

Warrior Mage

(Chains of Honor, Book 1)

by Lindsay Buroker

Copyright © Lindsay Buroker 2015

Foreword

About a year ago, I published the last book in my Emperor's Edge series. Some readers have been asking when I'll get back to that universe. *Chains of Honor* is the first book in a series that is set in the same world as the Emperor's Edge books. It takes us to a new continent and stars a new hero, but you can expect a few appearances from characters from the old series. There is no need, however, to have read the previous books. This is a new adventure, and I hope you will enjoy it.

Before you jump in, please let me thank my beta readers, Becca Andre and Kendra Highley, and my editor, Shelley Holloway, for coming along on another series. Happy reading!

Part I

Chapter 1

Yanko stifled a groan, trying to blink away the sand in his eyes and spit out the dirt plastering his tongue. Pain shot from his hands to his neck as his arms were nearly twisted from their sockets. He tried to ignore the titters whispering from the rows of young men and women watching him, but embarrassment flushed his cheeks. He couldn't see them—he couldn't see much more than people's shoes at the moment—but he knew his father and uncle were watching too. Probably with their faces buried in their hands.

"How's that taste, kid?" the behemoth grinding his knee into Yanko's back asked.

Kid? Yanko was eighteen now, the same age as most of the other Stargrind applicants. Just because this hulking thug had been in prison or chained to the oars in a longship for long enough to grow a beard down to his chest didn't mean Yanko was the anomaly here. He shifted his hips, trying to buck the big man off him, but with his arms pinned behind his back, he couldn't find the necessary leverage. His opponent only shoved him deeper into the dirt of the training arena.

"Tastes fine," Yanko rasped around the dust in his throat. "A little nutrient depleted perhaps, but nothing some enhanced compost wouldn't help."

"*What?*" The thug jostled Yanko, as if he had been speaking in a foreign language.

"Doesn't anyone study the earth sciences these days?"

"Earth magic is for old women and simpering slugs." The brute's head lowered, so he could growl, "Which one are you?" in Yanko's ear.

Before Yanko could come up with a witty reply, not that one had been poised on the tip of his tongue, the proctor's red and black boots came into view.

"Do you yield, White Fox?"

Yanko swallowed. He wanted nothing more than to stretch down into the earth with his senses and create a quake that would hurl his tormentor into the harbor for the sharks to munch on. But magic was forbidden in the dueling portion of the exam, and he couldn't have summoned the necessary concentration, anyway, not with dirt caking the insides of his eyelids. There was a reason even experienced warrior mages had bodyguards.

"Yes," he whispered. He had no other choice.

"What?" his tormentor asked, twisting Yanko's arms more painfully behind his back. "I don't think anyone heard you."

That drew more titters from the crowd, but thankfully the proctor said, "Enough, Sly Wolf. Let him up."

Sly Wolf. What a clan name for that thug. He was about as sly and cunning as a lizard of burden. If not for his strength and superior reach...

His opponent stood up, and blood rushed back into Yanko's fingertips, the sensation almost as painful as being pinned. He shook out his arms and told himself not to make excuses for his performance. He had done well in the earlier rounds—far better than he expected. There was no shame in second place.

Or so he thought. When he risked a glance toward the logs where the applicants' family members and tutors stood, he spotted his father shaking his head and muttering

something to his uncle. Yanko bit his lip and looked away. What had he expected?

“The winner of the combat stage of the test is Sly Wolf,” the proctor announced to the crowd.

The champion grinned through his beard and thrust his muscled arms upward in victory. The other applicants chanted a hasty chorus of the appreciation song, but it sounded forced. Understandable. Sly Wolf had pummeled many of them too.

“The next stage of the test is the obstacle course.” The proctor extended a hand toward the harbor where an ancient lizard skeleton the size of a great whale rose out of the shallows, its bones long ago preserved and strengthened so they would stand up to people clambering over them. Floating platforms, swinging ropes, and stationary whirlwinds of air waited to challenge the applicants. “You are allowed to use the mental sciences during this portion of the test. It is a physical event, but it’s unlikely you’ll pass *without* calling upon them. You’ll have ten minutes to finish, but remember, only the top ten applicants will be accepted into Stargrind this year.”

Sly Wolf stalked toward the beach, and the crowd skittered aside to let him pass. Most of the students were leaner, like Yanko, with little hope of reaching six feet in height. There had been speculation that Sly Wolf had Turgonian ancestors, but only pure bloods were supposed to be allowed into the elite warrior mage academy, so Yanko doubted that was true. The man was just a freak.

Yanko picked up his practice blades from where they lay in the dust of the arena, a saber and a *kyszar*, the short stabbing sword used for finishing an opponent. Alas, it hadn’t found the opportunity to finish anything against Sly Wolf. Belatedly, he wondered if he should have simply used the saber and tried the one-bladed, side-forward attack style the Turgonian prisoner in the salt mine had shown him. It came more naturally to him, but he hadn’t dared stray from the two-bladed Nurian style, not in front of the proctors.

After dusting off his weapons and putting them away, Yanko hunted around for his hair tie. At some point during the fight, his topknot had tumbled free. He probably looked like a woman shambling around with his shoulder-length black hair dangling about his face.

He spotted the red silk band and as he bent to pick it up, someone jostled him from behind. Hard.

“Better not dawdle, White Fox,” a female applicant said, holding up a sheet of paper. “You’re in the first round.”

Yanko grimaced at that revelation. Since he had advanced so far in the combat rounds, his arms were weary, and he had hoped the proctors would put him at the end, so he would have more time to rest.

“Maybe he expects his mother to show up to help him pass,” a man who looked like the woman’s brother said, glowering at Yanko as he spoke. “Or is she too busy sinking Nurian ships and thieving from good people?”

Yanko wanted to snarl that he had no idea where she was—she had left when he had been less than a year old, and he had no memory of her—but he forced himself to keep his mouth shut. He turned his back on the pair and tried to tie his hair up as he strode toward the beach, but the brother was not done talking. He trotted after and shoved Yanko in the shoulder, keeping him from putting up his hair.

“Only honored families wear their hair up,” the brother said, snatching at the silk tie.

Yanko kept him from getting it but did not dare retaliate. There had to be proctors

watching, and any fighting with other applicants, outside of the dueling event, would get him kicked out before the exam even ended. “My family is still *moksu*,” he said and started walking again, though he watched the troublemaker out of the corner of his eye.

“Some bureaucrat made a mistake then,” the brother said. “You’re delusional if you think they’re going to let the son of some pirate bitch into Stargrind.”

Yanko kept walking, though his cheeks were flaming for the second time in ten minutes. He was almost running by the time he reached the beach, but that wasn’t a bad thing because the proctor standing on an observation platform out in the water was already calling the first three names, including Yanko’s. Fortunately, Sly Wolf wasn’t in his heat. Not that he thought the big man could keep up with him—Yanko had always been one of the fastest runners in his village, and he thought he had the mental and physical agility for this—but the brute might shove his opponents into the water, just to be difficult. A fast time was everything in this event, and falling into the harbor would mean a delay.

Yanko removed his dusty tunic, tossed it on a log, and waded toward the starting platform, which hovered a foot above the water at the back end of the giant lizard’s tail. One of the other applicants who had been called floated across the choppy waves, a breeze whipping at the layers of his elegant green and gold clan robe. There was no reason to wear so much clothing for this, but the dress was a reminder that Yanko had never had wizard’s robes in his life. Such garments, often with magical protections woven into the fabric, were expensive, and Yanko’s family might have been prosperous once, but that had gone the way of their status.

“Wasting his energy,” Yanko told himself as the student passed over his head and alighted on the platform, not a droplet of water spattering his robe.

“He’s got it to spare,” said the short, wiry man wading out alongside Yanko. “That’s Temaris Gold Hawk. They say he’s been making fireballs since he was two. And making a stoat’s prick of himself almost as long.” The man flashed a quick smile at Yanko. “I’m Tam Tam.”

“Yanko.” It was the first time anyone had smiled at him that day, and he nodded back in appreciation. “Ferret god’s luck to you.”

“Thanks. I need it. Crowds make me nervous.” The wiry man waved toward the dozens of vibrantly painted war, fishing, and merchant ships tied to the docks and the dozens more sailing in and out of the harbor. Whether the craft were at rest or not, the wooden decks were full of observers. The city of Red Sky stretched along the beach, and people were out on the flat roofs of the white stucco buildings, as well.

Yanko wasn’t worried about them, but he understood the feeling of being nervous. He could sense his father’s and uncle’s eyes boring into the back of his head as he waded into deeper water, his family’s expectations almost palpable in the humid sea air.

With the water chest deep, they reached the platform. Yanko stretched to grab the edge and pulled himself up. The wooden square wobbled when he stood up, and Gold Hawk, a tall, lanky young man who didn’t appear old enough to grow chin hair, gave Yanko a disdainful frown.

Yanko ignored him and focused on the white vertebrae stretching across the harbor in front of him, sloping up to the massive hipbones and rib cage. Even with the feet anchored in the sand a few feet below the surface, the skeleton rose nearly thirty feet over their heads. Only one of them could run up the bone tail at a time, and he intended to be

first. Three women in clan robes stood out on platforms underneath the rib cage, final-year students at Stargrind, Yanko had been told. Each of them had been assigned one of the applicants, with the instructions to make the course difficult. Yanko hoped to get to them quickly, before they could craft too many obstacles to hurl at him.

"I suppose you're quite proud of your swordsmanship," Gold Hawk said, still sneering down his nose.

Yanko glanced at the proctor, hoping the man would start the test soon. He didn't want to chat; he just wanted to get this over with. Maybe if he was accepted, his father would finally be proud of him, finally have faith that Yanko could do the one thing the entire clan had been wanting him to do since he had shown magical aptitude at three years old: become a warrior mage, distinguish himself in battle, and redeem his family's honor.

"They're not going to let you into Stargrind even if you pass, you know," Gold Hawk said.

Tam Tam had also pulled himself onto the platform, and his brow furrowed in confusion at this. "Why wouldn't they?"

"He's a White Fox," Gold Hawk said.

That didn't smooth the other man's brow. Yanko hoped the test would start before Gold Hawk explained it. In truth, he hadn't expected anyone here to know who he was or about his family's disgrace, except perhaps for the proctors. Applicants came from hundreds of miles away, all over the Thousand Fjords region, and Yanko hadn't thought his family was *that* well known.

"The son of Captain Snake Heart Pey Lu White Fox," Gold Hawk explained further.

"Oh," Tam Tam said with sudden understanding. Yes, here on the coast, there wouldn't be many people who hadn't heard of the more infamous pirates. And Snake Heart, commander of the Midnight Fleet, certainly qualified as that. Tam Tam's smile vanished, and he regarded Yanko with new wariness.

"Applicants," the proctor called, his voice magically amplified. "Ready yourselves."

Yanko and Tam Tam crept to the edge, making the floating platform wobble. Gold Hawk rose into the air. He might be able to levitate up the tail, but the rest of the course involved ducking and climbing through bones and supports, as well as dodging attacks.

"Begin," the proctor announced at the same time as he flung a firecracker into the air. It exploded in fiery blue and red sparkles, drawing cheers from the nearby ships.

Yanko barely noticed it. He had leaped for the tail as soon as the proctor spoke. Tam Tam jumped immediately after him and landed just behind him on the bone bridge, jostling him as they nearly dropped onto the same vertebra. Yanko didn't know if it was accidental or intentional, but he did not let it slow him. He charged up the ancient bone knobs, hoping to make it to the top before his competitors caught up with him.

One of the wind vortexes that had been hovering at the surface of the water rose, and wind battered Yanko, nearly blasting him from his perch. Then one of the bones grew so slippery, his cloth shoe slid off it. His leg pitched over the side, and he almost followed, but he contorted his body and flailed his arms, catching the tail before he fell. Tam Tam leaped over him, taking the lead.

Growling, Yanko raced the rest of the way to the top, then slid down a rope that bucked and swayed, as if it, too, was the victim of a nearby whirlwind. He struggled to use his body weight to make it swing out the way he needed to in order to reach a

platform hovering under the skeleton's hipbones. But it was too far.

Though he hated to pause, he slowed down enough to summon his concentration. He corralled some of the wind gusting across the harbor, trying to keep it away from the temperamental vortexes that someone was controlling, then gave himself a great push in the back even as he leaped from the rope. As he flew through the air, wondering if he would reach the platform, he glimpsed a black fin protruding from the water underneath him. A shark? He had been joking earlier; they shouldn't truly be in the shallow water of the harbor.

Fortunately, he made it to the platform, landing on all fours. That was a good thing, since it tipped precariously, almost hurling him into the water. He scrambled for the center, expecting it to stabilize, but it tipped in the opposite direction. Suspicious, he checked the students responsible for making this difficult. Not surprisingly, one with her raven hair in long braids was focused on him. Yanko had to steady himself enough to leap for another rope, this one dangling more than ten feet away, but with the platform rocking and bucking, he would be lucky not to end up hurled out to the deck of one of those ships.

He wished he were on land, so he could call up a swarm of bees to harry her, but the air was devoid of insects. Even the seagulls had left the area. Shooed away by one of the proctors? Yanko was doubtlessly one of the few who had studied the earth sciences and could commune with animals, but maybe they knew that. Or maybe he was wasting time thinking about this. Indeed, Tam Tam had alighted on his platform.

A gust of wind slammed into him, knocking him into the water. At least Yanko wasn't the only one being picked on. Gripping the edge of his rocking perch with both hands, he focused on the platform underneath the braided woman. Hers was, alas, attached to the sea floor with bamboo poles. He ran his senses down them, searching for a weakness. If he could distract her, she would not be able to harass him until she recovered.

The bamboo appeared secure, sunken into concrete anchors at the bottom, but myriad sea life touched his awareness. Having grown up in a village in the mountains, he hadn't been to the coast often, and he had only tried to communicate with a fish once. It had been an alien experience, more akin to dealing with reptiles than mammals, but he reached out to some of the bigger ones near the platform supports and tried to implant the idea that it would be delightfully fun to leap out of the water and fly over that platform...

Most of the fish ignored him—or he was simply ineffective at conveying the idea of fun to them—but two small silver ones flew out of the water, one smacking the woman in the face. It wasn't a great attack, but it was enough. It startled her, and she squealed. Yanko's platform stopped rocking.

He didn't hesitate. He took a running start and flung himself toward the rope. Tam Tam had already dealt with his obstacle and was on an adjacent rope.

As Yanko scrambled up, he glimpsed a blaze of light behind him. Gold Hawk had also reached the platform, and he had chosen a more direct way of dealing with his tormentor. A swirling ball of fire flew through the air toward the handsome woman opposing him. It splashed on an invisible barrier several feet away from her, the flames dispersing and disappearing, but the applicants watching from the beach and the crowds of spectators on the docks and ships burst into an enthusiastic rendition of the appreciation song.

Yanko would have rolled his eyes at the overemphasis people put on the thermal sciences, but he had reached the bottom of the rib cage and was too busy climbing. He scampered through, leaping from bone to bone, until the hair on the back of his neck stood up. An attack was coming. He tried to face it and raise his own defenses—not certain if they would be nearly enough against a fifth-year student—but his heel slipped as he pivoted. He might have recovered, but a ball of fire was hurtling through the air toward him. There was no time to regather the concentration needed, not when he was busy flailing for balance. Yanko let himself slip off the bone, dropping and catching it with his hands on the way down. The flames poured through the rib cage, not stopping as they roared toward him, the heat of the fire scorching the air. This was not an illusion.

Since he had fallen, he wasn't in the fireball's path, but it seared his fingers as it blasted through the skeleton, and he gasped in pain. Tears sprang to his eyes, and he wanted nothing more than to let go, to fall into the water and cool his hands. But he would lose a minute, if not more, swimming to the platform and repeating the climb. Even though his skin blistered, he managed to pull himself back up. A good choice, since he glimpsed that black shark fin gliding through the water underneath him.

Back in the race, Yanko leaped from rib to rib, but he knew the braided woman must be readying another attack for him. Apparently, his fish-to-the-cheek tactic had not impressed her.

His hands burned so much that he didn't know if he could concentrate on forming a barrier to deflect whatever she threw at him next. Better to distract her again. He doubted a fish would catch her by surprise twice, but as he reached the top of the rib cage and struggled to climb one of the bones up to the shoulder blades, he caught sight of that fin again. He also caught sight of the woman with her hand outstretched toward him.

Food! he cried into the shark's mind at the same time as he flung an image of the woman on the platform at it. This time, Yanko didn't try to cajole; he tried to command. He wouldn't know if it had worked until the shark reached the platform, and he felt uncomfortable trying to convince an animal to kill another person, but that fireball could have burned him into cinders. Everything seemed fair and acceptable in this portion of the contest.

Ignoring the pain in his fingers, Yanko pulled himself up atop the shoulder. His instincts cried out at him again, those instincts honed over years of study to feel the telltale crackle of power in the air, the promise that someone had him targeted with the sciences. He stopped, focused his mind, and called forth the air around him, compacting it into a barrier.

He was almost too slow. The second fireball blasted fully into him, its heat scorching his cheeks. But enough of a barrier had formed to deflect the attack. Flames sizzled around him, and his clothes might have caught fire had they not been so wet, but this time, he did not receive any burns. Before the flames had fully dissipated, he resumed his sprint, aiming for the top of the spine and the skull. The finish platform with flags waving at the corners floated in the water beyond it.

A startled cry came from below and behind him. The shark leaped from the water, arcing straight at the woman. She flung herself to the side to avoid it, but there wasn't enough platform to catch her. Her hip struck the edge, and she bounced into the water.

At the base of the skull, Yanko hesitated. The shark had plunged back into the water on the other side, and it could turn in an instant to attack her. But Gold Hawk and Tam

Tam were both on the shoulder blades, running toward him.

Praying to the badger goddess to protect the woman, Yanko sprinted up the skull. In a few seconds, he would finish, and he could help her if the test proctors did not handle it. Though he worried he was making the wrong decision, that she would be horribly maimed or worse, he ran across the flat lizard head and leaped off the edge, calling the wind again to push him out to the platform so he wouldn't have to swim. He had not checked, but he would be shocked if there was only *one* shark down there.

Even with the help of the wind, he barely made it to the edge of the platform. At the last instant, as he realized how far he had dropped and how fast he was going, he wished he had aimed for the water after all. He hit the bamboo platform hard. He turned the landing into a roll, trying to spread out the impact as he had been taught when falling in combat, but gravity was a hard master to thwart. He was hurtled across the bamboo, battered as badly as sugar cane going through a press, and his breath flew out of his lungs. He came to a stop, his entire body hurting, inches shy of falling off the far end of the platform. He couldn't manage to breathe, but he saw the flags overhead and knew he had finished the course.

"Eight minutes and forty-seven seconds," the timekeeper stationed on the corner of the platform said blandly, as if he watched such spectacles every day.

Remembering the braided woman, Yanko forced himself into a sitting position. Gold Hawk landed lightly on the center of the platform, glared balefully at him, then looked to the timekeeper.

"Eight minutes and fifty-five seconds," the man announced.

Yanko took some satisfaction from the fact that Gold Hawk's fine robes were soaking and torn, but he didn't spare the other man more than a glance, looking instead back out to the course. Under the rib cage, the braided woman was still alive. Either through her own power or another mage's, she levitated in the air, her hair and robe dripping. No less than three shark fins circled in the water below her. As she floated back to her spot on the platform, she glared over at Yanko.

He sighed and wiped the water off his face. Another person who would never want to be friends with him.

Tam Tam came down a moment later, his landing as awkward as Yanko's, maybe more so. If Yanko hadn't reached out to catch him, Tam Tam would have rolled off the platform and into the water. The entire side of his face was burned, with blisters scorching his chin.

"Nine minutes and twenty-seven seconds," the timekeeper announced. "You may return to the beach. You'll find out later if you made it through this round, based on the times the others earn."

Yanko could have swum to the beach, but he was glad an oarsman came out to pick them up in a dinghy. After seeing all those sharks, he was not eager to dangle his body in the water. He had known these tests would be difficult, but he hadn't realized they would be life-threatening.

His father and Uncle Mishnal were waiting on the beach when Yanko came ashore. He walked toward them, trying to judge the expressions on their faces. His time had not been as good as he had thought it might be when he first saw the course, but it had been well under the cut-off. And he didn't think he had embarrassed himself too badly, given the circumstances.

When he came face-to-face with them, Yanko pressed his palms together in front of his chest, ignoring the pain that came from touching his fingers, and bowed his head. “Honored Uncle, Father.”

Neither brother was known for his smile, but Mishnal clasped him on the shoulder and gave him a nod of approval. Yanko allowed a ribbon of relief to flutter through him. He hadn’t known his uncle well until he had come to work in the mines six months earlier, for “hardening,” as his father had called it, but Mishnal had proven to be an honorable and fair man, despite his perpetual scowl. He had even praised Yanko on occasion, something his father had not done for a long time.

Now, his father was tugging at his black mustachios as he looked back and forth from the timekeeper to the nearest proctor. “Eighty-four, was it? I hope that’ll be good enough. They were harder on you than the others, don’t you think so, Mish?”

Yanko lowered his hands—he wanted nothing more than to run and find the healer who had attended the wounds some had received during the combat round—but he hadn’t been dismissed yet. Even though his father seemed more interested in talking to his brother than his son.

“They were hard on him,” Mishnal said. “We didn’t expect anything different.”

“No, I know. The journey is such a difficult one. I don’t know if he...” Finally his father looked directly at Yanko, but it was only to survey him and shake his head doubtfully. “It is a great challenge. Too much for him maybe. I wish Falcon...” He shook his head again, not saying the words.

He didn’t have to. Yanko looked away, blinking so moisture wouldn’t form in his eyes. His older brother had always been Father’s favorite, the one most like him, the one he understood. But like Father and Uncle Mishnal, Falcon had never shown an aptitude for the mental sciences. Yanko was the one who had inherited their mother’s talent, whether he wanted anything from her or not.

“I will find the healer, Yanko,” his father said. “Prepare yourself for the last test. The others will find this the easiest part of the exam, but I never could convince you to spend enough time studying the thermal sciences. You always wanted to be out in the woods, playing in the dirt. And those poems—” He cleared his throat and spat. “A warrior mage doesn’t write poems. A warrior mage is the one poems are written *about*, great ballads that become legend.” Father groaned and walked away.

“They were for Arayevo,” Yanko whispered, and he had only written poetry one time, that was it. He’d had too many outdoor hobbies as a boy to spend time inside with quill to paper. Too bad. If he had actually finished any of those poems and handed them to Arayevo, she might have realized how he felt about her and stayed.

Yanko slumped, feeling the weariness in his limbs now that his muscles had cooled and the obstacle course was past. He didn’t know whether to be relieved or not that the next test would be purely mental.

Mishnal surprised him by patting his shoulder. “I know you’ve been studying fire these last months. You’ll do well.”

“Thank you, Honored Uncle.” Yanko stood straighter, afraid he must look like a pouting child.

Mishnal gave him another pat, then headed to the log benches near the arena, an arena that would be used for something besides fighting this time.

* * *

Yanko sat cross-legged in the center of the arena, his hair and clothing dry, his fingers raw and tender but, thanks to the healer, no longer as tender as they had been. The rest of the applicants had finished—or hadn't finished—the obstacle course and the results had come in. With his time, Yanko had come in eighth place. It was not as good as he had hoped, but he had done better in the swordplay than he had expected, so he was sitting in a comfortable place for this last challenge. All he needed to do was finish in the three-minute time limit to ensure himself a place at Stargrind. His father's dream might finally come true.

But not your dream, eh?

Yanko shook away the voice in the back of his head. He had accepted years ago that what he dreamed of doing with his life and what the world—or at least his family—demanded he do with his life were not the same. Thanks to his mother's choice, this was his destiny, the only one to which he could honorably aspire.

"A simple task for a future Stargrind student," the proctor, a woman this time, announced as she strolled around the circular arena, her hands clasped behind her back.

Yanko would find out just *how* simple it was in a minute. He had been chosen to go first again. Even though the test hadn't begun, his shoulders were tight, his muscles tense. He could feel the other applicants, the twenty-one that remained of the original thirty-two, staring at him from the side of the arena. Between the averages of the two events, he had one of the highest scores, and the whispers floating out of the crowd implied that nobody was happy about it.

"...can't let some pirate's spawn into the most elite academy in the Great Land."

"...heard he didn't even have a tutor or formal schooling. ...can't be qualified."

Yanko did his best to pay attention to the proctor and ignore the commentary from the crowd.

A bald man in gray robes strolled out, whistling, an intricate wooden candelabra balanced upon his shoulder. He walked into the arena and placed it on the packed dirt, about five feet in front of Yanko. He withdrew six stubby beeswax candles from an inside pocket and placed them in holders at different levels on the candelabra, some that would be easy to reach with a match and others that were in the middle of the structure and barred by wood on three sides. A strange choice of materials for something that held flaming candles.

Or... not. The realization of what the test must involve came over Yanko. The precision that would be required daunted him, but he *had* practiced creating flame and lighting candles countless times in the last six months. This was doable.

"There are six candles," the proctor announced as the man walked away. "You will light each of them before the three minutes is up." She waved toward the bored-looking timekeeper from the platform. "If you do not finish in three minutes, you fail. If you char the wood, you fail. Stargrind prides itself on its fire mages, so if you cannot demonstrate the ability to handle this simple task, you will not be allowed to go forward with the training." She had been addressing all of the applicants thus far, but her gaze fell upon Yanko as she spoke that last sentence.

He was trying not to feel like the entire world was against him, but it was hard. He hoped that this would be a fair test and that nobody would attempt to throw obstacles in his path.

"Are you ready, White Fox?" the proctor asked.

Yanko wiped hands damp with sweat on his trousers, took a deep breath, and nodded. "Yes, Honored Teacher."

"Begin."

A click sounded, the timekeeper's watch starting.

Yanko let his eyelids lower to slits. First, the flame.

With his mind, he gathered the water vapor in the air, a task made simpler than it was back home, thanks to the humidity. He cleaved the molecules and ignited the flammable hydrogen left from the process. All thermal science manipulation was based on this process, and even though he would have been more comfortable manipulating the earth, the plants, and the trees, he had learned to deal with fire years ago. Before long, a small ball of flame burned in the air next to the candelabra.

"Thought you said he only knew the earth sciences," someone whispered behind him.

"Just said he's a slimy slug that would rather wallow in the dirt," another applicant responded. That was Sly Wolf.

Yanko's flame faltered, and he growled at himself to concentrate. He moved it toward the first candle, choosing one of the easier targets first, one that did not have wood all around it. His fiery ball whispered across the wick, and it burst into flame.

One down, five to go.

"Bet he gets tired before he makes it halfway through," Sly Wolf said, not bothering to keep his voice to a whisper.

"He looks shaky."

He did *not*. As much as he wanted to ignore the words, they kept seeping into his mind, irritating him and making him want to prove that he was just as capable as they were, even if he hadn't gone to a preparatory school or had a long-term tutor when he had been growing up.

He squinted at his flame, manipulating the shape until it shifted from a ball to a skull, hollowing the eyes just so and making an opening for the mouth. A couple of surprised murmurs came from behind him. Good. He moved it toward the second wick, rotating it as he went, so the other applicants could see that he *was* a capable fire mage, damn it. Or he at least had the potential to become one.

As he lit the second wick, the timekeeper spoke.

"One minute left."

Alarm flooded Yanko, and the outline of the skull wavered and morphed back into a lumpy ball. He couldn't worry about looks now. He had to finish lighting the candles. What had he been thinking? And why hadn't the cursed timekeeper made an announcement at two minutes, as well?

He licked his lips and veered the flame toward the third candle. The wick caught, but in his haste, he almost scorched the slender wooden support behind it. A bead of sweat dripped down the side of his face as he moved the flame toward the next candle. Unfortunately, he had lit all of the easier outside ones already. He had to dip between the wooden supports. He made his flame as tiny as he could, slipping it into the center of the candelabra, toward a stumpy wick practically lying on the wax, the candle cupped from above by six slender boughs of wood.

"Thirty seconds."

Yanko clenched his fists. A few bets and snickers ran through the crowd, but this time, he didn't lose focus. He lit the wick, carefully extricated his flame, and moved to

the next candle. It was just as challenging, but he slid in from the side, lit it, and exited through a gap on the other side. He was veering toward the last one and hadn't yet brushed the wood with his flame when the timekeeper spoke again.

"Time's up."

An instant later, the sixth wick brightened with flame. Yanko looked at the proctor, hoping he had been close enough. Surely he had demonstrated his aptitude? Some stupidity, too, but he could learn to do less of that. If he had a chance.

"The challenge was not completed in the time allotted," the proctor announced, scribbling on her clipboard without looking at him.

Yanko sat and stared. Did that mean he had failed? Because of one second? *Truly?*

A snicker came from behind him. "Told you," Sly Wolf said.

Yanko jumped to his feet, spinning toward the crowd, wanting nothing more than to sprint over there and plant his fist in the man's face. But someone stirred on the logs. His father. Yanko glimpsed a stricken expression on his face before he turned and walked away from the arena, his shoulders slumped.

All of the fight drained out of Yanko. He had failed his family, his entire clan. Not because he lacked the skill, but because of hubris. No, he had said it correctly before. Stupidity.

"Next," the proctor called, not a hint of empathy in her voice.

Yanko walked out of the arena, his chin to his chest. He didn't want to see his father and his uncle, not now, but he had nowhere else to go. And they were waiting for him. Actually, they were standing near the street, arguing with each other as lizards pulling carts trundled past, the rest of the world continuing on, not caring whether a man qualified for Stargrind or not.

Father spun as Yanko approached, his mustachios quivering. Fury burned in his dark eyes. "What was that? That was inexcusable. You were so close, but you dithered around, trying to show off."

"No, I just... wanted them to know I was good enough, better than they thought."

"*They?* The other boys? They matter nothing." Father chopped the air with his hand. "The proctors were all that mattered, the timekeeper. I thought you were smarter than that, boy."

Yanko wished Uncle Mishnal would come to his defense, but he merely stood in silence, saying nothing. What could he say? What defense was there? Yanko had been a fool, and he knew it.

"Don't bother coming home until you've mastered your pride, boy." Father flung up his arms, turned on his heel, and stalked away.

Yanko's mouth drooped open as he stared after him. He wouldn't even be allowed to return home? To see his cousins? His aunt? His great uncle? His friends in the village? His hounds? His bees and worms and garden?

Where would he go? What else could he do? This was everything he had studied for since childhood, unless one counted tending the gardens and the forest. But whose gardens would he tend if he couldn't work on the family's property? He wasn't qualified to do anything else that people would pay him to do. Even if he came down to the city, would he be able to find a job when everyone seemed to know exactly whose son he was?

Uncle Mishnal sighed, clearly as disappointed as Father, even if he did not storm off

in a huff. “You’re always welcome back in the mines, Yanko.”

Back in the mines. Hundreds of meters below the surface of the earth, below the trees and plants and everything he loved. It had been one thing to spend time down there to train for these exams, but to go back? To spend the rest of his life as a miner in the lightless depths of the earth?

When Uncle Mishnal walked away, Yanko had never felt so alone and so lost in his life.

Chapter 2

Yanko stared at the wooden bar between his hands as he walked in a circle with four other men, leaning his weight into it, providing the power that turned the screw and raised carts of salt from the lower depths of the mine to this upper level for processing and packing. His uncle had given him this job on his first day, more than six months ago, to help him build the muscle a warrior was expected to have. It had worked, but unfortunately it hadn't helped his brain muscles at all. Now, as he huffed and grunted in time with the other bare-chested men, sweat dripping down his arms and back, he saw it as a penance. His punishment for his failure.

"Well, well, well," came a woman's voice from behind him. "Look who's back in the mines. They didn't want your pretty face at Stargrind, after all?"

Yanko ground his teeth as a second punishment walked into view carrying a box full of carving tools. Lakeo stopped to look at him, a fist on her hip. She wore a shaggy sheepskin vest that left her muscular arms bare, aside from a pair of leather arm guards. Her short, black hair stuck out in all directions, as if she had been struck by lightning recently.

"I don't want to talk about it," Yanko said. He did not stop pushing or leave the screw, even though he could have at any time. He might have failed his entrance exams, but he was still *moksu*, and his family still oversaw the mine. Most of the people here were criminals, prisoners of war, or serfs, so he outranked them. Not exactly a great boon.

"Enh, Stargrind is for prissy know-it-alls, anyway," Lakeo said. "You would have hated it."

"Uh huh."

As usual, Lakeo acted as if she was so much more knowledgeable and worldly than he, even though she had grown up in some dusty village not ten miles from here and, by her own admission, had never been over the mountains and to the sea, or to anywhere more than a day's walk away. She was only a couple of years older than Yanko, but she always seemed to think she was far more mature than he.

"Is this what you're going to do with the rest of your life?" Lakeo pursed her lips and eyed the screw and the muscled slaves, men too tired and beleaguered to care about their conversation. An overseer stood on a platform overhead, tapping out a drumbeat to keep the men working—and to make sure that nobody started any trouble. Those known for it, or known to be dangerous criminals, wore glowing control collars around their necks.

"I haven't decided yet. I've only been back for a day."

"Don't you think you're kind of a burden on them?" She waved at the workers. "You're awfully short and scrawny in comparison."

"I am *not* scrawny."

Yanko caught himself flexing his muscles and puffing out his chest, despite the fact that he did not care one iota what Lakeo thought of his physique. If he *had* been scrawny, he might have simply accepted her ribbing, but he had gained ten pounds of muscle in the months he had been working here. Sure, at five-foot-nine, he might be shorter than a lot of the hulks in the mines, but that was because most were half-breeds or even full-

blooded Turgonians, and those people were commonly over six feet. For a Nurian man, he was perfectly normal in size.

"You're just overgrown." Yanko bit back an urge to comment on her dubious heritage, having figured out some time ago that she had at least some foreign blood flowing through her veins. In Nuria, that wasn't considered a good thing.

"If that's what you need to tell yourself to feel better, go ahead." Lakeo ruffled his hair. Yanko hoped that was a parting insult, but she added, "I need you down on Level Eight. You know those murals I'm carving by the lift in my oh-so-copious downtime?" She lifted her eyes toward the gray-white salt ceiling and scoffed. "Your art-loving uncle wants a..." She fished in a vest pocket. "A yellow fen tree. Because there's one in the Hound and the Ferret fable, and I'm doing a scene from it. As if I know what a yellow fen tree looks like. All we have on this side of the mountains are cactus and sagebrush. Maybe a stumpy juniper."

Yanko stepped away from the screw, waving up to the overseer to find a replacement. This wasn't the first time Lakeo had come to him for advice on the nature-themed statues and friezes she had been hired to carve in the mine. "Uncle Mishnal isn't that art-loving. That was the regional chief's idea, I think. Some notion of turning this into a tourist destination."

"Right. Because that wedding last spring went *so* well."

Yanko grabbed his shirt and headed for the lift. He couldn't say he was glad to return to Lakeo's company, not when he had been so looking forward to going home for the two-week visit he would have been due before heading off to Stargrind, but he admitted it wasn't entirely horrible to have someone familiar to talk to. Uncle Mishnal... hadn't been chatty on the three-day ride back across the mountains. Father hadn't even come with them. Yanko hadn't seen him since he had stalked away after the test, and a heavy stone of guilt weighed upon his soul. He may not have appreciated the burden of becoming a warrior mage, but he had been willing to take it on, because to do anything else could mean that their clan, once known for working closely with the great chiefs, might disappear from the history books altogether.

"This may be your last tree for me," Lakeo announced as they stepped into the bamboo lift. "Eight," she added, and the Made artifact that raised and lowered the cage hummed to life up above. They rattled down the dark shaft, past tunnels, some lit, some dark. The clang of pickaxes arose in the distance.

"Oh?"

"This is the last carving your uncle wants, and I'm not staying here to hack mindlessly at the walls." The cage rattled to a stop, and Lakeo led the way out, stopping in the open circular area outside the lift. Whale oil lamps flickered on the walls, and cart tracks led down six different tunnels. "The pay's been decent, or at least better than I was making mashing cactus for tequila out on the ranch, and I've saved up a little money." Lakeo patted the flat wall by the lift. She had already carved a forest floor scattered with leaves and flowers.

"Where will you go?" Yanko tried to decide if he would miss Lakeo or not. She did like to torment him, but so few other people in the mine even talked to him, because they were workers and he was the boss's nephew. He might miss her sarcasm.

"The coast, I think. Maybe to sea. You think your Arayevo ever got on a ship and found your mother?"

Yanko winced. Arayevo had been his babysitter when he had been growing up, his babysitter that he had been madly in love with since age eight or so. When she had come to visit him in the mines, he'd thought it might be because she missed him, because she realized he had become a man and that she might be interested in his... manly attributes. But all she had wanted was a lead on how to find his mother, because she had some notion of escaping an arranged marriage by going to sea and having adventures. Pirate adventures. He couldn't explain the betrayal he had felt, both because of her willingness to pursue a criminal lifestyle and because she hadn't been interested in any of his attributes, manly or otherwise.

"She's not my Arayevo," Yanko muttered. He had never explained it all to Lakeo and did not want to now.

"Whatever. You ever hear from her?"

"No." A thought dawned in his mind. "Why? You're not planning to become a pirate, too, are you?" It wasn't that he couldn't imagine Lakeo and her muscular arms stalking around the deck of a pirate ship, but... by the gods, what were these crazy women all thinking? Pirates were shot on sight in any respectable Nurian port, and their ships were chased down and sunk by the Great Fleet.

"Nah, not unless I can be in charge of the pirates. I doubt I'd make a good pirate peon. But I'd like to get out of Nuria, go somewhere where they don't care about... things. A place where you can openly study... things."

Yanko did not have any trouble inserting "your heritage" for the first instance of things and "the mental sciences" for the second, but he simply said, "Where will you find this paradise of things?"

"From what I've read, the Kyatt Islands."

"I don't think many Nurians go there anymore. Since we tried to take over those islands during the war and failed, we're not that welcome. Hardly fair when you consider that they let the infamous Turgonian war criminal, Admiral Starcrest, live there for twenty years. After all, *he* tried to take over their islands too. I guess he's not there anymore, what with being the new Turgonian president. Still, I don't know that Nurians get the song of welcoming."

Yanko stopped talking when he realized Lakeo was staring at him as if he had moths flying out of his nostrils.

"What are you babbling about?" she asked.

"The current political situation. Don't you know anything about what's been going on in the empire-turned-republic?"

"No." Lakeo set down her toolbox and plucked out a hammer and chisel. "Why do *you*? What does it matter down here?"

"Uncle Mishnal has the weekly newspapers from the capital and from Red Sky delivered, and I usually read them and discuss world events with him."

"Does he *make* you?"

Yanko was starting to feel like he was a mutant. True, what was going on in Turgonia or on the Kyatt Islands or in any other country didn't matter much to those working in these remote mines, but he had been taught from an early age that honored families should stay educated and informed, because they could be called into service for the Great Chief at any time. "He encourages it," Yanko said neutrally.

"Huh."

Lakeo hammered at her chisel, sheering off a chunk of salt. In its natural state, it was as hard as marble, which was probably why her arm muscles rivaled his own. He wondered if she would find a man on the Kyatt Islands who found such a look attractive. Or if she even sought a man. He had never seen her make overtures to any of the miners. Perhaps she preferred other women.

“Is my tree coming soon, or are you just going to stand there and stare at my arms?” Lakeo asked.

“Uh, right.” Yanko stepped back and closed his eyes, summoning the image of a yellow fen tree to his mind, its massive trunk with vines snaking down it and broad yellowish-green canopy.

“In case you’re wondering, women would rather have their breasts stared at.”

Yanko had been in the process of creating an illusion of the tree in the air, but this blunt statement shattered his concentration. “Er, what? I mean, I was given the impression that you weren’t *supposed* to stare. That downward drifting eyes could get you smacked.”

Lakeo grunted. “Don’t worry, Yanko. You’re too virtuous for anyone to find you lecherous. Now where’s my cursed tree?”

While he was trying to decide if he had been insulted, Yanko re-formed the illusion. This time, he succeeded in projecting it beyond his mind, and it floated in the air between them.

“Thanks. Hold that for a few minutes, will you?”

“As long as you need.” It wasn’t as if he had to do something, or go anywhere... Yanko kept his sigh inward. Even if he was in the mood to whine out loud, Lakeo would not be the kind of person to empathize with him.

“Good boy. Listen, Yanko. I was thinking.” Lakeo stared intently at her work as she spoke. Though she paused before going on.

He thought about responding sarcastically to her comment, but as usual, he never did. His father had drilled into him from a young age the idea that women, elders, and family members were to be treated with respect. That was probably why Lakeo found him virtuous. Did Arayevo find him virtuous too? Was that why she hadn’t considered him as anything other than the boy she used to babysit?

The leaves in the tree were wavering, and he forced himself to focus on the task again. Having virtue was a *good* thing, he told himself.

“Since you’re not going to Stargrind,” Lakeo finally said, not commenting on the wavering tree, “maybe you could come with me.”

Yanko gaped at her. “To the Kyatt Islands?”

“Why not? They’ve got a big university there, and you could study the earthy stuff there if you wanted to.” She waved a dismissive hand at the tree.

“How is it that you know about the educational opportunities there, but nothing of the political climate?”

“I’m interested in what I’m interested in and that’s it, all right?”

“I can’t leave my family,” Yanko said, but he paused and considered the words. Was that still true? If he could not become the warrior mage everyone had hoped he could, then was there any reason to stay? Would the Great Chief ever call upon a *moksu* as lowly as he to serve?

“Yeah, you can,” Lakeo said. “The people in your family that I’ve met are pricks. Just

think about—”

A shudder ran through the floor, and salt trickled down from the ceiling. Yanko dropped his illusion and grabbed the wall. A deep bonging reverberated through the mines. The alarm.

“All right, what craziness is going on now?” Lakeo stepped back. She sounded brave, but her gaze darted toward the ceiling as another tremor ran through their level, and more salt sifted down.

“The only other times the alarm has gone off since I’ve been here were when we discovered those insect creatures on the bottom level and we had explosions of methane in the tunnels.”

A faint boom came from somewhere above them. It reminded Yanko of the firecracker the proctor at the test had hurled into the air.

“Does methane set off explosives?” Lakeo asked. “Do insects?”

Explosives. Is that what they were hearing? Maybe someone was blasting new tunnels. Since Yanko had been gone for over a week, he didn’t know what was on the schedule. But that shouldn’t have caused the alarm to go off. Unless someone had miscalculated and started a cave-in.

Yanko called for the lift. A few of the overseers had a modicum of magical aptitude, but Yanko was the only one here who’d had more assiduous training. If there was a cave-in or trouble somewhere, the workers might need his help. The way the alarm continued, those gongs deep and urgent, made him certain this was no accidental triggering of the system.

But the lift never came. Several workers from their level jogged into the open area in front of it, their pickaxes on their shoulders, and soon, a crowd of men had gathered.

“What’s going on?” one asked.

“No idea,” Lakeo said.

“There must be other people calling on the lift.” Yanko imagined everyone racing to it to escape some horrible fate—tunnels filling with methane or some other gas toxic to humans. A chain of cave-ins, each more devastating than the last.

Stop it. Use your senses to check, fool.

Right. He could do that.

“Give me a second,” he murmured, mostly to Lakeo, so she knew to watch his back in case one of the workers decided the confusion would be a good time to club the controller’s nephew in the head and escape.

They were hundreds of feet beneath the surface, and he struggled to stretch up through the layers of salt and tunnels with his mind. He encountered knots of confused and frightened men on each level. The lift must be stuck somewhere near the top.

“That’s the only way out?” Lakeo asked.

Yanko did not know if she was talking to him or the men shifting and muttering behind them, but he didn’t answer. He needed his focus to push his senses farther, higher. Was that the first level? People were running in every direction. He could not tell if the lift was there. The vertical shaft had a feeling of openness that it should not have, not in the mines. Confusion laced his thoughts as what he sensed and what should be failed to match. So many people, so many afraid, but some were angry, some determined, some—

His eyes flew open, realization coming to him.

“Pray to the war gods,” he whispered. “We’re under attack.”

“Attack?” Lakeo asked skeptically. “Attack by who? We’re three days from the coast, and there’s nothing out here. And I do mean *nothing*.”

“Not nothing,” Yanko said, touching the salt wall. “This is as valuable as silver and a resource. There’s a reason an honored family oversees it.” He switched his focus to his mind’s eye again. “Let me see if I can find the lift, force it to come down. We need to help.”

“*We* do?” Lakeo asked, glancing at the workers behind them. “What’s it to us if the mine gets sacked?”

Irritation tensed Yanko’s shoulders, and he snapped, “Your room is up there. They’ll sack your savings, too, and then how will you get to Kyatt?”

She cursed. “You’re right. Get that lift down here.”

“I’m trying. But I’m not finding it.” He ground his teeth. They were right under the lift. How hard could it be to send his senses up the shaft? True, finding the life forces of others was easier than identifying inanimate objects, but still. He could feel all the way up to the guard shack with his mind. Or where the guard shack had *been*. People were jogging about, descending into the shaft and down to the first level, and he realized... “Damn.”

Yanko tried the obvious thing that he hadn’t before. He leaned into the lift shaft and looked up. Night had fallen outside, and it was a long way to the top, but yes, he could pick out the sky up there, a tiny dot of dark blue at the end of the black tunnel.

“The lift is gone. I think they blew it up, and maybe a little more.”

“Is there another way up?” Lakeo asked. “There better be. There’s no way we can climb up that shaft.”

Gold Hawk could have levitated himself up. Shame wrapped around Yanko. He was too afraid of falling to even try. He had called upon the wind and manipulated air before, but to use it to push himself up hundreds of meters? He couldn’t imagine it, nor did he want to imagine the fall that would await him if he made it part way and his powers failed him.

“In the back,” one of the miners said, waving his pickaxe. He had a thick accent. A Turgonian? His skin was a darker bronze than the typical Nurian yellow-brown, and he had the shoulders of an ox. “The carts go that way. You can get as far as the screw before you have to start climbing some walls.” He raised his bushy eyebrows at Yanko. “I’ll show you if you look the other way when I disappear in the mess.”

Yanko was on the verge of saying he could find the route himself, but what did the prisoners matter at this point? He needed to find his uncle, make sure he was safe, and then help in whatever way he could to drive these invaders away, whoever they were. Could it be the Turgonians? It was hard to imagine any of Nuria’s other enemies being so brazen as to attack this far inland, but the new republic had been talking of making peace of late, not war. Not that such words couldn’t be a ruse. Or a distraction.

“Let’s go,” Yanko said, waving for the man to lead.

* * *

The explosions continued on the levels above them, each one causing the tunnels to shudder and the wooden support posts to groan and creak. Yanko and Lakeo followed the big miner until he recognized the area. They had climbed up long switchbacks in the bowels of the earth, following those cart tracks, and even at a jog, it had taken nearly a half hour to rise from the eighth level to the second. With every passing moment, Yanko

had worried he was too late to help, too late to be any good to his family and the property they were charged to protect. He thought of the miners, too—men who had no swords, no firearms, no true means of defending themselves.

When they reached the bottom of the screw, they came across the first body. Yanko stared down at the overseer, the man who usually beat the drum from atop the platform overhead. His neck was broken. It looked like he had fallen from the landing above—or been shoved.

Whatever had happened up there, the platform appeared to be empty now. From fifty feet below it, he could not be certain. He tried reaching up with his mind to check, but a sharp stab of pain behind his eyes warned him that he had been doing much more of that than he was accustomed to—he had been using his senses to search the tunnels ahead for enemies at every turn.

“We climbing up?” Lakeo grabbed the thick rope attached to the cart lift.

The men who had been accompanying them—eight miners of various nationalities—grumbled amongst themselves as they eyed the body. They had to be thinking of hiding somewhere and waiting out the attack, rather than barreling into sword-wielding strangers. Yanko could not do that.

He jumped and caught the rope above Lakeo’s hand. “Yes. I’ll go first.”

Despite the burgeoning headache, he made himself inspect the platform above them as he climbed. He didn’t sense any more living beings in the area, though he could hear clangs and shouts in the distance. It made him uneasy that the offices, storage rooms, and living quarters were in that direction.

Even though he trusted his senses, he paused when he reached the bottom of the platform and poked his eyes over the top before committing himself. Three more bodies lay near the screw, two bare-chested miners and a third man in leather and black silks with a scimitar and *kylzar* that had dropped from his hands when he fell. Those were traveling clothes, not mining clothes, and the man’s hair was in a topknot.

Yanko pulled himself up, waved that it was safe for the others, and walked over to the body. He had assumed their attackers would be foreigners, invaders from across the sea, but this man had the clothing and skin color of a Nurian. More, the hair implied he was from a *moksu* family. Of course, the man could have chosen the style in an attempt to disguise himself, but the penalty for feigning a position in a class above oneself was steep in Nuria. Few people dared to try. So who was this then? Internal strife on a large scale was rare these days. The Great Chief squashed out rebellions, and thieves and bandits were dealt with before they could form into groups substantial enough to harry towns and clans. Even when groups did crop up, they usually targeted banks and bank-owned transports, rather than something as large as a mine. An invading army would be more likely to want to take over resources useful in supporting their troops.

“Friend of yours?” Lakeo asked, coming up behind him. She nudged the body with her boot.

“No.”

“Good.” She stuck her hammer and chisel in her belt and grabbed the fallen scimitar and *kylzar*.

The miners had reached the platform, as well. They eyed the bodies, but seemed more interested in finding a way out than in figuring out who was attacking.

Yanko took the lead again, wondering if he should have been the one to grab the

swords. If they encountered the enemy in the tunnels, he might not have time to summon a magical defense. The passages on this first level had been hollowed out hundreds of years earlier and were wider than the ones below. That should give him more space and more time to react, but it would also allow a number of people to attack them at once. He held the makings of a barrier in his mind as they advanced, following the cart tracks toward the lift and the way out.

More bodies scattered the passages, the white-gray floors stained with fresh blood. A few of the leather-and-silk-wearing enemies had fallen, but far more miners had been killed, men who probably hadn't even wanted to fight. Or who might have been willing to turn on their captors. Indeed, at one point, they passed an overseer who had been brutally mauled, his face unrecognizable, and Yanko suspected only someone seeking revenge would have lingered to do so much damage. It chilled him to think of the miners at his back deciding to turn on him if he blocked their way, or simply because they thought they could get away with it.

He glanced at Lakeo, glad she was with him. She wasn't *moksu*, and even if she voluntarily worked here, the miners would likely see her as one of them. But she should stand beside Yanko in a fight—after all, he had made countless tree and plant illusions for her over the last few months. Maybe that would make them less likely to attack him.

As they drew closer to the offices, living quarters, and kitchen, the air stank more and more of smoke. They turned a corner and nearly smacked into a rockfall blocking the passage.

"Guess that's what we heard down below," Lakeo said.

"Sh," Yanko whispered, sensing people up ahead.

The explosions and shouts from earlier had faded. He hoped that meant his people had driven out the attackers, but he couldn't assume that was the case, especially when the invaders had all been armed. The guards in the shack at the top of the lift must have been caught by surprise.

Yanko crawled up the broken slabs of salt. They didn't completely block the tunnel, and he could squeeze through at the top, but he paused before doing so. Two men had walked out of a storage room, each carrying bags of salt over their shoulders. These also wore the traveling garments, but their hair was cut short in the military style favored by the common man, and swords swayed at their hips.

Yanko took too long debating if he should try to capture and question them, and they disappeared around a bend ahead. He crawled the rest of the way over the fallen salt slabs, crouched and used his mind to probe the other nearby storage rooms. A draft of fresh desert air whispered across his cheeks. Odd. One didn't usually feel that until one was rising out of the mines on the lift.

A scream of pain traveled down the tunnel from ahead, halting his investigation. That scream had sounded familiar.

"Uncle?" Yanko whispered.

Lakeo slid down the rock pile and landed beside him.

"Watch my back," he said, barely aware that he was giving her an order. He sprinted up the passage without waiting for an answer. It made sense that the enemy would interrogate Uncle Mishnal if they had captured him. After all, he ran the mine. If there were any government secrets to be known about the salt and where it was distributed, he would know them.

Yanko almost crashed into a man walking out of a side room carrying ropes of sausages. Not wanting to slow down, Yanko slammed an elbow into his sternum and tore the intruder's *kizar* from his belt before the man had done more than drop the food. Yanko took advantage of his surprise, smashing a palm into his foe's face at the same time as he stepped in close, driving the blade into his chest.

He had never killed before, and remorse caught up with what had been instinctive reactions. He stared as the man fell back, landing on the floor, death in his eyes as he gasped for his final breaths of air.

The clang of steel near him told him Lakeo had passed him and also found an opponent. There was no time to linger. He pulled out the dying man's second weapon, a two-edged longsword, then raced up the tunnel to help Lakeo. She had stumbled across two men who had been carrying a trunk of cheeses out of a supply room. They had flung their load down and were pressing her, both attacking at the same time. Predictably, the miners accompanying Yanko and Lakeo hung back. They had pickaxes, but did not rush to engage in the battle.

Yanko charged up, catching one of her attackers in the side before he could break away to face him. Relentless, Yanko smashed the man's sword hand, knocking the weapon away. He slammed the *kizar* into the man's chest, the blade scraping and grinding against ribs. The reality of the noise made Yanko wince, but the fact that Lakeo was in trouble ensured he did not hesitate. He would have turned to help her with her opponent, but two more invaders were racing down the hall toward them. He had to trust that Lakeo could take care of herself. Even though he usually bested her when they sparred, she had a scrappy unpredictable style that he hoped would serve her well.

One of the approaching men carried a bow and paused to nock an arrow. Since he had a couple of seconds, Yanko did his best to block out the chaos of the fight, the rasping of men's heavy breaths, the clank of swords, the grunts of pain and frustration. He called upon that draft creeping through the tunnels, channeled it, and threw a blast of air at the archer. The man toppled backward, his shoulder slamming into the wall, and his arrow falling away.

"Mage!" the man started to scream.

Using the same force of wind, Yanko shoved it down his throat, battering his tonsils and forcing the warning cry back into his mouth. The man's head hammered against the wall, and he slumped to the ground, groaning.

That would have to be enough for the moment, because the second invader had reached Yanko, a bare-armed man with two longswords. He leaped, both weapons swinging for Yanko's head. There wasn't time to come up with a magical defense—and he certainly couldn't concentrate on one with those sharp blades angling for his eyes. He skittered to the side to avoid one of the swings and blocked the other with his purloined sword. The power of the blow radiated up his arm to his elbow, and he almost dropped the weapon. Cursing himself, he jumped back, giving himself room to recover. This was no duel in a practice arena for show. This man wanted to kill him.

His elbow brushed against something. Lakeo. She was still fighting her own opponent.

Knowing he could not back up farther without impeding her, Yanko stood his ground under the next barrage that the man launched at him. Each blow numbed Yanko's arms with its power, but he blocked them nonetheless and tried to find an opening in the blur

of metal dancing in front of him. The man wielded the two blades effectively, but Yanko noticed that the swipes from his right hand weren't quite as quick and deadly. He must favor his left hand. If Yanko could take that out of action, he might gain the advantage. He wished he could hurl some mental attack at the same time as he fought, but blocking the rain of blows took all of his concentration.

The man's foot bumped the arm of one of his fallen comrades, and he glanced down. He was only distracted for a split second, but Yanko turned the attack on him. Instead of defending, he launched his own series of blows, first a slash toward the man's head with the long blade, and then he lunged in, aiming for the vulnerable inner thigh. Getting so close on someone tall and with two swords was a risk—the man's reach was far greater than his own—but Yanko was fast and believed he could skitter back out again if he needed to. Fortunately, his rapid barrage of blows, half more feints than true attacks, made the bigger man step back. Finally, Yanko found his opening, and he whipped his shorter blade across, the edge cutting into the invader's dominant hand. The blade bit deep, and the man dropped the weapon.

Yanko ducked, anticipating the frenzied, defensive attack from the other hand. It came, and the longsword sailed over his head, so close that it almost relieved him of his topknot, but in his moment of slight panic, the man swung too hard. The sword struck the wall, biting into the salt.

Before his foe could recover from the wild blow, Yanko leaped in close and plunged his *kyzar* into the man's kidney.

The intruder gasped, his back going as rigid as a tree. He dropped his sword, clutched at Yanko's arm, and stared him in the eyes, horror and pain contorting his features. Yanko jumped back, in case the invader had one more attack in him before he passed on, but not before the impression of that face imprinted itself in his mind forever. His stomach churned, and his mouth was drier than desert sand, but he couldn't stop to dwell on this now, on the fact that he was taking the lives of other human beings.

He turned toward the archer he had attacked earlier, expecting that the man would have recovered by now. But there was a knife buried in his chest.

He turned to check on Lakeo. Blood dripped from a cut at her temple, but she had defeated her opponent, and she must have been the one to throw the knife, as well. She gave him a quick nod and waved her sword to signal she could go on. Her face was pale, and Yanko wondered if she, too, despite all her bravado, had never had to kill a man before.

The miners that had been following them had climbed over the rubble pile and still had their pickaxes, but they hadn't made any move to join in with the fight. A twinge of frustration ran through Yanko, and he had to remind himself that they had no reason to feel loyal to the mines or to him. Yelling at them wouldn't do anything.

Apparently, Lakeo didn't feel the same way. She pulled her knife out of the archer's chest and used it to point at the leader. "You ox brains help us with the fighting, and maybe Yanko will be more inclined to look the other way when you skulk off."

Remembering the cry that had come from the living quarters, Yanko headed off, not worrying about the conversation.

"That what happened with those Turgonians?" the miner asked.

"That's right," Lakeo said and ran to catch up with Yanko. "What Turgonians is he talking about?" she whispered.

"A handful of them escaped before you came to work here. Prince Zirabo and I were... knocked out and beaten up during their escape."

"Prince Zirabo? The Great Chief's son? The one who's a diplomat?"

"Yes. He came for a visit." They rounded a curve, and the doors to the living quarters came into view, so he did not expound on the details.

"At the same time as some prisoners escaped?"

"Yes. I looked the other way for it because one had been a sword tutor to me, if an unwilling one."

Yanko glanced through an open doorway, wincing when he spotted another dead overseer. This one had died in his bed, a pile of rock half-burying him.

They had to scramble across more rock debris in the corridor, and the draft had turned into a full-fledged breeze. In one spot, the tunnel was nearly impassable with more than ten feet of ceiling collapsed, leaving a hole open to a starry sky above. If they had wanted to simply escape, that could be a way out, but he had to reach Mishnal. They were close.

"That doesn't seem like you," Lakeo said, apparently not ready to drop the topic.

"Was that the *honorable* thing to do?" She had mocked him more than once about his determination to help his family, to become an honorable member of Nurian society, and he didn't miss the emphasis she put on the word.

"At the time, I thought it was. And if I ever run into that Turgonian again, he said he owes me a favor."

"Great, next time you're in the empire, I'm sure that'll come in handy."

"It's a republic now."

Lakeo gave him a scathing who-cares look. He did not respond. He sensed more people in the corridor ahead, and he slowed down, holding up a hand. Voices chattered. They didn't sound alarmed; they sounded like they knew they had already won and that there was nothing to worry about.

Yanko's fists tightened on the hilts of his swords. He would give them something to worry about.

The corridor curved again, and he paused to peer around the bend. At the far end, the lift shaft was visible, as was an enormous hole in the ceiling, at least twenty feet across. Ladders had been placed on either side of the entry chamber, and men were carrying loot out on their shoulders. Other men, heavily armed men, stood in a group, talking and pointing downward, toward the lower levels of the mine. Wondering if it was worth trying to go down there and loot further? Quiet fury filled Yanko at the thought of these people casually contemplating killing and looting this place. Even if the mines weren't exactly a home to him, they were his family's responsibility. For the first time, he felt that meant they were *his* responsibility too.

And they were Mishnal's responsibility. The door to his quarters and office stood open ten feet ahead of Yanko. Unfortunately, it was in full view of those men. This portion of the tunnel lay clear, with no rubble piles to hide behind, so he could not advance without being spotted.

"We lost our posse," Lakeo whispered in his ear.

The miners had disappeared. Probably up that hole. Yanko shrugged. He couldn't have depended on them, anyway. He would have to sneak up to his uncle's room on his own. He concentrated on the chamber around the invaders, trying to sense more than his eyes showed him, such as the way some of the crumbled earth around the edges above

hung precariously. A tall cactus leaned toward the hole, its root system half destroyed.

Yanko pointed at his uncle's door and made a get-ready gesture. Lakeo nodded.

With a silent apology to the cactus, he used his power to sever a few more of its roots. It toppled twenty feet, crashing to the ground a couple of meters from the men. They all spun toward it, several jumping in surprise. Knowing they would recover quickly, Yanko ran for his uncle's door, careful not to make a noise.

He slipped inside before the men turned back around—and almost tripped over the supine figure on the floor. Uncle Mishnal. A pool of blood spread out from beneath his torso.

The emotions that Yanko had been holding back boiled over, and tears of outrage and loss sprang to his eyes. He dropped to his knees, his weapons falling from his hands. He almost forgot about the men, that they were close enough to hear a conversation—or the clink of weapons hitting the hard ground. But Lakeo had made it inside, too, and she eased the door shut.

Yanko knew he was too late, but he touched his uncle's shoulder, hoping he might be wrong, that the injury was not fatal.

Mishnal's eyelids fluttered, then opened. Such utter pain twisted his face that Yanko wished he hadn't bothered his uncle, that he had simply let him die peacefully. But maybe this would be better, for Mishnal to know that someone was here for him in the end.

"Can you do anything?" Lakeo whispered.

Yanko shook his head. He was no healer. There wasn't time for any man to learn every branch of the mental sciences, and warrior mages were encouraged to master destruction, not healing. Healing was considered a woman's art. Much like the earth sciences. Yanko bitterly admitted that he could have healed a dying tree. But he didn't know how to help a human being. Maybe he had failed in choosing his passions.

"Uncle," he whispered.

"Yanko," Mishnal rasped. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth. Yanko wiped it away. "Tell... tell your father."

"I will. Do you know who these people are?"

"The prince... was right." Mishnal drew in a shuddering breath, then coughed, blood spattering the ground next to his face.

Yanko did not try to stop the hot tears tracing his cheeks. "About what, Uncle? What should I tell my father?"

"Protect... the village. There... this is only... the beginning."

"Of what? Who are these people? How can I help?"

"It's dark," Mishnal whispered. "Yanko? ...still there?"

Yanko glanced at the lamp still burning on his uncle's desk and struggled to talk around the lump in his throat. He squeezed Mishnal's shoulder. "I'm still here."

"Be careful... out there." Mishnal opened his mouth, but another round of coughs came out. Yanko wanted to tell him not to talk any more, not to stress himself further, but if there was any more information he could give, anything that could help... "Your father."

"Yes?"

"He cares. But... he's afraid."

"Cares for what? Afraid of who?" This wasn't the information Yanko needed, but

how could he interrupt a dying man?

“You. Afraid you’ll... be like mother... leave him, leave family. She was... there was a reason he loved her. You have... her power. Power... changes people. Don’t let it... change you.”

Yanko wiped his palm across his eyes. “I won’t.”

Mishnal managed one more breath, but it was his last. His eyes froze in place, staring at the floor, empty of his spirit. His hand shaking, Yanko reached out and closed his lids.

He had thought himself alone after failing his test, but this was far worse.

Chapter 3

“Sorry to interrupt,” Lakeo said, “but we have a problem.”

Yanko stood up, the muscles in his legs weak and wobbly. He wanted to prepare his uncle’s body for a funeral, not leave him, but what could he do? They were in the middle of an invasion. “Someone’s coming?”

Lakeo had her ear pressed to the door. “Yes. I think I heard someone say this door was shut and it hadn’t been before.”

Yanko wiped his eyes again and picked up the swords. He could find some tree to cry under later, where he could fall apart and rail at the world. For now, he had a duty. He had to escape and report this atrocity to his father. The village was over a day’s walk away, and he couldn’t assume anyone else would take the news. His father would know what to do with the information and how to round up volunteers to defend the area until word could be sent to the regional chief and the military could be brought in.

The doorknob rattled.

“I locked it,” Lakeo said, then shrugged. It hardly mattered. The people outside would know someone had come in. “Maybe we should have run,” she whispered.

Yes, getting out now would be difficult. Even if they could somehow beat all six of those men—which Yanko doubted, since they had barely handled three—he sensed dozens more on the ground above the mine, as well as pack lizards strapped to carts full of loot. These people had deliberately come to steal the salt and supplies and run. It infuriated Yanko that they’d had to kill to do it. Why couldn’t they simply have taken prisoners?

“Kick it down,” a voice outside said.

“We’ve got a live one in here,” someone else in the tunnel yelled.

Lakeo cursed. “They’ll all be down here in a minute. Yanko?” It might have been the first time she had looked to him for help, for advice.

He was not in the mood to appreciate the moment. He was staring at his uncle and fuming, his knuckles white where he gripped the swords. All this death. It needn’t have happened. It was pointless.

He glared at the door, seeing the men in the hallway with his mind, seeing more running to join them, their weapons at the ready. He also saw the layers of salt above their heads, the way the ceiling had already been damaged by the explosives set near the lift. Cracks and fissures meandered through the salt, more than had ever been there before. It would not take much to shift the ground, create an earthquake.

One that might bury them too?

A foot slammed into the door, and it flew open. He had no more time to ponder.

Yanko lifted his hand and funneled all of his rage and power into moving a section of the earth. Lakeo flung her knife at the doorway, and the men who had been about to charge in ducked and scurried back for an instant. The ceiling groaned, then snaps sounded in the salt. Far away, probably outside of the mine, someone screamed a warning. It was too late for these men.

The roar of falling rock pummeled Yanko’s ears, and white dust flooded the room. Coughing, Lakeo staggered back. She grabbed his arm and lunged for the corner, pulling

him with her. He might have dove under the desk instead, but chunks of salt were flying into the room like bullets, and he didn't take the time to object. In the corner, he hunkered next to her. They hid their heads beneath their arms and prayed. Yanko had examined the faults as carefully as he could in the limited time he had, and he didn't *think* their ceiling should fall, but he was not an expert at creating earthquakes.

Rock and dust continued to flood the room, until he couldn't have seen anything even if he had unburied his face. Screams of pain and the sound of limbs and torsos being crushed rose over the din of falling rock. This time, he couldn't manage any sympathy for the dead and dying. They had picked this fight, chosen to kill unnecessarily. Yanko just hoped that this act of defiance, of rage and vengeance, would not be the last action he ever took.

Lakeo coughed, her body shaking next to his. She might have been coughing all along, but this was the first time Yanko could hear it. The waterfall of dropping rocks had slowed to a trickle. The dust was settling in the room, though it still stung his eyes, the tiny salt crystals digging in. The ceiling above them remained intact, but so much of the ceiling in the tunnel had dropped that the doorway was nearly blocked. A tiny gap remained at the top, but Yanko did not know if they could squeeze through it, or what they would find when they exited. Dozens of men with bows waiting to shoot them?

He didn't see the *kylar*, but he picked up his sword—no, the sword he had taken from one of the invaders. His own gear was in the bunk room he shared with five other miners. Was there any way he could get to it? He didn't know, but they could not stay here.

Lakeo coughed again and wiped her mouth and eyes. "I'm not putting salt on my food again for a long time."

After giving up the search for the shorter sword, which had to be buried under the rubble that had flowed inside, Yanko climbed up the pile in the doorway. As he had anticipated, shouts came from above, cries to get help and unbury the men. Yanko didn't check to see if anyone was alive under the salt slabs he was climbing up—he didn't want to know. He peeked through the gap between the rock pile and the top of the doorway, having to turn his head sideways to do so, and gawked at the mess he had made. Not only had he brought down the ceiling in the tunnel, but he had doubled the size of the opening near the lift.

"Is it safe to go down?" someone above that opening asked.

"Yes, Gar Soon and Tink are down there. Hurry, we have to haul them out."

Yanko squeezed and contorted his body to pull himself through the gap. In seconds, there would be more people down here. Even as he pulled himself out, he had the thought that it was odd that the enemy was calling each other by first name, showing concern for fallen comrades. Shouldn't the people who could mastermind this attack sound less... human?

"Hurry," Lakeo whispered from behind him. "Move, move. We have to get out of here."

Yanko needed no urging. Once he was through the gap, he crawled to the side so she could climb out—and so he could figure out where to go next. Someone had jumped or used a rope to climb down, and the ladders were being set up again. Going that way would only get them caught. Yanko crawled toward the back of the rock pile. The ceiling had collapsed for a good ten feet in that direction, but he thought they could reenter the tunnel they had originally come up, maybe reach that hole the miners had escaped

through. If it was still there. He had tried to focus that quake in a small area, but it might have repercussions for meters, if not miles, in every direction.

“Made it,” Lakeo panted softly, crawling toward him. “Here’s a tip, Yanko. Never get boobs.”

Another time, he might have appreciated her attempt at humor, but all he could think of was his uncle’s death and that he had to warn his father of the invaders. He glanced up as he crawled through the remains of the tunnel, aware that someone might look down at them from above. So far, the invaders seemed to be staying near the lift, but he would make an easy target for an archer if that changed.

He reached the end of the area where the ceiling had collapsed, but the rubble pile rose so high, that he had to squeeze and squirm again to find his way back into the tunnel that still stood.

“Stoat’s teats,” Lakeo whispered, pausing while he worked his way under the ceiling. “I had no idea you could do something like this.”

“Earth science is more powerful than people think,” Yanko said, sliding head-first down the rock pile until he could stand on solid ground again.

Lakeo squeezed in after him, wincing as her chest and back scraped the confines of the rock above and below. She refrained from further comments about boobs. “Is that why you chose it?”

Once she reached the ground, Yanko jogged back down the tunnel, keeping his sword ready—some of the looters might well still be back here. “I chose it when I wanted to convince some bees to leave their hive so I could steal a taste of their honey. I was six.”

“I thought all six-year-old boys wanted to hurl fireballs.”

Yanko skirted a new rockfall, wondering again if the hole would still be there. “I was always comfortable in the forest.” He wouldn’t mind running and hiding in the woods now, as he had done as a boy whenever he was upset or in trouble. Somehow he doubted that would solve his problems this time.

“There it is,” Lakeo pointed over his shoulder.

The hole still gaped in the ceiling—if anything, it was wider now—with a big pile of rubble underneath it. Surprisingly, a rope dangled down.

“A trap?” Lakeo wondered. “Or were the invaders looting back here and going out that way?”

Yanko tugged at the rope, found it held his weight, and shrugged at her. “Maybe the miners left it for us.”

She snorted. “Optimistic. Maybe they dropped it down to help each other. That’s an ugly climb.”

Yes, they would have had to claw their way up fifteen feet before reaching the top of the hole. Yanko looked at his sword, wondered where he would put it since he didn’t have a scabbard or even a belt, and thought about trying to find a way to his room. But the sounds of men pushing aside rocks floated down the corridor after him.

“No time,” he muttered.

He could make this work until he reached home. Careful not to cut himself, he clenched the back of the blade between his teeth. He jumped off the rubble pile, grabbed the rope, and hauled himself up. The tip of the sword banged against the side of the hole, and he almost lost it—and his lip. Fortunately, the walls were uneven, and he found footholds to help him along.

By the time he reached the rim, his jaw ached, and he wanted to yank himself over the edge, to relieve the burden. Instead, he forced himself to ease only his eyes over the rim. A cactus, a bunch of boulders, and a stunted juniper were all he could see. He would have liked a better view, but this should mean nobody would see him climb out. He laid the sword on the dusty earth and rolled over the edge. After he waved for Lakeo to follow, he stood up, the weapon back in hand. He peered over the top of the boulder, and his mouth dropped so low, he nearly cracked his chin on the rock.

He had predicted dozens of raiders, but there had to be hundreds of men, lizards, and carts stretching along the road that led to the mine. Torches burned here and there, and people were setting up tents underneath the starlight. Guards patrolled the outskirts of the camp, bows, swords, and even Turgonian firearms in their hands. The group of people working at the mine entrance seemed to only be a subset of this group. Carts had been rolled up to the hole in the earth—as he had feared, the guard shack had been obliterated—and a few men waved and called advice down to those who were trying to unearth their comrades.

Yanko looked in the opposite direction, to the mountains where his village awaited. He hoped answers waited for him there and that his father would have a plan for dealing with these people, these invading thieves and murderers.

* * *

“I can’t believe I didn’t get my money out of my room,” Lakeo grumbled as she and Yanko climbed the trail that led into the mountains where he had grown up. He had opted for this route instead of the road, afraid the invaders might be using it. They had sneaked out of the camp without being seen, but he didn’t know how long their luck could last—or if the rest of the countryside was safe. “And my bow. But mostly my money. I’ve been saving that up for months. How am I going to get to Kyatt now?”

“I can’t believe I didn’t get food and canteens,” Yanko said, finding that more pertinent. They had walked through the night, which hadn’t been bad, but the sun had climbed into the sky, its heat beating down on them, a reminder as to why so few settlements existed on this side of the mountains. Even in the fall, it could be intense this far south. Fortunately, they had started climbing before it had grown too hot, and now the junipers and pines provided some shade. A small relief. His head ached with every step, and he wanted nothing more than to sleep, or to find a healer, though he knew it was overexertion that made his brain hurt, not any injury. If Arayevo were there, she might know of some medicine from the forest that could make him feel better. Or she would touch his shoulder and smile at him, and *that* would make him feel better.

“At least you know how to find water sources. You’re handy to travel with.” She thumped him on the back.

Yanko was fairly certain she was trying to cheer him up rather than being obtuse about his need to mourn, but he would have preferred to walk in silence. To reflect on his uncle, on the fact that, in the few months Yanko had worked with him, Mishnal had become more of a father to him than the man who had caused him to be born into the world. Had his uncle’s words been true? That Yanko’s father feared he would leave? And turn into his mother? Yanko had often wondered if he might take after her, at least in looks. He already knew that he had her aptitude for magic, but he had a broader face than his father and his brother, and his eyes were a deep, dark brown while theirs were a few shades lighter. But he had never seen a picture of her, so he didn’t know. His father had

removed everything from the house that was hers or that reminded him of her.

"If you can call two drops on a thorny leaf a water source." Lakeo rubbed her lip.

Yanko sighed. He wasn't going to get a chance to reflect on his feelings and his uncle's passing. Maybe it was just as well. It was too raw right now, and as tired as he was after the chaos and walking all night, he wasn't far from weeping. He did not want to break down, not in front of Lakeo. Not until he was back home and could find some privacy, perhaps in the very forest that had never stopped calling to him.

"Once we get over the pass, it's much damper," he said.

"So... we'll get three drops on a thorny leaf."

"Maybe four. And most of the leaves aren't thorny."

Yanko veered off the trail to climb up a cluster of boulders, the dry rock laced with tenacious lichen. At the top, he raised his hand above his eyes and squinted back into the desert. He wanted to know if the invaders remained camped outside of the mine. If so, if he hurried, his people might gather forces quickly enough to take back what had been taken—the material goods, anyway. But they had come too far, and he couldn't see the area anymore, not with his eyes. Though he was reluctant to make his headache worse, he tried to stretch out with his mind, hoping the openness of the land between here and there might let him push his senses farther than he usually could.

But he barely reached a mile back, and the amount of wildlife in the area overloaded his mind—his thoughts snapped back into his head with all the gentleness of an arrow to the eye. He groaned and slumped against the boulder, rubbing his temples. That should have been warning enough to give his mind a rest, but he had sensed something more than deer and squirrels out there. Even as his thoughts had been jerked back into his skull, they had brushed past the road.

He wiped sweat from his brow and pushed his senses in that direction again. Yes, there were humans out there. At first, he let himself hope that his father might have already received the news about the mine attack and that he had gathered troops, troops that would descend upon the intruders and punish them for their arrogance. But these men were walking and riding with lizards of burden, with carts strung out behind them. His father's team would have been led by men in carriages powered by magic, lightweight craft that could have moved much more quickly. These had to be more invaders, or was it the same troop? Heading over the pass? If so, the village was in danger. He had to—

Halfway through the thought, his senses snapped back again, this time with a blinding flash that brought light, then darkness. He slumped against the boulder, his legs giving out beneath him.

He did not realize he had lost consciousness until a shake to his shoulder roused him. He blinked blearily up at Lakeo, his head aching as if it had been pounded like an anvil in a smith's shop.

"If you want to take a nap, I wouldn't mind a break, either, but I thought you were in a hurry," she said.

"I am," Yanko croaked, his throat dry. He was looking forward to those leaves with the three drops of dew. He pushed himself to his feet, vowing not to try to draw upon his mental power again, not until he had rested for a night. Or seven. "There are more invaders on the road." He climbed down from the boulders. "I don't know if they're heading to the village, but it's not far off the main road over the pass. We need to get

there before they do.”

Lakeo took the lead, and he was happy to let her, to plod along until they reached their destination. The trail they were on would bring them to the village eventually. To the back side.

“Do you smell smoke?” She sniffed at the air as she walked.

All of Yanko’s senses seemed broken, and it took him a moment before he could catch the faint hint of burning wood on the air. “Yes. Some traveler’s campfire.”

She gave him a long look over her shoulder. “If you say so.”

“What do you think it is?”

“Maybe those people you saw aren’t heading to the village, but have already been there.”

Yanko tripped over a root. “What? No. There’s nothing there except a lake and some gardens around my family’s land. Where we keep bees. That’s the town’s biggest industry. Nobody raids a village for honey. They don’t.” He realized he sounded like he was trying hard to convince himself. Maybe he was.

Of their own volition, his feet sped up. He passed Lakeo and took the lead, almost jogging along the trail, especially when they crested the ridge and the ground leveled out. As weary as he was, he tripped often, but he could not bring himself to slow down.

They passed streams funneling down off the snowcaps, and the trees thickened, growing greener and more lush. Clouds drifted into the sky to dull the heat of the sun, but Yanko didn’t see any of it. Halfway across the pass, he had noticed smoke in the distance, too much smoke for a traveler’s campfire.

It was afternoon by the time they reached the far side of the mountain, and his stomach was snarling with hunger, but he didn’t stop until the trail crossed a familiar ledge, a cliff that overlooked the valley and the lake of his homeland. At that point, he verified the source of the smoke. He hadn’t wanted Lakeo to be right. He hadn’t wanted this day—this *month*—to get any worse. But those tendrils of black smoke were wafting from the roofs of burned buildings and burning trees. He was too far up to see people and animals, but the scene told him enough.

“They were attacked too,” Yanko said numbly.

Chapter 4

Yanko walked around the village, his *home* of eighteen years, in shock. Half of the log and earthen cabins, yurts, and larger buildings had been burned to the ground. Others remained standing, but they were devoid of life. Here and there, a chicken scratched in the earth, but the people and most of the livestock were gone.

The only thing that kept him from collapsing in an inconsolable heap was the fact that he hadn't seen any bodies yet. Maybe there had been some warning, and his people had fled. But why run instead of standing their ground? Why had they given up their homes? During the war, Father had been a soldier, and many of the other men in the village had been, as well.

Yanko found his answer when he walked closer to one of the Tayo Yant family's outbuildings, one that had not caught fire. It was, however, charred. He touched the hot log wall, which was still smoldering even though he judged this had been done the day before, and examined the huge circular scorch mark on the exterior. Nobody had done that with a torch. A wizard had flung this fireball. To leave a scorch mark this large and deep, it must have been an extremely powerful one.

There were Sensitives in the village, but he didn't think there were any others with an aptitude for the mental sciences, at least none who had ever studied it. Yanko's tutors had always been travelers that his father had talked into staying and teaching him for a time. The gypsy who had been his last one had moved on almost a year earlier, and Yanko did not know of anyone in the area who could have done this. *He* certainly could not. Most of his learning had come through books. Perhaps he had been delusional to think he would ever be qualified to attend Stargrind.

Lakeo strolled out of a shed with two canteens bouncing on her hips. "At least there's water here. Good well. Nice lake."

"You took those?" Yanko frowned at the canteens, the idea of his people being stolen from while they were gone irritating him. This whole situation irritated him.

Lakeo shrugged. "Nobody's using them. We have to walk another two days to the coast, right? I'm tired of licking leaves."

"Put them back."

Her indifferent shrug turned into a scowl. "You're not in charge here, Yanko. We're just two people traveling the same way. You don't have any right to tell me what to do."

Yanko stepped away from the building. "That's Shen Pon's shed and his canteens. He's a baker, lost a leg in the war, and his only son is a shepherd. He's probably poorer than you. Put them back, and I'll get you something from our house." Granted, Yanko hadn't reached his own family's homestead yet, but he trusted that whatever the raiders had come for, it wasn't canteens.

For a long moment, Lakeo stared mulishly at him, but she finally shrugged again and tossed the canteens back into the smoldering building. Half of the roof had burned off, and soot stained two of the inside walls. If Shen Pon came back, canteens were probably the last thing he would worry about. Still, the idea of stealing from his people—from any people—made Yanko grimace.

"Got any beds in your house?" Lakeo asked as they walked along the lake, the worn

cobblestone road in good shape despite the destruction to the rest of the village.

“Many.”

“Think we can rest there tonight? That it would be wise? I’m exhausted. They wouldn’t come back to raid the same village twice, would they?”

“I don’t know.”

Yanko did not know what they would find. It was wishful to think that the raiders hadn’t reached his homestead, but the property was fenced, so maybe the rest of the village had run there to hide—to put up a stand. Granted, the split-log railing that encompassed most of the area would not keep out determined warriors and definitely would not stop a wizard. Even the deer leaped over it easily in their constant quest to terrorize his grandmother’s garden.

Thinking of those deer and his family brought memories of his childhood to mind. He tried to swallow around the lump that had formed in his throat again—or maybe it had never completely disappeared.

“Look, Yanko,” Lakeo said. “I’m sorry you lost your uncle. And that this happened. I know it’s hard.”

“Thanks,” he mumbled. He sensed that saying that had been hard for her, though he didn’t know why. She could make sarcastic comments easily enough.

“I lost my mother too. A few years ago. Been on my own since I was fourteen. It’s not easy being alone.”

“Yeah.”

They passed through the wooden gates, and the grassy foothills that marked the beginning of the homestead came into view. The property wasn’t impressive by the standards of many of the honored families—he had been told that his grandparents had once owned several homes in the Golden City that princes would have been pleased to stay in—but it was sprawling, with plenty of space for children to roam. The centuries-old main house had room for multiple generations, and barns and yurts dotted the property, along with a couple of greenhouses that supplied much of the produce for those who lived in the valley, especially tropical fruits that couldn’t survive the mountain frosts. Yanko did not see any signs of destruction, no singed walls or smoke wafting from the roofs, but as with the village, an emptiness hung about the place. Though his headache hadn’t abated, he cast out with his mind, searching for his kin or even his hounds. Everyone was gone. A wind blew off the mountains, bumping two upturned canoes together on the beach, the sound eerie in the stillness of the valley.

“Looks like a nice place to grow up,” Lakeo said.

“It was. There should have been more kids running around, aside from my brother and me, but, well, you’ve heard the story about my mother. We did have some younger cousins who were around. That made it seem busier. Fuller.” Unlike how it felt now. Yanko peeked into the vehicle stable. The big lizards, a special breed that had been magically adapted over the centuries to deal with the cold of the mountains, were gone, but the wagons and the two carriages remained. Even from the doorway, he could feel the power from the Made devices that powered them. “Strange. Everyone left, but they didn’t take the carriages.”

“Those look like they would only be good on the roads,” Lakeo said.

“They are. The wheels aren’t suited for rough terrain. Are you opposed to taking the road down to the coast?”

“Didn’t you say some of those invaders were traipsing through the mountain pass? Along the main road?”

“Yes, but...” Yanko chewed on the inside of his cheek. “How many of those bands of marauders could there be? My uncle and I *just* crossed the pass on the road out to the mines a couple of days ago. I didn’t hear *anything* in town about trouble coming. But my uncle’s dying words... He seemed to think this was inevitable. And I remember Prince Zirabo mentioning something about it, too, back when he came to the mines.” He pushed his hand through his hair, half knocking out his topknot but not caring. “Why didn’t any of them tell me more? Did they think I was too young? That I wouldn’t care? Or couldn’t be trusted?”

“Maybe they thought you were getting everything you needed from those newspapers you were reading.” Lakeo pointed to the porch. “So, there’s a bed in there I can use?”

Yanko waved her toward the door. “There’s not a lock. Go ahead.”

He should think of bed, too, but it would not be dark for another hour or two. Even if they hadn’t slept last night, he couldn’t imagine relaxing now, not when he hadn’t solved the mystery of his people’s disappearance. Had they all run up into the hills to hide from the invaders? It was hard to imagine his father cowering behind a rock, even if a wizard was involved, but Yanko would feel better knowing everyone was safe in the forest somewhere.

In the brush near the main gate, birds squawked and flew up. The creaking of something—a wobbly wheel?—drifted on the breeze. Yanko flexed his hand around the hilt of the sword he had been carrying all night and day. He stood with his back to the porch that led into the house—Lakeo had already disappeared inside. Maybe he should find some shadows to hide in.

Before he had taken more than a step toward the woodpile at the side of the house, an army carriage wobbled into view, one of its wood and rubber tires half-busted, the cannon that should have been mounted on the roof torn off. Despite the sturdy construction and reinforced leather armoring the thick walls, no less than a dozen arrows stuck out of the sides. There wasn’t a driver sitting on the exterior seat, and whoever was peering at the road through the horizontal slit of a window in the front didn’t seem to be doing so soberly. The vehicle kept veering into the tall grass and ruts beside the cobblestones.

Yanko did not know if he should be running forward to help or continuing to his hiding spot. He stretched out with his senses, endured another white flash of light that had him gripping the corner of the house for support, then gasped because he recognized the aura of the wagon’s sole occupant.

“Falcon?” he whispered, a mixture of confusion and disbelief rushing into him.

It had only been a few months since he had seen his brother, when Falcon had been home on leave. He had returned to the frozen outpost where he was stationed shortly after. That was more than a thousand miles to the north—and ten thousand feet higher in elevation. He couldn’t have received leave again so quickly, and regardless, he wouldn’t have been given an army vehicle to come home in.

Yanko rushed forward, but had to leap out of the way as the wobbly carriage nearly ran over him.

“Falcon,” he cried. “What’s wrong?” Aside from the arrows sticking out of the craft... As it finally slowed to a stop, Yanko squinted at the end of the lake, wondering how

far behind those archers, and whatever trouble his brother had escaped, were.

“Yanko?” came a wan call from inside.

It was only then, with his brother closer now, that Yanko sensed not only his presence, but his pain. He rushed to the heavy door on the side and tugged on the latch, but it was locked.

“Falcon? Let me in. Were you shot?” Not waiting for an answer, he pulled himself onto the roof to try the hatch that gave soldiers inside access to the cannon. It was locked too. He was on the verge of trying to conjure up some magical method of picking locks when the lower door thunked open.

Falcon spilled out onto the street with a groan.

Yanko hopped down, landing beside him, touching his chest lightly. The nub of an arrow, the shaft broken off, protruded from his brother’s thigh, and a huge slash had torn open the shoulder of his army uniform—along with an inch-deep canyon in the flesh beneath.

“What happened? Do you...?” Worry constricted Yanko’s throat again, making it hard to finish. If Falcon was mortally wounded the way Uncle Mishnal had been... Curse the coyote god, Yanko couldn’t lose someone else he loved. Not his brother.

“Need a healer?” Falcon asked. “Love one, thanks.”

Yanko found the flippancy encouraging. Dying men weren’t flippant, right?

“Everyone’s missing,” Yanko said. “I’m sorry. We just got here and don’t know what happened.”

“Missing?” Falcon’s eyes grew haunted as well as pained. “Am I too late?” He touched a small messenger satchel strapped across his chest.

“If you have a letter for Father, yes. I don’t know where anyone is.” Yanko raised his voice and called, “Lakeo? I need your help.” He could carry his brother inside, but probably not without hurting him further. It would be easier to keep from bumping his wounds with two people.

When he started to stand up, Falcon grabbed his arm. “Yanko? The message is for you.”

“Me? Who would send me a message?”

“That’s what I asked.” Falcon managed a quirky grin, even though he was breathing deeply, grabbing his leg and struggling for composure. Someone had bandaged it around the arrow, not risking pulling it out in the carriage. Or maybe Falcon had made the clumsy bandage himself. “I wasn’t told. I was pulled from my unit, given a carriage, and told to deliver it to you.” With a shaking hand, he reached for the satchel, fumbling with the clasp.

“Let me. You’ve lost a lot of blood, haven’t you?” Yanko could see some of it staining the floor of the carriage. He glimpsed someone’s arm, as well, an unmoving arm, also coated in blood. “And a driver,” he guessed.

“Yeah.” Falcon moved his hand and let Yanko unfasten the clasps. “If I can’t have a healer, I could at least use a drink from Father’s forbidden cabinet. I’m old enough for it now, don’t you think?”

Footsteps clomped on the wooden stairs of the porch.

“He’s a mess,” Lakeo said. “Do you know who he is?”

“My brother.” Yanko pulled an envelope out of his brother’s pouch, then waved for Lakeo to come help carry him inside. When he spotted the deep purple wax seal on the

paper, he itched to open it, but he had to take care of Falcon first. “You saw the royal seal?” he couldn’t help but ask as Lakeo came around to Falcon’s legs. Yanko slid his hands under his brother’s armpits.

Falcon hissed when they lifted him. His face and arms were scratched and cut, in addition to the more major wounds. They appeared fresh, like he had been attacked earlier that day. Yanko glanced again toward the road leading to the lake, afraid pursuit might not be far behind.

“I saw it,” Falcon said between gritted teeth as Yanko and Lakeo maneuvered him up the steps and through the front door. “Was real tempted to open it.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t.”

“Been on the road for a week. That’s a long time to itch with curiosity.”

They took Falcon into the closest bedroom, one usually reserved for guests. He didn’t object.

“Figured I’d be struck down by lightning if I opened it,” Falcon said. “Or mauled by bandits.”

“Is that who attacked you?” Yanko doubted it, but he wanted Falcon’s account of it.

“If they were bandits, they were extremely prepared bandits. They had a lot of archers wielding big army longbows, and they had a wizard, as well. I was lucky to escape. They couldn’t have anticipated me—I don’t see how—but it was like they were lying in wait. I was coming through Bent Badger Canyon on my way up the mountains, and they leaped out. Got Sergeant Huko. Almost got me too.”

“Who did you annoy, Falcon?” After they settled him on the bed, Yanko turned on lamps. That arrow had to come out of his brother’s leg, and the shoulder should be stitched up, but he didn’t know how to do either. Grandmother had a few healing artifacts in her room that might deal with the gash, but the arrow?

“I’m just a soldier. You’re the one the note was addressed to.”

“Lakeo, can you get some water and some food for him? For all of us? I’m going to root through Grandmother’s closet for healing... things.”

“Healing things,” Lakeo said. “Going to find people who know how to use them too?”

“I wish.” Yanko knew of numerous people who lived in cabins in the mountains, but none of them that he could reach before nightfall. The sun was dropping below the ridge, and long shadows stretched across the grassy foothills outside.

“Just find me a first-aid kit, and I’ll cut out the arrow,” Falcon said. “Then bring some of Grandmother’s salves.”

“You’ll cut out the arrow?” Lakeo sounded impressed.

“I’ve had basic medic’s training.”

Yanko retrieved the requested items, though he wanted to tear into that envelope. It had to be from Prince Zirabo. Only the royal family was allowed to dress in dark purple or use the color in any manner, and Zirabo was the only one who knew Yanko existed. Maybe he had sent information about the craziness going on. Maybe it was a warning, one that had arrived too late.

“Here’s Grandmother’s surgical kit, that stinky mushroom goo she always put on us as kids, and her satchel full of other herbs. I’ll let you determine what’s useful, what’s hallucinogenic, and what’s a snack she was saving for a dreary day.”

“Wouldn’t mind a hallucinogen right now,” Falcon said, opening the kit. “Or

something to knock me out completely, but..." He shook his head and didn't finish the sentence.

Yanko could guess at his concern. "Do you think the people who attacked you followed you?"

"I think they knew where I was going. And if they didn't, they could find out. It's not like our family isn't known around here." Falcon removed the bandage around the arrow, pulled out a bottle that stank of alcohol, and swabbed the liquid around his wound.

Yanko was relieved his brother seemed to know what he was doing, because he felt useless. He also worried that they shouldn't spend the night in the house, that the woods would be safer, but he didn't want to drag an injured man out to sleep on the damp forest floor. Lakeo might object to that, too, given how many times she had asked about beds.

"Can I do anything to help?" Yanko asked.

"Yes, open your letter. I'd like to know what I almost died to deliver."

Lakeo came back in the room with a jug of water, a couple of rounds of cheese, and some smoked trout. "Looks like some things were taken from the kitchen and pantry and that someone packed in a hurry," she said, setting the food down on the bedside table.

The sight of the goat cheese made Yanko's mouth water, but he pulled out the envelope, as curious about it as his brother. Before he could break the seal, Falcon stopped him with a hand on his arm. He tilted his head toward Lakeo, a question in his eyes.

"She's my friend," Yanko said.

"Moksu?"

By this point, Lakeo had caught on, and she crossed her arms over her chest and glowered at them.

"No," Yanko said.

"You may want to read that in private."

Yanko turned the envelope over a couple of times. "It doesn't say that."

"It's implied by the purple seal."

"As if I care what the runty youngest son of the Great Chief tells you." Lakeo grabbed a piece of fish and stalked out the door, slamming it behind her.

Yanko frowned at his brother. "I thought you were the one who did wonderfully with the women, but maybe I was mistaken."

"I do wonderfully with the women I want to do wonderfully with." Falcon pointed at the note. "Now open it, will you?"

"I see. It's too private to read in front of other people, but not too private to read in front of you."

"I'm your brother. And *moksu*."

Too curious to argue further, Yanko broke the seal. A tingle ran up his fingers, and he realized there had been some subtle magic about the envelope. Maybe it had been protected so that only he could open it or so that someone else who tried would be punished. He rubbed his fingers. "I think it's good you didn't try to open it."

"I suspected as much." Though Falcon was in the middle of dealing with that arrowhead, he leaned close, trying to see what was inside the envelope.

Yanko slid out the message, surprised by the multiple pages and the amount of text that awaited him—and the fact that his name was indeed on top of it all. He had never seen Prince Zirabo's writing, but from the brisk script and the ink blots that speckled the

page, he suspected this had been written quickly. He read it aloud, so his brother could keep his eyes on his work.

“Yanko, as I alluded to when last we met, there is trouble in our Great Land. After building for centuries, rebellion has come to the Golden City and to other key regions. Men and women believe the Great Chief is to blame, as if another ruler could keep this tidal wave from washing to the shore. It is the tenth year of drought on the plains, our prime agricultural land, and dust storms and hunger are driving farmers out of the area. As you’ve seen, much of what used to be orchard and vineyards in the south, to the west of the mountains, has turned to desert. The climate has grown drier in this last century, and the aquifers have been drawn down and are not replenishing themselves quickly enough. Our people have been living on and farming this land for millennia, and the scars show on the land. Our population has grown too large for it to support, and thanks to our mineral-poor mountains, we have little to trade to other nations. The prosperity enjoyed by our neighbors in their less populous lands has not been ours. By military might, we have often sought to take their resources, but war is an expense we can no longer afford. Now, we face civil war with numerous groups wishing to put their own chief on the dais. They do not realize that a change in leadership will not solve our problem. A drastic culling of the population might help, but that is not something I wish to contemplate, nor does my father. Thus, we must seek more resources to satiate our people, to give us more time to deal with this situation or for the climate to grow more amenable again. This is where you come in.”

Yanko paused to flip to the next page and to check his brother’s reaction. Falcon must have seen some of this in the years since he had left home, because he was nodding. Yanko had read the newspapers and knew of some of these troubles, but down here, in the sparsely populated mountains, he hadn’t felt the hunger or noticed the changes. He supposed he had seen abandoned homesteads in the desert around the mines, but he had not realized agricultural lands had once filled the area.

“Even though my brother Zenato is more the scientist than I,” Yanko went on, reading the second page, “I have been doing research whenever I’ve found the time. As a diplomat, I’ve traveled to other nations and have long understood that the most resource-endowed and agriculturally rich land, that of Turgonia, is never going to fall to us. They are too mighty, and with their former war hero and master tactician Admiral Starcrest now ruling over the land, even my father has accepted this. So... we seek another solution, a land that hasn’t been claimed.”

Yanko paused to rub his head. What land of any significance had not been claimed? There might be uninhabited islands here and there, but the world’s continents had long since been discovered, mapped, and settled.

Falcon shrugged—this he didn’t know about.

“If you’re familiar with Kyattese history,” Yanko continued aloud, “then you know the Kyatts didn’t originate on their island chain. They came from a continent in the southern hemisphere, one that they destroyed through war and then fled because of a plague that may or may not have been magical in nature. This was over seven hundred years ago, but our people have been sailing the seas for millennia and remember this, even though the Kyattese were, at that time, an insular people. What I tell you now is more legend than recorded history, at least insofar as Nuria knows. Because the Kyattese devastated their land so, and because the plague was so horrible, claiming nine out of ten

people, they took their best wizards—or Science practitioners as they call them—and came up with a way to hide the continent before they left, to ensure future generations didn't try to return and fall prey to the plague, then spread it to the world. To this day, nobody has ever found this continent. Many doubt it ever existed. Yet there is evidence that seems to imply that the Kyattese came from another part of the world; their pale skin coloring if nothing else, surely an anomaly under the equatorial sun of their archipelago. Information about much of their migration and their early days on the islands has been lost, whether accidentally or purposefully, but they themselves mention in their history texts a Golden Lodestone that might one day guide the descendants home, when their leaders decide the time has come.

"I spent a week in Kyatt on the way home from my last mission and met much obfuscation when I brought up the subject of their history, but they knew who I was, whose son I was, and that may be why they shared little. Perhaps you would have more luck. As the son of a family who has, alas, fallen from the Great Chief's grace, I thought you might believably enroll in their polytechnic to study magic, and that such a position would give you the opportunity to find out the truth about this Golden Lodestone and where to find it. After seven hundred years, whatever plague might have once existed should have faded away, and it's possible the land has recovered and become rich and fertile once again. If so, our people could claim it. The Kyattese seem happy on their tropical islands, but even if that is not the case, they have no right to the land after so long. I have enclosed some money to see you to the islands and to get you enrolled in the first year of classes. I wish I could come myself to help you, but I am embroiled in the mess here in the Golden City, and I fear I have already taken too much time to pen this missive. I've had your brother's orders changed, so he can go along with you and act as your bodyguard. If word of your quest gets out—and I'm afraid my research hasn't been as secret as I wish it would have been, for there are spies everywhere in the Great Chief's palace—I have no doubt you'll see trouble. If this lodestone does indeed lead to a secret and unpopulated continent, the entire world will want it for themselves. Be careful, Yanko. I have faith that you can do this."

Yanko lowered the pages and stared at his brother, floored by the contents of the letter and by the task he had been given.

"Trouble, no kidding." Falcon held up the bloody arrowhead he had cut from his thigh. He had withdrawn it without so much as a whimper or grunt of pain—unless Yanko had been too absorbed in the letter to notice it—but his brown skin had grown ashen, and he looked like he could collapse on the bed at any second. Instead, he grabbed some of Grandmother's healing goo to smear in the gaping wound.

"Falcon, why would he send this to *me*?" Yanko whispered. "Enrolling as a student might be plausible for someone my age, but everything else... What am I supposed to do if I find the lodestone? And if you were already shot, does that mean there are assassins on our trail? Why would assassins think I could do anything worth... assassinating anyone over? Or do they think there's some huge secret in this note? All it says is go do research and find this lodestone. That's not worth killing over." Realizing he had been speaking rather quickly, Yanko forced himself to stop and take a breath, to let his brother talk.

"Two things," Falcon said. "First, stop hyperventilating. Second, calm down."

"Those are kind of the same things, aren't they?" Yanko had been waiting for more salient advice.

“Not the way you’re doing them. Hand me those bandages, will you? And a sponge. I’m making a mess here. I’m glad this isn’t my room.”

Yanko gave his brother the requested items, but he couldn’t stop thinking about the note, about the request. No, it wasn’t a request. This came from one of the Great Chief’s sons. He must consider it an order. To refuse the task would be cowardice, if not an outright crime. “I don’t understand why he thought of me.”

“You bonded when he came to the mines, didn’t you? That’s what Uncle Mishnal said.”

“If you call bonding being hit over the head by the same Turgonian thugs, then yes. But...” Yanko swallowed his sarcasm, realizing his brother didn’t know about their uncle yet. “Mishnal is dead. The mine was attacked. Lakeo and I barely got out and not without a fight.” It was silly, given the horrible news he was sharing, but he needed to let Falcon know that they *had* fought. He didn’t want to be seen as cowardly for escaping, for *surviving* when so many others had been killed.

“Is that where Father and everyone else went?” Falcon asked.

“I don’t know where they are. The village was attacked too. Did you see the smoking buildings?”

“Just from a distance. I was trying to steer the carriage and keep Sergeant Huko from dying. Neither worked well.” Falcon flopped back on the bed, wincing and glowering at his shoulder.

“Let me try to clean that for you. And bandage it until someone who knows how to stitch it shows up. Or we find someone. You’re coming with me, right? On this journey? Or...” Yanko looked down at the bleeding puncture where the arrow had been. “You won’t even be able to walk, will you?”

“Not for a while.” Falcon stared up at the ceiling. “Even if we find Grandmother, she’s not a mage. She can’t work healing miracles.” He rubbed his face, the dirt and stubble adorning his jaw, the scratches and bruises. He wasn’t fit to be a bodyguard or to travel.

The idea of going on this quest without him, without even knowing the fate of his father and the rest of his kin, made Yanko’s stomach feel hollow. But maybe Lakeo would go with him as far as the coast. He snorted. Maybe she would go with him as far as Kyatt. That had been her dream, hadn’t it? Maybe he could even give her the money the prince had sent for tuition if he could find information related to that lodestone another way. Except he hadn’t seen any money. Had those who attacked the carriage gotten it? He poked into his brother’s messenger bag.

“Don’t ask.” Falcon sighed. “That was the *first* attack.”

“Oh?”

“Three days ago, up the Coast of Green Tides. There were *two* other soldiers with me, alternating driving so we could travel day and night to get here as fast as possible. The prince was generous with the coin he sent along, perhaps too generous. It was quite the prize for a lowly corporal. Jathru either set up a bandit attack or took advantage of one. We were fighting off a group of eight men who attacked us, doing decently if I’m fit to judge. Then he took off after an archer who had been injured and was running away. Huko and I were busy driving off the rest of the group. We didn’t think anything strange of Jathru’s departure until fifteen minutes passed and he didn’t return. I went out to look for him—I was worried he’d been injured. Or worse.” Falcon grunted. “I was an idiot.

When I got back, Huko was there and told me the truth. The strongbox was missing.” He turned his head, staring Yanko in the eyes. “I’m sorry. I’m not even your bodyguard yet, and I already failed you.”

Having his older brother worried about failing him was such a bizarre turn of events that Yanko didn’t know what to say at first. He shook his head and spread his hand, groping for words.

“But, I was thinking on the way here,” Falcon went on, “that Father could give you some money if he has it. Maybe he doesn’t. Our family might be land rich by Nurian standards but isn’t financially wealthy anymore. Even so, there are the carriages. They might be old models, but the energy sources are as powerful as the day they were Made. You should be able to sell one for passage to Kyatt at least. I didn’t think Father would object when he saw the prince’s letter.” Falcon glanced toward the window—twilight had fallen outside. “If he’s not here, I guess he *can*’t object. We’ll take it down to the coast, and I’ll help you sell it in the Port of the Red Sky Wars. We’ll—”

“Falcon.” Yanko held up a hand. He didn’t want to make it sound like he was rejecting his brother, but those injuries could easily become infected, especially if they were off at sea for weeks. “Someone needs to stay here, find the rest of the family and the village. I’m guessing they hid in the hills from superior numbers, but we can’t know that for sure. What if they were kidnapped for some nefarious plan?” All right, that sounded far-fetched, but Yanko knew his argument had to be strong to sway his brother. Even if his kin all returned tomorrow, from Zirabo’s letter, it sounded like the region could anticipate more trouble. Having a young, strong soldier like Falcon here to help everyone would be ideal for them. “That someone to stay should be you.”

“My orders—”

“Didn’t take into account that you were nearly killed getting here.”

“Who’s going to watch your back while you conjure spells? That girl?” Falcon thrust his arm toward the door, then gasped and grabbed his wounded shoulder. He growled at the ceiling or at Yanko, or maybe at himself. Yanko understood all too well and all too recently how disappointing failure was.

“She’s not a bad fighter.” True, Yanko would rather have his brother—he didn’t even know if Lakeo would decide to stick with him once they reached the coast. She might go as far as Kyatt, but what then? She wanted to stay there, to study. Yanko had the feeling that would only be the beginning of his journey.

“But she’s not a trained soldier, is she? And she’s not your kin. Your *blood*, Yanko. Who else will watch out for you the way I would?”

“Nobody. You’ve always watched out for me. I know that.” Yanko hadn’t always appreciated it—he had wanted to stand on his own feet, not to have his brother step in when some kid in the village teased him because gardening and beekeeping were “girl hobbies.” But he had always known that he would have a bodyguard someday. Every wizard, even a warrior mage, needed one. And he couldn’t think of anyone better.

He plucked at the hem of the blanket on the bed, tempted to change his mind, to bring Falcon along. If they were going to take one of the carriages and ride to the city instead of walking, then might not his brother’s wounds heal along the way? Except it was less than two days to the port. He couldn’t do much healing in that time. And who knew what trouble they might face along the way? More battles? Battles in which a lame man would be a hindrance rather than a help? How would he feel if his choice resulted in his

brother's death?

"This is why I was sent," Falcon said. "To help you. To help us redeem our family's honor. This is the journey that could do it, Yanko."

Yanko wasn't so sure about that. When Zirabo had come, Yanko had learned that the prince was on the bottom rung of his family's ladder, and not just because he was the youngest son. It was very possible the Great Chief knew nothing about this quest. Still, it might be a chance at... something. Yanko had better not put the cart before the lizard, though. First, he had to get to Kyatt.

"I know, Falcon. And if I could wave my hand and heal you, I would. I *know* you'd be a huge asset on this journey."

"Even injured, I could be an asset. I'll heal along the way."

"And who will stay behind and search for Father? For Grandmother? For Great Uncle Lao Zun? Little Cousin Ishee?"

Falcon closed his eyes. He wanted to argue farther—Yanko could see it—but he had to feel the loyalty to the family too.

"I better pack for the trip," Yanko murmured. "It doesn't sound like it would be wise to delay."

"No." Falcon touched his injured thigh. "It wouldn't be."

"Yell if you need anything else." Yanko stood up, leaving the food and water. Maybe he could find the potent beverages in Father's cabinet that his brother had mentioned, let Falcon find respite with a heady drink. "Maybe Father and the others will return by dawn, and things will look up."

"Yeah." Falcon sounded listless, tired. Best to leave him alone.

"I'm sorry," Yanko said. He felt bad for telling his brother not to come, but also because Falcon had been injured, his entire life uprooted, all to deliver a message to *him*.

Falcon turned on the bed, faced the wall, and didn't respond.

Chapter 5

Yanko hadn't been in his father's bedroom many times as a boy, and going inside without his permission now felt strange. Given all that had happened, encroaching on his privacy should be the last worry on Yanko's mind, but he had the sense that he would get in trouble.

"You're a little old to be worried about being spanked," he told himself and set the lamp down on the table.

Usually, he would simply conjure light if he needed it, but his headache hadn't abated at all since arriving home. He had taken one of Grandmother's aspen-tree draughts, but his brain still demanded rest. As soon as he found something potent for Falcon to drink and finished packing, he would sleep. He had already moved one of the family carriages into an empty shed back in the village, just in case trouble came in the morning and Yanko and the others couldn't escape through the main gate. They might be able to circle around, through the trees above the foothills, sneak into the village, and grab the carriage there. He hoped he was being overcautious, but Falcon's attackers might not be far away.

There wasn't a lock on the old mahogany liquor cabinet. Father had never been lenient, and he had always made the rules known, so Yanko and Falcon had never dared to challenge them. Yanko knew little of the types of spirits inside, so he selected one randomly. He doubted Falcon needed a glass and was about to close the door when the glint of something in a drawer that hadn't been shut all the way caught his eye. Metal was a scarce commodity in Nuria. His curiosity prompted him to tug on the handle. If it was a firearm—also a rare commodity here, where magic was preferred over technological gadgetry—it could be useful on his quest.

But it wasn't a gun in the drawer. It was a golden amulet, one with a spherical jade stone in the middle, held in place by a lizard's claw—or maybe that was supposed to be the claw of a mythological dragon. A curious piece of jewelry, one Yanko had never seen his father wear. He touched it, wondering if it had any magical power, and a flare of warm orange light washed over him. Energy sang to him, not unlike that of the orbs that powered the carriages, but he immediately sensed that this piece had been Made for a different purpose. Not to power vehicles but to protect its wearer somehow. From what, he couldn't tell, but an impressive amount of energy hummed within the jade sphere. He was surprised he had not sensed its presence in the house before. Maybe it had fallen dormant after not being touched for so long.

After nibbling on his lip for a moment, Yanko took it out and set it on top of the cabinet. Taking something of his father's felt like stealing, but if this truly could offer some protection to its wearer, it could be useful on his journey. Besides, he had never seen his father wear it. It seemed a shame to leave a powerful artifact to collect dust in a drawer.

"Yes, get your excuses all in order for when he comes home and demands to know why it's missing."

Yanko tugged open the drawer below it. As long as he was snooping, he might as well do it thoroughly. It wasn't as if he should be packing or sleeping or something else useful in preparation for his journey.

This drawer also held a single item, a picture in a frame, an illustration that depicted Father as a young man, carrying a sword on his belt and wearing a soldier's uniform. He stood arm in arm with a handsome woman with strong, defined features and flowing black hair that fell halfway to her waist. She wore the colorful red of a warrior mage, her expression determined and almost fierce as she stared at the painter. Father's face, turned slightly toward her, was softer, a warm smile to his lips. A man in love.

Though it should have been obvious, it took a moment for Yanko to realize he was looking at a picture of his parents. Of his *mother*. He had never seen an image of her before, and Father had claimed there weren't any in the house, that he had gotten rid of all traces of her when she left and never came back.

Yanko put the picture back. Father had never lied about Pey Lu's current occupation, one that occasional mentions in the newspapers confirmed, and Yanko hadn't grown up with any delusions or romantic notions about her. Of course, he had been curious as a youth, but her own parents still lived in a neighboring village, and they had confirmed that she had never sent letters home, not to Father, and not to them. If she cared what happened in her homeland, none of her kin could verify it.

The last drawer was deeper, and Yanko pulled it out to reveal a folded crimson robe made from a rich material like silk, but heavier. Gold trim and several layers gave it an elegant look, but it wasn't until he touched it that the garment came to life for him. It didn't glow the way the amulet had, but an energy radiated up his arm, like touching a stove and feeling its heat, but more profound.

"Mother's robe from the war," he decided. It, too, must have protective energy locked within the fibers of the material or perhaps in the ancient runes that lined the cuffs and hem. He didn't know how to tell *what* they could do, but perhaps he could study the garment during his long sea voyage. Assuming he took it along. Male and female warrior mages wore the same robes, and Made clothing was often handed down through the generations, so it wasn't as if there would be anything strange about wearing something that had been Made for his mother. Regardless of what she had done after the war, she had been a great wizard during it, one who had saved the lives of many soldiers, or so the stories told. It wasn't as if Father would don the robe. Of course, he had not earned the right to wear a warrior mage's robe by graduating from Stargrind, or even qualifying to enter the academy.

He almost tucked it back into the drawer, but hesitated. What if it could help him in his quest? Dare he leave it?

After a few more seconds of debate, Yanko set the robe on the cabinet next to the other items. He gathered everything in his arms and headed into the hall where he almost crashed into his brother. Soft snores came from one of the guest rooms. He had thought they belonged to Falcon, but they must be Lakeo's.

Falcon should have been resting, but he had found crutches, and there he was. Yanko's cheeks heated at being caught taking their mother's belongings.

But Falcon merely nodded. "I was going to tell you about that stuff."

"You knew?"

Falcon shrugged. "I was old enough when she left to remember her a little. To remember Father's confusion at being abandoned and his belief that she would return. Her robe hung in his closet for quite a while, as if he expected her to come walking back in and put it on any day. It was a couple of years before the news that she had become a

pirate made its way home.”

Not certain what else to say, Yanko held out the smoky gray liquor bottle, its contents sloshing inside. “I got this for you.”

“Thanks, but I was lying in that bed and thinking.”

“Oh? I thought you were sulking.” Yanko smiled to let Falcon know he was teasing. It wasn’t the time for it, but he wanted so much to part ways with his brother on good terms. He wanted Falcon to smile back and to wish him luck on this journey.

“Yes, that too. But it occurred to me that we shouldn’t stay here tonight, not right in the house, anyway. We would be too easy for someone to find. This Golden Lodestone, if it can do what Prince Zirabo believes, could literally change the world. Give us another continent. Nuria needs it, but can you imagine what wealth it would represent to anyone who found it? A *continent*, Yanko. The thought of there being one somehow undiscovered... It’s incredible.” Falcon shifted his weight on the crunches, wincing again. He shouldn’t be up.

“I know,” was all Yanko said. Who was he to tell his brother how to take care of himself? “Where do you think we should go?”

“We can spend the night in the woods, keep an eye on the house. Then you can leave in the morning. And I... I’ll stay and wait for the others to return. Or as soon as I’m strong enough, I’ll search for tracks and try to figure out which way they went.”

“Lakeo won’t be happy about being roused from the bed. I think she was impressed with the goose down blanket. But I agree with you. I had the same thought. I hid one of the carriages in town in case we were trapped here.”

Falcon nodded, but then he smiled. “*You* drove the carriage? Did Father ever allow you to? He never let me, so I hadn’t touched a vehicle until I was in the army.”

“No, he never allowed me to, either, but I’m training to be a powerful mage, you know.” One so powerful he hadn’t qualified for Stargrind. Yet more bad news he would have to confess to his brother eventually. Though he supposed it didn’t matter much now.

“Uh huh. How many fences did you knock over on the way to wherever you were taking it?”

“Fences? None.”

Falcon raised his eyebrows expectantly.

“But a water barrel, two of those hanging flower baskets, and the village mailbox may now be slightly more damaged than they were earlier today.”

“I thought so.” Falcon turned around awkwardly and crutched himself down the hallway, the tips thudding on the timeworn pine floorboards. “I’m going to leave most of the packing to you, but I’m going to the kitchen to grab a few supplies, in case I get stuck out there for days. I’ll leave rousing your friend to you, as well. She seems like she might be grumpy when she wakes up.”

“Actually, she’s always grumpy.”

“I’m sure she’ll be a fun bodyguard then.”

Yanko decided not to mention that he wasn’t sure how long Lakeo would stay with him. “Are bodyguards supposed to be fun? I thought they just had to keep you alive.”

“The bodyguard handbook says it’s like a marriage because you spend so much time together. Having someone you can stand seeing every hour of every day is useful for a good relationship.”

Yanko stopped when he reached Lakeo’s door. “I haven’t decided if I believe that

there's actually a handbook about body guarding." His brother had mentioned it once before, but he'd thought it might have been a joke.

"That's because you're not a soldier," Falcon said as he turned into the great room and headed for the kitchen. "They don't trust anyone to be competent, so there's a handbook for everything. Washing your uniform. Polishing your boots. Cleaning your weapons. Personal hygiene."

"The army has to teach soldiers how to wash?"

"Oh, yes. That's another thing you should look for in a bodyguard. Good hygiene."

"Glad to hear that your sense of humor is improving," Yanko called after him, then lowered his voice. "Either that, or Grandmother's draughts are making him loopy."

He knocked on Lakeo's door. He wasn't expecting it to open promptly and for her to be standing there, scowling at him. "I heard a bunch of yelling and thought invaders had come. Then I heard you talking about hygiene. Loudly." Her scowl deepened.

"Yes, I hope your nap was comfortable. We've decided staying here tonight isn't a good idea, that we'll be easy to find. Fortunately, it's autumn, so there are plenty of cushy leaves on the forest floor to lie on." Yanko smiled and braced himself for an argument.

"I wondered if you'd want to stay here, if there might be people coming to finish what they started on your brother's carriage." Lakeo hefted a bag. "I'm ready if you don't have a problem with me borrowing some things. It's just clothes and food. And a bow I found out in that shed by the smokehouse." She plucked it from where it was leaning against the wall, a sturdy ash staff that had yet to be strung. She nudged a quiver of arrows with her foot too.

"That's fine. That's Falcon's hunting bow. I doubt he'll mind." Unless he wanted to take it with him into the woods. No, there was an armory in the attic, weapons from the generations of White Foxes who had lived on the homestead, or at least visited it seasonally. There were dozens of bows up there.

"I could borrow yours instead if you think he wants it," Lakeo said.

"I don't hunt."

Her brows rose, and he felt the need to explain.

"I can't. I wasn't very good at blocking my ability to sense others' emotions when I was a boy, and I had a special affinity for animals. I could feel what they felt when they were dying, and it made me throw up." His mouth twisted, remembering Father's disappointed look the first time they had gone hunting and that had happened. As a non-Sensitive, he couldn't have understood. He hadn't tried to, even when Yanko explained it.

"Huh. I'd call you a wimp, but I saw you pull down a hundred tons of stone with your mind." Lakeo put on her boots and grabbed her gear.

Yanko hurried to pack his mother's robe and amulet and was debating what else to bring when a cold, unpleasant whisper slid across the back of his neck. It was the sensation of someone powerful using magic nearby.

Cursing, Yanko ran into the hallway with what gear he had, little more than the clothes he had packed and his saber and *kylar*. "Someone's coming," he called as loudly as he dared. "Put out the lamps. Meet outside, out the back. Lakeo, Falcon, do you hear me?"

He raced through the house, cutting out lamps by hand, afraid to use his powers and alert the other mage to his presence. Next, he ran to the kitchen to make sure Falcon had

heard him. Lakeo was already striding for the back of the house. Yanko hadn't checked a window yet, but he didn't need to. If he felt someone calling upon the mental sciences, that someone couldn't be far away.

Falcon limped out of the kitchen on his crutches, a bag slung over his shoulder. "Thought I'd have a *little* more time to pack," he muttered.

"Sh, hurry." Yanko took the bag. "Mage."

As he made it down the now-dark hallway, listening to the thumps of his brother's crutches as well as his ragged breathing, Yanko felt guilty about telling him to hurry, but if they were caught in the house when a mage hurled a fireball at it, he would suffer far greater injuries.

A cold breeze battered them when they stepped out onto the back porch. Full darkness had fallen, and the moon hadn't risen. Clouds had come in, too, and the lake and mountains were barely visible. Though Falcon knew the land as well as Yanko—and far better than any stranger could—his injury would cause him to struggle. They would have to stick to the paths until they reached the tree line, instead of creeping through the waist-high grass that swayed in the fields as Yanko would have preferred.

"This way," he whispered.

"Someone's coming, right?" Lakeo whispered back.

"A mage, yes. Probably more."

They couldn't see the front of the house or the road to the gate from here, so they would have to trust Yanko's senses. He led the way down the path toward the greenhouses and the orchard, at a pace that was less than ideal. Falcon did his best to swing along on the crutches, but he had to be biting his tongue not to cry out every time he jostled his leg or shoulder.

The path curved, and Yanko got his first look at the gate and the village beyond the split-rail fence. Several armored carriages were rolling along the cobblestones, lanterns burning at their fronts and rears. One had already passed through the gate and onto the property. It had stopped about two dozen meters from the house. Two people stood outside, having a discussion, one in simple traveling clothing but another in a robe. Even with the lanterns on the carriage, Yanko struggled to determine its color, which might have given him a clue as to the mage's specialty and possibly who he worked for, but all he could tell was that it was dark.

A third figure crouched atop the carriage, as still as a statue, almost like an animal testing the wind. From this distance, Yanko couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman, but he or she wore light colors, a flowing garment that wrapped around the body and covered most of the face too. A matching cloak hung from the person's shoulders. Yanko didn't recognize the style or color as being part of a uniform. The garments almost appeared white, an unusual hue in color-loving Nuria. The hilts of two swords poked over the same shoulder, someone who favored a pair of long blades rather than the more typical combination of longsword and *kyszar*.

Falcon hissed softly. "That's a mage hunter."

A chill went through Yanko at his words. He had heard of mage hunters, but mostly in legend. He hadn't been certain they truly existed, at least not in the modern world.

"A what?" Lakeo asked.

"An assassin who specializes in hunting mages," Falcon said. The darkness hid his features, but Yanko could feel Falcon's frank eyes turning in his direction. "I'm surprised

he or she—I'm not sure of the sex, are you?—is traveling with a mage. They're reputed to absolutely loathe magic users."

"Something that we can have fun discussing once we're far away from here," Yanko said, waving everyone onward, wanting to reach the orchard and from there head to the pines and firs that rose from the hills above the lake. The darkness alone was poor camouflage, especially against a wizard. Maybe he was delusional in thinking they could elude their pursuit under any circumstances. Mage hunter. He hadn't read a great deal about the secretive organization of assassins, but he knew they weren't called *hunters* for no reason.

"Some of them are going inside," Lakeo whispered as they slipped behind the greenhouses, using them for cover.

"Looking for us? Or for something in the house?" Falcon paused to wipe sweat from his brow, but he was the first to lead them up the trail toward the apple and pear trees.

"Uh, they didn't tell me."

Something brushed at Yanko's senses, a probe sweeping across the foothills. "The mage is trying to find us," he whispered, then paused, his hand against the trunk of a tree. He closed his eyes and groped for a way to hide his group. His aching brain protested, and he lamented that he hadn't found any time to sleep since the attack at the mine. If he blacked out again, he would be a tremendous burden on the others. Still, if the mage sensed them out here, he would have no trouble leading his people in the right direction.

"Stop moving for a moment," he whispered.

Yanko had played hide-and-seek games with one of the tutors who had taught him for a short time, and he had learned to disguise himself to her senses, making her believe he was a tree. Sometimes it had worked, but usually she had been too sharp to be fooled by his boyish attempts. Wishing he had practiced the game more, Yanko did his best to mask their three auras, to give off the impression that they were simply trees in the orchard.

He felt the probe sweep across them again, and he wondered if his attempt was coming too late, if the mage had sensed them before he had attempted his camouflage.

But the presence left his mind, and nobody rushed around the corner of the house.

"I think they're all inside now," Lakeo pointed to lights moving behind the windows.

"Better try to reach the forest then," Falcon said. "Yanko?"

"Yes. I think... I may have fooled the mage, for the moment. I'll keep doing my best."

Neither of them commented on how bolstered they felt by his statement. Maybe he should have sounded less uncertain, but he didn't want to promise something that might not be true.

They reached the end of the orchard and clambered up the trail and into the woods. It grew narrower and rockier as they traveled up a path that wasn't used as often as those around the house and gardens. Falcon's crutches slipped off rocks, the clunks and scrapes making them all wince, and Yanko had to keep him from falling more than once.

"Some bodyguard I am," Falcon muttered to himself.

"It's dark enough that any of us could trip and fall off a cliff," Lakeo whispered.

Since Yanko had to stay behind his brother and steady him when needed, she was leading. He wished he could provide a small illumination orb, but that would stand out like a lighthouse to anyone below. He wasn't sure what the men in the carriages still in the village were doing, but the occasional shouts of a search party came to his ears. Maybe the people thought Yanko and his brother would hide out in someone else's

house? He hoped they didn't find the carriage he had stashed, not that it mattered right now. They couldn't reach it without revealing themselves.

"Take a right at the first fork," Yanko instructed. "There's a cliff that way."

"Oh, good. My falling dream can come true."

"It overlooks the village and the homestead. We can watch them from there." Now that they had climbed into the forest, Yanko couldn't see much behind them, and he didn't dare reach out with his senses.

The darkness made them slow, and it took twenty minutes of huffing and grunting before they reached the fork and another ten to reach the cliff. As soon as Yanko stopped, crouching so he wouldn't stand out on the bare rocks, Falcon flopped to the ground. Lakeo came and knelt beside Yanko.

"It doesn't look like anyone has thought to look for us in the forest yet." Lakeo pointed to a couple of lanterns bobbing along the lakeshore toward the dock and canoes.

"No. I wish I'd thought to untie one of those canoes and send it out there as a decoy. As it is, once it's morning, they may be able to visually follow our trail." Yanko didn't say it, but Falcon's crutches would make distinctive marks in the earth.

"This isn't quite the soft, leafy bed you promised me." Lakeo patted the cold rock beneath them. The temperature lay only a few degrees above freezing, and they hadn't had time to grab blankets.

A lone figure stepped out on the path behind the house, the clothing lighter than everyone else's. That mage hunter? The person faced the hills, and Yanko shivered as the gaze passed over them. He told himself the hunter was simply hoping to see something and that was it. Still, he couldn't help but hunker lower, trying to blend in with the rocks.

"Almost positive that's a woman," Lakeo whispered.

"What?" That had been the last thing on Yanko's mind, but he *had* been wondering earlier.

"The way she walks, stands. I thought I saw some boobs when she was crouching up there on the carriage. Probably bound so she doesn't bounce when she's fighting."

Yanko didn't know whether to find the information useful or to be indifferent. He couldn't let himself assume that a woman would be less dangerous. Not when his mother had reputedly been an unstoppable force during the wars. Surely anyone trained to be an assassin could slice his entrails up into mince meat and leave them on the rocks for the buzzards.

A second carriage, one that had been back in the village, rolled through the front gate. Unlike the armored vehicles, this was an open-air bamboo one, the kind common down in the warmth of Red Sky. Something dark moved around inside. It—or they—didn't look like people. Yanko wished he had a spyglass—or that he dared use his powers. Perhaps he was far enough away now that the mage wouldn't sense him if he did.

The carriage rolled to a stop behind the first one, and a dark head thrust out of the window. The ringing bay of a hound pierced the night.

Yanko almost laughed. Oh. He had been imagining a soul construct or some other huge, mutant creation of a wizard.

Lakeo groaned. "Hounds. They're going to be able to track us easily."

"Yanko?" Falcon asked.

"Yes, we'll see. If they have some magical compulsion, they won't be easy to communicate with."

The driver stepped out of the carriage and opened the door. The hounds flew out, barely restrained by their leashes. A handler stepped out after them, followed by several men with bows. Yanko thought he picked out a couple of Turgonian firearms in the mix too. The mage hunter walked around the house toward the group. The robed mage strode out of the house shortly after. He carried something dark in his hand. A shirt?

"They're giving the hounds your scent," Lakeo said. "Should we run deeper into the hills? Is there a stream out here where we might walk in the water a ways, so they lose our trail?"

"You sound like you've been tracked by hounds often," Falcon remarked.

At first, Lakeo didn't respond, though a sulkiness seemed to radiate from her. Maybe it was the hunch of her shoulders. "I had to steal some after my mother died, before I figured out people would pay me to carve. Not everybody gets born onto a big plantation or whatever you call that place."

"You sure you want a bodyguard who steals, Yanko?"

"I don't steal anymore."

Yanko didn't point out the canteens; these were extenuating circumstances. Besides, he was more interested in the hounds, in trying to ascertain if they had any magical aura about them. But he dared not probe openly, not with the mage right there. They might be out of his range, anyway. He would have to wait until they got closer, possibly a dangerous proposition.

The mage came close to the light of the carriage, and the garment he held came into view. "Those are your discarded bandages, Falcon," Yanko said.

"Great. It's my blood they're after."

"Probably because I didn't leave any bandages lying around the house."

The handler unleashed the dogs, and they tore away, the pack splitting, two going around one side of the house and two going the other way, their noses to the ground. Seeing them made Yanko nostalgic for his own hounds. They had been a concession to his father, a way Yanko could help with the family hunts, even if he couldn't do the actual killing. He had taught the dogs to track and help Falcon and the others, but mostly they had been friends. He hoped that wherever the family had gone, they had taken the pups, and that everyone was all right.

"We're not staying here, are we?" Lakeo whispered. "They're already on our trail."

The hounds had disappeared into the darkness behind the house, but their bays rose above the trees, traveling ahead of them. They were in the orchard, and they would be in the forest soon.

"Yanko." Falcon touched his shoulder and pointed past him, so he wouldn't miss it. "The other carriages are going to join in. They're leaving the village. Where did you say you put the carriage?"

"There's shed behind the bakery." Yanko waved toward the far end of the village, the end closest to the pass and the road they needed to take to escape.

"If you two take the loop trail, you can probably get to it without being seen."

"We'll never stay ahead of the hounds," Lakeo said. "Unless you're going to divert them? You can't keep ahead of them, either. They'll be on you in minutes."

"I'm hoping I won't have to divert them. Yanko?"

"Yes. I'm trying." Yanko had already closed his eyes and was stretching out with his mind, passing the myriad wildlife bedded down for the night, the owls and wolves on the

prowl, and finally encountering the eager minds of the hounds.

They seemed normal to him, like all other excited dogs on the hunt, and he greeted them with the friendly exuberance of a comrade. As animals usually were, the hounds were surprised by his touch, but they slowed down, paying attention to him. He showed them the image of his own hounds and tried to imply that he, too, was a hound of sort, one of their brethren rather than a handler. Then he imparted a message that he hoped would appeal to them.

When he opened his eyes, a wave of dizziness washed over him, and blackness danced before his eyes.

Hands gripped his shoulders. "Yanko?"

If not for his brother's grip, he would have fallen backward. Or forward. He grimaced at the cliff that dropped away a couple of feet in front of him. He truly did need a bodyguard, and not simply for battles.

"I'm fine," he said. "I've just been overexerting myself. I need a long night's rest."

Lakeo snorted. "That's not going to happen. Listen. They're getting closer." She fingered the bow she had taken from the house.

"Are they?" Falcon asked. "It sounds like... I think they went left at the fork. Yanko, did you talk to them?"

"I think I convinced them to visit that old oak at the end of the lake, the one where those squirrels enjoy frolicking."

Indeed, even as they spoke, the baying of the hounds moved away from them, paralleling the lake instead of heading farther up the hill toward their cliff. The hunters with their lanterns had passed through the orchard and started up the trail. The intervening foliage hid their lights, but their shouts were audible. They were following the hounds' lead.

Falcon thumped him on the shoulder. "Good. Now's your chance. Get as big of a head start as you can. They'll probably see the carriage drive away, and they'll be after you as soon as they realize it's you." His grip tightened on Yanko's shoulder. "Are you sure you don't want me to go with you?"

No, Yanko wasn't sure at all. But he managed to say, "Yes. Find our father, Falcon. He may need you. They all might."

"All right. I'll head up to the Bree place. I can make it up there, even on crutches. Ma Bree has some rudimentary healing skills if I recall correctly, and if nothing else, they have donkeys. They should let me borrow one."

Even though Falcon was a trained soldier now and capable of taking care of himself, Yanko hated to let him go off alone wounded. He hoped he wouldn't one day regret that they had split up.

"Be careful," he whispered.

"You too." Falcon pulled him into a one-armed hug, favoring that injured shoulder.

Yanko squeezed him back.

Lakeo was already standing, ready to start down the trail, but she didn't rush their farewell. Yanko made sure Falcon got to his feet and was heading away before trotting past her to lead the way. Wondering if this might be the last time he would see his home, he turned back toward the house and the lake before jogging into the trees.

He almost tripped. Smoke and flames were leaping from the roof of the old house, brightening the sky and the fields in all directions. His shoulders slumped. They were

burning his home.

Chapter 6

The setting sun blazed red across the sea when the carriage rolled into the Port of the Red Sky Wars almost two days later. Along the journey, Yanko and Lakeo had alternated sleeping and watching their backs, afraid the wizard, the mage hunter, and all of their cohorts would come barreling down the mountain and catch up with them.

Fortunately, he and Lakeo had slipped out of the village without being noticed. Yanko had used the last of his strength to camouflage the carriage as it rolled out of the shed and onto the road. Then he had passed out, his mind refusing to manipulate another atom of energy. Lakeo had managed to figure out how to steer the contraption, keeping it on the road and heading toward the coast until Yanko woke up the next morning. He didn't know what they would have done if they'd had to walk all the way to the city.

"I've never seen so many buildings in my life," Lakeo whispered, opening the hatch in the top to stand up and watch their approach, even though the front window showed the white-washed houses sufficiently. "Do multiple people live in each of them?" she asked. "What's the population? I can't even imagine. All the touching, brushing of arms. It must be so crowded."

"Yes."

Yanko barely heard her. They had crested the last of the ridges, and the harbor had come into view. He was looking for signs of the trouble Zirabo had written about. A line of warships stretched across the entrance to the sea, and he wondered if it was a blockade. He hoped not. They needed to get out that way. The streets seemed much quieter than when he had been here a week earlier for his test. The lizard skeleton still rose from the shallows near the docks, but no young applicants were swinging from its rib bones today.

"We're going to sell the carriage, right?" Lakeo called down. "And buy passage aboard a ship?" Her hips wriggled, as if she were dancing at the idea. Was she that eager to leave Nuria?

Yanko supposed if trouble was spreading across the continent, then a person with no loyalties to anyone might not have a reason to stay. He couldn't imagine not having loyalties. He patted the faded blue velvet seat, recalling rides in the vehicle with his family as a boy. His brother had found out there were storage cupboards beneath the seat and had tried to stuff Yanko into one. That had been before Falcon had decided his little brother was worth protecting.

"Yes," he called back, as if he knew where one went to sell magical carriages. He had a vague notion of standing at a busy intersection with a sign. He might have traveled more than Lakeo, but his father had always been in charge of money and accommodations. As they rolled toward the city, Yanko keenly felt his youth—and his lack of worldliness. "We'll head for the waterfront."

Maybe someone disembarking from a ship would need a land-based conveyance. Not that he noticed any ships entering the harbor, not with those large and well-armed vessels stretched across the passage out to sea. It *was* a blockade. It had to be. But whose? The government's? Or did those ships belong to the same rebels or criminals—Yanko had no idea how to think of them—who had taken over the salt mine?

He slid his hand along the control orb to choose a road that looked like it might lead

through the city and to the docks. The traffic made him uneasy, with bicycles, pedestrians, and lizards harnessed to carts clogging the streets. There were carriages as well, the magical energy from them plucking at Yanko's senses. Back home, such craft were rare. Usually, only *moksu* families and soldiers on important missions traveled in Made vehicles. They were not easy to come by and some, like this one, were passed down from generation to generation. The whole way here, they had only passed one.

"Up ahead, Yanko. Do you see that?" Lakeo plopped down onto the seat and pointed through the front window. "On that lot up there. They're selling lizards, donkeys, and wagons. I bet you could get rid of this carriage there too."

Yanko tried not to feel bitter that she was so eager for him to "get rid of" a machine that had been a part of his family since before his birth, and he tried even harder not to be annoyed, knowing that she only wanted the money so she could book passage to the Kyatt Islands. He hadn't shared all the details of his quest yet, but he had admitted to his destination. She had promptly confirmed her services as bodyguard in order to secure passage. It was better than going alone, he supposed, and he had to remind himself that his family's belongings meant nothing to her. Why should they? She hadn't been the one stuffed in the cupboards under the seat as a child.

"I see it," he said and slid his hand over the control sphere.

"Look out, you rich snot," someone yelled from the side. A pale-skinned man on a donkey with pots banging from its sides veered out of the way to avoid running into Yanko. He shook a fist at the carriage as he maneuvered around it.

"Apparently, your driving skills aren't as good as your earthquake-making skills," Lakeo said.

"That man was very rude."

She raised her eyebrows. "Yes, people are. You're the only one I know who calls everyone honored such-and-such."

"The people in my village all do that. Most Nurians do that."

"Oh, I'm sure they do it to you. But nobody down here is going to know you're *moksu*, especially after you sell this box." Lakeo thumped the wall with her fist. "If I were you, I'd keep it that way. Otherwise, you'll be a target for every thief, bandit, and mugger who thinks you've got money."

Yanko wasn't that worried about handling himself amongst thieves, bandits, or muggers—and in what dictionary were those actually different professions?—but he conceded that it might be best not to be recognized. That hadn't gone well for him during his exam. He wouldn't use his clan name. Here on the coast, even the common man would have heard of his mother.

Yanko rolled the carriage into the lot. Before he and Lakeo had done more than step out, a bow-legged man with his black hair dyed red ambled up with a clipboard. He was chomping on an cigar that spat a nauseating green smoke into the air.

"Interested in buying?" He extended an arm toward his lizards and goats. Most were old and underfed. The wagons slumped wearily in the late afternoon sun, the paint peeling off the sides.

"Interested in selling," Yanko said.

"Yeah? This your pop's carriage? You got permission to sell it?"

Yanko bristled at the idea that he wasn't old enough to own something like this, even if it was the truth. "It's mine. I don't need permission to sell it."

Lakeo's eyebrows twitched, but fortunately she didn't say anything.

The man hopped inside without asking and poked at the power supply and the engine. Yanko shifted about, watching the street behind them while he waited. Even if they hadn't seen sign of pursuit since leaving the village, he knew it had to be out there somewhere.

From the corner of the lot, he could see a few of the ships in the harbor. Numerous ones were in dock or anchored not far out, more than had been there a week earlier. Because they were trapped there, presumably. He wondered how feasible it was for a small, fast ship to sneak through a blockade at night. He would feel much better about their eluding their pursuers if they could ship out tonight. With luck, the party that had invaded his house—that had *burned* his house—wouldn't know Zirabo was sending him to Kyatt. Once Yanko escaped land, they shouldn't be able to track him.

The mournful cry of a coyote came from one end of the road that ran parallel to the waterfront, surprising Yanko. Wild animals in the city? Odd. Maybe they were to be loaded and taken to some other port. He took a few steps to the side so he could gauge where the cry had come from. Numerous cages stood next to an arena with benches around it. Everything from canines to great felines to the more dangerous lizards prowled behind the bars. The setup looked like a permanent installation rather than a group of cages waiting to be loaded onto some ship. A zoo or attraction of some sort, he supposed.

Yanko was about to turn his attention back to the lizard salesman, who was kicking at the wheels and grumbling about the age of the carriage, but he spotted a tall, broad-shouldered figure striding down one of the docks with a barrel over his shoulder, a figure he thought he recognized. The man towered over the Nurians he passed, even though he kept his head down, his face toward the dock, as if he were some common laborer.

"It couldn't be," Yanko whispered. "It's a port city. There must be lots of foreigners."

But lots of Turgonians? They weren't welcome here. A few mixed bloods and daring merchants might come through, but seeing one wasn't typical, even in a port city.

The man dropped off his barrel at the front of a skiff that had been ferrying goods back and forth to one of the ships, then he turned around and headed back toward the warehouses adjacent to the shoreline. Yanko willed him to look up, needing to see the face to be certain.

Another man walked past the Turgonian, this one not as tall or broad, but that didn't keep him from intentionally bumping the bigger man's shoulder. He said something, throwing a challenging glare at his target, but the Turgonian didn't react. He kept walking. If that was the man Yanko thought it might be, the belligerent Nurian had been risking his life with that shoulder bump. The Turgonian reached the head of the dock and picked up another barrel, lifting it over his shoulder as if it weighed nothing, despite the fact that he had a few gray hairs at his temple. In that moment, he finally lifted his face enough that Yanko could verify that he only had one eye, an ugly knot of scar tissue being all that remained of the left one.

"It *is* Dak," he whispered, that being the only name the Turgonian had given him.

Prince Zirabo had implied Dak was a diplomat or someone of political importance and that his father had made a mistake throwing him into the salt mine, but Yanko had never learned more than that. Dak had certainly never shared anything about himself. They had spent hours and hours sparring together—which had usually involved Yanko being pummeled mercilessly, then smashed into the ground—before Dak had even

revealed that he spoke and understood Nurian.

After he loaded the second barrel, a nervous-looking Nurian man carrying a sack of wheat came up to him and whispered something. A hundred meters away, Yanko had no chance at hearing it, but Dak responded, and the conversation went on for a long minute before the two parted ways. The *last* time Yanko had seen Dak trading whispers with someone, he had been plotting to escape the mines with a band of Turgonians, some of whom had been in there for murder. That had been more than six months ago. Why was he still on Nurian soil, and what was he up to now?

Lakeo elbowed Yanko. "You're not going to get a good deal if you don't come over here and defend your box. That sleazy salesman is coming up with all manner of deficiencies and knocking zekris off the price he's willing to pay every second."

Not wanting to take his eyes off Dak, Yanko said, "Will you barter with him for me? You're scarier than I am." He waved to her muscled arms. "I need to talk to that man down there. I'll be right back."

"What man? There are a hundred people on the docks."

Already trotting away, Yanko waved back and said, "I'll explain later."

With hundreds of people on the dock and hundreds of thousands in the city, if Yanko lost track of Dak, he might never find him again. Given that he had no idea what trouble the Turgonian might be starting, that could be a good thing. But no, Dak owed him a favor. Dak had said so himself, right before knocking Yanko out and disappearing into the night with his band of Turgonians.

As Yanko reached the head of the dock, he started to second-guess himself. Maybe this wasn't a good idea. Maybe that bit about a favor had been a lie, a distraction so that he could crack Yanko on the back of the head without resistance. But he kept walking. Dak was loading a crate onto the skiff now and exchanging a few words with one of the oarsmen, one that had the olive skin and larger build of a Turgonian. They kept their conversation short, and Dak turned toward the head of the dock again.

He halted when he spotted Yanko. His stony features hardened instead of relaxing in a friendly manner, and his gaze flicked past Yanko, searching the dock and boardwalk behind him. Did he think an escort would be standing back there? Armed men ready to return him to the mines? After six months? As if the mines even mattered now...

"Greetings," Yanko said, stopping a few feet away. He kept his tone cheery, but the utter lack of warmth in the Turgonian's face made that difficult. Part of him wanted to say he had mistaken Dak for someone else, apologize, and slink away. Even if the Turgonian was wearing a baggy shirt today, Yanko knew all about the thick, powerful muscles that lay beneath the garment, not to mention all of the scars from battles survived. Even though Yanko had done decently against him in their last sparring match, he had always known Dak hadn't truly been trying to kill him. He reminded himself of that now. If the Turgonian hadn't wanted to kill him then, he shouldn't want to kill him today. Probably. "Are you speaking Nurian this month or pretending you don't know it?" Yanko forced a smile. "I haven't had time to work on my Turgonian, I'm afraid."

After staring at him coolly for what felt like ten minutes but was probably five seconds, Dak said, "What do you want?"

Yanko lifted his chin in an attempt not to be daunted by the blunt words. It was almost as if Dak didn't recognize him. Was that possible? Maybe all Nurians looked alike to Turgonians. Yanko had heard the equivalent spoken by his own people about

Turgonians. But surely the reminder about the language would have jogged Dak's memory. Still, he said, "You remember me, right?" just to be certain.

"Yes." Dak's tone didn't imply that he was happy about the fact. "What do you want?" he repeated.

The head oarsman cleared his throat. Yanko glanced over and was surprised to see a slight movement from beneath a tarp folded between a few of the barrels. Was someone hiding under there?

Dak strode toward the head of the dock again, and Yanko might have been trampled, or knocked into the water, if he hadn't skittered to the side.

"I need your help," Yanko blurted, jogging to catch up.

"I'm busy."

"You said you owed me a favor. I'd like to redeem it."

Dak's jaw tightened, but he kept walking. Yanko stopped, giving him a moment to think about his words as he picked up another barrel. He would not be surprised if nothing came of this, if Dak ignored the promised favor completely, but he couldn't help but think what a marvelous bodyguard the big Turgonian would make if he could somehow talk him into coming along. It wasn't that he didn't appreciate Lakeo, but an assassin, even a mage hunter, would think twice about attacking Yanko with this wall of muscle standing at his back. He fully acknowledged that asking Dak to deflect the attacks of assassins and travel by sea for two weeks was out of proportion to the original act that had prompted the acknowledgment of a favor due, but it couldn't hurt to try to get Dak on his side, if only temporarily. The Kyatt Islands were halfway to Turgonia. Who knew? Maybe he was ready to go home and had to travel that way, anyway. Assuming Lakeo got enough from the salesman, Yanko could pay for passage for all three of them. He glanced at the blockade. If there was passage available. The idea of being stuck here for days or weeks while waiting for that to resolve made him grimace. That assassin was sure to catch up with him if he was loitering around in one place. All the more reason to enlist Dak.

Yanko lifted his brows as Dak walked past again, carrying another load. Despite his strength, this one seemed heavier than the others. The tendons at his neck strained, and his back bowed forward as he toted the barrel up the dock.

"What is it?" Dak asked as he passed.

An odd thump came from inside the barrel. Weapons clunking against the side? Or maybe another person being smuggled? Dak's expression never changed.

"I'm in need of a bodyguard." It occurred to Yanko that he might leave it at that, try to get the Turgonian's word before explaining the depth of the commitment he was asking for, but he couldn't bring himself to try and trick the man into helping. If nothing else, a bodyguard bitter about the job he was doing wouldn't be that eager to do a good job in his protection role. "For a trip to the Kyatt Islands," Yanko added. "Maybe farther." He lowered his voice, aware of other laborers striding up and down the dock to ships tied along the way. "I've been given a quest to find something valuable that could help my people." He stopped before saying more. Whatever Dak was doing here, he was Turgonian and ultimately worked for the other side, a side that surely wouldn't mind adding a new continent to the collection of colonies it already claimed. Maybe talking to Dak and trying to enlist him was the greatest foolishness. If he came along, he was certain to figure out what they were looking for. No, Yanko could keep that knowledge to

himself, do his research in private. He could make this work, he was certain of it. If Dak would agree.

Dak grunted and lowered the barrel into the skiff. He didn't thunk it down but was gentle with placing it next to the others.

The oarsman watched Yanko with wariness and glanced at Dak a couple of times, trying to catch his eye. And suggest that they should get rid of this Nurian kid poking his nose into their lizard cart?

"I'm too busy right now, Yanko." Dak waved at the oarsman and tilted his head toward the ships in the harbor.

If it hadn't been part of a dismissal, Yanko would have been pleased to know that Dak remembered his name. But those weren't the words he wanted to hear.

The oarsman untied the skiff and ordered his colleagues to start rowing. Dak headed for the front of the dock again, his strides long and determined. He clearly wanted to leave Yanko behind and forget this conversation.

But Yanko couldn't give up yet. Dak would be such a useful asset. He had already proven his skill with a blade, and in leading a group of prisoners out of the mine, he had proven that he was crafty, as well, despite his thuggish face and body. He had traveled the world, too, at least Turgonia and Nuria, so he would know things Yanko didn't. Like how to get a good deal selling a carriage and where to find a ship that could smuggle a few people to the Kyatt Islands. As Yanko trotted after Dak, he glanced back at the skiff. It was arrowing for a freighter, not a Turgonian ironclad—which would have been blown up if it showed up in a Nurian port—but a wooden sailing ship flying a Kendorian flag.

Dak strode toward a busy warehouse with people and carts all around the loading docks. Yanko might lose him if he didn't keep up. He jogged up to the bigger man's side and opened his mouth to try again.

"I can't," Dak repeated.

"I see," Yanko said. "You only redeem favors when it's convenient for you to do so." He hadn't meant to sound so stung when he voiced the words—he had already acknowledged that what he was asking was far out of proportion to what he had done for Dak—but they came out that way, regardless, maybe because so much had gone wrong these last few days. Yanko couldn't help but let the hurt and frustration seep into his voice.

Dak stopped and looked down at him, his expression one of exasperation rather than empathy.

"I need help," Yanko said, hoping his naked honesty might appeal to the man. "The mines were attacked, my uncle was killed, and I'm the only one left who can help the family, help my people." He waved back toward the freighter. "I know you help people, even if they're not usually Nurians." He didn't want to do anything so stupid as attempting to blackmail Dak by threatening to find the port authorities and having them search that ship—again, an unwilling bodyguard wouldn't be a good one—but maybe letting Dak know that he knew his secret would be enough.

"The Kyatt Islands," Dak finally said, not giving any indication that he was worried about that freighter or what Yanko knew.

"Yes."

"How are you going to get there? The port is blockaded."

"I have ways." Yanko wriggled his fingers to remind Dak he was a powerful wizard.

Or at least a young man with a few magical tricks.

“You’re going to offer to heal a fern for one of the captains?”

Yanko flushed, reminded that the only magic Dak had seen him employ had involved bringing a dying fern back to life for Prince Zirabo. Alas, the earth sciences never impressed anyone. Maybe if Yanko conjured a small fireball and sent it sizzling into the water...

But Turgonians reputedly hated all magic, some claiming it didn’t even exist, so he wasn’t sure a demonstration would help his cause.

“Actually I was going to try and find a smuggler to hire,” Yanko said and didn’t mention that he had no idea where one went to *find* smugglers. He eyed the freighter again, but if they were going to Kendor, they were sailing down around the cape and taking the extremely long way to Turgonia, one that wouldn’t even take them into the same ocean as the Kyatt Islands.

“You find a smuggler willing to run the blockade,” Dak said, “and I’ll go with you.”

Even though Yanko had been hoping to elicit this very statement, the fact that he had actually gotten it shocked him. He pressed his palms together in front of his chest and bowed. “Thank you, Honored...” He groped for a title that would work in this instance. Honored Turgonian? Nobody ever said that. Honored Bodyguard? He wasn’t sure anyone had ever given a bodyguard that much status, either. Honored...

Dak grunted. “Enemy?”

“Well, technically perhaps, but I hope that won’t be the case. Thank you. Where can I find you after I’ve, uh, secured the services of a smuggler?”

Dak’s dark eye narrowed. He probably knew Yanko had no idea where to look for someone. “The Lady’s Skirts.” He waved toward an alley at the far end of the docks, where large signs, most with pictures rather than words, promised pubs and hostels and brothels. “I’ll be there after dark. Bring your weapons. It’s a rough place.” With his eye still closed to a slit, he added, “Captains sometimes get drinks there.” His words spoken, he resumed his brisk stride toward the warehouse.

“I’ll be there,” Yanko called after him. “Thank you!”

A couple of sailors walked past and gave him a strange look. Yes, a Nurian kid yelling words of gratitude to a Turgonian wasn’t common, but Yanko didn’t care. He couldn’t keep from grinning. He might not have any idea how he was going to talk a smuggler into risking having his ship pulverized just for Yanko, but he had a bodyguard. A *good* one. Something was finally going right.

Chapter 7

“You want the good news or the bad news?” Lakeo said, sliding into a seat across from Yanko.

Thanks to the boisterous crowd in the combination pub, hostel, and brothel, he barely heard her. “What?”

She repeated herself and plunked two frothy glass mugs onto the table. They smelled vinegary, and a dead fly floated on the top of one of the heads. Oh, it wasn’t dead yet. He plucked it out, wondering if it would survive the bath in the toxic substance. “Both, I guess.”

They sat at a table the size of a stool in the back of The Lady’s Skirts, an unsubtle name, given the number of ladies for hire that were perched on men’s laps. There were a few female customers in the establishment, most drinking with groups of male comrades, but Lakeo was a rarity. She didn’t seem to notice or mind. She quaffed a third of her beverage, set it down with a heavy clunk, and wiped her mouth.

“The bad news is that the drinks are awful,” she said. “The good news is that the drinks are cheap, so it didn’t take much of your money to buy them.”

Yanko would have rather passed, but the waitresses had glowered at him and pointed at the door when he had suggested he wasn’t thirsty.

“Dak is going to stand out if he comes in here.” Yanko only saw a couple of foreigners or mixed breeds in the establishment, none that appeared Turgonian. The Nurian sailors and dockworkers trading jokes and handling—or mishandling—their prostitutes all wore their hair down or short. No *moksu* men in here. Yanko’s topknot had earned him a few speculative looks, and he realized he should have worn it down. These people would not appreciate anyone who smelled of a privileged lifestyle. Nobody had bothered him yet, but he was wearing his weapons openly and keeping his pack on his lap in front of him.

“Maybe he won’t show up.” Lakeo frowned at him and leaned close to be heard over a raucous drinking song that had started up at the next table. “I don’t know what you were thinking. We don’t need him.”

“You don’t think we can use all the help we can find?”

Yanko waved away a full-busted woman sashaying toward him. This was her third attempt to lure him up the stairs. He would like to be flattered, and he did find her revealing clothing very eye-catching, but he was sure her interest was only a result of his social rank—and the riches she must presume he had. Alas, they were paltry riches. Lakeo might have done better with the carriage negotiation than he would have, but he sensed they had been grossly underpaid. Made artifacts were rare and valuable. He worried that smuggler captains willing to run blockades would be too.

“Not Turgonian help,” Lakeo said. “You can’t rely on him. He figures out what your mission really is, and he’ll crack you on the back of the head, toss you over the railing, and go after that thing for himself.”

“That thing? I don’t recall telling *you* what my mission is.”

“You and your brother should talk more quietly if you want your secrets kept. And check who’s standing outside your door before reading important letters aloud.”

“I should have known you were there, since I didn’t hear your snoring until later.” Yanko hitched a shoulder. He had been willing to read the letter in front of her, anyway. Even now, he doubted if she cared about his mission or the ramifications of an undiscovered—or discovered and then lost—continent.

“I don’t snore. And I don’t trust Turgonians.”

At least one of those things was a lie. Yanko didn’t point it out. His brother had once told him that a man should never call a woman a liar, even if she was caught out in public in the middle of a fib. Since Falcon had always been much more successful at capturing the eyes of girls in the village than he, Yanko usually heeded his female-related advice. He did, however, need to know if there could be trouble between Dak and Lakeo. He couldn’t afford dissent amongst his crew, if two allies could be called a *crew*.

“Are you upset because I asked him to be my bodyguard?” Yanko asked. “The way I foisted that task on you while we were fighting in the mines, I thought you’d be relieved.” Actually, all he had requested was for her to watch his back. He hadn’t even implied it would be a permanent position. Though if she had been listening to the entire conversation with Falcon, she would have heard them talking about her as if it was.

“It’s not that.” Lakeo waved her hand. “Even if I *do* think you’re stupid to want that man at your back. Turgonians can’t be trusted. They’re all animals,” she finished with a snarl.

Her open hatred surprised him. True, many Nurians felt that way, especially those who had fought in the various wars, but because of her height and strength, he had assumed she *was* part Turgonian. He sipped from his mug, found the beverage as unpleasant as he had guessed, and set it back down. But in that moment, he had a revelation. Maybe being part Turgonian was the problem.

“You’ve never mentioned your father,” Yanko said, wondering if she had a reason to loathe him. Maybe he had left her family the way his mother had.

A sheet of ice froze over Lakeo’s eyes. “No. I haven’t.”

Ah, not a good topic to bring up.

“Look, are you going to figure out which one is a captain and get us passage, or not?” Lakeo asked.

“I’d like to do that,” Yanko said, happy to change the subject, “but they’re not exactly wearing military uniforms that denote their rank and status.” Most of the men in the pub wore similar loose clothing, some grimmer and with more holes than others, but Yanko was one of the best dressed people in the room. After his days of travel, that wasn’t saying much. “Any idea how to tell who might own a ship?”

“Maybe we can judge their wealth by the number of women in their laps.” Lakeo pointed to one fellow who had a busty lady on each knee with a third standing beside him, an arm draped over his shoulders. “More rank, more money, more women.”

“An interesting theory.” Yanko drummed his fingers on their tiny table for a moment, then snapped them. “I have an idea. Watch my belongings, will you?” He pushed his pack toward her.

“Will it involve a chance to see you humiliate yourself?”

Unfortunately, it probably would. But Dak hadn’t shown up—and Yanko could not be certain he would—so he had to try something. Besides, Dak had said he would only join if Yanko managed to arrange passage. He needed to do this on his own.

Yanko stood on his stool, which wobbled precariously beneath him, and raised his

voice to call out to the room. "Greetings, my friends. I am looking for—" He cut himself off because nobody had turned toward him. Nobody had even heard him. Only the bartender, glowering from beneath a heavy brow, gave him a cool look as he dumped one table's mugs and refilled them for another table without washing them.

"All right," Yanko murmured to himself. "Just need to get their attention."

Despite the threat of being followed, he had managed enough rest on the ride down from the mountains that his headache had gone away. He could call upon his talents tonight without repercussions, at least not repercussions from *within*. He decided on a few illusions and some noise. After contemplating the proper illusion for a moment, he concentrated and thrust a hand toward the ceiling in the center of the room.

A ringing boom sounded, like the noise from a hearty firecracker. At least, that was what he intended the noise to sound like. It might have come off as closer to a cannon firing, because half of the patrons threw themselves under the tables. Some pushed their rented women aside—others pulled them atop their bodies for cover. Yanko made a quiet note of who *those* people were; they wouldn't be his first choice for shipmates.

He waved his hand, and colored lights appeared in the air above the tables, then coalesced into the shapes of curvaceous women dancing. That convinced some of the men to crawl back into their seats.

"Greetings, my friends," Yanko repeated, now that the room had grown quieter. "I am an aspiring bard, writing the songs that will one day earn me a place at the Great Chief's court." He hoped nobody demanded to *hear* a song, because Yanko was the only tone-deaf Nurian he had ever met. "I came to this humble establishment hoping to hear stories of bravery and cunning. Sea stories. I hear the Great Chief has a great fondness for sea stories." He'd heard no such thing, but he hoped no one else knew enough of the preferences of a leader a thousand miles to the north to dispute him. "Who in here has the fastest ship? Has escaped from the most difficult of odds? I've got a gold coin for whoever can tell me the greatest story of their own adventures." He held up the coin he had selected. It was the smallest, thinnest gold coin in the region, but it would still buy drinks for the night for an entire table. As much as he hated to throw such money away, it would be worth it if he was connected with a suitable captain.

Hands went up all over the room, and several men started talking at once.

"The stories must be the truth," Yanko added, using his power to amplify his voice. "I'm sure none of you would exaggerate your exploits, but the coin will know if you speak the truth or not." He pretended to flick it into the air, but was sending another illusion to land amid the dancing ladies. The floating coin glowed golden, enough to impress the group, he hoped.

Several men stood on tables, trying to get the attention of the room. Yanko had expected more skepticism and for at least one person to demand to see the coin up close, but perhaps getting drunk men to talk about their own exploits wasn't so much of a challenge as he had thought. Maybe he hadn't even needed the coin.

When it became apparent that they weren't going to politely yield to each other, Yanko pointed at one of the more promising ones—meaning he hadn't used a woman for a shield when the boom had gone off. "You first," he said with his amplified voice.

He glanced down at Lakeo, curious as to whether she had an opinion about his tactic. It wasn't, he admitted, the most subtle move he could have made. If any assassins came looking for him on the waterfront, at least fifty witnesses here would remember him.

Still, if they could find someone who could take them out of the city—off the continent—tonight, wasn't that worth the risk?

Lakeo met his look frankly and shook her head in a you're-an-idiot manner. Well, that answered that question.

"...so we're coming through the Dragon Fangs Straights," the fellow Yanko had elected was saying, "and *three* pirate ships came out of nowhere to jump us." He flicked a glance at the coin, which presumably meant he was lying. Yanko made his illusion pulse with indignation. "Two pirate ships," the man corrected. "I always forget."

"Big numbers like that must be a challenge to keep in your head," a bald man sitting by himself in the corner said. He didn't have any women draped over him—the way his feet were propped on the other stool at his table didn't invite any to join him, either. He had a black eye and glared sullenly out at the room from behind a row of empty mugs. One less empty one rested on his stomach as he leaned against the wall. An interesting array of gewgaws hung from the loops of his belt, at least a couple of them having a hint of magic about them. Charms?

"Shut your grog hole, Shark. You can have your turn later."

"My turn? To impress some snotty brat?"

Yanko raised a finger. "Excuse me, I'm a snotty bard, not a brat."

"Who cares?" The man—Shark—returned to his beverage.

Lakeo slapped Yanko on the leg. "That could be your man."

"The one with the impaired counting abilities?"

"No, the other one. Shark. That sounds like the name of a captain."

"Please. Everyone here probably has some pompous sobriquet."

"Sobri-what?"

"Never mind. We're not interested." Yanko turned his attention back to the earnest storyteller, one who was so drunk he might fall off his table at any moment.

"Because he called you a snotty brat?" Lakeo asked. "You're not going to find a smuggler who's going to call you Honored Mage, you know."

"No, I—"

A crack rang out, a mug smashing into the table their orator was standing upon.

"*Boring*," someone shouted, drawing the word out to at least six syllables.

The speaker raised his voice and kept telling the story of his great pirate escape. The next time, someone threw a plate of food. The pub erupted in laughter. The speaker threw his hat down, grabbed a knife, and flung it at the first person. That person ducked the throw, and the long, sharp blade thudded into the wall inches above his head. The man who'd nearly had his hair cut off jumped onto his table, then leaped for the speaker, slamming into him. They both flew backward and onto another table, which broke under their combined weight, plates, mugs, and shards of wood flying everywhere.

Yanko stared, unable to believe how quickly his innocent request had turned into violence. Men who hadn't been involved in the first altercation were throwing punches and upending tables. Lakeo was giving him that slow you're-an-idiot head shake again. He jumped to the floor, lamenting that he couldn't hide under the table when he had been thinking men cowardly for doing that same thing earlier.

"What do we do?" he asked, even though he should have known. Wasn't he in charge here? Hadn't the prince sent *him* the quest?

Lakeo thrust his bag at him harder than necessary, and it thudded against his chest,

knocking him back into the wall. “Slink away before the owner comes over and demands payment for all the damages your dumb idea is costing him.”

“But, I—” They had to meet Dak here. How could he leave now?

A glass mug slammed into the wall above his head, bounced off, and nearly hit Lakeo. She glowered, not at the thrower but at him.

Right. They could watch for Dak from outside and intercept him. Leaving would be a good idea.

He turned and nearly crashed into the bartender’s barrel chest, the same fellow who had been glowering at him from behind dirty mugs.

He prodded Yanko in the shoulder with a meaty finger. “I’ll take that coin you were waving around. And any other ones you have, as well.”

A fresh crash sounded as a new table broke, and the bartender’s fists curled into balls. Behind him, a couple of burly men who worked for the establishment were trying to stop the fights. The ladies had disappeared up their staircase—a staircase that had several broken railings that hadn’t been that way when Yanko came in.

As much as he didn’t want to part with any of his coins, he did feel responsible for this mess. However inadvertently, he had caused a great deal of material damage. He reached for his coin pouch.

“What?” Lakeo grabbed his arm. “No. You didn’t tell a story, did you?” she asked the bartender. “That’s not your prize.” She shoved Yanko toward the door. “We’re leaving.”

The bartender grabbed his other arm, clamping down. Yanko groped for an appropriate response. His cheeks were hot with chagrin and embarrassment, and he didn’t know if he could concentrate enough to call upon his magic, or even if it would be appropriate if he could. He certainly couldn’t pull his sword on the man, a man who had a valid reason for demanding payment.

“I—”

The bartender’s hand was ripped away from Yanko’s arm with such force that he reeled back, knocking over a stool. A looming figure stepped in, his back to Yanko as he faced the bartender, a hand raised. “Back off,” Dak growled.

“He owes me money. Look at my pub. It’s wrecked.” The bartender flung an arm toward the mess without taking his eyes from Dak. Those eyes had grown quite round when the Turgonian had stepped in. Dak had to be six and a half feet tall. He towered over everyone in the room and made the burly bouncers look... less burly. At least the fights had dwindled, with people either being kicked out or ordered to pay for damages.

“You’re telling me it’s not wrecked every night?” Dak asked. His Nurian accent had smoothed around the edges in the six months since Yanko had seen him, but he still sounded very guttural. Very Turgonian. And that one eye glared even more effectively than two.

“Not... every night,” the bartender said weakly, his tone and attitude almost meek when it had been fierce before.

Yanko wondered if Dak had done something to earn a reputation here that went beyond simple assumptions made based on his appearance. Although when he pinned Yanko with his gaze, Yanko had to try hard not to squirm too.

“You find us passage yet?”

“No, I was working on that.”

“I saw.”

Yanko flushed. Again. He wished he could stop doing that. Surely, he would grow up enough to stop being embarrassed by his mistakes someday? Maybe that would be the same day when he could learn how to call upon his mental talents when he was nervous and flustered. It almost amazed him that he had managed to survive that fight in the mines. Maybe because there hadn't been time to think and grow flustered.

Dak tossed the bartender a gold coin. The man flailed and almost dropped it. He must have been expecting a dagger or something more dangerous.

"Drinks," Dak said blandly, with a wave inclusive of Yanko, Lakeo, and himself.

She had finished her mug. Yanko's had been knocked off the table. He wasn't that disappointed when the bartender shook his head and said, "We don't serve your kind here."

The man's courage seemed bolstered now that he had put some space between Dak and himself. One of the bouncers had also walked over to join him. He pocketed the coin. "That's a *start* toward repairs."

Dak's eyebrows rose, but he didn't run over and pummel the man.

"Sorry," Yanko said. "I'll pay you back."

A waitress walked by, one of the first daring to return to the floor, now that the upturned-but-not-broken tables had been righted. The broken ones were being moved to a back door where they might make nice firewood. Dak plucked three mugs off her tray, his hands moving too quickly for the woman to object. She stopped and stared at him. He glared at her, then at the bartender, who was watching it all. After a short staring contest, the bartender grunted in disgust and turned away. Yanko wished he could give off that much menace without actually doing anything.

"Are you really a diplomat?" Yanko asked, before he could think better of prying. It was hard to imagine that glare winning him many international allies.

"Who told you that?"

"A mutual acquaintance," Yanko said, not wanting to mention Zirabo's name out loud, not in public, anyway. He wasn't even sure he should tell Dak the prince had assigned him this mission.

"Go talk to Baldie," Lakeo said. "He's over there brooding. Looks lonely. Like a man wanting to break through a blockade."

"You sure *you* don't want to talk to him?" Yanko asked.

"He *is* handsome, despite the lack of hair. The beard and mustache are well trimmed. Fingernails too. He takes care of himself."

"Which is exactly what one expects from a smuggler captain, right?"

Despite his argument, Yanko left his loathsome drink and walked to the man's table. The sooner he found someone, the better. The bouncers were squinting at him. They had probably been ordered to toss him out the door when Dak wasn't looking. Well, they could try. Yanko rehearsed his fire-creation ability in his mind a few times as he crossed the room. If necessary, he would be ready to set some nostril hair aflame.

As Yanko approached the bald man—he and his table had somehow avoided the fight—a shadow looming over his shoulder made him jump. Dak. It seemed he was going to take his favor redemption seriously.

Since the bald man didn't move his feet or invite either of them to sit, Yanko pulled over a stool from another table. Dak remained standing, looming impressively behind him. Yanko would have felt smug about finding such an imposing bodyguard, but the fact

that Dak had been smuggling people—Turgonian criminals, most likely—out of Nuria two hours ago dulled the emotion. He had best remember that his new ally was working for the other side and might decide his “favor” had been redeemed at any time.

“Greetings. Shark, wasn’t it?” Yanko said.

The man stared at him. Even from across the table, he smelled of the alcoholic sludge that had once occupied the empty mugs. Yanko wasn’t sure why Lakeo believed he might be the solution to their problem—one of their problems, anyway—but his ploy hadn’t resulted in any greater leads.

“Evening, Muscles.” Shark smirked and raised his mug toward Dak and then toward Lakeo, who had walked over to join them. “Which one of you is the kid’s bodyguard and which one is the nanny?”

Dak didn’t react. Lakeo frowned, perhaps finding the man less handsome now.

“A more interesting question is whether you got your name because you’re deadly like a shark, or because you’re as bald as a fish,” she said.

“Was that supposed to be witty? Maybe you should try your jokes on Chuckles there —” Shark flicked his fingers toward Dak, “—before unloading them in public.”

“Shark, my name is Yanko.” Time to steer this conversation in a more pertinent direction. “I’m looking for someone with a fast ship.”

Shark snorted, his breath stirring the hairs on his mustache. “No kidding.”

“Do you own such a ship? My comrades and I are in need of transportation to the Kyatt Islands,” Yanko finished.

“There’s a blockade across the harbor, kid.”

Not exactly an invitation to come aboard, but the man hadn’t denied that he had a ship. That was promising. He had also promoted Yanko from snotty brat to kid. Progress?

“I can create a fog to hide us, so we can slip past without the warships noticing.” So long as the watchmen didn’t wonder why the weather phenomenon was so localized. Yanko doubted he could drop a blanket of fog over the whole harbor.

“Really.”

Apparently, a demonstration was in order. Yanko lowered his eyelids, focusing on the sticky wooden table. This would be easier out on the water, but there was enough moisture in the air for him to manipulate. Using a variation of the method he had learned to create flames, he heated the water particles, creating a fog by vaporizing them. Cloudy wisps formed over the table.

Shark watched. His expression didn’t change, but he did utter a, “Huh.” He looked at Yanko’s topknot, then scrutinized his face.

Yanko tried not to feel self-conscious.

“You were one of the kids trying out for that mage school last week, weren’t you?” Shark asked.

“Yes.” Yanko didn’t expound. He hadn’t expected to be recognized—maybe Shark had been among those watching from the docked ships—and he hoped the man had seen the obstacle course, rather than that final test. Yanko did not want Dak to know he had failed. His new bodyguard might change his mind about coming along if he knew how unlikely it was that Yanko was someone who would be chosen for a special mission. Dak couldn’t know that the failure only made Yanko more determined to succeed.

“Kyatt Islands are nice,” Shark said. “Friendly people, warm insurrection-free beaches, and they serve those fruity drinks in the coconut cups.”

"I've heard that."

"How much you paying for passage?"

"One hundred zekris." Yanko had more than that, but figured he should start lower so he could go up. Unfortunately, he couldn't go up that much.

Shark grunted. "That's it? I can't pay my crew and buy supplies for the trip on that."

"Maybe we could help you find a cargo to take," Lakeo added, stepping closer. "Must be a lot of people who want to ship things out but can't right now."

"Problem's more people who want things delivered."

"One hundred and fifty zekris," Yanko said, "but that needs to include food for us." He would rather not help the man find a cargo, since it might be an illicit one. As much as he wanted to succeed on this quest, he didn't want to become a criminal to do so.

"Shrimp food, kid. That's shrimp food." Shark swiped his fingers through the remains of the fog. "But it doesn't matter. Most of my crew is currently unavailable."

"Oh? Maybe we can be your crew. We don't mind working for our passage."

"You have experience sailing?"

"Lakeo and I are maritime novices, but my large comrade here, ah, rode on a boat to get here." Yanko glanced back at Dak, hoping he might explain that he actually had extensive sailing experience. He only stared back, his expression cool.

"Uh huh," Shark said. "Listen, I'll make a deal with you. If you can get my crew, we'll take you where you want to go."

"Of course," Yanko said, imagining trotting around town, rousting men from various hostels, but he immediately realized they must be more permanently indisposed. "Where are they?"

"You know those caves down the coast a few miles?"

"Uh." Yanko knew there *were* caves up and down the coast, but he didn't know of any specific ones Shark might be referencing.

"Red Sky Regional Detention Facility," Dak said.

"A prison?" Lakeo asked.

"There might be a prison in the caves, sure." Shark shrugged. "And it might be my crew is being held there indefinitely. For no good reason. Until I show up with a wheelbarrow full of money to pay the government's reparation fees. And in case you were wondering, one-fifty wouldn't come anywhere close to filling that particular wheelbarrow."

"So... you want us to break them out of jail?" Yanko asked bleakly. He hadn't wanted to do anything criminal, and this sounded far worse than putting together an illicit cargo.

"Soon as I have them all back, we can leave."

"Would our passage be free? Given the risk we'd be taking to get your people?"

"One-fifty is practically free already," Shark said.

Yanko rubbed his chin. "How would I find your crew? How many are there? Is there a roster?"

Shark stared. "A what?"

Lakeo leaned close to Yanko and whispered loudly, "He probably doesn't know how to write."

Shark glared at her. "Just find Arayevo, kid. She can point out the others."

It was Yanko's turn to stare in stunned surprise. "Arayevo?" he breathed.

It couldn't be *his* Arayevo. What would she be doing here? Of course, she *had* been

looking for a way to go to sea. To find his mother. Had she signed on with a freighter, hoping she might one day find passage to the waters Captain Snake Heart Pey Lu occupied? Or was this just someone else with the same first name? That made more sense. His Arayevo wouldn't choose to become a smuggler. Why would she do that? Just because she romanticized pirates and had wanted to find Yanko's mother...

"That's her name, yes. Pretty. Young. Spunky. There won't be many like her in there." Shark's fist tightened around the handle of his mug. "And they better not have hurt her."

"I..." Yanko didn't know what to say. Young. Spunky. It *did* sound like the Arayevo he had known his entire life, the one who had babysat him, the one he had fallen in love with as soon as he was old enough to know what love was... If she was stuck in the prison here, how could he say no to finding a way to get her out? And he couldn't help but muse that maybe if he was the one to rescue her, she might see him differently, as a heroic figure rather than as the boy who had tagged around after her as a toddler, calling her "Yevro" because he couldn't pronounce her name. "All right. If—"

A hand clamped onto Yanko's shoulder—hard. "A word," Dak said, his expression even darker than usual.

Yanko kept from wincing at the grip on his shoulder and held up a finger. "We'll be right back."

Shark hefted his mug. "Take your time."

"Find another ship owner," Dak said as soon as Yanko turned around. He didn't seem to care if Shark overheard them or not. "That's a ludicrous tradeoff, and if his crew is in prison, they probably deserve to be there."

"Much as you and your Turgonian friends deserved to be in my uncle's mine?" Yanko met Dak's eye. Even if he had been worrying over the same subject himself, he believed he had a valid point.

Dak's eye closed to a slit. "We can find another ship, one that can leave tonight. If you get caught and thrown in prison, whatever your mission is will fail."

"I have considered that." Or at least, Yanko was considering it now. "But I know the woman he mentioned. Arayevo. We're from the same village. She left a few months ago because she longed for adventure at sea."

"Looks like she found it."

"She's a vibrant and free soul. To leave her trapped in some dank cave would be a crime."

Dak's face hadn't changed at all. Apparently, he wasn't one to be swayed by arguments of vibrant and free souls.

"And," Yanko said, "she used to be apprenticed to a forest master. She can make healing salves and other potions with ingredients from the woods. Does your, uh, socket ever hurt? Maybe she can pick up a few herbs here before we leave and make a nice soothing poultice for you."

If anything, Dak's expression grew more dour.

Lakeo must have gotten tired of exchanging barbs with Shark, because she was standing next to them now, listening to their exchange. "Amazing someone gave him a mission to help the nation, isn't it?"

Yanko sighed. "She's my friend, Dak. *I* have to go. If you want to stay here and enjoy the pleasure of a woman, I'll understand."

Dak grumbled something in Turgonian and walked out the door.

“What does that mean?” Lakeo asked. “That he doesn’t like the pleasures of women?”

“I think he said you’re going to be the death of his other eye,” Shark called. The man had perked up and gave them a salute with his mug. Sure, he had others who were willing to risk their lives to free his crew. Why wouldn’t he be perky?

“Don’t worry, Yanko.” Lakeo thumped him on the back. “I’m sure your Turgonian is bolstered by the fact that you know someone who can make a poultice.”

From the way Lakeo rolled her eyes and walked out, Yanko had a feeling she hadn’t been impressed by his sales tactics. Probably not by anything he had done this night.

“This mission is off to an auspicious start.” He sighed and walked out, the cold gaze of the bartender following him.

Chapter 8

“I’m not sure whether to be more or less alarmed that you have a plan,” Lakeo said.

Yanko frowned as the sea breeze whipped at the piece of paper he was trying to write on. He should have done this back at the pub in town, rather than while sitting cross-legged in front of a flat rock alongside the road a mile north of the prison caves. But the idea—the plan, as Lakeo said—had only come to him while he, she, and Dak had been walking out of town.

Another fierce gust came, nearly knocking over the compact travel lantern perched on the edge of the rock. He caught it, but lost his quill in the tufts of razor grass growing alongside the road. The sharp edges scraped his skin as he hunted for the lost quill. He took a moment to send a few tendrils of earth magic into the plants, inviting the leaves to part and flatten down for him. They did so, and he found the quill, only to knock over the small bottle of ink with his elbow.

“Stoat’s teats,” he growled, lunging and trying to catch it before all the ink flowed out. Even without the others watching, he would have felt like an incompetent idiot. Maybe he should have gone with his first thought, using his earth magic to burrow a hole in the back of the cave system. The problem with that was that he could easily start a rockfall—or earthquake. Earthquakes weren’t the sneakiest way to enter an underground complex.

“Careful, Yanko, you’ll make my ears burn with such profanity,” Lakeo said.

Yanko found the ink jar, sighing at how much had dribbled out. If they hadn’t already walked four miles, he would suggest returning to town. How was he supposed to forge a letter on a rock?

Dak lowered a slender stick. No, not a stick.

“Is that a pen?” Yanko accepted it and examined it in the shaky light of the lantern. “I’ve heard of them.” He scribbled experimentally on his scrap paper. “Huh. The inkwell is inside the stick? Simple, but ingenious.”

“Yes,” Dak said dryly. “It’s advanced Turgonian technology. Don’t share it with your government.”

“Was that... a joke?” Yanko looked up at him, his towering form outlined against the stars. “Dak, I wouldn’t have guessed you had a sense of humor.”

“My superiors never encouraged it.”

“Superiors? Like officers over you in the military?” Yanko supposed he had more important things to worry about than prying into his new bodyguard’s background, but he wouldn’t be wise to ignore opportunities to learn more about him either.

“Finish your letter,” Dak said.

So much for opportunities. Yanko should simply be pleased that Dak had come along. When he had stalked out of the pub, Yanko had doubted whether he would.

He turned his focus back to his impromptu writing desk and examined Prince Zirabo’s penmanship under the lantern light, careful not to let the wind sweep *those* pages away—he had been keeping them in the inside pocket in his leather tunic. At times, he had wondered if he should memorize the words and burn the message, but he had a fear that he might show up at the Golden City one day and need the prince’s seal in order

to get an appointment to talk to him. His family name would not earn him an invitation to the chief's council room, not these days.

"The letters are swoopie, aren't they? Even when he's in a hurry." Yanko clamped the original message between his teeth and did his best to emulate the style in the new letter. He hoped that Zirabo wouldn't mind someone forging a letter in his name to further his mission. Actually, he hoped Zirabo never found out about it.

Lakeo crouched down on the other side of the rock, watched him write for three seconds, and announced, "That's awful."

"Thank you for your artistic opinion." Yanko bit his tongue to keep from adding, "Now, go away."

"You're better at making illusions. Can you make an illusion of a letter?"

"No, a person can't hold an illusion, and I doubt the prison guards are going to let me pretend to hold the note out to them."

"Why don't you tell me what you want to say, and I'll do it then?"

"You're a practiced forger, are you?"

"I'm a practiced artist, you idiot. You've seen my carvings."

"Yes, and if I needed a tree etched into this rock, you would be the first person I'd ask."

Dak started walking around, ostensibly watching the road in either direction, but he was probably bored. Or wondering why he had ever promised Yanko that favor.

"Here, go ahead and try," Yanko said. He felt bad for sniping at her, even if she had been as sarcastic as he. "Address it to the honored prison warden and—"

"Rekanogee," Dak said out of nowhere.

"Pardon?"

"That's the name of the prison commissioner."

"You've been here before?" Yanko stood up, relinquishing his rock desk to Lakeo. He recalled that Dak had known exactly what Shark had been talking about when he had referenced the caves south of town.

"Yes."

"Because you were breaking some people out? Or because you were interred?"

Dak's eyebrow twitched. "Yes."

"I see. Were some of the former inmates in those barrels you were loading onto that skiff?"

Dak faced south, pointing to the cliffs the road followed, cliffs that overlooked a maze of pinnacles and sharp boulders sticking up out of the deep water. "The one and only entrance to the prison is halfway up the cliff side down there, a large opening that usually has two guards inside of it along with artillery weapons to defend against sea attacks. There may be more men there now, due to recent prison breaks." Dak's eye glinted, a rare hint of pleasure showing on his face. "The main cavern branches with numerous tunnels leading back into the rock, each lined with cells, some large and some small. There were groups and individuals in the cells when I was there."

Yanko noticed the way Dak avoided answering his question, but he accepted this new information as a fair alternative response. It would be handy if Shark's crew was all being held in one cell, but he could not count on being that lucky.

"There are more guards back in the complex," Dak continued. "Two at the front of each tunnel, and more that sleep on the premises and can be called up at any time. There

are also defensive measures that can be activated if there's a break-in—or an attempt to break out. I didn't see all of them, but the portcullis that can drop over the cave entrance can be inconvenient."

"How did you get out?" Yanko wondered how many days had passed since Dak had staged the breakout. He didn't need to deal with extra alert guards.

"Organized violence."

"So... in the traditional Turgonian way."

"Yes."

"How is it that your people are more technologically advanced than mine?" Yanko looked down at the pen in Lakeo's hand.

"Necessity. We don't rely on magic to solve our problems."

Yanko hoped for an opportunity to show Dak what *magic* could do. So far, the Turgonian had only, as he had mentioned, seen Yanko heal a fern.

"How's this?" Lakeo leaned the page toward the lantern so they could see it. She had only written the salutation, but she had done a nice job emulating Zirabo's penmanship style.

"Good. All right, here's the rest." Yanko crouched on the balls of his feet. "It has come to my attention that you have a prisoner who smuggled an important artifact out of the Golden City. Arayevo Den Lo. I require she be turned over to Warrior Mage Akaron Sun Dragon—"

"Sun Dragon?" Lakeo protested. "From the legend? The one who singlehandedly held back a Turgonian invasion force of thousands?"

It figured that this would be one piece of history she actually knew.

"Those exploits are a part of legend now, but it's a real family with a long history of serving the great chiefs. I can't use my own clan name. As I found out last week, it's well known here, thanks to my mother's indiscretions."

"Sun Dragon." Lakeo snorted. "Next you'll be claiming descent from Selas the Great."

"Just write the words."

"Are you sure you want to imply your girlfriend is an even greater criminal than she is?"

"She's not my girlfriend." Yet. "And she's not a criminal."

"Right, I'm sure her work for Smuggler Captain Shark has been very noble."

"Have you written what I said yet?"

Lakeo grumbled, but she hunched over the page and went back to penning the note in the prince's hand.

"You're only seeking to get the girl out?" Dak asked. He didn't point out that retrieving only one crew member wouldn't win them passage from Shark, but he didn't need to. It was on Yanko's mind.

"Even if I can only see her for a couple of minutes, it may be enough. If she can let me know where the others are being kept, then I believe I can drill down from above. We can lower a rope without the guards knowing about it." He nudged the coil of rope he had stopped to pick up on the way out of the city.

"Drill down. Yanko, there's at least thirty feet of solid rock between the top of the cliff and the cave ceilings."

"Yes, but I study the earth sciences. I can manipulate rocks, make holes." He hoped

he wasn't making a promise he couldn't follow through on. Thirty feet of solid rock was daunting, especially if his attempt was not to collapse it but to find a way to winnow through it. "It might not be a particularly straight hole, but I should be able to make one."

Dak grunted dubiously.

"Oh, he can do the rocks," Lakeo said. Yanko was on the verge of feeling pleased by her faith in him when she added, "Passing himself off as some great and powerful warrior mage from a great and powerful family is a lot more questionable."

"You do know that I'm from a once-great family and that my mother was—is—extremely powerful, right?"

"Doesn't mean anyone is going to believe you are. You're too young. You barely look your age. And your age is young."

"I'm eighteen. That's not that young."

"You have three chin hairs."

"Because I *shave*."

"Yeah, but you only have three chin hairs to shave."

Yanko took a deep breath and relaxed the fists that had somehow become clenched. "I'll make it work. Just finish the letter, please. I require she be turned over to Warrior Mage Akaron Sun Dragon, who will bring her back to the Golden City for questioning. Your cooperation in this matter is appreciated. Prince Zirabo, son of the Great Chief."

Fortunately, Lakeo returned to writing without further comment on his age. Or his chin hair.

Dak was watching them, perhaps still wondering about the feasibility of the hole-making. Though his new bodyguard hadn't objected further, Yanko felt the need to explain in more depth, to bring him around to his way of thinking.

"Even though I'm certain we could retrieve the men using some of your organized violence," he said, "I'm not comfortable with the idea of hurting—or more than hurting—region-appointed guards in order to free prisoners that, as you pointed out, may have been justly incarcerated. These are my own people, and I'm already questioning the fact that I'm going to break a law here. I don't want to hurt anyone. Not for this. You strike me as an honorable man, Dak. I'm sure you can understand not wanting to make trouble for the authorities."

"I like making trouble for the Nurian authorities," Dak said.

"But not killing people who are just doing their jobs, I hope."

Dak didn't respond. Hm.

"Who took your eye, Dak?" Lakeo blew on the ink, finished with the forgery.

"Nurians," he said bluntly and gave Yanko a flat look.

Yanko did his best not to wither under his stare.

"Here's your letter," Lakeo said.

Yanko examined it under the light, relieved to find the words all spelled correctly. He never got the impression that Lakeo had received a lot of schooling. "Thank you."

He rolled it into a scroll, then carefully removed the deep purple seal from his own note and applied it to the new message. A slight warming of the wax, and it affixed itself to the paper. Zirabo's seal. Who could question it?

No one, he hoped.

"We ready to go?" Lakeo picked up her pack and her bow.

"Not quite. I need to change clothes."

* * *

“How do I look?” Yanko asked, smoothing the crimson robe that fit him far better than he had thought it would. They had reached the fork in the road and turned onto the path that angled down the cliff face. From here, they couldn’t see the cavern entrance, but lamps glowed in the darkness down there, lining the wide ledge where the path ended.

“Better than I thought you would when you said you were putting on your mother’s clothes,” Lakeo said.

Dak’s glower wasn’t friendly. “You look like someone I should be shooting.”

Yanko tried not to find that disturbing. He hoped it meant the garment lent authority to him, making him appear like a true warrior mage rather than some upstart who had failed his entrance exams.

“How old are we saying you are if they ask?” Lakeo asked as they started down the path.

Hoping nobody *would* ask, Yanko tugged the robe’s hood over his head to shadow his features. “I’ll do the talking. If they ask, I’ll say I’m eighteen. And a protégé. I entered Stargrind at thirteen.”

Lakeo snorted. “Does that ever happen?”

“Once. Three hundred years ago. To Se Mon the Star Flyer.”

Lakeo shook her head, apparently not familiar with the name.

“That was one of your great chiefs, wasn’t it?” Dak asked. “The one who razed the capital city to cow the resistance, then took over by force?”

“Yes.” Yanko tried not to find it disconcerting that Dak knew more about his people’s history than Lakeo did.

They stopped talking after that, padding down the rock path in silence. Two guards stepped into view before they had gone half way. One wore a black and white robe with the runes of a mind control specialist lining the sleeves.

Yanko kept the alarm off his face—he hoped—and raised his chin. Inside, he panicked. He hadn’t expected to find another mage here. In retrospect, it made perfect sense that someone from that discipline would be assigned to keep an eye on the prisoners. With his telepathy skills, the man could ferret out prisoners planning breakouts while they were still in the incipient stages. But he could also read every thought in visitors’ heads, if he so chose.

“He wasn’t here before,” Dak murmured. From the warning tone in that murmur, he recognized the significance of the outfit. There was a coldness to his tone, as well, a forbidding quality that made Yanko uneasy, even if the accompanying glare wasn’t directed at him.

“Keep your thoughts as blank as possible.” Yanko added, “He’ll be a telepath.”

“I know.”

Yanko kept walking—anything else would be suspicious—but he contemplated Lakeo out of the corner of his eye as he did so. If Dak loathed mind mages, his hatred might actually help him. His thoughts of strangling the man, or whatever violence he fantasized about, might keep the more important thoughts from surfacing, such as that this was all a ruse and that Yanko should be thrown atop the pointy rocks far below for his audaciousness. He was less certain about Lakeo. Even if she used a hint of magic in her carving, something he had witnessed before when she thought nobody was watching, that didn’t mean she had a well-trained mind that could deflect the inquiries of a telepath.

“Honored Warrior Mage,” the mind mage said, pressing his hands together in front of his chest and bowing when Yanko reached the ledge.

Yanko returned the gesture, making his bow slighter, since society said a warrior mage outranked all of the wizards in the other disciplines. The man had some gray in his hair, and Yanko felt like a fraud before he ever said a word.

“Honored Mind Mage,” he greeted. “I apologize for my tardiness, but my carriage broke down some miles north of the Port of the Red Sky Wars. The recklessness of young drivers.” He flicked a dismissive hand toward Lakeo, even as he hoped the night shadows hid his own youth.

The mind mage tilted his head curiously. “Could you not repair it?”

The general populace, and other mages too, it seemed, had a notion that warrior mages could do anything. Odd, since so many of them specialized in little more than flinging fireballs and wielding swords.

“It was the power source. I never bothered studying Making.” Yanko offered his best haughty sniff to imply that tinkering with artifacts was beneath him. Either that, or he implied he was trying to keep snot from dribbling out of his nose.

“What brings you here, Honored Warrior Mage?” the second man asked, a young guard with bruised knuckles. He must have been punching people lately. Did he sound suspicious at this late-night unannounced arrival? Yanko couldn’t tell. Maybe *he* should study telepathy.

“I have a message to deliver to the man in charge, Commissioner Rekanogee, I believe.” Yanko resisted the urge to speak quickly, lest they find it suspicious, but the fact that the mage was contemplating Dak and Lakeo made him nervous. When he dipped into a pocket for the forged letter, he noticed the dampness of his palms. He hoped nobody would spot the sweaty smudge marks he left on the edges of the scroll. “I’ve been told I’ll be making a pickup, as well. Shall I wait here?”

“A pickup?” The guard scratched his head. “I didn’t hear anything about that.”

“That’s why there’s a note.”

“Uh, all right. But the commissioner is sleeping.” The guard glanced at the mage and made an I-don’t-want-to-be-the-one-to-wake-him-up face.

“I’ll take it.” The mage squinted at Yanko as he accepted the letter, and he felt the faintest brush at the edges of his mind, an attempt to read his surface thoughts without delving too deeply to attract notice. Someone who wasn’t a Sensitive wouldn’t notice such a light touch, and not every mage would, either.

As soon as he had seen the telepath, Yanko had bricked off his mind, and he knew the man wouldn’t get anything, but a warning might be in order. Thus to discourage further attempts.

Yanko sent his senses down into the ledge and the rock that supported it, quickly finding that much of the cliff wall had eroded under the relentless tides. It took little effort to shift one of the crucial veins that kept the ledge from falling into the ocean. He made sure the damage wouldn’t bring it down completely, then sheered off a few rocks. Audible snaps came up from below, and the ledge shuddered with tremors.

The guard squawked and ran inside.

The quake should distract the mage, too, but in case he was still monitoring, Yanko let one of his thoughts slip through, an image of the entire ledge collapsing, except for the path and the portion he and his comrades stood upon.

The mage's eyes bulged.

"I do not appreciate anyone meddling in my thoughts, Honored Mage," Yanko said, doing his best to make his voice steely. It was hard because he felt like an ass for trying to cow the man.

"No, no, Honored Warrior Mage. I just had to be sure. Anyone can dress in a costume."

"Surely, you can tell this is not a fake robe." Yanko spread an arm, thinking of the power he had sensed within the garment. Even if he didn't know yet what it did, he knew it was there, and another mage should feel that too. To his surprise, the runes at the edges flared to life, a golden glow brightening the shadowy ledge. "Who would dare imitate a warrior mage?"

The ledge shivered again, not as a result of anything he had done. He hoped he hadn't miscalculated and truly made the rock so unstable that this portion of ground would collapse.

"No one, Honored Warrior Mage." The telepath bowed again, deeply and hastily this time. "You're right. My apologies. Please come inside and wait while I notify the commissioner." He glanced warily at the ledge. "I'll have food and beverages fetched."

Yanko inclined his head and spread his arm again, indicating the other fellow should lead. Yanko glanced at his companions, feeling wary himself, anticipating being called an idiot again. Dak merely gazed back at him blandly. He had retreated a couple of steps—to the path, which was supported by different veins of rock than the ledge—but he didn't comment on the quake.

Lakeo grabbed his arm. Instead of calling him an idiot, she whispered, "He was poking in my mind. I felt it. I tried to think about the carriage being broken, but I don't know if it fooled him. I'm not—I never had any training for dealing with telepaths."

"I know. Wait up top, will you? Just to be safe. And—" Yanko glanced toward the cavern. He had better not take long, lest the mage's suspicions be aroused again. "If anything happens, let my brother know where I am—or was. Please."

Surprisingly, she didn't argue. The mage's mind touch must have truly unnerved her. "I will," she said and jogged back up the path.

Trusting Dak to follow him, Yanko strode inside.

Nothing about the flat, grassy cliff top had hinted of underground passages, so Yanko was impressed by the size of the chamber that opened up around them. The already-wide entrance widened farther, creating a large cavern, the ceiling soaring more than thirty feet above with stalactites leering down, dripping water into small pools. Yanko stretched up with his mind, judging the amount of rock that stood between that ceiling and the cliff top above. Dak's estimate had been dead-on. In this spot at least, there was another thirty feet of rock above the ceiling. Numerous tunnels opened from that first chamber, several at higher elevations with wooden ladders leading up to them.

The mage was talking to another guard and pointing down a wide passage. While they spoke, Yanko turned his senses outward again, feeling out the different tunnels, trying to judge their length and how many people were housed down each one. Since he knew Arayevo, he hoped he might find her familiar aura as he searched.

But the telepath returned, and Yanko reined in his thoughts. He didn't want to be caught gazing longingly down prison tunnels.

"The commissioner has been awoken," the mind mage said, bowing deeply again.

Yanko certainly had made an impression on him. So long as that ledge didn't topple into the ocean before he and Dak had to leave. "He'll meet you over there." The telepath pointed to crude benches that had been carved into the wall and natural rock formations to one side. There was also a fire pit. Homey. At least by cave standards. Dripping water splattered on one of the benches, and a puddle lay at the feet of another.

"Thank you." Yanko headed that way, hoping to end his conversation with the mage. If he had been probing Lakeo's mind, he must have checked on Dak, as well. Even if Dak's rage might deter the mage from scraping too deeply into his thoughts, Yanko could not count on that. As a Turgonian, Dak would have even less natural ability to resist a telepath, and he wouldn't likely know when one was sauntering through his mind.

Unfortunately, the mage tagged along, following Yanko to the benches.

"I'm Senshoth Fire Badger," he said. "Do you mind sharing your name, Honored Warrior Mage?"

"Akaron Sun Dragon."

"Sun Dragon," the man breathed. "A truly great family. No wonder you can manipulate the earth in addition to your other talents."

"Yes," was all Yanko said. No need to share that his other talents, his non-earth science talents, were on the mediocre side by warrior mage standards. Or any mage standards.

Avoiding the puddles, Yanko sat on a bench carved into a stalagmite. Dak stood beside him, his hands resting on the hilts of his weapons. Even though he had sparred with a sword and a shield when they had practiced in the mines, he had shown up tonight with traditional Nurian weapons, a *kyzar* and a scimitar. Yanko wouldn't be surprised if he could fight in the Nurian style as effectively as in his own. But fighting wouldn't do him any good if the mage read his thoughts.

Senshoth perched on a bench across from Yanko and Dak. He draped his forearms on his knees and gazed over in... Yanko was not sure how to read that expression. Rapture? It couldn't be.

The guard Senshoth had been talking to earlier returned with a tray of appetizers and beverages. Technically, it was an upturned shield with some broken rice crackers and a chipped pitcher containing an undetermined substance—no separate mugs. The prison must not entertain often.

"If I may presume to ask," Senshoth said, "however did you claim a Turgonian for a bodyguard?"

Uh. It hadn't occurred to Yanko to prepare an answer for that question. He blurted out the first thing that came to mind. "He's a war prize."

"War?" Senshoth tilted his head. "What war? You're so young, Honored Warrior Mage."

Yanko didn't think he sounded suspicious—yet—but he accepted the pitcher and took a long sip from the side so he had a moment to consider an explanation. The potent beverage nearly burned his tonsils off on the way down. Who put such strong alcohol in a pitcher that big? It was all he could do not to cough and sputter.

"He was a Turgonian spy actually," Yanko said, surreptitiously wiping the tears from the corners of his eyes. "He had orders to study Stargrind and assassinate the headmaster if possible. He was captured and put up a great fight before he was brought down. I was a senior student at the time and had the luck to be the person instrumental in defeating

him.” Yanko resisted the urge to look at Dak, not wanting to see the icy glare that was doubtlessly leveled in his direction. Considering how many times Dak had flattened him into the ground while they had been sparring, the idea of Yanko defeating him was laughable. “The headmaster intended to put him to death, but after he was tortured and revealed all of his information, most of the fight went out of him. I had yet to claim a bodyguard for myself, and I thought it would be an interesting challenge to break him like a *sazchen* lizard.” This time, he didn’t *have* to look at Dak to feel the glare drilling its way into the side of his head.

“Fascinating,” Senshoth breathed, apparently believing the ludicrous story. “Because he was such a good fighter?”

“Indeed. I knew if I could handle him, it would be a great boon to have him at my side.”

“You must keep a charm or compel spell of some kind on him.”

Were there such things? Yanko hadn’t read about them. Something out of the mind mage books, perhaps.

“Naturally,” he said. He handed the pitcher across to the mage, not wanting to dull his senses by swallowing any more alcohol, especially since that stuff was potent enough to be used as a fire starter.

“I can’t read him at all,” Senshoth admitted, scrutinizing Dak. “It’s remarkable. You said he was a spy? He must have extensive training. It’s almost as if he’s a mage hunter.”

“Really?” Yanko asked before he caught himself. If he and Dak had been working together since his supposed graduation, he shouldn’t be surprised by anything about him...

“Really. I’ve been trying. I get the sense that he wants to kill me, of course, but that’s not surprising for a Turgonian.”

“No,” Yanko murmured, his mind dwelling on the revelation that Dak had been trained to thwart mental attacks. That wasn’t remotely typical for a Turgonian, not when ninety percent of the nation had convinced themselves that the mental sciences did not exist.

“But beyond that, he’s a blank wall. Much as you are. One expects a mage to be able to shield his thoughts from another mage, but for a Turgonian to do so? So surprising. They’re clearly an inferior race.”

“Clearly.” Yanko wondered if Dak would want to spar with him later, perhaps pummel him into the ground a few times as retaliation for this night’s indignities.

Footsteps came from one of the tunnels, hard-heeled boots ringing on the stone floor. The first guard and a heavysset man missing most of his hair strode into view. Yanko’s instinct was to stand up and bow to the man, but he reminded himself that he was the ranking person in the room, or at least pretending to be it. Whatever political or career status a mundane reached, he could never stand above a mage from an honored family.

The older man didn’t look happy about it, but he smacked his hands together and bowed. “Honored Warrior Mage.” Even as he lowered his head, he glanced at Senshoth and raised his eyebrows. The telepath nodded back.

Yanko let out a breath he hadn’t realized he had been holding. They were buying the charade.

“I have read the message from Prince Zirabo,” the commissioner said. “It is unprecedented, but I must say I am not surprised that the one called Arayevo is a

notorious criminal.”

Yanko kept his eyebrows from flying up—barely. “Oh?”

“She has been trouble since she arrived here.” The commissioner glanced at Sensoth again, but Yanko couldn’t interpret the silent exchange this time. He wondered if any communication beyond eye contact was happening. “I will have her brought to you, of course. Do you, ah, would the morning be acceptable?”

The morning? Why would they need to keep her another night? Was the man thinking of some way to corroborate Yanko’s story? It was likely he had a communication orb in his office and could talk to a superior in the city. Yanko was banking on him not having direct access to anyone in the Great Chief’s court, but he would hate to be wrong about that.

“I must have the woman tonight,” Yanko said. When both men’s eyebrows twitched, he realized that had not sounded quite right. “I must take her with me tonight,” he amended. “A ship awaits us in the harbor, and I’ve made arrangements to be allowed past the blockade, but it must be soon, before hostilities escalate.” He hoped that sounded plausible. Maybe he should have picked up a newspaper in his nonexistent free time and figured out what exactly the hostilities *were* at the moment.

The commissioner scratched his jaw, and Sensoth’s brow crinkled. “You’ve made arrangements with the rebels? When you’re on a mission from the Great Chief’s son?”

The rebels? Those had been Nurian warships out there, painted in Nurian navy colors. He had assumed they must have been sent by the central government to stamp out rebel activity down here. Or rather, he hadn’t given much thought to it at all. Idiot.

Despite his whirring thoughts, Yanko smiled and offered a simple, “Yes.” Before they could question him further on politics he knew nothing about, he added, “If you can bring her up promptly, I will be grateful. I’m certain Prince Zirabo would too. I’m not privy to the details, but I believe the stolen item was of great importance to him.”

“It’s not his diplomatic flute, is it?” Sensoth asked. “Those are so rare and valuable. It would be a tremendous loss, not only to him personally but to the Great Chief, as well.”

Yanko spread his hands. Whatever got them to bring Arayevu out more quickly.

“Yes,” the commissioner said. “I understand. I’ll...” He chewed on his lip and gazed thoughtfully at the tunnels on the far side of the cavern. “I’ll have her brought up shortly.”

Yanko watched him head over to talk to a guard, a little uneasy about his hesitations and his desire to prolong the handoff.

“Pardon me, please,” Sensoth said. “I’ll be right back.” He hustled into the same tunnel the commissioner had exited from.

Yanko stood up and met Dak’s eyes, wishing he could ask if the Turgonian thought anything seemed fishy here. But Dak’s face wasn’t easy to read, or rather the thoughts behind it weren’t. Judging solely on his expressions, he seemed to vacillate between grumpy and truly perturbed without much range beyond those feelings. What he was truly thinking about... apparently, not even telepaths could guess. Two men had returned to guard the main entrance, and they were close enough to hear if Yanko tried to speak with Dak, so he did not. He almost wished he had studied the mind sciences when he had been growing up. Communicating with animals had come naturally—nobody had taught him that—but the idea of trying to put images in Dak’s head the way he had done with the hounds in the mountains... It was daunting.

Movement in the closest tunnel caught Yanko's eyes. He stood on his tiptoes, leaning toward it. Arayevo? No, it was only the mage returning.

Senshoth jogged toward him with a leather-bound book in his arms. "Honored Warrior Mage," he said. "I would like to give you a gift."

"Oh?" Yanko must have truly made an impression on the older man.

Senshoth thrust the tome forward. "It's my life's work. A historical and instructional manual on compulsion, telepathy, and other mind-related disciplines. I, ah..." He poked at the binding on the book and avoided Yanko's eyes. "Well, you're from the Golden City, right? Or you pass through there often? I thought you might, only if you feel it's worthy, recommend my work to the mages on the Council of Eternal Starlight. I assume you must know them?" Senshoth lifted hopeful eyes.

The Council of Eternal Starlight? The committee of the most influential practitioners of the mental sciences in the Great Land? The most politically connected and distinguished mages from the most honored families?

"Of course," Yanko squeaked. He thumped his chest, cleared his throat, and repeated himself in a more normal register.

"Wonderful." Senshoth thrust the book at Yanko. "Please accept my gift."

Yanko had no idea how to reject it tactfully and thus ended up with the massive tome in his arms. It had to weigh ten pounds. How was he supposed to carry this around on a journey of thousands of miles?

He forced a smile and said, "Thank you."

Senshoth beamed.

"Here we are," came the commissioner's voice from across the cavern.

Almost dropping the book in his eagerness to see Arayevo again after all these months, Yanko spun, a more sincere smile on his face. But it faltered right away. The wild-eyed woman with shaggy brown hair and barbed tattoos encircling her wrists was most certainly not Arayevo.

Chapter 9

Yanko opened and closed his mouth a few times. Was it possible he'd had the wrong Arayevo all along? That this woman simply shared the same name? She *did* fit what he imagined a smuggler might look like. But no, Shark had described Arayevo as young and spunky. This woman had to be close to Dak's age and appeared about as spunky as a pothole.

"That's not Arayevo," Yanko said, even as the commissioner opened his mouth to say something.

"What? Of course it is." The commissioner smiled and stepped aside to show off the woman more fully. She glared dully back at him.

"Prince Zirabo showed me a picture of her—of the criminal."

"He—oh." The commissioner's shoulders slumped. "I didn't realize—I thought he'd just given you the message, and, ah."

Trying to make his voice steely again, Yanko stood as tall as he could and said, "You seek to deceive me?"

"No." The commissioner flung out a hand while glancing at the ledge outside. He must have heard of the small earthquake.

"I told you it wouldn't work," Senshoth said, as if wishing to show that he'd had nothing to do with the scheme.

"Where is Arayevo?" Yanko demanded.

The commissioner dropped his head and rubbed his face. "We're not sure. Don't worry—she hasn't escaped. I mean, she *has* escaped, but she's still in the caves somewhere. We can find her. We just need time. Senshoth was using his powers to locate her when you came down, Honored Warrior Mage. I'm sure by morning..."

"You're searching for the criminal now?" Yanko asked.

"We were."

"Then I shall help. As I've said, it's imperative that we leave as soon as possible. With my assistance, we can locate her more quickly." And maybe he could locate the rest of the missing crew at the same time. This could work out better than he had hoped. He kept his visage stern and didn't let any of his excitement show.

"That would be most appreciated." Senshoth smiled at Yanko, appearing excited at having his new buddy join the search with him. Yanko didn't know if he had truly impressed the mage, or if it was only the robe—and his made-up connections with the Council of Eternal Starlight—that had Senshoth so eager to spend time with him. As long as he couldn't read Dak, Yanko supposed it did not matter.

The commissioner was nodding. "Yes, we're glad to have your help. She's been a most trying inmate. Last night, she tricked—oh, never mind." He mopped his brow. "I won't regret having you take her away."

"Show me to the cell where she was kept prisoner," Yanko said. "I have tracking skills. It makes sense to begin the search there." And if she had been kept with the other crew members and he could identify them, perhaps he could assist them in escaping.

"Senshoth." The commissioner pointed to Yanko. "Take care of it, please."

The telepath bowed and waved for Yanko to follow him. They crossed the cavern,

climbed one of the ladders, and headed through a twisting natural tunnel lined with iron sconces. A lamp burned in every third one, leaving the way dim. Dak grunted more than once as he had to maneuver around stalactites, clunking against some of them in the darkness. Yanko tripped over the uneven flooring a couple of times too. He imagined trying for years to break out of a prison cell, finally making it, only to crash into a stalactite and knock himself out on the way to freedom.

"Just ahead," Senshoth said.

They passed several openings to cells that had been carved out of the limestone. None were the same size, and the vertical bars and doors had clearly been built on the premises and hand-fitted. Wrought iron. Yanko could heat such a substance to melting if he had a few minutes.

Senshoth stopped in front of a large cell with fifteen or twenty people inside. Shark's crew? They were a mottled, interracial bunch with tattoos, mismatched clothing, and hair in need of cutting. It was hard to tell if they had been interred for a long time or had come in that way.

"She was with them," Senshoth said. "They're pirates, the ugly lot of them."

"We're simple sailors, Honored Warrior Mage," one in the back proclaimed. "Wrongfully and unjustly locked up in this dank cell."

"Sure, Claw," one of his comrades said. "They're going to believe you. That one reads minds, remember?"

"Then he should know we transport cargo. We're not blighted pirates. What does he think? We're part of Snake Heart's crew?"

Yanko almost choked at the mention of his mother. Nobody spoke about her in his village, and he wouldn't have guessed that she was so notorious as to have become a part of the sea lexicon.

"Illegal cargo," Senshoth murmured. "Honored Warrior Mage, do you require anything to begin your search? I've been hunting in the back tunnels for her, but she keeps evading me. I'm more of a close-contact interrogation specialist than a tracker." He shrugged apologetically. "There's nowhere for her to go back there, but she doesn't seem ready to give up."

"A moment of silence is all I need."

Yanko placed his hands on the iron bars of the locked gate and bowed his head. He concentrated on searching for Arayevo first, afraid that the telepath would smell the burning metal once he started working on the lock. He reached out with his senses, past the last of the cells in this tunnel and into the darkness beyond the last lamp. The passage branched, then branched again, dozens of openings leading farther from the entrance, but as the commissioner had promised, none that rose to the surface. Rats scampered about in the tiny spaces as did a few larger scavengers. Yanko shuddered, thinking of Arayevo crawling around in the tight, damp spaces, hungry and cold as she sought an escape. This couldn't be the adventure she had longed for when she had left home.

His senses brushed an aura larger and far more familiar than that of the rats. Arayevo. *His* Arayevo.

He almost threw his head back and whooped in delight at having found her, but he remembered his secondary mission. He eyed the smugglers through his lashes, hoping he was doing the right thing, or at least that the end justified the means.

Aware of Senshoth shifting from foot to foot, less than a meter away, Yanko heated

the slender piece of metal securing the gate. Soon melted iron dripped from the gate. He used his body to hide it from Senshoth, and he hoped none of the smugglers were paying much attention. If they saw it and grew excited, the telepath might sense that from them. Yanko enticed a faint breeze down the passage to blow away the smoke and the scent of the burning metal. Then it was done, the bar that held the gate shut now gone.

"I've found her," Yanko announced, lifting his head.

Senshoth lifted his head too. "You're sure? It's not a rat? Because I found a lot of those back there." He rubbed his hand on his robe and grimaced.

"I'm sure. That way." Yanko extended his hand toward the end of the tunnel while he kept the gate closed with the other. It might swing open as soon as he let it go.

"You want me to lead?" Senshoth rubbed his hand again. What had happened with that rat?

"I'll be right behind you. I need to concentrate to track the woman. She's on the move." Actually, she was hunkering in a cubby, probably curled up and miserable. The thought made his heart ache. "If you could provide a light for us, I would appreciate it."

"Oh." Senshoth glanced at Dak, and Yanko was certain he would ask why Dak couldn't hold a lamp and lead the way, but he lifted a hand and conjured a soft globe of blue. He smiled and nodded, as if he was honored to help. It was strange having an adult at least twenty years older than he so eager to provide assistance. Once again, Yanko felt guilty for leading him astray.

Senshoth sent his blue light ahead of them, then trailed after it, glancing back to make sure he had followers. Yanko tilted his head for Dak to go first. Mostly, he wanted a couple of bodies between Senshoth and the gate. Dak narrowed his eye at the smugglers, but walked forward without objecting. The ceiling had lowered enough that he had to hunch to continue. He couldn't be enjoying this. Yanko wondered if he was afraid of rats.

Before following, Yanko faced the smugglers and raised a finger to his lips. Only a couple were looking at him, but that should be enough. He gave the gate a significant look, then stepped back. As he had thought it might, it groaned open a couple of inches. That made more of the men peer over at him. He made a wait motion, though he doubted they would, at least not for long, then jogged to catch up with the others.

What had taken him a minute to travel with his mind took them ten minutes of ducking, crawling, clambering, and climbing to reach with their bodies. Earlier, Dak might have been grunting and grumbling about the low ceilings, but he had fallen into a silent mode, choosing his steps carefully in the poor lighting. He scarcely made a sound and wasn't breathing hard, not like Senshoth, who kept kicking rocks. The clatters sounded like fireworks next to the soft patter of dripping water in the distance, and Yanko wasn't surprised when Arayevo stirred. She had heard them coming.

Yanko reached out to her, as if she were a hound to be calmed. He might not be able to talk to her, but he hoped she would recognize his presence.

"We're getting close," Yanko murmured.

"Should we try to surround her?" Senshoth touched his side. The robe hid whatever weapon he had there, but Yanko noted a bulge.

"This is the only way in. I'll go first now." Yanko didn't know if Arayevo had managed to secure any weapons, but she was a good shot with a bow. If she saw him first, that should keep her from trying to kill anyone.

When they were about fifty feet away, he thought about calling out, but he couldn't

use a friendly tone, not with Senshoth on his heels. He was supposed to be her new prison escort, after all. Instead, he lifted his hand and floated a light of his own out ahead of them, a larger, stronger illumination globe than Senshoth's. He wanted her to see them coming. To see *him* coming. To rescue her. He smiled.

They climbed up a ten-foot-high cliff, the cold damp rock slippery beneath their fingers, and came up to a ledge. A couple of tunnels branched away, but only one was big enough for humans to walk through.

Something stirred in the shadows ahead. Yanko's senses told him the passage did not reach back much farther, but he did not want Arayevo to have to run again. Time to give her a reason to stay put.

"Arayevo," he called, trying to keep the delight at meeting her again out of his voice.

The movement halted. He felt her looking at him, trying to puzzle him out, before the light brought her into sight. She had to be perplexed as to how he had come to be here. He still found the scenario perplexing himself.

"Arayevo, you're to come with us."

She stepped forward into the light. Her face was far grimmer and wearier than he ever remembered, her raven hair hanging limply about her face, and she had lost weight she did not need to lose, but he recognized her, nonetheless. For a moment, his throat thickened with emotion, and he couldn't speak. He wanted nothing more than to give her a hug.

That silent moment proved his undoing, for she blurted, "Yanko?" and he realized with horror that he should have mouthed something to her, warned her to stay quiet.

"No, I'm Akaron Sun Dragon. I've come to take you to the Golden City where you'll be held accountable for your crimes." Yanko held a finger to his lips, though he feared the damage had already been done. They might have fooled a simple guard, but a mind mage?

"Yanko?" Senshoth asked, his voice flat.

"She's mistaking me for someone else." Yanko stepped toward Arayevo, but all he truly wanted to do was put space between himself and Senshoth, in case the mage attacked him. He needed time to react, time to think. Not certain if he would have it, he turned, mentally bracing himself.

Senshoth stretched a hand out, his face icy cold. Before Yanko could decide if he wanted to attack back or merely defend himself, Dak lunged for Senshoth. Before he reached the mage, he gasped and fell back, his head hammering a low-hanging portion of the ceiling. A mental attack. Yanko's heart was beating a few thousand times a minute in his chest, but he forced himself to concentrate. He had to act before Senshoth warned his superior, something that would only take seconds for a telepath.

Yanko gathered all of the air in the tunnels behind him and hurled it at the mage. Senshoth wasn't far from the ledge. It wasn't much of a fall, and he probably wouldn't be hurt, but the pain might keep him from summoning the concentration needed to attack—or warn others.

Dak shook off the mental assault like a hound flinging raindrops from its coat and lunged for the mage again. At the same time, Yanko's attack landed, the gust of wind hitting Senshoth like a tornado. It lifted him off the ledge with more force than expected and flung him into the ceiling. The gale of wind almost drove Dak away too when the edge of it clipped him. But he dropped flat to the ground and kept from being flung over

the cliff. Senshoth struck the rocky ceiling hard, then fell out of sight below the ledge.

“Dak,” Yanko said, “over here. Hurry.” He had already examined the rock above their heads and found a natural fissure where he could shear off a slab of limestone. He would have to lower his mental defenses to concentrate on the work, so he hoped Senshoth hadn’t recovered from falling yet.

Dak wore a dazed expression, but he staggered over. Yanko grabbed his arm and pulled him back so that he and Arayevo were behind him. He closed his eyes, seeing into the rock with his mind, chose his spot carefully and sent tendrils of his power into the earth, snapping connections, shearing away pieces of stone. Yanko had scarcely started when a blast of energy erupted inside his skull. He threw the vestiges of his energy at the ceiling, even as he fell back, such agony bursting in his brain that he was certain his head would explode.

Defenses, the tiny part of his mind still capable of thought yelled. He struggled to protect himself, grasping for the tenuous concentration he needed for the task, but everything hurt too much. All he could do was curl into a ball, grabbing his head and gasping for air that wouldn’t come. A rumble filled his ears, but he didn’t know if it came from without or from within his own mind. Maybe his head *was* going to explode.

Finally, it was too much. He fell unconscious, his last thought that he hoped he hadn’t condemned them all.

* * *

Yanko came around slowly. A headache pounded behind his eyes, and he winced, not wanting to open his eyes or wake fully. Only the touch of gentle fingers to his cheek convinced him otherwise. His head was resting on a pleasant pillow—or was that someone’s leg?

“Sorry to disturb you, Yanko,” Arayevo said, “but there’s a lot of shouting going on in the tunnels, and I think that wizard went for help. Also, we’re stuck. It’s quite rude of you to leave me with your hulking Turgonian friend here. The way he’s stomping around like a caged tiger is unnerving.”

Yanko opened his eyes to Arayevo peering down at him, barely visible in the dim light of a single lantern sitting on the ground. Its wan light did little to illuminate the damp gray walls around them. He didn’t even know where the lantern had come from. Dak? Yanko had been using magic to light the way.

“Probably not important,” he muttered, his voice hoarse, an unpleasant metallic taste lingering in his mouth.

“What?”

He would have liked to continue lying there with his head cradled in Arayevo’s lap, but it didn’t sound like they had much time. “How long was I out?” he asked, forcing himself to a sitting position so he could assess the situation. He almost passed out again as another wave of pain rolled across his mind. If he had needed a lesson as to the importance of keeping one’s defenses up in the presence of a mind mage, he had it. He felt fortunate to be alive.

“Just a few minutes,” Arayevo said, “but we’re trapped, and I don’t know how long the air will last.”

To Yanko’s surprise, he had succeeded in bringing down the slab of limestone over the end of the ledge, if more sloppily than he had wished. Countless smaller rocks had fallen, forming a pile around the slab. A *big* pile. He had sealed them inside a dead-end

tunnel.

“The air should be fine for a couple of days,” Dak said, waving at their room and the other small tunnels branching away. Unfortunately, Yanko had already checked those passages and knew they didn’t lead far before also dead-ending. Nor did they offer a source of fresh air. “I doubt the commissioner and your new mage friend will leave us alone for that long.” Dak’s one-eyed stare wasn’t exactly baleful, but he didn’t look like he had much sympathy for Yanko. He had been struck by Senshoth’s attack, too. It was not fair that he was up and walking around when Yanko felt like throwing up. Given their limited confines, he decided to try to avoid that.

“If this was an attempt to rescue me, Yanko, I do appreciate it,” Arayevo said, “but I’m not sure I’m in a better position than I was a half hour ago.”

No, she wasn’t. At least then, they hadn’t known where she was. Yanko had led the other mage straight to her.

He sighed and forced himself to his feet, using the rock pile for support.

“Earlier, you spoke of making a thirty-foot hole from the surface to the cave with the crew in it,” Dak said.

Yanko peered at the ceiling above their heads, glad he hadn’t inadvertently brought the whole thing down around them when he had been working on that slab. “I was perhaps less aware of gravity and the displacement of large rocks than I should have been when I made that claim.”

“I see.” Dak kept his tone flat and unemotional, but he must be irked. He had been enjoying his life, helping his people, thwarting evil Nurians, and Yanko had come along and dragged him into this mess.

“I still think I can drill a hole. I’m just worried that the rock that would have to be displaced would fill our chamber.” Not to mention crushing them in the process. Well, no, they could hide in one of the side passages. If he was very careful, he could possibly cut through without bringing down any extra rock. If he had more power as a fire mage, he could burn through it, as he had with the lock, rather than trying to create controlled earthquakes. But he didn’t think he could manage to melt however many tons of rock lay above them. Also, this enclosed space might grow too hot for humans.

“How wide would your hole be?” Dak asked.

“Wide enough for us to climb up it, I suppose.” Yanko hoped Lakeo was up there somewhere, would notice a hole opening up in the cliff top, and could run over with the rope he had left with his gear.

“Three feet? And I estimate we’re about twenty-five feet under here. Do you concur?”

“Uh.” With his senses, Yanko felt his way through the rock above them, to the dirt and scruffy tufts of grass and finally open air. “That’s about right.”

“That would displace roughly one hundred and seventy-seven cubic feet of rock,” Dak said. “I’m rounding up.”

“Naturally.”

“This chamber is what? About fourteen feet long by eight feet wide? Eight feet high? It’s roughly shaped but let’s call it a *grushnol ersugtoth*.”

“A what?” Yanko looked at Arayevo, who only shrugged back at him. She was as bedraggled and unkempt as when he had first spotted her, but her eyes gleamed. By the badger goddess, she wasn’t enjoying herself, was she?

"I don't know the terms for volume equations in your language." Dak spread a hand. "A rectangle. A rough one, but we have close to nine-hundred cubic feet of space to fill. Even if you bring down more than expected, we should have room to climb out."

It sounded promising on paper—or in Dak's head—but the idea of drilling a hole with them down underneath all the rock made Yanko uneasy. Still, he waved for them to back into the smaller side passages. He crouched at the front, facing the open chamber. Before turning his attention to the rock, he stretched out toward the rest of the tunnel system itself, wanting to make sure Senshoth wasn't waiting out there to torment him further while he was in the middle of working on this. But the mage had left—nobody was within a hundred meters of their spot. Beyond that...

"Oh," Yanko said.

"What?" Dak asked warily.

"Your friends are out, Arayevo." And they were giving the guards a lot of trouble. That accounted for the shouts he had heard—he had the impression a full-fledged battle was going on out there.

"The crew?" she asked. "You mentioned them before, but I couldn't imagine why you had come for them. Or how you knew I was here, either."

"Long story, but I need passage to the Kyatt Islands, and your Captain Shark said he would take us if I freed his crew." As soon as Yanko spoke, he realized she might interpret that the wrong way, that he had come for them instead of her. He rushed to correct himself, so she would know the truth. "I wasn't going to do it—I mean, I didn't know why they had been incarcerated—but then Shark described *you*." He glanced over his shoulder, but Dak was between him and Arayevo, and he could barely see her. "I had to come for you, Arayevo," he said softly, turning back toward the chamber. He didn't want to make moon eyes past Dak. This wasn't the time for moon eyes, anyway.

"Thank you, Yanko."

"The rock," Dak said. "The prison break won't distract them forever."

"I know." Yanko wanted to explain that this was going to be hard, more difficult than the uncontrolled chaos he had created thus far, and that it might not turn out well... but Dak already sounded impatient. He wouldn't want to hear excuses. Besides, powerful warrior mages weren't supposed to make excuses. Though he'd failed his exam and wasn't even a student yet, he felt he should do his best to act worthy of his mother's robe while he wore it.

He felt his way up through the layers of rock, seeking the weaknesses, finding preexisting bubbles and cracks, trying to exploit those gaps and weakness in a way that would create a passage people could climb through but that wouldn't drop too much rock into their chamber. He started from the bottom, and soon clumps of rock thudded onto the floor in front of them, accompanied by a rain of dust.

Dak pulled his shirt up to cover his mouth and nose. Arayevo backed farther into the tunnel. Yanko kept working. By the time he had burrowed through five feet, sweat dripped into his eyes and he was breathing hard, as if he were sprinting up the side of a mountain rather than sitting on his butt and staring at the floor in front of him. The need for precision made everything four times as hard. He prayed for strength from the elephant god.

"The shouts have died down," Dak observed.

"I hope the crew got out," Arayevo said. "Most of them, anyway. Some of those

people are criminals through and through. The captain's not a bad man, though. Cares about making money and doesn't want to be beholden to any governments or laws, so he finds trouble now and then, but he's not a killer, unless it's in self-defense."

"Why were they arrested?" Dak asked. Did he care? About Nurians? Maybe he wanted to know if he and his unwelcome charge would be safe sharing a ship with these people.

Reminding himself to concentrate and ignore the conversation, Yanko worked his way through the next five feet of rock.

"Smuggling Turgonian weapons into Nuria for the rebels," Arayevo said. "I was excited to visit your empire. I only saw part of one of the port cities, but the locomotive was brilliant. And all of those huge metal steamships. I know our mages can do wonderful things with magic, but your cities—those huge, tall buildings—are quite impressive."

If the flattery appealed to Dak, it didn't come through in his voice. His only response was, "You support one of the rebel factions?"

"No. I mean, I don't really know. I haven't been paying attention. Is there more than one?"

Dak didn't respond at all this time. Yanko, sensing that he might think Arayevo dull, when that wasn't true at all, risked dividing his concentration to say, "Our newspapers haven't been publishing details of the rebellions. I think we're supposed to keep on believing that the Great Land isn't in trouble."

Dak grunted. "I have noticed that the Turgonian papers are covering it in more depth."

Yanko didn't know what to think about that. Would the empire—the republic—use the information of Nuria's troubles to its advantage? As if the threat of widespread hunger and civil war wasn't enough to spur Yanko forward on his mission, the notion that his homeland could be invaded by a conquering nation was even more distressing. What if Dak was here for far more than rescuing a few prisoners?

"Yanko?" Arayevo touched his shoulder. "Are you all right?"

The rocks and dust had ceased falling onto the chest-high pile of rubble in the center of their chamber.

"Yes. Just resting." Or being distracted. One of the two.

He refocused on the hole and went back to drilling out rock. A boom sounded, and he flinched, afraid he had done something wrong, that all the stone would crash down and bury them. But it had come from closer to the front of the prison. He hoped it wasn't the ledge he had tinkered with earlier, giving out under a barrage of escaping prisoners.

He redoubled his efforts on the hole. They had to get out of here and make sure... make sure of what? He didn't even know what he might do at this point.

"Getting close?" Arayevo whispered.

"Five feet to go," Yanko replied, his jaw tense. His whole body was tense. And tired. He pushed through the last few feet without any finesse, knowing only that he had to finish this task and free them before he collapsed. Or blacked out again. Powerful mages weren't supposed to wilt like dandelions under the sun.

A rush of rocks came barreling down the hole, and he grimaced, afraid he had been too reckless. Dust flooded the chamber and gravel and bigger shards of rock struck the walls. Yanko raised an arm to protect his face at the same time as Dak yanked him farther

back into their passage. His muscles were so shaky and enervated that he couldn't have gotten out of the way if he had wanted to.

A rock rolled at them, knocking over the lantern. Darkness and dust smothered their tunnel. For a long, worrisome moment, Yanko thought he had made a grievous mistake and that Dak had been wrong about their chamber having plenty of room, but the deluge dissipated to a trickle, and finally rocks stopped falling altogether.

Someone pushed past him—Dak, judging by the size of the leg that thumped him on the way by. Yanko wanted nothing more than to lie back, find Arayevo's lap with his head again, and take a long nap. But the prison guards might have heard that noise. If they had dealt with the escaped crew members, they could even now be charging up top to take a look at the hole—or they could be sending Senshoth back to attack Yanko through the rock wall. That thought alone was enough to spur him to find his feet. Shaking muscles or not, he groped his way to the main chamber. A draft whispered against his cheek, one that smelled of grass and the sea.

"You did it," Dak spoke from under the hole. "Huh."

"Save the celebration until later," Yanko said, though Dak sounded about as celebratory as a constipated cow. "Arayevo? Do you want to climb up first?"

"Because I'm the girl, and you think I'll fall and you'll need to catch me?" she asked.

"Uh, because I don't have the strength for it yet. If you make it, I'll go next, and then if I fall, Dak can catch me."

"Is that a requirement of the job?" Dak asked.

"Yes. There's a bodyguard handbook apparently. I'll have my brother find you a copy." Yanko kept from adding, *whenever I see him again...*

"I may need a boost up." Arayevo scrambled up the rock pile under the hole. "Maybe not. I can reach the ceiling now. Yanko, how about some light?"

Weary after the gargantuan effort he had made, the simple request made him want to cry. But one did not refuse a beautiful woman—he was fairly certain his brother had a rule about that. Fighting back the blackness that edged his vision, he forced a wan globe of light into existence.

"Thank you." More spry than any prisoner should be, Arayevo smiled and leaped up, planting her hands on either side of the vertical passage and managing to get the toes of her cracked and faded boots up there too.

Judging by her clothing, the last six months hadn't been easy on her, but she walked herself up the crooked shaft as if she was well rested and ready for adventure. Dust, grime, and a few rips couldn't hide the lovely curves of her body. He knew he shouldn't be looking, but this angle *did* give him an interesting view.

"Go," Dak said.

"Uh, right. Of course." Yanko hoped he hadn't been too openly admiring that view.

Following Arayevo's example, he clambered atop the debris pile. His legs went from shaking to quaking when he bent them to jump, but he wasn't about to ask Dak to give him a boost up. With a heroic effort, he leaped upward, slamming his hands into opposing walls to catch himself. When his back hit a third wall, he realized why he'd had to try so hard. He still had that massive book in his pack. He couldn't bring himself to toss it back down into the chamber. In part because he didn't want to hit Dak, but also because he felt bad about betraying Senshoth—even if the telepath had nearly knocked his brain out of his head through his ears after discovering the truth. Maybe he could give

Prince Zirabo the book whenever he reached the Golden City, a destination that seemed distressingly remote at the moment. All this effort, and he hadn't even made it two full days away from his village.

A rope smacked Yanko on the head. It surprised him, and he almost lost his grip. His foot did slip and knock dirt and gravel down into the dark hole.

"Sorry," Yanko whispered down, knowing Dak had started up underneath him.

"If you drop that book, I'm going to throw you to the sharks before the ship leaves the harbor."

"I'll keep that in mind."

When Yanko reached the top of the hole, he pulled himself out and collapsed on the earth, hardly caring that more of that razor grass stabbed at him. He might have lain there all night—or at least until Dak climbed out—but a loud whoop floated across the top of the cliff. He jerked into a sitting position and looked around for Lakeo. Enough of a moon had come out to illuminate the grass and road with its silvery hue. He did not see Lakeo, but a knot—no, a *mob*—of men popped into view, running along the path that led up from the prison.

"I recognize some of those people," Arayevo said. "But, uhm—how many prisoners did you let out, Yanko?"

"Only the ones in the cell you were in. They must have gotten some keys and started letting out others." Yanko swallowed as he watched no less than four dozen men sprint into the grasslands and run north or south along the coast. More than a few of them carried swords, the types of swords the guards had worn at their belts. Some of those blades, lit by the silvery moonlight, dripped blood into the grass.

Yanko dropped his face into his hands. He should have listened to Dak back in the pub. He'd had to get Arayevo, but the rest... what had he done?

Chapter 10

“His ship’s this way,” Arayevo said.

She was leading the way now, with Yanko, Lakeo, and Dak following. A few of the crew members were trotting down the boardwalk ahead of them, but more had veered into the city after escaping the prison. Yanko didn’t know if that was because they had friends or relatives to visit or because they simply wanted to enjoy a night of freedom before returning to their captain. He just hoped they *did* return of their own volition—and soon. It might be after midnight, but Yanko would prefer to leave right away rather than delaying another day.

“It hasn’t been impounded?” Dak asked.

“I don’t think so,” Arayevo said. “The cargo was, and we were, but Minark has a way of finding mouse holes to hide in. He bribes people when necessary. Blackmail on occasion. That’s how we got out of the Turgonian port.” She grinned at Yanko, as if this was a wonderful practice rather than being a crime.

“Minark?” he said, choosing to focus on that instead of the fact that his former babysitter was participating in criminal activity. Besides, who was he to judge? Now that he had freed a crowd of bloodthirsty prisoners?

“Yes, that’s the captain’s name. Shark is a nickname, because he’s fast, he says. I’ve also heard it’s because he’s not above biting people in a fight.”

“Do you think the men we let go will return to him tonight?” Yanko asked. “Does he have their loyalty?”

“Well, he has their pay. I don’t know if everyone will come back—the prison experience was a scary reminder of the risks we take when we smuggle goods—but most of them probably will tonight. Nobody had coin or even a change of clothes in prison.”

That sounded promising. Maybe they *could* leave tonight. Assuming Shark—Minark—would keep his word and take Yanko and his comrades.

“Will they try to mug Yanko again when they come back?” Lakeo asked.

Yanko glowered. Dak, who hadn’t said a word on the walk back to town, snorted—he actually sounded amused. Maybe he had enjoyed flexing his muscles and doing his bodyguard job when those three thugs had jumped out of the bushes.

“Not if he changes out of that robe.” Arayevo smirked back at him.

“I was planning to.” Less because of attempted muggings and more because wearing it made him a fraud.

“Where did you get it, anyway? Some trunk of your mother’s?”

“Yes.” Yanko would give her the rest of the story eventually, since her father and sister were among the people who had been missing in the village, but he would prefer to do that in the privacy of a cabin, not out here where drunks were staggering along the waterfront, occasionally leaning over the side of the boardwalk to vomit into the water.

“It’s beautiful.” Arayevo took hold of the sleeve, rubbing the material between her fingers. Her hand brushed his arm, sending a jolt of electricity through his body. “Bet you could get a thousand zekris for it.”

“What?”

Arayevo lowered her arm. “Does it do anything magical? Maybe you could get even

more.”

“You can’t sell warrior mage robes. They’re priceless. Invaluable. Handed down from master to apprentice or older family member to younger family member. Besides, even if you could simply *buy* one, it’s a crime to be caught wearing them, punishable by years in prison or even death, depending on the degree of fraud you’re trying to pull off.” And yes, he did feel like a hypocrite as soon as the words came out. Hadn’t he just been engaged in fraud of the highest order? That telepath had his name, too, probably his clan name, as well, if he had fished it out of Arayevo’s thoughts. Would the police be waiting for Yanko the next time he set foot on Nurian soil?

In case he had needed another reason to make sure he succeeded at Prince Zirabo’s quest, he had it.

“Oh, does that mean you passed your exams?” Arayevo asked brightly, not reading the chagrin on his face in the shadows between the streetlights.

Her question only brought greater chagrin. Arayevo had never been interested in the mental sciences and hadn’t cared whether he redeemed his family’s honor or not—at least she had never put the pressure on him that his kin had—but he still did not want to admit his failure to her. He groped for a way to avoid answering the question. Weren’t they getting close to Shark’s berth yet? They had passed the cages full of animals. Another quarter mile, and they would be at the giant lizard skeleton and past the docks.

“They bounced him back to the salt mines like an armadillo ball chucked off a cliff,” Lakeo announced.

Yanko groaned and lifted his gaze toward the heavens. Why did he have *such* helpful comrades?

“I placed at the top of the applicants in the first two events, but I let my pride get in the way during the last event and just missed making the cut-off time.” He hadn’t wanted to admit that failure within Dak’s hearing, either. Couldn’t he succeed brilliantly at something so his family and friends—and Turgonian spy bodyguards—would have a reason to think him competent?

“Oh, I’m sorry, Yanko.” Arayevo touched his sleeve again, this time resting her hand on his forearm.

“Uhm.” That was unexpected. He wanted her admiration rather than her sympathy, but if the latter came with touching, maybe it wasn’t so bad. “Thank you.”

Alas, she lifted her hand to point down one of the docks. “He should be down there, past that boathouse. He likes to choose a berth that isn’t visible from the port authorities’ building.”

“Who doesn’t?” Yanko murmured.

As they headed toward the boathouse, he tried to tame the nervous flutters in his belly, the worries that Shark wouldn’t follow through with the deal or that he wouldn’t believe Yanko and the others had freed the whole crew. It would have been much better if he were leading them all back with him, perhaps tied together by a long rope.

“Minark?” Arayevo called. “Are you there?”

“Quiet, woman,” someone growled from the shadows of the boathouse. The surly man had a heavy accent made heavier by drink, judging by the smell of him. He pulled his legs up to his chest and tugged a blanket over his head. Or maybe that was a tarp.

Paying him no mind, Arayevo trotted up the gangplank of the two-masted schooner docked directly to the side of the boathouse. Lamps burned intermittently on the docks,

showing the wooden hull to be painted a deep blue, but none of the lanterns on the vessel itself were lit, and Yanko did not see anyone on the deck. The name across the bow read: *Falcon's Flight*. Since it shared his brother's name, Yanko might have found it auspicious, but the deep gouges and scorch marks promised the vessel had seen a lot of trouble. It appeared old, as well, the wood worn beneath the paint, and he wondered if it truly was a fast ship.

Yanko waited on the dock with Lakeo. Maybe they should have searched for the captain at the Lady's Skirts first. Or maybe he was drunk and sleeping under a tarp somewhere like the grumpy man.

Surprisingly, Dak had stopped at the corner of the boathouse. At first, Yanko assumed it was because he wanted a view up and down the main dock, but he was talking to someone. The grump from under the tarp.

"What's he saying?" Yanko whispered.

"Don't know," Lakeo said, "but it's not in Nurian."

If Dak was going to continue attempting to smuggle Turgonians out of the port, Yanko wished he would pick less surly ones. He wouldn't invite that man along, would he? The grump wasn't in prison or chained to an oar bank anywhere. Couldn't he leave on his own, if he wished?

Yanko eased a couple of steps in that direction, trying to hear a few words of the conversation. The man was speaking quite animatedly now, pointing at the warships lining the harbor exit as he did so. Yanko only knew a spattering of Turgonian, but he didn't think the man was speaking that language. This was less guttural. Not as singsong as Nurian, but somewhere in between with lots of short words.

When the man wound down, Dak said a phrase in the same language, then walked up the dock to join Yanko and Lakeo.

"Kendorian?" Yanko guessed, less because he had recognized any other words and more because of the clump of shaggy blond hair that was poking out from under the tarp. It was also one of the other major nations in the world and a neighbor to Turgonia, though as far as Yanko knew, the Kendorians weren't allies with the Turgonians. Nobody was allies with the Turgonians, not willingly, anyway.

Dak looked at him for a few seconds before answering. "Yes."

"He have anything interesting to say?"

"The freighter he was working on was blown up when the rebel ships first came down." Dak pointed toward a wreck stuck on a rock near two of the warships. "A lesson to those who thought the blockade might not be serious. He swam ashore and is waiting for another ship to be heading in his direction, so he can work his way home. That suggests the rebels don't have a relationship with Kendor. Some people thought an outside force might be financing their insurrection, but perhaps it's all internal."

Though Dak didn't take out a notepad and record anything, Yanko couldn't help but get the feeling he was committing everything he learned to memory. For a report that might be sent home from the Kyatt Islands?

"Some people thought?" Yanko repeated. "Who were these some people?"

Dak was too busy surveying the warships waiting out there—*they* all had their lanterns lit—to answer. Or maybe he was only *pretending* he was too busy to answer.

"Yanko." Arayevo waved from the railing. "He's here. Come on up."

"Is he sober?" Yanko trotted up the gangplank.

“No. He was up in his cabin sleeping off his drink, but he said he would put on trousers and come out to talk to us.”

Lakeo elbowed Yanko. “He’s putting on clothes for you. I had no idea you were such an honored guest.”

“An honored passenger, I hope.”

“Maybe the robe will impress him into giving you a better deal.”

Yanko would settle for any deal at all.

Arayevo walked around the deck, lighting lanterns while they waited. Even though Yanko’s senses were weary, he felt something on the ship, some Made artifact. He couldn’t see what it might be, but it reminded him of the energy source on his father’s carriage. Maybe the captain had something that helped with speed.

Eventually, a door banged, and Shark walked out on deck. He had indeed put on trousers, and he jangled with each step, his charms bumping and clinking together.

“Hello, Minark,” Arayevo said with a cheerful wave.

“Good to see you, girl.” The captain veered toward her first, clasped her hands, and kissed her on the cheek. He held her gaze for a long moment.

Yanko shifted uncomfortably. They couldn’t be... more than coworkers, captain and crew, could they?

“I knew they couldn’t hold you,” Minark said.

“Of course not.” Arayevo kissed him back, also on the cheek, but there weren’t many inches of skin between cheeks and lips. And she hadn’t kissed *Yanko* on the cheek. Why would she want to kiss some smarmy smuggler captain? With a big beard. That couldn’t feel good to brush against.

Lakeo elbowed him. “Looks like she’s taken.”

“I hardly think that’s true.”

“Maybe you’ll find a nice Kyattese girl. If it’s a long voyage, you could have a fourth chin hair grow in. That’ll be more likely to impress the women, especially the older women.”

Yanko shook his head. None of this mattered. He had far more important things to worry about. That didn’t keep him from wanting to run over and kick the captain in the shin when Arayevo stepped aside.

“The rest of the crew escaped too,” Arayevo told him, “but they’re taking their time arriving.”

“I’ll bet.”

“Yanko was the one responsible. He made it possible for us all to escape.”

Arayevo beamed at Yanko, and he stood taller, thrusting his chest out. Maybe that kiss hadn’t meant anything, after all. Or maybe it had something to do with the smuggler’s nationality, whatever it was. Yanko had read that some cultures were very open with physical affection and that even men exchanged kisses.

“Is that so?” Minark eyed him from head to toe, his gaze lingering on the robe.

Yanko needed to take off the garment. What were the odds that he would receive his own private cabin on the ship where he might hide out below decks and study for most of the trip? He had promised to help crew the vessel if necessary, but maybe enough of Minark’s men would return, so that would not be needed.

“As agreed,” Yanko replied. “I assume your offer still stands. How soon can we leave for Kyatt?”

“You’re a pushy brat, aren’t you?”

Alas, he had been downgraded from kid back to brat again. Apparently, the captain was one man who wasn’t impressed by warrior mage robes. Or maybe he had Yanko pegged for a fake by now.

“Trouble is coming,” Yanko said. “Leaving before dawn would be wise.”

“Guess what, kid? Trouble is *here*.” Minark flung a hand toward the blockade, then dug something out of his pocket. “Here. Take a look at what you would have to get us through. Fog isn’t going to work, not here.” He tossed something at Yanko’s face.

Yanko caught the hard cylinder. A spyglass. He extended it and walked to the railing for a better look at the ships.

“He can help, Captain,” Arayevo said. “He’s talented.”

“Talented at what? A few hours ago, he was pretending to be a bard. Now he’s a warrior mage? One who barely looks old enough to have weaned himself from his mother’s teats?”

“A bard?” Arayevo chortled.

Yanko sighed as he extended the spyglass for a look. Yes, Arayevo of all people knew he couldn’t sing. He found the first of the warships at the north end of the harbor, anchored south of the big rock jetty. Not only were the running lamps lit, but men patrolled the decks alertly. They wore the uniforms of the Nurian army, red with blue trim. The two sailors he spotted wore the greens and grays of naval officers. A true rebellion from within. What if the entire military had been siphoned away from the existing government somehow? The civil war wouldn’t last long if there was nobody left fighting on the Great Chief’s side.

Yanko was about to move on to the next ship, but the spyglass chanced across a robed woman standing on the forecastle deck. A red robe. Warrior mage.

He grimaced and shifted the spyglass away from her, afraid she might sense his visual intrusion. Then he stepped behind a lifeboat, realizing that someone out there might be looking across at him and noting *his* red robe. From behind cover, he continued his scan. Maybe the other ships would have less alert crews. It *was* the middle of the night, after all.

But similar personnel patrolled the decks of the other ships, ships bristling with cannons and harpoon launchers, in addition to what the mages could bring to a battle. All of the military personnel were armed with swords and bows, ready to engage in battle at any moment. Not every vessel claimed a red-robed mage, but every one had a magic user on watch, many weather or fire specialists. Since it was the middle of the night, that probably meant one or two more rested below decks. In the general population, the gifted only made up one in a hundred people, but military duty was a requirement for most who went to the mage schools, including Stargrind, so it wasn’t surprising that a greater number of them would be on the warships. And had all of these people agreed to rebel? Or had some of them simply been dragged along by their captains? So long as they were willing to follow orders, it didn’t matter.

“You think a few wisps of fog will fool them, kid?” Minark asked, ambling over.

“If it’s spread widely enough, they might not find us in it until we’ve already passed. You said this was a fast ship, didn’t you?”

“It’s fast. But nobody’s faster than a cannonball. Or an irritated mage.” Minark plucked at the shoulder of Yanko’s robe. “A *real* mage.”

Dak must not have found the smuggler threatening, for he didn't run over to loom behind Yanko this time. He had procured a spyglass, as well, and was leaning against the railing, watching the warships.

Yanko removed Minark's hand, tempted to use more force than necessary, but in addition to those charms, the smuggler carried pistols and a cutlass on his belt, the butts and hilt worn from much handling. Yanko's sparring was improving, but he had only been in combat once now; Minark probably saw real combat on a weekly basis.

"Find your crew," Yanko said, "and I'll worry about the warships."

"I'm not letting my ship get shot to the bottom of the harbor for you."

"You said you'd give us passage if I freed your crew. Does your word mean so little to you?" Yanko had used a similar tactic on Dak, and it had worked, but he didn't know if the captain had an honorable streak.

His jaw tight, Minark gazed over his shoulder toward Arayevo. She smiled and nodded back at him.

"You better figure out something good, kid." Minark stalked away, tapping three times at a bugle-shaped charm on his belt. That was one of the trinkets that was more than decorative, with a faint energy humming about it. "Put out the lights, Arayevo. We don't want anyone noticing our ship over here, not if we'll be moving soon."

"Yes, Captain."

Yanko might have been relieved, but he was too busy dealing with a fresh wave of nerves. Now he had to find a way past those ships.

One of the coyotes in a cage yapped at the moon. Yanko rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. Maybe a couple of distractions piled atop each other? Get the warships looking toward the docks, and they might not notice a ship slipping out between them?

He wished it was a cloudier night. A talented weather mage might be able to bring in a small, compact storm, but tampering with the weather on a large scale was always discouraged, since it tended to have unpleasant consequences. If the makings for real fog were in the air, he could have helped them along, but a steady breeze swept down the shoreline. It would be hard to make his fog linger. Maybe smoke would be better. If something were burning, it might produce enough smoke to hide them. But there was nothing out there to burn except for ships. Yanko eyed the Kendorian freighter wreck Dak had pointed out.

"There's Maw and Garolok," Arayevo said from the railing, pointing to the boardwalk.

Minark nodded as if he had expected nothing less. The bugle charm. It must be keyed to his crew members to call them back. Indeed, two more men ran out of an alley and headed for their dock. Yanko would have been impressed by their eagerness to return to duty, but then two women shaking their fists stepped out of the same alley.

"If you can't pay, don't come sampling our wares," one bellowed after him.

Yanko dropped his face into his hand. He hoped the watchmen on the warships were observing the sea instead of the docks. With most of the waterfront asleep, all the activity around Minark's ship was sure to be noticed.

Dak walked over and joined Yanko at the railing. "Can you ignite black powder?"

Since it came out of nowhere, the question surprised him. "Not with a match, I assume you mean?"

"From a distance."

“Depends on how far a distance.”

Dak gazed toward the warships. “They’ll have armories. Kegs of powder for the cannons.”

“Oh.” Yanko shuddered at the idea of blowing up a ship full of people. Rebels or not, they were Nurians. And human beings. “I—do you think your friend’s old freighter might still have some black powder in it? I’d been thinking that I could burn that vessel without hurting anyone.”

Dak shifted his gaze down to Yanko.

“I know Nurians are all... the enemy to you,” Yanko said, “but these are my people. The prison was already a mistake. I never meant to help criminals. Or become one myself.”

“The freighter might not have been salvaged, since it’s so close to those warships. And since it hasn’t been out there long. It does have a few cannons, so there may be stores below decks.”

“Good,” Yanko said, in response to the information and also to the fact that Dak hadn’t called him a sissy or a hypocrite. “I’ll see if I can find them.”

Yanko spent the next fifteen minutes in the shadows—Minark’s orders to douse the lamps had been followed—sensing out the layout of the sunken freighter. Since he hadn’t had time to rest after the prison breakout, his brain protested further use. There was a school of thought that said the more a mage practiced and pushed himself to the reaches of his endurance, the stronger and more capable he would become. Another school of thought proclaimed that mages who pushed themselves too hard broke and went crazy. He hoped the former would prove true for him.

A great deal of water had flowed into the freighter through a huge gap in the hull, one received when it had run into that rock. In other spots, cannonball holes dotted the exterior, though they hadn’t caused as much damage. He worried that any powder room that might be below decks would be underwater, but the wreck was high enough on the rock that the upper level cabins and store rooms remained dry. He clenched a pleased fist when he found mostly dry kegs of powder.

He could have simply lit the wood of the ship on fire, but this would require less power on his part, and it would create a much bigger boom. More smoke. Smoke, Yanko would add to, after he put his first distraction into play.

More crew members had come aboard while he concentrated, most heading straight to duty stations. A couple carried lanterns, so they noticed Yanko’s robe as they passed. The Nurians bowed and greeted him as Honored Warrior Mage. Those from other nations offered greetings that ranged from, “Good, a mage,” to “Nice dress.” Yanko didn’t see the men who had tried to mug him, so he hoped they hadn’t been a part of the crew. It comforted him that Dak had remained close while Yanko had been concentrating on other matters. He may not consider Minark a threat at this point, but the rest of the crew was new.

“We’re ready,” the captain said, walking over. “You have a plan, kid?”

“All of your crew is here already?”

“Enough of them. Those who didn’t hurry to get aboard will miss us in the morning when they’re looking for their pay.”

“Hm. Yes, I have a plan.” In addition to scouting the wrecked freighter, Yanko had reached out to the animals in the zoo and had examined the locks on their cages. All of

them had been simple, far easier to break than the one in the prison. Now, with the captain looking on, he waved a hand, severing one lock after the other. Nobody would be able to see that far from the ship, but one of the coyotes howled, and a tiger roared, pleased at its freedom. Dogs answered the wild cries from the streets of Red Sky, and it soon sounded like a jungle had descended on the city.

“You doing that?” Minark asked.

“Step One, yes.”

Minark extended his spyglass toward the warships. Someone drew up his ship’s anchor, and the *Falcon’s Flight* glided away from the dock.

“They’re going to be looking right over us to check out that noise. I don’t know if this is a good idea,” Minark said.

Yanko waved his fingers again, shifting his focus out to the freighter this time. The first keg exploded with a deafening roar. Minark jerked around, gaping in that direction.

“Steer us around the back side of the wreck,” Yanko said, “between it and the south jetty. I’ll make sure there’s a *lot* of smoke in the air.”

Minark’s eyebrows rose with skepticism. “We’ll give it a try.” He jogged toward the helmsman at the wheel.

“I see he’s supremely confident in my abilities.” Yanko glanced at Dak, whose hand was resting on the hilt of his sword. “You must be too.”

“I do not like to rely on magic.”

Thus far, Dak hadn’t shown surprise at any of the mental science usage that had gone on around him, but it would be shocking if a Turgonian embraced it wholeheartedly.

“Does that mean you think the odds are against us getting through without being fired at repeatedly and then boarded?” Yanko asked.

“Yes.”

“You’re a pessimistic man.”

Dak gave him a sidelong look. “You’d want an optimistic bodyguard?”

“I suppose not. I wouldn’t want him to believe nothing bad would happen to me, then wander off to play dice instead of watching my back.” Maybe pessimism was listed as a desirable quality in that bodyguard handbook Falcon had mentioned.

“Tiles.”

“Pardon?”

“We Turgonians play a strategy game called Tiles.”

“Strategy? So even your games revolve around war?” Yanko shouldn’t be surprised. The Turgonians had conquered their entire continent within a matter of a few generations and had kept Nuria at bay for centuries, despite their unwillingness to study the mental sciences.

“Yes.” Dak nodded toward the freighter, which was blazing impressively in the aftermath of the explosion. “We’ll be behind it soon.”

“I know.” Yanko had already been creating extra smoke, and he pushed the process even further so it clouded the air above the ship and also close to the water. With luck, those watching would believe something like pitch was burning. He wished he could add that to the scent of burning wood, but he had never studied making illusory smells. It would take a lifetime to learn all that was possible with the mental sciences, if not a hundred lifetimes.

Roars and human cries sounded on the waterfront. With the freighter burning, Yanko

didn't know if anyone on the warship would be focused on the animal chaos ashore, but twice the number of lights were burning over there now, as people ran around with bows and lanterns.

The *Falcon's Flight* glided into the smoky pall. It had passed the last of the docks and was angling toward the south jetty. Crewmen scampered soundlessly through the rigging, putting out the sails. Aware of how high the masts stretched, Yanko worked to spread the smoke, creating a vertical cloud and not just a horizontal one. He also did his best to obscure the auras of the living beings on the ship, lest the mages sense their presence, just as Yanko could sense the presences of others, when he thought to look for them.

"Your animals are eating people," Lakeo said, joining them, her bow in hand as she cast nervous glances toward the warships. She also had the pessimism necessary for the bodyguard position.

"They're simply scaring them," Yanko murmured without taking his focus from the smoke. "I made a deal with them. Their freedom for some noise before they run up into the mountains."

He was trying to keep the flames from burning too brightly on the wreck, lest it light up their masts and sails even in the haze, but he could only manage so many things at once. Already his head throbbed. He tightened his hands around the railing for support. Once they made it past those warships, he could rest. Assuming none of them gave chase...

"If you say so. I just saw a city watchman run by with a patch torn out of the seat of his trousers."

Yanko ignored her, knowing she couldn't see anything in the smoke. He could barely see *her* three feet away.

Then an unfamiliar presence whispered across his senses, one he immediately identified as the probe of one of those mages. At least one person was suspicious. Yanko tightened his grip on the railing and tried to further camouflage their ship from mental senses, not just visual ones. But he was trying to do too many things at once. A gale of wind blew in from the sea, shredding his clouds of smoke into ribbons.

Dak stirred at his side. "We're going to be visible."

Yanko tried to regather the smoke, to create more to combat the wind, but it was too late.

"A ship!" someone in the blockade cried. "Ready weapons!"

Thumps and clanks came from behind Yanko. He spun around, reaching for his own weapons, for his *kylzar*, anyway—he didn't have the mental energy to contemplate an attack with the mind. Minark was stomping toward him, fury in his eyes.

"Kid, you better—"

Dak intercepted him, planting a hand on the captain's chest. Minark snarled, grabbed it, and tried to shove Dak to the side. He might as well have tried to shove a mountain. Not only did Dak not budge, but he flipped the captain onto his back and, in less time than it took to blink, had a dagger pressed to the man's throat.

"I'm working on it," Yanko said, though his mouth was dry. He hadn't expected that degree of initiative from Dak. Of course, the moment Minark had attacked him, it had become self-defense rather than bodyguard work.

Trusting Dak to keep the captain at bay, Yanko spun back toward the railing and the warships. Enough smoke remained that his view was obscured, but he knew they were

out there, full of armed men, weapons, and wizards. He groped for some brilliant solution, some way to delay their attack until the schooner could make it past the jetty and out into open water, but the only thought that popped into his mind was sending fish, one by one, leaping out of the water to smack into the chests of the mages. It was idiotic, and he did not have the mental energy left to find a fish, much less compel one to work for him. He wished he had not wasted precious strength on communicating with the animals in the cages and freeing them. He might have wanted to let them out because of personal feelings, but what had that done to help against the warships?

A boom rang out from the mouth of the harbor, the noise drowning out the crackle of the flames from the freighter. Yanko winced, hoping the cannonball would fly wide, that it would take the warships time to find their range. But what would happen when they *did*? A light craft meant for speed, the smuggler's schooner wasn't armored. Yanko fanned more smoke to life. It was all he could think to do, create more camouflage and hope it made them hard for the gunners to target. Unfortunately, it wouldn't matter to the mages, who could see with more than their eyes.

A second boom rang out, coming from one of the center warships.

"Fire back, Captain?" someone called from the schooner's guns.

"No," Dak said before Minark could answer—if he could answer. He and Dak must not have come to an agreement yet, because a blade was still pressed to the captain's throat. If a man could look terrified and furious at the same time, Minark did. "They're not shooting at us."

Yanko blinked. He had assumed the cannonballs had simply splashed into the water, and he hadn't heard the sound over the chaos, but was Dak right? Were the warships not firing at the smugglers at all? Who else would they be shooting at?

An entire chorus of booms rang out, not from the mouth of the harbor but from somewhere beyond it. More ships?

Dak sheathed his sword and hefted Minark to his feet. "You've got your distraction, Captain. I suggest you use it."

Minark gaped toward the mouth of the harbor, even if he couldn't see through the smoke any more clearly than Yanko. At least Yanko assumed that to be the case, but he touched one of the charms on his belt, and his mouth dropped even further open. "You're right. There's a whole fleet out there."

"Nurians?" Yanko asked. "Or someone else?" He could have looked with his mind, but the throbbing pain behind his eyes deterred him.

"They could be Turgonians, and I wouldn't care," Minark said, though he glared heroically at Dak before adding, "Not right now, anyway." Then he was off, sprinting for the wheel.

Their ship had glided away from the wreck, and Yanko struggled to keep the smoke following them. The sheer number of cannons firing in the distance sounded promising, but he couldn't know for sure that all of the warships had forgotten about the vessel escaping from the harbor. The closest warship was turning slowly, maneuvering its side full of cannon ports toward the sea. They were close enough that Yanko could see the crew, see that they were focused away from the schooner.

"More Nurian ships," Dak said, a spyglass to his eye. "This must be your government's retaliation. It was inevitable."

The schooner started rocking, rising and falling on the waves as it passed the jetty and

entered the choppy waters of the open ocean. Nobody was speaking, though they wouldn't have been heard, anyway, over the booms of those cannons. But more than one crew member leaped into the air or pumped a triumphant fist as the *Falcon's Flight* passed the southernmost warship, and nobody on board aimed a rifle at them. The sea lit up with the flashes of orange from cannons firing, but the schooner turned to the south, away from the chaos. They would have to find a northeasterly route later, but Yanko couldn't fault the captain for taking them well out of range of the battle before changing directions.

Strange, since this was all that he wanted and he had his mission to think of, but Yanko felt cowardly for fleeing. Had he gone to Stargrind and graduated, he would have been aboard one of those ships one day, presumably one of the ones working for the Great Chief. He couldn't imagine signing up for an insurrection.

"Someone else is taking advantage of the chaos," Dak observed, lowering the spyglass.

"What do you mean?"

Dak pointed, not at the ships engaged in battle, but toward the jetty. It was receding from view now, as the *Falcon's Flight* filled its sails and took advantage of the wind. Still, Yanko made out a faint dark smudge on the waves. Another ship. One with a low profile—a steamer instead of a sailing ship?

"Anyone you know?" Yanko asked.

"No." Dak frowned over at him. "I was going to ask you the same question."

"Me? I don't..." Yanko stared at the dark outline of the other ship. Maybe he hadn't shaken the assassins, after all.

Part II

Chapter 11

The equatorial sun beat down on Yanko's shoulders as he ducked, darted, and lunged in, attempting to strike. Dak had not grown any slower in the six months since their sparring sessions in the mines. There wasn't a lot of open space on the schooner, but he didn't need it; Yanko was the one dancing around, trying not to be hit and also trying not to run into people, masts, lifeboats, or coils of rope. Thanks to the rough sea, he had the added challenge of keeping from tumbling overboard every time the ship crested a wave.

Dak had the balance of a cat—or a man who had spent many months and maybe years at sea, possibly fighting many battles there. Neither his bulk, his missing eye, nor the fact that he was old enough to have gray sprinkled in his dark hair slowed him down. Turgonians didn't seem to get seasick, either—a fate Yanko had not avoided during those first days crossing the ocean. Dak's stomach was probably as tough as the rest of him.

"Yanko?" Lakeo asked from the side.

Yanko had been aware of her and Arayevo's approach, but he did not take his eyes from Dak—or the sword swinging toward him. He darted back, rather than simply ducking—he had been fooled often enough to know now that Dak was perfectly capable of making it look like he had fully committed to a swing, only to change direction mid-stroke. As soon as the blade whistled past, he jumped back in, throwing out his long saber to keep his opponent at bay, then coming in behind it with the short, stabbing blade. They weren't using blunted practice weapons, but it did not matter with Dak. Yanko never hit him, and Dak only hit Yanko when he wanted to make a point.

This time, Yanko tried to tap Dak in the back with the flat of the blade, but his weapon only swatted at air. Anticipating the blow, as he always did, Dak had stepped away, whirling to face Yanko again. He lowered his sword and knife—he had a new combination of weapons every time he sparred with Yanko—and tilted his head toward Lakeo.

She stood waiting, her arms folded across her chest, her foot tapping. "You've been at that for two hours."

"Isn't that all right?" Yanko wanted to improve, not only his endurance for using the mental sciences but his ability to defend himself with a blade, as well. What would happen if he ran into someone as good as—or better than—Sly Wolf from his exam? And what if Dak wasn't around to protect him?

"How come you don't have to take a turn at the bilge pump?" Lakeo asked. "Every time the captain sees me trying to eat or relax, he puts me to work."

"My turn was at midnight. He's decided that young mages are suited to standing watch in the dark. So last night, I 'stood watch' for him from the pump room. Amazing that a craft fresh out of the harbor could be so leaky."

"Oh." Lakeo lowered her arms. "I kept seeing you out here playing during the days. I thought you might have paid him with some secret stash of coins."

"No, this is my sleep shift." Yanko actually didn't mind being awake at night, since when he wasn't pumping, cleaning, or repairing something, he was able to sneak in some reading. Senshoth's book on the mental sciences. It was as dry as a dead cactus, but he

was learning from it. “In the mornings, I like to have Dak thoroughly exhaust me, so I fall into a stupor, instead of lying awake worrying about things.” Such as the ship that had been shadowing their route for the last week, sometimes seen, sometimes not, never getting close enough to be more than a speck on the horizon. The captain had tried a few times to lose the interloper, but it changed course when they changed course. Yanko suspected they were being followed and hoped it was not his fault, that his mother’s robe or amulet were not allowing someone to track them. But those items had been in his house for years without him ever noticing their power. They didn’t seem to give off much of a signature, even now that they had gone out of dormancy.

“If you two are done flinging sweat around, I need to talk to you,” Lakeo said.

“We can be done, right, Dak?”

Dak grunted and walked across the deck, asking if anyone else wanted to spar. Two hours only warmed him up.

“He’s nice to look at with his shirt off,” Lakeo commented, watching his back.

“Think he’s married back in Turgonia?”

Yanko had been picking up a tunic that he had demoted to a towel, on account of the stench, and he almost dropped it. “*That’s* what you wanted to talk about?”

“No. I was just curious. A girl gets an itch now and then, you know. The captain’s too busy ogling Arayevo to notice me—and he’s a sarcastic lizard kisser, anyway—and there aren’t that many appealing options around.” She gave Yanko a frank stare that made him feel naked. It did not help that he had not yet donned his tunic. “Dak’s eye is disturbing, but it wouldn’t be that noticeable in the dark. The broken nose too. He’s moderately handsome from the lips down.”

“I haven’t discussed Dak’s preferences with him—” Yanko curled a lip at the thought of that conversation, “—but I’m sure you can find available men on the Kyatt Islands if you prefer someone unlikely to have a wife or a criminal record.” He was less certain available Kyattese men found muscular women appealing. Maybe *she* should visit Turgonia.

“Criminal records aren’t that important.” Lakeo glanced at a bow-legged sailor ambling past. “Good teeth, decent breath, hair in the right places... these are things that matter.”

“I see.” As Yanko was toweling himself off, the captain walked past, pausing to speak.

“Not bad, kid, but I was hoping you would clobber him. Or at least touch him with something pointy.”

“You might not know it by looking at him,” Lakeo said, “but I don’t think Yanko is into touching other men with his pointy things.”

She and the captain shared a grin, while Yanko put on his tunic and pretended neither of them existed.

“At least he’s got a muscle or two under that dress.” Minark thumped him on the back and strode off to whatever other duty required his attention. Harassing crew members, perhaps.

“Haven’t worn the robe since the first day,” Yanko muttered.

“Anyone seen the limes?” the captain bellowed. “I know I gave orders to pack limes before you all were thrown into prison.”

“Listen, Yanko,” Lakeo started, but then frowned over at a clatter that arose,

drowning out her words. Dak had found a second sparring partner. “Come over here, will you?”

Yanko let her lead him to the railing. She tapped it with her finger a few times, then dug into a pocket and pulled out something in a small, dirty handkerchief. From the way the pouch clanked on the railing, he assumed it was money.

“Here.” She pushed it toward him.

“What is it?” He had already accepted the money from the sale of the carriage.

“The rest of your zekris.”

“Uh?”

A cloud blew across the sun, and a cool breeze gusted across the deck, ruffling the corners of the handkerchief.

“When I sold your carriage, you were very trusting in letting me handle the transaction. Too trusting. I’ve been worried about what I’m going to do for money when I reach Kyatt, so I kept a small seller’s fee for myself.”

Yanko eyed the bulge of coins.

“All right, not that small. But I want to give it back.”

“You’ve figured out what you’ll do for money on the islands?”

“No, but I’ve been feeling guilty about taking your money. So, here.” Lakeo picked up the pouch, grabbed his hand, and plopped it onto his palm.

“I appreciate your honesty, but you can keep it. You lost that money in the mines, the mines my family was supposed to be protecting.” He grimaced at all the still-raw memories that shot through his mind. “A seller’s fee sounds fair.” He started to set it back on the railing, but she swatted his hand away.

“Yanko, I *stole* it. I tried to justify it, but that’s what it was. Theft. From a friend. I want to give it back and make it right.”

“But—”

“You need money just as much as I do. I know you don’t have much left after paying our way, and it’s not like you can sell your services as a mage in Kyatt. I hear everyone there knows the mental sciences.”

“I’m not certain that’s true, but why don’t we agree to share it then? For lodgings or whatever we’ll need until I do my research and you... enroll in classes or find work, whatever you’re planning.” He tried to push the money her way again, but she backed up, throwing her hands up in exasperation.

“You don’t get anything about women, do you?” Lakeo stalked away, leaving him staring down at the coins and scratching his head.

“Not bad, kid,” the captain said, wandering past again. Didn’t he have something more important to do? “Usually men have to pay women for services, not the other way around.” He thumped Yanko on the shoulder again. “Hope you gave her a good time.”

Yanko rubbed his shoulder and frowned at Minark’s back as he jogged up the steps to the forecandle. He was fairly certain those were not friendly we’re-comrades-aren’t-we pats. They seemed more along the lines of your-bodyguard-emasculated-me-and-I’m-going-to-torment-you-every-chance-I-get pats.

Another gust of wind blew across the ship, and a shadow darkened the deck. The sun had disappeared behind clouds, gray clouds that seemed out of place in a sky that was blue on every horizon. A tingle ran across his senses, similar to electricity but less mundane. He was not experienced with life at sea, and he had heard of strange natural

phenomena, but this had the taint of otherworldly manipulation about it.

He waited for a wave to carry them to the crest, then looked to the horizon, expecting to spot the ship that had been shadowing them. Indeed, he expected it to be much closer now. But it wasn't there. Odd. Nobody could manipulate the weather from across great distances. Who else could be responsible? He certainly hadn't seen any of the crew demonstrate that they had aptitude for the mental sciences, and as far as Yanko knew, Minark was the only one with Made artifacts, if one could count his charms. None of them emanated the kind of power necessary for weather control. Yanko had sensed another artifact below decks and did not yet know what it did, but it would not make sense for the captain to create storms to torment his own ship.

"Got trouble coming up, Cap'n," one of the crew hollered.

"I see it."

The clanks and clangs of the sparring match ended. Dak scrutinized the sky too.

Yanko walked over to him, though he didn't know what a Turgonian warrior could do to help if a storm struck them. "There's a mage nearby."

Dak gazed out at the empty expanse of blue water rising and falling all around them. The wind had brought higher waves, but they could still see the horizons.

"I don't know where," Yanko said, "unless we have a stowaway."

"Secure the deck. Prepare for the wind." Minark ran below decks, while the crew scampered up the masts, letting out more sail.

Dak frowned. "That's not the usual way to prepare for a storm."

"Putting out more sail or hiding below decks?" Yanko asked.

"Both."

"Maybe we should search the ship, see if anyone stowed away and is causing trouble."

"Why would such a person want to cause trouble for the ship he's on?" Dak asked.

Yanko shrugged. "Sacrificing himself so those behind us can catch us? Don't you Turgonians sacrifice people all the time for military endeavors?"

The question sounded more condemning than he had meant it to. Nurian soldiers and mages sacrificed themselves at times, too, if it was for the greater good. It was just that the Turgonians had a reputation for blowing up their ironclad warships so the technology could not find its way into enemy hands, no matter if the crew was still on board...

Dak ignored the questions and said, "I'll go look." He paused, squinting at Yanko. "I'll be back in ten minutes. Don't get yourself into trouble."

Yanko did his best to look innocent. Why would he seek out trouble? Dak was the one going wizard hunting. Maybe Yanko should go with him, but if someone was thrown overboard or equipment broke, he might be able to do some good up here. He should also be trying to figure out a way to stop the storm.

Arayevo slid down a rope and dropped to the deck nearby. She had taken to the sailor's life handily and was fearless up in the rigging. Yanko wished he had found more opportunities to speak with her in the week they had been at sea. They had sat together at the communal meals, but she had the day shift, so they hadn't had many private moments.

"Wait until you see this," Arayevo said, waving toward the sails. "We'll either get capsized and all drown, or we'll outrun the storm."

"I'll hope for the latter. But what do you mean about—" Yanko stopped talking when

a buzz of power plucked at his senses. An attack from their mystery enemy? No, it felt more like the steady magical emission of an artifact, one nearby. The one he had been sensing since he came on board. Some secret weapon of the captain's?

The two cargo hatch doors in the deck were thrown open. Wind gusted, battering Yanko's topknot and filling the sails with air. The schooner surged forward, then leaned precariously as she climbed the front of a wave. The deck tilted, and Yanko ran to the railing, wondering if he should be securing himself with ropes and tarpaulins, the way the crew was battening down everything else on board.

The craft crested the wave and streaked down the back side, the deck tilting the other way. Queasiness stirred in Yanko's stomach. Just when he had thought he was past the point of seasickness...

The captain jogged back into sight, gave Arayevo a quick salute, and ran up the ladder to the wheel. The helmsman had a tense hunch to his shoulders, and he happily stepped back to let Minark take over. The captain grinned as he grasped the wheel with both hands, and Yanko imagined he could hear his charms jangling enthusiastically on his belt, though the noise of the wind and the creaking of the rigging drowned out everything. The sky had grown a solid gray over them, and the wind showed no sign of lessening.

Despite his upset stomach, Yanko attempted to find mental balance so he could focus. He needed to find whoever was causing this bad weather. Even if the captain had an artifact to enhance the ship's speed, a conjured storm could follow them, so long as its creator was nearby.

A distant boom sounded above the gales churning up the sea. A cannon? Out here?

Arayevo frowned at the mountains of waves rising on all sides of them, then raced up into the rigging again, climbing as easily as a monkey and standing out on a yard for a better look. A second cannon fired. This time, Yanko spotted the ball. It soared over the ship, falling harmlessly into the water fifty feet away. Good, but who was shooting at them? He stretched out again and was surprised to feel dozens of other auras—human beings—less than three hundred yards away.

"Ship," he called at the same time as Arayevo yelled the same warning down. It was the one that had been following them. How had it sneaked so close without being sighted? Some mage's camouflage. A mage who was much better at the mental sciences than Yanko, and who didn't need smoke to make their ship appear invisible.

"Man the cannons," Minark yelled.

"Already there, Cap'n," a crew member responded, "but we can't *see* anything."

Yanko ran along the railing, then veered across the deck for the ladder. Thanks to the tilt to the ship, it was like running up a mountain. Water sprayed over the railings, splattering him in the face as he climbed up to join the captain.

"It's the same ship that's been following us," Yanko said. "They've got at least one mage, maybe two." Keeping the ship camouflaged and creating a storm at the same time should be the work of two people—or someone who was extremely talented.

"How far away?" Minark asked.

"Less than three hundred yards. That way," Yanko pointed. "I think..." He ran his senses along the spot again, trying to get a feel for people's auras and their emotions too. Did they sense victory? Were they worried? Confident? Overconfident?

Harried. That was what he got.

Another cannon boomed, the ball falling wide this time, plowing into the wave the schooner had just left.

"They thought they had us—they were closing for the kill—and then you activated that artifact," Yanko said. "I think that forced their hand."

His knees nearly went out as they careened down the back of another wave. Maybe he should not be speaking to the captain while he was manning the helm. One false move out here, and the craft could capsize. At the speed they were going, it seemed inevitable. But it wasn't as if they could heave to and ride out the storm with enemies on their heels.

"If you can tell where that ship is, go help my gunners," Minark said. "And feel free to throw some fireballs at them, kid."

Fireballs. Everybody wanted fireballs. Yanko doubted he could conjure anything the other wizards couldn't defend against, but he climbed back down the ladder. He *could* help the gunners.

He ran across to the cannons mounted along the side rail, pointed, and said, "There. Three hundred yards away."

The fact that the other ship was sticking with them implied that one of their wizards was filling its sails with wind too. Yanko hoped whoever it was would get tired soon. The artifact could probably produce wind for a substantial period of time before it had to recharge.

"You sure, warrior mage?" one of the Nurians asked. "I don't see anything."

Another boom came from the direction Yanko had pointed. This cannonball blasted over the deck, narrowly missing the mast before burrowing into a wave on the far side.

"I'm sure," Yanko said.

"Uh, right."

Soon, the gunners at the bank of cannons were returning fire. Yanko gripped the railing between two of them, debating whether to attempt to single out and attack the wizard or wizards over there or to see if he could break apart the storm. Distracting the maker would probably be easier and more effective.

Don't count on it, a voice spoke into his head.

Yanko jumped. Telepaths had spoken into his mind before, but it wasn't a common occurrence. There were laws about uninvited intrusions, at least between those from honored families. The commoners had fewer rights, especially revolving around the mental sciences.

Who are you? Yanko responded. *What do you want?*

He had been reading the mind mage's book and trying some of the exercises, so he thought he might be able to amplify his words, and send them across the intervening waves, but he didn't do so. Let the other mage think him less powerful than he was. He did keep his barriers tight about his mind, so the person couldn't delve into his thoughts.

I am Jaikon Sun Dragon.

Yanko's grip tightened on the railing—he needed it to keep him standing upright. A Sun Dragon? A member of the very family he had been pretending to be a part of during his ruse at the prison? A very old and established family full of powerful wizards...

He gulped, hoping the man had no idea about the events in those caves.

I know much. The wizard sounded amused. And condescending.

What do you want? Yanko repeated.

We want what you also seek, of course.

This might be Yanko's first time hearing the man's voice in his head, but his aura felt familiar. He believed it was the same mage who had come to his village, the one who had sent hounds after him, and perhaps the one who had burned his ancestral home.

Yanko gritted his teeth. *I don't have it, so you might as well leave us alone.*

You have Zirabo's information on how to find it.

Yanko scoffed. As if that letter told him anything specific as to the lodestone's location. He carefully kept those thoughts locked behind his mental walls, walls that he reinforced with layers of brick, because he could feel Sun Dragon prodding at his defenses, searching for a crack he might slip through. Even if the letter didn't say much, it was better to keep his enemies as in the dark as possible.

So all of this, attacking my brother, burning my village, chasing after me... this has just been an attempt to get that letter?

What Zirabo wrote of promises the wealth, the resources, the pure untouched soil that we need. We will have it. The Great Chief will not.

Not that untouched if the place had been devastated by plague and razed by war... Still, Yanko believed as the prince did that seven centuries was enough for the land to have healed.

I thought your family was known for working with the Great Chief, not against him, Yanko thought.

The time has come for a new great chief, a new leader for our people. One who can lead us to the prosperity we once knew, and more.

You're working for the rebels?

Laughter rang in Yanko's head.

So... that was a yes? he asked.

You're in water too deep, boy. Tell that smuggler to slow down and let us board. All we'll take is the letter. We'll let his ship and his crew go afterward. Even you.

If you want the letter, you'll have to come get it. Yanko wouldn't usually taunt enemies, especially not older and more powerful enemies, but he sensed that the other ship was falling farther behind. This mage wouldn't be attempting to cow him if they could simply swoop down and destroy them.

I won't give you the offer of freedom twice. I couldn't if I wanted to. There's someone here who wants very much to slay you.

Even if Yanko had dismissed the mage's words as a desperate attempt to turn failure into victory, this statement chilled him, nonetheless. Especially since the image of that woman in white came along with it, the mage hunter with the twin katanas.

She's well trained, and she was eager to accept this mission, to find you and kill you.

Yanko should have kept his thoughts to himself, but he couldn't help but ask, *Why?* He hoped it didn't sound as plaintive in his enemy's mind as it did in his own.

Your family has many enemies, boy. Those who waited centuries for it to fall from grace, for its power to wane, and those who have more recent reasons to hate your clan.

Mother. Was this mage hunter someone she had wronged? She had been the only great warrior mage in the clan in her generation, so Yanko did not know who else might have provided "recent reasons" for hatred. Was he to be punished because of her misdeeds? He snorted. Of course, he was. Wasn't that the Nurian way? There had been clans and prominent families since long before the Great Chief had been elected, and legends spoke of feuds that ran back not only for generations but for millennia.

The wind stopped, its cessation so abrupt that Yanko almost fell over because he had been leaning to the side to brace himself against it. The sky lightened, clouds whispering away, and the crew erupted in cheers.

"We outran it," someone cried.

"Good work, Cap'n!"

Yanko wanted to share in their enthusiasm, but he worried that the other ship was simply changing tactics. They had fallen back to eight hundred yards and had stopped lobbing cannonballs, but many magical attacks could out-travel mundane ones.

"How far away are they now, kid?" Minark yelled from the wheel.

Yanko opened his mouth to respond, but the hairs on the back of his neck leaped up like hackles on a dog's back. "Attack," he blurted before he knew what it entailed.

An instant later, a fireball bloomed in the sky. It hurled toward them with all the intent and speed of a cannonball—and with more accuracy.

Yanko dropped his leg back, bracing his body as if for a physical blow, and lifted both hands toward the ball of flames. He formed a wall of wind, then funneled it into a shield the same size as the fireball, increasing the force even as he narrowed the width. When he launched the burst of air, the sails fluttered, and the ship groaned as the tremendous gust blew past. It smashed into the fireball less than fifty feet from the side of the ship.

Flames exploded as they struck the invisible shield, spattering in every direction. Then they disappeared, leaving nothing but a whisper of smoke in the air.

Relief washed over Yanko. He gripped the rail for support, weariness taking over his body, as if he had stopped that with his own sinews instead of with the air.

"More finesse," he muttered to himself. "Just use the amount of force that's necessary."

"That's the same mage that made the storm?" Dak asked from behind him.

Yanko hadn't realized he had returned. "I think so. Sorry to send you on a pointless hunt. They were there all the time and camouflaged. They're still—" Yanko halted, spinning back as he felt another attack coming.

A second fireball appeared on the horizon. Yanko gathered himself to deflect it again, this time creating a broader shield and trying to use less of his power. It was a fine line—he would hate to put less energy into it and have the flames smash into the ship—but he didn't know how many of these the mage would throw, and he had to be prepared.

This time, the fireball struck harder, hurling his air shield back when it landed. But its force still wasn't enough to blast through Yanko's defense. The flames spattered in all directions, as if mud has been thrown rather than fire, then dissipated in the air.

I can hurl those all day, spoke the voice in Yanko's mind.

That voice was more distant, and when Yanko checked, he could barely sense the other ship. It had fallen almost a mile back. He didn't bother to respond. As much as he would like to try and wheedle more information from Sun Dragon—and learn more about who this mage hunter was and why she wanted to kill him—Yanko feared he might be tricked into giving away more than he learned. He already had the sense that the mage didn't see him as a threat, perhaps rightfully so.

A third fireball blasted across the blue sky, but this one nearly fizzled out before it reached them. Yanko batted at it with the wind, and it dissipated. At least he had an idea of the Sun Dragon's range now. Yanko didn't know how many his opponent could have

cast, but he was glad they had out-sailed the other ship. Meeting those fireballs had taken a great deal of his energy, and a fresh headache threatened. He had done much more the night they had rescued the prisoners and sneaked the ship past the barricade. At the time, he had been so busy being fraught and exhausted that he hadn't dwelled on it, but in looking back, he was surprised at how much stamina he'd had then. And a little disappointed that it hadn't lasted. What had been different that night? He had been dressed in that robe instead of a simple tunic. Could it be that some of the magic woven into the threads increased the mental stamina of the wearer? He would have to experiment with it further.

Another cheer went up from the crew. Yanko turned, finding Dak standing at his back, as he had expected, but a number of the motley smugglers were also nearby.

"That's fancy fighting for a man who wears a dress," one said, and a few came forward to smack him on the shoulder and offer equally mixed praise. Better than being outright mocked, Yanko supposed.

His heart lifted when Arayevo walked forward, hugged him, and kissed him on the cheek. "I think we owe you our lives," she said, her eyes bright.

All too soon, she stepped back, but Yanko touched his cheek, the memory of the kiss burned into his mind forever. "Just trying to help," he said.

Minark strode up next, flicking a glance at Arayevo before punching Yanko in the shoulder. "Thanks, kid."

"You're welcome, Captain." Yanko resisted the urge to rub his shoulder. Given the captain's penchant for accompanying all of his words with physical blows, Yanko was becoming more and more convinced that the man had Turgonian blood. A lot of it. "If I were you, I'd keep your wind maker running for a while. It's the only thing that's been allowing us to keep ahead of that other ship."

"Best investment I ever made." Minark ambled away, his charms jangling as he went.

Given that he was getting new respect—sort of—from the smugglers, Yanko didn't mention the mage's words to anyone. He didn't want the captain to know that he—and Zirabo's letter—were the only reasons they were being followed and attacked to start with. Their gratitude would be fleeting if they found out. Of course, that might be inevitable. Yanko did not know what cargo Minark had taken on to make this trip worthwhile for him, but he doubted warrior mages were often sent to chase down smugglers.

Dak leaned against the railing, his arms crossed over his chest.

"Disappointed you didn't get to whack anyone with a sword?" Yanko asked.

"Moderately." Dak squinted at him. "You said you failed your mage school tests?"

Mage school. As if Stargrind weren't the most prestigious and vaunted academy in the Great Land.

"I didn't say it; I think Lakeo blurted it out for me."

"What was the problem?"

Yanko had already confessed to pride. That had been what ruined his chances ultimately, but it had been more than that, and he knew it. A need to prove himself to those who had mocked him, and also to those who watched. To his family. "I get nervous when people I know—my family, especially—are watching. There's this pressure to do well, the knowledge that... since I was three years old and showed an aptitude for the mental sciences, it's been understood that I would be the one to redeem the family's

honor, to become a powerful warrior mage and serve the Great Chief. Sometimes, it's hard to be competent with all that pressure trying to squish you." He knew he had said that word more than once, but even that didn't seem enough times to emphasize how much he felt the weight of the family's eyes upon him.

"You were just under pressure," Dak observed. "If you had failed, the ship would have been enveloped by a fireball."

"I suppose." Yanko shrugged. "Is it strange that your own relatives can make you more nervous than angry wizards and vengeful assassins?"

Dak's eyebrow twitched. "Assassins?"

Yanko debated if he should say more. The rest of the crew had gone back to work, and nobody was around to overhear the conversation. He might not want to let the smugglers know someone wanted to find him—and kill him—lest Minark and the others decide it would be safer for them if Yanko was thrown overboard one dark night, but wouldn't it be disingenuous not to tell Dak? How could he expect the man to risk his life protecting him when he didn't have any ideas as to what was coming?

"Perhaps," Yanko said slowly, "this would be the time to admit that there are some people following me."

Dak grunted. "I gathered that."

"There's at least one warrior mage, and there's a mage hunter, as well. They attacked my brother, who was delivering a message to me, then burned down the family house. Lakeo and I barely escaped."

"A message." Dak must be wondering how scintillating this message could be to cause all this.

Yanko did not think it as scintillating as all of this violence following in its wake implied. All it was now was a promise. Not even that. It was a suggestion of what might be out there. Nothing more. And yet, people were willing to kill for that suggestion.

"Yes," Yanko said. "It's from someone important. About something important." All right, that was vague, but even admitting that made him nervous. What would keep Dak from rifling through his bag one night while Yanko slept? Granted, Yanko had been sleeping in his clothes and with the letter in an inside pocket, but a light touch might still ferret it out. Maybe later, he could see if he could put some small hex on it, to deter snooping. Making wasn't his specialty, but he thought he could manage something simple.

"I see."

Yanko hoped he didn't, not truly. With the Kyatt Islands halfway to Turgonia, he had no doubt that Dak could find a way to relay information home from there. The last thing Yanko needed was for another party to become interested in what he sought.

Chapter 12

Yanko let out a long relieved breath when he spotted the island on the horizon of a placid blue ocean with not a wave over two feet in height. Both sights were a respite after the last few days. They had survived the magical storm only to run into one provided by nature. Nature's had been scarier and had lasted much longer.

He sagged against the railing, glad he did not feel the need to throw up over it this time. The captain must have his artifact working again, because the schooner was cutting through the water faster than it should have, given the slight breeze. Minark must not want the mage to catch up with him again. Understandable. Yanko didn't want to see him again, either, though it might be inevitable, since the other ship seemed to know where they were going. He had no idea how the rebel faction had learned of the letter or of Zirabo's mission, but he accepted it as a truth that it *did* know.

"Enjoying the calm waters?" came Arayevo's voice from behind him.

She walked up and rested her elbows on the railing next to him. He did his best not to gaze longingly at her, but he hadn't forgotten that kiss, even if it had been nothing more than the brushing of her lips against his cheek. "Yes. I'm not sure how many quiet moments I have ahead, so it's important for my stomach and me to appreciate them when they come."

She grinned and leaned over the railing, eyeing the hull of the ship. "Yes, you and your stomach are lucky the captain didn't have you hanging over the side here, swabbing vomit off the paint."

"Actually, he did. You're not on the night shift, so you missed it. It was before I worked the bilge pump and after cutting potatoes for that hash that seems to be one of only three meals your cook knows how to make."

"Well, our cook was a miner before he lied his way into this job. If dinner doesn't taste like charcoal, it's a good night."

"Arayevo..." Yanko bit his lip. He had been trying to think of a way to make this request for days. "I know you have a job here and that you seem to like it—" he tried to keep all judgment out of his voice, even if he believed she could do much more with her life, or at least much more legal things, "—but I wondered if you might like to come with me."

She tilted her head and regarded him, the breeze blowing a few strands of hair across her face. He resisted the urge to reach out and tuck them behind her ear.

"With you?" Arayevo asked.

"With all of us," he rushed to add. Yanko hadn't meant to make it sound like he wanted her to spend the rest of her life solely with him. Not right away. "Dak and me, anyway. As I've already told you, we're on an important mission, sent by someone high up in government. It could mean great social advancement for your family if you were to help us, if that's something you care about." It was important to so many Nurians, but Arayevo had never openly hungered for status. "Even if it's not, it would be a chance to gain favor, perhaps one day be given a job that's in line with your dreams and your craving for adventure."

"Hm." Arayevo gazed at the three islands that had come into view, some with

rounded green banks and black sand beaches, others with cliffs rising sharply from the shallows.

Yanko kept his mouth shut, not wanting to push her. He found it encouraging that she had not said no right away. A wistful expression had found its way onto her face. For as much as the sea life seemed to suit her—he had never seen her bent over the railing and experiencing the hash for a second time—maybe this smuggling gig wasn't quite her dream after all.

"It's strange that you're younger than me, but know exactly what you want from life, Yanko."

"That's only because my family has been telling me what I want from life since birth," he said dryly. He had whined to her often enough about how what he wanted and what his family wanted for him were not the same, so he didn't bring it up again now. Besides, he was growing too old for whining.

"I haven't decided yet, but I'm enjoying the adventure right now. This adventure. Seeing places, experiencing the world. All these different ports." Arayevo smiled fondly over her shoulder at the ship and the crew, and Yanko's hopes sank. "I know you care about the government and who's in charge, but honestly, I don't. One great chief means as little to me as the next."

"For us, in our remote village, maybe it hasn't been that important who's leading the Great Land, but the times are becoming more difficult. If we don't care now and act now... we might not like what our future holds."

"Then we can leave," Arayevo said.

"Leave?"

"It's not as if Nuria is the only nation in the world."

Yanko tapped his fingernail against the railing. It was not that he hadn't understood her; it was that he could not imagine walking away from his homeland. He was already agonizing over the fact that he didn't know what was happening to his kin back in the village. To abandon them and never look back... No, he couldn't imagine it.

"Your father would miss you," he said. "And your sister, as well."

"I would miss them, too, but we can always write. Assuming they're all right." A rare wrinkle formed on Arayevo's brow. "I *am* worried about the village, after hearing what you said. That's another reason I want to return with Minark, to see if I can find out what happened back there. There'll be word in port, and if not, I can take a few days and head home."

Yanko winced at the idea of her traveling inland alone, now that there were rebels roaming the mountains. Why couldn't she come with him instead? Once they finished, they could travel back home *together* to check on everyone. He had to make one more try, *tell* her that, make her see the logic. "If you were to come with us and we succeed, we'd all be able to go back to the village together, to check on everyone. Maybe the *pri*—person in government I'm working for would even give us a carriage and a military escort."

"You're going to take Dak back to our village?" She smirked at him. "I don't think he would fit in on your homestead."

Yanko flushed. He hadn't been imagining either Dak *or* Lakeo in the carriage with them as they traveled down the coast. Lakeo wanted to stay on Kyatt and study, after all, and Dak would doubtlessly consider his favor redeemed before they got to that stage.

Yanko certainly couldn't stroll into the Golden City with a Turgonian spy at his side.

"Let me think about it, will you?" Arayevo asked. "You said you're doing some research on the main island here? That you'll be a few days? The *Falcon's Flight* needs repairs after the storm, so we'll be in dock a few days too."

That was a better answer than he had expected to get. Maybe she was letting him down easy, but he brightened, nonetheless, and said, "Of course. Take your time. Just... there's one more thing. Have you considered—well, you probably haven't, but consider this from my perspective. I ran down to the Port of the Red Sky Wars without a plan or any notion of finding anyone I knew. But then—I know this sounds arrogant to say that the gods are helping me, but I feel that more than chance led me to you. And to Dak, as well. There are what? A hundred thousand people in that city? More? What are the odds that I would run into the two of you? Maybe this is meant to be." Yanko managed to keep himself from saying, "Maybe *we're* meant to be." It seemed a stretch to claim the gods wanted him to have a happy love life, but he had been thinking about the rest of it on the voyage, that maybe, just maybe, one of the gods was behind him in this.

"It's an interesting premise, Yanko," Arayevo said gently, "but I've never been one to spend time praying or studying religious history. I don't think the gods are that invested in me. I'd believe that they might have an interest in you, though."

Yanko wasn't sure she understood his point—he doubted a god was invested in any individual, but maybe one or more had a reason to put together a team that could bring better times to their people. He shrugged. It didn't matter for now; the argument wasn't going to sway her. "Gods aside, please watch out for that other ship while you're doing your repairs. They're after me—the letter I carry. They should leave the *Falcon's Flight* alone once we're off it, but you should still keep an eye out."

"Always." She hugged him, then backed up and waved. "They'll need my help docking, but I'll see you again soon."

"Of course," Yanko murmured.

Thanks to the wind artifact, the schooner had already reached the mouth of the harbor, and the crew was scurrying about, responding to the captain's orders. Since Yanko's shift had been during the night, he did not feel compelled to jump in, but he did see Dak pulling at ropes. Yanko watched the shoreline draw nearer, trying to guess which direction the Polytechnic would be. White and beige buildings lined the waterfront and stretched inland for at least a mile before the dwellings grew more sparse with more green interspersed. Here and there, palm, coconut, and eucalyptus trees arose between the structures and in parks, but the port was in the middle of a heavily populated area. More buildings stretched up and down the coast, stopping at the base of a cliff to the west. A dormant volcano rose in the center of the island, with greenery and black lava rock dominating its sides. This was the biggest of the islands, the maps told him, with a population of nearly a million. He would have to find a local map or do a lot of asking around in order to find anything.

As he considered asking for directions, it occurred to him that he did not know a single word of Kyattese. He would not have a guide who spoke the language, either, unless he lucked out and Dak knew it. Did he spy—or do whatever diplomatic things he supposedly did—here, as well as in Nuria? The Kyattese weren't allies with either Turgonia or Nuria, having fought fiercely, despite their pacifist tendencies, to defend their homeland from occupation. It was a port city, known as a destination for ships from

all over the world, so he would hope *someone* would speak Nurian.

Still, his next thought was to realize that all of the research materials in the library would likely be in Kyattese, including anything that referenced this Golden Lodestone. He groaned and rubbed his face. Why hadn't he realized this earlier? Not that he could have done anything at any point in the trip, but how was he going to recruit someone to translate for him and also dig through the foreign texts? Someone he could trust utterly? He didn't even trust his own comrades utterly. Neither of them knew the whole truth of this mission.

He sighed and gazed down at the water. The flip of a fin or a tail—something big and dark—caught his eye. It disappeared beneath the water before he could decide what type of fish or shark might be lurking out there. It hadn't *looked* like a fish, though. More like a snake, but larger. It wasn't in their path, but out of curiosity, Yanko reached out with his mind. He brushed past hundreds, if not thousands of fish, their auras tiny specks of brightness that lit up the world beneath the surface. A much brighter and larger aura appeared to him, and he grasped the railing tightly, a surge of fear racing through his body. He hadn't seen a snake but a tentacle, one of many. It belonged to some kind of giant octopus or kraken, and it was as large as the *Falcon's Flight*. He had heard of such massive sea creatures, but it was hard to imagine them from the mountain forests back home.

A thud sounded, a pack being thrown to the ground at his feet. It was *his* pack with his weapons strapped to it.

"We'll be docked in fifteen minutes," Dak said, a touch of reprimand in his voice. He wore his own pack over his shoulders and had his weapons belt strapped on.

"Eager to get off the ship, are you?"

"The captain doesn't want me here." From the way he said it, it didn't sound like it bothered him.

"I can't imagine why."

Yanko picked up his pack and hefted it over his shoulder. "Have you been here before, Dak?"

"Yes."

"Do you know where the Polytechnic is?"

"Yes."

"I don't suppose you speak the language?"

"Yes." Dak regarded him. Thoughtfully? He could guess that Yanko needed a guide, but did he wonder if this might be his opportunity to learn more about Yanko's mission? Granted, he hadn't exactly been trying to pry information out of Yanko. In fact, his expression had been bland to the point of indifference when Yanko had confessed oh-so-vaguely that someone important was sending him to do something important. But perhaps that was his strategy for gathering information. Pretend he didn't care, but then be there, lurking in the background when secrets were spoken.

"Do you read and write the language?" Yanko asked, even though it would be better to find some student at the Polytechnic to help him, someone who might find researching an ancient artifact interesting but who was too concerned about his or her own grades to consider the global ramifications or to do anything with the information.

"Yes," Dak said.

"Ah, good. You're a much more versatile bodyguard than my brother would have

been.” Yanko smiled, but he couldn’t help but think that if his brother were here, he could share *everything* with him.

Dak only grunted in response to the praise and started to walk away.

“Wait. I have one more question.” Yanko glanced in the direction he had sensed the kraken. It had dropped down into the depths again, and he barely felt its presence now, so there was nothing to show Dak. Still, the size of it made him uneasy, and he wanted reassurance that it wasn’t planning to wrap those tentacles around the ship and squish them. “Are you aware of any large tentacled sea creatures that enjoy these waters?”

“How large?”

“As big as this ship.”

“Sounds like a kraken,” Dak said. “They’re not common in shallow waters, but it gets deep quickly when you get away from these islands. And I’ve heard they’ve been more frequent here in the last twenty years. Apparently, they’re attracted to Turgonian underwater boats, and Admiral—President—Starcrest made a number of them for the Kyattese marine scientists when he was here. They’re lucky he put in some defensive capabilities.”

“What do the krakens do?”

Dak spread his arms in a hugging motion, then squeezed them tightly about himself.

“Oh.” Now, instead of imagining tentacles wrapped around Captain Minark’s ship, Yanko pictured oblong cylinders—he had only a vague idea of what a Turgonian underwater boat looked like—being snared and tugged down into underwater chasms at the bottom of the ocean. “Do they want to eat them or do they find them offensive for some reason?”

“No, they eat fish. *Lots* of fish. But there’s speculation that krakens are attracted to underwater boats and mistake them for mates.”

Yanko squinted at Dak, suspicious that he was being teased.

Dak only shrugged. “The Kyattese have tried painting their boats all different colors in the hope of deterring them. Usually, they have to use a shock system to electrify the hull.”

“That would be a jarring message to get from something you thought was your lover.”

“Tell me about it.” With that obscure comment, Dak walked away.

“We’re here,” one of the crew announced. “Land of sun, surf, and those blonde girls with the bouncing coconuts.”

“You’re referring to the drinks they carry in coconut shells, right?” Arayevo asked.

“Uh, right!”

“Enough blather,” Minark said. “I want these freeloaders off my ship.” He waved a hand toward Dak and Yanko, and Yanko stuck a fist on his hip. He, Dak, and Lakeo had worked the whole way here, in addition to paying, and Yanko had kept the captain’s ship from being turned into kindling for a fireball. “Morgagt, get your scrawny backside off to the markets and find me some limes. You people had teeth falling out *before* the voyage started. Everyone else, get to work on repairs,” Minark added. “The women can wait.”

“Just because he already *has* a woman,” someone muttered as they slunk past.

Yanko frowned, hoping that didn’t have anything to do with Arayevo. It would slay him if she wanted to stay here because of the captain.

Something poked him in the shoulder. Lakeo’s bow staff.

“You ready?” she asked.

“Yes. First stop is the Polytechnic to check about enrollment. Fake enrollment for me, but I assume you’re going to ask about real enrollment?”

Lakeo thumped the staff to the deck and headed for the gangplank, clearly expecting him to follow. “How come you asked Arayevo to come with you, but you’re ready to leave me here?”

“Uh, I thought your entire goal was to come here and study.” Yanko didn’t comment on the fact that she must have been eavesdropping on his conversation, but he made a note to look around more with his senses before having private chats with people in the future.

“It was, but that was when I had money saved up.”

Yanko kept himself from mentioning the “seller’s fee” she had taken from him and then felt compelled to return. He still didn’t quite understand what that had been about.

“Besides,” Lakeo said, “that was before you said all that stuff about having the Great Chief be aware of one’s existence and gaining honor and maybe a decent job and...” They were walking down the gangplank, and when she fell silent, he thought she might be concentrating on not tripping over something or might have seen a threat in the crowd on the docks, but she shook her head and said, “Never mind.”

He thought he could guess what had been on her mind. “I don’t know anything about the Great Chief’s thoughts or preferences—” Yanko chose not to use the word prejudices, “—but perhaps for someone who did a favor for his family—for our entire nation—there might be some honor or privilege awarded, even if she didn’t have an entirely Nurian bloodline.”

Her shoulders hunched, and she stopped walking. Yanko half-expected her to snap at him for bringing up that subject, but she sighed instead, tightening her hand around her bow staff and staring at it. “I just want to learn magic, Yanko. I’ve tried on my own, but it’s hard.”

“I know.”

“No, you don’t. You had tutors.”

“Intermittently. When my father could successfully bribe, bully, or beg someone to come stay in our village for a while. He didn’t have a lot of money to pay those people, and they never stayed long. I’m not sure you noticed, but our village isn’t an exotic tourist mecca, or a place people are drawn to stay unless they have roots in the community. A lot of time, I was learning from books.”

“Guess you’re smarter than me then.” Lakeo clenched her jaw and looked around.

“I didn’t mean to say that. The tutors did help. They gave me a foundation and made it easier to learn more on my own, but I’ve always known that my progress would improve when I could go to a real school. I’m sure you feel the same way.” Except the Nurian schools and academies did not accept those with mixed blood. Maybe that was the exception she thought the Great Chief might make if she helped with his quest. Institutions for the mental sciences did not cost students any money, not in Nuria. The Kyattese Polytechnic might be more inviting to different nationalities, but from what Yanko had heard, tuition was not inexpensive.

“Yeah.”

Dak had joined them at the base of the gangplank, so they had best put their guide to use and get on with the mission. That other ship could not be far behind, and if Sun

Dragon knew Yanko had been coming here, he might know where Yanko would go for research too.

“If you *want* to come along, Lakeo, I would be pleased to have you.” It surprised Yanko to realize he wasn’t lying. All those months in the mine, he had dreaded Lakeo’s appearance, knowing she would bring her sharp tongue and her snide comments. He did not think she had changed much, but for some reason, the comments bothered him less now. Maybe because she was all he had now that reminded him of Uncle Mishnal and home.

She shrugged again. “I’ll think about. After I find out how much it costs to go to their snooty school here.” She sniffed and looked around the docks.

They were busy, with more ships coming into the harbor every minute. Some found berths at the piers—there had to be a hundred of them thrusting out from the quay along the waterfront—while others set anchor in the large harbor protected by a jetty to the east and cliffs to the west. Nurian freighters made from wood and sail floated alongside Turgonian ironclads and other vessels flying flags Yanko only recognized from books on world history.

“The other girl’s not coming?” Dak asked.

Arayevo remained on the ship, talking to the captain.

“Not now,” Yanko said, hoping he didn’t mean, “Not ever.”

“This way then.” Dak headed east, along the quay, watching the people they passed.

About half of them had the pale skin and blond, brown, or red hair of the Kyattese, but the other half represented other nationalities, with clothing styles that ranged from robes to saris to military uniforms to trousers and tunics. The natives seemed to prefer saris, blouses, and knee-length trousers along with lightweight shoes or sandals.

“Police,” Dak said over his shoulder, tilting his chin toward a squad of men and women jogging down the quay. Wearing sandals, shorts, and yellow, button-down shirts, they did not have the intimidating mien of a martial unit, but they did carry cudgels and crossbows, except for one who wore a couple of glowing pins on his collar. Mage? Or practitioner, as they called them here?

“They won’t be a problem, I trust?” Yanko waved at the eclectic mix of travelers walking up and down the quay.

“Shouldn’t be.” Dak looked over his shoulder. “Assuming you don’t have any prison breaks in mind for this portion of your trip.”

The police happened to be walking by at that moment, and Yanko flushed. “No, just research.”

Though the police didn’t slow down, they gave his group curious looks, with one turning to walk backward for a moment as he contemplated Dak.

“You didn’t do anything notorious when you were here before, did you?” Yanko asked after they had passed out of earshot. “That one thought the back of your head was rather interesting.”

“I doubt they walk past many Turgonians speaking Nurian on their docks.”

“Ah.” That made sense. “Do you know of anyplace inexpensive where we can find lodgings?” Preferably in an area where wizards and assassins would struggle to find them...

“I usually stay at the Turgonian Embassy for free.”

“Would it be free for us?” Lakeo sounded serious.

Yanko gaped at her.

"It would depend on how large of an interrogation room you'd want to be placed in." Dak's eye glinted as he glanced back at them.

"Uh," Yanko said. "I'd prefer to stay on the other side of town from the Turgonian Embassy." None of the foreigners they were passing were picking fights with each other, perhaps a result of those frequent police patrols, but he had caught some glares between nationalities, and the sailors on a Turgonian freighter were shaking their fists and exchanging curses with the crew on a Nurian merchant vessel.

At the end of the quay, Dak turned onto a street, but he paused to look at the side of a large, whitewashed stone building. A police station? The entire side wall was papered with pictures of heads. Wanted posters, Yanko realized, looking closer. The tingle of magic came from the wall—probably some safeguard to ensure nobody took down or altered the posters.

Dak tapped an empty spot and said something in Turgonian.

"Pardon?" Yanko asked, perusing the extensive offering. He supposed the Kyattese, being known for peacefulness and neutrality, probably wanted to stop notorious criminals from strolling onto their island. A number of pirates were among the offerings. He skimmed the rows, half hoping to find Captain Minark on there, if only to show Arayevo what kind of man she had taken up with.

"They finally took one down that they were supposed to take down last year. A Turgonian assassin who's working for the government now. The president would prefer he not be shot on sight."

Yanko barely heard him. He had found the picture of his mother. If not for the name Captain Snake Heart Pey Lu typed in distinct print in three languages, he might not have recognized her from the image—that twenty-year-old painting in his father's cabinet was the only picture he had seen of her. Her black hair was short now, almost as wild as Lakeo's, and whoever the artist had been had drawn her with a heavy hand, an angry hand. Her mouth was pinched in a frown, her eyebrows were pulled together, and a large tattoo marked her neck. Some sort of lizard or dragon? She appeared perpetually irritated and older than Yanko would have expected. He saw little of the beauty that must have once drawn his father to her, but her dark eyes held the same determination they had in the picture.

"Is that your *mother*? She's *fierce*." Lakeo touched the tattoo and fingered a number of small notes that had been pinned to the corner. "What are these? Amendments?"

Yanko tore his gaze from the picture to focus on the papers. They were only written in Kyattese, so he couldn't guess. "Dak? If you're done checking on your infamous countrymen, could you translate something for me, please?"

Dak had been squinting at a picture at the far end, and looked ready to continue up the busy street, but he returned. "They're updates on that pirate. Recent sightings in the area."

"In the area?" Yanko gaped and pointed at the cobblestones under his feet. "*This* area? She's supposed to be two thousand miles to the south. Tormenting spice traders around the Mesuna Keys, that's what Uncle Mishnal said." Not that she couldn't have moved in the months since Yanko had received that information, information that may have been months or years out of date by the time his uncle received it. He shoved at his hair with his fingers, nearly knocking his topknot from its binding. Had he been claiming

that the gods were guiding him? Helping put together a team that could succeed at this quest? If that was true, why would they send his *mother* up here? The woman who had singlehandedly taken the White Fox clan from a position of honor to one of disgrace?

His stomach sank. What if she had somehow heard about the quest for the lodestone too? What if she had come to beat him to it? No, it couldn't be. Sun Dragon was from a powerful family, and it made sense that he might have a spy in the Great Chief's palace, especially if he was a key part of the rebellion. But a pirate wouldn't have such a spy. Yanko did not need to make up enemies where there were none. Or hyperventilate in front of a random wall in a new city.

"Why does the pirate matter?" Dak asked.

Yanko stared up at him, struggling to bring his mind back to the moment.

"Because," Lakeo said, tapping a finger against Snake Heart's face, "that's Yanko's loving mother."

Dak arched his eyebrows and looked back and forth from Yanko to the picture. Had he not shared that information with his bodyguard before? Apparently not. He braced himself, waiting for the condemnation that always came when people learned about his mother.

"Huh." Dak waved up the street. "This way. The Polytechnic is a mile walk."

Yanko stared after him, then ran to catch up. "That's it? Don't you care? She's killed hundreds, they say, if not thousands. Because of her, my family has been..." He trailed off. Why should Dak care? He wasn't a Nurian. What was the status of some random clan to him? "Never mind. I guess it's not important that she's around. I just find it disconcerting. These aren't her usual waters."

"We'll watch for her then."

And with that, Dak turned a corner and kept walking. Yanko wished he could so easily dismiss his mother's presence. He took a long look back at that wall of wanted posters before following Dak around the corner, wondering if it was the last he would see of her. Or not.

Chapter 13

“Greetings,” a middle-aged man in a white robe said from behind a desk bearing a plaque that read *Admissions*. He smiled brightly, his blue eyes crinkling, and genuinely seemed pleased to see Yanko and Lakeo walk in, even though he had been in the middle of scribbling notes on a pad. Three books lay open on his desk. If the fact that they were carrying all of their belongings, including weapons, surprised him, he did not show it.

“Fair afternoon,” Yanko replied, only then realizing the man had spoken to him in Nurian. That was a relief, since he and Lakeo had left Dak outside. After saying they should not need a bodyguard inside the Polytechnic, he had headed up a hill that offered a view of the harbor to watch for the arrival of that other ship. So long as he wasn’t securing “lodgings” for them in the Turgonian embassy.

“Welcome to our institution. Are you seeking the answers to questions? Or are you interested in enrolling as students?”

The answers to questions—that would be nice.

“How much is enrollment?” Lakeo asked.

“That depends on the field you wish to study—are you students of the Science?” He looked back and forth between them, as if something about their clothing might tell him the answer. “We offer other courses and degree programs, as well, but this particular campus is best known for its mental-science instructors. They teach in a range of specialties from the thermal sciences to telepathy and mind-based animal handling to earth and growing arts.”

“Earth and growing?” Yanko asked wistfully, despite the fact that he was here for another reason.

“Yes, we are particularly well known for such offerings. Because of our nation’s limited land size, we have had to learn to create homeostasis between the inhabitants and animal and plant species, so there is plenty for all. We are at the cutting edge for science-assisted, integrated farming, producing maximum harvest yields while retaining the rich fertility of the soil for future crops. May I select some brochures for you?”

The man’s bright smile never faded as he spoke, but Yanko couldn’t help but wonder if he was aware of the Nurian condition and had made this spiel based on their nationality. Even if it was a sales pitch, Yanko wished he *could* stay and study here. It sounded like the Kyattese had solved the problem his own people needed to solve. A twinge of envy ran through him at the idea that these people on their islands had figured out what had eluded the Great Land, but he reminded himself that they had destroyed their first continent before realizing they had to change their ways.

“I’ll take a brochure,” Yanko said. It couldn’t hurt, and he was curious what classes here might be like. Even if he had a mission now, that did not mean he could not return one day, so long as he didn’t get himself killed trying to complete Zirabo’s task.

“You *will*?” Lakeo whispered when the man turned toward a row of filing cabinets behind his desk. “Do you even know what he’s talking about?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll take something on the thermal sciences,” Lakeo said. “And on tuition.”

“Of course.” The man selected pamphlets and pulled them off shelves and out of

drawers. “The new semester doesn’t start for two months, so you’ll have plenty of time to peruse our offerings and see if a program here might be right for you.”

“Not for two months?” Lakeo slumped.

“There are preparatory study programs you may wish to engage in before your classes start. As well as tests. Most students already have an understanding of the Science before entering the Polytechnic, but there are remedial programs for those who are coming in fresh. Here you are.” He pushed two huge stacks of pamphlets, books, and diagrams toward them.

Lakeo stared down at the piles. Yanko did not know if all of that was promotional material, or if they had already been given homework.

“You mentioned answering questions...” Somehow Yanko doubted the Kyattese would offer up the secrets of their historical artifacts, so he kept his words vague. “Can anyone do research in your libraries? Or are the materials only available for students?”

“Anyone may access the library. Is there something in particular you’re looking for? I can direct you to the correct room. Do you read Kyattese? Most of the texts are in our language, but there are students stationed in the library to assist patrons. I can contact someone to help you.”

“That would be very useful,” Yanko said. It was everything he had hoped for. He wouldn’t have to use Dak after all and worry about him learning too much.

“Excellent. What is your area of interest?”

“Kyattese history.”

For the first time, the man’s smile faltered, and his eyes narrowed slightly. Yanko supposed it was strange that a Nurian should have a fascination with some other country’s history.

“You see, we—my people—are facing some difficulties in the exact area you mentioned, continuing to grow enough food to support our population. I was sent to study your ways and learn how we might apply them in Nuria.”

“Interesting. You’re very young to have been hand-selected for such a mission.”

No kidding.

“Did you bring any references from professors?” the man asked.

Erg, should he have put Lakeo to work forging academic papers too? “No, I’m mostly self-taught.” What would get him access to the library and the student assistant he needed? “But my family is *moksu*—we’re regularly called upon to serve the Great Chief, at any age.”

“I hadn’t heard that your Great Chief had any interest in sustainable agriculture.” The man’s tone had cooled considerably.

Yanko groped for a way to salvage the situation. Why hadn’t he simply said he was interested in the thermal sciences and then wandered off to explore once he was in the library? “It was actually his son Prince Zirabo who saw my potential when he was visiting the salt mine that my family oversees.” The mine they *had* overseen. “I didn’t think a letter would be required. I’m not seeking any special treatment.”

“Prince Zirabo?” The man’s brows rose. “Ah, I see. Yes, that makes more sense. Too bad he doesn’t have any significant power or sway over there.”

“Yes,” Yanko murmured, though he found it strange that random strangers should know more about his government than he did.

“What have you studied thus far? I ask so I might recommend a starting point and

also classes, if you decide to enroll.” The man was smiling again, but Yanko sensed he was being tested, or at least being asked to prove that he wasn’t lying.

“I’ve been helping in the greenhouses since I was a boy, creating my own special soil amendments—is vermiculture popular over here?—and also working in the forest around the property to keep the various plant species healthy and choose trees for selective harvesting. There’s a cave in the hills back home where we grow numerous strains of edible and medicinal mushrooms, taking advantage of otherwise barren space since it gets so little sunlight. I also use the mushroom compost in my soil blend. As for the mental sciences, I can speed up the process of growth or decomposition and sometimes find methods of treating blighted or otherwise damaged plant species. A couple of years ago, my grandmother and I found a way of curing the filbert blight that was affecting our orchards.”

Yanko stopped, more because Lakeo was staring at him with her mouth hanging open than because of anything the admissions director was doing. He was simply nodding his head attentively.

“You can cure filberts, but you made your brother take that arrowhead out of his leg on his own?” she muttered.

Yanko shrugged sheepishly. “I never had a healer for a tutor. People are different. Less bark, fewer leaves. It’s complicated.”

The man chuckled. “Yes it is, young fellow. But I believe I can be of assistance in your quest.” He closed a couple of the open books on his desk, peered under some papers, then opened a drawer. “Ah, there we go.” He pulled out a small communication orb, the glowing orange sphere nestled in a wooden base. He set it on the desk, rested his palm on it briefly, then said a line of Kyattese that included his name, Director Kelleoan, or something that sounded like that and a question.

A moment passed, then a harried monosyllabic reply floated into the room. If Yanko had to guess the equivalent, he would have made it, “Yeah?”

The director’s brow creased. “Who is this, please?” Yanko recognized that as one of the four Kyattese phrases he knew.

Another pause. “Akstyr.”

Given the size of the campus, Yanko would have found it surprising if the director knew all of the students, even assistants, by first name, but he said, “Oh,” as if he knew exactly who he was talking to.

The director placed a hand on the orb, studied the bamboo floor thoughtfully for a moment, then said, “I believe his Kyattese has come along well enough to be of use to you. That is if...” He turned his thoughtful gaze toward them. “Would you have difficulty working with a Turgonian?”

Lakeo issued a low growl from deep in her throat.

Yanko elbowed her. “Not if he’s here to seek greater education and enlightenment, as we are.”

Lakeo snorted, but didn’t object further.

“Wonderful. I’ll send you over.” The director removed his hand from the orb.

“Akstyr, you have a couple of Nurian visitors coming. They need help with research.” He repeated the words in his own language.

Another yeah-like grunt came back. This Akstyr did not sound enthused. He asked something in Kyattese.

The director's voice grew firmer when he said, "No." He dropped the orb back in his drawer and smiled again. "He'll be waiting for you. This pamphlet—" he opened a cardboard foldout with a detailed map on the inside, which rose from the page to hang in the air in a three-dimensional display, "—will show you the way."

"Thank you." Yanko accepted it, as well as the armload of other papers and pamphlets, and led the way out.

Lakeo followed, her own pamphlets in her arms. "This Akstyr sounds like a troublemaker."

"I'm sure that's not the case." Following the map's lead, Yanko led them down pathways and past numerous buildings of glass, bamboo, and lava stone. "Otherwise, he wouldn't be entrusted with helping students and visitors with their research."

They parted on the path to allow a student in shorts and sandals to stumble past, his arms so laden with books that he could barely see over the top.

"Or maybe he got in trouble for something, and this is an extra duty he's received as punishment. Isn't that how you usually ended up with extra duties in the mines?"

"That's certainly how I ended up having to create illusions of trees for you."

"Except for the time when I pummeled you in the practice ring, and you had to help me because of your embarrassing defeat."

"You shoved your boot into my... special parts when I was looking the other way."

"Yes, that's pummeling, isn't it? If you're dumb enough to look at a girl in the middle of a sparring match, then your special parts deserve attention from a boot."

"Thanks for the tip." Had Yanko truly been thinking that he liked having her along on his quest? He bared his teeth.

A couple of students studying under a cypress tree lifted their heads from books to watch them go by, or perhaps to watch Lakeo. Thanks to her height, her muscled arms, and the bow, she looked more like a soldier reporting to headquarters than a student. Yanko did not know if he fit in, either, with his swords belted at his waist, but he did still have that giant tome in his backpack. Maybe he could take it out and cart it around in his arms.

They entered the large, three-story library building, the foyer cool, thanks to the black stone walls and floor. People of all ages roamed about, books open in their hands or notes clenched as they strode about with determined expressions on their faces. One aspiring telekinetics mage strolled past, his stack of books hovering over his shoulder.

"How come you can't do that?" Lakeo asked.

"I can, sort of. Just not with anything important that I wouldn't want to break."

"So if you were going to sweep a woman off her feet and carry her into your bedchamber—" Lakeo looked at him, made a noise somewhere between a snort and a laugh, then went on, "—you'd want to use your arms instead of magic, eh?"

"It would depend on the woman." Yanko walked to a directory by the door, which showed a map of the three sprawling floors of the library, including numerous wings and out buildings that had been added over the years. All of the rooms were labeled in Kyattese, and some of the major ones had titles in several other languages, as well.

"As if you get so many offers."

Yanko resisted the urge to say, "More than you," and concentrated on the map instead. Besides, it probably wasn't true. Even if Lakeo wasn't quite the classic definition of beauty, at least by Nurian standards, she had the confidence to walk up to someone and

let the person know she was available. Yanko had never even managed to give Arayevo one of his love poems.

"There it is." He pointed to the second floor. "And there are stairs over there."

"I suppose it's not your fault that Arayevo's tastes run to older men. I bet she's drawn to Captain Minark's bountiful facial hair. You should be happy with a less beautiful woman, someone who doesn't mind a bare chin."

Yanko walked quickly through the foyer and up the stairs, hoping faster foot speed would end this conversation more quickly. He should not have responded at all, but he couldn't help from snapping, "She's not drawn to his hair, or anything else. They're just crew mates. And *lots* of men have bare chins. *Dak* has a bare chin."

Lakeo touched a plaque next to a door that read *Thermal Science Studies* and gazed longingly into the room before continuing on. "Because he shaves."

"I shave too." As soon as he reached the door to the history room, Yanko hustled inside, not wanting to get into another argument about the paucity of his facial hair. He would like to prove her wrong, but he had seen himself after a few days without shaving, and the wispy mustache and patchy tufts of beard growth would not impress a woman.

As soon as he entered the dim room, the scent of rotten eggs or sulphur or something of that nature reached his nose. A cloud of greenish smoke hung over a desk, and a faint magical taint hung about the odor.

Yanko stopped on a rug, not certain it was safe to continue inside. A wall to the left held maps of the world and close-ups of various continents, some recently drawn and others centuries old, the continents not always in exactly the same places or in the same shape as in the later renditions. To the right, aisles of bookcases stretched away into gloom. A couple of windows let in sunlight from the far side of the room, but one would need lanterns to navigate the shelves.

A man about Yanko's age, maybe a year or two older, leaned out from one of the aisles of books. He had a thick tuft of bleached white hair with green and blue dyed tips, and it stuck out in all directions, reminding Yanko of a porcupine. A single dagger-shaped earring dangled from one ear, and he had a defensive—or maybe surly was the right word—hunch to his shoulders. He also had a thick goatee and mustache in a normal dark brown color. Given their recent discussion, Yanko hoped Lakeo wouldn't comment on it. Turgonians must have an easier time growing facial hair.

He said something Yanko couldn't understand, grunted, and walked out with two bottles in his hands, both containing dark green liquids. He was taller than both Yanko and Lakeo, with a lean, rangy build. He waved away lingering smoke and set his ingredients down. More bottles and a small crucible sat on the desk, making it appear more like an alchemist's lab than a librarian's station. Whatever he was mixing looked and smelled volatile too.

"Was that Turgonian?" Lakeo asked.

"I think so. I should be having *Dak* teach it to me." As Yanko stared at the young man, it occurred to him that a Turgonian library assistant wouldn't work at all, even if he knew Kyattese, because neither Yanko nor Lakeo knew Kyattese. He might have to fetch *Dak*, after all.

"You the Nurians?" the man asked in a rough accent, his words slow and precise. And in Nurian. Maybe there was hope for communication after all.

"Yes, I'm Yanko, and this is Lakeo."

“Akstyr.” The man held out an arm. For the traditional Turgonian arm clasp? Dak had never stuck out his arm thusly, and Yanko had thought the greeting might be something done only between comrades, but he accepted the offer, regardless. Akstyr had an arrow branded into the back of his hand. That must have been painful. “For what are you looking?” He crinkled his brow. “What are you looking for?”

Yanko nodded. “The second one is more natural. I’m sorry I don’t know any Kyattese. Or Turgonian.”

“No? Here is how I learn.” Akstyr dipped into a desk drawer and dropped a series of thick pamphlets onto the corner.

Yanko picked up the first one. Its title was written in three languages. “One Thousand and One Lines Guaranteed to Make a Woman Notice You. The Nurian Edition.”

Lakeo snorted.

Akstyr’s shoulders lost their hunch as he wriggled his eyebrows at her, then bowed deeply. He touched his chest. “Most Honored Nurian Lady, you are much shiny and sweet, like a ripe apple.”

Yanko scratched his head. Shiny?

“Please,” Lakeo said, about as impressed as a child given extra chores.

“Yes,” Akstyr said. “Those are the words for what the woman says to me in bed.”

“We need to learn Kyattese,” Yanko told Lakeo, “if only so there’s no need for anyone to ply you with awful phrases proclaiming love.”

“Shiny love,” Lakeo said.

“Actually, I think it’s you who’s the shiny one.” Yanko almost pointed out that it was hard to tell for certain with Akstyr’s accent, but decided it would be uncouth to mock someone for trying to speak their language. It wasn’t as if Yanko could speak Akstyr’s or even the one used on these islands. He sighed, about to explain what they needed to research, but Lakeo spoke first.

“At least he’s got a nice thick beard.” She smiled devilishly at Yanko.

He groaned. He should have segued to the research topic more quickly.

“Beard?” Akstyr stroked his jaw. “Yes, it is nice, yes? You could have one also, for less than the cost of a meal in town.”

“Er.” Yanko suspected he was losing Akstyr’s intent in the translation.

“Which one of us is he talking to?” Lakeo asked, eyeing the concoctions sitting on the desk. Smoke continued to waft from the crucible, even though it did not have an obvious heat source.

“I don’t know, but I wouldn’t recommend a beard for you. A mustache, perhaps.”

Lakeo gave him a hard look. Good. She deserved to be teased back.

Akstyr opened his vest, revealing a number of vials tucked into a pocket. He took out one filled with a sludgy, green-brown concoction and held it out to Yanko. “My face was having like yours. No hair. Bad beard. But my potions fix your problem. Rub here.” He pantomimed pouring out some of the dubious goop and rubbing it on his jaw. “One month to big hair.”

“Which color would it be?” Lakeo pointed at Akstyr’s beard and then at his blue-and-green tipped white hair.

“Natural. Then you make color for the ladies.”

If that green attracted the Kyattese women, Yanko would eat his mother’s robe. “You’re... an alchemist?”

Akstyr shrugged. "Do much. Last semester, potions class."

"Ah." A hair-growth potion for a first-year student. That sounded promising. "For now, we're just interested in researching Kyattese history. The founding of the nation, in particular. *Both* foundings." Yanko meant to imply that he wanted to hear about the original continent the Kyattese had come from, but Akstyr only stared blankly at him. "The Kyattese have only inhabited these islands for seven hundred years, right? I'm interested in learning about where they came from."

"I'm not," Lakeo said. "I'm going to peek in that thermal sciences room. Maybe they have some books written in a good language."

Yanko wouldn't have minded a research companion, but he didn't object to her leaving. She did not know exactly what he sought, and he did not feel comfortable sharing all of the details with her. Besides, he had an... Akstyr.

"Farewell, Honored Nurian Lady," Akstyr called after her. "Your backside is more voracious than the front."

Lakeo squinted back at him, then slammed the door on her way out.

"That word right?" Akstyr asked.

"Maybe voluptuous?" Not that Yanko would use that to describe Lakeo, either. "Now, the history books, please?"

"Yes. Ancient history. This way."

Akstyr waved his hand, conjuring a light globe, and sent it ahead of them to push back the shadows. They padded through the long aisles, the books tidily arranged and dust-free. Yanko suspected that if he knew the language, he could easily find what he sought in the library. Akstyr pulled a few tomes off a shelf and set them on the floor, then promised he would be back after he checked on his potions—the smell wafted all the way to the back of the room. Yanko confirmed that all of the books were written in Kyattese and held nothing that he could translate. He peeked out a window, wondering if he should try to recruit Dak to help, after all. If he was in sight, standing watch on that hill, Yanko might call to him, but a couple of students sitting on a blanket were the only ones on the grassy knoll.

Yanko almost went to search for another student, one that might have a better grasp of Nurian, but he spotted an old atlas on the shelves and decided to start there. None of those maps on the wall had displayed a mystery continent, not even the centuries-old ones, but maybe an old book with its pages falling out would show something interesting.

He took it to a table and leafed through the tome carefully. Unfortunately, the Kyattese date on the front did not make any more sense to him than the words inside, so he did not know if he was looking at a text from before the founding or not. Either way, he did not find any extra continents on the maps, just some poorly shaped ones by early cartographers who hadn't had a good grasp of the scale of the world. Only Nuria, which had been inhabited by civilized people for countless millennia, was always drawn well.

"An old continent, with tired soil," Yanko murmured, running a hand across the land mass. Would the Kyattese with their modern farming methods have any ideas for reinvigorating it? He had ideas of his own, but they were all for small-scale applications—one might improve the soil in a garden, but across an entire continent?

A couple of hours later, Dak walked in while Yanko was sitting on the floor, his back to the shelves, listlessly flipping through the pages and feeling defeated. Akstyr had come back a couple of times and translated passages from books, but he had inevitably found

reasons to return to his own side project. He hadn't seemed to grasp what Yanko sought, so his help was dubious at best.

"Your research time may be limited," Dak announced.

He had changed clothes, out of the dockworker's sturdy attire he had been wearing and into factory-made brown trousers, a dark green shirt, and heavy, black boots. He had switched weapons, as well, and a cutlass, utility knife, and pistol now hung on his belt. The clothing would not help him fit in with the Kyattese and their cheerful and bright garb. No, he looked more Turgonian than ever, and seeing him thus made Yanko nervous. Was Dak even now planning to make an excuse to return to the work he deemed more important? Maybe he had already been to the Turgonian embassy and reported in.

That notion made Yanko even more nervous. He tried to keep the alarm off his face and simply asked, "Our friends have docked?"

"They haven't docked, but they're floating just outside the harbor, near the cliffs."

"I don't suppose one of your ironclads would like to fire a few cannonballs at them? Since they're pesky Nurians."

Not that Dak would have the power to give that order even if he wanted to. But maybe if he visited his embassy and mentioned the dangerous Nurians lurking out there...

"I'm sure they'd like that very much," Dak said dryly, "but after the last war, the Kyattese insisted both sides sign a non-aggression treaty before allowing either of us back into their waters."

"Yes, I suppose I knew that." Yanko stared down at the map, torn between asking for help and worrying that Dak would report back what he learned about the lodestone. Unless Yanko could somehow get his assistance without explaining exactly what he sought. Except that he always had the feeling Dak was more intelligent than his thuggish exterior suggested. Who did volume equations in their head? Yanko could manage it for a rectangle maybe, but not for a cylinder or whatever Dak had been using to gauge that hole.

"You need help?" Dak asked. "You should finish soon, find some place to stay that's not in town or at least that isn't easy to find, then leave for the next stage of your mission. I assume Kyatt isn't your final destination?"

"No, it's not." Too bad Yanko didn't *know* what his final destination was. Maybe he should confide everything in Dak and then just ensure Dak didn't wander off to talk to his people before Yanko had the lodestone in his hands. But how would he keep Dak from slipping away?

You're a mage, aren't you? Studying to be a warrior mage? He's a mundane.

A strong, fast mundane who's older and wiser than I am.

You can handle him as long as you're outside of weapons range.

Yanko sighed. Talking to himself wouldn't solve the problem. He did not like the idea of using force on Dak, anyway, and he hoped it never became necessary. Given what had happened at the mine, with Dak leading the escaped prisoners away while Yanko never loosed a crossbow bolt, he didn't even know if he *could* use force. No, if he was sure he was in the right or that he was protecting his people, he could. Probably.

"Yes, I need help," Yanko found himself saying before he had finished debating the situation to his satisfaction.

"What are you looking for?" Dak walked to the windows, his fingers tapping the hilt of his sword as he gazed down at the walkway leading to the library. Twilight was

darkening the horizon. Whether it was his intention or not, Dak was definitely giving Yanko the impression that he didn't have any time to waste.

"A long forgotten continent."

Dak turned toward him, his face giving away little. He did not appear surprised.

"The one the Kyattese supposedly came from," Yanko went on. "This is someone else's research, and I don't know how accurate it is, but I was told they didn't originate on these islands. There was some great magical war hundreds of years ago where they destroyed their own continent and many of their own people and caused or were victims of some horrible plague. They hid their continent with magic so people wouldn't accidentally discover it, catch the plague, and share it with the rest of the world."

"I've heard that story," Dak said.

His words startled Yanko. Was this more widely known than he had thought? Maybe it was in the Turgonian history books. But *story*, Dak had said, as if to imply it might be fictitious. Perhaps some legend of a lost continent was widely known, but nobody believed it. Except Zirabo?

"*Continent* seems unlikely," Dak said. "Given how many ships travel the oceans these days, someone would have found it."

"Well, it's magically hidden."

Dak snorted. "Right."

It hadn't occurred to Yanko that Dak wouldn't believe in his quest. Sun Dragon surely did. But then, Turgonians never put much stock in magic, if they believed in it at all. The fact that Dak had seen fireballs hurled at his ship in the last week didn't mean he would automatically grasp all the nuances of what people could do with the mental sciences.

"I'm searching for an artifact that's supposed to lead to it," Yanko said.

"To what end?"

"The person who sent me on the mission believes the land will have had time to heal and might be available for colonization and farming."

Dak's eye narrowed. "For the Nurians."

"We need it."

"You *have* a bigger nation than anyone else in the world already. Maybe you should fix the land you have."

"Turgonia is almost as big. And we have ten times the population, if not more. And none of the resources. And land that's been used up by centuries upon centuries of farming. You think that's so easy to *fix*? Turgonia is young. Just because it hasn't run into this problem yet doesn't mean it won't someday." Yanko glowered. He wasn't even sure what his point was—if anything, he was giving Dak a reason to want the hidden continent for his own people—but it rankled him that Dak dismissed his mission, as if his brother had been hurt for nothing, as if Uncle Mishnal had died for nothing. As if—Yanko gritted his teeth, refusing to get emotional over this. He already felt like a child sitting on the floor while Dak loomed over him. "Look, if you don't want to help research, fine. I'll find someone else who reads Kyattese. Someone who's not too busy making potions up front to stay back here for more than five minutes." He turned his glower in Akstyr's direction, though he couldn't truly be mad at the student. This was Yanko's mission, nobody else's. He should have foreseen this problem and thought up a solution before ever coming here.

“I doubt the answers are here,” Dak said. “The Kyattese are tight-lipped about their past, especially that which revolves around their colonizing of these islands.” Dak’s mouth twisted in an expression Yanko could not decipher.

It did not matter. He was offering up useful information. How he knew this, Yanko couldn’t guess, unless the Turgonians truly did have a better understanding of world history than the Nurians—a thought that was hard to stomach. “Any idea *where* the answers might be?”

Dak gazed out the window again, twilight deepening beyond the glass panes. “I have an idea as to where you might stay tonight that should be safe. I’ll check and see if the homeowners are amenable.”

Yanko pushed himself to his feet and lowered his face to hide the frown there. He could hardly scoff at an offer of assistance, but Dak hadn’t answered his question. And Dak was always so blunt.

“Meet me in the foyer in ten minutes,” Dak said and headed for the exit.

“You know, don’t you?” Yanko should not have said anything, but he couldn’t help it. The words tumbled out. “Where the answers to the Kyattese origins are.”

Dak paused, a hand on one of the bookcases. Without looking back, he said, “They are not my secrets to share.”

Before Yanko could come up with a reply, he disappeared down one of the aisles.

“Damn,” Yanko whispered, pacing around the stacks of books on the floor.

He was not shocked that Dak did not have an interest in helping Nuria with this quest—even if it stung because that also meant he didn’t have an interest in helping Yanko with *his* quest. But beyond his concerns, it was disturbing to think that the Turgonians shared some secret history with the Kyattese. The islands had long been contested by both Nuria and Turgonia, and the public story was that Kyatt didn’t consider either nation an ally and remained a neutral party in all matters. But that had been before the empire had become a republic and the notorious Turgonian war criminal Admiral Starcrest had become their first president, a president who happened to be married to a Kyattese woman. What if the two nations were now allies, secretly if not officially? They could be planning to take advantage of the turmoil in Nuria. And might Dak not think Nuria was even more desperate than anyone had realized if eighteen-year-old boys were being sent on missions of paramount importance?

“Stop it.” Yanko thumped a fist against a shelf. The politics, the diplomacy, the plans of war... it was far, far over his head. All he could do was focus on the task he had been given. If Dak would not share what he knew, there must be some other Kyattese person who would. Maybe he should find the Nurian embassy instead of heading off to the home of whatever acquaintance Dak had here. For all he knew, he would end up in some household full of Turgonians who would spend the night laughing at his notions of hidden continents. Except that the mage and the mage hunter out on that ship could stroll right into the Nurian embassy, the same as he could. As odd as it sounded, hiding amongst Turgonians might be health-inducing.

Yanko groaned and thumped the shelves again, afraid he had made a mistake in telling Dak anything, and at a loss as to where to find the help he needed.

“There is fine for breaking books,” Akstyr said from the aisle Dak had disappeared down, his light globe increasing the illumination.

Yanko had not noticed his approach—or that he had been pacing in near darkness, the

windows no longer brightening his corner.

"Sorry," he muttered.

"You find what need?"

"No."

Akstyr grunted, as if it didn't matter one iota. "I never do, either. Library closes soon." He picked up some of the books strewn about the floor.

Realizing he had made a mess, Yanko forced himself to put his pouting on hold for long enough to help. Dak had said to give him ten minutes, anyway. Ten minutes that he was probably using to chat with his superiors at the Turgonian embassy.

"That man talk on you?" Akstyr asked, tilting his head toward the exit.

"Dak? Yes." Yanko considered Akstyr. Another Turgonian. Maybe he knew who Dak was or something about him. After all, Dak had obviously been to this island before. "You don't know him, do you?"

"Nah. Seem familiar maybe." Akstyr scratched his head and looked toward the exit again. "But nah. He bought one of my potions."

"Oh. I didn't think most Turgonians liked magic. Or needed help growing beards."

"Nope. But I don't care. Need money. Hate... *gruthrukna*?" Akstyr raised his brows, as if Yanko would have a translation for what had sounded like a cat hacking up a hairball.

"Being broke? Living on others' charity?"

"Charity, yes. Girls are wanting good hair *and* money." Akstyr sighed.

"They're a finicky lot."

"Yes."

After they shoved the last books into the shelves, Yanko grabbed his gear and headed for the door. He poked his head into the thermal sciences room, did not see anyone in the dim interior, and softly called, "Lakeo?"

A book thudded shut. "Be out in a minute."

Yanko might have waited, but he was curious as to where Dak had gone to arrange their night's lodgings—he winced at the idea of being taken to the Turgonian embassy, even if the other Nurians would be unlikely to show up there. More, he wondered if he might catch Dak talking to someone else and perhaps revealing something telling.

He trotted down the stairs and through the foyer, glancing down hallways. With his size, Dak stood out easily amongst the Kyattese, who were closer to Nurians in height, but Yanko did not spot him. He might have left the library altogether. Maybe he knew someone else on campus who he meant to talk to? It couldn't be far away if he would be back in a few minutes.

Yanko was about to run outside, but skidded to a halt on the polished stone floor when he spotted a door open behind the head librarian's desk. The plaque to the side read *Staff*, but Dak was inside, talking to a woman. He pointed at a communication orb on her desk. She waved a hand at it and headed for the door. Before she exited—and could ask Yanko why he was standing there staring—Yanko scooted back a few feet and turned toward a hallway close to that door.

The woman returned to the desk, tapped a clock ticking toward the top of the hour, sighed, and settled into the seat with a book. With her back now to him, Yanko stepped away from the hallway and followed the wall to the staff door. Dak's voice floated out, and Yanko started to smile, thinking he might get his chance to spy after all, but of course

Dak wasn't speaking in Nurian. Turgonian? No, Yanko was fairly certain it was Kyattese, but that wasn't any better as far as he was concerned. Not unless he could get the librarian to come join him in the spying and then report the results to him. Not very likely.

An older woman answered Dak, her voice cheerful as she chattered back in response to his short greeting and question. A friend, apparently, though Yanko had a hard time imagining even Dak's friends being that enthused at the sight of his dour face.

Yanko peeped around the edge of the door, wondering if the orb was audio only, or if the person's face might display, as well. He glimpsed a plump, gray-haired woman's face, before Dak turned toward him, his eyebrows raised. Yanko fought the urge to lurch guiltily back behind the corner and waved instead, mouthing, "Ready to go." Of course, he wasn't, not until Lakeo came down. He hoped the conversation continued for a while.

"Can I help you, young man?" the librarian asked, lowering her book. She had guessed his language correctly and spoke it flawlessly. *She* was the one he should have talked into helping with research.

"No, just waiting for a—" Yanko almost said friend, but that wasn't quite the right relationship, was it? Spy? Bodyguard tricked into working for him? "Dak," he finished.

"Very well. Please let me know if I can be of assistance."

The Kyattese were all so polite. At least on the surface. Yanko wondered what happened if one pried into the past that they were supposedly tight-lipped about. He had only Dak's word for that.

"Actually..." Yanko made sure Dak was still talking, then joined the librarian at the desk. "A friend and I were chatting—" he waved toward Lakeo and Akstyr who were walking down the stairs, Akstyr talking and Lakeo looking like she didn't want to be talked to, "—and we were wondering where your people came from. Originally."

The librarian did not, as Yanko might have expected, hunch her shoulders and glance around to see if anyone was listening. She simply said, "There are numerous theories. The original colony ships battled storms and great adversity to find their way to the home we now know and love, and they lost the records and some of their ships on the way here. Many believe we broke away from the nomadic Pyrkanese tribes in the south—they were quite the world explorers and left numerous fascinating ruins to study before disappearing from this world. Regardless, we don't have extensive records of those early times. We've strived to make up for that by collecting and remembering more recent history." She spread a loving arm toward the foyer and the various rooms opening from it, each full of books.

A collective lie? The only truth she knew?

"Thank you," was all Yanko said. Dak had walked out of the office, and Akstyr and Lakeo were almost there.

Lakeo stopped at the desk, her pack hanging low on her back. It bulged at the seams. She must have stuffed all of those pamphlets into it. Akstyr hurried for the door, his hands in his pockets and a pack clinking on his shoulders.

"Akstyr," the librarian said, her voice stern for the first time. Perhaps for Lakeo and Yanko's sake, or because she had forgotten to switch back, she continued in Nurian, "Did you clean up whatever mess you made today?"

Akstyr's shoulders hunched. "Yes," he said.

"There are more appropriate places to work on your alchemy homework."

“Whatever.” He started to slouch toward the exit, but Dak stopped him.

“Akstyr?”

Akstyr turned a wary, somewhat sullen expression toward him. “Yeah?”

Dak switched to Turgonian, his tone firm but not particularly judging or condescending. He had purchased one of those vials, after all.

“Huh?” Akstyr frowned at Yanko and Lakeo.

Dak spoke another few sentences, then made a shooing motion with his hand.

“What was that about?” Lakeo asked as she, Dak, and Yanko walked outside.

Colorful globes burned on lampposts up and down the walkways, brightening the way with an attractive mix of hues, but Yanko’s gaze was drawn toward the ocean as he searched for lights in the darkness out there, a sign of where that ship waited. He hoped the fact that it was floating out there instead of anchoring in the harbor meant it did not intend to come in and harass the *Falcon’s Flight*. Or anyone else. But maybe it was simply waiting until full darkness, so it could sneak into the harbor, unannounced.

“Akstyr will drive us to our lodgings for the night,” Dak said.

“He has a carriage?” Lakeo asked. “He barely looks like he can afford clothes. Those trousers were an inch shy of falling off his butt.”

“It’s not his.”

Before Dak could expound, a rickety open-walled and open-roofed carriage rolled around the corner of the building, the entire frame made from bamboo. The way Akstyr sat with his knees up to his elbows suggested it had been made for someone at least a half a foot shorter. Yanko wondered if Dak would be able to fit without hitting his head on the frame. Without comment, he clambered into the front beside Akstyr, banging his knee, his sword, and his head. He said something in Turgonian, and Akstyr snorted and gave a short reply.

Dak waved to the back, to a hard bamboo seat in front of the engine and a pulsing green power supply. Yanko and Lakeo climbed in.

“Where are we going?” Yanko asked as Akstyr coerced the vehicle into motion. It groaned under the combined weight, but trundled off toward the road obediently.

“The Komitopis plantation,” Dak said.

Lakeo shrugged. The name sounded vaguely familiar to Yanko, like he might have read it in a newspaper. He puzzled over it, but they were well out of the city and driving along a dark road overlooking cliffs and the ocean before the answer came to him. That was the surname of the Turgonian president’s Kyattese wife.

Chapter 14

The plantation lay several miles outside of the city, with few lights burning to show off the land, but Yanko smelled the mango and citrus orchards they passed and recognized fields of sugar cane crowding the road. It grew down by the coast back home, and he remembered a boyhood trip he had gone on with Great Uncle Lao Zun to harvest some for the baker back in the village. A twinge of homesickness filled him, and he found himself wondering if his family was all right and if they were missing him. Instead, he should have been concentrating on the fact that he was going to the homestead of someone who at best must be a Turgonian sympathizer.

Snores floated from Lakeo's side of the seat. Apparently, she wasn't worried.

Akstyr and Dak had been having a long, quiet conversation up front, and Yanko would have given his mother's robe to be able to understand it. He couldn't imagine what they might have in common, aside from their nationality. Akstyr didn't seem like someone who responded well to authority figures or liked to talk to adults, even if he might be old enough to be one now.

Now and then, Dak glanced into the night behind them, and it made Yanko nervous every time. If these were some friends of his, then why would he bring trouble here? Unless he thought the people here were capable of handling it. Yanko didn't think he had ever read that the Turgonian president's wife was a practitioner, but maybe she had kin back here who were? Still, there was the mage hunter, as well as the warrior mage, after Yanko. Even a powerful magic-user could fall to an assassin's blade.

They passed a bunkhouse with a couple of lights burning and men's voices raising in laughter from inside. Beyond it, a large rambling house came into view, with magical lamps brightening the cleared land around it. Despite the size, its log walls made it feel more rustic than palatial, and it looked like it might house multiple generations of a large family, much like Yanko's own home.

The plump, gray-haired woman whose face Yanko had glimpsed in the communication orb waited next to a swing hanging on the front porch, alongside a boy and girl his age or perhaps a little younger. Grandchildren? Another figure—a man in dark clothes—leaned against the wall on the other side of the door. He stayed in the shadows.

Akstyr rolled the open-air carriage to a stop in front of the steps, waved to the grandmother, and gave the teenagers a salute, the female one most likely. She smiled back at him, but seemed more curious about Dak, Yanko, and Lakeo.

"This is our port," Dak said, hitting more body parts on the carriage frame as he climbed out.

"Greetings," Yanko told the crowd as he stepped out, then attempted the salutation in Kyattese, as well.

The grandmother ambled down the stairs with the help of a cane and examined Dak. She plucked at his shirt, clucked her tongue, and said something that sounded like the Nurian equivalent of, "You're as scrawny as a chicken leg. We'll have to fatten you up." It sounded grandmotherly, anyway, and Yanko almost choked. As brawny and tough as Dak was, it was hard to imagine anyone daring to mother him. Did he even *have* a

mother? It seemed implausible. But he did not fight off the woman. He merely sighed and looked at the man in the shadows.

Yanko glanced at him, too, but was more curious about the teenagers because they wore a few magical baubles, and the girl carried a book the size of a small table. He couldn't read the title in the dim lighting, but it had the heft and age of a Science tome. Maybe she was also studying to become a mage.

"You *are* from Nuria," the man in the shadows said in Nurian.

The grandmother was now clucking over Lakeo, Dak was grabbing his gear, and Yanko realized the shadowy figure was talking to him.

"Yes... sir." He couldn't guess at what the man's title or status would be and winced at what was an inappropriate honorific. "I'm Yanko."

"Clan name?"

Yanko hesitated. The man hadn't shared *his* name yet, and if he was from the Great Land, he might recognize the significance—or lack of significance—of Yanko's. Still, the manners that had been ingrained in him demanded he answer an elder.

"White Fox."

"Oh? Huh. I'd expected... or assumed you would be from a more distinguished family. And older," he tacked on as if he had realized his other words had been insulting. "I'm Mee Nar Silver Star. Or I was before I retired and moved here. Over there actually." He waved up the beach in the opposite direction from town.

"Yes, he's been spying on the house for some twenty years, I understand," Dak said, giving Mee Nar his squinty-eyed glare. "I wonder how long it was after you heard we were coming that you waited before showing up here. Five minutes? Two?"

"Spy? I've merely been enjoying the climate," Mee Nar said blandly. "Being married. Having children. Hardly the activities of a spy. I'm certain *you're* far more aware of what that lifestyle entails than I am."

Yanko kept his mouth shut and did his best to filter out the conversation Lakeo and the grandmother were having—which, yes, had to do with not eating enough food—so he could listen to this one. They were being good enough to speak in Nurian. Maybe he would finally find out what the rest of Dak's name was and what mission he was on.

"I doubt it," Dak said, then turned his back on Mee Nar and spoke to the grandmother in Kyattese again.

She pointed toward the front door.

"This way." Dak gripped Yanko's shoulder and prodded him toward the steps.

Yanko almost balked, wanting to hear more from this Nurian, even if he had been somewhat insulting. It wasn't as if Yanko wasn't used to that. But Dak's prodding turned more determined, and Yanko would have had to fight to escape—and he would lose any fight with Dak. He didn't want strangers to see him carried across the threshold over his bodyguard's shoulder, so he went along meekly.

He did manage a glance back at Mee Nar and caught more of his face this time. His hair was far more gray than black, and he had a potbelly. Not the image Yanko had in mind for a spy, but then neither was Dak.

The scents of roasting pork and pineapple teased Yanko's nose as soon as they made it into the house's open great room, and his stomach gurgled, reminding him that he had not eaten since breakfast, and that had only been a couple of rock-hard biscuits from the ship.

Before his nose could lead him to the source of the food, an ear-splitting squawk came from the left of the door. A large red and blue parrot perching on a coat tree peered at Yanko and Dak.

“Jorrats, jorrats!” the bird announced, then followed it up with a stream of Kyattese words Yanko did not recognize.

Dak sighed.

“That’s a racial slur, isn’t it?” Yanko asked, stopping to return the bird’s stare. “Against Turgonians? It’s the Kyattese word for ape, isn’t it?”

Dak opened his mouth to respond, but the parrot spoke again. “Puntak, puntak!”

“Oh,” Yanko said. “I know that one.” Another racial label, it referred to Nurian slitted eyes. Yanko scratched his head, trying to imagine the old grandmother outside teaching the bird such words.

“Yes,” Dak said, “it’s particularly fond of me. The story I got is that Mela’s father was very against his granddaughter marrying a Turgonian and had a lot of impolite things to say about anyone who wasn’t Kyattese. And a lot of Kyattese too. This was his bird.”

“So, he passed on, but the parrot didn’t?” Yanko shared a soothing feeling with the bird. It was a male that was prancing around on its perch, an agitated ruffle to his feathers.

“Ten years ago. The family keeps leaving the doors and windows open, hoping the bird will return to the wild, but it was with the old man for thirty years. It seems content to continue living here.” Dak waved to a dining room as large as the great room. “You can sit at the table. The family has eaten, but Mela said she’ll bring us something. She’ll insist on it. Vehemently, if not violently.”

“You know these people.” Yanko headed for the table, not about to argue with food.

The bird had calmed down—and stopped calling them names.

“I’ve passed through Kyatt a couple of times,” Dak said.

“Isn’t it dangerous to bring us here then? What if our presence causes trouble for this family?” This family that was related to the Turgonian president’s family. All Yanko needed was for something to befall them because of him. Then he would have Turgonians hunting him, as well as Nurians.

“The twins have warded the grounds around the house and are capable of defending themselves from mages.”

The twins? The two teenagers on the porch? “They’re younger than I am. You’re going to pit them against mages and assassins? Don’t forget the mage hunter.”

“They’re precocious. This won’t be their first battle, and I’ll be around. But my understanding of the household’s defenses is that they should be intimidating enough to convince a wizard not to step foot on the property.”

“I didn’t notice anything when we were driving in.”

“I don’t think they were active. Or maybe it was because we came in the family’s runabout. I don’t pretend to understand magic that well.”

Lakeo and the grandmother—Mela, presumably—walked inside. The twins jogged after her, but only waved before charging for stairs at the back of the great room. They almost knocked over a blond man in his twenties, but grabbed his arm and swept him upstairs with them, a whirlwind collecting all in its path.

“They’re excited to plan upgrades to their defenses,” Mela said, speaking in Nurian this time, even as she propelled Lakeo toward a chair. “Sit, sit. There’s plenty of food

left. Dak, you sit too. Too skinny.” She pinched his side again on her way back, clucked, and gave Lakeo a wink that startled Yanko.

Not sure how to interpret that, Yanko merely sat in one of the chairs.

“Do you want help—” Dak started to ask, but Mela hushed him to silence and disappeared into the kitchen.

“The, ah, neighbor isn’t invited to dinner?” Yanko asked.

“No,” Dak said, his glare quelling.

Yanko shrugged easily, but he was thinking that he might like to talk to this neighbor. Especially if Dak didn’t want him to. If Mee Nar had been living here as long as he had implied, might he have ferreted out some of the Kyattese people’s secrets? Maybe Yanko could sneak out of the house later and try to find him. Of course, he would have to get more details as to the “defenses” the twins were developing. And whose twins they were, for that matter. He had yet to see anyone of the age to be parents of teenagers. More important, dare he try to confide in them? If they were his age, they might be willing to have some secrets from the adults, a conspiracy of youth. But would they know Nurian? The grandmother spoke it wonderfully, as had that librarian. Maybe it was taught in the schools here.

“Here we are,” Mela said, carrying a tray almost as wide as she was tall into the dining room at the same time as Akstyr entered through a back door, toting an armload of books, which he plopped down on one end of the table.

“You live here?” Lakeo asked him.

“Until I am paying for a dwelling for me.” Akstyr gave a wistful look toward the stairs.

Mela set the tray down, jostling his arm in the process, and narrowing her eyes at him briefly before unloading plates and silverware and inviting them all to enjoy the food.

Yanko stood up and pressed his hands together for a bow. “Thank you, Honored Host. We appreciate your offering.”

Mela paused and blinked a few times at him. “You’re welcome, young man. Akstyr, that discussion we had on manners? This was it.” She pointed at Yanko, then headed into the kitchen.

Akstyr called something after her in Kyattese. If Yanko had to guess, he would translate it as Akstyr pretending not to have understood.

After she left, Akstyr grabbed a chunk of pork off the platter, not bothering to take a plate, and flung open one of his books. But he only eyed the pages for a moment before glancing at the kitchen door and sighing. “She thinks I be too old.”

“To learn manners?” Yanko suggested.

“For the girl?” Lakeo guessed.

Akstyr looked toward the stairs again and said, “Koanani,” this time with a longer sigh.

“I thought you were on the hunt for Nurian women.”

“Only because Koanani is... does not... Mela said... It’s not wrong. I am nineteen. She is sixteen. And she is—” Akstyr lifted his hands in the air as if he might outline her attributes, but he caught Dak glaring at him and let them drop down again. “Mature. And sweet. And beautiful. Shiny. Voracious.”

“We need to work on your Nurian adjectives,” Lakeo said.

Yanko wasn’t that concerned about Akstyr’s female problems—even if he could

empathize completely. He dug into the barbecued pork, pineapple rings, and a number of vegetables he did not recognize. Local varieties, presumably. Slathered in a savory white sauce, they were delicious, but he barely noticed the food after the first few bites. His mind was on the neighbor again and how to run out and find him. If he waited until everyone in the house went to bed, Mee Nar might be back in his home and in bed, as well.

The parrot squawked and started chanting a single word over and over.

Yanko touched his mind, trying to get a sense for what he wanted, but the answer soon came when the kitchen door opened, and Mela walked out, a small basket of chips in hand. Thanks to the bird, Yanko now knew the word for taro chips. He smiled, faintly amused at the idea of a parrot being his tutor. But as the bird chomped on its treat, a new idea jumped into his head. What if the bird could deliver a message for him?

It had to know the neighbor, especially if he came around often. Yanko wished he had gotten a better look at the man. He tried to share what he remembered with the parrot.

“Puntak, puntak,” the bird said, bits of chips falling from its mouth.

“No, it’s Nurian, *Nurian*,” Mela said in a soothing but slightly mortified tone.

Trying to unlearn a bird of thirty years of racist terms could not be easy. In this case, Yanko found the outburst heartening. The parrot had understood him. As soon as Mela finished feeding it chips, he shared further thoughts, trying to suggest that more chips would be available if the bird flew out, found Mee Nar, and repeated, “Yanko wants to talk,” a few times.

At the promise of more chips, the parrot flexed his wings and ruffled his feathers enthusiastically. He wanted to open his mouth and practice his new line, but Yanko urged him to wait until he got outside. The door Akstyr had come through was still open, the warm salty breeze whispering into the house, and Yanko pointed this out to his new ally.

“No, it’s Nurian,” the parrot said and flew off the coat tree and out the door.

“Oh, it sticks this time?” Akstyr lifted his head. “Much shame. I love that beak.” He grinned devilishly and said something else in Kyattese.

“Even when it’s calling you an ape?” Dak asked.

“Yes. It is funny.”

Yanko tracked the bird’s progress as it flew toward the coast, heading farther from town, in the direction Mee Nar had indicated. Then he caught Akstyr giving him a funny look and let the connection go. Maybe Akstyr sensed him using the mental sciences.

Lakeo yawned. “So, we’re sleeping here tonight? And hoping Yanko’s new friends don’t come to visit?”

Dak nodded. “Yes. Mela will have rooms for everyone.” Dishes were clattering in the kitchen.

“It’s nice of her to house us when we’re strangers.” To Yanko’s relief, Akstyr turned his attention back to his books.

“*Some* of us are strangers.” Lakeo glanced at Dak.

Dak was finishing his second helping of dinner and did not comment.

“I’m tired, as well,” Yanko said. “Perhaps I’ll go help Mela with the dishes and ask about a room.” Preferably one on the first floor with a wide window ideal for sneaking out.

As he stood up, heavy footsteps thundered on the staircase. The twins—nobody had given Yanko the boy’s name yet—raced down, taking three steps at a time. The blond

man followed, as well as a young girl of twelve or thirteen. Some new recruit from the family?

Yanko thought they might be passing through, on the way to pilfer snacks from the kitchen, but they took over the end of the table, the girl with a box full of wooden cat figurines and the boy with a map of the property, which he spread out for everyone to see. Dak propped his chin on his hand and watched without commenting as the girl plunked down large black panthers to pin the corners. Akstyr kept reading his book as he pretended not to notice the twins' arrival. Or perhaps the girl's arrival.

"We've placed alert alarms at the four corners of the property," she said in Nurian, waving to the panthers.

"Actually at the seven corners," the boy corrected. "Our ancestors were not geometry zealots. The original property boundaries meander."

"Can you tell us who the intruders are likely to be?" The girl held up smaller cats—bobcats?—and smiled brightly at Yanko. "Are they other practitioners? Fire mages? Or maybe pirates? I heard there were pirates over in the southern keys lately. We're ready for them. In addition to the alarms, we have proximity stun mines, smoke bombs, trip wires, and those pokey things Father gave us for the tree house." She looked at her brother.

"Caltrops," he supplied.

"Yes, it's a mix of Made devices and mundane Turgonian armament. Grammy doesn't approve, but we *knew* this day would come." If her eyes grew any brighter, beams would shoot out of them.

"I'm Yanko," he said, feeling behind on the conversation. What exactly had Dak told the family when he had talked to Mela through the communication orb? "Who are you?"

"Oh, I'm Koanani. This is my brother, Agarik. We may be young, but this isn't our first time defending a camp."

"Granted, it's slightly larger than our camp on the Mezormosha Islands," Agarik murmured, more soft-spoken and maybe shier than the girl.

"Yes, I can see that." Yanko nodded at the map, amazed at the size of the property, especially if he was reading the legend correctly and understood the distance involved. It stretched from the ocean all the way to the base of the volcano and extended a good ten miles north and south. Yanko's family had that much property, but that was in remote mountains, not in the center of a bustling destination island where land had to sell at a premium. "Is that road the only way on and off the property?"

"If you're coming in a vehicle, yes," Koanani said, "but if you're walking, there aren't too many places where the brush is too thick to cross, but that's why our alarms are line-of-sight, strategically placed all around the border. They've been there for ages, and actually Father helped put all of this in, but we've never gotten to use it. Until *now*."

"I've never heard anyone sound so happy that their home is about to be attacked," Lakeo remarked.

"She's an odd girl," Agarik said. "You'll get used to it."

Without losing her smile, Koanani elbowed him. "This is going to be fantastic. I was disappointed to be stuck here in school, while Mahliki has all the fun, but this will make up for it. Yanko, will it be more than one practitioner? We need more intel, please."

Yanko looked at Dak, still feeling helpless. Were the teenagers truly planning the defensive campaign for the homestead?

Dak spread his hand. "I'm only visiting. They're in charge here."

"I... am hoping no one comes to bother you at all," Yanko told the twins, "but there's a warrior mage and a mage hunter after me. At the least. There could be more powerful people. The mage is the only one I've met." He touched his temple to imply *met* was not quite the word.

"A telepath? Oh. We could talk to him." Koanani smiled at her brother.

"I wouldn't," Yanko said. "He wasn't witty or charming."

"Enemy mages so rarely are. He can't be any worse than that shaman who was in charge of selecting his people's ritual sacrifices, though. All right," Koanani went on, barely pausing to take breaths. "We'll assume they'll come from the direction of the port." She plunked a couple of bobcats down on the road.

Mela came out with ramekins full of a creamy dessert that smelled of coconuts. She shook her head at the cat-covered map but did not comment on the fact that her grandchildren were making war plans.

Chips! cried a voice in Yanko's head.

He nearly fell out of his chair. "Sorry, itch," he muttered and scratched his back, since the twins were looking at him. Even Akstyr had raised his head from his book. Yanko had not expected the parrot to speak into his mind—he had never met an animal, reptile, or bird that could do more than receive. Had it parroted his telepathic link, the same way it parroted people's words? Someday, he would have to find an animal-sciences specialist and ask about such developments.

Chips? This time the word came with the thought of Mee Nar walking along the coast. Toward the Komitopis house, Yanko hoped, though he had no idea how he was going to slip out to talk to the man, not when he was being grilled for intelligence.

"That's about all I can tell you," Yanko said, feigning another yawn. When Koanani's smile faltered, he felt guilty about his deception, but if he learned what he needed to know from the neighbor, he could leave without endangering the family. Just because the kids wanted a battle did not mean he should hurl one at their porch. "I'm still hoping they won't come at all. Honored Host, might you have a place where my friend and I can sleep?" He waved at Lakeo, trusting that Dak could arrange his own lodgings. It would be good not to have to share a cabin with him anymore. He didn't snore, but he was big, and when there were only two hammocks in a room the size of a closet, one didn't get a lot of sleep.

"Of course, Yanko," Mela said. "This way."

"Let me get another glass of water first, please." He held up his cup and nodded toward the kitchen.

"I can get it for you."

"Oh, no. You've already done enough." He smiled at her, ignoring the way Akstyr rolled his eyes, then hustled into the kitchen, hoping the taro chips were not hard to find. Ah, good. The basket was sitting out on the counter. He swiped a handful, hoping it would be enough to satisfy his bird ally.

Chips! came another cry when he touched the basket. What had he started with this connection? Was the parrot telepathically monitoring him? Could a bird *do* that?

He stuffed the chips in his pocket, filled his glass, and hustled back out to find Mela waiting. The twins and their other family members were hunched over the map, pointing and discussing. Dak had scooted closer to join the conversation. Lakeo's eyes were

bloodshot. Yanko's probably were, too, since he had been up all night and only dozed a couple of hours before they reached port that morning. Too bad he had no intention of going to sleep yet.

"This way." Holding a whale oil lantern, Mela led them down a back hallway. She paused in front of a door and looked back and forth between them. "Two rooms?" she guessed.

"Yes," Yanko said.

"Aw, Yanko." Lakeo slung an arm around his shoulders. "You don't want to take this opportunity to get cozy?"

"I've been sharing a tiny cabin with a giant Turgonian for the last week. I'm looking forward to having my own room. Besides, you have twenty pounds' worth of pamphlets there to study." Yanko waved a hand at her pack.

She lowered her arm and shifted it away from him. "Fine."

"He's actually only a couple of inches above average for a Turgonian," Mela said with a smile. "Their children eat well over there."

"I've heard," Yanko murmured, trying to keep the judgment out of his voice. Whatever struggles his people were having now, it wasn't as if he had ever gone hungry.

Mela pushed open a door. "Sleep well."

The window Yanko had been hoping for occupied the wall on the other side of the bed. As soon as the door shut, he dropped his pack and charged over to it, banging his knee on a trunk in the process. A candle burned on the nightstand, but its light did not travel far. He pushed aside the curtains and opened the window.

He was in one of two wings of the house that cupped a lush courtyard with a gurgling fountain and numerous flowering plants that sent their aroma into the room. It *would* be a nice place for a tryst with a woman, but he only had trysts with Nurian men in mind for tonight.

Yanko closed his eyes, reaching out into the fields and orchards behind the house, searching for the parrot. He did not have to search far. He hadn't had the window open for more than thirty seconds before wings flapped outside and the sleek red-and-blue bird landed on the sill in front of him. It tilted its head, a beady eye staring straight at Yanko. Actually, straight at his pocket.

Can you take me to the human? he asked, placing the image of Mee Nar in the bird's mind again. At the same time, he held out a couple of broken taro chips. That beak came perilously close to removing a chunk of skin in its eagerness to snatch up the treat. But he did not have to ask twice. The parrot flew out of the courtyard.

Yanko grabbed his sword, climbed out the window, and ran after him.

After seeing the size of the property, he worried he would have to run miles to meet up with Mee Nar, but the man must not have made it all the way home before the parrot caught up with him. He was waiting behind a mound-shaped earthen building with processing and distilling equipment visible through an open door.

"Greetings, Honored Neighbor," Yanko said when the man came into view, leaning casually against the back wall, as if he belonged there. Yanko wished he felt like *he* belonged here. Instead, he kept glancing nervously back at the house. "I sensed that you might wish to talk to me."

The parrot squawked from atop the distillery.

Yanko winced at the noise. He shared his gratitude with the bird, then gave him the

suggestion that more chips might be obtained in the kitchen. Wings flapped, and he took flight.

“Interesting,” Mee Nar said. “There aren’t many young people in Nuria who study the animal sciences any more. Or have things changed since I left?”

“They haven’t changed. I’m mostly self-taught and do prefer the earth sciences, but animals are a part of the earth. I find them easy to be around. Mee Nar, have you lived here long? I’m seeking an artifact. If the stories around it are true, it could change the lives of our people. I...” Yanko hesitated, not certain how much he should confess to a man he had just met and knew nothing about. Could he get his help without saying more? Did Mee Nar know anything useful to start with?

“Artifact? Some treasure? You’re not seeking the Ebony Dragon, are you? Or the Chalice of Eternal Life?” Mee Nar sounded disappointed. Understandably so, since those were, as far as Yanko knew, nothing more than items mentioned in fables.

“No, nothing so silly.” Or so Yanko hoped. He stretched out with his senses, making sure nobody was nearby. He sensed only the people in the house and more in the bunkhouse up the road, but nobody else was roaming around outside after dark. Good. “Have you heard of the Golden Lodestone?”

“No.”

Yanko relayed the story, explaining the lost continent, what it might offer for Nuria, and how the lodestone was supposed to be able to find it. Mee Nar listened without interrupting. It was too dark to see his face, and Yanko couldn’t tell if the man believed anything he was hearing or not.

At the end, Mee Nar asked, “Was it your idea to come here or the Turgonian’s?”

“To Kyatt?”

“To this house.” Mee Nar waved at the land around them.

“Dak’s idea.”

“Interesting.”

“Why?” Yanko leaned forward, his fingers twitching, as if he might pluck the answers from Mee Nar’s mind. He supposed he could try, but spending a week reading a book on mind science didn’t make him an expert, and if Mee Nar was a Sensitive, he would feel the intrusion.

“The Komitopis family is descended from the original colonists. I suppose most Kyattese are, if you go back far enough, but this family has been important throughout the islands’ history and has led the government at times. They’ve also had this land since the beginning, and there are a lot of interesting secrets in their attic.”

“You’ve been up there?”

“I’ve not been invited.” Mee Nar chuckled. “We get along admirably enough, but they’ve known from the beginning that I send reports back to our government. I’m retired ostensibly, and my Kyattese wife and our daughters don’t know I’m still in contact with the Great Land, but I’m often able to supplement the embassy’s reports, giving them information about things that happen outside of the city. In other words, I keep my ears open.”

“And you’ve heard about this attic. Any chance my lodestone might be in it?” Yanko did not truly expect that, but allowed himself a wishful smile.

“I wouldn’t be shocked if it was stuffed in a box on a shelf up there. If nothing else, you might find old journals or newspapers that aren’t in the library, the information that

could lead you to the artifact.”

“Written in Kyattese, I suppose.” Yanko desperately needed an ally he could trust who could read the language.

“Old Kyattese, if you’re talking about the era around their founding.”

“Oh. Can the average person here read that?”

“No.”

“I don’t suppose you can.”

Mee Nar chuckled softly. “Even after twenty years, I can barely read the newspaper.” He patted Yanko on the shoulder. “You’ll have to find your own way to do that research, but I’ll wish you well and that you haven’t been sent on some farcical errand. I would love to see our land brought back to its former power and glory.”

“Thank you. One more thing?” Yanko added when Mee Nar turned away.

“Yes?”

“Do you know who Dak is?”

“I have some guesses, but that’s the only name I’ve heard anyone mention.”

Before Yanko could ask about those guesses, he sensed that they weren’t alone any more. He gripped the hilt of his sword, then immediately let go. He recognized the person. With dread curdling in his stomach, he walked around the earthen building until he came face to face with Dak.

The lights behind him kept his face in shadows, but his tense stance told Yanko he had heard... far more than Yanko would have wished.

* * *

Yanko sat in a chair in a book-filled study while Dak and Mela argued back and forth over his head in Kyattese. Dak had already spent fifteen minutes arguing with someone through a communication orb before Yanko had been brought in. That conversation had been in Turgonian, though not many of the words had been audible through the door, not that Yanko would have understood them, regardless. He was going to have to get a book on languages—maybe Akstyr would loan him the one about complimenting women—if he survived the night. He didn’t know yet how much Dak had heard, and he didn’t think his conversation had been terribly condemning, but he also doubted Mela was going to invite him up into the attic.

He lifted his gaze toward the timber-planked ceiling, wondering if he would ever get the chance to snoop and wondering if it would do him any good, with the language barrier.

“It’s my history, Dak,” Mela said, switching to Nurian. “Not yours.” She walked out, shutting the door hard, leaving Yanko alone with his bodyguard. His big Turgonian bodyguard who appeared even less pleased now than he had when he had shown up by the distillery.

Dak leaned against the desk, his fist on his hip, and stared down at Yanko. Yanko thought about standing, so he wouldn’t feel he was in such a meek position, but what would it matter? Dak still towered over him.

“The neighbor you’d never met?”

“What?” Yanko asked, though he understood just fine. Dak was calling him an idiot for confiding in a stranger. He might be right.

“I can understand not sharing your secret mission with me, but with a random man you just met? A man who’s been a spy for decades?”

“Well, he was a random *Nurian* man.”

“A *Nurian* man. So automatically, he’s your ally. Yanko, there are about eight different factions vying for power in your country right now. You have no idea which one he’s reporting to. Even if he talks to a legitimate government operative, there are spies all over your capital right now. Why do you think there’s an assassin trying to shove a dagger up your ass right now? I highly doubt Zirabo decided to send those people along to incentivize you.”

Eight factions? Yanko had been thinking of these rebels as a single entity. How was it that his foreign bodyguard knew so much more than he did about what was going on in his own country?

Because your bodyguard is a spy, idiot.

Yanko rubbed his face, wondering again why the prince had thought someone so young and—yes, he had to admit it—*sheltered* would be the right choice for this mission.

“I needed someone who spoke and read the language,” Yanko said straight to... Dak’s chest. He had not vetted Mee Nar well, and he knew it, but he couldn’t bring himself to admit Dak was right, not out loud.

“And the spy next door was the obvious choice.”

“My first thought was Akstyr, because I doubted he would care one way or another about Kyattese history, but I didn’t think he would be able to translate anything that didn’t involve women.”

“*Akstyr* was your first thought?” Dak coughed. “If Akstyr and the spy next door are your choices for confidants, it’s clear the prince didn’t choose you for your ability to find and utilize allies.”

“No.” Still staring at his chest, Yanko muttered, “I haven’t figured out why he chose me.”

Dak sighed and started pacing.

Yanko took a deep breath and lifted his chin. “I may not know why he chose me, but he did, so I have to do my best to find what he wants and bring it to him. It’s hope for my people, and I’m bound by my family’s honor, by *my* honor, to obey the Great Chief and his kin, to help the Great Land. Or to die trying.”

“And what happens when obeying the Great Chief isn’t what’s best for the Great Land?”

“I... do not know that I’ll ever be fit to judge the Great Chief, but I would have to put helping my people first.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Dak said softly.

Was he? He didn’t sound sarcastic, not like before, but Yanko couldn’t imagine a Turgonian caring one way or another what happened to *Nuria*.

The door clicked open, and Mela walked in with a yellowed newspaper in hand.

“I thought you weren’t going to help,” Dak said.

“I wasn’t. I’m not. Even if I wanted to help the *Nurians*, which I don’t, my daughter would be the one you would want on your team to hunt for artifacts.” She had started out speaking to Dak, but now, she was addressing Yanko.

He sat straight in the chair, looking at her and resisting the urge to squint at the newspaper, but he couldn’t deny the curiosity—and hope—that burned in his chest. Might they help him, after all?

“Your story reminded me of something from when I was a girl,” Mela said. “At the

Polytechnic, we've long taught history, archaeology, philology, cartography, and other subjects useful in finding old things. We have fielded some of the most renowned archeologists in the last couple of centuries, but..." Her mouth twisted wryly. "We've also fielded some of the most infamous relic raiders too."

Mela held the front page of the newspaper up so Yanko and Dak could see.

"Uhm, I need a translation, please," Yanko said.

"Heanolik Tomokosis, better known as the Mausoleum Bandit, was an archaeology student who turned into a pirate and a relic raider. He made a fortune unearthing ancient treasures and selling them to the highest bidder. But apparently, hunting in remote jungles for booty wasn't enough. Seventy years ago, he staged his biggest heist ever, bringing in his team of pirate underlings to rob the Kyattese Interpretive Museum, the home of countless historical documents and artifacts from our own history." She laid the newspaper on the desk, grabbed a pencil, and circled an item in a list.

"What does that say?" Yanko leaned forward, hoping she had the answer he wanted.

"Old lodestone, gold."

"Descriptive," Dak said.

Yanko was not sure whether to feel optimistic or disappointed. He had no idea what the artifact he sought looked like, not that the newspaper article had a picture, anyway, and he also had no idea how many gold lodestones had been lurking around that museum. The only lodestones he had ever seen had all been grayish black. Was a golden one rare, or had altering their natural colors been trendy a few centuries ago?

"If it's the artifact I was sent to find, would they have had it out in a display case in a museum? If it could lead people to a continent that your ancestors didn't want anyone to find again... at least not for a long, long time..." Yanko searched Mela's face, wondering how much of the story she knew. Was she like the librarian, who might have been lied to her whole life and had no concept as to where her people had truly come from?

"It came out of the vault under the museum, not a display case." Mela pointed at the second paragraph of text. "All of the pieces the raider stole were from the vault, and there have been numerous expeditions sent out in search of the pieces over the years. My daughter even went on one about ten years back. That's why I thought of this story when Dak mentioned a lodestone." She tapped the newspaper.

Dak squinted thoughtfully at Mela.

"What happened to the pirate?" Yanko asked.

"Turgonian warships took down his vessel about six months after this heist. It sank to the bottom of the ocean with his bones aboard."

"The bottom of the ocean?" Yanko slumped back in the chair. "A *deep* part of the ocean?"

"About five hundred feet or so, actually. It was inaccessible until the Turgonian *flugnugstica* came along."

"The what?"

Mela shrugged at Dak. "Is there a Nurian word for them yet?"

"They're calling them underwater boats."

"Regardless, my daughter's expedition went down in one, searched the entire wreck, and didn't find any great treasures. This wasn't surprising, given that months had passed between the date of the heist and the date that the ship sank. Many historians believe that the Mausoleum Bandit had multiple hideouts and caches all throughout the island chains

in this part of the ocean. Booby-trapped and difficult to find. As far as I've heard, nobody has discovered any of them."

If countless historians and archaeologists had not found the pirate's stash, how was Yanko supposed to do so? For that matter, how was he supposed to know if this was even the right lodestone?

"What else was stolen at the same time?" Dak pointed to the list.

Mela bent back over the newspaper. "A book of maps, a sextant, a journal, a sure-sight artifact, and the broken wheel from one of the founder's ships."

"Sounds like the shopping list of someone going hunting for something."

"Yes, it does, doesn't it?" Mela agreed. "If the pirate only wanted to add to his wealth, there were more valuable items he could have stolen from the museum."

Yanko leaned forward again. "Meaning that seventy years ago, someone undertook my quest?"

"Someone else may have decided it was time to check on Kelnorean," Mela said.

"Kel-what?"

"The lost continent."

Yanko gaped at her. She *did* know. Dak stirred but did not say anything. He was watching Mela intently.

"Except it was never rediscovered," she said, "at least not publicly. Maybe the pirate was on his way to search for it when the Turgonians caught up with him."

"The stolen items would have been on his ship then," Dak said.

"Ah, a valid point. Maybe he had already hunted for the continent but hadn't found it. Or maybe he never intended to use the artifacts to search for it. He might not have even known what he had, though that does seem unlikely, given his background." Mela yawned and straightened up, grimacing and grabbing her back. "It's beyond me to guess. This is a game for younger, sharper minds."

Dak asked her something in Turgonian.

Mela smiled. "Yes, he was there. They went hunting for it together."

"Did they?" he said, speculation in his eyes. Yanko wished he knew what Dak had asked. "And they still couldn't find the cache?"

"They only searched briefly. They put most of their time into finding and salvaging the old ship."

"I see."

A distant boom-pop came from somewhere outside. It was after midnight, so Yanko couldn't imagine what it might be.

Then a cheerful voice yelled, "They're here. Our invaders are here!"

Yanko's stomach twisted into a knot. The trouble he had hoped wouldn't follow him to this home had found him.

Chapter 15

The dining room table must have been dubbed the control center, because the twins, Mela, and family members Yanko had yet to be introduced to had all gathered there. A fancy communications orb glowed at one end, its ornate wooden base and size—nearly as large as a man’s head—suggesting it did more than simply allowing conversations over distance. The cat figurines on the map had been moved, and two on the road leading onto the property glowed.

“They’re coming in runabouts,” Agarik said, a distant look to his eyes. “Two large parties of people. I think they’re armed.”

“We’re ready for them,” his sister said and dropped her hand onto the top of the orb. “Activating the deterrent system.”

Yanko would have assumed that first boom he had heard had been the deterrent. Mela watched the goings on with tense eyes. She must not be a practitioner, so she could only stand back and observe. And worry.

Yanko had left Dak in the study, but he must have gone out at some point, because he strode up to the table fully armed, with two rifles in hand, in addition to the pistol and sword at his belt. Yanko eyed the longer weapons curiously, wondering if they were the repeating firearms the newspapers had mentioned the year before, an upgrade to the earlier one-shot models that the Turgonians had used against the Nurians in previous wars. Yanko had seen one of the percussion-cap rifles as a boy—bringing them home as war booty had been a popular endeavor—but nobody back home had ever used the weapon. His people had always sneered that a good archer could shoot more accurately and load more quickly, but the newer firearms supposedly nullified the weaknesses of the old.

“Lonaeo,” Dak said, then tossed the second rifle to the blond man Yanko had noticed earlier. He raised his eyebrows to Mela and held up the other weapon in offering.

She shook her head. “I’ll trust to younger blood to keep me safe. So long as these Nurian intruders don’t disturb my sewing room or library.”

“They’re not all Nurians,” Agarik said in a puzzled tone.

“They’re not?” Yanko asked.

“One runabout has Nurians in it, but the other has Kyattese. Then there’s someone running behind the runabouts too. Or more off to the side of the road, but she’s keeping up with the rest.”

She. The mage hunter?

Yanko didn’t know if the intruders were close enough for him to sense yet, but he reached out with his own mind, wanting to assess the situation himself. Someone bumped his arm, distracting him. Lakeo.

She carried her bow and all of her gear, including the heavy backpack. “We staying here and fighting?” she asked quietly, glancing at the people around the table, chatting and prodding the map. “Or leaving?”

“I’ve... been wondering about that,” Yanko murmured. “It’s not their battle. It seems selfish to stay here and risk their safety and their home when the enemies are ours... Mine. We should probably leave and draw the attention away from here. But I don’t

know how you and I would beat such powerful foes alone.”

“I’m not too proud to run.”

Yes, but they had been running, and they hadn’t managed to put much distance between them and their would-be assassins. Yanko’s would-be assassin, at least. Sun Dragon’s team should not have any reason to hurt Lakeo if she wasn’t with him. She was yet one more person that he was endangering. He dropped his chin to his chest. He *was* being selfish... even cowardly... for involving others in this mission, but he shuddered at the idea of tackling it alone.

A flap of wings was Yanko’s only warning before claws dug into his shoulder.

“Puntak, puntak,” the parrot said in his ear, then added an exuberant, “Chips!”

“Kei,” Mela said, “go back to your perch.”

Judging by the way those claws had sunken into his clothing—and flesh—the parrot was quite comfortable where he was. At least Yanko had a name for him now. Since he still had some of the crumbled taro chips in his pocket, he dug them out.

“Did that bird just call you a puntak and then ask for food?” Lakeo stared at it.

“Yes.”

She smirked and thumped him on the shoulder. “Sounds like an abusive relationship.”

“Yes, I’m familiar with them.”

The parrot ate its fill, then leaped from Yanko’s shoulder, gouging him again as he flew over to a new perch.

“Komitopis *jiaksu*,” came an authoritative voice over the communication orb.

Another sentence followed, then was broken off in a grunt, followed by what sounded like a curse, and someone else’s cry of, “Ouch!”

“What is it?” Lakeo asked.

Yanko could only shrug.

Agarik was standing near them and translated. “He said, ‘Komitopis family, this is Police Captain Mihako. Desist in your...’ That’s as far as he got.”

Mela touched her cheek and said something, then glanced at Yanko and Lakeo and repeated herself in Nurian. “What are the police doing here? I thought...” She hustled over to the orb, shooing everyone else out of the way.

Frowning, Yanko reached out with his senses again. The boy had said Nurians were coming, but was it possible they weren’t *his* Nurians? The ones who wanted him dead? Or who at least wanted all information pertaining to the lodestone? Maybe these people had come on some unrelated matter.

But no, he recognized the Sun Dragon’s strong, bright aura as soon as he drew near it. Yanko almost expected a smug, “Ha ha, found you,” to reverberate in his head, but maybe the mage was busy with the twins’ deterrents.

The other Nurians in the runabout felt familiar, too; they were the people who had come to his family’s home, who had *burned* his family’s home. Yanko gritted his teeth, hating the idea of running away again. He wished he could get rid of these people, defeat them to such an extent that they would give up on following him.

What if that means killing them?

He reminded himself that he had killed before, in self-defense in the mines and in trying to reach Uncle Mishnal before it was too late. Still, that did not mean he was comfortable with the idea. Couldn’t there be another way?

“*Alalo* Mihako?” Mela asked, leaning closer to the orb than necessary. If it worked

like other communications artifacts Yanko had used, it would pick up all the noises in the area and transmit them—he would have to keep his mouth shut if he did not want the Nurians to know for certain he was here. With the warrior mage out there, it was probably a futile hope, but if the man was busy, maybe he wouldn't notice Yanko.

The man responded, sounding twice as harried as he had before. Agarik translated again. "Mrs. Komitopis, is that you? I order you to stop this harassment. We have the Nurian ambassador here, as well as the wronged parties. It's unjust for you to deter us."

"The Nurian ambassador?" Yanko mouthed. He was not the only one to draw back in surprise.

"Wronged parties, Captain?" Mela asked.

A new voice sounded, a deep one that spoke in Nurian. "I am Ambassador Still Water. I trust you understand me." Without waiting for confirmation, he went on. "You are harboring, either knowingly or unknowingly—"

The captain interrupted with something that sounded apologetic, some promise that he wasn't accusing the family of anything perhaps. Agarik did not translate it.

"You are harboring a criminal named Yanko White Fox. He is the *son* of Captain Snake Heart Pey Lu White Fox."

A dozen sets of eyes turned toward Yanko, and all he could do was gape. A criminal? How was *he* the criminal? *They* were the ones who—

But the thought lurched to a halt before he finished it, an image of the prison cavern jumping to the forefront of his mind, the people he had freed...

"They're the rebels," he whispered to the eyes staring at him. "They're working against the Great Chief. I'm working *for* him, for Prince Zirabo."

The others seemed to be too surprised to grasp his words. Nobody made a move toward him, but the puzzled frowns on those faces were not heartening. Dak, the only one in the room besides Lakeo who had known the truth, wore a dyspeptic scowl.

"Being the son of a criminal doesn't make one a criminal, Ambassador," Mela said, the room utterly silent around her. "To what crime are you referring, please?"

Yanko searched her face, wondering if she might side with him, if she might believe he hadn't done anything wrong. But even if she did, she couldn't kick the police off her property. She would have to cooperate. Damn, how had those assassins gotten the ambassador to come here with them? Was the ambassador sympathetic to the rebels too? One of the numerous factions Dak had mentioned? Yanko wanted to pull his hair out in frustration. He knew so little of what was going on in his nation, so little of what was now imperative for him to know.

"He helped prisoners escape from the prison at the Port of the Red Sky Wars," the ambassador said, and it was all Yanko could do to keep from fleeing the room. Sweat ran down his spine. How did they know? Sun Dragon's people had left as quickly as Yanko had. Had their ship been in communication with someone in Red Sky? It must have been.

Yanko looked at Dak, hoping he would say something on his behalf. He had been there. He knew what that night had truly been about. But Dak's face had turned into a stony mask that hid his thoughts.

"Just today," the ambassador continued, "his sidekick stole priceless books from the library."

"*Sidekick*," Lakeo blurted in indignation.

Yanko would have felt indignant himself, because he realized right away it must be

true—her pack was heavy from stolen books, not promotional pamphlets—but he was more worried about his own crime, one that he had hoped would either be forgotten by the time he returned home or that would be dismissed because of the heroic deed he was doing to help his people.

“We demand that you send these two criminals out to be dealt with immediately,” the ambassador said. The captain added something in Kyattese that sounded like an agreement. “To hinder us further would be completely unacceptable, and I will press charges in your judicial system if you do not cooperate.” This time the captain’s addition sounded less supportive, more like a nervous, “But we don’t want that to happen,” amendment.

Mela looked to Dak, uncertainty on her face. Dak shook his head and said something that was probably along the lines of, “I don’t have the power to countermand them.”

Yanko didn’t know what to say, didn’t know what he *could* say.

I surrender, is what you should say, Sun Dragon caroled into Yanko’s mind.

Coward, Yanko snarled back before he could think wiser of it. *You couldn’t best me with your fireballs, so you tattled to the ambassador?*

The voice did not return to his head. He hoped that meant his insult had made the man wince, knowing it had been the truth, but instead, Sun Dragon probably felt so arrogant and superior that he did not feel the need to reply.

“Come to the house, and we will discuss this,” Mela told the ambassador. “The... defensive measures will be stopped.”

“We should leave now,” Lakeo murmured.

A big part of Yanko wanted to stay, wanted to find a way to convince these people who had been nothing but helpful to him that he was not a criminal and that the others were the criminals, the ones conspiring against the government at least, but what argument could he make that would not involve lying?

Someone tapped him on the shoulder. Akstyr stood behind him and jerked a thumb toward the hallway where Lakeo and Yanko had been given rooms.

“Back door,” he said.

With Mela still negotiating with the ambassador, everyone was focused on the orb and that conversation. Trying not to feel like a hound fleeing with its tail between its legs, Yanko slunk after Akstyr. He expected someone to shout for him to stop at any moment, but the conversation continued, and nobody called after him. Lakeo had not needed any extra urging, and she walked into the hallway ahead of Akstyr.

“Which way?” she asked as soon as the three of them were out of sight of the dining room.

“I have to get my belongings,” Yanko said.

“Good.” Akstyr smirked at him. “Your room being the back door.”

“Ah.” Yanko opened the door, glad he hadn’t thought to lock it when he had departed through the window earlier, and grabbed his gear and weapons.

“Already open.” Akstyr stuck his hand through the open window and smirked again.

“Amused by this, are you?” Lakeo growled, looking like she might pull out an arrow to stab into his ribs.

Yanko patted the air, trying to cool her irritation. Akstyr was helping them. That was all that mattered.

“I am one usually being in trouble,” Akstyr said as Yanko climbed out. The fountain

still gurgled cheerfully, as if the world remained peaceful and serene. But the rattle of wheels on the driveway told Yanko the truth. He danced from foot to foot, waiting for the other two to climb out.

“Where should we go?” he asked as soon as Akstyr stood up. “We need to get back to town and...” Yanko had not figured out the rest yet.

Akstyr trotted down the length of the courtyard, until they reached the back edge of the house. He pointed around the corner toward the dark silhouette of the volcano, just visible over the trees. Yanko hoped he wasn’t going to suggest they hurl themselves into the caldera so they would be incinerated by molten lava. That wasn’t the kind of escape he wanted.

“Caves inside,” Akstyr said. “Long caves.”

“Lava tubes?” Yanko guessed.

“*Lava?*” Lakeo asked.

“Yes,” Akstyr said. “Old. Dry. They curve.” He pantomimed with his hands, and Yanko got the gist.

“Is there one that comes out near the city?”

“Yes. Go.” Akstyr waved toward the trees and the volcano, then thumped the back of Yanko’s hand with his own in some sort of parting gesture. “Luck.”

“Thanks.”

Lakeo took off first, her heavy pack and bow bouncing on her back. Though he knew he should not linger—those runabouts sounded like they had rolled to a stop in front of the house—Yanko couldn’t help but look back toward the large windows in the great room and dining room that looked out over the courtyard. Curtains had been drawn, but he could see the silhouettes of figures moving around inside.

Yanko hadn’t known those people for long and told himself it did not matter what they thought of them, but he would miss having Dak’s sword at his back. He might even miss *Dak*, as grumpy and secretive as he was. But this was for the best. Dak knew too much already, and his first duty would be to Turgonia, not to protecting some dumb—and now criminal—kid from the enemy nation.

Yanko ran after Lakeo, almost glad the need to escape would keep his mind occupied. If he had time to stop and think about what a wreck his life had become, he might never get started again.

* * *

Yanko and Lakeo ran down a road that cut across the plantation, trees on their right and fields of cane on the left. He had no idea if the wide dirt route would take them to the caves Akstyr had spoken of, but the volcano loomed ahead of them, blotting out the stars and the moon. If nothing else, they could cut to the south when they reached the foothills and parallel the road heading back to the city.

Of course, Sun Dragon might have anticipated that Yanko would flee and might have people waiting in that direction. The caves would be better, especially if few people knew about them. The dense tons and tons of rock should dampen a mage’s ability to find Yanko, as well. He could sense auras for a mile or sometimes more out in the open; he always struggled to extend his senses as far through solid rock.

“Is that assassin out here somewhere?” Lakeo asked, her words terse and breathless. They had already run two or three miles, tripping over the ruts and rocks in the road and ducking branches that hung low, hidden by the darkness until they smacked them in the

faces. “Or did we get away without anyone noticing?”

“I think the warrior mage can feel me from a distance,” Yanko admitted.

Lakeo grunted as she stumbled over another rut and pitched forward. Yanko thought about suggesting that her journey would be easier if she wasn’t wearing forty pounds’ worth of stolen books. But his own pack dug into his shoulders, a reminder that he, too, had a book that had been received as part of a ruse. He might as well consider it stolen too. Maybe it was fitting that he and Lakeo were fleeing together. A pair of thieves, the letter in his pocket the only thing that might legitimize his quest, but all it would take was for someone to steal it and burn it to leave him with nothing, no justification for the trouble he had caused.

“Any chance he’s not trying to feel you right now?” Lakeo asked.

“I doubt it. He seems drawn to taunt me.”

“Yeah, he’s not the only one, but maybe the others are distracting him.”

“They don’t have any reason to help us further. Especially now.” Yanko hoped he had a chance to shove his mother off the end of a gangplank some day. Not only was she ruining the family’s reputation in Nurian seas, but now she was tormenting Kyattese shipping lanes.

“You get any information that might help your quest?” Lakeo glanced over her shoulder.

Yanko had been monitoring the route behind them frequently during their flight. He hadn’t sensed any humans on their trail yet, but he was also distracted, so he did not know if he could rely on his mental skills right now.

“I found out the lodestone probably isn’t here. Some archeologist pirate stole it seventy years ago. If it’s even the right one.”

“Where’d he take it?”

“No idea.” Yanko would need the luxury of spending weeks researching in a library—a library where he read the language—to have a chance at ferreting out that information. Even if he somehow found the time and the ideal library, the information might not be there, not if Kyattese archaeologists had been looking for the pirate’s stash for decades. What did he have that would allow him to find what they had all missed? Nothing.

A siren wailed in the distance, originating from the direction of the house. Was that what a police alarm sounded like here?

“If they weren’t searching before, I think they are now,” Yanko muttered.

“Yeah. Damn. How are we going to find those caves in the dark?” Lakeo flung an arm toward the dark side of the volcano. If it had been bare lava stone, they might have had a chance, but it had doubtlessly been centuries since the last eruption, because dense green foliage grew halfway up the side. Only up near the top were there bare black patches.

“I don’t know, but lava should want to flow downward, right? Drawn by gravity? Maybe if we run along the bottom and come across a valley or depression, we’ll find an entrance there.”

“How can you... talk so much? Aren’t you... winded too?”

“I’m not carrying as many books as you. Why did you take them, anyway?”

“I didn’t think anyone would miss them. They have *thousands*. Tens of thousands.”

Yanko didn’t answer. The road had turned to follow the base of the volcano, and he

was squinting into the gloom to the side, hoping to spot some terrain feature that would hint of caves. If he had time, he might be able to stop and concentrate more fully, using his senses to see what his eyes could not, but he was much better at finding the presences of living things than inanimate objects or geographical features. They did not have energy about them the way people and animals did.

"I didn't plan to take anything," Lakeo huffed, slowing down and grabbing her side. "I didn't want to. I just wanted a chance to learn. To become a real mage, damn it. But did you see the price of their tuition? I could never afford that, not even to take a single class. Even if I had worked in your uncle's mine for five years, I wouldn't have had enough."

Another siren wailed, this time from ahead of them, and Yanko slowed down too. "They must have guessed we would run back toward the city. They're probably planning to form a barricade, cut us off."

Even if the property was miles wide, the terrain could make it difficult to slip through, and if his warrior mage nemesis was up there, he would be able to sense Yanko even if they left the road and sneaked through the cane fields.

Lakeo growled. "How many are up there? Can you tell?"

"Too many." His shoulders slumped. Should he even be trying to evade the authorities? What if he managed to make it back to the city? How would that help him? He might find the *Falcon's Flight* again, but could he convince the captain to take them back on board? Even if Minark was willing, he would be heading off to the next place where he had cargo to deliver; he wouldn't want to go on a hunt for a long-dead pirate's stash.

A presence nudged the back of his mind. Yanko slowed to a stop to focus on it. The mage? No, it was small and flying.

"Great," he said, "I can't even hide from a bird. What are the odds of evading police and mages?"

Kei struck the back of Yanko's shoulder, startling him as claws gouged him through his clothing. The parrot flapped its wings, batting him on the back of the head, and for a moment, Yanko thought he was being attacked. Then he realized Kei must have tracked him through their link rather than by sight. If parrots were like most of the birds back home, they had poor night vision.

The claws dug in again, as Kei finally righted himself, and the familiar request for chips filled his mind.

Yanko dug into his pocket, if only so the creature could sate its hunger and fly away, but he paused, fingers hovering over the remaining crumbs. If Kei had found the neighbor, maybe he could locate other humans. Yanko shared an image of the white-clad mage hunter and was working out a way to promise that he would share more chips in exchange for information on the person's whereabouts. But Kei responded quickly, showing Yanko a memory of seeing the woman as he flew over her. She had been running along the road with trees on her right and fields on her left, a bow and quiver on her back and one of her katanas drawn as she approached the bend.

Yanko gulped. He and Lakeo had gone around that bend only a few moments before.

"We have to get off the road," Yanko whispered, slipping into tall grass to the side.

Watch her, he told the bird. He was tempted to ask Kei to distract the woman, but she might kill him with a single swipe of her katana.

Chips?

Yes, if you watch her. Let me know if she's able to keep tracking us. He knew the parrot wouldn't understand the words, but he tried to share images that conveyed the same information.

Whether or not Kei understood, he leaped into the air again, flying back the way he had come.

"I'm going to need to get a shoulder pad if he's going to insist on being my friend." Yanko rubbed his shoulder and pushed deeper into the grass.

"If you get killed, having a bird scratching you won't be a problem anymore."

"A cheerful thought."

"I saw the lights of one of those funny carriages right before jumping into the grass," Lakeo said. "They can drive faster than we can walk. They're not far behind."

"The mage hunter is even closer."

"Wonderful."

"Keep walking," Yanko whispered. "I'm going to try to delay her."

"Delay the carriage, too, will you?" Lakeo continued on without looking back, the tall grass rustling around her.

Yanko sighed and told himself it was silly to want a female traveling partner who would gaze back with concern, touch his cheek, and make him promise to be careful before he went off in pursuit of danger. He thought of Arayevo briefly, then shook his head. There was another woman he had to concentrate on.

Yanko knelt in the grass, so that it covered his head, and touched the damp earth. He imagined the dirt road and the path they had just made, broken reeds in their wake. First, he healed those stalks of grass and encouraged them to show no sign of his passing. It might not matter. Either the mage hunter was so good at tracking that she was having no trouble following him, or Sun Dragon was guiding her. If Yanko managed to escape this night, he would have to find a way to keep the mage from sensing him in the future.

Once the grass had healed, he reached out to the countless roots in the ground around him, most small and belonging to the ground cover, but some were deeper, larger ones stretching out from nearby trees. He sent some of his own energy into them, giving them the power to animate and grab. Trusting the hunter would come down the road, he set his trap to trigger as soon as someone's weight touched the earth above the roots. If the carriage crossed that earth first, it mattered little. Someone would be inconvenienced.

His trap set, he turned and headed after Lakeo. The inconvenience would not distract his pursuers for long, and the roots would not do any lasting damage to anyone, but maybe they would make his pursuers less eager to charge into the brush after him.

Lakeo had covered more ground than he expected, and Yanko had to reach out with his mind to find her. She stood in the shadow of a charred tree that had been struck by lightning. A small hollow marked the ground ahead of her, and she was trying to find a cave.

Yanko reached the stump at the same time as Kei returned, promising the assassin would reach his trap soon. He handed the parrot a few crumbs.

"Find anything?" he called softly.

Lakeo had clambered down into the hollow. A soft splash sounded. "Does a wet foot count?"

"I'll see if I can sense anything." Yanko shrugged off his pack and dug out his

mother's robe. He hadn't had a chance yet to figure out its properties, but if there was a chance it did indeed improve the mental stamina of the wearer, he could not pass that up. He feared he would need every iota of stamina he could manage tonight. He fished out the amulet, too, and tugged it over his head. Though he had not donned it before, he trusted it would not do anything inimical. And maybe it would help.

"This is pointless," Lakeo said as Yanko was stuffing his other clothes back into his bag. "Let's just climb the side of the volcano. See if we can get around them that way."

Yanko eyed the slope and how quickly it grew steep after the trees stopped. They would struggle to reach that spot, and they would be visible to anyone on the plantation below, too, if they climbed out above the brush. Finding a tunnel through the volcano would still be the best course, if there even was one. He wished Akstyr had given better directions.

Yanko stretched toward the rocky slope, trying to sense the promised tubes. Unfortunately, he could tell right away that there weren't any near them. He pushed deeper, but encountered nothing but solid rock. On a whim, he probed the surface higher up the slope, sinking his awareness into the volcano, trying to feel the contours of its body and judge how lava might have once flowed from its core. At the tip of his limit, he found what he sought, an opening large enough for a person to walk through. One of the promised lava tubes? It had to be. Maybe they were all over, like a honeycomb inside the volcano. He tried to follow it, to find the entrance, but it continued on without nearing the surface.

Claws digging into his shoulder pulled him out of his concentration. He wouldn't have been able to push farther, anyway, not without hurting himself. Besides, going so deeply into his mind when the assassin who wanted him dead was a quarter of a mile away was not wise. Lakeo was climbing the slope, investigating farther instead of watching his back.

You didn't ask for her to do that.

I know, he answered himself. They needed to take risks to find the caves.

Kei shared an image with him, the white-clad figure hacking at vines and roots that had snared her legs. Yanko allowed himself a short feeling of pleasure. She wouldn't be entangled for long, but maybe they had a few more minutes.

That would have been your chance to get rid of her, you know.

I'm not getting rid of anyone.

If you don't kill the assassin, the assassin will kill you. She's a mage hunter, you fool. You know what that means. She's someone who trained for at least ten years to resist magical attacks and destroy mages.

She's not resisting my roots, is she?

Just don't try a mental attack. She'll be trained to deflect those.

I'm no mind mage. That's not a problem.

Yanko cursed at the voices in his mind; they were more annoying than the parrot, and he didn't have time to chat with himself.

Lakeo kicked a rock free, and it bounced and clanked down the slope.

Yanko grimaced, certain the hunter would hear that. A few birds squawked and flew out of a bush, annoyed at having their resting spot disturbed. Yanko looked skyward, and sent out a soft plea, trying to convince them to fly toward the volcano instead of the road—the hunter would be sure to see them otherwise and guess what had disturbed them. As

he was looking up, he spotted a bat flapping its wings and heading out for the night's hunt.

An idea leaped into his mind. He might not have much luck finding lava tube entrances in the huge mass of rock that rose up before them, but he could sense animals more easily. He reached out again, this time searching for the auras of bats instead of trying to push through layers of stone.

Almost immediately, he sensed a colony, about five hundred meters off to their right and two hundred meters above them. They were active, flying in and out of a cave.

"Lakeo," he whispered, hustling to catch up with her. "This way."

She shifted directions and followed him without a word. He hugged the trees and vegetation as much as he could for cover, though he saw that they would have to travel out onto bare rock before reaching the cave. From his position, he couldn't tell if it led farther back into the mountain, but he hoped it was the entrance to the lava tubes that they sought. If not, it would at least be a good place to make a stand.

Or surrender.

No, he couldn't surrender. If it had meant turning himself over to the police, he might have considered it, but if the hunter truly wanted him dead, he could not give up. He had to fight, to eliminate her as a threat.

Climbing took most of his concentration, but he tried to check on their pursuers at the same time. He could *hear* them, that was for certain. Whatever magic or mechanism created that siren, it was louder than ever, spewing its undulating cry across the cane fields. He could hear shouts, too, excited cries from the road. There were no hounds that he could send down a wrong trail, unfortunately. Sun Dragon would not fall for that again, regardless.

When they left the vegetation behind and clambered onto bare rock, Yanko looked down, morbidly curious as to how many people had come out to hunt him. Two roundabouts were parked on the road, and a dozen lights, some magical and some simple flame lanterns, illuminated the brush and grass on either side. He didn't see any sign of Dak or the Komitopis family members. They hadn't come to join the hunt, but they had not come to help, either. Not that Yanko had expected them to.

He and Lakeo had climbed high enough that he could not hear conversations on the road—not that he would have understood them—but he saw a couple of people hacking at the ground with swords. His roots must still be trying to snatch people. Good. But the hunter had escaped—he didn't see anyone in white.

He turned back to the rocky slope. If he could not see her, she was probably already on his trail again. She would not use a light that might give away her presence.

Yanko asked Kei to watch for her again. Even though the parrot flew off, seemingly interested in helping, Yanko couldn't keep from hunching his shoulders as they continued upward. The dark lava rock should hide them, unless someone thought to shine a light up here, but he felt vulnerable being out in the open.

The short chirps and squeaks of the bats drifted down to him, just audible over the sirens below. Almost there.

"They went this way," came a cry from down below.

Yanko winced. The roots must have been defeated, because all of the lights converged on the road and then headed into the grass, toward the stump where he and Lakeo had paused. He reached out toward the bats in the cave, some flying out to hunt,

others still dozing on the ceiling. Their minds were strange, even odder than those of birds and fish, but he tried to impart the idea upon them that a feast of bugs waited in the grass below and that they should descend to lunch on it.

"I see it," Lakeo breathed. "Finally."

The cave opening was not easy to spot, but because of his awareness of the bats, Yanko had been angling toward it all along. He reached the gap between two slabs of rock first. The shape of the mouth disappointed him as soon as he had a good look at it, because it appeared to be a natural fissure rather than something made by lava pouring out. It was a *narrow* natural fissure too. Would they even be able to get through? His thoughts of having to make a stand returned, grim and unwelcome.

The squeaks and chirps increased, growing more excited, and then the bats flew out, a greater mass of them than Yanko had expected. He was not sure whether their exodus was a result of his attempt to communicate or if they had simply sensed his and Lakeo's approach and were fleeing. He pushed and pulled himself into the opening, afraid the people below would spot so many bats flying out at once—and that they would spot a couple of people climbing into the cave at the same time. His hand splatted into something soft, at the same time as the stench of bat guano flooded his nostrils. Until then, the sea breeze must have been keeping the odor at bay, but he gagged, and it was all he could do to keep from coughing.

"*Yanko*," Lakeo whispered, making his name sound like a curse as she followed him inside.

"Sorry. Best I could do." Yanko forced himself to crawl deeper, though his stomach roiled at the powerful stench. He wanted to create a light, but dared not unless they could get far enough back that it would not be visible from outside. He sensed that the cave grew wider and continued, heading deeper into the mountain, and that heartened him—or at least made slipping and squishing through knee-deep piles of bat dung easier to accept.

"This is *not* the kind of place you're supposed to take a woman on a moonlit night."

"I didn't notice a moon out there," Yanko said.

"Fine, then on a starlit night. Or *ever*."

Distant shouts drifted up to the cave. Shouts of anger and irritation? Yanko could not tell for certain, but he hoped the bats were harassing his pursuers.

A faint orange light pulsed to life ahead of them. Yanko reared back, reaching for his sword. He hadn't made the light.

"Relax," Lakeo said. "It's me. I got tired of walking in guano."

"The assassin is right behind us," Yanko whispered.

Lakeo glanced back. "You're sure?"

They had crawled about twenty-five feet into the cave, and he could see the sky through the dark frame of rock at the opening. He didn't spot anyone crawling in, but his gut clenched when he reached out with his senses. She was outside, almost to the opening. There weren't any roots growing beneath the rock, no plants he could use to make another trap.

"Yeah," he rasped. "She's almost here."

Yanko swiped his hand through the air, cutting out Lakeo's light with a thought, but not before he glimpsed that the cave did indeed turn into a tunnel and continue into the volcano, at least for a ways. "Hurry," he whispered. "We can keep going."

But Lakeo stuck her hand in front of his chest to stop him. She took her bow off her

shoulder and pulled out an arrow. “You can’t run forever.”

“You’re not going to shoot her. Do you know what a mage hunter is? How well they’re trained?”

He imagined a lithe figure in white leaping into the air and spinning a somersault to evade an arrow shot at her, then coming down in a fighting stance with a bevy of throwing stars ready to hurl.

“I’ve heard stories,” Lakeo whispered. “They’re human. Arrows kill humans.”

Yanko wanted to object to the idea of killing anyone, or at least of putting blood on Lakeo’s hands when this wasn’t her fight. The local police might want her, but what did she matter to the Nurians? But he dared not speak again, because he sensed the hunter’s presence on the other side of the cave entrance. He could not see her yet, but Lakeo was waiting, the arrow nocked and pulled back.

Seconds passed, and she didn’t show herself. Even if she didn’t have the senses of a mage, her instincts must be telling her that danger awaited her inside. Would she wait out there? Call for her comrades to come up? As of yet, Yanko hadn’t heard a sound from her, neither the clatter of a rock knocked free by her climb, nor a startled cry when his roots had entangled her.

He thought about probing her mind, trying some mental attack or even trying to communicate with her, as he had with the animals. But he doubted he could convince her to take off after a potential feast down below. He—

Yanko flattened his back against the nearest wall. “She’s inside,” he whispered.

“Can’t be,” Lakeo whispered back. “I didn’t see—”

“Look out.” Yanko grabbed her, even as something whistled through the air.

He was too late. Lakeo gasped with pain, dropping her bow.

Afraid the assassin would be on them before he sensed her, that they wouldn’t have a chance once she reached weapons range, Yanko clenched his eyes shut and reverted to the only one of the mental sciences that came easily to him: earth magic.

He flung a hand toward the ceiling at the mouth of the cave, as if his energy would flow out through his fingers. More power than he expected surged through him. It blasted into the porous rock of the ceiling, bringing down the surface layers at once, and pouring pressure into the tiny gaps in the stone higher up. Great slabs of stone tumbled down, smashing into the ground. Cracks and snaps sounded above them, and rock flew everywhere. Something wet splattered Yanko’s face, but he barely noticed it.

This time, Lakeo was the one to grab him, hauling him farther back into the cave. It took him a moment to get his feet working, to follow her—the force he had discharged had left him stunned, almost taking him to his knees. He scrambled over fallen boulders, some old, some new, patting his way along in the dark, even as the rockfall continued behind him. His pursuers would not have any doubt as to the direction he had gone now.

Small stones struck the ground around Yanko and Lakeo, but the rockfall remained centered near the entrance. He hoped they weren’t in danger of being crushed—and he hoped there was another way out.

“Ouch,” Lakeo said, smacking into something in the dark.

Not the dead end of the cave, he hoped. The falling rocks dwindled, leaving the air full of dust and that horrible guano stench.

“You with me, Yanko?” Lakeo asked.

A hand slapped his cheek. Maybe it had been meant as more of an inquiring pat, but

he almost took a finger up the nostril.

“Yes. Just dazed.” He did not explain that he had hurled more power at the ceiling than he had expected. He fingered the hem of his robe, wondering if it or the amulet had affected him. Yes, it had been a move of desperation, and it was possible he had flailed and used too much force, but he had still meant to control the rockfall, so it would only bring down rock near the entrance, enough to block the assassin from reaching them.

But it might have crushed her. Yanko could not bring himself to check on her aura. Because the power drain had left him with a headache, he told himself. But he knew the truth. He was too cowardly and didn’t want to know. Why the idea of killing someone who was trying to kill him bothered him so much, he wasn’t sure. Yes, any kind of killing disturbed him, but he was logical enough to understand the need for self-defense, to understand that if he *didn’t* kill her, she would keep coming after him. Somehow that logic did not make it all right.

The soft orange light returned, hovering between Lakeo and Yanko this time. She had stopped clambering over the rough ground and faced him. Dust, grime, and sweat stamped her face, and blood dripped down her forehead and into an eyebrow. She grimaced and wiped at it with the back of her hand. One of those falling rocks must have struck her in the head. He should have shielded them. As soon as he had hurled that burst of power, he should have been prepared for the consequences, erecting a barrier above their heads for protection.

“Can you sense her back there?” Lakeo prodded at her shoulder, where her vest was torn. Blood dribbled from a fresh gash there too. That straight, clean slash must have been caused by a knife or throwing star, not a rock. “Did you get her?”

“I... don’t know.”

She frowned. “You don’t know or you won’t check?”

Yanko avoided her eyes. “I barely sensed her slipping through the entrance.” It wasn’t exactly an answer to the question. Sooner or later, he would have to check, even if he didn’t want to, because otherwise they risked an attack from behind. “Give me a second.”

Ignoring his growing headache, Yanko probed the rockfall, confirming that there was no way out—it had plugged up the entire mouth of the cave—and then searched the pile itself. He found a weak aura at the bottom and near the exit. She had almost made it out, but even a mage hunter could not beat gravity.

“She’s alive, but barely,” he said.

“Trapped under the rocks?”

“Yes.”

“That’s going to have to be good enough. We better hope this tube leads somewhere.” Lakeo wiped her brow again, then sent her small ball of light floating ahead. Rocks littered the floor, but the ceiling was high enough that they could travel without ducking, and the passage was wide enough for them to walk side by side. “By the way, this probably wasn’t the best time to put on an invaluable family heirloom.” She waved a hand at his robe before heading deeper into the volcano.

He looked down. The robe did not show any signs of permanent damage, but dust and bat guano battled each other for prominence. His new bird buddy had left a gift on his shoulder, as well.

“I’m sure I can wash it.” Yanko prodded at a sticky spot, some kind of pitch or sap.

“That’s probably what they have you do anyway in Kyattese prisons.”

Lakeo had started walking, but she frowned back at him when he didn’t follow. “We escaped the mage hunter. We’ll escape the rest. Get a ride on a ship going... somewhere. Not here. Come on.”

It was good advice, but Yanko found himself gazing back toward the rockfall. Even if Lakeo’s meager light did not stretch back far enough to see it, he could still sense the woman trapped beneath all the rubble. He had bored a hole through rock before. He might be able to reach her, to get her out.

But to what end? Would she be appreciative if he saved her life when he had also been the one who had put it in jeopardy? No, she would thrust a dagger into his chest. That was her mission, her quest. Just as finding that lodestone was his.

“Yanko, get moving,” Lakeo called from ten meters ahead. “I can’t watch your back if it’s way behind me.”

With his senses still extended, Yanko barely heard her. More auras had entered within his range. He drew back, not wanting to encounter the warrior mage if he had climbed up there. He wasn’t ready to deal with that superior attitude right now. All that mattered was that the hunter’s party had come, and they should try to dig her out. If they were in time. Her aura had grown weaker. She seemed to be trapped in a small, empty pocket under a big slab of rock, so he didn’t think she had been crushed. But maybe she wasn’t getting enough air. Though he didn’t know why he was doing it, he shifted aside a few of the rocks near her. Enough of them rolled away to create a tiny tunnel through which air could reach her.

“Yanko,” came another call from Lakeo, this one more distant.

He jogged after her, hoping he had not made a mistake he would regret.

Chapter 16

“We should have brought food. And more water.” Lakeo drank from her canteen. “But especially food. You bring any supplies?”

“Just water.” Yanko eyed the rounded ceiling of their lava tube, wondering if it would ever end. He had a vague sense that they had been heading downhill, but it was a subtle slope. Since he hadn’t thought to bring a pocket watch, he had little concept of how much time had passed, but he believed it had been an hour. Parts of the ceiling had dropped to the floor over the years, leaving boulders and occasionally huge rubble piles they had to scale. Anyone who knew where the tunnel came out could have driven there in a roundabout three times over by now. He had visions of walking straight into the hands of the ambassador and Sun Dragon with no chance of escaping into the city.

“Any chips left in your pocket? I wouldn’t be too proud to lick out crumbs.” Lakeo glanced at his bat-guano-smeared robe. “Well, maybe I would.”

“The chips were in my other clothes, but Kei got them all, anyway.”

“And hasn’t been back to visit since. I knew that parrot was rude as soon as we met him. You really shouldn’t make friends with birds that are clearly racist.” Odd, she actually sounded perky, like she was enjoying herself. Did she think they had won the night because they had trapped the mage hunter?

Yanko could not bring himself to be that optimistic.

You think you’re clever, boy? an irritated voice resonated in his head.

Yanko had been prepared for the warrior mage’s intrusion. In fact, he had expected it earlier, but maybe Sun Dragon had been helping unbury the hunter. Yanko did not respond to the question. He had already decided that he wouldn’t; on the chance that the man *didn’t* know where he was, Yanko did not want to risk giving away their location or thoughts of where they would come out. Not that he could do more than guess where they would come out. Only the gods knew if they had stumbled into the tunnel Akstyr had meant.

You should have studied more than rocks growing up. You can’t solve every problem by dropping caves on people’s heads.

Such venom came through the words that gooseflesh rose on Yanko’s arms. He doubted Sun Dragon could hurt him from this distance, but he kept that brick wall up around his thoughts, regardless, remembering the attack Senshoth had hurled at him in the prison.

As you shall soon see, boy. As you shall soon see.

“We’ve been threatened,” Yanko said.

“By your mage friend?”

“Friend isn’t quite the word I’d use.”

“I wonder why he doesn’t talk to me. Just because my talents are more meager than yours...” Lakeo waved to the orange globe floating ahead of them, the one that had gone out a couple of times during their trek because she had stubbed a toe or bumped a knee.

Yanko understood the struggle to master the ability to maintain enough concentration for basic tasks while other things were going on around a person. “Talent doesn’t have much to do with it. Just practice. You’ll get there, especially if you find someone to teach

you. I could try sometime, but as you know, it's frowned upon for people to become instructors unless they've graduated from an official mage school. And I..." He did not finish. She knew all about it. "Maybe if I give you the letter to hold, he'll talk to you instead of me. If you're truly eager to experience his wit."

"I don't think I want the responsibility of your quest. But I was thinking... you said pirate's stash? That's where your artifact is?"

"Yes." Yanko did not see any point in holding back the truth anymore, not when half of Kyatt knew about his quest—and his dubious past—so he relayed the information he had learned from Mela and her newspaper.

They came to their first cross passage as he did so, a spot where another tunnel fed into theirs, and the direction changed slightly. Yanko did not know whether that was promising or not, but they kept following the downhill passage. Heading upward should only take them to the caldera. Even if the volcano was dormant, he didn't want to end up there.

"So if we found this cache," Lakeo said, "you could get your gold rock and complete your mission, and maybe there would be other valuable loot there, too, loot that could be sold to finance a person's tuition to a certain expensive institution."

"The loot came from the Kyattese Museum. I think we would be obligated to return it."

"Please, we're Nurian. What's a museum in another nation to us? Besides, you're not planning to return the lodestone."

"I might after we've discovered the lost continent and claimed it for Nuria," Yanko said.

"Oh, very generous."

Up ahead, another tunnel emptied into theirs. Yanko increased his pace, hoping this meant they would reach an exit soon. He sniffed the air, hoping for a whiff of fishy ocean air, but he smelled an unfamiliar gas instead, something that made his nostrils pucker.

"It's gotten hotter," Lakeo said. "You're sure we're going *away* from the center of the volcano, right?"

Yanko wiped sweat from his brow. She was right. It *was* hotter. He had been thinking they had simply been working hard climbing over rocks, but since the first tunnel had joined theirs, the floor had grown relatively smooth. They were simply walking now, their pace brisk but not strenuous.

Their tunnel curved slightly, and a hint of orange stretched along the ground ahead. Yanko thought the glow of Lakeo's orange light might be reflecting off something, but her weak globe had not reached far enough to illuminate anything up there yet. Whatever was on the floor seemed to glow of its own accord. As they drew closer, he realized what he was looking at and felt stupid for not grasping the situation sooner.

"But I thought this was a *dormant* volcano..." True, nobody had *told* him that. Yanko had assumed that an entire city would not have built up around a volcano that could erupt at any time. Wasn't that *dangerous*? He had visions of buildings and entire civilizations being swallowed, such as had happened in the Legend of the Dragon God's Punishment.

"Lava?" Lakeo pointed at the small stream oozing out of the tube joining theirs.

The sluggish flow was not going anywhere quickly, and that was the only thing that kept Yanko from feeling too uneasy as they continued forward, walking near the wall so they would not chance stepping in the lava. "I hope this means we're getting close to..."

wherever the lava goes.”

“I was thinking that we would come out above town somewhere, but it’s hard to imagine a lava flow dumping out onto the president’s house.”

“I wouldn’t mind some dumping onto the ambassador’s compound.” Yanko lowered his voice and added, “Or on his head.” How could that man have automatically sided with an assassin? He could understand how seeing someone in the crimson robe of a warrior mage might sway a person—hadn’t he used his mother’s robe to sway the commissioner of that prison?—but mage hunters weren’t loved by the general populace. If anything, most people feared them. They had assassinated at least a half dozen great chiefs throughout history and been hunted nearly to extinction more than once. Maybe she had never made an appearance.

“Does this lava seem like it’s getting thicker?” Lakeo pointed at the orange ribbon they were following.

“We passed that other tunnel that was dripping some into the channel.”

Lakeo continued walking, but she kept glancing down at the molten stream. It *had* grown wider. Yanko thought his explanation made sense, but the orange stuff made him uneasy too. Heat radiated from it, turning the entire tunnel into a steam yurt, and sweat ran down the sides of his face.

“I’m sure it’s perfectly normal,” Yanko said, “but we may want to increase our pace, in case the authorities are waiting at the opposite end of our tunnel.”

“You’re the boss.” Lakeo broke into a jog, her bow and pack bouncing on her back.

“I am? Since when? And of what?” He matched her pace, telling himself it had nothing to do with the lava or the feeling of claustrophobia creeping over him.

“Well, you’ve effectively ordered that parrot around.”

“I’ve bribed him to do things by withholding chips. I don’t think that makes me his boss.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I was trying to make you feel better about yourself.”

“Really? I don’t recall you ever doing that.”

“You seem glum,” Lakeo said. “It’s no fun pushing you around when you don’t get that sulky expression on your face.”

“Thanks. I think.”

The air ahead of her had grown brighter. Yanko hoped that meant they were almost to the exit, but he couldn’t imagine what light outside they might be witnessing, not unless they had been down here longer than he thought, and dawn had come.

The tunnel curved, and Lakeo stopped abruptly, flailing her arms.

“Stoat’s teats,” she growled and caught herself on the wall.

Yanko couldn’t come up beside her, not without jumping over what had become a two-foot-wide river of lava, but he leaned out to look, and his mouth sagged open.

“Now what?” she asked, pressing her back against the wall, so he could see better.

He had already seen enough. Their stream of lava had met with the outflow of several other streams, and a huge steaming pool of molten rock stretched across the confluence zone ahead of them. Heat blasted his face, and the gas they had been breathing had grown stronger, a mix of unpleasant chemicals that stung his nostrils and made his eyes tear. The pool stretched from wall to wall, leaving no way around, not unless one had a boat that could withstand however many hundreds of degrees in temperature lava was. Maybe thousands. Yanko wiped his face. He had no idea, and he wasn’t about to stick his finger

in to check.

“About twenty meters.” Lakeo stood on her tiptoes and pointed to the far side of the cavern where a wide tunnel continued onward. “Want me to boost you up so you can take a look?”

“I’m perfectly capable of seeing our predicament from down here at my lowly height.”

It’s about to get worse, came the smug and angry voice of the warrior mage. *My specialty is fire, you know.*

“Maybe we could go back to one of those side tunnels,” Lakeo said. “Find another way around.”

Before Yanko could share the message, an ominous rumble reverberated from the depths of the mountain. Of the *volcano*, he reminded himself. The warrior mage wouldn’t cause it to erupt, surely. That couldn’t be within his power. Even if it was, the Nurian ambassador would not allow it. If the volcano blew, everyone on the island would be in danger, Nuriens as well as Kyattese. But if Sun Dragon was feeling angry and vengeful, maybe he had not asked for permission.

“That does not sound good.” Lakeo thrust an arm back the way they had come. “Look, the lava flow is getting denser. Faster. *Bigger*.” She gripped Yanko’s arm. “We’re about to have our flesh burned off our bones if you don’t do something.”

He kept himself from squeaking out an unmanly and uninspiring, “Me?” Instead, he examined the ceiling above the pool—the magma glowed intensely orange, throwing out enough illumination to highlight every crack and crevice up there. How far into the mountain were they? Had they traveled far enough down to be back below the tree line?

“Can you levitate us across?” Lakeo pressed her back against the wall and pulled Yanko over, as well. The two-foot-wide stream had grown to four feet, leaving them only a foot of solid rock to stand upon.

“I never mastered levitation. Telekinesis is covered in the mind sciences book I’m reading, but, uh, I haven’t practiced.”

“Maybe you should prioritize that.” Lakeo had not let go of his arm, and her nails dug in like the parrot’s claws.

“I’ll do so in the future. I can try to push us across with some wind, but the precision needed to land in that tunnel over there...” He could not imagine it being anything other than an act of last resort. He doubted there was enough air in the tunnels behind them to gather the force to hurl them twenty meters, aim notwithstanding.

“Push?”

“Maybe...” Yanko closed his eyes, reaching up through the rock above them with his mind, hoping to find plant life. “Ah, they’re up there.”

“What is?”

“Trees?”

“Trees. That sounds even less helpful than pushing.” She growled, her eyes huge as she stared at the rising flow of lava melting the ground as it passed inches from their toes.

Yanko tried to ignore the scorching air, the nauseating gases, the sizzle of molten ore melting the rock beneath it. He focused above the ceiling, beyond the rock and to the soil over it, soil that provided a bed for trees, shrubs, and grass. A vast network of roots ran above their tunnel—and above that lake of lava. Some had already broken through the volcanic rock, creating cracks and fissures, poking through over the years as they

extended downward. He identified the trees, since they would have the strongest roots, and sought those closest to their position. A forest of koa had claimed the earth up there. He nodded to himself, took a deep breath, and funneled his energy into the root systems.

"Yanko, whatever you're doing, it needs to be done soon," Lakeo said. "Or we're going to have to try to run across. Maybe it's not that deep." A thunk sounded as she threw a rock.

Eyes closed, Yanko barely noticed. He willed the roots to grow deeper, to stretch their toes for some fresh oxygen. Granted, this air wasn't all that appealing, but it was all he could offer.

A crack sounded, and shards of rock tumbled into the molten lake. The first root appeared, dangling down several inches from the otherwise smooth ceiling. More cracks came from farther out.

"You're going to bring down the ceiling so we can climb out?" Lakeo asked. "Good, hurry, Yanko. Damn, I don't know if I'll be able to reach..."

Yanko shook his head, but didn't respond. There wasn't much time, and he could not risk a lapse in concentration. He *could* bring down the ceiling, but the lava would splatter everywhere, and with a stream of magma running across the path they had come down, there wasn't room to run back up their tunnel. Besides, he didn't have Dak there to run volume equations and make sure the earth and rock above wouldn't completely fill in the lake and trap them. Instead, he kept pushing through the ceiling with clumps of roots.

It took tremendous energy, to make trees grow as much in a minute as they would in a year, and he had to lean against the wall for support. His thigh muscles trembled, threatening to give out. They weren't getting enough oxygen. The air was scorching, and his lungs protested the gaseous miasma entering them.

Pain burst from the side of his foot, shattering his concentration. He gasped, yanking his leg away from the flow that had brushed his boot, eating through the leather in an instant.

"Yanko," Lakeo said, already plastered against the wall and standing on her tiptoes to avoid the ever-widening lava stream, "are you going to—"

"There." Grimacing as he shook his leg, unable to put out the fire in his foot, Yanko thrust his hand toward the first clump of roots dangling from the ceiling above them.

"That's our path out. Jump up, grab one, and swing over to the next."

"Are you insane?" Lakeo stared at the route he had made, handholds dangling down at one- and two-foot intervals and running across the pool to the opposite tunnel, one that hadn't yet started to fill. It was their only way out, and if they didn't make it over there soon, it would be covered in lava, too—the level of the lake had risen noticeably in the few minutes they had been standing there. "I can't hold myself up and swing along like a monkey," she said.

"But... you have to." Yanko stared at her. He had known it would be a difficult task, but it hadn't occurred to him that she might not be able to manage it. "Leave the books. They weigh too much."

"Oh, no. I didn't spend the night crawling through caves with them only to lose them now." She gritted her teeth and turned toward the first root, but she had to flail to find her balance on the narrow strip of hard rock left under their feet. She nearly pitched into the flow.

Yanko stretched out his hand, steadying her. He worried that he was asking too much

from her, that she wouldn't be able to do it. Maybe he could try blowing her across the pool with a great gust of wind, the way he had assisted himself in the obstacle course back in Red Sky. But it was so far, and she didn't have any forward momentum.

"I hate you, Yanko," Lakeo announced, then jumped up, catching the first clump of roots. Her pack, bow, and quiver jostled on her back, dragging down at her, but she held on with both hands and managed to support her weight. Small shards of rock rained down, striking her shoulders, then bouncing into the lava where they melted instantly.

Yanko watched the roots tensely. He did not think they would give way, but he held his breath, regardless, afraid they would break with her over the stream of lava.

At first, she merely hung there, both hands wrapped around the roots. Finally, she growled and lunged for the next clump. Yanko had to move his boots again as a thick flow surged down the tunnel. Another thirty seconds, and the floor would disappear altogether.

As soon as Lakeo swung to the next clump of roots, freeing up the first, he crouched on the balls of his feet, ready to spring. His leg muscles quivered, drained from the poor air and the energy he had fed to the trees. Maybe *Lakeo* was not the one he needed to worry about.

With more lava coming every second, he could not second-guess himself. There wasn't time to try anything else.

He jumped and caught the first clump of roots. Lakeo had moved on to the fourth, her feet dangling a half a foot above the lake of lava. Yanko followed after her, his shoulders protesting the weight of his pack and weapons. Lakeo's must be on fire with all that gear on her back.

Smoke roiled off the magma, and as Yanko looked down into the swirling molten rock, he became certain that Lakeo's thought to run through had been suicidal. Even if it wasn't that deep, their legs would be burned to ash before they had taken two steps. And if they fell now, there would be no hope of surviving.

He looked up, focusing only on the root clumps ahead of him. Looking down only scared him. It was bad enough that sweat dripped into his eyes and slicked his hands. He reached for a root, only to have his grip slip with a lurch that nearly made his heart leap out of his chest. After that, he wiped his hand dry on his robe every time before reaching for a new perch.

Lakeo progressed slowly and carefully, pausing to brace herself, or perhaps gather her strength, before reaching for each new handhold. Yanko's shoulders ached, and his forearms burned. He would have preferred to take his chances swinging quickly from root to root, but he couldn't get around her. Besides, he needed to make sure she made it. If she slipped, he might be able to do something. Of course, if his arms gave out and *he* slipped... there would not be anyone to help him.

Another rumble came from the depths of the earth.

"Now what?" Lakeo groaned.

"Nothing. Keep going, please." Yanko glanced back up the tunnel, hoping he wasn't lying.

"I'm going, I'm going. This is killing my arms."

"I know." Yanko bit down on his tongue to keep from telling her that going faster would get them to the other side more quickly, where their arms could have a nice break. He did not wish to goad her into making a fatal mistake.

Still, the lake level had crept up another two inches. Any second, it would seep over the edge of the tunnel they were angling for. If they didn't make it before that happened, they wouldn't have a safe landing spot. Or any landing spot at all.

The light level increased, and the already awful heat grew more intense. A great surge of lava flowed down the tunnel they had left, filling it over halfway. It would plunge into the lake, which was sure to rise and fill the other tunnel.

"I lied, Lakeo. *Hurry*." His forearms needed a rest badly. They were shaking, and he didn't know how much longer he could hold up his bodyweight. He wished he had thought to abandon his *own* heavy book—maybe his entire pack.

"I am." She reached for a new root, one farther away than most of them had been. "Quit—" She brushed it with her fingers, but didn't manage to grasp it. All of her body weight swung downward, and the root she was hanging onto with her back hand lurched, a few of the strands breaking. She slid lower, the whites of her eyes showing as she struggled to keep from falling all the way off.

Yanko was afraid that if he swung over and tried to catch her, he would only bump her loose. Or worse, the roots he hung from would break if they had to support two people.

"Yanko!" Lakeo cried, her grip slipping another inch. She tried to reach up with her other arm, but she was carrying too much weight, or her muscles were too weary. She missed the grip, and her remaining arm trembled so greatly, he knew she could not hold herself up any longer.

With all the energy he could summon, Yanko gathered the air in all of the tunnels around them, channeling it into a wall of wind. Terrified it wouldn't be enough or that he wouldn't have the accuracy he needed, he hurled it at her at the same time as her hand slipped free.

Instead of plunging down into the lava, she was swept sideways. Her hair brushed the remaining roots as she was hurled toward that one tunnel that was not yet full of lava. She flew into it so hard that she landed more than ten feet in, striking the ground in an uncoordinated tumble that sent her rolling.

With his own arm shaking so badly it was rattling his teeth, Yanko lunged for the next root. He had used so much of his energy in that blast, that his fingers barely managed the strength needed to wrap around the handhold. Moving as quickly as he dared, he swung from root to root, his entire body trembling from the effort. Reaching the far side of the lake, he was about to drop down into the tunnel when the lava oozed over the edge, smothering his landing spot. Already in the air, he tried to replicate what he had done for Lakeo, funneling wind to give himself a push. There wasn't enough time, and he barely felt the breeze. He landed in an inch of molten lava. Heat seared the bottoms of his feet, but he leaped farther into the tunnel as soon as he touched down. He reached the solid ground, ran five steps to where Lakeo was standing up, then reached down, clawing at his laces. Even though he had left the lava, it had burned through the bottoms of his boots and painted his soles with pain. He ripped off his footwear, not caring if he had to run the next ten miles barefoot.

"Yanko, go, go," Lakeo cried as she took off running. "There's more coming."

"I know," he yelled and raced after her.

They sprinted down the passage, hardly caring that it grew dark as they outran the lava's influence. Yanko worried that the dimness would not last. That overflowing lake

had nowhere to go but down this tunnel. And once it all started pouring in behind them, it wouldn't be slow... It would swallow everything in its path on its way to wherever this blasted tunnel came out.

"How far to the end?" Lakeo yelled. She kept glancing back to check on him—or maybe to check on whether a wall of lava was chasing them.

"I have no idea." Yanko barely had the energy to run. Even if he'd had the reserves to call upon his sixth sense, he would have been too frazzled to use it. His feet hurt—his whole body hurt—but all he could think of was running, of finding the end before the lava found them.

"It's coming," Lakeo cried after another glance back.

As if he couldn't feel the heat rushing down the tube ahead of it... and see the rounded walls gradually growing brighter as it closed on them. "I know," was all he said, his legs churning.

The rough rock, already warm from the approaching lava, battered the bottoms of his burned feet, but he kept running. His lungs begged for a reprieve, for air that didn't stink of gas—and his own death—but he kept sucking it in. Despite his weary legs, he caught up with Lakeo. Her face was so red, it looked like her head could explode. He matched her pace and risked another glance backward. The lava raced after them, filling the tunnel, making the walls fiery orange, and then melting them.

"Hafta... do... Yanko." Lakeo shook her head once, clearly unable to get anything more coherent out.

He didn't know what he could do except keep running. He didn't have any power left for anything except moving his legs, and he could barely do that. But it was an island, wasn't it? There had to be an end to the tunnel somewhere. Unless they were spiraling down into the depths of the earth, only to run into another lake of lava, one they couldn't escape this time.

That last image flooded his mind with such hopelessness, such certainty that he was going to die, that he almost missed the whisper of fresh air against his cheek.

"Air!" Lakeo blurted.

The tunnel curved, and a hole came into view, a hole showing a dark sky beyond it. Hope surged through Yanko's weary body, giving him the power to make it, the power to beat—

His toe smacked into a rock so hard that he flew forward, his backpack nearly thrown over his head as he soared through the air—until he hit the ground, landing like a boulder. His sword hilt rammed him in the ribs so hard an inadvertent cry escaped his lips. Lakeo stopped, ran back, and grabbed his arm.

Terrified the lava would overcome him, he needed no urging to scramble back to his feet. Ignoring the fresh scratches and bruises, he waved for her to keep going. He had an eye full of an orange, smoking wall before he spun back toward the exit and sprinted the last fifty meters.

He wasn't trying to call upon the mental sciences, but some instinct warned him of danger a split second before he burst out of the exit. "Cliff!" he blurted, grabbing Lakeo by the pack.

She had already found out, reaching the edge and lurching backward, trying to keep herself from falling out. Only his hand on her pack kept her from tumbling down into the ocean below, an ocean littered with rocks and being battered by an angry surf.

“To the side,” he ordered, though he had no idea if there was anywhere to hang on.

With the lava scant feet behind them, Lakeo lunged right, and Yanko went left, patting at the wall with shaking hands. He found an impossibly tiny ledge, gripped it with the tips of his fingers, then yanked his legs out an instant before steaming lava surged from the tunnel, brightening the night with its searing orange glow. It poured forth, like molten ore from a blacksmith’s ladle, spattering onto the rocks below and splashing into the water, hurling steam into the air.

For a few seconds, he couldn’t find anyplace to put his feet, and he hung from his trembling fingers, certain he would fall, dropping to the rocks below. Then his knee banged against a protruding nub. He swung his leg up, landing his foot on the spot. His remaining leg dangled free, but at least he could get some of the weight off his hands and pause for a moment to breathe. They weren’t out of danger yet, but the taste and smell of the fresh ocean air almost made him euphoric as he sucked it in.

“Lakeo?” he rasped.

Between the lava still flowing from the tube and the clouds of steam rising up from below, he couldn’t see her, and he had to check with his mind to make sure she had found a perch too. Yes, she clung to the rock wall, legs and arms trembling, tears streaking down her flushed cheeks as she pressed her forehead to the stone, sucking in lungfuls of air.

Careful not to upset his precarious balance, Yanko tilted his head back, wondering how high they would have to climb. At least thirty feet. They had come out on the far side of the harbor from town and from the Komitopis plantation. No wonder it seemed like they had been running all the way to the depths of the earth.

A faint rumble coursed through the rock—the volcano still talking. Yanko couldn’t believe that damned mage had meddled with nature like that, just to hurt him. What if the volcano ended up erupting? Endangering everyone on the island?

“I don’t know if I can make it, Yanko,” Lakeo said, having caught her breath enough to talk, though she still sounded like she was on the edge of sanity. Understandable. If they fell, there was a chance they would miss the rocks and land in the surf, but with the way the tide was smashing against the cliff, he did not like their odds of swimming all the way to the harbor, especially as weary as they were. Even without trying, he could sense the marine life moving around down there, alert and agitated, doubtlessly aware of the volcano’s rumbles. A passing shark might not be so distracted that it wouldn’t notice a pair of weak swimmers in the water.

“Better to climb than jump,” he said, catching Lakeo peering over her shoulder. “You can do it. And then we’ll flop down on the ground up there and have a long rest before figuring out what to do next.”

“I don’t know if we’re going to get to do that.”

“What do you mean?” Yanko frowned.

She wasn’t giving up on him, was she? Not after what they had just survived. Yes, the climb would be steep, but they could take their time and handle it.

“Look.” Lakeo was not looking down, but out toward the ocean.

Yanko followed her gaze and groaned when he spotted moving lights atop the dark water. Sun Dragon’s ship. It was heading in their direction.

Chapter 17

“We have to get off this cliff,” Yanko said above the pounding of the surf. “You can make it.”

Lakeo groaned in response.

“It’s not too late to toss those books to the sharks.”

“Then the Kyattese will *really* hate me,” she said. “Destroying knowledge is probably a greater crime here than stealing it.”

Another rumble came from the depths of the volcano, making the cliff tremble. Yanko’s forearms trembled too. Even if that ship weren’t coming, he would need to get off the rocks before his fingers gave way. He shifted his weight, lifting one hand to pat the wall, hunting for a higher ledge. He found a vertical crevice. That would have to do. He wedged his hand in, then looked for a foothold for the leg that had been dangling free.

“I’m heading up,” he said.

“Me too. Not anywhere fast.”

“Me too.” Yanko resisted the urge to glance back at the warrior mage’s ship, the same sleek gray craft that had been following them since Nuria.

“Some light would be nice,” Lakeo said.

“I’m too tired to conjure anything else.” Yanko wiped his sweaty palm on his robe for the thousandth time before reaching for a new handhold. He couldn’t remember ever feeling so weary. “Besides, they would see it and be able to spot us more easily.”

“You don’t think that molten lava shooting out of the cliff a few feet below is enough of a beacon?”

Yanko sighed, acknowledging the point as he shifted his foot up to the next ledge. Light would not matter a wit. Sun Dragon could track him anywhere. It must be nice to be so talented. Maybe if Yanko had gone to school, he would have such abilities.

Focus. You’re an easy target right now.

I’m trying not to focus on that.

The voice in his mind did not have a response for that. He kept climbing, ignoring the fact that his fingers were bleeding. Twenty feet to go. Lakeo had to be as tired as he, but she was making better progress. Maybe she would reach the top and throw a rope down to him.

A shiver ran down his spine, one at odds with the humid night air, air made more humid by the steam still rising up from the lava spill. Dread came to nest in his stomach.

“Attack coming,” he warned and did his best to enter a meditative state there on the cliff side, with the wind tugging at his robe, trying to tear him from the narrow perch he rested on.

“What kind?”

Yanko shook his head. He could not spare the concentration to talk. He could feel power building out on that ship, even though it was still half a mile away and not daring the rocks beneath the cliff. When the fireball formed in the air above its deck, he was not surprised.

Lakeo cursed and climbed faster. Yanko held his position, fear humming through his nerves, giving him a modicum of fresh energy. The fireball raced through the air, its

target inevitable. Yanko used the same tactic he had on the ship, creating a wall of air and thrusting it outward from the cliff. As before, it met the fireball, but it did a poorer job of deflecting it. Some of the heat and power burst through, and Yanko ducked his head as much as he could, trying to take the brunt of it on his pack.

“Don’t let him get through, Yanko,” Lakeo called down. “You don’t want to lose to that monkey’s ass.”

“Losing is less of a problem for me than being incinerated.” Knowing there would be more attacks, Yanko returned to climbing as soon as the flames dissipated. He hoped there was something large and fire-retardant to hide behind on the cliff above. Ten feet to go.

The warning prick came again, licking his spine like a reptile’s sandy tongue. Eight feet to the top. Afraid he would not have the power to deflect another blow, he lunged for a handhold almost out of reach. If he could just pull himself over the edge and get out of the way...

Lakeo was crawling over the top now.

“Fireball,” she blurted.

“I know.” Yanko pushed off a bump with one foot and surged upward, grasping for the top. He caught it with the tips of his fingers.

Lakeo grabbed him under the armpit and helped him over. The light of the approaching fireball turned the top of the cliff orange, illuminating the grass and trees and boulders. Half crawling, half rolling, Yanko scrambled for a tree, having some notion of hiding behind the broad trunk.

The fireball struck the top of the cliff wall. Flames leaped over the edge, charring grass and blowing up shards of rock with the heat, but the stone took the brunt of the attack.

Yanko shoved himself to his feet. He staggered after Lakeo, thinking little more than that he had to get inland, that only distance and obstacles could protect him from further attacks. Rocks and grit stabbed at his burned, bare feet. He wanted nothing more than to crawl into some healer’s office.

“The *Falcon’s Flight*?” Lakeo asked, turning to follow the cliff. “Should we head down and try to find them?”

They were not as far inland as Yanko would have liked, but he and Lakeo would have had to have gone mountain climbing if they wanted to put more distance between themselves and the surf. Town seemed a more likely place for them to avoid Sun Dragon, but they would need to follow a steep path down to the streets and buildings, one that ran close to the edge of the cliff.

People were out in the streets below, staring toward the volcano and the smoke whispering from its caldera. On the flat roof of a large building in the center of town, two dozen men and women in white robes had gathered, also facing the volcano. Many had their hands up toward it and their heads down. Even from his perch on the rocky slope a mile away, Yanko could sense them working some magic, trying to settle the beast before it erupted. He wished he could borrow some of their power to settle another beast, an annoying monkey’s ass, as Lakeo had said.

“Yanko? The piers?” She was leading and glanced back at him. As if he knew where they should go.

“We better hide inland and—” Yanko’s instincts warned of another attack. “Duck,”

he said, lunging behind a boulder and wishing there was more cover on this slope. Lakeo's foot caught, and she tripped, landing flat on her stomach on the path. Before he could crawl out to grab her and pull her back, the ground burst into flames ahead of them.

Cursing, Lakeo rolled back and scrambled behind Yanko's boulder. He could not tell if anything was burning—there hadn't been much more than grass on the rocky hillside—but heat poured off the inferno, promising great pain to anyone who crossed through it. Another time, Yanko might have been able to find a way to put it out, but his mind ached, and he was so tired, he could barely think to scoot away as it rolled across the ground, approaching them with spitting flames.

"Back the way we came?" Lakeo looked up and immediately issued another chain of curses. "He's playing with us, that bastard."

Wearily, Yanko glanced over his shoulder. Another inferno burned at the top of the path. Already, it had started rolling toward them. The only way out would be to run and jump off the cliff. It wouldn't be as great of a fall here as it had been where they had come out, but they were still half a mile away from the calmer—less rocky—waters of the harbor.

Before he had finished considering that option, flames leaped up from that direction, as well, blocking access to the ocean. The mage *was* playing with them. And Yanko was *letting* him play with them. He needed to strike at the man somehow, not simply react to all the torment. This was ridiculous. But how could he attack someone from half a mile away? He had barely mastered lighting candles. Hurling fire across hundreds of meters? Not on his best day, and certainly not now. He needed to use his strength, earth magic. Maybe he could find some seaweed in the ocean, clog the ship's rudders, or...

He lifted his head, an idea sparking in his mind.

Lakeo growled and rolled to the balls of her feet. "We can run through it. Fire isn't like lava."

"Wait," Yanko said, resting a hand on her arm. "Give me a moment. I don't know if it's out there, but if it is, maybe..."

"Yanko we don't have a lot of moments here. Those walls of fire are closing in on us. Can you tell how far they extend?" She shifted her weight, ready to sprint through them rather than being trapped.

Yanko dropped to his knees instead, resting his hands on the earth, sending his mind into the ocean. The sea seethed with life, fish, octopuses, rays... all agitated, sensing the chaos within the volcano. Some were fleeing but others simply waited, those that made their homes in the shallow waters. Where else could they go?

But what about deeper water creatures? Yanko pushed his senses to their limits, searching out beyond the harbor. Just because he had seen that creature on the way in didn't mean it would be out there now, but it was probably the only thing powerful enough to trouble that ship. He brushed past a whale and almost stopped there, but a larger aura called to him, one taking advantage of the chaos to catch fish.

"Yanko," Lakeo whispered above the crackling of flames. "I'm not leaving you here. But you're *not* staying." She gripped his shoulder.

"Wait," he breathed, already touching the kraken's mind with his own, promising a huge bag of fish in return for a favor.

Lakeo didn't wait. She yanked him to his feet, breaking his concentration—and his link to the creature.

“What are you—”

“Look.” She thrust her hand at the walls of flame surrounding them, scorching the earth. She pushed him in the direction of the cliff and the sea, though he could not see either through the swirling orange and yellow inferno. “We have to run, jump. Go.”

Afraid she was right, that he hadn’t gotten his message through to the kraken and that it was too late to try again, Yanko lifted an arm to shield his face. Bracing himself for the pain, he raced into the flames.

But they stopped before they had done more than warm his skin. Between one blink and the next, the flames had disappeared, leaving only the charred and bare earth steaming where the fire had been.

That charred earth burned Yanko’s already raw and blistered feet, and he yelped, hopping back to the patch of untouched ground.

“Yanko,” Lakeo said from the cliff—she still had her boots, and the hot ground hadn’t stopped her. “Did *you* do that?”

He couldn’t see what she was pointing at. With a number of curses for the warrior mage’s clan and progenitors, Yanko forced himself across the burned earth to her side. When he stopped, he had to drop his pack and stand on it, since heat still radiated from the smoking earth. He spotted the ship right away, the *capsized* ship.

Massive dark tentacles had wrapped around the railing and the twin masts, pulling the craft off to the side. More tentacles batted at the deck, knocking people overboard to join others already in the water. One of the masts snapped in half, the loud crack audible even from Yanko’s perch. A heavy tentacle smashed through the wooden deck, leaving an eight-foot hole. Lanterns flew free of their posts, skidding into the water and going out.

“I didn’t realize it was that big,” Yanko whispered as darkness claimed the ship. He hoped the crew would be able to swim to shore or stay afloat until rescue boats rowed out. He glanced toward town to see if anyone down there had noticed, or if the smoking volcano still commanded their attention.

A number of people had gathered outside a fish market on the quay, and they were pointing toward the kraken. It shouldn’t be long before a rescue team could be formed, so long as the volcano did not erupt. If that happened, the warrior mage should have no one to blame except himself. *Should*. Sun Dragon might still blame Yanko.

“We better take our opportunity to find the *Falcon’s Flight* and get out of here. *If* they’ll take us.” Yanko tested the ground. It still oozed heat, but he could stand on it. He grabbed his pack. “A lot of ships might decide to leave at dawn to escape the chaos here.” Chaos that he was responsible for... No, he couldn’t blame all of this on himself. It might not have happened if he had never come here, but the warrior mage had chosen his tactics. “And I need to buy some fish on the way to the dock.”

Lakeo didn’t seem to hear him. She was staring out at the ship and shaking her head. Yanko hadn’t thought she would find any attack orchestrated against one’s enemies too much—she was the one who had intended to shoot the mage hunter. But he admitted that he didn’t know if the crew was his enemy, only that Sun Dragon was. Had they chosen to work for him? Or merely been ordered to by their employers?

“I’ll stop it,” Yanko said. The ship had been damaged so badly, it would be lucky if any part of it could remain afloat. It wouldn’t be chasing the *Falcon’s Flight*—that was a certainty. The warrior mage doubtlessly had the funds to requisition another ship, but Yanko hoped he would be delayed. Maybe if he fell far enough behind, Sun Dragon

would not be able to track Yanko this time.

He closed his eyes, reaching out toward the kraken, sharing an image of a bag of fish with it. The creature had done its task and could stop.

“Are you truly *commanding* it?” Lakeo gaped at him.

“It was more of a negotiation. You don’t command animals much bigger and stronger than you.” Yanko recalled a childhood attempt to command his grandmother’s cat. “Not many smaller and weaker, either.” He waved toward the path—with all of the grass on the hillside burned, they could choose any route down to the city.

“That’s incredible, Yanko.” Lakeo kept glancing toward the ship—the wreck—as they walked. The tentacles released, slithered off the wood, and disappeared back into the ocean. “I didn’t realize you were that powerful. I mean, I knew you were stronger than I am, but...” She whistled lowly.

“I’m not.” Yanko shuddered to think of his lowly talents compared to those of the mage hunting them. “It’s not as if *I* could have destroyed that ship.”

“But the kraken—who else would do that?”

“Anyone with animal-science training. The physical size of the creature doesn’t matter. It’s not any harder to communicate with an elephant than it is to chat up a mouse.”

“I don’t know, Yanko. I don’t think anyone else could have done that.”

Maybe it was because she usually teased or insulted him instead of looking at him with reverence, but her words made him uncomfortable. He did not speak again as they jogged into town. And he had reason to hurry; he could feel the kraken’s presence out in the harbor, waiting for him to come through with his half of the deal.

* * *

“Yanko?” came a woman’s familiar voice from the deck of the ship.

“Arayevo.” Yanko should have come up with a more cheerful greeting—after all, it was morning now, with the first hint of dawn on the horizon—but he could barely see over the barrel he was carrying. He was staggering, bow-legged and barefoot, toting the heavy load to the end of the long pier. “If you could get the captain, I need to talk to him, please.” Beg for passage was the more correct phrase, but that sounded undignified. It was bad enough that he was negotiating the wooden planks of the pier barefoot while wearing a robe more stained than the rocks under seagull nests.

Lakeo stopped at the *Falcon’s Flight*, letting Yanko continue the long journey to the end of the pier by himself. He supposed *he* was the one who had made the deal with the local sea life. Besides, she was carrying her own burden, a pair of dwarf lime trees that Yanko had purchased at the same market where he had acquired his barrel of fish.

“Arayevo, did you see what Yanko did?” Lakeo pointed out toward the wreck. A pair of harbor watch dinghies were on their way out to search for survivors.

“*Yanko* did that?” Arayevo asked.

“His eight-legged friend did. Or would it be eight-armed?”

Still walking, Yanko passed out of earshot and missed the rest of the conversation. That was a good thing. Even better would be if Lakeo did not mention the incident again. With all the trouble he was already in, Yanko did not want to be given credit for destroying a ship, a ship that had people on board who were friends with the Nurian ambassador and the local police.

About three days later—at least that was how it felt—Yanko made it to the end of the

pier and set down the barrel. He could feel the kraken out there, beneath the surface. He did not know whether to toss fish out one at a time or toss the barrel, so he formed both images in his mind and offered them to the creature. The return image came promptly and forcefully—all the fish, all at once, and if Yanko fell in, the kraken would happily eat him too.

So, maybe it wasn't *just* like communicating with a mouse.

Yanko heaved the barrel as far as he could, which, given the battering he had taken that night and the weight of the load, was not very far. A dark purple tentacle shot out of the water, the tip wrapping around its prize. The barrel disappeared so quickly, Yanko might have believed he had imagined everything. But a few seconds later, shattered pieces of wood floated up, all that remained of the meal.

Apparently, nobody else knew the kraken lurked so close to the docks, because there were people out, readying other ships to sail, but nobody had paid any attention to Yanko. He doubted anyone had seen the delivery. Good. He gave the creature a mental salute, then walked back to the *Falcon's Flight*.

"Not a chance," Captain Minark's voice rolled down from the ship's deck before Yanko drew close enough to see him.

Of course, Yanko was not looking at the ship. Another figure walking toward him from the opposite direction captured his attention—a tall, broad-shouldered figure with a sword and pistol at his hip and a huge pack slung over his shoulder. Dak.

"We brought you lime trees," Lakeo said.

"Do not under any circumstances lower my gangplank," Minark told Arayevo. "I'm not going to be bait for a Nurian wizard again. We almost lost the *Flight* last time."

"But Yanko protected us from the fireballs," Arayevo pointed out. Other crew members had shown up behind them at the railing, rubbing bleary eyes.

"Fireballs that were only hurled at us because *he* was on board." Minark thrust his arm toward Yanko.

Lakeo shrugged her shoulders as Yanko joined her. "I tried. He's not being wooed by the lime trees."

"You can't grow *trees* on a *ship*," Minark growled.

"I can create a protective potting system for them so they won't be bothered by the salt and the wind," Yanko offered.

"Not if you're not on board my ship, you can't." Minark crossed his arms over his chest, looking a touch petulant, as well as defiant.

While Yanko was hunting for an argument that might sway him—he had used the last of his money on the fish and the lime trees, so riches wouldn't do it—Dak came to a stop in front of them. He prodded Lakeo's bulging backpack.

"Those the library books the Kyattese are looking for?" he asked.

"I'll bring them back when I'm done using them. Isn't that how libraries work?"

Lakeo didn't sound remorseful over her unauthorized borrowing.

"For citizens. And for reference books that aren't a hundred years old and rare."

Lakeo scowled, challenging him with her eyes, as if she would be willing to fight him over them. "Then the Kyattese should thank me, because my travel mate suggested I dump them in a lake of boiling lava earlier tonight."

"To save her *life*," Yanko rushed to explain when Dak turned a cool gaze onto him. It occurred to him that Dak may have come to collect them and turn them over to the

embassy. Except he wouldn't have brought a bag if that was his intent, right? Sound reasoning, Yanko believed, but he couldn't keep from squirming under Dak's assessing gaze. "And *I* didn't steal anything," he found himself adding, like some child making excuses to a parent. "I even helped the Kyattese economy by purchasing trees and fish."

Dak looked down at the trees—Lakeo had grown tired of holding them and set down the pots. "And fish?" he asked.

"Uh, yes." Yanko glanced back down the pier. "The fish have been consumed already."

Dak's eye shifted toward the wreck—the rescuers were hauling people out of the water. Yanko shifted uneasily, having no delusions that Sun Dragon might have died. He needed to jump onto a ship—any ship on its way out of the harbor, and at the moment, he didn't even care where it was going.

"As entertaining as this blather is," Minark said from the deck, "we have a new cargo to deliver. Arayevo, you're coming with us, right?"

"I..." Arayevo looked at the ship behind her, the men running and climbing about, making ready to sail. Then she looked down at Yanko. "Are you all right?" she asked him. "You look... rough. Do you need my help?"

While his spirit had not been bolstered by her polite suggestion that he looked like a dead animal that had been plucked over by carrion birds for days, her offer of assistance let him forget that. Would it be selfish of him to say that he did need help? *Her* help?

The captain scowled fiercely at the question. Yanko almost told her yes right there, because he would love to end whatever chances Minark thought he had with Arayevo, in addition to winning her company. But... what right did he have to put her in danger? To put anyone in danger? He looked back out to the wreck, then shook his head.

"No, thank you, Arayevo. Nothing but trouble is going to follow me, and I don't want you endangered by it." Yanko looked at Dak. "And you've more than redeemed the favor you said you owed me. Thank you."

Yanko shrugged at Lakeo, not sure what to say to her. If she wanted to part ways, he would understand, but he thought she might continue with him, if only because she was being labeled a criminal here. Back in Nuria... well, he still had to figure out a way to finish Zirabo's quest and to bring honor to his family. Or at least clear his name. He sighed and picked up the lime trees, thinking he could barter them and his skills as a mage for passage on another ship. A fledgling mage. He had enough marks against him; he didn't need to lie about his qualifications to a potential employer.

"Your cargo worth more than a pirate's treasure?" Dak asked.

Yanko frowned in confusion, thinking the question had been for him. But Dak was looking at the still-scowling Minark.

"What?" the captain asked.

"I have a map to the secret stash of a former archaeologist-turned-relic-raider-and-pirate." Dak pointed a thumb over his shoulder at his large pack.

"Do you really?" Yanko whispered. From the way Dak and Mela Komitopis had been speaking, it hadn't sounded like *anyone* knew where the museum loot had been hidden. How could he have found a map in such a short time?

Dak shook his head infinitesimally. So, a bluff. But why? To gain passage on the ship? Why did Dak care? Unless he had become a believer in the Golden Lodestone and wanted it for himself. Or his people.

“What’s the pirate’s name?” Minark said, his eyes narrowed.

“Heanolik Tomokosis, the Mausoleum Bandit.”

“He-ah-no-what? I hate Kyattese names. Who can pronounce them?”

“The Kyattese,” Dak said.

“The Mausoleum Bandit.” Minark stroked one of the charms dangling from his belt.

“That name does sound familiar.” He looked at Arayevo, as if she were worldly and wise and might advise him on the matter.

She shrugged.

“Where’d you get this supposed map?” Minark asked.

“I made it myself. I’ve been doing research here.”

Yanko doubted Dak had found time to research anything in the handful of hours since he and Lakeo had fled the plantation. He might have had time to gather some books. That would explain the bulky pack.

“You’ve been doing research.” Minark grunted. “Aren’t you the bodyguard?”

Yanko watched curiously, wondering if Dak might reveal a little more of his background, thus to prove the likelihood that he might have access to restricted information.

All he did was give a tight smile and say, “Yes.”

“Care to show me this map?” Minark asked.

“Once we’re all aboard and underway in the direction of my choosing, I will.”

“We’d want an eighty percent cut of the loot,” Minark said. “We’d be doing all the work, getting you there, and I’ve got a crew and a bunch of freeloaders to feed.” He waved down at them.

“Fifty percent,” Dak said. “I have the map.”

Yanko almost choked on his audacity. What would happen when they were a few hours out to sea and the captain learned Dak didn’t have anything except some books? As strong as he was, he couldn’t fight off an entire crew.

“Seventy,” Minark said.

“Sixty.”

Yanko was surprised that Dak didn’t add that there was one item that he insisted on keeping, but then realized that it wouldn’t be a good idea to draw attention to the fact that they sought something special. Enough other people wanted the lodestone already.

The captain leaned forward, gripped the railing, and glowered down at the three of them. “I’m going to regret this, aren’t I?”

Dak gazed back without comment.

Arayevo smiled down at Yanko. He didn’t know if it was because she was excited at the prospect of a treasure hunt or she wanted him to come back aboard, but he smiled back.

“Fine, get on,” Minark said and stomped away.

“He’s such a pleasant host,” Lakeo said.

Arayevo grabbed someone else to help, then lowered the gangplank. When Yanko picked up the potted lime trees, Dak quirked an eyebrow in his direction, but did not otherwise comment.

Yanko climbed aboard as soon as the gangplank touched the pier, even if he had no idea where they were going. Maybe Dak had a vague destination in mind. For now, it did not matter, so long as they escaped Sun Dragon’s wrath. Dak and Lakeo followed him

aboard.

Arayevo hugged Yanko when he reached the deck. He must look like he needed it. He made no move to object.

"We were heading out this morning, anyway," Arayevo said. "Do you have a problem with leaving soon?"

Yanko glanced toward the rescue dinghies, which were now rowing the survivors toward shore. He couldn't see anyone in a robe hunkered on the benches, and even though he doubted he should hope for another mage's death, his life would be simpler if the nemesis he had never asked for had been destroyed.

"No problem at all," he murmured.

"I'll tell the captain," Arayevo jogged away.

Lakeo walked over to a big coil of rope by the railing, tossed her pack into it, and flopped down. After their ordeal, she would sleep for days. Yanko would like to do the same, but Dak would probably want help researching. Even if he didn't want it, Yanko would provide it. He doubted Dak's motivations for showing up on the pier had anything to do with wanting *Nuria* to find the lost continent.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked Dak, not that he expected a straight answer.

"You are not the only one who seeks honor," Dak said and walked off to stow his gear.

In other words, he had his own nation's interests in mind. Yanko watched him go with mixed feelings. Oddly, he was glad to have his surly bodyguard back, but he couldn't help but wonder if a time would come when they had to cross swords.

As two crew members stowed the gangplank, he glimpsed a red and blue bird flying over the harbor. Kei? He was a long ways from home. Had he sought out Yanko because of their mind link? Yanko had never intended for that to be permanent or for the parrot to continue to work with him.

With a flapping of wings that managed to avoid Yanko's head this time, Kei dropped onto his shoulder, sinking his claws in with his usual lack of delicacy.

"Puntak, puntak," he announced.

A Nurian sailor walking past frowned over at the bird. Yanko pretended not to notice.

You don't need to stay with me, he told Kei, forming a picture of the Komitopis plantation in his mind. *You can go home.*

"Chips," Kei announced.

I'm out of chips. Yanko added an image of empty pockets.

A return image popped into his mind, one featuring a pile of seeds.

Yanko sighed. *I'll see what I can find.*

The *Falcon's Flight* pulled away from the pier, and Kei made no move to fly back toward the island. Whether he wanted another traveling companion or not, Yanko had one.

He headed for the steps leading below decks, hoping he might find some scraps suitable for a bird. He had no sooner reached the bottom than a wave of power washed over him, *unfriendly* power. It was more of a probe than an attack, but the strength of it made him lean a hand against the wall for support. And then an all-too-familiar voice spoke into his mind.

You think you won a victory today? You've only won a temporary respite. I will follow you wherever you run, and you will die, boy. You will die.

THE END

Afterword

Thank you for checking out the first book in the *Chains of Honor* series. The second novel, *Snake Heart*, will be available soon. I'll send a note out to my newsletter when it's ready to go, so please [subscribe](#) if you haven't already.

In the meantime, there are three prequel novellas with Yanko and some of the other characters featured in this book. If you're wondering how Yanko first met Dak, please check out the [Swords & Salt Collection](#).

Also, feel free to visit me on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), or [Google+](#). Thanks for reading!