

Real courage is when you know you're licked
before you begin, but you begin anyway
and see it through no matter what.

— Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*



1

Onions, Scholars, and Blue Lightning



IN THE HEAT OF THE AFTERNOON the plaza of Tyvik the Wish-Bringer seethed with life. Hundreds of merchants had set up stalls and loudly touted their wares. Farmers from the surrounding districts hawked fresh produce, and food vendors waved sizzling spicy meat on skewers. On tables beneath fluttering awnings, craftspeople had spread their plates and shirts, scissors and shoes, potions and amulets, baskets and jars. Children ran and whooped and chased one another while street-corner orators harangued the crowd. Stylishly gowned matrons shaded by tassel-tufted parasols took tiny steps in their satin shoes, pretending not to notice the filth underfoot. Three red-faced men struggled to manage a snarling demon, tugging ropes looped around its neck while it strained at the chains that bound its taloned hands. A pair of uniformed Watchmen paced, wicked-looking long-barreled rifles strapped across their backs. A high-wheeled carriage, one of the new horseless kind, made slow headway through the crowd, the blue-liveried driver on his high perch between the gleaming brass lamps cursing and snapping his whip close enough above people's heads to knock a few hats off.

Market basket on her arm, Kyura worked her way down a broad aisle between stalls. Other than picking her way carefully, holding her purse tight, and keeping an eye out for bargains, she barely noticed the hubbub. Uppermost in her mind was the

need for trout. Catfish would do, if no trout were to be had. Also candles, salt, a jar of honey, and a bag of onions. In three hours the inn's guests would be wanting supper, and the cook could surely summon up something savory with fresh catfish and onions.

She was slim, with long dark hair, a chin that she thought too prominent, and a nose that she wished was short and turned up rather than long and narrow. The boys she knew — a few stolen kisses on a warm summer night, but none of them had stolen her heart away — would have said she was very pretty, but she seldom had an extra penny with which to be vain about it, and she was far too busy to use a curling-iron, though she had one (somewhere).

When Kyura was younger, Aunt Timabara had brought her to the market and taught her how to count her pennies and see that the produce was fresh. Aunt Timabara was gone now. At seventeen, Kyura took money from the cash box herself and went to market. And yes, there were moments when she wished she could trade the catfish and onions for silks, exotic creatures, and the clash of bright swords, and had to remind herself that it was foolishness to wish for things that would never be. But most often she was either working too hard or exhausted from working to waste more than a minute or two teasing herself with daydreams.

At the center of the market plaza, towering above the stalls, presided the gray and solemn statue of Tyvik. Seated on a cube of stone, more than twenty feet tall at the crown of its head, handsome once but now crusted with centuries of city grime, half its face sheared away by time and weather, or perhaps by cannon-fire in some long-forgotten battle, the statue gazed out across the plaza, its eyes now benign, now sad or thoughtful or stern as the light and shadow played across them. Tyvik had been a god once, but he no longer had any worshipers; all that remained of his divinity was this massive misshapen relic. His temple, a mile to the east on the riverbank, had been swept away long ago in a flood. Only a few bare pillars jutted up from the water to show where it had

once stood. But the statue in the plaza remained.

As Kyura neared the statue, a change in the tenor of the voices on all sides snagged her attention — that, and a cool mineral odor that slid around the mingled scents of sweat and fresh produce like water over rocks.

People were pointing and saying, “Look! There!” Pale veins of blue lightning snaked up from the base of the statue, and a dark tornado of crows had congealed to swirl around the statue’s head, crying out raucously.

Somebody shouted, “Back! Back!” The crowd retreated, leaving an untidy pool of emptiness around the base of the statue. Kyura knew why: Occasionally Tyvik stood up and walked, pacing aimlessly across the plaza, tipping over the tents and dragging them along, his slow stone footfalls jarring the ground and rattling nearby windows. And sometimes he spoke. She had never seen him move or speak, but she had heard the stories. On one of his meanders, years ago, Tyvik had stepped on a dog. People still talked about that.

A young man wearing the yellow vest of a messenger rushed past Kyura, nearly bumping her, and dodged away into the depths of the crowd.

The veins of pale fire sought upward across the surface of the statue, probing, retreating, dimming, brightening, casting off occasional crackling sparks. More crows angled in swiftly from here and there across the city.

As the veins of lightning crept up the statue’s neck toward its defaced face, the messenger returned, elbowing his way through the crowd of onlookers to clear a path for two scholars in long flapping brown robes and broad-brimmed hats. The scholars carried writing-trays laden with paper and pens, which threatened to spill, but they managed to reach the base of the statue without mishap, or as close to the base as they dared go, and unlimbered their writing implements.

The statue’s mouth opened and it began to speak.

Kyura was standing at the leading edge of the crowd, not more than fifty feet from the cube of stone on which the statue sat. Its eyes ought to have been leveled at the city skyline, but

though its features hadn't altered or its head tilted forward, she was awash suddenly in a queasy feeling that it had dropped its gaze to look down at her, the eyes (angry? amused? indifferent?) drilling holes straight through to her soul. Her back and neck and shoulders prickled. Less curious suddenly about what Tyvik might say or do, she suppressed an urge to run.

The statue's voice was impossibly deep, a grating rumble punctuated by long pauses and what sounded like inarticulate groans. The crowd had fallen silent, and hundreds of faces gazed up at the seated figure, rapt. The utterance went on for some time, and the scholars scribbled busily. Kyura thought perhaps she recognized the words "dragon" and "tower," but if Tyvik was speaking Garathian, it was an archaic dialect.

Eventually the pale lightning veins retreated into the base of the statue and then into the ground. The cool smell dissipated, and the crows lost interest and flew away. Conversations started among the crowd, and people drifted warily closer to the pedestal. A few moved in to peer over the scholars' shoulders, but most people drifted off, back to their business, whatever it was.

A bold little merchant went straight up to the scholars and said, "What'd it say? It's a prophecy, ain't it? What'd it say?"

"It's not for the likes of you," one of them said. "It's for the king. Get on."

"We got a right to know, don't we?"

"You have what rights the king says you have."

"The king don't care. He sits up there all high and mighty—" The merchant waved his arm at the royal palace, which crouched atop a steep-sided rock that all but abutted the south side of the plaza. "—and when there's trouble, we're the ones who catch it in the teeth."

"Get on, now. We have work to do."

After a grumble aimed back over his shoulder, the little merchant marched off. The two scholars put their heads together (their hat brims colliding), murmured, and scribbled. The trout she hadn't yet bought were calling to Kyura, but her curiosity was a burning itch. Soon she and two or three others

were the only onlookers who remained.

One of the scholars said, “That’s it, then. Let’s see what we’ve got.” Holding up a piece of paper, he read aloud from it, not making a proclamation, just reviewing the text for the benefit of his colleague:

*Come far and his kin with a horn that is broken,
Their birthplace Sa’akna as it is hers, bringing
A part of the wheel a heedless boy shattered
To her, the boy’s cousin, who labors obscure,
An unknowing hope, the savior of thousands,
Conversing with dragons and known by the sea,
In the hostelry signed by a pitcher of silver.
An old one is freed from the tower of pain
By her and two others. The tower collapses
In flames, the city in turmoil, the blood
Of innocents paid for in blood of the wealthy.
Pursued by a priest and an ogre, they flee!*

“Sounds about right,” the other agreed. “‘Wheel,’ though; are you sure ‘disk’ wouldn’t be better? Or ‘circle’? And ‘tower’? I still think he said ‘vault.’”

They dithered for another minute, crossed out words, and made corrections. At last the first scholar handed the paper to the messenger. “You’re for the king. Off with you.” The messenger trotted away. The scholars stoppered their ink bottles.

Most of the prophecy made no sense to Kyura, but the bits she understood dizzied her. The statue *had* been looking down at her! She had been born in Sa’akna — and a pitcher of silver? Her uncle’s inn was called the Silver Ewer! But the blood of innocents? The tower of pain? Conversing with dragons? What could any of that mean?

Trout and onions receded into the dim and misty distance, and she turned to run, but after a few swift steps she faltered, though her heart was still pounding, and turned to look back at the statue. Tyvik certainly wasn’t looking in her direction now. Her imagination must have been playing tricks on her, that was

all. The statue couldn't possibly have been talking about her. What a ridiculous idea!

Act like a grown-up, she told herself sternly. Do your marketing. It will come to nothing, you'll see. In a few days you'll be laughing about it.

But right now she didn't feel like laughing. Worry, obscure but implacable, crept through her the way the veins of pale fire had tickled their way up and down the statue. Fortunately, crows weren't buzzing around her head, those were only flies. She waved the flies away and went on about her business.



2

*Rake Handles
and a Horse*



TROUT IN THE COOLER. FLOOR SWEEPED. Two new guests checked in, their luggage carried up to their rooms. Time to help Meery hang the sheets to dry. Baskets of wet sheets: heavy.

Tell Meery what the statue had said? Kyura hesitated. What could she say that would make any sense? Nothing had happened; it was just her overheated imagination.

The stable yard was thirty feet wide and stretched fifty feet back from the street, flanked on one side by the two-story bulk of the inn and on the other by the stable, which was little more than a slant-roofed shed with half a dozen stalls. The clotheslines, now sagging from the weight of the sheets, ran from the side of the inn across to a corner of the stable. The afternoon was warm but not too warm, the sky scoured blue by a fresh breeze, not curdled with its usual layer of smoke from the city's thousands of cook-stoves.

But life wasn't all drudgery. When the sheets were hung and the empty baskets set back against the wall, Meery grabbed and hefted a heavy stick conveniently leaning there, swung it in front of her crossways, and said, "Hah!"

Kyura grabbed the other stick, hurriedly tucked a couple of inches of skirt up into her waistband so she could hop and pivot without tripping, and easily tilted the stick to block Meery's opening jab. And then they went at it, swinging, dodging, grappling, and grunting, carefully staying away from the

clothesline so as not to kick dirt up onto the sheets.

Meery Caitledore was a bit plump, but light and quick on her feet. Her broad, fair face was liberally dotted with freckles, and a profusion of red curls spilled untidily from under her cloth cap. Kyura and Meery were the same age, lived under the same roof, and had been friends for years. The fact that Kyura would someday own the inn, while Meery would never be anything but hired help, mattered to neither of them.

The sticks weren't really staves, just rake handles from which the business ends of the rakes had been removed. Both girls had earned bruises in the past from their sparring, and scraped knuckles. Aunt Timabara would have said it wasn't ladylike, but Aunt Timabara had died when Kyura was twelve, leaving Uncle Dulan to oversee a procession of unreliable cooks and stable-boys. It had been Timabara who convinced Dulan to hire Meery and let her live with them at the inn; he had grumbled about that for weeks before he admitted Timabara was right. That was after Kyura found Meery sitting in the street, dirty and crying, and brought her home. Meery's mother had just died, and the owner of the apartment building had slammed the door and turned Meery out to beg.

The only comment Dulan ever made about the girls' sparring was, "I guess it's good you two learn how to protect yourselves." Not that they were in constant danger. The Silver Ewer was not an inn that catered to a rough crowd, though there were no fittings as fancy as a silver ewer in any of the rooms, and never had been. The inn's guests were travelers arrived from other provinces across the Garathian League, farmers who stayed too late in the market square to make the journey home before dark, and locals who craved a pint after a hard day's labor. It was a small inn, but friendly (thanks to Dulan) and clean (thanks to Kyura and Meery).

Kyura was driving Meery back toward the kitchen door with an expert set of feints and jabs, huffing with effort, when a voice behind her said, "Excuse, please. Is this a place where travelers may take their ease?"

Startled, she turned toward the gate. Meery's rake handle,

already in motion, smacked Kyura's shoulder smartly, and she winced. She said, "Ow!"

Meery said, "Oops. Sorry."

Standing at the gate, peering in at them hopefully but cautiously, was a family of elves — two male elves, an elfa, two youngsters clinging to the elfa's skirt, and a babe cradled in her arms. One of the males was old. His whiskers were wispy, his eyes vacant, his back bent. The younger male stood proudly erect, though he was burdened with two large suitcases, one in each hand.

"This is such a place, yes," Kyura said. Only after she said it did she realize that both she and the elf had spoken Sa'aknan, not Garathian.

"We have come a long way," the male elf said. "This is a strange place, this city. It is noisy and troubles us, even to find where water is to drink. Might we ask for the kindness of a cup of water?"

"What's he saying?" Meery said.

Kyura waved her to silence without turning. "Gladly," she said, still in Sa'aknan. "You are welcome here." She unhitched the gate and stood aside as the elves shuffled into the stable yard. They were dusty, their clothing plain and threadbare.

"Not many in this place, honored lady, know the speech of our homeland," the elfa said.

"You have come from Sa'akna. That's a very long way."

"We did not walk," the male elf said. "We were carried on the railroad train."

The elf had used the Garathian words for "railroad train." Maybe there weren't any words in Sa'aknan for this new kind of conveyance. The first railroads had been built only a few years before. Kyura had never ridden on a train, but she could imagine the elves sitting in a passenger car, on seats too large for them, gazing out the window mile after endless mile.

The elf said his name was Enthuinn. The elfa — his wife — he called Nurrat. The old elf was her father, Geech. Or perhaps her grandfather; the term Enthuinn used was something like "honored ancestor." Kyura had never had any honored ancestors

that she knew of, so she wasn't sure what relation the words referred to. They stood around the horse trough while Meery took the tin cup from its hook and filled it from the pump. One of the young elves tried to climb over the side of the trough to drink from it, and his father restrained him with a hand on his shoulder. They passed the tin cup from hand to hand.

The elves' skin was the light, tawny brown of lambskin leather, their ears tall, pointed, and tufted with fine hair. Enthiunn was the tallest of them, and the crown of his head was no higher than Kyura's breasts. The tips of his curved horns came up as high as her chin. One of his horns was broken off more than an inch down. (*Come far and his kin with a horn that is broken* — no, just a coincidence. Don't think about it. But....)

"What happened to your horn?"

Enthiunn said something she didn't understand. He had attacked something, but she didn't know the words. It had been years since she had spoken or heard Sa'aknan, not since Aunt Timabara died. Her aunt and uncle had often spoken it to one another, and with Kyura when she was little. But even before Timabara died, Dulan insisted that Kyura speak only Garathian to the inn's guests, and slapped her once when she forgot. "We're citizens of Lorvondes," he said sternly, "That place — the fewer people know we're from there, the better."

Kyura must have looked perplexed by what Enthiunn said. "My husband attacked a digging machine," Nurrat said in musically accented Garathian. "They are very large, the digging machines. Much digging."

"I understood that," Meery said.

"We will use the common speech, then," Nurrat said. "We have no wish to be impolite. We are educated people, not elves of the forest."

"There must be a hundred inns in the city," Kyura said. "And this may be the only one where anybody speaks Sa'aknan. How did you find this one?"

"We asked at the temple," Enthiunn said, "at the temple of Akneora here in your city, where we might find an innkeeper from our homeland. The pastor there directed us here."

“Pastor Goltan? I’m surprised he still remembers us. We haven’t been to the temple in years. Not since—” Not since Aunt Timabara died. Aunt Timabara had wanted to keep the faith of their homeland, had cherished the songs and ceremonies. Dulan, though he grumbled, allowed himself to be led to the services. Kyura had learned to read and do numbers in the temple school. But after Timabara died, Dulan dismantled the little shrine to Akneora that stood in the vegetable garden behind the inn and chopped up the statue of Akneora for kindling. “Load of rubbish,” he growled. “Gods are for children and fools.” When she saw what he was doing, Kyura hung on his hatchet arm to try to stop him. She was still young enough then to think that the gods might be real — and wouldn’t a god retaliate if you desecrated his shrine? But Dulan brushed her aside and went on swinging the hatchet, his face dark with anger. Years passed before she understood that the anger was his way of avoiding giving way to grief.

Kyura let that thought pass. “But why did you come to Lorvondes?”

“Our pasturage was destroyed by the digging machines,” Nurrat said. “Our flock had no pasture to graze. Where else should we have gone?”

“Do you know anyone in the city? Friends to help you get settled?”

“We know no one.”

“We’d be happy to rent you a room. Or maybe two rooms. They’re half a crown for the room, and that includes supper.”

“We have no money,” Enthiunn said. “Not even for food. Our last money we spent on the tickets for the railroad train.”

“Oh, no,” Meery said.

Kyura looked at the young elves, and then at the adults. Enthiunn didn’t meet her eyes. He gazed off into the distance. She guessed he was too proud to beg.

“You can stay here for a few days,” she said impulsively. “I’m sure Uncle Dulan won’t mind. Maybe not in a room, though. There are empty stalls in the stable.”

“Anything that you are able to do,” Nurrat said. “We would

be most grateful.”

“We will repay you,” Enthiunn said, “when we have money. I will find work.”

“What kind of work can you do?” Kyura asked.

“I was for many years a herder of wharns,” Enthiunn said. “The little sheep, their wool very soft.”

“There’s not much call for herding in the city,” Meery said apologetically. “Maybe you could get hired on as a wagon driver, but horses and oxen are an awful lot bigger than you, if you don’t mind my saying.”

The bell clanged at the gate, and the brewer’s cart rumbled into the stable yard. The cart, on which stood half a dozen fat kegs, was flanked by the brewer and his “lad,” a massive, sleepy fellow who looked strong enough to toss a horse over his shoulder and stride out the gate with it. And given the condition of the horse hitched to the cart, he might have to do exactly that. Kyura’s eyes filled with tears as she looked at the cart-horse. It was limping badly, and flies buzzed around sores on its flanks.

Enthiunn said, “This horse. Its leg.” He moved toward the animal.

The brewer, a stout, red-faced little man with curly side-whiskers, said, “Here, you. Keep away from the animal. Keep away, I said.” He moved toward Enthiunn aggressively, as if to shove him.

“It suffers,” Enthiunn said. He didn’t even glance at the brewer; his eyes were on the horse. “It needs very much the healing.” He ducked under the brewer’s outstretched arm and touched the horse’s flank. The horse moved in response, not even lifting a hoof, just rocking a little from side to side.

“That’s none o’ your concern, is it? I won’t have an elf messin’ with my horse. Don’t touch it, you hear?”

The lad hefted a keg of ale from the cart and strode off toward the kitchen door. Kyura followed him, but detoured into the office to fetch two crowns from the nearly empty strongbox. The lad had been here before, and needed no instructions on where to put the keg.

When she returned to the yard, Enthiunn’s eyes were still

on the horse, and the brewer was still glaring at him. After paying the brewer, she said, "I thought working a horse to death was a crime."

"Well, it ain't dead yet, so I've not committed any crime, have I? Not that it's no business of yours."

Enthiunn looked uncertainly at Kyura. "I know of the harms of animals. Its leg must be bound, and its feed seasoned with certain herbs that will speed greatly the healing. For the sores I can mix a salve to make a poultice, but the leg is more troublesome. Without this healing, the horse will fall before it has gone another hundred steps."

The brewer worked his mouth silently for a few seconds, and spat on the ground. "Buyin' another horse, that wouldn't be cheap. You think you can fix this one up? How long would it take?"

"If I can find the needed herbs, a few days, no more. Where they may grow in this city, I do not know."

"I'd have to leave it here. How am I goin' to finish my deliveries, without a horse?"

Kyura said, "How will you finish your deliveries when it drops dead in the street?"

The brewer worked his mouth some more. "You got a point there. So what's it gonna cost me?"

Enthiunn looked helplessly at Kyura. She guessed he knew nothing about how much things cost in the city. She said, "If he can restore it to health, the next keg of ale is ours for free. If he can't, we won't charge you for the oats it eats. If it dies in our stable, you haul it away."

"All right, then. Three days you got. Or four, no longer. I reckon the lad and I can manage today, and I'll rent a horse for tomorrow and the day after. Then I'll be back."

The lad emerged from the inn and thumped last week's empty keg into the bed of the cart. Working together, they got the horse out of the traces. After speaking to it gently while reaching up to stroke its neck, Enthiunn led it slowly into the stable. Kyura followed. The lad got between the traces. Leaning forward for traction, he pulled the cart out through the gate.

The horse stood very still in a stall, the elves clustered around it. Enthiunn sighed as he inspected its leg more closely. “We must first bind the leg with wood and strips of cloth. Then the herbs.”

Kyura said, “Wood and strips of cloth we have. But you may not find the right herbs growing in the city. Not growing wild, that’s for sure. Maybe we can buy what you need, if it’s not too expensive.”

“I need the *avagna*,” he said, “and the *keloidnua*, and the *permaris*.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what any of those things are.”

“And I do not know the words in Garathian. My people may know. As we passed along the streets of the city, I saw a few of my people. We did not pause to speak with them. If these herbs grow here, or can be purchased — even dried, they would be helpful. Freshly picked would be better.”

“Will you need money? We don’t have much.” She thought about the nearly empty strongbox.

Meery said, “I can spare half a crown.”

“I thought you were saving up to buy some new shoes,” Kyura said.

“It’s all right. I don’t mind.”

Kyura wanted to tell Meery to keep her money, but she said nothing. It felt a little better to know they were all agreed that they would help the horse. Now all she had to worry about was telling her uncle about the new guests staying in the stable.



3

The Reluctant Innkeeper



IF THERE HADN'T BEEN an interruption, it might have turned into an argument. Sometimes Kyura would wait a few hours, or even a day or two, to catch Uncle Dulan in a good mood before she told him something he might not want to hear — the rising price of flour, say, or a leaky window that needed fixing. But this wouldn't wait. He might head out the kitchen door and across to the stable at any moment. She hovered nearby until he had finished trimming the candle wicks, a chore he usually did sitting at a vacant table in the common room toward the end of the afternoon, except on days when he forgot. When he folded his clasp knife and started gathering up the candles, she slid onto the bench across from him.

“Uncle Dulan, there's something you need to know.”

He eyed her suspiciously. “What is it this time?”

“I told a family of elves they could stay in the stable for a few days.”

His frown deepened. “Elves? Not just one elf, a whole family of them? How many?”

“Six. Three adults and three little ones.”

“Not in the stable. I won't have it. They can hire a proper room like anybody else. What are you thinking, girl?”

Kyura scraped the black burnt ends of the wicks off the table into her palm. He always forgot to do that, and in an hour dinner guests would be arriving. She said carefully, “They don't have any money for a room.”

“No money? You’re taking in beggars now?”

“It’s not like that, Uncle Dulan. Will you listen while I explain?”

“Oh, you’ll have an explanation, never fear. You always do. No. Out they go.”

At this hour of the afternoon the dozen sturdy tables in the common room were mostly unoccupied, though two guests were sharing an omelet at a corner table. Sunlight streamed in through the open upper half of the street door, along with the occasional rattle of cart wheels on the cobblestones. Dulan’s broad middle was wrapped in a brown innkeeper’s apron that was blotchy with old stains, and his hair, longish and black grizzled with gray, looked as if it hadn’t been combed since yesterday. His skin was coarse and pale above the beard, and his eyes were the color of cinders.

“Please, Uncle Dulan. They’re strangers in the city. They have nowhere else to go.”

“That’s no concern of ours, is it, now?”

“One of them is only a baby!”

“And I should be swayed by that? Send them on their way, or I’ll do it. If our guests see we’re letting beggars sleep in the stable, we’ll lose half our business. Little enough that we have, as it is. We’ll be out on the street, you and I.”

“The guests won’t see them,” Kyura said, trying to be reasonable. “They’ll stay in the stable.”

“Guests who have horses will see them. That’s even worse! A stable overrun by elves! Now, I’m a broad-minded man, you know that. Elves are as good as anybody in my book. But not everyone is as tolerant as I am.”

“We have to let them stay, Uncle Dulan. At least for one night. They’ve come a very long way. They’re footsore and hungry.”

Dulan snorted. “Baby birds, lost puppies, the month doesn’t pass when you’re not bringing home another stray to take care of. What sort of riffraff will you dredge up next — ogres? It’ll be ogres, I have no doubt, stinking up the place and breaking everything in sight. Send your elves packing.” Dulan jerked his thumb in the direction of the street.

When she was a little girl, Kyura had loved Uncle Dulan a lot and feared him a little. Now, at seventeen, she didn't fear him at all, she just got mad at him sometimes. It was hard to love him, but she still tried. "You know I would never rent a room to an ogre. I mean, I'm sure some of them are nice..." Dulan growled deep in his throat. She hurried on. "But these elves are clean and polite. Well, they're dusty. They've traveled a long way. And they're not ordinary elves." She paused delicately. She knew she might be walking into a bramble bush. "They came here from Sa'akna."

Dulan's eyebrows shot up. "Did they? Oh, that's fine. That's even worse."

"Why it is worse?"

"Don't ask. You don't need to know."

"But that's where we're from!"

"It was a long time ago. Best left in the dustbin."

"We've had guests from Sa'akna a couple of times. You treated them to a round, remember?"

"Ah, but those were paying guests. Anyhow, they were friends from the old days, not strangers. Strangers from Sa'akna — have to be on the lookout. You never know."

"On the lookout for what? Never know what?"

"You don't need to know."

Kyura pressed her lips together and glared at him. Whatever she was about to say (which she would soon have regretted) vanished like a snuffed candle flame when the street half-door opened and three men came in. Two of them wore the gray uniforms of the Watch, and were equipped with short swords in scabbards and standard-issue dour scowls. They were muscular and not, as it turned out, talkative. Leading them was a smaller man, dapper in a black suit faced with a double row of gold buttons. His face was bland and sharp-nosed, and his eager eyes darted around the room before coming to rest on Dulan and Kyura.

"This the Silver Ewer?"

"It is. What can I do for you, sir?" Dulan rose from the bench, his legs bumping the table so that the stack of candles

threatened to roll off onto the floor. Kyura grabbed them.

"I'm here on the king's business. You may call me Adjutant Broufort. I'm sent to ask questions of a woman who works here."

Dulan had sense enough not to glance in Kyura's direction. "And why would that be?"

"There's been a prophecy. Tyvik spoke."

"Did he? I'm a working man. Got better things to do than listen to statues gabbling nonsense."

"That's all right," Broufort said. "We're not here to question you."

"There's no women working here. You've got pixies in your hair."

"What about her?" Broufort gestured at Kyura.

"That's just my good-for-nothing niece. Never does a lick of work."

For once Kyura was grateful for the insult.

"Maybe they got it wrong, then. Could be it's somebody staying here. A woman who talks to dragons. There are no dragons anymore, I told the king that, but he said never you mind, go ask. She's got some kind of broken disk, that too."

"And you want me to roust out all my guests and line them up so you can ask if they talk to dragons?"

"If you'd be so kind."

It was at this moment that Meery Caitledore breezed in from the kitchen, tying her apron strings behind her, and said, "Kyura, the cook says we're short of flour for the biscuits, and where did you put — oh, hello. Am I interrupting?"

Broufort said, "She works here."

Kyura said, "We both do."

Broufort favored Dulan with a dark look. "No need to talk to the guests, then. Unless you've got guests from Sa'akna. Or — could it be you, innkeeper? You both have the look of southerners."

"We're from Sparaven," Dulan said, wrapping his dignity around him as if it were a second apron. "I've never been to Sa'akna in my life."

"How about guests who are elves or demons?"

“Demons? Do I look like a madman?”

“Madmen come in all shapes and sizes,” Broufort said. “What about it? Elves? An elf with a broken horn?”

“I have not a single paying guest,” Dulan said stiffly, “who is an elf. I’ll take an oath on that, an oath on my knees at the altar of any god you care to name.”

“And does either of you girls happen to have any contact at all with dragons?”

Meery and Kyura exchanged puzzled shrugs.

“Or how about a disk that’s broken? Would you know anything about that?”

Meery said, “We’ve both dropped plates and broken them. Does that count?”

“Broken plates. Ah, never mind. It’s a fool’s errand, I told the king that. But we’ll be keeping an eye on you, never fear. If there’s any dodgy goings-on around here, you’ll all three be hauled in for questioning.”

When Broufort and his men were out the door and gone, Dulan waited a moment before folding his arms and saying, “Is there something I should know about this prophecy?”

Kyura told him about being near the statue and then hearing the scholars’ translation. “It felt like Tyvik was looking at me. I’m sure he only mentioned the Silver Ewer because I was there. If I hadn’t been, he would picked out somebody else in the crowd and said something different. And the rest of what he said didn’t make any sense. Except — I think you should meet Enthiunn.”

“The elf.”

“He has a broken horn.”

Dulan stared at her. The stare went on and on, things flickering behind his eyes — worry, love, anger, resignation, hope. “A prophecy,” he said finally. “I was hoping maybe — well, never mind. Whatever’s coming, we’ll deal with it. Get rid of the elves before anybody sees them.”

“But we can’t! I promised them.”

“Ah, what good does it ever do, arguing with you?” Dulan frowned at the floor for a minute. “All right, they can stay.”

“Oh, and there’s something else. I almost forgot. There’s a horse.”

“A horse.” Dulan’s eyebrows went up. “And are we being paid to stable the horse?”

“Well ... no. Or maybe yes. It’s the brewer’s horse, and it’s lame. Enthiunn is going to try to heal it. If he can heal it, we get a cask of ale for free.”

“So maybe a cask of ale. What’s that, two crowns?”

“Two crowns threepence.”

“It used to be two crowns.”

“We changed to a new brewer.”

“One who charges more.”

That led to a wrangle about the cost of things. They were still on edge over Adjutant Broufort’s visit, and needed the distraction of arguing about something normal.

Leaving Meery to sort out the problem with the biscuit flour, they went out through the kitchen and across the yard to the stable. The elves had accommodated themselves cozily in one of the empty stalls. Nurrat paused in the act of wiping her daughter’s face with a damp cloth. The old elf was playing some sort of game with the little boy, a game of trading twigs and swiftly twiddling them between the fingers; they paused too, and looked up at the large frowning human.

Dulan’s glance lingered on Enthiunn’s broken horn, and his lips twitched with frustration, but he said nothing about it. Instead, “My niece tells me you lot are from Sa’akna.”

Enthiunn said, “She spoke truly. You are the innkeeper? We are most grateful to be allowed to find comfort here. I shall repay you, when I have money.”

“You’ll pay, or I’ll put you to work. Why did you come here, tell me that.”

“Where else should we have gone?”

“That’s not an answer.”

Enthiunn opened his hand to show its emptiness. “What would you have me say? Our home was no longer safe. To travel became necessary. It came to me that this was our true destination.”

“Then nobody sent you. Nobody told you to seek us out by name.”

“I hope you will forgive my ignorance, innkeeper. I have not been told your name.”

Dulan stared at the elf for a long moment. “Well, it’s been twelve years. Maybe by now the dust has settled. The name Dulan Petravian means nothin’ to you, then?”

Enthiunn said politely, “Should it?”

“No. No. Sa’akna’s a big place, no reason you would have heard about any of it. Or Kyura Lanviana?”

“This is your niece. She told us her name. We had not heard it before this. Should we have? Are you persons of importance?”

“Us?” Dulan threw his head back and tried for a belly-laugh, but it rang hollow. “Don’t make me laugh. I got work to do. See you stay out of the way. Oh, and one more thing.” He leveled a finger at the elves. “Nobody better hear you talking Sa’aknan. If I hear a word of it, you’re right out on the street.”



4

Puzzle Pieces



MORE THAN A DOZEN GUESTS had gathered for supper in the common room, and more came as the early arrivals departed. Kyura and Meery were busy for two hours taking orders, bringing food, counting out pennies in change, clearing the tables, and taking more orders. Dulan Petravian presided behind the bar, red-faced and boisterous, serving ale and swapping loud-voiced stories with the regulars. By the time the crowd thinned out, twilight was deepening into night. Candles flickered on the tables, and three wizard-lanterns suspended from the rafters cast their cool smokeless glow across the room.

Kyura put an untouched meat pie on a tray, along with a loaf of bread, tableware, and a bowl of peas and sliced carrots in butter. As an afterthought, she added a new candle in a stubby earthenware candlestick, and a couple of matches to light it. She wasn't sure what sort of food elves ate, but it would have to do.

In the stable, the elves had swept out one of the empty stalls and rolled up a couple of thick horse blankets to sit on. Their suitcases yawned open, and their meager belongings lay scattered here and there. One of the youngsters was sitting on Nurrat's lap. The old elf was lying down, and seemed to be asleep.

"I brought some food." Kyura set the tray on the ground, then set the candle on a shelf and lit it. "I hope it's what you like."

"It will be very nice, I'm sure," Nurrat said. "You are very kind."

Kyura's eye was caught by a glimpse of something in one of the open suitcases — a bright wedge of green, only partly wrapped by a cloth that had fallen open. She stared at it, and pointed. "What is that?"

"Oh, that." Enthiunn covered it quickly with the cloth, and then looked at her carefully, as if seeking something in her face. "It is a small thing we brought with us from home. A thing by which to remember a time when happiness was more easily to be encountered."

"But it looked like — I'm sorry, I don't mean to pry. It looked like something I — can you tell me what it is?"

Enthiunn regarded her soberly, his almond elf eyes dancing in the reflected glow of the candle flame. "You speak the language of our homeland," he said in Sa'aknan. "How came you to know this language?"

"I was born there," she said. "My aunt and uncle brought me here, to this city, when I was five years old."

"Ah. Then you know the worship of Akneora."

"Not really. My aunt had a shrine to Akneora, but my uncle says gods are nonsense. There are lots of gods in Lorvondes — Lathikni, Tyvik, Aurum. We don't worship any of them."

"Do you remember the ceremonies of the holy days in our homeland?"

Kyura shook her head. "I was only a little girl. I think they must have taken me to the festivals, but I don't remember. Maybe my mother took me. I guess she would have. My aunt told me once that my mother was a servant in the house of the high priest, so I guess she would have taken me."

Nurrat looked at Kyura curiously. "Not to remember your mother," she said. "This is a sad thing. Your aunt must have shared stories about her."

Kyura's eyes stung with tears. "Not really. My aunt and uncle would never talk much about her, only that she was pretty and liked to laugh. Sometimes I think I remember things that happened, but it's like smoke. I think there was some trouble." She paused to shudder. A door closing? A cry of distress from behind the door? But it slipped away again. "I think that must

have been why we came here. First we went to Sparaven, and then we came on further to Lorvondes, but when I asked about the trouble they would always change the subject. After a while I stopped asking.”

“There was trouble,” Enthiunn said. “Yes, most assuredly. You said you came here when you were five years old? That would have been how many years ago? For me to judge the ages of humans is not easy.”

“Twelve years.”

Enthiunn nodded. “And you said your mother was a servant in the house of the high priest. This is as I had not dared hope.” Swiftly he knelt and lifted a slim cloth-wrapped bundle out of the suitcase. “I am not wise in the ways of the gods,” he said. “I am only a herder of wharns. But I think I am to show you this.”

He lifted away the concealing fold of cloth. Nestled within the cloth was a flat wedge of green, a narrow triangle. The long sides of the triangle were rough and jagged, as if they had been broken, but the base was a smooth convex curve. A design of some sort was carved into the face of the wedge.

Kyura’s breath caught in her throat. This was completely impossible. “That’s mine! It’s mine!” She grabbed at the green wedge. Enthiunn pulled it back, away from her. “You sneaked upstairs and stole it! You’re thieves! Give it to me! And then get out, get out right now!”

Enthiunn exchanged a swift glance with his wife. “I assure you,” he said, “we brought this with us from Sa’akna. If you do not believe me, you must ask my wife.”

“Don’t take me for stupid. She’d lie for you.” Kyura lunged for it again, and he backed away from her. She tried to corner him at the rear of the stall, but he ducked and got past her, nearly nicking her arm with one of his horns. The candle teetered on its shelf, and she had to pause to right it. The little ones were standing up now, whimpering uneasily, and the old elf had sat up blinking. In the next stall a horse nickered and stamped.

Kyura glared at Enthiunn, breathing hard. Her fingers still twitched, but she could see that trying to grab something while

an elf is holding it, even if the elf has only one long sharp horn, could be suicidal.

“This fragment is a part of a larger whole,” Enthiunn said carefully. “Or so I have long been convinced. My people share among ourselves what is said by the humans, and in this way I came to know of events that took place twelve years ago, in the trouble of which you spoke. Some say that a thing of great importance was broken apart, though others deny it. So I must ask: Is it possible that you have in your possession another part of the same whole?” Eagerness crept up in his voice.

“Another part?” Confused, she paused. “I guess maybe — let me look at it. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said what I said. Don’t worry, I won’t try to grab it.” She picked up the candle and held it close to the green wedge, which he held out cautiously, keeping a firm grip. “I think the design is different from mine. The letters along the curved side are not the same, and the lines are different too.” Now she felt embarrassed. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said what I said. You’re not a thief.”

He tilted his head back, pointing his chin at her. She guessed this must be an elf gesture of accepting an apology. Pointing your horns away from someone would mean that you were assuring them you wouldn’t fight.

A thought teased the edges of her mind. Running down the street carrying a sack? “I think maybe — were there some other pieces? I don’t remember.” She knocked knuckles against the side of her head. That didn’t help. “I’ll go get mine,” she said. “I’ll bring a better light, too, so we can look at them side by side.”

Trotting across the stable yard, she was roiled by old emotions. The flat piece of green stone, safely tucked away in the bottom drawer of her dresser, was all she had left to remind her of her mother. Her mother had given it to her the day before her aunt and uncle took her away in the wagon. Or maybe several days before; by now the memories were jumbled and slippery. And then a red-headed man—? Her mother shouting for her to run?

She snagged a candle from the common room, dashed upstairs, yanked open the bottom drawer of her dresser, and

groped in the back for the keepsake. There it was, wrapped in a tattered piece of cloth. The wedge of green stone was flat, not as thick as her finger, and shorter than the length of her hand. The long sides were uneven and came to a sharp point, but the curved edge at the other end was smooth. It was shaped more or less like a slice of pie. She could see that it must be a piece of a disk. Someone must have hit the center of the disk with a hammer, so that it shattered.

She went back downstairs more slowly. What could it mean that Enthiunn had another green wedge like this one? Had he known her mother? She stood on a bench to unhook a lantern from a rafter in the common room and went back out to the stable.

Enthiunn said, "May I see?" After hesitating, she held it out to him. He handled it carefully, turned it over to inspect the back, and handed it back to her. "Unquestionably," he said. "Never had I hoped to see such a thing."

"But what *is* it? It looks like they're parts of something that got broken. What was it?"

"Today there is a new high priest in Sa'akna," he said. "He is only a few years older than you. His name is Tornibrac. He ascended to his throne twelve years ago, as a mere boy. His mother was his counselor then; now she is gone, and he rules Sa'akna alone."

"What does that have to do with—"

"Patience. The tale is not so swiftly told. For many years — hundreds of years, if the stories told are true — the high priest of Akneora has worn on his breast a disk of purest leafstone, a talisman whose face is carved with symbols of the magic of the ancients. At the holy festivals, the high priest would heal the sick using its magic.

"At the festivals today Tornibrac Ila'akna wears a disk of leafstone. It looks much as it did before. But when the gravely ill are brought before him, he does not heal them. The disk he wears, or so it is whispered, is a counterfeit. It has no power. The true disk has vanished.

"Others say the disk is as it was before, but the new high

priest does not know its magic and cannot use it, or that he wears a counterfeit because the real disk is too precious to be worn in public, though in the past it had always been worn. The story that seems to me most likely is that the true disk was broken apart. I prefer this story because I myself found such a broken piece, lying forgotten under a bush along a path in the forest. What became of the other pieces, I do not know.”

Kyura’s heart was beating fast. “These are part of the talisman?”

Enthiunn nodded solemnly. “Unless I am badly mistaken,” he said, “what you see before you is all that remains of the Leafstone Shield.”



5

The Breaking



THE DOOR OUGHT TO HAVE BEEN locked, but it wasn't. It wasn't even properly closed; a narrow gap lay open, a thin vertical ribbon of darkness between the edge of the door and the door-frame. A sturdy door of heavy dark wood bound with iron, it stood in a curved wall of well-finished stone blocks in the palace of Ila'akna. Jessamela Goufria paused, the intricate key in her hand halfway to the keyhole, to stare at the gap, perplexed but not yet alarmed.

For six months, ever since her husband died, she had been putting off this painful task. Beyond the door lay a curving staircase that led up to the tower room that had been her husband's workshop. When Alfric Goufria and his two assistants died in a terrible accident, the palace chamberlain asked her if they should pack up the tools of his art and his scrolls of lore and bring them across the city to her home. She said, "No. Leave all that to me. I'll see to it."

And then she delayed, and delayed, and delayed again. Four times since then she had come to the palace — first when Froese Ila'akna fell ill, again when he died and the funeral rites were being readied, and twice since then for reasons just as soaked in sorrow. Each time she had walked up to this door, taken the key from her purse, hesitated, put the key back in her purse, and walked away. If anyone had asked why she avoided the room, she would have said, "It may have been, you know, that as long as the workshop remained intact, in some sense Alfric wasn't truly

dead. He might come striding in the front door at any moment, laughing, and sweep me up in a hug. A foolish fancy, of course, but when a loved one dies, foolish fancies rise up like wisps of mist and wrap themselves around one quite tenaciously.”

Each time she came to the palace and then went away again, the door was securely locked. Or at least shut, and surely locked; she hadn't tested it. The chamberlain knew to keep it locked. Some of the tools of wizardry in the workshop were deadly. Only now it wasn't locked.

Half an hour before, as she sat sipping tea in her front parlor, the feeling had swept over her quite powerfully and without warning. *I must go to the tower.* Must I? *Yes.* Now. Edgy, fighting nervous urgency, she nonetheless took a few moments to comb her hair and put on the dark gray headscarf of widow's mourning. It was too fine a day to call at the stable for a pony trap, so she walked. Twice she found herself breaking into a trot, and forced herself to slow. The room had been shut up for months; what difference would a few minutes make?

The palace of Ila'akna was a broad, deep two-story home faced in brilliant white stucco through which protruded heavy dark beams. The palace and grounds filled an entire city block on a street of dignified but less imposing mansions. The circular towers at the front were wide but no taller than the rest of the building, and were topped with shallow conical roofs rather than battlements; the palace had never been designed to withstand a military assault. Well-tended gardens surrounded it, rich with fragrant blossom and sonorous with birdsong. Wide, shallow steps led up to the front doors, a pair of uniformed men with pikes always standing ready to open the doors. Most arrivals would send in a message and wait to be received, but Jessamela was known here, and was admitted without ceremony.

Across the imposing entry hall, down a side hallway to the tower door, her hand reaching into her purse for the key — but the door was already open.

She opened it wider and moved softly up the stairs. The dozen chemical reeks of a wizard's work had faded little; they might have been baked into the stone. The light on the stairs

was poor. Halfway up, she heard a voice above, a high childish voice lifted in a wordless sound that was like laughter but far more unsettling than laughter.

When she burst into the big circular room, she knew already whose voice she had heard. Tornibrac Maervilna, eight years old and the grandson of Froese by his daughter Ismaeva, stood in the center of the room, rocking unsteadily from foot to foot.

The windows were curtained, letting through only a dim brown radiance that cast no shadows. In his right hand Tornibrac held Alfric Goufria's scepter. Sparks coursed up and down the scepter like trapped and angry fireflies. And from the surface of the work table a green radiance blossomed to the ceiling.

Tornibrac's eyes, when he turned toward her, were wide with guilt and fear, but also with a kind of oily triumph. He dropped the scepter clattering to the floor and rushed past her toward the stairs. But before he plunged down and out of sight he turned and said harshly, "I didn't do anything! And don't you dare tell lies about me!" Then he was gone.

She picked up the scepter and went to look at what was on the worktable. And gasped, her heart sinking through the floor.

The Leafstone Shield lay shattered — broken into six pieces. The power of the long-departed ancients, handed down across hundreds of years of sacred tradition, the magic of healing and so much more, struck apart by a spiteful and mean-spirited boy. He couldn't have done it with an ordinary hammer; the Shield wouldn't have permitted it. No, he had done it using Jessamela's husband's scepter, which she had failed for six months to pack up and take away.

Somehow he had gained access to the cabinet where the Shield was kept. Somehow he had found a way to unlock the workshop door. But he was right about one thing: She couldn't tell anyone. Not having cleaned out the workshop months before, she was as much to blame as the boy, or nearly as much. And Ismaeva was a vicious, hateful woman. Either she wouldn't believe a word Jessamela said about her son, or she would find a way to turn it against Jessamela. She could claim Jessamela had done this awful thing and then lied about Tornibrac's

involvement. Could have her arrested. Hanged.

What to do? Leave the pieces lying here? No, that wouldn't do. When the Shield was found to be missing, the palace would be turned upside down searching, and when it was found here, the fingers of accusation would point straight at Jessamela. Jessamela herself was no wizard, but her husband had taught her a few things. Maybe she could work a spell that would put the thing together again, and then slip it back into the cabinet downstairs before anyone noticed it was gone. Or let it be found lying innocently in the garden.

Swiftly, her breath catching in her throat, she gathered up the pieces and put them in her purse. Now where might Alfric have kept a spell that would mend — mend what? A broken plate, perhaps. A trivial spell, something a wizard would teach to a first-year apprentice. The shelves along the walls were packed with hundreds of scrolls. She rummaged among them hurriedly and found three that looked promising.

Leaving the scepter — it was too long to fit into her purse, and she knew enough of magic to know she could not wield it safely, it was a miracle Tornibrac's hand hadn't been burned the moment he gripped it — she tiptoed down the stairs and stood listening at the door until she was sure nobody was passing by. Then out the door. Locking it took only a moment. Unobserved, other than by the footman who opened the palace's great front door for her, she swept down the marble steps, across the garden, and out the gate.



WHEN YOU'RE IN LOVE, being reasonable is not easy or natural. When you've had a child by the man you love, and he still won't marry you — not because he's already married, or even because he's in love with someone else, but because his family wouldn't approve — being reasonable may not be possible at all. But Geritta was doing her best, such as it was. Things were changing in the palace, changing rapidly. Clauvom's family weren't an obstacle anymore. His father, old Froese, was gone now, and his

older brother too. In a few days Clauvom would be anointed the new high priest, taking his father's place on the throne. And Clauvom still loved Geritta, she was sure of that! She had never doubted it.

Jessamela ought to understand. She ought to be willing to talk to Clauvom. But for some reason she was balking.

Jessamela was sitting on the brocade couch in her front parlor. The curtains were drawn. She was shading her eyes with one hand, not looking at Geritta. Geritta was trying to be reasonable.

"My sweet Clauvom needs a wife! He needs someone beside him who is on his side! His sister isn't. She hates him. Promise me you'll talk to him, Aunt Jessamela. Tell him — tell him I'll do anything! He can trust me."

"I'm sure he cares for you, dear. But there are political considerations."

"I don't see why." Geritta paced up and down. "Beoln's wife was nobody special. Her father is a shopkeeper. A shopkeeper! I'm every bit as good as her. Tell me if I'm not!" Beoln was Clauvom's older brother, and would have been first in line for the throne, if he hadn't died.

Jessamela said, "Have you considered the danger?"

"That's over now. My sweet Clauvom will have it all in hand. Lonimar killed Beoln, but now Ditmas has dealt with Lonimar as he deserved." Ismaeva was Clauvom's sister, and Lonimar was Ismaeva's husband. Ditmas was the youngest of the three brothers, and had taken revenge on Lonimar by killing him. "The danger's over! It will all be back to normal. You'll see."

"And not just Beoln," Jessamela said gently. "His wife and sons died too."

"That was an accident. Everybody said so. The boat capsized and they drowned."

Jessamela sighed. "Sometimes everybody says the things that are safe to say. If you had spent as many years in and out of the palace as I have, you'd understand that." She dropped her hand from her eyes to look at Geritta in a weary tilted way. "I'm fond of you, Geritta, you know that. As fond as if your mother

and I had truly been sisters, not just dear friends. So I must tell you, this is not a moment when it would be safe for you to press forward. Even if you had the means to do so.”

“But I do have the means! Kyura! She’s his daughter. He loves her, I know he does. Now that he’s to be the high priest, he’ll need an heir.”

“Yes, dear, I suppose he will.” Jessamela covered her eyes again. “Forgive me. I’m not at my best this afternoon. I believe I’ll go upstairs and lie down for a while. You can see yourself out.” She rose and crossed the room haltingly.

“Are you — is something wrong? Can I get you something?”

“I’m a very foolish woman,” Jessamela said. “I should have known better than to try it. But who else was there? Whom could I trust?”

Geritta had no idea what that might mean, but curiosity was not one of her dominant traits; or rather, her curiosity was highly selective. While rolling out bread dough in the palace kitchen or arranging the cups and saucers on a serving tray she often dreamed about the lacy blouses and embroidered skirts she had glimpsed in a shop window, wondering how they would look on her, or wondering whether she ought to try putting her hair up in side combs. On a free afternoon she was at the shop trying things on, satisfying her curiosity, even though the pennies she was paid as a kitchen helper could have purchased none of the finery. She knew she was beautiful. Clauvom said so, but so did everybody else. Clauvom had bought her lots of nice things, but since his father died he had been too busy to pay much attention to her. He hadn’t been to the cozy little room he rented for her downtown in — how long had it been? Even before his father fell ill. A year? Surely not that long! She knew he still loved her. She was prepared to be forgiving.

Not wondering much about why Jessamela felt unwell, she wandered out to the kitchen. The disorder was worse than usual, the dishes in the sink not yet washed. The maid must not have come in today. Maybe Jessamela would like a little glass of wine, that might help her feel better. Geritta went into the pantry to see if there was a bottle already opened. Maybe even a little sip

for herself, before she went on her way.

And what was this? Wrapped in loose folds of cloth on a low shelf. Apples? Fresh figs? She laid back the folds of cloth.

And gasped. Of course she knew at once what it was. Ever since she was a little girl she had seen Froese Ila'akna wear it proudly on his breast in the great ceremonies. But — broken? The Leafstone Shield broken? How was that even possible? And what was it doing here, in Jessamela's pantry?

Her first thought was to rush upstairs and blurt out a dozen questions. How had it gotten here? Had somebody brought it? Had Jessamela broken it herself? No, that was ridiculous. Aunt Jessamela would never do such a thing.

In the moment when Geritta scooped up the cloth and wrapped it around the broken pieces, a new thought intruded, and she paused to weigh it. Clauvom, her sweet Clauvom, would shortly be invested as the new high priest. The Leafstone Shield was rightfully his! He must already know it was missing. If she took it to him, even in its damaged state (and surely a wizard could repair it without trouble), he would see at once how devoted she was to him. Well, he knew that already, she had shown it often enough. He would be *indebted* to her, that was the truth of it. Indebted forevermore. She would have proved not only her devotion but her worth! The first words out of his mouth would be, "Beloved Geritta, please say you'll marry me." There was not the slightest doubt of it.

The loose cloth was no way to carry such a thing through the streets. On another shelf she found a burlap sack, not large. She slipped the pieces of the Leafstone Shield into it. On the way out the kitchen door she hesitated. Should she tell Jessamela what she was doing? No, Jessamela didn't feel well. She was taking a nap. No sense disturbing her. Later, after it was all put right, the two of them could have a good laugh about how unexpectedly it had all worked out for the best.

Geritta had gone no more than half a block, walking briskly, when she had an even better idea.



Cake Spoons for Breakfast



AUNT TIMABARA WAS STRICT about letting Kyura go out the gate into the street, because Kyura was only five. But she was allowed to play in the garden behind the inn. One day she was playing in the garden with Enjie. Enjie was a friendly dog with brown spots, who came sometimes to sniff around the garden. She was trying to teach Enjie to talk. Enjie liked the talking lessons, but he never said anything, only “woof.” It was a sunny afternoon.

And then Kyura’s mommy came. Kyura ran to her mommy and hugged her. Kyura didn’t see her mommy sometimes for days and days. Kyura lived with her Aunt Timabara and Uncle Dulan, and she loved them very much, but she loved her mommy too, just as much.

Today Kyura’s mommy was carrying a little cloth sack. She kind of fumbled the sack when she picked Kyura up to hug her, and it made a clinking noise, but she didn’t drop it. “Would you like to go see your daddy?” she said. “Let’s go see your daddy!”

“And then we can go in the kitchen and I get to lick the cake spoon?” That was always the best part of going to see Daddy. Once or twice Daddy had patted Kyura on the top of her head and ruffled her hair, but he never picked her up or hugged her. Daddy lived in a great big house called a palace with his brothers and his sister and footmen and maids and gardeners and a butler with whiskers. Mommy worked in the kitchen in the big house.

“That too. We’ve got a surprise for him. A great big surprise. We’ll give it to him together.”

“Is that what’s in the sack?”

“That’s right.” Geritta put Kyura down and took her hand.

“Should we tell Aunt Timabara where we’re going?”

“Let’s not. We’ll be back before she even knows you’re gone.”

They walked across the city to Kyura’s daddy’s house. It was a long walk. Geritta was humming a little tune. She looked really happy.

“What’s the surprise? Show me.”

Geritta looked around. Nobody on the street was paying any special attention to them. “It’s a secret,” she said. “Can you keep a secret?”

“I’m really good at secrets.”

Geritta opened the sack and let Kyura peek inside. “It’s the most precious thing your daddy owns. Maybe the most precious thing in the whole world!”

Kyura reached into the sack and pulled out a piece of something green. It was shaped like a slice of pie, but flat. There were squiggly lines carved on one side, and things that looked like letters, but Kyura knew her letters, and these weren’t like the letters she knew. She didn’t know what the green piece of something was, but she could see it was broken. There were more pieces like it in the sack, that was why the sack clinked.

Her mommy made her put it back in the sack. “When we get there you can take it out again and give it to Daddy yourself. You’ll say, ‘Daddy, this is yours. I brought it back to you.’ Then he’ll see how much you love him.”

“And then I get to lick the cake spoon?”

“We’ll have cake spoons for breakfast every day, sweetie. For supper too.”

They went in through the entrance behind the big house, the entrance the footmen and maids and gardeners used, but instead of going to the kitchen the way they usually did, they went straight up the stairs and down a long hall Kyura had seen only a few times before, when they came upstairs to see Daddy. There were lots of pictures along the hall, big pictures of people

wearing fancy clothes, and there were chairs with legs carved into curls and rugs on the floor with red and gold flowers and vines in them.

At a door near the end of the hall, Geritta said softly, "Let's just peek in and see if Daddy is here, and if he's alone. Here, sweetie — you hold this." She handed Kyura the sack, opened the door softly, and peeked in.

Geritta's breath caught in her throat in a shuddery way, like she almost couldn't breathe. When she turned to Kyura her face was white. "Go — you don't want to see, honey. You wait here while I — no, go downstairs, that's better. Go downstairs and wait. Mommy will be down in a little while. And don't worry, honey. Don't be scared. Mommy loves you."

Kyura could see from Geritta's face that there was something really bad in Daddy's room. She hugged Geritta quickly and then went back down the hall. When she turned to look, Geritta had already gone into the room and closed the door. There was nobody in the hall. But then, through the door, she heard Geritta start to say something, only half a word that ended in a cry that wasn't a word at all, and then there was a soft, heavy sound, a sound like someone falling. That was even scarier. Kyura hesitated. Should she go back and see if Mommy was all right? But no, she was supposed to wait downstairs. So she went on, the sack banging against her leg and making the clinking sounds, down the stairs into the big front hall of the palace.

She waited for a long time, but her mommy didn't come down the stairs. People came and went in the front hall. One of the maids stopped and said, "Hello, Kyura."

Kyura said, "I'm waiting for Mommy."

"Oh, that's all right, then. You just wait right here."

A very tall blond man came in the front door with two other men. A footman helped them take off their hats and gloves. The tall blond man glanced at Kyura, and she thought his eyes were like sharp chunks of ice. He went on across the front hall and up the stairs.

Before too long after that, suddenly people were running and shouting. A man came running down the stairs so fast he almost

stumbled and fell, and he shouted, "Ila'akna! A doctor! Send for a doctor!" Then other people were running and shouting. Kyura backed up against the wall to be out of the way. One of the footmen rushed out the front door and left it standing open. Kyura thought she would rather be outside, so nobody would bump into her when they were running, so she went out the door into the garden.

She waited for another long time in the garden, but her mommy still didn't come. Carriages came and people went into the palace, and nobody paid any attention to the little girl in the garden. She thought about it and decided Ila'akna was what they called Daddy. He must be hurt, that was what Mommy had seen through the door, so Mommy was probably really busy taking care of him right now, too busy to come downstairs and find Kyura. Kyura decided she should go home. So she went out the gate and down the street.

She thought she knew the way home, but she must have taken a wrong turn, because she got lost. The street wasn't one she had ever been on before. She went on slowly. Maybe she should go back to the palace, but she wasn't sure she could find her way back, so she went on. She was scared, and not sure what she was scared of, and that made it worse.

She went down a wide, important street, wagons and carts and carriages rumbling back and forth, women with shopping baskets, two men carrying a ladder, another man jingling past on a horse with harness that sparkled in the sun. At the sound of running feet behind her she thought it might be her mommy coming, or somebody chasing her. She turned to look back over her shoulder, but it was only a boy wearing a blocky cap, who dashed along waving a piece of paper and ducked into the door of a shop.

Because she wasn't watching where she was going, she bumped into — she looked up. A stocky red-haired young man put out a hand to steady her and said, "Careful where you're goin', little lady."

He had a nice smile, but she wasn't to talk to strangers. She only stood there looking at him.

“Are you all by yourself? That ain’t right. Where’s your mommy?”

Kyura pointed back the way she had come. “She’s in the palace.”

“The palace? Does she know you’re out here all by yourself?”

Kyura pressed her lips together and shook her head.

“Does your mommy live in the palace?”

“She works in the kitchen. She works for the high priest. Daddy is going to be the next high priest. Only I think maybe something happened to Daddy.”

The red-haired man thought about this for a minute. “What’s your name, honey?”

“Kyura. Kyura Lanviana.”

“And what do you have in the sack, Kyura? Can I see?”

Kyura hugged the sack tighter. “No. It’s a secret. It belongs to Daddy. I’m supposed to give it to him.”

“Well, then, maybe we could take it to him. Together, the two of us. Would you like that?”

That was a hard question. Kyura didn’t know what to say.

“But first you have to show me what it is. I wouldn’t want to take it to him if it’s a snake, would I?”

“It’s not a snake.” Grownups could be so stupid sometimes.

“Then what is it? Show me.”

Reluctantly she slid her hand into the sack and brought out one of the green flat pie-slice-shaped pieces.

His eyes got wide. “Do you know what that is?”

“It’s a thing the high priest wears sometimes. Only it got broken.”

Without warning he grabbed the sack and twisted it out of her hands. He tried to grab the piece she was holding too, but she yanked it away from him and backed up.

He glanced into the sack and said, “Ohh. Moon and stars! Without this, the stinkin’ priests got no more power!” He moved toward her, large and not smiling now. “Give that to me, honey. That’s the whole future of this whole country you got there! What let’s do, let’s toss the whole rotten thing in the river, you and me.” He hefted the sack as if to hurl it. “Be done with it.”

“It’s not yours, it’s my daddy’s! Give it back!”

“Oh, no. Oh, no. Now you give me that bit there. Don’t be selfish. There’s things you don’t know nothin’ about. Important things.”

Kyura turned and ran. For a while the red-haired man was running after her, shouting, but she didn’t stop. She ducked underneath the wheels of a wagon and then dashed down an alley and came out on a different street, and now he wasn’t following her anymore, and she was on a street she knew. She knew how to get back to the inn.

But what if somebody came along and tried to take the one piece of the green thing she still had? She slipped it up under her shirt and walked along, very fast, with her elbow pressed tight against it.

She didn’t know what had been happening in the palace, but she knew what stealing was. The red-haired man had stolen the sack. Once she had seen Uncle Dulan hit a man with his fists, which scared her a lot until Aunt Timabara explained that the man was a bad man who had been stealing money from the cash box. Maybe she should tell Uncle Dulan about the red-haired man, and he could hit him and make him give back Mommy’s sack.

But the closer she got to the inn, the less she was thinking about the red-haired man and the more she was thinking about what might have happened to Mommy and Daddy. When she came in through the kitchen Aunt Timabara was giving the cook instructions for supper, and didn’t even glance at her. Kyura waited for a minute, but she didn’t know what to say. When Aunt Timabara didn’t pause to look over at her, she went up the back stairs to her room and threw herself down on her bed. She hurt all over, and she felt hot and cold at the same time. But she couldn’t curl up into a ball, because the flat green piece was still under her shirt. So she got up again, took it out, and put it in her toy basket. She would keep it until she saw her mommy again. Even though she had lost the rest of it, Mommy would know she did the best she could.

Or would Mommy be angry because she had let the red-

haired man steal the rest of it? Maybe it was her fault he stole it.

It was close to supper time when Kyura woke up to find Aunt Timabara sitting on the edge of her bed, stroking her hair. Aunt Timabara's eyes were red.

Kyura said, "Did my mommy come back yet?"

Timabara pulled out a big handkerchief and snuffled into it for a minute. When she lowered the handkerchief there were tears on her cheeks. "No, honey. Your mommy hasn't come back."

"So she's still at the palace? We could go see her?"

"I don't think that would be such a good idea. Not right now." Timabara paused. "You said, 'still.' Were you there with her? Today?"

"We went to give Daddy something. I had it in a sack. Mommy told me to wait downstairs, but then she didn't come down, so I thought I should go home. And then a man on the street grabbed the sack and took it! Did somebody hurt Daddy?"

"Yes, dear. Somebody hurt Daddy. And that — that's a very bad thing for all of us. Your uncle and I have been talking about it. For a while now we've been talking, about what we would do if—" Timabara paused to snuffle into the handkerchief again. "Would you like to go away, dear? Would you like to go live in a new place? In another city?"

"And could Mommy come too?"

"I — I think that might be difficult. Maybe she can. We'll see. What we're going to do until then — your uncle is going to try to find a buyer for the inn. He knows a man who may be interested. So as soon as the man buys the inn, we can load all our things in a wagon and go down the canyon to Sparaven. But until then, we think it would be better if you stay in the secret room."



MAYBE THROWING IT IN THE RIVER wasn't such a hot idea. He had to get rid of it fast, no doubt about that. They'd be searching for it. They'd have wizards searching for it. Wizards had ways of finding things. If they found him with it he'd be as good as dead.

All of it in one sack in the river, though — no. That would make it too easy for them.

He went down to the railroad yard and slipped one piece through a crack in the door of a freight car. Whoever unloaded the car in Sparaven wouldn't even know what they had. The second piece — sure, the river, why not? It went off the edge of a dock at a moment when he was sure no one was watching. Another he gave to a friend who happened to be saddling up to ride south, across the mountains to Dorinda and the sea. "Lose it somewhere," he said. "I don't care where. I don't even want to know."

He took a hike out of the city and left the road to tramp through the woods — it was near sunset now, the shadows long — and tossed one piece under a bush. That left only one.

As he was puzzling what to do with it, he spotted a sprite eyeing him from a low branch. He whistled a few notes. Sprites were fascinated by whistling. The sprite sprang from the branch and fluttered toward him. Such a beautiful little thing, its whole body no longer than his arm, its filmy wings dancing with a rainbow of colors. Naked, of course, and this one was a boy-sprite.

He fished the last piece out of the sack. "Would you like something pretty? Pretty?"

The boy-sprite reached out its tiny hands. "Pretty-pretty!"

"Fly away with it. Take it far away. It's yours if you promise to take it far, far away." A sprite's promise was worth exactly nothing, he knew that. But giving it a suggestion wouldn't hurt.

The sprite said, "Promise-iss-iss-ss. Take pretty far-far-far."

"Good boy. Fly far with it. Precious pretty. Just for you, not for big people. Take it."

The sprite wrapped both arms around the wedge of leafstone. It was almost as big as the sprite's whole chest. It flitted off into the sunset forest, taking with it the last piece of the Leafstone Shield.

Moran Ibramavin dusted his hands, well satisfied. Someday Sa'akna would be ruled by a secular government. Maybe even not too long now. Any step that weakened the grip of the priests

was a step in the right direction, he was sure of that — and thanks to that little girl, whoever she was, he had just taken a very big step.

Several years passed before he began to wonder whether possibly getting rid of it had been a mistake. If he had kept it, possibly he and his friends could have learned to use its magic, and maybe some good would have come of it. But even then, he wasn't about to admit to anyone that he was having second thoughts. Boasting that he had personally deprived the high priest of a potent weapon — that boast gave them all hope for the future, and clinging to hope was all they had.