

Niera's Prophecy

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ABSTRACT

Niera's Prophecy

Aliko Tryphonopoulos

Niera's Prophecy is a novella-length fiction about jealousy, integrity and the acceptance of self. It is set in an arid land where the civilized live in walled city-kingdoms and the "uncivilized" live nomadically in the more inhospitable regions of the desert. Niera, the king's unrecognized daughter, suffers from her father's indifference and from envy of her half sister, Princess Meriope. When Niera becomes the apprentice of the court soothsayer, she believes she has finally found a way to distinguish herself. She soon discovers that being a soothsayer requires an impartiality and selflessness that are difficult to achieve. Her own prophetic sight is partial and incomplete, reflecting her inability to let go of her desires. When the court soothsayer is expelled from the palace, Niera finds herself in the position to make a judgement that will affect Meriope's future. Her actions lead to an unforeseen tragedy from which she gains an understanding of herself. Although *Niera's Prophecy* does not explicitly critique gender and class relationships, inequalities in both form the background of the story (e.g. the role of the female soothsayer in government, Meriope's bride price, women's mobility, Niera's view of the commoners, and the prejudice against the nomadic tribes).

For Gerhard Klaassen,
as sure as little green apples

Special thanks to my readers, Kate Sterns, Jeannie Hager and Daniel Moure, and to my wonderful family.

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I

The glass was old and wavy, and reflected back a darker vision of the bed chamber. Niera could not see her own face or features, only her outline, a curved void in the room.

Meriope was partially illuminated in profile where she sat on her bed, thoughtful and still, like the sentimental images of young mystics sold in the bazaar. A month ago, she would have been wearing the hodden robe with the waist braid knotted in the fashion of the cloister, but now she had on the latest styles from Har Alista. The real mystics, at least the ones Niera stayed with at the Wind Tunnels cloister, were not at all romantic. They were old and strict, preserved like honey dates by the desert sun. They tended to be brusque in the mornings, walking barefoot through the chilly canyons when the sky still looked like an indigo river overhead. But Meriope had not gone to the Wind Tunnels for her awakening. After two months in the cloister at Har Alista, she had spent another week in the city itself, making her social début and being fitted for her post-awakening clothes.

“You've been quiet about your trip,” Niera said, turning from the window.

“I thought the cloister was beautiful. I wish I could have stayed longer.”

“They didn't work you hard then.”

“I did the same chores as the others. I sieved water until my arms ached. I served pilgrims and beggars. I even served nomads,” Meriope said, and smiled. “I'm glad they didn't treat me specially.”

“Did you feel homesick?”

“Two months is not that long, really.”

“They didn’t cut your hair.” This was the first thing Niera had noticed. She had been expecting to see her half-sister’s famous mane scythed to a dark stubble. She should have known Anar would interfere even in this.

“They took a lock. Their tapestry already spans two walls in the prayer room. They have to be conservative or every surface in the cloister would be covered.”

“They only used a lock of mine,” Niera said. “But they took it all anyway.”

“The practice is falling out of favour at Har Alista. None of the other awakened had their heads shaved either.”

Niera sniffed. Evidently, the mystics at Har Alista thought nothing of flouting the traditions the desert peoples had lived by for centuries. The shaving of the head symbolized the birth into consciousness, the maturation of the body and spirit. Niera wondered if Meriope could fully awaken if she clung to her old hair.

“Thank you for the scarf,” Meriope said, smoothing out the twisted fringes. “It looks old. Was it your mother’s?”

Niera was about to say no.

“Yes.”

She watched Meriope’s expression, but Meriope merely folded the topaz scarf and put it aside. It was unlike her to be so quiet and contemplative. If Niera had thought it possible, she would have said that Meriope was sad. It had surprised her to learn that Meriope had not yet seen her best friend, Eissa, who was still a year from her own awakening and probably half-maddened with curiosity about Meriope’s. She had already

been home two days, so something serious had happened. Niera could not ask directly; Meriope would only insist nothing was wrong. But perhaps, Niera thought, now that Meriope had awakened, she might want to confide in someone more mature. Niera herself had awakened ten months earlier, directly after her own fifteenth year. It could be that Meriope was simply uneasy knowing that she had but a year before she would be marriageable. Niera knew all about that horror.

“May I?” Niera asked, her hand resting on the ornamental sash across the windows. Meriope nodded. Niera lifted it and pushed the windows outward, breathing the warm, fragrant air from the garden below—honeysuckle, jasmine, the Queen’s orchids and the sour yoghurt smell of a bush the gardener called *lemonthorn*. Niera had once asked why they tolerated the plant when it didn’t produce beautiful flowers and its spines betrayed its desert origin. The gardener had told her that it was used to make the soup eaten during the fasting period. This had surprised her, because the soup itself was not sour. “Only a little of the resin is used,” he had said. “Too much and it curdles the soup.” He had added, not without a certain approval, that the *lemonthorn* required less than a hundredth of the water of the other plants in the garden.

“I forgot how nice your view is up here,” Niera said. Her own room at the other end of the palace was almost level with the top of the palace wall. From Meriope’s window, she could see beyond the southern wall of the city itself, where the Basin Lands stretched to the horizon. It was easy to see why Kqaarin was called The Sandcastle City. The adobes were stacked three and four high in places, their humpbacked roofs imitating the dome of the palace court. The city had not been able to grow outward for many years, contained by the once generous parameters of the walls. Now it grew higher and more

convoluted. Passageways switched back, tunnelled beneath houses, or ended abruptly, after winding climbs. Even the bazaar street curved and narrowed in places to the point where people moved only by pushing those ahead.

Niera could hear the fat splash of the private fountain below, where she had once joined Meriope and her friends. She imagined herself floating over the southern wall of the city and out over the Basin Lands. The Wind Tunnels, deep canyons at the southernmost edge of the Northern Desert, would look like a complicated system of veins from the sky. She'd fly over them until they terminated abruptly at the cliff wall overlooking the White Desert. Beyond that ghostly expanse were the fabled Southern Lands, more strange and mythical to her than the coastal lands to the east, which, though further, were still accessible by caravan. In the south, there were said to be cities with green rivers and blue lakes that never dried up, protected by necklaces of snow-capped mountains. Beyond that, a salt sea the colour of lapis lazuli so immense no one could see its end.

A tingling sensation started in Niera's fingers. Her head felt suddenly weightless. *Not now*, she thought, but she knew from years of experience that these moments were beyond her control. She gripped the edge of the windowsill. *Be still*, she commanded, keeping her back to Meriope.

The great southern wall and the moonlit contours of the city were blotted out by darkness. Niera waited for the vision. She was suddenly in a vast space, a colonnaded arcade, lit by shafts of moonlight coming through the roof. The wind made a high whistling sound as it passed the holes overhead. She stood in shadow, a pillar cool and damp at her back. Her feet were bare and cold on the stone floor. Someone was coming down the aisle, silent as a phantom. Niera watched as the robed figure passed through

shafts of moonlight. She was afraid, but excited too. A bird's wings rustled and echoed somewhere above and she flinched. The figure stopped. She saw in the dimness that his face was long and thin. His hair was loose and dark about his shoulders. He turned and disappeared down the row beside her. Niera waited a moment, then slipped along the pillar's edge. She peered out. The row was empty. Her heart thundered as she turned. He was so close she could see the light passing through his iris. Then she, whoever she was, pulled him to her. Sighing, he raised a hand and stroked her hair. *It will be hard for you*, he said. *Harder than you think, Meriope.*

Niera started. She was staring through the darkness at the garden below. The babbling of the fountain greeted her once more.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Niera said, her vision clearing.

"It was one of those fits you used to have, wasn't it?"

"No," Niera said. "I thought I saw something in the garden." She turned from the window, a queasiness settling over her. There was a drop of spittle at the corner of her lip, and she brushed it away.

Meriope was at her side in a moment.

"What did you see?"

"I don't know. Probably the master gardener forgot to uncover the orchids." She returned to her cushion, trying to conceal her dizziness, but Meriope was busy searching the darkness below the window. After a time, she returned to her bed.

Niera found it difficult to look at her. She had discovered Meriope's secret, but not in the way she intended. Who was he? How had Meriope met him? Questions burned

in her mind, but she could not ask them. When she was younger, she had sometimes repeated the things she had seen in her visions, but she was careful not to do so now. Meriope and her friends had noticed her vacant stares, and Ganathar, a haughty daughter of one of the aristocratic houses, had teased her about being possessed.

When Niera looked at Meriope, she saw with surprise that Meriope was blinking back tears.

“The air is dry and bothersome tonight,” Meriope said, standing up. “There must be a sandstorm somewhere.” She went to shut the window. “Would you like some water?”

“Please.”

Meriope filled two glasses with the pitcher on her night table and handed one to Niera. Then she poured some in a basin and splashed her face. Niera took the moment to study the portrait over the bed. The frame had been made from a dark wood imported from a city a month away by caravan. Niera had seen the painting before, but had never felt she could study it to her satisfaction with others present. Meriope had been ten when it was commissioned, her brother Sehad seven. Sehad stood beside the King, his tiny chin raised, his hand grasping the sceptre below their father’s swollen knuckles. The artist must have thought austerity was dignity’s companion, but Niera didn’t believe her father was as severe as the portrait made him seem. His aloofness, she knew, was a result of long suffering. Her eyes flicked to the Queen. She avoided looking at Anar in real life because the Queen was too accustomed to it. With her golden eyes and bronze skin, Anar was an uncommon beauty—although Niera had heard that in the coastal city of Atrad, where Anar was born, even commoners had her colouring. Beside her stood Meriope, tall

and slender, with her mother's bronze skin and honey-streaked hair. Her eyes were a warm brown. She was the only one smiling.

"We don't look very much alike, do we?" Meriope said, coming to sit by her again. Niera sipped her water.

"You took after your mother."

"That's true. But I have Father's tiny ears and eye colour. I get those eye mask freckles if I stay out in the sun too." She laughed.

Niera felt a familiar tightening in her throat. She looked nothing like their father. This had been the source of rumours among the aristocracy, which grieved her deeply in private. Meriope seemed to sense her discomfort, because she leaned forward, her face compassionate.

"Do you ever wonder what your mother looked like?"

"I was told to stand before the glass," Niera said. She had never seen a portrait of her mother. Pulji told her the King had had them removed after her death, although Niera suspected Anar's hand. None of the servants seemed to know what had happened to them.

"I think my mother was a little jealous of her."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, because they say the *Kero* had a man's wisdom. They say Father respected her as much as one of his counsellors. Mother says he never listens to her. She says she'd do better to ask the opposite of what she wants."

"I'm sure she exaggerates," Niera said, but she felt pleased. She had heard about their father's respect for her mother before, but it felt good coming from Meriope. It pleased her that Anar should remember she was not the favourite wife.

“Are you nervous about your marriage?” Meriope asked, fiddling with the *bacalaora* horns on her necklace.

Although she had tried to make the question arise naturally, Niera could tell she had been waiting for some time to ask.

“No,” she said, but couldn’t suppress a shiver of disgust. Her thoughts were poisoned again by the *Kir* Dana. She didn’t know what was worse: marrying him or having incessant daydreams about escape. She knew the Queen probably relished the idea of returning her to her ancestors’ profession, but Niera had two months yet before Anar could make a formal announcement. She could not help but hope for a miracle, and this angered her more. The whole thing was terrible. She could scarcely think about it without wanting to scream. Tears of frustration flooded her eyes.

Meriope’s own eyes watered in commiseration. Niera wouldn’t have stood for it if it weren’t that Meriope would be in the same position in another year. Of course, Meriope would be marrying much better than an ambitious local merchant whose coffer had grown too large to ignore. But, then, she would not have her secret lover, either.

“Do you believe in love matches?”

“Why talk about what will never happen?” Niera said. “You and your friends may daydream, but not one of you—not even Eissa, despite what she says—will choose your own husband.”

Meriope pulled her knees to her chin. “There’s nothing wrong with asking. Besides, weren’t you going to wander the desert and take nomad chieftains as lovers?”

“I’ve awakened since then,” Niera said, flushing. “I look at what will be and prepare for it.”

They sat with their thoughts for a time.

“Our father believed in love,” Meriope said.

Niera felt as if she had been tricked. She too believed that her father had married her mother out of love. There could be no other reason. “That turned out happily, didn’t it,” she said.

“I wasn’t trying to be cruel, Niera. It’s just that sometimes I envy the commoners—the poorer ones who get to share in these decisions.”

“You wouldn’t envy them long if you shared everything with them.” She didn’t know why she was so irritated by Meriope’s romanticism, but her bitterness embarrassed her. “I have kept you long enough. *Jerasakard e shum glin*.” Niera made a slight bow and Meriope returned it. “*Bet*.”

Meriope followed her to the door. “Niera, I am glad for your honesty. You’re right, too: daydreaming only helps pass the moment.”

“What’s this?” Niera asked, picking up a tiny bottle in which a bundle of twigs tied with thread was suspended in wine-coloured liquid. She already had an idea. Meriope used the table by the door, the western-most point in her room, to try out the charms she learned from her *deela*. A small silver bead or bell lay at the bottom of the bottle.

“It’s a charm for sleep.”

“Why not call for a sleeping draught?”

“This one brings pleasant dreams.” Niera saw Meriope’s blush and envied her her lighter skin.

“Does it work?” Niera asked, smiling. Even if she didn’t believe the superstitions of the commoners, she could recognize a love charm.

“My *deela* only brought me the *thymari* today.”

That night, as Niera lay in her bed, she thought of Meriope’s lover. His face teased her like a faint light in darkness; she could only see it if she didn’t look directly. Everything else was clear: his movement, silent as a spirit, down the colonnade; his hair, loose and silky as a woman’s. She recalled the embrace again and again. His smell, which she had found so pleasant, became adulterated in her mind. This surprised her until she remembered that she had been smelling the *lemonthorn* while standing at the window.

Would he have liked her? She was not as striking as Meriope, who was tall and golden, and normally loquacious and carefree. At twelve, Meriope had already been given the title of “The Jewel of Kqaarin.” It was customary to bestow flattering titles on princesses, but there were limits. Har Kalthi’s princess was “The Slender-Ankled,” since she could not, apparently, be called a beauty without some mockery. Niera’s *deela*, Pulji, and her dance teacher, Kloofi-Menami, had told Niera that she had grace and presence. These were good qualities, but she suspected them of being praises resorted to when one could not quite say that someone was beautiful.

Niera sighed. She wished she could have had a lover before she was forced to marry the *Kir*. There had been no young men at the Wind Tunnels, where she had gone for her awakening—not even a visiting caravan. The mystics there were proud of their self-sufficiency. That trip, perhaps the only one she would take in her life, had been her lone chance.

Niera flopped on her side and gazed at the dark head of the palm outside her window. It worried her that the visions were coming more often. She feared what would

happen if someone like the *Kir* really did mistake them for possession. When Pulji caught her gaping at nothingness, she held her hand and shielded her from others until she woke. Nothing else could be done. When Niera had been six, she had told Pulji that her daughter was being hurt by a man who lived next to them. Pulji had asked her what she meant, and Niera told her what she had seen. It was the only time Pulji had ever slapped her, but she had left the palace that instant. When she came back, she shook Niera until both of them were in tears, then hugged her tightly and made her promise not to speak of what she saw in her daydreams—that is what Pulji called them.

“The gods have given you enough misfortune,” Pulji had said. “Don’t add to it.”

For a long time afterwards, Niera believed that if she spoke about her visions, even to warn someone, Pulji would die.

Now Niera wanted to speak about them, and Pulji was the only person she trusted. A vision she had had for as long as she could remember was recurring persistently. It was different from the rest because, in it, she did not live a fragment of another person’s life, thinking another’s thoughts, but took no form at all. She looked through a fog at a woman in the distance, shrouded in shimmering blue. Sometimes the woman was travelling in unfamiliar landscapes, but mostly she was sitting in a dark room with bright pools of water. Five nights ago, the woman had suddenly *looked* at her. Without understanding how, Niera knew the woman had sensed her presence. This had never happened before. It frightened and thrilled her.

A light breeze shushed through the palm, making the fronds sway like a row of dancers on the garden wall. Niera liked to pretend that they were gathering courage to

jump. Sometimes a strong wind made them crash and leap in a frenzy, but they never left the wall.

II

Niera woke to the snap of cloth being aired. There was an unusual smell of roast meat in the air, mingled with the familiar aroma of hot sesame cakes, mashed dates and spice tea. Outside, she could hear voices in the garden. Preparations, no doubt, for the Liberation Day festivities. She moaned and turned away from the window, where the sun was already stretching a finger.

“I know you’re awake,” Pulji said, flapping out another robe. “There’s a want of time as it is and we both know how you like being hurried.”

“Then leave me and go yourself. I won’t be missed. It’s the evening Anar cares about.” Niera vowed she wouldn’t dance with the *Kir*. If she had no choice but to attend the evening’s dance, she would feign an injured foot. She wouldn’t get out of talking with him, but at least he would have no excuse to touch her.

“You’ll miss the magician.”

Niera rolled over. Her *deela*’s hands were moving rapidly as she shook the robes that had been stored in the trunk. She was a stout woman with a hook nose and sharp eyes. Niera liked her hands, which were deft and expressive but also conveyed her warmth.

“A magician? From where?” Niera loved everything to do with magic since a magician had visited the palace three years earlier. Green fire had rolled from his mouth.

He had made a child disappear beneath his cloak and balanced a glass of water on a pole held in his teeth. Niera had been greatly impressed and sent a servant to tell him she wished to learn his secrets. He had refused, even when she offered him the gold anklet Anar had given her for her twelfth birthday.

“This one claims to have been born of the sand,” Pulji said. “A son of the *n'kri*.” Niera knew Pulji didn’t approve of such light use of the desert spirits. It was becoming fashionable for the aristocracy to view the desert lore as the superstition of ignorant caravan traders and nomads, no longer on a par with the gods of the sky and water. Niera suspected, however, that most of them still signed themselves when they found a dust dervish swirling outside their door. The thought of the magician cheered her.

“What’s this for?” she asked, holding up the plate of roast meat on her breakfast tray.

“Strength,” Pulji said, refolding the robes and placing them back in the chest with bouquets of an herb that discouraged moths.

“Bring it to your mother,” Niera said, pushing the plate aside. These unspoken preparations irritated her. Even Pulji’s airing of her dressing trunks, though a bi-yearly chore, anticipated her move to the *Kir*’s house. Meat was men’s fare. Women took it only if they were ailing, as Pulji’s mother was. Or to increase lust and fertility.

“It’s fresh,” Pulji said. “No *taraclove*.”

Niera left the breakfast and went to her washbasin. She hated the ten month shag on her head, visible in the copper-back mirror. It was amazing that Meriope could embrace the commoners’ silly superstitions, but ignore the sacred ritual of head shaving that all denizens of desert kingdoms underwent during their awakenings. Of course, it was

Anar, contemptuous of desert ways, who was behind it. Still, Meriope could have protested. Niera was confident that the Ancestors would show their displeasure soon enough. Anar should have considered that!

Niera noticed an inlaid wood box on the dressing table. She opened it and found it held cosmetics on one side and jewellery on the other. Just then, Pulji came over with a beautifully embroidered purple and white silk robe and headscarf.

“The Queen sent them this morning,” Pulji said, answering Niera’s gaze.

Niera shut the box and went to her dressing trunk, seizing the first cobalt robe she found. Turning her back, she began to change.

“Niera-*bi*,” Pulji said, with uncharacteristic softness. “You cannot be your mother’s daughter forever.”

“She’ll have what she wants in two weeks,” Niera said, pulling the robe over her head. “She should be satisfied with that. Until then, I’ll wear the *Kero*’s colour. That is my right.”

Pulji sighed. “You complain that the Princess is favoured and lavished with gifts, yet here the Queen makes a gesture and you insult her. You’re stubborn as a splinter.”

“She can afford to be generous when she’s getting rid of me.”

“Getting rid of you? You’ll be right here in the city. Haven’t you always wanted the freedom to go about in the city? Even the Princess won’t be so fortunate. She may become queen of her own kingdom, but she’ll be palace-bound for life and far from home.”

“Meriope won’t be marrying some gross, greedy, ugly, old bastard of a merchant! May he die this night!”

“Niera!” Pulji cried, flicking her fingers frantically to the west to ward off the Ancestors’ punishment. Niera flung herself on her bed.

“I don’t want to marry! I’d rather die...Oh, Pulji, help me! I’ll go to the cloister in the Wind Tunnels and become a mystic. But I won’t marry him. It’s too awful.”

Pulji nudged a cushion to the edge of the bed and sat down heavily. She took Niera’s hand in her own and rubbed it for a time, staring at the cold breakfast.

“Being alone is no good,” she said. “You’ve been alone for too long. You’ve had no mother to fight for your interests and your father is father to all Kqaarin. Marriage will bring you companionship. And if it doesn’t fill your heart, your children will.”

“I don’t want children! I wouldn’t want the *Kir* for a cook’s boy, let alone a husband! I have you.”

“Stop talking like this,” Pulji said, pulling her hand away. “You’re awakened now. The *Kir* might not be as young or handsome as you please, but young, handsome men are rash and restless. The *Kir* is said to be generous and dutiful. His years will have brought him wisdom. It’s not shameful for the *Kero*’s daughter to marry a man whose wealth exceeds all but the *Maj*’s and the King’s.”

“He’s a vulgar schemer.”

“Enough! Think what your mother would say if she heard you.”

“She’d agree. The King chose my mother. It wasn’t opportunity; it was love.”

“The King chose the *Kir* and you must honour your father’s judgement.”

“He did not!” Niera said, coming bolt upright. Her eyes were red, but her voice was low and cold. “It’s Anar. She wants me to marry as low as possible so that I’ll not sit by the dais in court anymore and remind everyone that she wasn’t first.”

“I don’t have time to argue,” Pulji said, hoisting herself up with the edge of the bed. “The court festivities will be starting in another hour and I promised Freshta I would take her this year. We’ll be fortunate if there’s any room in the galleries.”

“Sit with me,” Niera said defiantly.

“Stop your foolishness,” Pulji said, but stroked Niera’s head. Commoners were not permitted on the floor of the court unless they were being recognized for outstanding achievements, usually military or athletic. Still, they both knew that if Niera had the power, Pulji would sit with her.

“Take me into the city,” Niera said suddenly, grabbing Pulji’s arm. It was a familiar request.

Pulji shook her off and reached for the breakfast plate. “If I had known you would pester me like this, I’d never have done it. That was a special case, as you remember. And now that I think of it, it was another instance of the Queen’s generosity, which you’re so determined to overlook.”

“Please, Pulji!” Niera pleaded. The tears returned to her eyes. “I won’t complain about my marriage again. Just once more. Freshta can come with us. We’ll buy a story from a *dogwoman*. I’ll never ask another favour of you.”

Pulji extricated her arm once more. “I won’t disturb the Queen on a whim. You should know as well as I that the finest celebrations are here at the palace. Besides, the whole city will be in the gardens tonight. You’ll not miss the best of it.”

“Go then,” Niera said, wearily. “You think I’m selfish, but I know you wouldn’t take me even if you didn’t have to ask Anar. I’m a duty to you and you’d rather see the festivities with your own daughter.”

“You won’t intimidate me with that kind of nonsense. If you don’t want to go to the noon festivities, so be it. Your absence will only please the Queen, if she’s half so anxious to have you out of sight as you think. An envoy came from Har Kalthi early this morning.”

Niera picked a loose thread from her sleeve. Since she had been old enough to recognize Anar’s discomfort at being the Second Concubine, she had felt it her duty to attend court in her mother’s official colour whenever an envoy from another city-kingdom was present. The *Kero* would not be forgotten on her watch.

“I’ll return in the evening to help you dress.”

“I won’t wear that,” Niera said, glancing at the robe Anar had sent.

“That’s fine. I’ll return the jewellery too. I was told that some of it had been your mother’s.”

“You can return it later. Your daughter’s waiting.”

When Pulji left, Niera went to the table and opened the jewellery box. There was a necklace of *sapir* and *maiden’s tears* with matching earrings, and silver bangles and anklets decorated with gourd-shaped charms—a fertility symbol. Niera touched them, trying to divine which had been her mother’s. It angered her that Anar had inherited the jewellery, but that was the custom. She supposed Anar felt generous parting with these pieces, although she owned far richer ones. Niera held the necklace to her throat, but soon put it down.

She gazed out the window at the servants erecting segments of a gate that would separate the private gardens from those the commoners would have access to that evening. It was the one day of the year that the city people were permitted to see the

Treasure Gardens of Kqaarin, renowned throughout the Northern Desert for the wealth of water they required. The Queen's orchids, the fruit trees, and the fountain where Meriope and her friends gathered, of course, would be inaccessible.

Niera was agitated. Why had Pulji said her father had chosen the *Kir*? While she didn't believe it, she knew that he had, at least, approved the choice. She had understood for some time that she would not be marrying an heir prince, since her mother had not become queen, but she had expected a match with a second- or third-born—or, at least, the heir of a foreign aristocratic house. But to be promised to a merchant! It didn't matter a stick to her if he was among the wealthiest men in the desert. It was clear that Anar didn't want her to leave Kqaarin, because there would be proof abroad that she was Kqaarin's second choice—and second to a commoner. Anar also knew how prejudiced Kqaarin's aristocracy was toward the First Concubine for that reason. It had been the shame of the aristocracy's daughters when Niera's father had taken a merchant's daughter for his wife. A foreign princess, they might have expected, but a local commoner was an appalling expression of contempt for them. In return, none of them considered allowing their sons to marry the half-common daughter of the King. Some were even mean-spirited enough to doubt the ancestry of the other half. Anar knew this, but had sacrificed Niera to protect her own vanity.

Niera opened the bottle of scented oil and brushed it through her hair in quick, angry strokes. She knew why the envoy from Har Kalthi had come. It was a premature suit for Meriope. The Princess had not been back six weeks and the first suitor was putting in his pledge! Niera recalled how relieved she had been when she had returned from her own awakening almost a year earlier and discovered that she would not be

brought out immediately in a foreign court. She had not wanted to marry the moment her awakening year elapsed. But after six months, she had caught wind of the *Kir Dana*'s suit and realized why Anar had delayed the *début*. She had been furious at the Queen, but even more with herself for her naïveté.

Niera drew a long satin box from beneath her bed. It held the few things she owned that had belonged to her mother. There were two pre-awakening dresses, a broken ivory comb and a spangled cobalt headscarf. The only other things she had were the copper mirror and a painted oil lamp she lit every night. She would not put the jewellery inside until she was certain which pieces had been her mother's. Now she drew out the scarf and slipped it over her head. She pinned it in place in front of the mirror and took a deep breath. She felt she could face the noon festivities. And she had not forgotten the promise of magic.

III

Niera had barely taken her seat before the court musicians played the music for the entrance of the Royal Council. The counsellors filed in across from her, their dark green robes shushing over the carpet. Niera's eyes wandered over the colours of the court. The aristocratic houses, in rich silks and jewels, were assembled on crimson runners that spanned the length of the floor. The air was heavy with their perfumes, despite the labouring moth-wing fans that surrounded the dome.

The envoys from Har Kalthi occupied the place of honour at the head of the houses. They were slender, elegant men and women covered in silver and turquoise, dignified and erect on their ochre cushions. Medallions shaped like water jugs hung from their necks and the women wore headbands with maize and barley motifs. They were clearly reminding the court of the benefits of a more favourable trade alliance. Niera knew that Har Kalthi, though richer than Kqaarin, would not be the kingdom's first choice. Har Alista was the largest and wealthiest kingdom in the Basin Lands and it was no accident that Meriope had had her début at their court. Beauty was highly valued, and what Kqaarin failed to offer Har Alista in trade, it could offer in the prestige of a beautiful queen.

Niera's eyes flitted to the spot where the distinguished commoners sat. The *Kir* Dana was prominent, as richly dressed as an aristocrat. His green silk robe was only a few

shades lighter than those of the counsellors, whom he was watching assemble. His hands were folded across his stomach and his heavy-lidded, nightshade eyes gave him a perpetual look of sleepy pleasure. He seemed very much at ease. He caught Niera watching and, before she could look away, nodded to her. She returned with a nod as slight as decorum permitted.

In the crescent galleries above, the commoners of Kqaarin, dressed in their gayest festival clothes, stood or sat as room allowed. Aside from the Masque for the Ancestors, the Feast of Kqaarin's Liberation was the most important festival in the kingdom and one of the rare opportunities commoners had to enter the palace. Niera searched for Pulji and Freshta but gave up when the court musicians struck up the next introduction.

The *Maj*, conspicuous with his waist-length beard, gold coronet and lavishly embroidered robes that sent out wafts of *neri alista*, took his place on a raised, narrow throne at the right side of the dais. His presence in the court as high counsel was symbolic, since his domain was the welfare of Kqaarinites in the spirit world. The Soothsayer passed almost unnoticed by the aristocracy to her place behind the King's throne. Her shaved head and fustian robe, however, concealed great power. The wall between her and the spirit world was thin and the Ancestors transmitted advice and forewarnings through her, based on what they themselves had learned from the gods. The commoners revered her as their divinely appointed representative in court, and those who had been sitting in the galleries stood when she entered.

Meriope and Sehad emerged next from a private passage behind the dais. A murmur of approval echoed through the court.

Niera took in Meriope's sun-streaked hair, caught up in a golden net—a look every noble daughter would be mimicking at the dance that evening. A dropped diamond pendant hung over her forehead. Her lips had been reddened and her hands and feet hennaed. She wore a plain white robe, which doubtless made many young women feel overdressed. The *bacalaora* horn necklace was visible around her neck. If Niera didn't know that Meriope was genuinely superstitious, she would have thought the Princess was pandering to the commoners. Meriope had a natural smile for her audience, and she nodded graciously to the Har Kalthi envoy.

The King emerged next, with Anar an impatient step behind. The King looked short and stooped next to the Queen, but Niera felt this was further evidence of the responsibility and worry he had in governing the kingdom. If her mother had lived, her guidance might have eased his burden, but the gods had not willed it. Niera straightened her posture, willing him her strength.

The King bowed to the *Maj*, his mouth set grimly; he never seemed to enjoy festival days. The celebrations and levity must have seemed to him an unavoidable distraction from the more serious matters of the kingdom. These matters consumed him and Niera rarely caught a glimpse of him outside of court. He looked to his counsellors and nodded to the envoy from Har Kalthi. Niera bowed to him, as did everyone in the court. He took his seat in the middle of the dais, Sehad to his right. Anar settled by Meriope on the women's side of the dais, nodding at the envoy and smiling warmly at the court. Her *amkrin* robe made her bronze skin look lighter and brought out the honey-coloured highlights in her hair. She was naturally expressive, though Niera did not trust what her features conveyed.

The Seneschal rose to announce the agenda of the noon festivities, which would commence with a prayer from the *Venasthadeeb*, led by the *Maj*.

After the prayer, the court poet sang of how Kqaarin liberated itself two centuries earlier from the occupation by the Ashashan barbarians. As he recited the names of the Kqaarin commanders who allied with the forces of Akmahar, Niera studied her father.

It was hard for her to imagine what he had been like years before when he had flouted tradition and married her mother. She bothered Pulji endlessly to tell her what she knew, since Pulji had been the *Kero*'s maid, but Pulji claimed that she rarely saw them together and that the *Kero* was not in the habit of holding intimate conversations where attendants could hear. Niera doubted Pulji told her everything, but if she pressed, her *deela* became upset. Niera knew Pulji had admired her mother, but she sensed her guardian had not approved of the marriage. She had the feeling that Pulji blamed her father for her mother's death. He had been strong enough to weather the kingdom's scorn when he married Madura, but his power had weakened and, as the end of the five years approached and she had produced no heir, he succumbed to the pressure of the aristocratic houses to take a second wife. This time, the nobles wanted a woman whose ancestry would restore not only the palace's prestige, but Kqaarin's. As it turned out, Anar's father, who had been deposed by one of his brothers in Atrad and had been struggling to gather an army in Hasuud Fastness, was agreeable to an alliance with Kqaarin in return for military assistance.

Niera noticed that she was not the only one whose mind had wandered from Kqaarin's glorious past. Meriope's eyes were roving the galleries—a bold gesture, but then, Anar could not see her. Niera wondered whom she was seeking. Surely her lover

from Har Alista would not have dared to pursue her to Kqaarin! She followed Meriope's gaze, but saw no one who looked like a young noble disguised in common dress. Her lover was probably a second- or third-born or the heir of an aristocratic house—someone who clearly did not have the allure for Kqaarin of Har Alista's heir prince. Still, the idea that Meriope yet hoped he would come gave Niera a sliver of envy. Even Meriope's longing signalled another experience she would never have. When her gaze returned to the Princess, she caught Anar's eye. Although the Queen's expression didn't change, Niera knew she had registered the cobalt robe.

The court filled with applause and Niera returned her attention to the poet who was being lavished by some with entreaties to greet their descendants—a generous compliment since the spirits of great poets were thought never to abandon the flesh, rather finding new bodies to be born into after death.

Just then, there was an explosion of vermilion smoke at the rear of the court and a rider on horseback came galloping in from one of the general entrances. The confusion brought many nobles to their feet. People in the galleries strained to see what was causing the alarm. Niera looked in panic for the guards, but they remained at their stations by the walls. The rider brought the black steed to a rearing halt before the dais and jumped down, his black cape settling over his bare shoulders. He dropped suddenly in a deep bow that resembled an elaborate military drill. No one on the dais seemed alarmed. Sehad had raised his chin and was examining the man critically. A hoary counsellor rose bravely to his feet, but was soon pulled down by one of his fellows. Niera understood only a moment before he did that this was the magician.

The man's dress had been inspired by the nomads and Niera recalled what Pulji had said about his claim of being born of the *n'kri*. He wore a black vest embroidered with a red and white pattern reminiscent of clan designs. His riding robe left his long, muscular legs bare below the knee, exposing glass and gilded clay anklets. He wore a low black turban that hung loose over his back. A number of false braids covered in brass beads framed his handsome face, which had been painted with symbols in ochre and white lime.

In the swift motion of a knife-thrower, he drew two of the Queen's orchids from beneath his cloak and presented them to Anar and Meriope. The court recovered and there were exclamations and a scattering of applause. It was an offence punishable by death to pluck a plant from the palace gardens, but clearly this man had had permission. Niera was appalled and delighted by his arrogance—his brazen gaze, his outrageous entrance, the exaggerated sensuousness of his movements. She hoped there would be a flower for her, but when he turned, it was to bow to the counsellors, then to the aristocracy, with whom Niera was mistakenly included, and finally to the galleries.

The last magician Niera had seen had ended his act by rolling green flames from his mouth. Darqar, as this new magician introduced himself, spat fire as if his stomach were a forge. His acts merited his panache. Niera leaned forward with delight, taking in every swagger and flourish as he moved from one act to the next. She could not help but smile, anticipating a shaming, when a notoriously severe counsellor was asked to come up with the most difficult question he could think of. The counsellor finally decided upon asking the distance between Kqaarin and the sun at noon. Darqar invited him to write the question on a scrap of fabric, which he tied to a hawk's leg. The hawk flew out of a

western window and returned, after the following act, through an eastern one—having supposedly completed its circle around the world. In his deep voice, Darqar read the answer to the counsellor's question: *It is the same distance in liree as the number of grains of sand that fit in a mended tea cup.* Everyone laughed. The tale of “The Broken Tea Cup,” a childhood staple, taught the ridiculousness of prying into the mysteries of nature when one didn't know how to do practical things, like mend a cup.

Darqar was unlike anyone Niera had ever seen. He was doubtless common-born, but behaved as if he were the equal of those on the dais. His pandering to the women irritated some of the aristocratic men, for Niera was not the only woman leaning forward in admiration.

At one point, Darqar disappeared in a column of purple smoke and appeared at the private entrance to the royal wing. Niera was astounded. She looked to see if her father was enjoying himself and saw that, even if he wasn't caught up, he was following the show. It gave her a twinge of guilt that she could enjoy these diversions, while her father would never be free of the cares of the kingdom. Meriope and Anar, however, were not held back by such concerns. Even Sehad no longer feigned indulgence.

Darqar pulled a stack of large cards from his prop cart and bowed low and lavishly to the Queen, staring up at her with kohl-rimmed eyes. He asked her to choose one. The faces of the cards featured familiar and exotic animals and plants. The Queen whispered her selection to Sehad and Meriope. Sehad wrote the answer on a swatch of fabric and placed it in a chalk circle the magician had made on the floor. An explosion of sky blue smoke engulfed it and when it cleared, the fabric was gone. Darqar raised the card with the apricot, a smirk of triumph on his face. Anar smiled and Meriope and Sehad

clapped in agreement. Niera might have guessed her choice. The master gardener had never succeeded in growing an apricot tree in the palace garden, although Anar always talked about the apricot orchards of Atrad.

Darqar asked Meriope to choose another card from the stack. Meriope whispered her choice to the Soothsayer, which surprised Niera. It surprised Anar, too. Niera knew that there was no love lost between the Queen and the Soothsayer, perhaps because the Soothsayer had much more sway over the King than Anar could ever hope to have. To Niera's surprise, Meriope stepped off the dais and came to her side. "Gazelle," she whispered. Darqar looked at Niera for the first time, and she felt embarrassment and pleasure fuse at once in her face.

When Darqar had guessed Meriope's card, he asked Niera to choose one. She could not keep the smile from her face, but when she turned to her left, she saw that the nearest aristocratic house was Ganathar's. Ganathar had been the reason she had broken with Meriope's group a year earlier. They had been sitting around the fountain one day when Ganathar, who derived her power from her venomous tongue, told of how the head of one of the aristocratic houses had been indiscreet in his affair with a commoner. When his relatives confronted him, the aristocrat had defended himself by saying, "You should be thankful I don't do like the King and marry her." All the girls had laughed—except Meriope, who had turned to Niera in concern. Niera could have killed her. They all turned to her then. Niera had stood, walked over to Ganathar and given her a smart clip for each cheek. "How dare you!" Ganathar had roared. "I won't be punished by a commoner's bastard." That was when Niera knew what the aristocracy really thought of her.

Niera turned from the houses and approached the dais. She bowed and Meriope came to the edge to receive the answer. The obvious choice for her second witness was Anar, but in a flash of nerve, she crossed to the men's half of the dais and bowed to her father. He nodded, but rather than beckoning her to approach, touched Sehad's arm. Niera felt humiliated, but she managed not to show it while she gave her answer to Sehad.

As she was returning to her seat, her head grew suddenly light and her hands began to prickle. A wave of horror swept over her as she realized what was about to happen. She had time enough to sit and lower her head.

The darkness came quickly.

When she woke, it took her a moment to remember where she was. It made little sense to see the Soothsayer kneeling before her, studying her with browless, pale eyes. The sounds of the court returned and her muscles relaxed a little. Niera brought a trembling hand to her mouth, but thankfully, she had not drooled.

"Niera, what's the matter?"

Meriope was at her shoulder. Niera glanced over the Soothsayer's head and met countless eyes.

"I'm alright," she said, clearing her throat. "I just...I was dizzy. I'm fine."

"Do you want to leave?" Meriope asked.

"No," Niera said. It would look worse if she did. She wanted Meriope and the Soothsayer's attention off of her. It was drawing the court's.

They both rose and returned to the dais, and Niera saw Darqar hovering in the background, eager to continue his show.

"If My Lady is well enough," he said, holding up the card of the *lemonthorn*.

Niera shivered. She had *been* him only moments ago. “Yes,” she said, but there was scant applause. The court was full of murmuring. Niera wished she had left now. She had no idea what the people were thinking. Her eyes darted to the dais, but the only ones they met were the Soothsayer’s.

Fortunately, Darqar was working hard to win back his audience. After more explosions of coloured smoke, a series of flying daggers and the swallowing of a woman’s headscarf, which he retrieved and then shook, so that it became another colour, he recaptured the court’s attention.

Niera stared at his anklets, unable to bring her eyes any higher or enjoy the other acts. While he introduced the finale, she thought of what reactions her father and Anar could have to her lapse. She had heard of exorcism—it was something every *Maj* was trained to perform—, but the tales that had reached her were terrible, embellished no doubt by gruesome sensibilities. She was imagining the worst, but she didn’t know what to expect. Ever since that night long ago when Pulji had shaken her, she had known that these visions were potentially endangering to her.

Perhaps it was the silence that made Niera look up. She saw Darqar holding a vial over his head and muttering something with such intensity of concentration that he looked as if he were suffering. She heard only the barest whisper of his words, but she recognized the guttural, hissing sounds. She had heard the Lost Language only once, when the mystics at the Wind Tunnels had recited the Rite of the Sleeper’s Ascension.

“Stop! You cannot control this!” The Soothsayer dashed from the dais, but the magician pulled the stopper from the vial.

“The *sirsh’ha* is free!” he gasped.

The audience was silent, but after a moment they stirred impatiently at the absence of effect. Then a light breeze emanated from the centre of the great hall, fluttering headscarves and robes. Niera understood. The magician had cast an elemental spell. He had borrowed the gods' powers and harnessed the wind, creating a breeze!

The court filled with exclamations of wonder.

"Brace yourselves!" the Soothsayer shouted.

Some people had already begun to clap when a burst of wind, erupting from the very walls of the court, pushed everyone toward the centre of the room. Niera was blown forward in her seat. It lasted but a second.

In the stunned silence, Darqar raised the vial above his head again and stopped it. "Worry no more," he commanded. "The *sirsh'ha* is imprisoned." One of the moth wings had torn loose and glided down to the court floor. The moment it landed, cheers exploded, ringing through the hollows of dome, hall and alcove. Niera found herself on her feet, carried away with the rest, until she saw that her father was not applauding. He looked angry. Sehad and the counsellors were taking their cues from him. But Anar was also on her feet. Meriope stood to support her mother, but was uneasy in her applause. Niera clasped her hands and contented herself by staring.

The magician now seemed more than mortal to her. She could see that the spell had exhausted him, but he was basking in the applause and ignoring the Soothsayer's severe expression. How had he learned an elemental spell? They were the guarded ken of mystics, religious hermits and soothsayers—and few of those who were permitted chose to learn them. The spells were thought dangerous and of little practical use.

The Seneschal managed to step into the confusion and reassert order. He announced a four hour meal and rest period after which the commoners of Kqaarin could return for the evening dance and the midnight fireworks in the palace gardens.

Anar's maid caught up with Niera on her way to her rooms. Niera had hoped that the confusion and excitement over the magician's finale had diverted the Queen's attention, although she knew her behaviour in the court would be addressed sooner or later. Still, she had wanted to speak with Pulji first and find out how her trance was being perceived.

She steeled herself and accompanied the maid to the royal wing on the eastern side of the palace. When she entered the King and Queen's corridor, her heart began to race. She had only been in it half a dozen times that she could remember, and most of them had been unpleasant. This time, she did not have to wait.

The maid opened the door and led her through the richly carpeted sitting room to a room that served as the Queen's boudoir. The walls were covered in tapestries depicting coastal scenes: fishing boats, mermaids, large white birds, whales—things Niera had heard of in tales, but half-believed to be mythical. The *Twiga* carpet was woven in sea shades. Richly carved wooden furniture and a silver-arsenic mirror dominated the room. Anar was standing by the window, looking out toward the Scales. Niera saw that she still held the orchid, although it was wilting in her hand.

The maid left and Niera waited for the fatal pronouncement. But when Anar turned, she said, "I didn't want to be married at your age either. I wanted more than anything to return with my father's forces to Atrad and help him reclaim our city."

Niera frowned. What was Anar up to?

“In the end, of course, we obey tradition. We must, or there would be constant war. Men stay with the communities in which they were born—unless, like my father, they are unjustly removed. It is the women who forge the alliances between communities by belonging first to one and then to two.

“When my father told me I was to be the Second Concubine in a desert-kingdom I had never seen, I wept. I had never liked the desert. I still haven’t grown accustomed to it. But it was through this alliance that my father was able to reclaim Atrad...Of that, I am proud.”

Anar studied Niera. “Public displays like the one you put on today are a dangerous way of trying to get out of your marriage. The people of the Basin Lands are the most superstitious I have met, and you must remember that I have travelled.”

Niera thought of Meriope’s whole-hearted embrace of Basin Lands’ beliefs, but it would be stupid to bait Anar. She shifted, unsure whether to look away or directly into those lion eyes.

“I know you admire your father,” Anar continued, “and would want to do what he wishes. For that reason, you should bear in mind that the *Kir* Dana is his choice.”

Anar must have expected Niera’s shock, because a smile twitched on her lips.

“You think I lie, but ask him directly if you must. I favoured someone closer to your own age, one of the princes of Akmahar, but the *Kir* Dana is the most powerful man in Kqaarin, after your father and the *Maj*. He has a strategic monopoly on the metal shipments from the mines in Faejn Goa. He wants recognition; your father wants to help him; and your *deela* wants you to remain in Kqaarin. I was outnumbered.”

Niera felt sick. Her father *wanted* her to marry the *Kir*? Pulji had supported it? She would have hurled these hateful discoveries back at Anar if she hadn't sensed truth in them.

"You do not have to attend the afternoon feast or meet with the Har Kalthi envoy in the retiring room. I will say you overtaxed yourself during your dance lesson this morning and, with the excitement of the magician, it led to the fainting spell in court. You do not have to dance this evening, but you must attend and you must speak kindly to the *Kir*. Your father wishes it."

Niera nodded weakly and turned to the door.

"You are not the only one who has ever felt this way, Niera. It will pass."

IV

The bell rang while Pulji was comforting her. Niera had put on the dress Anar sent, but her eyes were swollen from crying and her skin felt feverish. She had refused to touch the jewellery or cosmetics. The milk tea with a mild sedative sat cooling on the bedside table. Niera couldn't drink with her nose plugged up.

"Niera-*bi*," Pulji said, stroking her short hair. "You'll see it isn't so bad. If you only knew now what you'll know later, you'd laugh at yourself."

"I'll never laugh," Niera said, lifting her head from Pulji's shoulder. "I know my duty, and I will honour it. But don't tell me I'll be happy; I'll never be."

The bell rang then, startling them both.

"We've taken too long," Pulji said, getting up. "The Queen's sent somebody."

Niera went to her washbasin and splashed her face. She wasn't going to give Anar or the *Kir* the satisfaction of knowing how hard this was for her. More importantly, she wasn't going to disappoint her father. If necessary, she would be like iron. This alliance was going to save the palace treasury vast amounts in trade payments to the *Kir*.

But there was something she wanted. Despite her knowledge that her father owed her nothing—it was, after all, her duty to make this alliance—she wanted a sign, an acknowledgement from him that he admired or, at least, appreciated her contribution to the kingdom.

She felt her *deela*'s hand on her shoulder. "The Soothsayer Ulna has come to see you," she said. Niera looked over at the door and saw the Soothsayer, sallow and androgynous in her dark robe. "I'll wait outside," Pulji said. Her nervousness showed in the dampness of her touch and the caution in her eyes.

Niera dried her face and approached the Soothsayer. Her heart was galloping.

"Please sit down," she said, motioning to a cushion.

The Soothsayer nodded, settling into a superior posture, which she held with ease of practice.

"Are you afraid?" the Soothsayer asked.

Niera drew up another cushion. "Yes," she said. It was better not to lie. She could only think that Ulna's presence was a result of her behaviour in the court. Was it possible that the Soothsayer had been sent to see if she was afflicted? Pulji had told her that her trance-like state had unsettled the commoners.

"You need not be," Ulna said. Her voice was low and sharp. "Tell me what happened in the court today."

"I felt dizzy. It was nothing really. I overtired myself during my dance lesson this morning and...well." The Soothsayer knew she was lying; Niera felt it.

"Did you see anything, any image, while you were faint?"

Niera wrapped her arm around her waist where she had tied her mother's cobalt scarf beneath the gown. She had meant for it to give her strength during her evening with the *Kir*.

"I'm asking," Ulna explained, "because you might have had a vision, which is the untutored sight. But I would need to know what you saw."

Was this a trap?

“I can’t have the sight,” Niera said. “I’m not a commoner. The Ancestors don’t speak to me as they do to you.”

A slight smile came to Ulna’s lips. “The gift of sight has only been found among commoners, that is true,” she said. “But what if I told you your mother showed signs of having it?”

Niera was immediately wary. She knew her mother had had the uncanny ability of offering good advice at the necessary time. Some of her enemies had used this gift against her, claiming it was evidence of the black art she practiced to ensnare the King.

“If she did,” Niera said, “why didn’t you recognize it publicly?”

“I wanted to, but she didn’t. She was in a difficult position, resented by the aristocracy for her origins and by the people of Kqaarin for her family’s wealth. She felt it would cause her greater anxieties.”

“She couldn’t have become a soothsayer anyway,” Niera said. “She was married.”

“I could have trained her to a point. There would have been no opportunity for her detractors to use her ability against her. The gift of sight is a gift from the gods, but it must be guided. It can cause as much grief as good. The seeing is a small part; it’s the ability to know how to use it that is critical.”

A thought seized Niera. “What would happen if I had the gift?”

“I would offer to train you.”

“I’m to marry in two weeks.”

“You would have to decide. If you became an apprentice, you could change your mind, but it is easier if you have thought it over carefully first. The training is demanding

and requires nothing short of your complete attention. A soothsayer gives up all of her particular allegiances for an allegiance to the people as a whole. It is not an easy renunciation.”

Niera tried to think. The day had been full of shock and wonder. A choice of this magnitude had never been presented to her. She feared it would vanish if she didn’t act immediately.

“What will my father think?” she said, gazing at the white headscarf that still lay on her bed.

Ulna watched her with eyes the colour of the underside of a leaf. “Either outcome would benefit him. You must base your decision—”

“How can you tell if I have the sight? What must I do?”

“You could tell me what you saw during the magician’s act.”

Niera ran a hand over her head. “And if I don’t have the sight, what will happen?”

“Nothing. I came here of my own volition. I cannot promise that nothing will come of this later. If you continue to have fainting episodes, people will worry.”

Niera swallowed. “I saw the magician,” she said. “I was his brother. They’re twins, which is why they can disappear and reappear in another place. There is a trap door under the prop cart. I was—they were arguing. I think this was last night. It felt close in time. It felt like the past. They were arguing about who would perform the finale. Both of them wanted to because they wanted to impress Anar and Meriope. They couldn’t agree which one of them had better control over the spell, so they began to fight. I was struck—I mean, the brother was—and I fell to the ground. After that they agreed to divide the show so that the one who didn’t perform the finale did most of the rest of the show.”

Ulna seemed to be looking past her. Niera resisted the urge to look over her shoulder.

“Was it a vision?” She was terrified now that the Soothsayer would withdraw her offer.

Ulna’s gaze drifted back to Niera’s. “Why did they want to impress Meriope?”

Niera shrugged impatiently. “They wanted to see if the rumours of her beauty were true, I suppose.” This was hardly important.

Ulna watched her a moment, then nodded. “I felt the truth in what you said.”

Niera inhaled. “You’ll train me?”

“If you decide to become my apprentice.”

“I’ve decided. When will you speak with my father?”

Ulna rose. “You are already pressed to make this decision; do not rush it. There are two weeks yet.”

“I already know,” Niera said, getting to her feet. She had never been more serious in her life. “You won’t change your mind, will you?”

“No.”

“I won’t change mine. Please, speak with my father tonight. He expects me even now at the dance.”

“Then you must go. I will speak with him at the Royal Council tomorrow. These are far from ideal circumstances for you to make this decision. I will expect you to think about it carefully in the next two weeks and throughout your training, if it comes to that.”

“I will,” Niera promised.

When Pulji came in, she found the *Kero*'s daughter shivering, her arms wrapped around her waist, as if holding herself together.

"Pulji," Niera said, "you'll never believe me. I'm going to be a soothsayer." At these last words, she whirled around and fell on her bed, laughing. "Look at you!" she cried, when she propped herself up. "You're more shocked that I was. It's true! I won't be marrying the *Kir*!" Niera could stand it no longer. She sprang up and danced around the room with abandon. It was some time before she noticed the gravity of her *deela*'s manner.

"What's wrong?"

"What did you tell her?" Pulji said, her face ashen. "Why did you speak? Don't you know that only commoners have the sight?"

"I'm an exception."

"You foolish girl," Pulji said, shaking her head. "You've no idea what you've done."

Niera grew still. "What do you mean?"

"Haven't you thought what people will say? A noble with a commoner's gift? The aristocratic houses will claim—"

"They already do," Niera said. "I don't care. They won't dare be disrespectful when I'm Kqaarin's soothsayer."

"You move too fast," Pulji said. "Do you think the people of Kqaarin will accept this? The sight has been theirs for centuries. You think they'll approve of a noble taking their position in the council?"

Niera shrugged. "That's many years away yet. They have time to grow used to it."

Pulji slapped the edge of the night table in disgust. The oil lamp rattled dangerously. “I told you never to speak of this. Your life will be a misery now.”

“Pulji, you’re wrong. All these years, I could have been training to be a soothsayer. I’ve been hiding my gift for nothing.”

“You’re blind,” Pulji said, sinking down on the edge of the bed. She pressed her hand to her head as if it pained her.

Niera was hurt. This was the most important thing that had ever happened to her and Pulji was disparaging it—Pulji, who had always claimed to want good things for her.

“You’re upset because I’m not getting married.”

“Loneliness is a terrible thing,” Pulji said. “I have gone nine years without my husband; I know. Now, you will too.”

Irritation pricked Niera’s throat. “Oh, stop your silliness and help me. I still have to go to the dance.” She took up the white headscarf and some pins and stood before Pulji. Her *deela* didn’t lift a hand.

It was long past midnight, after the fireworks had been spent and the last of the commoners had left for the city. Niera watched the palm tree outside her window and listened to the distant sounds of revelry floating over the palace walls. The white of her evening gown glowed dimly on the floor where she had shed it the moment she could. Her mind drifted through her life as a soothsayer. She would probably be Sehad’s guide, but she wanted to be her father’s. She wished she had asked Ulna how long it would take. She yearned to be present in the Royal Council to see her father’s reaction when Ulna told him of her ability. He was sure to be pleased. A soothsayer, after all, was a rare and

valued person. A marriageable princess might make a lucrative trade alliance, but without wise guidance from the Ancestors, even the strongest city-kingdoms could suffer disease, crop failures, or invasions. Look at the impoverished Akgar Seir! It hadn't found a soothsayer in its midst for almost three-quarters of a century!

Pulji's anger and disappointment had stayed with Niera all evening. It tainted her joy with a niggling feeling that she had made a mistake. She knew Pulji had always viewed her gift as unnatural and, if it was possible, evil. She wondered if her *deela* was simply afraid of losing her. After all, Pulji had wanted her to remain in Kqaarin, even if it meant marrying a commoner. If Niera had married the *Kir*, Pulji would have come with her as her maid. Soothsayers, however, didn't have servants. That had to be it. Niera's anxiety eased a little. She would be certain to assure Pulji that, even though she would soon be too old to have a *deela*, she would be sure to find her a good position in the palace, so they could still talk when they wanted.

Niera was struck with an awe-inspiring thought. It was possible that Ulna knew the elemental spells. If she became Ulna's apprentice, she would have the right to learn them too! Niera let out a trembling breath. She would have to wait a little before she asked, since Ulna had been so upset over the magician's usurpation of the spells.

Niera imagined commanding the clouds to rain over the outlying crops during the dry season. Perhaps Kqaarin would even be able to grow its own corn, like Har Kalthi and Har Alista. Niera sighed. She didn't know what she had done to make the gods so favourable toward her.

When sleep came, she saw the woman in blue again. She was riding a white horse in a strange, mountainous land with low, stunted trees. Although the vision was clear,

Niera had the impression that the woman was some distance away from her in time—in the future. Niera floated, disembodied, above the horse and its rider. The wind whipped the woman's shimmering veils and Niera could see her dark brows and the curl of her lashes. There was a sound like the tinkling of hundreds of small bells, only softer. Niera wondered if the woman wasn't a god—perhaps a god of the sky. But did gods have provision packs on their horses? Just then, the woman looked up at her.

Niera jolted awake.

V

Niera's breathing was slow and deep, coming from her abdomen. Her eyes were focused on the adobe wall in front of her. She could see the beetle climbing it, pausing to test the ground, but she did not allow her mind to wander after it. She could hear the music of two recorders carried in by the soft wind. Every now and again the air was punctuated by distant voices. The scent of the Queen's orchids mingled curiously with the hot sage coming off the desert. It was the height of the dry season.

Niera thought about the sky, the immensity of it. Its depth. Its colours. She focused her thoughts. She imagined being as expansive as the sky, enveloping the earth as dreams envelop a sleeper.

Today, the sky had a faint veil of white. She thought of the veil gradually dispersing. She shifted her concentration forward in time. The sun sailed across the sky, night came. The darkness lightened, then dissolved into the rising sun. She watched a number of days arrive and pass in this manner. She felt herself approaching the appointed day. A shred of desire entered her.

The sunrise wavered and pulled back, like a curtain sucking through a window.

And she was back again. No longer in the heavens, but in the meditation closet. She forced herself to be mindful of the room, its scents and sounds. She fought the urge to stand. She sighed without realizing it. The vision would not come if she consciously

desired it. She knew this, and yet it was so difficult. What she wanted most was to cast for something more exciting than the weather. Even as she thought this, she knew she was thinking wrongly and, worse yet, that she was wrong to judge her thoughts.

Niera rose to her feet and stood in the column of light, enjoying the wind's warm bath. She could feel the sunlight press through her robe. It was more comfortable than the hooded the mystics wore, but equally plain. Like Ulna's, it was charcoal, but tied with a grey sash instead of a black one. Her head had been shaved again. Although she had admired the power Ulna's austere dress implied, she felt homely dressed that way herself. Pulji had sucked in her lips when she first saw the fustian robe. She hadn't said anything, but she didn't need to. It was the first time Niera felt relieved to have outgrown the age for a *deela*.

The recorders struck up a tripping melody that Niera recognized. She stepped to the window. Meriope and Kloofi-Menami, their dance instructor, were practicing on the raised wooden platform. Meriope wore a full, white dancing skirt. A long scarf blew from her shoulders like a torn cloud. Niera recognized the *zindazel*, the first meeting of the mythical prince, Pari, and the fire nymph, Alitha. Meriope, playing the part of the nymph, was tapping the beat with her bronzed feet. Her bare midriff showed as she skipped out the steps, drawing her hands enticingly from her shoulders and snap-curling her wrists with each slide step. Even from her vantage, Niera could see Meriope had mastered the dove-style cocking of the head and the alluring roll of the hip. Eight months earlier, Niera had been learning the *zindafer*, the second dance of the nymph and the prince, during which Alitha, after learning that the prince has become betrothed to Princess Larina, turns her beautiful white flames into something that can burn man. It was a breathtaking,

difficult dance, involving boneless arm movement and graceful, precise leaping. She had not had a lesson since becoming Ulna's apprentice. There would be no more.

Niera leaned against the side of the window. Dancing was the only area in which she had outshone Meriope. Kloofi-Menami, who was renowned in the desert palaces for her unsurpassed dancing, had told Niera she had been born with the grace of the gazelle. Niera had cherished the compliment. No one would admire that grace now. Meriope would continue to improve under Menami's instruction. By her marriage day, she would be dancing the *zindafer*.

Niera saw her father emerge from the bougainvillea grove, accompanied by a young aristocrat. He was grasping the young man's elbow, a gesture she had only seen him do once or twice with Sehad. She raised her head. They stopped at the edge of the shade to watch the dancers. It was not difficult for Niera to guess the young man's identity. A royal caravan had arrived from Har Alista the day before, and there had been a formal welcoming in the court that morning. It was rare that a prince accompanied the envoy for his own marriage suit, but evidently Prince Seriot was anxious to remind Meriope of what he had to offer her, as well as Kqaarin. Niera had not been able attend the welcoming, since her mornings were spent in meditation.

She squinted. He was wearing a fine cream hunting tunic and laced pants. His face was handsome, although he was a little short. She smiled to think of what Eissa *er* Sapir, Meriope's favourite confidante, would have to say about the match. Eissa had often waxed romantic about Prince Seriot, whom she had seen once when her father had taken her with him to Har Alista.

There were still three months before the announcement could be made, but there was no doubt that Har Alista was the favoured alliance. They had copper, gold and coal mines, *neri alista*, the famous *Twiga* carpet artisans and enough water to grow luxury crops like corn, millet, pistachios and *lalohe*.

As the dance ended, the King and Prince Seriot approached the platform. To Niera's amazement, her father—who never danced, except perfunctorily to open a ball—mounted the steps and took Kloofi-Menami's place. Menami herself was surprised, but after a moment, she demurred. Niera's father gave the musicians an instruction and they began to pipe a popular *sava*. He took Meriope by the waist and hand and led the dance. It was not a difficult dance, but he confused the steps. Their laughter floated upwards. As they grew accustomed to each other, they turned from one end of the platform to the other, tracing the traditional star shape. Niera watched.

When Ulna had told the King of Niera's gift, he had nodded and said it was good that the next soothsayer should have been found. He said he was glad to know that Sehad's reign would be guided by the wisdom of the Ancestors. He had stared at Niera, but there had been no congratulations, no embraces or taking of hands. Anar had been more demonstrative, though she had no power to oppose the Soothsayer. Her looks made no secret of her enmity. She commented on how queer it was that Niera's gift should be discovered on the eve of her betrothal. Ulna had explained that the gift had never been known to exist among the nobility. The Queen had laughed, but kept the mystery of her mirth to herself.

When the song ended, the King kissed Meriope's wrist and she bowed to him. He stepped down, ceding his place to the Prince. The eight note opening of a court *terga* sounded.

Just then, the door opened.

"I knocked, but you must not have heard me."

Niera flinched, turning from the window.

"How was your meditation?"

"I didn't see anything," she said. She hated the quaver in her voice.

"That's not unusual. Even if you make a pure cast, it can come up empty."

"I think it's because the weather doesn't *feel* important to me. When do I ever travel?"

"That should make the casting easier."

"Maybe. But you said we might see differently. I find it difficult to devote so much concentration to something that means little to anyone. Commoners ask *sulvaars* to throw fowl bones when they care to know the weather. No one sets out on feast days anyway, so why does it matter what the weather will be like during the Soluud's Festival?"

Niera was not being completely sincere. She had already guessed that the Queen was hoping to publicize the match between Prince Seriot and Meriope on that day. Superstition, so unfashionable now in the courts, held that a disturbance in the sky on the day of a wedding announcement boded ill for the future couple. Despite façades, Niera knew that it was not only commoners who were superstitious.

“Weather forecasts may not be as exciting as casting on an important court matter,” Ulna said, “but you must master the smaller tasks before moving to the larger ones. It’s more difficult when the King and his counsellors await your judgement. Sometimes there is pressure to arrive at a certain conclusion. People’s lives often depend upon it.”

Niera sighed. She knew all of this. It seemed to her that she had been obediently struggling along for eight months now, getting nowhere. She couldn’t say Ulna hadn’t recognized her progress, but she had expected to graduate beyond foretelling unimportant things that Ulna already knew. The daily exercises were tedious and involved not only discipline of the mind, but of the body. Niera had never spent so much time in an empty room. She wondered if anyone would remember her when she finally attended court again. Only *Azazello* knew if she was ever going to learn the elemental spells. Ulna had been discouraging when Niera had finally asked. “There is almost no justifiable reason to use them,” Ulna had said. “To upset the natural balance, a rebalancing is necessary and there is always uncertainty about the secondary effect. The imbalance that magician made last Liberation Day with the wind spell need not have been a larger gust of wind. It might have been a wave of water or fire. He was not in control. It could have been a tragedy.” Niera could see from her mistress’s attitude that she would have to learn the spells from someone else—a mystic, perhaps, devoted to the worship of the elements. She’d probably be withered as a honey date by then.

“You already know what the weather will be like during the Soluud’s Festival,” Niera complained.

“This is true, but it is not what’s troubling you.”

Niera looked away. Laughter drifted in from outside, pattering through the bare room. “I’m tired,” she said. “I think I’ll retire for a little while.”

“Niera, I told you that commitment would be the hardest part of your apprenticeship. You must complete the exercises, regardless of your mood. Sleep will not solve your problems.”

Niera stopped on her way to the door. She was not accustomed to resistance.

Ulna looked at her neutrally. “I want to be honest with you, Niera. I have sensed something troubling about this apprenticeship, although I am not sure yet what it is.”

Despite her weariness, Niera felt a flash of fear. So much of her hope depended on her apprenticeship.

“Do you know of the desert *kitefly*?”

Niera nodded. She had seen a *kitefly* on one of the dromedaries kept for milk and wool at the Wind Tunnels. The fly had been fat as her fist, its wings an oily iridescence covering a blood-gorged body.

“Most animals that host a *kitefly* will go to great lengths not to have it removed. The flesh around the bite becomes so tender that the animal will sleep in an unnatural position, rather than put weight on it. The *kitefly* takes nourishment, then lays its eggs in the bloodstream of its host. This ruins the animal’s milk and meat, and eventually kills it, though the process can take many years.”

“So I have a *kitefly*,” Niera said. She had never cared for analogies, and the slant of this one was insulting.

“What I think doesn’t matter in the end.”

Niera's throat tightened. She was unskilled, but she wasn't the neophyte Ulna took her to be. She could tilt the balance a little, raise her teacher's non-existent brows.

"Why doesn't the Queen like you?"

The Soothsayer seemed a little surprised. "That is something you must ask her."

"Why wasn't Sehad named from the Book of Kings?"

Ulna looked at her sharply and Niera suppressed a smile.

"He *is* named after the book in Atrad."

Niera thought this was probably true. It would have been the most prudent way to justify the choice: the Queen making a special case for honouring her bloodlines.

"What happens," Niera persisted, "if one names a prince after the city's Book of Kings when he is not of the king's blood?"

Ulna betrayed no impatience. "He will bring famine when he reigns."

"And if he is named after the Book of Kings of another city-kingdom?"

"Nothing will happen, since the kingdom's book will not have been desecrated."

"Did you recommend that Anar call her son Sehad?"

"Niera, this is what I meant when I said that everything you see will not be useful. Much of the soothsayer's skill is in distinguishing what is of importance to the people at large. If you cast selfishly, you may find things you will wish you hadn't."

Niera's sense of triumph dwindled quickly after Ulna left. As she continued with her exercises, she began to nod off and was plagued by images of Meriope and her father dancing. She was no longer looking down on them from the window, but standing at the base of the platform, where the Prince had been. She had an urgent message for her

father, but could only call in whispers, and he never paused or took his eyes from Meriope.

VI

Niera ducked under the mesh tent that shaded the orchids during the hottest hours of the day. Despite her state, she soon became aware of the close, sweet humidity of the flowers which exhaled their scent through the tiny holes in the sides of the bell jars. Her tears were a further punishment in the heat. It was difficult to breathe and she hiccupped painfully. Local and foreign aristocracy had overrun the gardens: strolling under the bougainvillea, preening at the fountains, and mingling under the billowing silk canopies erected in the northern gardens. Musicians had set up in shady alcoves to entertain the competing entourages that had arrived from Loth and Har Kalthi, bent on nabbing the princess that Har Alista had lost. Niera had ventured out at the hottest time of day because she had thought the sunny side of the garden would be empty.

She had been in her room all morning, unable to go up to the meditation room, unable, almost, to get out of bed. There had not been a single vision in the last month. It was as if she had lost her gift the day she became insolent with Ulna. The Soothsayer had not questioned her failure to progress and Niera was grateful for that, but then Ulna had concerns of her own.

The voices of two women approached the tent. Niera drew up her legs and rested her head on her knees, snuffling quietly. She wished Meriope would hurry up and marry so that she could have the peaceful use of the gardens again. She despised the stuffy

nobles, and the foreign ones were worse. They covered the gardens like wood lice. It was Ulna's fault, really. Thanks to her, the alliance between Kqaarin and Har Alista had been abandoned.

The rumours had started when Prince Seriot's caravan departed for home earlier than planned. Niera was as surprised as everyone else when she heard that the match was impossible. She had had to press Pulji for the latest news, since she no longer attended court.

"I don't know why you wish to fill your ears with filth," Pulji had said, as she stripped Niera's bedclothes for the wash. Niera had not been able to part with her old *deela* completely. Even so, their relationship had changed. Pulji was distant and, Niera thought, more judgemental.

"Some say the Soothsayer told the council that the Prince was—." Pulji made an oblique sign.

Niera understood. It was extremely insulting to accuse a man of being barren and taboo to say it of royal men. The concubine was blamed. If Meriope did not produce an heir within five years, there would be a Second Concubine, and the First would be treated with scorn and ridicule. Relations between cities would sour, since Har Alista would have paid a considerable amount for a beautiful but barren queen.

Niera shuddered to think of how her own mother had narrowly avoided this fate. She had been in her fifth year when she had finally become pregnant with Niera. Nonetheless, it had been too late to prevent the arrangements for the marriage with Anar. When it was discovered that the First Concubine's child was a girl, there was great

disappointment. After that, the two wives raced to produce a male heir who would secure their title as queen. Anar bore Meriope less than a year later, and six months after that, Niera's mother died in childbirth, along with her son.

"Some say the Soothsayer warned that the Princess would run away or be taken by another man, but I don't believe she would say such things. More likely it's the invention of some wicked and envious tongue."

Niera was surprised. She had never heard anything unkind said about Meriope. She wished she knew this wicked tongue.

"Others say it has nothing to do with the Soothsayer's prophecy at all. They say the Queen changed her mind because of the Green Emperor's envoy."

Niera wondered if this could be the truth. The Green Emperor sent an envoy every two years to maintain relations between the kingdoms and discuss trade. The Emperor's son was two or three years yet from his awakening. A contract would have to be signed if Meriope were to wait. It was true that the Emperor had many times the wealth of Har Alista, but this was qualified by the great distance between the coastal lands and Kqaarin. No significant political alliance could be formed. Trade would be costly. And how did this explain Anar's disgust with Ulna?

The women's shadows fell across the tent and one of them laughed. Niera closed her eyes and willed them gone. The orchids' scent was making her sleepy and dizzy. She should never have left her rooms.

“Prince Kenjal may be more striking and sweet of nature,” one of the women said, “and they really have tried, sending this second entourage, but Loth is a more important trading city. You cannot argue with that.”

“I don’t think the Princess prefers either of them.”

“It is better that she doesn’t. It’s not her decision.”

“I heard she’s heartbroken over Prince Seriot.”

“I’m not displeased. Har Alista is far too accustomed to getting their way, throwing their weight around, involving others in their hostilities with the East. This refusal should shake them a bit. It’s a shame Anar doesn’t have two such lovely daughters. Both Loth and Kalthi would have made fine alliances.”

“There’s a daughter from the First Concubine, who died, though I haven’t seen her in court.”

“Anar will have her hidden well. It was the shame of Kqaarin, you know, when the King chose a commoner for his first wife. No heir prince would take the offspring of that match. They never even brought the girl out after her awakening. A plain creature, I would imagine.”

Niera stared at the grass by her feet. A cramp made breathing painful. The tent was smothering, but she could not leave. She would not be seen crawling out from it now, no. How she hated them! Them and everyone like them with their unfounded conceit. They had never seen her! They didn’t know her and yet they dismissed her, ignored her or speculated all sorts of cruel things.

The shadows slid to the ground and the women's voices faded into the sounds of the garden. Niera lay back, arms crossed over her chest. Hot tears ran into her earlobes and cooled immediately.

Meriope was lovely. Everyone thought so. She would have been loved even if she hadn't been a princess. People loved beauty unreasonably. It was so horribly unfair.

She woke with Ulna's gentle shaking. The Soothsayer passed her a cup of water and sat back. Niera drank the whole cup in a breath. She felt saturated with heat.

They were silent for a time.

"I'm sorry I didn't go to my exercises," Niera said, her voice a husk. "I haven't made progress in so long, I've been afraid that I've lost the ability."

"It cannot be lost, but it can be buried under emotion. You must understand what is troubling you—an understanding of both body and mind. Once you do, you must try to let it go. Keep to your training. I know that it's frustrating and difficult. It may even be helpful to leave Kqaarin for a while."

"What do you mean? Where can I go?"

"To Faejn Goa."

Niera had heard of Faejn Goa, a land of pink and yellow sandstone cliffs five days to the northeast by caravan. The cliffs had natural caves in them that the mystics used as a beehive cloister. There was a famous palace there too, carved from one of the cliffs. The idea of travelling immediately lifted her spirits.

When they left the tent, Niera was surprised to find that it was close to dusk. She wondered why the gardener had not dismantled the tent, then realized that he must have known she was in there.

“You must think I’m childish,” Niera said.

“No.”

Niera looked at her. Years of discipline had made the Soothsayer’s face unreadable.

“Do you ever miss your family?” Niera had wanted to ask this for some time, but had always been deterred by Ulna’s reserve.

If Ulna did miss them, the emotion was not near the surface. Niera wondered if becoming a soothsayer meant going dead inside. Attractive as that seemed at times, she didn’t want to be a stone.

“My sister,” Ulna said, momentarily confusing Niera. She had almost given up on a reply.

“What was she like?”

Ulna studied the ground as it passed beneath their feet. “My training has not ended, Niera. As I have told you, some of it is lifelong. She was precious to me.”

Something warned Niera against prodding deeper, though the feeling was soon forgotten in a tentative hope that had been growing inside her since Ulna had mentioned Faejn Goa. She would go. Ulna was right: something had to be causing her blindness. She would discover the source and return to Kqaarin renewed.

She didn't mind as much when the strollers passed her now in the dusk. They could think what they would of her now. One day, she would be Kqaarin's soothsayer, the power of the elements within her mastery.

No one would ignore her then.

VII

Niera waited in the retiring room, fighting her misgivings. The imported mahogany chairs, despite the wine-coloured cushions, were uncomfortable. The floors, like those in Meriope's room, were decorated with *Twiga* carpets at least three generations old. Niera shared the room with dignitaries and staff waiting to speak with the Queen about the upcoming marriage celebrations. Traditionally, the celebrations were held in the city of the groom, but Anar evidently planned to have Kqaarin share the honour. Niera was irritated by the unusually long wait and Anar's failure to invite her to sit in the private corridor. At least she knew the arrangements were bound to have put Anar in a favourable mood.

Niera recognized the head cook speaking with a woman whom she soon discovered was the coordinator for the dance music. The woman was grieved because the man appointed to coordinate the dining music was encroaching on her responsibilities. Kloofi-Menami, Niera's old dance instructor, came in shortly, after leaving the Queen's private rooms. She almost overlooked Niera, but Niera called to her.

"*Par'ba!* I didn't recognize you." She enfolded Niera in her arms and Niera returned the embrace with happy surprise. "You're taller, or I am sinking to my grave. How have you been?"

"I still practice the *zindafer*," Niera said, quietly. "For myself, anyway."

“Don’t be sad,” Menami replied, squeezing her hand. “You have a more important gift and it would be sacrilegious to waste it. It is a blessing for Kqaarin. Akgar Seir has not had a soothsayer for seventy-two years. They say it’s a curse for not heeding the prophecies of the last one. I can’t say I don’t wish you could dance at your sister’s marriage. But it is for the better, perhaps, or you might steal too much attention.

Niera laughed. When Menami left, she felt slightly guilty about failing to tell her old teacher that she wouldn’t be at the ceremonies at all. If all went well, she would be recovering her sight in the sandstone cliffs of Faejn Goa. She feared that if the public knew her intention they might think her bitter about Meriope’s success. She didn’t worry that Anar would harbour such thoughts. As the noblewomen from Loth had said, it was in her interest not to have Niera reminding everyone of the King’s sordid past—especially now that she would draw attention as Kqaarin’s apprentice soothsayer.

Niera was tired of waiting. She had been waiting longer than many of the servants. When it had finally looked as if it might be her turn, the head seamstress had swept in, bearing before her two bolts of damask with the ceremonial manner of the Seneschal carrying the royal crowns. Niera knew she would have to be pleasant if she didn’t want the Queen to deny her out of pettiness. She had not wanted to ask Anar’s permission in the first place. She was, after all, of mature age—in a few months she would be in her seventeenth year. Ulna, however, had insisted. There was no question of the Soothsayer making the request herself, since the Queen was still incensed over her pronouncement against the Har Alista. Ulna had cautioned that the gesture could save them trouble later if Anar decided that Niera was flouting her authority by going on the retreat. Niera was bound by the laws of the Soothsayer and her profession; however, the Queen could argue

that her own authority was forfeit only when it was passed to Niera's husband. There had never been a case of royalty being recognized with the gift of sight and so the rites of authority were not clear.

Niera caught the head cook staring at her. She knew that her gift had shocked the commoners. According to Pulji, the Queen was not the only one to wonder about the timing of the discovery. It was Ulna's character that had prevented rumours from gathering strength. Even so, Niera observed a change in the servants' treatment of her. Even those in the retiring room had become silent when she entered. Meriope would have broken the silence in some friendly way, making even the most reticent laugh with her. Niera had sat very tall and pretended not to see anyone, confident that her austere appearance would discourage whispering. Soon enough, the awkward silence was broken again with chatter.

When Niera was summoned, she felt the gazes of the others as she followed the Queen's maid through the door that opened onto the royal corridor.

When they reached the entrance to the Queen's sitting room, the maid paused for a moment, then motioned Niera to sit on the low, cushioned bench outside of the room. Both of them could hear the muffled argument behind the door. Someone had slipped in before her and succeeded in ruining the Queen's humour. Niera felt annoyance seep into her anxiety. She thought of telling the maid that she had changed her mind, but Anar would wonder why and it could make her less disposed toward a favourable response when Niera returned later.

Niera ran her fingers nervously over the arm of the bench. It was carved in a motif of mermaids and sea monsters—doubtless one of the Queen's commissions to evoke her

memories of Atrad. Niera studied one of the mermaids. She had two tails and was holding an end in either hand. It looked vaguely obscene. She leaned in to get a better look, but noticed the maid lingering at the end of the hall.

It seemed strange to Niera that her birth element should be water when she had seen so little of it in her life. There was the Soluud, the narrow green river that, some years, dried up completely at the height of summer, leaving Kqaarin to the mercy of brackish wells great distances apart. Of course, Niera had never felt the effects of water scarcity, although Pulji talked about it, casting peevish looks in the direction of the palace gardens. In rare years, the Soluud overflowed its banks during the short rainy season. The water was beautiful to the eye, a lizard's green, but full of sand and silt that had to be filtered out. Niera enjoyed climbing Kqaarin's northern spire during the rains to watch the ribbon of the Soluud swell. For a few weeks afterwards, there was a carpet of bright green flora growing at the sides of the banks. She dreamt of following that ephemeral carpet to see where it led.

Niera heard the handle of the door turn.

"I have not finished yet." It was the King's voice. Niera's heart skipped. She checked to see if her headscarf was in place.

The door swung to again, but didn't latch.

"I don't ask you for many things," Niera heard Anar say, "but this is our daughter. I would be ashamed to hold such a miserly leave-taking. What does a mother live for but the marriage of her children? I beg you not to humiliate us."

“You are acting out of excessive fondness. That is not the way it is done. Wait until your son is married, then it will be Kqaarin’s time to host. It is foolish to have a celebration when Loth must hold their own.”

“You speak of tradition, but I don’t believe it. You’re only concerned that the celebrations will squander the *mujali*. It’s shameful to think this way. Don’t try to make it an unnatural thing to have two celebrations. For me, it is unnatural not to. It is the custom in Atrad.”

In the hall, Niera became still. She could not believe how insolently Anar was speaking. Surely it was her father’s patience that prevented him from thundering her down.

“Atrad is a mythological land to the people here. Its customs are eccentric.”

“It’s the desert ways that are bizarre.”

“Anar, there will be no celebration apart from what is due the marriage envoy when they arrive.”

“I don’t understand you. If you’re so concerned about the treasury, why did you support that old witch when she prophesied jibbertygitch and lost our alliance with Har Alista?”

“She has never been wrong, Anar.”

“Has she ever been right? How many times has she returned from the tomb to tell you that she sees nothing? And how can you tell whether she’s recommended the best course of action when you often cannot know how it would have turned out otherwise? Have you ever considered that she might be guided by her own motivations?”

“You don’t know what you speak of, Anar. You have a woman’s mind.”

“Perhaps it is a woman’s mind the council lacks.”

“This matter is finished.”

Niera stood, deciding that now was not the time to see the Queen.

The door opened and Anar’s golden eyes lighted on her. The Queen sighed.

“Come in, Niera,” she said. “I suppose that Ulna demands you look the part as well.”

Niera bowed curtly and stepped into the sitting room. Her father was standing by the window, a dark, stooped form in silhouette.

“Greetings, Father,” she said, bowing respectfully. She felt a pain in her stomach.

“This one won’t break the palace treasury,” her father said, his voice a low rumble.

“Nor will she augment it, thanks to your woman with a man’s mind,” Anar replied, plucking an olive from a nearby tray. “But I suppose you should get back to the council. I wouldn’t want to bore you with women’s matters.”

The King looked at her sharply, but Anar turned to Niera.

“What did you want, dear?”

“I came to ask your leave to go on a retreat to Faejn Goa. It’s for my training.”

“What? Does our Soothsayer plan to take two retreats this year?” Anar threw a glance at the King, and he turned from the window.

“I would be travelling alone with the caravan that goes up to trade with Faejn Goa. There’s a cloister; I would be staying there.”

“When?”

“I would leave on the third week of next month.”

“You’ll miss Meriope’s wedding, but I’m not sure your mistress would permit you to join the marriage train anyway. She’s practically made you a hermit. Well, I’m not going to be an obstacle between you and your training. But you must take *Hana Pulji* with you.”

Niera’s face flushed. “Thank you,” she said tonelessly. Pulji hadn’t been her *deela* for more than eight months now! Niera bowed to her parents and turned to the door.

“Niera,” the King said, “you have not asked leave of me.”

Niera was too surprised to be ashamed. Her father had never been consulted on matters concerning his daughters, save their marriages. This was Anar’s territory.

“I’m sorry, Father,” she stammered. “Do you give me leave?”

“Why do you go to Faejn Goa?”

Niera did not want to reveal her blindness. “It will help me focus on my training.”

“What are the caves of hermits going to teach you about making decisions under duress? Ulna has excellent judgement, but I am not sure she is guided in this choice. I cannot see good coming from years of training in isolation. From now on, you will accompany her to the council and learn what is going on in the very kingdom you aspire to guide.”

“Juran, leave her go,” Anar said. “One retreat won’t bring down the walls of the city.”

“Silence, Anar.” His voice quavered. “Sehad has attended council since he was nine. Niera has been schooled in the graces of a noblewoman, a worthless upbringing in governance. She has to learn to be a fit medium through which our Ancestors may speak, not a vessel of ignorance.”

Niera couldn't meet his eyes. She was afraid to breathe.

"This is not the time to be running over the desert like an aimless dromedary. You speak of travelling with the caravans? Do you know that the nomads have been laying siege to our caravans for the last month?"

Niera shook her head. She was embarrassed by her ignorance. Oh, why had Ulna set her up for this? She should have known! Tears came to her eyes, but she would slit her throat before she let them fall.

"You will attend the Soothsayer in council tomorrow."

Niera nodded and bowed.

On her way from the royal wing, Niera passed Ulna's chambers. Her short corridor was opposite Meriope's. Niera had glanced at it before with curiosity, but had never visited Ulna in her rooms. She hesitated now at the entrance of the shaded passage. She knew she should wait until she was calmer, but she needed to talk to someone. With Pulji, she could cry without embarrassment, but Pulji did not like speaking about anything to do with the apprenticeship.

She stepped into the corridor. A light shone from under one of the doors. She was raising her hand to rap when she heard Meriope's voice on the other side.

"Isn't there anything you can do?" she said, weeping softly.

"I was not asked to prophesize on Loth. Something may happen yet," Ulna said.

"But there is so little time!"

The blood was ringing in Niera's ears. She was about to set her ear against the door when she noticed that the old guard, who had the evening post outside Meriope's

corridor, was watching her. He immediately looked away, but Niera stepped back. She hurried out of the corridor and headed to her own rooms on the other side of the palace.

Since when had Ulna been Meriope's confidante? There was not one thing that Meriope did not take from her. Her apprenticeship with Ulna suddenly lost some of its specialness. To think she had even contemplated confiding in Ulna about her jealousy! From the looks of it, Meriope and Ulna were as inseparable as pebbles in a bowl of lentils.

And why was Meriope resisting her marriage? For a moment, Niera felt a shudder of commiseration, thinking of how narrowly she had avoided her own. But Prince Jahan of Loth was young and reputedly handsome. It was hardly a fair comparison with the middle-aged, slovenly *Kir*. Perhaps Meriope had grown too proud, thinking she could choose her own match as she had chosen her lover. Yes, Niera thought, Meriope was certainly selfish to want more.

VIII

Niera stood dutifully at Ulna's side, listening intermittently to the tedious arguments about trade security. There had been another attack on a caravan carrying goods to Har Alista. The lives of the traders had been spared, but the nomads had taken the valuables in the shipment. A rubied harness meant to restore friendly feelings between the cities had been lost. The rash of attacks was unusual, since the nomadic tribes typically avoided the caravan routes. When they needed to trade, they either came into the city bazaars to barter their herds, tapestries and *taraclove* or conducted a *dasa bazaar*. The offending tribe seemed to be operating in a wide circumference around Kqaarin. Some counsellors suggested forming a strategic alliance with the city kingdoms most affected by reduced trade with the city. They proposed a military force that would hunt down and eliminate the marauding band.

Ulna's opinion had not been solicited, nor did she offer it. Niera tried to look attentive, but her mind wandered. She found herself thinking of the elemental spells. Soothsaying seemed exciting to the outsider, but the day by day work was boring. It involved much standing around, listening to the counsellors harangue. She sometimes felt guilty when she saw how embroiled her father was in the endless quarrels. Then she would try to listen more carefully, remembering how her mother had given such helpful counsel. Still, it seemed to take forever for the simplest thing to be decided. Niera

imagined capturing the nomad band in a wind spell, flushing them into the courtyard and imprisoning them in a tower of flame. In her daydreams, she would direct the counsellors' attention to the window where they would learn that their arguments were for naught.

"You have been working hard," Ulna said, as she walked with Niera from the council meeting.

"I want to improve."

Niera had begun to return to the meditation room in the evenings. Without Ulna's instruction, she cast for things that interested her, such as images of her mother and upcoming battles, which would impress her father. One evening she had tried to cast for her own future—something Ulna had warned her against—and her mind had caught a fleeting image. She had seen a stretch of green disappearing into a horizon that wavered like a mirage. She was travelling along it. This brief glimpse, though unconnected to her cast, lifted her spirits because it proved that she had not lost her gift. She had stayed up most of the night trying to induce another vision. Two days later, while casting for the identity of Meriope's lover, Niera saw the woman in blue in a room full of silver mirrors. The woman was bent over a table, carving something. Niera concentrated on moving closer so she could see what the woman was doing, but when she approached, a movement in her peripheral vision caught her attention. To her amazement, she saw her reflection in one of the mirrors—not in her disembodied form, but sitting in the meditation room, as she was even at that moment. Niera kept these advances to herself.

"I would like to speak with you. Could you come to my rooms?"

Niera nodded, a little surprised.

Only a week had passed since she had listened outside the Ulna's door. She had not seen Meriope since then, but imagined her busy being fitted for the fine clothes and other luxuries she would require for her new life in Loth.

Ulna guided Niera into the same room in which she had had her secretive conversation with Meriope. Niera was surprised to find that the space was not utilitarian and severe like Ulna herself, who seemed to have whittled herself to an edge, but full of peasant tapestries and painted sculpture from Kqaarin's bazaar. It reminded Niera of the glimpse she had had of a commoner's house years earlier, when her *deela* had taken her into the city for Liberation Day. Ulna gestured to a rough-woven, purple cushion and Niera settled herself. Her attention was caught by a shelf of old books lining one of the walls. She wondered if Ulna kept a book of the elemental spells or if she had memorized them.

"You are angry with me," Ulna said, after she had settled across from Niera. "Is it because of the retreat?"

"I *was* angry about the retreat," Niera replied. "But I'll have other chances, and I won't ask Anar's permission next time. I'm your apprentice now; if you agree, that should be enough."

"There is something else." She gazed at Niera with her pale, inscrutable eyes.

Niera stared back. "If I feel bad," she said, straightening, "it is because I've learned so little."

"You must first master the meditation exercises."

"I have."

"You have not."

“Why? Because you think I’m blind?”

“That is a symptom, not the cause. You have not yet transcended your desires. There is something, an obstacle, keeping you within yourself.”

“It must be the exercises, because I wasn’t blind before the apprenticeship.”

“You were not in control of your visions then. You also did not desire them. You have a strong desire for them now and a will to impress.”

Niera flushed. What was wrong with wanting to impress? She didn’t want to be invisible her entire life. Perhaps it was Ulna who feared what would happen if she made an impression before the council. After all, she would be succeeding Ulna one of these days. Maybe that explained the beetle’s pace of her instruction. The Queen, for one, would welcome a new soothsayer.

A knock broke the silence. Ulna rose to answer it, but Niera could not see who it was from where she was sitting. She heard some soft whispering.

“I’m sorry, Niera,” Ulna said. “I must leave for a few minutes.”

Niera nodded and Ulna drew the door closed behind her. She stared at the room, wondering what Ulna’s life would have been like if she hadn’t been discovered to have the sight. She wondered about the Soothsayer’s family and if she still saw them, despite her supposed renunciation of her bonds to individuals. Ulna still loved her sister; Niera knew that much.

Her gaze fell on the books again and she got up to examine them. Ulna was one of the very few commoners who could read. Pulji couldn’t. Niera had learned from a scholar who was the second-born of one of the poorer aristocratic families. It was Niera’s mother who had insisted she be taught. Pulji had remembered the wish and honoured it.

Niera pulled out a book with a cracked spine. The leather had had oil rubbed into it recently. She opened it carefully to avoid damaging it further, but was disappointed to find that it was a verse translation of the *Venasthadeeb*. She opened each book in turn and discovered more books of verse, guides identifying desert plants and their uses, chronicles by court historians, and even a small copy of Kqaarin's Book of Kings. She spied a tablet wedged in with the books and drew it out. It was full of drawings of various desert landscapes and people—probably from the retreats Ulna had taken over the years. Ulna had interspersed thoughts or short verses with the images. Niera found it difficult to think of the Soothsayer as an artist and poet. She flipped through the tablet quickly, alert for the swish of her mistress's robe. Toward the end, there was a picture of a woman in long, flowing robes, standing in a room full of mirrors. The sketch was rough; only the eyes were visible, but Niera recognized the Lady of the Mirrors, the woman in her recurring visions. So Ulna had seen her too! She wondered if Ulna knew who she was. It would be difficult to find a way of asking.

Niera flipped forward to the end and froze. There was a drawing of her and Meriope on facing pages. On her own page, she was depicted as disfigured. Her hair was long, as it had once been, but her face was scarred on one side. She was doing something with her hands, writing or etching perhaps, but Ulna had not finished the drawing. On the facing page, Meriope was depicted in a dark, commoner's robe and bizarre headdress. She was standing in the open desert. Her face—what could be seen of it, since her mouth and chin were covered—was as flawless and beautiful as ever. Between the two pages, like a balance, was a single word: Hope. Niera's heart was beating so audibly that she failed to hear Ulna return. She jumped, even though she was already back on the cushion.

“I’m sorry about that interruption.”

“No, no,” Niera said faintly.

Ulna looked at her and Niera averted her eyes. The Soothsayer handed her a cup of cool spiced tea and settled again on her cushion. They sipped their drinks in silence.

“You must let it go,” Ulna said, finally. “You have the potential to do much good, but you have been damaged by hurt and your envy of Meriope.”

Niera went cold. The tea sloshed over her fingers as she set it down. “I find it incredible that you can speak to me of my failings when you’re conspiring with Meriope. All I asked of you was that you teach me, and you’ve done little enough of that.” Niera rose, her skin damp with perspiration.

Ulna said nothing as she left the room. She didn’t attempt to stop her.

The following evening, as Niera was casting once more into her own future, someone tugged the bell rope outside of her room. When she opened the door, a dread came over her.

“May I come in?” Ulna asked.

After a hesitation, Niera stepped back.

When they had settled on the cushions, Ulna spoke first. “Niera, I want you to take a break from your training.”

“What do you mean?”

“You were never given sufficient time to think about what it means to become a soothsayer. There was pressure on you to make the decision. I want you to take four months now to think carefully about the apprenticeship.”

“I don’t need to.”

“This is not a request, Niera. You have noticed yourself that you are not progressing in the training. This is not because there is anything wrong with your ability or the exercises. It is because there are things you have not resolved within yourself. I was wrong to speak as baldly as I did yesterday, but I too want—”

“You can’t simply stop the apprenticeship,” Niera said, alarmed. It was as if in fearing the worst, it had taken form and come calling. What would happen now? What would her father think?

“Many things have gone unhappily in your life,” Ulna said, “and this will seem like one more thing, but it isn’t. I promise you. I’m not abandoning you. It will be four months and you will decide after that. You need this time, Niera.”

Niera’s mind roiled with thoughts of how she could counter Ulna’s decision. She could protest to her father, or better yet, to Anar, since she would be sympathetic to an opposing view. Ulna had no grounds to punish her like this. Anar had been right: Ulna had her own motivations.

Niera did not plead. She stared ahead, as though the Soothsayer were not there. Finally, Ulna rose. As she passed, she put a hand on Niera’s shoulder. “You *will* be someone, Niera. Someone who does much good for others.” Niera stiffened, rage and hurt surging in her chest.

As soon as she heard the Soothsayer’s steps retreating in the corridor, Niera snuffed out the dried flower wick on her mother’s oil lamp and flung herself on her bed. She didn’t bother to change her robe. She had found it ugly and shapeless once, but now it was her mark of difference.

Ulna had betrayed her. She would have to concentrate on her own preservation now. She thought of Ulna's eyes at the end of their meeting. *I am not abandoning you.* What else was it? But something bothered Niera: she recognized that Ulna cared for her. But how could this be reconciled with the drawing she had found in the Soothsayer's room? Disfigured people were often assumed to have trafficked with demons or dabbled in the black arts. There was nothing remotely hopeful in such a stigma.

IX

Niera woke with a start. She groped in the dark for her robe and broke her oil lamp, which had been set too close to the edge of her night table. The loss stabbed her, but she did not have time to feel it fully. She yanked the robe over her head and fumbled over the slippery debris to her door. A shard lodged in her foot and she hastily tried to flick it off, but it was stubborn. She ran down her corridor, past the startled guard who stood at the junction to the main hall.

“Is something wrong, My Lady?”

Niera did not waste time to reply. She had had a vision. It was incomplete, but much more vivid than anything she had seen in her period of partial blindness. Nevertheless, it would be of grave import to her father. How she had hoped for a chance like this!

At last, at last! her heart sang as she burst through the cavernous hollow of the darkened court. The flambeaux in the royal passages were lit and she followed the wavering path of light flung across the darkness. She could hear the guard behind her, but she didn't care. Her news warranted the upset. She realized that she was smiling and hid her joy.

As she passed the guards at the entrance to the royal wing, there came a shout for her to halt, but she ran on.

The guards at the entrance to the King and Queen's corridor had heard the commotion and barred her way.

"I must speak with my father," she gasped, looking beyond them into the candlelit corridor. Behind her, the other guards had caught up.

"I cannot wake him at this hour, My Lady," said one of the guards. "Can it not wait until morning?"

"No. You must wake him now."

"What does it concern?"

"Your head on a pike if you delay me longer!"

"Calm yourself, My Lady. I only want to know what to tell the Queen's maid. She won't wake him otherwise." Despite this objection, the guard retreated down the private corridor. One of the remaining guards shifted, as if anticipating Niera's urge to slip through. This treatment tainted her excitement. Just because she didn't live in the royal wing didn't make her an intruder. She raised her chin, as Sehad did when addressing his inferiors, and looked through the guards as if they weren't there.

"You're bleeding, My Lady," one of them said.

Niera glared at him, then looked down. Her eyes followed a trail of dark blotches on the bare adobe floor. For some reason, they reminded her of the flowers Meriope and her friends used to pluck when no one was watching. Niera had denuded one or two along with them, chanting some silly rhyme about love.

Just then the Queen appeared, a scarab green shawl flung around her shoulders. Her hair was tied back in a tail that hung past her waist like a stream of dark amber.

“What is the problem,” she said coldly, dismissing the servants with her eyes.

“The King is asleep.” The skin on her face looked tight.

“I must speak with him,” Niera said. “It’s urgent.”

The Queen was about to reply when her gaze snagged on something. Niera turned and saw Meriope and Ulna emerging from the Meriope’s corridor. Ulna came straight toward them. Meriope trailed behind, halting a few paces away. She avoided her mother’s gaze, glancing at Niera instead. Niera was surprised by the fatigue and anxiety she saw in Meriope’s face. She looked like she hadn’t slept in days. She was also noticeably thinner.

Niera’s concern soured when she glanced at the Soothsayer. Ulna could not continue the apprenticeship, but she had time for midnight chats with the Jewel of Kqaarin.

“Niera, what’s happened?” Ulna asked.

“What business do you have with my daughter?” Anar interrupted.

“We were speaking of her upcoming marriage,” Ulna replied, as if she hadn’t heard the displeasure in the Queen’s voice.

“From this moment, you will not to speak another word to her. You’ve ruined two marriages and I will paint myself a fool’s face before you ruin another.”

Niera was confused for a moment until she realized that the Queen was counting her aborted match with the *Kir*. She had never heard Anar speak to Ulna in this way. She could not tell what the Soothsayer was thinking behind those eerily pale eyes. Meriope, however, was distressed. “Mother, I asked her to speak with me. She’s helping me prepare for my marriage.”

“Don’t burden yourself with lies,” the Queen said, turning her golden gaze on her daughter. “If you fail to recognize your enemies, you will never be anything but a concubine; and believe me, your life will be trouble then.”

Niera bristled, but she could see that Anar had not intended the words for her. Meriope looked at Ulna desperately, but finding no encouragement, retreated to her rooms. Niera stared after her. Marriage was what Meriope had spent half her life chatting about with her friends and now she balked. Prince Jahan of Loth wasn’t such a falling off from Prince Seriot. Both were heirs to wealthy cities. Both were purportedly young and handsome, with untarnished reputations. This was certainly more than Niera would have had—or anyone in Meriope’s circle.

“You may leave,” the Queen said coldly. Ulna made a polite bow and left. Niera was thankful. The Soothsayer’s presence had made her uncomfortable, especially since she had come to share her vision with her father. If she had still been an apprentice, her vision would have been filtered through Ulna, who would have made all sorts of decisions, interrogations and commandments before it was deemed fit for another ear.

“Now what is it you must say?”

Niera checked to see that Ulna was no longer in sight. “It concerns the security of the palace. I’ve had a vision.”

“You have your sight back. Miraculous. And just when you’ve been released from the rules of your craft.”

Niera bit back her first response. “That was not my choice; *I* didn’t suspend the apprenticeship. And it’s not true about my sight. I never lost it.”

“Then why did our Soothsayer defer the apprenticeship?”

Niera was not sure how Ulna had justified the hiatus, but she knew the Queen wouldn't know either. "I don't know," she replied.

Anar sighed. "It wouldn't be the first act of caprice by that witch. She seems intent on burdening the kingdom with spinster daughters."

"I intend to become a soothsayer," Niera said tartly.

The Queen smiled faintly. "Come to my sitting room and tell me what you saw."

Niera started to protest, but Anar cut her short: "I will decide whether or not to wake the King. You understand that he can't be disturbed on a whim. Your sight has not been proven and I'll be convinced by water, not the twitching of a stick."

As Niera sat in the Queen's sitting room, she felt disappointment pressing on her throat like a tight scarf. The heel of her foot throbbed, but she resisted touching it, afraid the Queen might find another distraction in the welfare of her *Twiga* carpets. This was not the reception Niera had imagined.

"He's a nomad, you say?"

"Yes," Niera said. Was she being deliberately thick?

"And he's in the garden right now?"

"Yes, yes. In the bougainvillea grove, by the fountain. You must send guards for him now, before he slips away."

"And you don't know who he is meeting or what his intentions are?"

Niera shook her head with irritation.

"You seem to have inherited your mistress's manner of soothsaying."

Niera held her peace. It had been a partial vision, but it was certainly sufficient to raise an alarm. A nomad had gotten through the palace gates by guile. He was lurking in

the grove at that precious moment, waiting to meet with someone from the palace. That was treason right there! And he was only a messenger, a spy perhaps, working in the service of another. It could well portend an invasion! It was maddening that the Queen could be so deliberately calm.

“We’re wasting time,” Niera cried, despite herself. She took a risk: “The nomad’s lord plans to overthrow the kingdom.” Could she be very far amiss considering the circumstances? “His informant may be meeting with him as we speak. We must hurry.”

It seemed to Niera that the Queen took her time summoning the Chief of Security. He promised to organize a band of men immediately and report to her as soon as the two were apprehended.

“I will go too,” Niera said, as the security officer was taking his leave.

“You would do better to return to your rooms,” the Queen replied, although she did not forbid it. She asked Niera to tell her maid to send for saffron milk. “I hope it’s true for your sake,” she said, as Niera was leaving. “At least one daughter ought to try to please her father.”

Niera pretended not to hear.

She stood in darkness by a window, ignoring the pain in her foot. She had tried to remove the shard in the dark, but the skin had become tender and would require tongs, patience and light. The servants who had been sleeping in the room had been roused and sent stumbling to find other beds. Niera could not see where the nomad was hiding from her window and suspected that the Chief of Security had chosen this vantage so that she could feel close to the excitement without risking interference. He was doubtless

watching from another window, closer to the bougainvillea grove. Still, she was grateful to be accommodated at all. She no longer had the status of apprentice soothsayer and was once more merely the fruit of an unrecognized marriage. She knew her prophecy could change that once again.

Having trained with Ulna for more than eight months, she recognized the signs of anxiety in her body. The raised shoulders, the forward thrust of the neck, the clenched jaw and the breathing that seemed to come from a place just beside her heart. The Chief of Security had commended her for her good sense in speaking only to the Queen. She took consolation in this, but wished the praise could have reached her father's ears.

Niera wondered how all of this could go on without her father's knowledge. Was it because they didn't trust her sight? It made her wonder about the wisdom of arguing over foreign affairs when one didn't know what was going on in one's own palace. Perhaps Anar had refused to wake him so she could overstep her authority. Niera wondered if she shouldn't have been more insistent about speaking only to her father. Anar, however, had had the upper hand.

She squinted into the darkness. The guards were probably out there already. Niera could barely make out the vines that climbed the walls of the garden. Despite the wealth of water lavished on them, they never reached the top. The window stood slightly ajar and she could smell the night scents, the sour yoghurt smell mingled with jasmine and honeysuckle. Soon, she knew, the *lemonthorn* would bloom with yellow flowers, each protected by a nest of dry spines, which only the desert insects knew how to navigate. How insignificant those insects seemed to her, and yet the garden and city walls were nothing to them.

Niera saw something moving beneath the silver shimmer of the olive trees, close to the garden wall. The figure was narrow and hooded. Niera watched it disappear into the bougainvillea grove.

They were gathered in the council room. Nothing Niera had imagined between waking and arriving at the royal corridor had prepared her for the harvest of her prophecy. Her father had finally been roused by the Queen, who now deemed the incident of dire import, requiring his immediate consideration. Niera knew that her alacrity was far from limited to concern over the security of the kingdom. The vision that had promised to deliver Niera what she had wanted for so long had, by some sleight of hand, metamorphosed into an opportunity for Anar. Niera wished she were anywhere but lamed, like a shepherd without a staff, before her father's interrogation. Anar alternated between proclaiming Niera's gift and conveying her surprise that someone so valued could betray their trust.

Ulna was standing beside the nomad whose name was Abdim. The hood of her charcoal robe was thrown back. Her face was a sallow oval, her eyes shrouded like the skin that forms over a well. If she felt fear or remorse, it didn't show. Abdim's fierce black eyes and gaunt musculature attested the austerity of his life. He had seen worse than this.

Niera was made to stand before the King and his counsellors, in plain view of the two fugitives, and explain once again the vision she had had. In a wavering voice, she recited what she had seen, addressing the space in the middle of the table. Under the sleeves of her robe, her fingernails marked her palms.

“Tell the whole of it,” Anar said, when Niera had finished. “Why are you protecting your mistress when she delayed your training? Tell the council about the plot to overthrow the kingdom.”

Niera saw something flash in Ulna’s eyes, but it was quickly absorbed again. She felt as if she had been thrown into scalding water. If she admitted that she invented a part of her vision, she would be punished, and mistrust would tarnish all of her future prophecies. If she didn’t, Ulna and Abdim would receive a more severe punishment—perhaps death.

Niera could not bear to look at Ulna or her father.

“I cannot be sure,” she said quietly.

“Speak up, child,” her father demanded. “There are lives at stake and you whimper like a pariah dog.” Niera could hear the violence behind his voice. She knew he valued Ulna highly enough to have weathered years of criticism from Anar. Now she had forced the situation he had avoided for so long. Niera stared at the table, hoping to find guidance. Her voice came out high. “I said, I cannot be sure. I did not *see* their motives. I assumed that they—”

“A soothsayer assumes nothing,” her father snapped. “Do you think because you have some little ability you can become a soothsayer overnight?”

“No,” Niera said.

The Queen threw daggers at both of them with her eyes, but remained silent. Niera smoldered. Hadn’t she seen enough to capture the intruder and prevent some ill-doing from befalling the kingdom? Could they honestly say they would have been better off without her vision, half-formed though it was?

“Ulna,” the King said, finally addressing her, “you have served our city faithfully over the years, and I have found your judgements faultless. I want to hear what you have to say in defense of yourself.”

Niera thought Ulna would choose silence like Abdim, although the Chief of Security would encourage him to speak later. To her surprise, Ulna spoke. “I cannot tell you what this meeting was about, but its meaning will become clear soon enough. The peril this kingdom faces is a lack of compassion and, now, misguided prophecy.” Ulna looked at Niera.

Niera found the power behind her voice. “If my prophecy was misguided then why are you here? There was nothing false about it. I’ve spoken the truth.”

“Niera is right. You are in no position to be condemning others,” the Queen said.

“Niera,” Ulna said with tenderness, “you have ignored everything I have taught you about interpreting and judging your visions.”

The King, who had infinite patience for his counsellors’ squabbles, did not show the same tolerance for women’s. He ordered Abdim placed in the dungeon, “Until you find your tongue.” He had more difficulty deciding Ulna’s fate and was so irritable that no one, including the Queen, dared interrupt him.

“Ulna, you surprise and dismay me. I wonder if your woman’s heart has surfaced after all these years. I could have you stoned for your silence.”

Even in her state of exhaustion and strain, Niera knew that her father was bluffing, like the bluegreen lizards that inflated little sacs in their necks when they sensed a threat. Soothsayers were highly venerated and, even if her father was foolish enough not to know her worth, the people of Kqaarin did. They would rise up before the first stone could be

thrown. She was their voice in the palace and, in many ways, their queen. Niera understood that her father was showing his frustration and pain at the loss of something he valued. She suddenly felt the need to sit down.

“I have thought our palace very fortunate to be blessed by wise guidance for so many years. I never dreamed we would share the fate of Akgar Seir, which has not found a soothsayer in its midst for a generation. Now you force me to leave my kingdom in the same poverty. From this moment, you are no longer Kqaarin’s soothsayer. Tomorrow I will call an open court and you will explain to the people why you have been banished from the Royal Council so that they cannot accuse me of abusing my power. You will return to live among them, but you will not be permitted to leave the city. If you think this unjust, I will remind you that there are others here who would have dealt a harsher punishment. But I have spoken now.” He did not look at the Queen, but he didn’t have to. Everyone understood whom he was warning.

Ulna was escorted out by guards who would stand sentinel outside her door and see to her eventual departure from the palace. The counsellors were taking their leave, and Niera bowed alongside them. Her father, however, called her to him. The Queen had not yet risen.

“Why are you limping?” he asked.

“It is nothing. A small injury.”

“You would be foolish to take pride in what you have done here. You are green yet, and impatient.”

A numbness settled over Niera.

“A mirror gives a more reliable reflection than water, but even a watery surface can show the approach of a storm,” her father said. “I will write to Har Alista to request that you train with the soothsayer there. Until then, I expect you to attend council and contribute when you are asked and able.”

Niera nodded, staring at the military sash on her father’s tunic. She took her leave once more and limped down the corridor. The Queen’s voice floated after her.

“It wouldn’t have diminished you to congratulate her on her vision. You favour the one who betrayed you and reward your daughter’s loyalty with insults and commandments.”

“You understand nothing. My kingdom has lost its most valuable guide. You expect me to rejoice in a pool of water disturbed by every wind? If she were worth half as much to me as Ulna, I would be content.”

Niera hoped Anar would fall down dead, that mouth of hers silenced at last.

X

Niera had traditionally stood to the side of and slightly behind Ulna, who stood to the side of and slightly behind the King. Together they had made a radiating line. Despite Ulna's absence, she felt no closer to him. He had decided to wait a few months to send the request to Har Alista for her apprenticeship, in case Meriope's upcoming marriage renewed bad feelings about the failed match. The numbness that had descended upon Niera lingered. She listened to the counsellors argue about the continuing raids on the trade routes and how best to negotiate the *mujali* from Loth when the envoy arrived in another three weeks.

Niera found that her new state afforded her some distance, not only from those around her, but from herself. She felt the occasional nudge of intuition now, like someone tugging a bell rope in the far recesses of her mind. She listened with detachment and offered insights only when called upon. While they were not always heeded, she was surprised to find them considered. Her father never turned to look at her when she spoke, as he had never looked at Ulna. It was almost as if the Soothsayer were merely a voice inside his head. He would sometimes mumble her words to himself, as if weighing one of his own thoughts.

Anar had insisted that Niera take the Soothsayer's old apartments. Niera had long been bitter about being housed apart, assuming that her mother's ancestry had made her

too inferior to be embraced by the family. Now that the invitation had finally been extended, she found it less ideal than she had imagined. She understood too well Anar's motivations. Despite Ulna's banishment and the King's public declaration, the threat remained that he might take her back. He had, after all, indulged his whims in spite of public opinion in the past. Furthermore, the commoners were upset by the demotion of their soothsayer. It was a rejection of the established order, which required a commoner's voice to contribute to the kingdom's governance. Although there had been no overt defiance, the counsellors reported a widespread belief that the Ancestors would soon redress the balance.

At first, Niera had declined the offer to move to the royal wing. Anar had pretended to be offended, although Niera could see that she was frustrated and distracted. She tried a number of approaches, from flattery to veiled threat. Finally, she had leaned back in her imported chair and closed her eyes. Niera noticed how tired she looked. The lines around her mouth were sharp and deep. They sat in silence, only their breathing communicating their presence. Niera stared out the window before which her father had stood the day she had come to ask permission for the retreat. It seemed to her that when she finally caught hold of something worthwhile, it mutated in her grasp.

"I wish I had had two sons. Boys learn what they must do and girls what they must not," Anar had said, opening her eyes. "Meriope is not speaking to me and she won't eat. I don't understand: I've found her the best match I could. Does she think I'd do less?"

Niera was uncomfortable, but Anar had not seemed to expect an answer. She was looking past Niera. "Perhaps Juran is right. Perhaps I've spoiled her, but I don't know

why she's suffering like this. It will be better for her than it was for me. Until I had Sehad, I had to struggle every day for a dignified life. Prince Jahan is a young man, and she has the luxury of being his first wife. If providence is good, she will be the only one. That's the one thing I cannot ensure for her."

Niera didn't know what to say. She had hardly had time to think about Meriope. It seemed to her that Meriope's path was much clearer and easier than her own. She would not have to fight to make a place for herself. Her place was made; she was only asked to step into it with grace. It was an opportunity Niera found almost attractive in her present uncertainty.

"You two used to talk. Maybe you could go see her sometime soon. She won't see Eissa. I have no idea what's wrong—except that that witch has put some sort of charm on her. She does nothing but ask after Ulna. As long as I live, that woman won't taste air in this palace, she can be certain."

It was not the Queen's prompting, but Niera's curiosity that drew her to Meriope's rooms. She was uneasy in her new quarters, but to keep refusing the offer seemed to her an admission of guilt—and she had done nothing wrong. Pulji, despite having hinted forever that Niera belonged in the royal wing, had been against the move. Her discomfort in Ulna's old rooms was infecting Niera.

The day guard outside Meriope's corridor nodded as Niera passed him.

"Do you wish me to summon the princess, My Lady?"

"It's not necessary," Niera replied and entered the carpeted antechamber. She pulled the tasselled bell rope and waited. Meriope did not open the door. She knocked.

When there was still no answer, she slipped off her sandals, opened the door and stepped in. At first she thought Meriope was not there. The room was pervaded by the odour of sour milk. The side table that had held the love charm months earlier now held a bowl of curdled milk and a small oil lamp. Niera craned her neck. In front of the bowl, spelled out in the petals of a dried flower, was the name Jahan.

“Any mother in Kqaarin would have called off this marriage—”

Niera jumped.

“—It soured the night of the announcement.”

Meriope was sitting in the corner by one of the windows. A bright shaft of sunlight formed a curtain between them. She was dressed and neat, but she had the waxy look of an invalid. Her knees were drawn up to her chin.

Niera recovered.

“Do you believe that ritual?” she asked, gesturing to the milk bowl. She remembered hearing of it from Eissa, who matched Meriope’s interest in common superstitions.

“Almost all of the wisdom we have comes from commoners. You should know. Soothsaying has been their gift for centuries.”

“That doesn’t mean everything they practice is meaningful.”

“It is also what Ulna foretold.”

“Ulna never forbade this match. Only the one with Prince Seriot.”

“She said more unhappiness would come of a marriage to Prince Jahan than to Prince Kenjal of Har Kalthi.”

“Do you prefer Prince Kenjal?”

“No.”

They stared at each other.

“Do you enjoy being the new soothsayer?”

“I’m not a soothsayer.”

“I thought my mother intended to make you one.”

Niera was so surprised by Meriope’s hostility, she didn’t know how to answer.

“She would not have much support,” she said, finally.

Meriope smiled unhappily. “I’m sorry. I’ve been rude.” She motioned to a cushion. Niera hesitated, then drew it over. “It’s just... that I miss Ulna.”

They lapsed into silence.

“Has the prisoner spoken yet?”

“No. He’s quite strong willed,” Niera replied. A thought struck her. “Do you know why Ulna was meeting him?”

“No, but I know she isn’t a traitor. They’ve made a terrible mistake.”

You mean I’ve made a terrible mistake, Niera thought. She too felt Ulna’s purpose in the garden had not been malignant, and yet why hadn’t she explained herself? Ulna had held the key that could have rescued her from banishment but had chosen not to use it.

Niera was tired of carrying the guilt.

“Is there any news from the court?”

“Nothing except for your marriage preparations,” Niera said.

Meriope shivered. “No dignitaries or envoys?”

“None have been announced.”

Meriope closed her eyes. Niera noticed that she was trying to do the deep breathing. So Ulna had taught her some meditation skills! She was tempted to give advice about posture, but checked herself. It struck her as funny how much Meriope resembled Anar at that moment.

“I’m glad you finally live in our wing,” Meriope said, opening her eyes. Nothing in her face seemed insincere. “I always thought it was wrong that you lived on the other side of the palace like a stranger. I asked if you could move years ago.” Meriope shrugged as if those years didn’t matter anymore. “It will be nice to have you nearby these last few days. Ulna can have my rooms if she comes back.”

Niera shifted uncomfortably.

“Would you have married the *Kir* Dana, if Ulna hadn’t discovered your gift?”

“What choice would I have had?”

“There *are* choices.”

“I wouldn’t recommend running away. Even if, by some miracle, you got beyond the city walls, you wouldn’t go far. And the punishment....” Niera didn’t know what the punishment would be, but it would be severe.

Meriope gazed at the motes in the sunlight. Niera could see green veins, like river systems, in her neck and jaw. She looked old behind the light. The heat from the window made Niera feel dizzy. A heaviness settled over her limbs.

The vision was brief. She came to a forked passage, one lit, the other dark. She moved toward the light and saw a body, a silhouette suspended near the window, turning slowly in the sunlight.

Niera looked at Meriope in shock. She wanted to say something, but didn't know how to broach what she had seen. Horror and sadness contracted her stomach. She reminded herself that there had been another path, a dark one. She had not seen Meriope's alternate future. This must have been what Ulna meant once when she said that people approaching an important decision—people who were “between two rivers,” as the saying went—had multiple futures. Niera did not know what she could do to influence the outcome. Perhaps if she said something to Meriope now, she would only be encouraging her toward that untimely death.

Niera reached over and touched her half-sister's knee. “If you decide to run, I'll go with you.”

Meriope seemed momentarily baffled. Niera felt suddenly foolish. She rose to leave. On her way out, she picked up the bowl of sour milk.

“Leave it, please.”

“It will attract insects.”

“My mother assures me of it every time she comes.”

Niera spent the rest of the afternoon in the gardens, reluctant to return to her new rooms. When sleep finally came that evening, she had a nightmare about being asked to cast on an important decision for the kingdom. In the dream, she retreated to the meditation closet and tried to commune with the Ancestors. She could see nothing and was becoming more and more desperate when Ulna appeared. Ulna told her that she couldn't have a vision because a sorceress had laid a curse upon her. She needed to find the sorceress and put out her eyes, and then her own sight would be restored. Ulna promised to take her to

where the sorceress dwelled, but led her instead to a small space. It was dark and dank and difficult to breathe. She called out to Ulna, though it took all of her effort to make the smallest sound. She tried to move, but the space tightened around her like a skin. She struggled and beat her fists, and finally came to an exhausted stillness. In the stillness, she grew aware of movement. The space around her gradually rose and fell and rose again, moving her gently with it. In a flash of insight, she knew that she was inside the sorceress. She had been swallowed.

Niera woke abruptly, her muscles tensed. Turning to the window, she sought the familiar palm fronds. It was a horrible moment before she remembered why they were not there.

XI

Niera was practicing her walking meditation when the messenger came to summon her. It was late in the evening so she knew something unusual had occurred. The messenger was anxious and encouraged her to hurry.

“Do you know why I’m summoned?” Niera asked, suddenly nervous. The deep breathing and sense of being in the moment dissipated, and her mind cast forward with dark scenarios. Had Meriope killed herself?

“No, My Lady,” the messenger said. “But an entourage has just arrived.”

Niera wondered at the timing. Most envoys arrived during the morning or early afternoon. It was unusual to summon a formal court at such a late hour. She wondered if the Loth marriage retinue had arrived early. They were not expected for four days yet.

When she entered the great hall, she found the court almost empty. The dome and galleries were deep in shadow, but the floor was lit by the orange-ochre light of the flambeaux and the golden chandeliers that hung in the central aisle. She had not expected the galleries to be filled at this hour, but the aristocratic houses were also absent. Only the counsellors were seated in their formal, jewel-green robes, and, to her surprise, her father and Sehad were already present. The women’s side of the dais was vacant. The only things that distinguished the gathering from the daily council meetings were the location

and the number of armed guards that lined the walls and flanked the dais. Niera bowed to her father and moved to her traditional seat to the left of the dais.

“You will stand here, Niera,” her father said.

Niera’s heart skipped, but she showed only the barest hesitation. She stepped up onto the dais and took her position slightly to the left of and behind the King, where Ulna had traditionally stood. She felt both honoured and troubled. Was it really such an egregious trespass after having occupied Ulna’s place in the Royal Council? *I did not make this decision*, she reminded herself. *If my father demands these things, I must obey. Ulna caused her own exile.*

She wondered where the envoy had come from, and, above all, why her father wanted them to mistake her for a soothsayer. Perhaps he felt more secure with a green and impatient apprentice than an empty space. She still wore her fustian robe and kept her head shaved. This was as much for herself as it was to remind the Queen that she was not available for new matches.

The King signalled the Seneschal to summon the envoy. As he did, the King muttered something that Niera thought was meant for Sehad but realized was for her: “I want you to pay attention, child. These people have ways that are different from ours. I may need your eyes to see their true intent.”

At first, Niera was surprised to see that the envoy was a group of mystics. They entered the hall at the far side with no fanfare but solemnly and silently in black robes that made the faintest susurrations. They walked in no particular order, yet there seemed an economy and rhythm to their movement. When they reached the central aisle, Niera realized they were nomads. Nomads in the palace! While not the sworn enemies of city-

kingdoms, they traditionally had as little to do with them as possible. Although city dwellers respected the nomads for their ability to flourish in the desert, it was the sort of respect one had for the desert jackal. Out of their natural environment, they were mistrusted and thought primitive.

From a distance, they could only be distinguished from each other by small variations in height, the fetish pouches around their necks, and the beaded decoration on their water bladders. They had a tanned stripe across their faces where the *madebe* had failed to cover them. As they advanced, she could see their long hair, threaded with silver beads and braided back from the sun-hardened, gaunt faces. The light breeze blowing from the open windows at the back of the court carried their smell before them. It had something of the dromedary's musty pungency, mingled with improperly cured leather and old sweat, which would linger even if they were immersed bodily in the garden fountain and scrubbed with ashes and gypsum. Present in this was the smell of their diet, which was spiced with *taraclove*. Trade in *taraclove* was controlled by the nomads, and once a year the Ruruba tribe came to Kqaarin's bazaar to exchange it for metal, tools, and cloth. Niera had never seen the Ruruba herself, but she didn't think these nomads were from the same tribe, since Pulji said they painted the bottom half of their faces with lime.

When the envoy drew closer, Niera was fascinated to see that there were women among them, old and young, dressed the same way as the men. She wondered if they really had all the freedoms of their men. She had heard stories of wild nomadic women, usually in cautionary tales about behaviours best avoided. Seeing them now, Niera found it difficult to reconcile them with the darkly lascivious, necromantic personas they often had in tales. They did look strangely proud for a people who were popularly called "the

vermin of the desert.” All of them had dark, hooded eyes beneath broad foreheads that jutted at the same angle as their noses. The effect, Niera decided, was handsome.

Despite their surroundings, the nomads did not appear tense or nervous, although they were outnumbered by the guards. Nevertheless, Niera sensed the alertness in their upright posture and neutral expressions. She wondered how many weapons had escaped the guards in the folds of those cloaks and how many more of their tribe were waiting outside the walls of the city.

When they had gathered before the dais, they did not assemble themselves in any order, but a young man in the back stepped forward. If she lived to be as old as the tortoise, Niera would not forget his face. His broad forehead rose above black, intense eyes. His brows looked like a child’s drawing of two steeply sloping mountains. The knife lines of his cheeks came together in a pair of oddly full and sensual lips which, along with the forehead, countered the angularity of the rest of his face. Six braids, threaded with silver beads, hung in front of his shoulders. Niera could not tell if his intense seriousness was genuine or slightly ironic. He did not bow to the King, but drew up the sleeves of his robe almost to the shoulder and, raising his elbows, pointed clasped hands toward his chest. He was a slender man, but his arms were knotted with muscle. Niera knew from stories that his greeting was a display of good intent, since he showed that he concealed no weapons—at least in his sleeves. The King inclined his head slightly in return.

“You have a proposition you wish me to consider,” the King said, “but first tell us who you are.” Niera knew that, having granted an audience, her father already had this

information. His formality then was a sign that he was willing to treat the nomads with the respect he gave the envoys from city-kingdoms.

“We are the Naheirood,” the young man replied. “We travel the Basin Lands from Akmahar in the west to Hasuud Fastness and Har Rinjal in the east. Our herds have grazed as far north as Faejn Goa and as far south as the Inner Necklace Range of the Southern Lands. Our blood tribes extend to the coastal lands. It is not an exaggeration to say that we have ears, eyes and hands in every sink and grotto in the desert.”

Niera felt a thrill of recognition. The Naheirood were a large nomadic tribe with a rich tradition of storytelling. She knew many of their tales, which traversed the desert as easily as the wind. She was awed that they had crossed the White Desert, the barrier that made trade impossible between the Northern Desert and the Southern Lands.

“We come to offer you our blood brotherhood.”

“And why would Kqaarin desire this brotherhood?” Like her father’s previous question, Niera knew this one was another formality. Everyone present understood how Kqaarin would benefit from the protection of the Naheirood against the ambushes on the trading routes. Perhaps it was the Naheirood themselves who were responsible, although this made no real difference in the end. Kqaarin did not have the resources to keep all of its caravan routes secure.

“The pitcher ant carries many things when it migrates to a new nest,” the Nomad said. “Sometimes beetle dung or other kinds of food, sometimes bits of bark or thistle to fortify its new home. Trifles in the end, since they can always find more, but they must eventually carry their queen.”

Niera caught her breath. Was he threatening the marriage caravan? The King would not be going to Loth, but certainly Anar would. The security of the caravan would be Kqaarin's responsibility until the bride and her retinue passed through the gates of Loth. Even with Kqaarin's guard and Loth's supplemental escort, a large nomadic tribe could overwhelm the party. As many city-kingdoms had now come to realize, caravan trade existed only by grace of the nomads' customary indifference to it.

"What does the Naheirood ask in return?" Her father's voice was low.

"We wish the release of our brother, Abdim, from your dungeon."

So this is what Ulna was trying to bring about! Niera thought, in sudden wonder. *But why didn't she simply approach the council directly?* An alliance with the Naheirood would be, in light of the recent trade losses, even more valuable than special trade agreements with the wealthiest city-kingdoms.

"Our second request is not as simple," the Nomad continued. "We are aware of city ways. The sons and daughters of the desert are often mistreated in the cities, presumed to be thieves and savages. You have treated us with the dignity and respect you would show any envoy—no less than a brother should—, but it does not prevent you from betraying us. Poison does not cloud the water. You must prove that Kqaarin thinks of us as a brother before we will call it one."

"How can we best show our affection?" the King said. Niera could feel his anger.

The Nomad laughed, and Niera's heart leapt at his brazenness. "I cannot instruct you there. We shall camp outside the city for three days. You will see our fires at night, and we will welcome your people as our own. I swear on my true name that your

caravans will be safe during this time. If you wish to summon me, my tribe name is Hameed.”

At this, he raised his arms once more and clasped his hands toward his chest. He was about to turn when his eyes caught Niera’s.

“Is this your mantic?” he asked.

There was a long silence before one of the counsellor’s finally prompted: “He asks if this is your soothsayer, Your Majesty.”

The King made a noise that might have been a scoff or a rough assent.

Hameed smiled. “She is young—too young to be one of our mantics—, but I trust her face.”

For a moment, all eyes were on Niera except her father’s, who could not be induced to turn in his throne if *Azazello* himself roared at his ear. Niera kept her eyes focused ahead, though she felt as if she were being pricked by a thousand little cactus spines.

The nomads departed as silently as they had come.

When Niera finally left the court, the flambeaux had dimmed to spots of smoldering rust and dawn stretched across the court floor. Her mind was so full, she found it almost easy to sink into the no-thought that was so desirable for casting. Her mind hummed through her fatigue. Faint chills made her shiver when a phrase or face surfaced from the night’s memories long enough for her to pay attention.

She had been chosen to go with the envoy that afternoon. They would return Abdim to his people and speak again with the nomad Hameed. The counsellors had

assumed he was their delegate, although they knew that nomad tribes did not have a single ruler. Hameed's inexplicable avowal of trust in Niera had made some of the counsellors believe she had a role to play in facilitating the alliance, despite her standing. Some also argued it would appear strange if she were not present, since a delegation like the one required would normally include the palace soothsayer. Niera had listened to the counsellors arguing for and against her presence in the envoy. Although she agonized inside, she had learned from Ulna's example not to reveal a preference or offer an opinion until it was asked for. They had decided in her favour without consulting her.

At that point, her father, who had not taken part in the debate, had done something unthinkable. He had asked her to cast on the intentions of the Naheirood. He hadn't called it that, of course, but it was clear what he meant when he told her to "take some time in silence to consider what you have seen this night." She had retreated to the meditation room and tried to empty her mind, but it was impossible. It was one of the most exciting nights of her life. Her mind raced and her concentration on her breath was interrupted by thought after thought. She prompted herself internally, *rise...cess...*, but the mantra became meaningless almost immediately. She feared that during her absence they would re-evaluate the importance of her presence in the delegation. When she returned to the court, she did not lie about having a vision, but she didn't admit it outright either. She told the counsellors what she had known before she had departed—the Naheirood's offer was genuine. This she had recognized as plainly as she did her own reflection. Her opinion had not carried the power of Ulna's pronouncements, but her father had listened. He had less trouble with her as a voice behind his shoulder than a sight before his eyes.

Many of the counsellors had had to be convinced that the alliance was worth the negotiation. They clung to the belief that nomads could not be trusted, and they were not divested of that belief by the end of the meeting. They argued that the nomads' very way of life was so different that there could be no understanding between them as there was between city-kingdoms. "Look how they make no distinction between the wisdom of men and women," one counsellor had argued. "Do they think that water knows the strength of a mountain or a mountain the fertility and suppleness of water?" This made Niera think of one of Ulna's first teachings: body is mountain, breath wind, mind sky. In this light, everyone had both feminine and masculine principals, since the body contained all elements. Even so, she knew that most soothsayers were female since women were more sensitive to the winds that carried the messages from the spirit world.

Those in favour of the alliance had won in the end, not because they had a different opinion of the virtues of nomadic culture, but because they reasoned that their losses might come out the same whether the alliance worked or not. Kqaarin had suffered from the slowing of trade. Even the counsellors felt the shortage of fond things at their tables. Salt, wine and dried fruit from the Green Emperor's domain, tea and sweetening stevioside from Othana, and even pecans, almonds and pistachios from Akmahar were being rationed. Caravans carrying silver from the mines near Faejn Goa had thrice been ambushed and now the flow had ceased altogether. Har Alista risked only small shipments of wood and stone crafts, its plainer textiles and *neri alista*.

The deliberate vagueness about what the Naheirood expected in return made everyone uneasy. Releasing Abdim was simple enough, but proving genuine fraternal sentiment seemed either the eccentric whim of a people who were completely ignorant or

an act of coyness. Was sentiment to take the traditional expression of drams of gold or rubies? Could the Naheirood possibly value water rights? There was also the unsavoury whiff of moral superiority in the request. If the Naheirood were in earnest, payment of this kind could be insulting. A non-traditional solution would ease the burden on Kqaarin's treasury, which had yet to purchase a bride for Sehad and pay for Meriope's leave-taking and wedding caravan. What remained? Even if Kqaarin was desperate enough to pollute its bloodlines and incur the derision of the other kingdoms by entering into a marriage alliance, there was no bride to offer. The only suitable daughter had been promised to Loth. The counsellors had laughed at the jest of marrying Meriope to the Naheirood. For some reason, this had made Niera feel slighted. She knew it was silly. If anything, the fact that they hadn't considered her was gratifying evidence that she was thought of as their future soothsayer.

This memory lingered as Niera approached her rooms. Would the counsellors have suggested a marriage alliance between her and the Naheirood if she hadn't had the gift of sight? Would they have considered the unrecognized, half-common daughter of the King a suitable match? Hameed himself was not a prince and yet he probably spoke for as many people as the prince of a small city-kingdom. He did not own the desert he traversed and yet his people called home a land far greater than any city-kingdom's, including its agricultural, grazing and water fiefs. Still, if the Royal Council could laugh at the outrageous suggestion of dropping its Jewel in the sand, could it laugh at dropping what it considered only glass? Didn't glass come from sand?

Niera's thoughts were interrupted by a presence in her corridor. Meriope rose from the bench as soon as she saw her. She had lost weight since they had last met.

“Niera, what’s happened? I heard an envoy came last night.” She looked pallid, but her gaze was sharp. Niera did not need to ask whether she had slept well that night or the previous one.

“Come in,” Niera said, opening the door of her chamber. “You should have waited inside where it’s comfortable.” Meriope followed her, but stopped just inside the room.

“An envoy did arrive,” Niera said. “But not from Loth.” She suddenly remembered her promise and wondered if Meriope had come to announce that she was running away. She fervently hoped not. She had spoken out of her own despair, but everything had changed with the arrival of the Naheirood. She now felt driven to see the alliance formed. In fact, she was secretly hoping to bring it about herself. The need went deeper than the desire for her father’s admiration. She was fascinated by the nomads themselves and wanted to prove herself equal to Hameed’s trust. She wanted to learn about their way of life. Her mind, however, kept returning to Hameed’s ironic smile and burrowing eyes.

“From where?” Meriope asked, her voice hoarse.

“The desert,” Niera said, laughing. “It was a group of nomads. The Naheirood.” Meriope bent down and drew up one of the cushions. Niera settled on another. She felt a little guilty for her pleasure when Meriope was so wan and ill.

“Tell me what happened,” Meriope said.

Niera knew that despite her fatigue, sleep was far away, and she welcomed the chance to talk to someone. She could see that Meriope needed a distraction. First, however, she insisted that Meriope take breakfast with her. To her surprise, Meriope did

not protest. Niera couldn't help feeling a little smug as she related the order to the guard. Anar had not been able to accomplish as much.

Niera told of the nomads' unexpected arrival and their offer. She tried not to smile when she mentioned Hameed; it seemed cruel in light of Meriope's impending marriage, and Niera felt curiously shy. Meriope did not seem to notice. Niera suspected that she had returned to her own plight and was only pretending to listen.

"What did the council decide?" Meriope asked, when Niera had finished.

"They decided to risk the alliance, but they aren't sure how to show their commitment. I'm going with the envoy in a few hours to return the prisoner to them. Perhaps we'll learn more about what they expect."

"*You're* going? How did they permit that?"

Niera told of Hameed's unexpected pronouncement. She had omitted it earlier for fear that she might seem to be bragging.

"This is wonderful, Niera! I'm so happy for you." Meriope embraced her. "Do you have any sway in the negotiations?"

"No more than a counsellor. Less, really, since I must wait to be asked for my opinion. It's because of Hameed's approval that I'm being included in the delegation at all."

"Niera, I have an idea. It might even help Kqaarin prove its kinship for the nomads."

Niera laughed, pleased that she had wrested Meriope's mind away from her problems.

XII

Niera's eyes were fixed on the flapping, emerald robes of the counsellor in front of her. His cracked white heels, thick with calluses, poked up at every step. She felt that they were the only things weighing her down to reality.

The delay at the palace gates had been excruciating. One of the four counsellors selected for the envoy had suddenly decided that it was folly to go without guards, although it had already been agreed that an armed delegation might offend the nomads. Nevertheless, the counsellor insisted because it made him uneasy to walk with Abdim by his side. Abdim had been waiting by the palace gates. Although he was not restrained, Niera knew the Chief of Security would have guards watching him. It was finally decided that two guards would accompany them, although they would not be visibly armed. They were to flank Niera, since their presence could be justified by claiming that she was a noblewoman—albeit an exceptional one—and needed an escort while outside the palace walls. Niera was irritated, but thankful that she didn't have to ride in a palanquin, as she had when she left for her awakening.

After they had passed through the palace gates, Niera's eyes fastened on the spaces between the guards and counsellors, trying to get a look at the street life. She saw an old woman poking a length of cloth into a shallow vat of turquoise dye. Two young girls took turns pounding maize to meal, while men sat nearby talking. They stopped to

watch the envoy pass. The group soon attracted the attention of a number of children, who ran behind them giggling. Niera recognized the house of a *sulvaar* with its collection of bleached animal skulls hung on the outer adobe walls.

It was the glassmaker's house that made her stop briefly in her tracks. She had heard the tinkling long before they reached it and wondered what could be making finer music than Kloofi-Menami's bangles. As they approached the house, she saw the cascades of cut glass, blue and green, hanging from thin strips of leather. Over the door of the hut was an indigo curtain, sewn with glittering pieces of glass. Niera turned her head as she passed, feasting on the sight as long as she could. Although she no longer ached for the beauty of her old clothes, the chiming glass made her want to be surrounded by beauty again. Glass was common, but no diamond or ruby made that music.

When they came to the gates of Kqaarin, Niera was seized by an excitement tinged with dread. She felt as she had almost two years earlier when she had left for the cloister in the Wind Tunnels—that once she left its walls, the city-kingdom would vanish and, glancing homeward, she would find only desert. When the gatekeepers opened the iron doors, she sensed that the soberness of the moment was shared by those around her. She stole a glance at Abdim. He would feel differently about stepping into the untamed desert. His deep-set eyes stared ahead, revealing nothing.

The nomad camp had been set up between two of the caravan paths that radiated from the city. The envoy followed the closest one with the intention of cutting over the chaparral toward the end. Niera breathed the dusty sage and felt the sun like the weight of a hand on her headscarf. Despite the heat, she fought a desire to dash into the maze of shrubs and knotted cacti. The stolid presence of the counsellors only encouraged her.

As they cut from the trail into the brush, she came into possession of herself. The earth was soft, powdering their feet with orange silt. It was nothing she could have run through. They had to watch their step closely or their robes would be caught. Abdim walked ahead. Niera stopped for a moment to watch him glide around the shrubs without appearing to look down. She stepped on a branch and flinched when it stabbed her in the calf, afraid that it had been a snake. The guards were leading the straggling counsellors, searching the ground ahead for perils.

The nomads' camp was at the base of a butte the people of Kqaarin called The Scales. It had a spire on the south side, upon which a long, flat rock balanced. As they neared the clearing, the envoy could hear the music of the *jjfir* and the *kalis*.

Many of the nomads had already risen to embrace Abdim. Niera was embarrassed by her delegation, which was making its way with less than customary grace over the last of the shrubs. She had already stopped to help one of the counsellors free his mantle from the thorns, but he tore it loose when he saw her coming to his aid. After that, she concentrated on getting herself to the clearing with as much dignity as possible. She was glad that her robes were plain, plainer even than the Naheirood's, who had their beads and fetishes. The counsellors' rich robes, though striking in the court, looked garish against the pastel beauty of the desert.

Hameed stood at the edge of the sandy clearing with an older woman, whom Niera recognized from the envoy the night before. When he saw Niera among the counsellors he looked genuinely pleased.

“So the little soothsayer has come,” he said, smiling his peculiar smile. Niera could not think of how to cover her embarrassment, so she replied sternly, “I am here to facilitate an alliance between your people and my own.”

That was all she managed to say, because the counsellors had caught up to her. They were somewhat chagrined to find that their discussions would not be with Hameed alone or with a few of his counsellors. After some awkwardness, they joined a huge circle on the shaded side of the butte. The counsellors found themselves separated from each other and knee to knee with nomad women and youth. The guards had been mistakenly included in the circle, perhaps because the nomads did not understand their station. Niera could see that the guards felt as awkward as the counsellors, who were letting the transgression pass in light of all the other eccentricities of the nomads.

One of the counsellors, the one with the exhausting ability to draw from the fund of history instances of uncannily similar situations, began to enumerate on the blood brotherhoods of the past. They heard stories of great fortunes in gems and gold, of harems and skilled servants and of agricultural and water tithes swapped in the service of such alliances. Inspired by the size of his audience, the counsellor, whom Niera thought of as the “Chronicler,” continued with the more mythical examples of gifts given between cities, such as elixirs of youth, magic sticks, and bonded spirits. Perhaps, Niera thought, he hoped to hit on an instance that would elicit some show of preference from the tribe. Curiously, the counsellor failed to mention one of the most common examples: marriage between the allying parties. Of course, there was the problem of the nomadic society’s failure to produce a leader. At any rate, Niera knew that a marriage between Prince Sehad and one of the nomad beauties was no less likely than Kqaarin’s ability to produce the

two chunks of black onyx that the counsellor now described as producing rain when tapped together.

The nomads listened in respectful silence and, eventually, it was another counsellor who interrupted him. This counsellor, the same who insisted on the presence of the guards, tried to bully an answer from Hameed, insinuating that it was juvenile to force Kqaarin to play a guessing game. He was equally unsuccessful. The two guards were invited to speak, but both of them declined. When the last counsellor was asked, the one Niera admired for his thoughtful reflection, he confessed that he had no idea what would be an appropriate display of Kqaarin's affection. He pleaded instead for patience and understanding from the nomadic people. "You must forgive us our eccentricities," he said. "We have had few dealings with the nomadic peoples and our desire to win your allegiance oversteps our ability to act with sensitivity and understanding. It is a short time you have given us, and centuries of mistrust between the city and desert peoples cannot be overcome in such a time." A murmur rose among the nomadic people. Niera could not tell what had incited them, since she did not understand their dialect.

"What you say is true," Hameed said. "We cannot expect all mistrust between the two to be vanquished. What we ask for is a true show of intent in that direction. As for the time limit, that has been set by the stars."

He said this with good humour, but Niera could tell that beneath it, something was driving him. She sensed his impatience, as if the delegation was failing where it should succeed.

"Now," he said, turning his eyes upon her, as if he knew what she was thinking, "what does your wisdom tell you, mantic?"

“She is not the one,” someone said. It was Abdim. “The Soothsayer has been exiled from the palace. This is the one who exiled her.”

Niera felt blood rushing to her cheeks. “You are mistaken,” she said firmly. “The Soothsayer exiled herself. You might have helped her by speaking instead of remaining silent.” She could sense that more was expected from her, but her throat had closed up. Mercifully, the counsellor she liked most came to her assistance.

“It is true: she is not Kqaarin’s soothsayer, but she has the untempered sight. She foresaw the meeting between Abdim and our soothsayer, but not its intent. The secrecy of the meeting and the silence of the two are what condemned them.”

Niera stared ahead. She would be like Ulna’s mountain, unaffected by the winds that blew around it.

“What is your name?” Hameed asked.

“Niera.”

“The Dreamer,” he said, and she looked at him sharply to see if he was mocking her. He looked sober.

“Niera, I would like to know how you would proceed with this alliance.”

Niera drew a trembling breath. “I would hold a Masque,” she said. “You say you want a show of brotherhood; well, that is how the Masque originated. Our ancestor, King Jhaiwep, donned a cypress mask to commune with his brother in the spirit world. It was his brother who told him where to found the desert kingdoms. Each year, we hold a Masque so we can communicate with our Ancestors. I know that you have other ways of doing this, and different ancestors, but there is only one spirit world.” Niera cleared her throat. “We would be happy if you would dance by our side.”

A silence hung over the circle. The older woman, who had stood by Hameed earlier, addressed the nomads in the Naheirood dialect. A vote ensued.

“If you hold a Masque,” the woman said, turning to Niera, “we will come. We will dance with our Kqaarin relatives.”

It was dusk before the envoy set out again for the palace. When they reached the easier terrain of the caravan path, the acerbic counsellor broke the silence.

“What makes you think, *Keroheen*, that you can desecrate the rituals of our kingdom? Are you the *Maj* that you can make these decisions? Do you not need the King’s blessing like the rest of the council?”

Niera bridled. “I was called upon,” she said, in spite her better judgement. After all, the guards too had been called upon.

“You’ll know what that means soon enough.”

Niera seethed but held her peace. She moved to the other side of the guard where she could have a clear view of the desert. There was no need for strict decorum now that it was dark and they were still outside the city. The bewildered guards moved to flank her, but she held up a hand. The moonlight over the desert basin was hauntingly beautiful. Much of the brush, dry as it could get before the rains, looked like tufts of white hair. She heard a coyote howl and looked around to find her.

I made progress, she thought, and he resents it. A Masque is less a burden on the treasury than the payment they were prepared to make. They should be grateful to me. She could not understand the sacrilege in inviting the nomads to a Masque. According to

their tales, the Naheirood believed in the spirit world and were probably more diligent in honouring it than many of the aristocratic houses.

When they passed the glassmaker's again, Niera barely listened to the tinkling shards. She was worried by the silence of the other counsellors. Surely they didn't agree with the curmudgeon? How could they be affronted by the sharing of a tradition and not by a magician's use of the Lost Language (although she knew that many of the counsellors had been repelled by Darqar's act)? Would Eissa's father, the *Maj*, create problems? The King had the power to overrule him, but had never exercised it as far as Niera knew.

As they approached the palace, Niera felt a stone in her chest. She slowed her step without realizing it. She felt as she had the night she opened the door to her chamber and found the shards of her mother's oil lamp. She shrugged away the feeling and tried to prepare herself for the argument to come—for she would be called upon to defend her proposition.

When they passed through the palace gates, she walked ahead quickly. She was almost out of hearing when the gates closed again.

XIII

“Let me help you,” Pulji said, setting the carmine silk on her lap.

“You can’t, or you’ll never finish.”

“I’ll finish.” She held out her hand.

“I can’t see how you’ll rescue it,” Niera said, grateful to be rid of the cypress branch. She had broken almost every limb trying to create a presentable piece of jewellery. Normally, the palace artisans made the cypress ornaments for the Masque, but there had been no warning and they were furiously busy fashioning masks for the nomads. The nearest cypress trees grew four days to the north on the low arid mountains where the Basin Lands’ orange silt became clotted with rock. The two cypresses in the royal garden had been sacrificed—a greater sacrifice than the Naheirood would probably realize—so that each dancer could have a token of the sacred tree that represented the original Masque of King Jhaiwep. Compared to the commoners of Kqaarin, who had to share half a tree among them, Niera had a wealth of cypress in the skinny branch she had been allotted. At first she was irritated about not receiving a piece of the trunk, which could be carved into a brooch or beads, but then she recalled that there was no time for such artisanship anyway.

As Pulji set to work on the branch, Niera drew the silk from her lap and felt her heart lift. She was grateful for Pulji’s presence. She had not realized how much she

missed her old *deela*. Sometimes a week or two would pass without them laying eyes on each other. It was pleasant having Pulji with her for some reason other than the straightening of Ulna's old rooms.

"I don't see why you don't wear one of the robes from your trunk. Any of them would be finer than this."

"I don't want it to be lavish. I want it to be plain, but beautiful."

Pulji looked at her. "It would be too much of a change from your grey, I suppose."

"Don't get your hopes up, Pulji. I'll be wearing my grey tomorrow."

Niera wrapped the matching tulle veil, which Pulji had already finished, around her head. She could not see the full effect in her mother's copper mirror, but with her shorn hair covered, she felt transformed. She wondered what *he* would think.

"You wouldn't be parted from your cobalt a year ago."

Niera watched her short black hair reappear as she drew the tulle slowly from her head. It followed the veil, as if wishing to be hidden.

"I want to be in disguise. I want to dance without everyone knowing who I am for once."

"Is that allowed with your training?"

"Why not?" Niera said brusquely. "I'm not a soothsayer yet. I'm not even an apprentice at the moment."

She went to the window. Pulji had hit a sensitive spot. Strictly speaking, there was no prohibition for her to dance, but it was foolish to jeopardize her tenuous status—especially since she had so recently accomplished her first success in the potential alliance with the Naheirood. Doubtless, the commoners would not approve of her

dancing. But the nomads had awakened in her the desire to dance again—to be free, to pass through walls as easily as sand flew over them, to have no fear, to live without proscriptions....

“The marriage envoy will be here in two days. Have you bid farewell to your sister yet?”

“No,” Niera said, with a stab of guilt. “I’ve seen her, but we haven’t had time.”

“Well, you be sure to see her,” Pulji said, pausing in her sewing. “You two may not have been as close as you should have been, but she is your family. It will be hard for her to go so far from home. You should try to comfort her. Perhaps you will be able to visit her someday.”

Niera nodded. She felt as if her own life was just beginning. A year ago, she would never have imagined that her fate could be so different from Meriope’s.

“I will see her after temple worship,” she said. She had not even thanked Meriope for her idea about the Masque; though by now, she must have known it had been successful. Indeed, Niera had barely had time to think until this moment! As soon as she had arrived at the palace the evening before, the Royal Council had convened and the churlish counsellor had been silenced. The majority was so relieved that a suggestion had proved amenable to the nomads that the argument decidedly avoided her unfeminine license, centring instead on the sanctity of trade and on adaptability as essential to the robustness of tradition. The *Maj* had been summoned, but after reserving his judgement until the last moment—when he was assured that this request would be an exceptional case—he declared that honouring the spirit world twice in one year, as long as it was done with pure intentions, did not constitute irreverence.

“Come,” Pulji said, “I have time to put a trim on that veil before you wrinkle it.”

When Niera brought it over, Pulji gave her an anklet. It was a simple piece of beading wire threaded with five cypress buds. Niera slipped it on and turned her ankle, admiring the simple design she had failed to think of herself. She noticed that Pulji had placed the remains of the cypress in her sewing basket, but didn't mention it. Perhaps Pulji had not received her family's portion of cypress. She knew her old *deela* was devout and fastidious about rituals. Cypress offerings were not to be saved and used again for the next Masque, regardless of the beauty of their form. They were to be burned after each and offered to the spirit world.

“Why a Masque?” Pulji asked.

“I told you. The original Masque showed how King Jhaiwep honoured his brother by—”

“Nomads don't have the same ancestors.”

“They honour the spirit world, too.”

“Is the alliance to be based on a common belief in the spirit world? Every desert kingdom has such a belief.”

“It's a beginning,” Niera said, with a trace of annoyance. “Do you dislike nomads?”

Pulji looked thoughtful. “What I'm wondering is if this will be enough to make a brotherhood. You told me the nomads will be protecting the trade routes around Kqaarin. For what? The memory of a Masque in their honour?”

“What do you suggest?” Niera asked. She was beginning to regret having told Pulji of her victory.

“We’re all ignorant before the gods,” Pulji said, raising her hands. It was her favourite proverb before giving advice. “But I know nomads share many of our customs.”

Niera sighed. “There can’t be a marriage alliance, if that’s what you mean. There’s no one to wed.” Niera’s cheeks flushed. “One of the counsellors came as close as decorum permits to asking them if they wanted payment from the treasury. Nothing interested them until the Masque.”

“Well,” Pulji said, raising her brows. “There is still time. I’m sure they will make their needs known soon enough.”

“You don’t trust them.”

“Many don’t,” Pulji replied, trimming the seam of the robe. “Some even fear them, but I don’t think you could say that of me.”

“Why are you exempt?”

“My husband was the son of an Oschato nomad. He never—”

“Pulji! You never told me this!” Niera was shocked. Pulji would never have married a nomad!

“Not many people know.”

“Did you know it before you married him?”

“Of course.”

Niera’s eyes widened. “And what did your parents say?”

“They didn’t know,” Pulji said, neither eye nor hand wavered from her work.

“You hid it from them! Oh, Pulji, I would never have expected that from you!”

Niera would have laughed, if she weren’t so amazed.

“It meant his mother’s honour. She was married at the time.”

Niera sobered and sat down by Pulji. “How did she meet him?”

“She travelled with a caravan to visit her sister in Hasuud Fastness.”

“At a *dasa bazaar*?”

“A cup of tea would be fine now,” Pulji said, getting up. Niera watched her move to the hall to request it. This was the Pulji Niera recognized, the one who avoided prurient gossip.

“It must have been love,” Niera said, when Pulji returned. She fell back on the bed and covered herself with the deep red tulle.

“Love isn’t something that bites you like a fly—don’t do that, it looks like a shroud,” Pulji said, snatching the veil off Niera’s body. “It’s like a plant. You tend it, and it will be strong. You would have learned this yourself.”

“The gods spared me,” Niera said, rolling off the bed. She went to the window.

“It’s not time, yet,” Pulji said, watching her askance.

Niera stared at the dome of the temple, which was slightly smaller than that of the court, but dazzling in enamel and gold plate.

Only a year ago, she would have laughed if someone had told her she would fall in love.

As Niera hurried back to the royal wing, she remembered Meriope. She was anxious to dress for the Masque, because she had been detained at the temple. Ulna had tried to speak with her. She had even positioned herself so that Niera would have to pass her when she left. In a desperate bid to avoid the encounter, Niera had joined the Chronicler, who was enlightening the *Maj* and his new Temple Regent, the *Kir* Dana, about the

history of the tunnel that connected the palace to the temple. Now that the *Kir* had found the official recognition he sought and there was no danger of a match, Niera felt no more than an awkwardness in his presence. For his part, he gave her grey robe and shorn hair one glance and decided there was no need for another. Her attentiveness encouraged the Chronicler and he continued regaling her after the *Maj* and the *Kir* had managed to excuse themselves. She was able to guide him toward the tunnel to the palace as he spoke, knowing that Ulna could not follow once they entered. She turned toward him when she passed Ulna, pretending to be so engrossed that she failed to hear her former mistress's call.

As she entered Meriope's corridor, the old evening guard, who had learned to sleep while standing, roused himself. "My Lady, I am afraid Princess Meriope has left already for the Masque."

"Oh," Niera said. She had not thought Meriope well enough to dance, let alone capable of the strenuous concentration necessary for the Masque. "The Queen came for her?"

"No, My Lady, she went with the daughter of the *Maj*."

Eissa? Meriope had evidently made a miraculous recovery. Irritation crept into Niera's excitement, though she knew she was being petty. She would simply have to see Meriope in the morning, before council, or possibly lose the opportunity for a private farewell.

"Her Majesty was surprised, too," the guard said, thinking her disappointed, "but she said it was a good thing that the Princess has recovered her health."

Niera nodded, relieved that she wouldn't lose any more time from the Masque by visiting Meriope.

The court music reached her as she dressed, the sound of the *jfirs* enveloping her with their melancholic voices. The carmine robe was simple but elegant. She practiced a few graceful turns, then took the inlaid wood box from her drawer. She gazed once again at the cosmetics Anar had sent her almost a year earlier. She picked up the kohl and applied it carefully to her eyes. She had watched Eissa do it once, when she had snuck her mother's kohl powder to the fountain. The lip colour was a luxury. It came from the skin of the root of a walnut tree and was imported from the Green Emperor's domain. She rubbed it on and stepped back to admire the effect. She was surprised by how dramatic she looked. She dabbed a little hair oil on her wrists and ears, in place of perfume. Finally, she pinned the veil carefully in place. She had had Pulji double the length, so that the layers would conceal her identity. Unless someone came quite close.

When she entered the court, the air had already begun to thicken with the scent of *neri alista* and the piney fragrance of cypress. The candles in the golden chandeliers had wept half their lives away. They would be replaced throughout the night by the vigilant servants in the shadows. The music of the Masque, like the music of marriage celebrations, was one long piece that gradually evolved. Niera surveyed the vivid hues of the dancers through her veil. The nomads were easily distinguishable in their black robes, but they had been provided with beautiful cypress masks. Now Niera understood why she had been given a twig. A number of the aristocrats in various kinds of masks danced with the Naheirood, something Niera knew they had been instructed to do. The nomads had

their own style, but she saw dancers from both sides gamely trying to accommodate their partners. Most dancers simply mingled on the floor, since the Masque was traditionally danced alone in the company of many, each dancer holding a private conversation with the Ancestors.

The Queen was easily recognizable by her hair, which poured down her back like a river of dark honey. Her costume was green as the Soluud and stuck with gold charms. An emerald collar encircled her neck. She wore an elegant cypress mask—no twig for her. Her partner was a tall aristocrat whom Niera thought, by his exaggerated grace, must be the Seneschal. The Queen had evidently chosen not to follow orders. Niera knew that Anar had been furious to learn that the celebration the King had denied her for her daughter's leave-taking was to be lavished on people she had often referred to as desert vermin. For a moment, Niera felt a queer admiration for Anar. Then she saw her father standing alone by one of the flambeau. He had removed his mask and was searching the court floor. Niera was relieved when he was joined by one of his counsellors, whose small spray of cypress was the only indication that he partook in the Masque.

Niera began to search out the black robes on the court floor, a sense of urgency thrumming in her head. She thought she saw him once and made her way to his side, but when he turned, she saw from the lips and chin that it was not him. She danced with this nomad only long enough to avoid being rude. Afterwards, she returned to the steps by the northern entrance and scoured the floor again. Was it possible he hadn't come? The thought chilled her. It was then that she looked up and saw, to her astonishment, that some of the Naheirood were dancing in the galleries among the commoners.

Niera entered the general passage and found the stairwell that led to the crescent of galleries. She was glad that her costume, though beautiful, did not mark her as nobility. Jewels would attract attention in the galleries, but silk, though rare, was not unknown. As she climbed, she was surprised to see Eissa and her *deela* descending. Eissa looked annoyed and embarrassed, her satin mask dangling from her wrist. True to her father's name, she wore a bejewelled halter and full skirt of *sapir*, accented with silver. Although Niera could not hear what they were saying over the din, they stopped talking the moment they saw her. No doubt, Eissa was being reprimanded for venturing up to the galleries. Niera hesitated on the step, and Eissa flicked her eyes away contemptuously as she passed. It took Niera a moment to assure herself that they had not recognized her.

She walked along the outer wall of each of the galleries, her eyes glued to the dancers. In the fourth gallery, she was grabbed by a man who reeked of *lalohe*t. He laughed and released her before she could pull away. After that, she was careful to keep her distance from those smoking by the walls. When she passed under the archway to the seventh gallery, she saw Hameed. He was standing by one of the vaulted windows, his mask pushed above his eyes. He was speaking intently to a boy in a topaz turban. The candlelight accentuated the knifelike crease of his cheek and a single, beaded braid, separated from the rest, hung like a shining cord over his chest. His eyes were hidden in shadow, but she felt their burrowing intensity, even obliquely. She stood by the entrance, feeling joy and torment at once.

A servant disturbed her, begging her pardon so that he could take an exhausted torch from its socket and replenish it in the jug of oil he carried. By the time he relit it, Niera had joined the group of dancers nearest Hameed. They were already deep in their

conversations, their limbs swirling and flicking in personal rhythms, which, though different, were not incompatible with the music. Niera allowed the music to enter her feet. Finding her rhythm, she stepped up to Hameed and touched her right hand first to her chest and then lightly, with the flat of her wrist, to her forehead. This indication of the purity of heart and mind was the customary way for a woman to initiate a court dance. Hameed seemed surprised and looked at the youth beside him, who wore a plain wooden mask. After a hesitation, during which Niera felt her skin catch fire, the youth gently pushed Hameed toward her. Niera navigated him through the dancers by turning her hand, keeping her finger pointed at him. An unmarried man and woman did not touch unless they were dancing, and even then, they were supposed to be chaperoned. Despite her anonymity, Niera did not have Anar's courage to break rules—at least, not yet. She stopped when she reached the balustrade overlooking the court floor. It was likely to be the most privacy she would have, a wall of dancers between her and the watchers along the gallery wall. She knew well that the nobility rarely acknowledged their audience, so it hardly mattered that she was in view of the court below. She took Hameed's hands and began to lead him in a five step *sasvo* that was meant as much to spare her the worry of concentration as to spare him. She was embarrassed by how moist and shaky her hands were. His grip, though light, sent tremors through her abdomen. Her lips and throat went dry.

In her imaginings, she had danced the *zindafer* in midst of the whirling aristocracy, and he had watched, beshaded, from the periphery. Then she had turned to him and lifted her veil, revealing that she had danced for him all along. Her hair was long and shiny again, her skin bronze. He looked at her in a way that made her turn liquid

inside. They danced together for the rest of the night, the distance between them charged with a prickly longing. At the end of the evening, he pulled her behind a pillar and enclosed her in the hard, musky land of his body. And slowly, she had caught flame.

Now that he was before her, his hands in hers, she was painfully aware of how differently things were turning out. Hameed showed no interest in peering through her veil. He moved perfunctorily, although not without some suggestion of the agility in his narrow frame. He had not pulled down his mask and his eyes under their dark brows kept turning to the window. When he did look at her, he focused abstractly on the top of her head. She tried to maneuver him so that his back was to the other dancers, but he was insensible to the light pressure of her hands. He noticed only when she committed what Kloofi-Menami called “a hoof clop,” and bluntly positioned herself perpendicular to him, so that he was forced to turn toward her or dance with his arm wrapped over his chest. A twitch of a smile came to his lips and, for a moment, he seemed to find her eyes through the veils. Niera’s heart stopped. He danced with a little more effort and she moved imperceptibly closer to minimize the number of people who could see her when she lifted her veil. She had wanted a number of things to coincide to create the perfect moment to reveal herself, but she would have to sacrifice her expectations. Nothing about her felt natural or graceful. Hameed’s flagging attention and the slipping hours had created a galloping agitation in her. She closed her eyes, waited for the next instep, then lightly took her hands from his. He stopped, and she began to trace her fingers along the inside of her sleeve, gathering the edge of the veil. Suddenly, the boy was at his side. Niera’s hand dropped instantly. Sensing his release, Hameed bowed and turned to the youth. Niera’s arm shot out and grabbed his sleeve. He turned and looked at her. The dancers

next to her had noticed and, though still dancing, were watching her askance. The youth was staring too. Niera held the sleeve firmly. The colour had faded from everything.

She leaned close to Hameed. "It's me...Niera," she said by his ear. She tried to think of what else she could say. The words she had wanted would strip her naked.

She felt his hand touch her shoulder and her eyes slipped tears. He took her hand and led her back toward the balustrade. He turned her gently so that her back was to the onlookers and carefully lifted her veil, smoothing it so it protected her profile. She stared at his chest.

"Niera," he sighed. Hearing her name made her stomach ache. "Niera, my heart is bound to another, a woman I met some time ago. You have a good and honest heart. And courage—more than I, who have waited until it was almost too late and may yet be. But I sensed something when I saw you first in the court. We call it *aschahel*, truth-making. It is a quality of our best mantics. You are not someone the gods will forget."

He bent down so he could meet her eyes. Niera took a shuddering breath and lowered her veil. Without looking at him, she walked away. She passed through the archway to the eighth and final gallery. She descended the empty staircase, remaining for a time in the shadows of the general passage, watching the light from the court play across the floor. A peacefulness settled over her, as if a sandstorm had passed and buried her without a contour to mark where she had been. After a time, she grew aware of another presence.

"Niera?"

She looked up and saw Ulna standing partway between the shadows and the light. The Soothsayer was wearing a dark brown headcloth and robe. Niera looked beyond at

the light from the great hall. She would have to move into it to escape. A tremendous weariness settled over her.

“Niera, please listen to what I say. It is a matter of your safety as well as others’. You must not pronounce on Meriope’s wedding.”

“I never pronounced on it,” Niera said. “You did.”

Ulna was silent for a moment. “Niera, you *will* be asked to pronounce on her wedding. You must decline. It’s not only for her sake. You will want to interfere, but you must fight that desire. As it is, I am not sure it will be enough.”

“I too have had visions since we parted, Ulna. I have foreseen Meriope’s suicide and have done what I could to avoid that outcome, but I can’t prevent the marriage with Loth. If it were in my power, I *would*, since it causes her such misery.”

“The situation is not as you think.”

Niera looked at Ulna sharply for a moment, a cold tingle climbing her spine. “It never is,” she said finally and walked into the light.

“If you hurt her, you will hurt yourself.”

Niera turned, pulling off her veil. “Have I ever done *anything* to her? It’s astounding, the low opinion you have of me. Why didn’t you take *her* as your apprentice if you’re so concerned with her? You could have interfered in her life as much as you pleased then.”

“I *am* interfering, despite my training. You’re right. But I’ve been moved by a course of events I foresaw after you became my apprentice. You’re wrong when you say I have a low opinion of you. I’m here because I know what you could be if you didn’t suffer from jealousy and neglect.”

Niera bristled. How dare Ulna humiliate her!

“I have known for a long time that your fate is intertwined with Meriope’s,” Ulna continued. “In my own way, I’ve been trying to influence events so that neither of you is sacrificed.”

“I don’t want your help,” Niera spat. “You’ve done nothing but undermine me. When I finally had a vision, you called it misguided. When I wanted to go to Faejn Goa, you insisted I ask Anar. Your help comes at a high price.”

“Niera, one of the first lessons I taught you was that visions are not neutral. You must learn how to interpret them—and this means letting go of yourself so you can understand the vision as it truly is, not as what you, the individual, separate from the rest of creation, think it is.”

“I don’t wish to speak longer,” Niera said. “I hope you’re able to leave the palace as safely as you came.”

When Niera re-entered the whirling din of the court floor, she was trembling. Normally, this was her favourite part of the court dances, when everyone felt free enough to forget themselves. She moved quickly along the wall. Her father spotted her as she reached the entrance to the royal passage.

“Why in *Azazello*’s name are you dressed like that? Have you forgotten yourself? Cover your face before you are seen!” The reprimand would have been more severe, but he was distracted.

Niera arranged the veil.

“He hasn’t come,” her father said. “I wonder if this has been a waste of the treasury.”

“Do you think?” Niera said tonelessly. “Everyone is celebrating together. There are even nomads dancing with commoners in the galleries.”

The King looked up and seemed to mark this for the first time. “I suppose he could be up there,” he said gruffly. “I’ll send for him.”

“It would be better if you went yourself,” she said. “The nomads do not have the same view of commoners as we do. They make no distinction. Perhaps you will succeed where others have failed.”

“It could be a test,” the King said, gazing up at the galleries.

Anar joined them as the King was leaving. “Have you seen our daughter?” she asked. She looked sharply at Niera. “Who’s that?”

“Ask the servants,” he said, dismissing them both.

“It’s me,” Niera murmured.

“She’s disappeared,” Anar said. “The servants have not seen her since the first hour of the Masque and she’s not in her rooms. Eissa says they went up to the galleries and were separated. We must make a search at once.”

The King’s expression was instantly severe. “Talk to the Chief of Security, and no one else, if you have sense. She cannot have left the palace.” He exhaled. “May her ancestors protect her if she disrupts the alliance with Loth.”

“How can you think such things?” Anar snapped. “She may have been abducted by the very cutthroats you’ve invited to court. You speak of her as if she were a stranger.”

A cold smile came to the King’s lips and Anar recoiled. “You’ve never cared for her,” she said quietly and spun away.

The King left for the galleries. Niera turned and stepped into the royal passage.

She thought only of her bed. She wanted to be snuffed out as she snuffed out her oil lamp every night. Ulna had told her that it was in dreamless sleep that people came closest to their universal essence. Let her be an unconscious transcendent, then. She didn't want to wake.

When she reached her room, she pulled the veil from her head and stood by the window. She had a desire to fling it out, but it would only be found the next day in the garden. She let it drop, stepping on it as she pulled off the robe. Thoughts were knocking at the back of her skull, intuitions that had amassed over the evening and were large enough now to be probabilities. She had no intention of opening the door. Instead, she summoned a servant and asked for a strong sleeping draught. Soon afterwards, she was submerged in a dreamless sleep.

XIV

“I’m sorry, My Lady. I have been asked to summon you directly. The King requests your presence in the council room.”

Niera’s body flushed with sweat from the sudden waking. By the look of the light outside, it was mid-morning. She rose heavily, still groggy from the sleeping draught, and went to splash her face. She pulled the charcoal robe over her head and, for the first time since she had begun to wear it, felt self-conscious. Although she would not have admitted it the night before, she had betrayed the principles of soothsaying when she attended the Masque. It wasn’t the dancing, but her intentions. Still, if she wore one of her old robes, the change would be construed as a message, and she needed time to think about this new feeling within her.

When she left her rooms, she found two guards posted outside Meriope’s corridor.

“What’s happened?” she asked.

“The Princess has been confined to her rooms.”

“Is she alright?”

“Yes, My Lady.”

“I will see her, then.”

“It’s Her Majesty’s orders that she not be disturbed.”

Niera hesitated, but the servant who had summoned her reminded her that the King awaited. Niera wondered if Meriope's punishment for trying to run away would be an armed escort to her own leave-taking ceremony. Why hadn't Meriope spoken with her before trying to escape? Not that Niera could have been much help. Her heart had been set on attending the Masque. Guilt stirred in her chest.

The council room was unnaturally quiet. The usual loud sophistry that greeted her before she reached the doors had been replaced by low muttering. A few of the counsellors sat in silence, eyes glazed with fatigue. It was evident from the brittle cypress sprays still pinned to many breasts, and from the remains of a repast being cleared from the table, that they had not been to bed at all. She felt uneasy. As she moved around the table to her place, the Chronicler was saying: "It's not without precedent. You need look no further than our own walls. The *Kero*, after all, was a commoner."

"There is a great difference, a great difference, sir, between a commoner and a nomad," the Curmudgeon broke in. "Even if you are indiscriminating, the example of the *Kero* is hardly a proud moment in Kqaarin's history."

The King entered then from his private closet, silencing all conversation. The counsellors rose to their feet and waited until he was settled before bowing and resuming their places. Niera noticed that her father was wearing one of his finest cloaks, stuck with *maiden's tears*. He reserved such finery for the most formal occasions, preferring his military tunic. She wondered if the party from Loth had arrived a day early and were awaiting the traditional welcoming at court.

As soon as he sat, he addressed the space in front of his left shoulder. "It is a difficult decision we must make, Niera. I did not summon you until now, because I

anticipated the value of a fresh opinion. I want you to pay careful attention to the Nomad's responses."

"Yes, My Lord."

Her anxiety blossomed. What had happened while she slept? Had the alliance been concluded or abandoned? She detested the apprehension that came with being kept ignorant. And now she would have to assume the virtue of the soothsayer's calm. She drew a breath.

The King made a signal and the Seneschal disappeared into the corridor. He returned shortly with Hameed. He had no entourage this time and chose to stand, despite the Seneschal's offer of a chair. He stood where Ulna and Abdim had been only a month and a half earlier. His eyes caught Niera's and she averted hers, though not before noticing how tired he was. Her heart ached in her chest.

"We will not dally any longer," the King began, "since, by your own decree, we must conclude our negotiations by the end of this day. We will tell you now that the Royal Council is not favourable to a marriage alliance, nor are we satisfied by the furtive manner in which you have made your intentions in this alliance known."

Niera stared down at her father's head. What was he saying?

"The Princess, as you know, has been promised to Loth through traditional and formal contracts that cannot be sundered without reparations and bad sentiment. We cannot help but think that the Naheirood have willfully disrupted trade between Kqaarin and its neighbours in order to sever this alliance—creating disease where there was none and selling the cure. This is neither honourable nor brotherly."

“For you, it is dishonourable,” Hameed replied. “For us, prevailing in an unwelcoming environment is how we have always survived. City-kingdoms make alliances to augment their power and wealth. Intermarriage is of symbolic importance, never the primary motivation. Your trade agreement with Loth can be worked in another fashion. I have deviated from your customs in that my only motive is the marriage. I merely created the conditions in which I could be considered a suitor. Would you have admitted me into your presence—your palace, even—otherwise?”

“How does it serve you to marry our Princess?” the King demanded. “It will not change public estimation of nomadic tribes but for the worse. A jewel thrown in the sand does not elevate the sand. Only the jewel is lost.”

“I have thought long about the value of this Jewel you speak of and the prestige the city-kingdoms hope to gain by showcasing such a queen. It was in dwelling on this that I almost convinced myself I could not love your daughter; but, I was guilty of the same prejudice as the other suitors—only my vantage, as you have imaginatively described it, was different. I love Meriope. It is for her that I have come where I am unwelcome.”

“And if we refuse?”

“Trade to and from your kingdom will continue to be lean. Not the necessities, of course, but the subtleties that make a life comfortable.” A ghost of a smile tugged at Hameed’s lip.

“We could war on you. Our forces would be augmented by Loth.”

“No one knows the desert as we do. You could not keep every caravan safe,” Hameed returned.

Only the rumbling of a counsellor's stomach was heard.

"If she comes to you...*if*...her sole possession will be the commoner's clothes she wore to deceive us. You will discover your folly soon enough, choosing a wife capable of deceit and unsuited to the life of the desert. If you pressure for more, if you continue to disrupt trade, we will war on you until the desert is aspersed with blood."

"For centuries," Hameed said, his eyes ablaze, "the caravans have held little interest for us, except when trade was a necessity. The precious cargo you send across the desert would only burden us. My ambition is for your daughter. If Meriope becomes my wife, all that you have lost on the routes will be recovered. Kqaarin will no longer need to trade for *taraclove* and the trance drug. The Naheirood will gift it once a year for as long as your daughter lives."

The two held each other's gaze. Finally, the King turned to the Seneschal. "We will take final counsel."

The Seneschal bowed elaborately, then offered a simpler bow to Hameed before leading him from the room.

There was not enough air for the lungs that now heaved with indignity or outrage. It was as if a crypt had been opened and the occupants, mistakenly confined, were working themselves into the fit they could not have afforded earlier. The exchange between the King and the Nomad had rejuvenated flagging energies, although it did not suggest any course the counsellors had not foreseen. Their words winged over and past Niera.

Meriope.

Hameed was the phantom lover in the colonnade, the man Niera had seen in Meriope's past. Hadn't she recognized it when she danced with him? Hadn't she remembered something of his smell and touch?

"Niera."

She tore her eyes from the purple-blue stones on her father's cloak.

"Yes, My Lord."

"Retire to my closet, since it is more convenient than the meditation room. Make yourself permeable to the spirit world. We want you to cast for the outcome to a refusal. You are not a soothsayer: you have neither the training nor the experience. We will trust, therefore, that you will not invent a vision that would please us now and damage us later."

"No, My Lord."

The closet was a small room, thickly layered with carpets, adjoining the royal apartments. Light came obliquely from a window in the next room. Niera did not bother with the oil lamp. She lay on the carpets at the foot of an intricately carved sofa. The cool dimness of the room and the coarseness of the wool soothed her a little. The debate beyond the iron door did not reach her. She stared at the blank expanse of wall visible beneath an arras. It didn't matter. None of it mattered. Why should she cry?

When she grew still again, it occurred to her that they had deceived her. They had used her to sabotage the marriage with Loth. Meriope's idea of the Masque had not been accidental, but a desperate orchestration. She had not been thinking of how to help Niera at all. Hameed, in his right, had only noticed her in court that day because he had mistaken her for Ulna. It must have puzzled him when the idea of intermarriage was not

broached by the delegation, with Ulna planting the seed at council. It would have been an amazingly difficult seed to germinate. In any case, the Naheirood had not gambled. They had arrived with the scales tipped in their favour. In the end, they knew that trade was more valuable than a daughter. Even one like Meriope.

Niera could see the two recounting their adventures when they were finally free to be together—how they would laugh when they recalled her! She could not bear to think of Meriope hearing about her dance with Hameed. How Meriope would pity her! It made her sick to think upon. Suddenly it struck her that Meriope had seen the whole thing. It must have been her to whom Hameed was speaking so intently. Niera had been so absorbed in her own vulnerability that it had never struck her as odd that he would be talking so intently with a common boy. Niera squeezed her eyes shut.

How she must have been, for Hameed, just another obstacle! He must have struggled to think of something kind to say to her.

Niera turned her face to the carpet and shook her head to loosen the memory's hold.

“What are you doing here?”

Niera jolted. She had not heard Anar approach.

“I’m trying to meditate,” she said, getting to her feet. “The King told me to come in here.”

“What has he asked you to cast on, my daughter’s fate?”

Niera was immediately on her guard. She could see Anar was in a volatile state. Her cheeks and neck were flushed, and her eyes bulged slightly.

“Anar, I can speak of these things only to the council. I must go to the meditation closet now.”

“How can the council decide the fate of my daughter? What do those ancient fools know about a woman’s needs? She’s a bartering tool for them.”

Niera looked past Anar impatiently.

“Tell me this: Are they considering that desert snake? Do they dare think it?” The Queen’s eyes were red, but she looked capable of forking a hex at *Azazello* himself.

“You must ask the King.”

Anar laughed. “Do you think I could persuade a hair on his head? That man has a heart of sand; it blew away long ago.”

“I won’t hear this,” Niera said. Despite his jewelled robe and impressive threats, her father had been forced to see the limits of his power and was struggling yet.

“Oh, my child, you are green if you confuse his little attention for love.”

“I’m sorry for your troubles,” Niera said, and passed quickly. Anar turned after her.

“My troubles? They’ve been close company for years; I scarcely bother with them. It’s my daughter who will suffer! You must tell them she has to marry Loth or there will be a disaster. Even I have the sight to see how it will turn out. That desert vulture has charmed her. She has no idea how hard that life will be. It will kill her.”

“Anar, I will follow my vision,” Niera said brusquely. “The Ancestors know best. It’s not for you or me to make decisions.”

“I see how it will be,” Anar said, her face reddening. “You’ll let her go because you’re jealous like your mother was. You can’t stand for someone to do better than you.

You're itching to take her place, but you won't. The people of Kqaarin can never admire a commoner's girl. And the King will never love what isn't his own."

Niera blanched. "Then he must not love Sehad," she said quietly.

"What perfidious filth is this?"

"I may not be trained, but I have the sight. I've known for some time that Sehad is the son of the Seneschal."

Anar looked as if she would hurl herself at Niera, but after a moment, she seemed to resolve something within herself. "Let me tell you something," she said coldly, "that might wisen you to your own inheritance. The King is impotent. He has likely been this way his entire life—Don't turn away! If you have the ability to know the truth when you hear it, you will know this is true. Your mother, although I did not love her, was truly admirable in this: she did everything she could to conceive in those first years of her marriage. It wasn't until she was threatened by my arrival that she took matters into her own hands. I had the benefit of a faithful servant, so I was saved the strain of learning this myself. So, you see, he may not have sired my children, but at least they may know their true father. And do not delude yourself about the King's innocence—he *knew*. He knew and he held it against us anyway."

Niera turned away. Anar did not follow her this time, but said in a low voice, which already seemed defeated, "You are not his daughter, so there is yet a chance you may have some mercy."

Niera had scarcely settled in the meditation room before she was summoned again to the council. The attendant had to urge her more than once to hurry. Niera decided she would

tell the council that the Queen had disturbed her, and she had not had time for a vision. Still, they would wonder why she had dawdled so long with Anar. She would have to tell the truth, then: there had been no vision.

But she had had an insight. She had known that Anar's words were true.

When the King questioned her, she had to force herself to speak. For some reason, she heard Meriope's childhood voice in her head, telling her that the black moon of the eye grows when it looks on something it likes. Niera brought up her gaze and met the King's. She could not see that far.

"Well, have you something to say?" he prompted.

Niera hesitated. She would never have this power again. But did it matter now that there was no one to admire her for it?

"No, My Lord."

The King let out a sigh. "Then you may go."

She went gladly.

Niera wanted nothing more than to return to her bedchamber, but when she left the meeting room, the Queen's maid was waiting. "Tell her I had no vision," she said, before the woman could open her mouth. Niera headed toward her old rooms. She was midway through the echoing court before she realized her error. For several minutes, she stared at the sunlit floor. When she moved again, she made her way to the western spire and, drawing one of the stairwell windows open, found a seat on the sill. The Soluud had narrowed to a green thread and would constrict further before the spring rains in another two months. She followed its winding path until it merged with the distant purple range of

the Pinoris in the west. She watched for a long time, the sounds of the city carrying up from below. The sun's warmth was mesmerizing.

She remained until the sky turned dusty red along the horizon, like the skin of a pomegranate. The sun grew so large as it touched the tips of the mountains that she could almost see the individual veils that covered its face. She was returned to herself by an attendant who was lighting the sconces in the stairwell. Her muscles were stiff. She moved down the stairs like an old woman.

When she returned to the royal wing, the evening guard at the end of Meriope's corridor greeted her.

"The Princess wants to see you, My Lady. She sent someone to find you earlier."

"She will excuse me. I don't feel well." As she spoke, Meriope herself appeared at the end of the corridor. In a moment, she had rushed down the hall and threw her arms around Niera. Her tears wet Niera's cheek.

"Thank you! Thank you!"

Niera went rigid and Meriope stepped back.

"Could we go to your rooms? I won't stay long. I see that you're tired."

Meriope followed her into the sitting room. Neither of them sat.

"Niera, I wanted to thank you for pronouncing for Hameed and me. You can't know—you can't understand—how you've helped me. I thought I was lost when Ulna was banished. I thought...." Meriope put her hand to her mouth.

"I didn't help you," Niera said, looking at the door. "I didn't have any vision at all. They may yet decide against you."

“But they didn’t! One of the servants told my old *deela* that they accepted the Naheirood’s offer this afternoon. I thought you knew; I go to Hameed tomorrow!”

“And your mother?”

“She could kill Hameed, and she blames Ulna for everything, but her anger will spend itself. Father has decided—there is nothing she can do. The council already sent an emissary ahead to intercept the wedding party from Loth.”

“You are fortunate indeed.”

“I can hardly believe it. But Niera, I never thought it would be like this. I may never be welcome in the palace again. Mother is so angry, she cursed me. It torments her that she sent me to Har Alista for my awakening because Hameed was at the cloister, recovering from a wound he’d received from an enemy clan.

Oh, Niera! The first thing I’m going to do is run in the open desert. If I can do that, I know I can share the Naheirood’s life, because I’ll have tasted the greatest freedom I can think of and survived.

“What about your father and Sehad?”

Meriope’s excitement subsided. “I thought you would have heard. They’ve renounced me. When I leave the palace gates tomorrow, I will be a commoner.”

Niera stared at her, but Meriope looked out the window, her fingers rubbing the horns of the *bacalaora*.

“You can’t understand until it happens to you,” Meriope said. “I never thought about these things. I only thought of Hameed and our life together. Now it’s come and I feel as if the real trial is just beginning... I wish Ulna were here. She would know what to do.”

“Meriope, forgive me, but I’m exhausted from the Masque and the council meeting this morning.”

“Yes, of course. I’m sorry.” She took Niera’s hand and squeezed it. “Thank you for being so good and brave that day when you said you’d run away with me. I was so selfish then, I didn’t even understand what you had offered. I will never forget that.”

Meriope opened the door. “Niera?”

Niera could raise her eyes no higher than Meriope’s neck.

“Would you see me to the palace gates tomorrow? My mother swore she wouldn’t. No one else will be coming.”

Niera began to laugh tonelessly.

“You’re exhausted. We both need a good rest. I’ll send for a sleeping draught for you too. Thank you, Niera—you’ve been very patient.”

When Meriope pulled the door shut behind her, Niera sank onto one of the cushions.

Sometime later, there came a knock at the door. It was her sleeping draught.

XV

Niera woke tense with dread. Her head felt thick and muddled from the sleeping draught, but her heart hammered relentlessly. It was some time before she could disentangle the vision from her surroundings. She had been in an older woman's body, sitting on a brightly dyed blanket in a bazaar. She was humming to herself and weaving something rough and grass-like with her hands—she had so much skill she no longer needed to watch her work. She gazed instead at the passersby. There was a pleasant tinkling that reminded her of the strings of glass she had heard outside the glazier's shop. Many people stopped in front of her blanket and examined her wares, which Niera could not quite see from her line of vision. They always gazed with interest at a large, beautifully framed picture that stood just in front of where she sat. After a few moments, however, they became disturbed. Then they would glance at her and hurry away. A ragged girl and her *yaya* stopped before the frame. After a few moments, the girl laughed. Her *yaya* looked at Niera.

“Why does it change like that? Is it a trick?”

Niera laughed and answered: “It is no trick. It tells the truth about you.” She leaned forward and turned the frame toward herself. It was not a picture at all, but a looking glass—and Niera saw who she was. It was unmistakably herself, but older by some ten or fifteen years. The right side of her face was deformed with scars that looked

like a thorny vine. She was smiling at her reflection, obviously accustomed to such an image. At that moment, the mirror turned dark and her reflection began to change.

Niera sat bolt upright in bed. A pale finger of moonlight came in from the window. “Never,” she whispered. “Never, never.” She reached up tentatively and touched her cheek. The skin was damp beneath her fingers. She cupped it protectively. Her tired mind refused to think, and she returned again and again to the image in the looking glass. Was she to be deformed like some sorcerer of the black arts? Was this what Ulna had foreseen? Only a perverse mind could find hope in such a future.

But Ulna had also said that people had multiple futures. It was clear to Niera that her actions were leading her toward the one she had seen in Ulna’s drawing. There had to be a way, a decision she could make, that would change her course.

Ulna had said Meriope’s future was intertwined with Niera’s own. If that was true, and Meriope was so close to achieving her destiny in the desert—the fate Ulna had foreseen—how close was Niera to hers? A moan escaped her. What could she do? One of her earliest lessons as an apprentice had been the futility of seeking to avoid a prophecy. Oh, why hadn’t Ulna told her the truth that night she had offered her the apprenticeship? Sight was not a gift at all; it was a curse.

An idea forced itself up through Niera’s consciousness. If that bleak future of hers was connected with Meriope’s future with the nomads, would hers not change if she could change Meriope’s? She would have to ensure that Meriope did not, after all, go to the desert. Could she pretend to have a vision that denounced the marriage? It was late now. Too late. How could it be heeded after the council had chosen trade security over the alliance with Loth? Would it not make Kqaarin look worse to vacillate? The emissary

had already been sent. And the King would be furious with such a delayed vision. Even if he heeded it, the consequences might be terrible if the nomads were betrayed. No, it would not work. Niera took her head in her hands.

It was then that she recalled Meriope's superstition, the silly shrine she had erected with the bowl of milk. Only a commoner, someone without the services of a soothsayer, would set store by such rituals—but Meriope did. If she had set up the shrine on the night of the announcement of her betrothal to Loth, she might well do the same for Hameed. Niera wondered if it would be enough. Would Meriope dare to change her mind after all the trouble she had caused? It would, no doubt, cause her great grief and anxiety. Perhaps it would be sufficient to change her course of action. Certainly, her mother would support her in this.

Niera dressed quickly. She took the blade used to shave her head from the box by the washbasin and, when she could find nothing more suitable, the earthen cup she used to rinse her mouth. The old guard by Meriope's corridor was dozing at his post. Niera slipped down the hall and hurried toward the nearest entrance to the garden.

The air was warm and still, the stone tiles cool beneath her bare feet. When she passed the fountain, a tremor of doubt shook her and she paused. A cool mist settled over the side of her face. What was she doing? Was this not foolishness? She felt suddenly trapped and miserable. But the vision of her deformed face greeted her the moment she closed her eyes. She let out a small cry of anguish.

Then a voice spoke clearly through her confusion: *It is not foolishness*, it said, *it is survival*. Niera saw the truth of this. Hadn't her mother been in a similar position, choosing between a dignified existence and fidelity to her husband? A terrible choice!

But her mother had waited too long to act. Perhaps Niera had as well. The destiny Ulna had foreseen for her was perhaps but a few hours away. Meriope was on the cusp of starting a life of freedom and adventure in the desert—a life Niera had dreamed of since she had been old enough to hear tales. Meriope would have the man whom both of them loved. And what would Niera have? She wouldn't even be a soothsayer in Ulna's future!

Niera rose from the edge of the fountain and went to the *lemonthorn*. She knelt before it and took the cup and blade from her sleeve. Pinching the edge of a thick branch, she made a number of incisions, as she had seen the gardener do. The *lemonthorn*'s smell was like sour citrus yoghurt, but she did not find it unpleasant. It was a desert scent. She might not know who her father was, but she was certain her blood was the blood of the desert, undiluted. As she watched the drops of sap form, she wondered if she might even be doing Meriope a good turn, since her upbringing had not equipped her for the desert life. What was that nonsense about running in the desert?

Despite her care in catching the sap, Niera pricked herself on the spines and her fingers were soon sticky with blood and resin. She cursed Meriope for sending the sleeping draught. It seemed to her now that Meriope had done it on purpose. All of her risk would be for naught if there wasn't enough resin to curdle the milk. Niera took a trembling breath and tried to master her impatience. She could not afford a mistake.

At last, she rose and returned to the palace. The gaze of the guards disquieted her, but she knew that nothing would seem odd to them unless she behaved unusually. Over the years, they had grown accustomed to her habit of visiting the garden when she couldn't sleep. She kept a tight grip on the cup and blade beneath her sleeves.

When she entered the royal wing, she was relieved to find that the old guard was still dozing. She passed him, pressing the folds of her robe to her sides. If he woke, she would tell him she needed to give Meriope some advice before she left in the morning. It was credible enough. Still, it terrified her that he should see her. When she came to the door, she opened it quickly and stepped onto the layered carpets of the antechamber. The room was lit by two sconces on either side of the bedchamber door. Niera paused, listening to her own breathing. She had not thought of what she would say if Meriope woke. She didn't think she was capable of a convincing lie.

She crept to the bedchamber door and listened for a time. All she could hear was the blood rushing in her ears. Her fingers were distractingly sticky. She carefully set the cup and blade on the carpet, memorizing where she had laid them, then rose and extinguished the lights in the sconces. She knelt again, tracing the decorative iron of the door until her fingers met the handle. Holding her breath, she opened the door a crack. Flittering light jumped out at her. The oil lamp! It was as she had hoped: Meriope had set the shrine by the door again. Niera raised herself and saw the blue enamel bowl beyond the lamp. She could reach it without entering the room. She listened. Meriope had said she would take a sleeping draught too, but Niera could not count on it. Meriope would be excited and, as Niera knew well, the sleeping draught could be overcome if one were anxious enough. Niera found the cup and raised herself so that she could see the milk's surface beyond the flame of the lamp. She inched the door open further and it groaned. Terror shot up her spine. It was a long time before she found the courage to continue. The trembling in her arm was impossible to control. She rolled her sleeve to her shoulder. Staring at the bowl, she eased her arm through the crack. The *lemonthorn* sap was thick

and ran like cold honey. In the light of the lamp, Niera saw that it was not clear, as she had thought, but slightly yellow. She prayed the gods would pity her and the milk would remain white. And not require stirring. It took all of her strength to hold her arm over the bowl until the resin had run into it. She expected, at any moment, that the door would fly open and Meriope confront her. Now she saw that the milk was indeed curdling. With silent thankfulness, she began to withdraw her arm.

The hall door opened, flooding the antechamber with light. Niera flinched, her hand knocking something as she spun, shutting the bedchamber door behind her. The silhouette in the doorway was motionless. It took Niera a moment to recognize the Soothsayer's shape.

"What do you want?" Niera croaked.

"What are you doing, Niera?" The compassion in Ulna's voice was worse than accusation.

The Soothsayer turned, and for a blessed moment, Niera thought she was going to leave, but she unhoused a flambeau from its mount in the hall and stepped back into the antechamber. Niera's desperation increased. Ulna's face was no longer a mask of passivity. There was an intensity in her eyes that was frightening to see.

"Leave or I'll call the guard," Niera whispered. Her hand trembled on the handle of the door.

"Niera, I am here because something terrible is about to happen. Despite my efforts, a tragedy will not be averted. I cannot see it, but I know it. I cannot stop it, but I can lessen it."

"Go away! I don't want your help. I've seen your future."

“Niera, you have the sight and yet you see so little of what is promising in the world and in yourself. You look no further than the surface.” Ulna’s attention was drawn to Niera’s feet.

Niera looked down and saw the sheathed blade. The torch flickered.

“I’ve done nothing. She’s sleeping. How can you think...?” As Niera said this, she began to cry. “Go away! You’ve never trusted me.”

Ulna did not move.

“She’s had everything she ever wanted. Friends, a mother who loves her, and now the husband she chose. Even the King liked her better, and he’s not even her father! I had one thing, *one*. And you gave me up. You gave me up for her. And she already had everything! Why? Why?”

“I never gave you up.”

A piercing scream came from bedchamber. In two strides, Ulna crossed the room and threw open the door. A wall of flames leapt from the other side, forcing them back. Smoke filled the antechamber instantly.

The old guard appeared at the hall door, gaping at the flames in disbelief. He looked from Ulna, who still held the flambeau, to Niera, who had fallen on her knees in shock.

“Summon help!” Ulna called. He hurried away. “Niera!”

Niera was mesmerized. She could hear Meriope wailing somewhere in the burning room. “I didn’t do this,” she whispered.

“I know. Listen to me: drag the carpets out of this room and into the hall.”

In a daze, Niera stepped into the hall and began to tug at the carpets. She could vaguely hear Ulna yelling instructions to Meriope, but Meriope was incoherent. The carpets were heavy. When Niera dragged one through the door, another appeared beneath.

“Leave them. Niera, look at me!”

Niera looked.

“I’m going to hold the fire. There will be a path. I want you to go into the room and bring her out. Do you understand? You must trust me. I will not let you be harmed. But you must be fast.”

Niera nodded.

Ulna closed her eyes and began muttering under her breath. The fire had spread into the antechamber, and Niera was forced to move back again. She was suddenly aware that the screaming had stopped, and a chill went to her very core.

The fire had drawn close to Ulna. Niera was about to shout to her when she saw that a black line bifurcated the fire, as if an invisible blade had dropped and cut it in two. The line was growing steadily wider. The fire around it did not cease burning, but Niera could see a path of blackened carpet. As the path widened, she glimpsed Meriope’s bed at the far end. The lurid light made it impossible to see more.

“Go!” Ulna gasped. “Now!”

Niera started from her trance and took a few tentative steps along the path. When she saw that she was not harmed, she hurried into the room. Meriope was curled at the center of her bed. Her night robe had burned to the knees. Niera hefted her by the waist and dragged her backwards from the room. When she was by Ulna’s side again, the Soothsayer opened her eyes partway, and Niera could see the effort it cost her to speak.

“To the hall. As far as you can. Let no one near. Don’t come back. Now!” Sweat dripped from Ulna’s chin, like tallow from a candle.

Niera dragged Meriope down the hall. Several guards were hurrying toward them, but she yelled to them to stay back. As soon as the first one reached her, she relinquished Meriope and rushed back toward the corridor. Ulna had barely had the strength to speak, let alone leave the burning room.

Niera was thrown back by a ball of fire that rolled into the main hall like the breath of some mythical basilisk. The guards on both sides of the hall were cut off. When Niera regained her feet, she saw that the fire was like nothing she had ever seen. It burned in the center of the main hall, though there was nothing to fuel it. It fed on the very air. A cold horror came over her.

This was a rebalancing.

“Ulna!” Niera cried. She took a few steps forward, but the heat was unbearable. She could not see through it to the other side of the hall. “Ulna!” she screamed again. She came as close to the flames as she dared and tried to see into the corridor. A hand fell on her shoulder, pulling her back. It was the King.

“Stay back,” he commanded. “This is no natural fire.”

Niera glared at him, soot burning her eyes. “Ulna’s in there. We have to help her. Order someone to help her!”

“Ulna?” The King looked as if he had been struck. He stared at the fire.

Niera turned from him in disgust and saw Anar bending over Meriope. She was stroking her daughter’s hair and wailing. Meriope’s legs were burned. Servants were hurrying down the hall with basins of water.

“Even if we could redirect the Soluud,” the King said softly, “it would not quench this fire. It will burn until the balance is restored.”

Niera searched the faces around her, desperate for help. Frustrated, she turned back to the fire, stepping closer than she had before. Her skin smarted.

“Move back,” the King ordered.

She could barely open her eyes. She blinked hard before looking again. There was movement in the corridor. Someone was coming through the flames.

“She’s there!” Niera cried. “She’s trying to get out!” A hand grazed her shoulder, but missed its purchase, as she leapt into the flames.

Numbness. She could hear someone calling, but it sounded as distant as a shepherd’s cry at night. The voice grew stronger and more insistent and Niera opened her eyes to unbelievable pain.

Then it stopped. The fire was all around her, but frozen and clear as if she were trapped, like an insect, in a clot of amber. Before her stood Ulna, but she too looked different. Lucent.

“Niera,” she said, gazing at her. “Do not struggle against me. Do not refuse this gift. It is given with complete understanding and love.”

The fire came alive again, but not before Niera saw the crumpled mass of the Soothsayer before her. Just then, she felt a blow like the buffet of a sandstorm.

Niera flew out of the fire and lost consciousness when she hit a wall farther down the royal wing. She did not feel the rebalancing wind, which left no one in the hall standing.

XVI

“It is quiet tonight,” Pulji said, when she came into the room. Niera stared at her old *deela*’s reflection in the window, then looked through it to the darkness beyond. “It would be a good night for a walk in the gardens.”

Pulji picked up the ivory comb from the box by the washbasin and began to brush the fuzz on Niera’s head.

“You should take advantage. In a few days the Feast of Kqaarin’s Liberation will come, and the gardens will be crowded.”

Niera could sense Pulji’s eyes searching for hers in the window, but she kept her gaze on the garden wall with its top illuminated by moonlight. She was in her old rooms again. That, she supposed, had been Pulji’s idea—but she was grateful, if that was possible.

“Do you remember Liberation Day three years ago? You were so curious. Everything in the city interested you: the blacksmith’s shop, the *dogwoman*, the communal ovens, the *djual* gamblers.” Pulji laughed. “Anyone would think you had come from a hermitage.”

Pulji picked up the small bottle of scented oil. Niera had not allowed her to brush and oil her hair since she was in her eighth year. It was as if Pulji was going back to being

her childhood *deela*. Perhaps Pulji was hoping that she would protest. But to protest, Niera would first have to care.

When Pulji finished, she leaned on the table where she could get a better look at Niera's face. Niera knew Pulji still felt guilty, but she would have discovered the news from someone else eventually—and Pulji had always believed that the truth, no matter how hard, was the best remedy. Niera admired this about her. However, her old *deela*'s fussing, which had not abated in the month and a half following the fire, was becoming intolerable. It was worse, even, than Niera's discovery that she would never become a soothsayer. Not that she wanted to anymore, but the decision had been stolen from her. The King had bowed to the pressure of popular sentiment. He had visited her once, while she was in the throes of the fever. Even Anar had come twice. It was Meriope who had stayed with her the longest and had even, according to Pulji, come the morning of the day she had left. But Niera could barely remember the first two weeks after the fire at all.

Pulji drew herself up. "I spoke with the Queen," she said. "I have permission to take you into the city again for Liberation Day."

A wave of nausea passed over Niera. Now? Now that she didn't want to breathe, let alone venture from her room. She swallowed, but gave no impression that the news meant anything to her. She wanted Pulji to leave.

"It will be much larger this year because there's going to be celebrations all over the Triangle. Har Kalathi is even now celebrating the fourth century since its founding, then there's our Liberation Day, and a week later, Har Alista will be welcoming the Princess of Othana, their new queen. There'll be caravans from all over the desert."

Niera wondered if Meriope had heard about Har Alista's new queen. But then, Meriope would have no regrets. She was finally free.

"You don't have to tell me now," Pulji said anxiously.

There was no danger of that. Niera hadn't spoken for a month, and she didn't intend to again.

Pulji placed her hand on Niera's. Finally, she stared out at the garden too. In the silence, they heard the cry of a palace sentry calling the change of watch.

Niera woke abruptly on the Feast of Kqaarin's Liberation and saw, for the first time in almost two months, the full light of day. She gazed at the palm fronds, thinking of what she had seen. When she got up, her vision blackened and she had to sit again. After a minute of deliberation, she rang for tea and cakes. She had no appetite, but she felt she would need her strength.

When the servant came, Niera opened the door a crack, remaining hidden as she gave her instructions. Afterwards, she poured water into the washbasin and paused over the rippling shadow. Before it settled, she splashed her face. She was too anxious to sit, but Pulji would not be arriving until the late afternoon. Niera suddenly wondered if she would come. After all, she had shown no interest in going into the city when Pulji had made the offer some days earlier. Niera decided to send a message with the servant when she brought the breakfast.

Hope persuades a corpse. She could almost hear Pulji reciting the adage.

As Niera waited, she occupied herself by going over the vision she had had in her sleep, trying to remember anything she might have overlooked. It had been so vivid, she

felt certain it was close in time to the present. She had even recognized where the Lady of the Mirrors was. She was walking along the Soluud! It was just before dawn and the banks were beginning to show green, as they were even now. Niera had smelled the thirsty desert earth and the sweat of an animal. The tinkling of the woman's indigo robe was accompanied by the brass bells on the onager she was leading. A peddler's pack was secured to the animal's back. As the sun broke over the horizon, she shared the woman's desire to run ahead and cry out with joy. Niera sensed another presence nearby, but the woman's eyes were intent on the horizon, and she never saw her companion.

It puzzled Niera that she had shared the Lady's experiences this time, since her visions of the Lady had always been disembodied before. Nevertheless, there was no doubt that the woman was coming, or had recently come, to Kqaarin. The peddler's pack on the beast had given Niera a valuable clue. She felt certain the woman would be among the caravan vendors in the bazaar that evening.

Niera knew that the Lady of the Mirrors was important. She had always felt it. Ulna had seen her too, had drawn her in her book. Perhaps Ulna had met her before. With a start, Niera wondered if the woman could be Ulna's mysterious sister, the one it had made her sad to remember. If so, Niera knew she would have to tell her what had become of Ulna: how Ulna had sacrificed her life for her and Meriope. Niera hoped the Lady would forgive her and, perhaps, help her understand why Ulna had done it. But most of all, Niera hoped that the woman, who had so long been an inhabitant of the future, would tell her what she should do now. Ulna had told her she would do much good in her life, but she had never said how. Niera imagined that this was part of the reason why Ulna had sacrificed everything, and she wanted desperately not to disappoint the spirit of her old

teacher. There was no longer any question of Niera accomplishing good through soothsaying. Pulji had told her of the widespread unrest in Kqaarin after Ulna died. The instability peaked when a rumour reached the city that the Soothsayer had been seeking revenge for being supplanted. Many people suspected a palace plot to do away with the commoner's voice in the Royal Council. In order to restore peace, a public court had been called and the King himself had declared that no one of royal blood would fill the position of soothsayer—an irony that would have made Niera laugh, had she been capable at the time. The King had promised that the soothsayer from Har Alista would come in five months time to search among the commoners for one with the gift of sight, returning every two years until a potential was found.

The bell rang. Niera instructed the servant to leave the tray outside and conveyed her message for Pulji through the crack in the door.

As Niera carried the tray to her bed, she gazed at its dull finish. She set it on the night table and drew the copper-backed mirror from beneath the bed. After a few moments, she reached down and flipped it over. She waited for a time, but could not bring herself to lean forward again. Averting her eyes, she gently pushed it back under the bed.

When Pulji arrived, Niera was ready. She wore the same robe she had three years earlier when Pulji had taken her into the city for the first time. It was a pre-awakening dress her mother had worn while still a commoner. It was small now and restricted her arm movements. Niera had pinned the headscarf so that it covered everything but her eyes. She could tell that Pulji was overwhelmed, but the older woman had mastered her

emotions. She handed Niera some of her homemade sweet bread and a slice of cheese.

“We don’t want to miss anything,” she said, holding open the door.

At the gates, the guards spoke with Pulji amicably. They let Niera through without even looking at her face, as they should have. For the first time, it occurred to her how much Pulji had done for her. She reached for her old *deela*’s hand, but she was busy wrapping her own scarf around her face as Niera had. Pulji saw the gesture, and a look of worry came to her eyes, “You still want to go?”

“Of course. I want to see the vendors,” Niera said haughtily, trying to cover her embarrassment. She realized a moment later that she had broken her silence.

“I haven’t forgotten,” Pulji said. They joined the crowds along the main road leading from the palace. “Later tonight, we can have a late supper with my mother—if you’d like.”

Niera smiled apprehensively, then nodded when she remembered that Pulji couldn’t see her mouth. The offer was significant. Inviting a noble to dine with a commoner was fodder for mockery. Pulji, however, had not invited her as a noble. Nevertheless, she wished the invitation had come three years earlier. Today she wanted all the time she could have in the market. There were so many people in the city! It would not be easy to find the Lady of the Mirrors in the festival crowd, even if her robes did shimmer like the evening sky.

Niera watched a man lift his son to help him hang a string of lanterns outside their home. Her anxiety increased. She had not thought of how much harder it would be to find the Lady by lantern light!

“It will be a long evening,” Pulji said, breathing audibly. “If you show your hurry now, every peddler will see coins in your eyes. Believe me, their expectations will be more reasonable after nightfall.”

They were still some distance from the bazaar street when the crowd came to a standstill. Niera looked at Pulji nervously. It seemed that, following the afternoon celebrations at the palace, most of the city had gone straight to the bazaar, without bothering with the afternoon repast and siesta. People were shouting for those ahead to be more aggressive. Some were beginning to push.

“Come,” Pulji said, taking Niera’s hand.

Pulji led her along a web of narrow paths between hump-backed adobe abodes. Niera could have sworn that they were moving away from the bazaar street, but every time she was about to voice her worries, Pulji would come to a fork or duck down a tunnel under a home and turn back toward the bazaar.

They emerged onto the bazaar street from a narrow alley between two merchants’ huts and had to step around a peddler who had placed his blanket in the way.

There was not much leisure to admire the wares, because every minute or so, a mighty heave would move the crowd along. To buy something, one had to step into the low-roofed merchant huts or onto the blankets of the caravan vendors. Niera scarcely noticed the sumptuous smells of corn fritters, toasted nuts, goat’s cheese and roasted meat. She searched the faces of the peddlers and, when the crowd failed to move fast enough, examined the people around her. It was oppressively hot in the late afternoon sun. The odours of animal and human sweat, uncured leather, spices, perfumes and

foods—smells that had thrilled her three years earlier—made the closeness of her headaddress suffocating.

Pulji examined a doll from a vendor who purported to have brought it from the famous artisan shop in Faejn Goa. She grunted at the sewing and picked a piece of packing straw from the doll's hair. The merchant matched her by staring disinterestedly at the crowd. Pulji rubbed an invisible stain on the doll's robe. Finally, Niera could bear it no longer. "Come, Pulji. Who cares for these childish things?"

Pulji set it down, but lingered. A push from the crowd answered Niera's prayers and they were moved along through the crush.

"It's silly I should think of it now that Freshta's gone."

"Think of what?" Niera asked, her eyes roaming the crowd.

"The doll."

Niera started. "Gone? Where?"

"She's married. She married a silversmith, one of the palace artisans."

"When?"

"Seven months ago."

Niera had been spending her days in the meditation closet then, under Ulna's tutelage. She had thought herself too old for a *deela*—especially one who was critical of her apprenticeship. Niera was suddenly grateful that the stuffy headscarf hid her blush. She would send a gift to Freshta.

After another hour of pushing through the crowd, Pulji ducked into a tiny hut. She bought them cool spiced tea and found an empty cushion by one of the curved walls.

"Let's rest our feet."

Niera lifted her headscarf enough to admit the glass and drank in one long gulp. “Pulji,” she gasped, when she finished, “couldn’t I meet you here on my way up the street again?” She knew this was out of the question, since Pulji couldn’t leave her, but she didn’t know how else to refuse her old *deela* a respite.

“Rest now. The vendors are too confident yet.”

“But if we rest, they’ll pack up for the palace celebrations at midnight and we’ll miss some of them.”

“There’s time.”

“But Pulji, I don’t want to miss anything.”

“You won’t.”

“You don’t know.”

“What are you looking for?”

Niera hesitated. She knew Pulji blamed all of her troubles on the absence of her mother and the gift of sight. She would be suspicious of a quest motivated by a vision.

“A new robe.”

“A robe? Why not have...” Then Pulji remembered where they were. “You could have new ones tomorrow.”

“I don’t want *that* kind,” Niera said. And she realized it was true. It was not simply the finery. She no longer wished to wear the First Concubine’s cobalt. And she would certainly never wear fustian grey again.

Pulji sighed.

“Can’t I go ahead?”

Her *deela* sipped her tea. After a moment, she grunted. “Help an old woman up.”

The lanterns were lit before they reached Kqaarin's western wall at the far end of the bazaar street. They had seen only one side of the market. Niera pushed ahead now with Pulji grasping her sleeve to be sure they weren't separated. She was terrified that the vendors would begin packing up. Pulji was no help; she slowed Niera to show her moiré silk robes made by foreign palace artisans or batik headscarves imported from the coastal region.

"Look," Pulji said, directing her to a blanket covered in embroidered robes and tunics. "This one's skill lacks only to a spider," she whispered. Niera could see that Pulji was tired and that her feet were paining her, but she couldn't afford to be considerate. She shook her head, and hurried on.

It was close to midnight when they reached their starting point. The bazaar street was already clearing as people moved toward the palace for the midnight revelries.

"We've seen this already," Pulji called.

Niera searched the faces that passed her. "I've missed something," she said. The peddlers were packing up, and many of the merchants had already closed their shops. In the distance, the first of the palace fireworks exploded, prompting cheers from every corner of the city.

Niera could no longer see all the faces in the stream of people who poured past her.

"Niera," Pulji said, grasping her by the shoulder. "What are you looking for?" The firmness in her voice brought Niera out of herself.

"Pulji!" she cried. "I can't find her!"

“Who?”

“The woman from my vision. I’ve seen her for years! She’s important, Pulji. She was going to be here tonight. She might be Ulna’s sister. She can help me, I know it, but I have to find her first. I don’t know why she’s not here!”

“You must tell me what you mean,” Pulji said sternly. “But not here. Come.”

Pulji led Niera toward the eastern wall of the city. Every face that passed in the glow of the coloured lanterns looked eyeless and mask-like. Pulji took a path between two huts, and it seemed to Niera that she followed her old *deela*’s robe for ages. The thunder of the fireworks grew louder. They emerged, finally, on another main street. It was the one that led to the main gates of city.

“We’re almost there,” Pulji said. “When you’ve eaten, you will tell me—”

Niera stopped and looked up the street. In the distance, thousands of flashing lights hung in the air like celestial garlands. Among them, someone moved—a figure that glimmered like the night sky itself. Just then, the air above Kqaarin exploded with the light of a fountain firework.

Niera took a step and then began to run. When she came closer, she saw that the diamonds were strings of glass hanging from thin wires strung between posts. It was the glassmaker’s shop. The air was filled with melodic tinkling. The Lady of the Mirrors was as Niera had imagined her, dressed in indigo with flashing bits of mirror suspended from flowing robes. Although her face was not veiled, Niera could see only her forehead as she bent over a length of green tulle, clearing it of glass figurines. The woman looked up then and smiled. Niera saw with surprise that she was in her mid-life, with a face that had seen

long hours in the desert sun. She looked pleasant, but not glamorous and young as Niera had thought.

“Are you looking for something special?” she asked. She spread out the figurines again so Niera could see them.

“I recognized your dress,” Niera said, her voice shaking. “It’s as beautiful as in my visions.”

The woman looked bemused, but smiled. “I made it from leftovers in the workshop. I wear it for the festivals.”

“You live here?”

The woman laughed. “I was born in there,” she said, gesturing to the shop behind her.

Niera blinked. “Here?”

The woman stood to rest her knees. Another firework exploded and she walked to the edge of her shop to have a better look. Niera couldn’t help noticing that she did not quite have the grace of the woman in her visions.

“I only ever left Kqaarin for my awakening,” the shopkeeper said. “Even then, I didn’t go farther than Agrabbi Seep.”

“You haven’t travelled at all?”

“My husband goes on the caravan routes. I’m needed in the shop.” She looked at Niera’s robe. “Which caravan did you come with?”

“I...none. Do you know Ulna?”

“The palace soothsayer?” The woman’s smile vanished and she made the sign of respect for the dead. “No.”

“You’ve never seen her?”

“Well, of course. I don’t go to public court often, but I’ve seen her at various festivities. Her sister used to live just by the well over there.”

Niera followed the woman’s gaze. “Where is she now?”

The shopkeeper stooped again over the tulle and began to collect the figurines. “She passed away some time ago.”

“Disease?”

“Why are you interested?”

Niera was unused to be questioned. She fell silent for a moment. “I thought she could help me. There was something I wanted to tell her.”

The woman studied her. “I suppose you’re old enough,” she sighed. “Her family married her to the man who had mistreated her. She was a woman of gentle spirit, but she fought the match. Then it was found she was with child, so to preserve the family honour....”

A hand touched Niera’s shoulder. “We should go,” Pulji said.

“Did Ulna know her sister died?”

“Of course. This happened when she was a girl. It was a terrible tragedy—the man had *Azazello*’s temper.”

“Come,” Pulji said.

“Do you ever see things?” Niera asked. “The past, the future?”

The woman laughed. “I don’t have that gift.”

“Don’t you recognize me?” Niera’s head was ringing.

The shopkeeper looked from Niera to Pulji, suddenly cautious. "I don't know. I can't see your face."

"Come," Pulji said. "It's getting late." Niera pulled away. She removed the pins from her headscarf and let it fall.

She couldn't breathe as the woman's eyes travelled over her face. The Lady of the Mirrors had seen her during the visions too.

"I'm sorry," the woman said softly. "Perhaps you know one of my sisters. We are told we look alike."

"You've called to me," Niera insisted. "You've seen me before. Don't you recognize me? It's Niera!"

The woman looked confused, then startled. She bowed her head, "Forgive me, My Lady. I didn't recognize you. I don't go to court very often and...your robe...I thought—"

Niera didn't wait to hear more. She spun and ran into the darkness. The crack and boom of the fireworks drowned Pulji's calls.

Niera collided with a woman carrying a pot of beer, and when the woman turned on her with harsh words, Niera ducked into one of the footpaths. She followed the labyrinthine walkways between houses, changing direction when she saw a light or another person. At last, she fell down a step she hadn't seen. Laying there, she wept.

When she finally grew still, she heard the song of drunken revellers in a nearby abode. Somewhere, a baby was crying and someone was scrubbing a pot with an abrasive. Distant strains of music echoed from the city walls. Closer, she could hear the occasional ringing of bells. She drew herself up and followed the sound. She reached up

to secure her headscarf, but found it gone. The small courtyard she entered looked like it belonged to minor nobility or a wealthy merchant.

A stooped figure sat under the light of the moon. Before him was a blanket covered in what looked like tiny pools of water. As Niera drew closer, she saw that they were mirrors. Not copper mirrors, like her mother's, but silver-blue ones like the moonlight itself. They took strange shapes, their frames festooned with creatures and spirits Niera had never seen before. One mirror was larger than the rest and stood upright in its own frame. As Niera approached it, the figure spoke.

"Most people don't like what they see."

Niera looked at him, but his face was shrouded in darkness. "Why?" she asked.

"Who loves the truth?"

Niera considered this. She had had plenty of time to think about herself since the fire, and she hadn't liked much of what she found. Meriope's departure had not removed her *kitefly*, but her gradual understanding that Meriope had little to do with what truly made her unhappy had dissolved it, leaving her numb. It was a numbness not even the King's acceptance of her could influence. He no longer had the power to grieve her or fulfill her. She was the only one with that potential now.

Niera stepped before the mirror. In the light of the moon, or perhaps it was the cast of the mirror, she looked blue. The scars that covered the right side of her face resembled a thorny branch. She stared at them, her breath slow and deep. She followed the scars down her neck and lifted her sleeve to expose the burns that twisted down her arm. She dropped the sleeve and looked at her face once again. It was a miracle, really. She should have died in the fire, but instead had burns only on one side of her body.

There was no explanation for this, except that it had been a magic fire. And the disfigurement, terrible as it was, was easier to live with than the guilt. Niera met her own eyes. She would have to live with herself or end it. The existence she had subsisted in since the fire was neither one nor the other.

Just then, the surface of the mirror began to shift. Niera glanced at the man in alarm, but he sat motionless as stone. The surface swirled like a storm deep in the heavens. It dispersed outward, resolving into the form of a woman in flowing, glittering robes. It was the Lady of the Mirrors. Her eyes shone through the parting in her veils. Niera gaped.

They were her own.

XVII

“These mirrors tell the truth?” Niera demanded, turning to the old man sitting among the mirrors.

“Truths,” the Peddler replied. “There is rarely one of anything. There is certainly an infinite number of truths.”

“What I saw just now. It will happen?”

“It has happened. It is a truth of that moment.”

Niera looked at the mirror and saw her scarred reflection once again.

“Where are you from?” she asked, trying to see the man’s face.

“I come from a land beyond the desert. Far to the south, across a great body of water. My village is in the Outer Necklace Range.”

“Why have you come so far?”

“There is a need for truth everywhere.”

“But you can’t make truth.”

“No. Neither can the mirrors. The observer finds a truth about herself.”

“Why do people dislike what they see?”

“Most people rarely examine themselves.”

“They find they’re worse than they thought?”

“They find a stranger. They find it easier to remain as they are.”

“You make these mirrors?”

The man nodded.

“How did you learn this craft?”

“A woman in my village taught me.”

Niera gazed at the silver pools by her feet. “Why are you here?” she asked. “Why aren’t you in the bazaar? No one will see them here.”

“I am waiting.”

“For whom?”

“I cannot say.”

“Why not?”

“One cannot know a person who doesn’t know himself.”

Niera wondered if the man was mocking her. Suddenly, a light fell over the courtyard. She turned to see two men at the entrance of one of the paths. They were palace guards.

“My Lady,” the guard with the torch said. He hesitated a moment as he took in her face. “There is an upset in the palace over your disappearance. Please come with us at once.” It was decorum that made the command a request.

Niera turned to the Peddler. “Come with me to the palace. I have more to ask you.”

“I cannot.”

“Come when you’ve met your stranger then.”

“I’m afraid I must leave before first light.”

“Please, My Lady,” the guard said. They had come to her side. “*Hana Pulji*’s reprimand will be the more severe the longer you are gone.”

“You must come,” she commanded the Peddler.

“Here I must stay.”

One of the guards prodded the old man in the chest with his boot. “That’s not how you address a noblewoman, flea.”

The Peddler looked up.

“Leave him,” Niera said quietly. “I’ll go.”

She noticed little on her way back to the palace. Her mind was on the old mirrormaker whose eyes had been sewn shut.

The palace gardens and the court were full with merry-makers. It was the one day of the year that commoners were permitted in the gardens, and they were taking full advantage of it. Music played both in and out of doors. A steady stream of revellers passed through the royal gates. The guards led Niera to the front of a crowd waiting to be admitted to the palace grounds and were waved through without ceremony.

The guards took Niera to the eastern gardens where there was a private entrance closer to the royal wing. She was quickly transferred to the care of Anar’s maid, who led her to the sitting room where she found an ashen and exhausted Pulji. Before she left, the maid brought Niera a headscarf.

“Thank you,” Niera said, but made no move to take it. When the maid had gone, Niera sat beside her old *deela* and took her hand.

“I’m sorry, Pulji.”

Pulji returned her squeeze. Her voice was unsteady. "I'm glad that you're safe. I wanted to do something special for you. I thought this outing might bring you some good memories, but...." She shrugged. Her eyes were brimming with tears.

"There's no use crying," Niera said gently. "I have come to the other side and it's still desert." Pulji recognized her own saying and smiled.

"Has Anar spoken with you yet?"

"No. I have been waiting, but her maid said she wouldn't be disturbed until you were found."

"You won't be troubled on my account," Niera said, standing up.

"Where are you going?"

"To ring for tea. We would have eaten better in your home, but we should have something now."

When they had eaten, Pulji revived a little. "This is from the glazier's wife," she said, taking a bundle from the seat beside her.

Niera unwrapped the outer cloth.

"She brought it to the palace for you two hours ago....What's wrong?"

Niera stared at the mirrored robe. Her heart beat a swift tattoo in her chest. Finally, she touched one of the tiny mirrors. She knew who she was now.

Just then, the door opened and the Queen came in. Pulji rose, but Anar waved her down. She gazed at Niera, but tactfully did not linger on the scars. Smoothing her gown, she settled in her chair.

"I am not in the mood to discipline any more than the two of you are inclined to be disciplined. Therefore, I'll be brief. Pulji, I cannot entrust you to take Niera into the

city alone again. The next time there is a special event, you will have to take a guard with you. We cannot have Niera lost in the city. It is not safe for her, and it is a security threat to the palace.”

Pulji murmured her acquiescence. Anar turned to Niera.

“I am glad to see that you are well enough to come out of your rooms.”

Niera nodded.

“Many things have changed since we last spoke.” She paused for a moment to allow Niera to understand what she meant. “I’m afraid that without your apprenticeship, you are going to be rather bored.”

Niera’s face was impassive.

“I have asked Kloofi-Menami to resume your lessons. I know you always liked to dance.”

“Thank you,” Niera murmured.

“Is there anything else you would like?”

Niera shook her head. Anar’s attempt at kindness hurt Niera for a reason she was ashamed to admit. At least she no longer had to worry about matchmaking. Her fate was to be an old spinster in some forgotten closet of the palace, and both of them knew it.

“Have you heard from Meriope?” Niera asked.

Anar gave her a stony look. “No. The Naheirood move their flocks north for the spring rains. I imagine they are as far as Othana by now.” Anar rose. “I must get back to the festivities before I’m missed.” Niera could see that her composure was only surface deep.

“Tomorrow, I will have the royal seamstresses dye a number of lovely headscarves for you,” Anar said, turning at the door. “I want you to wear them in the palace, as well as the gardens. The commoners still hold a number of silly superstitions about certain things, but it is best not to have them talking.”

“Pulji,” Niera said, when Anar had left. “I need to talk to you.”

Niera was too agitated to resume her seat on the cushion. Pulji had been silent so long, she could hardly bear it. Perhaps she shouldn’t have told Pulji her plans, but she couldn’t leave without speaking to her old guardian. The sounds of the revellers outside heightened her awareness of how short her opportunity was. Tonight was the only night of the year that so many people would pass through the palace gates.

Niera went to her bed and pulled the satin box from beneath it.

“What are you doing?”

She removed her mother’s old scarf. “I’m going.”

“Don’t speak nonsense! It was a mistake for me to take you into the city. You’ve been overwhelmed—don’t make it worse. Go to sleep now and we’ll consider this thing in the morning.”

“I told you, he leaves before daylight.”

“Dreams and bubbles! What are you going to do? Wander the desert with a blind man? Make mirrors? You’ve never even held a needle!”

“Weren’t you listening? He was waiting for *me*, Pulji; I just didn’t know it.”

“I thought my ears must be lying.”

“Pulji! If you had seen his mirrors, you would understand. When I saw them, I felt that they were something worth making. And when you gave me the robe, I knew. This is my gift! This is what Ulna meant when she said I would do much good in the world. Many people won’t accept what they see in the mirrors, but some will.”

“I won’t listen to this foolishness,” Pulji said, rising from her chair. “I’m too tired to think. We’ll speak of it tomorrow. If you are destined to be this blind man’s apprentice, he will surely wait for you.”

“I’m going, Pulji,” Niera said. “I have to.”

“Then I will have a guard posted by your door.”

“Pulji, no!”

“You don’t understand the simplest things, Niera. You are dependent on the will of others. If you make trouble now, especially after the loss of the Princess, they will take away what freedoms you have.”

“Do you think I’ve been living? All my life, I’ve been in prison. Ulna foresaw disaster if Meriope and I remained here. Meriope would have killed herself! Ulna gave her life to give me this chance! Pulji, I’ve seen this Lady of the Mirrors since I was seven. I’ve been guiding myself to this moment. Can’t you see? My future is not here.”

“You don’t know the desert.”

“No. But I know I won’t survive here. You heard what Anar said: ‘You can take dance lessons again, so long as you always cover your face.’”

Pulji shook her head. “You’ve an obsession with the desert since you were a girl.”

“It’s providence then.”

“It’s foolhardiness! I would have to have brains of clay to think you could live in the desert.”

“I’d rather die there than be withered grain here.”

Pulji pinched the skin between her eyes. “I can’t help you, Niera. I don’t know what I can do for you....Not this.”

Niera had never seen Pulji cry, but her *deela* turned away when she came to her.

“I must go now. You are like my own daughter. You must know I can’t.”

“Yes,” Niera said quietly. She took a shawl from her bed and wrapped it around Pulji’s shoulders, embracing her.

When her *deela* left, Niera put on her mother’s scarf and tucked the bundle with the mirrored robe under her arm. She could tell by the sounds drifting through her window that the revellers were beginning to return to the city. She would need to be quick.

A number of guards saw her go into the gardens. One of them offered to escort her to the quieter northern side. Niera thanked him, but declined. When she entered the gardens, she headed for the *fernveils*. They had been her favourite quiet place as a child. The hanging fronds formed a giant pergola that she liked to walk through on windy days, when the bugs had blown away and the long waving tendrils tickled her ankles. She parted the fronds now, listening to be sure no one was there, before stepping in. A minute later, she had changed into the mirrored robe, which fit much better than her mother’s. She rearranged her mother’s headscarf so that it covered all but her eyes. She had to leave her mother’s old robe in the *fernveils* because she knew that the guards checked all

belongings at the gate, and she didn't want to explain herself. She crept along the garden wall until she could join the nearest group of revellers.

There was still a small crowd at the gates, waiting to be let into the city. The watch had changed and the guards were diligently checking the people who passed through, opening baskets and looking brazenly into the faces of the women. Niera cast about her and moved close to a mother who was trying to soothe her wailing baby. She hoped the guards would think they were together and wave them through quickly to be rid of the noise. When she was close to the head of the line, her courage failed her and she stepped back. A guard looked up.

"Come along."

Niera felt weak with fear. He would surely ask her to lift her veil now.

The woman with the baby passed through with barely a glance.

"Come along," the guard repeated. "I won't bite you." He turned to his fellow guard. "Or maybe I will." They laughed.

"Go on, then," a woman said, nudging Niera from behind.

Niera found herself before the guard.

"Lift the veil, please."

Niera looked over his shoulder at the road she had walked on only hours earlier. It wavered before her eyes. Even if she got past him, she would not reach the footpaths before he caught her.

"Hurry up," the woman said. "This is no time for false modesty."

Niera lifted a trembling hand to her veil. She would raise it partway and then make a dash.

Someone grabbed her by the shoulder.

“Freshta!” Pulji said loudly, embracing her. “Your husband told me you had left and I thought I’d catch you here.”

Niera was mute.

“Doesn’t she look fine in her festival dress?” Pulji asked, turning her toward the guard.

“Yes, *Hana* Pulji,” the guard replied, darting a glance at Niera. Pulji told him of the difficult night she had had with Lady Niera’s disappearance and how thankful she would be to spend the day of rest in her daughter’s company.

The guard nodded. “Not everyone is as well-behaved as your daughter,” he said, glancing at Niera again.

“Well,” Pulji said, shrugging. She led Niera through the gates.

“A moment, *Hana*.”

Niera felt Pulji’s grip tense slightly on her arm.

“I’m sorry to ask this, but I should really see Freshta’s face.”

“Yes, of course,” Pulji said. She leaned in and murmured something to the guard. He looked up at Niera with astonishment, then waved them on.

Niera took her first full breath on the street outside the gates.

“Don’t speak,” Pulji murmured. “Keep walking.” She made a sign to ward off the demons that punish liars. “You will take me to see this peddler man.”

Niera was only able to remember that she had entered the footpaths between the tavern and the blacksmith’s. As they stood together in the darkness of the path, she turned to Pulji.

“What did you say to him?”

“I told him my daughter had been beaten and was ashamed to show her face.”

Niera swallowed. “Thank you.” It was all she could say.

“You said this peddler would leave before daylight. We haven’t much time.”

Niera told Pulji what the courtyard looked like. “It felt like I had run for a long time before I reached it.”

“Was there statuary or a well?”

“No.”

“Can you remember anything else?”

Niera thought about it. “There was a smell like a garden. Of course, that can’t be. I was not near the palace.”

“Describe it.”

“It was something like the Queen’s orchids. Heavy, but made up of many different scents at once.”

A look of recognition came over Pulji’s face. “The perfume merchant has a house with a courtyard.”

Niera followed Pulji along the paths. At one point, they paused at a fork, and Niera looked up and saw that the sky was indeed beginning to lighten. There were heavy clouds in south, portending the arrival of the real spring rains. She strained for the sound of the bells, but the gentle tinkling of her robe was all she heard.

They came upon the courtyard suddenly, by a different route than the one Niera had taken. It was empty.

“We must hurry to the city gates before he leaves!”

Just then, they heard the jingling of the bells. The Peddler emerged from one of the passageways, leading his pack animal. Although they were silent at his approach, he stopped as if he sensed them.

“It’s me, Niera....Your stranger.”

The old man looked up from under the peak of his *madebe*. Both women stared at the sealed lids. After a moment, he tugged the lead on the onager. As he turned onto a footpath, he called back, “We must be out of the city walls before sunrise, Niera.”

Niera and Pulji followed him, watching his back with wonder. Despite the fact that he could not possibly see, he navigated the paths as if he had grown up in Kqaarin.

Pulji held Niera back for a moment.

“I’m not a sorcerer or an evil spirit,” the Peddler said. Pulji started, and Niera thought she saw her old *deela* flush.

When they reached the gates of Kqaarin, they found a number of caravans prepared to leave for the marriage celebrations in Har Alista. The early morning quiet was punctuated only by the restlessness of the animals. Most of the caravan-goers were asleep on their carts or groggily awaiting release from the city.

“I want to see these mirrors you make,” Pulji said, when they had found a position in one of the caravans.

The Peddler reached into a purse and removed a fragment of mirror. It was rust-spotted, but its cast was slightly blue.

Pulji looked at Niera. “Is this one of the mirrors of great beauty you spoke of?”

Niera stared at it, perplexed. All at once, she smiled. “Look into it. You’ll see its worth.”

Pulji stared at the fragment, her expression hard. Niera feared she would not have the patience to see what the mirror held. After a time, Pulji's expression changed. She looked alarmed.

"Is this a trick?" Pulji asked.

"Not unless you have worked one yourself."

"What did you see?" Niera asked.

Pulji returned the mirror to the Peddler. "I was standing between two rivers," she said anxiously. They both knew the expression. "I have been feeling poorly since I told that terrible lie. I've been too rash. Perhaps I've made a horrible mistake."

Niera could see Pulji's distress and hugged her. "I would never have made it through if you hadn't done what you did. I'm sorry for your suffering, but I am grateful forever for your courage."

There was a loud, solemn sound and the great gates of the city began to open. Those who waited watched in silence. A desert wind, warm and resonant with sage, blew over their faces and made a shiver shoot up Niera's spine.

Their caravan began to move forward, and Pulji seized her hand.

"It's best that you weren't seen with me now, Pulji. I would not want you blamed. You must tell Freshta and her husband everything so that they will support you. Tell them I'm grateful to them for the rest of my days. I will return this favour."

"May the gods pardon me," Pulji murmured.

Niera squeezed her hand. "They don't need to."

As they approached the gates, Niera adjusted her headscarf. "You will hear from me, Pulji. I promise."

Pulji fell back.

Niera continued on with the caravan. When she reached the gates, she turned and looked back, but she could no longer see her old *deela* amid the throng. Turning to the Peddler, she gently took the onager's lead from his hand, and they passed together into the open desert.

Glossary

amkrin *n.* 1. a nettle-like plant with blue flowers 2. a deep purple-black pigment made from the bulb of the amkrin plant.

aschahel *a.* [Naheirood dialect] magical, truth-making.

awakening *n.* a desert ritual marking the passage of a child into adulthood. When the child or “sleeper” turns fifteen, she is sent to a cloister to live and pray with the mystics for two months. At the end, there is a cleansing ceremony, during which her head is shaved and she is given a new robe (her old one is burned). She returns to her city-kingdom “awakened” into adulthood.

Azazello *n.* a demon god of the desert, responsible for sandstorms and other extreme weather. It is common to curse by him.

bacalaora *n.* 1. a brown and yellow desert beetle with large white pincer horns. 2. a protective amulet made from the horns of this beetle. Desert commoners believe the evil eye and other malevolent spells are caught by the horns.

bet *v.* “returned,” a polite response to a greeting or well-wishing.

—**bi** *suffix.* a diminutive term of endearment used after a name, e.g. Niera-bi.

dasa bazaar *n. phr.* an impromptu market conducted on a caravan route. The nomads prefer this type of trade to bartering in the markets of the city-kingdoms.

deela *n.* a guardian and maid, usually a common woman of high repute, who looks after the daughters of the aristocracy until they marry.

djual *n.* a game played with dice, usually for money.

dogwoman *n.* a woman who travels to city-kingdoms and tells stories to children for food, shelter or coins. These stories are thought to contain valuable wisdom, although adults are not permitted to listen. **dogman** *n.* a male, itinerant storyteller.

elemental spell *n. phr.* a spell which draws upon the creative power of the four elements: earth, air, fire and water. Each spell is accompanied by a “rebalancing” effect that is short-lived, but unpredictable and often severe.

er *prep.* of, of the, e.g. Eissa er Sapir.

fernveil *n.* a coastal plant with abundant trailing foliage.

Hana *n.* a respectful title for a woman.

har *n.* a stronghold or keep, e.g. Har Kalthi.

jasakard e shum glin *phr.* “Renew yourself and rise again” (like the sun), a phrase commonly used when parting at night.

jfir *n.* a stringed instrument that resembles a sitar. Literally, “the voice of the desert.”

kalis *n.* an instrument made from dried gourds filled with pebbles.

Kir *n.* a title of respect for a non-aristocratic man of considerable wealth.

kitefly *n.* a desert insect that feeds on mammals and lays its eggs in its host’s bloodstream.

Kero *n.* the title of the First Concubine.

keroheen *n. & a.* the belongings or descendants of the First Concubine.

laloheh *n.* a tobacco made from an olio of desert foliage. Depending on the quantities of the ingredients, it can range from a mild narcotic to a fairly powerful hallucinogenic.

lemonthorn *n.* a spiny desert plant that produces a resin used in the traditional stew eaten during the fasting period in the desert kingdoms. It gives off a scent like sour yoghurt at night.

liree *n.* a measurement of distance roughly equivalent to one and a half kilometres.

Lost Language *n. phr.* the language in which the elemental spells and ancient rituals are recorded.

madebe *n.* a high, peaked turban worn by nomads.

maiden’s tears *n. phr.* a transparent, purple-blue gem.

Maj *n.* the religious leader of a city-kingdom.

mujali *n.* bride price.

mystic *n.* a religious devotee who has pledged her life to the worship of the gods or the elements. Most live in cloisters, but some live as hermits (see **elemental spell**).

neri alista *n.* an incense derived from the resin of the alista tree, after which Har Alista takes its name.

n'kri *n.* sand spirit(s).

par'ba *inter.* An expression of surprise.

sapir *n.* sapphire.

sava *n.* any of the five-step dances favoured by commoners.

sirsh'ha *n.* an ill-tempered desert spirit that takes the form of a sand dervish, said to be a son of Azazello (see **Azazello**).

sulvaar *n.* a commoner with limited powers of divination. Their prophecies are based on the interpretation of fowl bones, oil in water, and the behaviour of animals.

taraclove *n.* a spice used to preserve meat and other perishables in the desert. It grows on the cliff wall overlooking the White Desert and is harvested chiefly by nomads.

terga *n.* a court dance.

thymari *n.* a squat, round desert bush with yellow flowers. Its leaves are aromatic and can be used in savory dishes.

Twiga *a. & n.* a renowned method of carpet weaving, mastered by the artisans of Har Alista. A carpet made by these artisans.

Venasthadeeb *n.* a famous epic of antiquity and one of the principal religious texts of the city-kingdoms. It includes the stories of King Jhaiwep, the founder of the first desert city-kingdom, and of Prince Pari, Princess Larina and Alitha (see **zindafer** and **zindazel**).

yaya *n.* grandmother.

zindafer *n.* a theatrical dance enacting the revenge of the fire nymph, Alitha, upon Prince Pari, when she discovers that he has become betrothed to Princess Larina. It is considered one of the most difficult dances to master.

zindazel *n.* a theatrical dance enacting the mythical meeting of Prince Pari and the fire nymph, Alitha. It is considered a challenging dance.