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Playing destiny

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CHAPTER 1.

Linear Kelt walked to campus everyday. To clear his head. He was beginning to feel his home life was, well, less than satisfactory. The old man was impossible. What was the boy? Uncommunicative. How could he know what the boy was? Rohan Bree never said, and anymore information could be neither cajoled nor coerced from him. He had simply become too strong for that. Kelt hoped that the boy wouldn't realize he could defy them. It hadn't come to that. Yet.

He refused to call it soul-searching, when he took these walks and thought about things. And it wasn't, either. He made it a point to never think about the hard things. Life was good, usually, and better when not considered too deeply. Today, the eight block walk up Ellis, from his Kenwood house to the University wasn't a pleasure. Too damn hot, for one thing, only 10 a.m. in early June and already 82°. Humid. He'd been up too late the previous night, as well. For all his concerns about the boy's loyalties lately, Rohan Bree had done well last night. They'd sent him out with Tellar. Bree had urged the man to drink too much, not a difficulty, it seemed, then brought Tellar home and they had questioned him.

Kelt's fear: the mother had told Tellar too much, before she died. Clearly not true. Tellar knew nothing, guessed less, and appeared well on the way to drinking himself to death, like his father. His step-father, Kelt amended. Because Tellar had known so little, and because it seemed likely they needed him later, Amar Ruan agreed to let him live. Even if he knew nothing, Kelt knew by the old man's fear Tellar had real potential. Amar Ruan had such power he should fear no one, but he feared Sam Tellar, a twenty-four-year-old party-boy lecturer in English Lit.

Such was the basis of his dissatisfying home life: Amar Ruan's contagious paranoia and Rohan Bree's studied indifference. Linear Kelt was nearly fifty, living with a man who could be his grandfather and a man who could be his son. But they weren't, were they? Three unrelated men of more than average intelligence, more than average ambition, and dangerously fewer than necessary ties to a world beyond themselves. Amar Ruan had chosen them carefully, but was too arrogant to admit perhaps not carefully enough. Bree was young, not yet thirty, and too indifferent, too unconnected. He would likely try to leave as soon as it occurred to him. Ruan was too old and presumptuous to even consider the possibility.

The ugliness of thoughts like that one was the reason Kelt preferred not to consider his present life too deeply. He made a vigorous and reasonably successful attempt to clear his
mind as he reached the Physics Teaching Center and entered by the front door. One of those newer buildings, sort of a Post-modern entry-way with a stark, fluorescently lit interior. Kelt knew of worse buildings on campus, and while he often cursed the brightly sterile corridors, today he welcomed the step from the vestibule into the air conditioning. He stopped in his office to pick up the stack of books he had left there the afternoon before, looked in the mirror, smoothed his greying hair, and mopped his face with his silk handkerchief.

Not a bad looking man, for fifty years old, in August; he probably looked younger. Presently sleeping with a thirty-year-old former student, at her insistence. A beautiful former student, and reasonably intelligent, as well. He and Ruan had chosen her carefully. He practiced his smile and with the heavy stack of books under one arm, locked the office door behind him and whistled as he walked down the hall, five minutes late for the first class. He planned it that way. The importance of making an entrance, after all.

Linear Kelt stepped into the classroom. He carried seven books: a standard elementary text in theoretical physics, James Gleick's *Chaos*, H.G. Wells's *Time Machine*, Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*, a Penguin edition of Shakespeare's *Tempest*, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and his own book, *A Beginner's Guide to Anarchy: Non-linear Time for Do-It-Yourselfers*. He set the books on the desk and faced twenty-two bright-eyed senior honors students. Did they really have to look this excited about summer school? He knew he was good, but he ought to tell them to get a life. He hadn't worked with undergraduates in several years. Oh, well riding a bike and all that. He wrote his name on the board, called the roll: only twenty-one bright-eyed seniors. Charming smile, he could do that. Practice, years of it.

"Children," he began, as he often began, "H.G. Wells tells us that 'Scientific people know very well that Time is only a kind of space.' I tell you the same thing. In this course we'll discover the true nature of time. Although I'm by training a physicist, this is an interdisciplinary seminar, and so we'll examine time and theories of time through literature and mathematics, science, theory and computer models. I know the course description also suggested we might delve into the mysteries of philosophy and religion, but that's bullshit as far as I'm concerned, so you won't be reading Aristotle or Aquinas. Any complaints thus far?"

He surveyed the room, the silent students sitting in rows of desks bolted to the floor. Not a hand went up. "Surely at least one of you believes he will receive a better education if I slip in a few of the classics, preferably in Greek and Latin? Are you honors students? Is this the University of Chicago? Am I in the right classroom?"

A girl in the front row giggled.

"Do you have a comment, Miss?"
"I can save it until after class," she suggested.

He gave her a brief second look and smiled. "This, children, is the attitude that will earn you an 'A' in my class. Laugh at my jokes and meet me after class." Several other students laughed. He passed out the syllabus. "I know it pleases you when your egomaniacal professors assign their own books as texts. I'm sure it pleases you even more when the text in question costs thirty-five dollars. I do not assign this book because I am an egomaniac or because I need the pitiful royalties I receive on its sales. I assign it because everyone else you'll read is presenting a theory of time, or an aspect of a theory. My work is not theory, it's reality. Now are there any complaints?"

The room was quiet. "Good. Now, true or false: history is an unalterable sequence of events?" The room stayed quiet. "No one has an opinion about this?"

"Do you mean like culturally denying something happened, or rewriting history?" A boy in the back of the room.

"No, I mean actual events. In order." Kelt turned to the chalkboard and drew a line. Made marks, added dates. The Declaration of Independence, the Civil War, Professor Kelt's Birthday, Martin Luther King's assassination, Bush's election as president. "American history. How can we alter this?"

"We can't now." Same kid in back; God he was bad at names.

Kelt looked at the roll sheet, pointed his chalk at the boy. "If not now, when Mr. Barns? 'Now' implies there was a time at which events might have been altered?"

"Maybe," the boy said.

Kelt let the silence hang a moment to see if he could get the boy to say more. This was where they usually backed themselves into a corner. Better to get the vocal ones shut down the first week of class. The boy said no more, and Kelt nodded, impressed.

"That's a good answer. Maybe's a thinking man's response. A thinking person's response, sorry, these are the 1990s and in the interest of political correctness we've been taught to believe women can think as well. Maybe is a thinking person's response. Just don't try it on the exams. No one else?" He paused. "Then I'll tell you. As long as you have a linear model of time, there is no way to alter it. Your past, present and futures are all carved in stone. Birth to death we will each fulfill a single, unalterable, pitiable destiny. There is no freedom, and the best we can hope for is an easy death." He paused and looked out over their eager faces. God. He almost lost track of where he was going with this.

"Next time someone tries to show you a time line, just laugh. Time is not linear. It's only a kind of space and space is curved. Einstein told us that. Why is space curved? It's
warped by the distribution of mass and energy within it. Time, boys and girls, is a ring." He drew a ring on the chalk board, not round but elliptical. "Usually, we move on its perimeter, and let's face it, our lives are very short things in the history of time. If we move from here to here" he made two marks, very close together and labeled them A and B, "in the span of our pitiful little lives, time most assuredly seems linear, events seem to follow in orderly cause and effect. But it's not so, and when we see the whole picture we understand that cause and effect is a myth created to satisfy man's innate need for order and that time is a complex web of coincidence, with a grey center of unknown magic and chaos."

"No way." The smiling girl in the front row.

"Do you have a better theory?"

"No, not yet." She smiled and looked down at her notes. A lot of notes that girl had. Did she take shorthand? She was Asian, probably Japanese, with shiny black hair. A pretty girl. Why did they always have to sit in the front, the pretty ones? Where was he going with this? She glanced up then, expectantly, and he smiled. Perhaps too intimate a smile, it was only the first class. Whatever. She was a keeper.

The girl looked away quickly, but smiled a little herself. Kelt continued, "The center of the ring is chaos, the unordered grey of dreams. Every event along the perimeter has an exact Time-Space coordinate. You find that coordinate, you can move in time, alter events. In theory."

The girl raised her hand. "But not the past. If something has happened, it has to happen. That's true even on Star Trek. You can't act on the past, but maybe you can alter the future."

He checked the roll; her name was Emily Ikuko. Try to remember that one. He looked at her more closely. "Maybe," he said. "If time were linear that would be true. But if time is a ring, events are happening not sequentially, but concurrently. We can literally be two places at once. Time is not a smoothly flowing river but a vast ocean. It is four dimensions, length, width, breadth, and duration. I challenge any of you to think in four dimensions. Hard as hell."

He was silent a moment and let them think about that. They usually thought he was crazy for the first week or so. Maybe longer with undergraduates, he didn't remember exactly. The hum of the electric wall clock and the faint buzz of the fluorescent lights became loud in the silence following his declaration. They tried it, so diligently he hated to break into their attempts, though he knew they wouldn't succeed. Most people couldn't visualize three dimensions consistently.
"We'll be using computers to generate models for the theories of time our authors present. Shakespeare's *Tempest* is based in a realistic, pre-scientific model of linear time. The play exhibits a strict unity of time and place. But the characters reflect an understanding of the relativity of time." A hand shot up, Barns. One in every class. "Mr. Barns?"

"Like Einstein's relativity? In Shakespeare?"

"More or less. Each group of characters understands that time is perceived differently, relative to other factors. Only to Prospero, the time-keeper, does any feeling for the time of the outside world exist. We'll be reading the *Tempest* first, so you should finish that tonight. Don't moan, it's short. Relatively."

"What about Beckett?" the girl in the front asked. "I don't get how you could model the time in that, even with a computer."

"Beckett gives us static time. Maybe time as it would be in the chaotic center, with no movement. Isaac Newton wrote about the concept at the end of the sixteenth century. He wrote about an absolute time which is not subject to change and flows without relationship to anything external. Perhaps a whirlpool in the ocean, a black hole in space, a loop in your computer program. Beckett's characters are trapped in a time loop, waiting for a future moment that cannot come. A world in which the ring has collapsed upon itself to correct the past."

"I thought it was about the death of God." The boy in the back. Barns.

"If you lived in a black hole, you might think God was dead, too." A little tittering laughter ran through the class. Good enough. This might not be so bad.

Kelt spoke to the girl, whose name he had already forgotten, after class. He worried unnecessarily about these things, but she seemed to know more than she ought to. She was smart enough, and really, very pretty, so it wasn't a trial to sit in his office and talk to her for a few minutes. She was an English major.

"You know Sam Tellar?" Kelt asked, with only slight interest in his voice. As a senior, she could.

She smiled. "Not really. I mean, everybody knows of him. He's really young and cute and sort of famous. You know how girls are. They talk. Are you friends?"

"I knew his mother. I don't know him, really." Fairly non-committal.

"I see." The girl nodded. "I guess he's sort of manic, as a teacher. He does these impressions, like Mick Jagger as Hamlet or Elvis as Romeo. Like singing 'Satisfaction' or 'Heatbreak Hotel'? Sort of weird, but funny. A girl I know said he's the only one to take Shakespeare from. I mean, really, really good. He knows some of the plays by heart. His class was full for fall, though."
"I heard he's good, too. I don't usually sit and gossip about colleagues. He was over at the house last night and seemed like a nice guy." Kelt, hating himself for trying to sound folksy and relaxed, thought about that lie.

Sam Tellar hadn't seemed like much of anything. Pitiful. But the power was there. Something vaguely attractive had been there. Not his looks, though he was the sort freshman girls might find attractive and call enigmatic: a non-threatening blonde prettiness combined with an attitude of existentialist disinterest that probably resulted from being chronically hung-over. The sort of thing that appealed to the eighteen and under set; little girls might mistake drunk for deep. As far as Kelt could see, there wasn't much there. Tellar did four things with equal success: got drunk, got laid, taught Shakespeare and played pick-up basketball. He amended that to five things, to add what he'd witnessed last night. Tellar was a reasonably astute backgammon player. He'd given Amar Ruan a run, anyway.

Kelt talked to the girl a few moments more, and she told him they were doing the Tempest in her acting class, this fall. He smiled. He liked actresses, and always had. "You do that here? Who do you have?"

She shook her head. "At the Old Town Arts school. They do a Shakespearean acting class there. I'm looking forward to it. I've taken other things there, but I guess that's really fun." She stopped abruptly, and he knew his smile had frozen a little. Nothing, a coincidence. She would not have told him if it were not a strange coincidence. At his long silence she stood to leave.

"Sounds like a good class," he said from behind the desk, without standing. "You know, we were talking about Tellar. His mother taught there before she died last year. Did you know her?" He tried to keep the intensity from his voice. A hard thing.

"No. She was famous, though. Probably where he gets all the acting stuff, you know? I never thought about that. Sorry, I've got another class. Now you must think I'm really a hack. Talking to the professor after class, and taking two summer school courses. Don't think too badly of me, Professor Kelt." She smiled; a very winning smile that girl had. She waved as she walked backwards out the door with her books against her chest. "See you Wednesday."

"Thank you for the chat." He thought a moment, and remembered her name. "Emily." He was distracted, trying to decide if she hurried away because she told him too much, or because she truly had a class. He phoned the registrar. Always that little paranoia, he knew, living with Ruan had done that to him. She had an Elizabethan poetry course on the other side of campus, an hour after his course ended. It only made him feel more strongly than ever that
there was no cause and effect. Coincidence would forever dot the lattice-work of his life. Good enough. He could live with coincidence. And he liked actresses.

He thought about the encounter all the way home, down Ellis, to the three story Queen Anne they had had painted last year. Sort of a grey and mauve thing now, like every dental office interior in the country. Most of the neighbors had hired the same painting and restoration business and the whole block was newly pastel. The street looked great, property values were up. He liked it fine. Bree had said with his usual inscrutability that it looked like the sort of house three single men would live in. Kelt still wasn't certain about that one. He thought he had known and had replied with a laugh, "Interior decorators?"

Bree had shrugged. "I was thinking of physics professors." Kelt didn't understand him.

When he arrived home he wished he had stayed longer, even if only to be sitting at his desk in his air conditioned office. He was sweating as he climbed the stairs to the grey and pink porch. Bree met him, holding open the wood-frame screen door. He'd obviously been at the lab, he wore the summer uniform: khakis, blue Oxford cloth, sleeves rolled up, no socks, loafers and a too-narrow pink silk tie with Pink Panther painted on it. The Pink Panther wasn't part of the uniform.

"Ruan wants you upstairs," he said, black eyes deceptively sleepy. "He said it's our move."

Linear Kelt slid his leather briefcase behind the fern stand and shook his head. "He doesn't want a game, does he?" Ruan occasionally woke him from a sound sleep for a backgammon game. The old man had played with Tellar last night. He'd not been happy about that game. Bree had installed a game into the computer, but Ruan said it wasn't the same, that it was meaningless to defeat a machine.

"Don't think that sort of move." Bree smiled, one of those reflex smiles that never quite made it past his mouth.

Kelt ran a hand through his damp hair. "What, Tellar?"

"I don't think so." Bree shrugged. A very intense man, Kelt knew; the indifference was just his game. Rohan Bree played well. He was smart as hell and reasonably amoral, refreshing qualities in a young person. Kelt didn't like the immoral ones or the sanctimonious ones, certainly not the dumb ones. Bree was a good compromise. Kelt should probably take some credit for Rohan Bree's coolness, but really, he wasn't a parent. And until just recently, Bree seemed perfect. No loves, no hatreds, entirely passionless and unconnected, and perfectly
tractable. Now he seemed interested in a little power, real knowledge. Not a bad thing, Ruan had suggested privately, but Kelt was less certain.

Rohan Bree had been carefully chosen, and even more carefully groomed. For fifteen years now, since he had been a shy, brilliant twelve-year-old, Kelt and Ruan had prepared Bree to be their third. They knew after the experience with Tellar that they couldn’t just erase someone from history, the ring doubled back, fell in on itself to make time right. They had to go forward, to 2010. Born in Iowa City, Iowa, both parents physicists at U of I: Ph.Ds Oxford, mother British, father Indian. Kelt and Ruan had told twelve-year-old Rohan Bree it was an accident, an experiment gone awry, one they had no safe way to correct, no safe way to send him home. It had been a successful experiment. Kelt smiled. He liked Bree better than Amar Ruan. What had Shakespeare said? "Misery acquaints a man with strange bedfellows?" So does necessity. And then there were three.

"What, Ruan?" he yelled up the stairs.

"Get up here." Linear Kelt looked at Rohan Bree and rolled his eyes. Ruan was a man it did not do to cross. Though they had mastered time, altered histories, shaped the stars, they were not wizards. Bree practiced some little magics, and though he could do much more if he trusted himself, Ruan was their access to power, to other worlds. The old man needed them, but they needed him more. For now. And when they didn’t need him, they’d have Tellar and control all his potential. They needed three for what Ruan wanted them to do. Three complete the ring.

Kelt trotted up the stairs, Bree followed. They found the old man in his dark and frigid bedroom; Ruan kept the temperature near 50°, year-round. Kelt wondered if it was similar to the climate control boxes in which they kept the mummies at the Field Museum: preservation by refrigeration. Amar Ruan was 120 years old, but he didn’t look a day over eighty. A fit eighty, too. White hair, clear green eyes, and the tan, deeply etched skin of a man who had spent too many days in the sun, he was tall and not stooped. He had been a king. More than a king. "I've been thinking all day. It's our move," he said. He stood looking out the dark-tinted window and did not turn as he spoke.

"So Bree told me. What move?" Kelt forced his voice to reveal nothing of his annoyance at Ruan’s enigmatic declarations.

"The girl. Mirandah. She found Tellar. I don't like what Tellar told us. He gave her the stone. There's power in that. I want her out of this game." The girl Tellar had told them about last night, in a rambling, drunken confession. Kelt had given the story little weight.
"But we have the ring," Rohan Bree said, maybe a bit too quickly, from where he leaned against the oak door frame, loosening his tie. "We have three."

"What exactly do you suggest we do?" Linear Kelt ignored Bree and spoke directly to Ruan.

"Kill her. Bring me her body. Bring me the stone. Simple." No emotion in the old man's voice.

Kelt found himself cursing silently.

Rohan Bree studied Ruan with cool black eyes, spoke with equal lack of expression: "We have to get her here. Pull her out of the ring of time, and you don't even need to kill her. Take her power and she can't get back." Bree seemed to think about his own words for a moment, then he continued in a different tone. "It's what you did wrong with Tellar. You had to let him be born there, then pull him out, so he'd just be a missing baby. I know you know how to do that." He paused, waiting for that to sink in. It did--Ruan smiled, Kelt tensed. Bree noted both and continued, "Now Tellar's floating around in time there like potential energy and there are people aware of it, aware of the gaps, waiting for him like the second coming. How do you think she found him? You didn't even clean up any of the mess he made, the psychic ephemera of a person's potential. It's like you tried to, but turned on the vacuum cleaner backwards, and shot it all over. He's everywhere, there, Ruan, past, present, and future. You've given a past to a man who's never lived. You screwed that up so perfectly I can't believe you got me here in one piece." Bree shrugged, then flashed his faint, inward smile and added drily, "Unless of course, you didn't."

Kelt knew it had gone very wrong, with Tellar. But Ruan had attempted that entirely on his own, right before he had met Kelt. Ruan had been tampering with the past for years, fine-tuning it like an instrument he wanted to play. The tampering had created a strange sort of fold in time. When Ruan had sought out Kelt, thirty years ago, Kelt had been a Ph.D. student, working on an unpopular and underfunded topic--absolute time--not Newton's but a more complex theory, about the effect on time of that moment at which the universe stops expanding, but before it begins to rubber-band backward. The shot rubber-band was a good model, because theoretically, there would be a moment at which momentum caused one end to overtake the other. That was the moment Kelt wanted to understand. That was the moment Ruan sought him out to explain: How a man who had yet to be born could exist throughout layers of time. Kelt agreed with Rohan Bree, Ruan had screwed it up. Royally.
Bree slanted a glance at Kelt, then continued more harshly, "And of course you should have killed him. If you're really worried." He shrugged, indifferently, the intensity momentarily gone from his dark eyes. He played well.

"It's refreshing to be instructed by the young, but I need the girl's body and it's of no particular use to me alive. She'll be back, she'll come for Tellar. Why do you think we've let him continue living? She has to come. They think they need him."

"They?" Linear Kelt asked the old man.
"She and the other." Ruan gritted his teeth and named the man, "The Protector of Remin. Two to call. She'll get my son, in the end, because he won't be able to deny her anything, he fears her too much."

Ruan's son. The one who had destroyed the empire, dissolved the monarchy, denied his father. Ruan's most hated enemy, his own son. Kelt nodded, calmly, spoke slowly against Ruan's rising anger. "Why does it matter? Your enemies are dead or worse. Your son will kill himself, if you give him time. How often have you said that yourself?" Kelt wondered if the man was getting senile.

"We haven't the time, anymore. My two greatest enemies still live. That girl has the power to strengthen both. The stone. It cannot happen."

"The stone is a piece of theatre costuming. Tellar said as much. The stone is nothing." Kelt knew the futility of attempting to make Ruan see reason, but this had been the interaction at the core of their relationship for too long.

"The stone has strong magic associated with it. I gifted my first wife with it on the occasion of our wedding, and I want it back."

Kelt sighed. "Alright, I'm sure we can get it back for you. But Ruan, neither your son nor Tellar knows he's your enemy. Isn't it better if we don't move hastily and alert them?"

"The Protector of Remin knows." Amar Ruan spat the title with contempt, leaning on the edge of his green marble-topped desk. "Perhaps Tellar does not. But he will know, when Mirandah finds him again. And he's a player, Kelt. He'll learn the rules and you don't want to see it."

Linear Kelt shook his head, "Why, Ruan? What aren't you telling us?"

Amar Ruan drew himself up to his full height, and in spite of the baggy gold jogging suit, Kelt saw in his posture and manner what it meant to be a king. It meant few people had ever questioned him. Ruan dropped his voice, as if speaking to a slow, but beloved child. "You never did understand what this is about, did you? Do you think we are playing with your computer simulations here? Tellar wrote, 'Can vengeance be pursued further than death?' I
think it can, Linear Kelt. I will not stop until I regain what I lost. My power. Until I have the
next Remin king here." He held out his open palm and then pulled his fingers in tight. Ruan
was always going on about retrieving lost power. Revenge on his son, who had denied him.
His son's boy, who he would use to restore the monarchy. Kelt shuddered. "Are you feeling
squeamish? About one girl? I need her to get Arin, and I will have that boy. He will be king."

"Shakespeare wrote that. About vengeance. One of the history plays, I think." Bree
stood with his hands in his pockets, thumbs hooked through the belt loops, and glanced up.

Kelt shot him a glacial look, hoping to silence him. "Why? You need to tell us
everything, Ruan. We're with you. But why?" Kelt didn't know if he was with him, sometimes,
though he'd memorized the refrain: power, revenge, murder most foul--like one of the history
plays.

"What do you think we've been doing, boy? This is about power, revenge." The wizard
fixed his eyes on Kelt. Flat, dead eyes, like a snake. "I've never shared this particular obsession
with you, have I?"

Kelt didn't know how to answer. Ruan was a man of many obsessions, and he'd never
before felt the need to explain or elaborate. Kelt frankly preferred it that way.

"Have I?" Ruan barked.

"No," Kelt admitted. "You haven't. I don't understand, but I don't need to. I'm with
you."

Ruan laughed, tossing back his head. He dropped to his knees in one soundless
motion, moving fluidly for such an old man. "You're afraid what you'll find out. Bree? Shall I
welcome you into my obsession?" Though he looked up at Rohan Bree, grinning, he drew on
the floor, a sketchy drawing, with his finger against the polished wood.

Bree showed his teeth, perhaps a smile. "As long as I needn't share mine."

Ruan laughed again. "Mine will be yours. That's what Kelt fears. Do you fear that?"

"Let's see what we have first."

"Such a pragmatist. Good on you. Let's see what we have." Ruan drew a square
around the marks he had made, then settled himself in his wingback chair. "Sit boys. The
Protector of Remin first, at the citadel." Ruan motioned with his right hand, touched the
elliptical silver ring he wore on a cord at his neck, and scene appeared before them as if they had
opened a window. A blonde man, tanned and tall stood on a patterned geometric carpet before a
carving-embellished marble fireplace. He wore only pajama bottoms, his chest was scarred
purple, and he drank a clear liquid from a short, wide-mouthed glass. He grimaced as he drank,
then tossed the glass in the fire where it shattered, noiselessly. A too-young girl sitting on the
bed reading, with her knees tucked up under her clothes, cringed at action, pulling the gold brocade bedspread up over herself. The room brought to mind something from Versailles, too-ornate and gilded to be exactly attractive; the man occupying it seemed not so much drunk as in pain. Kelt guessed the man a few years older than he was; he had the look of a man, once handsome, who'd lived too hard. He lifted a half-full bottle from the mantle, drank in a long pull and dropped back into a chair. He spoke to the girl, adding a loose, unreadable gesture at which she moved to the far edge of the bed, and climbed underneath the covers, pulling them up over her head so only her blue eyes peeked out. She repositioned the book so that she might still read, though she seemed to squint slightly in the room's low light.

"Pretty girl," Kelt commented. "Your son's wife?"

The old man snorted. "No longer is he my son. Such is how he spends his life: drinking and little girls. The empire is falling to factions at his feet. Sometimes I'm am pleased he refuses to call himself king, so pathetic a man is he. He's ruined the work of my life. Systematically," Ruan rasped. He shook his head, as if to shake away the anger. He smiled. "Would you like to see the named Heir? The next leader of my Empire, if I don't intervene?"

He repeated his right-handed motion, grasped the heavy ring, and the scene fell away, as if they watched through water. A new scene coalesced, focused. A room, pink and white, late evening. A child's room. A child, warmly wrapped in several blankets, sat before a high fire. The fire's glow lit her pinched, pale face. A pretty woman, long-legged, Kelt's type, stood behind, brushing the girl's silvery-blonde hair, drying it. The girl watched the fire, in a dreamy trance.

"Aminah Ruan. I should have strangled her at birth, so she would not have carried my name." The old man smiled, firelight from the illusion reflecting in his eyes. Kelt was fairly certain the words were bluster, not because Ruan wouldn't strangle a baby if it served his purposes, but because this one wouldn't have been worthy of the effort. "Simple-minded, sickly. Like her mother. She'll never produce a child. He's trying to marry her off, to the son one of his Defenders. She won't last a moon." The old man shrugged. "Then to the real heir. Arin. My chosen heir. Illegitimate, perhaps, but he's perfect."

Kelt looked over at Rohan Bree, who raised an eyebrow. "You'll usurp your son's heir?"

"Usurp her? I mean to have her killed. And my son, when the time comes. Now my obsession. The next King of Remin. We'll restore the monarchy, set the empire to rights." Ruan again motioned with his right hand, put a long finger to the silver ring, and the image they watched blurred, the colors ran, shimmered and shifted to form a new scene, this one so dark Kelt's eyes had to readjust before he could make out any of it. The boy sat at a rough table in a
dark, smokey room, also drinking, also with a woman. A backgammon board sat between them. The boy's gold hair fell past his shoulders and reflected the light of another fire, to his left, over which meat turned on a spit. He slouched in his chair and rolled the dice, watching a girl in a fitted red dress saunter by carrying a tray. He moved his checkers with the grace of an experienced player, negligently picked up his dice and laughed as the woman facing him said something amusing. A beautiful woman, her face partially in shadow, the fire at her back. She played dark, assessed her lead by a glance at the pips, and doubled. She reached out to flick the boy's hand to reclaim his attention.

He flicked her back, poured another glass of whatever he drank, and kept his eyes on her. He must have done some quick figuring of his own, and accepted her double. The girl rolled and moved, hit his blot and claimed the point. The boy protested; the girl laughed. Her dark hair was braided, and she was dressed very nearly like the boy, both in collarless, once-white shirts with vests over them. Both wore gold earrings in their left ears. "Lovely, isn't he?" Ruan whispered. "You can't know what it does to me, to know how close. To know we begin the game." His hand clasped into a fist, perhaps involuntarily, and Kelt found himself shuddering again.

Kelt admitted he was a beautiful boy, if not particularly clean. He wore a sword at his hip, had a lazy posture that spoke of self-assuredness: every bit Shakespeare's Hal, the young prince slumming. The boy himself had inspired Ruan's course of action, Kelt realized for the first time; Ruan had recognized in a poor boy of questionable birth a man who would be king. The woman watched the boy's intent appraisal of the blonde in the red dress with annoyed amusement, and finally kicked his shin to make him continue their game.

"What do you think of the woman, Rohan?" Kelt heard the suggestion, the seduction in Ruan's voice.

"The woman?" Rohan asked, and then watched the scene more keenly. "Who's the woman?" He whispered as well, asked as if he had only now noticed her.

"The girl Tellar told us about. Mirandah. Arin cares for her a great deal. She'll come for Tellar, and when she's ours, Arin will come easily. I believe she's his obsession."

"Tellar said she was a child." Rohan still whispered, never taking his eyes from the woman.

"Tellar's a fool. She is a pretty thing. Good player. Quite a waste, really, to kill her?" Kelt found himself needing a breath of air after Ruan made one of those silky-voiced offers, even though this time the offer had not been made to him. Ruan studied Rohan Bree,
considering. That considering made Kelt nervous. "Perhaps we can spare her. You'll watch Tellar for me, Rohan?" Kelt knew the offer implied there.

Rohan Bree did, too. He nodded, even as he blinked to clear his head. "I'll watch Tellar. I can take care of the woman, if we need to." He never took his eyes off the scene before him.

"That's all I wanted to hear. You're a good boy." Ruan smiled at Rohan with real pride. He rewarded loyalty. He punished betrayal. Rohan Bree didn't know what the old man was capable of, and because Kelt felt a genuine fondness for the boy, he tested him himself. Often. If he could be certain of Bree's loyalty, he could be certain of his safety. Ruan made the left-handed motion that cut the magic and the image disappeared.

"I certainly am," agreed Rohan Bree leaving the room.

"This isn't what I agreed to. Shifting stars, moving in time, that's one thing. That's research." Linear Kelt left and pulled the door closed, followed Rohan Bree downstairs.

He heard Ruan's rasping laughter. "That's becoming God. You forgot research a long time ago. Admit it, Kelt. It's for power. And we'll both have our hands on it when we have that boy." The old man's voice trailed down the stairs, touching Kelt like a caress. After all these years, he had little immunity against it. Rohan Bree had none.

Kelt followed the younger man into the kitchen where Bree looked in the refrigerator, rummaging around. "He will make you kill that girl. He wants her dead. Are you willing to do that? All because that old man's wife and son died in a war ninety years ago in another world? Because his second son denied him somehow and isn't much of a ruler? He wants people dead."

"We'll see what happens. I can't really see myself killing someone, can you? I know how to do the other, though. You can get copper wire at the hardware store. Why can't we keep her? Make her your next physics hack. I've always wanted a little sister."

"You goddamn well don't want a little sister," Kelt said. "Don't even think about it. He'll have you like he's got me."

Rohan Bree smiled and shrugged, a cool smile and a disinterested shrug. "Worse ways to get got, wouldn't you say?" He took out an apple and bit it, closed the door. "It's your turn to cook dinner tonight. Dad," he told Kelt as he left the room. His look was unreadable, but Linear Kelt thought perhaps it even cooler than usual. Too cool by half.
CHAPTER 2.

Blinding summer sun poured in the uncurtained windows of the apartment bedroom. The roar from Wrigley Field, only two blocks away, woke him. But it was that sun that might kill him. Samuel Beckett Tellar felt a little tender. As his father would say. God rest his soul. Sam didn't remember coming home, or sequentially, anything after midnight or so. Though it was noon when he rolled out of bed, it had been just dawn when he had found bed, so he was still drunk. But not enough, so he was feeling tender.

He dug through the pile of discarded clothes on the floor, found his jacket and rummaged blindly through four of the pockets for his cigarettes before finding his sunglasses. Black plastic, cheap imitations of the Ray Bans John Belushi wore in The Blues Brothers. God rest his soul, too. He put them on and they helped. He crawled back to bed because the room moved too much to stand and lay back on the white sheets, in the middle of the bed, in the clinical white of his freshly painted bedroom, naked but for his sunglasses to ponder the biggest decision of his day. A few shots of the Jim Beam under the kitchen sink and he could probably function, minimally. He would have to sober up sometime, though to be honest, Sunday evening would be soon enough. Goddamn. A pox o' your bottle. This sack and drinking can do. Shakespeare. The Tempest, of course.

He had defended his dissertation almost a year ago, but the play was automatic now—he could recite it backwards, drunk. Not that there was ever a need, but it might be the kind of thing that could get him on David Letterman if he were a better self-promoter. He could likely do the same with Waldron's Virgin Queen, but who would listen, backward or forward.

He had chosen a purposely absurd topic for his research, Waldron's ludicrous 1797 drama as an appropriate critical response to the perplexing riddles Shakespeare posited in The Tempest. He had half-hoped the topic would be rejected by his committee. He was Adam Tellar's son, however, and his dissertation had been hailed as brilliant. Maybe it was. But when you're named Samuel Beckett Tellar and your father was the playwright Adam and your mother was Hannah Pador-Tellar the Shakespearean actor, what you have to say is brilliant, no matter how absurd. Sad but true. There were a lot of pathetic people out there, many of them had Ph.Ds, and he might be one. He'd been drunk for a year, so it was hard to tell.

The ceiling fan was white, but its shadow was grey, he noted, looking up. He wasn't entirely sure if the fan was on, or if the bed was turning. His life, this past year. Exactly like
that. Was it a brilliant analogy or was he drunk? Or hallucinating? *These are not natural events. They strengthen from strange to stranger.* Shakespeare had something to say about everything. Sam's mother had died of breast cancer just a year ago. That was bad. They had been close; she had been his one connection to the world, but it would be terrible to watch your mother die of breast cancer even if you were not close. Maybe worse: a subtlety he would have to be much more drunk, or sober, to contemplate. Almost a Zen sort of thing. Not thinking about it didn't make her less dead. Was there a triple negative in that thought?

He finished his dissertation and defended it six weeks to the day after her memorial service. A doctorate from the University of Chicago at twenty-three, like his father, which didn't sound as bad as it was. When your father was Adam Tellar, you don't want to follow in his footsteps. And on afternoons like this one, it seemed inescapable. His father drank himself to death by the time he was thirty-five. Unfortunately, he hadn't quite died until he was forty. The price of brilliance. Sam didn't need to think about that one. He groaned and turned over. It was definitely worse when he moved.

Big mistake, last night. Rohan Bree, a tenured, twenty-something, Doogie-Howserish hack in the theoretical physics department had asked him out for a drink. They didn't know each other well; in fact, Bree had gone to a good deal of trouble to meet him. Bree lived with a man his mother had known, though hadn't much liked, another slick physics professor, Linear Kelt, and had used that as an opening.

Maybe the guy was lonely, needed to meet some younger people, like he said. He had some bullshit line about the young hotdogs sticking together. Sam wasn't certain what the point had been; the guy was incredibly intense and drank more than anyone Sam had ever met. Well, he drank better, keeping up the pace all night with no effect. Sam, who drank well himself, had to admit he'd been blown out of the water.

They'd gone back to Bree's place. Sam really couldn't remember. Too cold, there, it was air conditioned like a meat locker. Bree lived with two older men, he remembered that. One, Linear Kelt, the other very old, unaccountably creepy, Amar Ruan. He'd played backgammon with the old man, at an ornate game table inlaid with green and black stone. The old man had insisted they play backgammon. "I'm not much good," Sam said. "I haven't played for years."

"Play, Tellar." The old man smiled. He had lots of teeth, white and straight, for such and old man. "Light or dark?" Ruan asked, offering the trays of cool stone checkers.

"Dark." Sam accepted, and the old man grinned and nodded slowly, as if he had expected that answer. Sam played. He damn near won. The old man was good, but Sam had
the counting game down, he could figure the shots or count pips fast, even drunk. He'd always
done ok with numbers, figuring odds.

"This is life," Ruan said, sliding his checkers. "Luck and skill, figuring odds, judging
your opponent. You can tell a lot about a man by how he plays. Kelt defends. My son traps.
We play opposite games, you and I. I attack, preemptively. You, Tellar, run."

Sam thought about that, took a gulp of the sticky, sweet liquor Ruan had offered him.
He was already trashed and he knew it. Luckily, his mind worked, more or less, right up until
he passed out. Practice, years of it. "Like basketball. Run and gun. Full court press, go for
the fast break. You die by it sometimes. Sometimes you win. But the game's never boring."

Ruan threw back his head and laughed. "A worthy opponent, Tellar. If you keep the
game interesting, I'll let you continue playing."

They'd asked him about the girl. Or had he brought it up? Talking about time and
space and all those things that seem deep when you're really drunk and what luck to be with a
bunch of physicists to ask about it. Maybe. And maybe they had asked him. What had he
said? Beyond guarded speech, he'd been. Even drunk it felt so wrong.

A bunch of dried lavender stood stiffly in an empty peanut butter jar on the table by the
bed. Evidence that while he might be a drunk, he was not insane as well. Only a week after his
mother died, he woke to find a crumpled heap of an unconscious child on the floor of his
bedroom. After tripping over her in the dark on his way back from the bathroom, he had turned
on the lamp at the bedside to see what he had stepped on. At first he thought she was
convulsing, she shook so, but when he touched her, he realized she shook with cold. Her skin
felt like ice to his touch, on a warm June night. She clutched the flowers tightly in her small
hand. He had pried them away to cover her, thinking he would then call the paramedics.

She'd opened her eyes and said in a husky voice, "Tellar, I am so cold." She knew him?
Not that he remembered, a bad sign, though she seemed far too young to be a girl he might
know, no matter how drunk he might have been, ever. Her accent was odd; he couldn't place it,
but he was never good at those things. As he wrapped her in the comforter from his bed, she
nestled into the warmth of his arms. Gradually her shaking subsided and she slept. So did he,
for the first night in a week, sitting against the metal frame of the bed, on the polished wood
floor, with the lamp on.

He woke the following morning, very early, to the sound of the garbage truck. Though
her skin was warm and she breathed regularly, the girl wouldn't wake up. He placed her on the
bed and went to get himself a glass of water, being a little dehydrated, a little hung-over. He
watched her breathe as he drank the water. A little girl, she was, too pale, with an over-thin
sharpness that made her not quite pretty but something else. She dressed strangely, affecting
the '90s hippy look of kids who listened to Seattle grunge and had protested the Gulf War.
She'd gathered her dark red hair into one thick braid with different colored lengths of ribbon.
One small, gold hoop earring pierced her left ear.

He tried again to wake her, but she lay limp and unresponsive. She had no purse, so he
looked through her clothes for identification. In the waistband of the pink leggings he found a
dagger made of copper, in a silver sheath. He placed that on the table beside the bed.

In a pocket of her vest he found a little book, about the size of his palm, very old and
roughly bound in faded blue cloth. Inside the cover was inscribed, "For Mirandah who taught
me wonder and showed me this brave new world. Good luck in the future. S.B. Tellar." He
recognized his own handwriting. His own signature. He hadn't written it. He thumbed through
the book, finding it mainly written in his hand, though some of it in characters like
hieroglyphics, little pictures he didn't understand, and complex numerical equations he couldn't
possibly have written. Sam didn't understand them, had never seen their like. He sat on the bed,
leaned back on his pillow against the white iron headboard, put his feet up and thought about it.
He fell asleep holding the little book.

He opened his eyes and found she studied him, not moving, with the comforter pulled
tight around her. Her eyes were green and dark, but clearly not focused, the pupils hugely
dilated. When she saw he was awake, she reached out to touch his cheek. "Tellar," she said,
with the accent on the second syllable. She dropped her hand and closed her eyes, as if that
small effort had been too taxing. "We are such stuff as dreams are made on, Tellar," she quoted
dreamily. How he wondered about that.

He had begun to worry that she should be in a hospital when he had gone in to check on
her that evening and she was truly awake, although confused. She looked at him without
recognition, looked around the room for anything familiar. She tripped out of the bed, not quite
falling, not quite walking. When he approached to help her, she pushed him away, shaking her
head. "No." Then, her voice tight, "Please, I need to leave."

Sam held up his hands and stepped away from her, considering panic. What had he
been thinking to let her stay? He could imagine at least a hundred ways the situation could get
ugly way too fast, and most of them ended at Joliet, doing five-to-ten. "You can go. Go. I let
you stay because you seemed to know me."

She stumbled to the window and looked out. "I am lost," she whispered, without
looking at him. She grasped the woodwork at the side of the window for support, not taking
her eyes from the street.
"Who are you?" Sam asked. "I'll try to help. We can call your family, or a friend?"

"I am Mirandah," she said, as if that explained everything. "Where have you brought me?"

Not good, not good, not good. He forced a calm smile. "Mirandah. I'm Sam. I didn't bring you, I found you here."

Her eyes were wide as she turned toward him. "I do not remember." She hadn't cried, though he had thought she might. He'd gotten her food, shown her how to shower and use the bathroom. Found her clean clothes, not an easy thing, she was so small. Her behavior was too strange, she clearly was lost, nothing was familiar to her. She knelt on the floor, making marks on the wood with her finger. She was frustrated, whatever she thought she was doing was not working. She gave up.

The girl followed Sam's every move, wary of him; she moved gracefully out of his way if he approached too closely. "I am not certain how to get home," she said, eating the pizza he had ordered. She had picked through her first piece, touching then smelling the components before removing all the pepperoni with the most surgically precise use of a table knife Sam had ever witnessed. When she saw how he watched her she simply said, "I do not eat meat." She blinked and sneezed when she tasted the Coke and proceeded to drink a quart of milk.

"I don't know how to help you if you won't tell me a last name, or where you live."

"You do not understand. I am lost. I did not mean to come to this place. You cannot help me. You are very kind, though. Your food is good." She smiled a real smile, looking him in the eye. "I think I miscalculated. I got frightened and went to fast. I do that."

"You can't stay here forever. You need to be with your parents, your family. They'll be worried, won't they?"

"I have no parents, but my brother will worry. Maybe if we went out, if I could touch the ground."

"You might recognize something?"

She slowly shook her head as if they spoke different languages. "No, not that. I do not have enough power here. Maybe we are too high."

"Sure. Whatever." He had taken her outside. Down five floors.

She was nervous, watched the traffic. "So many people," she said looking at the rows of houses. She finally lay down on a strip of grass and closed her eyes. She sat up and began marking in the grass with her hands. Finally, she stood. "I cannot do it." She took his hand on the way back to the apartment and he felt bad, because she didn't want his comfort but there was no one else.
They had cold pizza for dinner. She finished eating and stood before the shelves of books until he said, "Read anything you like."

She studied him a minute like he had been testing her, then shook her head. "I cannot read that."

"You can't read?"

She shook her head. "Not that."

"But the book you had?" She followed him to the bedroom to retrieve it. "You can read this?" He picked up the little book.

"I can understand it, feel it, but not read it."

"What do you mean?" Sam had asked.

She took the book from him and opened it to the inscription. "I know what this means. This is Mirandah. In the Old way, it means wonder. My name, too. This also means wonder." She was pointing to the different words in the sentence as she spoke. "This is something Tellar wrote, he is quoting himself, maybe a little joke. This is his name. Do you know of Tellar, Sam?"

Sam shook his head, "No."

Mirandah nodded with childlike seriousness. "Tellar was a great wizard, more, I think. Some people say he is not real, or that he was many men. I have his book, though. He knew many things." She paused, then held the book out to him. "Can you read these characters?" She looked up at him and he nodded. "They are like in your books, then." The girl thought about that but made no comment. She turned the pages to the hieroglyphics. "These are Stars, runes representing stars. I can read this, though I should not."

He was interested in this, the book in his handwriting. "What's this?" he had asked, pointing to a series of dots arranged within a square, three dots by three dots. The right margin was filled with the little boxes and the seemingly randomly arranged dots.

"These are the seven markers." She pointed to the figures in the far right margin. "The markers are very important to the meaning. There are only 421 runes, and they have to mean every word, so the markers add meaning. And we use them for counting, mathematics."

She looked up at him, pausing until he nodded. "But those were not their only purposes originally. The combination of the markers with the runes describes all of time. Any moment in the Ring of Time. Ta Karin Pol. If you know a thing's moment, you know the thing, and you can work magic on it. You must know the Stars before you can work magic. Do you understand?"
"A little, maybe," Sam thought he might have a glimmer, not the time part. Sort of an astrology thing?

A quick, indulgent smile. "Even Tellar did not know it very well. He got things wrong. The times are almost all wrong," she pointed to the margin. "There is five-hundred years difference, plus some, between when he says he was writing and when this was written. This is not in the Stars. What he wrote here is out of Ta Karin; it has not occurred yet. He was just writing quickly, I think."

Sam smiled, but he knew it was one of those I-have-no-idea-what-to-say-to-this-crazy-person smiles he'd perfected teaching freshman. What the hell was she talking about? Was she one of those Dungeons and Dragons pre-teen sorts? He heard they sometimes lost it, in those role-playing games.

"What does it say?" He pointed to a place on the page.

"Right here?"

"Sure, that's as good as any."

"Mirandah-sh kaman'to radamani." She smiled. "He says 'Mirandah's teacher is filled with filth.' Maybe not that, but something vile. Also something like he is not really a man, he implies that. This marker," she pointed, "makes 'i' or 'hi.' It means little, like an endearment, but usually to a child. Occasionally to a woman, but really never to a man. It is rude to say to a man. You know how men are." She paused and made a little face. Sam wasn't sure he did, but he gave her a nod he hoped didn't commit him. She smiled as if it had proven her point.

"What does he mean?" Sam said.

"I have not read it all yet, so I do not know the context. There are many stories about Tellar. One story is that Tellar and Mirandah's teacher did not like each other. The Radaman was a Dark wizard. Mirandah gave her teacher's power to Tellar. Stole it. Maybe that is the true story. The language changes, and the stories are not quite right, either. They say history is a little truth under the big lie."

Sam smiled again, wondered if his face might stick that way. "It takes a long time to learn to read, then, doesn't it?"

"Yes. The language is only written. There are many things I do not understand yet. Reading runes is illegal, especially for women, so it is no good to ask when I am wrong. We do not speak the Old way ever, except for magic. Because it's not really legal. The Tarani speak it, some."

"Who?"
"Tarani. They live in the mountains, the north. They once owned the whole continent, but there aren't many left. The Remini didn't like their religion and killed most of them."

"Who are they?"

Mirandah paused and studied him carefully, in some way trying to gauge the question's intent. She answered carefully, as if the wrong words might be dangerous. "They control the continent. The Protector, from the citadel controls the Remin armies which are most everywhere now. Even where I am from in B'Tor, we follow Remin civil law, for the armies are so strong. If we were rich, like the Southlands, they would probably own us now, too. They do not only because they do not care to, because we would more be poor people for them to care for." She shrugged, as if it hardly mattered.

He thought about that, and knew something was seriously wrong with the picture. He glanced up to look at her in the mirror over the dresser. Mirandah looked up and caught his eye, but saw something else, too. She put down the book and walked to pick up a green glass pendant, square-cut like an emerald, that had been his mother's. She grasped it tight, pressing it to her palm, shutting her eyes.

"You are Tellar. You are." She turned toward him. He didn't know how to read her face. "Oh, Tellar, what have I done? You are dead." She was quiet for a moment. Sam stared at her in surprise. Then she laughed. "You are Tellar. This proves it. Your gemstone." She pointed to the pendant. "I want you to be my radaman." She explained so gently, as if she knew he would not understand or consent. Her eyes searched his for some response. He did not know what she saw in them, because he didn't understand. She stuck out her chin a little, perhaps sensing his unwillingness to acquiesce to anything. Such a childlike gesture, he nearly smiled before she turned away. "You are right," she told him, her voice flat. "I cannot stay."

He probably wasn't right. He didn't have a clue. "Mirandah." He reached for her, to reassure her. She surprised him by sitting close, allowing him to put an arm around her shoulder. Finally she climbed around, into his arms, like a younger child than she was, but he knew how she felt, abandoned and small.

"Oh, Tellar. It will be fine. I think we should believe that."

What did one do with a lost child? He couldn't just keep her, but he understood; he knew that, what it was to be truly alone. He felt connected to her. She was the lost child, but he was the one who cried. He wasn't sure of all the things he had said to her. He babbled, likely, talked about his mother, his grief. The isolation, surrounded by people: the thing he never understood. Though he had meant to comfort her, she sat near him and listened, let him cry.
She told him things he didn't understand, things of magic, Stars and the myth of a wizard named Tellar who quoted Shakespeare. Another world.

She went to the window to see the stars. Only a few were visible in the bright city, but he didn't know their names. He gave her the pendant, strung it on one of her hair ribbons and tied it around her neck. She sat there, on the floor beside the bed, all night, penciling figures on a legal pad. He slept some, just for having someone near. After sunrise she got up, placed the little dagger in her waistband, against her flat, pale stomach, and retied the drawstring of the leggings as she held her shirt up, pinning the tail to her chest with her chin. She was nearly flat-chested, and her ribs showed beneath her thin undershirt. She dropped the shirt and tucked the book into her vest pocket, startled and blushed when she saw he was awake and watching.

"What are you doing?" he asked her.

"I must try to go home. I know what I was doing wrong. The Stars are changed. You are not at all where you ought to be, Tellar. I think this will help." She touched the pendant. "Have care. I will not tell you n-rani, there is too much between us, I think, for this to be all." She kissed his cheek and walked out into the living room. He knew she would return because she couldn't manage the locks. He didn't think she'd opened the door, but when he followed her out, she was gone. He had spent the day looking for her, with no luck. Why did he come back to this when he was already feeling so awful?

He closed his eyes against the turning of the fan blades. Even on his side like this they caught his peripheral vision dizzingly. Goddamn. He was losing it, whatever tenuous grip he held on his life. Slipping away. Like his mother. He hadn't even been there when she died. He would never, ever, forgive himself for that one. Like the girl? Mirandah. The lavender the only proof she had really existed. Hardly proof, that. He'd never sorted out the things she had told him, too hard. Never told anyone, until last night.

What had Bree made of it? Kelt? What had Kelt asked? Did you touch her? No, she was a little girl, he told them. Kelt's smug smile. Not like that, did you touch her? What did she feel like? Did she feel like a normal child, or was there something else? There was something else. Nameless. But not unknown. He had felt it in himself, maybe. Almost.

He rolled onto his back and opened his eyes. A man stood over his bed. "Jesus Christ," Sam said, sitting up. Too quickly, his head spun. Strange to stranger. He pulled the sheet across himself reflexively. The man stepped back at his quick movement, watching him while glancing around the room. "What do you want?" Sam asked.

The man was his age, likely, and oddly dressed in a dark blue choir robe made of some rough fabric. He was barefoot and wore a necklace of silver charms. His nearly-black hair was
tied back to keep it from his pale face. There was such a Hollywood prettiness about him that Sam would not have been certain he was a man but for the darkness of a two or three day beard. A siren sounded suddenly and the man startled, his cold, blue eyes looking toward the window. Nervous, maybe dangerous. A rush of adrenalin sobered Sam slightly.

The man turned back to Sam. "Are you Tellar?" he asked abruptly, and he had an odd accent.

"I'm Sam Tellar. Who are you?"

The man seemed to consider that, narrowing his eyes. "Sam Tellar? I do not know that other name, Sam. But are you Tellar?"

"Not this again. Why do you want to know?"

The man continued to study him. "Did you injure your eyes?" he asked. Sam stared as the man gestured the sunglasses by running his forefinger across his own eyes.

Sam shook his head. "It's just too bright in here. I drank too much last night."

The man nodded seriously. "Yes. And today you feel terrible. You should not drink again."

"No, but I probably will. I think I should go back to sleep, though. Do you mind if I ask you to leave now?"

"I would talk to you, Tellar. Shall I make you feel better?" The man stepped toward the bed.

"I really don't think so, thanks." Things could strengthen from strange to stranger way too damn fast. He wrapped the sheet around his waist and got out of bed, started to the door. The other man was his height, but more slender, and nervous enough to seem threatening as he stepped between Sam and the door, closing it gently with the tips of his pale fingers.

"I truly must talk to you, Tellar. I mean no harm. Let me show you." He reached out, and although Sam tried to step away, he gripped Sam's arm tightly with his left hand, and touched Sam's forehead with his right index finger, as if writing. "Is that better?" he asked, stepping back as Sam shook away.

And it was better. He was even awake and alert. "Who are you?"

The man backed against the door, his jaw tightened with annoyance, though his voice betrayed nothing. "I am Micah Treador. D'pol, Tellar. Like you."

"De Paul? I don't know what you mean." Sam shook his head. Did the man think they had gone to school together? "I went to the University of Chicago, even under-grad."
Micah Treador considered that, his face relaxed slightly. Sam realized that there was a fundamental communication gap here. The man was clearly intelligent and trying as hard as he was to fit the pieces together. "N-shad jan'to Aman'to gu?" he asked softly.

Sam shook his head. "I don't understand." The man sort of grimaced, concentrating, looked so confused and disappointed, Sam added, "I'm sorry."

The man stood quiet, thinking. "I do not think I am mistaken. The Stars brought me here, you are Tellar. Why do you lie to me?" It was Sam's turn to step back at the sudden hostility, to begin to consider possibilities of escape that didn't include the window and a five story drop.

"Why would I lie? I don't have a clue here."

The man's cool eyes moved slowly over Sam's face, down his body to his feet. "The time is wrong, I think. You are not d'pol yet. Do you have small magics? Gu Amanjani?" He touched the silver charms at his neck one by one. "Shad? Ruid? Telle? D'jan? D'shaden?"

Sam shook his head again. It sounded a bit too New Age for him. He felt silly standing in his bedroom in his sunglasses, wrapped in a sheet, talking to a strange man in a choir robe about small magics. He turned, dropped the sheet and pulled on his jeans. Took off the sunglasses and put them in his pocket, turned back to the man and asked, "Want some coffee?"

"Coffee?" Harsh suspicion in his low voice.

"You drink it."

Micah Treador was cautious. "The drink that made you ill?"

"No, this is what makes you better after the beer makes you sick." He laughed a little.

Micah Treador thought about that, a bit too long, then nodded, barely. "I know about beer. Yes, I would have some coffee." A long pause, and then, as if he thought it might be required, "Thank you."

Sam leaned over to dig through his jacket for his cigarettes and matches. The man didn't move away from the door immediately, but when Sam made a motion toward it, he gracefully side-stepped and followed Sam into the kitchen, looking around the apartment, running his hand over the wall. Sam flipped on the light in the windowless kitchen, tossed the pack of Camels on the counter. Turned on the tap, filled the coffee maker and switched on the machine.

The man watched, standing very still in the center of the room and touching nothing. "You have magic." A statement, the way he said it, about knowledge that did not make him any more comfortable. Sam wasn't more comfortable, either.
Sam pulled up a stool, shoved it toward him. "Sit down." The man sat, silent. Sam held the pack of cigarettes to the man. "Cigarette?"

"No." His nose wrinkled slightly in distaste, but after a pause, "Thank you."

Sam lit a cigarette as the coffee brewed. The man watched him smoke, then looked down at his hands. "Do you use milk or sugar?" Sam finally asked.

The man narrowed his eyes, then smiled slightly, sounded defeated as he spoke. "I do not know. I know about milk. Perhaps milk?" Sam gave him plenty of milk and three sugars, though he drank his own black. Handed him the mug. The man smelled the contents, shrugging an apology when he met Sam's eyes. "It is not that I do not trust you, Tellar. I am not familiar with this." He tasted it. "It is good. Sweet. Thank you."

"I'm glad you like it. Why are you here? Are you looking for the girl?" It had to be.

The behavior was too similar.

"The girl?" He spoke so carefully he seemed bored.

"You know, a woman, but younger," Sam said.

"I know the word." He smiled faintly, always, little self-deprecating smiles. "I do not know what girl you mean. I do not know many girls. I am looking for m-Tellar mina. Your amulet, gemstone. It is green and set in silver, maybe this large." He held his thumb and index finger about an inch apart. "Perhaps you do not have it yet."

Sam studied him. "But you don't know the girl? I gave it to her. A year ago."

Now the man was interested, though he kept his face so carefully schooled Sam saw the eagerness for only an instant. "So you did have it. I knew you were Tellar. Tell me about this girl."

Sam shrugged. "She was young and very small, a child. Maybe thirteen. Sick, too, I don't know exactly what was wrong. I thought it was drugs or something at first. She wanted the jewel, like you. She was like you, she thought she knew me."

The man thought about that. "How can I find her?"

"I don't know you can. I looked for her, after. I found her on my bedroom floor one night. Tripped on her. She slept for two days, said she miscalculated and was lost. Could that be?"

The man arched his eyebrows. "Perhaps. How was she sick? Marked or hurt?"

Sam shook his head. "She was just cold. Almost frozen. But it was summer, like now. She brought me flowers."

"A Guardian. She has powerful enemies."

"She was just a regular little kid."
"I think not. Her looks?"

"Small, young to be wandering around alone."

The man's look changed suddenly, as if he found a piece to the puzzle. "Did she have hair of an unusual color, very long and green eyes? Beautiful?" he asked, making a motion across his face with his hand.

Sam nodded, took a last drag off the cigarette and dropped it in the sink. "Red hair. Not beautiful, really, it was something else." He couldn't put words to it. She wasn't exactly beautiful: too young, too thin, too pale. But there was something else, a thing that he had felt when he held her, a connection. Not anything he could name. He had felt a thing he had no name for. And the book. He wondered what his face showed, because the other man studied him, intent. Sam asked, "You know her then?"

The man shook his head. "Not really, no. She came to me in a dream once."

"If you find her, tell her I hope she's alright. I think about her." The man gave him a questioning look, and Sam shrugged. "Why do you want the pendant? Why did she?"

"I need it because I am being tested. To show I can move in time. *D'pol.* The jewel has strong magic associated with it." The man continued to study his face for a reaction, but Sam knew he had none. Micah Treador looked down at the mug and finished his coffee, passed the empty mug to Sam. He stood.

"I am pleased I met you, Tellar. You may not know it yet, but you are the most powerful wizard who ever lived." He smiled, that same small smile. "Until me." He squatted, balancing delicately on the balls of his feet, and began to make marks on the floor with his finger.

"What do you mean? I'm no wizard."

"It has already happened, you are five-hundred years dead."

"What do you mean by that?" What had Mirandah said? *Oh, Tellar, what have I done? You are dead.* Dead.

The man raised his right hand, palm out, at his chest then stepped into the center of the figures he had made on the floor. He motioned with his left hand and disappeared. Sam heard him say, "*N-rani, Tellar*" even after he was gone. Goddamn. Maybe this is what had happened to his father. One day you conjure up a way to cure a hangover and you can drink yourself to death. Dead. He poured himself another cup of coffee, sat down on the stool and lit another cigarette. He made the decision then, pulled the bottle from under the sink and added a good shot of Jim Beam to the coffee. He took a drink and gagged a little. Still, it wasn't too bad. Well, it would do.
When he saw it was the girl, lying in the dust, sick and hurt, Ti Ruan understood too many things at once: the mysteries of time, the ironies destiny, and the capriciousness of fate. A heady dose of understanding for a man who thought he had it all figured out. He was just a man, and though a clever one, he fell prey to small vices. Usually, the recognition of irony was a pleasure he sought; today it sliced through his gut with the force of a broadsword. As the years of his watching flashed through his mind, Ti Ruan named as fear what he had known before as only a vague unease.

He had made a bad move years before, and was caught in the end game. Life had begun so badly for these children and because he was a rational man and because they were, after all, only children, he felt some guilt for his part in that. He had been only thirty years, which was young enough to be very foolish, too young to be so powerful and that an ugly combination for any man. The mother had been only twenty years, which was young enough to be very, very foolish, only she was not. She was clever and very beautiful and so cold, but he had mistaken the iciness for something else, discovered the truth too late.

Ti Ruan had had many women; because his wife was gone, there was no reason to be even discreet. Young and heartsick, he searched for comfort, found it in the numbing combination of women and drink. He had made it easy for her, lit his own pyre, really. A gift, she had been, a pretty little Tarani girl, who had used magic to create a wild attraction, had come to his bed, more than willingly, more than once; and without warning tried to kill him. Nearly did kill him, as he slept, with a copper dagger which luckily hit a rib, but poisoned him nonetheless, with the burning fever copper causes in magic users. First though, it exposed her, and once he knew with certainty she was Shadeem, a Tarani magic user herself, he dealt with her easily.

Bleeding and poisoned, hebraceleted a wrist in copper wire and said simply, "You are mine, Shadeem." His word was enough, and her power became his. Wrapped in copper, she could never again draw magic. He remembered little of it, but others told him. She was Shadeem, and in the eyes of the law, that alone condemned her. He remembered nothing but grey for a long time after, but even in the grey of his delirium he cursed himself for the stupidity and vanity that had allowed him to trust her. When he finally pulled himself up into the light, when he might have given the woman the opportunity to explain her actions, he found her touched and too long pregnant. There would be no explanations, but he guessed. His father had
moved. The counter-attack was feeble, a bad move, against the odds. Ti Ruan tossed the children into the fray, doubled the stakes. His father accepted that double, readily.

He watched his children grow, though he had seen them only once, on the night of their birth. He had not touched them then, but heard the midwife note the girl's silver birthmark, marked for power, Old magic, as her mother was marked. Marked for insanity, too perhaps, but he did not say it aloud. He allowed the midwife to place the children on the ground because the mother had asked. Begged. More magnanimous foolishness, to add power to power, though it had seemed little enough, more Tarani superstition than anything.

He had been merely curious when the Shadeem who was their mother said, "They will see the end of you, those. You feel it. The girl is marked, for your soul. The boy, for your life." The cool malice in her voice brought a startled wail from the boy baby, and his sister soon joined in the cry. Then he did feel it, and his curiosity turned to fear. His own father had promised he would die a soulless traitor; he knew those words constituted both a threat and a prophecy.

He considered briefly having the children killed there, in the midsummer summer heat of his bedroom, but in confusion he thought that the mother's revenge, the act in which his soul would be irredeemably offered up. He turned toward the small woman who lay surrounded by the bloody sheets of the birthing bed. Her white wrists were wrapped in bracelets of copper wire. The firelight shone off her flame-colored hair and glittered golden in her hard eyes; the young midwife took a protective step nearer the basket holding the crying infants. He noticed this and smiled his best smile at both women, but addressed the midwife. "What of you? What have you seen?"

"The end I see is not yours," the midwife replied quietly, looking at neither the man nor the woman, but at the basket. "They will never know of you from me."

Witless, to double from a losing position; the count favored his opponent. Ti Ruan laughed, without humor but with resignation, because it wasn't the answer he wanted to hear, but the truth still, as he had the power to see to that. He gestured the midwife to the infants. "Go then, take them."

"What of the lady?" the midwife asked.

"What of her?" Ti Ruan replied. "Go before I change my mind."

The midwife hurried out with the babies, who quieted as they left the room. An anguished sob escaped the mother and he asked softly, "Would you rather I had killed them? Is that what you hoped?" If his heart had softened toward her during her two day struggle to give birth, it had hardened, now. She did not reply, so he grasped her chin in his hand, turned her to him and repeated his question. "Did you want me to kill them, Shadeem? Your own children?"
"Better, perhaps, for us all, had you." She said it steadily, her gold eyes momentarily clear and lucid as they looked into his. She pulled away then, but not before he saw in her face the thing that chilled his heart. He could hardly be certain what it was; he had not thought before it existed in her. Maybe compassion, for him, her jailer and tormentor. Because of that thing, which was maybe compassion, he had not forgotten these children, but had watched. Not always or regularly, but he was a powerful man and could afford no mistakes now. He must guard his soul from this girl-child he feared in his heart, guard his life from the boy he feared with his mortal flesh. Ti Ruan watched with his magic, and though there was no parental pride or feeling beyond curiosity, he was not without satisfaction.

The midwife had travelled far to attend the woman, which was as he had wanted it. He didn't need anyone in the citadel knowing. Although his pale child-wife was five years gone, after delivering his pale, sickly daughter, he had an heir and did not need the frightening political mess of a child by the Shadeem, son or daughter. So the midwife took the babies far east, to the fertile coastal plain of BTor, to the waiting husband and son and warm field-stone cottage and raised them with love. And Ti Ruan watched, knowing he could claim them if they pleased him, or be rid of them if they did not.

He didn't much like the girl, named Mirandah by the midwife, for the mythical woman who had been Tellar's teacher. In the Old language of the Shadum, the name meant wonder. Entirely misnamed, he thought as he watched her examine her world with a calm efficiency. No wonder in her as she attacked, dissected, and understood the series of puzzles that made up her child's world. For all her rationality, the child had no pretense, and every emotion she felt crossed her face. She was not a pretty child, which surprised him; her mother, who she resembled, was extraordinarily beautiful. But the girl was small and pale, with a pinched little face and green eyes too large and hard, eyes that missed nothing and reflected her soul.

Now the boy, that boy was his: handsome, winning, clever, golden. Arin, they had called him, which meant gold, and like the girl he was small, but sturdy. His eyes, skin and hair were all a deep burnished gold, like a Remin king, with none of the coloring of the Tarani grandmother he knew they had. Like his sister, the boy had the delicately arched brows and generous mouth of the mother. But for those, he was the image of his father. Ti Ruan found himself inordinately pleased by that.

Neither child could be the offspring of the tall, dark midwife or the brown Toran wizard, who wore the yellow robes of Light but walked barefoot on the earth like the Shadum. Because the parents were powerful people among the poor rice farmers, goat herds, and rug weavers of coastal BTor, no one ever asked the midwife where she found the babies. Such things happened
regularly enough that people understood they were better not knowing. The midwife kept true to her word and the children did not know the young woman and her wizard husband were not their parents.

The children ran wild with the older boy, who had been ten years when the midwife brought the babies home. Both children soon learned the little magics their parents could teach them; the boy was a negligent pupil, but still he possessed the spark. The father taught the boy to read his few slender volumes of simple magic. He learned the runes and what they meant. Not the girl, as was right and proper. The power of the Stars, which was what the runes were, was too powerful to be put into the hands of women. Gentle B'Toran women, virtuous women, needed no such knowledge, outlawed long ago by the Remin Church. Women's magic was limited to midwifery and its secrets were committed to memory. The girl stayed close by her mother the midwife, and learned all her secrets early and quickly.

What was a spark in the boy was a raging fire in the girl. The mother recognized this and helped the girl commit to memory the magics she watched her father work: things of herbs, gestures, and mumbled phrases, though not magic of Stars. The father knew the 421 runes and their meanings, but he did not know how to use them. The girl saw his little incantations of weather and crops and fertility once and they were hers. By her sixth year, she was as powerful as any midwife or wizard of the first order, Earth-master, the only level of power these rural wizards attained. Ti Ruan was a powerful man, but the girl's quickness frightened him. Not yet his move, so he watched, and figured the odds on it. The shots grew longer each time he called them.

He watched them playing games with the village children, both of them small next to the B'Toran children. The girl took the lead; the boy followed willingly, even when she played with the girls. They played the Ring game, turning in two circles passing an indigo scarf from the inner to the outer circle, chanting. "One to travel, two to call, three complete the ring. Time around, kiss the ground, Stars change everything." That game was no longer played in the North, having died with outlawed Shadum magic and its Dark practitioners.

As they grew, the twins spent less time in their days together, except when the older boy, Donn, was at home to teach them swordplay and tell them of his life as a hired warrior. Legendary warriors, the Torans, and Donn taught the twins well. He cut them practice swords of wood—weighty enough to do damage if they did not have care. The boy was fast, good with the sword, quick on his feet. The girl, smaller and not as strong, was quicker. While his son fought with the raw intensity of emotion, the girl remained calm and rational. To defeat the boy, she had to win quickly and she knew it. Attack was simpler than defense, Donn taught them, and the
simple directness of her sustained assault won over her brother's strength at least half the time. And oh, she was lucky, always.

Ti Ruan followed them, the two children and the handsome older brother, nearly a man, sitting outdoors at night. The older boy named the constellations and planets and described their movements. As a traveller and sometimes sailor, he knew the heavens. A patient teacher, Donn Maddor. Of the 421 constellations, he knew more than half. Of course, the combinations were limitless. A language, he told them in his quiet voice. If someone learned to read it, he would know the future, understand the past, comprehend the Ring of Time. Ta Karin Pol. The brother smiled as he said that, the Old words, Shadum words he should not speak. Illegal knowledge, anyplace on the continent.

The twins looked up with wonder. Wonder. "I will learn to read them," the girl declared in her husky, child's voice. "I will know Ta Karin Pol." The gentle warrior brother laughed at her determination, but Ti Ruan wondered.

Donn told them then the oldest story, of creation. Nod, the Unnamer, the bright and blinding nothing who once ruled the chaos, who fought the Mother still. It was the force not of destruction, but of the slow disintegration, decomposition of Aman's order. It had kept the chaos unnamed and beyond time, stealing away the names and moving the stars even now.

Donn told them of Shad Aman, Earth-Mother, pulling herself out of the grey of chaos and naming the grey to create the people and animals and plants, 421 times 421: all the things of the world. She frightened Nod to Its center, and became Its most bitter enemy, for Aman knew the names of all things. She set her self in motion, spinning. Donn told of her tears for all the souls who would be lost, their names swallowed up in the bright nothing. Her turning spun her tears out into the heavens to become the glittering stars. Spinning them out into the Ta Karin Pol, a ring of stars with the grey of magic at the middle, the core. The idea and matter for all creation, Amanjano tula, to the Shadum. A story few knew, anymore. A story that was heresy, because it denied the one, true God of the Remin Church. Donn Maddor drew the figures in the dirt with a stick to help the children more easily find the constellations. There was power in that, Ti Ruan knew, but the children were innocent of it. Good lives, thought the father who had let them live, who let them continue living.

He found the girl first, always, the cool little girl he did not much like who was clever and not pretty, but maybe something else. The promise of that other, nameless thing, flickered around her like an aura. The thing he had recognized in the mother, but had not been able to understand. Power? He Dream-mastered, pulling out of magic's grey to focus on the brightness of her hair, darker red than her mother's.
He had watched the girl kneeling on the dirt floor at the low table before one of her father's open books. She stared at the runes and studied the notations in some long-dead wizard's cobwebby script. The mother stood at the hearth cooking potatoes and green beans, fresh from the summer garden. Like all B'Toran midwives, with their vaguely Shadum ways, she ate no meat. Aware of the child's concentration, she worked quietly. The girl could not read, Ti Ruan knew, but he saw something else happening in her eyes as the girl etched the unfamiliar runes into her memory. And they weren't all unfamiliar. She traced some with her fingers and mouthed the names. He shuddered involuntarily and the girl looked up, looked into his eyes as if he were there and she could see him. "Who is the one who watches me, Aman?" she asked her mother.

The mother looked around at her and it was her turn to shudder. "No one. No one watches you."

"But I feel him. Here." The child held up her hand, pushing her thumb into her fingertips. She met her mother's eyes and added, "And here." She touched her hand to her thin little belly.

The mother shook her head, but then hesitated and said, "Perhaps it is Arin, when he is out with Daman. Arin watches you always." And the girl smiled, as if she knew that for truth. Ti Ruan remembered her mother's words, though, her other mother. The girl is marked.

At night the boy would always be near, sharing the straw bed in the loft and if Ti Ruan had wanted, he could have listened to their murmured children's secrets. The girl drew telle, made illusions for her brother, a light beneath the sheets to ease his fear of the dark. She made illusions for them, glittering jewels, kittens, fancifully dressed dolls: things of children. She made a man, once, a Tarani Dark wizard, wearing rough, indigo robes and a necklace of cast silver runes; his face indistinct, shadowed behind the cowl of his robe. The boy screamed in fright, hiding under the sheets and wool blankets. Even these B'Toran half-Shadum feared Tarani, feared Dark magic. The girl had calmed him. "That is my radaman, Arin." She told him, so softly, a comforting hand on his arm as the illusion faded away. "I dream him." If the girl were Mirandah, and she had a Dark wizard radaman, what did it mean? Ti Ruan thought of the layers of time and he thought of Tellar, and he wondered. He could not help his wondering; she was marked. What did it mean? He should have guessed then.

They studied at the Stars out the loft's window and the girl quietly named them for her brother, the constellations which, she whispered to him, were well and truly the runes in her father's books. Because the boy knew all the runes, together they found all the constellations. Ti Ruan enjoyed their cleverness, even as he recognized his own vanity in his enjoyment, even when
it left him sick and shaking. He tried be certain of them there, together, the lithe, sober girl and his beautiful son, but he could not. He could not know what they were, or read their futures in the stars. He feared them both, the girl's cool and the boy's passion.

The wizard-father died when the children were ten years. Ti Ruan had not thought of the children for several moons and woke to find himself falling into the grey of the Dream-mastery with little control. He had not initiated it, he knew, when he focused on the red of the girl's bright hair, now shorn, and felt the constriction of grief in her heart. She did not cry, but he reassessed her in that moment and in some way claimed her for the first time. Too much power there, he realized, and none of it cool. That was the mother: cool, hard, and just once, maybe compassionate. The girl was something else, a thing he had not counted on, a wildfire burning too hot and uncontrolled. She had called him, an accident of her grief, maybe; how could that be?

The boy cried, standing near the shrouded mother wrapped from head to foot in mourning grey. The absent older boy was often gone now, hired with his sword and becoming a legendary warrior in his own right. The dead wizard-father dressed in yellow robes burned on the pyre. The hot fire reflected in their faces. Mother and boy watched the fire. The girl touched her newly short hair and watched the Stars.

"Light to Light," the boy said, tossing a handful of herbs on the fire. They flared quickly and left a sweet, smokey smell. That was right.

"Death to Dark, return you to your soul," said the mother and threw a handful of earth into the fire. It also flared. That was all wrong, Shadum heresy. After nearly the entire night tending the fire, it burned down to ash and just before dawn they turned toward home. Ti Ruan watched their bare feet walk across the dewy grass, followed them back to the cottage, although he now had pulled back control of the dream and didn't have to.

They knelt at the low table, washed by the flickering light of the olive oil lamp. The mother dropped away the rough wool covering her head. She had cut her face, the narrow, careful slice marking her a widow ran vertically from her forehead to chin, down her nose, over her lips. She had shaved away her myriad of row braids, with the same razor. Her husband's razor. A waste of a beautiful woman, Ti Ruan thought, but B'Toran woman married only once. Virtuous women wore their grief as an emblem. He'd seen them, in his youth, when he'd travelled in the east. The little family poured their tea in silence, offered a few drops to the earth floor. The boy tearfully said the prayer, for his father was dead now. The mother ritually praised him, in his father's name.
The girl said, "I made this for him tonight." She showed her mother a scrap of parchment on which she had inscribed the rune for father. Daman. She had drawn a square around it to contain the rune. The square, symbol of the wizard's fourth order, the Dreammaster. D'jan in the rune language, mind-follow. The boy and the woman looked at her, surprised. But the watcher then knew what had happened, how she had pulled him from his sleep without intent. He shuddered, trying to comprehend the strength of her magic.

"No!" the mother yelled. She looked around the room wild-eyed, afraid; she knew more than a midwife should; she read the rune. Shadum, he knew. "She is a child, she does not know what she does," the mother cried out. To Ti Ruan, who she knew would be there. The boy's mouth opened, then shut. The girl gave a derisive little laugh, a sound that should not have come from a child. "Who do you call to, Aman?" The boy's golden eyes repeated the question and the mother repeated her cry. "They are children. Believe me, they know nothing," she said.

The girl thrust the parchment at her mother. "Who is this?" she asked. "Who fathered us, really?"

"I cannot say. I vowed you would never know from me," the mother whispered. She raised her voice to carry, though he had heard her whisper: "They will never know from me." But it was too late; he knew what would happen then, he had seen it in her eyes years ago. The end I see is not yours. He had tolerated the children being taught the Old stories of a long dying people, tolerated them running so wild they might learn whatever they wished. Those didn't matter; they was nothing. But if he had stopped that, this might not have had to happen. "I must sleep now," the mother said. "Tomorrow I will need to think." She kissed them both. He knew what would come, because suddenly he understood he was not the only watcher who had an interest in the lives of these children. He could only watch that night, and plot his next move, strategy for the long run. The midwife was just a checker, for his opponent to bear-off.

The children washed up, the tea things and themselves, and climbed wearily to their loft, whispering quietly. The boy cried occasionally while the girl explained what she guessed but did not know and hugged him fiercely to her thin shoulder. When the door opened and a barefoot figure in a yellow robe entered, both children would have thought it the shade of their father, so like him it seemed, and he had been a good man and they were in the grey of nearly asleep and not afraid. The figure shuffled to their mother's room and the children heard what Ti Ruan did, the bed creak and the whispers, soothing and almost familiar.

They drifted to sleep, the darkness past the grey, but were awakened by their mother's cry which was not fearful, but it was dawn and they climbed down to be certain of her. Her room had a sweet, dead smell they could not recognize, and in the half-light of the dawn her face and
body were covered with a damp, green glow of decay. Dead, but unmarked, unhurt.

They were orphans. The girl caressed her mother's ice-cold cheek and walked out to the main room to pick up the parchment from the table. She took the little copper knife her mother had used for her simple spells, the copper knife that might have saved her mother's life had she carried it to bed, and pierced through the rune with it, stabbing the scrap to the table. Ti Ruan felt that, in his heart and in his soul. Re-doubled. He couldn't fight destiny, he must work with the rolls of the dice. A soulless traitor, surely.

He watched as they took to the road in search of their older brother. They went south across the plains toward Lladwyn, the most northern of the three Southlands. They did not need much watching; they wandered further from where they could do him damage. The girl found work easily, making the love potions of a midwife and directing her brother in little magics learned from the father. She carried the books with her and she read them. She managed magic her father had not, magic her brother could not. Tisanes, potions, simples and spells for healing, controlling fertility, witching the weather. Magics that were midwife lore and should not have worked, but which under her hand did. With her short hair, she played at being a boy, a wizard. As she grew, she grew in power, and sometimes, if he were alone at night, Ti Ruan found himself afraid. But not nearly as afraid as he ought to have been.

He watched them in smokey taverns, where the twins learned to play. The King's Game, they called it, because it was that--Remin kings learned military strategy, political gamesmanship, life, by practicing the gambits, learning the capriciousness of fate's dice roll, understanding the numbers. His father had taught him he could learn much about a man by the way he played the Game. The boy had light-fingers and simply cheated: cheating an acceptable strategy, provided one wasn't caught. He wasn't caught. The girl gave equal weight to her extraordinary luck and her extraordinary ability. She played brilliantly, jumped as quickly as possible to a running game, and was off. She didn't win by large margins, often four or fewer pips--but she nearly always won. Big money when she played in the box, at the tavern chouettes. He would never wager against her.

They learned to play other games, dice games, odds games. They wagered that the girl could out-drink any man crowded tavern common rooms. She did, of course, sketching quick runes on the table with her finger. With simple magic she turned the little glasses of spirits she drank into water. She could drink all night and she often did. They played the simple farmers out of small coins, coppers or tins, usually, and even though many guessed they were being played, few complained of the fine entertainment.
She taught her brother street magic, sleight-of-hand, and he began to practice his trade. He was a competent thief. They chose bigger checkers for their thievery—usually Remin warriors who carried silver, sometimes customs houses. Living in B’Kat, as they did for several years, there was no shortage of easy targets. They were quick and clever and not greedy, so they were never caught. The girl bought ancient and illegal books, written in Shadum, and read at night; the boy rarely inhabited their rooms after sunset. They both stole and played and lived fine lives. He watched them irregularly, because the girl was aware of being watched, and Ti Ruan had other plans to make. The children were simply game pieces he would bear-off when the time arrived. They knew nothing and did not try to guess anymore: life on the road saw to that.

Though he made certain of them less frequently, he still checked. He always found her first, and his son through her. His interest returned when he saw the children meet a wizard, whose robe was yellow for the Light, whose green chasuble designated him a Star-master and whose Shadum silver named him either a renegade or a competent warrior. Ti Ruan guessed him both, the man wore a sword, its hilt marked with a Defender’s sigil, though his manner gave no clue to whether he was the sort of man who murdered Tarani magic users for their silver. That the question existed would add to the man’s reputation.

The twins met the wizard in a tavern, watching him from across the room for no short time, discussing him. The girl rose and moved to the table where the man sat alone, joined him without asking, sweetly wagering a purse of silver, suggesting she could drink more spirits than the man. The wizard laughed. "I’ve enough silver. And you’ll never win a drinking wager with a wizard."

That girl smiled ingenuously and downed a quick glass of dreeza. "I will keep up with you then. Match you."

He laughed and shook his head. "I don’t want your silver, little girl. Not to offend, but I don’t much want your company, either."

"Neither my silver nor my company? What would you like, Wizard?" She studied the wizard through her eyelashes, and Ti Ruan knew what she wanted from the man, what she would get. He would never wager against her. The wizard with the Defender’s sword just smiled and shook his head until she reached to touch the silver he wore around his neck. The man fell back into his chair as if he had been punched. The girl’s eyes widened, with pain or surprise, Ti Ruan was uncertain, but she didn’t let go. "I want a radaman. I will wager whatever you like against that, Wizard." she whispered. She was fifteen years and thin and not pretty, but there was something else the wizard would have to feel there, the power of it pulled.
"No." He fought whatever she did; sweat beaded on his forehead. His voice was tight and he sighed, reached out to touch her hair, then dropped his hand to her shoulder, pushing down her blouse, baring her thin shoulder, the flat plane of her chest. The wizard cared nothing for that; he didn't even look. His shaking hand found the silver mark at her collar bone. The boy, sitting a few tables away, jumped to his feet, hand on his sword. The girl gestured him back.

"Teach me, Wizard." The man nodded; she let go and with the boy led the stumbling wizard up to their room. The girl caught herself a teacher.

His son seemed to like the man, Luc Denton, a garrulous Southlander, probably Katwynian, lean, fair, and of middle years: a man who married his name and his title. Ti Ruan knew little of him, set out to learn more. The girl watched, the wizard's every word, every gesture. Wizards, even charming, drawling Southlanders with no reputation to lose, didn't take on fifteen year girls as pupils. Especially cool, intense, clever girls--anyone could see the danger in that. The crime in that.

Not only magic, Luc Denton’s lessons. He taught the girl his politics, equally criminal lessons of political resistance, Tarani watchers, and Toran mercenaries. He described King Gav’s fight, twenty-five years before, to negotiate with the young Ti Ruan, the acting King of Remin, the treaty of D’Amanum, for a Tarani safe-land guarded by the Toran army. The girl learned of recent fear that Ti Ruan’s political weakness at the citadel might lead him to renegotiate that treaty with swords, preferring a foreign enemy to a civil war. Ti Ruan, the Protector of Remin, was pleased to learn how perfectly his plans were taking shape, and wondered where among his enemies his daughter would find haven. He was then a man who believed destiny held few secrets: the boy marked for his life, the girl for his soul.

They sat around their little fireplace, holed up in a homey Toran hostel for a long winter, drinking dreeza warmed on the mantle, though the girl wasn’t much of a drinker. The wizard told them the stories of Tellar, and Mirandah his radaman, who was neither a Light wizard nor Shadeem. How? the girl asked. How can that be? What else is there? The girl did not understand and neither did the wizard. But Ti Ruan knew, it was the thing that shimmered around the girl like a promise. The thing the wizard felt but could not name when she held his silver. "She stole the Dark wizard’s magic for Tellar. Why? Did Tellar trick her? Was she very wicked? Or was the Dark wizard wicked?"

Luc Denton smiled at her, and Ti Ruan saw his patience. She was so young, and the man genuinely cared for her, and the boy. Amazing, after she had deceived him. Used him. "Who knows, with the Old stories?"
The wizard put down his bottle, retreated into his own room as the boy laid out his blankets. Ti Ruan realized the girl no longer curled up to whisper with her brother; she watched their fire for a moment, kissed her brother and followed the wizard to his room. As he watched, the girl sat on the wizard's bed, holding his hand a moment, speaking low. Ruan felt his fear dissolve and he began to laugh at his own foolish worry. He thought then that he would never have to fear this girl again, knowing she had put away the slender volumes of little magics for the real power to which women had access. Let her have her wizard; the man was no Tellar.

He lost her in that year. He found the boy instead, after sixteen years of coming out of the grey to focus on her bright hair and her thin face. The boy had changed; he was certainly a man, handsome and golden as he remembered, but hard and determined. No more laughing and playing and drinking. He used magic at a high level, though he wore no robe or chasuble. Ti Ruan could not guess his destination, but Arin travelled the Southland with purpose. He watched this new activity infrequently and wondered if the girl was dead or with her wizard somewhere. He'd had no feeling about that, except maybe confusion at the uncertainty in the Stars that would allow destiny to be so altered.

Then this clear morning in late spring, when he understood too much. He watched with wonder as the boy, with a pack on his back, wrote a complicated series of runes in the dust with a willow staff. Even as his son drew a five pointed star around the figures and stepped into the center, Ti Ruan knew what the boy attempted and followed as he faded into grey. The grey lasted several moments and the father had time to feel deeply satisfied at the cleverness of his son. All the years of watching and it came to this, witnessing this terrible power. Wonderful power. How to recover the boy? How to keep the boy from being recovered by the other, the unnamed one who once had been Amar Ruan? And even in the same thought, he knew it was all so wrong. So much conceit, too much pride, he knew. What he wanted to see and not the reality under the illusion. The simplest of illusions. A clever child could do it. You feel it. He felt it. Hard.

He pulled himself from the grey and focused on the bright hair of the girl sprawled before the black iron gates of *Aman'to Shir*, Darktower. Saw the brilliant green jewel on a ribbon around her neck, recognizing it as Tellar's in the moment he recognized so much. Not easy for her, all this untrained power, burning too hot and uncontrolled. The rawness of it left her sick and weak, too weak to maintain the illusion of her brother's likeness. So weak if she entered the the tower she would likely be dead. But he could not count on it. *The girl is marked.*
Oh, the girl, who was no longer thin and pinched, but something else, something frightening. His golden son was gone; it amazed him, that he could feel that. He felt the triumph of the Shadeem who was the mother of this girl, this Distance-master: in the Old way, d' sheden, earth-follow.

He saw it beginning, what he wanted and feared, and uncertainty cramped his gut. He laughed as he had the night she had been born, without humor but with resignation. She would take his soul, the seer had promised. He did not need a seer now. She was Mirandah, and she wore Tellar's stone, and Micah Treador would be her Dark wizard radaman unless he stopped it. He could make sure Micah Treador found his daughter there, and he could make certain Micah was afraid enough to act, but he did not want to see it. He said a final farewell to her, there at those iron gates in front of the labyrinth of Darktower. He had taken pride in her, and admitted it in that honest moment, but he knew he must play out the end game. When Treador finished, the magic would be gone and he would not find her again. It must be so; he knew no other way.

He felt something he hadn't expected and for the first time he understood the Shadeem's look. Maybe compassion, but whether for the girl, or Micah Treador, or himself, he didn't know. As he faded to grey, he thought for some reason of the pale, sickly daughter, now nearly a woman, who had been always near but whom he had never watched.
What a horribly complicated thing it was to think of his sister at a time like this. Not that he thought of her for more than an instant, because he really had not. But then he did have to hesitate a moment to think of why he would have thought of her at all, and by the time he had done that and was satisfied that it was completely normal, he had been thinking about her for several moments and not concentrating the least bit on what he was doing. He had to concentrate at a little, so it was no good and he mumbled an apology and rolled away from the girl, whose name was Marri. Not terribly complicated, Arin thought, because he was lying in the sweet smelling straw of the loft with the girl's cold feet against his legs--but embarrassing still.

The girl raised herself up on one elbow and looked at him. Her short hair was golden on top and darker underneath. She was thin and strong and brown on all her parts that got sun and very white on all the parts that did not. She had found a way to get sun on more parts than seemed likely, far up her thin legs to nearly the tops of her thighs. He found that so interesting. She let the blanket fall away so he could truly look at her, at the lantern light washing across her sun-dark skin. He watched her a moment, then rolled onto his back to study the unsteady light playing off the rafters. Waves of shadows rolled over the interior of the peaked roof. "You fine?" she asked, with her little Southland lilt. She reached over and touched the gold ring in his ear, brushed back his hair.

What to say. "Yih. I've been worried about my sister." The truth would work. Lies he saved for women he knew better than this. "That'd kinda do it," she agreed. "Now what was it that made you think of your sister? You're really bad, you know."

And he saw she teased him, so he crawled under the blanket and rubbed her feet until she laughed. "I think it was the cold feet. We never wore shoes and her feet were always so cold."

"You didn't wear shoes?" she asked, but it wasn't really conversation. Her hands were too busy for that. Still, he liked her voice, and it seemed like only manners to talk a little.

"A religious thing. When you are bound to something, you give up your shoes. It means you won't walk away. You don't walk on Mother earth in shoes, you give yourself up to her. My parents were pretty religious." He'd never thought about it much.

"Your parents were Shadum?" She frowned, then sat, suddenly more interested in conversation.
"No, of course not," he said without even a hesitation, in his careful, amused citadel Remin. This wasn't the best turn of conversation, when hoping to lie with a superstitious Southland farm girl.

"Then you believe in god?"

"No. I'm not Remin Church." An easy honesty--she was unlikely to be Remin Church, or care if he was not.

She smiled, slowly, then mimicked the boredom of his Remin accent. "Obviously."

Arin sat, too, then, because this was getting more complicated. She wasn't what she'd been pretending, and he hadn't fooled her. "You really want to talk about religion?"

"As it seems to be the most interesting thing happening here, for the moment, yes." She pushed back her hair and waited.

Arin nodded. "Sure. I don't have religion. My parents were simple. But not Shadum. Not like Tarani, if that's what you mean." His mother had been very strict, actually. But she never discussed her beliefs with Mirandah or him. She had prayed, twice a day, dawn and dusk, at the little statue of *M-Amanumi*, the little Toran goddess. His father had worn yellow robes, as did all Toran wizards, but he had admitted once, smiling, that he received no power from the Remin god. He had pointed to his bare feet, to the earth. Arin hadn't ever thought much about it. Donn's stories had all been heresy; Arin had discovered that early and kept them to himself. There weren't many Church Wizards, Guardians of the Light, they called themselves, remaining, but the few wandering about killed for heresy. An immediate death sentence, they'd tie you with copper, strike a spark with magic, and you'd burn, beautifully green and uniformly hot, for a very long time. Magic and copper, as they say, don't mix.

"Don't be so defensive. Not an accusation. But what would a nice Remin boy pretending to be a Southlander with a B'Toran gold earring be doing worshipping the Tarani god? Who are you, Arin?" She didn't really want an answer; maybe she'd already formulated one.

He didn't know. He'd never thought about it. The accent he'd worked hard at. B'Toran accents were too identifiable, especially in combination with his blondness. He hadn't wanted to be too easily recalled, not in his line of work. Why would she think he was Remin, though? Any Southlander with recent Remin wealth spoke citadel Remin like he did. The old aristocracy had retained their drawls, if not precisely all their silver after the Coda of B'Kat officially welcomed the Remin army into the south several hundred years ago. Only farmers had the lilt, anymore, and the mountain *Shadum* sounded more Tarani. She really noticed too much for a girl who was playing at being a Southland farm girl. "What do you know about B'Toran earrings?" Arin challenged.
She laughed, a low little laugh that had very little to do with amusement. "A lot. Of course your parents were Shadum, if you had your ceremony. B'Torans are just Tarani dark enough to hide it better."

"That's old and wasn't amusing the first time I heard it. And it means nothing, since I'm not dark or Tarani." A hard place for him, knowing his father had likely been a Remin, and not his mother's husband, and not the man he had grown up loving. He saw by her eyes she'd repeated a stupid joke because she'd guessed that, at least that, and maybe more. He wished then he hadn't responded so quickly, or with quite so much feeling, because that was what she wanted. She smiled again, and he decided to go find Luc. Some women just weren't worth the trouble. But then she said nothing more and pressed herself against him, kissing him in a way that made him forget not only Luc, but to breathe until the dizziness reminded him. Then he was careful not to think about anything but breathing. Fainting at this point would be really embarrassing.

When he woke just before dawn she was gone, and he found himself disappointed because she was an interesting woman; he'd like to see her again. Even in the daytime, but he didn't know where she lived. Other than the brief discussion of religion, her common name was all he knew of her. He'd met her on the road from the village, on his way back to camp. He had been following the road through the dense Southland woods, more than a little nervous, because he had never liked the way the forest imposed on a person, on him. Darkening forest was even worse. He had a nightmare recurring from childhood of running in dense woods, meeting unnamed evil. He walked with his hand on his sword, his thoughts tied up in his dreams which were fresh memories. He had dreamt it again only the night before, the shining white nothing waiting with welcoming arms in the forest. He had bad dreams when Mirandah wasn't near, always had.

As the girl had approached in the dimming light, he thought her a boy, dressed as she was, with short hair, and on the road alone. As she came closer, he paused, patted her down with his eyes: checking for the tell-tale bulges of weapons, jewelry, and purse, in that order. A knife at the waist, the blade just less than a palm in length, and something questionable in the right sleeve. No obvious jewelry, so he checked for the purse. Easier in a crowded room, when he could manage a quick feel, though he had become adept at identifying the contents of a man's purse or pockets by sight alone. It was in that look he recognized she was a girl, and took his hand from his sword so as not to alarm her. She'd smiled at the movement, looked him over, a much quicker up and down than he had given her, and asked him if he had a place to stay the night. Of course he had, but that wasn't what she was asking, so he went with her to the stable.
He crawled out of the loft and dressed, leaving to return to the clearing where he and Luc had camped the afternoon before. They had eight more phases, two full moons, before they would meet Mirandah at B'Kat, the city across the bay from the peninsula on which Darktower sprawled. Eight phases of fun, as he saw it, worth a little troubled sleep. The way Mirandah led them about, he supposed he and Luc deserved a bit of time off.

As Arin neared their camp, Luc's big old bay snorted an acknowledgement. Leaving the road, he came to the horses first; they were grazing peacefully on their pickets. He patted his own black mare as he walked past. They camped in a little clearing, far enough from the road for safety, but near a little stream so the forest thinned and the grass grew deep. The sun rose pink as he came upon Luc, who made tea over their small fire.

"You're back late," the wizard stated without turning around.

"I thought I was back early," Arin said and yawned, then glanced down at himself and tucked his shirt tails into his leggings, pulled down his brown tunic.

Luc turned to face him. "Have a good night?"

Arin ran a hand through his hair and picked out some straw. He glanced at it before dropping it to the ground, meeting Luc's eyes. "Yih, I guess. How about you?"

"I guess? Only that?" came Marri's drawl as she stepped out from the shadows beyond where Luc stood. Luc froze for a surprised moment, then shook his head.

"What's she doing here?" Arin asked Luc, a little accusation sounding in his voice. He couldn't quite help it.

"She needed to talk to Luc. Alone. I thought you'd sleep a little longer. I would've gone back," Marri explained.

"Luc could have just asked for a little time alone. You needn't have gone to so much trouble to get me out of your way." Arin's confusion made it sound harsher than he wished.

"No trouble," Marri ignored his tone. "Really, I had no idea you knew each other. I was just killing time."

"Flattering."

She laughed, he supposed at the coolness of his comment. "I'll flatter you later. Oh, don't look so angry. We were just letting you get some sleep. I thought you'd need it." She wasn't really pretty in any way he thought of pretty; she was built like a boy and all colored dark by the sun, rather than round and pale and pink-cheeked. Her smile absolutely dazzled him and he realized he wasn't angry, he was just pleased to see her again. "Besides," she continued, "I should be angry with you." When he looked puzzled she mimicked the boredom in his Remin accent, "Yih, I guess."
He relaxed and grinned at her as Luc handed him a steaming mug of strong tea. Some women weren't worth the trouble, but she wasn't some women. "I don't like to make the old man feel bad. You understand," Arin said. As he spoke, he offered a few drops of tea to the earth.

Marri wrapped her arms around Luc's neck and kissed his cheek. He stiffened at her touch and she grinned at him, though her voice, when she spoke, had an edge. "I've always found a lot to recommend old men. Especially this one." She took the mug of tea Luc thrust at her and backed to sit on a fallen log Arin had pulled up near the fire when he had helped make camp the previous afternoon. Arin joined her, sitting close, sipping his hot tea.

"We have some decisions to make. At the citadel all the talk is of war. Ruan will either invade D'Amanum or face an ugly power struggle at the citadel. Half his Defenders are out for his blood." Her soft drawl intrigued Arin. She had dropped most of the farm girl vocabulary and her accent was much more like Luc's, just that slow, soft Remin of the old Southland aristocracy. He listened to her voice without quite hearing her words; the words meant little anyway: political, the sort of conversation Arin studiously avoided. "Ruan's daughter is marrying Defender Sildar's son. Strange bedfellows, wouldn't you say? Likely Ruan thinks he can avoid an outright takeover by Sildar's faction of Defenders."

"I heard about the wedding. It was bound to happen, the girl's of age. What intelligent man wouldn't use his daughter to seal an alliance?"

Marri pulled a face, but continued, "I'll wager you haven't heard this. Ruan has a new little girl. From Baddan."

"And?" Luc shrugged. "He's got a new girl regularly. He likes Tarani girls. Most all of them are from somewhere up north."

"Guess where the Defender Sildar's son is being posted, after the announcement of his betrothal?" Marri's sidelong look made Luc sit down, hard.

"Baddan." Luc shook his head; Marri just flashed her eyebrows, shot him a self-satisfied smile. Luc whistled, shook his head before speaking again. "It's mudhole. What kind of move is that? If Ruan wanted an alliance, you'd think he'd at least post the kid well. I thought this one was clever?"

"He's clever. Lannon Sildar was first in his class, Citadel Men's and military."

Luc sighed, as if he understood. "Ruan doesn't trust him."

Marri's turn for a bored shrug. "Possibly. He'd have little reason to. The man with the most to gain from Ruan's death--after the wedding. But I'm not certain yet. That's too easy."
"Sometimes it's just easy." Silence then, but not because Marri agreed. "And D'Amanum? You know Gav has agreed to pull the Toran army out? Won't be much of a war, if the enemy won't stick around and fight."

Arin knew a little about that one. The Toran king was said to have been pressured by the Protector of Remin to remove his armies from D'Amanum and leave the Tarani in the northern city to the mercies of the Northern Remin Army. The NRA was not known for mercy.

"It's all they talk about at the citadel. That's buying Ruan time. If he can send his enemies out to make war on Gav, or the Tarani, he's sitting a lot safer at home. Gav knew it." Marri's explanation sounded about right to Arin, little as he knew of it. Ti Ruan was fighting for his own survival, against his own Defenders.

"No." Luc shook his head. "What pressure did Ruan put on Gav? Gav has a treaty from twenty-five years past. I can't believe he would agree to hand over the city like that," Luc mused, almost to himself, working it through.

"I don't know. Supposedly Ruan's let him keep the river, but I wouldn't think that would be enough. What would river commerce be when Tor has the whole eastern coast?" Marri shook her head, too, as if she had spent time considering the question. The river, Arin guessed, would be the D'Amanum, which divided Tor from the Protectorate. The city of D'Amanum was on the Protectorate side, but had been ceded to Tor twenty-five years back, as part of a treaty for a Tarani safe-land. "Gav was our strongest ally. Something happened, but no one is saying. Ruan's not supposed to be in any condition to pressure anyone, drunk and holed up like a woodchuck in his room with that little girl for two phases. Pallen Gav doesn't know why his father would give in to that, he doesn't know when his father would even have met with Ruan."

"So Pallen Gav is really with you?"

"We got most of our information from him. He's concerned about the Tarani."

"I'm not surprised. Tell me about Ruan's daughter."

Marri shook her head again. "I don't know much about her, but word around the citadel is that she's a sickly little thing with the brains of a turnip--a real little nothing. Dead in a year. Pallen Gav thinks if she is," Marri shrugged, "despoiled, we can force a confrontation between Sildar and Ruan. Give Tor time to reinforce positions, go at a divided Remin army. Pallen's young, but he knows what's going on politically. Even if his father won't stand up to Ruan, he will. He's with us, Luc."

Luc snorted. "We need all the thirteen-year princelings we can get, I suppose."

"Don't be so difficult. He's nearly fifteen years. Someday the Toran heir will be the Toran king and that's not a bad friend. He's a good fighter, a clever boy." Although she spoke to
Luc, she watched Arin, who thought about what her words meant. Not safe. It then occurred to him that Marri was a watcher of some sort—he knew she was interesting, but he hadn't guessed she would be that interesting. He tried to think of everything he knew about the watchers and the Remini. Not much.

"You have a thing about clever boys, girl," Luc commented, also casting a glance toward Arin, who felt not at all clever, trying to follow the conversation.

"What? What's this about?" Arin turned from one to the other. He thought he had it figured out, now this. If he had been confused before, the turn the conversation had taken was beyond him. There was clearly something between Luc and Marri that he was missing.

"She has the morals of a stray cat and I just wanted to point that out to you. To her." Luc looked at Marri and turned away.

"Ignore him," Marri said. "My Daddy feels bad that he didn't hang around long enough to share with me his refined code of moral conduct."

"You're her father?" Arin knew he hadn't masked the surprise in his voice.

"So the story goes. I'm hardly proud of it," Luc said.

"Oh, really. Leave it. Why aren't you disappointed in your boy here?" She poked Arin.

"I am. I thought he was developing better taste."

"He's old enough to decide where he sleeps. I didn't hold a knife to his throat."

"I'm pleased to know your habits have changed," Luc remarked. Her eyes darkened briefly, as if he might have hurt her, but then Marri laughed so merrily, so apparently unconcerned at her father's claimed displeasure Arin was sure he'd been wrong.

Arin eyed Luc narrowly. "I want to know what the rest of this is about. You're watchers, aren't you?" He looked to Marri for an explanation, but Luc answered, placing his empty mug on the ground.

"I don't think you could really call us watchers. That's too selfless and Tarani. You always knew I was doing more than following you and your sister around. I have some contacts down south. Marri's one. We're some people concerned about Remin expansion and making a little silver opposing it. Basically." That seemed to Arin an understatement. Everyone outside Remin was concerned about Remin expansion. Everyone on the continent knew the Tarani were all but extinct, because of Remin expansion.

Arin raised his hands like a question. "So you're concerned. Everyone is concerned. What do you do about it? And how do you make silver?" They exchanged a glance and Marri shrugged.
"We watch. Customs houses. The citadel bank." She returned his smile. Well, an admission of sorts. Watcher had become a fairly general term for anyone gathering information on another, but the first watchers were Tarani resisting the Remin warriors. Arin had never been as political as Mirandah, though he didn't much care for the way the Remini governed.

"Specifically, what do you do? Are you helping the Tarani?" Arin wanted to understand where Luc and Marri came into this.

"We aren't really helping the Tarani, though some are helping us. We trade information that sometimes helps them. Right now, we find out who's in control at the citadel. Maybe make sure that this wedding doesn't take place," Marri told him. "We're leaving this morning. We'd like you to come with us, but we trust you to keep silent if you prefer not to go along."

"But you'd prefer I go, now that I know your plans," Arin stated carefully. "You've probably said too much."

"I'd prefer you go. That's why we told you our plans. Nothing more," Marri said.

"So how will you stop this wedding?"

"We'll make certain Lannon Sildar can't marry Ruan's daughter. If she's as dim as they say, she shouldn't be difficult to seduce," Luc told him. "Oh, don't look so worried. You'll spoil your looks. No one will get hurt. Nothing need happen, as long as she seems to be compromised." Luc smiled at that.

Marri agreed, then added, "There'll just be five of us, if you go, Arin. We three, Pallen Gav and a hired sword, the best on the continent, rumor has it."

Arin nodded as he looked into the little fire, absently took a drink from his empty mug, then set it aside. "Will we be back in time to meet Mirandah?"

"Would I miss that?" Luc asked by way of answering.

Arin nodded. "I'm in." Even as he said it he was unsure. It seemed wrong to become involved in the affairs of nations because of boredom. He was agreeing to travel with watchers, help them compromise a Princess, the daughter of one of the most powerful man on the continent, because he had nothing better to do for a few phases. Not useful to consider it too deeply.

"So Arin, how are you at seducing drab little virgin princesses?" Luc refused to smile, though the hint of it was there.

"Never thought about it. I can only try."

"Him?" Marri asked.

"You think you'd do better, girl?"

"He'll manage. I just thought you owed Ruan one."
Luc looked up at her and she brought her hand to her chest. Luc brought his own hand to the silver charms at his neck and shrugged slightly. "No. It's political, not personal."

Marri nodded to Arin. "Refined code of moral conduct. I'm learning."

They broke camp, put out the fire and saddled the horses, Marri taking Mirandah's little mare. Watching her swing easily into the saddle, Arin thought of Mirandah again. Marri was so thin and strong and like Mirandah, she wore boy's clothes: narrow cut leggings of deep blue wool, a white linen tunic and a brightly striped vest. Her short boots were red, laced with red leather. Mirandah would have liked those boots. Marri immediately took the lead. Arin glanced at Luc, and found him studying Marri as well. The wizard smiled. "I think it's our destiny--to be led around by little girls."

Arin nodded seriously, because that had been his destiny from birth. Men had had worse destinies, and much worse leaders. Mirandah always led, and only when he struck out on his own did he encounter real trouble. The road stretched out ahead of them, surrounded closely on both sides by dense forest. He kept a constant eye to the trees. Marri rode slightly ahead, setting the pace, which seemed leisurely.

They arrived at a tavern before sundown. Arin volunteered to take care of Marri's horse as well as his own, but not Luc's because the beast bit and kicked. He and Luc walked the horses into the stable while Marri went to see about some rooms. Arin watered the horses while Luc measured their grain, writing the measures on a slate board near the door. Arin tossed the horses several forksful of hay, then turned to find Luc. Together they made their way toward the tavern, a freshly white-washed frame building just off the road. The structure was typically post-occupation Southland, several hundred years old, and the design built along major trade routes to comfortably house the Remin warriors who moved constantly through the area, providing protection. The common room was lit only by open windows and the large fire, and though dusk was approaching, it was still early to light the lamps. It took the two men a moment for their eyes to adjust to the darkness and locate Marri, sitting with two other men, in a corner, away from the fire. She drank a large mug of beer. Arin glanced at Luc and laughed. "Why didn't you tell me you had a daughter like her? She's perfect."

"She's too old for you. And she's trouble. Copper and magic. She'll burn you." They stood watching Marri a moment before Luc continued, "I didn't know I had a girl until she found me. My wife and I weren't close." He sounded a little sad, but said the last as almost an excuse. An excuse for himself or Marri? Arin guessed he might have been a good father, and maybe he felt bad about that.

Arin shook his head. "She's not that many years, what twenty, twenty-three?"
"It's not the years. She needs more than you could give her."

"I didn't hear any complaints."

Luc gave him a long look from narrowed blue eyes, considering. "You're such an infant. That's what I mean. Just believe me." Arin didn't change his mind. Marri was the first woman he had met who needed the same things he did. Exactly. Luc must have seen he was unconvinced; he reached out and grabbed Arin's arm. "I wasn't a father to her." He swore, low, shaking his head, collecting his thoughts maybe. "Not at all. But I can be to you. She'll hurt you. I promise you're not ready for this."

Marri stood and waved them over. The other two men stood as well. They were both Toran, with their black hair braided into many tiny rows of braids and tied back. The younger man was Arin's size. The older, taller one, had pale pink scar trailing from his eyebrow nearly to his chin on the left side of his face. He wore heavy rings of yellow gold in both his ears, and his clothing was mercenary black, the fine cloak he wore caught with a gold clasp at the shoulder. His heavy broadsword stood in relief, outlined beneath the cloak.

He studied Arin for a long, silent moment, then stepped closer to pass a gloved hand over Arin's hair, almost testing the weight of it. "Arin?" His voice carried the unmistakable accent of a B'Toran and was soft and shy, at odds with his height and regality.

Arin placed the voice immediately. "Donn. Oh, Donn." Arin leaned into the open arms of the larger man, burying his face in his brother's chest. Donn Maddor returned Arin's embrace and bent to kiss his cheek, then his mouth.

Luc cleared his throat. "Do you two know each other, or is it the onset of true love?"

Donn Maddor grinned at Luc, stroked Arin's hair, studying the gold of it in the low light. "He is surely beautiful. The prettiest baby I ever saw."

Luc's hand went to his hip, but he stood tensed, moving no further, and looking more perplexed than Arin had ever seen him.

Arin shook his head. "He's my brother."

Marri raised her eyebrows, remarked coolly, "Who'd have guessed?"

And indeed, no one would have, Arin knew. Donn must have always known they had different fathers; he had told the twins many times of the day his mother had come home with two tiny babies in a basket. Donn had told how he would be allowed to hold one baby while their mother put the other to her breast. And even though he and Mirandah were pale and their parents and brother were brown, Arin hadn't ever guessed, until the night of his father's death, that the father was not theirs.
Donn nodded, with a sideways smile to Luc, who relaxed visibly, even grinned. "You need not die for your friend's honor today, Defender Denton," Donn teased, nodding to Luc's hand at his sword. "Nor will we argue about a very young girl who is said to be your second travelling companion, nor will we discuss your extensive collection of Tarani silver."

Luc dropped his hand, spoke drily, "Your point is well taken. As we're both men who may have somewhat exaggerated reputations preceding us, why don't we see if we can't overlook them as so much gossip for now?"

Donn nodded absently, focused himself on examining Arin.

"Life has a way of getting interesting, doesn't it?" Marri commented, and sauntered off in the direction of the tavern keeper, in no apparent hurry to return.

Donn introduced Arin to Pallen Gav and Luc went to call a round of beer. Pallen sat straight-backed in his chair, quietly sipping his beer watching the other men. He no doubt assessed Arin, but so obviously it made him both uncomfortable and a little angry. He trusted the boy because Donn did. So Arin played him; he lounged, his usual game, slouched in his seat, as he told Donn lazy tales of his life on the road with his sister. He drank and played and let nothing slip that he did not want known, and learned everything he needed by watching the Toran heir.

Donn told of his own life, measuring each word carefully, a man unused to speaking at all, much less speaking about himself. Pallen said he had known Donn for two years. Arin watched long enough that he knew what Pallen did not say, that he had selected Donn as the model for the type of man he hoped to be himself. Pallen Gav studied and duplicated Donn Maddor's every move.

Luc returned with four large mugs of beer. Arin did not question Marri's disappearance, but simply took over her chair. They spoke of no plans in the public place, but had more beer and dinner. Donn wanted to know about his sister. Arin, who missed her deeply, was happy to oblige. The quiet Toran men listened to the stories of Mirandah, who Arin described as half his size and capable of out-drinking any man. Luc laughed at that.

Finally, only because they were to ride in the morning, they left to seek their rooms. Marri had gotten them each a room, and the tavern keeper, a Southlander with the round figure, jovial disposition, and slurred speech of an avid beer drinker, showed them up the stairs, lighting each of their lamps before leaving them.

Arin's room was cramped and dark, in the attic, tucked into the eaves and low-ceilinged; the walls were unfinished boards, the ceiling exposed rafters. There was no fireplace, but it was a warm, summery night and the narrow bed had enough blankets. His pack already rested by the
washstand; Marri must have done that. He unlaced his boots and undressed, blew out the lamp and fell into bed. He realized after lying down he was about half-pissed because the bed turned, and he began to drift quickly. He woke when the door banged, sat up and reached for his dagger, which was in his trousers. Which were on the floor, nowhere near the bed. He muttered an oath and groped for his trousers, half-asleep, too drunk.

"It's just me." Marri felt her way to the bed. A few moments later, she climbed in and he realized dully she was undressed.

"I thought you'd gone to bed before dinner." Arin moved slightly to give her more room. He was glad they were both small, the bed was narrow.

"So did I. I wanted to tell you something, so I came up here." She moved closer to him and he put his shoulder under her head, to make them a little more comfortable. He didn't say anything, waiting.

"You asleep?" she asked after a moment.

"No. What did you want to say?"

"Luc warned me to leave you be." He considered that for a moment, in silence. "Arin?"

She had such a great voice, like honey; he liked how she said his name, smooth and slow, all in one syllable: Ahrn.

"What?"

"Don't you have anything to say?" Did he?

"I love how you talk. You have a beautiful voice. I like lying in the dark and listening to you."

"Are you drunk?"

He laughed. "I don't think particularly, no." She'd only come because her father told her not to. Oh, well, kiss the ground for little blessings. Crickets chirped into the silence, gentle rain dripped from the eaves. "He told me to stay away from you, too."

"Will you?"

"Am I?"

He felt her smile against his arm. "Did he give you a reason?"

"He said copper and magic. Poof."

"You'll get burned." She nodded. "He's right, you will, if you're around long enough. I'm worse than a Tarani woman."

Arin wasn't sure he understood. She made it sound as if it was beyond her control.

"Tarani women treat men bad?"

"You know any?" Her whisper was soft.
"Yih. She treated me fine."

Marri laughed, then, and the whole tone changed. "Yih, well. Lucky you. You'd think most would cut your balls off just for spite, if you look Remin. That they'd forget it's not really a war. If I was Tarani, I would." Her voice was too light.

"It isn't a war. All they have to do obey the law. No one would bother them." He didn't really care to talk about the other part, the cutting of the balls thing, because it seemed a particularly vivid warning and he'd rather she forgot about it.

"You really think that?"

Arin stopped. He'd never much considered it beyond the talk of drunk warriors returned from the deep north. The Remini didn't want to be up there as much as the Tarani didn't want them to be. "Probably not. Do you?"

"I only wanted to know what Luc said about me. This got deep too fast."

"Yih. And we seem to end up talking politics or religion. What do you really think about Tarani women?"

"There aren't many left to think anything about." Arin didn't reply to her flippant remark, and the damp silence hung. Marri touched his earring, then the other ear with no earring. "Oh, Arin. You don't want to know. You're such a baby." She said it gently, as if it were a sweet compliment, and she sounded tired and sad and suddenly years older than he was. "You don't know a thing about any of this, do you? Let's not spend the night talking about Tarani women and the NRA. All the ugliness will be there tomorrow."

Ugliness. It was ugly. Arin had heard the stories. The Tarani still practiced their Dark magic. He'd heard of Tarani stealing children from the citadel, from their Remin fathers, for use in Dark religious ceremonies. Taking their souls. On the rare occasions such children were recovered, they were possessed by demons, mumbled the unintelligible language of the evil Dark wizards, fought to return to their captors.

And the other stories, told by drunken warriors, of men so cowardly they would not fight to protect their women or children. Young men so beautiful the warriors could not tell them from the women unless they undressed them. Children who starved themselves to escape their own fathers, to return to their evil ways and impoverished lives. The warriors who returned from NRA duty were haunted by their experiences, spent their nights drunk and sleepless and in the beds of whores dressed as Tarani Shadeem. Men who had seen such horrors, committed such horrors, maybe, they couldn't speak of them.

"You haven't seen it yet. I'd like to be sixteen years again. Innocent again."

"What changed you?"
"Luc." She didn't say anything more for a long time.

"He said he wasn't a good father to you," Arin started.

Marri made a small noise he couldn't identify and turned her back to him. "He wasn't a father at all, so it's not like he could be good or bad at it. He's a good man, though, I know that now." She sighed. "He's already got your sister, you know. Now he'll work on you. When Luc shows you the world, you're never the same." Arin quit listening to her words to hear her voice.

"You have such a beautiful voice," the last thing Arin said before falling asleep.

When Luc opened the door to wake Arin, Marri still lay near him. "Downstairs. Soon, if you want breakfast." Luc pulled the door shut, a little too hard.

Arin rolled out of bed to pull on his clothes, and gave Marri his hand and pulling her out of bed into the room cool enough that she had to dress quickly.

Luc was the only one downstairs. He poured them each a cup of tea, watched as Arin offered a drop to the rush floor, mouthing the ingrained prayer whose meaning he had forgotten long ago. "The food is coming." Though Luc said nothing more, his harsh look perhaps attempted to reprimand Arin, and it did give him pause. Arin assumed the look was about Marri, not the praying, though it was prayer that was driven from his mind. The Torans came down the stairs with their packs, piled them against the wall and sat. Donn poured them both tea.

"We missed you last night, Marri." Pallen, drinking his tea.

"I'm sure you did, Pallen. You wouldn't miss me so much if you didn't lock your door." Marri answered sweetly, winking at Pallen. Arin laughed. Even Donn smiled.

Marri spoke seriously, then. "We'll have to ride at least twenty measures a day. I'd like to be there in two phases. Luc can get us in."

Arin shook his head. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Be another arm if we have trouble. Wear your sword, too. It won't do us much good in your pack," Luc told him.

"I wear it most days," Arin objected.

"Wear it everyday."

"Don't I need to know the rest?"

"We have two phases to go over it. Let's leave it for now," Marri told them, nodding toward the door. A plump, pink girl in embroidered Southland skirts brought in several plates of hot scones and a platter of ham. Neither Arin nor Donn ate the meat; they had never been served it as children and hadn't developed a taste for it. It actually made Arin ill to eat it. But the scones
tasted good and they ate quickly, eager to be on the road. Arin finished first, wiped his sleeve across his mouth, and left for the barn to ready the horses.

Just dawn, on a fine day with the promise of warmth, in middle spring. He travelled with his best friend, his brother, and a woman he liked, a lot. And Pallen Gav, the Toran heir. He missed Mirandah, found a dull ache in his chest each time he thought of her, though they had been away from her for only two phases. She would be at Aman'to Shir, he calculated. Yesterday. The first day of summer it would be his birth-day. Mirandah's. Less than three phases.

He began to saddle the horses, beginning with Marri's. Mirandah's. He hadn't thought he would miss her so terribly. He saw her then, and thought it his imagination because she weighed so heavily in his thoughts. But she appeared there, though more a shadow of her. No substance, made only of light and air: some strange magic, like when she followed him into his dreams. Only this was no dream. Her back was to him but he recognized her hair, which had escaped her braid and fell loose and tangled past her shoulders.

"Mirandah?" He called to her and she turned. His breath caught in his throat when he saw her face, the cheek and jaw bruised and bloodied. She wore a rumpled wizard's robe of dark blue, far too long and hanging open. Her tunic, torn down the front, revealed a bleeding cut trailing from the base of her neck to the top of her blood-stained camisole. A narrow black bruise ringed one side of her neck, as if a ribbon or cord had been tightened there to cut off her breath. She stood barefoot, clutching the fabric of her torn tunic together, her hand shaking as she tried to cover herself.

"Oh, Arin. I did as he asked. Please believe it is not what we thought. We do not know all." A man stood behind her, tall and dark-haired with cold, cold eyes and he pulled her arm, too hard, Arin saw, pulling her away.

"Poor little girl," the man said, his voice emotionless. "Even when you win you lose." The man held her, one hand too tightly gripping her arm. He met Arin's eyes, and raising his hand, touched her hair. Arin reflexively reached for his sword. Not this, Mirandah. The man's eyes softened, for a moment, as his hand traced down her hair.

"No," she said to the man, pushing his hand away, unwilling to be touched so intimately. "Not yet," she whispered; Arin heard the promise in it and moaned. She unclasped her hand and something glittered bright as it slipped from her fingers. "Have care, Arin," she said. "Always." She reached out to Arin, and would almost have touched his face, but she was only shadow and still the man pulled her away. She looked to Arin, sadly, longingly, he thought, before she turned away to take the man's hand; without looking back, they faded to nothing.
“Mirandah, don’t,” Arin called, reaching toward the place she had been. Luc was there, too, his face drained of color, eyes carefully shuttered. Behind him Donn, Pallen and Marri. “You saw?” Arin asked them, and they all nodded. “What was it?” he asked the wizard.

“I don’t know. A nightmare, I think. The man was Micah Treador, but we know he’s in Darwin. She’s probably in the tower, having a bad dream. What’d she drop?” So unconcerned, Luc sounded.

Without speaking, Arin lifted Tellar’s amulet by the broken ribbon. They were all quiet until Arin said, “We have to go after her. Or I do.”

“No,” Luc said. “We promised her.”

“You won’t be taking points for loyalty if she’s dead,” Arin said, tightly controlling the cold in his voice.

“Arin, no. If she needs help, she’ll tell us more directly. She can do that. She was dreaming, that’s happened before. It was too confused. There was no message.” Luc’s voice also carefully controlled.

“What about this?” Arin held up the jewel.

“Put in on. She’s worried about you, not herself. Let’s saddle up,” Luc told them. The wizard turned away and closed his eyes.

Arin watched. Luc felt worse, he knew; he had let her go. Helped her go. Arin knew Luc was right, though. They were two phases away from Aman’to Shir and even if they were at its gates they couldn’t get to her if she were inside. She had the map of the maze. If Micah Treador had found her? The Tarani Dark wizards were the worst, empty and cold; they gave up their souls, their humanity for power. People said Dark wizards gained their power by killing other wizards, or seducing the souls from innocent children. Arin did not want to think of that; Mirandah was both.

He thought of the other time. Luc had helped her go then, too, to Tellar’s crypt; she had been missing for three days, was hurt, confused and sick, but holding the amulet, when they finally found her. Still, Mirandah had so much power, more than the Dark wizard, and different; Arin could see the other thing sometimes, when they were in the dark, like an after-glow burned onto his retina. He wanted to escape the image of her with the soulless Dark wizard. A bad dream. They would ride to Remin. He had promised to let her do this, and he knew she could. He felt it.

Marri tied the amulet around Arin’s neck. Donn and Pallen saddled their horses and said nothing, but Pallen’s usually composed face was disturbed. “It will be alright,” Donn said finally. “She might fear Treador in a dream, but he would not likely hurt her. I know she is fine, you
could feel it if she were not. You would have known. The wizard, too, I think." He gestured to Luc. That speech convinced Arin, because he believed so strongly he would have felt it.

He saddled the horse and belted on his sword, though he felt not quite as keenly the excitement of the adventure or the promise of the day. Still, only moments down the road, with his sword at his side and Tellar's jewel around his neck, Arin felt invincible. Marri rode so near her leg brushed his and he thought of his sister. A horribly complicated thing, he knew. He might always think of Mirandah first.
A delicate child, she had been called. Of delicate health, delicate beauty. Euphemisms, she knew, for sickly and unattractive. All the better to remain happily unmarriageable. Aminah Ruan knew her looks well enough; she sat before a glass more than any woman in Remin, lately, being prepared to meet some or another snake of a Defender. She had silver-blond hair, pale skin, and steely grey eyes too large for a thin face. They had called her the shade of her mother, a pale little thing who had been married to her father only a year before she died sometime after giving birth. Gone and too quickly forgotten, she might have thought, except her father had never married again, which had always seemed dreamy and romantic to Aminah. He had loved his pale young North Island wife too much to ever replace her, although he clearly enjoyed women and desperately needed a son.

Aminah Ruan had always known her father was a wizard, which lent further romance to the story of her life. A fanciful child, she'd believed for years she possessed some of his great magic because she had the ability to make herself invisible. Invisible to her father, and consequently, invisible to everyone else. They all thought her quiet, just a bit slow, in all a good girl. Qualities which would make a good woman and pliable wife. She knew many things she should not have known; she was so thoroughly a part of the background people would think longer about speaking before a potted plant than they would about speaking before Aminah. She had been horribly spoiled by the lack of attention and when she was older and was harder to ignore, she had to be a bit sly to learn the things she found out. She had managed. What she knew now: her father might be drunk, was likely touched and spending all his time with a fourteen year Tarani girl, but it was all perfectly planned. And Aminah had become part of his plan. Somehow.

Now Aminah Ruan was twenty-one years, too old to be unmarried and her father had suddenly noticed her. Which meant everyone in the Protectorate of Remin noticed her. Oh, to be invisible again! She understood too completely what was expected of her. Ti Ruan hadn't needed a son because if he had a daughter he could choose the son. Any man on the continent, a better son than the one chance might provide. She was to be sacrificed as surely as if her father had handed her to a soulless Dark wizard. Part of the Protector's grand scheme, which she understood only in hazy snatches. The pieces would fall into place. She felt the need for a little delicate health coming on and took to her rooms to think on it and to escape the crush of men
seeking her attention, not caring when the whole of the court at the citadel whispered about her female trouble. Only two days ago, in chapel, they had joined in prayer for her quick recovery from her female troubles. It was female trouble, because it was trouble to be female. But how to solve it? Aminah Ruan knew better than to wait for the intervention of God.

Men visited her father, and unfortunately Aminah as well, with regularity and interest. Her father seemed to favor Lannon Sildar, a warrior of only nineteen years who was tall and plain, with blunt Remin features and an intelligence beyond his years. He was ambitious, to be sure, but not too and not personally. He was polite to Aminah, always, though he kept their interactions brief and impersonal. Her father didn’t much care for his father, a Defender with holdings in the far North on the Plain, a rival with a hand in stirring dissention at the citadel. Aminah was to be given to the boy to forge an alliance, to avoid a civil war or Defender Sildar’s outright overthrow of her father’s tenuous control at the citadel. And Ti Ruan liked the boy’s mother. A lot, and for several years. To marry the boy seemed vaguely incestuous, but Aminah never said much about any of the men. She had, however, felt unnerved enough by the situation to request that her father come see her where she had hidden herself in her rooms.

Her bedroom was large, with windows on two sides. The heavy, pink brocade curtains had been drawn back, and morning sun flooded the room through large panes of clear glass. She sat in her ornate canopied bed, drinking tea, wearing a yellow bed jacket because the color did not suit. In the bright sun she did appear wan, but not nearly as much as she hoped.

Yesterday she had overheard one of the Defenders of the Protectorate, a wizard named Denton, a man newly arrived at the citadel, comment to his bastard son, that "the little Princess really is quite pretty, if you like that sort of thing." The implication being, that no one really did, like that sort of thing. Certainly not the wizard’s handsome son. Of course her father could have the man gutted for referring to her as a Princess, which suggested Royalist Imperialism still gripped the Protectorate, but that was hardly her gripe with the statement. She understood the political situation as well as anyone.

A five-hundred year war, undeclared and yet unwon by generations of her ancestors. At first they simply pushed the Tarani from the Plain into muddy mountain villages and let cold and disease take care of the problem. When the Tarani’s intolerable religious practices became clear, her great-grandfather, King of Remin, evoked patriotic memories of the ancient warrior religion, and combined efforts of the Remin army and the resurrected Soldiers of the Church, to conquer half the continent in a Holy War against the atrocities of Shadum heresy, wipe out most of the soulless, godless Tarani who had survived to that point, and of course collect their silver. He died, at 107 years, of a copper dagger in his throat, leaving her grandfather king.
Amar Ruan had been a quiet boy, born in his father's ninetieth year, a scholar who waged the war against the Shadum more privately, studied ancient histories, made Remin rich and practiced some little magics. He was not a terribly religious man, though he gave to The Church a proportion of his accumulating wealth, and was blessed accordingly. An Empire builder, until his first wife and twin son and daughter were killed by Tarani watchers. A portrait of his wife, a Lladwynian princess, hung in the great hall at the citadel. A lovely woman, pale hair, blue eyes, tall. He had married her to gain greater hold in the South. The Church, and its high officials, were not pleased with the contamination of the bloodline, pure and Remin since God and his Remin consort begot the first Remin king. As a young man, Amar Ruan had turned his back on his father's resurrected Church, weakened it. At his wife's death, he became a warrior, hunting the Tarani where they hid in the mountains, binding the power of the Shadeem, collecting Shadum silver, expanding the Empire through the continent, right to the borders of Tor. The work of The Church, he did, while placing the remnants of the institution, all very strange and ancient men, within his inner circle. He abdicated a very old man, under odd circumstances, but his second son had been born late in his life and was young to be king, though he already was a Light wizard, one of the group which had broken away from the Church's strangle hold on magic over five hundred years before. His father's advisors were her father's enemies.

Her father immediately consolidated his power by destroying the hierarchical titles of the Remin nobility, naming them instead Defenders of the Protectorate, in return freely parceling out to them the vast lands of the nomadic, and mostly dead, Tarani. Church officials were pleased, initially, and supported the young king against worrisome nobility. When he even renounced his own title as king in an effort to stamp out the corruption of Royalism, that was the end of the support. Unfortunately for the high wizards of The Remin Church, it was too late. Ti Ruan severed the Protectorate's ties to an official Church. Her father was a heretic, but but a powerful one, as he had killed all the nobles and officials who disagreed with his politics. With the power of both the army and the Light wizards behind him, he didn't have to kill many.

Upon signing the Treaty of D'Anuman with Tor's king, Gav, Remin officially controlled the entire continent but for Tor and its eastern sister, tiny B'Tor. The city of D'Anuman, a Tarani safe-land, though geographically in Remin, was under Toran control. Unofficially Remin controlled the Southlands, too, the three countries south of the Dividing range, Lladwyn, Katwyn, and Darwyn, though the three-hundred year standing Coda of B'Kat officially stated that the Remin Army of the South occupied at the official request of the the Unified Southland States, which paid dearly in commerce taxes for the honor. Under her father's guidance, constant war ended, the Empire grew, and Remin prospered, the few remaining Church Wizards regrouped
quietly, somewhere in the Southlands. Until seven years ago, Ti Ruan had been the most powerful man on the continent.

Then he'd started drinking, heavily and always, calling for her long dead mother, taking in some or the other Tarani girl as it suited him, and searching out other women between times, governing sporadically, testing every allegiance to the breaking point. His only loyal followers were a handful of Defenders and field Generals rumored as touched as he. The petty hatreds seething just below the surface, Church Wizards searching for lost glory, power hungry Defenders, and war hungry warriors, fought for their little pieces of ground. Ti Ruan looked puffy and old, too tired to continue, and Aminah felt the shimmer of magic he used to create the illusion.

Now was the difficult task, because he had to marry Aminah to one of his sycophant Defenders, or worse yet, to an enemy, and be certain he could keep the man under control while feigning this weakness. Aminah didn't want to marry. She didn't like politics very much, liked men even less, and thought the idea of dying to present some man she did not like with a child who would be another political pawn was, well, stupid. Her quiet life had been good until recently, and she planned to explain her feelings to her father that morning.

Her serving woman, Kara, entered to announce her father's arrival. Tall and lovely, with deep chestnut hair and pink skin, Kara was a beautiful woman; everyone thought so, it was widely discussed. Of all the servants, she was not unpleasant to Aminah, but her rather cool attempts to befriend the girl were always rebuffed with the stolid dullness with which Aminah faced the world. Better that way.

Today Kara wore a prim grey dress, but it did not save her from Ti Ruan's quick appraisal as she showed him into the room. He touched the woman's hair, an intimate gesture that caused her to stiffen and flush pink. Ti Ruan had too many women, everyone knew it, and Aminah was disgusted. It was one thing to lie with the wives of his friends, women who lived at the citadel while their husbands upheld their claims to the Plain. They could object if they didn't care for the arrangement. Serving women from the South, half-Remin illegitimate daughters of warriors, and the Tarani Shadeem he favored would not begin to know how to rid themselves of his attentions. Whatever he thought, Aminah knew the truth. It was cruel. She was frightened that she so clearly identified with it, and annoyed on Kara's behalf when her father turned to watch the woman leave.

He smelled of spirits, his shaggy hair was uncombed and he carried a glass of something nasty, nearly full, which he sloshed onto the carpet with his uncoordinated gesturing. He turned away from the woman, pulled one of Aminah's delicate, white lacquered chairs toward the bed and
dropped down. He had never been in her rooms before, and she thought he looked silly and out of place here, over-sized among her daintily scaled things.

"You've summoned me, Daughter?" He spoke thickly, then took a drink, draining the glass.

"You needn't bother playing me. I feel the magic you use."

He raised an eyebrow, nodded, took control of the situation like a man used to doing that, and Aminah forgot her carefully prepared speeches and watched him dumbly as he tossed the glass into the fireplace and motioned with his left hand. He sat back in the little chair, stretching his legs before him. He wore soft, black leather boots beneath his yellow silk wizard's robe. A handsome man, she realized, surprised, as the illusion faded. He was tanned golden, had dark golden hair and green eyes. She looked at him as if for the first time and thought of her pale young mother, long dead, who could not have been anything but an annoyance to this man. Even as she herself was an annoyance, one he hoped to charm into being useful. So much for romantic stories.

"You're looking well today, Aminah," he stated flatly, crossing his ankles. "I've spoken to the wizard and he seems to think you're a strong, healthy girl and all of these little complaints will disappear once you've had a baby."

She blushed that her father would say such a thing to her. "Certainly you are right. All my mother's little complaints disappeared after she had me." She had thought he might be angry, so his laughter startled her.

"By the Light, girl, I always thought you were witless. So that's what this is about. He laughed until he had to wipe his eyes and then mused, "Well, well, well. Look at us."

"That's not what this is about. It is not about having complaints or babies. As you say, I'm not witless, and I know how not to have either." He looked surprised at that, both the words, a statement not entirely true, and the tone. She could be hard, but she had his attention.

"So, then, what is this about? There are hundreds of men who want to marry you. Any girl your age would be happy about that. You won't always have so many chances. You're getting older. Now, you are still pretty enough." Blunt, he was.

"I am not any girl, am I? There are hundreds of men who want to be Protector of Remin. I'm not vain enough to think there is even one of them interested in me. I can get much older and much uglier, and there will still be hundreds of men who want to be Protector of Remin. And there will likely be a few very ambitious ones who want it enough to do something as distasteful as marrying me and risking generations of imbecile children." She could be blunt, too.
He laughed again. "True," he agreed with her. "But we have to give your husband time to consolidate his power and get you a son before I die. The way I live, I will die very soon, they hope."

"It will do you little good if I die trying to present you with a grandson. Sometimes the child dies, too, Father. They say I won't live the year, once married." Best change strategies, here.

"You're afraid because you think your mother died having you," her father commented blandly. "She didn't. She was a healthy girl who could have had many babies. She simply chose to defy me."

Aminah did not know how to reply to that. The threat seemed too overt. Though her voice shook, she said "I think, Father, that you should have your own son."

"I'll not repeat my father's mistakes. If I had a son, you would be nothing. You would have nothing. You have little enough as it is. Don't defy me, little girl, unless you know what it would take. In a phase, you're going to be presented to Lannon Sildar. Be pleasant. He'll be your husband." He was very angry, but still smiling. How did he do that? she wondered.

She took a sip of now cool tea, and her hands shook as she replaced the thin porcelain cup on the saucer. The clatter seemed deafening and Ti Ruan noted her discomfiture with a tolerant glance. The interview had lasted only moments and she already knew the argument was lost to her. He smiled more gently, then. "I think we understand each other, don't we? I'm glad you're not witless. It makes this more interesting. I thought you a game piece, a checker, Aminah, but you've just become a player. Play well, even clever players will be sacrificed. This is for real, girl."

As he stood and turned to leave she shouted after him, "I won't do it, marry that boy. I don't like men!"

His smile was devoid of any emotion as he replied very softly, "I don't believe I've ever known a woman who really does." He flicked his right wrist and he stumbled from her room a much older man. When he pulled the door closed behind him, she threw her teacup at it. As it shattered he laughed again.

Though she was still angry that night, she left her rooms for her father's, where she planned to apologize and acquiesce, hoping submission, or the appearance of it, would buy her time to think of a better solution. It was later than she had thought and the halls she walked were dark and deserted. When she arrived at her father's door, she saw that he'd sent his man off to bed, but the door was still not locked and she saw a light, so she knocked very softly. No answer, so she pushed the door slightly ajar and looked in.
Her father stood in his outer room, the sitting room, in the midst of some sort of incantation, oblivious to her presence. He knelt, traced invisible figures on the polished wood with his index finger, then made a box around them and stood, stepping into the place he had drawn.

When he stepped into the square, he faded ever so slightly, as if he had suddenly become that much less real. Aminah dropped to her knees so she could watch more easily through the narrow crack. She forgot entirely her earlier concerns. He must have been conjuring a spirit, because a man appeared near him, a man made of air rather than substance.

The man was much younger than her father, Aminah saw, and though also tall, he was more slightly built. But darkly handsome, with his very long black hair pulled away from his pale face. Tarani. She did not know if she had ever seen a Tarani man. It gave her an exciting little shiver of fear to look at him. He wore a wizard's robe, but the color was wrong and he had no chasuble. Silver charms on a cord around his neck glinted in the firelight. What would her father want with a Tarani Dark wizard? The man's eyes were closed, his insubstantial body shimmered there in the flickering light as if he were a shade, asleep.

"Micah," her father said finally and the spirit's eyes opened and it reached up to touch the silver charms at its neck.

Then it recognized her father and gave a half-smile. Once its eyes opened, it seemed older, cool and cynical. "Oh, Ruan." A quiet voice, bored. "It has been a long time. I am tired, what do you want?" She had never heard anyone speak to her father like this. Even his greatest enemies treated him with fawning politeness. She liked this creature.

"Eight years, Micah Treador."

The shade shrugged. "They say you had changed. You look the same to me." The thing flashed its teeth, not really a smile, and its gaze was so cold Aminah felt it in her heart.

"You still need a haircut." An odd thing for her father to say, but it made the shade look down, nearly shyly, at its bare, white feet.

"What do you want that your watchers cannot tell you?" Ice in his voice.

"You've been gone awhile. A moon, almost, I've looked for you," her father's voice, low and charming. "But a Time-master now. Good for you. You gave up everything for this."

"Ruan, what? You did not pull me here for small talk." The hard cold remained, and the shade watched her father, wary.

"I don't consider this small talk. We know each other too well for that. You have what you gave your soul for. I want to know how it feels." Under the smile in her father's voice hovered something else. Envy? Regret?
"It feels tired. Strong magic, and it only feels tired. Did you call me here to compare philosophies? I chose eight years ago, as did you. Your concern should be for your own soul." The shade turned away from her father, gesturing with its left hand, preparing to leave.

"Actually, I carry a friendly warning. For my d'ra, for old times."

The shade turned back, lowering its hand, "What? Your overtures of friendship can be dangerous. My memory is better than you might wish."

"The past is the past."

"Yes. I want to be left in peace. Especially by you."

"Well, you should know this, then. Someone is waiting for you at Aman'to Shir. She tried to kill me, near full moon, twice back. I followed her to Darktower. She's d'pol. So much power, she has, but no idea how to control it. D'pol, Time-master."

Aminah gasped. She knew most of what went on at the citadel, but had heard nothing of this. With only minimal thought, she dismissed the lie. An assassination attempt, even talk of one, so recently and Aminah could never have walked to his door with such ease.

"How did she try to kill you? Why?" The shade's frown suggested he didn't believe the story, either. "What happened?" No patience from the thing.

"I was foolish. I taught her things I shouldn't have. But how was I to know? She's a beautiful girl and sometimes a man doesn't say no when he should. You wouldn't know about that, I suppose, you never lose control do you?" A little goad, that seemed to be, by the smugness in her father's voice. The shade made no reply, in word or expression. "She stabbed me, with a copper knife. She's a cold one. And she's marked, a silver mark on her left shoulder." The shade started to laugh but her father opened his yellow robe to bare his chest, marred by a hideous purple scar, barely healed. The spirit's laugh died as its eyes traced the jagged mark. But her father had always had that, Aminah knew. Years longer than two moons. What was this about?

"Is she Shadeem?" the shade choked, a real fear in its eyes.

Her father shrugged. "Possible. You've no reason to fear Shadeem." He left the last statement hanging, like a question.

"I had a dream," the shade began, but was interrupted by her father's harsh laughter.

"All boys dream of Shadeem," her father cut in derisively, too much emphasis on boys.

The shade glanced at him. "Perhaps they do, but this one said she was a wizard, not Shadeem. She was dressed in al'kira, but she was no one I knew. I only know one who still wears al'kira in public. Buridan."

"How much do you know of that?" Though his voice came soft, there was a violent intensity to her father's words Aminah knew wasn't pleasant, and certainly not small talk.
The shade paused, and also seemed to be assessing her father's tone. "Very little. Her mind is gone." Then, more harshly, "You destroyed her."

"That one destroyed me, and I am destroyed, surely you've heard." And though her father's voice was amused, his eyes were not quite. He nodded with a little shrug, dismissing the whole subject. "But the other. She's waiting for you. You're Time-master, get back while she's still weak. There can't be two of you, and she knows it. Make sure of her. I wanted to let you know it's your move, boy."

"I have not played games since I left you. I will not play this one."

"Then she will kill you. Or worse. What would be worse, Micah? For you?" Her father's voice whispered soft, softer than Aminah had ever heard.

The shade looked up, met her father's eyes. "Are you threatening me?"

"No. I'm warning you. Mirandah, she's called, and she wears Tellar's stone. Be afraid, Dark wizard. Know what she wants of you. Not playing is playing. It's your move. Move."

The shade whose name was Micah Treador gave a non-committal nod and turned again to leave. Her father whispered, "Micah. Please."

Then the thing laughed with a certain harshness of its own and as it faded it said, "Now I know you lie. I prefer not to become involved in your lover's quarrels. I am pleased you have finally met your match."

Then it was gone and her father sank to his knees on the wood floor and whispered to himself, "Just one daughter to deal with now" and though he sounded relieved, Aminah thought she detected something else in his voice, too. A thing she had not known existed in him. She didn't speak to him that night, but crept quietly back to her rooms, afraid and planning. Her father had ordered a Tarani Dark wizard to kill his daughter.

Aminah lay in bed, sleeping little, trying to decide. She could not get to Darktower alone, or quickly enough. She needed a wizard. And the more she thought about it, the more she realized a wizard could solve many of her problems, all at once.

With the morning she had a plan, thought through only so far, which though risky would probably work because she was not known to be a liar or a gambler. She would engage the wizard to help her sister, and she would destroy her reputation at the same time. She knew of only one way to be certain Sildar would reject her as a bride, since he clearly did not see his way to reject her because she was sickly, dull-witted, or unattractive, that combination enough for most men she had known. He would have to think her unworthy, that he would be dishonored to accept her. Working magic with a wizard, in his room alone, would make her very unworthy.
She woke early, though she had slept very little, and dressed in a morning dress of organdy, pale rose, which was a good color on her. She did up her hair in little silver combs and pinched her cheeks for color but knew that never worked. She left her chambers quietly, without disturbing Kara, and made her way through the rabbit-warren corridors of the citadel to the second level rooms that visiting Defenders occupied. She made one indiscreet inquiry of two chattering serving girls as to the whereabouts of the rooms of one of her father's Defenders, a wizard named Denton. They knew, of course. Aminah knew, too, but she needed there to be talk.

Only a phase at the citadel, his first time in residence, and already the man had made a great stir. Parents were directing daughters carefully away from the pretty, illegitimate son who would inherit nothing. The father had a wicked reputation of his own: a Southlander who had married his title under questionable circumstances, drank too much, had several children, only one by his deserted, now dead wife, and was considered a rather too-competent wizard. He wore Shadurn silver, too, openly, and had been years in the north collecting it. Perfect, really. The serving girls exchanged a quick glance, curtsied negligently, directed her to the room and hurried off with their gossip. She might have been a farmer, Aminah decided, easy as it was to sow seeds.

She entered the room quickly, without knocking, for fear of losing her nerve. The outer chamber was empty, for Denton had no servant of his own. Aminah entered the next door. The room was smaller than her own and darker, the walls decorated with four dark tapestries, shot through with silver and gold threads, the Tellar myths: Tellar's successes leading the Remin army. The golden-haired wizard binding a Shadeem's magic, addressing the kneeling warriors, striking down a Dark wizard with a single gesture, collecting Shadurn silver. The fire in the grate had burned out, but the morning was warm enough that it was unneeded. The bed was unmade and empty, and though its trundle had been pushed back into place, bedding trailed from beneath the bed half way across the room. Various pieces of men's clothing lay scattered about and three empty dreeza bottles stood on the dark oak table. No glasses in the room. Denton was not there, nor did anyone else seem to be. She stood for a moment, undecided.

"Well, this is a surprise." A mocking voice to her left. Aminah jumped, startled. A man studied her, leaning against the carved-limestone frame of the double doors that led to the balcony. His uncombed golden hair nearly reached his shoulders and he wore only a pair of baggy linen trousers, one gold earring. Not Denton, but his son. He allowed himself a slow smile showing even, white teeth. By the Light, he reminded her of her father.

She stood dumbly, planted to the spot, while he circled around her, not close, but placing himself between her and the door. His eyes continued to smile as he spoke. "Speak and conjure," he said. So he'd been talking about her. To whom? She glanced around the room but
saw no one else. He laughed. "I must mean think and conjure, for I was only thinking about you and you appeared. I hate to think if I'd actually spoken your name aloud." She wasn't certain of his meaning, but she blushed at his tone, studying her feet, still silent. Oh, this wouldn't do at all.

He waited a moment more and laughed again. "Is there something you wanted?" He watched her, his eyes bright, golden almost, like a cat's.

"I wanted to speak with your father, but I see he's not here. I'll return later." She took a tentative step toward the door.

"Why don't you wait? He won't be long." He parried her move, stepping back, still keeping her from the door. He was graceful, but obvious.

"I mustn't stay here. You wouldn't want to be forced to marry me. Every man in Remin fears that. Imbecile children and all." She said that lightly, but his behavior made her nervous.

He actually laughed at her joke. "I'm not afraid. Don't underestimate the lust men hold for your father's title. You'll be married, and it won't be me."

"Perhaps so. Still, I wouldn't want the appearance of anything inappropriate. You know how they talk around here." She smiled, not coyly, because she didn't know how to do that.

Another step toward the door, countered again.

"I'm not worried. You're to marry Sildar. He's a nice boy, so I'm certain he won't mind our having a private talk. He'd likely appreciate it."

Her first impulse was to be outrageously offended at his tone, but she was more interested to learn what he knew of her betrothal. She stepped back. "What do you mean by that?"

Another slow smile at the question as she stepped back again.

"What do you think I mean, Princess?" He stepped toward her, too close.

"I'm not quite certain." She stammered a little, felt the heat in her cheeks as she blushed, and stepped back into the table. "What do you know of my betrothal?"

"Enough." Something almost menacing in his voice made her want to back away further. He stood too close, leaned forward and kissed her, his mouth too hard. He caught his hand up in her hair, the way only a husband or lover should. He must have felt her recoil, because he changed his tactic, then, and went all soft against her, his mouth and his fast hands gentle on her.

She turned her head to the side, away from him, and murmured, "Please do not." He pulled away from her, stepped back. As soon as he released her hair, she moved away. Not a good idea, this, she found she feared him. He'd unbuttoned her dress to nearly the waist. She looked down at herself dumbly, felt hot tears on her cheeks, but set her shoulders and brought her eyes up to his, said steadily, "I won't do this. I'll scream and fight you."
He paled then; she watched his eyes track her tears, take in her unbuttoned dress, her hand clutching the fabric to her chest. Her hand shook as she pulled the dress more tightly to cover herself. A strangled sound, nearly a sob bubbled up from his throat and he turned away and gripped the table. "Mirandah," he whispered and then cursed.

Aminah stared, interested in his reaction, wondering vaguely if she should comfort him. "Are you alright?" she asked, backing to the door.

He nodded and turned back to her. "Don't cry. Please let me apologize. Truly, there's no excuse for that. None. I would kill a man who would do such a thing." He shrugged as if with a tiny embarrassment and admitted, "I didn't consider that you might not want me to." He went to the washstand in the alcove and found a linen face washer, returned and held it to her. She looked up at him, confused until he explained, "I've no handkerchief."

Aminah accepted the linen square, wiped her tears and buttoned her dress, all with her back to him, facing the door. He said nothing, giving her several moments to consider. She needed to speak to his father, and as soon as possible. She turned. "Have you had breakfast?" she asked him. He looked at her curiously, smiled like a question and shook his head. She walked to the table and swept the empty bottles and dirty clothes away to one side. "Well, call for something. I'd like tea and toasted bread. Butter and honey."

She sat down at one of the places she had cleared. He looked at her for a moment, then smiled that slow smile. He turned, stepped into the outer room for several moments. She heard him ring for the servant and speak to the man before he returned to sit opposite her. "I'm waiting for your father, so don't even think about touching me."

He nodded agreeably, tipped back in his chair, resting his feet on the table pedestal, studying her. "You're nothing like I thought you'd be," he observed. "But I think that's how you want it, am I right?"

"I'm not sure what you thought, or what I seem. What's your name?"

"Arin, Princess."

"Call me Aminah. I'd hate to see you gutted for treasonous talk of royalism." Aminah also leaned back and put her feet up on the pedestal, balancing. "I overheard you speaking with your father a few days ago, and I thought you might be friends to me." She said it with a plaintiveness that was not feigned, but he paled at her words. "What," he began hoarsely. He began again. "What did you overhear?"

A knock at the door, and he waved her toward the balcony. She sat where she was. He shrugged and opened the door. The man who entered with the breakfast tray recognized her immediately and nearly dropped the tray. "Good morning, Lady Aminah," he mumbled and after
taking in the disarray of the room and the room's other occupant, he kept his eyes on the ground and went about setting out their breakfast.

"Good morning," Aminah replied in the hushed, shy tones she reserved for the servants. "Would you stay and join us, sir?" An entirely inappropriate question, but the servants expected such from her, because she was so dim. Sweet and dim. Arin turned his back from her little act.

"Oh no, miss." He turned to Arin. "Don't worry. I didn't see nothing."

"I'm not certain I did either," Arin replied.

"Good," the man said as he left. "That's real good, sir." Arin closed the door behind him.

As soon as the door was closed, with no preliminaries, Arin stalked to the table and demanded, "What did you overhear?" His eyes blazed, with fear or anger, she couldn't be certain. But as her father had informed her, she wasn't witless, so she knew he was afraid she might have overheard something far more than his father calling her Princess. What?

"Sit down." She said it and he did it. She slowly poured herself a cup of tea and began to butter her toasted bread. He didn't glance at his food. "Oh, eat. Don't look so worried. I won't give you away." She barely glanced at him, though his expression was strained. "Will you eat?" She took a bite of her toast, as if for emphasis. He looked sick. She waited a moment, eating alone and in silence. "Why is it that you speak like a Remin, but you have an East coast accent?"

He just stared. "You had a B'Toran accent, just now, but you spoke like a Remin, before."

"Why are we discussing this?" Perfect haughty Remin, then, like they spoke at Men's.

"I need to know who you are working with. Your father is a Southlander and you have a B'Toran accent. You don't look as if your mother was B'Toran. I find that interesting."

Arin narrowed his eyes and seemed to be measuring her, a man trying to predict her, figuring odds. "My mother was B'Toran." He said no more, but almost seemed to be considering it himself.

She shrugged. "I think we can help each other. But I have to know exactly what you have planned. And with whom you have made plans."

He shook his head. "We have to wait until Luc gets back. I'd be foolish to say more."

"You'd be foolish not to. I can be a good friend, I think. But I can be a powerful enemy. Don't underestimate me." She let the threat stand, liking the power she'd checked for too long.

Arin paused, considered the threat, but asked, "Why does your father want D'Amanum?"

"I don't know. Do you really think he does? Want it?"

"That's all we want to know. If he really wants it."

She nodded, still eating her toast. "So what was all that, before? Surely I'm not so attractive you simply can't keep your hands from me?"
He pulled a face, but replaced it with his quick smile. "Pallen Gav thinks you're beautiful. He'll be disappointed he wasn't here."

"Pallen Gav?" Her eyes widened as she understood the implication of his last comment. He and his father were plotting with Pallen Gav? A dangerous game, even if Arin was too innocent to know it. Maybe he'd never put the right and proper name to the game he played. Treason. Aminah shook her head and breathed, "You're watchers. You don't know what you're saying. By the Light, don't ever say that again."

"I agree with the lady. What in the name of the Mother do you think you are doing?" Another man from the balcony, this one dressed all in black, holding a drawn broadsword. Tall and very dark, a Toran, she supposed, he looked angry, his mouth a grim line, his gloved hand flexed tight on the sword hilt.

As she watched, two more men swung themselves over the balcony. One she recognized as Defender Denton, Arin's father. The second, also a Toran, was young, though no child. Slender and tall as Arin, brown as the other was golden, his black hair was row-braided, then gathered into a single braid down his back. Heavy gold rings in both ears. His wide-set brown eyes were quiet and intelligent, assessing the situation before he reached the doorway. Pallen Gav, it had to be. Aminah's heart was in her throat. Watchers. Pallen Gav was a watcher, at the citadel. She'd discovered something so horrifying they would probably kill her. They had to. Information like that would start a war.

She stood quickly and all three men on the balcony froze at her movement. She glanced at the door and though she saw Arin had anticipated her thoughts of escape, he made no move. She darted to the door, as one of the men yelled at Arin, "Stop her." But he didn't have to, the door was locked.

As she turned back to face them, Arin smiled gently, took the key from his pocket and placed it on the table. Somehow he had locked it behaind the servant. His smile was so honest and unlike any of the mocking grins he had given her earlier, she saw the hint of a promise in it and smiled back. She returned to the table, poured herself another cup of tea and waited.

The three men looked at Arin in astonishment. Arin stood and held his hand to Aminah, who grasped it and rose to stand. "Aminah Ruan, these are three of my co-conspirators." She smiled at his use of the term. "The one you know is my friend Luc Denton. He's your wizard. The tall one's my brother, Donn Maddor. And the last is the Toran heir, Pallen Gav." He turned and whispered to her, though it was loud enough for the others to hear, "Don't worry, they aren't nearly as fierce as they like to think. I would have bolted, too, if they had looked at me like that."
She squeezed his hand, just a little, and he grinned crookedly. No one said anything. No one moved. Three pairs of eyes looked from Aminah to Arin. Aminah sat abruptly.

"Could I talk to you alone?" she faced Luc Denton.

"No, I don't think so." Hard, final. "We don't know what's going on here. Give us a clue, before you head out on your own like this. Timing is fairly important here, Arin." Donn Maddor nodded in abrupt agreement, a man barely checking his anger. At least he'd put the sword away.

"She came here and said she was looking for you, Luc. But she really wanted to see me. Poor Luc, don't they all? Well, tomorrow is my birth-day. And," he winked at Pallen and glanced at the unmade bed. "We had some breakfast."

"I do not think it is appropriate that you are having breakfast here. Together. Alone. Arin, you are not even dressed." Pallen Gav said the last pleadingly.

"What did you think we were doing here? Wasn't this the whole idea?" He made a rude gesture that Aminah had never really seen, but caught the meaning of right off. She wasn't witless. Pallen Gav looked almost miserable.

"He's crude, isn't he? A liar, too." She glared at Arin's gasp of mock horror. "Though we did have breakfast." Aminah leaned back in her chair with her feet up. "I was waiting to speak to you, Defender Denton."

"So speak." He was younger than her father, but not young, and looked more like a warrior than a wizard, lean and strong. The two wizards she knew of, other than her father, were round old men who'd been serving boys to the Church wizards. Wizards with any sort of power beyond parlor tricks or a little medical knowledge were rare creatures.

"Private things, please." She caught the sparkle in his eye, though he didn't smile. He glanced at the other men, and the large Toran shook his head.

"Not a good idea." Pallen Gav spoke. "I think not. We're partners. No private things. As intriguing as the proposition sounds, Princess."

"Two things. The first is easier. I overheard you two," she pointed to Luc then Arin, "talking earlier this week and I thought we probably had similar goals. I came to discuss that with you. I'm still willing to do that. My first goal is to prevent this wedding." Pallen Gav glanced up at that, frowned at Arin's grin. "Surely you could tell me details of your plans so we might work together?"

"No. Second item?" Luc demanded.
She thought a moment, but then said it. "I need help. I need you because you are a wizard. Maybe you can help, maybe not. Once I tell you why, it must not leave the room. I do not ask this as a favor. In return, I'll do anything you ask, if it is in my power to do so."

Luc Denton glanced at the other men, nervous almost, then nodded to her. "Go on."

"I have a sister. A half-sister, whose mother was Shadeem. I've known of the woman for many years, but just learned of the sister."

There was a long, stunned silence and Luc Denton forced a laugh. "She lives? Your father let her live?"

"Last night, she still lived."

"You're the best informed person at the citadel," Luc commented, pulling a wry face Aminah could not quite read.

Even Arin's serious brother smiled. "You are annoyed because you thought you were."

"And?" Luc Denton studied her so intently she wiped at her mouth, fearing toast crumbs or some other unsightly foodstuff.

"And last night my father ordered a Tarani Dark wizard to kill her. I need your help to warn her. I need to get to Dark Tower."

Arin and Luc Denton exchanged glances. "Dark Tower? Aman'to Shir?" they asked.

"My sister is a wizard, I think, and is at Dark Tower. My father told the wizard to go and make certain of her. I can't help her on my own. If you could just mind travel to warn her. I know you wear silver. I know you could do it. I've seen my father do it. I could show you the marks." Aminah pointed to the floor, then stopped. The room was too silent.

"What are you talking about?" Arin grabbed her roughly by the shoulders and spun her to face him. "What do you know?"

Luc pushed Arin away, nodded to Pallen Gav, who held tight to him. "There aren't women wizards," Luc told Aminah, whispering. "You must have misunderstood."

"My father said she was a woman. D'pol, at Darktower. He told the Dark wizard he had to make certain of her," Aminah explained. Arin looked up, confused and frightened, dug a quick elbow into Pallen Gav's ribs and slipped from his hold.

Luc Denton spoke, his voice hard and low, "Tell us everything you know about this. Everything. It could be important." He held her, one hand tight around the back of her neck.

She glanced sidelong at Arin, but then told them everything she had heard the night before. She told them what the shade, Micah Treador had said, what her father had said. That she knew her father had lied, about the attempt on his life, about knowing the woman. When she
related her father's knowledge of the girl's scar, Arin gave an agonized moan, and closed his eyes against tears.

"That bastard. Why did he do it? I don't understand. Why Mirandah? Why would he say she is Aminah's sister? To make Treador do it?" Arin wanted an answer, but not the one Luc had.

The wizard shook his head, loosed his grip on Aminah's neck as if just noticing he held her so. She stepped beyond his arm's reach as he spoke. "Arin. You know what she is. Of course they would want her. How would they know, though?"

"We're too late. You can't warn her. He sent Treador back. It would have been nearly a moon ago. He did it. I'll kill him."

"Treador or Ruan?" Luc asked, his voice tight.

Donn put an arm around his brother, who sobbed openly. "No. Treador would not," Donn whispered, almost confused.

"I agree with Donn, I don't think Treador would have hurt her. He'd have no reason to do Ruan's bidding, the opposite, and certainly not what we saw. He would just close her eyes, take her power." Luc paused and closed his eyes. "What else?" he demanded of Aminah.

"After, when the shade was gone, my father dropped down on his knees and said," her voice dropped to a hoarse whisper at the horror of it, "Only one daughter to deal with now. You see why I must save her?

It wasn't a lie. She's my sister." The room was silent as they all considered that. What it meant. Arin understood something first and swore in that confused way he had after he had unbuttoned Aminah's dress. He broke free of Donn, somehow he had the other man's sword in his fast hand, and ran to the table, fumbled for the key.

"No." Luc said, as realization hit him more slowly. "Oh, no."

Aminah was the only one who could be at the door before Arin reached it. This time, she blocked him, and though he pushed her easily away, the others were there holding him instantly.

"I'll kill that son-of-a-bitch. Dog. He killed our mother, too. You know that, don't you?" he asked Donn, still struggling against them. "Mirandah knew it. She didn't know it was him, but she knew our real father did it. She knew he watched her." Aminah wrenched the key from him and passed it to Pallen who dropped it in his trouser pocket.

"Do you understand what is happening?" Pallen Gav asked quietly, his brown eyes searching her face. Aminah shook her head. "I think Arin is your brother."

And she did understand then, not entirely, but enough, and she saw her father in Arin, as she had even before she knew, in his looks, easy charm and grace. But such an innocence, too. If
her father ever had that, it was gone now. Pallen Gav watched helpless while she cried, for so much lost innocence and all her years of invisibility, which might have been very different. For the sister who must certainly be lost to her now. The father who had been lost to her always. The father who could order his daughter's death. She feared she would be sick.

Finally, Pallen Gav held her, but rather uncomfortably. He ran his hand over her shoulder, patted her back, a genuinely comforting gesture, and said, "Please do not cry. We would not hurt you. Never fear that." He spoke smoothly, the sort of precise Remin Toran diplomats always spoke, but with a boyish shyness. She ceased crying abruptly, embarrassed almost of her display. The Toran heir untucked the hem of his black linen shirt to wipe her tears, which did not seem like good form, but he was fourteen years and she didn't object. Luc and Donn had pulled Arin to the floor and taken the sword from him. Luc drew a rune on Arin's forehead and his struggling ceased immediately.

"I apologize," she said pulling away from Pallen Gav, but to no one in particular.

Luc turned toward her, swearing under his breath. "Why didn't I guess? We've got to get out of here. If your father sees him here, he's dead, too. Do you understand?"

Aminah nodded. "Please let me come with you. I can't stay here. I can't."

Luc glanced at Pallen then Donn. They returned his gaze, but nothing more. "Yih," said Luc. "You'll come. First, I want you to go to your father and find out anything more you can. Can you meet us here after dark? Would you be followed?"

Aminah shook her head. "No one would follow me. I'll go to my father."

Luc nodded in dismissal and turned back to Arin's still form. He picked up the boy and held his limp body close. Pallen Gav turned away and unlocked the door for her. "Will you be fine?" he asked. She nodded but she thought she might never be fine again.

She found her way to her father's rooms where he was having breakfast with his latest girl, though it must be nearly midday. Sunlight filled his sitting room. His man showed her in and her father glanced up at her from his breakfast plate, breaking off his discussion with the girl. The ever present dreeza bottle sat near his right hand, and a map lay between them on the table.

The girl wore pale green silk veils, edged deep with dark blue embroidery, though her hair and face were uncovered when Aminah entered the room. She raised her blue eyes to Aminah before lifting the silk to cover herself: her braided black hair, her pale face. A beautiful child. Her father spoke a few terse words in another language; the girl nodded, rolled up the map, lowered her eyes and retreated to the bedroom, closing the door behind her. Aminah smelled Tarani, that mossy, smokey smell they all seemed to have, like they couldn't quite wash the woods off them.
Aminah stared after the girl. A pencil rolled onto the floor, and her father leaned over to pick it up. "Noren Treador sent her from up in Baddan. Hard to return a gift that nice." Aminah simply turned to stare at him, at his explanation.

"To what do I owe this honor?" he prodded, his voice indicating her visit neither an honor nor even a surprise. "Something you forgot yesterday?" She stood quiet for a moment and then he looked up at her again. He raised an eyebrow, a study in calm composure. He didn't even care; he had perhaps already forgotten the daughter he ordered killed.

Aminah dropped to her knees before his chair and said, "Oh, please, I've come to apologize, Father." She started to cry, the tears so genuine they frightened even her, who had planned this all along. She knelt at her father's feet and sobbed, finally laying her face against his knee, because she was still a fanciful child and this is how it might have happened in a story.

He sat stunned for a moment, then reached down to pat her hair; he would know nothing else to do for a crying woman. An inappropriate thing it was, distracted and self-conscious, yet it was meant to be comforting, so she sobbed all the more. He found his handkerchief and dried her tears and asked, not unkindly, "What is this about, Aminah?"

"You think I'm silly and stupid, I know," she said carefully. "But please, I didn't mean the things I said yesterday. Please. I will marry whomever you choose for me. I want to be married right away. Oh, Father, please." She sobbed a few more breathless sobs for good measure.

"What is this about?" he repeated.

"I know you are right. I--I don't want to displease you." She said it so carefully, and it sounded as she hoped, rehearsed and frightened.

"What's changed in you?" he asked, trying not to show too much interest.

She looked down quickly because she had hooked him. Some little sound bubbled up from her. "I had a bad dream last night," she whispered carefully, carefully. "It was only a dream." As if to calm herself, the repetition. "But it made me think. I want you to be pleased with me. I'm your only child..." She threw that out so gently it could mean anything.

"Tell me," he said sharply. Too sharply because he changed his tone. He grasped her shaking shoulders. "Tell me your dream," he said more softly. "Perhaps I can help."

She met his eyes with what she hoped seemed terror and pleaded, "It was just a dream. I know you think I'm a silly child. I'll try to be a woman now. I'll get married, Father. Please."

"You're a good girl. I don't think you're silly, but I need to know your dream. Sometimes evil wizards cause such things and if you tell me, I might be able to help." He seemed somehow so genuinely concerned someone might be plaguing her dreams she hesitated a moment. Who?
She sighed, a deep shuddering sigh. "Oh, that's probably it. Maybe someone evil did this, to make me think..." she let her voice trailed off suggestively. "I was so afraid! A woman came to me, a girl, like from the grave, only more horrible. You understand, buried, like Shadum. She called me sister and said if you could do that to her, you would do worse to me. She said to marry the Defender's boy, like you said, because you had destroyed other women, and you would do the same to me. That was all. I know it seems foolish, but it was so real. So real."

When she looked at him again she knew this for a mistake, far too close to the wicked truth. To his guilt. But oh, she had hoped. When he had stroked her hair, that tiny attempt at comfort, she had hoped. Her father was a stranger to her, and she couldn't have known she would fall so close to such terrible guilt.

He paled to white and perspiration beaded on his forehead before he wiped it away with a table napkin. He seemed momentarily unsure, looking to the bedroom door; Aminah had never seen him so. He stood so quickly his chair fell backwards, cracking sharply against the wood floor. He turned his back to her, steadied himself with a hand against the table-top. "You did have a sister and she went to steal from a Dark wizard. Steal his magic and his life. I warned him. I truly do not believe he would hurt her. I hoped he would bind her magic. She would have taken my soul otherwise, she was marked to do so from birth. It may be so, Aminah, and likely if she is gone the act rests on my soul, but I would not let it happen at the wizard's expense. I let her have a good life for almost seventeen years. If she is dead, I hope she had an easy death." But then he turned, steeled his eyes on her and spoke again. "I would not do worse to you because you do not defy me."

She saw a gleam of something in his eyes, a challenge almost, as if this were all contrived to frighten her to her soul. Her father was in league with a Dark wizard. She simply chose to defy me. About her mother. And what had the shade said, about some other woman? You destroyed her. She had never been brave, but she had never needed to be. Aminah rose to her feet, gave a strangled cry and ran from the room. Because she would defy him. Always she must defy him, now.
She fell into grey for several moments before ground met her body with an impact that ripped her breath from her lungs. Mirandah lay unmoving in the dust for several moments more, though she knew she was exposed. She struggled to pull the illusion back, to become Arin again, but the weakness from drawing strong magic made her too slow. She felt the watcher's magic in the numbness of her fingertips and the tightness someplace deep in her belly that she had never been able to articulate. Why now? She rolled onto her back to watch the sky, steady her breathing, fight the sickness. What did he think, the one who watched her? Did he know how he pushed her, to reach for this power? Did he know enough to be afraid? "Father," she whispered, but the Remin word stuck in her mouth like paste. Pushing herself to her knees with the aid of her walking stick, Mirandah noiselessly retched before the massive iron gates of Aman'to Shir. She had attempted this only three times and by now had learned not to eat breakfast first.

Slowly, she turned herself to rest against the wild scroll-work of the iron gates. From the gate posts fanged dragons threatened, green enamel eyes staring down, talons poised to strike intruders. Not the creatures of her fears. Soon she would steal in, among the shadowy, unnamed things that protected the tower from intruders, to learn to master time. The first Time-master since Tellar, or perhaps the second by now. Perhaps the other would do it first, maybe he already had—it was not a race, not against him. But she had to learn, to understand, before he returned. She had two full moons by her careful calculations; Micah Treador was in Darwyn and could not possibly return sooner. Mirandah did not want to think of meeting Micah Treador in this tower he had claimed, the heart of his power. Not a Tarani Dark wizard, he would kill her: for her magic, for power, for her soul, whatever he wanted. Cold as ice, he was, and dead in his heart.

She found her water bottle in her pack, offered a few drops to the earth, and took a long drink, shutting her eyes against the dizziness that threatened to pull her into the grey again. When the water hit her stomach she vomited again, and sometime later, when she stood with her pack on her shoulder, leaning on her willow stick, she did not have the strength to push open the gates. Luckily, she did not have to; they swung open hungrily, the dragons above the hinges turning to follow her as she entered. She laughed, because she was hungry, too.

The legend had it that before Micah Treador, only Tellar had successfully entered Aman'to Shir, stolen the Time-master knowledge and gotten out. Forbidden knowledge, the secrets of time, to yellow-robed wizards of Light, because they had not the power for it. It would
snuff them out entirely to draw such strong magic, Luc had told her. Luc was a Star-master, the third order of Light wizard. Very respectable, that was, and although there were on the continent several wizards of the third order who wore the green chasuble, there were few of greater power. Light wizards simply could not summon more power without risking themselves. Luc told her some had, and those were unnamed, soulless like Dark wizards, neither quite dead nor exactly alive. Dark wizards gave their souls for the power, and still only a few had ever made the offer, for both power and skill were needed, and even commanding the necessary power, only the most arrogant would wager on their skill.

Mirandah knew arrogance was not the thing driving her. She had made a vow, on the morning of her mother's death, with a copper knife and childish charcoal scribblings. She would see her father's end. He knew it; she had felt him recoil when she had stabbed the silly scrap of parchment to the table. In that moment, she identified the taut line connecting them, and might have followed it back to him, had she but known how. Magic was all, since then. And this her final test. This was every wizard's final test. She knew the risks. Every time a Light wizard drew strong magic, it cost a little piece of him. Drawing *d'pol* would cost him everything, his soul. But she was not a Light wizard.

Not a Shadeem nor a Dark wizard either. Though every Dark wizard with enough power, since Tellar's time, had stolen into the tower to sift through books to find the keys to master time, none had, or was willing to wager all his power that he had. Maybe Micah Treador would be the first. He was the first to live there, alone, but among the shades and souls and monsters who did his bidding; he studied ancient books and practiced coldest magic.

Mirandah had tried to learn his habits in the village, but he rarely made his way among people. He flew at night as a huge owl, killing lambs, draining their blood. Two Remin warriors had been attacked west of the village and their silver coins stolen. A girl who watched the Stars at night had a dark-haired baby. He walked among them occasionally, arrogant and unrepentant, spending his ill-gotten silver, overpaying for the sorts of goods any man might need, as if that might lull them into trust. Damning evidence in a tiny village, and Micah Treador was feared.

Mirandah believed full well he had the power, the skill, to draw *d'pol*. Two moons ago she had drawn *d'jan*, mind-followed him, to be certain: where he was going, and how long he would be away. Mirandah laughed at that, too, as she walked toward the tower; grass and violets grew up between the seven-sided stones of the path, oblivious to the dangers there. She had miscalculated and Micah Treador had frightened her beyond reason, but she had survived. Though she had meant only to watch him, mistakenly she followed him into his own dream, up this path, through the maze, up the tower stairs, into his library.
He wore deep blue robes of the Dark, and sat at a huge desk with a black marble top. From a cord around his neck hung the charms of his power, five runes cast in silver: the circle of the earth-master, *shad*; the crescent of the moon-master, *ruid*; the triangle of the star-master, *telle*; the square of the dream-master, *d'jan*; and the five-pointed star of the distance-master, *d'shaden*. At first she assumed she was invisible to him, as she would have been had he been awake. She settled herself on a corner of the desk, watching him write, studying him closely.

His pale hands were graceful and long-fingered, pretty almost, like a girl's. He was young and fair. Tarani. She had never seen a Tarani man from such close vantage. He had the years of her brother, perhaps fewer; his dark hair brought to mind Donn's, though it did not curl so tightly. His skin was pale and he needed to shave as if he had been studying there through the night.

The books she needed lay open on the desk; he studied them, penciling in the margins in the fine, spindly script she could not read and had always associated with magic. The most frightening man in the world, perhaps, certainly the most powerful of all those who had offered up their souls for this power; she could only think that the marble desk-top felt very cold, and she should have felt nothing.

She knew then she had been wrong; he slept and she had followed him into his dream. That gave him control, and so the desk was cold and hard and she was not invisible. He finished writing, laid down his pencil with deliberate care, and looked up at her. Such empty eyes. He studied her for a long, silent moment. She shivered. He briefly touched the silver at his neck, as if for protection, but he did not appear afraid.

"I should not sit so close, *Shadeem*, were I you. If the stories do not frighten you, this ought to: I am *d'pol*." He dispassionately assessed her. In his dream, she looked down at herself; her hair fell unbraided, her feet were bare and she wore the *al'kira*, deep blue veils, of a *Shadeem*, though she had no copper on her wrists. Confused by his words, she studied his face and realized he meant *Shadeem* in the Old way. A Tarani priestess. She caught his meaning, then; a real *Shadeem*'s magic could be bound only by a king, heir, or *d'pol* like Tellar had been.

She smiled, more at the boyish dream of such a wicked man than at what he had said. She reached out to touch the silver at his neck, like a question, for he had claimed to be *d'pol*, but there was no six-pointed star with his charms. He jerked away from any contact but then seemed to understand. "A formality. I go to Darwyn after the second full moon. Why are you here, *Shadeem*? Do you want your magic bound?" What all *Shadeem* feared, that.

"I am not *Shadeem*." Her voice, in his dream, was her own, low and controlled, though she was afraid.
"Why are you dressed so, then, who are you?" Micah Treador pushed his chair back and stood, taller than she thought.

She wished then she had not sat so close, wished she knew how much power he had in his own dream. "I am a wizard. I do not know why I am dressed this way. It is your dream. Tell me, then, why you have dressed me so."

He considered that and did not seem to like what she implied. "If you are a wizard but not Shadeem, how can you be a woman?"

She shrugged under the thin gauze of the Shadeem veils. "It is your dream."

He reached up to push the veil from her face; she pulled back but he grasped her arm. The very abruptness of his movement promised he did not care if he hurt her. "As you say, it is my dream, Wizard." He spoke cool sarcasm, then pulled the veil down and pushed back her hair. With the veil fallen, and her shoulders bared, his hand dropped there, involuntarily, perhaps. He touched the silver mark at her collar-bone, and his hand melted into her in a way she had felt only once before, and had tried ever since to forget.

She should not have been surprised; she knew he was soulless. But his eyes widened, wary and so dark she had to reassess that assumption. She could not twist her arm away from him, so she pulled at the fabric of the al'kira with her free hand, trying to cover herself. He pulled his hand away, disgusted, wiped his fingertips on his robe and raised his eyes to study her face, clearly confused. "I do not know you. What do you want?" Bored, he sounded, though he backed from her in too-quick, frightened steps. She gestured left-handed and fell into the grey magic between life and dreams, because she already had what she wanted. Two moons.

Mirandah had been ready for these two moons, watching and waiting for him to leave for Darwyn. She wished him success; her calculations required that he be so worn from the strong magic of drawing d'pol that he could not immediately draw d'shaden to arrive home. Hardly a consideration for today, it would only mean a phase or two at the end. Now she had two concerns, staying alive and finding the library in the maze. Those she could do, too. The last year she had spent making it a surety.

With Arin and Luc's help she searched the Southland for what no one had had since Tellar: the amulet that had protected him from the things of darkness in the tower, his parchment drawing of the map through the maze, and the notes in his own strong hand outlining the holdings of the Darktower library, describing the books and passages needed for the mastery of time. Luc had told them the things existed, explaining in his slow drawl the legends of the mountain Shadum. Luc did not teach her, which was forbidden, but he let her watch him by day. She followed him in his dreams and directed long nights of questioning. She had taken it, the
knowledge, the language, the words for strong magic, outlawed for five-hundred years. The legends he had given her, the taste for how Tellar had done it.

Luc saw what she could be, perhaps the most powerful wizard alive; he told her that. First, though, she would have to be tested; no one could be a Time-master, a sixth-order wizard without being tested. No living Light wizard would test her. Luc hinted at how she could be tested. Tellar's test, which had not been met since his death. Find the map, amulet and notebook, well hidden by Tellar's magic. Become a wizard and then to Aman 'to Shir, to learn to master time. In his dream, she had told Micah Treador she was a wizard, and she was, though it was still hazy and had almost killed her--she had passed Tellar's test.

Darktower loomed at the end of the tree-lined path. Aman 'to Shir in the Old way. She did not know exactly how that translated. The difficulty with runic languages, Luc had explained, was that there were subtle nuances in the combinations which had little to do with the literal meaning of the runes. Aman 'to Shir was mother-bottle rock, literally, but Darktower, in translation. She had seen the runes drawn with and without a marker, so she was uncertain what the accurate translation was. Always the way, she was never quite certain. That her magic worked was a surprising thing; magic as she understood it required an exact understanding of the Stars. Her knowledge was limited and her magic intuitive, but it worked. And it did not unname her.

The tower loomed up behind the twisted oaks and ancient lindens, a massive stone pile of a building, once the holdings of a Katwynian prince, when the Southlands were rich and independent, before the opportunistic Church wizards raised fears of infiltration of Shadum religion through the mountains and offered the Southlands protection. The Southland kingdoms had traded much of their wealth and independence for the dubious honor of a Remin presence. Darktower, and its legendary library of magic and astronomy, had been deserted for over five hundred years, but protected from intruders by souls and shades and monsters. Soulless and unnamed wizards. Micah Treador.

Darktower was not dark, but a pale grey limestone; grey being the color of all magic and only the users of the magic Dark or Light. It was Darktower now because of what lay within; without it was a heavy, graceless building of ancient design, like many of the old castles or temples, but softened with the green of runaway ivy. The windows were arched, narrow and few, lancets paned with diamonds of beveled glass that glinted golden in the reflected light of the afternoon sun, the teal of ancient copper flashing holding the glass in place.

Not a single tower but four, each situated at the at the corners of the great central block which housed the maze. The east tower contained the library, but once inside the labyrinth that knowledge would mean little. She hoped none of intruders of the last five hundred years had
changed the maze. One missed turn and she would be lost. With Tellar's map in hand, she approached the huge doors, which swung open for her. Kissing the amulet for luck, she took a deep breath and steeled herself for what lay inside, according to Luc's legends.

The souls of the Dark wizards who had sold themselves for this power, but wagered foolishly on inadequate skill. The shades of all the Light wizards who had sold their names to darkness by coming here and dying. Dark souls of dead men guarding knowledge by killing thieves. Maybe. Maybe rumor. Maybe the truth was worse. She traced a rune on her left hand to make a little light there, enough to read her map and guide her way and stepped into the darkness. The doors slammed shut behind her and within a moment, she smelled the sweet, dank air and knew the truth was worse. Her hand shook as she identified the odor.

"Ahh, a sweet little wizard," whispered a voice. The man stood directly before her. Maybe a man, though certainly not a soul or a shade which are both insubstantial and air. A Guardian. Her insides shriveled cold with fear.

"Not a wizard," the Guardian amended and in the vast stone room, the whisper rasped from somewhere else. She held her little light toward its face and saw that although he was not air, he was not solid either and dripped with gelatinous ooze. Still, he was a man of sorts, under that. A barefoot man wearing a pale yellow robe.

His form shifted, silvery and liquid, as he found her memories, and became nearly Arin. She shook her head because she knew better, and the creature shifted back to a shadow-form of what he may have once been.

The hand he lifted toward her face glowed with a faint phosphorescence. He held her chin, turning her face to examine her more closely. She tried to turn away but he tightened his grip and liquid wrung out between the fingers. The smell of rotting flesh enveloped her and she pulled away again, but he was strong and his other hand gripped her arm. She knew what he could do, what would come next, and she wanted to escape that memory, a year old and buried.

"Why are you here, little not-a-wizard?" he asked and his whisper surrounded her and the smell of him was perhaps not decay or death, but still too sweet, cloying.

"I wear Tellar's amulet," she warned, stepping back. He laughed. The laugh was his laugh, but he was not alone. The corners of the dark echoed with their laughter and the laughter surrounded her like so many gentle fingers and the sweet smell of them made her dizzy.

"The reason for the question," the man said softly, and his whispering voice worked a subtle magic that left her dull, slow to respond. His teeth gleamed sharp as he spoke.

"You cannot kill me."
"Ahhh, you think not, little one? Not the best answer." The hand that had gripped her face slid down her neck before the razor nail of his dripping index finger traced the placket of her thin linen shirt to grasp the green jewel. He flashed to formless and white upon touching the amulet. She gritted her teeth and stood motionless as narrow trail of blood beaded on her skin where the fabric of her shirt parted.

The Guardian held the amulet. "Very nice. The color suits. You interest us, pretty one, so listen to our question, because the correct answer can save you much. There will not be another chance. Why do you come to us?" His whisper insinuated smoothly until he jerked the stone, violently testing the ribbon that cut into her throat but did not break. Mirandah choked and brought a hand to her neck, working her fingers between the taut ribbon and her throat, pulling.

The Guardian stepped closer; she backed into the heavy door. The amulet had to protect her, she trusted it to protect her, and not from death alone. She stalled. "I came to see your master. The Dark wizard. Let me talk to him."

The Guardians talked among themselves, a high whisper rose like a keening wind up a mountain canyon. Abrupt silence. "Not the one," the Guardian whispered.

"Good," a second rasped, lengthening the syllable nearly beyond recognition, as if a slow hand worked a bellows. They pressed nearer, five of them, their glowing decay leaving glittering trails on the stone floor. Slugs on garden paths. Mirandah shuddered. "Not our master. Not here. But you know that. You've been watching him, waiting. Thief." Their whispered accusation echoed, "Thief, thief, thief" scuttling across the vaulted ceiling, across the stone floor. Mirandah started to the maze and they stayed pressed tight around her. She held up her little light to their shifting faces, almost men, all in yellow robes. "I am going to the library."

"You'll not find it," the Guardian said, at her left ear. "I will take you there. For a price."

"What do you want?" she demanded, trying to shake them away, for their trembling hands stuck to her like wet leaves.

"Tellar's amulet." The whisper sighed, long, with no laughter.

She knew then that she was safe as long as she kept the jewel. But she knew too she could spend days wandering in the maze and never find the library, or any of the towers. "I am thinking. Just step back for a moment." And they did. They felt her confusion and growing weakness and slid back, their bare feet leaving slick trails against the stone. With her staff, she sketched a quick series of runes in the glowing slime, surrounded them with a square and stepped into the figure. She realized immediately she had made a mistake. She needed the five-pointed star of d' shaders, not a square. But her in her dull-mindedness realization hit too late; she slipped
into grey grip of confused magic, retracing her steps in the Dark wizard's dream, through the maze, up the narrow, winding stairway, to the door of the library, gilded with greening copper leaf.

She could not pull out of the grey, even when her face slammed into the heavy door with enough force to bruise. The library, she thought, but the grey of her miscalculated magic caught her thoughts, slowed them, and she could not pull herself out. She found the door handle, but she was not really there; she had drawn djan, for dream magic. That was the mistake.

She fell into the room and crawled, dropping her staff and shrugging off the pack, for it pulled her down, too heavy. Kicked the door closed with her last strength. Not enough, it did not move. Nothing to focus on, no way to find herself. But someone was already there, the Guardian, so maybe it did not matter. Tired, she laid her head down on the floor which she felt only just, and gave into the dream-grey, floating. He rolled her onto her back, touched her lips with a cool hand to feel for breath. He thought her dead. Better that. He touched the bruise on the side of her face; that she felt and tried to jerk away.

"Be easy, little Wizard," he whispered and lifted her in his arms. Her face pressed into the rough robe, grey like everything. Too far gone, she no longer smelled death but smoke and herbs and saw her brother throwing lavender on her father's pyre, the bright flare. Her mother. "Death to Dark, return you to your soul," she murmured. Not the right answer, though, she knew. "I do not know the right answer," her anguished denial, but perhaps she lied. She would not remember the thing they wanted, the thing they had nearly taken from her, a year ago.

He brushed her hair away from her face, scraped from hitting the door. His touch was not repulsive, so she knew she had to speak. "I would rather die this time," she said thickly and he seemed to understand her words.

"I fear you may," he said, a tiny regret maybe, in his flat whisper, but she took it as a promise until she felt the terrible cold.

She had fought remembering for so long, but no longer had the strength to do that. She sat with Luc and Arin, in the forest, wrapped in their blankets, in the glow of fire. Arin hated the woods, but that was not his concern, not tonight. "I don't think we should let her do it. Not go in alone. What if she needs you?"

Luc laughed. Oh, Luc. "As if she ever needs me. Neither of us can stop her, at this point. Arin, you have to know I've nothing she doesn't. She's managed the map and the book."

"It's different. You both know it. It's his tomb."

"The magic is complicated, but not dangerous. Tellar is testing me. I feel like I know him now. Know how he thinks. I want to see him there, whether I succeed or not. I want to bring him something." She brought him lavender, as legend told the first Mirandah had. "Light to
Light," she would tell him but it was wrong, because he had not been burned. He was not dead. No, that could not be right. She had made herself forget for so long. Why remember now?

She had found the green jewel, his amulet. But something else was there. What, what? Important, this was, because the amulet had not protected her. No, wrong. She did not have the amulet then. It happened first. She stepped into the cave, Tellar's crypt by the legends, and found it empty. What to do? Strong magic, this was a test. She traced Tellar's Stars on the sandy floor drawing a six-pointed star, strong magic, d'pol, to tell him why she wanted what she wanted. But someone moved behind her, no more than a shadow across her light. Who? She turned.

"You killed my mother," she accused the barefoot man in yellow robes.

"Not I," he whispered.

"Who are you then?"

"You know me, I'll take care of you always," he sighed into the half-darkness as he touched her with his cool mouth. When she opened her eyes, he was Luc. "Always." The sibilant whisper hissed insidiously through the cave. She let him touch her, put his mouth on her. Not right, she knew. Luc would not do such a thing, but she was so tired. She shut her eyes and leaned into him, but he was not quite solid and she felt him become part of her, his hands and mouth no longer on her skin but melting deeper, feeling for something.

She held herself rigid when she felt the magic he worked. Evil magic. "Don't make me hurt you, Mirandah. I want this to be nice for you," he spoke into her neck, without breath, only his cool lips against the vein where her panicked blood pounded. He touched her still, but it felt so cold she cried at the pain of it. He touched her everywhere and the cold went so deep she was freezing in her heart and she would die, she knew, but somehow she thought that better. "You are hurting me, Luc." She could only gasp it, but even so she knew Luc would not hurt her. Her mind numbed and the names slipped away, as slick grain through a chook-girl's winter fingers. He waited to gobble them up, eyes glittering like a greedy hen, ready to take them all, her own name last. If she opened her mouth, they would pour out. And she would be unnamed, no more.

"No," she said, and tried to force him from her mind. All she could do, to deny him. But the thing that was not Luc was so surprised, and pleased, somehow, with every denial he loosened his grip, a little, until she could move. She summoned all her strength, not much, for she was too frozen, and she forced herself a step back into the star she had drawn. The ground opened and she fell so hard into the grey.

A year ago. Why this? she thought, struggling against the deep cold, fighting the grey. Why remember now, when it was too, too late? She felt the cold of the Guardian and remembered the Stars she needed to find Tellar again but there was no strength. "Please, no."
"Know what?" he whispered, close to her ear, eager for her last words.

"No," she sobbed, pushing at him, shaking with cold but no strength. He tried to cover her, but she fought him. "I am lost," she forced, and stopped struggling, saddened, because she did not want to die, even now.

Through the grey and the cold, someone walked toward her. At first she thought it Donn, her lost brother, come to lead her to the Otherside, because he was tall and dark haired, dark eyed. Dark eyes not brown, but blue as a Dark wizard’s robe. She turned away.

"You are not lost, you are hiding," he accused, his gesture encompassing all the unfocused grey. He took control, his magic giving substance to the surroundings and she saw she lay on the marble desktop in the library at Darktower. No Guardian there, the cold she felt seeped up from the stone, through her thin summer clothes, the too-large tunic and leggings that had been her brother’s. The bright vest, her ankle-high black boots. Her own face, bruised, her hair straggling free of her braid. Her mother’s gold earring, a dark blue robe thrown over her shoulders.

A low fire burned in the grate, a polished tin kettle steamed on it. Deep-green, cushioned chairs, a tea table, shelves of books, doors opening into three other rooms lit by rainbows of dancing light. The late sunlight through beveled glass, she comprehended. A barefoot man stood before her: arms crossed at his chest, hair tied back from his face, wearing black pants and a white shirt and a six-pointed silver star strung with the other five runes on a cord around his neck.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"It is your dream, Wizard," he answered. "You tell me why you dream of me." He made a quick motion with his left hand, and disappeared. Any other man and she might have thought he teased her, but it was Micah Treador.

Never one to hide, Mirandah did not let the grey and cold he brushed away return. She pulled herself out of the dream and opened her eyes. She lay on the marble-topped desk, his robe thrown over her. As the room swam into focus, she swung her legs off the desk to stand, but had no strength and fell instead, to her knees on the rough stone. He leaned over her saying, "Where do you think you are going?" grasping her arm too hard, jerking her to her feet. Where did she think she was going? She laughed, a frightened, hysterical giggle that for a moment she could not recognize as coming from her. Her legs would not support her, and when he relaxed his grip, she slumped to the floor. He pulled her up again, his hands tight around her arms, and unceremoniously plopped her on the desk top. He picked up the robe, placed it over her shaking shoulders and pulled the rough linen around to cover the open front of her shirt. Almost as an after-thought, he reached in and lifted the jewel.
"You cannot possibly know the annoyance you have caused me." He spoke so mildly she was not expecting the motion that cut the slender ribbon.

He touched her neck, sliced by the ribbon when the Guardian had jerked the amulet. She pulled away from his hand and demanded, "You should be in Darwyn. Why are you here?"

"I was in Darwyn, for ten phases. Now I am here. I am d'pol. That is what it means. Do you understand that?" His eyes rested on the jewel in his palm, but he raised them to meet hers. He sounded as uninterested as if he had been talking to himself. She nodded, but did not trust herself to speak and looked away. How stupid. She was so certain, always, and this one she never thought through. Death because of stupidity was an embarrassing death. She laughed, thinking of her pages of careful calculations that had overlooked the most obvious problem with the equation. He could be away ten phases and return the day he left, or a year before, or twenty years after. He had mastered time. That was what it meant.

"Oh," she said, wiping her eyes with her hand. "I thought I was clever but I have been lucky. Silly mistake. I cannot believe I have lived this long."

A long silence and she sobered under his stare. "You think I am going to kill you?" he asked, his voice so soft she heard the threat that he may not have intended.

So many things more frightening then death, and she refused to let this man know he was one of them, refused to give him more power than he already had. She stuck her chin out and declared, "I am not afraid to die, you know."

He arched one eyebrow as if she were touched before he shook his head and turned to face the fire. "Good, because that will save us the unpleasantness of discussing it further. It was suggested to me that I make certain of you or see that someone else did. The arguments in favor of that action were persuasive. Had they been offered by someone for whom I had respect, we would not be having this conversation." He turned back to her.

"Do you mean you will not kill me, then?" she asked, suddenly hopeful.

"I mean I will not hurt you. I did not wish you to come here. Just answer me truthfully." No kindness there, in his distracted tone. She found his answer somehow evasive, uncomfortable, for it was certainly possible to kill her without hurting her. "Why might Ti Ruan wish you ill?"

She did not need to feign surprise. "The Protector of Remin?" He snorted at her use of the title but nodded. "I do not know him."

"He knows you, described you in enough detail. The silver scar on your left shoulder."

She always thought the mark a birthmark and not a scar, but still. "I do not know him," she repeated dully. Her face hurt; she was tired. "Why would someone I do not know want you to kill me? How can that be?" She closed her eyes, but could not fit the pieces.
"It cannot. He would not bother. Especially when he already knew what would happen if you came here. He only wanted to be certain I discovered you. And knew you were d'pol."

"But I am not. That is why I came, like Tellar, to find out how." That seemed easy, and it came out quickly.

Too quickly, judging by his reaction, an over-patient nod, like one might give a very naughty child. "Now I know you lie. What about this?" He threw down the amulet like an accusation onto the desk beside her and pulled her to her feet, reaching into the waistband of her leggings where she kept carefully sheathed the little copper dagger that had been her mother's. He tossed it to the floor. "And this? I saw the scar it left on him, do you know how that would heal on a wizard, a copper blade? If it heals? I would be more inclined to say good show if I were not the next intended victim."

She backed away from him the moment he let her loose, scrambling up onto the marble top and over, keeping the massive desk between them. "I do not know him," she repeated. It was one thing to die of her own stupidity, but something else completely to die because a powerful man she did not know wanted her dead. "Why would I want to hurt you? I did not want you to be here. I took care to learn when you would be away, how long."

"How can I believe that? With the power you have? I saw what you did below. You drew d'jan but you pulled yourself here. It should not have worked. You pulled your body here; your spirit was lost but that is the opposite of what should have happened." He stopped, as if to check the anger in his voice. When he spoke again his eyes were unreadable and his voice without intonation. "I want to know about Tellar's stone, then I will ask again about Ruan. It would be best for you to tell me the truth. I will know, if you lie." He waited.

"What about it?" She tried to sound defiant, but only succeeded in sounding tired. She had drawn strong magic twice already today, and she was so tired she nearly could not think.

"I went to Darwyn, for my test." He brought his hand to the silver at his chest. "I chose to ask Tellar for his amulet, but Tellar told me he had given it to a beautiful girl who brought him flowers. He described you well enough." He paused, his cheek twitched. "He thinks of you."

"Me?" Mirandah was angry at the accusations she could not understand, at the dullness that kept her from defending herself. She did not remember the time with Tellar well enough.

"You have the amulet. Who are you?"

"Mirandah."

He looked away to hide whatever brief emotion crossed his face. "I know you are Mirandah. Ruan told me that. Are you Tellar's Mirandah?"
"Of course not. She has been dead hundreds of years, if she ever lived. I was just named for her." Why would he ask a question like that?

"Many girls are named for her. No others are d'pol, though. No others are marked as you are. No others possess Tellar's stone. No others have come here to steal from me." He paused, thinking. "In Darwyn, Ti Ruan was waiting for me with his story of how you seduced him, stabbed him, left him for dead and were waiting for me at Aman'to Shir. A friendly warning, he said. But we are not friends. Tell me about the amulet." He pulled himself to sit on the desk, not near, not quite interested, but listening, his pale hands resting on his knees.

"I have little memory of it. There was a Guardian there. I told my brother that Tellar had saved me. Maybe it was a dream. I had the amulet, though." She knew her words did not constitute the explanation he hoped to hear; her story was garbled, unclear, especially to her.

"There was a Guardian in Tellar's crypt? Like below, a Church Wizard? One of the undead?" His voice betrayed interest for the first time and the questions came fast.

"A Church Wizard?"

"Yes." Micah Treador seemed annoyed at her question. He wanted information more quickly; his eyes were somehow brighter. "Did it say anything?"

"No. I think one killed my mother and I accused it of that. It just denied it." The memory froze in her; the words were difficult.

"Then?" Nothing but impatience from him.

"Then? They are your creatures. You know what they do. He tried to unname me."

Micah Treador considered that. "Unnaming. We say kinta jan, spirit-stealing." He did not even look at her for confirmation. "When they succeed, if they take the names, you are one of them, die soulless, and it is power to take a soul. If you hold your name, they kill you, painfully. Power in that, too, though less, I think. Not my creatures."

"Why then do they not hurt you?" She wanted to look in his eyes, learn why he might lie.

"My silver and my power keep me safe, and I have no soul, which confuses them." As he spoke, he touched the silver against his chest. He looked up at her sharp intake of breath.

"I was not certain that was true, that you are soulless," was all she said. Why was it more frightening to hear him admit it, in that passionless voice?

After a heavy silence he slid his legs off the desk to stand in front of her, close but not too. "An intriguing story, but not entirely convincing."

"But why would I lie?" She whinged, bit her lip then, embarrassed.

"Because you hoped to steal from me, my knowledge and my magic. You thought you would die if I discovered you here. Good reasons to lie."
She felt the energy his indifference required, saw it in the white tightness of his jaw. She scooted herself back onto the desk, but realized the foolishness of it. There was no place to go. "I cannot deny those things. But I meant you no harm. I haven't the power to be a threat to you."

She looked up at him, searched his eyes, now. "What will you do?"

"What would you have me do, Wizard?"

"If you try to take my soul, I will fight you."

"And if I wanted your soul, if I were a spirit-stealer, that is what I would want. The longer you held, the more power I would gain at your death, or when you gave in to me." He stood quiet a moment, eyes on her face. "The longer you struggle, the better I would enjoy it. Best to give in immediately." He shrugged, entirely indifferent. "That is advice. You have so much power, you would not want to compound it before giving it away."

"Oh, please. I am so tired." It was a moan, beyond her control, maybe. She wanted to lie down there, on the cold desk. Or on the carpet before the fire. Holding herself upright required too much concentration.

"You need not die or be hurt. I would not be party to that. Give me your silver and leave." He held a hand out to her.

Mirandah stared at his hand, held very still. "I have coins in my pack. Forty Remin silver coins. Maybe a few more."

An unpleasant laugh. "I am not so cheaply bought. Give me your silver, little girl."

Again, he presented his hand, palm up.

"I wear no silver."

He began an angry contradiction, in Shadum too quick for her to follow, then stood silent for several long moments, studying her. He brushed aside his dark robe and her vest, to touch the silver mark on her shoulder, as if she were not a person, but an interesting object, a thing he had found. "You are marked. Do you know what this means?"

She shook her head. "No. My mother made me keep it covered, always."

He nodded. "Your mother was Shadeem?"

"No." She said it defensively, but saw his quick confusion at her hostility and paused then, remembering what he was. He did not mean whore when he said it. She shook her head and said, "A midwife."

He took a breath and started slowly, "I have heard of such things, legends. It is power. Your silver." He stood with his hand on her, considering it. "What should I do with you? Since it seems you cannot give up your silver?" He took his hand away, rubbed his thumb across his fingers as if he could feel something there, and watched her unhurriedly.
"I would stay and be your d'ra," she countered quickly, to throw him off balance, and it did. More than she could possibly have guessed.

He made a noise, maybe a laugh, though he looked suddenly as if he might cry. He turned his back on her, scrubbed a hand through his black hair. "Why would you wish to stay? Ruan sent you? Oh, I think so. Why? Just for my magic, or does he want my life as well?"

"What do you mean?" Mirandah felt panic rising in the beat of her heart.

"Go back to him, if you like. I would not keep you here. But you may take nothing."

*Take nothing.* And there it was. Her magic, she knew he wanted her magic. The way he had touched her shoulder, as if she were not a person, as if her body were just a vessel for the power. "I will give you nothing. I will fight you." How?

"I am generous in this. I do not want your life, little girl. Understand that. You may leave. You may take nothing back to Ruan."

"I do not know him." She started the list of denials but saw he was not listening. She paused and lowered her voice. "I asked to stay as your pupil. The request is genuine. You must respond to that." A formal offer. As her teacher, his duty would be to protect her. A sacred trust.

As she spoke, though, his eyes snapped up to hers. The careful facade cracked like spring ice as near horror crossed his face. He stepped back and touched the charms at his neck, like a Southland peasant warding off evil. In spite of his outward cool, he had feared her, all this time, perhaps as much as she feared him. The thought staggered her; the understanding changed the meaning of all that had passed before. "I need no pupil, you need no radaman. You have power but no control. It is too late to teach that. I would have to unteach first. I have neither the interest nor the inclination to do so."

"But I have asked. I have come to you to place myself under your protection and to do your bidding. There are no impediments. I have no teacher, I have strong magic. You cannot deny me simply because you do not care for me." She guessed he probably could. Any Light wizard could, for teaching women was illegal: even Luc had. She knew nothing of the rules governing Dark wizards but that they had little respect for Remin law and that they killed other wizards for silver and souls. Perhaps not their pupils?

He clenched his jaw. "You think you are very clever, do you not, little girl?" The merciless precision of his speech tapped away at her resolve to show no fear. "You are so certain of yourself. You must know what I would do. Set an impossible task for your test, that would kill you or destroy your power. My problem solved. Why do you wish to solve my problem?"

She hadn't thought of that. Another miscalculation, a very long day of them, it seemed. "Because I am very certain of myself. I would pass your test, any test. What would you do in
my place?" Mirandah's heart raced, her mind sorted, too slowly. She needed sleep, especially as she was forced to bluff, and bluff again.

"Your place? If given the option of dying quickly or dying slowly, I would always choose the former. Those are the choices here, if you continue to pursue such silliness, there is nothing else." He chilled her to her heart. He would not look at her.

"We are dying slowly from the moment we are born, Dark wizard. I will always choose the latter, because it is so familiar. What would you have me do for you?" A test. One she could accept or decline. But declining would change nothing. She thought of his cool mouth on her throat, deeper than her skin, searching for her soul, for her magic. She had no choices.

He thought, quiet for several moments and she waited. His face was composed and entirely unreadable, but the disgust in his voice was clear. "Your cleverness is your foolishness. Your request has given me no choice but to test you, and you will not pass, look at yourself." She did. Her hands shook. "I offer you one last opportunity to do the clever thing. I will shut your eyes, painless: no memory, while I walk you out, leave you near the gate. You would not remember." Mirandah shook her head, and held his gaze as he studied her. If she agreed to that, anything might happen. He would steal her soul. Kill her cleanly, with no struggle as she slept. She could not trust him to do anything but what she knew Dark wizards did. Seduce souls and hoard magic. He cleared his throat. "Or, be foolish, and step from this room and meet me on the other side of the maze. Before the sand runs out. That is your test." He pointed to the mantle, to a sand-glass for counting time. He tossed the amulet behind him, onto the carpet, touched his dark robe on her shoulders. "Without these. I will go out with you, then wait below."

The thing she feared that was not death. He thought she would decline. He assumed. "You do not care how I do it?" she asked, and she knew he tried to see her mind work, to see if he had missed something. Which he had not. Without the amulet she would not be protected from the Guardians long enough to even sketch out a rune. He would not pull her out of the grey of her uncontrolled magic this time, either. The energy she might use trying to hide herself would make her head fuzzy and she would not remember her way through the maze, certainly not in so little time. She already knew she could not maintain an illusion when she worked stronger magic. And most of all, she was tired and shaken. She could not draw d'shaden now. She looked at her trembling hand and his eyes followed her gaze. He knew. He had thought of all that and now so had she. Her magic then, would not protect her. His might, but only might, for it was a guess.

"I do not care how you do it."

"Let us go, then, and finish with this." He paled then, a little; he had expected her to decline. She thought of all the magic she had taught Arin, which was not really magic, but
thievery that relied upon distraction and deception. So she distracted him. And deceived him. She never prayed much, but she prayed for a single distracted instant. She shrugged off the robe, tossing back her shoulders, and the ripped shirt and vest fell away, too, not entirely but enough, down one arm, revealing her shoulder and camisole and the curve of her breast.

Because she had chosen that instant to stand, it took her just a little longer than it otherwise might to straighten her clothing and she was off-balance and brushed against him, her palm between them against his chest. If he felt her other hand at the back of his neck, it did not register quickly enough, because he was distracted. Not very, but for an instant and enough. "Let us go," she said.

"I think you should reconsider. You understand what they will do to you?"

"I know what they will try to do." She prayed for a little luck, a quick tap with her thumb knuckle against her heart, a B'Toran wizard's prayer. She turned and offered him only the briefest of glances, the sort of once-over tavern girls gave Arin, "Your move, Radaman." She made herself smile at him, wide-eyed, and unconcerned, like a Remin actress. Micah Treador turned away, but not quickly enough to hide the sudden confusion that bloomed vividly as he flushed. She stepped into the corridor before he could recover himself enough to realize what she had done.
CHAPTER 7.

Radaman. Teacher. Micah flinched at that. He heard Ti Ruan's voice in her quip. Your move. He wished to yell, I do not play games. But he did. The game was fate, and everyone played. Not playing is playing. How had this happened? He had lost control somewhere. He, who never lost control. She should have declined, cried and begged, so he could lead her to the door, drop her pack on the step and allow her to feel chastised and very lucky to hold her life. She should be far more afraid of him. Grown men with swords feared him; little girls hid in darkened doorways to watch when he walked into the village. Her steady green eyes held his, waiting, until he looked away. Her confidence, fearlessness confused him, frightened him. If this foolish test hurt her, it would mark his soul, regardless of who she was, truly Mirandah or just some ill-named girl.

He followed her out the door. She said nothing, but gave him another long, cool look before she turned and walked down the dark hall toward the staircase and then the maze. She was brave. He had sent her into the thing she admitted fearing. He thought of calling her back, telling her simply to leave. If she saw that as a victory? He did not want her coming back, thinking he owed her. She needed to leave afraid and defeated and thankful for her life. He watched her straight back and her hands clenched in tight fists at her sides and he wondered how he would see her below. He quickly asked Aman, the Mother, to protect the girl. A child like this, as Ti Ruan's game piece, sickened him, though he knew from sad experience how such a thing could happen.

She attempted no magic, just walked through the maze. Not a bad tact, really, a clever girl. She needed her head clear to remember her way though, and her magic was so wild he knew any attempt at strong magic made her foggy. So she would walk through. Which only solved half the problem and not the half that could kill her, in the end. He would not let her die, but she could not know that. He had lied, anyway. He had never begged, and he never would. In her place, he would have done the same, and he admired the quick conclusions that had led her to make a formal offer, one he had no basis to deny.

He sat back on his heels and sketched a series of runes on the floor with his finger. He spoke low in Shadum and then transcribed a five-pointed star around the figures, working carefully but quickly. He stood and stepped inside the center of the star, and as he faded into grey he heard her cry out, and not with fear, from somewhere below. He had forgotten to turn over the sand glass, his last thought before the grey held him for too long.
This should not have made him so sick; the first thought he could frame. Her warm hands brushed at his neck, beneath his hair, then helped him sit. The glowing light on her hand cast wild shadows as she moved. She knelt before him, not meeting his eyes, likely hiding the triumph there. Micah Treador leaned his face against his knees, pressing his forehead hard into the rough weave of his trousers, a long way from speech but very angry still, because he had been concerned for her welfare, while she had been doing this to him. Mirandah.

"If you are feeling faint, keep your head forward, Radaman." Radaman. He flinched again at her use of the title, though she said it with respect. Solemn faced, she sat back, unlaced her boots and handed them to him, a B'Toran custom demonstrating her refusal to walk away from her commitment. He was Shadurn and did not want to even touch the leather boots, leather being unclean, but to refuse would deliver the wrong message, would relinquish back to her the power she had just granted him. That would be foolish, though he did not relish the thought of a dunk in the cold sea, the only place he knew of where he could fully immerse himself to wash away the taint of things profane. "May I help you?" She whispered, low. He shook his head, still unable to speak, fighting the nausea. The last thing he wanted was to be sick before this girl. She sat back on her heels, pushed her heavy hair from her eyes and waited. Too close, she was. She smelled of lavender and outdoors, and of his robe, incense and linen and herbs.

He choked and cleared his throat. "How did you do it?"

She shook her head. "'My high charms work and these mine enemies are knit up in their distractions.' Tellar. Can you stand yet?"

Oh, she was confident. He shook his head, and gestured her back, away from him. "A moment." He hardly recognized his voice, the tightness. She did not stand, but slid back, to give him room. He leaned against the cool stone wall, closed his eyes and waited. His knees shook so he doubted he could walk back through the maze. He had not felt like this since he was a child, attempting magic beyond his ability to control. He reached to touch his silver and dropped the amulets inside his shirt, where they fell oddly warm against his skin.

He opened his eyes to find she had laid herself down on the floor. The light shining from her palm wavered, she trembled so. Cold, fatigue, and fear, all, he supposed. She studied him obviously, not through the eyelashes, like a Shadurn girl. Afraid, but not hiding. Movement shimmered in the shadows beyond the light, shuffling steps scrabbled about like rodents in the walls. Not safe for her here, he would not wager on his own safety if they fell asleep now.

"We must go back." She sat and nodded at his words, peering into the shadows. "Do not fear them. My power, my silver, keep them back." He shrugged, but she looked away.

"Can you stand?"
"I will try." He was uncertain what it would come to, his trying. He was as weak as she. Weaker. She pushed herself up against the wall and reached a tentative hand to help him. He considered briefly before accepting. She pulled him upright, and he staggered back against the wall but kept his feet.

"Come," he said, pulling his left hand up inside his sleeve, keeping the fabric of his robe between his fingers and her boots as he leaned to pick them up. He walked supporting himself by leaning his shoulder against the wall. "Will you make another light?" He hated to ask, to show his weakness, but he knew he could not and feared a serious misstep in the near dark.

She stood beside him as he paused to rest, glanced up. "How hurt are you?"

"Not hurt, weak. If you cannot, either." He shrugged.

"No, I will try. Radaman." She made a quick rune in the air and gestured with her right hand. A dim light appeared over her left shoulder. Effortlessly.

He handed her her boots. "You owe me far more than a pair of shoes," he told her, voice calm, but angry at her easy magic, angry at what she must have done to him. Effortlessly.

"What do you mean?" She had a low, husky voice, a heavy B'Toran accent.

"Your soul." And it was his turn for a knowing smile. "Poor little girl, even when you win you lose." A look of stricken horror crossed her face, as if she had been the one deceived. Ah, well, let her think it had been his trap all along. He was being cruel, but he had been horribly deceived and he wanted to know how. "Of course, you may leave, if you would rather."

"No," she said quietly, but denying what? Her eyes reflected more fright than they had when she had thought she might die. Those were the sorts of things they taught children to fear. All the wrong things. And still she refused to leave.

"You must wear Dark robes to be my d'ra. You must give me your soul to wear the Dark robes. I see I will have to teach you to think your actions through at least a step further. You seem always dismayed at the outcome of your foolishness." She seemed likely to cry and he wondered how any human being could live as long as she had and be so unable to hide emotions. That frightened him as much as her power. "How old are you, D'ra?" He must force her to see how it would be, here, to understand her position, acutely.

"Sixteen years. I will not leave yet. You owe me at least a look in your library. You have tried to scare me away, but I do not think you are so frightening." Said with great bravado, and so close to right he would have smiled were he not so tired. He walked, forcing himself upright.

"Perhaps I am not. You are very brave not to believe the stories." She tripped along beside him, one shoulder against the wall, looking away. "What will I do with you? I have younger brothers and sisters, but I never much had the patience for child-minding."
"I have not been minded for many years. I require access to your library, nothing more."
Nothing more. He knew she would do it, stay and learn, for the power. To take what he could teach her, to control what seemed to be innate. As it had been for him when Ruan had found him, though that had nearly cost him his soul in reality, rather than in ritual. A mistake, to make her think she could stay. He had been the one over-confident. He had not thought this through. He was dismayed by the outcome of his foolishness.

"How are you different from the Guardians?" she asked, interrupting his thoughts.
He paused before he answered. "I am assuming you mean because I ask for your soul. That is the difference. I ask, you hand it to me. Like your boots. They take it, or kill you trying."
"If you see the difference, you think more subtly than I."
A little more defiance, there, maybe. He was weary, too weary to argue. She was small and frightened and he could not decide about her, could not know what she was. Mirandah who would steal his magic? What did he want her to be? "I have been told I think very subtly."
The light beside them dimmed and went out, but the little wavering light on her palm remained. A small, mostly stifled sound escaped. "I am so tired I cannot make that light." She leaned into the wall. "If you are going to steal my soul, do so now."
"I will not steal your soul. I cannot hold it unless you consent. That is how I differ from the kinta jan. I will not lull and seduce you. You will simply give it when I ask."
"And if I refuse?" A dry whisper.
"Then you refuse, and I leave you at the gate. I do not expect you to refuse me, if you wish to stay here, safe from the Guardians."
"I see, how that is," she said, her low voice almost meditative. What did she think, that she did not fear him? He led her up the stairs, to his tower rooms.
As they entered the warm library, he pushed the door closed and sank into the cushioned chair before the fire, leaning his head back. The girl dropped her boots to the floor, paused and picked up the amulet before she sat herself into the window seat to the left of the fireplace, gingerly touching the scraped side of her face. She was only dirty, bruised, not hurt. She leaned back, closing her eyes, and her blouse gaped open. He saw in the failing light what he had not seen before, the phosphorescent glow on her chest.
"What is that?" His voice was too sharp and she started. He made a gesture toward his own chest, mimicking the length of her cut.
She looked at him in surprise. "The Guardian scratched me. It is nothing."
"Come here." She hesitated and he said more impatiently, "Come here." She pulled herself up and walked to him, watching his eyes. He stood, pointing to the chair. "Sit." He
turned toward the fire, found a cloth and wetted it with warm water. He gestured her to open the tunic, but she sat watching him, stone-still and pale. He knelt and pushed back the tunic himself, wiped away the blood on her chest, carefully cleaning the narrow scratch.

In his workroom, he found surgical spirits and soaked a clean linen rag. Returning, he laid the cloth against her chest; she gritted her teeth and groaned. He should have warned her. He removed the linen and she drew in a sharp breath when air hit the scratch. That he could not seal, to do so would seal in the poisonous infection the Guardian might have left. She buttoned her vest to hold the torn tunic together, and let herself down onto the floor. He sank into the other chair. "It can poison you, if not cleaned immediately. May still. We wait, to know."

She thought about that for a moment, then nodded. "Thank you," she told him, resting her head on the chair seat, but watching him.

She was filthy and perfect, her hair thick and nearly straight, hung with cobwebs from the maze, but beneath them a strange color of dark red he had never before seen. She had pale skin, smudged with grime and sweat, but the typically straight, fine features of his people. Her eyes were green, though, dark and tilted upward a little. Not quite Shadum. He never much noticed what women looked like. He did not want to begin now, certainly not with this girl, who was radum, other, and unclean in more than the religious sense. He shrugged, just barely, because even that tiny movement tired him. "You need not thank me. What is mine is yours, D'ra."

The girl considered that, studying him with open curiosity. "Is it always this bad when you draw d'shaden?" she asked with what seemed like professional interest rather than concern. She paused and added quietly, "I always am sick, but I thought maybe I was doing it wrong."

"No, usually the silver protects me." He reached up reflexively to the cord at his neck, but then pointed to the discarded copper dagger on the floor. "You should not carry that, not against your skin. It disperses the magic, cuts and weakens it. Shadeem carry them, but they are not d'pol. You have too much power to attempt that. Without the silver sheath, it could kill you. Copper and magic, as they say. The copper melts, burns. Too dangerous." He paused, then began, "You are here now, as my d'ra. You must answer me truthfully. Who sent you?"

She did not reply for several moments. "No one. The truth. I cannot make you trust me and I cannot prove it, but I came on my own, only to learn. I wanted you gone, away. Why I visited your dream. Surely you see?" She was as tired as he, and spoke with such childlike honesty he doubted she lied.

He nodded. "What did you do to me?"

She opened her eyes, surprised, did not answer immediately, then began haltingly, "I did not know it would make you sick. I ask you to believe that."
He pressed her. "Tell me." She sat back onto the rug, moved away from him and sat on the floor, pushed up against the window seat, as if cornered. "What did you do to me?" He asked it softly, but that seemed to frighten her more.

She studied him a long moment. "Please. I did not know it would hurt you. I took your silver, you said I could do it any way." The last thrown in defensively. "I knew my magic would not work, you did, too, so I had to use yours." She awaited his response. "They would have killed me."

"You did not consider asking me if you could leave? I offered to leave you at the gate. I want no one to die, even thieves and intruders. I made the test impossible so you would decline."

She looked up, half-smiled. "I never decline a double. So you know in the future." He treated her to a harsh stare, though it seemed nearly useless. She shrugged, then. "You are my teacher now, and by honor must protect me. Tell me truly: If I let you put me to sleep, what would you have done?"

"Carried you and your pack to the gate." She snorted, a little, disbelieving girl-noise that suggested something more shocking than that he lied. He ignored it, because that was easier than considering it. "How did you do it? Take my silver? I would have felt any magic."

She shrugged and looked away, out the window. So tired, her voice when she spoke at last. "I untied the ribbon. Retied it in the maze." He cleared his throat, but realized his mouth felt too dry to speak. She must have realized he wanted further explanation. "When I took it, I think you were looking at something else." She pulled herself into the window seat.

Micah closed his eyes. *I think you were looking at something else*. The memory of warm fingers at his neck. He thought of how she had slipped and fallen against him, how warm her hand had been against his chest. He saw again the narrow cut trailing from her neck down. Her pale shoulder, her lace camisole, her breast. Looking at something else? He had been trying to remember how to breathe.

*My high charms work*, she said. The most powerful wizard on the continent and he was sitting in his own library, ragged and dizzy, because a girl had had him thinking confusedly about a half-moment look at her underclothes. Like a boy. Ruan always called him boy. Ruan had orchestrated this, though likely without the girl's knowledge or consent. It had seemed accidental, she had been so innocently embarrassed. Oh, he had fallen into something he for which he had no experience. *Even when you win, you lose*. Boy. Ruan's harsh sarcasm echoed in his own words. He glanced up at the girl who had laid down on the window seat and closed her eyes.

The light faded quickly, so he lay on the floor to chant the *Cerinna dar*, evening prayers, for the dead. He named his own dead and there were so very many, waiting for him on the
Otherside, to muddle through the next world together. He whispered the chant so as not to wake the girl, kissed the ground, and lay there, too spent to pull himself up. She had taken his silver, with no magic, nothing more than thief-quick hands, and he had not even noticed. How quickly she could catch him unaware, and steal his magic, for Tellar. Who had admitted he thought about her. Any man would.

When the evening had moved from pink to grey, then dark, he pulled himself from his thoughts to stand and throw his robe over the sleeping girl. In the darkened room her hand glowed, and he saw the magic she had drawn there for a light. Even asleep, forgotten, it glowed. Too much power, Ruan had meant that to frighten him. He rubbed his own hand across her palm to put it out, covered her bare feet with the end of the robe, and considered touching her hair, where it spilled tangled across her arm, but knew that could become a fatal temptation. Pulling back his hand and walking into his own room, he drew his light on the wall and fell into bed. He wished he knew what she was; now she was his d'ra. Mirandah.

She never declined a double. He would know in the future. Whatever she was, she was good. Fearless and clever. As it was when he was a child, he played Ti Ruan's game. Still he did not understand all the rules. Perhaps he would never know the rules, but he was no longer a child. Micah lay on his back, and smiled a little at the vaulted ceiling. Perhaps he could maneuver her to leaving of her own accord. Certainly the best option. Though he guessed what she was, he vowed not to fear destiny, not to live a convoluted life of avoidance. He knew what had happened to Ti Ruan, paralyzed by fear of fate, drunk and despairing for more than seven years. Likely bringing about the destiny he avoided. That was the function of prophecy, in all Micah's experience. Had he not invited the girl to stay as his pupil when he agreed to test her? He knew the prayer, from childhood. Aman, make me the instrument of my own destiny, and in all my endeavors, let me embrace your works. Micah Treador vowed to embrace this work, because he had never been good at the numbers, figuring the shots. He guessed this a long shot. Ti Ruan, he thought, I just wanted you to know it is your move.
Rohan Bree sat in front of the glowing screen of the color monitor, watching the brilliant patterns bloom and separate, bloom and combine, the plottings of fractal equations depicting outcomes of backgammon games based on player strategies. Out of a million games, how many times would a running game defeat a game of ruthless preemptive attack? Long shot odds, even if the comparative skill of the opponents was nearly equal. A player could not get into a running game quickly enough to establish and control game flow without a nearly immediate 6-6, 6-5, 5-6, 4-4, 3-3. 35:5 shot for the rolls, and though a runner could win a percentage of games in which he didn't control the flow, it wasn't .500. Rohan Bree figured around .421, though it was a non-repeating decimal he'd followed only to the two thousandth place. There were, of course, too many variables for even that figure to be entirely accurate, but it was between .419 and .4225.

He rubbed his tired eyes. The woman leaned over his shoulder, her cheek against his, her breasts pressed into his shoulder, and hit the return key. The screen reverted to the equation. "Again," she said. "We don't have the numbers yet." Rohan Bree's back hurt. His neck ached. He began re-entering the equation, explaining non-linear mathematics, the geometric increase in the variables after each move. This had been going on for days, and all he wanted was a drink of water. He had never been so thirsty.

"Please, Mirandah. I need a glass of water." Water poured from somewhere behind him, and she brought it to him in the Mickey Mouse 75th birthday glass he remembered from his childhood. She sat on the edge of the desk as he drank, a beautiful woman with long dark hair, blue eyes, one gold earring. "Oh, come on," she said, crossing her bare legs. "Again. Until we've got the shots." He tried to explain he couldn't juggle the numbers that much—the running game would never have the odds. "How do you figure in luck?" She laughed.

"There is no luck, in a million games, luck is statistically even for both players."

"No one will ever play a million games. There's one. Always one game at a time. So luck counts."

Rohan Bree came awake slowly, opened his eyes, and for a confused second was lost. The room was stunningly bright, white walls, no curtains and those white, narrow blinds, open to channel every possible ray of sunlight directly into his eyes. He squinted because his head hurt, and knew where he was. Tellar's living room. In an upholstered chair, he sat wrapped in his jean jacket with his feet up on the glass-topped coffee table. His neck ached from sleeping sitting, and
he moved his head from side to side in an attempt to stretch. On the sofa sprawled the girl he knew was nothing close to twenty-one, even though they’d met her in a bar. Covered with a white cotton blanket, her face turned into the sofa cushion, all he could see was her long curled hair, brown, one arm, in a pink shirt, and one tan leg, bared all the way up to her lace-edged underwear. Her jeans lay balled up on the floor beside the sofa, near her white lace bra, Nikes and pink socks. Six empty beer bottles stood on the table between them, none of them his; he’d been drunk enough when they came in.

He’d been doing ok—had maybe two beers, pretended to have many more in the hours they were downtown, when the girl had plopped herself in his lap and given him a shot of tequila. "Sam says you can’t get drunk. I want to see if that’s true." Her name was Beth, her friend was Sarah, and Bree felt he couldn’t refuse, the way Tellar sat watching him. After the fifth shot it was increasingly clear it wasn’t true, that not only could he get drunk but he was also becoming a danger to others, the way he gagged at even the smell. So he was able to free himself of her and dropped his face in the peanut shells and spilled beer on the formica-topped table. The girls wandered away somewhere. Tellar studied him so intently Bree thought he had to know, then asked a waitress he clearly knew well for a cloth and a coke. Tellar slid his chair over, lit a cigarette, and gently wiped away the bits of hard shell, the papery peanut skins, and the beer that stuck it all to Bree’s face. He leaned Bree back in his chair and handed him the Coke. "Why didn’t you just say no?" Tellar asked around the cigarette clamped tight between his lips. "Not a goddamn thing to prove, Bree." Testing him, always, it seemed.

He knew Tellar didn’t exactly like him. He didn’t quite like Tellar, either, but it was more now than watching him for Kelt. There was an attraction there, something spiritual and beyond them both; he thought Tellar felt it, too. When Tellar called last night, from a Rush Street bar, Bree went, and only in part because Kelt would have insisted. Tellar hadn’t mentioned the women, he had just asked Bree to meet him for a beer. That easy.

The girls were playing darts with Sam when Bree walked in; the bar was packed and noisy and smokey, full of account execs and customer services reps, the low income end of the yuppy-wanna-be North Shore. Tellar was already fairly drunk, smoking a cigarette, wearing Levis, a tie-dye Grateful Dead T-shirt and canvas high-tops, looking academically disreputable among the suited Friday happy hour crowd. He looked up and found Bree the moment he walked in the door. Just like that. Their eyes met and Tellar smiled, but Bree knew Tellar was as confused by it as he was. They didn’t like each other.

Tellar had, literally, a girl on each arm, both too young and drinking, though certainly not drunk. He immediately introduced them, with a little shrug and sideways smile, sort of take your
pick, it's the same to me, and he walked off and left the three of them standing there. Both girls were pretty in the generic, vanilla-pudding bland way Midwestern girls were pretty, more alike than different, and vapid in a way that made Bree think they were probably smart enough to hide any glimmer of intelligence. He shouldn't be so hard on them; he'd been the same at nineteen, always thinking if no one noticed he was smart he might have a chance. Maybe it was all the same to Tellar, but Bree didn't want either one of them.

He knew he had nothing much to say to either of them, but Beth, the shorter of the two, got him playing darts. The room was too loud; there was a singing contest of some sort going on, with the loud, tuneless droning typical of Karaoke, but he was thankful for it because it precluded conversation. If he didn't have to talk to these girls, maybe he would survive the night. He played darts well, like he played basketball well, because he had a steady hand and a good eye, and an evening of cricket without talk might be possible.

Tellar returned with four Mexican beers, his fingers curled around the bottle necks, cigarette hanging from his mouth. Sarah attached herself to him; she was tall and still thin in a teenage way, all legs and arms and long, pretty fingers. She draped herself over his shoulders, like a Shetland sweater on a preppy, ostensibly to take a beer, but she stayed that way, saying something in his ear and smiling.

Tellar gave her a tolerant smile, passed the beers around, took a drag off his cigarette and said, "I'm glad you could come, Bree. I wanted to see you tonight." His voice was rough, from the cigarettes and the yelling, but for a moment Bree forgot why he was really there, and he believed Tellar. And even after he remembered he was just there to spy, and he didn't like the man, he felt something. Tellar intrigued him, and occasionally, like right then, it seemed it truly was an act, that the drunkenness, the girls, the easy charm might be a cover for something deeper and more important.

Things happened to him when he spent time with Sam Tellar. It made him think Sam did truly have some sort of power. He had called Kelt, from the bar, near midnight, in a panic, because he was drunk after the tequila, and suddenly paranoid, certain Tellar knew everything. "What's going on, Rohan?"

"He knows. You should see how he's watching me. He got me drunk." Rohan Bree had thought he might cry. He was too confused.

"How could he get you drunk?"

"The girl. He had her make me drink. He sat and watched. I couldn't refuse, or he'd know."

"Relax. Just relax. Why'd you call?"
"Come get me. What if I say something?"
"You're ok. You're not that drunk. Relax."
"You can't feel it. He knows something."
"Then get a cab or stick with it. Find out what he knows. It's Friday. I'm busy." Kelt hung up. Bree hung up the pay phone, turned, realizing Tellar waited behind him.
Tellar just sort of nodded and touched Bree's shoulder. "You really want to go home?"
"Yeah. I think I'll get a cab."
"Not yet. We're singing."
"You and Sarah?"
Tellar laughed and threw an arm around his shoulders. "Me and you. Come on. We have to choose a song."
"I don't sing."
"Good. You'll make me look better. Bree, can you relax a little? You'll never see these people again. What the hell does it matter? Have some fun. Impress the girls." And that was how Tellar was, Bree was powerless against it and it scared him. Always a test, maybe, to see how far he would go. Will you do this, Bree? What about this? He always did it. It frightened him, what he might do for Tellar. Maybe it was just his own paranoia; Kelt was always testing him. He assumed that was how the world operated. Tellar was their enemy and it was clear that their enemy would be testing them. And he was more drunk than he had ever been and more than a little confused.

Tellar led him up onto the brightly lit stage, where he squinted to read the prompter. All he could do was ask himself why he was doing this, until he decided it was fun. They sang "I've Got You Babe," in front of four hundred drunks; Tellar's startling kiss served as finale. They won fifty dollars cash, only second prize, though Tellar assured Bree he sang much better than Sonny Bono.

Once Bree relaxed, he knew he was not terribly drunk, but he still felt stunned and slow. Beth engaged him in limited conversation; it was nothing, small talk, but he was so afraid something would slip. He kept at it as long as he could, then stood abruptly. "I'm going home. I've got to go. Thanks, though." He turned to the girls. "I'm glad I met you." He worked his way to the cool outside and stood looking up and down the empty street for a cab. He was way too paranoid to drive home. Certainly too drunk. He leaned forward, resting his arms against his thighs, trying to breathe. Relax. That was the only parental advice Kelt had ever offered, since Rohan was twelve years old. "Relax, Bree." Before he spotted a cab, Tellar was at his elbow.
"You ok?"
"Yeah. Fine. I need to get home. I'm not good at this, it makes me nervous. I had too much to drink."

Tellar smiled. "You had fun. Admit it."

Bree thought about it and then nodded. He had had fun. "Yeah. It was fun. I'm glad you called. But I need to go home."

"Come with us. We're going to my place. You and Beth can have the sofa."

Bree shook his head, more to clear his mind than in flat-out refusal. "Don't you think they're kind of young? There's not a whole lot there. I'm not interested."

Tellar shook his head and grinned. "Come on. They're fine. Really. I had Sarah in one of my classes a few years ago."

"I prefer grown up women I don't meet in bars." He really didn't like Tellar. He didn't.

"You don't have to sleep with her. Hell, Sarah's nice. Bree, I like her."

"Yeah, right. You would have liked Beth as well."

"I do like Beth as well. Does it matter?" Tellar turned his back to the wind, took out a cigarette and lit it. He palmed the unfiltered cigarette, held it backwards like an actor in an old-time movie. Bogart, maybe. He looked up then, for a response to what Bree thought was a shocking admission.

"You'd sleep with either of them?" he asked slowly.

"Maybe. And maybe I'd just like you to come over so we can all spend some time together tonight and you and I can play basketball tomorrow."

"And if I go home, Beth will go home, and if Beth goes home, Sarah will go home, and if Sarah goes home, Sam sleeps alone. Which is why you called me." Tellar was such a user, really. He used Bree; he'd use Sarah.

Tellar grinned. "And you say you're drunk, with logic like that? She asked if I had a friend. But I wanted to see you. We were going to get together tomorrow anyway, right? Come on, Bree. It'll be fun." Bree thought about it, but didn't reply immediately. He looked over at Tellar, and Tellar spoke again, then; the grin was gone and his voice was very different. "I don't think you can know how much I hate to sleep alone. It's not even sex. It's not about that."

The naked despair in his voice made Bree turn away; the sudden honesty turned in his gut. He didn't want to feel close to Tellar. He didn't want to feel Tellar had been used just like he had been used. Tellar needed to be the sort who would do the things Ruan said he could do, lead the old man's son to betray him. Worse. Lead Mirandah into a betrayal she would die to correct. He wanted Tellar to be a user and a drunk and a womanizer and a real bastard, because otherwise Bree couldn't do what he had said he would do. "I understand, I think. Sometimes you just feel
But there's the joy of it, Bree. It's so damn easy to connect. Come on." Tellar grinned again and the moment was lost and Bree thought maybe he had just imagined what he had heard, or that it was more good acting on Tellar's part. Tellar flicked the cigarette away and it broke apart as it hit the pavement. The wind caught the glowing ember and tumbled it away, down the sidewalk. Rohan Bree went home with Tellar in part because he didn't know how to tell him no, and in part because Kelt and Ruan needed him to say yes. Would reward him for saying yes.

And here he was, hung-over and depressed, with a sore neck. He heard someone in the bathroom, and Beth turned over and sat up. She looked at him for a confused moment, then sort of rolled her eyes. "What time is it?" Her voice was a whole octave lower than it had been last night. She cleared her throat; Bree looked at his watch.

"About ten. Five to."

She fell back onto the cushions, groaning. "I was supposed to work at nine." Then she turned to him, shrugged and said brightly, "Oh, well." Her makeup was smudged and faded, very dark around her eyes and barely pink at her mouth and cheeks, like a girl in a tinted Victorian photograph. She looked at the pile of clothes on the floor and shook her head. "God. Sorry about last night. Really. I'm not usually like that. You're way too nice." Bree was surprised, a little. She had wanted him to sleep with her; he had declined, so she had taken off most of her clothes. He still declined. He was interested only in one woman. Obsessed, really.

"Maybe you're way too nice." He said it quietly, but she laughed.

"No. Not me. Sorry, though." She flashed him a smile, but then seemed to think of something else. "I've got to call work. Where's the phone? You know?" She hopped up and buttoned her shirt but didn't reach for her clothes.

"Sorry. I don't know." After a quick survey of the room they were in, she stuck her head in the kitchen, then headed down the hall and pounded on the bedroom door.

"You said you'd wake me up," she yelled, and then walked into the bedroom. Bree heard Tellar laugh and Sarah begin an apology and he pulled himself up, dropped his jacket on the chair, and passed the bedroom on the way to the bathroom.

"Morning, Bree," Tellar called. Bree looked in and they were all three on the bed, Beth perched on the edge talking on the telephone, Tellar at the foot, wearing his jeans and sunglasses, sprawled on his back smoking, and Sarah, stretched out on her front, reading a library book she had propped open across his stomach. The page was covered with rune-like figures and tree-
diagrams. She wore round glasses and one of Tellar's concert T-shirts, red flannel boxer shorts and dark green socks.

"You're reading?"

"It's Sam's. But really interesting. Comparing ancient language systems. Some of them died out and we only have these runic alphabets to try to piece together spoken language. Sam was telling me all about it, and I kind of got into the book."

"Sounds exciting." He tried to sound bored, but it did sound exciting. Interesting, truly.

Tellar studying runic alphabets of dead languages?

Tellar spoke to the ceiling. "Ready for some basketball?" He did not look like a man seriously contemplating athletic activity, but he almost never did. He was a good basketball player, even on bad Saturdays when he played in his sunglasses with a cigarette in his mouth. Tellar could get into a pick-up game almost anywhere on the north side, a fairly significant reputation, in the playground circuit. If he hadn't been working on his Ph.D when he was 20, he probably could have played point guard at a Division I school. The drinking and cigarettes were tough handicaps, but Tellar was good.

Bree stood at the door for a moment. "Are you?"

"Anytime."

"If Beth can talk her dad into giving her the afternoon off, we'll play, too." Sarah smiled up at him briefly, but turned back to the book.

"Yeah." Bree locked himself in the bathroom and took a long shower, but his head felt just as bad when he was finished. Tequila was poison.

They did play basketball, the four of them. Sarah was good, fast and in good shape and nearly as tall as Tellar. Beth moved fast, and shot well from outside, but was far too short to get in and rebound. Tellar and Bree played together every Saturday, and were fairly evenly matched when Sam was the one who was hung-over. They did better in pick-up games when they were on the same team, because they read each other perfectly. It took awhile to get the teams matched well, but when Bree and Sarah played Sam and Beth, it seemed about right. Close, at least, every time. He liked those girls, Bree decided. They played basketball without pretense; they were good and they showed it, with no concern for looking cute or acting dumb. They played hard and they played to win. Bree played like that, and by the time they quit, he felt better.

It was only a few blocks from the playground to Tellar's apartment, but by the time they got back, the girls were planning to cook dinner and Tellar glanced at Bree and shrugged.
"Sure." Bree had no interest in going home, perhaps ever, but certainly not in the next few hours. He lay down on the sofa resting a glass of water on his chest. After an inventory of the kitchen, the girls collected money and left to buy groceries.

"Want a beer?" Tellar yelled from the kitchen.

"No. God." Never again.

"Still feeling a little tender?" Tellar laughed, opened his beer and sank into the chair.

"Yeah. I guess."

"How did Beth get you so drunk? Never before, no matter how much you drank." Tellar studied him.

"I never drank shots before."

"Oh." Tellar did not really believe him. Not paranoia now, he knew. "We don't really have much in common." Tellar contemplated his beer bottle, but glanced up as he spoke.

"I don't know," Bree said evenly. They had everything in common, Tellar just didn't know it. "We both like to play basketball."

Tellar raised an eyebrow. "You sleep with Beth last night?"

"I said I wouldn't."

"No, I said you were under no obligation to. Very different." He took his cigarettes out of his T-shirt sleeve, looked at them for a long moment, then tossed them down on the glass table.

"But you didn't?"

"No." He wasn't sure what it was to Tellar. He pushed himself to sit up.

"Why do you suppose? You like women?" Bree thought about the question before he answered, maybe a little too long, because Tellar laughed. "I'm not asking for a lifestyle decision, or anything. Generally."

"Yeah. I know. I like women. I suppose it would be an easy thing, to use that. I'm not like you, charming, whatever the hell it is. It's so much work for me, and so temporary. I don't connect with people. Men, women. Not much there. So I don't know. But it seems pointless to involve nineteen-year-old girls in it."

"Ok. But we connect. You and me. I know you feel it. Why is that? I mean, we don't have anything in common." Tellar reached out and took a cigarette then, lit it, and picked up an empty beer bottle to use as an ashtray. He looked up.

Bree sat stunned. "We aren't all that different." He shrugged. It seemed easier than thinking about the real question; he hadn't thought Tellar capable of guessing so close.

"Yeah, right. We started college when we should have been in junior high. We like to play basketball. Doesn't do it for me. We both feel unconnected. So does half the country,
probably half the world. 'We have different ideas about how to solve the problem, I'd say.' Tellar sounded frustrated, maybe even angry.

Bree looked at the ceiling, and thought about Sarah, who had read nearly half a book on ancient alphabets by 10 a.m. "Not that different."

Tellar smiled. "Sarah's so damn smart. Interesting."

Not a non sequitur, Bree knew. "She read all night?" He didn't want Tellar to think he didn't know.

Tellar's cigarette burned short. He took a last drag and dropped it in the bottle where it fizzed and sputtered for a moment before he set the bottle back on the table and reclaimed the full beer. He took a drink and grinned. "We talked for awhile first. She can't sleep when she's drinking. I slept. I have trouble sleeping, sometimes."

"When you're alone."
"Yeah."
"So that really is what it's about."
"Yeah, ok. You were right. They're a little too nice. Maybe a couple years ago. Before I was so burned out."

"A couple years ago she was twelve."
"Jesus, Bree she's only three years younger than me. It's not the age, it's the level of cynicism. She still believes in Santa Claus."

"What do you believe in, Sam?"
"Nothing."
"No. I'm serious."

"I don't believe in anything. I'm lost. When I was a kid, once I got separated from my mother near the ape house at the Lincoln Park Zoo. I think I was four. But I never forgot that panic, knowing I was cosmically alone and entirely unable to deal with it." Heavy silence in the room, though outside there were traffic noises, voices. Crowd noise from the ballpark, and further, the rattle of the el: "Have you ever been lost, Bree?" Tellar had such an intensity, sometimes.

He didn't answer that one. He'd been lost for so long he almost made himself forget, sometimes. "So why do you think it is? That we connect?"

Tellar studied him in silence and took another long drink. "I don't have a clue." But it was one of those moments when Bree knew there was much more there; something deep and intuitive told him Tellar not only had a clue, he knew. He didn't like Tellar, maybe, but it didn't matter. *Does it matter?* Tellar had asked last night, and Bree had been disgusted. But it didn't
matter, he saw that now. Whatever connected them went deeper than like and not like. This thing between them went deeper than either of them. Rohan Bree closed his eyes. He wouldn't think about this, about what he might have to do for Tellar.

"So have you ever been lost?" Tellar didn't even look at him. He didn't have to.

Bree didn't even have to answer, but he did. "Yeah. Once."

The girls' voices echoed in the stairwell, and Tellar glanced over at him and grinned. "Nice to get a second chance, sometimes, isn't it?" He stood and walked out to the kitchen. "Sure you don't want a beer?" he called.

"No." But he hadn't answered the question Tellar asked, so he found a cold beer dropped in his lap. The moment faded in the hiss of screw-off tops and once again Rohan Bree found himself unconnected and wondering if perhaps he had only imagined there was ever a moment.