

# **The Bookster's Apprentice**

**by Greg Wilson**

*YA fantasy novel*

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*65 Highfield Road  
Toronto, Ontario M4L 2T9  
gvwilson@third-bit.com  
<http://third-bit.com>*

*Take a squat pyramid of rock, four gallops square and two gallops tall. Lift it into the air, then tilt it back like an old man looking up at a passing cloud, so that its leading edge rises gently to the central peak, while its stern drops so steeply that only goats, birds, and a small village called Aft Landing can find a foothold. Put a town of some ten thousand souls on its bow, and smaller towns (not villages—their inhabitants are quite definite about that) on its port and starboard flanks. Bash its underside against the peaks of a few ordinary earth-bound mountains, then let rain, snow, and windblown sand weather it for a few thousand years as it travels around the world. That is Avaunt.*

*Now put it in motion. Eight months north from Mau Ngapcha to Gandan Berth, with half the world's chocolate in its warehouses, along with cinnamon, cloves, silk, and cured bamboo as tough as stone. Two weeks on the ground, while merchants from all over northern Cherne elbow past each other to make bargains, and then another eight months in the air with grain, cider, wool, and steel for the south.*

*When the Pilots ruled the world, Avaunt roamed the world over. After they destroyed themselves, it was taken over by wild-eyed tinkers with a fascination for the Pilots' strange machines. They called themselves the Hett, and as the years passed, the people who lived below them regarded them with growing suspicion. Stories spread of the Hett's hoarded wealth, and of the plots they must be hatching to one day rule the world as the Pilots had.*

*Eventually, an ambitious young prince with few prospects at home decided to do more than mutter. The next time Avaunt landed at Gandan Berth, the rag-tag army he had recruited attacked. Most of the Hett were slain. The rest were driven off the mountain with nothing but the clothes on their backs. It was barely spring, and bitterly cold. Few survived.*

*The Hett's storied wealth turned out to consist of goats, scrap metal, and books no one knew how to read. Undeterred, the prince retitled himself the Captain of Avaunt, made his least untrustworthy followers his bosuns, and gave the Hett's houses and farms to rest. Most of them smoked, drank, or gambled away their gifts, but the rest settled down to trade, raise families, and watch the world slip past beneath them.*

*Now, look closer. There, in Starboard Town. Four hundred years have passed; it is Redsdag, the 11th of Peridot, 1261. A girl is running for her life. She just felt the mountain shake for the first time in centuries, but that's not what she's afraid of. She's afraid of what*

*the boy chasing her will do to her if he catches her...*

Erileine raced down Slip Street twenty strides in front of her pursuer. She paid no attention to the frightened looks on the faces of the people she hurtled by. "What just happened?" they asked one another. The ground had shaken—had there been an avalanche? But then why hadn't there been any noise? No one had noticed yet that the sun lay fifteen degrees away from where it had been. No one had realized that for the first time since the Pilots fell, the flying mountain had changed course mid-flight.

Past Donaïen and Armaend's; past Fraederiq's house, where his father Gaeston was just coming out onto the street, looking for someone to blame for the bottles that had fallen off his shelves and shattered. There—Mamaere Mayeule's tavern. Erileine cut right into the little alley that ran between it and the smokehouse next door. She ran blindly for a second, her eyes useless in the deep shadows after the brightness of the morning, praying that Mamaere Mayeule hadn't left any barrels out to air.

Fraederiq was only a dozen strides behind her when Erileine burst into the little courtyard behind the tavern. She startled a cat, jumped over a stool, banged her knee against a second without stopping, and pulled herself over the stone wall at the rear of the courtyard. The mountain wasn't quite as steep there as it was around most of Starboard Town. It was one of those places children were definitely not supposed to play, which meant that she knew it as well as her tongue knew her teeth. There was a narrow ledge thirty strides below that led to her papaere's cottage. She'd be safe if she could get there. Safe for the moment, anyway, and she could worry about afterward once she was she sure had one.

Fraederiq hardly broke stride as he flung himself over the wall behind her. Erileine glanced over her shoulder as she slipped and slid down the slope, scraping her hands as she grabbed at bushes to slow herself down. Stones clattered past her as Fraederiq did the same. It was going to be close...

"Whoa!" she cried, almost sliding past the ledge before her sturdy boots found purchase. She grabbed hold of a strangle vine for balance, yanked her arm away before the hungry plant could wrap itself around her, and quickstepped along the narrow shelf.

Fraederiq slid to a halt two heartbeats behind her. A trickle of bloody spit made a dark wet track through the dust on his face. "You little lump of nose wax!" he shouted. "I'm going to throw you over the side!"

The ledge was barely a handspan wide. Pursued and pursuer both had to shuffle, left foot to right, then right forward, hands grabbing bushes, branches, roots, and outcroppings of rock for balance.

Erileine stumbled on a loose chip of stone. "Go on, jump!" Fraederiq yelled. "Save me the trouble!"

"Jump yourself!" Erileine shouted back without turning her head. There was nothing between her and the plains below but a gallop of empty air. Left foot, right, left, right... She could see her papaere's cottage. Just a few more steps, and—

Fraederiq's hand caught hold of her collar. "Gotcha!" the older boy said triumphantly.

"Let go! Fraederiq, let go! I'm going to fall!" Erileine wriggled and tried to twist free, her shirt pulling free of her trousers as Fraederiq yanked her back.

Fraederiq's ugly grin widened. He let go of the roots he was holding and pulled his hand back for a punch.

As he did so, the mountain shuddered again. Fraederiq's eyes widened in sudden terror as he lost his balance. He let go of Erileine and windmilled his arms.

"No!" Fraederiq shouted. He reached out desperately, but Erileine was frozen against the mountainside. Off balance, his arms still flailing, Fraederiq toppled backward into space and plummeted toward the dry earth below.

Erileine clung to the mountain. "No, no, no..." she moaned, squeezing her eyes shut so hard that speckles swirled beneath their lids. Her arms tried to drive her fingers into the rock, to root her in the mountain so that she wouldn't fall too. This couldn't be happening. Fraederiq couldn't be gone, not like that. How could he just *fall*? And why hadn't she reached out to grab him?

She bit her lip, her body shuddering as she tried to control her sobs. She had to tell someone. She had to get out of there before the mountain shook again. And all of a

sudden she needed to pee, badly.

She took a deep, unsteady breath and forced her hands to relax, only then realizing that they were sticky with blood. She had scraped her palms and fingers raw on the mountain. Her forehead too—she must have ground her face against the cliffside.

She turned her head to see how far it was to the end of the ledge. Twenty strides, maybe less. She couldn't do it. She couldn't move, but she had to.

She stood there, the wind of the mountain's passage ruffling her hair, until she stopped shaking. With her face and chest pressed against the rough, indifferent rock, she edged toward her papaere's one step at a time. Each time she moved her feet, she had to force herself to peel her hands off the mountain. The air around her was filled with the trills and caws of panicked birds. She felt oddly disconnected, as if her body was moving itself and she was just watching.

The ledge finally merged with a steep hillside littered with sturdy deep-rooted shrubs for her to hold onto. Without warning, the last of her breakfast rose in her throat.

A minute later, she spat in a vain attempt to clear the taste from her mouth, then wiped dust, sweat, blood, and tears from her face with the tail of her shirt. Saints and their creations, what was she going to tell Fraederiq's father?

Erileine stumbled shakily toward her papaere's cottage. Pine branches slapped her face in silent reproach. She had been right there. Why hadn't she just put out her hand? He might have pulled her off the mountain with him, but that would be better than—better than— She doubled over, heaving again.

Vurt was on his verandah, cursing in a flat monotone when his granddaughter stumbled out of the trees. "Eri!" he exclaimed, dropping the old crossbow he'd been trying to reassemble onto the scarred table beside him.

Erileine collapsed into her papaere's arms. "Eri? Eri!" Vurt shook her. "Frogs on stilts, girl, you look like you've been a ghost! Are you all right?"

Erileine shook her head. "I— we— Papaere, he fell. F-F-Fraederiq fell. When the m-m-mountain..." She buried her face in her papaere's chest, her body racked by sobs again.

"What?" Vurt took Erileine's shoulders and gently pushed her back to study her face. "Who fell?"

"F-F-Fraederiq. We were—" Words failed her. She jerked her head back the way she had come.

"*Saad*," Vurt cursed. "Are you sure? Maybe he only slipped down a ways."

Erileine shook her head miserably. "No, I s-s-saw him. He *fell*." She wiped her nose on her sleeve. "Papaere, what happened to the mountain?"

"I don't know," Vurt said grimly. "But it knocked me right over. And look." He pointed at the sky. The sun was almost hidden behind the roof of his cottage. "We're off course. I'm guessing it's about a quarter of an arc. If your paere didn't still have my weeping-be-damned sextant, I'd know better." His face darkened. "Now, tell me what happened."

A flock of plausible lies flew through Erileine's mind. "We were on the ledge below Mamaere Mayeule's," she confessed miserably. "He was chasing me, and I thought if I could get here I'd be all right, but he w-would have caught me if I'd come straight down Slip Street, so I—" She broke off, unable to meet her papaere's eyes.

Vurt waited, his face expressionless. "I went over her back wall," Erileine finished dully. "He came after me. We were halfway here when it happened."

Vurt studied his granddaughter's face. "You know you're not supposed to go there."

"I know," Erileine said wretchedly. "I'm sorry." Suddenly her eyes widened. "What about maere and paere? And Queçenne?" She turned to run up the stairs that led from Vurt's cottage to the lower end of Starboard Town's single street.

Vurt caught her arm. "Hang on a heartbeat. You can't go up there looking like that—you'll give your maere a fright. Go inside and clean up a bit. There's water in the jug." He pushed his granddaughter toward the cottage's front door, then stooped over to pick up his crossbow, wincing as his knee cracked.

A moment later, the old brass wash jug clanged down on his kitchen table, empty. The door opened. "You ready?" Vurt asked.

Erileine goggled at him, her dark face scrubbed clean but her eyes still red from

weeping. "Papaere—what are you doing?"

Vurt frowned. "What does it look like I'm doing?"

Erileine looked at the sword slung at her grandfather's side, the loaded crossbow in his hands, and the polished teak fangs of the ankle-biter sticking out of the worn leather pack on his back. "Starting a war?"

Vurt's frown turned to an angry scowl. "Funny girl. I'd rather have it and not need it than need it and not have it, that's all. Now come on." He turned toward the stairs.

Erileine hesitated. "What's wrong?" Vurt asked.

"Papaere—what am I going to tell Gaeston?"

Her grandfather's mouth twisted. "I don't know, love. Never have. Now come on—your maere will be fretting herself sick."

\* \* \* \* \*

*A few hours earlier...*

The day started like any other. Sunshine meant it was morning. Morning meant Erileine had to get out of bed. She rubbed the grit from her eyes and rolled over, luxuriating in a last few moments of warmth.

The gumminess in her mouth told her that she had read past midnight once again. The book responsible sat on the stool beside her low-framed bed; the thumb-sized piece of dayglass that had been her nightlight when she was little lay on top of it, still glowing faintly with the remains of the previous day's sunlight.

She yawned and sat up, wrapping the quilt around her shoulders. Vaszlav would arrive soon, if he wasn't already in his usual spot outside Mamaere Mayeule's. Erileine groped under the quilt for her pants and shirt, then slipped the book she'd borrowed on the peddler's previous visit into her satchel and went downstairs.

"Morning," her father Laeuc said.

"Morning," Erileine replied, yawning again. Her father had already been up for hour or more carving fine curlicue details on the shaft of a bamboo flute.

"You going to see Vaszlav?"

"Mm hm." Erileine eyed the heel of potato bread that lay forgotten on a plate at her

father's elbow. "Are you going to eat that?"

"No, go ahead." Laeuc scored a quarter circle in the flute, then held it up and squinted at it critically. "Don't forget you have to finish the fence today."

"I won't." Slipping the bread into her pocket, Erileine headed out the front door.

She stood blinking for a moment in the sharp light of the mountain morning. It was earlier than she'd thought—Slip Street was almost empty. She was tempted to go back inside to sit with her father and watch him carve, but then she heard a rooster crow from Armaend and Donaïen's yard. Wood smoke and the ever-present tang of pine trees hung in the spring air. Her mother would be up soon, and would undoubtedly think it was a fine day for doing chores. Erileine grinned. If her sister Queçenne was the only one in the house to do them, so much the better.

Slip Street ran the length of Starboard Town, as crooked as a dropped piece of string. It was paved from top to bottom with rounded gray cobblestones, each as large as Erileine's two hands put together. Weeding between them was the bosun's favorite punishments for minor offenses, which meant that Erileine had pulled up more burlicks and snowdelions than any two of Starboard Town's other children, invariably muttering, "But I didn't mean to," under her breath.

The houses crowded shoulder-to-shoulder on either side of the street had steep roofs for the snows of northern winters and large shuttered windows to let in the breeze during the hot southern summers. Their whitewashed walls held brightly-painted doors, each unique: orange and gray, blue and red, a diamond pattern of black on gold. Wooden soldiers half Erileine's height stood guard beside the doors in matching uniforms sewn from scraps and rags. Every storyteller on the mountain had a different explanation for the custom; all anyone really knew was that they made them because their grandparents had, and their grandparents before them.

Above the narrow street flew the town's kites. The townspeople launched them when the mountain left Mau Ngapcha, with wishes written on their bamboo cross-struts. A few had already fallen, or been blown away by storms, but most still dipped and swayed in the steady breeze of the mountain's northward journey.



Erileine touched two fingers to her lips and pointed them at the blue, orange, and yellow paper diamond holding station downwind from her family's chimney. "Next year in Gandan," she whispered. Next year in the greatest school in the world, surrounded by books and scholars, a place where no one thought you were strange if you knew what "loquacious" meant...

A cream-and-chocolate goat bleated at Erileine from a nearby rooftop, then lowered its head to nibble the moss between its feet. Two startled irvings fluttered away like leaves in a sudden hurricane, returning a heartbeat later to peck at the goat's leavings. Hitching her satchel's strap higher on her shoulder, she ambled up the street to Mamaere Mayeule's.

Vaszlav was just starting to set up when Erileine arrived. "Clear day, young *sra*," the old Hett tinker puffed, slipping his heavy pack off his shoulders and ducking his head respectfully.

"Day, Vaszlav," Erileine replied. "Did you find the other Farberre book?"

"Ah, that..." Vaszlav shrugged apologetically. "I'm sorry, but the fellow wouldn't lend it out. Offered him half a quarter-ring, like you said, and promised he'd get the full worth of it if there was so much as a smudge on the back page, but he said it was the only copy he had."

"Oh." Downcast, but also somewhat relieved that she wouldn't have to spend a week's allowance on something she would probably read in a single evening, Erileine leaned against Mamaere Mayeule's and watched the old man take his pack's bamboo frame apart with a speed born of long practice.

She turned at the sound of footsteps on the cobblestones to find a second Hett had come up behind her. "Clear day," Erileine said politely.

The Hett nodded. "And to you." He was younger than Vaszlav—perhaps in his twenties or early thirties. Where the older Hett was wiry, the newcomer looked as sturdy as a cart ox, with the top two buttons of his shirt undone and a sleeveless vest over top of it instead of the full coat that Vaszlav wore no matter what weather the mountain was flying through. His curly hair and dark eyes were as unremarkable as his homespun

clothes, but there was a stillness about him that unsettled Erileine.

Vaszlav cleared his throat. "This is Jaromir, my new apprentice. And this *sra* is Erileine Saedanne é Laeuc, the most voracious reader on Avaunt."

The Hett nodded. It was definitely a nod, not Vaszlav's deferential dip of the head. "Shall I set up here?" he asked the older Hett.

"Please." Vaszlav handed his apprentice two pieces of bamboo. "Here. Idiot things must have warped with the wet. See if you can sort them out."

A small knot of people gathered while the two Hett put Vaszlav's stall together and set out his wares, each explaining to the next who Jaromir was. Bored, Erileine counted the cobblestones beneath her feet. Two, four, six... eighteen, twenty—Slip Street was twenty cobblestones wide. She frowned. How many there were on the whole street? Her papaere or the bookster would have thought it would be fun to figure it out with her. Not the townspeople around her, though—they would just roll their eyes and trade amused looks with each other.

Or worse. Her stomach sank as she saw Fraederiq and Niquolas coming toward her. The three of them had been friends when they were younger, but then Fraederiq's mother had run off, intoxicated (some said) by the whispered poetry of a Bantangui cinnamon merchant, and weary (said others) of her husband's endless dissatisfaction with everything and everyone. Now fifteen, Fraederiq hadn't just grown taller and stronger: he'd grown angry too, angry at the whole world. As always, Niquolas had followed suit, rolling up his sleeves the way Fraederiq did, throwing stones when Fraederiq threw them, and sneering at whatever stirred the older boy's displeasure that day.

As the only other child their age in Starboard Town, and with a head full of odd facts, Erileine was resigned to being their favorite target. Lately, though, it had seemed as if Fraederiq was trying to be nice to her. That worried Erileine more than the surreptitious trippings and knucklings she'd grown used to. She slid behind Armaend and Donaïen, who were lost in one of their interminable discussions about cooking, but it was too late.

"Day." Fraederiq's greeting was just a grunt.

"Day." Erileine stuck her hands in her pockets. The less she said...

Fraederiq jerked his chin at Vaszlav's stall. "Anything better than the usual junk this time?"

Erileine shrugged. "I dunno."

Fraederiq's eyes narrowed. "Who's he?" he asked, pointing at Jaromir.

"Vaszlav's apprentice."

"Huh. Another stupid newcomer. My paere says there's too many new Hett on the mountain."

Erileine shrugged again. Fraederiq's father Gaeston said many things, few of them kind. She was saved from having to think of another noncommittal answer by the ringing of Vaszlav's chime. "Clear day, good morning, *mingala ba*," he said, as he always did. "Please, good *sra*, how may I help you today?"

Erileine cast a quick eye over the odds and ends on display, seeing nothing she hadn't seen before. As she turned to go, Fraederiq caught her arm. She stiffened, waiting for a knuckle-twist in her ribs. Instead, Fraederiq nodded brusquely at Vaszlav's shelves. "What do you think of that barrette?" he asked.

"What?"

"That barrette," Fraederiq repeated impatiently. "Think it's any good? My paere says a lot of what the Hett sell is junk. I don't want to waste good money on junk."

Bemused, Erileine looked at the little barrette. It didn't look like much of anything to her, just two fingers of polished wood held together by a bent tin spring. "I guess it's all right to me."

"I think it's junk," Niquolas sneered.

Fraederiq silenced him with a look. "You think someone like Queçenne would like it?"

Erileine blinked. "Um... I don't know," she said weakly.

Fraederiq scowled. "Come on. She's your sister, you ought to know."

Erileine shrugged helplessly. Sharing a house with Queçenne didn't mean she

knew how her sister thought. "I don't know," she repeated. "Why don't you ask her?" *Or jump off the mountain*, she added to herself. The thought that Fraederiq might care what Queçenne liked and didn't like was deeply unsettling.

"Pfah. You're useless." Fraederiq let go of her arm and slipped past Armaend and Donaïen, who were still arguing about the best way to chop onions when making curry. "How much is that?" he asked Vaszlav, pointing at the barrette.

"This?" Vaszlav handed it to Fraederiq. "It's quite the pretty, isn't it? Thindi, not Bantanguï—on my blood, that's real mahogany. I could let you have it for three quarter rings."

"What? For this trash?" Fraederiq scowled. "It's not worth half that. Here." He pulled a string of coins out of his pocket, untied it, and held out a pair of quarter-ring coins. "I'll give you half a ring for it, how's that?"

Vaszlav spread his hands helplessly. "I am sorry, *sra*, but I cannot. I paid two quarters five pence for it myself, and—"

"What about goods in trade?" Niquolas interrupted. He elbowed Fraederiq. "We've been doing some carving, haven't we? We figure they'll fetch half a ring each. Give you three now, that's..." He paused, his fingers moving against his trouser leg.

"A ring and a half," Erileine supplied automatically.

Before Vaszlav could reply, Jaromir spoke up. "What kind of carvings these are?"

Niquolas glanced around. "Heads," he said conspiratorially. "For door soldiers. We're making them out of coconut shells. They're really scary—still have all the hair on and everything. People are going to pay a fortune for them, you'll see."

"That sounds interesting," Jaromir said, his tone saying more than his words. "Perhaps we could take a look at some before making any agreement?"

As Niquolas opened his mouth to reply, Fraederiq cut in. "Why? Do you think our work isn't good enough for you?"

The burly Hett shrugged. "How can I know until I have seen them?"

"Well, they're better than most of the junk *you're* selling!" Niquolas protested.

The Hett shrugged again. "Then perhaps we should be more careful in general."

Erileine caught her breath. Hett didn't talk that way to Avauntois, not if they knew what was good for them.

Fraederiq scowled. "Hells, keep the damned thing." He tossed the barrette at Jaromir, deliberately throwing it too low to catch. It bounced off the Hett's knee and fell to the cobblestones. Without saying a word, Jaromir stooped to pick it up and replaced it on the stall's shelves.

The corner of Fraederiq's mouth curled up. "Nice catch," he said. Without another word he turned and walked away, whistling, with Niquolas hurrying along behind him.

Erileine's heart sank. She knew that look and that whistle. They meant that Fraederiq had a plan, and that was *never* good news.

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Erileine spent the rest of the morning mending the bamboo fence that kept the rabbits out of her family's vegetable garden. When Vaszlav rang his chimes at noon to signal that his visit was over, she hung her hammer on the fence and squeezed into the narrow gap between her house and the one next to it.

The sweat on her face and arms chilled instantly in the cool shadows. She inched toward Slip Street. If she stopped just *here*, she could see Fraederiq's house without being seen herself.

Vaszlav and Jaromir trudged past with their reassembled packs on their backs. A heartbeat later, the door Erileine was watching opened. Fraederiq stepped onto the street and set off after the two Hett.

"Great," Erileine muttered. Now what was she going to do? Tell the bosun that she didn't like the look Fraederiq had on his face three hours ago? Wishing she could whisper in someone's ear from halfway across the world like a magician, she followed Fraederiq.

At the top of Slip Street, the Hett turned right onto Forecastle Road. Fifty strides behind them, Fraederiq hopped the fence into Papaere Badette's bedraggled front garden. Erileine's heart sank. That was the shortcut to the upper goat pasture—Fraederiq was definitely trying to catch up with the Hett, out of sight of the rest of the

town.

"Afternoon, young bookster. Shouldn't you be up at the Captain's House?" The booming voice made Erileine jump.

"Afternoon, bosun." She touched her fingers to her hairline in a hurried salute. "I'm, um, I'm mending the fence."

The bosun raised his eyebrows. "Really? Looked to me like you were standing in the middle of the street."

"Yes, bosun." Erileine swallowed. "It's just..." *Fraederiq will kill me*, she thought bleakly. "It's just, I think there's a problem."

If Erileine hadn't sounded so miserable, the bosun wouldn't have believed her. After all, this was the girl who once claimed that she hadn't hung the laundry up to dry because she had been kidnapped by a pack of banana trolls. But when Erileine mentioned Jaromir catching the thrown barrette, the bosun nodded. "Heard about that," he grunted. "Damn cheeky of him."

"Yes, *sra*," Erileine said, not sure whether the bosun was referring to Fraederiq or Jaromir.

Bosun Uyves sucked on his front teeth for a moment. "Up to the goat pasture, eh? All right. Let's go see what's happening."

"But—"

The bosun raised a finger. Just one, but it was enough. Erileine closed her mouth with a snap. How did she get herself into these things?

There was an even shorter shortcut to the pasture, one that involved scrambling up a near-vertical rock face near the pit where the villagers dumped the gleanings from their outhouses. Once at the top, the bosun reached down, grabbed Erileine's wrist, and pulled her up like a sack of yams. He tapped his finger to his lips, then slipped into the trees. Erileine followed helplessly.

The dense carpet of fallen needles underfoot muffled their steps. Suddenly Erileine heard voices ahead. "Actually, I'm saving you money," Fraederiq said. "I mean, the fine would be what, two crowns? Maybe three? Hells, the bosun might even shackle you for a

week. Giving me that piece of trash seems cheap by comparison, doesn't it?"

Erileine and the bosun were close enough to hear Vaszlav clear his throat. "If you put it that way..."

"No," Jaromir said firmly.

Erileine gingerly moved a branch out of her way. Fraederiq was standing in the middle of the road with his back to the bushes Erileine and the bosun were hiding behind. The Hett were facing him, their oversized packs on their shoulders. A frightened smile was fixed on Vaszlav's face, but Jaromir's arms were crossed, and his expression stony.

Fraederiq tsk'd. "Well then, I suppose there's nothing I can do except go and tell the bosun."

"Tell me what?" Uyves asked, stepping onto the road. As Fraederiq whirled around, Erileine saw Jaromir flick his hand to toss something into the bushes beside him.

"Clear day, bosun," Vaszlav said nervously. "We, um, we were just—"

"Tell me what?" the bosun repeated, ignoring him.

Fraederiq jerked his thumb over his shoulder at Jaromir. "He's wearing a homestone. I saw it when they were in town."

"Did you now?" Uyves' eyes never left Fraederiq's face. "Funny you didn't mention it then."

Fraederiq shrugged. "I just wanted to be sure."

The bosun's hand shot out to grab Fraederiq's collar and yank him up onto his toes. "You want to be sure of something, be sure of this," the bosun growled into the struggling boy's ear. "Taking fines is the captain's business, and no one else's. I ever catch you doing it under your own sail, you will be chopping wood until your hands bleed. Understood?"

"Yes, *sra*," Fraederiq said sullenly, touching his finger to his hairline grudgingly.

The bosun pushed him away. "Good. Now be off with you."

"Yes, *sra*," he repeated. As he turned to go, he shot Erileine a look that was as cold

as a dead snake's heart.

"So," the bosun said to the Hett. "What's this about a homestone?"

Jaromir shrugged without uncrossing his arms. "I am not wearing one, *sra*."

"Mm hm." The bosun beckoned him forward. "Open your shirt."

Wordlessly, the Hett undid his vest, then his shirt, and held them open. Other than a healthy crop of chest hair, there was nothing to see.

"So where is it?" the bosun asked.

Jaromir lowered his arms and began buttoning his shirt.

"I said, where is it?" the bosun repeated sharply.

Vaszlav wrung his hands. "*Sra*, if my apprentice—"

"Quiet, old man. I'm not talking to you." The bosun cracked a knuckle. "Hells. All right, you're not wearing one, but I don't think the boy would have made it up out of nothing. Half a crown, or ten days, take your pick."

Vaszlav opened his mouth to protest, but Jaromir cut him off. "As you say, bosun. May I pay in parts?"

"Just as long as I have it before we berth," Uyves replied.

The Hett dipped his head. "On my blood."

Uyves waited a heartbeat for the '*sra*' that should have followed. When it didn't, he glanced at Vaszlav. "Pretty sure of himself, isn't he?"

The older Hett dipped his head nervously in apology. "He is still new to the mountain, *sra*. He means no offense."

"Mm. Well, best be on your way." Uyves turned to Erileine and clapped her on the shoulder. "Good work, lass."

"Thanks," Erileine mumbled. She could already imagine Fraederiq's hands around her throat...

With a final nod to Vaszlav, Uyves turned back toward Starboard Town. As soon as he rounded the corner, Jaromir set his pack down and fished his homestone out of the bushes where he'd thrown it.

"Wonderful," Vaszlav said tiredly. "Perhaps you could have waited until the young



*sra* was not here?"

Jaromir glanced at Erileine as he hung the homestone around his neck. It was a flat lozenge of polished granite, half again as tall as it was wide, with a hole drilled near the top for a cord. Many of the Hett who had come to the mountain the past few years wore them. For luck, for good health, because it had been their grandmother's, because all the other Hett were doing it—there were as many explanations as there were stones, and as many complaints about the practice as there were Avauntois who would rather not have any Hett on the mountain at all.

To quiet the angrier of his citizens, the captain had ordered a handful of homestones tested for magic. When none was found, he banned them anyway, ordering a fine for a first offense and expulsion from the mountain for a second. *And here I am looking at one*, Erileine thought. She should have stuck to mending the fence.

"Don't worry," she said aloud to Vaszlav. "I won't say anything."

"Thank you, young *sra*," the Hett replied gratefully. "Now, if you will excuse us? We will be two days to Forecastle with these packs."

"Sure. Safe journey." She half-raised a hand in farewell.

She turned and walked back toward town, her pace quickening as she realized that she was going to be late for her lesson at the Captain's House. She jumped as a macaw squawked at her from a branch overhead, instantly angry at it for making her heart pound. Stooping, she picked up a stone and threw it at the brightly colored bird. "Go home," she said loudly. The macaw squawked again and flapped away, wondering in its little bird mind why the trees smelled so strange and why the nights were so cold. A few jungle creatures were always caught on the mountain when it left Mau Ngapcha. The townspeople caught them and sold them as pets or delicacies at Gandan Berth when they could. Better that than letting them starve or freeze to death, they told one another.

Erileine heaved a sigh of relief when she reached Slip Street, having half-expected Fraederiq to ambush her on the way. People were stringing beans and weeding potatoes in the terraced fields on either side of town. She waved hello to the few who noticed her, but didn't stop to chat.

The Captain's House watched over Starboard Town from the top of Slip Street like a shepherd watching her flock. The old captain had still been living there when Erileine was born. After his death, it had been empty until Razi had arrived one morning with a letter from the current captain saying that he was to catalog its eclectic collection of old books and yellowing papers.

That morning, the walled garden in front of the house was a riot of pink and purple flowers. Bees buzzed back and forth among them in busy ecstasy. Erileine paused at its front gate—the only iron gate in Starboard Town—to catch her breath. As she reached for the latch, a meaty fist struck the side of her head.

She yelped, staggering under the blow. Strong hands took hold of her jacket and pulled her into the shadowed alley next to the garden wall.

Erileine oophed as Fraederiq slammed her against the stone wall. "You little slug," he hissed, his face so close that Erileine could feel the moist warmth of his breath. "Who the hells do you think you are? Eh? You think you're better than the rest of us because of all that cake you read?"

"Let go of me!" Erileine struggled helplessly. Fraederiq jerked her toward him and slammed her back into the wall.

"Didn't anyone ever tell you to mind your own business?" Fraederiq twisted Erileine's collar tight with his left hand and punched her in the ribs with his right. "Eh? Didn't anyone... ever... tell you... not... to stick... your nose... where it doesn't... belong?" Fresh blows punctuated the sentence.

"Let me go! Let me go or I'll tell!" Erileine threw a desperate punch of her own. She was as surprised as Fraederiq when it caught him in the eye.

Fraederiq grabbed Erileine's wrist and drove Erileine's hand into her own face. "Ow! Oh, stop, Erileine! Stop, please, you'll hurt yourself!" Again and again Fraederiq punched Erileine in the face with her own fist. Hot tears stung Erileine's eyes. She opened her mouth to yell for help.

And without warning, the mountain lurched beneath them. Fraederiq stumbled and fell to one knee. Erileine yanked herself away and started to run.

\* \* \* \* \*

Erileine and her grandfather climbed the steps to the bottom of Slip Street in silence. By the time they reached Mamaere Mayeule's, half of Starboard Town was standing in the street, anxiously asking the other half why the mountain had changed course and what it meant.

"I don't know!" Bosun Uyves repeated loudly. His voice was as big as his shoulders were broad, but even he could barely make himself heard above the hubbub. "I don't know anything more than you do. No, the captain didn't tell me this was going to— Yes, I'm sure he knows. No, I mean, I'm sure he knows it's happened, not I'm sure he knew it was going to— Salt and scissors, Vurt, what in Luck's name is all that for?"

The townspeople turned to gape at the old man. "What, this?" Vurt said, glancing down at his crossbow. "I just thought— You know, better safe than sorry."

"Safe from what?" someone asked.

Vurt scowled. "If I knew that I'd have brought enough for all of you."

"Let's not all go crazy at once," the bosun said loudly, glaring at the old man. "And let's just thank our favorite saints that we got off with nothing worse than sprained ankles and broken crockery."

Erileine felt as though she was going to throw up again. Before she could speak, someone spun her around and pulled her into a hug. "Eri! Are you all right?"

She disentangled herself. "I'm fine, maere," she said, embarrassed. "I'm fine. Where's Queçenne?"

"Helping with Matthieu," Laeuc said from beside his wife. "They were hoeing beans when it happened. Matthieu's still frightened, so they're trying to calm him down. Like the bosun said, it's lucky no one was really hurt."

"I wish that was true," Vurt said. He caught the bosun's eye.

The scowl fell from Uyves' face as Vurt's words sunk in. "Quiet!" he ordered. "Quiet, dammit!"

His tone accomplished what volume alone could not. As the crowd fell silent, Vurt stepped forward to put his hand on Gaeston's arm. "I'm sorry. Saints and all their

stories, man, I'm sorry. Fraederiq and Erileine were down by my place when it happened. Fraederiq went over the side."

"Oh, no," someone whispered. Someone else started to cry. The shock on the bosun's face mirrored that on Gaeston's.

"What?" Gaeston said helplessly.

Vurt squeezed his arm, never taking his eyes away from Gaeston's. "I'm sorry," he repeated.

Without warning, Gaeston knocked Vurt's arm away. "Hold on, there," the bosun said sternly, grabbing Gaeston's sleeve. "Just hold on. It isn't *his* fault."

"What the hells was my boy doing down by your place?" Gaeston demanded.

"Never mind that," the bosun ordered. "Laeuc, Donaien—everyone, get your climbing gear and get moving." With a speed born of many late-night searches for missing goats, the townspeople quickly organized a search party.

Erileine stood silently beside her mother, forgotten in the rush. She still felt sick. Why hadn't she grabbed Fraederiq's hand? And what was going to happen to her when the bosun had a moment to stop and think? Half the town must have seen Fraederiq and Erileine running down Slip Street. Would they think she had pushed him?

Wait. "Where's Razi?" she asked. "Where's the bookster?" How could she have forgotten her teacher? The shelves in the Captain's House were mahogany, as tough and as heavy as iron. If one of them had fallen on his head...

"*La*, Razi is fine." The lilting voice behind Erileine made her jump. She spun around and gasped with relief.

The bookster was as tall as the bosun, but as narrow as the bosun was wide. His skin was desert-black instead of mountain-brown, all except his palms, which were a startling pink. In place of the Avauntois' boots, trousers, shirts, and colorfully-embroidered vests, he wore a tan ankle-length robe that he called a *deel*, a wide woven leather belt, and thick-soled sandals. He had arrived in Starboard Town just after it left Mau Ngapcha four months ago with a note saying that he was to inspect and catalog the contents of the library in the Captain's House. Erileine had become his apprentice three

days later.

As always, the expression on Razi's face was somehow cheerful and melancholy at the same time. He dipped his head toward the bosun. "I am sorry to hear of the young man's passing. I regret I did not know him well."

"Don't go building his pyre just yet," Uyves said sharply. "He could have got lucky." Razi dipped his head again but did not reply.

The search lasted an hour. It would have been half that, but no one wanted to be the first to give up. There was nowhere for Fraederiq to be—no lonely trees, no outcroppings, nothing. "I'm sorry," the bosun said quietly to Gaeston, squeezing his shoulder as Vurt had done. Dry-eyed, Fraederiq's father slung his ropes over his shoulder and walked slowly up Slip Street to his empty home. He didn't look at Erileine as he passed.

As the searchers returned to town they gathered in Mamaere Mayeule's, which served by turns as Starboard Town's inn, its general store when the weather was too bad for tinkers and pack-traders to set up their stalls on Slip Street, and its meeting hall. Built for weddings and birthdays, its main room couldn't hold half of the two hundred or more people trying to crowd into it to look at the map Razi had brought down from the Captain's House.

"Stop shoving!" the bosun thundered. "Mayeule, open the shutters so people can hear. Kings and their collars, I said *stop shoving!*"

Miraculously, people did. Erileine found herself pinned against the edge of a table with half a dozen people peering over her shoulders and half a dozen more peering over theirs.

Beside him, Razi seemed oblivious to the press. He unfolded a stiff sheet of parchment to make a square an arm's length across. The map's colors had faded with age, and the gall ink used for the lettering had gone brown, but the straight blue line that showed the mountain's path across the face of Cherne was as clear as the day it was drawn.

The bosun put a salt shaker on the blue line. "So, let's say we're here. From what I

can tell, we're heading north of northeast instead of pure north. If we stay on this course —"

"What if we turn again?" someone called out.

"I said if, didn't I?" Uyves growled. He tapped the inverted triangles marking the mountains that defined the border between the great plains of Darp and the patchwork quilt of prinedoms, dukedoms, and my-back-yarddoms that was Praczedt. "*If* we stay on the course, we'll hit the Brumosos in a couple of weeks at most."

"Did he say we were going to hit the mountains?" "Saints, we're going to crash into a mountain!" "We'll be crushed like bugs!"

"We are *not* going to *hit* anything!" the bosun bellowed. "And the next person who says we are will spend the rest of this trip pulling weeds!"

In the hush that followed, Erileine said, "Do you think—" She stopped himself.

The bosun raised his eyebrows warningly. "Do I think what?"

"Nothing, *sra.*"

"Come on, lass, spit it out."

Erileine swallowed. "Do you think something might have happened to Gandan? I mean, maybe the mountain's turning around because there's nowhere for it to berth any more."

"Saints and their songs," someone gasped. "My Chaentelle is apprenticing there."

Erileine winced under the bosun's glare. "Or maybe—"

Razi elbowed her ribs. "*La*, or perhaps the mountain is thirsty," he said loudly. "Like a camel. Once they decide they want a drink, straight away they go to the nearest water. There is no arguing with them, I assure you, none."

The bosun grunted. "Not likely. We filled the cisterns at Mau Ngapcha, same as we always do. Never heard of the mountain getting thirsty before."

Razi shrugged. "Everything has its first time." He reached for the map, but the bosun stopped him.

"Leave it here," Uyves said. "If anything else happens, we'll want to have another look."

He raised his voice so that it would carry to the crowd outside. "Captain's probably already figured out what's going on. My bet is, Jack or one of the condors is already halfway here to tell us what's what. 'Til we know, there's nothing we can do, so I want you all to just go about your business. Clean up what you can, fix anything that's broken..." He paused a moment. "I'll say the *tehanu* for Fraederiq tomorrow morning. Anyone wants to add anything to the pyre, talk to Gaeston before then."

The crowd began to break up. Erileine stood a moment longer and studied the map as she studied so many others in recent years. The Brumosos curved across northern Cherne, then strode boldly down its east coast through Praczedt to peter out in the long peninsula of Barra Bantang. The blue line that showed the mountain's usual course ran from Mau Ngapcha in the southeast to Gandan Berth in the northwest. If Avaunt went northeast instead, they would reach the sea in just a few weeks.

But what if it turned again? It could go *anywhere*. The enormity of the thought dizzied her. The Staircase Kingdom at the East Pole, or Ruuda in the north, or even further, to Anuvatik—what was to stop them from wandering forever like the fabled Cursed Caravan, caught in its perpetual sandstorm in the depths of the Karaband?

She traced a line across the map with her finger east, past Sullair and over the ocean. What if Avaunt went all the way to the Worldrim and just kept going, past where the last stream fell forever into nothing, past the last rogue cloud blown far from its herd, and out into the void that separated Cherne from the stars? She shivered. The world suddenly seemed very small.

\* \* \* \* \*

Queçenne burst into tears when her mother told her what had happened to Fraederiq. "You'd best go up to your lessons," Laeuc told his younger daughter, watching helplessly as his wife gathered their older daughter into her arms and made soothing noises.

"I suppose," Erileine said. It didn't seem right, practicing verbs after what had just happened, but what else could she do?

She trudged up Slip Street to the Captain's House, watching sidelong to see if

anyone's face changed when they caught sight of her. "It wasn't my fault," she wanted to say, but there was no one to say it to.

The purple lumens in the garden of the Captain's House filled the air with a wet peppery smell. *I should trim them back*, she thought for the third time in as many days. She took a brick of dayglass from the tray by the door where she had left it the day before to soak up some more sunlight and went inside. Unlacing her boots, she slipped her feet into the fleece slippers that waited beside the door and went into the library.

Razi sat at the narrow table that stretched the length of room, just as he had four days a week since his arrival. He walked to Forecastle every Bluesday, leaving after lunch and returning in time for Purplesday dinner with Erileine's family. "*La*, because my belly and I spend enough time sitting," he explained when Erileine's mother Saedanne asked why. "And because reading a book is like eating it—if you would truly understand what it said, you need time to digest."

The lantern by Razi's elbow shone dull orange, its captured daylight almost exhausted. Behind him, an inexpert watercolor of the Pilot ruins on the peak of Avaunt hung next to a much more competent ink rendering of Forecastle seen in three-quarters view. The rest of the walls were shelves packed to bursting with—with everything, Erileine had come to realize.

"Clear day, bookster," Erileine said, replacing the spent piece of dayglass in the lantern with the freshly-charged one.

Razi looked up from the origami book that lay unfolded on the table in front of him. "*Shalma'a*. How are you?"

Erileine shrugged, not knowing how to answer the question. "Fine," didn't seem right, but neither did, "Someone I've known all my life just died and I think it's my fault," so instead she asked, "Is that Bantangui?"

"*La*, it is." Razi pushed it across to his apprentice. Golden curlicues and ruby zigzags danced around the brown-black calligraphy on the delicate mulberry-paper page. "The shapes and colors tell you what you should feel as you read it. The green means sadness, and these sapphire dots? They are for irony. Whatever the poem says,



*la*, you are supposed to feel its opposite.”

Erileine gazed hungrily at the page, her remorse momentarily forgotten. Every day, it seemed, the bookster casually pulled a miracle off the shelf.

She realized suddenly that Razi was still waiting. “What does it say?”

Razi grinned. “That the writer feels woe, such woe as no one has ever felt before, at their lover’s departure. But *la*, the more woe they feel, the more sapphire they use.” He folded the book and placed it carefully in the crate he referred to as the “someday” pile. If it had been interesting, he would have had Erileine catalog it and put it back on the shelves that lined the library’s walls. If it had been *really* interesting—magic or history or both—he would have spent an hour going through it, talking aloud while Erileine made notes and asked questions.

The captains of Avaunt had been retiring to Starboard Town for two hundred years. In four months, Razi and Erileine had sorted one wall of their collected books and one shelf of a second. Four more shelves and two more walls, and what Razi called “the easy part” would be done. Then they would start the research he had come to do in the first place. Where had each book come from? Who had drawn each map, signed each contract, scribbled notes in the margins of each yellowed tax receipt? And what light could they cast on the dark centuries following the Pilots’ civil war and disappearance, when heroes did battle with monsters only to turn into monsters themselves? “Everything that has happened since has been footnotes to that time,” Razi had explained the first day Erileine started work for him. “If we would truly understand who we are, *la*, we must first understand those years.”

He reached for a small volume bound in faded red leather and set it in front of Erileine. “*Unprofitable Speculations*,” she haltingly read aloud. “By His Balance, Eimin di Cuayaçedil.”

“It is better pronounced ‘*Quay-ya-se-deel*,’” the bookster corrected. He opened the book to a spot marked by a colored thread. “Here. The original text is on the left, in Arañese. The translation is on the right. It is perhaps a little loftier than you are used to, but *la*, see what you can make of it.”

Erileine scanned the first few lines. "And among the—Bantangui?" Razi nodded. "Among the Bantangui, they believe that when people die, they are reborn as themselves..." Her voice trailed off.

"Go on," her teacher said mildly.

Erileine blinked. She was *not* going to start crying again. "When people die, they are reborn as themselves, to live their lives over once again. This they must do, time without number, until they have lived it—I'm sorry, I don't know that word."

"*Ipfa'ana*," Razi said. "Or *ibfa khana*, in the southern form. It means properly."

Erileine nodded. "Until they have lived it properly." Erileine looked up at her teacher. "Is this because of Fraederiq?"

Razi turned his hands palm up, then palm down, in a Karabandi shrug. "There is more later, in the same vein. Eimin had reason to ask these questions once. I thought perhaps you would find some use in his thoughts."

Erileine closed the book carefully. "Thank you."

The bookster nodded. "So," he said, his voice suddenly brisk, "Today you will finish with the books you started indexing yesterday, yes? So that tomorrow we may move on to things more interesting?"

"Yes, bookster." Erileine opened the first of the ledgers in her work pile, turned the lamp slightly to move a shadow out of her way, and set to work.

Every one of the books in the library mentioned the mountain, but only a few said anything more than that it was big, it flew back and forth, and its people had little sense of humor. "Do people really think that about us?" Erileine had asked the fourth time she read it. "Oh, *la*," Razi had said diplomatically, "They don't know you as well as I do."

The room was silent for the next three hours except for the scratching of Erileine's pen, the leaf-fall whisper of pages being turned, and the occasional rumble from Erileine's stomach. When these grew continuous, the bookster said, "*La*, enough, go and eat. I will greet you tomorrow."

\*"Shalma'a," Erileine replied, somewhat self-consciously, raising her palms to her teacher in the Karabandi style.

"*Shalma'a*," the bookster replied before bending his head over the old diary he had spent the greater part of the afternoon deciphering.

Erileine traded her slippers for her boots and let herself out quietly. The horizon had already eaten half the sun; the fat orange blob that remained looked as ready for bed as Erileine suddenly felt. A herd of clouds was passing in the distance, their bellies purple-gray with unshed rain. If she had been at her grandfather's, Erileine would have looked for their shadows on the ground below.

The air smelled of pine logs burning in kitchen stoves, and of squash and beans cooking in iron pots. All of a sudden she remembered playing tag in the trees when she was little: herself, Queçenne, Niquolas and his slow-witted brother Matthieu, Fraederiq, Uego who had moved to Portside when his mother remarried... She couldn't have been more than seven or eight. The mountain must have been near the equator, because darkness had fallen as suddenly as a lid being put on a pot. They had talked a little too loudly in the dark on their way back to town until Fraederiq said, "I can smell dinner." Laughing, they had raced the rest of the way.

She wiped her eyes on her sleeve and set off for home.

\* \* \* \* \*

Three generations sat at the varnished pine table that Laeuc had made his wife as a wedding present eighteen years before. Steam rose lazily from the scrambled eggs, onions, and tiny cubes of squash in the heavy clay pot in the middle of the table. It was Queçenne and Erileine's favorite meal, but both of them picked at it as if it were cauliflower. Queçenne's eyes were still red. When Erileine whispered, "I'm sorry," her sister nodded without looking up.

The adults were as quiet as the children as they mopped up eggs with hunks of crumbly potato bread. There had been no word from the captain. In its absence, speculation had swirled about all afternoon, leaving the whole town exhausted in its wake. "Be better off doing some militia drill," Vurt had grumbled, earning himself a "shush!" and an elbow in the ribs from Mamaere Mayeule.

Laeuc was doubly tired after sitting with Gaeston for an hour. Fraederiq's father

hadn't said much besides, "Thanks," when Laeuc poured him his first glass of Bantanguirum, and, "Leave the bottle, will you?" when Laeuc rose to go.

"Well," Saedanne finally said, pushing her plate away. "So what does *sra* bookster think of all this?"

Erileine shrugged. "He doesn't know. He said if anything like this had ever happened before, everybody would probably already know about it."

"He's probably right," she said briskly. She pushed the stew crock toward Erileine. "Here, take this up for him—I'm sure he could use a good dinner. Queçenne, why don't you tidy up?"

Having to scrape egg off her mother's precious cast-iron pan would normally have sent Queçenne into a blue sulk. That evening, she just nodded and took it out the kitchen door. A moment later it clanged against the water cistern. A moment after that, the foursome at the table heard Queçenne's quiet sobs.

"I'll see to her," Saedanne said, rising. "Erileine, make sure you wear your coat."

"I'm only going up the street," she protested.

"Do as your maere says," Laeuc sighed. Vurt only grunted, his elbow on the table, his chin on his fist, and his eyes hooded.

Warm yellow light was still dribbling out between the slats of the shutters on the library window when she reached the Captain's House. She paused. Had she heard a voice? Curious, she stepped closer to the window.

The shutters were slightly ajar. Through them, she heard Razi speaking in Karabandi, all esses and vees and doubled vowels. He paused, then spoke again.

Erileine frowned. Who was he talking to? She stood on tiptoes, but the shutters' slats were angled upward too sharply for her to see through. Razi spoke again. "*Iye*," he said, "No."

Frustrated, she went around the corner and untied the leather cord that held the door closed. She pushed it open gently. "Hello?" she said uncertainly. "Bookster? I've brought you some dinner."

No one answered. Erileine rapped her knuckles against the door frame. "Hello?"

"*Ayah.*" A chair scraped back. Razi's sandals slapped on the pine-planked floor. A moment later, the bookster opened it and blinked at her.

"*La*, Erileine... Come in, come in." He turned and walked unsteadily back to the table in the center of the room. An earthy smell like incense hung in the air. Erileine was shocked to see drops of sweat on the bookster's shaven head. Everything she had ever read about strange southern vices came rushing back to her.

"Um, my maere thought you might want some dinner."

Razi nodded jerkily. "So kind... I was just meditating. Thinking, *la*, so much to think about today." A thick candle stood on a square brass plate in the middle of the table. Razi licked his thumb and finger and pinched the faint wisp of smoke coiling up from its wick. "*La*, that *does* smell good. Please, to sit, to sit. We'll talk while I eat."

He attacked the stew as if he hadn't eaten in a week. "Here," he said through a mouthful of food, pulling an old book with a faded blue leather cover off the top of the pile on the table. "I found this in the back. Have you seen it?"

Erileine shook her head. "What is it?"

Razi opened it and pushed it to her. "*La*, you tell me."

Erileine studied it. The pages were printed rather than hand-lettered, so the book was less than a hundred and fifty years old. The language was Gandan-o, but there was no royal stamp on the title page, so it had escaped the censor's inspection.

She sounded the words out carefully. "The tunnels beneath Gandan and Trunggar are so—I don't know that word."

"Similar. Go on."

"Similar as to—I'm sorry, bookster, I don't know the next word either."

Razi wiped the last of the stew from the pot with his finger, licked it off, and dried his hand briskly on his sleeve. "*La*, no matter, you did well." He tapped the page. "The author measured the tunnels below Gandan Berth and those underneath the royal palace in Trunggar. They have the same height and width, the same distance between turnings. From this, she argues the latter were also made as a berth for the mountain."

Erileine frowned. "So you think we're headed to Trunggar?"

Razi shook his head. "That is not the direction in which the mountain moves. But *la*, perhaps tomorrow we can search for other descriptions of tunnels to see where else we might be going."

He stretched and yawned. "Enough of books. Would you choose to walk down to my lodgings with me so that I do not lose myself?"

Erileine thought that Razi was about as likely to get lost as he was to grow wings and fly, but she was happy to have company. As they walked down Slip Street, the bookster had her say words aloud in Gandan-o, reminding her every dozen steps to roll her r's and soften her n's.

They stopped when they reached Mamaere Mayeule's. "Please thank your parents for dinner," Razi said. "I shall see you tomorrow?"

"Yes, bookster. Good night."

"Good night." Light and noise spilled out onto the street as he opened the door, along with a few respectful greetings. The room inside was packed as tightly as a shearing pen in spring. Voices swirled around, each interrupting the one before, and were muffled again as the sturdy door closed. Erileine looked up. Diwei, the Western Star, should have been almost directly above the chimney of the Captain's House. Instead, it glittered a double handspan to the left. Wishing there was still stew in the pot she was carrying to keep her hands warm, she hurried toward home once more.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next day dawned clear and cold. Most days did on Avaunt. Except during storms, the only clouds that flew higher than the mountain were old gray bulls spread so thin that they could hardly be seen.

But there were no bull clouds in the sky that morning, no stately white heifers pillowed on top of one another, no streaky calves barely able to hold themselves together. There was just the sky paling to gray as the sun rose in the wrong place.

Erileine lay in bed and watched her curtain slowly brighten. It had taken her hours to fall asleep. If she had just put out her hand... Fraederiq's weight might have pulled her off the mountain, but maybe that would have been better. Maybe then she'd be able

to close her eyes without starting to cry again.

She twitched at the sound of a lammergeier calling somewhere high above, threw back her quilt, and stood up. She wasn't getting back to sleep, so she might as well make a pot of tea.

Her grandfather had beaten her to it. Sitting at the table in the clothes he had worn the day before, but with his mustache combed and oiled and his nails trimmed and as clean as they ever were, he waited for Erileine to sit before pouring her a cup of tea and stirring it with a piece of crushed sugar cane to sweeten it.

"You want to talk about it?" he asked gently as Erileine warmed her hands on the mug.

She shook her head. Vurt nodded. "That's all right. I never do either." He sipped his own tea. "Walk up with me?" Erileine nodded, and after that, they sat together in silence.

As the sun rose, the people of Starboard Town gathered at a walled garden on the hill behind the Captain's House. It was a quiet, tidy place, overlooked by the blue maples and braided pines that the townspeople planted on their children's naming days. People took pride in being able to point to their grandfather's grandmother's tree. "Still straight and tall," they would say. A few knew that the beams in Starboard Town's first houses had been made from the naming day trees of the Hett who had lived there before them, but only a few.

Everyone wore their best clothes and something the same colors as the wooden house soldier—a scarf, a shirt, a brooch, whatever they had. No one knew why they did it; it was just how things were done. Mothers brought babies in nursing slings, while Papaere Badette, the town's oldest man, was carried up the hill in a wicker chair. Wrapped in a long black coat whose wide sleeves had gone out of style thirty years before, he looked like a strange, solemn bird.

The bosun had worked since before dawn to build a pyre of pine logs on the heavy gray stone at the center of the garden. He stood beside it in the blue coat and trousers of his office, his square black hat tucked under his arm, and nodded to people as they took

their places around the garden wall. No one spoke except the smallest children, who were immediately hushed.

Gaeston was the last to arrive. In his hands he held a stuffed toy goat, a tiny pair of sandals whose soles had been worn thin by countless adventures in the village's gardens, and the embroidered shirt that Fraederiq had worn on his fifteenth naming day a few months before. Erileine's heart twisted at the sight of it. She remembered Fraederiq standing as straight as a piece of bamboo while he swore to observe Avaunt's laws and obey the captain and his appointed officers in peril of his soul's rest. He had stumbled a little over the oath, but had nearly split his cheeks smiling when the bosun clapped him on the shoulder and ordered him to turn out for militia practice with the other men.

Gaeston set Fraederiq's things on the pitch-smeared logs. Moving as stiffly as a marionette, he took a blue silk hair ribbon from his pocket. As he laid it on the pyre, Erileine heard Laeuc whisper, "But that's—!"

"Sh!" Saedanne elbowed her husband to quiet him, but her eyes were with Erileine's on Queçenne, whose renewed sobbing told the whole town who the hair ribbon had belonged to.

Gaeston stepped back and saluted the bosun. Uyves returned the salute gravely. A baby began to cry. "What? What?" Papaere Badette asked. His granddaughter shushed him gently.

Gaeston took the smoldering torch the bosun handed him and touched it to the logs. The crowd held its breath. The flame hesitated a moment, then began to spread. Everyone exhaled with relief, except the baby, whose mother was nursing him to keep him quiet. The flame had caught. Fraederiq was at rest.

As dark smoke wrote its message of loss and grief on the sky, the bosun cleared his throat. "When I die, I shall give back to the world all that I did not do. All that I might have been and wasn't, all the things I lost and spent and wasted, I shall give them back to the lives that haven't been lived yet. That will be my thanks to those I loved, and to the world that gave me the life."

Around him, the people of Starboard Town bowed their heads and murmured,



"That will be my gift." In twos and threes and families, they turned toward home, leaving Gaeston to tend his son's last fire.

Laeuc put his hand on Erileine's shoulder and squeezed. "Come on."

Erileine shook her head. "I want to stay."

Her father shook her gently. "This isn't for you, love. It's for Gaeston."

Erileine wiped her eyes on her sleeve. "I know," she said wretchedly, his throat aching from the effort of not sobbing. "I'm sorry. I should have— I—"

"Sh." Her father gently shook her again, dry-eyed, but as miserable as his daughter. "It wasn't your fault. You can come back later and help clean up the ashes if you want. All right?" Gently but firmly, Laeuc turned her toward home.

The townspeople spent that morning repairing the minor damage the mountain's shudders had caused. They talked about Fraederiq—what a shame, so young, what would Gaeston do now, it would be terrible if he started drinking again—but conversation quickly turned to the mountain. Where do *you* think we're going? And shouldn't we do something, just in case? Well no, I don't know what, but surely there's something. Yes, I'm sure the captain's thought of all of this, but still—poor Fraederiq, what a shame.

Erileine finally fled, unable to listen any more.

She was sitting at the top of the stairs that led down to her grandfather's cottage, watching the unfamiliar peaks and hating herself, when Niquolas said, "Hoy," behind her hesitantly. Erileine grunted without lifting her chin off her knees.

"Whatcha doing?" Niquolas asked.

"Thinking."

"Oh." There was a pause while Niquolas digested that. "What about?"

Erileine shrugged, then sighed just loud enough to be heard when Niquolas sat down beside her.

"You ever wonder what it's like down there?" he asked. When Erileine didn't answer, Niquolas continued, "All those cities we never see—I bet they don't all look after goats 'n' pull up weeds."

"Bet they do." Erileine wiped her nose on the knee of her trousers. "Someone has to."

"Doesn't mean it has to be us. Me and Fraedi... Here, look." He pulled something dark and hairy out of his shoulder bag and held it out.

Erileine looked at it sidelong. A little larger than her two fists put together, covered in coarse, dark fibers, with scraped-out diamond-shaped eyes and a ragged grin full of carved fangs... "What is it?"

"It's a head," Niquolas said proudly. "For a door soldier. C'mon, you remember—I was going to trade some of 'em to the Hett for that thing Fraedi wanted."

"Oh. Right."

"We got the coconuts out of the trash after Departure Eve, and we've been carving them all different ways. Well, mostly I've been carving, but a lot of the ideas were Fraedi's. He figured we could get half a ring each for them in Gandan, on account of them being novelty items. Maybe more, if we had time to make some helmets for them or something."

"Mm." Erileine turned back to the mountains.

After a moment's hesitation, Niquolas put the coconut head back in his bag. "Now that he's... Well, I was wondering if..."

Erileine stood up abruptly. "I have to get up to the library," she said. "The bookster will be expecting me."

Niquolas scrambled to his feet. "Right." He raised a hand in a half-wave to Erileine's back. "Suppose that's more important."

As Erileine reached the first bend in the path, she glanced back. Niquolas was still standing at the top of the stairs, staring at the peaks below. Suddenly remorseful, Erileine opened her mouth to call out to him, but just as she did, Niquolas threw the carved coconut off the mountain.

Just after noon, when most people were sitting down to soup and fried squash, a blue and yellow parrot settled on the sill of Bosun Uyves' front window. He cocked his head one way, then the other. Satisfied that none of the town's cats were anywhere

nearby, he rapped his beak sharply against the window's shutter. "Uyves!" he squawked. "Uyves, open up!"

Inside, a feminine voice whispered a panicky question. A deeper voice answered. There was the sound of clothes hastily being donned, then a creak as a rear door opened and closed. A moment later, the shutter flew open.

"Clear day, Jack," the bosun said brightly, buttoning his shirt.

"Clear day," the parrot replied. He imitated a cough. "Sorry for interrupting."

"Ah, not to worry." The bosun leaned on the sill. "Just consoling those as need it."

"Of course," the parrot said dryly.

Uyves watched the kites flying overhead for a moment. "You sharing your nest with anyone these days, Jack?"

The parrot bobbed his head. "Aye. She came on board at Mau Ngapcha."

"Oh? Well, good for you. Mind me asking what her name is?"

"Doesn't have one. She's not Gifted."

"No?"

"Nope." Jack's version of shaking his head was two quick twitches left and right. "It ain't as common as stories would have you believe."

"Mm. Well, then it's a good thing you lot don't mind having ungifted mates."

Jack scratched the side of his head with a claw. "Aye. And I suppose it's a good thing for you that so many women on Avaunt feel the same way."

The bosun's laugh nearly filled the street.

Ten minutes later, he stood at the top of Slip Street, his hat firmly on his head. "Gather all, gather all!" he bellowed, pounding the town's assembly drum in time with his words. "Gather all and hearken!"

The townspeople assembled quickly. A few said hellos to the parrot, who bobbed his head at them in return from his perch on the Captain's House gate.

"Morning, Jack." Mamaere Mayeule held out her hand. "Dried plum?"

"Don't mind if I do," the parrot said, deftly beaking it off her palm.

"Right, quiet down," the bosun said to the crowd. "Jack here has word from the

captain. Jack?"

"Thank you, bosun." The parrot spread its wings and settled them again. "Well. You all know what happened yesterday. That means you know as much as anyone does. The captain had no warning, and doesn't know where we're headed. We could be back on course tomorrow, or not."

He raised his voice over the crowd's murmurs. "The immediate problem is water. There's enough in the tanks to get us through to Carnelian, or even to Chalcedony, but only if we're careful about how much we use. So, orders are," his voice changed to imitate the captain's, "No water for vanity gardens, or for boiling dyes or dagging wool."

The crowd's murmurs grew louder. "I know, I know," Jack said in his own voice. "But until we have a better idea of what's happening, those are his orders."

"Do you want us to stop bathing, too?" a voice called out.

The bosun spoke up quickly. "What difference would that make to you, Donaïen?"

A few people laughed. Donaïen crossed his arms and scowled. Beside him, his husband Armaend asked, "What about evacuation?"

The crowd stilled. "What about it?" Jack asked.

"You said we'd be all right until Chalcedony, but what if we haven't berthed somewhere by then? Even if we stop watering the fields, we'll be dry by Tourmaline. What happens then?"

Jack fixed his beady stare on Armaend. "Nobody is going to evacuate anything," the parrot said. His rasping voice carried clearly on the gentle midday breeze. "I've lived on this mountain eighty-three years, chick and bird. It's always found berth, and until we see otherwise, I'm going to trust it to find berth again."

"Easy for you to say," someone muttered behind Erileine. "You can always just fly away."

Jack scratched the side of his head briskly with a claw. "So, unless there are questions? Right. Bosun?"

Bosun Uyves' chest swelled as he took a deep breath. "Dis...missed!"

As the crowd began to break up, the parrot squawked, "Bookster? A word?" The

Karabandi had been standing next to Erileine and her family, a thoughtful expression on his face.

"Of course," Razi said. "Erileine?"

"*Sra*?"

Razi raised his eyebrows. "You *are* my apprentice, aren't you?"

Erileine glanced at her parents. "Go ahead," Laeuc said. Erileine hurried after her teacher and the bosun into the Captain's House.

They gathered around a small map of northern Cherne that Razi had found in a book on the medicinal properties of fungi. "Not much room for us to get through, is there?" the bosun said, tapping the inverted V's that marked the Brumosos.

The bookster shrugged. "*La*, there are gaps and passes—perhaps we will go through one of those. *Sra* parrot, does the captain perhaps have more detailed maps in Forecastle?"

"Don't know, but I'll ask. And just call me Jack, bookster. Never been much of one for titles."

Razi inclined his head. "Jack, then. And if I might ask another question? The captain's wife—did she feel anything yesterday?"

The parrot shook his head. "Not that anyone's told me. But as far as I know, her magic's all for healing, so..." He ruffled his wings in a birdy shrug.

Razi closed the book and set it aside. "Well, please convey my greetings to the captain, then. I hope you have an uneventful flight."

The bosun left with Jack on his shoulder. Erileine closed the door behind them. "What do you think will happen if there isn't a pass big enough?" she asked.

Razi wagged his hands absent-mindedly. "*La*, who can know? The mountain flies higher over Darp than it does at Mau Ngapcha or Gandan Berth. Perhaps it will fly higher still when we reach the Brumosos. Or perhaps crashing is the wrong way to think of it. Perhaps the mountain is in season to mate."

He grinned boyishly at the look on Erileine's face. "Oh come, am I the only one to think of that? Perhaps the mountain is like a goat in spring. Stranger things have

happened.”

“Not around here,” Erileine muttered, embarrassed.

Razi's grin softened. “*La*, well, just in case we survive, I think you should keep working on your Praczny. I know it is not used so much on the mountain as Gandan-o or Bantanguì, but the exercise will do you good. Here—see if you can find the word for ‘pass’.”

“Yes, *sra*.” Erileine took the tattered blue-and-yellow Praczny dictionary from its place on the shelf by the window, pulled the dayglass lantern closer, and settled into her chair.

“Mountain,” she said. “A mass of rock that—um, hang on.” She flipped the pages again, pursed her lips, and flipped back. “A mass of rock that rises above its surroundings, and is bigger than a hill.” She glanced at the bookster. “So that’s no help.”

Razi nodded. “How about ‘travel’? Or ‘road’? *La*, one of those might lead you to something that leads to ‘pass’.”

Erileine looked at him in dismay. “But that could take forever!”

“Yes, it could.” Razi slid another book back into its place on the shelf. “But sometimes that’s just what you have to do.”

Erileine chased words all afternoon while Razi sorted books into piles. Every once in a while he set a volume on the table instead to shape a rough map of Cherne: those from Ruuda at the north end, those from Thind, Ini Bantang, and Barra Bantang at the south, the Ninety Kingdoms in the west, and a scant handful from Praczedt to the east. A lone volume of Karabandi poetry occupied the center with a pair of spell books beside it.

The dozenth time Erileine looked up, two glinting pieces of brass caught her eyes. “What are those for?”

“*La*, I thought to add some landmarks to my map. That one is for Ossisswe. The other is Coriandel. You see?” Razi handed them to Erileine. The first was square, with a lantern stamped on one side and the date “1241” on the other. The second was round, with a hole punched through it. A hatched pattern framed the hole on both sides, put there, Erileine had learned, to deter trimmers from taking metal off the coin’s edges.

"Wait." Erileine replaced the coins, then fished a smooth gray pebble out of her pocket that she had put there several days ago for some now-forgotten reason. "Avaunt," she said, setting it down a double handspan from the coins. It seemed very small.

They worked through the last of the afternoon, pausing only to answer the call of nature. For a time, someone chopped firewood outside, and someone else trundled a cart past the Captain's House, but the only sounds in the library were those of pages being turned and chairs creaking as their occupants shifted their weight.

A knock on the door made them both start. "Hello?" Laeuc called as he entered. "Anyone aboard?" He tousled his daughter's and looked around. "Saints, but there's a lot of books here, isn't there?"

"Well, it is a library," Erileine said.

"Ah. Right." One corner of Laeuc's mouth twitched. "Anyway, I just came to say, a flock of us got to talking, and we've decided to head up to Forecastle tomorrow to pick up a few things, just in case. I was wondering if you would like to come along."

Razi pursed his lips, then nodded. "Certainly. I could use some more ink and paper, and *la*, some fresh air would do my apprentice some good."

"I'm sure it would," Laeuc agreed. "We're wanting an early start—on the road at dawn?"

"Of course," Razi agreed. He rolled his head to work the kinks out of his neck. "I shall see you then."

Walking home beside her father, Erileine suddenly asked, "What did you mean, just in case?"

"Hm?"

"Back in the library. You said people were going up to Forecastle just in case."

"Oh, that." Her father shrugged. "I don't know. People got to talking about Vaszlav's last visit, and how they'd all wanted something he didn't have, and, well, it just seemed like a good idea to get to the market and pick up a few things."

"Oh. Are maere and Queçenne coming too?"

Laeuc shook his head. "I don't think Queçenne feels up to it right now."

They walked the rest of the way home in silence. As they rounded the big bend in Slip Street, Erileine caught sight of Niquolas emptying a compost bucket in his family's back yard. She raised a hand to wave, but Niquolas turned away and pretended not to see her.

After dinner was over and she had scraped the dishes clean, Erileine sat with her mother and sister while her father played a few songs on the flutes he was carving. As always, he said it was to make sure they were in tune, but Erileine had long since realized that he just liked to play. She laid her head on her mother's shoulder and listened to the gentle notes, each as light as a butterfly.

"Want to try it?" Laeuc asked when he finished. She sat up, took the flute from him, and raised it to her lips. A tentative breath brought a fluttering, wavering note that steadied as she blew harder. Her father picked up another and joined her in a simple round.

When they finished, she went up to her room and slid under her quilt. She lay there for a moment looking—really looking—at her room for the first time she could remember. A cage for a pet rat who had escaped and never been found, a picture of the great library in Gandan, the dozen books she actually owned, the wood-and-leather toys on the shelf by the window that seemed somehow to have shrunk in the past year... She pulled the quilt tighter around her shoulders. Maybe her mother was right: maybe it was time to pass the toys on to someone else.

She listened as her parents murmured to each other too quietly for her to hear and put themselves to bed. A shutter creaked, and then the house was still.

Moving slowly, Erileine slid off her cotton-and-straw mattress and pulled out the book that lay waiting beneath it. She let out a silent sigh of relief. She hadn't exactly stolen the book from the Captain's House, only borrowed it, but she wasn't completely sure her mother would understand the difference.

The polished brass cylinder her grandfather had given her as a nameday give was on the windowsill where she had left it. Easing gingerly back into bed, she unscrewed its lid. The captured sunlight that poured out of the sliver of dayglass inside made a circle



of light on the handwritten pages she had been trying to decipher for the last week.

But “decipher” wasn’t the right word. The book was written in Gandan-o, so she could read it just fine; it was making sense of it that escaped her. Page after page described how its anonymous author had bargained away everything from a single toenail to the ability to tie a knot in a piece of red thread, all in exchange for magic, but nowhere did it say who they had bargained with or how.

Did magicians make deals with ghosts? When she asked Razi, as casually as she could, he pursed his lips. “*La*, in Anuvatik, or so the Ruudians say. But not elsewhere—civilized people do not trouble the dead.”

“But then who?” Erileine asked in frustration. “When magicians say they’re making bargains, who are they making bargains *with*?”

The corner of the bookster’s mouth quirked. “If you ask two magicians, they will give you three answers. The Pilots, even though they are gone? But then who did the Pilots bargain with for their powers? Or perhaps some secret part of their own souls, or some invisible Author who will rewrite the story we all live in if asked to politely?”

He shrugged. “All anyone knows for sure is that there is always a price, and that anyone who is hasty or careless when making their bargains always winds up wishing that they had been neither.”

She gave up on the book the second time her eyes jerked open. Suddenly weary, she capped her little dayglass light, slid the book back under her mattress, and rolled over.

Sleep came quickly, and with it a half-familiar nightmare. Fraederiq and Niquolas were dangling her out the upstairs back window at Mamaere Mayeule’s. One boy held each of her legs; each time she tried to grab the window sill, they relaxed their grip for a moment, making her shriek with terror. It had actually happened, a year or so ago. Niquolas had eventually said he was tired of the game, and insisted that they pull her in. This time, though, Erileine hung over the edge of the mountain, not over Mamere Mayeule’s courtyard, and no one heard her cries and came to rescue her.

She woke with a small cry. Dizzy with sweat, she groped for her light, then shone it

on the ceiling, dim but comforting, and waited for dawn.

\* \* \* \* \*

Starboard Town woke to discover that the mountain had sped up during the night. The steady half-gallop-an-hour breeze of its passage had had become a steady wind that blew people's hair back, rattled doors, and made chickens nervous in their coops. Branches rustled against each other restlessly, while overhead, the town's kites jerked on their strings as if trying to escape.

For the people gathered in front of Mamaere Mayeule's, the mountain's change of pace somehow felt worse than its change of course. The wind's steady whisper had been part of their lives from the day they were born. Now it seemed to be murmuring, "Trouble is on his way."

"It ain't right," Donaïen said to Armaend, staring out their kitchen window, the morning's chai cooling in a pot on the table between them.

Armaend shook his head. "Ain't right at all." He stirred his mug to get the honey off the bottom and drained it in one noisy gulp. "Come on. Time to go."

Erileine and her father were almost the last ones to arrive. As he patted their house soldier on its head for luck, Saedanne spotted a stain on Laeuc's shirt too faint to be seen by male eyes and insisted that he change. And while your father's doing that, Erileine, can't you please comb your hair? Yes, I know you're going to be wearing a hat, what has that got to do with it? Honestly...

"There's Razi," Erileine said. "Can we walk with him?"

"Sure." Laeuc nodded hellos to his friends, some as fresh as he was, others, like the bosun, bleary-eyed and grumpy.

Forecastle was only four gallops for Jack the parrot, but the narrow track that connected it to Starboard Town was as twisted as an arthritic snake. It would take the Starboard Towners most of the day to get to Forecastle; they would have only a couple of hours in the market before the sun set, then another hour or two the next day before starting the return journey.

"Right," the bosun said loudly. "Those coming, let's be off. The rest of you, don't

get into any trouble while I'm not here to enjoy it." He waved his arm as if sweeping a herd of goats into a pen.

It seemed to Erileine as though everyone who wasn't actually going was up to see the travelers leave. Seized by sudden misgivings, a few people pulled on boots and coats, kissed their husbands or wives goodbye, and joined the flock trailing after the bosun.

Standing in his doorway, Gaeston watched them leave impassively. Laeuc waved and said good morning, but Gaeston made no reply. From the look of his hair and clothes, he hadn't washed since his son's funeral; the dark green bottle in his hand could have been half full or half empty. He watched the little parade go by, then went back inside to his lonely anger.

The bosun counted them off as they walked past him at the top of Slip Street. "Twenty five, twenty six, twenty seven... Twenty seven." He turned to Vurt, who was standing beside with a hot mug of tea in his hand.

"I'll keep an eye on everything while you're gone," the old man said.

"Thanks." The bosun hesitated. "And one more thing. That ladder of yours. Think you could put back together, just in case?"

Vurt's face went carefully blank. "Didn't know you knew about that."

The bosun smiled. "Whole town knows about it." Vurt's "ladder" was a chain of climbing anchors, cleverly concealed loops of rope, and sturdy bamboo rungs that ran from his verandah down to the base of the mountain. A goat couldn't have climbed it, but a man could—even a one-legged man, if he was patient and careful, and as a matter of principle didn't want to pay the captain's duty on a pack full of Bantangui spices. Each time the mountain berthed, Vurt reassembled the top fifty strides of his private connection to the world below and visited like-minded businessmen on the ground below.

Vurt nodded. "I can do that," he said gruffly. The bosun clapped him on the shoulder and hurried to catch up with his traveling companions.

Vurt stared into his tea. He told people he had built his ladder so that he could make a little extra money. Only on the darkest nights, when he missed his long-gone

wife the most, did he admit to himself that it was because he'd never really believed a mountain could fly forever...

A hundred strides past the last beanfield, conversation died as Forecastle Road climbed a dark shoulder of granite to the town's upper goat pasture. A pair of red-billed steelbirds kept pace with them for a time, clacking their beaks to warn the Avauntois away from their nest. Boot soles clomped on stone while the wind slipped cold fingers down the travelers' collars, toying with their scarves and rustling the branches around them.

Erileine was sweating by the time they reached the pasture. A fence made of pine branches woven through sturdy uprights closed off two of its sides. Goats bleated behind the prickly wall, their brown and white coats half-visible through the barrier. The cliff that formed the pasture's third side was too steep even for them to climb, although a creeping vine from the jungle below Mau Ngapcha had made a nest just out of reach of their hungry mouths. Erileine paused a moment to watch it wave its sweetly-scented flowers at a rabbit. Come closer, come closer, they seemed to beckon. Come to me... The rabbit scampered away.

The road narrowed beyond the pasture, forcing the townspeople to walk single file. It cut back and forth like Slip Street as it climbed. "Need to fix that," the bosun grunted, shaking a wobbly pine railing with his hand. Laeuc just nodded. Despite his protests, Saedanne had insisted that he carry waterproof rain capes for himself and Erileine, and he was puffing under their weight. He'd walked to Forecastle and back in a single day once to get his wife a naming day present. He didn't remember it being so hard then...

They stopped to rest when the road leveled off. Erileine turned and looked back the way they had come. All he could see of Starboard Town was the roof of the Captain's House and a few household kites. In the distance, a herd of clouds was raining on the plains below. *At least they have water*, Erileine thought.

"Do you think they know?" she asked no one in particular. "Down below, I mean. That we're off course?"

"They know," the bosun said firmly. "Can't move a mountain around without

people noticing.”

Razi nodded. Despite the die-hard patches of snow lurking among the rocks, his feet were bare in his thick-soled desert sandals, though he had tied the wrist strings of his *deel* and belted it more tightly to keep the warmth in. His pack was half the size of the bosun's; an ancient sword hilt stuck out of a green glass bottle strapped to one side, and a plain black umbrella was strapped to the other. “*La*, it will be like the tale of the camel in the crib. There will be meetings—kings and princes, ministers and magicians, all twittering at each other like birds. What does it mean, who will advantage by it... Heh.” He sniggered like a little boy who has heard a dirty joke.

“Glad you find it funny,” Donaïen said a little sourly. “Can’t say I see the joke myself.”

Razi spread his hands. “*La*, I am sorry to give offense. But I spent some time as a clerk in the court at Armaq when I was younger, and oh, they are all so serious. Even when there is nothing they can do, they must write each other letters.” He laughed suddenly. “*La*, perhaps *especially* when there is nothing they can do. Like the King of Nyengmo and the three elephants. Do you know the story?” Donaïen shook his head. “No? Well, if I may as we walk?”

Donaïen shouldered his pack and waved Razi on. “After you.”

Razi dipped his head. “Thank you. Now, many of my stories are not true, but this is a true story. The king in question, Phuntsok, was a very fat man...”

A hundred strides later Erileine's ears were burning. She was glad her mother wasn't there, although the women within earshot were laughing as hard as the men. When Razi started imitating voices—the squeaky Minister of Law, saying that the elephants would have to marry, and the stuttering Minister of Rumors, saying that her desk had never been so clean—the bosun had to lean against trees and hold his sides.

“So you see,” Razi finished, ducking a low-hanging branch, “You are very lucky, here on your mountain. You have a captain, *la*, who is wise enough to know that if he cannot steer his ship, he should not pretend to, and a bosun in each town to make sure children spend their days pulling up weeds instead of getting into trouble—”

"I wish," the bosun said, still chuckling.

"La, less trouble, then," Razi agreed. "But please, I have burdened you with a story—perhaps I could carry one of yours in return?"

"Do you know how Papaere Vurt lost his foot?" Erileine asked before anyone else could speak. When Razi shook his head, Erileine pointed up the mountain's side. "It was up there, in one of the old tunnels. Bosun Uyves' father was there, wasn't he?"

"That he was," Uyves said, wiping the damp off his mustache. "It was, what, forty years ago? Forty-one, now..."

*The bonescuttle whose skull would eventually hang above Vurt's fireplace was what brought him to Avaunt. They were patient creatures, slow-moving until prey was in reach, then as fast as a striking snake. No one knew how this one had found its way onto the mountain—an egg lying unnoticed in a sack of chocolate beans, perhaps, or some angry Bantangui merchant trying to sabotage a rival. It just appeared one day, fully grown and very hungry.*

*It took goats at first, dragging them back to its lair to dismember. Then it took a Hett boy, the son of tinkers who had made camp outside Forecastle. A few people said, "Better them than our goats," and more thought it without saying it, but they all knew that the bonescuttle wouldn't care whether the next child was Hett or not.*

*So the Forecastle bosun and several of his mates went hunting. Tracking the bonescuttle was easy, but when the trail led to the mouth of an old tunnel, he and his men stopped. Like all Avauntois, they had spent their lives under an open sky, with the whole world spread out below them. They stored trade goods in the shallowest tunnels, but the thought of going into their depth... Of having such a weight of stone over their heads... No. Unable to meet one another's eyes, they turned back. This wasn't a job for an Avauntois.*

*Vurt was twenty-four then. His parents had walked into the desert the year before when scribbling fever swept across the Karaband. They had left him a small house and a rat catching business whose clients were as poor as themselves.*

*Unable to bear the house's emptiness, Vurt sold it for half what it had been worth*

*a year before—it was a poor market, when so many stood empty. He was on his way to Tomb Hill to look for work as a caravan guard when he saw a palace clerk painting a notice on the wall in Six Ears Square. The Captain of Avaunt... a bonescuttle... passage there and back to be provided to any qualified applicant... He looked up at the blue sky over his head, and thought, why not? He'd killed one of the things before.*

*The next morning, he found himself on the back of a small cloud, sweating in the heavy coat and fleece-lined trousers that the cloudherd swore he would need once they got higher. He cried out in wonder and fear when the cloud rose into the air. He had played on Coriandel's rooftops, and climbed trees, but this—this was how the sun and the moon saw the world.*

*"First time?" the cloudherd asked.*

*"Yup."*

*"Well, if you're going to sick up, do it over the side. Squabbles here hates being puked on."*

*The mountain swelled as they approached it. Its irregular peak was stone gray and ice bright; its lower reaches were dense with vegetation. And there, directly ahead, a town clung to its side like a burr to a camel.*

*The cloudherd set him down in a goat pasture. Bunched together at the fence in the hope that he might have carrot greens for them, the goats watched as he shouldered his bags and went looking for someone who could tell him what he was supposed to do as the cloud lifted off once again.*

*The first villager Vurt met didn't speak Karabandi. Neither did the second, or the third. It wasn't until he pulled a steel trap out of his bag and waved it in their faces that the Avauntois realized their savior had arrived.*

*It didn't take Vurt long to realize how much the Avauntois disliked the tunnels. Truth be told, he didn't like them either. They reminded him of the night he had spent beneath Coriandel, hunting his first bonescuttle. The way their floors and walls and ceilings were tilted made it worse: at some point in the distant past, the mountain had tipped back so that floor were angled ramps and stairs were saw-edged traps for*

spraining ankles.

*Vurt was setting the last of his traps when word came that the bonescuttle had taken another goat. Grim-faced, Starboard Town's bosun led Vurt to the scene. The creature had cut through the thorny wall around the pasture. A drying pool of blood showed where it had caught hold of its prey. More blood speckled a shallow furrow that led to half of the goat's remains.*

*Vurt put his hand on the still-warm carcass and looked helplessly at the woods around them. He had spent his whole life in the desert—he didn't know how to track something among trees. "What way go?" he asked the bosun in bad Gandan-o.*

*The bosun pointed. Vurt stood and wiped his hand on his trousers. "I follow."*

*The trail led to a tunnel mouth. The bushes growing around it seemed undisturbed, but scratches on the stones showed where the creature had sharpened its pincers.*

*Vurt unslung his crossbow. Its quarrels were tipped with steel barbs that hooked cruelly backward. His father had bought them years before but never used them. He ran a quick loop of spider silk through the eyelet at the quarrel's base, knotted it, and handed the coil to the bosun. "Good?" Vurt asked.*

*The bosun shook his head. "No. Let's go."*

*Twenty strides in, Vurt raised his hand to signal for a stop. Up ahead, he heard the sound of pincers stripping flesh from a goat's leg to make morsels small enough for a tiny mouth.*

*Vurt tapped the bosun on the shoulder. "I loud, you pull, yes?" he whispered, twitching the silk line trailing from his quarrel to illustrate.*

*The bosun raised his fist to his ear and nodded. Hoping that meant, "I understand," Vurt edged forward gingerly, one foot on the tilted floor, the other on the steeply-angled wall beside it.*

*The sound ahead of him suddenly stopped. Vurt raised his crossbow to his shoulder and thumbed open the shutter on his little dayglass lantern.*

*The bonescuttle froze in the sudden light, blinking its too-human eyes. Its*



*scorpion tail twitched above its back, and then it charged.*

*Vurt fired. The quarrel hit the bonescuttle with a crack. "Pull!" Vurt yelled. "Pull pull pull!" He swung his crossbow at the bonescuttle's head like an ax as the bonescuttle caught his left leg with its pincer.*

*Vurt fell backward as the bosun and his men dragged the bonescuttle on top of him. He covered his head with his arms as its fleshless legs stabbed the stone on either side of him, then drove his knife up between the plates on the creature's belly. Screaming in terror and fury, he pulled his knife free and stabbed it again and again.*

*The next thing he knew, the bosun was dragging him out of the tunnel. "Is it? Is it?" Vurt gasped, not knowing the Gandan-o for "dead".*

*One of the men held up the bonescuttle's severed head. Vurt nodded and fainted.*

*The emir's doctress in Coriandel might have been able to save his nearly-severed leg. The Avauntois in Starboard Town couldn't. Vurt lay in bed shaking with fever for a week.*

*When he woke, a woman was sitting on a stool beside his cot, grinding herbs with a pestle and mortar. She soaked the bandages on his stump in warm water to loosen them, then unwrapped them slowly and carefully so that she could pack more herbs onto the bloody ruin below his knee. He said, "Thank you" in Karabandi, and slept again.*

*By the time he could get out of bed he had learned how to say, "Thank you," in Gandan-o, and a great many other things as well. They sat for hours on the wooden deck behind the small house the town had loaned him, looking down the steep, twist-back street to the world passing slowly below. Coriandel was three hundred gallops behind them. The desert had given way to chaparral, which was turning into the forest that covered the northern arch of the Brumoso Mountains. When Vurt asked his nurse how to say, "I would like to marry you," she laughed and kissed him for the first time.*

*Razi nodded through the bosun's story, while Laeuc, Erileine, and everyone else walking within earshot chipped in with corrections and elaborations. "La, and no one ever found out where the creature came from?"*

Uyves glanced at Laeuc. "Not that I ever heard of."

Laeuc shook his head. "Nor me. After he was walking, Vurt went back into the tunnel to bring out the bones of the Hett boy for burning. Never heard him that say he found anything else."

"I didn't know he went back," Erileine said.

The bosun shrugged. "No reason to think the boy would turn haunt, but no point taking chances."

The travelers fell silent after that. They were above the treeline, and each breath was a cloud of steam that turned to tiny ice crystals in people's nostrils. Everyone except Razi had put on gloves and pulled the flaps of their hats down over their ears.

Despite the cold, the view was magnificent. Crabby old patches of ice dazzled white in the early afternoon sun. Below, gray stone and green-brown moss gave way to dwarf juniper and stands of braided pines, their triple trunks twined together. A little melt-stream splashed through tiny rapids to the small pool made by an ancient dam, then tumbled down the mountain once again to fall into space, a tiny echo of the rivers that legend said fell into infinity over the side of the world.

"Who's that down there?" Donaïen pointed to the campground next to the dam. Erileine caught a glimpse of a two bent figures hurrying into the trees, shouldering their heavy packs as they went.

"*La*, is that not the tinker and his apprentice?" Razi asked.

Bosun Uyves scowled. "Aye. Probably spent the night here. He knows that's not allowed."

Razi's eyebrows went up fractionally. "No?"

"Nope. Law says they can't settle anywhere on the mountain."

Razi's eyebrows climbed even further. "And camping overnight in such a place is considered 'settling'?"

"Anywhere there's stonework," Donaïen said, before the bosun could reply. He spat off the side of the road. "That's the law, not that it counts for much these days. One of them owns a whole house now in Forecastle. Captain pretends not to see, but—"

"What the captain sees and doesn't see isn't for you or me to have words about," the bosun said sharply. "I'll gnaw on Vaszlav's ear the next time he's in town. You want to make any more out of it, take it to the Debates. Now, come on. I'm hungry."

As the travelers picked their way down to the campground the Hett had just fled, Razi stopped a moment to adjust his sandal strap, straightening up as Erileine went past. "*La*, so, are you in the mood for a history lesson?" the bookster asked.

"Sure. I mean, yes, thank you, bookster."

"So, the tale begins with Yegor the First, who was king in Uws when your people came to the mountain." The bookster pushed a branch out of his way, his voice slipping into its familiar lecturing tone. "He gave the Hett refuge, and appointed several to his council. His son, however—this is Yegor the Second, also called Yegor the Sharp—he believed the Hett knew the lost secrets of the Pilots, so when he put on the royal collar, he demanded that they tell him. When they said they knew no more than anyone else, he ordered them expelled. 'By evening three days hence,' according to the official chronicle, 'They shall be outwith the borders of our kingdom, taking no more than they brought.'"

"So what happened?" Erileine asked.

The bookster sighed. "*La*, having been driven from their homes once already, the Hett felt disinclined to obey. They put up barricades, and fought with all the fury of people who have no more to lose. Which was perhaps Yegor's goal all along. The Sarkoszy's were no longer as secure upon their throne as they had been. He would not have been the first king to find himself in need of an enemy. The Hett were already unpopular—they were better smiths than the Uwsians, and many had grown wealthy. Once the first stones were thrown, the rest..."

He paused a moment, his eyes focused on the distance. "Those who fled north into Ruuda were taken apart by the Pale Remainder. Those who went south to Praczedt, *la*, wherever they went, they found the story of their 'secret knowledge' waiting for them."

"Sounds like you have a soft spot for the Hett." Laeuc's voice behind them gave Erileine a jolt.

Razi shrugged. "They are an interesting people. *La*, merely the fact that they *are* a

people, after centuries without a home, makes them interesting.”

“Well, best to keep that interest to yourself, at least in company.” Laeuc nodded at the campground ahead of them, where a double dozen Starboard Towners were already eating hard bread and dried fruit. Donaïen, Armaend, and the bosun had a fire going, and were talking in low voices as they waited for their kettle to boil. “Most people don’t feel as charitable toward them as you do.”

“Of course.” Razi dipped his head. “I shall endeavor to be more circumspect in future.” Which was not, Erileine thought, the same thing as saying that he’d stop talking about it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Erileine’s legs were aching by the time they crested the spur of rock called the Cripple’s Shoulder to find Forecastle spread out below them. She had been disappointed the first time she saw Avaunt’s capitol—it had seemed small compared to the cities she had looked down on from her grandfather’s verandah. But then her father had led her down the last half-gallop of road, and the realness of it had taken her breath away. It wasn’t a picture in a book, or a map, or a giant’s toy on the ground a gallop below. It was a bustling, prosperous town. A few goats nipped at rooftop moss, ignoring the smoke that rose from the chimneys around them, while chickens cackled in wicker coops against the side of every second house, but that was where the resemblance to Starboard Town ended. Starboard Town’s homes didn’t have glass windows. Its shops didn’t have banners strung proudly over their doors proclaiming the quality of the wares within. And if Starboard Towners wore silk, it was just an accent laid over plain cotton, not a whole shirt or a broad, brightly-colored skirt that would have made a peacock jealous.

Forecastle Road’s last half-gallop wound through a pine tree plantation. Thin smears of black smoke rose from charcoaling sheds on either side. A handful of arborists stripping bark off recently-felled trees waved to the Starboard Towners. One, a young woman with her hair pulled back in a thick club, set her root drill on the ground and trotted over to say hello to the bosun. He waved his companions on. “I’ll catch up with you,” he said to knowing grins from Laeuc and a few others.

The forest ended abruptly a few minutes later. Thirty strides away, on the other side of the firebreak, brick and timber buildings lined cart-wide streets that turned back on themselves like tangled yarn. Here, the afternoon sun turned a carp pond silver. There, a vanity garden tumbled down a wall, rank upon rank of flowers standing bright and proud in defiance of the fear of drought.

The travelers dispersed the moment they arrived, some to visit family, others hurrying straight to particular shops. The Forecastlers who greeted them seemed cheerful enough, but the second thing out of their mouths was invariably, "We don't know either." The third was usually, "You won't like the price." In the two and a half days since the mountain had changed course, people had bought all the flour, smoked cheese, and dried fruit they could find. Candles, too, and cotton for bandages, and jars for storing water. Prices had gone up like kites in a strong wind.

"Everyone got all panicky," an old woman grumbled when Laeuc, Erileine, and the bookster stopped to look at the preserves she was selling. Her expression was as dark as the blackberry stains on her fingers. "What's happening, where are we going, what if the water runs out, on and on and on. Feh." She spat the gooey remains of the cinnamon bark she'd been chewing into a cracked mug. "The Hett got right onto it too, of course. That Klaues fellow, he was in Mapmarket Square in a heartbeat, splashing silver around and tossing what-not into a wheelbarrow while everyone else was still picking themselves up."

"Didn't the captain do anything?" Laeuc asked.

She made a face. "Kind of like asking whether your fingers will do something about your thumb, isn't it? But you mark me—things keep going on like this, the captain will have to do something whether he wants to or not."

Whether he wants to or not... It had never occurred to Erileine that people could ever force the captain to do something. The thought felt as strange as someone else's shoes...

She nearly bumped into her father when Laeuc pulled up short outside a glasswright's to greet a familiar balding man with a broad smile on his face, a baby on

his hip, and a bundle of cured brown bamboo under his arm. "Regi! Clear day to you too. Bookster, this is my brother Reginael. Regi, this is Bookster Razi, Erileine's master. And who's this? Oh, now, you can't be Annanette, can you? When did you get to be so big, eh?"

Razi caught Erileine's eye and smiled as Laeuc made faces at the wide-eyed baby girl. Erileine fidgeted from foot to foot until she could take it no more. "Paere? Can we...?"

"Hm? Oh, of course." Laeuc tousled his daughter's hair fondly. "You go ahead, and I'll see you at the Green Pig at sundown. Do you remember how to get to there? Are you sure? No, don't scowl, I'm just asking."

"I'm not scowling." Erileine scowled. "Do you want me to get anything?"

"How about something for Queçenne? No more than a quarter bezel, though. And not a hair ribbon," he added hastily.

Erileine and Razi left Laeuc making faces at his chubby-cheeked niece. The bookster seemed to be in no hurry, and Erileine was happy to amble along beside him. Here and there, people had built rooms right over the street, joining houses on opposite sides to create arches. Mountain swallows whistled at frustrated cats from stick-and-mud nests on the undersides. Erileine heard a snatch of Uwsian (at least, she thought it was Uwsian) from two pale-skinned men arguing amicably on a bench outside a chocolate seller's. A dozen strides further on, an old woman with nimble fingers made a marionette dance and tumble, nodding solemn thanks every time a coin clinked into the tray at her feet. So what if there weren't many kites in the sky as there were over Starboard Town, or if some of the cobblestones needed weeding, and some of the narrow alleys they passed smelled of damp garbage? It seemed that Forecastle had something new to show her every time they turned the corner. It wasn't Gandan Berth or Mau Ngapcha, but at least it wasn't Starboard Town.

Drumlurch Street led to Three Bees Alley, which opened onto a third street whose name Erileine didn't know that took them up a steep flight of stairs built against the side of a warehouse past a barber's, a loom mender's, and a prosperous little Bantangui-style

tea house where chili merchants bought, sold, and speculated day and night when the mountain was on the ground.

As they rounded yet another corner, Razi said, "*La*, is that not the bosun?"

Erileine grinned. "I guess he has a lot of people to talk to." At that particular moment, Uyves was talking to another young woman, one whose almond eyes and long fingers showed Bantangui ancestry. He nodded at something she said and touched her arm lightly in farewell.

"Whoa!" He jumped slightly when he turned to find Razi and Erileine standing behind him. "Well, there you are," he said to Razi. "I was wondering where everyone had gone."

"*La*, to market, I believe. That is why we came, is it not?" the bookster replied blandly.

Uyves grinned. "Well then, lead on."

Mapmarket Square lay in the center of town under the watchful gaze of the sprawling, turreted building called the Hardeck. The captain's clerks and mates had their offices on its bottom two floors, while the captain himself lived on the third, in a suite of rooms that were supposed to be as richly decorated as the king's own chambers in Gandan. Gazing at the Hardeck's gray slate roof, Erileine wondered where the captain was at that very moment. Standing in front of the famous window in the Grand Hall, watching the world roll by? Or sitting at a desk somewhere, reading reports and writing orders? *I wonder if he knows about Fraederiq?* Erileine thought, suddenly guilty that she hadn't thought of him since they arrived.

The market itself was as busy as a goat pen at shearing time. Stalls of all shapes and sizes stood amongst chicken coops and goat pens that smelled like damp feathers, nervous animals, and droppings (which even in the market were carefully scraped up, bagged, and sold to fertilize gardens). People from Portside and Aft Landing jostled against second cousins from Forecastle and Starboard Landing, all of them filling their bags with anything that wouldn't spoil. "Five sequins for a jar of plums!" Erileine said to Razi, scandalized, when the bosun stopped to clasp hands with someone Erileine didn't

know. "My maere would have a dog!"

Razi shook his head. "*Masa il-kutna*. Have I taught you that yet? It is Karabandi. It means 'fill your water jars'. It is what people say when a storm is coming."

Erileine looked around. No one was smiling. Everyone's voice had an edge—not the customary mock-scandalized market-day edge, but something harsher. She suddenly remembered her papaere's stories about his teacher, who had lived through the siege of Armaq. "Once the last of the cats were gone, people ate rats," Vurt told his wide-eyed granddaughter one evening when Erileine's parents were safely out of earshot. "And when the rats were gone, they ate each other, one mouthful at a time..."

"You think there's going to be a storm?" the bosun asked, having heard only the bookster's last few words.

"*La*, perhaps when we reach the mountains," Razi replied. "If we have to go higher to get over them, would we not—*teh!*" Without warning, he lunged forward to catch a grimy collar.

"Ow!" A small figure struggled furiously, trying to slip out of the oversized coat the bookster had caught. "Let go of me!"

"Hoy, what's going on here?" the bosun asked.

"I didn't do anything! He just grabbed me! Stinking groundling! Let go!" The boy Razi had grabbed was half a head shorter than Erileine, his frizzy dark hair hacked short below his ears. His grimy coat was two sizes too large for him, but his waxed Bantangui sailing trousers left a handspan of bare copper-colored ankle above his split-seamed shoes.

Razi shook him. "*La*, not until you give the nice gentleman back his wallet, yes?"

The bosun patted his coat. "Hoy!"

The bookster pushed the boy in front of the bosun. "It is in his left pocket."

Stony-faced, the bosun slapped the boy's hands out of the way and pulled his wallet out of the boy's coat. "I didn't do it!" he yelped. "He put it there! Stinking wormy —"

"Quiet!" the bosun bellowed, red-faced. People around them stared at the scene,



some grinning, some tsk'ing under their breath.

The boy subsided, glaring. The bosun took his collar from Razi. "Thank you, bookster. I'm sure the captain will want to have a word with our little ragtagger."

Without warning, the boy bent double and pulled his arms free from his jacket. As he darted away, Erileine instinctively stuck out her foot.

"Ooph!" Down he went. The bosun pounced on him. "Let go of me, you sock-clutching bent-masted..." His stream of curses set the people nearby laughing.

Not the bosun, though. Erileine thought steam was going to start coming out of his ears. "Right," he said grimly, "If you want to play magpie..." He pulled a twist of cord out of his pocket and twisted the boy's arms behind his back. "There? Happy now?" he asked as he tied the boy's wrists together.

The boy glared at him, then at Razi, and then spat at Erileine's feet. Muttering under his breath, the bosun pushed him toward the Hardeck. "Come on," he said over his shoulder.

"*La*, that was well done," Razi said approvingly.

"Thanks," Erileine muttered. If she had moved that quickly two days before, Fraederiq might still be alive...

Instead of marching his prisoner up the broad steps that led to the Hardeck's front doors, the bosun half-dragged him to a smaller door that stood in a shadowed recess at ground level. When he yanked the cord that dangled beside it, a drum thubbed inside.

"Prisoner for charge," he told the uniformed guard who opened the door a moment later, pushing the boy inside ahead of him. Erileine and Razi followed them.

Erileine had never realized that arresting someone involved so much writing. Even Razi's patient smile eventually grew forced. "*La*, you would think we were in Thind," he muttered as the clerk scribbled in yet another ledger.

"Sorry," the clerk said unapologetically, handing the ledger book to Bosun Uyves to sign. "Procedures, you know. Must say, I'm glad we don't have to go through this very often when we're in the air. At least, we didn't until this one started showing up."

The bosun looked up. "You know him?"

The clerk sighed theatrically. "Oh yes. I doubt another night in the dungeon will scare any sense into him, but we'll give it a try. Thank you. Now, can you initial here and here, please? And I'll need a thumbprint here..."

Erileine glanced at the boy, who was sitting on a stool in the corner of the cold stone room with his hands still tied behind his back and his coat on the floor beside him. She hadn't known the Hardeck *had* a dungeon. He didn't look as though the thought of spending a night in it scared him. He looked as if he wanted to bite someone's head off.

The clerk inked a round stamp and rolled it carefully across the bosun's final signature. "I think, yes, that should be everything. No, a moment, there's—no, no, that's all. Thank you, bosun." He stood and nodded. "Now, you said you wanted to speak to the captain? Yes? Good. He should be upstairs. You know the way?"

\* \* \* \* \*

The captain was indeed upstairs—three flights of granite stairs worn smooth by a slow waterfall of feet. The polished bamboo handrail beside them had been worn shiny-smooth by generations of hands. Clerks in blue jackets bustled past the trio from Starboard Town, squawking "shortage" and "inventory" to one another like strange flightless birds.

Erileine was so busy gawking at the tapestries on the walls and the statues frowning sternly between them that she stumbled on every tenth step. Most of the tapestries were brightly-painted silk from Ini Bantang and Barra Bantang, though some had faded with age—great age, she thought, gazing at a bird's-eye view of what could only be the sunken city of Plange.

"Quite the sight, aren't they?" Bosun Uyves said, as proudly as if they were his.

Erileine nodded. "What's that one?" he asked, pointing.

The bosun shrugged cheerfully. "Not a clue. Bookster?"

Razi studied the tapestry. Glass windows let in the light at regular intervals, but even so, the building's interior was growing dim as evening approached. "The Parliament of Whales, I believe. Not bad work." He gestured at the one next to it. "This, on the other hand, is Ossisswean. See here? The squares in the corner? *La*, those are the

painter's sign. It is bad luck to put one's name on someone else's image, so portraitists mark their work after this fashion. Now, you notice the way the subject's hands are clasped in front of his chest? In a formal portrait such as this—"

The bosun cleared his throat noisily. "Sorry, bookster, but you'd best save the lesson for some other time. Wouldn't want to keep the captain waiting."

Despite his own words, the bosun still paused for a few moments at the top of the stairs to straighten his jacket and run his fingers through his hair before thumping the little door drum. "Enter," a deep voice said.

"Oh..." Erileine gasped. They were in the Grand Hall—the *Grand Hall*. One entire wall was a single enormous window. Below it, the Hardeck dropped vertically to the steep cliff that formed the mountain's leading edge. The great window curved slightly, so if you stood close to its center and looked straight ahead, you saw nothing except sky.

Paintings from all over Cherne covered the room's rear wall. Delicate yet indestructible ruins from the time of the Pilots, the sun rising over a glacier in Anuvatik, tigers and courtiers in mirrored masks listening to music on board a palace barge in Thind... None of them showed Gandan, Mau Ngapcha, or anywhere else the mountain flew over. Generations of captains had collected pictures of scenes they never thought to see out their front window.

The only picture from the mountain itself was a scrimshaw plaque larger than Erileine was tall, carved out of a single bone of some enormous, long-forgotten creature. The colors etched into its surface had faded with age, but they still showed what the ruins on Avaunt's peak had looked like before the Pilots fell and the mountain tilted backward. Half a dozen pillars formed a half-circle around a flat-topped pyramid the size of a house. A throne rested on top of the pyramid, too large for anything human to sit in comfortably.

Erileine had seen a more modern painting of the spot in the Captain's House in Starboard Landing. The pillars had been broken long ago, and the throne was long gone, but the pyramid was still there, tilted at an angle like everything left on the mountain from those days. The icicleers who climbed the mountain twice a week to bring snow

back to Forecastle gave the place a wide berth. It wasn't haunted—they would have known what to do with ghosts—but like so much of what the Pilots had left behind, it reminded people just how inconsequential they were.

"Good afternoon, bosun." Erileine jumped. She hadn't noticed the two men standing in the corner.

The bosun saluted, nudging Erileine with his elbow to do likewise. "Good afternoon, *sra*."

The captain returned the salute sharply. He was stocky and broad-shouldered, somewhere in age between Erileine's father and grandfather. What was left of his close-cropped hair was shot through with gray, and the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes had been etched by the sun and the endless, patient arguments it took to rule, even a domain as small as the flying mountain.

The man beside him was a head taller, with white teeth and a neat mustache. His knee-length jacket and trousers were simply cut, but absorbed the light in a way that hinted at expensive fabric and fine tailoring, and the lines on his face had been put there by a lifetime of smiles like the one he was wearing.

The captain gestured at the paintings. "I was just asking Klaues what he thought the odds were that the next captain would have to hang pictures of Gandan Berth and Mau Ngapcha up there some day to remind us of what they looked like. Any thoughts on that, bosun?"

"None, *sra*," Uyves said. "Afternoon, Klaues. Been arrested lately?"

The Hett smiled. "Six days a week, bosun, six days a week. Any chance you'll have time for another game of cards this trip? I wouldn't mind a chance to get some of my sequins back."

"Plans made, I'm afraid," the bosun replied affably.

The captain cleared his throat. "I understand you had some excitement on the way here?"

"Just a little ragtagger, *sra*. The bookster snagged him, not me."

"Mm." The captain cocked an eyebrow at Razi. "Anything I should concern myself

with?"

The bookster turned his hands palms-up. "*La*, your clerk was pondering a night in the dungeon and some scrubbing of cobblestones."

The captain snorted. "Bucket full of good that's done in the past. Anyway, I'm glad you've come—there's a few things I'd like to ask you. If you'll follow me? Bosun, you are of course welcome to join us."

Bosun Uyves cleared his throat. "Thank you, *sra*, but with your permission, I *do* have some other matters I'd like to look in on while I'm here"

Erileine saw Klaues stifle a smile as the captain said, "Of course. Go finish your, um, rounds."

"Thank you, *sra*." The bosun saluted once again and left, humming softly.

Razi and Erileine followed the captain and Klaues through a side door to a normal-sized room with normal-sized windows, a low Bantangui table, and comfortable chairs. Very comfortable chairs, Erileine thought, sinking into one moments after the three adults. She climbed Slip Street a dozen times every day, but even so, the long walk from Starboard Town had worn her out. She wondered if there'd be time to visit a steam bath before dinner. *Probably not*, she decided regretfully.

There was chocolate, though. An old man in a spotless blue jacket poured for them and left. The captain and Klaues picked theirs up and blew on them gently, but Razi ignored his, so Erileine left hers alone as well.

"So," the captain said. "Bookster. I don't suppose you've turned up anything that might be of use?"

Razi spread his hands apologetically. "*La*, not so much as I had hoped. I did find an account from Anuvatik of a stone boat that sailed to the moon and back. The author—she doesn't give her own name, but from the style, I would guess her to have been from Vaarda—said that the boat made the journey several times before disappearing."

The captain drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair. "Hm. What do you think of it?"

Razi sighed. "To be honest, I rather suspect it was just a traveler's tale about

Avaunt grown garbled with time and distance. As I have been telling my apprentice, being written does not make a thing true.”

“I wish more people shared your skepticism,” Klaues said regretfully. “Here. Have these shown up in Starboard Town yet?”

He took a sheet of cheap gray paper from his pocket and passed it to Razi. Erileine craned her neck to look. The printing was rough and slightly smeared, but the message was plain. “The Committee of Twenty-Nine,” Razi read aloud. “Because there are twenty-nine of them?”

“Question twenty-nine from the last Debates,” the captain grunted. “About how many Hett should be allowed on the mountain.”

“They’ve gone further this time,” Klaues said quietly. “No Hett on the mountain at all.”

Razi stroked his chin with his fingertips. “Will they have the voices they need?”

The Hett shrugged. “Who can say? Four days ago, I would have said we had left this behind us. Now? Two of my nephews have had stones thrown at them in the streets. Somehow, people seem to think that what happened on Orangeday is our doing.” He laughed. “It apparently hasn’t occurred to them that if we have magic enough to move the mountain off its path, throwing stones at us would be less than wise.”

“And speaking of magic...” The captain steepled his hands under his chin. “Do you know a magician named Thomas?”

Razi smiled politely. “Of course! Do you also?”

“He arrived this morning in some kind of magical flying sailboat. Scared the roof goats half to death, and the militia, too. Apparently Lady Jangchup—she’s the King’s Voice in Gandan these days—is worried enough about us changing course to send her chief magician hawking after us under full sail.”

Razi laughed. “*La*, so is old Barramarrabee dead then? And Roderick the Rhymer also?”

“*Her* chief magician, not the king’s,” the captain emphasized. “He was very careful to make that distinction. ‘Not speaking on behalf of the Throne and Collar’, and so on.

Anyway, he had a few things to say when I mentioned you were here."

Razi nodded. "I imagine he would. We are not friends."

"I gathered that." The captain lifted his cup to his lips. "But from what he tells me, you and Lady Kembe are."

Erileine's breath caught. Lady Kembe was the most powerful magician in the Karaband—some said in the whole world. There weren't just stories about here, there were *legends*.

Razi met the captain's sharp eyes calmly. "Am I accused of anything?"

"Accused? No. But when you boarded in Mau Ngapcha, all you told me was that you wanted to see what was in the Captain's House library. There was no mention of you being Lady Kembe's fetch."

"I am no one's fetch." Razi didn't raise his voice, but his tone could have struck sparks off flint. "I have worked for her from time to time, as I would work for anyone else who wanted old books found and read, but I am not, and never have been, soul-ridden. If Thomas says otherwise, I call him a liar."

The silence that followed stretched as tight as Klaues's smile. The captain finally broke it with a sigh. "Fair enough," he grumbled. "But you could have said."

Razi spread his hands. "*La*, there is always much that could be said, and is not. And much that is said, that—"

The captain waved him into silence. "Don't get philosophical on me. Mind telling me what it is between you two?"

"He tried to kill my previous apprentice," Razi said. "It is not the sort of thing one easily sets aside."

The captain looked at Erileine as if she was something Razi had brought with him from the market. "I imagine not."

"Tell him about the picture," Klaues said.

"I'm getting there," the captain said testily. "Here—what do you make of this?" He picked a book up off on the table and passed it to Razi.

The bookster tilted the page in so that Erileine could see a tinted sketch of a small

village in a mountain valley. There was something familiar about the scene... "It's just like Gandan Berth!" she blurted. "The big bowl the mountain sits in!"

The captain nodded. "That's what I said. Thomas said some spell or other pulled him to it. If you flip the page over, it's called *The Mine at Tinhead*."

"Which is where?" the bookster asked, still studying the picture.

"Upriver from Anyalcze. About two weeks away at our usual speed, though at the rate we're going, we could be there in..."

"Five days," Klaues volunteered.

"Five days," the captain repeated. "Don't suppose there's any mention of the place in any of your books, is there?"

"*La*, they are actually *your* books," Razi corrected mildly. "But no, not that I recall, though we will certainly look."

"Do so." The captain set his empty cup on the table. "But keep it to yourself until we know whether there's anything to it. There's enough rumors and what-not kiting around right now."

"On my blood," Razi said, dipping his head slightly.

The captain glanced at Erileine. "Mine too," she said hastily.

He stood and straightened his jacket. "Well then. Thank you for your time."

Setting the book on the table and standing in turn, Razi bowed slightly. "Thank *you*. But may I ask, can you perhaps tell me where Thomas is to be found? I should pay my respects."

The captain's brow furrowed. "There'll be no blood shed on my mountain, is that clear?"

Razi placed his right hand over his eyes. "May I be struck blind."

"Hmph. He's probably upstairs with the birds. Said Lady Jangchup wanted him to send word as soon as he arrived."

"*La*, then if I may excuse myself? Thank you. *Sra* Klaues, good afternoon. Come, Erileine. Let us say hello to our young magician."

\* \* \* \* \*



*Once upon a time, a captain of Avaunt fell in love with a young man from Aft Landing. She was twenty years his senior, but when they spoke, she felt like a girl again. But one day, as the mountain lay berthed at Mau Ngapcha, he disappeared. Some people say he went looking for glass flowers to give her as a sign of his love. Others say he wanted to see more of the world than what passed below Avaunt, or lacked the courage to tell the captain that he had tired of her. Whether he was swallowed whole by a python, drained dry by parasquitoes, or simply shaved off his mustache and changed his name, he disappeared.*

*In her grief, the captain locked herself away in the Hardeck's highest room. Day after lonely day she sat there, neither eating nor sleeping, until that part of her that could leave this world did.*

*The room stood empty after that—her nephew, who became captain in her wake, feared that she might return as a ghost. Besides, his leg hurt from a long-ago fall, and there were many stairs between the Grand Hall and that room.*

*Some years later, a family of Gifted condors came to the mountain in search of a new home. They were northerners, with gray feathers and sharp eyes, who had nested peacefully in the Brumoso Mountains their whole lives (peacefully but not happily—condors are not naturally cheerful creatures). When yet another spasm of anti-Gifted sentiment swept through the country, raccoons argued that the anger would die down, and bears matter-of-factly said that they would eat anyone who tried to harm them, but the condors just spread their blunt wings and left their troubles behind.*

*The captain was happy to give them space: they could carry messages to and from the surface, and even their ungifted progeny would help keep the mountain's rabbits in check. He had the room's window widened and a screen put in to shelter the birds from the wind and rain. Twice a week, on Redsdays and Greensdays, one of the Hardeck's unluckier clerks swept the rabbit bones on the floor into a sack for burning, refilled the birds' water jug, and scraped their acrid white cake off their roosting posts with an old wooden spatula and a wrinkled nose. New clerks sometimes tried to chat with the room's residents, but Gifted condors are hardly more talkative than their*

*ungifted kin. No one ever asked the birds whether the heartbroken captain's ghost haunted the room, and for their part, they never saw any reason to say.*

"By my eyes, a dozen rabbits, hung 'til they're as ripe as cheese! Two dozen! Just go!"

"Nawp." The first voice was human, heavily accented, and exasperated. The second was an indifferent rasp. Razi smiled humorlessly and thumped the door's drum.

"Yep?" the second voice squawked.

Razi pulled the door open and stepped into the room. Erileine followed, her mind still whirling. Razi worked for Lady Kembe? For *Lady Kembe*?

"Ah, Razi! Hello, hello. So very, um, to see you again. I've missed the sound of your sandals behind me—they *are* the same ones, are they not? Well made, I must say, to have lasted so long." The magician appeared to be in his early twenties, with red-gold hair, blue eyes, freckles, and the whitest teeth Erileine had ever seen. He wore a long black skirt and a rich brocade jacket, black and dark green with red and gold thread twisting through it. The pattern shifted slightly each time Erileine blinked.

Razi bowed deeply, fluttering his hands through an elaborate desert greeting. "Thomas. Welcome to Avaunt."

"Thank you, thank you. You look well."

"As do you. This is my apprentice, Erileine."

Thomas beamed, as if he had been introduced to some famous wonder-worker. "The pleasure, truly, the pleasure." He folded his hands in front of his chest Bantanguistyle.

"*Shalma'a*," Erileine said, returning the magician's bow awkwardly.

Thomas waited. When she said nothing more, his smile broadened. "A woman of few words, eh? Like... Like... What was his name?" He cocked his head and glanced down at his jacket. "No, not him, the boy from Medef. Eben?"

"Eimin," Razi corrected calmly.

"Of course, of course, Eimin. Resourceful fellow. His Karabandi was much better, but of course he had more chance to practice. How *is* he these days, do you know?"

"Studious. Happy. Alive. And yourself?"

"Oh, alive as well, very much, and busy, busy, busy. Lady Jangchup is wonderful, really. I'm learning so much from her, and of course I'm grateful for a chance to serve however I can."

"I'm sure you are," Razi repeated dryly.

Thomas raised a finger. "Now, now, that's two unpleasantries in as many sentences—let's not have a third, shall we? There are serious matters afoot here. We can't afford to waste time bickering. Speaking of which..." He turned back to the condor, who had neither blinked nor moved while the humans spoke. "I believe we were discussing rabbits, were we not?"

"Nawp," the condor squawked.

"Tsk ts," Thomas clucked. "I'm *sure* the captain would want my letter to reach Lady Jangchup without delay. I implore you—"

"Nawp." The condor shook her head. She wasn't as ugly up close as Erileine had expected. Her beak was cruelly curved, and bald red skin on her neck hung in loose wrinkles, but her eyes glittered like mid-winter icicles, and the ruff of white feathers on her chest looked as warm as a favorite sweater. "Might not get back. Might not know where back was."

Thomas crossed his arms. "By my eyes, they're as bad as the waiters in Anyalcze," he said to Razi. "Do you have any suggestions? Wait!" He snapped his fingers. "Perhaps you could ask Lady Kembe to give Lady Jangchup a message on my behalf? She is so good at whispering in people's ears."

Razi raised his palms in apology. "Perhaps the best thing would be if you carried your message back to Gandan yourself."

Thomas's smile hardened and the pattern on his jacket turned jagged, but whatever riposte he would have made was forestalled by wings rustling outside the window. A moment later, a second condor sidled into the room. "Ehp," he squawked.

"Ehp," the first one replied.

"What do they want?" the newcomer asked.

"Message downbelow."

The second condor rustled his feathers. "Nawp."

"Nawp," the first agreed. They swiveled their heads in unison to fix a double stare on Thomas.

"Well, then," the magician said in mock-exasperation that wasn't really mock, "I suppose we'll just have to find some other way. Thank you for your time." He turned back to Razi, still smiling. "Razi—as always."

"And you." Razi raised his palms again.

"And good luck with your apprentice. I hope her education is easier than her predecessor's was." Thomas caught himself. "Oh, but I forgot to ask. Exactly which of your many trades is this one studying?"

Razi raised his eyebrows at Erileine. "I want to be a bookster some day," she said, feeling foolish.

"Ah, how worthy. I'm sure Lady Kembe will find that valuable."

"I'm not learning it for her." Even in her own ears, Erileine sounded defensive.

"Of course not," Thomas agreed warmly. "Well, clear day and *mingala ba* to you both."

"Nasty," the second condor squawked after the door closed behind the magician.

Razi laughed. "*La*, yes, like ground glass in rice pudding." His expression grew serious. "But truly, are you not flying any messages today? Or was that just for his benefit?"

"Nawp." The female condor's head bobbed from side to side. "Mountain's moving too fast. Might not be able to get back."

"I see," Razi said thoughtfully. "Well, if you change your mind—for anyone—I'm sure the captain would be grateful if you let him know."

The condor tilted her head to study Razi, as if trying to decide whether he was a rabbit or a tiger. "Ehp," she finally squawked, meaning "yes" or "no", or "silly mammal, I already knew that" or perhaps something entirely bird-ish that Erileine wouldn't have understood.

She followed Razi down ten flights of stairs to the main floor, breaking into a trot in places to keep up with the bookster's long-legged stride. "Was his jacket magic?" she asked when the bookster finally slowed down enough for conversation.

"*La*, I'm afraid so," the bookster sighed. "And very old. Nobody alive would know how to make it." He slowed slightly to let her catch up. "I apologize—I've never thought to ask if you've seen any before."

"Sure. When Fraederiq—" Erileine swallowed. "Fraederiq broke his arm when we were little. We were playing dares on a swing rope, trying to see who could get the highest, and he fell off. Gaeston walked up here to get the captain's wife, and she came and did a spell so that Fraederiq's arm would mend straight." She saw no reason to add that Fraederiq's father had waited almost a week. By the time she reached Starboard Town, his son had been drenched in fever, and his arm had been mottled. That had been just a few months after Fraederiq's mother had left; Fraederiq's arguments with his father had started almost as soon as he was well enough to stand again.

"And there was a rock slide a couple of years ago when we berthed in Mau Ngapcha. The captain hired a Bantangui to make the rocks dance themselves into a pile. He used one of my paere's flutes."

The bookster nodded. "Well, unless the world has turned upside down in the last ten years, you're going to see some more magic done today. And *la*, there he is. I'm surprised he doesn't hire a stage and a crier so that the whole town can watch."

Thomas stood at the bottom of the broad steps in front of the Hardeck. His brocade jacket hung in the air beside him as if on an invisible coat rack, its patterns shifting and swirling playfully. The market-day crowd had already formed a half-circle in front of him. They watched, hushing one another, as he folded a sheet of creamy blue paper.

"What's he doing?" Erileine whispered.

Razi rolled his eyes. "Performing," he said in a normal voice. "He lives for it, truly. See?"

Sure enough, Thomas had folded the piece of paper to make a toy bird small

enough to nestle in the palm of his hand. He raised it to his lips and blew on it gently. Its tiny wings fluttered, then flapped. It rose from his palm and circled his head like a strange blue wasp. A few people applauded. Thomas whistled sharply. The bird shot away westward. "Show-off," Razi grunted.

Thomas raised his arms over his head and whistled again. His jacket flapped as if caught in a strong wind to settle neatly on his shoulders. Before Erileine's astonished eyes, the buttons did themselves up. Thomas smiled broadly as a few more people applauded, then strolled toward the closest stall like a princess inspecting her stables.

Razi shook his head. "Him and that jacket. Truly, there is no one as stupid as a clever man." He paused. "Especially a clever man in love." He gathered his *deel* around him with one hand and strode away.

Erileine followed him through the end-of-day bustle of the market closing up. Some vendors were disconsolately wrapping up the entire stock they had brought that morning. Buckles and straps for climbing harnesses, copper jewelry set with colored glass, embroidery thread—the worried Avauntois had barely glanced at them. Those selling onions, sacks of rice, cured peppers, palm oil, and rabbit traps, on the other hand, had nothing to take home except jingling strings of coins. Some had raised their prices five times before noon, and five times again before sunset. "Scandalous!" people exclaimed, but they paid.

Razi had to stop every dozen strides to let Erileine catch up. When they finally reached the narrow streets on the market's other side, Razi glanced at her. "So, do you know the way, or shall we ask someone for directions?"

"I know the way." But then the question that had been swelling in Erileine's mind spilled out. "Bookster—did you know the mountain was going to change course?"

Her teacher blinked. "By all the saints who laugh—whatever gave you that idea?"

"I don't know." But she *did* know, and somehow the ache in her muscles from day's long walk gave her the courage to say, "It just—it seems like too much for coincidence. You coming here, and, you know, what Thomas said." She shrugged uncomfortably.

Razi nodded. "*La*, you mean the fact that I have worked for someone as famous for

meddling in the world as Lady Kembe?"

Erileine shrugged again. "And the other night, when you said you were meditating. I heard you talking to someone, but there wasn't anyone else in the room."

"*La*, that." Razi sighed. "It has been a day for stories and secrets, hasn't it? So, I will share one more with you, though I ask you to keep it to yourself. You don't have to," he continued, raising a hand to forestall whatever Erileine had been about to say. "If you decide your parents or the bosun really ought to know, then of course you will tell them. But..." He lowered his hand. "It may be nothing—just a grain of sand in her shoe. *La*, and if she had any name but her own, no one would pay it any attention. I will therefore ask you to think carefully before repeating what I tell you."

He waited, a lean dark figure in desert brown, standing in the early evening half-light on a narrow cobbled street a thousand gallops from the city of his birth, while his apprentice wrestled with her conscience. Finally Erileine nodded. "All right."

"Thank you. Lady Kembe has dreams sometimes, dreams that are more than dreams. These last few years, they have shown her a shadow moving across the land. At first she thought it was a metaphor, but of late..." The wave of his hand took in the mountain, their change of course, and the whole world. "Perhaps it is to be taken literally."

"So you're here because of a dream," Erileine said flatly.

Razi shrugged again. "I have chased rhymes before, and children's games—why not dreams? It could mean nothing—they often have in the past. But still, better to search and not find than not to search. And since she cannot come here herself..." He turned his palms up. "Here I am."

Erileine scowled. "So the captain was right. You *are* her fetch."

Razi's hand was suddenly on Erileine's arm. "I will say it again," he told his apprentice calmly. "I am nobody's fetch, and never have been. Lady Kembe has done this world greater service than it knows—*la*, greater than it deserves, I sometimes think—but if she ever tried to bend my will, I would write her name on the wall just so that I could piss on it. I do this for her because if she is afraid, then so am I. And if a smiling

tapeworm like Thomas is crawling around then I am doubly afraid, because where she would act to keep the world in balance, he would look only to find advantage.”

He let go of Erileine's arm. “Now, let us find your father. Half the mountain is here today, and if we do not claim beds for ourselves soon, *la*, we will have to perch upstairs with the birds.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Like people everywhere, the Avauntois preferred the company of their own kind. Starboard Towners tended to stay at the Green Pig when they were in Forecastle, or in one of the two smaller hotels next door known as the Piglets. If you were from Portside, you probably closed your eyes in the Tattered Flag, which took its name from a song that had been popular in Gandan a generation ago; if you'd walked all the way from Aft Landing, Im Awre's Bantangui-style hostel on Flat Saddle Street was your favorite port of call. If you were too poor for any of these, you scrubbed dishes in the militia's ordinary room so that you could sleep on its floor. And if you were Hett, you found what shelter you could half a gallop out of town, next to the tipping grounds where sawdust from the mountain's single sawmill was mulched with the contents of Forecastle's nightsoil jars before being spread on the town's vegetable gardens.

The Starboard Towners were doubled up twice over, nine in rooms meant for three, on the Green Pig's upper floor. At dinner, they talked over soup and sweet potato bread with Forecastlers who preferred eating out to cooking in. Who had they seen? What had they bought, and for how much? *How much?* Oh, that was a crime.

“Though you can't fault folk,” a severe-looking woman said. “If they weren't selling for twice what they ought, they'd never to be able to afford anyone else's prices, would they?”

Heads nodded. Salt, someone else said. It had been hard to find salt, and what could be found was ten times its usual price. Someone else mentioned boot leather. “And tea,” said a third.

“Try the Hett house,” another Forecastler said. He had been silent until then, with his head bent over a wooden bowl of stew, and a thick gray Darpani-style ponytail



hanging over the back of his collar. "That Klaues fellow was the first one down the market when it happened. Bet he's got tea. *And* salt."

Donaïen snorted. "Let him have it. You can live without tea, if you have to."

"Just like soap, eh?" one of the Starboard Towners jibed. A few people laughed.

Donaïen flushed. "'S unhealthy," he muttered.

Armaend put a hand on his husband's shoulder. "Nothing special about tea," he said. "Why, my paere used to boil burned bread instead. Swore the leafy stuff never tasted half as rich. Of course, if the water runs out..."

Before anyone could answer that, there was a sharp rap on the window shutter. "Can you get that, please?" the innkeeper's harried daughter called. A Forecastler untied the latch string and pushed the shutter open.

"Much obliged," squawked Jack the parrot, hopping from the window sill onto the table. He shook himself with a quick rustle of feathers, preening one wing with quick strokes of his blunt beak as various people said hello.

"Hoy!" A man at the next table beckoned to the innkeeper. "Some crackers for our friend here!"

The room instantly went so quiet that Erileine could hear the innkeeper's daughter complaining in the kitchen about the looks that one of the customers had been giving her. The silence stretched out until the man who had spoken mumbled, "Sorry. Just making a joke."

"Well, nobody's laughing," someone said coldly.

Jack rustled his feathers again. "So," he squawked brightly, "Who's buying the first round?"

Erileine sat silently between her father and Razi as tiny glasses of steaming cider arrived, lost in her own thoughts, until she heard her name. "Pardon?" she asked.

"I said, I heard you met the captain today," Jack said. "In the Hardeck."

Erileine nodded. "And a magician named Thomas who's come up from Gandan, and a man named Klaues."

"Awwrk! Figures he'd be there. His mouth's never more than your little finger from

the captain's ear."

Erileine hesitated. "He said he'd been arrested."

A few people laughed. Puzzled, Erileine looked at her father. "They arrest him every day," Laeuc said. "Because of his house."

As the innkeeper and his daughter wrestled an iron pot full of bread pudding in orange peel sauce onto the table for dessert, the room explained, doubling back every half sentence as someone added a correction or a detail or an opinion. Hett weren't allowed to stay in town overnight, so Klaues' father, who had been the first Hett on Avaunt to have any real money, had built his house just a few steps past the boundary stone on Squid Street that marked the official edge of Forecastle. A few years later, an old map had surfaced (or been forged—it depended who you asked) that put the boundary sixty strides further out. Rather than toss the Hett out, the captain of the time had reached an understanding with them. Every morning, at dawn, a bosun's mate knocked on the front door of the house and announced that every Hett inside was under arrest. And every morning, the house's occupants answered with a short string of coins to pay the fine.

"Of course, being Hett, they found a way to play it to their own end," Jack finished. "There's half a dozen houses there now, all roofed together so they can claim it's just one."

"But they still all have to pay the fine every day," Laeuc countered.

"So?" Jack pecked a piece of orange peel off the plate that Donaïen had put in front of him. "Still shouldn't be allowed. I don't mind Vaszlav and the like—they know their station—but these new Hett...they're shifty." He scratched the side of his head with a claw. "Like cats."

"Well then, here's to the real Avauntois!" The ponytailed Forecastler raised his glass. Everyone else reached for theirs, saying, "The real Avauntois," with varying degrees of enthusiasm—everyone except Razi, who smiled slightly but said nothing.

Conversation rambled after that. When the innkeeper and his daughter came to clear the table, Razi wrapped his *deel* around his long legs and retired to a bench against

the common room wall with a book. Laeuc took out a flute; another traveler tuned the battered old erhu standing in the corner and joined in, and soon a ragged chorus threw the verses of a round back and forth. And if the voices were a little too loud and the cheerfulness a little forced, well, what of it?

When the last song ended, Erileine followed her father and the other Starboard Towners upstairs to their room. The sliver of cheap orange dayglass the innkeeper had given them threw distorted shadows on the walls as they took off their boots, coats, and overshirts, wrapped themselves in whatever blankets they had brought, and fell asleep on the bed, on the floor, or in hastily-slung hammocks.

Erileine found space in the corner with her legs stretched out and her head pillowed on a roll of blue goat's wool Laeuc had bought for Gaeston. She wondered how many others would have picked up something extra for Fraederiq's father as well. *Most*, she bet herself guiltily. Gaeston wasn't popular, but he was still their neighbor. She should get him something as well, and Queçenne too.

She drifted into sleep, and then into dreams. Fraederiq was so small that Erileine could have picked him up with one hand, except he was hiding among the lumens blooming in the Captain's House garden. She tried to catch him with the blue blanket she held in her outstretched arms, but he bolted through her legs like a rabbit. She shouted after him. Everyone else shouted too, angry that she had let the rabbit escape.

It took her a moment to realize that she was awake, and that people really were shouting. Men and women struggled to their feet around her, unshuttering dayglass lanterns and asking one another what was going on, who was yelling, was there a fire?

There was. Erileine could smell the smoke. But the sounds outside the hostel's narrow window weren't the sounds of people organizing to fight it. They were angrier. And that crash—that was glass being shattered.

A glance told her that Razi's hammock was empty and his pack was gone. She shoved her feet into her boots, ignoring her father's, "Stay here!" and ducked through the crush of grownups trying to get dressed and find their belongings and get out of each other's way all at the same time.

Downstairs, around the table where she had eaten dinner a few hours before, out the door into a stream of people. "Come on!" someone shouted, maybe at her, maybe at themselves, maybe just to shout. The sting of smoke was stronger now. Another crash of breaking glass. More shouting up ahead, too far away for her to make out words, angry and exulting.

A lone bosun's mate tried to stem the tide. "Get back in your beds or I'll arrest the lot of you!" She stepped in front of a bare-legged man in a winter-weight coat, reached for his sleeve, was knocked aside by someone else. "Hey!" She spun around, helpless and seething. Erileine hurried past her, head down, her heart in her throat. She didn't know what was happening, but something told her it was bad—very bad.

Up a dozen broad, shallow stairs, past a man kicking and kicking to work cobblestones loose for other people to snatch up, around a corner and only then realizing that the flickering light two stories above her was flames reflected in windows. There, on the other side of the waist-high marker showing where Forecastle had once officially ended, the Hett house was burning.

"Bring 'em out! Bring 'em out!" the crowd chanted. Cobblestones flew, thumping against walls or sailing through windows already emptied of glass. A tall man with a shaved head wound up and ran forward three steps and flung his stone. The crowd cheered as it sailed up, up, up, and groaned as it dropped again just a stride short of the top-most window.

A dozen bosun's mates stood in a line between the mob and the house's front door. Erileine swallowed. The ones anchoring each end had spears, and one of the mates in the middle had a bow. They wouldn't—no. They *couldn't*, not their fellow Avauntois. This couldn't be—

She shrieked and jumped as a hand came down on her shoulder. "You should not be here," Razi said, low and urgent. "It is not safe."

"But—what happened?" She flinched as the fire *whoomped* in a downstairs room. "Are they- The Hett— Did they—"

"*La*, they are out, if not safe," the bookster said, looking past her at the burning

building. "They have seen such as this before, and were ready for it." The green glass bottle that had been strapped to his pack hung from his belt, the sword hilt still jammed into it. His eyes were hooded like a hunting bird's.

"But who..." Erileine faltered. These were her people. How could they do something like this?

The bookster shrugged, his hand on her shoulder pushing gently to guide her back away from the crush without her really realizing that she was moving. "Someone had too much to drink. *La*, or someone has a debt they think they should not have to pay, or perhaps one of the Hett didn't step out of the way on the street quickly enough. It is like asking which drop of rain makes the dam break."

A shout cut through the night. "Let go of me!" Erileine and a hundred others whirled around. Three men were dragging a struggling fourth through the crowd. It was Klaues, Erileine realized, bloody-faced and frightened.

The crowd whooped. "Throw him in! Throw him in!" A hundred voices picked up the chant. The men holding the hapless Hett were beaming as if this was a goat-shearing contest and they had just won first prize.

"Stop!" the bosun's mate with the bow bellowed. He notched an arrow, raised, aimed, and staggered back as a cobblestone hit him in the head. "Throw him in!" the crowd shouted, pelting the lines of bosun's mates with whatever they could grab.

Razi's hand tightened on Erileine's shoulder. "Enough," he said in a voice that frightened her in a way the scene in front of her hadn't. Stepping away from her, he slipped a hand inside his *deel* and pulled out a small blue vial. "You will go back to the hostel," he ordered. She nodded jerkily, but he had already cocked his arm and thrown.

Nobody in the crowd noticed the little vial sail through the air. Nobody heard it shatter on the stones two strides away from the men holding Klaues. And for the first vital heartbeat, nobody noticed the darkness billowing out of it, blacker than a starless night.

But then they did, and shouts turned from anger to panic. What was happening? Had the Hett worked a spell? People stumbled back as Razi charged light-footed into the

inky cloud.

"Line advance!" the chief bosun's mate shouted, seeing his chance. He and his squad marched forward. The crowd swirled and broke, the anger of a moment before now confusion.

Erileine turned and ran a double dozen strides, then pulled up short in the lee of a pushcart someone had left outside their front door overnight. There! Even as the patch of inky darkness began to thin, Razi emerged on its far side, one arm around Klaus, the Hett's own arm over the bookster's shoulder. Erileine waited a moment longer for the last of the magical darkness to dissipate and reveal the prone figures of the three men who had been holding Klaues. One tried to sit up, thought the better of it as the line of bosun's mates reached him, and slumped back to the cobblestones.

Razi and Klaues disappeared into an alley. Erileine swallowed the ache in her throat and joined the stream of people—no longer a mob—hurrying back to their lives.

\* \* \* \* \*

The mood on Forecastle's streets the next morning was stretched as taut as a violin string. People kept their heads down and spoke in low voices. They all jumped when the innkeeper's young son dropped a plate, making the boy burst into tears.

The bosun didn't look surprised when Razi said that he was going to stay in Forecastle. "Just for a few days," he promised. "*La*, until things settle down." The bosun's sour look said what he thought the odds were of things settling down in a few days.

"Absolutely not," Laeuc said firmly when Erileine asked if she could stay too. "Your mother would skin me and dip me in brine."

"But paere!" Erileine pleaded. "I'm his apprentice!"

Laeuc finally relented—he always did—but only after Erileine swore that she would go straight to Uncle Regi's if anything happened. As his youngest daughter raced upstairs to grab her pack, he drained the last of his tea, staring at the wall as he wondered how in the names of all the saints he was going to explain this to his wife.

Erileine followed Razi through the streets to the Hardeck. People measured them

sidelong as they passed—a tall black figure in a dust-colored *deel* with a round-faced brown girl trailing hurrying to keep pace with him—but no one smiled or said hello. “Where are we going?” she finally asked, puffing slightly as she hurried to keep up with the long-legged bookster.

“*La*, the captain has asked Thomas to have a look at the mountain.” Razi paused to let two squabbling women carrying a heavy chest of drawers go by. “And he asked me to keep an eye on Thomas, so...”

Forecastle's lone air dock lay at the bottom of a stairway that zigzagged down the cliff below the Hardeck. The dock itself was a weatherbeaten pine shelf, ten strides deep and forty long, whose tree-trunk railing posts doubled as stanchions. Tiny compared to those at Ruuda-in-Ruuda or Yadanapore, it was adequate for the clouds, magic carpets, and more unusual visitors the mountain received between its northern and southern berths.

The *Presumption* was the dock's only tenant that morning. She was smaller than Erileine had expected, with a single mast with a furled white sail, narrow benches on either side of a low-roofed central cabin only slightly larger than a double bed, and an oversized ruddier. If she had been floating in the water instead of bobbing up and down in thin air, she wouldn't have attracted a second glance at the great river dock in Gandan.

Razi tossed his bag into the boat. As he stepped over the gunwale, the green glass bottle swinging on his hip, Thomas said, “What about your apprentice?”

Razi froze. His face twitched. “I beg your pardon?”

Thomas raised his eyebrows innocently at Erileine. “Have you flown before? There's really nothing like it.”

Erileine stared at Thomas blankly. “Um...”

“She will not need to accompany us,” Razi said firmly.

“Really? But they're always so *helpful*, your apprentices.” The magician's smile broadened as the pattern on his jacket formed diamonds that looked more than a little bit like teeth. “And just think of how educational it will be for her.”

Erileine could almost hear the space between the two men's locked eyes crackle. She bit her lip and tried not to look like a hungry kitten when Razi glanced at her.

Sighing, Razi slid over to make room. "*La*, come on then."

As Erileine stepped awkwardly into the flying boat, Thomas untied them. "Sit on the other side," he instructed, his voice suddenly serious as he slipped the stay cord off the rudder. "We'll be off balance otherwise. And hold onto the gunwale. And whatever you do, don't stand up unless you want to fall down. A long way down."

He didn't do anything that Erileine could see, but the sail suddenly bellied out, full of wind. The boat rose smoothly and swiftly into the air.

Her knuckles white on the gunwale, Erileine peered over the side. *So this is what birds see*, she thought. The Hardeck was a slate-roofed L, Mapmarket Square a bustling jigsaw of color in front of it. A lake of brown faces looked up, some shading their eyes, others pointing or waving. Forecastle spread out around them, cobblestones making crooked gray streams between the canyon walls of the houses. Chickens squawked and clucked in rooftop coops; smoke rose from a double hundred chimneys, and kites fluttered in the wind. It was different than looking down on the world from Avaunt—closer, faster, and a thousand times more exciting.

And there—a large square of colored cobblestones, carefully tended, showed the outline of Cherne and the mountain's path across it. White stones set among the gray showed the continent's coastline; red ones showed the mountain's path from Mau Ngapcha to Gandan Berth. Every morning, rain or shine, generations of captains had come out and moved the post showing Avaunt's progress. Erileine searched the square until she found it standing in a bucket of sand amidst some hastily-relocated stalls, ten paces away from the path it had followed for centuries.

The boat's green and white pennant snapped above the sail as they climbed higher and higher. Vertigo suddenly rose in her throat as she remembered Fraederiq falling...

Thomas banked to starboard. "Rather the view, isn't it?" he said loudly. "Shall we go under?"

"What? I mean, pardon?"



"Shall we go under the mountain? It's quite spectacular. A bit choppy, mind you—the wind can be tricky."

"No," Razi said firmly. "Just the sides."

Thomas rolled his eyes at Erileine and swung the rudder to the side. The *Presumption* came about obediently. Erileine suddenly realized that they were sailing straight into the wind. She wasn't sure, but she thought that was supposed to be impossible. *Then again*, she thought giddily, *We're in a flying boat*.

A moment later they were beside the mountain instead of over it. Erileine's ears were freezing, but she didn't notice. The sheet moss that hung on the braided pines was northern, as were the pines themselves. The jungle creeper vines that sprouted brown and yellow from tiny cracks in the rock were from the south. The cold killed them off when Avaunt went north, but they recolonized it every time the mountain returned to Mau Ngapcha.

And the birds—how could she not have realized there were so many birds? Thousands of them nested in every nook and cranny they could find, on ledges too narrow even for goats' feet, in the branches, or in round nests made of mud and sticks that clung directly to the rock. Irvings from the north, blue-crested cockatiels from the south, steelbirds with their blood-red beaks, and others Erileine couldn't name. Everything human seemed insignificant compared to the mountain's looming bulk. *We're just fleas on a whale's back*, she thought with no regard at all for zoology.

A tawny-crested gull suddenly appeared beside them, wings spread to hold the breeze as it tilted its head to study the boat. No food there, it decided, tipping to the side and soaring away with a disappointed cry.

"*La*, over there," Razi said, pointing. "See?" A pair of trolls with long orange hair—the kind the Bantangui called "orangutans"—swung from branch to branch through the pines.

"Whoa," Erileine said in awe.

Razi smiled. "They will have tales to tell when they get home, I think."

Erileine gaped. "Do you think they're Gifted?"

"Ah? Oh, *la*, no, no, I just meant..." The bookster shook his head, amused. "No, I'm sure they're not. They would have asked for sanctuary by now if they were."

"Oh." Other than Jack, and the condors, and a raccoon who had tried and failed to sell bad poetry in Forecastle the year before, Erileine had never spoken to a Gifted animal.

"Whoa!" She clutched the gunwale as the boat turned so sharply that even Razi lurched. "Look!" the magician pointed. "There, you see?"

For a moment Erileine didn't understand what he was pointing at, but then the darkness on the face of the cliff resolved itself. It was the mouth of a tunnel, too rectangular to be natural. Like everything left behind by the Pilots, the steps inside were tilted a quarter-arc from true.

Beside the tunnel, two men in rough clothes were scrambling up the rock face as fast as they could. Both had axes on their backs, and both wore climbing harnesses anchored by long ropes to trees growing above the tunnel mouth. As Erileine watched, they dove into the undergrowth and vanished from view.

"Can you take us closer?" Razi asked Thomas.

The magician nodded briskly. "Your wish is my every desire. Hold on!"

As they neared the cliff, the air being shouldered aside by the mountain made the *Presumption* dance like a scrap of cinnamon bark in a pot of boiling water. Thomas held them as steady as he could twenty strides away from the cliff face while they studied the tunnel mouth. It had been weathered smooth by centuries of southern rain, desert grit storms, and northern frost, but the stairs inside could have been made that morning.

A dozen freshly-cut stumps clustered around the tunnel mouth. *It would have been hellish hard work*, Erileine thought. Dangling in a harness as you swung the ax, having to watch that you didn't chop through the rope you were hanging on... They must have been at it for hours.

But something else was asking for her attention. Something about their vests... "They're Hett!" she exclaimed, immediately adding, "At least, I think so. They're wearing the same kind of clothes as Jaromir."

Razi studied the mountainside thoughtfully. "*La*, I think this deserves the captain's notice, don't you?"

"You see?" Thomas said approvingly to Razi. "I *told* you she'd be useful." He smiled at his passengers and nudged the rudder, turning the boat toward the bow of the mountain.

They docked without incident and climbed the stairs in single file. As they neared Mapmarket Square, voices shouted in unison. They rounded the corner to discover that half the stalls had been cleared away to make a parade ground. "Hwah!" Forecastle's gray-haired bosun and his three mates shouted orders, corrections, encouragement, and abuse as a dozen squads of spearmen and archers lunged and knelt, drew and released.

A pair of guards stood outside the Hardeck's main doors as usual. Today, though, they wore helmets and gorgets, and gave the approaching travelers a careful up-and-down as they climbed the stairs. "Magister," one said to Thomas, nodding respectfully while the other opened the door.

"Thank you," the magician said politely. He swept inside like royalty with Razi and Erileine in his wake.

The captain was in the Grand Hall, his hands clasped behind his back, a frown furrowing his forehead. He turned away from the window as they entered. "Magister, bookster," he nodded. "Have you found anything to brighten my day?"

Razi shook his head. "*La*, no, not in your library. But elsewhere..." He quickly described the men they had seen.

The captain's expression hardened as the bookster spoke. "By the death of dogs," he swore. "Klaues promised me this was nothing to do with his people."

"*La*, perhaps he is as ignorant of what is being done as we were," Razi suggested. "From what I am told, the tinker's assistant is new to the mountain."

The captain scowled. "I doubt many people will care about that, especially after last night's madness. Anyway, it looks like we're headed for Tinhead after all. See for yourself." He gestured at the window.

Erileine followed the line of the captain's pointing finger. The mountains in front

of them were ridged and ragged like a crumpled carpet, snow-white and pine-green. Without warning, the scene swam and re-formed. She yelped and threw up her arms even as the view steadied again.

"Oh, well done," Thomas murmured appreciatively as his jacket made round circles of delight. The panes to the left and right showed what they had a moment before, but the one in the center had pulled the view closer. Instead of mountains a hundred gallops away, they were looking at a neat town from what appeared to be no more than a tenth of that distance. Buildings made of gray brick and roofed with dark slate shingles stood around a paved square as large as the one outside the Hardeck. A flat-topped pyramid stood in the square's center, two stories tall and crowned with six pillars of dayglass as tall as Erileine. The only sign of life was a lone jay that fluttered away even as they watched.

"That looks just like the one up on the peak," Klaues said, pointing at the pyramid. "Same shape, same flat top..."

"It's amazing," Thomas said, ignoring the Hett to run a gentle fingertip across the window. "Who did it—Korrandarrenduk?"

The captain shook his head. "Rinchen of Trunggar. There was another one at Aft Landing, but some Bantangui raiders smashed it to bits about a hundred years ago."

The pattern on Thomas's jacket froze at his words. "May they be reborn to misery a thousand thousand times," the magician said, smoothing his lapels as gently as someone would pet a frightened cat. "Do you mind me asking its price?"

The captain shrugged. "My name. And I can't ever leave the mountain."

"Ah." Thomas nodded sympathetically. "Rinchen was never one to use a pin when a lance would do."

"*La*, captain, can you move the focus?" Razi interrupted.

The captain nodded. "Yes. But only to things that would be in view anyway."

Razi pursed his lips. "*La*, so, where is the picture of Tinhead? The one from the book?"

The captain jerked his thumb at the wall. "I stuck it up there next to the whales."

Razi blinked. "You tore it out of the book?"

"No, of course not. I used a razor. Why?"

Razi stared at the captain. "Perhaps... perhaps in future you could use a bookmark instead?" he said stiffly.

The captain and Thomas exchanged amused looks as Razi took the page down from the wall. He held it up in front of the window, glancing back and forth between it and the scene in front of them.

"*La*, so, can you show us what's to the left, please?" he asked. The captain passed his hand slowly in front of the window. The view slid sideways, making Erileine's stomach lurch. Braided pines no different from those on Avaunt, rocks, a fence around an empty pasture—

"Stop! There." Razi pointed. A stone tower twenty stories high stood against the side of the mountain.

"Why in the names of the saints would anyone build something like that in the middle of nowhere?" the captain demanded testily.

"Because you expect something to come to it?" Erileine said. She blushed under the sudden weight of three pairs of adult eyes. "Sorry," she muttered. "I just thought..."

Thomas beamed at Razi. "You *do* pick bright ones, don't you? One day I shall have to ask you how you find them. My apprentices have all been a great disappointment."

"Hold the reins a moment," the captain interrupted. "It must have taken years to build that thing! Do you think someone's been planning this for that long?"

Razi shrugged. "Who can say? A closer look might give us some answers."

The captain frowned. "I could ask one of the condors."

"*La*, but how long would that take?" Razi said. "Whereas if we left now, we could be back in time to spoil your dinner."

"We?" Thomas blinked theatrically. "As in, you and me? Razi—I'm touched. You said you'd see me dead before you'd work with me again." The pattern on his jacket danced.

"That was more of a hope than a requirement," the bookster replied.

"Stow it, both of you," the captain ordered sharply. He frowned at the view in front of him. If the top-most branches of the trees hadn't been swaying gently in the afternoon breeze, Erileine could have believed it was some strange kind of painting. "All right. Do you want a couple of my men along, just in case?"

"I'm sure we'll be fine," Thomas said politely. He gestured toward the door. "After you?"

Razi pulled a string of coins out of the sleeve of his *deel*. "Take these and find us a room," he ordered, as if Erileine had done it for him a dozen times before. "Somewhere close by—*la*, closer than the Green Pig, if you can. I would prefer quiet to noisy, and small to large, and a bath above all other things." He smiled reassuringly. "We won't be long."

A few minutes later, Erileine stood alone on the Hardeck's steps. She hefted the string of coins. It was more money than she had ever held in her life. Somewhere with a hot bath *would* be nice.

Erileine didn't think of herself as shy, but she had never had to ask a stranger for directions before. She had always been able to follow her father through the streets and alleys that doubled back on themselves, met at odd angles, or, in the case of the one she was now on, dead-ended against the front door of a bootmaker's.

Voices rose and fell inside. "Hello?" she said uncertainly, pushing the door open.

The two women sitting behind the long trestle table inside looked up and said, "Clear day," in unison. Both had their hair in braids pulled back and tied with twists of silk. Planks of dark brown leather lay in neat stacks behind them, while half-finished boots lay in pieces or stood upside down on lasts before them. A samovar as big as a goat's head took up one entire end of the table. The sugary smell coming from it made Erileine's stomach grumble.

She cleared her throat. "Clear day. I'm, um, we're visiting. From Starboard Town."

"With the bosun?" the woman on Erileine's left asked immediately.

The one on the right rolled her eyes. "Shush, Gisabelle, let the girl speak."

"Um, sort of. He went back yesterday. I'm just, I'm supposed to find somewhere to

stay. Do you know anywhere? Somewhere small and nearby?"

"The Sign of the Three Rabbits," the woman on the right said. "It's the bosun's favorite when he's here, isn't that right, Gisaelle? Very quiet for those who don't want to be disturbed." She elbowed the other woman in the ribs.

Gisaelle blushed. "It has very good food," she said defensively.

The first woman snorted. "Any food tastes good after exercise. Anyway, two up on your left to the cordwainer's, go down the alley, left again to the stairs by the flower seller, top of the stairs. Not far at all, isn't that right, Gisaelle?"

"Far enough for people who don't want other people sticking their noses into things that are none of their business," the second woman replied sharply.

When they wanted a scare, Avauntois children told each other about a house in Aft Landing (or maybe Portside, it depended who was telling the story). There was nothing beyond its back door but empty air, and when children were nosy, the evil magician (or Hett, or ghost) who lived there sent them through it unawares to fetch firewood.

Erileine felt like she had just stepped through that door. She raised her palms with a hasty, "Thank you, ladies, that's very helpful, much appreciated," and fled.

A grin split her face as she walked toward the cordwainer's. She would *definitely* have to ask the bosun about his boots when he got home. Of course, the story would be better if she knew the name of the shop...

She turned impulsively at the thought. The small figure two dozen strides behind her instantly turned around as well. "Hoy!" Erileine exclaimed. "Hoy, you!" It was the ragtag boy who had tried to steal the bosun's wallet. "Stop!" But he had already disappeared into a side alley like a rabbit going down a hole.

Erileine thrust her hand into her pocket and whooshed with relief. The coins Razi had given her were still there. Wasn't the boy supposed to be in a dungeon? She hurried up the street. As soon as she found an inn, she would go back to the Hardeck and tell them he had escaped.

The Sign of the Three Rabbits was as big as the Captain's House in Starboard Town, and just as well kept. Knee-high wooden planters filled with red and yellow

azaleas stood guard on either side of its spotless yellow front door. More flowers watched primly from matching planters on the window sills. Symmetric blue whorls were painted on either side of the door frame, Bantangui style, representing the ears that were supposed to listen for malicious gossip about the house's residents. The old woman snoring in a wicker rocking chair on the balcony above the door made the picture complete.

Erileine yanked the braided cord that hung by the door. A drum thumped inside, but no one answered. She pulled the cord again, harder.

The snoring stopped. "Who is it?" a voice yawned.

Erileine stepped back from the door and looked up. The old woman was rubbing her eyes, her dark brown face silhouetted against the sky.

"Clear day, *sra*," she said politely. "I'm looking for a room for the night. The bootmakers said you might have one?"

The old woman dug the last of her nap out of the corners of her eyes. "On your own?" she asked doubtfully.

Erileine shook her head. "No, *sra*. I'm Bookster Razi's apprentice. The room's for both of us." She held up her string of coins and jingled them.

A few minutes later, Erileine had exchanged a half-ring and sixpence for a pair of wooden tokens that might have looked like rabbits to whoever had carved them. The old woman certainly knew Bosun Uyves. Very popular, the bosun was. Easy to see why, with shoulders like his, and that smile, and of course everyone said he was such a good dancer, not that she had ever had a chance herself, her dancing days were far behind her, just as Erileine's were still in front of her. She did dance, didn't she? With anyone in particular yet? No? Oh, that would come, that would come, not to worry. Why, she herself had been fifteen the first time someone had asked her to dance. A vagabond, he turned out to be, not like the bosun, but of course she couldn't have known that at the time. Now, did she want to leave those bags with her, or in the room? Oh, yes, the room had a lock, of course, and not just for when they were berthed at Gandan or Mau Ngapcha, no, sad to say, the mountain had thieves of its own, Hett and what-not, the



saints alone knew why the captain let them stay on the mountain, not that she was questioning his judgment, of course, he was a fine captain, though his predecessor *had* been much firmer about such things. That camp of theirs by the sawdust tips was as good as being a little town of its own now, wasn't it? And that house on Squid Street, well, it shouldn't be allowed, particularly not if they were going to use it for (she lowered her voice) *magic*, like they had the night before, but of course it wasn't her place to decide that, of course, the captain knew his business, he was a fine man, just as Bosun Uyves was a fine, fine man, very popular, and easy to see why, of course, with shoulders like his, and that smile...

Her words splashed over Erileine like the monsoon rains of Mau Ngapcha. She kept smiling and saying, "Yes, *sra*," and "Thank you," and turning toward the door, but the torrent didn't stop until she backpedalled onto the street.

And so Erileine found herself alone in the biggest town on Avaunt with time on her hands and money in her pocket. Emboldened by her success in finding the Three Rabbits, she asked a man walking by with a rack of skewered chickens over his shoulder for directions. Dreamers' Cross? Down that way was fastest. Erileine ducked to avoid being clouted by a dead chicken as he turned to describe the route.

Anyone watching would have thought Erileine was ambling without a care in the world—at least, that's what she hoped. She peered into shop windows, stopped to study herself in the half-height mirror chained to the wall in front of a tailor's, and doubled back on her own trail half a dozen times. She never looked directly at the ragged figure trailing in her wake. It was just like trying to catch Mamaere Mayeule's cat: you had to get *it* to chase *you*...

But eventually her shadow disappeared. She doubled back once more, but the boy was gone. Disappointed, she tried to be philosophical. At least now she could actually go and look at some books.

Her father had first taken her to Dreamers' Cross on her eighth naming day. The booksellers had rolled their eyes at one another as she wandered in awe from stall to stall, all thinking, "Here's another one," and remembering themselves at her age.

Novels, pamphlets, diaries... Poetry, medicine, recipes, magic, and law... Gandan-o, Ruudian, Uwsian, Bantangui, Praczny, and languages Erileine didn't even recognize... Lost among the petrified learning, the failed and forgotten spells, and a lifetime's worth of elsewheres and elsewhens, she took no more notice of time passing than she did of her own breathing.

She leafed through every Gandan-o book she found, finally selecting a tract on the rights of Gifted animals and a collection of romantic stories full of noble knights who left their loves behind for seven years while they quested after tin rings that held their parents' souls, or magicians who were wrongly imprisoned for necromancy, only to be saved (or doomed) when a king in waiting fell in love with them. She weighed them in her hands, then put the tract back where she had found it. Her mother and Queçenne would prefer the stories, she told herself, not admitting to herself that she'd enjoy them too.

"Three rings," the bookseller said when Erileine asked its price.

Her jaw dropped. "Three rings!?"

The bookseller shrugged without looking up from the water-stained collection of fishing poems he was carefully mending. He was as tall as Razi, but skinny where Erileine's teacher was merely lean, and had stupendously bad breath. "That's cheap. Possibly the only cheap things left on the mountain, books. Beans and wool, they're what's in fashion these days." He snorted, sawing delicately at the book's binding with a scaling knife.

Erileine sighed. A half-ring, and she might have bought it. But three rings!

She scowled. "A half-ring and eightpence."

"No." The bookseller didn't even look up.

"All right, a half and ten," Erileine offered. "Look, the spine is almost broken. I'll have to stitch the pages back together in a year or two."

The bookseller glanced at the book, then at Erileine. "Two rings a half and sixpence, not a fingernail less." He shrugged again. "I can't sell it for less than I paid, can I?"

"Well, you *could*," Erileine muttered, knowing she was defeated. She could probably find something that she could afford, but after deciding she wanted the stories, anything else would feel second best. And anyway, it was getting late. She should get back to the Hardeck and wait for Razi.

Two new guards stood at the Hardeck's front doors. As far as they were concerned, young Starboard Towners belonged in Starboard Town while all this fuss was going on. "But I'm Bookster Razi's apprentice," Erileine protested. "I was getting us a room. At the Three Rabbits."

One of the guards raised his eyebrows at that. The other shook his head. "Can't go in without an escort."

"But I'm supposed to meet him here!"

The guard shook his head again. "Not without an escort."

"All right." Erileine thought for a moment. "Well, if you see the bookster, can you please tell him we're at the Sign of the Three Rabbits?" The guard supposed he could do that, so Erileine thanked him and headed for the sky dock.

The shadows were lengthening when Erileine reached it, and the cold air felt damp. She shivered and hunched her shoulders so that she could bury her chin in the collar of her coat.

The land below was beautiful. Orange sunset reflected off the ponds and streams nestled in countless little valleys, the snow on the peaks of the mountains around Avaunt, and the clouds grazing near the horizon. It could have been the approach to Gandan Berth, except there wasn't a road or a building in sight. Traders from all over the Ninety Kingdoms would be on their way to meet Avaunt at that centuries-old rendezvous. How many of them already knew that the mountain wasn't going to be there?

There! That dot. She brought her hand up to shield her eyes. It had to be the *Presumption*. She was coming in fast, Erileine realized—very fast.

She waved. A tiny arm wave back. She dragged a couple of bumpers over to the dock's edge, looped their nooses around stayposts, and kicked them under the railing so

that they dangled over the side.

The flying boat was only fifty strides away when Erileine realized that something was sticking out of her hull. Her belly went cold. It was an arrow, but as long as her arm and as thick as two of her fingers. Splinters starred the planks around its puncture like a frozen shout of pain.

Thomas steered the *Presumption* in close, yelling, "Clear away!" Erileine scrambled back. As the flying boat thudded against the bumpers, he threw an end of rope at Erileine. "Tie her fast!" he ordered. "Saints and their creations, what a mess!"

"Where's Razi?" Erileine asked as she made a clumsy knot.

Thomas slipped around the mast to the boat's bow and jumped onto the dock with another length of line in his hand, heedless of the half-gallop of empty air below him. "It's not that he would be much of a loss," he said as he tied the boat fast. "But *she* would never believe that I didn't have a hand in it. Here, get that gangplank over here." He hopped back into the boat, the pattern on his jacket roiling in agitation.

"But where's Razi?" Erileine repeated. Panic was like cold soup in her throat.

Thomas crouched down. "Right here," he grunted, "Busy messing up my boat as usual." He straightened, his right arm around Razi's back, his left holding the bookster's arm across his shoulders.

"*La*, so, put down a rug next time," Razi mumbled. His *deel* was slick with blood. More leaked through the fingers he had pressed against his side.

He and Thomas stumbled down the gangplank like drunkards, the bottle slung from Razi's belt making the picture complete. As they reached the dock, the bookster tripped over his own feet and collapsed.

\* \* \* \* \*

"He's half-empty," Nuu Ciy said matter-of-factly, washing her hands in a basin of soapy water. "And if it had been a thumb to the left, he'd be compost. As it is..."

"As it is?" the captain prompted.

His wife was shorter than Erileine, but carried herself as if she was as big as the mountain. She dried her hands on a scrap of cotton and dropped it into a shallow copper

bowl whose sides were sticky with Razi's blood. She sighed and started untying her apron. "As it is, he'll live unless he does it again."

"Thank you, love." The infirmary on the ground floor of the Hardeck was as big as the Grand Hall. Two dozen wooden beds lined one wall; the other was completely taken up with shelves. Bandages and spools of strong cotton thread stood next to trays of scalpels and wicked-looking bone saws. Night had fallen, so the only light came from pieces of expensive yellow-white dayglass set in bamboo sconces above the beds.

Nuu Ciy had stitched Razi's wound closed as carefully as Papaere Vurt would stitch up a torn boot, and about as gently. She had muttered small spells the whole time, pleas for strength and wards against infection that made her hands glisten faintly. Erileine wondered what she has given up on Razi's behalf: her ability to taste garlic, perhaps, or her memory of the colors in the dress she had worn on her tenth naming day. If she was smart and careful and had planned ahead, her losses would all be things she could live without. She would write them down somewhere safe and pore over them when the time came to give up something more. *And one day that book will be on the shelves in the Captain's House*, Erileine thought, just like the ones she herself had pored over.

Through it all, Thomas sat on the bed next to Razi's, watching Nuu Ciy's work with professional curiosity and occasionally muttering to his jacket. Erileine had almost (almost) punched him when he told Erileine that he couldn't help Razi. "But he's dying!" she had shouted.

"Yes, so the faster you get help, the better," he repeated for the third time.

"But why can't *you* fix him!?" she pleaded.

"Because every spell that might be useful would cost me far more than I am willing to give up, especially with so much mundane help just a few steps away," the magician snapped, his jacket making an emphatic jagged pattern in agreement. "Rushing around saving people—that's not really what magicians do, you know. That kind of thing is better left to heroes like him. Now, are you going to do something useful, or shall we sit back and wait for those imbecile condors?"

Erileine had gone for help.

As Nuu Ciy's assistant scrubbed streaks of blood off the doctress's arms, the captain turned to Thomas. "So there was no warning at all?"

Thomas shook his head. "None. As I said before—twice, I believe—we were still a gallop from town. They must have hidden siege bows in the trees by the road." The pattern on his jacket shifted up and down in a nod of agreement.

Thomas yawned suddenly. "Clever of them, I must say. I mean, they can't actually have been *expecting* us."

The captain's scowl showed what he thought of Tinhead's inhabitants being clever. "And there was just the one shot?"

Thomas shrugged, as if the question was no more important than whether he preferred his apples cut or quartered. "There may have been more afterward, but I turned tail the instant we were hit. It's really quite vexing, you know. I put a lot of work into mending that boat the first time around—it will take *ages* to get her fixed up." His jacket swirled in agreement.

The captain scowled. "At the rate we're going, we'll be there tomorrow."

Even as he spoke the words, the guard at the door cleared his throat meaningfully. "What?" the captain barked.

"Chief Steward, *sra*. Wants you to know we've sped up again."

Thomas barked a single short laugh. "Saints," the captain cursed. "Tell him I'll be up in a heartbeat. Oh, and Eamile? No telling tales about any of this, understood?"

"Yes, *sra*." The guard saluted sharply.

The captain sighed again. A hundred people had seen Razi carried into the Hardeck, unconscious and dripping blood. By now, half the town would be saying that he had been attacked by griffins, gargoyles, or gaunts, while the other half would be just as sure that he and Thomas had fought a duel on board the magician's flying boat. He'd be dead and risen, or have vanished in a puff of smoke.

"And someone will find a way to blame the Hett," he said sourly.

"*Sra*?" Erileine said uncertainly.

"Nothing," the captain said, clapping her on the shoulder, his eyes on Razi.

Nuu Ciy unstopped a small black bottle and painted a few drops of poppy tar on Razi's lips with the trimmed end of a feather. "He'll sleep until morning," she announced, re-corking the sickly-sweet mixture. "Now, everyone out. You too, young woman. One of my nurses will stay with him."

Erileine was out the door and on the Hardeck's steps before she realized that she had no idea what to do next. Once again, she was on her own in the biggest town on the mountain with a string of coins in her pocket. This time, though, the sky was dark, and her teacher was unconscious with twenty-two fresh stitches in his side. She supposed she should go back to the Three Rabbits, but the thought of lying alone in her room was unbearable. Maybe he should go to Uncle Regi's instead, if she could figure out how to get there.

"Well, then." Erileine turned as Thomas ambled down the steps. "Quite a day, wasn't it?"

"If you say so," Erileine said curtly.

Thomas smiled indulgently. "Now, now. There's really no need to speak that way."

"He could have *died!*" The angry words were out of Erileine's mouth before she knew she was going to say them.

Thomas nodded. "Yes, he could have. He could have died yesterday, too, or the day before. Would that have been my fault too?"

For a moment, all Erileine could do was gape like a fish out of water. "You—you could have saved him if you wanted to! You could have—" *You could have grabbed his hand*, she'd been about to say. *All you had to do was reach out.*

Thomas sighed theatrically. "It escapes me, truly, why supposedly educated people believe that magicians can just snap their fingers and set the world right."

"Did you tell his last apprentice that too?" Erileine asked bitterly.

Thomas smiled thinly. "No. I told *him* that if he ever got in my way again I'd put his eyes out with my thumbs." He nodded farewell politely and went on his way, whistling. On his back, his jacket made a shape like a hand waving goodbye.

Erileine's anger dissipated as quickly as it had come, leaving her cold and tired.

She bought a sausage on a stick and a strip of flat bread from a stall that stayed open for militiamen on the night watch, and chewed them slowly as she walked back to the Three Rabbits.

The old woman at the Three Rabbits had already heard about Razi, but seemed more worried about Erileine. "I'm fine," she reassured her. "But I hope my maere and paere hear the story straight. I mean, if someone tells them it was me instead of him..."

"Well, there's nothing anyone can do about that tonight, is there?" the old woman said soothingly. "Now, are you sure you aren't hungry? There's plenty of beans left in the pot."

"I'm fine, thank you. I think I'll just go to bed."

"All right. Oh, but wait. I almost forgot. Your little friend left this for you. He said you dropped it in the market." The old woman took a book from the mantelpiece and handed it to her.

Erileine blinked. It was the collection of stories she had looked at that afternoon. "Thank you," she said automatically. "Was it—who dropped it off?"

The old woman raised an eyebrow. "You don't know?"

Erileine shrugged, feeling embarrassed. "I can guess," she lied, "But, you know, I'd hate to get it wrong."

The old woman's smile turned up at the corners. "Starboard Town must be quite the place on holidays."

Erileine blinked. "Excuse me?"

"Well, if everyone is as popular as you and the bosun... I'd say he was twelve or thirteen. Could use some new clothes and a bath, but he had very nice eyes."

Blushing, Erileine thanked her again and climbed the stairs to her room. The only light came from a sliver of dayglass beside the window. It was cheap stuff, orange instead of yellow-white and not really bright enough to read by, but she sat on her bed with the book open in her lap anyway. It had to have been the thief. But why would he give her a book? Unless he planned to tell the militia that she had stolen it. No, that didn't make any sense. The old woman would tell them where it had come from.



She riffled its pages, then turned it upside down and shook it. Nothing. Invisible ink? Magic writing that would only show up when the moon was full, or if she whistled the right song?

Defeated, she wrapped the book in her spare shirt and slipped it into her satchel, then stripped down to her underclothes and slid her skinny legs under the quilt. She stared at the watercolor of a boxer throwing the same punch forever that was the room's sole decoration. She would take the book back tomorrow after she checked on Razi, she decided. She closed her eyes and tried not to think of the bookster lying on the dock, bleeding. She had just stood there. He had needed her help, and she had just *stood* there.

Sleep was a long time coming.

\* \* \* \* \*

The old woman shook Erileine awake. "What? What?" Erileine demanded muzzily. The little piece of dayglass had long since gone dull, but the old woman had a small brass lantern. Lighting her face from below, it made her look like a ghost out of a Bantangui puppet play. "I think we're berthing!" she said fearfully. "Can't you hear it?"

"What?" The words made no sense to Erileine. How could they be berthing? But suddenly the crackling sound she could hear wasn't a fire in the hearth downstairs but a forest being crushed to kindling by the mountain's underside. A faint shudder ran through the house. A moment later, thunder rumbled faintly in the distance. Erileine swallowed. Had they just knocked the peak off one of the mountains below?

She flung off her quilt and reached for her clothes. "It woke me up," the old woman said, hugging herself inside the oversized ankle-length coat that she was wearing over her thick white nightdress. "I went downstairs to see if it was someone trying to jemmy the door, but there was no one there, and then everything started shaking. What's happening?"

*Why are you asking me?* Erileine thought resentfully, even though she knew it was because she had no one else to ask. "I don't know," she said. She pulled her right foot out of her left boot and took a deep breath. "Do you have someone you can be with? Just in

case?"

"There's my son-by-marriage," she said uncertainly. "He's remarried now, but he's just two streets away. But I don't want to be a bother."

Erileine almost laughed. She doubted that this would be counted as being a bother. "I'm sure he won't mind," she said, knotting her laces and grabbing her satchel. "But I have to get to the Hardeck."

She ran through the streets of Forecastle like a rabbit with a lynx on its tail. The streets seemed even more tangled in the dark. Twice she thought she had lost her way, but each time she came around a corner and found herself exactly where she should have been.

Around her, guards with militia helmets in one hand and spears or bows in the other hurried to their rallying stations. People with coats or blankets thrown over their nightclothes stood in doorways or looked out of thrown-open shutters, yelling questions at each other, at Erileine, at the mountain itself.

One last corner, and she was in the market square. It was chaos. Someone yelled, "Caeline! Caeline!" over and over, looking for their squad or perhaps a lost cat. "Watch where you swing that!" a man in striped summer trousers and heavy boots snarled as a clumsy militiaman's spear nearly took his ear off.

"If you've got your gear, find the rest of your squad and form up!" a bosun's mate bellowed. "If you don't, then get it! Hey, where do you think you're going?"

"I'm the bookster's apprentice," Erileine panted. "He's in the infirmary. I'm supposed to be with him." She started up the steps.

The bosun's mate blocked her. "Get off with you."

A guardsman coming up the stairs behind Erileine caught her. "Go easy there," he cautioned the shover. "We're not at war yet." He looked at Erileine. "I know you. You were with what's his name, the fellow on the boat."

Erileine nodded vigorously. "In the infirmary. I'm supposed to be with him now."

The guardsman let go of her arm. "Well then, get in there." He pushed Erileine up the stairs, past the glowering mate.

Erileine raced to the infirmary, dodging clerks, mates, and household staff as they all tried to organize one another. She stopped at the infirmary door to catch her breath, then pushed it open as gently as she could. "Bookster?" she said softly.

Razi lay motionless in bed, looking exactly as he had when Erileine last saw him. For a moment Erileine thought he was dead, that the spells the captain's wife had used hadn't been enough, but then Razi's fingers twitched.

"Bookster!" she whispered loudly. "Are you awake?"

The bookster's eyes fluttered. "My lady?"

"Bookster?"

"*La*, Erileine..." Razi struggled to sit up, then let his head fall back on his pillow. "When is't?"

"It's morning. Almost, anyway. You're in the infirmary, in the Hardeck. Bookster, we're berthing!"

The bookster closed his eyes again. "And the sea shall give me over to the land, constant and weighty," he whispered.

"Bookster, are you all right?" Erileine sat on the edge of her teacher's sick bed, swallowing back the panic rising in her throat. She hadn't thought any further than finding Razi. He *had* to know what to do.

The dark man chuckled weakly. "*La*, I do not think that is the phrase I would use. Have you water?"

There was a pitcher on the table where Nuu Ciy's bowl had been. Erileine poured some into a heavy pottery mug and held it up gingerly.

Razi sipped and made a face. "There's poppy in this."

Erileine took it from him uncertainly. "The captain's wife gave you some last night. Do you remember what happened?"

Razi sighed raggedly. "Someone shot us. Me. From the trees." He slid one hand down to his side under the quilt and winced. "*La*... She will be disappointed in me, you know. I told her, yes, I promise, I can do a little traveling without gathering any new scars." He tried to chuckle.

The room trembled slightly. Erileine clutched the bedframe wide-eyed. "What was that?" Razi said, some of his usual sharpness in his voice.

"I think it was another mountaintop."

"Another...? *Ye mashe aue*, we're berthing?" At Erileine's nod the bookster tried once more to sit up. Erileine rushed forward to help him, but the bookster fell back again before he could.

"Go," Razi said, reaching for the leather belt and sword-hilted bottle that someone had carefully stowed under the table beside his bed. "*La*, go, the magic window. Find news. I will dress."

Erileine took the stairs to the Grand Hall three at a time. They shuddered beneath her. A painting fell from the wall, missing her by a handspan. She tripped at the top, banging her knee painfully against the floor, but hobbled on.

The Grand Hall was as full as the market square. She squeezed between two guards, ducked under a clerk's elbow, and found herself just inches from the magic window.

"Brace yourselves," the captain barked. The room shook as Avaunt clipped another peak. For a moment Erileine thought the red thread running through the trees below them was lava, but it was just the rising sun reflecting off a stream.

The scene below was like something out of the Pilots' war. This wasn't Gandan Berth or the jungle at Mau Ngapcha. Avaunt hadn't trimmed these trees every sixteen months for centuries. These were full grown, tall and proud, but still they bent under the force of the mountain's bow wave just before being snapped in half.

A flock of frightened ducks burst upward from a pond as its surface trembled. The winged pigs that had been rooting in the muck at the pond's edge took flight a moment later, and then the pond was gone. Deer and gaur fled in panic side by side with chameleon bears, the Gifted among them shouting panicked orders. Nests and burrows were crushed as Avaunt ground the earth beneath it.

Suddenly there was silence as the mountain cleared a ridge and the land momentarily dropped away beneath them. "Look!" half a dozen voices shouted

needlessly. There, nestled in a bowl-shaped valley, lay Tinhead, its neat streets and tidy houses peaceful in the dawnlight.

The captain swept his hand across the window. The scene shimmered and re-formed. They were close enough now that they almost didn't need magic to see, Erileine thought dazedly. Another few moment and they could have seen the soldiers with their own eyes.

And soldiers they clearly were, on the road that wound up the steep hills behind the town, real soldiers with polished steel helmets on their heads, heavy packs on their backs, and swords at their sides. Some had their shoulders against the rear ends of carts, while others bawled silently at heavy-laden mules, but most just marched.

The captain passed his hand over the window again. There were more carts further up the mountain, heavier ones, with four wheels instead of two, piled high with furniture, chickens in coops, children, a very pregnant woman, an elderly couple dressed in the same gray wool as everyone else. As the image swept by, Erileine saw one boy, pale-skinned like a Ruudian, jump up and point toward the town below. The old man sitting beside him on the cart's plank seat turned to look back at the houses the mountain was about to crush. *I hope you're as frightened as we are*, Erileine thought grimly.

"Come on, where is it?" the captain growled. Another pass, another scene. The gray tower they had seen the day before was now an enormous prow of stone, twenty stories high. The road from town zigzagged beside it. Three arched openings, each two stories tall and broad enough to swallow a cart, broke its front face. Heavy timbers lay stacked in piles by each one.

The room rumbled again. This time, the rumbling didn't stop. The mountain wasn't just clipping the tops of the hills any longer. It was down, grinding implacably toward Tinhead.

Without warning a house collapsed. One wall of another gave way as the town's cobblestoned square rippled like a blanket being shaken.

"Bosun!" the captain barked. "Bosun! Get the birds out! And send Jack, too. Tell

them we've berthed at Tinhead, and need help. Tell them!"

"Yes *sra*!" the bosun snapped, saluting. "Tell who, *sra*?"

"Everyone! Saints in dark places, it doesn't matter, just *send them*!"

The bosun saluted, staggering and nearly falling as the floor shook beneath him. All around Erileine, people yelled at each other to stop yelling, to make way, to stand back from the window in case it shattered, it would be a hailstorm of knives if it did, saints, why was this happening? Why was this happening?

Sunlight glinted off the helmets of the soldiers waiting for them. The tower wouldn't reach as high as Forecastle, Erileine realized. Not even close. When the mountain berthed, the openings would be face to face with sheer cliffs. Unless—

She squirmed around a shaven-headed clerk and tugged on the captain's sleeve. "*Sra! Sra!*" she blurted. "The tunnels!"

"What?" The captain looked down at her. "What are you doing here? Where's the bookster?"

"The tunnels!" Erileine shouted. "That's what the tower is for. They're going to go into the tunnels!"

The captain's gaze snapped back to the window. "Bosun!" he bellowed. "Where is the damned weeping bosun?" He grabbed a clerk's arm. "Go and find him!"

Erileine turned back to the window. Ten heartbeats, five... The town disappeared below the window's lower edge. Erileine imagined she felt an especially hard bump as Avaunt ground Tinhead into gravel.

Suddenly the mountain slowed. Erileine was thrown forward against the window, along with everyone else in the room. Miraculously, it held. She stood up, her face pressed against the glass. The mountain had stopped. They had berthed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Chaos ruled Forecastle. Children and adults alike cried out in terror. Bosun's mates bawled for order as the militiamen in Mapmarket Square struggled back to their feet, tripping over one another's spears. Fallen lamps scattered shards of broken dayglass like burning leaves. People were thrown down stairs, losing teeth and breaking arms. Lintels

cracked, roofs fell in, and a whole row of warehouses on Butterjuggle Street collapsed. Miraculously, both the single old man asleep on guard and the young lovers who had snuck in for some privacy walked away with nothing worse than scratches.

Rumors scampered around like frightened rats. The mountain had crushed an entire town when it berthed. Hundreds were dead, or none, or a thousand vengeful Hett ghosts had come to eat everyone's souls. The magician Thomas had stolen the spell that kept the mountain flying, and the captain wanted his head.

Amidst the confusion, Erileine jostled her way downstairs and ran pell-mell back to the infirmary. The bookster's face was drawn, but he was sitting up. He smiled when he saw his apprentice. "*La*, once again, history is being made around me, and all I want is a few quiet moments with a night jar. Please, help me up."

Erileine hurried to the bed. Razi took hold of his apprentice's shoulder and pulled himself to his feet.

"Are you sure you should be getting up?" Erileine asked anxiously.

The bookster pressed his free hand against his side. "*La*, no, I am most sure that I should not be. But I will be all right unless the good doctress finds out. Now, help me upstairs"

They didn't even make it to the door before Nu Ciy swept in like a tiny, determined storm. "Back to bed," she ordered sharply as she threw open a cupboard and began piling bandages and bamboo splints in the arms of her apprentices.

Razi straightened up. "*La*, and miss the excitement?"

Nu Ciy barely glanced at him, banging the cupboard door shut and pulling open a drawer. "All of them," she told her apprentices brusquely, pointing at the knives and tongs that lay in polished mahogany cases. She turned back to the bookster. "Now. Or on my blood, I'll give you a dose of poppy syrup that will keep you asleep until the world melts away."

Razi nodded meekly in defeat. "Come," he said to Erileine, shuffling his feet as he turned around. "Back to prison."

Erileine had to help Razi sit on the edge of the bed, then help him again to lie flat.

"*La*, please, do not fuss, I am fine," the bookster winced.

"Well, you look awful," Erileine said, secretly glad that the captain's wife had caught them. "Do you want some water?"

"Please. *La*, wait." Razi shook his head. "Not from the jug. I need my head clear. Get it from over there. You found us rooms? Yes? Well done. Now, *la*, I must ask a small favor of you, and then also a large one."

Erileine nodded, wiping the mug beside the bookster's bed with her shirttail and re-filling it from the urn by the door. "What do you want?"

Razi swallowed a sip of water and coughed weakly. "Goodness, that hurts." He rested the mug on his chest. "There is a black leather case with silver stitching in my pack, and a pair of candles. And a silver knife with a crystal handle. Oh, and underclothes. I really should put on some clean underclothes."

Erileine hesitated. "Are those your...your meditation candles?"

"You mean, am I going to do magic?" Razi shook his head. "*La*, I am afraid not. Getting my things is just the small favor. Using them for me is the large one."

Erileine swallowed dryly. "I'm not a magician."

Razi smiled weakly. "Neither is anyone until they make their first bargain. Don't worry—most of what this will need is in the candles and the picture that are in the case. Lady Kembe paid their price when she made them—you don't have to worry about your teeth falling out or having to stand on your head when you make water."

"I wasn't," Erileine lied. "I just..." She shrugged.

Razi's eyes were tired but steady. "She needs to know, Erileine. She can't help us if she doesn't know what has happened."

Erileine swallowed and nodded. She had dreamed about being a magician. There wasn't a child in Cherne who hadn't. When she was little, she had imagined turning herself into a tiger or an elephant. Later, she had daydreamed about having a giant's strength so that she could settle the score with Fraederiq. "What do I have to do?" she asked.

"Just light the candles and say some words. That's all. *La*, truly, that's all." Razi



closed his eyes. Suddenly, surprisingly, he chuckled. "It's a pity I don't have anything to read. This would be a wonderful time to catch up."

Erileine slid his satchel off his shoulder, undid the drawstring, and pulled out the collection of tales. "How about this?" she asked.

Razi took it from her flipped through the pages. His eyebrows went up. "Oh, Artan, the sun will burn out before I give my heart to any man but you.' Erileine, I would never have guessed your tastes were so...purple."

Erileine felt her ears burning. "It's for my maere and sister," she mumbled. "I thought I could read it to them. For practice."

"La, yes, well..." Razi turned another page. His eyebrows went up even higher. "You may want to read it through yourself before you do so for them. Some of the vocabulary is rather...advanced."

Erileine slipped out of the infirmary and hurried along the corridor. None of the clerks and guards she passed took any notice of her. Outside, half of the militia in Mapmarket Square had managed to form up, spearmen and archers side by side. The rest were milling around, shouting for their companions or standing on tiptoe, waving to be seen. *They don't even have proper uniforms*, she thought. The spearmen wore vests and helmets of bootsole leather. The soldiers in Tinhead had all been in armor.

She shook her head. Unshuttering the tiny hand lantern she'd taken from the infirmary cupboard, she hurried back to the Sign of the Three Rabbits.

It was locked. Erileine thumped the inn's door drum over and over again, but the old woman didn't appear. She stepped back and looked up at the little balcony. If she could get up there, and if that door wasn't locked... But how?

"She went to stay with the family three doors down." Erileine whirled around at the voice behind him. The thief boy was standing a few strides away in the mouth of the narrow alley that ran between the inn and the house beside it.

"What are you doing here?" Erileine demanded.

The boy scowled. "None of your business. Do you want to get in or not?"

Erileine opened her mouth to say 'no', and instead said, "Yes. It's really important.

The bookster needs his things."

The boy nodded. "All right, I'll get them for you."

"Oh no you won't. He told *me* to get them."

The boy crossed her arms. "Fine. Go ahead."

Erileine glowered at him. "Look, just tell me where her son-by-marriage lives, and I'll go get a key."

"Uh uh." He shook his head.

"I don't have time for this," Erileine muttered. Without thinking, she took a step toward the boy. Instantly, he darted into the alley.

"Wait!" she shouted. "Wait! Come back!" She ran to the alley, but the thief had vanished.

"Great," she muttered. She was right back where she had started. If she put one of the big planters beside the front door on top of the other and stood on that... She still wouldn't be able to reach the balcony. And anyway, how was she going to move the planter? It was half as big as she was. *Why can't people leave ladders lying around like they do in stories?* she thought bitterly.

The balcony door opened above her. The thief stepped out with Razi's bag in his arms. "Can you catch?" he asked.

\* \* \* \* \*

This time the guards at the Hardeck's doors waved Erileine through. Inside, the confusion had ripened into a more purposeful kind of madness. What-ifs had been replaced by orders given, clarified, countermanded, and repeated.

The infirmary was as busy as a tavern on Departure Eve. A pair of nurses held a screaming clerk down while Nu Ciy tried to get the upper and lower halves of his shin to line up. A woman with iron-gray hair waited stoically on the next bed, the cloth she held over one eye red and getting redder.

Amazingly, Razi was asleep, the book of stories open on his chest. Erileine set her teacher's bag on the floor and sat down gingerly at the foot of the bed. Razi's eyes opened.

"*La*, there you are." Razi yawned. "Did you have any trouble?"

"Not really," Erileine said. This didn't seem the right time to explain how she had gotten the bag. She had checked it, though, to make sure everything was there. When the boy protested, Erileine said, "You told me yourself that you're a thief, remember?"

He had walked with her back to the Hardeck. The closer they got to Mapmarket Square, the edgier he became, until he slipped away between one step and the next.

Stiff and slow, Razi sat up, then stood. "Quick," he whispered loudly, using the bedpost to steady himself, "You distract the guards. I'll make a shovel out of a feather and an eggshell, and we'll tunnel our way to freedom."

"What?" Erileine blinked. Had her teacher taken too much poppy tar?

Razi shook his head. "*La*, never mind. Let us escape while the estimable doctress's attention is elsewhere, yes?"

In the confusion, 'escape' turned out to be no harder than walking out the door. The bookster picked up a dayglass lantern that someone had left by the door, nodded regally at the guard hovering nearby, and said, "Come along, then," over his shoulder to Erileine. Just like that, they were out in the corridor.

They found shelter in a narrow cubbyhole of an office. The bookster lowered himself creakily onto the stool behind the room's battered old writing stand.

"Tie it closed," he ordered. Erileine fastened the door shut as Razi opened his bag and took out a scroll-sized cylinder of black leather. Silver stitching decorated both of its ends and the seam on its side. A wooden box came next, and then the knife. Its handle was a piece of crystal, worn smooth like a pebble in a mountain stream, and its short silver blade had a single edge.

Erileine licked her lips. All the scene needed was a skull with glowing eyes, a black rooster in a wicker cage, and a Gifted troll named Ygor rubbing his hands together malevolently, and it could have been put on stage. "So, what do I do?"

The first step was to take a sketch of Lady Kembe out of the tube and pin it to the wall. The woman it showed was as bald as Razi, round-faced and full-lipped, with shoulders like a longshoreman's and a pair of fiery wings tattooed on her neck. She was

sitting at a plain wooden desk; a neat row of books stood watch on a shelf behind her head, and an elaborate curlicue grill covered the window next to it.

"That is the writing room in her house in Ossisswe," Razi said, shaking two brass tacks out of the case and passing them to Erileine. "The spell only work if she is there. Luckily, *la*, she usually is."

Next, the candle. There were two in the box, one half the length of the other. Erileine set the shorter one on the floor in front of the picture. "Do you want me to find some matches?"

Razi shook his head. "There's no need. If she hears us, she will light it herself. Now, take the knife. You need to put three drops of blood on the wick of the candle."

Like most doors in the Hardeck, the one behind Erileine was padded with a thick piece of felt. It muffled the voices, footsteps, and confusion outside, making the office so quiet that Erileine could hear herself breathe.

"It only has to be a scratch," Razi said gently. "You've done worse falling out of trees."

"I know," Erileine said. The knife was very sharp. She would barely feel it. It was the idea... She took a deep breath and pressed the edge against her forearm, then slumped. "I don't think I can. I'm sorry."

"*La*, it's all right," Razi raised his palms to his apprentice. "Just put it down. She probably isn't even there right now."

Erileine nodded jerkily, then surprised herself and the bookster both by drawing the knife sharply across her forearm. She gasped as dark blood welled up, even though she barely felt the cut.

"What should I do with the knife?" she asked, staring a little lightheadedly at the lengthening red streak on her arm.

"Dip the tip in the blood," Razi commanded. "Now touch it to the wick. Good. Again. No, dip it, then touch the wick again—it has to be three separate drops. That's right. Now, put the knife down on the table. If you look in my bag, you should find a roll of bandage."

Just as Erileine handed the roll of white cotton to Razi, a tiny flame appeared on the candle wick, and a presence entered the room.

There was no other way to describe it: Erileine *knew* another person was there. She glanced up at Lady Kembe's picture. The most powerful magician in Cherne looked back at her disapprovingly. "Who is yourself?" she asked. Her lips didn't move—the portrait hadn't come alive as they did in stories—but Erileine heard her as clearly as if she were standing a stride away.

She swallowed dryly. "I'm Erileine, *sra*. Erileine Saedanne é Laeuc, of Starboard Town, on Avaunt. I'm Bookster Razi's apprentice."

Somehow, the portrait frowned without any part of it moving. "Where finds himself? Why not does himself speak with myself?" The candle flame flickered in time with her words.

"He's here, *sra*." Erileine gestured, not knowing whether she could see or not. "He was bowshot. Yesterday. In Thomas's boat. We berthed at Tinhead an hour ago. There were soldiers waiting for us. I think they're going into the tunnels, but I don't know for sure."

"Hold, hold," Lady Kembe said. "Begin yourself from the beginning. My Razi has been shot *again*?"

The story of the day's events tumbled out in pieces. The more Erileine talked, the more clearly she saw Lady Kembe. She was older than Erileine had first thought, but gave the impression of great strength. Her *deel* was white instead of brown, and she had heavy rings on all of her fingers.

By the time Erileine finished, those fingers were drumming on her desk. "You are certain they were truly men?" she demanded, her accent and grammar somehow less ancient with every sentence. "Those the soldiers whom you saw?"

"Yes, *sra*." The scent of the candle was making Erileine dizzy.

Lady Kembe frowned. "This disquiets me. Tell my Razi I will make such inquiries as I may. Tell him also that such voices as with whom I would usually speak have fallen into quiet. I will ask others, but that will take some time and doing. And should Thomas

attempt any more than to watch, my Razi is to let me know *immediately*. That braggart boy will peril us all if he is not soon kenneled." It didn't sound like she would particularly mind being the one to kennel him.

"Yes, *sra*, I'll tell him." The room was swimming. Erileine's head snapped back. How could she fall asleep at a time like this? "S there an'thing else?"

Lady Kembe's expression softened slightly. "No. Tell my Razi that I shall do my usual to mend him with such as he left here. He is not to allow himself more injury in that time, or I shall be very cross indeed. Now, darken the candle, and rest. You have done your name credit."

"Yes, *sra*," Erileine said faintly. She almost toppled onto the candle as she bent over to blow it out.

Lady Kembe's presence vanished. Erileine's knees gave way. Her tongue felt like a slab of raw goat, and tasted almost as rank. "Sit, *la*, just sit," Razi told her. "It will pass."

Erileine slid down to the floor. The rich, sweet smell of the candle was too much. It was like her seventh naming day, when she snuck downstairs and ate both of the blackberry pies her mother had baked for her, then threw up in the field behind Mamaere Mayeule's. The whole room was going cross-eyed...

"Erileine. Erileine!" Her eyes snapped open. Razi held out a small red bottle. "Here, this may help. That's it. That's it. No, not all at once, just a sip, then some more. *La*, and I will open the window."

Erileine did as he was told. The lemon-mint tang of whatever was in the bottle helped. So did the cold night air. She filled her lungs again and again. Her stomach was still queasy, and arms and legs felt like they were made of wet rags, but at least she wasn't going to throw up.

"Better?" Razi asked. Erileine nodded. "*La*, it is quite something, isn't it? The first time Lady Kembe talked to me that way, my kidnappers had to tie me onto my camel to stop me falling off afterward."

"Too bad we don't have any camels," Erileine said.

"*La*, believe me, you are better off without them. Now, give me your arm, and tell

me what she said.”

Razi bandaged Erileine's cut as she recounted Lady Kembe's side of the conversation. He nodded when Erileine repeated Lady Kembe's comment about the 'usual voices' having gone quiet. “*La*, she thought that might happen. The gossipy little spirits who bring her news are frightened, though they know not of what.”

Erileine pulled her sleeve back down. “Does she know what's going on?”

“No. She would tell us if she did. She is not the kind to send anyone into battle blindfolded. *La*, don't look so worried, it is just a figure of speech. Now, let us see if sneaking back to bed is as easy as sneaking out. You need to sleep—we both of us do.”

“Sure.” Erileine didn't need convincing. Her eyelids were so heavy... “Wha' did she mean about mending you?”

Razi shrugged, seeming almost embarrassed. “*La*, she will work a spell to help me heal, is all.”

“All the way from there? Wow.”

“*La*, well, I left some things behind to make it easier. Don't worry about that—you should sleep.”

Erileine nodded, looking again at the sketch on the wall. It was just ink on linen once more. “Should I put it away?”

Razi shook his head. “I will do it. Though *la*, I am sure we will need it again soon.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Erileine was asleep in the chair beside Razi's bed when the infirmary door flew open. The captain strode in with two guardsmen behind him. “Is he awake?” he asked brusquely as Erileine stood up, grabbing for the book of Praczny romances as it slid out of her lap. Razi had been right—some of the stories were definitely not for her family's ears. But she did have several new words to investigate...

“*La*, he is now,” Razi said, opening his eyes. He sat up without any apparent difficulty. “How may I be of help?”

“The damn window won't show me what's in the tunnels,” the captain snapped. “It's like trying to look up your own nose. And your friend Thomas and his boat have

vanished. Any chance Lady Kembe could do us a turn?"

"*La*, I am sorry, but I have never heard of a spell for looking inside a mountain. Although I wouldn't be surprised if Lady Kembe had one for looking up her nose. She can be rather vain sometimes, and since she can't use a mirror..." He settled his head back on his pillow.

"Hmph. What about you?" the captain asked, turning to Erileine.

Erileine gulped. "Me, *sra*?"

"It was your grandfather that did the bonescuttle, wasn't it? That Coriandi fellow?"

"Yes. Yes, *sra*, it was."

The captain's unblinking gaze remind Erileine of the condors upstairs. "Ever been in the tunnels yourself?"

Erileine shook her head vigorously. "No, *sra*."

Just then heavy boots pounded on the stone floor. The militiaman who came through the door nearly tripped over his spear as he stopped and saluted. "Captain!" he gasped. "The well. On Scissormaker Street, *sra*. Phaelippe saw folk in it! With helmets and swords and all!"

"Did he say how many?" The militiaman shook his head.

"Captain! Where's the captain?" Another voice in the corridor.

"I'm in here, damn it!" the captain bellowed again.

More footsteps. This time it was a clerk with a misbuttoned jacket. "Lame Fish Stairs, *sra*," she said. "Bosun said to tell you. He sent a couple of squads home to sleep, but somebody attacked them on the way."

"What do you mean 'attacked'? And who in the names of the failed saints is 'somebody'?"

The clerk shook her head helplessly. "Bosun didn't say, *sra*. He's headed there now with half of his men. The rest are still out in the square." She swallowed. "Might be a good idea if you came, *sra*. No one knows what's going on."

"I don't weeping know what's going on either," the captain complained, but he was already on his way out the door with his bodyguards behind him.



As soon as they were gone, Razi threw back his quilt. "You'll have to help me with my sandals," he told Erileine crisply, sitting up and swinging his long, skinny legs off the bed. "*La*, now where is—*ayah*." He braced one hand against the wall, blinked a few times, and then reached for the green bottle with the sword-hilt cork that stood on the floor.

Erileine opened her mouth to say, "You're not supposed to be up," but thought better of it. "What can I do?" she asked instead.

The bookster took a deep breath. "Find my sandals."

He moved stiffly as he buckled his belt carefully across his hips, so that the heavy green bottle hung down from his side like a scabbard once again. "What is that, anyway?" Erileine asked.

"It was a present from Lady Kembe." Razi scrunched his toes to settle his feet in his sandals. "Good enough. Now, everything else into my bag."

Erileine hesitated, "Bookster? What do you think is happening?"

His teacher smoothed his *deel*. "The same thing you do. I think the mountain is being invaded."

The little office they had used the previous evening lay down the corridor to their left, but Razi turned right instead. He walked slowly but purposefully, nodding at everyone they passed but never breaking stride.

Erileine followed him down a flight of stairs into a narrow corridor that dead-ended at a heavy wooden door, wondering briefly how he knew his way around so well. Razi slipped a flat leather wallet out of his sleeve. Unfolded, it revealed half a dozen odd-shaped metal picks. A moment's work, and the door's lock clicked. He waved Erileine through and closed the door behind them.

Sharp-edged sunlight poured through a barred window high on the wall opposite them. Another sturdy wooden door, barely taller than Erileine, stood beneath it.

"Phew!" Erileine wrinkled her nose. The shelves on all sides of the small room were lined with night jars waiting to be carted away.

"*La*, I'm sure some of it is yours," Razi said as he crossed to the far wall and untied

the door. Outside lay a single worn gray step and an alley barely wide enough for the two-wheeled cart that blocked it. Razi cocked his head to one side, then glanced over his shoulder at Erileine and smiled. "What do you think? Shall we take care of this until the regular man comes back?"

Erileine scowled. "I thought the whole point of becoming a bookster was that I wouldn't have to shovel other people's—"

*Whoomp!* The sound of the explosion hit Erileine like a padded club, staggering her. Razi grabbed her arm and pulled her up the alley toward the street. In the distance, people started screaming.

"What was that? Bookster, what was that?"

"Quiet." Razi flattened himself against the wall, wincing.

"But—"

"*Quiet,*" Razi hissed. "It was banefire, *la*, what the Bantangui called wizard's anger. Now, stay behind me, and whatever you do, do *not* drop Lady Kembe's things."

Razi edged forward on the balls of his feet. He paused at the corner, then glanced around it and pulled his head back in one quick motion, like an irving thrusting its beak into a pine tree to snatch a grub.

"Over there," he mouthed to Erileine, pointing to the other side of the alley. Erileine tiptoed across.

From where she huddled against the wall, the alley's mouth was a window onto hell. The blast had blown a hole twenty strides across in Mapmarket Square. Gobbets of red-orange fire sizzled among the scattered bricks. People ran back and forth, shouting and screaming, some trying to help the wounded, others trying to rescue their wares, and still others trying to knock down the stalls that were still standing so that the fire wouldn't spread. Militia spears lay forgotten on the cobblestones as their owners beat the insolent flames with their coats. Erileine saw a bosun's mate grab a militiaman's arm and yell an order. The man shoved him away, knocking him off his feet.

*Thomas!* Erileine suddenly thought. Anger and fear churned in her gut. Was this the missing magician's work? Had he been in league with the soldiers in Tinhead the

whole time?

Razi caught Erileine's eyes and shook his head. "There's nothing you can do," he said softly, misreading Erileine's thoughts. "Now, *la*, we must hurry, before they seal the town." He stepped into the street and walked briskly away from the destruction.

Erileine's thoughts whirled. What did he mean, seal the town? And shouldn't they be trying to help? People were dying! All of a sudden she thought, *What about Starboard Town?* Was it under attack as well? What was happening to her maere and paere, to Queçenne and Papaere Vurt?

"Erileine!" She jumped. "Now!"

Erileine hurried to match her master's pace. Fifty strides up the street they turned left into an alley that stank of cat. Razi slipped the latch on a gate, ignoring the honking of the irate guard goose tethered next to it, and strode across a yard filled with half-finished benches and chairs.

A sharp right turn brought them to another yard, filled like the first with furniture in various stages of repair. The pink roof tiles told Erileine where they were: the steam baths. She had been here with her father the last time the mountain had berthed at Mau Ngapcha.

"You! Stop there!" Erileine nearly jumped out of her skin. Razi turned around, his hand resting casually on the sword hilt sticking out of the bottle on his belt.

A militiaman stepped out from behind a half-finished wardrobe. "Who are you?" he demanded, his notched arrow pointed at Razi's chest. Two more men who had been hiding with him took places at his side, their long spears held in white-knuckled grips.

Razi let go of his sword hilt and raised his palms. "I am Razibendra uy-Ossisswe, a bookster. This is my apprentice, Erileine Saedanne é Laeuc, from Starboard Town."

The militiaman's aim didn't waver. "You the one they shot?"

Razi nodded. "*La*, yes. Am I about to be shot again?"

"Thinking about it. What's happening back in the market?"

"It's burning. The enemy has been seen on Scissormaker Street as well."

"I told you," one of the spearmen muttered angrily.

The man with the bow ignored him. "So you're just walking away from it all?"

Razi shrugged helplessly. "*La*, my wound is still fresh. I thought there would be people in greater need of the sick room this night than me, so—"

The archer's eyes widened as the spearman beside him yelled, "Look out!" Razi grabbed Erileine's arm and threw her to the ground, whirling in the same motion to face the half-dozen armored soldiers who poured onto the street through the bath house doors, two holding crossbows, the rest with swords in their hands. "*Nas na forchem! Na forchem!*" the one in front yelled.

Maybe even then there had still been a chance. Maybe if the militia archer hadn't been as good or as lucky as he was. Maybe if the Avauntois had spoken enough *Praczny* to understand that the Tinhead sergeant was yelling, "Don't shoot them!" But when the militiaman's arrow snickered over Erileine's head and took the sergeant in the throat, whatever chances had been in that little yard flew away like frightened birds.

*Whap! Whap!* The Tinhead crossbows sounded like books being slammed down on a table. The quarrels knocked the Avauntois archer back against the chest of drawers.

"Aaaaah!" the spearmen yelled. They charged the invaders, two frightened men who had just seen their best friend die against twice their own number of swords.

Metal clanked against metal. A spear clattered to the ground. A man's terrified cry for help was suddenly cut off.

"*Yeshed nausi pra tallein!*" Razi shouted. "We take no side!"

That quickly, it was over. Erileine scrambled to her feet, the breakfast she hadn't eaten rising in her throat. One spearman lay dead just two strides away. The other was thrashing on the cobblestones, harsh animal sounds escaping from his throat as blood spurted out of the gash in his thigh. The two Tinhead crossbowmen had braced their bows against their feet and were cranking the strings back into place.

A soldier with blood on his sword gestured at Razi. "*Nausi bayian?*" he demanded.

"Stay behind me," Razi said, stepping in front of Erileine as the Tinhead soldiers came toward them. With a smooth flourish, he drew his sword.

It came out of its bottle like silver syrup, shaping itself into a sharp-edged whip of

quicksilver. As Razi lunged at the nearest soldier, the blade lengthened and thinned to stab him through the shoulder from three strides away. Snapping it back, Razi stepped forward, turned, and slashed a bowman. Blood spurted from the arm he threw up to block the blow.

The bookster lashed out again as the three swordsmen still on their feet closed on him. One got his sword up in time to parry a head cut. The liquid blade rang on his like any other. He jumped back to avoid being disemboweled by Razi's backhand, tripped, and went down.

The second soldier swung wildly at Razi's head. The bookster ducked the blow and kicked the man's knee, cracking his sword like a whip just thumbs from the third man's eyes. "Run!" he shouted to Erileine. "Run!"

But someone else was shouting, "Avaunt! Avaunt!" A squad of militia burst into the courtyard, spears down. Razi cursed and threw himself to the ground. Arrows whicked through the air. Erileine screamed in terror as they thunked into an overturned table a handspan above her head.

*Phweeet!* The Tinhead crossbowman who was still on his feet blew a whistle. Erileine scrambled over to Razi on her hands and knees. "Are you—"

"Up," Razi gasped, digging his fingers into Erileine's shoulder. His blade had bunched into a blobby club. He struggled to his feet, using Erileine's shoulder like a drunk would use a handy tree, while swords clanged and men shouted and died three strides away. Together, the bookster and his apprentice stumbled back the way they had come.

"Here," Razi said twenty strides later, pushing Erileine into a narrow side alley and collapsing on the ground behind her. They lay there for a moment, Erileine panting with fear, Razi's breath rasping. When he took his hand away from his side and looked at it, he winced.

"Are you all right?" Erileine asked anxiously.

"No," Razi said weakly. "I am not. It has come open. Where is the inn?"

"I—I don't know. I mean, I know from the Hardeck, but I don't know where we are

now.”

Razi nodded. “We will have to find somewhere else. Help me up.” Holding Erileine’s hand so tightly that it hurt, he somehow got back on his feet and pushed his strange liquid sword back into the bottle hanging from his belt. The quicksilver rippled and gurgled back into its strange sheath.

*Whoomp!* Erileine jumped as banefire rumbled behind them. The bookster’s grip tightened on her shoulder. “Sorry,” Erileine said. The early morning sky was a blinding-bright strip of blue over their heads, but the alley around them was still dark. It was probably always dark, Erileine thought, as the damp cold around them crept under her shirt. She stumbled over a loose stone, again over a board someone had thrown away, and a third time over something spongy whose exact nature she didn’t want to think about. Razi gasped each time. “Sorry,” Erileine kept saying. “Sorry.”

Finally Razi squeezed her shoulder. “Here,” he said. “I can’t...” He put his back against the wall and slid down it to sit on the bare earth.

Erileine squatted on her heels beside him. “What can I do?” she asked anxiously. “Bookster, what should I do?” She hadn’t realized that she was crying.

“M’lady,” Razi gasped. “Ask her...”

“Razi?” Erileine shook the bookster’s shoulder gently. “Razi, wake up!” Slowly, peacefully, the bookster toppled sideways.

“Razi!” Erileine pulled his collar open and felt for his pulse. It was as quick and as light as a feverish child’s.

When she was eight, Erileine hiked down to Starboard Town’s lower goat pasture. She wasn’t supposed to—it was twice as far from town as the upper pasture, at the end of a steep path, and there were places where one bad stumble would mean a long slide down a steep, stony hill, followed by an even longer drop—but she had lost the toy dragon Papaere Vurt had made for her out of a few scraps of leather, and Niquolas had joined Fraederiq in taunting her about it, and she just wanted to get as far away from everyone as he could.

She stayed in the pasture, watching the goats and muttering angrily at the empty

air, until her stomach started to rumble. As she walked back to town, she was so sunk in self-pity that she didn't see the rabbit hole until her foot went into it. "Ow, ow, ow!" She pulled her foot out of the hole and tested her weight on it. Pain shot through her ankle.

Erileine started to cry, but then, in a moment that stayed with her the rest of his life, she stopped. She wasn't crying because she was hurt. She was crying because she wanted someone to pick her up and carry her home, but that wasn't going to happen. Her maere and paere would come looking for her if she wasn't back for dinner, but that was hours away. She stopped crying because it wasn't going to make a difference.

So she picked herself up and started limping up the mountain, two steps on her good foot, one quick, hopping step on the other. It was half an hour before Donaïen and Armaend heard her shouts. "Well, you're a mess, aren't you?" Donaïen said, trying to make a joke of it while Armaend cut a length of bamboo from a nearby stand to make a crutch.

She never told anyone about her epiphany. What would she have said? But there in that alley, kneeling beside the limp, prone figure of her teacher, that memory told her what she had to do.

The wooden box, the leather tube, and the knife were all in Razi's bag. She set the stub of the candle from the previous night on the cobblestones. Shaking Lady Kembe's portrait from its tube, she ran her fingers along the wall until she found cracks she could jam pins into.

And then, the knife. She couldn't bring herself to pry up the scab on the previous cut, so she laid the blade beside it and pulled.

One drop, two, three... She touched them to the candle, praying that she hadn't missed some vital step, then set it on top of Razi's bag, crossed her legs, and waited.

Lady Kembe's picture studied her. She couldn't imagine the magician smiling. What if she wasn't in her room? What if she was—

*Pop!* A tiny yellow flame appeared. "Again, you?" Lady Kembe's eyes narrowed. "I did think my Razi was teaching you in books, not magic. Where finds he himself?"

Once again, Erileine would have sworn she was there, even though her portrait was

still just a picture. "He's bleeding again. There was a fight with some soldiers. I know, I'm sorry, start at the beginning." She took a deep breath and told the story as quickly as she could, leaving out only the details that would later wake her up in the middle of the night: the sound the militia archer's arrow had made when it hit the Tinhead sergeant, the spearman writhing on the pavement, trying to hold the wound in his leg closed, the scene in the market. "And now he won't wake up," she finished. "He's bleeding again and I can't wake him up."

Lady Kembe scowled. "Have you his knife?" Erileine nodded. "Good. Rest a moment where you find yourself." The picture became just a picture again, though the candle flame still burned.

*Whoomp!* Banefire thudded in the distance. All of a sudden she felt desperately lonely. What would she do if Razi died? She couldn't just leave his body lying in an alley—there were rats around. She shivered. Did the Karabandi burn their dead? Or bury them, like the Uwsians and Ruudians were supposed to? Did Razi have any oaths unaccomplished? The thought of her teacher returning as a ghost made her queasy.

And what was happening in Starboard Town? Saints and small stones, what was happening to everyone she cared about? What was *going* to happen to them?

Lady Kembe's picture came back to life. "Well and then," she grunted, setting a heavy iron bowl down on her desk. "Have you there his knife?"

Erileine picked up the crystal-handled blade. "Yes, *sra*."

Lady Kembe took a neat stack of white bandages out of the bowl and set them on the table. Next came a knife identical to the one Erileine was holding. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. "Well and then," she said without opening her eyes. "Here is what is needing done. First, lie my Razi on his back. Make certain of his arm, that it is out of the way. Yes, as so. Good. Now, open his cloak. No, there is in it a tie string which must be undone. It finds itself on the inside. Higher. Yes, there. What? Oh, his self and his knots... No matter, just you cut it. Yes, with the knife. Good. Now open his cloak... Oh my."

The wound was a thumb and a half long. It gaped and closed in time with the



bookster's panting. Crusts of old blood clung to it; more oozed out as Erileine watched.

"Do you know the depth of it? Well, we shall together discover that, then. Now, hold the knife over the candle. Look at it carefully. Is there on it any blood? Any dirt? Any fish scales? No? Good. Are you wearing anything yellow? Or can you hear any person singing? Any at all, even so faintly? Take a moment, it is of the greatest importance. You are certain? Good. Now we are come to the hard part."

She laid her left arm across the bowl, forearm up, and hefted the knife. "Have you the knife in your right hand? Good. Now, you must put your other hand on the candle flame. No, not yet, not yet. Attend me." She opened her eyes and looked straight into Erileine's. "The flame shall not cease with burning. It shall hurt. You must be ready for that and you *must not* pull it away once we start. Do you understand? The doing of it could kill you and leave me witless."

"I—I don't know if I can do that," Erileine said.

Lady Kembe scowled. "He thought himself that you could and more. He has this much said to me the first day you spent with him."

Erileine swallowed and nodded jerkily. "Good," Lady Kembe said. She squeezed her left hand into a fist, took another breath, and closed her eyes. "Put your hand over the flame."

Erileine hesitated. "In haste," Lady Kembe said calmly. "His death has near found him. It will have him for sure if you cannot do what needs done."

Erileine looked at Razi's drawn face. He couldn't cry for help the way Fraederiq had. *He wouldn't even if he could*, Erileine thought. He would just look at Erileine, patient and understanding, waiting for her to do the right thing, in nightmare after nightmare.

Erileine squashed her hand down on top of the candle. The flame stung like a wasp. For a moment she thought that would be all, but then the tiny yellow flame bit into her hand like a drill bit. She clamped her teeth together to stifle a scream, and only then realized that her right arm had thrust the knife it was holding into the wound in Razi's side. She couldn't feel it at all—it was moving of its own volition, probing the

wound with the knife.

"Hold!" Lady Kembe snapped. "Hold fast!" Erileine bit down on another scream. Saints, saints, saints, it hurt. It hurt like nothing she had ever imagined. She dug her fingers into the candle. *Don't let go, don't let go*, she told herself over and over. Tears ran down her face. *Don't let go...*

Her right hand swept the blade back and forth over the wound as if spreading honey on a piece of bread. The wound shrank, its sides joining and sealing until it had turned into an angry red scar. She nearly fainted when her stomach rumbled at the odor of her own flesh being roasted.

Without warning, her right arm went limp. Whatever force had been helping her hold the candle disappeared. She clutched her hand to her chest. "I'm sorry," she moaned, rocking back and forth. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry..."

"Hush, child, hush, the thing is done." She opened her eyes. The tiny candle flame still lit the alley. The iron bowl beneath Lady Kembe's left arm was half full of blood. The wound she had cut in her forearm was exactly as long and as deep as the one in Razi's side had been.

She dropped her knife into the bowl with a clang and unfolded a bandage on the table beside the bowl with her right hand. "There," she said, laying her arm on the cloth and folding it over gash. "That should keep him whole for a time. Now, show to me your hand."

Erileine opened her left hand and looked down at it. Other than a smudge of black soot, there wasn't a mark on it. She flexed her fingers. Something felt odd...

"Hold it up as I may see it," Lady Kembe ordered. Erileine raised it and wiggled his fingers, realizing as she did so that she couldn't feel them.

"Hm. Not of the best, but not of the worst, either. Some feeling should return, if you are patient. Now, how fares he our Razi?"

The bookster's pulse was slower, but stronger, and his breathing was more like that of a sleeping man than a wounded goat. "He's better. What did you do?"

"Magic," Lady Kembe replied shortly. She unfolded a second bandage on her table

one-handed. "You do understand the working of it, I hope? That you never have anything for free, but must rather always pay for it." She unwrapped her arm, dropped the first blood-soaked bandage into the bowl, and set her arm down on the second. "Your hand and my blood for my Razi's life." She glanced up at her. "I count it a bargain."

"Yes, *sra*," Erileine said. She rapped her knuckles against the ground. Nothing—it was as if her hand was made of wood, like Papaere Vurt's leg.

"Be you careful with that," Lady Kembe warned. "It cannot feel, but it is still of flesh as before. You may easily injure it."

"Yes, *sra*," Erileine repeated. "What do you want me to do now?"

"Wait. That is all you can now do." She glanced out her window. "It is only just morning where you find yourself, is it? He will sleep to nightfall, or perhaps thereafter, and then be weak but able to walk. He will find you somewhere to hide."

Erileine nodded miserably. She felt light-headed and nauseous. *Again*, she thought blearily. It seemed to have been happening a lot recently. "right," she mumbled, almost toppling sideways.

Lady Kembe's expression softened. "Sleep, child, sleep. But make certain you keep yourself warm—you will else feel as badly come evening as he does now. And child—thank you. You have been brave."

Erileine nodded. She didn't feel brave. She felt like the world had just used her as a night jar.

The candle flame disappeared. Even as she thought, *I should put all of this stuff away*, she rolled onto her side and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Years later, a young Ruudian bookster named Leif's Unruh decided to make that day the subject of the formal debate the university required him to prepare to become a bookster. He spoke with dozens of people, some for as long as it takes to drink a polite cup of chai, others over the course of several days. He even tracked down Jack, the Gifted parrot, who by then was living in comfortable retirement at the court of the*

*Sad Duke of Anyalcze. Some of those conversations were quiet, almost nostalgic; others quickly turned angry, or dissolved into tears. The bookster nodded and scribbled through them all, untouched by those long-ago losses, until a draper with a patch over one eye undid the top two buttons on her shirtcoat and drew out the small cloth bag that hung around her neck.*

*Wordlessly, she loosened the bag's mouth and spilled its contents on the rickety tea-shop table. A porcelain doll's head; a puzzle piece in the shape of a horse, its hindquarters blackened by fire; a simple oval locket, the face and most of the gilt long gone. "It'th all tha'th left," she said quietly. Whatever had ruined her eye had left her jaw misshapen as well, unable to reach certain sounds. She pointed at them one by one. "That wath my daughter'th. That wath my thon'th. The fire killed them."*

*"And this one?" the bookster asked, tapping the locket gently with the feathered end of his pen. "Whose was that?"*

*The cobbler swept them into her bag and hung it around her neck without answering.*

*"Sra? Who did the locket belong to?"*

*"That wath mine. I won it for thinging when I wath fifteen." Her voice was steady. "I wath going to teash my shildren to thing, but I never got the shance."*

*Leif's Unruh got very, very drunk that night, and spent most of the next day sitting in front of the fireplace in the inn where he had taken lodging, his notebooks in his lap. He later wrote, "Twice I made to throw them into the flames. I asked myself, what use is scholarship? What use another dry recitation of kings and wizards, wars and treaties, poems written and legends wrought? That was when I realized that what truly matters is not describing the world, but fixing it."*

*That motto became the introduction to his debate, which the university duly rejected. "These are just stories," one examiner wrote disdainfully. Another scribbled, "Fireside chats with common people do not merit a penny whistle, much less a scholar's collar and sash," on the twelfth page, and read no further.*

*But others did, especially after Leif's Unruh died in a daring but doomed attempt*

*to steal enchanted weapons from the tomb of Janbinder the Great. The manuscript was copied and passed from hand to hand, until three young firebrands in Vaarda (who were later hanged, eaten by trolls, and married off to a respectable farming family respectively) set it in type. Lines Leif's Unruh had written turned up in ballads, were quoted by ambitious young councilors, were translated into Karabandi and thence into Thindi, where they were promptly labelled seditious. When Prince Thokmay of Gandan stood before the Great Debate and said, "My lords, my ladies, we are all Avauntois now," the assembly erupted with equal measures of applause and abuse.*

*But that was later...*

\* \* \* \* \*

The first thing Erileine thought when she woke up was, *I need a night jar*. The second was, *Something stinks*, and the third, *Where am I?*

The answer was an alley. The air was cold, damp, and heavy with the smell of last week's apple cores and chicken bones. The mortar in the wall beside her had crumbled with age. Moss and yellow pinflowers grew in the gaps.

She sat up and rubbed her eyes. The left one felt odd. Suddenly she looked around wildly. Razi was gone. So was Lady Kembe's picture. This wasn't even the same alley! And—

"Hoy." She whirled around. The thief was standing a few strides away, his back against the wall, the book of Praczny romances in his hands. He closed it and cocked his head to the side. "You're a sight."

"Where am I? Where's Razi?" Erileine asked, struggling to her feet. Her vision swam. Saints, but her head hurt. And she was hungry—no, starving.

"He went to find food," the boy said. "But there are soldiers everywhere. I'm supposed to watch you in case they come this way."

"What?" Erileine flexed her left hand. It wasn't her eye that felt strange—it was her hand that couldn't feel anything at all.

The boy nodded at it. "Is that from what you did for him?"

"Yeah." Erileine flexed her fingers experimentally. She could see them moving, but couldn't feel a thing. She tapped her palm with a fingertip. Nothing. The meaty base of her thumb? Nothing there, either. Her wrist? Yes, she could feel that. She made a fist and squeezed so hard that her arm trembled.

"You did all right," the thief offered. "He looked fine."

Erileine smiled weakly. "To be honest, I would have preferred to let Nuu Ciy take care of him."

The thief scowled. "Like *she* knows anything," he muttered.

"She did all right when he got shot," Erileine countered. "Anyway, do you know where he went?"

The thief rolled his eyes. "I *said*, he went to find food. But there are soldiers everywhere. Half the market burned down, and they knocked the dock right off the mountain, and everybody is supposed to stay indoors." He hesitated. "The bosun's dead. I saw his body. And Allaere, and the glazer, and a whole house fell down on Rose Noodle Street with people inside." He bunched his shoulders inside his oversized jacket. "I don't know what happened to the captain."

"What's your name?" Erileine asked after a moment.

The boy stiffened. "None of your business."

"Just asking." Erileine studied him. "First Razi catches you stealing, then you start following me around, then you steal that book, then you break into the inn, and now you're—"

"And now he's making sure no soldiers find you. *La*, which they certainly will do if you don't keep your voice down." Erileine spun around. A tired, unwashed, but very alive Razi held up a battered brass pitcher and a handful of flatbread. "Hungry?"

As the trio washed mouthfuls of stale bread down with warm water, Erileine described what Lady Kembe had done. Razi examined Erileine's hand. "*La*, it seems I owe you my life."

"More like you owe Lady Kembe," Erileine mumbled, gulping the last of their meager meal.

"Oh, *la*, my life was hers already, many times over." Razi wiped his hands on the hem of his *deel*.

The thief's eyes were as big as marbles. "Lady Kembe was *here*?"

"No," Erileine and Razi said simultaneously, the first annoyed, the second amused. At the crestfallen look on the boy's face, Razi added, "If she could be here, *la*, it would not be so quiet today, I promise you."

"So what happened?" Erileine asked, dreading the answer.

Razi sighed. "Forecastle has been taken. If there is a window left unbroken in the Hardeck, I didn't see it. The Tinhead soldiers had the militia pile their spears and bows in Mapmarket Square, then sent them home. The captain's guards, *la*, they are in the stock pens. Or the infirmary, or dead."

"What about Starboard Town?" Erileine asked anxiously.

"And the captain?" the thief asked. "Do you know if he's all right?"

Razi shook his head in answer to them both.

"They're not just bandits, are they?" Erileine asked quietly.

Razi shook his head again. "Bandits do not bring their children with them. Or their cattle. And banefire, *la*, that is not such magic as bandits would use."

Suddenly he raised his finger to his lips. Footsteps—no, marching. Heavy boots, coming closer. A whistle blew, high-low-high, and was answered by another.

Razi caught the thief's arm as he sprinted for the mouth of the alley before Erileine had even digested what the sounds meant. "Trap," the bookster mouthed, not letting the boy go until he nodded.

The bookster laced his fingers together to make a stirrup. Tucking the Praczny storybook into his jacket, the thief stepped into it. Smoothly, with no sign of the wound that had nearly killed him the day before, Razi boosted him up to the window. The thief opened the shutter and wriggled through.

The bookster gestured with his cupped hands at Erileine. As Razi lifted her, she grabbed the windowsill. Her feet scrabbled uselessly on the bricks for a moment before she got her weight through the window and fell onto a warped plank floor crusted with

ancient bird cake.

As she rolled over, the thief tossed one end of a rope out the window. The other end was already knotted around a beam. Razi squirmed through the window a few moments later. Quickly, without a word, the thief untied the knot, coiled the rope, and stowed it in a nondescript canvas satchel. Shouldering the bag, he picked up a larger one that was waiting on the floor and handed it to Razi.

The bookster slipped its strap over his shoulder. "Lead the way," he ordered.

They were in an old warehouse. Pigeons, irvings, and other birds had left years' worth of white cake on the floor. Everything looked and smelled as if it had been there for years.

"Rooftops are fine in stories," the thief said to Erileine as if repeating a lecture. "But it's hard to move quietly on tiles, and if anyone is above you, arrows are difficult to outrun. It is always better to move under cover." As he spoke, he drew a workman's knife from his bag and gouged the mortar away from some of the bricks in the wall to reveal a thick cord. Grabbing hold of it, he braced his foot against the wall and yanked sharply. As the cord went taut it dislodged even more mortar. A final yank toppled a small section of wall inward for him to catch and lower quietly to the floor.

"*La*, well done," Razi said, admiring the newly-made hole as if it were a work of art. "How are you going to close it up again?"

"Why would I?" the thief asked. "We'd be fools to ever come back here."

"But leaving it..." The bookster pursed his lips like chef tasting an apprentice's first omelette and finding it lacking in salt. "You make it easy for others to follow you."

The thief made an exasperated noise in the back of his throat. "You're never happy, are you?"

Erileine felt a pang of jealousy as Razi grinned and tousled the boy's hair. "Right now, *la*, the most important thing is to keep moving." He shooed Erileine and the thief through the hole and followed them on his hands and knees.

The second warehouse was as decrepit as the first. A flight of stairs and a weather-beaten door took them to a wicker bender's back yard filled with corded rolls of rattan



and bamboo. A hole in its fence looked out onto the yard behind the steam baths where Razi had fought the soldiers the day before. Their bodies, and those of the three Avauntois militiamen they had slain, were gone. Dark stains on the cobblestones were all that remained to show Erileine that the fight had actually happened.

Razi halted, pressed himself against the wall, and glanced quickly around the corner. "Soldiers," he said quietly.

"There are some loose boards over the window to the pot mender's," the thief said. "Her downstairs has a delivery door on Sweet Icicle Street. It's only a couple of streets from there to the Rabbit."

Razi shook his head. "We're not going to the Rabbit. We're going to Starboard Town."

"What? Wait!" the thief hissed. "What about—what about Forecastle? What about the captain?"

Razi put a hand on his shoulder. "Piaerre, you can do nothing here. *La*, nor can I. We can help most by making ourselves safe. Besides, did you not say that you wanted to see some more of the world?"

The thief wrinkled his nose. "I didn't mean Starboard Town."

Razi smiled. "*La*, well, it may be a better place to begin than you think. Come."

Razi slipped through the hole in the fence. The thief gestured impatiently for Erileine to go next. She paused. "Piaerre? That's a nice name."

The thief made a face. Erileine grinned and followed Razi into the next yard.

It took them half an hour to make a journey that would have been a five-minute walk the day before. Forecastle was deserted. There were no *bouquinnaires* selling grilled whole rabbits on skewers, no dyers with indigo-stained arms lugging barrels to and fro, no children spinning Bantangui tops or playing dance-with-your-mother on the cobblestones. The town's kites still flew, but the tramp of marching feet and the shrill calls of the soldiers whistles were all around.

Razi never rushed. When he moved, he moved quickly, darting from one shadow to another, but he spent more time listening and waiting than he did in motion. Erileine

felt another pang of jealousy when her teacher held up a hand and made a series of quick signs that sent the thief back the way they had just come. The two clearly knew each other, and she would bet every book on Avaunt that he was the real reason for Razi's weekly visits to Forecastle. But then why had Razi let the bosun arrest him?

The bookster squatted and duck-walked through a waist-high gap beneath a broken wooden gate. When Erileine followed, she found the bookster pressed against the wall, his finger across his lips.

The gate stood at the top of a steep hill. Below them, Tinhead soldiers were marching from somewhere to somewhere else. A few wore bandages, or had fresh dents or scratches on their armor, but only a few.

Erileine began counting. Four... eight... At sixteen a quartet of soldiers appeared with a sedan chair on their shoulders. The man in the chair wore the same gray uniform as the soldiers, but no armor or helmet. He sat upright, hands on the chair's padded arms, staring straight ahead, swaying only slightly as the chair rocked back and forth. Sunlight glinted momentarily off his eyes, as if off metal, and then he was gone.

Another dozen soldiers followed. Razi waited until they were past, then waited some more. Erileine desperately wanted to straighten up—almost as desperately as she wanted to empty her bladder—but she waited until Razi signaled to keep moving.

They reached the pot mender's a few minutes later. As Erileine squeezed through the boarded-up window, something tugged at her. She looked down to find a long splinter embedded in the palm of her left hand. She yanked it out, watching blood well up with a curious sense of detachment.

"Let me see that," Razi said, pulling a box out from under some rolls of rotting canvas and a red jar out of the box. Unscrewing its lid, he scooped out two fingers of something that smelled like bad cheese.

"Like this," he said, smearing it over Erileine's left hand. "Work it in gently, like oiling leather."

"Will it make the feeling come back?" Erileine asked, massaging the ointment into her numb skin.

Razi shook his head. "*La*, no, nothing will do that. But it will stop your skin from going stiff and cracking."

Erileine wrinkled her nose at the smell. "You have stuff just for that?"

The corner of the bookster's mouth quirked. "Actually," he confessed, "It's for keeping cows' udders soft in winter."

"Oh." Erileine digested that as she looked around. "So how many places like this do you have?"

"In Forecastle?" Razi turned his hands palms-up. "Just the two you have seen."

"And in Starboard Town?"

The bookster closed his box and sat on its lid. "That should be enough. Try to use it as much as you normally would, to keep it strong."

Erileine let her hands fall to her sides. She was hungry, and tired, and frightened, and the way the thief had rolled his eyes at her question was the last straw. "Bookster—I said, do you have a cache like this in Starboard Town too?"

Razi glanced at her. "Not in, no, but near. One takes precautions."

In the long, dark hours that followed, as she repeatedly squeezed and relaxed her left hand in a vain attempt to take her mind off her empty stomach, Erileine wondered what other precautions the bookster had taken. When she wasn't doing that, or worrying about her family, she wondered who the invaders were and what they wanted with Avaunt. The spices in Forecastle's warehouses were worth several fortunes, but like Razi had said, this wasn't just banditry.

The pot mender's shop smelled of clay and glue. It wasn't much bigger than Papaere Vurt's kitchen: a counter, some shelves, a small kiln, and a stairway so steep that it might as well be called a ladder. The thief sat on the floor, slowly turning the pages of the book of Praczny stories. Erileine didn't know if he could read; even if he could, there wasn't enough light for it, but he turned the pages anyway. Razi lay on his back near Erileine's feet, his arms behind his head, breathing slowly and softly.

Suddenly Erileine could stand it no longer. She stood up. "We have to get going."

"Two more hours," Razi said without moving. "It will be dark then."

"But—"

"Two more hours," Razi repeated. He turned his head to look at Erileine. Erileine sat disconsolately and listened to the pages turning slowly behind the counter.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the end, Razi had to wake Erileine from an uncomfortable doze. "It's time," he said softly, shaking her shoulder.

The bookster's empty bag lay neatly folded on a shelf. The tube holding Lady Kembe's picture hung over his shoulder on a cord. The rest of his things were hidden in the depths of his *deel*, except for the green sword bottle that hung from his belt and a coil of rope that he wore over one shoulder and across his chest.

"All clear," the thief whispered loudly from the basement.

"After you. *La*, and take care with your hand." Razi stepped back to let Erileine go first down the steep, narrow steps.

The pot mender's shop had barely been large enough for the three of them. Its basement was even smaller. The dust mice on the steps were big enough to deserve individual names, and gray clumps of cobweb hung in the corners.

Razi waited on the bottom stair behind Erileine while the thief cracked the delivery door open. He slipped through and then beckoned them forward.

Sweet Icicle Street took its name from the shops at its upper end, which Erileine could just make out in the gathering twilight. Twice a week, on Redsdays and Greensdays, Forecastle's icicleers climbed up the shoulder of the mountain overlooking the city. There, near the peak, they scraped hard-packed snow into their buckets, packing it down under layers of wood chips. After sleeping for a few hours wrapped up in goat-skin rugs to stay warm, they hiked back down to town, where they added drops of lemon, blueberry juice, mango, and other carefully-measured flavorings to the ice.

The icicleers were famous for their clannishness and contrariness. You couldn't have a wedding in Forecastle without tubs of flavored ice—the icicleers would stand outside the banquet hall banging on their buckets and shouting insults if anyone tried. When people said, "It was as quiet as Sweet Icicle Street," they were describing a

shouting match.

But that evening, the street truly was quiet. With the mountain at rest, there wasn't even a breeze, just the muffled bang of a shutter being closed hastily a few houses away. Someone had seen them. *Probably several someones*, Erileine thought nervously. She hoped they were Avauntois.

The sharp-sweet tang of boiled blueberries filled her nostrils as she followed Piaerre and Razi into a narrow gap where one shop didn't quite rub shoulders with the next. The gap led to a small, neatly-kept courtyard. A bamboo lattice gate filled its opposite site. Beyond it, garden sheds watched over patches of vegetables fenced with wicker and string to keep out rabbits, and beyond them stood pine trees. They were on the very outskirts of Forecastle.

Even as she realized that, Erileine heard boots on cobblestones. She hurried to take shelter with Razi and Piaerre behind some sweet-smelling shrubs in terracotta pots. Whistles called back and forth around them. Razi patted the air with his hand—keep still—and crept silently to the gate. Ignoring his signal, the thief followed suit. Stung, Erileine followed him.

"They're watching the road," the thief whispered, pointing at a glimmer of light escaping from the tin shutter of a lantern hanging on a tripod between two of the sheds. Half a dozen soldiers stood beside it, yellow light reflecting off their helmets.

"*La*, and if they're smart, they'll have a few more further down the road, without lanterns," Razi muttered. "My apologies—getting back to Starboard Town may prove more difficult than I had thought."

"What about the beanfields behind Conemongers Street?" the thief asked. "We can crawl through the drainage ditches. That'll get us to the pine orchard."

Razi cocked an eyebrow at Erileine. "I can do it," she whispered, nettled that her teacher thought she was the weak link.

"*La*, I'm sure, but—hsst!" The bookster shooed Erileine and the thief back from the gate. Erileine caught a glimpse of a sedan chair surrounded by a squad of soldiers, its straight-backed occupant staring straight ahead.

A whistle blew, high and shrill. "*Nettin ya! Nettin ya!*" the man in the sedan chair shouted, pointing at the gate. They had been found.

Razi didn't need to give the order—they ran like rats, back to the alley and away. Panic tightened Erileine's chest. Razi's cache of equipment, the way he knew his way around Forecastle's back streets and byways, even his friendship with the thief—whether it was habit or Lady Kembe's premonitions, he had clearly planned for the worst. But as they ran out onto Sweet Icicle Street, it was also clear that the bookster had run out of plans.

"Psst! Over here!" Razi pulled up sharply, stumbling a step when Erileine plowed into him, and again when the thief plowed into her. A dozen strides away, a hand beckoned through a door opened just a crack.

They squeezed through. The door closed behind them with a click. Two men, worried and angry, studied them by the light of a dayglass lantern.

"*La*, please, cover it," Razi whispered urgently. "They will be following." The light disappeared.

For a moment, the only sound was their breathing, but then Erileine heard the tramp of boots coming closer outside. She swallowed and closed her eyes as the soldiers marched past.

"One blue banana, two blue bananas..." Razi counted the time under his breath. At twenty, he let his breath out in a whoosh. "Thank you. And now, please, the light?"

The sunlight trapped in the dayglass flooded the room. Their rescuers were standing shoulder to shoulder in front of the shop's plank counter. Father and son, or uncle and nephew, they had the same unruly black beards and wore the same determined expressions.

Razi raised his palms. "We bring no hurt," he said. "Just our thanks for giving us refuge."

The older one nodded. "You're that foreign fellow, aren't you? The one that got shot."

Razi bowed slightly. "I am. I am Razibendra uy-Ossisswe. This is my apprentice,

Erileine Saedanne é Laeuc, of Starboard Town. And Piaerre, without whom I am sure we would be wearing fetters at this moment.”

“You have any idea who these lot are?” the younger man asked.

Razi shook his head. “*La*, no. We spent the day hiding from them.”

The older man grunted. “Same here. They came around first thing this morning, telling everyone we’re to stay indoors ’til they say otherwise. Couple of folk tried asking questions, but all they got was ironmongery waved in their faces. We been here since.”

Razi nodded gravely. “And what of the captain? Has there been any word?”

The older man shrugged. “Aivenne—he has the shop next to us—he saw some soldiers marching a couple of the captain’s guard up False Eel Street. Looked bloodied up, all of them, so he figures there’s still some fighting going on.”

“Not that fighting did us any good last night.” The young man’s hands clenched into fists. “You figure we’d have a chance if we took them one by one?”

Razi shook his head. “No. Not just two of you. What they did yesterday, *la*, they are not just soldiers. They have magicians with them, powerful ones.”

“Told you it was a stupid idea,” the older man muttered.

As the younger man opened his mouth, Razi cleared his throat to forestall whatever argument was about to be reawakened. “But *la*, you said you had spoken to your neighbor? Aivenne?”

Still glaring at his older companion, the younger man said, “Yup. The walls here are pretty thin. Hardly there at all sometimes, if you know what I mean.”

“Oh, you mean there’s a hidden door,” Piaerre said off-handedly. “For moving stuff around on tax day so the bosun won’t find it.” He crossed his arms at the glares from the two men. “What?”

“Whatever the reason,” Razi interrupted smoothly, “If we can make our way to the end of the street without actually being *on* the street, *la*, it would be a great help.”

“And what then?” the younger man sneered. “Off the mountain like ticks off a dying camel?”

“Avaunt isn’t dying.” Erileine was as surprised as anyone to hear herself speak.

"And we're not ticks. We're going to Starboard Town. We'll figure out what happens after that when we get there."

The two men exchanged looks. Then, without a word being said, they turned, took hold of a narrow set of shelves, and pulled them away from the wall. "Careful," the older one said, steadying a heavy glass jar. "Don't know when we'll get more of that."

Through the waist-high hole in the wall, a voice asked, "Huon? Is that you?"

"It's me. Got some folk want to say hello." The older man waved the trio through.

Aivenne, it turned out, was as nervously chattersome as Huon had been gruff. He had a small clay oven, the back of which hung on a concealed hinge. His neighbors, a husband and wife who needed a moment to make themselves decent, used a pulley hanging from their ceiling to raise the section of floor that covered a crawlspace into the next shop.

Razi, Erileine, and Piaerre eventually reached the end of the chain of hidden passages. Some of the shops had been empty, but their neighbors knew which screens to slide out of the way and which floorboards to lift. Everyone asked the same questions: Who were the invaders? What had the trio seen? Was there any word of the captain? Were people fighting back? *Should* they be fighting back? Each time, Razi answered, "I don't know. *La*, less than you. None. No. No, not yet."

In the last shop, a woman with long white hair tied back in a club wished them luck. "Down the bottom of the garden," she said, pointing through the slatted shutter she was about to open. "Don't bother trying the gate. It hasn't opened since before my time."

"Thank you," Razi said, raising his palms.

The woman made a disgusted sound in the back of her throat. "You can thank me by braining one of them when you get a chance."

The garden took them to a street that doubled back twice before curving around an outcropping of granite to a storage pond that had almost run dry. The beans on its far side were only knee high, but Erileine's foot sank up to her ankle in the ditch that ran between them. Its bottom was squelchy with mud and rotting greenery.



"La, I grow tired of this," Razi sighed. Piaerre wrinkled his nose, but lay flat and began wriggling. Erileine followed suit, gagging the first time a buried twig flung a palmful of mud onto her face. She found herself wishing that Lady Kembe's spell had taken her sense of smell rather than the feeling in her hand.

The far end of the ditch connected with a larger one built to carry runoff to the carp pools. Erileine cautiously raised her head. A yellow glow moved through the trees fifty strides to her left.

"Do we run for it?" the thief whispered.

Razi shook his head. "We cannot outrun crossbows. Keep going."

They reached the tree line long minutes later. Working in silence, Razi and Piaerre cut down the bean plants nearest the ditch so that the trio could slither out of the ditch without making too much.

"This way," Razi hissed once they were standing. He bent branches out of their way and releasing them slowly instead of letting them snap back into place. Erileine moved gingerly, testing the ground with each step before putting her weight down. She had hunted rabbits this way since she was eight years old. She had never expected to be the one being hunted.

They reached a rectangular patch where the replanted trees were only waist-high. "Keep to the edge," Razi ordered.

Suddenly Piaerre grabbed Erileine's sleeve. "Look!" he whispered, pointing at the sky.

High above them, the *Presumption* slipped out from behind a cloud, banked slightly, and disappeared behind another one.

"Do you think he's looking for us?" Erileine asked Razi.

Razi pursed his lips. "No. Not Thomas. He will just be looking. Come on."

It took them half an hour to reach the road. They saw two squads of soldiers, one marching purposefully away from Forecastle, the other guarding a double handful of arborists and charcoleers. The prisoners were sitting on the ground with their hands tied behind their backs and gags in their mouths. One was sobbing quietly.

Eventually the neat rows of the pine orchard blended into unkempt wild forest. "Rest," Razi said, squatting on his heels. His eyes were very white in the moonlight. "*La*, a few minutes, no more. Then we walk until morning." He looked at Piaerre. "Can you keep watch?"

"Sure." He hesitated. "What should I do if soldiers find us?"

"Surrender," Razi said. He settled against a tree, and was instantly asleep.

Erileine sat on the ground two strides away. A root dug into her backside. She wriggled, then shuffled sideways to try to find a softer spot. Finally she gave up. *At least it'll take my mind off my hand*, she thought wearily. The tingling in her wrist had turned into an infuriating itch.

"Hoy," she said softly, trying to take her mind off her desire to scratch. "So what's your story?"

Staring into the darkness at the city that lay behind them, the thief didn't answer.

"Suit yourself." Erileine picked up a twig and wrote her name in the dirt, then wiped it away and closed her eyes. Writing her name made her think of Mamaere Mayeule, who taught the children of Starboard Town their abracadabras. She hoped the spry old woman was all right. She and Papaere Vurt had been circling around one another for as long as Erileine could remember. "Just marry her and be done with it," Saedanne told Vurt time and again, but that only made him laugh.

*He'll fight*, Erileine thought bleakly. Some people might not, especially once they knew Forecastle had fallen, but Papaere Vurt wouldn't care about that. He'd fight.

Erileine looked down at the numb hand lying in her lap and wriggled her fingers. She had to make sure she kept her hand strong. She'd never be able to use it properly if she didn't, and if she couldn't use it properly, she wouldn't be able to help her grandfather.

\* \* \* \* \*

It took them a day and a half to reach Starboard Town—a day and a half of not knowing what was happening there, or in Forecastle, or anywhere else. Razi kept them in the trees most of the time. Whenever the only way forward was to venture onto the

path, they huddled beneath low-hanging branches and let the toothworms sting them until the bookster was satisfied that no one was watching.

Erileine's stomach grumbled for the first few hours, then turned into a hard, painful lump. Her head ached and she felt grimy, even after peeling out of her clothes and washing off the worst of the mud. Razi and Piaerre did the same, or at least she presumed they did—by unspoken agreement, it was the one time they were out of each other's sight.

They were halfway to their destination when they heard chopping and caught a whiff of smoke. Cautiously, they edged forward to look.

Fifty strides below, a dozen soldiers were clearing brush from the mouth of an old tunnel that probably hadn't seen daylight in centuries. They worked with their helmets off, but kept their breastplates on, and their swords and crossbows close to hand. They spoke in monosyllables, intent on their labor.

As they watched, one of the soldiers drove his ax into a stump for safekeeping and called out to his companions. They set their axes and saws aside to gather in three ragged lines in front of the first speaker. He spread his arms wide, then folded them across his chest and bowed his head. The men facing him imitated him. As the sun touched the western horizon, they began to recite in unison.

A chill ran up Erileine's back. "What are they doing?" she whispered. "Some kind of spell?"

"*La*, I think not," the bookster replied thoughtfully. "I think they are praying."

Erileine blinked. "Like the Ruudians?" The invaders didn't *look* Ruudian. Their hair was dark, not blond or golden red, and their skins weren't pale like those of the loudspoken iron traders who visited Avaunt at Gandan Berth.

Razi nodded. "Except the Ruudians do it when the sun comes up. Interesting..."

"What's 'praying'?" Piaerre asked.

"Asking for help," Erileine explained in a whisper. "Or guidance. Or to be excused if they've done something bad."

Piaerre frowned skeptically. "Asking who?"

"The whole world, I guess," Erileine said. The books she had read had never been very clear about that.

The ceremony below them ended. A few men took pans and a kettle from their packs and started making dinner while the rest returned to chopping. Wordlessly, the trio slipped back into the forest and continued on their way.

They slept in turns that night. Piaerre snored, but only faintly. "What's his story?" Erileine asked when Razi woke her to stand watch.

The bookster propped himself up one elbow. "*La*, he does not get on with his father, and even less well with his father's new wife. So he spends as little time with them as he can, which means he spends most of his time on the street."

"Oh. So why did you get him arrested?"

The bookster grinned like a mischievous child. "He needed practice escaping. As I once did."

Erileine digested that for a moment. "Razi?"

"Mm?"

"Do you ever miss your home?"

The bookster smiled at that rather than grinning, but his expression was melancholy. "Yes, very much. But it has changed a great deal since I left it, and so have I. *Shalma te*, apprentice." He lay back down and closed his eyes.

"*Shalma te*," Erileine echoed.

She studied the stars through the branches above them as her companions slept. Diwei was a steady blue-green dot to the west. Shiwu was hidden by the trees, but she could see Chefu just above the horizon. She shivered. She had loved to go star-watching with her father when she was younger, but they'd had a warm fire to come home to.

*I'd give anything for a fire right now*, she thought despondently.

«Anything?»

She froze. She hadn't heard the one-word question, but she knew, she *knew*, that someone or something had asked, and would reply if she answered. She swallowed dryly and let the moment pass.

Razi got them moving again before dawn. Mountain streams quieted their thirst, but the early berries they stripped off the bushes weren't enough to ease the ache in Erileine's stomach or the throbbing in her head. She didn't mention the not-a-voice she had not-heard during the before. Instead, she grit her teeth and told herself that she wouldn't complain until Piaerre did.

An hour after sunrise, as they neared Starboard Town, Razi raised his hand. "*La*, do you smell?" Erileine sniffed the air. Pine smoke, and the faint, stomach-rumbling tang of food.

"More soldiers?" Piaerre asked. His hair was one great tangled knot, and he started shivering whenever they stopped for more than a few moments, but he hadn't complained yet, not even when Erileine slipped backward on an awkward climb and stepped on his head.

Razi shrugged. "The easiest way to know is to look."

Slowly, carefully, they made their way through the trees. As quiet as they were, when they caught sight of the campfire, there was no one in sight.

"*La*, not soldiers," Razi said, scuffing dirt onto the fire as he scanned the trees around them. "Perhaps some Hett. They may not even know the mountain has been invaded."

"Can you tell which way they went?" Piaerre asked.

"*La*, if we were in the desert, and I had sand to read, but not here."

"There were three of them," Erileine said, tracing a path into the trees with a pointing finger. "The first one had a limp. The second one was left-handed, and was carrying most of their gear. The third one was younger—no more than twelve. Oh, and the one with the limp? He was blind in one eye, too."

Piaerre goggled at her. Razi's eyebrows rose into the middle of his forehead. "Truly?"

Erileine shrugged, suddenly embarrassed. "No, I was just making that up. Let's keep going."

Just then, something rustled in the bushes behind Razi. The bookster whipped out

his sword as Piaerre grabbed Erileine's sleeve and pulled her the other way.

"It's me, it's just me," a familiar voice pleaded. Arms raised, Vaszlav stepped into the clearing.

Razi poured his blade back into its bottle. "*La*, and what is it that has happened to you?" The tinker's face was bruised, and his clothes dirty and torn. A rough splint bound three fingers of his right hand together.

"It was the Hett. The newcomers." The tinker seemed close to tears, whether from shame or frustration or relief, Erileine couldn't tell. "Don't you know? They're all Hett."

His story tumbled out of him while Razi fashioned a fresh splint for his hand. He'd been camping by the little stream that marked the half-way point between Forecastle and Starboard Town. His family was supposed to join him there, but they hadn't. He didn't know where they were. He hoped they were all right.

Then the soldiers came out of the old tunnels. They were Hett, no doubt about that. They all wore homestones, every single one of them. "They asked me why I didn't have one," he said bitterly. "I told them I'd never seen the point. That's when they started yelling at me." Yelling had quickly turned to blows. How dare he call himself Hett? How dare he stand by while *real* Hett gave their lives to reclaim their rightful home? How dare he *collaborate* with the very people who had stolen it from them? The Great Work was beginning—whose side was he going to be on?

"I said I didn't know anything about any great work," he finished. "So they gave me one last kick in the backside and sent me on my way."

Razi tied a final knot in the splint on Vaszlav's hand. "*La*, this great work of theirs—did they say what it is?"

The tinker shrugged. "Not to me."

The bookster nodded. "And your family," he asked. "Do you know where they would have gone?"

"Maybe," Vaszlav replied, suddenly guarded. "Why?"

Razi raised his palms in a desert shrug. "*La*, I only ask. We are returning to Starboard Town. You would be welcome to join us."

Vaszlav snorted. "Why? So I can have my other eye blackened? No thanks." Standing, he nodded to Erileine. "Say hello to your papaere, will you? He was always a decent fellow." With no more goodbye than that, he turned and walked away.

\* \* \* \* \*

The goats in the pasture above Starboard Town watched the trio pass from the security of their fenced-in enclosure, as indifferent to the invasion as they were to the fat gray clouds threatening rain overhead. Nothing seemed to have changed: kites still flew and smoke still rose from chimneys.

"Is there any other way into town?" Razi asked.

Erileine shook her head. "Not unless we can borrow Thomas's boat."

Razi smiled wryly. "So the front door it shall be. But *la*, let us not bring too many gifts to the banquet." He handed Erileine the leather case containing Lady Kembe's portrait, unslung his strange sword, and beckoned to Piaerre. "On my shoulders," he ordered. "No, standing, not sitting. I'll steady you."

With a hand around each of Piaerre's ankles, Razi slowly stood up. Piaerre grabbed a nearby branch to keep his balance. "Good, now, do you see the cleft in the tree, just above your head? Yes? Good. Erileine, pass me the case. Can you wedge it in? *La*, no, higher than that. Don't be so gentle, it isn't silk. Good. Now my sword. This you can be gentle with—we're a thousand gallops and a thousand years away from anyone who could make another like it."

The Starboard Town militia ambushed them a hundred strides later, where the road snake around the remains of a long-ago landslide. "Halt there!" Bosun Uyves bellowed. Three archers rose out of the bushes to their left, while the bosun and two spearmen stepped onto the path in front of them.

"Erileine!" Laeuc dropped his spear and rushed forward. Father and daughter hugged one another. "Oh, love, your mother's been so worried."

The bosun waved at the archers to unstring their arrows. "What in five hells has been happening in Forecastle?" he demanded. Then he frowned at Piaerre. "Do I know you?"

Erileine told their story quickly. She left out Razi's magic sword and Lady Kembe—those parts already seemed like a dream. Even without that, it sounded like a fairy tale: the destruction of Tinhead, the banefire that had burned Forecastle market to the ground, and then, their discovery that the invaders were Hett.

"Get away," the bosun scoffed. "The Hett couldn't do something like this. They're not soldiers."

"*La*, these ones are," Razi replied. "Good ones. And their magicians are even better."

The bosun spat into the bushes. "Damn them whoever they are. What about the captain?"

The bookster spread his hands. "*La*, we do not know. Taken, or slain, or in hiding."

"Aye, that's what Jack said. How long d'you think before they get here?"

"I don't know," Razi said. "But when they come, *la*, I do not think there will be much you can do."

"That's our concern, thank you," the bosun replied brusquely. "Now, go get some rest. And you, boy. Stay out of trouble."

"Yes, *sra*." Piaerre muttered.

As the travelers turned to go, the bosun clapped Laeuc on the shoulder. "Best you go too, I suppose."

"Thanks, Uyves," Laeuc said, his arm still around Erileine's shoulders.

"And Laeuc? Next time, don't just drop your spear, all right? Sets a bad example."

"Yes, bosun."

Uyves took a big breath and let it out with a whoosh. "All right, you lot, back where you were. From the sounds of things, the next folk down this road won't be so friendly."

People working in the fields ran to meet them as they trudged down the mountain. Saedanne almost cracked Erileine's ribs hugging her, then surprised herself and everyone else by hugging the bookster and Piaerre as well. Mamaere Mayeule took one look at Piaerre and dragged him away. "Have you *ever* had a bath?" Erileine heard her ask.



The next thing she knew, she was home. Her mother stripped her filthy clothes off her as if she were a baby and sent her stumbling upstairs to find fresh ones.

Vurt and Queçenne were waiting for her when she came downstairs, along with a pot of reheated stew. After hugging them, Erileine dropped herself onto a stool and began gulping down mouthfuls of steaming squash, talking around it as coherently as she could. It burned her lips, but she didn't care.

"Easy," her grandfather said, nodding a thank you to Saedanne as she handed him a mug of tea. "It'll come back up if you eat too quickly."

Erileine nodded, sucking air into her mouth to cool its contents as her grandfather quickly filled her in on what had happened while she had been away. There had been a rockslide when the mountain berthed—nobody had been hurt, but it had made kindling out of the shearing shed above the goat pasture. A few house beams had cracked or skewed, and some crockery had been broken, but that was the worst of it.

Papaere Vurt slid a folded piece of paper across the table to Erileine. "Niquolas wanted me to give this to you," he said gruffly. "He and a couple of others—they decided they'd had enough. Or maybe they were planning to go walkabout when we got to Gandan Berth. Anyway, they came down past my place, and he stopped in and..." The old man shrugged, clearly uncomfortable.

The writing was blocky and awkward. *The coconuts are under the boards in the drying shed I bet they really are worth a lot you will see you can keep it all love Niq.* He had signed it with an elaborate curlicued 'N' that took up a quarter of the page.

Erileine folded it and tucked it into her pocket as her mother took her bowl from the table. "Papaere? What are you going to do when the soldiers come?"

Her mother was behind her, so she didn't see her freeze, but his grandfather did. "Don't know," Vurt said. "Worry about that when they get here."

Erileine yawned. "I just wanted to say, whatever you do, I'll help. I'm going to bed now." She stood, endured another hug from her mother without protest, let her grandfather hug her as well, trudged upstairs, opened her door, and closed it without going in.

"Well?" her mother asked below. Erileine could almost hear her cross her arms.

"What *are* you going to do?"

"Depends," Vurt answered.

"On?"

"What these fellows want. How long they plan on staying. How nasty they are. How many others do more than just talk." Vurt cleared his throat. "Could be none of them do, you know. Could be this story's already over."

"Somebody will do something," Saedanne said bitterly. "Somebody always does."

As quietly as she could, Erileine opened her door once more, lay down on her bed, and was instantly asleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Erileine woke to a gentle, irregular tapping sound, like pebbles clattering in a sieve. She slipped on her trousers and shirt, threw off her quilt, and padded barefoot down the stairs.

"Ssh!" Queçenne hissed from beside the front door. Her hair was tousled, and she had her winter coat on over her nightdress. "Look at it."

Erileine stood on tiptoes to peer through the half-open door over her sister's shoulder. The sky was a roiling mass of clouds. They had been dozing placidly, letting the wind carry them where it would, when the mountain had plowed into them without warning. Now they were panicking, dumping water to lighten themselves so that they could get out of its way.

But their water wasn't falling as rain. Instead, hailstones the size of pearls were bouncing off roofs and cobblestones and painted wooden house soldiers to lie cold, white, and brilliant in the cracks between them. Erileine had never seen anything like it.

"Do you think it's a sign?" Queçenne asked, hushed.

Erileine blinked. "Uh, what? No. No, they're just—they're just frozen raindrops."

"I know they're frozen raindrops," her sister hissed. "I mean... I mean everything. All of it. Isn't there anything in all those books you read? About what's happening?" She shivered and pulled her coat tight around her shoulders. For an unsettling moment she

seemed like a little girl to Erileine. For that one moment she understood why their paere and maere sometimes looked at them so wistfully sometimes.

The sisters watched the hail bounce off the cobblestones a few moments longer, until Queçenne said, "I'm going back to bed. If you find out anything, will you tell me?"

Erileine smiled in the dark, remembering a Yearagain Eve long ago. "Only if you give me one of your painted eggs."

Her sister scowled. "Idiot. You didn't even really know what they'd got for me."

Erileine's smile broadened. "No, but it took you three eggs to figure that out." She dodged her sister's half-hearted shoulder punch, then surprised them both by putting her arms around Queçenne and giving her sister an awkward hug.

"I'm sorry about Fraederiq," Erileine mumbled into her sister's shoulder.

Queçenne froze. Erileine let go of her, an apology already rising in her throat, but her sister pulled her back into the hug and squeezed her. "It wasn't your fault," she said.

The two young women sniffled in unison, laughed shakily at the sound and then again at their own laughter. "It wasn't your fault about Niquolas leaving either," Queçenne continued.

"My fault?" Erileine asked, bewildered. "Why would it be my fault?"

Her sister studied her face. "His note—he was sweet on you. Didn't you know?" Queçenne smiled at Erileine's bewildered look. "You know, for someone who's so smart, you can be pretty stupid sometimes."

"I guess so." Erileine hugged herself. *Niquolas?* she thought. *Really?*

"Anyway, don't stay up too late." Queçenne stepped around her sister to go back into the house.

"I won't," Erileine promised. She stood and watched the hail bounce off the cobblestones until the draft through the partly-open door raised goosebumps on her arms, then stooped and picked up one of the tiny white grains. It felt odd for a moment, almost powdery. When it melted, it left a slippery film between her thumb and finger that evaporated almost instantly.

The drumming subsided and stopped as quickly as it had begun. She closed the

door and tiptoed back upstairs to bed.

As she lay there, curled on her side with her head pillowed on her arm, she wondered about the clouds Avaunt had panicked. What if people below had been counting on them for rain? She imagined herself as a groundling farmer, shaking her fist at the bad luck passing indifferently over her head. Her fields were too dry. One good rainfall, just one, would bring it to life, but the mountain had stolen that chance. If she and her family stayed in their little one-mill village they would starve. They loaded everything they had onto a cart, but it was all books, everything, piles of them, endless lists of verbs flying after each other like tiny birds... Her eyes closed again.

\* \* \* \* \*

As Starboard Town's last morning of freedom dawned, the bosun was downing a mug of the strongest tea he had ever had. He and Vurt were sitting behind Mamaere Mayeule's, looking at the unmoving forest that was beside the mountain instead of below it, their fleece jackets open to let the morning sun warm their chests.

"A couple of hours, I guess," Vurt finally said, setting his mug down. Mayeule was inside, working her own brand of magic with garlic sausages, dried apricots, eggs, and potato bread. "Want me to get started?"

The bosun nodded heavily. "Yup." He stood up as Mayeule came out with the teapot. "Oh, no thank you. That last will keep me going all day." He ducked his head to her, as if he was still a ten-year-old struggling with his letters in the hopes of getting a smile from the teacher, and left them alone.

"He wants you to rig the traps on your ladder?" she asked Vurt.

He nodded. "Quick as I can. Just in case." Then he frowned. "Didn't know you knew about that."

She squeezed his hand. "Whole town knows about it."

The corner of his mouth ticked up. "I'd best be about it, then."

She squeezed his hand. "Best had."

Up in the beanfields, the clouds had moved on without raining, leaving the air close and oppressive. People worked in the fields, or sat on stools outside their front

doors mending shirts and plaiting bamboo and spoke in low, hushed voices, as if waiting for news from a death bed.

Finally Gaeston exploded. "Everyone's acting like it's all over!" He was ankle deep in wet soil, a hoe in his hand. His spear leaned against the terrace wall two strides away. "This is our home! Are we just going to lie down and let them take it?"

"So what're you going to do?" Laeuc asked.

"I don't know." Gaeston waved his arm. "Ambush them. Take the sons of chocolate merchants one at a time, even things up a little."

A few strides away, Matthieu clutched a half-full bucket of weeds and watched the argument with growing concern. "Wh-what are they? Mad about?" he asked plaintively.

"Nothing," Queçenne said beside him. It was her turn to look after Matthieu. She had pleaded with her mother to have someone else do it, but Saedanne had said in her don't-even-start voice that it would do Queçenne good to pick herself up and get back to things.

"B-but—" Matthieu started.

"I said *never mind!*" Queçenne snapped. "Saints, could you just—oh. Oh, no, I'm sorry." She got to her feet and put her arms around him as he started to cry.

"I'm scared," Matthieu said, child's eyes in a grown man's face, child's fear in a grown man's voice.

"Sh, sh, it's all right," Queçenne said, hugging him. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. It's just—I'm scared too. We all are."

And then shouts came from the terraces above them. "They're here! They're here!"

The soldiers marched into Starboard Town in two columns, their helmets gleaming in the sun. Each man wore a steel breastplate, and had a short steel sword belted around his waist. They were clean-shaven and unremarkable: brown-skinned, dark-haired, neither tall nor short. Their heavy boots made a *tramp, tramp, tramp* Starboard Town hadn't heard since the ancestors of the Avauntois had captured the mountain four hundred years before.

Bosun Uyves and five others walked in their midst, their hands tied behind them.

As they approached the upper fields, some people ran for town. Others just watched, their hearts echoing the shame and anger written on the bosun's face. There would be no battle for Starboard Town.

Laeuc lay his hoe down on top of his earthing bucket and hopped over the fence into the neighboring field. "What are you planning to do with that?" he asked conversationally.

Alone among the Avauntois, Gaeston had picked up his spear. He shook his head wordlessly at his friend's question. "Come on, put it down," Laeuc said. "Not here, not now, there's nothing you can do. Come on, put it down." Gently, as if coaxing a sick goat into a pen, Laeuc took the weapon from Gaeston's hands and dropped it in the furrow at his feet. That done, he clasped his hands together behind his back, squeezing them to stop them shaking.

"Erileine?" Saedanne pounded on her daughter's door. "Erileine, the soldiers are here!"

Erileine sat up and dug sticky grit out of the corners of her eyes. "Where's Razi? And Piaerre—the boy who came with us?"

"He's at Mayeule's. I don't know where Razi is. Maybe you should just stay here for now."

"I can't, maere. I have to find Razi." She pulled her good shirt on awkwardly, then fumbled with the buttons on her pants. It was hard to do small things when she couldn't feel half her fingers.

"Hold on." Saedanne crossed to her, scowling when she tried to block her mother's hands. "Oh, stop fussing. I've changed your diaper, I can do up your pants." She fastened the three buttons and tugged the laces on her shirt tight.

"Where did paere put my boots?" she asked.

"I don't know." Saedanne followed her down the stairs. "Erileine, where are you going?"

"I told you, I have to find Razi. He's the only one who speaks enough Praczny to talk to them." She veered into the kitchen. "Is there any bread left?"

"Just the heel. Take it. I'll make some more later." *If I can*, she added mentally.

The light outside dazzled her for a moment. She bit a mouthful off the lump of bread she had taken and shoved the rest into her pocket. Here and there on the street, people peered out from behind half-open doors. "Go back inside!" Donaïen hissed from the other side of the street. "The soldiers are here!"

"I know." Erileine hurried up the street to Mayeule's.

Razi wasn't there. Neither were Mayeule or Piaerre. "Hello?" she called. Her voice echoed slightly in the main room. She shivered. She felt like a ghost, alone after death in a world empty of everyone except her. She opened the door, stepped out, and ran straight into a soldier's armored chest.

"Ooph!" Erileine stumbled back a step. The soldier eyed her coldly. "Go home," he said in badly-accented Gandan-o.

Erileine spread her hands and tried to smile despite her thudding heart. "I'm sorry, but I'm looking for my teacher. I have to—"

"Go home!" the soldier repeated, waving Erileine back down the street.

Erileine swallowed hard. "*Inesh Praczny pertakken*." She hoped that was right. "I speak a little Praczny."

The soldier's eyes narrowed. "*Pertakka arapche be keprelaptekete arjo?*"

"Um, *ve nesse arja me*." Erileine shrugged. "My teacher speaks it better, though. I'm trying to find him. My... teacher..." she repeated slowly. "Saints, what's the word for teacher?"

The soldier whistled sharply through his teeth, two quick notes high and low.

"*Hara?*" A second soldier walked over to join them.

The first soldier saluted and pointed at Erileine. "*Arap be Praczny pertakken in pidje*."

The newcomer nodded. "Yes, I know." It was Jaromir.

A black eye, a scab on the bridge of his nose, and two stitches in his upper lip contrasted with his spotless plain gray uniform. Two silver ribbons sewn around its right sleeve were all that distinguished him from the other soldiers nearby. He nodded to

Erileine. "Good morning."

Erileine's mouth worked for a moment. "What are *you* doing here?"

The Hett waited a moment, then quietly said, "Please, finish your sentence."

"What?"

Jaromir tsk'd. "I think you meant to say, what are you doing here, *sra*. Didn't you?"

Erileine stared at him. *Sra*? Nobody called a Hett "*sra*", not unless they were mocking drunk. But Jaromir plainly wasn't just a Hett any more. He was a man with a uniform and a sword, and his stony look showed what he thought of Erileine's silence.

"Yes, *sra*." Erileine switched back to Praczny, thinking furiously to construct her next sentence. "I is—am—apprentice for language. Trade also. I learn Praczny, Gandano, read and write, Bantangui also, then Ruudian also."

Jaromir grunted. "Good. So where's your teacher?"

"*La*, I am here, honored *sra*."

Erileine felt a flash of spiteful satisfaction as Jaromir started and spun around. The bookster closed the gate to Mamaere Mayeule's back yard behind him and bowed gracefully. He gave no sign that he had slept rough the last two nights, or that he had been close to death before that.

"Bookster." Jaromir nodded a stiff reply to Razi's bow. "I am glad to see you well. Some very important people have been worried about you."

The bookster raised his eyebrows. "*La*, I am honored. I wasn't aware that any important people even knew of me."

Once again, Jaromir tsk'd. "Please, bookster, no fencing. There aren't very many Karabandi on the mountain, and only one who might have a quicksilver sword." He held out his hand. "I apologize, but I must take it from you."

Razi raised his palms apologetically. "*La*, captain, I have no such sword. Truly."

The corner of Jaromir's mouth twitched. He lowered his hand. "It's lieutenant, bookster, not captain. A captain would have three ribbons. But you know that. Just as you know that if your mistress were not who she is, I'd have your back broken here and



now for what you did to my comrades.”

Erileine held her breath as Razi lowered his hands as well. “I have no mistress, lieutenant. And I swear by my blood, I do not think I have done anything recently to merit a broken back.”

One of the soldiers behind him said something in Praczny too quickly for Erileine to follow. Jaromir shook his head. “*Nesh*. We have orders. For which *you* should be grateful,” he added to Razi, his tone level once again. “We are to send foreigners to Hepje Het as soon as possible for disembarking. Sergeant Burak here will help you collect your things.” He jerked a thumb at the soldier who had spoken.

“Ah.” Razi raised his eyebrows. “And who, if it is permitted to ask, is Hepje Het?”

Jaromir—Lieutenant Jaromir, Erileine corrected himself—smiled faintly. “Not who, where. Hepje Het is the big town forward.” He waved a hand to take in the houses around them. “This is Anapje Het.”

Razi blinked. “*La*, truly? I have heard it called Starboard Town.”

The lieutenant shook his head. “No. It is Anapje Het. What these people called it no longer matters.”

“*La*, truly?” Razi repeated softly.

“Truly.” Lieutenant Jaromir waved a hand to take in Starboard Town, the mountain, and possibly the whole world. “Whatever name these people gave it is now in the past, and that past has ended.”

Whatever reply bookster might have given was cut off by a sharp three-tone whistle. The small knot of soldiers behind Lieutenant Jaromir instantly drew their swords. “*Hurtiyet!*” someone shouted, “Catch him!” Erileine whirled around, crying out as Razi pulled her out of the way.

Bosun Uyves’s escape was short-lived. Roaring like a bull, he slammed into the first soldier, knocking him to the ground. Somehow he managed to keep his feet for a few more steps before stumbling and falling to his knees on the cobblestones with his hands still tied behind his back.

The Hett soldiers kept their swords drawn as Lieutenant Jaromir walked over to

him. He barked a question in rapid Praczny. One of the soldiers who had been guarding the Avauntois straightened up and slapped his open left hand against his breastplate.

"*Sho!*"

"*Idjen cakhuisa*," Jaromir said. Shamefaced, the soldier saluted again.

"So..." Jaromir said, looking down at the bosun. "Where did you think you were going? Or was your plan simply to knock us off the mountain one by one?"

The bosun let fly with a stream of curses. "Maggoty lackwit goat-fondling..."

Jaromir drew his sword and placed its point against the bosun's throat. "We are not animals," he said without preamble as the bosun's words ended in an indrawn hiss. "None of us—*none* of us—will ever do to you what people like you have done to the Hett for hundreds of years. It would be an insult to everything we believe."

"But you need to understand, right in your gut, that things have changed." He clenched a fist in front of his belly for emphasis as he spoke. "We govern here now, not you, and we will not swallow abuse or disobedience any more than you did. We would give our lives for the Great Work. We will certainly give yours if we have to."

He straightened up, eyes still on the fallen bosun. "Bookster! Get your things. Sergeant Burak!"

"*Sho!*"

"*In Hepje Het zaue buikken apchala erregan. Immet na perressagern, nesh karpe abj terteperressagern.*"

"*Sho!*" The sergeant slapped his breastplate and nodded curtly at the bookster.

Without turning his head, Lieutenant Jaromir said, "Translate what I just said."

Erileine hesitated, glancing at the bookster. Razi nodded. Erileine cleared her throat. "Go with the bookster to... to Hepje Het. Take the—I don't know the next word."

"The tunnels," the lieutenant corrected.

"The tunnels, but not the—I don't know the last word either."

"The deep tunnels," Razi supplied. "Or 'major'. It's the same word. It could even be 'the fundamental tunnels', although—" He cut himself off, smiling. "My apologies. Once a teacher, always a teacher. Erileine?" The bookster raised his hands, palms forward,

and inclined his head gravely. "Please give my regards to your parents, and my thanks. You have been a good student." With no more than that, he gathered his *deel* around him and strode away. Sergeant Burak and two others hurried after him.

Erileine stared at the bookster's retreating back, bewildered. That was it? He was just leaving? No, it couldn't be. Razi had to have a plan.

"I wouldn't hope for salvation from that quarter." Lieutenant Jaromir said, as if he had read Erileine's thoughts. But no, the Hett was speaking to Uyves, and was also watching the bookster walk away. "Lady Kembe is every bit as powerful as the stories say, but she is just one woman, and very far away. She will feel us out, and send spies, and ask herself, what should I do, but then the Bantangui will stir up trouble again, or the Sad Duke will open his mouth when he shouldn't, and this will all become something that has already happened. In ten years, people will have to be reminded that it has been ten years."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Where in the saints' names have you been?" Laeuc demanded when Erileine finally arrived home. The whole family was at the table, with Mamaere Mayeule and Piaerre sharing a stool somewhat precariously at one end. The young thief was wearing a plain brown overshirt and black pants two sizes too big for him. His hair hung down in braids on either side of his face, which was clean for the first time since Erileine had met him.

"I have a new job," she said tiredly, leaning against the wall. She sniffed the air. "Is there any dinner left?"

"What kind of job?" Laeuc asked.

Erileine shrugged resignedly. "I'm Lieutenant Jaromir's translator."

The stunned silence that followed was everything Erileine had expected it would be. "His translator?" her mother spluttered. "I'll be a haunt before you'll be his anything!"

"I don't think I have a choice, maere. Thanks, papaere." Erileine took the plate of grilled squash her grandfather passed her and began forking it into her mouth.

"Of course you have a choice! Laeuc, she can't—what will people think?"

Laeuc patted the air. "Hold on, love, let her speak. Erileine, what exactly do they want you to do?"

"It doesn't matter what they want her to do!" Saedanne exploded. "No daughter of mine is going to have anything to do with those—those *animals*!"

"What do they want you to do?" Papaere Vurt asked.

Erileine swallowed. "Translate. Jaromir doesn't need me himself—he speaks Gandan-o as well as I do. But most of the others don't, so I have to talk to people for them. He said I'll be a Local Assistant Specialist, Second Grade, so I'll get twenty pence for each day I work, and Purplesday off, except in emergencies."

"You're not going to take a single bent penny from them," Saedanne said fiercely.

"I don't think I have a choice," Erileine repeated.

"What about the bosun?" Papaere Vurt asked. "What did they do to him?"

"They asked him a lot of questions," Erileine blew on the next piece of squash to cool it. After wracking her brain for three hours to conjugate Praczny verbs, what she really wanted was mint tea with lots of sugar and something inconsequential to read.

But everyone was looking at her, so she laid her fork on her plate and collected her thoughts. "Jaromir wanted to know all kinds of things. How many bushels of squash did we grow each year? Who used the old tunnels as cellars? Who drank too much, who got into fights, had anyone ever been a *penteche*, all kinds of things."

"A what?" Laeuc asked.

"A *penteche*. It's a soldier who fights for whoever will pay him."

"A mercenary," Papaere Vurt translated, scowling. "He wants to know if anyone knows how to fight for real. And how much food we can produce. It means they're settling in for the long haul."

The silence that followed was broken only by the purring of the cat in Mamaere Mayeule's lap. Laeuc looked troubled, Queçenne looked miserable, Saedanne looked angry, and Mayeule and Vurt looked at each other, both thinking how unfairly short life was.

"What about the captain?" Piaerre asked. "Did anyone say anything about him?"

Erileine scooped the last slice of grilled squash off her plate. "Bosun Uyves asked that too. Said he wasn't going to answer any more questions unless he got some answers. I thought Jaromir was going to get angry, but then he said, why not?"

*Bosun Uyves stood straight and tall, his hands tied behind his back. The tinker, who had clearly always been much more than just that, sat on the other side of the tavern table, toying absently with the homestone around his neck*

*Two soldiers stood guard at Mayeule's door. A third sat on a bench behind Jaromir, taking notes. Something about her face made the back of Erileine's mind itch.*

*"Your first question is probably why we're here," Jaromir said.*

*The bosun made a sound deep in his throat. "Eat cake. What have you done with the captain?"*

*The Hett shook his head. "I don't know. I wasn't at Hepje Het, although some of my men were. They told me that the fighting didn't last long, so he may have survived. If I get word, I promise I will tell you."*

*"You can eat your promises, too."*

*Jaromir tsk'd. "Like it or not, Uyves, you and I are going to have to work together. Your people are going to want to tend their beans, and my men have to be able to go about their business without worrying about someone putting an ax in them. If you and I can't get along, things could go very, very hard here, and neither of us wants that."*

*He tucked the stone around his neck back under his shirt. "Now, about your irrigation system—we have some ideas that might reduce the amount of water you need..." The soldier who was taking notes pulled a hand-drawn map from the broad leather envelope at her side and passed it to the lieutenant.*

"That's when I recognized her," Erileine said. "She was here. Not last year, the year before, when we were at Gandan Berth. She was selling portraits, remember? I think she did one of Niquolas and Matthieu." She nodded at her sister. "You wanted one too, but maere said we couldn't afford it."

"What—she wasn't Hett," Queçenne said.

"Of course she wasn't," Piaerre said, with just a hint of the scornful tone Erileine was used to. "Spies are never what they seem to be."

"Razi," Laeuc said suddenly. "Saints, do you think he was working for them?"

"No." Erileine said quickly. "No, I'm sure he wasn't."

"How can you be so sure?" Vurt asked from behind him.

Erileine and Piaerre looked at each other. "Because he works for Lady Kembe," Erileine said resignedly. "He killed some Hett in Forecastle when they attacked."

She used the stunned silence that followed to wipe the last of the gravy off her plate with her finger. "It started just after the mountain changed course..."

It took Erileine less time than she'd expected to tell her family what had happened and what she had done. Her mother's face grew stonier with each passing moment, while her father and sister looked at her as if she was a stranger.

But when she finished, her grandfather put his arm around her shoulders and gave her a squeeze. "Good job," he said. "Now, let me see that hand of yours."

Erileine held it out, palm up. Papaere Vurt studied it. "Doesn't look any different."

Erileine shrugged. "It still tingles a bit. Right here." She made a ring around her wrist with her other hand.

"You could try some of the skin cream I bought in Mau Ngapcha," Queçenne volunteered diffidently. "If you wanted."

Erileine smiled at her sister. "Thanks. That would be great." The cream smelled like flowers, even from half a dozen strides away, but the old woman who'd sold it to Queçenne had sworn that it would cure just about anything except a cold.

"Yes, well..." Laeuc cleared his throat. "We should think about bed, I suppose. Tomorrow's probably going to be a busy day."

"Um, about that." Erileine cleared her throat. "Jaromir said that we have to tear down anything that's on top of the old tunnels. He wants it done right away."

It took a moment for her words to sink in. "Tear down—that's ridiculous!" Her mother laughed angrily. "Donaïen and Armaend are right on top of one. They use it for a

cellar.”

“That’s what the bosun said. Jaromir said it didn’t matter. He said we’d have to move the smokehouse, too. The bosun asked him how we’d get water if we couldn’t use the tunnels, and he said they were going to take care of that for us.”

“But they can’t *do* that!” Saedanne spluttered. “These are our homes!”

“The bosun said that too.” And that was when Lieutenant Jaromir got angry. He didn’t raise his voice or pound the table, or have his men hit the bosun again, but the Hett might have been looking at a weed that needed pulling rather than a living, breathing man.

“No, Uyves,” he said. “This isn’t your home. It never was, not really. It’s ours. It always was, and it always will be. You drove us away, but we’re back now. I suggest you get used to it.”

Vurt, Mayeule, and Piaerre spent the night. They didn’t have a choice—when they tried to leave, the Hett patrolling Slip Street turned them back. “Curfew,” they said. It might have been the only word they knew of the Gandan-o that the Avauntois spoke. “Curfew.”

Erileine gave up her bedroom, and was less surprised than her mother when Vurt and Mayeule announced that they would share it. “Wrinklies are kind of cute when they’re in love,” Queçenne whispered to Erileine, making the younger girl grin for half a heartbeat.

Erileine was equally unsurprised at how well Piaerre hit it off with both of them: her grandfather told Piaerre one tall tale after another, laughing as Mayeule interrupted every few sentences to correct his exaggerations and outright fabrications. If it hadn’t been for the occasional whistle on the street, or her mother’s angry voice coming from her parents’ bedroom, it would have been wonderful.

Finally, though, it was time to sleep. She and Piaerre piled coats and spare blankets on the floor downstairs. “It’s like the walk from Forecastle all over again,” Erileine grumbled, rolling her father’s spare shirt into a pillow.

“Oh, I’m used to sleeping out,” Piaerre said airily.

"What about your family?" Erileine asked.

Piaerre studied the silhouette portrait that hung on the wall. A young Bantangu woman with a shaved head and exaggerated false eyebrows had drawn it the winter Erileine turned eight. Laeuc and Saedanne's profiles filled the center. Above them, half as large, were Laeuc's parents and Papaere Vurt; Saedanne's mother had died a year too early to be in the picture. Queçenne and Erileine were below their parents, facing away from each other. "I don't want to talk about them," Piaerre said.

"Why not?"

Piaerre scowled. "Because I don't."

"All right." Erileine gave up trying to find a soft spot on her makeshift pillow and closed her eyes. "Sleep well."

"Sleep well."

A minute passed. "Erileine?"

"Mm?"

"When you helped Razi... Did it hurt?"

Erileine squeezed her unfeeling hand. "Yup."

"Oh." A pause. "A lot?"

"Yup."

"Oh." Another pause. "I'd have done it for him too, if I'd been there."

"I know." This time it was Erileine who paused. "I think... I don't think I really did it for him, though."

She heard a rustle as Piaerre rolled onto her stomach. "So who'd you do it for?"

Erileine swallowed. If she'd been able to see him, she would have mumbled, "Never mind," but there in the dark, home again after everything that had happened, everything that had been stewing in her finally bubbled over. "I did it for— I did it because when the mountain shook the first time, I was standing right next to someone, and maybe if I'd done something then, I could have stopped him from falling, and... I thought maybe doing this would, you know, balance things somehow."

"Huh. That's stupid." Piaerre rolled onto his back again.



"Oh really?" Erileine said, stung.

"Mm hm. Razi says that good and bad aren't like profit and loss. They don't add up or cancel out. They just *are*, and whatever you've done, you've done."

"Well, I guess I missed that lesson."

"I guess you did." She heard him yawn. "But it was still pretty brave of you."

An itch woke Erileine a few hours later. She shifted on her pile of blankets, listening to Piaerre's nasal snore as she tried to figure what was wrong. It was as if her shirt had ridden up to expose a little bit of skin on a cold day, or a sneeze couldn't quite manage to take shape in the back of her nose.

«Erileine...» It wasn't a sound. It was a *knowledge*. Lady Kembe wanted to talk to her...

"Hello?" she whispered. Piaerre grunted and rolled onto his side.

She waited until she heard him snoring again. "Hello?" she repeated. "My lady?"

«Erileine...» The itch ebbed and vanished. After a long moment, she lay down once more.

\* \* \* \* \*

Noise from the street woke her a few hours later. Something creaked, and then there was a sound like wood snapping. A muffled curse followed, followed by the knock and clatter of someone trying to do a heavy chore as quietly as they could. She slipped out of bed and peeked through her curtain without opening it.

A pair of soldiers stood on the street below next to a wheelbarrow—Papaere Badette's wheelbarrow, the big one that everybody borrowed when their own was too small. For one gut-wrenching moment she thought it was full of children's bodies, but then she realized they were house soldiers. The Hett were prying the painted wooden soldiers off each house in turn.

A sudden motion in the window across the street made her duck. Someone else was watching too. She swallowed. Should she wake her parents or her grandfather and tell them? *They won't be able to do anything*, she told herself despairingly. With an unexpected ache in her chest, she slid back into bed.

\* \* \* \* \*

A heavy knock on the door woke her again just before dawn. Erileine scraped the sleep out of her eyes and answered it.

Two Hett soldiers stood there with the bosun. "Rise and shine," Uyves said sourly. His hair, normally so carefully tended, looked like a goat had been at it. That, and his black eye, made him look like some half-mad cousin of the dapper bosun Erileine knew.

Erileine craned her neck to look around him. Her face fell. It hadn't been a dream—the wooden soldier that had stood guard by her front door her whole life was gone. Uyves caught her eye and nodded grimly.

"Erileine, who is it?" Her father hurried down the stairs as Piaerre slipped silently into the kitchen.

"It's me, Laeuc. The *lieutenant* wants everybody out in the fields." The bosun's expression made it clear what he thought of the idea. "And he wants Erileine for translating."

Erileine heard footsteps on the stairs her mother joined them. "Laeuc, what's happening?" Saedanne asked.

"The soldiers want Erileine out with them. To translate."

Her jaw set. "No. I won't have it. She's just a child, Uyves."

Uyves' hands bunched into fists, and for a moment Erileine thought he was going to take a swing at the soldiers beside him. Then his hands unclenched and he said, "It isn't your choice, Sae."

"Then whose is it?" she demanded sharply.

The bosun looked at her levelly. "It's mine. As far as I'm concerned, until the captain relieves me, I'm still in charge here, and I say Erileine goes with them."

"But—" Saedanne and Laeuc spoke at the same time, stopped, and exchanged looks, Saedanne's angry and Laeuc's pleading.

One of the soldiers nudged the other. "*Irre pentelele arpe hebmedji sheh kerremperpele*," he said, nodding past the trio in the doorway. Erileine twisted around to see Queçenne peeking out of the kitchen. The soldier smiled broadly at her. She blushed

and pulled her head back out of sight. The other soldier laughed.

Erileine didn't understand all of what the soldier had said, but she understood enough. "*Ap medji eshweggen*," she said. "Sit firmly on your sword." The soldiers just laughed again.

Uyves put his hand on Erileine's arm. "You do their translating," he said quietly. "And then you come find me and tell me everything you heard, understood? *Everything.*"

Erileine nodded jerkily. He squeezed her arm and then turned to the soldiers and nodded once, firmly.

"Tell them they are to work in the fields as they would on any other day," the first soldier said slowly in Praczny. Erileine nodded and translated his words into Gandan-o.

"What if we don't work in the fields?" Papaere Vurt asked. Instead of putting on his false leg, he had hobbled downstairs with his pant leg pinned below his knee, using an upside-down broom as a crutch. He looked older than Erileine had ever seen him—deliberately so, she realized. What was her grandfather up to?

The soldier shrugged when Erileine passed on Vurt's question. "Tell him to stay out of trouble. Now come."

Bosun Uyves knocked on each door in turn. Sometimes he had to bang his fist and bellow to get someone to answer. Other times, the door flew open before his meaty hand even hit it. "They want us up in the fields," Erileine said over and over. "Just like any other day."

"So we're to be slaves, are we?" Gaeston snarled when his turn came. He glared at the soldiers with bloodshot eyes. "Well, I'm not going to be a house gelding for them. You tell them that! You tell them this isn't Ini weeping Bantang, and they're not the Midnight weeping Admirals!"

"Put a cork in, you idiot," the bosun growled. "This isn't the time or the place. And anyway, it's our own food we're growing. Or were you planning to eat moss next week?"

Gaeston crossed his arms and leaned against the doorframe. "I'm not doing it."

Erileine turned to the soldiers. "*Aweche panja nesh... um, nesh perwerketeppeen*

*ubbo.*"

The soldiers glanced at each other. The first one shrugged. The second one turned back to Gaeston and kicked him hard between the legs.

As Gaeston doubled over, the first soldier put his hand on Uyves' arm to restrain him. "*Bashte*," he said warningly.

"Eat cake," the bosun spat. "You're a bunch of animals! Hells, you're worse than most of the animals I know!"

"Worse than you?" the second soldier asked in strongly accented Gandan-o. "Worse than you do all Hett here?"

With a final glare, Uyves turned to Gaeston. "Come on, stand up. A walk will shake 'em back into place."

Slowly, painfully, Gaeston straightened up. The look he gave the soldiers was filled with venom. He took his coat from the hook by the door and shrugged it on, then made a show of closing the door behind him. As he stepped around Erileine, he pretended to stumble slightly. Catching hold of her shoulder, he put his mouth next to her ear.

"Leech," he hissed.

By the time they reached the top of Slip Street the entire town was either in the fields or trying to look busy around their edges. Angry groups of three and four muttered to each other about the missing house soldiers. The Hett had piled them in the burning pit by the outhouses. Why would they do that?

As Erileine looked around, she counted. There were hundreds of townspeople, and only three dozen soldiers... For one heady moment, she thought about shouting, "Charge!" So what if the soldiers had armor and swords? Unless one of them was secretly a magician, the townspeople would surely win. She imagined herself dodging the soldiers' thrusts, knocking one down, snatching up her dropped sword and crying, "Avaunt! Avaunt!"

But how many of the people she had grown up with would die? And anyway, there would just be more soldiers. In fact, there *were* more soldiers. When she looked up to the highest terrace, the early morning sun gleamed on their helmets. These ones cradled

crossbows in their arms as they watched the Avauntois pull up weeds and clean out irrigation ditches.

Erileine caught the bosun looking at her. She realized her lips had been moving. She shook her head, embarrassed. As she turned away, Matthieu tugged on his shirt. "Are we allowed to use the stinky house?" he asked anxiously.

Erileine smiled reassuringly. "I'm sure we are." He caught the eye of a nearby soldier. "*Ippe arenteme ephwe bae cakhuisa?*" The soldier shrugged and waved his hand. "Go ahead," Erileine told Mattheiu.

Striding up the path, Lieutenant Jaromir turned his head as Matthieu lumbered by. The boy's steps quickened when he saw the lieutenant, as if he wanted to break into a run, but stopped himself. Erileine felt a moment of pride.

"Good morning," the lieutenant said to Erileine.

"*Sra.*" Watching the soldiers nearby salute, Erileine wondered if she was expected to do the same, and what her mother—never mind Gaeston—would say if she did.

The lieutenant studied the people in the field. After a moment, Erileine realized he was counting them. "Pretty much everyone's here," Erileine offered. "Except the little ones. Mamaere Mayeule has them for lessons."

"Yes, I stopped in there on my way up," Jaromir said absently. "And your papaere, of course. I passed him on Slip Street. Is something wrong with his leg? I've never seen him with a crutch before."

Erileine flushed. "Um, sometimes he doesn't wear it. *Sra.* Says it gives him sores if he doesn't give it a rest."

"Mm." Jaromir acknowledged the lie with a nod. "I imagine you were sorry to see the bookster leave. I certainly was—he's an interesting man. How long had you been his apprentice?"

Erileine shrugged. "Since Mau Ngapcha. He came here to catalog the books in the Captain's House, and..." She shrugged again.

"Mm. How far did he get?"

*I shouldn't shrug so much*, Erileine thought, shrugging. "Less than half, *sra.*"

"Mm. Well, I'd like you to keep sorting through them. It would be a shame to stop in the middle, and it will help you with your studies."

"*Sra?*"

"Your studies," Jaromir repeated. "You do still want to be a bookster, don't you?" He nodded toward the nearest knot of townspeople. "It's probably the best thing you could do to help your people."

Erileine hesitated. "*Sra...* If it's all right, I should help my family right now. I can start studying again later."

"Mm." The lieutenant nodded. "You don't want to stand out, do you? Soldier's pet, and all that." The corner of his mouth twitched. "Believe me, I know what that feels like. Try being Hett for a few years. You'll learn a lot more about being singled out than you ever wanted to."

"Yes, *sra*." Erileine hesitated. "*Sra?*"

"Mm?"

"What is the Great Work?"

Jaromir clapped her on the shoulder. "All in good time." He nodded to Erileine and strode away, oblivious to or perhaps even enjoying the sidelong looks of hatred the Avauntois threw his way.

Erileine certainly felt them, though. As she hurried up the path to the terrace where her family was working, they felt as hot as the desert sun. "Don't blame me," she wanted to shout. "I didn't want to do this," but she knew that would only make things worse.

When she reached the terrace, she grabbed a rake and attacked the nearest furrow furiously. "What was that all about?" Laeuc asked.

"He wants me to keep working in the Captain's House," Erileine said. "He said it would be the best way to help."

"Help? Help what?"

"Help us," Erileine replied bitterly. "I mean, *us*. The Avauntois." The word sounded strange in her ears.

"Wonderful," her mother said under her breath. "Mareille asked me what in hell's burning forests you were doing. Gaeston wasn't even that polite. I told them you didn't have a choice, they picked you out because you knew their language, but I don't think they care." She grabbed the base of a thistle and yanked it from the dry soil.

"Did either of them say what they thought I should do instead?" Erileine asked bitterly.

"Easy, easy," Laeuc whispered at them urgently. "Let's not fight, all right?"

His wife pulled another thistle from the ground. "Just like always—let's not fight, let's not disagree, let's try to see *their* side. Maybe it's time you saw *our* side for once."

Erileine held her breath as her father stood up and brushed his hands clean. "Yes, well," he said uncertainly. "So what can you tell us about the boy you brought with you? She and Mayeule seem to be getting along fine, but..."

"He tried to steal the bosun's wallet when we went to Forecastle. They put him in the dungeon, but he escaped. It's all right," she added hastily. "We can trust him. The bookster did."

Saedanne tore another thistle from the ground. "Erileine, until we know what's going on, the only people we can trust are ourselves. Do you understand? Not this boy you brought with you that no one here has ever met before, not the bookster, no one who wasn't born here."

"What about papaere?" Erileine asked bitterly. "He's wasn't born here. And come to that, you're only half Avauntois."

"Erileine!" her father said sharply. "You will *not* speak to your mother that way."

Erileine looked at the ground sullenly. "Where is Piaerre anyway?"

"Armaend and Donaïen took him," Laeuc said.

Erileine looked over at the next field, where Armaend, Donaïen, and Piaerre were working. "I have to talk to him," she said. She walked away without looking back, thinking that she'd rather be fighting the Hett soldiers than fighting her parents.

Donaïen was sitting on an overturned bucket pointing out weeds to Piaerre, while Armaend pointed out the ones he missed and Piaerre gossiped non-stop about people in

Forecastle: who took quick nips from a bottle hidden under the counter when there were no customers in his shop, whose daughters looked nothing at all like her husband, who had shortchanged himself in a complex business deal in Mau Ngapcha...

*They're enjoying his company more than they ever enjoyed mine*, Erileine thought sourly. He was certainly better at talking than he was at gardening—he had smudges on his face from brushing his hair out of his eyes with his dirty hands. And then she wondered if those were accidental, or whether it was something Razi had taught him to hide his appearance.

"Clear day," Erileine said, smiling insincerely. "Can I borrow him for a few moments?"

Donaïen sat back. "As long as you keep weeding," he said. "Unless they said you don't have to?"

"We'll keep weeding," Erileine promised.

"They're fun," Piaerre said, sitting back on his haunches and watching the two men as they ambled over to the other side of the field, lost in one of their endless domestic not-quite-arguments.

Erileine shrugged. "I suppose." She sat down on Donaïen's bucket. "Listen, we have to get Razi's things." Quickly, she told him about hearing Lady Kembe's voice in the night.

He nodded. "All right. Do you remember where they are?"

Erileine blinked. "Don't you?"

"There's a lot of trees out there," he said defensively. "If we'd put them in someone's basement, or on a roof, I'd remember for sure."

Erileine rolled her eyes. "Fine. I can get them this afternoon, but how are we going to sneak them into town?"

"Leave that to me," Piaerre said confidently.

\* \* \* \* \*

Erileine offered to share her lunch with Piaerre at midday, but he declined. "Mamaere Mayeule's expecting me," he said, tossing a last handful of weeds into the



bucket. "But don't worry—I'll be back in time."

Erileine rehearsed her story on her way to the Captain's House. *I need peace and quiet to study. And someone needs to check on the goats.* When she knocked on the library door, the soldier who had been taking notes the night before answered. "Eue?" Erileine started to explain what she wanted. Halfway through her third sentence, the soldier said, "*Eshe*," and let her in.

She and another soldier Erileine hadn't seen before had taken over the long table in the center of the library. The books that she and Razi had left there lay in neat piles on the floor. In their place was a printed map of Avaunt, crisscrossed with dashed lines that could only be tunnels. As the Hett bent over it, homestones dangled around their necks.

Erileine pulled a book from the nearest pile, thanked the soldier, and fled. Back on Slip Street, she willed herself to walk more slowly. "Just act normal," she said under her breath, repeating Piaerre's parting words.

The soldiers at the edge of town turned her back. She protested, but her Praczny wasn't enough to convince them that a skinny girl with a book under her arm had permission to go anywhere.

Back at the beanfields, Lieutenant Jaromir seemed pleased. "They'd have been cleaning underpits for a month if they'd let you by," he said approvingly. He took a flat metal token from his pocket and handed it to her. "Here. Show them this. But mind the curfew—you're to be indoors by sundown like everyone else."

"Yes, *sra*." Erileine tucked the pass into her copy of *The Customs, Laws, and Language of Northern Praczedt: A Guide For Those So Fortunate As To Have Been Born Elsewhere*, by A Gentleman. It was just a sliver of stamped brass, but it felt heavy.

The soldiers barely glanced at the pass before waving her on. As she walked through the woods, Erileine kept glancing into the trees to see if any more soldiers were lurking among them. She couldn't, but that just made her more nervous.

The goats were as uninterested in her as usual. She found a flat rock to sit on, and opened her book. "*Errebe*... I was. Past tense." She flexed her hand as she read, wiggling

her fingers to ease the itching around her wrist until she suddenly remembered that Queçenne had pressed some of her precious Bantangui skin cream on her that morning. She fished the brown pottery vial out of her pocket, pulled the cork—

—and froze. “In Marandine, the chief village of the cloudherds, I met three men who claimed to be nobility from Anyalcze,” she whispered. “They were fleeing prosecution for a crime which they swore they had not committed, though in all my travels in that sorry country, I have never yet met one who did not deserve prosecution for something. Seeking to avoid...whatever, they came roundabout the mountains through a town they called Tin Head.”

A chill prickled the small hairs on Erileine's arms. She put the skin cream down and turned the book over to look at its cover. It couldn't be a coincidence. Was Lady Kembe trying to send her a message? Or was picking up *this* book just some leftover bit of magic intended for the bookster?

She opened the book again. “They came roundabout the mountains through a town they called Tin Head. It is in Anyalcze's lands, but not of it, as its people do not recognize the length of its dukes. No, wait, that must be ‘rule’.” *Its people have some small farming, but are miners by love and trade. The least ill-kept among the Pracznys said that they worshipped the earth as the Ruudians do the sun. Another disagreed, saying that they worshipped not the earth, but some speaking stone they had found in it that was their king and oracle. The third (who was the only one among them able to hold a fork properly) agreed with the second, and spoke further of some Great Work upon which these people believed themselves embarked. He knew not what it was, but claimed they had invited him to join them in it. At which point, his companions grew sullen, wondering aloud why he had not spoken of this beforetimes. For all their pretty accents, I am confident that by the time these words are before you, Learned Reader, they will separately or jointly have been unheaded as they undoubtedly deserve.*

Erileine stared into the distance. What was the “Great Work”? It couldn't mean invading the mountain—Lieutenant Jaromir had spoken as if it still lay ahead. As hard as it was to stomach, it seemed that conquering Avaunt was just a stepping stone to

something else. But what?

She scrambled to her feet, suddenly impatient to be moving. It only took her a few minutes to reach the spot where she, Razi, and Piaerre had come out of the forest onto Forecastle Road. An irving trilled nearby. A bush rustled slightly in answer. She tensed, then relaxed at the white-and-brown flash of a rabbit darting away.

Kneeling, she looked around as she pretended to re-tie her boot lace. There was no sign of any Hett soldiers. There was no more reason to delay. She took a deep breath and chinned herself up onto the first branch. It took her two tries and one near-fall to hook a leg over it. Sap stickied her hands, and pine needles crawled inside her shirt as she winced at the noise she was making.

There. She slung Razi's leather case over her shoulder, then undid her fleece vest, and slipped the sword bottle inside. It was heavier than she had expected, and warm, like water left standing in the sun. She lowered herself to the ground and brushed as much of the sap off her hands as she could.

Ten minutes later she was crouching behind a shrub at the edge of the woods on the edge of the lower beanfields, cursing Piaerre in Gandan-o, Karabandi, and Praczny. Where was he? The sun was about to kiss the peak of the mountain—any longer, and she'd have to hide Razi's things again to get home before curfew.

He came around the corner a moment later pushing a wheelbarrow full twigs and thistles. Erileine sighed with relief. The only soldier she could see was two terraces away, and seemed more interested in cleaning the inside of his nose than in a boy doing chores.

Piaerre reached the edge of the field. "Gosh, how silly of me," he said loudly. "I wasn't supposed to bring this here. I was supposed to take it to the burning pit. Oh, but it's so heavy. It would be wonderful if someone could help me."

"Sst," Erileine hissed from the woods. "Piaerre. Stop it! This isn't a game!"

He put his hand to his ear theatrically. "What's that? It sounded like a snake."

"Bring it over here," Erileine whispered loudly. "Closer to the trees."

Piaerre trundled the wheelbarrow closer. Erileine crept forward and tucked the

case and bottle under the thistles. "Are they covered?" she whispered. Piaerre nodded.

"All right. Is anyone watching?"

Piaerre glanced casually over his shoulder. "Uh uh."

"Good." Erileine handed him her book. "Here, take this. I'll push."

Piaerre looked her up and down. "You look like you've been sleeping in a bush again," he said critically. "Someone's going to want to know why."

Erileine glanced down at herself. He was right—she was plastered with pine needles, bits of twig, and a clump of something that she hoped was dirt. "Great."

Piaerre thrust the book back into her hands. "Hang on." He lay down on the ground and rolled over a few times.

Erileine gaped at him. "What are you doing?"

He stood up and studied the twigs and bits of grass that were now clinging to his jacket. "That should do," he said, satisfied. "Come on."

Together, they trundled the wheelbarrow back across the field. "Looks like you two have been busy," one of the soldiers said loudly in Praczny as they went past, elbowing his partner in the ribs. Erileine blushed furiously as the other man guffawed.

Queçenne's jaw dropped as she caught sight of her little sister and the boy she had brought back from Forecastle, looking as though they had been wrestling—or something—on the forest floor. All Erileine could think was that she hoped her mother wouldn't see her before she had a chance to clean up. She would rather be tortured by the Hett...

Halfway down Slip Street, Erileine turned the wheelbarrow into the narrow lane beside Mamaere Mayeule's. The shutters on the kitchen window had been left open. As they went past, Piaerre slipped the case and bottle out from under the trash and pushed them through the window. There was a faint thud as they fell onto the waiting pile of blankets.

Back on the street, Erileine felt as though she had an archery target pinned between her shoulderblades. She emptied the wheelbarrow into the stone-lined burning pit behind the outhouses, just as she had a hundred times before, and sadly surveyed the clutter of broken wooden house soldiers. She couldn't see her family's, but that one was

Donaïen and Armaend's—they had repainted it and their door in yellow and blue when they got married. And that one over there with its arm broken off, that had been Mareille's, and...

She shook her head. She hated the pit's acrid, ashy smell. Every time the mountain berthed at Mau Ngapcha, the townspeople shoveled it out and spread its contents on their fields. It was a dirty, choking job.

She sighed loudly. "What's wrong?" Piaerre asked.

"Nothing." Erileine shook her head. "Just missing something I never thought I'd miss. Let's go."

The sun had just touched the mountains as Piaerre wheeled the wheelbarrow back to the fields. Erileine trudged over to her father, who was kneeling next to another man. "Just about done?" Erileine asked.

"Just about," Laeuc said. "But there's someone here who wants to talk to you."

The other man carefully patted a handful of earth around the base of the squash he had just replanted. "Hello, Erileine," he said. "How's your hand?" He stood, brushing the dirt from his hands. He looked completely ordinary, with a round, dark face, dark hair, and a solemn expression.

Suddenly, just for an instant, Erileine's eyes refocused. Red-gold hair, blue eyes, a mocking grin—it was Thomas.

Erileine gasped. The illusion rippled back into place. "Best not to gawp," he said calmly. "Don't want any soldiers paying too much attention to your long-lost uncle, do we? Now, if you'd be so kind, I could use a hand with this." The magician knelt once again and began uprooting another squash.

Erileine went down on her knees beside him. "What are you doing here?" she hissed. "I thought you ran away."

"Flew away, actually," the magician corrected. "It's much more efficient. Pass me that trowel, would you?"

Erileine clenched her teeth. "You tell me what you're doing here, or I'm going straight to Lieutenant Jaromir."

"Don't raise your voice to me, whelp." Thomas's voice was as sweet as cream. "And keep in mind, any conversation I have with the good lieutenant will almost certainly come around to the subject of your left hand. Oh yes, I know about that—candlemark is easy to see if you have the right eyes. I'll bet the lieutenant would know what it was. As a matter of fact..." Thomas sat back on his haunches, looking thoughtful. "As a matter of fact, I'd be surprised if his masters didn't already know about it."

"Really? Then why haven't they already arrested me?"

Thomas shrugged. "I suppose they've decided that there's no point ruffling the good lady's feathers."

Before Erileine could answer, a soldier called, "*Yevve!*" from the terrace above them—it's time. She stood up, brushing the dirt from her hands. Why were they stopping? There was still at least an hour of daylight left.

"*Yevve! Yevve!*" She looked around as other Hett soldiers took up the cry. Some thumped the butts of their spears on the ground. Others clapped in time, exultant smiles on their faces. "*Yevve!*"

"What are they doing?" her father asked.

"I don't know," she said. "I think—"

She shrieked and stumbled as the mountain suddenly lurched beneath her. Birds exploded into the air from the trees fifty strides away, and a tray of clay winter planting pots toppled over with a crash.

Laeuc grabbed his daughter's arm. "What the hells is happening *now*?"

"We've taking off, obviously," Thomas snapped, surging to his feet. "How very inconvenient. Girl! Where's your master?"

"They took him to Forecastle!" Erileine said.

A nasty smile danced a brief jig across Thomas's lips. "Really? Did they put him in chains? Oh please, tell me they put him in chains."

Around them, the Hett soldiers were clapping and cheering, hugging each other with tears streaming down their faces while a sergeant bawled at them to pick up their damn spears and get back to their posts. A slight breeze tugged at Erileine's hair. Three

rows over, Matthieu started to cry.

Thomas scowled. "Did he leave her portrait with you?"

"What?" Erileine looked at him blankly, too overwhelmed to make sense of his question.

"Did Razi leave his picture of Lady Kembe with you?" the magician repeated impatiently. "I need it to talk to her."

"Why would *she* want to talk to *you*?"

Thomas sighed. "Because I'm here and he isn't. We're all trying to save the same world, you know."

Erileine hesitated. "It's at Mamaere Mayeule's," she admitted, mentally adding, *But you're not getting his sword.* "I was going to try to use it tonight."

Another shudder ran through the ground. A breeze had sprung up, not strong, but enough to put frightened looks on everyone's faces. They were going straight up.

"I think we may want to try a little earlier," Thomas said.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mamaere Mayeule set out the best she had for dinner—spiced pork sausages, rice with fresh cauliflower, and a jar of mango chutney that she had been saving to give Vurt as a naming day present—but the mood around her big table was somber. Uyves sat glowering beside Laeuc, having declared that he'd walk home when they finished eating, curfew or no curfew, and take his bruises as they came. Piauere was upstairs, having refused (much to the magician's amusement) to sit at the same table as Thomas.

A cup of strong tea cooled near Thomas's elbow as he told them all what he had seen. Hidden among a herd of clouds aboard the *Presumption*, he had watched squads of Hett soldiers fan out from boarded-up wells and forgotten basements to cut Forecastle's neighborhoods off from one another. As they took control of the streets, a quartet of magicians threw banefire every time the militia tried to repulse them.

"It was really quite impressive," he said, as if commenting on a children's ball game. "Especially considering the spell's price."

"Which is what?" the bosun demanded.

Thomas grimaced. "Your eyes. Both of them." Erileine thought of the Hett she had seen in the sedan chair in Forecastle, and of the way the sun had glinted off his eyes, but said nothing.

Portside fell next. There had been real fighting there, but again, the outcome was never in doubt. "What do you mean, real fighting?" Saedanne asked.

The pattern on Thomas's jacket fell still. The magician cleared his throat. "Yes. Well, your side managed to put some arrows into the first few Hett they saw, so the rest went back into the tunnels and waited for reinforcements. By the time they arrived, the bosun and a few of his friends had made a little fort for themselves in a barn."

"So the Hett fired it," Vurt said flatly. Thomas nodded.

"Oh dear saints," Saedanne breathed.

Then it had been Starboard Town's turn. Perhaps they had learned from Portside, or perhaps their plan had been different all along, but when they came, they came in greater numbers. Thomas hadn't bothered to watch them seize Aft Landing. Instead, he had flown in under the cover of the morning fog and tied up near Vurt's cottage.

"So why'd you come back?" the bosun asked, sitting back and crossing his arms.

In answer, Thomas took a sea shell out of his pocket and passed it to Erileine. Faint seams of pink and gold shone in its ivory white whorl. "Here—listen."

Erileine turned it over. It was heavier than it looked, and smelled faintly sandy. "Go ahead," Thomas urged her. "It won't bite."

Erileine held it up to her ear. At first, all she heard was a rushing sound, like air being blown over the mouth of a bottle. Then, faintly, he heard whispers in Gandan-o, Praczny, and a dozen other languages.

"What is it?" Laeuc asked as her eyes widened.

"Voices," Erileine said, handing it back to the magician. "Hundreds of them."

Thomas set the shell on the table. "Despite what playwrights would have us believe, most people don't actually indulge in soliloquies. And when they do, well, half of them are practicing what they should have said the night before, while the rest are making sure that if they're ever made Emir of Coriandel, they'll have an acceptance



speech ready. No, thank you." He waved away the teapot Mamaere Mayeule lifted. "But they do talk about useful things once in a while. You just have to be patient. Like the Hett—as near as I can tell, they've been working for over a hundred years to get Avaunt back."

"Back?" The bosun thumped his fist on the table. "The mountain is *ours*! My great-grandfather's naming day tree is up the top of this hill, and his mother's is right next to it!"

"Mm," Thomas nodded. "But if you walk up the road a little further, you might still find some the Hett planted when they lived here."

"That was four hundred years ago! It's our home now!" The bosun pushed himself back in his chair and glared at Laeuc, who had been making shushing noises with his hands while shooting worried glances at the front door.

"And if they throw you off tomorrow, will it still be your mountain in four hundred years?" Thomas asked.

"Damn right it will!"

"Enough," Vurt said sharply. "I want to know how they got the mountain to change course. And what they're going to do now."

"Ah, well," Thomas said, "That's where I have to start speculating. It all comes down to something they call the *Uremme Bech*: the Guide Stone."

Erileine's breath caught. What had the book said? They worshipped not the earth, but some speaking stone they found in it that was their king and oracle. "It's 'Pilot Stone'," she corrected. "Guide is just *urem*, not *uremme*." She flushed slightly at Thomas's sour look.

"Pilot Stone, then. They found in a mine. It may even be why they started mining in the first place—it spoke to them in their dreams. 'The world is broken, free me and we will mend it...'" He waved his words away. "These old magics are always persuasive. No offense meant," he added to his jacket, running a hand along its lapel. "But after four hundred years of being pushed around, I imagine the Hett were particularly easy to seduce."

Whatever angry retort the bosun might have made was cut short by a sudden wail from the floor above. "That's Piaerre!" Erileine exclaimed. As she struggled to untangle her legs from the chair's, Mamaere Mayeule hurried up the stairs. A door opened. There was another wail, then sobbing.

Mayeule led the weeping boy down to the common room a moment later "He's dead!" Piaerre wailed. "He's dead!"

"Who's dead?" Mamaere Mayeule asked, her arm around him. "The bookster?"

"N-no," Piaerre hiccuped wretchedly. "Th-the captain. They killed him."

"Hoy," Laeuc said gently, as if coaxing a kitten out from under a bed. "How do you know?"

"Because I *felt* it!" Piaerre pushed Mamaere Mayeule away and wiped his nose on his sleeve.

Even as the bosun and Laeuc exchanged disbelieving looks, Thomas was rising to his feet. "What did you feel?" he demanded, the pattern on his jacket shaping bold squares. "Tell me, what *exactly* did you feel?"

Piaerre sniffled back his tears. "It was c-c-cold. All of a sudden. And then it was like—like—"

"Like you were a bell being rung?" Thomas demanded. Piaerre nodded miserably.

The magician straightened up and ran his fingers through his hair. "Well, that's that, then, isn't it?" He stabbed a finger at Erileine. "I need that portrait *now*!"

"You don't believe this little snip, do you?" the bosun scoffed.

The corner of Thomas's mouth twitched. "I'd show a little more respect if I were you. This little snip is your new captain."

A stunned silence followed. Uyves opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again, and still didn't manage to get a word out before Piaerre fished a small silver medallion out from under his shirt. The bosun's eyes widened at the sight of it. Straightening up, he saluted, eyes focused somewhere slightly left of the shamefaced boy. "*Sra.*"

Erileine just gaped. "But—"

"My paere wanted me to learn my way around," Piaerre said, his voice not much

louder than a whisper. "After he remarried and we started fighting all the time. He said a good captain needs to know the bilges as well as the captain's table." He sniffled. "And when Razi showed up and wanted to look at all the old stuff here, paere said all right, let's make a deal. That's why he started teaching me stuff." His face crumpled. "But now he's g-gone and I don't know what to *do*."

Thomas pointed at Erileine. "The portrait—now."

Erileine took the stairs three at a time. The tube containing Lady Kembe's picture lay on top of a roof beam, right where she had told Piaerre to put it. Standing on the bed, she jumped up and tapped it with one hand, catching it as it fell, then looked at the window. The bottle containing Razi's sword stood on the sill. Should she?

"Erileine?"

"Just a beat!" She grabbed the bottle and its belt, glanced out the window, and hurried back downstairs.

"The Hett are all out on the street," she whispered loudly.

"As long as they're not in here," Thomas said, ignoring Razi's bottle as he slid Lady Kembe's portrait from its tube. "Now, bosun, if you wouldn't mind watching the door?"

Without waiting, the magician rolled the picture flat on the table and stood a candle beside it. He didn't bother with a knife—he just pinched the back of his left hand and jerked. Blood welled up where his nails cut his skin. "Sh, sh, it's all right," he said softly as the pattern on his jacket jumped around in agitation.

One drop, two, three... "Good evening, *sra*," Thomas said, bowing politely toward the picture as the pattern on his jacket fell completely still.

"Where is she?" Laeuc whispered.

"Sh!" Erileine shushed her father with a gesture. "I'll explain later."

The conversation was brief. Thomas summarized what he had told the Avauntois earlier, adding the news that the captain's son had felt him pass. Yes, the boy was safe, at least for now. Yes, Thomas could get him off the mountain—assuming, of course, that he could get off himself. It was tied up nearby. No. No. Yes, quite a few—they were patrolling the street ("There is only one") in pairs. No. No.

Then Thomas fell silent, his frown deepening. "Yes, *sra*," he finally said. "But they'll have to do the rest. You know how my obligations..." He spread his hands apologetically, his sentence trailing off as the candle flickered and died.

"Well?" Vurt asked.

Thomas rubbed his eyes. "Whatever else the Hett believe in, they don't believe in wasting time. Their great work is happening tonight, right at the top of the mountain, and Lady Kembe wants us to stop it."

"She wants *us* to stop it?" Laeuc said incredulously. "Why not you?"

Thomas spread his hands. "Because I can't. And as the bosun keeps saying, it's your mountain."

Uyves snorted in disgust. "All right, how?"

"Lady Kembe says they're bringing the Pilot Stone to the peak at midnight," Thomas said crisply, his usual insouciance gone. "And no, I don't know how she knows. But that seems to be the key to all of this. If you can get your hands on it, perhaps..." His shrug showed how much trust he put in that 'perhaps'.

The bosun and Vurt exchanged grim looks. "No telling where it is now," the old man said. "Which means we'll have to do it at the peak."

"Where all the weeping Hett are going to be," Uyves finished. "We won't stand a chance."

"Or you could try ambushing them in the tunnels," Thomas offered. He rolled his eyes at the expressions around the table. "Yes, the tunnels. Please don't tell me there's some quaint superstition about those going into them never been heard from again. The Hett certainly seem to have come through it unscathed."

"It's not that," Laeuc said awkwardly. "It's just..." It's just that we've spent our whole lives on a mountain under the open sky, he didn't finish, and being underground makes us feel like we're being smothered.

Thomas made a disgusted sound that was echoed by dripping splotches in the pattern on his jacket. "Well then by all means let's go straight to the peak. I'm sure the Hett archers and magicians and what-not wouldn't mind waiting until we land before

attacking. If you ask politely, do you think they'll come at you one at a time like they would in the tunnels? And would *sra* like some tea and a foot bath while we travel as well?"

"You've made your point," Uyves growled. "We'll go through the tunnels if we have to. But then what? Once we have the stone, do we just smash it?"

"Absolutely not," Thomas said sharply. "You bring it to me."

Uyves crossed his arms. "Smashing it seems a lot simpler."

Thomas sighed. "Of *course* it's *simpler*, but for all we know, that stone is what keeps Avaunt flying. If you smash it, you could all be part of the landscape a few heartbeats later."

A sudden suspicion coiled in Erileine's gut. "You want it for yourself, don't you? You want the stone so you can control the mountain!"

Thomas sighed. "Saints save me from the half-clever. No, girl, I don't want to control the mountain. Being your captain interests me rather less than being a stable boy." His jacket rippled a rebuke. "Well, perhaps about the same," he amended.

"Then what do you want the stone for?" Vurt asked.

"Because I want to know how it works," he said simply, and for the first time since she had met him, Erileine believed he was being completely sincere. He pointed at the sea shell lying on the table. "The Pilots made things like that as toys. They made dayglass by the ton, and all we can do is dig it up and polish it. They made miracles like this mountain, and we use it as a glorified pack camel. We're so *little* compared to them, and I don't want to be little any more. Having a chance to poke around that stone won't change that overnight, but at least it's *something*. Now, who's coming?"

It only took a minute to pick names. Uyves, of course, but not Vurt, not through the tunnels one leg. Laeuc would come—he didn't look at Saedanne when he said it—and Gaeston and Mareille were the best archers in Starboard Town, and Armaend and Donaïen as spearmen made six. Thomas would get them as close to the peak as he could, then come back and collect Piaerre once they had the Pilot Stone.

The next question was how to get past the curfew patrols to the *Presumption*. "I

can help with that," Vurt said confidently. "I left some gear at Mayeule's, and a few presents on the stairs in case anyone came snooping."

Uyves nodded. "Laeuc and I will get Gaeston and Mareille. Erileine, can you get up to Donaïen and Armaend's without being caught?" Erileine nodded. The bosun looked around the table. "Well then? Let's be on with it."

\* \* \* \* \*

Unable to watch as her father say an awkward goodbye to her mother, Erileine bounded upstairs. "Here," she said when she returned, handing Piaerre a small book bound in faded red leather. "Something to read 'til we we get back. Razi gave it to me."

Piaerre opened it. "*Unprofitable Speculations*," he read aloud. "By His Balance, Eimin di Cuayacedil."

The pattern on Thomas's jacket danced. Thomas rolled his eyes. "Oh, you *can't* be serious..."

Piaerre hugged the book. "Thanks."

Erileine nodded, feeling as awkward as her father looked. "Take care of it, all right? No folded corners or anything." She leaned forward and kissed the frightened young Captain of Avaunt clumsily on the cheek.

A minute later, with both of the lanterns in the tavern's main room covered, they slipped out the back door: Uyves, Thomas, and Laeuc in front, Erileine and her grandfather behind them. Two soldiers stood at the top of Slip Street next to a lantern on a stake, just as they had the night before. Another lantern shone unguarded at the bottom of the street. Voices and laughter from the yard of the Captain's House, and the sound of an inexpertly-played flute, gave evidence that the Hett were making themselves at home.

"Wait!" Erileine hissed.

"What?" the bosun whispered back.

"Just wait." A moment later, she heard the creak of leather and the scuff of a boot.

Erileine nodded grimly. "The soldiers with the lanterns are just a decoy," she whispered. "There are more by the smokehouse. You'll have to go around."

Uyves exchanged a look with Laeuc. This wasn't the Erileine they had known since she was young enough to delight in taking off her diaper and hiding it in the most awkward place she could reach.

The night was cold and clear, the moon a battered sliver lozenge in the sky. Stars twinkled around it, as cold and aloof as ice crystals. The mountain was flying north, farther than ever from its age-old course and everything the Avauntois had ever known.

Erileine crept from one hiding place to another, huddling where the shadows were deepest. Once she was only ten strides from a soldier relieving himself in a wilted vanity garden, but the Hett didn't hear her heart pounding behind the woodpile.

Donaïen and Armaend's house nestled in a bend in the road like a baby in the crook of its mother's arm. A freshly-painted summer chair stood beside their back door. Gingerly, Erileine stepped onto it and rapped her knuckles softly on the upstairs bedroom's shutters. "Psst," she hissed through the slats. "Donaïen! Armaend!"

Someone threw back a quilt. Erileine ducked her head as the shutters swung open.

Donaïen blinked at her. "Erileine—what are you doing? The soldiers will—"

"Get dressed," Erileine interrupted. "And get your climbing harness, and your spear. The bosun's waiting for you. Both of you." She grabbed at the windowsill to steady herself as the chair shifted beneath him. "We have to save the mountain."

It only took the two men a couple of minutes to collect their gear, but it felt like an age to Erileine. Finally Donaïen slithered out the window with Armaend behind him, the harness in his hand jingling slightly.

Corner to corner, house by house, one back yard at a time, they crept like thieves through the town they had always called home. A faint tang of pine smoke hung in the air, as familiar to Erileine as the smell of her own sweat. A young goat bleated from a rooftop pen; a cat darted across the street, startling them into silent immobility for a moment. Somewhere nearby, a soldier laughed at another's joke. All around them, people sat in front of their fireplaces or lay awake in their beds, wondering where they were bound and what new disaster would befall them tomorrow.

Thomas, Laeuc, Uyves, and Gaeston were waiting in the trees a dozen strides past

the bottom end of Slip Street. Two soldiers lay awkwardly on the ground beside them, their blood dark on the dark ground. Mareille sat beside them, knotting a strip of cloth around a wound in her leg.

"Saints—you've killed them!" Armaend gasped.

"Didn't have a choice," Gaeston said gruffly. "And it's two less we'll have to—"

"*Forchem!*" a harsh voice shouted behind them. A sharp whistle pierced the night.

"Go!" the bosun shouted, snatching up a sword that one of the fallen soldiers had dropped and turning toward the shout.

*Thunk!* One moment he was standing, the next he was down on the ground, his arms flung out at his sides and the feathered end of a crossbow quarrel sticking up out of his chest like a lone tree on an otherwise barren island. His sword clattered on the cobblestones at Erileine's feet.

*Swick!* Erileine cried out as another bolt whistled over her head and ran for the top of her grandfather's rickety ladder. Whistles split the night behind her, Hett boots thudding on cobblestones and angry Hett voices calling to one another. An armored figure burst out of the trees and tackled Donaïen, knocking him into Armaend. The three men went down in a heap, the Hett already throwing punches.

"Erileine! Come on!" her father shouted. She slipped and stumbled. He yanked her to her feet and pushed her in front of him so that she could scramble down the ladder two rungs at a time.

Erileine yelped when her grandfather grabbed her leg. "Are you all right?" he demanded.

"The bosun," Erileine choked. "He's— Papaere, they shot him."

Papaere Vurt pushed her forward. "Get in the boat!" A dozen strides away, the *Presumption* bobbed up and down in the air next to his verandah. Gaeston was already on board, clutching the gunwale in a white-knuckled grip.

Erileine raced across the verandah with her father three steps behind her. She vaulted over the gunwale just as someone shouted in pain and surprise at the top of the stairs.



"What are you waiting for?" Papaere Vurt yelled. "Get out of here!" He yanked hard on a cord hanging beside the ladder rungs and was answered by another angry shout.

Thomas tossed the mooring line into the boat's bow and vaulted in after it. The *Presumption* dipped slightly and drifted away from the porch. "Go!" Vurt bellowed again.

"No!" Erileine screamed. "Papaere, they'll kill you!"

Something went *snakt!* above them. A crossbow quarrel thunked into the verandah, then another. Vurt spat a curse, hobble-ran three awkward steps, and flung himself over the railing.

"Gotcha!" He grabbed hold the gunwale with both hands and hauled himself on board, a manic grin splitting his face. As the *Presumption* heeled to port, he dropped his trousers and mooned the Hett with a whoop.

They flew through the night to the sound of the wind, the creaking of the rigging, and Vurt cursing quietly under his breath as he tried to do up his trousers. Avaunt loomed over them, a dark mass blocking the stars. The braided pines on its flanks were solemnly indifferent to their passage; a startled sickle-wing bat flitted across their path and was gone.

When Erileine looked back, there was nothing left of Tinhead except a long scar in the earth. Beyond it, the great stone tower that had been built to await the mountain was lost among the trees. Erileine wondered what people would make of it a thousand years hence. Would anyone remember why it had been built, or what it had meant?

*I'll remember*, Erileine promised herself, thinking of the bosun. Laeuc shifted beside her and put an arm around his daughter's shoulders. Erileine leaned against her father and wept silently. Her tears were cold on her cheeks, but she didn't wipe them away.

Papaere Vurt was the first to speak. "He'll be missed."

Laeuc nodded heavily. "He was a good man."

Gaeston shifted on the plank seat. "What do you think they'll do to Mareille? And

Donaïen and Armaend?"

Laeuc's arm tightened around his daughter. "I don't know."

"Look on the bright side," Thomas said. He was sitting at the stern, one hand on the rudder, the other absently stroking his lapels. "A lighter load means we can get there faster."

Gaeston's grip tightened on his bow. "It doesn't bother you at all, does it?" he said levelly. "Uyves being dead. Or any of this. You don't care who's right and who's wrong."

"I find it's rather like tossing a coin," Thomas replied lightly. "The right side is whichever one lands up. Now, look in the cabin, would you?" he continued to Erileine. "There's a jar a little larger than your two fists."

Erileine stood, grabbing the bracket atop the boat's small cabin to steady herself. The door folded inward in the middle like a book. She stuck her head inside, blinking in the soft glow of a dayglass lantern whose cover had been lifted by a string attached to the door.

The cabin's walls were lined with shelves from floor to ceiling. Boxes, jars, bottles, and books stood side by side, held in place by fine silk nets. As she reached for the nearest shelf to steady herself, a small ceramic turtle tried to hide behind a larger inanimate one. "Sh," Erileine said softly. "I won't hurt you."

When Erileine picked up the jar, it vibrated faintly in her hand. She returned to the deck and handed it to Thomas.

"Thank you." Keeping one hand on the rudder, he clamped the jar between his knees and twisted the lid. A pair of glowing dots shot out.

"What in the saints' names are those?" Vurt demanded.

"They're from the East Pole," Thomas said as the buzzing points of light circled around him, fascinated by the shifting patterns on his jacket. "No, no, shoo. Shoo." He brushed them away. Together, the little lights flew away into the night. "Aren't they marvelous? They're drawn to power like bees to nectar. If anyone's working magic up here tonight, these little darlings will find them."

With a twitch of his hand, the *Presumption* heeled sharply. The Avauntois cursed

and grabbed for handholds. "It would probably best if you all held onto something for the next little while," Thomas said without taking his eyes off the receding specks of light. "I don't want to lose them."

Thomas had Erileine release another of the magic fireflies a few minutes later, and another a few minutes after that. Each flew straight for the mountain's peak.

*Whoomp!* Somewhere high above them, orange light flared and died. "Oh saints," Erileine whispered. She grabbed her father's sleeve. "It's banefire! Paere, it's banefire!"

"It most certainly is," Thomas said. The patterns on his jacket swirled madly. "I *know*," he added under his breath. "Just give me a moment."

"What are you doing?" Gaeston asked as the boat drifted closer to the mountain.

"Letting you off," the magician replied without taking his eyes off the approaching mountainside.

"What?!"

*Whoomp!* Another burst of fire lit the sky above them. The acrid tang of burning pine caught inside Erileine's throat.

"I said, I'm letting... you... *off*," Thomas repeated, his usual mocking humor gone. "Laeuc, those branches up ahead—throw a tether around them. Or would you rather just jump?"

Gaeston stood. The bow in his hands wasn't quite drawn; the arrow notched in it wasn't quite pointed at Thomas. "Tell me we're close to the peak," he said.

"I have no idea whether we're close or not," Thomas snapped, the patterns on his jacket swirling angrily as a third *whoomp!* sounded in the distance—less of a distance than the first two, Erileine realized with a sinking feeling. "But I am not going any closer to *that*. Best wishes, good luck, may your grandchildren's grandchildren all bear your name, and so on."

Gaeston raised his bow. "Like hell."

Erileine never found out what would have happened next, because her father shouted, "Look!"

She whirled around. A familiar lean figure was racing through the trees like a leaf

blown by a gale. Moonlight gleamed off his shaven head as he leaped over a fallen log, rolled to his feet, and hurtled onward.

His pursuers burst into sight behind him a heartbeat later with steel in their hands. One knelt and raised a crossbow. A branch above Razi's head whipped aside as the quarrel struck it, but the bookster kept running.

And then, behind them, a bareheaded man raised his arms and clapped them together. *Whoomp!* A ball of fire as big as a house blossomed in the sky above the fleeing bookster.

"Look out!" Erileine screamed.

Razi threw himself face-first down the side of the mountain. Destruction crashed to the ground a hand's breath behind the soles of his sandals. Pine trees exploded as pitch boiled and burst into flame. He was already on his feet, still running.

"He's trapped!" Laeuc shouted, pointing. Dead ahead, the forest ended at the edge of a cliff.

Erileine spun around. "Pull in closer!"

The magician held the rudder steady. "No."

Gaeston raised his bow once again. "You heard her."

Thomas shook his head. "They'll kill us all."

For a moment, Gaeston didn't move, then— "No!" Erileine shouted, as Gaeston lowered his bow. Without thinking, she hurled herself at Thomas. Her shoulder hit him in the chest. He cursed in surprise and grabbed a guyline to save himself from falling over the side.

Erileine threw her weight onto the rudder. The *Presumption* tilted sharply. Her father's spear clattered to the deck as he grabbed the gunwale with one hand and a cursing Vurt with the other.

Twenty strides, ten, five—just as Razi threw himself over the cliff, Thomas pulled Erileine out of his way. "Idiot!" he snarled, yanking the rudder as the boat's starboard side scraped against the mountain.

*Thud!* Razi hit the sail and slid down to the deck.

"Oh cake," Gaeston swore. Erileine whirled around. Standing at the top of the cliff, the blind Hett magician raised his hands and brought them together.

*Whoomp!* Banefire fell toward them. There was no way it could miss them—no way they could escape.

Thomas pointed at it and shouted words no human throat was ever meant to make. Erileine screamed as the fire splashed against something invisible above the mast. A roiling mass of flame poured past them and to fall away as the *Presumption* fled into the night.

"Razi!" Erileine knelt beside the bookster and shook him. "Razi, wake up. Wake up!"

The bookster groaned and put a hand on his head. "Ouch." He squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them and looked up at Erileine. "*La*, that was well timed."

Whatever Erileine would have said next was cut off by a low moan from the stern. "No. No no no no..." Thomas stared down in horror at his jacket. "No, please, give her back—please, I didn't mean it, I didn't mean it, I just didn't have time to make a better bargain. Please, please, give her back..." The vibrant ever-changing patterns on Thomas's coat had stilled.

Razi sat up unsteadily and clasped his hands in front of his chest. "*La*, I am sorry for your loss, and grateful for your sacrifice."

"Damn your gratitude." Tears glistened on the magician's cheeks. "She's gone. Saints, she's gone. What have I done?"

"Oh, get over it," Gaeston said gruffly. "You can always get another coat."

"No he can't," Razi said, soft and sad. "Not one like that."

\* \* \* \* \*

"We traveled underground," the bookster told them as a stone-faced Thomas steered them through the night, his stilled jacket neatly folded on the bench beside him. The Hett had taken him through tunnels as busy as an anthill, intending perhaps for him to tell Lady Kembe and the rest of the world just how pointless it would be to fight them. Entire families were scraping the accumulated muck of centuries off the walls,

repairing ancient clockwork, and building chicken coops and forges, all in preparation for whatever was to come next.

Razi didn't tell them how he had escaped, or where the fresh cut on his left cheek had come from. But as he buckled his sword bottle around his *deel* after a grateful "thank you" to Erileine, he confirmed what Thomas had said. The Hett were starting their Great Work at the mountain's peak that night.

"Not much we can do about it now, is there?" Thomas said venomously. "After your little adventure back there, they'll have a hundred eyes on the sky."

"*La*, just get us to the tunnels," Razi said gently. "We'll do the rest. And Thomas—go south. Go and see her. Maybe there is something she can do."

"Go and beg a favor from the great Lady Kembe?" Thomas spat over the gunwale, his polished court manner peeled away by grief. "She'd like that."

"Go and see her," Razi repeated gently. "I did far worse than you, and she helped me." The magician set his jaw but didn't reply.

They flew in silence after that, climbing steadily. The trees that had seemed so wonderful to Erileine on her first flight now loomed like haunting spirits, their moon-cast shadows spilling down the mountain in an ominous tangle. When Razi pointed and said, "There, that one," all Erileine saw at first was the cliff, but then a darker patch ahead resolved into a shape too regular to be natural.

Gaeston crouched in the bow as Thomas edged the *Presumption* closer. "A little more, a little more... Right." He stepped onto the gunwale and into the tunnel mouth. Steadying himself with one hand, he grabbed the rope Laeuc tossed him, then pulled it taut to draw the *Presumption's* bowsprit closer.

The boat swayed slightly as the Avauntois made their way forward one by one. When Erileine's turn came, her father said, "Erileine?"

"I'm not staying behind," she said defiantly.

"I know," he said. "I just wanted to say that whatever happens, I'm proud of you."

Like everything Pilot-made on Avaunt, the tunnel was tilted at a shallow angle. Instead of a floor, two walls, and a ceiling, the tunnel had a right-angle vee, one side

lower than the other, with a matching vee overhead. When Erileine swung her legs over the side of the boat, her boots slipped on the time-smooth stone and tried to slide into the crook of the lower vee. Her father pulled her forward, steadying her until she could steady herself.

Vurt and Gaeston were already putting on their climbing harnesses by the light of their hand lamps. "Here," Vurt said, handing Erileine the harness that had been Mareille's. "It ought to be safe enough if you tighten it all the way."

Razi was the last to debark. He took the rope from Gaeston, coiled it, and tossed it back into the bow. The *Presumption* drifted away slowly until the wind bellied her sails. "Go and see her," Razi urged one last time as Thomas put his weight to the rudder. The magician didn't even glance at him as he turned the boat and flew away.

Gaeston watched it go with calculating eyes. "We can't let him have the stone. You know that, don't you?"

Razi nodded. "I know." He looked at Laeuc and Vurt, who nodded in turn.

"Wish the bosun was here," Laeuc said.

Gaeston grunted. "Or the dragon." He eyed the bookster. "You'll have to do, I suppose. Which way?"

In answer, Razi held up the jar of fireflies he had somehow managed to pocket. When he twisted the lid to let a single blue-green dot escape, it zoomed into the tunnel. Without a word Gaeston followed it, the others falling in behind.

The tunnel ended in a tee thirty strides later, one arm dropping to their left, the other rising to their right. Two rusty iron rails lay on what had been the tunnel's floor. When Razi released another firefly, it shot up the shaft to their right.

Gaeston set his feet against the rail, one above the other, and braced himself against the wall. With his lamp hung on his belt, he started up the tunnel, toe-heeling his feet as he walked his hands forward on the tilted wall.

Erileine had to stretch, but she could reach. Her arms and legs ached, then burned, then settled into the dull weariness brought on by hard labor that has no end in sight. The moist air made her shirt stick to her like a moldy leaf.

Wondering how much further it could be, she leaned sideways to see past Gaeston. As she did so, her foot slipped. "Whoa!" she exclaimed, sliding down the shaft.

Razi grabbed her pant leg as she went by. Erileine found herself hanging upside down on her back. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"I'm fine," Erileine lied. She was head-down in a dark tunnel, inside a mountain flying only the saints knew where, on her way to steal a magic stone from an invading army. "I'm fine."

She moved more carefully after that. When she reached the horizontal passage at the top of the shaft she collapsed beside the grownups, panting.

Eventually Gaeston clambered to his feet and took his bow from his pack, restringing it while Laeuc screwed the two halves of his spear together and Vurt made sure that his sword was loose in his scabbard. Without a word being said, he picked up his lantern once again and set off.

Laeuc stayed seated. "*La*, we must go," Razi said.

Erileine's father took a deep, shuddering breath. "I don't think I can," he said, his face ghostly in the dayglass lantern's light. "I—I'm sorry, I can't breathe in here. I need some air. I need to get some—"

"*Heshe, heshe*," the bookster soothed, as if Laeuc was a frightened young goat. "Close your eyes a moment. It will pass."

"Come on, man, scrape it off," Gaeston said impatiently. "If I can do it, you can do it. Come on!"

Laeuc was breathing in short, shallow puffs. *He's panicking*, Erileine realized, the thought stirring her own guts with cold fingers. He was clutching his spear the way she had clutched the side of the mountain the day Fraederiq fell. They needed to get moving. *He* needed to get moving—she was sure he'd be all right once he was back on his feet and doing something. She needed to do something, but what could *she* do?

And there it was again, the not-a-voice that she had not-heard when she had so desperately wanted a fire on their way back to Starboard Town. «Something?» It was a question and an offer all in one, an invitation and an opening bid. Did she want her



father to walk? Was it worth being able to walk herself?

*No!* She recoiled from the idea. Not walk? They'd be in the same mess they were in or worse, only it would be forever. *But I'd give up dancing*, she thought. She'd never been any good at it, and didn't enjoy it half as much as Queçenne. She'd give up dancing to get her father up and moving.

But that wasn't enough for whatever she was not-talking to. What about the use of her hand—her good one? No—and no again when it asked about her candlemarked hand. Just one finger? Maybe—no, absolutely not, not if she had to cut it off herself.

Then she looked at her father and saw the flute sticking up incongruously out of his pack and knew what price she would pay to help him. Whatever it was caught her thought and found it acceptable. An instant later, something she had never consciously noticed was gone.

She swallowed hard. "Paere? Are you all right?"

"Does he *look* all right?" Gaeston snapped angrily.

But Laeuc drew a shuddering breath and nodded. "I—what just happened?" He struggled to his feet, oophing as his daughter embraced him.

She turned her head to lay it against his chest for a moment, closing her eyes so she wouldn't have to meet Razi's questioning look. Her fingers brushed briefly over the top of the flute. She had loved playing music with him. She'd miss that.

"Come on," she said, stepping back and wiping her eyes on her sleeve and trying very hard not to think about the fact that she had just done magic. "We have to get going."

A hundred strides, two... Erileine had no idea what time it was, what direction they were heading, or what they would do when they got there. But her father was managing now, so she could too. *At least until we get there*, she added to herself. "Steal the stone" was even less of a plan than the heroes in stories usually had.

Gaeston stopped abruptly, raising his hand to halt the others behind him. Something rumbled in the distance. There was a slight breeze, barely enough to stir Erileine's hair, but it smelled faintly of oil and wet cinders. "Right," Gaeston whispered.

"Laeuc, you're with me. Bookster, Vurt, you—cake, you do whatever you want."

The passage opened onto a room tilted at the same disquieting angle as everything else inside the mountain. "*La*, allow me," the bookster said. He drew something from inside his *deel* and threw it against the floor. It tinkled like breaking glass, flooding the room with light that came from everywhere and nowhere.

"Wow," Erileine breathed. The room was enormous—the Captain's House would fit into it with space left over for a sizable garden. The only break in the polished walls was a square opening opposite them, identical to the one they had just come through.

They were halfway across the tilted floor when an all-too-familiar whistle blew. "Run!" Gaeston shouted needlessly. Voices shouted behind them. Erileine glanced over her shoulder as soldiers in steel helmets spilled out of the tunnel behind them.

"*Forchem!*" a voice commanded! *Thwack!* A crossbow quarrel whistled over Erileine's head, and for a crazy moment she wanted to turn and scream, "Stop it! Stop shooting at me!"

Razi reached the opposite passage first. He spun around, shouting, "Through, through!" as Vurt and Erileine followed, then Laeuc, and then Gaeston—but no, Gaeston was down, tugging weakly at the crossbow bolt in his side before going limp.

"Gaeston!" Laeuc shouted. "Gaeston!"

Vurt grabbed his collar and dragged him onward. "Come on!" he shouted. They ran down the corridor ten strides behind Razi and Erileine. Left, right, right again, and up a stairway tilted drunkenly on its side.

Razi stopped at its top. "Make ready," he said quietly. Vurt hefted his sword, the smile on his face just an animal baring teeth.

Three Hett came around the corner. There was no way Razi's quicksilver sword could miss the first one, or Laeuc's spear the second. The third stumbled over his fallen companions, just in time for Vurt to lunge forward and swing.

Erileine looked at the three men lying dead on the stairs and threw up.

\* \* \* \* \*

There was nothing for them to do after that but follow the fireflies. First one and

then another flew away without hesitation, always leading the upward toward the mountain's peak. The tilted tunnel floors made Erileine's back ache, and every time they had to negotiate a flight of stairs, she was sure she was going to twist an ankle.

They finally reached a double door twice Erileine's height and wide enough to drive a cart through. The crisp smell of fresh mountain air beyond it was almost as good as the cold drink she had been craving for the previous half hour. Razi eased the door open, tapped his fingers together in front of his lips to signal 'be quiet', and slipped through. Vurt and her father followed, and then it was Erileine's turn.

She gasped as she stepped onto a balcony the size of Mapmarket Square. Fresh scrapes and loose dirt on its otherwise polished surface showed where it had somehow slid out of the mountainside like a drawer. Its downward tilt made Erileine feel like one false step would send her tumbling into space.

Below them lay a stone amphitheater that Erileine recognized from pictures and paintings. Even after centuries of theft, neglect, and occasional vandalism, it was still full of carved stone benches, waist-high walls, free-standing doors that led nowhere, and heavy misshapen sculptures that looked more like the pictures children drew of monsters than like anything Erileine had ever seen. Globes of dayglass on newly-erected wooden pillars blazed yellow-white among them. They had made it—they had reached the mountain's peak.

"There," Razi said, pointing. A flat-topped pyramid stood in the center of the amphitheater, identical in proportions to the mountain itself and to the pyramid they had briefly seen in Tinhead. Beyond it, what had originally been a steep hillside was now a near-vertical cliff.

The Hett had built a wooden stage around the pyramid to give themselves a level workspace. Their boots drummed on it as they hurried back and forth between devices that looked even more unsettling than the age-old statues. An eerie blue light rose from one machine like steam from a kettle. A face ten times larger than life and too narrow to be human suddenly appeared above another, its mouth open to laugh or scream, then vanished.

The rumbling suddenly stopped. Vurt cursed. "We have to find a way to get down there."

Razi caught his sleeve. "*La*, allow me." Bottling his sword, he slipped a coil of rope off his shoulder and knotted it around the balcony's stone railing. Without bothering to test it, Vurt swung his false leg over the railing and slithered down the rope.

A minute later, the four of them crouched together on the amphitheater floor behind a pedestal twice Erileine's height. Ahead and below, the Hett hurried about their work unawares.

"*La*, look there," Razi whispered, pointing. Four soldiers marched toward the center stage with a sedan chair on their shoulders. The uniformed man sitting on it swayed slightly with the its motion, but looked neither right nor left.

Vurt tightened his grip on his sword. "One of their magicians?"

Razi nodded. "Just so. And *la*, do you see over there? I think they are the others." Two more sedan chairs stood empty next to the wooden stage. An elderly woman with her hair pulled back in a severe white bun stepped down from a third. She shook off the hand of a soldier who moved to help her and strode proudly toward the pyramid.

Vurt made a sound in his throat. "You sure they're blind?"

"Yes, but not the soldiers," Razi said grimly. "There are more of them than I had hoped."

"So what do we do?" Erileine asked. She had stopped counting after forty—there didn't seem to be any point knowing exactly how hopeless their mission was.

Razi pointed at the square tunnel mouth that the sedan chair had come through. "*La*, if the magician came from Forecastle, then perhaps the stone will come the same route. If we are careful, we could move closer—see there, the statue that looks like a sand miser wrestling an octopus? We could hide behind that to wait for it."

"And then?" Vurt asked.

Razi shrugged. What was there to say?

They crept toward the tunnel mouth Razi had pointed out, bent nearly double to stay as concealed as they could. Erileine was sure someone would see them, but the Hett

who weren't busy preparing for whatever they were about to do had their eyes on the sky, crossbows ready in their hands.

*Thummm...* Two more machines lit up, one purple, one green. They were the colors of the week, Erileine realized. Red, yellow, orange, green, blue, purple—there was one machine for each day. *Or maybe people named the days after the colors*, she thought. When the Pilots were involved, anything was possible.

In the center of the stage, Hett soldiers lifted the lid off a bulky crate. Quickly but carefully, they levered its walls apart and cleared away matted straw to reveal a statue of a man with ram's horns curled on the sides of his head.

"By all the named saints and their wondrous creations," Razi whispered. "Oh, *la*, you who raised us up, if you have ever sought balance in this world, help us find it now."

"What is it?" Vurt asked, but the bookster was already two strides away, as light on his feet as a hunting tiger.

Around a wall, through an empty door frame, past a statue of a bear with a bat's wings and a biting snake for a tail, up two stairs and down two more... A fourth machine *thummed* to life, adding orange to the swirling light. They were a hundred strides from the tunnel that the Hett wizard had come through. Eighty, fifty, twenty...

Razi pulled up short as a quartet of soldiers emerged from the opening, then a second. A gray-haired man, his face half-drowned by a heavy beard, followed them, and was followed in turn by a third squad.

In his hands, the bearded man held a polished steel casket. Erileine's heart sank. It had to be the Pilot Stone, but there was no way the four of them could get past the dozen soldiers around it. They'd never even *reach* the soldiers—they'd be cut down by crossbows at the first shout of alarm.

Razi stood and threw three blue vials in high arcs one after another. Even before they hit the floor he was running toward them, his quicksilver sword in his hand.

*Crack! Crack! Crack!* Darkness billowed up from the shattering vials. Vurt whooped and charged after the bookster.

"Erileine! No!" Laeuc shouted, reaching for her a heartbeat too late as she

swallowed her terror and ran into the inky darkness that had swallowed the bookster and her grandfather.

Erileine held her breath as she entered the darkness, expecting the choking smell of smoke, but just as in Forecastle on the night of the riot, the darkness had no more taste or smell than a shadow. Metal clanged on metal ahead of her. A cry for aid was suddenly cut off.

She banged her shin hard against something as her father shouted her name again. What had she been thinking? She couldn't help Razi—she didn't even know where he was.

Suddenly she slipped on something wet. "Oof!" She fell clumsily to the floor.

*"Ashenope! Ashenope arra te paurenatepe ejo!"*

Her mind raced. *"Ije! Atneseppe te!"*

*"Arra!"* Run! Whoever it was grabbed her arm, pulled her forward, and pushed something heavy into her arms.

Smooth, heavy, unnaturally cool and slick... She ran her hands over it, already knowing what they would tell her. Angled sides, rounded corners, a flat top: it was the casket the Hett had been carrying. It was the Pilot Stone.

*"Arra!"* the voice repeated. She heard a wet cough, then a final wheezing rattle, and then she was alone. She hugged the casket to her chest, rose first to her knees and then to her feet.

The magical darkness cleared to reveal a scene of chaos. The bearded man's body lay motionless beside her. She had slipped on his blood, she realized vaguely. It was on her clothes. She would have to wash them.

She looked up. By pure chance, she was hidden behind a pedestal whose statue had long since been stolen, smashed, or thrown off the mountain. She ducked her head and peered around the corner.

Razi was on his knees ten strides away, his hands behind his head, one crossbow against his back, another pointed at his chest from two strides away. The hilt of his sword lay just out of reach in a pool of quicksilver. Two bodies lay beside it.

Ten strides away from him, Erileine's father and grandfather stood back to back surrounded by a circle of Hett. Somehow they had found each other in the darkness and not tried to run each other through by mistake.

With that thought, the world came back into focus. She looked at the casket in her arms. She had to get rid of it and its contents before she was discovered. The amphitheater ended in a cliff just twenty strides away. Heart in throat, she began to pick her way toward it.

"Drop your weapons *now!*" a familiar voice barked. "Do it, or I swear we will drop you." Jaromir strode out of the tunnel mouth, fury on his face and a sword in his hand. Laeuc lowered his spear. A moment later, he elbowed his father-in-law hard in the ribs. Reluctantly, Vurt set his sword down at his feet, his face twisted in anger.

Jaromir halted in front of Razi. "*Auedje ne atarappa paurenatepe ke fe iuadje te?*" he demanded coldly.

Razi smiled politely. "*La*, my apologies, but I don't speak—"

"Yes you do," the Hett said in angry Gandan-o. "Where is the stone?"

Razi shrugged. "I swear, I do not know."

"No?" Jaromir pointed his sword at Vurt. "And if I take this one's head?"

"*La*, there is no need to murder," Razi said, lowering his arms. The Hett behind the bookster jabbed his crossbow into Razi's back, but the lean Karabandi ignored him.

"Murder?" Jaromir snarled. "You talk to me of murder? I see three good men dead here by your hand!"

"Hey, one of those was me," Vurt said, sounding hurt.

Jaromir put the tip of his sword under Razi's chin. "I am tired of my people dying, do you understand that? I am tired of people who have done no harm in this world being beaten by drunks, or driven from their homes by mobs, or robbed blind by petty lords who know that no one will hold them to account, not for the likes of us. Your mistress has done nothing to help us—nothing!—and neither has anyone else, so now we are going to help ourselves."

"I grieve for the wrongs done to you and your people," Razi said. "But please, this

will not—”

He tilted his head back as Jaromir raised the tip of his sword. “Where. Is. The. Stone?”

Panic rose in Erileine's throat. She fumbled with the latch on the casket, haste making her fingers clumsy. *Snick*. She lifted the lid.

Inside, a plain gray stone the size of her fist rested in a cast-iron spiderweb. She didn't know what she had expected, but it wasn't something as plain as this. But then she could suddenly feel the power coming out of the casket like a giant soundless heartbeat in time with the pulses of color from the machines by the pyramid. No—that was wrong. The *machines* were pulsing in time with the *stone*.

She looked back just as Jaromir's patience snapped. “Very well. Sergeant!” A nearby soldier snapped a salute. Jaromir pointed at Vurt. “Make ready.”

Drawing his sword, the soldier stepped into place behind Erileine's grandfather. When the old man turned to face him, the soldier grabbed his shoulder, spun him back around, and forced him to his knees.

“I will ask you again,” Jaromir said to Razi softly. “And then once more, and then it will be your turn.”

Razi looked up at him steadily. “All things in balance.”

Jaromir's jaw tightened. He raised his arm. The Hett soldier brought his sword up.

“No!” Erileine shouted. Jaromir whirled around as she stood up at the edge of the cliff and raised the open casket. “Let them go or I'll throw this over the side!”

“*Neh!*” Jaromir said, raising his hand to stop the half-dozen crossbowmen who had just aimed their weapons at her. If she fell backward, she and casket would both go over the edge.

“Let them go!” Erileine shouted. “Let them go or I'll drop it, I swear on my blood I will!”

Jaromir laughed. “Go ahead. The *Uremme Bech* survived the Pilots' war—it will survive a fall. And then it will call to us, and we will find it, and all you will have done is delay us by a few days.”



She hesitated. "Erileine..." her father pleaded. Vurt caught her eye and nodded, his back straight, his gaze unwavering.

Erileine sagged. As the soldier behind Vurt lowered his sword, she reached into the casket and yanked the stone out of the casket.

Or tried to. The moment her candlemarked hand touched the stone, something larger than the mountain—something as big as the whole world—noticed her, considered her briefly, and moved its attention elsewhere. She wanted to pull the covers over her head and hide from it. She wanted to beg it to come back and hold her close forever.

Lightning sparked up her arm. She collapsed on the floor, her muscles limp. As her head lolled to the side, the plain gray stone slipped out of her hand.

"*Teppate me peua! Netahante adj auje!*" Jaromir ordered. Rough hands picked Erileine up and carried her across the stone floor to lay her down beside Razi. The paralysis vanished as quickly as it had happened, its sudden absence leaving her shivering uncontrollably.

"Now watch," Jaromir said. "Watch, so that your people will know what change has come." Drawing a pair of gloves from his belt, he picked up the Pilot Stone and carried it to the pyramid. He bowed to the four magicians waiting there. Bowing in return, the gray-haired woman took it from him and mounted the stage.

The lights above the strange machines throbbed purple and blue, green and yellow, orange and deep, deep red. The magician joined her companions in a circle around the ram-horned statue that now stood on the pyramid's flat top, a pair of bamboo struts bracing it so that it didn't topple over.

Erileine could hear the machines now. They were singing to each other, great long notes that ran from bone-tingling bass to fluting whistles that pierced her ears. The air tingled as the light folded around itself and became a shining emptiness too bright to understand. The magicians chanted in time with the machines' rhythmic pulse.

And then the Pilot Stone began to shine, except that wasn't right. It wasn't glowing: it was becoming more *real*. Erileine threw up her arm to cover her face, but the

not-light went right through it—right through the whole world.

As one, the magicians on the stage cried out. Erileine lowered her arm just in time to see the light sucked into the statue's mouth like smoke being inhaled. The statue opened its eyes and tilted its head to one side.

«Good.» The word appeared inside Erileine's head like a sliver of ice dropped into a pool of water. Its eyes were steel marbles, Erileine noticed, dazed. Even without that, and the horns coiled on either side of its head where its ears should have been, and its hairlessness, and the complete lack of anything male or female between its legs, it was still too perfect to ever be mistaken for human.

*“Aya! Aya! Aya!”* the Hett shouted. “It is done! It is done! It is done!”

“My lord.” Tears ran down the Hett magician's face, but her voice was strong. “My lord, welcome. Welcome back.”

«Who are these?» The statue's thought took in Razi and the Avauntois.

“Unhearing ones, my lord. They tried to prevent your return.”

«They failed.»

“Yes, my lord.”

The statue pointed. «Return that one to the world.»

“No!” Erileine screamed as two Hett soldiers took Razi by the arms and pulled him to the cliff's edge. “No! Please! Don't!”

The bookster turned his head to look at her. “Be well, apprentice,” he called. With a sudden twisting shrug he pulled free from the soldiers holding him, and flung himself over the cliff.

“No!” Erileine screamed. “No, please...” She buried her face in her grandfather's chest.

The statue swept its gaze around the chamber, taking in the now-silent machines and the reverent Hett. «This place is a mess.»

“Yes, my lord,” the magician replied.

«It needs mending.»

“Yes, my lord.” The magician's voice was exultant.

«This world is broken.» Each word came perfectly formed into Erileine's mind.  
«There are deserts where there should be gardens. The moon strays from its course.»

"Slow poison rots the heart of the world." The Hett magician spoke the words aloud in time with the statue. Others joined in, some weeping with joy. "The ocean drains away and monsters roam free. It falls to us to mend it."

«It falls to us to mend it.» the statue agreed. Its steel gaze fell on the Avauntois.  
«Go tell the world. The Great Work begins.»

One moment they were standing at the peak of the mountain. The next, they were on Slip Street outside the front door of their house.

The door flew open. "Erileine!" Saedanne rushed forward and pulled her daughter into a hug. "Oh, love, I was so worried." Hot on her heels, Queçenne threw herself at her father.

Saedanne squeezed Erileine. "What happened? How did you get here?"

"I don't know," Erileine said, her voice muffled by her mother's shoulder. "We were up at the peak, and—" She *wasn't* going to cry.

"Wait." Her mother looked past her at her husband. "Where's Gaeston? Where's the bookster?"

Laeuc shook his head wordlessly, his elder daughter still in his arms. Vurt put his hand on his son-in-law's shoulder.

"They're gone," Erileine said dully. Her throat ached from the effort of not crying. Fraederiq, the captain, Uyves, Gaeston, Razi—even without the reanimated statue and whatever it was that had briefly touched her when she touched the stone, it was too much.

"Never mind that now," Vurt said gruffly. "What the hells was that *thing* they woke up?"

"I think that was a Pilot," Erileine said.

"A Pilot? But they're all dead!" her grandfather protested.

Erileine shrugged. "Not any more."

Anything she might have added was cut off as the ground lurched beneath them.

Slowly but inexorably, the mountain began to tip over.

*Here ends the first part of The Fall of the Flying Mountain.*