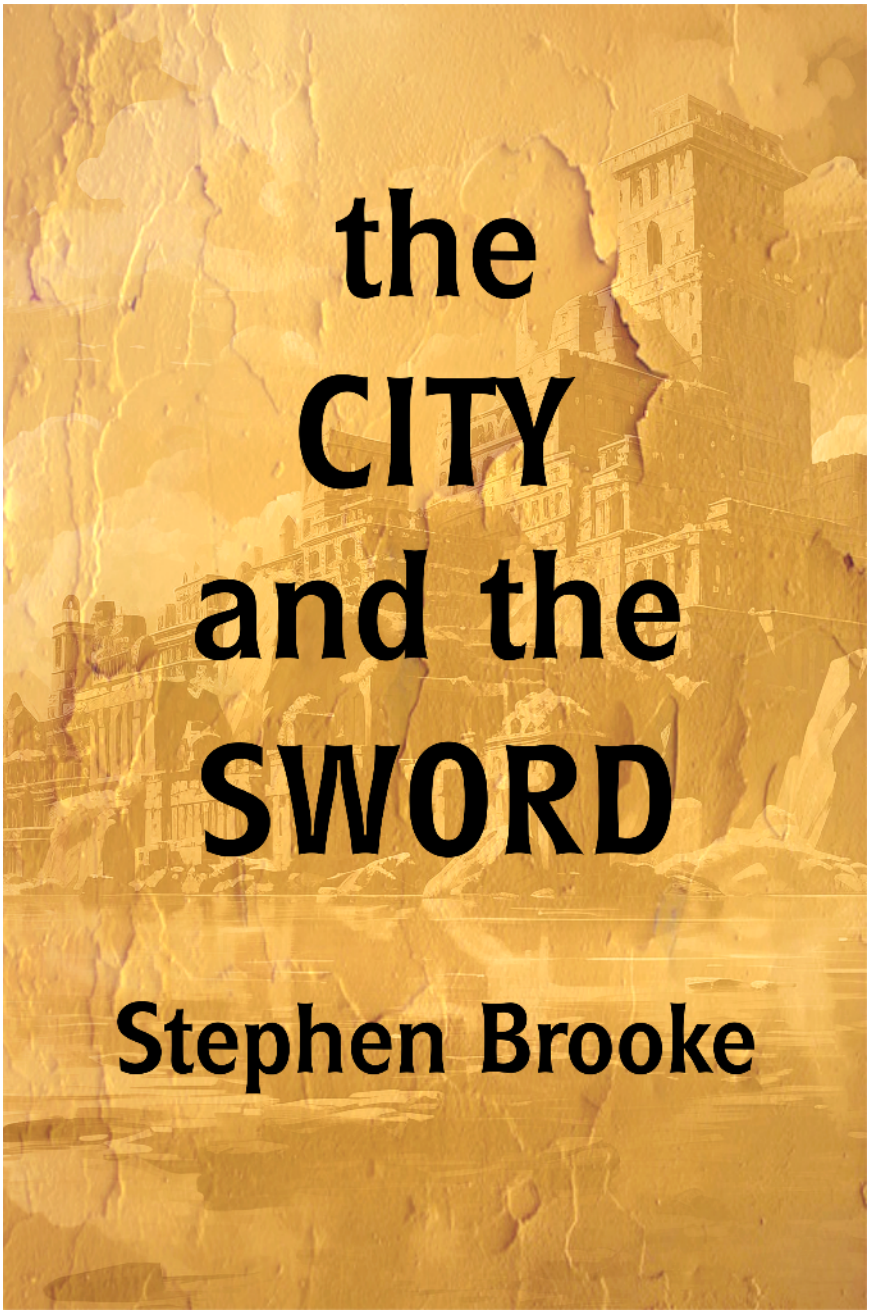
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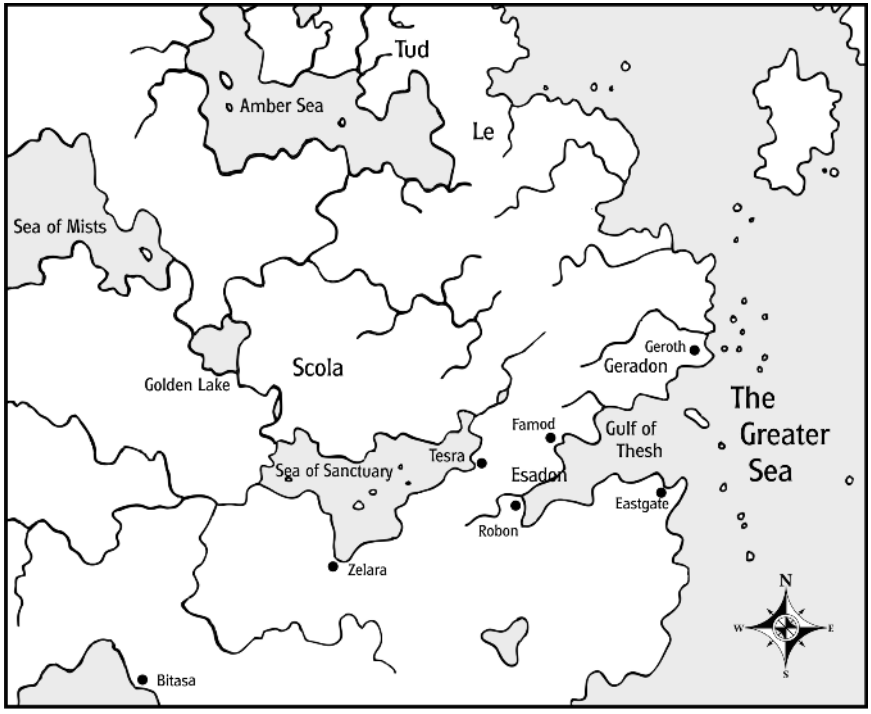
THE CITY AND THE SWORD



The Kingdoms of the Mura

around 50 BD

THE CITY AND THE SWORD



Stephen Brooke

Arachis Press 2024

Once Tesra was great, more wealthy,
more beautiful, than any city in the world.

The City and the Sword
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I. The Doomed City

From the battered ramparts of Famod, Lelanva watched another ship burst into flame.

"Is that one of ours, Lellie?" asked her wide-eyed companion.

"It is." Her heart sank even as did the vessel burning in the harbor. The relief fleet was defeated, scattered, and the city was doomed. Its low, gray stone walls would not hold against the next assault.

She had heard tales of what happened in the sack of a city. At the best, she and Nib and everyone left alive would be taken away as slaves, perhaps across the Great Sea. At worst—Lelanva shivered and put that from her mind. Action was needed now. "We must escape," she informed the boy.

He only nodded. Nib trusted her. Trusted her too much, she feared! As Lelanva, he had lost all his family to plague during the siege. Nib was a slender, dark lad, maybe a couple years younger than she was. Lelanva was pretty sure she was twelve.

All around, soldiers prepared for what must surely come. If some seemed unenthusiastic, it was hardly surprising. Perhaps more than a few of them were also thinking of escaping the city. How, when the forces of the Empire surrounded it?

"We need food," the girl decided. "Any we can find. Anything else we can find, for that matter." She leaned close and whispered. "I know a place we can hide."

"Hide? Can't we leave?"

"Later, maybe, when it's all over. We couldn't get out now."

Nib accepted this. "I dreamed of fire," he murmured. "And people screaming."

"Only nightmares," Lelanva assured him. "We're going to be all right." They were. She was going to see to it. She would shield them both from the real nightmare that was coming. "We need to prepare."

"To hide." The boy didn't sound overly confident in stating this.

"Not yet. When the attack comes. Come along and we'll forage."

The wait was not long. Siege machines began hammering on the walls as night fell, continuing through the darkness. Lelanva knew their thud by now, and suspected it would not cease this time. Not until the fortifications were breached.

It would be best to find their refuge before dawn, Lelanva decided. Not that the city wasn't already bright with torches and braziers, lighting the way for defenders scurrying here and there. The citizens mostly remained off the streets, awaiting what would come in their homes, be they high houses or lowly hovels. There was little noise other than that incessant thud, the city hushed in anticipation.

She should have a torch herself, or a lamp. Lelanva rooted among the meager belongings that remained in this house, her house, now and for just a little longer. I won't ever come here again, will I? she asked herself. There was no need to answer. Candles. As many as she could find. That would do. And an oil lamp, the one of carved stone with the flue, like those used on ships. The one her father had left before sailing away again. Lelanva had no idea whether he yet lived. It was unlikely she would see him again, either.

"Let's go." Nib shouldered the load she had packed for him and followed her into the night. "Stick close to the walls," she warned. "We don't want to attract attention." There was an outcry, somewhere toward the harbor, and the crashing of stone on stone. The walls had been breached. Lelanva was a little surprised; she had expected that to happen on the landward side.

It still could. Best to hurry on—hurry toward the center of Famod. Trusting Nib followed until she came to a halt by a low, round stone edifice. "Good, no guards," she said. It had seemed unlikely there would be.

Nib hesitated as she started toward the arched entry. "Are—are we going down?"

"Yes, Nib. It's not scary and I'll be with you. We've done it before."

"Uh-huh."

But not as she had on her own. Lelanva had thoroughly explored the system of cisterns that lay below Famod. She thought maybe she knew them better than anyone else in the city. A great bucket lay on its side, next to a wide, dark pit. The team of oxen that drew water from the depths in that bucket were gone, slaughtered and eaten weeks earlier. Unlike other necessities, water had remained in good supply through the siege and the cisterns had not been tapped. She hopped across the dry channel that would carry water out to the city and led the way to a smaller opening in the floor, the beginning of a stone staircase that wound down into the dark.

Lelanva had only used this way down at night, when no one was around to stay her. Or no one noticed her, anyway. There were other ways into the depths of the cisterns. She needn't concern herself with those tonight. Or today. It was already growing light out, wasn't it?

No, that ruddy light spilling into the room came from fire. "Down we go. Careful!" It was not wise to hurry on these stairs. As soon as they were below the floor level and out of sight, they should be safe. Sooner or later, she suspected, soldiers would look into every building. By then she and Nib should be far down, in tunnels she knew and they didn't.

"Stay close. Hmm, hang onto my belt. We don't want to get separated and I'm not ready to risk a light." She didn't need one. She knew this stairway well enough. In the blackness below lay the water, deep, still, one of three basin carved into the solid rock below the city. Each of those cisterns was connected. Lelanva knew where the tunnels lay, and other passages where water drained into the reservoirs.

"All this was built centuries ago," she informed her companion, just to have something to say, something to break the uncanny silence of this place. The words, though barely whispered, echoed through the great chamber. "When Famod was a great port of the Tesran Empire."

"The Unem," replied the boy. "They called it the Unem."

She didn't know what an unem was and decided not to ask Nib.

He surprised her now and again with bits of knowledge like that. His family had known things, too. Nib's father had been a scribe and had helped Lelanva learn her letters. "You're partly Tesran, aren't you?" she asked, feeling her way down, right hand brushing the rough stone wall. There should be a turn soon.

"I guess."

Everyone was partly something in Famod. Lelanva herself was about as close to being purely a Mur as any who dwelt in the city. "Maybe Tesra would be a good place to head for," she said. They would have to go somewhere, wouldn't they? She could think about that later. Ah, there was the way. "Right now, we're turning down this corridor. I think we can have a light."

If the coal she had carefully packed in sand would light one. She attempted a candle. "Come on, come on." The candle sputtered and dripped and, at last, a flame appeared on its wick. "We should keep two lights going from now on. I don't think I'll be able to use the coal again." None the less, Lelanva carefully packed it back into its bag of sand.

She lit the little oil lamp from her candle and handed it to Nib. He stared at the flickering light for a moment. "I thought I could see a flame," he said, waving an arm toward the darkness. "Somewhere—else. I almost felt like I could reach out and bring it to me."

Things the boy said at times baffled Lelanva. This was one of those times. "Just take care of that one," she ordered. "We could go up one of the drains and catch a glimpse of what's going on. It would be safe enough." The upper ends of those drains were far too small to allow passage of a human body and it wouldn't be worth anyone's while to try to break through them. But they would be trapped there if someone followed behind them.

"I don't want to know," Nib responded.

She shrugged. "I guess I don't either." It really would be better not to indulge her curiosity. Yet she did feel drawn to take a look at what was going on above their heads. Excitement and fear mingled in her heart. Would that she could wield a sword and join the battle!

No, you're being silly, Lelanva told herself. There is only horror to see up there. Slaughter and rape. "We'd best find a good spot to sit things out," she said. They crept forward, casting two little pools of light in a great darkness. The girl sniffed the air. "Not down that way," she said, nodding toward a passage opening on their left. "Basilisk."

"It stinks," observed Nib.

"Yeah, but it eats the rats. And it won't bother us unless we trip over it in the dark." She had discovered the small—small being about five feet in length—predator in previous explorations.

"A basilisk is a kind of dragon," Nib went on.

Lelanva knew that. Someone had told her sometime. Oh, she'd heard it from a storyteller in the market. Would the attackers harm an old blind man like him? Maybe no one was safe. Those not suitable to be sold as slaves might be struck down with the sword.

She thought she might use a sword on herself before becoming a slave. Escape into another sort of darkness. But she would rather fight if she had a sword in her hand.

"Here's the second cistern." It was smaller than the one through which they had descended. Some said it was the oldest of the three. Another lay closer to the western walls. That was the direction they should probably go to escape the city, away from the waterfront.

Distant, muffled sounds reached them here, rising and falling like surf on a shore. It was impossible to make out what they were. Though no light penetrated here, the sun must be high by now. "Not a safe place for us to stay," she decided, and moved on.

The tunnel they entered was dry. Lelanva had been told water once flowed through it, carried from the hills by the great aqueduct. That had fallen into ruin long before she was born. Now the cisterns collected only rain water that fell on the city, intended as a reserve to the wells and springs that served Famod's population.

"Can we stop soon, Lellie?"

"Tired?"

"Uh-huh."

Me too, she thought. "A little further. There's a good place to eat and rest a while."

"Are we going up?"

The rock beneath their feet had been gradually rising, barely noticeable but tiring one all the more quickly. "We are. A little. Here we are. Watch for the steps."

Lelanva could only guess why this narrow stone stairway existed. Maybe it had provided workers access at some time in the past. Now the way was choked by a cave-in, a dozen steps up. It provided a convenient nook for Nib and her to rest a while, hidden from eyes even if someone did venture into the tunnels.

The pair listlessly nibbled at some of their bread, too tired to have much of an appetite. Neither had slept last night and had kept going now halfway into the day. "Let's get some sleep."

Nib at once reminded her, "One of us should stay on guard." He frowned and added. "And make sure our lights don't go out."

"That's sensible," she agreed. "You sleep first. I need to think a while."

The exhausted boy took no time in falling into slumber. Lelanva watched him for a couple minutes. It would have been easier had she left him behind, left him to whatever fate the gods ordained. They would not treat Nib well, would they? The gods of her people were not kind gods. Best not trust them with her own fate.

She found herself blinking. Don't fall asleep! The girl rose and walked up and down the stairs a couple times. "Is it my turn to watch?" came a small, sleepy voice.

"Not yet. I'll watch for a bit more." Watch over Nib. There wasn't really a choice, was there? Maybe that was her fate! Lelanva giggled at the thought and the sound echoed back, so transmuted she could barely recognize it as her own voice.

But they were alone, just her and Nib. She could pray, she supposed, not that she'd ever heard of it doing much good. Not to great Orgum, the Sky Father. He wouldn't hear a little girl, buried beneath a doomed city. It was the soldiers above who would be giving him thanks now for their victory. Or cursing him for their

defeat. Instead, Lelanva spoke a few words to Old Grandmother Moon, who ruled the night. By night they would have to make their attempt to escape.

How soon? As soon as this night, though it would be possible to hide here for weeks, even months. She'd have to go up and forage for food sometime, wouldn't she? Not for a couple days. It might be safer then. Oh, she didn't know. Lelanva held back a sob. But another followed and would not be held back, nor that after it. She bowed her head and cried, a little girl in the dark with far too much responsibility and far too many decisions to make.

Nib got up and wrapped his arms around her. "You sleep now, Lellie. I'll watch."

"All right." She settled down on one of the steps, her body barely fitting its width. Lelanva was not only young, but rather small. At least she was warm; she had insisted both of them dress in more layers than one might think necessary. She slept but had no way of telling how long. She knew only that she opened her eyes and Nib was still sitting there, with a faraway look in his eyes. She wouldn't have blamed him at all had he fallen asleep, nor would it have been likely to matter. Both lights still burned.

She'd need to find more oil or candles too, wouldn't she? Not a concern at the moment. She sat up, saying, "I wonder if it's night yet." Not that it mattered much. She'd just like to know, to orient herself a bit.

"How can we find out?"

"The bats. I know where they roost and we can see if they've flown out." She paused a moment to think. "We should be going that direction, anyway. Let's eat first! I'm starving!"

But Lelanva ate sparingly and her young comrade followed her lead. Both knew their food might have to last. There wasn't much down here to eat. Rats, maybe, but not bats! "I wonder if fish get into the cisterns," she said, mostly to herself. She'd never heard of any being in the water dipped from their depths.

"Crocodiles," stated Nib, completely straight-faced. Crocodiles in the cisterns was an old tale, told to frighten children who might

feel the urge to explore. It had not made Lelanva pause for even a second. She'd wanted to see one.

"Of course," she agreed. "So there must be fish for them to eat."

"Or kids who get too close to the water." Both had to snicker at that. But Lelanva wasn't sure she'd be willing to swim in one of the cisterns. Too dark, too deep!

They set off toward the western cistern. There was no particular reason to go there, Lelanva knew, but it beat sitting. "Watch your feet," she warned, a few minutes later.

Nib looked down. "What is it?" he asked. "It stinks almost as bad as the basilisk."

"Bat droppings." She raised her candle and peered toward the roof. "All gone. It's nighttime."

"Do they go out through the cistern?"

"Yeah. We're close to it." This third reservoir was partly a natural cave, or so Lelanva had been told. It certainly didn't have the circular shape of the other two cisterns. It was both wider and shallower. Again, so she had been told. She wasn't about to jump in and test the depth.

She held her candle high as they entered the chamber. It did little to illuminate the space.

"I'm thirsty," whispered Nib. "Could we go down and get some water?"

They certainly could. There was no difficulty in reaching the reservoir. "It's best to boil the water that comes from the cistern," she reminded him.

"But we can't."

"True." Lelanva thought on that only a moment. "We'll have to chance it. This cistern is supposed to have the cleanest water." The furthest upstream, so to speak. Best not to think about bats pooping in it. She stared down into the basin's depths. A dim, nebulous circle of light floated on the water, barely to be noticed. Lelanva looked toward the skylight in the center of the dome above. A few stars floated in the darkness there.

Nib broke into her reverie. "I hear someone."

She suspected the boy's imagination was working again. "Ghosts?" she asked.

"No such thing. Listen!"

Yes, there were voices. Where? They were impossible to locate with the echoes here. She backed toward the way they had entered, pushing Nib along with one arm.

Torch light appeared on the far side of the enclosure, as someone descended the stairway from the level above, the ground floor. Three men. They jabbered at each other in what most called Imperial Muram, which melded many dialects into one language. It had become the common trade tongue on both sides of the Great Sea. Lelanva could understand it. Understand it well enough.

Sent down to inspect the place, maybe, or wandered in on their own initiative. That didn't matter at all. What did matter was that Nib and she would be in danger if they were spied. Should they put out their lights? They had no way of relighting unless one of them ventured into the city above.

Shouting. They'd been seen or the lights had. There was no sense in dousing them now. "Run," she told Nib. "Follow me."

A straight tunnel lay ahead of them, with no side ways diverging for some distance. They'd be easy to follow. Were the soldiers after them? Yes, their cries suddenly rang louder as they entered the way behind the fleeing children. Nib was tired and would never be able to outrun them. Maybe she couldn't either.

The first side tunnel yawned to their right. Lelanva almost ran past, seeking better refuge than it offered, when a whiff of stench drifted from the opening. A plan popped into the girl's head at once. Perhaps not a well thought out plan, but a plan none the less. "This way!" Nib wrinkled his nose but followed without complaint.

"Don't stop, no matter what," she yelled to him. "And jump when I tell you!"

Oops, her candle had gone out as she rushed along. Nib's lamp still cast light behind her. The stink was growing stronger. This might work!

Suddenly, a sinuous form appeared in their path, like a great

weasel with vestigial wings, blinking and uncertain what was going on. It would not remain that way very long!

"Jump! Jump!" She and Nib both sailed over the confused creature and disappeared into the dark beyond. It might have snapped at them; if so, its fangs closed only on empty air.

Behind them rose howls of dismay. "It sprayed them," commented Nib. Both laughed and ran on.

Sprayed. That was how all dragons shot their fire, discharging a burning, noxious liquid from their rears. Lelanva wished she could have stayed and watched.

They slowed down a bit. "Are we safe now?" Nib asked.

"Only for a while. They know someone's down here now." They would surely come looking again. Eventually. There must be other things going on to keep the soldiers busy. More important things, she hoped. "We'll have to find a good place to hide."

"Near the basilisk," suggested Nib.

"But not too near!" Hmm, how did the basilisk get in? Certainly not through the city! There must be an opening somewhere else. An opening outside the walls. She turned into another side tunnel, a curved way that led back again toward the west. Coming to a halt after a few minutes, she announced, "This is as good a place to hide as any, for a little while. Not too long. Hey, let me light my candle from your lamp." She noted the oil was low when she did so. That would be the last of it. "Maybe you should use a candle too. And don't burn yourself with it."

"Yes, Lellie. I'll be careful."

He would try to be. Nib was terribly absent-minded. "I'm thinking," the girl said, "that there might be a way that leads outside the city. We should look for it." That's what they should do, yes, for at least a day or two. If they couldn't find a way, she would have to risk going into the city for supplies. Best not to think about that until there was no other choice.

"Maybe bats go in and out there, too," suggested Nib.

"Maybe. We'll watch for them." Lelanva recognized it as a good suggestion, but she only knew of the one colony. "I haven't been in

these tunnels a whole lot. They don't seem to go much of anywhere."

The boy held up his candle and surveyed the low, uneven roof. "I think it's a cave."

Yeah, he was probably right. No one had chiseled a way through here. Maybe they added to it, though, for some reason she'd never know. "There are lots of blind tunnels and dead ends and cave-ins. That's why I always avoided them." They actually scared her a little, where they grew narrow or low. She didn't like those walls so close around her.

This, she would never admit to Nib. Nor anyone else!

"We won't get lost, will we?"

"We can just follow our noses back to the basilisk," she assured him. Lelanva did know these passages well enough, she thought, to avoid getting confused. But here she was searching for an unknown way. Where could it be?

They were closer to the west walls here than any other. Beyond them lay the hills. They could give cover for all sorts of animals! Lelanva had rarely ventured out of the city but she had heard tales of wild and dangerous beasts lurking beyond its safety. Maybe no more real than the crocodiles in the cisterns, she told herself.

She might find out soon! "Let's move on. I know a way that runs beyond the western cistern." The pair trudged forward. It might have been for hours. It was probably day by now, the girl thought. Their tunnel opened onto the one she sought, the one she guessed had once carried water from the aqueduct to the cistern. The way was blocked, further up. That might have been done on purpose sometime, or it could have simply caved in. Either way, Lelanva thought she should give it a thorough look.

But she didn't like this narrow passage. She felt closed in, trapped, like—like a prisoner. Better than being in the city and being a real prisoner. Here she could escape. She *was* escaping.

What was that soft, murmuring sound? It was growing louder. The soldiers weren't following again, were they? "Do you hear that?" she asked Nib.

"Uh-huh. The basilisk?"

"Nah, we'd smell it. Something else."

'Something else' revealed itself a few seconds later when a rat scurried by. More followed. Nib shrank away from them but Lelanva was used to rats. They wouldn't bother them, even in these numbers. And they were running from something. That, too, was revealed when the first snake slithered into their lights.

"Run!" She didn't know if the snakes were any more of a danger than the rats but didn't intend to stay and find out. For at least a while, the two children could outpace the animals. Lelanva gasped on suddenly remembering there was no exit ahead in this tunnel. Not for someone her size, or Nib's.

"Maybe we should turn and run back the other way," she choked out. That could be the only way to escape. If the snakes weren't venomous.

"Look!" cried Nib, pointing to ceiling. Bats were rustling about up there, disturbed by the turmoil below. Then one, another, an entire cloud of little winged bodies took to the air, rushing to escape. There, just above their heads, a hole in the rock wall. The bats disappeared into it.

Lelanva reacted without thought. "I'll boost you up," she told Nib, and pushed him toward the opening. He wriggled in and turned around to reach a hand down for her to grasp. Could she find a foothold? A rat ran across her foot, with a shrill little scream of terror. She felt like emitting one herself. All right, she had a hand on the edge of the tunnel now, was kicking her way up. Hissing below. She could see one of the snakes striking toward her leg, by the light of Nib's candle. Her own, she had dropped.

The boy had hold of her jacket now and helped her scramble the rest of the way up. "I don't think they can climb," he said.

"Or have no reason to," she responded. "No rats up here."

"Just two really big ones, hiding in their hole."

"We'll have to see where the hole leads. Let me catch my breath first."

This was even more like being imprisoned than before. There was

no room to stand, only to crawl forward. And upward; they were definitely moving upward. Like the bats, of course, rising toward the world outside.

"We'll have to be quiet," she warned. "There's no telling where we're going to come out." Or if the passage would remain wide enough for them to come out at all.

The way was growing steeper. That could keep them from getting out too. Nib anyway. Lelanva knew she could work her way up a vertical flue and had on occasion. "There's light ahead," she whispered. "Daylight."

A very wan sort of daylight, but any daylight was dangerous. She should be cautious, maybe wait until dark to go the rest of the way. It would be a terribly uncomfortable wait, wedged in this hole. Maybe a peek. Lelanva pushed herself up just far enough to get a look, maybe figure out where they were.

That proved to be inside a small room, walled with great, gray stone blocks. She glimpsed a bit of red sky through a gap high in the wall. Sunset. That explained why none of the bats had flitted back in. What part of the city was this? Carefully, she climbed the rest of the way up and went to the broken place to peer out. Why, they weren't in the city at all. They were outside the walls!

She couldn't see those walls from this angle. "Come on up," she whispered to Nib. "It's safe." For now. They could always bolt back into their hole if there seemed to be any danger.

Nib looked around. "I think we're in the aqueduct."

Lelanva thought he could be right. "But what is this room?"

The boy shrugged. "Maybe it was a secret hideout."

She thought that could well be right, too. "And a secret passage, which we found."

"The bats found it and showed us," he corrected her. Then the boy frowned. "But wouldn't that tunnel we were in have been full of water in the old days?"

"Not deep, I think, and maybe not all the time. A man could probably wade if need be. It would do for emergencies." She wasn't really at all sure of this but it sounded plausible. And it didn't

matter much now, after all. She looked around the room. "How do we get out of here?" There was no obvious door. Maybe they could squeeze through that hole in the wall, but it was awfully narrow. Bat sized, only. They certainly couldn't shift any of those big stone blocks!

It had grown noticeably darker out. Nib held up his candle and peered toward the ceiling. "The way out must be up there."

Any wooden ladder would have rotted away long ago. Surely whoever built this cell had provided something better. Oh, she was too tired for more puzzles! Every time one was solved, another came along.

"Here it is!" crowed Nib. He seemed to be walking right up the wall. No, there was a exceedingly narrow stairway of the same gray stone as the walls. One could hardly make it out until one set foot on it, and not much better then. Even less so when it was this dark.

Lelanva definitely wouldn't attempt to come back down it without light. "Let's see what's up there. And you be really, really careful, boy. We didn't get this far so you can fall and crack your head."

Up they went, sidling with their hands against the wall, Nib in the lead. "There's a narrow place to go through here," he said as they reached the top. "Ooh, full of cobwebs."

"Maybe snakes, too," she couldn't resist telling him. "Slide on through."

"It's hard to hold onto my candle. Now it goes back the other way. So no one can see it, huh?"

It was supposed to be secret, after all. Lelanva didn't bother to remind him of that. A minute later they sat on a ledge on the side of aqueduct, feet dangling, looking toward Famod.

"There are still fires," she said. "Mostly burnt out, I think."

Not much light at all came from the city. Torches could be glimpsed along the ramparts. They were really far too close to those to dawdle. "I don't think we should use the road," said Lelanva.

Nib looked up. "We can use the channel as our road."

"Is there water in it?"

"Broken in too many places for that. My dad showed me when we came up here. We used to—used to come out from the city whenever we could." The boy stifled a sob.

"Then you'll have to be our guide from here out. I don't know about anything outside Famod."

They clambered over the edge of the aqueduct without much difficulty and hiked up its channel. Quite dry it might be, but much litter and dirt had accumulated in it, and some surprisingly large trees had taken root. Moreover, it was broken here and there, though no gaps proved too wide for them to jump across.

Grandmother Moon rose to light their way, in time. Lelanva said a little prayer of thanks for that, though she felt a bit silly doing so. Through the night they walked, resting only now and then, and into the dawn. Famod looked far away now. "There used to be villas up here," said Nib, pointing to ruins barely recognizable as once having been dwellings. "Rich Tesrans lived in them. They were the first places looted when the Mur took over."

Like me, thought Lelanva. Her ancestors were barbarians. She wasn't too far removed from being one herself. "I don't suppose it would be safe to take shelter in one." A roof over their head would be nice but most didn't appear to still have roofs. And the weather was good, as fine a day of early summer as one might wish.

Would that summer had never come. It had brought the fleet of the Muram Empire with it. True, some ships would cross the Great Sea even in the middle of winter, but the Empire had not been willing to risk its fleet before spring. These facts she had heard from soldiers on the walls, from sailors on the docks, from her own father.

"How far does this aqueduct go?" she asked. "I know we can't follow it all the way to Tesra!"

"There is supposed to be a lake. I've never been that far."

"We'll go find it later. Right now we need to find a good spot to hide and rest a while." A thicket of bushes provided concealment, to rest and to eat. Lelanva could spot a grove of hutnee trees below them. Their beans wouldn't be ripe yet. The girl knew them well as

common fare for cattle and impoverished humans. She didn't know if she would recognize anything else growing wild. The last of their own food would soon be gone.

Both slept soundly and started off again in the mid afternoon. The aqueduct varied greatly in height now as it passed over the rolling hills, sometimes on high arches, sometimes with its channel set into the ground, even cutting through the top of a rise, here and there. Lelanva felt vulnerable when they were down low, though they had spied not one person so far.

She hoped none had spied them! By sunset they could spy the lake glimmering ahead. Soon, water began to appear in the channel. The aqueduct was again nearly level with the ground here. When reeds sprouted from a sheet of water spreading from one wall to the other, it was time to abandon their erstwhile roadway.

"Ooh, what is this?" Lelanva asked, as she hopped down and sank into the soggy ground.

Nib knew. "It's a marsh."

She knew the word. This muddy reality was not quite what she'd expected. She did not like its smell at all, and she had experienced more than a few unpleasant smells in Famod. "Well, we can't stay in it. That way." The lake was not large, not that Lelanva knew of any other lakes with which to compare it. Nor did Nib, for that matter; he truly knew only a little more of life outside the city walls than his friend. It was much smaller than Famod harbor, to be sure.

Some might have named it a pond. Shortly, they were on higher ground and halfway around to its other side. "I bet there are fish in there," said Lelanva. "We can try catching them." That, she did know something about. She had fished from the wharves of Famod.

They crossed a barely perceptible, overgrown road. "That's not the way to Tesra, is it?" the girl ask. She much doubted it but was sure of nothing, right now.

"Huh-uh. The road over the hills is paved with stone."

"Just like when it leaves the gates of Famod?"

"Yep. All the way." She was willing to believe it. If it were not

true, they would find out eventually. They *were* going to Tesra. She could come up with no other plan.

A sizable compound of stone buildings, falling into ruin, rose ahead. They'd best be careful approaching them. She squatted and motioned for Nib to do the same. "We'll wait until it's darker," she told him. The sun was near sinking behind the hills already. It wouldn't be long.

Nib whispered, "My dad told me there was a shrine here, to one of the Tesran gods."

Lelanva knew the names of some of those deities. They had tended to become mixed up with the Muram gods in the minds of many. She wondered if they minded. Or if they even paid any attention.

She could imagine them joking about it. "Dark enough. Let's go."

The duo crept toward the buildings. None of those rose particularly high—even without their roofs—save one tall structure in the middle. Lelanva at once guessed that was the shrine, proper, and the others were workshops and dormitories and the like. "I'll bet there is a big kitchen somewhere," she whispered to Nib. "Was a big kitchen."

"The one with the chimney," he responded, pointing.

Sensible boy. It was indeed a larger chimney than those on any of the other buildings, even if it had crumbled some. It also made as good a landmark as any for them to head toward. A kitchen might be attached to a dining hall. They wouldn't want to blunder into a large space with nowhere to conceal themselves. She led her friend around to what was probably the rear of the kitchen. Any doors that had once hung in the openings there had long disappeared. One would be as good to try as another. Up a few stone steps and inside they went.

A storeroom, maybe, once. The slight lingering bit of daylight that filtered in from outside showed little, and they no longer carried any lights. Those had been doused when they took to traveling in the open along the aqueduct, and they had no way to relight one of the remaining candles.

Lelanva stepped cautiously into the next room, one even darker. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust, to realize there was a man inside, huddled on a stool beside a shrouded lamp. He spied them at once and rose, one hand on his sword, the other lifting his light, then relaxing when he took in who his visitors were. The fellow looked thoroughly Muram—copper-complected, dark of hair, sparse of beard. His outfit was that of a soldier, tunic and trousers, with a short sword at his side, but any insignia had been discarded.

"You kids by yourselves?" he asked, peering into the darkness behind them. "All right, then, come on into my home." He barked a laugh. "I guess it's mine now! Someone had already been squatting here but they've taken off. Maybe the troubles in Famod scared them away." He looked the pair over. "You've come from Famod?"

Lelanva gave him a cautious nod.

"How went things there? Has the city fallen?"

"Taken and sacked."

"We snuck out," Nib added.

"Smart of you," the soldier told them, settling back onto his stool. "I be Sogid. No reason I shouldn't tell you that."

"But maybe not others?" hazarded Lelanva.

"Ha, maybe not. Want some grub?"

That they did. "I am Lelanva and this is Nib," she told him, as they took places on the floor. It was not a clean floor, as most would define such, but the dirt was dry and old and not at all nasty. And there was an intact roof above them.

Sogid gave them each a millet cake. Typical marching fodder for a soldier. "I was with the Esan troops sent to defend the city," he said. "I could see it was a lost cause, you know? So I took off."

Lelanva couldn't bring herself to judge him for that. She'd taken off herself. Not that she ever had any duty to stay. "Are you making your way back to the Esan army?

There was an emphatic shake of his head. "I'd be crucified as a deserter."

"We're going to Tesra," volunteered Nib. Lelanva shot him an annoyed expression but he seemed to miss it.

"Hmm, a week's journey, at least, afoot," said the soldier. "It might be the place for me, too. Aye, it just might." He surveyed the pair for a few seconds. "And I might just accompany you if you don't mind."

Lelanva's first instinct was to mind very much. She'd done a pretty good job of taking care of herself and Nib, so far, hadn't she? But she could see no real reason to object. She could even grudgingly admit they might need his protection.

"Do we travel by night or day?" she asked. "We're ready to move on right now if you are."

Sogid gave that more thought than it probably needed, giving the youngsters a lingering, thoughtful appraisal before speaking. "It would be best to go by night, wouldn't it? Until we're further from Famod. Wouldn't surprise me at all if the Imperials decided to send some patrols up this way, when they think about it."

Within the hour, the three were on their way. "The main road's over that way," said Sogid, waving an arm southward. "I reckon we could angle to it 'stead of taking that cow-path I came in by."

Across unknown hills in the darkness? Lelanva wasn't so sure of that. Oh, but once the moon came up it should be all right. Even the starlight on this clear night helped.

It also helped that the hills were largely barren of aught but grass. There were supposed to be forests further on, but that was yet another thing of which she knew only by hearsay. Around Famod, the harsh winds off the sea didn't allow for much in the way of trees, much less big trees pressing close to one another.

By the time the moon rose, they walked the stones of the road to Tesra. Weary they were when dawn came and all too willing to hole up for the day. The soldier meted out a couple more cakes, and Nib and Lelanva shared what was left of their own store. "It might be hard going in a couple days," felt Sogid, reclining on his ragged cloak, "unless we find some food somewhere. Haven't seen any farmhouses or the like, so far."

"Would they feed us?" wondered Nib.

The man shrugged. "If they don't, we can take what we need.

One way or another." He gave Lelanva another long look before rolling over and snoring.

So they rose at dusk and walked through part of another night. "I say we stop here and rest a bit," spoke Somig, a few hours before dawn. "We could start walking by daylight then. Should be safe enough."

Lelanva might have chosen to go all the way to Tesra by night, but could see there was no reason now. Maybe they'd run into other travelers by day. It would be nice to know there were still other people in the world!

Not very many of them it seemed, when they once again took to the road, at least in this part of the world. A ragged man hurried by once, not looking at them and keeping his distance. A shepherd surveyed them from the safety of a nearby hill. At least his dog barked at them. Ruined buildings rose here and there along the way but no one seemed to live beside the road now. "That's one of the old caravansaries," Sogid informed them as they approached a tumbled-down place. "The Tesrans put them all along the roads. There's ones like 'em on the road from Robon."

"You're from Robon?" asked Lelanva.

"Lived there," was all the soldier was willing to say. "Good a place as any to camp." Without further word he turned from the road.

Lelanva was just about ready to walk on without him. This Sogid wasn't going to make decisions for her! They didn't need him anyway. But Nib followed the soldier. The boy looked tired. She was pretty tired herself. The caravansary—what was left of it—once had sheds lining the inside of its walls. Those were largely gone but the stone walls were intact. For the most part.

"It's safe to have a fire now," Sogid decided. "You two see if you can find some wood."

Orders, again. But it would be nice to have a fire. She and Nib gathered armfuls of what they thought might burn, though they knew little of such things. Sogid made no comment when they dumped them, but busied himself with a fire-bow, igniting a small

flame. A fitful fire soon burned. That evening they shared the last of the food they carried. Lelanva still felt empty as she fell into sleep.

To be awakened with a start. It wasn't morning yet. What was going on? Sogid was straddling her, tying her hands together with a leather thong. "Don't struggle, girl. There, that should do. Now behave," he growled. He got off her, kneeling now by her side.

"What—?" She didn't know what question to ask.

"I reckon I can sell you to a brothel when we reach Tesra. Maybe the boy too." He reached out a calloused hand, slid it up her leg. "No reason I shouldn't enjoy myself some first though, is there? No reason at all." His hand strayed further under her skirt. "And teach you how to behave, eh?"

"Stop!" Nib was suddenly there, fists striking again and again at him.

Sogid casually backhanded the boy, sending him sprawling. "Maybe I'll have some of you, too, when I've finished with the girl." He returned his attention to Lelanva. She could glimpse Nib lying stunned beyond Sogid. Then he was atop her and she could see nothing but his leering face.

His hands tore at her blouse. "Ha, nothing to see there," he snickered, pressing his wiry whiskers against her nipples. What was he doing? Oh, trying to slide his trousers down. She couldn't fight him. He was too big, too heavy, and had her pinned down. And tied! How could she have let that happen?

Sogid's breath came fast, ragged. Then came a sudden deep gasp and he rolled off her. Surely that wasn't all, was it? That wasn't at all what she had heard about sex. No, there was blood running down the man's torso and Nib standing there with a sword in his hand. Where had he found that?

The soldier rose and fumbled for his own weapon, his trousers about his ankles, his erection visibly deflating. Lelanva at once rolled over, throwing herself against his legs. He stumbled, fell, his sword clattering on the ground. "Get him again!" she yelled at Nib, even as she reached for Sogid's wayward weapon. Then both were

thrusting their blades into the soldier's body, over and over, and far more than was necessary.

"Did he hurt you, Lellie?" asked the boy when both stepped away. His slight body shook. Lelanva was a little surprised by how calm she felt herself. There was no time to think about that now.

"No. Never got the chance, thanks to you. Where did you get that sword?"

"I—I needed it and I, uh, saw it and reached out and grabbed it." He held the weapon out to her. It was longer than the military blade Sogid had carried, and much nicer in workmanship. It could bring a good price anywhere.

As she held it, the sword faded and evaporated. "Oh, well, we have the other sword," said Lelanva. "Reached out and grabbed it, eh? From another world, maybe?" She had heard of such things, in the tales told in the marketplace.

"I guess, Lellie. I don't know. I—I don't know anything." The boy began to bawl.

She finished sawing through the thongs on her wrists and went to embrace him. "I know you're the bravest companion I could ever have." Holding him then at arms' length, she said, "You must have wizard blood. That means you definitely belong in Tesra. They called it the city of wizards, didn't they?

"City of wizardry."

"I was close. Let's gather what we need and be on our way."

Before dawn, the two companions walked the road to Tesra.

II. The Road to Tesra

Nib woke gasping. "It's all right," Lelanva assured him, taking his trembling hands in hers. "It's all right. We're safe now."

"We killed him, Lellie." The boy burst into tears and threw his arms around her. "I see him when I dream and—and other things."

She had only the vaguest idea what those other things might be. They had discovered but a few days ago Nib had wizard heritage, though there had been hints all along. Hints Lelanva hadn't been able to recognize. Wizards did see things, didn't they? Things in other worlds. That was pretty much all she knew on the subject.

"A boy his age shouldn't see the things he has," said a gaunt, middle-aged man.

"No one should, Doab," added the woman on his arm. Lelanva did not think she was his wife, but the pair were fellow refugees from the fall of Famod. Comrades now and more than comrades, heading for a new life. So they hoped. The children had fallen in with a group of such refugees, traveling the old, worn stone road across the hills. There had been kindness to the two ragamuffins, who might have starved before reaching Tesra otherwise.

There had been kindness, too, along the way. People lived closer to the road here, and were willing to aid those who had escaped the sack. It was distant news to them, but worrying none the less. What if an Imperial army marched up into the hills now?

Unlikely, the refugees would tell them. Taking Famod had been the objective of the attack, securing an important port. Tesra, across the hills, would not be so tempting. Moreover, it would bring open war against the Scola who now controlled the city.

"We could have used some of Scola's aid, ourselves," remarked someone as they had traveled on.

"There is said to have been some, on the sly," came the reply from a merchant, a man of Tesra, who claimed he often traveled this road. "The Scolam king wasn't about to risk getting into a war but money was finding its way across the hills to the Esa. At least

enough to hire a few mercenaries." He frowned in the direction of the boy and girl, apparently recalling their tale of Sogid, the man they had slain when he attempted to rape Lelanva. "Not very good ones, it seems."

The merchant, who named himself Zil, had been journeying toward Famod when he had met the band of refugees. On hearing of the city's fate, he had turned around and joined them. Although he had transportation in the form of a cart and donkey, he had chosen to walk with his new companions. Nib was offered a ride, but the boy's pride wouldn't permit it.

Surely the man had known Famod was besieged, thought Lelanva. Why did he think he could carry on his trade there? From the haphazard assortment of goods in his cart, she couldn't quite figure out what that was, either. Many of the packs and bags of the travelers were now tossed in atop his wares.

The story of the two had soon become known throughout the group, as well as the fact that Nib was—or might be—a sorcerer. Lelanva saw no reason not to tell the truth though perhaps not so much of the truth as Nib. He bragged of their adventures and of her prowess to anyone who would listen. "When we reach Tesra," she told him, "we'll have to set you up in the market as a story-teller."

What *were* they going to do when they got to the city? Would they be welcomed at all or would the gates be shut in their faces? Lelanva assumed there were gates. Famod had gates but it was the only city she'd seen. If only she were a boy and could join the army! Especially if they went to war with the Empire.

Oh, Tesra had a harbor like Famod, too. That she had heard more than once. Lelanva knew ships, so maybe she could get some sort of work on the docks. And she'd take care of Nib. She'd be Lellie, she decided, when they got to the city. Their new friends called her that. New friends, a new city, a new name.

The man to ask about all this was the Tesran merchant. She could learn at least something about the place before they got there.

She made her way to his side and walked there silently for a few minutes, each of them pretending to take no notice of the other.

At last, she asked, "Sir, Tesra is ruled by the, um, Scola, right?"

It might not have been the sort of question he was expecting. "Not directly. The prince of the city is a vassal of the Scolam king. You know what a vassal is?"

"It's, ah—no, I don't," she admitted.

"Have you ever seen a puppet show?"

"Sure." She'd even paid once.

"Then think of the prince as a puppet and King Osmor as the hidden fellow who makes him dance."

She had to smile at the thought of a dancing prince. "It's good to know how things work. The Scola. They're Muram, like the Esa and the Gera?"

"They like to claim otherwise. Their tribe migrated from the north much later than those who founded their kingdoms by the Great Sea. But they speak a Muram language. You probably won't need to learn it but you will need to know Tesran." She and Zil had been conversing in the Esam dialect spoken in Famod. "Modern Tesran, that is, which is a Muram-based pidgin spoken all around the inland sea. Few know or speak the old tongue in the city."

It took her a moment to realize he meant it was spoken elsewhere. "In the city?"

He chuckled at her attempt at nonchalance. "The old language of the Tesrans is spoken in the Great Rift still. Or a language much like it."

Neither said more about the Rift. For Lellie, it was an incredibly distant land, said to be the habitation of wizards and demons. But Zil did add, "I daresay your friend should learn the old tongue. I'll—well, best save that for later. Right now—look!"

The merchant pointed westward. A great body of water spread before them, visible now from the rise on which they stood. "That is the Sea of Sanctuary. To be honest, it is a very large lake rather than a sea, but don't say that to anyone in Tesra."

Sanctuary? That was what she and Nib needed. "Why is it called that?"

"It was named by the founders of Tesra, fleeing a distant and powerful enemy."

Refugees. This group of refugees had come to a halt, surveying the distant sea. "Are we near Tesra then?" someone asked.

"Another day. We jog to the south and parallel the coast," announced Zil. The man turned his eyes to Nib, gawping with the rest of the band. Doab had him on his shoulders so he could see the better. "I would guess your friend has some of the old Tesran blood in him," he told Lellie.

She cocked her head at the merchant. "Do you, sir?"

"It is inevitable that I do, but perhaps not much. You might well have a drop or two yourself. Ho, let's get moving," he called to the others. "Tesra won't come to us!"

To the girl, he said, "By the way, you might best address me as Master Zil when we reach the city. If anyone asks, you and Nib are in my charge."

Lellie felt a certain resentment rising in her. People trying to make decisions for her again! How did she know this man's intentions were any better than those of Sogid? She suspected he had his own plans for her. Best, maybe, to keep close to Doab. He was a big man, even if much of that size was in height.

The caravansary in which they stopped, a little down the road, was maintained in reasonable repair. It seemed Tesra kept an eye on the road within its own domain. "Trade with Famod," admitted Zil, "has fallen off greatly, though it remains the easiest way to reach the ocean. Travelers are more likely to cross the hills by the steeper route to Robon."

"And safer?" asked a woman.

"That too. Some find it even safer to send goods the long way, south to Bitasa."

"A den of pirates," spoke Doab. "Or so I've always heard." Lellie had heard the same.

"Pirates are a danger anywhere," Zil responded. "However, the Bitasans are allies of Scola. For the moment."

Fourteen was the little band that settled inside the compound's walls. Fifteen, were one to include Zil's donkey. A handful of other travelers joined them. None of these were bound over the hills—at least not to Famod—but headed north or south along the shores of the inland sea. Though the water could no longer be spied from their road, Lellie knew it lay close. There was none of the pervasive smell of the sea she knew from Famod, but the same seabirds flew above them. Gulls, terns. Even a sea-eagle she glimpsed once.

But there many others new to her. This whole world was new. Even the people, who spoke strangely, and were darker for the most part and without the common eyelid fold of a Mur. But such were found in Famod, too, including Nib.

"Do we need go all the way to the city?" wondered one of the men. "Do we even need to be noticed by, um, those in charge of things?"

Added another, "And will they try to draft us into their army?"

"Or make us slaves?" That came from Anniqa, Doab's companion.

Zil did no more than smile. "A little late to think of such things, my friends, is it not? But know that other refugees preceded you, those who got out of Famod early. I think not many will follow."

"And they were not ill-treated?"

"They were not. Enemies of the Empire and their Ger allies are to be welcomed." To this, he appended, in a seemingly offhand manner, "And might always prove useful."

Anniqa snickered. "Not this bunch!"

"Resourceful enough to escape. That's saying something." More than one head nodded. People always liked to feel good about themselves. Zil knew that, thought Lellie.

Lellie hadn't paid much attention to Doab's companion before. There was so much else to see and think about! She gave the woman a closer looking over now. Anniqa was a bit homely, maybe, a plump woman with ample breasts. Guys liked that, didn't they?

She thought they must get terribly in the way. But maybe breasts weren't so bad. Stop staring, she told herself. The woman's soft hands and manner said 'whore' to Lellie. Not from one of the high-class places near the western wall, but not one to hang about the docks propositioning sailors, either.

"What are you daydreaming about?" whispered Nib.

"Nothing," the girl mumbled, feeling her face redden. "How did you escape?" she asked, not directing the question toward any one person. She just wanted to get her mind on something else.

"We both slipped out during the sack," said Anniqa, looking up at the man whose arm encircled her.

Doab nodded. "But different ends of the city. I went over the walls and into the water, where Anniqa managed to make it through one of the gates in the chaos."

"So did others. Most of these," she said, nodding toward the other refugees, "escaped in the darkness of that night."

"But none of us went underground like the kids!" Doab's chuckle gave way to a more serious, perhaps thoughtful, expression. "Hey, I'd bet there are those who would like to know about that secret way out."

"Or in," came Zil's dry response. "No concern of ours, eh? I'm going to get some sleep now. Tesra tomorrow." With that he pulled up a thin blanket and rolled over. The travelers still hanging about wandered off to find beds of their own.

Lellie didn't at all believe he wasn't interested in her escape route. But the story had been told often enough now that it would no longer be a secret. There were bound to be those who repeated it.

Zil was right. Tesra tomorrow—sleep now. But anticipation, excitement, maybe a touch of apprehension, prevented her from falling at once into slumber. The merchant's donkey in the next stall didn't seem ready to sleep either. She could hear it moving about, uneasy, restless, snorting softly now and again. A low 'yip' sounded somewhere in the dark. Close maybe.

"Doggy?" murmured a half-asleep Nib.

Lellie's first thought was of wolves. She'd never seen a wolf but

she had seen their hides, so she knew they existed. As to their exact appearance, much less their size, she knew far less. The girl suspected the marketplace storytellers tended to exaggerate such details.

Then the donkey exploded, braying loudly and insistently, waking all the travelers and, undoubtedly, anyone within miles. Immediately, figures rushed toward Zil, a man and a pair of—what? Not wolves. She was sure of that.

Lellie grabbed for the short sword of Sogid, the soldier she and Nib had slain. She didn't much care for the feel of it in her hand; it seemed clumsy and heavy and only good for stabbing, up close. But it was a weapon and one was needed. She never paused to consider whether she was needed to wield it.

Zil himself had come to his feet, a long dagger in his hand. It was matched by that in the grasp of his attacker. Lellie ran in and swung at one of the dog-like creatures. She swung badly and hit it with the flat of the sword. With a snarl, it turned to confront her.

At least I kept it from attacking Zil, she told herself, holding her blade before her. To her credit, it did not waver in the least. As the beast leapt toward the girl, a tall figure stepped forward and brought a heavy stave crashing down on its spine. It crumpled at her feet.

"Fence post," stated Doab, casting it aside. "It was handy. Are you all right, girl?"

She could only nod. Others surged forward now. Most of the refugees hesitated, uncertain of what was going on. None were armed, after all, aside from small knives, for the citizens of Famod did not carry swords. Not openly. Those travelers who came from this side of the hills were less reticent and better equipped.

If the intent of Zil's assailant had been to kill quickly and escape, he had failed. He shouted something Lellie couldn't understand, and turned to run into the darkness, his remaining companion bounding after. It ran sometimes on all fours and sometimes two, in a crouching shuffle.

None felt a desire to pursue them into the night. The man looked

like none she had ever seen, though she had caught but a glimpse of him. His hair was definitely blond. Lellie had seen blond Tesrans who visited Famod, but this fellow was not at all the same.

And as for the creatures who followed him—they were beyond anything she knew or had even imagined.

Nib slipped past her and knelt by the stricken animal. Animal it seemed to Lellie, though disturbingly manlike in some respects. "Poor doggy," the boy whispered. It whimpered, as he softly stroked its short, gray fur.

Zil crouched beside him. "Its back is broken, lad," he said, placing a hand on the boy's shoulder. "The ghalun are not evil creatures, no more so than dogs. Ah, it is gone."

"What is it?" asked someone.

"Ghalu," he said, rising to address the crowd gathered around them. "Jackal-men some name them, though there is nothing of mankind in their heritage. I've seen none in these parts in many years."

"Should we bury it, sir?" This came from the older man who managed the caravansary. He stood regarding the dead creature, toying with his long, curling beard.

"Hmm. They might be interested in it in Tesra, but I've no intention of hauling its carcass there in my cart. Yes, bury it somewhere. Tuvo, aren't you? I'll see that your name is mentioned when I report all this to the authorities."

Tuvo motioned to a pair of stable hands to haul the body away. They did so with some reluctance. No one seemed to want to get close to the dead ghalu, Lellie included, and she did not blame them one bit.

Except for Nib and Zil. She accompanied the pair back to their beds. Doab followed behind, and Anniqa, who had joined him at some point. Lellie dropped back to say, "Thank you for helping me."

Anniqa snickered. "You mean saving you, girl."

"Don't be so sure she couldn't have skewered the beast on her

own," the big man told her. Lellie suspected he was not being completely serious. Anniqa only squinted up at him and shrugged.

As they settled down with their blankets, Lellie sat cross-legged, regarding the Tesran merchant and trying to figure things out. Her suspicions about him were even stronger now.

He only smiled on noting her attention. "Yes," he told her, "I was their target and, no, I don't know who set them on me. I can make guesses."

But he didn't make guesses, at least not right then. "Are we safe now?" asked Nib.

"For the moment. Now both of you get some rest. Tomorrow night we sleep by the Sea of Sanctuary."

III. The Sea of Sanctuary

"Occupation?" asked the guard at the city gate. He was attempting to sound interested. Or at least official.

"Stevedore," replied Doab. "And this is my wife," he added, putting an arm around Anniqa.

Lellie well knew that wasn't true. The two had met only a few days ago, fellow refugees from the sack of Famod.

The other guard looked the rawboned dockworker up and down. "You used to wrestle, didn't you? I think I saw some of your matches."

"Too old for that now," was the only reply Doab seemed willing to provide.

The merchant Zil spoke up for the first time. "I'll take charge of this pair. Same with the kids," he said, nodding toward Lellie and Nib.

"Certainly Master Zil. The rest of you—hmm, nine?" He looked at the list he had scrawled. "Yes, the rest of you can go up the street to the temple of Fasenais and they'll see about getting you fed and settled. Or just go squat somewhere. No one is likely to stop you."

"Many of the buildings are empty," Zil informed his traveling companions. "Tesra has not even a quarter of the inhabitants it once boasted."

Lellie had been impressed when she first spied the sprawling city from the hills above the Sea of Sanctuary. Tesra dwarfed Famod—admittedly, the only other city she knew. It was disappointing to know it was so far fallen from its days of glory, as the capital of a great empire.

"Who is Fasenais?" asked Anniqa, as they started down the stone-paved way.

Nib piped up before Zil could answer. "The Tesran mother goddess."

"Indeed so. One of the four major deities worshiped here from of old, and identified with the element of water." Zil gazed toward the

wide inland sea. "Fasenais is also connected by many to the Sea of Sanctuary. Lan Tenac, in the old speech of the city, though you are not likely to hear that very often. Here is the temple."

Also disappointing, thought Lellie, on glimpsing the small, squarish stone building set among a grove of cedar trees. "One of the springs that provides Tesra with water is located here. Those also are considered sacred to Fasenais. Though unlike your Famod, the aqueducts that bring water from the hills are still intact."

"Is there a temple for Grandmother Moon?" asked Lellie. She immediately felt a bit foolish for asking this, but she did look upon her as a protector of sorts. At least on those occasions when the moon shone above and she could actually believe in the ancient goddess.

"Not that I am aware of, but there are other shrines to the various Muram gods. The moon is also considered an emblem of Fasenais. Greetings, sisters." Two women in deep blue robes had come out to them. "I fear I have brought more in need to you."

"If they are in need, sir, it is fitting that you did. Come with us, good folk."

Doab appeared uncertain whether he should follow the others. And Lellie had decided she and Nib would go wherever he did, whatever this Zil wished. Or Anniqa wished, for that matter. She got the feeling the woman didn't care for them tagging along.

Maybe she didn't want to feel responsible for them. Silly woman, Lellie thought. I'd probably be the one taking care of her!

"You may go where you wish, Master Doab," spoke Zil, spreading his arms wide. "All the city is open to you but I offer you my hospitality tonight." And perhaps more tomorrow? That seemed implied.

The sun was sinking into the inland sea—how strange after watching it rise from the ocean all her life. Lellie didn't like the idea of being out at night in this great, dark, unknown city. The girl had just about decided to take Nib on into the temple, if Doab dawdled any longer.

"We'll go with you, sir," Anniqa said, "and we thank you for your kindness."

Well, someone made a choice! "Then let's be off." Zil glanced at Nib. "The boy's asleep on his feet. Get him into my cart. Plenty of room now." The refugees' meager luggage had gone with them.

Doab set the boy in among Zil's supposed trade goods. Lellie felt pretty worn out herself so she perched on the rear of the wagon, while the adults walked ahead. The buildings that rose to two or three stories on either side did not seem too different from those she had know in Famod. On many, the stucco exteriors had cracked or broken off, exposing brick walls. A turn to the right, onto a street that looked much the same. Here and there, a lamp created an island of light in the sea of dusk. Tired she might be, but there was too much to see here for Lellie to fall asleep. None the less, her eyelids were drooping when the cart halted. How do they tell one building from another? she wondered.

"Master Zil! I was about to shut the gates, sir." A thick-bodied man emerged from the arched entry. His dark eyes swept across the little party. "Is it true Famod has fallen? The rumors are many and do not all agree." For the first time, someone in Tesra was speaking in something other than Imperial Muram. Zil had addressed the guards and priestesses in that tongue and they had responded in kind.

Lellie found that she could understand the gist of what the man said. "It is so, Ogos. These are some who escaped and will stay with us a while. In we go, girl." This latter was addressed to the donkey.

Ogos looked thoroughly Muram to Lellie, but his accent was like none she had ever heard. The girl had heard a great variety of them spoken in Famod, by merchants and sailors and loafers on the docks.

"Master Ogos is my majordomo," Zil informed them as they entered the shadowed passageway. The walls here were of naked brick, and doorways opened into rooms on either side. Where had Ogos gone? She peered into the growing darkness behind them to see the man had pulled stout oaken doors closed, and was dropping

a thick bar. Zil turned abruptly into a wide opening to their left. "We tend to Cappy first," he announced, giving the donkey a pat. "She's worked the hardest this day."

Nib had sat up and was taking interest in their surroundings. "A stable," Lellie whispered. Zil must be pretty well to do, if he owned this place.

"I like the smell," the boy whispered back, and slid out of the wagon. "Can I help with Cappy?" he asked.

"Best we leave that to the grooms and get you settled somewhere," the merchant replied, giving him an indulgent smile. "You may come down here in the morning, if you wish."

Nib nodded, and hugged the donkey's neck. "Good girl! Thank you!"

Anniqa's giggle spoke of her amusement and also, perhaps, a fondness for the youngster. "You may have found a new stable boy, sir," she said.

Zil answered only, "I expect greater things from our Nib."

"But it is an honest trade," Doab had to add.

"That it is. Follow me, friends." They emerged into a narrow courtyard. Lellie was not too surprised; some older houses were built on this plan in Famod. Mostly crowded tenements! She looked up to see galleries all around. Three stories? It was hard to be certain in the gloom.

"Many of the rooms lie empty," Zil informed them. "Empty of residents. I use some for storage." He looked back over his shoulder. "I depend on you to know which ones, Ogos."

"All four together, sir?" asked the majordomo, now speaking in the Imperial dialect.

"The children in my suite and a room for the couple. That is acceptable to you?" he asked Anniqa and Doab.

Anniqa might been thinking of objecting but Doab spoke first. "Acceptable to me, master, but how do Nib and Lellie feel about it?"

Lellie felt that was a quite sensible question. About time they asked her opinion! "Anywhere is fine, sir, as long as Nib and me are

together." Nib was her responsibility. She was not about to give him up to anyone else.

The girl was definitely suspicious of Anniqa's intentions toward Nib. She might not have been quite willing to admit to being jealous. Zil crossed the courtyard at an angle, halting before tall double doors. "My office," he announced. "Come on in, all of you, and share a meal while Ogos readies a room. Tell them to send something from the kitchen, won't you?" he asked the majordomo.

"Certainly, sir. I think there is a suitable room across the way. Second floor."

Zil nodded, somewhat absentmindedly, and the man left them. He did not seem to hurry. "He's a Scol, isn't he?" asked Anniqa. "I've, um, met one or two of them in Famod." Lellie behaved herself—with a little effort—and stifled a snicker.

"Yes. There are a fair number of Scola in Tesra. Ogos first came here as a soldier. Sit anywhere."

"Wow," came from Nib. "I've never seen so many books." Bookcases filled one wall, floor to ceiling.

"You can read, I assume." The merchant turned his eyes to Lellie. "How about you?"

"Nib's father taught me my letters. I can sign my name." The girl took a certain measure of pride in that fact.

She noted that Zil didn't bother to ask his two adult guests, but said only, "Reading is a useful skill. So would be speaking the language of the city. Imperial will only get one so far."

"That's what you and Ogos spoke, isn't it?" asked Lellie. "It wasn't too hard to follow."

"It shouldn't be. Best you refer to my majordomo as Master Ogos. He takes his office quite seriously and would not take to little ragamuffins being too familiar."

Zil's tone was less serious than his words. "So I will, sir," she replied. "For now."

That rated naught but a raised eyebrow. A man and woman, emerged from a side door, bearing platters. These they placed on the long table central to the room. "Ah, our dinner." Zil briefly

considered his guests. "I suppose you eat Muram-fashion, but I haven't the proper table in here. You'll have to sit in chairs."

Lellie's family had indeed taken their meals in what she considered the sensible way, on cushions about a low table. But she wasn't ignorant of the world beyond her neighborhood. She knew of those who ate at high tables like this, even in Famod.

Both servers wore long robes. Silk? Again, Lellie was not surprised by this, nor by their dark skins, nor even by the straw-colored hair of the man. She had seen Tesrans before coming here and more of them since arriving. The man filled tumblers from a pitcher as his partner set bowls before each guest. "Will you have further need of us, Master Zil?" she asked.

Zil waved a hand in dismissal. "Come back to clean up later. The morning will do."

The pair bowed deeply—that did surprise Lellie a little—and silently slipped out the way they had come. The kitchen must be that direction, she thought. It was always good to know where one might find food.

She sniffed at the brown liquid in her tumbler. Hutnee. That was obvious, but with other flavors the girl couldn't identify. A sip. Sweeter than they served it in Famod. The hot beverage was not at all a bad way to finish a day and a journey. There were some sort of cakes and cold meat. The cakes were full of dried fruit—it was a little early for much to have ripened yet.

Tesra was known for oranges, wasn't it? She'd had an orange once and would like to again. The city was known for other things, too. "Don't you all drink tea in Tesra, um, Master Zil?" she asked.

"It is popular," he conceded, "and is among the goods in which I trade." He smiled when she cocked her head at him. "Yes, I know you suspected I was more than a peddler with a donkey-cart. That was but a bit of deception so I might learn of the situation at Famod."

Anniqa spoke up, between mouthfuls of the sweet cake. She apparently quite liked it. "Then you are not a trader, sir?"

"A trader I am in truth, one of the merchants of Tesra. Most of

my trade is around the sea, by ship and caravan, and not so much across the hills." His eyes went to Doab. "So I could certainly use a man like you, in one capacity or anther. We can speak of that on the morrow."

Little but crumbs remained when Ogos entered by the front doors. "Master, Lord Nuthonides has come," he announced, adding with the slightest of knowing smiles, "As I am sure you expected."

"It was only a question of how soon the counselor would show up. Please tell him to come in. These two," he said, nodding toward Anniqa and Doab, "you may show to their room. Hmm, and best show them the way to the kitchen first."

Ogos beckoned to the pair and they followed him into the night. A minute or so later, a dark, heavy-set man entered. "Greetings, Zil. You slipped back home sooner than we expected."

"There was no reason to dawdle, my friend. Have a seat. I have dismissed the servants for the night but I can offer wine."

"Wine and a story will do," Nuthonides responded, settling into one of the high-backed, carved chairs. He glanced at the youngsters but asked no questions about them.

Zil filled two unadorned metal goblets with a tawny wine. When Lellie held out her tumbler he only shook his head. "None for children, my girl." The girl did not hide her scowl but he seemed not to notice it. She had drank watered wine all her life. Well, as much of it as she could remember.

The merchant proceeded to tell of his trip partway across the hills and back, including the news of Famod's fall, in the Tesran dialect. Lellie felt she understood the better part of it. "We had heard as much of the city," mused his guest. "But this attack on you is surprising. Baffling, I might say."

Zil stared into his goblet before answering. "We might make guesses about it and some might be correct. It does seem certain someone knew I was not the simple trader Zil."

"But what was the reason for you to be a target? You had no real mission on your trip."

"No, I only went to scout the situation at Famod. It may have

been no more than someone seeing an opportunity to remove me." A shrug, a smile. "I have made enemies, you know."

"And apparently some of them are wizards."

Zil turned his attention to the children for the first time since the counselor's arrival. "The boy here is a wizard and, as far as my knowledge of such things goes, seemingly a talented one. He will need training."

Nuthonides nodded agreement. "What of the girl?" It didn't sound like he put much value on an unknown, ragged child. Maybe he shouldn't, thought Lellie. Who was she to be with these apparently wealthy and powerful people?

"She is his protector. I do not think we should separate them, even if we could." Zil seemed both positive of this and amused by it. "Also, I feel there is promise in Lellie. We might be able to make use of her when she has a bit of education."

Make use of her? "I can take care of myself," she blurted. "I—I'll get work at the docks. And I can take care of Nib too!"

The snicker that came from Nuthonides died with a reproving glance from their host. "I am sure you can, Mistress Lellie. We can offer you more. Would you like to learn to properly use a sword?"

That she would. But, no, she wasn't about to show how eager she was. Lellie knew about bargaining. "I guess I can give it a try. For a while. It would be better for Nib too, wouldn't it?" The boy had fallen fast asleep on a plush divan. She felt her own eyelids drooping.

"Most definitely," offered Nuthonides. "It is dangerous to be an untrained sorcerer. Many such go mad."

"I'll take him to Una tomorrow," spoke Zil, tossing off what wine remained in his goblet. "And both had best go to their beds now."

"Then I'd best be on my way, as well," Nuthonides said, rising. "Our friends will wish to discuss these matters in greater depth."

"To be sure. We'll meet in the next few days." Zil picked up a couple pieces of flat wood and clapped them together, thrice. Ogos

appeared within seconds. "The counselor is leaving," Zil told him. "You can bar the gate again and then get some sleep."

"Certainly, master." With a deep bow, as Lellie had seen from the servants earlier, he left, Nuthonides following in his wake.

"And we can sleep as well." Zil blew out all the candles save one. "Bring that one," he ordered, scooping up the sleeping boy, and began to ascend a curving stairway. Lellie hurried behind him with the light.

"This counselor is important, isn't he?" she asked.

"Somewhat. He is close to the prince." Yet he clearly deferred to Zil. She could see that.

"There is a rarely used bedroom up here," Zil continued. "Get the door, will you? My hands are full."

Lellie squeezed by. The handle baffled her. She could neither pull nor push it, nor did it move up or down. "It has to be turned," Zil informed her. She was glad he didn't laugh, though she did herself when she got the door open.

What a room! She held the candle high while Zil deposited the still-slumbering Nib on a bed wider than any she'd ever seen. "I, um, don't know anything about—children, so I'd best let you take things from here," the man said. He lit another candle from the one she held and retreated. To his own bedroom, Lellie assumed.

This room was nearly as large as the house in which her family had lived, back in Famod. The ceiling was definitely higher. And it had pictures on it! How could anyone sleep with all those to look at, up there? The girl pulled Nib's shoes off. It was hardly cool enough to need it but she pulled one thin cover over him. She herself just lay down atop the bedclothes. The candle she left burning; it made her feel safer in this strange, new place.

So she fell asleep.

"Lellie! Lellie!" Someone was shaking her. Nib.

"It's all right," she told him. "We're safe here."

"No we're not! Someone broke in and we have to tell Zil!"

Just a bad dream, she told herself. They didn't have to wake Zil. No. She sat up. "Are you sure?"

Nib nodded vigorously. "They—men—" Puzzlement briefly appeared on his face. "Broke a lock. I think. I could see it." The boy frowned. "*Feel* it."

And Lellie felt the truth of his words. She slid off the bed and rushed into the hall. Which of these doors led to Zil's room? "Master Zil! Wake up!" She pounded on a a door chosen at random. "Wake up!"

A different door opened. "What is it?" The man wore a loose, sleeveless tunic; a long, curved blade was in his hand.

"Nib says someone broke a lock. Broke in. I don't understand it but—" Her voice trailed off. She didn't know what else she had intended to say and had run out of breath.

"I do. And I believe him. Come. You too, Nib." The boy stood wide-eyed at the doorway to their room. Zil opened another door and led them into a narrow passage. "There are wards—magic, you would say—placed on my gates to prevent entry. To bind the bars in place." He frowned at some thought before going on. "Nib must have felt it when someone broke them. I do not truly understand how such things work."

Nib slowly nodded. "Everything came apart," he murmured.

"I'll take your word for it, boy. Now I want you to keep going down this hallway till you reach a door. That will be Ogos's quarters. Wake him and tell him what is going on. Not too much noise, all right?"

"Where will you be, sir?" wondered Lellie.

"Greeting our visitors." He turned and disappeared into darkness.

How she wished she could accompany him! She wished as well her sword had not been left behind in the bedroom. Remember to carry it with you, she told herself. "Let's do as he says," she told Nib.

There was the door. No noise? She shouldn't knock then, should she? Lellie pushed the door open; it was dark on the other side. She held her candle high and whispered, "Master Ogos?"

She heard more than saw someone stir, then sit upright in a bed. Ogos. A dark form moved beyond him.

"What do you here?" he hissed.

"Master Zil sent us. Someone is in the house."

"They broke in," added Nib.

Lellie assumed the majordomo's next word was a curse. "And the fool has gone to confront them, hasn't he?" He turned to his woman, now sitting up as well. "I'll go rouse the house. You stay here with the kids." The man pulled on a pair of loose trousers, grabbed a short-sword leaning in a corner, and exited by the way the children had entered.

Lellie stood pondering that doorway for a moment. No one had told her to remain, had they? "You stay," she ordered Nib, and plunged into the darkened passageway. The woman might have raised an objection but the words were lost behind her.

Where Ogos might have gone, she didn't know, but Lellie could retrace the way to Master Zil's rooms. No one there. She detoured only to retrieve her own sword, before creeping through the darkness—she had thought it wise to leave her candle behind—to the top of the stairs.

A clash of metal rose from below, and a hint of light. The urge to both rush in and to run away rose in her; both she pushed down and forced herself to carefully descend, heart beating wildly.

A single lamp illuminated the library. There stood Zil, facing two men. A third sprawled on the floor, not to rise again. All three fought with long, gracefully curved swords, Zil's longer than those of his opponents, and wielded with both hands.

She couldn't fight them. The girl knew that. But she could be a distraction!

And she was in the line of sight of Zil's opponents. Lellie jumped up suddenly, waving her sword. The girl stifled a war-cry that had come to her lips. That might distract Zil!

Their eyes went to her, if only for a second. That was enough for Zil to skewer one with a fluid overhand thrust. Lellie thought it was one of the most beautiful things she had ever seen. Better than the

dancers in the temple of Uchpat! The other man sprang back rather than taking the opportunity to attack. Stupid!

Or maybe he saw the fight was lost and wished only to escape. She would never know, for Ogos and a couple men with spears burst in through the front doors. The intruder took one long look at them, sighed, and fell upon his own sword.

Lellie came clattering down the stair. Zil raised an eyebrow at her. "So you're what caught their eyes, eh?" he said, and no more.

She didn't mind. He knew she had helped and she liked that. "You're awfully good with the sword, sir."

"I am an adequate swordsman, but no master." He turned to address Ogos. "Carry the bodies outside. To the stables. I doubt we'll learn anything from them but we can look them over in the morn."

The majordomo looked the room over right then. "I'll need to get someone in here to clean up the blood, Master Zil."

"Again, in the morning." The men already had one body out the door.

"Very well, sir. I'll go let Toa know it's safe and fetch the boy." He started away, then paused to look at Lellie and shake his head. "This one should learn to obey."

"No one gave me any orders," she objected. Not that she felt any of them had the right. "Except to go and fetch you."

Ogos stood there a moment with furrowed brow. "I suppose that's true," he admitted. "Not that I would've expected a little girl to run toward trouble."

"I fear this one always will," said Zil.

IV. Among the Ruins

"Doesn't Master Zil have a wife? Or whatever?" Lellie knew somewhat of the various arrangements that existed between men and women. Or men and men, for that matter. Maybe Zil was that sort.

"His mistress lives elsewhere. I suspect you will meet her soon enough." The wife of Ogos, Toa, had roused them from bed. Zil was already somewhere else, doing something else. The woman shook her head at their ragged clothing. "I must tell the master you need new garments. We could clean these ones but it might be better to burn them. Ho, are you going to wear that to breakfast, girl?"

Lellie had strapped on her sword. "I go nowhere without it from now on," she proclaimed.

The woman only shrugged. She had probably been warned to expect the unexpected. "Well, come along then."

Toa was a rather tiny woman, who looked thoroughly Muram. As much so as Lellie, at least. She had spoken in a mix of dialects from both sides of the hills, as if she couldn't decide which to use with them. Down the stairs to the library she led them, where two women were scrubbing the dried blood stains. As soon as they were out the door, Toa spat. Lellie had seen many a Mur do so in the presence of death, symbolically cleansing themselves. She decided to do it herself. It made her feel better, somehow.

"Quicker to get to the kitchens through the courtyard," their guide told them, "and it's nice weather out. We're getting into the dry season. That's different over the hills, I hear."

"It's always raining there," said Nib.

"But there is usually too much fog to tell," Lellie added.

"Oh?" She might have been amused or puzzled or might even have believed them. "That's the dining hall over to your right. Master Zil uses it for storage space."

It seemed he used the courtyard to store things as well. There

were stacks of lumber and barrels and things covered up so Lellie couldn't tell what they were. A dry fountain stood in the midst of it all. The kitchens lay at the far end. The north end, Lellie was fairly sure, though the sun was not yet high enough to tell its exact position. The courtyard was a well of shadow this early in the day.

A shallow arcade ran along this northern side. "I think I smell food," said Lellie. She felt quite ravenous. There were still a lot of hungry days to make up for.

"Kitchens straight ahead. The laundry and workshops are over there," Toa told them, gesturing toward her left. "And storerooms back that way."

"And the stables!" piped up Nib.

"I'm hungry enough to eat Cappy."

Nib scowled at her. "She's not very nice sometimes," he confided.

"Maybe," Toa told him, "she'll be nicer with some food in her stomach."

"It's worth trying," Lellie informed them, pushing ahead to enter the kitchens first. At a long trestle table, Anniqa and Doab sat in conversation with Master Ogos.

"Ah, there they are," spoke the majordomo. "Some breakfast for the master's guests," he called out.

A girl scarcely older than Lellie called back, "They can come fill a bowl like everyone else."

Ogos only laughed and waved the two toward her. On their return with bowls full of coarse brownish cakes and boiled eggs and with cups of more hot hutnee—did they drink anything else here?—they took seats on a bench opposite the Scol.

"Master Zil will be along for the pair of you soon. He wishes to speak with you, as well," Ogos told Doab and Anniqa. "The master may ask you to care for this pair, Mistress Anniqa," he said, nodding toward the children. "We can't expect my busy wife to play nursemaid to them. She pretty much runs this place, you know."

"As long as *you* know," Toa told her husband. "But I wouldn't

mind too much having them around. At least this well-behaved boy." She winked at Lellie.

Who ignored her. The girl was in no mood for jokes at her expense. She wasn't in a mood for anything but to be left alone to eat, right now. Lellie wasn't even sure she wanted to eat anything, or stay around this place any longer. What if she just threw this bowl at—at something and grabbed Nib and walked out of there?

No, no, no, Lellie. That would be no good for her friend. Her only friend, the only one left. Everyone else was gone. Her home, her family. Stop crying, you idiot, she told herself.

None of the adults seemed quite certain how to react. Nib wrapped his arms around her, saying, "It's all right, Lellie. You and me are going to stick together."

Part of her wanted to hold him and part wanted to push him away. Who was she to take care of Nib? Let Toa or Anniqa or someone do that. She was useless.

She didn't know what to do so she just hugged Nib. He whispered, "Let's go to the stables. You can even try to eat a donkey."

Lellie couldn't help giggling. "The girl's been through a lot," she heard Doab rumble.

To which Ogos answered, "Many an adult she would put to shame. She will grow to be a true Muram woman, a warrior like those of old." The 'harrumph' that followed undoubtedly came from Toa.

The girl felt proud and embarrassed at once. "Let's go," she said to Nib. The stables sounded like a good place to be right now. She wouldn't exactly be hiding, would she?

"Return your bowls first," Toa told them. "That is the rule here."

Nib grinned. "Even for Master Zil?"

"When he eats in the kitchens, yes." Lellie believed it. Toa was a bit like those Muram women of old, too. Was she going to look like Ogos's wife when she grew up? She knew she wasn't likely to be much larger.

Nib led the way across the courtyard to the entry arch. There were undoubtedly other ways into the stables but they knew this

one. "There's Cappy," he crowed, and ran to say hello to the ass. There were many empty stalls. Some looked as if they had seen recent use. Lellie took inventory; another donkey, three horses. She had half-expected an ox or two to lug Zil's heavier merchandise. Oh, he probably kept them elsewhere. A small spotted dog followed her as she made her round. She tried to assure it she meant no harm but felt it didn't believe her.

It was inevitable that Nib would kneel and pet it as soon as she got back to him. "That's Rus," a groom informed him. "He's taken to you right off now, hasn't he?"

"You're a good boy, Rus!" Nib assured him. Rus agreed.

A clatter arose outside. Hooves! "That would be the master returning, I reckon," said the groom, sauntering toward the entrance.

A matched pair of black horses danced just outside the gate, hitched to a light chariot. Zil stood holding the reins. "Just who I wanted," he said, on spying them. "Climb in. Jel, run and tell Master Ogos I've taken them, will you?"

"Will do, sir."

Lellie doubted the man would actually run. Zil shook his reins and gave some command she didn't recognize. It apparently meant 'go' for they very much went. She had never traveled so fast! A peek at Nib assured her he enjoyed it. She thought she did too.

Nib could be happy here. He didn't need her. Lellie still wondered if it wouldn't be better if she just disappeared and left Nib with Zil. Her and her sword, the sword strapped at her waist, going anywhere she wanted. She thought about that sword for a while. Maybe she should be like the assassin in Zil's library. She could just admit defeat and fall on it. Maybe she would go live with Grandmother Moon then. Or maybe there would only be sleep.

Sleep was good. Zil slowed his chariot. "I'll have to talk to Doab later. Maybe even give him and his woman a tour," he said. "How do you feel about Anniqa?"

"She's lazy," stated Nib.

Lellie had to snicker at that. There was certainly some truth to it. "I think she was a whore in Famod."

"As do I. I would hold that against no woman. I do fear she might be the sort to throw our Doab over if someone better came along. Someone who seems better. I don't believe she could actually do better."

Most of that went over Nib's head, she thought. But she thoroughly agreed with Zil. "Did you think to give her a job, sir?" Lellie recalled what Ogos had said over breakfast.

"Possibly. Hold on, we're turning here." The chariot careened around a corner, onto a wide thoroughfare. "If I take Doab on, I might as well keep her busy too."

Lellie had barely paid attention to what he said. Her eyes were wide, taking in the wonders on either hand. And at the end of the avenue, the sea!

"Oh, can we go down to the water, Master Zil?"

"Certainly. Shall we see how quickly we can arrive?" He shook the reins, urging his horses forward with a single word. On either side rose massive buildings of gray stone, heroic statues, commanding colonnades. But Lellie could see many were in ruins, the great edifices seemingly empty. A few ragged inhabitants of the city moved lethargically among the reminders of Tesra's former glory.

"Ho!" Zil brought his horses to a sudden stop and at once turned around, picked up Nib, and set his feet on the pavement. The boy immediately puked.

"Just in time. You should be all right now, young master, but we'll go slowly the rest of the way." He sounded rather too cheerful to Lellie. Maybe Zil was just glad Nib hadn't thrown up in the chariot.

Most of the traffic was carts, pulled by oxen or donkeys, and traveling both directions. The girl saw no other chariots but they did pass a palanquin, carried by four dark, burly fellows in kilts. It looked a bit shabby to her, and the paint was far too garish.

For that matter, Master Zil's chariot wasn't that tastefully done,

was it? She didn't think she would say anything about it to him. Zil brought his chariot to a halt at one of the stone quays. Beyond sparkled the Sea of Sanctuary. Lan Tenac. She'd have to remember that name.

"That is one of my ships," said the Tesran, pointing. "And that one over there."

They were broad-beamed tubs, not particularly large, with square, battened sails. "They look awfully slow. Can they escape pirates?"

"One of the benefits of Scolam rule is that they keep this end of the sea free of piracy. The other end I avoid." The three walked out a little onto the gray stone; a man had materialized from somewhere to hold the horses. One of Master Zil's employees? Or maybe just someone looking for a tip.

The calm water lapped against the stone. There were no waterlines to mark that it ever rose higher. "Is this high tide?" It didn't seem the proper time for it, going by the moon. Lellie knew things of that sort.

"There are no tides on Lan Tenac, it being a land-locked sea."

"But—but I thought the sea always followed Grandmother Moon."

"There's no place for it to go. No more than in the cisterns of Famod." She recognized that made sense of a sort. "Though," he added, "I have read that there actually is a tide that rises and falls no more than the width of a finger. I've never attempted to measure it myself."

Lellie scanned the horizon. There might be an island out there. Too hazy to tell for sure. "I'd love to sail across someday," she said.

"And there is no reason you shouldn't." Zil paused and smiled. "Someday. Right now, we're off to see someone."

"Someone important?"

"I think so." Lellie immediately suspected it was the man's ladylove. Toa had mentioned her, right? And she'd said they would meet her.

Off the three set, on a winding way paralleling the shore. Once a

dog decided to chase them, barking loudly but wisely keeping its distance from their spirited team. She had no doubt they would use those hooves if it got too close.

Lellie wasn't sure even she would want to get too close. She had better warn Nib to be careful about trying to befriend them.

They pulled suddenly aside, to their right—the sea lying on their left—and up a road winding among low hills. Here, too, much appeared abandoned, or at least neglected. Lellie suspected some of those she spied along the way were squatters.

And why shouldn't they move into empty houses? Even Master Zil had suggested it. The house before which they halted was definitely not empty. Compound, not house, Lellie decided. Low walls surrounded it and tall cedars rose above it.

"This is the villa of the Mec Una," Zil informed them. "Best you address her as Mec, but Mistress would be acceptable. Or even Lady Una, though that form is little used anymore." The gates swung open to admit entry to a paved courtyard. "You should know she is the Chief Wizard of Tesra. That title also has fallen somewhat into disuse but some of us recognize it yet.

"Careful, there!" he called to an attendant reaching nonchalantly toward the horses' harness. "Either one would be willing to bite off a large piece of you." The man backed away. "My beauties can be rambunctious after a good run. I'll lead them "

"May I help?" asked Nib.

"Yes, but not too close until they get to know you better."

The building they entered was no high house of apartments like Zil's, but all of one level. Yet there was a central courtyard, both more spacious and tidier than his. A woman waited on a shaded bench, a woman in a white robe, beneath a mulberry tree. Lellie looked up, hoping to spy any lingering fruit, though she knew it was late for them. She'd have mulberry trees someday and an estate like this. Yes.

Dark was the lady, with long curling hair tumbling down her back. Otherwise, Una was rather plain, with a heavy brow and jaw.

"Mec Una, I present Master Nib and Mistress Lellie."

"This is the boy?" she asked.

"Indeed, Mec. The lad looks a bit Tesran, doesn't he?"

"More like the old race that was here before us. As do you, Zil."

"Oh, I know what a mongrel I am, my lady."

"Please be seated, all," spoke Una. "Will you serve the tea, Master Zil?"

"Ever your servant." He filled cups from an earthenware crock. At least tea would be a change from hutnee, thought Lellie. A very nice change! She didn't think she had ever had tea that tasted this good.

Good tea was something else she must have in the future. Once she'd made her fortune.

"Tell me your story," said the Mec. "From the start."

All three guests took up the tale, generally agreeing on events, occasionally interrupting each other. Nib had a tendency to stray far from the narrative but the others pulled him back. Una spoke not a word, asked not a question, until they finished, only nodding from time to time

"So the boy definitely has gifts of wizardry. Yet I know not why he would have felt the wards being broken." She thought on this for some seconds before asking, "Were the gates barred in his presence?"

"Master Ogos closed them behind us," volunteered Lellie.

"Ah. Chances are you sensed them binding, Nib, and it stayed with you." Una remained outwardly calm, but Lellie could tell she was impressed. "I, of course, felt it, being the one who set the wards in the first place and having left a bell of sorts on them. I sent a swift messenger to you, Zil, but it seems all was over by the time he arrived."

Master Zil did not wish to dwell on any of that. "So it was. There would have been a wizard involved, I assume."

"Indeed so, but they need not have been near your house. A skilled sorcerer could accomplish such a task from the other side of the world." A faint, brief smile. "And it would have needed such a skilled sorcerer to undo my wards. But," she went on, "one neces-

sary weakness in the bonds I placed was that they must allow you and your man Ogos to remove the bar. That could have given someone with knowledge of this fact a way in." The Chief Wizard of Tesra turned her eyes to Nib. "You know, it is possible their target was the boy, and not you."

"But not likely."

"No, not likely. What *is* likely is that there was someone on the inside to physically lift the bar. That could be done by magic, in theory, but I know no one capable of it." Again, her faint smile. "Other than a god or two."

"Then there may be traitor among my people." The man frowned, as if trying to puzzle out who it might be. "Though I suppose someone could have slipped in and hidden."

"That is for you to figure out, my Zil. My concern is for the boy. If none knew about him before, they will now."

Lellie had barely been able to contain herself through this exchange. "Would someone want to hurt Nib?"

"Kidnap him, more likely. He would be seen as a valuable asset by many."

"By us, as well," commented Zil.

"This is so. And if they can not get hold of the boy, some might think it best to assassinate him. He must be kept safe."

Zil nodded toward Lellie. "He has an able bodyguard. The two should stay together." There was the tone of mock-seriousness that frequently crept into his voice.

"And that, I think, should be at the House of Zil. For now. In time, Nib can come here to train more extensively in the arts sorcerous." She inclined her head toward the boy. "If you wish it, young master."

"I just want to be with Lellie," he asserted.

Did Master Zil sigh? Maybe he had wished to rid himself of them, hand the pair off to this wizard. Again, she felt ready to lash out at someone, anyone, ready to grab Nib and march out of there.

"So had I expected," said Zil. "Know, my lady, I have no idea how to care for them, much less educate them."

Una laughed outright for the first time. It was a nice laugh, a sparkling laugh, thought Lellie. Una should laugh more. Ha, maybe she did when she and Zil were alone!

"There are many in your house who can help you. In fact, I shall send one who can teach both, as well as placing fresh wards on your gate as often as needed." The mec paused to think only a moment. "Arrisha. Yes, just the one. If she is willing."

"And I suppose I must be," said Zil, and gave Lellie a wink. The girl was decidedly confused. She could not make out how he truly felt at all.

"Now, Nib," spoke the sorceress, "what say you we explore your abilities, just a little. Only if you wish."

He gave a cautious nod, after a glance toward Lellie. "All right."

"Very well. Now I know you can see the other worlds and even reach into them. How many of those worlds do you think there are?"

Nib looked perplexed. Perhaps he tried counting them in his head. Then he laughed and said, "Lots!"

"Lots, indeed. Some say they are infinite. Too many ever to count, anyway."

"Infinite? That means they go on forever, right?"

"Even so. Though each world itself is finite, with its beginning and end. We must be careful, Nib, not to become lost in all those worlds."

Lellie did not even want to think about that. This Una or what's-her-name—Arrisha—had better teach Nib very well or they'd answer to her!

Una had a red flower in her hand. Lellie had no idea where it came from. It had just appeared. But she had seen the tricks of conjurers so that didn't bother her. "Look carefully at this flower, Nib. I just brought it from another world and it will soon return on its own, as all such do. When it does, I want you to follow it and find its world. I'll be there waiting for you."

Sure enough, it melted before their eyes. No more than a few seconds later, it reappeared in the hand of a laughing Nib. "Now

that was a cute trick, my boy," said the Mec. "And not what I asked of you. You must take training seriously."

From the corner of her eye, Lellie could see Zil trying to contain his mirth. "That might be enough for now," he said.

Una held up a palm to him. "Nay, one more exploration. This time, come looking for me."

Both sorceress and boy sat silent for more than a minute. "Good enough," said Una. Her manner suggested it had been more than good enough. She might even had been a bit shaken. To Zil, the mec said, "He is very open. There is both good and evil in that. The boy must be taught to ward himself."

"Can this Arrisha do that?" blurted Lellie. If it was so important, she'd better be able to!

"She can, and much else. And I'll trust you to make sure Nib doesn't try anything on his own until she gets there. Is that agreed?"

"Yes, Mec Una. But—how will I know?"

There was that pleasing laugh again. "I suppose you'll have to ask him. And may I ask if you are staying to lunch?"

"Lellie's hungry enough to eat a donkey," Nib told her. "Or maybe one of Master Zil's horses!" He turned his face up to Zil, shyly asking, "Is it all right for me to be friends with them?"

"I would suggest you and Cappy visit their stalls together when we get home. They are familiar with her. But, again, don't try to get too close yet."

As they followed the mec into the house, Nib traipsing at the woman's side, Lellie leaned in toward Zil, saying in a low voice, "I'm sorry if we are a burden to you, Master Zil."

"No problem, my girl. I can hand the burden on to someone else." He must have noted her expression—and read it correctly. "Oh, child, I don't mean that. I'm the one who should be sorry. It is a fault of mine to make light of things when I shouldn't."

"It is Nib who is important. Who is *valuable*. To Mec Una, anyway. What use am I?"

"That we shall see. I may have as many plans for you as Una does for Nib."

Lellie couldn't help but wonder what those might be.

V. A Sparrow

"I am Arrisha but you can call me Arrie. Hmm, I suppose you should say Mistress Arrie."

"It would be best," felt Master Zil, giving Nib and Lellie a casual looking-over. "Not that we can expect much from this unruly pair."

She ignored Zil's interruption. "I am to instruct you in much more than magic, I am told." Arrie had appeared early that morning.

Again, the master of the house spoke. "First, they must learn the common Muram dialect of Tesra. That," he told the children, "is the trade speech all around the Sea of Sanctuary. You would pick it up naturally in time but a few lessons could hurry things along." He turned back to the young woman. "Fluency in Scolam is not important at this point, and others might be better suited to its teaching. I am sure you will give lessons in Old Tesran."

"Nib should begin its study, yes, and that of the Zikem from which it derives."

"Zikem, mistress?" asked Lellie.

"The language of our long ago ancestors. A fairly pure form is still spoken in the Rift. Although it might not do you any good, Mistress Lellie, your friend may find it easier to learn if you share his lessons."

Zil was giving the two of them an appraising look. "Mistress Toa told me you need clothes, yet I am certain that is not the apparel you wore yesterday."

Ogos, silent to that point, said, "The wife had their extras washed. They came to us wearing layers."

"Lellie said we should," offered Nib.

"Smart of her," felt Zil. "The girl is good in a crisis."

"And not so good when there isn't one and she has time to think about things," Ogos replied. Lellie felt most uncomfortable being discussed so. Especially as she recognized there was some truth to it.

"None the less," Ogos went on, "their clothes are little better than rags."

"Agreed, and we must remedy that. Would Mistress Toa be willing to go shopping?"

The Scol grinned. "Always, sir, though she will complain about her busy schedule being upset. Should she take the children?"

"Nib only. Send Anniqa with her, and Doab as a bodyguard. They can take the donkey cart. And you, Mistress Lellie, are coming with me."

She and Nib gave each other a long look. They had not been apart since they were in Famod. "It will be all right," she told the boy.

He nodded but did not look convinced. "And you'll be with Cappy," she added. That should help.

"I apologize for abducting your students, Mistress Arrisha," said Zil. "I trust you will not tattle to the mec. Hmm, where shall we put her, Ogos?"

"Why not next to the children, Master Zil? You have room upstairs and she could give lessons there when the library is in use."

"Yes, yes. Very practical." Lellie wondered if maybe he'd been hoping to move Nib and her elsewhere. "Well, come along, Lellie. That outfit will have to do for one last morning."

She followed him through the library doors, into the courtyard and another clear, sunny morning. It would be good to look on the sea again. Its expanse could be spied from Anniqa and Doab's room on the other side of the house. Maybe she would have liked to move over there; the only view from the small window in her room was of the courtyard.

"Shall we prepare the chariot, master?" asked a groom, as they entered the stables.

"No, we'll ride. Saddle up Piro and Penza."

Lellie felt a moment of panic. Then another one! "Ride, sir? On a horse?"

A sharp look was followed by a slightly rueful chuckle. "You've never been on one, have you? I should have thought of that. Well,

it's best you learn sometime. You should expect to learn many things, my girl."

He stood gazing into the shadows for a moment. "Ho, make that Mak rather than Piro," Zil called to the groom. "He's a docile old boy," he told Lellie. "But slow."

Slow sounded good to her. But Mak was big! He towered over her when a groom led him in. How was she going to get up there?

Zil apparently intended her to figure it out for herself.

"Left foot in the stirrup and grab the front of the saddle," whispered the groom, with a friendly smile. Jel. That was his name. "It's easy from there."

Maybe not easy but not so hard either. Keeping her balance once she was aboard—no, mounted, that was the word—was another matter. "Let me adjust those stirrups, mistress," said Jel. "Your legs are a bit short for fat old Mak, I fear."

Mak followed Zil and his horse without her needing to do anything. She had little hope that would continue. Her companion reined back to fall in beside her.

"A male horse like Mak is called a stallion, isn't it?" she asked.

"Strictly, Mak is a gelding."

"What's that?" She knew nothing of horses.

Zil seemed at a loss for the proper words. "Hmm, a horse eunuch? Yes, I suppose that's accurate."

"Oh." Now she knew more of horses.

"Penza," he said, patting his steed's neck, "is a mare. I had intended her to be your ride this morning."

"This is hard on my rear end," she said.

"Try standing in your stirrups, rather than sitting all the time. See? Let your legs bend." He watched her try for a while before laughing. "Not so easy on a barrel like Mak. We'll get you onto Penza next time."

Lellie thought Cappy might be more suitable. "Someone told me the Mura invented stirrups." Nib's father, maybe.

"I suspect the knowledge originated elsewhere, for the Mura were not horsemen when they came down from the north. They adopted

them quickly enough, especially in the empire. But no history lessons today. I'll leave the teaching to Mistress Arrie."

"Then what are we doing today, sir?" She'd been wanting to ask for some time.

"Perhaps beginning a different sort of schooling." He said no more and Lellie decided not to press him.

But she did come around from another angle. "Nib and I will be going different directions."

"You're going all sorts of directions right now. Try to keep Mak from meandering."

Zil wasn't going to be drawn, was he? No matter. She had other questions. "Where was he and the others going this morning? Are there clothing shops near?"

"There are. Toa would know better than I where they are located and which are suitable." He then spoke quite seriously. "The criminals of Tesra are bold these days. That is why I sent Doab with them. I would never have allowed the others to go without a bodyguard."

"He makes a pretty good bodyguard, doesn't he?"

"At least in appearance. A man skilled in weapons would not be stopped by him." Zil gave her a sidelong glance. "Nor a woman. But he should deter the common ruffians of the streets."

Lellie looked around. This was just the sort of street where one might find such ruffians, wasn't it? Even the worst sections of Famod didn't look this bad. Famod. Did anything at all remain of the city? Tesra decayed here by the Sea of Sanctuary but fire and sword had ranged through the city of her birth.

She would return someday, she told herself, and look upon the Great Sea once more. Mak had come to a halt. The building before them was much like many others on this street and the other streets through which they had passed. A great many vines covered its facade.

A man stepped out of the shadowed entryway, a man with a long sword. Two long swords. And a knife. "Zil asks admittance to the House of the Sword-Master."

The sentry bowed low. "Enter Master Zil." He held up a hand as Lellie followed. "Name yourself."

"I am, um, Lelanva."

"Do you serve Master Zil?"

For a moment she thought to answer in the affirmative. Only for a moment. "I serve no man."

She had not heard Zil laugh so loudly before. "I vouch for Mistress Lelanva," he stated.

"Very well. Pass then, girl with no master."

As they entered the house's courtyard, Zil whispered, "It was a good answer. But know that if Jarcom accepts you, he will be your master, at least while you are in his house. And if he does not, you will never return."

Who was this Jarcom to make judgment on her? Much less claim to be her master! Those thoughts fell away, forgotten, as they rode into the sunlight. Men fighting!

Well, practicing fighting. The pair were going at it with long wooden swords, their moves much like those Zil had used in the library. Someone came forward to take the horses. Lellie slid down from the saddle without problem; she'd worry about getting up again later!

A third figure, in a long robe, was watching the two spar. He turned now to greet the visitors.

"He's like the man who tried to kill you. On the road."

"Yes, Master Jarcom is of that nation. He is a Smot."

Lellie had heard of the Smota but never seen one. The man was quite blond; not the straw-colored hair of some Tesrans but almost white. His face was very pale too, and his eyes blue.

But his accent when he addressed them was purely that of Tesra. "Welcome, Zil. Have you come in search of much-needed lessons?"

Zil gave the man a bow. "There is always much to learn from the master."

Jarcom acknowledged Lellie's incredulous expression with a smile. "I have heard of this girl," he said. "Lellie, is it not?" She

nodded, uncertain why anyone would know who she was. "Let me see your sword."

She held it out to him, again uncertain why. The man turned it over in his hands. "A common gladius. A soldier's weapon. How came you by it?"

"I killed the soldier who carried it."

"Tell me of this."

So she found herself again giving the story of Sogid, the man who had attempted to rape her, and how she and Nib had fought and slain him. "She has a warrior's spirit," said Jarcom at the conclusion. "That is certain. Skills are another matter."

He looked again at the sword he held. "Know you anything of the gladius, girl?"

"Only that soldiers use it. No matter what side they're on."

"That is so. Muram mercenaries of many tribes became familiar with the gladius when they served Tesra. It has become the sword of the Imperial troops and the kingdoms of the west have emulated them. He handed the sword back to her. "It is not at all a good choice for you. You surely realized that already."

"It's awfully heavy," she admitted. "But it was all I had."

"The weapon we hold is always the best choice," spoke Zil.

The Smot chuckled. "Ha, one of the old platitudes I spout at my students." He returned his attention to Lellie, giving her a long, appraising look. "She hasn't the size and strength for slashing with the two-handed sword, nor probably ever will. Better she learn the ways of using the point. The ways of using that sword you carry now, young mistress, but with something more easy to wield." He shook his head. "She is terribly slight. No more than a sparrow."

"I think you may find her more a sparrowhawk," replied Zil.

"We shall see about that. Hit me, Sparrow."

"Hit you, sir?"

"Yes. Try to hit me in the face. And never question my orders. Only obey."

Her first halfhearted attempt was easily eluded, and answered with a casual tap on her forehead by Jarcom's finger. Don't lose

your temper, Lellie, she told herself. You know how to fight. The man easily dodged her next jab, as anticipated, but she followed with her shoulder, putting her weight on his arm and blocking it long enough to reach over to deliver her own poke.

"Ha! A well done trick, though it wouldn't work twice."

"Once was enough," observed Zil. "And it was your fault for thinking like a swordsman."

"It is what I am," stated Jarcom. "Others can train wrestlers." He halted to give Lellie another long look. "Or assassins. Is that what you have in mind for her?"

"No, Master Jarcom. Lellie would be wasted in such a role."

"Good, for I would not take her as a student if you had such plans."

"I have my own plans," Lellie told both. They'd better know it!

"I am sure you do, Sparrow," said Jarcom. "If learning the sword is among them, I would welcome you as a pupil."

"And I would like to learn, Master Jarcom." She gave him one of the deep bows she had seen these Tesrans make.

"Now," said the sword-master, "Master Zil and I must arrange the matter of tuition."

"As she is so small, surely the payment should match," asserted the merchant.

"Yet her patron's fortune is not so small."

"Me? Trade has fallen off terribly. I barely survive from day to day!"

They wandered off to dicker. As no one told her otherwise, Lellie remained and watched the two men sparring. Not men. They're just boys, she realized. But both a head taller than her.

The two halted their exercise to come give her a looking over. "A common girl of the streets," said one. "And a Mur."

"But she was with Master Zil," objected the other.

The boy dismissed this with a sneer. "Some urchin he found and is going to take home to scrub his floors. Isn't that right, little girl?"

"Don't Punny—"

Lellie held up a hand to stop him. She looked rather imperious doing so, she felt. "I'm going to be a student," she proclaimed.

An angry frown appeared on the boy's face. He'd probably hoped to do no more than bully her a little. "Then it's time for your first lesson," he hissed. "Give her your stick, Hiul."

He appeared reluctant to do so but Lellie held out her hand for it.

The boy was grinning but she kept her face expressionless. Let him guess what she was thinking. Maybe he'd think she was scared and be overconfident. Lellie knew little of swords but somewhat of stick-fighting. And she had watched these two—yes, and the fight in Zil's house—and had an inkling of the sort of moves she might expect.

That was just the position Zil took when he killed the second assassin. This Punny was only posturing though, she was pretty sure. He would swing at her, not thrust. She held her wooden sword —several slender staves bound together—before her, allowing its tip to waver. Now, let it drop a bit and see if this big, stupid-looking fish takes the bait.

He swung. Maybe not that hard; Lellie had the fleeting thought that his heart might not be in it. She responded by turning her weapon sideways, grasping it at both ends, and deflecting the blow. It *was* hard enough to sting her hands a little. At once she stepped in and caught him on the cheek with the butt of her sword.

Surprise? Pain? No time to think about that. As the boy stepped back, she let her shaft fall between his knees and pushed forward, bringing him face-first onto the ground, his own weapon gone flying. As he rose to hands and knees, Lellie couldn't resist giving him a swat on the rear. Not too hard, of course!

"Enough!" The sword-master had returned. Master Zil stood behind him, smirking.

Her erstwhile opponent rose, claiming, "The girl cheated!"

"There is no such thing in a real fight. She bested me but a few minutes ago by doing the unexpected." He turned from the boy. "You have a weakness, Sparrow, in that you do not think of blades. Had you and Punatho been wielding real swords, your tactics

would not have worked. Nor would you have been able to reach me were we fighting with knives."

Lellie could see the truth in all that. "But, Master Jarcom," she said, "we were not fighting with blades."

"Very true. You will have to pretend you are when I begin your training." Now he returned his attention to his student, shaking his head. "I should thrash you for breaking both the discipline and hospitality of this house, but I think our Sparrow has taken ample care of that."

All the anger had drained from the boy's face. "I am ashamed, master. And I apologize to Mistress Sparrow."

"I'm Lellie, you idiot," she told him. His companion laughed; after a couple seconds, he did as well.

"Nay," spoke Master Jarcom. "Henceforth you are Sparrow in this house, unless you become, as Master Zil promises, a sparrowhawk. We will begin your lessons—when, Zil? Tomorrow?"

"Make it the day after. And twice weekly then, for a while."

"A Muram week I assume you mean. Very well."

Lellie was puzzled by that. "A Muram week?" she whispered as they went to their mounts. "Is there a different kind?"

"You might be surprised by how many kinds. Not all nations fit seven days into their weeks. Some don't have weeks at all." Without further comment, he pulled himself astraddle Penza.

So she would have to figure out how to hoist herself onto Mak again. Jel had moved the stirrup up so far, she didn't think she could get her foot into it. "She needs a boost," said someone behind her.

"One leg each," came a different voice. In a moment, Lellie had been lifted to the saddle. She looked down to see two grinning boys.

"I thank you, Master Punatho and Master, um, was it Hull?"

"Hiul. We won't be able to go home with you to get you down again."

"But a sparrow should be able to fly," said Punatho. Both stood there watching her and Zil ride into the passageway.

"They're good enough lads," said Zil. "From old Tesran families. But boys that age can be obnoxious."

Lellie well knew that. "Though he likes to make a show of being choosy," Zil continued, "Master Jarcom will accept almost any student who can pay. There are other female pupils, by the way."

Lellie wondered what they were like. It might be interesting to spar with a girl. "So I am only to learn the sword, Master Zil?"

"It would be well to study other arts. In time. I wouldn't ask Doab to teach you wrestling. He's the sort to depend overmuch on his size rather than technique. But I think I shall have him accompany you to your lessons."

A bodyguard. After all, Zil couldn't always escort her. "And Nib will have very different lessons," she said.

"Sometimes. I expect Mistress Arrisha to drub some education into both your heads." He seemed to muse on that a moment, as they rode along. It was late morning now, the sun shining down into the streets between the tall buildings. "It would not hurt our Nib to learn a little of weapons. But only a little. As for you, we will see how things go."

"Whether I'll make a good spy?"

"Only if you wish, Lellie. A lifetime of opportunities and choices lie ahead of you, in the great adventure of life." The man chuckled. "Why, you might decide to marry Punny and throw everything else aside."

Somehow, Lellie doubted it.

VI. Finding Balance

"How old is Mistress Arrie? I've heard you can't always be sure with Tesrans."

"She is young, as young as she looks. It is true that some of the old Tesran blood age more slowly."

Lellie was pleased to hear their tutor wasn't an old woman. Not that she really had thought so. "How about you, master?"

"I, too, am about the age I appear. Or maybe younger! The Mec Una is nearly twice my age."

Over sixty? "Is that the way with wizards?" She suddenly imagined herself as an old woman with Nib still youthful

"No. Longevity and wizardry come from the same heritage, it is said, but are not connected. The mec could explain this much better."

That's all I really need to know, thought Lellie. She wasn't going to go pester the mec. She didn't knew if she'd ever even see her again. She probably shouldn't be pestering Zil either, but Nib was having lessons in wizardry and she was at loose ends.

There came a cautious rap at the side door, the one that led toward the kitchens. "Enter," called Zil.

Anniqa slipped into the library. She wore a long robe in the Tesran fashion now. "You wished to see me, sir?"

"Indeed, Mistress Anniqa. When I don't have him acting as escort on the streets of Tesra, Doab is useful at his old trade of moving things about, but what are we to do with you?"

Lellie and the woman exchanged quick glances, glances Zil noted and interpreted. "Not nursemaid, Lellie. I doubt Anniqa could keep up with you two." The woman looked grateful to hear this. Lellie was every bit as grateful but tried not to show it. "What skills have you, mistress?"

"I can read, sir. And know my numbers." She paused, maybe wondering if she knew anything else useful. "Um, and embroider."

She probably knew her numbers so she could properly charge her

clients, the girl thought. No, be nice, Lellie. Anniqa was all right. Just an easy target!

Zil might have been surprised by Anniqa's abilities. Not the embroidering, but the others. "You could be helpful to Ogos and Toa. Neither can do more than keep a tally. And though I have a skilled scribe at my warehouses, I might occasionally find need for a secretary here." He nodded toward the girl. "I do expect Lellie to learn such work."

It was the first she'd heard of it.

"So, consider yourself Toa's—hmm, no. Consider yourself Ogos's assistant. If he wishes to lend you to his wife or put you onto some other task, that will be his business."

Anniqa again looked grateful. Ogos would be the less demanding taskmaster of the two. "Thank you, Master Zil," she said, attempting a deep bow before exiting. She did not pull it off very well. Too top-heavy, thought Lellie, and almost snickered at the thought.

"I'm going to be a scribe, sir?" she asked as soon as the door shut.

"Why else would I allow you to laze in my library? When you are not busy with aught else, I expect you to read." He waved an arm toward the wall of books. "There is much to be learned from reading."

At her doubtful expression, he added, "And from doing, as well, my girl. It is always good to find a balance, in this as in all things."

"Balance, Master Zil?"

"Something I think you sorely need." He walked to his book shelves, perusing them for a minute or more before retrieving a volume. "Many of these are in the old Tesran script and language," he told her. "You may learn that in time. Try this one. It is a book of Muram tales, written in the Imperial dialect."

She might know her letters but Lellie had never read much. Never the less, she set herself to puzzling out the first story. It seemed to be about a toto. She knew of totos. Sometimes they had come into Famod as pack animals, and garments were made of

their wool. But this one spoke! Wait. Hadn't she heard this very tale from a marketplace storyteller?

Not quite the same. Oh, yes, its owner was just as foolish and ended up losing all the riches the little toto had won for him. She closed the book. Wasn't it time for lunch? She was quite hungry.

But Nib was still upstairs with Mistress Arrie. Zil stood by the front doors, open for ventilation on this warm day, gazing out into the courtyard. "Sir," she began, "are there totos in Tesra?"

"Not so many in the city itself but they are common enough in the countryside. You know they are a sort of camel?"

She shook her head. Lellie had heard of camels but never seen one.

He came over and sat at the head of the table, sideways in his chair so he might still see out the door. "Toto is nothing but the Muram word for camel. The camels of the south are much larger but it is known the two can breed and have fertile offspring."

"I have heard they are nasty beasts."

"As are the totos, but less dangerous, being smaller. The ancient Tesran name for the toto, from the people who dwelt here before them, is bosixi, meaning 'thorn-eater.' The toto thrives where few other animals can."

"It's good to know things like that," she decided.

"Indeed so. Ah, here is Nuthonides arrived. Why don't you run along to the kitchen while we speak?"

"Yes, master. Um, but I wondered—who writes these books?"

"Their authors are many. Men, women, Muram, Tesran. Even Baxac."

"No, I meant who writes out all those words on the pages?"

"Oh. Most of the newer ones were copied by slaves."

Were there slaves in Tesra? Lellie decided not to ask. She gave Zil's guest a rather sketchy bow and hurried toward the kitchen.

Sogid had planned to sell her, hadn't he? That didn't mean anything. She suspected the soldier had been as ignorant of the city as she was. To a brothel, he said. Those were everywhere but the

law in all Muram cities and nations—or so she had heard—prohibited slaves being whores. Bad for business, people claimed.

Lellie suspected some found ways around those laws. There were always ways. She passed Ogos and Anniqa, the woman marking a slate as the majordomo pointed to this and that in the courtyard. She waved but didn't stop.

By the time Nib and Arrie showed up, she was working on her second bowl of stew, dipping a piece of hard barley bread into it now and then. Lellie peered at the new arrivals over her cup of hutnee as they took seats opposite her. "I wish I had some of that wonderful tea the Mec Una served us, instead of this," she told them. Maybe Mistress Arrie would know where to get some. Or even ordinary tea.

"I'd rather have coffee," Nib announced.

Arrie seemed almost shocked. "Like Baxac pirates drink?"

The girl couldn't help giggling. "And ordinary Baxac sailors too. Some visited Famod from time to time."

Would they ever again? Well, there was no point in dwelling on that. "I was reading," she told them. "Master Zil lent me a book. It had a story about a toto."

"Oh, I want a toto!"

"You would. What were you up to? Or aren't you allowed to tell?"

Mistress Arrie but smiled at this. "There are no secrets to magic, but chances are you would not understand if we tried to explain it."

"She isn't teaching me the good stuff yet," complained Nib. "Just how to stay out of trouble."

"Which I am sure you need. What's on for this afternoon? You know I'll be off to study the sword with Master Jarcom in the morning."

"You have reminded us more than once," said the young woman. "As Master Zil suggested, you should become more familiar with the common speech of the city. His books might prove an excellent starting point for that."

On entering the courtyard after lunch, they saw Zil beckoning

his majordomo. On spying Arrisha and the children, he waved them to him, as well.

"I am going to be gone a fortnight or so," the trader announced, "sailing down to Zelara to do business."

Where or what Zelara was, Lellie had no idea. She could ask someone later.

"Shall I have your chariot ready in the morning, sir?" asked Ogos.

"Ready it now. I shall sleep elsewhere tonight."

On one of his boats? At the Mec Una's house? Lellie was bursting with curiosity but knew it best not to ask. Instead, "Remember I'm going to sail Lan Tenac one of these days."

"You must learn to curse like a Tesran sailor first," he told her, quite straight-faced. "Otherwise, the crew is likely to throw you overboard as an impostor."

"Another thing to balance!" She had heard more than a few sailors' curses in her short life—some mouthed by her father—and believed she could hold her own.

"Yes," agreed Zil. "We intend to turn you into a juggler, my girl." Ogos headed toward the stables; the rest entered Master Zil's office. He at once hurried upstairs.

"Where is Zelara, Mistress Arrie?" asked Lellie.

"It is a port that lies southwest of Tesra. I'm sure Master Zil must have a map somewhere in here—yes, here we are."

Arrie unrolled a scroll on Zil's long table. "It's on this bay here, see?" She pointed. "And it is at the end of the main caravan route down to Bitasa." Bitasa lay on an arm of the Greater Sea, where the coast curved back toward the west. Lellie had already possessed a vague idea of that city's location but seeing it on a map was far better.

"Can't they use this river instead?" asked Nib, his finger tracing its course.

"Some do," came Zil's voice from the stairs. "It has become a dangerous route to follow and the port there has fallen into disuse."

With that, he was out the door. "He didn't say goodbye," whispered Nib.

"I don't think he's used to having people around," Lellie attempted to explain. "Except ones who work for him."

Didn't Master Zil have any family? No one had ever mentioned one. The man certainly didn't seem to be used to children.

Arrie's voice brought her back from these thoughts. "Which book shall we choose?

"I'd like to know about Tesra."

"Me too."

"A history? Here's one in Tesran Muram." She opened it on the table, Nib and Lellie seated on her either side. "You'll see the letters are a little different, even if the words sound much the same. I'll read and you follow along." She turned pages to reach the opening lines. They seemed to be some sort of introduction, just as a storyteller might say a few things about his tale before he got to it.

Once Tesra was great, more wealthy, more beautiful, than any city in the world. She reclined upon her hills by the Sea of Sanctuary, greeting ships and caravans from far nations. Now, only a shadow of her former glory lingers. Many have left her; those who remain live in squalor, dreaming of a past that will never return. She is in thrall to foreigners, to barbarian overlords, and slowly forgets who once she was.

Arrisha sat silently when she finished, pondering what she had read, and then flipped to the first page. Of a sudden, she announced, "We shouldn't be reading this book. Let's try something different." She put it back into the bookcase, choosing another. This one had lots of pictures of animals.

Nib liked that. Lellie was a bit bored with it but followed along, familiarizing herself with the Tesran letters. But she wondered why Arrisha had put the other book back.

That night, she still wondered. With Nib sleeping soundly, Lellie slipped out of their room and crept down the stairs. Only her candle lit the way. No one outside would see that light, for the tall,

narrow windows had been boarded over at some time. Around her rose the library walls, cloaked in deep shadow.

Which book was it? Arrie had put it back—there. She slid it out and tried to puzzle out the words by her flickering light. All right, this was the title, wasn't it? Simply *Tesra*, and below, *a history, from the pen of Zil*.

Master Zil had written it? Somehow, this did not surprise Lellie, but it brought many new questions about the man.

All she could conclude was that Zil must be pretty good at balancing too.

VII. A School for the Sword

"I CAME THROUGH here years ago and stayed only a few days," said Doab. He shook the reins to urge the donkey—not Cappy this morning—to more speed. It did not work.

"To wrestle. Did you visit other cities?"

"Aye. I dallied in Robon for some while. That was long before I settled down to work on the docks." He gave the girl a sidelong look. "I met your father there, but did not know him well. Dock-workers and sailors do not mix, for the most part."

She had heard of fights between them. Sometimes fatal. "I don't know if he's alive."

"At least he got out of the city before it was invested."

"Leaving the rest of us to die."

Doab had no answer to that.

"I'm going to be a sailor, too," proclaimed Lellie, "so I can sail away and leave everything behind if I want."

"Even Nib?" This time it was the girl who had no answer.

"It's this place up ahead, isn't it?" asked Doab. "The one with all the vines?"

"Yep. There's the gatekeeper come out to look us over."

"The girl with no master returns," spoke the man, "only to submit to one here." He bowed toward Doab. "You are welcome, sir. Drive right in."

Considerably more students crowded into the courtyard than on Lellie's last visit. Master Jarcom stood to one side, observing. He ambled over to greet the new arrivals when Lellie, eager to begin, hopped down.

"No longer the ragged girl," said the sword-master, looking her up and down. Lellie was indeed in all new clothes. No boys were going to make fun of this outfit. They'd better not! "A skirt is acceptable and you should learn to move in one. For now, however, trousers might prove more practical."

She wouldn't mind that at all. "Master," she asked, "should I have

a sword?" Lellie hoped he would think it needful. She had reluctantly left the gladius behind this morning.

"Not yet and not here. You will train with wooden weapons at first. Outside these walls is another matter and one you should discuss with Master Zil. And," he told her, "there will be no more stick fighting. I admit it is a useful skill in its own and I myself shall suggest to Master Zil that you receive further training in it."

She wouldn't see Zil for two weeks! Lellie was sure she would have all sorts of things to ask him on his return. But there were other questions right now. "Will I train with Hiul and Punnie, I mean, Punatho?"

"I would not have them running home to their mothers saying you mistreated them." Lellie was pretty sure the sword-master joked, though he gave no indication of it. "I have chosen an instructor for you. You will share him with another beginner."

He strode off across the courtyard. the girl hurrying behind. A young man awaited them and, at his side, a girl no taller than Lellie.

But younger than she was, Lellie was pretty sure. "I have promised my daughter she could soon begin formal training. I believe the day for that is come." Jarcom shook his head. "Though her mother will surely complain."

Their instructor-to-be—hardly more than a boy himself—smiled at this. The little girl remained quite sober. She looks like her dad, thought Lellie. Darker. And she wore trousers, loose ones that fell to mid-calf. She must get something of that sort!

"Elixane," continued Jarcom, "this is Sparrow. And Sparrow, this is Master Urathus. You will both address him as master. Understood?"

Lellie nodded at once. Whatever would get them to their lesson! Elixane was slower to answer. "Yes, sir," she murmured. Her expression, though, might have betrayed a certain skepticism. She surely knew this young fellow already under less formal circumstances.

Urathus handed both girls stick-swords, shorter than the one

Lellie had wielded a couple days previous. "You will now learn the first attack position."

So the morning passed, with the pair learning proper stances and ways to hold their weapons, without once having the chance to cross swords. Lellie suspected Elixane was as disappointed as she was.

Maybe more disappointed. Not surprisingly, the sword-master's daughter already knew far more than her. But—she did not seem to move gracefully. Maybe because she was two or three years younger.

At last, all three exchanged deep bows and the girls were on their own. "What kind of name is Sparrow?" Elixane abruptly asked.

"Your father gave it to me. My real name is Lellie but I'm not supposed to use it here. Hey, we're Ellie and Lellie!"

"Um, maybe. My parents call me Xane."

"Oh. Well, it seems everyone here is going to name me Sparrow so it wouldn't have worked anyway." She considered that a moment. "Unless you could come visit me at Master Zil's house."

"Father says Master Zil was one of his best students. Watch out, here comes trouble."

Lellie turned to see Punatho and Hiul approaching. "These two?" she asked, attempting to express utter scorn. Not very successfully, as she was barely able to keep a straight face. "I've already taught them manners."

Punny only laughed at her jibe but Hiul shot back with, "Not me, little Sparrow."

"Give us a little while and we'll be ready to beat both of you." She turned to her companion. "Which one do you want to thrash, Xane?"

This was met only with giggles. "I guess you're safe for now," she told the boys.

"Aw, Xany would never hurt us," claimed Punny.

Elixane just smiled, glancing up quickly and then away again. The girl was shy around this pair? Lellie dismissed that thought with a shrug. "I think Doab's in a hurry to go," she said.

"We all need to get out of here," Hiul agreed. "And allow Xane to practice for our upcoming duel." He gave the little girl a deep bow.

"You should have whacked him while he took his eyes off you," Lellie told her. "See you the day after tomorrow. Or no, three days, right?" With that, she hurried to the waiting Doab.

The big man eyed the practice sword she carried. "Are you supposed to take that with you, Lellie?" he asked.

"Urathus, um, Master Urathus, told me to carry it home and practice with it." They were still on the sword-master's property so she'd better use the title.

"Home? Is Master Zil's house home then?" he asked, as they climbed into the cart.

"As much as anywhere, I guess! I'm sure not going back to Famod."

"No, I suppose none of us are. Whoa." He pulled back as a chariot cut into his path. Punatho held the reins.

Which the man at his side took from him. "Apologies, Doab," he called. "The young fool wanted to drive."

The boy only laughed at this. "I'll have my own chariot soon," he proclaimed.

"The gods help us all!" shouted out the driver, as they disappeared through the entry arch.

"You know that man?" asked Lellie.

"I gossiped with some of the other drivers. You're not the only student with a bodyguard. Get up, now." The donkey followed the horse-drawn chariot at a considerably more leisurely speed.

She hadn't figured out why she had one. "I know Master Zil wouldn't have paid me much attention had I been on my own. It's Nib everyone's interested in."

"But you did catch his attention. Enough for him to think it worth sending you to the best sword-master in Tesra."

She hadn't figured that out either. "It sure stinks today."

The pavement was thick with manure. There hadn't been nearly so much in Famod, where fewer horses and draft animals were

used, and that tended to be cleaned up quickly. There were those who made a living doing so, and selling it as fuel.

Doab agreed. "The heat isn't helping." The sun stood nearly overhead in the cloudless sky.

Punatho's chariot could be spied a block or so ahead. Maybe he lived somewhere this direction. No, it was turning off to the right, toward the sea. It would be great to live near the water.

As they reached the street, she took a look down its length. "Stop, Doab! Stop!" She pointed. "Punny's in trouble!"

Not more than halfway up the block, figures surrounded the chariot. The driver was plying his whip, both to beat them back and to urge his team to break away. Punatho stood facing them in the rear of the chariot, a small dagger in his hand. He looked scared.

"Stay with the cart," Doab ordered, and jumped out to run toward the melee. He drew his short sword as he went.

Stay with it? Sure, but not right here! Lellie turned the donkey and urged it forward. Oh, someone had Punny and was dragging him from the chariot. The driver turned to fight, only to have many hands laid on him.

Doab burst upon the mob. Well, five men or was it six? That could be called a mob. And all with knives or short swords, oh, and one with a big cudgel. Now Lellie was on the scene and jumped down to strike the nearest man as hard as she might with her practice sword. The stick splintered in her hands.

But it certainly distracted the fellow! Doab swung wildly with his sword. He obviously knew nothing of how to use it. That didn't matter; his size and sudden onslaught sent the attackers running.

Driver and passenger seemed none the worse for their manhandling. Punny did appear much less confident than a few minutes ago, when last she had seen him.

But he managed to choke out, "Thank you, sir."

"I thank you too, Doab," spoke the driver. "And you as well, mistress," he said, giving Lellie a bow.

"Enemies?" rumbled Doab.

"I would guess they meant to kidnap the boy. I would *hope* they meant to leave me alive to carry the tale to Lord Murso." He looked back toward the corner. "An ambush. They might have known the chariot would slow to go around the turn. They jumped on us at once, before we got going again."

"It might be wise to vary your route," Doab opined. "And it might be wise if we accompanied you to your destination."

"For both our sakes. There might be those who would think to take revenge on you, my friend. And none who live on these streets would lift a finger to help you." The driver walked around his chariot. "Nothing damaged. Let's go."

"Ride with us, Sparrow," said Punatho.

She jumped up into the chariot. "Call me Lellie."

Their progress was slow, keeping to the pace of the donkey cart. The shabby houses rising on either side began to give way to buildings of gray stone.

Lellie felt her elation giving way to emptiness. What business had she attacking grown men? It was stupid. She felt as useless as the shattered stick she still held. She couldn't even take care of it properly. The girl stifled a sob. All so useless.

"What's the matter, Lellie?"

"I broke my sword." It sounded so silly.

But Punny did not laugh. "I have one at home. You can use it." He took the broken practice sword from her hand. "We'll have to show Master Jarcom what you did with this one."

"Won't he mind?"

That did bring a laugh. "You'll become even more a favorite than before. Is it—" The boy hesitated. "Is it true you killed a man?"

"I'm tired of talking about it."

"Then I won't mention it again. And I'll make sure no one else does at the school."

That would be good. She really didn't want people to keep bringing it up. "Thank you, Punny. Hey, we're almost to the sea. Is your home by it? I used to live by the Great Sea, you know." Close, anyway.

"We live over there in the palace." The boy pointed to walls rising at some distance. "We're related to the prince. But I do have a boat if you'd like to go sailing."

Oh, how she would! They came to a halt before an arch set in a low wall of rough stone. Heavy iron-bound oaken doors stood open, framing a broad-shouldered man with a decidedly Muram look to him. "You arrive later than expected. I was becoming concerned."

"We were set upon in the street, sir," spoke the charioteer. "Had not Master Doab come to our assistance, we might not have arrived at all." He nodded toward Doab and Lellie, and then added, "And Master Zil's ward."

The man peered at her. "Lellie, isn't it? I have heard of the lesson you gave my son. Well deserved, I am sure."

"Indeed so, Father," said Punatho. He held up Lellie's shattered stick. "She gave one of our assailants a lesson, as well."

"I thank you both. I knew well the streets are dangerous but not that lawbreakers had grown so bold. In broad daylight!" The man shook his head.

Lellie piped up. "Aren't there city guards, sir? They kept Famod safe. Mostly."

The question might have been impertinent—more so coming from a little girl—but was answered with all seriousness. "The old Wardens of the Ways still serve the prince but they are too few for the sprawling ruins of Tesra. There is also a Scolam military police. They are more interested in political crimes." A fleeting smile followed. "And so they keep a watch on me."

"You, sir?" asked Doab. He at once looked like he regretted opening his mouth.

"As a cousin of Jomastes, I will always be suspected of something. Both by the Scola and the prince himself." He gave them another looking over. "Best you have some protection on your way home. I shall send a mounted soldier with you. Thank you again for your assistance." With that he turned and disappeared through the gateway.

Lellie whispered to Punny, "Who is your father, anyway? I can tell he is important."

The boy seemed surprised she didn't know. "He is Lord Murso," he whispered in return. "He's a general."

"Oh." Important enough.

But that depended on how big his army was, didn't it?

VIII. Visitors from Afar

"What became of Zuth?" Lellie couldn't recall seeing the guardsman about Zil's house in some time.

"He, ah, accompanied the master to Zelara."

Why was Ogos uncomfortable with the question? There must be something more to it. Oh. "And isn't coming back. He was the one who opened the gate, huh?"

The majordomo had no answer to that. He only squinted at the girl and shook his head.

That was answer enough! Did Zil have him thrown overboard? Or maybe he sold him into bondage. Some Baxac master might be applying the whip to him even now.

"Shouldn't you be at your lessons?" asked Ogos.

"Mistress Arrisha is teaching Nib wizard stuff," she told him. "And I'm tired of practicing the same sword moves over and over." She took the third defensive stance with her practice stick. Master Jarcom had replaced the broken one without comment.

But he would have known the story. Lellie let the tip of the wooden sword rest on the ground. "I hope I learn new things soon."

"That will be up to Master Zil. He might let you learn the arts of scullery."

His small joke flew wide of its target. "I wouldn't mind! As long as I have something to do." Lellie much missed the free life she had led in Famod, where she roved the city as she pleased. Here, they wouldn't even let her through the front gate without a guard.

Oh, here came Nib and their tutor. Magic lessons done for the day, she assumed. "Come along, Lellie," spoke Arrie. "We'll have some lunch and then language lessons."

"We should have siestas, like the Sharshites," felt Nib. He must have been reading about them.

"In this weather, I might well agree," said Mistress Arrisha. She gave Lellie a looking over. "Are you going to remain in pants?"

"I'll change after lunch." It would probably be for the best, as much as she disliked the idea. She'd just as soon never don another long skirt. Much less one of those baggy robes!

As they settled down with their lunch bowls, Lellie voiced a question that had popped in and out of her head over the last week. "Is Murso a Tesran name or a Muram one?" Lord Murso certainly looked Muram but he was a member of the city's ruling family.

"The word mur," began Arrie, "has different meanings in different tongues. Of course, it gave the Mura their name."

"It means warrior," interjected Nib.

"Yes, or sometime simply man. It has come to have more the connotation of 'noble,' in some places and some dialects. But it is also a completely different old Tesran word, found in many of our people's names. More than one of them was famous, such as Admiral Mursoazes. We could read about him, if you'd like."

An admiral? That sounded good to Lellie.

"In honesty, I know not whether Lord Murso's name is Tesran or Muram. He may not know himself. Be that as it may, in Zikem the word means something along the lines of a container. 'Containing' or 'full of' might be its meaning in a name."

"But Lord Murso is Tesran."

"Yes and no, Lellie. Our princes are the descendants of a Muram mercenary who took the city a couple centuries back." She allowed that bit of history to sink in before adding, "It might also be noted that Lord Murso's mother is a Scol."

That explained his looks and satisfied Lellie's curiosity, but she wondered now about Punny's mother. The boy looked much more Tesran.

In came the majordomo and his wife. Ogos at once announced, "Word is Master Zil's ship is at the docks. We'll see him by evening, I reckon."

"Or tomorrow morning, certainly," said Toa.

"Without Zuth," snickered Lellie.

Ogos's rebuke came surprisingly sharp. "We'll not talk of such things, girl."

An angry retort almost slipped out. No, Ogos was completely right to reprimand her. "Yes, Master Ogos."

Soon, Lellie—in a skirt—was sitting beside Mistress Arrie as they read from one of Zil's books. It was in Tesran Muram but she found she could follow along well enough now. Maybe better than Nib, for she had less of his knowledge of Imperial Muram to get in the way.

The story told of Admiral Mursoazes, who cut somewhat of a bigger-than-life figure while leading Tesran ships to victory, but more of it was about the sorceress Na. She might have been the most powerful Chief Wizard to ever serve Tesra.

"She came from another world?" asked Nib. "I thought—I thought we couldn't do that."

"Not on our own. One must find a gate between worlds. You will learn of those," Arrie assured him.

"Are any close?"

"Close enough, but none would take us anywhere we wish to go. There are several in the Rift, making it a place of great power."

"And wizards can go through them?" asked Lellie.

"Anyone can go through them. What's this commotion outside?"

"It's Master Zil!" Lellie jumped up and ran to the open library doors. "I don't know who that is with him."

"I am sure Master Zil has many acquaintances we do not know," spoke Arrisha, come to stand beside her. "But his attire does not look Tesran."

Lellie could recognize that. The dark blue, knee-length robe was unlike what she had seen worn around the city. The man himself did look Tesran, dark of skin, with curling hair and beard—both longer than was customary here.

Nib stared at him for a few seconds, before announcing, "I bet he's from the Rift."

Zil was giving orders to his majordomo. Moments later, the stranger followed Ogos through a doorway opposite them. Showing him to a room, thought Lellie. The man was going to stay for a while.

"I believe you are right, Nib," Arrie murmured. "An emissary from Tul Sunac and undoubtedly a sorcerer. Now let's get back to our lesson instead of gawking."

Lellie squinted toward the returned Zil. What was that on his shoulder? Reluctantly, she turned away. "How did you know where he's from?" she whispered to Nib.

"His clothes. I've peeked at wizards from the Rift." He gave Mistress Arrisha a furtive look. "Don't tell Arrie."

Lellie suspected that was just what she should do. The thought flitted away when Master Zil appeared at the door. A bird. There was a bird perched on his shoulder.

Not surprisingly, all three pairs of eyes in the room went to the brightly colored creature. Arrisha was the first to remember her manners. "Welcome back, sir," she spoke. Her eyes went back and forth between man and bird.

Zil laughed. "This is Matti." He held a hand up and the red and gold bird hopped to it from his shoulder. "Do not ask whether Matti is male or female. I am told it is hard to tell with parrots."

"Not if they start laying eggs," said Lellie. She knew that much of birds.

"Very true, Mistress Lellie. I had Matti of a Baxac trader in Zelara. He is for you, Master Nib." He held his arm out to the boy and Nib did not hesitate to do the same. Mattie hopped over and tipped his head at the youngster. "He eats fruit and nuts," Zil told him. "I had this of the same trader," he continued, and drew forth a small curved dagger. "The southerners do have a way with steel. For you, Lellie. From all I've heard since getting home, you need be better armed."

"Thank you, sir." She admired the bright blade for only a moment before asking, "Did you have a good trip?"

"Quite good, girl." He gave her one of his half-smiles. "I suspect you would like to make such journeys."

That she would! Lellie but nodded, attempting not to appear over-eager.

Nib was hiding nothing of his feelings, busily making friends

with his parrot. He looked up and asked, probably of Mistress Arrisha, "Is it possible to talk to animals? Or with animals, I guess I mean."

The sorceress' answer came seriously and without hesitation. "I have heard of those with a special gift for such things being able to link with relatively mindless creatures, such as reptiles. Nothing as sophisticated as a bird."

Nib frowned, giving this a moment's thought. "You'd have to reach around through another world and try to enter their mind, wouldn't you?"

"Exactly. So do some powerful sorcerers send dreams to those without our gift."

Zil spoke. "Parrots such as Matti can learn to mimic our words, though they do not understand them. It is wise to be careful of ones speech around them."

"More so if you are talking about Master Zil," added Lellie, grinning.

"Indeed." Zil settled in one of the chairs, stretching his legs before him. "I had a long conversation with Lord Murso. Long for him. The man can be as fidgety as our Mistress Lellie."

Lellie at once attempted to sit still though she knew she wouldn't be able to keep it up.

"You came up in our conversation, Lellie, and someone will say more of that in time. A more urgent topic was the man who returned with me from Zelara."

"And from the Rift," she said.

The Tesran gave her a long look before shaking his head. "That is something else that should not spoken, whether around Matti or not. He will be our guest for dinner this evening."

"You wish us all to be there, sir?" asked Arrisha.

"Unless it makes you uncomfortable, mistress."

She thought but briefly on that. "It does, but I am most certain the Mec Una would wish me to attend."

"The mec wishes many things, I am sure, but I am master in this

house." He laughed of a sudden. "And let us hope Matti does not repeat that to her."

Arrie smiled only slightly, but said, "I will take dinner with you and our guest, sir. Someone must make these unruly children behave."

"I fear we both spoil them." Zil rose. "I'll go change from these travel clothes." With that he went up the stairs, leaving the three in the library.

Lellie went over to give Matti a closer look. She had never seen a parrot up close, only glimpses of those owned by sailors. But she had known those who kept pigeons in Famod. There were plenty of wild pigeons, too, and starlings and all sorts of sea birds. "What are you going to teach it to say?"

The boy only smiled and shrugged. Just having Matti was probably enough for the moment.

"Maybe it knows some Baxac words. Can you talk to us, Matti?"

The bird ignored her. She pulled out Zil's gift to her, to give it a better looking over. The blade was quite plain but she knew better than to judge it by that. Baxac steel was the best. So everyone claimed. Arrisha looked over her shoulder. "That is the sort of small knife a noblewoman might keep in the sleeve of her formal robe," she stated.

"Oh, do we need to dress up?" Lellie didn't much want to but it would let her try out Arrie's suggestion.

"Master Zil would have told us, had he wished it."

Zil reappeared a few minutes later. His dress was not at all formal but what he might normally wear about his own house, a short, loose robe, trousers tucked into soft boots. "None shall join us," he announced from the stairs, "but my guest. Others will come to meet him soon enough but we both need time to rest from our journey." He shot a quick look of amusement at Lellie. "Or journeys."

Only seconds later, Master Ogos ushered in the visitor. Zil must have notified him in some manner. The man seemed ordinary

enough—for a Tesran. He looked rather young but Lellie had heard enough now to know that could be deceiving.

"I'll go inform the kitchen you're ready, sir," said the major-domo, backing out the doorway with a quick bob of a bow.

"I present Master Nanos," spoke Zil. "The priestess Arrisha. My wards Nib and Lellie."

Mistress Arrisha greeted him with a formal bow but then asked, "Nanos? What sort of name is that, sir?"

Both Nib and Lellie understood its meaning. One of the first Tesran words they had learned was nanem, meaning 'wanderers.' Some of the old families used it to describe themselves, taking pride that their ancestors had journeyed here from a far land.

So did this wizard style himself a wanderer? Or maybe he was lost! Lellie stifled a snicker at her private joke.

"It speaks of my vocation, my lady. I travel wherever my master sends me."

Dxukur. No one spoke the name but all recognized whom he meant. Even Nib, Lellie was certain.

"And now," he went on, "I have been sent here." Lellie felt Nanos was not particularly happy about it.

"But that is nothing of which we wish to speak tonight. Here is our dinner." The two robed servants who usually brought Zil's meals had materialized at the door. While the master of the house had been gone, Arrisha and the children had eaten in the kitchen.

Now the sorceress sat at Zil's left hand and the visiting wizard—he was surely a wizard—at his right. Nib and she took places below them. The girl was disappointed to again find hutnee in her tumbler while the adults drank wine.

And the food was all mixed up together as Tesrans seemed to like it. Lellie would have preferred her rice over there and her meat here and the vegetables somewhere else, if she had to eat them at all.

"This is your first visit to Tesra, Master Nanos?" Arrie was asking.

"It is mistress. There is much I would wish to see here!" He chuckled, seemingly a bit embarrassed by his outburst of enthu-

siasm. "I am a scholar, first, and it is with the eyes of a scholar my lord wishes me to see Tesra."

Zil smiled at that. "A spy who admits his mission?"

The smile on Nanos's face was fleeting, at best, as he resumed his serious demeanor. "I admit to knowing little of spying, sir, and to being new to diplomacy. I would wish to visit libraries and archives if it is possible."

"We should be able to help you play tourist, sir. Mister Arrisha might be willing to play guide."

Mister Arrisha did not appear to think much of the idea. Yet she politely asked, "What impression has our city made, sir?"

"The buildings are unlike anything I have ever seen. Seen in person." His eyes flicked for only a second or two to his host. "So many arches! And so many in ruins. That is not so good to see."

"Tesra is much fallen from its glory," murmured Zil.

"Yet still imposing to we who live mostly in the burrows we have carved in the rocks of Tul Sunac. My home, too, has greatly fallen."

"It seems your Wizard-Lord is attempting to remedy that."

Nanos stared down at his food for a moment before answering. "Yes, attempting. There is much to be done. Our ruins rival those of Tesra and our resources are fewer." A lengthy pause. Lellie thought he was done and went back to attempting to fish bits of fowl out of the mix in her bowl. "Following the defeat and death of Torut," he said finally, his voice become almost a whisper, "the Rift drifted, no longer the power it had been, racked with internal strife."

"Eight hundred years ago. But we in Tesra were falling into decline as well, and unable to act against Tul Sunac."

"I suspect none saw it as a threat."

"Most didn't," allowed Zil. "And barbarian nomads and Baxac pirates were more immediate problems. Now Dxukur has made the Rift a concern again."

"I was but a child when Dxukur came to rule as Wizard-Lord, forty-some years ago." He looked down the table. "Perhaps Master

Nib's age." His eyes lingered on the boy, as if assessing him, before returning to the adults.

Master Zil nodded. "Following a period of chaos after the murder of Leu."

"Yes. There was very much a change of culture under Leu, I understand. She brought some stability with a long reign, but concentrated on putting her realm in order rather than becoming a power."

"Would that most rulers did so," commented Arrisha.

"We have no designs on Tesra, mistress."

Zil went so far as to raise an eyebrow at this. "None immediate. We know the Rift's eyes are on the Scola and the Empire, not on our decaying city."

"I would think so, sir. There are those here we might wish to be allies, but this is neither the time nor place to discuss such things, is it Master Zil?" Nanos rose from the table. "I am yet tired from my journey, and should seek my bed. I would thank you for your hospitality and wish all a good night."

"Certainly, Master Nanos," spoke Zil, rising as well and walking with his guest to the doors. Lellie was not at all surprised to see a guard outside, waiting to accompany the man to his room. I would have expected it if I'd thought, she told herself. So think about things!

No sooner was the man out the door than Mistress Arrisha turned to Zil. "I would thank you, Master Zil, not to introduce me as a priestess. I have taken no vows nor am I likely to do so."

"Oh?" He seemed surprised by this. "I made assumptions I should not, it seems, and I apologize."

"The mec should have told you I was not of her order." The laugh that followed held perhaps a tinge of embarrassment. "Or I should have!"

This baffled Lellie. She decided it was not a good time to ask questions.

"I still might ask you to show our visitor some of the city," said

Zil. "Only if you are comfortable doing so. Your students could learn along with Master Nanos."

"I would be willing, Master Zil. He does not seem a bad sort." She seemed to muse on her statement before adding, "I may have let prejudices color my perception."

"Oh, you should remain distrustful. Nanos is indeed a spy of Dxukur. And now, Lellie, I must speak to you of what General Murso said to me."

Had she done something wrong? Maybe she had been too impertinent or too familiar or something.

"His son—you call him Punny, right?" She nodded quickly. "His son wishes to take you sailing. I approve but told him Nib must be invited as well. Does this suit you?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Then be ready to go to the docks before dawn. Both of you upstairs now and get some sleep. And Nib—" The boy looked up from the parrot he had been feeding bits of fruit. "Do not let Matti sleep in your bed."

IX. Standing Stones

"Hiul? I thought Punny was coming." And she had hoped he'd be in his chariot. Instead it was this boy in a wagon, pulled by a pair of sedate donkeys.

"He's fussing with his boat. You must be Nib," Hiul said, jumping down from the front seat. "I like your parrot."

Matti squawked something. "Was that a word?"

"It's Baxac," explained Nib. "Master Zil says it's too filthy to translate."

Both the older children snickered. "We'll have to find someone who knows what it means," felt Hiul. "Maybe a sailor."

"I could find a Baxac wizard," Nib offered.

"No you don't!" Lellie thought he might be joking but it was best to take no chances. "It would be good to learn some Baxac. Maybe Master Zil can find the time to teach me."

"Scolam would be more useful," felt Hiul. "Punny can speak it. Let's ride in the back. You move up front with the driver," he told the one guard accompanying him. Then he peered again at the parrot. "Is it coming too?"

"I'll put it in its cage. Right back!" He scurried into the stables. Nib deemed it the best place for Matti's home, when they were not in Master Zil's rooms. Lellie suspected the bird might learn a few undesirable words around the stable hands.

"I met your father when he visited Master Zil," said Lellie, as they waited for the boy to return.

"He'll be back. Everyone wants to see your guest. Ready?" Nib came running and all three climbed into the cart.

It was still dark as they pulled out into the streets of Tesra, and the moon sat just above the western horizon. It would be wonderful to sail by her light, wouldn't it? They should have gotten up an hour earlier!

"Xany wanted to come too," Hiul was saying, bringing her mind back to the mundane confines of the wagon. "Not enough room."

"I invited her to come visit here." She gave the boy a furtive look. "That goes for you, too." Not to mention Punatho. But he lived in a palace. Why would he want to come to the house of Zil?

For that matter, she should probably ask Master Zil whether the boys could come. How much longer? These donkeys were bigger than Cappy, and faster, but they'd never match a horse-drawn chariot!

Nor a horse, for that matter. Now Zil has returned she might get to ride again. On Penza, maybe. Oh, she could see the water now. But Grandmother Moon had gone to bed. Why was Hiul waving? Punny. And that must be his boat.

Lellie was not impressed. She had seen ocean-going ships at Famod and knew how a vessel should look. This one was broad, like those Zil had shown her before, with a rather tall battened sail. It was good sized though; she had feared it would prove some sort of toy and not suitable for aught more than paddling around the shores.

Though on a fine morning like this, that might be enough! The clear water of Lan Tenac lapped at the stone quays, sparkling beneath a cloudless sky. She hopped down from the wagon to give Punatho's boat a closer looking-over. Not so bad, maybe. The draft appeared quite shallow. She had never seen a steering oar situated like that, passing through an opening at the squared-off stern, rather than being set to one side. That seemed sensible though she could also imagine drawbacks. No matter.

A young man, equipped with sword, stood beside the boy. "This is Alporus," Punny said. "My father insists that my bodyguard come along. We can put him to work on the oars if the wind dies."

Alporus looked exceedingly Tesran, right down to his mess of straw-colored curling hair. "Count on me if you start a mutiny," she told him.

"Oh? Will you two become pirates?" asked Hiul.

Her attempt at a disdainful tone probably fell short. "I don't think we could catch any ships in this tub."

"Now I'll have to prove you wrong!" laughed Punatho. "All aboard. Nib, right? Get right on in."

Five—two of them on the small side—did not crowd the vessel. Alporus put a foot against the quay and pushed them off, while Punny adjusted the sail. It didn't seem to require much. "Drop the centerboard, Hiul," he called out.

Lellie was baffled by whatever it was Hiul did. "Centerboard?" she whispered to Alporus.

"A retracting keel," he whispered back. She appreciated his tact in doing so.

"Oh. That makes sense. Thank you, Master Alporus."

"Al will do," he told her.

"Will we see any mermaids?" came Nib's voice. He knelt at the prow, scanning the water ahead. "I read there are mermaids."

"They don't come this close to the city," Punatho told him. "We'd have to go visiting among the islands out there." He waved an arm toward the west.

Alporus at once warned, "Too far for today."

"Yes, right." Punny sounded just a tad peeved. "They do come closer to these shores than they used to, I've heard. Fewer people and fewer boats to scare them away."

"They're timid," added Hiul.

"The mec lives over there." Nib pointed toward the shore. Lellie could see no landmarks she recognized but was willing to take his word for it. The sorceress' house should be somewhere in that general area.

"I wish we had more breeze," muttered Punny. "I'd show you how fast this boat can go."

Lellie couldn't keep from giggling. "I believe you, Captain Punatho. I'm sure it is the swiftest vessel sailing this little lake you call a sea."

The boy only shook his head. Al leaned in, again whispering, "That might not be too far from the truth, missy. It is a fast little boat."

"All right. I won't tease Punny anymore." She reconsidered that. "Not as much, anyway."

"Ah! There's a breeze." It seemed quite light to Lellie, yet the little boat shot forward. That's just what it's intended for, she told herself. It wouldn't sail so nicely in a strong wind. Much less a storm!

"It's not a bad little boat," she admitted. She did not think she would go further than that. "Hey, are those islands over there? Can we visit them?"

"We can sail around them," Punatho replied. "Most have villas on them so we probably shouldn't land."

Hiul piped up. "How about the prince's island?"

"That's the one we read about, Lellie," said Nib. "Remember? It was in the story about Na and the admiral. Can we go there, please?"

Hiul was nearly as enthusiastic. "Yes, let's, Punny." He turned to the younger boy. "They were attacked by demons that came out of the stone circle. It's still there!"

Punatho only shrugged. Maybe he didn't read much. He did turn his little vessel northward.

Not much more than a minute later, Nib announced, "I feel funny."

"Seasick?" asked Punny. "If you puke, do it over the side."

"No, no. There is—something out there. It makes me feel excited and scared all at once." He stared into the distance, seemingly entranced.

Alporus understood at once. "The boy must sense the place of power on the isle. He's of wizard blood?" This was answered by nods from all. "It might be best to veer off."

"No! I want to see it!"

Punatho looked undecided. Then, "The priestesses will be there. He'll be all right."

"Maybe so," admitted the bodyguard.

The island soon rose before them, rocky and clad in conifers. It was bigger than Lellie had expected. Punny steered his boat into a

small sandy-shored cove. "Should we pull up the keel?" Lellie whispered to Hiul.

"Uh-huh. Help me."

Which was just what the girl wanted to do and get a closer look at it. Oh, it pivoted on its leading edge so the depth could be varied. But that required a bigger hole in the bottom of the boat, didn't it? She had no more time to think of that as they scraped along the wooden pilings of a dock. Only one other boat, smaller than Punny's, was tied up. Maybe those priestesses they'd mentioned used it.

She looked back toward the shores of Tesra. Not all that far. Close enough they could be seen, anyway. That taller, blocky mass over there must be the prince's palace. Most of the city remained in the shadow of the hills. She hopped up onto the dock in Punatho's wake. His tying up of the boat looked clumsy to her. She should teach him some better knots!

But she didn't really know sailing, did she? Lellie had to admit that to herself. Whatever Punny's skills with a rope—or lack of them—might be, he knew far more about managing a boat.

Nib clambered up to stand beside her, turning this way and that, taking in the island. Maybe searching for something? Lellie's reverie was broken in on by Hiul calling, "Should I bring the lunch basket?"

"Too early," Punny called back. "Come on." The boy started up a well-marked pathway through the cedars.

Lellie thought they were cedars, anyway. Close enough to being cedars. She wasn't about to ask and have one of these boys tell her they were pines or something. "There's a shrine up ahead," confided Hiul, falling in beside her. "It's not much. The circle is what's interesting." Nib and Punny set the pace ahead of them; Alporus brought up the rear.

The shrine, indeed, proved 'not much.' What lay just beyond it interested the visitors far more. A circle of tall, rough stones—six of them. The ground between them was barren earth and that was not

interesting. Not interesting to anyone but Nib. "There is something there," he said, pointing. "I can almost see it."

"Sorcerers claim to see a shimmering there," spoke a woman who emerged from the tiny, shed-like shrine. They would have to live somewhere else, felt Lellie. Another, younger women followed in her wake. Both wore robes of white, like the Mec Una. The sorceress must be a priestess too, of some Tesran god or another. They wore their hair long like Una, also, falling down their backs but gathered at the neck. She could see it might get in the way otherwise.

But short hair didn't get in the way at all!

"A gate, right?" asked Nib, and then remembering his manners, added, "mistress."

"You may call me sister," responded the priestess. "Both of us."

"And you must be Master Nib," her companion said. "We have heard about you."

"Me, sister? Why—why would anyone hear about me?"

"I am sure you will figure that out soon enough. Master Punatho, isn't it? You have visited before."

"Yes, sister, and these are my friends Hiul and Lellie. Oh, and Master Alporus."

"Welcome all." Her gaze lingered on Lellie for just a moment. Maybe she'd heard of her, too, though she knew she wasn't as important as Nib. "I would guess you came to look at the standing stones."

"And have a picnic," added Hiul.

"It is a good place for one," the priestess allowed. "Most people only come to look at the rocks and then leave again. I suspect they are somewhat disappointed."

The other woman said, "They might as well look at the circles on the mainland."

"But they're not magic!" objected Hiul, who proceeded to give the stones a thorough, sober perusal.

How silly he can be! thought Lellie. She decided to ask a sensible question. "How do you keep the weeds out of it?"

"Nothing grows within the circle. The cedars won't even take root close to it."

She was right about them being cedars. Lellie had seen that Tesrans liked to plant them around their temples but these ones were wild and unkempt. She thought she preferred them.

"It is, however, completely safe for humans to enter the stones," the priestess continued. "Many have so done, without harm nor without being transported to the world beyond. Its gate is locked against our kind."

Hadn't wizards passed through it in the story they had read? Lellie tried to remember just how they did so but the details were jumbled in her head. At that moment, something came bounding from the shadows of the trees.

"A ghalu," Lellie breathed, taking a step back, unsure whether to run or pull out her new knife.

"Fear not, mistress. Boba will not harm you." The priestess allowed herself but a slight smile.

"Lellie was attacked by ghalun on the road across the hills," volunteered Hiul. "My father told me."

"Ah. I too have had word of this. None from our pack, mistress."

"Your pack?" It came as a cracked whisper. Lellie kept her eyes fixed on the creature, which had settled down at the woman's side.

"Even so. Ghalun do not live here but they visit now and again from their home in another world."

"There is a story to that, is there not, my lady?" asked Alporus. "These newcomers to Tesra might like to hear it."

"So would I," added Hiul.

"Very well. Let us walk and I shall speak of it. I, by the way, am Sister Lurana and this is Sister Catha."

"Priestesses of Trepais," interjected Nib. How did the boy know that? Pay more attention to things, girl, Lellie told herself. She'd been giving herself lots of reminders like that lately, hadn't she?

"Indeed we are, Nib. Our order has long watched over the prince's isle and its stones. We were here when the Smotan warrior Duxi first brought the ghalun to the isle, nearly a thousand years

ago. She saw it would not do to keep them as pets in the city, so the ghalun were allowed to roam this island, where they can pass through a gate to another world. One better suited to them, or so they claim." She glanced down at the ghalu walking by her side and seemed to growl something at it. "But they come back from time to time to visit. It has become custom for some of the priestesses to learn their language so we may communicate with the beasties."

At once, Nib stated, "I want to learn it."

"We might be able to arrange that. You must ask the Mec Una."

Nib only nodded and stared toward the center of the circle, seeing something there none of the others could. "How can the ghalun pass through the gate?"

They stood now gazing toward the center of the circle, having walked all the way around its perimeter. "We believe the gate bars the passage of life from either world, but the ghalun are not native to this world nor to the other. Thus in the old account of the sorceress Na, humans were able to come through by being in physical contact with demons from yet another world."

"And a god," Nib had to add. A squint followed and a question followed that. "Would touching a ghalu work?"

This provoked a meaningful—and maybe slightly surprised—glance between the two priestesses and a laugh from Lurana. "You are not the first to think of that, young master. It has been attempted but has always failed."

The boy looked decidedly disappointed. "Is it all right to go to the middle? I want to get a closer look."

The priestesses looked at each other again, perhaps uncertain of how to deal with someone with his powers, however young. Catha only shrugged when her companion said, "There is no reason you shouldn't."

"Come with me, Lellie," requested Nib, holding out his hand. He might be more sure of himself since coming to Tesra, but Nib still trusted the girl to keep him safe in unfamiliar circumstances. She took his hand and the two slowly walked forward, Punny and Hiul

close behind. "It feels stronger," Nib murmured. "It's right there." He reached out an arm.

And they were no longer among the stones. Great trees rose about them, rose to dizzying heights, their distant crowns shutting out the sky. A soft green light filtered into the stillness. "Get us back," whispered Lellie. It did not seem a place to raise ones voice.

The boy nodded and turned about. "There's the door." He stopped, stared here and there. "And there and there. I can't tell which one is right."

"Don't try one!" cautioned Lellie. "We don't know where it might lead."

Nib continued to scrutinize the area all around them. "They're fakes," he finally decided. "But it makes it hard to find the real one."

Laughter erupted from somewhere in the shadows. Many voices? Several, anyway. Of that Lellie was sure. And there might be something moving out there.

Then there was something moving near. A snarling ghalun dashed past them, straight toward the source of the laughter. That laughter changed to shrieks of fear. Less than a minute later, the jackal-man—or jackal-woman, more accurately—returned to them with the mangled body of some small creature in her mouth. When she spat it out, Lellie could see it was somewhat human.

"It's Boba!" cried out Nib. "She must have been sent after us."

Lellie thought she was going to be sick as she watched Boba consume her catch. The little body was much too manlike. But whatever it was, it had surely meant Nib and her no good. "I wish we could speak to her."

Boba crunched a bone and looked up at the pair. "Ahrrr, ahhrrrr!"

"Huh?" said Lellie.

"I think she understands some of our language, even if she can't speak it."

"Oh. I guess that sounds right." The ghalu's mouth was not

designed to speak human words but it was bright enough. "Thank you for helping us, Boba. Let's get back, then."

"But you have only arrived," came another voice, an exceedingly low rumble of a voice. Boba only looked up before returning to her snack. She did not seem alarmed.

Lellie thought she should be. A great shaggy beast, twice as tall as Doab, stood before them. She had her knife in her hand without thinking.

"A brave little *neski*. You do not belong in this world." The gleaming, deep-set eyes went to Nib. "Yet this one does. A part of him does." The dark muzzle bobbed up and down as the beast silently regarded them. "It is good I found you before one of my brothers."

Nib looked up at the creature. "Are you a bear, sir?"

A deep, rollicking laugh. "I am a god, little one. Kusket they used to name me. That means nothing but Great Bear." He held up a huge paw. "One moment, mortals." With that he began to diminish, to transform into something not quite so beast-like. Shortly, a man stood before them, but larger than any man Lellie had ever seen. Eight feet tall, maybe? Quite hairy, with a long black beard, and dark skin where it could be seen.

It could be seen in too many places, she felt, for Kusket was also completely nude. And—and he looked a bit like Nib, didn't he? Like the aboriginal people of the area, those who raised the stone circles before ever the Tesrans came to live by the Sea of Sanctuary.

"Is this better, Neski?" the being asked.

"Neski?" ventured Lellie.

"Naught but the word for girl in the language of those who used to honor me. I like hearing it again. I will continue to name you Neski," he stated.

She wasn't about to tell him no. Instead, she said, "This is Nib."

Kusket scrutinized the lad. "A baby wizard. One with the blood of the gods in him, too, I'm pretty sure. Ha! Maybe even mine, boy. I could be your many-times great grandfather!"

"I'll never be as big as you, sir," came the boy's matter-of-fact reply.

The bear god roared with laughter so loud it hurt Lellie's ears. Louder than the most powerful thunderstorm that had ever rolled off the Great Sea, it was. "I suspect not!"

"Lord Kusket," spoke Lellie, "who were those little people? They meant us harm, didn't they?"

"The *azimazi*. They sought to lead you astray and get you hopelessly lost in the forest. They do like to play with their food." He glanced toward the ghalu. "It is good your *hordax* came along."

"Yes, she's a good girl. Aren't you, Boba?" asked Nib. The ghalu wagged its stubby tail.

"Better than me, no doubt, and I'm better than most you would find in this world. There be wicked creatures here who would want to use Nib as a way to pass to your world. The *borugi*. What you would call werewolves, I think." He paused to look about, peering into the dark shadows beneath the trees. "Indeed, there are three or four of them slinking about out there right now."

Boba lifted her muzzle and sniffed. "Rrrrurrri," she growled. Lellie's eyes swept the forest but she saw nothing. She was willing to take Kusket's word on the the werewolves and even more willing to take Boba's.

A deep, rumbling chuckle arose from the god. "The hordax are not fond of borugi. Ghalun you call them, don't you? I approve of their presence in our world though not all are taken with them. Know that most that is here is not evil. Amoral is a better word. My brother Lion Man thinks mostly of the hunt and the kill. I'm not sure he understands much beyond that. And Horned God is completely obsessed with sex. It is good you two are under-aged or he might have caught your scent." It was hard to tell how he felt about any of that. Kusket seemed more an observer than a doer. "Even Umu herself is not moral in any sense you would understand the word."

Nib broke in. "Umu? That's the Great Mother, right?" He and

Lellie had read of her in one of Master Zil's books. It might have mentioned this big fellow too.

"Yes, Umu is the mother of our world. She *is* our world. All around you is Umu."

"Are you a good god, then?" she asked. She was just a tad surprised she had once the words came out.

Kusket only shrugged. "I sleep and eat and poke my nose into this and that. I'm too lazy to cause much trouble."

Boba growled again and this time rose off the ground, her short gray fur bristling. "The borugi are unsure whether I intend to protect you," said the god. Lellie was unsure herself. Maybe even Kusket was. She suspected he might be just as amoral as those other deities he had mentioned.

Nib and she were only curiosities to him, maybe. Something to poke his nose into. There, something was emerging from the darkness. She could see the gleaming eyes, yes, and another pair over there. How soon was night in this world? It would not be good to still be here when the sun set.

Now something was moving over there. Yet another danger?

"Ah," said the Great Bear, as a group of small, rather bulbous men and women appeared. "*Badaga*. Umu must have called them." They carried bows and spears and looked a fearsome little troop.

Nib nudged Lellie and whispered, "Brownies."

She gave them another look. Maybe so. But badaga was just as good a name and maybe a better one in this world. The black, shaggy borugi could be seen clearly now, having moved out into this clearing, and seemed to be working up their nerve to attack, pacing back and forth, letting out the occasional howl.

Boba turned her head to the children, as if asking permission to join in the fight. "Best you stay with us, girl," Nib told her. The ghalu whined but settled down at his feet.

"Most interesting," commented Kusket, giving the two a somewhat casual look. "Definitely blood from one of us is in the boy's veins." Then his attention was drawn to the beginning of the battle.

A very short battle it proved. A few arrows flying their way

unnerved the werewolves and they fled back into the forest. Perhaps they were still unsure about whether they might need to face the bear god.

The badaga reformed their ranks and came over to speak to the god in a language Lellie could not understand. Kusket replied in what seemed to be the same tongue. Hey, how did he know the modern Tesran dialect, anyway? That was not a question to be answered at the moment. She gave the badaga—or brownies—a closer look. Just like the pictures. Well, almost like the pictures. Spindly arms and legs sprouting from bulbous bodies, with seemingly over-sized heads. Brown of skin and long of nose. Large ears, but not pointed; she had kind of expected them to be. They stood no taller than a man's knee. Higher than her knee, lower than Kusket's!

There were nods of the head toward Nib and her from both sides of the conversation. Were they making plans about what to do with them? Then a great voice seemed to rise from all around them, a voice of almost unbearable, haunting beauty. "You were thinking of keeping them here, weren't you, Bear?"

"I miss having humans around," came the big god's surprisingly sheepish response.

"Yet you were the one who chose to close the way between our worlds."

"And it was the right choice." Kusket sighed. "I shall send them home, my love."

"It is the best place for them. For now."

For now. Nib could pass back to this world, if he chose. And the whole of her own world lay open to Lellie. Someday she would leave Tesra and find what it offered her.

"Ready?" asked Kusket. "The gate is right over there."

Nib started forward, Boba following at his heels. "Easy to see now."

"You may talk to me from afar anytime," said the god. "Only think of me in this place and I will hear your call."

The boy gave that a thoughtful nod. "And the others here won't?"

"They pay little attention to such things. Farewell, little wizard. Take care of him, Neski."

"I will, Lord Kusket," she promised, as Nib took her hand. A second or two later they stood among the stones on the prince's isle. Boba, too.

"They're back!" someone yelled.

"We couldn't miss Hiul's picnic," Lellie announced. "I'm awful hungry!"

"I'd best tell everyone the children are safe," said Catha. "You are safe, aren't you?"

"We seem to be. Why haven't you gone for the food yet, Hiul?"

The priestess and Hiul both scurried off. "Sister Catha has been speaking from afar about your disappearance," Lurana informed them. "Now she'll have to do it again to tell everyone you have returned. Though we have no idea how you passed through the gate." Her eyes, of course, fixed on Nib. No one would expect Lellie to know anything about it.

"I do," Nib replied, "and I think I shouldn't say anything about it."

Lellie felt that was wise.

X. The Great Luth

"There is a school that holds we do not actually send forth a part of our being but that we connect with alternate versions of ourselves," said Nanos.

"Hmm. Well, there should be infinite versions of each of us, shouldn't there? So I suppose it is plausible."

Nib pushed his way into the adults' conversation. "Could someone be connecting with us right now and telling us what to say?" The boy couldn't help grinning at the absurdity of the thought.

Nanos pondered that, perhaps more seriously than it deserved. "In theory, I suppose they could."

"But none of it actually matters," concluded Mistress Arrisha.

"Not in the least," Nanos admitted.

Lellie was bored. She was also near bursting with the desire to tell of her visit to Umu, the world of the Old Gods. Nib steadfastly refused to speak of it to anyone and she respected his wishes.

It had been a great adventure, hadn't it? A more enjoyable adventure than those that had preceded it. Just sailing with her friends was adventure enough! She hoped they'd do it again. She liked Punny. Hiul too. Maybe she'd fall in love with one of them. That happened, right? She was almost thirteen, after all.

Was something like that happening with Arrie and Nanos? The visitor from the Rift certainly seemed to pay a lot of attention to her tutor. Arrie. She liked Arrie too. What would it be like to kiss Arrie?

Stop daydreaming! Mistress Arrie was lecturing again and Master Nanos was doing his best to look interested.

"Large sections of the city have already reverted to farms," she said. "That will continue, I believe, but Tesra remains useful as a port."

"Assuming trade continues on Lan Tenac," came Nanos's reply.

"That's one of things you're here to talk about, isn't it?"

"Perhaps," admitted the sorcerer.

Lellie could not stifle her snicker. The envoy from the Rift gave her a tolerant smile before his eyes went to—and lingered on—the boy by her side. He was as interested in Nib as he was in Arrie, wasn't he?

Lots of people seemed interested in the boy lately. And more than a few had been pestering her about him! Nib remained oblivious of it or maybe pretended to be. Right now, his attention was on Rus, the stable dog, who accompanied them on this outing. No one had told him no when Nib had called Rus to jump up and ride with them.

He probably would have brought Matti too, were it possible. The parrot remained in its cage, a long-unused dovecote by the stables. This wagon was larger than the donkey cart in which Lellie was accustomed to traveling. It needed to be, with so many passengers! There was Nib and she, and Arrie and Nanos, and a driver and a pair of guards. No Doab today, nor did Cappy pull them. Instead, two rather sturdy chestnut horses were in harness. The grooms had told her both wagon and team were lent to Zil by the Mec Una.

Maybe the attendants too. Arrie seemed familiar with them.

"There's the palace," she informed all. "I wonder if Punny is there."

"I suspect his tutor is making him study rather than taking him for rides around the city," Arrie responded. "That is indeed the prince's palace," she told Nanos.

"To which I am unlikely to be invited. I have no official recognition in Tesra." He surveyed the squat gray stone walls, slanting inward as they rose. "It is old, isn't it?"

"As much else in Tesra. Such edifices have not been built in centuries." Multicolored pennants fluttered from atop the ramparts. Lellie assumed each had some significance.

They rode on, now paralleling the shoreline of Lan Tenac. This route would take them near the mec's villa. Maybe they'd visit. Oh, she would want to quiz Nib, wouldn't she? Best they ride by!

"Would you like to see the Great Luth? It is only ruins now."

Without waiting for an answer, Arrisa told the driver, "Turn here to the right."

"The Temple of the Tetrad. I've been warned it can be, um, disappointing."

"That, sir, depends on what you expect from it."

"It was in the book about Na, too," said Nib. "Remember Lellie? With the night wasps!"

"They don't still have those, do they?" she asked, attempting not to sound nervous. She would as soon not meet any foot-long stinging insects.

"I've never seen one," Arrie told her, but turned her eyes toward Master Nanos.

"They can yet be found in the Rift. Not many. They are not natural to this world and have been dying out."

"It is said Torut bred them," the sorceress commented. Nanos had no reply for that.

The temple looked quite a lot like the palace. Blocky walls of gray stone sloped inward as they rose. It was not nearly as large, and crumbling here and there. Maybe the folks around it had been borrowing stones for their own uses.

Nanos squinted at the structure. "There is power here, isn't there?" Both Arrie and Nib nodded. Lellie was inclined to believe them. "Can we go in?"

"Please?" added Nib.

"Certainly." Arrisha stepped down from the rear of the cart. "The temple stands on a locus of power. Not a strong one."

"But a thinning of the wall between worlds, none the less." Nanos followed her to the uneven pavement.

A guard announced, "One of us should go first. No telling what might lurk in that hole." He nodded toward a dark, deep entryway.

"Stay, Rus," ordered Nib, as Lellie and he fell in behind the adults, the other guard bringing up the rear. The passageway arched above them. Lellie knew it was called a barrel vault. Some of the tunnels under Famod were built so.

Apparently they were elsewhere too. "Reminds me of Tul

Sunac," spoke Nanos, "but more likely to be chiseled out of the rock there than built by laying up stones."

There proved to be no dangers, only a few loiterers sitting or leaning against a wall. Not a bad place to hide out on a hot day; it was almost cool in here. They emerged into an open space. Lellie wanted to call it a courtyard, at first. No, this had been an arena. There were still places to sit, all around. Here and there, small trees had pushed up through the stone pavers.

A low mound of earth and broken stone lay in the middle. Mistress Arrisha gestured toward it. "Once, a holy stone served as an altar there. It had no power but simply marked the spot."

"Did someone steal the stone?" asked Lellie.

"Indeed they did. Barbarians who knew not it was worthless."

"That's stupid. One should always check the value first." She'd heard that more than once in the streets of Famod.

"I'm sure they should. If I go into thievery, Mistress Lellie, I'll make certain to take your advice."

"Just don't try to steal Nib from me." Where had that come from? Lellie at once regretted blurting it out.

But she did resent the way these Tesrans had been been pulling him away from her. Nib's friendship was all she truly possessed in this strange city.

"He is the only thing here *worth* stealing," opined Nanos. "Oh, are there still priests?" Three men in black robes approached.

"Followers of Kerais. I knew not any lingered here but there is no reason they shouldn't."

Lellie could think of several reasons. Even if they could clean the place up a bit, it would still be crumbling around them. Her knife leapt into her hand the instant the men drew short swords from their robes, striking down one of the unprepared guards.

Nanos was almost as quick with his own blade. The remaining guard drew his gladius but seemed less that eager to engage. "Protect the woman and boy," Nanos ordered.

He must not think I need protecting! Lellie told herself. Oh, if only she had a sword and could put her lessons to use.

What was Nanos doing? He held out one hand and smoke billowed in the direction of the false priests. Pulling it from another world, right? The wizard lunged forward under its cover, nicking one of his opponents but doing no real damage.

Yet they backed off, regrouped. Maybe they hadn't expected his capabilities. Well, they wouldn't expect her capabilities, either! Something whistled by her ear, one pitched forward, an arrow in his chest. The other two fled.

Nanos and Lellie turned to see Arrisha with a bow in her hand. "You called that from another world, mistress?" asked Nanos. Surprise and a certain amount of awe mingled in his voice.

"Not I, sir. I have no training in such things. Nib reached out and found it for me." She bowed toward the boy. "And I thank you, young sir. Oh!" The bow had disappeared from her hand.

"And he does have training?"

"Not a bit. Our Nib figured it out on his own, sometime back. Is that not so, Lellie?"

"Uh-huh. He grabbed a sword from somewhere to protect us in the hills." She felt it best not to mention they had killed an assailant with it.

"Ah, I have heard the story but not that detail. Let us see if the man you skewered still lives, Mistress Arrisha."

The guard was crouched above him already, and shook his head. "Dead," he said, rising. "So is Cef." He nodded toward his fallen fellow and then turned back to the body at his foot. "Can't figure what happened to the arrow."

Arrie suddenly sagged. "I killed a man," she breathed. "Killed him without a thought."

Nib took her hand. "You had to, Arrie. Don't feel bad."

The sorceress knelt and took him in her arms, tears flowing. Oh, Nib's too. He'd gone through this himself, not so long ago.

Nanos looked unsure of himself. "We'd better go tell somebody what happened," said Lellie.

"Yes, yes. Quite so. We'll get you all home at once. Leave the bodies," he ordered. "They can be someone else's concern."

The driver was dozing on his seat when they emerged onto the street, Rus stretched out beside him. “Have a good look at it, gentlefolk? Not too exciting, I’d think.”

“You might be surprised,” answered Nanos, helping Arrisha into the wagon.

“Never know, I guess. Hey, where’s Cef?”

“Dead,” responded the remaining guard. “Murdered while you malingered out here.”

“Well, I never! Home then?”

XI. The House of Spies

"I DON'T THINK I hate the Empire. Maybe the king in Geroth for becoming their ally." Lellie had heard just enough gossip on the streets and wharves of Famod to know this war was part of a long rivalry between Esadon and Geradon. "Maybe I hate all the kings and emperors and—and mayors and generals and just everybody."

Master Zil might have sympathized. "I fear most humans need someone to give them orders."

"Then I'll be queen myself someday!"

"I would not be surprised. Tonight, you will not assert yourself but only observe. If you feel you must say something, first ask permission."

For a second or two, Lellie was ready to add Zil to the list of those she hated. Instead, she asked, "Did those men plan to kidnap Nib?" She remembered Nanos saying he was the only thing there worth stealing.

"Possibly. Or they might have intended to assassinate Nanos. You may hear more of that this evening. Now run and find Nib so the two of you and Mistress Arrisha can have your dinner first."

"All right." She jumped up and started for the doors. "It's a good thing Mistress Arrie is a good archer, huh?"

"That it is. I did not know she had that talent." He mulled on that a moment before saying, "The Mec Una is a renowned archer."

"One of them will have to give me lessons!" she announced, passing out into the courtyard. She was fairly sure she heard Zil's laugh behind her. Nib would be in the stables; that Lellie knew.

Yes, there the boy was, talking to the stable hands again. "Time to get Matti back to our room," she announced. "And get something to eat." She ambled over to peer at the parrot. "Does he like this cage?"

"She," Nib corrected her.

"Matti's a girl? How do you know?" She gave the bird a closer look but could find no clue.

"Kusket told me. He can tell, somehow."

Lellie had no idea what to say to that. Or whether she should report it to someone.

"She likes going in and out of the nest boxes," said Nib. "It was made to hold a whole bunch of pigeons. And she can see what's happening in the stables and even outside." He undid the catch and reached in an arm. Matti hopped on at once.

"Aren't you afraid she'll fly away when you carry her outside?"

"She won't. She could undo that silly catch anytime and leave if she wished." The parrot climbed up onto his shoulder and rubbed her head against his. They headed toward the kitchen with Matti still perched there.

"If I get Matti a proper cage of her own, maybe we could have doves too."

"To eat?" Pigeon was a pretty common food in Famod.

Nib frowned. He probably hadn't even thought of why most people raised them.

"Lazy oafs!" shrieked Matti as they walked into the kitchens.

Ogos burst into laughter. "Your bird has been listening to my wife!"

"Just the assistant I need," commented Toa. "You all need to hear that frequently."

The children took seats across from the majordomo and his wife. "Where's Mistress Arrisha?" asked Toa.

"I don't know. We'll wait a while for her to show up." And if she didn't soon, they'd start dinner without her.

"Maybe she's too busy with Nanos," snickered Nib. This brought puzzled looks.

"Nanos is sweet on Mistress Arrisha," Lellie explained. "Maybe he'll carry her off to his distant home!"

"Hmmph," was all Toa had to say about that.

"Better if she could get him to stay here," felt her husband. "He's a competent wizard, I hear."

"And he knows how to use a blade," Lellie told him.

"So do I, but I'll not be marrying Mistress Arrie." His wife gave

him a deserved jab of the elbow. "Ouch, my dear. We must go prepare things for this little conference tonight. Master Zil is introducing him to a number of important people."

Lellie only nodded to this. She'd be introduced to them too. Only sort of, if she had to keep her mouth shut. There was Arrie.

"I might have known you'd already be here," their tutor said, sliding in beside them. "Have you eaten?"

"We were waiting for you," Nib told her.

"Thank you. Let's go fill plates and then get you up to our rooms and out of the master's way."

As they returned to their places, Lellie asked, "Aren't you going to be at Master Zil's meeting?"

"I could add nothing. But he invited you, didn't he?" At the nod of Lellie's head, she said, "You know you don't have to attend if you prefer."

"I'm just supposed to listen. Is this chicken again?"

"Lellie wants to eat pigeons," spouted Nib.

The girl gave him a stern look. "I wonder how parrot tastes."

Nib did not think that was funny. Rather, he mused, "Maybe I'll stop eating animals. Like Na."

"And her comrade Im," said Arrie. "It is rumored he yet lives."

Lellie doubted it. That would make the sorcerer close to a thousand years old!

"He helped defeat Torut, right?" asked Nib. "That was, umm, later on?"

"Yes. We'll find a book about it. Im did visit Tesra from time to time, though he chose to live beyond the Great Sea. It has been centuries since he was seen here."

Nib seemed wrapped in thought. He's considering trying to talk to him from afar, isn't he? thought Lellie. She wondered if Arrie recognized that.

A sudden question came to her. "Hey, are people here descended from this wizard? Or from Na?"

"Some from both," replied Mistress Arrisha, with a smile. "Let's clean our bowls and get out of here."

Toa and Ogos were directing servants in Master Zil's library when they returned, lighting lamps and setting out goblets, in preparation for his guests. Of those, there was not yet any sign nor was Zil himself present.

Mattie went to her perch as soon as they reached their room. "It is early yet," spoke Arrisha. "Do you wish to read something before bedtime?"

That they did, but Lellie was too nervous to sit still and pay attention. "Do you know who is coming?" she asked Arrie.

"Lord Nuthonides, I would think. You met him before."

"Hiul's father," interjected Nib.

"Yes. Officially, a member of the prince's council. It is an open secret he is also his spymaster."

"Master Zil's superior?"

The sorceress hesitated. "I'm not so sure of that. Rumor has it that the master reports directly to Prince Jomastes. They are old friends."

A spy to watch his spies. Such an independent man was useful. Even she knew that. "If they are such friends," Lellie said, "why hasn't he taken me to meet him?" She would much like to see the interior of the palace.

"Your friend Punatho is more likely to get you inside. Now where were we?" Arrisha returned her attention to their book.

"I'm going to go downstairs to wait," Lellie announced. Out the door and onto the curving staircase she went, down to where she could see Master Zil in conversation with Doab. She sat down, several risers up from the library floor. She would be out of the way there, able to observe but not readily take part, and partially hidden by the shadows.

Zil glanced up at her. "A good spot for you, girl."

"It's uncomfortable."

He tossed her a pillow from one of the divans and turned back to Doab.

The cushion helped. What was Doab's duty? Zil trusted him, maybe, but he wasn't trained in the arts of combat. The big man

took a position by the doors. A minute later came a knock on those doors.

"Speak!" called out Doab.

The reply was too muffled for her to make out, but Doab opened to a pair of guards escorting Nanos. "First?" asked the sorcerer, looking about.

"If one doesn't count Mistress Lellie," responded his host.

Nanos noted the girl on the stairs and gave her a decidedly respectful bow. "One must count Lellie, I think," said he, dropping into one of the chairs.

Others knocked and were admitted over the next half hour. Some Lellie recognized. Nuthonides, to be sure. And the priestess Catha. That was a surprise. One of them dressed in the fashion of a Scolam nobleman.

Seven guests when all were arrived. She was a little disappointed that General Murso was not among them. Zil stood and spoke. "We are gathered to greet Master Nanos, this evening. Nothing more, nothing less. If other matters come up, we may or may not discuss them."

A few discreet smiles met this announcement. "Nanos is not an official visitor. There are no diplomatic relations between Tol Sunac and Tesra, save through the Kingdom of the Scola." He bowed toward the man in Scolam dress. "The prince condones his presence but officially does not recognize it."

"Nor do we," said the Scol. "He is but another traveler in our eyes."

"But an interesting traveler," someone commented.

"That is for each of you to decide," Zil responded. "Master Nanos, may I present Lord Pargom, a representative of the Scola in Tesra?"

The man waved his hand in a sort of dismissal. "Representative is too heavily laden a word. I am but an aide of the ambassador."

There were those knowing smiles again. He must be somewhat more important than he claimed. Another spy, Lellie decided.

"Sister Catha, a priestess of Trepais."

Nanos bowed. "Sister Catha. Do you speak for your order or the wizards' council?"

"The council. I am the Mec Una's voice this evening." Lellie wondered if the two priestess-sorceresses would be speaking to each other from afar. It would undoubtedly be impolite for anyone to ask her.

"Lord Nuthonides, counselor to the prince." The greeting of these two was perfunctory, a bow, murmured words. It was likely they had already met. Hmm, and Nuthonides had probably known the wizard was coming to visit Tesra. He might even have sent Master Zil to fetch him.

Or it might have all been done by Zil and the prince, behind his back. The man would be likely to resent that. She would, anyway.

Another woman was next, in a long formal Tesran robe of several bright colors. Wasn't it far too hot for that? "I present Mistress Jaci, head of the traders' league."

The woman, middle aged and homely at best, was the first to extend a hand rather than to bow. That was what Mura did. Scola, too, Lellie suspected. Nanos brushed it with his lips. And Jaci, of course, was a quite Muram name.

"Brother Kyros, chief priest of Kerais." An almost obese man in black robes bowed—not very deeply—toward Nanos.

"And leader of all who revere the Tetrad, no?" asked the wizard, returning the bow.

"It is so, sir," he replied. "Tell me, is the Tetrad followed in the Broken Place?"

Nanos seemed puzzled. "Broken Place?"

"Tul Sunac translated into Muram," interposed Zil.

"Oh. Yes, of course. I still stumble some in your language. But to answer your question, brother, no. The Tetrad has never been popular in the Rift."

"And prohibited at times," appended Sister Catha.

"That is true. Some of our leaders have not been fond of the religion and its challenge to their authority. The old gods of our people have hung on there," Nanos said. "The Rainbow Snake is still

revered by many. Others have picked up Smotan beliefs from the tribes that live around us."

Nanos was the scholar he claimed to be, wasn't he? The man belonged in a library, not attempting to woo a room of powerful men and women. Sister Catha was giving this Kyros unfriendly looks. If she didn't like him, neither would she, decided Lellie.

"And this is the Lady Huena." No explanation of who she was but she looked Tesran. Mostly Tesran.

"My lady." The usual bows were exchanged.

Then turned Lady Huena toward the stairs, saying, "Master Zil, you should introduce your other guest. My son has told me much of her."

"I can imagine, my lady," he said. "Greet my guests, Lellie."

She stood to give the room a bow and plopped back onto her cushion.

"I never noticed the girl up there," drawled Nuthonides. "Should she be here at all?"

"I wish her to be. And she has promised to keep her mouth shut." Lellie considered sticking her tongue out at him but restrained herself.

That seemed to satisfy the counselor and everyone else. They were even more satisfied when wine appeared.

"Do you wish to lead things off, Master Nanos?" asked Zil.

The wizard rose. "Only to state that we had no part in the attacks on Master Zil or his house. I was sent for purposes of peace and profit."

He would say that. Oh, she probably believed him. That didn't mean his master, that Dxukur fellow, wasn't plotting something else entirely. "To be sure," he continued, "I came only to explore. To open channels, perhaps."

"Behind our backs?" wondered Pergom. "Do you seek to turn our Tesran friends against Scola?"

"Are not Tol Sunac and Scola allies?" came Nanos's retort. "Your friends should be our friends."

"Allies for the moment," barked out Mistress Jaci.

Many heads nodded. The two now made common cause against the Empire, after warring against each other for decades.

Nanos was unfazed. He also recognized the interests of the woman who had just spoken. "Unlike some of his predecessors, Dxukur recognizes the importance of trade."

"Then he should help clear the western end of Lan Tenac of pirates."

"He has no authority there," stated Pargom. "The Sea of Sanctuary is a Scolam lake."

Lady Huena laughed aloud. "We all know you have to say that, Lord Pargom."

"And I hate to disappoint anyone, my lady. This war is central to our concerns, is it not?"

"Not so much to us in Tesra, perhaps," Zil reminded him. "Peaceful trade on all the reaches of Lan Tenac is an attractive idea."

"And forget the ambitions of the Muram Empire and their allies? They would soon be over the hills to sack your city. Without Scolam protection, it could not survive."

What silliness. Lellie stood and then remembered herself and sat back down. Oops, Master Zil had noticed her. "Mistress Lellie would say the Empire does not care about us. They are invested in the war between the Esa and the Gera, and control of the coasts."

Yes, she might, if she had Zil's way with words. Too many eyes turned her direction. She should have been up higher on the stairs where the shadows were deeper.

Kyros said, "The rumor is you Scola are giving the Esa aid."

"Secretly," added Mistress Jaci. "Taking advantage of the situation."

"They would be fools not to," Lord Nuthonides informed them. "We're not going to win the war tonight. And certainly not in Zil's library."

"It would make a terrible mess if you did," commented Huena. "We need to speak of Master Zil, do we not?"

"How many attacks have there been on you since you came back

over the hills, Zil?" asked Nuthonides. "Two, isn't it, and more on those around you?"

"Two in the city. I ran into some troubles in Zelara." His eyes went to Nanos who nodded in agreement. This was a story Lellie wanted to hear! "There was no wizardry involved in that one."

"But there was in the others. Sorcerers of Tesra? Or of the Rift?" Now many eyes went to Nanos.

"Or in the service of some other nation. Master Nanos has been a target, as well, we should note."

"And the attempt to kidnap my son?" asked Lady Huena.

Her son? She'd mentioned him before. She was Punny's mom!

"Perhaps unrelated," felt Nuthonides. "Ransom might have been their only motive."

"Or the same groups might be involved in all of them. There are dissidents within Tesra who are not fond of our ruling family. They also might like the idea of ransom money."

Nuthonides carried on. "The first attack on you, the one in the hills, most concerns me. It means someone knew who you were and that you would be vulnerable."

"Perhaps not. I was recognized as a spy, yes, that is obvious, but it does not mean my identity was known. The attack might not have been planned but only someone taking advantage of an opportunity."

Lellie found herself doubting it. It seemed some of the others did too.

"But it was followed by the attack here. Whoever ordered that definitely knew who you were," insisted the spy-master.

"Most likely agents of the Empire or the Gera, or even Tesran dissidents of one sort or another. Possibly working together."

"Together?" That from Lord Pargom.

"Some see the Empire liberating us from the yoke of Scola. But then again, your Scolam secret police could have had a hand in things. I would not expect you to know if they did, Pargom."

"They *are* secret police," the Scol admitted. "And they may well consider you a dangerous man."

"Do you?"

"Oh, I know you are. The question is to whom you are dangerous."

"Mostly myself, it seems. I know the police also see the independent wizard council as a danger and would like to see it abolished. Or to arrest all its members."

"Many mistrust wizards these days," Brother Kyros put in.

"That has long been true," spoke Sister Catha. "Many in the past were seduced to the Wizard-Lord's side."

"And more than a few, whatever their gifts, still see the Rift as Tesra's salvation. I consider Tol Sunac a greater danger than all others. Its promises are attractive to those who believe the city can be restored to its former glory." Zil shook his head. "That will never happen. Tesra's sun has long set."

Nanos looked as though he wished to make some response but seemingly could not find the words.

Master Zil went on. "Most of us here support the prince. We tread a way between those who would serve the Rift and those who see the Empire as their salvation."

"Which makes you at least to some degree friendly toward my king," said Pergom. "The least of a host of evils, perhaps."

"Now what of this latest occurrence?" asked Nuthonides. "The one at the Great Luth."

"We know not whether it was aimed at Nanos or Nib."

"Nib. That's the young wizard, right?"

"Quite young," answered Catha, "and quite powerful. The capabilities he showed on the prince's isle may have attracted attention."

"So there might have been an attempt to take him. The Rift would be most likely to be behind that," spoke Nuthonides.

"Not that I know of," responded Nanos. "They attacked me too."

That was not completely true, thought Lellie, but he certainly didn't seem to be in league with them.

"Do not doubt Dxukur would throw you aside if it suited his

purposes, Nanos," said Zil. "Then again, the attack my have been aimed at you and not at the boy."

"Once again attempting to disrupt your mission here," Nuthonides added. "We could discover nothing about the man who was slain. Certainly not one of your priests, Brother Kyros."

"I should hope not! This is an excellent vintage, Master Zil. I don't know how you manage to have the finest wines in Tesra."

"You have to sail across the sea and fight pirates to fetch them," Huena told him, to laughter all around.

"Master Zil sailed across the sea to fetch me," said Nanos. "And sooner or later I must leave. My job here is mostly to learn and to make what contacts I can. I think I have learned tonight; as for making contacts, I can't say, but I salute each of you who came to meet me." He raised his goblet to the group.

"Well said, Master Nanos," replied his host. "We hope the remainder of your visit passes without assassination attempts."

Nanos chuckled at that and changed the subject. "What are your plans for young Master Nib?"

"We recognize the value of Nib, but he is still very young. Any plans for him would be tenuous at best."

"He should visit the mec again soon," spoke Sister Catha.

"So she has told me. Mistress Arrisha is teaching him the ways of wizardry."

"And much more," interposed Nanos. "He is a true little scholar."

"She is doing it well, I am sure, but he may soon outstrip her. It is apparent—"

There came a heavy pounding on the door, a powerful voice calling for admittance.

"Who's there?" yelled Doab through the thick slab.

"Nib is in trouble! Let me in or I'll break it down!"

Lellie jumped up. "That's Bear! Let him in." She spun around and ran up the stairs, two at a time. She paused only to pull out her dagger at the door to the bedroom. They'd better not have hurt

Arrie! What was that racket? Oh, Mattie was shrieking and possibly cursing.

No light inside. Arrie must have already gone to her own room. "Nib?" she called out. Suddenly someone careened into her, knocking her to the carpet. Two men ran from the room, one holding tightly to Nib. A moment later their way was barred by Kusket.

The god had diminished himself to something like the size of a man, albeit a large and powerful man with thick knotted muscles. Still hairy and bearded but he had appeared in clothes this time. The first man came at him with a knife. Kusket backhanded him across the hall. "Release the boy!" he roared.

There was no hesitation. He let go of Nib and sank to the floor in submission. Doab was the first to reach them, just as Arrisha poked her head out of her room, a candle held high and eyes wide. The stevedore eyed the big man. A bigger man than he was.

Lellie put a protective arm around Nib. "Bear saved Nib. He's a, um, wizard." It seemed the handiest lie. Many of the guests now crowded behind Doab.

Sister Catha looked the visitor askance. "Kusket, isn't it? Boba told me of you." She moved closer, whispering so none others could hear. "I am aware gods can travel at will from world to world, but why did you not appear in Nib's bedroom?"

"The wards on this place prevented me. I had to pop into the courtyard instead. It's not barred against entry from overhead."

The priestess had to laugh at that. "I must tell the mec. She set those wards." She turned around to address the approaching Zil. "All is well. I know Bear and can vouch for him."

"I trust you can explain him, as well."

"In time, sir. You might wish to question this one," she said, nodding toward a dejected housebreaker, seated on the floor. "The other, I fear, is beyond questioning."

Doab looked toward the body and said, "I would not wish to wrestle you, Master Bear."

XII. With the Wizards

"A GOD, THEN," said Zil. "And you've been speaking with him."

"Uh-huh. He was the first one I thought of when those men came in and grabbed me."

"You could have called me," Mistress Arrisha told him. "We've practiced together times enough."

"Yes, Mistress Arrie. But you wouldn't have hit them as hard."

But she could have shot them if she had a bow. Lellie thought it best not to mention that; Arrie still seemed troubled about having taken a life. "Sword lessons today," she announced.

"Yes, we mustn't disappoint Master Jercom by keeping his prize student away. Perhaps we can call on the mec tomorrow and you can tell her all about your divine friend."

"Can I learn the sword too?" asked Nib.

"Perhaps in time. I do like the idea of Mistress Arrisha teaching you two some archery." He looked toward the woman but she gave no sign of her own thoughts. "There are many lessons on many subjects in both your futures."

"How did those men get into the house, anyway?" asked Lellie, taking a sip of her hutnee. She wished it were tea instead. "Weren't the wards supposed to stop them too?"

"Not stop," explained Arrie. "Give warning."

"And prevent latches and locks from being opened," added Master Zil. "I can only conclude they came in with one of our guests last night."

Arrie nodded. "So it would seem. Unless—unless Nanos let them in. He might be able to accomplish it."

"He would like to take Nib back to the Rift. Of that I've no doubt."

Nib shook his head in emphatic rejection of the idea. "It's ugly there."

"I have heard it smells bad too," said Zil. "No donkey cart for you today, Lellie. I wish to speak with Master Jarcom so we shall

travel in my chariot." He considered Nib for a moment. "You might come, as well, unless Mistress Arrisha has some pressing plans for your education."

"Your are quite welcome to the boy," the sorceress replied. "And any friends who might show up unexpectedly."

Lellie doubted Kusket would bother to show again anytime soon. He might be entirely likely to forget about Nib if some new novelty popped up. Something else to poke his nose into.

She knew something about being impulsive. "You can make new friends at the school of the sword," she told Nib. "You have to meet Xane. I invited her to visit. Um, that's all right, isn't it, Master Zil?"

"Yes, my girl. Even that pair of boys would be welcome."

"Punny isn't always nice," volunteered Nib.

"He does push Hiul around some." He knew better than to try that with her, now.

"Young Punatho has too high an opinion of himself, I fear. Are we ready to go?" asked Master Zil.

A few minutes later, Zil's matched pair was speeding through the streets of Tesra. Nib's eyes, not surprisingly, were more often on the black horses than aught else. They could only hold Lellie's attention for so long, nor did the decaying buildings along the way hold much interest anymore.

"Lady Huena is Punny's mother, right?" she asked Zil.

"She is." He took a moment to form his thoughts before telling her, "The lady is of the family that once ruled Tesra. This makes her suspect in some eyes."

"And General Murso, too?"

"Even so."

Lellie nodded in understanding. "I like her."

"Like her if you will, but put little trust in her. Ho!" He pulled on the reins, guiding his team around a corner. One wheel might have briefly left the pavement.

Zil might like to go fast but he wasn't reckless like Punny. He wouldn't get in anyone's way, much less endanger them. That did not mean he had always been so. Master Zil might once have been

such a boy himself, obnoxious and obstreperous. She giggled at the thought.

Fortunately, Zil did not ask her why. Soon they slowed before Master Jarcom's school. Zil only saluted the guard and drove on through the arched entry and into the courtyard. As soon as Lellie and Nib's feet hit the ground, they were surrounded by curious students.

"My dad told me all about the man who rescued Nib last night," said Hiul.

"But no one can figure out who he is," finished Punatho.

"He's a priest of the Old Gods." She and Nib and Zil and Arrie had all conferred and decided that was the best story. "A crazy wild-man priest who lives somewhere in the hills and befriended Nib. And, of course, also a sorcerer." That explained most things pretty well.

And gave rise to all sorts of new questions! Xane might have some. She was giving Nib a good looking over. Lellie headed them off by telling all, "Nib might become a student now."

"He's pretty small," felt Hiul. Xane nodded agreement though she was scarcely taller and almost certainly younger.

"People grow," Punny told him. "Except maybe Sparrow. She'll always be a runt."

That should have earned the boy another thrashing. Oh, Master Jarcom would probably disapprove. Punny's mother, too.

Maybe not his father! "Mistress Arrisha is going to teach both of us archery," she announced.

Xane at once informed her, "I want to learn too!"

"That is up to your father. And I think he wants to speak with me." Master Jarcom was indeed beckoning her to him. Zil stood at his side but gave the sword-master a short bow and stepped away as Lellie approached.

"Walk with me, Sparrow," said the master. "I have seen that you hold back when you spar with my daughter. I thank you for not hurting her—or her feelings—but she will not improve without being challenged."

"She knows the moves but she is, um, kind of clumsy."

"That may be her age, though I much doubt she will ever match your natural talent. You need to be challenged as well."

She wouldn't mind that. "So," he went on, "I shall place young Nib with Master Urathus. You will remain his student but may also study with other masters from time to time. I trust you to help Urathus with those two children."

Meaning she wasn't a child? She didn't think she would ask. "Master, is it all right for Xane, er, Elixane to visit us? And shoot the bow?"

"It is. I have already told Master Zil I approve." He stopped and turned to the girl. "You may well be able to serve as one of my teachers here, in a year or two. If you desire." A laugh. "And if Zil does not have too many other plans for you. Now go to Master Urathus."

Nib proved even more clumsy than Xane. He didn't seem to mind and was proud to carry his own practice sword home with him. Lellie resolved not to spar with him when they got there.

"Tomorrow, we shall visit the Mec Una," Master Zil informed them on the ride home. "Back to your regular lessons with Mistress Arrisha this afternoon."

"But lunch first!" proclaimed Lellie.

"Of course. But let's not call your friend, Nib. He looks like he would have quite an appetite."

"I'll tell him not to invite his brothers."

"Hmm. Best not to ask about them, I think."

Lessons followed lunch and dinner followed lessons and sleep after that. Sleep for some; Lellie found it difficult to find slumber. Things were moving and changing, just when she thought she'd reached a place to rest. She and Nib were inevitably moving in different directions. She did not believe he would stay at the House of Zil forever, nor even for much longer.

As for her? How could she know? Master Zil had plans for her but that didn't mean she had to follow them. She should make her own plans. Lellie fell asleep while doing so.

"Are you coming with us?" she asked Mistress Arrie over breakfast the next morning.

The woman shook her head. "The mec requested I remain here."

Lellie would have liked her support. The mec was intimidating.

"Sister Catha will be there," said Nib. "She told me so."

Arrie couldn't hide her surprise. "You've been speaking from afar?"

"Uh-huh." The boy stuffed another cake into his mouth.

"Is she important?" Lellie asked.

Mistress Arisha did not think long on that. "Not particularly. She spends much time on the prince's island, assisting and sending messages for those who are unable. Most of the priestesses are not sorceresses."

"But the mec is." And she *was* important.

"Yes. Though the mec is a priestess of Trepais, her duties as chief wizard prevent her from taking much part in her order. Your Punatho's aunt serves as chief priestess."

Not my Punatho! Someone else could have him. "Lady Huena's sister?" she hazarded.

"Yes. The Cana Holiva."

Allie didn't seem inclined to volunteer more, so Lellie didn't ask. Not even what 'cana' meant.

"Are we ready?" Zil stood in the open doorway, dressed for riding. "I am afraid you must sit on fat old Mak again, Lellie. Nib is getting Penza." He gave the boy the look of amused tolerance he so often wore. "I hear you've been on the back of every horse in the stables."

"Giddy-up!" screeched Matti, who had sat silently on the back of Nib's chair up to that point.

"Will you go unguarded, sir?" wondered Arrie. She clearly thought it not a good idea.

"An escort from the mec waits at the gate." Both adults now glanced toward Nib. That was who needed protection.

She wasn't important at all. "Do you really need me along, Master Zil?"

"Mec Una asked for you."

"And I want you," added Nib.

The escort proved to be two mounted men at arms, helmed and bearing the usual short swords. With Matti safely ensconced in her cage, they set forth, north and west, through the streets of Tesra. Again, Lellie had needed a boost to get aboard the barrel-bodied Mak.

Nib was delighted to be on Penza, even if he had never truly ridden before. She would never have that sort of rapport with a horse. Master Zil kept an eye on horse and boy but needed say not a word. Lellie and Mak ambled along behind.

Now they left the route they had traveled before, crossing fields rather than sticking to the streets and roadways. Up and down wooded hills they went. Ruins of abandoned dwellings were to be glimpsed here and there. Humans, the few they saw, avoided them.

Ah, there was the sea in plain view, its blue distances disappearing in mist. Would that be the prince's isle? Lellie very much wanted to sail again, but further out, further away. She hungered to cross that hidden horizon and not turn back.

Someday. When she was older, when Nib was older. This was the coastal road now, wasn't it? And the turning aside to the mec's villa was—there. About time. Her butt hurt.

"Good old boy," she whispered to Mak, giving him a pat on the neck before half-sliding, half-falling to the ground in the courtyard. What was that? A groom had brought a box for Nib to step down onto. She might need one when she tried to mount up again.

"The mec awaits you in her chambers," a servant informed them.

"And we shall attend to the horses," said one of their escorts. "Being careful of your stallion, Master!"

"That is wise," he replied. "Let's go."

Not only Mec Una but Sister Catha waited in a simply furnished but spacious room. The ceilings were high and there had once been much lacquer-work of abstract design, now cracked and peeling. The mec got right to it. "I suppose the first thing we must talk

about is this god. It has been long since any of his pantheon visited this world."

"Their worshipers are largely gone," said Catha.

"And I greet you too, my lady," spoke Master Zil. "You must at least feed us if you expect our cooperation."

The sorceress gave him a pained look but then laughed. "Very well." She clapped two flat sticks, ready at hand, together and a servitor at once appeared. "Tea," she ordered. "Oh, and cakes or something of that sort." The woman bowed and retreated from the room.

"I feel there may be another deity involved in this, somehow. One with longer-laid plans."

"Not one of the Tetrad," said Zil.

"Unlikely. If there is someone, I doubt they ever show themselves. Now—Kusket, it is? The Great Bear?"

"That is what he named himself, mec," Lellie replied.

"And you," she said to Nib, "were able to pass the gate none others have. We must have the whole story, from the start. Ah, here are the refreshments, just in time."

For the next several minutes—perhaps half an hour—Nib and Lellie took turns telling their tale, occasionally breaking in on each other, sometime contradicting what the other said, but getting it all out.

"Kusket thinks you have the blood of the Old Gods in you." Mec Una mulled on that a while. "It does seem a good explanation. Very diluted by now, of course."

"But such things have a way of popping up unexpectedly in later generations," Sister Catha reminded her.

"They do indeed." She gave Nib another looking other. "No telling which deity was the culprit."

"He's not as hairy as Bear," said Lellie. "And he doesn't have horns."

"Give me time," Nib shot back.

"Indeed, you could grow quite furry one of these days," Sister Catha said, "but I would guess Lion Man, if I had to."

"Which you don't," the mec told her. "But why?"

"His affinity for animals."

"Hmm, possibly. You have spoken from afar with the god, I understand." This she addressed to Nib.

"Yes, my lady. I—I think he may be forgetting about me, though."

"Gods have a way of doing that, by most accounts. We are of no more than a moment's interest to them."

"I could go back to his world and remind him. And you could go with me, Sister Catha."

Quite a tempting offer! Lellie could see that. As well as how dangerous it could be. "The Horned God might carry you away, sister," she warned. Exactly what the deity might do with her, she had but a vague idea.

"Far too dangerous," stated Zil, making his opinion of things known for the first time. The mec obviously concurred. "I believe you have also been speaking from afar with our boy, sister."

"It is so. Should I have not?" The question was obviously directed to the mec. It should have been asked of Zil, felt Lellie. Nib was in his charge.

And it was he who answered. "No harm was done but you should have let Mistress Arrisha know, Nib." It was perhaps implied Catha should have done the same.

"I think Catha has bonded a bit with the boy," said the Mec Una.

"Should I be hiring a new tutor?" Lellie didn't think Zil was serious but it was often hard to tell with him.

"Sister Catha is a considerably more talented sorceress than Arrisha, but she is not cut out to be a scholar. Our Mistress Arisha remains the ideal tutor for Nib. For Lellie, too, for that matter."

Zil shook his head. "The girl needs a firmer hand. Could I depend on you to beat her, Sister Catha?"

"Not I. She might knife me in my sleep."

No. Don't let them set you off again, she said to herself, gritting her teeth. They don't know how much it can hurt when they treat

you like this. She hated them all and hated her life here. Nib's hand rested on her thigh, reassuring her, and things felt better. She didn't hate Nib, couldn't hate Nib. He understood. She hoped he would never leave her.

But no, someday she would surely leave him. Lellie had been alone before and she could handle being alone again. What was going on between him and Catha? The two had exchanged a look of understanding. Had he just told her how she felt? She felt ready to burst again. It was no one's business but her own. Not even Nib's!

"I apologize to you, Mistress Lellie," spoke Catha. "I had no right to say such a thing, even in jest."

"It's all right, sister," she muttered. She didn't know how she felt now. Tired, maybe. Tired enough to sleep for days and forget everything.

The mec deemed it a good time to change the subject. "Have you any idea who attempted to snatch Nib the other night?"

"None. Nor at the Great Luth, if that was their intention."

"You think they might have been after your guest."

"Possibly. And I am not convinced those supposedly fraudulent priests weren't the real thing."

"Kyros? I know he does not favor a relationship with the Rift. Have some more tea, Lellie. I know you like it."

"Master Zil gives me the same boring hutnee all the time." She filled her cup from the crock and snagged a sweet cake while she was at it. No, make it two. One for Nib.

"How terrible. Do you know who Kyros is, Mistress Lellie?"

"The chief priest of one of your gods, right?" She hadn't gotten those gods straightened out in her head yet. Maybe she didn't actually care to.

"Of Kerais, the god of the earth. Kyros is also the head of the officially recognized religion in Tesra, and not at all independent. He serves the prince more than his god, I fear."

"Not that Jomastes would be involved in any of it," said Master

Zil. "Of that I am completely certain. But Kyros might believe he serves the interests of the prince."

"And the Scola," added Mec Una.

Zil only shrugged at that. She continued. "Kyros could even have smuggled those two into your house, though I know not what interest he would have in Nib."

"He would like such a sorcerer tied to his order. Perhaps even the Chief Wizard one day."

"I don't know how he could get away with it. The boy couldn't be hidden."

"But possibly seduced."

Lellie felt she had to speak up. "Not Nib."

"You sound very sure of that," spoke the mec, "and I am inclined to think you are right. So. We go on as we have, Zil? You looking after these two. And what of we two? Do we also go on as we have?"

"Should we not?" A note of caution had crept into Master Zil's voice. Lellie had heard men sound that way before and it did not always end well. "Is not our love enough?"

"Love? I am not sure that is what we have, Zil. We are fond of each other. We are comfortable with each other. We have become a *habit*."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Perhaps not, especially for those such as we who cherish our detachment. But you need more. You need a wife and an heir."

Lellie put two and two together and came up with a surprising number. "That's why you sent Mistress Arrisha to his house!"

The mec could barely contain her laughter. "I can see why you have hopes for this one, Zil. But I do wish you hadn't spilled the hutnee, young lady. Zil might have remained oblivious."

"The whole thing is preposterous," he maintained.

"Of course," said the mec. "Quite."

XIII. Arrows in Flight

"The one lesson you must learn above all others is self-control."

"And sword fighting and archery and sailing and horse riding and—"

"And many other things you have not thought of," said Zil, "or do not deem important. Mastering yourself is the key to all of them. You have taken your first steps on that path, Lellie, but a long journey lies ahead. A difficult journey, I fear."

"I sometimes just want to run away from everything. Even myself."

The Tesran sighed. "I can not understand all you feel, nor would I claim to. I do know you have your bouts of melancholia. That I have seen in others. Some have let it destroy them." He thought on that a moment, seeming to idly scan the wall of books behind the girl. "And they may grow stronger as you grow older. We can only attempt to help you deal with what lies within you."

Lellie thought of denying all of it, of saying she could take care of herself. She didn't need anyone meddling in her life!

"Now run and join your friends. And try not to shoot any of them."

"Yes, Master Zil."

Out in the courtyard, a couple bales of straw had been stacked to serve as a target. There was always straw about for the packing of goods in crates. "All the household has been warned to take cover," Arrisha announced. "And you will shoot only toward the target and never release an arrow without first asking." The target stood before a blank wall—the unused dining hall lay on its other side—so arrows were unlikely to go far astray. Though a few might break!

Xane and Nib were eyeing the bows, eager to get at it. The pair had become friends immediately. Nanos was seated on a bench by the broken fountain and, at his side, Master Jarcom. Lellie doubted he would personally bring his daughter again.

The two were not speaking to each other. Indeed, each seemed

to pretend the other was not there. Why? Hmm, didn't the rulers of the Rift enslave Jarcom's people or something like that? Treated them badly somehow. She'd have to look it up. Or ask Arrie. Or even Nanos, for that matter. He knew lots of things, more than Mistress Arrisha, really, but then he was a lot older than her.

Arrisha carried a bow herself. She took a casual look at the target, drew back, and put an arrow dead center. "Now it is your turn," she said, laying the bow aside. "The first thing you must learn," continued Arrie, "is to string your own bow. Anyone not capable of doing so will not be allowed to shoot. And doing so properly, I might add."

Lellie caught onto the proper technique at once. Nib and Xane took a little longer, though all were equally novices. The two might be small, but they were sturdy kids and neither one too weak for the task. Clumsy, though. They giggled and joked over their ineptness.

She stood and watched them, feeling suddenly left out of Nib's life. Arrisha came to her side and gave her a looking over. "Hmm. You are starting to grow breasts, are you not? They shouldn't get in the way."

"Anniqa's sure would!"

"I think neither of us will ever have that problem." Then, more seriously, Mistress Arrie said, "You will do more than just grow breasts as you become a woman, Lellie, and some of it can be quite confusing. I will always be here if you need to talk about any of it." She might have weighed her next words a second or two before letting them go. "Or I think Mistress Anniqa might be someone to give advice. Would you mind if I mention it to her?"

It didn't matter much, did it? "I guess not. Doab say she wants to leave here and open a tavern."

"Only a tavern, I hope." Lellie knew what she implied. Doab wouldn't approve. Of that she was pretty sure.

"Very well," said Arrie. "Now for arrows." She handed one to each student. Lellie noted they had no points, only blunt ends. She resisted asking whether the feathers came from parrots.

For that matter, what sort of wood were they? Or the bows? It was good to know such things. It was also better to save the questions for later.

"Don't pinch the string, Nib. See how Elixane holds it?"

With her fingertips. If that was the way to do it, that was the way to do it. Lellie had not seen many archers in action. One of her neighbors in Famod had owned a little crossbow that shot clay pellets and he knocked down pigeons with it. Rats too.

One of those might be handy. She drew back the bow as Arrie demonstrated. Damn. The arrow wanted to fall out of place. "Left arm straight, Lellie. But not locked. That might hurt your elbow."

She attempted to achieve the form her teacher wanted from her. "I'll bet Master Zil could shoot with either hand."

"He's am—ambum—" Nib attempted.

"Ambidextrous? That may be from training. Very well, that's an acceptable stance, Elixane. Don't crouch, Lellie. You're not in a sword fight."

When would they be allowed to shoot? She was getting tired of holding her arm out.

"Now draw back the arrow. Keep your elbows level with each other. As much as you can. Can't you pull any further, Xane?"

The little girl grunted and tried to draw back further. "I think we'll have to find a bow with a lighter pull for you. Now all of you lower your bows and slowly let the strings come back. Good."

"Are you going to give us another demonstration, Mistress Arrisha?" called Nanos from his bench.

"Perhaps later, sir. Do you shoot?"

"I have been known to. I learned from a warrior of Master Jarcom's people."

The sword-master deigned to give him a leisurely perusal before turning away again.

"First, you must shoot," Arrisha told her students. "Nib. Trade bows with Elixane."

"Is that better?" she asked, after the trade.

"Yes, mistress." Indeed, she could draw the string back to her cheek, as Mistress Arrie had instructed.

"Sight down the arrow toward your target and release." The shot went wide. Even Lellie could see she had let her arms move before sending the arrow. "Try to hold steadier next time. Now you, Nib."

Nib's arrow flew high, striking the wall behind the target. "Oops."

"Not the last arrow you are likely to splinter. You did shoot straight. Lellie."

This bow seemed easy enough to bend. Maybe too easy. Don't pull back too far! You'll end up shooting yourself in the hand. Arrow. Target. Eye. And release. The shaft hit near center, though a tad low. Lellie's only surprise was that she was not surprised.

"Yay!" yelled Xane.

"Lellie's shot would have been even better," Arrisha told them, "had she aimed higher. But she did as I instructed and kept her arrow level. We shall worry about shooting higher and lower some other time. Do you wish to try again, Elixane?"

So it went for nearly an hour. By that time, Master Zil had abandoned his library and occupied a seat beside their other spectators. After a while, Nanos rose and sauntered over to the archers.

"I should have brought my own bow," he commented.

"All the way from Tol Sunac, Master Nanos?" wondered Arrisha.

"It seemed unneeded for my mission, mistress. Extra luggage."

"I fear my bow would prove overly light for you." Nanos was not a big man but he looked sturdily built.

"May I?" he asked, holding out a hand. She passed it over without obvious hesitation. "All wood," said Nanos, turning it and then sighting down its length. "My own is laminated with horn from the mountain sheep."

"That is cedar, sir, as are those my students are using. It is cheap and plentiful."

"You needn't call me sir, Mistress Arrie." Lellie was fairly sure he hadn't called her Arrie before. At least not when she was around.

Arrisha had no comment on anything the envoy said. Rather, she

turned to her pupils, telling them, "That is enough of lessons for the day. Unstring your bows and place them over there." Only then did she speak to Nanos. "Shall we have a match?"

The wizard bowed. "I would be honored to compete."

The three children took seats on the ground around the bench. "You all did well," spoke Master Jarcom.

"That they did," agreed Zil. "Lellie seems to have some talent for the art."

"Agreed. She will never have the strength to bend a heavy bow, just as she is not really big enough for one of the long two-handed swords. It is best to work to ones strengths, Mistress Sparrow." The sword-master turned to Nib. "You're small now but I wouldn't be surprised if you shot up into a large clumsy fellow before long." He spoke again to Zil. "And probably never much of a swordsman."

"That, I think, is true of many of your students."

"Indeed so. Ah, they are ready to shoot. This wizard seems attentive to your Mistress Arrisha."

Lellie snickered. "Nanos is trying to steal Mistress Arrie from him."

"She's not mine," objected Zil.

Master Jarcom winked from behind his back.

"Her bow is definitely too light for the man," stated Zil, attempting to steer the conversation into less dangerous waters.

"But of a good length for him. He is not overly tall."

The two traded shots for a time, at various distances, and neither seemed the better archer. With Arrie's bow, that is. Lellie recognized Master Nanos would have an advantage with his own weapon, with its heavier draw and more power. As Master Jarcom had said, one should work to ones own strengths.

She must figure out just what hers were.

Probably not archery! Elixane's father took her home after lunch, and she and Nib settled down to their lessons. She wasn't sure where Nanos went. Gossip was that he spent time on the docks, conversing with various traders. Usually with a guardsman or two in tow.

She wouldn't mind doing that herself. Lellie had always enjoyed listening to the merchants and sailors on the docks of Famod. Did any ships visit there now? Surely the Gera had the port open again. If they still controlled the city. She hadn't heard otherwise but that didn't mean much.

So the day passed into evening and the evening into night. Lellie was in bed, with Nib asleep and Matti only stirring occasionally in the dark, when she saw a flicker of light beneath her door. Someone moved out there with a candle or maybe an oil lamp. Zil, headed for his own rooms? He typically ascended the stairs in darkness.

She eased the door open and crept into the hall. There was Mistress Arrie going down to the library, her form silhouetted by the light from below. Down on her stomach went Lellie and slid to the top of the stairs. She could see what was going on from there.

Master Zil looked up from the papers spread on his table, and gestured for the sorceress to take a chair. "Is there some problem, mistress?"he asked. "Or do you simply have trouble sleeping this night?"

She at once blurted out what she had to say. "Nanos proposed marriage. He told me he would abandon his allegiance to Dxukur and become a Tesran and help me teach Nib. He even told me his real name." She frowned. "But that was in confidence so I shouldn't repeat it."

"It does not matter," came Zil's soft reply.

"No, I suppose it doesn't. He took me by surprise, Master Zil. I think Nanos is a good enough man, at heart. He could do much for Nib."

"All that does matter is whether you love him."

"I do not."

"But you did not turn him down."

Arrie sighed. "Nor did I accept his proposal. I asked him to wait till the morrow for my answer."

"That must be no. You should not accept the man only for the sake of others."

"But I do love Nib. Lellie, too, but I do not think she and Nanos would be a good mix!" The woman smiled for the first time.

Zil leaned back and pondered a moment. "They might make excellent partners in crime."

Mistress Arrisha had to giggle at that. "Lellie would have to be the senior partner."

"But of course. You will turn down Master Nanos tomorrow, won't you?"

She rose. "Yes, I shall. Thank you for listening, sir."

If they spoke any more, Lellie did not know for she slipped silently back into her room.

Master Zil might or might not have realized she had been up there listening. That, too, didn't matter.

XIV. Sparrowhawk

"Cana? It means consecrated and is mostly reserved for religious leaders."

"Like Punny's aunt what's-her-name."

"Holiva," said Nib, pouring more cream into his hutnee. "Catha told me about her."

"Who is Catha?" asked Doab. They breakfasted in the kitchens, Master Zil being gone when they had risen. The former stevedore would be conveying Lellie to her sword lessons shortly. Nib too, now.

"A priestess of Trepais," answered Arrisha. "They speak from afar and have deigned to let me join in once or twice."

Doab only shook his head. He'd prefer to keep his distance from sorcery.

"Trepais is a goddess, right?" asked Lellie. So she had understood.

"One of our four highest deities. They are, ah, related to the four directions."

"What about the other two?" asked Doab.

She had a feeling it was a question Arrie had needed to answer before, with so many Mura now residing in Tesra. "I know your people count six directions and include up and down. But if the world is a globe, where exactly are up and down?"

Wait. "A globe?"

"Yes, Lellie," Nib explained. "It's a great big ball. That why you can't see ships when they go across the horizon."

That was the pedantic little Nib she had known in Famod. She had to admit it made sense. Lellie liked things to make sense. "I'd wondered why no one ever sailed off the edge of the world. The Scola have the same gods as we Mura, don't they?"

"Pretty much. The names are a little different. Let's clear our dishes and get you on your way."

And out of her way a few hours. Would she tell Nanos her deci-

sion this morning? "I think I'll stick with Grandmother Moon," she announced. "Even if she can't make tides rise and fall here in Tesra."

"A good goddess to follow," felt Doab. "Ancient yet still beautiful."

"The very first of the Gods," piped up Nib. Then he grew suddenly pensive, his brown brow furrowing. "The first Muram god. Is Umu older, do you think?"

Arrie had a ready answer. Perhaps this was a question she'd been asked before, as well. "She is the oldest in her own world. I do not think anything else matters."

"Grandmother Moon doesn't live in our world?" This was confusing.

"The home of the Muram gods is in another universe, just as those of Umu's world or the Tetrad, for that matter."

Lellie wondered if any gods at all lived in her world. Someone must have been first here, too, right? She might think about it some other time. Off to Master Jarcom's school now!

A mounted guard accompanied the little donkey cart today. Doab remained at the reins and Cappy was in harness. It was another clear morning, though clouds were building out over the sea. The rainier season might soon come to Tesra. Neither Nib nor Lellie gave much thought to that; anticipation of the morning's training session filled their minds.

"Maybe I'll get to fight today," said an eager Nib.

"Maybe," Lellie allowed. More likely continued practice of stances and moves for the novice.

Their escort said no more than two or three words all the way to the school. There, the gatekeeper gave him a looking over. "I don't know you, sir," he spoke, his hand resting on the hilt of one of his long swords.

"I'm a guard at Master Zil's warehouses, most of the time. He sent me along this morning to watch over the kids." He jerked his head toward them more than he nodded.

"Do you vouch for him, Master Doab?"

"He showed up at dawn and told me the same thing. I admit I'd never laid eyes on him before."

Jarcom's man considered this. "My orders will not allow me to admit you, sir. You may remain out here, if you wish."

The man shrugged. "All one to me." He slid off his mount and led it into the shade of the wall.

The lesson went well this morning. And was over too quickly! She was still with Xane and Nib. When would she move to a more advanced group?

Master Urathus called for a halt, saying, "Go cool down, now. And Master Jarcom wishes to speak with you. Especially you, Mistress Sparrow."

The trio trooped over to where the sword-master stood surveying the courtyard. He didn't seem overly interested in any of it. Even less so now that the groups of students were ending their sessions. He did not speak nor even acknowledge their approach until they stood in a semicircle before him.

He addressed only Lellie. "Master Zil and I have agreed my daughter and Nib will train at the sword but once a week, for a while. You will be with them on that day, both to learn and to help Master Urathus. I shall place you elsewhere on other days. Oh, and Elixane will continue to visit Master Zil's house. She wishes more archery lessons." He now favored the other two children with a smile. "And more time with Nib. That is all."

A dismissal. Maybe she could talk to Hiul and Punny a little before she had to go. As they walked away, Xane leaned in to confide, "I'm gonna marry Nib."

Lellie gave gave Nib a sidelong look. He seemed oblivious. "Does he know?"

"He doesn't need to yet."

She wondered if Mistress Arrie had similar plans for Zil. Oh, probably not. Just dealing with Nanos would be enough for now! Nib and Xane wandered off together; she went to say hello to her friends. There was plenty of time, truly, for no lessons took place in the midday. Sensible folk relaxed and lunched then.

If only Doab didn't grow impatient and hurry them away. No, he seemed willing to gossip with other drivers and bodyguards for the moment. But he'd soon grow hungry and want his lunch. Master Doab had an appetite.

One of the students came running from the direction of the entryway. "Master Jarcom! Master Jarcom! Something has happened to your gatekeeper!"

"Hurt?" asked the master, following the boy.

"I—I think he's dead."

They hurried more then and everyone crowded in behind to see what had happened. Yes, dead. Lellie could see that. He leaned against the wall, just inside the entry arch, as if at rest, but a second look told her his throat had been cut. It wasn't the first time she'd seem a man murdered in such a fashion.

But in Famod, not here. Where was the guard they had left out here? Where was Nib? Not in this crowd of curious students. "Where's Nib?" she cried out. "Where's Xane?"

"Search for them!" ordered Master Jarcom.

It took little time to locate Xane. She lay in an alcove off the entryway, only a few yards away. Jarcom rushed to his daughter, knelt to examine her. "Asleep." A sigh of relief was followed by a closer look. "Drugged." He picked up a container lying by her side. "Someone offered the two a drugged drink, I'd wager. They would want the boy asleep so he couldn't call anyone from afar."

"Will she be all right, sir?" came a tremulous voice. An ashen Hiul.

"Aye. They wouldn't have wanted to harm the boy. Someone carry her into my house." Urathus scooped up the little girl's form. "Now see if you can find Nib."

"They'll have taken him away already," Lellie cried out. "It must have been the man who accompanied us here. Punny! Get your chariot! We have to go after them!"

"Right!" It took but a moment for him to have it at the passageway. Of his driver, there was no sign; if he'd been anywhere close, he'd probably have the reins. Lellie jumped in beside him.

"Hold!" commanded the sword-master. Did he intend to stop them? She half-wanted Punny to run over him and keep going. "I shall accompany you." Jarcom leapt up into the chariot as well.

"Send word to Master Zil," he called out. "Both the docks and his house. Let's go, boy!"

Where would someone take Nib? To the sea, of course. A ship must be waiting, to spirit him away to the Rift. Or maybe to Scola. There would be so much waterfront to search!

Punatho seemed to have figured that out himself. His chariot hurtled toward the shores of Lan Tenac.

Jarcom handed Lellie his short sword, his secondary blade. "I would not have you weaponless but use this only if you must."

"Yes, master." If Nanos was involved in this, she hoped she'd have the opportunity to use it on him.

Here was the waterfront. "Which way?" asked Punny. She had no idea. And would they even know if they found the right ship? They might rush right by it, unaware.

"Left," ordered Jarcom. They were toward the northern end of Tesra's main port area, so that made sense. But a boat could pull in almost anywhere! Lellie's eyes went from one quay to another, from ship to ship, in desperate search of some sign.

"Someone coming fast," called out Punatho. Where? Down a broad street to their left, a horseman rushing toward the docks. Zil!

He reined in Piro, the stallion nearly sitting back on its dark, flowing tail. "Follow!" were his only words, as man and horse again sprang forward, southward now.

Punatho and his team followed but inevitably fell behind. Warehouses lined the road here, many seemingly abandoned, some falling down. What was going on? How was Zil here? Why was he here? There was nothing to do but trail after him as he had ordered.

Now he was slowing, looking toward the waterfront. Scanning it. Then quickly down from the saddle and striding away from his lathered steed. Punatho brought them to a halt beside Piro.

"Stay with your chariot, Master Punatho," said Jarcom, jumping down to hasten after him. "And you keep out of the way, Sparrow."

Zil had come to a halt, perusing a nondescript warehouse. A small ship lay tied up at the dock beyond it. "This is surely the place," he stated, when the pair caught up.

"The boy is within?" asked the sword-master.

"And armed men, most certainly. I suspect their intention is to sail after nightfall."

"A mistake. They should not have dawdled."

Lellie had to ask, "How did you know where to look? How did you even know what happened?"

"Nanos warned me. Or he spoke to Mistress Arrisha from afar and she passed on his words to me." He looked over the building again. "Let the two of us fight, Lellie. Be cautious and keep an eye out for Nib. He is our priority. They would not hesitate to slay the lad if they think they can not escape with him."

For once she was not being told to stay out of things! Nib. Her duty was to find and rescue Nib.

"You and I in from the dock," Zil told Jarcom. "Lellie, you try to sneak in from this side after we engage them. Do not take chances!" With that stern warning, he led the way around the warehouse.

Lellie crouched by the door that opened toward the road. She could see Punny from here. He looked awful nervous! She held up a palm in acknowledgment of his presence and waited. For what? Maybe the sound of steel on steel.

Though it would be best if the rescuers were able to fulfill their mission with none of that. Silent assassination. It could be going on inside right now. She did hope Jarcom was able to skewer the man who murdered his gatekeeper. She'd liked the fellow. Lellie didn't even know his name or she'd say a prayer for him. Oh, the name probably didn't matter. She mumbled something to Grandmother Moon she hoped sounded right.

Yelling! And yes, steel ringing. That was her cue. Stacks of crates rose to one side, as she slipped through the doorway Ahead, on the open warehouse floor, half a dozen men or more faced Zil and Jarcom. Another two or three already sprawled on the floor. Poor fellows; they didn't know they were up against two of the best

swordsmen in Tesra. To her right lay a cubbyhole, with a table and a couple stools. Probably the room where business was done in this place.

Nib lay on the floor, a big-bellied, bearded man, dressed sailor-fashion, standing over him. He thumbed a long dagger, eyeing the boy. Nib slept on, unaware of anyone's presence.

Nothing to do but rush upon the guard before he made up his mind to act. This was a good sword. She liked the feel of it. Arr, too late. He'd spied her, and turned, knife before him, a grin on his dark face. At least she'd kept him from hurting Nib.

"Run little girl, or there will be an extra body to count." He snickered at his jest.

"Only yours," she replied, taking the third position of attack and thrusting her blade forward. He looked quite surprised as he gurgled out red froth and sank to the floor. She had to pull rather hard to get her blade out of him.

Nib. She must get Nib to safety. She had carried the boy before and she could do it again. Heavier than she remembered. Nib must be gaining weight. Master Jarcom was right about him growing into a big clumsy boy. She half-carried, half-dragged him to the doorway and beckoned for Punny to come help. That made getting him to the chariot a lot easier.

Should she go back in? They might need her help. Of a sudden, four men burst from the doorway she had just used, running toward the shelter of the neighboring warehouses. Masters Jarcom and Zil strode out behind them. "Let them go," called out Zil. "We've more important things to attend to."

"Aye. It was good to fight at your side again, Lord Zil.'

Zil looked annoyed by the use of the title. "Nib is all right?" he asked, walking toward the chariot.

"Still asleep."

"But safe," said Jarcom. "You did well, Sparrowhawk."

Another chariot came rushing up the roadway, Lord Murso at its reins. "All is over?" He looked, perhaps, a little disappointed. As an afterthought, he asked his son if he was all right.

"I stayed out of the way, father," the boy reported. "As ordered."

"Always wise. But you served well too."

"It was Lellie who thought fast and got me involved!"

Mounted men at arms straggled in behind the general. Lellie suspected more soldiers and guards and what not would be showing up. Not her affair. She went and sat beside Nib, lying on the floor of Punny's chariot. "Are you going to sleep all day, you lazy lump?" she asked.

"Hmmumm." He answered. Maybe whatever they gave him was wearing off.

"Nib should be at home in bed," she announced.

"Undoubtedly," agreed Zil. "Will you continue to serve and carry him to my house, Master Punatho?"

"Gladly, sir," said the boy, giving him a bow.

"I'll get you home, Jarcom," offered Murso. "I am sure there are perturbed parents there who wish to speak with you."

"Not to mention my wife." He stepped into the general's chariot. Murso wheeled it about and set off toward the north.

"And you gentlemen," said Zil, addressing the soldiers, "should probably leave the bodies inside to the police. Best you guard the place till they arrive. Ho, Punatho, allow me to ride with you. Piro has carried me enough this day."

Once they were underway, Master Zil said, "I doubt anyone will find much of interest back there, but Lord Nuthonides and others will want to look them over. Waking up, Nib?"

"Ummm. Wewwie?"

"We'll have you home soon."

"Awight." His eyes flickered open for only a second or two.

"They would have needed to dose him again soon, wouldn't they?" asked Punny.

"Maybe several times before they got enough distance to feel safe."

"Wherever they were taking him," Lellie said.

"The Rift, ultimately. That's why Nanos knew about it. We can talk about that later."

"Did Jarcom get the guy who killed the gatekeeper?" she asked.

"He was not, alas, among those in the warehouse. Most of those were sailors and not much in the way of fighting men. Whoever murdered Master Jarcom's man and stole Nib must have also slain the guardsman I sent. I suppose his body will turn up." Zil sighed at that.

They arrived in time. Nib was fussed over and Punny stayed for a late lunch before clattering away, when a couple of his father's soldiers came looking for him. Maybe he'd visit again.

And Nanos? Lellie had seen him but he was keeping to himself. She wondered greatly what role he had played in the day's events.

She was to find out when Master Zil invited the man to take dinner with them. Zil and Arrie and herself; Nib had nibbled a bit earlier and gone back to sleep. She would bet the boy would be ravenous come morning.

Wine was poured after the meal. None for her again!

"Do you wish to speak, Master Nanos?" asked Zil. "You needn't if you would prefer."

"I do wish and I will," the sorcerer stated. "I knew nothing of this plan until Dxukur had already put it into action and deigned to inform me. Only this morning, as I was on my way from this place."

After Mistress Arrisha had given him her answer. Lellie almost felt sorry for the man. Only almost.

"I felt uncertain when the Wizard-Lord told me of it. I did not feel friendly toward you at that moment and felt I owed you nothing." He shook his shaggy head. "I know stealing the boy would have hurt all of you and I could not wish that, not truly. But far worse would be to put him in the hands of Dxukur, to be twisted into one of his servants. I have spoken only well of him on this mission but I say now he is a man of evil and one of great ambition. Yes, I did hesitate before I chose to spoke from afar with Mistress Arrisha and told her all I knew."

"Then you were not involved, even indirectly," said Mistress Arrie. She seemed relieved to know that.

"But lives might have been saved had you decided more quickly," Zil told him. "So it is. It was to be expected your master would covet the boy. And I always assumed the Wizard-Lord was in your ear, giving you orders. Will Dxukur blame you for the failure of his plans?"

"There is no reason he should know of my part in that. The Wizard-Lord is powerful—more powerful than I—but not powerful enough to find it in my mind. Not without destroying it in the process." A wry smile followed that observation.

That did not sound at all good. Did sorcerers do things like that?

"You could remain in Tesra," Master Zil told him.

"It is not my home." Only for a moment did his eyes go to Arrie. "And there is nothing to keep me here."

"Then you wish to return to the Rift."

"I do."

"Very well. Best you not hurry home, as that might arouse suspicions. Finish your avowed mission here and one of my ships will bear you back to Zelara."

"I thank you, sir." Master Nanos rose, bowed in turn to each of them—even Lellie—and left the library.

"I suspect," observed Zil, "someday he will have enough of serving Dxukur and truly betray him."

"Master Nanos is also ambitious," said Mistress Arrie. "It will not be easy for him to give up a high place in Tol Sunac. I think—I think that is what most bothered me about him. I could see it in him."

Yet he had been willing to give her his heart and remain in Tesra. Lellie was confused about the way adults acted, sometimes. She wouldn't be so stupid when she got older.

"You did well today," spoke Master Zil, his voice soft. "Even commandeering Punatho's chariot was a pretty good idea. Maybe not rushing into unknown danger with it, but this I understand."

"I had to for Nib."

"Yes. You had to. Why don't you get up to bed now? It's been a long day for you."

"For all of us," murmured Mistress Arrisha.

"Indeed."

Lellie climbed to her still, dark room. Nib's even breathing was barely discernible. She felt—stifled. Maybe that was the word. Something like it. Maybe she should be tired but she felt restless, ready to burst out, to be off on some new adventure.

The girl went to her window and gazed out at the courtyard. The moon rode in the sky, bathing the world in silver. The moon that had lit her way when she and Nib escaped Famod. Good old Grandmother Moon.

She would light her way on other journeys someday.

Afterword

The City and the Sword is not so much a novel as a collection of related tales about the young Muram girl named Lelanva, who became Tes and, eventually, Qala, Queen of Pirates. Ah, you recognize that name? Qala has appeared in several of my novels and been the main protagonist of two. This book would be her earliest appearance, at age twelve—an origin story, if you will.

Might the story be continued? That is most certainly my intention but, for now, one might read of the adult Qala in the two Crocodile Chronicles novels, *The Crocodile's Son* and *The Crocodile God*, or in the story in which she first appeared, *The Eyes of the Wind*. There may well be more stories to follow those, as well.

Stephen Brooke