

shut.

What in Austre's name was that? she thought, pausing for what was probably too long a time as she stared at the door. Finally, she sighed, turning away. The usual fire crackled in the hearth, but it was smaller than previously.

He was there. Siri didn't need to look to see him. As her eyes grew more accustomed to the darkness, she could notice that the fire's colors—blue, orange, even black—were far too true, far too vibrant. Her gown, a brilliant golden satin, seemed to burn with its own inner color. Anything that was white—some of the lace on her dress, for instance—bent slightly, giving off a rainbow of colors as if seen through a prism. Part of her wished for a well-lit room, where she could experience the full beauty of BioChroma.

But, of course, that was not right. The God King's Breath was a perversion. He was fed on the souls of his people, and the colors he evoked came at their expense. Shivering, Siri undid the side of her dress, then let the garment fall to pieces around her—the long sleeves slipping free, bodice falling forward, skirt and gown rustling as they dropped to the floor. She completed the ritual, sliding the straps of her shift off her shoulders, then dropping the garment to the floor beside the gown. She stepped free of both, then bowed herself down into her customary posture. Her back complained, and she ruefully contemplated another uncomfortable night. The least they could do, she thought, is make certain the fire is large enough. At night in the large stone palace, it got chilly despite the Hallandren tropical climate. Particularly if one were naked.

Focus on Bluefingers, she thought, trying to distract herself. What did he mean? Things are not what they seem in the palace?

Was he referring to the God King and his ability to have her killed? She was well aware of the God King's power. How could she forget it, with him sitting not fifteen feet away, watching from the shadows? No, that wasn't it. He'd felt he'd needed to give this warning quietly, without others hearing. Watch yourself. . . .

It smelled of politics. She gritted her teeth. If she'd paid more attention to her tutors, might she have been able to pick out a more subtle meaning in Bluefingers's warning?

As if I needed something else to be confused about, she thought. If Bluefingers had something to tell her, why hadn't he just said it? As the minutes passed, his words turned over and over in her mind like a restless sleeper, but she was too uncomfortable and cold to come to any conclusions. That only left her feeling more annoyed.

Vivenna would have figured it out. Vivenna probably would have known instinctively why the God King hadn't chosen to sleep with her. She would have fixed it the first night.

But Siri was incompetent. She tried so hard to do as Vivenna would have—to be the best wife she could, to serve Idris. To be the woman that everyone expected her to be.

But she wasn't. She couldn't just keep doing this. She felt trapped in the palace. She couldn't get the priests to do more than roll their eyes at her. She couldn't even tempt the God King to bed her. On top of that, she could very well be in danger, and she couldn't even understand why or how.

In simpler terms, she was just plain frustrated.

Groaning at her aching limbs, Siri sat up in the dark room and looked at the shadowy form in the corner. "Will you please just get on with it?" she blurted out.

Silence.

Siri felt her hair bleach a terrible bone white as she realized what she'd just done. She stiffened, casting her eyes down, weariness fleeing in the face of sudden anxiety.

What had she been thinking? The God King could call servants to execute her. In fact, he didn't even need that. He could bring her own dress to life, Awakening it to strangle her. He could make the rug rise

up and smother her. He could probably bring the ceiling down on her, all without moving from his chair.

Siri waited, breathing with shallow anxiety, anticipating the fury and retribution. But . . . nothing happened. Minutes passed.

Finally, Siri glanced up. The God King had moved, sitting up straighter, regarding her from his darkened chair beside the bed. She could see his eyes reflecting the firelight. She couldn't make out much of his face, but he didn't seem angry. He just

seemed cold and distant.

She almost cast her eyes down again, but hesitated. If snapping at him wouldn't provoke a reaction, then looking at him wasn't likely to either. So she turned her chin up and met his eyes, knowing full well that she was being foolish. Vivenna would never have provoked the man. She would have remained quiet and demure, either solving the problem or—if there was no solution—kneeling every night until her patience impressed even the God King of Hallandren.

But Siri was not Vivenna. She was just going to have to accept that fact.

The God King continued to look at her, and Siri found herself blushing. She'd knelt before him naked six nights in a row, but facing him unclothed was more embarrassing. Still, she didn't back down. She continued to kneel, watching him, forcing herself to stay awake.

It was difficult. She was tired, and the position was actually less comfortable than bowing had been.

She watched anyway, waiting, the hours passing.

Eventually—at about the same time that he left the room every night—the God King stood up. Siri stiffened, shocked alert. However, he simply walked to the door. He tapped quietly, and it opened for him, servants waiting on the other side. He stepped out and the door closed.

Siri waited tensely. No soldiers came to arrest her; no priests came to chastise her. Eventually, she just walked over to the bed and burrowed into its covers, savoring the warmth.

The God King's wrath, she thought drowsily, is decidedly less wrathful than reported.

With that, she fell asleep.

Eventually, Lightsong had to hear petitions.

It was annoying, since the Wedding Jubilation wouldn't even be over for another few days. The people, however, needed their gods. He knew he shouldn't feel annoyed. He'd gotten most of a week off for the wedding fete—conspicuously unattended by either the bride or groom—and that was enough. All he had to do was spend a few hours each day looking at art and listening to the woes of the people. It wasn't much. Even if it did wear away at his sanity.

He sighed, sitting back in his throne. He wore an embroidered cap on his head, matched by a loose robe of gold and red. The garment wrapped over both shoulders, twisted about his body, and was hung with golden tassels. Like all of his clothing, it was even more complicated to put on than it looked.

If my servants were to suddenly leave me, he thought with amusement, I'd be totally incapable of getting dressed.

He leaned his head on one fist, elbow on the throne's armrest. This room of his palace opened directly out onto the lawn—harsh weather was rare in Hallandren, and a cool breeze blew in off of the sea, smelling of brine. He closed his eyes, breathing in.

He'd dreamed of war again last night. Llarimar had found that particularly meaningful. Lightsong was just disturbed. Everyone said that if war did come, Hallandren would easily win. But if that were the case, then why did he always dream of T'Telir burning? Not some distant Idrian city, but his own home.

It means nothing, he told himself. Just a manifestation of my own worries.

"Next petition, Your Grace," Llarimar whispered from his side.

Lightsong sighed, opening his eyes. Both edges of the room were lined with priests in their coifs and robes. Where had he gotten so many? Did any god need that much attention?

He could see a line of people extending outside onto the lawn. They were a sorry, forlorn lot, several coughing from some malady or another. So many, he thought as a woman was led into the room. He'd been seeing petitioners for over an hour already. I guess I should have expected this. It's been almost a week.

"Scoot," he said, turning to his priest. "Go tell those waiting people to sit down in the grass. There's no reason for them to all stand there like that. This could take some time."

Llarimar hesitated. Standing was, of course, a sign of respect. However, he nodded, waving over a lesser priest to carry the message.

Such a crowd, waiting to see me, Lightsong thought. What will it take to convince the people that I'm useless? What would it take to get them to stop coming to him? After five years of petitions, he honestly wasn't certain if he could take another

five.

The newest petitioner approached his throne. She carried a child in her arms.

Not a child . . . Lightsong thought, cringing mentally.

"Great One," the woman said, falling to her knees on the carpet. "Lord of Bravery." Lightsong didn't speak.

"This is my child, Halan," the woman said, holding out the baby. As it got close enough to Lightsong's aura, the blanket burst with a sharp blue color two and half steps from pure. He could easily see that the child was suffering from a terrible sickness. It had lost so much weight that its skin was shriveled. The baby's Breath was so weak that it flickered like a candle running out of wick. It would be dead before the day was out. Perhaps before the hour was out.

"The healers, they say he has deathfever," the woman said. "I know that he's going to die." The baby made a sound—a kind of half-cough, perhaps the closest it could get to a cry.

"Please, Great One," the woman said. She sniffled, then bowed her head. "Oh, please. He was brave, like you. My Breath, it would be yours. The Breaths of my entire family. Ser vice for a hundred years, anything. Please, just heal him."

Lightsong closed his eyes.

"Please," the woman whispered.

"I cannot," Lightsong said.

Silence.

"I cannot," Lightsong said.

"Thank you, my lord," the woman finally whispered.

Lightsong opened his eyes to see the woman being led away, weeping quietly, child clutched close to her breast. The line of people watched her go, looking miserable yet hopeful at the same time. One more petitioner had failed. That meant they would get a chance.

A chance to beg Lightsong to kill himself.

Lightsong stood suddenly, grabbing the cap off his head and tossing it aside. He rushed away, throwing open a door at the back of the room. It slammed against the wall as he stumbled through.

Servants and priests immediately followed after him. He turned on them. "Go!" he said, waving them away. Many of them showed looks of surprise, unaccustomed to any kind of forcefulness on their master's part.

"Leave me be!" he shouted, towering over them. Colors in the room flared brighter in response to his emotion, and the servants backed down, confused, stumbling back out into the petition hall and pulling the door closed.

Lightsong stood alone. He placed one hand against the wall, breathing in and out, other hand against his forehead. Why was he sweating so? He'd been through thousands of petitions, and many had been worse than the one he'd just seen. He'd sent pregnant women to their deaths, doomed children and parents, consigned the innocent and the faithful to misery.

There was no reason to overreact. He could take it. It was a little thing, really. Just like absorbing the Breath of a new person every week. A small price to pay . . .

The door opened and a figure stepped in.

Lightsong didn't turn. "What do they want of me, Llarimar?" he demanded. "Do they really think I'll do it? Lightsong, the selfish? Do they really think I'd give my life for one of them?"

Llarimar was quiet for a few moments. "You offer hope, Your Grace," he finally said. "A last, unlikely hope. Hope is part of faith—part of the knowledge that someday, one of your followers will receive a miracle."

"And if they're wrong?" Lightsong asked. "I have no desire to die. I'm an idle man, fond of luxury. People like me don't give up their lives, even if they do happen to be gods."

Llarimar didn't reply.

"The good ones are all already dead, Scoot," Lightsong said. "Calmseer, Brighthue: those were gods who would give themselves away. The rest of us are selfish. There hasn't been a petition granted in what, three years?"

"About that, Your Grace," Llarimar said quietly.

"And why should it be otherwise?" Lightsong said, laughing a bit. "I mean, we have to die to heal one of them. Doesn't that strike you as ridiculous? What kind of religion encourages its members to come and petition for their god's life?"

Lightsong shook his head. "It's ironic. We're gods to them only until they kill us. And I think I might know why the gods give in. It's those petitions, being forced to sit day after day, knowing that you could save one of them—that you probably should, since your life isn't really worth anything. That's enough to drive a man mad. Enough to drive him to kill himself!"

He smiled, glancing at his high priest. "Suicide by divine manifestation. Very dramatic."

"Shall I call off the rest of the petitions, Your Grace?" Llarimar gave no sign of being annoyed by the outburst.

"Sure, why not," Lightsong said, waving a hand. "They really need a lesson in theology. They should already know what a useless god I am. Send them away, tell them to come back tomorrow—assuming that they are foolish enough to do so."

"Yes, Your Grace," Llarimar said, bowing.

Doesn't that man ever get mad at me? Lightsong thought. He, more than any, should know that I'm not a person to rely upon!

Lightsong turned, walking away as Llarimar went back into the petition room. No servants tried to follow him. Lightsong pushed his way through red-hued room after red-hued room, eventually finding his way to a stairwell and climbing up to the second story. This floor was open on all sides, really nothing more than a large covered patio. He walked to the far side—the one opposite the line of people. The breeze was strong here. He felt it plucking at his robes, bringing with it scents that had traveled hundreds of miles, crossed the ocean, twisting around palm trees and finally entering the Court of Gods. He stood there for a long time, looking out over the city, toward the sea beyond. He had no desire, despite what he sometimes said, to leave his comfortable home in the court. He was not a man of jungles; he was a man of parties.

But sometimes he wished that he could at least want to be something else.

Blushweaver's words still weighed upon him. You'll have to stand for something eventually, Lightsong. You're a god to these people. . . .

He was. Whether he wanted to be or not. That was the frustrating part. He'd tried his best to be useless and vain. And still they came.

We could use your confidence . . . you're a better man than you give yourself credit for being.

Why did it seem that the more he demonstrated himself to be an idiot, the more convinced people became that he had some kind of hidden depths? By implication, they called him a liar in the same

breath that they complimented his presumed inner virtue. Did no one understand that a man could be both likable and useless? Not every quick-tongued fool was a hero in disguise.

His life sense alerted him of Llarimar's return long before footsteps did. The priest walked up to join Lightsong alongside the wall. Llarimar rested his arms on the railing—which, being built for a god, was about a foot too high for the priest.

"They're gone," Llarimar said.

"Ah, very good," Lightsong said. "I do believe that we've accomplished something today. I've fled from my responsibilities, screamed at my servants, and sat about pouting. Undoubtedly, this will convince everyone that I'm even more noble and honorable than they previously assumed. Tomorrow, there will be twice as many petitions, and I shall continue my inexorable march toward utter madness."

"You can't go mad," Llarimar said softly. "It's impossible."

"Sure I can," Lightsong said. "I just have to concentrate long enough. You see, the great thing about madness is that it's all in your head."

Llarimar shook his head. "I see you've been restored to your normal humor."

"Scoot, you wound me. My humor is anything but normal." They stood silently for a few more minutes, Llarimar offering no chastisement or commentary on his god's actions. Just like a good little priest.

That made Lightsong think of something. "Scoot, you're my high priest." "Yes, Your Grace."

Lightsong sighed. "You really need to pay attention to the lines I'm feeding you, Scoot. You really should have said something pithy there."

"I apologize, Your Grace."

"Just try harder next time. Anyway, you know about theology and that sort of thing, correct?" "I've studied my share, Your Grace."

"Well then, what is the point—religiously—of having gods that can only heal one person, then die? It seems counterproductive to me. Easy way to depopulate your pantheon."

Llarimar leaned forward, staring out over the city. "It's complicated, Your Grace. Returned aren't just gods—they're men who died, but who decided to come back and offer blessings and knowledge. After all, only one who has died can have anything useful to say about the other side."

"True, I suppose."

"The thing is, Your Grace, Returned aren't meant to stay. We extend their lives, giving them extra time to bless us. But they're really only supposed to remain alive as long as it takes them to do what they need to."

"Need to?" Lightsong said. "That seems rather vague."

Llarimar shrugged. "Returned have . . . goals. Objectives which are their own. You knew of yours before you decided to come back, but the process of leaping across the Iridescent Wave leaves the memory fragmented. Stay long enough, and you'll remember what you came to accomplish. The petitions . . . they're a way of helping you to remember."

"So I've come back to save one person's life?" Lightsong said, frowning, but feeling embarrassed. In five years, he'd spent little time studying his own theology. But, well, that was the sort of thing priests were for.

"Not necessarily, Your Grace," Llarimar said. "You may have come back to save one person. But, more likely, there is information about the future or the afterlife that you felt you needed to share. Or perhaps some great event in which you felt you needed to participate. Remember, it was the heroic way in which you died that gave you the power to Return in the first place. What you are to do might relate to that, somehow."

Llarimar trailed off slightly, his eyes growing unfocused. "You saw something, Lightsong. On the other side, the future is visible, like a scroll that stretches into the eternal harmonics of the cosmos. Something you saw—something about the future—worried you. Rather than remaining at peace, you took the opportunity that your brave death afforded you, and you Returned to the world. Determined to fix a problem, share information, or otherwise help those who continued to live."

"Someday, once you feel that you've accomplished your task, you can use the petitions to find someone who deserves your Breath. Then you can continue your journey across the Iridescent Wave. Our job, as your followers, is to provide Breath for you and keep you alive until you can accomplish your goal, whatever it may be. In the meantime, we pray for auguries and blessings, which can be gleaned only from one who has touched the future as you have."

Lightsong didn't respond immediately. "And if I don't believe?" "In what, Your Grace?"

"In any of it," Lightsong said. "That Returned are gods, that these visions are anything more than random inventions of my brain. What if I don't believe that I had any purpose or plan in Returning?"

"Then maybe that's what you came back to discover."

"So . . . wait. You're saying that on the other side—where I obviously believed in the other side—I realized that if I Returned I wouldn't believe in the other side, so I came back with the purpose of discovering faith in the other side, which I only lost because I Returned in the first place?"

Llarimar paused. Then he smiled. "That last one breaks down a little bit in the face of logic, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, a little bit," Lightsong said, smiling back. He turned, eyes falling on the God King's palace, standing like a monument above the other court structures. "What do you think of her?"

"The new queen?" Llarimar asked. "I haven't met her, Your Grace. She won't be presented for another few days."

"Not the person. The implications."

Llarimar glanced at him. "Your Grace. That smells of an interest in politics!"

"Blah blah, yes, I know. Lightsong is a hypocrite. I'll do penance for it later. Now answer the blasted question."

Llarimar smiled. "I don't know what to think of her, Your Grace. The court of twenty years ago thought bringing a royal daughter here was a good idea."

Yes, Lightsong thought. But that court is gone. The gods had thought melding the royal line back into Hallandren would be a good idea. But those gods—the ones who

believed they knew how to deal with the Idrian girl's arrival—were now dead. They'd left inferior replacements.

If what Llarimar said was true, then there was something important about the things Lightsong saw. Those visions of war, and the terrible sense of foreboding. For reasons he couldn't explain, it felt to him like his people were barreling headfirst down a mountain slope, completely ignorant of a bottomless chasm hidden in the cleft of the lands before them.

"The full Court Assembly meets in judgment tomorrow, doesn't it?" Lightsong said, still looking at the black palace.

"Yes, Your Grace."

"Contact Blushweaver. See if I can share a box with her during the judgments.

Perhaps she will distract me. You know what a headache politics gives me."

"You can't get headaches, Your Grace."

In the distance, Lightsong could see the rejected petitioners trailing out of the gates, returning to the city, leaving their gods behind. "Could have fooled me," he said quietly.

Siri stood in the dark black bedroom, wearing her shift, looking out the window. The God King's palace was higher than the surrounding wall, and the bedroom faced east. Out over the sea. She watched the distant waves, feeling the heat of the afternoon sun. While she was wearing the thin shift, the warmth was actually pleasant, and it was tempered by a cool breeze blowing in off the ocean. The wind teased her long hair, ruffling the fabric of her shift.

She should be dead. She had spoken directly to the God King, had sat up and made a demand of him.

She'd waited all morning for punishment. There had been none.

She leaned down against the windowsill, arms crossed on the stone, closing her eyes and feeling the sea breeze. A part of her was still aghast at the way she had acted. That part was growing smaller and smaller. I've been going about things wrong here, she thought. I've let myself be pushed about by my fears and worries.

She didn't usually take time to bother with fears and worries. She just did what seemed right. She was beginning to feel that she should have stood up to the God King days ago. Perhaps she wasn't being cautious enough. Perhaps punishment would still come. However, for the moment, she felt as if she'd accomplished something. She smiled, opening her eyes, and let her hair change to a determined golden yellow. It was time to stop being afraid.

"I'll give it away," Vivenna said firmly.

She sat with the mercenaries in Lemex's home. It was the day after the Breaths had been forced upon her, and she had spent a restless night, letting the mercenaries and the nurse see to the disposal of Lemex's body. She didn't remember falling asleep from the exhaustion and stress of the day, but she did remember lying down to rest for a short time in the other upstairs bedroom. When she'd awoken, she'd been surprised to find that the mercenaries were still there. Apparently, they and Parlin had slept downstairs.

A night's perspective hadn't helped her much with her problems. She still had all of that filthy Breath, and she still had no idea what she was going to do in Hallandren without Lemex. At least with the Breath, she had an idea of what to do. It could be given away.

They were in Lemex's sitting room. Like most places in Hallandren, the room was swollen with colors; the walls were made from thin strips of reedlike wood, stained in bright yellows and greens. Vivenna couldn't help but notice that she saw each color more vibrantly now. She had a strangely precise sense of color—she could divide its shades and hues, understanding instinctively how close each color was to the ideal. It was like perfect pitch for the eyes.

It was very, very difficult not to see beauty in the colors.

Denth leaned against the far wall. Tonk Fah lounged on a couch, yawning periodically, his colorful bird perched on his foot. Parlin had gone to stand watch outside.

"Give it away, Princess?" Denth asked.

"The Breath," Vivenna said. She sat on a kitchen stool instead of one of the overly plush chairs or couches. "We will go out and find unfortunate people who have been raped by your culture, their Breath stolen, and I will give each one a Breath."

Denth shot a glance at Tonk Fah, who simply yawned.

"Princess," Denth said, "you can't give Breath away one at a time. You have to give it all away at once."

"Including your own Breath," Tonk Fah said.

Denth nodded. "That would leave you as a Drab."

Vivenna's stomach churned at that. The thought of not only losing the new beauty and color, but her own Breath, her soul . . . well, it was almost enough to turn her hair white. "No," she said. "That's not an option, then."

The room fell silent.

"She could Awaken stuff," Tonk Fah noted, wiggling his foot, making his bird squawk.

"Stick the Breath inside of a pair of pants or something."

"That's a good point," Denth said.

"What . . . does that entail?" Vivenna asked.

"You bring something to life, Princess," Denth said. "An inanimate object. That'll draw out some of your Breath and leave the object kind of alive. Most Awakeners do it temporarily, but I don't see why you couldn't just leave the Breath there."

Awakening. Taking the souls of men and using them to create unliving monstrosities. Somehow, Vivenna felt that Austre would find that an even greater sin than simply bearing the Breath. She sighed, shaking her head. The problem with the Breath was, in a way, just a distraction—one she feared she was using to keep herself from dwelling on the lack of Lemex. What was she going to do?

Denth sat down in a chair beside her, resting his feet on the sitting table. He kept himself better groomed than Tonk Fah, his dark hair pulled back into a neat tail, his face clean-shaven. "I hate being a mercenary," he said. "You know why?"

She raised an eyebrow.

"No job security," Denth said, leaning back in his chair. "The kinds of things we do, they tend to be dangerous and unpredictable. Our employers have a habit of dying off on us."

"Though usually not from the chills," Tonk Fah noted. "Swords tend to be the method of choice."

"Take our current predicament," Denth said. "No more employer. That leaves us without any real direction."

Vivenna froze. Does that mean their contract is over? They know I'm a princess of Idris. What will they do with that information? Is that why they stayed here last night, rather than leaving? Are they planning to blackmail me?

Denth eyed her. "You see that?" he asked, turning to Tonk Fah.

"Yeah," Tonk Fah said. "She's thinking it."

Denth leaned back further in his chair. "This is exactly what I'm talking about. Why does everyone assume that when a mercenary's contract is over, he'll betray them? You think we go around stabbing people for the fun of it? Do you think a surgeon has this problem? Do people worry that the moment they're done paying him, he'll laugh maniacally and cut off their toes?"

"I like cutting off toes," Tonk Fah noted.

"That's different," Denth said. "You wouldn't do it simply because your contract ran out, would you?" "Nah," Tonk Fah said. "Toes is toes."

Vivenna rolled her eyes. "Is there a point to this?"

"The point is, Princess," Denth said, "you were just thinking that we were going to betray you. Maybe rob you blind or sell you to slavery or something."

"Nonsense," Vivenna said. "I was thinking nothing of the sort."

"I'm sure," Denth replied. "Mercenary work is very respectable—it's legal in almost every kingdom I know. We're just as much a part of the community as the baker or the fishmonger."

"Not that we pay the tax collectors," Tonk Fah added. "We tend to stab them for the fun of it." Vivenna just shook her head.

Denth leaned forward, speaking in a more serious tone. "What I'm trying to say, Princess, is that we're not criminals. We're employees. Your friend Lemex was our boss. Now he's dead. I figure that our contract transfers to you now, if you want it."

Vivenna felt a slight glimmer of hope. But could she trust them? Despite Denth's speech, she found it hard to have faith in the motives and altruism of a pair of men who fought for money. However, they hadn't taken advantage of Lemex's sickness, and they had stayed around even after they could have robbed the place and left while she was asleep.

"All right," she said. "How much is left on your contract?" "No idea," Denth said. "Jewels handles that kind of thing." "Jewels?" Vivenna asked.

"Third member of the group," Tonk Fah said. "She's off doing Jewels stuff." Vivenna frowned. "How many of you are there?" "Just three," Denth said.

"Unless you count pets," Tonk Fah said, balancing his bird on his foot.

"She'll be back in a while," Denth said. "She stopped in last night, but you were asleep. Anyway, I know we've got at least a few months left on our contract, and we were paid half up front. Even if you decide not to pay the rest, we probably owe you a few more weeks."

Tonk Fah nodded. "So if there's anyone you want killed, now would be the time." Vivenna stared, and Tonk Fah chuckled.

"You're really going to have to get used to our terrible senses of humor, Princess," Denth said. "Assuming, of course, you're going to keep us around."

"I've already implied that I'll keep you," Vivenna said.

"All right," Denth replied. "But what are you going to do with us? Why did you even come to the city?"

Vivenna didn't answer immediately. No point in holding back, she thought. They know the most dangerous secret—my identity—already. "I'm here to rescue my sister," she said. "To sneak her out of the God King's palace and see her returned to Idris unharmed."

The mercenaries fell silent. Finally, Tonk Fah whistled. "Ambitious," he noted as his parrot mimicked the whistle.

"She is a princess," Denth said. "They tend to be ambitious sorts."

"Siri isn't ready to deal with Hallandren," Vivenna said, leaning forward. "My father sent her in my place, but I cannot stand the thought of her serving as the God King's wife. Unfortunately, if we simply grab her and go, Hallandren will likely attack my homeland. We need to make her disappear in a way that isn't traceable to my people. If necessary, we can substitute me for my sister."

Denth scratched his head.

"Well?" Vivenna asked.

"Little bit out of our realm of expertise," Denth said.

"We usually hit things," Tonk Fah said.

Denth nodded. "Or, at least, keep things from getting hit. Lemex kept us on partially just as bodyguards."

"Why wouldn't he just send for a couple of Idrian soldiers to protect him?" Denth and Tonk Fah exchanged a look.

"How can I put this delicately?" Denth said. "Princess, your Lemex was embezzling money from the king and spending it on Breath."

"Lemex was a patriot!" Vivenna said immediately.

"That may have been the case," Denth said. "But even a good priest isn't above slipping himself a few coins out of the coffer, so to speak. I think your Lemex figured it would be better to have outside muscle, rather than inside loyalists, protecting him."

Vivenna fell silent. It was still hard to imagine the thoughtful, clever, and passionate man represented in Lemex's letters as a thief. Yet it was also hard to imagine Lemex holding as much Breath as he obviously had.

But embezzling? Stealing from Idris itself?

"You learn things as a mercenary," Denth said, resting back with hands behind his head. "You fight enough people, and you figure you start to understand them. You stay alive by anticipating them. The thing is, people aren't simple. Even Idrians."

"Boring, yes," Tonk Fah added. "But not simple."

"Your Lemex, he was involved in some big plans," Denth said. "I honestly think he was a patriot. There are many intrigues going on in this city, Princess—some of the projects Lemex had us working on had a grand scope, and were for the good of Idris, as near as I can tell. I guess he just thought he should be compensated a little for his patriotism."

"Quite an amiable fellow, actually," Tonk Fah said. "Didn't want to bother your father. So he just did the figures on his own, gave himself a raise, and indicated in his reports that his costs were far greater than they really were."

Vivenna fell silent, letting herself digest the words. How could anyone who stole money from Idris also be a patriot? How could a person faithful to Austre end up with several hundred BioChromatic Breaths?

She shook her head wryly. I saw men who placed themselves above others, and I saw them cast down, she quoted to herself. It was one of the Five Visions. She shouldn't judge Lemex, particularly now that he was dead. "Wait," she said, eyeing the mercenaries. "You said that you were just bodyguards. What, then, were you doing helping Lemex with 'projects'?"

The two men shared a look.

"Told you she was smart," Tonk Fah said. "Comes from not being a mercenary."

"We are bodyguards, Princess," Denth said. "However, we're not without certain . . . skills. We can make things happen."

"Things?" Vivenna asked.

Denth shrugged. "We know people. That's part of what makes us useful. Let me think about this issue with your sister. Maybe I'll be able to come up with some ideas. It's a little like kidnapping. . . ."

"Which," Tonk Fah said, "we're not too fond of. Did we mention that?"

"Yes," Vivenna said. "Bad business. No money. What were these 'projects' Lemex was working on?"

"I'm not exactly sure of the whole of them," Denth admitted. "We only saw pieces—running errands, arranging meetings, intimidating people. It had something to do with work for your father. We can find out for you, if you want."

Vivenna nodded. "I do."

Denth stood. "All right," he said. He walked past Tonk Fah's couch, smacking the larger man's leg, causing the bird to squawk. "Tonk. Come on. Time to ransack the house."

Tonk Fah yawned and sat up.

"Wait!" Vivenna said. "Ransack the house?"

"Sure," Denth said, heading up the stairs. "Break out any hidden safes. Search through papers and files. Figure out what old Lemex was up to."

"He won't care much," Tonk Fah said, standing. "Being dead and all."

Vivenna shivered. She still wished she'd been able to see that Lemex got a proper Idrian burial, rather than sending him off to the Hallandren charnel house. Having a pair of toughs search his belongings felt unseemly.

Denth must have noticed her discomfort. "We don't have to, if you don't want us to."

"Sure," Tonk Fah said. "We'll never know what Lemex was up to, though." "Continue,"

Vivenna said. "But I'm going to supervise." "Actually, I doubt that you will," Denth said.

"And why is that?"

"Because," Denth said. "Now, I know nobody ever asks mercenaries for their opinion. You see—"

"Oh, just get on with it," Vivenna said with annoyance, though she immediately chastised herself for her snappishness. What was wrong with her? The last few days must be wearing on her.

Denth just smiled, as if he found her outburst incredibly amusing. "Today's the day when the Returned hold their Court Assembly, Princess."

"So?" Vivenna asked with forced calmness.

"So," Denth replied, "it's also the day when your sister will be presented to the gods. I suspect that you'll want to go get a good look at her, see how she's holding up. If you're going to do that, you'll want to get moving. Court Assembly will begin pretty soon."

Vivenna folded her arms, not moving. "I've been tutored all about these things, Denth. Regular people can't just walk into the Court of Gods. If you want to watch the judgments at the Court Assembly, you either have to be favored of one of the gods, be extremely influential, or you have to draw and win the lottery."

"True," Denth said, leaning against the banister. "If only we knew someone with enough BioChromatic Breaths to instantly be considered important, and therefore gain entrance to the court without being questioned."

"Ah, Denth," Tonk Fah said. "Someone has to have at least fifty Breaths to be considered worthy! That's a terribly high number."

Vivenna paused. "And . . . how many Breaths do I have?"

"Oh, around five hundred or so," Denth said. "At least, that's what Lemex claimed. I'm inclined to believe him. You are, after all, making the carpet shine."

She glanced down, noticing for the first time that she was creating a pocket of enhanced color around her. It wasn't very distinct, but it was noticeable.

"You'd better get going, Princess," Denth said, continuing to clomp up the stairs. "You'll be late."

Siri sat nervously, blond with excitement, trying to contain herself as the serving women did her hair. Her Wedding Jubilation—something she found rather inappropriately named—was finally over, and it was time for her formal presentation before the Hallandren gods.

She was probably too excited. It hadn't really been that long. Yet the prospect of finally leaving—if only to attend court—made her almost giddy. She would finally get to interact with someone other than priests, scribes, and servants. She'd finally get to meet some of those gods that she'd heard so much about.

Plus, he'd be there at the presentation. The only times she'd been able to see the God King had been during their nightly staring matches, when he was shrouded in shadow. Today, she would at last see him in the light.

She smiled, inspecting herself in a large mirror. The servants had done her hair in an amazingly intricate style, part of it braided, the rest allowed to flow free. They'd tied several ribbons into the

braids and also woven them into her free-flowing hair. The ribbons shimmered as she turned her head. Her family would have been mortified at the ostentatious colors. Siri grinned mischievously, making her hair turn a brighter shade of golden blond to better contrast with the ribbons.

The serving women smiled approvingly, a couple letting out quiet "ooo"s at the transformation. Siri sat back, hands in her lap as she inspected her clothing choices for the court appearance. The garments were ornate—not as complex as the ones she wore to the bedchambers, but far more formal than her everyday choices. Red was the theme for the serving women and priests today. That made Siri want to choose something else. Eventually, she decided on gold, and she pointed at the two golden gowns, having the women bring them forward so she could look at them more closely. Unfortunately, as she did so, the women fetched three more golden dresses from a rolling wardrobe out in the hallway.

Siri sighed. It was as if they were determined to keep her from having a reasonably simple choice. She just hated seeing so many options disappear each day. If only . . .

She paused. "Could I try them all on?"

The serving women glanced at each other, a little confused. They nodded toward her, their expressions conveying a simple message. Of course you can. Siri felt foolish, but in Idris she'd never had a choice before. She smiled, standing and letting them take off her robe and then dress her in the first of the gowns, careful not to mess up her hair. Siri inspected herself, noting that the neckline was rather low. She was willing to splurge on color, but the amount of flesh the Hallandren showed still felt scandalous.

She nodded, letting them take off the gown. Then they dressed her in the next one—a two-piece garment with a separate corset. Once they were finished, Siri eyed this new outfit in the mirror. She liked it, but she wanted to try the others as well. So, after spinning about and inspecting the back, she nodded and moved on.

It was frivolous. But why was she so worried about being frivolous? Her father wasn't around to regard her with that stern, disapproving face of his. Vivenna was an entire kingdom away. Siri was queen of the Hallandren people. Shouldn't she try to learn their ways? She smiled at the ridiculous justification, but went on to the next gown anyway.

It's raining," Lightsong noted.

"Very astute, Your Grace," Llarimar said, walking beside his god.

"I'm not fond of rain."

"So you have often noted, Your Grace."

"I'm a god," Lightsong said. "Shouldn't I have power over the weather? How can it rain if I don't want it to?"

"There are currently twenty-five gods in the court, Your Grace. Perhaps there are more who desire rain than those who don't."

Lightsong's robes of gold and red rustled as he walked. The grass was cool and damp beneath his sandaled toes, but a group of servants carried a wide canopy over him. Rain fell softly on the cloth. In T'Telir, rainfalls were common, but they were never very strong.

Lightsong would have liked to have seen a true rainstorm, like people said occurred out in the jungles. "I'll take a poll then," Lightsong said. "Of the other gods. See

how many of them wanted it to rain today."

"If you wish, Your Grace," Llarimar said. "It won't prove much."

"It'll prove whose fault this is," Lightsong said. "And . . . if it turns out that most of us want it to stop raining, perhaps that will start a theological crisis." Llarimar, of course, didn't seem bothered by the concept of a god trying to undermine his own religion. "Your Grace," he said, "our doctrine is quite sound, I assure you."

"And if the gods don't want it to rain, yet it still does?" "Would you like it to be sunny all the time, Your Grace?" Lightsong shrugged. "Sure."

"And the farmers?" Llarimar said. "Their crops would die without the rain."

"It can rain on the crops," Lightsong said, "just not in the city. A few selective weather patterns shouldn't be too much for a god to accomplish."

"The people need water to drink, Your Grace," Llarimar said. "The streets need to be washed clean. And what of the plants in the city? The beautiful trees—even this grass that you enjoy walking across—would die if the rain did not fall."

"Well," Lightsong said, "I could just will them to continue living."

"And that is what you do, Your Grace," Llarimar said. "Your soul knows that rain is best for the city, and so it rains. Despite what your consciousness thinks."

Lightsong frowned. "By that argument, you could claim that anyone was a god, Llarimar."

"Not just anyone comes back from the dead, Your Grace. Nor do they have the power to heal the sick, and they certainly don't have your ability to foresee the future."

Good points, those, Lightsong thought as they approached the arena. The large, circular structure was at the back of the Court of Gods, outside of the ring of palaces that surrounded the courtyard. Lightsong's entourage moved inside—red canopy still held above him—and entered the sand-covered arena yard. Then they moved up a ramp toward the seating area.

The arena had four rows of seats for ordinary people—stone benches, accommodating T'Telir citizens who were favored, lucky, or rich enough to get themselves into an assembly session. The upper reaches of the arena were reserved for the Returned. Here—close enough to hear what was said on the arena floor, yet far enough back to remain stately—were the boxes. Ornately carved in stone, they were large enough to hold a god's entire entourage.

Lightsong could see that several of his colleagues had arrived, marked by the colorful canopies that sat above their boxes. Lifeblessor was there, as was Mercystar. They passed by the empty box usually reserved for Lightsong and made their way around the ring and approached a box topped by a green pavilion. Blushweaver lounged inside. Her green and silver dress was lavish and revealing, as always. Despite its rich trim and embroidery, it was little more than a long swath of cloth with a hole in the center for her head and some ties. That left it completely open on both sides from shoulder to calf, and Blushweaver's thighs curved out lusciously on either side. She sat up, smiling.

Lightsong took a deep breath. Blushweaver always treated him kindly and she certainly did have a high opinion of him, but he felt like he had to be on guard at all times when he was around her. A man could be taken in by a woman such as she. Taken in, then never released.

"Lightsong, dear," she said, smiling more deeply as Lightsong's servants scuttled forward, setting up his chair, footrest, and snack table.

"Blushweaver," Lightsong replied. "My high priest tells me that you're to blame for this dreary weather."

Blushweaver raised an eyebrow, and to the side—standing with the other priests—Llarimar flushed. "I like the rain," Blushweaver finally said, lounging back on her couch. "It's . . . different. I like things that are different."

"Then you should be thoroughly bored by me, my dear," Lightsong said, seating himself and taking a handful of grapes—already peeled—from the bowl on his snack table.

"Bored?" Blushweaver asked.

"I strive for nothing if not mediocrity, and mediocrity is hardly different. In fact, I should say that it's highly in fashion in court these days."

"You shouldn't say such things," Blushweaver said. "The people might start to believe you."

"You mistake me. That's why I say them. I figure if I can't do properly deific miracles like control the weather, then I might as well settle for the lesser

miracle of being the one who tells the truth."

"Hum," she replied, stretching back, the tips of her fingers wiggling as she sighed in contentment. "Our priests say that the purpose of the gods is not to play with weather or prevent disasters, but to provide visions and serve the people. Perhaps this attitude of yours is not the best way to see to their interests."

"You're right, of course," Lightsong said. "I've just had a revelation. Mediocrity isn't the best way to serve our people."

"What is, then?"

"Medium rare on a bed of sweet-potato medallions," he said, popping a grape in his mouth. "With a slight garnish of garlic and a light white wine sauce."

"You're incorrigible," she said, finishing her stretch.

"I am what the universe made me to be, my dear." "You bow before the whims of the universe, then?" "What else would I do?"

"Fight it," Blushweaver said. She narrowed her eyes, absently reaching to take one of the grapes from Lightsong's hand. "Fight with everything, force the universe to bow to you instead."

"That's a charming concept, Blushweaver. But I believe that the universe and I are in slightly different weight categories."

"I think you're wrong."

"Are you saying I'm fat?"

She regarded him with a flat glance. "I'm saying that you needn't be so humble, Lightsong. You're

• god."

"A god who can't even make it stop raining."

"I want it to storm and tempest. Maybe this drizzle is the compromise between us."

Lightsong popped another grape in his mouth, squishing it between his teeth, feeling the sweet juice leak onto his palate. He thought for a moment, chewing.

"Blushweaver, dear," he finally said. "Is there some kind of subtext to our current conversation? Because, as you might know, I am absolutely terrible with subtext. It gives me a headache." "You can't get headaches," Blushweaver said.

"Well I can't get subtext either. Far too subtle for me. It takes effort to understand, and effort is— unfortunately—against my religion."

Blushweaver raised an eyebrow. "A new tenet for those who worship you?"