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TRUDI
CANAVAN

The
ROGUE

Book Two of THE TRAITOR SPY TRILOGY

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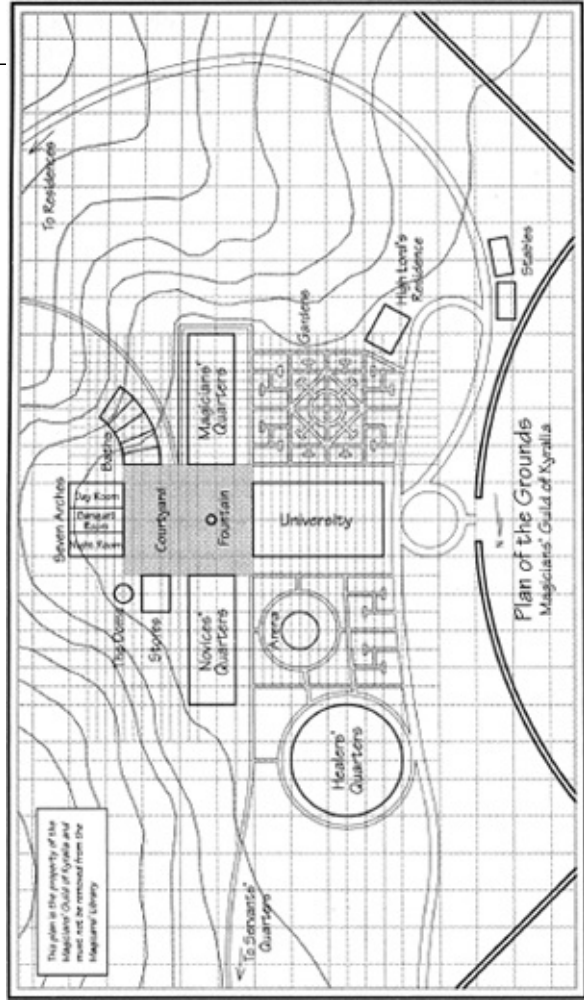


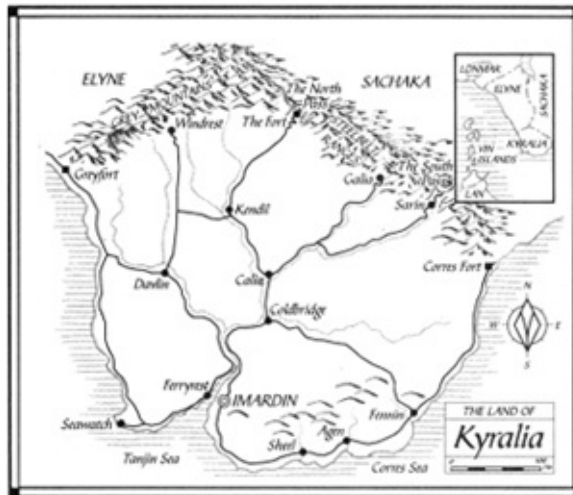
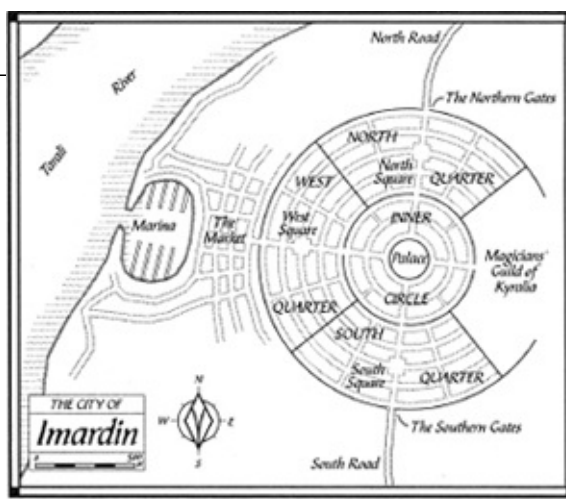
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PART ONE

THE STONE-MAKERS' CAVES

According to a Sachakan tradition so old that nobody remembered where it had begun, summer had a male aspect and winter a female one. Over the centuries since their founding, Traitor leaders and visionaries had declared the superstitions relating to men and women—especially women—to be ridiculous, but many of their people still felt that the season that exerted the most control over their lives had many feminine characteristics. Winter was relentless, powerful and brought people together in order to best survive.

In contrast, to occupants of the lowlands and deserts of Sachaka, winter was a blessing, bringing the rains that crops and livestock needed. Summer was harsh, dry and unproductive.

As Lorkin hurried back from the Herbery, all he could think was that it was colder than he'd expected in the valley. The chill in the air held a threat of snow and ice. He didn't feel like he'd been in Sanctuary long enough for winter to be this far advanced. Only a few short months had passed since he'd entered the secret home of the Sachakan rebels. Before then he'd been down on the warm, dry lowlands, fleeing in the company of a woman who'd saved his life.

Tyvara. Something in his chest tightened in an uncomfortable, yet strangely pleasant way. Lorkin drew in a deep breath and quickened his stride. He was determined to ignore the feeling as resolutely as Tyvara was ignoring him.

I didn't come here only because I fell in love with her, he told himself. He'd felt bound by honour to speak in Tyvara's defence to her people, because she'd saved his life. She'd killed the assassin who had tried to seduce and murder him—but the assassin had been a Traitor, too. Riva had been acting on behalf of a faction that believed he should be punished for the failure of his father, the former High Lord Akkarin, to uphold a deal he'd made with the Traitors many years ago. Nobody within the faction had admitted to giving Riva an order to kill him. To have done so would mean they had acted against the wishes of the queen, so they claimed it had been all Riva's idea.

There are rebels within the rebels, Lorkin mused.

His defence of Tyvara may have saved her from execution, but she had not evaded punishment. Perhaps it was the tasks that Riva's family had set for her that kept her away from him. Whatever the reason, he'd endured the loneliness of a stranger in a foreign place.

He had nearly reached the foot of the cliff wall that surrounded the valley. Glancing up at the multitude of windows and doors carved into this side of the valley, Lorkin knew there would be times he'd feel trapped within this place. Not because of the savage winter, which would make staying indoors necessary, but because, as a foreigner who now knew the general whereabouts of the Traitors' home, he would never be allowed to leave.

Beyond the windows and doors were enough rooms to house a small city's populace. They ranged from small cupboard-sized hollows to halls the size of the Guildhall. Most were not cut far into the rock wall, since there had been tremors and collapses in the past and people felt more comfortable living close enough to the outside that they could run outdoors quickly.

Some passages ventured a lot deeper. These were the domain of the Traitor magicians—the women

who, despite their claims that this was an equal society, ruled this place. Perhaps they didn't mind living further underground because they could use magic to prevent being crushed in a collapse. *Or perhaps they like to stay close to the caves where the magical crystals and stones are made.*

At that thought, Lorkin felt a tingle of excitement. He shifted the box he was carrying to the other shoulder and strode through the arched entrance to the city. *Perhaps tonight I will find out.*

The city passages were busy as workers returned to their families. At one point Lorkin's path was blocked by the children of two Traitors who had stopped to talk to one another.

"Excuse me," he said automatically as he squeezed past.

The adults and children looked amused. Kyralian manners puzzled all Sachakans. The Ashaki and their families, the powerful free people of the lowlands, had too great a sense of entitlement to feel the need to express gratitude for the services of others—and thought thanking slaves for doing what they had no choice in doing was ridiculous. Though Traitors did not keep slaves and their society was supposed to be equal, they hadn't developed a sense of good manners. At first Lorkin had tried to do as they did, but he did not want to lose his habit of being polite to the extent that his own people would find him rude, should he ever return to Kyralia.

Let the Traitors think of me as strange. That's better than ungrateful or aloof.

Not that Traitors were unfriendly or without warmth. Both men and women had been surprisingly welcoming. Some of the women had even tried to lure him into their beds, but he had declined politely. *Perhaps I'm a fool, but I haven't yet given up on Tyvara.*

Close to the Care Room, the city's version of a hospice, where he worked most days, he slowed down to catch his breath. It was run by Speaker Kalia, the unofficial leader of the faction that had ordered his execution. He did not want her to think he had hurried back for any reason, or needed to finish his shift on time. If she thought him anxious to leave, she'd find a task to delay him. Likewise, if there wasn't much to keep him occupied, he knew better than to sit down and rest or Kalia would find him something to do, and often something unpleasant and unnecessary.

Still, if he sauntered in as if he had all the time in the world, she might punish him for that, too. So he adopted his usual calm, stoic demeanour. Kalia saw him, rolled her eyes and took the box from him with magic.

"Why do you never think to use your powers?" she said, sighing and turning away to take the box to the storeroom.

He ignored her question. She wouldn't want to hear about how Lord Rothen, his old teacher at the Guild, believed that a magician shouldn't substitute all physical exertion for magic to avoid becoming weak and unhealthy.

"Would you like me to help you with that?" he asked. The box was full of herbs that would be turned into cures—some that he'd like to learn the recipe for.

She glanced back at him and scowled. "No. Keep an eye on the patients."

He shrugged to hide his frustration and turned to survey the large main room. Not much had changed since the early morning, when he'd begun working for the day. Beds were arranged in rows. Not many were occupied. A few children were recovering from typical childhood illnesses or injuries and an old woman was nursing a broken arm. All were asleep.

It had been Kalia's idea to put him to work in the Care Room, and he was sure she'd done it to test his resolve to not teach the Traitors how to Heal with magic. So far there had been no patients likely to die from sicknesses or injuries he could only cure with magic, but it was bound to happen eventually. When it did, he expected Kalia to stir up animosity toward him. He had a plan to counter Kalia's, but behind her motherly appearance and demeanour was a shrewd mind. She may have guessed his

intentions already. He could only wait and see.

~~Right now he couldn't wait. He needed to be somewhere else. He was late, and getting later every moment that passed, so he followed Kalia into the storeroom.~~

"Looks like you have a lot of work to do," he observed.

She didn't look up at him. "Yes. I'll be up all night."

"You didn't get any sleep last night," he reminded her. "It's not good for you."

"Don't be stupid," she snapped, glaring at him. "I'm more than capable of doing without sleep. This has to be done *now*. By someone who knows what they're doing." She turned away. "Go. Take the night off."

Lorkin did not give her a chance to change her mind. He smiled wryly to himself as he slipped out of the Care Room. Guild Healers knew how damaging lack of sleep could be to the body because they could sense the effects. Not knowing how to Heal with magic, Traitors had never sensed their error and believed a good night's sleep was an unnecessary indulgence.

He hadn't tried to convince them otherwise, since reminding them of what they didn't know wasn't tactful. Many years ago, his father had promised to teach the Traitors to Heal in exchange for the knowledge of black magic, despite not having the approval of the Guild to pass on such knowledge and, more importantly, black magic being forbidden to Guild magicians.

At the time, many Traitor children had caught a deadly disease and knowledge of Healing magic might have saved them. Black magic had allowed Akkarin to escape the Ichani who had enslaved him and return to Kyralia, but he never came back to Sachaka to fulfil his side of the deal. Since learning of his father's broken promise, Lorkin had considered many possible reasons. His father had known that the brother of the Ichani who had enslaved Akkarin planned to invade Kyralia. He may have felt obliged to deal with that threat first. Perhaps he could not explain the threat to the Guild without revealing that he had learned forbidden black magic. He might have considered it too dangerous to return to Sachaka alone, risking recapture by the Ichani or the vengeance of his former master's brother.

Perhaps he never intended to uphold the deal. After all, the Traitors had known of his terrible situation for some time before they offered their help, whereas they helped others—mainly women of Sachaka—all the time without asking a price. That they hadn't helped Akkarin regain his freedom until it was an advantage to them certainly demonstrated how ruthless they could be.

The passages were quieter now, so Lorkin was able to travel faster, breaking into a jog when there was nobody around to observe. If someone from Kalia's faction noticed he was in a hurry, it might be reported to her.

Life here didn't quite live up to Tyvara's claims of a peaceful society—or even a fair one, despite the Traitors' principles of equality. *Still, they are doing better than many other countries, and especially the rest of Sachaka. They have no slavery, and the work people are given is mostly decided by ability rather than an inherited class system. They may treat men and women unequally, but so do all other cultures—the other way around. Most cultures treat women far worse than the Traitors treat their men.*

He thought of his newest and closest friend in Sanctuary, a man named Evar, who he was meeting tonight. The young Traitor magician had been drawn to Lorkin out of curiosity because he was the only other male magician in Sanctuary who had not yet paired with a woman. Lorkin had discovered that his first impression of the status of male magicians had been wrong: he'd assumed that if there were male magicians then the Traitors must offer them the same opportunities to learn magic as they offered women. The truth was, all male magicians here were naturals—magicians whose magic had

developed naturally, forcing Traitor magicians to teach them or abandon them to die when they lost control of their powers. Magical knowledge was not otherwise offered to Traitor men.

The few fortunate male naturals were still not equal to the women, however. Men were not taught black magic. This ensured that even weak female magicians were stronger than the male ones, because they could boost their strength by storing magic taken from others.

I wonder... would I have been allowed into Sanctuary if I'd known black magic?

He did not ponder that, as he had finally reached his destination: the "men's room." It was a large room that accommodated Traitor males who were too old to live with their parents but had not yet been selected by a woman to be her companion.

Evar was talking to two other men, but left them as he saw Lorkin enter. Like most Traitor men, he was thin and small-boned, in contrast to the typical free Sachakan male from the lowlands, who tended to be tall and broad-shouldered. Not for the first time, Lorkin wondered if Traitor men had somehow grown smaller over time to fit their social status.

"Evar," Lorkin said. "Sorry I'm late."

Evar shrugged. "Let's eat."

Lorkin hesitated, then followed the other man to the food preparation area, where a steaming pot of soup had been cooked up by one of the men for them all to eat. This wasn't part of the plan. Had he returned too late? Had Evar's plans changed?

"Are we still going for that walk you suggested?" Lorkin ventured as casually as he could manage.

Evar nodded. "If you haven't changed your mind." He leaned closer. "A few of the stone-makers are working late," the young magician murmured. "Got to give them time to finish up and leave."

Lorkin felt his stomach knot. "Are you sure you want to do this?" he asked as they moved to one of the long dining tables, taking places at the end a little distance from the men already eating.

Evar chewed, swallowed, then gave Lorkin a reassuring smile. "Nothing I'm going to show you is secret. Anyone who wants to have a look is welcome to, so long as they have a guide, keep quiet and stay out of the way."

"But I'm not just anyone."

"You're supposed to be one of us. The only difference is you've been *told* you can't leave. If I tried to leave, well, I doubt I'd get far without permission, and that permission isn't likely to be granted. They don't like having lots of Traitors outside the city. Every spy is a risk, even with the mind-read-blocking stones. What if the stone was in your hand and your hand was chopped off?"

Lorkin grimaced. "Even so, I doubt anybody is going to be happy about me being there," he said, returning to the subject. "Or you taking me."

Evar swallowed the last bite of his meal. "Probably not. But dear Aunt Kalia loves me." Though Lorkin had never seen Kalia chatting sociably to Evar, she did appear to approve of her nephew. "You going to finish that?"

Shaking his head, Lorkin pushed the remains of his meal aside. He was too nervous to eat much. Evar frowned at the unemptied bowl, but said nothing, took it and simply finished off the leftovers. Since land for crops or livestock was limited, the Traitors didn't approve of waste, and Evar was always hungry. They rose, cleaned and packed away the utensils they'd used and then left the men's room. Lorkin felt his stomach twist and flutter with anxiety, yet at the same time he was full of impatience and anticipation.

"We'll go through one of the back ways," Evar murmured. "Less chance you'll be noticed going in."

As they travelled through the city, Lorkin considered what he hoped to find out. The Guild had

maintained for centuries that there were no true magical objects, just ordinary things given structural integrity or enhanced properties—like magically strengthened buildings, or the walls that glowed in the University—because they were made from material in which magic acted slowly and so continued to have an effect long after a magician stopped working on it. Even glass “blood gems” didn’t qualify. They channelled mental communications between the wearer and the creator in a way that prevented other magicians from hearing, but they didn’t contain magic.

He suspected that some of the gemstones in Sanctuary did. Most were like blood gems in that magic was sent to them and was converted by the stone to a purpose. Others appeared to hold magic ready to be used in some way. All Traitors who ventured outside their secret home carried a tiny stone inserted beneath their skin that not only allowed them to protect their mind if a Sachakan magician read it, but also let them project innocent, safe thoughts instead. The corridors and rooms within the city were illuminated by gems that gave off light. The Care Room where Lorkin attended the sick contained several stones with useful properties, from producing a warm glow or a gentle vibration to soothe sore muscles, to stones that could cauterise wounds.

If the historical records Lorkin and Dannyl had encountered were correct, then it was possible for a gemstone to store a vast amount of magic. There had been one such storestone in Arvice, the Sachakan capital, many hundreds of years ago. According to Chari, a woman who had helped him and Tyvara get to Sanctuary safely, the Traitors knew of storestones but did not know how to make them. She might have been telling the truth, or lying to protect her own people.

If knowledge of making such storestones existed, it could free the Guild of the necessity of allowing some magicians to learn black magic in case Sachakan magicians invaded again. Magic could be stored within the stones instead, to be used in the country’s defence.

Which was why he was risking this visit to the stone-makers’ caves. He did not want to learn how to make stones, he wanted to confirm that they held the potential he hoped. Then perhaps he could negotiate a trade between the Guild and the Traitors: stone-making for Healing. It would be an exchange that would benefit both peoples.

He knew he would have to work hard to convince the Traitors to consider such a trade. Having hidden from the Ashaki for centuries, they were rigorously protective of their secret home and way of life. They didn’t allow any mental communication in case it drew attention to the city. The only Traitors allowed in and out of the valley were spies, with few exceptions.

But as he followed Evar deeper into the underground network of passages, Lorkin worried that it was too soon to be visiting the caves. He did not want to give the Traitors reason to distrust him.

But as a foreigner, they might never trust him fully anyway. He only needed them to trust him enough that he could persuade them to trade with the Guild and Allied Lands. *Eventually they may realise I haven’t been officially forbidden to visit the caves, and do something about it. I must take the opportunity now.*

Evar had another view: *“Traitors make their own decisions—or rather, they don’t like letting others make decisions for them. If you want us to do something, you’ve got to let us think the idea was ours. Should someone discover us visiting the caves, you will have, at least, reminded everyone that we have something the Guild might want in exchange for Healing.”*

“Here we are,” Evar said, glancing back at Lorkin.

They had been walking down a passage so narrow they couldn’t walk side by side. Evar had stopped by a side opening. Over Evar’s shoulder Lorkin saw a brightly lit room. He felt his heart skip a beat.

We’re here!

Evar beckoned and stepped into the room. As Lorkin followed he looked around the huge space. It was empty of other people, as far as he could see. He turned his attention to the walls and drew in a quick breath.

They were covered in masses of glittering, colourful gemstones. At first he thought the distribution was random, but as he gazed at the swathes of colour he realised there were bands, swirls and patches of similar hues. He turned to regard the wall behind them and saw that the stones varied in size from tiny specks to crystals the size of his thumbnail.

It was beautiful.

“Over here we make the lightstones,” Evar told him, beckoning and heading toward a dazzling section of wall. “They’re the easiest to make, and it’s obvious when you get them right. You don’t even need a duplication stone.”

“Duplication stone?” Lorkin repeated. Evar had mentioned them before, but Lorkin had never quite grasped their purpose.

“One of these.” Evar changed direction abruptly and led Lorkin over to one of the many tables around the room. He opened a wooden box to reveal a single gemstone sitting in a bed of fine downy fibre. “With the lightstones you just have to imprint the growing gems with the same thought that you use to create a magical light. But for stones with more complicated uses, it’s easier to take one that’s already been successfully made and project the pattern within it. It reduces the rate of mistakes and flawed stones, and you can also raise several stones at the same time.”

Lorkin nodded. He pointed to another section. “What do these stones do?”

“Create and hold a barrier. They’re used for temporarily damming water or holding back rock falls. Look over here...” They moved across to a wall of tiny black crystals. “These are going to be mind blockers. They take a long time to make because they’re so complicated. It would be easier if they only had to shield a wearer’s thoughts, but they also need to allow the wearer to project the thoughts a mind-reader expects to read, to fool them into not realising there’s anything going on.” Evar gazed at the tiny stones in admiration. “We didn’t come up with them—we used to buy them from the Duna tribes.”

Dannyl’s warning that the Traitors had stolen the stone-making knowledge from the Duna people flashed into Lorkin’s mind. Perhaps that was only how the Duna people saw it. Perhaps it had been another deal gone wrong, like that between his father and the Traitors.

“Do you still trade with them?” he asked.

Evar shook his head. “We surpassed their knowledge and skills centuries ago.” He looked to the right. “Here are some we developed ourselves.” They approached a patch of large gemstones, their surface reflecting light with an iridescence that reminded Lorkin of the inside of exotic polished shells. “These are call stones. They’re like blood gems. They allow us to communicate with each other at a distance, but only with the gems they were raised next to. It can be hard to keep track of which ones are linked, so we can’t yet stop making blood gems.”

“Why stop making blood gems?”

Evar looked at him in surprise. “You must know of their weaknesses?”

“Well... let me guess: the maker of these doesn’t constantly see the thoughts of the wearer?”

“Yes, and only the message that the user sends is picked up by the gem receiving it, not all their thoughts and feelings.”

“I can see how that would be an improvement.” Lorkin turned to regard the room. There were so many patches of gems, and tables laden with objects faced the walls everywhere. “What do those gems do?” he asked, waving at a large section.

Evar shrugged. "I don't know exactly. I suspect that's an experiment. Some sort of weapon."

"Weapon?"

"For the city's defence, if we're ever invaded."

Lorkin nodded and said nothing more. Questions about weapons would be suspicious even to his new friend.

"Weapon stones have to do things that a magician can't already do," Evar told him. "For someone with little skill or training, or a magician who has run out of strength. I'm hoping they make one's strikes more accurate. I wasn't much good at battle training, so if we are ever attacked I'll need all the help I can get."

"Would you even be fighting?" Lorkin asked. "From what I understand, in battles with black magicians, lowly people like me and you are only useful as a source of extra magic. We'd probably give our power to a black magician then be sent somewhere out of the way."

Evar nodded and gave Lorkin a sideways look. "I still think it's strange that you call higher magic 'black.' "

"Black is a colour of danger and power in Kyratia," Lorkin explained.

"So you've said." Evar looked away, his attention moving around the room as if searching for something else to show Lorkin. Then his eyes widened and he made a low noise. "Uh, oh."

Turning to look in the direction toward which his friend was staring, Lorkin saw that a young woman had stepped into the room, entering from the larger main archway. He resisted casting about for the smaller back entrance; it must be several steps away and the woman was bound to see them before they got there.

Looks like we're going to get into that trouble Kalia wanted us to avoid.

A moment later, the woman looked up and saw them. She smiled at Evar, then her gaze slid to Lorkin and her smile faded. She stopped, looked at him thoughtfully, then turned and walked out of the room.

"Have you seen enough? Because I think it might be a good time to go," Evar said quietly.

"Yes," Lorkin replied.

Evar took a step toward the back entrance and then stopped. "No, let's go through the main way. We don't want to look guilty now that we've been seen."

They exchanged a grim smile, took deep breaths, and started toward the archway the woman had disappeared through. They had almost reached it when another woman appeared, scowling angrily. She saw them and strode over.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded of Lorkin.

"Hello Chava," Evar said. "Lorkin's here with me."

She looked at Evar. "I can see that. What is he *doing* here?"

"I'm taking him on a tour," Evar replied. He shrugged. "No rule against it."

The woman frowned and looked from Evar to Lorkin and back again. She opened her mouth, closed it again, and a look of annoyance crossed her face. "There may be no rule," she told Evar, "but there are... other considerations. You know the danger in interrupting and distracting stone-makers."

"Of course I do." Evar's face and tone were serious now. "That is why I waited until these makers had gone home for the night, and didn't take Lorkin to the inner caves."

Her eyebrows rose. "It is not up to you to decide when it is appropriate. Did you seek permission for this tour?"

Evar shook his head. "Never had to before."

A flicker of triumph in Chava's gaze set Lorkin's heart sinking. "You should have," she told them

“This must be reported, and I don’t want either of you out of my sight until the right people have heard about this, and decide what to do with you.”

As she turned on her heel and strode toward the archway, Lorkin glanced at Evar. The young man smiled and winked. *I hope he’s right about not needing permission*, Lorkin thought as they both hurried after Chava. *I hope there isn’t some law or rule that nobody told me about, too*. The Speakers had instructed him to learn the laws of Sanctuary and follow them, and he’d been very careful to do so thoroughly.

But he couldn’t be as unconcerned as Evar was. Even if they were both right, Chava’s reaction had confirmed Lorkin’s fears: that he had tested the Traitors’ trust in him by visiting the caves. He only hoped he hadn’t gone too far, and ruined his hopes of them ever trading with the Guild—or letting him go home.

CHAPTER 2

AN UNEXPECTED ARRIVAL

Dannyl put down his pen, leaned against the back of his chair and sighed.

I never thought that taking on the role of Guild Ambassador again, in a country like Sachaka, would have me sitting around doing nothing, bored and alone.

Since Sachaka wasn't part of the Allied Lands, he had no local youngsters hoping to join the Guild to test for magical ability, no matters concerning local Guild magicians to deal with, and no visiting Guild magicians to arrange accommodation and meetings for. Only the occasional communication between the Guild and the Sachakan king or elite came into his hands, or matters of trade to settle or pass on. That meant there was very little for him to do.

It hadn't been like this when he'd first arrived. Or rather, the nature of the work had been the same but he'd also spent a lot of time—usually evenings—visiting important and powerful Sachakans. Since he'd returned from chasing Lorkin and his abductor all the way to the mountains, the invitation to dine and converse with Ashaki, the powerful elite of Sachaka, had all but stopped.

Dannyl stood up, then hesitated. The slaves didn't like it when he paced the Guild House. They flitted out of his way or peered around corners at him. He'd hear their whispered warnings preceding him, which was distracting. He paced in order to think, and didn't need whispering interrupting his thoughts.

Eventually they'll learn to stay out of sight, he told himself, stepping out from behind the desk. Either that or I'll have to get used to walking in circles around my room.

As he emerged from his office into the main room of his apartment, a slave standing against the wall threw himself on the floor. Dannyl waved a hand dismissively. The slave gave him a cautious, measuring look, then scrambled to his feet and vanished into the corridor.

Walking slowly, Dannyl crossed the room and entered the corridor. It was strange and a little ironic that the way Sachakan homes were designed made them appealing buildings for pacing. The walls were rarely straight, and the corridors of the larger private part of the house meandered in gentle curves that eventually linked together.

The next cluster of rooms had been Lorkin's. Dannyl paused at the main entrance, then moved inside. Any day now, a replacement assistant would arrive and take up residence here. Dannyl moved to the bedroom door and stared at the bed.

I don't think I should mention that a dead slave woman once lay there, he mused. I would find that knowledge disturbing, and probably lie awake at night trying not to imagine a corpse lying next to me.

The body had been a nasty discovery, but worse had been finding that Lorkin had disappeared, along with another slave. At first he had wondered if Sonea had been right to fear that the families of the Sachakan invaders she and Akkarin had killed over twenty years before would take their revenge on her son.

After questioning the slaves and following the clues he'd gathered, with the help of the Sachakan king's representative, Ashaki Achaty, he'd discovered that this wasn't the case. The people who had abducted Lorkin were rebels, known as the Traitors. Achaty had arranged for four Sachakan Ashaki

magicians to join them, and they had chased Lorkin and his abductor into the mountains. Into Traitor territory.

A mere five Sachakan magicians and one Guild magician could never have stood up to a Traitor attack, however. Dannyl had eventually realised that the only reason the Traitors hadn't attacked was that it might have led to more incursions into their territory. If Dannyl and his helpers had come close to discovering the Traitor base, however, they'd have been killed. Fortunately, Lorkin had met with Dannyl and assured him that he wanted to go with the Traitors and find out more about them.

Dannyl turned from Lorkin's former bedroom and slowly paced out of the apartment, feeling a gloom settle over him. He'd been relieved to know Lorkin was safe. He'd even been excited at Lorkin's hopes of learning about magic the Guild had no knowledge of. What he hadn't grasped was how awkward the situation had been for his Ashaki helpers.

They had been obliged to continue searching until Lorkin was found. Giving up out of fear of attack would have been a slight to their pride. Dannyl had saved them that humiliation by making the decision himself. It had seemed only fair, after they had put themselves in danger for him and Lorkin. But he hadn't understood the harm it would do to his status within the Sachakan elite.

The corridor curved to the left. Dannyl ran his fingertips over the rendered white wall, then stopped at the opening to another apartment of rooms. These were for guests, and had rarely been occupied in the many years the Guild had used the building.

I've fallen out of favour, Dannyl mused. For giving up the hunt. For fleeing from the Traitors like a coward. And probably also for letting a Guild magician I was responsible for and outranked join an enemy of the Sachakan people.

He would have made the same choice, if faced with it again. If the Traitors did have knowledge of a new kind of magic, and Lorkin could persuade them to teach it to him and let him return home, it would be the first time in centuries that the Guild's store of magical knowledge had been added to. He did not count black magic as new; it was more of a rediscovery, and it was still considered dangerous and undesirable.

Ashaki Achaty had assured him that some regarded Dannyl's "sacrifice" of his pride as admirably noble. Dannyl could have avoided it by asking his Ashaki helpers to help him come to a decision, thereby spreading the damage among them. But that would have risked a group decision to continue the hunt, and that wouldn't have done anyone much good.

Dannyl did not enter the guest apartment, instead moving on down the corridor. Soon he reached the Master's Room, the main public room of the building. Here was where the owner or person of greatest status within a typical Sachakan house greeted and entertained guests. Visitors entered the property from the main courtyard, were greeted by a door slave and led through a surprisingly humble door, down a short corridor, and into this room.

He sat down on one of the handful of stools arranged in a half-circle, thinking of the many delicious meals he'd been served while sitting on similar furniture in similar rooms. Achaty, the king's representative, had been given the role of introducing Dannyl to important people, and instructing him on protocol and manners. It was both interesting and a little worrying that this man was the only one who was still able to visit Dannyl without any disfavour rubbing off on him. Was Achaty immune to such social rules, or was it something else?

Is he visiting because his interest in me is more than political?

Dannyl remembered the moment Achaty had indicated he would like to have a closer relationship than friendship. As always, he felt a mix of emotions: flattery, trepidation, caution, and guilt. The guilt was not surprising, he reasoned. Though he'd left Kyrallia feeling frustrated with and detached

from his lover, Tayend, they hadn't made any clear decision to part.

I'm still not sure I want to. Perhaps I'm being sentimental, not wanting to let go of something that only exists in the past. Yet when I ask myself if I'm interested in Ahati, I can't answer either way. I admire the man. I feel we have a lot in common—magic, interests, our age...

A slave entered the room and threw himself on the floor. Dannyl sighed at the distraction.

"Speak," he ordered.

"Guild carriage here. Two passengers."

Dannyl stood up quickly, his heart leaping with sudden excitement and hope. His new assistant had arrived at last. Though he had no work to hand over, at least he'd have some company.

"Send them in." Dannyl rubbed his hands together, took a few steps toward the main entrance, then stopped himself. "And get someone to bring some food and drink."

The slave scrambled to his feet and hurried away. Dannyl heard a door close and footsteps in the entry passage. The door slave stepped into the room and threw himself at Dannyl's feet.

The young Healer woman that followed regarded the slave with dismay, then looked up at Dannyl and nodded respectfully. He opened his mouth to bid her welcome, but the words never came out, because his eyes had been drawn to a gaudily dressed man stepping into view from behind her and taking in the room with avidly curious eyes.

Eyes that snapped to Dannyl's, and twinkled as a familiar mouth stretched into a smile.

"Greetings, Administrator Dannyl," Tayend said. "My king has assured me the Guild will supply accommodation for Elyne's foreign Ambassador in Sachaka, but if that is inconvenient I am sure I can find appropriate lodgings in the city."

"Ambassador...?" Dannyl repeated.

"Yes." Tayend's smile widened. "I am the new Elyne Ambassador to Sachaka."

Despite the fact that associating with criminals was no longer against any Guild rule, and that it was logical for Sonea to consult Cery when hunting down rogue magicians after he'd helped her capture one before, Sonea still met with him in secret. Sometimes he appeared mysteriously in her rooms in the Guild, sometimes she dressed in a disguise and met him in a secluded area of the city. One of the most secure places to meet had turned out to be the Northside hospice storeroom, reached by a hidden door to a neighbouring house Cery had bought.

It was safer to meet in secret because the most powerful Thief in the city, the rogue magician she was hunting for, did not look fondly on Cery for helping the Guild catch and lock up his mother, Lorandra. Skellin still had a lot of influence in Imardin's underworld and would do anything—including murdering the searchers—to prevent himself being captured as well.

Not that we've seen any sign of Skellin in the last few months. Though Sonea had finally been given permission to roam the city freely, none of her investigations had produced any clue to the rogue's location. Cery's people were more likely to hear of sightings of the rogue magician, but they'd heard nothing. A man as exotic in appearance as Skellin ought to catch someone's eye, but no reports of a reddish-dark-skinned, slim man with strange eyes had reached them.

"His rot sellers are all over my territory," Cery told her. "As soon as I shut one brazier house down another opens. I deal with one seller and ten more turn up. No matter how I deal with them, nothing puts them off."

Sonea didn't want to ask what "deal with" involved. She doubted it meant asking them nicely to leave. "Sounds like they're more scared of Skellin than they are of you. Surely this means he is still i

the city.”

Cery shook his head. “~~He could have someone else spooking sellers into it in his name. You got enough people working for you, and allies, you can run business from a distance. Only downside is how long it takes to get orders to your people.~~”

“Can we test that? We could do something that Skellin has to deal with personally. Something his allies and workers can’t decide for him. We’ll find out how long it takes to get a reaction, and that might tell us if he is in Imardin or not.”

Cery frowned. “Might work. We’d have to think of something big enough to get his attention, but which won’t put anyone in danger.”

“Something convincing. I doubt he’s the kind to fall into a trap.”

“No,” Cery agreed. “Trouble is, I can’t—”

Sonea frowned. His eyes had fixed on something over her shoulder and he had tensed all over. A soft scraping sound came from the door behind her. She turned to see the handle of the door slowly turning, first one way then the other.

She was keeping the door closed with magic, so whoever was testing it had no hope of getting inside the room. But whoever was, was trying to do so surreptitiously.

“I had better go,” Cery said quietly.

She nodded in agreement and they both stood up. “Let’s both consider it.” *How long has the person turning the handle been standing on the other side of the door? Did they hear anything we’ve said?* Nobody here but the Healers and helpers should be in this part of the hospice, and they would consider anyone lurking near the storeroom suspicious. *Unless it is a Healer.* A handful knew about her meetings with Cery and supported her, there were others who did not and who might find it objectionable that she used hospice rooms for the purpose.

She approached the door, waiting until Cery had silently slipped through the secret exit before she straightened and removed her magical lock.

The latch clicked and the door swung inward. A short, thin man took a step forward, grinning maniacally. As he saw her, and his eyes dropped to her black robes, his expression turned to one of horror. He went pale and took a few steps backwards.

But something stopped him. Something made him halt and brought a crazed hope to his face. Something made him put aside all fear of who and what she was.

“Please,” he whined. “I got to have some. Let me have some.”

A wave of pity, anger and sadness swept over her. She sighed, stepped out of the room, then closed the door and snibbed the mechanical lock with magic.

“We don’t keep it here,” she told the man. He stared at her, then his face darkened with anger.

“Liar!” he shrieked. “I know you have it. You keep some to wean people off it. Give it to me!” His hands became claws and he hurled himself at her.

She caught his wrists and halted his charge with a gentle pressure of magic against his chest. He was already agitated enough without her adding to his desperation by wrapping him in magical force. She could see the flash of green cloth in the corner of her eye as Healers further down the corridor, having heard his outcry, hurried to deal with him.

Before long the man’s arms had been seized by two Healers and they began half dragging, half guiding him back down the corridor. A third Healer remained, and as she looked up at the man she felt her heart lift in surprised recognition.

“Dorrien!”

The man who smiled back at her was a few years older and tanned from plenty of hours spent in the

sun. Rothen's son was the local Healer for a small town at the edge of the southern mountains, where he lived with his wife and children. A long time ago, when she was still a novice, he had come to the Guild for a visit and a friendship had started between them—a friendship that could have become a romance. But he'd had to return to his village and her to her studies. *Then I fell in love with Akkarin, and after he died I could not contemplate being with anyone else.* Dorrien had stayed in Imardin to help with the recovery after the Ichani Invasion, but his village had never stopped being his true home and he eventually returned to it. He'd married a local woman and had two daughters.

"Yes, I'm back," Dorrien said. "A short visit this time." He glanced at the drug-crazed man. "Am I right in guessing the cause of his problem is something called roet?"

Sonea sighed. "You are."

"It's the reason I'm here. A couple of young men in my village returned from market a few months back with it. By the time they'd used what they'd bought, they'd grown reliant on it. I'd like advice on how to treat them."

She looked at him closely. Unlike Healers in the city, he was under no obligation to avoid "wasting" his magic on treating the drug users. Had he tried to use Healing magic to rid the young men of their habit and failed, as she had with most of the patients she'd secretly treated?

"Come with me," she said, then turned and unlocked the storeroom. As he stepped inside she followed, shutting the door behind her. He glanced around the room, eyebrows raised, but took the seat Cery had been sitting in without comment. She settled on the chair she had just vacated.

"Did you try to Heal them?" she asked.

"Yes." Dorrien described how the young men had come to him for help, realising belatedly that they couldn't afford a roet habit, and embarrassed to find they'd been caught up in a vice of the city. He'd searched with his Healing senses for the source of the problem in their bodies, and Healed it, as Sonea had done with the patients she had worked with. And, as she had, he'd had varying success. One of the brothers had been cured, the other still craved the drug.

"I've had the same result," she told him. "I've been trying to figure out why it's possible to Heal some people and not others."

He nodded. "So what do you advise for those that aren't?"

"They shouldn't use the drug again, in case the effect gets stronger. Some of my patients say keeping busy helps them ignore the cravings. Some drink. But not in small quantities—they say too little weakens their resolve to avoid rot."

"Rot?"

"It's the drug's nickname on the streets."

Dorrien grimaced. "I gather it's an appropriate one." He frowned and looked at her thoughtfully. "If we can't Heal away other people's addiction, can we Heal away our own? Not that I have a roet addiction," he added, smiling faintly.

Sonea answered his smile with a grim one of her own. "That's a question I've also been seeking the answer to, but with far less success. So far I haven't found one roet-using magician willing to be examined. I've questioned a few, but that's not going to produce the evidence I need."

"You need for what?"

"To convince the Guild this is a serious problem. Skellin's plan to enslave magicians with roet could have been successful—could still be successful."

Leaning back in his chair, Dorrien considered that. He shook his head. "Magicians have been blackmailed and bought by other means before. Why is this any different?"

"Perhaps only in the scale of the problem. That's why it needs more investigation. What percenta

of magicians could be affected by roet? Are the ones not affected going to become addicts if they continue using the drug? Just how much does it alter thought patterns and behaviour?"

Dorrien nodded. "What is your guess? How big do you think the problem to be?"

Sonea hesitated as Black Magician Kallen came to mind. If Cery was right, and Anyi had seen the magician buying roet, the problem could be *very* big indeed. But she did not want to reveal what she knew until she was certain Kallen was using roet and she had proof that roet was as big a problem as she suspected. He might have been buying it for someone else. If she claimed he was an addict incorrectly she'd look a fool, and if she revealed it before she had proven that roet was dangerous to magicians then it would look like she was making a petty fuss about nothing.

Oh, but I wish I could tell someone. She had not told Rothen. He would want to do something immediately. He did not like it that Kallen treated her as if she couldn't be trusted. Rothen was always urging her to put Kallen under as much scrutiny as he put her under. So would Dorrien.

"I don't know," she replied, sighing.

Ironically, the one person she thought she could probably tell and trust to remain silent was Regin, the magician who had helped her find Lorandra. *Ironic that the novice I once hated for making my life a torture is now a magician I'd trust.* He understood the importance of timing. Though she had met with Regin to discuss the search for Skellin, so far she hadn't been able to bring herself to mention Kallen.

Perhaps I'm even more afraid that Regin won't believe me, and I'll make a complete fool of myself. She smiled wryly. *No matter how much I tell myself we are not novices and deadly enemies any more I can't shake the suspicion that he'll use any weakness against me. It's ridiculous. He's proven that he can keep a secret. He's been nothing but supportive.*

But he often did not make it to their meetings, or arrived late and was distracted. She suspected he had lost interest in the search for Skellin. Perhaps he felt that tracking down the rogue magician Thier was an impossible task. It had certainly begun to feel that way.

With Cery forced into hiding, and his people unable to find any sign of Skellin, she was not sure how they could find the rogue—aside from pulling the city apart brick by brick, and the king would never agree to that.

The Foodhall was, as always, noisy with the clatter of cutlery on crockery and the voices of novices. Lilia let out an unheard sigh and stopped trying to hear what her companions were discussing. Instead she let her gaze move slowly across the room.

The interior was a strange mix of sophistication and simplicity, the decorative and the practical. The windows and walls were as finely crafted and decorated as most other large rooms in the University, but the furniture was solid, simple and robust. It was as if someone had removed the polished, carved chairs and table in the grand dining room of the house she had grown up in, and replaced them with the solid wooden table and bench seats from the kitchens.

The occupants of the Foodhall were as varied a mix. Novices from the most powerful Houses to those born of beggars on the dirtiest streets of the city ate here. When Lilia had first started magic lessons, she had wondered why the snooties had continued to eat their meals in the Foodhall when they were rich enough to have their own cooks. The answer was that they didn't have time to leave the grounds each day to dine with their families—and they weren't supposed to leave without permission anyway.

She suspected there was a feeling of territorial pride at work as well. The snooties had been eating

in the Foodhall for centuries. The lowies were the newcomers. The Foodhall had been the scene of many a prank between the lowies and snooties. Lilia had never been a part of either. Though she had never said it aloud, she was from the upper end of the lowie group. Her family were servants for a family belonging to a House of reasonable political power and influence—neither at the top of the political hierarchy nor in decline. She could trace her line back for several generations, naming which of her ancestors had worked for which families within the House.

Whereas some of the lowies were from very shabby origins. Sons of whores. Daughters of beggars. Plenty were related to criminals, she suspected. A strange sort of competition had begun between these lowies to lay claim to the most impressively low origin. If sewer ravi could be claimed as parents, some of them would boast of it as if it was a title of honour. Lowies from a servant family didn't boast or make anything of it, or they invited a lot of trouble.

The hatred some lowies had for snooties did not seem fair to her. Her parents' employers had treated their servants fairly. Lilia had played with their children when she was growing up. They had ensured that all of their servants' children were given a basic education. Since the Ichani Invasion, they had brought a magician in every few years to test all children for magical ability. Though none of their own had enough latent power to be accepted into the Guild, they had been overjoyed when Lilia and servant children before her, had been chosen.

The two girls and boys she spent her social time with were lowies, and they were nice enough. She and Froje and Madie had been friends since starting at the University. Last year Froje had paired up with Damend and Madie with Ellon, making Lilia the odd one out. The girls' attention was mostly taken up by the boys now, and they rarely sought Lilia's opinion, advice or suggestions for things to do. Lilia told herself it had been inevitable and that she didn't mind too much, since she had always been more comfortable listening in than joining their conversations anyway.

Her gaze fell upon a novice she had been watching for a long time now. Naki was a year ahead of Lilia in University studies. She had long black hair and eyes so dark it was hard to find the edge of her pupils. Every movement she made was graceful. Boys were both attracted and intimidated by her. As far as Lilia could tell, Naki had shown no interest in any of them—not even some of the boys Lilia's friends thought were irresistible. Perhaps she thought herself too good for them. Perhaps she was simply choosy about her friends.

Today Naki was sitting with another girl. She wasn't talking, although the other girl's mouth was moving constantly. As Lilia watched, the talker laughed and rolled her eyes. Naki's mouth widened and thinned in a polite smile.

Then, without any little movement to warn that she was about to, Naki looked directly at Lilia.

Uh, oh, Lilia thought, feeling the heat of embarrassment and guilt beginning to rise. *Caught out*. Just as she was about to look away, Naki smiled.

Surprise froze Lilia. She wondered briefly what to do, then smiled in return. It would have been rude otherwise. She forced herself to look away. *She didn't seem to mind me watching her but... how embarrassing to be caught staring*.

A movement in Naki's direction tugged at Lilia's attention. She resisted the temptation to glance back, trying instead to decipher what she was seeing in the corner of her eye. A dark-haired person was standing near where Naki was sitting. That person was walking now. That person was coming in this direction.

Surely not...

She could not stop her head from turning and her eyes from looking up. Naki, she saw, was walking toward her. She was looking right at her, and smiling.

Naki put her plate down next to Lilia's and then slid onto the empty space on the bench beside her.

"Hello," she said.

"Hello," Lilia replied uncertainly. *What does she want? Does she want to know why I was looking at her? Does she want to chat? What on earth will I talk about if she does?*

"I was bored. I thought I'd come over and see what you were doing," Naki explained.

Lilia could not help looking over at Naki's former companion. The talker was staring at them, looking confused and a little peeved. Lilia glanced at her companions. The girls were surprised, and the boys had that fearful and wistful expression they usually wore when Naki was close.

She said "... what you were doing." It didn't sound like it included all of us.

She turned back to Naki. "Not much," Lilia said honestly, wincing at the lameness of her reply. "Just eating."

"What were you talking about?" Naki prompted, glancing at the others.

"Whether we chose the right discipline," one of the others said. Lilia shrugged and nodded.

"Ah," Naki said. "I was tempted to choose Warrior, but for all that it's fun I can't see myself spending my life doing it. I'll keep up my skills, of course, in case we're ever invaded again, but I decided Alchemy would be more useful."

"That's what I thought about Healing," Lilia told her. "More useful."

"True, but I've never been much good at Healing." Naki smiled wryly.

As Naki continued chatting, Lilia's surprise slowly began to melt away. Somehow, by smiling at someone across the room, or perhaps because the talker at the other table had been boring, a beautiful and admired novice was chatting to her like they were new friends.

For whatever reason it had occurred, she resolved to enjoy the moment. Because she certainly didn't think it would happen again.

ACCUSATIONS AND PROPOSALS

The three days since Lorkin and Evar had been ordered to remain in the men's room and stay there until the Speakers were all available to meet and deal with them had been surprisingly enjoyable.

"For doing what?" Evar had delighted in asking anyone who suggested that accusations or punishments would be directed at them. Nobody could say exactly what he or Lorkin were going to be accused of. Which gave Lorkin some confidence. *Everyone knows there isn't a rule or law or even an order that Evar or I have broken. If there was, I'm sure they'd have locked me away in a room on my own.*

The occupants of the men's room thought it was all very funny. Since the governance of Sanctuary was out of their reach, they delighted in any errors their leaders made—so long as those mistakes didn't affect everyone badly, of course. They were so pleased that Lorkin and Evar had showed the Speakers up for fools that they had brought them gifts and spent time making sure their new heroes never grew bored.

Three of them were teaching Lorkin a game involving gemstones that had failed to take on any magical properties and a painted board. The game was called "Stones," and they'd chosen it because gemstones were what he had got into trouble over.

A growing audience was hovering nearby. A few men were talking to Evar, and several more were scattered about the room, doing their usual chores or relaxing. So when the room began to quieten all of a sudden, everyone paused and looked up to see what the cause was. The men standing between Lorkin and the room's entrance shuffled aside. Lorkin looked beyond them, saw who was standing there, and felt his heart stop beating and stomach start to flutter.

"Tyvara," he said.

A smile fleetingly touched her lips, then she was serious again. She walked gracefully toward him ignoring the men staring at her. Being the focus of those beautiful, exotic eyes sent a shiver of pleasure down Lorkin's spine. *Oh, I definitely haven't got over her,* he thought. *If anything, the time she's been away has made seeing her again even more exciting.*

"I want to talk to you in private," she said, stopping a few steps away and crossing her arms.

"Love to," he said. "But I'm not supposed to leave the room. On Kalia's orders."

She frowned, then shrugged and looked around the room. "Then the rest of you leave."

She watched as the men, muttering good naturedly, made their way out, and noted that Evar hadn't moved. She narrowed her eyes at him.

"Under the same orders—but don't worry," he said, standing up and moving away. "I'll stay over there and try not to listen."

Tyvara watched, one eyebrow raised in amusement as he moved away to the food preparation area before looking down at Lorkin.

He smiled. It was too easy to smile at her. He was at risk of grinning like an idiot. Her long dark hair was clean and the dark hollows under her eyes were gone. He'd found her alluring before; now she was even more beautiful than imagination had painted his memory of her.

I wasn't like this when we were travelling, he thought. Maybe I was too tired...

"I guess this will have to do," she said quietly, uncrossing her arms.

"What do you want to talk about?" he managed to ask.

She sighed, then sat down and fixed him with a direct stare that set his heart racing. "What are you up to Lorkin?"

He felt a vague disappointment. *What did I expect? That she'd invite me to her rooms for a night of...* He quickly pushed the thought aside.

"If I was up to something, why would I tell you?" he countered.

Her eyes flashed with anger. She glared at him, then stood up and started toward the door. His head leapt in alarm. He couldn't let her leave so soon!

"Is that all you're going to ask me?" he called after her.

"Yes," she replied, without turning.

"Can I ask *you* a few questions?"

She slowed, then stopped and looked back at him. He beckoned. Sighing, she walked back to the seat and dropped into it, her arms crossed again.

"What then?" she asked.

He leaned forward and lowered his voice. "How are you? I haven't seen you in months. What has Riva's family got you doing?"

She regarded him thoughtfully, then uncrossed her arms. "I'm fine. I'd rather be out there doing some good, of course, but..." She shrugged. "Riva's family have me working the sewer tunnels.

He grimaced. "That can't be pleasant, or interesting."

"They think it's as nasty a task as they could come up with, but I don't mind it. This city needs its waste removed as much as it needs defending, and being a slave can involve much more unpleasant duties than that. But it is boring. I may end up hating it for that, alone."

"You should come by and visit. I'll try to entertain you, though I can't promise it won't be anything more than the silly mistakes a foreigner makes in an unfamiliar place."

She smiled. "Has it been difficult?"

He spread his hands. "At times, but everyone has been friendly, and while I never wanted to be a Healer, at least I'm being useful."

Her smile disappeared and she shook her head. "I never thought they'd put you in Kalia's hands, knowing that she wanted you dead."

"They know she'll keep an eye on me better than anyone else."

"And now you've made a fool of her," she pointed out.

"Poor Kalia," he said, without a trace of sympathy.

"She'll make your life hard for this."

"She does anyway." Lorkin raised his eyes to hers. "You didn't expect me to try to befriend her, did you?"

"I thought you smart enough to avoid giving her excuses to stir people up against you."

He shook his head. "Lying low and keeping out of trouble will not get me that."

She stared at him, her eyes narrowing. "One foolish Kyralian boy cannot change the Traitors, Lorkin."

"Probably not, if they don't want to," he agreed. "But it seems to me the Traitors do want to. It seems to me some major changes are definitely part of their future plans. I am no foolish boy, Tyvara."

Her eyebrows rose, then she stood up. "I have to go." She slowly turned and walked away. He

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