

THE
WHITEFIRE
CROSSING

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BOOK I OF THE SHATTERED SIGIL

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SAN FRANCISCO

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To Robert, who knows the landscape of my heart

CHAPTER ONE

(Dev)

I knew right from the moment I opened Bren's back room door this job was going to be trouble. See, here's how it should go: Bren, waiting, alone, with a package on the table and my advance payment in his hand. Simple and no surprises. So when I saw Bren, waiting, not alone, and no package on the table, I got a little twitchy. My first thought was that Bren had crossed someone he shouldn't, and sold me out as well. But the stranger in the room didn't look like a guardsman, or even someone's freelance enforcer. He was young, well-dressed, and nervous, which settled me somewhat as other possibilities became more likely. Maybe a younger son of a wealthy family, hock deep in gambling debts? Bren sometimes worked as a collector. Didn't matter, though. Whatever the stranger was here for, I wanted no part of it.

"I'll come back later." I started to shut the door. Bren caught my eye and motioned me in.

"Dev! Just the young man I was looking for!" His deep voice had the annoyingly cheerful tone he used on highsider customers. He'd even dug out a magelight in place of the battered oil lamp that usually

perched in the corner. The brighter, harsher light from the faceted crystal sphere only highlighted the cracks in the adobe walls and the wax stains on the table.

I took a few steps into the room but left the door open at my back. “Who’s he, then?” I jerked my head at the stranger, glaring at Bren. I don’t like surprises when I’m in the city. They never turn out well.

“Shut the door, and I’ll fill you in.” Bren ignored my obvious displeasure and waited patiently. The stranger shifted on his feet but didn’t say anything. Eventually, as Bren had known it would, my curiosity got the better of me. I shut the door, but didn’t come any farther into the room. I still wanted to be near an exit.

Bren’s lined brown face creased in a satisfied smile. “Dev, this is Kiran. He’s looking for passage over the Whitefire Mountains to Kost. I told him you were the best, most discreet guide I know, and you know the mountains like nobody else. You can take him along on the usual run.”

I choked back the first thing that came to mind, which was along the lines of “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” but didn’t bother to keep my feelings off my face. I hadn’t missed his emphasis on the word “discreet.”

For several years now, I’d run packages across the mountains and over the Alathian border to the city of Kost for him. The Alathians were strict as hell on magic, piling on all kinds of laws and regulations to try and stop people from using it except in the tame little ways approved by their Council. Human nature being what it is, that makes for a thriving trade in certain specialty items. And since they’d outlawed all the darker, more powerful kinds of magic, it wasn’t too hard to get around the poor bastard of an Alathian mage stuck with border inspection duty. Easy money as far as I was concerned, but smuggling a few illegal charms and wards was one thing. Smuggling a person was a whole different story.

One corner of Bren’s wide mouth quirked. Yeah, he’d seen what I was thinking.

“I know you’re a busy man, Dev, but I promise this will be worth your while. The pay is very generous. Very. And what man couldn’t use an extra windfall?”

This time I kept my face blank, although inside I was furious. He knew, then. Gods all damn this city. Nothing stays secret here for long, but I'd hoped for a few days' grace before word spread of the disastrous end to my partnership with Jylla. We'd only split yesterday. That meant Bren must have asked after me special, and he must have known he'd need extra leverage to get someone to take this job. Worse, he had it on a platter, damn his eyes. I needed money, and badly.

"Good point," I said. Bren looked like a kitfox with a mouthful of plump sage hen. To take my mind off my anger, I eyed the human package, Kiran, or whatever his name was. Why in Khalmet's name would some highsider kid want to go to Kost, especially this way? He looked a little old to be running away from his family in some kind of teenage snit. Highsiders played power games with each other same as streetsiders, but I'd never heard of anything like this.

He'd listened to my exchange with Bren in solemn silence. His black hair was long enough in front that it fell forward over his face and shadowed his eyes, making them hard to read. I could tell they were light-colored, probably blue, and that was about it. I'd seen men from the far north with skin pale as his, though never with hair so dark. That might not mean much, since we were all children of immigrants here in Ninavel, highside and streetside alike. No sign of a family or merchant house crest on his clothing, but that only meant he wasn't a complete idiot, assuming he didn't want anyone to know about this meeting.

"What are the specifics?" I asked Bren.

"Same as always. Make sure there are no questions, no records, and get him across the border into Kost, along with my usual package. Ten percent in advance plus expenses, the rest upon return with proof of delivery."

Bren made it sound so easy. It usually was, with a package and enough money for what Bren called "expenses." But I had serious doubts a person would be so easy to hide, no matter how idiotic the Alathian mages were.

"And payment?" Bren had better make this good.

"Triple the usual, plus expenses."

I made a disgusted noise. Bren had me over a barrel, but I had

leverage of my own. There probably wasn't anyone else desperate enough to take this job, and he had to know it. "Triple, expenses, and I want ten charm-grade gemstones from Gerran for each item I deliver." Gerran was Bren's partner in Kost, who handled the distribution of the smuggled goods to their buyers. His legal business was the import of gemstones, metals, and mineral ores.

It was Bren's turn to snort. "Gerran would never go for that, and you know it." He studied me, one finger tapping on the table. I kept silent. Eventually he said, "I think I can talk him into five charm-grade stones per item, but only for this run, you understand?"

I was careful to keep my surprise from showing. I'd never thought Bren would actually go for such a wealth of high quality gemstones. I'd figured he'd offer me two or three stones total and nudge my flat fee higher. Huh. This Kiran must be paying him an absolute fortune. Either that, or I was missing something about this job.

"Anything else I should know?"

Bren didn't blink, despite my pointed tone. "It's a simple enough job." The flat finality in his eyes told me I'd get nothing more out of him. I hesitated, weighing the pay against my niggling sense of unease.

"Done," I said at last. Bren's smile widened until it nearly reached his ears.

Kiran had been watching us with a small frown line between his dark brows. "It is arranged, then? When do we leave?" His voice was soft but clear, with the faintest hint of an accent I couldn't place. The accent made me even more curious about him. We get all sorts here in Ninavel, and I'd thought I'd heard just about every possible accent by now.

Bren turned that broad smile on him. "That's right, everything's set. You'll be in good hands with Dev here, I promise. You'll leave when the first trade group of the year to Kost does." He tilted his head toward me.

"Day after tomorrow," I said. "Meet me at the Aran Fountain, near the Whitefire gate, two hours before dawn. You know where that is?" Kiran nodded. "Don't bother bringing anything with you, I'll provide what you need for the trip." I'd bet a thousand kenets

he didn't have any clothing capable of standing up to a trip over the mountains. I eyed the smooth, delicate skin of his hands, and sighed. I'd have to make sure and bring gloves. And salve. An awful thought struck me. "You can ride, right?"

"Yes." Some of the nervousness I'd seen in his stance showed itself on his face. "That is—not well, I don't do it often—but I do know how."

"That's fine," I said, relieved. Some highsiders didn't bother riding, thought it was something only servants and streetsiders did, who couldn't afford carriages. Others were horse-mad. You never knew.

Bren made a few more pointlessly glowing comments about me as he ushered Kiran out the door. With a supreme effort, I managed not to roll my eyes. Thankfully, the instant Bren shut the door he lost all the fake cheerfulness.

"Damn, Bren, laying it on like a Sulanian charm dealer, weren't you?"

Bren shrugged. "Fucking rich brats, they all expect it." He splayed his hand on an engraved copper panel set into the smooth adobe of the back wall. The ward tracings flared silver as they recognized him and revealed his strongbox.

"What the hell is this all about, anyway?"

Bren smiled, a much smaller, tighter smile than he'd displayed in front of Kiran. "Want me to make up a nice lie for you?"

I made a face but didn't reply, figuring I'd deserved that. He'd made it clear enough back when I started working for him that he expected a courier to keep his mouth shut and ask no questions.

Bren removed a bundle of tightly wrapped items from the strongbox, laid a banking draft on top, and slid the lot across the table to me. "Once you get him across the border, no matter what he says, take him straight to Gerran's. No delays, and don't let him out of your sight." He leaned forward and held my gaze. "The job's not done until then. And Gerran and I expect discretion on this. Full discretion. Understand?"

Yeah, I understood, all right. Either Kiran was an errand boy for someone who didn't trust him, or Gerran intended to turn an additional profit on Kiran's little trip and didn't want him to know about it. Shit. This job got crazier by the minute. I scowled at Bren.

“A little tricky for such a simple job, don’t you think?”

“You agreed to the terms,” he said, his tone a warning.

This was my last chance to back out. I eyed Bren’s banking draft. Damn Jylla to Shaikar’s darkest hell for making this job a necessity.

“Fine.” I slipped the draft into a pocket. “This had better be worth it, Bren.”



Only the highest towers of the city still showed a faint gleam of sunlight warming their pale stone as I hurried away from Bren’s place. The high walls and buildings surrounding me blocked my view of the mountains to the west, but I could imagine their snowy serrated ridges deepening toward the blue of twilight and their vast shadows spreading out over the desert valley. Damn, but I couldn’t wait to get up there again. I always got a little edgy after a long winter in the city, but this time I had other reasons for wanting out of Ninavel.

My pace slowed as the evening crowds gathered. Ninavel is always liveliest after sunset, when cool night breezes relieve the searing daytime heat. People filled the streets, shopping, drinking, standing around in loose groups laughing and watching street performers. Out of the corner of my eye I caught sight of a kid darting through the crowd, chased by another, both giggling and shrieking. The adults around them didn’t look twice, but I noticed the careful pattern of their ducking and dodging, and smiled to myself. Taint thieves, both of them. Not that powerful, or they’d be doing something tougher than crowd work. I tried to spot their minder, but he or she blended with the crowd well enough that it wasn’t an easy mark. I checked the protective amulets I wore on both wrists. Their silver shone untarnished, and the stones remained clear. My money and Bren’s goods would remain safe, at least from lesser Tainters like those kids.

The crowd noise abruptly hushed. People melted away from the middle of the street like rime ice in noonday sun, clearing a path for a lone, distant figure.

I’m told in other cities, it’s kings and lords who cause that kind of upset. Not in Ninavel, so far out in the western territory of

Arkenmland that it takes a year's journey to reach the king's city. No, Ninavel is the haunt of mages, of all kinds, and ordinary men learn fast to stay out of their way.

When Lord Sechaveh first came to the Painted Valley and started building Ninavel, people thought he was crazy. Only a moonbrained old fool would try to found a city in a waterless desert, they sneered. But sly Sechaveh sent word to all the mages he could find, saying if they came to his city and helped conjure water, he'd let them do whatever they wanted. No rules, no laws, no taxes—spend time on water duty, and any other magic is fair game, no matter how dark. That promise drew mages like fire ants to peachflower honey, especially the ones who practice magic in ways forbidden elsewhere. Of course, mage talent is rare, strong mage talent more so, and even here in Ninavel you mostly see middling types who can't do much more than make a decent charm. Yet a charm can boil a man's blood, or leave him a mindburned ruin; even a middling mage makes for a terrible enemy when crossed.

From the fearful silence of the crowd, the approaching mage was a lot stronger than middling. I craned my neck around a group of tradesmen in hopes of spying the sigils on the mage's clothing. On occasion I'd seen men whose silken shirts bore the looping golden scrawls signifying sand mages, and once—from a distance—a woman with the eerie, pale spirals of a bone mage patterning her dress, but none more powerful than that.

The tradesmen gasped and shrank back. I sucked in my own breath with a startled hiss, as I glimpsed jagged red and black sigils.

A blood mage! Gods, I'd never thought to see one in the flesh, though I'd heard plenty of spine-freezing stories. Everyone knows mages have to raise power for their spells somehow, but most of them find ways that don't turn grown men pale. Blood mages, on the other hand...they're rare as mist in the desert, but the word is their magic's as powerful as it comes, fueled with pain and death. And the bloodier, nastier, and more lingering the death, the better.

I plastered myself against the wall right alongside the cringing tradesmen, but I couldn't resist sneaking another look. From the stories, you'd think a blood mage should look deformed and evil, but he just looked like a man. A tall man, broad shouldered, with

thick wavy chestnut hair coiling past his shoulders, highsider-style. Arrogant as all get out, in that way ordinary highsider men tried so hard to imitate. What would it be like, to know you could do anything you wanted? Anything at all?

I darted a glance at his face, then nearly shit myself when his eyes locked with mine. For a long, frozen interval his cold hazel gaze pinned me in place, like a mudworm pierced by a dagger. At last he smiled—a smile whose predatory, amused malice turned my gut hollow—and strode on.

I slumped against the wall, my heart hammering. Next temple of Khalmet I passed, I'd make an offering. A *big* offering, because clearly I owed the god of luck for saving me from my own stupidity in attracting a blood mage's attention. He'd probably come streetside to claim fresh victims for his spellwork—a fate I shuddered to imagine.

I pulled myself together. I still had a visit to make before preparing for the trip to Kost. I ducked down the next alley and made for the far corner, where the mortar between the great stone blocks had crumbled away. It was all too easy to scramble up the hundred feet to the building roof, using my fingers and the edges of my shoes in the cracks. City climbing's never as fun as climbing in the mountains.

City views aren't bad, though. Colorful magelights gleamed and sparkled in the highside towers like Suliyya's thousand jewels of legend, outshining the stars in the darkening sky and contrasting with the warmer glow of lanternlight radiating up from the streets. Above the soaring outlines of the western city towers, the dark bulk of the Whitefires rose like a great saw-toothed wall, the snow on their peaks pale in the twilight.

My mood eased by the sight, I headed across the roof to a small cupola and a window glowing with warm light through a gauzy curtain. I made quick work of the window lock and pushed my way through the curtain, dropping into the brightly painted room beyond.

"Dev!" Liana beamed a welcome from the long table where she was clearing away the remains of a meal. Toys lay scattered over the floor, and she had to raise her voice over the excited shrieks of the kids playing on the far side of the wide room. "You could use the door, you know. I promise we'd let you in."

“Nah, it’s more fun this way,” I said. “Besides, I remember how you always liked surprises.” The kids tumbled across the room and threw themselves at my legs, giggling and shouting my name.

“Dev, what’d you bring, what’d you bring?” the littlest one yelled. I picked him up, tickling him gently, and tossed him into the air. Where he stayed, floating, I did an exaggerated double take.

“No! This can’t be Tamin. Tamin can only lift himself a body length!” I said loudly, and reached for him, ready to tickle. He darted backward in the air, out of my grasp.

“I am so Tamin! Look what I can do, Dev! Liana says next month I’m old enough to go out on jobs with everyone else!”

The other kids clamored for attention. I handed out the candies I’d been saving for the occasion and made sure to marvel as they showed me their prowess, making the candies float and dance and have mock battles in the air. My eyes roved over the group. Jek, Porry, Alsa, Kuril, Ness, Jeran, Melly...I frowned. “Where’s Tobet?”

I’d asked Liana, but it was eleven-year-old Melly who answered me. “He Changed and couldn’t lift no more, so Red Dal sent him to his new family.” She raised her chin, her amber eyes sparkling. “Red Dal says I’m boss Tainter now, Dev. I call the ward tricks tonight and the littlies have to do what I say.”

Only long practice kept my voice light. “Bout time, huh, kid? Taint like yours, you’ll make a fine boss.”

My eyes met Liana’s as I spoke, and we shared a moment of bitter memory. The Change is a terrible thing, for a Taint thief. One day you’re happy, and cared for, and can fly and lift and kip and do all kinds of fun tricks. Then puberty hits and the power dwindles away, never to return. You’re useless to your handler then, so he sells you off to whoever will take you. New family for Tobet, yeah, right. Just another pretty lie from Red Dal to make sure his Tainters stayed complacent, backed up by his follow-me charms. And if I tried to say different, I’d be dead before dawn, and the kids with me. The city ganglords won’t risk Tainted kids turning on them.

The kids were still chattering with excitement, the younger ones darting through the air like whiskflies. Liana caught Tamin’s ankle as he zipped past.

“Kids, calm down, all right? You’ve a busy night ahead and I don’t want anyone getting too tired.” They grumbled, but obeyed when Liana shooed them back over to their play area.

“Job tonight, huh?” I dropped into a chair next to Liana.

“Yeah. First in a couple days, so they’re a little over-excited.”

I knew better than to ask what the job was. Liana let me come around for old times’ sake, but I didn’t work for Red Dal anymore. He wouldn’t take it well if I got nosy. My gaze lingered on Melly’s dark red hair, bent over an intricate pattern of string as she chanted a rhyme along with Ness and Jeran. No telling how long she had left. I thought of the blood mage’s smile, and suppressed a shudder. As an adult, I’d heard too many stories about Changed kids sold off to anonymous buyers, never to be seen again.

Liana followed my gaze. “Dev, about Melly...” She trailed off. My stomach knotted up at the unhappiness on her face.

“What’s wrong?” Melly’s Taint couldn’t be failing already. Gods all damn it, not yet. Not when I had no chance of keeping my promise to her father.

Liana read my face. “Don’t worry, her Taint’s still strong. But...” She leaned in close, and whispered, “Morra said she saw Red Dal talking to a man wearing the badge of Karonys House.”

Under the table, my hands clenched into fists. No surprise that Red Dal was already shopping Melly around to the top pleasure houses. Sethan had been handsome enough, but his daughter looked to surpass him by far. More, she’d inherited that crazy hair of his, the deep crimson of magefire flame—a shade rarely seen in Ninavel. Red Dal would make a mint, that was sure. But Karonys House... shit. They catered to highsiders with nasty kinks, and used taphtha juice to keep their jennies compliant. Melly’d be a vacant-eyed doll within days of entering Karonys, her mind burned away forever by the taphtha. I fought down nausea.

“Nothing’s certain yet, Dev. Another house could outbid Karonys, easy.” Liana sounded like she was trying to convince herself.

“Yeah.” I didn’t trust myself to say anything more. Hell if I’d let any pleasure house get their hands on Melly, after everything Sethan had done for me after my Change. I vowed silently I’d do

whatever it took to complete Bren's gods-damned job. I'd never outbid Karonys, but my promised pay would be enough for other, riskier options. Red Dal or Karonys, neither would take well to theft of costly property, but with enough coin to cover our tracks, I could spirit Melly away and set her up proper in a new life far from Ninavel.

"I'm sorry, Dev." Liana put a gentle hand on my arm. "You all right? I heard about you and Jylla..."

I gritted my teeth. "Oh, for Khalmet's sake. You'd think someone had stood on top of the Alton Tower and announced it."

"But you two've been together since your Change! I don't understand. Just because she found a highside mark to squeeze dry...that kind of game never bothered you before." Concern was all over Liana's wide brown eyes and round face. I bit back a sour smile. Thank Khalmet, Liana didn't know the half of it. I shrugged and made an effort to sound cheerful.

"I'll be fine. I've got a job going, I'm heading out to Kost. That's why I came, wanted to say goodbye before I left."

"Oh good, I know how you love the mountains. But we'll miss you, me and the kids both." She gave me a little, wistful smile. "Take care of yourself out there, huh? Don't get eaten by wolves."

It always amused me what city people like Liana thought about the mountains. Wolves. Ha. More like avalanches and falling rocks and late-season storms. "Right. I'll make sure to fend off the wolves, and I'll bring you and the kids something from Kost."

Her eyes lit up, and for a moment I could see the skinny, shy little girl she'd once been. She always did love presents. I slipped a few coins into her hand. "Thanks for the news. Keep an eye out for Melly, huh?"

"You know I'll try," Liana said softly. I got up from the table, after another glance at Melly's fiery hair. *Grow slow, kid*, I urged her silently. *I just need a few more weeks.*

(Kiran)

Kiran shifted from foot to foot beside a trellis covered in night-blooming jasmine. For the hundredth time, he stared up at the pattern of stars visible above Lizaveta's courtyard wall. The hour of his rendezvous with Dev was fast approaching. Yet without Lizaveta's promised aid, he dared not leave Ninavel. His magic was no match for Ruslan's. Ruslan would hunt him down with the lazy ease of a sandcat, the instant he realized Kiran had fled the city. Kiran plucked a moonflower from a nearby vine, then crushed the blossom in a fist. Lizaveta had told him to come to her garden, assured him of her help...but would she keep her word? She'd known Kiran since he was a child, but she'd known Ruslan far longer.

The patter of feet on stone made him whirl. A somber youth in the pale robe of a servant slipped through the courtyard gate. His eyes downcast, he handed Kiran a sealed packet. Lizaveta's personal sigil lay in glowing violet lines over the warded seal.

Kiran placed his hand over the seal. Power stung his senses, delicate and sharp as a cat's claws, and the seal cracked open. He unfolded the packet, which proved to contain a jeweled silver disc on a thin chain, and a note in Lizaveta's spiky handwriting.

The amulet will hide you so long as you abstain from magic. You have until dawn tomorrow before Ruslan returns. Use the time wisely.

Kiran let out a shaky breath. The servant was already retreating. "Wait," he said. Obediently, the youth turned. "Tell her—" Kiran stopped. Loss and regret tangled with gratitude in his throat. "Tell her, *athanya solaen*." A farewell, one of the scant phrases he knew of Lizaveta's native tongue. He'd heard Ruslan say it to her, once.

The youth bowed, and vanished into the darkness beyond the gate. Kiran balanced Lizaveta's note on his palm, and called fire from within. Blue flames devoured the note and remained, dancing, in his cupped hand.

Such a small thing, for the last act of magic he would ever perform.

The flames vanished as Kiran snapped his hand shut. Ruthlessly, he crushed the yearning they left behind. Alisa had lost her life. His own losses paled in comparison.



The Aran Fountain stood still and silent, its stone bowl empty of all but starlight. Lord Sechaveh only ran city fountains on his favorite feast days; to do otherwise would be a shocking waste of water. The square appeared as empty as the fountain. Kiran's stomach sank. Where was Dev? Had he changed his mind?

On the far side of the fountain, a shadow moved. Kiran sighed in relief when it resolved into Dev's short, wiry form. He tried to force his muscles to relax. He had to prevent Dev from realizing the depth of his anxiety. Bren had assured him Dev wouldn't ask questions, but Kiran remembered Dev's uncomfortably sharp scrutiny in Bren's office. If Dev ever discovered the truth, he'd abandon Kiran in an instant. No untalented citizen of Ninavel would risk the wrath of a mage as powerful as Ruslan, no matter how high the pay.

Dev didn't speak as Kiran approached, only motioned for him to follow. He led the way through a maze of narrow alleys and darkened side streets, ending up in front of a cracked and splintered wooden door. The scent of animals, dung, and hay hung heavy in the air. Dev opened the door and ushered Kiran into a dusty room crowded with crates. The flickering light of a candle lantern illuminated a single rough table, covered in piles of leather straps and strange metal implements.

"Here's how this'll work." Dev pushed back his hood and dropped onto a crate, motioning Kiran to another nearby. Even in the low light, Dev's pale green eyes were as startling as Kiran remembered. Their color seemed completely out of place combined with the nut-brown skin and coarse dark hair so common in Ninavel.

"I've signed on as an outrider for the first trade convoy of the season. You're gonna be my apprentice. You're a little old for it, but I'll say your family's business failed and I'm taking you on as a favor." Dev studied him, head tilted. "Apprentice means you get food and water, no wages. And you have to work. Hard."

Kiran realized he was expecting a protest. "I can do that." Kiran had spent endless hours locked in concentration with Mikail in Ruslan's sunlit workroom, measuring out channel patterns for practice spells.

Surely mere physical labor would seem easy by comparison.

Dev looked skeptical, his eyes going to Kiran's hands, then back up to his face.

"If...I mean, if you'll show me what to do. I'm not familiar with..." Kiran eyed the tools on the table. He couldn't even guess at their purpose. "What does an outrider do, exactly?"

"What do you know about the route from Ninavel to Kost?" Dev sounded like he didn't expect Kiran to know anything at all. Kiran stiffened on his crate. He might not know much about untalented professions, but surely his knowledge of world geography far surpassed Dev's.

"It leaves the city to the west and crosses two high passes in the Whitefire Mountains before it reaches the border with Alathia. It's impassable in the winter from all the snow. The first group across is always a large one, because the merchant houses are anxious to sell."

Dev's one-sided little grin said he hadn't missed Kiran's indignation. "True, but that's not the only reason the first convoy is big. The route through the mountains isn't like some nice smooth city street. It's rocky, steep, rough, and winter avalanches and spring snowmelt mess it up pretty bad. Without repairs to the trail, wagons would never make it. So the merchant houses all chip in, money and supplies and labor, and the first convoy fixes the trail as they go. Anyone who doesn't contribute has to pay a toll, if they use the trail later in the season."

"An outrider helps with the repairs, then?"

"Nah. The convoy brings carpenters and stonemasons and their hired labor for that. Outriders work as a kind of scout. While the laborers work on one repair, we check out the terrain ahead and let the convoy boss know how badly the trail is damaged so he can plan properly for what's coming. Sometimes that just means riding up the trail a ways, but other times we need to climb up snow slopes or onto pinnacles to get a good view of the terrain. But checking trail damage isn't the big reason we're there. Our main job is the safety of the group." Dev's face had turned serious.

"You mean from bandits?" As a child, Kiran had spent hours reading adventure tales where brave soldiers fought off bandit hordes

sweeping down from the mountains to prey upon wagons full of precious cargo.

Dev made a dismissive noise. “Too early in the season, and the convoy is way too big. Gangs’ll wait ’til it’s warmer, and you get single wagons going through. No, I mean safety from the mountains. Avalanches, rockfall, storms, the like. We look at the snow and weather conditions and tell the boss if we think it’s safe enough for the teams.”

“But how can you know for sure?” Did outriders use charms of some kind? Weather magic was chancy at best, and required careful control. Kiran had never heard of a charm detailed and flexible enough to allow an untalented man that kind of power.

“You can’t.” Dev spread his hands. “You know the mountains well, you can make a pretty good guess. It’s still a guess, though. Sometimes we’re wrong, and people get hurt. Or die.”

“Have you ever...?”

“Been wrong? Not yet. I’ve seen it happen, though, when I was an apprentice. Twice. The first time, only one wagon was lost, along with two men and a team of mules. The second time was...” Dev inhaled, looked as if he were searching for a word. “Worse,” he finally said, his voice studiously calm in a way that Kiran recognized.

“Oh,” was all Kiran could think of to say. Dev sighed and leaned forward on his crate.

“Before we get to talking about gear for the trip, I need to know something.”

“What is it?” Sweat sprang out on Kiran’s palms. He’d always been better at lying by omission.

Dev hesitated, frowning slightly. “Look, I’m just the courier, and whatever your reasons for this, they’re none of my business. But one thing is my business, because it affects how I do my job. You want to keep this little trip of yours quiet, that’s fine. But what kind of attention are we talking about hiding from, here?”

Kiran took a careful breath. “Primarily the Alathian authorities at the border. But I also need to avoid drawing the attention of anyone in the employ of Suns-eye or Koliman House.” Both were among the largest of the banking houses in Ninavel. With luck, Dev would assume his journey to Alathia was merely part of one the clandestine

power maneuvers the great houses were famous for making. Should he tell Dev that he'd already taken precautions against magical methods of tracing? No, Dev would want to know what sort of precautions, and that would raise too many dangerous questions. Better to keep it simple.

"Exactly how intently will they be watching for you?"

"You needn't worry about any concerted effort on their part. They don't know I'm traveling to Kost. I only need to keep it that way."

"And that's all." Dev's eyes had narrowed. "You sure?"

Kiran met Dev's searching gaze. One heartbeat's worth of power, and Dev would believe anything he said. He throttled the urge. "Of course I'm sure."

Dev studied him a moment longer, then shrugged. "Fine. We'll only do some easy stuff, then." He tossed a small wax-sealed lacquer box to Kiran. "Hair dye. Rub that through your hair, and then I'll use a binding charm to set it. It'll turn your hair brown instead of black, make your coloring a little more like a northern Arkenlander's." The corner of his mouth lifted again. "Right now you stand out like a raven among sage hens. Oh, and we'll cut your hair some, so you look less highside."

Dev slid a small silver disc from his pocket, the size of a decet coin. "You'll need to wear this, either next to your skin or tied in your hair." At Kiran's questioning glance, he held it up in the light. "It's a look-away charm. Subtle, not flashy. Lots of us wear charms of one kind or another, nobody'll notice it." He indicated the silver bracelets on his own wrists, which Kiran recognized from the rune tracings as simple protective charms.

Dev held out the look-away charm. Kiran took it, gingerly. To his relief, the charm lay quiet in his hand, with no sparking or flaring coming from either it or Lizaveta's amulet, safely hidden under his clothes. Good. That meant Dev's charm was small and simple enough in purpose not to cause any pattern interference with the magic of the amulet. Kiran set down the charm and opened the box of dye. The pasty muck within smelled absolutely terrible.

Kiran forced himself to scoop up a handful. "Please tell me the stink goes away after using the binding charm."

For the first time since Kiran had met him, Dev laughed. “Think of it as practice for the trip, city boy. Have you ever smelled the shit from an entire convoy’s worth of mules?” He laughed even harder at Kiran’s reflexive grimace.

CHAPTER TWO

(Dev)

First time I'd seen a mountain convoy preparing to head out, only my fierce determination to impress Sethan kept me from slack-jawed gaping. The sheer number of men, beasts and wagons crammed into the staging yard was incredible enough, but it was the swarming efficiency of the preparations that had stunned me. Ganglords could only wish their crews were that fast and disciplined. When later I'd described my amazement to Jylla, a wry gleam had lit her slanted black eyes. *The toughest ganglord's not more than a sandmite in the eye of a highside merchant house*, she'd said.

Jylla. Gods all damn it, how long before every memory of her wasn't like a fucking knife to the gut?

I made sure my face was blank before I turned to Kiran, but I needn't have bothered. He was so busy goggling at all the commotion in the staging yard that I could have been wailing curses like a Varkevan demon singer and he wouldn't have noticed a thing. I checked him over one last time in the pale dawn light. His newly brown hair hung just below his collar instead of halfway down his back, grit lined his nails, and his clothes were old and ill-fitting but good tough leather.

Yeah, he'd pass for a streetsider. So long as he remembered to keep his mouth shut, anyway.

The westgate staging yard lay right inside the bulwark of the city's towering sandstorm wall, and the noise echoing off the smooth stones was deafening. Men were yelling to each other, mules braying, horses whinnying, all mixed in with the crash of crates being stacked and secured on wagons. I had to grab Kiran's arm to get his attention.

"Come on. We'll check in with the head outrider at our supply wagon, then pick up mounts from the horsemaster." I dodged my way through a trampling herd of burly packers hefting crates.

Kiran trailed after me. "You don't have your own horse?"

"Are you kidding? Do you know how much a horse eats? It'd be stupid to own one when I only use 'em on outrider jobs. Pack mules are better if you're going solo."

We'd nearly reached the sturdy, weathered wagon painted with the outrider mark, indistinct black shapes resembling crossed ice axes. I recognized the tall, lean woman in sun-faded leathers who waited there. So, Cara had made head outrider? I'd never admit it to her, but I was impressed. Though Cara was a good six years my senior, she was young for the top spot on such a large convoy.

Kiran's face said he was dying to ask another question, but he shut his mouth as Cara strode forward. Good boy.

"Dev! I heard you were on for this job!" She caught me up in a spinecracking hug.

"Ease up, huh? I might need my ribs later." I pretended to gasp for air. Cara laughed and let go, her teeth flashing white in her deeply tanned face. Her blonde hair was bleached to the color of old bone, and with that tan, she must've spent her winter on the desert routes. I thumped her shoulder. "You've been working eastbound? Did you sign up when you were drunk? Those aren't mountains, they're sandhills."

"The climbing's no good, but the sandcat hunting makes up for it. At least I didn't sit on my ass in the city all winter. How do you stand it?"

"There are compensations," I said. She rolled her eyes.

"That's right, your she-viper of a business partner, I forgot. She still got you by the piton straps?"

Cara must be the one person in the entire city who hadn't heard, and I wasn't going to be the one to tell her. She'd never understood my bond with Jylla. If I had to listen to a chorus of "I told you so" all the way to Kost, I'd end up shoving Cara off a cliff. Fortunately, I had the perfect distraction.

"Cara, meet my apprentice, Kellan na Erinta." I gestured with a flourish to Kiran. I'd chosen his false name carefully. The first name was common as sand in Ninavel, yet close enough to Kiran's own to help him remember to respond. The last name used the old-fashioned Arkennlandish mode still popular among northern immigrants, to match his odd coloring.

Cara's pale brows shot up. "You? An apprentice? It's been, what, four whole years since your own apprentice days—you getting bored already?"

"His family's having trouble paying for their water rations. Bad times with their business, you know how that goes. I'm taking him off their hands as a favor." I put on my best virtuous expression.

"Hmm." Cara squinted at Kiran. I held my breath. The look-away charm would keep him forgettable and easy to overlook by the casual observer, but it wouldn't prevent direct scrutiny, and Cara had a keen eye.

After a moment's study, a wicked smile spread over her face. "You know, kid, if Dev throws you out, you can come to me. I'm sure we could work something out." She looked him up and down again, slowly and deliberately, and winked.

Well. First test passed, anyway. I glanced at Kiran, and didn't know whether to laugh or groan. His cheeks flamed and he looked about a heartbeat away from bolting. At least he didn't get all snooty and offended, highsider style. As it was, I gripped the back of his arm where Cara couldn't see, and squeezed. Hard. If he wanted to pass as a streetsider, acting like a sheltered sulaikh-maiden wasn't the way to do it.

"Need a bucket for that drool?" I asked Cara. "Must have been a long eastbound run. I hear those outriders turn into dried up old sticks, out there in all that heat and sun."

"This dried up old stick wants you to get your ass on a horse

already. Meldon's about to order us to form up." Cara pointed at the convoy boss on his high platform overlooking the yard. As Kiran turned to see, she leaned over to me and spoke quietly. "Seriously, Dev, you'll have to keep an eye on him. Kid is too pretty for his own good, and it's clear he's got no clue how to handle it. Teach him how to say no nicely. I don't want any trouble, hear?"

I sighed. Cara's reaction to Kiran only confirmed what I'd suspected. Those high cheekbones and all that fine highsider skin and hair threatened to attract unwanted attention, no matter how many look-away charms I hung on him. No help for it but for me to keep him out of the way as much as possible.

"I've got it handled," I assured Cara. The horsemaster and his little group of spare mounts stood only a few wagons away. As Kiran and I headed over, I called back to Cara, "Who's our third rider, then?"

"Jerik." She pointed to a sinewy man with night-black skin who stood talking to an elderly drover. I hadn't recognized him from the back, but once Cara said the name, I knew him. Last I'd seen him, he didn't have the threads of gray streaking his braided hair. I'd worked with him once or twice back when I'd been Sethan's apprentice. Jerik was a good climber. Better yet, he was quiet and kept to himself. Perfect.

As we neared the horsemaster, my satisfaction disappeared in a hurry. Three wagons over, a thin-faced drover with a wild mop of curls was watching me as he checked the buckles of his mule team's traces. Khalmet's hand, what was Pello doing here? He worked for one of Bren's competitors in a different ganglord's district, but as a shadow man, not a courier. Merchant houses were always eager for privileged information on their competitors' shipments, and men like Pello made good coin sniffing out secrets. But shadow men stayed local, as a rule, haunting warehouses, stabling yards, and taverns. It wasn't unheard of for one to work a convoy route, but the timing sure as hell made me suspicious. If he'd gotten wind somehow of this gods-damned little stunt, I'd have real trouble keeping Kiran's trip to Kost quiet. Not to mention the potential disaster at the border if Pello decided to sell me out to the Alathians.

"We'll be riding those?" Kiran was eyeing the shaggy ponies beside

the horsemaster's wagon with a distinctly dubious expression.

Pello's gaze hadn't left us. I clapped Kiran on the back, and said loudly, "Don't worry, they don't buck. They're sturdy, patient sorts who don't mind a novice rider, and they'll carry you safe over rocky trails and through mountain storms." As opposed to the graceful, highstrung animals highsiders rode.

Kiran's abashed glance said he'd guessed my meaning well enough. The horsemaster turned, chuckling.

"New to convoy work, eh? Never fear, boy, I've the perfect mount for you." He urged Kiran toward a stocky bay gelding with a graying muzzle and a phlegmatic air.

I leaned against the wagon, met Pello's eyes, and nodded, deliberately casual. Pello returned the nod, a sly little grin creasing his coppery face.

I resisted the urge to grit my teeth. Damn it, I needed to talk to Kiran about Pello, and fast. But I couldn't do it in a crowded staging yard where anyone might overhear, and the convoy was about to leave. I'd have to wait until I could arrange a moment alone with Kiran on the trail.

The horsemaster returned with Kiran and the gelding in tow. After a quick discussion, I secured a pinto mare for myself, and a pile of tack. Kiran followed my instructions readily enough as I showed him how to check over and adjust the gelding's saddle. I watched carefully as he swung himself up. It wasn't smooth, or graceful, but he managed it without help, which I took as a good sign.

Cara was already mounted and waiting when we returned. "You and Kellan take the mid station, with the supply wagon. Jerik's on point, and I'll take the rear."

I nodded and tried to look grateful. Cara had seen Kiran's inexperience and was giving us a chance to let Kiran switch off riding the horse with riding in the wagon. But as long as we stayed with the supply wagon, we'd be in earshot of Harken, our wagon's drover. Harken had handled the outrider supply wagon for convoys longer than I'd been alive, and he was canny as they came, despite his laid back demeanor.

"At midmeal, Kellan and I can switch stations with you for a bit,

if you want to eat in comfort while we get some exercise.” I gave Cara a meaningful look, which I hoped she’d interpret as me wanting to work on my apprentice’s shaky riding skills away from any catcalling drovers.

“Fine with me.” The amused approval in her blue eyes told me she’d taken it the way I wanted. She turned her horse and trotted off along the snaking line of wagons.

Kiran watched her go with a little, puzzled frown. “Why aren’t we all riding together?” His voice was low and hesitant. At my encouraging glance, he spoke a little louder. “You said an outrider’s job doesn’t truly start until we reach the high mountains...”

“Yeah, but rockfall’s a danger even in the lower reaches of the canyons. Each outrider sticks with a different part of the convoy so if a bad rockfall or avalanche hits, then only one outrider gets injured or killed. If the convoy lost all its outriders, there’d be nobody to safely direct the search for survivors, or scout once the convoy moves on.” He’d never know how cold that logic really was. I still had screaming nightmares about the terrible day Sethan had died.

Metal squealed, followed by a deep groaning sound. I straightened in my saddle, anticipation driving unpleasant memories into hiding. Far up ahead, the great western gate swung open, massive metal doors being pulled apart with a system of gears. My heart lifted as the mountains beyond came into view. The snow on their tops blazed fiery pink with dawn alpenglow, ridges and pinnacles standing out in sharp relief. The beauty took my breath away, and for a moment I felt like the luckiest guy in the whole world, forgetting all about Jylla and the job and all the rest of it. I couldn’t keep a grin off my face as Meldon shouted, a hand bell rang, and the first teams of mules started forward in their traces. There’s nothing like the thrill of starting a mountain trip.



My horse plodded up the sandy trail after the outrider wagon. Harken appeared to be dozing on the wagon’s frontboard, his broad-brimmed hat tilted down over his face, but I wasn’t fooled. Soon

as Cara returned, I'd drag my so-called apprentice off for our long-delayed private conversation. I'd been chewing over Pello's possible involvement all morning. No surprise that Kiran's little tale of banking houses wasn't the full story; I hadn't expected anything different. But if he'd lied to me about the level of scrutiny we faced, then highsider or no, I'd make him regret it.

Kiran sure didn't seem concerned now. He'd been snarled up tight as coilvine when we'd met at the fountain, but the stiff set of his shoulders had begun to ease the moment we passed the Whitefire gate. He almost looked relaxed, wedged between lumpy oilcloth sacks in the back of the wagon. His head was bent over some spare strands of rope as he diligently practiced the climbing knots I'd shown him earlier. It reminded me of Melly and the other kids with their string game, and I turned away.

Behind us, the remainder of the trade convoy stretched in a long line back down the trail. It had taken us all morning to cross the alkali flats outside the city walls. Now we'd reached gently rising slopes, covered in sagebrush and rabbitbrush, punctuated by occasional black lumps of whorled glassy rock and worn into folds by dry gullies. The only rain that ever fell in the Painted Valley came from rare but vicious summer thunderstorms that sent flash floods scouring over the parched soil, eroding it faster than a man could run.

It was hot already, the air shimmering and dancing above the alkali flats, making the city's shining white walls and pale spires seem to float above the ground. Ninavel always looks beautiful from the outside, and unreal. A mirage-city, completely out of place in the harsh heat of the deep desert valley. Behind the city towers, in the distance loomed the brown outlines of the dry, barren Bolthole Mountains that formed the eastern side of the valley, much lower and less rugged than the Whitefires. The haunt of sandcats with claws longer than a man's hand and the strength to crunch a man's skull into jelly; Cara was crazy for hunting them with nothing more than a crossbow fortified with a longsight charm.

I turned frontways again. Kiran's gaze had fixed on the city. His blue eyes darkened with something that reminded me of Red Dal sighing over a highsider house warded too well to risk sending Tainters

inside. His fingers clenched around the half-finished knot, so tight his knuckles showed white.

So. Not as relaxed as he'd seemed, then. "Sometimes it's a hard thing, leaving the city," I said.

Kiran started. "What? Oh. Yes, I...I suppose." He fumbled at the knot again, his eyes darting to mine and then away. "Though it's... well, it's exciting, too. Traveling the mountains, like adventurers from a tale...I hadn't imagined I'd ever get to make a journey like this." A hint of wistful amazement touched his face.

"Oh, the excitement's just starting," I said, more curious than ever. Maybe he was only playing his streetside role, but I didn't think he was so good an actor. Highsiders had the coin to travel if they liked—but then, he'd implied he worked for a banking house, and certainly they were said to have rigid notions of a man's duties. A banking house even fit with Bren's covert instructions; they never trusted anyone. Hell if I could come up with any good reason for a banking house to try and sneak a person across the Alathian border, though. Banking houses loved their secrets same as all the other merchant houses, but I could think of a hundred less risky ways to pass private information or materials between Ninavel and Kost.

A jingle of straps and clomping of hooves filled the air, and our section of the convoy moved over to the side, allowing room for a Ninavel-bound mule train. This low down the trail was wide enough for two groups to pass easily, although the cloud of dust and sand kicked up by the passing mules sent Kiran into a coughing fit.

"Here." I tossed him my waterskin. "Remember, we're on strict water rations until we ascend out of the Painted Valley—so don't guzzle it all." Merchant houses hated to waste their weight allowances on water. Part of the convoy boss's job was to figure out the minimum amount of stores necessary to keep us all from collapsing of thirst before we reached the first high mountain stream.

Kiran took a careful few swallows. He capped the waterskin and handed it back, not without a last longing look at it.

"Where were those mules coming from? I thought we would be the first group coming through the pass?"

"From the mines." I pointed higher up on the valley slopes, where

the sagebrush scrub changed over to broken cliffs. The rock there was scarred and dotted with the dark holes of mineshafts. Tailings piles streaked vivid colors across the dull tan slopes below. “Most of the mines are low enough they can be worked year round.”

“What kind of mines?” he asked, and I stared. What kind of highsider wouldn’t know the answer to that, let alone someone supposedly involved with a banking house? Most families who’d made it big in Ninavel had done so through the mines or the selling of their products. Banking house, my ass. Unless...maybe Kiran was newly come to Ninavel? But no, from the way he’d gaped around at the desert beyond the city gate like a Tainter on his first job highside, I’d swear he’d never set foot outside Ninavel in his life.

“Gold, silver, copper, iron, you name it, these mountains have got it.” I kept my tone casual, but watched his face. “Why else do you think old Sechaveh went to all the trouble of building the city here in the first place?”

Just for a second, surprise showed in his eyes. But then they turned thoughtful, and he nodded. “Oh yes, I see. He founded the city here and then could make his money back from the mines.”

“In vaultfuls,” I said. What other reason could there be? The Painted Valley held nothing else but sand and sagebrush. Ninavel had to import or conjure everything needed to survive. Without the enormous wealth from the mines, the city would’ve failed in a season. Instead, Sechaveh and his heirs were now richer than the most outrageous tales of Varkevian sultans, and plenty of others had clawed their way to riches on his coat hem in the hundred years since he’d founded Ninavel. Sechaveh himself was a popular tavern topic streetside. Some said he had to be a mage, arguing no man could live as long as he had without magic. Others disagreed, pointing out his large numbers of descendants and the well-known fact that mages can’t have kids. They said Sechaveh was so wealthy he could pay for immortality the way other men paid for healing charms.

“About the mountains...” Kiran’s face shone with eager interest. I waved a hand at him to continue. So long as he stuck to questions any new hire straight from an inner district might ask, he could ask away. “What you said this morning—do you really go alone up there?”

“Yup.”

His eyes went wide as a snow owl’s. “But why?”

“Convoys only need real climbing outriders in the early and late seasons. In high summer, it’s no problem to travel through. A man’s gotta eat the rest of the year round.” I didn’t bother telling him the real reason for my solo trips. I couldn’t imagine anything better than a summer spent climbing in the Whitefires. I’d long since given up trying to explain the allure of the high peaks to my city friends. Most of them just thought I was crazier than a rabid kitfox.

“But...” He frowned. “How do you make money, then, if you’re not with a convoy?”

“The Whitefires hold plenty of profitable goods, if you know where to look.” His confused frown didn’t change, so I went on. “Take carcarbon stones. Charm dealers’ll pay good coin for any big enough to boost a charm’s power, and the cliffs here are studded with ’em. Chefs drool over cloudberries, midwives want jullan leaves...you get the idea. I find stuff, bring it back, sell it and resupply, then head back up. Until the season’s over and the winter storms come, and then nobody goes up there until spring.”

“Oh! I never...” He cut himself off, real short. Then tried to hide it by rattling on. “What do you do in the winter?”

If he’d been about to say he’d never known where highside delicacies like cloudberries came from, then thank Khalmet he’d shut up in time. Old Harken wasn’t even pretending to sleep, now. I realized Kiran was still waiting for my answer.

“If I have a good enough summer, I don’t have to do anything in the winter.” Which wasn’t a lie, exactly, but I certainly wasn’t going to get into details on the shadow games I played in the city. Especially since they’d all involved Jylla.

“Ho, Dev!” Cara cantered out of the settling dust cloud.

Fucking finally. “Come on, Kellan.” I waited impatiently while Kiran climbed back on his horse. “I owe you one,” I muttered to Cara.

She vaulted onto the wagon’s outboard. “I know.” Her smug smile said she’d collect on it, too. She flipped a hand in a mocking little wave. “Have fun, boys.”

I had Kiran ride in front of me, ostensibly so I could watch how he handled the horse. In truth, I wanted to keep an eye on the drovers' reactions as the heavily laden wagons rumbled past us. Several drovers raised their hats to me, but their eyes slid off Kiran as if he weren't even there. His look-away charm was working, all right.

Pello's wagon was the second of five marked with the circle and hammer of Horavin House, near the end of the line. Pello himself sat slouched on the frontboard with his mule team's reins dangling idly from one hand. He studied Kiran with undisguised interest as we approached, unaffected by the charm. Kiran shifted uneasily in his saddle and shot a glance back at me. I willed him to stay silent.

"Dev, I never thought to see a man like you with an apprentice," Pello called out.

"There's a first time for everything, Pello." I'd wanted a clue about whether his interest in Kiran was specific or only the result of a shadow man's finely honed curiosity, and I supposed he'd given me one. Surely if he'd been hired to ferret out our plans, he wouldn't be so damn obvious about it. Unless he'd guessed my intent, and was playing to my assumptions? I cursed under my breath. Mind games like this had always been Jylla's specialty, not mine.

That thought didn't improve my mood any. I scowled at Kiran's back for the rest of the ride past the convoy. Soon as we passed the final wagon, I led the way off the trail and into a gully whose steep sides were dotted with spiny blackshrub. The syrup-sweet smell baking off the branches in the midday sun was chokingly strong. Nobody'd follow us here without good reason. I slowed my horse to an amble.

"We need to talk," I told Kiran, grimly.

"So I gathered." His shoulders had tightened up again. "What's wrong? Is this about that man who spoke to you?"

At least he wasn't totally oblivious. "Got any ideas why a shadow man's interested in you?"

He blinked at me. "A what?"

"Freelance spy. Sells information to the highest bidder, with a ganglord as middle man." Though in Pello's case, if he'd gone to all the trouble of joining the convoy, he must be on retainer for a specific job. "Pello's here for a reason, and I need to know if it's you. If there's

anything you failed to mention back in Ninavel, now would be the fucking time.”

Kiran looked honestly taken aback. “He can’t be here because of me. I told you, no one knew I was leaving Ninavel.”

Oh, for Khalmet’s sake. He couldn’t be that dumb. Right? “No one, huh? What about that banking house of yours? You know for a fact nobody let something slip by accident?”

His eyes had flickered at my sarcastic emphasis on “banking house,” but he raised his chin and met my gaze straight on. “He doesn’t know who I am. Unless *your* employer was indiscreet.”

I snorted. Bren hadn’t run a successful smuggling business all these years by being sloppy. “Fine, let’s say Pello’s here on another job. That won’t stop him from seeking a little profit on the side. The minute he figures out you’re no streetsider, he’ll sell you out in a flash to Suns-Eye or Koliman, long before we reach the border.”

Kiran jumped as if I’d stabbed him with the business end of a piton. “You mean, Pello can send messages back to Ninavel? How? I thought convoy workers didn’t have access to such powerful charms!”

Interesting. Back in the city, Kiran had claimed he was most concerned about the Alathians at the border. The horror on his face now told a different story. “Ordinary convoy men don’t. But Pello spies on merchant houses for a living. He’ll have something, all right. Maybe not powerful enough to send more than a few words, but with the right codes, that’s all you need.”

“Oh.” Kiran swallowed, hard. “That would be...unfortunate.” He fiddled with his reins, then burst out with, “Once we cross the border, I don’t care what messages Pello sends. But if news of me reaches Ninavel before then, it’ll...it’ll ruin everything!”

I glared at him. “If you’d told me how *unfortunate* back when I asked, I would’ve done a hell of a lot more to hide you.” A disguise charm powerful enough to wholly alter a man’s appearance cost the moon, especially on such short notice, but I could have demanded Bren produce a second advance.

Kiran flushed and looked down. “I’m sorry. I thought if I stayed anonymous leaving the city, I wouldn’t have to worry about word getting back...” One hand rubbed his chest, over his heart, in an odd,

nervous gesture. “What do we do?”

I sighed. “For now, you act your part, and stay clear of Pello. His charm’s likely only strong enough to send one message, maybe two. He won’t use it unless he’s sure he’ll profit.” Meanwhile, I’d have to come up with a plan to cover that scenario. Great. Pello was no fool, and as a shadow man, his experience dwarfed mine in fighting dirty. I scowled all the harder at Kiran. “Anything else you’d like to share, *before* it bites us in the ass?”

He shook his head, still staring at his saddle horn. Not exactly a response to inspire confidence. I leaned over and grabbed his reins. The gelding cast a reproachful eye at me as I yanked him to a stop. Kiran jerked his head up, blue eyes gone wide.

“You want to reach Alathia safe and sound, with no one the wiser? I can make that happen, but only if you tell me what I need to do my fucking job. Understand?”

“Yes.” He had the solemn, earnest look of a Tainter being chided by his minder. I flung his reins back in his lap.

“Remember: lay low. Don’t do anything to draw attention, from Pello or anyone else. And stick close to me—don’t give him a chance to get you alone.” If Pello forced Kiran into conversation, I gave Kiran five minutes tops before Pello sniffed out his highside origins.

He nodded, still all serious and intent. I aimed my horse straight at the gully’s steep side. Time to play out the role of off-trail riding lesson, in case any curious eyes were watching. In the meantime, I could ponder what I’d learned from our little conversation. So far I’d mostly gained a whole new set of questions. Chief among them: who or what back in Ninavel had Kiran jumping like a frightened snaprat?



(Kiran)

“Here. Have some breakfast.” Dev tossed Kiran a lump of bread.

Kiran nearly fumbled the catch in the dim predawn light. He’d never seen a more unappetizing meal. The bread was dense as rock and

studded with unidentifiable dark chunks he could only hope signified dates or nuts. A far cry from his usual fare of cinnamon spice cakes drizzled with peachflower honey, or perhaps savory rolls with diced kelnar nuts...his stomach rumbled.

Dev wore the little one-sided grin suggesting he knew exactly what Kiran was thinking. "Eat up, Kellan. You'll need your strength." He jerked a thumb at the horses they'd just finished saddling.

Kiran smothered a groan. His groin and legs already protested every time he moved. The memory of his blithe certainty the day before about the ease of physical labor was a bitter one.

Dev chuckled heartlessly. "Hurts, does it? Don't worry, you'll feel better after a few days. Just remember to stretch your muscles out like I showed you, any time we take a break." He stuffed a chunk of bread in his mouth and heaved a supply sack onto the wagon.

Despite the deceptively gradual ascent out of the Painted Valley, the convoy had climbed higher than the tallest towers of the city before stopping for the night. Ninavel glimmered on the vast emptiness of the desert plain below, magelights fading with approaching dawn. Kiran shut his eyes. Even with his mental barriers up at full strength, the roiling confluence of earth forces beneath the city blazed like a lake of fire in his inner sight. He'd never before seen the confluence from the outside, in all its wild, turbulent glory. Within the city, the bone-deep pulse of its shifting currents had been as much a part of life as the air he breathed. Only now could Kiran fully appreciate why only the strongest of mages could harness its forces, and even then, only at a remove.

The earth beneath his feet already felt dead in comparison. As for the mountains...Kiran turned. The Whitefires stretched skyward before him, their snowy peaks burning crimson. Beautiful enough, but completely inert, from a magical standpoint. From all he had read, Alathia would be little different. Kiran denied the longing ache deep within. He had no intention of casting any spells in Alathia and risking discovery by their Council. The Alathians weren't known for their mercy toward foreigners caught working illegal magic.

Crimson changed to gold as the sun slipped over the eastern rim of the valley. Kiran's heart thumped painfully in his chest. If Lizaveta's

note was accurate, any moment now Ruslan would return to Ninavel. And when he found Kiran gone...

The bread was ashes in Kiran's mouth. He stood, abruptly. Too late, he noticed Cara watching him as she secured straps on the supply wagon.

"Hey, kid, you look a little rough today. You being mean to him already, Dev?"

"Mean? Me? You know I'm the soul of kindness." Dev assumed an expression of injured innocence. He darted a glance at Kiran. "He'll be fine. He's just not used to sleeping on hard ground yet, right, Kellan?"

Kiran nodded, trying to imitate Dev's relaxed posture.

Dev swung up on his horse with easy, thoughtless grace. "His family was in the bookbinding business, you know. City folk, nice and soft," he said to Cara.

Kiran clambered onto his horse, with considerably less grace than Dev. Abused muscles screamed as he settled into the saddle, and he nearly bit through his cheek in his effort not to cry out. Dev and Cara exchanged an amused glance, and Cara shook her head.

"Dev, only you would take a city boy on as an apprentice."

Dev shrugged. "Sethan did it for me, back in the day. And hey, we can't all have outrider parents."

To Kiran's surprise, Cara looked away, as if made uncomfortable by Dev's words. But when she spoke, her voice remained teasing. "You were a tough little brat, as I recall, and you could already climb like a whiptail. Soft, my ass."

"Couldn't ride for shit, though. I thought I was gonna kill Sethan when he made me get back on a horse our second day out." Dev directed a knowing grin at Kiran. "Bet you're cursing me to Shaikar's seventh hell and back right now."

"It's not so bad," Kiran lied. A thread of curiosity surfaced through his nerves. He tried to picture Dev as an awkward young outrider apprentice, and failed. Even though Dev couldn't be that much older than Kiran—five years at the most—Kiran couldn't imagine him without his air of casual competence. He'd assumed Dev had learned all his skills since earliest childhood, raised in some kind of outriding

family, but apparently that wasn't the case. Perhaps he could find a way to ask Dev about it, without inviting any unfortunate questions in return. The last thing Kiran wanted to discuss was his own childhood.

"Aw, listen to him," Cara said. "Still all polite. Now there's a nice change from your foul mouth, Dev."

Before Dev could reply, a bell clanged out from the head of the convoy. The level of commotion rose a notch as wagons began creaking their way back onto the trail. Cara tossed her long blonde braid over her shoulder and vaulted into her saddle, the mockery gone from her tanned face. "You and the kid get the rear station today. Jerik's on point scouting the lower canyon, and I'm with the wagon."

Dev flicked a hand in acknowledgement. He turned to Kiran. "You ready?"

"Yes. Should I—"

Raw, unadulterated power slammed outward from the city. Invisible and inaudible, yet Ruslan's magic blazed forth with the screaming intensity of a sandstorm. Kiran's senses reeled as Lizaveta's amulet seared fire into his skin. Dimly, he was aware of falling; then an impact knocked him breathless. The surge of magic washed over him, seeking onward through the valley. Kiran was left sprawled in the sand with one foot still caught in a stirrup.

"I hate to think what's gonna happen when your horse actually starts moving." Dev leaned down from his saddle and freed Kiran's foot, his face full of amused disgust. Beyond, men continued to bustle around the convoy wagons, hitching mules and securing gear, as if nothing had happened. Kiran shook his head in amazement. He'd known the untalented couldn't sense magic, but this...how could they be so blind? His ears still buzzed with the sheer force of Ruslan's fury.

"Muscle cramp," Kiran mumbled to Dev. He waved Dev's offered hand away and staggered to his feet. "Sorry. Caught me by surprise." Awe and terror tightened his throat. That blast of magic had been Ruslan's alone, with no help from the great forces of the confluence. Kiran had always known Ruslan was powerful, but he'd never had quite so vivid a demonstration of Ruslan's strength.

"Told you, you should stretch." Dev's expression was bland,

though his green eyes were sharp as ever. Kiran wanted to inspect the amulet for any damage, but under that gaze he didn't dare. Dev was already suspicious enough of Kiran's cover story. If Dev realized a mage hunted them, he'd plead with Pello to send a message to Ruslan, in hopes of saving himself. Kiran bit his tongue in frustration. Finding and destroying Pello's charm would be child's play, if he used magic. But the instant he did, he might as well shout his location straight into Ruslan's ear.

Kiran remounted his horse. This time the ache in his muscles faded to insignificance under the weight of his nerves. Ruslan's initial salvo had been a matter of impulse, the equivalent of a single, visceral shout of anger. Now Ruslan would plan his spellwork in earnest. Mindful of Dev's eyes on him, Kiran suppressed a shiver.

CHAPTER THREE

(Dev)

“**Y**ou sure you didn’t crack your skull in that little tumble this morning?” I asked Kiran, as our horses followed the tail wagon of the convoy around yet another dusty switchback. “You’ve barely said two words all day.”

“I’m fine.” Kiran’s head was bowed, his shoulders stiff. “It’s just so hot.”

True enough that the midday sun blazed fiercely enough to turn a man’s brains to sludge. But yesterday’s equally blistering heat hadn’t kept him from a steady stream of questions.

“Well, good news: we’ve reached Silverlode Canyon.” I pointed ahead, where the trail left the sagebrush to disappear into a narrow gash in the pale cliffs. “In Silverlode, the heat’ll ease some. And we’ll be done with this gods-damned sand.”

“Oh. Good.” Kiran’s gaze stayed locked on his saddle.

So long as he hadn’t thumped his head badly enough to get brain sickness, he could stay silent as a sand lump if he liked. Though after long hours spent wrestling with the problem of Pello and his charm, I could’ve used a nice distracting conversation.

Red Dal had taught me a whole host of dirty tricks for disabling charms, and the more inspired ones even worked without the Taint. Problem was, they all depended on direct access to the charm in question. A clever man like Pello was sure to use serious protective wards to hide his charm stash from prying eyes. I might search his wagon a thousand times and never find the message charm. And try as I might, I couldn't come up with a way to arrange an unfortunate accident for Pello that wouldn't risk killing other, innocent men. Maybe Jylla was right and Sethan had turned me soft, but I didn't much like the thought of killing innocents for my own gain.

I sighed as my mare clopped up the final rock-strewn incline leading to the canyon's mouth. No, there had to be a way to break Pello's wards. I'd learned in my Tainted days that a little creativity can go a long way. I just had to figure how to apply it right.

Within the confines of the canyon, sand changed over to jumbled boulders. Great cliffs reared skyward on either side, hiding the high peaks from view. The sight of those familiar awe-inspiring cliffs improved my mood considerably. Even Kiran perked up a bit, staring at the heights rather than his saddle.

As we wound along the canyon's north slope, the kreeling shriek of a banhawk echoed off the sheer wall above. I turned to Kiran, wanting to see if he'd flinch or grab for a charm. That faint accent of his...I'd once shadowed a group of Kaithan traders who'd come straight from the southern blight. The liquid slur of their speech was the closest match I'd come up with for Kiran's oddly inflected vowels. And southerners were all superstitious as hell. Varkevians, Sulanians, Kaithans...even the ones who scoffed at the vast southern pantheon of demons still wore devil-ward charms and turned pale at the sight of a banhawk.

Curiosity brightened Kiran's face as he watched the hulking black shape soar past. "What kind of bird is that? I've never seen one so large."

Ah. Banhawks were rarely seen in the city. I'd spied them on occasion perched near butcher shops and slaughteryards in hopes of snatching up offal, but I'd forgotten a highsider wouldn't have cause to visit such places, not with servants to buy meat for them.

“Banehawk,” I said. “They eat carrion. Some say they’ve the souls of devils banished from Shaikar’s hells, and their call’s a death omen. Half the men in this convoy are snatching at devil-ward charms right now.”

“Devil-ward charm?” Kiran peered at me like he wasn’t sure if I was joking. “But devils are only stories. What would such a charm even do?”

Well. His accent couldn’t be Kaithan, then. I snorted. “Nothing. They’re just a way for streetside charmsellers to make easy coin. Slap together some loops of copper, etch on some fancy-looking sigils, and sell it to superstitious marks who’ll never know it’s got no magic.”

Superstitious though they were, southerners did know how to tell a good story. Khalmet’s their god of luck, and they say he has one hand of human flesh and one of skeletal bone. If he taps you with the flesh hand, your luck is good, but if he taps you with the other, no charm will save you from disaster. Any man who spends time in the mountains sees enough people die through no fault of their own for that to make perfect sense. But I’d never seen reason to believe invisible devils lurked about waiting to poison men’s souls. In my experience, men were capable of evil enough on their own.

Kiran shook his head. “But any mage could tell them the charm was worthless.”

I cast him a sharp, quelling glance. Thank Khalmet we were riding far enough back from the convoy that no drovers should’ve heard that little comment.

Confusion mixed with unease on his face. I leaned toward him and muttered, “Ask a mage? Right. Because so many of those live streetside. Besides, devils might be the stuff of campfire tales, but mages can kill you just as nastily. Ganglords and highsiders may think themselves clever enough to deal direct with mages, but ordinary streetside folk know to keep well clear.”

Kiran winced. “I see,” he said softly. His lips pressed together, his expression turning as stubbornly withdrawn as it had been before we entered the canyon.

I sighed. I hadn’t meant to shut him up entirely. But then, better he rode in silence than make any more dangerous slips of the tongue.

Pello's wagon wasn't far up the line.

The afternoon wore on and the trail grew ever more rocky as we continued the relentless ascent. I kept an eye on the clouds overhead, which had started as occasional tiny puffs and were by now numerous and much larger. Still white, but I was guessing that would change soon. Sure enough, Meldon's bell rang out once we reached a spot where the upward grade of the canyon lessened enough for the drovers to safely halt the wagons. We hadn't reached the trees yet, but head high catsclaw bushes choked the boulder-strewn bottom of the canyon, which meant water lurked down there.

"We're stopping here?" Kiran asked.

"Yep. See those clouds? They've been building all day, and there's likely to be a storm. Cara's told the boss, and he's decided to stop for the night. Better to have plenty of time to cover everything nice and tight and set up shelter."

"But what about water? I thought you said we wouldn't stop today until we hit a stream?"

"We have." I pointed down at the silvery green sea of catsclaw. "Catsclaw only grows where it's wet enough. There'll be a trickle of water down there. It'll be a pain in the ass to bash through the bushes and fill the jugs, but it's possible. We've got enough water left in the barrels to last the evening, but tomorrow morning we'll have to replenish our stores." I peered at the sky again. "It may even rain some, but I doubt it. This side of the mountains, you mainly get hail and lightning."

A frown crossed Kiran's face at the word "lightning." He squinted up at the clouds, shading his eyes with a hand. "Is it normal to get this kind of storm?"

I shrugged. "Yeah. Usually it takes longer to build up again. The last one was maybe four days ago. This time of year, you usually get a week or two in between, but you never know. No doubt the southerners'll claim that banehawk brought bad luck on the convoy."

Kiran still looked concerned, which surprised me. Most city dwellers think lightning's only a fun fireworks show, like the ones Sechaveh commissions from the mages for holidays. With all the mage wards on the towers, nobody ever gets struck in the city. Up

here it's a different story, but most don't know that.

"You worried about getting hit? Don't be. Lightning likes to strike the highest point, and we're well below the ridgelines, here."

"That's good to know," he said, but his expression didn't change.

"We gotta head back to the outrider wagon and give Harken a hand with covering the supplies." He followed me as I spurred my horse up the trail, but he kept glancing at the clouds when he thought I wasn't looking.



(Kiran)

Kiran hung on to his corner of the oilcloth as a sharp gust of wind tried to rip it from his cramping hands. He was grateful Dev hadn't asked him to help secure the ropes lashing the oilcloth over the contents of the wagon. Kiran had seen how swiftly and nimbly Dev and the others tied their knots. He couldn't match their skill, even when his muscles weren't already burning with exhaustion. He only hoped Cara, Jerik, and Dev finished with the other end of the wagon before he lost his grip entirely.

The clouds had grown dark to the west. Massive thunderheads towered above the serrated rock of the western ridges, and wind gusts kicked grit and sand into the air, stinging Kiran's eyes. Far worse was the sting of power against his inner senses, crawling along his nerves. His initial suspicions had solidified into certainty: this was no natural storm, no matter what Dev thought. Magical power coiled and twisted through those clouds. Invisible and intangible to the others, but each lightning strike would slam that hidden power against his mental barriers with the force of a battering ram. And if his barriers failed... Kiran shuddered. Ruslan would have him, then, and he'd never get a second chance to escape.

Magic whispered against his senses, right behind him. Kiran started and nearly lost his grip on the oilcloth.

"Easy, lad, it's only me." Harken patted him on the shoulder,

his dark eyes kind. “Storm has you on edge, does it? Same goes for the animals.” He nodded to the tethered outrider horses, who were snorting and tossing their heads. “Even good-natured, steady sorts like these don’t care much for thunder and lightning, so we drovers have a little trick...” He opened one blunt-fingered hand. A pile of thumbnail-sized discs, each bearing a single swirled rune, gleamed in his callused palm.

“Muting charms?” Kiran blinked at the harmless little charms, berating himself for reacting so strongly to their minor magic.

Harken smiled at him in approval. “Exactly, lad. Put one of these on a halter...” He moved to the nearest horse and deftly clipped a charm to the inside of the halter’s cheek strap. “Even the nerviest of beasts will sit meek as you please through a nasty storm. It doesn’t totally block their senses, you understand—they wouldn’t like that much. Only dims them, so all the noise and light aren’t so overwhelming.” He pulled a knife from his belt, pricked his thumb, and smeared a tiny drop of blood on the charm to activate it.

Kiran’s breath caught in his throat as an idea blossomed. “That’s... very interesting. May I see one?”

“Sure.” Harken tossed a charm onto the wagon’s outboard. “I’ve got plenty.”

Kiran released a hand from the oilcloth and snatched up the charm. Something so simple and small wouldn’t interfere with his amulet, and though the charm couldn’t possibly relieve the coming assault on his senses, it might take the edge off. Enough to help him hold his barriers fast, if he was lucky.

“Hey!” A sharp tug on the oilcloth yanked Kiran from his thoughts. Dev was scowling at him in exasperation from a few feet away, a length of rope in his hand. “Let go, already. I can’t tie this last knot with you pulling like that.”

“Sorry.” Kiran released the oilcloth and shoved the charm into his pocket. The storm was still far enough away that the thunder was only a low grumbling, but each distant lightning strike sent fire racing along his nerves. Dev finished his knot and directed Kiran over to help him set up a camping tarp. He used a huge boulder as the anchor for one long side and pounded stakes deep into the ground for the

other, forming a slanted shelter with open sides.

“I doubt we’ll get rain, but it’s best to be prepared,” he yelled over a loud wind gust. Kiran gritted his teeth and tried to focus on the task and not the increasingly ominous sky. When Dev turned away to check the stakes, Kiran slipped the muting charm out of his pocket and under his sock cuff, against his skin. Thankfully, only the untalented had to activate charms with their own blood. Kiran sent a slender thread of power into the charm. His sight dimmed, the world turning gray. When lightning struck again, to his relief the fire burning his nerves raw lessened a fraction.

Dev pulled Kiran under the slanted shelter of the tarp and sat down on folded blankets. “Now we wait,” he said, his voice faint and tinny sounding.

Kiran drew his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around them, hoping to hide his shivering. Lightning flashed outside, and the resulting crash of thunder was lost in the soundless white fire in Kiran’s head. So much power, so close...even with the little muting charm’s help, the sensations threatened to overwhelm his control. Under his clothes, the amulet sparked and burned against the skin of his chest, and he hoped desperately its protections would hold. Lightning struck again, closer yet. Power smashed against his barriers. He buried his head in his arms, choking back a scream. He had to stay hidden from Ruslan, regardless of the cost.



(Dev)

The storm’s fury raged outside the open end of our tarp. No rain, but we got near-constant lightning mixed with the occasional violent burst of hail. The clouds were thick and dark enough to give the scene the look of late twilight, even though another few hours remained in the day. The cracks of thunder sent booming echoes rolling through the canyon. I kept an eye on the canyon’s opposite wall, watching for rockfall.

Beside me, Kiran sat hunched up in a ball, his head down in his arms so only a shock of brown-dyed hair showed. He'd been skittish as a kicked colt before the storm hit, although he'd tried to hide it. And when I'd pulled him under the tarp, his arm muscles beneath my hand had felt tight as guy ropes. He hadn't said a word, only curled up tight as a snail on the blankets.

As a searing flash lit the world outside, I noticed he was trembling. Huh. I had seen little kids and animals afraid of thunder, but never an adult, young or otherwise. But then, I'd once met an outrider terrified of the harmless little whiptail lizards that liked to sun themselves on courtyard walls in Ninavel. He'd told me he knew it was crazy, but he just couldn't help it.

Maybe Kiran was the same; or maybe it was yet another piece of the puzzle. I wished I could start fitting pieces together, but so far nothing about him or the job made much sense. What really confused me was Kiran's obvious inexperience in shadow dealings. Unless this was only a practice run—maybe his superiors weren't sure a person could be safely smuggled through the border, and wanted some evidence of success before putting their real plan into motion. But if they wanted to send someone expendable on this run, why a highsider? Why not some streetsider eager for coin and safely ignorant of highsider business? Then again, given Bren's instructions, maybe somebody back in Ninavel wanted Kiran gone and didn't much care if he ended up truth-spelled and spilling his secrets to angry Alathians.

A wide bolt of lightning struck a pinnacle jutting like a broken finger from the ridge across the canyon, in a stuttering flash so bright it left glaring afterimages printed on my vision. Thunder exploded, and Kiran flinched violently. He made a choked noise loud enough for me to hear over the echoes, but didn't raise his head.

A puff of vaporized rock rose from the pinnacle, and a shower of enormous boulders tumbled down the cliff face, sending up an even larger cloud of rock dust. A sharp, flinty smell filled the air. I coughed, trying to get the scent out of my mouth and nose before it brought up memories I didn't want to think about. Just as well Kiran hadn't seen the rockfall happen. If the storm scared him now, I'd hate to see his reaction if he realized we were easy targets for any rockfall

from the cliffs on our side of the canyon. I grinned sourly to myself at the thought as the rocks smashed into the talus slopes at the base of the cliffs. The grinding roar of the collision mixed with yet more thunder.

Gradually, the storm moved off eastward, taking the light show with it. We got one more shower of hail that made the horses fling their heads and snort in protest despite Harken's calming charms, but after that the clouds started to break up. Cautiously, I poked my head outside the tarp. The sun had sunk behind the peaks during the storm, and the western ridgelines stood out clear and sharp against a rose-colored sky.

The city wasn't visible anymore, thanks to the twists and turns of Silverlode Canyon, but the eastern sky was a sullen black. Continual flashes lit up the clouds, accompanied by the distant growl of thunder. The cityfolk would get a real show tonight. That was by far the most powerful storm I'd ever seen this early in the season. Usually storms didn't get anywhere near this bad until the heat of late summer. Of course, any outrider knows the mountains can always catch you by surprise.

I ducked back under the tarp. "Hey. Storm's over."

Kiran raised his head, and I sucked in my breath, shocked. His face was bloodless, with shadows dark as coal dust under his eyes. His pupils were dilated so wide his eyes looked black in the low light, and his teeth were clenched so hard his jaw muscles stood out in ridges.

"Damn, kid, are you all right?" I reached for him. He jerked and scrambled backward as if I'd threatened to stab him.

"Don't touch me!" For the first time, he really sounded like a highsider, his voice full of arrogant command. But the impression was marred by the way the whites of his eyes showed, which made him look more like a trapped animal. I spread both my hands, palms out.

"Okay, okay, just calm—"

He jumped up and raced outside before I could finish. A pair of drovers crossed his path, and Kiran jinked sideways so hard he bounced off a wagon and tumbled head over heels. One drover called something to him, but Kiran only scrambled to his feet and took off again. He dodged between the wagons and disappeared down the

slope toward the catsclaw thickets. The drovers stared after him with their mouths hanging open.

Well, shit. So much for staying unnoticed. What in the name of Khalmet was wrong with him? I sprang to my feet, then hesitated. If I went running straight after him, there'd only be more talk. No, I should delay a little, then ease over to the catsclaw and try and find him before it got dark, if he hadn't already come to his senses and returned to the convoy. At least he couldn't get truly lost in this kind of terrain—there was no place to go. But if he tripped over a catsclaw root in a blind panic and bashed his fool head in, I could kiss my promised payment goodbye.

I headed for the wagon. Cara and Jerik were already at work, unlacing knots and checking supplies. Cara cocked an eyebrow at me. “The kid's faster than he looks. Needs to learn some manners, though.”

“City boy.” I tried to sound disgusted instead of stunned and pissed off. “The storm scared the shit out of him. Literally.”

Cara snorted. “Some apprentice you've got there. Sure you didn't bring him along just for some fun in bed?” I made a face and reached for a knot, but she stopped me. “Forget helping with the wagon. I want you to scout before the light fails. If rockfall hit the trail ahead, I'd rather Meldon knew it tonight, instead of waiting 'til a morning scout.”

I swallowed a protest. I knew why Cara wanted me to go. Of the three of us, I was by far the fastest climber, especially on an untested route. To have a sightline all the way up the canyon, I'd need to climb a spire on one of the knife-edged rock ribs extending down from the heights. But gods all damn it, from the height of the ridge, even if I hurried I'd barely make it back to the convoy before nightfall. So much for my plans to track down Kiran. I cursed silently as I pictured myself fighting through catsclaw in the dark. He'd better have calmed down and come back by the time I finished.

“You worried about the kid? Don't be. Jerik and I will keep an eye out for him.” Cara's blue eyes held a little too much curiosity for my liking.

“I promised his family I'd keep him safe, is all,” I muttered, grabbing the supply crate that contained the pitons. Ordinarily I'd

downclimb rather than set an anchor and rappel from the ridge—there’s no challenge in rappelling—but a rappel would get me back to the convoy that much faster.

Jerik barked out a laugh from the opposite end of the wagon. “Safe? As an outrider?” His voice was low and gravelly, probably from disuse. Prying conversation out of him was like chipping holds in granite.

“Not every apprentice decides to stick with the trade,” I said. Which was true enough; some would-be outriders changed their minds quick after their first close call in the mountains. A perfect excuse for my sudden lack of an apprentice, once we reached Kost.

I threw a set of pitons, a hammer, a hemp rope, my climbing boots, and a waterskin into a pack. “Bet you I make it back before Harken shares out dinner.” At least I’d have a chance of spotting Kiran from the ridge, unless he’d worked his way too deeply into the thickets.

Cara surveyed the ridge, then grinned. “You’re on. One free drink in Kost if you make it back before dinner, two free drinks if you make it back before we finish taking care of the horses.”

I flicked my fingers in the old streetside gesture used to seal a bargain, shouldered my pack, and raced off, leaping from rock to rock up the steep slope above the trail. My breath came fast and hard by the time I’d scrambled up the boulders to the base of the ridge. I stopped to let my heart slow before starting the climb. Plenty of small ledges and flakes studded the mica-flecked rock in front of me, and I judged the route well within my ability to climb without protection. But Sethan had long ago hammered into my head that it only takes one instant of carelessness or overconfidence to kill a climber.

I braced my back against the rock to put on my climbing boots, careful of the sharp iron nails protruding from their soles. The vivid pink of the western sky was edging toward paler violet, but an hour or so remained before the light grew too dim for contrast. From my vantage point I had an excellent view of the long line of the convoy, and below the trail, the thick tangle of catsclaw. I scanned the head-high bushes as I laced my boots, searching for Kiran, or at least some signs of his passage. But catsclaw was tough and resilient,

its interlocking branches difficult to bend and nearly impossible to break, and I couldn't spot any trace of him.

I was about to give up and start the climb when something else caught my eye. A drover, approaching the outrider wagon with a casual stride. And damn it, though I was too far away to make out facial features, from the man's height and coloring I was sure it was Pello.

He sauntered up to Harken and Jerik, waving a friendly greeting. The two men paused in the act of unloading a grain sack, and Cara's blonde head turned, though she didn't stop currying her horse. Their conversation was lost in the indistinct hum of voices floating up from the convoy, but Harken pointed up in my direction. I clenched my teeth. Pello was sure to find out Kiran had run off alone. Oh, this got better by the minute.

Sudden and unwelcome as rockfall, memories of Jylla overwhelmed me. She'd always been the one clever with people and plans, even back when we were a pair of desperate, angry kids just past our Change. If she were in my place, she'd outfox Pello without even trying. *Dealing with people's no different than Tainting a mage ward*, she'd told me once. We'd been lying sprawled in a tangle of sheets, her slender fingers tracing lazily down my spine. *Find their weak spot, and push them the way you want.*

Yeah, just like she'd pushed me. How could I have been so dumb as to think she saw me any different? I spat and banished the image of Jylla's golden curves and teasing eyes. I might not have her cunning, but I'd never yet failed on a job. Shadow man or no, Pello wouldn't keep me from earning my pay.

Still no sign of Kiran in the catsclaw. This time I felt only relief. I turned back to the rock and flattened my hands on the stone. Shoving all my worries away, I concentrated on the gritty texture under my palms until nothing else existed. Then I moved, stepping smoothly up onto the rock while my fingers searched out ledges.

For a glorious interval, the entire world consisted of me and the cliff. My body flowed up the rock, every muscle perfectly under my command, my mind locked in absolute focus on each succeeding set of holds. When I reached the ridgetop and wedged myself into position

straddling a block of stone, my grin stretched nearly as wide as Bren's. My nerves sang, and the stark beauty of the surrounding ridgelines and snowcapped peaks made my heart swell. The satisfaction deep inside was almost—not quite, but almost—as good as my childhood memories of my lost Taint.

My exhilaration faded at the thought. I surveyed the terrain ahead, recalled to duty. My perch gave me a hawk's-eye view of the upper reaches of the canyon, all the way up to the edge of the wide basin below the pass. I traced the pale line of the trail. About a mile upcanyon from my ridge, a pile of freshly fallen boulders blocked the path. Some of them were big, too, wagon-sized or more.

I set about hammering pitons into cracks in the rock to anchor my rappel, unwelcome thoughts of Pello and Kiran creeping back into my mind. When I leaned out to throw the rope down, I stopped short. The catsclaw thickets below the convoy now lay deep in shadow, but a few circular patches appeared unnaturally dark, as if the bushes themselves had turned black. I squinted, trying to make them out, but the light was fading fast. I gave up and reached for the rope. I'd have another chance to take a look when we bashed our way through the catsclaw for water in the morning.

By the time I returned to the outrider wagon, twilight was giving way to darkness. The storm still blotted out the eastern sky, far enough away now that only silent sourceless flashes lit the horizon. Overhead, the first stars glimmered amidst stray wisps of cloud. Cara straightened up from lighting a candle lantern and clapped her hands, slowly. "Well, you win one drink, at least. Harken and Jerik are about to dig out our dinner rations."

"You'll want to talk to Meldon. I spotted major rockfall on the trail, about a mile up. Probably a full morning's work to clear." I shrugged out of my pack and tried not to be too obvious about looking around for Kiran.

"Figures, after that little show we had during the storm." Cara glanced across the canyon to the lightning-struck pinnacle, a sharp black outline against the darkening sky. We squatted down together next to the lantern and I drew a quick diagram in the dirt for her of the rockfall's position and extent.

Cara stood and brushed off her hands. “I’ll head up to Meldon, fill him in before I eat. Oh, and the kid’s back, safe and sound—he took your gear up to your tarp. Looked kinda wobbly, though. You sure you’re feeding him enough?”

“He’s just tired. Long day, for a city boy.” Relief made my voice light. If Khalmet really favored me, maybe Kiran had even managed to avoid Pello. I’d have to think of some innocent way to ask Cara about Pello’s little visit.

“He can sleep in some tomorrow, thanks to that rockfall. I doubt the convoy’ll move before noon.” Cara peered at me, her blonde brows drawing together. “You look like you could use some extra sleep yourself.”

“Not my fault if Kellan snores.” It wasn’t entirely a lie. Kiran didn’t snore, but he certainly was a noisy sleeper. Lots of thrashing and sighing and whimpering. From the sound of it, his dreams weren’t much more fun than mine.

She grinned and strode off. I hurried over to the tarp, my nerves keying up a notch. When I ducked under the edge, the glow of a lantern illuminated our sleeping blankets, laid neatly out beside our personal gear. Kiran sat cross-legged beside them, staring at his hands laced together in his lap. He raised his head when I squatted down in front of him. Cara was right, he did look a bit unsteady, though that was a big improvement from the last time I’d seen him.

“What in Khalmet’s name happened with you?” I demanded.

His eyes slid away from mine. “Nothing. I just don’t like storms.”

“Right.” I drew the word out. His chin lifted, and I got another glimpse of a highsider’s usual arrogance. Judging by the stubborn, mutinous look on his face, I could wait until all the snow melted off the Whitefires before he’d explain. I clenched my hands on my knees to keep myself from shaking some sense into him. “Remember how you agreed to lay low and stay close? Was I somehow not clear? Or in highsider talk, does laying low mean running screaming from a simple thunderstorm in front of half the convoy?”

“I wasn’t—!” He shut his mouth so fast I thought he’d bite his tongue off. His gaze dropped back to his hands. When he spoke again, his voice was carefully controlled. “How much of a problem will this cause?”

“Did Pello find you? Talk to you, at all?”

He shook his head. My relief didn't lessen my anger. “He could have, easy. You gods-damned idiot! You think just because you're highside, you can ignore anything I say? You pull another stunt like this, and you can go to hell on your own.”

“I'm sorry, all right?” His blue eyes were stricken. “Have you never acted out of emotion without thinking first?”

I opened my mouth to deny it, but couldn't manage the lie. Not with memories of my final night with Jylla so raw and recent. If I'd kept a cool head, I might have bargained with her and saved myself from losing everything. But no, I'd let my fury take my tongue, and done my level best to rip her apart. You don't live with someone as long as I had with Jylla without learning what will cause the most pain. Of course, that goes both ways. By the end of that night, we'd both said things we could never forgive or forget. And look where that had gotten me.

“Next time, think twice,” I growled. “This isn't some fucking kids game. At the border, we'll be playing with our lives.”

“I know,” he said quietly. My anger faded at the sincerity in his voice. I studied the dark circles under his eyes, frowning.

“You okay, now? You still look a little...” I waggled a hand.

“I'm fine.” The stubborn look reappeared.

“Whatever,” I muttered. I shoved myself to my feet. “Come on, then. Time to eat.”

Dinner wasn't much, without spare water for proper cooking. When I handed Kiran his ration of jerky, hardtack, and dried fruit, he released a sad little sigh. Harken and I chuckled, and even Jerik's mouth twitched.

“Last night of dry rations, lad.” Harken gave Kiran a sympathetic look. “Tomorrow night we'll be high enough the stream will be in full flow, and I promise you won't be disappointed in my cooking.” He leaned back from his seat on the wagon's outboard and reached into the stacks of supplies. “In the meantime, I brought a little something extra to share around.” He produced a fist-sized sack which proved to contain Sulanian seedcakes sweetened with peachflower honey and dusted with cinnamon.

“You’re a marvel, Harken,” I mumbled through a mouthful of seedcake. Harken grinned at me, the warm golden glow of the lanterns softening the years etched in his face.

“You outriders aren’t so different than the horses. Give you a treat every now and then, and it keeps everybody happy.”

Footsteps crunched on rock, and Cara’s high, clear laughter pierced the night air, followed by a man’s indistinct murmur. I peered into the darkness beyond the lanternlight. That male voice sounded all too familiar.

“Hope you boys saved me something.” Cara stepped into the light, her companion trailing after. Gods all damn it, I knew I’d recognized Pello’s voice. Couldn’t he mind his own business for one night?

He nodded to us all, friendly as could be, but my annoyance grew when his eyes lingered a fraction longer on Kiran than the rest of us. “I thought I’d return your awl before morning,” Pello said to Harken, handing him the tool. “Many thanks for the loan.” He sketched an exaggerated bow to Cara, his face full of wry humor. “And Suliyya’s grace upon you, for the delight of your company on the way.”

Cara’s eyes sparkled with mocking amusement. “I love a man with a smooth tongue.”

I stifled a disgusted snort. It hadn’t taken Pello long to figure out the perfect excuse to come lurk around our camp. Cara was happy to flirt with anything short of a rock bear. Though she always held to her rule about not mixing bedplay and outriding, it didn’t stop admirers from hoping. I had no doubt Pello would eagerly play the part.

“Glad I could help,” Harken told Pello as he handed Cara her dinner ration. At least he didn’t offer Pello any of his seedcakes. “Nasty storm like that, I’m surprised more tarps weren’t damaged.”

Pello’s expression turned serious. “Perhaps you outriders could answer a question for a man new to the westbound route. Is it natural to get a storm so strong this early in the season?”

Beside me, Kiran went still. When Pello had first showed up, after one quick sidelong glance at me, Kiran had stared at the ground, picking idly at small rocks as if bored. Now I sensed him listening intently, though he didn’t raise his head.

Cara dropped to sit against a wagon wheel, her hands full of food.

“It’s not the usual way of things, but weather can be strange up here. I’ve seen it snow in midsummer.”

To my surprise, Jerik spoke up. “The question’s a fair one. A storm that bad before summer takes hold...it reminds me of the weather some twenty years ago, during the mage war.” A frown marked his dark face.

“You worked that year?” Cara sounded impressed. “Must’ve been a hell of a trip.”

“It was,” Jerik said, shortly.

My respect for Jerik shot upward. I didn’t remember anything from the mage war, since I’d only been a toddler at the time. I’d heard the stories, though; we all had. There’d been a falling out among some powerful mages, and they’d got to fighting. Lord Sechaveh had ignored it for a while, keeping to his hands-off policy. But when the magic thrown around got to the point of damaging the city and killing crowds of unfortunate bystanders, he’d gotten mad enough to draw the line.

The stories differed on what he’d done—some said he’d had the mages involved killed, others that he’d banished them. Nobody agreed on how he’d managed to do either, but the end result was that life in the city went back to normal. Still, it had been a crazy few months, and all that messing around with magical forces had screwed up the weather in a big way. I’d heard stories of storms with colored lighting bright enough to blind anyone foolish enough to look at it, and hail the size of a man’s head.

I glanced at Kiran, wondering if his reaction to the storm had something to do with the mage war stories. He was several years short of my own age, so chances were good he hadn’t even been born when it happened. Maybe somebody had told him the more gruesome stories as a kid and scared him good, but it was hard to imagine that making him go rabbiting off into the catsclaw. I had a sudden flash of the horror on his face when he’d realized a message might reach Ninavel. Had he thought the storm meant a mage was after him? Surely not. Even a highsider would know how dumb that idea was. Whatever mages want, they get, and they don’t fuck around about it, either. If a mage wanted to stop him, Kiran would be dead already.

No, it had to be something else.

Kiran didn't look scared now; far from it. His fascination was plain as day, and I could practically see all the questions jamming themselves up in his throat.

"Mage war." Pello spoke as if he were savoring the words. "Now there's a thought to disturb a man's sleep." An odd undertone colored his voice, and I shifted forward, wishing his eyes weren't in shadow.

"Surely so," Harken agreed. "I worked a convoy traveling all the way to eastern Arkenland that year, so I missed all the excitement, but from the tales my sister shared, I'm not sorry. She lost her husband and two nephews—stonemasons, all of them. They were on a job repairing the southgate wall when one of the fights flared up. The whole wall came down, killed their entire crew in an instant."

Jerik stood, his back rigid. "I'll check the horses before I turn in," he announced, and headed off into the night without a backward glance.

Pello's mobile face creased in theatrical disappointment. Cara cuffed his shoulder. "Don't expect any campfire tales out of Jerik, not without a lot of sarkosa wine to soften him up first. The man's got a mouth tighter than a snare trap."

"I'll keep that in mind," Pello said. His gaze swept across us, and his smile held more than a hint of irony when he nodded to me. I suppressed a scowl as he made his farewells and finally disappeared down the line. Cara watched him go with a small, contemplative smile on her face that made me want to hit her.

"For Khalmet's sake, Cara, can't you manage one trip without any lovesick drovers mooning after you?"

She smirked. "I'd wondered where your tongue had got to. Who says I'm the main attraction?" She aimed a soulful look at Kiran. "Hard to compete with the likes of you, kid. You must have had herds of city girls throwing themselves at your feet...and plenty of boys, too, I'd wager."

Kiran looked like he wished the earth would split open and swallow him, but he managed a stiff little shrug. Cara ignored my pointed glare and flicked a dried fig at him.

"No need to be so shy. What, you have a lover back in the city?"

Someone you miss?"

Kiran hurriedly ducked his head, but not before I saw the way he'd squeezed his eyes shut, as if in pain. "No," he muttered.

Well, that little reaction added new weight to my theory that someone back in Ninavel wanted him gone. I didn't know the rules for highsiders' love games, but maybe he'd chosen the wrong lover to chase after, and now he was paying the price. I felt a twinge of sympathy, but pushed it aside. Time to distract Cara. Teasing Kiran about his love life was one thing, but from the growing curiosity in her eyes, her next questions might be more dangerous. Anything she learned about his supposed past was sure to end up in Pello's ears.

"Have a heart and leave the poor guy alone, Cara. Can't you see he's tired after an entire day in the mountains?"

"Oooh, an entire day, and all he did was ride? Dev, you *are* going soft. As I recall, Sethan had you climbing laps your first day out." Cara stuffed another fig into her mouth. A reminiscent grin spread over her face as she chewed.

"Yeah, up and down that overhanging crack near the second bend of the canyon. I thought my fingers would fall off by the time he finally let me quit." I'd been mad as a stinkwasp. Later, I'd realized Sethan had been teaching me in his quiet way that endurance was as important as technique for a mountain climber.

"Gods, you were such a cocky little bastard, bragging that you could climb anything. Sethan had to shut you up somehow, or the rest of us would have strangled you by midmeal." The look on Cara's face said she was still savoring the memory.

Harken gave one of his low chuckles. "If we're telling tales, I remember one about a blonde-haired little loud-mouthed chit who insisted she could climb the Darran Spire." He leaned down to poke Cara's shoulder with one wide finger.

To my delight, Cara's cheeks reddened, an event nearly as rare as rain in the Painted Valley. "Oh yeah, let's hear that one," I said eagerly.

"Think I'll save it for a special occasion." Harken levered himself off the wagon's outboard. "Would one of you be good enough to help me put the food away? It's late, and this old man needs his rest."

“Sure.” I jumped up. “Just show me where you want it, and Kellan and I’ll take care of it for you.”

Kiran scrambled after me with obvious relief. He darted glances my way as we stowed the food back in its warded container, but he held his tongue until we reached our tarp. “Pello’s trying to find out about me, isn’t he?”

“Oh, you noticed?”

He winced. “What are we going to do?”

And by “we,” he meant me. “Take care of that damn message charm of his, for one thing.”

“If you steal his charm, won’t he know it was you?”

“Who said anything about stealing? I’ll fix it so the charm seems to work, but any messages he sends go nowhere.” Deadblocking a charm was one of Red Dal’s best tricks, and one he held close to the chest. He’d always claimed no other handler knew the secret. I hoped a Varkevian-born man who’d never even been Tainted wouldn’t know it was possible.

Kiran was looking at me like he’d never seen me before. “You can affect a charm’s magic? How?”

“A little trade secret I picked up from a specialist. Nothing a highsider like you needs to know.”

Frustrated curiosity was all over Kiran’s face. His mouth worked, as if he wanted to ask a question but couldn’t think of how to phrase it.

“Disabling the charm’s the easy part,” I told him. “Finding Pello’s stash, that’s hard. But I’ve got a few ideas. Give me the night to think them over.”

“Anything I can help with?” Now he had the hopeful air of an eager young Tainter. It set my teeth on edge.

“Not unless you know how to peek an active hide-me ward.”

I’d meant to shut him up, but a thoughtful frown creased his brow. “Do you mean, reveal the ward’s location?” He fumbled in his hair. When he lowered his hands, the look-away charm lay glinting in one palm. “My...father once showed me that if a charm and ward are similar in purpose, yet have a different maker, the interference of their magic may cause visible effects if the charm passes too near the ward.”

He’d choked on the word “father” like he had a mouthful of

cactus spines. Bad blood there, perhaps? I pushed speculation aside. I knew what Kiran meant. Every kid in Ninavel knows that party trick, though it's not very useful in practice. Crawling all over a house waving a charm takes hours; somebody's sure to discover you before you're done. Pello's wagon was a more reasonable area to search, but a bigger problem remained. "Yeah, a look-away's enough like a hide-me, but that charm's way too small to flash the ward."

"Didn't you say the cliffs here have carcabon stones?"

My mouth dropped open. Boosting the look-away charm with carcabon could actually work. I wouldn't get anything so obvious as sparks, but all I needed was the tiniest shimmer of air over the ward's location. No, wait, I didn't have any silver to properly bind a stone to the charm...my eye fell on my warding bracelets. If I tied both stone and charm against a bracelet, that might be enough.

"Huh. That's smart," I said. Maybe a brain lurked in that highside head after all.

Kiran's whole face lit up. Khalmet's hand, if Cara ever saw him smile like that, she'd keel over from sheer lust.

"Don't get too excited," I warned him. "We still have to find a decent stone." The nearby cliffs had been picked clean long ago. Except one. My blood tingled with a familiar thrill. Nasty, overhanging, with holds no bigger than sandmites and cracks too thin for pitons...no outrider had ever climbed Kinslayer crag. Word was the name came from an outrider whose brother had died attempting a climb. I'd scouted Kinslayer once and thought I could piece together a workable route, but Sethan had talked me out of trying it. Well. Sethan wasn't here now, and Kinslayer was the best chance within miles for a stone large enough to help us. I'd scout it again, see if the route I remembered was real or only the product of a cocky kid's ego. And if it was real...my heart pounded. What a climb that would be! But I couldn't deny the risk. If I fell, I'd sentence Melly to a living death.

CHAPTER FOUR

(Kiran)

Sunlight warmed Kiran's face and burned red through his closed eyelids. He opened his eyes, expecting the familiar sight of his bedroom's pale stone ceiling etched with the swirling lines of ward patterns. Instead, only the sun-bright blank canvas of Dev's tarp greeted him. He threw an arm over his eyes, a lump in his throat. He'd never see his bedroom in Ninavel again, with the stargazing charm he'd created for Mikail perched gleaming on his writing desk, and his favorite books of adventure tales hidden amongst the stacks of treatises on magical theory.

The adventure books had been gifts from Alisa. Kiran's eyes stung. How Alisa would have loved this trip! She'd pored over explorer journals and dreamed of traveling as an envoy for her merchanter family when she reached her majority. Grief and guilt turned the lump in Kiran's throat hot as molten silver.

The sound of voices outside the tarp recalled him to caution. Kiran hurriedly swiped at his eyes and sat up in the pile of blankets. He blinked in confusion at the sight of Dev's gear already packed up in neat little bundles. Why hadn't Dev awakened him? He yanked his

boots on and stepped outside.

The sun was already high, and the white rock of the canyon walls shone bright enough to make Kiran's eyes water. The convoy wagons still stood in their unbroken line along the trail. A small group of drovers sat in a loose circle nearby, talking idly.

"Hey, lazybones!" Dev waved from his perch on top of the massive boulder that anchored the high side of the tarp. "Thought you'd sleep forever."

"Why didn't you wake me? I thought you said last night we'd have to fetch water while the rockfall gets cleared?" Had Dev spent the morning hunting for a suitable carcabon stone?

"Since I'm such a nice guy, I took care of the water duty myself. You looked like you needed the sleep. Besides, I figured you'd had enough of bashing through catsclaw." Despite Dev's casual sprawl and easy grin, his eyes raked over Kiran from head to toe with a calculating curiosity that made Kiran wince internally.

"Um. Thanks." Kiran fought to keep his expression neutral. The aftermath of Ruslan's storm was not a pleasant memory. The deceptively innocent-looking catsclaw had proved a nightmare to navigate, with thick, tightly woven branches that refused to bend and gave vicious scratches when he'd forced his way through. Worse, his barriers had been wavering on the edge of collapse. He'd been terrified Dev would chase after him before he could safely rebuild them. If Dev saw him draw power, he was certain to realize the extent of Kiran's lies.

"Not to worry, we'll keep busy, now you're finally up." Dev looked up at the cliffs above the trail, shading his eyes with a hand. "High time my apprentice learned some tricks of the climbing trade."

Ah. If Dev had indeed searched for stones that morning, he'd been unsuccessful. A climbing lesson would provide the perfect excuse for Dev to scour another cliff. Kiran smiled at him. "I look forward to it."

A sardonic gleam showed in Dev's eyes. "I'll remember you said that." He jumped down from the rock and went over to rummage in the wagon. "Grab something to eat, then we'll go."

Kiran choked down a handful of hardtack and jerky. Dev assembled their packs with a simmering energy completely at odds

with his relaxed posture of a moment before. Despite his apparent confidence, he surely shared Kiran's relief about taking action to prevent messages from reaching Ninavel.

"Time for your first lesson—walking on talus." Dev jerked a thumb at the jumble of boulders covering the steep slope leading up to the cliffs. "Take it slow, and watch out for loose rocks. Use your hands to steady yourself, if you need to."

Dev strode up the talus as if it were no more difficult to navigate than a flagstone-paved courtyard, but Kiran found it a continuous struggle to keep his balance. By the time he and Dev reached the base of the cliffs, his leg muscles ached and he was gasping for breath.

"Sit down and rest a minute," Dev told him.

Kiran tried not to resent the way Dev wasn't out of breath at all. He sat down, gingerly. In the shadow of the cliff, the rocks underfoot were smaller, pebble to fist sized—what Dev had called scree. The scree slid and shifted under Kiran with a rattling hiss every time he moved, giving him the uneasy sensation that any minute he might tumble down the slope. He twisted to eye the cliff looming over his head.

"You think there's carcaban here?" The cliff looked impossibly steep. Kiran had no idea how anyone would get up it without the use of magic.

"On something this easy? Hell, no. Anything useful is long gone. But it's a good approach to the spot I have in mind, and it'll make a perfect practice ground for you."

"You mean I have to *climb* that?" Kiran's mouth went dry. He'd imagined practicing more knots and ropework while Dev pretended to give him a climbing lesson by example.

Dev chuckled. "What, did you think you'd get to laze around? I told Cara and Jerik I'd be training you today, and they'll be watching. We gotta put on a proper show before I do any prospecting."

"Oh." Kiran struggled to hide his dismay. He didn't mind the physical effort, but he was more than a little worried about his instinctive reaction if he fell. Even the tiniest use of magic outside his barriers, and Ruslan would find him.

Dev was watching him with his head tilted. "I'll show you the

basics down here first, and when you climb, you'll be safe on a rope." His green eyes measured Kiran's face. "But if you think you're going to have some kind of breakdown halfway up, tell me now."

Kiran flushed, hearing the unspoken *like you did last night*. "I'll be fine." He wiped his sweaty hands on his leathers. He'd survived Ruslan's storm. He could handle a simple training climb.



Kiran clung to the cliff, his fingers wedged in a crack. His forearms burned, and tremors wracked his calves. His right foot threatened to slip off its precarious hold at any moment. He glanced down and immediately wished he hadn't. The sharp-edged boulders far below reminded him of the teeth of some storybook dragon, ready to rend and maim. His instincts screamed for him to call power to save himself. Grimly, Kiran concentrated on holding his barriers firm. He refused to break under a mere physical threat. But if he fell—

"Hey!" The rope at his waist tugged upward. "You planning on moving any time this century?" Dev's voice floated down from a ledge high overhead.

Kiran repressed the urge to blast Dev to ash. "If...I move, I'll... fall!" he panted.

Dev's brown head poked over the rim of the ledge. "So fall. You're not going anywhere, I promise." The pull on Kiran's makeshift rope harness increased. "Trust me!"

Trust. Kiran wheezed out a bitter laugh. Hardly any existed between himself and Dev. Yet he'd never doubted Dev's competence at his job. Kiran inhaled through clenched teeth and hauled himself upward.

Overtaxed muscles cramped. One hand popped free of the crack, then the other. Kiran yelped and pitched backward, only to stop short as the rope snapped taut. His chest smacked into the rock hard enough to bruise, but he moved not an inch downward. Kiran leaned his forehead against the rope and tried to calm his racing heart. He'd held his barriers. Barely.

"See? Falling's not a problem," Dev called. "Brace your feet against the rock and rest your arms."

“H-how long can you hold me like this?” Kiran tentatively pushed his body away from the cliff with his feet.

“Long as I need to.” Dev leaned over the ledge’s rim again. “You’re tied in to the rope, remember? No need to clutch it like a southerner with a devil-ward charm. Shake your arms out, it’ll help them recover faster.”

Finger by finger, Kiran released his white-knuckled grip. The rope remained reassuringly taut. He swallowed and let his arms drop to hang at his sides. Dangling from the rope wasn’t at all comfortable—his knotted harness dug painfully into his upper thighs and groin, and already his legs tingled with impending numbness—but the relief to his forearms and hands was immediate.

Kiran peeked again at the dizzying void beneath him. He’d once been accustomed to placing his life in another’s hands. *The trust between focus and channeler must be absolute*, Ruslan had always said. Kiran had believed him; had trusted both Ruslan and Mikail without reservation.

What a fool he’d been. Worse, Alisa had been the one to pay the price. Guilt tore at him. If he hadn’t loved her, if she hadn’t trusted him...the terrible memories crowded in, full of blood and screaming. Kiran shook his head, violently. If he didn’t escape Ruslan, Alisa’s death would only be the first of many.

He scabbled at the rock and managed to cram his fingers back into the crack. “I’ll try again,” he yelled.

“Ready when you are.” Dev sounded pleased. Kiran summoned his concentration. He’d watched Dev climb, and years of channel pattern exercises had honed his memory. *You place your feet right, the rest is easy*, Dev had told him. So where had Dev put his feet? Kiran examined his memory and compared it to the cliff face before him. Ah—there. He balanced one foot on a rounded protrusion, wedged the other in a crack, and pressed upward.

Without the fear of falling overshadowing every move, the rest of the ascent was only an exercise in endurance. His muscles trembled with fatigue again by the time he wormed his way onto the broad ledge where Dev waited. Kiran settled himself cautiously in the spot Dev indicated and slumped back against the cliff with a sigh of release.

“Not bad for your first time.” Dev’s fingers flew as he tied a second, shorter length of rope from Kiran’s harness to a nearby piton. At Kiran’s skeptical glance, he nodded. “Seriously, I mean it. You did better than most would.”

A tendril of warmth stole through Kiran. He rubbed his aching forearms. “If that was an easy climb, I don’t ever want to see a hard one.”

Dev’s mouth twitched. “Don’t worry, showtime’s over. Now you get to relax a while.” He glanced down at the head of the convoy, where the steady flow of men and tool-laden mules on the trail continued unabated. Their destination was out of sight around a bend, but the clink of tools on rock and the wavering tones of a Sulanian chant song echoed back down the canyon. “Let me stow some gear, and then we’ll talk carcabon.”

The sun-warmed rock felt good against Kiran’s sore back. He flexed his hands, the burn in his muscles finally relenting. The canyon was oddly peaceful. Somehow colors seemed stronger and more vivid than in the city. The craggy cliffs forming the opposite canyon wall were blindingly white, with only occasional streaks of rust-red or gray or brown marring their purity, and the sky overhead was a deeper blue than Kiran had ever seen.

To Kiran’s relief, the azure depths of the sky contained not even the smallest puff of cloud that might build into a storm. Ruslan couldn’t know for certain which route Kiran had taken out of Ninavel. Since his storm had been unsuccessful at forcing Kiran to reveal himself, Kiran might have a few days’ grace while Ruslan hunted in other directions. Or so he devoutly hoped.

A rattling noise called him from his thoughts. Dev was running his fingers over a set of pitons on a rope sling, as if counting them. But his eyes were fixed high above on the cliff, and his expression was oddly remote.

“What are you looking for?” Kiran asked.

Dev blinked and set down the sling of pitons. “The red bands of rock are where you find carcabon. I think that one’s our best bet.” He pointed to a red streak slashing across a sheer section of cliff, high and to the left of the ledge.

“Please tell me you’re joking!” The angle of the rock edged past vertical, and Kiran couldn’t see a single crack or ledge blemishing the sunlit stone. “We can’t possibly climb that!”

Dev’s one-sided grin appeared. “Well, you’re right about the ‘we’ part. You’ll stay right here, so you can quit twitching like a roundtail in a snare.” He stood and shucked off his shirt. Then untied the rope from his harness.

“What are you *doing?*” Dev had impressed on Kiran in no uncertain terms that the rope was his lifeline, never to be untied while on a climb.

“Kinslayer’s not the kind of climb that lends itself to pitons. Without ‘em, a rope’s only dead weight.” Dev stretched his arms overhead and rotated his wrists. “Once I reach the carcabon, I can set a piton in the crack between the rock layers. I’ll tie off with a sling, chip out any decent stones, and then climb an ascending traverse off the overhang. When I’m done, I’ll downclimb back to you.” He spoke as casually as if he planned a stroll down a city street.

“You’re going to climb something called Kinslayer without a rope?” Had Dev gone insane?

Dev made a noise halfway between a snort and a laugh. “Don’t let the name bother you. Outriders always make up dramatic names for crags. Makes for a better tavern story.”

Kiran eyed the smooth expanse of rock leading up to Dev’s chosen streak. A vivid vision of Dev’s body plummeting through the air to splatter on the ground far below brought sweat to his palms. The ledge suddenly seemed a far more precarious perch than it had a moment ago. Kiran didn’t even know how to get back down the cliff safely without Dev, let alone cross the Alathian border. “What if you slip? Forget the carcabon! We can find another way to deal with Pello.”

Dev crouched down until his eyes were level with Kiran’s. “Look. I’ve been climbing since I was knee high to a mule. I know what I’m doing.” He slapped the pale stone of the ledge. “I wouldn’t try Kinslayer if I thought I might fail. Without a carcabon stone, I can’t find Pello’s wards to break them. Kinslayer’s the best chance for a stone. You want to stop Pello from sending any messages, this is the only way.”

Dev was wrong, of course. There was another way. If Kiran were the one to search Pello's wagon, he could sense the location of any wards, even through his barriers. If he pointed the wards out to Dev, and then Dev used whatever trick he'd planned to break them... but no. How could Kiran possibly explain an ability to sense wards, without arousing Dev's suspicion? If he claimed he carried a special charm...no, Dev would want to see the charm, perhaps insist on using it himself instead of Kiran...

Kiran pinched the bridge of his nose. "Can't you at least get me back down first?" If only he had more time to think!

"What, and leave you alone where Pello can find you? Nope. You're safer here." Dev uncoiled from his crouch and locked his hands behind his back. He arched over in another stretch. "If Khalmet touches me, and I fall...you sit tight. Cara and Jerik will come for you. Stick with the convoy until just before the border. Then make up some excuse to stay behind, and send a message through with one of the workers, to Gerran's import house at the river docks. Gerran'll handle it from there." Dev hesitated, his eyes traveling over Kiran's face, as if he might say something else. Instead, he turned away.

"Was that supposed to reassure me?" Kiran cast about desperately for a tale that might convince Dev without revealing the truth. His mind remained stubbornly blank.

Dev paced to the end of the ledge without a backward glance. Kiran cursed himself for ever having suggested a carcabon stone as an option. "Wait, maybe we can—"

"Shut up," Dev said mildly. "I need to concentrate." He flattened his hands on the rock and bowed his head. Kiran recognized the intent stillness in his stance. He'd seen it hundreds of times in Mikail, preparing to cast a channeled spell. Kiran opened his mouth, then shut it again. Perhaps the climb was well within Dev's abilities, and Kiran was agonizing over nothing.

Yet if Dev had misjudged the difficulty...Kiran could halt any fall with ease, if he chose. Was Dev's life worth the cost? Kiran imagined Ruslan hot-eyed with predatory triumph. His stomach rolled over. If it were death Kiran risked, the choice to save Dev would be easy. He would have welcomed death at Ruslan's hands. Kiran pressed a hand

against the hidden lump of the amulet and grimaced. Lizaveta's aid had not come without price. That escape was lost to him.

Dev raised his head. Kiran had one glimpse of the meditative calm on his face before Dev was gone, climbing away from the ledge with languid, flowing grace. He moved up the cliff as freely as if the ground waited mere inches away instead of a hundred feet below. The utter confidence in every line of his body eased the churning of Kiran's stomach.

Dev's pace slowed as the angle of the cliff increased. He shifted only a single hand or foot at a time, with precise, unhurried control. Kiran still couldn't understand how Dev could cling to such a sheer surface, let alone ascend it. But Dev twisted, and reached, and stepped, all with that same sinuous grace. Kiran began to relax as Dev neared the red seam.

For the first time, Dev hesitated. He leaned back, the muscles standing out like ropes under the brown skin of his back and arms. Reached a hand out, then withdrew it. Stretched upward, and slid his fingers over the rock, as if searching for a hold.

Kiran clenched a sweaty hand around a piton. He remembered the fiery ache in his forearms and hands after mere minutes of ascent. How long could Dev cling to such tiny imperfections in the cliff face? How long before even the most well-trained muscles must give way?

Dev held still for an agonizing interval. At last he straightened his arms and sank down into a twisted crouch. He rocked once, twice... and sprang upward, his body fully extended in the air. Kiran's breath froze in his chest. Clearly he'd been right, before. Dev was *insane*.

At the apex of his jump, Dev's reaching fingertips locked with unerring accuracy on the crystalline lip of the red layer. His arms flexed, taking his weight—and one hand lost its grip. Dev's body jerked. He swung from his remaining hand, clawing at the rock with his feet.

Kiran's heart leapt into his throat. He scrambled to his knees. He had only to release his barriers... He raised a hand; then dropped it, and sank back. Sick certainty cramped his gut. He couldn't face the unceasing hell that awaited, should Ruslan reclaim him. Kiran covered his face with his hands. Alisa would never have condoned a

man's death, for any reason. Yet another way in which he'd failed her, though not the worst.

He'd dreaded the sound of Dev's scream, but the loudest sound remained that of his own thudding heart. Kiran peeked through his fingers.

Dev hung from the edge of the red seam in a contortion of limbs. One foot was wedged high over his head, the other leg doubled up beneath the hand he'd jammed between the rock layers. With his free hand, he was busily working a piton into the crack.

Kiran sagged against the cliff. The relief that swept over him did nothing to erase the shame that still seared his heart.

Dev grabbed the slender hammer hanging from its knotted sling around his waist. The high-pitched ring of metal on metal shivered through the air. Another agonizing pause followed as Dev snatched up a second sling tied to his harness, threaded the free end through the piton ring, and tied a one-handed knot. Sweat sheened his back as he worked. Kiran dug his nails into his palms, and willed Dev's grip to hold.

Dev swung one foot down, then the other. The sling drew taut as his weight settled onto the piton. The piton held.

Dev threw his head back and laughed. The sheer joy in the sound made Kiran's breath catch. He dropped his head to his knees, heat pricking his eyes. *Our nature is the same*, Ruslan had shouted. Kiran had spat at his feet and denied it. And yet in the moment of truth, he'd proved Ruslan right.



(Dev)

I climbed back down to Kiran with my blood still buzzing like I'd drunk an entire cask of firewine. I felt light on my feet as a full-fledged Tainter. Almost, I believed I could step off the cliff and float free in the air the way I'd used to. Gods, I hadn't felt this good in years.

"Got us a decent stone," I announced. Kinslayer hadn't disappointed.

Several thumb-sized lumps of red crystal waited in my belt pouch. One to peek Pello's wards, and the rest I could sell for a tidy little sum once back in Ninavel. The more coin I had before trying to slip Melly from Red Dal's grasp, the better.

"You nearly died." Kiran's voice was flat. The tight curl of his body reminded me of the way he'd huddled during the storm, but his eyes were narrowed, rather than wide with fear.

"Aw, did that little slip scare you? Trust me, I've come closer to Shaikar's hells than that." Not much closer, in truth. I inhaled and stretched, remembering the cold shock of my hand breaking loose. Every fleck of mica on the granite had blazed into knife-edged clarity, every beat of my heart loud as thunder. I'd never felt more alive.

Kiran's eyes narrowed further. "It wouldn't have mattered what I said beforehand, would it? You wanted to do that climb."

"Of course I wanted to do the climb." What outrider wouldn't? I surveyed my route up the gleaming arc of cliff, and sighed in satisfaction. Sun winked off my single piton, still jammed in the fingers-width crack beneath the carcarbon layer. Every outrider who traveled this canyon would know someone had conquered Kinslayer.

"So it's all right for *you* to endanger everything," Kiran snapped.

I took in his clenched fists and the sweat drying on his temples. Well, I was no stranger to fear-fueled anger. I shrugged back into my shirt. "Difference is, I didn't take a risk for no reason. Now we can take care of Pello's charm. You'll feel better then, you'll see."

Kiran twitched and turned his face away. I blinked, puzzled. Anger I could understand, but now he had the shifty-eyed look of a Tainter who'd screwed up an important job. Was he so touchy over his panic after the storm?

"How do we get down?" he asked. He still wouldn't look at me.

I started shaking out the rope. "I'll lower you, and then I'll climb down after you. Just face in to the rock, push your body away from it with your feet, and walk down as I let out the rope."

Kiran glanced over the edge and swallowed.

"Don't worry, it'll be a lot easier than the climb up." I made sure the rope ran properly through the system of pitons and around my waist, ready for the belay. "When you were, uh, *exploring* the catsclaw

yesterday, did you notice anything unusual?”

“Like what?” His shoulders hunched up even higher.

I waved a hand at the silver-green mass of catsclaw far below. “See those black patches?” I’d confirmed early this morning while getting water that my eyes hadn’t been tricked by the fading light of evening. Whole groups of bushes had died, their leaves withered and blackened as if burned. “None of us have seen anything like it before, not even Jerik.”

“Could it be from...lightning strikes, perhaps?” Kiran wore a frown, but the guilty expression had faded. His twitchiness wasn’t over last night’s disappearing act, then.

“Maybe. But I heard Harken telling Cara this morning that some of the drovers are worried about their mules. Seems they’re off their feed, like they’re sick. And from up here, looks to me like the sick mules are from wagons closest to those burned patches.”

Now he looked upset. “Will they be all right? The mules?”

“Who knows?”

Kiran leaned over to peer down at the convoy, biting his lip. “Will this delay us in reaching Kost?”

His worry was so evident that I relented. “Nah. From what Harken said, the mules are still able to pull. Just seems odd. You sure you didn’t see anything in the catsclaw?”

His shoulders relaxed a little. “No,” he said softly. “I didn’t notice anything. I was...a little distracted, at the time.” He glanced at me. “By the way, Cara’s coming up the talus.”

I leaned over, and made a face. She sure was. Stomping up the boulders like she meant to grind them into powder, in fact. No doubt she’d prefer to crush me instead. “Brace yourself. Soon as we’re down, she’s gonna flay me raw.”

“She cares about you.” He said it low, but I still heard the bitter undertone. Yeah, somebody had burned him, and recently, too. The lover he’d denied? Or the father he’d choked over? Regardless, I didn’t bother to correct him. He’d learn soon enough that Cara’s fury wasn’t over my personal well-being. I’d broken the main unwritten rule of outriding—no risky climbs while on a job unless absolutely necessary—and as head outrider, she had to make me regret it.

I cast another fond glance at Kinslayer. Ah well. A climb like that was worth an ass kicking, even without the carcaban stones.

“You ready?” I asked Kiran.

He nodded. I helped him ease himself around to face the rock. He took a deep breath, and his face settled into the grim concentration I remembered from when he’d first crawled onto the ledge. I suppressed a grin. I’d seen that same determination on Sethan once, as he struggled with ice-coated holds on a difficult route.

The rope inched through my hands, and Kiran disappeared over the edge. The sharp focus I’d needed for Kinslayer hadn’t yet faded, and in that cold, clear light, my half-formed suspicions about him solidified into certainty.

Kiran had an enemy back in Ninavel. Not just some faceless opposing merchant house, but someone specific he’d crossed. Someone Kiran believed didn’t yet know of this little venture—but rich enough that if he found out, he could hire a mage to target Kiran. Maybe a relative, maybe a rival in love...either way, someone Kiran both feared and couldn’t avoid within the city. Kiran hadn’t wanted to leave Ninavel, that much was plain. No, he’d signed on for this trip out of desperation strong as mine.

I knew why, too. Once Kiran reached Alathia, not even a Ninavel mage could touch him—the Alathian border wards were rumored to be impenetrable, an invisible barrier surrounding the entire country that no spell and no foreigner could breach. Gods knew Bren had spent years trying to figure out a direct way through, without success. He was stuck using couriers like me to smuggle a trickle of goods past the Alathian guards at the few border gates. And within the border, all Alathia’s cities lay smothered under a blanket of detection spells meant to alert their Council the instant anyone tried any magic more powerful than simple household charms.

But until Alathia, Kiran would be fair game. No wonder he was jumpy as a scalded polecat, and trying so hard to hide it. I ought to be mad as hell. Only thing was, I had a powerful hunch Kiran’s enemy didn’t need a mage. Bren’s covert instructions made plenty of sense, if he and Gerran had worked a side deal with someone who wanted to both profit from Kiran’s venture and ensure he never returned from

Alathia. Now I understood why Bren had been so insistent on my silence. He'd likely known I'd figure out this much. And he'd made it clear that if I warned Kiran, I'd forfeit all my pay.

Gods all damn him, anyway. If it came down to Kiran's safety against Melly's, I knew which one I'd choose. But I sure didn't like it.

The rope went slack in my hands. Kiran had reached the ground. An indistinct murmur of voices drifted up. Then Cara's yell came, loud enough to shatter stone.

"Dev! Get your ass down here!"

She sounded ready to rip my limbs off. Well, I'd stalled long enough. Time to face the minder.

CHAPTER FIVE

(Dev)

Cara lit into me before I'd even gotten both feet on the ground. "What the hell was that?" She stalked past Kiran, who flinched back like a man faced with a scorpion. I didn't blame him. The scowl on Cara's face could have melted lead.

"A climbing lesson?" I said. No good starting with an apology right off; that'd only rouse Cara's suspicions. If she realized I'd made a deliberate plan to climb Kinslayer for my own profit, she'd fire me on the spot.

Her fists clenched, and I hurriedly dropped my pack. I had to play it brash, but not so cocky that she fired me out of sheer annoyance.

"I know, I shouldn't have made the climb. But I was training Kellan, and I happened to spy a route, and I couldn't resist..." I tried to look contrite, but a grin pulled at the corners of my mouth. I threw my arms wide. "A first ascent of Kinslayer, Cara! Come on, you know you would have climbed it in my place."

Cara's gimlet-eyed glare only intensified. "Shaikar take you, Dev! If I'd realized you hadn't outgrown this kind of shit, I'd never have signed off on hiring you. You're not on some solo jaunt—you've got

a responsibility to this convoy! You think because we're friends, I'll overlook whatever brainless stunts you pull? You can gods-damned well think again!"

"I got stupid, okay? I admit it. But, Cara..." She was a climber, same as me. Surely underneath her anger, a hint of sympathy lurked. I let the memory of the climb swallow me. Mind and body and stone, locked in perfect unity... "It was *glorious*."

I had one instant to realize it was Kiran who showed a glimmer of wistful recognition, not Cara. Then Cara's fist slammed into my jaw.

I staggered sideways into the cliff. One hand darted to the boneshatter charm hidden in my belt, before I caught myself. "What the fuck?"

She advanced on me with a murderous look in her eye. "Glorious? I saw that slip of yours. It's only by Khalmet's choice you're standing here at all! You think I want to scrape your bloodsoaked carcass off the rocks, the way you did with Sethan? Did you forget how glorious that was?"

Blood pouring black from Sethan's mouth, gleam of bones poking through his side, and I didn't want to look lower, oh mother of maidens, how could he still be alive? I clenched my jaw, and welcomed the white-hot stab of pain where Cara's fist had landed.

"Leave it, Cara." She hadn't watched Sethan die. What the fuck would she know about it?

Cara jabbed a finger at my chest. "The hell I will. Accidents are one thing; we all feel Khalmet's touch in the end. But this! You'd be dead through your own gods-damned stupidity. At least Sethan's death wasn't his fault!"

"No, it was your father's," I snarled.

Cara's head rocked back. Hurt flared in her eyes, before they went hard as granite.

My anger died to ashes. Shit. Clearly I hadn't learned a thing from my fight with Jylla. I scrubbed a hand over my face, praying I hadn't just destroyed a years-long friendship.

"Cara...I didn't mean that. Truly. Denion made the best call he could. Nobody could've predicted a rockfall that big, after such a brief storm." My buoyant energy from Kinslayer leaked away, leaving

me weary and a little sick. I knew how bad it had burned Cara when no convoy would hire her father again, despite his forty years of experience. How she'd flinched when tavern gossips proclaimed Denion's incompetence had killed all those men, as if they knew anything about weighing risks in the mountains. Gods damn me, why couldn't I rule my tongue? Jylla had deserved every harsh word, but Cara was only doing her job.

My apology made all the impact of a pebble thrown at a glacier. Cara eyed me with a frozen disdain that was worse than any of her anger. "Maybe money's the only language you'll understand, Dev. I'm docking half your pay for this run. If I catch you jeopardizing your safety or that of the convoy again, you're out of a job."

"Fine." My pay as an outrider was a pittance compared to what Bren had promised me. She could dock it all, if it'd thaw the ice in her eyes.

"One more thing," Cara said, still in a voice colder than a snowmelt stream. "Hand over those carcaban stones."

"What?" Damn it, she might have let the stones slide, if I hadn't ripped her so hard. "You dock my pay, that's fair. Taking my property, that's not."

"You think I'm going to let you profit from this?" She folded her arms. "If you want to stay on with this convoy, hand them over. Or head back to Ninavel. Your choice."

Behind Cara, Kiran was twitching like he'd stepped on a fire ant nest. He opened his mouth. I scowled at him. Last thing I needed was for him to stumble in and make things worse. Thank Khalmet, he took the hint and subsided, although the glare he directed at me nearly matched Cara's.

I slapped my belt pouch into Cara's hand, and prayed she wouldn't search my pack. "There. You happy?"

"Not in the least." She opened the pouch and checked the contents. Aimed another freezing stare my way, then rounded on Kiran. "You want to be an outrider, kid? Then learn this lesson well. The lives of everyone in the convoy depend on us. If you can't put that responsibility over your own desires, do us all a favor and stay home. Got it?"

Kiran's mouth tightened to a thin line. He stared at the ground and jerked his head in a nod. Khalmet's hand, you'd think he'd been the one caught climbing Kinslayer. He'd better learn to control that face of his before we faced the guards at the Alathian border.

"Crews are almost done clearing the trail. I'd better see you two back on station at the convoy before we move." Cara stalked off down the talus.

I blew out a breath. "Well, that could've gone worse."

Kiran raised his eyes to give me a disbelieving look. "I don't see how. You risked your life and our cover in the convoy, and we don't even have a stone to show for it!"

"Oh, relax." I slid a hand deep inside my pack and retrieved the carcarbon stone I'd stashed there. "Why d'you think I made sure to chip out more than one stone?"

A gratifying mixture of surprise and relief flowed over his face. "You knew she'd take them?"

"I like to be prepared." Too bad nothing else about the conversation had gone the way I'd planned. My jaw throbbed like a demon singer's drum. More, I had a sinking feeling Cara's forgiveness would be a long time coming.

I tossed Kiran one end of the rope. "Coil that, and I'll pack up the rest."

He began looping the rope over his shoulders. Without looking at me, he said, "When we were on the cliff, you didn't tell me nobody had ever climbed Kinslayer before."

It had the sound of an accusation. I slammed a set of pitons down with a resounding clang. "Didn't we go through this already? I climbed it. We've got a stone. End of story."

"No, I didn't mean..." He hesitated. Twisted a section of the rope in his hands. "I only wondered how you learned to climb so well."

Meaning, he wanted to ask me about Sethan, but he didn't quite dare. Damn her eyes, why'd Cara have to drag the past up in front of him?

I shrugged. "Learned it young, that's all." And not from Sethan. No, for that I could thank Red Dal. He made sure all his Tainters learned to climb. A Taint thief can float more loot down from

highside spires if he doesn't have to lift himself, too. I'd been better at it than most, just like I'd been more Tainted than most. Yeah, Red Dal had been over the moon about me in my Tainted days. I'd been so proud to earn his jubilant smiles and fatherly hugs. Shame I'd been too young and dumb to realize he didn't care two kenets about me, only for the profit I brought him. He'd sold me off without a second thought the moment my Taint failed.

Not a subject I wanted to discuss, either. Good thing I knew a quick way to shut Kiran up.

"How about you? What kinds of things did you learn as a kid?"

Kiran's face went shuttered and still. "Things from books, mostly. Nothing like climbing." He bent over the rope again.

Ha. Better than a silencing charm. It wasn't until he finished with the rope that he spoke again.

"When will we use the stone?"

I laced my pack shut and stood. "Once again, there's no 'we' here. You stay clear, and I'll handle Pello."

Kiran heaved an exasperated sigh. "All right, when will *you* hunt for Pello's charm?"

"Soon as I know for sure he'll be away from his wagon a nice long while." Something that'd be a bitch to arrange, for a man as wary as Pello. Before I moved, I hoped to gain one vital piece of information on his charm stash. And unless I missed my guess, Pello himself would provide it.

※

(Kiran)

Kiran reached out a hand to feel the spray of the stream on his skin. The water tumbled through a rock slot in a white roar of foam. Never in his life had Kiran seen so much water, moving so quickly. The sheer wonder of it eased the bitter tangle of his thoughts and brought new energy to his aching body.

Even Dev's mood seemed improved by the sight. He'd been stone-

faced and silent all the long afternoon ride. As they'd set up camp for the night, he'd spoken only in terse orders. But when he and Kiran emerged from a pine grove to confront the stream, the grim cast to his face softened.

Dev straddled the stream, his feet braced in rocky crevices. His arm muscles stood out in sharp relief as he held a jug against the force of the water. "Nothing like this in the city, huh? Wait 'til we get over the pass—then you'll see lakes."

Lakes. Kiran knew what they were, had seen illustrations and even scry-visions of them. But to see all that water with his own eyes—he found it incredible to imagine. He couldn't help a smile at the thought. Dev gave him an answering smile, one of his real ones, free of any trace of sarcasm or condescension.

Kiran's smile died as guilt clawed him again. Memory presented him with Alisa's voice, unwontedly serious. *Every life matters, don't you see? Rich or poor, we all have hopes and dreams, and people who love us.* Her words had struck a chord deep inside him, in a spot long left uneasy by Ruslan's harsher teachings. He'd agreed without hesitation, captivated as much by Alisa's ideals as the radiance of her smile.

Yet today on the cliff he'd have sacrificed Dev as surely as if he'd used a knife.

Kiran cast a stone into the stream with a vicious twist of his hand. He vowed silently that next time would be different. Next time, he'd make a choice worthy of Alisa, and accept the cost.

Within his mind, a small voice spoke—not in Ruslan's mocking tones, but in Lizaveta's gentle ones. *Make all the vows you like,* it whispered, fond and pitying. *You cannot change what you are.*

Dev was staring at him. Kiran hastily schooled his face and asked, "Where does all this water come from? And how can it be here with no one using it?"

Dev chuckled, though his gaze lingered. "It's not here long. This is snowmelt from the east side of the highest peaks. You only see this in the early season, and the water disappears into the soil of the lower slopes before it ever reaches the Painted Valley. The really heavy snows happen west of the mountain crest, so most of the water flows to the west. That's why Ninavel doesn't get any."

Dev handed the filled jug over to Kiran. He untied the dustcloth from around his neck, bent and wet it in the stream, then pressed it against the spreading bruise that darkened his jaw. His eyes shut in obvious relief.

“Didn’t you bring any healing charms?” Kiran had never used such things himself, but he’d heard from Alisa that the untalented mended their injuries with charms and herbal potions.

Dev slanted a wry glance his way. “Healing charms don’t come cheap. I wouldn’t waste one on something this small.” Dev hopped back over the water. “C’mon. We’re helping Harken with cooking duty tonight, since we’ve finally made it to a decent campsite.”

Reluctantly, Kiran left the marvel of the stream. At least the pine trees surrounding their camp were nearly as fascinating. Trees were rare in the city, even in the largest of gardens. The only pine tree he’d ever seen in Ninavel had been head-high with thin branches and sparse clumps of silvery needles. These trees reached more than three or four times that high, with gnarled heavy branches bristling with deep green. Pine cones and fallen needles littered the ground around the ever present rocks.

When they reached the wagon, Dev dug in a box and produced a set of fire stones. After clearing out stray pine debris from a small ring of rocks, he set the glossy black stones within. He pulled a knife from his belt and pricked his finger, letting a drop of blood fall and muttering the charm’s activation words. Magic rippled against Kiran’s barriers, gently enticing. Kiran clamped his hands on his knees. One day, the temptation would fade. He refused to believe otherwise.

The stones flared with red and blue flames. Dev sat back in satisfaction.

“Good. Last time out, we had a set where the damn mage who made them hadn’t cast the charm properly, and I had to trade a good vermin ward to a stonemason to get hot food.” He handed a battered tin pot to Kiran. “Here, fill this with water and set it on the stones.”

Harken ambled over, a small brass chest cradled in his callused hands. “My thanks for fetching water, lads. I’ll handle it from here.” He opened the chest, and the pungent aromas of curry and crushed carrow seeds rose into the air. Kiran’s mouth watered. It felt like years

since he'd eaten anything but hardtack and jerky.

Harken stopped Dev as he passed. "Here, take this." He pressed a thin copper disc traced with dark runes into Dev's hands. "I brought it to treat sandfly bites, for the horses. Near wore it out, back in the desert, but it might have a thread of power left. It'd be a shame if that jaw of yours was too sore to chew my famous rasheil-nut curry."

A hint of red tinged Dev's brown skin. "Thanks," he muttered. He smeared a drop of blood on the charm and held it to his jaw. Kiran tried to unobtrusively shift position to get a view of the runes. Ruslan had dismissed healing charms as unworthy of study. *A mage has no need of such trivialities, and should you injure one of the nathahlen beyond repair, simply obtain another to suit your purpose. Men without magic are common as grains of sand.*

Kiran flinched, thinking of Dev on the cliff. Oh yes, he'd learned Ruslan's lessons well.

The tiny flutter of magic as Dev's bruise faded to a shadow conveyed little information. Dev flipped the charm back to Harken before Kiran could think of an excuse to inspect it.

Jerik emerged from the trees with another full water jug. Behind him strolled Cara and Pello, talking and laughing like old friends. Dev greeted them as casually as ever. Cara jerked her chin in a stiff, brusque nod, and walked to the opposite side of the fire. Pello's gaze flicked between them. His smile edged wider.

Kiran's stomach tightened. He took care to sit in the shadow of the wagon. Dev showed no sign of nerves around Pello, but Kiran didn't trust himself to manage the same.

"Real food, thank the gods." Cara inhaled with a beatific expression. She turned to Pello. "Want to join us for dinner? Harken's a hell of a cook."

Pello shook his head. "Much as that would please me, I should return to my own wagon." He ran his hands through his mop of curls with a longsuffering sigh. "I must inventory my supplies tonight. I fear I didn't lace my wagon cover tightly enough this morning. An animal got in while I was away working on the rockfall."

Kiran barely stopped himself from jerking in surprise. He glanced at Dev, who was leaning against the side of the wagon watching Pello

with a blandly civil expression. Dev had worked alone that morning, while Kiran slept. He could have searched Pello's wagon—but why, before they'd secured a carcabon stone? Surely he wouldn't be so foolish as to put Pello on his guard before they had a real chance of finding the charm.

Dev's face provided no clues. Kiran tore his gaze away, hoping Pello hadn't noticed.

"Marmots are the spawn of Shaikar," Harken said. "Next time, bring a stronger vermin charm. The kind cityfolk buy keep out rats well enough, but not bigger animals."

"But if you do, remember to stash it this side of the border." Dev's one-sided grin made a fleeting appearance. "The Alathians have no sympathy for a convoy man's troubles."

Had Pello's eyes flickered? Kiran leaned forward.

Pello made a rueful face. "Ah, the things one learns too late. We have no such troubles on the southbound route."

"Yeah? So what brings you westbound?" Dev said, all polite interest.

Pello smiled at him, his dark eyes glinting. "A favor to a friend, as it happens. One of his regular men became unreliable, and he asked me to fill in." His smile sharpened. "I'm sure you understand, Dev, after your recent experience with unreliable friends."

"What's this?" Cara looked back and forth between Dev and Pello. Dev's expression stayed polite, but Kiran saw his fist clench, low at his side in the wagon's shadow.

"Surely you heard the sad tale?" Pello's eyes locked with Dev's. "It was all over Acaltar district before we left, how Dev's partner cast him aside like a burned-out charm."

Cara straightened, her mouth falling open. "Mother of maidens, Dev, that bitch finally cut you loose? No wonder you—" She stopped short.

Dev's breath hissed out through his teeth. "Yeah, Jylla and I split," he said, sharply. "Not that it's anybody's business but ours." Kiran winced in sympathy. From the look on Dev's face, he'd rather crawl through magefire than discuss whatever had happened. Kiran knew how that felt. He bowed his head, fighting back thoughts of Alisa.

“Ah, but when lovers are business partners, that’s where the sadness comes in.” Sympathy dripped from Pello’s voice. “I heard she played you like a wind pipe. You did all the work, while she dallied with half the men in the city. Then she took your accounts and—”

Dev shoved away from the wagon. “Don’t believe everything you hear,” he growled, and advanced on Pello.

Cara sprang to her feet. “Enough!” She pointed at Dev. “You, back off. I’ll have no fighting here.” Dev grimaced and slouched back against the wagon. Cara turned to Pello. “You, out. I didn’t invite you to our fire so you could provoke my riders.”

“My apologies if I offended.” Pello dipped in an ironic bow. “I’ll leave you to your dinner.” He vanished into the darkness.

Cara broke the awkward silence. “Whatever bad blood’s between you and Pello, Dev, that’s the last I want to see of it on this trip.”

Dev didn’t answer. He was scowling after Pello, but to Kiran’s surprise, his eyes looked more thoughtful than angry. Kiran nudged him.

Dev blinked and bared his teeth in a grin at Cara. “I’ll keep out of his way, if you keep him out of mine.”

“Food’s ready,” Harken announced, leaning over to look in the pot. Kiran wasn’t the only one who let out a sigh of relief. As Jerik set out bowls and Harken ladled portions, Kiran edged closer to Dev. Under the rattling of Harken’s spoon in the pot, he whispered, “Why did—”

“Later,” Dev muttered sharply. Kiran sat back in frustration. Later, when? Dev had warned him earlier the other tarps would be too close that night for safe conversation.

Cara handed round the filled bowls. When Dev took his, she leaned down and spoke quietly. “If that little sand adder ripped her fangs out of you, I get you’re still working out the poison. Must be tough, leaving someone after so long. But for Khalmet’s sake, don’t fuck up the rest of your life over it.”

For a moment, Dev looked weary beyond bearing. Then his face smoothed out, all expression vanishing. “Are we scouting tomorrow morning?” he asked, loud enough for everyone to hear.

Cara shook her head and muttered something under her breath.

She raised her own voice. “Yeah. First thing, too, so nobody stay out too late.” She glanced at Kiran. “Kid, you’ll join us. We’ll be scouting avalanche conditions before the convoy crosses Broken Hand Pass—one of the most important parts of the job. You stick close to Dev tomorrow and pay attention.”

As Cara retreated to the far side of the fire, Dev whispered, “Wait for the scout.”

Kiran nodded, grudgingly. If Dev thought it necessary to be so cautious, Kiran would choke back his questions until morning. But he didn’t see why they couldn’t simply return to the stream and depend on the noise of the water to cover their conversation. Perhaps Dev thought Pello would anticipate such a move, and follow them? Kiran stabbed his spoon into his bowl. For the hundredth time, he regretted the necessity to hold his barriers. Without them, he’d sense Pello’s presence no matter how well he hid, the man’s living *ikilhia* energy burning bright as magefire flame in Kiran’s inner sight. As it was, he could hardly feel the flicker of Dev’s *ikilhia*, and Dev was sitting right beside him.

No one seemed eager to restart the conversation. Spoons scraped bowls, punctuating the rush of the stream in the distance. Kiran ate mechanically, barely tasting Harken’s concoction. Cara’s soft words echoed in his ears: *Must be tough, leaving someone after so long*. The truth of it intensified the ache in his heart. He’d spent his entire life with Ruslan and Mikail. Despite the horror of Ruslan’s true nature, and Mikail’s betrayal...a part of him missed them, badly. Childhood memories ran through his head, bright as sunlight. He bit down on his tongue hard enough to draw blood. The life he remembered was nothing more than a lie.

CHAPTER SIX

(Dev)

I sat cross-legged on a flat topped chunk of talus and soaked in the view. Below me sprawled the broad rock strewn basin at the head of the canyon. Dawn's light painted the surrounding peaks a vivid gold and softened the contours of the icy snowfields that spilled from their heights. To the west, between two rugged peaks lay the saddle of Broken Hand Pass, blown clear of snow by the high winds of spring. Out eastward, beyond the jagged pinnacles surrounding the deep gash of Silverlode canyon, the pale white rock of the ridges dwindled into steep gray and brown slopes and leveled out in the low sandy expanse of the Painted Valley. Ninavel was visible on the desert plain, tiny and toy-like at this distance, the firefly radiance of magelights sparkling in the valley's shadow. The splendor of the scene and the bite of the chill morning air helped to clear the cobwebs from my head.

Gods, I was tired. Though Kiran looked far worse. I eyed him as he struggled over the wagon-sized boulder below mine, his chest heaving in great gasps. Bluish circles stained the skin beneath his eyes, and his cheekbones stood out sharp as the ridgeline above us.

After all the yelling and thrashing he'd done in his sleep last night,

I thought it a miracle he had the energy to walk at all. Tonight I meant to go buy some yeleran leaf extract off Merryn, the convoy's healer. If Kiran refused to swallow it, by Khalmet, I'd pour it down his throat. Yeleran would knock him out for sure, and gain us both some much-needed sleep.

Kiran collapsed beside me with a groan. "*Now* can we talk?" he panted.

I turned to check on Cara and Jerik. High above on the slope, two dark forms squatted on the outflung arm of a snowfield. Sun winked off metal as they swung their ice axes. I had to admit, this apprentice thing had its benefits. Without Kiran, I'd be up there chopping a pit deep enough to check layers in snow still frozen from the cold of night. But Kiran couldn't match our pace on talus, even when he wasn't dragging from lack of sleep, and Cara had given me leave to hang back and watch out for him. Of course, I'd had to promise that I'd do all the heavy work on the next snow pit, when the sun would be high enough I'd be sweating like a rock bear on a sand flat.

"Yeah, we can talk," I told Kiran. "So long as you keep your voice down. Sound carries more than you'd think up here."

Kiran didn't waste another second. He blurted, "Pello was angry with you—did you search his wagon? If so, why would you do that? You can't have found his wards without the carcabon stone. Now he'll be suspicious of you, so how can you get to his charm? If he tells the Alathians about us—"

"Whoa, hold on! Take a breath before you pass out."

He sucked in a huge draught of air, and promptly doubled over in a coughing fit. I thumped him on the back and handed him a waterskin.

"Yeah, I searched Pello's wagon while he was working the rockfall. For two reasons. First, imagine you're Pello, and you come back and realize someone's pawed through the very place where you've hidden a warded charm stash. What's your first move?"

Kiran blinked at me, still red-faced. "I'd...make sure the wards remained intact and none of the charms had been taken."

"So, Pello checks his charms, finds them all still there, and then

reactivates his wards. Which means they're nice and fresh and fully powered."

Kiran's mouth rounded into an "oh" of understanding. "A recently activated ward should react more strongly to the look-away charm."

"Exactly." Even with the carcabon to boost it, the look-away was such a minor charm that I wasn't entirely sure it could flash the ward. I wanted all the advantage I could get.

"What was your second reason, then?"

"Insurance, in case the carcabon's not enough to find his stash. A man's reaction to a threat can tell you a lot about what he's protecting. You saw how he tried to twist my tail after I poked him about the Alathians. If he only carried personal charms, he would've been a hell of a lot more subtle about his warning. Nope, he's carrying contraband meant for profit. Good news: it means he's got to keep clear of the Alathians, same as us. Better yet, now he knows that if he sells me out to the border guards, I'll happily return the favor the instant they put me under truth spell."

Kiran pulled off his woolen cap. He turned it over in his hands, thoughtfully. A tiny, dry smile pulled at his mouth. "What did he learn from your reaction?"

I snorted. "Nothing he didn't know already." Hell, Pello'd even done me a good turn. Now that Cara thought I'd climbed Kinslayer out of some misguided desire to lift my mood after Jylla, she might thaw a bit. Much as I hated the prospect of her lecturing me all the way to Kost, that had to be better than frozen, awkward silence.

The only part that bothered me was how Pello knew a bit too much about me and Jylla for a man who hailed from Gitailan district, not Acaltar. He must've checked up on me before the convoy left Ninavel. Maybe he'd only done it out of a shadow man's natural caution, since he knew I worked the route as Bren's courier. Or maybe it was a clue he really had signed on to sniff out our plans. All the more reason to take care of that damn message charm.

As if reading my thoughts, Kiran said, "But what about the message charm? Won't he be even more careful, now?"

"Probably." Too bad Pello wasn't the sort of man who'd assume himself safe after an apparent failure on my part to cross his wards.

“But he’s on repair crew again day after tomorrow. Past Broken Hand Pass, the trail will need a lot of work; and Goranant House’s lead stonemason owes me a favor. I’ll get Gaven to claim Pello for rocksplitting duty—that should keep him away from the convoy long enough for me to flash and break his wards.”

“Two days...” Kiran’s fingers dug into the wool of his cap. “Isn’t there a way you can search sooner?”

“Not a good way,” I said.

Kiran’s head tilted. “But there *is* another way.”

Yeah, there was. One I’d considered during my sleepless night, and rejected as too dangerous. “Trust me, safest to wait for his next work shift.”

Kiran gave me an urgent, pleading look. “Two days is too long! If you have another option, at least tell me what it is.”

No question he was scared shitless of that enemy of his in Ninavel. I sighed. “Fine. What’s the one thing guaranteed to pry Pello away from his wagon and hold his attention?” I poked Kiran’s shoulder. “You. If he saw you wander off alone, he’d slink right after you, in hopes of cornering you into a conversation.”

Kiran brightened. “So I would draw him away, while you disabled the charm...what’s wrong with that idea?”

I scowled at him. “Shadow men are clever bastards. The moment you open your mouth, Pello will mark you for a highsider. And the longer you talk, the more he’ll learn. He’ll twist the conversation on you, make you reveal things without even realizing it. It’s too risky.”

“I’ll answer him with nods and shrugs. He can’t learn much from that.” Eager determination shone in Kiran’s eyes. “If he can’t send any messages, and he’s wary of Alathian interest...then even if he does realize I’m not from a lower district, the harm should be minimal.”

Yeah, right. Kiran had no idea of a shadow man’s wiles. Then again, a full inventory of Pello’s contraband in my hands would go far towards ensuring his silence. And if Kiran’s fear of his mystery enemy back in Ninavel was so strong he jumped at the chance to play bait, that was a warning I shouldn’t ignore.

I’d scouted Pello’s wagon already, which saved me time. Assuming the carcaban could boost the look-away enough, I figured on twenty

minutes to flash and break his wards, disable the charm, and cover my tracks. Pello could find out far too much in twenty minutes. Unless... maybe I could arrange it so he'd waste time chasing Kiran down, first. Make sure the conversation was so short Kiran might have a chance of keeping his mouth shut. I thought for a moment, then fixed Kiran with a forbidding stare.

"You want me to disable that charm so bad, then listen close. If we cross the pass today, we'll camp at Ice Lake tonight. Nobody'll think it odd for a city boy like you to run straight to the lake the instant you're done with chores. If you go alone, Pello's sure to follow. You keep moving around the lake, and stay ahead of him best as you can. When he does catch up, no matter what he says, you keep your mouth shut, hear me?"

Kiran nodded, emphatically. "That won't be a problem."

"I'll come interrupt the moment I'm done with his wagon. If he starts pushing you too hard before then, then you leave, straight off. Don't worry about holding him there." Even if Kiran never said a word, Pello would read in his body language that he had something to hide—but he'd surely guessed that already.

"If you can disable that charm tonight, the risk is worthwhile," Kiran said softly.

"I hope so," I muttered. If he was wrong, I knew who'd have to handle the mess.

Cara and Jerik had left the snow pit and begun kicking their way up the snow slope, toward the broken rock tower resembling a man's upright hand that gave the pass its name. The summit of the Hand would give us an excellent view of the avalanche chutes beyond the pass. If we ever reached it.

"We gotta get moving," I told Kiran. "Snow climbing's easy to learn, but it's exhausting work."

A hint of the same fascination he'd shown at the stream joined the determination in his eyes. "Snow...does it truly freeze your skin if you touch it barehanded, like the stories say?"

"You're about to find out."



Cara clapped when I helped Kiran onto the tilted blocks of stone forming the Hand's broad summit. "Congratulations, kid." She gave him a companionable whack on the back that nearly knocked him to his knees. "Wasn't sure you'd make it, after all your hollering last night. Did you decide the mountains were too quiet?"

I suppressed a sigh. I hadn't realized how much I'd miss Cara's cheerful mockery until none of it was directed at me. Even if Pello's tale-telling had spared me any more icy glares, the laughter still died out of her eyes whenever she glanced my way.

For once, Kiran didn't stiffen or blush at her teasing. He probably hadn't heard a word she'd said. He was gaping with eyes wide as kenet coins at the frozen sea of sharp peaks that stretched to the horizon. Immediately in front of us, the rock slabs dropped away in a thousand-foot cliff to another barren high basin full of boulders and snow. Once we crossed Broken Hand Pass, we'd have several days travel over an alpine plateau full of sharp ridges, subpeaks, and cirques before the trail plunged into the deep trench of Garnet Canyon and then made the long climb up the canyon's western wall to Arathel Pass. Beyond Arathel Pass waited the heavily forested western slopes of the Whitefires, and eventually, the Alathian border.

"How'd the snow layers look?" I asked Jerik. I might be the fastest climber, but Jerik's years of experience made him the uncontested expert in avalanche behavior.

"Nice and bonded," Jerik said. "Only one layer I didn't like. Must've had a warm spell after that snowfall. But the layer's well packed, and deep. It won't slide easy. Though if it did, we'd get a devil's lash."

Kiran turned. "A what?"

"A monster avalanche," I said. "Most avalanches happen when the top layer of snow breaks. The slide's maybe a few hundred feet wide. Enough to take out plenty of wagons. But if a deep layer breaks, the force can set the whole slope moving, maybe even all the way to bare ground. Avalanches that large can wipe out entire convoys."

"They're rare," Jerik added. "Last one was before my time."

Kiran's expression hovered somewhere between worried and fascinated. "But if you saw a dangerous snow layer...how do you know it won't slide?"

Cara laughed, not happily. "No guarantees in the mountains, kid. But don't you worry, we don't leave it entirely up to Khalmet. Layer bonding is only one of the telltales we check. Speaking of..." She slid her spyglass out of her pack and handed it to Jerik. "Let's take a look at those chutes, boys."

Jerik held the glass up to one dark eye and scanned slowly across the rugged terrain. "Shaikar's Tongue slid maybe a few days ago," he said.

I squinted at the chute he meant, a wide couloir dropping down from the upper slopes of a mountain with a distinctive double summit. Avalanche debris lay scattered at the bottom, but the slide hadn't reached as far as the trail.

Jerik lowered the glass. "Nothing more recent, and the Gate of Amaris looks good." He handed the spyglass to me, and I repeated the survey. I paused as I passed over a peak whose upper ridges were marked with streaks of darker rock.

"More snow on Iblanis than usual," I said.

"Didn't spot any big cornices, though," Jerik said. I studied the peak through the glass, carefully following the ridgelines above the chutes.

"Me neither." I finished my survey and handed the glass back to Cara. While she took her turn, I moved to Kiran's side. I nudged him and pointed down at a steep-walled semicircular bowl of rock just north of the pass. "Ice Lake's there, at the bottom of that cirque."

The lake in question was small and still choked with ice, but the pale green of melted water showed in patches near the edges. The convoy would have plenty of water without needing to melt snow. When the drovers all rushed off to fill their barrels before dark, I'd have the perfect opportunity to revisit Pello's wagon unobserved by any of his neighbors.

Perfect, so long as Pello didn't rattle Kiran into talking. If he did, the time for veiled warnings would be over. I'd have to confront Pello straight on. And if direct threats didn't work, I'd need to swallow my scruples and play a darker game, no matter the cost to others. Not a pleasant thought.

“The high mountains seem so...so stark. There’s no life up here,” Kiran said. His gaze tracked across the basin, a frown appearing on his face.

“You’d be surprised,” I told him. “Birds, hopmice, all kinds of creatures live here. Later in the season after the snow melts, there’ll even be flowers everywhere.” A wistful pang shot through me as I remembered summer afternoons spent lazing beside cliffs amidst a riot of wildflowers. If I finished this damn job and at long last fulfilled my debt to Sethan...then I planned on disappearing into the Whitefires and letting clean stone and sunlight scour these last few Shaikar-cursed weeks from my head.

Kiran’s face said he didn’t believe me about the flowers. “Why are all the peaks named after southern demons?” he asked.

“Because they’re beautiful, unforgiving, and can kill you on a whim,” Cara said, grinning at him.

“They’re not all named after demons,” Jerik said. “But before Arkennland claimed this territory, the only people who came up here were southerners. Sulanians, Varkevians, even a few of the Kaitha. They named most of the peaks on the eastern side of the range, and their names stuck. Our name for the mountains, Whitefire, is actually a translation of an old Varkevian word for lightning. They saw the summer storms and thought it must be demons fighting.”

It was the longest speech I’d ever heard from him. Cara gave a small, surprised snort. “History lessons aside, I think the convoy’s safe as far as Ice Lake. We’ll do some fracture testing and another layer check on the lakeside slopes, but so far the risk past the lake looks low. Agreed?”

Jerik nodded. “If deep layers go, it’s usually earlier in the season.”

I nodded my own assent. The risk was small enough that Meldon was sure to choose to continue. Thank Khalmet, we’d have no delays in reaching Kost. Every day brought Melly closer to her Change. The faster I finished this job and got back to Ninavel, the better.

“What would happen if you thought it was dangerous?” Kiran asked me.

“Depends on how dangerous,” I said. “Medium risk, Meldon might send wagons through with much wider spacing. That way if a

slide happens, hopefully you only lose one. High risk, we might wait at the lake a couple extra days, try and give things time to settle.”

Cara handed Kiran the spyglass. “Here, Kellan, take a look.” She looked at me. “Go on, tell the kid the signs to watch for.”

It was the first thing she’d said direct to me in hours. At least she was meeting my eyes now. Progress, of a kind.

I did my best to repeat what Sethan had told me on my first trip out, while Kiran surveyed the couloirs with studious precision. Sethan had been a patient and careful teacher, with a real gift for explaining things in ways that made sense and were easy to remember. I knew I was way too impatient to match his skill in that area. Fortunately, I didn’t really need it for this little charade Kiran and I were playing out, though Kiran was an excellent listener. He never twitched or fidgeted or sighed, and his attention never wandered. The intensity of his focus actually unsettled me. It didn’t seem natural for a highsider. Though in truth the only other highsiders I’d met were drunken idiots who’d stumbled down streetside for gambling and cheap jennies.

Kiran, on the other hand...after I’d seen his fine clothes and smooth hands in Bren’s office, I’d dreaded the idea of dragging him across the Whitefires. I’d figured either I’d be stuck listening to an endless stream of complaints, or he’d collapse under the demands of real work. Instead, so far I had to admit he’d done a decent imitation of a real apprentice. Hell, sometimes I even caught myself having fun showing him the ropes, and anticipating his moments of bright-eyed wonder. I scowled, reminding myself that it didn’t matter. So he was better company than I’d imagined—so what? In the end, this was a job like any other, and I’d better keep it straight in my head that he was only another package to deliver.



(Kiran)

Kiran clambered over the enormous boulders that choked the approach to Ice Lake. He darted a glance back toward the cirque's mouth, but the ragged sea of rocks blocked his view of the convoy's camp beside the trail. Traversing talus this large was more difficult than he'd anticipated; he might as well be crawling rather than walking. If Pello possessed any of Dev's easy agility, he'd surely catch up at any moment.

A thread of unease wormed through his chest. Kiran suppressed it, firmly. Pello was untalented, blind to the distinctive blaze of a mage's *ikilhia*. He couldn't possibly identify Kiran as a mage from a few short minutes of conversation, no matter how observant he was. The rest of what he might learn was trivial by comparison.

Kiran heaved himself onto the gently angled top of another giant boulder. He started to his feet, thoughts of Pello momentarily banished by wonder. He'd reached the lake.

So much water! And so different from the illustrations he'd seen. Books portrayed lake water as blue, or perhaps clear. But this water was a strange, milky green, like sunlit jade. High peaks surrounded the lake on three sides, their snowfields stretching down unbroken to the ice that still covered much of its surface. The ice was smooth and snow covered on the far end of the lake, but buckled and broken and fluted into strange shapes where it turned to open water.

Though the sun still stood a handspan above the western peaks, the air was already cooling fast, and a chill breeze wafted off the lake. Kiran shivered and pulled his overjacket tighter. He scrambled forward to the boulder's edge. The water rippling against the rock below was too far down to reach, but perhaps from the next boulder he could—

“An amazing sight, isn't it?”

Kiran froze. He'd had no warning of Pello's approach—curse the man, how could he move so quietly over such difficult terrain? He turned, careful not to lose his balance. Pello stood only a few feet away on the boulder's broad top. A water jug dangled from one hand, and a patchwork wool cap contained most of his curls. Though his

grin was friendly, his dark eyes were fixed on Kiran with an intensity that prickled Kiran's skin.

Pello gestured with his jug at the lake. "Not even the hanging gardens of Reytani can compare to such a wonder...or so I'm told."

Kiran shrugged, carefully. His face felt rigid as stone. Of the thirteen highside districts, Reytani was the one Ruslan called home. Had Pello mentioned it at random? Kiran's unease swelled.

"Shy of me, are you? Never fear, I carry no scorpion's sting." Pello sauntered closer. Kiran couldn't help a glance over his shoulder. No retreat that way; only the lake. The long drop off the boulder's top to the fanged rocks on either side was more than he dared attempt. Pello blocked the only route off the boulder. He'd trapped Kiran as neatly as a thrice-spiraled ward.

Out of the roil of his emotions, power uncoiled, silent and seductive as a courtesan's dance. *No*. Kiran smothered the flame deep within. He focused grimly on the scuffed leather of Pello's boots.

"I once saw a man with skin and eyes as pale as yours," Pello said, in a musing tone. "In Prosul Varkevia, when I was a child. But he had hair black as Shaikar's heart, not brown, and spoke no civilized tongue—the shuka dancers whispered he hailed from far over the eastern sea."

Kiran raised his eyes before he could stop himself. He'd long known that his looks were unusual in the city. He'd once spent precious stolen hours searching without success through the contents of Ruslan's library for any mention of a people that might hold his heritage.

"Ah, that caught your attention." Satisfaction shaded Pello's smile. "Were you a talented boy, then? Sold off by the mother you never knew, as Dev was?"

Talented. Kiran's stomach curdled. Deliberate word choice, or not? Regardless, Pello now skirted terribly close to the truth. Silence was no longer an option—Kiran had to quash this line of thought. He recalled the cover story Dev had insisted he memorize, and lifted his chin.

"My parents are bookbinders, in Kulori district." A sliver of curiosity pricked through his anxiety. Had Dev truly been sold as a

child? And if so, to whom, and why? Dev's *ikilhia* was dim as that of any untalented man.

Pello clapped his hands. "He speaks!" He cocked his head. "Bookbinders, you say...and what distant city left such a unique stamp on your family's tongue?"

Kiran knew his speech bore the influence of Ruslan's gliding vowels and harsh-edged consonants. Remnants of Ruslan and Lizaveta's native language, from a city Lizaveta had told him was no longer remembered except in tale and song.

He jerked his shoulders in another shrug. "I should get back," he mumbled. Even if he hadn't bought Dev enough time, he dared not linger. Had he really been so arrogant as to think his identity safe because Pello lacked mage talent? He truly was as prejudiced as Ruslan.

"Of course," Pello said genially. "Forgive my curiosity. Dev rarely keeps such interesting company." He took a single step to the side.

Kiran squeezed past, doing his best to ignore Pello's proximity. He sat down in preparation for sliding down the steep rock slope to the top of the next boulder.

A hand skimmed through Kiran's hair to settle on his shoulder. In a flash, Kiran was back in Ruslan's workroom, fear and fury clouding his vision. With a shout he tore himself away, raising one hand to strike even as he thumped painfully down onto rock.

"Hey!" Dev's yell slashed through his panic, dispelling the fog of memory. Kiran yanked his hand down, his heart pounding. Dev stopped short a few rocks away, staring at Pello, who pushed to hands and knees from his awkward sprawl on top of the lakeside boulder. "What in Khalmet's name is going on here?"

Kiran clenched his hands to still their trembling. His barriers still stood firm. He'd used no magic outside them, nothing Ruslan could detect. But Pello had been touching him when Kiran's power had flared, and the shock of unbridled magic had knocked him flat. Would he know a mage had felled him?

Pello staggered to his feet. His eyes met Kiran's, full of stunned realization. Kiran's heart stuttered in his chest.

He knows.