



The Sunday Times bestselling author of
THE BLACK MAGICIAN TRILOGY

TRUDI
CANAVAN

The
TRAITOR
QUEEN

Book Three of the
TRAITOR SPY TRILOGY

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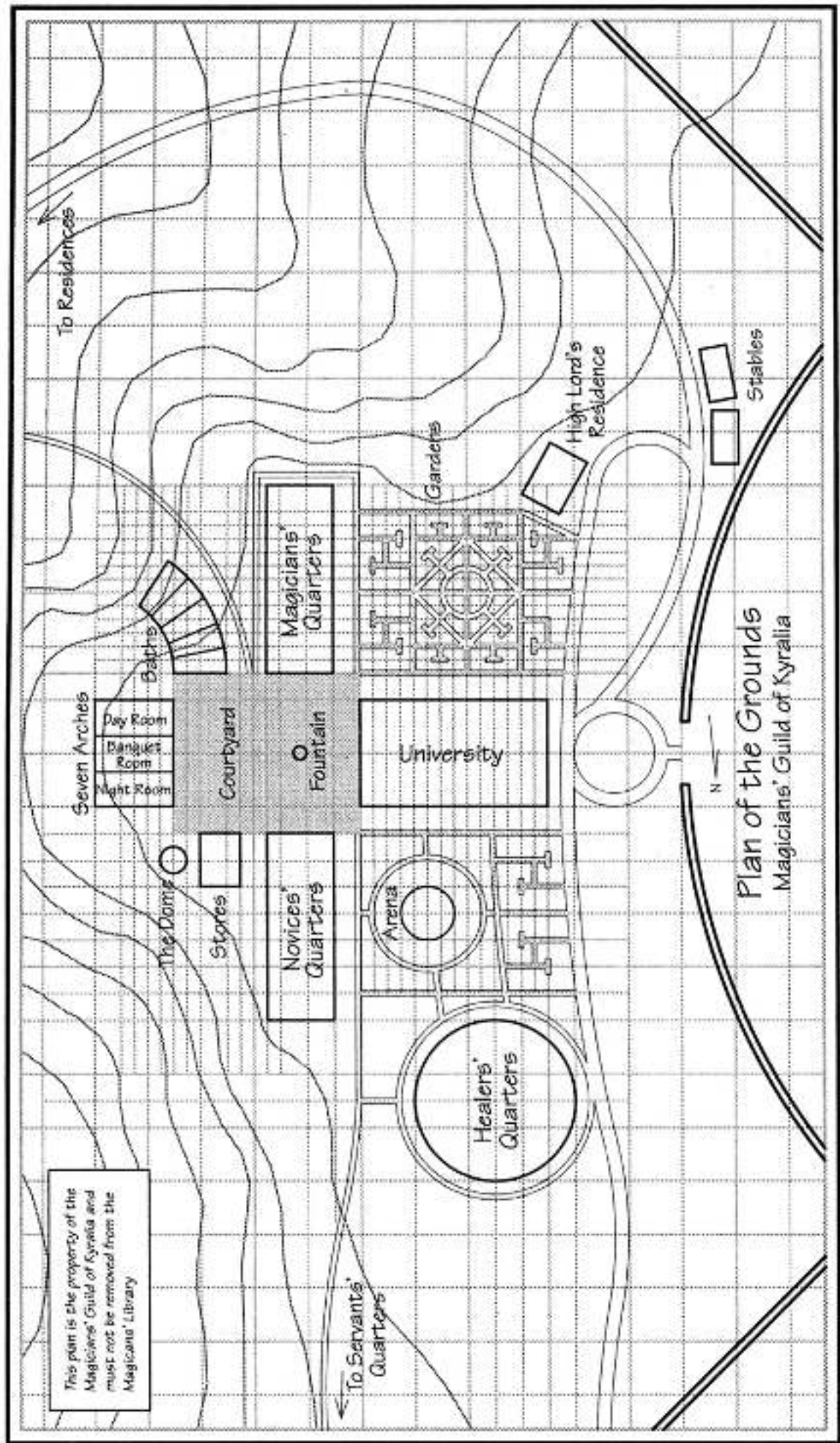
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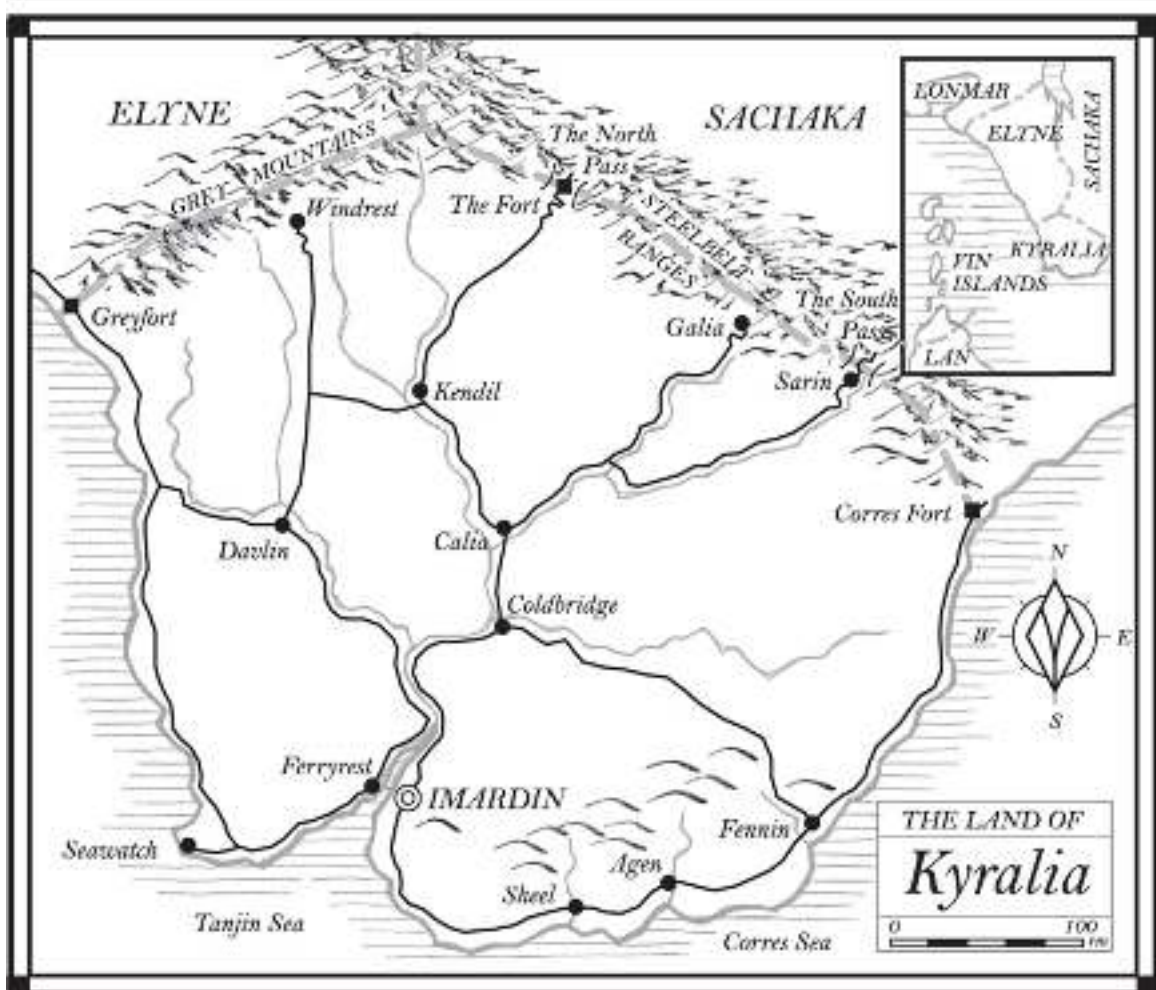
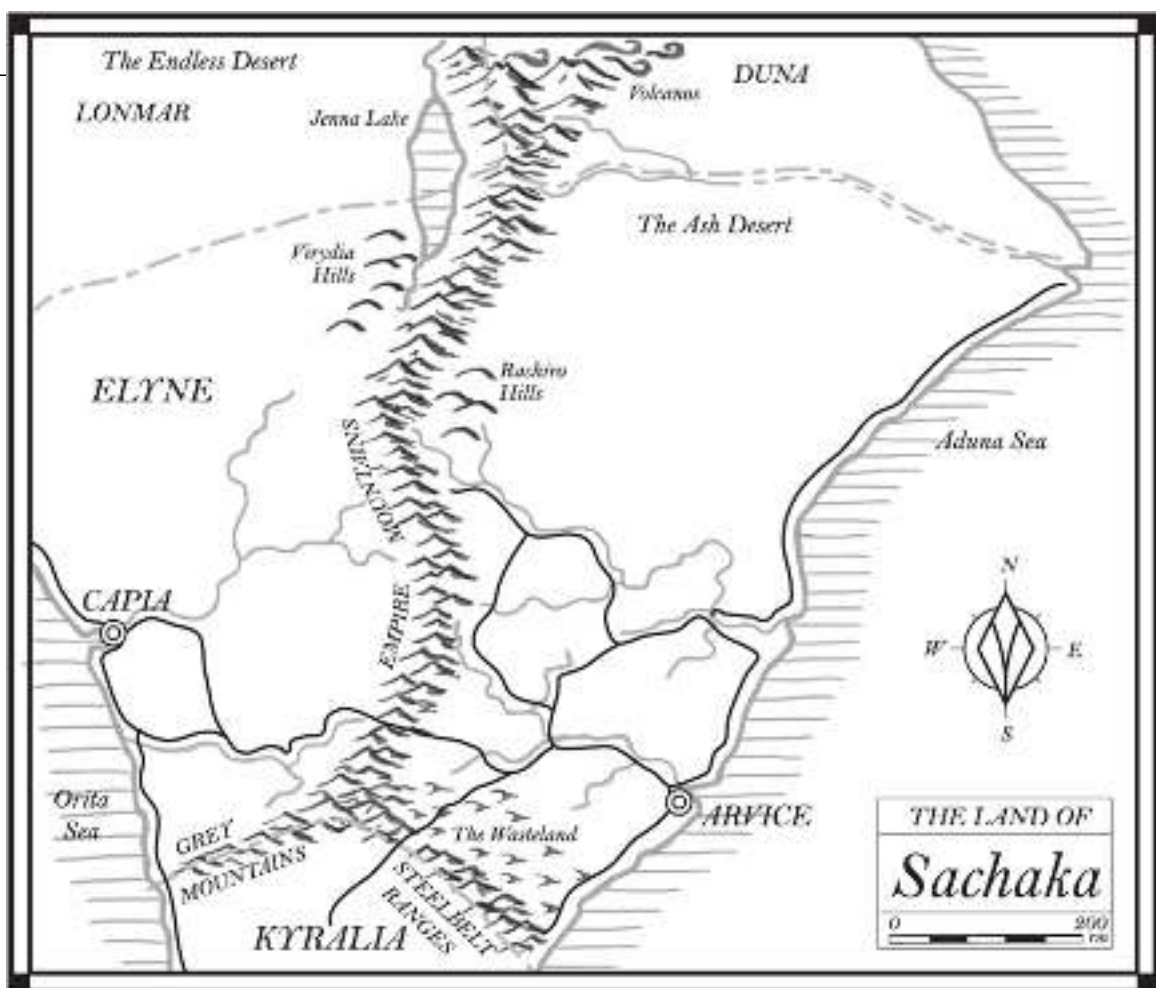
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PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

ASSASSINS AND ALLIES

There is a mistaken belief, in Imardin, that printing presses had been invented by magicians. Anyone unaware of the workings of presses and magic could easily gain the impression, from the spectacular noise and the convulsing actions of the machine, that some sort of Alchemy was taking place, but no magic was required so long as someone was willing to turn the wheels and operate the levers.

Cery had learned the truth of the matter from Sonea years ago. Prototypes of the machine had been presented to the Guild by the inventor and the Guild had embraced it as a fast and cheap way of making duplicates of books. A printing service was then offered to the Houses for free, and to anyone from other classes for a charge. The impression that printing was magical was encouraged to deter others from starting their own trade. It was not until people of lower-class origins entered the Guild that the myth was dispelled and printing presses began to appear in the city in significant numbers.

The downside to this, Cery reflected, was the boom in popularity of the romantic adventure novel. A recently published one featured a rich heiress rescued from her luxurious but boring life by a young handsome Thief. The fights were laughably implausible, nearly always involved swords rather than knives, and the underworld was populated by far too many good-looking men with impractical ideas about honour and loyalty. The novel had given a portion of the female population of Imardin an impression of the underworld that was a long way from the truth.

Of course, he had said none of this to the woman lying in bed beside him, who had been reading to him her favourite parts of these books every night since she had agreed to let him stay in her cellar. Cadia was no rich heiress. *And I am no dashing handsome Thief.* She had been lonely and sad since her husband's death, and the idea of hiding a Thief in her basement was a pleasant distraction.

And he... he had all but run out of places to hide.

He turned to look at her. She was asleep, breathing softly. He wondered if she really believed he was a Thief, or if he simply fitted well enough into her fantasy that she didn't care if it was true or not. He was not the dashing young Thief of the novel – he certainly didn't have the stamina for the adventures described, either in bed or out of it.

I'm getting soft. I can't even walk up stairs without my heart thumping, and getting out of breath. We've spent too much time locked away in cramped hiding places and not enough time in fighting practice.

A muffled thump came from the next room. Cery lifted his head to regard the door. Were Anyi and Gol awake? Now that he was, he doubted he'd sleep again for some time. Being cooped up always led to him sleeping badly.

He slipped off the bed, automatically pulling on his trousers and reaching for his coat. Slipping one arm into a sleeve, he reached for the door handle and turned it quietly. As he pushed it open Anyi came into view. She was leaning over Gol, a blade catching the light of the night lamps, poised ready to strike. He felt his heart lurch in alarm and disbelief.

"What...?" he began. At the sound, Anyi turned to look at him with the enviable speed of youth.

It was not Anyi.

Just as quickly, not-Anyi's attention moved back to Gol and the knife stabbed downwards, but

hands rose to grab the assassin's wrist and stop it. Gol surged up off the bed. Cery was through the door by then, but checked his stride as a new thought overrode his intention to stop the woman.

Where's Anyi?

He turned to see that another struggle was underway over at the second makeshift bed, only this time it was the intruder who was pressed to the mattress, holding back the hands that held a knife hovering just above his chest. Cery felt a surge of pride for his daughter. She must have woken in time to catch the assassin, and turned his attack against him.

But her face was stretched in a grimace of effort as she tried to force the knife down. Despite the assassin's small size, the muscles of his wrists and neck were well developed. Anyi would not win the trial of brute force. Her advantage was her speed. He took a step toward her.

"Get out of here, Cery," Gol barked.

Anyi's arms were forced back as her concentration was broken. She sprang out of reach of the assassin. He leapt off the bed and dropped into a fighting stance, whipping out a long, thin knife from within a sleeve. But he did not advance on her. His gaze moved to Cery.

Cery had no intention of leaving the fight to Anyi and Gol. He might one day have to abandon Gol, but this was not that day. He would never abandon his daughter.

He had slipped his other arm into the coat sleeve automatically. Now he stepped backwards and feigned fear, while reaching into the pockets, and wriggled his hands into the wrist straps of his favourite weapons: two knives, the sheaths fastened inside the pockets so that the blades would be bare and ready when Cery drew them out.

The assassin leapt toward Cery. Anyi sprang at him. Cery did too. It was not what the man expected. Nor did he expect the twin knives that trapped his own. Or the blade that, well aimed, slid through the soft flesh of his neck. He froze in surprise and horror.

Cery ducked away from the spray of blood as Anyi withdrew her knife, knocked the assassin's knife from his hand, then finished him with a stab to the heart.

Very efficient. I've trained her well.

With Gol's help, of course. Cery turned to see how his friend was faring and was relieved to see the female assassin lying in a growing pool of blood on the floor.

Gol looked at Cery and grinned. He was breathing hard. *So am I*, Cery realised. Anyi bent and ran her hands over the male attacker's clothing and hair, then rubbed her fingers together.

"Soot. He came down the chimney into the house above." She looked at the old stone stairs leading up to the basement door speculatively.

Cery's mood soured. However the pair had got in, or found them in the first place, this was no longer a safe hiding place. He scowled down at the dead assassins, considering the last few people he might call on for help, and how they might reach them.

A small gasp came from the doorway. He turned to see Cadia, wrapped only in a sheet, staring wide-eyed at the dead assassins. She shuddered, but as she looked at him her dismay turned to disappointment.

"I guess you won't be staying another night, then?"

Cery shook his head. "Sorry about the mess."

She regarded the blood and bodies with a grimace, then frowned and peered up at the ceiling. Cery hadn't heard anything, but Anyi had lifted her head at the same time. They all exchanged worried looks, not wanting to speak unless their suspicions were true.

He heard a faint creak, muffled by the floorboards above them.

As soundlessly as possible, Anyi and Gol grabbed their shoes, packs and the lamps and followed

Cery into the other room, shutting the door behind them and lifting an old chest into place before it. Cadia stopped in the middle of the room, sighed and dropped the sheet so that she could get dressed. Both Anyi and Gol turned their backs quickly.

“What should I do?” Cadia whispered to Cery.

He picked up the rest of his clothes and Cadia’s bedroom lamp, and considered. “Follow us.”

She looked more ill than excited as they slipped through the trapdoor that led to the old Thieves’ Road. The passages here were filled with rubble and not entirely safe. This section of the underground network had been cut off from the rest when the king had rebuilt a nearby road and put new houses where the old slum homes had been. Though it was not quite within the borders of his territory, Cery had paid an old tunneller to dig a new access passage, but had left the old ways looking abandoned so that nobody would be tempted to use them if they did find them. It had been a handy place to hide things, like stolen goods and the occasional corpse.

He’d never planned to hide himself here, however. Cadia regarded the rubble-strewn passage with a mix of dismay and curiosity. Cery handed her the lamp and pointed in one direction.

“In a hundred paces or so you’ll see a grate high on the left wall. Beyond it is an alley between two houses. There’ll be grooves in the wall to help you climb up, and the grate should hinge inward. Go to one of your neighbours and tell them there are robbers in your house. If they find the bodies, say they’re the robbers and suggest one turned on the other.”

“What if they don’t find them?”

“Drag them into the passages and don’t let anyone into the cellar until the smell goes away.”

She looked even more ill, but nodded and straightened her back. He felt a pang of affection at her bravery, and hoped she wouldn’t run into more assassins, or be punished some other way for helping him. He stepped close and kissed her firmly.

“Thank you,” he said quietly. “It’s been a pleasure.”

She smiled, her eyes sparkling for a moment.

“You be careful,” she told him.

“Always am. Now go.”

She hurried away. He couldn’t risk staying to watch her leave. Gol moved forward to lead the way and Anyi remained at the rear as they made their way through the crumbling passages. After several steps something slammed behind them. Cery stopped and looked back.

“Cadia?” Gol muttered. “The grille closing as she climbed up to the street?”

“It’s a long way for the sound to travel,” Cery said.

“That wasn’t the sound of a grate on bricks or stone,” Anyi whispered. “It was... something wooden.”

A rattle followed. The sound of disturbed bricks and stones. Cery felt a chill run down his back. “Go. Hurry. But quietly.”

Gol held his lamp high, but they could only manage breaking into a jog now and then with so much rubble on the passage floor. Cery bit back a curse more than once, regretting not tidying things up a little bit more. Then, after they’d continued along a straight section of tunnel, Gol cursed and skidded to a halt. Looking over the big man’s shoulder, Cery saw that the roof ahead had collapsed recently, leaving them in a dead end. He spun about and they hurried back toward the last junction they had passed.

Anyi sighed as they reached the turn. “We’re making tracks.”

Looking down, Cery saw footprints in the dust. The hope that the pursuit might follow the tracks down to the dead end was dashed as he realised that Gol’s now led down the side passage, leaving

plenty of evidence they'd backtracked.

But if there's another opportunity to set down false tracks...

None came, however. Relief surged through him as they finally reached the connecting passage to the main part of the Thieves' Road. Once again he regretted not anticipating the situation he was in: while he'd disguised the entry to the isolated tunnels, he'd made no effort to conceal the exit from anyone exploring within.

Once the door was closed behind them, they looked around at the cleaner, better-maintained passage they were standing in. There was nothing they could use to block the door and prevent their pursuers from leaving the old passages.

"Where to?" Gol asked.

"South-east."

They moved faster now, shuttering the lamps so that only the thinnest beam of light illuminated the way. Once Cery would have travelled in the dark, but he'd heard stories of traps being set up to defend other Thieves' territories, by enterprising robbers or by the mysterious Sligs. Even so, the pace Gol set was precariously fast and Cery worried that his friend would not be able to dodge any dangers he hurried into.

Soon Cery was breathing hard, his chest aching and his legs growing unsteady. Gol drew ahead a little, but slowed after a while and looked back. He paused and waited for Cery, but his frown didn't fade and he didn't move on as Cery caught up.

"Where's Anyi?"

The lurch Cery's heart made was like a stab of pain. He whirled around to see only darkness behind them.

"I'm here," a voice said quietly, then soft footsteps preceded her out of the gloom. "I stopped to see if I could hear them following." Her expression was grim. "They are. There's more than one." She waved a hand as she hurried closer. "Get going. They're not far behind us."

Cery followed as Gol raced onward. The big man set an even faster pace. He chose a twisting route but they did not lose their pursuers – which suggested they knew the passages as well as he and Cery. Gol drew closer to the Guild passages, but whoever followed was clearly not sufficiently intimidated by magicians to let their prey go.

They were nearing Cery's secret entrance into the tunnels under the Guild. *They won't dare follow me there. Unless they didn't know where the passages led. If they follow, they'll discover that the Guild leave their underground ways unguarded.* Which meant that Skellin would find out as well. *Not only will I never be able to escape that way again, but I will have to warn the Guild. They will fill the passages in and then our safest way to Sonea and Lilia will be gone.*

He regarded the Guild passages as an escape route of last resort. If there was any alternative...

Twenty strides or so from the entrance to the Guild passages a sound came from behind, confirming that the assassins were close. Too close – there would not be time to open the secret door before they caught up. When Gol slowed to look back at Cery – his eyebrows raised in a silent question – Cery slipped past him and headed in a new direction.

He had one other alternative. It was a riskier one. It might even lead them into greater danger than that which they fled. But at least their pursuers would be in as much danger, if they dared to follow.

Gol, realising what Cery intended, cursed under his breath. But he didn't argue. He grabbed Cery's arm to slow him, and took the lead again.

"Madness," he muttered, then raced toward Slig City.

It had been over a decade – nearly two – since dozens of street urchins had made a new home in the

tunnels after the destruction of their neighbourhood. They soon became the subject of scary stories told in bolhouses and to terrify children into obedience. It was said that the Sligs never ventured into the sunlight and only emerged at night via sewers and cellars to steal food and play tricks on people. Some believed that they had bred into spindly, pale things with huge eyes that allowed them to see in the dark. Others said they looked like any other street urchin, until they opened their mouths to reveal long fangs. What all agreed on was that to venture into Slig territory was to invite death. From time to time someone would test that belief. Most never returned, but a few had crawled out again, bleeding from stab wounds delivered by silent, unseen attackers in the dark.

Locals left out offerings, hoping to avoid subterranean invasions of their homes. Cery, whose territory overlapped the Sligs' in one corner, had arranged for someone to put food in one of the tunnels every few days, the sack marked with a picture of his namesake, the little rodent ceryni.

It had been a while since he'd checked to make sure they were still doing so. *If they haven't, then I'm probably not going to get a chance to punish them for it.*

Soon he spotted the markers that warned they were crossing into Slig territory. Then he stopped seeing them. He could hear Anyi's quick breathing behind him. Had the assassins dared to follow?

"Don't," Anyi gasped as he slowed to look over his shoulder. "They're... right... behind... us."

He had no breath to utter a curse. Air rasped in and out of his lungs. His whole body ached, and his legs wobbled as he forced them to keep jogging onward. He made himself think of the danger Anyi was in. She would be the first one the assassins killed if they caught up. He couldn't let that happen.

Something grabbed at his ankles and he toppled forward. The ground wasn't as flat or hard as he expected, but heaved and rolled, and muffled curses were coming from it. Gol – now invisible in utter darkness. The lamps had gone out. Cery rolled aside.

"Shut up," a voice whispered.

"Do it, Gol," Cery ordered. Gol fell silent.

Back down the passage, footsteps grew louder. Moving lights appeared, filtering through a curtain of roughly woven fabric that Cery did not recall encountering. *It must have been dropped down after we passed it.* The footsteps slowed and stopped. A sound came from another direction – more hurried footsteps. The lights moved away as their bearers continued in pursuit.

After a long pause, several sighs broke the silence. A shiver ran down Cery's spine as he realised he was surrounded by several people. A thin beam of light appeared. One of the lamps. It was being held by a stranger.

Cery looked up at a young man, who was staring back at him.

"Who?" the man asked.

"Ceryni of Northside."

"These?"

"My bodyguards."

The man's eyebrows rose, then he nodded. He turned to the others. Cery looked around to see six other young men, two sitting on top of Gol. Anyi was in a fighting crouch, a knife in both hands. The two young men standing on either side of her were keeping a safe distance, though they looked willing to risk a cut if their leader ordered them to take her down.

"Put them away, Anyi," Cery said.

Without taking her eyes from them, she obeyed. At a nod from the leader, the two men climbed off Gol, who groaned with relief. Cery rose to his feet, turned back to the leader and straightened his shoulders.

"We seek safe passage."

The young man's mouth quirked into a half-smile. "No such thing nowadays." He jabbed a thumb toward his chest. "Wen." He turned to speak to the others. "This name I know. One who leaves food. What we do?"

They exchanged glances, then muttered words to which he shook his head: "Kill?" "Free?" "Worm?" one said, and Wen looked thoughtful. He nodded. "Worm," he said decisively. Somehow this resulted in nods, though whether of acceptance or agreement Cery couldn't tell.

Wen turned to Cery. "You all come with us. We take you to Worm." He gave Gol back his lamp, then looked at one of those who had been sitting on the big man. "Go tell Worm."

The young man scampered off into the darkness behind Wen. As Wen turned to follow, Anyi reached out and took her lamp back from the youth holding it. Two of the youngsters hurried forward to join their leader Wen and the rest took positions at the rear.

No one spoke as they walked. At first Cery only felt an overwhelming relief at simply not running any more, though his legs were still shaky and his heart was beating too fast. Gol looked as winded as he did, he noted. As he recovered he began to worry again. He'd never heard of anyone meeting with Slig called Worm. Unless... *unless Worm isn't really a man, but something they feed trespassers to.*

Stop it, he told himself. If they wanted us dead, they wouldn't have hidden us from our pursuers. They'd have stabbed us in the dark or led us into a dead end.

After walking for some time, a voice spoke in the darkness ahead, and Wen grunted a reply. Soon a man stepped into the light and the group stopped. He stared at Cery intently, then nodded.

"You are Ceryni," he said. He extended a hand. "I am Worm." Cery held out his hand, unsure what the gesture meant. Worm grasped it for a moment, then let it go and beckoned. "Come with me."

Another journey followed. Cery noticed that the air was growing humid, and from time to time the sound of running water came from a side passage or behind the walls. Then they stepped out into a cavernous room filled with the rush of water, and it all made sense.

A forest of columns surrounded them, each splaying out to form a brick archway that joined with its neighbour. The whole network formed a low ceiling that suggested draped fabric or a faren's web. Below this was no floor, but the reflective surface of water. Their guide was now walking along what appeared to be the top of a thick wall. The water flowed past on either side. It was too dark to tell how deep it was.

Fortunately the path was dry and not at all slippery. Glancing back, Cery saw that the water flowed into tunnels which, by the slant of their roof, descended even further under the city. On either side he saw other wall tops, too far away to reach by leaping. The only illumination came from the lamps they carried.

The water itself was surprisingly free of floating matter. Only the occasional oily slick passed them, mostly smelling of soap and fragrance. The walls bore patches of mould, however, and there was an unhealthy dampness to the air.

A cluster of lights appeared ahead and Cery soon began to make out some sort of large platform bridging two of the walls. Several people were sitting on it, and a low murmur of voices echoed in the vast room. Beyond the platform Cery made out dark circles within a lighter area, and eventually picked out enough detail to see that they were more tunnels, this time set higher up and with water spilling out into the vast underground pool.

Their footsteps set the platform creaking as they followed Worm onto it. Looking at the people, Cery saw that none were older than their mid-twenties. Two of the young women nursed babies, and a toddler was tethered by a rope to the closest column, probably so that he did not scamper off the platform into the water. All stared at Cery, Gol and Anyi with wide, curious eyes, but none spoke.

Worm glanced at Cery, then gestured at the water outlets.

“This lot come from the Guild Baths,” he said. “Further south there are sewer pipes and those up north are both sewers and drains from the kitchens. But here the water is cleaner.”

Cery nodded. It wasn't a bad place to settle, if you didn't mind being underground and constantly surrounded by dampness. Looking to either side he made out other platforms, populated by more Sligs, and narrow bridges linking them.

“I never knew this was here,” he admitted.

“Right under your nose.” Worm smiled, and Cery realised how right the man was. This part of Sli territory ran under Cery's own area. Cery turned to face him.

“Your people hid us from people who wanted to kill us,” he said. “Thanks. I would never have trespassed if I'd had another choice.”

Worm tilted his head to one side. “Not the Guild tunnels?”

So he knows I have access to them. Cery shook his head. “It would have shown them to my enemy. I'd have had to warn the Guild about that, and I don't expect to like what they'd do about it. I'm guessing you would not like them snooping around down here either.”

The man's eyebrows rose. “No.” He shrugged, then sighed. “If we'd let the one who sent the hunters after you find you, he would find us too. Once he takes your things there is nothing stopping him from taking ours.”

Cery regarded Worm thoughtfully. The Sligs were far more aware of the goings-on in the world above than he'd have expected. They were right about Skellin. Once he held Cery's territory he'd want control of the Sligs too.

“Skellin or me. Not much of a choice,” Cery said.

Worm shook his head and scowled. “He won't let us 'lone, like you do.” He nodded toward the tunnels. “He will want those because he wants what they lead to.”

The Guild. Cery shivered. Was this a smart guess by the Slig leader, or did he know of Skellin's specific plans? He opened his mouth to ask, but Worm turned to stare at Cery.

“I show you this so you know. But you can't stay,” he said. “We will take you out in a safe place, but that is all.”

Cery nodded. “It's more than I'd hoped for,” he replied, putting all his gratitude into his tone.

“If you must come back, speak my name and you will live, but we will take you out again.”

“I understand.”

Worm held Cery's gaze for a little longer, then nodded. “Where do you want to go?”

Cery looked at Anyi and Gol. His daughter looked anxious, and Gol looked pale and exhausted. Where could they go? They had few favours left to them, and no safe place within easy reach. No allies they could trust or risk endangering. *Except one.* Cery turned back to Worm.

“Take us back the way we came.”

The man spoke a word to the youths who had rescued Cery and his companions. Worm gestured to indicate Cery should follow them; then, without voicing a farewell, he walked away. Taking that as a Slig custom, Cery turned also.

The journey out of Slig territory was slower, which Cery was grateful for. Now that fear and relief had both passed, he was tired. A gloom settled over him. Gol was dragging his feet, too. At least Anyi had youthful stamina on her side. Cery began to recognise the walls around them, then the Slig guide melted away into the darkness. The lamp Cery was carrying spluttered and died as it ran out of oil. Gol did not protest as Cery took his lamp and led them to the entrance to the Guild passages.

When they had slipped through and the door was closed again, Cery felt much of the tension and

fear leave him. They were safe at last. He turned to Anyi.

“So where is this room you and Lilia meet in?”

She took the lamp, leading him and Gol down the long, straight passage. After a side turn, they reached a complex of rooms connected by twisting corridors. An unwelcome memory rose of being locked in the dark, imprisoned by Lord Fergun, and Cery shivered. But these rooms were different: older and with a feel of deliberate confusion to the arrangement. Anyi took them into a room cleaned of dust, with a few small wooden boxes for furniture and a pile of worn pillows for seating. At one end was a bricked-up chimney. She set the lamp down, then lit a few candles in alcoves carved into the walls.

“This is it,” she said. “I’d have brought in more furniture but I couldn’t carry anything big and I didn’t want to draw attention.”

“No beds.” Gol settled down onto one of the boxes with a groan. Cery smiled at his old friend.

“Don’t worry. We’ll sort something out.”

But Gol’s grimace didn’t soften. Cery frowned as he noticed that Gol’s hands were pressed to his side under his shirt. Then he saw the dark stain, glistening in the candle light.

“Gol...?”

The big man closed his eyes and swayed.

“Gol!” Anyi exclaimed, reaching his side at the same time as Cery. They caught Gol before he could fall off the box. Anyi dragged pillows over.

“Lie down,” she ordered. “Let me look at that.”

Cery could not speak. Fear had frozen his mind and throat. The assassin must have stabbed Gol during the fight. Or perhaps before he woke up, and Cery had only seen Gol stop the second stab.

Anyi bullied Gol off the box and onto the pillows, pulling his hand away and peeling back the shirt to reveal a small wound in his belly, slowly seeping blood.

“All this time.” Cery shook his head. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“It wasn’t that bad.” Gol shrugged, then winced. “Didn’t start hurting until we were talking to Worm.”

“I bet it does now,” Anyi said. “How deep do you think it went?”

“Not far. I don’t know.” Gol coughed in pain.

“This could be worse than it looks.” Anyi sat back on her heels and looked up at Cery. “I’ll get Lilia.”

“No...” Gol protested.

“It was only a few hours until dawn when we left Cadia’s house,” Cery told her. “Lilia might be at the University already.”

Anyi nodded. “She might. Only one way to find out.” She raised an eyebrow at him questioningly.

“Go,” he told her.

She took his hand and pressed it over the wound. Gol groaned.

“Keep pressure on it and—”

“I know what to do,” Cery told her. “If she’s not there at least get something clean to use as a dressing.”

“I will,” she said, picking up the lamp.

Then she was gone, her footsteps fading as she hurried into the darkness.

CHAPTER 2

SUMMONED

“Should I take Mother’s blood ring?” Lorkin asked as Dannyl walked through the open doorway of his rooms in the Guild House.

Dannyl looked down at the ring of gold Lorkin held, a globe of red glass set into the band. *If something should go wrong during this meeting with the Sachakan king it would be good if we both have a way to communicate with the Guild, he thought. But if things go that badly both of our blood rings could be found and taken, and could be used as a tool of torture and distraction against Osen and Sonea.*

That was the limitation of blood gems. They conveyed the thoughts of the wearer to the magician whose blood went into their making. The disadvantage was that the creator couldn’t stop sensing the thoughts of the wearer, which was particularly unpleasant if the wearer was being tortured.

This had been done to his old friend and mentor, Rothen, by one of the Sachakan outcasts – known as Ichani – who had invaded Kyralia twenty years before. The man had caught Rothen but, instead of killing him, he’d made a gem from Rothen’s blood. He had put it on every one of his victims so that Rothen received a flood of impressions from terrified, dying Kyrilians.

Of Black Magician Sonea and Administrator Osen, who would be most affected if their ring was taken? Dannyl shivered at the obvious answer.

“Leave it,” he advised. “I’ll have Osen’s ring. Give Sonea’s to me and I’ll hide it, in case they read your mind and learn of it.”

Lorkin looked at Dannyl, an odd, half-amused expression on his face. “Don’t worry, they won’t read anything from me,” he said.

Dannyl stared at the young magician in surprise. “You can...?”

“In a limited way. I didn’t have the time to gain the skills the Traitors have at tricking a mind-reader. If someone tries it on me they won’t succeed, but they’ll know they aren’t succeeding.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” Dannyl said. He took a step back toward the door. “I’ll go hide this and meet you in the Master’s Room.”

Lorkin nodded.

Dannyl hurried back to his rooms, ordered the slave to leave and stop anyone entering, then looked for a place to hide the gem. *Lorkin can block a mind-read! Ashaki Achaty, the Sachakan king’s advisor who had been Dannyl’s friend since he had arrived in Arvice, had said the Traitors had a way of doing it. How else did their spies, posing as slaves, avoid detection? I wonder what else Lorkin hasn’t told me.* He felt a stab of frustration. Since returning to Arvice, Lorkin had been reluctant to say anything about the rebel society he’d lived with for the last few months. Dannyl understood that his former assistant had been entrusted with secrets he couldn’t reveal without risking many lives. *But it gives the impression that his loyalties now lie with them more than with the Guild and Kyralia.*

The young magician had begun wearing robes again, so he clearly still considered himself a Guild magician – despite telling Dannyl, back when they had met in the mountains, that the Guild should act as if he’d left it.

The legs of Dannyl’s travel chest were carved to look like tree stumps, with rough, twisted bark.

Dannyl had cut out one of the twists with magic, making a small hollow behind it, in case he ever needed to hide Osen's ring. Easing out the twist, he set Sonea's ring inside, then plugged the hollow closed again. Then he set off for the Master's Room, the part of a traditional Sachakan house where the head of a family greeted and entertained guests.

The Guild had never officially declared that Lorkin was no long a member, despite the awkward situation this had created between Sachaka and Kyralia. Aside from avoiding the pain this would have caused Sonea, the Higher Magicians did not want to appear to give up on finding wayward magicians too quickly. However, there had been a danger that doing nothing would make it seem as if they condoned Lorkin's association with the rebels, which would strain relations between the Allied Land and the Sachakan king.

Coming back to Arvice might have eased that strain, except for the fact that the Sachakan king badly wanted to know what Lorkin had learned about his enemy. He was about to be disappointed.

As soon as he knew the young magician had returned, King Amakira had sent orders forbidding Lorkin to leave the city. Dannyl had expected a summons to the palace to come soon after, but several days had passed with no further messages. No doubt the king had been consulting with his advisers.

Including Ashaki Achatu, if his absence is any indication.

The adviser had not visited or sent any messages since the day he, Dannyl and Tayend had arrived home from their research trip to Duna. At the thought of the journey, Dannyl felt anger simmering. Tayend had manipulated Achatu into taking him with them, then deliberately and successfully prevented Dannyl and Achatu from becoming lovers.

Funny how that has made me want us to be together more, when before we left I was hesitant, and doubtful about the political consequences of such a relationship.

The fact that Tayend's reasons for interfering were the same as those that had caused Dannyl to hesitate in the first place, and that the current situation was exactly the sort that would make such an affair awkward, did not make it any easier for Dannyl to forgive him for interfering.

Dannyl could not help hoping it was only the situation with Lorkin that kept Achatu away, rather than that the man had given up on him.

He also could not help feeling a pang of guilt. Whether he and Achatu were lovers or not, there would always be secrets they must keep from each other. Secrets like the Duna people's proposal for an alliance or trade agreement with the Guild. That matter had been all but forgotten since Lorkin had returned. Once, the Guild would have been excited by any chance to acquire a new kind of magic, but the prospect of the same trade with the Traitors, who would be a more formidable ally, had eclipsed that.

Dannyl did not know exactly what the Traitors had told Lorkin to communicate to the Guild. Osen had decided that it was best that Dannyl did not know, in the unlikely event that his mind was read. Dannyl frowned. *Osen must know that Lorkin can block a mind-read. Lorkin isn't going to tell me anything he hasn't already told Osen.*

Arriving at the Master's Room, he saw that Lorkin was already there. He, Tayend and Lady Merria, Dannyl's assistant, were sitting on stools, talking quietly. They got to their feet as Dannyl entered.

"Ready?" Dannyl asked Lorkin.

Lorkin nodded.

Tayend gave the young magician a serious look. "Good luck."

"Thanks, Ambassador," Lorkin replied.

"We've both been asking our Sachakan friends what they think the king will do," Tayend added, glancing at Merria. "Nobody wants to predict anything, but they all hope the king won't do anything

upset the Allied Lands.”

“~~And do they think I should break my promise and tell all about the Traitors?~~” Lorkin asked.

Tayend grimaced in reply. “Yes.” Merria nodded in agreement.

Lorkin’s lips twitched into a brief smile. “Hardly surprising.” But despite his apparent humour, his eyes were hard. Dannyl was suddenly reminded of Black Magician Sonea. Thinking of how stubborn Lorkin’s mother had been at his age, Dannyl felt a little better about Lorkin facing the questions and bullying of the Sachakan king. *Let’s hope bullying is all he tries.*

“You be careful, too,” Merria said.

Dannyl realised she was looking at him, and blinked in surprise. She had been giving him dark looks since he’d returned, letting him know that she hadn’t forgiven him for not taking her to Duna. He wasn’t sure how to respond to her concern, especially since he didn’t want to think about what would happen to himself should matters take a turn for the worse.

“I’ll be fine,” he told her. “We’ll be fine,” he added. Tayend was looking at Dannyl in a concerned way that Dannyl did not want to think about either, so he turned towards the corridor leading out of the Guild House. “Well, let’s not keep the king waiting.”

“No,” Lorkin said softly.

Dannyl looked over to Kai, the man who was now his personal slave. Merria had learned from her friends that it was a typical ploy of slaves to switch tasks a lot, since it was harder for a master to find the right slave to punish for a particular error if many different slaves could be responsible. The more slaves you saw the harder it was to remember their names, and if you couldn’t remember a slave’s name it was harder to order them punished.

Merria had demanded that each occupant of the Guild House have one or two slaves dedicated to meeting their needs. But though the arrangement was closer to having a servant there were still disadvantages. A servant asked questions. A servant would tell you if something was impossible or difficult to do. A servant didn’t throw himself onto the floor every time he came into your presence. Despite having had some irritatingly argumentative servants over the years, Dannyl would rather than the inconvenience of unquestioning obedience.

“Let the carriage slaves know we’re ready, Kai,” Dannyl instructed.

Kai hurried ahead. Dannyl led Lorkin down the corridor to the front door. As they stepped out, bright sunlight dazzled Dannyl’s eyes and he lifted a hand to shade them. The sky was blue and cloudless, and there was a warmth and dryness to the air that, in Kyralia, he’d have associated with the onset of summer. Here it was only early spring. As always, the slaves threw themselves onto the ground. Dannyl ordered them to rise, then he and Lorkin climbed on board the waiting carriage.

They rode in silence. Dannyl considered all that Osen had told him to say, and to avoid saying. He wished he knew more of what Lorkin and the Guild planned. Not knowing the full truth made him uneasy. All too soon the carriage turned into the wide tree-lined avenue leading to the palace, then pulled up outside the building. The slaves clambered to the ground and opened the door.

Dannyl climbed out and waited for Lorkin to join him.

“Pretty,” Lorkin said, gazing up at the building in admiration. *Of course, he hasn’t seen the palace before,* Dannyl thought. Looking up at the curved white walls, and the top of the glittering gold dome just visible above, he remembered how impressed he’d been the first time he’d visited. He was too worried about the coming interview to feel admiration now.

Turning his attention to the entrance, he led Lorkin inside. They strode down the wide corridor, past the guards, out into the huge, column-filled hall that served as the king’s grand Master’s Room. Dannyl’s heart began to beat faster as he saw many more people were present than at any time when

he'd met the king before. Instead of a cluster of two or three people here and there, there was a small crowd. Judging by their highly decorated short jackets and confident poses, most of them were Ashak. He counted quickly. *About fifty.*

Knowing that there were so many black magicians surrounding him sent an unpleasant chill down his spine. He concentrated on keeping his face impassive and his walk dignified, hoping he was hiding his fear successfully.

King Amakira was sitting on his throne. Though old, he looked as tense and alert as the youngest of the Sachakans in the room. His eyes never left Lorkin until Dannyl stopped and dropped to one knee. Lorkin, as instructed, followed suit.

"Rise, Ambassador Dannyl," the king said.

Dannyl stood up and resisted looking at Lorkin, who was obliged to remain kneeling until told otherwise. The king's gaze had shifted back to the young magician. His gaze was intense.

"Rise, Lord Lorkin."

Lorkin got to his feet, looked at the king, then lowered his gaze politely.

"Welcome back," the king said.

"Thank you, your majesty."

"Have you recovered from your journey back to Arvice?"

"I have, your majesty."

"That is good to hear." The king looked at Dannyl and a kind of cold amusement crept into his eyes. "Ambassador, I wish to hear Lorkin tell how he came to leave Arvice, live with the Traitors and then return."

Dannyl nodded. "I expected you would, your majesty," he replied, managing a smile. He turned to Lorkin. "Tell him what you told me, Lord Lorkin."

The young magician gave Dannyl an amused, almost reproachful look before he turned back to the king. Dannyl suppressed a smile. *If he tells them what he told me, he'll hardly be telling them much at all.*

"On the night that I left the Guild House," Lorkin began, "a slave crept into my bed and tried to kill me. I was saved by another slave, who convinced me that assassins would return to finish me off if I didn't leave with her. My rescuer, as I'm sure you've guessed, was not really a slave at all, but one of the Traitors."

"She explained that the society she belonged to was formed before the Sachakan War, when a group of women were driven to unite by their ill treatment in Sachakan society. The war forced them into the mountains, where they became a new people, rejecting slavery and inequality between men and women."

"They are ruled by women," the king interrupted. "How is that equal?"

Lorkin shrugged. "It's not a perfect arrangement, but still fairer than any I've encountered or heard of."

"So you went to their base?"

"Yes. It was the safest place to go, what with the assassins still hunting for me."

"Could you find it again?"

Lorkin shook his head. "No. I was blindfolded."

The king's eyes narrowed. "How big is their base? How many Traitors are there?"

"I... I can't really say."

"You can't or you won't?"

"It wasn't the sort of place where you can easily guess how many people are around."

“Take a guess anyway.”

Lorkin spread his hands. “More than a hundred.”

“Did you gain any impressions of their fighting strength?”

Once again, Lorkin shook his head. “I never saw them fight. Some are magicians. You know that already. I can’t tell you numbers, their strength or how well trained they are.”

A movement among the Ashaki near the throne attracted Dannyl’s attention, and his heart skipped at he recognised Achatu. The man met Dannyl’s eyes briefly, but his only expression was one of thoughtfulness. He leaned closer to the king and murmured something. The king’s stare didn’t waver from Lorkin, but his eyebrows lowered slightly.

“What did you do while with the Traitors?” he asked.

“I helped treat the sick.”

“They trusted you, a foreigner, to heal them?”

“Yes.”

“Did you teach them anything?”

“A few things. I learned a few things, too.”

“What did you teach them?”

“Some new cures – and I learned several from them, though some require plants we don’t have in Kyratia.”

“Why did you leave them?”

Lorkin paused, obviously not expecting the question so soon. “Because I wanted to return home.”

“Why didn’t you leave sooner?”

“They do not usually let foreigners leave. But they changed their minds in my case.”

“Why?”

“There was no reason not to. I hadn’t learned anything important, so I couldn’t reveal anything important. When I left, they made sure I’d never be able to find my way back.”

The king regarded him thoughtfully. “Even so, you’ve seen more of the Traitors’ base than any non-Traitor has before. There may be details you do not understand the significance of. These rebels are a danger to this country, and may one day be a danger to other lands in this region, including yours. Will you consent to a mind-read?”

Lorkin went very still. The hall was quiet as he opened his mouth to answer.

“No, your majesty.”

“I will enlist only my most skilled mind-reader. He will not search your thoughts, but will allow you to present your memories to him.”

“I appreciate that, but I am obliged to protect the knowledge taught to me by the Guild. I must refuse.”

The king’s gaze moved to Dannyl. His expression was unreadable. “Ambassador, will you order Lord Lorkin to cooperate with a mind-reader?”

Dannyl took a deep breath.

“With respect, your majesty, I cannot. I do not have the authority to do so.”

The king’s eyebrows lowered. “But you have a blood ring that allows you to communicate with the Guild. Contact them. Get the order from whoever has the authority to give it.”

Dannyl opened his mouth to protest, but thought better of it. He must look as if he was trying to be cooperative. Reaching into his robes he took Osen’s ring from his pocket and slipped it on a finger.

—Osen?

—Dannyl, came the immediate reply. The Administrator had said he would arrange to be

unoccupied while the meeting with the Sachakan king took place, and Dannyl detected no surprise at his communication.

—*They want the Guild to order Lorkin to submit to a mind-read.*

—*Ah. Of course. They won't believe a word he says.*

—*What should I tell them?*

—*That only Merin has the authority to order it, and he will only consider it once he has had a chance to interview Lorkin personally and privately.*

Dannyl felt a chill. The only way the Kyralian king could make his wishes clearer would be to abandon formality and demand Amakira send Lorkin home.—*Nothing else?*

—*Not for now. See what Amakira says to that.*

Dannyl slipped off the ring and, keeping it in one hand, looked up at the king of Sachaka and conveyed Osen's message.

Amakira stared at Dannyl for what felt like a long, long time. When he finally moved, it was preceded by a shifting of his jaw muscles that hinted at the anger the message had roused.

“That is inconvenient,” he said quietly. “And forces me to question whether I must cast aside efforts at cooperation between our nations for the sake of protecting my own – or at least reduce my efforts to match that of Kyralia's.” He pursed his lips, and turned to look at two of the Ashaki. “Please escort Lord Lorkin to the prison.”

Lorkin took a half-step backwards, then stopped. As the two Ashaki approached, Dannyl moved forward.

“I must protest, your majesty!” Dannyl exclaimed. “I ask on behalf of the Allied Lands that you honour the agreement—”

“Either Lord Lorkin goes to prison, or Lord Lorkin goes to prison and Ambassador Dannyl leaves Sachaka,” the king said, loud enough to drown Dannyl's words.

—*Let them take him.*

Dannyl almost gasped aloud in surprise at the voice in his head. He realised he was gripping the ring tightly, allowing the gem to touch his skin and therefore conveying his thoughts to Osen.

—*Are you sure?*

—*Yes, the Administrator replied. We hoped this wouldn't happen, of course, but we'd rather not lose Lorkin and have you expelled from Sachaka. Go back to the Guild House and start nagging Amakira to let Lorkin go. We'll be doing everything we can from this end.*

Dannyl felt his heart sink as the two Ashaki stepped past him and stopped on either side of Lorkin. The young magician looked resigned and worried, but when he met Dannyl's eyes he managed a wan smile.

“I'll be fine,” he said. Then he let the two men lead him away.

Dannyl turned back to the king.

“Take him if you must, your majesty, but do not harm him,” he warned, “or any chance of a peaceful alliance between the Allied Lands and Sachaka will be much harder to achieve in the future. That would be a great shame.”

Amakira's stare did not waver, but his voice was quieter as he spoke.

“Go back to the Guild House, Ambassador. This meeting is over.”

Even before Sonea opened her eyes, she knew it was too soon for her to be waking up. Turning toward the screen over her bedroom window, she frowned as she saw early morning light reflected on the wa

behind it. The light at this time of day always had a quality that distinguished it from the late evening glow, and told her that she had only been asleep for an hour or two.

A knocking from the main room told her why she was awake.

Groaning, she threw her arms over her eyes and waited. Every morning, except on Freedays, Black Magician Kallen stopped by to escort Lilia to lessons. Most of the time the novice prepared for her day at the University quietly enough not to wake Sonea. But it had taken Kallen some time to work out, after Sonea pointedly mentioned several times that she usually took the night shift at the hospice that he should knock *softly*.

He appeared to have forgotten this morning.

The knocking came again, even louder. Sonea groaned again. Why wasn't Lilia answering the door? Sighing, she threw off the bedclothes and forced herself into a standing position. She ran her hands through her hair to straighten it, grabbed an overrobe and threw it on over her bedclothes. Entering the main room, she headed for the door, tossing a little magic out to turn the handle.

As the door swung inward, a frowning Kallen looked up and saw her, and his eyebrows lowered further. His gaze flickered to her overrobe and back up to meet her gaze, his expression not changing.

“Good morning, Black Magician Sonea,” he said. “Sorry to disturb you. Is Lilia here?”

Sonea looked toward Lilia's closed bedroom door on the other side of the room, then walked over to it. She knocked quietly, then louder, then opened the door. The room was empty. The bed was made however, so clearly Sonea's aunt and servant, Jonna, had been and gone.

“No,” she said, returning to the main door. “And no, I don't know where she is. When I do, I'll let you know.”

“Thank you.” Kallen looked decidedly unhappy, but he nodded and stepped away from the door.

Closing the door, Sonea headed back towards the bedroom, then stopped. It was unusual for Lilia to be absent of a morning. It was not in her nature to misbehave or cause trouble, but she still needed watching over because she had proven to be easily led astray by others.

Perhaps not as easily as in the past, though. After all, being tricked into learning black magic by your closest friend so she could frame you for the murder she committed has got to make you consider carefully who you trust. Not to mention discovering that Lorandra, the rogue magician who had helped Lilia escape from prison, intended to return that favour by turning Lilia over to her son, the infamous Thief, Skellin, so that Lilia could teach him black magic.

While Sonea trusted Lilia not to *willingly* get into serious trouble again, she might unwillingly do so. Sonea was also obliged to look as though she was keeping an eye on all other black magicians. Though she wasn't officially Lilia's guardian – that was Kallen's role – letting the girl stay in her rooms had given everyone the impression she had taken responsibility for her.

Looking around the room, Sonea saw the corner of a slip of paper under the water jug on the side table. She walked across the room and picked it up.

Left early to meet a friend. Tell BMK I will go straight from there to class. Lilia.

Sonea sighed and rolled her eyes, but her annoyance soon passed. The message was probably not for her, but Jonna. The servant hadn't seen it – or wasn't able to wait around to meet Kallen – or else had tried and failed to find him.

The friend was probably Anyi, who had saved Lilia from being handed over to Skellin. Since Anyi was Cery's daughter, Sonea wasn't entirely convinced the girl wouldn't lead Lilia astray in some way. *Cery wouldn't let the girls get into trouble. Even so... I wonder why Lilia is meeting Anyi at this*

time of day – and where. Sonea put the note down. She knew that Anyi was entering her rooms the same way that Cery occasionally did: through a hidden doorway in the guest room. But for Lilia to leave to meet Anyi meant they were getting together elsewhere, and that was something to worry about. As a new black magician, Lilia was forbidden to leave the Guild grounds.

Perhaps she went back through the hatch with Anyi. The passages beneath the Guild were forbidden to all but the Higher Magicians, officially because they were unstable and dangerous but mainly because there was never any *good* reason for anybody to be down there. That wasn't what worried Sonea the most about Lilia leaving to meet Anyi, however.

Skellin wanted Cery dead. That meant that anybody who helped him was a target. So far Cery had been able to conceal the fact that Anyi was his daughter. Officially she was still a bodyguard, but that still meant she was a target. Lilia might be able to protect herself with magic, but if the attacker was Skellin or his mother, Lorandra, she would be in trouble since both were magicians.

Has she left because Cery needs her help? But surely he'd contact me first. She frowned. Lately Cery had been hard to find, and when they did manage to meet he looked gaunt and anxious. She suspected he was polishing the truth about his efforts to find Skellin, and was only succeeding in keeping himself out of the rogue Thief's reach.

Sighing for a third time, Sonea went back into the bedroom, but not to sleep. It was unlikely she would do more than lie awake, now that she had both Cery and Lilia to worry over. She washed and dressed, drew a little magic to soothe away weariness, and was making a cup of raka when someone knocked on the main door again.

Catching herself about to sigh again – she had sighed far too much already today – she looked over her shoulder and opened the door with magic.

Administrator Osen stepped into the doorway. She blinked in surprise.

“Administrator.”

“Black Magician Sonea,” he said, inclining his head politely. “May I come in?”

“Of course,” she replied, turning to face him. He closed the door. “Would you like some raka or sumi?”

He shook his head. “I have some bad but not entirely unexpected news.”

She felt a sensation uncomfortably like all her inner organs turning to water. *Lorkin.*

“How bad?”

Osen's lips thinned in sympathy. “Not the worst news. I'd be more direct, if that was the case. Lorkin refused a mind-read. King Amakira demanded he be ordered to submit to one. King Merin refused. Amakira sent Lorkin to prison.”

A chill ran down her spine and her stomach flipped over. An image of Lorkin chained up in a dank dark cell sprang into her mind and she felt nauseous. In her mind's eye he was a frightened boy. *But it isn't. He's a grown man. He knew this might happen, and still refused to betray the Traitors. I have to trust his judgement that they are worth saving.* She forced her attention back to Osen.

“What now?” she asked, though the Higher Magicians had discussed this eventuality many times before.

“We work towards freeing him. We being the Guild, the king, and the Elyne king. If Lorkin is right, and he can prevent them reading his mind, then we must convince Amakira that letting him go is the easiest path towards learning more about the Traitors. That's where your role begins.”

Sonea nodded and felt a belated relief. Her task to meet the Traitors on behalf of the Guild had become more complicated when it became clear King Amakira wouldn't let Lorkin leave Sachaka until he had learned all he could from him. The Guild had decided to send her to Arvice as well to

negotiate her son's release. This worsening of Lorkin's circumstances could have made them change their minds.

Because the Higher Magicians had decided that only a black magician would receive the respect needed to negotiate with the Sachakan king, that meant choosing between her and Kallen – Lilia being too young and still a novice. They had good reasons not to choose either of them. While the Sachakan regarded women as having less status than men, and being Lorkin's mother might leave her open to blackmail, Kallen's addiction to roet made him potentially unreliable and just as vulnerable to coercion.

And perhaps knowing that I have killed Sachakans before, and would be prepared to do so to save my son, may also nudge Amakira towards releasing him.

Of course, the Sachakan king might threaten to harm Lorkin in order to gain something from her, but there wasn't much he could gain from that. She did not know what they wanted to find out, and could not order him to speak. All she could do was promise to try to persuade him to, if they let him go.

Unless, of course, he gives in to torture first. But she didn't want to think about that. She turned to Osen.

"So when do I leave?"

Faint light spilling out of a doorway ahead told Lilia that she and Anyi were nearly at their destination. Dodging rubble in the corridor, she followed her friend to the opening and into the room beyond.

Cery was sitting on one of the old wooden boxes Anyi had found to use as seats. Under his hands, lying on some of the threadbare pillows from the pile Lilia and Anyi had so often lounged upon, was Gol. Even in the dim candlelight she could see he was pale. She brought her globe light closer and brightened it. His brow was slick with sweat and his stare was feverish with pain.

Lilia stared down at him, paralysed with doubt. *Do I know enough of Healing yet to save him?*

"Just... try," Anyi urged.

Glancing at her friend, Lilia nodded. She made herself kneel down beside Gol. Cery's hands were pressed against Gol's abdomen, stained with blood.

"Should I take the pressure off?" Cery asked.

"I... I'm not sure yet," Lilia admitted. "I'll just... look."

She pulled away more of Gol's shirt, placed a palm on his bare skin, then closed her eyes and sent her senses outward and into his body.

At first all was chaos, but she drew upon what she had been told or read, and on exercises designed to make sense of all the signals. The first thing that was obvious was the pain. She nearly gasped aloud as she picked that up, and was proud that she did not lose focus. Pain was easy to stop. It was one of the early lessons taught to Healers. Once she'd tackled that, she looked for other information. Her mind was drawn toward the damaged part, where essential liquids were being lost, and others that were dangerously poisonous were trickling into healthy systems.

His guts have been nicked by the blade that stabbed him. He'd have died already if the leak had been much larger. Clearly that's what I have to fix first...

Drawing magic, she fed it into the rupture so that the edges of the wound knit together, healing faster than they could ever have done without intervention.

Now I have to stop the blood leaking out. But before I do, there's this poison from the guts and the

blood pooling inside him to deal with. Use one to help wash out the other. She hoped Cery and Anyi weren't panicking as she used magic to force the liquids out of the wound. There was a little more resistance to this than she'd expected. Then she remembered that Cery was still pressing on the wound. She concentrated on her own body enough to gain control of her vocal cords.

"You can stop now," she made herself say.

She saw the blood begin to flow again, and was forced to concentrate hard to align and Heal the separated flesh and skin. Remembering warnings from her teachers, she checked within to make sure there were no internal rents causing bleeding to continue within. A few tubes needed fixing. Easily done.

After a final check, she drew her senses back to herself, took a deep breath and opened her eyes. Gol's face was no longer rigid with pain. He looked up at her and smiled.

"Better?" she asked.

He nodded. "Yes. But... tired. Very tired." He frowned. "Thirsty."

"You will be. You've lost blood and there might be some inflammation from the poison."

"The blade was poisoned?" Cery asked, alarmed.

"No, but his gut was sliced into. What's inside acts like a poison if it gets into the rest of the body."

Cery regarded the big man thoughtfully. "You're not going to be any good for fighting practice for a while." He looked at Lilia. "How long until he fully recovers?"

She shrugged. "I'm not sure, but faster if he can get good food and clean water." She looked at Anyi. "If you come with me I'll see if Jonna left anything back in the room. There'll be water, at least."

"You're already late for classes," Anyi pointed out. "You should go straight to the University."

"In these?" Lilia looked down at her novice robes. They were scuffed and dirty from climbing down the narrow gap within the Magicians' Quarters walls that allowed her to slip out of Sonea's rooms and into the underground passages. Normally Anyi brought some old clothes for her to change into, but this time she'd arrived empty-handed. They couldn't keep them in Sonea's rooms in case Jonna, Sonea's servant, found them. Lilia hadn't wanted to risk that Gol might die while she tried to find something else to change into.

Anyi looked at Lilia's robes. "Can't you use magic to fix them?"

Lilia sighed. "I can try. Depends how bad they are. It might take longer than going back."

Anyi inspected her. "Doesn't look too bad. Nothing you can't explain away as having tripped and fallen into a hedge."

"What about getting food and water?"

Anyi shrugged. "I'll do it."

"Sonea will be in her rooms all day."

"She works the night shift at the hospice, right? So she'll be asleep."

"And if she isn't? Or she wakes up?"

"Then I'll tell her I dropped in to visit you and I was hungry."

"If it's just water we need, I know of a few leaky pipes," Cery said. He looked at Lilia sternly. "But we'll be in a worse situation if you miss classes or someone realises you've been roaming around under the Guild. We're going to be stuck here for a while, and need you free to visit us, Lilia."

She looked from him to Anyi. He was right, of course. While classes seemed unimportant compared to keeping her friends safe and well, skipping them would only rouse suspicion. Once more she cursed herself for giving in to curiosity, and trying the instructions on using black magic in Naki's book. Nobody had paid her any attention when she had been an ordinary novice. She sighed and

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