

**Kingdom Beyond
The Rim
Volume I in
The Saga of Magiskeep**

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Dedicated to the memory of Lockie Richards, one of the finest horseman I have ever known. He gave Brego to Aragorn, and I give Whim in his honor. RIP, Lockie.

KINGDOM BEYOND THE RIM

PART ONE

I

“One brellum leaf is like another,” said Joria as she held up a frond from one of Turan’s beloved trees. Nine pairs of eyes watched her in curiosity. The Mistress of Illusion knew how to capture the attention of a class of Prentices distracted by an announcement from Magiskeep’s Master of an impending Choosing. “Observe,” she continued as the leaf in her hand seemed first to vanish, then appear again on the slanted marble podium in front of her. An instant later, another leaf appeared in her hand. “Now,” she asked, “which is the brellum and which is the illusion?”

Still as stone, the students peered intently at the two leaves, their brows furrowed in purposeful concentration.

Waiting while they studied the puzzle, the silver haired Sorcereress let her own thoughts drift to the upcoming Choosing. Which of these would be Chosen? All were of age, having passed at least fifteen circles and all showed some promise. Raven-haired Jessa had been passed over twice already. Now nineteen, would this at last be her moment? Or arrogant Sarn and his shadow, the less talented Sareth? Siamel, even now absentmindedly tugging at her already too low neckline and arranging her silken hair to fall alluringly on her bare shoulders, was far too talented to go unnoticed by the Cups. Could it be the time for Jeimer or Jihren, the two boys who might easily be mistaken for twins, or even the unassuming little Sela, more timid than a duskit, but bold in her Magic, or Soren? Eight children, born and bred in Magiskeep, fruit of Magic itself, each ready and able to become a Master. And the ninth, the dark haired grey-eyed boy who always cowered in the shadows? There lay a puzzle greater than the brellum for, despite having been born of common parents in the Outworld, Jamus seemed more ready than any to take a Cup. Yet, even now, he sat quietly, separated from the others by the chance of his birth, a lonely little boy ward by the Master of the Keep, belonging to no one.

Sarn’s assured voice broke her musings as he nodded first, a grin of satisfaction absorbing his face. “The one on the tabe,” he offered firmly pointing to the leaf on the tall narrow desk to Joria’s right.

“I beg to differ,” Siamel said sweetly, fluttering her long eyelashes at him in alluring apology, “as clever as you may be, dear Sarn, Mistress Joria still holds the true leaf.”

“I have studied the frond on the tabe,” Sarn returned. “It is brellum to its core.”

“I agree with Sarn,” Jeimer said, nervously fiddling with the laces on his brown tunic as if he were far less sure than his words suggested.

“You always agree with Sarn,” Siamel told him, accenting the comment with obvious sarcasm.

She tossed her head, making sure her long shining auburn curls caught the sunlight filtering in through the upper window. “If the sun were to set in the West, you would agree with Sarn that it was a perfectly normal event, despite Turan’s natural order.”

“I would not!” Jeimer protested. “I... .”

“Enough,” Joria commanded, the Mage’s phrase silencing her charges instantly. She glared at them sternly, her hand tapping the brellum frond impatiently against the sleeve of her grey gown. “I would expect a dispute to be conducted in an appropriate manner in my classroom. Now, choose your sides. How many of you agree with Sarn?” Four hands rose at once, with Sela and Sareth joining the pair. “Well, then, can I judge that the rest of you support Siamel’s decision?”

Jessa, Soren, and Jihren nodded cautiously, but in the back of the room, the dark haired boy shook his head slowly.

“Jamus?” Joria asked, moving between the study tabes towards him. His ice grey eyes showed no uncertainty as he met her gaze from the shadows where he sat amidst the crowded shelves of books and scrolls. “You disagree with your fellows?”

“Of course he does,” Sarn mocked, “he’s an Outworlder. What does he know of the Magic?” He grinned at Siamel before continuing, “If we were to say the sun sets in the East, he would agree with no one that it was a perfectly normal event.”

Joria glared at the sandy haired student who was now but a foot away from her, shrinking him back with the force of her admonition. “It would do you well, Prentice Sarn, to take more note of what is not in front of your nose. Master Mages, if you aspire to be one, seek knowledge and opinion from all quarters.” She turned back to the slim figure who waited silently. “Jamus? Do you disagree?”

“I do,” he replied simply. “Both the brellum leaves are real.”

The other Prentices burst out in derisive laughter. “Do you think Mistress Joria hid the second one up her sleeve to trick us?” Sareth jeered. “This is not a Turan sideshow with jugglers and follymen. This is a classroom in Magiskeep.”

“Our Mistress would never prank us,” Sela said firmly, folding her arms as she had so often seen Joria do. “The second leaf is real, the first illusion. Even a First Season Prentice could see that.”

Jamus glanced at Joria, trying to read her thoughts, but he found only the blank mask of a Master Mage challenging her student’s confidence. “Both leaves are real,” he said softly. “Mistress Joria created the second one, the one in her hand, through a weave of solid illusion. I have never seen it done before, but is truly Master’s Art.”

“Pah!” Sarn scoffed. “Those eyes of yours are about as wise as a rimchuck’s. Look again.”

“I suggest the rest of you look again,” Joria replied, deliberately turning back towards the front of the room. “This time look with Crystal Vision at what lies before you. Jamus is right. Both leaves are real.”

Stunned, the others cast a quick glance in Jamus’ direction, then refocused their attention on the brellums. The silence in the room thickened as even their breathing stopped in the few moments it took for them to accept Joria’s admission.

“Mistress,” Jessa asked quietly, “why have you shown us this?”

“The Choosing will come soon. Each one of you will have a chance to be Apprenticed to one of the Seven Masters. Perhaps even the Great Sagari will select one of you. The Seven Arts

are not kind to those who do not open their minds to possibilities. You decided this was mere illusion from me because it is what you expected.”

She lifted the brellum from the tabe and held it up alongside the one already in her hand. “If you look carefully, you will see the first brellum frond is missing one branch. This was the substance from which I created the second leaf. Master’s Art expands upon what you know of illusion, for it takes the understanding of structure and applies it to creation. When you study the heart of one brellum you will see there is no difference in the next. Remember its pattern, the soul of its weave, and you will always be able to make another.”

“That is not illusion, then,” Jihren said.

“To those who cannot see with Crystal Vision, everything is illusion. Only the Mage who can see the truth in all things knows the difference.” She fixed her eyes on Jamus, who had lowered his head, as if absorbed in the text lying open on his tall study desk. To say anything more of his success would only antagonize the others and, by the Hand, he was already victim enough of their animosity. “It is time for midmeal. Remember, you have a Weswin class with Sur Sarena in the tower. It would not be seeming for any of you to be late.”

With murmured farewells and respectful nods of their heads, all, save Jamus, left the room exploding to noisy excitement as soon as they reached the hallway. Joria smiled at their departure, then glided back to where the lone boy sat. “Aren’t you hungry, Jamus?”

“I’ll eat later, Mistress.”

“When the others have left the dining hall?”

“I haven’t finished reading Sorem’s essay yet.”

“You don’t need to make excuses to me, boy, not as well as I know you. If you like, I could accompany you to midmeal. I doubt you would be bothered if I were there.”

The ice in his eyes had already begun to melt into tears, but he kept his voice steady. “I can’t go around hiding behind a Mage’s robe, My Lady. I just thought... after what happened that it might be a good idea to avoid the issue, at least for today.”

She shook her head sadly. “How long will you have to run? If you were my son, I would make it clear that you were justly welcome here in Magiskeep.”

He drew himself up, straightening his shoulders. “Sagari does not need to defend me, nor does he believe he should. When he adopted me, he said I must make my own way, not rely on his name. I will do exactly as my father expects.”

And suffer for it, she thought. Of all the students she had ever taught, Jamus consistently showed the most potential, with keen insight and perception far beyond his years and training. Yet, in the realm of human relations, where Magic held no sway, he was poorer than any she had ever seen. No matter how hard he tried, his classmates tormented him relentlessly. Now as he faced her in his defiance, she saw what the others saw in the ill cut of his rough green tunic and the careless fall of his dark curls on his brow. “I wish I could help you.”

This time, his tears fell. “You are always kind to me. That is help enough.”

She wanted to reach out, take him in her arms and comfort him, but his pride had always mounted a sturdy wall around him.

Even now, as he rose, his mouth quivering with suppressed emotions, he was too remote to touch and somehow, too dangerous. "I will see you tomorrow in class," she said, moving aside to let him pass.

He nodded in respect and left the room, but not before a wary check to be sure the hall was empty.

Joria sighed, and sat down on her stool, fingering the brellum leaves. Were it not for the one missing branch, even she could not tell them apart. Yet Jamus had known from the first instant which was which. Then, she shivered as a wave of cold realization swept over her. Perhaps the others were not so foolish to exclude him after all. Fear of his talent could be a potent motivation.

As soon as the door to the study closed behind him, Jamus backed against the wall, searching the vast hallway before stepping across. When he saw none of the other students, he cautiously crossed to the library, peered through the door to see if Master Jired had dismissed his class, then breathed a sigh of relief to find the room empty. With all the other Prentices gone to midmeal he could walk the hall unmolested. He passed the door to the East Tower and turned for the staircase leading to the courtyard when a teasing voice checked him.

"Sneaking about again, Jamus? When are you ever going to learn to walk with your head up high?"

He spun on his heel, startled, then grinned. "Salene! You've mastered the art of lurking better than most."

A tall, golden haired girl, not much older than he, slipped out of the shadows near a blustone column. Dressed in leather leggings and a blue wool tunic, she could almost be mistaken for a boy were it not for the long braid hanging nearly to her waist and beautiful blue eyes set in a strikingly pretty face. "I lurk in lust for you, little brother."

Jamus laughed. "Don't let anyone hear you say that, or you'll join me as the target of every mocking tongue in the Keep."

"Alas," she sighed, a smile tickling the corners of her mouth. "Though I would gladly sacrifice myself to that fate for the sake of your love, I fear my departure will deny me the privilege."

Jamus' face dropped. "Departure?"

Salene stepped closer and eyed him seriously, all trace of a smile wiped away. "I am leaving Magiskeep with the changing of the Wind. I have had enough of Father's criticism."

"Father loves you, Salene. He only corrects you so you will be the best Magician the world has ever seen."

"By the Hand, Brother," she said, shaking her head, "I had no idea the Lord Sagari had so bespelled you. When he first adopted you, you were a feisty little boy who used to question everything he said. Now do I see a half man walking in his shadow."

"I am grateful to him, that's all. If he had left me in the Rim, I'd be dead by now."

"And are you alive here, creeping along the hallways with your back to the wall, hiding in the corners until a room is empty, or missing at least one meal a day which..." she took his

hands, spread his arms wide, and gave his thin frame a critical glare, "...I dare you can ill afford to do?"

"I eat in the kitchen... sometimes."

"Not often enough, from the looks of you. Do you ever smile? Your eyes always have a hunted look, little brother, except when they're lost in some cryptic rune." She shivered a little as his eyes met hers, their icy intensity seeming to pierce through her. Then she went on, "Or, when you study something as if you're about to chant it."

He broke his stare, his gaze softening. "I'm sorry. I thought..."

"Thought what? That you could change my mind with a spell? What do you take me for, a first season Prentice? I am Keepbred and have been in the Way since my birth." Despite her denial, Salene shivered inwardly again, all too aware of how much his probing had affected her.

"I didn't!" he protested, shaking his head, then dropping his eyes to the floor. "I was only looking to see if you really had to go. I needed to understand. I'm sorry."

Salene cupped his chin in her hand and lifted his head. She studied his face, still boyish, but with the promise of a tempting handsomeness to come if he were ever to finally become a man. With her free hand, she brushed the stubborn lock of hair from his forehead and then kissed him lightly on the cheek. Surprised, he drew back from the contact. "Have you felt the touch of kindness so little that you can't recognize it? What's wrong?"

He trembled. "I didn't know you hated him."

Her eyes widened. Of all the secrets she had ever kept, her hidden feelings for her father were locked in the deepest part of her soul, too far even for her to touch. Jamus' words terrified her. Then, an instant after the recognition, she masked her face with Mage's skill. "I will worry about you when I am gone."

"Where are you going? You haven't told me."

"Turan always has need of Healers. I have heard the people will often ignore a little use of Magic if a Healer is skilled enough. I will be happy if I can help. I am going beyond the Rim."

"You can't cross the Rim alone!" he cried, grabbing her wrist as if his meager strength could stop her. "You can't! I have lived there. The illusions are more powerful than anyone here in Magiskeep can begin to comprehend. You mustn't go!"

She wrenched easily from his grip. "I am not a fool."

"You don't understand! The Rim was created not only to keep them from Magiskeep, but to keep the Magic from Turan. There is death at every turning."

Salene reached onto her belt pouch and pulled out a smooth round Stone. Strangely shiny and pulsing with a curious pink light, the stone almost seemed alive in her hand. "I have a Rimstone, Jamus."

He relaxed, nearly smiling in relief. "Where did you get it?"

"It was my mother's. Where she found it I never knew. She gave it to me on the day she died and told me to use it when I finally decided to free myself from my Father's power."

Jamus had never known the gentle Salecia, but he had heard so many stories from his adopted sister that his heart ached at the thought of her death. "Rimstones are very precious, and bonded to their masters. She must have loved you a great deal to pass its Gift to you."

"Mother understood, Jamus. This was her way of telling me. I wish you had known her. Perhaps your eyes would be open by now."

"I see with Crystal Vision."

"Only the things you study, my brother. It might do you well to examine the rest of the world with your heart."

"I don't understand."

She sighed. "And I cannot explain." She looked at the stone carefully. "You know of Rimstones?"

He nodded eagerly, "My father mined many from the caves in the mountains. He sold them for a great price in the Telman Province markets. One Rimstone could buy enough provisions to keep us all fed for a month."

"Have you ever seen one used?"

"I have used them myself." He paused, as if uncertain about something before he finally asked, "Don't you know how?"

"Only what I have read in Sorem's Runes."

"Then thank the Hand you found me before you left." He reached out and gently took the Stone from her hand. At his touch it pulsed bright red, as if caught in a fiery rage. Calm yourself," he said softly, "I mean you no harm. I hold you merely to show your mistress the Way of the Stone. Grant me this favor for the sake of her life." The stone softened again, to a quieter, by still wary pink glow. "Please," he asked, his voice as soft as the color, "show us the color of caution." The stone pulsed red, though not the violent flame which had burned at his touch. "When Stara turns this color, you must stop at once and wait until she chooses the path to take."

"Stara?"

"That is her name, your Rimstone. She is a sensitive one too, so you'd best listen as soon as she speaks. The traps in the Rim can come upon you in sudden and totally unexpected ways. You are lucky to mistress such a talented gem." Stara glowed the most beautiful pink Salene had ever seen and almost appeared to snuggle into Jamus' hand. Salene could swear she heard her purring. Seemingly oblivious to the Stone's reaction, Jamus continued his lecture, "If the Lady is willing, please show me the ways of turning." At his request, the stone turned yellow. "This," he said, "is the color of a left turning. Walk slowly, with your eyes on her heart, though. Trails twist in parts of the passes. Never take more than four paces before you consult her again." The stone turned blue. "That is the color of right turnings and this," he said as the stone changed to a vibrant green, "is the color to proceed straight ahead. If she is white, the way is clear of illusions. You will find a long stretch in the center of the Rim near..." He choked suddenly on the words. "... Near Cowltop..." he faltered. The Stone glowed purple, trembling so much that its force began to shake his arm. Then, from its center, a tendril of rainbow light reached out, brushing his face as if tenderly caressing him. "Thank you," he whispered hoarsely. "It is painful to remember."

The light retreated back into the Stone which lay still again, pale and pink. "My parents died there," he said simply.

"I know," Salene said. "I will always feel your pain. When I pass the place, I will say a Chanting to the Hand for you."

Jamus swallowed hard, took a deep breath, and addressed the Stone again. "Gracious and gentle Lady, if you will, please show my sister the color of stopping." The Stone turned black, as if all its light was extinguished. "If you need rest, or Stara is too weary to see with Crystal Vision she will look like this. She will never color so if it is not safe to make camp for the night and will always remain on guard, but you must heed her darkness. She is a part of the Rim and knows its moods. It is always safe to camp near... near Cowltop." He seemed almost pleased to be able to say the name. "There are no illusions there for many strides around. It is the one place you can feel safe to use any of your Magic. Be warned to be careful elsewhere. Stara will glow with gold whenever you may spell safely, but only if you ask her." At his words, the Stone emitted a rich golden light. "She will shine with Maglit silver too, if you need a torch to see by." The Stone blazed a brilliant silver beam. "She will lead you safely if you watch her carefully." He gently stroked the Stone. "Thank you, Sur Stara. You are truly the most worthy companion my sister could ever have." He handed the pink gem back to Salene, who heard it sigh with regret as it passed into her hand, then wriggle in ecstasy at her touch.

"She likes you," Salene said.

Jamus shrugged. "I know the Way of Stones, that's all. She loves no one but her mistress. Though I might ask, she would never lead me." At that, the stone shook so hard that Salene nearly dropped it. From its heart flames of color pulsed, one after another.

Jamus' eyes widened. "My Lady! Please, please forgive me! I did not mean to insult you! Of course, of course." The stone settled somewhat, the colors fading back to a pink glow which quivered, as if threatening to erupt again. Jamus trembled, visibly shaken. "I... I don't understand. Rimstones never bond to more than one master."

Salene laughed, breaking the tension. "You do know the Way of the Stones, Jamus, and unless I miss my mark, you also know the way of women."

Jamus blushed. "I know less of women than anything in this world."

Salene grinned. "I doubt that will last for long. You are of an age, brother."

"Salene!" he protested weakly. Then he added words that nearly broke her heart, "I will never learn it here in Magiskeep."

To hide the tears filling her eyes, Salene made a pretext of nestling Stara carefully in her pouch. It seemed to take forever until she felt composed enough to face Jamus again. "I promise I will be careful every step of my journey, my brother. May we meet again in days of fortune." She clasped his hand in farewell, furrowing her brow at the curious tingle she felt at this touch.

He seemed not to notice and returned the customary phrase, "May we meet again in days of fortune." Then, without another word, he turned away, and ran down the staircase, fleeing before she could see him cry.

"Walk cautiously, Jamus," she whispered. "For some reason I think you must watch every step even more carefully than I."

Midmeal was over, and the Wind had changed before Jamus was able to wash the red from his eyes and cover his raw emotions with the one ward he had perfected: that of pretended indifference. Lately, though, it was becoming harder and harder to ignore the cruelty of his classmates. At the age of fifteen circles, he was finding his heart running before his head more often than not, and he knew there was trouble to come. His stomach grumbling about the missed meal, he resolutely forced himself to concentrate as he left the courtyard where he had grieved for Salene's loss and made his way back into the Keep, to the Tower Room, where, unfortunately, most of his fellow students were already waiting for Mistress Sarena.

"We missed you at midmeal," Siamel crooned as soon as he stepped through the doorway. "I saved you a seat." She patted her leg suggestively.

Sarn stifled his giggles as he watched Siamel slink towards Jamus. She had changed her gown again and, if anything, this one, in tight fitting lavender shaenis, was even more revealing on top than the one she had worn at Easwin. "Watch out, Rimboy. She's after you."

Siamel smiled sweetly. "Nonsense, Sarn. I just missed him that's all." Without warning, she reached out, her fingers playing lightly on his chest. Then, as she locked her green eyes on his face, she let her hand slide down.

Jamus chewed his lip nervously, unable to pull away as she backed him against the doorjamb. Her hand was stroking now, first his stomach, then lower, pressing and probing as she leaned into him, her soft body rubbing against the coarse fabric of his tunic.

Involuntarily, he felt himself respond, hardening beneath her persistent massage. His breathing quickened and sweat began to trickle down his back. She moved closer, relentlessly playing with her fingers as she closed her lips on his, her tongue pushing against his tight mouth. He squeezed his eyes shut, hopelessly seeking control, but instead found his teeth unclenching, his jaw surrendering. He opened his mouth to her and then, she laughed.

They all laughed as she pushed herself away from him and spun herself in a delighted circle. "I told you I could do it! I told you!"

His face was on fire, Jamus knew it. He was blushing uncontrollably. His loins ached in incredible agony and it was all he could do to keep standing. Had he not spent so many tears on Salene, he would have burst into sobs now, but his eyes were drained dry. He stood mute, holding on to the ironwood doorframe for support.

Amidst the hoots of laughter, Siamel turned back to face him. "Did you really think I wanted you, Rimspawn? An ungalens like you? I had to cast a blinding spell before I could even touch you. I won you, though, didn't I? I felt you harden in my hand. If I had wanted you to, you would have laid me right here. Wouldn't that have been a pretty picture? You with your pants down in front of everyone."

The laughter escalated. Sarn, bent double in a fit of hysteria, could barely summon enough breath to speak. "You should have, Siamel, you should have gone on! I would have surrendered a Skill to see that! Oh, do it again! Do it again! Take it further though. I'd love to see where his bottom lies."

“By Sorem’s Blood,” Sareth gasped, “that would be rich! Go on Siamel! Do it again.”

Jamus trembled; his eyes darted about the room for some means of escape. But, his shaking legs could not support him for even one step. If he let go of the wall he would surely fall. He was rooted to the spot as Siamel began to advance again. *Please*, he begged inwardly, *not this, please*. He felt her hand brush his thigh and he cried out.

“Enough!” a stern voice commanded at his right ear. “Siamel, put your hand back where it belongs this instant or I will put it there for you!”

Siamel bolted back, her green eyes wide with horror as Mistress Sarena strode between her and Jamus. All he saw was the Mage’s white gowned back, and the fall of dark curls against her shoulders. He found his breath again, though he could not control his trembling, and he still could not move.

“Go to your seats, all of you, and absolute silence.” Sarena ordered. Whether they did as she told them, Jamus could not see, but he knew enough of this Master to know she would not be defied. The silence was overwhelming. He closed his eyes and sighed. When he opened them again, her gentle eyes were peering at his face. “Jamus?” she said softly.

“I’m all right,” he answered in a strangled voice.

She touched his arm and strength surged back into his legs as Healer’s Art soothed his terror. Then, without warning, her face whitened, and she snatched her hand away. “Go... go and sit,” she told him, her voice betraying some inexplicable uncertainty.

Meekly, he obeyed, focusing his eyes on the stones beneath his feet to avoid the stares of the others. When he finally reached his stool near the back wall, he climbed up and shrank himself as small as possible.

Sarena kept her back to the class for a long time, breathing deeply, searching for her composure so rattled by her touch on his arm. What, in the name of the Hand That Guides the Circle, had happened when she touched him? It had been all she could do to break the contact, as if he were drawing her into him with a lure even more potent than Siamel’s. Worst of all, he hadn’t even seemed to notice, but had stood there, bound by such panic that his mind was blank. She took another long, deep breath, and found the quiet core of her reason. Then, she walked resolutely to her own table.

“We will not speak of this again,” she said, her words ringing with Mastery, “not in this room or in any other in this Keep. If one of you so much as dares such a thing again, I will petition the Seven to deny you the Right of Cups. It is not what you have done so much as how you have used the Magic. Your actions have bordered on breaking both Rule and Vow with the cruelty of your intent.” She watched her students’ faces as they paled at her admonition. “Siamel and Sarn, since you two have chosen to be the tools of this despicable act, you will spend eight winds in the Duty Room practicing humility with a mop, scrub brush, and bucket. Use Magic once to ease your punishment, and it will be doubled. She glared at all but Jamus. “The rest of you will report to Master Silven for a series of much needed lectures on Rule and Vow.”

Despite her command for silence, there were groans from nearly every Prentice. Master Silven was the acknowledged expert on the Ordering and Use of Magic, but he was also the most tedious and boring instructor in the whole of the Keep. Jihren thought that Siamel and Sarn had gotten off easily.

“Siamel and Sarn,” Sarena added as an afterthought, “will also attend the master’s lectures. I expect their time in the Duty Room to be made up after classes each day.” No one could ever say Sarena was an easy taskmistress. She paused, weighing her words carefully, well aware of the potential consequences. “Jamus is, of course, excused from the lectures. It is clear to me from the fact that Siamel and the rest of you bear no marks from his hand, that he at least understands the Way of Magic.” She looked directly at auburn haired Siamel. “My dear Prentice, I think you should know that I once saw a temptress lose both breasts to her victim’s counter spell. Since you seem so proud of yours, I would suggest you exercise some caution in your weavings.”

Siamel’s eyes bulged as she frantically tried to pull up the neckline of her gown. Her fingers tugged uselessly at the scant fabric suddenly seeming to offer no protection at all. Had she sensed the charm Sarena had sent with the words she might have felt less fear, but the vision of a flat chest had blotted out her reason. Sarena laughed to herself. Vanity often had more power than Magic.

Then, quite calmly, The Mistress of Compassion began to intone the litany of Healing, “Touch of life and Touch of breath, Art to stay the Hand of Death.”

Automatically, the class responded, “Deep the soul, deep the Sight, Touching darkness, seeking Light.”

“Now,” the Mistress of Healing said as she took a sweet surlep fruit from her pocket, “who can tell me how to heal an open wound?”

Jessa, first to recover from the shock and the one who had laughed the least at Jamus’ plight, raised her hand tentatively. “Does it not depend on the nature of the wound, Mistress?”

Sarena smiled. “All Magic depends on the nature of things, Jessa. Still, you are right. Each wound requires its own understanding.”

Remarkably, it was Jamus who offered the next question. His voice a little more hoarse than usual, but at least he was talking. “How do you understand, My Lady?”

“That is a question with no answer, Prentice Jamus, because there must be no question. The Mage who questions his Magic is no Mage at all and, in turn, he has no Magic. Observe.” She drew a slender dagger from her belt and plunged it into the fruit. “Of all the Arts, Healing tolerates no question. Often there is no time, and more often no purpose. Were this fruit a man, how long would he live? Long enough for me to scrutinize the edges of his wound, test his blood, search how far the damage had gone? If I did so, what then? Would my next move be to ponder the nature of the tissue and fiber I would need to bond, or would he have bled to death by then? You will learn one day, if you ever reach Mastery, that each of the Seven Arts really requires no deeper thought than your Will to do. That is why so few are Masters of more than one Art. By the time a Mage has acquired all the knowledge to understand the nature of the world enough to simply do, the better part of a lifetime will have passed. There is only one in a generation like the Master Sagari who can work all Seven Arts with equal skill, and even he must pause now and then.”

Sela shook her head. “Can you do a Healing without studying the injury?”

“I, in this case, understand the surlep quite thoroughly, as I understand every minute fragment of matter in the human body. When I Heal, I Vision all as it should be and Will it to be so.” She Touched the fruit lightly, and the hole sealed without even a trace of juice left.

“Your Will must be stronger than the disease,” Jihren remarked. “That can take a lifetime of study.”

“And so it must, Jihren. You must know every possible illness a man can suffer, understand what the hurt does to the body, and know unerringly what ‘right’ truly is. I have studied for more than forty Circles and still I study. My Will is strong because I know what I am doing at every turn.”

“We can’t hope for that now, Mistress Sarena. Why are you telling us this today?” Sela asked.

“I am speaking of the truth of Master’s Art. Each one of you will sit at the Choosing Table two Sevenstins from now, hoping with all your heart to fly a Cup. Are you prepared to face what will come if your hand is filled? There is no way you will ever know if you do not know at least a little of what lies before you. Once you become a Master’s Apprentice, the gentle days of your classroom are gone. The studies are rigorous and unrelenting. If you are to be Gifted with the strength of a Master you will need to wear Rule, Vow, and Will with absolute certainty, disciplining yourself without mercy. The Magic will test you many times, teasing you with seductive promises. Fail at any time, and you may threaten even the Great Circle itself.”

“Is Master’s Art truly so strong?” Siamel questioned, her confidence finally restored.

“Magic’s River is the soul of Turan. Master Mages draw from those waters. A careless thought, a too full dipper, and who knows what can drown in its depths?” Sarena slammed her hand down on the table for emphasis and suddenly cried out in pain as the blade of the dagger sliced her palm. Blood splattered crimson on her white gown as she stared, shocked, at the gaping wound.

The students leapt to their feet, rushing over to stand helplessly, too unskilled to even attempt a Healing.

“Sareth, go and get Mistress Joria at once! Tell her Mistress Sarena has been hurt!” Jessa cried as she grabbed for Sarena’s shaking elbow to hold her up.

Sarena felt faint, the pain searing through her arm, denying even a thought of helping herself.

Then, Jamus pushed his way to the stricken Mage. “Jessa, Siamel,” he said quietly, “help her sit her on the edge of the platform.” Stunned, the two girls did as he directed, supporting Sarena gently. Wordlessly, Jamus took her hand, then closed his over it.

The air thickened, pressing down into the room, making breathing almost impossible. *Sarena grew suddenly aware, locking her own frightened eyes on Jamus’ concentrating face. She gasped as a fire of desire swept through her, pulsing in her blood, as she was wrapped in the intoxicating allure of his touch. The pain coursed back down her arm, to her hand and then, Jamus himself, sweating profusely, cried out in agony. She sobbed to see him so, ached for his hands upon her body, yearned for him as she had yearned for none before. He cried again as an explosion of light filled the room and he was thrown back against her table, releasing her hand. Sarena nearly screamed at the loss of their link, and struggled against Jessa and Siamel, trying to reach him again. Then, two strong grey robed arms enveloped her.*

“Peace, Sarena, peace,” Joria soothed, taking the woman’s injured hand in hers. “Peace.” The sight of pure, unscathed skin on the palm brought her up short. Quickly she examined Sarena’s other hand as if unwilling to accept what she had seen.

Jamus sat, panting heavily, his eyes unfocused. Joria touched him lightly, snapping her hand back as a jolt struck her and in that one brief instant she realized what had happened.

“All of you, go now. Your class is dismissed. I will tend to your mistress.”

Shaken and confused, the eight prentices obeyed, leaving her to sit quietly, holding Sarena’s shaking hands while both Masters studied Jamus.

Sarena’s pain had torn itself through his whole body, wracking him with incredible agony, consuming his reason. He had not thought of what he was doing, only that Sarena was hurt, her hand horribly cut. Instinct drove him to her and fed the uncontrollable need to help. He remembered taking her bleeding hand in his and wanting, more than anything for it to be healed. That was the last conscious thought he could recall. The rest he had done unaware. “I’m sorry, Mistresses. I was so afraid... I was so afraid you’d bleed to death, Sur Sarena. After what you told us, I was afraid Lady Joria would never get here in time.”

Finally free from her mad obsession with him, Sarena ventured to touch him, to ease his anguish. Joria blocked her instantly, shaking her head urgently. Words would have to suffice. “It’s all right, Jamus. It’s my fault as well. I shouldn’t have frightened you so with that lecture. It was just that after what the others had done to you...”

His face reddened.

“What are you talking about?” Joria asked, noting his reaction.

“I will tell you later,” Sarena said as Jamus sighed in relief. “Are you all right now, Jamus?”

He nodded weakly. “I’d like to go. Father wants me to work with Redwin every day. I have an hour or so before the Wind begins to change. There’s plenty of sunlight yet.”

“Then go. But Jamus, remember, next time, it is not necessary to call upon the whole River to wash away the blood from one hand. It was not so big a gash after all.”

He grinned lopsidedly and shrugged. “I’ve never done it before. Next time I won’t dip so deep.” With a slight bow, he pulled himself to his feet and walked unsteadily to the door. As always, he checked the hall first, and then left, breaking into a run as soon as he reached the stairs.