmur that would not carry beyond the worktable at which Lok-iKol sat, but now he pointedly looked at the servants and waited until Lok-iKol had waved them out of the room before he spoke again.

“They have gone, my House,” he repeated. “Escaped.”

“Impossible. Who freed them?” His hands were fists, and the scarring stood out bone-white from the rest of his face.

Dal had never seen Lok-iKol so angry. Fear could take a man that way, but somehow Dal doubted what he saw in Lok’s face was fear.

“You pardon, my House,” he said, keeping his voice neutral. “No one needs to free Mercenaries; they free themselves. The cell was found locked, but empty.”

“The cell—Etkyn! Etkyn, here!” One of Lok-iKol’s personal guard charged in from the anteroom, sword drawn.

“Go to the east room immediately and check it.”

“Your pardon, my House,” Dal said. “They have left without killing anyone. If we let it end here, they may take no action against us.”

“Cousin,” Lok said before Dal had managed more than a couple of steps. “I had intended to meet with our little cousin, the Lady Mar-eMar this morning. Would you see her for me and ask her something? Ask her—” He sat back in his chair. “Very well.” He picked up the parchment he had been studying when Dal had broken the news. Etkyn glanced at him, and Dal gave him the slightest of nods, left to return to his post outside the door. Dal prepared to follow.

“Cousin,” Lok said before Dal had managed more than a couple of steps. “I had intended to meet with our little cousin, the Lady Mar-eMar this morning. Would you see her for me and ask her something? Ask her—” Lok broke off, staring unseeing at the ceiling of the room. “Ask her at which inn the Brothers who brought her to Gotterang stayed when they arrived.”

“Certainly, my House.” Dal waited, but Lok returned once again to his parchments.
So much for letting them go. Dal thought, as he, too, bowed and left the chamber. Dal didn’t know what was so important about these Mercenary Brothers that Lok would endanger the House in the first place, and go looking for them in the second. Karlyn-Tan did not know either—though the Steward of Walls had now made it his business to find out. The problem was the number of men-at-arms who reported directly to Lok-iKol, and who were not part of Karlyn’s guard. The Scholar, Gundaron, he would know. And little Cousin Mar might know something as well. Dal began to walk faster.

And mine as well, Mar thought, as she watched the older girl wipe her eyes. As soon as she could, Mar left the assembly and headed back to her room, threading the corridors carefully to avoid getting lost. She was mounting the second staircase when Gundaron caught up with her.

“You’re leaving the House,” he said, so quietly Mar had to tilt her head toward him to be sure she’d heard him correctly. “Your things this morning,” he went on. “You were packing.”

Mar risked a glance at his face. He was frowning, but not the kind of frown that seemed about to raise the alarm. “That’s nonsense,” she ventured. Her hand slid forward on the banister as she continued up the stairs. “I’m not going to stop you. In fact,” he swallowed. “I’m coming with you.” “You are not.” Mar stiffened, her right foot raised for the next step. She couldn’t believe how easily he’d tricked her into giving herself away.

He patted the air between them. “Not so loud, do you want to be stopped after all?” He looked down the staircase behind him, and up to where it curved to the right. “Get your things, come to my room and I’ll explain.”

Mar wasn’t sure exactly how she managed it, but it seemed no time at all until Gundaron was showing her into his room, where she sat gingerly on the edge of the round stool at his worktable, watching him empty books out of stiff canvas bags and arrange them in tidy rows on the shelves. “Here,” he said, handing her an empty book bag. “Put your things into this.”

“Why?”

“Because neither of us would ever be carrying around bags of clothing in this House, let alone out the gates. But we might be carrying books. I’d be returning them to the Library of Scholars, and you might be interested in coming with me, since you can read. We’ve no duties to perform for the Fallen House, either of us,” he added. “If no one sees us for a while, they’ll just be glad we’re not underfoot.”

Mar swallowed, the words she had to ask trembling on her lips. “Not that ‘why.’ I meant why would you come with me?”

He lowered his eyes, but not before she saw the fear. “I can’t stay, knowing what I know. I can’t do it again. I could have gone to the Fallen House and resigned. She would have accepted my Scholar’s oath to keep the House’s business to myself. But Lok-iKol . . .” He turned away, began picking up his own clothing. “If we leave together, it’s like the book bags. Misdirection. We’ve no reason to run away together, so no one will think we are.” Gundaron took a deep breath and stopped, a clean and neatly folded undershirt in his hand. “I don’t want to stay here, and from the look of things, neither do you. We might be able to do together what we’d fail to do alone.”

Mar was aware of a small hollow in the center of her body, where she hadn’t been aware anything existed. He was coming with her because he had to leave the House, and doing so together made logical and tactical sense. Well, of course, she thought, gritting her teeth. What other reason could he possibly have? And yet there was that little hollow inside her.

Gundaron didn’t know how much he was depending on Mar’s agreement until she stood up from the chair and began transferring her clothes and possessions into the book bag he’d given her—and his heart started beating again. Most of what she was shoving into the book bag was clothes and similar bundles, but he recognized the oiled canvas package that held her pens, inks, and spare parchments. We have a lot in common, he thought. It makes sense for us to be together. He turned back to his own packing, struggling to keep the smile from his face.

He had been afraid to approach Dhulyn Wolfshead, but after learning of the Fall of the House, he’d left Mar and gone down to the cell in the western subcellar where the other Mercenaries were, hoping to explain and apologize. He’d found it locked, but empty. The Mercenaries had left without killing him. And maybe, just maybe, if he kept his head down, they wouldn’t come after him—they’d be satisfied with Lok-iKol. He and Lady Mar could get away. Together. He was starting to feel good about this. “Will these really get us through the Gates?”
“I go to the Library often, and there’s no reason for them to stop you, is there?”
The girl shook her head. “They’ve reason to think I wouldn’t dream of running away.”
When she didn’t continue, Gundaron shrugged. Looked like the Lady Mar-eMar had some secrets of her own.
“Where are we going once we get out of here?” she said.
Once again he hesitated, tongue flicking out to lick his lips. “One thing at a time,” he said. “First we get out.”

“You asked for anything unusual, Steward of Walls,” Jeldor-San said.
“I did.”
The Scholar Gundaron and the Lady Mar-eMar left the House; they claim they go to the Library, and they were carrying book packs.”
“Did you send someone to follow them?”
She grinned. “I sent Ollivan, the new man. They’re neither of them likely to recognize him, but he knows the city well.”
He smiled back at her, pleased with her initiative. This one would make a fine Steward of Walls one day. “Have him report directly to me, when he returns.”
“As you wish, Steward of Walls.” When his Deputy did not move, he looked up at her with raised brows. “The Lord Dal-eDal was looking for the Lady Mar earlier and not finding her.”
“Was he? Never mind, Deputy of Walls, I will speak to him myself.”

Gun led her away to the left, trying to stride along confidently and keep his relief from showing too obviously in his face.

“Slow down,” Mar-eMar said. “Why are we going this way?”
“We told them we’re going to the Library,” he said, slowing his pace to match hers. “So we’re headed that way.”
She was right, though, they should look as though they were out for a stroll, their destination not particularly important. He found himself wishing, as he smelled the sharp bitterness of ganje beans roasting, that they really were just on their way to the Library. They would turn into one of the little shops along the road and sit down, order some ganje or some chocolate, and while away the morning. It wasn’t unheard of that a Scholar and the child of a minor Holding could—Gun felt his face grow hot as he cut off the thought before it could complete itself. No point in daydreaming. They’d go their separate ways; Mar had no reason to stay with him, though Gun found himself wishing he could think of one.

“You’ll tell me which street I need for the Mercenary House? I don’t think I’ll recognize it going this way . . . what is it?”
“You c-can’t,” Gun stammered, stopping dead in his tracks. She couldn’t have said what he thought she’d just said.

“Oh, I think they’ll still be there,” Mar-eMar said. “It’s only been a few days, and they were going to look for work here in Gotterang, so even if they’ve found it—”
“No, I mean—” A large man carrying an iron bedstead cursed them, and Gun got out of his way, drawing Mar-eMar into the closed doorway of a nearby shop. He hadn’t planned to tell her, he didn’t want to tell her, but how could he live with himself if he let her go to them, knowing what he knew.

“They’ve not been gone for a few days,” he said. “They only escaped last night.”
She pulled her sleeve out of his grasp, her face pale. “What do you mean ‘escaped’?”
He looked away from her suddenly fierce eyes, but there was nothing to help him in the comings and goings of the late afternoon foot traffic.

“Dhulyn Wolfshead—” No, that wasn’t the way. “There was something Lok-iKol wanted from them, something they weren’t likely to simply give him or sell him, so he held them until he could persuade them.”

“Something he wanted from them?” Mar’s brows drew down until they almost met over her eyes. “This is why Pasillon made you so afraid. It isn’t just a story from your childhood.”
Gun clenched his teeth and said nothing.

“It wasn’t just the Marked you were Finding, you Found Dhulyn and Parno as well.” She looked away from him, the corners of her mouth turned down.

“Mar, I—” Her upheld hand silence him.
“They escaped, you said.”
“Yes, but . . . the House Fell.”

For a moment Mar just looked at him, eyes wide, mouth fallen open. Then she shook her head, lips thinned to a stubborn line. “They wouldn’t have killed her. Lok-iKol, perhaps, but not the House. They’d have known who was to blame.”

Almost against his will, Gun found himself agreeing with her.

“No,” she went on. “It’s Lok-iKol who needs to worry about Pasillon.”

“But, Mar,” Gun said, not noticing until now that he’d twice used the familiar form of her name. “As you say, they’ll know who to blame.” When she still looked at him, a puzzled frown twisting her brows, he went on. “I found them, and you brought them here.”

“You don’t understand,” Mar said, the words clear despite her clenched teeth. “One person’s already dead because of me, and I don’t want there to be any more.”

“But—” Gun was beside himself. “I only told you about this to prevent you from going, don’t you see? They have every reason to kill you, and you’re going to walk right up to their House.”

“You’re the one who doesn’t see. I’ve got to explain, I can’t have them thinking that I knew—” Her voice cracked, and she took a breath that shuddered all the way in. “That I knew about this. You’ll see. They won’t kill me.”

Gun wasn’t sure if he could explain how thoroughly he wouldn’t be seeing this. “How certain are you?”

Mar swallowed, her lips trembling. Clearly, she wasn’t as sure as she pretended. Her eyes dropped to focus on a pebble at her feet. “They won’t kill me,” she repeated.

“And if you’re wrong?”

Her chin lifted. “According to what you say, it doesn’t matter what I do. This is our Pasillon. ‘Harm one, harm all.’ That’s one of their sayings, isn’t it? If they want to kill me, they’ll find me and do it.” She licked her lips. “Well, I don’t want to live my life that way, hunted, on the run.”

As Mar’s words sank in, Gun swallowed against the acid in his stomach. Hunted. On the run. He was a Scholar, for the Caids’ sake, not a soldier, or a Cloud. Where would he suddenly develop the skills to hide from the Mercenary Brotherhood? Was he ready to spend the rest of his life looking over his shoulder? He squeezed his eyes shut.

“Thank you for being so worried about me,” Mar said. “But I’m sure I’m right.”

Here he’d thought there was no way he could feel worse. “I’m in it just as deeply as you are,” he heard his voice say. “Deeper.”

He felt the gentle pressure of fingers on his shoulder. He couldn’t look at her.

“I’m not as brave as you,” he said, finally lifting his head to meet her dark blue eyes.

Mar looked back at him, her eyes, so warm and expressive moments ago, shuttered now and cold. After what felt like a long time, she spoke.

“Maybe you’re right,” she said, letting her hand fall to her side. “Maybe you’ll never have to face it. Good luck.”

Without another word she set off toward the main street that would take her to Mercenary House. Gun watched her walk away, head up, pack shouldered. Once she turned the corner, he’d never see Mar-eMar again.

Maybe he’d never have to face it. Maybe he’d never have to face anything. What, after all, had he ever faced in his life? He couldn’t face being a Finder, he’d wanted Scholarship instead. He hadn’t wanted to face what was going on in Tenebro House—hadn’t wanted to face losing his research. No wonder Beslyn-Tor had found it so easy to make him forget.

She was almost at the corner. She’d begun the turn, he could almost see her profile.

“Wait!”

Thirteen

DHULYN LOOKED WITH INTEREST around the small reception room. It was sparsely but very expensively furnished, and while the chair opposite the entry doors was too small to be a throne, it was decorated with the distinctive red carnelians that were set aside for the exclusive use of the Tarkins of Imrion. The floor, a soft creamy marble, still had its carpets laid down against the winter chill, and likely would for a few weeks yet. The light oak panels on the walls, even the double doors on the left side of the room, were inlaid with silver hooded snakes, the
symbol of the ancient House of Culebro, founders of the Tarkinate of Imrion. Two men and a woman stood close to
the Tarkin’s chair, and it was the younger man who turned, saluting Alkoryn with a smile and a lifted hand, before
taking the seat.

Like the room, Tek-aKet, Tarkin of Imrion, Consage of the Lost Isles, Darklin of Pendamar, and, as it happened,
Culebroso, was plainly but richly dressed in the dark red of the Tarkinate. On his left sleeve were two thin stripes of
color, yellow and brown, to show his Culebro heritage. As tall as Parno, but as slim as herself, the man was well-
muscled, with his northern father’s dark hair and his southern mother’s fair skin setting off eyes so pale a blue as to
be almost colorless. The woman, olive-skinned, her eyes a glowing black, her hair and most of her dark red gown
covered by a long veil of purple silk shot with gold, took her place to the Tarkin’s right, and Dhulyn realized that it
was the Tarkina herself who was taking part in the audience. Dhulyn hooked her thumbs in her worn leather sword
belt, unsure whether the Tarkin’s presence would make things easier . . . or harder.

The older man, skinny, and wearing more jewelry than either Tarkin or Tarkina, Dhulyn noted with a grimace,
also wore the Carnelian badge on his left shoulder, marking him for some upper-level aide of the Tarkin.

“I greet you, Alkoryn Pantherclaw.” The Tarkin’s voice was surprisingly gruff coming from so smooth-looking a
man. And there was a smile in it, Dhulyn realized, which explained how Alkoryn had been able to see the Tarkin so
quickly. Some connection, whether friendship could be the word or no, existed somehow between the two very
different men. “My aide Gan-eGan you know,” the Tarkin said, gesturing at the older man, “and my Tarkina you
have met. You say there is a threat against my life?”

“I greet you, Lords, Lady,” Alkoryn said, bowing his head and touching the empty loop on his belt where his
sword normally hung. “May I present my Brothers, Dhulyn Wolveshead the Scholar, and Parno Lionsmane the
Chanter. It is the Wolveshead who brought this news to me, and I bring her now that you may hear her own words.”

The Tarkin turned his pale blue eyes to her, the strange etiquette of the Carnelian court allowing him to notice her
for the first time.

“Lord Tarkin,” Dhulyn said, lowering her gaze for a moment and touching her sword belt in imitation of
Alkoryn’s example. Her Senior had heard and approved the version of the story she and Parno had planned, and she
began it now. “I have recently been in House Tenebro, and while there I overheard the present Tenebroso speaking
with a Jaldean priest. They were discussing your assassination, my lord, and making plans to put the Tenebroso Lok-
ikiol—the Kir as he then was—on the Carnelian Throne.”

The Tarkin leaned back in his chair, rested his chin in his right hand. The red stone in his seal ring caught
the light, twinkling.

“The newly risen House and a Jaldean priest?”

“Yes, Lord Tarkin.”

The Tarkin looked at his aide. “Have your people heard anything of this?”

Gan-eGan shook his head. “No, my lord, and I do not see how this could be so. The Jaldeans have made no
changes in their usual demands.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Dhulyn saw Parno rub his upper lip with his left index finger. She, too, imagined she
knew what the “usual demands” were. Judging from what they’d heard preached on the street, the Jaldeans wanted
arrests and detainments, not just green headdresses, curfews and pressure to come to their shrines voluntarily.

Alkoryn cleared his throat. “Nor would there be, if they had something like this in view. You are too moderate for
them, Lord Tarkin . . .”

“It may be, as some suggest, that I would prefer the Jaldeans had never found their new teachings,” the Tarkin
said. “But they are here, many listen and believe, and that is a reality of my reign. I am sorry for the Marked. I have
instructed my soldiers, and the guards along my borders not to hinder or stop them if they wish to go, though the
Jaldeans would prefer I did otherwise. I am not myself a New Believer, but I will have order, and until I find some
other way, the Marked are the price I must pay.”

“It is as I have said,” the aide said. “The Jaldeans have no need to support the claims of another for the Throne.”

“Perhaps the need is Lok-ikiol’s,” Dhulyn said.

“You should be more careful, Mercenary. This is a High Noble House you speak of.”

Dhulyn smiled her wolf’s smile, and Gan-eGan edged farther away from her. The Tarkin looked quickly aside,
lifting his hand to rub at his upper lip. I could like him, were he not so wrong, Dhulyn thought, stifling a genuine
smile of her own.
“May I ask, Dhulyn Wolfshead, how it is you came to overhear this conversation?” the Tarkin said. Dhulyn swallowed. This was the tricky part. “They thought I was unconscious, and so spoke freely before me.” The Tarkin sat up straight. “They thought you were unconscious? How?” He transferred his look to Alkoryn. “Drunk?” “Drugged, my lord.” The aide sniffed. “Is that not much the same thing?” “Drugged by them.” “To what possible purpose?” The Tarkin was content, Dhulyn saw, to let his weasel of an aide pursue his questions for him. She drew in air through her nose. “I did not catch your name, sir,” Parno cut in. Dhulyn ground her teeth but stayed silent. This was Parno’s world, as she herself had said. She’d do best to let him handle it. “I am Gan-eGan,” the aide said through stiff lips. “I am the head of the Tarkin’s private council.” “I am surprised, Gan-eGan, to find you so hostile to persons who have come here with a warning.” “The Brotherhood’s neutrality is well known, so you may therefore understand my caution when one of you, claiming to have been drugged, comes with an accusation against a High Noble House,” Gan-eGan said. It was all Dhulyn could do not to throw her hands in the air. This would get them nowhere. “My partner and I delivered a cousin of theirs whom we’d guarded from Navra, and when the job was done, we were set upon and held. We don’t know why—perhaps you could ask the Tenebros? They gave me fresnoyn, and while they were waiting to question me—again, I don’t know why—I overheard the conversation I’ve described. The interrogation was interrupted, and we escaped before it could be continued. We thought about remaining in captivity and asking a few questions of our own, but rational thought prevailed.” “Do not take offense.” The Tarkin’s eyes danced in an otherwise straight face. “The Carnelian Throne is not an easy seat. Even the accusations of friends must be examined, when they come without proof. Is there proof you can offer me?” Dhulyn closed her eyes and gritted her teeth. “I thought it was a mistake to come here,” she muttered. “Believe us, don’t believe us—it’s all the same to me.” It was as if Dhulyn had thrown a cat into a dovecote. The weasel of an aide yammering his indignation, Alkoryn’s rough whisper failing to catch the Tarkin’s ear, and Parno also trying to be heard. Dhulyn ground her teeth together. This would all be for nothing if she could not get them to believe her. She caught Parno’s eye and raised her eyebrows. He grimaced and shrugged, leaving it up to her. She looked from Alkoryn to the Tarkin and back. She was here. Her decision, she realized, had already been made. She grasped Gan-eGan by the shoulders and moved him to one side as though he had been a child, stepping into the space he had occupied, stepping to within striking distance of the now silent Tarkin. If details were what they wanted . . . “They will poison you in a dish of kidneys.” Every tongue stilled. Every eye in the room turned to her, and the Tarkin’s were not the only ones which had narrowed. Dhulyn took a deep breath, now she was for it. At least the weaselly clerk had stopped his yammering. “You’ll be in a little room, much smaller than this one, in an old part of the palace where the walls are very thick. There’s a tall, thin window with an archer’s grille, and a shutter on the inner wall, with glass panes in it.” The Tarkin’s chair was elevated enough that Dhulyn looked straight into Tek-aKet’s blue eyes. “The lower left-hand pane has some words scratched on the glass; I don’t know what they say, it’s a language I don’t know. I could write it for you, though. There’s a worktable, with an armchair on each side of it, both cushioned. A fireplace on the side of the room farthest from the window, with a small fire laid but not yet burning. A dark patterned carpet on the floor, old with worn spots, but you can still see the outline of snakes. A cloth covering the table with weights sewn into the corners—” “Enough,” the Tarkin said, his voice harsh and abrupt. “I know the room.” “Well, they’ll bring you a dish of kidneys there, Lord, and you’ll die from it.” “How can you know—” “She’s Marked.” Only the Tarkina would interrupt the Tarkin, and she’d been silent so long they had all forgotten her. She sounded as though she smiled with delight under her veil, and her voice had the liquid lilt of her northern homeland. “She’s a Seer.”
“That’s why you include the Jaldean priest in your accusation.” Gan-eGan stabbed the air with his beringed index finger. “Now your motives come clear. The Marked have ample reason to wish the Jaldeans accused of the assassination of the Tarkin.” The man’s eyes narrowed with calculation as he turned to the Tarkin, “My lady, this is not proof.”

“You could always let the Tarkin be poisoned, then you’d know for sure.” Parno said in his most reasonable tone.

“I Saw what happens to the Tarkin, and I Saw Lok-iKol on the Carnelian Throne,” Dhulyn continued, leaning forward against the grip Parno had on her arm. “I don’t need the Sight to know what will happen to you. It’s all the same to you who sits on the Carnelian Throne, providing you keep your office—” She poked the aide’s shoulder with her index finger.

“You will feel differently, sir,” she told him. “You will. If this man falls—” she jerked her head toward the Tarkin, “so will you.”

Dhulyn stepped back into Parno’s circling arm and hung her head, swallowing. They were fools, all of them. Listen to them now, Alkoryn’s urgent whisper going unheard, drowned out by the clerk bleating his outrage. Only Parno’s murmur in her ear made any sense. She wished she hadn’t come.

The doors to the anteroom opened, and the slim, golden-haired young woman who’d been their escort through the winding corridors of the Carnelian Dome came in with a unit of six guards in the Dome colors at her back.

“My lord Tarkin,” she said, “a report has come from House Tenebro. It seems the old House did not Fall of age and infirmity as was thought at first. There is now evidence that the Fallen House was poisoned, and two members of the House have run away, suggesting their guilt.”

“I grieve to hear it, Amandar,” the Tarkin said. “But why must I hear it now?”

“One of the runaways is a distant cousin, Mar-eMar, recently come to the House, and brought by these Mercenary Brothers.”

“Who else ran from the House?” Parno said.

The young woman shot a quick glance at Parno out of the corner of her eye before focusing again on the Tarkin. “The Scholar Gundaron of Valdomar,” she said when the Tarkin had nodded his permission for her to answer.

Dhulyn looked at Parno and raised her eyebrows.

“And do we know where these people are now?” the Tarkin asked.

“They were followed almost to the doors of Mercenary House, and then lost, my lord.”

“Alkoryn Pantherclaw,” the Tarkin said. “You will understand that I must detain your Brothers—” He raised his hand to halt Alkoryn’s whispered protests. “This is the Fall of a High Noble House, and not any House, mind, but one closely related to my own . . . and it places into a different light the tale that these Brothers have brought you. Some will say,” here he looked aside at Gan-eGan, “that they wished to make the first move in a game of accusations—but enough! Questions must be asked, and these Brothers will remain here, well-treated, until the answers are found. You, I hold blameless; you may go. But see that you send the Tenebro cousin and the Scholar Gundaron to me, should you have occasion to find them.”

“My lord, we are neutrals, we cannot merely—”

“You may go.” The Tarkin stood and looked to his wife, who shook her head and remained standing beside the chair. He nodded to Alkoryn, and left the room by the double doors to the right of his chair, accompanied by Gan-eGan. Once her husband had cleared the door, the Tarkina turned back to the young woman and the guards.

“Amandar, you will give me a moment with these Brothers. You guards may wait outside. Alkoryn Pantherclaw, I know you have matters to attend to at your own House.”

“I do, my lady, but I expect to return for my Brothers.” He turned to them and touched his forehead.

Dhulyn caught herself before the smile reached the surface of her lips. It was not the Tarkina, but she and Parno who were being reminded. Dhulyn remembered Alkoryn’s workroom, and the charts and floor plans that lined his shelves, and thought she knew how Alkoryn intended to return for them.

“Dhulyn, Parno,” Alkoryn touched his forehead with his fingertips. “In Battle.”

“Or in Death,” they replied in unison, saluting him in return.

The young woman, Amandar, hesitated but finally made a short bow and gestured the guards out of the room. The Tarkina waited until they were alone before sitting down in the Tarkin’s chair and throwing off her veil with a sigh. The face revealed was striking, her olive skin darker than the norm for Imrion, and her profile too pronounced, too
hawklike, for conventional beauty. But her eyes, the darkest Dhulyn had ever seen, were large and lustrous, her lips full, warm and ready to smile.

Dhulyn pressed her own lips together. She’d wondered what the presence of the Tarkina might mean; perhaps she was about to find out.

“Do you know when this will come to pass?”

For a moment, Dhulyn wasn’t sure what the woman was asking about. Then she remembered it was the Tarkina who had guessed she was Marked.

“You believe me,” she said.

The dark woman in the Carnelian chair nodded slowly, the jewels in her hair twinkling in the light of the oil lamps. “Most people think there are no Seers left in the world, but I know differently. There was one, an old man from the far west, at my grandfather’s court when my father was a child. Long before my time, truly, but unlike Gan-eGan, I do not need to experience something personally to know that it exists.”

“And you do not mistrust the Wolfshead’s words, simply because she is Marked?” Parno said, his head tilted to one side as he considered the woman in the chair.

“No,” the Tarkina said, leaning back in such a way that it was obvious she’d often sat in her husband’s chair. “By what I was taught, the New Believers are heretics, and in Berdana the Queen, my sister, provides asylum to the Marked, and refuses the demands they are starting to make. Here in Imrion they are my husband’s subjects, and therefore safe from my bad opinion.”

“You’re not afraid of what you don’t understand?”

The dark woman shrugged. “I don’t understand higher mathematics, but I am not afraid of the Tarkin’s accountants nor yet his astronomers. And I’m not afraid of the Marked, that’s certain. Whether I understand it . . .” She shrugged again. “When we were young, my sister and I, in our father’s palace in Berdana we had many companions from among the children of the noble classes, and my favorite, the one who I think would have loved me even if I were not the daughter of the King, she was Marked. Not a Seer, no, but a Finder. Because of my love for my friend, our tutors told us stories of the Marked, and made their histories part of our studies.”

The Tarkina brought her gaze back from the shadows of her childhood to focus once more on Dhulyn. “If I can persuade my husband, will you help him? And if I cannot, can I hire you myself, to act as eyes and ears about the Dome?”

“Lady, I believe we are being detained under suspicion of abetting in the Fall of a House.”

“Yes, that is a small problem.”

“T’m glad you think so.”

“You misunderstand me. I’m not concerned with the Fall of Tenebro House. I’m concerned with the Tarkin—personally,” she said, giving Dhulyn a direct look from her raven-dark eyes, “not just for the sake of my position, and the position of my children. I believe it would be a tragedy for Imrion to loose Tek-aKet as their Tarkin, but it would be more than a tragedy for me to lose my husband. At the moment, Tek and the moderates among the Houses who support him are keeping the Jaldeans in check in this country. If the New Belief wins here, there will be war. War here will mean war for Berdana; my sister cannot remain neutral.”

The Tarkina leaned forward and rested her chin on her right fist. “Gan-eGan is a fine man, whatever you might think, but he lacks imagination. Unlike him, I believe the Jaldeans will not stop their persecutions with the Marked, and if the Carnelian Throne will not give them what they want, I believe they will take the Throne. For Imrion, which is now my home, for Berdana my homeland, for my sister as well as my husband and children, I would push the Jaldeans back into their temples, and out of the council halls. For the sake of my old friend, I would have the Marked free again. Will you help me?”

Dhulyn glanced at Parno and found him looking at her, the same thought, she knew, in both their minds. This is what they had talked about, back in the Mercenary House, when she hadn’t been sure about warning the Tarkin. The Tarkina saw the same things in the Jaldeans that they had seen themselves. The balance would be upset, no matter what the Tarkin thought, and she and Parno needed to know on which side of the scales they were weighed.

“If we are free and alive,” Dhulyn told the dark woman in the Tarkin’s chair, “we will help you.”

A Mender.

In an instant he was in the mirror room, standing over the Mender woman holding her head between his hands; holding it high and tight so that her neck stretched uncomfortably and her eyes flared with alarm. This is where it had begun. Where he’d been Seen and Found and Healed and Mended. No matter that he had not been lost, and was
neither sick nor broken.

“Do you know this room? Have you seen me before?” She had a different form, but that did not mean this was not the Mender who had first given him shape. Even now, even after all this eternal passage of time in this world of forms and solids, he did not understand all that it was possible for shape to do. “Are you the one? Can you open the door?”

Her eyes flicked from side to side, seeing the great round mirror that held the doorway, the worktable with its scrolls and books. The sword.

“No, my lord. No.” She would have shaken her head, if he had not been holding it so tightly.

At once they were in the priest’s room in the Jaldean Shrine in Gotterang, he still holding her head between his hands. He reached into her with his own essence, sought out and found once more the golden flame. It burned hot and chaotic, almost shapeless. But he knew what true shapelessness was, and this was a mockery. He touched the golden flame and released it, dissolved its form. Made it NOT.

The woman fainted. When they took her away, her face was empty and she cried.

He was resting when the Tenebro Lord Dal-eDal came. His was a red flame. No danger there. The man held himself stiffly, as if he would rather be elsewhere.

“I am sent by the Tenebroso Lok-iKol,” Dal-eDal said, coughing to disguise the roughness in his voice.

“It is true, then. The House has Fallen.”

“It has.”

“He gives me a time?”

“Tonight, if it is possible.”

He nodded. “Tonight it shall be.” He closed his eyes, and the Tenebro Lord went away.

“Go out, my eyes and ears,” he whispered when he was alone again. “Go out, all my tongues, and whisper. It is time.”

“Of course I’m sure.”

Mar pressed her lips together. Why was it that fear so often made people angry? She’d been so pleased when he’d called after her, she’d known that Gun was braver than he’d thought. She only wished he was brave enough not to be annoyed now that he was doing the right thing. Though, with luck, he wasn’t irritated enough to be mistaken about the way . . . she’d followed his lead, trusting that he knew where he was going, but once they’d left the wider avenues for the warren of alleys, laneways, and courtyards that lay to the north of the Great Square, she was well and truly adrift.

Gundaron tapped the wall they stood by. “This is the east wall of the Bootmaker’s Inn, the one you told me about.” His fair brows drew down in a vee. Mar opened her mouth . . . and closed it without asking again if he was sure. Gun looked over at her.

“I’m thinking,” he said, “that we might not want to just walk up to the Brothers’ front door. Maybe we should be a bit more circumspect.”

“If this is some way to get out of going there,” Mar began, but was silenced by his tight-lipped headshake.

“We’re not having that argument again,” he said, voice gruff. “But we might not be the only ones looking for Dhulyn Wolfshead.” His lips trembled as though there were words he held back before continuing. “I’d like a chance to see if there’s anyone there we wouldn’t want to run into.”

Mar nodded. That made sense. She shifted her pack higher on her left shoulder.

“If you follow along until the end of this wall and turn right, a little ways up you’ll come to one of the big archways, one of the entrances to the Great Square; then, just a bit farther along, Mercenary House is on the right-hand side, the same side as the entrance,” Gun said. “There’s another laneway on the left, just before you get there.”

“And so?”

“So you can walk down and then turn into the other lane. You’ll look like you’re going down toward the Old Market, but you can see if there’s anyone suspicious around Mercenary House.”

Mar took her lower lip in her teeth. “Why me?” She thought it extremely unlikely she’d know what “anyone suspicious” looked like.

“Because no one from Tenebro House is likely to recognize you in clothes they saw you in for five minutes four days ago. Me, they’ve been living with for two years.”
At first Mar was inclined to argue further—after all, no one could be looking for them yet, and when the search began, if it began, surely no one would think to look for them here. Still, she felt Gundaron’s logic, and second thoughts persuaded her that this was exactly what Dhulyn Wolfshead and Parno Lionsmane would have done.

“Mar-eMar,” Gundaron said, when she still hadn’t spoken. “If you’re not sure—you don’t have to do this.”

Mar looked up sharply, but his eyes were firmly on hers, his gaze direct and open. This was no ploy to get her to change her mind; Gundaron was really worried about her, was really offering her a chance to think about it. It had all seemed so clear when she was explaining it to him around the corner from the Scholars’ Library. She couldn’t believe she was in any danger, but now she couldn’t help remembering what the Lionsmane had told her on the way to Gotterang. Anyone might kill you.

She dragged in enough air to fill her lungs. They’d saved her life. Dhulyn Wolfshead had killed someone for her. The Caids only knew what had been done to them in return. She owed them an explanation and an apology. Nothing changed that.

“Keep my pack for me,” she said, slipping the book bag off her shoulder and stepping out around the corner. Gun watched her walk away, head high, step sure. Everything he’d said to her was true. It was better, and safer for both of them for Mar to go. But he felt like a coward just the same. Was there anything he could do to help her? Could he Find danger? He closed his eyes.

Cloudman, she thought, Racha man, too. Mar remembered seeing the same tattoo on Yaro of Trevel. She continued down the road until she’d passed the archway and crossed as she drew abreast of the lane leading away on the left, just where Gun had said it was.

And there was the small gated archway of Mercenary House, and the Racha man just going in the postern door. Mar had taken a half step toward the House, forgetting Gundaron’s plan, when a guardsman wearing a black cloak with a familiar crest on the left shoulder and a broad teal stripe along the bottom approached the Mercenary’s gate from the far side, and called out to the still open door. Mar ducked into the lane before the man could turn to look in her direction. Only after several minutes had passed did her heart slow down and her breathing return to something like normal.

Mar could hear voices as the guard in Tenebro colors exchanged words with the Brother answering the gate at Mercenary House, but their voices were low, and the rain was noisy enough that she couldn’t overhear what was said. Now is the time to move, Mar thought. While the attention of the guard from Tenebro House was taken up by the Brother. Mar took three slow, deep breaths and stepped out of the lane, turning immediately back in the direction she’d come from. Remembering something Dhulyn Wolfshead had told her in the mountains, Mar dragged her left foot a little with each step, changing entirely the way she walked, and forced herself to go slowly, as if she hadn’t a care in the world besides getting home for her supper.

By the time she got back to the semi-dry corner where Gundaron waited, the pain in her left foot was real, and her stomach was tight as a fist. She pushed back her hood, welcoming the cool touch of the rain, as she told Gundaron what she’d seen.

He licked his lips, looking from her to the corner of the wall and back again.

“Most likely it’s the Mercenary Brothers they’re looking for, but I’d be very surprised if that guard hasn’t orders to watch the place, at least for tonight.”

“Where does that leave us?”

“It’s late, and later still for us to find a room somewhere even if we could afford it.” He frowned. “If we can make our way into the Old Market, we should be able to find somewhere to lay up until morning. Give us a chance to figure out what to do next.”

Mar swallowed, picked up her pack. If he was anything like as exhausted as she was, he’d be glad of any place out of the rain where they could sit down.

“I’m not promising much,” he said, and he started to retrace their steps.

“I was almost a moon on the road with Mercenaries,” she said. “I don’t expect much.”

“Tenebro’s Deputy Steward of Walls came in half an hour ago,” he reported to the older man.

“With news I’ll tell you as we go,” Alkoryn said, walking briskly to the Dome’s open gates. “Did the Deputy see you?”

“No.” Hernyn hesitated, but as Alkoryn Pantherclaw was already on his way across the courtyard, he could do
nothing but follow.

“Our Brothers?” he managed to murmur once they were out in Tarkin’s Square, a broad expanse of normally sun-drenched pavement fronting the massive pile of buildings that was the Carnelian Dome, seat of the Tarkins of Imrion.

“Detained.”

Hernyn listened in growing disbelief as Alkoryn told him of what had passed within.

“But—did you know this of Dhulyn Wolfshead?”

Alkoryn shrugged. “It’s rare for the Marked to become Mercenaries, and Seers are the rarest of the Marked. . . .” His whisper died away. “There’s nothing in the Common Rule about such a thing. Nothing to tell us what to do or, or what to think.”

“Is she still . . . ?” It was so unthinkable Hernyn couldn’t bring himself to say it, but fortunately Alkoryn knew exactly what he wanted to ask. And he knew the answer, too.

“Of course she is,” he said. “Brotherhood ends only with death.”

But for all that, there was something troubling the older man, Hernyn could tell that much.

The streets near the Dome were much more crowded than Hernyn would have expected, given that it was late and just beginning to rain. As they turned into the avenue that would eventually lead them to the Great Square and their House, they ran into a group of men blocking almost the whole of the way. Hernyn stepped forward.

“If we may pass?” he said.

Several young men, and one not so young, stepped back out of the way with nods.

What I wouldn’t give for a horse, Hernyn thought as Alkoryn returned the nod of a bearded shopkeeper he obviously knew by sight. And what’s a silk merchant doing here? Hernyn wondered, making his own assessment of the man’s clothing. They passed out of the quarter of Noble Houses that crowded as closely as they were allowed to the Carnelian Dome and through the neighborhood of jewelers and metalsmiths. Here there were still shops, but these were the lesser trades: food sellers, weavers, cobblers, bakers, and the like. Though rain was falling more heavily, and the shops were closed and closing, there were still a surprising number of people, both men and women, on the streets at a time when most should be at home preparing for their suppers. Nor did they appear to be on their way home. Small groups formed and re-formed, and some, though talking in friendly enough fashion, kept looking over their shoulders. One tall fellow with a smith’s heavy shoulders and a familiar amulet around his throat, stared hard at Hernyn’s green cloak as they walked by.

Hernyn tossed back his hair to draw attention to his Mercenary badge, bared his teeth in a strained smile, and placed his hand casually on his sword hilt. And knew without looking that Alkoryn had done the same.

“If I were you, my Brother,” Alkoryn said, tugging at Hernyn’s dark green cloak once they’d left the smith behind, “I’d think about getting something in a different color.”

“It was a good price,” Hernyn said.

“And now you know why.”

As streets wide enough for two coaches became narrower and shorter, they passed shops which were now closed for the night, and the small knots of whispering folk grew fewer, and farther between. They were able to make better time here, and Hernyn had picked up the pace when Alkoryn spotted a woman in dark green creeping from doorway to doorway, taking advantage of every shadow the rainy evening offered her. As they drew near, she pressed herself into a doorway, turning her face away from them and waiting to let them pass. Hernyn was just thinking that she’d better hurry—curfew for the Marked was the setting sun, and with the rain it was hard to prove that the sun had not already set—when Alkoryn signaled to him with a quick finger snap and stopped in front of the woman, effectively shielding her from any others who might pass by.

“Korwina Mender,” he said, his soft whisper making it perfectly safe to say her name. “I thought you were gone from Gotterang.”

Seeing who it was, the woman looked up, but didn’t leave the deep shadow of the doorway. “Your advice was good, Charter, but we left it too late. We were turned back from the gate.”

Hernyn winced at a sudden bad taste in his mouth.

“I’m sorry, Korwina, that can’t be good,” Alkoryn said.

“So we thought, and it’s followed by worse. I’m to present myself and my family at the Jaldean High Shrine tomorrow morning.”

Alkoryn shook his head. “Do they know your family? How many . . . ?”
“If they don’t, there’s plenty of my neighbors will tell them.” The woman’s tone had no resentment, no bitterness, Hernyn noticed. They’d got used to this kind of thing in Gotterang. She shrugged. “They’ll have to, to save themselves. Still, I’ve been going round now, to my best customers, to see if there’s any will hide my children. If they’re not there tomorrow, the Jaldeans can’t take them, no matter what tales the neighbors tell. But no one dares.” Again, she sounded as if she didn’t blame them. “They don’t know, you see, what the Jaldeans may do to us once we’ve gone to them. They can’t risk that I might tell . . .” the Mender drew in a shaky breath. “That I might tell where my babies are hidden.”

“Send them to us,” Alkoryn said.
Hernyn looked up in surprise.

“Come to Mercenary House.” Alkoryn’s voice sounded harsher than usual. When the older man turned to him, Hernyn had had time to school his face.

“You go with her, my Brother, make sure she and the children are safe and none see you. Your Brothers in the House will know what to do with them. Tell your Brothers further what has occurred at the Dome; tell them to bar all doors and gates, and to make the lower chambers ready. Then join me yourself at the Dome.” Alkoryn looked off into the middle distance, as if he were listening to some music only he could hear. “Tell them that if we are not back by sunrise, Fanryn Bloodhand is Senior.”

“But, Alkoryn—”

“I’m a fool, Hernyn, I’ve been too long with my maps. The time for counsel and waiting is passed. Go now, do it quickly.”

His mouth suddenly dry as sand, Hernyn nodded, and stepped round to take the Marked woman gently by the elbow.

“Waste no time,” Alkoryn said. “In Battle.”
Hernyn touched his forehead. “Or in Death.”

“The Caids bless you,” the Mender said in the ancient way, “the Sleeping God hold you in his dreams.”

“Someone’ll have to,” Hernyn muttered, as he followed the Mender woman down a narrow corridor between two buildings. She did that well, he thought, almost like a Mercenary. It was surprising what people could learn when they had to.

The sound of the door latch drew him around, and made the old dog sleeping in front of the fire raise its eyelids.

Larissa-Lan, junior page for this old tower, and therefore the one who usually brought whatever was required to the Tarkin’s private workroom, entered balancing a tray with practiced ease on her left hand. On the tray, along with cutlery, linen, and a breadbasket, was a heavy ceramic dish whose close-fitting lid barely the contained the familiar odors of a wine sauce.

“Here we go, sir,” said the young woman, smiling. “Still hot, and unsampled, though I had to threaten Kysh with a beating.”

“What is it?” Tek asked, though he thought he knew.

The page looked up in surprise. “Why, your favorite, Lord. Kidneys in jeresh sauce.” She advanced on the worktable, set down the tray, and laid out a heavy place mat for the hot dish. Beside it on the right she placed a crisp napkin folded in the shape of a crane, along with one of the new silver forks, and arranged the small breadbasket to the left.

Tek did his best to nod naturally even while his throat closed and his stomach dropped abruptly. This was coincidence with a vengeance—and altogether too pat for comfort.

“And who ordered this treat for me?”

“The Tarkina, my lord. At least, that’s what the cook told me. I was to say, with the compliments of the Tarkina.”

“Excellent, Larissa, thank you.”

“A pleasure, sir. Enjoy.” With the confidence of familiarity the young woman left the room.

Enjoy. Well that was going to be difficult. Tek almost wished young Kysh had taken a taste of it. Then at least he’d know . . .

He shook his head and sat down at the table. He already knew. Of course he did. There was nothing wrong with these kidneys and he didn’t need a taster. Tek broke off a piece of bread and picked up his fork in his right hand, speared a particularly juicy looking bit of kidney, and, using the piece of bread to stop the sauce from dripping on his clothes, lifted the tasty morsel to his mouth.
The Tarkin of Imrion let the fork clatter down on the plate. The old dog raised its head.

Larissa said the Tarkina had ordered the dish. Any other day Tek would have believed it—but not today. Just this morning, long before the request for an audience had come from Alkoryn Pantherclaw the Charter, Zelianora had talked to him about how tight his clothes were getting, and how little exercise he’d managed to get over the winter. A nice dish of steamed carrots, flavored with cumin. Apples spiced with cinnamon—even a hot soup. Those he would have expected Zella to send him. But kidneys in jeresh sauce? Not likely.

That didn’t mean the dish was poisoned. And it didn’t mean that it wasn’t.

Old Berlan got up with difficulty from his spot by the fire and walked his old dog’s walk to nudge his master’s hand. Tek absently stroked the bony old head, pulling the long silky ears through his fingers. The dog lay his head on Tek’s thigh and snuffled. Tek looked at the dish of kidneys, at his dog, and back to the dish. Berlan was too old to hunt, too old even to go outside, almost too old to eat. His pain was not yet great, but that day, too, would come.

Tek took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. He thrust one finger into the center of the ceramic dish to test for heat before placing the dish on the floor. He watched as Berlan, tail wagging, began to eat. No great harm, perhaps even a kindness, if the dish was poisoned.

And if the dish wasn’t poisoned? No great harm there either.

Tek-aKet, Tarkin of Imrion, Consage of the Lost Isles, Darklin of Pendamar, and Culebroso, sat back in his chair to watch his dog eat.

Fourteen

MY INSTRUCTIONS WERE very clear, Mistress. I’m to escort you and the children to Mercenary House.” Hernyn hovered in the doorway to the Mender’s inner room, frustration and impatience making his skin crawl. The family were living in the two back rooms of what had been a decent tradesman’s dwelling—before the furniture had been sold and the family tapestries and ornaments taken from the walls, leaving pale marks behind to show where they had been. There were two tick mattresses on the uncarpeted stone floor that had obviously seen their bedsteads sold out from under them, and the outer room held only three mismatched chairs, an unpainted wooden table, and a carefully arranged stack of pottery plates and mugs.

Three children, a boy of about eleven, and two younger girls, perhaps seven and four, sat close-mouthed and wide-eyed on the edge of the larger mattress.

“I must wait for my man.” Korwina Mender fastened the ties on a small leather pack and handed it to the older boy. “He’s been out same as I have, looking for a place to hide the children. I can’t let him come back to an empty house. Please,” she turned to Hernyn, showing him a face that wouldn’t accept a “no.” “I’ll wait and bring him with me. But please, Hernyn Greystone, take the children now.”

Korwina Mender looked at him, mouth set, the words she wouldn’t say in front of her children shining from her eyes. That her man would come back too late, if he came back at all. That, having seen her children safe, she would wait to share whatever ending fate brought her husband.

Hernyn looked from the children to the door and back again. Time was wasting. “Say your good-byes,” he told Korwina.

The older boy stood and went to his mother, the pack clutched in his hands, his face solemn. He was almost as tall as she, with the same soft brown hair and hazel eyes. Korwina brushed the hair back off his forehead with a steady hand.

“I’ll not be long,” she said. “But you are the head of the family until your father and I come. Watch out for your sisters.” She turned to the two younger children. “Mind your brother, and the good Mercenaries, until . . .” her voice faltered and she looked back at her son.

“Don’t wait too long, Mama,” the boy said.

“I won’t, my heart.” But the look they exchanged showed that both knew the truth. There was not luck enough left in the air tonight to bring the husband and father home in time, and this was good-bye. The boy swallowed and blinked rapidly, as if he knew that tears would frighten the younger children. But his lips were trembling too much for him to say anything more.

Korwina Mender took her son’s face once more between her hands and shut her own eyes. After a moment she opened them again, and her son’s face was calm, peaceful. He pressed his lips together and nodded, touching his mother’s face lightly. Hernyn looked from one to the other, knowing that something had happened, but unsure what it could be. The boy looked more solid somehow, more whole. She’s Mended him, Hernyn thought, licking suddenly
dry lips. *By the Caids, she’s Mended him."

“Hernyn Greystone,” the woman said, lifting her hands slightly as the boy led his sisters from the room. “I should
tell you, my boy shows signs of Mending, like me. We’ve told no one else.”

“I don’t care if he shows signs of being a vulture plant,” Hernyn said. “Good luck to you, Korwina.”

“And to you, Greyestone.”

As soon as they were out on the street, Hernyn picked up the older girl and set off as quickly as the boy, carrying
his younger sister, could manage.

“What’s your name, boy?”

“Jerrick.”

“Come along, then, Jerrick.”

As he neared Tarkin’s Square in front of the Carnelian Dome, the rumbling he’d heard in the distance grew
louder, becoming murmuring, with individual voices raised in shouts Hernyn couldn’t quite make out. It seemed like
every corner he passed had grown a knot of three or four men. This was no ordinary crowd, Hernyn thought, his
stomach muscles tightening, but a mob in the making.

He slowed his pace still further and sheathed his sword, but kept his hand resting lightly on the grip. Trying to
appear nothing more than curious, he sauntered up to the nearest group of men. “Hey, friend,” he said. “What’s
caused all this buzz? Are we invaded?”

“Have you not heard?” the man said, his smile wide, plainly pleased to be giving news to a Mercenary Brother.
“There’ll be work for you boys, that’s certain. Imrion’s Fallen.”

Hernyn hoped his raised eyebrows disguised the shock he felt.

“The Tarkin’s been poisoned,” the man continued. “They say it’s those cursed Marked.”

Hernyn walked away, his eyes fixed on the towers of the Carnelian Dome, still some blocks away. The distant
shouting had become screaming, and he could hear the sounds of metal clashing on metal.

Hernyn began to run.

She looked up from the vera tiles she was laying out on the table as Parno asked the same question for the third
time.

“Alkoryn says he’ll return for us,” she said, giving the same answer she’d given twice already. “Compose
yourself in patience, my soul.”

“Caids take it, of course he’ll come,” Parno said. He turned back to the door and stroked the lock with the
fingertips of his right hand. “You’re certain we shouldn’t help him a bit ourselves? Meet him halfway, as it were?”

Dhulyn shot him the look she usually reserved for people cheating at tiles and put down the tile she was holding
with an audible click. “You’re the expert on politics and Noble Houses,” she said. “You tell me. Tell me you think
it’s a good idea for us to wander about the Carnelian Dome hoping to meet our Brother in hallways crawling with
servants, pages, and nobility both high and low, to say nothing of the Tarkin’s Personal Guard. Tell me this, and that
lock’s as good as picked.” Dhulyn went back to studying the hand she was laying out before Parno had even finished
rolling his eyes. She moved a page of swords from its place in a sequence of sword tiles so that it stood next to the
seven of staffs. The two tiles, though of different suits, had the same color pattern. Green. There was a hand. A
winning hand called Tarkin’s Jade. She looked at the tiles, frowning. She could have sworn that for a moment she’d
seen something else, not a pattern exactly, but some total lack of . . .

“Parno—” she began.

“Shhh. Someone comes.” From habit, Parno moved away from the door to stand where he wouldn’t be
immediately visible when it was opened. He needn’t have bothered. The Tarkin’s Guard weren’t Mercenary
Brothers, but they weren’t common idiots either; the one who opened the door checked both walls before he allowed
the tall young man behind him to enter.

“I greet you,” the young man said. “I am Far-eFar, Senior Page of the Old Tower. The Tarkin Tek-aKet thanks
you for waiting so patiently and sends me to ask that you join him at your earliest convenience.”

Even Dhulyn could tell that this was mere politeness for “now and be quick about it.”

“We’re at his lordship’s disposal,” Parno said, with a bow that Dhulyn was sure gave credit to his childhood
tutors. He gave his arm to Dhulyn, and she put her fingertips on it, exactly as she’d seen noble ladies do. The Senior
Page smiled and, nodding to the guards who remained at their stations, led the Mercenaries out of the room.
“You have no guards with you?” Parno said, as if he were remarking on the weather.

“No need,” Far-eFar said. “I assure you I know the way.”

Dhulyn exchanged a look with Parno behind Far-eFar’s back. This did not have the smell of a trick. So the Tarkin no longer felt the need to guard them? Was this the work of the Tarkin, or had something else happened? They knew there was no point in questioning Far-eFar; no one could be in the Tarkin’s household for long and not have learned when to speak and when to hold his tongue.

Though this did not mean that the young man stayed silent, Dhulyn observed with a grin. He was a well brought up lad, Far-eFar, and he made a polite inquiry about archery that soon had Parno chatting with him as if they were on their way to the supper table at the young man’s home. Dhulyn listened, half-entertained and half-annoyed. That nobles, whether of Houses, Households, or Holdings, couldn’t go ten breaths without speaking was something she already knew. Nor was Parno acting, aping the manners of the noble class; this was the voice, the manner, even the way of walking that he’d practiced for years before he had come to the Brotherhood. Before she had met him on the field at Arcosa, before they had become Partnered.

Dhulyn pressed her lips together. No point in lying to herself; being so close to the lures of Parno’s old life still worried her. Even if her Vision had been of his past and not his future—something she could not be sure of—that did not mean that all would be well for them now. Parno was so sure there was nothing here to entice him, he did not even have his guard up. She looked at him out of the corner of her eye. The sooner they were out of these noble lives and back to their own, the better.

The hallways through which they walked became narrower, dating from more austere times when ladies’ skirts were not so wide as fashion had them now. The walls were dressed stone instead of paneling, the ceilings squared instead of arched, and made of inlaid woods instead of painted plaster. Dhulyn gave a silent whistle. Was it possible she’d recognize the room they were heading for?

Far-eFar stopped in front of a heavy oak door reinforced with bands of metal. There was an old lock, the kind that had a key as big as a man’s hand, but one of the smaller, more difficult to pick modern locks had been added above it. Far-eFar rested his long-fingered hand on the heavy iron handle that lay between the two locks.

“I wait here,” he said, as he opened the door for them.

Dhulyn took a step forward and looked around her with interest. There was the table with its cloth, weights sewn into the corners so that breezes wouldn’t disturb it. The fireplace, ready to be lit. The window with its etched pane. The Tarkin on the floor with a dog’s head in his lap.

“He wasn’t in a lot of pain, not yet,” the Tarkin of Imrion said without looking up. “But he was old, and soon the pain would have become much worse.” He looked up at Dhulyn. “They brought me a dish of kidneys in jeresh sauce,” he said. “I gave them to Berlan. He took my death.”

Dhulyn crouched down next to the Tarkin. She stroked the still-warm muzzle with the backs of her fingers.

“Do you think he would have preferred it otherwise?”

The Tarkin looked at her, frowning, before his countenance cleared. He almost smiled. “No,” he said, his voice sounding much lighter. “Not at all. Thank you.” He gently placed the old dog’s head on the curly wool of the hearth rug and stood, shrugging the stiffness out of his shoulders as he returned to the chair behind his worktable. He stood for a moment, his eyes on his old dog, before waving at the chairs on the opposite side with an open hand.

Parno had long ago given up any expectation of ever again finding himself sitting down in the same room as his distant kin, the Tarkin of Imrion. In the back of his mind a much younger version of himself was making a very childish gesture at his father. Parno grinned, leaned back in his chair, and propped his right ankle on his left knee.

“And so I take it from this that neither you nor the Lady Mar-eMar, nor even the Scholar of Valdorah had anything to do with the Fall of Tenebro House? As the poet says, ‘True in one thing, true in all things?’ ”

“Take whatever you like,” Dhulyn said, shrugging. “Proving it’s a different breed of horse altogether.”

Parno was never sure why Dhulyn, who’d read far more than he and could speak in as cultured a manner as any Library Scholar, often took great care to sound as barbarous as possible. He’d have thought her nervous with the noble classes—if he’d ever seen her nervous. He’d opened his mouth to speak, thinking in any case to take the pressure of conversation with the Tarkin from her, when an urgent tap sounded on the door. From the look of astonishment on the Tarkin’s face, it was a sound he’d never heard in this place.

“My lord.” Far-eFar, pale as a piece of bleached parchment, entered without waiting for a summons. “I beg your pardon, my lord. Alkoryn Pantherclaw the Charter is here saying there are rioters in the streets, proclaiming your death by poison. The Guard Captain’s sent men out to find out what he can.”

“So quickly.” The Tarkin blinked slowly. “My cousin has nerve, I’ll give him that. I’d have waited until I saw the
“It’s possible they won’t let him wait.”

“Ah, yes, the Jaldeans.” The Tarkin turned to the page. “Does the Charter tell us anything about them?”

Far-eFar glanced behind him and bit his lip.

The Tarkin sighed, and stood. “Don’t keep him standing there, Far. Let’s have them in, by all means.”

Parno and Dhulyn came to their feet as the Tarkin stood, moving silently off to one side as the page pushed the door full open, allowing Alkoryn to enter. Parno, catching a glimpse of Hernyn’s Mercenary badge among the soldiers waiting in the hallway, signaled the boy with a flick of his fingers to come in and indicated the corpse of the dog with a tilt of his head. Hernyn nodded, bending over at once to pick up the body and carry it out into the hall. No use having people step on the poor beast, and it was one less thing to distract the Tarkin.

Hernyn slipped back into the room on the heels of the arriving Guard Captain. The man was flushed, out of breath, and accompanied by only three more soldiers in the dark red surcoat of the Tarkin’s Personal Guard. One of these had an arm dangling limply at her side.

"Numbed by a blow," Parno thought. "No blood."

"How bad does it look out there?" he asked Hernyn.

The young Brother shrugged, trying his best to imitate Parno’s relaxed tone. "Bad, but the looting hasn’t started."

Dhulyn dragged her eyes away from them and addressed her Senior Brother. "What news?"

The older man shook his head. "Worse than I would have expected, given the time," he said. As quiet as his voice was, everyone in the room stopped to listen. "There were people inside before we could get the gates shut, and the Dome is full of House soldiers." Alkoryn caught Dhulyn’s eye. "Not just Tenebro either. It seems Lok-iKol has allies in the other Houses. I saw the colors of both Jarifo and Esmolo. The Carnelian Guard is scattered; half of them think the Tarkin is dead." His disgust at poorly managed security was evident. "As for the Tarkin’s Personal Guard," he shrugged.

"How could this happen?" Parno said. "Where is the rest of the Dome’s Guard?"

Dhulyn found it more than interesting that such was Parno’s natural tone of command the Guard Captain answered without questioning Parno’s authority to ask.

"The Carnelian Guard is out in the city, helping to quell the rioting in the merchant quarter."

"Making obvious the purpose of the rioting," Dhulyn observed under her breath.

"The discontented have always dispersed in a very orderly way upon the arrival of the Carnelian Guard."

"Of course they have, Din-eDin." The Tarkin’s even voice silenced everyone. "Making us all the readier to send the Guard out tonight." The Tarkin drew back his gaze from the distance.

"How many do we have?"

"No more than fifty at the most, my lord," he said, looking up from the strip of cloth he was using on his wounded guard, strapping the woman’s arm immobile. "But they are scattered through the Dome and some do not know you still live. With us now, a dozen of your Personal Guard, no more."

He caught the look that passed between the Mercenary Brothers.

"Our security was not lax!" he said, straightening to his feet. "We’re a Personal Guard, not an army. As recently as this morning, all was at peace."

"The Sleeping God?" Dhulyn murmured.

"Think you’re funny?" Parno said under his breath.

"What do you know, Dhulyn Wolfshead?" Alkoryn said.

Dhulyn gave a pointed glance at the number of people in the room, and waited to speak until she saw her Senior Brother’s face change in acknowledgment of her point that this was neither the time nor place to speak of her secret. "This isn’t a simple coup on the part of an ambitious House, and we all know it," she said. "This fire has the Jaldeans for fuel. And whatever it is that stands behind them, pushing them forward."

"Your security was not lax," she told him. "You did not know you were at war. Neither your men, nor your preparations, took the followers of the New Believers into account."

"My Brother’s right, Tek-aKet. Even had you believed her immediately, our warning may have come too late to do more than save your life. The Carnelian Throne we cannot save, not tonight at any rate. Once you’re upon it again, that will be the time for us to talk about what the duties of the Tarkin’s guards should be."

Dhulyn did not trouble to hide her grin. The look on the Guard Captain’s face as he looked openmouthed from Alkoryn to the Tarkin and back again was almost worth the trouble that brought them together. She’d wager her
second-best sword—or she would if she knew where it was—that the man had never heard anyone speak to the Tarkin that way before. Let alone use the man’s name without his title attached.

“How steadfast are your men, Din-e-Din?” Alkoryn asked.

The Tarkin’s raised hand stopped Din-e-Din from answering.

“Perhaps that, too, is a question to be answered later, since there is only one way to test it.” Was it possible that the man was smiling? “I am open to suggestions for present action.”

“A strategic retreat, my lord,” Alkoryn said. “Get the Tarkina and yourself to a safe place, and regroup.”

At that moment a disturbance came at the door as the guards let in another man wearing their dark red uniform. He was panting, his hair stuck to his forehead with sweat, but the blood on his clothes was evidently not his own.

“My lords,” the man spat out as soon as he had gathered breath. “They draw nearer. We will be cut off if we do not move.”

“Nonsense,” Din-e-Din said. “We can hold these rooms indefinitely until relief comes.”

“And from where is this relief to come?” Dhulyn’s voice rang out, in stark contrast to Alkoryn’s thin whisper.

In the silence that followed, Dhulyn leaned back against a table and crossed her arms, watching indecision fight its way across the Tarkin’s face. It hurt his pride, she could tell, to abandon his palace, his throne. His jaw firmed, and Dhulyn raised her eyebrows. He would make the grand gesture then, make his stand and die, here and now. She was wondering where their weapons had been taken when the Tarkin’s face softened.

“We will run,” he said, “and see what the future brings us.” He looked around him. “But how can we leave the Dome without bringing our enemies with us?”

Dhulyn shrugged and relaxed into immobility once more, exchanging glances with her Brothers. She saw the same thing on their faces as she knew to be on hers. They would die here or somewhere else; today or on a day to come. They were Mercenaries.

Not that they were in any hurry, she grinned as Parno winked at her. She’d just as soon escape as die trying.

“Captain Din-e-Din.” Alkoryn was now very careful to observe the formalities. “Are there enemies between us and the old keep where the summer kitchens once were?”

The Guard Captain was shaking his head, his mouth twisted in thought. “There may be a few, but most are coming in from the front and western gates. They’re in the Throne room, and the Tarkin’s suite of rooms behind it. They’ll seek to isolate us here, but they’d have no reason to go into the old keep. There’s nothing but offices and work-rooms there now.”

“Then there is a way to leave the Dome unseen. But we must spend some of your men to keep your enemies from following.”

The Tarkin grimaced, his handsome face a twisted mask. “How many?”

“You may spend as many as you like,” Din-e-Din said. “That is what we are for.”

“You know your men,” Alkoryn said to the Guard Captain. “You tell me how many we’ll need. There are three points that should be held. Let men stand at the two staircases, the Coral and the Ruby, that lead down to the old summer kitchens. Let them hold as long as they may, and then fall back to the intersection where the old serving corridor meets the Onyx Walk. That is the final point. If that is held long enough, we’ll be able to get away. But,” he looked Din-e-Din in the eye, “if we are hard-pressed, the men who hold that point will not escape with us. They must stand.”

The Guard Captain stopped nodding. “There’s no escape through the old kitchens.”

“And as long as everyone believes that, we’ll be safe.” Alkoryn said.

“What do you know, old man?” The Tarkin had some hope on his face.

“Enough to get us out of here safely.”

Din-e-Din shook his head, “They will know where we went.”

Alkoryn bared his teeth. “They will know where, perhaps, but unless we have no luck at all, they will not know how.”

“Jay.” Din-e-Din turned to a young dark-haired man. “Take two men and hold the Ruby Staircase. Taryn, it’s the Coral Stairs for you and two others. Send anyone of ours you see, any you know to be with us, to the old kitchens. You know your orders.”

It was not a question, but the dark-haired guard answered. “Hold our positions as long as we can. Do we fall back, Captain, or would you prefer us to die at our stations?”
He was grinning, but Dhulyn could tell from the set of his jaw that his question was meant seriously.

“Why don’t you improvise, man?” Din-e-Din said with a grin of his own that was answered by all the guards. “The rest of you are with us. Stay with the Tarkin, no matter what passes. After we reach the Onyx Walk, you’ll take your orders from Alkoryn the Charter until you’re free of the Dome, and then from the Tarkin himself.”

“Dhulyn Wolfshead will be my voice,” came the harsh whisper of the old Mercenary. “Listen for her.”

The guards nodded, some of them studying the Mercenary woman covertly. A few looked as though they would have felt better if Alkoryn had said Parno was to be his second, not, she knew, because she was a woman, but because she was so obviously an Outlander.

The Tarkin had not moved. He was still leaning against his worktable, arms folded across his chest, frowning down at the spot where his dog should have been lying.

“My lord,” Din-e-Din said.

The Tarkin blinked and stood up straight. “Zelianora and the children.”

Dhulyn glanced at Alkoryn and waited to speak until he’d nodded.

“Tell us the way, and if you’ve arms for us, Parno, Hernyn, and I will go for the Tarkina,” she said, “and meet you by the Ruby Stairs.” Or even if you don’t have arms, she refrained from saying out loud. Guard Captain Din-e-Din no doubt felt inadequate enough.

Fanryn Bloodhand stepped off the last of the twisted narrow flight of treads cut into the rock deep under Mercenary House and felt her eyebrows rise and her mouth form an “oh” as her lantern illuminated what Alkoryn had called the lower chamber. A grunt reminded her she wasn’t alone and she moved forward out of Thionan Hawkmoon’s way.

“Well,” Thionan said after a minute of staring about her. “Big enough, isn’t it?”

Fanryn nodded. The chamber was a good four spans long, partly natural, and partly cut out of the rock, with beds for at least twenty and space for twenty more.

Holding her lantern higher, Thionan moved deeper into the room. “There’s bedding,” she said, “and the air’s fresh enough. Cold, though.”

“We’ll send one of the youngsters down to start a fire,” Fanryn said, indicating the iron stove along the right-hand wall and the pile of neatly cut logs stacked next to it. “Make sure everything is warm and dry.”

“What is it?” her Partner said, as Fanryn stood still near the bottom of the stairway.

Fanryn shrugged. “I didn’t like sending Hernyn off again like that. One of us should have gone.”

“And spoil the fun of his first real danger? Go on, he wouldn’t have thanked us. And besides,” Thionan said, putting her arm around Fanryn’s waist. “Our orders were to hold the House.”

Fanryn nodded, doing her best to smile. “And with luck, Hernyn’ll come back with whoever it is Alkoryn wants this room made ready for.”

“There you go,” Thionan said, giving her Partner a squeeze. “Let’s get out of here, it’s too blooded cold.”

“Parno, my soul,” she said in the voice one used on nightwatch, the voice that didn’t carry. “What happened to that purse of money the old Tenebroso gave us?”

“Gone when I woke up in the cell with our Brothers.”

“Another thing that one-eyed piece of inglera dung owes us,” she muttered under her breath.

They had advanced as far as the end of the final dressed-stone corridor that led away from the Old Tower, and had turned into a wider, wood-paneled hallway when they heard the soft tramp of careful feet, offset by the muted jingle of soldiers’ harness. The Mercenaries slowed, if possible becoming even more silent than they had been before.

Parno raised his brows at her. “For or against?” he asked in the nightwatch murmur.

“Against,” she answered.

“How do you know?” Hernyn said.

Parno shut his eyes and shook his head slightly, but Dhulyn answered. “Their footsteps are hesitant. If they were on our side, they’d know where they were going. Since not for us, against us.”

“They’re closer,” Parno said.
Dhulyn looked around quickly. The hallway was a long one, and they had come too far down it to be sure of getting back to the cross corridor without being seen. And, unlike Tenebro House, there were no hiding places in the hallway itself—the original designer had seen to that, and the later inhabitants had been careful not to disturb it.

“Dhulyn.” She’d known Parno long enough to hear the impatience in his voice.

“Fine. We kill them.”

“I don’t understand,” Hernyn said, stepping into the lead at Dhulyn’s gesture. Dhulyn merely shook her head.

“She doesn’t like to kill people,” Parno said. Hernyn looked at Dhulyn and back at Parno. “It’s an Outlander thing,” Parno added, shrugging.

“Advance,” Dhulyn said, pulling the dagger from her boot. “Or we lose the element of surprise.”

Not that they needed it, she thought moments later. They reached the end of the wide hallway just as their quarry rounded the corner. That they did so without either looking first or sending a man ahead was testament to their carelessness. Hernyn spitted the first one on his sword as quick as breathing, and had the sword out and killed the next man while the first body was still slumping to the floor. Parno kicked the feet out from under a tall, thin man who obviously thought he had the reach on everyone, gutting him with his left-hand short sword as the man went down, while blocking another blow with the short sword in his right hand. The fifth man turned to run, and with a call to warn her Brothers, Dhulyn threw the jeweled dagger and caught the runaway squarely under the left shoulder blade as Parno pulled his sword from the fourth man.

Dhulyn stepped around the bodies and blood on the floor, grasped the jeweled hilt, and pulled the dagger free.

“Thows well, too,” she said, wiping the blade clean on the dead man’s shirt.

“Look what I have.” The dead soldiers had all been wearing badges in the Tenebro colors of black, teal, and dark red pinned to their chests. Hernyn had removed them. “We can wear them as a disguise.”

Dhulyn leaned forward and picked one out of his hand. “This one has blood on it.”

They had not progressed much farther when noises came from behind them. Parno twisted around to listen more carefully, holding up his hand for Dhulyn and Hernyn to be still.

“We’re between them and the Tarkina’s rooms,” he said. “But they sound like they’re coming this way.” He lowered his hand. “Dhulyn? You’re Senior.”

“You wait here for them. Join us if you can. If not, we’ll be back for you.”

“My Brother, I could stay.”

Parno caught Dhulyn’s eye but should have known better; of course she’d seen what he’d seen. The nervous half smile that appeared on Hernyn’s face whenever he stopped controlling his features. Those two Tenebro soldiers could very well be the first people he’d killed since his Schooling had finished. The boy had done well, and he knew it, but was trying to be as offhand about it as his Senior Brothers. Since he was paying more attention to his attitude than his job, this was not the time to put Hernyn in charge of their rear guard.

“My Brother,” Dhulyn said with command in her tone. “This is not your time.” Parno caught her eye and winked.

“In Battle,” he said.

“Or in Death,” they responded as they trotted down the hall toward the Tarkina’s rooms. Parno adjusted the badge pinned to the front of his tunic and stood, feet shoulder width apart, knees slightly bent, shoulders relaxed, swords held out from his body. He released all the breath from his lungs and breathed in, consciously beginning the rhythms of the Eagle Shora. His heartbeat slowed, sounds became clearer, the light brightened.

The first man into the hallway was Dal-eDal Tenebro.

Parno felt his lips peel back from his teeth. The blond man motioned his fellows to wait, stepped forward himself to striking distance and stopped, but Parno wasn’t stupid enough to move. He was already in the best spot to stop them from advancing, close enough to the corner to crowd them as they came around, far enough from the other end to give him room to fall back.

Dal’s eyes flicked to the badge on Parno’s chest.

“We’ve engaged no Mercenary Brothers to fight for us,” Dal said.

“Do all your allies know? Because once I’ve killed you, you won’t be telling anyone else.”

“I would tell you something, Mercenary,” Dal-eDal said, with a noticeable pause before the last word.

“And what might that be? If I recall correctly, the last thing you told me was a lie.”

“This is not. You might wish to know that your Household fell almost two years ago. The Lady Pen-uPen is Householder now.”
Parno managed to stop himself from lowering his sword, but his heart rate did speed up. His father was gone, then. But his sister had been allowed to inherit. He shook his head. “Who do you think you’re speaking to?”

“My cousin, Par-iPar Tenebro. I didn’t remember you at first, but the only time I was here in Gotterang with my father, you were here as well, and you helped me with my pony. My father liked you.”

“The man you speak of was Cast Out,” Parno said, gratified that his voice was steady. “I am Parno Lionsmane the Chanter, I fight with my Brother, Dhulyn Wolfshead.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, man. You’re closer to the main line than I. If Lok-iKol dies, you would be Tenebroso.”

“And Tarkin, too, I suppose?”

Dal shook his head. “With Lok gone, no need for Tek-aKet to die. And the man has children to inherit, besides.” Dal sheathed his own sword and took a half step forward. For a moment Parno saw, not the tormented, torn man Dal had become, but the laughing child he’d once put on a pony. “Think about all you give up!”

This time Parno did lower his sword. Dal wasn’t going to hurt him. Not here anyway, maybe not ever, if he thought there was a chance that Parno would step back into the life he’d left. The life I was Cast Out of.

He shrugged one shoulder. When he’d talked of this to Dhulyn—was it only hours ago?—he had no way of knowing such a temptation would come his way. His sister would keep the Household; he’d be taking nothing from her. He thought of his mother, still alive. He could place House Tenebro and all its power behind Tek-aKet and defeat the Jaldeans. His thoughts faltered as he remembered the green shadow that looked from men’s eyes. What power would they need to defeat that?

He thought then of his Schooling, of the feeling in his stomach on the morning of a battle; of the smell of spring as he rode his horse down from the mountains; of the air of a foreign country filled his lungs. Of the look on Dhulyn’s face when she turned over the right Vera tile. Of her husky voice singing while he played the pipes. Of the smile she smiled only for him. He thought of the years on the road together since Arcosa. In Battle or in Death.

“You have no idea what I’d be giving up,” he said finally.

“Locked and barred,” he said. Dhulyn rolled her eyes. “And there is no light that I can see.”

“I doubt she’d bar the doors if the rooms were empty.” Dhulyn took her Brother firmly by the sleeve and pulled him to one side. She gave the door three sharp blows with the side of her fist and called out. “Tarkina! It’s Dhulyn Wolfshead. Let us in.”

There was a thump, and a small bang on the far side of the door as the bar was removed and laid to one side. The door cracked open and a woman’s hand beckoned them in. Dhulyn wasted no time entering, and she and Hernyn made short work of rebarring the door. It was good stout work, she saw with satisfaction, the insets for the bar not merely attached to, but part of the structure of the walls. They were as safe as could be—short of treachery or starvation.

Dhulyn almost didn’t recognize the woman who’d let them in. Gone were the Tarkina’s veils, and her palace gown with its fluttering sleeves. In its place Zelianora wore the loose trousers, long-sleeved blouse, tight vest, and short boots of her own desert people. An older woman, similarly dressed, stood at the doorway across the drawing room with a curved knife in her hand. Her surprise must have shown on her face, because Zelianora Tarkina took one look at her and smiled.

“Denoea saw strange soldiers in the courtyard,” she said, “and what with the noises . . .”

Strange soldiers? Dhulyn said to the older woman.

The nurse Denoea cleared her throat and gestured to the arrow niche that served this drawing room for a window. “They wear Tenebro color.” Her accent was the same as the Tarkina’s, but her words more hesitant.

“For them to be in that courtyard, someone had to let them in,” the Tarkina said, sinking into a nearby chair. “One of my husband’s people.”

“Not necessarily.” Hernyn spoke from the doorway to the suite of rooms. “The Tenebros were Tarkins not so long ago. They might know a way in that doesn’t rely on treachery.”

Dhulyn snorted, then rolled her eyes as everyone turned to her. Youngsters. “Say what you like, my Brother, but treachery’s the simpler answer and you know it.”

“I was trying to spare the Tarkina suspicions of her own household,” Hernyn said shyly.

“Please don’t.” The Tarkina stood up. “I may not be a Mercenary, young man, but I prefer not to be told that the wolf at the door is only a pet dog. We must go at once to my husband.”

“It’s under his orders that we’re here, Tarkina.” Dhulyn eyed the other woman’s clothing. “You’re Berdanan,
aren’t you, Lady? As you’ve been Tarkina of Imrion for several years, I must ask, do you still keep your travel packs ready?”

“I was Berdan long before I became Tarkina of Imrion, Dhulyn Wolfshead; our packs are in the bedroom.”

“Get them, then, and we will go.”

The Tarkina spoke softly to the nurse in her own tongue and Denobea ran into the other room, coming out so quickly with two well-balanced travel packs that Dhulyn assumed they must have been taken out of their storage place already. Following her, eyes big in faces too serious for their ages, were a slim girl of perhaps nine, leading a toddler still chubby with baby fat.

“I will carry my son,” Zelianora Tarkina said, picking up a wide shawl of heavy linen and wrapping it around her upper body with practiced ease, tying it to form a sling across her chest. She held out her arms and the small boy let go of his sister’s hand and ran to her. “With the pack on my back, my weight will be even.”

For an instant Dhulyn flashed to the memory of warm wrappings supporting her own legs and back, and the smell of leather and spicy sweat that was her father. She blinked and breathed deeply.

“The little one looks to be asleep, already,” Dhulyn said, a question clearly in her voice.

“I gave Zak valerian, a safe dose,” the Tarkina said. “It seemed the best way to keep him quiet.”

“And what about this lady?” Dhulyn looked down at the nine-year-old girl who looked back at her with the Tarkin’s firm jaw and blue eyes, but her mother’s steadfast gaze.

“This is our daughter, Bet-oTeb,” the Tarkina answered.

“The Tarkin-to-be.” Dhulyn bowed to the child.

“Exactly,” the child said in a soft, clear voice that only wavered the slightest bit.

“Are you armed, Lady?” Dhulyn said, doing her best not to smile.

For answer, the child drew a knife long enough to be sword-sized for her out of a stiff sheath at her waist.

“And do you know how to use it, Tarkin-to-be?”

“I’ve trained with the Personal Guard since I was six,” the child said.

“Then, if it please you, Lady, you shall walk by your mother, and help to keep your sibling alive.”

The child nodded. “It pleases me.”

Dhulyn bowed again.

Hernyn coughed from his post by the barred door. “Someone comes.”

“I’m getting tired of this.” Dhulyn drew her sword and motioned the Tarkina back toward the inner rooms.

“Dhulyn, my heart.” The voice was unmistakable, even through the door.

“Parno,” Hernyn said, sheathing his sword and helping Dhulyn with the bar on the door. Parno for certain, she thought, but something had happened. His voice sounded thick, as if he were about to start a cold.

“Someone could be forcing him,” the Tarkina said.

Dhulyn looked back over her shoulder. “No,” she said. “Someone couldn’t.”

Parno came into the room out of breath, and startled Dhulyn by taking her immediately in his arms.

“My soul,” she said, with the little breath he left her. “The enemy.”

He let her go, whirled to face the door, and drew his right-hand sword all in one movement.

“Not just now,” Dhulyn said, “but at any moment.” She turned back into the room. “Lady Bet-oTeb, Nurse Denobea, my Partner, Parno Lionsmane the Chanter.”

“Ladies.” Parno gave his best bow and accepted the young Tarkin-to-be’s acknowledgment. “Do you know the fastest way to the Onyx Walk?”

“The Tarkin has gone ahead with Alkoryn Pantherclaw,” he told them, as they reached the opening of the service corridor. “You are to join him immediately, Lady Tarkina. He will send back the volunteers for this spot.”

“No need for them, I’ll stand with you.” Every head in the corridor, even that of little Bet-oTeb, turned to look at Hernyn.

“Demons and perverts, Hernyn. There’s no need.” Parno grasped the younger man’s arm. “Dhulyn, tell him there’s no need.”

Dhulyn looked at Hernyn but waited, knowing the young man had to speak. For the first time since they’d made it to safety after their escape from Tenebro House, he met her eyes squarely, and held them. His glance didn’t fall
away in embarrassment after a few blinks. She saw strength there now, courage and resolve. It seemed what was left of the School boy had faded away, and Dhulyn saw the man, her true Brother.

“It’s for me to do,” Hernyn said. “Not for your sake, my Brother, for my own.”

Dhulyn clasped Hernyn’s hands in a firm grip. “Captain Din-eDin, if my Brother, Hernyn Greystone, called the Shield, will stay,” she said, still holding Hernyn’s eyes with her own, “you will need no others.”

Hernyn nodded, once down, once up, taking her words as they were meant, as a blessing.

“I welcome the Shield’s assistance,” Din-eDin said. He turned to the Tarkina. “You will be safe with these Brothers, my lady, and the Lord Tarkin.”

“Din-eDin, I thank you.”

“There is no need, my lady, but you are welcome.”

The Tarkina stepped forward from her spot between Parno and the nurse Denobea and kissed both Din-eDin and Hernyn Greystone the Shield on the cheek. The child, Bet-oTeb stepped out also, though not before the nurse made a move to stop her. She gave one hand to each of the two men.

“Thank you,” she said, her child’s voice ringing softly against the cold stone. “Thank you for my life.”

Oh, yes, Dhulyn thought as the two warriors—Mercenary and Guard—blushed and ducked their heads to the child before them. She’ll be Tarkin one day, and people will fall over themselves to follow her.

Fifteen

A WOMAN USING the public fountain at the east end of the Old Market had taken pity on him and given Gun a clay pitcher with a cracked lip to take water away in. Though he’d known better than to try paying her—he hadn’t completely forgotten being Gundy the horse boy—he had still tried to give her something in return.

“Keep your scarf, youngster,” she’d said to him, though Gun was fairly certain the woman wasn’t that much older than he was. Poor nutrition during childbearing would account for more of her lost teeth than age—obviously she didn’t come from the part of society who normally had access to Healers. Not that anyone did now.

“You’ll need all you have an’ more, I should think,” the woman added, eyeing him up and down and appeared to make up her mind about him, for she went on in a quieter voice.

“Don’t take this amiss, boy, but have you any other clothes? Rumor on the street says they’re looking for a Scholar, something to do with the Fall of Tenebro House what happened last night. There’s a reward offered an’ all. I’m not saying you’re the one they’re looking for, but you stick out, boy, that’s a fact, and if you don’t want to be answering questions, you’ll try to look less like what you are.”

“But I—” Shock stopped Gun’s voice. Looking for him because of the Fall of the House? Water began to dribble from the pitcher as his hand relaxed.

“Watch it, boy, watch it. No need to waste water.” The woman propped up his elbow with her strong fingers. “I’m not asking any questions myself, mind, just passing along a bit of advice. If you’ve no other clothes, go down to old Semplon-Nast, south corner, the rag and bone man. Tell him Nessa sent you, and he’ll give you good trade for what you’re wearing.”

“Three reasons. One, I sent you; two, he’s got no love for the Noble Houses and won’t care if one’s Fallen; an’ three, he’s blind. He can’t see a Scholar, but he can feel the quality of the cloth you’re wearing.”

Gun unwound his scarf and held it out to her. “Not for the water,” he said. “For the warning, and the advice.” This time she nodded once and took it.

Still, he waited until she had gone on her way before taking a firm grip on the clay jug of water and starting back
to where he’d left Mar. He was careful to take a different route from the one he’d come by.

This was the middle one of our three fireplaces in the old summer kitchen, and though Alkoryn Pantherclaw had known perfectly well which of the three was wanted, he’d insisted that all of them be emptied of their contents.

“We hope to mislead those who’ll come after,” Alkoryn had whispered to the Tarkin. “If they do not know which of these holds the passage, they will have to break into all three. They may even think we escaped elsewhere.”

One of the guards had dropped a cask during the moving, shattering it on the worn stone floor, and now the heady smell of aged liquor mixed with the dry dust smell of the old kitchen itself made Dhulyn’s stomach lurch. She swallowed, looking for something to distract her. The Tarkin, Tek-aKet, was only a few paces away, half-sitting on an upright cask, his right arm around the Tarkina, his left hand resting on his daughter’s shoulder.

“Look, Zella,” he was saying, pointing with his chin to several barrels that had been rolled to one side. “That sweet wine was laid down by my father when I was born.” He looked up at her again. “We should have been able to drink it next year.”

“We still shall,” she said, in a voice so firm that even her little daughter nodded.

Dhulyn straightened as Alkoryn stepped back from the fireplace wall and motioned Parno forward. The Senior Brother indicated five particular stones, waited for Parno to nod, and then touched them again in a different order. Parno nodded again, rubbed his upper lip with the first two fingers of his right hand, and touched the stones himself.

“Tap there, my Brother, but gently. Say that you wanted to knock out a sentry, rather than kill him.”

Parno nodded, and hefted the war hammer.

“Want me to do it?” Dhulyn said.

Parno just showed his teeth as he swung the weapon forward and lightly but firmly tapped the stones in the order he’d been shown.

With a grinding Dhulyn felt in her bones, a section of wall moved backward. Two of the guardsmen helped Parno push it aside to reveal a long tunnel. Alkoryn caught Dhulyn’s eye and nodded.

“Lord Tarkin,” she called over her shoulder. “We’re ready. Alkoryn Pantherclaw will go first, seeing he knows the way.” Dhulyn tapped the shoulder of a tall guard with thick black hair. “Kole, isn’t it? Go with him. Then you three,” she said, nodding at the remaining guards. “Lord Tarkin, you and your family next, and Parno Lionsmane and I will come last.”

The Tarkin was nodding, but his mouth was twisted as if he’d eaten something unpleasant. “I don’t want to seem ungrateful,” he said. “But I cannot honestly say I’m pleased that the Mercenary Brotherhood knows of secret passageways in my Dome.”

Dhulyn shrugged. “It was someone else’s Dome before you, Lord, and the Brotherhood is older even than the Dome, older than the reign of Tarkins. Older than Imrion, if it comes to that. There’s many things we know.”

Hernyn wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and resisted the desire to spit. Then he thought about where he was, and how long he was likely to be there, and spit freely on the inlaid tesserae of the Onyx Walk. He heard an unmistakable clatter in the distance, and looked to Din-eDin, who nodded his acknowledgment that he, too, had heard the approaching noise.

“Won’t be long now,” the older man said.

It was Hernyn’s turn to nod. When they’d first taken up their station an arm’s length down from where the narrow service corridor met the Onyx Walk, they’d heard the sounds of voices and what seemed like moving furniture echoing up the long hallway from the old kitchen, but now, while they could still hear voices, the louder noises had stopped.

A shadow moved into their field of vision. Hernyn glanced at the extra weapons he’d lined up behind him on the floor of the passage and picked up a handheld crossbow he’d found among the Tarkin’s things. A toy, really, and he’d blushed when he saw that Dhulyn Wolveshead had seen him pick it up. But she hadn’t said anything, she hadn’t even smiled. It was a beautiful little piece, finely constructed out of ash wood and inlaid with mother-of-pearl, and probably intended for ceremonial use. And deadly just the same, he thought. Not very good for distances, of course, but he was willing to let the man approaching get close enough.

“Hold.” Din-eDin put up his hand; he’d squatted down to take a quick look about waist height around the corner of the wall, and was now straightening. “He’s one of mine.”

The Guard Captain was stepping forward to meet his man when Hernyn put out his arm, blocking his advance.

“Don’t step into the Walk,” he said. “Not for any reason. That’s how we get flanked. Make them come to us.” A
part of Hernyn felt like a School boy reciting his lesson, as if Din-eDin had been only testing him; a part was embarrassed to have to correct an older, more experienced man; a part—and this by far the largest, was rolling his eyes at the carelessness of those who were not Mercenary Brothers.

He leaned against the cold stone of the left-hand wall and angled his head until he could see the approaching man clearly. He was in the uniform of the Tarkin’s Personal Guard, right enough. But why wasn’t he running? The only reason for the men at the other points to come down here was to fall back to this position when their own was overwhelmed—and if they were quick enough, to get out through the tunnels Alkoryn had said were there. And this man didn’t move like someone who’d been overwhelmed. He moved like someone taking a walk—or no, amended Hernyn as the man stumbled and put out a hand to the plastered wall of the Onyx Walk. He walked like a man who was drunk and determined not to show it.

Drunk . . . or wounded?

“Are you hurt, man?” Hernyn called out.

The approaching guard shook his head, but kept advancing at that strange, overly-careful pace. As if he pushed against a stiff wind, though no air stirred in the halls.

“Ask him where the others are,” Din-eDin said. Hernyn flicked his eyes to the older man. There was sense in that, at least.

“Do your comrades still stand?”

“Let me pass,” the guard said.

Hernyn resisted the urge to rub the back of his neck, where it felt like all the tiny hairs were standing up. There was no urgency in the man’s tone, no fear, no excitement. Nothing, in fact. And surely his shadow should be angled the other way?

“That’s Ennick,” Din-eDin said.

“No,” Hernyn said. “I don’t think it is.”

The guard Ennick was now close enough that they could see his face clearly in the light from the wall sconce near the intersection in which they stood. Hernyn could see the man had the most beautiful jade-green eyes.

“Let me pass,” he said again. He had been looking beyond them, down to the far end of the Onyx Walk, but now he brought his gaze to bear upon them. “Let me pass.”

“He’s in shock.” Din-eDin pushed Hernyn’s restraining arm out of the way and stepped into the Onyx Walk.

Ennick brought up his sword and slashed at his captain, catching him on the arm as Din-eDin lifted it to block the blow to his head.

Hernyn raised the crossbow and let the bolt fly, feeling a hot burst of satisfaction when the bolt buried itself in the guard’s neck. The man put his hand up to the bolt and stood swaying for a moment before he dropped to his knees.

“Captain?” he said.

Hernyn broke his own rule and stepped into the corridor to help Din-eDin pull the other guard back into the relative safety of the narrow kitchen passage. They shifted him until he was sitting with his back to the wall. The bolt was plugging the hole in his neck, but turning his head to look at them started the blood flowing in earnest.

But he was looking at them now, and the strange, staring green of his eyes was gone. His eyes were very dark brown.

“Ennick?” Din-eDin said.

“Captain,” he said again. “Don’t—” He coughed, and a bubble of blood broke on his lips. “Don’t.”

“No fear, my boy,” the captain said. “We won’t.”

Ennick nodded, and his eyes closed.

“What was that?” Din-eDin frowned down at the body of his guard.

“Whatever it was,” Hernyn said, “it means we can’t trust anyone else who comes down this corridor.”

Din-eDin shut his eyes. “Makes things easier for us.”

“It does at that.” Hernyn glanced up at the older man. His jaw was set, and his eyes sharp, but the wound on his arm was bleeding. Hernyn quickly tore two strips of cloth from the dead man’s tunic. One he folded, and used the other to tie it securely in place over the gash on Din-eDin’s arm.

“Can you handle a sword left-handed?”

“As it happens.”

“Better to be lucky than good, isn’t that what they say?” Hernyn bent to strip Ennick’s body of weapons before
rolling it back out into the wider corridor. “Let him be useful in tripping up the rest of his companions.” Hernyn glanced behind him. Amplified by the stone corridor, the voices of those in the kitchen echoed in the air around him. He was sure he’d heard Dhulyn Wolfshead’s ringing tone.

“This changes things,” Din-eDin said. “We can’t let anyone past us now.”

“That’s not all,” Hernyn said. “We’ve more to worry about as well.”

The man glanced from the corner of his eye. “Explain.”

Hernyn nodded at Ennick’s body. “It looks like there’s worse than death might come to us. Did you see how his eyes were glowing green? That wasn’t just Ennick, not at first anyway.”

The other man tapped the dagger he had at his waist. “We’ll have to be sure, then, won’t we?” His eyes narrowed.

“Can we warn the others?”

But then they finally heard the sounds they’d been waiting for, rushing feet, jingling harness. Men who weren’t taking the trouble to be quiet. Din-eDin stepped in front of Hernyn. Hernyn was about to say something when he realized the man was right for once. Older, injured, and not a Mercenary. Three reasons to put him in front.

“Here they come,” Hernyn called back over his shoulder, hoping the amplification of sound in the service corridor worked both ways. Before picking up his second sword, he checked that he had a dagger in each boot, and that the one strapped to his left arm wouldn’t stick in the sheath. He stood squarely in the passage with the Guard Captain in front of him, facing the opening to the Onyx Walk, and lightly tapped the walls with his swords, fixing the space well in his mind.

He would rather have died with his Brothers, but if he could die for them, well, that would be enough.

“Should we wait?” Parno asked.

One of the many cords that bound her hair must have broken, for a fine blood-red braid fell over Dhulyn’s forehead with the minute shaking of her head. She pushed it back.

“We told Din-eDin we would close the passage,” she said.

Maybe if she ignored it, the yelling would stop and she could go back to sleep. They’d spent more than half of the night hiding in a crawl space Gundaron had found, under a surprisingly intact floor of thick oak planks, but they hadn’t had much sleep. Trying to get comfortable on ground made uneven by loose foundation rocks and ancient garbage, with nerves stretched to the snapping point by the drizzly rain and the knowledge that they were being accused of having a hand in the Fall of Tenebro House, would have been difficult enough. As it was, the night had been marred by the noises of screams and running. A fire had broken out in the Old Market itself, and it had been close to dawn by the time she and Gundaron had been able to fall into sleep.

“Mar!” A hand shook her shoulder.

She cracked open one eye. From the look of the light that slanted down through the breaks in the old floorboards above them, the sun was well up.

“Did you hear what he said?” Gundaron shook her shoulder again. “Mar, did you hear?”

Without waiting for her answer, Gun crawled out of their hidey-hole. Still blinking sleep from her eyes, Mar followed, afraid to lose sight of him. Lionsmane and Wolfshead had been teaching her to navigate out on the trail, but in Gotterang she felt it would be all too easy to get completely lost.

Mar had a moment of panic when she didn’t see Gun right away, but then she remembered he no longer wore his Scholar’s tunic and, looking for the gray-brown of homespun rather than the bright blue of the Libraries, she spotted him. Gun stood on the fringes of a group gathered around a thickset man in breeches, boots, and a full-sleeved shirt who must have been standing on a broken bit of wall, as he was head and shoulders above the crowd. She blinked at him, holding up her hand to shield her eyes. Ran the taproom down by the fountain, she thought. That’s where she knew him from. She’d bought food from there last night.

“Imrion’s Fallen, I’m telling you that’s certain, they’re crying it in the Great Square. Lok-iKol Tenebro is Tarkin by acclamation.”

The taproom keeper had plenty more to say, but Mar had stopped listening. She tugged Gun by the sleeve.

“Gundaron,” she whispered, tugging again until he turned to look at her.

For a moment the sight of her face stopped Gundaron’s breath. A wisp of hair had fallen out of her head scarf and swayed over her right cheek. In the vivid depths of her blue eyes, her pupils shrunk to pinpoints as she blinked in the morning sun.
“Is this what I helped him do,” she said. “Bringing him Wolfshead and Lionsmane? He wanted to be Tarkin? That’s what this is all about?”

His thoughts spinning, Gun followed Mar back into their hiding place. She was right, wasn’t she? Lok-iKol was Tarkin. The things that he had done, the people he had harmed, all that research, not for scholarship—Gun’s stomach turned at the thought of his own naïveté—but to put Lok-iKol on the Carnelian Throne.

Mar was still waiting for an answer. He swallowed, mouth suddenly dry. “There must be more to it than that.” He blinked, eyes narrowing as he followed the pattern of his thoughts to its logical conclusion. “The Carnelian Throne’s what Lok-iKol wanted—but not what the Jaldeans want.”

“But if the New Believers want the Tarkin’s full backing . . .”

Gun realized he was shaking his head. “But what they’re saying about the Marked and the Sleeping God—that the god should stay asleep and the Marked are trying to wake him—none of that is true.”

“I never thought it was, but—”

“No, no. I mean they don’t believe it themselves, at least, not the ones in charge, not Beslyn-Tor. There’s something else going on.” Gun hoped Mar wouldn’t ask how he knew—in fact, he was afraid to examine the knowledge too closely, afraid that it might be yet another thing the Green Shadow had helped him forget.

“If the Jaldeans have some other trouble in mind,” Mar was saying, “we have to tell someone.”

Gun nodded. “Who?”

“Come on,” Mar said, swinging her pack up on to her shoulder.

“Where?” Gun drew himself straight and formed his hands into fists when they wouldn’t stop trembling.

“Mercenary House.”

“Something up ahead,” he said to Dhulyn’s back. She was just enough shorter, he’d noticed with disgust, to walk upright through most of the passages.

“Lamplight, not torches,” she whispered back to him. “Alkoryn’s not stopping.”

Which meant the old man expected to find lights ahead of him, which meant there was nothing for the two of them to worry about. Except whether he’d ever be able to stand upright again, Parno thought.

Exhausted as they all were from close to two hours of walking from one sealed entrance to another, everyone managed a short burst of speed once it became clear there was nothing besides more tunnel ahead of them. When Parno finally followed them all into the lamplit room, however, he saw that they were still underground, although in a chamber large enough—with a ceiling high enough, he found, straightening gratefully—to accommodate all of them easily.

The Tarkin led his wife and children immediately to the nearest beds, making sure they were seated comfortably before leaving them in the hands of the nurse Denobea and joining Dhulyn, who had stepped around them and the guards to stand beside Alkoryn. Head lowered and tilted to one side, she listened to his whispered orders, nodding, though at one point her face went completely blank.

Something she doesn’t like there, Parno thought, maintaining his position as rear guard just inside the entrance to the chamber. With his eyes still on his Partner, he arched his back and raised his hands over his head, willing his abused muscles to stretch out.

“Lord Tarkin,” Dhulyn said, her voice pitched to carry to everyone in the chamber. “My Brother Alkoryn Pantherclaw suggests that you rest here in comfort while he and I continue to the surface. There is fuel, food, and drink. We will return or send for you as soon as we are able.”

“Why must we wait?” The Tarkin, Parno was impressed to see, was not arguing, but simply asking the question.

“It’s very likely Lok-iKol will want Mercenary House searched,” Dhulyn said. “This chamber can be closed off and hidden, so you’ll be perfectly safe here. If it comes to the worst,” Dhulyn added, “my presence in the House is natural. Yours, Lord Tarkin, could not be explained. My Brother Parno Lionsmane will remain here with you.”

Parno met Dhulyn’s eyes over the heads of the Tarkin and her children. That’s what made her face change, he thought. Is it the thought of separation she doesn’t like, or the idea of leaving me here with my cousin, the Tarkin?

She smiled at him, lifting her shoulder in the slightest of shrugs.

In Battle. Only her lips formed the words.

In Death, he answered.
“But we’ve important information,” Mar said, craning her neck to see the woman.

“Oh, I’ve no doubt he’s got information enough—but I’m not inclined to let him in, no matter how important it might be.”

“Then let Mar in,” Gun said, placing a hand on the gate in his eagerness. He swallowed, realizing that he’d just called Mar by her personal name. Out loud. “The Lady...” He looked at Mar, looked back up to the sentry window. “You’re Thionan Hawkmoon, aren’t you?” he said. “That’s how you know me.” He waved his hand impatiently. “It doesn’t matter about me, but you can let Mar in, she needs to speak to Dhulyn Wolf...”

“Ah, so you’re the little trickster from Navra, are you? I hadn’t seen you before now.”

Any hope Gun might have had that they’d do as he asked died at the tone in the Mercenary woman’s voice.

“Listen, children, we’ve our orders, and if I was likely to break them—which I’m not—it certainly wouldn’t be for you two. And besides—”

Thionan Hawkmoon froze in mid-syllable, her attention caught by something within the walls.

“And besides,” she took up where she’d left off. “There’s an order out for both of you. Seems you ran away after the Fallen House Kor-iRok was found dead.” She looked down at them with a wink. “Don’t make me send for the City Guards, now.”

Sixteen

FANRYN BLOODHAND AND Thionan Hawkmoon were both waiting when Dhulyn swung the counterweighted chunk of flooring to one side and climbed out, reaching back in to give Alkoryn Pantherclaw a hand up.

“We’ve left the others in the lower chamber,” Dhulyn said, telling her Brothers in a few words just who those ‘others’ were. “Hernyn?” Thionan said.

Dhulyn’s lips parted, but her throat closed on the words.

“Hernyn Greystone the Shield remained behind,” Alkoryn said for her. “That we might escape.”

“In Battle or in Death,” Fanryn said after a long pause. The eyes of the four Brothers met, and for another moment they were silent, in honor of the one who had fallen. And in unspoken prayer that they should fall the same way, on their feet, swords in hand.

“Since his body will be found,” Alkoryn said, breaking their silence at last. “We can expect inquiries, perhaps even a request to search our premises before the day is out. What is it, Thionan?”

Even Dhulyn could see and recognize the slightly furtive look that had crossed Thionan’s eyes.

“About an hour ago,” she said. “I turned away the Tenebro’s tame Scholar and that Navra girl you and Parno brought, Dhulyn, telling them I’d call the City Guard on them. I was joking, but . . .”

“You spoke truth without knowing it,” Alkoryn said. “Well, at least they have been warned. What else can you tell me?”

Dhulyn only half heard Fanryn’s first words. So Mar and Gundaron of Valdomar had come here. Looking for what?

“Lok-iKol holds the Dome and the city,” Fanryn was saying, leading the way out of a few words that, to anyone who didn’t know better, held nothing but the old cistern of Mercenary House. “Of the High Nobles, Jarifo and Esmolo Houses are with him—”

“We saw their men in the Dome,” Dhulyn said as she followed the other women up a short flight of stone steps and through another counterweighted chunk of wall.

“The other Houses are holding off, waiting to see how true Lok-iKol’s arrow will fly, though there’s talk that the Tenebroso will be acclaimed by midday,” Fanryn continued, her face showing her displeasure. “The only one demanding to be shown Tek-aKet Tarkin, living or dead, is the Penradoso.”

“I know that House,” Dhulyn said, thinking back over the years to the last time she’d fought in Imrion. When she and Parno had met.

“You should,” Alkoryn said, pausing with his hand on the wall to take a deeper breath. Dhulyn didn’t like the look of the man, his color was worse than a sleepless night walking underground should make it. “Fen-oNef Penrado was an old ally of Tek-aKet Tarkin’s father, and he fought on the old Tarkin’s side at Arcosa. You’d have seen him there. The odds are very short that he’ll come to Lok-iKol’s side without proof positive that Tek-aKet’s dead.”

“Lok-iKol’s gone ahead and scheduled his anointing for next new moon,” Thionan added. “Twelve days from
now. And the Jaldeans have agreed. So old Penrado hasn’t much time to decide.”

They’d reached Alkoryn’s map room by this time, and the old man looked better for being able to sit down in his own chair. Dhulyn leaned against the wall between the two windows, angled into a corner of the map shelves where she couldn’t be seen from outside, and stifled a yawn. If she sat down, she thought, she’d fall right to sleep.

“Is there anything more?” Alkoryn said.

Fanryn considered, her head to one side. “There’s seventeen Brothers in the House,” she said. “Eleven of those from the Carnelian Guard who were out in the streets overnight. They felt their oaths were to Tek-aKet Tarkin, rather than the Carnelian Throne, so when he Fell, they came Home.”

“Did any die in street fighting?” Dhulyn asked.

“None. In fact, they saved some of the other Carnelian Guardsmen, and we’ve got them hidden around the quarter, some in the Old Market. None in the House, of course.” Fanryn looked over at Thionan when her Partner cleared her throat. “Besides the children you sent us, we do have a guest, however, who was visiting in the House when your orders came to shut the gates.” Fanryn waited to be sure she had both Dhulyn and Alkoryn’s attention.

“Cullen of Langeron is here,” she said, “an intimate of Yaro of Trevel, and a Racha man, no less. Seeing that Yaro was once of our Brotherhood, we gave them sanctuary.”

“That may turn out to be very lucky.” Alkoryn leaned back in his chair, folding his hands over his stomach. “How many Marked have we in the tunnels?”

“Including the Mender’s children Hernyn brought us, seven.”

“Delay no longer. See that they go now, before the day is out. Send also our own youngsters, any waiting for Schooling and any not ready for their badges. Let them go with the Marked as far as the Tourin Road, then to Nerysa Warhammer. The Marked to Pompano, unless Cullen would like to take this opportunity to return to his home, in which case he may want them to accompany him to Langeron. Who is scheduled for the task?”

“The sisters, Jenn IceSea and Jess Riverhorse.”

“Let them choose two others to help them and go with the group to Nerysa. If Cullen of Langeron decides to go, ask him to have word with me before he departs.” He nodded twice and looked up at Fanryn. “If there is nothing else pressing, I’d like a few minutes with Dhulyn if you would, my Brothers.”

Both Fanryn and Thionan straightened to their feet. “I’ll have some food and drink sent up,” Thionan said.

“Considering we may need a place to hide the Tarkin Tek-aKet and his family, it’s a very lucky thing indeed that the Racha man is here.” Alkoryn spoke half to himself. “No one would think to look for them in the Clouds.”

Dhulyn stayed at her perch by the window, consciously relaxing each muscle group as she waited for Alkoryn to turn his full attention to her. She could think of only one reason Alkoryn would have sent both Fanryn and Thionan away.

He’s going to ask me to see, she thought. That’s the reason I’m not in the caves with the Tarkin.

“It must say, Dhulyn, my Brother, if the reaction of the Tarkin and his counselor is any indication, I am not at all surprised that you tell no one of your Mark.” Alkoryn sat up straight and laid his hands palm down on the map of Gotterang that still covered his table. “But I would fail in my duties as Senior Brother and Commander of this House if I did not ask you, despite what you and Parno have told me of your experience, is there no way you can look for a Vision that may be of help to us?”

Dhulyn looked at him for a long moment. He was asking her in the same way he would ask a swordsmith how many weapons were ready for use. No judgment, just a request for the kind of information that would help him plan his strategy. A tightness she had not been aware of loosened in her chest. Whatever she said now, he would take her at her word. She was still among Brothers. In Battle or in Death.

“It’s worse than Parno told you,” she said. “Worse than I knew myself. Only very recently I have learned that some of what I See is not the future at all, but the past. If I cannot even tell which is which, the Visions I do See are useless to us.”

“Word has come from the Dome,” Semlin said, and cleared her throat. “The Tenebroso is on his way.”

“Sit down, Sem.” Karlyn shoved his paperwork to one side. There would be time to do it once Lok-iKol had come and gone. Both he and Semlin-Nor had received messages from the Dome in the twenty-four hours since Lok-iKol had taken the Carnelian Throne, asking for one thing or another that the new Tarkin had decided he wanted from his own House. A levy of men from Karlyn-Tan, a favorite chair from Semlin-Nor. There were only two things the Tenebroso could not send for, Karlyn thought, and they were both in this room.

Semlin had shaken her head and remained standing, her hands on the high back of the chair across from him.

“Which of us do you suppose he wants?” Semlin’s voice was steady and true, but Karlyn-Tan had an idea from the
whiteness of her knuckles on the chairback how much that steadiness cost her.

“I can think of no area in which you’ve failed the House,” he said. “And I shall say so, should I have the chance.”

“As will I for you,” Semlin said, nodding.

Karlyn looked at her carefully, but there was no insincerity in her face. “No.” Karlyn leaned back in his chair, tapping his lips with the fingers of his right hand. “I have reason to believe it will be me. Don’t try to shield me, you can’t know the cost.”

The woman across from him took her lower lip into her teeth, shot him a glance from under her brows before focusing once again on the papers which layered the top of his desk. Karlyn raised his eyebrows as awareness dawned.

“How long did you know?” he said, sitting forward again.

“The House knew, and told me.” The words tumbled from her mouth. “She’d been looking for the golden-haired one, the Lionsmane, for some time. As for the rest,” she spread her hands, “I keep the Keys, man, how could I not know when food was prepared, when rooms were cleaned and light taken to them? Heat? Bedding? As for the rest . . .” Semlin lowered her eyes, the corners of her mouth turning down. “I gave the Fallen House my solemn oath to make no mention of it, nor of her plans. The next I knew, she was Fallen, and the Mercenary Brothers were gone.”

“That going will be on my head. As well as the going of the Scholar, and the Lady Mar-eMar. As Keys is your function, so mine is Walls.”

The tightness in Semlin-Nor’s shoulders relaxed, but her face did not regain its usual color.

“You’ll see I’m right,” he said, getting to his feet, and taking his sword of office down from its bracket on the wall near the door. *Might as well be formal,* he thought, *it may remind Lok-iKol of his obligations to me, as well as mine to him.*

When he looked up from the silvered clasp of his sword belt, Semlin was already at the door. Her smile was a mere baring of teeth and her nod set her earrings swinging. There was little that his reassurances could do. She knew as much as he did about what had gone on in Lok’s rooms when he was just Kir. Maybe more.

They walked without speaking from Karlyn’s tower rooms to the main doors, silent even in those portions of the corridors where they knew they could not be overheard. Semlin-Nor came as far as she could with him, stopping in the outer courtyard, at the lowest steps of the House.

“The Caids bless you,” she whispered through barely moving lips as he stepped off onto the stones of the yard. “The Sleeping God keep you in his dreams.”

“And you.”

He could feel her eyes on his back as he crossed the outer courtyard to the gates to greet his House, the new Tarkin.

It was as he’d suspected. It was only Karlyn-Tan that the Tenebroso had asked to accompany him to his workroom. Lok-iKol sat behind his worktable, staring at the sharp nib of a pen as he rolled it between thumb and fingers. For the first time in many years, he had not invited Karlyn-Tan to sit.

“With respect, my lord,” Karlyn said, “I remind you that they were not in my keeping, and that I know nothing of their leaving.” It was safe for him to say so, as he knew that the keys for Dhulyn Wolfshead’s shackles never left Lok-iKol’s own hands. “Mercenaries do not require assistance in these matters. It is known they cannot be held, if it is their own wish to be gone.”

“And the Scholar, and the Lady Mar-eMar? Were they assisted?”

“Once more, I remind you, my House, that neither I nor any of my men had orders to prevent any members of this House from proceeding about their affairs. We knew of no reason to prevent them from leaving.”

“You remind me.” Lok-iKol pursed his lips and straightening in his chair, dipped the pen into the open bottle of ink lined up perfectly with the piece of parchment waiting to be written on.

“My mother, the Fallen House, often said that as a young man there was no hunter as skilled as you. You will find my Scholar. You will find the girl, and you will find me the Mercenary woman, the Wolfshead.”

“My hunting days are past, my House. I am Walls now.”

“I know you cannot leave the House,” Lok-iKol said. “But you will direct the hunt.”

“Let me speak more plainly, my lord. No, I will not.”

Lok-iKol looked up, lifting the pen from the paper. Karlyn-Tan watched the ink gather into a large drop at the tip of the nib, grow large enough to shiver for a moment in the morning sunlight streaming through the window and fall
onto the page beneath. Still he said nothing, waiting for his House to speak.

“I am your House,” Lok-iKol said finally. “And now I am your Tarkin as well. You are my Walls, and you will do as I ask.”

“I am the Walls of House Tenebro, my lord.” Karlyn-Tan nodded, looking directly at the man seated at the worktable. “I am neither yours, nor mine, but Tenebro’s. As I have said to you before, I serve only the House, with my own obligations, and my own judgment. It is my judgment that pursuing these Mercenaries will bring danger to the House. As Tenebroso, you may discharge me, but you cannot overrule my judgment.”

“Then you are discharged.” Lok-iKol looked down at the page before him, twisting his lips when he saw the stain of ink. “Be gone by sunset. Take nothing that belongs to me.”

Karlyn fought to keep his knees locked, to keep his hand from reaching for the support of the chairback next to him. It was as though he suddenly found himself on the edge of a chasm, and only firm control would keep him from plunging down. The chasm had always been there, but he had grown so used to it, he had forgotten it could harm him. As he managed to forget, most of the time, that this man was his half brother. A voice inside him, the voice of the boy who had never known any other home but this one, cried out that he should submit, that he should agree to anything, and his lips parted, but the words that came out. . . .

“I’ll give you a piece of advice,” he said. “There’ll be no need to hunt for the Mercenaries, Lok-iKol. They will come hunting for you.”

“I am Cast Out.”

She put out a hand for the edge of the table, lowered herself into a chair.

“Do nothing. Say nothing. You are not safe here. Go, we never spoke.” He could not endanger her. He, at least, had seen the outside world, even if not for fifteen years. She had been born in this House, and had never left it. If she were Cast Out, guilty by her association with him, it would destroy her.

Still, he could not help feeling hurt when Semlin ran from the room without further word. The touch on the hand she gave him as she pushed past was not much consolation. He sat down in the chair behind his worktable and let his face fall into his hands. He had until sunset. Until sunset to decide what, if anything, he was allowed to take with him. He had a little money of his own, saved up over the years. A ring and a dagger the Fallen House had given him. Surely not even Lok-iKol would put him into the street naked, but was there anything in his rooms that was not of Tenebro colors, or which didn’t bear the Tenebro crest?

Karlyn took a deep breath and looked up. From the angle of the sunlight on the desk, he’d been sitting here the better part of an hour already. And he had not given any thought to where he would go, once he’d found clothing. Was the Blue Dove Tavern still in business, he wondered, thinking of the last place he had stayed before coming to Tenebro House, and did it still rent rooms cheaply?

Leave the House. The fiery heat of his anger had finally died away, leaving a tightness in his throat and chest. He forced himself to take a deep breath, and then another. A sound made him get to his feet just as the door to the hallway opened. It was not, as he’d expected, Semlin-Nor, or even his assistant Jeldor-San, having just learned of her unexpected promotion, but the Lord Dal-eDal.

His hands full, Dal-eDal kicked the door shut behind him. In his right hand he carried a bulging saddle pack, and in his left, held by the scabbard, a sword. Both of these he put on the table in front of Karlyn.

“I did not knock, since I have learned that these are no longer your rooms.”

Karlyn-Tan inclined his head.

“I have further learned that you have been told to leave with nothing that the Lord Lok-iKol has given you. Therefore, I have brought you clothing and a sword.”

By the tone of his voice, and the expression on his face, Dal-eDal might have been passing Karlyn the bread at a communal table and not the tools that might save his life.

“I may need to report that they come from your hand.”

Dal-eDal shrugged. “Consider it reported. My cousin has returned to the Carnelian Dome, and I am the heir.”

Karlyn nodded his understanding, feeling a tightness in his shoulders relax. It was to find Dal-eDal that Semlin-Nor had left in such a hurry. “In that case, I accept.”

It was Dal-eDal’s turn to nod. He straightened his cuffs as if searching for something more to say.

“Did he want you to find the Tarkin?”

“You mean Tek-aKet Culebroso? The former Tarkin?”
Dal smiled. “Yes, that is what I meant.”
Karlyn took a deep breath, found further tension releasing. “No,” he said. “The Scholar, the Lady Mar-eMar, and the Mercenary Dhulyn Wolveshead.”

Dal leaned against the doorframe, folding his arms across his chest. “What is it about this woman? He tricks Mar-eMar into bringing her to Gotterang, and now, with all that must be occupying him in the less than two days he’s been on the Carnelian Throne, he finds time to leave the Dome to ask you to find her?”

“The Scholar would know.”

“And if we had the Scholar,” Dal said, “we would know.”

We? Karlyn thought. Dal presumed much on the basis of clothing and a sword. Karlyn believed he could put his hands on both the youngsters pretty easily, thanks to Jeldor-San’s fast thinking in having them followed and to his own tracking skills, but he saw no need to tell Dal-eDal as much.

The two men exchanged a long look.

“If you would,” Dal said finally, “once you know where you are, send me word.”

“Why not?”

Dal-eDal’s parting smile was more than half grimace.

“Just as soon as I figure out who you’ll tell,” Karlyn-Tan said once the door had closed again.

Parno was using the sharpening stone he’d found in the underground chamber’s weapons kit to put a better edge on one of the knives he’d been given from the Tarkin’s armory. As soon as he could get upstairs, he’d be able to recover those of his own weapons—including his best sword—that had, along with the rest of his pack, been left with their horses at Mercenary House. He scowled at the knife, moving it this way and that as the light caught the edge. Was it really only a week ago?

Parno looked over the edge of the blade to find Bet-oTeb looking at him. The Tarkin-to-be looked very solemn, her eyes huge in the chamber’s uncertain light. “My father wants you,” she said. “If you would be so good as to come with me.”

Parno bowed to her, put the knife back into the sheath he wore at his belt, and followed Bet-oTeb to the far end of the room, where the Tarkin sat with his wife. Tek-aKet smiled his thanks to his daughter and indicated that Parno should seat himself on the next bed.

The Tarkin looked tired, as well he might, having slept only a few hours after being up most of the night. Parno doubted he would have recognized the man he had merely encountered him on the street, any more than his second cousin appeared to recognize him. There was a world of difference between the seventeen year old he had been and the bearded, tattooed, and heavily-muscled Mercenary Brother he had become. The last time Parno had seen Tek-aKet, back when he himself had still been Par-iPar Tenebro, Tek had been thirteen, gangly and round-shouldered from study. Fourteen years later, Parno could see the old Tarkin in the shape of Tek’s eyes, the breadth of his shoulders, and the firm set of his jaw.

Tek-aKet now leaned forward until their heads were almost touching.

“Zelianora and I have been taking thought,” the Tarkin of Imrion said. “Am I correct in my understanding that you can speak for your Partner?”

Parno nodded. “We are the same person,” he said.

“Can you tell me, then, whether she will use her Mark to help me?”

“More than she has already done,” the Tarkina said, acknowledgment and gratitude in her voice. Her husband flashed her a smile and nodded.

Parno looked down at his hands, clasped between his knees. The man thought he had a great tool, and who could blame him . . . Parno had once thought so himself. Experience had taught Parno differently, but how was he to convince Tek-aKet? Did Dhulyn escape from Lok-iKol only to fall into his cousin’s hands? Parno looked at Zelianora Tarkina, who was watching her husband’s face with steady dark eyes. Composed, almost serene. He looked back at the Tarkin. This man was not like Lok-iKol, he thought. Nothing like.

“One time,” he said quietly, “Dhulyn woke up crying. She’d Seen a farmer drowning a basket of kittens. Is that the kind of thing you want her to tell you?”

Tek-aKet sat up straight, letting his hands fall to his knees. “You’re saying she can’t control it.”

“I’m saying she can’t control it.” Parno rubbed his chin. He’d kill for the time to shave and a nice sharp razor, though he feared he’d have to wait until he left Imrion to do it. “At first, I thought it was just some kind of Outlander stubbornness. She hated the thought that I might be watching her in the morning, trying to see in her face some sign
that she’d Seen something in the night. That I was waiting for her to tell me what to do next, instead of using my
own brain. ‘I’m not a crutch,’ she used to say to me. But then I realized that she wasn’t trying to teach me a moral
lesson, but telling me the real truth. Her Mark wasn’t something that we were going to able to use, to lean on.”

“How does it work, then?” the Tarkina asked in her musical voice.

Parno shrugged. “It comes when it comes, waxes and wanes like the moon. Strongest with her woman’s time, as if
the blood brings it, and if she’s touching someone, she’s likely to See something pertaining to them. But not always.
And sometimes she’ll get Visions in between, not so clear, but sometimes.” He looked up to find them both
watching him.

“And you have to understand, there’s never any context to them. The farmer with the kittens? She didn’t know
what country he was in, or when it would happen. If we’d wanted to stop it, we wouldn’t have known where to go.
She’ll help you,” he said. “We both will. But don’t count on her Mark to win for you.”

“It would not be more diplomatic to see him at least individually?” Lok-iKol frowned, resisting the desire to rub
at his eye. He’d managed only a few hours’ sleep in the last two days, and right now he felt they hadn’t done him
much good. The day had started well, the Dome and city were his, and the Assembly of Houses had met and
accepted him as Tarkin—though not quite by acclamation. House Penrado had pleaded illness and absented himself,
as Lok had expected, but he had not actually protested. Lok would do something about that later.

But the day had not continued well. Lok closed his right hand into a fist. He had not expected Karlyn-Tan to defy
him, and now he would have to find someone else to hunt for the Seer.

“A meeting at this time, my lord Tarkin, is a mere formality. They acknowledge you, and you remind them that
existing relations will continue. Your re-assurances to the Berdanian ambassador will carry more weight when spoken
in front of such witnesses. When I said ‘informal,’ I meant in dress and preparation, not in topic of discussion.”

“Very well.”

As Lok spoke, a page entered the spacious room that had been Tek-aKet’s public study. Lok-iKol let out his
breath with such force that Gan-eGan looked up from the mark he was making on his parchment list.

“My apologies, but I have no leisure for him today.”

“Lord Tarkin.”

Lok realized that Beslyn-Tor had followed on the page’s heels and was already in the room. He suppressed the
irritation that immediately rose to twist his lips. Gan-eGan looked around, brows raised and head twitching as he
backed away from the priest. Lok’s eye narrowed. It seemed there was something between Gan-eGan and the old
priest. Something unpleasant.

Lok smiled. He’d expected Beslyn-Tor to turn up, though not quite so quickly.

“More wine and a glass for my friend,” Lok said to the page, ignoring the Jaldean’s shaken head and gesture of
refusal. He’d never seen the man take either food or drink, and Beslyn-Tor was noticeably thinner than he had been
when Lok had first met him, though he showed no other signs of ritual fasting. His color was good, his grip firm, his
jade-green eyes particularly clear and his movements, as he took the chair next to the worktable without waiting to
be invited, graceful.

Once more Lok-iKol suppressed a frown. “As you heard me say,” he began, “I have no great store of leisure
today. If you would tell me in what way I can assist you?”

“I have given you what you desired, yet you withhold my payment.”

Again a darting glance from Gan-eGan, and another from the page, as he came in with a tray bearing a fresh flask
of wine and a second goblet.

Lok looked at the tray as the page set it down on the table. “Leave us,” he said.

Unexpectedly, Gan-eGan did not protest. Hugging his parchment lists to his chest like a shield, he scuttled from
the room. The page looked from the old counselor to Lok-iKol and back again, as if he might speak.

Lok raised his remaining eyebrow.

The page inclined his head, though his lips thinned as he turned to go. No one in Tenebro House would ever have
looked at Lok like that. What has Tek-aKet been teaching his servants?

Only when they were alone did Lok sit down in the Tarkin’s chair. “I must have time to solidify my position
before I can give you what we agreed upon. A moon, perhaps two.” As the priest narrowed his eyes, Lok smiled and
spread his hands. “Come,” he said. “Have we not prospered?” He leaned forward and poured himself a glass of the wine. It was a dark, full red that Lok knew from experience would taste of the oak it had been aged in. “When I am anointed, I will prepare the proclamations that shall give you what you’ve asked for.” He sipped at his cup of wine, savoring it in his mouth a moment before swallowing. And, once I’m anointed, I won’t need you. “The support and countenance of the Tarkin for yourself and your followers. Dominion over the Marked.”

“Why do you wait? Every delay allows the Sleeping God more time to awaken.”

Lok ground his teeth. The man’s beliefs were becoming more than a nuisance. Lok set his wineglass back on the table, fixing his guest with his eye. The Jaldean was not even looking at him. “I have declared Tek-aKet Fallen, but in the absence of a body, there are rumors,” he said, with more force than he had intended. “Rumors which force me to move much more slowly than I had originally planned.”

Beslyn-Tor brought his gaze back from the distance and fixed it on Lok-iKol, the jade-green eyes as bright as though they’d absorbed the light of the setting sun that streamed through the windows. The new Tarkin of Imrion suddenly wished he was not sitting down. He would feel stronger on his feet. It seemed the whole room had darkened.

“You think to put me off. I warn you, do nothing you will regret.”

Lok brought his fingertips together and tapped his lips. “Do you threaten me? You stirred the people against the Marked; that is a great power you have. But Tek-aKet was taken by surprise, I will not be. That trick cannot be played again.”

The Jaldean priest waved the statement away with the closest thing to a smile Lok had ever seen him make.

“I seek to give you what you want most.”

“And that is?”

“You have named it. Power.”

Lok-iKol felt the cord of his eye patch move as he drew in his brows. “I am Tarkin.”

“Is that the extent of your ambition? What if there were more power to be had?”

Lok sat back, gripping the chair arms with his hands. This was too much.

“What? Will the Sleeping God bless me and hold me in his dreams? Do you think me as gullible as the rabble you rouse to frenzy? You are a useful tool, Beslyn-Tor, and I will reward you as promised, but do not presume too much on my gratitude.”

As a sign that the audience was over, Lok-iKol stood. Beslyn-Tor sighed and heaved himself to his feet, his age suddenly showing in the noise of his effort.

“My lord Tarkin,” he said, lowering himself to one knee. “Forgive an impatient man. Allow me to be the first to give you my allegiance.” He bowed his head and reached up his right hand.

Lok-iKol hesitated, but there was no irony, no smug sarcasm, nor even any calculation on the old man’s face. He took the offered hand between his own. The priest’s skin was warm and dry, his grip firmer than Lok would have expected in so old a man. Lok licked suddenly dry lips.

“I receive . . .” he began, and shook his head in irritation. For a moment he couldn’t remember the words. He blinked and focused again on Beslyn-Tor’s face, the man’s jade-green eyes. The room around them grew darker.

The Seer was lost.

For a moment the body’s heart stopped beating.

She must be found, this Mercenary, this Wolfshead. Who could do so?

The Scholar. He had Found once already. But the Scholar himself was missing. Karlyn-Tan Cast Out. Dal-eDal. That one always knew more than he told.

He looked down at the old man on the floor.

“Jelran,” he called and was pleased by how swiftly the page entered.

“Have the junior priest who accompanied Beslyn-Tor enter. His master appears to have suffered a stroke.”

The young page glanced at the figure on the floor and licked his lips. “Of course, my lord.”

He watched, feeling the inside of this shape, testing the strengths, tasting the skills, as they helped the stricken man dodder out of the room.

“Jelran? Tell Gan-eGan to cancel the ambassadors’ supper and send for my cousin Dal-eDal to come to me.”

“At once, my lord.”
I have got nothing to worry about, Dal-eDal told himself, nodding to the pale-faced Dome Guard as he dismounted at the Ironwood Gate. If Lok was ready to have him killed, he needn’t bring Dal to the Carnelian Dome to do it. Far more likely to suffer some “accident” at home, like so many others of the Tenebro family. No, the difference today was that the summons came not only from his House, but from his Tarkin.

Or someone’s Tarkin, anyway.

Dal smiled and tossed his reins to the waiting stable girl, thanked his escort and began the long walk across the fitted flagstones of the wide interior yard to the Carnelian Dome’s Steward of Keys, waiting on the steps of the grand entrance known as the Tarkin’s Door. Like the stable girl, and a couple of the Carnelian Dome Guards for that matter, the Steward’s face showed a pallor and a stiffness that spoke of underlying uncertainty. Not unlike, Dal thought, the look on the faces of the people in Tenebro House on the morning the House fell.

“Not your first time here, at any rate, Lord Dal,” the Steward said with the ghost of his usual smile on his lips.

Dal tilted his head with a smile of his own. He felt and recognized the need for normal conversation in these most abnormal times. “I barely remember that event,” he said. The Steward gestured, and Dal preceded the man through the gateway. “I was four when my father became head of his Household, and I came with him to give his oaths to the Tenebroso, and to the old Tarkin.”

The Steward made a half-aborted motion with his right hand, and Dal coughed. So it was better not to mention even Tek-aKet’s father, was it?

“I wasn’t Steward then,” the man said. “I don’t believe I remember your father.”

“He was only in Gotterang once more. In fact, he died on his way home from that last visit to the Tenebroso. Fell from his horse.”

“You became Household then? Or was there an older sibling?”

“No, I was Kir for my Household, but at eight years old, my House thought it better to put a Steward in place and brought me to her in Gotterang.” No need to tell the Carnelian Dome’s Steward of Keys that such young children were used as hostages; the man well knew that for himself.

“And, of course, you’ve been here ever since. Once in the capital, who would want to leave?”

Dal smiled, his lips pressed tightly together. Ever since. Ever since his father, who must have guessed something about that summons from which he never returned, had kissed him good-bye whispering, “Stay alive, Son. See you survive to avenge me.”

Still alive, Papa, he thought. Accomplishing that much at least.

“It must have been strange for you,” the Steward said, as he opened the third set of double doors for Dal to walk through. “I remember being very homesick when I first came here as a child.” Dal stood to one side as two pages, heads down and mumbling their excuses, came stumbling through the opened door.

“Not exactly homesick. Though there were no children my age in Tenebro House,” he said, after the young pages were out of earshot. “And I’m afraid I found my cousin Lok-iKol very . . . impressive.”

The Steward of Keys, with a glance at Dal’s face, nodded his quick understanding.

At first, Dal had been too shocked by grief and the change in his circumstances to remember his father’s last words to him. Afterward, he’d needed to be sure that it wasn’t just homesickness and an aversion to Lok’s company that made him want to kill his one-eyed cousin. The longer he waited, the harder it became to do anything. If he killed Lok openly, he would be killed himself. Failing in his father’s first command to him. If he killed Lok by stealth, he’d become the heir, something he’d never wanted—still didn’t want. So he’d spent years studying the situation, gathering information, in part to protect himself, in part to find a safe way of enacting his father’s vengeance. All in all, he’d been gathering information for a long time.

When he’d realized just why Parno Lionsmane had seemed so familiar, only the iron discipline of years had stopped him from running singing through the House. He’d thought all his problems were solved. As kidnapped Mercenary Brothers they would kill Lok, and as a first cousin, Par-iPar Tenebro would set aside his Mercenary Brotherhood, become heir, and Dal could finally go home.

But the Brothers were gone, and Lok was now Tarkin.

“My lord.” The Steward of Keys motioned Dal to one side. Approaching them down the corridor were three individuals dressed completely in dark green, escorted by two guards in Tenebro colors and two Jaldean priests. From the corner of his eye, Dal looked at the Steward’s impassive face. For it was clear from their air of stumbling confusion that something had been done to these Marked. One of them, a short stout woman, was supporting a man almost twice her height, holding him around the waist. She merely looked red-eyed and blotchy, tears still rolling down stiff cheeks, but the man was vacant-eyed and drooling. The third, perhaps their son, was white as paper, and
breathed shallowly as if in great pain.

“I thought the Marked were being taken to the Jaldean High Shrine,” Dal murmured to the Steward of Keys.

“Last night the new Tarkin gave orders for them to be brought here,” the Keys said. Something in the man’s voice made Dal look at him closely, but the Keys kept his eyes lowered. His lips, Dal saw, were trembling.

Once the Marked had passed, Dal and the Steward of Keys fell silent. They continued down the hall until it widened before the delicately carved doors of the Cedar Room, the small audience chamber. Here, there were comfortable cushioned chairs set out for waiting dignitaries, grouped around small empty tables that normally carried jellied fruits, salted nuts, and carafes of wine and cider. The place, usually crowded with petitioners and the younger children of the Noble Houses, was deserted.

Suddenly, Dal didn’t want to go any farther.

“If you would wait a moment,” the Keys of the Dome said. “I will see if the Tarkin is ready for you.”

Dal sank into one of the cushioned chairs. Once again he reminded himself that Lok need not bring him to the Dome to kill him. So what did Lok want? Dal thought about the message he’d received this morning from Karlyn-Tan, that the former Steward of Walls could be found at the Blue Dove Tavern. And where, Dal wondered would Gundaron the Scholar and the Lady Mar-eMar be found? Dal did not believe for a moment that the two had anything to do with the Fall of the House, but it was evident that Lok wanted them, and that meant Dal might gain something by finding them himself.

Lok had asked Karlyn-Tan to find the Mercenary woman, and the Steward of Walls had refused and been Cast Out. Was Dal now about to be asked? If he refused? What would Lok do then?

The Keys pushed both doors of the small audience room open, gone so pale that his mustache and eyebrows stood out dark against his skin. “You may go in, Lord Dal-eDal.” He gestured toward the open doors.

Stomach twisting, wishing he had the courage to simply turn and walk away, Dal went through.

Whatever he’d expected to find, it wasn’t Lok in what was clearly the Tarkin’s great chair—carved out of white cedar, studded with carnelians, and just smaller than the official throne—talking to Chief Counselor Gan-eGan. Dal hovered, unwilling to approach more closely. The older man was on his knees on Lok’s right side, his hands clinging to the arm of the great chair, as a man in the sea clings to the side of a raft. Dal licked his lips and took a hesitant step forward.

With a soft sigh the counselor stood, lifting a trembling hand to his mouth, sketched a shaky bow, and headed for the door. Dal actually had to step out of the man’s way, as Gan-eGan—usually so punctilious it was almost laughable—passed him without acknowledgment of any kind.

“Cousin.” Lok’s voice was curiously flat, as if he was too tired to speak with more animation. Perhaps he’d found being Tarkin to be more work than he’d expected, Dal thought as he crossed the floor to his cousin’s side. He performed a more elaborate version of the counselor’s bow and straightened, forcing a smile to his lips.

“All is well at the House,” Dal said. “Tenryn-For is settling well into his duties as Walls.” As well as he can after less than twenty-four hours, and after Karlyn-Tan’s Deputy Jeldor-San had unexpectedly refused the post.

Lok nodded, but with an air of a man who is listening to something else. He got to his feet and gestured to Dal to fall in beside him as he walked toward the smaller, private door behind the great chair.

“If I didn’t know better, Dal thought as he followed Lok through the door and nodded at the redhead page who waited there and fell into step behind them, I’d think he was drunk. There was just something a bit too careful, too focused, about the way Lok was speaking—and walking, now that Dal thought about it.

Any other time Dal would have welcomed the chance to walk through the private corridors of the Carnelian Dome, places that the public—even relations like the Tenebros—never saw. As it was, he kept his eyes on his cousin, and only took in the occasional detail, here a portrait of a heavily bewigged Tarkina, there a rug showing the bright dyes that marked it as a product of Semlor in the west.

Lok finally stopped outside a thick oak door, reinforced with embedded iron bars, whose massive frame was carved to look like snakes. Treasure room or armory, Dal thought, recognizing the motifs of the Culebro Tarkins. The page, pale, wide-eyed, and tight-lipped, once more took up his position to the right of the door, ready to wait until he was wanted.

Lok unlocked the thick door with a final twist of the key and walked straight into the room. Dal stopped dead on the threshold, until he realized that the reason his mouth felt dry was that it was hanging open. Treasure room he had thought, and treasure room it was, but thought is one thing, and sight another. A long central aisle stretched out between tiered shelving, every shelf covered with dark blue felted cloth, and every finger span of cloth covered.
Plates and tableware used on state occasions filled more than half the room, personal jewelry by the basketful—including the cat’s-eye rubies the Tarkina had brought with her on her marriage—and, halfway along one side, the Tarkin’s gold crown, bracelets, ear clasps, and pectoral of woven snakes, every one with gleaming carnelian eyes.

“The lists say there is a relic of the Sleeping God here,” Lok said, so quietly that Dal almost did not hear him. “A bracelet with green stones.”

Dal took a step forward. “Did you wish me to look for it?” His voice sounded harsh in his own ears, but Lok did not seem to notice.

“No, I wish you to find me the Mercenary Dhulyn Wolfshead.” Lok stopped, turned to the shelves on his right and picked up a pendant, a square-cut emerald set in silver wire. He frowned and set it down again.

Dal almost smiled as he watched his cousin pick up yet another piece of jewelry with a green stone and set it down again. Finally, a chance to learn why Lok found this woman so important.

“The Mercenary?” Dal said, careful to show no real interest. “What is it about this woman . . . ?”

Lok had stopped again, this time to pick up a bracelet made of gold links set with square smooth-polished stones. From that, and from the color and thickness of the gold, it was obviously very old. These stones, too, were green, but seemed likely to be jade. As Dal watched, Lok pushed it on over his hand, barely able to move it past the root of his thumb, to where it hung closely about his wrist.

Dal cleared his throat to ask his question again, but he hesitated, as his cousin had closed his eye, tilting his head back as if he were listening to some favorite music. Glancing down, Dal saw the bracelet on Lok’s wrist move, as if it were suddenly a living thing, its colors suddenly painfully bright, and then fading, dissolving as it was absorbed into Lok’s wrist, until it seemed he had a tattoo there, where his skin had been clear and clean a moment before. Even as Dal took a breath to exclaim, the tattoo faded, and Lok’s skin was clean again. Dal looked up, but his cousin’s eye was focused on the spot on his wrist where the bracelet had been. And his shadow, cast on the wall behind him was not his own, but larger, darker, than it should have been, and somehow the wrong shape. Dal’s own shadow was beside it, pale and small and normal.

“Lok, what . . . ?” His voice was paper thin and Dal cleared his throat. Without moving the rest of his body, Lok twisted his head to look at him and Dal saw that Lok’s right eye, clear and beautiful in the unmarred side of his face was green. Not crystal blue as it had always been, but a soft jade green. And Lok’s eye patch had shifted, perhaps because of how he’d turned his head and Dal lifted his left hand to his own face, as if to indicate to his cousin what had happened, but he froze, unable to move.

Both of Lok’s eyes were green. Both of them.

Seventeen

KARLYN-TAN HAD TO STEEL himself not to twitch away from people, not to hug the walls as he walked down the street. He recognized his feelings as the horizon sickness, though he’d never suffered from the fear of open spaces before. There was not too much space, he told himself, just more than he was used to—and too many strangers. Already this afternoon he’d had to convince two young toughs that he wasn’t someone they could prey on. Thank the Caids, Dal-eDal had given him a sword. He now walked with his hand openly resting on the sword’s hilt, as a message to any other tough boys in the area.

He kept walking, following the market crowds into the Great Square, resisting the urge to run back to his inn—run away from outside. He took a deep breath and looked around him, forcing his shoulders down. Was it his imagination, or was everyone around him walking too quickly, heads ducked, cloaks held more closely than the warm day called for? He frowned. He’d been Walls too long to remember what people on the outside were like.

Karlyn walked directly across the square, heading for the steps in the southeast corner that would lead him out into Swordsmiths Street and Mercenary House.

There were several people on the wide stone steps leading from Great Square to the street below and Karlyn’s attention kept being drawn to one of them in particular. Fair-haired, medium height, fair width of shoulders . . . and the right shoulder hitched up a bit, as if he was used to carrying a pack or heavy bag slung over it. Horizon sickness forgotten, Karlyn increased his pace. He knew that walk and that shoulder hitch even without the Scholar’s tunic; he’d been watching them around Tenebro House for the last two years. So Gundaron of Valdomar was still in Gotterang, and where was he heading now?

She was listening carefully for the short three-note whistle that would mean Gundaron had entered the alley. She’d answer with the agreed-upon variation, and then watch from her hiding spot as he walked to the end of their
lane past the entrance to their cellar and turned the corner. She’d wait for a count of fifty and, if the lane stayed empty, she’d whistle again. Gundaron would double back and meet her as she let herself down from her window hole. This was just one of the ways they’d figured out between them—her from stories she’d picked up from Dhulyn Wolfshead and Parno Lionsmane, Gundaron from his fund of reading—of watching if anyone was following them, or if anyone had found their hiding place. Still, Mar was getting heartily sick of spending most of her time watching her back.

When the whistle finally came, she answered it, and Gundaron glanced up to where he knew she would be. When their eyes met, a new look passed over his face, a familiar look.

Oh, Cailds. I know that look. She’d seen it on Parno Lionsmane’s face when he looked at Dhulyn Wolfshead. She’d wanted someone to look at her that way. The blood hammered in her ears and her hands shook, even as a small flower of joy bloomed under her heart.

“It’s a judgment on us,” Gun said.
Mar’s hand stilled. “What do you mean?”
“We’re surrounded by people we can’t trust,” he said, looking up from the small lamp he was refilling with the last of their scrounged oil. “Maybe it’s because we can’t be trusted.”
“I’m trusting you,” she said, touching his forearm lightly with her fingertips. It felt just as hard as the metal cup in her other hand. “And you’re trusting me. And . . . we were used by the people we did trust, both of us,” she added. “That makes a difference.”

Gundaron rubbed his face with both hands, the corners of his mouth turned down. “I don’t think the Mercenary Brotherhood are going to feel that way about me.”

Mar pressed her lips together. She did trust him, just as he trusted her. And yet there was still something Gun wasn’t telling her. What could be worse than what she’d done, betraying people who had saved her life? Maybe it was because she hadn’t read the stories Gun had, maybe it was because she’d spent so much time with the Mercenaries, but she honestly didn’t believe she or Gun were in any danger from the Curse of Pasillon.

“Gun,” she said finally, handing him the cup. “But you wanted to tell them, the Wolfshead, I mean, and Lionsmane.”

She nodded, lower lip caught between her teeth. “We’ve been sent away from Mercenary House twice now,” she said. “What if we don’t get a chance to tell them?”

“Tell them what, Lady Mar?”

Like anyone who’d commanded troops, he was a good judge of character. The girl looked nervous, he thought, and a little too pale. But her jaw was firm, and her mouth a resolute line. She was tougher than her noble birth and her town fostering might lead some to believe. After all, she’d come over the Antedichas Mountains with two Mercenaries, met the Cloud People, and lived to tell of it—not to mention surviving those particular four days in Tenebro House. Karlyn looked to the Scholar.

Though he was a few years older than Mar-eMar, Gundaron was likely the younger in experience—that being the trouble with book learning. The boy was frankly terrified, in Karlyn’s opinion. Where the girl was pale, the boy was white-faced; where she was firm and resolute, he held himself so stiffly he had a slight tremor in his hands. And he blinked too much. But for all that, Karlyn thought, impressed almost against his will, Gundaron was keeping his fear firmly in check. What could have frightened him so badly? This was the first real emotion Karlyn had ever seen in the boy. What had woken him from his Scholar’s daydream? Was it the girl? Or something more sinister?

“We didn’t harm the House,” Lady Mar said, breaking into his thoughts. “I know you have no reason to believe us, but we didn’t.”

“Perhaps I have no reason,” Karlyn said, “but I believe you. What decided you to leave when you did?”

Lady Mar took a deep breath. She was wearing the same clothes she’d had on when she’d arrived with the Mercenary brothers, now much creased and dirty. But she seemed not to notice any discomfort. “I’d been used,” she said, a bitter twist to her mouth. “I didn’t know how badly just at first. I knew I’d been lied to, though, and I couldn’t stay where there was no one I could trust.”

Tough, all right. Tougher than some other cousins of the House he could name. Karlyn turned to Gundaron. The Scholar clamped his jaw, not like someone determined not to speak, Karlyn thought, but like someone who expected the words to burn on their way out. The Lady Mar put her dust-grimed hand on the Scholar’s arm.
“I know you have no reason to believe me,” Karlyn said, deliberately echoing Mar-eMar’s words. “But you can trust me. I did not choose to leave Tenebro House, I have been Cast Out for refusing to hunt for Dhulyn Wolfshead and Parno Lionsmane. I believe we are allies.” The two youngsters glanced at each other before looking back at him. Was there hope in their eyes? “What is this you were saying about Mercenary House,” he asked them.

“We’ve amends to make,” Lady Mar said, her eyes flicking toward the Scholar. “And information to give. But we can’t get anyone to listen to us.”

Karlyn nodded. “I believe I can,” he said. “Let’s get you cleaned up. I believe they might listen to me.”

“You’re not afraid of the blade, which is good,” Dhulyn said, stepping forward as Parno retrieved his sword. “But you kept your own too low, and too far off the central line. Watch.” She took the Tarkin’s place and came at Parno slowly, her movements exaggerated in such a way that Tek-aKet Tarkin would have no trouble following. She held her sword so that the sharpened tip sagged below her waist. As she advanced on Parno, he once again turned the blade aside with the palm of his hand.

“How do you see?” Dhulyn said. “Your blade was off-center, and at an angle that made it easy for him to turn it aside, even without another weapon of his own. Now watch where I have mine.” Dhulyn executed almost the identical move, except this time Parno was able to turn her blade aside only by sacrificing his own forward momentum, and losing any chance to turn the move to his advantage. She and Parno lifted their points and stepped back.

“Did you see, Lord Tarkin?”

Tek-aKet nodded, brow furrowed. “I thought I’d had good teachers, but you’ve shown me things—” He lifted his shoulders and let them drop. “I didn’t think to watch his bare hand.”

Dhulyn sheathed her sword and extended both her hands to show the fine scars on the palms. “When it’s life and death, and not for show, everything is a weapon. Kill or be killed, all battles come down to this.”

“Kill or be killed,” Tek-aKet repeated, his dark brows drawn down into a vee over his clear blue eyes. “I think you have shown me more than a Shora of offense and defense, Dhulyn Wolfshead, I think you have answered a question for me.” He looked up at them, the sheen of sweat drying on his upper lip. “I think I must take back the Carnelian Throne.”

“There was some doubt of this?” Parno’s eyebrows could not raise any higher.

Tek-aKet nodded, his eyes hooded. “I never wanted to be Tarkin,” he said, a half smile playing about his lips. “My brother died of a fever, and I had to take his place. It did actually occur to me that this was my chance to take Zella and the children and go to her sister in Berdana.”

“And what decides you against that?” Dhulyn said.

“Zella and the children,” he said. “My family will never be safe with Lok-iKol Tenebroso on the throne. No matter where we go, what we do, he will see us as a threat until he hunts us down and kills us all. He’s been doing exactly that to his own House for years.” He lowered his eyes again, and his face turned to stone. “But there is also this. Lok-iKol is not Tarkin of Imrion. Neither by inheritance nor by Ballot. I find it is, after all, that simple. I will not walk away from my throne, my people, my responsibilities, and leave them to that jackal. I must find some place, some fortress or other, that I can use to rally my army. If I move quickly, then many who are now confused will come to us.”

“Well,” Parno said lightly. “We’re looking for work, Lord Tarkin. We’d give you a good rate.”

Dal-eDal entered and stepped immediately to one side so as not to present a silhouette in the entrance—and also to let his two guards enter with him. As soon as his eyes adjusted to the relative dimness of the taproom, his chin lifted as he caught sight of Karlyn-Tan. He crossed the half-empty room with a nod at the innkeeper behind the bar and joined Karlyn at his corner table. Karlyn smiled when the nobleman sat down with his back to rest of room—evidently Dal was sure that Karlyn would warn him if there should be any trouble. Or perhaps he was counting on the loyalty of the two guards, now being served at the bar? The young nobleman looked paler than usual, with lines around his eyes Karlyn had not seen before. When his cup of wine arrived, the fingers that turned it around on the tabletop without lifting it to his lips trembled slightly.

“You might have been better to come afoot,” Karlyn-Tan said. “You’d attract less attention.” He threw a pointed glance around at the patrons of the barroom, only some of whom were minding their own business. Others seemed to think that a well-dressed and mounted nobleman, even with two guards, was their business.

“I will not be in Gotterang long enough for attention to harm me,” Dal-eDal said, turning to sit sideways in his seat.
That was enough to make Karlyn look up once more from his polishing, as Dal-eDal must have known it would.

“My House and lord, Lok-iKol,” Dal said quietly, his eyes now idly drifting over the room, “has an errand for me outside the city.”

“Lok-iKol wishes you to leave Gotterang?”

Dal-eDal inclined his head once.

Karlyn-Tan relaxed, allowing his shoulders to rest against the wall behind his bench. No one in the House had thought it strange that this younger cousin had been kept on a short leash. Younger cousins who were part of the succession, even if they had no apparent ambition, were always a danger to heirs, and best kept where they could be carefully watched. This was no less true now that Lok-iKol was calling himself Tarkin. And yet Lok-iKol was now sending Dal away?

Karlyn let his eyes drift over to the two men watching from the bar. “Is he so sure of himself, now that he is Tarkin?”

Dal shook his head impatiently. “It’s more than that. He . . .” Dal looked across the table from under his brows. “I’ve been long a coward, Karlyn-Tan, or so I thought. But yesterday I saw something that makes me understand what fear is. I need help.”

Karlyn raised his eyebrows, his lips parting of their own accord. He quickly lowered his own eyes back to the bits of buckle, the polishing paste and rags on the tabletop. Dal had to be afraid, to say such a thing aloud.

“I appreciate the help you have given me,” he said slowly. “But I remind you that I am no longer a Steward of Tenebro.”

Dal stopped turning his wine cup on the table and took a long draw from it, setting it back on the table with a sour twist to his mouth.

Serves him right, Karlyn thought. This isn’t the kind of place you should order wine.

“This is a greater concern than who is Tenebro and who is not. We speak now of the fate of Imrion.” Dal wiped his lips with the back of his hand. “You haven’t asked about my errand.”

Karlyn-Tan waited.

“He sends me to find the Mercenary Brother, Dhulyn Wolfshead. I feel it is imperative that we find her, if only to learn why Lok-iKol wants her. If only to use her ourselves.”

Karlyn-Tan felt himself go perfectly still. And kept perfectly silent.

“How?”

“How else? Against Lok-iKol.”

Ah. Karlyn drummed the tabletop with his fingers. The fate of Imrion, indeed.

“How else?”

“Can we rid ourselves of the two men with you? I have someone I think you should meet.”

“For whom do you speak?”

“To you, I speak for myself,” Karlyn glanced away before returning his eyes to hers. “I rejoice to see you well, and alive. And I bring you warning that Lok-iKol Tenebroso seeks everywhere for you.” She bowed toward him. “For whom do you speak?”

“Dhulyn Wolfshead,” he said, taking half a step toward her before remembering his instructions and standing still.

“I did not think it possible that my ears and eyes both should deceive me,” she said. “And yet here you are.”

“You are not deceived, Wolfshead,” he said. “I am here.”

“And your Walls?”

“Are mine no longer. I am Cast Out.”

For a moment Dhulyn could think of nothing to say that was adequate to what he’d told her. Finally, she nodded.

“You bring messages here for Tek-aKet Tarkin?”

“I do. Mercenary Brothers helped him escape, and he is either with you, or his whereabouts are known to you.”

Dhulyn kept her face still as stone, giving nothing away. Of course Dal-eDal knew they had been in the Carnelian
Dome, helping the Tarkin. Did anyone else know? Were the tunnels secure enough for the Tarkin and his family? Alkoryn certainly believed so, but better careful than cursing, Dhulyn thought.

“Does Dal-eDal hope to become Tenebroso? And will you then be restored to your Walls?”

“We have no such hope or expectation,” Karlyn-Tan said. “There is too much future for us to see what will come.”

Dhulyn narrowed her eyes, but it was clear his words were innocent of any hidden meanings as he continued with his message.

“Our purpose is to remove the usurper Lok-iKol Tenebro from the Carnelian Throne, and restore the Culebro Tarkin, Tek-aKet.” He cleared his throat, giving her a chance to respond, but she only smiled her wolf’s smile. “If we live, there will be time to see what will follow.”

Dhulyn crossed her arms and, with her head to one side, studied the former Steward of Walls. If their House was being watched, no one, not even Karlyn-Tan, could simply enter and not be seen to come out again. Fortunately, Alkoryn had thought of even this contingency when she’d gone to consult with him.

“When the moon has set, bring Dal-eDal to the Fountain of the Rivers. You will be met and taken to the Tarkin.”

“There are two others I believe you will want as well, for the information they may have, Mar-eMar Tenebro, and the Scholar of Valdomar, Gundaron.”

She raised her eyebrows. They were alive, then, and likely to stay that way if Karlyn-Tan had taken them under his wing. Still, she told herself, she had no wish to see either the Scholar or Mar-eMar Tenebro again.

“The Scholar, at least, was intimate with Lok-iKol, and has information that may be of use.”

Dhulyn sighed. Of course he did. And she was a blooded fool not to think of that herself. “Very well, you may bring them.”

Instead of a large council table, such as could be found in the public meeting room in the House above them, here were half a score of small round tables, scattered over a floor leveled with sand and inlaid cobbles, each with chairs or stools to allow three or four to sit, making the place resemble nothing more than the taproom of a small tavern.

All it lacked were windows and a serving bar. Ganje, water, bread, and dried fruit had already been laid out on the tables.

Dhulyn was alerted by noises in the passages behind her to the arrival of Cullen of Langeron, a lean, wiry man with steel-gray hair and the feather tattoo covering the left side of his face. The ceilings did not allow for Cullen’s Racha bird, Disha, to ride in her accustomed place on his shoulder, and Dhulyn was intrigued to see that the bird nevertheless accompanied her Partner, walking on the ground almost under his feet in the manner of a playful cat.

The Cloud went immediately to Tek-aKet and saluted him with the formal bow of an ambassador.

“Don’t stand on ceremony, Cullen of Langeron,” Tek-aKet said. “At the moment I’m Tarkin of nothing but this room.”

“On the contrary, Tek-aKet Tarkin,” the Cloudman said sharply. “It is precisely because you are Tarkin of more than this room, that ceremony will be observed.” The two men locked gazes, and after a moment Dhulyn saw a loosening of the tension of Tek-aKet’s shoulders, a lessening of the darkness in his eyes. Guard yourself better, she thought, make your thoughts harder to see. The Tarkin of Imrion nodded, just once, as if in answer to her thoughts, and gestured to seats at the nearest tables.

“I have just been telling our host that most of the army is away on the borders to the south and west, keeping the Kondrians honest. I don’t know how many might come to us.”

“I believe we may have time to put that to the test,” Alkoryn said. He signaled to Fanryn Bloodhand.

“The latest news,” Fanryn began, “is that the Anointing and Dedication scheduled for the new moon has been postponed. Lok-iKol has sent for the Mesticha Stone, and tells people he’ll wait for its arrival. What this means, no one knows, but it’s only the last and strangest of the changes the latest days have brought us. As we know,” Fanryn said, tossing her hair back out of her face and accepting the cup of ganje Thionan had brought her, “the first few days found the Houses of Jarifo and Esmolo coming and going in the precincts of the Dome, giving themselves airs about the court and the city itself.”

“It seems there was to be a wedding,” Thionan added, “between Lok-iKol and Riv-oRiv Esmolo.”

“She’s young,” Tek-aKet said. “Too young to marry in any case.”

“Too young to marry, but not too young to be promised in marriage.” Parno drew their attention as he leaned forward, elbows on the table. “It’s a good move,” he added. “Buys the support of an important House without really
committing himself to anything.” He shrugged. “A great deal can happen between now and the time the girl can actually marry.”

“Well, the wedding’s no longer spoken of,” Fanryn said. “Now both those Houses have taken down their flags and flowerets, pulled their men off the streets, closed up their enclaves. Like those other Houses who were neither for you nor against you, Lord Tarkin, they now bide their time, waiting to weigh Lok-iKol’s power, waiting to see who they should salute. What’s changed them, though, that we can’t find out.”

Disha the Racha bird suddenly hopped from the floor to the back of an unoccupied chair. As if it were cause and effect, Cullen spoke, his soft voice cool and dry.

“So the Houses are playing their tiles carefully. There’s nothing new in that,” he said.

“But if the Houses have withdrawn their support, it may be we have a chance to regain the Throne if we act quickly. I’ve sent out word through the old network,” Alkoryn added, “letting people know that you’re alive, Lord Tarkin, and that you will return. Soldiers and guards alike are presenting themselves at safe contact points. One who’s come to us quietly with no fanfare and on foot so as to draw no attention is Fen-oNef Penradoso. He says to tell you that he doesn’t forget his promise to your father, nor yet the one he made to you. If you want Lok-iKol dead, say the word.”

Tek-aKet exchanged looks with those around the table, returning Parno’s broad smile with one of his own. Tek-aKet’s skin looked less bleached, Dhulyn thought, and the muscles of his face had regained their youthful firmness. This was what he needed to hear; that there were those who had believed in him, who were willing to support him still.

“He’s a tough old man, Fen-oNef,” he said, still smiling. “And I’ve no doubt that he would try. But it’s too dangerous.”

“Exactly what I told him. And it’s too dangerous for him to house the would-be soldiers who keep turning up. One of the things we must think of, is a place to gather troops.”

“What of the Jaldeans,” Dhulyn said, leaning forward. “And the Marked?”

Fanryn’s eyes flicked at the Cloudman, her question as clear as if she’d spoken it aloud. How much did they know? Dhulyn shrugged. It no longer mattered, she thought. As the Clouds revered the Marked, she was probably safer with them than with anyone besides her own Brothers.

“There’s a mystery there somewhere.” Fanryn shook her head. “At first, there was great rejoicing from the Jaldean Shrines, and people were talking about the dream of the Sleeping God as if they were about to join it.

“But now petitionerers are being turned from the shrines, told to come back, and when they do, they’re turned away again with excuses and soft words. There are no services or meditations, and the priests aren’t seen in the streets. Beslyn-Tor has not been seen in over two days—not even by his own people—and some others who were believed touched by the god are also conspicuous by their absence. People are wondering what has happened to the promises the Jaldeans were making before the fall of Tek-aKet Tarkin. The very people who were so quick to support them, are now murmuring against them.”

“Helped by the rumors we and the Scholars are spreading, of course,” Thionan said with a grin.

“And the Marked?” Tek-aKet asked.

Thionan’s voice came low and rough. “Two days ago they started being taken to the Carnelian Dome, and not to the Jaldean Shrines. None have been seen, city or country, since.”

The silence in the room was as thick as inglera fleece.

“We will hope there are some in hiding,” Cullen of Langeron said, as his bird Disha nodded.

Thionan cleared her throat. “There’s something else, though it’s hard to know how significant it is,” she said. “I’m sorry to say, Lord Tarkin, that your counselor, Gan-eGan, was yesterday found hanged in his private chambers. Hanged by his own hand, it appears. It seems a small tragedy in the face of everything else, and in the face of what the Marked have had to endure, but we thought perhaps you would want to know.”

Dhulyn shut her eyes, seeing again the two images of the skinny, overjeweled old man, one with green eyes, the other standing behind, weeping. She blinked. Green eyes again. Like the Mage in her Visions. And the Scholar. Who was on his way even now with information. Perhaps more information than he knew.

Dhulyn glanced at Tek-aKet. He was pale again, his face fixed and resolute. But before she could ask any questions a young woman appeared in the cave’s entrance. Dhulyn recognized her as the same one, Rehnata by name, who had greeted them when they first arrived in Gotterang. Since then, the dark brown hair above her temples and ears had been removed in preparation for the tattooing of her Mercenary badge.
“They are here, my Brothers,” she said to Alkoryn, acknowledging Dhulyn as well with a bob of her head. “Shall we bring them?”

“By all means,” Alkoryn said.
From the sound, the warning had come just a second too late for Karlyn-Tan, Gundaron thought. He himself was too short to worry about bumping his head, but being led blindfolded through passages and tunnels meant bashed elbows and stepped-on toes, no matter how careful your guides. As things were, however, Gun was grateful to have sore elbows and bruised toes to distract him from what was coming. He knew Mar and Karlyn-Tan were right—this was what he had to do. But just at the moment, he was more than half convinced he’d been persuaded against his will.

Finally the blindfolds came off. They’d had them on so long that even the soft light of the lanterns carried by their guides was enough to have all four of them blinking and squinting. Gundaron tried not to hang back as they approached the open doorway of the underground meeting room. Not that he could do much more than drag his feet a bit since there were Mercenary Brothers both in front of and behind him. From what Karlyn-Tan had said, he’d expected Dhulyn Wolfshead herself to lead them to Tek-aKet, but it had been two black-haired Mercenary Brothers with Semlorian accents. The smiles they’d given him when they’d met them at the fountain made the skin on the back of his neck crawl.

Dhulyn Wolfshead would be inside the room, he thought, watching Dal-eDal pass through the entrance. Along with the Brother he hadn’t met, her Partner Parno Lionsmane.

The first Brothers he saw as he followed Mar into the room weren’t the two he was dreading the most, however, but Fanryn Bloodhand and Thionan Hawkmoon, who went so far as to lay her hand on her sword hilt and grin at him. Gun looked away and, seeing Mar’s face, followed her line of sight to where Dhulyn Wolfshead stood to the left of Tek-aKet. Mar stepped toward the Outlander woman with her hands lifted, reaching out, but hesitated, coming to a stop as the Wolfshead gave her the half bow that was the very knife edge of courtesy among the Noble Houses. Such would be the greeting—Gun had seen it many times—between two nobles who had some long-standing grudge, but were forced to be civil in some public gathering. Dhulyn Wolfshead straightened and turned her eyes away, and Gun braced himself . . . but her stone-gray eyes moved over and past him as if he was not even there.

He immediately looked down, heart thumping. It seemed he had nothing to fear from Dhulyn Wolfshead. It seemed that as far as she was concerned, he didn’t exist. He found himself hugging his arms around his chest, to convince himself he was there, he was.

When he had enough control of himself to listen, he found that he had missed Dal’s first words. The Tarkin was speaking.

“To say that I am surprised to see you does not begin to describe my feelings, Dal-eDal Tenebro.” He put up his hand and Dal stilled. “You are heir to your House, and now to the Carnelian Throne, and yet you come with your oaths of loyalty to me.”

It was not a question, but Dal-eDal answered it.

“My lord—” he cleared his throat and began again. “I am not an ambitious man. I have never wanted more than my own Household. But my cousin Lok-iKol sees a mirror in every man, and his own image grinning back at him. Fate may lead even a distant cousin to become House of his family, whether he wished it or no, but the Tarkanite . . .” Dal shook his head.

“I was warned to be skeptical of your loyalty,” Tek-aKet said, nodding at where Fanryn Bloodhand and Thionan Hawkmoon stood leaning against a small table to Gundaron’s left. “Perhaps you do not want the Carnelian Throne, but you would have me believe that you choose this moment to act against your House?”

Dal licked his lips. “I do not believe I go against my House, my lord,” he said, in that quietly strained voice that had been all Gun had heard from him for the last day. “I believe my House has Fallen.”

At this everyone, Gun included, edged forward. Fanryn Bloodhand straightened to attention and Thionan Hawkmoon put a restraining hand on her Partner’s arm. Even the Wolfshead and the Lionsmane exchanged glances.

“Who is it, then, who sits on my throne?” Tek-aKet’s voice was hard as the rock overhead.

“I do not know,” Dal said. “Outwardly, it seems to be my cousin.” Dal glanced suddenly at Parno Lionsmane, but Gun couldn’t see that the Brother had moved in any way. “Possibly, in some way, it is. But I do not believe it. Something else occupies . . . something else is there.” He straightened, and Gun saw for the first time the dark smudges under the man’s eyes. “Indulge me, my lord,” Dal said. “I have waited what seems an age to tell the full story only once, and it is choking me.”

Tek-aKet glanced at the older Mercenary Brother seated next to him. When the man nodded, the Tarkin gestured at Dhulyn Wolfshead, indicating that she should take the seat next to him. That left an empty seat across the table.

“Sit, Dal-eDal Tenebro. Refresh yourself, tell your story.”
Dal nodded, waited until a cup was poured for him, but made no move to pick it up. He took the chair, though, Gun thought, feeling the ache of his own muscles.

“I have spent my whole life waiting, and watching, my lord; so long that perhaps I forgot what it was that I was waiting for.” As Dal folded his hands on the table in front of him, Gun saw them trembling. “Lok had my father killed, and I believed I was waiting for the right moment to avenge him. I wonder if I would ever have found it.” Dal drew in his brows, frowning at his hands on the table.

Mar shifted, stepping forward as if she would move closer to the table. Gun put his hands on her shoulders, and pulled her back a little, until she was standing against his chest. Her skin felt warm, even through two layers of clothing, and she relaxed under his hands, though she kept her eyes on the faces of the four seated at the table.

Dal glanced up at Tek-aKet and waited until the man nodded before he continued. “Perhaps three days after he took the Dome, my lord, my cousin called me to him, saying that he had an errand for me.” Keeping his eyes fixed on Tek-aKet, Dal’s voice did not falter. “For years he has kept me under his hand, and I have not left Gotterang unless as his companion. Yet he has now, suddenly, asked me to do so, in order to find the Mercenary Dhulyn Wolfshead.”

Mar glanced at Gun over her shoulder, her eyebrows raised; Gun pressed his lips together and nodded. A quick look around the room showed much less puzzlement than he would have expected. She’s told them, he thought, by all the Caids, she’s told them.

Dal, too, had noticed the change of atmosphere in the room. “Apparently, you know more of this than I, though I knew that my cousin had shown interest in this Brother before he took the Carnelian Throne.

“He said no more of her at that moment, and I walked with him to the room where your crown, my lord Tarkin, and your treasures, and the jewels that your wife brought with her to her marriage are kept. He said he was looking for a relic of the Sleeping God.”

Tek-aKet nodded. “An old bracelet,” he said, “with green stones. I know of it. The Jaldean Shrine here in Gotterang has been asking for it for months.”

“As you say, my lord. Lok found it, a gold bracelet in the antique manner of the Caids, and he put it on.” Dal picked up the cup of ganje that had been poured for him, looked inside it, and put it down again. He’s not looking anyone in the face, Gun thought. When did that start? Dal had always been the most watchful of men.

“What of it,” the Tarkin said. “My mother wore it often. I’ve worn it myself.”

Gun wouldn’t have thought it possible, but at these words Dal paled even more, the shadows around his mouth stained a faint green.

“Drink something, man; you’re no use to us if you faint,” Dhulyn Wolfshead said in her rough voice. The Cloudman to the Tarkin’s left stood and with his own hand poured out water from the glass jug on the table and handed the mug to Dal-eDal.

“Thank you.” His voice was a thread of air. He sipped at the water and set the mug down next to the untouched ganje. He cleared his throat, but his voice when he continued was still rough. “Lok found the bracelet,” he said, “and slipped it over his hand. As I watched, the bracelet faded, dissolved, and was absorbed into his skin. I looked up, and Lok was watching the spot where the bracelet had been and smiling. And his shadow, on the wall behind him, was not his own, but larger, darker, than it should have been—” Dal sucked in a short, sharp sip of air, “and was the wrong shape, as if it had wings about to open.”

Parno Lionsmane’s cup tilted, but he caught it before it fell.

“The lantern—” Tek-aKet started to say.

“No, my lord,” Dal interrupted. “My own shadow was there, pale and ordinary, as familiar to me as my own hand. Except that my shadow seemed to shrink from his, as if it knew something I did not.” This time, when Dal stopped speaking, no one else moved or spoke, so obvious was it that he had not finished. “There is more, my lord. When I looked again to my cousin, to ask him about what I had seen, his eye was green. Not blue as it has always been, and, his eye patch—” Dal lifted his left hand to his own face, as if to show them where the eye patch should be. “I don’t know, perhaps because of the angle at which we were standing, perhaps because he had touched it somehow—” Dal looked across the table at his Tarkin. “My lord, I could see that both his eyes were green. Both of them.”

Mar shifted abruptly and Gun loosened the suddenly tight grip he’d taken on her shoulders. His breathing came uncomfortably quick, and in his mind he saw again the barricade of shelves and books that kept away the Green Shadow. The Cloudman at the table with the Tarkin made the old sign against evil, thumbtip to tip of index finger, the Mercenaries standing around the room developed suddenly neutral expressions, and Wolfshead and Lionsmane looked at each other, recognition in their faces. But Dal spoke matter-of-factly like a man beyond caring what other
people thought.

“Clearly, you believe what you saw,” the Tarkin said finally. “What do you believe it means?”

“It means you must not wait, my lord,” Dal said. Suddenly reaching out his hand to the man across from him, Dal looked the Tarkin directly in the face. “Listen to me. This is no ordinary coup. I have thought that it did not matter to me who sat on the Carnelian Throne, but I tell you, it matters to me what sits there, and that green-eyed thing is not my cousin.” Once again he spoke, not as a frightened man who expects to be held in contempt, but as a man freely owning a fear in the face of which the opinions of others were meaningless. “It has the Marked brought to the Dome, and they leave broken and mad. The Carnelian Guard—” He broke off, frowning. “Elite troops injure themselves with carelessness or in quarrels, except for those who go off duty and disappear. Gan-eGan has killed himself. Children are weeping in corners. Whatever this is, its poison is spreading. You must waste no time. You must act now.”

Gun licked his lips. One pair of eyes had left off looking at Dal-eDal and had fixed on him. One pair of stone-gray eyes that had slid over him, unable to see him when he had entered the room, were focused on him now.

“Let’s ask the Scholar,” Dhulyn Wolfshead said. “I’ll wager my second-best sword he knows what this is, or can guess. He knows more than anyone what the formerly one-eyed Lok-iKol has been up to.”

Gun’s hands formed fists at his sides. It felt like every eye in the room was on him. Even Mar had turned around and was searching his face, her eyebrows drawn down, her lips parted.

“Come, Gundaron of Valdomar.” Gun winced at the tone in Dhulyn Wolfshead’s husky voice. “From the look of you, Dal-eDal’s not the only one here who’s seen this green-eyed thing.”

Everyone was looking at him, Gun saw as he tried to swallow with his suddenly dry mouth. Everyone except Parno Lionsmane. He stood behind the Wolfshead, his hand on her shoulder, his eyes squeezed shut.

“Come forward, boy, and tell us what you know of this.”

Gun found himself responding to the tone of command in the Tarkin’s voice, stepping around Mar and coming closer to the table before he realized he’d made up his mind to do it. Mar touched him on the arm as he passed, her worried eyes searching his face. He looked away from her. He couldn’t tell them everything. He couldn’t tell them that he, himself—they would never understand. Mar would never understand. He would lose all that was growing between them.

When he was facing the Tarkin, he cleared his throat, and released the breath he was holding. “I have seen it, my lord Tarkin. It is real.” Gun glanced around, but except for Mar, there was no friendly face. “I—we’ve been hiding,” he said. “Can you tell me, Lord Dal, have the Marked been going to the Dome only since the . . .” Gun bit his lip and then continued. “Since the green has come into Lok-iKol’s eyes?”

“I believe the decree changed that morning, just hours before my cousin, or the thing that he has become, sent for me.”

“What can you tell us, Scholar of Valdomar?”

Gun drew in a deep breath and settled his shoulders. He found himself folding his hands in front of him, as if about to recite his lesson. If only this was just another lecture, another examination in his Library. That what he was about to say was only interesting history, and not something that might very well change the lives of everyone in this room, including his own.

“I believe it is this Green Shadow that seeks for and destroys the Marked. That the teachings of the New Believers are nothing more than an excuse, invented to give it freedom to act.”

Gun saw movement out of the corner of his eye and hesitated. The Cloudman was nodding, a satisfied smile on his face.

“Continue,” the Tarkin said.

“I cannot explain how, my lord Tarkin, but I have only recently remembered seeing what Lord Dal describes, the green light, the misshapen shadow, the . . . the feeling of otherness, in Beslyn-Tor, the Jaldean High Priest. It seems I took no notice of it at the time, but afterward, as I say, I remembered seeing it many times.” Gun waited for the murmurs to die away.

“I think I saw it in Lok-iKol once, but not in the same way,” Gun continued when no one else spoke. “At that time, Lok-iKol did not move or speak, but stood slackly, like a rag doll, as if the Green Shadow only looked through his eyes. In any case, it was the priest who wanted Marked brought to him, not Lok-iKol.”

“The Green Shadow,” Parno Lionsmane said under his breath.

Gun meant to continue, to tell about himself, to tell everything, but his throat closed. He looked down at his
clasped hands, trembling, knuckles white. When he looked up again, he met Dhulyn Wolfshead’s eyes. *She knows,*
he thought.

“They say Beslyn-Tor has suffered a stroke, and lies feeble and raving in rooms Lok has given him in the Dome,”
Dal said, leaning back in his chair with a thoughtful look.

“Always the Jaldeans,” Tek-aKet said. “Zella warned me they were the real danger, and I didn’t listen.”

“They supported Lok-iKol’s coup,” Dal pointed out.

“But why? Was it this Green Shadow?”

Gun nodded. “It wants the Marked.”


“And so they gave their support to someone who would.” Parno Lionsmane focused his attention on Gun over his
Partner’s head. “But what did that support entail?”

“The people.” It was Dhulyn Wolfshead’s raw silk voice that answered. “How did the traitors get into the Dome
so easily? Almost all of the Carnelian Guard, soldiers whose duty it is to protect the Dome, and more than half of
your Personal Guard, Lord Tarkin, have been in the streets for the last moon, helping the City Guard keep order,
quelling little riots and mob violence. All started by the Jaldeans.”

The Tarkin was shaking his head. “They wouldn’t have done so much on Lok-iKol’s bare word that he would
enact their laws. Lok-iKol must have been doing something for them already.”

Gundaron swallowed. “Lok-iKol was collecting Marked for them, my lord.”

“Explain.”

“Not everyone came voluntarily to the shrines to be blessed by the Sleeping God. Some even left the city, or
moved to new quarters, never obeying the edicts about their dress. Lok was seeking these out and holding them for
the Jaldeans when he found them.”

“And how was he finding them?”

Something in the Tarkin’s tone, in the glint of his eyes, made Gundaron look away, down at the white knuckles of
his clasped hands. He licked his lips. “I found them for him, my lord.”

“How?”

Gun bit his lip, his throat tight as a fist. He risked a glance at Mar. Her face was still as stone, but she said
nothing. “Research.” His whisper sounded uncomfortably loud in the silence of the room. Dhulyn Wolfshead looked
at him with narrowed eyes; he shifted his own and was startled to find the same searching look in the eyes of the
Racha bird.

“What were the Jaldeans doing with the Marked you helped locate?” Tek-aKet’s voice was silkily quiet.

“I don’t know. That is—” Gun kept his eyes fixed on his folded hands. “I didn’t take any part after the people
were found. Afterward, when I remembered . . . now I know that Beslyn-Tor came to give them what he called the
Sleeping God’s blessing. But as for why . . . I think he—I think it, the Green Shadow, is destroying the Marked; it
fears them, as if they can harm it somehow.”

“You never tried to find out?” Gun glanced up at Parno Lionsmane, but immediately dropped his gaze. The
Mercenary looked like he’d opened a pie only to find snakes writhing inside.

“I didn’t know.” He couldn’t tell them everything, they wouldn’t believe him.

“It may be that the Green Shadow took the memories from him,” Dhulyn Wolfshead said.

“And it was for this that you brought my Partner, my soul, to Gotterang?” The growl in the man’s voice showed it
wasn’t just for his coloring that he was called Lionsmane.

“No!” Gun cried out, holding his hands up, pushing away the worst of it. “Dhulyn Wolfshead wasn’t for the
Jaldean. Lok-iKol wanted to keep her for himself.”

“And who else?” Dhulyn Wolfshead glanced over his shoulder and suddenly Gun knew exactly who was standing
just behind him. He could almost smell the distinctive sweetness of the soap they’d used in Karlyn-Tan’s room.

“And Mar, too, if she prove to be a Finder as he suspected.” He squeezed the words out through the barrier his
throat had become.

“As he suspected because you had told him so—”

“Enough, Parno.” The Wolfshead’s voice, though soft, had the force of a cracked whip. All the murmurs in the
room died away. “We are all alive, which is more, apparently, than can be said for Lok-iKol,” she smiled her wolf’s
smile, “on whom, as his mother wished, has fallen a terrible curse.” She turned to Gun. “What of you, Scholar of
“Valdomar?”

“I’ll kill him if you like,” Parno Lionsmane said, and there were a few murmurs in the room that showed others agreed.

“He meant no harm,” Dhulyn Wolfshead said, steel showing in her voice. “You forget the Scholarly mind, my soul. It isn’t real to them unless it’s in a book.”

Gundaron looked up at her. There was no horrified disbelief on her face, as there was in Parno’s. He felt a crumbling hollow in his mind where there had been a good solid wall. A wall that he’d built by sticking to his books, his notes. By not asking awkward questions and by telling himself that everything was all right. He had a sudden mental image of the little page Okiron once telling him that Lok made him nervous, and of himself telling the boy that everything was all right. He’d told himself over and over, since leaving Tenebro House, that he was doing all he could to make amends and there was no point in dwelling on the past. But he’d still been hiding something behind that wall. Of course he’d been horrified when he’d finally remembered, finally realized, what Lok-iKol and Beslyn-Tor were doing. But that hadn’t been why he’d wanted to leave. He’d wanted to leave out of fear for himself, not out of horror at what he’d done to others. Out of fear of the Green Shadow, and what it might still do to him. Out of fear of Pasillon. Not out of resolution and defiance, as Mar had done, but out of fear.

Of course the Outlander woman showed no surprise now; she’d known all along, she’d seen him in Lok-iKol’s study, and known what he was.

“We have strayed from our point.” Gun roused himself at the sound of the Tarkin’s voice. “What of the green-eyed Jaldean spirit? What can be done now?”

Gun cleared his throat. No one had offered him anything to drink, and he was afraid to ask. “Lord Dal is right, this is not Lok-iKol. The Shadow does not want what Lok-iKol wanted. If you wait to gather an army, my lords, there may not be an Imrion to save. From what I have seen, the Shadow doesn’t care about the country, only about the Sleeping God and the Marked.” Gun coughed again.

The Racha bird startled them all by suddenly opening and closing its wings.

“These people came together, my lord,” the Cloudman said. “Shall we accept what they told us without verification? You can withdraw to the mountains. An army can’t fight the Clouds,” he said, reminding them all of the old saying.

“Never before,” Gun agreed, “because the Tarkin always counted the cost of it, in time, in soldiers, and in lost revenues. But what if the cost was immaterial to him? What if it’s the Shadow that comes? The Green Shadow cares only to destroy the Marked.”

“What is this Shadow?” Fanryn said. “Is it the Sleeping God, awakening to destroy us?”

The Cloudman’s bark of laughter brought every head up. “Don’t be misled by the lies of fools. We have nothing to fear from the Sleeping God, awake or asleep. This is some enemy.”

“Enough.” The Tarkin’s soft baritone cut across and silenced all other noise. “Dal-eDal, if you have nothing further to add, would you withdraw, and allow me to consult with my advisers?”

“I am entirely in your hands, Tek-aKet,” the Tenebro man said. “But I urge you again, waste no time.”

_Eighteen_

“SO THE LORD DAL-EDAL is certain.” Cullen’s Racha bird Disha had hopped up on the table in front of him, and was eating tiny pieces of hard cheese from the palm of his hand. “I don’t find his certainty altogether reassuring, do you?” He and his Racha tilted their heads at each other, their movement a perfect mirror image. “It’s madness to believe him.” Cullen’s quiet tone was at odds with his words. “It’s a trick. These men have been sent by the Tenebroso Lok-iKol to lure you into acting before you are prepared.”

“Mercenaries?” Tek-aKet looked up from the food lying untouched on his plate.

“What of Karlyn-Tan?” Dhulyn said. “The oaths taken by the Stewards of a House are as binding as those taken by Mercenaries . . . or by Racha Clouds,” she added, inclining her head toward Cullen and Disha. “Do you suggest that he has not been Cast Out? A Steward of Walls does not leave his post for a trick, not even so weighty a trick as this one.”

“But, Dhulyn.” Now it was Thionan who spoke up from her perch on the nearby table. “Demons? Possession by green shadows? We can’t make plans based on such ravings. Has any of us, any we can trust, seen this thing?”

“I have.”

In the silence you could hear the rustling of Disha’s feathers as she turned her head to look.
“You, Lionsmane?” Alkoryn’s harsh whisper held the surprise that was mirrored on every other face in the room. Dhulyn almost smiled. Parno was supposed to be the ordinary soul, she was the strange one.

“In the eyes of a Jaldean priest in Navra. A priest who was standing at the back of a mob while that mob burned down a Finder’s house, with his children still inside.”

“I also have seen it,” Dhulyn added.

“In Navra?”

“In a Vision.”

Cullen and Disha leaned forward, their heads at an identical tilt. Disha half opened her wings and took two rocking steps toward Dhulyn on her taloned feet. Dhulyn hesitated, aware that everyone in the room waited for her next words. Should she reveal what she’d seen of the Scholar, or should she keep it to herself until she’d had a chance to investigate it further? Did Gundaron of Valdomar know that the Green Shadow had also looked through his eyes? It might be an idea to find out before exposing him.

“I have Seen a green-eyed Lok-iKol on the Carnelian Throne, his shadow misshapen on the wall behind him.”

Cullen and Disha nodded, satisfied, but the Tarkin’s two guardsmen showed by their thinned lips and narrowed eyes that belief was mixing with something closer to fear in their thoughts. Dhulyn sighed, and pressed her lips together. It was exactly to avoid that look that she’d always kept her Mark to herself.

The Tarkin had seen it also. “Let me remind you,” he said to his men. “If Dhulyn Wolfshead was not Marked, I would be dead. And you, who gave oaths to defend me to the death, would be either dead as well, or alive and forsworn. She has done us all a great service.” Both men had the grace to look shamefaced at their feet. Tek-aKet nodded, satisfied.

“May I have your counsel for action?”

Slowly Dhulyn realized that everyone in the room, Cloudman, Racha bird, Mercenary Brothers—Tarkin and his guardsmen—all were looking at her. She glanced first at Parno, then at Alkoryn. Both men nodded to her.

“The Green Shadow exists,” she said. “Whatever its ultimate goal, it begins by destroying the Marked.” She glanced around at the faces intent on her words. “That is where it begins. We cannot know how it will continue.”

“It begins where it fears the most, you think?” Parno had obviously been giving this some thought.

“Very likely,” Dhulyn agreed. “If it fears the Marked, it means the Marked can harm it somehow. We need to find out how.”

“No.” They turned to the Tarkin. “We must remove it from the Throne.”

Tek-aKet Tarkin raised his hands, palms toward her, and Dhulyn fell silent. “With respect, Dhulyn Wolfshead, hear me out. Perhaps we can destroy it, but perhaps we cannot. Our first act must be to remove it from the throne, to regain control of Imrion. At the moment, its power does not extend past Gotterang, and if we act quickly, it will not. Once we have the city, now that we know what we must fight, we will have a position of power from which to do it.” He placed his hands palm down on the table. “We must act and act now.”

Alkoryn was nodding, his fingers tracing lines on an imaginary map. “A frontal assault will not work. We have not the numbers needed, and unlike Lok-iKol, we’ve no trick to empty the Dome of its Carnelian Guards.” He looked up from his tracing to indicate the rock walls around them. “Fortunately, we know a way into the Carnelian Dome that has nothing to do with front gates, or the number of guards. Dhulyn, my Brother, if you would.”

Dhulyn bowed and turned to the door. “Rehnata,” she called, and waited for the girl to appear in the entrance before turning back to Alkoryn.

“Fetch my maps of Gotterang,” Alkoryn said now that the girl was within reach of his voice. “The blue series, not the green, and the plans of the Dome. When you have done that, bring back our guests.”

“If you would stand here, Lady Disha,” Alkoryn the Senior Brother said in his scarred voice. Thus courteously addressed, Disha was happy to move. There weren’t many who knew the Racha would understand them—as, of course, she could, so long as Cullen himself was in the room. If it were possible, his already healthy respect for the Mercenary Brotherhood increased.

“There are three layers of guards,” Tek-aKet Tarkin was saying. “Those here, in the outer perimeter, allow access to the public rooms and galleries where any petitioner may enter; here the second, letting pass only those who have business with the Throne. And finally, here, the innermost circle,” he looked up. “These posts are usually taken by my own Personal Guard, and they watch the family and private rooms.”

“So far as I can tell,” the Tenebro Lord Dal-eDal said, frowning down on the drawings, “the guard postings have
not changed—though the guards themselves are different.” His brows drew down even further. “No, there is one change. There are now guards here, in the Onyx Walk.”

Cullen’s eyes narrowed as Disha cocked her head to look closely at the Tenebro man. He’d no trust of this one either, cousin to the usurper, a man who stood to gain no matter who died. Cullen shifted his gaze across the room to where Dhuelyn Wolfshead stood, relaxed, her eyes on Dal-eDal, her wolf’s smile on her lips. Except for that, and their intent stances, the Partnered Brothers could have been asleep on their feet, there was so little tension in their bodies. Disha transferred her golden eye to the Wolfshead in response to Cullen’s thought.

+SEER+ was the thought that Cullen caught. +YES+ he answered. The balance of power in the room had changed utterly for him when he understood the direction of what had been said. Menders, Finders, even Healers were to be found among the Clouds—and if Lok-iKol was hunting the Marked, that was reason enough for him to help kill the man. But a Seer. His mother had spoken of one that had been known in her mother’s day. Cullen had no more hoped to be in the same room as a Seer than he would have hoped to fly without Disha.

We are here for you, Seer, he thought, knowing that Disha heard him and agreed. My soul and I. Yours is the lead we follow. He and his soul turned their attention back to the man speaking.

“That need not preclude our using that entrance, though we would lose the element of surprise,” Alkoryn Pantherclaw was saying, tapping his gnarled index finger on the plans in front of him. “And there are other secret ways by which we can enter into the Dome, but,” and here the old one paused, looked at the Tarkin and at the Tenebro lord. “But I will not take Dal-eDal through these ways.”

The Tenebro lord hissed air in through his teeth, plainly displeased, and Cullen smiled, Disha shifting from foot to foot.

“Surely—” The Tarkin broke off in the face of Alkoryn Pantherclaw’s slowly shaking head.

“You objected, Tek-aKet, that the Mercenary Brotherhood knew of ways into your Dome, and now you ask that we tell others? I should not even have taken you that way, but what’s done is done. As Senior Brother, I must consider the future and not merely the needs of the moment. In any case, we could not take many through the tunnels and passages. I advise sending only those who have already been. What say you, Brothers?”

Dhuelyn Wolfshead grimaced, considering. “It seems to me these passages were never intended to be used by soldiers—to the contrary. In many places they are so narrow, that we could pass only one at a time, considering that we will be carrying weapons. That would likely also be true of whichever secret door we used.” She turned to Parno Lionsmane and added, “Remember the engagement at Lashar? Where we used the caves beneath the escarpment? One company of men was caught and slaughtered because of just such a bottleneck in the passages. Besides Tek-aKet, I would recommend no more than six Brothers.”

“We can’t walk in the front door,” Tek-aKet said, rubbing his chin with the fingers of his right hand. “But Dal-eDal can, and he can bring others with him.”

“That I can’t do. I was sent for Dhuelyn Wolfshead, and I can’t return without her.”

“Then Dhuelyn Wolfshead you shall have,” she said.

Cullen clenched his teeth and remained silent. The Wolfshead waited patiently until the storm of protest died away before continuing as if she had not been interrupted. “We’ll be able to operate from two fronts, allowing us to flank if need be.” She looked up, not at her Senior, but at Lionsmane, her Partner. “I’ll be perfectly safe,” she said in her honey-rough voice, “until I get to the Green Shadow, and by then you’ll be there.”

“We are for you, Dhuelyn Wolfshead,” Cullen said. “Disha and I. We also should not be shown the secret ways,” he added.

“I can’t bring back more than the eight I brought away with me,” the Tenebro lord said. “In fact, it would be more convincing if I returned with fewer.”

“You would have needed a tracker to find a Mercenary Brother,” Cullen said. “I am that man, come with you in the hope of greater rewards.”

The Tenebro lord spread his hand. “A good enough notion, but surely there is another way to get our own people into the Dome. Could some of the Mercenary Brotherhood not take work there, to act as spies, if nothing else?”

Disha moved closer to the Tenebro man. +BITE+ was her thought. +NO+ he responded, though he stifled a smile.

“What have I said?” the Tenebro lord said when the silence grew lengthy.

“The Mercenary Brotherhood does not take someone’s pay in order to spy upon them,” Alkoryn Pantherclaw said. “Not even when it appears to suit our purposes to do so. We are true to our employ, always. This is one of the reasons the Brotherhood is as old as it is.”
“And one of the reasons there are so few of us,” Dhulyn Wolfshead added.

“Your pardon, Alkoryn Charter.” There was a hint of sarcasm in the Tenebro lord’s tone, as if he had himself taken offense. “Ordinarily I wouldn’t argue with a policy that has stood so well the test of time. But as I’ve said, this is no ordinary foe. Now, if ever, is the time to suspend such rules, before you find yourself and your Brotherhood destroyed.”

Maybe he should have let Disha bite him. +YES+ she thought.

“What difference?” Dhulyn the Seer broke in. “If we suspend our rules, there is no Brotherhood, we would have destroyed ourselves.”

Tek-aKet held up his hands. “Dal, please. I know you are anxious—”

Cullen remembered that these two were also, in some way, cousins.

“With respect, Tek, you didn’t see—”

“No, I didn’t see. But these others have, and yet they are not ready to plunge headlong in. Things are as they are. We work with what we have.” He turned to Alkoryn Pantherclaw. “What of loyal guard within the Dome?”

Dhulyn the Seer and Parno Lionsmane both shook their heads. Dhulyn shrugged and signaled to Parno to speak.

“In view of what the Scholar Gundaron has told us, I don’t think we can count on any who are still within the Dome,” he said. “They may prove to be free of the taint of the Green-eyed Shadow,” here Parno paused and looked pointedly at Dal-eDal, “but we can’t be sure enough to trust them with our plans and our secrets.”

“Either the Scholar or the Lord Dal might have been touched by the Green Shadow without knowing it.” Dhulyn pulled a chair away from the wall, turned it around, and sat down astride it, twisting her spine from side to side; the last thing she needed at this moment was cramping muscles. “The Scholar, I believe, has been.”

Parno sat down on the edge of the room’s only bed. “What do you mean?”

By this time in their Partnership, Dhulyn had had a fair amount of practice describing her Visions to Parno, and this one went quickly. “It looked to me,” she said finally, “as if there were three Scholars, one the body being used, one a spirit trying to escape, and one a spirit watching.”

“If he watched, then he knows.” A muscle in the side of Parno’s jaw popped out. “And he made no mention of this.”

“Some part of him does know, I’m certain, but can you be surprised that he would keep this to himself?”

Parno looked at her with narrowed eyes. “He is a danger.”

“We must warn Alkoryn to keep the boy watched, I agree, and to limit most strictly where he goes, and what he sees.”

“If the Green Shadow is looking for you . . .”

Dhulyn folded her arms on the chairback and rested her chin on her hands. “I understand the Tarkin’s wish to regain his throne, but it is the Green Shadow that is the real danger to us all, I think.”

“With luck,” Parno said, “we will destroy it when we kill the body it wears.”

“And Lok-iKol does die by my hand, I have Seen it.”

“Then we proceed, and we’re back to my concerns.” Parno leaned forward, his elbows on his knees.

Dhulyn shook her head, her eyes shut. “Dal-eDal would be a problem if we did trust him. We’ve already agreed we don’t, so he’s no more dangerous now than he was before.”

“You’ll be bound—”

“I won’t really be bound, you dolt,” she said. “I’ll even be on my own horse, as if Bloodbone and I between us can’t confound Dal-eDal and his plans. If he has any. Now tell me what the real problem is.”

“Then I’ll come with you.” Parno spoke through his clenched teeth. “No disrespect intended to your horse.”

Dhulyn laid her forehead down on her crossed arms. “This has been decided. You’re to go with the Tarkin. I’m to go with Dal, and Karlyn-Tan and two others. And Cullen, don’t forget, which gives us the Racha as well. What can go wrong?”

“You’re the Seer, you tell me. Do you hear yourself? ‘What can go wrong?’ ” He threw out his hands and widened his eyes in a parody of innocence. “If I started listing things now, I’d still be talking when it was time to leave.”

Dhulyn slammed her hands down on the chairback. “That’s right,” she said. “You’d still be talking. The rest of us would be at work.” She rubbed her face with her hands. “ ‘Let’s go to Imrion,’ you said. ‘We haven’t been there in
years,’ you said. ‘I miss the smell of my own hills.’ If we’d followed my advice we’d be in Voyagin even now, helping to plan the summer campaign.” She sucked in a deep breath, grimaced, and let it out as slowly as she could. “And the Green Shadow would be destroying the Marked. I’m sorry, my soul. These politicians waste my patience. Come, it’s not the first time a campaign has separated us, and it won’t be the last.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” he muttered. “I’d rather have Dal with me.”

She shook her head slowly. “And I’m supposed to be the inarticulate Outlander. Even if you did doubt my own abilities—which I know you don’t, bound and gagged I could still kill him easily—I won’t be alone. The way they feel about the Marked, do you think Cullen and the Racha bird would stand idly by if Dal-eDal threatens me?”

“They won’t be watching him carefully enough.”

“Carefully enough for what? Why should it prove so much more dangerous for Dal to be with me than with you?”

He stared at her for a long moment before speaking, his breath coming short and fierce through his nostrils. “Because Dal has no reason to want me dead. He may think he has such a reason for you.”

She looked up at him, eyes widened in surprise. “Nice to know I make enemies so easily.”

“I told you we met and spoke in the Dome. I didn’t tell you that, like the Fallen House, Dal wants Lok dead, and me to become Tenebroso. I told him I would not leave the Brotherhood. I would not leave you. What if he thinks my answer would be different if you were dead?”

“The old woman,” Dhulyn said. “The House-that-was. She thought I would make a fine consort.”

“And so you would, if we were not Partnered, and Mercenary Brothers. That life is gone.”

She nodded, rubbing the small of her back with both hands. “Parno, my soul. Would you fetch me warm blankets, please?”

Parno glanced at the open doorway, sensing the youngster still hovering, obviously torn between courtesy and curiosity.

“You’re Rehnata, aren’t you?” he asked, straightening from the bed and walking cat-footed closer so she wouldn’t have to raise her voice. “Go ahead, ask.”

The girl licked her lips, and pulled herself up straighter.

“Two things, Parno.”

Parno needn’t have worried about moving closer, she’d been well-trained in the nightwatch whisper.

“First, if this were the morning of a battle, what would the Wolfshead do for her pains?”

“First,” Parno said quietly. “When there is training, pain can be ignored, as I’m sure you already know. But in order to ignore pain, there must be a distraction. When there is no fighting, distraction of a kind can be found in drugs. Your herbalist can tell you which are best. The Wolfshead does not like drugs. She says that the pain exhausts, but the drugs make you stupid. Better tired than stupid, she says.” Parno smiled. Dhulyn had never been any great fan of the stupid. “As for the day of battle, the necessity to kill others is often in itself a powerful distraction.” He turned and looked again at Dhulyn. She slept, but under the weight of blankets she still moved and shifted as if, even in her sleep, she sought relief in movement for overtaxed muscles.

“And the second?” he said, turning back to Rehnata.

“Is she,” here the girl looked away, not wanting Parno to see what was in her eyes, “is she Seeing?”

Parno frowned. This would be the first of many such questions, now that Dhulyn was no longer hiding her Mark. “I think so. She has not said it, but it seems when there is more pain, there is more Sight.”


“Have I been asleep long?”
“A few hours. Is the pain better, or worse?”
“Better, I think.”

Parno turned her hand over and kissed the palm. She pushed herself up on one elbow, and, using her grip on Parno’s hand for leverage, managed to roll onto her side so she was still lying under the covers, but able to see her Partner without twisting her neck.

“What?”
“More discussion, but they’re agreed. Dal will meet you at Yerloa’s Spring at the hour the moon sets tomorrow night. That will bring you to the north gates of the city just as they open, and we’ll meet inside the Dome just as the morning watch is settling in and getting complacent.”

“What of the Tarkina?”
“She’ll stay here where it’s safer. Mar and that Scholar boy as well.” He took the hand he still held, and bumped it softly against his lips before adding, “Well-watched, as you advise, but I still say you should let me kill the twisted little book reader.”

Dhulyn sighed. “It is the purpose of Scholars to learn, and this one has learned something of the world that his Library neglected to show him. Let him live with that knowledge, and with the knowledge of the evil he is capable of. And let us not forget, we may yet learn something from him ourselves.”

Parno shrugged, though his own smile did not touch his eyes. “It’s your decision, I suppose. Let me know if you change your mind, though. I’d be happy to kill the little dung eater later.”

Dhulyn tugged his hand. “I’ve Seen Gun helping Mar. They were both looking into that bowl of hers.”

Parno sat back, releasing her hand and placing his own on his thighs. “They’ve been wondering, the Tarkin especially, whether you’ve Seen anything. I don’t think they’re going to care much about Mar and her bowl.”

“Daresay you’re right.” Dhulyn began pushing back the blankets that covered her. “I saw Lok-iKol again, and I killed him again. Sometimes he had two eyes, sometimes one.”

“But you still See his death, so that’s to the good. Nothing we’ve done so far changes that?”
“Evidently.”
“What aren’t you telling me?”
“I Saw Tek-aKet on the Carnelian Throne.”
“So why don’t you look happy about it?”

She shrugged as best she could lying propped up on one elbow. “I was standing next to him with my sword out.”

Parno nodded his understanding. “Armed in the presence of the Tarkin is one thing, but weapons out in the throne room? That’s not likely.”

“Exactly what I thought. The throne room might have been just an overlap from the image of Lok-iKol, but . . .”
“You don’t know for certain.”
“I don’t know for certain.”

When she looked into Parno’s eyes, she saw there the same knowledge he would see on her face. She couldn’t know for certain. She never had, and this is what the loss of her tribe really meant—not just her mother and father, but the loss of all and any who might have taught her to School her Visions, to read them properly, even to guide them. That had always been the drawback, the flaw, to using her Sight. But with so much, and so many, relying on her now, what else could she do?

“I need to know more about how the Sight works,” she said. “I can’t go on hiding from it.” She looked up at him. “That’s the lesson the Scholar has taught me.”

“When this is over, we’ll go looking for some answers.”
“It seems the Scholar might have answers.”

“You just don’t want me to kill him.” Parno’s swift grin faded just as swiftly. “There’s something else, isn’t there?”

She nodded, lower lip caught between her teeth. “The Green Shadow fears the Marked, for reasons unknown to us. It follows that the Shadow has knowledge of the Marked, also unknown to us. In killing it, might I be destroying the source of the very information I seek?”

“Do we have a choice?”
She kept her eyes down.

“You Saw Tek on the throne, so that has to be good,” Parno said, in the firm tones of a man telling the surgeon to
go ahead and cut.

“I saw him on the throne,” she agreed.

“Watch Dal, my soul,” he said after a moment’s silence. “I’ve made it clear he’s not to think of me, but . . . watch him.”

“I do not like these Houses of yours,” Dhulyn said, taking his offered hand and letting him pull her out of the bed. “They’re none of mine,” he said.

But Dhulyn had noticed that he’d called Lok-iKol—and even the Tarkin himself—by their diminutives, Lok and Tek. As if he felt somehow free to speak of his old kin as he must have done when they had all been young together.

“Dhulyn Wolfshead.”

The Wolfshead had her heel hooked on the sill of the window casement, and was leaning over, stretching out the long muscles in the back of her leg. The older woman looked over her shoulder, lowered her heel to the floor, and straightened to her full height.

Heart still pounding from her run up the stairs, breath still coming short, Mar took one look at the Wolfshead’s face and flung herself into the Mercenary’s arms.

“Dhulyn, I’m so sorry,” Mar said, sobbing out the words. “This is all my fault.”

Mar felt the Wolfshead relax, ever so slightly. The muscled arms came up, and the long-fingered hands took Mar by the shoulders and held her away.

“Sun and Moon, Lady Mar.” The words were kind, but the tone, and the face when Mar had courage to look up at it, were cool and closed. “Don’t make yourself so important, child,” the Wolfshead continued. “You didn’t make the Jaldeans insane, and you didn’t make Lok-iKol rebel against his Tarkin.”

“But you and the Lionsmane—”

“We’re still whole and hearty, no harm done; in fact the contrary, if our help to the Tarkin has come in time.”

“But I betrayed you.” Mar wiped her face with her sleeve. “Please, let me explain. You must forgive me.”

“Tchah. There’s nothing to forgive. How could you betray us? It’s not as though we’re Brothers.”

Mar swallowed with difficulty, the Wolfshead’s face blurring as she blinked away tears. Finally, she nodded, and, keeping her eyes lowered, left the room.

“I would like to live, Lionsmane. What can I do?”

“Don’t wait.” At the boy’s raised eyebrows, Parno added.

“You give me a reason not to kill you.”

Nineteen

MAR AND GUN HAD been given beds in the same large underground chamber that housed the Tarkin and his family, though screens had been brought in to give some semblance of privacy. Mar opened her pack and took out her writing supplies, laying pens, inks, and parchments carefully on the small table that sat under the largest of the chamber’s lamps. Her hands trembled, and she took a deep breath as she steadied the carefully stoppered glass bottle of black ink. Mindful of her reception at Tenebro House, only Mar’s determination to confront Dhulyn Wolfshead had distracted her from her dread of meeting with Zelianora of Berdana.

As it was, she’d almost knocked the Tarkin down as she rushed, blind with tears, across the inner courtyard of Mercenary House. The Tarkin had given Mar a fierce hug, kissed her forehead, and dried Mar’s tears with her own neck scarf, making Mar blow her nose as if she was no older than little Zak-eZak who even now was pushing a small wooden horse across the chamber’s uneven floor. Mar had been so astonished at the Tarkin’s behavior, that any uneasiness she might have felt had disappeared entirely, and she realized that she felt more at ease with the Tarkin of Imrion than she ever had with her own family in Tenebro House, or even with the Weavers in Navra.

It wasn’t the same kind of comfort as sleeping snug and safe between Dhulyn Wolfshead and Parno Lionsmane, but comfort it was.

“I hear you are lettered and have worked as a clerk,” Zelianora Tarkin had said, once Mar’s eyes were dry. “Will you help me with the children? This is so hard for Bet-oTeb, her tutors and friends gone. If I could re-establish in some small way her regular routine . . .”

“Perhaps you’d prefer—Gundaron is a Scholar . . .”
Zelianora Tarkina had waved this away, linking her arm through Mar’s and leading her inside. “With respect to the Libraries and their teachings, we had Scholars in Berdana as well, and undoubtedly the time will come for economics and the philosophy of history. At the moment, however, I’d be happy if Bet could add and subtract.”

So while the Tarkina had sent the guard to find her daughter, Mar had gone down into the chamber to set up her classroom. Mar picked up the better of her two wooden pens, tested the seat of the steel nib, and set it aside for Bet-oTeb’s use. For herself she applied her penknife to an uncut quill. She thought about the two giggling sisters in Tenebro House and suppressed a smile. The idea that she was about to begin teaching the future Tarkin of Imrion the basics of accounting was giving Mar an unexpected sense of satisfaction.

She could almost forget the cold lump of wretchedness that sat under her heart. She’d thought she’d been alone and miserable in Tenebro House, but that was nothing compared to what she felt now. Was it possible to be more miserable because you weren’t alone? What was she going to do about Gun? Was she even sure of what she felt?

Suddenly Mar remembered Lan-eLan, and that woman’s kindness to her. Where was Lan now? Mar hadn’t even thought to ask Dal if the older Tenebro woman was safe and well. Mar blinked rapidly, willing the tears not to flow. She was always leaving her friends behind. Sarita in Navra, Lan-eLan in Tenebro House. Even Dhulyn Wolfshead.

“I’m scum,” she whispered.

“Nonsense.” The Tarkina’s gentle voice startled her, the slight Berdanan accent giving a musical lift to the word. “I’ve known women like the Wolfshead, she’ll forgive you.”

Mar felt the heat rise to her face.

“Maybe,” Mar said, lining up the edges of her parchment squares. “If she thought she had something to forgive.”

Zelianora took the parchments and set them to one side, sat down beside Mar in the chair that Mar had drawn up for Bet-oTeb. The Tarkina just sat, quietly waiting, and somehow this loosened the knot in Mar’s throat, allowing her to draw in a deep, ragged breath.

“The Wolfshead said that I hadn’t betrayed her, that I couldn’t because, well, because I wasn’t her Brother.”

“And that doesn’t help, because you feel that you did.”

“Yes.”

Zelianora reached across the small space that separated their two chairs and laid her fingers, the signet of the Tarkina twinkling in the light of the lamp, on top of Mar’s clenched hands. “She is right. You can only be betrayed by someone you trust. In that pure sense, a Mercenary can only be betrayed by another of their Brothers, because she would never give her trust to anyone else.”

“That’s what I thought she meant.” Mar hung her head so as not to meet the Tarkina’s eye. Zelianora hadn’t seemed like one of those lecturing grown-ups who pointed out the obvious as though it was wisdom’s best pearl. She twisted her mouth to one side. Must come from being a parent.

“We have a saying in my homeland: ‘there is more than sand in the desert.’ Dhulyn Wolfshead may tell you she is not angry with you, and it could be so. It could be herself she is angry with, and in her strict honor, she refuses to be angry with you.” Zelianora lifted her hand and sat back in her chair. “But I don’t believe it. I was one of those watching, and I saw her face when she told us you were with Dal-eDal. The Wolfshead was happier to know you safe with him than she should have been, seeing you are no Brother of hers. Somehow during that journey through the mountains I have heard of, she grew to trust you. It’s hard to sleep with someone you don’t trust.”

“We only lay together for warmth.”

“Lie down together, yes. Even with your arms about one another, with certainty. Even guards traveling with prisoners have been known to do this, when it was their duty to return alive. But sleep? With the prisoner unbound? No, my dear.” Zelianora shook her head, and Mar glanced at her out of the corner of her eye. “Mercenary Brothers would never have fallen asleep in the arms of someone they did not trust.”

“So I did betray her, and she knows it.” Mar took another deep breath. “Why do I feel better?”

“Well, it seems you are important to her, after all. And since she is angry with you, whether she believes it or not, it will be possible for her to forgive you.” The Tarkina stood. “If we all live long enough.”

Mar stood up, too, smiling for what felt like the first time in days. “Then we’ll just have to live long enough.”

Gundaron selected another waxed strand of cotton and held it up into the shaft of sunlight that hung, warm and bright, from an opening high in the wall across from his bench. He threaded it through the finest curved bone needle in the sewing kit Alkoryn Pantherclaw had given him. These weren’t the best bookbinding tools he’d ever seen, but he’d been taught at his Valdomar Library to make use of materials at hand when a book needed to be mended. He’d no idea where this quantity of paper, cut and folded to table-volume size, had come from, but no one here in
Mercenary House had the knowledge or skill to turn the paper into a proper book. And Alkoryn wanted one to make a portable set of maps. This was good useful work, Gun knew, tapping together the first bundle of sheets . . . only not needed, or important, or even wanted particularly urgently. Except as a way to keep him out from underfoot, while the real work was done. Now that he’d told them what he knew, given them his warning, there wouldn’t be anywhere he was really needed, or wanted. Not after what he’d done.

He sighed, letting his hands fall into his lap, the pages slipping from slack fingers. Neither he nor Mar was considered physically dangerous to anyone here, that was obvious enough from the way they were treated, but he didn’t miss the point that they’d been put into the one chamber that was, for the sake of the Tarkina, constantly guarded. So he and Mar could be watched at the same time, with no wasted effort.

Zelianora Tarkina had been pleasant to Mar, asking for her help with tutoring the Tarkin-to-be, but with him the Berdan princess was distantly polite, like an upper Scholar whose classes you were not yet a part of.

Gun told himself he was happy that Mar was being accepted more easily. After all, she’d only been tricked and lured into a mistake in judgment—a mistake, what’s more, she’d set out immediately to correct as soon as she had learned of it. It was obvious to everyone, even to himself, finally, that what he’d done was far worse. He hadn’t set out to betray or destroy anyone, but he’d ended up betraying and destroying everyone.

Even himself. There was no doubt in his own mind who was to blame. How many times had he been told while still in his Library not to become too focused, too narrow in his methods and his theories? Too sure of himself and his abilities? To do his best to keep the greater whole always in view? In his zeal to track down the ancient Shpadrajha, and connect them with the modern Espadryni, he’d done a good job of forgetting that particular lesson, and making himself an easy tool for—he shivered. For Beslyn-Tor. For the Green Shadow.

He picked up the pages and rescued the needle from where it had fallen into the crack between two flagstones and found himself staring at the bone implement’s sharp point, wondering how large a hole it would make in a vein. There were other needles in the kit. How large a hole would he need?

He gripped the needle fiercely, eyes shut. He might as well stop playacting. He was too big a coward to solve his problems that way.

“Didn’t anyone ever teach you how to hold a needle?” Mar’s head popped up over the ladder from the lower level of caves.

“What are you looking so cheerful about?” Gun pushed the needle carefully through the scrap of soft cloth that held its brothers.

“The Tarkina says that Dhulyn Wolfshead will probably forgive me.”

“May the Caids continue to smile on you.” Gun was sorry as soon as the words left his lips, even before her face fell. He knew he should be happy for her, but . . .

“I’m sorry,” he said, shifting over on the bench and indicating the space next to him. “I mean it, I really am happy for you. It’s just hard to tell you so when I’m feeling so sorry for myself.”

“Well, if you know you’re feeling sorry for yourself, you’re already well on the path to recovery.”

“If you’d like to stop talking like someone’s nurse, maybe you could actually be of some use.”

“Or I could go and find better company if you can’t be civil.”

Gun took a deeper breath, let it out slowly. “I’m sorry, really, I am.”

“Yes, you’ve said that,” Mar said dryly, but Gun looked up in time to catch the sparkle in her eyes before she turned her head. “You know it isn’t me you need to apologize to—well, yes, it is, and I forgive you, just don’t do it again—but there are others who need your apology. For . . . what happened, I mean.”

“You mean for helping a madman hunt down and destroy innocent people?” Gun waved away her protest. “I knew what you meant.” He squinted up at the lowering sun. No one seemed interested in accepting his apologies anyway. “I am sorry,” he finally said. “But who am I going to tell?” Certainly not the Marked he’d help find and turn over to the Green Shadow.

To his surprise, Mar was actually considering his question seriously, resting her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands. He was even more surprised when her brow cleared and she smiled.

“Tell the Tarkina.”

“What?”

“I’m serious. She’s the representative here of the Tarkin, or I suppose Bet-oTeb is, really, but she’s still so young. Tell them both. Tell them . . . tell them everything.” Gun looked away; he knew she meant his Mark. “Ask them what you can do to make amends. You can help them, you know.”
“They won’t care. They don’t trust me.”
“Give them a reason to.”

Gun sighed. Isn’t that what Parno had said? He looked up to find Mar watching him, her eyes warm, but the corners of her mouth turned down. He found himself sitting up very straight. He thought he had faced what he was capable of when he admitted to himself what he’d done in helping Lok-iKol. But like the Wolfshead, he’d been hiding a part of himself that could be useful. A part that could help.

“Mar, you’re wonderful.”
“Did I help?” She was smiling, her dark blue eyes shining.
Gun took her by the shoulders, spilling the papers to the ground, and kissed her on the mouth.

Karlyn-Tan was evidently looking out for her, and as Dhulyn had made no attempt to hide her approach, stood as soon as she came into view. He held his place, however, making no move toward her. She smiled in the darkness. 

“No one’s fool, she thought. The less movement, the less noise.

“Your Cloudman has not come, Dhulyn Wolfshead.” Dal-eDal’s was the hunter’s soft murmur. “Will you take one of our horses, or ride double with one of us?”

Dhulyn smiled her wolf’s smile and there was evidently enough light to see by, for the Tenebro lord backed off a pace.

“Cullen,” Dhulyn called softly. Dal-eDal snapped his head around and one of the two brothers swore as Cullen stepped out from cover so thin even Dhulyn had trouble believing he’d hidden there.

“Your horse is on the far side of the spring, Dhulyn Wolfshead,” Cullen said. “Disha tells me no one is near.”

Dhulyn measured the light in the east with a practiced eye. They were little more than an hour from Gotterang’s main gate, enough time, once she’d fetched Bloodbone, to finish her preparations.

She was leaning over from her saddle, practically upside down, tying her bent left leg to the saddle leathers in such a way that she looked safely trussed up, when Karlyn-Tan came to her, soft cloth bag in his hand.

“Well, Karlyn-Tan,” she said, before he had a chance to speak. “Once again, we meet under strange circumstances.”

“Once again, Dhulyn Wolfshead, you seem to be bound.” He answered her smile with a careful one of his own. His faded more quickly. “I’m afraid this time you’ll be blindfolded as well. I regret the necessity, Wolfshead,” he said, as he handed her up the cloth hood. “But best to put this on well before we get to the gates.”

Dhulyn shrugged. “I thank you for your concern, Karlyn-Tan, but a blindfold won’t unnerve me at all. We’ve had occasion, Parno Lionsmane and I, to learn how to fight blindfolded.”

“I’d like to hear that story.”

“If we live, I’ll be sure to tell you.” She looked over her shoulder. “Pull on that thong, would you? It needs to be tighter.”

“It seems far too tight already,” he said, though he reached to comply. “You are not meant to be truly bound.”

For answer Dhulyn thrust downward with her left leg, heel out as if she were kicking someone in the throat, and all the bindings that held her leg fast to her saddle fell away as if by magic.

“Any more observations, Karlyn, and we shall miss our appointment.”

Fanryn looked around from staring out the window at Swordsmiths Street and stepped over to help Alkoryn Pantherclaw strap the last packing case shut.

“That will be the lot of them,” he whispered, the light from the windows picking out every line and wrinkle on a face suddenly old.

Fanryn straightened up and looked over her Senior with her surgeon’s eye. Like his namesake the panther, Alkoryn had been pacing the room since Dhulyn had left before midnight, and the grayness around his mouth and eyes testified to that. She picked up a glazed jug of ganje from its place on the strangely naked worktable, poured out a cup, and placed it in front of Alkoryn’s customary seat.

“I was surprised when the Racha man offered to go with Dhulyn,” she said. “From the look on his face when he learned Dhulyn’s a Seer, I don’t think he’ll be parted from her until all this is over.”

“The Clouds have claimed since the times of the Caids that the Marked are under their personal protection. The fact that until recently the Marked needed no special protection has never changed their attitude.”

Fanryn picked up her own mug of ganje and tossed it off in one swallow. She made a face.
“Cold,” she said.

Before Alkoryn could do more than smile, Thionan came striding in, Oswin Battlehammer, one of the two Semlorian Brothers in Gotterang, in tow. “I hope this is the last,” she said, tapping the travel case with the side of her foot. “We’re starting to run out of room.”

“It is. As soon as you have it safely stowed, Parno will want us in the common room.”

Thionan glanced at the window, checking the amount of light showing above the rooftops. “They’ll still be in the copse. We’ve got the better part of an hour before they come through the gate, and at least two until they arrive at the Carnelian Dome.”

“When you reach my age,” Alkoryn said, “you’ll realize that you can never have too much time.”

Fanryn glanced at her Partner over their Senior Brother’s head. She knew Thionan’s grin was a mirror for her own. And she knew why. Neither of them expected to reach Alkoryn’s age.

Almost an hour later Parno stood beside Tek-aKet in the Mercenary House’s small whitewashed common room and counted over in his mind the group assembled there. Half a dozen Brothers only, including Fanryn and the two Semlorians, but not Thionan who’d gone off to watch for Dhulyn’s party to come through the north gate.

“You’ve all seen the maps,” he said. “There’s only one tricky part, so watch the walls for our marks.” Parno indicated the man leaning against the trestle table to his left. “The Tarkin and I will be first, with Jessen and Tonal of his Personal Guard. Oswin Battlehammer and Tyler Nightsky will follow next, and then the rest of you behind us by twos.” He tapped a small sand clock he’d borrowed from the kitchen. “Use this to time yourselves, we can’t afford to get bottled up. We’ll be going through the northwest passage, exiting in the Steward’s room behind the main dining hall.”

“Remind me to brick that up when all this is over,” Tek-aKet said with a smile twisted sideways. Parno waited for the laugh to finish before he went on. It wasn’t much of a joke—in fact he was sure that Tek meant every word of it—but anything helped to relieve the tension.

“Fanryn, you and Thionan—”

“If she ever gets back,” Fanryn said, rolling her eyes and shaking her head.

Parno grinned. “When she gets back,” he said. “You’ll stay with Barlen Jadestar and Noshun Icehawk. Try to make it look like there’s still twenty of us here, and keep the Tarkina safe until . . .”

“Until you send for us,” Fanryn said. “Or until you don’t.”

“If it should be that we don’t,” the Tarkin said in a quiet voice that nevertheless reached every ear, “will you see that she reaches her sister in Berdana.”

“We’ll do it ourselves, Lord Tarkin, my Partner and I,” Fanryn said.

Instructions given, Brothers and Guards started to leave the common room, some laughing or whistling, some studying the floor with narrowed eyes as they went. Everyone reacts differently, Parno thought. It was something he’d seen before, every experienced soldier had. He saw the look on Tek-aKet’s face and smiled. Every experienced soldier. Tek looked like he didn’t know whether to be scandalized at their levity, or to laugh himself.

All thoughts of laughter vanished as Barlen Jadestar burst into the room.

“Fanryn,” Barlen said. “Come quickly, it’s Thionan.”

Parno wasn’t very far behind Fanryn as she ran down the short corridor that led to the entrance courtyard. There would be only one reason, he thought, his heart heavy, that Fanryn should come quickly. A small, selfish part of his soul sagged with relief that Barlen had not come calling for him. Still, he cursed himself when he reached the outer courtyard and found Fanryn taking Thionan into her arms, easing her Partner down onto the bench under the plum tree, and pushing Thionan’s hands away from the bloody rag she held to her chest with both hands.

Parno sucked in his breath when he saw the blood-darkened arrow shaft sticking out between Thionan’s hands. She’d been surprised coming back from the gate, and not too far away, judging by how far she could walk with that shaft in her chest. And the Healer who’d fixed his arm long gone.

“Traitor’s soldiers surround the House,” she said, blood bubbling through her lips as she breathed.

“That dung eater Dal-eDal has sold us to the Shadow,” Parno said.


“They don’t know she’s at the gates with Dal?”

“Save your strength, just nod,” Fanryn said, her own teeth clenched.

Thionan nodded. Her lips formed the words “passed” and “gate.” Parno looked at the angle of the sun. This changed all their plans—and yet it couldn’t. They couldn’t leave Dhulyn and Dal-eDal to enter the Dome alone. He
looked up as a shadow touched him to see Alkoryn studying his face.

“Pasillon, after all,” the Senior Brother said with a sour smile.

Parno nodded, grim-faced. “They’ll wish it was only the Sleeping God they had to worry about, when we are through,” he said. He turned back to Fanryn and Thionan. “Can you cut it out? Or can we move her?”

Fanryn shook her head. “It’s in the lung.” She turned her face toward him, though her eyes never left Thionan. “And it’s barbed.”

A war arrow, then, not the kind the City Guard would normally use on citizens. This was war, the kind of death they all expected—for many, the death they hoped for. Parno could imagine many worse ways to spend his final moments than in Dhulyn’s arms, her cheek against his forehead.

So long as it was not the other way around, he thought. Please all the Caids, demons and fates, not the other way around.

Cullen, who somehow managed still to smell of mountain thyme, moved suddenly to her right.

“Disha tells me the banner does not fly from Mercenary House.”

With an effort Dhulyn kept relaxed and still. She could not risk loosening her false bonds. “Let her tell us when it does.”

“And if it should not?”

“There’s no turning back now,” Dhulyn said.

“But, Wolfshead—”

“My Brothers will reach us,” she said.

“And if they do not?”

“Then we will kill the Green Shadow ourselves.”

“Or die in the attempt.”

“Or die in the attempt,” she agreed, with a careful shrug. “It is all that is required of us.”

“Get those shutters,” he called, jerking his head toward the other window as he closed the ones in front of him and threw up the first of the three solid iron bars that fit horizontally across, locking the iron-reinforced shutters tight. He glanced over, saw that Sharan had her shutters closed, and felt along the baseboard for the vertical rods he knew would be there, sliding them through the bars and locking them with sharp turns before going to help Sharan.

“They’ve backed off downstairs,” she said. “Shall I watch here?”

Parno nodded, his breath a harsh rasp in his throat, and headed back down the stairs. Now that this first assault had been repulsed, he was free to think about Dhulyn, knowing she would continue to the Dome, signal or no signal. He’d known her going off on her own was a cyantrine sniffer’s dream. He hoped he would be able to tell her so.

The first person he saw when he reached the outer courtyard was Tek-aKet. The Tarkin had a streak of dirt on his face and blood on the point of his sword.

There was silence from the street outside, when Parno would have expected the shouts of the troops and the sounds of running feet. It reminded him of that day in early spring, when he and Dhulyn had found the crowd watching the Finder’s home burn down with the children inside.

“It’s so quiet,” Tek-aKet said, coming up to Parno as he entered the courtyard. “Everyone is so quiet.”

Parno knew who “everyone” was to the Tarkin. “We’re killers, Tek,” is what he answered. “We’re trained to be quiet.” Though that didn’t account for the silence outside the gate.

“Parno,” the Tarkin said. “If we delay much longer, they’ll be in the Dome without us.”

“I know, Tek, I know. Just a few minutes more.”

Parno’s searching eyes froze on the spot where the plum tree in its pot had shed some late blossoms over Fanryn, still sitting with Thionan in her arms. Alkoryn, his sword in one hand, stood over them.

“Lionsmane.” Tek’s voice brought Parno around with a jerk.

“Sorry,” he said. He sheathed his own blade and went to Alkoryn. “Time for everyone to get into the tunnels.”

“Not everyone,” Alkoryn croaked. “I will not leave my House.” At Tek-aKet’s protesting noise, Alkoryn raised his hand and glanced behind him at the Brothers under the plum tree. “They will not move, and how could I leave them? Besides,” the old man shrugged. “If Lok-iKol’s men find the place empty, they will look for the tunnels. Barlen and Noshun will stay, Sharan has asked to remain also, that the rest of you may escape.”
“This is the second time people will die in order for me to escape.” Tek’s voice was calm, level. “I don’t like it.”
“You’re time will come another day,” Alkoryn said, turning away.
“In Battle or in Death,” Parno said, knowing from the Senior Brother’s tone that it would be useless to argue. This was the end the old man sought. He hugged his Brother to him with one arm, kissed an oblivious Fanryn on the forehead, and touched Thionan’s hot cheek.
“We’re to the tunnels, then. Any who do not stay, send them after us.” He clapped for the attention of the Brothers in the courtyard and signaled to those who’d been assigned to go with him. The rest he would leave in Alkoryn’s hands.

**Twenty**

HE GOES SWIFTLY to the corner of the Library where the books and shelves make a great wall and begins to pull at the volumes, his hands going unerringly to one special section and pulling enough books and scrolls out of the way to make a tunnel in the wall, a tunnel he can enter only on his hands and knees. He encounters no shelves as he goes, just book after book, scroll after scroll, as tightly packed as unripe seeds in a flower head that lift away and disappear as he moves them out of his way. He tunnels for what seems like days, and he begins to fear that he cannot find his way out again, even though the books and scrolls he removes go on disappearing as he pulls them free of the wall in front of him as the tunnel crawls through gets smaller and smaller until he is reaching almost at his arm’s length to move the final small scroll aside so that he can see the Carnelian Throne and the man sitting on it with his eye patch not quite covering the steady green luminescence of the left eye.

The wall begins snapping back into place.

It had taken him the better part of the night to think what to do, but he hoped that this would be useful enough.

“Gun?”

More water slopped on the table as Gun jerked upright and spun around. Mar stood with her hand on the back of his chair, dark brown brows drawn down into a vee over her eyes. He blinked. How could he have forgotten she was there?

“What did you find?”

Gun stopped short of answering her as a fair-haired Mercenary Brother he didn’t know appeared in the doorway behind her.

“The Tarkina wants you,” the Brother said. “Quickly.”

Gun tossed the water on the floor and handed the bowl to Mar, ushering her out of the room in the Brother’s wake.

They found Zelianora Tarkina placing packets of dried food into her travel bags, the nurse Denobea tying young Zak-ëZak into his sling, and Bet-oTeb dressed and ready, her long dagger in its sheath at her side. The two Personal Guards the Tarkin had left behind were waiting, arms crossed, just inside the entrance to the sleeping chamber.

The Tarkina glanced up but kept packing. “The House is under attack,” she said. “We’re to follow Parno Lionsmane into the tunnels.”

“We’re not safe enough here?” Even as she asked, Mar went to her own bags and began to restow her bowl and pick up her writing tools.

Zelianora tied the last loose thong on her pack and hefted it, nodding, before answering. “If Tek and Lionsmane succeed,” she said, “we can return to the Dome.” Her hands stilled. “And if they fail, we need to leave here in any case. I prefer to be prepared.”

Gun took his lower lip between his teeth. “Mar, can you pack for us both? I’ve got to speak to Parno Lionsmane.”

The fair-haired Mercenary Brother shook his head. “He’ll have started—”

Gun didn’t wait to hear more. He ducked under the arm of the man at the doorway and dashed off in the direction of the deeper tunnels. There were only four of these tunnels in this section of the caves, and only one that led in the direction of the Dome. Logically—

Gun ran headlong into the chest of a large, hard Mercenary. Prevented from ducking around him, Gun strained to look over the Brother’s shoulder. Was that a glimmer of light he could see?

“Lionsmane,” he called. “Listen! You need the throne room. He’s... it’s in the throne room.”

The light stopped moving.
“Let him come.”
The Mercenary holding him let go and Gun dashed down the tunnel toward the light.

What all this meant for him was that if you knocked, the person on the inside had to stop what he was doing, and come to let you in. Or not.

Telian’s hands formed fists at his sides. There had been lots of changes since the night Lok-iKol had come, but it was the more recent ones that were especially worrying. At first, when they’d heard the noise of feet pounding and steel clashing, Tel and some of the other pages in his dormitory had wanted to rush into the passages and find out what was going on. But the Steward of Keys had sent senior pages to keep all the younger ones in their rooms and dormitories. The next morning Keys had called them all into the big kitchen where the chief cook and his assistants, the kitchen help, the household staff—cleaners for the most part—and the pages had been asked to gather. Tel had missed the Keys’ first few words—something about a transfer of power that hadn’t sounded too scary—he’d been too interested in the kitchen to pay attention. He’d been here before, but always on an errand, and the noble staff weren’t encouraged to loiter down here.

“Each will remain in his or her own post,” Keys had said, nothing in his voice showing that he’d drunk three bottles of the Tarkin’s best jeresh the night before and must have had a splitting headache because of it. “You’ll find men with Tenebro badges,” here he’d tapped his chest on the left side, “in the public rooms and at cross corridors in the Dome. Be ready to explain who you are and what your errand—and as I said,” here Keys had looked ‘round at all the staff, junior and senior, “this is nothing to worry us; it’s just while they get to know us.”

One of the Tarkina’s lady pages, tall, dark-haired Rab-iRab Culebro was bold enough to interrupt and ask about her mistress, but Keys had told her to stay in the Tarkina’s suite with her fellows and await orders.

“Your families may send for some of you,” Keys had said, though everyone knew that wasn’t likely to happen, at least not until they all saw how things were going to fall. No one wanted to risk offending the new Tarkin by appearing to remove their support along with their family members. Tel, for one, had been hoping no one came for him. Minor son of a Holding, a position in the Carnelian Dome was the best thing that could have happened to him.

He’d been so excited, he saw now, looking back on a morning that was only a week ago, though it felt like a month. All he knew was he was a lot more than a week older. He hadn’t admitted to himself, possibly hadn’t realized, how much he’d been hoping that some miracle would happen, and Tek-aKet Tarkin would come back. After the last few days, a return to minding his father’s almond groves and vineyards under his older sister’s supervision didn’t seem like such a bad thing. Locked doors were not the only changes for the worse in the Dome.

He took a deep breath and knocked, waited, standing with his back straight, elbows in as he’d been taught, straining to hear any command, any footsteps nearing the door, and finally hearing only the bolts being pushed back. He took two more slow breaths before pushing the door lightly aside with his fingers and entering the room.

Lok-iKol was sitting as usual in the armchair by the open window, the papers and documents on the worktable against the far wall untouched and gathering dust. He allowed no attendance, not even from his own people.

“My lord Tarkin,” Tel said, and waited to be acknowledged.

“Speak,” the man by the window said in his heavy voice.

“The Lord Dal-eDal has returned, and brings with him a prisoner.”

Tel gasped with pain as Lok-iKol was suddenly beside him, holding his upper arm in a grip that stopped Tel’s breath.

“Where?” The man’s breath was like rotting fish and Tel did his very best not to turn away.

“City gates, my lord.” Tel spoke through clenched teeth, unable to keep himself from squirming in an instinctive attempt to pull free. The man holding him took no notice whatsoever.

“The throne room,” the man said, dropping Tel’s arm and turning away. “When they come, tell them the throne room.”

“Yes, Lord.” Tel blinked back tears and sucked in air as circulation restored itself to his lower arm and hand. Lok-iKol turned away, no longer paying him the least attention, so Tel just turned and ran from the room.

Maybe he would send a message to his father, after all, and beg to come home.

And then he would only have to wait for the last piece to arrive and he would be whole again, in the first shape he’d known, in the shape that, perhaps, might be the key to freeing him from any shape. Whole, he would be safe, for without the Seer, there could be no Lens. And without the Lens, the Sleeping God would never awaken.
He saw the men who waited in the throne room, but he didn’t speak. They talked too much, these shapers. He sat on the throne.

So where was it, then, the city noise?

These were, more or less, the same streets she’d been through not that long ago, and she wasn’t hearing what she should, nor smelling what she should either.

It was much too quiet for early morning. In this part of Gotterang there should have been—there had been when she’d come through with Parno and Mar—people hawking their wares, the squeaking un-greased wheels of hand- and donkey carts, children running and playing, chanting their games, and the buzz of conversations, the tiptap of hundreds of footsteps, the hum of hundreds of pairs of lungs pushing air in and out. But the noises were few enough that Dhulyn could detect and identify them almost as easily as she did the people who were with her. A woman wearing stale perfume scurried by on the right with what smelled like a basket of radishes, fresh from the ground with the earth still on them. Dhulyn’s stomach growled, and she realized that there was no smell of foods cooking, but only the smell of burning, faint but noticeable. Not so faint was the smell of filth—clearly the night soil had not been picked up in days.

“Turning left in a few paces,” murmured Karlyn, with a light touch on her left leg.

As they turned, the breeze brought the unmistakable odor of a decomposing body. Her companions were singularly silent, though Dhulyn knew they must have noticed the stench. Better not ask, she told herself.

Closer to the Dome, the streets smelled marginally cleaner. but there were even fewer sounds of people. At one point Dhulyn heard rapid hoofbeats in the distance, but they came no nearer.

Bloodbone’s muscles bunched and relaxed in a new way, and Dhulyn sensed that they had started up the incline that was the road to the Carnelian Dome. The Dome itself had originally been a fortress on the edge of the escarpment that overlooked the Talgus River, but as Imrion had grown, and the Tarkins had settled on Gotterang as its capital, they had all added to the original structure. Rather than building outward, however, when each subsequent Tarkin had needed more space, they had built up so that the Carnelian Dome was, in fact, layer upon layer of buildings, from the lowest ancient kitchens, to the highest lookout towers. The outer wall was almost as thick as the city walls, and built in the time of Jorelau Tarkin, that most paranoid of leaders.

Their hoofbeats made an entirely different kind of echo when they reached the open plaza of the Tarkin’s Square. Another touch on her thigh told her they were stopping—but at a point she judged well back from the gates themselves.

“The gates are open,” Dal said. He kept his voice pitched low and soft, so that it would not carry over, but his shock was evident. Dhulyn understood. The outer gates of the Carnelian Dome stood open only when the Carnelian Guard was parading in the square, and her ears told her that other than themselves, the square was empty.

“It’s only the pass door,” Karlyn said. “Whatever may be the explanation for this, we cannot turn back now.”

“In a tale,” Dhulyn said, “those words would be the signal for an attack.”

“That is what comes of reading too much.”

They stopped again at what Dhulyn estimated was well within bow-shot of the gates, and therefore too close for comfort if they really expected to be attacked. She heard the creak of Dal’s saddle as he stood up in his stirrups.

“Give answer,” he called. “Who attends the gates, give answer.”

“I attend,” came a man’s voice out of the air.

“I am Dal-eDal Tenebro, the cousin of Lok-iKol Tarkin. May I pass?”

Dhulyn grinned. Would anyone else find it significant that Dal-eDal was so careful to say which Tarkin he was related to?

“Enter, enter, enter . . .” said the voice in the air, fading as though the speaker was turning and walking away.

Around her were the noises of her companions dismounting, but Dhulyn stayed where she was.

“You’ll have to duck down,” Karlyn said from around her right elbow. “You’ll just fit through the door if Bloodbone walks carefully.”

“I’ll do what I can,” Dhulyn said rapidly reviewing the knots she’d used before deciding none of them would either pull loose or become dangerously tight if she bent enough to get through the door. Such doors, she knew, were specifically designed to prevent the entrance of people on horseback, but Bloodbone was not large, and if Dhulyn could lay practically flat along the mare’s neck . . .

She pressed her cheek against Bloodbone’s mane, and felt the loop around her right knee tighten painfully. Just as
she was about to sit up again, she felt a hand loosening it. “Thank you,” she said, knowing it was Karlyn-Tan.

The quality of the echoes thrown off from hooves and footsteps once they’d passed through the gate told Dhulyn
the inner gate was already open, and she could picture the look of disgust that must have decorated Karlyn-Tan’s
face at the carelessness which allowed both gates to be open at once.

Dhulyn closed her eyes and concentrated her senses—there was more wrong here than sloppiness with the gates.

“Are there archers in the recesses?” she asked. There should be, she knew. There had been archers at the slitted
openings high in the curve of the tunnel walls when she had passed through here with Parno and Alkoryn.

“I see no one,” Karlyn said.

A shifting of air and the feel of sunlight on the skin of her arms and hands told her they were through the inner
gate and into the main courtyard of the Dome.

“You there,” Dal called out. “Where are the Stewards? Our horses need attendance, as do we.”

Nothing more than muttering, and what sounded like fingers snapping in time to an unheard tune. The muscles in
Dhulyn’s stomach tightened. The last time she’d felt this way had been in Navra, watching the crowd around the
Finder’s fire.

“What is happening?” she said, not caring who heard her speak.

Before anyone could answer Dhulyn heard the unmistakable sound of an arrow whistling through the air, and a
grunt behind her, a swift click of hooves as a horse shied to one side, a jingle of harness, followed by the
unmistakable dull thud of a body hitting the cobbles.

Without conscious thought she squeezed her knees together and Bloodbone obeyed the signal, rearing as Dhulyn
thrust out both heels, pulling free of her leg bindings and sliding off Bloodbone’s back to land squarely on her feet
as the mare took a step forward. Lifting and uncrossing her arms over her head freed them, and Dhulyn yanked off
the hood, ducking just in time to avoid another arrow as it fell bouncing on the stones beyond her. The flagstones
underfoot were swept relatively clean, but as she straightened, Dhulyn mimed tossing dirt into the faces of the two
nearest strangers, who flinched without thinking. She pulled her boot knives free and used them to deflect yet
another arrow.

Not that the arrows appeared to be specifically aimed at anyone, Dhulyn realized as she glanced around, squinting
against the light, near blinding after so long in the hood. The second flight of arrows seemed let off from loose
strings, so haphazard as to be no real danger. Not like the armed guards running from the doorway beside the gate.
They were badly dressed and disorderly, but heavily armed and deadly serious. Though if they hadn’t been coming
from what was obviously a wardroom, Dhulyn would have sworn these were soldiers coming spent and dirty from
the battlefield.

One even had dried blood on the blade of her sword. And a moment later, Dhulyn’s dagger growing out of her
eye.

Dhulyn turned and pulled her own sword from the scabbard lying hidden along Bloodbone’s side under her
woolly oversized saddle pad. Why would a professional soldier not clean her weapon, Dhulyn thought, as she
automatically brought up her blade to block a blow aimed with great fury but little skill at her head. And since when
did the guards of the Carnelian Dome have little skill?

“This way,” Dal-eDal called from behind her, and Dhulyn automatically stepped back, throwing a quick glance
over her shoulder. Dal was heading toward a small arched doorway on the far right of the courtyard, not the
elaborately carved main entrance Dhulyn had used when she’d come for her audience with the Tarkin.

Three more guards came trotting into the courtyard, but instead of coming directly to the help of their fellows,
they hesitated, looking from friend to foe with frowns. One of them stared about as if he wasn’t even sure where he
was. Dhulyn moved her sword with more discretion, hitting with the flat of the heavy blade, pushing one youngster
away with a boot to the midsection, unwilling to kill people who didn’t seem altogether certain that they wished to
kill her.

She was one of the last to reach the doorway Dal stood guarding, and she helped him slam the heavy door into
place, stepping aside as Karlyn and Cullen thrust down the bar. A quick look around confirmed only minor injuries,
barring the unlucky Linn, who’d been hit by the first arrow—the only one which had come with any force. They had
left his body outside with the horses.

“This doesn’t make any sense,” Karlyn said. “Where are the Stewards? Why were the gate guards not better
organized?”

“And cleaner. And aware enough to actually do some damage with their swords,” said Dhulyn.

“What do you mean, Wolfshead?” Dal-eDal said.
“Did you not see it?” Cullen said. “They moved as if they knew what to do, but had forgotten how.” He looked between Karlyn and Dhulyn.

“Or as if they’d forgotten why,” Dhulyn said. “There was no coordination, as if they’d never fought together before. As if they were each of them alone.”

“We were lucky,” Karlyn said. “You can be killed just as dead by someone who doesn’t know why he’s shooting at you.”

“This is a kind of madness,” Dhulyn said. “We saw this in Navra, Parno and I. Did you see their eyes? It is some effect of the Green Shadow.”

“We waste time with questions we cannot answer,” Dal said pushing away from the wall. “Come.”

Three identical dressed-stone passages led from the entrance hallway, each as wide as her outstretched arms, each carpeted with runners of woven matting to deaden the sound of servants’ feet. Dal had chosen the one on the right, and they had advanced as far as the first cross corridor when they heard footsteps running. Dhulyn and Cullen had been walking with their swords at the ready, and now Karlyn and Joss lifted theirs, bracing themselves. Dal held up his hand and after a few moments it became clear that the running feet came no nearer, but were fading into the distance.

“They go to the throne room,” Dal said.

“If our people are the target of those running guards, they will need our help.”

“Throne room it is.”

And even though they were helping him at the moment, Tek-aKet Tarkin didn’t like it. He didn’t like the darkness, the closed-in spaces—hadn’t liked it the first time through, but then he’d had Zella with him and the children and that had made a difference.

He didn’t at all like that the tunnels existed, and he especially didn’t like that the Mercenaries knew so much about them.

The passage they followed now was narrow enough that in places they had to turn sideways, and Tek found himself thinking how lucky he was that he took after his slim mother, and not after the hulking bear of a man his father had been. As it was, there were one or two places where even walking sideways made for a tight fit. Parno Lionsmane, with the maps Tek didn’t like to think about firmly in his mind, led the way. After a long, unbroken stretch of bricked tunnel, they came to a crossroads and the Mercenary Brother hesitated.

“Tell me again, Scholar, which way we should go.”

Unable to turn completely, Tek looked over his shoulder at where the Scholar stood between Jessen and Tonal.

“He’s in the throne room, Lionsmane. I’m sure of it.”

Because of the confinement of the walls, Tek was the only one of the group who could see the man’s face—and Tek was fairly certain even Parno Lionsmane didn’t realize he could be seen. Tek saw distrust flit across the Mercenary’s features, strangely bronzed by the light from the cresset he held. The distrust was followed by frustration as Parno Lionsmane shut his eyes tight. And finally the man shrugged.

“Throne room it is,” he told the pale-faced Scholar. “If we live through this, you’re going to tell me how you know.”

Using his dagger, he scratched a pattern on the tunnel wall at eye height and added an arrow.

The tunnel grew gradually wider, and narrow slitted openings began appearing high in the stone walls, letting in some outside light. There was something familiar about the pattern of the light, and it dawned on Tek that this was the outer wall of the Soniana Tower, so called after a long-dead Tarkina, and the present-day location of the Carnelian Throne. He had seen these narrow slits in the walls from the outside, and thought them decorations.

There was light enough for them to see the end of the passage before they walked into it. Parno Lionsmane signaled, holding up his left hand with the first two fingers extended. Tek passed the signal back to his guards. The Lionsmane stuck the cresset into a bracket to the left of the wall in front of him and ran his fingertips over the bricks, feeling for the one glazed smooth. Tek saw him take a deep, quiet breath and let it out slowly, before he ran his hands over the bricks again.

“Should I hold the light?” Tek said.

Lionsmane shook his head. “The maps say the brick won’t show, no matter where we hold the light, that only—here it is.” Tek put out his hand and the Lionsmane guided it until Tek could feel the smooth glazing for himself. It was one of the smaller tying-in bricks, he thought smiling, placed someways to the others both to create a pattern and
to strengthen the double-layered wall. Unless you knew what to look for, the smooth surface was too small to draw attention to itself.

The Mercenary braced his fingers and pushed the smooth brick with his thumbs. “Lord Tarkin, your hands under mine, please.” Even straining as they all were, Tek heard nothing, and it wasn’t until they released the catch that Tek felt the wall give, shuddering slightly under their hands. According to the instructions that had been handwritten on the map, this section of wall was cantilevered, and they should be able to swing it open by pushing on the left-hand side.

Lionsmane drew his sword, and motioned Jessen and Tonal forward, showing them with the point of his blade where he wanted their hands. “I’ll go through first and to the left; the Tarkin behind me and to the right. Guards, you follow up the middle. Scholar, stay out of the way of the blades.” When everyone was in position, the Mercenary nodded and the two guards pushed against the wall to the left of the trigger brick. As promised, the wall opened, so quietly that without the change in light Tek wouldn’t have been sure that it had happened.

“Who’s been keeping this oiled?” he whispered as he followed the Mercenary through the narrow space into the dressing room and stepped to the right. Lionsmane threw him a glance that made Tek’s ears burn.

Of course. The Brotherhood maintains the tunnels.

When Tek was growing up, this room had been filled with his father’s robes of state, the Tarkin’s coronet and the spear and sword, symbols of the Tarkin’s office. Tek preferred less ceremony, and had always used the room as a private salon, where he could retreat to rest and refresh himself without technically leaving the throne room, or to send petitioners to wait for a more private audience. A thick rug covered the stone floor, with two comfortable chairs placed near a table covered with an embroidered cloth, tall enough to serve for either writing or dining.

As Tek stepped to the right out of the opening, he glanced down at this table. It held the cut-glass inkwell that Zella’s sister Alliandra had sent him from Berdana’s new glassworks. The ink had dried, and inkwell, pens, and embroidered cloth were all covered with a fine layer of dust. Tek tightened his grip on his sword and felt a chill trickle up his spine. His whole life he’d lived in the Carnelian Dome, and he’d never before seen dust on the furniture.

Lionsmane waited until everyone had come out of the secret passage before he swung the wall shut behind them. The paneling was decorated with an inlaid pattern, and with a tap of his forefinger, he drew their attention to the piece of inlay that marked the door’s trigger from this side. When Tek and his two guards had nodded, the Mercenary turned to look at the room.

“Does that door open directly into the throne room,” he asked, his voice a quiet growl, “or is there another, connecting room?”

“I’m surprised you don’t know,” Tek said, smiling to take the sting out of his words. Well, he thought, first you kill the wolf, then you worry about the holes in the fences. He would deal with the extent of the Mercenaries’ knowledge when they lived through this. “Not a room, but a connecting passage,” he continued. “Go immediately right. The door on the left wall at the other end is the entrance to the throne room proper. The entrance will bring us out to the right of the Throne itself. The door opens toward us and will lay flat against the far wall.”

Parno Lionsmane nodded, his eyes still on the door.

“You’re best guess as to the number of guards in the room, Lord Tarkin.”

“There are always two standing at the throne itself. This is not the normal time for audiences . . .” Tek turned to look at the Scholar, looking all the paler for a streak of dirt on his face, standing close to the hidden opening, as if he would like to go back through.

“He’s there,” the boy said. “Or the Green Shadow is.”

Tek nodded. “Then there may be more guards. We should be able to hear voices through the second door.”

“Very well,” Parno said. “Keep the same formation, but come out striking.”

**Twenty-one**

ON THE COUNT of three, Parno dove out through the door held open for him, tossing throwing stars to the right and left and making an automatic count of the men in the room as he rolled up onto his feet. Five against each side wall, two flanking the formal entrance. None close to the throne. Twelve. Not so bad, if he didn’t have Tek-aKet to worry about. But with luck there should be Brothers only minutes behind him in the tunnels, and Dhulyn only steps away. Between them he and his Partner could handle twelve easily, even while keeping the Tarkin and his guards alive. Tek-aKet had already followed him into the throne room and was engaging one of the guards standing against the right wall, with Tonal and Jessen running up to help.
Three guards in Tenebro colors approached him warily as Parno straightened to his feet and lifted his sword, already deciding which he would gut first. Just as he shifted his weight to make the first move, he was grabbed in a bear hug from behind, clamping his arms to his sides.

Idiot! he thought, cursing both himself and his assailant. He should have been aware of his own back, not watching for Tek’s. As for the fellow who’d grabbed him, he must have been unarmed—otherwise why waste time with wrestling moves? Even as he was thinking this, Parno squatted, bracing his legs and bending forward to tip the man off-balance. The guard was not unskilled, however, and he countered Parno’s shift of weight by thrusting his own leg forward between Parno’s braced legs. The man was barrel-chested, the strength in his arms astonishing, and Parno felt his lungs close down, refusing his next breath. But he had some experience of his own, and this was no simple wrestling match, skill against skill alone, undertaken for money or glory, and over when one man was pinned to the ground. Years of Schooling allowed Parno to ignore the burning in his lungs, the pounding in his blood, and focus on distribution of weight, on leverage, angles, and cutting edges. Still squatting, he turned his dagger a few degrees of arc, stabbed back and upward, felt the hot gush of blood as he severed the artery in the man’s thigh, took a deep welcome breath of air and shrugged his way out of the man’s suddenly limp grasp.

As he straightened, Parno lifted both his blades, swinging his sword through the arm of the Tenebro guard who was closing in on Tonal. Of the three who had been approaching him, only two were left and Parno leaped to engage them, forcing them back toward the throne itself. Lok was standing, a sword in his hand, looking out at the men fighting like an owl sitting on a perch, turning this way and that, watching for prey.

The dark man was Tek-aKet. The golden man would fight to save the dark man. Interesting. He could not TOUCH the golden man from here. But he could TOUCH the dark one.

“This way.”

Mentally checking and approving the direction against the map she’d seen days before in Alkoryn’s workroom, Dhulyn ran down the corridor after Dal-eDal. This was the right direction for the throne room, even though they’d missed the formal public approaches that would have taken them directly there. She quickened her pace until she was just behind the Tenebro lord. If he was leading them into a trap, she was willing to let him spring it. As they came up on a second cross corridor, they slowed. This passage was not as wide as the one they were using, but its carpet was good wool, not the woven matting they were walking on. Here they might run into someone with authority.

“Hold your sword down and just walk straight across at a normal speed,” Dhulyn told him. “From a distance we’ll pass for Dome Guards. It’s the stealth and the running that attracts attention.”

They slowed to a walk, but just as they reached the other corridor, a slim, dark-haired young woman turned briskly into their passageway. She yelped, took a quick step back, turned, and ran off. Training made Dhulyn pull out a throwing dagger before she thought again, and resheathed it. Killing the girl would accomplish nothing.

“So much for stealth,” Dal said. “Let’s hope she doesn’t bring the guards.”

“You mean more guards?” Dhulyn said.

They were no more than ten or twelve paces past the intersection when a small group of six guards burst into the passage behind them. They came, Dhulyn noticed, not from the arm of the corridor down which the dark-haired girl had fled, but from the opposite direction.

“Sun and Moon take them,” Dhulyn cursed. They couldn’t hope to outrun soldiers on their own ground, and while six were not too many to deal with, it would cost them time they might not have.

“Let me try something,” Dal said. He took a step toward the approaching Guards with his hands up, palms toward them.

“We come to kill Lok-iKol,” he called out, “and restore Tek-aKet to the Carnelian Throne. We’d just as soon not kill you, so are you with us or against us?”

Dhulyn grinned, seeing that the man in front, while unshaven, was otherwise tidy in the solid dark red uniform of the Tarkin’s Personal Guard, as were three others. The remaining two wore the multicolored sleeves of the Carnelian Guards. Dal-eDal had good eyesight.

The lead guard rubbed his face with his free hand. “You’ve got Tek-aKet? He’s alive?”

“He should be ahead of us,” Dhulyn said. “With my Partner.”

“You swear it’s so?”

“I’m Dhulyn Wolfshead the Scholar, I was Schooled by Dorian the Black. I fight with Parno Lionsmane the Chanter. I swear by my Partner, may we both die in battle.” Dhulyn touched her forehead with the back of the hand
that held her sword.

The man reversed his own weapon and held it out to Dhulyn, hilt first. “I’m Dernan. We’re with you. Lead on.”

“You won’t mind keeping your weapon, and taking the point position? It’s not that I don’t trust you,” Dhulyn said, with a smile. “It’s that I trust no one.”

With their reinforcements surrounded, they crossed three more corridors on the way to the throne room, but the only other people they saw were two young pages. Unlike the dark-haired young woman, these two boys did not run away, but stood looking at them as they approached. They clung to each other, though Dhulyn was sure they weren’t aware of it.

“Telian-Han,” Dernan called out. “Go for Talya. Tell her to come help us kill the Tenebroso usurper.”

Both boys broke into wide smiles and ran off down the corridor behind them.

The waiting area outside the wide oak doors of the throne room was just as dusty and neglected as the corridors had been. But somehow it made Dhulyn’s skin tingle to see the tastefully organized chairs with their side tables carrying dead greenery and guttered candles.

“Take care, my lords,” Dernan said, as Dhulyn, shoving her sense of unease to one side, ran across to the closed doors. “If you stay too long with the Tenebroso, or too near him, some illness takes you.”

“I don’t want to stay long in One-eye’s company,” Dhulyn said. “I want to kill him.” She seized the gilded pommels in the center of the ornamental doors and threw them open.

Even as the others spread out, Cullen behind her, Dal to her right, Karlyn-Tan to her left, Dhulyn assessed the room, mentally ticking off friend from foe, looking for the one she wanted most to see. She found Parno just as he shrugged a guard off his back and cut off another’s hand with a casual stroke of his sword before turning to engage two others. A guard she recognized as one from Mercenary House, who had been facing two opponents until one suddenly found herself hand-less, dispatched the man left to him with a broad cut to his head. Dhulyn was more than halfway across the room herself when she heard Parno cry out “Tek, no!” and increased her speed.

Parno’s cry had a strange impact on the people in the room. Fighting all over the room faltered as several of the Carnelian Guards raised their weapons and stepped back from their opponents, looking around them as if unsure what to do. One even nudged a fellow guard who was still fighting out of the path of his adversary and called something Dhulyn couldn’t hear into the man’s ear.

Dhulyn ran past them and skidded to a halt.

Tek-aKet Tarkin and Lok-iKol Tenebroso were circling each other in front of the Carnelian Throne. Lok looked as though he had been wearing the same clothes for some days, and his hair hung stringy and unwashed. He still wore his eye patch, but a green glow shone from behind it, matching the color that shone from his good eye.

Dhulyn caught Parno’s attention across the room and flashed him a grin as she circled around to the left, hefting her dagger. Now if only the Tarkin could maneuver the green-eyed dung eater around so that she could plant a blade in him. Her experienced eye was just telling her that Lok was holding his blade a shade too low, when Tek-aKet, remembering what they had taught him, swept the other man’s blade aside and planted his own squarely in the center of the taller man’s body.

For a moment they stood there frozen, Lok’s arm falling limp by his side, his sword dropping to the floor with a clang of metal on stone, his green eye hooded. He coughed and a dribble of blood ran out of the corner of his mouth. Then Lok moved, reaching out for Tek-aKet, pushing himself up the blade until he clutched at Tek’s clothing, staring the Tarkin in the face as if he would say something important. Per-force, Tek let go of his sword, grabbing Lok’s wrists to prevent being pulled off his feet. Dhulyn saw the green die out of Lok’s eyes, saw the lips form the words, “Tek, Cousin” as Lok-iKol’s knees sagged, and he slid slowly to the floor, taking the blade with him, hands still clamped to Tek’s arm. Lok’s mouth still worked, but the lips formed no words. Dhulyn ran forward to catch the Tarkin’s arm before he joined his cousin on the floor.

Tek-aKet screamed, yanked his arm loose and fell, cracking his head against the foot of the Carnelian Throne.
Dhulyn lifted her fingers from the charred window frame. “What?” “You’re humming that children’s tune, the one from the game you’re so interested in.”

“It’s going through my head, I can’t get it out.”

“Come, the floors are unsafe here. We must go.”

Dhulyn followed Parno out of the charred ruin that had once been Alkoryn’s map room. It had taken them some time to get away from the rejoicing at the Carnelian Dome, but as soon as they could find enough horses, they’d gathered the Mercenaries who had come up through the tunnels and returned to Mercenary House through streets filling with people as news of Tek-aKet’s restoration spread through Gotterang. They’d found the gates battered but still closed, no attackers outside, and nothing living inside.

It didn’t need any great experience to see what had happened. Unable to breach the gate, the attackers had resorted to fire arrows and scaling ladders. From the body count, seventeen had made it inside the House. They’d been laid to one side in the courtyard, as far as possible from the four bodies of the Brothers who’d been found. Parno had found Thionan’s body where he expected, under the plum tree. Fanryn was lying over her, sword bloody.

“Another one this way,” Tyler Nightsky stuck his head in the door.

“We’ll help,” Parno said, turning away from the stairs and following his Brother to the rear of the House. He stopped Tyler with a hand on the arm. “Dhulyn,” he said, motioning her forward. “It’s Alkoryn.”

From the look of the bodies, Alkoryn Pantherclaw had killed one man as he came through the second-story window, and had been backed into a corner by a second man in a Tenebro uniform. This second man was spitted on Alkoryn’s sword, the pool of tacky blood beneath him showing the wound to be immediately mortal.

“Does he live?”

Dhulyn pulled the Tenebro man’s body away and squatted next to Alkoryn. In death, his hand had fallen away from where the hilt of a dagger stuck out, just below where his navel would be, if she could see it. He’d held it in place, keeping the blood in, until he’d been able to dispatch his opponent.

“In Battle or in Death,” Dhulyn saluted him, touching her fingertips to her forehead.

Zelianora looked up from where she sat in the window seat of her bedroom, the shutters angled to throw the morning sunlight on the book in her hands, and keep it from the bed where Tek was resting. At the sound of her name, she put the book aside and stepped over to the bed.

“How are you feeling?” she said, sitting down on the edge of the thick mattress, and drawing her hand down the side of Tek’s face, letting her fingertips linger on his warm skin. She had caused him to be shaved as he slept, and though he was thinner, and there were new lines on his face, he looked more like the man who had met with and disbelieved the Mercenary Dhulyn Wolfshead—was it only a half moon ago? It felt like three moons at least.

Tek had been unconscious for almost a day after the fight to restore him to the throne, and of course there were now no Healers to be found in all of Gotterang. A surgeon had come from the Mercenary House, a “Knife” as they called him, but the Brother had found nothing physically wrong with Tek beyond the lump on his head.

Zella took the hand that lay on the outside of the thick feather bedcover. “Here I thought that, once we were back in the Dome, all our troubles would be over. I would rather have you well, than all the thrones in the world.”

Tek squeezed her hand and she thought she saw him smile.

“It is only a headache, Zella,” he said. “The Mercenary Knife said, from the knock on my head. It will pass.”

Zella nodded, smiling. “Dal-eDal is suggesting that you show yourself to your men, and to some of the other Houses, now that you are awake. They need to know that you are well, and Tarkin again.”

“I’m so tired.” And indeed, his voice was lower than she had ever heard it, even the time that he’d had the coughing sickness and had lost his voice for three days. There had been no Healer then, either, now that she thought about it.

“I thought perhaps a short audience,” she said now. “It would have to be in the throne room itself, I’m afraid, but we could get you seated before inviting your nobles in . . . And we could be careful of the light, so long as they could clearly see you.”

“No Mercenaries,” he said. “Not Dal-eDal.”

Zella licked her lips, hesitating. Dal had been a great help to her while Tek was unconscious, and she well understood that without the help of the Mercenaries, neither she nor Tek—nor their children—would be alive to
have this discussion.

He seemed to take in what she left unspoken.

“It’s the appearance,” he said. “I—we. We mustn’t look as though we were relying on paid troops, no matter how respected the Brotherhood is. And even if Dal has not yet been confirmed as Tenebroso, his attendance might send the wrong message.”

Zella nodded, relief making her smile come naturally. Tek was talking and thinking like his old self. “I see, that’s well thought out,” she said.

“Get Gan to arrange it.”

Zella felt her face go stiff. “Gan-eGan is dead, my heart. Don’t you remember?”

“Trying to tickle me?” she said, aiming a blow at his left shoulder which he parried, making her duck under a cut to her head.

Parno grinned. “And why, exactly, shouldn’t I tickle you?”

“Because you know what tickling leads to.” She saw her opening, slapped his sword aside with the palm of her hand against the flat of the blade, and stepped into him, taking his wrist in her left hand and throwing her sword arm around his neck. She kissed him, light touches on cheeks, chin, and lips, as he laughed. “And we have company.”

She made to step back, but his arms had gone around her, so she turned in their circle and smiled her wolf’s smile at the two men approaching from under the arches of the arcade along the north side of the courtyard.

Parno whistled softly next to her ear as he let his arms fall away, releasing her. She gave Dal-eDal and Karlyn-Tan a short nod before turning to the stone bench where they’d left their other weapons. She tossed Parno his shirt and slipped her vest on over her breastband.

“I see we’re not the only ones left uninvited to Tek-aKet’s audience,” Parno said, as he wiped the sweat off his face and arms with his shirt.

Dal-eDal shrugged, tilting his head to one side. “I could see how my presence might be awkward, but I was surprised when I heard that you were also excluded.”

Parno grinned. “Politically, it’s an astute move. Now isn’t the time to remind the Houses that the Tarkinate was restored by a handful of Mercenary Brothers.”

“You were always more politically aware than I,” Dal-eDal said, with a short bow. “And that is why I have come to you. I felt you should be told. The Tarkin has sent word that he will confirm me as Tenebroso four days from now.”

“You don’t need my permission.”

Dal shook his head, lips pressed tight. “Nor do I ask for it. But I find that I would like your . . . your approval.”

“You have it.” Parno’s voice was low and cool.

“The reason for your Casting Out has been removed, and I would like to offer you the shelter of the House once more. So that you are Tenebro again.”

Dhulyn’s heart thundered in her ears as Parno remained silent a long moment. Would he give the same answer here, in front of others, that he had given her?

“Don’t take offense at what I’m about to say, Dal,” Parno finally said. “But I want you to remember that I didn’t leave the House. Do you understand? It was taken from me. I was Cast out.” Karlyn-Tan’s head came up, and he looked sharply at Parno. “I have another House now, one that I can never lose. And I have a Partner. Not even death will release me from that bond.” He looked down at Dhulyn and touched her cheek with his fingertips. “In Battle,” he said.

“And in Death,” she answered, forcing her voice through the barrier in her throat.


“Both of you. The task of being Tenebroso will be difficult enough without you.”

“Want my advice?”

“Always.”

“Just ask yourself, what would Lok do? And do the opposite.”

Dal-eDal joined the laugh, but Dhulyn thought his eyes were not smiling.
“All’s well, my soul?” Was it possible that the woman was still worrying about Dal-eDal and the lure of House Tenebro? Would this uncertainty haunt her forever?

His heart froze as she looked up the short distance between them, frowning, her blood-red brows drawn down in a sharp vee.

“I don’t like Tek-aKet’s behavior,” she said. “I don’t like our being excluded.”

Parno let out his breath slowly. After all this time, he still expected her to react like a civilized woman—as his mother or sisters might have done, wanting to talk it over, reassuring themselves again and again. Was he ever going to know her well enough to know what she was thinking? Did he want to?

“Tek’s position is logical, politically speaking.”

“There is no such thing as logic, politically speaking.”

“Ah, so young to be so cynical.”

She shook her head, lips pursed. “There’s something off. Something wrong.”

Parno pushed the door open and let Dhulyn precede him into the baths before he answered. “Let me see if I understand. We’ve killed Lok-iKol, restored the rightful Tarkin to the Carnelian Throne, we’re valued guests of the Tarkinate . . .” He imitated Dhulyn, shaking his head, pursing his lips. “No, I can’t say that I see a problem.”

Parno doubled over, gasping, as Dhulyn poked him in the solar plexis with stiffened fingers, and stepped around him to shut the door against the cooler air of the corridor. “You’ve forgotten the Green Shadow.”

“Well, I was trying to, yes.” Parno dragged in a ragged breath, fully aware that he didn’t sound as lighthearted as he was pretending to be. “Unlike some overeducated Outlanders of my acquaintance, I don’t like to dwell excessively on the negative. As I said before, evil defeated, Tarkin restored, Mercenaries luxuriating in well-appointed baths of Carnelian Dome—no, I see no difficulties here.”

Dhulyn sat down on the cedar wood bench just inside the door and pulled up her right foot, but made no other attempt to remove her boot. “I hope you’re right,” she said. “But, somehow, I’m not so sure about evil’s being defeated.” After a moment she looked up, her eyes still focused inward. “Zelianora tells me that other than the bump on his head, Tek-aKet has no injuries.”

“And so?”

Dhulyn sighed, shutting her eyes. “Why are you being so stubborn? If his arm was not broken, why did the man scream when I touched him?”

“What are you saying?”

“Has anyone noted the color of his eyes?”

He knew there were some among the staff and Carnelian Guard who hadn’t thought that well of Tek-aKet Tarkin, who’d maybe been a bit pleased when he was gone. But there were few—very few—who had found they actually preferred Lok-iKol Tenebro. For the last three days the halls and corridors had been filled with smiling faces, Rab-iRab, the Tarkina’s lady page, was practically dancing in her work, and altogether everything, Tel thought with satisfaction, was once again as it should be.

Today he was so happy that he wasn’t really listening very hard to the conversations behind him. After the first few they were pretty much the same. The first House into the room had been Fen-oNef Penrado, no surprise there. His support for Tek-aKet Tarkin had been unwavering. The second was unexpected. It was Jor-iRoj Esmolo’s daughter whom rumor had promised to Lok-iKol. Either the rumor had been false, or the Esmoloso was anxious that Tek-aKet believe it so. After that bit of excitement, the conversations had been boringly repetitious. If everyone was so glad to see Tek-aKet in what they all referred to as his “rightful place,” how had it been so easy for Lok-iKol Tenebro to sit in it?

Tel stood straighter to attention and pricked up his ears. Old Fen-oNef was approaching the throne again, and since he’d already paid his respects, this meant that he had some other business with the Tarkin, business that might require the Tarkin’s Runner.

“My lord Tarkin,” the old man was saying. “I see there are no Jaldeans present this afternoon.”

A little surprised, Tel glanced around the room. No, there weren’t any of the recognizable dark brown robes. How had he missed that?

“They are saying, my lord, that the Jaldean Shrines are shut, and petitioners are being turned away.”

“Is this so?” The Tarkin sounded tired. Tel hoped the audience would be over soon.

“My men tell me that one of the shrines has been broken open by discontented believers, and found empty, not a
priest or acolyte in sight.”

Tel carefully kept his face from showing his surprise. He knew that Lok-iKol had stopped supporting the New Believers as soon as his particular friend the priest Beslyn-Tor had become ill, but he hadn’t been aware just how far the fortunes of the Jaldeans had fallen.

“My lord.” Old Fen-oNef was still speaking. “If you would take the frank advice of an old ally, let me remind you what your father would have done in these circumstances.” Fen-oNef waited for the Tarkin’s nod before proceeding. Old family friend he might be, fool he was not. “Once or twice it seemed that the Houses had lost confidence in Nyl-aLyn Tarkin.” Here the old man smiled, brushing back his long mustaches with the back of his hand, but Tel managed to keep his face straight. He knew that with his “once or twice” Fen-oNef referred to the near-rebellions that Tek-aKet’s fierce father had suppressed. “At those times, you may remember,” the old man continued, “your father held a Ceremony of Dedication, where each House reaffirmed its loyalty and support. Why not do the same? If nothing else, it is a marvelous excuse for a banquet.”

At this Tel did smile, almost squirming at his post in excitement. He’d been too young to be a page when Tek-aKet became Tarkin, but a Dedication was almost as good as an Anointing.

“An excellent suggestion, Fen,” Tek-aKet said, his hand straying up to his left cheek. Tel frowned. He’d seen that gesture once or twice already, and if the Tarkin’s head still pained him, this audience should be cut short.

“It will take some organization, I know,” Fen-oNef said. “But I’m sure Gan-eGan has left able assistants, and, if I may, I would advise this as soon as possible.”

The Tarkin tapped his mouth with the first two fingers of his right hand as he considered this. “I agree,” he said finally. “Preparations can begin immediately, but I would suggest the ceremony itself wait for the arrival of the Mesticha Stone. That should serve to quell any fears felt by the Jaldeans and appease their faction.”

The Tarkin and the Penradoso went on speaking, but their words were drowned by the buzzing in Tel’s ears. The Mesticha Stone? Tel had almost forgotten about it, even though he himself had helped the Steward of Keys arrange with a representative of the Jaldeans for the Stone’s arrival. One of the small rooms behind the throne had been designated as the artifact’s resting place, though as yet no changes had been made.

But it had been Lok-iKol who had asked for these arrangements, not Tek-aKet. He risked a glance over his shoulder at the Tarkin. What did Tek-aKet know about this? How did he know?

It wasn’t until after the evening meal that Telian-Han decided he would, after all, speak to someone about what he’d overheard.

“One of those Tenebro girls came to be a lady page with us last year,” Rab had said. “Zelianora Tarkina gave her a three-month trial before sending her home. She won’t tolerate any of that type here.” Rab had welcomed her Tarkina back with laughter, and not a few tears, and had embraced Mar willingly, all the more so as her fellow senior page had left to be married some few weeks before the night of terror.

Of course, it didn’t hurt that Rab had been much impressed by Mar’s adventures. “It reminds me of the Tale of Evanian the Carver,” she’d said. “I hope your life has every bit as good an ending.”

It was the same excited but serious look that Rab-iRab was wearing now.

“Mar,” she said, barely waiting for the door to close behind them. “Is the Tarkina still asleep?”

Zelianora had come back from the audience in the throne room exhausted, her emotional resources worn to thinness by all that had happened in the last half moon. Now that she was finally enjoying a deep and satisfying sleep, Mar was reluctant to wake her, and said so.

“This is Telian-Han,” Rab said, indicating the younger boy. “He’s one of the Tarkin’s pages.”

Mar smiled at the boy and he smiled back, though the frown that drew down the corners of his eyes did not go away. “Can your message wait until the Tarkina awakens?”

“It’s not a message, Lady Mar,” the boy said, clearing his throat as his voice croaked. “It’s something that happened in the throne room this afternoon. Something that worried me.”

“It won’t seem like much,” Rab said. “But it made me think of something you’d told me in your adventures. How the Wolfshead said that a scout’s report should include everything, even the details that don’t seem important because you can’t tell what’s important until you have all the details.”

Mar looked from one young face to another. The boy was definitely frightened, and desperately hiding it. Rab’s flushed cheeks showed her excitement, but her eyes were steady and serious. These two lived here with Lok-iKol, Mar reminded herself. And with whatever Lok had become. They’d been having their own adventures.
“Tell me,” she said. “Maybe together we can decide what to do.”

Mar could tell from the practiced way he told the story that Tel had given this a great deal of thought. What she couldn’t see was why the boy was so frightened.

“The Mesticha Stone is an important artifact,” she said. “And it would take time to prepare a Dedication Ceremony in any case, so why not wait for it?”

“It was the way he said it,” Tel said. “It . . . I’d heard him, the other one, say it just about exactly the same way. The same tone in his voice, the same words. Even the part about ‘appeasing the Jaldean faction.’ Tek-aKet Tarkin never cared about appeasing Jaldeans,” the boy said, his lip curling. “And even less so now, from what we’ve been told. It was as if I was hearing Lok-iKol speaking with the Tarkin’s voice.”

Lok-iKol or something else. Mar fought to keep the sudden surge of fear from her face.

“What color are the Tarkin’s eyes,” she asked.

“Blue,” said both pages in unison.

“And are they still blue? They don’t seem green?”

The two pages looked at one another, looked back at Mar and shook their heads, confusion evident on their faces.

Mar was not reassured. “I don’t think we’ll go to the Tarkina with this,” she said finally. “Not quite yet anyway.”

Gun had gone to the Library, and might not return tonight if he found something useful among the books and scrolls. That left only one person she could take this to. Mar rose to her feet and set down the book she’d been reading.

“Let’s find Dhulyn Wolfshead.”

“I thought you were there for the rest of the day, challenging all comers,” she said as he caught up with her.

His pipes bleated a mournful note as he tucked them closer under his elbow, freeing his other arm to slip around her waist as they continued down the corridor.

“Pah,” he snorted, a feigned disgust wrinkling his lips. “As if there’s any contest when the Tarkin’s own Chanter gets involved. The woman does nothing all day but play. Small wonder she can best the rest of us.”

“There, there, my soul,” Dhulyn said, grinning. “There’s plenty you can do better than she.”

“As I hope to be proving to you in a few minutes,” he said, squeezing her closer and brushing his lips against her cheek. Dhulyn hugged him closely in turn, sighing as the muscles in her neck and shoulders relaxed.

“How long do you think we’ll stay,” she asked him.

“Well, at least let’s get paid,” he said. “Or do you find you simply can’t take the luxury of fires, feather beds, and regular baths a moment longer?”

Dhulyn smiled at the undercurrent of laughter in his voice. “It isn’t that,” she said. “And you know it.”

Parno nodded without speaking, and held his tongue until they were at the door of their rooms. “We must stay and keep watch, in case there’s reason. So you told me this morning, and I agreed. But there’s something we should do,” he said, “so as to be ready when the time for leaving comes.”

“I believe we did that, too, this afternoon,” she said, trying to make him laugh, “and unless I’m mistaken, we’re about to do it again.”

“Never you fear;” he said, smiling and shaking his head. “We’ll never go short, not so long as we’re both alive, and I, at least, have breath enough for my pipes. But there is a place here where a Brother of ours fell. Let us visit it while we have the chance.”

Dhulyn pressed her lips tightly together. “You are right, my heart. Bring your pipes, and I will fetch my sword.”

Parno patted the bed with his free hand. “I didn’t mean we should go right now.”

This time Dhulyn laughed out loud. “Oh, yes, you did.”

“Died on his feet,” Parno said. “Good lad,”

“So may we all,” Dhulyn said, leaning her shoulder against the wall to one side of the bloodstain. “Tell me,” she said, beginning the ritual, “how did you first know our Brother Hernyn Greystone the Shield?”

Parno made himself comfortable against the wall on the other side of the stain. “I knew him when he was only Hernyn Greystone,” Parno began. “And he was a sorry sight when I first laid eyes on him, let me tell you . . .”

The exchange of story and anecdote that made up the Mercenary’s Last Farewell did not take very long, even though Dhulyn and Parno tried to remember everything they had seen Hernyn say or do.

“We stand now where our Brother stood at the last,” Dhulyn said finally. “And we say farewell to Hernyn
Greystone the Shield, who gave his life for ours. Farewell, Hernyn, we stood together in Battle, and we will stand together again in Death.”

“In Battle and in Death,” Parno said, lifting his pipes into position, and fitting the chanter to his lips. The melody that he played then was not traditional, but one of his own making, and Dhulyn thought that if he had played it in the guardroom, he might have beaten even the Tarkin’s piper, in spite of all her practice.

When the final notes died away, they stood a moment or two longer in respect for the music, and their fallen Brother, before Dhulyn gave the bloodstained wall a final salute, touching her fingertips to the bloodstain, and then to her own forehead. Holding hands like children, they retraced their steps to the upper floors.

They had not yet reached the first staircase when Dhulyn hesitated between one step and the next, holding Parno back with a tug on his hand. He caught her eye, and nodded; he’d heard it, too.

“That was not the last dying away of the pipes’ music,” he whispered. “There’s no echo so long as that.”

“Speak again,” Dhulyn called, her voice pitched carefully so as not to echo too much in the deserted stone passages. “Speak that we may find you. Do you need our help?”

Again there came the low moaning that had first caught at Dhulyn’s ears. There was, indeed, something of the mournful notes of the pipes in the sound.

“This way,” Parno said, as he turned to go back the way they came. They were not far on the other side of the narrower passage that led to the old kitchens when they found a series of rooms, roughly the size appropriate for storage, the bolts on the outside of the doors showing evidence of what had been stored there. The man making the sound was in the third room.

He cowered away from them, pushing himself with his feet into the corner of the cell and covering his eyes against the brightness of the lamplight. It took a few minutes, along with some gentle words, for his eyes to adjust enough to allow Dhulyn to coax his hands away from his face.

“He hasn’t been here long,” Parno said, joining her after a quick look into a pail in the far corner of the cell. “But I’d say no one’s been near him in a few days.”

Dhulyn nodded, pulling her small emergency flask of water out of her belt pouch and holding it to the man’s lips.

“You speak, Grandfather,” she said as gently as she could.

The prisoner worked his lips, licking at them and swallowing. “Mercenary,” was the word that finally found its way out of his mouth.

“That’s right, sir,” Parno said, squatting down next to the old man. “Can you tell us who you are?”

Suddenly the old man grabbed Dhulyn by the front of her vest, his gnarled fingers tangling in the bits of lace and ribbons. “Did you see him? Has he found you?”

“Who would that be, sir?” Parno said.

“The Sleeping God,” the old man said, subsiding once more into his corner, one hand still clutching Dhulyn’s vest.

They became aware that the torn and stained robes the old man was wearing had once been the dark brown of a Jaldean priest. Their eyes met over the prisoner’s head.

“You’ve seen the Sleeping God?” Dhulyn asked, just as Parno said, “Does he have green eyes?”

“I thought he was, do you see? I thought he was. I thought I was helping him. Helping him to awaken because his time had come.” The old man subsided. “I thought he was the God. At first. I thought I was touched by the God.”

She repeated the phrase several times before putting his dirty index finger, with its cracked nail, to his lips, tapping them in the “shhh” sign, all the while his head trembling as if he had the palsy. “But no,” he said finally, the words a mere whisper. “But no.” He caught at Dhulyn again. “I welcomed him. I rejoiced!” He shook his head again, but this time like a man who just can’t believe he could have been that stupid. “But he isn’t the God. He fears the God. He fears the God, do you see?” He collapsed backward. “And then he left me.”

“Where did he go?”

“To Lok-i-Kol. To Lok-i-Kol. Like this.” And here the old man took Dhulyn’s face tenderly in his hands, and
focused his eyes on hers. “Like this. That’s how it’s done.”

It took all of Dhulyn’s force of will to take the old man’s hands off her face gently, without breaking his wrists.

“That’s how he does it, is it?” she asked.


The focus faded once again from his eyes and the hand that clutched at Dhulyn’s vest relaxed. She felt for and found a pulse under his jaw, but it was fitful. She glanced up at Parno, found him grim-faced.

“Can you carry him?” she said. “I don’t think he’ll last long anyway, but we can’t leave him here.”

“Take my pipes,” Parno said. “Dhulyn,” he added as she straightened to her feet and held out her hands for the instrument. “Do we understand him to mean . . . ?”

“I think we must,” Dhulyn said, tucking the pipes under her left arm and picking up the lantern. “From what he’s said, I think it means the Tarkin.”

“Who should we tell?”

“That’s a good question.” Alkoryn was dead, she thought. And as little as she liked it, that might very well make her Senior Brother in Gotterang.

“Dhulyn Wolfshead? Lionsmane?” came a tentative but familiar voice. As she turned, Dhulyn did not trouble to suppress a sigh that was so short as to be almost a snort of annoyance. Mar was part of the Tarkin’s household now; what could she possibly want from Dhulyn?

She raised her eyebrows as she turned and recognized the youngsters with Mar. One she knew as Rab-iRab, senior lady page to Zelianora Tarkina. Younger than Mar, but tall for her age, and with an air of having very recently learned how serious the world can be. The other was a page of the Tarkin’s whom Dhulyn had now seen several times without learning his name. Dhulyn felt a heavy weight settle into her stomach. What would bring pages from the Tarkin’s household looking for Mercenaries? She was very afraid that she knew.

“Wolfshead and Lionsmane,” Mar said. Dhulyn knew that look—half fear, half resolution—she’d seen it in Mar’s face in the mountains. “May we speak with you in private?”

“We’ve business of our own to attend to, Lady Mar,” Parno said. “Can this wait?”

Mar exchanged looks with the two pages. The young boy spoke up. “It’s about the Tarkin,” he said, eyes glittering.

“You’re his page, aren’t you?” Dhulyn asked him. “You know our names, what is yours?”

“I am Telian-Han, son of Debrion-Han of Culebro Holding.” The boy had to clear his throat halfway through, as his voice threatened to crack.

“You knew the usurper, Lok-iKol Tenebro? You were here?”

The boy nodded. “We both were.”

“And you have something to tell us?”

Again the nod.

Parno raised his hand to his face, placing the tips of his index and middle fingers on his lips. Dhulyn saw and silently agreed. She wasn’t the only one with a sense of disaster.

“Come with us,” she said to the youngsters.

Twenty-two

PARNO LEANED FORWARD in his chair, elbows on his knees, hands lightly clasped. *Demons and perverts.* He looked from one white-faced page to the other, and fixed a look of confident encouragement on his face. Behind him, Dhulyn leaned against the window frame, arms folded across her chest, ankles crossed, eyes almost closed. They’d taken the youngsters straight to their own quarters where the first thing he’d done was shut the windows—though it was very unlikely that anyone could overhear them, here on the fifth floor. Their three rooms here in Zelianora Tarkina’s tower made up a small suite, with this outer, double-windowed room furnished as a sitting room with a long upholstered settee, a round table covered with a weighted cloth, thick patterned carpets on the dark oak floor, and heavy armchairs made soft with bright cushions.
Rab-iRab and Telian-Han, though they would ordinarily bear no resemblance to each other, now wore identical pale, wide-eyed looks. Parno and Dhulyn had listened to Telian’s story without commenting, yet somehow, in the repetition of it, both young pages had become aware of the gravity of their suspicions.

“Lady Mar,” Dhulyn said, her eyes still resting on the face of the young Telian-Han. “Would you be so kind as to find Zelianora Tarkina and bring her here?”

“Dhulyn,” Parno began.

“We are still, technically, in her employ.” Dhulyn turned to Mar. “Come straight back to us here, Lady, if you would be so good. I need hardly tell you, speak to no one of this, not even the Tarkina herself, until you are both safely in this room. Until we are sure, any and all of us may be in danger.”

Or may be the danger, Parno thought.

“The children?” Rab-iRab said. Parno’s jaw tightened as he exchanged a look with Dhulyn. Just when they were thinking things could not be any worse.

“They should both be asleep,” Mar said, getting to her feet. She spoke more than half to herself. “Denobea will be with them.” She looked up at Parno, glanced at Dhulyn. “They’ve seen very little of their father these last few days.”

“Perhaps you could make sure of their whereabouts somehow, my Dove, without alarming the Tarkina.”

It was a shock to see what a change two small words could bring to a young woman’s face. Suddenly there was a brightness in Mar’s eyes, and she left the room with a light step and more heart for her errand than she had when she’d entered it. Parno shook his head, smiling. Leave it to Dhulyn to know the right thing to say, and the right moment to say it. What a Schooler she would make, if they lived so long.

As the door closed behind Mar, Parno turned to the two pages, sitting close together on the settee, holding hands.

“Would you youngsters be so kind as to wait in the inner room while my Partner and I consult?” The two pages exchanged identical worried glances. “You’ll be safest there,” Parno continued, “and no one will be able to ask you any questions you’d rather not answer.”

This reassured them, and they both stood. “Come, Tel,” Rab-iRab said as they walked toward the door Dhulyn held open for them. “You look as though you could lie down.” Dhulyn gently closed the door behind them.

“What are we going to tell the Tarkina?” Parno said.

“I think we’ll rather ask her if she’s seen anything unusual, anything that has given her pause.” Dhulyn rubbed her eyes. “You’ll be safest there,” Parno continued, “and no one will be able to ask you any questions you’d rather not answer.”

This reassured them, and they both stood. “Come, Tel,” Rab-iRab said as they walked toward the door Dhulyn held open for them. “You look as though you could lie down.” Dhulyn gently closed the door behind them.

“What are we going to tell the Tarkina?” Parno said.

“I think we’ll rather ask her if she’s seen anything unusual, anything that has given her pause.” Dhulyn rubbed her eyes. “Are we crack-brained? Do we make too much from the maunderings of a half-crazed old man and the nerves of a young page who has seen perhaps too much in the last half moon?”

“A half-crazed old man who knew the Shadow well, and a young page who knew his Tarkin. Add to that the fact that we’ve not spent time in the Tarkin’s presence since the restoration, when he would hardly be parted from us before.” Parno shrugged. “Evidence enough at the least for us to investigate further.”

Dhulyn tapped the table lightly with the side of her right fist. “Think what we risk if we don’t learn the truth. I’d rather beg pardon if I’m wrong, and take what punishment might be awarded me, than be sorry I never tried to be sure.” Her eyebrows drew down in a frown. “Where’s Gundaron, where’s the Scholar? It’s not like Mar not to go to him first.”

“Set your mind at ease,” Parno said. “He went off this morning to the Library and hasn’t returned; likely intends to spend the night there. He’s been poring over all the old books he can find, looking for any mention of the Green-eyed Shadow.”

“Send Corin Wintermoon to fetch him,” Dhulyn said. “All things considered, whatever he’s found so far, I’d like to have him here while we discuss this.”

“And sending Corin has the added advantage that it will stop her flirting with the guards before she hurts one of them.”

There it was again, a low thumping, as if—Zella shot to her feet, almost falling as she tripped on the shawl Denobea must have tucked around her legs. The sound was coming from her own bedroom, where Tek was yet again lying down. Pushing open the door, she ran into the room and found her husband by the side of the bed on his hands and knees, crawling toward the door. He shrank back as she entered, blinking at her in the dim light that followed her through the doorway.

“Zella?”

“Tek, what’s happened?” She ran forward to help him to his feet. He hunched his shoulders, cowering from her and narrowing his eyes to a squint.
“Zella?” His voice stronger now, but there was a note of query in it that made her pause, her hands still outstretched, ready to raise him to his feet. Before she could help him, he clutched at her forearm with such force that her sleeve tore.

“Tek—” she gasped. “You’re hurting me.”

“Zella,” he shook her. “Where’s Dhulyn Wolfshead? Bring her, get her now.” The fierce focus died out of his face, the painful grip on her arm relaxed as he collapsed onto the floor.

The Index of Materials told him this Library did indeed have a copy of Holderon’s *Commentaries*, but no one could find it on the shelves. Yet Gun was certain he’d seen the scroll himself.

The history covered a period about which there were more legends known than facts, the early rise of the Marked, before they had formed into Guilds, and, interesting but not so significant for his present purpose, it had a section on the Sleeping God as well. But it was Holderon’s interpretation of this piece of ancient learning—if Gun remembered what he’d read correctly—that the Mercenary Brotherhood, the Jaldean Priesthood, the Marked, and even the Scholars themselves all appeared at the same time—just after the fall of the civilization that was now called the Caids. If Holderon was right, Gun thought, if there was a connection of some kind between the disparate groups, surely that could be a starting point, a guide for them to—

The sound of footsteps made him look up, and the sight of Karlyn-Tan heading toward him brought him to his feet. He found his mouth dry and tried to swallow, brushing down his tunic with trembling hands, conscious of being once more in Scholar’s dress. Logic told him he had no reason to fear the former Steward of Walls, but he found he still wasn’t really comfortable with anyone but Mar.

“Karlyn-Tan,” he said. “I didn’t think to see you still outside Tenebro House.”

The older man smiled and shrugged one shoulder into the air as he propped his hip on the edge of the next carrel. “Nothing’s made permanent, Gundaron. The Lord Dal-eDal is giving me time to think. I’m not altogether sure that I want my old post back. I was Walls for fifteen years, never thinking to come out.”

“But now that you are out . . .”

Karlyn nodded. “Exactly. Now that I am out—I may be more useful outside the Walls, and, well, it’s rare a Steward has a chance to rethink such a choice, and I’m using the opportunity.”

His own heart being well awake now, the significance of certain looks and gestures suddenly dawned on Gun. “It wouldn’t be Dhulyn Wolfshead who’s making you rethink your choices?” Gun asked, made bold by Karlyn-Tan’s friendly tone.

Karlyn-Tan laughed. “It might, though perhaps not in the way you’re thinking.”

Gun sat down again. “What brings you here?”

“Dal needed a message sent, and I felt like a walk. When they told me you were in here, it seemed like a gift from the Caids. There’s a deal of scrolls and books left in your room at Tenebro House, Gundaron of Valdomar, and—what have I said?”

Gun stopped striking his forehead with the palm of his hand. “I was looking for a scroll and wondering why I couldn’t find it and all the time it’s probably sitting in my study at Tenebro.”

Karlyn-Tan looked at Gun with such sympathy that Gun lowered his eyes. “You’d rather not think about Tenebro House, wouldn’t you?” the man said. “Put it all behind you, as it were?”

It was Gun’s turn to shrug.

“Your pardon, Scholar Gundaron.” It was one of the youngster Scholars that Gun didn’t know. “There’s a Mercenary Brother at the gate. You’re to come to the Dome.”

Gun glanced at Karlyn-Tan.

The older man nodded. “I’ll come with you.”

“The Tarkina was on her way here,” Mar said.

“Mar has told you, then?” Parno said, rising to his feet as Mar entered behind the older woman and shut the door. The young woman was shaking her head even as Zelianora spoke.

“Told me? Told me what? No.” She looked wildly around the room before focusing her eyes on Dhulyn. “Dhulyn Wolfshead,” Zelianora said, reaching out her hands, “Please come, Tek asks for you.”

Dhulyn stood slowly. “What are you not saying?” Four days ago this request would not have brought the Tarkina herself. Four days ago Zelianora would have sent a servant.
The Tarkina hesitated, lips parted, before turning to glance at Mar. As she turned back, she faltered, as if her knees were failing her. Parno stepped forward and took the Tarkina’s arm to steady her and led her to a chair, but let it go immediately as Zella gasped in pain. Dhulyn sprang up with a snort of disgust and pulled back the woman’s sleeve, to reveal bruises darkening on her forearm.

“Zelianora,” Dhulyn said, her voice sharp enough to shock the Tarkina to attention. “The Tarkin did this.”

“No! Yes, but hear me out.” The Tarkina waved Dhulyn away with impatient hands. “This is not important.”

“We are listening, Zelianora Tarkina,” Parno said.

“I don’t know that I can make you understand.” She raised her hands to her head as if she would cover her ears. “He is terrified. I have never seen anyone so afraid.” She looked directly at Dhulyn. “And yet . . .”

Dhulyn took Zelianora’s hands and led her to a seat. “And yet?”

“He is himself in a way he has not been these past few days. Since the blow to his head, he’s been like a man suffering from an illness. Now it is as though a fever has broken and—he is himself again. He is Tek. Do you understand?”

“Before this,” Dhulyn said, indicating the bruised arm. “Did he stare into your eyes? Touch you in any way that made you feel dizzy? Ill? Are there gaps in your memories?”

“No, indeed,” Zelianora said. “Nothing like that. Since his illness Tek . . . he has not touched me,” she said, as if realizing it for the first time. “But he’s been ill, I thought nothing of it.”

“If I might interrupt,” Parno’s voice was vibrant with urgency. “I rejoice that Zelianora Tarkina is well, but she tells us that the Tarkin is more like himself than he’s seemed in days. In the light of what we were discussing, perhaps we should go and see for ourselves.”

“Don’t let him touch you,” Parno said, as he helped Dhulyn lift her sword belts over her head.

“If you’d rather do it yourself . . .” Dhulyn pulled her multicolored vest back into place. She needed no help to remove harness or weapons—she could have done it by herself, in the dark, and one-handed—but Parno had needed the reassurance that helping her disarm, that touching her, would bring. And he’s not the only one.

“Don’t you know what you’re going to do?” Parno reminded her. “I sent for you, Lord Tarkin?”

“Are you,” the man turned to face her.

He laughed without making a sound and stepped back from her.

“You sent for me, Lord Tarkin?”

“I sent for you.” The tone was ambiguous enough that Dhulyn could not be sure whether it was question or statement. The man turned to face her.

She took a step toward him, and then another. With the light behind him, his face was shadowed and she couldn’t be sure . . . She took another step. And stopped, repressing a shiver as the hair on her arms and the back of her neck stood up. There was no doubt. The man’s eyes were green. Whatever Zelianora thought she had seen, it was gone.

“What is it, then?” she asked.

“You take a very informal tone with your Tarkin.”

“But you’re not the Tarkin, are you? Mine or anyone else’s.” she said, strolling casually closer, fingers reaching
automatically to tap the place on her hip where her sword hilt should rest. Could she keep him from hearing the
noises in the anteroom?

“What am I, then?”

Dhulyn frowned. She would almost swear the question was asked in earnest. “You best know that yourself.” She
moved still farther into the room, beginning to circle around to the right, keeping his attention on her, and away from
the door.

“Will you tell me something? I am curious.” He turned to follow her, stepping away from the window and into the
room.

“You are capable of curiosity, then?”

“I am capable of worlds.”

Dhulyn wanted to snort in disbelief, but found she couldn’t. “Ask.”

“How was it known, so quickly, that Tek-aKet was not here? With the others, with Beslyn-Tor, with Lok-iKol, no
one knew.”

A sensible question. How did you catch me? A very sensible question. Would the Green Shadow understand the
answer?

“They had no one close enough,” she told him. “No one who knew them well enough to see a change.”

“No one who could see me?”

“No one who could see you,” she agreed. It didn’t know about Dal, then, or Gun; nor was she about to tell him.
She stepped around a long padded bench, still moving toward him. They were only a few spans apart, almost close
enough, and she was eyeing the precise spot on his neck where her blow should land.

“What do you want?” she asked. Keep him talking, keep his attention from what she planned.

“Nothing.”

“Your actions say otherwise. Have we no common ground? Can we not negotiate?”

The thing that possessed Tek-aKet closed its eyes. “Common ground.” Its voice, Tek’s and yet not Tek’s,
trembled with some unnameable emotion. “Too much shape.” The eyes opened, bright as gemstones. “All things
here have shape. Everything. Shapes. Edges. Start, stop. Here, even I have shape. Even I. Can you send me back,
Seer? Can you or any of your kind do more than force me to a different shape? You ask me what I want. Give me
nothing.” The right hand rose up and, fingers curled, tapped it on the chest. “Make this nothing. I want NOTHING.”

She blinked, and shifted her gaze. The far end of the bench, the end closest to the Shadow . . . shimmered like the
air above a fire. It was not there, then it was. She blinked again and shook her head. A fog grew out of nowhere and
swallowed the bench, and the Tarkina’s room, and the world, leaving a curious emptiness. A NOT.

Dhulyn stopped walking. A corridor formed around her and dissolved as she stepped forward onto a beach . . . the
Tarkina’s bedroom again with the Green Shadow who inhabited the Tarkin looking at her . . . the hold of a ship . . . a
window, a mirror—no, a window, the night sky cut and a green fog spilling down. The corridor again with the fog, a
cloud like hot dust eating the air, consuming all that lay before it, making NOT.

Advancing toward her.

This was death coming. Now. Death was now. No battlefield. No sword in her hand. No hot rush of blood, heart
pounding in her ears. A slow dissolve, the world like crystals of ice slowly melting and becoming not water, but
nothing, nothing at all.

NOT . . .

Why had she never Seen this? Never this Vision?

The world changed again. Not a Sight. A memory. A dark-skinned man, his teeth white in the darkness of the
hold as he smiled at her where she stood over the corpse of the careless slaver, that same slaver’s sword in her hand.
“Come with me,” the smiling dark-skinned man had said, “and I’ll teach you to use that thing.” Suddenly that sword
was once again in her hand, the memory sword, her first sword, that Dorian the Black had let her keep, and taught
her to use. Sharp, clear, its edges well-defined and solid. She brought the sword up in a salute, and then brought
it down and up again, in the sweep she would use to clear space before her when she was being crowded. The blade
passed through the stones of the corridor before the dissolve could reach her, cutting them cleanly and leaving a
sharp, distinct edge. A gap like a firebreak.

The fog was on the other side, and, now that she was focused, now that she was armed, she could see the two
spots of green that were the eyes. She smiled, lifted her left hand and made a beckoning motion.

She was back in the Tarkina’s bedroom. Back with the Green-eyed Shadow before her. But this time she knew
what to do. Her breathing steadied, and she fell into the first position of the Wading Crane Shora.

Focus. Like light through a lens. Sharper. Cast out all noise, all smells. See only the strike. When you strike, with blade or with hand, with stave or with elbow, you strike through, not at. The blow does not stop at the target, but goes through. See nothing but the target. See only the strike.

SEE the Strike.
SEE the Fall.

Was that a thump? He shook his head. He didn’t care what he’d agreed to, he was going in. He drew his sword, unlatched the door, grabbed up Dhulyn’s sword in his free hand, and kicked the door open.

Dhulyn was dragging Tek-aKet’s unconscious body toward the bed. One of the clothes presses was open and a number of silk scarves had been pulled out, their colors spilling over the thick rugs.

Parno frowned, blinking. For an instant the far end of the padded bench that stood between him and Dhulyn had looked somehow melted and blackened. Then it had appeared whole again. He stepped forward to examine it more closely and found that his initial assessment had, after all, been correct. The end of the bench was melted and fused like glass, as was a large section of carpet and floor under it.

“Since you’re here, you can help me tie him up.”

Parno looked around. “It was the Shadow?”

Dhulyn gave him a look that would turn wine into vinegar, and Parno felt his muscles unknot, felt the grin spread across his face. Only the real Dhulyn could look at him like that. He sheathed his sword, tossed hers on the undamaged end of the bench and grasped the Tarkin’s wrists.

“On the bed, I thought,” Dhulyn said. “We’ll have to keep him comfortable, and he’ll have less leverage lying down.”

“Facedown?”

“And feed him how?”

Parno shrugged again. The fact was that Dhulyn had far more experience with keeping prisoners—or being kept prisoner, than he had himself.

“What if Tek, the Tarkin I mean, comes back to his senses?”

Dhulyn pulled a final silk scarf around the unconscious man’s head and secured it as a blindfold over the eyes.

“Always supposing that’s possible, that Zelianora actually did speak to her husband, and not the Shadow.” Now it was Dhulyn’s turn to shrug. “We’ll explain to him why he’s tied up.” She walked back over to the damaged section of the floor. “Does this look at all familiar to you?”

Parno squatted beside her. “How do you mean?

“Does it not remind you, in a small way, of the Dead Lands?”

Parno pursed his lips in a silent whistle.

After checking the ties one last time—better careful than cursing, is what Dhulyn always said—they came out into the anteroom to find Gun and Karlyn-Tan waiting for them. The former Steward was wearing a politician’s face, telling nothing, but the young Scholar had his lower lip between his teeth.

“What now?” Dhulyn asked. Parno smiled. Someone was going to regret creating that edge of exasperated impatience in her voice.

“It’s Beslyn-Tor,” Gun said, shooting a glance at Karlyn and waiting for his nod to continue. “He’s left. Just got up and walked out.”

“What do you mean ‘walked out?’ ” Parno asked. When he’d seen the old Jaldean priest that morning, it was all the man could do to find a chair with his backside. “Who’d he go with?”

“No one,” Karlyn said. “It seems he simply walked away. The guard at the gate included it in his usual report at the transfer of shift, but had no orders to stop him or to report it earlier.”

“Of course he didn’t.” Parno could have kicked himself. “The man could barely walk to the door unaided. Who thought he could walk out the gate?” He turned to Dhulyn. “Was he shamming all along?”

She was shaking her head, slowly, her eyes looking at but not seeing the tables and chairs of the Tarkin’s anteroom.

“When did this happen?”

“Just before we arrived. Perhaps ten minutes ago, a little more.”
“What color were his eyes?” she asked. Parno looked to Karlyn, but the man was shaking his head. That was a detail no one would have thought to check.

The silence lifted Dhulyn’s eyes to meet Parno’s.

“We’re going to have to leave him tied up,” she said, indicating the inner room with her chin. “No matter who he is.”

Twenty-three

DHULYN LEANED AGAINST the wall behind Zelianora Tarkina, watching the familiar faces around the table. She and Parno could have had seats at the table as well—and maybe Parno would have liked that, she thought, looking sideways at him out of the corner of her eye—but she felt more comfortable on her feet, where she could watch everyone and move quickly, should it prove to be necessary.

They were in the private council chamber in the north tower of the Carnelian Dome. Zelianora Tarkina sat at one end of the oval table, to the right of Bet-oTeb, present as the official representative of her absent father. The Tarkina was pale, and there were lines around her lips that had not been there last night. In no other way did she show the fear and worry that she must have been feeling. The Tarkin-to-be was a copy of her mother, down to the rigidly straight back and the frown line between the eyebrows. On Bet-oTeb’s left was Dal-eDal, Tenebroso in all but name, with Karlyn-Tan leaning against the wall behind him, which put the former Steward directly across from Dhulyn herself. To Dal’s left was Cullen of Langeron, and the Racha bird Disha paced back and forth upon the table itself, pausing every now and then, turning her head to watch the person speaking.

And to round out the circle of those who knew about the Green Shadow, Gundaron and Mar-eMar sat together at the end of the table farthest from the Tarkina and Bet-oTeb. Dhulyn narrowed her eyes. They were never far from one another, those two, and Dhulyn wasn’t at all sure how she felt about that. She told herself it was none of her business. Mar had made herself very useful to Zelianora and her pages, and whatever had brought her to Gotterang in the first place, she now seemed well placed in the Tarkin’s court. Gundaron had pledged himself to the Tarkina also, Dhulyn had heard. All she knew for certain was that the boy was looking thinner than was good for him. He also looked older, more thoughtful, as well he might. But he still had trouble meeting people’s eyes.

“The Shadow has left the Tarkin, then?” Dal was saying. “Can he tell us anything?”

Zelianora Tarkina had been murmuring something to her daughter, but at this question she raised her head and looked around the table, taking in each face in turn. Now Dhulyn could see the exhaustion in the woman’s eyes, held at bay by the firmness of her mouth. The Tarkina shook her head.

“He is Tek-aKet, of that I’m certain, and Dhulyn Wolfshead agrees,” she said. “But his mind still wanders.”

Dhulyn cleared her throat. “It was the same with Beslyn-Tor. He could not focus for more than a few moments at a time.” The Tarkin had been moved to his own chamber, where Corin Wintermoon stood guard beside the bed. She’d been warned not to untie the Tarkin, no matter what was said, or who requested it—and to be especially suspicious if the man became lucid. Now that they knew the Shadow could revisit former hosts, they could not afford to leave Tek-aKet unbound. Though, Dhulyn admitted to herself, it was all too likely the creature could destroy any restraints holding it, if it didn’t mind the cost to the body housing it.

“The Tarkin will know things about the Shadow,” she continued, turning to Zelianora and Bet-oTeb. “Just like the Jaldean did. Things that could help us. We must question him, even if his mind is wandering.” She could understand that their first concern would be for the father, the husband, the leader of Imrion. But they hadn’t seen the Green Shadow, or spoken to it. Hadn’t see the NOT that it would make of their lives and their world, if they did not find it and destroy it.

Bet-oTeb spoke up, her clear child’s voice startling. “Can’t we—could we not find a Healer? Somewhere? I have heard that there are Marked among the Cloud People. Would they be willing to help us?”

Dhulyn was pleased that the child who was to be the next Tarkin spoke of willingness to help, rather than of forcing. That boded well for everyone’s future, if they all came out of this alive, and in their right minds.

“There is a Healer in the Trevel settlement,” Cullen said. Disha shrugged her wings and walked up the table toward him in her peculiar rocking gait. “Disha says that if she leaves now, she can be back before nightfall, but the Healer, even if she’s found quickly and is willing to come,” he spread his hands. “It would take more than half a moon for someone to get here from the mountains.”

“I would be very grateful if you would go,” Bet-oTeb said, addressing the bird directly. Disha opened and closed her wings with a snap, hopped to Cullen’s shoulder where she butted his cheek with her head as if she were a cat, and from there launched herself out the open window next to Dhulyn.
“I don’t think we have half a moon,” Dal said. “The Houses are already beginning to ask questions. If Tek is not able to take part in the Dedication Ceremony, they may very well ask for the Carnelian Throne to be set to the Ballot, and if that occurs, we must ask ourselves how likely it is that Bet will be chosen as Tarkin.”

“And where will that leave us?” Bet-oTeb asked.

Dal shrugged. “At the moment we are holding secure. As Dhulyn Wolfshead suggested, we’ve let rumors be spread that Beslyn-Tor is stricken with an illness that spreads on the touch. People are asked to report if they’ve seen him, without trying to capture him themselves. I think a good many people will be happy to do just that, especially since the rumor carries word of a reward.”

“There are still those among the New Believers who may hide him,” Karlyn-Tan said.

“That’s so,” agreed Dal. “But most of the Houses are with us—either really with us, or holding off to see what happens next, depending on their spirit. The conservative faction of the Jaldeans, the Old Believers, are also making overtures toward the Tarkin, now that it’s obvious the New Believers have lost so much of their former power. But if Tek-aKet does not regain his health, and a Ballot is demanded . . . ” Dal lifted his shoulders and spread his hands. He turned his eyes toward Parno, leaning against the wall within touching distance of Dhulyn.

“We would lose our leverage, our ability to act freely against the Shadow,” Parno said. “We stand in a position of strength only so long as we can be seen as acting on the Tarkin’s orders. Without him, we have no authority.”

Dhulyn looked between the two men. If it was left to Dal, she realized, there would always be a connection between them, no matter what Parno thought.

“He must be made well again,” Zelianora said. “There must be a way.”

“Gundaron of Valdomar,” Dhulyn said, turning to look down the length of the table. “Have your researches told you anything that could help us?”

The boy glanced quickly at Mar before he spoke. “I’m afraid I know of nothing that might help the Tarkin,” he said. His voice, though quiet, was trained for the lecture hall, clear and carrying. “At least—there are several indications that this is not the first time we’ve been visited by this Shadow. The very oldest texts, those which date to the times of the Caids—we always thought they were legends really, myths, but many of them speak of a time of great peril, a time when the world itself was in grave danger. Texts speak of floods and earthquakes, but there’s one of the Eshcaidath scrolls—” Here the boy sat up straighter, gaining poise and confidence from the familiarity of reporting on his researches, and looked at Dhulyn, waiting for her nod of recognition before he continued. “It speaks of an ‘undoing’, a kind of dissolving, of large areas of land where there seemed to be no land, and where beasts and men died blue, as if their breathing had stopped.”

Yes, Dhulyn thought, her heart pounding. That’s what the Shadow had meant, when it spoke of making nothing. What it had done so casually to the small bench in the Tarkin’s room, it wished to do to the whole world.

Cullen leaned forward, drawing in his attention from the distance where Dhulyn was sure he followed his Racha’s flight.

“The Dead Lands,” he said. Dhulyn found she was nodding along with the Scholar.

“But the peril was overcome?” Zelianora said.

“It was. The people called upon the Sleeping God, and the God awoke. When the peril was banished, the God slept again, or departed, or, well—all the texts differ.”

“But have the same essential meaning,” Dhulyn shifted her weight to her left leg. “Beslyn-Tor told us. The Green Shadow fears the God.”

“The New Believers said,” Bet-oTeb said, her girl’s light voice trembling, “that we are the dream of the God, and if he awakens, the world will be destroyed.”

Gundaron shook his head, his lips pressed together. “There’s just no basis for that idea in any text, book, or scroll. And the Old Believers among the Jaldeans have always denied it. The ancient stories say that the God awakened to destroy this great evil, this peril. So the God was awake, do you understand? It destroyed the peril and then . . .”

“Fell asleep again?” Parno’s voice was a soft rumble.

Gundaron shrugged, and nodded.

“Are we in any doubt that this is the same peril?” Karlyn-Tan asked.

“Given the use it has made of the New Believers, and its insistence that the Sleeping God not be awakened, I think not,” Dhulyn said.

“How do we awaken the God?” Strangely, it was Bet-oTeb who voiced the question in everyone’s mind, as if, childlike, she was not afraid to ask.
Gundaron licked his lips, glanced again at Mar, and seemed to draw strength from her.

“The stories don’t say how,” he said. “Just that the call went out into the world, and the Sleeping God awoke and came.”

“How can they not say?” Zelianora massaged her temples with her fingertips.

“It’s not unusual,” Dhulyn said. “It’s the reason there are so many commentaries on the old books. The writers take a certain knowledge for granted, they assume a shared understanding. They say ‘the enemy,’ without naming or describing the foe—for them, there can be only one enemy, and description is unnecessary.”

“But how could this be?” Dal slapped the tabletop with his hand.

Parno shrugged. “When you tell someone how to catch fish, do you tell them what a fish is? What it looks like? Of course not, everyone knows what a fish is. But when we were in the deserts of Mondothir, we had to draw pictures of fish in the sands, for some of the tribes there had never seen one. These texts, they would be like that.”

“So Scholars try to understand fishing, without ever having seen a fish?”

“Something like that, yes.”

“We must remember,” Gun said. “What we have in our Libraries of the times of the Caids are mere scraps of their writings and knowledge. In his Commentaries, Holderon speculates that by the time the Shadow was finally defeated, so much of the land had been laid waste, blighted by its presence, that the rule of law collapsed. There followed a long period—no one knows how long, really, but it must have been generations, not years—before the books were gathered again, and learning reestablished. It was then that the first Jaldean Shrines, the Scholars’ Libraries and the Mercenary Schools were founded, then that the Marked were first gathered into Guilds.”

“And if the method of calling the Sleeping God is in one of these lost texts?” A silence followed Zelianora’s words.

“Excuse me,” Mar said, blushing as everyone in the room turned their eyes to her. “But surely calling the Sleeping God must have something to do with the Marked?” Her voice faltered as she took in the faces of those staring at her. “Mustn’t it? The Shadow has been gathering and destroying the Marked for months, maybe years. And Tek-aKet, when Dhulyn Wolfshead—I mean, the Shadow tried to destroy her as well.”

“Wonderful,” Parno growled. “And the only trained Marks more than half a moon away.”

“Cullen?”

The Cloudman was already on his feet and heading for the door. “Let me go to a rooftop. Sometimes I can reach over greater distances if I have greater height.”

“Dhulyn Wolfshead.” Zelianora Tarkina spoke into the silence that followed Cullen’s departure. “Before I return to Tek, I must ask. I have told myself time and again that I will not, but you have saved him twice now. Have you Seen anything?” The Tarkina rubbed her forehead with a hand that trembled. “I’m sorry. I know you would have said.”

“I have Seen nothing new for days,” Dhulyn said. “And what I have Seen—” she shook her head, frustration rising yet again. By force of will she kept herself from glancing down the table at Mar and Gundaron. “Without a context, the things I have Seen mean nothing. I do not even always recognize the people I See. Are my Sights important to our dilemma? How can I know?”

Zelianora bit her lip, then nodded her head. She patted her daughter’s arm and stood.

“Send for me if there is any change,” Dhulyn said to her. “And, Tarkina, don’t release him, no matter what he says or does.”

The face that turned toward her at these words was not the face of the loving wife, but the face of a Queen’s sister, and a future Tarkin’s mother. “No fear,” that regal face said. “I will not.”

Dhulyn leaned back against the wall as the discussion went on among Dal-eDal, Gundaron, and Parno. Her Partner pulled out Zelianora’s chair and sat down. She had nothing more to contribute, they were only rechewing the same mouthful of overcooked stew. She hadn’t told the strict truth, but only Parno knew it. She hadn’t Seen anything useful. She’d had several Visions more than once, but nothing that could help them. Mar-eMar in her silver gown. The unknown man—a mage? a king?—with his magic window. Was that a way to make the Shadow disperse? Would someone else call it into a different land? Gundaron sitting at a table, looking down on something. She repressed the urge to spit, mindful of Zelianora’s clean parquet floor. Now there was useful Sight. A Scholar, seated, looking down at a tabletop. If the Marks were a creation of the Caids, as some of the stories Gundaron had been talking about alleged, she wished she had a few of those old-timers with her now. She would give them the benefit of her thoughts on the subject of the Sight.
A movement at the far end of the table caught her eye, Gundaron fidgeting with his pen case. If her Mark could not help them, and there was no Healer near enough to reach them quickly—would a different Mark be of more use?

It was past time this meeting was ended.

Dhulyn Wolfshead sighed heavily, turned a chair around, and sat astride it, resting her cheek on her hands.

“Gundaron—Sun and Moon are my witness, if I were going to kill you, I should have done it long before. Will you look at me, and listen? Mar, can you help us?”

The touch of Mar’s hand on his shoulder was like a rope to a drowning man, firm, stong, life-giving. “Gun, I’ve told you Dhulyn Wolfshead wouldn’t hurt you, and now she’s told you. What more do you want than her own word?”

He looked from the Mercenary’s face to Mar’s and back again. Dhulyn Wolfshead raised one eyebrow and slowly blinked.

“What are you more afraid of,” she said. “That I will kill you, or that I won’t?”

Gundaron’s lips parted, but no protest came out.

“Wolfshead!” It was Mar who spoke, a wrinkle forming between her deep blue eyes.

“Would you rather he wasn’t bothered by what he’s done?” the Wolfshead said, her voice calm as still water.

“But he’s trying to help. The Tarkina and Bet-o-Teb forgave him.” Mar spoke her next words to Dhulyn Wolfshead, but she looked at him when she spoke. “I forgive him.”

“He hasn’t forgiven himself.”

Heat burned through Gun’s face and he lowered his eyes. Not that Dhulyn Wolfshead wasn’t perfectly able to read him without looking into them. How did she do this? How did she know him so well?

“People are dead because of me,” he said. “No amount of ‘help’ can bring them back.”

“Many have died at our hands also,” Parno Lionsmane’s light voice fell softly into the air. “And many are also alive because of us. You still live; you have time to make the second true for yourself as well.”

“You’re not the first to do what he finds repulsive,” the Wolfshead said. “And you won’t be the last, blood knows, people being people. But you stopped the first chance you had, hold to that.” She shook her head, blood-red braids shivering. “Words won’t help you, at least not now. But I assure you, time will, if you let it.” She looked at Mar before turning her steel-gray gaze back to him. “In the meantime, since you’re sworn to help, I’d like to share a thought with you. I’m thinking that when something is lost, it’s a Finder we need, not a Healer.”

“You might have thought of this before the Racha bird was sent,” Parno Lionsmane said, with just enough sarcasm in his tone to ease the tension in the air. “We’ve no more a Finder than we have a Healer.”

“I think we do,” Dhulyn Wolfshead said. “What do you think, Gundaron of Valdomar?”

“How—” Gun’s throat closed. He would have said it was impossible, but he was sure he felt the blood drain from his face. He hadn’t... How could she know? Had she Seen? He shot a quick glance at Mar, but she was shaking her head.

“I didn’t—” Mar subsided when the Wolfshead raised her hand.

“No one told me,” she said. “Except you, yourself, when I thought about what you have done. Found documents left carelessly aside for centuries. Found the secrets of tribes and cities lost for generations. When Marked were wanted, you found them.” Dhulyn Wolfshead paused, tapped herself on the breastbone, causing tiny bells tied into the laces of her vest to chime. “When a Seer was wanted, you found her. You told Parno where to find the Green Shadow when it was in Lok-i-Kol—ah, you thought we’d forgotten that. Even now, you know where to find the information that we need.”

“But that’s research...” Gun let his protest trail away. He could not use that lie again—not even to himself.

The Mercenary was shaking her head. “You forget, I’ve been trained as a Scholar myself, though it was not the life for me. I know how research is done, and the kinds of answers it produces. And how swiftly. And how many important answers in one person’s lifetime. What you do is not research. Your books may have told you what to look for, they couldn’t have told you where. You are finding.” When Gun still hesitated, the Wolfshead went on, her voice rough but warm. “Come now. The time for secrets is past.”

“I’ve never...” Gun took a deep breath. He’d never convince anyone unless he could speak clearly. “I meant to tell you, after Lok-i-Kol, it’s just...I’ve always kept it secret. I’m a Scholar. It’s all I ever wanted. Even before the Jaldeans turned against the Marked, I never wanted to be...”

“Do you think I wanted it?” The Wolfshead was quiet but firm. “Untrained and half useless as it is? The world is
not what we want, but what we make.” She paused, as if that word had some special significance for her, before continuing. “I wish your world was the Library carrels, the shelves of books, and the under-Scholars fetching ink and pens. Once I wished that for myself . . . I know how precious it is. But you are needed for more than that now. Wish for it or no, you will have to come out of your Library now and join the rest of us out here on the edge of the knife.

“You are a Finder, Scholar Gundaron. I am a Seer. Neither of us wants this. But we are what we are.”

Gundaron hung his head, aware as if from a distance that he was shaking it ever so slightly, wanting to deny her words. But Dhulyn Wolfshead was right. He lifted his head and found the Mercenary’s cool gray eyes ready to meet his. Next to her, leaning his hip against the table’s edge stood her Partner, Parno Lionsmane, the left corner of his mouth lifted. Beside them sat Mar, her blue eyes darker than usual with concern. When his eyes found hers, she smiled, her face lighting as if from within, and for an instant his heart stopped beating as the breath caught in his throat.

He would have to come out into the world. But he wouldn’t be alone.

“What do you want me to do?” he said. He’d thought his voice would shake, but it rang out firm and true.

“The Tarkin’s mind is lost. I would like you to Find it.”

Gun’s heart sank like a stone into a lake turning to ice. “The Tarkin? But how? I’m not trained. To Find something like that . . .”

“How did you Find the Green Shadow?”

Of course she would think of that. Library-trained, Dhulyn Wolfshead the Scholar. Her mind would work like his. Gun looked at them, Mar smiling, the two Mercenaries watching with guarded faces. He had to tell them, he realized. It would change everything, he would lose all the ground he’d gained, but he would have to tell. No more secrets. No more lies.

“I can Find the Green Shadow,” he began. “Because it . . . it touched me.” He looked up again into the silence. Mar, white-faced, lips trembling; Parno Lionsmane, the killing look back in his face, a knife in his hand. Dhulyn Wolfshead . . . Dhulyn Wolfshead calm and nodding?

“I’d lost some memory,” Gun said. “There was time I couldn’t account for, so I looked for it, and when I Found it . . .”

“You Found the Green Shadow. I Saw,” the Wolfshead said. “When One-eye was questioning me. The Green Shadow was there, looking through your eyes.” Parno Lionsmane made as if to move forward, but stilled at the Wolfshead’s raised hand.

“But it only looked through my eyes, I swear it! It never lived in me as it did Lok-iKol.” Relief at having finally told them warred with fear that they would not believe him.

“And when it comes back?” Lionsmane’s voice was a snarl.

“It can’t.”

“How can you be sure? Convince us.” Dhulyn Wolfshead spoke with the voice of command.

How to make them understand? “It’s not Marked. I’ve hidden myself. It can’t Find me.”

“Dhulyn, we can’t be sure,” Parno Lionsmane said.

But the Mercenary woman was nodding. “Yes, we can. He is probably the one person we can be sure of. Who better to hide, than the one who Finds?” She looked up at her Partner and took hold of his sleeve. “The boy’s right. It was not the same. I Saw it in him, and I Saw it in Tek-aKet, and it was not the same.” She frowned and then looked at Gun once more. “Still, the Green Shadow has touched both you and Tek-aKet. Can you use that link somehow to Find the Tarkin?”

Could he? Did he dare? He looked at Mar’s face, calm now, but wary. If he didn’t try, would she ever smile at him again?

“I’ll need Mar’s bowl.”

“I have Seen this,” Dhulyn Wolfshead said, her hand on her Partner’s arm.

Gun took a couple of deep breaths and focused on the water. He’d found Tek-aKet before, but that was just . . . the water shimmered, and the image broke. Gun steadied his breathing and tried again.

Parno Lionsmane sighed and Gun jumped in his chair.

“I’m sorry,” the Mercenary began, but Gun held up his hand.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. “All I’m getting is the Tarkin in his room.”
Mar put her hands on his shoulders. “Relax,” she said. “Try again.”

Gun blinked, his eyes suddenly threatening tears. He dragged in another breath and let it out slowly.

It’s not water, it’s a bright page of paper. What should he write there? The story of Tek-aKet. Suddenly he’s back in the Library. Of all the lines on the floor before him, he needs to choose one in particular. Dark red it should be, the color of carnelians. He frowns. It’s there, but it’s stained, as if someone spilled green ink on it and didn’t clean it off fast enough. He shudders; the last thing he wants to do is follow anything green. He takes a deep breath, looks around him at the ghosts and shadows of other Scholars and steps out, following the red line. Concentrating on the red. He walks swiftly now, down the main aisle, shelves and scroll holders branching off to left and right. The place is enormous, the silence broken only by the sound of his booteels on the wooden floor.

He turns a corner and the thread of color is gone. The floor is covered in a thin carpet. The shelving is darker, too thin to carry the weight of the countless tomes on it. He reaches out a tentative finger. It’s cold, painted metal. He turns around. The shelves behind him are exactly like these. There is no sign of the Library he came from.

There is a red mark like a small square of paint on the spine of one of the books. Gundaron looks around. There are similar marks on other books as well. Clean red marks with no green stain. He sets off again. This is only a Library. There is nothing to be afraid of.

He walks faster, following the red-marked books as they lead him across a wider lane with a metal cart in it. The cart holds books with green marks on their spines and Gun averts his eyes as he crosses the aisle into the next wall of shelves. There’s a man at a desk farther down, his elbows on the tabletop, his head down between his hands. Just a shadowy figure at first, but he comes clearer as Gun advances. Gun knows the man won’t look up, that he’s afraid to. Gun puts his hand on the man’s shoulder, wondering whether he knows the book the man’s reading. He can see the writing, but it’s a language he doesn’t know.

“My lord Tarkin,” are the words that come out of his mouth. “Tek-aKet. You must come with me.”

**Twenty-four**

“THERE IS A PRECEDENT for madness.”

The next morning, Tek-aKet Tarkin’s voice sounded even more gruff than usual, as if someone had been sanding his vocal cords with a metal rasp. Dhulyn frowned. Or as if someone else has been using them.

“Madness is not considered grounds for the Ballot. Tau-Nuat Tarkin was always restrained to prevent him from harming himself,” Gun said from where he stood, shifting from foot to foot, near the door of the Tarkin’s bedroom.

“True,” Tek-aKet said. “And he’s an ancestor of mine, as it happens, so neither Guard nor Houses will be too shocked if they see me chained to the throne.” He lifted his hands the scant inches allowed by the silk ropes to illustrate his point.

It may have been a trick of the light, but Dhulyn could have sworn there was a smile hovering on the man’s lips. When Gun had come out of his Finder’s trance, they had all rushed immediately to the Tarkina, and they had found her, with tears in her eyes, already in Tek-aKet’s room clutching his bound left hand in both of hers. Now, Zelianora still sat on the edge of the bed, across from where Dhulyn had dragged up the chair that had been standing closer to the window.

“Do you remember anything of the Shadow?” she asked.

Zelianora raised her face from where she’d laid it on Tek-aKet’s hand. “Give him a chance to rest—” Her words died away as Tek-aKet tried to raise his hand.

“We may not have time, Zella. If it should come back . . .”

The Tarkina swallowed, and nodded her understanding. She reached up and smoothed back a lock of hair that had fallen into his face.

“Your pardon, Dhulyn Wolfshead. Pray proceed.”

Dhulyn looked at where Parno leaned with his back against the door of the room. He raised his left eyebrow, and lifted both shoulders the merest fraction. She inclined her head to the same degree.

“Lord Tarkin?”

“The first I remember is the pain in my head. I’d banged it once as a child, falling from my pony, and I thought —” He cleared his throat, “I thought that somehow I was there again, or there still. Thank you.” He raised his head to sip at the water cup the Tarkina held to his mouth. “I realized after some time had passed that I did not actually feel the pain.” Tek-aKet frowned. “It was as if I stood to one side and watched it more than felt it.” He turned to his wife. “I’ve had the same feeling when I’ve been fevered.”
And there were drugs, too, Dhulyn thought, that gave you the same feeling of detachment.

“Suddenly I wasn’t off to one side, but inside. Inside, looking out through my own eyes as if they belonged to someone else. Pushed to the back like a passenger in a carriage.” The Tarkin swallowed, but he shook his head when Zelianora lifted the water cup. His voice dropped to a thread of sound. “More time passed, and—some of that time—I wasn’t inside. I was . . . nowhere.” He looked up. “It, the thing I was inside, is nowhere.”

“NOT” Dhulyn said.

“What do you mean?” Gun took a step into the room.

“When I knocked it out, before I knocked it out. I saw it changing the room, and the space around itself, making it nothing.” She looked over the boy’s shoulder to Parno.

“The damaged part of the floor, in your bedroom, Zelianora,” Parno said. “The end of the bench that looked melted.”

“Like the Dead Lands.” It was no question, but Dhulyn nodded to Gun just the same.

“It is not simple damage,” she said. “He makes a nothing. No.” She shook her head, the words not making sense even to her. “Not nothing, for that’s the opposite of something, and therefore a thing in itself. Unmaking it, as if it never was.”

“Yes,” the Tarkin said dreamily, his eyes unfocused. “It unmakes, it returns the world to the never was.”

“Lord Tarkin.” Dhulyn tapped Tek-aKet sharply on the side of the face. “Do not drift away from us.”

The Tarkin pressed his lips together and took a deep breath through his nose. “It’s so old,” he said. “It wants its home. It loathes the body, the . . . the shape, and would destroy it.”

“Your body?” It was true the man looked older and worn, as though he’d been faded through too many washings.

The Tarkin nodded, but slowly, face contorted with the effort of making himself understood. “Yes, but also . . . the body of the world.”

“And the Sleeping God?” Gun asked.

“It fears the Sleeping God. Hates and fears it. It was the Sleeping God who broke it. Into parts. It knew nothing of parts—do you know, I just realized that. That’s the reason it hates the world and everything in it.” Tek-aKet dropped his voice as if he were sharing a secret. “We’re all made up of parts. Shapes within shapes.”

Dhulyn looked at Parno, saw her own confusion mirrored in his face. Shape and edges. That’s how she’d Seen it when she was close to the Green Shadow. What Tek-aKet saw as parts. If what made up the world was strange to the Shadow—how could that be? Unless the Shadow was not of this world.

Then she Saw it. The mirror window that was the night sky. The sword cut that opened the doorway in the stars. The entrance of the mist. The entrance of something not of this world.

A Sight from the past, not the future. She’d realized with her Vision of the Finder’s fire from Navra, and the circle of Espadryn women that the Sight was showing her the past as well as the future, but, fool that she was, she’d never thought to examine her other Visions. Parno’s voice brought her back to the present moment. She would have to consider what the Vision of the doorway could tell her later.

“Does it know how the Sleeping God is called?” Parno was asking.

“It’s ironic. It knows irony. Only the Marked can call the Sleeping God. But they’ve forgotten how. He’s the only one left who knows. The Shadow.”

“But he kills them anyway.”

“Surely.” The Tarkin nodded, his eyes still focused on his memory. “What if they remember?”

“Now we know,” Parno said from the doorway.

The Tarkin licked his lips. Dhulyn leaned forward again with her cup of water. “You frightened it, Dhulyn Wolfshead. It knows what I know. When it rode Lok-iKol, it only suspected, but it knew you were a Seer as soon as it entered m—” He clamped his mouth shut as if against a scream. Dhulyn knew he was drawing upon the rags of his strength to be able to speak to them at all, to tell them what he must. Worse than any rape, the Green Shadow had been inside him, inside his mind. He had watched it wear his body, use it. Such a thing could do more than make a man mad—it could drive him to his own destruction.

“Enough, Lord Tarkin,” she said. “Now you must rest.”

“No.” It was a command, no matter how faint the voice. “It had to wait to destroy you,” Tek-aKet said finally, spittle forming at the corners of his mouth. “It had to wait until the effects of the blow to my head had worn off, and the body—my body, was strong again.”
“Lucky it hadn’t finished, then,” she said.

“You were too fast for it. Then, when the Scholar found me, its attention was turned away; it had gone to look through someone else’s eyes for a while.”

They all look at each other. “Beslyn-Tor?”

Tek-aKet lifted his right hand as far as the silk bindings would let him and waved it from side to side. “Not then. It was—oh the blessed Caids, it was Far-eFar. Who else?” His hand clutched and Dhulyn grasped it, wincing at the sudden strength of his grip. “Hid-oHid the Steward of Keys and Korvolyn the guard. It can look through their eyes, and,” his eyes locked on hers, “it can visit them.”

“Parno!”

But her Partner was already on his way out the door.

“Wolfshead, he must rest now. He must.” Zelianora rose to her feet, ready to argue, but Dhulyn also stood. They had heard the meat of it. If the Tarkin regained his strength, there might be more he could tell them, but if they taxed the man too much now—She forced her lips to smile in what she hoped was reassurance. He looked as though he’d been ill of a wasting sickness for months. As she began to release his hand, however, it tightened once more on hers.

“Dhulyn Wolfshead,” Tek-aKet said, his voice suddenly strong. “Promise me. If the Shadow returns, kill me. I lived too long in the never was. I can’t go back. If it returns, kill me.”

Dhulyn knew the right words to reassure him and opened her mouth to say them. Things were never so dark as you thought. He was not alone in the world. He could come back from anything but death. But she remembered her own sight of the NOT and the platitudes died unspoken.

“I am Dhulyn Wolfshead, called the Scholar. If the Green Shadow possesses you again, I will kill you.”

“What if all we’d manage was to chase it into someone else? Even if I find it again . . .” Gun looked at the food on his plate as if he couldn’t imagine how it had arrived there. “We need to know how to destroy it.” He picked up his knife and fork, but did nothing more.

“We need to awaken the Sleeping God,” Dhulyn said. Once Parno had returned from securing the men—all men, she noticed, and wondered if it was significant—and setting Brothers to watch them, they’d brought the youngsters once more to their own rooms.

“We don’t know how,” Parno said.

“What do we know?” Dhulyn said. “Gundaron, an exercise for your scholarship, summarize what we know about the Green Shadow.”

“We know it does not have innate shape or substance, and that it views these things as foreign and hateful. Therefore, it must originate in a world other than our own.” Gundaron tilted his head to one side, as if examining his own thought, before nodding in satisfaction. He sat up straighter and began cutting his food.

Mar began to protest, but subsided when Dhulyn held up her hand. No time now to describe the links in the chain of theory.

“We know it destroys the Marked to prevent them—to prevent us,” Gun amended with a nod at Dhulyn, “from calling the Sleeping God. Even though we don’t remember how,” he added, his voice turning thoughtful. “We know it wants the Mesticha Stone, though again, we don’t know why.”

“I have a theory,” Dhulyn said, “but finish your list.”

The corners of Gundaron’s mouth turned down. “I think I am finished.”

“We’d have done better to list the things we don’t know,” Parno said, throwing his own knife down in disgust.

“We may not have that much time,” Dhulyn said. She looked over her companions. “I’ve not spent much of my life in Imrion,” she said. “What does the Mesticha Stone look like?”

“Well,” Mar said when it appeared no one else would speak. “Like all the Jaldean relics, it’s believed to be a part of the Sleeping God.”

“Like the bracelet with green stones that was in the Tarkin’s treasure room?” Dhulyn picked a wing from the platter and tore it in two.

“It’s green, all the relics are,” Gundaron said. “But the Mesticha Stone is shaped like a hand carved from green stone. There’s a treatise—the original’s here in the Gotterang Library—that says there was a statue of the Sleeping God that shattered when the God last awoke, or because the God awoke, something like that. That’s what these relics really are, just bits of the statue.”

Dhulyn tossed down a bone. “Bits of a green statue that this Shadow absorbs into itself,” she said. “Beslyn-Tor
said when he collected five relics of the God together for the first time, the God appeared and spoke to him."

"Except he was mistaken," Parno said. "It wasn’t the Sleeping God at all, it was this Green Shadow. And it made him keep on collecting the relics." Parno thought, his head to one side. "Pieces of itself, do you think?"

"But if it has no form," Mar said, "how can there be pieces of it?"

"Pieces of its first shape," Dhulyn said, remembering the Green Shadow’s words to her. "Nothing exists in this world without form, so it must have taken a shape—been forced into a shape when it entered our world."

"And the Sleeping God broke it," Gundaron said. "And the awakened God, eyes shut still in sleep, sword aloft, turned his head, listened for the Intruder, and when he heard the cries of the fearful creature, struck again and again, turning the Intruder into dust, breaking it, bone and spirit." Gun opened his eyes. "The original’s in verse," he said, "but that’s the sense of it."

"How can you be so sure?" Mar looked from one to the other.

"Because I’ve Seen it."

At the fall of silence, Dhulyn looked up from lifting the bones from her fish to see three identical faces frozen in shock. "There’s a Vision I keep having," she began, and told them what she’d Seen, the Mage with his book and sword, the mirror that was a window that was a door, the entrance of the green mist. The possessed Mage, green-eyed, unable to open the doorway again.

Parno froze in the act of refilling his wine cup. "It has to be. There are too many details that fit for it to be anything else."

"But how?" Mar said. "I thought Seers saw only the future."

"It’s the common assumption," Gundaron said, eyes narrowed in thought. "But when I was researching the origins of the Espadryni," he faltered, licking his lips. "In the city state of Shpadrajh, they answered any question that was put to them, and one old scrap of parchment was a partial list of the questions that had been asked in one year. Many seemed to make no sense, as they obviously concerned events which had already occurred. It was long thought to be a mistranslation, or at the least a misinterpretation, but if it’s not . . . the Sight isn’t limited in the way everyone assumes."

Parno gave a low whistle. "Tek-aKet said the thing understood irony. Now we see why. It began its present existence in irony. It killed the only person who knew how to send it back."

"Wolfshead." Gun laid his fork down gently. "If you’ve Seen the Green Shadow coming into the world, you’ve Seen a time before the Sleeping God destroyed it."

"I suppose I have. Blood! The Mage could be one of the Caids."

"That means you could See how the Sleeping God is called."

"I can’t make a Vision come when I want it to, and even if we could afford to wait until my woman’s time when the Sight is stronger, I can’t See what I want to See."

"You must try, my heart. You had clear Visions when we were in Tenebro House, and that was not your woman’s time."

"Fresnoyn." Dhulyn and Gundaron spoke at once.

"I thought you were in a hurry. Stop wiggling, you’re only annoying the horse."

Dhulyn Wolfshead sounded as though she might be smiling, but she’d only turned her head enough for him to see the very corner of her mouth. Gun pressed his knees tightly against the saddle and tried to sit up straight as she’d instructed him. It had been years since he’d sat on a horse, and even though it was said that you never forgot how to ride, there seemed to be something lacking in his own recall. Had the beasts always been this far from the ground? His teeth closed sharply on the inside of his cheek as his horse stopped short. Gingerly, the taste of blood on his tongue, he edged his horse next to Dhulyn’s.

"I thought we were in a hurry," he said. He craned his neck to see what had stopped her, but all he could see was a group of children playing Blind Man. Three stood to one side, waiting their turn to play; four were chanting as they danced around the child in the center, blindfolded with what looked like a strip torn from the bottom of his shirt. Someone’ll be in trouble when he gets home tonight, Gun thought.

"They wouldn’t be out now, if they knew what we know," Gun said.

The Mercenary smiled her wolf’s grin. "We do know," she said, "and yet here we are." She clucked to her horse
and Gun was jolted upright as his own beast followed.

“If this is a game,” Gun said to her back. “I don’t want to play anymore.”

“Look to the Scholar,” she said to him as he came to help her down from Bloodbone. “He’s the one’s not ridden much.”

But another guard was stepping up to help Gundaron, and Karlyn-Tan stayed where he was, smiling up at her.

“We thought it would be Parno Lionsmane with you,” he said. “Is your errand to the Tenebroso?”

“Is there a Tenebroso?”

“The lord Dal-eDal was called to the Tarkin’s bedside this morning, and confirmed before witnesses as Dal-eLad Tenebroso.”

“And do you address me as his Walls?”

Karlyn-Tan smiled again and shrugged, shaking his head in answer. “But I must do something while I’m here, eating his bread.”

“Since you ask as a friend, Karlyn, we come on the Tarkin’s orders, to fetch certain needed supplies that the Scholar knows to be in his former rooms. Whose leave do we ask, if not yours?”

“As you come in the Tarkin’s name, I’d say you ask leave of no one.”

Dhulyn swung her leg over Bloodbone’s head and slid off the mare’s back, landing on her feet face-to-face with the former Steward of Walls. He made no step back, just put his hand out for the bridle. “Perhaps, then, the Scholar can find his own way to his old rooms,” she said.

“Undoubtedly he can, but Dal-eLad Tenebroso’s been told of your approach, and has asked that you speak with him when your errand is done.”

Dhulyn looked Karlyn up and down, the beginnings of her wolf’s smile on her lips. “It seems to me I’ve come into this House once before, Karlyn. I’m in no hurry to do so again.”

“Ah, but this time you may keep your weapons,” the former Walls said, his own grin wide and open. “The new Tenebroso says that all Mercenary Brothers are to be regarded as members of his House. Your Partner and yourself above all others.”

Dhulyn absently stroked Bloodbone’s neck. “Does he now? That’s kind of him.” She supposed it was, really, but somehow she couldn’t find herself grateful.

“So you may go about your business, Scholar. The Wolfshead will be in the small salon when you are ready.”

When Gundaron looked at her, Dhulyn nodded. “Go ahead, Scholar, I’ve no need to see that room again.”

Karlyn waited until Gundaron had run up the left-hand staircase before leading Dhulyn away to the right.

“You won’t be familiar with the small salon,” he said, holding open a heavy wood door with a small iron grille at eye height for her. “Dal is converting it to his study, and restoring the old Tenebroso’s sitting room to its public function.”

“I’m surprised to see you still here, if you don’t intend to become Walls again,” Dhulyn said.

He let her pass through the door, then paused a moment holding it open. Dhulyn stopped and looked back at him. He faced her, but his crystal-blue eyes were focused inward.

“It’s not my plan to stay here,” he said, finally lifting his eyes to her. “But it’s as good a place to live as any until this crisis ends, or until I know where I wish to be.”

“You are not too old to make a Mercenary Brother, if you lived through the Schooling,” she said.

His smile, for all that it creased his eyes, made him look younger. “I’ve lived through several things already.”

He wasn’t surprised to find the same partially restored order in his clothespress, though he was surprised that his spare tunics were still there. What wasn’t there, however, was the box of drugs that should have been on the top shelf.

Gun chewed on his bottom lip. He’d taken the drugs to the workroom when he’d given them to Dhulyn Wolfshead. He’d brought them back here—hadn’t he? He touched the spot on the shelves where the pearwood box should be. Well, if he had brought it back, whoever had searched the room had taken it away again.

That did leave him one other place to look.

He was actually out the door and into the hallway before he remembered there was something else he’d come here to get.
“Do you play the tiles, Tenebroso?”

“Please, call me Dal. We are related, in an odd way, though it seems we’re not to acknowledge it. And no, I get no pleasure from gambling. I don’t even play the Solitary hands, really. It’s the patterns that interest me most. I lay the tiles out in the old patterns as a way to help me relax.”

“The old patterns?”

“The Seer’s Patterns, my nurse used to call them. It’s why I wanted to see you, as it happens.” He gestured for her to sit in the chair opposite him before resuming his own seat.

Dal laid the tips of his fingers lightly on the backs of the tiles nearest him. “My mother brought this set into our Household. I don’t know how far back it goes in her family, but it was said the set was made in the time of the Caids.”

Dhulyn shrugged, her eyes on the tiles. “It’s certainly possible. If parchments and even some paper can last so long, why not tiles? Do you know what they’re made of?”

“Some kind of bone or stone, judging by how they change temperature.” He picked up a piece and handed it to her.

Dhulyn lifted the tile to her mouth and touched it with the tip of her tongue, tested it with her teeth. “Stone, I would say. I do use the tiles for gambling, as it happens, but I doubt you’ve asked for me in order to teach you how.”

Dal laughed softly. “Quite right. Turn over the tile you’ve got in your hand.”

Suddenly—

“Yes, thank you.” Eyebrows raised, Dhulyn turned the tile over. Rather than being marked with one of the cups, coins, swords, or spears that she was familiar with, this tile had a circle with a dot in the middle. She looked back at Dal-e-Lad.

He was nodding. “There are tiles in this set not seen in the sets used for gambling. That’s one of them. There are four tiles with that dot and circle. And three other sets of four.” He began turning over the tiles in front of him. “A simple straight line, running lengthwise down the center. A rectangle, just smaller than the tile itself, and a triangle, centered along the length of the tile, like a spearhead.”

Dhulyn set down the tile she held next to its brothers. “A line, a circle, a rectangle, a triangle. Four in each pattern. Sixteen extra tiles?”

Dal shook his head. “Seventeen. This one is unique.” He picked up a tile that lay to his left, and showed, if possible, more wear than the others. When he turned it over, Dhulyn could see, faint but clear, a design of three concentric circles.

“Could the other three have been lost?”

Dal shook his head. “My nurse said no, the set had always been like this.”

“But surely, if the set is so very old . . .” Dhulyn let her objection die away as Dal went on shaking his head.

“No other tile is missing, you can tell by the wear and the patterns that they are all original. What odds would you give me that three tiles only, and those particular three would be the only ones lost since the time of the Caids? No. This tile is unique.”

“So,” Dhulyn leaned back in her chair, tapping her lips with her linked fingers. “Seventeen extra tiles we don’t use in the modern sets of vera tiles. And these patterns, what are they?”

“As I said, my nurse called them the Seer’s Patterns. My sisters and I—”

Dhulyn looked up from her study of the tiles. Dal sat with his elbow on the table, chin in his hand, lips pressed tightly together. His sisters are gone, she thought, and it still hurts him.

“My sisters and I,” Dal began again, his voice lower and carefully under control, “would pretend to be Seers, telling each other’s fortunes.” He cleared his throat and began turning all the tiles faceup. “You know that some of the tiles have names, other than their places in the suits?”

“The Tarkina of Swords is called the Black Maid, the nine of cups is called Wealth, that kind of thing?”

Dal nodded. “Exactly.” He held one tile in his hand, leaving the others as they lay. “My nurse said that once upon a time all the tiles had names, and meanings as well. That you would choose the tile that stood for you, and from it your fortune could be told.”

Dhulyn leaned forward, placing her elbows on the table.
“Show me.”

“This is my tile,” he said, showing her the Mercenary of Coins. “A young man or woman, golden-haired, brown-eyed. This tile would be placed in the center of a table such as this one. I would ask my question, and this tile,” he held up the singleton, “with its concentric circles, would be placed atop my own.” He set the unique tile on top of the Mercenary of Coins. “The circled dot above, the triangle below, the rectangle to the right, the line to the left, forming a small cross. We would toss the rest of the tiles, and, drawing one at a time, place one face up above the circled dot, one below the triangle, one to the right of the rectangle, and one to the left of the line, extending the arms of the cross.” Pretending to draw tiles from the box, Dal placed them as he indicated. “Lastly, we would choose four more, one at a time, and place them in a vertical here, to the left of the tiles we’ve already set up. This is the simplest of the Seer’s Patterns.”

“The simplest?” Dhulyn drew down her brows in a frown, shaking her head. “And what does it tell you?”

Dal spread his hands, palms raised. “That I can’t say. No one in my family ever had the Sight, to my knowledge. But I thought that you . . .”

Dhulyn let her lower lip slip from between her teeth. “I’ve seen these markings before,” she said. She tapped one of the rectangle tiles with her fingernail. “Around the base of Mar’s bowl. They’re—” the blood rushed to her ears. “They’re Marks.” She looked up, smiling, but Dal was frowning his incomprehension. “Marks,” she said again. “This one’s a Seer,” she tapped the circled dot. “It looks like an eye. This one’s a Finder, Gundaron says Finding is like following a straight line.”

Now Dal was nodding. “So one of these is a Healer—”

“Probably the square.”

“And the other’s a Mender.”

“But this one,” Dhulyn tapped the unique tile with its concentric circles. “I’ve no idea what this one might be. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Because it’s a Lens,” Gun said from the doorway. Dal jumped in his seat, but Dhulyn didn’t even look around. “The missing Mark.”

“What do you mean, my Scholar?”

Gundaron held up the scroll in his hand. “It’s in the Commentaries, the part I couldn’t remember, Holderon writes about an ancient text of the Caids, one that existed in his day but doesn’t any longer, though some of the stories it was said to contain have come down to us in the forms of folk songs and plays. Anyway, in the part that I’m referring to, Holderon appears to be answering the argument of another Scholar, and it’s Holderon’s position that the other Scholar is mistaken, that the Missing Mark, the so-called Lens, doesn’t exist.”

“A fifth Mark? What was his logic?”

“That while everyone knew of the other Marks, no one had ever encountered a Lens.”

“Perhaps it wasn’t a person,” Dal said. “Perhaps it was an artifact?”

An artifact, Dhulyn thought. A round artifact. One, perhaps, that had somewhere along the line been disguised as something more ordinary, and therefore not nearly as old. Something round could easily be disguised as . . . Dhulyn’s blood began to pound in her ears. As a bowl, for example.

Dal and Gundaron had gone on talking, and after a moment Dhulyn realized they were suggesting that she try Seeing, using the tiles.

“I’m afraid there is no fresnoyn,” Gundaron was saying. “I’ve tried Finding, but I get nothing.”

“Possibly Lok-iKol used it,” Dhulyn said, shelving her thoughts about the bowl. It would wait until they were back in the Dome. “Let me see what the tiles can do. Which shall I use?”

“I should think you’d be the Mercenary of Swords,” Dal said. “You’re not old enough to use the Tarkina’s tile.”

“I use my own tile?”

“A Sight that involved you might prove to be most useful,” Dal suggested.

Dhulyn nodded and took the tile he handed her, setting it down in the center of the table as Dal had shown her. How do I call the Sleeping God? she asked herself. As she placed the tiles she thought of as the other Marks, Dal swept the rest off the table, and shook them in their box. As they were placed, Dhulyn tried not to guide her thoughts, but to let them float freely, making whatever associations they might form by themselves. Her Visions usually came to her in her sleep; those very few she’d had in her waking state had always fallen upon her like a blow. Unlike Gundaron, she had never used her Mark deliberately, never sought after a Vision. Perhaps she would See one, though, if their methods were not too broken. And providing the Visions were not so thoroughly linked to
her woman’s time that this effort was wasted. That tile was the Tarkin of Swords, clearly a man and he was holding a type of sword very much like one she owns, though she doesn’t use it much as it’s . . .

HE TURNS AWAY FROM THE STRANGELY TIDY WORKTABLE AND TOWARD A CIRCULAR MIRROR, AS TALL AS HE IS HIMSELF. THE MIRROR DOESN’T REFLECT THE ROOM, HOWEVER, BUT SHOWS A NIGHT SKY FULL OF STARS. HIS LIPS MOVE AND SHE SEES HIM NOW FROM THAT SIDE, AS IF SHE WERE STANDING IN THE MIRROR AND HIS LIPS FORM WHAT DHULYN KNOWS ARE THE WORDS FROM THE BOOK. ADELGARREMBIL HE SAYS, AND THEN ACUCHEEYAROB. A FOREIGN TONGUE?

“Wolfshead. Wolfshead wake up.”

Dhulyn snatched the hand from her shoulder and only just stopped from breaking the wrist when she realized the person shaking her was Mar-eMar. Dhulyn’s heart grew cold. The little Dove was out of breath and as pale as lilies. Behind her, in the doorway of Dal-eLad’s salon, was the Mercenary Brother Oswin Battlehammer.

“Dhulyn, hurry. Tek-aKet’s sitting on the Carnelian Throne and he’s—” she shot a glance over her shoulder at the Brother in the doorway. “He’s raving.”

“Where’s Parno?” Dhulyn was already into the hallway and heading to the courtyard where Bloodbone waited.

“At the doors to the throne room letting no one in, but you must . . .”

Mar fell behind, but Dhulyn went on running. She knew perfectly well what the girl had been about to say. “You must hurry.” Of course she must. Wait too long, and Parno would go in without her.

Twenty-five

“How did this happen?” Dhulyn stood with her right hand pressed tightly against the ornate carving of the doors to the Carnelian Throne Room, as if she could somehow reach through and sense what was happening inside.

“You think I know?” Parno growled. “I was helping the Tarkina with the Semlorian ambassador when the page, Telian-Han, came running for me. He’d gone to the Tarkin’s room with the midday meal and found the guard who’d been left there dead on the floor.”

“And the Tarkina?”

“Keeping the ambassador calm, I imagine.” Parno closed his fingers around her upper arm. “Dhulyn, my heart, don’t do it. It doesn’t have a head wound now. What if it—it must know you are coming? The best you’ll accomplish is to send it to another body.”

“You prefer to have the Green Shadow as Tarkin of Imrion?” She looked at him as if she didn’t even feel his grip on her arm. Her eyes were as bright as the edge of a knife.

“Besides, I promised him I would kill him. I gave my word.”

“We have only you and Gundaron. If it destroys you before you can kill Tek-aKet, we will never prevail against it.”

“I gave my word.”

“At least let me come in with you.” He knew it was no use even before she started shaking her head.

“I can kill him,” she said. “I don’t know that I could kill you if . . .”

Parno let his hand drop to his side. He’d known what her answer would be, but he’d had to try. She was what she was. When Dhulyn took his face in her hands, he did not pull away.

“Beslyn-Tor said, ‘like this,’ did he not?” Dhulyn’s steel-gray eyes fixed on his.

Parno closed his hands around her wrists. “He did.”

“Eye-to-eye, that’s how the Shadow moves, and how, I’ll wager, he destroys.”

“And so?”

“And so? Blindfold me, you idiot.”

Smelled now, not just Parno’s familiar smell, but the garlic in the sauce of the partridge they’d eaten for luncheon, the wine he’d had, and the bay leaf in the water he’d used to cleanse his hands. She felt and heard Parno slip the makeshift bar free and eased herself through the opening, moving only enough to allow him to shut the door behind her. She could hear two sets of breathing now—two?—and stilled her own to listen better. From the left. Low, steady, almost a snore. Unconscious, then, and neither help nor hindrance. And the second? Above.
Dhulyn stepped to the right in time to feel the displacement of air as the body of her assailant landed to her left, his grunt sounding loud to her sensitive hearing. She ducked under the blow she sensed sweeping toward her head, felt the air push past her face and seized the wrist instead of dancing away as instinct and training demanded. She continued her turn into her opponent until she had it back against the wall, her forearm against its throat, and her knife buried in its chest.

Dhulyn eased the body to the floor, pulled her knife out of the wound and wiped it clean on her breeches before carefully feeling upward with her free hand and covering the dead eyes. Many fights were lost through too early belief that they were won. No point in being careless now. She took a moment to allow her breathing to return to normal, to release herself from the discipline of the Shora before laying the knife down behind her and using that hand to dig her fingers into the side of the throat, under the jaw. Nothing, no pulse. The blood had stopped moving from the wound. She made sure the eyelids were closed before she recovered the knife, inserted it with care between her skin and the blindfold, and sliced the strip of cloth free of her face.

“I fulfill my oath, Tarkin of Imrion,” she whispered, touching her forehead with her fingertips.

She rose to her feet in one movement and advanced in the direction of the other breathing she’d heard. She stopped when two legs, one folded under the other, came into her view on the far side of the dais. She advanced even more slowly, certain that she recognized those soft-soled boots with their intricate embroidery. Her lips formed a soundless whistle as she knelt, sheathed her knives, and pulled loose one of the braided leather cords that were woven into her vest. Two important questions leaped immediately to mind.

What had Cullen of Langeron been doing in the Throne room? And was this still Cullen of Langeron?

Dhulyn had just finished trussing the unconscious Cloudman when the doors of the throne room were flung open behind her. The rapid footsteps stopped only paces into the room, and then advanced once more, slowly. The last knot secure, Dhulyn looked around, knowing already who she would see.

Zelianora Tarkina sank to her knees by the corpse of her husband, laying her fingers lightly on his closed eyelids. When she looked up, her dark brows were like splashes of ink on her face.

“Did he speak, once the Shadow had departed?”

Shaking her head, Dhulyn rose to her feet and approached the other woman. She stopped when Zelianora held her hand up, palm toward her.

“Leave me, please,” she said. “You stood by your word and for that I thank you, but leave me now. Please.”

Dhulyn hesitated, looking from the kneeling Tarkina to the trussed Cloudman. Parno left his post by the door to take her by the elbow.

“Come,” he said.

“We must bring Cullen,” she said.

Parno shrugged and bent over to grasp the front of Cullen’s tunic, hauling the unconscious man upright enough to sling him over his shoulder.

“Don’t know why you bothered tying him. The Tarkin wouldn’t have been attacking you if the Shadow’d left him. Logic tells us Cullen must be clean.”

“Logic’s killed people before. Better careful than cursing.”

At the doorway Dhulyn stopped and looked back into the room. There was something wrong. The throne room showed no signs of the encounter, just the body of Tek-aKet, with his grieving Tarkina kneeling over it. Dhulyn drew in a deep breath through her nose, tasting blood at the back of her throat. But there was something else. Something she couldn’t put her finger on.

“Dal, are you all right?”

A few blinks assured him he was looking into the blue eyes of Karlyn Tan, riding beside him. He held the focus until he was sure his vision was clear.

“Felt dizzy for a moment.” He looked away, rubbing the side of his face.

“You looked as though you were about to faint.”

“I’ll be fine,” Dal said, shrugging away Karlyn’s concern. They had no time for any of this, they had to get to the Dome as quickly as possible. “Let’s go.”

Parno Lionsmane closed and tied the silk bag that held his disassembled pipes. “Not everyone will feel that way. The fact remains, little Dove, that my Partner has killed the Tarkin of Imrion, and even though it was at his order . . .
well, there’s no way to know which way the Houses will jump, if they find out. If we ask for permission to go and are denied,” he shrugged, “better to explain, and defend ourselves if necessary, from the mountains.”

Gun took her hand. “We’d have to go anyway,” he said. “We don’t know where the Shadow is now, but we do know we need the other Marks. And the only other Marks we know about are in the mountains. Before Wolfshead killed the Tarkin, we could have sent Cullen’s Racha bird for them—what did I say?”


“Two nights ago, the same night Gun found Tek-aKet. What of it?”

“Cullen was in the throne room without Disha.” The two Mercenary Brothers looked at each other tight-lipped.

“She could be anywhere,” Parno Lionsmane said finally. “He could have sent her with a message, or just away, if he suspected something was wrong with Tek. We won’t know anything until he comes to himself.”

“If he comes to himself.” The Wolfshead chewed on her lower lip, the half-folded cotte twisting in her hands.

“That mistake won’t be made again, you can be sure,” Parno Lionsmane said. “Cullen’s well-guarded and, unlike Tek, has no authority to order himself freed.”

“It seems hard to go to the Cloud people without him.” Dhulyn Wolfshead frowned at the cotte she still held.

Mar looked down at her hands, clasped in her lap. Here we go again, she thought, surprised to find her hands so steady. Once more on the run. Had she spent longer than three days anywhere since she’d first set eyes on the Mercenaries? She got to her feet, mentally reviewing what she should take with her. No point in packing any of the court gowns Rab-iRab had found for her. However much nicer they were than the clothes she’d had at Tenebro, they wouldn’t be much use on horseback. The sound of her own name made her look up.

“Mar can stay here with Zelianora Tarkina,” Gun was saying.

A cold shock buzzed in her ears. Did he really mean to go without her? “Not likely,” she said, thrusting herself between Gun and Parno. “It’s my bowl you need, remember!”

“But, Mar, you’re safer here if we—”

“Best if you waste no time arguing.”

The voice from the doorway stopped Gun before he could finish giving Mar his excuses. Dal-eLad and Karlyn-Tan had come with them from Tenebro House, but while she and Gun had come straight to the Mercenaries’ rooms, the Noble House had gone to the Tarkina. Dal’s glance fell to the open packs. “Good. I should have known you would be ahead of me. The Houses are already arriving. Penrado happened to be here when you came riding in and he’s called the others.”

“And if we’re asked for?” Dhulyn Wolfshead did not stop packing to ask.

“Zelianora has told them you’ve gone after the murderers of the Tarkin,” Dal said. “She’s said that he told you enough to set you on the trail with his dying words.” He entered the room far enough to shut the door behind him.

“There is good comes of this, if we are careful. Tek deposed and dead was one thing, the Houses were willing for Lok-iKol to be Tarkin rather than begin a civil war. But Tek assassinated is another. Anyone who steps forward to claim the Carnelian Throne will be suspect. The Penradoso is speaking against a Ballot, and calling for Bet-oTeb to be declared Tarkin, with an appropriate Guardian, of course, and many of the other Houses are listening.”

“Enough?”

Dal shrugged. “It will be easier for Zelianora to ask for the Guardianship herself if . . .” Dal stopped, his unspoken words hanging in the air.

“If she’s seen to have acted decisively in sending us after the assassins,” Dhulyn Wolfshead finished for him. He nodded to her, clearly relieved that she understood. “These youngsters have yet to pack. Meanwhile we can saddle the horses—”

“You misunderstood me,” Dal said. “There were those who wished to question you yourselves, and Zelianora has told them you have already gone. You will not ride out of the front gates now without making her a liar, and raising the very questions we wish to avoid.” Dal shrugged. “I can have your horses, and even your saddlebags sent after you to the Tenebro summerhome outside of Gotterang.” He turned to Parno Lionsmane. “You remember?”

When Lionsmane nodded, Wolfshead turned to Mar and Gun.

“Go, you two, quick as you can and meet back here. Small packs only, Mar, but leave nothing you cannot afford to lose. Be sure to bring the bowl.” Dhulyn Wolfshead fastened the last buckle on the straps of her saddlebag.

“And speaking of that.” Dal had been carrying a small case made of time-darkened wood with a brass handle set into the lid. “I’ve brought the vera tiles for you, Dhulyn Wolfshead. They seemed to work at least somewhat. . . .”
“I’ll see they come back to you safely.”

“Keep them. I can have a new set made.” Dal looked at Gun, and then at Mar herself as if he would say something in particular to them, but finally he bowed and left them.

As Mar was pulling the door shut behind them, she heard Dhulyn Wolfshead say, “I wonder. Can the Shadow enter the Rachá?”

“I thought we’d go through the old kitchens,” Gundaron said, handing his pack over at Parno’s gesture and sitting down to get at his boots.

“We’d have to pass through too much of the Dome to get there,” Parno told him. “We’re supposed to be gone already, remember.”

“We little thought we’d be taking you with us this way, my Doves,” Dhulyn said, looking out the window of their bedroom. “But it’s not so difficult. If you don’t look down.”

She looked with longing at her saddlebags. Everything she couldn’t do without—including the set of vera tiles—that had been transferred to a travel pack, but uncomfortable wouldn’t begin to describe their journey if, by ill luck, they lost the bags. And there was her second-best sword, to say nothing of the axes and the longbow. She gave a mental shrug, put her most cheerful smile on her lips. Either Dal-eLad would get them their horses and saddlebags, or he wouldn’t. No point in giving the youngsters anything more to worry them. Under her breath, she ticked off a list of weapons. Knives—in boots, wrist sheaths, back sheath under her shirt and the public one at her belt—with short sword, throwing star pouch, and disassembled crossbow, all attached to vest harness, and tied down so as not to snag on anything or tangle the ropes. Parno had, in addition to his own body weapons and sword, the cavalry recurve bow that came apart into three pieces, and the arrows they’d brought back from the Great King’s court, steel arrows that unscrewed, patterned after relics of the Caids. Everything else was either too heavy or too long to take by this route.

She’d just have to hope that Dal came through for them. She turned her back on the pile of books and scrolls stacked neatly on the room’s side table. If she didn’t look, she wouldn’t think about them. Much.

Her inventory finished, she helped Parno move the roped packs to the window.

“I’ll get these up now,” he said. “And come back to help with the youngsters.” He was out the window and up the wall in a moment, trailing the rope with the packs attached behind him. Dhulyn knew he’d reached the roof when the rope grew taut, and she eased the packs over the windowsill, watching them rise as Parno pulled them up.

She turned back into the room and smiled when she saw Mar and Gun eyeing herself, and the window, in disbelief.

“If you’re ready,” she said, attaching ropes to the front and rear of Gun’s and Mar’s harnesses, until they were strung out, herself to Gundaron, Gundaron to Mar. “The ledge is wider than it looks. Follow me out, then Parno will lead us all.”

As if hearing his cue, Parno swung himself back into the room and, seeing they were ready, linked himself to Mar with the rope he’d used to haul up the packs. He looked up with a nod as he finished checking the knot.

“Ready?” Instead of just stepping out onto the ledge as she would have done if she were alone, Dhulyn sat on the edge of the window casement, swung her legs out, turned to face into the room, and, gripping the edge of the casement tightly, lowered her legs until her toes felt the ledge.

“You see?” she said. “Just like that. I’ll be out here to steady you.”

Gundaron followed her out, trying his best to ape her actions exactly. He had a shaky moment when his toe couldn’t find the ledge, but once Dhulyn had guided his foot down, he managed well enough.

“Move over here, Gun, and mind the ropes,” she said, allowing him to pass between her and the wall. “Let Mar out.”

Anyone would have thought that Mar had been climbing out of fifth-story windows all her life—as, indeed she may have been, for all Dhulyn knew to the contrary. The little Dove slid out of the window onto the ledge and over next to Gun without hesitation or sign of nerves. Parno followed her out, drew the casements shut behind him and, using a bit of wire tied onto the end of a string, pulled the latch over as he did so. From the inside, at least, there’d be no sign that they’d left via the windows.

“Eyes on me,” Parno said. His tone was even and calm, the same tone, Dhulyn thought, that he’d used to coach Mar in table etiquette when they were on their way to Gotterang. “Watch where I put my hands and feet, and you put yours the same. Don’t start up until you see me wave at you. I’ll be anchored, so you can’t fall, but be careful all the same.”

As Dhulyn knew from her own reconnaissance, there were no windows directly above theirs, so Parno could
climb straight up until he’d cleared the two stories above them, and reached the battlements at the top of the tower. These were decorative only, intended to match the style of an older tower, with no place for guards or archers to stand behind them, Dhulyn knew, only the shallow-pitched peaked roof of the tower itself. Parno swung himself over the edge of the stone, and after a few moments, they could see his hand waving.

“Up you get, children, fingers and toes now.” Dhulyn had tested the route herself only the day before, and knew that there were many finger- and toeholds in the rough stone wall, and more than a few places where the whole foot could be placed to take the weight off the hands.

This time Mar went first, scrambling up the wall like one of the monkeys Dhulyn had seen in the jungles of the northwest. Gun lifted his arms to start up almost as soon as he had room to do so.

“Wait.” Dhulyn said, her hand on his shoulder. “Let her reach the top; you would pull her down as well if you fell.” And me with the two of you, she didn’t say aloud. No point in frightening the boy any more than he was already.

Still, his fear didn’t stop him from starting up as soon as Mar had cleared the top, and Dhulyn found herself nodding in approval for the first time. He’d learned somewhere not to let his fear stop him. He might make a worthwhile human yet.

Halfway up, he froze, and Dhulyn bit back her thought. “Don’t look down,” she told him. “I’ll be right there.” She pulled herself up until she was nearly on top of him, covering his legs with her body, careful not to tangle the ropes. “Take a deep breath and move up. Parno’s there, see him? He’s got the slack of the rope. You can’t fall, just help him bring you up, don’t let him do all the work.” When he still didn’t move, she added, “Look within, Find your courage.”

Dhulyn’s fingers were just beginning to feel the strain when the boy nodded as though his neck were made of oak, and began to move, first his right hand, then his left, his right foot, his left. Dhulyn held herself back a moment, checking the rope, keeping out of the way of his lower limbs, but not letting Gun get so far ahead that he couldn’t feel her presence between him and the long fall.

“Keep breathing,” she said. “Let the air move in and out, in and out.”

It could not have been more than minutes later that Parno was helping Gun roll over the battlement onto the roof, but Dhulyn was sure that it felt much longer to the boy.

“Not to worry,” Parno was saying. “We’re only going to walk along this wall to that other tower you see there. No more climbing.” Mar had hold of the boy’s hand, and his grip on hers was so tight her fingers looked white.

Gun swallowed, but whatever he wanted to say didn’t make it out of his lips.

“We’ll still have the ropes,” Dhulyn said, in her most matter-of-fact tones. “There’s still no way for any of us to fall. You keep your eyes on the spot where your rope attaches to Mar, and you’ll be fine.”

Gun pressed his lips together into a thin line and nodded. When she saw that he intended to stand, Mar helped him to his feet. He looked to Dhulyn, then to Parno, and nodded again. Parno picked up the two heaviest packs, one in each hand to balance himself, and set off. Dhulyn picked up the two remaining packs and watched as Mar and Gun followed her Partner.

They were a little more than halfway across when the boy spoke.

“I thought the Carnelian Dome was impregnable from this side,” he said, in a voice that was a tight parody of nonchalance.

“Oh, you can’t get in this way.” Parno answered as if he hadn’t heard the tightness.

“But you can get out,” Dhulyn said.

Parno led them only a few spans farther, until the section of wall that led off from their tower met the ruined corner that was all that remained of a tower that no longer existed. There was room enough—just—for them to stand together.

Parno began unhooking the ropes that tied them together, coiling them neatly at their feet.

“Use these cords to tie your packs to your wrists, my Doves. Mar, check Gun’s knots. Use the ones we showed you on the trail.”

When her own pack was ready, Dhulyn retied the rope that had attached her to Gun, making it much shorter. When Parno had done the same with the rope between him and Mar, Dhulyn leaned over the edge of the most exposed corner of wall, looked back at them and grinned. “I forgot to ask, can you swim?”

Gun shot a quick look over the edge. “You can’t be serious.”

“Never more so, my Scholar. The cliff’s undercut, and there are no rocks in the river, which is deep enough. I
checked. We’ll go first,” she added, to Parno.

“Got him?” Parno said, as he took Mar’s hands in his, moving her away from the edge.

“Got him,” Dhulyn said. With her right hand, she gripped Gun’s right wrist, and was gripped by him in return. Parno caught her eye above the youngsters’ heads.

“In Battle,” he mouthed.

Mindful that Gun and Mar could see her face, Dhulyn merely smiled and bowed her head, touching her fingertips to her lips.

“Let’s go.”

As she and Gun stepped out into space and began to fall, Dhulyn wished she’d really had a chance to check that the river was deep enough. She’d worked it out in her head, but . . .

The coughing seemed as though it would last forever, and by the time it had stopped and Gun was able to loosen his grip on the Wolfshead and look about him, the current of the river had taken them away from the Carnelian Dome, and downstream, toward the summer homes of the very rich.

“I can swim,” he said.

“Not just yet,” she said. “Let the current take us for now. Turn over on your back.”

With the Wolfshead to brace against, turning over was easy. Gun had a difficult moment when he thought he’d begin coughing again, but it passed. The Wolfshead slipped her own arm under his and across his chest, holding him against her but with his head well above the water. He forced himself to relax, breathing steadily and slowly, as she used a lazy sidestroke to give them steerage as they floated downstream. The water still felt icily cold, and Gun knew that luck was with them. It was too early in the year for water sports, and the wrong time of day for fishing. It wasn’t long before piers and jetties were replaced by boathouses, water pavilions, and long stretches of terraced gardens leading away from the water. Gun’s teeth began to chatter and he almost didn’t feel it when Dhulyn Wolfshead nudged him on the shoulder.

“Look up,” she said, a murmur in his ear.

Gun tried, but could make out nothing beyond the shadowy shapes of clouds partially obscuring the darkening sky.

“What is it,” he said, keeping his own voice low.


It didn’t surprise him that it was Karlyn-Tan who greeted them, directing the bustle of the servants as they stoked braziers, fetched hot water and food, and led Gun and Mar off for warm baths, hot drinks, and dry clothing. It made sense that Dal would have sent one of the few others who knew exactly what was at stake.

With a nod of thanks Parno accepted a steaming mug from an older man with a Steward’s badge in the Tenebro colors.

Dhulyn pulled her wet shirt over her head and handed it to a waiting page, accepting a large towel in exchange.

She must have felt Parno’s eye on her, for she looked over at him, lifting one blood-red brow.

“I saw a Racha bird,” she said.

Karlyn nodded, caught the Steward’s attention, and waited as the man gathered up his helpers with a gesture of his hand and left the room. “I’ve much to tell you, the chief of which is that Cullen is here, with us.”

“Why?” Parno said, just as Dhulyn said, “Where?”

Karlyn held up his hands. “He regained his senses, and as the Racha accepted him, and his eyes were normal, we felt he must be clean. Even so, Zelianora Tarkina felt he would be safest with us. If there is any chance the Shadow is with him, we are the only people equipped to both recognize and deal with it.”

Dhulyn looked up from toweling her hair as dry as it would get while still in braids. “There’s merit in that idea, much as I wish she hadn’t thought of it,” she said. “Now we’ll have to spend precious time watching to make sure he isn’t trying to escape.” She exchanged a look with Parno. In it was the knowledge that so long as they did not know for certain where the Green Shadow was, they would all be at risk, and they could trust no one.

Parno set his cup down. “What else is there to tell us?”

Karlyn had been leaning against the edge of the table near Parno, arms crossed. Now he looked down at the floor, chewing his upper lip.

“Out with it, man,” Parno told him. “What could be worse than knowing we might have the Shadow with us?”
“We had not time, before, to wonder how it was the Shadow returned to the Tarkin.”

Parno stopped in the act of pulling off his own tunic. “And now?”

Karlyn looked at Parno without raising his head. He shot a glance at Dhulyn, but his eyes did not linger. “The Mesticha Stone came.”

Dhulyn finished pulling on the dry breeches she’d taken from her saddlebag, secured the waist, and strode toward Karlyn-Tan. The towel she’d been using was slung over her shoulders like a cloak, not out of modesty, Parno knew, but out of the habit that made her cover the marks of the whip on her back, when they might be seen by strangers.

“The orders to bring it directly to the Tarkin upon its arrival had never been changed,” Karlyn said, looking directly at Dhulyn. “And so it was brought to him.”

“And Cullen?”

“Saw the Tarkin in the hallway, heading for the gates, he thought, and chased him into the throne room.”

“Or so he says,” Parno said.

“Or so he says,” Karlyn agreed. “Either way, the Mesticha Stone was not found in the bedchamber when it was looked for afterward.”

Dhulyn turned aside, tossed her towel across the back of a chair near the brazier, and took a vest made of dozens of strips of supple leather out of her saddlebag, shrugged it on, and began fastening it shut. “The Shadow was in the Tarkin,” she said. “It must have been ‘visiting’ him, as we suspected it might. When the Stone arrived, it seized its opportunity.”

“It was the last piece,” Parno said. “It’s at its full strength now.”

Dhulyn looked up from her laces. “And the Racha seems content?”

“As far as any of us can tell,” Karlyn said. “Nor does the Cloudman object to riding bound, if we prefer it.”

“Well, he wouldn’t, would he?”

“What is it you’re thinking, my heart?”

Parno looked from Dhulyn to Karlyn and back again. “He’d want to come with us, don’t you think?” He held up one finger. “We’ve got the only Seer he knows of, and,” he held up a second finger, “we’ve got a Finder.” A third finger. “We’re going to the only place we can be sure there are other Marks. What more does he want? He can let us do his work for him.”

Dhulyn had taken breath to answer him when Karlyn spoke.

“So we’re safe enough on the journey,” he said. “If the Shadow’s with us, it won’t do any harm until we arrive.”

“Us?”

“Under the circumstances, I’d better come with you, don’t you think?”

Twenty-six

“THERE IS A SHADOW hanging over us all, a Shadow with green eyes.”

Koba the Racha bird eyed Dhulyn from his perch near the fire as Yaro of Trevel gestured her into a seat, hooked the heavy kettle of water on the andiron, and swung it into the fireplace until it rested closer to the flames. As Dhulyn took up her tale, telling what they knew, what they thought, and what they hoped, Yaro watched the kettle, waiting for the water to come to a boil.

When Dhulyn had been silent a moment or two, the woman who was once Yaro Hawkwing the Cloud, Mercenary Brother, tossed a handful of leaves into the now boiling water and, pulling the kettle away from the fire with a heavy cloth, set it on a small iron stand to one side of the hearth. The room began to smell of bee balm.

“I know why you’ve come to me,” Yaro said. She stood a few moments longer, looking into the flames, before turning to face Dhulyn. When their eyes met, the older woman reached up and touched the feathers tattooed on her face. “You would ask of Cullen.”

Yaro turned away to take two thick earthenware mugs from a small shelf to the left of the fireplace and set them down on the table between them. She picked up the cloth she’d used to shield her hand from the kettle’s handle, but, instead of turning to the fire, stood still, the cloth hanging from her hand, her eyes staring into a distance of time and space.

“If Cullen is not in his body, then Disha would not fly.” And as if the words released her, she was able to turn to the hearth, pick up the kettle, and pour out the strong-smelling brew into the mugs on the table. When she had set the
kettle down once again on the hearth, she took the stool across from Dhulyn, wrapped her hands around the mug in front of her, and studied the surface of the tea.

“But if the Shadow is in Cullen’s body, would it not be in Disha’s as well? Could Disha not fly then?”

Yaro opened her mouth, closed it, and shook her head once more. “I do not know if I can make you see. You told me that Tek-aKet Tarkin was gone from his body until the Scholar Found him?”

“In his own words,” Dhulyn said, remembering, “he said that at first he had been pushed out, then allowed to return, but as a passenger. Later, when I struck the Shadow, Tek-aKet was lost. As though the body lived, but he was not in it.”

Yaro tapped the tabletop with her index finger. “Without Healer or Mender, in the moment, however short, that the Shadow pushed Cullen from his body, Disha would fall.”

“But you—”

“Had a two-month bond, no more, and as it was, only one of us survived. Cullen and Disha have been more than half their lives one being. If they were severed, even for an instant, then for a time so short that the mind cannot conceive of it, they would die.” Yaro placed both hands palm down on the table, one to each side of her empty mug. “It is as I say, Dhulyn Wolfshead, my Brother. If Disha still flies, Cullen is free of the Shadow.” She breathed deeply in through her nose and, blinking, raised her mug to her lips.

Dhulyn nodded, slowly. There must be such a moment, however short, in which the Shadow did move. What Yaro said made sense—but Dhulyn was aware that it was also what she wanted to hear, and therefore suspect. It was clear that Yaro spoke what she thought to be the truth, and Dhulyn believed her. But was that enough? It seemed a small thread from which to hang the fate of the world. Dhulyn rose to her feet, touched her forehead with her fingertips.

“It is good to have seen you, Brother,” the older woman said.

“You will see me again,” Dhulyn said. Yaro raised her eyes. “In Battle.”

“Oh in Death,” Yaro Hawkwing replied.

What to do, what to do? If he destroyed the Healer now, would they suspect, or would they think it merely her time?

A Mender was coming. If he destroyed any of the Marked now, even the old woman, perhaps the Mender would not come. If he struck, he might lose the chance to destroy the Mender as well. He looked up into the sky and watched the bird float on an updraft, seeming to hang in the air that these folk thought of as nothing, not knowing the true nothing, The NOT. If he struck, they would know he was here, now, when they had almost forgotten to suspect, and they would hunt for him. But without the Lens, what could they do?

He could wait. He had overheard the two younger ones talking in the night, when they thought all asleep. They believed they had the Lens, and this belief weakened them. They no longer searched for it, and he could destroy them before they ever realized they should continue to look. He was strong enough, now that he was whole again. He could turn all back to that moment, when he first had form. If he waited, if he managed to find the Lens before them. This time he could succeed. This time he could turn this world into the NOT.

Or could there be another way? The bird swept down, and he pushed himself away from the edge of the wall. What if he did not destroy? What if he occupied? Was he strong enough for that? His breath came short, and he tried to steady the pounding of his heart. Was one form any worse than another? He had never looked from the eyes of a Mark—but they would never suspect. Once accomplished, it would be the safest place for him to wait.

Dhulyn glanced up from the washbasin to where the Healer, Sortera, sat in the shaft of sunlight that entered through the doorway of the public washhouse in Trevel. It was the old woman’s presence here which had brought them to Trevel, and today she was taking advantage of a warm day and a good breeze to launder her winter garments. After a few minutes of watching the Healer trying to wring out soaking cloth with her crook-fingered hands Dhulyn had asked her to sit down, and had taken over the task of the wash herself, with Mar to help her. Sortera had smiled in such a way, her teeth remarkably good in her wrinkled face, that Dhulyn was certain she’d been outfoxed. But she hid her own smile and kept her thoughts to herself.

Not that laundry was Dhulyn’s purpose here this morning. Cullen was as clear-eyed and apparently Shadow free as he had been all the way from Gotterang, but Dhulyn felt only somewhat reassured by what Yaro had told her the night before. After talking it over with Parno, they’d decided that, as far as the Shadow was concerned, very few precautions could be called “unnecessary.” She and Mar were watching Sortera; Gundaron they’d left with Parno,
going through what scrolls and books the Clouds had in their library. A young Mender boy was coming from Pompano, and until he and his Racha bird escort arrived, no Mark was being left unguarded.

“We Marks didn’t live settled into a city in those days, see you,” Sortera continued telling them as Dhulyn scooped up another handful of the soft soap in the nearby bucket. “We were all of us on the road, taking our Mark, whatever it might be, to everyone.” She leaned forward, resting her hands, with their heavy veins, on the knob of her cane. “Back in those times, people would save only their most important things for a Mender, and they didn’t waste a Finder’s time on lost scissors or lapdogs, see you. No, it was more like: ‘where did granddad put the harvest money for safety before he fell off his horse and died?’ or ‘can you Find us the spot for our new well?’ That was our work in those times, see you. Marked of the gods, we were. When us Marked started living in cities,” she shook her head, “that was when the trouble started, as far as I’m concerned. Then we were like any tradesman, and people started treating us that way.”

Dhulyn carefully squeezed the soapy water out of a thick inglera wool shawl and passed it to Mar for rinsing. Mar pulled the wooden sluice gate from the water channel between the double row of stone sinks and let fresh rainwater flow into her basin from the cistern on the roof. They were the only people in the washhouse this morning, and could use as much water as they liked.

“Eight days on horseback, and all we get are stories of her youth?” Dhulyn said to Mar under her breath.

“I can hear you, young woman,” Sortera said, her thin lips pulled back in glee. “I may be old, but I am a Healer. My hands may trouble me, but my hearing’s just fine.”

“Your pardon, Grandmother,” Dhulyn said. “How old are you, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“Oh, I don’t mind, but you won’t like the answer, see you. The truth of the matter is I don’t know for certain. I remember when there was a Tarkin named Jenshannon—a woman she was—but people tell me that can’t be so, that I must be thinking of Jen-aNej Tarkina.” The old Healer wrinkled her nose and shook her head in disgust.

Dhulyn rested her forearms on the edge of the basin and thought, mentally ticking off a list of names and dates. It was two hundred years, perhaps more, since noble names began to change to their present mirror-image form. Surely they were right, the people who told Sortera her memory was at fault.

On the other hand, the woman was a Healer.

“You may be right, Grandmother,” she said. “In any case, don’t listen to those who tell you your memory is at fault.”

Sortera’s laugh was toneless and without heft in the cool mountain air. “I believe you, Granddaughter, I believe you.”

“Tell me something else. In all that you have heard of the Mark, do you know of anything called a Lens?”

“All right, then.” Gun pushed himself back from the table and rubbed his eyes with stiff fingers. “We know it’s not me. I’ve no trouble Finding ordinary things.” He looked up. “But I still can’t Find the Shadow.”

“You’re sure you’re doing what you did before?”

Gun just looked at him, lips pressed together. Parno raised his hands, palms out. “Forgive me, but you have Found it twice before, and somehow I don’t think it’s just disappeared off the face of the earth.”

“I said, it’s not me.” Gun sighed and rolled his left shoulder, grimacing as if at a particularly stiff muscle knot. “I’m not even getting that other Library where I found the Tarkin.” The boy looked sideways at him. “I think it’s the bowl.”

Parno tried not to let his disappointment show. They’d been waiting until they arrived in Trevel to try using the bowl; on the trail there had been no way to hide what they were doing from the others.

“But you have no better luck finding the Shadow without the bowl.”

“That’s just it, I was getting better results in Gotterang—”

“Caids help us if we have to be in Gotterang for the thing to work.” Parno said. He pulled out a chair and sat down, rubbing the edge of the bowl with the tip of his right index finger. “Has the Healer tried it?”

“She has,” Gun said. “And reports no results.”

“Are we sure . . . she’s so very old.” Parno hated to say it aloud, but what if the woman was simply too old to Heal?

But Gun was already shaking his head. “I asked. Last week a hunting party came back carrying one of their members with a bad leg break. The bones had pierced the skin. She Healed it.

“And she wants me to go with her this afternoon,” he continued. “To help a small girl child who seems to have
lost her wits. Together, Sortera says, we’ll be able to Find them, and Heal her.” Even he could hear the notes of awe and pleasure in his voice as he thought about the old woman’s plan.

As Parno Lionsmane blew his breath out with force, making the woven back of the chair creak as he leaned back, Gun forced his attention back to the matter at hand.

“Then this is not the Lens,” Lionsmane said. “It works for you because it is a scrying bowl. But it would work for everyone, if it were the Lens.”

“What about Dhulyn Wolfshead. Can we get her to try?”

The Lionsmane twisted his lips and looked toward the window.

“You’ve tried already, haven’t you?”

The man nodded. “Good news is, the vera tiles seem to work, though that may be because she’s closer to her woman’s time.”

Gun pursed his lips in a silent whistle. “That’s it then. We’re back where we started. We haven’t got the Lens.”

Dhulyn Wolfshead’s quiet voice was filled with assurance, and Gun wished that it could do the same for him. He looked up at her impassive face and told himself there was no mistrust, no suspicion in her stone-gray eyes. He wasn’t sure he believed it.

“I don’t know what it looks like,” he said, sounding, even to himself, like a child trying to escape the blame of eating the family’s cakes.

“You didn’t know what Tek-aKet’s soul looked like either,” Parno Lionsmane said. “But you managed to Find that. This is bound to be simpler. It’ll be some artifact of the Jaldeans or even of you Scholars that no one thinks is of any importance.”

“Try again,” Wolfshead said. “Try the way you found Tek-aKet.” She sat down on the stool to Gun’s right, set her left ankle on her right knee, and folded her hands into her lap. The Lionsmane patted Gun on the shoulder before stepping back from the table himself. Behind him, Sortera sat against the whitewashed wall under the shuttered window, in the room’s only padded chair, nodding over the knitting in her lap. Mar had fallen asleep on the pallet next to the old woman, her thick lashes making circled shadows on her cheeks.

Would he ever feel completely forgiven, Gun thought, as Mar so obviously did? Unable to stay awake, sent to bed with a kiss on the forehead like a favored daughter, while he sat here with the scrying bowl in front of him. Gun took a deep breath and set his hands lightly around the edge of the bowl. He was still alive, so he supposed he knew that Wolfshead and Lionsmane both did actually forgive him. He couldn’t expect the affection they showed to Mar. Her offense had been against them personally, while his . . . He cleared his throat.

“Move the candle a little closer, please,” he said, and out of the corner of his eye saw the Lionsmane’s hand reach into the candle’s circle of light and move it. The light’s reflections on the surface of the water within the bowl flickered and moved, as if someone had taken a page of parchment and shaken it out like a sheet. The water—

Mar sits in a carrel, asleep with her head down on her folded arms. Of course. He’s thinking about her, sleeping so near him in the room, warm and soft. Her affection was in no doubt; bright and shining, he Finds it. He has to stop thinking about her, and think only of the Lens. He sees the line again at his feet and follows it, somehow knowing that this time he is going deeper into the library than he has been before, where he does not see even the shadowy outline of others. The line is fine and dark and leads him to. . . .

Mar again. This time she’s snoring.

Dhulyn got up and stretched, pushing her hips first to one side, then the other. “She’s right, my Scholar. It’s late and all you can Find is your bed. We’ll try again in the morning.”

As Dhulyn watched, Gun took off his boots, shrugged out of his tunic, and in his shirt and breeches squeezed himself onto the pallet beside Mar. He put an arm around her, but Dhulyn couldn’t tell if it was from real affection, or from lack of space. She hoped it was the former.

Parno tapped her on the shoulder and motioned with his head to the door, picking up his crossbow and hanging his sword on his belt as he went. The door’s closely fitted planks gave immediately onto the steep stone staircase that ran between Sortera’s narrow house and the building that was its neighbor.

Parno stepped down until he was standing a stair below her, and cupped her cheek in his calloused hand. “My Brother, my soul.” He spoke softly, mindful of the Clouds that lay sleeping all around them. “You look tired. Get some rest.”
“I know what that means,” she said, forcing a smile to her lips. “When a man tells you that you look tired, he’s telling you that you look old.”

“If this is what you’ll look like when you’re old, I sincerely hope we both live to see the day.”

She felt her muscles loosen as she rested her forehead against his, felt his arms come up around her, drew in a breath full of his scent and nearness. “You’ll be late for your watch,” she murmured. She felt him nod, felt the touch of his lips on hers.

“I’ll go for now,” he said. “But I’ll be back. I’ll always be back.”

“In Battle,” she said.

“And in Death,” he answered.

She watched him until he’d gone all the way down the narrow stone steps and turned the corner into the street—just as narrow but not so steep—below.

Dhulyn stood there in her vest and linen trousers until the cold mountain air had time to make her shiver. Then she lifted the wooden latch and stepped back inside Sortera’s house.

Gun and Mar were both asleep, nested together like two arrows in a quiver. At first, Dhulyn thought Sortera had fallen asleep in her chair, but something about the length of the old woman’s regular breaths, the deliberate movements of her fingers along the needles of her knitting, told Dhulyn Sortera was probably in a Healer’s trance.

Wonder if she’s Healing herself, Dhulyn thought. One way at least to explain how so old a woman could still be alive.

There was another pallet in the interior room, but Dhulyn’s turn at watch along the upper slope would come soon enough to make sleep more of a bother than a help. Instead, she took Dal’s small box from the shelf beside the hearth, pulled the chair Gun had been using closer to the table, and sat down in the light thrown by the lamp they’d lit to eat their suppers by. She opened the box and began taking out vera tiles.

HIS LIPS FORMING THE WORDS.

DHULYN MOVES CLOSER, UNTIL SHE CAN SEE THE WRITING ON THE PAGE IN FRONT OF HIM, BUT SHE CAN’T READ IT. SHE LOOKS AGAIN AT HIS LIPS.

ADELGARREMBIL, HIS LIPS SAY. ACUCHEEYAROB. FETENTABIL. DEBEREEYAROB. ESFUMARRENBIL.

THE MAGE REPEATS THE WORDS SEVERAL TIMES AND CLOSES THE BOOK.

WHEN HE STANDS, DHULYN SEES HIS SWORD HANGING BY ITS SCABBARD FROM THE BACK OF HIS CHAIR.

“Go back to sleep, my Dove.”

“I thought I heard you call me.”

“You’re dreaming, Dove. Go back to sleep.”

Mar shut her eyes and Dhulyn began replacing the tiles back into their box.

Dhulyn had heard the soft sounds of booted feet behind her for some time, and so wasn’t startled by Karlyn-Tan’s voice when he finally spoke. She stopped at the end of the narrow lane and waited for him to join her before walking beside him across the small square.

“It’s late for you to be out.”

“I followed Cullen,” Karlyn said. “But it seemed he was just giving his bird some hunting, and when I saw him safely back into his quarters, I suddenly felt the need of company.”

“A few minutes earlier, and you would have caught Parno still awake.”

“I did,” he said, looking away from her as if to examine the face of the moon. “I saw him return from his watch and waited for you.”

Dhulyn glanced at him, but he was still looking at the night sky. They reached the spot where she was to stand her watch, where a young Cloudwoman yawned, waiting for Dhulyn to relieve her. They exchanged hand signals and the Cloud left them, silently moving through the empty streets to her bed.

The northwestern end of the valley in which the village of Trevel lay was marked with a small orchard of apple
trees. There was no wall as such, only a few large boulders placed to give those who took the herds beneath the trees a place to rest their legs. On the far side of the orchard was a stream, and the shallow pass that marked the village’s vulnerable point from this direction. It was that pass that accounted for Dhulyn’s presence here, as every weapons-wise adult in Trevel—even guests if they were trusted—was expected to take a turn at guard duty.

Telling Karlyn to wait for her by the rocks, Dhulyn scouted through the orchard, ears primed to catch every sound and nose prickling at the sharp, clean scent of trees newly and thickly leaved. She heard the foraging of small animals under the trees halt as she neared and continue as she moved farther away. When she was satisfied that there was nothing in the orchard more dangerous than herself, she rejoined Karlyn at the rocks.

“I have heard,” Karlyn said after they had been silent for many minutes. “That Partnered Brothers often have lovers.”

It took Dhulyn a moment to realize that her mouth was hanging open, and to shut it. She set her crossbow on the ground, and leaned forward, elbows on knees, chin propped on her hands. She’d had lovers, of course, as had Parno, but she was always surprised by the offer. She let her eyes drop to Karlyn’s hands, with their strong fingers, resting on his knees.

“The bond,” she said, “is not how you imagine it.” They sat so close, she could reach out and touch him with no effort at all. As if he read her thought he lifted his hand and reached toward the side of her face. The moon, shining through the screen of apple leaves, was bright and full enough to give a green cast to the light.

“Look up, my Wolfshead. Let me see your eyes.”

Dhulyn straightened until her hands rested on her knees. Without pause, she lifted her head, smiling, and felt the little fold at her upper lip that created her wolf’s smile. As her head rose, she took a deep, steadying breath, raised her hands, and—just before their eyes could meet—she struck.

She caught the unconscious man as he pitched forward, easing him to the ground and searching through the laces on her clothing for something long enough to tie him.

“What was taking you so long?” Cullen said, stepping out of the orchard just as Disha landed on his shoulder.

“I had to be certain,” Dhulyn said. “Look.” She turned one of Karlyn’s hands palm up in the moonlight and compared it to her own. Her hand was pale and white in the moonlight, his showed a faint but unmistakable green cast.

THE LOCKUP IN Trevel proved to be a disused horse stall in the back of the headman’s house. Like every other building in the village, the walls were thick stone covered with whitewashed plaster, but the window opening had an iron grille, Parno noted, not shutters, and the door was barred from the outside.

Gundaron, bent over the trussed Karlyn-Tan, looked up and nodded. “It’s here,” he said.

Sortera leaned on her staff, shaking her head. “Nothing wrong with him that I can sense,” she said. “Barring that he’s unconscious, see you.”

“We’ll want to keep him that way,” Dhulyn said. “Can we?”

The old woman’s face creased as she smiled. “Course you can, there’s drugs to do it, as you well know. But we’ll have to watch him carefully if we don’t want to kill him.” She thought a moment, frowning heavily. “Let me talk to the village Knife. Between us, we can work out the dosages, see you.” She tilted her head, focused her sharp eyes on Dhulyn. “How long do you plan to keep him this way?”

Dhulyn drew her eyes away from Karlyn-Tan. “As long as we have to.”

“We’ll need to look to our supplies, then,” Sortera said. “We can’t have innocent people going without because we’re using all we have on this one.”

“Then we’ll have to find a more permanent solution,” Parno said. “Wait for us in the other room, Grandmother. We’ll come as soon as Gun’s finished.” He turned to Dhulyn and lowered his voice still further.

“Are you certain it’s trapped?”

Dhulyn shrugged. “I couldn’t think of anything else to do. From something Yaro told me, I hoped I could strike at the body fast enough to trap it in Karlyn, especially since it did not know I suspected it.”

Parno loosened the muscles in his jaw that kept getting too tight. “I’m surprised he let you get close enough for the Hooded Snake Shora.”

Dhulyn shrugged. “Even those who have seen a woman’s strength never really believe she’ll use it against them.”
Parno coughed. “And what about you, Cullen. Why didn’t you tell us?”

The Cloudman’s teeth gleamed white for an instant as he smiled. He was leaning against the wall next to the door.
“What was I going to do, Lionsmane? Swear to you I wasn’t possessed?”

Dhulyn and Gun both laughed.

Parno rubbed his face with his hands. It seemed his own bond with Dhulyn helped him to sense the link that they had between them. The Marked. As potent and as real as the bond of Partnership. It was a good thing, he told himself, he was only uneasy because he hadn’t experienced it before. Before, it had only been Dhulyn and him, and he could almost forget her Mark.

Surely it was only this uneasiness, this new sensation of exclusion, that gave him the feeling things were getting out of hand?

Dhulyn had tried the tiles again after returning to their quarters in Sortera’s house, and even though they’d worked, she saw no Visions that she hadn’t already seen, although each was clear and precise in a way they had never been before.

She stopped as a door in the wall beside her opened and discharged a Cloudwoman of her own age with a large basket of eggs on her hip. The villager saluted her with a nod and a “good morning” before setting off down the lane at a pace only a native would have found comfortable, given the steepness of the street.

Chickens in an inner courtyard, Dhulyn thought. Enough of them that the excess eggs were going to market to be sold or traded for things that didn’t grow in the woman’s inner courtyard. The uncomplicated pattern of village life. When had their lives, hers and Parno’s, become so complicated? Since Navra. Dhulyn slowed her pace even more. And she’d had more Visions since Navra as well, now that she thought about it. The Fresnoyn would account for some of those, she knew, as would the unusual stress and worry of being so near Parno’s home. Even the weather might have made its contribution. Blood knew, she’d never been really comfortable in the warmer north.

More Visions; fine, she could account for those. But why clearer ones?

Dhulyn shook off her thoughts and looked around her. Trevel was like no other town or village she had lived in, tucked into its high mountain valley, its location protected by narrow passes and thick forests impenetrable to those who didn’t know the ways. Ahead of her now was the tallest structure in town, the stone tower of a Jaldean Shrine—Old Believers, of course—and beyond that, perhaps three days’ ride away, the peaks of the Antedichas Mountains to the south. Nothing like what little she could remember of her own birthplace, the cold, windswept southern plains, or even any of the port towns she’d known during her Schooling with Dorian the Black.

Light voices sang out ahead of her as a small group of children ran out from a crossing lane, racing down to the small square between the Jaldeans’ tower and the public fountain.

Bursting into the open space, the children did a quick rhyming count to see who would be the victim—“one two, sky blue, all out but you” was what Dhulyn caught—and one small boy was blindfolded and took his place in the center of four others. As these four joined hands and began to chant, Dhulyn stopped to watch, setting her buckets down on the cobblestones.

The children repeated the chant several times, stepping first in one direction, then turning and skipping the other way, sometimes faster, sometimes slower. Finally, they fell silent, stopped, and dropped hands. The blindfolded boy in the middle began immediately to grope for his friends, grabbing the smallest girl as her giggle gave her location away.

They had used almost the same words and a very similar tune as the children on the pier in Navra, Dhulyn thought; children were so much the same everywhere. So much had happened since the evening when they first met Mar and the Weaver woman in the tavern room of their Navra inn. So much—

“Oh, for blood’s sake.”

A woman passing between her and the children glanced at her with a tentative smile.

The Lens tile in the center with the other Marks placed around it. A child in the center with four others circling around. Circling. Herself asleep on the trail with Mar in her arms, Mar with her hands on Gundaron’s shoulders.


Dhulyn whirled around, almost tripping over the buckets she didn’t remember until much later, and ran back up the hill.
But the love’s here, she thought. It’s here.

Gun sighed. “I’m so useless,” he said.

Mar bit back an exasperated retort. “Come on,” she said, as kindly as she could manage given that what she really felt like was slapping him. “We’ve been through this. You’ve done the best you could.”

“Well, no arguing with that,” Mar thought. She was trying to come up with an argument, however, when the Wolfshead herself came running up the narrow steps—smiling.

“Gun, you were right, the books were right. I should have listened to you from the start. We’re just too blooded smart for our own good.”

Gun got to his feet. “I was right?”

The beads behind them rattled as Parno Lionsmane joined them in the doorway. Mar felt something tight in her chest loosen as Dhulyn Wolfshead gave her Partner a wide and joyous grin.

“We’re making this too hard. The fifth Mark you said, Gun, and the fifth Mark it is. The Lens isn’t a thing. It’s a Mark, like all the others. Not a thing, a person.”

Shutters popped open in the house across the stairs.

“Inside,” Dhulyn Wolfshead said, ushering everyone before her.

“But why hasn’t anyone met a Lens?” Parno Lionsmane said. “Not even Sortera, and she isn’t sure how long she’s been alive.”

“Listen!” The Wolfshead sat down on a stool. Her chest rose and fell, but she didn’t seem to be out of breath, for all the running uphill she’d just done. She reached out for Gun, and when he was near enough, she took his hands in hers. “You know how all the books and stories say that some Marks are rarer than others. Menders the most common, Seers the most rare? The Lens must be the rarest of all! There’s no general use for a Lens. It only affects another Mark. It’s a focuser, a Lens.”

Gun sat down, and seemed unaware that Parno Lionsmane got a stool under him just in time to prevent his falling to the floor. He was nodding, his eyes focused inward. “It makes sense. It’s logical.” He looked up at Dhulyn Wolfshead. “That passage in Holderon’s Commentaries makes sense if what you say is true. That’s why I couldn’t find it, I’ve been looking for a thing. You’ve got to be right.”

Mar’s cheeks hurt, and she found she was smiling just as hard as the Mercenaries. The weight that had oppressed everyone since the discovery of Karlyn-Tan’s possession seemed to be lifting.

Then she saw that Gun wasn’t smiling, and she felt her own smile fade.

“But, Wolfshead,” Mar said, sure now that she saw the flaw in all this deduction. “We still don’t know who . . .”

Dhulyn Wolfshead was holding up one finger. “Oh, yes, we do.”

That was when Mar realized that the Wolfshead was pointing at her. Jerrick Mender was almost twelve years old, thin, with eyes so large and round his name would be Jerrick Owlbeak if he were a Mercenary Brother. When Parno told him that, he seemed quite pleased, and Dhulyn had laughed. Parno had always had a way with children.

“You didn’t see my parents in Gotterang? Savern and Korwina Mender?” he said in a voice too old for his child’s face. A voice that said he knew the answer, but had to ask.

“No, Jerrick, I’m afraid not.”

The boy nodded. “I promised my sisters I would ask. There was another Mercenary Brother who helped us, Hernyn Greystone. Is he with you?”

Parno exchanged a look with Dhulyn, who shrugged. There was no good news to tell this boy.

“Our Brothers are always with us,” Parno said gently, crouching down until he was on Jerrick’s level. “Hernyn Greystone the Shield is with us in Death.”

Jerrick Mender’s lower lip disappeared, and he nodded, blinking.

“Will you be able to help us, Jerrick Mender?” Dhulyn asked.

The boy squared his shoulders, taking a deep breath that shook a little on the way in. “I think so,” he said. “My Mark’s new, but my mother was training me since I was little.”

Parno patted the boy on the shoulder.

“Look,” she had finally said. “It’s Mar that I keep seeing in my Visions—has been right from the start and the
same Vision over and over. When Mar is in the room, my Visions are clearer, have more detail, even when I’m using the vera tiles. And it was Mar that Gun kept Finding, not because he was tired and wanted to go to bed, but because he was looking for the Lens.”

“There is one thing,” Parno said now, making room for Jerrick at the table with the others. “Now that we know what the Lens is, what are we going to do with her?”

Dhulyn looked at Gun and nodded. “There’s one of each of us,” he said. “It’s common for Finders, Menders, and Healers to work together; and Sortera remembers working with a Seer, years ago. With her experience to guide us, we should be able to unite our Marks, and using the Lens . . .” He looked at Mar and seemed to gather strength from her nod. “We’re going to call the Sleeping God.”

“Oh, good,” Parno said. “I was afraid we didn’t know what we were doing.” Dhulyn rolled her eyes.

“I suggest we use the drying shed,” Sortera said. “It’s the largest space that’s not in use at the moment, and whatever happens, there’s not much there to damage.”

“In my Vision,” Dhulyn said when she found everyone looking at her. “Mar was standing, holding the hands of the people next to her.” Mar took hold of Gun’s left hand with her right, and offered her left hand to Jerrick. Dhulyn shook her head. “But the vera tiles have the Lens in the center and the rest of us around her . . .”

Sortera was nodding. “Take Mar’s left hand in your left, Jerrick, now give your right to Dhulyn Wolfshead. And you, Gun, give your left to me. See now, we’re all connected.”

Mar nodded. “It’s like the start of a country dance.”

“There was a dance in my youth,” said Sortera, “so many years ago now, that began like this—”

“The Market Dance,” Parno said. “You remember, Dhulyn, I told you my sisters used to dance it.”


“It is possible,” Gun added.

Parno pulled the chanter of his pipes from his belt. “Do you remember the tune, Sortera? What?” He looked at the faces in the form. “You’ll need to focus on something and the music can be just as old as the dance.”

Sortera shut her eyes and began to hum a tune. Parno frowned. At first, it seemed the woman’s age was against them. Like many elderly people, her voice had lost its ability to modulate itself into notes, but as she hummed, her body began to move in time to the beat, and after a few more tuneless notes, the humming grew stronger, and the notes more distinct. He began to hear hints of the tune and it seemed familiar; much like the one Dhulyn had been humming for months, but also like the one he remembered from his own childhood. Parno lifted his chanter to his lips and began to play. Like all these tunes from round dances, the same short, bouncy melody repeated itself over and over.

“Hey.” Jerrick laughed. “I know this song. My father taught us this game when I was little.” His feet began to move in short skipping steps, and under his breath, he began to sing,

Gun shut his eyes, let the music wash over him. Saw a page with writing. No, not writing, musical notes. He could read them like words, and, under his breath, he began to sing,

FOCUSED

“Sleeping God, Sleeping God
Come into our arms, show us where to go
In our hearts we know, these the parts that grow
One to teach, one to touch, one to reach, one’s too much
Bring us an old one, a cold one, a bold one
Give us a sold one, a told one, a gold one.”

We are the Sleeping God.

“And the Shape and purpose of all these things.”
“Look! A wrinkle there in the fabric of the world, just this one spot, where there’s a whole.”
“You mean a hole.” We laugh.
“Let’s Mend it, it’s easy when you know how.” The youngest part of us is very happy to be Mending.
Together we’re Sight, and we’re the Lens turning the Light until in it we See the Shadow. We’ll Find, and once
Found, we’ll Mend and we’ll Heal.
“There.” The Finding part of us is strong and true now, Mended and Healthy.
“The Green Shadow.”
The youngest part is frightened; we all are, but together it is much easier to be brave.
“What is it?”
“It’s mad. Forced to ‘shape’ in our world, its wholeness makes it broken, and drives it insane.”
“In its madness it will destroy, unmake, undo.”
“To make a home for itself.”
“How sad, how frightened it must be.”
“We must destroy it, or let its madness destroy us. For the safety of all, and for mercy to it as well.”
“Please, don’t let’s hurt it. Can’t it be Mended? Isn’t it a lost child, singing the same in-and-out song that we
know? Couldn’t we Find its home?”
“It’s too badly hurt, like a dragon, dying, but breathing poison as it dies.”
“It’s like torn pieces of paper and parchments covered with writing, glued and sewn together by a child. Form
without true content, spilling lies.”
“It is a plague victim, innocent but spreading death as it walks.”
“We need to see more clearly, focus more. The Shadow is all and none of these things. If we must destroy it, let
us give it honor. It will fight us, in its madness and its fear. Let us be a warrior, and give it a clean death.”

The man looks up from the table, shock showing in his face. “You can’t follow me here.”
I approach him, looking at him with our head tilted to one side. “Who do you think you speak to?”
“Dhulyn Wolfshead.”
The man looks like Karlyn-Tan, but I shake that from our mind. Now he is Lok-iKol, his one eye blazing green,
and that is easier. He looks down at his hands, face twisted in surprise.
“How—who are you?”
“You know who.” There is a sword in our hand and I cut, striking off the hand nearest us and a piece of jade-green
stone falls to the floor. Its hand and arm remain still whole. I see the comprehension pass over his face like a cloud
across the sun. He whirls and snatches the sword from the scabbard that hangs on the back of the chair. He strikes at
me, but I jump back.
I look around us. “This is the room where it all began. There’s the mirror.” I leap on the table and cut at him
again, but this time the One-eye parries, and jumps back himself, forcing us to descend once more to the floor. I
strike and whirl and strike again, moving our feet in the Shora, but he wards off our blows.
“When I am whole—” his mouth twists as if the word itself was poison, “I can come back to this room. Behind
that mirror, through that sky, is my home, the real world, not this place of shape and form.” His mouth forms those
words, but the thought I can see in his mind is “horror” and “pain.”
“I can end your pain.” A cut, a thrust, which the one-eyed man does not parry in time. Our sword penetrates his
left side to the depth of three fingers. If this were a man, he would be bleeding too freely to continue fighting.
Of course, if this were a man, my earlier cut would have removed his hand, and he would have bled to death
already.

“No, you can only break me into pieces. Me, that should never have had form to be made into parts. Do you think
that ends the pain?”

“What would end it?”

“Open the door, send me home.”

I smile and shake our head. “I would open the door, and others of your kind would come here.” But the youngest
part of us, the part that is a little boy is crying, he, too, has lost his home. I shake our head again. Our homes are also
lost, but I have found another. I have her Brotherhood. I have Parno Lionsmane. He is our home. The little one, he,
too, will find a new home. But what about this one’s home, the little one asks us?

The man changes again. Now he’s the Mage. The sword flicks out, much faster than the One-eye could use it, and
I fall back, tasting a sharp flicker of fear in our throat.

“What would end it?”

“I cannot read the book. That is too much form for me, too much shape. It is not just words, but thoughts, the
form of form and shape of shape. If I could use the book, I would have gone from here before the madness came.”

I keep our sword high, but think. It is true that I have Seen this man trying to open the gate, and failing. And that
man wept, not from frustrated ambition, but from despair. I know, because I Saw truly, and I See truly now. I back
around the table until I can glance down at the book. It is a language I have never seen before. I can’t read it. We
can’t Find it.

I look up at him. “Would you promise to stay here, in this room, to leave the world alone?”

He shakes his head, rubs at his lips with trembling hand. “I must unmake it. It is madness. I must be sane again. I
must.” He snatches up the sword again. He strikes, again, and again, and I fall back, suddenly feeling the young
ones’ fear weighing down my limbs, the old one’s age in my laboring lungs.

The edges of the room begin to waver, the walls to dissolve and I try, my breath short and my eyes watering, to
Find my place again as the NOT approaches, closer . . .

Focus. I need focus. The Hunting Cat Shora. Defense and offense. Stillness and movement. I grasp at the Shora
and they all grasp with me, all breathe with me; our hearts beat as one. We breathe as one, and together I fall into the
Hunting Cat Shora, sword up, left hand raised, feet sliding across the floor, keeping our weight balanced.

I glide toward him like the cat the Shora is named for and he cuts at our head. I parry, he cuts again, thinking to
blind us with his speed, but I move when he blinks, faster than he imagines possible, for I am the God Awake. I cut
his arm, slash his ribs, and miss his neck by a hair-breadth. He touches our thigh, but I Heal.

It is like a dance, and I hum a tune under my breath as I strike, and strike. I feel all our thoughts, all I feel, focus.
The pain of loss. A home gone. The need to have that home restored, and the hateful and the horrible things that
need drives us to do. Part of me weeps, and I know I must end this. I am the Sleeping God, but my bodies are
human. I cannot dance this measure forever.

But he is so lonely, and all he wants is his home. I stand back, our breath rough and uneven, the sound of weeping
in our ears, the taste of tears on our lips.

As if he hears my thoughts, and shares my feeling, the Green Shadow steps away.

“He wants his home,” he says. He is trembling, and I see ourselves shining in the light that comes from his eyes. He reverses
his sword and plunges it into the floor.

He falls to his knees and bows his head, covering his face with hands that shake. “Break me, Sleeping God,” he
says. “Let one of us keep their home. Buy your world time. Let us start the long dance again. Until the one is Found
who can send me home.”

I take the Mage’s sword in our left hand, I step toward him, close enough to strike.

“How many times have we danced these steps?” I ask him.

He shakes his head.

I have seen him in this room many times. He cannot read the book, and without it, he cannot cut the mirror, he
cannot open the gate. But I also cannot read the book. Even I, the Sleeping God. Healer, Finder, Mender, Seer, held
and focused by the Lens. Scholar, warrior, child, maid, crone. I have to strike, to break him once more into pieces,
begin the dance of the Sleeping God again. Will another like us See this room? See the Mage reading his book? See
his lips forming—

I leap over the kneeling man at our feet and raise the Mage’s sword. Adelgarrembil, our lips say. Acucheeyarob.
I bring the sword down and cut the mirror, cut the night sky, and the gateway opens. The joy of the Shadow behind us cuts through us like a knife as it blows, flies, ROARS through us and into its own place.

We teeter on the brink of the gate. There is no room behind us, there never was, and there is nothing, no safeguard, no door to shut, that prevents us, our thoughts, our selves, from being sucked through into the formless NOT. Nothing, the real nothing, awaits us, our parts unmaking into the NOT.

I drop no sword from no hand fall to no knees
Until there is only one small piece of us left.
A thin line of black traces through the blue and the green.

Parno, I think, my soul.

Suddenly I find a sound, a chord of music, playing itself through our mind. Our feet move in the dance. We mend the cut in the universes. We heal the holes in our being. We turn to see, and clearly, brightly, with great focus, Dhulyn Wolfshead finds herself in her Partner’s arms.

**Twenty-eight**

Parno sat in the chair by the edge of the bed on which Karlyn-Tan, gray-faced and drawn, lay propped up on feather pillows.

“Sortera the Healer has finished her long journey,” Parno said. “She did not wake from the trance of the god.”

“We were almost unmade,” Dhulyn added from where she leaned on the doorframe. “And she chose to use her strength to heal us. So you must heal yourself, Karlyn, with rest and good food. We’ll wait for you to return to Gotterang with us.”

“Don’t wait,” Karlyn said. “I’m not going back to Gotterang.”

Dhulyn approached the bed, stopped with her hand on Parno’s shoulder. “Where, then?” she said.

“I’m going to Tourin,” Karlyn said. “To Nerysa Warhammer. I’d like a House that won’t cast me out.”

“You can’t do better,” Parno said.

“If you live through it,” Dhulyn added.

“You’re sure you won’t come with us,” Parno was saying to Mar. “Dal would be glad of you, I think. He seems to set great store by his relatives.”

“Maybe one day,” Mar said, looking over her shoulder at where Gun was looking down the trail. He must have felt her gaze; he turned and smiled at her, and her face lit up. “We’re going to Valdomar. Gun needs to write down all that’s happened, and while he does, I’d like to see if the Scholar’s life is for me.”

“The Scholar is definitely for you, I would say.” Dhulyn stroked Mar’s hair away from her face, and suddenly found her arms full, as the girl hugged her.

“There, little Dove, we’ll meet again, don’t fear it.”

Mar stepped back, blinking. “We tried again last night,” she said. “Not because we don’t believe it, but . . .”

“Just to be sure,” Dhulyn said, turning to check Bloodbone’s girth.

“There no sign of it.” Gun drew nearer. “Nowhere in my mind’s Library. Even the wall of books is gone.”

“Never thought I’d be happy to hear that books had disappeared.” She gave Gundaron a friendly shove and was surprised at the flush of pleasure that colored his face.

“And with Mar’s help?”

“No difference,” the girl said with a wistful look. “I don’t think I’m the Lens anymore.”

“Broken?” Parno said.

Mar shook her head. “Jerrick says not, he feels nothing broken about me. I don’t feel any different, just,” she shrugged, “lighter, maybe.”

“The Lens has dissolved, perhaps, like the godhood we were; unnecessary now.” Dhulyn swung herself into the saddle. “The gods blow fair winds on you, and warm. Farewell, my Doves.”

“The God’s gone, then?” he asked her.

Dhulyn frowned, her blood-red brows drawn down in a vee over her narrowed eyes. “The Sleeping God is gone.
Perhaps forever.” She looked up, her brow still clouded. “If its only purpose was to oppose the Green Shadow, then there is no further need of the Sleeping God.” She thought for a moment, until her face cleared. “We can’t know. As Mar said, Gun will write it all down, in case the God is ever needed again. Lenses will be tested for, like the other Marks—though, thank the Caids, I don’t have to create the test, for I’ve no notion what it might be.”

“But for us, it’s over?”

“I won’t forget. Shape and form has been at the root of this, and part of me will always remember what it was to be the form of the God.”

“Oh, wonderful,” Parno threw up his hands. “My Partner is a god. I’ll never hear the end of this.”

“The maps are safe, thanks to your warning,” he told them, once they had been found seats in a half-restored room and been served with mugs of hot ganje. “Though we’ve told the Tarkina that they were destroyed in the fire.”

“Thus setting any fears of us to rest,” Parno said. “So we’ve only to present ourselves at the Carnelian Dome, collect our wages, with, it’s to be hoped, a nice bonus, and be on our way.”

Dorian shook his head.

“Bet-oTeb Tarkin, on the advice of her Guardian, Zelianora Tarkina, has sent you your wages here, and begs that you not present yourselves at the Dome. Though it’s been proclaimed that you found and killed the assassins of Tek-aKet Tarkin, awkward questions may yet be asked. Bet-oTeb Tarkin suggests that you may wish to find employment elsewhere until interest dies down. Zelianora Tarkina suggests her sister, the Queen of Berdana, may have work for you.”

“Essentially, take your wages and leave the country—better yet, the continent?”

“Essentially.” Dorian’s smile was very white in his dark face. “There’s a ship just now in the harbor, leaving tomorrow at dawn. The Horse’s Mane. A good omen if ever I heard one.”

As they walked down the staircase to the sound of carpenters hammering, Parno looked around.

“Well, at least we’ve been paid this time.”

“Do you realize what our expenses have been? Replace at least one horse? Two thirds of our weapons gone and the expensive two thirds at that? A capital city is not the best place for good prices. And now we’re to buy passage on a ship at the height of the season?” Dhulyn stopped, her fingers tapping out a now familiar rhythm on the railing.

“What of it?”

She gestured at the carpentry work around them. “We can’t sleep here, so that means an inn, and where there’s an inn there’s a taproom . . .”

“And where there’s a taproom there’s gamblers. Do you think they’ll let you use your own tiles?”

Violette Malan lives in a nineteenth-century limestone farmhouse in southeastern Ontario with her husband. Born in Canada, Violette’s cultural background is half Spanish and half Polish, which makes it interesting at meal times. She has worked as a teacher of creative writing, English as a second language, Spanish, beginner’s French, and choreography for strippers. On occasion she’s been an administrative assistant and a carpenter’s helper. Her most unusual job was translating letters between lovers, one of whom spoke only English, the other only Spanish.

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