



TRACY HICKMAN

Presents

THE ANVIL OF TIME · VOLUME THREE

Renegade Wizards
LUCIEN SOULBAN



**WE KNOW PEOPLE CAN USE
PASSION
TO STOKE THEIR SPELLS.**

“But Wyldling magic has always been
around,”

Tythonna argued. “We know others
advocate its use.”

“Never like this,” Astathan replied.

“Most practitioners of
this ilk were unguided and
unprincipled. Selfish. But, if we
were lucky, their own inexperience
would consume them.

More to our favor, they kept their
secrets to themselves,
treating knowledge as a thing to be
hoarded. It was like an

illness that never spread because
everyone shut themselves
away with whatever sickness they
caught. Berthal, however,
is trying to bring discipline to the art.
He's teaching others
how to do more without burning the
wick of their souls."

"You want Berthal ...
eliminated?"

Ladonna asked with a
grin.

"You must find Berthal and lead the
renegade hunters to him.
He must be brought to justice, for
betraying his oath as

a member of the Red Robes, for
fomenting this dissent, and for
teaching what should have remained
forgotten!”

“Us? Really?” Tythonna asked in shock.
“But how?”

“As renegades,” Astathan said.
“I’m asking you to become renegades.”



TRACY HICKMAN

Present

THE ANVIL OF TIME

The Sellsword

Cam Banks

The Survivors

Dan Willis

Renegade Wizards

Lucien Soulban

The Forest King

Paul B. Thompson

(June 2009)

To my mother, Pieretta Ramponi Soulban, who I miss daily: Thank you for believing that all abandoned shoes on the street belonged to kidnap victims; for believing that the outstretched telephone cord you walked into that time was a garrotte; for believing that the swarm was indeed descending upon the city and not just something I saw on a television program. In short ... thank you for your wild imagination.

To my father, Shukri Moussa Soulban, who I love dearly: Thank you for putting a real skeleton in your bed to frighten the maid when you were in med-school; thank you for considering attaching gas canisters to the alarm system to knock out intruders; thank you for buying mom a gold-plated pen that fired bullets in case mom

“needed protection.” In short ... thank you for
your sense of humor.

To my sister, Graziella, who I also love dearly:
Thank you for finding a way to burn your knees
while cooking; thank you for leaving your blood
splatter all over the kitchen and not telling
anyone that you went to the emergency room
(and letting mom, of all people, discover what
looked like your murder scene); thank you for
having those coke/caffeine induced
hallucinations while pursuing your doctorate
that made life so interesting. In short ... thank
you for sharing mom's and dad's insanity.

To my niece and nephew, Christopher and

Christiana ... I love you both. And best of luck.
You've got some hard acts to follow.

CHAPTER 1

The Broken Dove

The wizard Pecas was troubled. His forehead wrinkled fretfully, as he ambled between the rows of books on creaking knees with the help of a stout oak cane. His bony fingers danced lightly over the volumes, and he brought his face and flickering candle dangerously close to the stacks of brittle pages.

The room was rank with the tang

of aged parchments and ancient stone that captured all the tortured smells of decades past. It was a fine library, to be sure, one of the most impressive private collections of any wizard, but it was going to waste in the dungeon of the small keep, at least as far as some were concerned. The other White Robes coveted the rare works within the library, but they politely waited ... waited for Pecas to bequeath the collection to them then respectfully drop dead.

But the elderly Pecas seemed more obstinate about clinging to life with each passing month. Some

of the younger wizards joked that should a drop of water ever touch his deeply wrinkled skin, why, he might swell up to twice his size like a raisin returning to the glory of a grape. Then, of course, others said he was always a raisin, one nurtured on a cold and soured soil.

Pecas, however, heard none of it, cared for none of it.

“Master Pecas,” the messenger said, peering around from his spot at the bottom of the stone stairs. “Perhaps I can help you find—”

“Eh? No,” Pecas snapped. “Stay where you are. No urchin, no

matter his master, touches my books except me and Virgil ... where is that blasted boy?"

The messenger, a lean man with sea-blue eyes, sighed. There was no boy to be seen. He himself had pounded on the door for nearly an hour before Pecas finally answered. The old wizard was annoyed at having been disturbed so late in the evening, and more so that the boy was nowhere to be found. Another hour had passed with most of that time spent trying to explain the matter to Pecas.

"Please, Master Pecas," the messenger said, and tempted fate

by stepping off the last step into the library itself. “His most Eminent Lord, the Duke of Elmwood, awaits your wisdom on this matter. Impatiently, I might add. If I can just help—”

“No ... this isn’t possible,” Pecas said. He was ignoring the messenger. His twiglike finger probed the empty space between two books on the oak shelf, where another book was supposed to be. “It’s supposed to be right here. I saw it not three days ago!”

His attention wandered to another shelf, where Pecas poked at another gap, then another, like

a tongue wandering in between broken teeth and finding only raw nerves for its efforts. With each discovery, he grew more irate and more panicked. Books were missing, books that had no business being elsewhere, books inked with the very blood of magic. In the hands of a skilled practitioner, the knowledge within the books was lethal. In the hands of a novice, even worse. The wrong word spoken from their pages, the wrong sheet of parchment torn, could ruin the magic contained within the books, or unleash wild arcs of fire and lightning that would kill

anyone around them. Worse yet, Pecos's reputation would be ruined. All those years spent fostering an iron name to watch it turn to rust in an instant.

The messenger advanced another step into the library, but Pecos said nothing. He was still staring at the empty spot. "Perhaps your student borrowed them?"

Pecos turned on his heel, the strictures of his age momentarily forgotten as he straightened an inch and brushed past the startled messenger. "Go! Get out!" he snarled. He mounted the stairs, bellowing, "Virgil! Damn you, boy!"

Where are my books?" But no one answered him.

Above the shuddering canopy of giant elms and oaks, the storm thundered and raged. Water dropped from the cups of leaves and the bellies of branches—a thousand trickling waterfalls that steadily drummed the green floor. The shield of leaves that blotted out the cloud-choked sky made the stormy night that fell over the Lemish Forest darker still.

There were no homes that close to the border of the southern

Darkwoods, where the trees were heavy and thick with age and the roots had torn free of the earth. Even through the din of the storm, though, the boy swore he could hear the soft lilt of alien voices, a song that wafted around wide tree trunks like long fingers and searched for an ear to hear them. He was still at least a few hours' travel from the strange and eerie Darkwoods. How was he supposed to get close enough to reach the port town of Caermish?

The boy shivered beneath the skirt of the brown-bark elm. Its drooping branches curled all the

way to the ground and provided him with a wall of leaves. He was dry and warm, but it was the dark that rattled him. He gripped his travel pack even harder. It was heavier than he anticipated, and after the flush of success had run its course, he was beginning to doubt his actions under the burden of its weight. The boy was barely old enough to turn the soft stubble on his face into a true beard, and his robes were muck-splattered and torn. He would have loved to turn around and gone back to the comforts of his old life; what few comforts had been provided were

opulent in comparison to his current circumstances.

It was too late to turn back, far too late. He'd come too far to be felled by his own hesitations. He'd taken an oath and stolen for the cause. His only hope of escape was to reach the ship docked at Caermish, the one that would not wait for him.

Sleep finally began to overtake the boy when something snapped in the darkness: a piece of wood cracking in half. Fear pumped into the boy's chest, staggering his heart and forcing him fully awake. Someone—or something—was out

there. The boy bolted to his feet, ears pricked and thoughts screaming at him to run. He willed himself to stay put, however, and pulled out his dagger. He reached out and gently pushed away a branch to see better, but for all the good it did him in the night- and storm-stricken forest, he might as well have kept his eyes shut. There was only darkness and his imagination, but that was enough to hint at moving shadows and the whisper of steps.

The boy's mind reeled at the possibilities, his thoughts suddenly filled with the monsters of his

youth and the stories of the woods he was in. He imagined undead prowling the forest, their coal eyes searching the undergrowth for a dinner of flesh and a drink of blood. He could imagine their withered fingers wrapping around branches, suddenly pulling them aside to uncover their next meal: him.

Let it be hobgoblins, he prayed.

Or better yet, let it be the Kagonesti elves that inhabited the Darkwoods, though the boy had heard that they would never be so clumsy as to be heard in the forest. Perhaps it was merely an animal,

but almost immediately, the boy heard a voice, a whisper.

Whoever was out there was sneaking up on him. The hairs on the back of his neck told him so. The flutters in his stomach added their warning as well. There was more than one someone out there, and they knew where he was hiding.

The boy panicked and broke through the curtain of leaves and branches. He shouted an arcane word and felt eldritch magics spark along the surface of his scalp, raising the black hairs on his head. It thrilled him to utter those words

that unlocked those strange and hidden doorways in his mind. He ran, one hand cradling the heavy pack, the other holding the dagger aloft. The magic coursed through the pommel of the dagger, and a sphere of light burst from the tip of his blade. Shadows scattered as the white light blossomed and lit his surroundings.

The two men screamed at the sudden light and dropped the net suspended between them. They clutched their eyes and cursed. The boy, however, ran as fast as he could, the beacon torch of his dagger lighting his way. Trees

appeared from the shadows, and the boy dodged some and careened off others. Already, he was lost, but that didn't matter right then. He would run straight back to the town of Elmwood if it meant losing his pursuers.

Maybe they're brigands, he thought, trying to console himself.

Or perhaps they're exactly who you think they are, his subconscious pointed out.

He ran and whimpered when he heard footfalls pursuing him. He glanced back and saw one figure hurdling over exposed roots and

past tree trunks with catlike grace. The boy ran harder, his frantic sprint nearly sending him to the ground.

A voice called out from behind him. It sounded female. By the time the boy realized that it was a word of power, the air was sizzling with eldritch force and a bolt had struck him in the back, toppling him head over heels. The blow ripped the pack from his arms, and the dagger plunged into the soil and extinguished itself. The boy's body screamed at the pain. Only slowly did the effects lessen, until finally, the boy lay there in the darkness,

spent of everything but his fatigue. That he had in ample supply.

He couldn't move as the footsteps approached. Three forms in the dark loomed over him. He heard someone spit and felt a wet gob splatter on his cheek.

“That was for running, boy,” a rough voice said. It was the woman's again, but it was ragged as though coarse with smoke.

The boy heard a sword being drawn. The blade was thin, like a rapier that had been flattened. It emanated a strange, pale blue light from the delicate azure runes that

had been etched into its side.

The person holding the blade was a woman. She wore a black cape and brown leather pants tucked into her black, flared boots. Across her quilted, brown jerkin was a bronze-bound tome, like a shield protecting her flattened chest, and held in place with four chains that vanished beneath the cloak. The book's cover was an intricate pattern of silver ivy leaves and thorns, so delicate in the carving that it looked elven. Her eyes were almond shaped, and her features carved and cold. From her hood fell luxuriant black hair.

Her two male companions were similarly attired, but an eldritch silver script trimmed her clothing.

The woman pressed the edge of her blade against the boy's face, and with a gentle flick of her wrist, slashed his cheek. He screamed and pushed against the wound with his hand. Blood flowed over his fingers and splattered on his filthy robes.

“And that's for betraying your master, thief,” the woman said. Her accent was faint, almost musical. “By order of the Wizards of the White Robes, I am taking you back for judgment, Virgil Morosay. You have been branded a renegade.”

The boy's heart sank. They weren't hobgoblins or the undead. They were worse and the very thing he feared was after him: they were renegade hunters.

The woman nodded to the man next to her, a bear with thick arms and a beard that filled his hood. He grabbed the pack from the ground and pulled it open. There were only four small wooden logs within.

The woman returned her attentions to the boy. She pushed the tip of her blade beneath his chin, forcing his head back.

“The books you stole from Master Pecos,” she said. “Where are they?”

If the woman expected Virgil to plead for his life or cry, however, she was mistaken. Virgil met her eyes, gaze for unflinching gaze. “Already gone,” he said with a half smile. “Safe from you and *your* kind!”

The woman snarled, but it was the thin, rakish man with blond hair who kicked him hard in the jaw.

The largest of the trio tied the

arms and legs of the unconscious boy, while the blond hunter went off to retrieve their horses. The woman sat upon a fallen, moss-covered log, fuming. She played with a dagger, gouging troughs in the trunk.

“He handed it off already,” she said.

“I heard,” the large man said. He dropped the trussed-up boy back to the ground. “The orders won’t be happy.”

“No, they won’t,” she said. “But more work to come for us.”

The bearded hunter grunted

noncommittally before his gaze flitted to the darkness between the trees. A crossbow appeared in his quick hands. The woman had heard it as well, the brush of fabric against wood. She drew her blade and stepped forward, pushing light into the shadows.

“Who’s there?” the man barked. “Speak or be killed for your silence.”

“Don’t kill me,” a voice cried out. “Forgive me, I meant no intrusion.” Into the light stepped a woodsman with sea-blue eyes. His hands were raised. “I live in these woods,” he said. “I thought you might need

help.”

“We need no help,” the woman said. “Be gone with you.”

The woodsman nodded and retreated into the darkness.

It was time he left anyway. This particular chapter had played out, and he wanted to commit it to the page before memory tarnished it. Besides, the main characters in the little drama had yet to appear, and the woodsman needed time to position himself for what he knew came next.

CHAPTER 2

The Trinity

Nothing of the city intruded upon the Three Eyes Academy—no reek of the animal pens and butcher stalls of the Merchant District, no cries of the Guild militia training in the Hall of Knights, nothing to suggest a thriving city of twenty-four thousand souls living and breathing and struggling to survive within the great walls of Solanthus.

The Three Eyes Academy was meant to be a refuge for the study and training of the magical arts. It imparted a sense of seclusion, a monastic devotion to the arcane, free of the mundane distractions of life outside. In truth, however, the wizards built the academy for students whose blood ran distinctly blue and whose purses bulged with steel. It was a place of privilege, a showpiece to display the respectability of the Orders of High Sorcery.

The Star Chamber of the Three Eyes was domed and made of the finest marble slabs from the

quarries of Kayolin. While dwarf stonemasons had cut the stones, elf artisans had sculpted the eight lithe and long-limbed statues of wizards that stretched along the curved wall. Between the statues rested pairs of fluted columns. The marble veins glittered like emeralds in the torchlight, and upon the great semicircular dais sat the three mahogany chairs with bronze trim and silver overlay. The floor was also marble, intricately carved, with inlaid brass patterns of magical knot work. From the flattened edge of the dais descended a handful of curved

steps.

The light of the white moon shone into the great assembly hall from the starburst aperture in the ceiling. Although only the white and red moons shone over Krynn for most, black-robed practitioners alone could see the third moon, an ebon disc as though forever eclipsed.

Tythonnia marveled at both her surroundings and her circumstances. The uncertain honor that had her squirming in her seat, almost fidgeting with anxiety. She did not know why she had been asked to attend a wizards'

conclave, of all things. Or why the meeting was being held here and not at the Tower of High Sorcery in Wayreth.

She sat before the dais in one of three sections, each angled to face the thrones. In each section were three rows of wood benches upon which sat the members of the conclave. It was the gathering of the greatest magical power of Krynn, an assembly of spell weavers dedicated to the responsible tutelage and understanding of the mystic arts; and Tythonna certainly didn't count herself among them. The

White Robes sat to the far left, upon frost elm benches bleached and lacquered to the color of snow; the Black Robes sat to the far right, upon dark oak benches stained a glossy black. Tythonnia's own order, that of the Red Robes, sat upon the middle row of mahogany benches stained cherry red.

All the hushed conversations layered atop one another, building into a buzz of noise. Conclave members seated themselves out of respect for the three presiding wizards who were perched upon their own chairs, but they chattered excitedly with other men and

women who they hadn't seen for as many as several years. Despite any racial misgivings, humans conversed freely with elf and dwarf mages. Their craft united them. And yet Tythonnia felt like an outsider, an intruder in such august company. Her gaze wandered, drinking in all the attendees. There were more than just the seven conclave members of each order. There were other luminaries who made *wizards* a feared word—men and women, elves and dwarves, who could strike foes cold with a glance. Tythonnia couldn't help herself; she tapped her foot more

quickly, nervously.

A hand wrapped in red silk and tapered into elegant, henna-painted fingers touched Tythonnia's knee.

“Be still,” Amma Batros whispered. She smiled, a flash of pearly white teeth against a backdrop of lustrous mahogany skin. A tiara rimmed with a trim veil of glass beads rested on her forehead; her brown eyes shone thanks to heavy kohl that blackened the rims of her eyes and painted her cheeks in unblemished arcane script. Her ruby nose stud sparkled.

“I’m sorry,” Tythonnia said, immediately intimidated and taken with her mentor’s beauty. She felt small and lumpy in Amma Batros’s presence, her skin too pasty in contrast to her teacher’s rich brown hue, her dirty blonde hair dusty in comparison to Amma Batros’ luxuriant black mane. Where Amma was lithe and supple, Tythonnia felt pudgy and stout—like nothing but a farmer’s daughter in the middle of all the Conclave’s finery. “I’m nervous,” she admitted.

Amma Batros laughed delicately in a way that was both simple and

enchanting, and Tythonnia blushed.

“As well you should be,” Amma whispered. “Our greatest are here tonight. See that Black Robe there,” she said, motioning to a seated dwarf with a pale complexion; a black, scraggly beard; and dark, scowling eyes. “That’s Willim the Black. And over there,” she nodded to a white-robed human with a youthful smile, “is Antimodes.”

“It’s Master Merick,” Tythonnia whispered. Amma followed her gaze to the grizzled old man in red robes who sat to the back, away from everyone. He appeared lost in

thought. “I want to ask how Justarius is doing.”

Amma, however, shook her head. “No,” she said simply. “Justarius was gravely injured during the test, and Merick is taking it hard. It’s not easy for any of us to see our pupils hurt so.”

“But he’ll recover, right?” Tythonnia asked. Her thoughts flashed on Justarius, on the hollow in his eyes. The test had changed him. It was the last and only time she’d seen him since his ordeal, and she wondered if her cousin would ever be the same.

“Time will tell,” Amma replied.

Tythonna went quiet at that. She'd undergone the harrowing Test of High Sorcery, the three final exams that push a wizard beyond their limits, near to the point of failure or, in many cases, past it. Each test was unique, and more often than not, it permanently affected the wizard. Most escaped physically unblemished but forever mentally scored. Their thoughts would never leave that fateful day; they would remember it with a clarity that would forever reopen their wounds. They remained haunted.

A rare few suffered a physical affliction or injury. It was a reminder that magic has a cost, that it was a burden and privilege to possess an affinity for spellcraft. It weeded out those unworthy of their gifts, and for a time, Tythonnia thought she'd be among them. She'd survived, however, but the cost was something she never expected. She learned things about herself she wasn't ready to face yet. But neither could she escape that knowledge.

All around Tythonnia, even the greatest among the wizards seemed somehow marred by their tests.

Willim the Black walked with an obsidian staff mounted by an ebony orb. Other wizards carried their scars in their eyes, invisible for no one but themselves to feel and know.

If anyone could have emerged unscathed from the test, many young wizards believed it would be Justarius. He was fearless, physically adept, and level-headed. The best of the reds, it was whispered. Only, he didn't survive intact; far from it, in fact. Whatever happened to him had left him bedridden, a shadow of himself. Some said he was crippled;

others claimed he was disfigured. Tythonnia knew better, but the rumors alone created a crisis of confidence among the many wizards who had yet to take the test.

“If Justarius could almost fail and die,” a young acolyte had confided to Tythonnia, “what hope do I have?”

Tythonnia tried to counsel and console the other students as best she could, but she lacked the conviction to lie, to tell the others that everything would be all right. What happened to Justarius left her wondering: if he had

undergone his ordeal before her, would she have possessed the courage to carry through with it? She wasn't sure anymore.

She pushed such thoughts from her head and distracted herself by studying the people around her. It took a moment before she realized someone was watching her, a black-robed wizard of exceptional beauty. The female Black Robe was striking, from her wide, jet eyes to her long and braided raven hair; silver jewelry girding her fingers, wrists, and neck. Like Tythonnia, she appeared to be in her mid-twenties, but her gaze was

unbridled. Tythonna immediately looked away, unable to meet and match the fierce stare. She found the white-robed Pecos and studied him instead, even though her thoughts never left the other young wizard.

Servants scuttled about with jugs of water to fill the goblets of those gathered, among them the sour old Pecos. Pecos was hardly alone, but neither did he engage anyone in conversation. Everyone had by then heard of his shame: his own acolyte turned renegade and thief

in stealing a handful of valuable tomes. Some wanted Pecos to discuss what happened, in some vain hope for idle gossip, but he merely grunted at whoever spoke to him until they left him alone.

Thirsty, Pecos snapped his fingers to attract the attention of a servant. As the lean man with sea-blue eyes filled his goblet with water, Pecos studied him with a sudden and intense curiosity. He'd seen the man before ... recently in fact. But where?

The man nodded respectfully to Pecos and continued on his rounds. Pecos followed him with his gaze,

still unsure where he'd seen him, but his memory wasn't what it used to be. That soured his mood even more. He grumbled and returned his attentions to the three wizards waiting patiently upon the chairs.

From somewhere nearby, a gong rang, filling the chamber with its booming echo. Tythonnia started at the noise. Amma Batros continued staring straight ahead even though a small smile escaped her lips at Tythonnia's jolt of surprise. The other wizards obediently fell silent and turned to watch as the accused

was brought in.

First to step into the chamber through the great archway was a woman, a renegade hunter. Many eyes flickered over her appreciatively, but Tythonnia found something reptilian in the woman's gait and bearing. Then she found herself staring at the woman's chest and upon the intricate bronze tome strapped to it. Tythonnia was about to ask her mentor what that was, but Amma Batros was leaning forward and squinting hard at the unusual tome. She didn't know either.

The huntress approached, her

gaze never deviating from the three chairs. Behind her was the accused, Virgil Morosay, defrocked White Robe. Tythonnia studied him, but he seemed no different than the young students who came to her for guidance or solace. She pitied Virgil and ached for the wound to his face. He seemed tiny under the angry gazes of his former masters, and his eyes remained fixed on the floor. Pecas, in particular, wore a mask of utter venom. His fingers clenched and furled, as though ready to let fly with a spell, and Tythonnia half thought she might very well

witness a murder today.

Bringing up the rear were two more renegade hunters, one a bearish man with a thick beard, the other slender and blond. Quietly, the entourage made their way to the steps of the dais, where they stopped. The woman gracefully dropped to one knee, her head down. The other two hunters forced Virgil down before they knelt respectfully as well. It was only then that Virgil happened to glance at the three people sitting upon the dais. His face blanched, and he swooned under his own fear.

Tythonnia suddenly realized

Virgil had no idea who'd be presiding over his fate until that very moment. They had not met thusly in years, the masters of the three orders, dressed in the most crimson of reds, ivory of whites, and obsidian of blacks—these masters of magic and mouthpieces for the wills of the three moons.

Upon the left chair sat the red-robed master, Yasmine of the Delving. Her light skin was milky for her fifty-odd years, and her black hair streaked with copper highlights was pulled back into dozens of tight braids. At her side waited her chief advisor, the

wizard Belize, seen by many within Tythonnia's order as an opportunist.

Upon the right-most chair sat the master of the Black Robes, Reginald Diremore. His skin was glossy and pale. His greasy gray hair, combed straight back, added to his almost rodentlike features, while his eyes were those of a shark searching for its next meal. One eye was the natural green of his birth, the other completely black from pupil to sclera. He studied Virgil intently, as though preparing to mount a siege against his weak points.

Upon the center chair, however, sat the most frightening of them all, the Highmage Astathan of Qualinost. If humans grew old, then elves grew ancient. Despite his short stature, there was something grand about him, something that made him appear larger than the others. Perhaps it was his reputation; he was the father of modern magics and savior of the Wizards of High Sorcery. He breathed life into the study of the arcane crafts, turning it from an art of dead tongues and dusty principles to a new frontier of exploration and renewed vigor.

Astathan was certainly the oldest among the high mages, old enough to have witnessed the Cataclysm, when a mountain dropped from the sky. He was not unlike a great, old tree, his long fingers and limbs like knotted branches, his billowing white hair pulled forward and spread across his ivory-cloaked chest. The gold of his almond-shaped eyes glittered and never dulled.

Unlike Yasmine or Reginald, however, Astathan looked upon the scared Virgil with a look of the utmost pity. He didn't see the boy's failings, Tythonnia realized; he saw

his own.

From Astathan's side stepped another white-robed wizard, a human herald with tanned skin and a thin, black mustache.

"Rise," the herald said.

The hunters did as instructed and the two men prodded Virgil to his feet.

"You are faced with crimes against the Wizards of High Sorcery," the herald continued, "including theft of your master's property, betrayal of the wizards' conventions, and the practice of illicit and wild magics. You are

further charged with abetting the enemies of High Sorcery. Have you anything to say to these charges?"

Virgil looked around, bewildered that he had been asked to speak on his own behalf. Tythonnia watched him, her breath caught in her mouth, waiting for him to beg for forgiveness, for leniency. She prayed it was the folly of youth that guided him.

The former initiate, however, suddenly straightened and proudly thrust out his chest. Tythonnia could see no apology forthcoming in his bearing, and she regretted the words she knew were coming,

regretted them because she knew he would not.

“You lied to us,” Virgil said, staring directly at the three masters.

The room erupted into shouts and cries of anger. Several wizards rose to their feet in condemnation of the upstart, but it was the female renegade hunter who reacted the quickest. She backhanded Virgil, sending him to the floor. The room fell silent save for the rustle of fabric as more rose to their feet to see what was happening.

“Sit! Sit down!” the herald cried. His voice thundered across the hall and carried the hint of magic to its strength.

Everyone complied, sitting back down as the two hunters lifted a staggered Virgil to his feet.

“Huntress Dumas,” Astathan said in a clear and steady voice. “We appreciate your service to High Sorcery, but you will refrain from striking the boy.”

Dumas blushed and bowed her head quickly. “Forgive me,” she said.

“The boy has a right to speak,”

Astathan said, addressing everyone. “Otherwise, we serve justice in ignorance, and I cannot abide ignorance. Now, boy, when have we lied to you? And how does that justify your betrayal?”

Tythonnia suddenly felt a warm hand over hers. Amma Batros was touching her lightly and staring at her in concern. Amma’s gaze was questioning, and it took Tythonnia a moment to realize she was shaking. Tythonnia nodded that she was fine and willed herself to calm down, for the adrenaline to seep away.

Although Virgil spoke through his

tears, his voice was too large for the chamber, strong in its dedication to be heard and matured, somehow. His posture changed as well, suddenly more in command of himself than she believed someone so young could muster. “You betrayed us,” he reiterated, and it was then that Tythonnia realized the words had a rehearsed quality to them. She glanced at Amma Batros and found her mentor studying the captive in turn.

“You decide who learns magic, and you cripple us in teaching it,” Virgil continued. “Your faith serves

the bureaucracy of the three moons. You have become a religion of your own making, a failed experiment!”

Astathan’s eyes narrowed and he exchanged glances with the other two masters. They sensed something amiss. The black-robed Reginald Diremore nodded and casually strode up from his seat. He grabbed Virgil by the front of his jerkin and pulled him to within inches of his face.

“Youngling,” Reginald said, “I would have your words in your *own* tongue!”

“It’s a glamour of some sort,” Amma whispered to Tythonnia.

Tythonnia was about to ask what she meant when Reginald hissed out a spell. His words were like an oily snake, and his fingers contorted and knotted into hand gestures. The hairs on Tythonnia’s neck prickled, and a flash of light ebbed on the tips of Reginald’s fingers. Virgil was somehow weaker for the spell. He stumbled back and was pushed forward again by the blond-haired hunter. He looked around, his mouth agape and his expression dumbfounded. The certainty was gone from his

posture, his shoulders weighted by fear and his head darting. A mere youth once more, scared with the courage brutally ripped from him. He didn't act like the same person speaking a moment earlier.

“Let's see you speak rhetoric now, mouthpiece,” Reginald said. With a triumphant smirk, he returned to his chair and sat back down.

“We give you the opportunity to speak your mind, boy,” Astathan said as he shook his head, “and instead you allow another to speak through you. Since you have nothing of your own to say in your

defense, answer me this: Who do you serve? Who just acted through you?"

Virgil appeared panicked. He was adrift and forced to speak with his own timid voice. "Berthal," he said finally, almost shrinking at the admission. "I serve the one true master, Berthal. And I'd gladly ask him to speak for me again!"

Tythonnia, the black-robed woman who had been staring at her, and an older white-robed wizard were asked to wait outside after Virgil's admission. The black-

robed woman was beautiful with alabaster skin and black, braided hair. There was a rough air about her, however, in the way she sat and watched everyone. She was no woman of society nor one concerned with any specific social graces.

The white-robed wizard, however, was another matter. He appeared pleasant, a faint smile on his face and shy, darting blue eyes. His hair was a light brown, as was the pinch of a beard on his chin. Tythonnia estimated him at ten years their senior, putting him somewhere in his mid to upper

thirties.

“Par-Salian,” he said, introducing himself to Tythonnia and the other woman.

Tythonnia was glad for his congeniality. He possessed an easy way about him.

The black-robed woman was curt, however. Only after a moment’s prodding did she finally introduce herself as “Ladonna.”.

Par-Salian shrugged to Tythonnia and sat down on one of the gilded benches that lined the hallway outside the meeting chamber. Tythonnia studied the inlaid

marble and alabaster geometric patterns on the floor while Ladonna paced a bit and studied the busts of former wizards stuffed into the alcoves.

A servant quietly served them water from a jug while they waited then darted past the double doors, back into the conclave's chamber. In doing so, he left the great wooden doors framed in burnished iron open a crack. Voices drifted through, the great wizards still in deliberation. Ladonna, without a shred of shame, drifted to the open door and began listening.

“Psst,” Par-Salian whispered.

“What are you doing? Get away from there!”

Ladonna waved him off and continued listening. Par-Salian stared at Tythonnia with a look of apprehension, and the red-robed wizard felt obligated to intervene. She quietly strode over to Ladonna, whose head was near the open crack. She glanced at Tythonnia, but her expression remained inscrutable. Tythonnia was ready to say something, to drag her away from her breach of decorum, but then she heard Master Astathan speak. It was hard to hear his voice and not listen.

Tythonna found herself approaching closer, and before she realized what she was doing, she'd rested against the wall nearest the door. Astathan's voice was soothing and almost lyrical. A mischievous smirk played on Ladonna's face, a delighted look that lit her eyes with fire. Tythonna couldn't help herself. She grinned back and continued listening, despite the huffs of frustration coming from Par-Salian.

“Master Pecas?” Astathan was asking. “You were wronged most grievously by Initiate Virgil's betrayal. What have you to say on

the matter?”

Pecas coughed to clear his throat. The chamber hung upon his every word, as did Tythonnia and Ladonna. Even Par-Salian had gone quiet.

“Virgil was my trusted apprentice for many years,” Pecas said plain for all to hear, “and would have made a tolerable addition to our ranks. But his betrayal of me, of our ideals, is a grave sin. If I were not cloaked in the white robes of our order, I’d almost say ... unforgivable. Indeed, we must make an example of him. We who wear Solinari’s robes

believe there is always the possibility of redemption, of hope within each soul, but there is also a time when we must make a statement to all those who would follow in his steps," he said, stamping his cane into the ground. "Therefore, I say, hand him over to the Black Robes for punishment. He deserves no mercy from me."

The room exploded into argument, and even Ladonna and Tythonnia exchanged glances. They both looked at Par-Salian, but he, too, appeared shocked. Such a thing was unheard of, a White Robe offering judgment of a

renegade to the Black Robes. One espoused mercy, the other punishment. One was compassionate, the other ruthless.

Suddenly, the servant who served them water popped his head back through the doorway, surprising Tyhonnia and Ladonna, who edged back. With an apologetic look, he quietly closed the door on the conclave. They could hear no more.

Ladonna sighed, the soft sound echoing throughout the chamber. The members of the Conclave had been dismissed after several hours

of deliberation, but Tythonnia, Par-Salian, and Ladonna were asked by their mentors to remain behind. When pressed, all Amma Batros would say to Tythonnia was, “Answer truthfully and don’t be scared. You’ll do well.” With that, she left her student.

Then a servant had come to fetch Par-Salian to a private meeting. The servant told them they would be summoned in turn. That had been two hours earlier.

Tythonnia sat on the rearmost red bench, feeling the muscles slowly knot their way up her back. Ladonna lay on one of the white

benches, facing the ceiling and playing with the jewelry on her fingers. The red wizard envied that small streak of rebelliousness in her compatriot. Still, she wished Ladonna were a bit chattier, but the other woman tended to answer questions with silence and an air of scrutiny. Tythonnia gave up any hope of being cordial and, instead, watched the servants sweep the hall.

Ladonna sighed again, and Tythonnia could bite her lip no more.

“For the love of the three moons!” Tythonnia snapped.

“You’re bored. I get it! You’re not alone here, you know.”

The black-robed woman turned her head toward Tythonnia. A single brow levitated high above Ladonna’s eye and a smirk snaked across her lips. “All right,” Ladonna said, never losing her mischievous look. She pivoted and sat up in one supple motion. “How do we amuse ourselves, Red Robe?” she asked as she sauntered over to Tythonnia’s bench.

“Tythonnia.”

“I know.” Ladonna went quiet a moment. “The renegade—”

“Virgil?”

“Him,” Ladonna said. “He mentioned Berthal. Wasn’t he a member of *your* order?”

Tythonnia nodded. “Yes ... before my time.”

“What happened to him?” Ladonna asked. She smiled, eager for the gossip.

“I—I don’t know,” Tythonnia admitted. “We aren’t taught much about them. The renegades, I mean.”

Ladonna’s expression returned to boredom. “Pity,” she said. She swiveled about on the bench again

and lay back down, dropping her head on Tythonnia's lap.

Tythonnia blushed; Ladonna's familiarity and little regard for respectable distance caught her tongue-tied.

"Wake me up when something interesting happens," Ladonna said, closing her eyes.

"All—all right," Tythonnia said when she really wanted to say, "Get off of me, please." She looked at the servants to see if any of them were watching with disapproval. Dutiful to the last, however, nobody was paying them

any heed. Still, Tythonnia wasn't sure what to do, especially with her hands. And she couldn't stop glancing at Ladonna's face, with its alabaster skin, pale and blemish free. Her lips were full and her cheeks soft and graceful. Again, she found herself admiring another woman's beauty, admiring those qualities she felt were lacking in her own features. Somehow, staring at Ladonna's beauty put her at rest, the exhale after tension-filled days.

Ladonna's eyes opened suddenly, and Tythonnia quickly looked away.

“Got you,” Ladonna whispered.

“I was—”

“Don’t be embarrassed,” Ladonna said, sitting up. “You wouldn’t be the first woman who was attracted to me.”

Tythonna’s eyes went wide, a million panicked responses perched on her lips. Ladonna smiled at Tythonna’s terror-filled expression.

“I’m not ...” Tythonna said, unable to say the words. “I’m not like that.”

Ladonna shrugged. “Like what, hmm?”

“Like *that*,” Tythonna whispered.

She looked around, fearful someone was watching them. Again, the servants were lost in their duties.

“It’s all right. Don’t fret,” Ladonna said.

“But I’m not.”

“Well, if you ... insist.” Ladonna was already looking elsewhere, following the clop of footsteps heading toward them. The servant who had escorted Par-Salian away had returned.

“My turn yet?” Ladonna asked.

The servant nodded. “Yes, mistress. You are to follow me.”

“Where’s Par-Salian?” Tythonnia asked.

“Preparing, mistress,” the servant said before walking away.

Ladonna shrugged and followed. She spun about once, effortlessly, and offered Tythonnia a quick wink.

Tythonnia cursed herself for blushing so easily, for being so easily flustered in Ladonna’s presence. She was stronger than that, better than that. Her attractions did not rule her, could not rule her. And yet she could not escape the giddy memory of the

last time a woman touched in her that way.

The memory was always the same, the senses capturing specific seconds of random moments before the minutes and days blurred. The bits of clarity lasted forever, however; the brush of Elisa's fingertips as they held hands, the heat of her breath as she leaned in to whisper a secret.

Tythonna still shivered, her heart forever trapped in those endless minutes, but they were always broken by the same

memory: she was lying next to Elisa in the field of tall stalks and the infinite blue sky above; their lips meeting, the electricity that prickled their skin, the rough hand that pulled her up by the arm, the disgust that filled her mother's face, the strange sadness that eclipsed her father's. After that the memories were locked behind a wall of tears; Tythonnia couldn't stop crying.

“She forced me to,” Elisa protested as her parents dragged her away.

Elisa and she were never friends again.

Gently the servant roused Tythonna from her dream. She'd fallen asleep on the hard, red bench and lost track of time and place. The chamber was empty and dark, save for the lantern in the hands of the man with eyes like mountain lake water.

“Mistress,” the servant whispered. “It’s time.”

Tythonna nodded and rose awkwardly. She shook her head, trying to wake up. “The others?” she mumbled.

“Preparing,” the servant said

simply. He turned his back while she stood and straightened her garments. When she was ready, he escorted her from the dark chamber, through the unfamiliar halls of the Three Eyes Academy.

Nobody else met them; nobody was awake at whatever deep hour of night found them skulking about. The only light came from the servant's lantern and from the basrelief wall sculptures of the great forest of Wayreth that ran either length of the long corridor; the tips of the trees glowed with motes of faerie fire, turning the passageway into a star-cluttered

field of pinprick lights. Tythonnia had never seen anything so beautiful and, despite her nervousness, she marveled at the simple artistry of it.

The servant reached a large bronze door that dominated the end of the corridor; floral patterns and glowing magical script of elven make were etched on its surface. The servant rested his fingers against the door; it silently glided open as though mounted on the exhalation of one's breath. The servant bowed his head and motioned for Tythonnia to step through. He then closed the door

behind her.

The chamber was large, two floors in height and the interior the size of a modest tavern. The upper walls were a strange fusion of green rock and red metal, fluid droplets caught in their molten states. The lower half of the walls was a jigsaw of mahogany wood pieces, varnished and fit perfectly together. Spiraled columns of solid stone branched into irregular ribs along the green ceiling, like a tree trunk opening its branches to the canopy. In fact, the entire room was organic in its design. Few hard edges adorned its space, including

curved experiment tables of granite that bore the appearances of artists' palettes.

Behind a row of Qindaras clay pots and Abanasinian glass urns stood Highmage Astathan. Tythonnia knelt immediately, her heart racing at the honor of meeting him.

“Child, stand,” Astathan said, motioning with his hand. He had a delicate way about him, despite his age.

Tythonnia obliged, but could not bring herself to hold his gaze.

“Come,” he said. Another gesture

drew her to his side. He took both her hands in his own, his slender digits still strong and nimble. To her surprise, he turned her hands this way and that and, before releasing them, nudged her head left then right with a finger. Tythonna blushed under his golden-eyed scrutiny; she wasn't sure how to react.

“Master?” she asked.

“Impressive,” he said, nodding to himself all the while. He let her go and walked to a row of jars mounted on shelves. He studied them, his back to her. “If I didn't know better, I would say you'd

never undergone the test.”

“Um, thank you?” she said. She was uncertain how to respond or what he wanted to hear.

“It’s the deepest recesses of your eyes that betray you,” he said, still studying the urns. Finally, he tapped one. “Ah,” he exclaimed and brought it to the table where more jars and urns lay.

“My eyes?”

“The test wounds everyone,” Astathan said, uncorking various jars and bottles, and smelling each in turn. He nodded to some and sealed others right back up again.

“Why?”

“Why?” Tythonnia asked. “Oh—why do they wound everyone?”

Astathan glanced at her long enough to nod before returning his attention to the table’s contents.

“It’s a reminder, Highmage. That magic has a price.”

“That’s a patterned answer,” Astathan said. “It’s something I’d expect from an initiate reciting his lessons, not from someone who underwent the test herself. *Why* does the test wound us?”

Tythonnia stammered. She wasn’t sure what to say. Was she

supposed to stay silent and learn at the feet of the greatest mage of their time? *Listen* was the pivotal axiom of Amma Batros's teachings. Or was Astathan testing her?

He played at distracted, but she could tell he was listening intently. He genuinely wanted to hear her answer. He was curious—curiosity meant there wasn't one possible response. Then it hit her. The test is never the same from one person to the next, therefore, why should the consequences be. She once heard someone say that the test wounds and injures in a manner specific to one's ordained path, a path that

embraces the study of magic and draws one away from life's distractions. Call it a cruel mistress who demands attention, or perhaps the insistence of destiny, but the trials of a wizard are the roadmap of his or her future.

Astathan wasn't interested in why the test wounded its applicants, Tythonnia realized. He was interested in why it wounded *her*.

"I can't speak for anyone else," Tythonnia said, framing her response carefully as she spoke. "But maybe I was injured to reveal a ..." she hesitated. The admission

frightened her, but she was more afraid of lying to Astathan. He was a mythic name, a living legend, and any number of powers was ascribed to him. Discerning falsehoods among them, perhaps? His gaze penetrated her flesh, rendering her genderless and naked to the soul. “To reveal something about myself, like a truth,” she said finally.

“And this truth ... it troubles you?” he asked, looking up to study her.

“It scares me.”

“As well it should,” Astathan

said. “Those hurt physically must overcome adversity, yes, but rarely are their lives stripped of any pretense. Rarely are they forced to face their true selves. Many of us wrap ourselves in our lies. We let them define us for fear that others will hate us for what we despise in ourselves. Soon it becomes our flesh; its whispers, our voice.”

Tythonnia nodded, barely following the gist of the conversation. Astathan, however, continued speaking.

“But the test ... ah, the test,” he said, a wistful smirk on his face. “It forces us to face the naked truth.

The test is there to humble us, to forever remind us that we are never greater than the magic itself. Each of us burdened, each of us forced to remember that a greater cost exists. Do you follow?" he asked. He looked Tythonnia straight in her eyes.

"I—I think so."

"Good. Because you're about to be tested again. *Tidur et mencelik betina batin santet!*"

Before Tythonnia could respond or react, Astathan opened his palm and blew a handful of dark powder into her face. Everything went

black.

CHAPTER 3

The Ghostwalk

It was an empty land, bereft of anything living, No grass to dapple the dusty earth, no leaves to clothe the twisted branches of trees. Winds whipped about in blind fury and left the air tasteless and stale. The lamed sun hid behind a gauzy sky, and instead of bringing heat to the world, it sucked it away and hungered for more. In the distance, monochrome

thunderclouds flashed and brought down a rain of ash.

Tythonnia walked across the plains, stirring up clouds of dust with her bare feet. Her robes were filthy with it, her features and hair caked ashen gray. The world leeched her life, turning her from woman to crone. Her bones ached; her muscles screamed. Age was a locust that devoured the green of her youth. She would die soon.

In the distance lay a mote of red, the only color in a colorless world. It swirled, vibrant and charged. It pulsed like a heartbeat, and flowed in small whorls and eddies like

living blood. Tythonnia knew she had to reach it, touch it. It was the last reminder of color. Without it, Tythonnia might never remember hues again in the toneless world.

Finally, with her shriveled and atrophied body, she reached out to grab the last ember of life. It hovered within reach and she was eager to consume it, to forestall the inevitable. But she hesitated. Her gnarled fingers trembled with exertion and age.

Who was she to consume that thing, just for the sake of want?

Who was she to take and not

regret the fleeting moment?

Was her life worthy of the last particle?

When the world needed it more?

More than she ever could?

Or deserved?

No.

Tythonna closed her hand and stood as straight as frail age allowed. Instead of adding its life to hers, she surrendered hers to it, so the world might have that last precious thing for a moment longer ...

Tythonnia's eyes fluttered open, and the rigors of age faded slowly from her body. Her joints ached and a dull throb stretched itself over the rack of her spine. Amma Batros sat next to her on the velvet reclining couch and smiled down at her. She cleared away an errant lock of hair.

“What—” Tythonnia asked.

“You passed,” Amma said. Her smile was wide and grateful. She helped Tythonnia sit up.

She was still in Astathan's study, but the highmage was not within sight; only she and Amma were

present.

“Passed? What happened?” Tythonnia said, struggling to root her bearings. The pain of age lingered in her joints like an echo, and she struggled to focus. Amma Batros brought a mug of steaming liquid to her lips. Tythonnia obliged with a sip before the foul concoction struck her nostrils. She almost vomited at the taste of the onion tea, but Amma tipped the mug forward, spilling more into her mouth.

“You must drink,” Amma said against her struggles. Tythonnia swallowed another mouthful before

sputtering and gagging. Amma placed the mug on the floor and rubbed Tythonnia's back as she continued coughing. "The test weakened you," she whispered. "You need your strength back."

"What's happening? What test?" Tythonnia asked.

"I'm sorry, child," Astathan's voice rang out, "but it was necessary to administer a small test to determine your loyalty to the Orders of High Sorcery." He appeared from behind a curved bookcase, his features drawn with fatigue.

“It was a truth spell,” Amma said gently. “But you passed.”

“Truth spell?” Tythonnia said. The word released a surge of panic. What had she revealed about herself? Did they know? “I don’t remember it!”

“Be calm, child,” Astathan said. “The spell is not invasive. It isn’t like the Test of High Sorcery ... not entirely. It strips away duplicity in regards to loyalty. We neither hear nor see the test. We merely know you’ve passed.”

“I passed?” Tythonnia repeated cautiously. Amma nodded. “And if I

didn't?"

Astathan fixed her with a piercing gaze. "We would know that too," he whispered. He returned to studying the spines of books, distracting himself with the search.

"Amma," Tythonnia whispered. "What's going on?"

"Compose yourself," Amma said. "The others are almost here."

Par-Salian, Tythonnia, and Ladonna stood before High-mage Astathan. He sat in a great chair of

gold oak that was girded with bands of what appeared to be translucent jade. The armrests were two great reptilian claws that curled downward to grip two marble globes. The backrest curled up like a drake's spine, forming a gold dragon's head.

Tythonnia studied the others, but whatever sparkle had dazzled Ladonna's eyes, whatever keen interest had sharpened Par-Salian's gaze were both absent. The test had affected them differently, but no less deeply than Tythonnia.

“What you hear now does not go beyond this chamber,” Astathan

said. “If you choose not to participate, it is within your right, but I will enchant you to forget this meeting happened.”

The three wizards exchanged glances that asked the same question: what have we gotten ourselves into? But Tythonnia could also see the excitement in their faces; the chance to serve Highmage Astathan directly was an unparalleled opportunity. It could propel all three of them to greater heights within their respective orders. While it was an honor to better the Wizards of High Sorcery, Tythonnia still wanted to advance

within its ranks. She wanted to be recognized as someone special, unique. By the look in Ladonna's eyes, so did she, though Par-Salian appeared to be a different matter. He beamed, his pride at the bursting. Tythonnia could only smile.

All three of them nodded, eager for their moment in the sun.

“Do not agree to this lightly,” Astathan said, chastening them with a stern look. “It is dangerous, perhaps equal in peril to the Test of High Sorcery.”

The smiles faded from their lips,

and Tythonnia tried to treat the matter more gravely.

“Since the Cataclysm, we have been at war,” Astathan began, his voice dropping a sorrowful octave. “And I have seen most of this conflict through. The fall of Istar brought about a dark time for magic, a return to the old ways, the wild ways. There was no discipline to its practice, no accountability demanded. People wielded the arcane like a knife or a sword, swinging it wildly with nothing to temper their strokes. Even tempered, magic is a violent force that requires every trained skill to

use safely. Unskilled magic, however, is a chaotic, untamed thing that hurts and maims and changes the world in profound ways. People had a right to fear us, even though we've sought to control the use of magic for everyone's sake. But by persecuting us, they forced us into hiding. We could not operate openly, and that allowed for the proliferation of wild sorcerers."

Astathan cleared his throat before continuing. "Now, finally, we are no longer forced to hide. We are taming the use of the feral arts and bringing wild sorcerers to

heel, advising them to follow the tenets set down by the orders, or desist. We are bringing responsibility back to the practice of magic, but there has been a setback. You witnessed it at the trial, earlier, in fact.”

“Virgil Morosay?” Ladonna asked. She cocked an eyebrow and smiled. “Ah wait, no ... Berthal, his master.”

A shocked Par-Salian hushed her quickly, but Ladonna ignored him with a self-satisfied grin.

“What’s been kept from all wizards, save the conclave and our

most masterful practitioners, is that there's a plague upon us, delivered in two strokes. The first is an epidemic of betrayed principles," Astathan said. "We are losing initiates and members alike to this renegade Berthal. Students are stealing from masters, and make no mistake, Virgil was not the first. Masters are leading their students astray from the guiding laws of High Sorcery and the safe paths set down by the moons. The longer Berthal is allowed to continue spreading his rhetoric for unregulated magic, the more he undermines the laws of magic and

the safety of innocent people.

“The second stroke is equal in peril,” Astathan continued. “Berthal has not only turned his back on our guiding ethos, but he’s done so by embracing the most primordial of magics. He wields the arts that existed at the time of the Graygem, when magic wasn’t a craft, but a force of nature.”

“How is this possible?” Par-Salian asked.

Astathan sighed. “It is to our own detriment sometimes that we diligently preserve knowledge of the past. Berthal stole ancient texts

detailing the path of wild magic when he broke with us. He is now teaching his followers these Wyldling Arts, teaching them to unleash their natural talents without the focusing matrices of reagents or words. A discharge of static becomes a lightning bolt from the heavens, wild in its unpredictability. A gust of wind becomes the storm's heart, raging indiscriminately.”

“So he can will magic and bend it to his whim?” Ladonna asked. “No spell, no words, no reagents.”

“None. Just chaos for its own sake. And now he teaches others

how to blanket the world in a storm of his making.”

“But Wyldling magic has always been around,” Tythonnia argued. “We know people can use passion to stoke their spells. We know others advocate its use.”

“Never like this,” Astathan replied. “Most practitioners of this ilk were unguided and unprincipled. Selfish. But, if we were lucky, their own inexperience would consume them. More to our favor, they kept their secrets to themselves, treating knowledge as a thing to be hoarded. It was like an illness that never spread

because everyone shut themselves away with whatever sickness they caught. Berthal, however, is trying to bring discipline to the art. He's teaching others how to do more without burning the wick of their souls."

"You want Berthal ... eliminated?" Ladonna asked with a grin.

"No, never!" Astathan said. "I would never condone the murder of another. To do so is to break the very ideals I'm trying to protect. You must find Berthal and lead the renegade hunters to him. He must be brought to justice, for betraying

his oath as a member of the Red Robes, for fomenting this dissent, and for teaching what should have remained forgotten!”

“Us? Really?” Tythonnia asked in shock. “But how?”

“As renegades,” Astathan said. “I’m asking you to become renegades.”

Par-Salian nodded his thanks to the servant for the glass of honey blossom Qualinesti tea and waited for him to leave the room. The two white-robed wizards sat across the engraved cherrywood table from

each other, quietly sipping their warm drinks. Par-Salian occasionally glanced up at Highmage Astathan, feeling awkward. If the high-mage noticed it, he gave no sign one way or the other. He merely sampled from his glass, his eyes heavy with fatigue or thought.

The silence was unbearable. Par-Salian wasn't sure why he was there. He opened his mouth to speak, but Astathan stopped him.

"Tea tastes better in silence," Astathan said. He continued drinking. "Contemplate the flavor."

Par-Salian nodded and continued to drink. He tried focusing on the flavor as instructed, tried enjoying the honey that slid down his throat, warming his chest and calming his nerves with its smooth texture. There was an underlying taste, however, one he couldn't place. It was difficult to focus. He drank, but his thoughts drifted to everything Highmage Astathan had told them.

Berthal was a great threat to the orders. Not only was he recruiting directly from the ranks of High Sorcery itself, drawing student and teacher alike to his banner, but he

was advocating the teaching of wild, primordial arts. Wyldling magic had a destabilizing effect on the world. It transmuted species and was held up to no one's accounting. Before the orders came along, the wild arts transmitted through the eye of the Graygem were at the heart of the split that created subspecies and offshoots. It was the weapon of choice for terror, and the common folk came to see magic as a thing to be feared, a thing to be struck down. It was a viper that could kill anyone who stumbled across its path, at least until the three moons

finally gave magic rhyme and purpose. They created accountability through the three orders that followed the teachings of the moons. They instilled control over the chaos and helped show people that magic was a tool for their benefit.

Berthal threatened all that, however. His sanction of untamed magic could again frighten a world already wary of its power. More so, Par-Salian realized, he could turn people against all practitioners of spellcraft and undo the positive works of mages such as Astathan.

A thought struck Par-Salian, as he put his cup of tea down. He repeated the idea in his mind, trying to study and analyze it, trying to probe it for weakness, for cracks. The idea remained strong, however.

I must help bring Berthal to the Wizards of High Sorcery for justice, he thought. Otherwise, the orders might not survive the scandal, especially since Berthal was once one of us. His flock also consists of former members of the three colors. Any wrongdoing, any evils he commits would fall upon our shoulders. Any distrust Berthal

levies would be levied, in turn, against us. We would suffer the most for this because the orders would be seen as weak, as incapable of enforcing their own principles. Indeed, we would appear corrupt, for few cared to distinguish the differences between a wizard of the orders, a sorcerer, and a Wyldling practitioner pursuing power for his own ends.

Par-Salian opened his mouth to speak then realized Highmage Astathan was studying him very intently. He closed his mouth again. The tea lingered with a slightly oily aftertaste on his

tongue, and Par-Salian finally recognized it. It was bekial seed from the thorn bushes of Estwilde; it acted to open one's consciousness without the deleterious effects of most other opiates. A little was enough to put its user in a trance. Too much was toxic. And the fine line between the two was only drawn by master herbologists.

“You realize what is at stake.” Astathan asked. “You see where the roads lead.”

“Yes, indeed, Highmage,” Par-Salian replied. He focused elsewhere and was amazed at where his mind wandered. The

road between things—the connections—were clear.

“It’s important you realize the dangers facing you without any prompting from me. It’s not enough to know; you must understand, and to truly understand, you must arrive at certain conclusions yourself. I say this because the two others you travel with may not recognize the full implications of Berthal’s threat.”.

“They’re young,” Par-Salian agreed. “They haven’t healed from the wounds of their trials. It’s too easy to reopen them, play upon

them.”

Astathan nodded. “Berthal’s words may hook them far more deeply than they realize. You are the oldest among them. It is your responsibility to lead them, to remind them of their duties, to steep their actions in righteousness, to guide them through their own doubts.”

“And should I fail?” Par-Salian asked, anxious for the course set before him, for roads his mind was already traveling.

“Plan for failure, but do not anticipate it. That is the mark of a

leader.” With that, Astathan pushed a small rosewood box to him from across the table. Inside was a gold medallion, depicting a sun with its rays curled around three interlocking moons. “As we discussed, use this only when necessary. It’s crucial.”

Par-Salian nodded, and continued to drink his tea. He allowed the bekial to gently push him further along the journey, though there was one last thing he wanted to know, something that had been troubling him all night.

“Highmage?” Par-Salian asked. “What will happen to Virgil

Morosay? I—overheard Master Pecas turn his fate over to the Black Robes.”

Astathan nodded grimly. “We convinced Master Pecas to show more mercy. Virgil will remain in our care for three months and be given the opportunity to repent.”

“If he doesn’t?”

“Then damn Berthal for putting us into this position,” Astathan whispered.

Ladonna waited patiently while Reginald Diremore paced the stage

of the empty lecture chamber. The amphitheaterstyle wood benches were empty, the candle niches dark and cold. Reginald threw the occasional glance her way, and despite herself, Ladonna felt ill at ease around him. Most men she could measure by the way they appraised her beauty. Magic was the common currency of her order, and the richest men were the ones most versed in its arts. Ladonna, however, possessed currency of a different sort, and she wasn't above using it to her advantage. She never offered her body in exchange for considerations; she

was too skilled as a spell weaver to be that short-sighted. But she knew how to exploit her looks to her benefit. She knew when she could dominate or manipulate others to her will and how to hold their attention. Her beauty wasn't a matter of sexuality. It was the valuable currency she alone possessed.

Yet Reginald was immune or, perhaps, indifferent to her charms. With his good green eye, he studied her like a master tactician, no more entranced or in love with her than a general might love one of the many ballistae at his disposal. She

was a mere weapon and a tool to the master of the Black Robes, and she was fine with that. The way his black eye seemed to stare right through her bothered her, however.

“Highmage Astathan discussed the situation with you, yes?” Reginald asked.

“He did,” Ladonna replied.

“Good, good,” Reginald replied. He remained silent a moment. “Your mission is threefold, then,” Reginald said. “Help the others find Berthal and his camp of renegades —”

“And capture them?” Ladonna

asked, arching one of her delicate eyebrows as she did. She still wasn't certain why Berthal should be left alive when he posed such a risk.

Reginald stopped pacing and stared directly at Ladonna. It was a warning in no uncertain terms. "Do as Astathan instructs," Reginald said. "He has earned that right and our respect."

Ladonna nodded. "Of course. I didn't mean—"

Reginald waved off her apology with a dismissive gesture and continued pacing. "Besides,"

Reginald said. “Astathan won’t be around for much longer. He’s old and he has his eye on another, a successor he wishes to groom personally.”

“Really?” Ladonna said. “Who might that be?”

“Par-Salian,” Reginald replied.

“Par-Salian? That White Robe who is far too pretty to be handsome? He isn’t even on the conclave.”

“After this assignment, you may well see his star rise quickly. That’s why I want you to take the opportunity to foster ties with him.

Make him easier for us to manipulate if the time comes.”

Ladonna was never known for her patience or her dull tongue. She often spoke her mind before questioning whether her opinion could cost her. This was once such moment.

“So that’s why I was handpicked for this assignment?” Ladonna asked, her tone challenging. “To seduce a White Robe?”

Reginald stopped, his surprise and annoyance etched across his face. “Are you good for anything else?” he asked.

For a moment, Ladonna couldn't speak. Astonishment robbed her of speech, and anger made it difficult to think. Reginald controlled the order, and by serving him well, Ladonna would improve her standing. More important, the other wizards would treat her more seriously. Beauty and skill were in antithesis to each other, especially in scholarly circles where the mind is prized over physical attributes. This assignment, Ladonna had hoped, would shatter any misconceptions that her ability was a purely physical one.

But it appeared as though she

was nothing but a toy as far as her order was concerned. Not a weapon, but a plaything—a harlot—to seduce Par-Salian. The words slowly found their way out, consequences be damned, Ladonna thought.

“Really? And did I seduce the monsters that attacked me during the test to pass as well? Mm? Perhaps I seduced the books I studied to surrender their secrets?” she said, despite the venomous glare being leveled against her. “Perhaps I seduced Highmage Astathan when I passed his little trial to his satisfaction.”

“You forget yourself!” Reginald said.

“And your ignorance bores me,” Ladonna snapped. “Find some harlot plying her trade at the Palanthas docks to seduce Par-Salian. Replace me if you want, but I wish you luck explaining to the highmage why you need to find someone else to take my place. Especially since he complimented my skill,” she said proudly, almost to herself. “How many others will be able to claim the same? Will there be enough time for you to find out?”

Reginald and Ladonna stared at

one another, neither blinking, neither surrendering. Ladonna, however, broke a sly, satisfied grin. She saw him working through the issues, deciding on the best course. His green eye was his window, but instead of a soul revealed, she could see the cogs and wheels beneath spinning and moving. What was also common knowledge was that Reginald's ego was thickly armored. He was vain and self-centered, but he knew when to sacrifice personal opinion and face to accomplish his means. In the hierarchy of things, the Order of the Black Robes was above his own

wishes, his own desires. That was what made him calculating, and that was why Ladonna knew she'd bested him.

“So,” she asked, “since I’m no longer bound to the three things you wanted me to do, I am to do two things—locate the renegade Berthal and ... what was that second thing?”

“Books?” Tythonna repeated.

Yasmine of the Delving nodded. “Yes. We know the Black Robes lost very valuable books when three from their order joined Berthal.”

“Books of what?” Tythonna asked. She glanced around the room, her eyes drinking in all the astrological parchments and the black ceiling painted with the stars. The three of them stood beneath the Book of Souls constellation, a good omen, Tythonna thought, given the vow of the Red Robes to stand as the balance point between light and dark, good and evil.

“The nature of the books is unimportant,” Belize said. He was fidgeting, his thumb playing with his black goatee, his eyes thoughtful—scheming. “All that matters is that they are dangerous

in the hands of renegades and, I might add, with the Black Robes as well.”

Tythonna glanced at Yasmine to see her reaction, but she was listening to Belize. She deferred to him, her gaze almost loving and respectful. Tythonna wondered if they entertained each other in bed, then quickly thrust the unwanted image from her mind. Personally, Belize turned her stomach.

“You’re saying I should ... steal the books back?”

“Appropriate them,” Belize corrected. “For the safety of

everyone involved. We think the Black Robes did not report their theft because the tomes were dangerous.”

Tythonna suppressed the frustrated moan building in her throat. Belize was being deliberately vague and condescending in that power-hungry manner that seemed to grip small men with too-big ambitions. Yasmine of the Delving was the head of her order and, as such, should have been the one instructing her. Belize shouldn't even be there; his presence was an unwanted and annoying intrusion.

“What is it, Tythonnia?” Yasmine asked. She seemed genuinely concerned, though distracted. Her eyes drifted in to and out of focus.

“It’s just—” Tythonnia faltered, then made a deliberate effort to ignore Belize. She faced Yasmine. “I can’t do my duty if I don’t know more. What do the books look like? Are they books of rituals? Are they cursed?”

“I told you earlier, the precise nature of the books is unimportant,” Belize snapped.

“If they’re not important, we wouldn’t be looking for them,”

Tythonnia said, her gaze fixed on Yasmine. She pleaded, hoping to shake Yasmine from her torpor, “Out of the three orders, we’re the ones who can’t afford to work in ignorance. We need all the facts so we can decide where the balance lies.”

“We’ve already decided where the balance lies,” Belize said, his agitation growing. “We’ve decided the books are to be retrieved to rest in our care, and as a member of the order, you are to carry out your duty without question. Frankly, we wouldn’t have chosen you to begin with, had it not been for Justarius’s

injuries. But rest assured, if you will not do this, we'll find someone else who can!"

"No."

Yasmine's statement was simple, strong, and without hesitation. And it saved Tythonnia from faltering under Belize's threatening glare. Yasmine's eyes seemed to regain their clarity, and even Belize acted surprised. He was ready to complain, but a glance from Yasmine stopped him. She was still master of the Red Robes, and he her servant.

"Highmage Astathan wants

Tythonna on this mission to provide a balance to the overly cautious Par-Salian and the volatile Ladonna. There is no other choice; there never was.” Yasmine took both of Tythonna’s hands in her own. “The books we seek are *The Scarred Path of the Gem*, *The Ways Lost*, and *Forgotten Tongues*.”

“I’ve never heard of them,” Tythonna admitted.

“Few have. They are books masters read from when there is nothing else left for them to learn.”

“Are they spellbooks?”

“No ... something far more

powerful. They are books of knowledge, collections of papers and diary pages and treatises, all works dealing with the years before the Cataclysm shattered the world. They are powerful precisely because anyone can read and understand them and put their knowledge to use.”

“So ... they’re books on Wyldling magic.”

“No,” Yasmine explained. “More like an accounting of the past. A tally of things missing.”

“Why does Berthal want them?” Tythonnia asked.

“We think he is searching for something,” Yasmine of the Delving said, “though we don’t know what. All we do know is that if he wants it so badly, we cannot allow him to have it. He misbalances the already uneven scales. We must know what he wants ... and why he wants it. That way, we can keep that knowledge out of his hands and out of the hands of anyone else who would dare use it for their own gains.”

Tythonna nodded. “All right, I’ll find your books.” Then, as an afterthought to irk Belize, she added. “I live to serve you, Mistress

Yasmine of the Delving.” But Yasmine’s eyes seemed remote again, lost in a maze of her own thoughts. Belize, however, appeared angry, and made no secret of his feelings as he glared at Tythonnia.

“Highmage Astathan?” the servant asked as he collected the tea glasses from the table. “Do you need anything else tonight?”

“It’s morning,” Astathan said, staring out at the curtain of purple overtaking the horizon. “The days move more quickly now, you

know. Or maybe it is my advanced age, moving quickly, forcing me to pay for my actions.”

The servant nodded politely and tried to show deference. Something obviously troubled Astathan, a weight that pressed upon his shoulders and made heavy his entire body. “I’ll be turning in soon,” he said with almost a whisper.

“As you wish,” the servant with sea-blue eyes said. He carried the glasses to the large bronze door, and was about to leave when Astathan spoke again.

“Tomorrow I commit three students to hardship ... perhaps even death. And they go willingly,” Astathan said. He shook his head. “What a burden that power is, that good men and women will die for you. How terrible a thing, loyalty.”

The chamber was quiet as Astathan ruminated aloud on those things only he saw, those tortured thoughts he alone was privy to. What he endured those past centuries, the servant did not know. But he could imagine ... indeed, he'd seen the centuries pass with his own eyes. Only his was the blessing of knowing what

tomorrow brought and knowing he could escape it. Still, he had to wonder—why was Astathan sharing his thoughts with him?

“The three renegades haven’t experienced much of the outside world. We haven’t sheltered them, but they’ve been weaned on a diet of study. I wonder if the hardship of the road ahead might not be too much for them. We’ve risen from the muck of the Cataclysm, but I wouldn’t call these enlightened times either. They face many dangers.”

The highmage studied the servant, piercing him with a

furious gaze. Those eyes, the servant realized, those eyes could divine most answers. "Watch over them," Astathan said.

"Highmage?" the servant asked.

"You're here for them, aren't you?"

The servant said nothing, his counsel better kept in silence. He was confused, however, uncertain of what Astathan wanted. Or better yet, why.

"I'm tired and perhaps I look forward to my sleep a bit too much," Astathan said finally. He ran a slender finger along the

leather binding of a book on the table. "So do this old elf the courtesy of not refuting what I know is true. I know what you are, Journeyman. I have lived long enough to have seen you before ... looking much the same as you do now, perhaps younger now than when I last saw you. One does not lead the Wizards of High Sorcery for so long without learning a dangerous secret or two."

"I see," the servant said. Part of him wanted to deny the charges; it was one of the first things taught to him, to deny and conceal. But it was obvious that the Journeyman's

masquerade as a humble academy servant was at an end.

“I’ve had some most interesting ... conversations with your predecessors. I’ve also fought one of your kind before, someone who wasn’t there just to observe, though I did not realize that until much later.”

The Journeyman said nothing, choosing instead to remain quiet, to listen, but the comment puzzled him. What did the highmage mean by “his kind”? He knew himself to be the only one traveling as he was, observing and recording history through time. It was

feasible that others might have done it before him, or after.

“Or perhaps you are the first,” Astathan mused, studying his expression. “Yes, perhaps you are ... no matter. You are here to watch, but can you do more? Will you do more?”

“I can’t alter what’s already happened,” the Journeyman said, hazarding a neutral response.

“So you’ve said before,” Astathan remarked. “But you wouldn’t be here if there wasn’t a question that already exists ... an uncertainty. The uncertainty directs you; that

much I know. Therein is your leeway.” Astathan stood and straightened his back with a slight groan. He ambled to the door. “The three renegades travel tomorrow, before the dawn. They’ll stay parallel to the road until they reach Palanthas. After that, it’s anybody’s guess where fate will direct them. In watching over them, perhaps your questions will be answered. Perhaps uncertainty will guide you to act for their benefit.”

With that, Astathan left the room and the Journeyman alone to his troubled thoughts. There was no reason to maintain the charade any

more, however, and he set the glasses down. He had to prepare for the upcoming journey.

CHAPTER 4

A Man of Shadows

The encampment was small, the tents poor shields against the crisp mountain air. A lone fire sparked and raged in the grip of the frosty weather, forcing the men and women seated around it to huddle closer and tuck their chins behind their scarves and cloaks. Over the fire rested a large pot of boiling water, tended by a dwarf with a frosted beard that served as

his apron.

Kinsley patted a few people on the shoulder for encouragement before heading for one of the tents. He was comfortable despite the cold, though he'd never gotten used to the remedy against the Vingaard Mountain chill. Beneath the layers of his cloak and his wool-lined jacket was a pouch tied by string around his neck. Inside the pouch was a boiled potato, a few hours old and still emanating the heat of the fire. It was a farmer's trick, but it worked. Regardless, Kinsley looked forward to returning to Palanthas and eating at a real inn.

He was tired of hot potato for company and cold potato for his meal.

After scratching at the growth along his jaw, he decided that he was looking forward to a good lather and shave as well. However necessary, the outdoors experience was entirely to his disliking. His round, boyish face, green eyes, and delicate fingers were better suited to seducing the daughters of noblemen and offering charms and enchantments to their wives. Potions to spark a husband's sexual fervor, trinkets to appear younger or shapely once more, scrolls to

improve private fortunes, and the rare curse to punish a cheating lover: Kinsley provided many favors for the spoiled noblewomen of Palanthas, magics often looked down upon by the Wizards of High Sorcery. And therein lay the problem; were it not for the Wizards of High Sorcery and their zealous enforcement of magical law, Kinsley wouldn't be here in the Vingaard Mountains, freezing his potatoes off.

He stood at the closed flap of the tent and cleared his throat.

“Come in,” a voice called. It was deep and sounded annoyed.

“I have to return soon,” Kinsley said as he entered the tent. He tried to sound disappointed but couldn’t wait to leave.

Berthal nodded absently as he continued reading the book set upon his lap. He was a bearish man with a black beard and mustache. His black hair was a touch messy, and he wore gray robes. Even seated cross-legged on the mat, he was imposing. In another life and without any talent for magic, he might have been a warrior. Instead, he sat, mouthing the words from the page with a scholar’s intensity. Leaning against

the tent wall was his staff, two braided pieces of wood that unraveled at the top into two dragon heads that faced each other.

“Anything of interest?” Kinsley asked, nodding to the book.

“Not interesting enough,” Berthal said, slamming the book shut. “Damn fool of a boy got caught for pinching the wrong books.” He waved the leather-bound tome to make a point. “Only a desk-trained practitioner would consider this important. Too much theory ... not enough practical stuff in it. Just like the orders.”

“What about the other books,” Kinsley asked, motioning to the three other volumes on the mat next to him. “Please tell me I didn’t break my back bringing them to you for nothing.”

“Well, you didn’t actually break your back,” Berthal said, “so I feel no pity. But here,” he said as he tossed Kinsley the tome. “Throw it on the fire. Nothing in there worth keeping, so it might as well keep us warm.”

Kinsley looked at the book and shrugged. “Don’t you think we should hold on to them, just in case?”

“Just in case this Wyldling magic doesn’t work, you mean?”

“Honestly, Berthal,” Kinsley sighed. “Are the old ways really so terrible?”

“These are the old ways,” Berthal replied. He held up his hand. Liquid light flowed from his elbow, up the column of his forearm. Threads of yellow energy undulated between his fingers and were spent in pops and snaps. Berthal’s eyes sparkled with their light; he delighted in the touch of raw, naked magic, unformed and uncontained by spell or word, ready to become something at the merest

provocation. Pure, shapeless energy. Wyldling energy. It was the spark of creativity and the flush of inspiration before the artist turned it into something manifest.

“You know what I mean,” Kinsley said. He worried when Berthal got into those almost ecstatic states, as if he might lose himself and never return.

“Very well,” Berthal said. He sounded frustrated. His fingers flared open, and the light vanished, but the magic was never so easily dismissed. That which was called would never return willingly. Pages fluttered in the tent; the

flame in the hooded lantern turned blue; two books rose an inch, then fell; Berthal's eyes went white, then returned to normal; the temperature increased by several degrees inside the tent.

“We can't keep hiding like this,” Kinsley said.

Berthal was silent a moment, his eyebrows arched together in troubled thought. “I know,” he replied. “More recruits are on their way. Then we'll move down the mountain. Someplace warm ... warmer at least. So go. Back to Palanthas with you, and have a stout for me. We'll join you soon

enough.”

Kinsley nodded and weighed the book in his hand. “It’s risky ... calling in these favors from our spies. What are you looking for?”

Berthal tapped one of the books next to him in thought. “Hope,” Berthal finally said. “And a weapon against the wizards.”

“Our army is growing.”

“No ... armies are for war. To be slaughtered,” Berthal said. “I’m not looking for an army; I’m looking for a solution.”

Kinsley hesitated, uncertain of Berthal’s meaning, but the large

man had gone back to thumbing through the books. It was time to return to Palanthas, Kinsley realized. Maybe something would turn up in their favor.

CHAPTER 5

Three Travelers and More

It was too early to call it true morning, and the world still slept under skies suffused a deep purple. A mist gripped the earth, haloing trees with a ghostly nimbus and engulfing the landscape in the otherworldly.

Tythonnia pulled the gray cloak about her neck more tightly in the hopes of driving away the fog's chill touch. Her travel garments

were road-beaten leathers and suede—her pants and tunic, her boots and hooded cloak belonged to her during her time working on the farm, and all were perhaps a bit snug nowadays. She was used to toiling outdoors, but the past few years behind desks had winnowed away some of her muscle. That said, her nostrils welcomed the country air and her lungs swelled with each fresh breath. There was no moldy parchment, no ancient stone to spoil the smell of the outdoors.

Still, the words of Astathan rang in her ears, his final instructions to

the three “renegades.”

“Finding Berthal will be tricky, for to approach him you must impress and fool his lieutenant.”

Tythonnia patted the neck of her horse, a strong Northern Dairly over fifteen hands high and colored chestnut with golden highlights. It was a sturdy riding horse and built more for distance than speed. Still, the animal reminded Tythonnia of her farm days, of taking the horses out for a jaunt over the plains; and it was everything she could do not to spur the horse forward at a gallop. But her companions were obviously not comfortable riders—

or at least, not comfortable enough to encourage their steeds into a race. Tythonna turned in her saddle to check on the other two.

No, most certainly, they did not appear comfortable.

“Par-Salian will lead,” Astathan had said. “As the oldest among you, he possesses the wisdom and the experience to hold you true to your course. You will defer to him.”

Par-Salian had ridden horses before, but not with the familiar skill that Tythonna possessed. She could see the affluent breeding in him, the privileged life of wealth

and status. He didn't strike Tythonna as a nobleman; the arrogance was lacking, and the humility was something she'd expect from one raised among the clergy. Still, he rode his stocky gray Qwermish heavy horse with its smooth, long mane and wore his new travel garments undaunted. To his credit, he was enjoying the experience. He offered a small smile to Tythonna and continued studying his environment as though confronting it for the first time.

Ladonna was a different matter.

“Your destination will be the city of Palanthas,” Astathan had

continued, “where, we’ve learned, a lieutenant of Berthal operates. We do not know his name, but make your gifts in magic known, and it’s likely he will find you. For this, you will need to rely on Ladonna’s help. She was raised in Palanthas and knows its streets well.”

Ladonna, one of beauty’s paragons and both cunning and graceful, looked anything but, that morning. Although her robes were gone, her leather pants, her riding boots, her jerkin, and her cloak were all equally black. Like Par-Salian, her travel clothes were new

and hardly creased. She rode an Abanasinian bay over sixteen hands in height. She appeared tiny in her saddle, next to its broad head and long back, but it was a calm beast and sensible, not given to panic, easily the best choice for a novice. Yet Ladonna gripped the reins hard enough to strangle the blood from her fingers and seemed naked without her customary array of jewelry. Still, a rich finger or three bore rings, and a silver necklace set with precious stones dangled about her neck. The others had tried to convince her to remove them, but the best they got was her

promise to keep them hidden. Even then, a wink of silver appeared from beneath her jerkin.

Ladonna caught Tythonnia staring at her, and clamped her jaw down in determination. Tythonnia tried not to smile too broadly and turned forward again.

“The trip will be arduous and the road unforgiving. For that, look to Tythonnia. Her experience in the wilderness will see you through the journey.”

Morning finally surrendered to the dawn, and the rising sun burned away the mist. They were

hours gone from the city gates of Solanthus, though the twin spires of the city, the two great pillars of rock that rose above the walls and curled gently away from one another, were still barely visible in the distance. The path they rode was hammered into the grass and raw earth by the hooves of cattle herds. Solanthus was a trade hub, especially for livestock and grains. Roads, both paved and not, radiated from it like the rays of a broken sun.

Their route was relatively isolated and far from the tolled roads that the guilds of Solanthus

maintained. It was rough ground, to be sure, but it offered anonymity as it drove straight north into the fertile Plains of Solamnia.

“And why aren’t we on a paved road?” Ladonna asked, her voice jarred by her horse’s steps. “There’s one a few miles west that leads straight to Castle Di Caela. From there we can take the road to Hartford and follow the river up to Vingaard Keep. You know, we might even be lucky enough to find a wayfarers’ inn or two along the way,” she added, her voice coy and seductive with the promise of luxury.

“That sounds ... wonderful,” Par-Salian said.

Already, he was looking forward to hot baths and warm meals. He was falling for the promise of an easier journey. Tythonnia hated to disappoint them, but ...

“That wouldn’t be smart,” Tythonnia said. “Castle Di Caela and the road leading to it are controlled by the Knights of Solamnia. They’d question us about Solanthus, about the guild masters and the strength of the guild militia. And if they knew we were wizards, they’d assume we were renegades and turn us over to the

Orders of High Sorcery in the hopes of a reward.”

“But we aren’t renegades. The orders would know that,” Par-Salian said.

“No,” Ladonna replied. “Only the masters know about our mission. We’d be freed, eventually—maybe—but they’d consider the mission a failure.” Ladonna shot Par-Salian a venomous look of surprising animosity, and added, “And *I* don’t have the luxury of failing *my* order.”

“Well ... neither do I,” Par-Salian replied, perplexed by Ladonna’s

sudden vitriol.

Ladonna retreated into silence again and continued riding. Tythonna exchanged a glance with the red-faced Par-Salian, but he was clearly embarrassed. Why, Tythonna couldn't say. They rode quietly for the next few hours.

The female servant with pale skin and auburn hair bowed as she swept open the door for the renegade hunter Dumas. The atrium beyond was a marvel of gardening, the flowers bright and colorful, the birdsong relaxing.

Pink-flowered apricot trees offered shade to the benches below while tall juniper shrubs marked the shoulders of the path. Vines grew along the red columns and plaster walls, lending the atrium an air of cultured abandonment.

The servant closed the atrium door behind Dumas, leaving her to the seclusion of the large garden. Rather than surrender to the surrounding beauty, however, Dumas stalked the cobblestone footpath, ears pricked to every sound, eyes sharpened to every shadow. The pathway and high shrubs opened into a small, circular

court made of polished mirrorstone with a grand elm growing at its center. Beneath the tree stood the red-robed Belize.

“You summoned me,” Dumas stated simply.

“I did,” Belize replied with equal precision. “Did you tell anyone you were coming?”

Dumas shook her head. When serving the Wizards of High Sorcery, it was often prudent to follow every word of their instructions. Magicians were fickle creatures given to precise standards. Carelessness cost lives in

their craft—or worse. Timing mattered, words were chosen for meticulous reasons; no interpretation was permitted. Interpretation meant increasing the odds of failure. And wizards could ill afford to fail because in magic, failures could be *spectacular*.

“Excellent,” Belize replied. “Your reputation is well earned, I see.”

Dumas, however, said nothing. Compliments did not interest her. In fact, they annoyed her. She continued listening, surrendering nothing, not even a smile.

“As I’m sure you well know, the

number of renegades and theft of High Sorcery property is on the rise.”

That was not news to Dumas, she who was already involved in apprehending a handful of wayward wizards and stolen artifacts, all successfully, she noted with some satisfaction.

“Unfortunately, three students have gone missing, and we suspect them of trying to join the renegade Berthal.”

“We?” Dumas asked. She looked around to emphasize her curiosity.

“Well, therein lies the problem,”

Belize said. “Two of the students are prodigies, the chosen pets of their colors. Par-Salian of the White Robes and Ladonna of the Black. Both of them are—were—very much the pride of their orders. As such, Highmage Astathan and Master Reginald Diremore are too embarrassed to make such a request themselves. This reflects badly upon them, you see.”

“And the third renegade?”

“One of our own. A Red named Tythonnia. Nobody of consequence really, but still embarrassing for us, you understand.”

Dumas wondered if he would ever get to the point.

“I think it most prudent, for the sake of the orders,” Belize said, “if these three renegades were apprehended and eliminated, yes?”

“Eliminated?” Dumas asked, surprised.

“Yes ... an embarrassment of this magnitude could prove costly to our society.”

Dumas scowled and studied Belize carefully, trying to divine his motives. The three orders had three customary ways of dealing with renegades. The Whites advocated

capturing the targets and trying to redeem them; the Order of the Black Robes used death and sometimes even torture to deal with traitors; while the Reds fell neatly between both extremes. Not only was it strange for a red wizard like Belize to make such an extreme request, but to do so without the open support of Yasmine of the Delving, Reginald Diremore, and Highmage Astathan was highly suspect.

“I will need the sanction of the masters of the orders,” Dumas said.

“I speak for Yasmine of the Delving,” Belize said. “And besides,

the masters are too embarrassed by this betrayal to speak openly of it. I do it in their stead.”

“Then let them tell me that,” Dumas replied. “I am discreet with the society’s business, but I am not an assassin to be sent on private errands.” She turned on her heel and stalked away. The conversation was at an end, and there were too many peculiarities about it not to report Belize’s request.

“Pity,” Belize said.

Dumas sensed her mistake immediately. Her hand flew to the

pommel of her blade as she started to turn, but it was too late. Belize uttered a single word; it was a thing of power but simple enough to be spoken more quickly than she could react.

“*Capik*,” Belize whispered. The word seemed to roil and echo. It struck her in the small of her back and unfurled up her spine.

The huntress was shocked. The book strapped to her chest should have stopped part of the spell, diminished its effect. Instead, she fell to the hard ground, her muscles locked and her jaw clamped down. Her body was no longer her own.

Belize smiled down at her as he rolled her onto her back and faced her to the sky.

“This won’t do,” he whispered as he ran his fingers along the bronze tome. “Not at all.”

His finger pressed something on the cover of the book, and Dumas gasped as she heard the lock snap open. He raised his hand, his fingers undulating like a spider suspended. The cover flew open, and the pages flipped rapidly.

“It’s quite the artifact,” Belize said. “I’m quite proud of having contributed to its construction. I’m

even more proud that I had the foresight to leave behind a little spell of my own crafting.” He stopped waggling his fingers, and the pages stopped turning. He leaned in closer to study the script. “Ah yes, here we are.”

Dumas struggled against the paralysis, but her body no longer obeyed her. She lay there, screaming with a voice that echoed only in her own skull as Belize spoke a spell from the book. It was a spell that seemed to unravel the very tapestry of her will ...

A breeze rustled the high grass and whispered through the leaves and branches of the copse of trees. In the distance, lights flecked the fields where farmers and woodsmen settled in for the night, their clusters of homes small islands of comfort in the darkness. It was a peaceful place, filled with the memories and the voices of the past. Tythonna could hear her parents and friends in the sounds. She could smell the lamb and potato stew that her mother made.

More so, she relished the smell of wild grass and smiled as whirring insects took to the air in fright. The

sky above blazed with a diamond-studded panorama of stars; even the air seemed so much clearer, cleaner.

Tythonna felt young again as she crept forward, deeper into the small thicket of trees. Her dagger felt reassuring in her grip. It was another reminder, a token of her past when her father taught her to hunt the land for her food, and magic had yet to dominate her life. For certain, she was grateful for her studies, but she remembered another time as well ... a time when magic was a thing of awe and wonder. It was more organic,

somehow. It wasn't fossilized in reagents or cocooned in words. It wasn't formulaic and rehearsed.

In the quiet of the hunt, Tythonnia's thoughts drifted to home. She remembered the local wisewoman, a sorcerer named Desmora. Her magic flowed naturally—a protean, Wyldling thing. Everyone told their children to stay far from Desmora, but everyone bartered with her for the goodwill of the elements all the same.

Desmora was both legend and monster in Tythonnia's childhood—a crone to be feared or adored, her

powers a frightening mystery. And more frightening was when Desmora took Tythonnia as her pupil. Tythonnia would hunt the occasional hare for Desmora, and Desmora taught her a trick or three in return. The old crone frightened her to bits, but never once did the older woman justify that fear. Desmora was primal and fierce and she knew how to whisper to the world.

For a while, Tythonnia thought she might forget that particular part of her life as she'd almost forgotten the incident involving Elisa, but out there, in the absolute

darkness of the wild, surrounded by familiar echoes that plied the strings of all her senses, the memories returned. Hunting, Desmora, the magic, her parents, her flirtation with Elisa ... all of them rose to the surface again with surprising clarity.

Her muscles remembered as well, and she continued advancing slowly, making as little sound as possible. Her eyes were well adapted to the darkness, and she could make out the tan Heartlund hare. Tythonna raised her dagger to throw it as her father had taught her; years of training remembered

in a rush of memories.

The hare bolted upright. Tythonnia heard it a second later; the heavy scrape of boot against earth. The hare bolted.

“Sihir anak!” a woman’s voice cried from behind Tythonnia.

Tythonnia yelped as four darts of light trailing glowing streamers appeared from over her shoulders, zipping around her body. Their glow temporarily blinded her night-accustomed eyes before they slammed into the hare. The four bolts shredded their target, blasting it apart, scattering two of its limbs

and splattering its entrails on the tree. It didn't even have time to scream. From the underbrush, more noise rose as other animals scattered.

Tythonnia whipped about to find a startled Ladonna behind her. "What're you doing?" Tythonnia said, practically screaming.

"Helping you hunt," Ladonna said. A surprised chuckle escaped her mouth. "But I wasn't expecting *that!*"

"I told you to collect firewood!"

"No need ... I cast an Unseen Servant to take care of that for us.

We have more than enough now. In fact, why are we even hunting? Can't you just use a spell to stun—"

"No!" Tythonna said. She could feel her temper slip, her voice rise in pitch, and her anger provoking the better of her. Another part of her, however, was content to let that happen. "Is everything magic with you? Can't you survive without it?"

"Better than any of you know," Ladonna said, her voice chilled.

"Really? Or maybe you just can't let anyone else prove their worth? It has to be about you and what

you can do.”

“Or maybe,” Ladonna said, “I was trying to help you.”

“You can help me by staying out of my way. I know what I’m doing.”

“Oh yes, skulking about in the darkness like a beast, that’s a fine talent. Maybe it’s not me who’s desperately trying to prove her worth.”

“I’m doing this for you!” Tythonna protested. “The both of you!”

“I don’t need your help,” Ladonna said.

“What’s going on?” a voice asked. Par-Salian stood in the shadow of a tree, his gaze curious but cautious.

Without a word of explanation, however, Ladonna turned and brushed past him as though he were nothing more than another branch. He turned to ask Tythonnia, but she was too upset to respond. She simply waved him off and shook her head. Don’t ask.

Par-Salian shrugged and followed Ladonna, leaving Tythonnia alone. A moment later, their footfalls faded Tythonnia took the quiet moment to regain her

thoughts before creeping forward again, hunting for another meal. She listened intently, but the copse was silent, its denizens scared away by the intruders and the strange scent of magic. The red wizard could sense the change as well; even her memories refused to return. They were gone, as were her feelings of contentment. It was nothing like home anymore.

Tythonna spit a curse that would have shocked her father, who always swore a blue streak, and headed back to her camp. There would be no cooked meal to warm the bones and fill their sleep

with happy thoughts. It would be rations—salted beef, pickled carrots, and perhaps a candied fig to wash down the taste.

Maybe their hunger tomorrow would instill Ladonna with some regret. Tythonnia doubted it, however.

“Where are you going?”

Ladonna didn't bother turning around to face Par-Salian. “A walk,” she said, heading for the open field. She didn't want to be around them right then. She was angry. It made it hard to think, and

more important, it made her spiteful. In that instant, she despised everyone. She hated Tythonnia and she hated Par-Salian. And Par-Salian's attempts to mollify her grated on her nerves even more.

“It's not safe out there.”

Ladonna turned around long enough to level Par-Salian with a seething gaze. “I'm sure I can handle any wayward cows,” she said.

“That's not what I meant,” Par-Salian replied. “I think we should talk about—”

“Not now,” Ladonna said as she walked away. “And I suggest you learn to understand women better. I don’t need your help.”

To Par-Salian’s credit, he didn’t pursue the matter. Ladonna marched into the darkness and continued past the high grass that stroked her hips. In the lonely quiet, her anger bled away and her nerves went still. Ladonna turned to gain her bearings; she could barely make out the clutch of trees against the distant sky, but it would be enough to guide her back eventually.

Ladonna found an outcropping

of rocks that broke the sea of grass and sat upon her granite throne. It was too peaceful out here, too quiet. Absent were the noises she found familiar, the sounds of a city that never truly slept. The noise of humanity. The sleeping breath of other children. She missed that; she missed the sense of family, the close-knit bonds that made survival more bearable. She inhaled deeply, as though winded by the memories.

What's bothering me? she wondered. She was usually in better control of her emotions. She angered too easily these days, too quick to the boiling. And too quick

after that to the overflowing, rash decisions and actions she would always regret.

It was a step back, a relapse into someone—something she was before. She grew angry again, her ire slowly flaring. She recognized elements of her old self, the volatile temper and its aftermath. The violence was still there, the child made into beast, a creature of stark instincts. She wasn't that animal anymore. In fact, she hated that animal. It took years to tame it and break its conditioning. But why was it returning? Why was she relapsing into someone she

abandoned years before?

Palanthas, she realized. Her city, her den. She was returning home, and that meant facing a legion of fears and bad memories. She was going back to face the monsters, a child at the mercy of the merciless. That alone spurred her heart to racing faster.

Sutler.

Ladonna shifted uncomfortably on the rock. Palanthas was stripping away her crafted veneer, exposing the frightened little thing beneath.

Stop this! Ladonna chastised

herself. What am I afraid of? That I'll become that child again? I am a wizard of the black robes, the most feared of practitioners, the strongest of spellcasters.

She forced herself to dispel the storm of emotions that welled within her. She was no longer that defenseless child, that urchin thief. A gulf of fifteen years separated who she was then from herself at that moment. It had been fifteen years of magical preparation and dedication, fifteen years of training to survive and surpass one life-altering test for a lifetime of power and mystical prowess. She

commanded fire, ice, shadow, wind, earth, and even death itself. She communed with those things that could not be seen, and how they feared her.

A smile crept across Ladonna's lips. Oh how she would have loved to have possessed those powers as a child, to have protected herself and provided for the brothers and sisters she made on the streets of Palanthas. She could think of a few men and women who would have benefited from her more punishing magics. The lessons she could have taught men such as Sutler ...

Sutler.

Her bones still ached from his touch.

Ladonna rose from the rocks and slowly made her way back to the others. Palanthas wasn't a reunion to be feared, she told herself. Palanthas was an opportunity to fulfill the wishes of a vindictive street urchin who never had the strength to fight back. She was returning home a conqueror, and as all conquerors are wont to do, she was looking forward to the settling of old scores.

Par-Salian continued watching

her, even after she'd vanished into the night.

Should I go after her? he wondered. When he was a young man, he'd once courted a woman who flew into tantrums and stormed off. She wanted to be chased and mollified. She wanted the attention regardless of the cost. Par-Salian hesitated. Ladonna was nothing like the women he'd bedded, albeit all those years before. The near two decades of study and consideration had softened his ardor, and the years had dulled the adventure and romantic zeal from his blood. He

questioned himself and his decisions more. In fact, Highmage Astathan's recent interest in him made him uncomfortable. He knew that the White Robes held some expectations for him, and that frightened him.

What if I fail?

What if I'm not up to the task?

Like tonight, he thought miserably. He had been asked to lead the small expedition and maintain their cohesion. Yet here they were, on their first night alone, and already he could see the schisms forming. Worse, perhaps,

nobody wanted to tell him why. Tythonnia was hunting and stewing in her anger, and Ladonna was off somewhere in the darkness, alone with her thoughts. He wanted to help her, to make things better, but her gaze spoke clearly enough. She wanted to be alone. She didn't need his help. She didn't need his leadership. She was perfectly fine without him.

And that troubled him.

Still, Par-Salian couldn't leave her alone. The Heartlund countryside wasn't dangerous aside from the occasional brigand or wandering pack of goblins, but

still, the danger was there.

“*Cas mata,*” Par-Salian muttered as his fingers danced and intertwined. He closed his eyes and felt the magic spark along his bones and raise the hair on his arms. A shiver ran its fingers up the nape of his neck, and he opened his cat-slit eyes. The world had become a monotone of green shades, but the horizon of darkness had been pushed back much further than he expected, thanks to the many stars. Off in the distance, he could see Ladonna walking blindly ahead. She must have been several hundred feet away, and in danger

of vanishing into the mist that marked the edge of his sight, the mist that seemed to obliterate the world itself.

Par-Salian stepped forward and matched her progress step for step. He would not intrude, but neither would he leave her alone.

It was only in the deepest recesses of his thoughts that he wondered why he was eager to watch over Ladonna and not Tythonnia. Perhaps it was because the Red Robe was familiar with the wilderness, but the answer came after too much searching; it felt too much like a justification. Par-Salian

did not dwell upon that, however, and continued following Ladonna. She needed him more than Tythonnia, he reasoned to himself. He was going to help her.

From the sanctuary of the tall grass, he watched them. The spell of his devising narrowing the distance between Ladonna, Par-Salian, and himself in sight and in sound. He heard them as clearly as his ears heard his own voice, saw them as clearly as his eyes saw his own hand. Despite the mile between them and the shadows of

night, he might as well have been standing next to them.

The Journeyman made himself more comfortable and watched Par-Salian keep Ladonna within sight. He observed Ladonna seated upon a rock, talking to herself. He saw Par-Salian maintain a distant vigil, his gaze scanning for danger but returning more often to study Ladonna. Did he know he was holding his breath when he looked at her?

Probably not.

He understood that, the Journeyman did. He knew the

history of the two and the events to unfold and shape their lives. But it was Tythonnia's role that remained intriguing ... that and the event that would obliterate almost all knowledge of Berthal's fate.

CHAPTER 6

Honoring the Dead

The wide, open plains that spread out to the horizon's sunlit fringes gave way to blankets of bruised clouds. Rain fell in heavy sheets, like a play with a never-ending series of curtains, and the temperature evaporated at the storm's touch. The three renegades rode the wet days with barely a word; they rarely spoke to one another, each somehow

inconvenienced by the others' presence.

Par-Salian had given up his attempts at banter, much to the relief of the other two. Tythonnia tried her best to teach them the necessary wilderness survival skills, while Ladonna did her best to prove she was equally capable using magic. Tythonnia searched for dry wood for the night, and Ladonna used magic to ignite wet wood. Tythonnia hunted for food to extend their provisions, and Ladonna killed larger game with her spells.

The two women were in fierce

competition, and when Par-Salian refused to take sides, he paid for it with their silence and scornful stares.

That drove the three into a deeper, more uncomfortable quiet.

The rain fell harder as they approached a branch of the Vingaard River; they were less than a day's travel from the river, but they were already well into the fertile delta called the Plains of Solamnia. Here lay the crop and cattle belt of the region, where farmers drove herds to Solanthus to the south and Palanthas to the northwest. A necklace of three

mountain ranges surrounded the plains, with the Vingaard Mountains to the northwest; Dargaard to the east; and Garnet to the south, below Solanthus itself. It created a basin where the mighty Vingaard River branched and forked into smaller tributaries. All told, it afforded for rich fields and easier flooding.

Likewise, the communities thinned out, with farmers and cattle owners clustered around the different keeps and river communities. Unfortunately, that little fact exacerbated the friction between the three wizards. Par-

Salian advocated staying close to the roads and paths for safety. Ladonna wanted to spend the night in an inn, where they'd be warm and wonderfully dry. Tythonnia, however, insisted on sticking to the wilderness, where they could avoid civilization and the threat of discovery.

“You’re not happy unless we’re all miserable!” Ladonna said.

Tythonnia almost growled. She was tired of that argument every few miles. Couldn’t they understand how their course helped them? What was she supposed to do? Order the elements to comply

to Ladonna's whims? Turn around because their resident Black Robe fretted?

"You can't spend your life being pampered!" Tythonnia shot back. She prodded her horse forward.

"Pampered? I've lived hardships that would have killed you, farm girl," Ladonna said, nudging her own horse forward. Her skills as a rider had improved substantially, which annoyed Tythonnia. She preferred Ladonna when she was too focused on riding to complain.

"I'm sure wearing all that jewelry is such a terrible burden!"

“Tythonnia,” Par-Salian said, “Ladonna, stop bickering!” His voice was low. Perhaps he was fatigued. But Tythonnia recognized the edge to it, the frayed nerve about to snap.

Ladonna pulled hard on the reins and wheeled her Aban-asinian about. “Perhaps if you chose a side —”

Par-Salian laughed, a bitter guffaw that cut Ladonna off and showed the exhaustion in his rain-streaked face. “Choose a side? Is that what you think? This is what I get for trying to support you both? Fine ... here’s my side. How about

you show that backbone the Black Robes are so renowned for and stop complaining! You do your order a disservice. And stop trying to undermine everyone's authority! Until we reach Palanthas, you follow Tythonnia's lead and my instructions!" He turned on Tythonnia next. "And you ... take us closer to the roads where the travel will be easier, and find us a damn inn for the night so we can sleep properly for once. No arguments! I will suffer no more disrespect from either of you. Once you've spent another ten years within the orders, serving them to

every bloody inch that I have, then maybe you can address me as an equal. Until then, I find you wanting—in age, in skills, and in manners! Now shut up. Do you hear me? And I swear ... one more argument, and I'll give you both a lesson in magic you won't soon forget.”

They sat there a moment, their horses uneasy in the storm of rain and argument. Both women stared at Par-Salian in shock; they'd never seen him so short-tempered. Until then, he'd taken matters in stride, perhaps too much so. They could see the raw, exposed nerve now.

Whether or not Tythonnia agreed with his outburst, it was no time to argue her position. She nodded her head and wheeled her horse about.

“This way,” she said. “There’s a village nearby, I think ... maybe they have a barn we can use.”

A triumphant smile began to mark Ladonna’s lips, but Par-Salian silenced it with a glare. He would brook no more quibbling that night, for which Tythonnia was grateful. She wasn’t sure how much longer she could hold her temper in check. She wasn’t sure how much longer any of them could hold back. She hoped a night spent

somewhere warm and dry would improve everyone's disposition.

Tythonna, Par-Salian, and Ladonna stared at the village in disbelief. A road eaten into the plains' grass served as its axis. No more than four or five buildings dotted either side, likely once small shops that catered to travelers and local farmers—a trading post, a smithy, a tavern. Fire, however, had made them indistinguishable. Bodies lay in the streets, some purple and bloated in rainwater puddles, others charcoaled by the

flames. The sky seemed to cry harder at the sight, and the curtains of rain drenched the macabre stage.

The three exchanged glances, uncertain of what had transpired here. In the mud lay a sword or two, and an ominous farmer's scythe stabbed into the spine of the ground. Otherwise, there was nothing to show for their deaths, no arrows or dead horses, no signs of battle. Just corpses and the cindered remains of buildings.

"We should leave this place, I think," Ladonna said.

“We can’t leave the bodies out to rot,” Par-Salian whispered.

“We’ll tell one of the neighboring villages,” Tythonnia said. “Hartford is a day’s ride from here.”

“Whatever killed them might still be about,” Par-Salian said.

“Exactly why we should go,” Tythonnia replied. She glanced around and was sickened by the charred body of someone too small to be an adult. A fabric-sewn rag doll, untouched by the flames, lay inches from the corpse’s fragile hand. Tythonnia looked away.

“No,” Par-Salian said. “I will not send more villagers to their doom. Not without knowing what unfolded here.”

The same thought must have crossed Ladonna’s and Tythonna’s minds because neither of them pressed the matter. They would follow Par-Salian. He was older than both of them, and while age counted for little, he was rumored to be in line to lead the White Robes. That meant there was tremendous magic at his disposal.

Ladonna climbed down from her horse.

“What are you doing?” Par-Salian asked, his voice an urgent hiss.

“You wish to play leader? Fine!” Ladonna said. “Good leaders know when to rely on the expertise of their allies.”

Tythonnia bit her tongue as Ladonna handed her the reins of her horse. The black robe wizard calmly walked up to one of the unburned corpses as though long intimate with it. She kicked away a rag doll lying near the body and managed to turn the corpse over onto its back with the tip of her boot.

Tythonna could not stop staring at Ladonna in that moment. There was something in her expression, the mesmerizing and lethal grace of someone utterly sure in her craft. Magic was a dance for her, sometimes the dance of a seductress and sometimes the dance of a tribal warrior. Silently, Ladonna knelt in the muddy soil and removed her gloves. With practiced hands, she clasped the sides of the dead man's face and opened his opaque eyes with her thumbs.

Ladonna leaned in close, as though to kiss the corpse. She

began whispering to it, her breath congealing as cold vapor. A trickle of mist seeped from the corpse's lips.

The Black Robes and their skills in necromancy were renowned among wizards, and frankly, the skills of healing and resurrection powers once attributed to holy women and men were skills of the distant past, things of legends. No, she was not healing him or bringing him back to life. She was stroking the tattered veils that bordered the lands of death. She was coaxing a little of what was left back into its vessel. The corpse

was no more living than an echo of the original voice.

Par-Salian blanched and looked away; necromancy was a controversial art, surrounded by its most vocal Black Robe supporters and White Robe detractors. The Red Robes remained neutral, as always, judging the situation and not the practice. Tythonnia continued watching out of curiosity because she'd never seen anyone use the magic of the dead before. It distracted her from her nagging thoughts, that there was something she should have noticed. But the whispers of the dead swelled the

air, their ghostly strokes falling between the patter of droplets and finding all the negative spaces to fill. Tythonnia couldn't understand their words, but the dead were speaking and Ladonna was listening.

Even when the corpse tilted its head up to within an inch of Ladonna's ear, even when it reached up to stroke her face and stopped just shy of Ladonna's cheek, Ladonna never flinched or appeared distressed. Tythonnia marveled at her bravery and had to wave a startled Par-Salian back from saving Ladonna.

Whatever Tythonnia was overlooking, however, continued to nag at her. It would not remain silent, even with all her attentions focused on Ladonna. She shook her head the same way she might shoo a fly bothering her and looked around. What was she missing? What was so important that—

Tythonnia's eyes flew to the rag doll that Ladonna had kicked away from the corpse. It was still resting where it lay. She looked to find the other doll near the burned child, but it was no longer inches from her fingers. It was several feet away, closer to Tythonnia and Par-

Salian.

The blood froze in Tythonnia's veins, exposing her stomach and chest to an ice-water chill. She looked around and saw another rag doll and another. All lay in the mud, all near bodies or in the ruins of buildings, yet somehow untouched.

Tythonnia stared from doll to doll and from shadow to shadow, and while she saw none of them move, each seemed somehow closer than the last time, their limbs in different positions.

“Par-Salian,” Tythonnia said,

trying to keep track of the rag dolls. She counted six ... then seven. “The dolls!”

“What?”

Ten dolls rested in places Tythonna knew there hadn't been any dolls before. And they were edging closer.

“The dolls!” Ladonna shouted as she rose from the mud. Her fingers were scrambling for her reagents pouch. “The dolls murdered everyone! They're alive!”

No longer bound by pretense, the heads of the dolls snapped upward in unison. There was a greenish

glow to their wood-button eyes, and their stitched mouths strained open, tearing the burlap fabric. There was malice in their expressions and rage for anything living.

The dolls scrambled forward in the mud like a pack of dogs. There were more than a dozen, and they moved with frightening speed. They emerged from the burned buildings and crawled out from puddles, from beneath the mud and under the bodies.

Tythonna had never seen such terrifying venom in their expressions. Par-Salian tried to cast

a spell, but the creatures upset the horses. Tythonnia struggled to control her Dairly, and Par-Salian flipped over backward as his Qwarmish reared up on its hind legs. The only one in a position to fight was Ladonna.

“Sihir anak!” she shouted, and four darts of light flew out in different directions from her finger. Each found its target with unerring accuracy, and blasted four dolls backward. Without pause, however, the slightly blackened and damaged dolls were back on their feet, racing to overtake the three wizards.

Par-Salian cried out, and Tythonnia regained control of her mare in time to see one doll on his back, biting his shoulder. There was no blood to be seen, but Par-Salian was in agony. He tore at the doll, but it would not let go, and more were advancing on him.

Tythonnia kicked her horse into motion and bore down on Par-Salian. He'd just managed to pull the doll from his back and throw it to the ground, but five others were mere feet away. With the reins quickly looped around her wrists, her fingers danced together as Tythonnia called, "*Khalayan*

perubahan!”

As with all illusion spells, Tythonnia concentrated on the glamour and its intention, on the effect that would unfold. The magic found its mouth through her fingertips, and her eyes felt hot as it surged through and out of her. Arcane threads briefly manifested in the air and shot into Par-Salian. He vanished and instantly reappeared two feet away.

He appeared startled, as did the dolls. They hesitated a moment before shifting direction and charging toward Par-Salian. The dolls leaped at him and passed

right through him. Tythonnia was grateful that the illusion worked, but it was a brief reprieve at best. The dolls were already looking around, trying to find the wizard.

Par-Salian, however, was ready for them. Because it was her spell Tythonnia could see him clearly. He hadn't budged; her magic had merely displaced his image. Par-Salian's fingers and mouth were already moving, ambient flickers of magic coruscating around his body. Palms directed downward, he whispered and the air hissed as a sphere of flame unfurled beneath his hands. The ball of fire crackled

and steamed with the downpour, but it was not quenched. Par-Salian pointed at the dolls and the ball rolled through the air toward them. It caught one doll then another. It danced and burned at the behest of Par-Salian's outstretched hand, tumbling this way and that, sweeping through the dolls, dousing them in fire.

Tythonna pulled on the reins and forced her mare to trample the dolls coming toward her, but they were quick underfoot and dodged the mad, panicked dance of hooves.

Ladonna lost none of her grace.

She stood her ground as a half dozen dolls scrambled to overtake her. Suddenly, one of the gaudy ring stones on her finger flickered, and as her arms swept the ground around her, a curtain of fire erupted from the earth. The wall steamed under the rain and caught a handful of dolls in its heat. The others turned and scampered back into the buildings' dark ruins.

Tythonna's horse bucked and she cursed herself for getting so distracted. Several dolls were already at its hooves, trying to leap onto its legs. One managed to clamp on and bite, and again, its

soft mouth seemed to draw no blood. But the Dairly whinnied in pain and reared back. Tythonnia lost her balance and fell into the mud.

The fall drove the wind from her lungs and knocked her senseless. Something in her mind screamed at her to get up and fight, but her thoughts were muddled. Dancing dangerously close to her, the horse bucked and kicked, trying to knock the dolls loose. Only a couple attacked the horse, however. Four, or perhaps more, had turned on Tythonnia. She screamed in pain as the first doll bit into her calf.

The bite itself wasn't very deep, but the doll's mouth seemed laced with something that burned her skin with an unholy pain, a lancing agony that impaled her leg and sucked her strength through the wound. She felt weakened even as her blood pushed her heart faster.

"No, no!" she cried, fighting to pull the doll from her leg, as another doll bit into her forearm. Strength faded and she thought she might pass out.

"Discipline through pain," a voice said. It echoed somewhere deep inside her thoughts. Tythonnia dimly recognized the voice. It

belonged to a trainer, a veteran taskmaster named Segarius. Her teacher, Amma Batros, had asked Segarius to put Tythonnia through her paces in preparation for the test.

“Use the pain to provide focus. Focus is clarity and clarity is magic.”

“I can’t think! Stop! Please!”

“The test is merciless, so why should I be any different? Don’t think! Act!”

A third doll bit into her arm and overwhelmed her in pain. It rode the senses; she was suddenly bereft

of the right words, the correct motions to unlock the magic spells stored in her head. She felt a sudden void where the knowledge was supposed to be; the bizarre dolls were sapping her strength and her ability to think, to react.

Save me, she thought, hoping the others would somehow hear her, but they were caught up in their struggles, and her horse was racing away with two dolls latched onto it. Through tear-swollen eyes, she could see more dolls running toward her. And still the magic refused to come. Tythonnia could recall nothing beyond that moment

of pain.

She couldn't remember the magic, but there was once a time when she could *feel* it. Long before Amma Batros taught her to read arcane script and unlock the power hidden in reagents, long before the High Sorcery wizard found her on her father's farm, there was the crone Desmora. Desmora could whisper to the world and have it heed her words. Desmora taught her how to bend the elements to her whim without words or dancing fingers, just using naked will to harness magic.

Tythonna felt raw energy surge

along her body and down the channel of her arm. She thrilled at it. From her outstretched hand, Wyldling magic curled and popped between her fingertips, and she grabbed the first doll. It jerked in her grip, and the stray ends of straw that poked out from the lining of its burlap skin caught fire. A hissing shriek escaped its lips before the glow of its button eyes dimmed and it went limp.

She pulled it away in time to grab another doll and send another electric charge into that little monster. It, too, shrieked and fell. The pain diminished even though

one doll remained firmly clamped on her thigh and several more were charging her.

Memories returned and with it, her training. Suddenly, the lessons of Amma Batros and Segarius flourished in her thoughts.

Her fingers danced and connected before the next wave of dolls could reach her.

“Sihir anak,” Tythonnia whispered.

The words evaporated. Four darts shot out, two arcing back to strike the one biting into her thigh, the other two slamming into the

lead doll. The doll stumbled and fell, while the one latched to her thigh was blasted loose, never to rise again.

The pain vanished almost immediately and Tythonnia could feel her strength return in full force. More important, she could think clearly, and with that came the anger at what she'd done. To have retreated to unsanctioned, chaotic magic and forgotten her training shook her to the very core. She was proud to be a wizard of the Red Robes, but to have abandoned her discipline in a moment of panic was unforgivable.

Anger gave way to rage, and Tythonnia pulled a pinch of powder from a small belt pouch.

“Corak pesona!” she said as she released the spell material. In her mind, the powder overtook the dolls racing for her and another ribbon script of magic was unwritten.

The powder fanned out into a cone of violently clashing colors. It swept over the attacking dolls, and instantly, all four fell into the mud. Tythonnia quickly crawled to them and began stabbing them as hard as she could. It only took a stroke or two before the light dimmed

from their button eyes, but Tythonnia stabbed each a couple of times more for satisfaction and good measure.

The three wizards surveyed the damage about them. Fifteen or more dolls lay scattered in the mud, some burned, others ripped apart. Tythonnia, Par-Salian, and Ladonna said nothing. They were too tired, too exhausted from the battle that had sapped their strength and pushed their magics to the breaking point. Ladonna seemed to have fared better than

the rest of them, never once succumbing to the dolls, while Par-Salian looked downright miserable with his hair and clothing caked in mud.

“What’s happened to your hair?” Par-Salian said, looking at Tythonnia.

Tythonnia’s hand went to straighten her blond locks, but it was hard to find them beneath the layer of mud that covered her. Even the rainstorm was hard pressed to rinse her clean. Tythonnia and Par-Salian laughed so hard, it was impossible to stop or stand straight. Even a stern look

from Ladonna fueled their laughter even harder.

Ladonna allowed her two compatriots to ride out their mirth until they were too exhausted to offer anything but a chuckle. Finally, she asked, “What about the dolls that escaped? I counted two or three of them. And there’s the matter of their creator,” Ladonna said.

“Creator?” Par-Salian asked.

“Yes,” Ladonna replied. She motioned toward the body of the dead villager, the one she spoke to earlier. “He told me that the dolls

belonged to an old man living on the edge of town.”

“We must rest first,” Par-Salian said, levity instantly forgotten.

“No,” Tythonnia said. “This isn’t our concern.”

“He murdered these people,” Par-Salian said, motioning to the corpses around them. “He nearly killed us!”

“I think he should die,” Ladonna said.

“Wait, wait. I didn’t say that either,” Par-Salian protested.

“It isn’t our problem,” Tythonnia said. “It isn’t our place to bring him

to justice, only to report him. Our priority is finding our horses and reaching Palanthas.”

“We should at least bring him before the conclave,” Par-Salian said.

“To what end?” Ladonna retorted. “To assuage your guilt for leaving him alive? I say kill him.”

“No,” Par-Salian replied. “And that’s final, Ladonna.”

“Then leave him for the conclave,” Tythonna said. “Send them a message, and let them decide what to do about him. We need to keep going.”

Par-Salian shook his head slowly as he pondered the matter. It wasn't an easy choice, Tythonnia knew, but none of them were ready to capture a renegade, much less drag him back across the countryside to Solanthus. That would not only delay them, it would endanger their identities as well. It was better to leave him for the conclave to deal with.

“We find our horses,” Par-Salian announced finally, “and continue on to Palanthas. I’ll alert Highmage Astathan as to what’s happened here.”

To Tythonnia’s surprise, Ladonna

said nothing.

It had taken them an hour to find the three horses. Tythonnia's Northern Dairly had managed to lose her two attackers along the way, though where the dolls had escaped to was anyone's guess. The three wizards decided to camp at the spot where they'd found the Dairly, in an open field good for grazing with a nearby cluster of five trees. Though all three were exhausted, Ladonna offered to take the first watch while Par-Salian and Tythonnia slept beneath the

cloudlike canopy of the green ash.

“You can cast while riding,” Par-Salian said to Tythonnia, as they made ready to sleep. “Nifty trick, that.”

Tythonnia blushed at the compliment. “I was taught to spell-ride. I can cast some spells from horseback.”

Par-Salian nodded in appreciation. “I’m glad you can. You must teach us how you do that.”

Tythonnia nodded before her eyelids fluttered heavily. “We have the time for it,” she said with a

yawn. Her eyes closed.

A moment later, Par-Salian's eyes closed as well.

Ladonna paced around to stay awake. She would have loved to sleep, but her mind was in turmoil as it analyzed scenarios, went over plans of action, and argued with itself. She understood their obligation to the mission, the need to reach Palanthas. It was a reunion she herself eagerly and nervously awaited. But there was the matter of the monster that had animated the dolls. Par-Salian and Tythonnia opposed his execution, which was expected, considering

the robes they wore, but they hadn't heard the dead one speak. They hadn't heard the dead cry out for vengeance. Ladonna had. She'd heard the terror in their voices, the ghosts of parents searching for their children, the ghosts of children crying to be held. Neither ever seeing the other. They would never be reunited and move beyond the pale of life until someone satisfied their need for justice.

The villagers were more than just terrorized and murdered. They were torn from life, their every connection broken until there was

nothing and no one to remember who they were. Ladonna could not abide that. Ghosts created in that fashion would never rest until satisfied, and without rest, they would haunt whomever came upon them.

By no means were the Black Robes saints. In fact, murder and terror were well-regarded tools in their repertoire, but they did not condone either without regard for the specific benefit to the Order of Black Robes first and the Society of High Sorcery second. It was necessary, since many felt that the line between Black Robe and

renegade was thin at best. So the members of Ladonna's order, while advancing personal wishes, always used "benefit of the order" to legitimize their actions in the eyes of others.

Ladonna sighed. The old man responsible for crafting the dolls was proof that magic needed rules, that Ansalon itself needed the orders. She understood the mission, but sometimes the needs of the moment temporarily took precedence over longer-term ambitions. Ladonna knew what needed to be done, and it would be her responsibility alone. She waited

a half hour longer, until she was certain her companions were sleeping deeply.

She circled the small cluster of trees once in a wide arc while swinging a tiny bell from a silver string. She incanted the words, barely stirring her own ears with her whispers, and felt the magic slip through her feet and fall along the path she'd trodden. The circle was complete and if anything broke its borders, the spell's cry would be shrill enough to wake the dead.

At the very least, she wouldn't be leaving her companions without an

alarm. She only hoped that she would be back before they awoke.

The rain had lessened by the time Ladonna spotted the old man's cabin; it was out of the way and at least twenty minutes from the ruins of the small village. With any luck, Ladonna thought, she could be done and back at the camp within another hour. Ladonna dismounted from her Abanasinian and patted the tall horse on the neck, grateful for its calm temperament. She tied its reins to a nearby tree stump and

walked slowly to the cabin. Its ragged curtains were closed, but the frayed edges betrayed flickering candlelight. The walls were rubble stone, cobbled together to form a low-ceilinged house. The roof was thatched and in bad need of repair. Ladonna crinkled her nose at the building; it barely managed as a barricade against the elements, much less a home.

Carefully, she nudged a corner of the wet cloth from the window, enough to afford her a peek inside. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust and another moment to suppress the shudder that ran

through her body.

The one-room cabin held little furniture—a rickety chair to lend company to the rickety table, a molding mat on the floor for a bed, and a cooking pit dug into the earth. A sewing bench rested against one side, where two dozen more dolls hung from hooks in the wall, waiting to be finished. The floor was cleared of grass and covered in a layer of packed dirt. Piled on the floor and table, however, were dozens of small artifacts and trinkets. Jewelry, coins, children's toys, gourds, bottles, a decomposing chunk of

ham already white with maggots, fabric rolls—everything stolen from town, Ladonna realized.

What held Ladonna's attention, however, was the old man himself. He sat on the bed mat, his back to the wall, attended by a half dozen dolls. Silk cloth torn roughly from a bolt was arrayed over his shoulder; an exquisite quilt covered his lower body. Two dolls fitted him with rings and necklaces, riches for their king. Another doll served him morsels of dried fish and meat from gelatin-filled pots, but the food tumbled from his lifeless mouth.

The old man had been dead for

days, by the stink of his corpse. His eyes were white, his body drying. His head lolled to one side, and food covered in maggots filled his mouth. And yet the dolls continued to cater to him as though he lived. They were his friends in life, and his death had somehow tainted them. Did they blame the villagers for his death? Ladonna wondered. Or perhaps he imparted into the dolls some loathing of his neighbors.

Ladonna didn't know. All she knew was that the companions the old man had created were killing people. Perhaps, even, they might

have killed him, though despite their hellish appearance, the dolls administered to the old man gently, even lovingly.

She didn't know or care.

Ladonna quietly stepped away from the cabin, grateful that the rain had covered her footfalls, and retreated to her horse. When she was comfortable with the distance, she turned and pointed her finger at the home.

“Be undone,” she whispered.

The ruby-colored stone set into the ring on her finger sparkled and turned into a pea-sized ball of

flame. It shot straight at the cabin, growing in size until it was larger than a horse's head. The ball struck a stone wall and exploded it inward. Almost instantly, the cabin collapsed in upon itself, the fire quick to devour the roof and everything inside that was flammable. Curls of flame licked upward.

In seconds the cabin and everything inside it were gone, destroyed. Ladonna abandoned hope of ever feeling satisfied at her actions, and simply mounted the Abanasinian. She cast a final look at the bonfire and directed her

steed back to the camp.

The three riders were similar in appearance, from their dark cloaks and hoods to their three black Blödegeld horses, a stock so stout and thick they were said to have ogre blood in them. But of all horse breeds, there were few that were as tireless and strong as the Blödegeld. It was the perfect animal for the three renegade hunters.

Dumas had been quiet the entire trip, though the trio rarely spoke. It was the quiet in each other that

they preferred, and hunting renegades for the past few years had given them a comfortable familiarity with each other. Still, Dumas knew both the slender Thoma and the bearlike Hort were troubled by her seemingly distant manner. In fact, Dumas herself was troubled by her own thoughts.

She did feel detached from everything around her, as though the roots of her feet had broken free of the soil. As though there was nothing left to anchor her in the seas of the sky. She'd been feeling that way since leaving the chambers of Highmage Astathan,

Reginald Diremore, Yasmine of the Delving, and ... Belize? Was Belize there, she wondered? No, she couldn't remember him attending when the three masters of the orders instructed her to find and kill the three renegades.

Perhaps that's what bothered her. For Highmage Astathan to condone the deaths of three wizards, regardless of their actions, was highly unusual. She quickly chastised herself. Who was she to question the highmage himself? Had anything been too untoward regarding his request, surely Yasmine and Reginald and Belize

would have spoken up.

No wait, Dumas reminded herself again, Belize was not there.

Dumas shook her head against the rain and the gauze that seemed to fill her mind. She kept seeing Belize there, sometimes standing with the others in the chamber of Highmage Astathan, sometimes alone in a strange garden. She was tired; that's what it was, or perhaps she was ill. She distracted herself as fair-haired Thoma leaned over in his saddle, low to the ground, and studied the path closely. He pulled himself back up again.

“There’s no way to track them,” he said. “Too much rain ... way too much rain. We don’t know if they’re sticking to the roads or the fields. Dumas, I tell you we’re better off racing ahead and intercepting them.”

Dumas nodded. “I thought as much. All right. There’s a small village ahead. We check there first, then head to the High Clerist’s Tower. It’s the only way to reach Palanthas. At the very least, we’re bound to catch them there.”

Hort nodded in agreement and spurred his horse forward. In seconds, the three renegade hunters

were galloping along the mud-splattered path, deeper into the thick rainstorm.

Ladonna dismounted and walked her horse to the invisible arcane boundary separating her from the camp. As she approached, she was pleased to note that it lay undisturbed, a shimmer of yellow light against the green that only she saw. With a whisper of her password, "*Daya*," she and her steed crossed over the ward without triggering it. She walked her horse over to the others and

glanced to where her companions rested.

Par-Salian was asleep, but Tythonna was seated and awake. Her gaze locked firmly on Ladonna, her brow knitted in angry furrows. Ladonna said nothing, though she was mildly surprised. She studied Tythonna, measuring her. Neither of them spoke, even as Ladonna looped the reins of her Abanasinian to the low branch of a pine tree.

So Tythonna knew, or had guessed.

Ladonna didn't bother offering

explanation or justification for being caught missing. She could have said the old man was already dead when she arrived, but it would be a weak excuse. She went there to kill him, and she would have killed him had she found him alive. Pretending otherwise was a lie, and they both knew it.

She stepped under the canopy of the tree and pressed the water from her long, black hair. She settled into her bedroll that rested on a dry bed of leaves.

“Your turn at watch,” Ladonna said as she settled down to sleep.

“I was awake,” Tythonnia whispered, “waiting for you to come back.”

“I didn’t ask you to stay awake for my benefit,” she replied as she turned away from Tythonnia.

“I won’t worry about your safety again,” Tythonnia said. “I promise you that. And I won’t say anything to Par-Salian, but when this is done, you’ll answer to the conclave.”

“I look forward to it,” Ladonna said with a smile. “Aren’t you on watch? Mm?”

“No, I’m not,” Tythonnia said.

“You left your post, which means you can have my shift too.”

Ladonna stopped herself from muttering an insult. She didn't feel much like sleeping anyway. Thus she rose and began her vigil anew, feeling the Red Robe's gaze on her back. She silently chastised herself; probably she should have cast a deep sleep spell on her companions before leaving. The rain descended even harder.

The three Blödegeld horses shifted around nervously, but Hort kept a strong hand on their reins.

Whenever they got too nervous, he clucked gently and managed to calm them again. Dumas and Thoma surveyed the destroyed buildings and examined the bodies. Perhaps more perplexing, however, were the nearly two dozen small dolls scattered about in the mud, their bodies torn and burned.

“What happened here?” Thoma said as he leaned against his longbow. Runes along its length glowed ever so slightly.

Dumas shook her head. “I’m not certain ... not yet at least. But I suspect ...” She closed her eyes and rested her hand on the tome she

carried. She mumbled the incantation and heard the pages flip open even though the cover remained unmoved beneath her palm. The words in the book slithered as she uttered them, as though suddenly uncoiled and slippery.

The spell began slipping away, and Dumas regrouped, trying to grasp it again. She managed to pull it back into her before it eluded her completely, and she felt her eyes warm to the spell's touch. Her eyelids opened to reveal silver irises, and her sight suddenly beheld more of the world. She saw

the dead bodies, the destroyed buildings, and the strange dolls. More, even, appeared as the faint echo of magic became visible to her: Crimson threads that materialized and were devoured from one end to the next; black, thorny ribbons like the tendrils of some dark plant; and finer threads that shifted hues like oily water. There were more colors, too weak to distinguish properly, shifting in and out of being.

Dumas tried concentrating on what spells might account for the echoes, but her mind refused to cooperate. She felt lost in her own

dreams, one turn behind in a maze of her own making. Whatever had happened here, however, magic was at its root.

The three renegades, her thoughts whispered. The notion was unfounded, and yet it rang with certainty. Not Dumas's own convictions, but the whispered beliefs of someone else. Who? One of the three masters? The voice almost sounded like Diremore's, Yasmine's, Astathan's, and—perhaps most strongly—Belize's voices all rolled together.

No, Dumas thought as she corrected herself. Belize wasn't

there.

It hurt to fight the voice in her head. It took too much from her to resist it. So she allowed its truth to worm its way into her heart and was rewarded with a clearer head. She suddenly felt better, as though broken of a fever.

The three renegades did this, Dumas thought and again felt better, rewarded. In fact, it seemed silly that she questioned the truth of it at all in the first place. Of course they did it; that was the only possible answer.

“The three renegades,” Dumas

said, “they’re responsible for this.”

Thoma and Hort exchanged glances.

“You sure about this?” Thoma asked.

“I’ve been told to expect this,” Dumas said, taking the reins of her horse from Hort.

“We should send word, no?” Hort said, his brow furrowed.

“No,” Dumas said, mounting her Blödegeld. “We were told to stay hidden. It’s more imperative than ever that we find the renegades and kill them before they can murder anyone else.” She nodded

to the ruin around her. “Before they can do this again and cast the name of the wizards in disrepute.”

CHAPTER 7

The Frail Path

The High Clerist's Tower stood snugly in the valley between the peaks of the Vingaard range. Beyond its walls lay the Knight's High Road, a canyon trail and the only direct route through the foreboding, snowcapped mountains to the coastal city of Palanthas. To travel around the mountains was to add months to the journey.

Even before Par-Salian,

Tythonnia, and Ladonna reached the rolling grasslands of the Wings of Habbakuk, they could see the tower. It was an impressive monument to the gods of old and the clerics who served them—one of the more imposing structures to have survived the Cataclysm that split and flooded the lands three centuries earlier.

Travelers, pilgrims, and merchants clogged the road leading to the High Clerist's Tower. Small tents of weary travelers dotted the shores of the nearby stream, though a couple of garishly painted pavilions appeared more

permanent, at least while the seasons remained favorable. Signs proclaimed their services, from offering drink and warm food to selling supplies for the journey ahead.

With each step forward, the structure seemed to grow taller and far more impressive. It was, in fact, two separate buildings, and the road split on its approach to both. The first and most imposing was the tower itself. The ground-level battlement was octagonal with giant ramps leading to a trio of portcullises on the three sides facing the grass fields. The road

split further into a trident, each approaching one of the ramps. On each corner of the eight-sided wall stood a tower bristling with arrow slits, while between them hung a string of ramparts. The central spire itself lay behind the curtain wall. It rested upon a giant octagonal base with a ring of turrets that rose higher than the battlements themselves. They, in turn, were dwarfed by a one-hundred-fifty-foot tower that surpassed them all as it rose like a spear into the heavens. It seemed a worthy companion to the surrounding mountains.

The second structure was an adjoining keep, a later addition to the High Clerist's Tower. Built by the city of Palanthas itself, the keep was blocky and relatively squat but imposing nonetheless. Where the tower rested against one side of the Knight's High Road, the keep extended to the other canyon wall. A stream ran to a portcullis gate at the foot of the keep, while the second road approached a stone ramp leading up to the main gate.

As the road split between the tower and keep, so, too, did the traffic and caravans. Pilgrims and

the sick traveled to the High Clerist's Tower. Although the gods had been quiet since the Cataclysm, many followers still made the journey to worship at its temples. Some prayed for good fortune for their businesses or families or crops, while others made the journey for one last reprieve against whatever illness had struck them or their loved ones. In fact, Tythonna could see a leper caravan moving slowly toward the tower. The other travelers steered clear of the carts that bore the yellow banners.

Merchants and others journeyed

straight for the keep and, presumably, the city of Palanthas. To the chaos of that road was added the traffic leaving the pass and heading into the Plains of Solamnia. The human flow added considerably to the din of baying animals, loud voices, creaking carts, and the clop of hooves against the cobblestone road. People argued over right of way as caravans tried passing one another and carts grazed each other.

Over the chaos presided a handful of Knights of Solamnia, a token force to orchestrate the traffic. They allowed pilgrims to

enter the High Clerist's Tower to worship at the temples—for a fee, of course—but nobody was allowed to venture beyond the second level, at least according to the knight who stood upon a wood platform, shouting information over the noise and answering questions from the dozen people standing below him.

The traffic heading toward to the gate had come to an abrupt stop.

Tythonna, Par-Salian, and Ladonna reined their horses to the side of the road, where pilgrims were selling their remaining goods and hand-carved religious icons on

blankets. A group of children, meanwhile, ran about, whooping and crying in play.

“I thought this place abandoned,” Par-Salian said.

“Abandoned? Maybe in the sense that only a handful protect it,” Ladonna said. “The temples need to be maintained and the Knight’s High Road must be protected from brigands who’d use it to tax the caravans.”

“The Westgate door *looks* blocked,” Par-Salian said.

“Trade caravan,” Ladonna said without looking. When the others

pressed her further with a glance, she continued, “From Palanthas? The knights will stop traffic and let them through after an—how do I put this delicately?—inspection.”

“They’re robbing the caravan?” Par-Salian asked, shocked.

“Robbing? Of course not,” Ladonna said with a mischievous smirk. “Encouraging, perhaps, but certainly not robbing. They ‘encourage’ caravan drivers to pay a tax to expedite the inspection. We heard about it all the time in Palanthas.”

“So they’re not stopping

anyone,” Tythonna said. “But they’ll take longer if they’re not happy with the bribe.”

Ladonna grunted by way of confirmation. It was the most words they’d exchanged in the past few days, not that Tythonna minded. “We’ll likely be waiting a couple of hours depending on the length of the caravan and the mood of the guards.”

“But—they’re Solamnic Knights, sworn to uphold integrity and faith. Why, they’re no different than the brigands you—”

“If it makes you feel better, they

give part of their earnings to the priests who maintain the tower's temples," Ladonna said. "Being good means committing the same sins but finding better justifications for them."

Tythonnia shook her head. It was typical of a black robe wizard to assume the worst of everyone else. Before she could say as much, however, Ladonna dismounted and began pulling her horse along as she examined the wares on the blankets.

"Wait, where are you going?" Par-Salian asked.

“We’re here for a few hours, and I could do with some time alone,” Ladonna said.

“We should stick together,” Tythonnia said.

“Not every bloody second of every bloody day,” Ladonna said. “I’ll meet you back here in two hours. Unless you’re afraid of being left alone?”

“That’s not the point, Ladonna!” Par-Salian said.

“Good,” Ladonna replied, drifting into the crowd and waving back at them. “Two hours it is. Ta!”

Par-Salian and Tythonnia

watched their compatriot vanish into the gathered mass.

“Maybe she’s right. I could do with a cooked meal,” he said, nodding at the pavilion-covered tavern. “And with eating at a table. I miss tables. And chairs.”

Tythonna shrugged her shoulders. “Fine,” she said, though it irked her to let Ladonna get away with her little act of disrespect. “Two hours.”

Par-Salian did little to hide his exasperation. “Tythonna,” he said. “Perhaps you should stop taking things so personally.”

Tythonnia opened her mouth to complain, but he stopped her with a raised hand. "I'd expect that of Ladonna ... as a Black Robe," he practically whispered. "You know how they are. She's been taught to be selfish. But you, you're of the red cloth. You should be open to both sides."

"What about you?" Tythonnia said, her eyebrows cocked high. "What's your job?"

"To believe in the best of you both," he said with a congenial smile. There was a sparkle to his grin, a rare thing since the trip began.

Tythonna felt the tension melt away, and she nodded with a smile. “Maybe you’re right. I could do with a couple hours alone. Go, go get your warm meal. And be careful.”

Par-Salian nodded and practically licked his lips in anticipation of sitting down to eat. Tythonna spotted a camp farther away and decided to investigate. Truth be told, she was tired of fretting over her two companions, and perhaps Par-Salian was right; maybe they all needed a break from each other.



The Journeyman watched the three wizards split up, each of them heading in different directions through the crowd. After a moment of watching them, it was easy to see where each was headed. Ladonna perused the wares being sold along the road. Par-Salian's appetite got the better of him as he tied his Qwermish to a hitching post outside the tavern. Tythonnia headed for a small encampment of travelers and their shelter wagons.

That would make his job more difficult, but of the three, history knew the least about Tythonnia. Par-Salian's and Ladonna's

contributions to the orders were well recorded and scandalized, while the Red Robe was a relative enigma, historically speaking.

He chose to follow Tythonnia.

“Welcome, sir. Sit, sit.”

Par-Salian was caught off guard when the bald-headed man rushed forward to meet him and, as quickly, ushered him to an open table. The pavilion was spacious and propped up by ornately carved poles. Six tables took up one side of the tent, while wood barrels and a makeshift bar filled the other side.

A serving boy bustled through the tent flap near the bar, and Par-Salian caught glimpse of a cooking pit outside next to the stream where they washed the dishes.

The tables were made from three barrels tied together as a base with a circular tabletop. The chairs were stools and comfortable in the short term, while the bar itself was a series of barrels with planks between them as counter space. Four men and two dwarves stood at the bar, drinking a quick goblet of something with businesslike quiet, while travelers from different lands occupied two tables.

The ground was muddy, the grass torn up by regular traffic.

“You got steel, do you?” the bald man asked. His arms were as thick as his accent, and his chest seemed to swell out into a hard gut.

Par-Salian nodded and lightly clinked the purse hanging from his belt. The man happily slapped him on the back, leaving a stinging spot, and sat him down on the stool with both beefy hands on his shoulders.

“Then you’re our most honored guest!” he said. “Name’s Tarmann. What drink to wet your lips?”

“The house brew,” Par-Salian said, hoping to hide his ignorance of the local customs and flavors.

That seemed to please Tarmann, who promptly grinned and moved off to the bar. Par-Salian had a moment’s quiet to reflect on the people around him. Finally, he felt at ease again ... normal in the company of others. A redheaded server approached the table with a pitcher and poured the cold water to the muddy ground while Par-Salian washed his hands in the stream. A moment later, Tarmann returned with the mug of beer and gave Par-Salian the run of the

menu. Unfortunately, there was only pork to be eaten warm and a crumbling rye bread, but there were a good variety of pottages including Par-Salian's favorite, a barley dish.

Par-Salian smiled at his good fortune and eagerly awaited his cooked meal.

Tarmann poured another drink from the barrel, an expensive mead he rarely served, and handed it to the dwarf with a braided beard. He offered customers a gregarious smile to their faces when their gaze

met his, but when nobody was looking, he fixed Par-Salian with look of consternation.

Finally, Tarmann motioned over the redheaded server, his young nephew. The boy obliged quickly, knowing better than to try his uncle's patience. Tarmann brought the boy behind a stack of barrels, out of sight of the customers.

“Well?” Tarmann asked.

“He's got lots of pouches,” the boy responded with a shrug. “I suppose them's the kind of pouches we was told to look out for.”

Tarmann nodded. “Right then.

Go find that cloaked lass who came in earlier. Tell her or her two mates we got someone that looks like they described. Go on now. Hurry.”

His nephew nodded and ran past the tent flap. Tarmann returned behind the bar’s counter, all smiles and eager glances at Par-Salian.

Ladonna pulled her Abanasinian gently, coaxing it along with a carrot. It didn’t really need much encouragement, but Ladonna was feeling particularly generous today. The few minutes spent alone, despite the crowd of people,

was an unexpected luxury. And she planned to indulge in its every moment.

She scoured the knickknacks and tidbits scattered about on the blankets, looking for anything that caught her eye. Most of it was of poor craft and made with even cheaper materials, much like those made by the beggar-vendors in the Labyrinth Market of Palanthas. But even the shoddiest work could be a treasure in disguise. She loved jewelry in particular, be it a rusted locket with a dormant charm hidden within or a ring with enough of an enchanted mote to

sparkle just so. Ladonna's gift lay in discovering items with a bit of magic left in them. Even if the artifact was spent of the arcane and merely an empty vessel long forgotten of its purpose, she was drawn to it.

That was how she had earned the attention of a wizard of High Sorcery. There she was, a street urchin with fingers light enough to lift any purse and a gaudy array of jewelry and forget-me-nots best left to the dung heap. She was common trash to most, but to the wizard who spotted her, the echo of magic in everything she owned was

unmistakable. If she possessed such an innate sense of the arcane, the wizard realized, then she could be trained to wield it as well. And it was easy to convince her; she took one look at the wizard's possessions and was suddenly in love with him.

Well, not him, she corrected herself, but with the power he possessed. Hello ...

Ladonna's eye caught the glimmer of a shine coming from a child's toy—a wood carving of a strange knight. There was nothing Solamnic about the ornate curves of the toy knight's shoulder pieces

and the twin mounted horns that spiraled upward from his helm. The paint was gone, leaving behind only the hint of a color, and the wood itself was cracked.

It's ancient, Ladonna realized. Pre-Cataclysm.

Whatever magic it once possessed was likely gone, but even without scrying the piece, Ladonna recognized it as a child's luck charm.

"That soldier," Ladonna said. "How much?"

"A Lord's pence," the elderly woman said.

Ladonna tossed her a copper stamped with the Lord's Palace Seal of Palanthas and grabbed the soldier. She studied the piece as she walked away, trying to divine more from it. Perhaps there was a scrap of magic left in it, enough to enthrall a child and protect him if only once. She smiled and continued walking through the crowd, searching for anything else intriguing even though she knew she was already lucky enough for one day.

It was thanks to that state of calm that Ladonna almost missed the cloaked figure moving through

the crowd. Ladonna's gaze washed over the almond-eyed woman a dozen feet away before her gaze snapped back to her. She recognized the renegade huntress Dumas from Virgil Morosay's trial. Her heart dropped and for no reason she could justify, she suddenly feared the woman who was walking away from her.

Don't be silly, you're on a mission for the conclave ... as a renegade, she added as an afterthought.

Dumas seemed intent on something. She was searching the crowd for someone.

Us.

Impossible, Ladonna thought. Why would the highmage complicate their assignment by sending a renegade hunter after them? It didn't make sense, but it seemed too great a coincidence that Dumas was there at the same time as they were.

Maybe Highmage Astathan sent the renegade hunter to help us? Then why not mention it before, Ladonna answered. Hope could be a strong motivator, but it was a poor planner. Ladonna had learned that the hard way growing up. No, it was better to prepare for the

worst. And the worst thing she could imagine right then was that the renegade hunter was after them. That was the safer assumption. If that was the case, however, who sent them and was Dumas alone?

Reginald Diremore?

Ladonna's palms turned slick with sweat. Had she overplayed her hand with Reginald? Was he more vindictive than she anticipated? Ladonna wasn't sure, but it made sense. Diremore wanted them to fail so he didn't have to challenge Highmage Astathan's faith in Par-Salian

openly.

With a sinking weight in her belly, Ladonna followed Dumas deeper into the crowd. Her thoughts were in turmoil, however. Should she turn around and warn the others? Or continue to track the renegade hunter?

Tythonnia approached the encampment of wagons on foot. There were bow top wagons with curved roofs, and box-framed wagons that looked like miniature cabins balanced precariously on their wheels. The old wagons were

all wood covered and bleached of color, but the carvings and fluting on many were intricate and beautiful. The wagons were arranged in a circle, with a communal hearth at the center.

Most people steered clear of the encampment. The Vagros were not widely trusted.

Tythonna thrilled at the prospect of seeing a legitimate Vagros caravan for a second time in her life. Following the Cataclysm three hundred years before, the Vagros began as refugees looking for new homes in the savage and broken continent of Ansalon. As

people settled into new homes and founded new communities, however, the Vagros, or “Wanderers,” emerged as those who’d developed a taste for a nomadic life. They became insular and distrusted, thieves some would say, though Tythonnia never believed the rumors fully. She held that the misconception of Vagros as thieves came about in the dark days after the Cataclysm, when theft was sometimes a necessity of survival.

Still, the humans, elves, and dwarves shunned them, but it was said their ties with the eager and

wander-struck kender were strong. In fact, Tythonnia could see three kender traveling with the Vagros, their clothing bright and garish, two with topknots, blond and brown, and one dirty-blond fellow with a short crop of hair. The kender were four feet tall, and they played games with the Vagros children, matching their energy and enthusiasm bit for bit.

Tythonnia had heard that Vagros caravans made annual stops in kender communities and in the cities of Kender-more and Hylo. The Vagros brought them gifts and stories from across the lands, and

the kender offered supplies and more stories in return. They bartered in tales and whispers of adventure.

Everything Tythonnia knew about the Vagros came from the old woman Desmora. Desmora had Vagros blood and dealings with some Wanderers, especially the clan matriarchs. It was said they shared some of the same mystic traditions, though as Tythonnia grew more skilled within the Wizards of High Sorcery, she came to realize that was a generalization of all renegade magics.

Still, the Vagros possessed what

the wizards disparagingly called “cupboard tricks,” and such minor magic exerted a hold over small communities. In fact, the simple people of the land put greater stock in the good luck charms, divination readings, and crop blessings of village renegades than those of any trained wizard of the orders. That said, there were a rare few such as Desmora who had tapped into the more rare, more powerful Wyldling magic.

Much to her chagrin, Tythonnia had to admit she was fond of the old ways as well. She found comfort in them, in the home

remedies and the bits of common wisdom. It was that comfort that brought her to the outskirts of the Vagros encampment. If Amma Batros knew she was there, she'd never hear the end of it. Amma had grown up around wisewomen and seers such as Desmora. She even revered them once, but she put far more stock in the "respectable" practices of the wizards. Tythonnia, however, never shook her respect for the humbler magics and their practitioners—even when her training taught her that they were her enemy.

A trio of women peeling potatoes

next to a bow top wagon eyed Tythonnia suspiciously. Four men speaking around the pit fire also stopped and watched her approach. Only when she stopped just outside the circle of wagons did the men stand. Even the kender stopped, and while one of them smiled and seemed ready to step forward, a young Vagros girl stopped him.

Tythonnia knew her place among their traditions. With her hand light on the reins of her Dairly, she waited until the group of men approached. A Vagros with thin features, hair peppered

prematurely and a thick shadow of stubble, took the lead. He was dressed in flared trousers and black boots, his silk shirt still bright with yellow and blue hues. His thin fingers rested on his belt, close to his dagger.

“What do you want?” he said. He eyed Tythonnia suspiciously and found her wanting in his appraisals.

“I come to barter,” Tythonnia said. “A gift for the advice of your wisewoman.”

He grunted both as acknowledgment and for

Tythonnia to show her offering. She pulled a mirror from her travel pouch; its back was polished wood, its handle carved with geometric designs. It was a small indulgence of vanity that Tythonnia could do without.

The Vagros studied the mirror with disinterest, the face of a haggler. “How do we know you don’t hunt us?” the Vagros asked, not addressing her directly. “Maybe you want to hurt her.”

“I ... was a student. Of Desmora. She introduced me to Mother Benecia of the Gratos Clan. Mother Benecia honored me with a

reading.”

The Vagros studied Tythonnia under renewed scrutiny. “Desmora, we know, and we trade with the Gratos. But Mother Benecia—”

“Passed away years ago, I know. I was very young when I met her, and she was very old. I never forgot her.”

The Vagros pocketed the mirror and motioned for Tythonnia to enter the circle of wagons. He and the others flanked her as they escorted her to a box-top wagon with spiraled fluting and stars and crescent moons carved through the

wood. The windows were shuttered closed, but candlelight flickered through the carvings. The lead Vagros knocked on the door at the rear and entered when summoned. He vanished inside.

Although still under their scrutiny, Tythonnia tried not to fidget. The cabin door opened again, and the Vagros hopped down. With a sweep of his head, he motioned for her to enter. Tythonnia nodded and suddenly doubted the wisdom of her actions. It was one thing to seek Vagros counsel when she was young and didn't know better, but the Vagros

dabbled with prohibited magics. The reasons the renegade hunters and the Wizards of High Sorcery hadn't hunted them down entirely were twofold. The first was that Vagros rarely produced anything beyond folk charms—remedies, fortune-telling, and any number of other “charlatan arts”—at least publicly. The second reason was that the Vagros stood behind their wisemen and wisewomen, and any attempt to bring a matriarch or patriarch of the clan to High Sorcery judgment was met with outright and savage warfare. More than one renegade hunter had

reputedly vanished at the hands of the Vagros and more than one Vagros clan had been massacred in a horrible misjudgment. The Vagros may not have believed it, but most wizards truly regretted those incidents.

But they still couldn't condone the clans' use of magic and the rare threat of Wyldling arts.

Yet here Tythonnia found herself, ready to seek their counsel. She couldn't explain why she felt more and more comfortable remembering the old ways.

What if I'm caught? she

wondered.

Then say you were acting the part of the renegade, she answered almost immediately.

That little bit of justification was enough for Tythonnia to gird her courage, mount the steps of the wagon, and enter the candlelit cabin. The door closed behind her.

Par-Salian sopped the hard bit of bread in the barley soup and savored the warmth of his food as it slid down his throat. It was an average meal but long overdue, he thought. There was something

bothering him, however—the owner Tarmann. Par-Salian prided himself on being able to divine people's emotions and moods, and the owner was a strange one.

As Par-Salian was finishing his bowl, Tarmann became more and more agitated. When the owner thought nobody was looking, his gaze darted to the tent flap, as though anxious for someone's arrival. But did that have anything to do with Par-Salian? The White Robe wasn't sure, but he couldn't afford to take anything for granted. He reached for his purse and saw the look of panic that

flittered across Tarmann's face.

Tarmann practically ran for his table.

“Finished, are you?” Tarmann said as he approached. “You’re not thinking of leaving without trying our sweet cakes?”

“I couldn’t possibly eat another bite,” Par-Salian said. He began fishing through his purse for the right steel, but Tarmann shoved the purse away with a laugh.

“It’s on me and the missus,” Tarmann said. “Just you wait. A finer bit of sweet I’ll warrant you’ve never tasted.” With that, he

grabbed the plates from Par-Salian's table and quickly bustled off with a final glance back.

Par-Salian knew for certain now that Tarmann was trying to delay him. The reason was a mystery, and that was enough cause for worry, especially with Tarmann staring at him, as though nailing him to the seat with his very gaze. He had to escape without provoking a confrontation.

Par-Salian slowly reached for one of his pouches and removed a pinch of wool. The table covered his movements, and Tarmann took no notice as he gestured beneath

the table and whispered the words to evoke the necessary spell.

“*Capik*,” he said, feeling the energy trickle through his fingers and into the wool like warm water. The magic ate the wool, turning it to dust, and Par-Salian directed the invisible spell along the arrow of his gaze, pinning Tarmann to the floor with it. Tarmann’s eyes glazed over, and he simply froze.

Par-Salian immediately dumped coins on the table for his meal and headed out the tent flap. Tarmann had yet to react. In fact, he wouldn’t be able to for a few more seconds. Par-Salian quickly darted

into the crowd of people waiting for the gate to be cleared and caught a glimpse of a panicked Tarmann shoving past the tent flap and looking around. He cursed his luck when he remembered he left his Qwermish steed behind.

“There he is!” a voice shouted.

Several people looked about, startled, but Par-Salian recognized the redheaded server pointing a finger at him. Accompanying the server was a bear of a man with a bushy beard. He was larger than Tarmann and dressed in black with a hood pulled over his head.

Par-Salian blanched; he recognized the renegade hunter, as well as the intent in his black-eyed expression. The renegade hunter was after him, though why, he didn't know. The hunter pushed the boy out of the way then hesitated. There were too many people between him and his quarry.

Par-Salian jammed his fingers into one of his many pouches with practiced familiarity and pulled at the reagents as the spell words flew to his lips. Somewhere in his mind, a page inscribed with the ink of thought burned with a flash. The script vanished and the spell made

itself felt through Par-Salian's fingertips.

Before the renegade hunter could react, Par-Salian whispered, "*Dumak edar*," and threw the bit of bone wrapped in bat fur to the ground. Darkness exploded from the bone, swelling up into a great sphere of night that engulfed Par-Salian and the crowd around him. Nobody could see, save for the white wizard. People screamed in panic, and the mob scattered in all directions, blindly trying to escape.

Par-Salian ran away from the renegade hunter and used both the mob and the dome of darkness to

hide his retreat. He wasn't sure how much time he just gained, but he knew he had to flee toward the High Clerist's Tower.

Ladonna watched in horror as shouts pierced the air and a short distance away, a twenty-foot dome of shadows suddenly appeared. The panicked crowd surged away from the darkness, pushing Dumas and Ladonna away from it as well. Dumas struggled to fight her way upstream, but Ladonna knew better. She mounted her Abanasinian and, upon succeeding

—barely—pulled away from Dumas to search for the others. They had to leave this place, but if they didn't reach the other side of that keep, they would never make it to Palanthas. No, they had to find a way around the blocked gate.

It was only by chance that she spotted the brown-topped head of Par-Salian as he fought his way toward the keep. Ladonna kicked her horse forward and pushed through the crowd to reach him.

Tythonnia stared at

Grandmother Yassa; she had a young face, younger than hers, but such ancient eyes they might have belonged to another woman. She'd been swept past the strange whirlpool of wrinkles around Yassa's eyes and into their black pools. The young woman commanded authority with her words and her gaze. She was a stick of a person with thin fingers that spread from the branches of her thin arms. The beaded lace shawl that covered her head did little to hide her prematurely white hair. She was truly an ancient soul, young for her time.

Yet it was her words that had robbed Tythonnia of her senses and continued to echo and linger in her thoughts. Tythonnia struggled to say something, anything, but the arguments would not come.

Grandmother Yassa, however, continued as she swept up the painted cards and hid them back under the veil resting upon her wooden table. “You hide behind too many masks. You’ll die a stranger, among strangers. Nobody will ever know you. Change, or you live alone. Embrace that change, or you die lonely.”

Tythonnia nodded absently,

trying to digest the proclamation. It was true enough: Ever since the Test of High Sorcery, her life seemed to be unraveling. She was no longer who she thought she was, no longer who she wanted to be.

“Is it your aim to be unhappy?” Grandmother Yassa asked.

Tythonna shook her head. “No, of course not, but how do I know so little about myself? I feel like I’m turning into a ... stranger, as you said.”

“It is the way of things,” Yassa said, nodding knowingly. “Magic is alive, dynamic. Not even death is

stagnant. Why should you be?"

"Magic?" Tythonnia said, suddenly uncomfortable. "Why do you say magic?"

Yassa fixed Tythonnia with a scorn look that hooked into her soul. "You reek of it, girl. Your fingers are stained from powders and unguents; your hair practically dances with electricity. I smell it on you, wizard."

"I—" Tythonnia began, but the old woman cut her off with a wave of her hand.

"I also smell the older magics on you as well. You learned the wilder

ways first, did you not?"

There was no use lying, Tythonnia realized, so she merely nodded.

"Our ways are the old ways, before the moons could speak. The moons have forgotten to respect the wisdom of their elders."

"That's not true," Tythonnia protested. "It's ... more complicated than that."

"So you say. But when you are most troubled, you return for our comfort and not the wisdom of your moons."

"I thought ..." Tythonnia said,

but she bit her tongue. The Augury of Cards wasn't specific in its readings, and for all of Yassa's wisdom, she didn't know the details of what bothered Tythonnia. She knew only that something troubled her and there was an internal battle for her heart. But the words came unbidden in Tythonnia's thoughts, as did Yassa's words.

You have strangers living inside you, Yassa said. And yet they know you better than you know yourself. For they have made a home of your heart. Let them guide you.

I want children. I want to be married, Tythonnia pleaded with

herself. She had promised her mother children, had promised her father a legacy. She wanted to grow old with a man and find contentment in his love. But the stranger in her heart answered with the memory of Elisa.

“What was her name?” Yassa asked.

“Sorry?” Tythonnia said, shaken into cold panic.

“The other girl I can see by your side. The one who enters and leaves your heart freely when you yourself are locked outside of it. Who is she?”

Tythonna hesitated. She had never spoken about that to anyone before. Her inclination was to dismiss the question, to laugh it away. She opened her mouth to lie, but Yassa cocked her head in warning, as though she knew what was coming.

“Elisa,” Tythonna managed to whisper, and the sound of it on her ears sent a shock through her system. She’d done her best to suppress the memories of Elisa until the Test of High Sorcery dredged them all back up again.

“Elisa,” Tythonna repeated, just to be sure she’d spoken it aloud.

“But it’s wrong,” she said weakly.

“That is not your voice speaking. You let other people speak for you?” Yassa responded. “It—”

A rattle at the door startled Tythonna from her thoughts. The Vagros who brought her to Yassa stood at the door, blocking it. He had his hand on the shoulder of a girl in her mid teens. She had brown hair and blue eyes and was breathing hard.

“Tell them what you told me,” the man urged.

“Renegade hunters,” the girl said breathlessly. “They’re looking for

three people. Two women and a man ... renegades.”

The Vagros man fixed Tythonnia with a poisonous stare. “Go. You are done here.”

Tythonnia rose to leave, but Grandmother Yassa clasped a hand over hers and pulled her down to whisper in her ear. Her breath flushed Tythonnia’s skin with its warmth.

“It takes strength to love, not weakness,” Yassa whispered. “Trust your inner voice and worry not about the disapproval of others.”



Tythonna left the encircled camp in a daze, her thoughts overwhelmed. There were Yassa's words, her own uncertainties, and finally, the renegade hunters. The hunters had to be searching for her and her companions. Why renegade hunters were on their trail was a question she couldn't answer. She had to find Par-Salian and Ladonna.

The area was in turmoil. Travelers and pilgrims alike stared in awe of the dome of shadow that rose over two stories high. Knights forced their way through the crowds, their swords already drawn

and their demeanors rough.

Most of the crowd stayed clear of the shadow bubble, but Tythonnia caught a glimpse of a hooded man moving toward the High Clerist's Tower. She didn't recognize him, but she spotted Ladonna pushing her horse through the mob a dozen yards to his side. They were both chasing the same person.

A renegade? Tythonnia wondered. Then she realized they were both chasing after Par-Salian. Tythonnia shoved people aside with little care for etiquette. She had to reach Ladonna.

The throng of people was like a troubled sea, and Tythonnia continued to see and lose track of Ladonna and the hunter. They were heading for the central ramp leading up to the tower. Tythonnia swung up onto her saddle and prodded the Dairly forward.

As she neared Ladonna, Tythonnia could see there were two hunters in the crowd, the second a woman headed straight for Ladonna. Tythonnia almost panicked when she recognized the female hunter from Virgil Morosay's trial. She'd forgotten her name, but she feared the other

woman just the same. Ladonna had no idea she was about to be overtaken.

Less than a dozen feet away from Ladonna and the huntress, Tythonnia realized she would be too late. The woman raised her hand and uttered words that were lost in the din of the mob. More screams followed when strands of web flowed from the huntress's fingers and snapped between two giant wood poles from which flew the Solamnic banners of the crown. The spell immediately snared Ladonna and her horse. The horse whinnied in panic and tried to

buck as strands anchored it and several people together. Those not caught pulled away, sparking a stampede of humans and animals alike.

Ladonna was removing her cloak and trying to struggle out of the web. Unfortunately, the huntress was almost upon her. Tythonnia watched in horror as the huntress unsheathed her flattened blade and prepared to run the trapped Ladonna through.

Ladonna saw her attacker and tried to react, but she was still trying to wriggle free of the strands that had ensnared her right arm.

She was powerless as the huntress raised her blade for the downward stroke. But for some reason the huntress hesitated, as though awakening to her own actions.

Tythonna saw the opportunity and took it. She raised her hands and gestured, forming a rapid series of signs with interlocking fingers.

“Sihir anak!” She felt her heart surge four times at each fast, panicked beat. The daggers snaked and darted toward the huntress, bolting around anyone in the way.

The renegade huntress pivoted to

face her. The bronze tome sent out a spark of electricity that traveled along one set of chains and up her blade arm. Her thin blade moved of its own volition, blocking each of the incoming missiles and bursting them. Tythonna was too shocked to act; no one had ever been able to intercept that spell before.

Fortunately, since the huntress faced her, she didn't see Par-Salian emerge from the crowd behind her. As he strode forward, Par-Salian raised his hand. A sphere of shimmering energy suddenly enveloped the huntress, trapping her like a fly in amber. She

struggled to escape, but the sphere of energy held her solidly. Par-Salian kept marching straight toward Ladonna, intent on helping her. The second hunter, a burly man, emerged from the crowd near Par-Salian and took a second too long to assess the situation.

With nary a hesitation, Par-Salian snapped one arm across his body so his hand pointed over his shoulder back at the hunter. A sudden wind rustled Par-Salian's clothes. The upturned grass rippled at its push, and both the hunter and the shocked bystanders around him were suddenly bowled over by

the savage gust. The air seemed to wrinkle and form a solid mass of wind that ripped and tore at the ground.

Tythonna broke through the mob, which was drawing away from the scene, and rushed to Ladonna and Par-Salian just as Ladonna pulled herself free. Unfortunately, her panicked Abanasinian still struggled against its webbed prison, as did four other men and women caught in the magic. In the distance, knights shouted and struggled to reach them.

“My horse,” Ladonna said.

“No time,” Par-Salian replied.
“We must leave, now!”

“Why are they after us?”
Tythonnia asked, helping Ladonna to her feet. She stared at the huntress, who glared back through the sparkling globe of energy.

“Enough time for that later,” he whispered. “The keep gate is blocked. Can we go through the Clerist’s Tower?”

Ladonna nodded. “But there will be guards.”

“To the tower, then,” Par-Salian ordered.

“What about the horses?”

Tythonna said.

“We’ll have to improvise.”

The three wizards aimed for the tower’s central ramp. The wall of people seemed to melt at their advance, unwilling to touch or be near them. Fortunately, the deeper they drove into the mob, the more they blended in. Only a handful of people had seen them, and soon the companions moved past pilgrims and gate guards who were trying to get a better vantage of the action.

They reached the ramp and assessed their situation. A group of

knights was confronting the two renegade hunters, though the huntress was still trapped in the sphere. The larger man was arguing with two knights who had drawn their blades and was pointing in their direction. Parsalian urged them to keep moving.

A great stone ramp led up to the mighty steel gate of the exterior battlements, which were open. The gate alone was worth a dragon's ransom in wealth for the steel-starved continent.

Tythonnia and her compatriots passed under the large archway of stained rock and into a narrow

courtyard that buffered the outer battlements from the octagonal tower. The central courtyard where they found themselves was sealed off, however, by two double doors to either side.

Par-Salian uttered a minor curse under his breath. They couldn't use the courtyard to circumnavigate the tower. They had to get inside.

Directly ahead of them, a pair of stairs rose to the exterior ledge of the second story, where the temples were located. Pilgrims dotted the path. Between the stairs was a large corridor, which ended at a mammoth and rusting portcullis

that barred further entry into the tower. The passage was also lined with angular columns shaped like serrated teeth.

Shouts drew their attention to the battlements above. A knight on the outer ramparts was pointing down at them and screaming something unintelligible but loud enough to attract attention. Par-Salian pushed Tythonnia and Ladonna up the stairs, past a handful of startled pilgrims. It was only then that one of the guards at the gate noticed them. He rushed across the courtyard, intent on giving chase.

They reached the top of the stairs, where a rail hedged the ledge and a tower archway opened into a small temple. Par-Salian led them toward the archway, the shouts behind them growing in volume.

Par-Salian snarled as he looked inside the temple. Beyond the row of intricately decorated pillars, past the pilgrims genuflecting at the kneeling slabs, was an altar, and behind it, a massive golden door that was sealed.

“Not that way!” Par-Salian said, pointing toward the ledge around to the right.

“Stop!” a knight shouted. He’d just reached the top of the stairs while trying to draw his sword.

“Don’t hurt him!” Par-Salian cried just as Ladonna raised her hand in his direction. An onyxlike stone from her ring finger levitated into the air before the color vanished from its surface, turning milky white. The knight’s eyes widened and he suddenly cried a scream that cut right through them. He sliced at the air with his blade, desperately fending away some unseen horror before he stumbled down the stairs in panic. He tripped and fell down the

remaining steps.

Par-Salian grabbed Ladonna's arm. "I said not to hurt him!" he roared.

"A n d we can't be caught!" Ladonna shouted back as she pulled free of his grip.

"Let Tythonnia handle them," he said, pushing them along the ledge again." Your illusions!" Par-Salian said to Tythonnia. "Use your illusions."

Tythonnia nodded, even as she pulled a small crystal rod from a pouch. As they cleared the first corner of the eight-sided tower,

they could see more stairs leading upwards and a knight left to guard its access. He was alert and debating whether to investigate the shouts or remain at his post.

“Hold on here. What’s going on?” he demanded and pointed his broadsword at them.

Tythonnia reacted and pointed the crystal rod at him. There was no need to mouth the words of the spell as she envisioned the kaleidoscope of a shattered rainbow, the lights hypnotic. Colors filled the gap between the two of them, a shifting blur of hues. The colored lights swarmed

the knight, who instantly relaxed, his expression deadening until he looked serene. His sword clattered to the ground, and the colors vanished.

“It won’t last long,” Tythonnia said as they passed him. “Hurry.”

Another corner passed and another side of the octagonal tower stood revealed. They faced more stairs descending into the adjoining keep—definitely not an escape option—and another temple entry. As they ran past the archway, they saw the same layout as before, with the column, altar, and golden door, but no pilgrims this time.

From the side stairwells, they could hear men below making their ascent. And ahead of them echoed more shouts.

Par-Salian hesitated. There was no way out except the way they had come. Ladonna's eyes lit up, however, and she pulled Par-Salian by the arm into the temple. Tythonnia followed.

"There's a door," Par-Salian protested. "Likely locked."

"Once a thief," Ladonna mumbled.

"What?"

"Trust me," she shouted more

forcibly. She ran past the kneeling slabs and up behind the altar. Once at the golden door, she ran her fingers along its yellow surface, a smirk on her lips. The voices outside grew louder.

Ladonna leaned in close to the door and whispered a word ...

“Ufta.”

Something clicked, a cog unhinging itself perhaps, and the golden door quietly swung open. The voices outside seemed as though they were right at the archway.

“Quickly, inside,” Par-Salian

hissed.

The three slipped through the narrow opening and put their backs to the door, forcing it shut again. It closed with the barest whisper. They stood there a few moments, listening for any noises outside, any shouts of discovery or hammering on the door. For a moment, there was nothing then finally a muffled voice that said, "They're not here."

After that, silence.

Par-Salian and Tythonnia breathed a slow sigh of relief and only then caught Ladonna's

wonder-filled expression. It was a simple corridor, nothing extravagant in its design save for the carved friezes showing a procession of priests and pilgrims heading off in different directions down the corridor. Otherwise, it was shrouded equally in shadow and dust.

“We’re inside,” Ladonna whispered, her tone almost giddy. “Nuitari’s Kiss ... we’re *inside* the High Clerist’s Tower. Not even the knights venture inside the tower proper these days. Not while there’s no High Clerist living here.”

“I know precious little about this

place, I must admit,” Par-Salian said.

“My teacher, Arianna—bless her for this—had me spend much of my training in the library of Wayreth. I read a great deal about this place. I fantasized about finding a way inside. And now ... I have,” she said with a great, honest smile that lit up her face. She caught herself a moment after, and the smile vanished behind those cunning eyes. “We have quite the task ahead of us,” she said. “This place is reputedly a maze with secret passages and false corridors—oh! And haunted at that.”

“Is that why it’s abandoned?” Tythonna asked.

“As a religious center, it lost much esteem when the gods left us. Politically, the Solamnic Knights aren’t well liked, so as favor with them waxes and wanes, so, too, does this place. When the Solamnics are in favor, this place is partially opened to serve the religious and political needs of various noble households, pilgrims, and the clergy. Think of it as a meeting place, a conclave of sorts.”

“So when the Solamnic Knights aren’t in favor,” Tythonna said, “nobody comes here except

pilgrims? Like now?”

“Like now,” Ladonna responded. “It’s the best time to explore this place ... unravel her secrets.”

“We can’t stay here,” Par-Salian said.

“I know.” Ladonna moaned. “More’s the pity.”

“It won’t take them long to realize where we are,” Tythonnia said. “We best move.”

They explored the right corridor first, but within a few steps, they hit a dead end. Without their travel packs, Tythonnia enchanted the blade of her dagger to glow. It did

not trouble the shadows to stir, but it was still enough to see by.

From the walls hung dust-coated tapestries depicting great moments in Krynn's past, from the passage of the Graygem, which created many of the demiraces and monsters, to the heroism of men and women such as Vinas Solamnus and Huma. Simple doors opened into empty rooms and cells, each one possessed of intact desks, tables, cots, and shelves. Thick cobwebs coated whatever the shadows didn't claim, speaking volumes of its long isolation, but stacks of papers and books lay

waiting in orderly piles.

As the corridor turned another corner, again following the contour of the octagonal walls, Par-Salian motioned for them to join him. He stood at an opening opposite one of the golden doors. The chamber beyond was a narrow room, with an ornate bas-relief of the Fisher King carved into the opposite wall. It was a blue phoenix with feathers that seemed to curl into licks of flames. In its claws was a sword engraved with a rose, its hilt pointed left. Its eyes glittered with large gems, and a crown of jewels surmounted its beaked head.

Ladonna's eyes widened as she registered the gems, and she took a step forward, but Par-Salian blocked the door.

"Don't enter," he said and motioned to the left and right of them where two statues stood at either end of the small room. They were iron knights bearing the rose-engraved swords of the Solamnic Order. Both swords were pointed to the floor as the knights grasped the hilts. "In every story read to me as a boy," Par-Salian said, "if there's a statue, it comes to life."

"True enough," Tythonnia said. "Let's search somewhere else. We

can come back here if we have to.”

They quietly agreed, though Tythonnia noticed Ladonna throwing one last forlorn peek back at the bejeweled Fisher King. The three followed the corridor further, encountering more small rooms and cells, a third golden temple door facing the outside wall, as well as another narrow room dedicated to the Fisher King. It was a replica of the previous room. There was no way out they could see other than the three golden doors, each leading to one temple outside.

“You said the tower was riddled

with secret passages?" Par-Salian asked.

"That I did," Ladonna responded.

"Maybe one of the rooms with the iron knights?" Tythonnia offered.

"Unfortunately, I think so as well," Par-Salian said. "There's something peculiar about those two rooms."

"Maybe we have to pry the jewels free to open the door," Ladonna suggested with a smile. "I volunteer."

Par-Salian said nothing, but a grin escaped him.

They stood at the door once again, staring at the Fisher King carving. Something was off, something that wasn't entirely right. But what was it? The jewels? The flaming feathers? The sword pointed to the right?

"The sword," Par-Salian said with a snap of his fingers. "The knights would never point a sword to the right in any standard ... always to the left."

"I'll check," Tythonnia said, and before anyone could stop her, she stepped into the room. She walked up to the carving and noticed that both the claw and the sword were

slightly removed from the wall. Tythonnia grasped the hilt and turned it downward. It resisted with age-rusted joints. Tythonnia could see the seam in the claw's wrist, where the mechanism was supposed to rotate, but it wasn't budging. She put her weight into it and struggled to rotate it one way then the other.

“Tythonnia!” Ladonna shouted.

The heads of both iron statues snapped up. A metal groan filled the chamber, and dust shook loose from the shoulders and heads of the statues. In unison, they pulled their feet loose of their moorings and

stepped forward, their footfalls echoing sharply. Both raised their swords in mirrored precision.

Tythonna grunted and pushed all her weight into the sword. With a rust-grinding click, the sword swung down and to the left, toward the sinister. The two statues strode forward, their blades poised to strike. The Fisher King's sword locked in place, and the wall panel upon which the bas-relief was carved heaved open.

The two statues stopped immediately, and in perfect imitation of their advance, reversed their course move for

move, back to attention again. Par-Salian exhaled in relief while Ladonna grinned; she was enjoying it.

The secret panel opened into another corridor that paralleled the one they just left. No tapestries hung there, however, no doors to entice the curious. There was only a winding stone stairwell at one end that corkscrewed upward.

“Down,” Par-Salian said, exasperated, “we must go *down*.”

“Sometimes you have to go up to go back down,” Ladonna suggested cheerfully.

Par-Salian grumbled something under his breath that Tythonnia couldn't hear, but Ladonna's smile widened.

The stairs opened into a small corridor that ended at a wall. A quick examination by Ladonna, however, and a touch of her light fingers, revealed a latch. The brick-faced door swung open into a dining room. It was a large chamber with a great table running along the room's spine and dark chandeliers above. The places were all set, the silverware reflecting Tythonnia's dagger torch, the goblets filled with some dark drink,

and the plates stacked with potatoes and rice and a generous carving of boar meat. Seven doors lined the sides of the room while opposite the secret passage lay a wide corridor.

Dust and spiderwebs and shadows encrusted the room, save for the table, which appeared freshly cleaned and served, except ... no smell came from the food and no warmth graced the room. The three exchanged glances, knowing full well the scent of magic when they encountered it.

“It’s like it’s waiting to be lived in again,” Tythonnia said.

“Everything’s preserved until needed,” Par-Salian said. “Papers, the food ... the important things protected until this is again a home.”

“If it’s ever a home again, don’t you mean?” Ladonna asked.

Par-Salian shrugged. “I hope so,” he said. “Reopening this place could mean a return of ... hope. Or some such thing.”

“A return of the gods?” Ladonna said with a laugh. “You didn’t strike me as a believer.”

“They still bless us with magic,” Tythonnia said. “Their

constellations are where they're supposed to be in the sky. Why shouldn't they come back?"

"Maybe because they withdrew the healing arts, dropped a mountain on our heads, and then left us with all the tools to murder each other," Ladonna replied. "If you ask me, they're waiting for us to kill each other so they can start anew. The gods can be as petty and as angry and as shortsighted as any of us. The only difference is they have the patience to do it for much longer."

Par-Salian shook his head at Ladonna's glib response, but he

also grew quiet.

“Keep looking,” Tythonnia said quietly. “We need to get out of here.”

They traveled down the wide corridor, looking into the barrack rooms with their empty cots and chests, into sealed chambers off the dining hall that once served as officers’ quarters. Par-Salian was adamant that nothing be touched or violated, but every time they passed a closed chest or lockbox or bureau, Tythonnia could see Ladonna struggling not to look. She thrived on mystery, and it was killing her to curb her curiosity.

Finally, they found another passage off one of the doors in the dining room, a corridor that opened into a large chamber. It was a railed balcony ledge surrounding a wide flight of stairs that led to the floor below.

“Finally,” Par-Salian said, but before he could leave the corridor, Tythonnia stopped him with a gentle hand on his shoulders. She nodded to the head of the stairs. The room was nearly octagonal, except for one side where the wall jutted out like a peninsula, and arrow slits along it faced the stairwell.

“It’s a strangle point,” Ladonna said. “I read about these ... rooms where archers could slow and even halt an enemies’ advance.”

“That’s why this chamber is open,” Par-Salian whispered. “Do you think anyone is inside that room?”

“No,” Ladonna said, “I don’t think they had time yet. But I don’t know for certain.”

“I have an idea,” Tythonnia said. She closed her eyes and imagined herself melting, her identity protean. A dozen ideals sprang to mind, people she wished to be ...

all women. She focused on the knights they saw outside.

“Perubahan saya,” she whispered. The magic overtook her body like long trickles of cold water down her dry skin. She suppressed a shiver.

“Wonderful,” Par-Salian exclaimed with a smile.

Even Ladonna nodded in appreciation. Tythonnia quickly studied her arms and body; she was covered in chain mail and a blue tabard with a sword stitched down its front. The illusion held no weight, but for all appearances,

she was a female Solamnic.

Tythonna entered the hall and walked directly toward the strangle point chamber. It bristled with arrow slits, and she tried not to show any fear. In the strongest voice she could muster, she demanded, "Have you seen them yet? Report!"

There was no answer, and she was easily within arrow-shot of anyone inside.

"Who's in there?" Tythonna demanded. Again, there came no answer. She hazarded a glance through one of the arrow slits, but

the interior of the chamber was dark. She examined the surrounding doors, pulling them open to discover a small chamber and brick-lined walls behind two of the false iron doors. In one of the side rooms, however, was a staircase that wound its way up. After a quick study, she felt reasonably certain the area was empty. She motioned the others over.

“Down the stairs,” Par-Salian advised them, but Ladonna shook her head.

“Not yet. I read in the accounts of the tower that where one found

false doors, one could find secret doors as well. The tower has two layers to it. What an invader might see and what a defender sees. Are you following?”

“Yes I understand, but—”

“Let her finish,” Tythonnia said. “She knows this place better than we do.”

Ladonna nodded gratefully. “The route of the invader is meant to confound and trap them. The route of the defender will be more direct. We are currently in a maze meant for the *invader*.”

Par-Salian blushed and nodded.

“You’re right, of course. Find the secret door, and we find our escape. If there is one,” he added as a warning.

“Just search,” she advised.

The three of them drifted to different parts of the chamber, each of them feeling along walls. They pushed exposed bricks, tugged at sconces, and leaned against sections of wall. Her illusory skin shed, it was Tythonnia who discovered the incongruity along the peninsula wall covered in arrow slits. One panel of slits didn’t go all the way through. They were there for show.

Tythonnia jabbed each hole with her lit dagger until finally, she was met with a bit of give. The click of the door mechanism seemed to fill the chamber, and drew her companions to her. The door into the stranglehold point opened, and the three entered the brick-lined room with its archer alcoves. Par-Salian quietly squeezed Tythonnia on the shoulder, and she tried not to blush at the silent praise.

The stranglehold room opened up into an octagonal chamber with a thirty-foot square pit in the center. There were four archways, including the one they entered

through, each located along the chamber's cardinal point. Three archways opened into strangle point rooms, while the fourth exited onto the tower's exterior ledge. Unfortunately, they were still fifty feet below the outside battlement, meaning any rampart guard could spot them if they stood in the archway.

The pit in the center of the chamber was a supply shaft for the tower's defenders, with a series of ropes, winches, and pulleys extending down its length. A wood platform rested on the temple floor a hundred feet below, with ropes

tethered at its four corners. Each floor below and above them had an opening where the platform might stop, though there was a good fifty feet between them.

Directly above them, however, were a handful of floating shapes, half gauze and half human, in advanced states of decay. They appeared to be drifting aimlessly. Par-Salian quietly motioned Ladonna and Tythonnia back, away from the lip of the shaft and out of sight.

“See? I told you this place was haunted,” Ladonna said in a low voice.

“We can try our luck with the outside ledge,” Par-Salian said, “though at this point, I can’t tell which direction we’re facing.”

Tythonna glanced outside and said, “North. Toward Palanthas. There’s also the stairs we saw earlier, one going up and the other —”

“No, no,” Par-Salian said with a shudder. “I don’t wish to press our luck with the tower. No more stairs. No more maze. It’s the pit or outside.”

“Then we have three problems,” Tythonna replied. “The first is

getting down. The second is unlocking one of the giant steel gates that surround the courtyard. And the third is escaping on horses we no longer have ... though I could conjure a horse.”

“Really?” Ladonna asked with a bemused eyebrow raised.

Tythonna shrugged. “Well, you know—‘once a rider’,” she said. “It’s a trick all riders learn. But I’d need to study my spellbook to summon horses for all three of us. I’d have to conjure well enough for them to last half a day’s travel at least. Enough to get away from here.”

Par-Salian nibbled on his thumb a bit before nodding. “Very well. We can’t escape until dark as it is. That gives us some time to prepare. Tythonnia, study your spells. Ladonna, the spell you used to open the gold door, will it work on the steel doors?”

“No,” she said. “I’m afraid we’ll have to open it by hand. But how do we get down?”

“Feather fall,” Par-Salian said. “I have the very spell. It’ll carry our weight, but not the distance. We’ll have to jump twice: from one level to the next and then down again.”

Ladonna and Tythonnia exchanged glances. If the plan sounded a bit dubious, Par-Salian's worried expression robbed them of their remaining courage. But for now they said nothing. Instead, they retreated into the strangle-point chamber behind them, pulled out their spellbooks, and began studying the necessary incantations.

The studying was done in a few hours, while there was still sun to stretch light across the four horizons. Par-Salian was the first to

fall asleep, leaving an anxious Tythonnia and introspective Ladonna to sit there, brooding while their compatriot snored.

Tythonnia's nerves played with her patience and imagination. Was the pass beyond filled with knights waiting for them to emerge? Why were the renegade hunters after them? And were there more of them? She glanced at Ladonna, who also looked preoccupied by her own thoughts.

“What did you mean by ‘once a thief’?” she asked Ladonna.

Ladonna looked at her and

smiled at some faint memory. “I’ve had a colorful past,” she admitted playfully. “There is no secret in that, even if I keep the details to myself. But my mistress, Arianna, she once told me to start thinking like a wizard. But once you live as a thief, it’s hard not to keep thinking like one.”

“I know the sentiment,” Tythonnia said. “My spells kind of reflect my upbringing, as a farm girl.”

“And your desire to misdirect ... hide in plain sight, hmm?” Ladonna said.

Tythonnia decided not to argue a point that was likely truer than she wanted to admit. She was tired of her rivalry with Ladonna. “Maybe,” she admitted.

“Par-Salian’s more the straight arrow type,” Ladonna said with a quiet chuckle. She nodded toward the white wizard and whispered, “Funny that he’s attracted to me.”

A smirk graced Tythonnia’s lips and she nodded. “I’ve noticed. You two should marry, a Black and White Robe together ... have some nice gray-robed babies.”

Ladonna laughed aloud and

rushed her hand over her mouth, but Par-Salian remained fast asleep. “I envy your ability with them,” Ladonna whispered in a gentler tone than Tythonnia had heard from her, “with illusions. Arianna was never good at them, so I never learned them with any real skill. When we have more time, maybe you can teach me?”

“A Black Robe learning from a Red Robe?”

“One wizard of High Sorcery to another,” Ladonna amended.

Tythonnia nodded. “I’d be happy to.”

Ladonna smiled. "Now hush and get some sleep. We've got a hard night ahead of us."

Tythonna felt calmer, more ready to face the evening. She lay on her back, her arm tucked behind her head, waiting for sleep to overcome her. And just when she thought she'd never fall asleep, she finally did.

It began quietly, in the darkness of the evening, with no light save the glitter of stars and the stare of the red moon. They understood their role, each of them, and the

only words spoken were the kind that electrified the skin, words of power that unlocked the hidden mechanisms of the world, words of magic.

“Pfeatherfall.”

Both Ladonna and Tythonnia gasped as they stepped from the edge of the shaft. There was a difference between an absolute faith in the arcane and the unspoken laws that ruled mind, body, and nature. Their hearts felt as though they dropped faster than the rest of them, but Par-Salian calmly held the hands of both of them during their long, lazy drop

to the level below. Their feet touched the floor, and Par-Salian cast the second spell before either of them lost their nerve.

“Pfeatherfall.”

Again they meandered downward to the wood platform of the ground. Tythonnia was unsteady on her feet, her knees wobbly and unable to take her weight. Ladonna, on the other hand, was laughing nervously, heady excitement and fear mixed together.

After needing a moment to recover, Tythonnia did her part.

“Tak’kelihatan.”

She turned Ladonna invisible with a touch, while Par-Salian mumbled the words to render himself unseen.

“Tak’kelihatan.” Tythonnia repeated the spell and turned invisible as well. She strode down the north ramp and into the courtyard between the battlements and the tower. She walked up to the steel gates, up to the counterweight pull ring. No guards could be seen, either on the grounds or on the battlements. Likelier, she thought, the knights would be outside, or perhaps they

thought they'd already escaped. Regardless, it was a small force of knights, not enough to maintain watch everywhere.

Tythonna waited until she heard Ladonna and Par-Salian arrive next to her.

“Ready?” Par-Salian whispered.

They replied in the affirmative and put their combined weight into tugging on the pull ring. All they needed was a foot or two, enough to slip through. The gate, however, was heavy and required every bit of weight they could muster to budge it an inch. It creaked open,

loud enough to sound like thunder. Another jump dragged the large iron ring down, and the double steel gates spread open a little wider.

“It’s enough,” Par-Salian said. “Go, go.”

They ran for the gate and peered through. They could see the mountain pass rising up on either side and the two knights staring nervously up the ramp. Tythonnia tried to slip through, as it was agreed that she would be the first, and was almost stuck in the pinch of the door. She tried not to grunt as someone pushed her through;

her flesh stung, but she was grateful for the escape. She could hear the rustle of cloth as Par-Salian or Ladonna came through next.

Thankfully, the two knights were just far enough away to hear nothing. Instead, they eyed the double gate warily until the brown-haired, walrus-mustached Solamnic said, "Summon the captain and them hunters. I'll stay 'ere and make sure nothin' gets through."

The other knight nodded and ran to the keep just as a couple more knights were running up to the ramp.

“Hurry,” Par-Salian said with a hiss of a whisper.

Carefully, quickly, Tythonnia moved down the ramp on an arc away from the knight who was pointing his sword at the door. She held Ladonna’s hand lightly, enough to guide them along and stay in contact.

“Come on then, Mr. Door,” the knight said nervously. “No need to be opening like that on yer own. Just ain’t natural. How about ya close yerself up again and we can go on then, nice and peaceful, eh? No fuss.”

Down the ramp and onto the soft, lush green of the plains, Tythonna was grateful to put the tower behind her. That side of the pass was empty of caravans and camps, though the grass was flattened in places. Since the knights were behind them, Tythonna moved faster. After another moment, they were along the mountain walls of the Westgate Pass and behind a fold in the skirt of the cliff. They were out of sight of the keep and in near darkness.

Three times, Tythonna grasped a tuft of horse hair, her hands moving into interlocking gestures

and mouthing the words, “*Stahaliun emersa.*”

Three times, the script of rune vanished from her thoughts, like a word almost remembered and out of tongue’s reach. Three times, the air shimmered dimly as a brown horse fifteen hands high with golden eyes and a mane the color of the darkness between stars seemed to emerge from somewhere unseen. The horses were equipped with bit and bridle, their bodies lean and made for the run. Par-Salian, Tythonnia, and Ladonna quickly mounted their steeds.

All but Ladonna were happy to

put the Tower behind them. She cast a wistful glance back, a wish unspoken to return someday and explore the tower at her leisure.

CHAPTER 8

Tower's Epilogue

The torches set by the knights around the tower to illuminate the night also hemmed in their view. They couldn't see beyond the ring of fire, not that they expected to need to—anyone fleeing would have to pass the Solamnics. The Journeyman, however, sat in the darkness beyond torchlight, nestled in a sheltered alcove of the mountain pass. Nobody could see him there, and it was unlikely anyone would stumble across him.

He hid over a hundred feet deep into the Westgate Pass, hoping he hadn't missed the three wizards.

It took a while to get through the blocked gate of the keep. The knights searched diligently for the three renegades, after much debate with the hunters, but to no avail. The knights refused to believe anyone could have found their way into the tower, a denial seemingly rooted in the Solamnics' refusal to actually enter the spire, from what the Journeyman could overhear. There was a thin line between faith in something and a reverential fear of it.

The Journeyman knew better, however. He knew that Ladonna, Par-Salian, and Tythonnia were in the tower with a comfortable certainty, and he knew he should wait for them. With the mysterious arrival of the renegade hunters, the Journeyman suspected that Astathan's protégés would need all the help they could get. Especially since they had lost their steeds.

So it was, in the deep hour of night, that a strange, metallic groan echoed lightly through the canyons and the Knights of Solamnia gathered around one of the giant steel double doors. The

Journeyman waited patiently, however, until he saw three brief glimmers of light against the far canyon wall. It wasn't strong enough for the knights to notice thanks to their own torches, but the Journeyman enjoyed the benefit of darkness. Then he saw them, the three companions riding away on conjured steeds.

The Journeyman smiled and waited to see if anyone gave pursuit. The knights didn't seem to notice the three. The tower's steel doors remained their focus. The Journeyman mounted his hay-colored Dairly and began trotting

after Ladonna, Tythonnia, and Parsalian at a respectable distance.

Dumas paced the office of the captain of the guards. Despite his imposing appearance, Hort sat back in his chair, resigned to being “guests” of the knights. Thus, he remained calm. They were not prisoners exactly, but neither were they entirely trusted to help the knights search. Had Dumas or the wizards not respected the Solamnics for their dedication to order, she and Hort might have already escaped. Such action,

however, would have damaged an already tenuous relationship between the guardians of High Sorcery and the knightly orders. Still, sitting and waiting was almost too much to bear for Dumas. She needed to hunt the renegades down, to kill them. Only then would things be right again. She felt that with an odd certainty.

“They’ll slip past the guards,” Dumas grumbled.

“But not Thoma,” Hort said quietly. “We’re lucky these knights didn’t find him. If the renegades slip past, he’ll lead us to them. You’ll see.”

Dumas nodded. A fusillade of steps and the jostle of chain signaled the arrival of someone outside the captain's office. The door burst open as a breathless female knight faced them. Hort rose in anticipation of action, and Dumas was also ready to move.

“Captain wants to see you,” the young knight said. “One of the steel doors opened on its own.”

Dumas's jaw clenched. If the door opened, then the renegades were already gone, likely down the Westgate Pass. It was up to Thoma to keep pace with them until they could catch up.

Thoma kept his Blödegeld calm. It could smell the hunt and was hungry for the chase, but it would have to stay patient. Thoma could not handle three renegades alone, especially three of that proficiency. They were more skilled than they appeared, and that troubled the hunter. It wasn't unheard of for wizards to go rogue, but rarely after the crucible of the test. The Test of High Sorcery was brutal beyond any measure of preparation, and it had a way of solidifying one's ties with other wizards.

Renegade wizards of their skill weren't unheard of, no, but to see three of them defect and travel in each other's company ... and from three different orders, much less? There were too many coincidences too ignore.

The fact that the three orders rarely interacted together?

The fact that three renegades happened to be in Solanthus at the last conclave, and chose then to defect?

The fact that instructions to give chase came so quickly?

The fact that they were told to

kill the renegades, even though Highmage Astathan and Yasmine of the Delving would never condone the death of a renegade when conversion and redemption remained unexplored possibilities?

The fact that there was another mysterious rider on a Dairly following the three renegades?

No, it all seemed far too arranged, too pat. Something more was afoot, but to question the mission too deeply was to question Dumas herself. And Thoma trusted Dumas with his life, even when her story didn't make sense. So he continued pursuing the three

renegades and the man who followed them, hoping that by the time his compatriots caught up to him, he might have stumbled upon the right answers and the proper course of action.

Berthal brought up the rear of the column. Near one hundred people stretched out before him on the trail down the mountain: men, women, and children, many with magical skill or a belief in the cause. The sight of them made Berthal proud; they were willing to bleed and die for what they knew

was right and true.

They were growing stronger every day, and there was rumor that another twenty followers were on their way to join them. It was growing harder to hide, though, and the Wizards of High Sorcery wouldn't let his threat go unchallenged. They needed to prepare. It was with that realization that Berthal felt his heart grow heavier. He had to pull every favor he could from his spies in the orders. If there was ever a time he needed more help, it was at that moment. He had to choose his spies wisely and their tasks

even more so.

Berthal paused and leaned on his thick staff. It gave enough to be comfortable, but never enough that he feared it might snap under his weight. He closed his eyes and filled his mind with Wyldling magic. His thoughts, like tentacles, raced out to locate the men and women awaiting word from him. He could sense their frustration, their anxiety.

Finally, his mind settled on four faces: two men and two women within the various orders, each strategically placed. Their attentions turned toward him, the

link between them and Berthal was realized. Berthal thanked them for their willingness to sacrifice everything before he instructed each on what was to be done. Three of them were in no position to help at the moment. The fourth, an acolyte within the Order of the Black Robes, was ready to follow through on her instructions, however.

CHAPTER 9

Jewel of the Cataclysm

It was hard to breathe. Her lungs contracted in a sudden and constant gasping for air. Her thoughts raced and surged like a wild ocean, each wave threatening to overwhelm the last, to overwhelm her. She fought the panic and wondered distantly if this was what the test was like, an unvarying state of panic.

No, she amended to no one but

herself, terror.

Her spells were limited, but her master always told her a handful of spells prepared for the moment were better than any random volume of magic. Well, former master after that night, she realized. And for all her misgivings about the test and the Wizards of High Sorcery, her master was still right in that regard. Preparation was the best weapon.

Mariyah was a slip of a girl, frail in every way except in the qualities that truly mattered. She was mousy in appearance and outgoing in spirit; she was timid in laugh and

gaze, but fierce in conviction. She hated her fish lips and the way the bottom lip always seemed to droop, and yet people could never look away from her soulful, doe-brown eyes. She was kind, giving, and until recently, undoubtedly going to enter the Black Robes should she pass the Test of High Sorcery. She would need all her qualities to survive, to break away from the Black Robes, whom she served as acolyte.

“*Ufta*,” she whispered and relished the way the word seemed to tickle her tongue. The small chest opened, its click echoing in

her master's study. Mariyah waited for some sound to mark the discovery of her presence; waited for her master to stir from unconsciousness.

Nothing happened. The books lining the inset shelves along the wall stared back at her. No eyes appeared in the crystal ball on the divining table, no mouths on any of the dark oil paintings overlooking the oak desk.

Mariyah gently opened the small, wooden box inlaid with silver-blue mother-of-pearl. She gasped. The velvet lined interior was larger than the exterior.

Mariyah studied the scrolls of paper, the trinkets, the baubles, the handful of flasks all waiting for her eager fingers. For her to steal them, however, seemed like petty theft.

No. She served a higher purpose than to line her own pockets.

Strengthened by that thought, Mariyah was about to close the box when something caught her eye: beneath the scrolls, a flash of white. Mariyah pulled out an object; it was a bone key so fine and lacy that she thought it might snap between her fingers. But whoever fashioned this key made it

for no ordinary lock. She looked around, hoping to see where it belonged, but there was no lock in sight ... or at least none she was willing to try for fear of breaking the key. It was a prize but for what? Well, that was a question reserved for magicians better than she.

Mariyah gently closed the small wooden box and tucked it under her arm. She pulled her black cloak over her shoulder, shielding the box from sight, and walked to the chamber door. She cast one final look back into the study, back at her black-robed master who lay

unconscious at his desk. His tea cup was tipped, the drink spilt, and with it the drug that had rendered him senseless. Mariyah was about to apologize but did not. He could not hear her and the box was too important to Berthal. It could help the renegade movement as a whole; apologizing for her actions would disgrace her belief in them and their struggle. And, frankly, that lecherous old thing deserved no words of apology. She'd put up with his advances for years. This little debt was owed her.

At the very least, Mariyah thought, I'll soon be fighting at

Berthal's side.

The caravan traveled along the Knight's High Road, past the gentle, sloping hills dotted with small farms and white patches of sheep and goat herds that grazed upon the green slopes. After the cork of the Westgate Pass at the High Clerist's Tower, the corridor carved into the rock had slowly widened until, finally, it became a steep and surprisingly fertile valley near the town of Yarus. The stream that flowed from the Wings of Habbakuk and the Plains of

Solamnia vanished beneath the surface; some surmised it became part of a larger, underground river that allowed farmers to drive shallow wells.

As the caravan of bow top and box top wagons wound its ways through the valley, farmers and their families quietly watched them pass with distrust. The farmers continued watching until the wagons were out of eyeshot. The suspicion being heaped on the Vagros procession, however, seemed lost on the kender traveling with them. The kender ran alongside the wagons or sat next to

the drivers, waving at anyone they saw as though they were the centerpiece of some well-attended parade thrown in their honor. That confused more than a few humans and a handful of cows that received a wave, a smile, and on the rare occasion, a blown kiss. The blond-haired kender went so far as to run up to a couple of bewildered farmers, shake their hands, and thank them for being “the salt of the earth” before attempting to kiss one farmer’s baby. He enthusiastically settled for kissing the family dog before rejoining the caravan.

What was more frightening to the “salt of the earth,” perhaps, was that the kender promised the farmers to come back and visit, which was, by their expression, akin to telling them a tornado was coming and that it expected dinner.

Finally, the caravan wended its way along the Knight’s High Road, through another narrowing of the valley into a tight pass, up to the city’s South Gate. The South Gate was an archway shaped like a giant horseshoe driven into the ground. Around it was a gatehouse, with the road leading straight through the building’s open

courtyard. It appeared an inferior structure compared to the larger gatehouses guarding the Old City Wall inside Palanthas, far more feeble since dwarf hands had no part in its construction. The archway and courtyard were open to travelers day or night.

Palanthas was the preeminent port city of the continent, and her docks were always open to all manner of ship. Cattle drives and merchant convoys constantly trickled through the gates. Keeping it open through the night saved the day hours from constant congestion.

Again, the caravan met with suspicion as it passed into the courtyard, and some of the city knights and bonded mercenary soldiers protecting the gatehouse glared openly. But no one moved to stop the caravan, which did not hesitate in the slightest in its progress until stopped at the tollhouse under the archway. The Vagros paid for the right to enter and trade within the city and were given papers that said as much.

Once through the South Gate, the city of Palanthas seemed to explode outward. Although hemmed in by the bowl of the

mountain range, the city overlooked a sparkling green ocean to the north that was emerald in its radiance.

Two great sections divided the city of Palanthas; the Old City Wall protected the hub, wherein lay, among other things, the imposing, magical, and abandoned Tower of High Sorcery, the Palace, the Great Library, and the various nobles' estates. Like a cup about to drink from the ocean, the Old City Wall lay open to the docks. The spokes of roads spread out from the wheel of the Old City and into the surrounding New City, which bore

that title only because it was the younger of the two sections at two millennia in age.

All of Palanthas was ancient; it was the only city, in fact, that had escaped the Cataclysm that shattered the continent and gnashed cities down to their bones. Its very buildings were works of history, its air distinguished. The citizens knew it with a pride that bordered on arrogance. The Vagros knew all this too. They may have entered Palanthas unchallenged, but they knew they would never be allowed into the Old City. Instead, they diverged from the Knight's

High Road and entered the more tightly packed streets of the Merchandising District. The wagons barely fit through the narrow avenues; they almost brushed the awnings and display bins of the many shops and stores. Nobody complained, however. The citizens merely stepped to the side or squeezed past the procession in the single-minded pursuit of their daily affairs.

After an hour of that slow pace through the narrow streets, the caravan finally pulled into the enclosed courtyard of an inn called Wanderer's Welcome. Stable boys

immediately tended to the horses without question, and the proprietors emerged to embrace the Vagros one at a time. It was the embrace of family, and even the kender were given a hug and a kiss by the inn owner's wife, a woman of ample frame and fiery red hair that matched her matronly grin.

With a groan, Ladonna and Par-Salian descended from the green bow top wagon. Tythonnia emerged from another box top wagon with spiraled fluting. They were glad to finally stretch out their backs and legs.

Tythonnia immediately walked

to the head of the Vagros caravan, to find Sebastian. The man's peppered stubble had grown darker, and he played with the hoop dangling from his ear.

"Sebastian," Tythonnia said. "Thank you for smuggling us into the city. If it wasn't for you—"

Sebastian waved off her concern impatiently. "You're lucky you found us," he said. "Besides, Grandmother Yassa says you are a sister. Even if you don't admit it yet," he added with a grin.

Tythonnia smiled and tried not to appear surprised. That drew a

wider smile from Sebastian.

“Come,” Sebastian said. He rested his hand on her shoulder and guided her toward the innkeeper’s wife. “This is Bess. She’ll find you and your friends a room.”

“And hot water,” Bess said, laughing. She motioned Par-Salian and Ladonna over. “You three look like you could use a bath, a pint, a warm meal, and a bed. In that order.”

Tythonna smiled gratefully, and Ladonna and Par-Salian grinned widely in anticipation.



Dumas fumed silently. Anger was plain in her eyes, in the scowl on her lips, and in the slight knot between her eyebrows. The guards of the South Gate seemed worried. Any appreciative glances they might have had, the catcalls that they'd shouted to the women on the last wagon a mere second before were absent now. Men found their courage lacking in Dumas's presence, especially when she looked so furious. Her expression carried the promise of murder, and nobody wanted to attract her attention.

She dismounted her Blödegeld,

and after casting a last venomous look at Thoma, she headed for the officer on watch. She wouldn't find out anything much from him, however. That much Thoma knew in advance.

After she'd gone, Thoma glanced at Hort before motioning one of the soldiers over. The black-haired, pimply-faced young man approached cautiously. He had yet to fill out his uniform with any measure of confidence.

“Did a Vagros caravan come through here?” Thoma asked, almost whispering.

“Mmm hmm ... a couple hours ago, I reckon. Queer sight, them, eh?”

“Yes,” Thoma agreed absently and tossed the boy a couple of coppers for the bother.

Hort, who'd been eyeing the exchange suspiciously, nudged his horse closer to Thoma. “What are you on about?” he asked with a whisper.

Thoma looked around to make sure Dumas was not watching them. “I didn't lose the renegades,” he whispered back.

“What?” Hort said with a hiss.

His features darkened. “You said —”

“It’s called a lie, you oaf,” Thoma said. He patted his friend on the shoulder. “I had to. This entire business with Dumas and the renegades smells peculiar.”

“Dumas doesn’t lie.”

“I know,” Thoma said. “But you must admit something is strange. Since when do we execute renegades?”

“We’ve killed,” Hort said, shrugging.

“But we don’t *execute*,” Thoma stressed. He looked over at Dumas,

who seemed to be concluding her business with the officer on watch. “We’ll discuss this later. Say nothing to her for now.”

“So ... the renegades. They’re with the Vagros caravan, aren’t they?” Hort asked.

“Yes,” Thoma said as Dumas walked back. She was staring at the ground, scowling. “We’ll discuss this later.”

Hort grunted, but Thoma knew his friend well enough to know the big man would stay quiet ... for the time being.



Ladonna quietly closed the door to her room on the landing and tiptoed past the rooms of the others. From Par-Salian's door came the contented rumbling of a deep sleeper. Ladonna didn't blame him. Her body ached for the touch of comfortable sleep, for a night spent in a bed and not on a patch of hard earth. But a ball of energy filled her chest, dulling the exhaustion and exciting her. She couldn't sleep even if she wanted to.

After the wizard recruited her and took her from the city to learn under Arianna, Ladonna had never

again set foot in Palanthas until now. This was her homecoming, a moment filled with anticipation and trepidation, dread and excitement all in one terrible ball that sat in her stomach. She was desperate to walk the streets as a confident woman, no longer afraid of the shopkeepers and city militia that had chased her for much of her youth. And yet she still felt like the small child, afraid and alone except for her family of urchins and the woman who sometimes cared for her—when Ladonna would let her.

She continued past Tythonna's quiet door. Tythonna wasn't there;

she knew as much. She was in the bathing chamber downstairs, the last of them to enjoy a long, hot bath. Ladonna chose that moment to leave, while her two compatriots were busy and likely not to miss her for a few hours.

Ladonna went downstairs and paused long enough to take stock of the adjoining tavern of the Wanderer's Welcome, where the Vagros laughed loudly, drank, and enjoyed a warm meal served in their honor. She was hungry for a hot plate of whatever they were eating, but neither she nor the Vagros were comfortable around

each other. She left them to their celebration and walked out the door into the courtyard and from there into the Merchandising District.

The streets and the shops filled with noise played a familiar refrain, and yet it all seemed so different. She kept expecting to see familiar faces look back at her, perhaps even welcome her as a long-lost daughter of Palanthas. It was a foolish thought, she knew, but for all the trials she had faced here, it was still home. Perhaps it was home especially because she'd struggled so hard to carve out a

place for herself. Perhaps that was why it stung a little that life continued on without her. Her return caused not so much as a stir, a ripple.

They'd probably remember me at Smiths' Alley, she thought then chased that thought away. She wasn't ready for that reunion yet.

Once she reached the Knight's High Road, she walked down the slope of the street, toward the Old City Wall. Palanthas was mostly bowl shaped, the Old City at its pit and the New City rising up to the foot of the mountains. The rise and dip of hills prevented the bowl

from ever being a perfect crater, but it gave Palanthas character.

From there, Ladonna's gaze stretched out across the city, down to the green waters of the Bay of Branchala. A hundred ships of a hundred makes docked at her piers or floated languidly in her port. The city itself was tightly packed with homes and buildings. In the New City, trees dominated a modest number of blocks, while the interior of the Old City seemed like a forest. A few buildings and towers cleared the vegetation, but it was a marvel of planning that allowed the manicured forests and

the clutter of structures to exist seamlessly.

The densest collection of buildings lay between the Old City Wall and the foothills that would eventually grow into the mountains. Atop the foothills lay the rich estates of mercantile and guild leaders, men and women not rich enough to live in the Old City on Nobles Hill but rich enough to dominate districts such as the Golden Estates and Purple Ridge.

The familiarity of it all invigorated Ladonna.

But it was not the Palanthas

most familiar to her. Despite surviving her youth here, there were parts of the city she never visited for fear of the city guards. No, Ladonna was more at home elsewhere. She headed toward the Old City Wall.

The poorer districts lay in the shadow of the Old City Wall, a double-battlement partition between new and venerable. The homes were more compact and closer together, creating alleys barely wide enough for one man and rooftops whose eaves almost overlapped. Along those roads, it was easy to travel by roof and

never once set foot on the ground. That was why the Thieves Guild made its home there; they could travel above the city patrols and above observation.

As Ladonna approached the Old City Wall, she could see the unemployed men and women and the aimless children, sitting along the roofs, watching the traffic below them. The double minaret gate of the Old City came into view, as did the wall blackened by the soot of the chimneys at its feet. Ladonna continued forward, her eyes darting to dark alleys and building corners. Here and there,

she spotted a red handkerchief tied to a post or the hanging sign of a business; or the faded mark of chalk on wood, a simple scribble that could have been mistaken for graffiti. In fact, she knew she was looking at thief marks, indicators that certain stores had paid the Thieves Guild for protection against robbery and harassment. Ladonna continued looking, taking in as much as she could. She was on a scouting foray. Tythonnia and Par-Salian stuck out like sore thumbs; they could never hope to blend in the way she could.

Shouts and squeals caught

Ladonna's attention. A pack of children were running through the crowd, half in play as they darted underfoot and half in work as they begged for steel or skillfully nicked something from one of the bins. Ladonna gasped at the children, at the reminder of her own past that seemed to return to her with the strength of a sharp slap. How much like her they were, wild and hungry, carefree yet crippled by the understanding of their own mortality. That was perhaps the lesson that most urchins learned the quickest. Death and misery came to everyone, to them earlier

than most.

Ladonna searched for someone specific to her needs. And there she found him, a young boy of perhaps six. Black hair, wild and unruly like a kender's, and eyes like green fire. He was the age she had been when she lost her world. He ran and whooped with his friends, eager in spirit and hiding in the forest of adults and horses.

“Boy!” Ladonna said as he ran close by.

He stopped and eyed her suspiciously. “What?” he demanded, full of six-year-old

defiance and unafraid of anyone.

Yes, Ladonna thought with a smile. He'll do. She held out her hand; in it was the toy soldier that she'd purchased from the old woman at the High Clerist's Tower as well as two copper bits. His eyes widened at the prize, but he did not approach ... not yet.

"What's that for?" he asked suspiciously.

Ladonna smiled. He was a tough little thing, already disciplined from life's lessons.

"The soldier? Why, it's your luck charm," she said. She tossed him

the figurine. He fumbled for it and dropped it. Quick as a mouse, he scooped it up with both hands. He eyed the coins.

“And that?” he said.

“*Edoha*,” she whispered. “Know where I might find it?”

The boy’s eyes widened; she knew Thieves’ Cant, the secret tongue that allowed members of the guild to converse openly without fear of being overheard. *Edoha* was the first word anyone learned.

“Coins first,” the boy said nervously.

“No, no. Half now,” Ladonna replied, tossing him one coin. She showed him the second coin. “Where?”

The boy darted and vanished into the crowd.

Ladonna smiled. She didn't expect to get an answer, but the boy would mention the strange woman who knew Thieves' Cant and had asked for sanctuary. She hoped that would be enough to start the ball rolling. As for the toy soldier ...

Let's hope it brings you the luck I never had, Ladonna thought. She

continued moving through the crowd, relishing each memory and savoring the painful ones with an eager eye toward vengeance.

“But how can you be sure?” Tythonnia asked. She turned in her chair to look at Kandri, but the woman laughed and pushed her head forward again before continuing to braid her damp locks.

“I just know,” Kandri said. She was a dark-skinned woman in her forties, her face and hairline marked with a distinct scroll of tribal scars and dots. Her black

eyes looked like they could drink in the world or offer it all the hope for which it could ever thirst.

The bow top wagon was small. Yassa slept in the bed at the front of the wagon, her alcove covered with lace cloth. She preferred the darkness, and whatever condition made such a young woman look so old also took its toll on her strength.

Still, Kandri was a patient and attentive partner. She took care of Yassa whenever her condition flared, and nothing seemed to diminish her white, polished smile. And for the past few days, she had

been Tythonnia's confidante.

"But how?" Tythonnia insisted.

Kandri pulled Tythonnia around in her stool and brought her face-to-face. "You," she said. "You think your thoughts are evil?"

"I don't know," Tythonnia admitted.

"But you had them as a little girl?"

Tythonnia nodded.

"So you were an evil little girl?"

"No, of course not," Tythonnia said.

Kandri smiled and urged her

forward again. “A lot of people are eager to tell you who they think you are,” she said, “especially if you are a woman, but it’s none of their business. They see evil where there is none. They fear what is different from them. And then they’ll use the gods to attack you.”

Tythonnia shrugged. “I suppose.”

“When you pray to the gods, who else is there with your prayers?”

“What do you mean?” Tythonnia asked.

“When you pray. Who speaks for your prayers? Who delivers them to the gods?”

“No one, I guess,” Tythonnia said. “Just my own voice.”

“So why are you letting others decide your relationship to the gods? It’s not their concern.”

“But the priest of my village—”

“Fah!” Kandri said. “My marriage to Yassa was ordained by a priest of Mishakal. The priest of your village was blind ... not his god, but him. Men are eager to ascribe their weaknesses to their gods. That way they don’t have to better themselves. They can wallow in their ignorance, turn it into arrogance, and then call it faith.”

Tythonnia was quiet a moment as Kandri pulled and weaved her hair into a tight braid. Yassa's soft snoring filled the wagon, but it was soothing. It was the sleep of untroubled dreams.

The tavern was quiet; the Vagros had left in the late night and staggered back into the courtyard and their own wagons. A few slept upstairs, but for the coming few days, the Wanderer's Welcome was closed to other business. It was a Vagros reunion, and even those growing number of Vagros who

sold their wagons to live in cities such as Palanthas were welcome as cousins, as were kender. While the three kender accompanying the caravan had vanished into the streets with promises of “I’ll be right back,” it was understood they wouldn’t be. There was no malice in their departure. Only an understanding and appreciation of the wanderlust in them all.

In their place came a half dozen other kender who turned up to visit with the Vagros. They, too, were welcome cousins, and a great game was made of “borrowing back” what the kender’s light fingers

happened to take “unintentionally.” Tythonnia, Ladonna, and Par-Salian gripped their pouches like a drowning man might hold on to flotsam, and still, reagents and some copper managed to slip through their white-knuckled fingers.

It was for that reason, among several, that the three wizards sat alone in the empty tavern. They spoke lightly, their voices dimmed against any listeners, though they had to constantly remind Par-Salian of that precaution. He was growing upset.

“There has to be another way!”

he said.

“Maybe there is,” Ladonna said, “but this is the quickest way I know of.”

“You’re talking about—”

“Shh,” Tythonnia said. “Lower your voice.” She looked around, but the serving girl was in the kitchen with the cook.

“You’re talking about stealing. Breaking laws.” His voice had dropped back down to a whisper.

“We *are* renegades,” Ladonna said. “I believe that makes us outlaws.”

“Yes, outlaws with sanction of

the Wizards of High Sorcery,” he replied.

“Then why were those renegade hunters after us?” Tythonna whispered, to which Ladonna nodded. “Why was *Dumas* chasing us?”

“I don’t know,” Par-Salian said. By his expression, that was bothering him as well. “But you’re talking about robbing the local merchants—breaking Palanthas law. Actually *breaking* it.”

“And how do you propose attracting Berthal’s lieutenant? Par-Salian, we don’t know who he

is,” Ladonna said.

Par-Salian opened his mouth to argue, but Tythonnia knew Ladonna’s reasoning made sense. She interrupted him.

“Par-Salian, she’s right. Say we find the lieutenant. Then what? He won’t trust us, and we’ll have to try even harder to convince him. What happens if he tests us? Tells us to kill or hurt someone to prove ourselves?”

“You don’t know any of that,” Par-Salian replied.

“No, I don’t,” Tythonnia admitted, “but!” she added,

stopping her compatriots from interrupting her, “but if we do things he might approve of, things to encourage him to contact us, then he’ll be less suspicions. We make him feel in control, and there’s less chance of a test.”

Par-Salian sighed. “I don’t like this. This goes against everything I believe in.”

“Not everything,” Ladonna corrected, her voice dropping. She looked away from their eyes. “You believe in the Wizards of High Sorcery and in Highmage Astathan, don’t you? And sometimes that means sacrificing your lesser

beliefs on the altar of your greater ones.”

Both Tythonnia and Par-Salian were silent a moment, stunned by Ladonna’s heartfelt admission—she’d sacrificed some beliefs of her own. After a moment of being stared at, Ladonna shot them back a look of annoyance.

“What?” she demanded.

Tythonnia and Par-Salian shook their heads. There was no reason to embarrass her further.

“Nothing. Sorry,” Par-Salian said. “So ... what’s the plan?”

CHAPTER 10

To Build a Thief

We start petty,” Ladonna said.

The Labyrinth Market was a sprawling, open square in the Old City pinched between the verdant grounds of the Royal Gardens to the south and the Palanthas Trade Exchange district astride the docks to the north. To the immediate southeast lay the Great Palace, its spired towers emerging from a

small forest of trees. Farther south, past the Royal Gardens, rested the haunted Shoikan Grove and the tri-horned minarets of Palanthas, the Spire of Lore and Doom. It was a crumbling edifice, centuries abandoned and inviolate even to its rightful owners, the Wizards of High Sorcery. If they could not enter it, much less pierce the Shoikan Grove that protected it, what hope had the city of tearing down such a dark stain?

Instead, the Tower of High Sorcery remained, and the people learned to ignore it as best they could. That included those in the

so-called Labyrinth—an open square by night but by day, a maze of vendors and merchants who arrived to compete for space. With a small flagstone settled, they sold their wares on open blankets and from carts. It was a communal market, the pathways never set from one morning to the next, the vendors and their wares ever changing. Every day in the Labyrinth was new and fresh, filled with the possibility of exploration.

“All thieves start petty, becoming more comfortable with thievery as time goes on,” Ladonna said. “For you two, though, we do this to

build up your courage and because we must build a reputation. We cannot appear from out of nowhere. We must show a growing daring.”

The first test of thievery was a simple one. Ladonna would distract the cart owner while Par-Salian filched an apple from one of his baskets. Should the cart owner see or give chase, Tythonnia was to help whoever was in most danger using the most subtle magics available to her.

As planned, Ladonna went to distract the cart's owner by dropping her cloth sack in front of

him. When she bent down to pick it up, her breasts pressed against the loosened braces of her doublet. The man's attention immediately focused on the delicate curve of her bosom, and he missed Par-Salian's pass at his cart.

Tythonnia's gaze flitted to Ladonna's chest, but she was surprised that the sight did nothing to titillate her—a thought which troubled her even more. But as quick as that, Ladonna straightened, shot the cart keeper a shy smile, and walked away. Tythonnia glossed over her own concerns and went to rendezvous

with the others. When they gathered again, Par-Salian showed them the apple he'd nicked. Ladonna and Tythonnia smiled and congratulated him, but Par-Salian could only blush in reply.

“Please,” he said. “May I return it?”

As quick as a magpie, Ladonna plucked the apple from his hand and took a juicy bite out of it.

“Not anymore,” she said, smiling and chewing. “But here’s the good news: it’s Tythonnia’s turn now.”

They spent two days in the Labyrinth, stealing small things here and there, always under the watchful eye of Ladonna. Parsalian's guilt slowly diminished, though not entirely, and Tythonnia found herself enjoying the tasks more than she cared to admit. But then Ladonna decided to change the rules on them. As Tythonnia approached the cart on one occasion, Ladonna again provided the distraction, tripping and falling into the chubby merchant's arms.

Tythonnia didn't even break her stride as she picked up a wooden statuette from his blanket. Ladonna

pointed at her, however, and cried, “Thief!” The shocked merchant immediately turned on her.

Tythonna froze at Ladonna’s outcry, standing still long enough for the merchant to grab her wrist. The merchant squeezed and forced her down to one knee. Ladonna vanished into the crowd again.

“Steal from me, will you?” he roared. He raised his other hand and backhanded Tythonna across the face. The blow stung her cheek and split her lip. Before she could register the blood that spilled from her mouth, however, another blow caught her in the jaw.

“Please, stop,” she shouted. “I’m sorry!”

The man clenched his fist, preparing to beat her, when he suddenly froze. His eyes went vacant, and before Tythonnia realized what was happening, Par-Salian was pulling her from the merchant’s grip. He shoved the merchant hard enough to topple him to the ground. That shook him from his stupor. The merchant suddenly came to life again and struggled to rise, but by then, Par-Salian was already pulling Tythonnia away through the crowd. She staggered and he

tugged hard enough to produce a yelp of pain from her.

After their escape, Tythonnia and Par-Salian arrived at the edge of the Royal Gardens where two white fir trees bent toward each other to form a natural arch to the maze of pathways beyond. Ladonna, however, wasn't there, which was just as well. Tythonnia was ready to murder her. Her skin was hot with shame, and the most venomous anger she'd ever experienced took hold of her. She could barely think. She wanted to

sink her teeth into Ladonna's neck; she wanted to cry, scream, rage, hurt, punish.

“Why?” Tythonnia said. It was the only question she could think to ask. She didn't dare ask more. Already her throat ached, and she knew that to speak was to start crying. She refused to cry in front of anyone and felt angrier for being brought to that state.

“I believe—” Par-Salian began then he caught her glance. “I don't know,” he admitted. “Do you wish to talk—”

“No,” Tythonnia growled. Her

eyes misted and she scraped away the tears with her forearm.

Par-Salian said nothing. They waited a few minutes in silence while Tythonnia paced. “I’m going,” she finally said.

“Where?” Par-Salian asked.

“The inn,” Tythonnia said, again feeling that overwhelming ache in her throat and that mist that covered her eyes.

Par-Salian kept in step with her, not saying a word, for which Tythonnia was grateful.

They arrived at the Wanderer's Welcome. Tythonnia stormed up the wood stairs, her anger and frustration building with each step, it seemed. She brushed by a man with sea-blue eyes with nary an apology, not that he stopped to ask for one. By the time she reached Ladonna's door, she was ready to break it open. Only Par-Salian's quiet and steady encouragements not to jump to conclusions kept her from doing so.

Instead, Tythonnia hammered on the door and was surprised when it swung open under her barrage. Ladonna stood on the opposite side

of the room, ready to meet her. That was all it took for Tythonna's world to turn red. Her vision narrowed, the edges turning black until she was staring down a dark tunnel. The only person she could see, the only person that mattered was Ladonna, and in that moment, Tythonna absolutely hated her beyond sense or comprehension. She loathed her, wanted nothing more than to hurt her the way she'd been hurt.

Tythonna rushed through the door, her fingers aching to encircle Ladonna's throat. Ladonna, however, opened her palm to

reveal a piece of wool. It was only in the dim recesses of Tythonnia's mind that she recognized the reagent, though in her present state, she was hard pressed to remember what spell it accompanied.

“Capik,” Ladonna said.

Ah, that one.

Tythonnia stumbled and froze, unable to move. She felt disconnected, severed from action. She was trapped in the coffin of her own flesh. She started falling to the floor, but Par-Salian caught her and lowered her gently.

“What are you doing?” he shouted with such rage Tythonnia almost forgot her own.

“Protecting myself,” Ladonna said. “I would have thought that obvious.”

The wall that jailed Tythonnia evaporated as quickly as it'd appeared. She suddenly bucked against a startled Par-Salian, who struggled to hold her down.

“I'm going to kill her,” Tythonnia shouted, struggling harder, but Par-Salian wouldn't let go.

“You froze!” Ladonna shouted back. She strode to the door and

slammed it shut, for the little good it did to muffle their voices. “You never, ever panic.”

“You betrayed me!” Tythonnia screamed. “You bitch!”

“Only to test you,” Ladonna shouted back. “Both of you,” she said to Par-Salian.

“It wasn’t your place to test us,” Par-Salian said.

“Really? If not me, then who, hmm?” Ladonna said then lowered her voice. “Maybe you White Robes can get by on well wishes and bunny rabbits, Par-Salian, but that’s not how the world works. It’s

hard and bitter, and far too often there isn't time to consider both sides of the argument."

She paused, waiting to hear what either had to say. Tythonnia was too choked up on her own emotions to speak, however, and Par-Salian had his hands full with her.

"The mission is my concern, not your feelings," Ladonna said and spread her arms open. "And I needed to see how you'd react to getting caught."

"You endangered her," Par-Salian said.

“I saw you moving to help her,” Ladonna said. “And if you hadn’t, I would have. I wasn’t going to let her get hurt.”

“And what do you call *this*?” Tythonna said, pointing to her split lip.

“A trophy. Let her go, Par-Salian.”

Par-Salian hesitated but only for a moment. Tythonna broke free of his grip and scrambled to her feet. She stood nose to nose with Ladonna. Ladonna stared back at her, a fierce expression that did nothing to cow Tythonna.

“All thieves earn that at one time or another,” Ladonna said without a shred of mercy in her voice. “What they can do to you—the merchants, the guards, any of them—is far worse than a split lip and a bruised pride.” She pulled her long, black hair back and turned her head, revealing a burn scar behind the ear. It looked like an arrowhead. “Much worse,” she said. “I needed to know how you’d react. Before it really counted.”

Tythonna’s fist connected with Ladonna’s jaw and sent her head snapping to the side. The blow was solid, a punch learned from her

cousin who taught her how to deal with troublesome boys. Ladonna stumbled backward but did not fall. The wall caught her. Par-Salian grabbed Tythonnia about the shoulders, but she managed to shrug loose.

“Now you know how I’ll react,” Tythonnia said. She strode for the door.

“Fine,” Ladonna said, nursing her jaw. “You only get one of those.”

“Wrong. I’ll take as many as I want,” Tythonnia retorted.

Ladonna laughed, not her cold,

mocking laughter, but a genuine guffaw that seemed blessed with something natural, the gritty, boisterous laugh of a rowdy commoner. “I’ll make a Black Robe of you yet, Tythonnia,” Ladonna said.

Tythonnia said nothing as she opened the door and stormed out. The innkeeper and his wife downstairs suddenly looked very busy.

They stood outside the courtyard of the Wanderer’s Welcome, in the shadow of an alley. The older of

the pair was a man in his forties. He wore black leather pants and a mailed surcoat with the sleeves missing. A tapestry of tattoos stretched up his arms to gird both biceps and cover his shoulders. From the straps across his chest hung two curved daggers, while the scars that stitched his grizzled face and his hands said he'd been in a fair number of scrapes.

The younger of the pair was a boy with black, unruly hair and green eyes. His clothes weren't rags just yet, but they were well on their way. His right hand was in his pocket, fidgeting with the toy

soldier. He was nervous and jumped slightly when the man's rough hands clamped down on his neck and held him there firmly. There was a threat in his fist, the ability to snap the boy's neck. The boy knew that; all the children did.

"I'm getting tired of waiting," the man said, his voice like rocks tumbling over each other.

The boy squirmed, trying to break free of the man's grip, but he remained held firmly in place. "I seen her come here," the boy said. "I promi—there!" he said, almost shouting. He pointed at the black-garbed woman who emerged from

the inn into the wagon-strewn courtyard.

The older man squeezed the boy's neck even harder for his outburst and pulled him back into the shadowed alley.

"I told you I seen her, Sutler," the boy said, trying to speak through the pain. "I told you—"

Sutler shook the boy hard like a rag doll before forcing him to face the woman. She didn't notice either of them as she headed out of the courtyard.

"Her? You're sure?" he demanded, shaking the boy again.

The boy nodded. He was struggling not to cry; that alone was enough to earn a beating from Sutler. “Yessir,” he said. “She asked for *Edoha*, but I told her nothing. I saw her running scams down by the Labyrinth with another girl.”

Sutler released the boy from his grip and ran his thick fingers over the rough stubble of his chin. The grating noise drove a shiver down the boy’s neck. He tried not to show it, especially since Sutler was thinking so hard about something.

“Nah ... it can’t be,” Sutler said, staring at the woman. His eyes widened. “Paladine’s balls, it is

her!”

“Who is she, Sutler?”

Sutler spun on the boy, making as though he was ready to backhand him. The boy cringed, but Sutler’s hand slapped down on his shoulder, instead, almost bringing him to a knee.

“What’s the first rule I taught you about the guild?”

“Blood for life?” the boy asked by way of an answer.

“Blood for life,” Sutler said, concurring. He walked out of the alley, forcing the boy to catch up. “Blood for life,” he repeated, a

murderous smile inching its way across his face. “Just happens that some lives are shorter than others.” He followed the black-haired woman.

Par-Salian tried to make peace between the two women, but Tythonnia claimed it was no longer an issue. The punch settled the matter. Yet Tythonnia still felt betrayed, and Par-Salian knew that. He understood her anger, however, and likely shared it.

Tythonnia was still upset at Ladonna and felt incapable of

trusting her. She approached every one of their thieving forays as another opportunity for betrayal and expected Ladonna to ambush them at every turn. For the remaining week, no treachery came and that, perhaps, was even more frustrating.

The next set of lessons proved difficult for Tythonnia and even more so for Par-Salian. It was a step up in daring, robbing a shop in the middle of the night. Par-Salian insisted on keeping a tally of what they stole, to reimburse the shopkeepers when their assignment ended. Ladonna wanted to argue

the point, but Par-Salian insisted with a stiff jaw. He saw no reason not to make amends once the mission with Berthal was done.

In the span of four evenings, they robbed two stores of Ladonna's choosing. One, a barter house, was in the Merchandising District, while the second was a jeweler in the more affluent Palanthas Trade Exchange. In both cases, Ladonna chose places protected with mystical wards. It was time to incorporate magic into their theft, she said, to attract Berthal's lieutenant.

From the barter house, they stole

what people would need to survive: equipment for traveling and monies. From the jeweler, they stole what greed dictated, though Ladonna took longer to pick out certain pieces to nick, all of them antiques. Tythonna couldn't be bothered to mention it, even to Par-Salian who decided it best if he served as lookout.

It was on their way back from the second job that Ladonna broke the bad news. As they kept to the shadows and avoided the well-patrolled, main thoroughfares, she told them.

“I think it's time we redouble our

efforts. I say we rob shops in daylight, where people can see us use magic.”

Par-Salian’s jaw seemed to knot up; Tythonna knew he was upset. “We’ll discuss this later,” he said, his voice dangerously low.

“If you insist,” Ladonna said, her voice equally low and dangerous. They continued on their way home.

The courtyard was dark and empty when they arrived. The Vagros had left the day before, much to Tythonna’s regret. She’d wanted to spend more time with

them, instead of engaging in such messy business. Par-Salian and Ladonna had barely given the Vagros a nod good-bye, but Tythonnia spent an hour speaking with Grandmother Yassa and Kandri in the privacy of their wagon. It was like talking with family.

Sebastian also told Tythonnia she'd be welcome among them if she ever needed shelter or traveling companions. She thanked him for his hospitality then watched him usher along five new kender as though they were his most beloved children.

Tythonnia looked around the courtyard and felt hollow for its emptiness. Ladonna stopped, however, and hissed at the others to freeze. Par-Salian complied and Tythonnia immediately noticed the exterior lanterns had been extinguished, heightening the darkness in the courtyard. Before any of them could react, however, several figures seemed to appear from the shadows. Tythonnia felt the blade against her throat before she even realized someone was behind her.

Four men and a woman emerged into view. All of them were lean

and masked by black cloth hoods that covered their lower faces. One man held Tythonnia to absolute stillness with the edge of a short sword pressed to her throat. The same held true for Par-Salian. The remaining three surrounded Ladonna, each ready to gut her. Only the man facing her, however, seemed confident and relaxed. Tattoos covered his arms, and he spun the two daggers expertly as he stood there.

“Little thief, little thief, welcome back home,” the man said.

“Sutler,” Ladonna replied. “You’re still alive? I’m surprised

nobody's crushed you under their boot yet."

Sutler pulled his mask down, revealing a roadwork of scars. "They've tried," he said. "Care to finish their work, little thief?"

Ladonna purred at the thought. She smiled. "In good time. What brings you here?" she asked casually.

"You left the guild. Nobody leaves the guild," he replied. "You came back. Even dumber of you. But to rob guild-protected shops? You must be feeling downright suicidal. I came by to help you with

that.”

Guild-protected shops? Tythonnia thought. Her strength fled; her stomach fluttered wildly. She could see it in Ladonna’s gaze, the guile, the machinations playing out. She was enjoying their situation; she felt in control. She’s out for revenge, Tythonnia realized. She used us to bring these people here so she could ...

“Ladonna?” Par-Salian said carefully. His attacker pressed the knife to his throat.

“Shut up,” Ladonna said. “Let me do the talking.”

Sutler smiled and nodded to Par-Salian. “And who is this, little thief? Your boyfriend? Too pretty for your tastes,” he said. The knives in his hands danced between his fingers. “We simply can’t have you courting someone prettier than you.”

Tythonna’s eyes widened. Par-Salian was in trouble; they all were. She looked to Ladonna for help, but the cool, calm gaze of her compatriot was gone. In its place was a feral expression: anger, hatred, pain. The real Ladonna was showing through, Ladonna the street urchin, Ladonna the animal,

Ladonna the hurt.

“We can’t all like little girls,” Ladonna said; her voice seemed to chill the air.

In an instant, the mood changed. Tythonna felt her assailant inhale ever so slightly, a small, panicked gasp that was shared in the glances of the other thieves. Whoever Sutler was, he was not a man to cross. Everyone there feared him, down to his own foot soldiers.

Sutler’s face contorted in anger. He bared his yellowed teeth and strode up to Ladonna. She stood her ground, however, her face

turned up to his in defiance. The rogue's blade flashed in his hands and across her face. Ladonna yelped in pain and immediately pressed her palm against the cut on her cheek, but the blood flowed freely over her fingers. His hands danced again, and another cut appeared on her exposed arm, then another.

Ladonna stumbled back and the woman behind her pushed her forward. Sutler caught Ladonna by the jaw.

“What was that, little thief?” Sutler said.

Despite the cuts to her face and her arm, Ladonna stared at him with an unflinching gaze. “I’ve suffered worse at your hands,” she said then looked at Tythonnia. She smiled. “And one more thing,” she said, turning her gaze back to Sutler. “I’m no longer ‘little thief.’”

As Ladonna’s claws dug into Sutler’s chest, she cried, “*Halilintar sentu!*”

Electricity sparked and danced between her fingers and into Sutler. He screamed and jerked as the threads of static leaped across his body and plunged between the links of his chain armor.

Tythonna kept her hands in front of her as she locked her fingers in three quick movements.

“Sihir anak!” she whispered. One dart of light curled back and struck the man holding her. He screamed and pulled away without drawing her blood. Another struck the man holding Par-Salian. He, too, stumbled back as Par-Salian shrugged him off and prepared his own spell. The final two darts struck the man and the woman behind Ladonna, stopping them from falling upon her.

Sutler slashed out, cutting Ladonna across the ribs with his

blade. She dodged another swing, but already her hands and mouth were moving with the dance of another spell. Par-Salian cracked his wrists together, producing a bell-like clang from the bracers around his wrists. The air around his body shimmered with heat, and three blazing arrows appeared. They shot out, their paths straight and true.

The first arrow repaid Tythonnia for her favor by striking the man behind her. He cried out in pain as a patch of clothing caught fire. The second arrow caught the woman behind Ladonna in the abdomen.

She gasped and went limp, falling to the ground. She didn't stir again. Unfortunately, the third arrow missed its mark. The other man flanking Ladonna barely managed to twist away, avoiding the bolt that struck the stone wall behind him. It vanished in a blazing pop. The cutthroat stabbed at Ladonna, catching her across the back. Whatever magic she had in store vanished from her lips in that moment of pain. The spell was lost. Ladonna was defenseless against Sutler and the other attacker.

Tythonnia saw everything happening too quickly, her own

reactions too slow. The man behind Par-Salian was already at his back again, his dagger poised to strike; Ladonna fell into the mud, bleeding and flanked by two men who eyed her throat with a predatory gleam. The man behind Tythonnia scrambled to get up.

Who do I save? she screamed to herself. Everyone was within reach, everyone was too far to save.

The words came unbidden, as though possessed of their own voice. Her fingers darted into place, her hand motions swift and concise. She touched the pouch strapped to her wrist, the one with

her eyelash trapped in tree sap. As the magic rode the shiver up her spine, she cried the words, “*Tak’kelihatan lingkaran.*”

And everyone vanished.

CHAPTER 11

Flight

Tythonna quietly stepped forward, as lightly as she could muster, given the adrenaline racing through her. She could hear the others breathing, the sudden panicked inhalation of shock, the shifting weight on the cobblestones. The inn remained quiet, the courtyard dark; the world seemed to be waiting, and so was she. Her only hope was that

Ladonna and Par-Salian had heard the words of her spell and understood what to do next.

To wait.

Gently, carefully, Tythonnia began preparing the next spell. She did not want to cast it just yet, but to ready the words rolling around her tongue, the weight of the magic balanced in her skull, balanced for the tipping. She inhaled softly and felt the air drag across her lungs. Any moment ...

... any moment.

“H—hello?” someone cried out. It was a man’s voice, unnatural

against the empty courtyard, haunted. It belonged to one of the rogues. There was more shuffling about, though the courtyard appeared empty of everyone but Tythonnia herself.

“Where’d you go?” another voice cried, almost relieved.

“I’m right here! Where are you?” The voice seemed to come from close to where Ladonna stood.

“Here!” the voice cried. It came from behind Tythonnia. She turned to face it, ever so carefully.

More shuffling was followed by a snarl. It was Sutler who spoke out

with a rough whisper. It was hard to pinpoint his voice. “I can hear them breathing! They’re still here! Attack, damn you!”

Tythonna braced for the chaos about to erupt. Her spell was prepared, the words pacing in her mouth like an eager dog. She could only hope the others realized what was happening and had prepared accordingly.

The first thief suddenly appeared. It was Tythonna’s attacker, his short sword swinging wildly while his other hand was outstretched, as though blindness gripped him. The second and third

rogues appeared as well, the one who had attacked Par-Salian and the one who had attacked Ladonna. They all swung blindly; then they spotted one another, their eyes widening.

Tythonnia didn't know whether their horrified expressions came because they realized they had broken the constraints of the invisibility spell, or because they were now visible to attack. Sutler had yet to appear, but Tythonnia knew she had to press the advantage before the trio of cutthroats could somehow regroup. She prayed her companions had

come to the same conclusion. The words spilled from her mouth.

“Keajukan ut saya.”

The rogues hesitated. Tythonnia reappeared, but now there were seven manifestations of her, each of them interspersed through the area, each of them seemingly as real as the other. Six copies mimicked the moves of one, another of her skillful illusions.

As the thief struck at one of the illusions with his short sword, obliterating the image into a mist of glittering powder, Tythonnia began another spell. The other

illusions simultaneously mimicked the sway of her arms and twist of her fingers. The cutthroat near Par-Salian struck at the Tythonnia nearest him, shattering that illusion as well. Five Tythonnias left to kill.

And there was still no sign of her companion wizards. They must have been waiting for Sutler to show himself, but he seemed smarter than his ilk. He wasn't doing anything that would reveal his position.

Tythonnia had to act again; the rogue nearest her had shattered another illusion, bringing her down to four Tythonnias. She was too

close to him not to be attacked next. In unison, the four Tythonnias completed a fresh spell; in unison, they called:

“Sihir anak!”

Four bolts of light zipped from each of the four Tythonnias, sixteen daggers in total that stitched zigzag paths over and under each other. Only four bolts were real, but the effect was the same as if all sixteen carried menace. They peppered the attacker like arrow fire and sent him lunging to the floor. He uttered a groan but stayed down.

Par-Salian materialized behind his attacker, his spell spoken as barely a whisper. A sphere of fire unfurled between his puppeteer-like fingers and the cobblestone ground. He flung the sphere at his attacker, caressing him with flames. The cutthroat screamed and batted at the sphere to push it away, but his sleeves caught fire. He cried even louder as the blaze engulfed his arms. Then he ran out of the courtyard as if his legs could carry him away from his burning body. His cries echoed through the alleys.

As both Tythonnia and Par-

Salian turned to confront the last of their visible attackers, one of the glamours burst into mist, and a sharp pain slammed into Tythonnia. She fell backward to the ground, her scream and agony-twisted face mirrored in her two remaining doppelgangers. Looking at them she realized there was a dagger lodged in her shoulder. The cutthroat nearest Ladonna was pulling another pair of daggers from his belt.

Par-Salian sent the sphere hurtling at the rogue, but as before, the villain proved nimble. He dived out of the way and rolled back up

to his knee. His arm flashed forward, and two more daggers were suddenly embedded in Par-Salian's thigh. The wizard cried out and clutched his leg, as he crumpled to the floor.

Tythonna tried to ready a spell, to unleash it before the rogue could attack them again, but pain and nausea made it hard to focus. Somehow, between the seconds spent in agony, another two daggers appeared in the attacker's hands. He prepared to throw them underhand, and neither Par-Salian nor Tythonna could stop him in time.

Ladonna appeared behind the cutthroat, her hands pressed on either side of his head, her mouth moving. He gasped, first in surprise then at the sudden rush of pain. Ladonna's fingernails glowed with cold, blue light, and her victim's face seemed to go white. Tiny, blue veins appeared across his flesh, his skin growing terribly pale and thin. The wounds on Ladonna's arm and face stopped bleeding and scabbed over. She gained strength as the rogue withered; finally his eyes rolled up into his head, and he dropped away, dead.

Tythonna fought to concentrate,

to ready one last spell. She knew what was coming; Ladonna had made herself vulnerable to save them; Sutler was still invisible. But Tythonnia couldn't think straight with the dagger still in her shoulder. She needed to remove it.

With a cry of pain, Tythonnia gripped the dagger and pulled it out. She screamed and almost collapsed from the sickening rush that filled her stomach. The spell, she thought, she must prepare it before—

Everything went silent as Ladonna arched out, her black eyes wide in shock and her head thrown

back. Sutler appeared behind her, both fists buried deep into her lower back, the blades drinking of her blood. A wild grin cracked his face open, an eagerness for the kill that bordered on frenzy.

Tythonna saw the solution clearly, the one spell she knew that she was loath to ever use, the one spell in her repertoire of illusions that marked the pinnacle of her understanding of those particular arts. The spell called out to her. If ever a situation existed—a person, even—to inflict that spell upon, that time had arrived, that person was here.

The words came easily, the gestures unbidden, from years of practicing the patterns and motions. If she should die fifty years later, never having practiced magic again in the meantime, the interlocking finger and hand patterns would remain with her.

As her fingers flew and her mouth uttered, "*Khalayan ut matithat*," her mind became a mirror. And in that mirror stood Sutler. Also in the reflection, standing behind him, was the very thing to augur his doom.

A shadowy cloud, its edges tattered and bleeding wisps of

smoke, appeared between Tythonnia and Sutler. He finally saw it, his crazed eyes unable to register it at first. He glanced at Ladonna then snapped back to the shape. His mouth dropped open, and the lunacy evaporated from his face. The shape remained the same as far as Tythonnia could see, but to Sutler, it took on terrifying dimension and weight. The details became clearer, and it turned into that thing in the mirror, the thing that would undo him.

Tythonnia couldn't see it, but she knew it was something stitched together from the fabric of all

Sutler's fears, a patchwork monster to embody his every greatest terror. Ladonna slid to the ground as Sutler stepped back. He tried to raise his blades, to fend the creature off, but his arms barely budged. The daggers clattered to the cobblestones, and a strangled cry escaped Sutler's lips.

The shadowy form darted forward; a tendril touched Sutler. He clutched his chest and inhaled a terrible, ragged gasp. He dropped to his knees, his fingers scrabbling over his heart as though seeking to tear it out. The look of horror deepened, and there he died, on his

knees, the fear forever etched on his face.

The two other Tythonnias instantly vanished, and both the real one and Par-Salian hobbled over to Ladonna. Her eyes were open and staring up past them to some distant point in the night sky.

“Ladonna, hold on,” Par-Salian said, “please hold on. We’ll find help.”

Her gaze drifted to Sutler, dead and still upright. “Not fair,” Ladonna whispered. “I wanted to be the one who killed him.”

“Don’t you dare die on us,”

Tythonnia said. "I haven't taught you my best illusions."

Ladonna nodded. "I think ... that last one was ... nice."

"Shh, shh," Par-Salian said. He turned toward the inn and cried, "Help! Help us!"

Nobody appeared and the pool of blood around Ladonna's body kept growing. Par-Salian fumbled for his chest and pulled out a golden sun medallion that Tythonnia had never seen before. He stared at it then at Ladonna, caught in indecision.

Tythonnia stood and ran for the

inn door. It was locked, the windows dark and the shutters on the ground floor closed. She hammered on the door, but nobody answered. She knew what was happening, and it enraged her enough to hammer even harder. They'd angered the Thieves Guild. They were on their own. She caught a glimmer of candlelight inside through the gap between the door and its frame.

“Please,” Tythonnia cried. “She’s dying! Help us, damn you!”

Nobody responded, though the light inside seemed to grow stronger.

The Journeyman watched quietly from the upper story window, assessing the situation. In the history he knew so well, Ladonna would live. Ladonna would go on to greater things. And yet there she was, bleeding from two killing strikes that had likely ruptured her kidneys. She looked to be dying and needed help.

The Journeyman pulled an ampoule from his pouch and walked out the door of his room. The inn was dark, the lights in the tavern extinguished. The innkeeper and his redheaded wife—he had

forgotten their names—stood in the darkness. The innkeeper carried a cheap-looking sword, and she clung to him. They both stared at the door, hearing as clearly as he did the desperate hammering outside.

The innkeeper pointed his blade at the Journeyman. “You there, back to your room!” the innkeeper said in a whisper. “This don’t concern you.”

The Journeyman opened his hand and whispered, “*Shirak lingkaran.*” A floating orb of fire appeared in his hand, driving the shadows away and startling the couple.

“Please,” Tythonnia cried from outside. “She’s dying! Help us, damn you!”

With a nudge, the orb drifted toward the frightened innkeeper and his wife. They cowered before it, even though it lacked the strength to harm them. For the purposes of the Journeyman’s bluff, however, they didn’t need to know that.

“Help them,” the Journeyman instructed as he walked down the stairs.

“But the guild will slit our throats,” the innkeeper said. He

waved his blade fearfully at the ball of fire.

With another mental nudging, the Journeyman willed the orb to separate and turn into four blazing spheres. They surrounded the innkeeper and his wife, who had started weeping.

“Please don’t,” the innkeeper begged.

“Help them or I swear by all that is holy you will become ash and cinder.”

The innkeeper raised one hand to show he meant no harm and lowered his sword. “All right, all

right. Just don't hurt my Bessie."

The Journeyman held out his hand and motioned for the innkeeper to take the ampoule resting in his palm. The innkeeper did so reluctantly and practically wrenched his arm stretching over to grab it. He didn't want to approach any closer than necessary.

"Go outside," the Journeyman instructed. "Give this to the injured woman. Tell them it's something the Vagros left you as a gift."

"What does it do?" the innkeeper asked, suspiciously eyeing the

amber-colored liquid inside.

“It’ll save your life. Now do as I tell you, and say nothing of me, do you understand?”

The innkeeper nodded. The Journeyman dissolved the orbs and stepped into the darkness. He didn’t wish to be seen. With a glance to his frightened wife, the innkeeper unlatched the door and opened it. Tythonnia, pleading for his help, pulled him outside.

The Journeyman went to the window and opened the shutter a touch. He glanced at the nervous wife, and mused, I thought only

cows were named Bessie.

Tythonna almost cried out in relief as the door opened. She grabbed the innkeeper's hand and practically dragged him out.

“She’s bleeding badly.”

The innkeeper appeared rattled; the blood was drained from his face. He glanced back at the inn but followed her to Ladonna.

“Hold on, Ladonna,” she cried.

Ladonna was barely conscious. Her eyes seemed to roll loosely in their sockets, and she was moaning

in pain and delirium. The ground around her was soaked in a pool of her blood, and Par-Salian's pants were filthy with it. He held Ladonna's hand and whispered in her ear, trying to keep her with them. The medallion was resting against the outside of his tunic, its purpose forgotten.

The innkeeper didn't seem to know what to do; almost absently, he shoved the amber-colored ampoule into Tythonnia's hands.

"What's this?" she asked.

"A gift from the Vagros," he said. He was already turning to dash

back to the inn.

Tythonnia stared at the innkeeper in shock and back at the ampoule. What was she supposed to do with it? Feed it to Ladonna blindly? What if it did more harm than good?

She's dying! A thought seemed to scream in her head. Do something!

Unable to think properly, Tythonnia snapped off the top of the ampoule.

"What is that?" Par-Salian whispered, his voice rough with grief.

"I don't know," Tythonnia said.

“Hope?”

Par-Salian didn't argue. Instead, he helped lift Ladonna's head while Tythonnia tilted the ampoule into her mouth. The amber liquid seemed to vanish as soon as it touched her lips.

Ladonna's moans slowly turned into soft breathing. She blinked; her eyes seemed to clear, lose focus, and clear again. Some of the color returned to her face.

“What—what happened?” Ladonna asked, she tried to raise herself up, but was too weak to move.

“You were stabbed,” Par-Salian said.

“I still am,” Ladonna replied. She smiled weakly.

“Gently, roll her to her side,” Par-Salian instructed.

Her back and long hair glistened with blood. The two puncture wounds on her back, however, were partially closed with the beginnings of thick scabs. They bled still but not enough to kill her.

“We must leave,” Ladonna said as they helped her stand. She winced in pain, her every movement straining her wound.

“The guild will send more of them after us. We’re not safe here.”

“At the inn?” Par-Salian said, supporting her as best he could. How he managed with his wounded leg, Tythonnia didn’t know. She felt pain in her own shoulder.

“No ... Palanthas,” Ladonna responded. She grimaced as she stood wobbily.

“We can’t leave until you get better,” Tythonnia said.

“You should talk,” she replied. “Have you seen yourselves?”

That was enough to set all three of them chuckling.

The Journeyman watched them from the window. The ampoule's draught wasn't enough to heal her injuries completely, but time would do the rest. The Journeyman was only glad he'd been prepared for the lack of healers in this time.

The innkeeper and his wife watched in horror as the three wizards made their way to the Wanderer's Welcome. "They can't stay here!" the innkeeper begged the Journeyman. "Please!"

The Journeyman nodded. He mounted the stairs. "I'll be out by the morrow," he said. "And they

will be leaving too. But help them now and remember our agreement. Say nothing of me.”

The innkeeper nodded gratefully.

The boy with unruly, black hair and green eyes waited in the shadows of the alley in the company of his older companion. Unlike Sutler, the boy felt safe with Keanan. The older boy was still young by guild standards but well regarded for his skills.

“Ain’t you gonna kill them?” the boy asked, nodding to the three injured wizards heading into the

inn.

“No,” Keanan said. He drew the black cloak around his shoulders and pulled his long, black hair out from beneath it. “They killed twice our numbers with magic—no telling what they got left in their bag of tricks.”

The boy nodded sagely in hopes of impressing his companion.

“Besides,” Keanan said, “I’m not much inclined to avenge Sutler. He had what’s coming to him.”

The boy studied Keanan’s angular face to see if he was being tested for his loyalty. Keanan was

grinning down at him, however, a thin eyebrow raised in amusement and a look that playfully defied the boy to contradict him.

“Yeah, he did,” the boy said. “I’m glad he’s dead. But guild law says those three gotta pay for what they did.”

Keanan’s smile widened. “You’re right. They gotta pay, and I know just the people to do it. And they’ll even pay *us* for that privilege.”

The boy threw a quizzical look up at Keanan, but the older fellow was already bounding upward, bouncing between the two walls of

the alley until he deftly pulled himself over the lip of the adjoining roof. From above, Keanan whispered, "Stay here. If they leave, follow them and then tell me where they got to."

The boy nodded. "But what if the guards come?"

"They won't," Keanan whispered. "After those screams, nobody's venturing outside to alert nobody. Now keep watch."

The boy grinned and beamed inwardly. Keanan had trusted him with an important task, and he was eager to do right by that trust. He

watched the inn, intent on his duty. A small, satisfied part of him enjoyed watching Sutler's corpse.

It wasn't until the next morning that the boy found Keanan again. He related what he'd seen and heard, and in turn, Keanan brought him to speak with three strangers waiting at the Bright Horizons Rest. The strangers were all intimidating, from the blond-haired man who studied the boy with an eagle's intensity, to the bear of a man who was stout of chest and all beard, to the woman with knives

for eyes and a strange metal book strapped across her chest.

“Tell them what you told me,” Keanan said, nodding to the three. They were all seated in a private dining room in the back, their table covered in breakfast plates (most of it for the larger man, the boy suspected) and the air filled with the smell of eggs and thick bacon. The boy began speaking, but he was so hungry, he kept distracting himself with glances to the table.

The large man smiled and offered the boy two strips of greasy bacon. The boy wolfed them down quickly, despite the impatient look

thrown his way by the woman. Finally, after a small burp, the boy continued.

“So I started following them like I was told,” he said.

“Did they have horses?” the blond-haired man asked.

“Two. They took them from the stables. The woman with black hair was riding one with the man holding her up; I thought she was dead, for sure.”

“Go on,” the woman said. “Where did they go?”

“Well,” the boy admitted, “I’m not exactly sure.”

“You lost them?” the woman said, rising suddenly from her chair and tipping it to the floor with a loud crash. Even her two compatriots seemed startled.

Keanan was all smiles as he stepped in between the woman and the child, his hands resting easily on his belt. The boy knew better, however. He knew the belt hid throwing knives, enough to kill the three strangers.

“Easy now,” Keanan said. “Let him finish.”

The woman was momentarily confused, like the anger had

overtaken her suddenly. She nodded absently, righted her chair, and sat down, apparently taken aback at her own behavior and angrier still. She motioned for the boy to continue.

“Well, the three and their horses ... they just vanished, see?” The boy snapped his fingers. “Like that. Like they did in the fight.”

“They went invisible,” the large man said, sighing. “Back to the beginning.”

“No wait,” the boy said. “I still followed them.”

“How?” the blond-haired man

asked.

“Well, they vanished right?” the boy said, all proud of himself. “But I could still hear them clopping through the street. So I followed the sound.”

Both the large man and the blond one smiled, a look that filled the boy with pride. The woman, however, didn't appear impressed one way or the other. The boy decided he didn't like her.

“You followed the sound and didn't get caught?” the woman said. “Lucky. Very lucky. Where did they go?”

“Well that’s the thing. They rode all the way into Smiths’ Alley and then stopped. I listened for a long time ... till morning when everyone started waking up, but I heard nothing. I didn’t see where they hid. Only that it was near the Alley.”

The woman stood again, the uncertainty gone from her eyes. She tossed Keanan a coin purse and nodded to the others. They stood as well and headed for the door.

“If this information proves accurate,” the woman said, “we’ll pay you the remaining half later.”

Keanan nodded as he hefted the pouch in his hands. He didn't bother peering inside the purse.

The bearish man, as he passed the boy, patted him on the shoulder with his massive hand and nodded to the table. "Eat. Grow big and strong like me," he said then laughed at his own joke as he left the room. The boy decided he liked him the best.

The boy waited for Keanan to give him the nod before he set about wolfing down the plates of food. They were partially eaten, but he devoured them just the same. There was no telling when

he'd have a chance at such a fine meal again. As he ate, shoving bits of pork and scooping eggs into his mouth with his fingers, Keanan sat next to him.

“You did good,” Keanan said. “I think you’ve earned yourself a nickname ... Lucky.”

“Lucky Leppomanto!” the boy cheered with food spilling from his mouth and his arm thrown in the air.

“Let’s stick with Lucky, for now. Leppomanto’s not an easy name to remember.”

The boy nodded again. He felt as

if he were going to burst. Sutler was dead and he had earned himself a guild nickname before any of the other boys. Just when he thought it couldn't get any better, Keanan pushed a couple of copper pieces his way.

“You earned it,” Keanan said before claiming two strips of bacon for himself.

The boy grabbed the pair of coins and shoved them into his pocket. His fingers touched the toy soldier that was already there, and he suddenly remembered his good luck charm. He wrapped his greasy fingers around it and smiled.

Lucky, he thought before
shoveling more food in his mouth.

CHAPTER 12

The Hush Between Heartbeats

It had been a strange and eerie ride through the empty streets of Palanthas, especially when they couldn't see each other. There were only the echoes of hoofbeats that broke against the city walls and the odd looks from occasional travelers they encountered who were baffled by the sound of phantom horses. Tythonnia had added the invisibility spell to her repertoire

following Ladonna's little object lesson. She'd focused mostly on illusions, choosing misdirection as her weapon of choice. After the fight, she was glad she had.

Finally, after what felt like hours of travel, Ladonna whispered for them to stop at a gap between two buildings. The wood and stone structures were mere feet from each other, enough that children in either building could play catch with one another from their windows. It was more than two buildings, however. It seemed that the gap separated rows of structures, all built two or three

stories tall.

It's a street, Tythonnia realized, narrow enough that two horses could choke the throat of it. The buildings were constructed in the shadow of the wall, and their chimneys rose so close to it that the battlement was black with soot.

“Smiths’ Alley,” Ladonna said.

Tythonnia wished she could see her and Par-Salian. Ladonna sounded weak, and Tythonnia had to admit, her own shoulder wound still hurt. They needed to rest. They moved into the street, instead, the awnings of rooftops touching and

forming a permanent canopy. It also walled-in the stench of humans and animals, a nauseating aroma. The horses echoed even more loudly and Tythonnia wished she had the trick to silence their hoof falls before they roused the neighborhood. She decided she would find a spell later that allowed her to travel more quietly ... if they survived the night.

Smiths' Alley lived up to its name, with building upon building advertising smithy services on wood placards. Tythonnia felt them drawing near to the end of the spell's effect when Ladonna

whispered for them to stop in front of a small building.

“Drop the spell,” Ladonna instructed.

The three of them reappeared to one another, and Ladonna definitely looked the worse for their ride. She was pale, the back of her dress glistening with blood. Par-Salian, his leg bandaged, supported her and helped her dismount. They ushered the horses into a side alley where the horses barely fit. Ladonna hammered on a large side door, a rickety piece of wood that shuddered even under her weakened fist. A curled rose,

faded with age, was painted above the door.

It took a few moments of knocking before Tythonnia saw candlelight flicker between the slats of wood.

“Who is it?” a rough voice asked. It belonged to a woman.

“Ladonna ... Adwin’s daughter.”

There was a pause before someone hastily undid the latch and slid the door open. It was large enough to fit the horses, but blocking the doorway was one of the largest women Tythonnia had ever seen. Her hair was white and

braided around her neck like a loop. Despite the generous fat on her body, she was well muscled with a round face, gray eyes, and a strong jaw. She looked fit enough to snap them all in two. She wore a night slip that barely contained her bosom. She saw Ladonna, and at once seemed shocked.

“Look at you, child,” she said. She pulled Ladonna into the doorway and waved the rest of them in. “What happened to you?”

“Hello, Rosie,” Ladonna said, grimacing. They were inside a small barn, hay scattered about the ground, with three empty stalls.

Ladonna leaned against a column of wood and breathed hard.

Rosie scowled and crossed her massive arms. “That’s the work of the Thieves’ Guild, isn’t it? Is that what you left for?” she asked. “Just so you could fall back in with that bad lot?”

“They were settling an old grudge,” Ladonna said.

“And you had nothing to do with encouraging it?” Rosie asked. It sounded like an accusation. “How long have you been in town?” she asked in the same accusatory tone.

“A week,” Ladonna admitted.

“She’s hurt,” Par-Salian said. “We all are.”

The woman laughed and pointed at his thigh. “That nick? My husband cut himself worse shaving.”

“Our injuries don’t matter,” Tythonna said. “But Ladonna almost died.”

Rosie softened a bit at that but remained scowling. Her arms dropped to her sides, and she began helping Ladonna toward the rickety stairs at the back of the barn that led to a loft bedroom.

“Get the horses inside,” Rosie

said. “I’ll see to this little troublemaker myself.”

“You’ve gotten big,” Ladonna mumbled as they headed up the stairs.

“And you still have the body of a twig.”

“Thank you.”

“That wasn’t a compliment. Twigs are meant to be broken.”

They watched Rosie and Ladonna vanish upstairs before taking stock of their situation. The barn was simple and tucked behind a smithy’s shop, the door of which was closed.

“You, sit,” Tythonnia instructed Par-Salian. She pointed to a sawhorse leaning against the wall.

“I can help,” he said as he struggled to hobble forward. “You’re hurt, too, you know.”

“Not where it counts,” Tythonnia said. “Besides, if I can push you over with one hand—” which she did, shoving him gently but enough for him fall backward.

“Hey!”

“—then maybe you should lay down.”

Par-Salian grumbled, but eased himself down. Tythonnia took that

as argument won and went back outside, where she proceeded to wrangle the horses around the tight corner and into the barn. By the time she brought the second horse in, Par-Salian looked exhausted enough to fall asleep. He kept her company, however, chatting as she removed the saddles and brushed down the horses.

“How do you do it?” he asked. “Your illusions are ... exemplary. Even for a Red Robe.”

Tythonna nodded. “When I passed the test, Amma Batros gave me a tattoo.” She pulled the sleeve of her shirt up and rolled it to the

shoulder. Lines of black and red, barely visible, marked the outline of a medallion.

“How does one *give* you a tattoo?” Par-Salian said then laughed. “I thought that sort of thing is what renegades did? Cupboard magicians?”

“Where do you think some of us first encountered magic?” Tythonna retorted. “The first bit of arcane magic I saw was through a Wyldling sorcerer.”

“Wyldling?”

“And the occasional charlatan posing as a wandering hermit or

fortune teller.”

“Really?” Par-Salian said. “My father employed a house magician sanctioned by the Wizards of High Sorcery. That’s where I learned my first spells.”

“Born and bred in the order, eh?” Tythonna asked. “You should pay more attention to your peers, especially those of the red and black cloth. By trying to teach proper magic, the orders have always overlooked certain interesting ... things.”

“What sorts of things?” Par-Salian asked.

“The kind of book-learned magics you’d expect from wizards, but the foci and reagents are different. Homespun, I guess you could say. Like using spit and blood and breath to fuel a spell.”

“And tattoos?”

“Amma Batros’s people use tattoos as a show of devotion. Henna tattoos, kohl runes, and even ink,” she said, looking at her own faded mark. “I got this tattoo for passing my test. It waxes and wanes according to how often I use it.”

“It’s almost gone,” Par-Salian

said, squinting at her. “Does it have practical uses?”

“It improves my glamours. I can make them last longer or stronger or extend them over a larger area. It also lets me cast one illusion, one normally outside my training.” Her voice trailed away.

Par-Salian nodded. “Is that how you ... dealt with Sutler?” he asked.

“Fear kills us in small doses,” she said as she continued to absently groom the horse. “But sometimes it’s terrible enough to send you to the grave screaming.” She paused at the recollection of absolute

terror on Sutler's face. "My turn," she said. "That medallion around your neck ... the one you pulled out when Ladonna was hurt. What is it?"

Par-Salian suddenly realized it was still hanging free and shoved it back inside his tunic. He appeared sheepish. "A gift from the highmage," he admitted. "For when our mission is complete. It'll take us back home."

Tythonna stopped what she was doing and looked at Par-Salian. The slow realization burned through her. "You were going to use that to save Ladonna,"

Tythonna said, “but you didn’t. Why?”

“I almost used it,” he whispered. He looked away, unable to meet her stare. “Almost ...”

They awoke to the sound of metal upon metal, a deep clanging that resounded in their ears. Tythonna checked the bindings of her wound, which Rosie had quietly helped her with the previous night before she checked on Par-Salian’s leg. He stared at her through one eye as he lay upon his bedroll in the stall and promptly fell asleep

again.

Tythonna cleaned herself from the iron wash basin Rosie left out for them and changed clothes. She finished and found a shirtless Par-Salian washing himself as well. His eyes were practically swollen with fatigue.

The clanging persisted.

The two companions entered the smithy through the barn and were surprised to find Rosie working hard. She wore a leather smock and maneuvered the tongs expertly while she hammered away at an iron rod that glowed red at its tip.

Near her anvil was a stone hearth set against the brick wall. The heat from it was blistering, but Rosie paid it no mind. On the other side of her was a stone slack tub filled with water, while all manner of metal implements hung from chains in the ceiling's rafters.

She glanced at them, and as she spoke the hammering punctuated her words, almost obliterating them.

“How’d you sleep?” she asked.

“Fine,” Tythonnia said, practically yelling. “Thank you.”

“Yes, thank you,” Par-Salian

said. “Ladonna? How is she?”

“Still asleep, not that she’ll wake up any time soon.”

They were quiet a moment, the awkward silence of strangers.

“Well,” Rosie said, “there’s food in the larder, through the door beneath the loft. Go on, help yourselves.”

Tythonna and Par-Salian nodded their thanks and had started back into the barn when Rosie stopped hammering.

“How much trouble is she in?” Rosie asked as she shoved the rod back in the hearth.

“I—uh, we’re not comfortable—discussing Ladonna’s affairs,” Par-Salian said.

Rosie stepped away from the forge and wiped the grime and sweat from her forehead. “Listen carefully,” she said. “Ladonna is the closest thing my husband and I had to a daughter. We gave her food and a bed when her fool of a father lost his forge to gambling debts. And we gave her sanctuary whenever she angered the Thieves Guild. This isn’t the first time she’s come to me, beaten and bleeding. This isn’t the first time I’ve bandaged her. Now ... is this an

affair of thieves or one of wizards?”

Par-Salian clearly wasn't sure what to say, so Tythonnia intervened. “Wizards,” she said, despite Par-Salian's sharp intake of breath. Tythonnia, however, ignored him. “I can't say why we're here, but Ladonna is respected among her peers. If you were her adopted mother, then you've got a lot to be proud of.”

Rosie guffawed. “You're laying it on a bit thick, aren't you?” she said.

“Maybe,” Tythonnia said, “but I

respect her.”

“What happened last night was an old vendetta, it seems,” Par-Salian added. “But it was necessary to put ourselves in harm’s way. For a greater good.”

Rosie grunted something that could have been approval or disbelief. In either case, she pulled the iron rod from the fire and dropped it into the tub. A tremendous rush of steam erupted, but she ignored it. She removed her smock and hung it from a hook on a wood post. “Come on,” she said, brushing past them. “Let’s see if there’s something to eat. And stop

thanking me,” she said, interrupting Par-Salian. “It’s done.”

“Welcome to Palanthas.” Kinsley bowed in jest and kept the door open.

Berthal entered and pulled the hood of his cloak back. He nodded appreciatively at the abode, which was far from humble or poor. It was a square, courtyard-style building, with staircase towers to the left and right. The exterior was timber framed and lined with windows. On the interior, the entrance porch opened into a

carpeted hallway, and, from there, into a side parlor with a cold fireplace and walls covered in timber paneling and tapestries.

The house was beyond the means of most citizens of Palanthas and ostentatious enough to sit proudly on the clifflike hills of Purple Ridge on the city's edge. Berthal handed Kinsley his cloak but kept the simple walking staff. Kinsley knew an illusion masked the staff's real appearance, but the double-headed dragon was a certain give-away to Berthal's real identity, more so than his face.

Berthal sat in the wingback chair

upholstered in red leather. He groaned happily. "Chairs. I miss chairs," he said. He eyed Kinsley. "Whose place is this? It isn't yours."

"For the week it is," Kinsley said. "It belongs to the mistress of a Nobles Hill senator. They're on a trip to Solanthus, and she very much admires rebels," he said with a broad smile.

"What did you tell her?" Berthal said as he studied Kinsley from under his bushy eyebrows.

"Nothing that endangers us," Kinsley said with shrug. He

dropped into a white armchair across from Berthal. “But we have much to discuss.”

“Indeed. There’s a girl—Mariyah. A Black Robe. She stole something for us from her masters. Said it was something we should see. She’ll be arriving within a few days by boat. See to her, will you?”

Kinsley nodded. “I’ll bring her to you. But there’s something else. The robbery of two shops protected by spells.”

“Were the spells triggered?”

“No,” Kinsley said with a shake of his head and a rather broad

smile. “They were dispelled. The owners made quite a scene with the local wizards, complaining to whoever would listen. But that’s not the interesting part. Both stores were protected by the Thieves Guild, and on the night of the second robbery, they sent enforcers after the culprits. According to witnesses who saw the fight happen at the courtyard of an inn, there were three magicians involved. They killed their attackers, who outnumbered them five to one.”

“Robes?”

“No.”

“Fifteen thieves killed at the hands of three sorcerers?” Berthal asked. He laughed. “Unlikely.”

“The numbers? Perhaps. But several witnesses said the night was lit by plumes of flame and daggers of light. Then everyone vanished and reappeared. That made me curious, so I investigated. The inn shows burn marks along the flagstone floor and in a couple of places along the wood walls. The innkeepers were terrified. Refused to speak. I paid a soldier to let me examine the body of one of the thieves. The expression on the corpse’s face was ... horrifying.

Like he died of fear. The soldiers are charging people to see the corpse, you know? As an oddity.”

“When did this happen?”

“Three nights ago. But that’s not all. Dumas is in Palanthas with her men. She’s asking questions about three renegades who arrived in town recently.”

Berthal bit the tip of his thumb and decided he didn’t like the taste of it. “It’s a trick,” he said.

“Perhaps. The hunters seem very interested in Smiths’ Alley, but it’s twenty blocks long and filled with people who greatly distrust

outsiders.”

Berthal remained quiet while he considered the matter. Finally, he said, “Find them; find out about them. Who are they and where are they from? We can’t afford to accept things at face value.”

Kinsley nodded and slapped his knees as he rose. “There’s a tub of hot water upstairs to bathe; my nose sincerely hopes you’ll take advantage of it. Meanwhile, I’ll see what else I can find on these three renegades. I know a couple of people in Smiths’ Alley. Maybe I can loosen their tongues a bit.”

“Wait,” Berthal said as he rose, using his staff for support. “Where was the inn where these attacks took place?”

“Merchandising District.”

“And Smiths’ Alley is to the northwest of that by many blocks, yes?”

“At least an hour’s travel, yes.”

“Then perhaps we’re looking for someone who used to live there? A prodigal son returned in desperate times? If Smiths’ Alley is so tightly knit and the hunters are searching there, it could mean the sorcerers once knew that neighborhood. That

might suggest your avenue of questioning.”

“Find out who has returned after a long absence? Sounds reasonable. I guess that’s why you’re the leader.”

“That and my rugged good looks and virility,” Berthal said, scratching his beard. He straightened with a groan.

“How could I forget?” Kinsley said, chuckling. He left Berthal to enjoy the luxuries of a real bath and a real bed.

Ladonna's condition had improved greatly over the past five days. Although still bedridden by the two dagger strokes to her kidneys, she was seated in bed with her back to the wall and the table within easy reach. Rosie's thick quilt covered her lower body,.

Par-Salian marveled at their good fortune with the innkeeper and the healing draught. There was barely a spotting of blood on her bandages when, normally, an injury of that type would take a month to recover from ... if one even survived. He was determined to return their horses when they

could do so safely. Right now, per Ladonna's and Rosie's orders, neither he nor Tythonnia were venturing far from the barn. Gossip was easy in that part of town, and two strangers wandering in and out of Rosie's Smithy was sure fodder for chitchat. Still, there was time enough in the late evening to stretch their legs and take in fresh air.

During the day, they took turns helping Rosie, studying their spells, and keeping Ladonna company. To Par-Salian's surprise, Ladonna was easier to talk to, as though her injury had stripped her of all the

pretensions that accompanied members of the Black Robes. She smiled more often, despite the lingering pain, and laughed more easily. Par-Salian found it difficult reconciling the woman he met in Solanthus the previous month and the different sides of the woman he had discovered: Ladonna the Black Robe, Ladonna the orphan, Ladonna the street waif, Ladonna the fighter.

“What?” Ladonna said, looking at Par-Salian as he stared at her.

“Sorry,” Par-Salian said, shaking his head. “I was just thinking about everything you’ve been through.

Nothing like that's ever happened to me."

"No hardship? Ever? Nothing bad?"

"My father was very protective. Oh!" Par-Salian said suddenly. "I did stub my toe once. Father was very upset. We held a vigil."

Ladonna laughed, wincing at the pain it caused. "Stop making me laugh, you idiot," she said, though her expression was far from serious.

"I'm sorry," Par-Salian said. He couldn't stop grinning. "I'll stop."

"Fine," Ladonna said and

abruptly switched topics. “What about the test? You can’t tell me you didn’t face hardship there?”

“Oh, that. That was hard, yes,” Par-Salian admitted. “I was forced to face my worst ordeal, my ... gravest fear.”

“Can I ask what that was?” Ladonna asked.

Par-Salian hesitated then nodded gravely. “Yes,” he whispered.

Ladonna drew closer.

“I stubbed my toe again,” Par-Salian said.

Ladonna’s voice rang in a new peal of laughter.

“Stop laughing,” Par-Salian protested. “It was both feet this time!”

She laughed harder with yelps of pain, but there were tears rolling down her face. Par-Salian had to admit, he liked making her laugh.

“Don’t make me come up there!” Rosie shouted from the barn floor. The giggles and laughter died down a little but continued in whispered fits like two small children sharing a secret.

Rosie smiled and motioned for Tythonnia to set down the wooden

crates they were carrying. They weren't heavy but they were unwieldy for just one person, and Tythonnia's shoulder still hurt. She healed quickly even though the injury was still enough to limit her mobility. Tythonnia's muscles hurt from the exertion, but it felt good to be working so hard. She missed the simple life, the heavy days accompanied by hours of the deepest sleep one could imagine. Magic set the mind working constantly, and insomnia was a common curse for all wizards.

Tythonnia leaned against the pillar, trying not to breathe hard in

front of Rosie.

Rosie, however, seemed pleasantly distracted by the voices upstairs. When she noticed Tythonnia watching her, she said, “How’s the shoulder?”

“Good enough for any job you have in mind,” Tythonnia said.

“You’re a sturdy girl. It’s good to have a pair of strong hands helping out again.”

Tythonnia nodded. “A farmer’s upbringing,” she admitted.

Rosie sat on a wood crate and patted the one next to her. Tythonnia joined her.

“That explains it,” Rosie said. “You didn’t strike me as the wizardly type.” When she saw Tythonnia’s expression, the slightly pained one, she amended her statement. “Don’t take it that way. Most of the wizards I’ve seen are frail little sticks never blessed with the joy of hard work,” she said. “But you’re like them in one regard, if that helps.”

“How’s that?” Tythonnia asked.

Rosie tapped her own temple with her finger. “You live up here too much.”

“I know,” Tythonnia said and

went quiet at all the thoughts raging in her head.

“You’re doing it again,” Rosie said. Another fit of laughter in the loft, however, seemed to distract Rosie. She laughed, winking at Tythonnia.

“I’m not the only one,” Tythonnia said.

“It’s been too long since I heard happy voices,” she admitted.

“No children?” Tythonnia asked.

“Not for a lack of trying, but no. The only children we had were the ones we welcomed into our home. Orphans of the Alley, my Lawry

called them. Ladonna was one of many, but she was also the most precious of them.”

“You stopped taking care of children?” Tythonnia asked.

“The Alley is changing,” Rosie admitted. “The city has closed down many smithies because our smoke is tarnishing the walls of their beautiful Palanthas,” she said with a sneer. “More people are leaving and strangers are moving in. It’s not the home I remember.”

The two were quiet for a moment, indulging in memories of homes lost and families forgotten.

Finally, Rosie patted Tythonnia's leg. "I have work to do and an errand to ask of you."

"Ask," Tythonnia said.

"I need you to go to a couple of shops nearby. We need provisions and I have work to finish up here."

Tythonnia nodded happily. She was looking forward to sunlight and fresh air, or at least as much as Smiths' Alley could provide.

Sunlight dropped into the Alley as slivers of light, making the shadows deeper. The street bustled

with life, however, a thin traffic of humanity made thicker by the street's width. Tythonnia made her way past windows where tough-looking women leaned out and jabbered with their friends, past gangs of kids running through the crowds, past shops that were so shallow in depth they'd barely gouged the stone and wood of the storefront.

Still, life was rich here, every day a luxuriant tapestry of noises and experiences. It felt alive and far less austere than the indifferent arrogance of the people and stores in the Merchandising District.

Tythonnia relished it far more than she thought she would. She preferred the wilderness, she always did, but there was a flavor to the city that she loved as well.

Tythonnia entered Grimble's, a small shop filled with grains and all sorts of preserved fruits and nuts. The fresh varieties were rare and only to be found closer to the docks and nearer the city gates. She placed her order on Rosie's behalf and was told to expect the provisions later that day. Her second stop was Dawler and Sons Butcher, which included a surprisingly large animal pen in

the back that jutted outside the Alley. Again, she placed orders for specific cuts of beef and pork as well as cured meats.

With her errands done, Tythonna spent a moment admiring the cows and chickens and pigs, all nestled in their stalls. She missed being on the farm and almost asked the butcher if she could help feed the animals.

As she prepared to leave the stall fence, however ...

... *Don't move.*

A foreign voice entered her thoughts, pushing hers aside. She

began looking around when the voice stopped her.

Don't move; don't look around; don't say a word. I have an arrow trained on you as we speak.

The voice was definitely male, though one she'd never heard before.

Move your mouth or wiggle your fingers, and I unleash my arrow with the second arrow nocked before the first one ever reaches you. Tense your muscles, and I shoot you. Better you dead than me. Understand?

Yes, Tythonnia thought.

Good. I can discern lies. You know

the spell?

Yes. She was also familiar with the spell that allowed her stalker to speak into her mind. Fortunately, it did not allow him to read her thoughts, only hear what she chose to share.

I will ask questions; you will answer them. Lie to me, and I kill you.

What do you want?

Are you a renegade?

Tythonna faltered. All their work, traveling and eluding those renegade hunters ... all of it hinged on her answer to that question. The problem was her response

depended on whoever was asking the question. Was it a hunter who had her in his sights, or Berthal's lieutenant? And if she answered wrongly, she risked their only potential contact with Berthal by admitting she was a Wizard of High Sorcery.

Well?

Who are you? Tythonnia asked, trying to stall.

Answer me! My arm is growing tired, and my arrow might slip!

Tythonnia closed her eyes and prayed the odds played out in her favor.

No, she admitted.

Say what you are. Say it!

It was hard not to run, but run where? The speaker was hidden somewhere, and if she ran, was she running toward him, or away?

I am a Wizard of High Sorcery, she thought and felt the world slip out from beneath her. After all their work, she felt ashamed to betray their identities so easily. She half expected to die any second, the arrow lodged in her brain before she could regret a single thing. To her greater regret, nothing happened. It felt like forever, that

moment of silence.

Are you there? Tythonnia thought, hazarding a question. She could still feel the pressure in her mind.

Here still, the voice replied. *Why is there an execution order on the three of you?*

What? Tythonnia thought. *With who? The Thieves Guild?*

No ... with us. We're the renegade hunters you eluded at the tower. Why have the masters of the orders sanctioned your execution?

Tythonnia was too stunned to answer. Her mind grasped at the

greasy thoughts, but they squirmed free. Her face contorted in confusion, and she quickly shut her mouth when she remembered the warning not to cast spells.

That's impossible, Tythonnia thought. It's the masters who sent us to find and spy on Berthal... with the highmage's blessing!

They told you this directly?

Yes! Tythonnia said. It was growing hard not to vocalize her rampaging thoughts. They told you to murder us?

Yes... no. Not directly. Not me. What do you—

We need to speak ... face-to-face.

The barkeep maneuvered in the narrow corridor behind the plank of wood. The stools were in the street and had to be moved when a horse came by, and the drinks were all served from barrels stacked behind the bar.

Kinsley sat upon one of the stools. He nursed a weak pint and watched the barkeep go about his business. The man was thin and unsympathetic looking, but at that point Kinsley was too tired to care. He hated the neighborhood. He was

sick of it with its scrunched-up buildings and scrunched-up people with their sour faces and sour attitudes.

“I’m looking for someone,” he said to the barkeep.

The man grunted in response and served a man with sea-blue eyes seated two stools down. The barkeep wasn’t interested.

“Look,” Kinsley said, pointing at the mug in front of him. “How many mugs of this armpit sweat you call a drink do I have to buy from you to get information?”

The barkeep considered it

carefully. He held up all the fingers on both hands.

“Nine?” Kinsley repeated. “I won’t survive one.”

The barkeep looked at the bare stub of his missing pinky and wiggled that too.

“Fine, how about I just *pay* you for ten, and you tell me what I want to know?”

The barkeep shrugged.

Kinsley sighed. “Shrug yes? Or shrug no?”

The man shrugged again.

“Here!” Kinsley said and dropped

a couple of pieces of steel on the bar. “I’d like to buy a letter from you. Perhaps a whole word if you’re feeling generous.”

The barkeep walked over to Kinsley and cleaned his spot on the bar with a rag. The coins vanished and the barkeep leaned against the wood, waiting for Kinsley’s question.

“I’m looking for strangers,” Kinsley said.

“He’s a stranger,” the barkeep said, nodding toward the blue-eyed man.

Kinsley offered a patient smile

that said he was anything but. “Three strangers, two women and a man. My age.” He began describing what he could of the trio, from the bejeweled, black-haired woman’s beauty to the man’s refined features. Of the blonde woman, there was little to share, other than hair color. Otherwise she was common enough.

The barkeep thought about it a moment before finally answering. “Haven’t seen them together,” he said. “Alone ... seen the man and maybe your blonde woman.”

“When?”

The man shrugged. "But I seen them both coming from that way and leaving that way," he said, nodding to the north.

Kinsley offered the man a flat smile; the meager morsel was the most information he'd gotten in the past few days, and it was still close to a frustrating nothing. He was about to leave when he spied the man next to him again. The blue-eyed patron's fingers had stopped moving, a whisper still on his lips. The barkeep had missed it, his back was to the customer, but Kinsley recognized the workings of magic. Suddenly, a stack of steel coins

sitting next to one of the barrels lifted into the air and shot over the bar, into the man's hand. They barely made a sound.

The man walked away as quickly as he could, practically toppling the bar stool in the process. Kinsley smiled and followed the man for a block before finally stopping him.

"I saw what you did," Kinsley said.

"Please, sir," the lean, blue-eyed man said. "I didn't mean no harm by it. Just a little steel to eat."

"Then stop wasting it on drink," Kinsley said. "But that spell you

cast ... how much more do you know?"

The man looked around nervously. "Enough to get me in trouble with the wizards," he said, turning to walk away.

Kinsley stopped him again, more gently. "We should talk. Unless you like living like a rat?"

They met in the shadow of an alley off the main street, between two buildings and the blackened Old City Wall. Tythonnia recognized him instantly, the blond-haired hunter who had

brought Virgil before the conclave. His features were gentle, but his fierce, black eyes were a startling contrast to the rest of his face. He carried a powerful and etched longbow, and they spoke in whispers, each relating their part of the story, from Solanthus, to the attack of the dolls at the ruined village, to the High Clerist's Tower, through to that moment.

Tythonna was relieved to hear Thoma harbored doubts about the instructions to execute them. He was struggling to believe that his companion Dumas was either lying to them or somehow enchanted. He

did admit, however, she'd been acting strangely.

They both agreed Thoma needed to speak with the other two.

They'd just arrived at that consensus when Thoma's eyes widened. Tythonnia barely had time to react before Thoma grabbed her shoulder and threw them both to the ground. The air above them crackled and sizzled as a wall of heat pushed past them. A ball of fire exploded against the Old City Wall behind them, and flames peppered the adjoining roofs.

Dumas stood there, between them and the Alley, her face contorted in livid anger. It was the murderous look of a woman scorned. Thoma scrambled to his feet, caught in the hesitation of whether to draw his blade or not.

“Dumas—” he managed.

“You dare?” she screamed. Before Thoma could respond, Dumas’s hands flew into a pattern, her lips moving to unlock a spell.

“Run!” Thoma managed.

Tythonna got to her feet just as electricity flowed from the tome’s chains into Dumas’s arms. The

spell, whatever it was, ruptured the ground between the two hunters, and the force of it slammed into Thoma. He flew backward and struck the city wall. He landed in a heap and struggled to rise.

Instinct took over and Tythonnia grabbed his arm to lift him, but Thoma shoved her away, toward the narrow defile between the buildings and the battlement.

“Run,” he cried again. With a shout of fury, his hands flew into a quick pattern. “*Halilintar!*”

A jagged blade of lightning coursed from his hands directly

towards Dumas. Tythonnia rounded the corner, but in her peripheral vision, she could have sworn the lightning bolt struck the tome on Dumas's chest before simply vanishing. A moment later, she could hear Thoma shouting, "Dumas, what are you—"

Something cut his voice to a strangled halt.

Tythonnia ran even harder, turning down one alley and across another. Finally she hit Smiths' Alley, in time to meet with a surge of locals. Two buildings were on fire, and the denizens of the Alley were reacting quickly by forming

water chains. It was enough to clog the streets and, Tythonnia hoped, hide her escape.

By the time Tythonnia reached Rosie's shop, the older woman was outside, watching the commotion.

“What’s going on?” Rosie asked.

Tythonnia grabbed her by the arm and dragged her back into the barn. Par-Salian was coming down the stairs while Ladonna was out of bed and looking down at them from the loft.

“Hunters,” Tythonnia said. “Dumas’s gone mad. She killed her companion to get to us.”

Par-Salian's face turned ashen.
“*Dumas* is here?”

“We leave now!” Tythonnia said. She rushed into the stall and began shoving whatever she could grab into her pack.

Rosie ran up the stairs to help Ladonna while Par-Salian was at Tythonnia's side.

“The horses?” he asked.

“Street's too crowded,” Tythonnia said. “We go on foot.”

“Dumas?” he asked again, shoving his personal effects into his bag. “You're certain?”

“Yes!” Tythonnia shouted. “And

don't ask me why. I don't know!"

Kinsley watched pandemonium unfold around him as people ran back and forth along the street. He managed to grab someone by the arm, a young woman who looked ready to punch him. He flashed a copper coin in front of her eyes to quiet her down.

"What's going on?"

The woman plucked the coin from Kinsley's fingers before answering. "A woman set the buildings on fire with witchcraft!" she said. She pulled free of

Kinsley's grasp and raced down the street.

Kinsley looked around, hoping to spot the likeliest culprits.

It wasn't the first fire Smiths' Alley had had to deal with, but that didn't diminish the chaos. Parents escaping with their children and a fire line struggling to pass water buckets forward filled the street. The buildings were packed tightly enough that it was easy for the fire to spread. People raced around not so much to douse the blaze that ate at two buildings, but to throw

water on the adjoining roofs.

With murder in her eyes, Dumas pushed through the crowds, unmindful of the yelps of protestation that greeted her. She couldn't believe Thoma was dead; she could still see the renegade Tythonnia cutting him down with a spell—

But why do I see my own hand extended?

She was trying to save him. That's what it was. Thoma was about to die, and she couldn't save him from—

You.

From Tythonnia! She couldn't save him from Tythonnia. Indeed, she made an effort to remember it more clearly: Ladonna and Par-Salian were there too. They were torturing Thoma and keeping her at bay.

“Dumas!”

Dumas turned and found Hort racing toward her. “What happened?”

“The renegades,” she said, grabbing Hort by his cloak. “They killed Thoma. They did this. Find them! Kill them and spread their guts across the rooftops!” she cried.

Hort appeared dazed, his eyes glazed at the news.

“You go that way,” she said, pointing north along the street. “I’ll go south! We can’t let them slip by us. Not this time.”

He nodded absently as he moved away. With each step, however, he seemed to gain momentum like a juggernaut. He didn’t seem to care who he pushed out of the way; he was out for blood, and Dumas wasn’t entirely sure why that pleased her so.

Within a few minutes, they were

packed and ready to leave. Rosie forced Ladonna into a hug, and despite her protests, she seemed to relax in the older woman's embrace. Par-Salian thanked her in turn, and to Tythonnia's surprise, even she was swept into the woman's arms.

"You have a home here. Visit," Rosie whispered in her ear.

"I will," Tythonnia said and meant that promise with teary-eyed fierceness. She liked Rosie and hoped she could return to spend time with the older woman.

The three wizards melted into the

street crowd. The fires still raged several blocks away, and the line struggled to keep the blaze contained. For the moment, they were winning, and Tythonnia prayed the fire wouldn't make it to Rosie's place. The older woman, in fact, moved into the crowd, trying to help with the line. Her strong arms would be a welcome addition.

They followed the stream of traffic to the north, toward the docks. Men and women not involved in staunching the blaze took their children, their elderly, and a handful of possessions for safekeeping just in case the fire

spread.

Tythonnia kept glancing over her shoulder, searching for Dumas or the other hunter. She could see nothing, however; the street was too crowded to do anything but brush over the many faces in the rush. Ladonna walked with some difficulty. The wound needed more time to heal, but she was supported by Par-Salian.

Several people in the crowd gasped, and before Tythonnia could register what was happening, a bank of fog swept over them. At first, she thought it was smoke from the fire, but when the sulfur

smell of rotten eggs struck a second later, she understood the nature of the spell.

The stench was overwhelming, and before Tythonnia could stop herself, she'd fallen to her knees and was vomiting violently. Ladonna and dozens of others also succumbed, some clutching their chests and guts as waves of nausea swept over them. The stench of bile made her even sicker, and she was overcome by a bout of dry heaves, her stomach cramping to void what wasn't there.

She couldn't move without triggering a new wave of nausea,

couldn't think clearly enough to cast a spell. Two people, including Par-Salian, were still standing. He was fighting the nausea well enough though he seemed a touch green around the gills. He looked around and Tythonnia, in turn, realized none of them could see very far. The cloud extended a considerable distance, and with everyone trapped within the narrow confines of Smiths' Alley, it may well have extended for several blocks in either direction.

Par-Salian's fingers danced and slipped over one another before he raised both arms and cried, "*Belit*

gusta!"

Gusts whipped at his trousers and shirt, and the cloud was pushed away. Par-Salian directed its course and cleansed the air around them with a sweep of his hand. He was able to cut a swath through the noxious cloud, though he couldn't push its effects away from everyone entirely. Only a handful of people were safe, including them.

The fresh air was a welcome blessing, but before Tythonnia could stand, four bolts of light suddenly appeared from the mist ahead of them and slammed into

Par-Salian. The blow knocked him off his feet. He hit the street hard, the back of his head bouncing on the cobblestone ground. He groaned in pain, and a weakened Ladonna crawled over to help him.

Tythonna squinted, trying to see where the bolts had come from. When she realized she couldn't see their attacker, she decided to go on the defensive until they could rally. She fumbled for the bit of eyelash trapped in amber as she rose to her feet. Her hands moved and the magic responded with a spark that traveled up her spine and into her skull.

“Tak’kelihatan lingkaran,” she said. The spell had saved them before; perhaps it could do so again. The script of magic vanished from her thoughts just as the three of them vanished from sight.

A moment after that, the whole world vanished.

Tythonnia stopped, sudden panic overwhelming her.

No sound came to her, nothing of the screams and cries of the people in the street around her. No sight came either; the world was dark as though the gods had blown out the candle of the sun. She could still

smell the lingering sulfur and bile, the sweat and stale air. She could still feel the clothing on her back and the street beneath her.

She swayed, finding it difficult to maintain her balance. The cloud left her weak. Panicked, she swept her arms out in front of her and cried the names of her friends. But if they responded, she couldn't hear it against the pressure of silence. Time turned momentum against her, the seconds slowly turning into minutes, turning into hours. She felt suspended in an inkwell, not even hearing her own voice, her own breathing.

The blow came out of nowhere, shocking the breath from her lungs and paralyzing her entire body. It struck her in the stomach, like a kick to her midsection. Tythonnia dropped to her knees, unable to inhale. She clutched her belly and tried to curl up into a ball. Another kick stomped down on her shoulder and drove her to the ground. She screamed in pain as the wound tore open again. And yet she heard nothing.

Again the blows came, vicious and without mercy. One attacker, one heavy foot, drove into her again and again, the attack made

worse by the horrible, pressing quiet. She screamed even louder, if only to hear her own voice, and flailed to grab the angry foot, to stop the attack. The next kick blew past her hand, however, and struck her squarely in the jaw.

The rush of blood filled her ears. Blind, senseless, she reached out to stop the attacks. Her hands brushed against the ground and swam through the empty air. Nothing came and the nothing lingered. Was it mercy or cruelty that stopped the attack? Did her attacker take pity on her, or was he toying with her?

Bright light filled her vision and drove iron nails into her skull. She shielded her eyes and suddenly realized she could see again. Sound returned too, like liquid filling an urn. She blinked and swooned, the blow still ringing through her head. Her jaw felt wet, and her fingers came away glistening red. It took a moment to realize someone was helping her off the ground.

“... on,” the voice said, filtering through the cotton in her skull. “Can you walk?”

Tythonna found herself staring at a handsome young man with slightly rounded features, a clean

face, and green eyes. He was dressed well, with a crimson and silk doublet and flared, red pants.

“Who...?” Tythonnia managed.

“The man who just saved your life,” he said.

Tythonnia saw Par-Salian and Ladonna rising from the ground as well as the body of a large, cloaked man. She recognized the hunter from Virgil’s trial and the High Clerist’s Tower. The stench cloud had dissipated, and everyone was taking as wide a berth around them as they could.

“Is he—?” Tythonnia asked,

motioning to the hunter.

“Dead? No,” the man said. “That would cause too many problems with the local constables. Follow me.”

“What?” Tythonna asked. She was still confused and not a little dazed.

“Do you want sanctuary or not?” the man asked them. By then, Par-Salian and Ladonna were also exchanging glances as they approached. “Anyone who runs afoul of renegade hunters is safe with us.”

Ladonna took the initiative since

both Par-Salian and Tythonnia seemed knocked clear of their wits. “Sanctuary, yes,” she said. “Get us out of here, please.”

The man nodded and ushered them through the crowd as best he could. Within minutes, they were outside Smiths’ Alley with the unforgiving daylight beating down upon them. Minutes after that, they’d located a coachman to take them away entirely.

The man introduced himself as Kinsley. He explained how the renegade hunter had incapacitated

all three of them before he started kicking Tythonnia. Had Kinsley not intervened, the big man was surely going to beat all three of them to death.

The coachman arrived at Merchant's Pier, at a harbor keelboat with a large deckhouse that dominated the vessel's profile. The ship was one of many that catered to the larger galleys that were waiting to dock and couldn't afford to keep their cargoes aboard for a minute longer. For the moment, it was wedded to a small pier, its lower deck empty and ready to receive wares. The

captain, a dwarf of all things, asked no questions while Kinsley brought his three passengers on board and settled them belowdecks. He promised to return later.

Hurt and spent by their recent ordeal, the three companions quietly tended to each other's injuries before exhaustion overtook them. They fell asleep atop their bedrolls, to the gentle rocking of the swell and the crooning of creaking lumber. By the time they awoke, it was night outside and their only light came from a dirty lantern. They ate a meal of cured meats and fruits, devouring their

stock with barely a care before the deck above them creaked under the weight of footsteps.

Each of them prepared their spells, their reagents hidden in their hands and the arcane words ready to be spoken.

Kinsley walked down the stairs accompanied by a second man. The companion wore gray robes; he was a large man, wide at the shoulders, and his mouth and chin pinched with a black beard and mustache. The same colored hair hung in long wild locks from his head. In his hand he carried a plain gnarled staff, but Tythonnia

realized Ladonna was studying the staff.

“I hope you’ve all rested,” Kinsley said, “because as of right now, you three are hunted fugitives wanted for starting a fire in Smiths’ Alley and for murder.”

“That wasn’t us,” Tythonnia said in protest.

“Perhaps,” Kinsley said. “But we protect our own. You can’t stay in Palanthas.”

“Who’s he?” Ladonna asked, nodding to the large man.

“My name is Raff,” the man said. “And I’m here to bring you to

safety.”

“Safety?” Par-Salian said.
“Where are you taking us?”

“To meet our leader,” Raff said,
“Berthal.”

“That’s nice,” Ladonna said,
bluffing. “And who in the Abyss is
Berthal?”

“The man who’ll save us all,”
Kinsley said. “Now enough chatter.
It’s time to leave.”

CHAPTER 13

Laid Bare

Red-robed wizards and acolytes bustled along the hallways, each one on some crucial errand. The desert sun of the Northern Wastes beat its heat into the rocks and stones that clothed Abrasama Keep. It was an unpleasantly hot and sticky day, but there was little complaint. Everyone was too preoccupied, for the order owing fealty to the red

moon, Lunitari, was in turmoil.

Belize walked through the corridors and tried not to smile at the contained commotion around him. Everything had gone according to plan, almost as if the moons themselves ordained his plots and machinations. That day was the culmination of years of planning and aggressive daring. That day was the beginning of his rise to power.

Two red robe wizards stood outside the solid oak door on guard or on vigil. Belize couldn't tell which, nor did he care enough to ask. He nodded to the door, and

one of the wizards quickly opened it for him.

The room beyond was dark and surprisingly cool. It was hot outside and humid, thanks to the Turbidus Ocean on whose shoreline they sat. A handful of lonely orbs floating near the ceiling provided magical light, but they were so dimmed as to make candles blinding. The shadows made murky the room's dimensions, though he could see the hint of a bed and nightstand, a bookshelf, a dresser, and a washbasin. It was a chamber he knew well, the bed even more so. A robed physician spoke a gentle

word to the patient who lay in repose and glided over to Belize. A mouth appeared in the thicket of his white mustache and beard.

“You’re in time,” he said gravely. “I’ll leave you two to confer.”

Belize nodded and waited for the physician to depart. He went to stand over Yasmine’s deathbed and patiently waited for her to die.

He struggled to hide his smile. Yasmine of the Delving’s last coherent instruction was that Belize was to head the Order of Red Robes. The order had to approve his ascension, but that was almost

certainly a formality.

Yasmine's eyes fluttered open; they were half lidded, her skin so pale that Belize could read the blue map of capillaries that scored her eyelids. She struggled to smile, to speak, but only a thin rasp escaped her lips.

Belize looked around the room and cast two spells in quick succession. The first ensured they were, in fact, alone. The second ensured nobody could hear what he had to say. With those two spells in place, Belize finally allowed his smile to spill open. The words he'd kept to himself finally found their

release. Belize couldn't help gloating. He desperately needed to share with someone. It was a maneuver worthy of boasting and only successful on the condition he remained silent ... until that moment.

“The other masters of the orders couldn't make it here in time, for which they send their sincerest apologies,” Belize said. “But they're currently dealing with a crisis. It seems that a certain three renegades have been making a mess of things. First at the High Clerist's Tower and now in Palanthas.”

Belize chuckled to himself.

“They more than exceeded my expectations in the hunt. I knew sending Dumas after them would sow chaos, but this is beyond ideal.”

Yasmine continued staring at him in confusion. Her mouth opened and closed to speak, but no words would sound.

“Shh, shh,” Belize whispered, kissing her lips. “No need to tax yourself so. The poisons I’ve been slowly administering to you, my love, have almost run their course.” He paused, studying her wide-eyed

expression. “Oh, did I fail to mention that? You haven’t been dying of illness; I’ve been poisoning you slowly. I’m quite good at it, you know. Well, I suppose you know now, but that’s beside the point.”

A strangled gasp escaped Yasmine’s lips.

“Why, you ask?” Belize shrugged. “Well, poisoning you was the only way to keep you susceptible to my suggestions. And it was the fastest way to power. But yes, I also sent Dumas and her hunters after Tythonnia, Ladonna, and Par-Salian.”

Yasmine struggled to speak, but her breath grew shallower with each indrawn hiss of air. She rasped something incoherent.

“Again with the questions,” Belize quipped. “Well, I suppose you deserve an answer. I need Berthal alive, you see. Not because I wish him success, but because I need the conclave preoccupied and looking elsewhere while I maneuver. Thanks to Berthal, and now that incident in Palanthas, nobody will examine your death too closely. In times of crisis, people want continuity and stability. Nobody will oppose my

ascension to master of the order.
Brilliant, no?"

Yasmine shuddered as she passed through the final stages of death. Her eyes, however, remained clear despite the pain. She focused on Belize and opened her mouth to force out one last word, a spell perhaps. Belize, however, gently clamped his hand over her mouth.

"Farewell, lover," Belize whispered, drawing in close to her ear. "Now ... shut up and die."

The keelboat had sailed past the naval docks of Palanthas and out

into the Bay of Branchala proper. It followed the mountainous coastline until the mountains turned to high-sloped hills just before the Gates of Paladine marked the mouth of the bay and the Turbidus Ocean beyond.

The keelboat anchored close to the sandy shore and ferried its passengers by rowboat to the bay's western beach. From there, Par-Salian, Tythonnia, and Ladonna followed Raff on foot as he navigated the twisting maze of hill paths to the west. Where they were headed, Raff did not say—at least until the third night of travel, when

the Vingaard Mountains were behind them and the grassy plains stretched out before them.

Tythonna and her compatriots were glad to finally have a bed of grass to sleep on, and within moments after eating a cooked hare beneath the open sky, Ladonna and Par-Salian settled in to their bedrolls. No sooner had they closed their eyes than they were asleep.

That left Tythonna to quietly help Raff with the cleaning of the hare meat from the bone and burying the viscera in the pouch of the animal's fur.

“You do that well,” Raff remarked.

“Practice,” Tythonna admitted. “My father taught me everything I know about hunting and surviving.”

“Did he teach you magic as well?” Raff asked.

“No. That was Desmora, a wise woman in our village. She had Vagros blood.”

“Really!” Raff said, his curiosity piqued. “Wyldling magic?”

Tythonna blushed then realized there was nothing to be ashamed of, not in front of Raff. “Some

Wyldling craft,” she admitted. “But it was a hard discipline.”

“Yes!” Raff said. “Discipline. People miss that fact. They think the Wyldling ways are carefree—easy. Which clan of Vagros did she come from?”

“The Gratos,” Tythonnia said. She washed her hands with a bit of water from her waterskin.

“I know them,” Raff said, nodding. “I believe they’ve settled, most of them. A few Vagros are with us.”

“That’s surprising,” Tythonnia said.

“Hunters captured one of their seers. For practicing Wyldling magics. They’re nearly the last practitioners of it, you know.”

“Ah,” Tythonnia remarked. She couldn’t help herself. She felt her skin flush at the comment. “I’m sorry.”

“Why are you sorry?” Raff asked, scrutinizing her. “You’re not part of the Wizards of High Sorcery anymore.”

“But I was,” Tythonnia said, drying her hands. “I can’t help feeling responsible, like I failed somehow—” She hesitated.

Raff cocked an eyebrow at her and waited for her to complete her sentence.

Tythonna glanced at the others. “The Wizards of High Sorcery don’t understand why certain magics exist.”

Raff nodded and motioned for Tythonna to sit next to him on the grass, away from the others. When they were both seated, their legs crossed, Raff planted his chin in the palm of his hand and waited for her to continue.

“They can’t tell the difference between why *they* practice magic

and why fortune-tellers with their so-called cupboard tricks practice theirs.”

“And why do the others practice their magic?” he asked with a half-cocked smile.

Tythonnia felt like she was back with Highmage Astathan, answering his riddling questions and trying to glean the reasons behind the queries. “To offer comfort,” Tythonnia said.

Raff smiled and nodded; he seemed pleased, like a tutor’s pride for the ingenuity of his principal student.

“The orders don’t understand that,” Raff said. “They think all sorcerers study magic for the same reason: for power. That’s not what this movement is about.”

Tythonna listened and nodded in places she thought appropriate. Only she found herself nodding more often than she realized. Raff explained how Berthal’s movement was about freeing magic again, so its use wasn’t restricted in practice or parsed out to only those who could afford it. He wanted to eliminate the barbaric practice of the test, a process that crippled or killed bright and promising

students who be forced into the test too early.

The more Raff spoke, the more passionate he grew in his statements. He was truly bothered by what he saw happening with the wizards. And the more he spoke, the more Tythonnia realized that he was once a wizard himself.

Finally, after an hour of talking, Raff excused himself. It was getting late, and they all needed their sleep. Raff retreated into the darkness to relieve his bladder, and Tythonnia made her way to the bedrolls. She found Ladonna lying there, awake and watching her.

Tythonnia hunkered down next to her and pretended to drift asleep.

“Good conversation?” Ladonna whispered.

“I—I think he’s Berthal,” Tythonnia responded.

“I know,” Ladonna said. “His staff holds powerful magics ... too powerful for a mere guide.”

“He doesn’t trust us yet,” Tythonnia said. “For the last couple of days, he’s been leading us in circles. He’s taking his time and—shh. He’s coming back.”

Raff returned and settled down away from the three of them.

Shortly after, his rumbling snores filled the air.

Over the next two days, they continued walking, though both Ladonna and Par-Salian finally realized their path was not straight and true. Raff took the time to speak with each of them, finding out why they'd decided to become renegades and how they ended up meeting.

Their stories were well rehearsed, what with all the time spent practicing on the journey to Palanthas and during their nights

in the Wanderer's Welcome. Ladonna spoke of a desire for power without the restrictions of High Sorcery impeding her ambitions. She was convincing in her story, and Tythonna had to wonder what shred of truth made it so compelling. Par-Salian spoke of falling in love with a woman who died during her Test of High Sorcery. The grief drove him away from the principles of the wizards.

Finally, the question came to Tythonna, and after considering her predigested answer, she decided on a different tack. Her talk with Raff had been intimacy of

a sort. She found herself wanting to share her story with him and was suddenly worried that anything she lied about would sound false because it lacked any real conviction. Neither, however, could she tell him the real truth about why they were there.

The fact was, she knew *why* she was there, but ...

“I don’t know,” Tythonnia admitted. “I’m not sure *what* I’m doing here.”

Everyone stared at her in surprise—her companions for her off-script remark and Raff with an

enigmatic but bemused expression that said she'd caught him off guard. Beyond that, however, she couldn't explain herself. She hadn't realized it until listening to Raff the other night, but the fact was, she'd been feeling that way since the journey began. The nostalgia of sleeping under the stars, of hunting and surviving, of speaking with the Vagros and remembering the Wyldling spells she once learned through Desmora—all that had affected her deeply.

Ever since the test, she had been forced to reexamine her very identity, down to her sexuality. The

only words that brought her comfort belonged to the voices of Desmora and Grandmother Yassa and Kandri; the only lessons that gave her strength were learned outside the books and stuffy lecture halls of the orders. The tenets of High Sorcery no longer reassured her. They were just words, applicable to everyone in general and never meant to console anyone in particular.

Everyone was still staring at Tythonnia, however, and she realized Raff would not let a remark like that slip away. So she shifted to another truth.

“There’s a member of the order,” Tythonnia said. “Justarius. He’s a good friend. Not scared of much and a bit reckless maybe. He could shoot an arrow straighter than me, and there was nobody better at handling a horse. He was better than me at spell-riding. And fast on his feet.”

“You loved him?” Raff asked.

“No,” Tythonnia said quickly. “It’s just that he reminds me of my cousins ... men of the woods. Only Justarius is smarter than them. Honestly, he’s better than me at about everything I think I’m good at. Or—he used to be.”

“What happened to him?” Raff said.

“The test,” Tythonnia responded. “He survived it, but it crippled his leg. He’ll never ride well again or run or hunt. He’s now just another book-learned wizard. The test hurt the strongest parts of him while it left me untouched.”

“The test leaves no one unscathed,” Raff said.

“Maybe not. But I survived it better than he did. And he was better than me at everything. Doesn’t that mean I should’ve been hurt, not him?” Tythonnia asked.

“The test is arbitrary,” Raff said, his gaze growing distant with a sad twist of his mouth. “It kills the best of us, makes us beggars desperate for the scraps of talent left.”

The remainder of the walk was spent quietly, though it didn’t escape Tythonna’s notice that Par-Salian and Ladonna had exchanged troubled glances when they thought she wasn’t looking.

For whatever reason, Raff seemed to trust them more after that. He led the trio to a camp nestled at the foot of the Vingaard

range. There were more than three dozen tents of various sizes and almost as many wagons with countless horses either hitched or standing idly by. They rested near a mountain stream that cascaded down over polished rocks, surrounding a great fire pit that had been dug into the ground. The smell of roasted meat tickled Tythonna's nostrils. Nearby, children sat around a woman who read to them.

As soon as Raff appeared, several men and women greeted him with eager hails and smiles. They eyed his three companions,

but there was nothing belligerent in their stares, merely curiosity.

When they called him Berthal, he merely turned to the three wizards and asked, "So when did you know?"

Ladonna smiled, Par-Salian appeared embarrassed, and Tythonnia answered, "The night we first talked, just you and me."

Berthal smiled and made his way to one of the tents. Before entering, he motioned to the three of them and told the others to find space for them. He vanished through the tent flap.

Berthal found Kinsley and a woman waiting for him. Both were standing, as though expecting his imminent arrival, and chatting, though the woman appeared embarrassed and awkward. She was very slight, more like a young boy in frame than a woman, and she wore weathered traveling clothes made of worn leather. Yet for all her mousy qualities and a lower lip that drooped, she was attractive still. It was her brown eyes, Berthal decided, soulful and yet nothing escaped their notice. Whoever was caught in her gaze

was caught completely. Around her arm, she wore a ragged, black armband.

“About time you got back,” Kinsley said. “Everything go well with the three new arrivals?”

“Well enough,” Berthal said. “We’ll talk about it later. This must be Mariyah?”

Kinsley introduced Mariyah, who smiled shyly in acknowledgement. From the pack slung forward on her shoulders, she produced a small wood box inlaid with mother-of-pearl panels. She presented it to him with both hands, her smile

eager.

Berthal accepted the box and sat down on his bedroll. When he noticed he was the only one seated, he motioned for the others to join him.

Inside the velvet-lined box were scrolls, bits of jewelry, and flasks of liquid—all magical, no doubt, but Berthal was eager to dig deeper. He'd heard about such pocketsafe boxes, containers that were larger on the inside than they appeared on the outside. While the box itself was impressive, it was said to hold a valuable artifact, at least, that's what Mariyah's overly

amorous mentor had told her in one of his bids to win her to his bed.

What she must have endured, Berthal thought and stopped rummaging. "Thank you for this," he said, putting the box on his lap.

"Don't you wish to examine it?" Mariyah asked in surprise.

"In a moment," Berthal said. "What's more important is that you made it here safely."

Mariyah smiled broadly, her expression one of shyness and a strange pride that would not be concealed. Berthal liked the

strength he saw in her, which had not been immediately apparent. He glanced back into the box and saw the key made of bone lace.

“Ah,” he said, the comment escaping his lips in surprise. “It can’t be.”

“What?” Mariyah asked eagerly. “Is the key important?”

Berthal picked it up and examined it. He almost laughed.

“What is it?” Kinsley asked, trying to examine it without touching it.

“The Key of Gadrella,” he said in awe.

“Highmage Gadrella of Tarsis?” Mariyah asked. She shifted closer to examine the key under new light.

“And yet my question remains the same,” Kinsley asked. “What is it?”

“An answer to a dilemma,” Berthal said. “Well done, Mari-yah. You’ve more than earned your place among us.”

The Journeyman watched as Par-Salian, Ladonna, and Tythonnia were given a spot to lay camp. The renegade movement was growing

in strength, and they were welcoming more and more people each day. They were definitely becoming a threat to the Wizards of High Sorcery, even though their number included children playing and the husbands and wives of the sorcerers making the camp livable.

Still, it was easy enough to gain Kinsley's attention. Once the Journeyman realized who he was at the tavern in Smiths' Alley, a little display of magic was all he needed. After that, a touch of persuasion and acting to prove his sincerity earned him an invitation here, where it was easier to

continue watching the three wizards on their mission.

And if the scant records of the event were remotely accurate, here was also where matters unraveled.

Talking would be far more difficult, since a hundred people or more surrounded them. Looking around, Tythonna realized that the accompanying families far outnumbered the sorcerers. Magic was a devotion to the Wizards of High Sorcery, and while not a celibate organization, the quest for knowledge was often thought to

come at the expense of living a normal life. Unfortunately, that was also the standard that they measured others by. If one was not willing to sacrifice everything important to him to study magic, then one did not deserve the knowledge.

While Tythonnia understood the reasoning behind that notion, she also thought the wizards had somehow blown matters out of proportion. Most of them didn't even understand why they did what they did, only that it was a tradition handed down to them that they thought should be

maintained.

The more Tythonnia thought about it, the more upset she became. These people, at the camp, weren't renegades and dangerous outlaws. There were families and men and women who tempered life and magic. And they were unjustly condemned for trying to find balance in their daily routine.

Certainly, there were sorcerers who hungered for power and who despoiled the art by using it to spread misery, but more often than not, sorcerers wanted to be left alone. They used magic to help their neighbors or themselves. They

brought comfort or they protected. They raised families, they nurtured, they loved, and for that they were hunted for using a natural affinity to the Wyldling.

“You’re talking to yourself,” Ladonna whispered as they dug a small fire pit and surrounded it with rocks.

“Am I?” Tythonnia asked, embarrassed. Her mouth had been moving, she realized, and she forced herself to calm down. Whether or not she agreed with what they were doing there, she still had orders to follow and an oath to fulfill. Distasteful or not,

she'd made a promise.

And still ...

Par-Salian returned with fresh water from the stream, and after they were done making camp, they decided it was time to explore. The camp leaders, however, had a different idea. Two men and two women approached the trio. Their leader had ebony skin and a mixture of braided and beaded hair that ran to the nape of his neck. He looked to be of Vagros stock in his manner and style.

“My name is Shasee. Welcome to the camp,” he said, shaking hands

and exchanging introductions with Par-Salian, Tythonnia, and Ladonna.

“We are a community,” he explained, “and everyone here is expected to participate and to pull their weight. I am told you three cast magic?”

The three companions nodded, listening patiently.

“Good. Welcome, then. We ask that you not cast magic around the camp, especially when it comes to your chores.”

“Why?” Ladonna asked. She was irked; she wasn’t used to someone

dictating her use of the arts.

“For the children,” Shasee explained patiently. It was obvious he’d encountered that particular resistance before. “It gets the little ones excited and sets a bad example for them, implying that magic is a trick to avoid hard work, a plaything. They’re too young to understand how dangerous it can be. Unless you want a dozen children following you around constantly, begging you to show them a trick like urchins looking for steel.”

Tythonnia struggled hard to suppress her smile. Ladonna and

Par-Salian were shocked; they had clearly never entertained the notion that renegades would act responsibly when it came to magic. That was something they always believed was the province of wizards alone.

“We’ll be careful,” Tythonnia said. “How can we help?”

Shasee smiled. “You tell me,” he said. “We need someone to read to the children. To help teach them.”

“I’m not a teacher,” Tythonnia said. “But I do hunt.”

“Excellent,” Shasee said. “We need more food for this coming

week. Anything you can find.” He pointed to the grizzled man standing next to him. “Lorall will tell you where the hunting is good.”

Lorall nodded in greeting.

“What do you teach the children?” Par-Salian asked nervously.

“Reading and history mostly. We have no tablets for them to write on, so ...” he said, trailing off with a shrug.

“I can do that,” Par-Salian said. “History is a favorite subject of mine.”

Everyone turned to Ladonna expectantly.

“Fine,” Ladonna said with a roll of her eyes. “I can mend.”

“You can?” Tythonnia asked. Even Par-Salian was surprised by the admission.

“Yes,” Ladonna said. “Rosie taught me. Now hush about it, or I’ll show you what else I can do with a needle and thread.”

Tythonnia and Lorall returned after a few hours with four hares, tied together at the legs, and a

small boar, all being dragged behind them on a hunting litter. She was grateful for the hunt the past few days, the simplicity of living off the land and working her muscles to earn a meal. Her injuries burned, but it felt rewarding. Several times she found herself contemplating this spell or that to lure more game to them or to ambush their prey more easily. But the thought of hunting with magic felt abhorrent to her. Magic wasn't a crutch. It was a dangerous tool that shouldn't be used without heavy consideration. And yet she'd grown so comfortable with it she

knew she was tempted to use it as a substitute for real work.

Thankfully, the other hunting teams did well enough. A couple bagged deer and more hares, while those less fortunate took to gathering wild apples and edible berries. Nobody returned empty-handed, and with the provisions purchased from the nearby village of Dart, the camp had four more days of food. Yet it felt like they were falling behind, that there were too many mouths to feed.

As Tythonnia helped gut and clean the food, she kept watch for her friends. Par-Salian beamed

with enthusiasm as he taught the children. He spoke from the book in one hand, but his oration seemed inspired and energetic and drawn from some ancient love of the subject. The children sat forward with their mouths slightly agape, leaning on their legs as he spoke and dazzled them with the tales of great battles. Then they followed him around the camp after lessons were done.

Tythonnia smiled and searched for Ladonna. To her surprise, Ladonna sat there quietly with a small group of women. They gossiped and chatted, and Ladonna

focused on her work, matching cloth from the scraps pile that best fit the clothing they were trying to mend. Her fingers flew, the needle flashing occasionally in the light.

Satisfied they were all fitting well into their roles, Tythonnia continued cleaning out the hares and shooing away a persistent Khurrish hunting dog that eyed the set-aside entrails hungrily. Finally, exasperated, she tossed the dog a bit of liver and watched it tear into its meal. The cook, a dwarf named Snowbeard with a facial mane to live up to his moniker, frowned at her. She smiled back and almost

laughed when he began muttering to himself.

She was happy here; she'd spent too long with her head in books.

The evening unfurled its starry sky over the plains, leaving the cooking pit and a half dozen fires to light the camp. All the people in the camp received a modest portion for their meals, not enough to send them to bed hungry but enough to remind them that they lived lean.

Tythonna, Ladonna, and Par-Salian sat together near the fire

pit, the unofficial gathering spot for the camp, while a trickster performed sleight of hand for the children. With the meal completed, the families wandered away to tuck the little ones in, and many moved off to sleep themselves. That left the twenty or so sorcerers to finally indulge in their most passionate of pursuits: discussions of magic. The night always seemed like the perfect time to pursue such matters. It was the first time the three companions felt comfortable enough to stay.

They listened quietly as the sorcerers spoke of spells and the

arcane. Many couldn't escape their training and their need for the formulized and structured arts; Wyldling magic seemed to have no form and few global rules. The Vagros, however, explained how Wyldling magic was personal, and its exploration was, in effect, an exploration of the individual. *Chaos* in that manner never meant to imply "wild" or "dangerous," only that the rules of the individual took precedence over any laws guiding the masses.

From there, the sorcerers went on to discuss different theories about the craft, some of which

drew a quiet sigh from Par-Salian or the flash of an unintentional sneer from Ladonna. Tythonnia listened carefully, however, for the experiences of the men and women present closely mirrored her own. When the conversation turned to include someone seated on the periphery of the circle, only then did Tythonnia notice the mousy woman with the black armband.

“What about you?” Shasee asked the girl. “Mariyah, isn’t it?”

She nodded and smiled sweetly, and Tythonnia found herself smiling along with her.

“What about me?” Mariyah asked. “I’m afraid all my theories come from the Wizards of High Sorcery.”

A few people inhaled softly while others nodded, and Tythonnia suddenly realized the fear that many present bore toward the wizards. Ladonna and Par-Salian, however, became more attentive. Here was one of them, trained as they were, but a true renegade.

“Did you take the test?” Tythonnia asked.

“No,” Mariyah admitted. “Did you?”

Tythonna nodded.

“Unscathed?”

At that, Tythonna had to shrug. Unscathed held no meaning anymore. Everyone was quiet, listening to them speak. To some, she was the enemy, repentant perhaps, in their midst. That was as close as any of them wanted to be. For the others, she was a familiar face in whom they hoped to find affirmation of why they had left the orders.

“That’s what I don’t want hanging around my neck for the rest of my life,” Mariyah said.

“What?” Tythonnia asked.

“That haunted look many wizards carry. The look that says forever shall they suffer.”

Tythonnia could see Ladonna trying not to squirm as she sat there. She wanted to jump into the conversation and debate with Mariyah. She wanted to argue, but she couldn't, not without revealing herself as a spy. Tythonnia decided to change the subject.

“Are you in mourning?” Tythonnia asked, pointing to her black armband.

“No,” Mariyah said. “In some

cultures, black is the color of celebration. It's the hem of my robe. I'm celebrating my freedom from the orders."

At that, Ladonna stood suddenly. Both Par-Salian and Tythonnia felt the sheer panic rise into their throats.

"Time for sleep, I think," Ladonna said, excusing herself.

"You disagree with what she said?" Shasee asked.

Ladonna's customary grin inched out across her face, and Tythonnia cringed at what might come next.

"Disagree?" Ladonna asked. "Yes

... with every single one of you in fact. You're fools. One and all—fools.”

Tythonna almost groaned, and even Par-Salian seemed too stunned to move. Any moment, Ladonna would reveal herself as a spy and get them all lynched. Any moment, they'd be fighting for their lives and losing. Two sorcerers jumped to their feet, ready for action. Others shifted position where they sat, their pouches in easier reach. It was Shasee, however, who rose and stepped between Ladonna and the others. His voice was steady, his

smile unwavering and casual in a way that suggested he could end the argument easily.

“She misspoke, isn’t that right?” he asked Ladonna over his shoulder. He made it sound like a warning.

Ladonna, however, continued undeterred. “I spoke clearly enough, hmm? You’re angry with the orders for not sharing their power with you, but why should they when they argue and bicker over it as well? Take what you want! Nobody’s going to give it to you. Magic is struggle; to treat it otherwise is to underestimate it.”

“If you feel that way,” Mariyah said, “then why did you ever leave?” She wasn’t afraid of anything, it seemed, certainly not a confrontation with Ladonna.

“Because,” Ladonna said, “the Order of the Black Robes underestimated me. They’re jealous of my skill, so they use my beauty against me. They refuse to treat me seriously? So be it. It’s at their peril, and I’ll make them pay. But I won’t do it around a campfire, pining for a better world where we can all live like brothers and sisters. We are rivals with a common purpose. That doesn’t

make us friends. That makes us convenient.” With that, Ladonna stormed away, leaving Tythonnia and Par-Salian to deal with the angry crowd.

“I’m terribly sorry about that,” Par-Salian said as he stood. “She’s been having a difficult time of late. I’m ... going to check on her. Tythonnia?”

“I’m staying. The conversation’s interesting,” she said, glancing around at the others. Everyone seemed upset or indifferent except for Mariyah and Shasee. The two men who had stood remained standing.

Par-Salian backed away awkwardly and left the fireside quickly. Everyone was quiet a moment, most of them angry or shocked.

“She’s harsh sometimes,” Tythonnia said, trying to think of a way to salvage the situation. “If she hadn’t left the order, they would have kicked her out, I’m sure.”

A few others nodded absently. Tythonnia slowly realized she was no longer welcome there either. She stood to leave and offered a nod to Shasee when a voice startled her.

“Leaving already?”

The others stood, their angry expressions gone instantly and replaced with humble glances to Berthal. The gray-robed sorcerer entered the lit circle, holding a braided staff with two dragon heads facing one another. A few practitioners muttered his name almost reverently.

“I’m afraid so,” Tythonnia said. “It’s been a long day.”

“And this would have nothing to do with Ladonna’s outburst?” he asked.

“You heard ...?” Tythonnia

asked, blushing.

Berthal sat on the ground and motioned for the others to sit. When Tythonnia hesitated, he gently grabbed her hand between his large fingers.

“Sit. Please?” he asked.

Tythonnia hesitated and looked to the others, but nobody was about to disagree with Berthal. Finally, she obeyed.

“We can’t save everyone,” Berthal said. “In fact, you’re not responsible for saving everyone.”

“I know,” Tythonnia said, “but she’s our companion—”

“But is she your *friend*?”

Tythonna nodded. “I’d ... like to think so.”

Berthal smiled kindly and gently steered the topic away to different matters. As he spoke, a hush fell over the assembly, and they listened with careful consideration to each and every word. Even Tythonna lost herself in his discussion and felt uplifted for it.

Par-Salian walked among the tents, trying to find Ladonna, but she was nowhere to be seen. She was neither at their campsite nor

among the clumps of people seated around the smaller fires, not that Par-Salian expected to find her there. Finally, tired of looking, he went back to check on Tythonnia and found her seated among the sorcerers. Ladonna wasn't there either, but Kinsley and Berthal were. Berthal was speaking with hypnotic fervor.

Curious, Par-Salian drifted closer to the fire pit until he was well within earshot of the conversation but outside the light. He preferred the anonymity of the darkness; he felt tired of having to watch his every gesture and word for fear of

betraying his mission. More so, he was tired of lying to these people. He wished they were rough and crude and evil. By the moons, how he wished they were evil so he could feel less guilty about doing what he was doing. Instead, they had children and they were kind and generous. They were also careful with magic, treating it with a reverence he had thought exclusive to wizards.

But they were wrong, absolutely and flat-out wrong. Wyldling magic was unpredictable and chaotic, a thing so devoid of order that the gods themselves had

stopped its practice. The passage of a great artifact called the Graygem changed the foundations of the world itself, all because of wild magic. What—just because Berthal and his ilk thought they could handle it, were they justified in endangering the lives of all those around them? Spells and conventional magic didn't exist because of the magic of weaker minds, as the Vagros claimed. No ... spells and rituals existed to minimize the collateral effects of wielding the craft. Fire had to be tamed to become a weapon and a provider; water had to be

controlled and diverted before it could become a life-giver to agriculture. Nature had to be conquered before it became tempered. Such was the truth with magic. Wyldling magic had to be broken like a stallion before anyone could ride it safely.

Par-Salian didn't want to like these people but he did. And that frustrated him even more. Why couldn't they see the truth? Why couldn't they realize the danger they put themselves and their children in? He was so ready to hate them but he couldn't. He could only ache to save them.

Why couldn't they be evil?

“Of course we offer the gods their due. But no more than that,” Berthal said. “More than that, and we hobble our will to their whim.”

“What about the passage of the Graygem?” Tythonnia asked. “There was a time when magic was truly destructive, and even now there are those that would use magic to hurt others. Aren't the rules needed?”

Par-Salian wandered closer. He suddenly feared Tythonnia was revealing too much of her own allegiances. If it bothered Berthal,

however, it didn't show. In fact, he seemed to thrive on debate and questions. He wasn't interested in blind adoration. He liked his company to think and challenge him.

“The orders had their place,” Berthal said, a statement that surprised Par-Salian and several others by their expressions. “Many of us here believed that once. In fact, we still wrestle with it. But what once brought structure to magic has been used to manipulate the orders themselves, to force them to adhere to the rules governing the practice of the

arcane, not a respect for magic itself. It's the curse of all churches. We've bound ourselves to the service of the moons, not to the arcane. It's blind obedience. And where has that gotten us? How many times have we been used to further the cause of the three gods themselves? Been enemies and not cousins?"

"You keep saying 'we,'" Mariyah pointed out.

Berthal chuckled and nodded his head deeply. "I do. I do. Hard habit to break, trust me," he admitted before continuing. "That is why we must return to Wyldling magic. To

again learn from it and forge our own path this time. The way must be ours. We are no longer the infants of the moons. We're no longer savages either. Why are we being punished like we are? Until we take accountability for our own actions, the gods will never respect us. Not truly."

Despite himself, Par-Salian sat upon one of the rocks and continued listening. It was hard to ignore Berthal. It was harder still not to like the man. Only distantly did he wonder where Ladonna had gone.



Ladonna moved past the tents as quietly as she could. The fires in this part of the camp had died, the people long asleep, but one misstep could awaken the wrong lot. Ladonna had seen Berthal join the group at the fire pit, and she planned to take advantage of the opportunity. She wasn't sure when she'd get another chance.

Berthal's tent was ahead, at the edge of camp—close enough to be a part of it yet far enough away for its occupant to remain an outsider among his own people. That was just fine for Ladonna. She walked across the gap between the main

encampment and Berthal's tent, stopping well short of her goal. She had little to fear about being seen, with the spell of invisibility sheltering her from prying eyes. Only her footfalls could betray her, but her ill-spent youth gave her a light step. What she had to worry about were the magical wards protecting Berthal's home. For that, Ladonna had just the spell prepared. Her fingers flew together and apart, as though stitching the very air.

“Mencelik sihir,” she whispered.

Nothing happened. Nothing changed. Ladonna stood her

ground and studied the earth and the grass, the tent and the tent flap. Nothing glowed or glittered. There was nothing that marked any sort of enchantment or mystical ward. It was possible Berthal was so skilled in the arcane crafts he could cast something far beyond her ability to see it, but she doubted it. The more powerful the magic, the easier it was to see. More likely, he was confident in the company he kept, and wasn't securing his tent every time he walked away. Or perhaps the wards were inside.

Ladonna maintained her focus as

she stepped forward, up to the tent. She had to keep concentrating, lest the spell dissipate. She gently moved the tent flap and peered in.

The tent was sparse: a bedroll for sleep and a small table and chair for study. On the table were a quill and inkwell, as well as a stack of books. Ladonna checked the interior; she detected the faint glimmer of magic from one of the books in the pile and nothing else. It glowed softly, the memory of candlelight. She slipped inside and examined her surroundings more closely. Surely there must have

been an alarm, something to protect his tent?

When Ladonna realized there was nothing of the sort, her dislike of Berthal grew. He was nothing but a fool leading other fools. How he had passed the Test of High Sorcery, much less served as a Red Robe, was beyond her. Disgusted, she crossed to the table and studied the bindings.

The Scarred Path of the Gem, The Ways Lost, and Forgotten Tongues ... those were the books Master Reginald Diremore wanted. Well, that and for her to seduce Par-Salian, which she had refused to

do. She was a wizard, a scion of the order, a disciple of Nuitari. She served a greater power than the self-interest of sorcerers and the ambitions of men such as Diremore. But then, that was before she knew Par-Salian. He seemed weak at first, for all his compassion and quiet ways, but Ladonna had come to realize he was far better skilled than she, perhaps even more skilled than Reginald. Par-Salian hid it well. He was humble and so comfortable with the magic at his disposal that he saw no reason to prove himself through boasts.

Thus, for Ladonna, her dislike turned into grudging admiration for his prowess. He was also handsome in ways her ego didn't let her recognize at first, not until those days spent recovering at Rosie's, not until he made her laugh and his eyes brimmed with the twinkle of youthful mischief she never expected to see in a white wizard. There was a bit of the trickster in him, a scoundrel made respectable by his learning and position, but a scoundrel nostalgic for capers nonetheless. She wondered how far she could coax that element from him.

She wanted to act upon her attraction then corrected herself. It wasn't attraction; it was pure, physical desire—a need for companionship with someone whom she respected. But how could she seduce him without looking like she was succumbing to Reginald's orders and bowing to pressure? It grated on her, this dilemma.

Ladonna swallowed a curse. She saw none of the books she needed in the pile. She looked closer at the one that glowed. There was no title embossed on its spine. Carefully, Ladonna cleared away the books atop it and stared at the cover. She

was instantly disappointed at the title: *Arcanum Unearthed*. It was a rudimentary spell book, the magic only cover-deep and meant to protect the tome from wear. She quickly flipped through the book, but saw that it was nothing more than what it appeared.

There was nothing here of importance to the Black Robes and nothing to impress her concerning Berthal. It was almost better to kill him there and then and dispense with their entire charade. She closed the book.

Berthal was in the middle of a sentence when he paused. A small grin pulled at the corner of his mouth, and he glanced off into the distance, toward his tent. He continued speaking after that, though the smile lingered for a few minutes longer.

Frustrated, Ladonna returned to her own campsite. Par-Salian was seated next to a small fire, drawing figures in the ground with a stick. Ladonna sat down next to him and said nothing. He offered no remarks in return, though Ladonna

suspected she knew what was wrong with him. That camp, those renegades ... they were nothing like he expected. They were normal, everyday people, misguided perhaps, but people still.

She expected that Par-Salian wanted to save them, to show them that the orders could be a powerful tool for the betterment of all. He wanted to debate and argue with them as people of reason. But he couldn't. He wasn't there to be friends. He wasn't there to debate and rescue them. He was there to bring Berthal to justice and end the renegade threat. He knew that and

he had the strength to see it through, of that Ladonna had no doubt. But it was still a bitter wound.

Her hand found Par-Salian's. He looked at her in surprise, but she stood and pulled him up gently. He was about to speak, but her finger found its way to his mouth. Her lips followed and she kissed him gently.

Par-Salian's eyes widened, but he didn't pull away. He finally kissed her back; Ladonna marveled that a man's lips could be so gentle and soft, and she felt as though she might sink into them. She could

taste a hint of cloves on his breath.

Without breaking her gaze from his, Ladonna pulled Par-Salian by the hand. He followed willingly, off into the darkness of the plains and away from the light of the campfire.

The fire pit had turned into a sea of embers, and the sorcerers slowly drifted away. The hour was late, and fatigue seemed to wash over everyone, though nobody really wanted to leave. They wanted to continue talking until dawn overtook the day and rendered

conversations ordinary again. When Tythonnia stood to wish them good sleep, and Berthal decided to retire as well, it seemed like a good time to call it a night.

Before Tythonnia could leave, however, Berthal surprised her by gently clasping her hand and asking if he could walk with her. His touch electrified her skin.

“Of course,” Tythonnia responded. Her heart quickened and her cheeks flushed with warmth. For a moment, she was happy that her own uncertainties seemed behind her, and she tried not to probe them too deeply lest

they erupt anew.

Berthal spoke quietly with Kinsley a moment before the other man left for his tent. The two magicians then walked through the camp; Berthal seemed to enjoy the silence.

They reached the stream of fresh water and followed its snaking path along the grass. When they were far enough away from the tents, Berthal turned toward her and smiled.

“Out with it,” he said.

“Out with what?” Tythonnia asked.

“The questions you want to ask. The ones you’re afraid might be insulting. The ones I can hear buzzing around in that skull of yours.”

“Oh,” Tythonnia said, almost laughing. “You can hear them? That’s rude of me. I guess I should ask them so the buzzing isn’t as loud.”

“Indeed,” Berthal said.

Tythonnia paused as she thought about the questions. There were so many, and she knew she had to pick and choose the right ones.

“You said the Wizards of High

Sorcery only see power, but aren't you stealing from them? Aren't you trying to steal some of that power?"

When Berthal didn't answer, Tythonnia immediately regretted the question. She'd overstepped her bounds with him and betrayed her true purpose here. She was about to apologize, to retract the statement, when he spoke.

"Most people wouldn't question why," Berthal said. "They'd just assume it was vengeance, a stroke for a stroke. They'd assume I'm trying to build power to fight the wizards. Many of them would love

nothing more than to hurt a wizard, any wizard. They want a war. But the truth is fighting the disciples of High Sorcery on their terms will destroy us. They have the training and the experience to make war a foolish pursuit.”

“Then why are you stealing books and wizards?”

“Ah,” Berthal said. “I never stole *anyone*. They came here of their own volition. To hear the truth. I am stealing books and artifacts, I’ll admit. But I’m trying to find something to help improve our lot, give us a fighting chance to survive. At least until we’re strong

enough to resist the Wizards of High Sorcery. We want to give spellcasters a choice. Follow the three moons, or their personal brand of magic.

“This current dilemma cannot continue,” Berthal continued softly. “We can’t keep crippling and killing our best and brightest with this ... this infernal test!”

“And you found something.”

“Maybe,” Berthal said and continued walking. “I think we have, but that means risking more lives to steal it. And therein lies my quandary.”

Tythonnia nodded and stilled her curiosity about what Berthal wanted to steal. She suspected he wouldn't tell her. There were other questions, however, more questions she felt compelled to ask. None of them involved the moment; all of them involved Berthal the man. She knew that he had left the Wizards of High Sorcery but not the specific reasons why. So she asked that instead.

The question seemed to unstitch a deep wound inside Berthal, and his green eyes flickered as they struggled to keep the memory from biting too deeply again. Tythonnia

fell silent, embarrassed she caused him such pain yet terribly curious. He answered, though he never looked at Tythonnia when he did. She suspected he was pretending he was alone, speaking his tale to the stars.

“His name was Joss, and he was the brightest, most capable student I ever taught. He was like a son to me. And the test killed him ... savagely. I thought he could pass. He was strong and able, quick-witted, and a natural with magic. He spoke the language of magic as fluidly as his mother tongue. He never had to grasp for words or

struggle through the gestures and intonations. They just came to him. Like breathing.

“He didn’t fail,” Berthal continued. “I failed him. I sent him to die—”

“But you didn’t know,” Tythonnia said.

“But I did,” Berthal said as he turned to face her. His expression was grave, furious, stricken. It didn’t know where to settle. “I knew the test didn’t reward the most able, only the most suicidal. It rewards anyone who forsakes love, happiness, passion. It rewards cold,

calculating ambition above all else. Where is the strength in that? Where is our hope in that? Ambition doesn't console you, love you. It is unforgiving.”

“I—” Tythonnia felt as though she should defend the test, somehow, but her thoughts drifted to her own ordeal.

“The test divorces us from everything that makes us who we are. It strips away our father's strength and our mother's love. All that remains is a blind loyalty to the moons. We swear an oath to three fickle lovers who never love us back—not in any way that

matters. They give us power, yes, but there's nothing of substance. And to ensure we never love anyone other than them, their so-called test leaves us with a scar that never heals. A scar that forever cleaves us from other people and reminds us just how alone we truly are.

“The test divorces us from life. But why should it be this way, when the arcane is a part of life, as certain in the earth as it is in the trees and in the blood? Sorcery ... Wyldling magic is the magic of passion, of living. Life isn't regimented or ordered! Why should

magic be so disciplined as to cripple? Let it flow like the river and dance like the wind. Let it stand tall as the mountains and warm our souls like fire!”

Berthal was breathing heavily, his rant far from spent, but his lungs were winded. Tythonnia couldn't help but stare and marvel at his passion.

“I despise the test,” Berthal said with a whisper. “It deprives the freedom, the natural right of those gifted to practice what comes naturally to them.”

“But ...” Tythonnia hesitated.

“The test is only there to stop people from learning magic beyond their ability. From hurting others. Or themselves.”

“Really?” Berthal asked. “So to prevent one or two miscreants from practicing the arcane, we kill some and censure others? Tythonnia, anyone with the ambition to hurt or kill will find a way to do so. Anyone can pick up a sword and kill with it. Anyone can take any of the basic spells and use it to do harm. Those trying to learn magics beyond their means will hurt themselves. It’s inevitable. Magic doesn’t suffer fools lightly.

Anyone who is capable of wielding stronger spells and crafts will find a way to do so with or without the wizards. The test is nothing more than a mechanism of control. It doesn't regulate or enforce. So why is it there? It's there to fill the coffers of the three moons with worshipers.

“I'm not saying the wizards don't serve a purpose. Perhaps enforcement is necessary to stop some spellcasters who hurt others. But the wizards are depriving the rights of everyone when no crime is committed, when no wrongdoing has taken place.”

“They’re trying to stop it from happening in the first place,” Tythonna said. “Before anyone gets hurt.”

“Conditional liberty is the language of tyrants,” Berthal said.

Tythonna was only vaguely aware her companions were gone, their bedrolls empty. Berthal’s words continued to echo in her thoughts, and his gentle kiss good night still tickled her cheek.

There was too much going on in her head to think clearly, so she did what she always did in those

situations and compartmentalized her thoughts. She went over the debates in her head as a way of distraction.

She disagreed with Berthal on a couple of points; she thought some regulations were needed to ensure evil men and women were deprived the magic that would allow them to hurt others. Then she thought about the Black Robes and realized that the test didn't stop evil from happening; it only gave it the air of respectability—evil by sanction.

Berthal's words resonated with her concerns and fears, and she

studied the components of her own test. They lived in vivid echos in her thoughts, the test remembered with such clarity it might be transpiring at that moment. So consumed was she with the thoughts of it she sat there while the burning wood disintegrated into glowing nuggets. Only when she felt cold did she distract herself long enough to throw more branches onto the fire. Her thoughts overtook her again, and she thought about her test.

What would she sacrifice to practice the arcane, the test asked of her. Who would she sacrifice?

Then it showed her who she loved and asked her to choose between them and the craft. The only surprise was the one she loved—not who she expected. She saw the women of her life and few men. She recognized them for who they were, as father, as grandmother, as mentor, as friend. She saw Elisa. But she saw others in a new light and was forced to choose between their love and the love of magic.

Amma Batros was there, as mentor and more. Though Tythonnia had never shared anything intimate with her teacher, the visions in her test had been

specific and embarrassingly erotic. She never thought of Amma in that way, but when she saw her now, all her previous actions and thoughts suddenly carried a different nuance. Suddenly, it wasn't Elisa she kissed in the high grass of the fields, but Amma Batros and a handful of other women she'd unknowingly gravitated toward. And it wasn't her mother who caught her, but slaving monsters of shadow and web.

The test was forcing her to reveal her true self, for nobody could maintain a lie *and* practice magic.

Perhaps that was the true meaning of the test. It wasn't choosing between the arcane and those she loved. It was choosing whether to hold on to a lie so perfect she believed it herself, or to burn away the deceit and practice magic without the proxy of masks. So Tythonnia immolated herself instead of the monstrosities threatening her loved ones. She set herself ablaze with her own magic and screamed through the fire.

When Tythonnia had emerged from the test, there were no burn scars, though the heat blossomed from her skin for days after. There

were no marks on her, but the sense of pain remained. Her skin felt uncomfortably tight, as though still healing, and she could remember her anguish in perfect detail. Still, despite all that, she could still feel the kiss on her lips and the heat of Elisa's breath in her mouth. That burned worse than anything else.

Amma Batros proclaimed her success a miracle, not a single blemish showing, but Tythonnia knew better. She knew the fire that burned her was on the inside and that if she ever cut herself open, her organs, not her skin, would

bear the scars.

So Tythonnia sat there, considering how much was too much and trying desperately to ignore the phantom tickle of a beard against her cheek.

The grass was comfortable beneath their backs, the sky their beautiful ceiling. Par-Salian's head rested on Ladonna's naked stomach, and she tousled his brown hair absently.

"I'm not too heavy, am I?" Par-Salian asked.

“No,” Ladonna said.

They fell back into calm silence, each one lost in the nothingness of their thoughts. Lovemaking had a way of clearing the mind of all its woes and securing people in the moment. And what a moment it was, thought Par-Salian. The wind lightly caressing their bodies and cooling their skin, the campfires distant. Like the world was made for them and untouched by anyone else.

It couldn't last, however. Perfection existed for a few moments at most then was gone. Life would move forward again,

and things would change. Par-Salian sighed at the thoughts that returned.

“You’re questioning our role here, aren’t you?” Ladonna said gently.

“Yes,” he admitted. He shifted position and lay on his elbow to face her. She turned to face him as well, their whispers intermingling. “Don’t misunderstand—I am still loyal to the Wizards of High Sorcery. But I can’t help but think these renegades may have a point. In some regards,” he amended.

Ladonna nodded and waited for

him to continue.

“Have we become too political? Too involved with ourselves to notice the world around us? Despite the Wyldling magic they practice, these people work to benefit each other. They help one another. They guide and nurture. What do we do? We bicker and we jockey for status. We fight over the most mundane things. Who are we benefiting?”

Ladonna smiled and shook her head. It was a sympathetic look she wore, not one of admonishment or disappointment. She pressed closer to Par-Salian until her lips could

almost touch his.

“I can see why you’d find their intentions attractive. It’s not my way; we both know that. I think competition breeds stronger wizards and benefits the practice of the arcane as a whole. We sometimes fight too much or work at cross-purposes too often; I’ll admit that. We do pay for it. But Berthal and his followers are naive if they think they won’t suffer the same fate. Idealism is a great motivator, Par-Salian, but eventually idealism becomes the status quo. And the first thing the status quo does is defend its power

and philosophies against all threats. The renegades here can afford their idealism because they haven't been forced to put it into practice."

"You're saying they won't be any better than the wizards? That seems more like a condemnation of our practices, doesn't it?"

"Not at all," Ladonna said. "By the time they reach our place in life, we will have moved past the problems they have yet to face. We will have grown ... matured. Maybe a more open society of wizards is called for, but why start from the beginning again? Why

not steer what we have now towards something better, instead of abandoning it and running into the same exact troubles later?”

Par-Salian studied Ladonna's eyes intently, his gaze lost in her dark pools.

“Par-Salian, it is the nature of all groups to undergo this trial. Idealism becomes acceptance; acceptance becomes status quo. After that, the people in power will dictate rules and regulations to preserve their standing. They become exclusionary, the hierarchy more rigid. Infighting occurs, and backbiting, yes. But eventually

change comes, and when it does, it must be from within.

“These people have served their purpose,” she concluded. “They’ve opened your eyes to what must be done. But they aren’t the answer. You are.”

Par-Salian nodded, taking a moment to digest what she said. The words felt like an epiphany, a cleansing of his soul.

“You’re right,” he whispered. “We’ve done our work. We found their camp. We have to leave.”

“Not just yet,” Ladonna replied. “We have two problems right now.

The Black Robes lost valuable books to the renegades, and we need them back. They are a danger to whoever possesses them.”

“Very well,” Par-Salian said. “We’ll try to find them. What else?”

“Tythonnia,” Ladonna said. “I think we’re losing her.”

Berthal stepped into his tent to find Kinsley asleep atop his bedroll. Kinsley, however, was a light sleeper and quickly stirred.

“Rest, rest,” Berthal said, motioning for Kinsley to remain

still. "I'm not tired."

"Mm," Kinsley responded and yawned. "How was your walk?"

"Good," Berthal said. He sat in the chair and fell silent in thought.

"What?" Kinsley asked, sitting up.

"We're going to have to move soon."

When Kinsley threw him a troubled look, Berthal continued. "Our three new recruits are most certainly spies for the Wizards of High Sorcery. They're endangering the camp."

Kinsley straightened, his fatigue

gone in an instant. “You’re sure? Lorall and I can handle it, if you want.”

“No,” Berthal said. “I don’t want them killed. They’re still young.”

“Not Par-Salian.”

“He’s naive and that’s perhaps worse. I don’t want them harmed. They aren’t evil people ... only misguided.”

“What about Tythonnia? She seems sympathetic.”

“I think she is,” Berthal replied. “We can sway her to our side.”

“Not the other two?”

“No,” Berthal said. “Par-Salian is a born and bred wizard. And Ladonna ... well, given that she ransacked my tent earlier I don’t think she has much sympathy for our cause. Casting that spell on the *Arcanum Unearthed* was a good idea, by the way. But no, we handle this quickly and move elsewhere before Ladonna or Par-Salian can send for reinforcements. But we need to get Tythonnia on our side first.”

“And this has nothing to do with your interest in her?” Kinsley said. “Oh, don’t look at me that way. I know you like her.”

Berthal shrugged. "I suppose I do."

"Lecherous old goat," Kinsley said, resting his head again. "She's young enough to be your daughter."

"Says the man who has done his share of wooing daughters from their fathers."

"Lies!" Kinsley said, throwing a finger high into the air. "Spread by my enemies."

"Spread by your own mouth," Berthal said.

The two men chuckled at their wit and let the fatigue overtake

them.

The docks creaked beneath his feet and swayed with the urging of the shore waters, though that could have been the mead talking. Thrack was built like a stone tablet, from his frame to his dwarf constitution. He could drink the customers of any tavern along the docks under the table, though it took some of the fight out of him.

He staggered back to his keelboat, tugging on his braided beard as though trying to right himself. There was a woman and a

large man in his way, looming over him. He lurched to the left, and they stepped in his path again.

Thrack looked up at them, not intimidated by the size of either of them, but he almost tipped over backward trying to see the big one's face. They wore cloaks, like thieves, though the woman had an odd metal book strapped to her chest. Some people had the strangest notion of what constituted armor. Thrack guffawed.

“You are the shipmaster Thrack Greenstone,” the woman stated.

“Correct. I’m glad we cleared that up.” He tried to move past them again, but the big one stepped in his way.

“You smuggle people in and out of the city,” the woman continued.

“Perhaps. If I did, though, I’d have to charge double for the big one here.”

“I am looking for two women and a man, both injured. Where did you take them?”

“Don’t recall them ...” He paused to count. “Three?”

“You will remember,” the woman said, unsheathing her thin, glowing

sword. “Or you will die.”

“Will I now? Well, lass, I make my living on the ocean, something no sane dwarf would ever do without getting drunk enough to knock Reorx down with his breath. So death threats don’t work on me. Now if you wanted to threaten me with coins. Well, coins, I find downright frightening. Especially the bronze or steel ones. Very scary.”

The big human looked at the woman and shrugged. She seemed annoyed that she wasn’t going to be killing anyone that night and sheathed her blade before tossing

him a small purse, which he barely caught.

“Take us where you took them,” the woman demanded.

CHAPTER 14

Make or Break

Another few days spent in the camp, and Tythonnia rarely saw Ladonna and Par-Salian. Those two seemed off in their own world, though Tythonnia grudgingly admitted she, too, was preoccupied. Her days were spent hunting, but finding food was growing more difficult and the hunters discussed the use of magic to draw their kills to them. The fact

was, they'd thinned the local wildlife too quickly. They needed new hunting grounds.

In the afternoons, Tythonnia gutted and cleaned her kills, while the evening was reserved for the company of Berthal. Sometimes they were alone and sometimes they mingled in the company of others who seemed to accept her far more readily than they did her compatriots. She was never happier.

That night was no different. It was spent with Berthal as he related stories of his youth. She also spoke with Mariyah, whose

personality seemed to blossom more each day.

When the fire pit began cooling, people took their cue to retire to their tents. Once again, Berthal and Tythonnia walked back to her campsite while taking a meandering, scenic path. It was as though they were both forestalling ending the night early. And they spoke with a comfortable familiarity that made mundane conversation enchanting. Still, Tythonnia couldn't help but feel there was something on Berthal's mind. She suspected what it might be, but eventually, curiosity drove

her to ask.

By way of answer, Berthal urged her away from the encampment, her hand in his. It wasn't until the country dark claimed them in shadows that he finally turned to her. He appeared to be considering something then, without warning, leaned over and kissed her.

Tythonna broke away from the kiss. Her lips tingled with the heat of it, but her mind pulled her in a dozen different directions.

"I'm sorry," Berthal said, pulling back. "I've overstepped my bounds. I thought—"

“No, no,” Tythonnia said, suddenly wishing she could take her hesitation back. Neither could she bring herself to step back into the kiss. She wanted to be attracted to him. She was, in fact, and that jarred with everything she’d come to believe about herself. Had she not burned away her old self? Was she not trying to embrace who she really was for the sake of magic?

The test, she thought and grew even more confused.

She shook her head, as if that might somehow shake her free of her doubts, and almost growled in frustration. “I do like you,” she

stammered, “I do. I *do!*”

“Then what’s the matter?” he asked.

Tythonnia suddenly felt terribly old, and that knocked the strength from her legs. She chose to sit down and was grateful when Berthal sat next to her. She leaned against him, and against every fear that screamed for her to shut her mouth, she told him about her test. It was a rare thing to divulge the intimate secrets of one’s test, for it always revealed a truth about who someone was, a truth so profound that it shook the one who passed the test to the core of his or her

identity. That was why few people ever shared such secrets, for the absolute truth of an individual is something not easy to see or accept.

Berthal listened and did not react when Tythonnia told him she usually did not feel attracted to men. It might be that she was more attracted to women. It was a gray area she couldn't define clearly yet. Her desires bullied her, pushed her emotions around, and left her helpless. She didn't know what to think or where to turn.

At the same time, there was no question, she did find herself

attracted to Berthal.

“Tythonnia,” Berthal said gently. He raised her chin with his finger until she was staring into those light green eyes that turned gold in the sun or around the campfire. “We all wear masks. What we say to people, how we act. Even the robes we wear: black, red, white, gray. They define who we are, or they can hide us. But they reveal more about us than people realize. Masks are a part of us, drawn up from whatever desires exist. That can be good, or it can be fatal.

“Don’t you realize the test rejects any loyalty except for magic? It

forces you to burn away anything that might compete with your devotion to magic. That is not right. I believe you must embrace both the magic and your humanity, while the test wants to burn away anything that makes you human.”

Tythonnia shook her head.

“I understand that your emotions are in turmoil. The test would like you to deny them, live only for the magic.” Berthal took her hand. “Is that what you want? To lose something vital in exchange for hollow devotion? A false promise?”

“No,” Tythonnia said softly.

This time Tythonnia did not pull away. She let his kiss overtake her thoughts. She was happy to enjoy it.

The sky hedged the purple light of early dawn when Tythonnia finally returned to their campsite. She practically stumbled into her bedroll and would have fallen asleep with her boots on had Ladonna not sat up. Par-Salian was asleep and earned a nudge in the ribs from Ladonna.

“Where’ve you been?” Ladonna asked. She felt annoyed at having

stayed up to keep tabs on Tythonnia. She was just as tired as Par-Salian and envied his ability to fall asleep so easily.

“Out, obviously,” Tythonnia grumbled. She was about to put her head down when Ladonna gently pulled her back up into a sitting position. Par-Salian rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

“With Berthal?” Ladonna asked.

“The answer depends,” Tythonnia said. Her dirty-blond hair was disheveled, and there was a rosy glow to her cheeks. A pleasant grin seemed etched on her

face. “Where did you and Par-Salian go in the middle of the night?”

“Working,” Ladonna said then cursed herself when she inadvertently broke eye contact with Tythonnia. She wasn’t normally shy about anything, but her tryst with Par-Salian was enough to put her on the defensive. It’s only physical, she reminded herself, but for some reason, she had to repeat that to herself.

“Fine,” Tythonnia said. “I’ve been working too. Good night.”

“This is serious,” Par-Salian

whispered. He sat closer to the two women. “We’re here on a mission, but we’ve been growing too close to these renegades. Me included.”

Tythonnia’s smile slipped but she continued listening.

“It’s hard being here, I know,” Par-Salian said. “And I cannot bear the thought that I might have to betray these people. These good people. But, Tythonnia, they’re misguided if they think they can topple the Wizards of High Sorcery. Berthal is leading them into suicide. Worse yet, there are children here. What happens if hunters descend upon them? What

happens if the Wyldling magic spirals out of control? It's too dangerous for the innocent ones."

They were quiet a moment. Both Ladonna and Par-Salian were waiting for Tythonnia to react, to say anything that might validate their fears or trust in her. She, of them all, was in the greatest danger, and they needed to know she was still loyal to the wizards.

Tythonnia pressed the palms of her hands against her eyes. "Why can't this be easy?" she groaned.

"We have to report back to the orders, sooner or later," Ladonna

persisted.

“I know,” Tythonnia admitted. “But Berthal is charismatic and wonderful, though he’s too angry to see rationally.”

Par-Salian didn’t need to speak for Ladonna to see his relief. Ladonna was more surprised that she, too, felt relieved to hear Tythonnia utter those words. There was still a chance for them.

“There’s a complication,” Ladonna continued. “I wasn’t supposed to mention this to either of you, but Berthal stole some books from the Black Robes. Par-

Salian and I have been searching for the books, but ...”

“But,” Par-Salian said, “we now think we know where they are. Berthal’s robe is enchanted. It might contain secret pockets. Is there any way you could, ah ... um ...” Par-Salian couldn’t finish the thought.

“We need you to search his robes,” Ladonna said.

“You mean sleep with him?” Tythonnia said.

“Are we asking something you haven’t done already?” Ladonna asked.

Tythonna looked away. “No,” she admitted. “But still, to sleep with him in order to betray him ...?”

“We all sell something of ourselves for magic,” Ladonna replied, her voice growing cold again, professional. “It’s what makes us wizards. It’s why we were chosen.”

“I know it seems like a terrible thing we’re asking,” Par-Salian said. “But it’s the only way. Can you do it?”

“Yes,” Tythonna whispered, “but I don’t have to like it.”

“I—”

“Shut up, Par-Salian,” Tythonnia said. “Stop trying to make yourself feel less guilty than you should.” She turned on to her side, her back to them. “Just be ready to use that medallion tomorrow night. We won’t be safe here anymore after that.”

The day was spent quietly, as though a hush had fallen across the camp. Kinsley and a few others were at the town of Dart, a few hours away, to buy provisions for the renegades. Others went about

their business, trying to stay occupied with mending, caring for the children, cooking, washing, and hunting. But a pressure lingered in the air, a heaviness that weighed upon every thought and body.

Tythonnia hunted with Lorall, though they'd thinned their pickings. The scarcity of the hunt forced Tythonnia to mull over her plans for the evening and to regret every step of her betrayal. So she forced herself to hunt harder, run faster, push herself to her limits anything not to think too hard, to reconsider her actions. She felt angry at the wizards for

putting her through the mission, at the test for inflicting her with such a burden, at her companions for their part in the sordid play, and at Berthal for turning her questions into aching doubt.

No matter what Tythonnia did, however, she could not forestall the passage of the day. With a pair of hares to show for their hard work, Tythonnia and the quiet Lorall returned to the camp and gutted their kills as the sun began to dip. The children would have first pick at the food, and there was a rumor that one of the sorcerers could create a small feast for the others

to share. It would be enough to stave off the growing hunger.

And these are the people the Wizards of High Sorcery fear as a threat, Tythonnia thought bitterly.

Instead of sitting around with her companions or the other sorcerers, Tythonnia headed for Berthal's tent with her rations. He seemed taken aback to see her until Tythonnia stepped inside his tent, twisted the cord latch, and fell into his arms with a smothering kiss. Then he seemed pleasantly surprised. They never got around to eating dinner.



Tythonna rested in Berthal's arms and was comforted by the soft rumble of his snoring. She would have fallen asleep to it if her thoughts didn't haunt her so. No matter what she did that night, she was bound to betray someone for whom she cared. She didn't know what to do anymore. Her world had spun out of control.

You have strangers living inside you. Yassa's words came back to her. And yet they know you better than you know yourself. For they have made a home of your heart. Let them guide you.

Tythonna rested on her elbows

and watched Berthal breathe. His chest rose and fell in the dim light, his body dark with hair. She glanced at his gray robes, lying there in a pile, waiting for her to search them. She could easily reach over to them and feel for hidden pockets, but she couldn't bring herself to make the first move.

Stop fighting who you are and face the real turmoil that haunts you.

It had nothing to do with the betrayal of her companions, she realized as she sat up. It had to do with following what she truly believed. It all came down to one question, one question at the core

of everything. Even though she survived the test itself, it was still asking her: Do you follow the dictates of the moons, or do you follow your own path?

And be damned for either answer you give.

Berthal stirred and Tythonnia felt his hand resting on the small of her naked back. She lay back down next to him and nuzzled his ear with her nose.

“What?” he whispered.

“We need to talk,” she whispered back.



The camp was quiet, the fire pit a sea of black sailed by ships of cooling embers. Snowbeard slept where he sat at its stone-lined edge. Tythonnia hurried through the camp, a bundle wrapped in cloth pressed against her chest. She looked here and there in worry, heading straight for her encampment.

When she arrived, Ladonna and Par-Salian, who were pretending to sleep, bolted upright. Their backpacks were ready, and they were fully clothed beneath their cloaks. Tythonnia spilled the bundle at their feet.

“Did you get them?” Ladonna asked, pulling at the cloth.

“Yes!” Tythonnia said. “But we have to—”

Someone shouted an alarm from the main camp.

Ladonna ignored the screams and growing commotion. She opened the bundle and revealed a book wrapped in leather, *The Scarred Path of the Gem*. “Where are the other two?” she demanded.

“With me,” Tythonnia said. She patted a pack hidden beneath her cloak, the one slung under her shoulder. “I was told to return the

books to my order.”

“They belong to me!”

“They belong to the Wizards of High Sorcery. I’m doing what’s best for the whole society,” Tythonnia said. “We each get one ... one for each order.”

“Sounds fair,” Par-Salian said.

Ladonna scowled and thought to argue the point further. Instead, she nodded to Par-Salian. People were emerging from their tents, trying to figure out what was happening. Par-Salian pulled out the sun and three moons medallion hidden in his shirt and

concentrated. His eyes squeezed shut, his lips moved in silent incantation.

People were pointing at the three of them. Some began to run toward them; others fumbled for their pouches to launch spells to stop them. A couple were drawing upon wilder magic still and pulling energy from the air itself.

Before anyone could act, however, a disk of golden light appeared beneath the three wizards' feet. Just before the disk rose above their heads, enveloping them, Tythonnia saw Berthal racing, his staff glowing as he was

about to release a spell. Ladonna hissed as a ball of fire hurtled toward them.

Then they were gone.

The ground beneath their feet was no longer grass, but cold, gray flagstone. Behind them was a gate of silver and gold, the face of which was as precise and as delicate as butterfly wings. Beyond it was a foreboding forest choked on a thick mist. A tall wall separated them from the forest. Towering above them were two large towers made from black glass and etched with silver and black runes and two smaller towers, all

measuring over two hundred feet in height.

“Home,” Ladonna breathed in grateful exultation.

They had arrived at the Tower of High Sorcery in Wayreth.

The flash of fire on the horizon and the shouts that carried across the plains were what finally gave away the camp's position. The noise persisted, the sounds of agitated horses and men crying orders.

Dumas and Hort reached the

camp within an hour. The darkness kept them hidden, and they stayed well beyond any campfire light. With the reins of their Blödegelds in hand, they watched quietly as men raced to pack their carts and their horses and women helped settle the panicked and sleep-deprived children. In a few places, sorcerers used magic to expedite their departure by conjuring invisible servants to carry heavy sacks and crates. The camp would be ready to move within the next hour.

“Renegades?” Hort asked.

“Likely. I don’t see our prey,

though.”

“Me either. There’s too many of them. How many casters?”

“A dozen. Maybe more. We need help. Follow them,” Dumas said. “Leave a trail for me to find if they cover their tracks.”

“Where you going?” Hort asked. “We want the three renegades.”

“I’m going back to Palanthas to hire mercenaries,” Dumas said. “And if our renegades aren’t in that camp, then someone down there knows where they are.” With that, she patted Hort on the shoulder. “I’ll see you in a few days. Don’t

lose them.”

He scowled and nodded curtly. He didn't like that one bit, but after what the three renegades did to Thoma, Hort wasn't going to question his companion anymore, no matter how strangely she acted. He wanted the renegades to pay. Even if it meant following the camp of mystic refugees down the funnel of the Blood Sea of Istar, he would avenge Thoma's death.

CHAPTER 15

In Shadow and Scheme

While it was Highmage Astathan who served as master of the Tower of High Sorcery in Wayreth, his position was largely ceremonial by choice. He watched over the affairs of the Wizards of High Sorcery, which more than occupied him, and left it to others to run the daily matters of the tower. Ladonna's mentor, Arianna, possessed the enviable and much

coveted role of managing the tower's library, perhaps the greatest known repository of magic, arcane lore, and artifacts anywhere in the world.

As such, the tower was open to all wizards with sanction to be there, as well as a cadre of assistants and librarians who cared for the monumental library and maintained the tower grounds. It was those assistants who first came to investigate the commotion in the courtyard, but it was Arianna who welcomed them back.

Arianna, a woman in her forties with short-cropped brown hair and

rounded features, took Ladonna into her embrace, but the kisses the two women placed on each other's cheeks seemed cold and distant. Once they might have been mentor and student, but that was no longer the case. They were fast growing into rivals.

To her credit, however, Arianna made sure baths were drawn and chambers afforded the sojourners while Highmage Astathan was roused from sleep. He'd been awaiting their return. Before Arianna parted company with them, however, she pulled Tythonnia aside.

“You should know,” Arianna whispered, “Yasmine of the Delving died. Belize has replaced her as master of your order. He’s at Abrasama Keep but expects a full report when you are finished with Highmage Astathan. I’ll arrange for your communications.”

Tythonnia nodded. She felt too numb, too tired to care. It was inevitable that Belize would head the order; Tythonnia had just hoped she wouldn’t be around to see it. Ladonna and Par-Salian said nothing either. They regarded one another with looks of utter exhaustion. Their shared ordeal

would forever bind them regardless of what came next.

Before Tythonnia entered through the wooden door to her chamber, she pulled out one of the books from her worn pack, *Forgotten Tongues*, and handed it to Par-Salian. Par-Salian nodded in gratitude, but Ladonna continued scowling. They retired to their chambers without another word.

Tythonnia stretched and stifled a groan. The hot bathwater soaked through her, numbing her muscles and edging her toward exhausted

sleep. There was still much to do, but until the water grew cold or black with filth, she would stay here.

As she luxuriated in its steaming warmth, she examined the bone-lace key that Berthal had given her. She turned it end over end and marveled at its delicate design. He'd been loath to part with the three books stolen from the Black Robes, but what the key promised to unlock was of far greater value. Tythonnia had happily offered her help and was grateful when he told her he knew about them and their mission. That thrust everything out

into the open, and Tythonnia couldn't wait until she was reunited again with the renegades. She tired of the duplicity, but slowly, she was ridding herself of the lies.

The next two days were spent in a blur of activity. Tythonnia, Ladonna, and Par-Salian, with barely a word to one another, spoke to Highmage Astathan together then each in private. They related their journey, including their encounter with the animated dolls and the flight through the High Clerist's Tower. They told him

everything they knew about the renegade hunters, about the attack at the tower and again in Palanthas and about the murder of Thoma at the hands of Dumas. That troubled Astathan deeply. He promised to speak with the other masters about the attacks, but as of that moment, he had no choice but to send out more hunters to bring Hort and Dumas back for questioning.

Unfortunately, he could not address the incident with Dumas directly until he'd cleared up other matters first. In particular, he had to mend fences with Palanthas

following the debacle with the Thieves Guild and the fire in Smiths' Alley. The Wizards of High Sorcery were also dispatching scouts from Palanthas to track Berthal's camp.

Afterward, the three companions made their reports to the masters of the orders. Ladonna reported to Reginald Diremore through a scrying crystal in Arianna's study. He didn't hide his displeasure when she told him about securing one book only and was about to dismiss her for having performed "barely well enough to remain in the order" when she interrupted him. It

was a moment of panic, of seeing her hard-earned position slip away. She couldn't allow that to happen.

"I seduced Par-Salian," she said. Immediately, the words sank down into the pit of her stomach, and she almost burned with shame.

I don't care for him that way, she thought. I don't—I mean ...

Reginald cocked an eyebrow in intrigue, but Ladonna wasn't about to let him steal her moment.

"I have his ear. Me ... nobody else," Ladonna said. "If you want me to influence him in the future, I suggest we discuss what the order

can offer me in exchange for that influence.”

That brought a smirk to Reginald's face. That was twice she'd backed him into a corner and twice he was smart enough to know when he was beaten. He would discuss it later with her, he said, as he studied her under his black eye, but her future was more promising than it had been a few minutes earlier.

Ladonna continued staring absently at the scrying crystal long after it had gone dark.

Par-Salian performed exactly as was expected of him, which was to say he met with the highmage's lofty expectations. He had kept the group together, survived several brushes with death, he was able to give them the position of Berthal's camp, and he had returned everyone home safely. But it was obvious Par-Salian didn't consider the mission successful. They had located Berthal but were in no position to capture him. The group almost shattered apart on several occasions. Indeed, they had almost died and Par-Salian's sympathies for the enemy forced him to

question himself.

Highmage Astathan listened, never nodding or shaking his head, never smiling nor frowning. He listened while Par-Salian confessed to those terrible things, and only when the younger man was done did Astathan speak.

“Never apologize for the hardships you face. Never apologize for questioning. The test we take is but one of many life throws our way. What matters is weathering it intact, regardless of the scars you earn from the experience. What matters is having the strength to ask the questions

and to face the answers with a straight back. You did both. Par-Salian, I am proud of you. I may not have been your *Shalafi*, but I am as proud of you as I am of any of my students. You will make a fine addition to the conclave.”

“But I questioned my own loyalties. I questioned the test.”

“As well you should,” Astathan said. “The test is a choice, and all choices demand examination. You were not forced into it. You took it willingly, as a show of devotion. But you took it knowing what to expect. That was a choice, to take the test to show others you earned

the right to learn the secrets of the greater arcane. Berthal is smart and compassionate, but his demand to rid us of the test is the cry of an over-protective mother. Nobody learns by being sheltered their entire life. Nobody respects something if it's given to them without struggle. Rarely has a great thing been given away. It's always been earned. And you, my boy ... you earned your place here today. You should be proud."

Par-Salian nodded gratefully and contemplated Astathan's words and praise. Still, some doubt shadowed his heart, for there was one thing

he kept to himself: he said nothing of his affair with Ladonna.

Tythonnia's brush with Belize was decidedly less pleasant. She had no love or patience for the ridiculous little man, and he was not impressed with her performance. As master of the order, he proved himself the petty tyrant others knew him to be.

"One book?" he said through the scrying crystal, his pinched face hovering in the murk. "I'm glad Yasmine wasn't here to see this travesty," he said. "All that wasted

effort for one book. I pray you will beg for the highmage's forgiveness because this failure is unacceptable."

Tythonna's patience had frayed thin, but she couldn't afford to annoy the master of her order.

"I beg your forgiveness," Tythonna said, looking down at her feet. "I failed you, Master, and I failed the order. Please ... give me a few more days to see if I can get the books back."

"I should recall you right now," he said.

"I can get the books back. I know

I can,” she said.

“How?”

“Leave that to me,” she responded. “Better you don’t know in case this goes badly for me. You can say I acted on my own.”

Belize pondered it a moment before nodding. “Very well. But get caught, and I’ll personally push for your execution. Understood?”

“Yes, thank you!” Tythonnia said, doing her best to feign gratitude.

“You have two days,” he said. He waved his hand in front of the scrying crystal, and his image was

swallowed by the mists.

Tythonnia spit on the floor and was glad to be rid of him. Soon she would be free of all pretenses. She hoped it would happen before Amma Batros came to Wayreth to visit her. Tythonnia knew she could lie to the others, but Amma Batros—and perhaps even Ladonna and Par-Salian—they were another matter.

The Tower of High Sorcery in Wayreth was one of the few remaining legacies of the power that the Wizards of High Sorcery

once held. Its four sibling towers were either destroyed or sealed against all intrusion, leaving Wayreth as the last of the great repositories of knowledge. Before the Cataclysm, it had been the first one built, but afterward, it was a sanctuary for the beleaguered orders. It was a haven against all the spite and hate the world possessed against wizards for their perceived role in bringing about the Cataclysm; it was the one place they wouldn't be harried and murdered.

That was, until Astathan became highmage and rebuilt the

respectability of the wizards. He forced them to leave the confines of Wayreth and again to travel the world, where Wyldling magic and renegade sorcery had blossomed to the benefit of a select handful. The wizards sought students and opened academies. More important, they showed the world they would no longer hide but neither should they be feared. The world went on fearing them, however, though they stopped murdering them.

Because of its history and significance in a wizard's life, the tower's crypts also housed some of

its greatest members. Not everyone who called himself a wizard was laid to rest there, but most masters and highmages were.

What Berthal sought, what Tythonnia hunted for a week after arriving, was in the crypts, not the library. The latter was protected by too many traps and spells, but the crypts contained only corpses ... supposedly. Anyone intombed there had donated his or her books and possessions to the orders and the various libraries. Thus, there was nothing of interest to crypt-robbers and little reason to protect it.

The crypts lay beneath the ground, between the principal towers of Wayreth. A winding staircase of polished stone and friezes etched in mercurial runes spiraled down into the central crypt. Tythonnia tried to breathe deliberately, to slow her pounding heart, but the deeper she descended, the faster her heart raced. Not only was she betraying her oath and her order, she was about to do so before the dead eyes of High Sorcery's most powerful luminaries.

If there's ever a place to be afraid of ghosts, it's here,

Tythonna thought. Her imagination played on her fears, and she envisioned the reanimated dead masters killing her in a hundred different, terrible ways. Another fear drove her forward, however. Amma Batros was coming the next day for a visit, and Tythonna didn't want to be around. She couldn't bear looking Amma in the face, knowing she was about to betray someone she cared for deeply.

Through the archways at the bottom of the stairs, she entered the central crypt.

The chamber was circular and

well greater than sixty feet in diameter. Across the domed ceiling was a stylized panorama of stars and planets as they appeared in the sky above Wayreth right at that moment. It was a masterful illusion, displaying the planets and constellations in silver against a deep azure sky. Lines of gold flickered between the stars, showing the signs of the different gods. It was the sole illumination in the chamber that evening and more than enough to cast an eerie light over everything.

Around her, set into the wall, were the funeral vaults, each one

dedicated to the head of the conclave or hero of the order. Past the silver-plated gates were the sarcophagi themselves, each one topped with a gold slab, their sides enameled appropriately in red, white, or black. Three corridors led from the central chamber into the catacombs for the hundreds of wizards interred there. Each corridor was dedicated to one of the three orders and fell away into the darkness, but Tythonnia was grateful she didn't need to enter any of them. What she sought was in the room she stood in.

Skippping the ones where she saw

red or white coffins and focusing on the black ones, Tythonna checked the name above each vault. Finally, she came to the one she was looking for: Gadrella of Tarsis, the first woman and the first of her order to sit as highmage.

The gate waited for Tythonna to open it, and she swallowed hard. She was about to defile the resting place of a highmage, a Black Robe at that. No telling what nasty little tricks protected Gadrella's vault. A bit of necromancy was enough to animate the dead or to kill a grave robber with a withering affliction.

A thousand possible deaths awaited Tythonna if she proceeded, and yet she'd live through a thousand deaths if she lied to herself and stayed with the orders. Her heart didn't belong to them or the three moons anymore. Hers was the most ancient of traditions, the magic fueled by passion.

“Live one day honestly,” she reminded herself and touched the bone key to the silver gate. It glided open silently and stopped just short of clanging against the wall. Tythonna prayed Berthal was right about the key, that it would keep her safe from possible

traps. She stepped into the vault, each foot forward celebrated with a pause as she waited for the hammer to drop. Nothing happened, however.

Tythonna placed the key against the golden slab, and it, too, pivoted open. Inside the velvet-lined coffin lay the corpse of Gadrella. The enchantments had slowed her deterioration, but had not halted her decay. Her skin had grayed and was eaten through at the cheeks. Her eyelids and eyes were completely missing, as was her nose. Thin, brittle, white hair that fell across her black pillow covered

her head. Gadrella's mouth lay open in a perpetual gasp, and her desiccated hands rested across her chest.

What must come next filled Tythonnia with dread. Every time she thought about it, she stopped herself and almost backed away from the sarcophagus entirely. Finally, she took the bone key and pressed it into Gadrella's mouth as quickly as she could. Tythonnia shuddered fiercely and silently cursed the Black Robes for their necromancy.

A sigh seemed to escape Gadrella's shriveled lips, and the

fabric of her black robes rustled. Tythonnia realized Gadrella was holding a book beneath her hands.

Berthal had told her about the legend, about a key Gadrella had fashioned to hide a book. It was meant for the Black Robes if there was ever a desperate time for their numbers. The book would return to her only when someone placed the key in her mouth. However, the tome would serve Berthal instead. It was worth far more than the three books he gave Tythonnia to regain her compatriots' trust.

Tythonnia carefully slid the book out from beneath Gadrella's dead

fingers. It was heavy, its surface bronze and silver, and its patterns reminiscent of spiderwebs layered over one another until no light could shine through them. It reminded Tythonnia of the volume strapped to Dumas's chest.

Etched into the steel plate, bolted into its front was its title: *Orphaned Echoes*.

She took the book and retrieved the key from Gadrella's mouth. No sooner had she pulled it out, however, then the gold slab covering the coffin and the gate to the vault both slid closed. Tythonnia's heart stuttered, and

she struggled to breathe. No monster gripped her lungs, only her own fears choking her. She forced herself to relax, to think clearly. She was not trapped ... not yet.

Then she heard footsteps echoing through the stairwell. Someone was racing down into the central crypt.

With the key tucked safely away, Tythonnia fumbled for the pouch on her belt. The footsteps grew louder, like thunder, spurring Tythonnia to move faster. But the pouch strings were tied too well. Her fingers couldn't pull the knot apart. She tore at it but only

tightened it further. The echo of footfalls was too painful to bear, like someone hammering on the door of her ears. She couldn't be caught. Too much depended on her escape. She grunted in panic and pulled out her dagger.

“Tythonnia!”

It was Ladonna. Tythonnia went cold; she did not want witnesses to her betrayal, least of all Ladonna and Par-Salian. Better that she vanish into the night, never to see the disappointment on their faces. She pulled at the string and slit just below the knot. Ladonna raced into the chamber and spun around,

trying to find her. Tythonnia ducked behind the sarcophagus. To her terror, the footsteps raced straight for Gadrella's vault.

“Answer me!” Ladonna cried. “I know you're in there! Tythonnia!”

Tythonnia pulled a flask from her pouch. A gold liquid filled its belly, its mouth covered with a wood stopper and sealed in wax. She couldn't believe she was about to leave behind her life of the past ten years. Her mind reeled at the thought of her own betrayal, but she didn't belong here anymore.

“Ufta!”

Tythonna cringed at Ladonna's arcane word, then she heard the gate of the funeral vault swing open. More footsteps sounded as Ladonna raced into the chamber.

“Tythonna! No, wait!”

Tythonna bit down on the wood stopper and pulled it free with her teeth.

“I'm sorry,” Tythonna said. “I have to.”

“You don't understand! The book —”

It was too late. As Ladonna rounded the sarcophagus, her hands outstretched to grab her,

Tythonnia tossed the liquid back, splashing it into her mouth. She didn't swallow it; it evaporated on her tongue, sending pricks of pain down her throat. Ladonna's words were lost in the tremor rush of thunder that swelled in her ears.

Like a page of the world turning, everything around Tythonnia slipped out from around her. She was no longer anchored in the world. Instead, she was standing out in the green forests of Qualinesti, at the foot of the ancient and knotted trees. Another page turned, and she stood a dozen yards above the waters of the

Schallsea Straits. Before she could fall even an inch, she found herself on the hills near the Garnet Mountains, on the Plains of Solamnia, high in the instantly bitter cold of the Vingaard frost, in Berthal's tent.

She would have fallen, had a startled Berthal not caught her.

“Back so soon?” He half laughed. Tythonnia was shivering, her body frozen to the marrow by the magic that drove the potion; she couldn't stop her teeth chattering long enough to speak. She dropped the book, but Berthal ignored it as it thudded to the ground. He lowered

her and pulled the cover from his bedroll to wrap her inside it. Afterward he warmed her with soft kisses to her face until she could finally speak.

“I found it. I found my way back.”

Par-Salian was startled awake by the hand covering his mouth. His eyes opened, his instincts telling him to fight. He bucked against the attacker, and she relented easily. It took him a moment to distinguish Ladonna standing there in his chamber, over his bed.

“Ladonna, you shouldn’t be here,” he whispered.

“Hush now,” she said. “Do you still have that medallion the highmage gave you?”

“No,” Par-Salian said. “It’s spent. Why?”

“Tythonnia is in terrible danger.”

Hort wrapped himself in his cloak, trying desperately to stave off the mountain cold that dug deeply into him. The renegade encampment was less than a mile away, and Hort had chosen a perch

among the rocks that lay well outside the game trails. He didn't need hunters finding him before Dumas returned. Hort prayed she would come back soon because he was getting tired of waiting.

"You're certain," Par-Salian said, searching through the pile of books stacked on his desk. "A trap?"

"It's what Arianna told me. She learned it directly from Reginald Diremore. What are you looking for?"

"A spell I have in one of my—ah!" he exclaimed, pulling out a

book bound in red leather. He flipped the pages. “It’s a teleportation spell,” he said.

“You don’t know how to cast one of those,” Ladonna said. She hesitated, the smirk receding from her face. “You know how to cast one of those?”

“After everything we’ve been through,” he said, “I believe I can. I’ve managed to grasp more powerful spells recently. But I need a destination.”

“Berthal’s campsite. Where we stayed. Are you sure you can do this?”

“If what you say is true, we have no choice. Not just for Tythonnia’s sake, but for the sake of the children there as well. We should inform the highmage.”

“We mustn’t,” Ladonna said, “or they’ll imprison Tythonnia and drum me out of the Black Robes for divulging this secret. It’ll drive a rift between the orders. You know what will happen.”

“Fine!” Par-Salian said. “But the campsite is likely abandoned by now.”

“But it’s a start, yes?” Ladonna said. “And it’s the only thing we

know for certain.”

Sunlight streamed into the tent through the partially opened flap. It seemed too raw for daylight, as though unfiltered by the sky. It was a mountain sun, brutal and harsh. Tythonna sat up from the bedroll and wrapped the blankets around herself more tightly. The cold did not come from within her anymore; it was the chill of their surroundings. She stood with the blankets draped around her shoulders and slipped into her boots. It wasn't the season to go

barefoot.

The camp rested along the wide forest ledge of the slope, where trees and a swath of green soil clung to the mountain's waist. There were small fires to keep people warm, but the children scampered about like mountain goats in their new playground. The dwarf Snowbeard traveled from hearth to hearth with a cooking pot that bounced precariously close to the ground. He served warm soup to those hungry and never seemed to mind the weight.

Tythonna saw Berthal speaking to a small crowd of sorcerers,

among them Mariyah, Shasee, and Kinsley. Mariyah saw her and waved at her with a genuine smile. That distracted Berthal long enough to motion Tythonnia over.

“There she is,” he said, “our other hero. Were it not for Mariyah and Tythonnia, we wouldn’t be so blessed.”

Mariyah blushed at the compliment, which wasn’t too difficult given the cold that made her paler than normal. The others nodded to Tythonnia. Berthal continued speaking.

“The ritual will take a few days

to prepare. I'll lead it, but I need you four to learn your parts," he said, looking at Kinsley, Mariyah, and another man Tythonnia knew only by sight. "Once open, Shasee and the others will cross over and secure our foothold."

Cross over? Foothold? What's happening? Tythonnia wondered. She was unsure of what secrets rested inside the book, but for the moment, she remained quiet.

"How long can you keep the door open?" Shasee asked.

"A few hours," Berthal responded. "Anything permanent

requires much more preparation and a secure location to plant the gate.”

“Gate?” Tythonnia blurted.

“I’m sorry, my love,” Berthal said as he squeezed her shoulder and pulled her to his side. “You were sleeping and I didn’t want to wake you. The book you brought us is a gateway to a bottle realm, a stronghold.”

It was Mariyah who jumped in with the explanation. “Highmage Gadrella built it for the Black Robes, in case they ever needed a place to hide,” she said excitedly.

“It’s a place the wizards would never find,” Berthal said with a broad smile. “Gadrella hid it so well even the Black Robes won’t find it without the book and the key. There we can recruit and practice and live until we’re strong enough to resist the orders. They wouldn’t even know where to start scrying for us. You found us our sanctuary,” he said.

Following the excitement of the morning’s gathering, everyone went about the preparations. For some, that meant learning their

spells, while for others, it meant honing their control over the Wyldling magic or simply helping around the camp to keep food on the plates and the children out from underfoot.

Berthal wanted to spend more time with Tythonnia, but there wasn't time to spare. In distraction, he almost walked away when Tythonnia grabbed him by the arm and pulled him into the tent.

"I don't think we have time for this," he said with a playful smile.

Tythonnia tried to return his grin but couldn't. His expression

changed as well.

“What is it?” he asked.

It was far from an opportune time, but she didn’t want to lie to him either.

“When I left the wizards behind,” Tythonnia began, “I vowed that I’d stop living a lie. No matter how comfortable.”

Berthal took her hand and urged her to sit next to him on the bedroll. His eyes never left hers; his concern never wavered. He was committed to her; she knew that. That’s what made her decision so difficult.

“Am I a part of that lie?” he asked gently.

She nodded. “I’m sorry. You’re a wonderful man, and—I—I care for you, but not the way you want me to. I can’t—I don’t love you.”

Berthal was quiet, a mixture of love and sorrow in his eyes.

“Gods, Berthal, you’re a good man. And kind. And generous. You’re the best thing I’ll take away from all this.”

“But it’s not enough,” he said softly.

“No, it isn’t,” she said.

“Then I’m happy for you,” he

replied and swept her into his embrace.

Tythonna hugged him back fiercely and simply held him until the tears had been washed from both their eyes.

They arrived in a small flash of light that pushed wind and grass away from them. Everything returned to normal a moment later, leaving Ladonna and Par-Salian standing in a clearing of flattened grass where the camp had once stood. Strung over their shoulders were travel packs; they wore their

broken-in trousers, tunics, and cloaks from their last expedition. Ladonna, however, had clothed herself in more bejeweled rings, a thin tiara, and stone-studded choker.

Immediately, the two wizards examined their surroundings for any sign of a direction that the camp might have taken. After a half hour's search, however, Par-Salian kicked a stone and threw his hands in the air.

“I can't tell where they've gone. Can you?” he said. “Damn it. The only person who could have tracked the camp's movement is

with them right now.”

“They likely covered their tracks. Berthal’s smart,” Ladonna said. “If we’re lucky, they used magic to hide their physical trail.”

“Perhaps,” Par-Salian said. “We don’t have much choice.”

Par-Salian thrust his fingers together then apart. “*Mencelik sihir*,” he called.

Ladonna was familiar with the spell, the ability to perceive magic or its lingering effects. Par-Salian’s skill with the arcane meant he was better suited for the task. She also knew Berthal would have

anticipated all the ways he could be tracked, including scrying and other magics, and he would know in advance all the ways to counter them. There was a reason the Wizards of High Sorcery had to use the three of them to find him.

Par-Salian's grim expression suddenly changed, however. He spied something and began running for a birch tree.

"This way," he cried.

The tree was young and pried of its bark by bored children. Had the camp remained any longer, they might well have cut it down for

firewood. It had survived, and Par-Salian was examining something on its smooth trunk.

“What is it?” Ladonna asked.

“It’s ... an arcane mark. It’s showing us the direction they left in!” he said excitedly. “There, back to the Vingaard Mountains.”

“That doesn’t make sense!” Ladonna said. “Why take all this effort to conceal themselves and then leave such an obvious marker?”

“I don’t know. Maybe for stragglers? Or maybe ... someone was following them and marked

the route. The highmage said they were sending scouts here. Perhaps one of them—”

“No ... they searched and said they found nothing, the idiots.”

“They should have used—”

“Par-Salian, my love, it doesn’t matter. It’s a trap ... to ambush whoever we sent after the renegades.”

“This is far too obvious,” Par-Salian said. “But we don’t have much of a choice, do we? Tythonnia is in trouble, and unless you have any other ideas ...” he said, trailing off.

Ladonna looked around, trying to figure out their next step. But Par-Salian was right. They had few options left and time was of the essence. “Let’s summon the horses,” she said. “Look for obvious landmarks, places we might find more marks, though if they’ve gone into the mountains, I suspect they’ll follow the path of least resistance with all those carts.”

“Are you all right?”

Tythonna wiped away an errant tear with the heel of her palm, and nodded at Mariyah with what she

was sure was probably a pitiful smile. Mariyah returned the smile enthusiastically, however, and walked alongside Tythonnia as she made her way through the camp.

“Quick to rise, slow to melt,” Tythonnia said.

“What was that?” Mariyah asked, brushing away a lock of black hair.

“My father said it’s how I smile. You also have it ... quick to rise, slow to melt.”

Mariyah beamed even more widely, and Tythonnia couldn’t stop the laugh from escaping.

“There you go,” Mariyah said. “You’re much prettier when you smile. You’re certain you don’t want to talk about it?”

Tythonnia considered it before deciding. “Not right now but ... would you ... like to take a walk? I’d like the company.”

Mariyah nodded enthusiastically and Tythonnia was surprised at how uplifted she felt being around the other woman, somehow nervous and comfortable at the same time.

CHAPTER 16

The Stagger of Echoes

The journey was two days long, the sunlit hours spent riding up the foothills of the Vingaards and the short nights spent studying the spells lost and catching a couple hours sleep.

Luckily, it wasn't hard for Ladonna or Par-Salian to find the renegades' route. They found a few hidden arcane runes planted on obvious landmarks, such as an

alabaster column broken by age, the last corner of some ancient building, or a mountain hemlock tree growing askew. They were also rewarded with some visible signs of passage, such as horse droppings, a spent campfire, or flattened grass. Upon reaching the steeper slopes of the Vingaards, the trail became more a matter of deduction. The carts limited the mobility of the renegades, meaning some paths were likely taken.

Again, the arcane runes marked specific branches until finally one winding route of pebbles and dirt up the slope remained. By that

point, the mountain chill frosted their breath.

On the second night, in the early morning, Par-Salian roused Ladonna. She groaned lightly, the rocks and hard-packed dirt a poor mattress. Par-Salian gently touched her lips with his finger and pointed to the slope above them. They were well short of the mountain's cliffs, but somewhere beyond a patch of green grass and the tree line farther up she could hear the faint echo of voices. It sounded like the high-pitched laughter of children. The tree line lay an hour away, the echoes of laughter floating in and

out like the ghost of sound.

Ladonna nodded and prepared for the next leg of the journey. At least it didn't appear as though they were too late.

The air crackled with anticipation, and the children sensed the excitement of their elders. Snowbeard and his entourage of helpers prepared a hearty meal that morning. Everyone ate porridge and finished the bread in danger of molding. That gave the adults the strength to ready themselves for the

monumental task ahead. And the meal gave the children a much-needed boost to their spirits. They spent their morning running about and playing or watching Berthal, Tythonnia, Mariyah, and a handful of others construct a giant ritual circle.

None of the children could understand why the adults were going to deprive them the pleasure of watching the sorcerers cast the spell. The adults said it would be too dangerous, and many planned on steering clear of the ritual in case anything went wrong. That was Berthal's order on the matter.

Tythonnia felt giddy, her stomach filled with butterflies; there was no place for food, though Mariyah finally shoved a piece of rye bread in her face and told her, “Berthal’s orders: eat something.”

She accepted the bread and wolfed it down. Perhaps she was hungrier than she realized. Mariyah smiled at Tythonnia and unfurled a piece of cloth, revealing a small loaf of bread. The two women worked side by side and pinched at the bread laid out between them, sometimes exchanging glances and chuckling.

Any reservations that Tythonnia

had in coming there were gone. It felt good to be needed, to be critical to a process, to be appreciated.

Tythonna felt she was doing something to help the world. She was happy preparing the ritual that would change all their tomorrows. She could hardly wait. They were less than an hour away.

“What’re they doing?” the man asked. He was a brutish fellow with a grizzled face, thick forehead, and a sheared head. Faded tattoos covered his arms, each a mark of

the conflicts where he'd served. His chainmail shirt jangled lightly.

“A ritual circle,” Hort said addressing his concern to Dumas more than in answer to the mercenary's question. He rose slightly to get a better look over the rock at the sorcerers transcribing the circle, but he could no more distinguish the specific runes and marks than he could the renegades involved.

“Ritual?” the mercenary said nervously.

Without regard, Dumas nodded him back, down the rocks where

twenty of his men waited with the horses. “Go back to your men and prepare to attack.”

“But that circle—” he said.

“That’s our concern, Migress,” Dumas said. “You just worry about cutting down anyone who gets in your way.”

Migress nodded, uncertain but more afraid of Dumas than of any danger lurking down below. A sorcerer was bad enough, but Dumas could wield both magic and a sword, both with frightening proficiency. That made her doubly dangerous in anyone’s book. He

headed back to his men.

“Do we have enough men?” Hort asked.

“Maybe,” Dumas said. “We’ll attack them during the ritual, when they’re distracted.”

“Dangerous,” Hort said. “We don’t know what ritual that is. Could threaten us all.”

“If that’s the case, then letting them complete it would be even worse,” Dumas said. “They seem almost ready. We should be ready as well.” She paused, searching the ranks of the renegades. “You’re sure only one of the three wizards

is down there?" she asked.

"Certain," Hort said. "Maybe they're hiding. Or due along shortly."

"It doesn't matter," Dumas replied. She nodded toward the small ant of a figure below them. "That's Tythonnia," she said. "She's the one who delivered the killing stroke on Thoma. It's only right that she die first."

The Journeyman watched quietly. He knew vaguely what came next and had moved away from the excitement. He'd watched

matters unfold and avoided Tythonnia lest she recognize him. He was invisible, thanks to a bit of magic and he was both unseen and far from everything, far enough to survive what happened next ... he hoped.

The renegades were ready, everything in its place. Mothers and fathers escorted their children and the animals away from the ritual circle. They stayed no closer than five hundred feet away, under the supervision of Snowbeard, who wielded a double-edged axe of polished brilliance, and Lorall with his longbow.

Berthal offered last-minute instructions to the sorcerers remaining behind to help, thirty all told. Some could barely cast a handful of minor, inoffensive spells, while others such as Tythonna and Berthal had passed (or were capable of taking) the Test of High Sorcery. A select few versed well enough in Wyldling magic to use it with any proficiency also waited in the wings.

Five would conduct the ritual; another ten, led by Shasee, would then enter the gate and secure the keep on the other side. The

remaining fifteen sorcerers would remain between the camp and the ritual to protect the camp if necessary.

Kinsley, Mariyah, and Tythonnia stood at the four cardinal points of the ritual, Tythonnia and Mariyah across from each other on the north-south axis, and Kinsley and a sorcerer named Hundor along the east-west axis. Hundor was a quiet man, a product of the White Robes who eventually found himself at odds with his own order. The Journeyman suspected a growing thirst for power drove Hundor, not that it would soon matter.

They were about to begin. Berthal stepped into the center of the circle and raised his arms for the ritual's opening stroke. It was everything the Journeyman had been preparing for, waiting for—the moment was upon them.

He needed to see what happened that forced the orders to rewrite history and wipe out almost all mention of the event.

Tythonna smiled as Berthal took his place at the center of the circle with his staff in one hand and the book in the other. He smiled back,

his eyes practically glittering with anticipation. It was the kind of day the future would never forget. Shortly, the fortunes of spellcasters everywhere would change; nobody would be deprived of choice ever again. Nobody would be forced through the tortures of the test for the right to learn magic.

Berthal opened the book and stared deeply into its pages, as though each word were a keyhole. Tythonnia chanced a last glance at Shasee and the men and women waiting outside the circle. Then she looked at those forming the circle. Already Kinsley and Hundor had

their eyes closed; Mariyah smiled at her. Both women closed their eyes as they focused to channel the magic through to Berthal.

He began speaking, his words reverberating deeply as though it were the song sung by ancient trees.

The language of the mystic unfurled through him, each word like a fat droplet of rain, pregnant with power. The magic flowed out of her like warm blood, comfortable and soothing.

Berthal suddenly caught his breath, and Tythonnia's eyes flew

open. More people gasped, the sorcerers outside the circle taking a step back. The book no longer rested in Berthal's hands, but levitated before him. The pages flipped open, past lines of black and red scrawl. Some pages stopped turning long enough for a specific word to flash and vanish from the text.

Tythonna cursed; it was a hidden spell, layered within the first.

“S—stop—*aku colang keawetan*,” Berthal cried, his own mouth revolting against him as it shifted between his words and the hidden

spell. “St—stop—me, *aku mencelik mati.*”

Tythonna struggled to act, to move, but the trap gripped her too and bled the magic from her. She felt one spell evaporate from her thoughts then another.

“Break the circle!” Shasee shouted. “Break the circle!”

“What’s happening?” Migress asked, watching as the sorcerers in the circle struggled against themselves, it seemed. The mercenaries lay near a small thatch of pine trees, hidden in the

shadows of their boughs. Migress's men fidgeted with bow or sword, nervous with such open displays of magic. Before them was the circle of sorcerers and beyond that the second group of fifteen watching the camp.

“Something's wrong,” Hort said.

“It doesn't matter,” Dumas said.
“Attack!”

“This isn't right!” Hort said.

“It's our only chance!” Dumas replied. She stared at Migress and Hort, but when they seemed too scared to move, she snarled a small curse. “Fine, but if you won't

attack—”

Before Hort could stop her, she pointed her blade at the group of sorcerers standing immediately outside the ritual circle.

“*Halilintar*,” she cried. Electricity traveled along one chain of her book and up her sword arm. A bolt of lightning crackled outward from the sword tip, the edge of its fan catching three renegades in the back as it spread. They screamed in pain and fell to the ground in spasms. The remaining renegades seemed caught off guard, putting out the ignited robes on their three injured companions, and slowly

turning to face their attackers. Two were reaching into their pouches and preparing spells, however.

“—then defend yourselves!” Dumas concluded, an absolutely wicked leer carved into her face, a woman possessed by the madness that would stay dormant no longer.

In that moment, Hort realized how insane Dumas had actually grown.

At that moment, the kaleidoscopic flash and thunder of spells erupted.

At that moment, the sky above the ritual circle tore open like an

iris.

At that moment, a legion of bone-chilling wails filled the air.

A peal of thunder and cries most dreadful rolled around the tongues of the mountains. Ladonna and Par-Salian had just entered the narrow line of trees when they heard the world itself becoming undone.

“It’s happening!” Ladonna shouted, running past the trees.

Ahead of them was a group of sorcerers, some running to help

those trapped in the ritual circle and some retreating to the camp. Berthal had carved the circle into the earth, its borders set with rocks and the ground stained with runes. The markings and small trench seemed to glisten with a crimson sheen, as though filling with blood. In the circle, Berthal and Tythonnia, among others, stared helplessly at the red gash in the sky. Wails and howls erupted from its depths.

Beyond the circle, a group of sorcerers fired spells of fire and darts of light at another thatch of trees. Armed men emerged from

the small grove and charged the sorcerers with swords and arrows. Dumas led the charge, her blade deflecting the darts of light aimed at her. Two sorcerers fell dead as arrows plunged into their necks and chests.

To Tythonnia's far left was the encampment, the men, women, and children there frozen between fear and curiosity.

“Par-Salian, over there.” Ladonna pointed to the camp. “Help them escape; they’re too close! I’ll save Tythonnia!”

Par-Salian didn’t argue. He ran

straight for the camp, waving his arms to get everyone to run. Nobody moved. They were all too dumbfounded to uproot themselves.

Ladonna ran toward the ritual circle, praying she could reach it in time. As if in terrible response, the first of the blight shades dropped to the ground.

They had been alien to Ansalon ... until that moment.

The heavens were uncorked, the evil unleashed. Tythonnia watched in frozen horror as the first creature fell through the iris above

them and landed nimbly on the ground. It appeared humanoid, with a tattered hood for a head, and a black cloak covering its otherwise naked body. Shadows wreathed its emaciated limbs and sometimes, when they parted, the creature's skin vanished as well to reveal an oily bundle of exposed muscles. Tentacles of shadow rose from its body. A terrible and bitter chill emanated from the aperture above Tythonnia, an aperture into a world where a ruined keep stood on mud-cracked earth and the orange skies smelled of sulfur.

What frightened Tythonnia even

more than the gleaming embers for eyes that glowed inside the creature's cowl, or the hint of a puckered orifice for a mouth, was the dozens—or perhaps hundreds—more creatures that ran—no *galloped*—for the gate. And try as she might to move, to run, to seal the doorway, the ritual circle held her tight and continued to drain her magic. Another spell formed and dissipated.

One of the sorcerers outside the circle saw the creature and cried a warning. Those who could turned to look, but they all had bigger problems. Dumas was almost upon

them, the men accompanying her not two seconds behind.

The creature remained low to the ground on arms and legs bent at unnatural angles. It seemed more wolf than human as it turned about and examined its surroundings. Then ignoring her and the four others in the ritual's confines, it bounded out of the circle and barreled into the first sorcerer it saw, a woman.

Tythonna watched in horror, helpless, as the creature swiped at anyone near it and tore terrible gashes into two sorcerers. The poor woman it attacked directly writhed

in pain as the shadows surrounding its body seemed to drill into her flesh. She cried out, her skin graying and cracking, her body succumbing to a living putrefaction.

Then suddenly, the creature leaped onto another sorcerer and started a new attack. It hadn't killed the first woman, but neither was she in any condition to defend herself.

More creatures dropped through the threshold, and the men with Dumas hesitated then stopped in their tracks.

Ladonna was about to cast a spell to smite the blight shade when it lunged and attacked a renegade outside the circle. She realized those in the circle were being bypassed. They fueled the gate; they would die last.

That suited Ladonna just fine. She had returned to save only Tythonnia, everyone else be damned. Par-Salian saving the children was merely a ruse to get him out of the way, protect him against his more noble nature. Anyone near the gate right then had little chance of survival.

Ladonna was close to the circle

when five more blight shades dropped to the ground. They glanced around, searching for prey, and immediately bounded off in different directions. Two attacked the nearest sorcerers. Another passed by the closest wizards and headed straight for the men with Dumas. The last one headed right for her. She quickly prepared a spell and prayed Dumas would stop to fight the creatures.

Dumas, however, ignored the blight shades, and instead cut down the first sorcerer in her path.

What is she thinking? Ladonna wondered, but the only words that

emerged from her lips were, “*Sihir anak!*” Four daggers of light blossomed and shot for the blight shade.

Look at the depths of their evil, Dumas thought as she reached the first sorcerer. See how they consort with those ... things.

Her blade danced of its own accord to deflect another barrage of arcane darts. The sorcerer, a young man of farmer stock, backpedaled, trying desperately to prepare another spell.

This is all their doing, she

thought. The three renegades summoned these monsters! Dumas's blade seemed possessed, though the huntress knew it was the magical tome that honed her skills and protected her. Her blade found the sorcerer's throat, cutting through it and the spell that he stuttered to unleash. She went for the next renegade.

See how the creature obeys—

Kills them? Why is it killing them? Something is wrong. A searing pain filled Dumas's thoughts, like a hot needle sewing a filament of fire directly into her brain. She struggled to deal with

the agony; her eyes shut; she fell to her knees and dropped her sword as her hands went to her temples. She felt as though she had just suffered a fatal wound. Was she dying?

Dumas opened her eyes despite the searing pain that followed. To her horror, she was still on her feet. She still held her sword and she still fought, running a sorcerer through with her blade. She was a puppet, guided by the instinct of the book.

Belize ...

No! she thought. He had nothing to do with this. He wasn't at the

meeting with Astathan, Yasmine, and Reginald—Belize was alone. He did not demand the murder of three wizards for his own personal gain—in the courtyard where he opened my book.

The pain redoubled upon itself, and Dumas felt as though she might vomit from the agony. She couldn't think clearly. She struggled to regain control of herself, but every time she forced her eyes open, she was killing someone else. She laughed hysterically.

Are there an infinite number of these creatures? Why are they killing their masters ... unless? She

wanted the pain to go away. She wanted to think clearly again and have purpose, direction.

Then say it, something said inside her head.

The three renegades summoned them, Dumas thought. And then turned on their allies. They are evil. Nothing is too degenerate for them.

Good girl.

The pain evaporated, and Dumas almost tripped over herself in regaining control. It was like a surreal race, she trying to catch up to her own body when her body

suddenly stopped and she slammed into it. But she was focused again ... and just in time.

A sorcerer with ebony skin and a look that could slaughter children was about to unleash a spell against her. He didn't incant any words; he didn't fumble for reagents or make his fingers dance. The arcane simply coalesced around his body, wild magic made manifest. Unlike the others, he looked reasonably competent. He would make for good practice before she got to Tythonnia.

Shasee wasn't sure what he feared more, the monsters or the sword-wielding woman who seemed positively possessed as she cut through their ranks. Her expression seemed fluid, insane even. It shifted from a berserker's fury to frightened and manic to resigned and then back to battle-frenzied. Despite being divorced from her actions, her body moved with unnatural grace. Even her own men seemed scared by her battle frenzy and fought at a distance. Distance was good. Distance was a magician's friend.

To Shasee's left a woman cried

“Kendala!” The air shimmered and two arrows broke against her invisible wall. To his right, a man grunted and spun his two hands around each other. Wyldling tornadoes of fire suddenly spiraled up from the ground and swept through three creatures that were savaging a fallen sorcerer. The creatures screamed and bounded away, looking for easier prey. A dozen attacked, and more dropped through the rent in the sky.

The demented woman had hesitated. Her cloak shifted. Shasee finally saw the metal tome strapped to her chest. He knew

then who she was, all the more reason to stop her, the blood-enemy of sorcerers and Vagros alike.

Dumas seemed lost for a moment, unable to focus. That is when Shasee saw his opportunity. He focused on the Wyldling, on the strings of chaotic magic all around them, the ones strummed to frenetic vibration with all the ambient magic and wild passions there that day, and he pulled the strings together. The demented woman turned and focused on him, a smile stretching her already-possessed face into an almost

transcendent leer. She advanced, twirling the blade without feeling the weight of it.

“Die!” Shasee cried. He pulled at a thread of Wyldling magic and hurled it at her. The thread lengthened into an arrow, shot straight and true as though from a bow.

Dumas’s blade tried to intercept the attack, but she was too slow. The arrow sunk into her shoulder; the shaft bubbled and the leather around the wound disintegrated. Dumas screamed in pain and yanked the arrow free. The acid coating the arrow sizzled against

her glove, but she pulled it off before the acid ate through it.

Shasee had her attention now.

Par-Salian raced for the camp, past the startled group of sorcerers. His legs burned with exhaustion, his heart shrinking at the growing howls of the unearthly. Before anyone could stop him, however, the sorcerers left behind to protect the camp shouted and pointed. Par-Salian glanced back and regretted doing so. Two of the undead monsters that Ladonna had called blight shades were racing for the

six sorcerers who had stood their ground. Behind them, another pack of nine ran straight for the camp.

Only one sorcerer had managed to unleash a spell, but Par-Salian hissed a curse. Damn the caster for his inexperience; it was the wrong spell. A pattern of colors filled the air, meant to dazzle and enchant the attackers, but the undead were not easily beguiled. They broke easily through the rainbow hues and immediately leaped atop the sorcerer. He screamed as they putrefied him alive, his skin rotting and sloughing off.

Par-Salian stopped. The only

way to save the camp was to stop the creatures from attacking. He had to stand and fight. He had to give the sorcerers a chance to survive.

The remaining sorcerers were stabbing and bludgeoning the two blight shades with their staves. Only one had the wherewithal to unleash a spell; she was a young girl with milky skin and almond eyes. She motioned and the tip of her stave glowed suddenly with wild arcane magic. She drove it down into the undead creature, impaling it and pinning it to the ground, struggling to keep it rooted

while her compatriots finished it off. They didn't see the half dozen blight shades bounding toward them.

Par-Salian pulled a ball of bat guano and sulfur from his pouch. His arms moved in broad strokes, like a monk practicing a kata, and the ball of guano ignited.

“Api hortasa,” he cried, unleashing the ball of flame before it could immolate him. The ball expanded, spit, and roared as it flew above the sorcerers. The fireball struck the earth right before reaching the undead and splashed outward. Four of the

creatures were caught in the whoosh of flames. They screeched and writhed in agony, but the two that remained untouched sidestepped the burning ground and continued straight for them.

The sorcerers seemed confused. They knew Par-Salian, knew him as a spy. And yet he was helping them.

“Prepare yourselves!” Par-Salian shouted, drawing their attention back to the deadly enemy. He was going to need all the help he could get if they hoped to survive.



The attacks were scattered, uncoordinated, like a swarming of insects. More blight shades poured through the iris in the heavens, and while individually they proved no match for most sorcerers there, their strength was in their numbers.

Ladonna continued toward the ritual circle, spells curling off her fingers as she smote the undead. She was a dozen feet away, watching Tythonnia, Berthal, and the others struggle against the rooting effect of the curse. Three more creatures loped toward her, but she was ready with killing

spells.

The first spell to roll off her tongue spent the fold of red cloth in her other hand and evaporated from her mind. The blister of swollen grass rose from the ground before a carpet of biting insects erupted from the earth. They swarmed up the arms and feet of the blight shades, biting and dying as the undead aura of decay overtook them. One of the creatures stumbled into the mass of writhing insects and thrashed about as they instantly covered its body.

The other two creatures dashed away from the patch of insects,

trying to escape the devouring death.

Ladonna never felt calmer. Her test had involved necromancy unchecked and waves of undead assailing her. She survived that. She was ready for what challenged her now. Ladonna motioned the insects to clear a path for her. They did, overtaking another blight shade that seemed to melt into their mass. She reached the ritual circle.

Dumas and Shasee were engaged in battle, sword against undamaged staff, feints leading into attacks, blows blocked, and

parries opening the opponent up to fast-cast spells. Shasee struck Dumas with an open palm that sent a jolt through her body. Dumas responded by speaking an arcane word and twisting the blade so a flash of light nearly blinded them all. Ladonna was impressed with Shasee's skill. The Wyldling sorcerer was more competent than she gave him credit for.

The blight shades, meanwhile, were busy attacking Dumas's men. The mercenaries fought a retreating battle, so Ladonna didn't bother with them.

The ritual circle itself was

corrupted, the sanctity of it despoiled. Ladonna crossed the circle, bringing the insects along with her. Blight shades landed all around her, but the swarm always attacked those closest, sending the creatures into thrashing spasms.

The circle was too large and powerful a spell to disrupt entirely, but like all chains, all she needed to find was a weak link. She grabbed Tythonnia's arm and for a moment, studied the panicked look in her friend's face.

“Sihir evak,” Ladonna said, gesturing as though to paint the air itself. The disruption spell unfurled

in her thoughts, and she focused on shattering just one link in the curse's complex chain. She felt it snap, and suddenly, the blood-red glow from the sigils and the rune lines burned away.

She'd broken the circle, and Tythonnia collapsed into Ladonna's arms. The others slumped to the ground, except for Berthal, who steadied himself on his staff.

The iris, however, remained above them. The creatures that were dropping through seemed confused for a moment. Then they hissed in anger. Everyone inside the circle was suddenly fair game.

Three blight shades tackled Kinsley as he lay on the ground. They tore into him with a fierce vengeance, rotting him alive as he screamed and fought until his tendons could no longer hold him together. Another two lunged for a man in the circle Ladonna knew vaguely, Hundor she believed; he flicked his head at the undead, sending them both flying.

Berthal swept his staff around, his eyes white with Wyldling energy. An orb of fire appeared between the two dragon heads and spit out in a gush of flame as he swept the staff in a wide arc. He

caught three creatures in the blaze, obliterating them.

Ladonna looked around in wonderment as she helped Tythonnia to her feet. It was utter pandemonium. The fight was everywhere, the number of creatures increasing steadily despite the many they had killed while the number of humans grew fewer by the minute. The blight shades were simply overwhelming them.

In the distance, more screams could be heard. Ladonna didn't need to see the camp to know the creatures were there already.

More blight shades dropped through the hole, some attacking, some running toward the camp or the men with Dumas, some simply trying to escape their prison. How anyone would survive that day, Ladonna didn't know.

Shasee struggled in the battle. Dumas alone was a skilled opponent, worthy of his full attention, but the constant threat of the creatures added to his peril. He saw one of the sorcerers by his side fall to one of the dread beings and couldn't save him. The other

closest sorcerer, a woman by the name of Calyasy, was struggling to protect him while he fought Dumas. Calyasy had no spells left, however, and she fought with her staff.

Suddenly, Calyasy screamed, and Shasee barely caught a glimpse of her as the undead dragged her to the ground.

It was the distraction Dumas needed; Shasee realized his mistake as soon she deflected his staff and reached in to grab him.

“Halilintar sentu!” she said with a smile.

Lightning shot through the claw of her hand straight into Shasee's chest. His teeth clamped down, and he fell to the ground, unable to move as his muscles clenched into spasms.

Dumas smiled down at him and walked away. Her blade shot out on its own, cutting three quick slices into an undead creature about to attack her. She ignored the ones advancing on him, however.

Shasee struggled to move, to defend himself, but two creatures were upon him already. They grabbed his arm and his leg and

pulled. He felt the decay overtake his limbs, like a torch being passed over a field of his nerves. He struggled to fight back, but it was too late. A terrible cold overtook him, not enough to numb him from the pain, but enough to sap his strength. That was when he felt his joints pop and the fabric of his skin rip.

Hort stood his ground between the trees and the ritual circle. He wanted to advance, to help Dumas, but the mad gleam in her eye was foreign to the woman he knew. A

feral countenance had slipped over her, and it recognized nothing else beyond what lay in her pin-point focus. He wasn't sure she wouldn't strike at him if he approached too suddenly. And she'd just left her foe to a terrible death at the hands of the creatures. It was an act wholly without mercy or humanity. This new Dumas, whoever she was, frightened him more deeply than anyone ever had. Loyalty kept him from retreating, but fear stopped him from advancing.

Instead, he fought the closest creatures with his axe, its viscera-clotted edge deftly slicing through

them. Those that thought distance was safer, however, met with his spells. He cast nothing terribly fancy, just the type of arcane magic that bent the advantage in his direction. There was no time to use the crossbow strapped to his back, not at that range.

Hort unleashed filaments of web from his fingertips, catching four creatures in the strands suspended between two rocks.

“Archers, shoot!” he cried, backing away from the monsters.

When no arrows whistled in response, he turned and saw

Migress and the surviving mercenaries fighting a retreat back to the tree line.

“You’re on your own, madman,” Migress shouted.

An undead creature deftly avoided the sword stroke of one of the men next to him and latched its puckered mouth onto his throat. The mercenary fell but Migress came to his man’s rescue.

A sharp pain cut into Hort’s shoulder then, and he cursed himself for being distracted. One of the creatures was on his back and clawing at him. Pain blistered his

skin, the first whisper of death. Hort swung backward, overhead, with his axe. His blade sliced cleanly into the undead. It screeched in his ear and tried to drop away. Hort pivoted and slammed his axe and the undead into the ground, driving the blade deeper into it.

The creature stopped writhing, and Hort's back tingled as life slowly returned to it. At least the putrefaction wasn't permanent, Hort thought, but he faced an ugly proposition. He couldn't stand alone here. He was making himself a target, and there was safety in

numbers. He wanted to retreat, but he didn't want to abandon Dumas. She meant too much to him. Despite everything, she remained his friend. He owed it to her to save her.

Hort advanced toward the ritual circle, slaughtering any of the creatures foolish enough to approach him. But then, they were all fools that day, he thought.

Berthal yelled in rage, a frustrated cry of anger so foreign to his nature that Tythonnia glanced at him fearfully. Shasee

had died, in the most inhuman way possible, and the huntress Dumas was heading straight for her and Ladonna.

Mariyah rose to her feet with Hundor's help; he continued knocking creatures about with a glance or a head toss. He appeared weakened, however, each effort costing him. Tythonnia felt exhausted, her spells gone, her energy drained through the vortex of the gate. Ladonna helped her up, to her own peril. She didn't see the creature at her back.

“Api kartus,” Tythonnia said, barely thinking. The thumbs of her

outstretched hands touched, and a jet of flame engulfed the creature advancing on them. She didn't even realize she had any magic left. Ladonna spun around in surprise then nodded in appreciation.

"We have to leave now!" Ladonna said. She began pulling Tythonnia out of the circle.

"Not without the others," Tythonnia said, tugging herself free from Ladonna's grip.

"I don't care about the others," Ladonna replied. She was about to say something else, but a terrific

explosion almost knocked them off their feet.

Berthal and Dumas were fighting.

Staff rang against sword, neither of them giving an inch. Spell slammed into counterspell, obliterating one another in showers of sparks and fire. As Berthal and Dumas struggled, each one a master of their craft, Hundor and Mariyah kept the creatures at bay and away from their leader. Tythonnia broke from Ladonna's grip and joined her friends. They couldn't help Berthal fight; they had their hands full with the blight

shades.

Berthal twirled his staff around, striking out with the hardened bottom, but Dumas parried the blow. She couldn't match force with force, but she was skilled enough to deflect his best efforts.

Each collision of wood and steel produced a flicker of sparks as each arcane weapon tried to defeat the other. Dumas deflected another staff thrust and spun away, her hand on her metal tome, her mouth moving. Her sword arm shot out, unleashing a clash of bright hues

that threatened to overtake Berthal. Instead he slammed his staff into the ground, sending out a wild distortion wave that broke the back of the incoming spell.

Before Dumas could unleash another spell, however, Berthal rushed forward to close the gap. He barely deflected two rapid strokes, but a third one nicked him on the arm. He backed away, but as Dumas tried to press the advantage, Berthal leveled the staff at her. A fire sphere appeared between the two dragon heads and shot out like an arrow. Dumas raised her arm to shield her face.

The ball of fire struck her and exploded. Streams of flame curved around her body. She caught some of its heat, her clothing combusted along her arm, but otherwise was unhurt.

And so they continued sparring, trading cut for cut, injury for injury.

Tythonna struggled to remember and cast her remaining spells, but Mariyah seemed harder hit. She fumbled her incantations and dropped reagents through leaden fingers. Hundor fared best as he

motioned across the gap between them and the gate that disgorged more undead; a wall of flames broke free of the ground, sending sheets of fire upward. Tythonnia suspected their relative skills in magic dictated who had gotten hit the hardest and who survived the curse the best. As it was, she was scraping bottom, her spells nearly depleted or useless. Hundor still had learned magic and Wyldling ways to spare.

Thankfully, Ladonna was with them, adding her spells to the mix. If she'd hoped for a quick escape with Tythonnia, that was no longer

an option. The creatures were attacking steadily—uncoordinated but steady. Ladonna, however, was ready for the worst. Her spells punished the creatures for their advance, destroying any that skirted around the wall of flames. From her fingers flew a ray of sickly green light that overtook two creatures. They collapsed to the ground and struggled to rise.

“Sihir anak!” Tythonnia said, unleashing what she suspected was the last of her useful spells. Her illusions had proven ineffective against the undead. She dispatched four missiles of light that darted

around one another as they peppered one of the monsters. It fell back, wounded but still eager for the fight. With a flick of his head, Hundor sent the wounded creature into the cascading wall of flames. It shrieked as the heat ignited it; Hundor sent it flying into two more undead, igniting their parchment-like skin as well.

Tythonna glanced at Berthal. The fight with Dumas obviously had taxed him, but he didn't show any sign of surrendering. Both Berthal and his opponent moved fluidly from parry to stroke to spell as though it was all one beautifully

choreographed move.

Hundor had other ideas, however. With the fire wall extended around them, he turned his attention on the preoccupied Dumas. His hands flew into deft motion, his movements graceful and precise as he grabbed the spell's reagent from the battle pouch on his wrist. The spell was just materializing on his lips when he staggered back.

The crossbow bolt had appeared out of nowhere; it pierced Hundor's chest. He cried out in pain and gripped the wound around the shaft with one hand, as though to

stop the red spot that raced outward. With the other hand, however, he motioned toward a large man.

It was the other hunter, Tythonnia realized. He was taking aim again with his crossbow.

“Kendala,” Hundor groaned. Nothing seemed to happen until the hunter unleashed another bolt. It struck something in midair and broke. The hunter appeared unhappy and quickly reached for one of his pouches. Tythonnia did the same, both of them racing to unleash their spells.

Her illusions had little chance of entrancing the undead, but they still worked against the living.

Berthal and Dumas paid no attention to the others. Berthal spun the staff above his head, shifting it from one hand to the other. As he did, sparks rained from the staff's tip down around them both, striking and sparking off Dumas's face and arms. She yelped in pain and, for the first time, stumbled back. Berthal pressed his advantage. He attacked like a man possessed, battering his

staff against her blade as she held it up to protect herself. He forced her to her knee and seemed poised to win.

That was when the large hunter brought something out from his pouch, a piece of metal. Tythonnia couldn't hear what he said, but to her horror he hurled it at Berthal who froze suddenly, unable to move as the spell held him. Tythonnia could see his wide-eyed panic, his arms over his head, exposing his chest and stomach to Dumas.

Tythonnia tried to redirect her illusion spell to save Berthal

somehow, but in her panic, it slipped from its mooring and dissolved in her own mind. In that moment, Dumas lunged forward with her thin blade and pierced Berthal through his stomach. She smiled with bloody teeth, a hellfire grin married with the mad delight in her eyes.

The large hunter screamed, and out of the corner of her eye, Tythonnia saw fire engulf him. The hunter had Ladonna's full attention. And Dumas had Tythonnia's.

Berthal had collapsed to his knees, with Dumas standing over

him. He cradled his stomach as though the world itself might spill out. He looked up helplessly at the hunter. She stabbed him again and again through the stomach. Tythonnia screamed her hate and, rushing forward, caught Dumas in the back with her dagger; she plunged it in deep, twisting the knife with all her strength.

The huntress threw her head back, slamming it into Tythonnia's forehead. She staggered from the blow, her head blossoming with pain-filled light. She could barely focus. She had a vague sense of Berthal lying on the ground, of

Dumas driven to one knee, of the other hunter screaming and twisting in agony as fire engulfed his entire body, of Mariyah cradling a dying Hundor, of Ladonna standing alone and unleashing spells in a frenzy trying to keep the undead at bay. There seemed to be a lot of them, circling around.

“We have to leave!” Ladonna shouted; Tythonnia had the distant impression her words was directed at her. “Dark Nuitari, it’s too late!”

Tythonnia felt the tug on her clothing and hair, that sense of an impending shift in gravity ...

toward the iris. The undead wailed again; they turned and screamed at the gate that pulled at them and encouraged them to come home then turned back again to stare hungrily at Tythonna and the others.

This is it, Tythonna thought. This is how we die.

The undead readied themselves for the final onslaught.

“You will not have me!” Ladonna screamed at them. “It is I who will have *you! Rogan xur grig!*”

For a moment, Tythonna thought she was hallucinating.

Ladonna stood with straightened back, her arms out by her sides as though ready to become airborne. In the sunlight and in the orange glow of the world beyond the aperture, her jewelry seemed to sparkle. Then all at once, the precious stones lifted from their settings and hovered around Ladonna. A dozen or more egg-shaped stones of the most vibrant purple surrounded her. They orbited around her on a dozen separate trajectories that brought them into intersecting paths, but never once did they collide.

The undead hesitated at the

spectacle but for only a moment. Then the stones circling Ladonna flared and flashed, and from each, she unleashed hidden spells.

Tythonna shielded her head as daggers of light—too many to count—burst outward from the stones. They filled the air with their numbers, each one zigging and zagging around the others and leaving trails of light as the arcane darts found their marks and peppered the undead. Still more daggers of light exploded from the stones until they filled the air with their singing whine. It was almost beautiful.

There were too many of them; it was impossible to halt the tide. Par-Salian and another sorcerer, a Vagros barely old enough to call himself a man, were at the edge of the camp. They were trying to save people—Par-Salian with learned spells and the young man with the erratic magic of the Wyldling.

The blight shades were everywhere, and the cries of anguish and agony wouldn't stop. The most terrible of the screams came from the children, their high-pitched terror as the undead slaughtered indiscriminately. Par-

Salian wished he could gouge out his own eyes and tear off his ears. A senseless dark would have been better than this horror.

Par-Salian summoned another sphere of flame and directed its path to protect those in the greatest danger. He maneuvered to avoid the bodies littering the ground already, but it was growing more difficult.

The Vagros continued unleashing what paltry magic he possessed and swinging his club when he had a chance. He was crying and struggling to keep the tears from blinding him, but he fought with a

frenzied fervor for his friends and family. Par-Salian's heart broke for him.

Among a clutch of wagons, Par-Salian spied Snowbeard struggling to protect a young boy of eight. One arm dangled by Snowbeard's side, bloody and useless, while the other still hefted an axe. He was swinging it freely to keep two blight shades at bay, but his last swing unbalanced him, and Snowbeard tripped over Lorall's body. The undead creatures mauled him while the boy looked on and screamed.

One of the monsters noticed the

boy then, its head snapping up in attention.

“Save him!” the Vagros sorcerer shouted. He batted at the head of a blight shade nearing him, but the creature, after stumbling, sprang back to its feet, angrier than ever.

Par-Salian nodded and ran for the boy, only barely recognizing him as one of his history students. He directed a sphere of flame ahead of himself with a flick of his hand, catching the undead from behind. Its gauzy cloak and hood caught fire, and it threw itself against the earth, thrashing, trying to extinguish the flame. Its high-

pitched shrieks filled the air, and its compatriot leaped away from Snowbeard's decayed corpse to avoid the same fate.

The boy was still screaming when Par-Salian reached him. The child clung to his leg, sobbing Par-Salian's name into his thigh. Par-Salian wanted to pick him up and console him, but he needed both hands free. Another two blight shades loped toward them. They were surrounded; only Par-Salian's blazing sphere kept the monsters at bay.

A sudden flash of light caught their attention. Even the undead

glanced back at the incredible spectacle unfolding at the ritual circle.

Par-Salian could barely see his friends through the black bodies of the undead, but the air over their heads glowed as dozens of hornetlike lights spit out in all directions. He watched in amazement as missiles angled off. The air seemed filled with a never-ending cascade.

Ladonna's Death Blossom, Par-Salian realized. She'd been preparing for the attack for days, slowly storing one single spell again and again in the magical

stones hidden in her jewelry. It would be her final desperate act if the monsters were about to overwhelm her, he knew. It meant that conjuring a horse to escape with Tythonnia was impossible now. It meant that reaching her to teleport away was equally unlikely. It was the end. She was in mortal peril, and he could do nothing to save her.

He could barely save himself and the boy with him.

Just then, Par-Salian felt the pull of some critical force ... toward the gate. The boy cried out in panic, as his feet seemed to lift into the air.

The blight shades howled in panic and clawed at the ground to anchor themselves.

Farther away, creatures, a few corpses, and renegades who had escaped were already aloft and flying through the air, back toward the gate. Just before they reached Par-Salian, however, they stopped in from their flight, fell and landed hard.

The pull is greater at the periphery, Par-Salian realized. It was a collapsing bubble that was about to sweep over them and push them back toward the iris and into it.

Par-Salian abandoned the flame sphere and lifted the boy in his arms.

“Run!” he screamed. He wasn’t sure anyone was left to hear him, but he ran, the undead be damned, for the gate.

And at his back, he felt the growing pressure of the collapsing bubble.

Once caught, nothing could escape it.

The deadly darts blasted the undead, peppering them with shots

and leaving behind ruined bodies. Tythonnia knew the missiles wouldn't touch her, yet found it impossible to budge. It was time for her to act, to do something.

Berthal was on the ground, struggling to rise and bleeding heavily. Hundor lay deathly still, though Mariyah gripped him like a drowning woman looking for purchase on the ocean. Everything seemed surreal, the moment too insane to grasp completely. As Tythonnia watched in shock, she saw the limp bodies of the destroyed creatures begin to roll away, toward the patch of ground

beneath the iris. More monsters landed on the ground, intent on coming through. But some of the others were being tugged upward.

Then Dumas rose slowly to her feet. She didn't seem to notice the angry gnats of light buzzing around her. A furious mixture of hate and pain swelled her face. Berthal was forgotten in her eyes, but Ladonna was there to slake her blade's thirst.

In that moment, Tythonnia never hated another human being as much as she did the huntress. Dumas was not yet broken. Tythonnia wanted to shatter her.

She wanted to hear the woman scream in agony, to match the unholy wails in her own thoughts.

Tythonna envisioned her tattoo, her gift from Amma Batros, and imagined the full circle of black ink drain away. She felt the power of the tattoo slip through her skin and into her veins and arteries. The power infused her, made her skin ache. She shivered.

Dumas advanced on Ladonna, stumble-stepping with her blade in her hand. Ladonna did not see her. Tythonna did, and moved to counter her once and for all.

Tythonna was spent of her learned spells, but the Wyldling was still hers to command. She fell into familiar motions. Her fingers flew together. They flew apart. Her mind became a mirror. And in that mirror where Sutler had once stood was Dumas. She was blurry and distant somehow, but the tome on her chest was visible and distinct in each detail. Also in the reflection, standing behind Dumas, was the very thing to end her.

“Khalayan ut matithat,” Tythonna said through clenched teeth. The magic sent static coursing through her hair.

Dumas hesitated as a shadowy, nebulous vision appeared to block her path. It was indistinct and hard to decipher. She shook her head and swung weakly at it. The illusion shimmered and wavered—it was as though she had hit a wall. The metal tome was resisting the spell, but the magic in her would not be denied. She pushed harder and drained the ink of the tattoo completely, forever perhaps. The Wyldling flooded into her blood and back out again through her mind. Around her, flames of witch fire flickered and sparkled.

The huntress let out a small yelp

at the same time Ladonna's flight of darts finally ended. Bodies were slowly floating upward, through the portal. The pull had strengthened.

Dumas shook her head against the illusion, fighting it with every last ounce of willpower. Tythonnia forced every ounce of hers into the spell, but in the mirror where Dumas stood, there was the tome, protecting her. It prevented her from coming into view clearly.

Then the image wavered.

"No!" Dumas grunted. She shook her head. Whatever she saw was

beginning to shake her confidence. Her hand grabbed at the cover, her fingers scrambling at its edges. “No!” she said.

In the mirror, Dumas was struggling to pull the metal tome off.

She’s fighting with the book! Tythonnia realized.

“I killed Thoma!” Dumas cried. “I did it! Bastard! He made me do it! It was Be—” she stammered, trying to force the word out, but something was stopping her. “B-Be —!”

The shadow shape meant to kill

Dumas struggled to take form. Dumas's fingers grappled with the tome's lock. Her body was caught in seemingly crippling paroxysms as she fought the illusion and fought herself.

A single moment of control was all she needed. Tythonnia pushed harder a final time. Dumas grabbed the latch of the metal book.

“Ufta!” she cried.

The hard, bronze cover swung open, the gold-leaf pages within flapping wildly. In Tythonnia's mind, the tome vanished from the reflection and Dumas appeared in

focus.

The illusion had her; the Wyldling currents pushed into the huntress, scouring out her skull. She began screaming as pure horror gripped her tightly. Tythonnia couldn't stop it if she wanted to.

Ladonna was spent, as were her precious stones. They'd fallen back into their settings among her jewelry, though the color had left them. Around her, the blight shades regrouped, but the gate was dragging everything back toward

it. The creatures were content to wait; everything would get pulled through, and anyone still alive would be at their terrible mercies.

In the distance, Ladonna could see the undead, the renegades, and Dumas's soldiers all falling and tumbling back toward them. Would they be crushed and battered before going through? It didn't matter. They couldn't run from it. Even as she watched, her clothing rippled upward as though caught in an updraft, and the pull drove her to her knees.

The undead began clacking eagerly, like a flock of birds. Some

willingly jumped up and back inside the iris; others struggled against the force. Some just watched them, waiting for the terrible moment when it all would be done. There wasn't much time left. Dumas was dead, her expression forever locked in a state of horror, the empty pages of her book flapping in the air. She began to roll away, toward the gate.

Tythonna was by Berthal's side, cradling his head and struggling to keep them both rooted. Mariyah was near them, looking frightened and alone.

“Tell her to leave ... before it's

too late,” he gasped. “Ladonna!”

Ladonna didn’t expect to hear her name. She scrambled to Berthal’s side and nearly overshot him when the iris pulled her along an additional foot. Tythonnia was struggling to keep them both in place, and Mariyah joined them to add her strength.

“It’s too late,” Ladonna shouted over the rush of air and the clacks of the undead. “We’re trapped.”

“No!” he said, staring at Tythonnia. Ladonna tried not to wince at the look of utter grief and confusion that filled her friend. He

touched Tythonnia's face. The pull of the other world grew stronger still. They were being dragged through the dirt slowly.

Mariyah and Tythonnia gripped Berthal harder, as though trying to anchor him through willpower alone.

"I can't do this with them on me!" Berthal cried. He appeared ashen and so close to death that Ladonna half wondered if he wasn't dead already. But she understood. She grabbed Tythonnia by the shoulders and tried to pull her away.

“No!” Tythonnia screamed.

“Mariyah, help me!” Ladonna cried. “Berthal’s trying to save us!”

Mariyah, though frightened, nodded and struggled to peel Tythonnia away. They were being dragged toward the iris. Finally, Ladonna and Mariyah managed to wrench Tythonnia away from Berthal. They fell together and Berthal was immediately dragged toward the gate; he left a blood smear in his wake, as he fumbled for his staff.

“Go!” he shouted. He slammed the staff into the ground. A circle,

no more than five feet across, glowed brightly where his staff touched the earth then dimmed. It didn't vanish, however.

The gate sucked Berthal farther away from them. He was almost beneath it; his body rose by inches then feet.

“No!” Tythonna cried. She struggled against her friends, desperate to break free and save him.

Ladonna and Mariyah held her tightly, tighter still when he was suddenly sucked through. Berthal was gone and the growing roar of

the gate devoured Tythonnia's scream. Ladonna pulled them toward the circle of light left by Berthal, the iris's gravity helping them along. Plumes of dirt and grass spiraled around the gate's lip like water being drained through a hole. The undead fought the pull as well, though many slipped and fell up through it.

The circle was almost beneath their feet. Ladonna quickly looked around to see if there was anyone left to save, but she couldn't see another soul through the biting dirt storm. She prayed Par-Salian had been selfish enough to save

himself.

Tythonna struggled to get away, to run for the portal and pursue Berthal into the beyond, but Ladonna and Mariyah tackled her again when she broke from their grips. They overshot the circle by inches and a few inches more as the gate dragged them toward its greedy mouth. Mariyah screamed. One of the undead gripped her foot, but she kicked the monster hard enough that it stumbled back and up, through the aperture.

Mariyah grabbed Ladonna's legs as the gate dragged her up; even then, Ladonna could feel her grip

around Tythonnia's waist and Mariyah's grip on her leg slipping. At the last second, Tythonnia realized what was happening and reached down to grab Mariyah's wrist before she, too, fell away. With the last of her strength, Ladonna stretched for the circle even as the gate tried to suck her from it.

Her ribs protested the torture, but her finger grazed the lip of Berthal's circle. The teleportation ring exploded in a burst of light, and all three women vanished.

Par-Salian wedged the boy into a rock outcropping, trying to shield his body. The pull of the gate was tremendous, with bodies slamming into the rocks and ground with enough force to crack bone. In a moment, he'd be sucked away and the boy would be crushed against the rocks by the growing force trying to drag them into hell.

The winds whipped and howled around them, and Par-Salian struggled to look over the rocks at the ritual circle. Was anyone still alive?

He spotted Ladonna, struggling on the ground with Tythonnia and

Mariyah. They were seconds away from being sucked through the iris. Mariyah kicked away a blight shade. Ladonna lunged for something on the ground, and a burst of light nearly blinded him. When he could see again, they were gone.

Panic filled his stomach and lungs. Where'd she go? Was she safe?

Anywhere is better than here, he thought.

The boy cried out in pain. The weight exerted against them had flattened the boy out on the stone.

He was pressed against it.

“Can’t—breathe,” he gasped.

Par-Salian felt the pressure too. If he didn’t act, they’d both be dead. But he couldn’t leave while Ladonna was still here.

Wherever you are, be safe, he prayed. The pull increased and he nearly tumbled out over the rocks. The boy could no longer cry; the air was being crushed from him.

“*Beysar*,” Par-Salian gasped as he touched the boy’s shoulder.

They both vanished.

CHAPTER 17

Aftermath

The circle beneath their feet glowed a moment before sputtering out like a spent candle; a faint discoloration remained in the red carpet. They lay inside a parlor with richly paneled oak walls, luxuriant tapestries, and a fireplace. Tythonnia pulled free of Mariyah and Ladonna as she stood, her hand scrambling through the empty air, trying to save a man

who was no longer there.

“No!” she screamed and spun around, trying to gain her bearings. “Where are we? Where are we?”

Through the transom window, Ladonna could see the hub of Palanthas and the Bay of Branchala. They were somewhere in Purple Ridge, overlooking the city. Likely, it was the safest place Berthal could envision before casting his spell.

“Palanthas,” Ladonna answered softly.

“We have to go back!”

Mariyah wept softly. She understood the situation; she knew there was nothing they could do. She crumpled into one of the chairs.

“We can’t,” Ladonna said. “It’s already too late. The portal—”

“No,” Tythonnia said, pacing around the room, ready to hurl herself at the walls at any moment. “No no no, you’re wrong.”

“I’m not,” Ladonna said gently. “It was a trap.”

“By who?” Tythonnia demanded. “What was that book?”

“It was put there by the Black

Robes,” she said. “I didn’t know about it, but Arianna boasted about using it against Berthal. I tried to stop you, but—”

“A trap,” Tythonnia said. “They couldn’t have known! How did they know?”

“They knew what to do the moment the key was stolen ... the one Mariyah took.”

Mariyah looked up, her face absolutely horror-stricken.

“Did you really think we’d leave a book of spells by Gadrella of Tarsis, of all people, where it was? Especially when we had the key

this entire time. The real book hasn't been there in decades.”

Tythonna stopped pacing as the revelation settled in. She stumbled and fell into a velvet-covered settee.

“Once Mariyah stole the key, the Black Robes placed the book of *Orphaned Echoes* there. It opened into a demiplane but not the one you wanted. They saw it as a way to end the renegade threat once and for all. That's why the crypt lay unprotected. They were waiting for another spy to steal it for Berthal.”

“No,” Tythonnia whispered. “The Black Robes wouldn’t move against the highmage like this. The other orders—”

“The Red Robes were complicit in this, Tythonnia. We found a strong ally in Belize.”

“But—”

“I’m sorry,” Ladonna said. “The Black and Red Robes realized they couldn’t afford to capture Berthal. They couldn’t make a martyr of him. Neither could they murder him outright without accomplishing the same thing. He had to die of his own arrogance, his own undoing.”

With that, Ladonna walked toward the doorway, but she hesitated at the archway leading onto the entrance porch. “I’ll tell the orders you both died fighting alongside Berthal. I saved you, and you too Mariyah; that’s as far as I go, Tythonnia. If you want to live out your remaining years in peace, I suggest you hide and never practice magic again. Tythonnia and Mariyah are dead. Find new lives.”

“And if we don’t?” Tythonnia asked, almost whispering through the pangs of sorrow.

“Then I’ll find you and kill you

both myself. Don't make me regret this."

"I'll never forgive you," Tythonna said bitterly.

"Perhaps," Ladonna responded. "But I couldn't let a friend die ... no matter how much she wanted to."

Ladonna chanced a last glance back at the two women holding each other fiercely. She walked through the door and out into the sunlight of Palanthas. She had to find a way back home, if she still had a home.



Par-Salian stumbled as he reappeared in his bed chamber. He was exhausted, spent of all the magic he knew. A wizard without his spells was a truly terrible thing, for his mind felt empty from the loss of knowledge and his spirit seemingly tapped beyond reach of recovery. Yet, he knew, rest would not be his reward.

He only prayed that Ladonna had escaped safely.

“Did you save anyone?” a voice asked.

Par-Salian spun around in surprise. There was nobody there a

moment before, but Highmage Astathan was seated there, next to his bed.

With almost knee-jerk panic, Par-Salian wanted to explain what he'd done and why he'd done it, but Astathan motioned for him to be still.

“Did you ... save anyone?”

Par-Salian realized Astathan knew everything already, or at least most of it. He saw no admonishment in the highmage's eyes, only concern and a terrible sadness that seemed to reach down into his very soul. It was no time to

protect himself. Astathan was speaking to him as an equal.

“A boy,” Par-Salian admitted. “One boy. He’s with my aunt right now. She’s a kind woman.”

Astathan nodded but said nothing. His head fell deeply until it almost touched his chest. His age truly showed in those terrible moments.

“It—it was horrible. We must do something,” Par-Salian whispered. “The Black Robes went against your wishes and now innocent people are dead. Not just Berthal or his sorcerers, but women and

children. None of them deserved this,” he said. He couldn’t stop himself from weeping at the memory, at the screams.

“If there is justice for this action,” Astathan said. “It will not be in my time.”

“What?” Par-Salian said. He wiped away his tears.

“All mention of this is to be erased. You and Ladonna are forgiven your transgressions, but nobody must ever know what happened in the Vingaard Mountains.”

“How can you say that?” Par-

Salian said. “The Black Robes orchestrated a massacre!”

“Yes,” Astathan said. He struggled to rise, and Par-Salian helped him to his feet. “And for that we are all damned for our complicity. I only learned of all this from Reginald, but heed me well, Par-Salian. There are dark times ahead. Far darker than this, I suspect, for the orders, for everyone. Already the Black Robes are pulling away, and I fear we cannot stop them.”

“What are you talking about?” Par-Salian asked.

“I do not envy you, my boy,” Astathan said. “You will see more precarious times than I could imagine. When I am gone, the Black Robes will drift away, and it will be your responsibility to ensure their absence doesn’t shatter the orders completely. It may even be your responsibility to bring them back again. As much as I want to see justice done, this incident with Berthal will only drive an irreparable schism between us if we demand satisfaction. And what the future holds is too important to lose the support of the Black Robes. They

are crucial to our survival, and we to theirs.”

“So ... we just forget this ever happened?!” Par-Salian asked.

“See what the future holds,” Astathan said, “and then decide. You may realize the future is more important than history. Or perhaps the future must reconcile with the past to be stronger. But wait and watch. You owe the world that patience, at least.”

Par-Salian nodded, though he wasn't happy with the notion. “If that is your wish,” he said, his mind dark with bleak thoughts.

“Of course it isn’t,” Astathan said. “My wish was to save Berthal and welcome him back into the order. He was a good man. Misguided and still wounded by the death of his protégé, but good nonetheless. He didn’t deserve this.”

“Highmage,” Par-Salian said. “What of Ladonna? Is she safe? Do you know?”

“She is safe,” Astathan said. “I couldn’t scry Berthal’s movements, but I could follow yours. Likely, she is your best hope of keeping the Black Robes from isolating themselves completely. You have a

connection with her, no?”

Par-Salian shrugged, suddenly uncomfortable with sharing his personal life with Astathan “Did anyone else survive?” he asked.

“No ... and it’s easier for history to forget about them if it believes them dead. Leave the dead where they are. The future is consigned to the living.”

EPILOGUE

In All Things, a Cycle

It was a quiet night for Palanthas, but the city hummed with speculation and omens. Some rumors surrounded the growing bands of goblins that were moving through the countryside. Where they were going, nobody knew; nobody survived long enough to ask. Of greater worry, however, was the spread of the Medusa Plague. It had struck Solamnia the

hardest, melting the skin of its victims, until their arms turned into three-headed snakes and the afflicted became stone. Refugees clogged the High Clerist's Tower, but the temples were closed and the Knight's Spur sealed to prevent Palanthas from becoming inundated. The port of Palanthas was calm. A handful of ships came and went, but the navy quarantined all arriving ships and inspected them for carriers of the plague. Still the infection somehow found its way into the city.

It was a time of fear, and thus, the only time to travel unmolested.

Ladonna knew the streets well, the buildings of Smiths' Alley wedded together so closely over tight alleys and corridors. She knew the area well enough to keep a spell at the ready. No trouble met her; she arrived at her destination with her package cradled in one arm.

The building was as she remembered it, the painted rose barely visible over the barn door in the alleyway. Yes, it was still Rosie's place, the only home she'd ever known, the one bright spot in her childhood. That brought a smile to her face. She knocked on the

door and looked around just in case. Through the cracks in the barn wall, she could see the dance of approaching candlelight.

“Who is it?” a woman asked.

“Ladonna ... Adwin’s daughter.”

Someone pulled the latch off; the door slid open.

The woman standing there was strong, with a thickness to her waist and arms that said her strength was muscle as well as fat. Her biceps were meaty, her hair fading from dirty blond to gray. She was no Rosie, Ladonna realized sadly, but Tythonnia was doing a

good job of following in the old woman's footsteps.

Tythonna cast one look at Ladonna, at the package she carried wrapped in red cloth, before gently pulling her in. The baby in Ladonna's arms whimpered in her sleep.

The barn had changed; the stable walls had been removed and the floor brushed of its hay. A row of bench desks faced a small podium beneath the loft, and along one wall rested a row of books. Rosie's barn was a classroom. Ladonna

inspected the books with a glance; they were all simple reading and history books, nothing of magic. Ladonna continued nursing her child as she sat on one of the benches.

“What’s her name?” Tythonnia asked. She offered Ladonna a glass of warm cider and sat next to her.

“Kira,” Ladonna said. “I told people the baby belongs to Arianna, my mentor, but ...”

“Par-Salian?”

“He doesn’t know he has a daughter,” Ladonna said. “I’m keeping it that way.”

“Why?” Tythonnia asked.

“It’s ... a long story.”

A shuffle in the loft distracted them both. Staring down at them was a boy. He was perhaps seven or eight with brown hair and shockingly light green eyes that seemed almost gold in hue. Ladonna knew those eyes; she’d watched them die before.

The breath fled her lungs, and she stared at Tythonnia. “What’s his name?” she asked.

“Berthal,” Tythonnia answered with a wistful smile.

Another face appeared overhead

in the loft; it belonged to a mousy woman with a curiously intense gaze. Ladonna knew her as well: Mariyah. Mariyah recognized her in turn. Her eyes widened in shock.

“Mariyah, love,” Tythonnia said calmly. “Could you please put Berthal back to bed?”

Mariyah nodded, her gaze still on Ladonna; the suspicion never left her as she took the boy by the shoulders and ushered him out of sight.

“Should I leave?” Ladonna asked.

“No,” Tythonnia replied. “Whatever anger I felt towards you

for Berthal's death is gone now. My son is alive because of you. I'm sorry if that's why you didn't visit while Rosie was still here."

"I meant to attend her funeral," Ladonna said ruefully. She adjusted Kira and let the infant continue feeding.

Tythonnia nodded. "If it's any consolation, she died in her sleep. She was happy. She let me turn her barn into a classroom. She was grandmother again, to Berthal and all the children who came here to learn."

Ladonna tucked her head down

and tried not to weep. The tears would not listen, however, and they flowed until they salted Kira's cheeks.

“Ladonna ... what are you doing here?” Tythonnia asked.

“I came to tell you,” Ladonna said, struggling not to sob. She inhaled deeply, but her breath seemed to stutter and skip across her throat. “Remember that thing with Dumas? Why she came after us?” she finally asked, changing the subject. “It was Belize who sent her. He was controlling her through the book on her chest. He was a renegade as well ... but for his own

ambitions.”

“I see,” Tythonnia said. She stayed quiet. That was not the reason Ladonna was there, but she also knew the woman would explain herself in her own time.

“Anyway, Belize is dead. Some time ago. Justarius now sits on the conclave, as do I,” she said rather proudly.

“Par-Salian?”

“Highmage,” Ladonna said quietly.

“I’ve heard,” Tythonnia said. “But you’re not satisfied with just sitting on the conclave, are you?”

“No,” she admitted. “I wish to be master of my order.”

“But you can’t do that with a daughter?” she asked.

“Perhaps, if I was a Red or White Robe wizard, I might. But as a member of the Black Robes? Kira would become a—”

“Liability?” Tythonnia asked. She couldn’t help but sneer at the thought, that once again the orders spent more time being petty than advancing the cause of magic everywhere. After the “incident,” they’d done their best to wipe out the remaining practitioners of

Wyldling magic, and even the Vagros had all but vanished.

“You may not approve,” Ladonna said, “but yes. She’ll become a target to those seeking to curtail my ambitions.”

“Then retire. Just be her mother.”

“I can’t,” Ladonna whispered. “Dark times are upon us,” she said, trying to soothe her fidgeting baby. “The auguries are there, as plain as day. The world is about to unleash a storm that may rival the Cataclysm in how it changes the world. We all feel it in our bones.

The Black Robes are retiring into the shadows to watch and wait. Nobody who has touched upon the magic of the black moon, called upon Nuitari, can avoid this.”

Ladonna shook her head. “Anyways. Better Kira know the love of a real mother than one too busy with her own ambitions.”

“You want *me* to raise her?” Tythonnia said. Her eyes widened.

“I want you to give her the same chance Rosie gave me. You’re my—you’re *her* only hope.” Ladonna covered her breast and slung Kira’s head unto her shoulder. She patted

the infant's back, waiting for her to burp. "Please," Ladonna begged. "I don't know where else to turn."

"Won't anyone miss her?" Tythonnia asked.

"I'll say I gave her to a henchman to deliver to a family in Palanthas. She was lost at sea in a storm."

"If anyone reads your thoughts —"

"They'll find the lie there as the only truth I know. Protecting Kira means deceiving everyone. Including myself. I'll take steps to ensure that."

Tythonnia hesitated, a storm of emotions brewing on her face.

“I love my daughter,” Ladonna insisted. Her voice was low, shadowed by sadness. “But she would come to hate me and my ambitions eventually. Better I make the choice my father was too spineless to make for me. Better she has a loving home.”

Tythonnia sighed and finally motioned for the baby. Ladonna wept softly as she handed Kira to her.

For the last time in her life, Ladonna kissed Kira on her

forehead and stepped back. She pulled a pouch of steel from her belt, the weight alone a fortune for those of modest means. She dropped it on the bench.

“Thank you,” she whispered, not trusting her voice to crack.

“I’ll protect her as my own.”

“I know,” Ladonna said. She slipped through the door and out into the chill air of Palanthas. It would be her last visit there. This city was no longer her home.

Outside, children laughed and

played, and the sun would not be refused as it found its way into Smiths' Alley. Inside the barn, Tythonnia played with Kira as the child sat in her lap. She'd cried for the first couple of nights away from her mother, but she came to accept cow's milk for her meals and smiled when Tythonnia or Mariyah picked her up.

The boy Berthal stood nearby and watched the new baby girl cautiously. She was still a stranger in his life, but Tythonnia knew her son was kind and good-natured. He would come to love Kira as his sister.

Tythonna was proud of him and motioned him closer. She kissed his forehead, and he wiped it clean with his forearm and let out a tiny yelp of protest.

“Stop,” he said. “I just washed.”

Tythonna laughed and pointed upstairs with a flick of her head. “Go,” she said. “Go get your special books.”

“Are we learning more ... Wyldling?” he whispered cautiously in her ear as though the baby might overhear them.

“As soon as Mariyah comes back, yes. We’ll read a new chapter.”

He nodded and was about to race off when a thought struck him. “Will you be teaching Kira too?” he asked.

“When the time comes,” Tythonnia said. “Yes. Who knows? By then you might be old enough to start teaching her yourself.”

He beamed at the thought.

“But you can’t tell anyone, right?” she asked.

“I promise,” he said. “I haven’t even told my friends.”

“Good boy,” Tythonnia said. “Now go.”

Berthal raced up the stairs and

began rummaging around the loft as he pried the books from their hiding spot.

Tythonna sat there and marveled at the wide-eyed innocence of Kira. Like Berthal, Kira had come from a family of strong magic; her grasp of it, her knowledge, would almost be intuitive. Like her adopted brother, she could grow very powerful in the Wyldling craft and free from the interference of the Wizards of High Sorcery.

Tythonna spoke the truth when she told Ladonna she no longer harbored a grudge against her. No,

her conflict was with the Wizards of High Sorcery, and there were still ways of fighting them. Maybe the struggle wouldn't unfold in her lifetime, but it might happen through her son and daughter, or their children. There would be a reckoning.

Berthal would not be forgotten; his ethos and compassion and generous nature. He would live on through his son and adopted daughter. And maybe, eventually, Berthal would be remembered by people, not stricken from history and he'd be honored as a hero.

Tythonna smiled at the thought

and continued playing with Kira. She could already see great potential in her deep black eyes and her brown hair. The strength of her parents ran true through her veins. The magic in her practically sparkled.

A knock on the barn door distracted her. Tythonnia hefted Kira up to her shoulder as she got up and slid the door open. A man stood there. He was slight of frame and ordinary in almost every way. He wore worn leather trousers, and his lean frame was tucked inside his cloak.

“Yes?” Tythonnia asked.

“I was wondering if you still did smithing here?” the man asked.

“No, sorry,” Tythonnia said. “We haven’t in years. We’re a school now.”

The man nodded. “Thank you.” Then, almost as an afterthought, he said. “You have a beautiful girl. She takes after her mother.”

Tythonnia thanked him and watched him walk away. She paused, continuing to stare at him until he rounded the corner and vanished into Smiths’ Alley. He seemed familiar, somehow, the stranger with the eyes of the blue

sea.

But Tythonnia couldn't place him for the life of her. She closed the door and prepared for her son's lesson and the other chores of the day.



Ed Greenwood
Presents
Waterdeep

BLACKSTAFF TOWER

STEVEN SCHEND

MISTSHORE

JALEIGH JOHNSON

DOWNSHADOW

ERIK SCOTT DE BIE

APRIL 2009

CITY OF THE DEAD

ROSEMARY JONES

JUNE 2009

THE GOD CATCHER

ERIN M. EVANS

FEBRUARY 2010

CIRCLE OF SKULLS

JAMES P. DAVIS

JUNE 2010

Explore the City of Splendors through the eyes of authors
hand-picked by FORGOTTEN REALMS world creator Ed Greenwood.



FORGOTTEN REALMS, DUNGEONS & DRAGONS, WIZARDS OF THE COAST, and
their respective logos are trademarks of Wizards of the Coast LLC
in the U.S.A. and other countries. ©2009 Wizards.





MARK SEHESTEDT

Chosen of Nendawen

The consumer, the despoiler, has come to Narfell. His followers
have taken Highwatch and slain all who held it—save one.

Book I

The Fall of Highwatch

November 2009

Book II

The Hand of the Hunter

November 2010

Book III

Cry of the Ghost Wolf

November 2011

*Vengeance will be yours, the Master of the Hunt promises.
If you survive.*



FORGOTTEN REALMS, DUNGEONS & DRAGONS, WIZARDS OF THE COAST, and their respective logos are trademarks of Wizards of the Coast LLC in the U.S.A. and other countries. ©2009 Wizards.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lucien Soulban, who lives in Montreal, Quebec, has penned the scripts for the videogames *Dawn of War* and *Winter Assault*, as well as the novels *Blood In, Blood Out* for VAMPIRE: THE REQUIEM and *Fleshworks*, as well as a previous DRAGONLANCE® novel, *The Alien Sea. Renegade Wizards* is his fourth novel.

RENEGADE WIZARDS

©2009 Wizards of the Coast LLC

All characters in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

This book is protected under the copyright laws of the United States of America. Any reproduction or unauthorized use of the material or artwork contained herein is prohibited without the express written permission of Wizards of the Coast LLC.

Published by Wizards of the Coast LLC

Dragonlance, Wizards of the Coast, and their respective logos are trademarks of Wizards of the Coast LLC, in the U.S.A. and other countries.

eISBN: 978-0-7869-5592-3

U.S.,	EUROPEAN
CANADA,	HEADQUARTERS
ASIA,	
PACIFIC, &	
LATIN	Hasbro UK Ltd
AMERICA	
Wizards of the	Caswell Way
Coast LLC	
P.O. Box 707	Newport, Gwent
	NP9 0YH
Renton, WA	

98057-0707

GREAT BRITAIN

+ 1-800-324-
6496

Save this address
for your records.

Visit our web site at www.wizards.com

v3.0