

*Song for
the Basilisk*



PATRICIA A. MCKILLIP



ACE BOOKS, NEW YORK

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the Basilisk*



THE FORGOTTEN BEASTS OF ELD
THE SORCERESS AND THE CYGNET
THE CYGNET AND THE FIREBIRD
THE BOOK OF ATRIX WOLFE
WINTER ROSE
SONG FOR THE BASILISK

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An Ace Book

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for Tom
thanks for all the music

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PART ONE



Caladrius



Within the charred, silent husk of Tormalyne Palace, ash opened eyes deep in a vast fireplace, stared back at the moon in the shattered window. The marble walls of the chamber, once white as the moon and bright with tapestries, were smoke-blackened and bare as bone. Beyond the walls, the city was soundless, as if even words had burned. The ash, born out of fire and left behind it, watched the pale light glide inch by inch over the dead on the floor, reveal the glitter in an unblinking eye, a gold ring, a jewel in the collar of what had been the dog. When moonlight reached the small burned body beside the dog, the ash in the hearth kept watch over it with senseless, mindless intensity. But nothing moved except the moon.

Later, as quiet as the dead, the ash watched the living enter the chamber again: three men with grimy, battered faces. Except for the dog's collar, there was nothing left for them to take. They carried fire, though there was nothing left to burn. They moved soundlessly, as if the dead might hear. When their fire found the man with no eyes on the floor, words came out of them: sharp, tight, jagged. The tall man with white hair and a seamed, scarred face began to weep.

The ash crawled out of the hearth.

They all wept when they saw him. Words flurried out of them, meaningless as bird cries. They touched him, raising clouds of ash, sculpting a face, hair, hands. They made insistent, repeated noises at him that meant nothing. They argued with one another; he gazed at the small body holding the dog on the floor and understood that he was dead. Drifting cinders of words caught fire now and then, blazed to a brief illumination in his mind. *Provinces*, he understood. *North. Hinterlands. Basilisk.*

He saw the Basilisk's eyes then, searching for him, and he turned back into ash.

"Take him to Luly," he heard the white-haired man say clearly. "No one will expect to find him there. If they ever suspect he is still alive."

"To Luly? That's nowhere. The end of the world."

"Then it might just be far enough from the Basilisk."

"But the bards—they're scarcely human, are they? They live on a rock in the sea, they go in and out of the hinterlands, they can turn into seals—"

"Tales," the white-haired man said brusquely. "Go before they find us here. I'll finish this."

"You'll be killed."

"Does it matter? Tell them to call him Caladrius. After the bird whose song means death. Go."

He looked back as they led him from the room, and saw a ring of fire billow around the dead. The eyeless man turned in the flames to look at him. A dark word flew out of his mouth, spiraled upward through the smoke on ravens' wings into the night.

He closed his own eyes, made himself as blind, as silent, so that he could enter the kingdom of the dead.

It was a long journey. The wind's voice changed, became harsher, colder. It began to smell of sea

instead of light-soaked stone or earth. The moon grew full, then slowly paled itself down until it shriveled into a ghostly boat riding above the roiling dark. Then it fell out of the sky. They climbed into it, left land behind, and floated out to sea.

Over the shoulder of the stranger who rowed them through the waves, he watched a dark mass separate itself from the night. A constellation of vague, flickering lights formed among the stars. The small boat veered erratically into hollows between the waves. Wood smacked water; brine flicked across his face. He opened his mouth, tasted the odd, dank mingling of bitterness and fish. He swallowed it, and felt a word form in his throat, the first since he had died.

“Where,” he heard himself say. No one else did, it seemed for a moment. Then the man behind him, whose hands braced him against the fits and starts of tide, loosed a long breath.

“That is Luly,” he said softly, his voice very close. “The school on the rock. You’ll be safe there among the bards. Just learn what they teach you, and stay out of the hinterlands, and don’t swim with the seals. If you remember your name, keep it secret, lock it away somewhere until you are old enough to know what to do with it.”

He saw fire on the rock then, and words died again. Ghosts began to form in the flames. He closed his eyes, hid himself and his memories in the ashes of a ruined palace. He burned; he watched himself burn until he knew that he was dead, and that the boy in the boat who saw fire on the rock had no memories, no past. The boat bumped against something. He opened his eyes, stared unflinchingly at the windblown flames on the dock while the boy buried himself in the ashes, until he turned into ash, until the ashes themselves disappeared.

He rose then, stepped out of the boat to meet the fire.

It turned itself into torches. Men and women circled him, questioning in lilting, sinewy voices. Their long hair and windblown robes flowed in and out of the night; the uneasy tide spilled against the rock behind them, tossed a glittering spindrift over them, so that they seemed to reshape themselves constantly out of fire and wind and sea. Their faces resembled the faces of animals in old tapestries: lean-jawed wolves and foxes, golden-eyed owls, falcons, even a unicorn, with white skin and hair, and eyes like ovals of night. But they spoke and smiled like humans. Their words, holding no shadow of grief, weariness, despair, seemed of another language, that he once knew, and still recognized.

“Caladrius,” said one of the men who had brought him, in answer to a question. “Call him Caladrius.”

He felt a hand under his chin, met eyes that seemed, in the torchlight, as gold as coins. She was a sea creature, he saw: half fish, half woman, who rose up out of waves on the backs of his father’s chairs, with a shell in her hand and a mysterious smile on her face. The woman drew damp strands of hair out of his eyes. Her own hair, the color of wheat, fell in a fat braid over her shoulder. It seemed to him like some rare, astonishing treasure; his fingers lifted of their own accord, touched it. Her mouth smiled, but her eyes, not quite smiling, searched for the past he had abandoned.

She said slowly, “It’s a complex name for one so young.”

“That’s all we were told.” The man’s hands lay gently on his shoulders, still holding him; his voice was dark and taut with past. “After we found him in the ashes. The farm in the provinces burned with everything in it. His family. Everyone. Tell him that when he asks. He doesn’t remember anything.”

“Then who told you his name?”

“His great-uncle. I doubt that even he lived much longer, after he told us to bring the child here. Will you keep him?”

He heard tide gather and break, far away. Gather and break. His breath gathered; he waited, watching the woman’s face. She spoke finally, her slender fingers, white as spindrift, sliding over his head.

“We’ll call him Rook, for his black, black eyes.” She glanced around the circle, her gold brows

raised, questioning silently; there was no dissent in the strange, wild faces gazing at him. "Rook Caladrius. And if he begins to remember?"

"Then he will name himself."

The man's fingers tightened on his shoulders, then loosed him abruptly. He turned, saw all that was left of his past get back into the boat. For a moment ash sparked, flamed in his chest; he swallowed fire, watching until the boat was only a tiny, glowing lamp swaying above the waves. He turned then, feeling nothing, empty as the air between sea and stars. He followed the strangers up the endless stone stairway along the face of the rock, his eyes on the next step, the next. Near the top he stopped abruptly, staring up at the tiers of fire-washed windows carved out of the stones. The woman behind him, keeping a hand at his back, asked, "What is it, Rook?"

He said, astonished, "The rock sang."

The ancient school on Luly, he learned, was older than the name of the rock, older than the language of humans. It rose out of rock like something sculpted by wind, shaped by storm. It was never silent. Sea frothed and boomed constantly around it. Gulls with their piercing voices cried tales passed down from bards who spoke the forgotten language of birds. Seals, lifting their faces out of the waves, told other tales to the wind. Wind answered, sometimes lightly, sometimes roaring out of the northern hinterlands like the sound of all the magic there, if it had one word to speak, and a voice to speak it with. Then the rock would sing in answer, its own voice too deep to be heard, a song that could be felt, running from stone into bone, and from there into the heart, to be transformed into the language of dreams, of poetry. Rook heard the rock sing again the first night he slept there. Later, out of stone, he made his first song.

He played it one day on a single-stringed instrument whose unpredictable sounds, sometimes tender, sometimes ragged and eerie, said best what he saw. Bard Galea, the woman who had named him, was pleased. Bard Trefon, whose deep eyes and dark skin reminded Rook of the seals that peered out of the waves around the rock, was not.

"I hear seagulls squabbling in it," she said. "And the wind. And ravens calling your name."

"I hear the picochet," Bard Trefon protested. "I am trying to teach him the harp."

"Well, he was born in the provinces, of course he would be drawn to the picochet. It's the farmer's instrument; he must have heard it in the womb."

"He has an ear for the harp." They argued amicably, their voices spirited and strong, tide tangling with wind on a bright day. "It's the harp that the land barons will want to hear in their courts, not the peasant's instrument."

"I think," Bard Galea said, looking deeply into Rook's eyes, "he has an ear for whatever he touches. Can you put words to your song, Rook?"

"They burned," he said briefly.

Her eyes changed, became strange with thought, like birds' eyes, or the unseeing eyes of students lost in their music. "Then you know something that's hardest to learn. Words change, here. You must make them new as if you had never spoken them before."

He looked at her, his eyes gritty, charred with sudden anguish; an ember flared out of the ashes. He plucked the single string; past and terror receded, blocked by sound as tuneless as a wave. "I never have spoken them before," he answered, remembering the taste of the sea on his lips, the first word forming in him as they rowed toward Luly.

Bard Trefon broke off the piece of a word in the back of his throat. He took the picochet from Rook gently and set it aside. He wore a harp at his back like a butterfly's wing, as if it had unfolded there and never left him. His eyes consulted Bard Galea's in the way that they had, saying things silently. She said softly, "They were right to bring him here, I think. This may be where he belongs. Rook, do you know the story of how the first bard came to this rock?"

“No.”

~~“The first bard in the world learned all his words new; he had no father and no mother, and no one to teach him. So he went exploring the world, to put names to all the wonders in it. He was following the path of the sun across the sea to find the land where it set, when an enormous whale rose out of the water and swallowed him, coracle and all. The bard began to sing in the whale’s belly, a song of such heartrending beauty that the whale could not bear to stop it. It swam toward the setting sun until finally it came to a barren rock. The whale opened its mouth and the bard stepped out, still singing, this time to the rock. At the song, the rock loosed its fierce clench on itself and grew hollow, letting the song carve chambers and doors and long hallways that caught wind in them like breath and molded it into music. The whale, unable to leave the bard, fed itself to the birds and the fish, and left its backbone for a bridge between rock and land, and its ribs for boats. One day, the bard, ever curious, walked across the whale’s backbone and disappeared into the hinterlands.~~

“A thousand years later he returned, pursued by all the magic in the hinterlands for the magical instrument he had stolen. That’s the one you played for me. The picochet.”

“It depends,” Bard Trefon said to a passing gull outside the window, “who tells the tale. I think he stole the harp.”

Rook looked curiously at the picochet’s square painted belly and the long, single string that wound around a peg above his head. “What is magic?”

She paused. “A word. It changes things, when you know what it means. The magic in the picochet makes things grow. So the tale goes, and so the farmers of the provinces south of the hinterlands believe.”

“The picochet,” Bard Trefon said, “would hardly be worth picking a quarrel with all the magic in the hinterlands.”

She smiled her sea smile at him, her eyes catching light. “That’s how the tale goes.”

“But what is the truth of the tale?” He took the picochet gently from Rook and set it aside. “Magic comes from the heart, and it’s the heart that plays the harp. Come with me, Rook. I’ll show you.”

Her smile left her, like light fading on the sea. “Be careful,” she told them both.

Bard Trefon took him out in a boat, rowing away from the rock until they were safe from the exuberant swell and thunder of breaking waves. Then he dropped an anchor stone over the side, baited a line, and let it drift. He took the harp out of its case and handed it to Rook. “See what comes,” he said, his dark face sparkling with brine, his eyes intent, like the seals when they rose out of the water to watch. The boat, veering and darting around its anchor stone, nearly tossed the harp out of Rook’s hands before he struck a note. He positioned it awkwardly, plucked one tentative string after another, the haunting scale Bard Trefon had taught him. The land beyond them dipped and rose, the flatlands to the south luminous with morning, the northern forests still receding into shadow. In the distance, a misty blur of hills rose out of the forests, rounded like bubbles. They seemed to float above the still, dark trees. He narrowed his eyes against the light, tried to see beyond. Bard Trefon, tugging at his line, said, “You’re looking at the hinterlands. They go north to the end of the world.”

“Who lives there?”

“You never know until you go there. Everyone who goes returns with a different tale.”

“Have you gone?”

“No.” He pulled up his hook. The bait was gone, so was the fish that had taken it. “Not yet. It’s where you go to ask a question. About your life, perhaps. Your future. Or your past. People there tell you. If you listen. If not, you come back at least knowing some odd tales, very ancient songs. Some never come back.”

“What happens to them?”

“They go elsewhere. They may return to Luly, many years later, and tell what happened to them.”

Sometimes the bards only hear of them in a song.” He let his line drop again. “Play the song you made for the picochet. See if you can find it on the harp.”

He tried, but the sea kept getting in the way of the song, and so did the hinterlands. He gazed at the floating hills, wondering what he would see if he walked across them, alone through unfamiliar trees crossing the sun’s path to the top of the world. Who would he meet? In what language would they speak to him? The language the sea spoke intruded then, restless, insistent, trying to tell him something: what song he heard in the seashell, what word the rock sang, late at night under the heavy pull of the full moon. His fingers moved, trying to say what he heard, as the sea flowed like blood in and out of the hollows and caves of the rock, trying to reach its innermost heart, as if it were a string that had never been played. He came close, he felt, reaching for the lowest notes on the harp. But it was his own heart he split, and out of it came fire, engulfing the rock in the sea.

He cried out. A string snapped, curled with a wail like wood in fire. Bard Trefon, staring at him, reached out, catching the harp before Rook flung it into the water. “No,” he said quickly. “Rook.”

Rook stared at him, his heart still burning. “It was on fire.”

“I know,” the bard breathed. “I heard. Rook. Try again. But this time—”

His fingers curled into fists. “I will never play it again.”

“But you have a gift for it. And there are other songs.”

“No.” He added, as the bard watched him, brows crooked and questioning, “There is a fish on your line.”

“Rook.”

He turned away, tugged at the dancing, thumping line until Bard Trefon finally put the harp away and helped him.

The more the bards taught him, the farther back he drove the fire and what lay within it. He built walls of words against it; he charmed it away with music. There was nothing, it seemed, he could not learn in order to escape. He changed the meanings of words without realizing it. Becoming a bard meant becoming someone who knew no past but poetry, he thought. A bard changed the past to song, set it to music, and made it safe. So he learned the tales of the hinterlands, the provinces; he played their instruments even in his dreams, until he woke with strange cadences and ancient languages he almost understood fading in his head. He was taught, in cursory fashion, of the city south of the provinces, which had a sheathed, dangerous paw on the world around him. But its music made him uneasy. Like the harp, it led him back, toward the past; it smelled of fire. Its bright, sweet, complex language was not rooted in wind and stone; it was too new. It held no word for bard. So he reached back, finding past and eluding it, as far as he could, to the first words, the first tales, the first sounds fashioned out of the language of birds and insects, the whine of wind and wolf, the sough of the sea, the silence of death, all the sounds the first bard had woven into his song. After eight years on Luly, he could spin poetry from his dreams, and play anything his hands touched. After three more years the bards of Luly said that he was ready to choose his future.

He had grown tall and muscular, his long, fair hair usually a rook’s nest of wind and brine, his rook’s eyes, beneath level brows, so dark they seemed without pupils. His rare smile softened their grimness. When he played, his face lost its usual calm. Someone else, the boy in the boat perhaps, staring unflinchingly at fire, looked out of his eyes; they reflected what he did not remember seeing.

“You should call yourself Caladrius,” he was told sometimes. “It’s a name more suitable for a bard.”

He would shrug. “Rook suits me.” And when he played, they saw the raven in his eyes.

He sat on a grassy slope outside the school one sunny day, imitating birds on the clay pipes, when the bards summoned him to make his choice. The summons came in the form of Sirina, a land baron’s daughter from the northern provinces. She had been at the school for three years; she had a restless

nature and a spellbinding way with a harp. "You're wanted," she said, and sat down on the grass beside him. He looked at her, still playing, and realized in that moment how she had changed, from the slight, freckled girl he had first met. Her harper's hands were pale as sea spume; her long hair gleamed like pearl. She knew things, he thought suddenly. She held secrets, now, in the long, slender lines of her body; she held some music he had never heard before. "Rook," she prodded while his pipes spoke back to a passing gull. He lowered them finally, still gazing at her.

"Who wants me?"

"Bard Trefon, Bard Galea, Bard Horum. They want you to make a decision. About your future." She had a northerner's way of chopping sentences into neat portions, as if they were carrots.

"There's no decision to make," he answered simply. "I'm staying here."

"It's more complicated. They said. What you must choose."

"Staying or going is one or the other. It's not complicated." He added as she sighed, "I'll stay here and teach. It's what I want."

"How can you not want to be a bard? How can you want this rock?" she asked incredulously. "You could have the world. If you would only learn to harp. It's what the world wants."

"I don't want the world." The spare, taut lines of his face softened at her bewilderment. "Sirina." The color of her eyes distracted him suddenly; he forgot what he was going to say.

"You can play anything else. You can tell any tale. Sing any song. Why do you balk over a harp? Anyone can play it. You don't have to play it with your heart. Not to please the land barons. Just with your fingers."

"I prefer the picochet."

"Peasant."

He smiled. "Very likely." Her eyes had changed at his smile, become shadowy, mysterious. Their color kept eluding him. "Mussels," he decided, and her gaze became skewed.

"What about them?"

"It's a riddle," he said, following an ancient formula. "Answer: I am the color of mussel shells."

Her eyes narrowed faintly, holding his. "Is that so," she said softly. "Answer: I am the color of a starless night."

"Is that so." His hand dropped to the ground, very close to hers. Neither of them blinked. "Answer: I am a son without a father, a bird without a song. Who am I?"

He watched her lips gather around the first letter of his name. He bent his head, gently took the rest of it from her. She opened her eyes as he drew back; they had grown very dark. He heard her swallow.

"Rook." Her fingers shifted in the grass, touched his. "They're waiting."

"Will you?" he asked as he stood. He had an impression, as her hair roiled away from her into the wind, of someone rising out of foam. "Will you wait?"

Her eyes answered.

He felt something leap in him like a salmon, flicking drops of water into light on its run toward home. I'm never leaving, he thought, striding toward the ancient, drafty pile of stone in which he could still hear, late at night, between the wind and the wild burst of the tide, the final cry of the bard imprisoning all the magic in the hinterlands. Never.

"You have three choices," Bard Galea told him. Her hair was more silver now than gold, but she still had the mermaid's enchanting smile. "You may choose to stay here and teach. Which is what I think you want."

"Or you may choose to master the harp and be called bard," Bard Trefon said. "Which is what I think you should do. Then you will leave Luly and find your future with some house or court or school in need of a bard. If you choose that, remember that the farther you go from Luly, the more the word

'bard' changes, until, if you go far enough south, you will hardly recognize yourself." He waited, dark brows lifted, still questioning, after so many years, still hoping. Rook turned to Bard Horum, a tall, very old man who looked, with his pure white coloring and ancient, oval eyes, as if he might once have been a unicorn.

"Or," the third bard said, "you may take the path across the sea to the hinterlands, and let what comes to you there decide your fate. If you choose that, remember that you may not find your way back to Luly."

Rook started to answer. The unicorn's eyes held him, powerful and still. Did you? Rook wanted to ask. What did you find there? "I choose," he said to Bard Horum, and caught himself, startled and breathless, as if he had nearly walked over a cliff. He blinked away from the ancient gaze, and it dropped, hid itself. He turned back to Bard Galea's smile. "I choose to stay."

That night he dreamed of fire.

He woke not knowing his own name, consumed, as with a sudden fever, by the knowledge that he had a past hidden by fire, another name. Somewhere on the mainland, the blackened, crumbling walls of a farmhouse held his name. He could not find his future without his past. He could not play a true note, even on the picochet, or sing a word that meant itself, without his past. He lay awake in the dark, staring at it, listening to the rill of the tide filling hollows beneath the school. When night finally relinquished its grip of him, he still felt blind, memoryless, as if he had only dreamed his life, and had wakened to find himself among ashes, without words and understanding nothing.

"I can't make a choice yet," he told the bards in the morning, trembling with weariness, rubbing at the rasp behind his reddened eyes. "I'm going to the provinces." This time the seal's eyes watched him, curious, approving. The unicorn's eyes were still hidden.

. . .

He left three days later at dawn. Sirina rowed him to shore. They did not speak until the boat scraped bottom and he jumped into the waves to run it out again on the outgoing tide. She said, softly, her face quiet and pale in the new light, "I'll give you a thread. To find your way back."

"Or for you to find me," he breathed, and she nodded. She leaned forward abruptly, kissed him before tide pulled the boat out of his hands. He watched her row halfway to Luly while he stood knee deep in surf, pack and picochet dangling from his shoulders, still tasting her sea-salt kiss.

Finally he turned, found a beach littered with driftwood and mussel shells, without a footprint, human or otherwise, anywhere in the sand. Beyond it lay the wild land north of the provinces, the forests and hills flowing to the end of the world. He felt its pull, its mystery, as strong as the tide carrying his heart back to Luly, as strong as the name waiting to be found in the provinces. He waded out of the water, shook the sea out of his boots, and began to walk south toward the villages and farmlands, the great houses of the provincial barons. Ravens cried at him from the ancient forest, raucous, persistent. He did not know their language, he explained silently to them; he did not understand. Later, when they dropped a black trail of feathers to guide him into the unknown, he refused to see.

He played the picochet in farmhouses, in inns, the flute and the lute in barons' courts all over the provinces. Sometimes he stayed a night, sometimes a month or two, playing whatever he was handed, singing whatever he was asked. He was given lodgings, coins, new boots, new songs, a strange instrument that had found its way out of the hinterlands, a haircut, an embroidered case for his picochet, many local tales, and offers of positions ranging from tavern musician to court bard. But he could stay nowhere. His rook's eyes searched for fire everywhere. He was shown charred, ruined farmhouses, or the place where they had been before they were rebuilt, or the cornfield where the far-

had stood before it burned and its ashes were plowed under. Solk, their name was, or Peerson, or Gamon. They had lost a baby, or a cat, or all their horses, or everything but each other. A terrible fire with only one child, a son, left alive? That sounded like the Leafers, but no, only the grandmother had been left alive in that one. She had wandered out of the house in her nightgown in the middle of the night, thinking she heard her baby son crying. She woke to hear him crying to wake his own children inside the burning house. The Sarters in the next valley had lost their cows when the barn burned, but . . . The Tares' girl had lost her parents, but there were those who said she had started the fire herself.

He couldn't say who had taken him to Luly?

He couldn't say why Luly?

He couldn't say why the name Caladrius and no other?

He couldn't say.

"But you must belong here," he was told many times. "The way you play the picochet. You must have heard it in the womb."

He was certain he could not stay? Not even if—

He was certain.

He returned at night, nearly two years later, alone, on foot. He lit a fire on the beach and sat there listening to the dead silence in the forest behind him, waiting while a star moved across the water in answer to his fire. Before the boat entered the tide, something spoke in the dead silence of his heart. He got to his feet without realizing it. When the tide caught the boat, and the lamp careened wildly on the prow, he left pack and picochet on the sand and ran into the water.

Sirina caught him as he caught the boat. Tide poured between them; the boat tilted, spilled her into his arms. An oar went its own way; the star was doused.

"You're here," he kept saying, stunned. "You're still here."

"You came back." A wave broke over them; she laughed, wiping her face with her wet sleeve, the his face. "You took long enough."

"You waited for me."

"We waited. Yes."

"You." He stopped, heard the boat thump hollowly as a wave flung it upside down on the sand. Beneath that, he heard silence again, as if the trees were listening. He said, "We."

"I called him Hollis. After my grandfather."

His knees turned to nothing; he sank suddenly under a wave. She tugged him out, laughing again. "Don't be afraid. You'll like him. He has my eyes."

He tried to speak; words turned to salt. She pounded on his back as he coughed. Brine ran down his face like tears. "Hollis," he said finally. Then he heard the strange, deep song of the whale weltering up all around him from sea to sky, and he shouted, loud enough to crumble rock, to overwhelm the magic of the hinterlands, send it fleeing from his heart.

He picked her up, carried her out of the sea.

And so the years passed.

The child in the ashes waited.

Two



In the Hall of Mirrors at Pellior Palace, within the walled city of Berylon, Giulia Dulcet lifted the instrument in her hands many times in many different mirrors and began to play. The hall was soundless but for the music; the hundred richly dressed people in it might have been their own reflections. Arioso Pellior, Duke of Pellior House and Prince of Berylon, stood with his three children across the room from the musicians. Giulia caught brief glimpses of them now and then as she lowered the sweet, melancholy lavandre to pass the prince's melody to Hexel on the harpsichord. The prince's compositions seemed predictable but never were: he scattered accidentals in music, Hexel commented acidly, as in life. Above Arioso's head, the basilisk of Pellior House, in red marble and gold, reared on its sinuous coils and stared back at itself in the massive frame of the mirror behind the musicians. All around the room the basilisks roused and glared, frozen in one another's gazes, while mortals, beneath the range of their stony regard, stood transfixed within the prince's vision.

The composition ended without mishap. Playing the prince's music kept Giulia concentrated and on edge: a note misplaced in his ear would be enough, she felt, to get them tossed, by the irate composer, out of the Tormalyne School of Music into the gutters of Berylon. But the muted tap of fan against gloved fingers reassured them. Arioso Pellior acknowledged compliments with a gracious inclination of his head. The hall quieted for his next composition. Giulia exchanged the lavandre for a flute. She and Hexel played a duet. Then Hexel sang a love song, a stylized piece with vocal frills that he tossed out as lightly as largesse. Giulia sat listening, a slender figure in her black magister's robe, her straight, sooty hair neatly bound in a net of gold thread, her tawny, wide-set eyes discreetly lowered as she listened. Only the lavandre moved to her breathing, its spirals of rosewood and silver throwing sparks of light at its reflection.

The song ended. The prince's younger daughter, the Lady Damiet, lifted a folded fan to her lips and swallowed a yawn. Her broad, creamy face revealed nothing of her thoughts; she was reputed to have few. On the other side of the prince stood his son Taur, twenty years older than Damiet, offspring of Arioso's first marriage. Taur, looking slightly disheveled in his finery, brooded visibly while the music played, applauded a trifle late when he noticed it had stopped. Taur's wife, a thin-lipped woman with restless eyes the color of prunes, seemed to search perpetually for the cause of her annoyance in the mirrored faces. Taur's younger sister Luna Pellior stood behind Arioso's shoulder, nearly as tall as he, with her hair the rich gold of a dragon's hoard, and her eyes, like her father's, lizard green. She had his face, Damiet her mother's. The prince's wives had both died, having done their duty to the Basilisk, and being, so it was widely believed, no longer required.

The hall quieted again. Giulia turned a page and raised the lavandre. Its liquid voice imitated hunting cadences, announcing the beginning of the pursuit. Hexel, she noted, had forgotten his loathing for the composer and was galloping over the keys. A strand of her hair slid free and drifted above the lavandre's mouth, fluttering with every note she played. She ignored it, though the prince's

daughter Damiet, her eyes opening slightly at Giulia, seemed to have found something at last to interest her.

The hunt reached its climax; something was slain by an unexpected chord. The harpsichord paced itself to a peaceful walk, while the lavandre sang a pretty lament for the dead. Midway through it, Giulia saw the prince's eyes, beneath slow, heavy lids, fix on her face, as if she played jewels instead of notes, and every one belonged to him.

He came up to her afterward, while the musicians were putting their instruments away, and the guests picked daintily at what looked like butterfly wings and hummingbird hearts. Giulia, who saw the Prince of Berylon rarely and at a distance, swept her magister's robe into a deep curtsy, wondering if she had mortally offended him with a turn of phrase.

Rising, she looked into his eyes. The skin around them was lightly crumpled with age, but they were still powerful, at once searching and opaque, like a light too bright to be looked at, but which illumined everything. This year would mark his sixty-fifth birthday, the thirty-seventh year of his ascent to power over Berylon. His fine face, gilded by sun and symmetrical as a mask, seemed not so much aging as drying. It was as if, Giulia thought, his skin were a husk within which blood and bone were busily transforming themselves into something else entirely.

She lowered her eyes, wondering suddenly if he had read her thoughts. He said only, "You play music very well."

"Thank you, my lord."

"As I would play it, if I were that proficient. As if you like it."

"Then I must," she answered in her low, clear voice. Years in Berylon had smoothed the provincial quirks out of her speech. "I don't play well what I don't like."

"Did you think the lament a trifle long?"

Surprised, she lifted her eyes again, to glimpse the tentative composer behind the ruler. "No, my lord. You made me see a stately animal, maybe with mythical qualities, that had been slain. Something to touch the heart. Not just something to be viewed as supper. A stag?"

"Or a griffin," he suggested, with his tight, still-charming smile. "I have heard you play here before. You teach at the school."

"Yes, my lord."

"How long have you been there?"

"Five years as a student, my lord, and five as a teacher."

"You are a northerner." She hesitated, surprised again; his smile deepened. "I hear it in your voice. You came to the school young, then. And were given assistance? You are not a land baron's daughter."

"Yes—no, my lord. My grandfather still farms on the northern slopes. He sent me here at fourteen, thinking that I would astound the magisters of the Tormalyne School with my music."

"And did you?"

"Yes, my lord. They had never heard such noise in their lives."

For a moment his smile reached his eyes. "What were you playing for them?"

"My picochet. They locked it in a closet, and forbade me to touch it for five years. They taught me to play more civilized instruments."

"I am not familiar with the picochet."

"It is a peasant's instrument, my lord."

"And one you still play?"

For a breath he caught her wordless. She felt the blood gather in her face, under his bright, unblinking gaze. She said finally, "Yes, my lord."

"I know many uncivilized instruments. . . . But not that. You live at the school?"

"Yes, my lord."

“Good. Then I will know where to find you.”

“My lord?”

“When I need you.”

She blinked. He turned away; she curtsied hastily, lost sight of him when she straightened. She put the lavandre into its case, her straight dark brows puckered slightly.

Hexel came to her side; she said with relief, “I can’t believe we got through that with no bigger disaster than my hair falling down. He was pleased.”

“What exactly was he pleased with?” Hexel asked suspiciously. “What did he say to you?”

“Pleasantries . . .” Still frowning, she snapped a case latch with more force than necessary, and a blood bead along the quick of her thumbnail. “He has such strange eyes. They seem to see everything even what I’m thinking. Or don’t know I’m thinking. He said that he would know where to find me when he needed me.”

“And what did he mean by that?” Hexel’s blue eyes were narrowed, his long, black hair looked suddenly windblown, though the candles behind him burned still. As a dramatist and composer, he had an exhausting passion for dramatics. He was lean, moody, intense; students at the music school constantly pushed notes under his door, or set his discarded scribbles to music, or dropped roses or themselves across his work. “What kinds of pleasantries did he have in mind?”

“Oh, Hexel.” She wiped blood on her robe and began to put her music in order. “He meant music. That’s all we talked about.”

“Then why are you frowning?”

She tapped the manuscripts straight slowly. “Because,” she said finally, “of who he is. Whatever he needs of anyone, how do you say no to the Basilisk? I never had to think of it before. He never looked at me before, with those eyes.” Something dragged at her attention from across the room; she added nervously, “The way he’s looking now. As if he hears us.”

“He is an aging tyrant who gets his music played free,” Hexel said without compunction, “since he had the foresight not to destroy the Tormalyne School. You are my muse, not his. He can find someone else. I need your inspiration. Tonight.”

“For what?”

“For the prince’s opera, what else?”

“Oh. Hexel, I can’t. I’m playing the picochet in the tavern tonight.”

He gazed at her, exasperated. “Not again.”

“It’s this day every week.”

“But I need you!”

“Tomorrow.”

“You are merciless.”

“So you are always telling me. Why can’t you find someone else to be your muse instead? All I do is inspire you with horror, headaches, frustration, and despair.”

“That’s why I need you,” Hexel said briskly. “Without proper proportions of despair, how can I tell if I’m doing anything right?”

“Come with me. We’ll talk on the way. You might like what I play.”

“I would rather have hobnails driven into my ears. You are only doing this to prove some obscure point, because no one could possibly want to listen to you.”

“Northerners do,” she answered simply. “They miss it.”

Hexel snorted so audibly that faces across the room turned, exhibiting exquisitely raised brows. “It’s a foolish and dangerous thing you are doing, Giulia Dulcet, and if anything happens to you it will devastate my work—” He sensed a distraction hovering at his elbow, and found a page there, bowing to the music stand. “What?”

“Master Veris Legere will make a formal presentation of the prince’s music to the school, if you will please. . . .”

They followed him across the room. The prince, formally presented with Hexel, looked at Giulia over Hexel’s bowed head, the faint, sharp splinter of a smile in his eyes. She thought in horror: He heard. . . . Veris Legere, the silver-haired Master of Music for Pellior House, who knew Giulia, greeted her more pleasantly. He presented the musicians with scrolls tied with gold ribbon, about which they all, even Hexel, made proper noises. Hexel ate a hummingbird heart; Giulia drank, in two swallows, most of a glass of wine while she responded to Veris Legere’s polite interest in her work at the school. The mirrors around them began to lose movement, color. The musicians in their scholarly black detached themselves from satins and pastels to gather their instruments and music. Small clusters of courtiers, like elegant bouquets, drifted in the wake of the prince’s departure. Finally the mirrors emptied even of servants, who left them to reflect themselves, while the onyx-eyed basilisks turned one another into stone.

. . .

Later that evening, Giulia made her way alone through the streets of Berylon. She still wore her magister’s black, beneath a flowing hooded cloak. The stone streets, broad and lamplit in front of the music school, grew narrow and twisted as she neared the north wall of the city. Tiers of closed doors and bright windows rose above shops and taverns, smithies, tanneries, market stalls covered for the night. Each street had its own particular odor: she could have smelled her way by now to the tavern at the gate of the Tormalyne Bridge.

Four bridges led across water into Berylon, each named after one of the ancient ruling Houses. To the west, the Iridia Bridge crossed slow moat water in which the frogs would be singing. The plain beyond that was treeless, grassy, the long, dust-white road curving through it flowed visible from the horizon. To the south, the Marcasia Bridge spanned broad deep water to the docks, where fishers moored their boats and cleaned their catch, and the trade ships, sails colored according to House or province, took their wares downriver. East, the Pellior Bridge rose over slower, shallower water, where goods and passengers were carried by flat-bottomed barges. The Tormalyne Bridge crossed the river at the beginning of its long curl around the city, where the rushing, silvery water had sliced a path through shelves of rock, torn earth away and swallowed it, scoured the sides of the ravine into cliffs as sheer as a knife blade. There were no docks on this side of the city, no river traffic. Travelers crossing the bridge passed into a forest that stretched between Berylon and the northern provinces. The smells that roamed into the tavern beside the bridge were redolent of raw pelts and tanneries.

She was stopped once by the night watch. The long instrument she carried had made a suspicious silhouette in their torchlight. Bloodred basilisks on black tunics cast baleful stares at her; neither they nor the watch saw farther than her magister’s robe, and they let her pass.

On Tanner’s Street, she opened a weather-beaten door beneath a faded sign: a griffin poised between broken halves of shell. The Griffin’s Egg, the tavern called itself. At that hour it had a scattered crowd of trappers, tanners, a few dusty travelers out of the provinces, shopkeepers, tired women with barefoot children at their knees. Giulia eased through the crowd to the back corner of the tavern, where Justin was fitting pieces of his bass pipe together, and Yacinthe unwrapped half a dozen small drums of various sizes from their cases. Ionia, who played the flute, set a brass bowl on a table with a few small coins in it to inspire their audience. She smiled at Giulia, showing a sapphire fang over one eyetooth. Jewels glinted through her hair, down her shoulder, from the studded rein that she had trimmed from some horse’s fine harness. Yacinthe, beating a drum, danced around Justin, the go-rings on her toes tapping on the floorboards, blue feathers trying to fly in her dark hair. He tossed her

a grin, his eyes on Giulia as he went to meet her.

“I’m sorry I’m so late,” Giulia said. “I had to—”

He stopped her with a kiss. Then he said softly, “I know what you had to.” She looked closely at him. His eyes were lowered, his smile troubled. He was tall and fair-haired, with a sweet ruffian’s face that was a misleading combination of innocence and danger. His hatred of Pellior House was genuine and unremitting. She had met him in the Griffin’s Egg one night when she searched for a place outside the school to play. Like the instrument she brought there, he was an indulgence and a passion; she knew little of his life outside of the tavern where they played, the tiny room above a shop where he lived. She laid a hand on his chest; he clasped it, but still did not meet her eyes, busy swallowing his protests, she suspected.

“I play where I’m told,” she reminded him simply. “You know that. It’s my work. And I can’t help loving the music. You know that, too.”

“I know.” His fingers tightened on her hand. He raised her palm to his mouth, before he loosed her. He looked at her finally, his brows crooked. “I worry about you in the Basilisk’s house. He is unpredictable and ruthless. And you were alone on the streets. There’s a full moon tonight. They’re coming in here to drink hard. The watch challenges anything that moves.”

“They stopped me,” she said. She slid off the magister’s black beneath her cloak, and then shrugged off her cloak. “They thought I was armed.”

“They killed a man near Pellior Bridge. They thought he was armed.”

Giulia, on one knee, froze for half a breath, then continued unbuckling a shoe. “They don’t kill magisters.”

“Not yet.”

She kicked off her shoes, then pulled the gold net out of her hair so that it fanned darkly over her bare shoulders, nearly reaching the waist of the short, full skirts that skimmed her knees. Justin watched her, his smile surfacing again. Someone rattled a cup against a table like a drumroll. Yacintil imitated it. Justin pulled the gilded, beaded leather tie from the mouth of her instrument case. He looped it around her neck carefully, tied it, while she watched the mottled light slide over his brown, muscular hands, and catch in the tangled cloud of white-gold hair. He pulled the instrument out of its case and handed it to her.

“Magister,” he said gravely. “Don’t break the windows with it.”

He picked up his pipe again and blew a deep note. She plucked the string, listening until she heard its solitary voice clearly beneath laughter and argument, the roll of dice and clank of pewter on wood. She tuned it to a note out of the north.

They began to play.

Three



Sirina waited until Hollis was fourteen before she left them. Rook had sensed her going long before. Like tide turning, drawn by the moon, by the mysteries of the deep, she had ebbed, little by little, away from him, so that he stood once again on a lonely shore, watching the distance widen between them. She asked him, in many ways, to come with her, before she got tired of asking.

“Luly is growing tiny,” she had said to him. “There’s not enough room. For all of us.”

He thought of the stone chambers, tiered like a beehive, the walls so thick not even the sound of the picochet traveled between them. They might have been living there with only the wind and the sea shouting poetry at them in forgotten languages. “There’s room,” he had answered absently.

“I thought I would take Hollis home,” she said another time. He had stared at her, oddly perplexed by the word, as if what he had thought it meant was wildly inaccurate.

“He is home. Luly is his home.”

“I mean to see my father. For a while.”

“How long is a while?”

“Just a while. Just a few months. So he can see what it is to be a court bard. In a house planted on earth instead of stone. With people coming and going. So that, when he’s older, he can make choices

“I made choices without knowing.”

“I know,” she said softly, her brows crooked at something he could not see. She had grown, he thought, more beautiful through the years: tall and supple, with a line beside her mouth left there by laughter, by pain, by thoughts she did not reveal.

“Come with us,” she begged.

“I can’t leave my students.”

“It’s this rock you can’t leave,” she said, turning abruptly, gazing out at spindrift as pale as her hair. He thought only that she was probably right.

When she finally made it clear to him that she was leaving, he felt, stunned, that the rock was the only safe and changeless thing he knew.

“I can’t stay,” she said. “I love you. But I never meant to stay here. I want the world back.”

“I’ll come,” he said, without moving. She separated her skirts from his tunics, folded them neatly on the bed. “I’ll come,” he said again. “When you find a place. Send word to me—”

She made an exasperated noise. “You’ll come when the quarter moon falls out of the sky. You’ll come when you can row it to land like a boat.”

“Hollis—”

“I’ll let him choose.”

He stared at her, breathless at the thought. “How can he? He’s a child! How can you ask him—”

Her face twisted; tears appeared seemingly at random, beneath her eyes, on her cheekbone, beside her mouth. “It’s all I can do!” she cried. “It’s the best I can do. I only stayed for you and Hollis. I am

bard of Luly. I must find my place. As you never did. Ever. Ever. I tried to tell you.” She turned to him blindly; he held her fiercely for a moment, a silky roil of froth, the undertow. Then she slid away from him and was gone.

Hollis went with her. He came back five months later, looking taller, older, and prickly with moods. “I want to be a bard,” he told Rook tensely. “Like her.” He looked like her, Rook thought; he had her eyes, her tall grace, though his hair was the color of his father’s name. He did not say much more for years, it seemed to Rook.

And then, like his mother, he became a bard, finding music in a shinbone, poetry within the oyster’s shell. Like her, he was torn between love and land; he became articulate, and began, Rook thought with amazement, to sound exactly like her.

It was in that spring, he saw clearly later, when the young man with the surprising name came north from Berylon, that the Basilisk’s eye turned toward Luly.

He was in the middle of a desultory argument with Hollis when he saw the fire on the shore across the singing dark. He started to comment; Hollis paced a step, stood in front of the window, the distant flame a tantalizing question beside his hand. The world was still on the edge of spring. The winds came that day out of the provinces, mingling newly turned earth with the smell of brine around the rock. Rook, who by now had spent thirty-seven years on Luly, rarely felt the cold. His passage through the school, except on the roughest days, trailed a wake of open windows. Hollis, stars and fire at his back, shivered without realizing it.

His young face was taut and stubborn. He looked, Rook thought with some sympathy, exactly like Sirina commenting on Rook’s life. Hollis had grown broad-shouldered and lean, like his father; he wore his black hair long and wind-knotted. Unlike his father, he was methodical rather than impulsive; he had known exactly what he wanted for years. Rook, still compact and muscular from climbing up and down the cliff to the dock and hauling in fish when he had to, kept his silver-gold hair cropped short now. His raven’s eyes had not changed; their blackness hid expression, while Hollis’s face changed expression as often as the sea.

The sight of the harp in Rook’s hands had provoked Hollis, already restless at the smells coming out of the mainland. What they were arguing about seemed nebulous to Hollis and very clear to Rook. He was trying, as Sirina had done, to bring himself to leave Luly and Rook. “I don’t understand why you never learned to play that,” Hollis said tautly. “You could have left this place long ago. Can you explain?”

Rook loosened a cracked peg on the harp, remembering the day, thirty-seven years before, when he had played Bard Trefon’s harp in the fishing boat, and had set his world on fire. “There is something I want to forget,” he said slowly. “Once, when I was harping, I came too close to remembering.”

Hollis gazed at him, openmouthed, nonplussed. “What is it you want to forget?”

“I don’t remember.”

“But don’t you think—”

“No,” Rook said evenly. “I don’t think.”

“But if you—”

“If I remember, and learn to harp to please the land barons, then I can leave this rock. Yes. But I don’t want to leave. I’m content here, teaching. You want to leave. Your mother had ambitions and she would do you. I don’t.”

“So you always say.”

“So I always say.” He unwound string from the peg, looking perplexedly at his son. “Since that’s what I always say, why can’t you believe me?”

“I don’t know,” Hollis said tersely. “Maybe because you play everything else like the first bard must have played, and even he got himself off this rock for a thousand years. You belong in the

world.”

“It’s you who should leave,” Rook said patiently. “You belong in the world. Maybe you should row yourself ashore and join your mother for a few months. Leave the boat for whoever is out there in the dark.”

“I don’t want to go to a land baron’s court.”

“Why not? The change might—”

Hollis made an impatient gesture, ending his sentence. “It’s too warm, too soft. I’ll forget what I’ve learned here. I’ll forget to come back. I’m not ready to leave yet.”

“Well,” Rook said softly, meeting Hollis’s eyes with his raven’s stare. “Neither am I.” He loosened another peg, added more temperately, “You’ll have roots in both worlds: me on this rock, your mother at court. When you need to leave, you’ll always know where to find us both.”

“It’s not that,” Hollis said tightly. “I’m not afraid of leaving.”

“Then what is it?”

“I don’t know. You let my mother leave you—you’ll let me leave you. For this rock. I just feel—sometimes—that I don’t know you at all.”

Rook was silent a moment, his eyes straying back to the window. “Your mother used to say that to me,” he murmured. “I never understood what she meant, either.”

Wind flew like a bird around the workroom, skimming over broken or half-finished instruments, sounding overtones, leaving scents of fish, salt, night. Hollis turned to latch the frame of thick ovals of glass and lead against it. He paused, peered out. “There’s a fire on the shore. Are we expecting anyone?”

“A young man from Berylon.”

“I’ll go.”

“No,” Rook said, rising, wanting the peace and quiet of elements that might complain of him, but not in any language he felt obliged to understand. “I’ll go. You finish this; your heart is in it.”

He heard Hollis draw a preliminary breath as he took the harp. Rook shut the door before he had time to listen, and went to get his cloak.

Outside, he descended the hundred stone steps from the school to the dock. He lit a lantern from the dock light, hung it from the prow of a boat, and stepped into it. Rowing in the easy tide, facing the little coracle of the moon, he remembered that on the night he himself had come to Luly, so many years before, the moon had been dark. As he neared the shore he smelled meat, heard voices, the fierce cry of a seabird begging. A wave seized the boat, shook it; the sighing became a slow, sullen roar. Rook leaped into the foam. Someone splashed out to help him heave the boat out of the tide. Laughter around the fire encouraged them. Dripping, Rook stepped into the light.

Three strangers faced him, all young, all wearing their patched mantles and boots, their wild, untidy hair, like some proud livery. Small harps, in and out of their cases, leaned against driftwood, along with skins of water or wine. A hare crackled on a driftwood spit above the fire. In the farthest wash of light, Rook saw large, gentle eyes, the wink of harness.

He studied two faces, one dark, one fair, then turned to the slighter man beside him, wringing the brine out of his mantle. “Griffin Tormalyne?”

“Yes,” the young man said instantly. And then, under Rook’s dark gaze, his eyes flickered and he said, “No.”

The other two were silent now, no longer laughing, watching Rook as if they had handed him a riddle to solve. Rook said slowly, remembering scraps of news, gossip, that had been washed up along the northern coast or carried back to Luly from someone’s travels, “It’s not a name common this far from Berylon. And I would guess not spoken often even within the walls of the city.”

“It will be,” the young man with the troublesome name said fiercely. “It will be heard.” He

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