

A  
WIZARD'S  
FORGE

BOOK ONE OF THE WOERN SAGA

BY

A. M. JUSTICE



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*For the Refugees*

# KNOWNEARTH



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# PART 1. ORE



# CHAPTER 1

## THE LOGS

Vic had never been much of a sailor. When she was a child, the other children had laughed when she bent over the gunwale, paled-faced and shaking—their people were fisherfolk, after all. Now, stomach heaving, she gulped air through her mouth, trying not to smell the stench wafting from her dress. She squeezed her eyes shut and popped them open, as if the bursting stars behind her eyelids could bring real light into the ship’s hold. But eyes open or closed, the darkness remained, filled with sobbing and moans and terrified cries. She couldn’t close her ears to those. Nor could she ignore her wrenched gut, sapped dry by the tossing of the ship but still straining to empty itself of misery. “Don’t think about it,” she whispered over and over, hearing instead the laughter of schoolmates about her white face and shaking hands.

Hands clenching her skirts, she clung to memories of jeering. They hadn’t laughed the day she’d passed her exams. That morning, the youth of Ourtown had looked at her with—respect, jealousy, admiration? She wasn’t sure. But being the youngest Logkeeper in history had to count for something. As Martha led her down the jaundstone path, her life had opened up. “Teach and preserve,” Martha said, when she handed Vic her own Logbook.

“Until they come,” Vic had recited, so pleased with herself she nearly burst. Yet the rolling misery of the ship’s hold was so real she wondered if her past was a dream. Not caring whether it was, she pulled the memories over her head and let the darkness carry her home.



As she chanted the Logtitles, Vic’s mind wandered. Henry had asked her to go with him to Festival tomorrow, but her spine squirmed at the thought of his sweaty palms. Her voice droned onto the next series of Logs, and she wondered why they bothered to keep them. *Ninny*, she scolded, or was it Martha’s voice that scolded her? “*We do not seek to understand,*” the Master Logkeeper always reminded her, “*only to preserve.*”

“Log 105.672, Ensign Chu set up the communication disk; 105.673, Civie Samantha Farrak killed by mountain sheep; lost Logs 105.674–111.13; 111.14, party sent north to find iron ore or other usable metal.”

Martha nodded. “Good. Now, recite all of Log 43.17.”

Vic’s lungs filled with relief. Her gut had told her she would be tested on this one. Her orals done, tomorrow they would name her Logkeeper and send her out among the villages. “43.17, Captain’s personal log. There’s a phase-out each time we enter hyperspace. Every day I become more and more concerned that perhaps we were never meant to reach Gomorrah Two . . .” She recited the whole log in two breaths.

Martha sat with her eyes closed, slowly rocking as if listening to music. “Some say you’ve progressed too fast. We’ve never made anyone so young a Logkeeper before. What is the significance of 43.17?”

Caught off guard, Vic stammered her answer. Martha never asked for an analysis of the Logs. “Captain Wong knew

the *Elesendar* would crash here—well, not here, necessarily, and they didn't really crash of course, but he knew they would never make it to Gamorrah. He realized the *Elesendar* had been sabotaged."

Martha pursed her lips and squinted one eye at Vic. "Has anyone given you these answers—your father, perhaps?"

Vic shook her head. "My knowledge is my own."

Martha nodded once. "Go rest." She paused, glancing out toward Winter's Isle, where the rest of the town's youth cavorted around bonfires. "Festival is tomorrow. And pack your bags."

The corners of her mouth twitching up, Vic bowed to Martha and left the Master's lodge. They'd accepted her. Tomorrow, she would be a Logkeeper.

She didn't even glance toward the Isle as she walked home. Laughter and firelight filtered across the water, but Vic had no interest in going out there, especially when she saw Henry on the beach with his boat.

She tried to hurry past unseen, but he called her name. Even if Henry didn't stink like legumes, he would still be pudgy and greasy, Vic thought as he huffed up the short distance between the water and the road. "Vic," he gasped, "aren't you going to the Isle?"

She snorted at him. "What for? Rolling around in the bushes with teenagers is *not* something Logkeepers do."

"Come on. We're missing the fun."

"Martha's making me a Logkeeper. I have to tell my father the good news."

He blocked her way, eyes rolling over her spindly frame. "Come with me, Vicky. It's not like you're going to get any other offers."

*Skinny Vicky, short and icky.* A taunt the girls in Ourtown chanted whenever Vic passed. Her throat closing, she dug her

fingernails into her palms and pressed her lips together, trying to hold in tears.

Henry reached for her elbow. "Come on."

She jerked away, stepping quickly down the beach. "You won't shame me into rolling with you! I'll be a Logkeeper tomorrow. Then you can't treat me like this."

"You'll be an ugly old hen tomorrow," he cried as she ran down the beach.

When she reached Belfast's Point, she climbed the rocks, tearing her skirts, until she could see the breakers. Ourtown nestled against the cliff as if waiting for a tsunami to come and drown it. In the shallow bay, ribbons of red light and white adorned the wavecrests, reflections of the bonfires and *Elesendar's* pale gleam. Vic wondered what the indigenous life of Knownearth thought when a new star entered their heavens and began rapidly crossing the sky, moving overhead at least three times most nights. Nearly three thousand years had passed since Captain Wong parked a United Mineral mining vessel with the registry LSNDR2237 in orbit around this world; two hundred generations since the Oreseekers came north, hunting iron and copper and other ores needed to repair the *Elesendar's* disabled drives. They'd failed in their quest and for some reason had decided to settle these steppes, thousands of miles from where the *Elesendar's* crew had disembarked. Her ancestors had preserved every record they could from their space travels and home planet, but they hadn't recorded why they never returned to their people.

She sighed, wondering if life as a Logkeeper would be as purposeless as the Oreseekers' quest. She could recite thousands of Logs from memory, but who cared if she remembered equations for the precise targeting of a wormhole if no one would ever use it? The waves whispered and shouted of other lands, where the rest of humanity still lived. Occasionally peddlers

made their way up the coast, though the harsh winters turned most back before they made it to Ourtown. Still, they knew people lived in great cities far to the south, occupied forests and mountains, even mined precious iron the Oreseekers had missed. And on the high seas sailed the dreaded Caleisbahnnin—merciless pirates and slavers who ruled the waves.

Vic wondered what such people would think of her. She'd spent her life training to be a scholar and teacher, but the other girls had teased her and the boys ignored her because she was weak as a jellybug and skinny as a totem. And Henry thought she would settle! As if she would ever consider rolling in the bushes with *him*.

*"Your mother looked just like you at your age," Father says, eyes sparkling. "Don't worry, honey. You're not pretty. Pretty's a common thing, and you're not common. Beauty is something you acquire a taste for."*

*"I'm not a pickle."*

*He laughs and glances at Veronica's portrait. "Neither was she."*

Vic gazed at the stars, wondered which one was circled by Gamorrahs One and Two. Did they have a taste for beauty there? She shook her head. Why did that matter? She'd be a Logkeeper tomorrow, like her father before her and his mother before him. The youngest Logkeeper in Ourtown's history. Great things, Vic, she whispered. You're destined for great things.



The next morning, Martha bestowed the Logkeeper's sash in a brief ceremony quickly overshadowed by the hubbub of Festival, and Vic departed on her first journey as a Logkeeper.

As spring unfolded across the tundra, she traveled inland trails, camping in patches of purple spineflowers, sleeping in the corners of barns or, in the larger villages, by the mayor's hearth. Her duties—teaching the children their letters and mathematics, drilling the youths on the history of the Oreseekers—made her welcome most places, especially because she brought news and mail, an unofficial function she discovered as she left Ourtown and an old woman pressed a letter into her hands and asked her to deliver it to an old man in another town. By the summer solstice, her route brought her back to the chill winds of the coast, and she carried several letters for the residents of Cairo, nestled into a sea cliff like a little sister of Ourtown. Standing atop a bluff, Vic scanned the cluster of ironreed lodges through a swarm of gnats dancing in the golden light. Far bigger than the inland villages, the town boasted a fleet of fishing boats and a school and full-time teacher. As she came down among the lodges, townspeople waved cheerily at her yellow sash and pointed her toward the schoolhouse.

"You'll find Samson still there," said a woman slicing fish. "Don't let him bother you. He's a good sort."

Vic followed her gesture to a mud-caulked dome surrounded by verdant fronds and flowers. Chillenherb flared her nostrils. Strong stuff, she thought. Except for festivals, most people kept their cooking bland—as bland as the tundra.

She walked in the open door and announced herself, but no one emerged from the shadows. A closed door beckoned from behind the teacher's desk, so she knocked.

"Not now."

"I'm a Logkeeper," Vic told the voice. "The villagers sent me here. Where can I put my things and bed down?"

"Go to the innkeeper's lodge. I'm busy."

Chagrined, Vic wished she were older. Since she'd left Ourtown, she had more often come across suppressed chuckles

than eyes wide with awe at the sight of her yellow sash. That upstart mayor in Hackensack had actually accused her of being an impostor.

Gritting her teeth, Vic demanded the teacher come out and greet her.

"I will soon enough. I'm in the middle of something."

"What could be so urgent that you won't greet your superior?" she asked, raising her chin.

Silence ebbed from the doorway. Vic stamped her foot—she would not put up with this. She turned the doorknob.

"Get back!" Samson cried as the door popped open and a draft sucked inside. Vic dove aside as light and heat burst into the schoolroom and then vanished with a thwump. Cautiously, she peered into the billowing smoke.

Coughing, a man stumbled out, black with soot. "What did you do that for?"

"I don't know." Idiot, she thought, that's a child's answer. "Why wouldn't you answer me?"

He looked around them as if the smoke said it all. Vic followed his gaze back into the room.

"What were you doing in there?"

Shaking his head, he walked out of the schoolhouse. "You can leave your papers here. Nobody's going to bother *them*."

The innkeepers prepared a hot bath for Vic as soon as she walked in their lodge. Well-fed and red-haired, the duo laughed and guessed that the soot on her face came from one of Samson's experiments. "He's always tinkering, that boy," the husband said.

The wife shooed Vic off to a curtained corner of the lodge and down a ladder to the cellar, where a clay bathtub steamed. "You want your clothes laundered, honey?"

Vic nodded and slipped into the tub, saying she'd wear her green dress. The innkeeper bundled her other clothes into the

washbasin and busied herself with soaping and scrubbing. Vic lay still as heat eased travel-weary muscles. Spread across the water, her hair turned from sunset gold to deeper red as the water pulled it down.

"Such lovely amber hair," the innkeeper said, laying a pair of towels near the tub. "Bet the boys just fall all over you."

Vic blushed, and the woman smiled. "Don't worry, dear. Pretty's a common thing."

"My father always says that."

The innkeeper nodded. "Wise man. Now hurry and dress. You've arrived just in time for the Solstice Scoop!"

At the shoreline, boats tilted on their sides in the sand, shadows slanting across the beach to kiss the base of the cliff.

"While the tide's out," the innkeeper explained, holding her apron in the shape of a basket, "we all run out to the waterline and the men scoop up crabs and mussels while the women run behind and catch them in their skirts. Do they have Scoops in Ourtown?"

Vic shook her head.

The innkeepers whispered at each other, then the woman turned to Vic. "Go with Justin and he'll find you a partner."

Smiling wanly, the husband grumbled under his breath as he led her through the gathering crowd. "You there." He tapped a black-haired man on the shoulder. "Samson, you got a partner?"

Vic backed away when she heard the name and blinked at Samson's almond eyes when he turned.

He frowned. "I guess I've got one now." With the soot washed away, he was younger than Vic thought, perhaps only five or six years her senior. She edged closer.

"I don't bite. But next time a door is closed and you're not invited in, don't open it."

Vic narrowed her eyes but swallowed a retort. "So when

does the scooping start?" Shellfish scuttled here and there, waiting for the return of the sea.

"We'll wait until the tide ebbs as far as it'll go, then we'll run for it. The beach is steep; the water washes back pretty fast. You've got to be quick."

Vic fingered her skirt. "I can be quick."

"Just don't drop anything. Aren't you too young to be a Logkeeper?"

Someone whistled, and Samson clutched her hand and rushed down the beach alongside other couples. Whooping, laughing, the men grabbed and tossed, women dodged and swerved, everyone leapt over each other. Samson kept a steady stream sailing over his shoulder, and Vic managed to catch more shellfish than she missed. By the time the tide washed back up the shore, she and the teacher were laughing along with the rest, and Vic's skirt was as heavily laden as the others'.

"What do you do with all of it?" she asked as Samson led her among the cauldrons, sorting crabs and snails into different pots.

"Tonight we'll feast until everyone goes home too stuffed to sleep, and we can use the leftovers for winter."

At the last pot, a few dungcrabs clambered over each other within the basket of her skirt. Vic grimaced. "These are foul. We don't eat them in Ourtown."

"We don't either. Let's throw them back in the next cove. They'll eat our nets."

At the far edge of town, the sand gave way to rocks. Shadows long, the water red, they scrambled over the sharp, glistening stones to reach another beach, then walked in the gloaming in silence. She'd never seen honey skin and almond eyes like Samson's. The Oreseekers filled their early Logs with tales of "vitamin D deficiency," a condition that had left many of her darker-skinned ancestors bent and crippled. No one

remembered what had been wrong with those people, but now dark hair was uncommon, brown skin a rare throwback. She asked Samson where he was from.

He grimaced. "Here. I was born here. Just because I don't have pasty skin and round green eyes, don't think I'm not one of you."

Vic's cheeks warmed. "I was just curious."

Halting, Samson gazed out to sea. The waves rolled in, the crash and churn echoing off the cliffs behind them. Dipping into the ocean, the sun flickered around something, perhaps a boat out for a solstice cruise. "My mother was a Caleisbahnnin," Samson confessed, and Vic's breath caught in her throat. "One winter my father found a Caleisbahn man washed up on shore, half dead. He took the man in and in the spring gave him a fishing boat so he could go home. Late that summer, the man returned and left my father the best boat he's ever owned."

"That huge green skiff? It's fantastic," Vic exclaimed. The boat had stood out from the others like a rosy in a bed of spineflowers. Most fishing boats were made of ironreed and looked as utilitarian as they needed to be, but this one was wood with a carved bow and a mast that spiraled high above the others, green paint glimmering amid the scuffed and patched hulls of the others. "And your mother?"

Samson sighed and began walking again. "The skiff was payment for the boat my father had given the man. But, by Caleisbahn law, he still owed my father his life—or at least *a* life. My mother was the other half of the payment."

Vic almost dropped the crabs wriggling in her skirt. "You don't pay debts with people."

"Here, we might as well let those go. We're far enough away now."

She looked back at the distant cliff. Another stone outcropping marched into the sea ahead of them, and she

wondered how far the Caleisbahn sailor must have traveled to wash ashore here.

Samson shrugged. "Far enough you don't see more people like me."

Her skirts fell, and the crabs scuttled toward the waves like cows for the barn during a thunderstorm. Certain she had not said anything aloud, she stared at him. His face cracked into a grin, then he burst out laughing. "Vic, you Logkeepers spend years reading and rereading about quantum mechanics and space travel, but you don't know anything. My mother taught me mindspeech—the ability to Hear what people don't say. It's a common skill among her people."

"Who? Among slaves sold by pirates?"

His eyes narrowed, but his smile widened. "My mother was proud of what she was. Among her people, to be traded to pay a debt of honor is an honor in itself. She loved my father, but she never let me forget who I am. She taught me mindspeech and the history of Knownearth. That's where the rest of humanity lives: Knownearth. Where we live is called the Unknown on their maps. If other people have heard of Oreseekers at all, they only know *us* as slaves traded by pirates."

Vic shivered. Rumors of Caleisbahn raiding parties regularly filtered up from the southern Oreseeker settlements, and parents would use the threat of pirate slavers to frighten children into good behavior.

"No one else in Knownearth cares about the Logs either. The few who do think they're religious parables, not history. We have to stop waiting for somebody to show up and ask you to recite all those records you know by heart. If we would use that knowledge ourselves, think of what we could accomplish!"

"Your experiments?" she snorted.

"Yes. Ways to make freshwater out of seawater. Lighting that doesn't fill your eyes with smoke when you read in winter.

Why are our lives so hard, Vic? Our ancestors had all sorts of things to make life on these tundras easy, or at least easier. Why else would they have settled here at all?"

She shrugged. Samson echoed all the doubts she had harbored for years but been afraid to voice. *Ours is not to understand, but to preserve.* She had said that maxim so many times, she never thought about what it meant.

"A scholar doesn't just memorize as many texts as she can," Samson continued. "A scholar seeks understanding. We could be so far ahead of the rest of the world, but we're so mired in old knowledge that we've fallen behind. There's a country called Latha where all people speak is mindspeech, and it's no harder to learn than any spoken language. And then there are the cities. My mother said that Traine is gorgeous to behold. Spires that kiss the clouds, and all the different kinds of people in the world moving like a multicolored tapestry. Our lives are all gray."

Vic stood and began striding back toward Cairo. "I don't believe you. They'll come. Our lives"—she turned back and shouted at him—"my father's life and his mother's before him are not meaningless!" Her feet sinking heavily into the sand, she ran from him, from her doubts. How could the rest of the world have forgotten, when the Oreseekers hadn't? Three thousand years since the marooning. Her people hadn't forgotten—how could anyone else?

The surf blotted out the screams until she came around the cliff to Cairo's beach. The feasting tables lay jumbled together on sand strewn with boiled shellfish. Strange men carrying bludgeons stomped past the overturned cauldrons, heaving prone villagers into boats drawn up onto the sand. A raider guarding the boats shouted and pointed at Vic.

Samson grabbed her arm and broke the icehold of her fear. "Run!" He dragged her back over the sharp rocks and onto the

other beach. Vic's feet pounded across hard-packed sand, spray flying as they ran through water crawling up the beach. Behind them, men shouted. Samson panted next to her, but in her mind she heard his voice, "If we can make it around the next cliff face, there's a cave where we can hide."

Her legs pumped faster, but her dress—the thick, multilayered skirts designed for warmth—caught around her shins and slowed them down. She paused to gather them up above her knees. Samson urged her on, and the cliff on the other side of the beach inched closer.

The pirate tackled her, his weight knocking her breath from her. Her mouth full of sand, she gagged and coughed, but before she could scream, his bludgeon rose up and blotted out the stars.

## CHAPTER 2

### TRAINE

The creak of planks beneath her, the sobs of the woman next to her, and the smell of fear and misery intruded on Vic's memories, pulling her back into the nightmare of the slavers' ship. As a Logkeeper, she had prepared for sickness, flood, even starvation. As a Logkeeper, she was supposed to *lead* in times of crisis, but what she could do now? Swallowing her fears, she sat up.

Startled by the movement, the woman next to her yelped, then clutched her arm, moaning. Vic asked her name.

"Ellen," the woman choked. "I don't recognize your voice. Why is it so dark?"

Vic patted the woman's shoulder, wishing for some comfort herself. "I'm Victoria, the Logkeeper," she announced. "Is the mayor here?"

Many feet away, someone cleared his throat and said he was Michael, son of Cairo's mayor. "None of our parents are here," he said tautly. "At least, I don't think so."

Other voices confirmed it—no one over twenty-five, or under twelve, had been taken. The older villagers and children must have been left unconscious on the beach—with the tide rolling in. Vic shuddered. "Have they told us anything?"

"No," Michael answered. "I wish Samson were here. His mother taught him their language."

As if the words were a prophecy, a hatch opened and blinding sunlight shafted into the hold, followed by a thunk and "oof." The hatch slammed shut.

"Who are you?" Michael asked while Vic blinked to clear the starbursts from her vision.

"It's me." Samson's voice. All talking at once, Cairo's youth crawled over each other to reach him. Vic hung back, her stomach grappling with fear.

Michael's voice spoke out over the babble, silencing the others. "What do they want?"

Samson stayed silent for a long time. Ellen began to whimper softly. "They're taking us to Traine," he said at last.

The city of spires that kissed the clouds. It sounded lovely when he'd described it before. Why did it sound so ominous now? Vic cleared her throat. "What will happen to us there?"

"I don't know." His voice cracked. Vic wondered if Samson did know but thought it too terrible to say.

Scuffling, people moved away from him. "Are they going to feed us?" a boy asked. "We were only sitting down to eat when they came."

No one answered. Vic shuffled backward on her knees, away from Ellen and her wailing. Wedged against the hull, she pressed wet cheeks to her knees and willed this to be a dream.

"How did they find us, Samson?" Michael's voice knifed through the darkness again.

Samson started to answer with a whisper, then stopped. When he spoke again, his voice was as strong as Michael's, but flat and hollow. "The captain of this ship is the man my father rescued. Apparently, his usual . . . supplies . . . had run dry. They had me on deck so he could find out about each of you and enter your names in his ledgers."

"And your name, Samson. Where was it entered?"

"It was the first one on the list."

"We have to escape," Vic said. Others murmured their agreement, but Samson laughed. The slow halting guffaws shut everyone up, including Ellen and Michael.



The journey passed in darkness, relieved only by snatches of light whenever the pirates dropped water and flatcakes through the hatch. Days stretched into a week, then two. In the beginning, Vic swallowed her fear and helped Michael and Samson distribute the food. She gave comfort, letting the boy, Freddie, sleep on her lap and Ellen cry on her shoulder. But the darkness and tossing of the ship wore at her resolve. She grew smaller, her mind shrinking from the creaking hull and misery. As the second week slipped into the third, she retreated to the edge of the hold. When Samson handed her a flagon of water, she drank. If Michael placed a flatcake in her hand, she ate. But she tasted nothing. The time passed, filled with cruel whispers and wishes the ship would sink and they'd be done with it. She almost smiled at the idea of a few cold gulps of saltwater, then oblivion.

When the bucking hull eased into a sloshing roll, she drew her knees up under her chin in disappointment. Hours later, the dull thuds and groans of the ship pulling up to dock jarred her out of her stupor. The hatch banged open. Burly sailors swarmed down a ladder, laughing and holding their noses. No one struggled as the sailors heaved them to their feet and fastened leather collars around their necks. Vic dumbly followed the others out onto the deck, where they stood blinking in the wan light of the setting sun while the pirates linked their collars together with a long rope. Above the wharf, the city climbed hillsides surrounding the

bay, the spires indeed reaching for the sky. Vic shifted her gaze away from the towers and their leering red reflections.

When they walked down the rampart onto the dock, Vic kept her eyes on the ground, sickened by the whorl of color and sound and smells. Around them, hawkers held up fish and meat on sticks, musicians drew crowds at street corners, and people bearing great loads on their heads or backs bellowed for others to get out of the way. One of the prisoners ahead of her yelped, and Vic gasped when she looked up. Their heads held high, five nude men strode down the street, carrying a sedan chair. All wore leather bracelets around their ankles and wrists, and all were tied together by a line attached to a leather belt. The man in the front, however, wore a metal belt. Metal! Vic's eyes widened in disbelief.

The bearers stopped when they came abreast of the captives. A woman stuck her head out of the curtained chair, a glorious halo of black curly hair framing her dark face. She shouted something at the Caleisbahnin at the front of the line, and he smiled and waved toward the warehouse in front of them. Blowing the man a kiss, the woman disappeared behind the curtain, and the two groups moved on.

At the warehouse, they waited for some cattle to be herded in ahead of them. Great birds with sharp beaks pecked and nudged the animals along while calves called for their mothers. Under the feet of cattle and birds scampered little green lizards. The lizards woke Vic's awareness enough to notice the sweat trickling between her breasts.

In the warehouse, shadows bled heat like a furnace, and Vic fought to keep her knees from buckling. Shoving the captives along, the pirates led them into a room where a half dozen big-shouldered men glowered behind a man and woman who tapped pencils on writing boards. Ellen whimpered. Vic's stomach twisted.

The pirates uncollared the men first. As each captive was released, the woman felt his hair and arms and looked at his teeth while the man took notes. She spoke to each one, the language harsh and strange. Samson answered her in the same tongue. Frowning, the woman spoke to her partner, clucked her tongue and shook her head. Moving on, they pulled Freddie, the youngest, aside and made him turn around, then sent him out of the room with a guard.

The pair started down the line of women, performing the same examination—hair, teeth, shoulders, a few words. Next to Vic, Ellen sniffed and twisted the wedding band on her finger. Vic swallowed guiltily, thinking of all the times she'd wished the young woman would be quiet. When they reached Ellen, the examiner held her chin and stared into her eyes. After a moment, Ellen stopped crying and straightened up a little. She was a buxom girl with fine blond hair—just what the boys liked back home. Vic sighed, wondering if these people had found something special about her because they sent her off with another guard. Will they find anything special about me? As soon as the thought crossed her mind, she scolded herself. Better they find you so useless they put you out on the street.

The woman pulled some of Vic's hair off her shoulder, felt its weight and said something to the man. "*Amber girl,*" her father used to call her. Vic bit her lip to stifle a sob. "*But Father,*" she'd tease him, "*amber's nothing but dried up old tree sap with bugs in it.*"

Pulling Vic forward, the woman held her shoulders and turned her around. She ran her hands down Vic's sides and murmured something. The man's voice echoed deeply as he wrote on his board. With a pat on Vic's cheek, the woman grasped the collar of her dress and yanked, tearing the material down to Vic's belt. Yelping, Vic fell to the ground, trying to cover herself, but two guards came over and pulled her up.

While the guards held her arms, the woman ran her hands over Vic's shoulders and along her belly, speaking all the while to the man. Then she cupped a breast and teased it erect with her thumb. The man spoke again, nodding. The woman laughed. Wiping the tears from Vic's cheeks, the woman forced Vic to look at her. This time when she spoke, Vic understood her. "Don't cry, darling. Your life will be an easy one."

The examiners moved on and a guard dragged Vic by the arm toward the door. She searched for a pair of eyes that would meet hers, but everyone looked away, their faces red. As they crossed the threshold, Samson's voice echoed in her mind: "I'm sorry."

At the other end of the hall, they passed into a small room housing a large clear vat full of orange jelly. The door clicked shut, and the man reached for Vic's belt. Screaming, she tried to pull his hand away, but he caught her wrists in one hand and tore away her clothes with the other, then hoisted her over his shoulder. Kicking, beating his head, she shrieked at him to let her go. Growling a little, he ignored her blows, carried her up a set of steps next to the vat, flipped her upside down, and forced her head into the jelly. Yelling, she pushed against the sides of the vat, but the orange stuff was cool on her cheeks. She swallowed some, a taste of spring and honey on her tongue. The guard shoved her down, her shoulders, elbows, and waist sinking into the goo, and she wondered what she had been so upset about. I'm still breathing, she realized with a yawn, then wondered if she were dying. Sunny, cool orange eased the pain in her head, melted over her thoughts, and lulled her to sleep.



Sunshine streamed through gauzy curtains. Vic blinked at the light, yawned, and stretched in the warmth. A green blanket.

White sheets, white furniture, white walls, a white animal's skin carpeting a white stone floor. The strangeness slapped her in the face, and she sat up. In the mirror across the room, a girl with shining amber hair and a jeweled band around her throat stared back. Her skin was like cream. "My face," she whispered, feeling her chin, once plagued with blemishes. Still staring at herself, she stood on the bed. Jeweled bands also circled her wrists and ankles, sewn on too tightly to remove. A metal band backed with suede fit snugly around her waist.

"Metal," she gasped. The Oreseekers had found so little they had been ashamed to return, while the people here used something so precious for decoration. The belt bore jewels of green and red and blue and small metal rings that tinkled softly when she moved. She wore nothing but these adornments. Her cheeks flamed.

Stepping off the bed, she pulled the spread around her shoulders. A pair of windows on opposite sides of the room let in light; a cross-breeze whispered through slots above the glass. Two closed doors faced each other on the remaining walls. One was locked, the other led into a bathroom, complete with a tub large enough to lie in, washbasin, and commode. Vic gasped when she turned a knob above the basin and cold water poured out of a spout. Only the Ancients had had running water.

Back in the bedroom, one of the windows overlooked a courtyard far below. A youth came through a gate with a pair of cows and took them into a stable while two women pulled greens and tubers out of a garden, loading them into a broad basket. A boy ran through one gate carrying an armful of half-plucked birds and disappeared inside the building below, downy feathers swirling in his wake. Everyone, women and men, wore brightly embroidered vests and trousers that billowed around their hips. A man rode through the gate on a long-legged, capering beast, and a boy and girl ran out of the stable to hold

the reins while he leapt from the saddle. Vic wondered if the animal was a horse. All the mammals on this world had come with the crew of the *Elesendar*, but the last Oreseeker horse had died generations ago. Below, the man slapped the boy on the back and laughed. Blond hair waved away from a handsome face to the nape of the man's neck, held there by a silver ribbon. He waved a burly fellow over and pointed at something in the corner of the yard. Vic followed their gaze to a small scaffold. A man's corpse hung by his hands from the jib. As Vic stared, a bird fluttered down and pecked at an eye.

Eyes wide, Vic ran to the locked door and yanked on the handle, rattling and tugging. It remained fast. The other window overlooked the street and wouldn't open either. She banged on the glass, shouting at passersby, but none looked up. Some wore red and orange turbans that towered high above their heads. Others swept down the wooden sidewalks in great, billowing robes that hid the motion of their feet. An old woman limped by in rags, holding out her hand. Cartwheeling across the street, a child dropped a shiny stone in the beggar's hand.

Then there were those dressed only in jewels like Vic. Fully clothed men or women led naked girls like her, and boys and young men too, down the street by leashes attached to their belts. Her lip trembled as she watched, her fingers scraping at the glass. One couple passed, the clothed man carefully holding the woman's arm, her stomach swollen beneath a filmy white skirt hanging from her jeweled belt. When she stumbled, the man supported her, his eyes worried. She nodded and ruffled his hair, and they moved on.

Oh Martha, Vic whimpered, what am I going to do? For weeks she had shut out the nightmare, but the reality hit her like a sledge. Sold into slavery, she did not know the language, or how to escape, or even if escape was possible. The hanging man haunted her. What kind of people left the dead out so

birds could peck out their eyes? Panic rose from her stomach like vomit. She ran around the room, pulling and banging on the doors and windows. Her breath short, her face hot, she threw herself at the outside door and wailed when it would not budge. Her cries filled her ears, and she crept to a corner, pulled the blanket over her head and wished again and again that it all was a bad dream. It has to be a dream, she said. Come on, Vic. Wake up.

She did not wake up. The sun dimmed, finally sinking past the tower across the street. As the shadows deepened in the white room, her tears dried. Her breathing eased. She waited.

At last, the outside door clicked open. The man who had ridden the long-legged animal walked in, carrying a tray. Vic's stomach grumbled at the smell of roast meat. "Hungry, my dear?" the man asked.

"No."

"I'm ravenous. Had barely a thing all day. Are you sure you don't want anything?" He locked the door behind him, slipping a key on a ribbon over his neck. He wore a robe held together at his waist with a large green jewel. A touch of gray and crow's feet marked him as her father's age. Sitting at the table, he piled meat and vegetables between two thick slices of bread. "I heard you thumping around earlier. Come dine with me."

Vic eyed the fruit and cheese, her stomach rumbling again.

"Join me, my dear. We're going to celebrate your arrival."

From the corner, she watched him eat. "How come I understand you?" she asked flatly. "I hear strange words come out of your mouth, but I know what they mean."

"I speak to your mind as well as your ears, darling. I thought one of your village-mates had the skill. Anyhow, don't worry. I'll teach you Betheljin before you need to speak to anyone else. We have plenty of time."

He ate as if he didn't want to swallow before tasting every flavor, leaving only a slice of cheese and a small red fruit when he came and sat next to her on the floor.

"I'd like to see you." He tugged gently at the bedcover.

She hunched over further, fresh tears spilling onto her cheeks. He gazed at her with deep indigo eyes, his teeth gleaming cruelly. She would have thought him handsome except for the hardness of that smile.

Brushing her tears, he chuckled softly. "You are young. It's almost a crime, except nothing's a crime in Traine if you have enough money to pay for it." Standing, he held his hand down to her. "Come to bed, love."

## CHAPTER 3

### POLITICS

Marble columns adorned the face of the brothel, a carpet skimming the steps down to the cobbled street. Ashel whistled softly at a brass knocker. Traine had twice as many thieves as slaves. How did the knocker remain fixed on the door and not carried off in someone's pocket?

Simlael rubbed his hands together. "This is what I've dreamt of since I was a lad, boys."

Bellin, face flushed red as his hair, held Ashel's arm. "You cannot go in there."

Exchanging a grin with Simlael, Ashel hefted his pouch. "I think I can."

"I'm not talking about the cost!" His eyes darting at passersby, Bellin leaned closer. "If you get into trouble—"

"Come on," Simlael snorted. "Leave the old biddy here."

"I just want to see," Ashel assured Bellin as he mounted the steps. "We'll meet you back at the Guildhouse."

A woman, clad only in strips of gauze tied to a ring round her neck, admitted them. Ashel's cheeks flamed at glimpses of creamy brown skin molded in luxurious curves. Since he'd arrived in Traine, he'd grown accustomed to mistresses walking nude through the streets—or, at least, he no longer feared the

buttons might burst off his trousers. The buttons strained in their buttonholes now. "Maybe this was a mistake," he muttered.

Simlael cast him a scathing look as they followed the woman to a parlor furnished with silk-upholstered chairs and gleaming tables. Carpet thick as summer grass cushioned their steps, and damask draperies graced doorways leading elsewhere. Patrons garbed in silk and erinsheen chatted while gauze-clad youths strolled among them. Ashel and Simlael sat upon a vacant couch and took the wine offered by a green-eyed boy of twelve. Ashel's stomach flopped over, thinking what duties the boy might have. His mother's railing against Trainer debauchery rang in his mind as a girl the same age kneeled before them and handed them cards discreetly printed with services and fees. "Anyone who pleases you." She gestured at the courtesans scattered among the patrons: mature men and women down to youths barely into puberty. They're not slaves, Ashel reminded himself. The courtesans belonged to a guild, just as he did.

"Well, I see one I like. Or maybe two," Simlael said, hopping off the sofa. "Don't know how long this'll take, my boy."

Ashel lounged back, examining his cuticles. "See you in ten minutes."

"Ha! I'll see you back at the Guildhouse." His friend put a finger alongside his nose. "Don't let Bellin's nattering stop you from having fun."

He gathered a pair of youths, waggled his eyebrows at Ashel, and followed them out. Sipping wine, Ashel watched the other patrons. One woman, her hair braided with silver twine, beckoned to a young man with sculpted biceps and thighs. Pulling aside the gauze covering his hips, the woman pursed her lips. With a curt nod, she glided out, courtesan in tow.

"You're a beauty," a woman purred, sitting beside him. Blue silk strips cascaded from the band of jewels round her

neck. Dusky aureoles peeked through the gaps in her gown, and Ashel's blood rushed to his groin.

Do not act like a lusty bumpkin, he ordered himself. Imparting his best smile, he raised his glass. "Only one of many in this room."

"Let me tell your fortune."

His eyes fell on the card, but she covered it with her hand. "To serve the prince of Latha would be an honor, Your Highness."

He glanced after Simlael. "You know who I am?"

"Who you must be—two younglings come into my establishment, clearly Lathan by their dress and speech, or lack of it." She smiled slyly. "It's disconcerting, hearing voices in your head but not in your ears."

"I'll speak aloud then," he said in Betheljin.

"Oh Highness, your voice is as easy on the ears as you are on the eyes, but in this house you must do as you please."

"I'm pleased to continue listening to your deductions."

A contralto laugh turned the air a sultry red. Ashel's heart thudded, his palms moist as she leaned closer, her hand sliding up his thigh. "As I said, two Lathan younglings stroll in and one may be the comeliest youth I've ever seen. Considering my business, that's quite something. There could be only one conclusion. It's an honor to serve you, Your Highness. I'll tell your fortune upstairs."

Her hand pressed into his crotch, and the buttons of his trousers threatened to pop. His breath came in short gasps, and he had to swallow a yelp as the woman pressed against him. "No charge," she breathed.

Elesendar. His hand floated toward the gaps in her garment and those plump brown breasts, his lips hungered for the salty skin below, his fingers longed to glide along her thighs, he yearned to feel her hands reaching round his—

"I'm sorry, madam," he said, thrusting himself off the sofa. "I shouldn't have come." Setting his wine glass on a table, he reached for his pouch. "For the wine—"

"No charge," she said with a wry wink. "But come again, when you're ready."

Outside, the afternoon heat pressed upon him, and he considered heading for the docks and a plunge. The stink of dead fish and raw sewage might cool his ardor better than the water, but he'd never survive Simlael's ribbing and Bellin's disgust. Instead he turned toward the Guildhouse, choosing a path that led him past a warehouse sporting a mural of a woman descending to a valley full of erin. Three rams stood in front of the herd, their horns fierce in a brilliant sunset. Facing them, the woman clasped her hands in supplication. It was a mystery why this painting of a Lathan mountain valley should be here, in the richest, most powerful capital in Knownearth, but Ashel enjoyed the reminder of home, and he found something new each time he studied it. Today, a hint of white caught his eye, and when he peered closely, he saw the artist had included Elesendar's Shrine on a bluff overlooking the valley. "Samantha Farrak giving herself up," he breathed, then kicked himself for not recognizing the painting's subject sooner. He was studying to be a Loremaster, for Shrine's sake.

"Samantha Farrak indeed," a passerby said, halting beside him. Blond hair framed a handsome face, the man's skin bronzed from sunshine. The gemstones and thread of gold adorning his vest bespoke wealth; the brawny pair of guards, eyes flicking over the street, marked him as a Citizen. "Without her sacrifice," he continued, "the Erin Alliance would never have come about."

Ashel smiled to cover a tick of nervousness at the bodyguards' threatening glares. "But it would never have been drafted without Lieutenant Grossmont."

"A scholar of the Logs! Oh, but you're Lathan. Did you attend the Academy?"

"I'll be teaching there once I return home." Ashel relaxed, pleased to find one of Traine's first rank who cared about something more than profit.

The Citizen's blue eyes sparkled. "A fine institution, with a well-deserved reputation for excellence. Are you headed to the Minstrels Guildhouse now?"

At Ashel's nod, the man declared he had business in that direction, and they walked together, talking of the mural's artist and how various influences on art, architecture, and music crisscrossed between nations. Ashel felt he'd found a kindred spirit and welcomed the arm the Citizen placed on his shoulder. When they paused in front of a silversmith's, the man pointed at a silver flute in the window. "Have you ever seen its like?"

Ashel's lungs emptied of breath. That single instrument probably cost more than three months' provisions for the entire Lathan army.

"Gold in the morning, pink in the evening," the Citizen quoted an old poem. "The spires of Traine deny the shame of her people."

"Those lines were penned two hundred years ago to protest the Betheljin monopoly on metal ores," Ashel said as they resumed walking.

His companion smiled. "You do know your history! Some say it's still true. What do you think?"

Ashel glanced at the bodyguards, then squared his shoulders, determined to honor the man with an honest opinion. "I've found many glorious things here, sir. I don't begrudge the Citizens their wealth, but you have slavery and crushing poverty too, and a society founded on the backs of the starving and the despised will collapse, sooner or later."

"Ah, but in Latha, the Guilds guard their capital as closely

as the Citizens watch theirs.”

“My nation’s war with Relm has lasted a long time. The Guilds are weary of the cost.”

The man’s smile sharpened. “Well said, young man, and here is the square. I hope we meet again. Farewell.”

When Ashel entered the Guildhouse, the apprentice on door duty told him Jovial wanted to see him. He knocked on the Guildmaster’s office and pushed open the door at her call.

“What have you been up to? Bellin stomped in here an hour ago and declared he’d just witnessed the unraveling of Latha’s moral fiber.”

Ashel clenched his fists. He’d thought Bellin had outgrown tattling to the masters. “We were studying Trainer culture, as instructed.”

Jovial raised an eyebrow. “In a brothel.”

He offered an innocent smile. “It’s a well-regarded profession here. The Commissar has brothel-lords on his council.”

“And when I found you dicing away your passage home, you reminded me the gambling dens play a vital role in Traine’s economy. Bellin is right that you should take more care. Remember where you are and *who* you are, Ashel. Traine may be a neutral capital, but the Relmlord keeps a home here—you could run into him anywhere, any time. And after the Guild swore we could protect you without a boatload of guards, the last thing I need is to be forced to inform your parents that the Relmlord has had you snatched off the street and is holding you for ransom.” He started to protest, but she waved him to silence. “You’re performing tonight at the Commissar’s.”

An impish thought produced a grin. “What’ll you do if the Relmlord is there and has me snatched out of the Commissar’s parlor?”

Jovial glared at him. “The Guild used to cane journeymen for cheek like that, prince or no.”

“Luckily I apprenticed in more benevolent times.” He sobered. “You know the only reason the Commissar asked for me is because I’m a prince who sings. I’m no more than a novelty to him.”

“Be that as it may, you’re going.” The corners of Jovial’s mouth tilted upward. “The Commissar pays well. You might even earn enough for a cabin on the ship home, instead of a hammock in the hold.”



As midnight approached, Ashel changed into the ceremonial robes of the Guild, hesitated, then slung the spun crystal sash over his shoulder, declaring his status as a Lathan royal. A novelty indeed.

Jovial waited for him downstairs, her hair done in elaborate curls sparkling with crystal dust. Glintil shell shimmered around her throat and at her ears, and a jeweled brooch held her cloak about her shoulders. She smiled as he came in. “Try not to look so uncomfortable. A minstrel must use everything to his advantage. If being a prince gets you a gig, be a prince!”

In the Commissar’s palace, a butler led them into the largest hall he’d ever seen. Crystal chandeliers hung from a lofty ceiling covered with mirrors. Lamplight reflected on a floor blazing with red and gold silk. Elaborate costumes bedecked the guests, from chandelier-bumping turbans to an emerald gown with a train so long two yawning children had been employed to carry it.

The butler’s voice echoed across the babble, announcing them: “The Minstrel Jovial of Alna, Master of the Guildhouse in Traine. The Recorder Ashel of Narath, Prince of Latha.”

Jovial led him to a sitting area where courtiers surrounded a sharp little man. “Commissar Parnden,” Jovial said aloud in

Betheljin, asking Ashel in mindspeech to put on his best rustic-prince face, “your invitation came as such a pleasure! May I present his Highness, Prince Ashel of Latha.”

Ashel bowed and offered his hand. An enormous diamond strapped to the Commissar’s forehead seemed to crush his neck into well-padded shoulders, so the man looked like he was drowning in orange silk. Parnden clasped Ashel’s hand, his grip soft and his grin malicious. “How is your lovely mother? I was schooled in Latha, you know, and miss the sight of her. But here you are, her very image, if she were a fine young man, that is. Here, sit with me.”

Hiding revulsion behind his stage smile, Ashel accepted a glass of wine while Jovial excused herself to oversee the musicians. Halfway across the room, she dipped her knees to a tall, blond Citizen—the art connoisseur from that afternoon. The Commissar smiled devilishly at the man’s approach. “There’s someone else who attended your Academy and knew your mother and father. You ought to meet.”

Ashel stood, his gut twisting with foreboding.

“We met this afternoon.” The Citizen dipped his shoulders and offered his hand; his grip might have broken the bones of someone who had not spent years stretching for chords on a harp. “And now we’ve run into each other again, just as I hoped.”

“Ah, you know each other already?” Parnden sniggered. “And yet the watch reported no trouble today.”

Ashel cursed himself for the biggest fool in Knownearth. *Snatched off the street.* That pair of bodyguards could have stuffed him into a carriage before anyone noticed. “We weren’t properly introduced. Lornk Korng, I presume?” His heart quailed at the lecture he’d receive from his mother for acting the rube in front of the Lord of Relm. And like a buffoon he’d told Latha’s enemy that the Lathan Guilds were tired of paying

for the war! Elesendar's Shrine, it was lucky his father hadn't made him the Heir.

The Relmlord flashed white teeth at him. "Pleased to make your formal acquaintance. How are your parents?"

"Well. The Lathan border expands every day."

Lornk laughed. "By fall we'll have regained our rightful lands. Perhaps by winter we'll have won through to Narath. I haven't dined at the Manor in"—his eyes rolled over Ashel—"twenty years? Certainly before you were born."

Ashel returned a tight smile. "Olmlablaire is something to behold, I hear. I look forward to the day when its bannerpoles bear Latha's flag."

Jovial came over and rescued him. Nodding to the Commissar, he walked to the dais and picked up his harp. His great-grandfather, a master minstrel, had carved it and won the heart of Latha's Ruler with it, so becoming her consort. This harp, Ashel thought. Music, not politics. The notes drifted into his mind as he sat. When they assembled themselves, he began to sing.

His voice had settled into a baritone a few years before, and he reveled in its power as the audience's contempt for a rustic prince from a poor country turned to admiration. Even the Relmlord bent forward, indigo eyes staring intently. In response, Ashel shifted his selections to heroic sagas about Lathan heroes overcoming great odds. He sang of Kara, Knownearth's greatest wizard, and of how she defeated the beast that rose out of the sea. He sang about Saelbeneth, his ancestor and leader of the Council of Wizards that went to the fabled Direiellene to defeat the evil sorceress Meylnara. Casting a dagger at the Relmlord, he sang of the founding of the Erin Alliance, and how Samantha Farrak sealed the bargain with her death. Snuffling, the emerald-clad woman dabbed her eyes with a silk handkerchief, an action echoed by others around

the room. And Ashel reminded them all that Elesendar chose Latha as the home for His newborn children. Latha was the birthplace of humanity, and their spirits returned to Latha when they died, to be reborn as cerrenils in the forest of Kiareinoll Fembrosh. Ashel's chest filled, his voice broadened when he saw Elesendar shining through a window, adding His light to that of the candles. Good timing, said the showman in him.

When he finished, the audience stood enraptured, the applause slow to begin, but soon clapping and cries slaked his thirst. The Relmlord's scowl convinced him he'd won a battle in their war, and he gladly answered Citizens' questions about the Academy and how often it accepted foreign students.

"See, Ashel," Jovial teased, "you love the glory."

The hours passed, and the ensemble played country reels mixed with stately waltzes, the courtiers dancing as gaily as Lathan villagers at Landing. When golden dawn shone through the windows, the courtiers and other musicians retired, leaving Ashel and Jovial alone with the Commissar and Relmlord. Jovial curtsied to them, and Ashel returned the bows of the two men. As he turned to leave, the Relmlord grasped his hand.

"Sometimes I forget why Latha is so important," he said. "Tonight, you reminded me. Farewell, Your Highness, and give your mother my love."

Ashel's eye twitched, his sense of victory unraveling. Nodding again at the Commissar, he strode to the exit, Jovial hustling after.

"I thought you weren't interested in politics," the master said when they reached the square.

"Do you believe in evil?" he asked, suppressing a shiver as he thought of the Relmlord's last words: *Give your mother my love.*

She pursed her lips. "I believe in misunderstandings."

## CHAPTER 4

### AN EASY LIFE

Blood pulsing in her ears, Vic paused in the doorway to look back at Lornk. The key, swinging slowly on its ribbon, brushed her thigh, mimicking his fingers. He lay still on the bed, his breathing as slow and steady now as it had been when she dared untie the ribbon from his neck. Shutting the door softly, she exhaled, outside for the first time. A month or more had passed—she wasn't sure. She no longer measured time by the setting sun, but by Lornk's comings and goings.

Wan light bled from beneath the door. The stairs, open on one side to a well of blackness, descended the square tower through air thick as pitch. By the first turning, the light was gone. Her toes scraped across wooden steps, seeking the edge of each riser as her hands crept along the outer wall. Her ears strained for noise of pursuit, but she heard only her own tense breathing and the slow scuffle of her feet. At the second landing, she gulped back a whimper and fought the urge to climb the stairs and crawl into bed before he missed her. The dead man she'd seen hung out for birds to feed upon had been his last mistress, a term applied to the slaves—male or female—whom Citizens kept for pleasure. Would Lornk kill her for trying to escape, hang her in the courtyard as bird fodder?

She swallowed, clenched her fists, and pressed on. At the third landing, she wondered how heavily guarded the courtyard would be. A bodyguard patrolled it each night, but if she stuck to the shadows, she might be able to get to a little door she'd noticed. If that led to the street . . . Shutting her eyes, she took a breath and held it. *See if you can make it that far.*

At each landing, doubts and fears loomed. She forced herself to move through them, down the next flight, but they followed her, gnawing at her resolve, weakening her knees. What would he do if he caught her? How would she get out of the courtyard? Where could she find clothes? Would anyone help her? Did she *want* to leave him? Finally, legs shaking, she felt cool stone beneath her feet. A line of pale starlight leaked across the floor. Biting her lip, a cry of relief or joy caught in her throat, she trotted toward the gleam.

His footsteps banged on the stairs behind her. Yelping, she dodged, but he grabbed her elbow and flung her against the door. The wood was smooth and cold on her cheek and belly; he pressed himself against her, sandwiching her between his prison and the freedom outside, crushing her with his weight until she could hardly draw breath. His silken robe brushed her calves as he wedged his hand between her legs, long fingers pressing, teasing. She closed her eyes, swallowing whimpers, and her head seemed to grow in the darkness. Short, gulping breaths echoed softly. His fingers lit a fire; his cock, dancing across her backside, stoked the flames. Tears spilled as her hips tilted toward him and the black fire in her loins rose to her throat. The key clinked on stone, Lornk stood back, and she dropped to the ground, her head pounding.

His voice turned the air red. "Never forget I am a very light sleeper. I *let* you get this far." Wrapping her arm in one hand, he picked up the key and carried her back upstairs; she flopped against him like a rag doll as they ascended.

In the room, he dumped her on the animal skin. "Kara," he barked, "what are you?"

She had learned the answer to that question early. Shaking, she pressed her forehead against the white fur, whispering, "I'm yours."

Silk hissing, he draped his robe over a chair, then stood beside her. His feet and toes were long, the muscles of his calves graced with soft hairs. "I didn't hear you," he menaced.

But you did, she thought. She did not have to speak for him to know her mind. She had once wished he would bring a knife with her meals, and he had laughed until tears ran from his eyes. "*I lead a nation at war, girl! Do you think you could slice me open so easily?*" Now she gulped and raised her head a few inches. "I am yours, my lord."

"That didn't sound as if you meant it."

A shiver ran down her spine as he knelt and his hand encircled her neck, his thumb against her windpipe. She kept her eyes on the floor, studying the angles made by his knee and foot. "Once more," he commanded.

She cleared her throat, sure if she didn't her voice would crack. "My lord. I am yours."

Wordlessly, he reclined on the rug and pulled her head down. As she took him into her mouth, his musk filled her nose and throat and she considered biting, but the grip tightening around her throat pushed the thought from her mind until sweet and salt burst in her mouth. When his desires were sated, he scooped her up and laid her on the bed, his face pensive as his fingers skated over her hips and belly. Her skin grew hot as if burned by the sun, and she trembled as his hand migrated into the nest of soft hairs between her thighs. With his thumb, he pressed and eased off, pressed and eased off. Her breath fell into his rhythm as if he worked a bellows, slowly stoking desire in her heart and submission in her limbs.

Trembling, she asked, "Why don't you just finish it?" A month or more she'd been locked in this room, and his cock was still just a threat, or a prize she'd yet to earn.

"My mother was a bliss addict," he said, adding a circling motion that sent waves of lava to Vic's eyes. Over her gasps, he continued, "She'd smoke it in the Roost. That's a slum on the north shore of this city, populated by thieves and brigands and escaped slaves, most of whom are Oreseekers, like you." Vic's ears twitched at mention of her people, but each press of his thumb ratcheted her hips upward while her breath still matched the rhythm he set. "My mother smoked away more than half the Korng fortune. That was no easy task, but she was diligent and committed to her cause." Blood boiling toward a climax, Vic gnawed on her lower lip as a moan leaked out. He pressed once more, the circling motion aching slow and she teetered on the edge—

He withdrew his hand. She collapsed onto the mattress, quivering, her head aching as heat receded. His thumb brushed the tears leaking into her hair. "I want you to crave me the way my mother craved bliss," he purred. "Your body does already, but your mind does not. Does it?"

She swallowed, unsure of the answer he wanted. "I'm yours, my lord," she said meekly.

He smiled softly, with a sort of relish. "No, not yet."



He never struck her. He didn't have to.

The first days, she wore the green bedcover as a robe and did not take it off when asked. When he came, she crouched in a corner, holding the spread around her like a shield. Her throat constricted as he approached, and she heard herself gibber in fear when he knelt down and laid his hands on her shoulders.

Murmuring sympathetically, he would wrap his arms around her, stroke her hair with the palm of one hand, and gently pull the spread away. His hands would caress the tension from her shoulders and belly with clinical skill. When at last she relaxed in his arms, meek and quiet, his fingers would stray below her waist. And when he left an hour or two later, she would lie beneath the sheets, weeping at the yearning coiled in her loins.

One night he stood in the doorway, frowning as she cowered in the corner. "Are you going to take that off?"

Wondering if he would leave if she refused, she slowly shook her head.

He took one step inside the room. "You try my patience. Are you sure of that answer?"

Her stomach muscles clenched at the color of his eyes—bluer than the midday sea. But she nodded, hoping he would leave her alone.

Slamming the door, he strode over and tore the cover away. She screamed, and he shoved her back into the corner and threw the spread over her head. Peeking, she cringed as he pulled sheets from the mattress and flung them at her. He tore down the curtains and swept the heavy skin off the floor and dropped them on top of her. Pressing them down, smothering her cries, he asked if she wanted to wear them all. Flailing, she tried to push him off. But he pressed the linens onto her face, and her struggles weakened, her head ached, and her eyelids grew heavy until all went black. When she woke up, she lay on a bare mattress with the dawn bleeding through a naked window.

He brought breakfast that morning, put it down on the table, and motioned for her to join him. She remained on the bed, glaring from behind her knees. Finally he sighed and asked, "What are you, Kara?"

"My name is Victoria of Ourtown, and I am a Logkeeper for the Oreseekers."

He raised his eyebrows and cocked his head at her. Then he smiled secretly and shook his head. "Wrong. You're mine. You belong to me. What are you?"

Above the smile, his eyes blazed like glaciers in the sun. Her stomach knotted, she crept backward on the bed. "I'm your mistress?"

"Today you're less than that." He towered over her. "What are you?"

"I don't know. Please don't hit me," she screamed as he raised his hands. He seized the little table beside the bed and flung it at the window. Glass crashed. He grabbed her and shoved her across the shards to hang upside down. Crying, begging, bleeding, Vic reached for the window sill, but he shook her by the ankles, yelling the question over and over. "What are you?" Below them in the street, passersby looked up and hurried onward. "What are you, Kara?" He let go of an ankle. "I'm yours," she sobbed finally. "Just yours." So the litany began.



A few days after he broke the window, a pair of shears lay on the tray when he arrived with breakfast. Eyes locked on the porcelain blades, Vic clutched her tresses and shrank into the corner.

"Come here," he demanded, swiping a chair from the table and jamming it down in the middle of the room.

"Please don't," she begged as he picked up the scissors and snapped the blades together. "Please, my lord. Please, no."

His fingers drummed on the chair back, his eyes glacial blue again. Tears dripped onto her feet as they paced slowly toward the chair, onto her knees when she slumped into it. Tugging a lock taut, he warned her to hold still. The shears opened, and

the hair sprang free of the slicing jaws. She let him tug and cut the hair to chin length, but hoarse sobs clogged her throat.

When amber littered the floor, he knelt beside her and tugged her chin round to face him. The anger had melted from his eyes, and they shone sympathetically. "Why do you want to hide yourself?"

"My hair was the only thing about me people ever admired," she admitted, swallowing another sob. "It was the best part of me."

"Oh, my dear," Lornk cried. "It was the least part of you! You have bewitched me, Kara, and not with your beauty. Never be ashamed. I won't permit it."



Her hair was not all he took. From her mother's death when she was four, Vic had clung to her father's side, learning about the world through study—first his, then her own. When Lornk left her alone, she wondered if her mother had not died so early, would she have followed her path instead? And if her ambition had taken her along another route, would she have ended up here?

By town legend, Veronica had sampled Ourtown's men like a chef after spices before she finally chose Theodore. She announced her pregnancy when she won the mast-scaling competition at Festival, brandishing the trophy in triumph. So many children were lost to the cold and the hard life that most expecting women retired from the boats or the fields to indoor duties, but not Veronica. She still sailed with the other fishers at dawn, and when winter came and Vic was born, the ice, not the child, kept her off the water.

Vic had fuzzy memories of sitting in a hammock slung between the mast and the prow of Veronica's skiff, listening

to her describe how the wind would reveal itself in the whitecaps on the water's surface. She could almost see her mother's face, lively in the sun, her auburn hair dark with sea spray. She remembered watching her parents dance around the bonfire at Festival, her mother's small, strong body reined in by her father's arms. And the two of them grabbing her and swinging her between them, up and down, back and forth, spinning.

But all these memories could have been just pictures her imagination had made to color her father's tales. She did remember the sad looks of the townspeople after the fever took Veronica, how their heads shook as she drew in on herself, became shy of the other children's games, and turned for solace to Martha's libraries. Most Logkeepers apprenticed when they turned eleven or twelve. When Theodore took Vic to Martha's lodge, saying he'd taught her all he could, she was eight.

Now her hands ached for the cool sheaves of Martha's books. The first weeks in Lornk's tower, she spent the days copying out all she remembered of the Logs onto the table, her fingertips writing an invisible record across the wood. But summer's heat soaked through the walls, shimmering from the table, the mattress, the glass in the windows. Over time, her thoughts smoldered away, leaving lethargy like ash. She lay on the bed, gasping at the whispers of air sifting through the slats above the windows, waiting for him.

Sometimes as he approached her, his hands, his head, his arms and legs would grow to a gigantic size, and as time passed, she felt herself grow smaller, to the size of a doll who sleeps until the child plays with it and gives it life. The light through her windows dimmed whenever his key turned in the lock, the door opening like the world turning toward the rising sun. Eventually the breeze through the slatted windows cooled so she shivered when she slept alone, and she began to welcome

his warmth. She began to address herself as Kara. And then one morning, she surprised both of them by smiling when he brought her breakfast.

Setting the tray on the table, Lornk sat down and draped an arm across her shoulder. "Kara," he exclaimed, "are you happy to see me?"

She nodded, tears streaming. Her body, enlivened by his touch, leaned into him. "Yes, I'm glad to see you, my Lord," she said.

"Oh my dear, not nearly as glad as I am to hear that. Now go wash your face."

"Will it be today?"

He kissed the top of her head. "You're not ready yet. Not today."

Standing and walking toward the bathroom door, she felt her muscles groan in disappointment. Her anticipation for him strong, she had to wait a long time to relax enough to use the toilet. I want him, she admitted, beginning to weep again.

When she came out, her face and hands clean, he had gone, taking her breakfast with him. A cry of frustration bit out of her, and she threw herself on the bed, clawing at the mattress.

He didn't come again for two days. "Hungry?" he asked her, poking his head in through the door.

Eagerly, she pushed herself to the edge of the bed and nodded.

"But not for me. Let's see if I can change that." Another day passed before he returned, bringing a vase filled with flowers and a tray of cheese and fruit. She tottered toward the table, smiling softly.

He fed her each bite, breaking off tiny bits of cheese and placing them in her mouth, his fingers lingering on her lips. Gratefully, she kissed his fingertips. When she reached for the fruit, he shook his head and peeled it for her, placing each

section in her mouth, watching her intently as she chewed and swallowed. "Three months to the day," he said, when she'd swallowed the last piece.

Coughing, she met his eyes. Three months? Summer long gone from the Oreseekers' land by now, her father would be expecting her home. Clearing her throat, she moved back to the bed. What would Theodore do when snow closed the roads and she still had not come? Her shoulders began to shake, and she gulped back a sob.

Raising an eyebrow at her, Lornk sat back, splaying his hands wide and examining his fingernails. "Do you love me, Kara?" he asked casually.

She blinked at him. He had just taken her father from her, as he took her clothes, her hair, her self. Her head shrank into her shoulders, while his eyes grew larger, bluer as he watched. "You want me to have nothing but you," she said, her voice clearer than she would have thought.

He laughed softly, stretching his arms out, then twining his fingers behind his neck. "I told you once—I want you to crave me. Why do you think that is?"

"So I'll obey you."

"Oh, I've had your obedience for months. What I want now is your devotion. The day may come when you will have the world in your hands, and I want you to hand it to me, without reservation."

She gaped at him. "What does that mean?"

He laughed softly. "I want you to know what's expected of you, so you will rise to the occasion. But that's a discussion for another day. For now . . . come here."

She shook her head, wincing at her audacity. "No. Not today, not willingly."

"What?" He stood, towering. But his voice was light, almost playful. "What are you, Kara?"

Averting her face, certain he would finally strike her, she met his gaze from the corner of her eye. But she did not answer him. *I am nothing.*

Sighing, he grabbed the flowers and stepped toward the door. "I've probably spoiled you. I'll have to change that."

## CHAPTER 5

### PLACES

A knock startled Vic awake. Drawing her knees under her chin, she rubbed her eyes. Lornk never knocked. "Hello, may I come in?" A voice as deep but less self-assured than Lornk's—a stranger. She looked around for somewhere to hide. "Are you awake?" A youth perhaps a year or two older than her poked his head through the door. He stopped short when he saw her cringing on the bed. "Can I come in?"

What is he doing? she wondered, craning her neck to see if Lornk stood behind the boy.

He stepped across the threshold. "I understand your name is Kara. Please call me Earnk. My father asked me to look after you while he's gone—what's wrong?"

Vic scurried to hide behind the bed, shaking her head furiously. "He's gone?" she croaked, eyeing the open door.

"He didn't tell you?" The boy rolled his eyes. "Oh, well. He'll be gone a month or two. I'm supposed to take care of you. Are you hungry? You look like you could use some sun. How long have you been with us?" He sat on the corner of the bed and waited for an answer, blinking his father's indigo eyes at her. He spoke like Lornk, both out loud and to her mind, but his speech seemed . . . smoother . . . than his father's. Earnk

had Lornk's golden hair, but his face was longer and his frame shorter and more slender.

"Where's your mother?" she asked suspiciously. It had never occurred to her that Lornk might have a family.

"Dead." His eyes hardened. Flinching, she slid toward the bathroom. He stared at her, his lips tightening with menace, then softening into a frown. "You weren't born in Traine, were you?"

"I don't even know where Traine is."

He nodded. "There're so many dialects in the city—I didn't think. Where are you from?"

She shook her head. "North. It's much warmer here."

"That will change. Summer's over."

A shiver rippled down her spine in memory of the night before, the coldest yet. Would she be allowed clothes when it grew colder? She continued edging toward the bathroom as he watched her, his gaze as intent as his father's. Suddenly flushing, she wished he would go away.

"Do you want to get some air?"

Her eyes darted to the outside door, left open on the dark stairway. "I can leave?"

"The garden and courtyard are all right, but you shouldn't leave the house. You're too valuable to get lost in the streets, and Traine's not an easy place to find your way. Even I've gotten lost on my way home from school."

"School?" Books, she thought, with longing.

He shrugged, a closed smile curving his lips. "The only time I come home is when he's away." The nonchalance of his voice, as if he weren't telling her anything personal, surprised her. Starting suddenly, he touched the bare mattress. "Where are the bedclothes?"

Swallowing, Vic glanced at the door. If this were some trick . . . "He took them."

"Do you want them back?"

She hesitated. The boy's question was earnest, puzzled—not calculated, as if he were luring her into something. Slowly, she nodded.

"I'll have someone—"

"Never mind," she blurted.

"What's wrong?"

Her voice caught on the answer. But he must also have been able to hear her thoughts because he sighed and sat down again. "Why are you afraid? No one but my father can touch you. Hasn't anyone else come by before now?"

She shook her head. Frowning, he went to the door, flexed the handle, told her it was no longer locked. "I'll be back later with the linens." As the latch clicked, Vic ran and put her back against the door, then sank to the floor, her fingers raking through her hair. *I've spoiled you. I'll have to change that*, he'd promised. Now she feared his return more than when he had left.



Earnk felt his way down the dark steps, his thoughts muddled. She was young, though boys and girls younger than her waited outside cafes all the time. Yet he had never seen anyone scared like her before, except his mother. The last year of her life, Mother had huddled in the corner, whimpering. She'd gone mad, everyone said. Earnk stumbled on the stairs, shaking his head to free the clinging memory. Richelle had been proud to be Lornk Korng's mistress, especially as he never married. But the last year of her life, that pride had withered into shame, and shame into madness.

"Maybe Father's new mistress will tell me why," he muttered, thinking of her wide green eyes and quivering hands.

Light and noise burst through the open door at the bottom of the tower. Bodyguards and servitors, just rising to their

morning duties, clapped him on the back as he passed through the courtyard, welcoming him home. They expected an easy month while Lornk was gone and his son was in charge. Discipline already slack, Earnk stopped and cast a round of dice with the grooms, grinned, and ruffled a boy's hair before heading toward the kitchen.

He found Elsa in the pantry. "Where are the bed linens?"

She nodded toward a closet. "What do you need them for?"

"Father's mistress doesn't have any."

"That man." Elsa smiled and shook her head. "He brought them down some time ago and asked to have them laundered. You mean he hasn't returned them to the poor girl? He's so forgetful."

Negligent, you mean. "Well, here they are, curtains and all. Why hasn't anyone been up to see her?"

"Oh, his lordship said she was from a savage place with no civilized ways. He didn't want anyone to laugh at her because she didn't know how to use a fork. She's quite good for him. He needs a hobby."

"She's an expensive hobby if she's not bred in Traine."

"True. But you know your father's whims. He does care for her though. I think she reminds him of your poor mother. He grieved for Richelle too long."

Grimacing, Earnk shook his head. "Right. I'll take these upstairs now."

"Why don't you let me? I haven't seen the girl yet."

"She's very timid."

Elsa waved her hands dismissively. "That's nothing a friendly face won't cure. I hear she's from the north, where my grandfather—your great-granduncle—came from." She sighed. "The stories he would tell. All these fables about great ships falling from the sky. Nonsense, but delightful."

"Let me go up for now. I don't think she knows anything about ships. I'll bring her down later."

"You're the master for now." She patted the sheets in his hand, then winked at him. "But careful, dear. Don't grow too fond of your father's toys. Don't play with her either."

"I'm well aware of the consequences, Elsa."

He gathered some fruit and sausages from the larder and took them with him back to the tower. On the way, he stopped at the library and picked up a few picture books. It was time this girl started learning Betheljin.

When he had stumbled with full arms back up the stairs, he had to knock again because the girl had shut the door. He waited a minute, then called to her. Finally the latch clicked open. As he elbowed his way inside and dumped his load on the table, the girl peeked at him from behind the door, her eyes like emeralds.

Uncomfortable under the intense stare, he threaded the rod through the curtains. One window was missing a glass pane—something to have fixed before the autumn storms blew in. While his attention was on the drapes, she crept over and took a sheet from the pile, then lay down on the bed beneath it.

"I brought you some breakfast," he said when the curtains were up.

"Thank you," she croaked.

"I also brought some books—"

The eyes peeped out. "Books?"

He raised his eyebrows, not expecting her interest. "I thought I could show you the pictures and tell you how to say them. Not everyone has mindspeech in Traine."

"Show me." She sat up, head and shoulders emerging from the sheet, careful to keep the rest of her body covered. Earnk had never heard of such modesty—even Relmans seemed more sophisticated than this girl. He sat beside her and opened one of his childhood favorites. "Man, woman, chair, table, bowl, spoon. You try."

She pointed and repeated his words, then named other objects in the picture. "Cookie, bread, tray, plate. Read me the story."

"What?"

"Please." Her eyes had softened to a brownish hazel, weighted by long dark lashes. "Don't think the words to me. Just read it and let me follow the pictures. That's how I'd teach the children to read at home."

He blinked at her. "Teach? You can read?"

"Of course." Eyes flashed at him, then fixed on the ground.

"It's about a cookie that comes to life and runs away," he began unsteadily. Somehow she had made him feel like the savage.

"Hmph."

He grinned. Modest and brash at the same time. "You don't want to run away."

"I don't know. Read the story."

He read that story and all the others. She asked him to bring more and let her keep these so she could study. "Your alphabet is quite similar to ours, and I think I can remember what you named things."

"You learn quickly."

"Your father taught me a little."

"What other words do you know?"

She flushed and Earnk felt his own face grow hot—prying into his father's privacy was a mistake he would not wish to make in front of him. "Are you sure you don't want to go walking?" he stammered.

Her face turned toward the outside window, and hope rippled from the blink of her eyes down to the corners of her mouth. Then her expression hardened. "I wish you'd bring me more books."

Fascinated, he sat at the table, nibbling at her breakfast. "So, you were a teacher?"

Startled, she turned back to him, her eyes wet. "I was . . ." She swallowed, then looked down at the bands around her wrists. "I was a Logkeeper."

"You collected firewood?"

"No," she snapped, her eyes flashing green again, her face flushed with impatience. That look alone confirmed she had been a teacher of some sort—he'd seen the same on his own instructors when he taunted them. "I traveled around the villages, teaching our history, among other things."

He nodded. "You mean you were a recorder. Can you sing?"

"I know some songs, but I'm no singer." Leaning forward, she spoke more loudly, with greater confidence. "The Logs are our history—and yours too. Our ancestors came from Earth on the mining ship *Elesendar*. We weren't supposed to end up here, but there was an accident."

Earnk laughed. "You're a heretic! I'll have to try that one out on my friends next time we discuss theology. *Elesendar* an accident!"

Now she glared openly at him. "Logkeepers preserve the Logs and the data banks so that someday the people on this world can go home."

He suppressed another guffaw. "To the stars? Why don't your own people go?"

"If you haven't noticed, there's precious little metal on this planet." Beneath the sheet, her hand tugged at her belt. "We chartered ourselves to preserve the Logs—the rest of you are responsible for figuring out a way home. Instead, you waste your time"—she waved at the room—"indulging yourselves."

Blood pounding suddenly in his ears, he stood. "I have things to do."

Vic watched him charge out, her heart in her throat. This boy's open face and clumsiness, so different from Lornk's grace and veiled looks, invited her confidence. Lornk would smile with all his teeth bared, like a koot before it bites. Earnk had a gentle mouth. Lornk's eyes stripped her like a gale; Earnk's gaze ruffled her like a spring breeze. She could still smell his spicy-earthy cologne, and his voice, reading, echoed in the room. The food lay frazzled from his nibbling. She shook her head, trying to clear it. It's only because he's the first one I've seen who wasn't *him*. A book lay open next to her on the bed. Her heart sighed. Books. Like water in the desert, she thought. No. Like, like—similes failed her. The Oreseekers had nothing that compared with books, although she imagined that chocolate, the delicacy of the Ancients, might. The Ancients had described one bite of that food as a metaphor of life: hard and bitter followed by a softening in the mouth to a final sweet lingering. Some of the books transcribed in the Logs would linger in Vic's mind for days, their hardness, their bitterness often the source of their sweetness. She sighed. It felt like a lifetime since she'd thought about such things. This boy had appeared and Kara had vanished.

The door stood open. She thought again that Lornk could be waiting outside, testing her loyalty. Even if this weren't a trick, she thought glumly, where would she escape if she ran? For all she knew, that pirate ship might have taken her off the planet and put her among the stars. Someplace where people already had a taste for beauty. Her own dreams mocked her.

Standing up on the bed, she looked at herself in the mirror. Really looked. Her eyes had avoided that wall for the past three months, but now she threw off the sheet and stared at the reflection. Touching the jeweled band at her throat, she thought of all the other mistresses she had seen walk by on the street below. Why couldn't she muster the same pride? A vision of

Lornk's tongue licking his lips gripped her stomach, and she sank to the bed again. She had never been good at anything physical, and she certainly had never kissed anybody, not even—especially not—greasy Henry. So why would Lornk, or the trader who'd picked her, have thought she would be good at this? This boy Earnk acted as if she ought to enjoy it, and that woman at the warehouse had said she'd have an easy life. The people from Cairo who'd been taken with her—what awful things had happened to them? Did they toil in a mine somewhere or push oars in a galley? It seemed likely Ellen and Freddie had been sold as mistresses too, and poor Freddie was only a boy! Did they suffer rape and degradation from masters even more cruel than hers? She supposed things could have been much, much worse, but still . . . her fear of Lornk, and, worse, her *craving* for him—the shameful desire to accept him and her place with him—was the hardest thing she'd ever known.

Lost in thought, she didn't hear the voice in the doorway. A woman bustled in with a soft smile and kind eyes that rooted Vic to her seat. Gray hair waved loose over her shoulders, and her vest bared large, well muscled arms. Oreseeker men would have appreciated that physique. She spoke, something about Vic's breakfast.

"No," Vic answered, signaling that she didn't want the food taken away yet. Nodding, the woman took a yellow sash from a pocket in her trousers, unraveling it in the sunlight.

"Where did you get that?" Forgetting to be shy, Vic moved to take the sash. It wasn't hers. "This is a Logkeeper's sash. It's very old."

The woman laughed and kissed Vic on the cheeks, then began talking rapidly and pointing at the ceiling. She took Vic's hand and started toward the door, still laughing and talking.

"No! No, thank you," Vic managed in Betheljin. She retreated to the table, and pointed to the food, excusing herself.

With a frown, the woman shrugged and left, leaving the sash in Vic's hand. Reverently, she laid it out on the table, bits of the fragile wool clinging to her fingers. Once again she wondered if the day's events were part of an elaborate trap leading up to a punishment for defying Lornk. "I don't care if it is," she whispered, laying her cheek against the wool, feeling she'd just regained a small part of herself.



Earnk hesitated before opening the glass cabinet. His father had never forbidden him the books inside—on the contrary, Lornk Korng would have been pleased to find his son thumbing through the leather-bound diaries and Ancient volumes. But Earnk's shoulders crept toward his ears, hoping to muffle Mother's contralto laughter as she and Father exchanged verses from these books. Shaking off the memory, he pulled open the cabinet and took out one of the older volumes, a Log of the Ancients, written in their obtuse, vowel-heavy language. The same one Kara spoke.

"I'm having the east tower sconces filled with oil," Elsa said, coming into the library. "It's a wonder your father hasn't broken his neck, climbing those stairs in the dark."

Earnk ducked his head to hide a grimace, his fingernails digging into his palm. "Do you know where these came from?" He held up the one of the diaries.

She smiled. "Those belonged to my grandfather. Your great-grandmother put them in here. He told me his fables were written inside them, but no one ever tried to read them except your mother and father. Pappy was gone by then."

"How come you never learned?"

"Come now. I was to learn to cook, not study old books. I like a good story, but my ears are better than my eyes."

"Kara talked to me about going back to the stars."

"I knew it." She clapped her hands together. "I know you told me not to, but I couldn't resist seeing her, and she didn't seem that frightened. I took my grandfather's sash, and she went wild over it."

"Do you think she could read these books?"

"Could be, dear. Let her finish eating and then go up and ask her. Perhaps I should come with you."

"Are you that curious?"

She pressed her lips together, cocking an eyebrow. "You know I love you. But after I've seen her, I'll warn you again. I know you. See that you don't get too close."

"I'm not stupid, Elsa."

"I know. You're clever enough to think you can get away with something. Don't even think about it, love. After his last mistress, your father's been a little suspicious of everybody. He'll know, believe me."

"And how do you know?"

"Don't be flip with me. You're not the master yet."

"That isn't what you said earlier."

"I was humoring you. His lordship tells me things nobody else hears. That girl's a virgin until he can trust her. Don't let anything happen that could hurt either one of you."

Earnk's cheeks flamed. "Nothing's going to happen, and you don't have to chaperone us. I know my place."

"Good. I hope she knows hers."

"Nothing will happen."



When he went back to Kara's room that afternoon, Earnk found the rest of the curtains up and the bed made. Even with the draperies, sunlight blazed off the white walls and

furnishings, blinding him after the walk up the dark stairway. The bedspread glowed like a patch of lawn found clear after the first snowfall. Verdant, alive, doomed.

He expected to find Kara hiding under the bed, but she surprised him by being seated at the table reading one of the books, wearing nothing but what she ought. When he came in, she looked at him with glistening eyes and puffy cheeks. He asked if she'd been crying.

"This story is so sad." She held up a picture book that had been one of his favorites.

"That's a happy story. The king finds his lost love."

She shook her head, her frown telling him he was a fool. "That isn't what the pictures say. Look at this woman being turned into a bird. Her expression is rapturous, as if that's what she's always wanted. And here on the last page, after the king disenchanting her and is taking her to his castle, she looks sad, and they're so old. By that time, what difference did it make?"

"The point is that they found each other, no matter how long it took."

"Maybe she didn't want to be found."

He shook his head, cleared his throat. "Elsa, the woman who came up earlier, thought you might know what these are. She said you recognized the sash."

Kara glanced down at the yellow wool in her lap. "How did she get one of these?"

"It was her grandfather's."

"How did he get here?" He could almost taste the bitterness in that question.

"I think he was found adrift by some traders. My great-grandmother bought him and let him keep his things."

She swallowed. "You're his great-grandson?"

"My family came from a formal arrangement."

She peered at his books, saying nothing. But her thoughts

were loud as anyone's who didn't know mindspeech, and he heard glimpses of a man defying tradition and setting out on a boat alone with some valuable artifacts. Kara sighed. "Are those his Logs?"

He brought them to her and sat while she thumbed carefully, reverently, through the pages. "These are the personal logs of the first officer. They detail a visit to Jupiter, another planet in the crew's home system." Her voice trembled. "These have been missing for generations—hundreds of years. Charles the Fool did not take these away with him. Where did they come from?"

"They were in the same cabinet with the books Elsa's grandfather had. We thought all of them were his."

"There are more?"

"A whole cabinet."

She looked at the window, clenching and unclenching her fists. He sensed sudden determination building up inside her like a brick wall. "Take me to them."

Earnk smiled. She was like a wounded bird stretching her wings for the first time in weeks. And he suddenly thought that he might become her friend, and that would be enough to make sure his father could never trust her. I won't touch her, Elsa, but he won't have her either. "Come on. I'll show you the library."

## CHAPTER 6

### CUSTOMS

She read avidly, up at dawn and in the library pouring over the Logs. She didn't share her hmms and uh-huhs with him, so Earnk Listened in on her thoughts. What he Heard astounded him. She actually believed the stories of ships that flew through space, on board which people had lived, worked, loved. He kept asking questions about the books, pulling her out from behind that brick wall. A good storyteller, she related many of the log records to him, sharing her theories about the sabotage of the *Elesendar*. At night, he took her up on the roof and had her point out the Gamorrahs and the constellation from whence the *Elesendar's* crew had come. The first week, instead of teaching her Betheljin as he'd intended, he found himself learning from her as they scanned the Logs together. He looked forward to the dumbfounded look on his Classics teacher's face when he returned to school. But the more time they spent together, the more Elsa would drop into the library at random, patting Kara on the head and frowning harshly at him.

Within a few weeks, she settled into the household, no longer blushing when she bumped into someone in the hall. She would walk in the garden and ask the gardener in broken Betheljin what herbs he was growing and when the vegetables

would be ready for harvest. She joined the household on Enddays to watch the bodyguards wrestle. She spent evenings with Elsa, telling her stories of their ancestors, her Betheljin improving each evening they spoke together. The day the clockmaker came to tune the floor clock, she watched his work so avidly and asked so many questions that he took the entire mechanism apart to show her how each gear drove the others. So long as no one mentioned Earnk's father, she seemed happy. And the library became her domain. After she had read through all the Logs, she moved on to studying Betheljin, picking it up far quicker than he had learned Relman with formal instruction at school. Then she announced one day that the library was a mess and she was going to reorganize it. Now genuinely wanting to be with her, Earnk didn't hesitate to offer his help.

"Why do you have a copy of this book about rocks?" she asked as they were sorting, holding out a large tome with a picture of a granite slab on the front.

"That's the Relman Stonemasters Guild Creed. Go ahead and put that in the non-Betheljin pile."

"Why do you have it?"

"My father rules Relm—that's where he is now. The war's heated up, and he was needed there."

"Oh." He Heard her wonder if Lornk had stolen the throne.

"It was a peaceful succession, I promise you! The Relman people love my father. The Lathan war has lasted a whole generation. They've been fighting as long as I've been alive. All that time, Father has defended the border and made sure trade never suffered." Beckoning her over, he dug an atlas out of the piles and made space on the table. "This is Relm here in the south. You can see it's got no seaports because these mountains in the west are impassable. Relm used to send its goods through Lathan ports, but when the Lathan Ruler closed the border, my

father negotiated overland routes through Semeneminieu here in the east, and trade has boomed since.”

“Semmen-emma-what?”

He laughed. “Semeneminieu. Just say Semeana plains; everyone will know what you mean.”

She gave him a quizzical look. “Relm is landlocked, but Trainie is a port city.”

He grinned and pointed to it on the map. “It is. See, it’s the capital of Betheljin, up here.”

Her eyes measured the distance between the two nations. “That must be thousands of miles!”

“About five thousand.”

“Your father couldn’t travel that far in one or two months.”

Earnk chuckled, enjoying her consternation. “He can and does. He goes to Relm nearly every day. The only reason he’s been gone so long now is that his Council needed him in Re—that’s Relm’s capital, here on the plains.” He directed her attention back to the map. “But my father rules mostly from Olmlablaire, up here in the mountains. People also call it Lordhome.”

She arched her eyebrows at him, a look he’d come to recognize as an expression of ignorance she blamed upon him, not on herself. “Five thousand miles? How is that possible?”

“I’ll show you.” Happy to teach her something, he clambered over the piles of books and shoved some volumes aside on a shelf, revealing a small wooden knob poking out of the paneling. “This will let you into a room behind these cases.”

“A secret room?”

“Not secret to anybody who lives here. Do you want to see it?”

“Can I?” The question was suspicious, not curious.

He pulled out the knob. “Come on.”

A section of the bookcase swung back, revealing a smooth granite passage lit by sconces. As they descended, he told her how the servants kept the sconces lit all the time so Lornk wouldn't have to fumble in the dark for candles. Her steps hesitated at the mention of his father, but as they went deeper, her shoulders straightened and she bowed her head. The ramp leveled out, and the passage widened before ending abruptly, forming a circular room carved from the bedrock beneath Traine. In the center of the floor, a black metal knob angled out of a white porcelain sconce. Around the knob, slots spoked between blue gems. Kara walked around the Device, glanced at him, then knelt down and pointed at the knob, resting in the southeastern slot. "What is this?"

"The Device. That's how my father can keep two houses five thousand miles apart. Don't touch it—you could end up in Relm."

As if stung, she jerked her hand back. "How? Who made it?"

"I always thought it was wizards' work, but nobody knows for sure."

Kara harrumphed. Why a girl who believed their ancestors came from *space* refused to accept the documented facts about wizards was one of the mysteries he liked about her. "What happens if the knob is in one of the other slots?" she asked.

"Oblivion. None of the other slots will take you anywhere, but you'll disappear from here. It's a death I'd rather not think about."

Kara bit her lip, her fingers lingering near the Device. "I'd think about it," she whispered.

Swallowing, he glanced back toward the library. "I thought you were starting to like it here." Those green eyes shot daggers at him, then faded to hazel, and her glare smoothed over. He couldn't eavesdrop at times like these; her thoughts were too jumbled.

"I do like some things."

"Do you like me?"

"I might if you called me by my real name."

"The name we gave you is your real name now."

She shook her head. "My name is Victoria . . . Vic, to my friends."

He grabbed at what she offered before he could figure out what it was. "I'll call you anything you like if you come out with me tonight."

She stood, her hands hugging her shoulders. Whenever visitors came to the house, she would quickly disappear, retreating to her tower. Clearing her throat, she raised her eyes and asked, "You promise not to call me Kara anymore?"

"Yes. Vic. There's a fair outside the Commissar's palace tonight. I'd like to buy you some winter clothes."

"Clothes? I'm allowed?"

"It snows a lot in winter. You'll need boots and a coat. Is it very cold in the north where you're from?"

"The tundra's probably already frozen by now," she said sadly. "I'll be glad when it gets truly cold here."

Their eyes met and he smiled. "It will. Soon." Then his smile faded. After my father gets back.

"Do you think I'm beautiful?"

The question ambushed him, and he stuttered his answer. "You're very appealing."

But not beautiful, he heard her think in response. His fingers reached for hers—the first time he'd ever touched her. Static jolted up his arm, and his heart lurched. "I cannot say you're beautiful. I cannot even think it. I'm not allowed. We all have our place"—drawing his fingers out of hers was like drawing aching muscles out of a hot bath—"and mine is to be nothing more than your friend."

She stared at him, eyes blinking back toward green, glanced

at the Device, then turned and started up the ramp. "I don't think you can even do that."

"Will you still come with me tonight?"

She did not turn around. "Do I really have a choice?"

Unable to answer her aloud, he shook his head.



Back in the tower room, Vic watched the milk peddler make a late delivery across the street, but her mind was stuck on the secret room under the library. When Earnk had so nonchalantly shown it to her, she had expected to meet Lornk there, as if the son was presenting her—tamed—to the father. She was certain nothing that happened in Lornk's absence was done without his blessing. He'd put her on a very long lead, perhaps to show how pleasant her life might be if she gave him what he wanted. *I have your obedience. I want your devotion.*

Could she give it to him? All his servants had—grooms, bodyguards, housemaids, cooks all venerated their master. Elsa revered him, seemed to bear no resentment that they shared a grandmother but Lornk had inherited a kingdom while she labored as his housekeeper. Earnk alone betrayed discontent, but just now, in the library, his eyes had shone with admiration as he described his father's reign. Earnk bore his father's face, his hair and eyes, but was in every way smaller, more human, more humane. Softly, she cursed the boy. With the curtains and bedclothes, Earnk had restored her dignity. With books, he had restored her intellect. With her name, he had restored a life she'd thought lost.

When Lornk returned, he'd take them away again, unless, perhaps, she gave him what he wanted. *Your devotion.*

A sob welled up from her belly, her eyes filling with tears, but she bit back the grief. This is *my* life. Not Lornk's.

I am . . . Her thoughts paused. The litany was so familiar, she could not complete it without “his.” I *am* his. She felt herself—Vic, the girl Earnk had resurrected—slipping down a hole, leaving nothing but the craving of Kara. For nearly a month she’d slept alone in this room, and she missed the smell of him, the heat of him, the press of his skin to hers in the night. Shame surged up her throat, revulsion for the part of her that was eager for his return.

Slowly she rose. Elsa’s workers had lit the lamps all the way down and the door at the bottom stood open, letting in light and chatter from the courtyard. It was no longer the dark place where Lornk had caught her that night, yet every time Vic touched the door, her heart would jump to her throat. He might have killed her here. That night he had shown her how her very breath came and left at his command. *I want you to crave me.* Elesendar, but she did. Shivering, feeling ill, she hurried across the courtyard and through the kitchen door, slipped through the servants’ dining room to the hallway. A solid red runner led down the marble floor past the library. She paused, looking back at the white stone walls, the hallway empty except for the floor clock, ticking off miracles as the interlocking brass gears turned in time with the pendulum swing. How many marvels had she found within this house? Not enough, she decided, and went into the library.

Stacks of handwritten quartos, piles of printed volumes teetered all over the floor, narrow walkways between the heaps. Earnk was gone, had shut the door to the secret room, even replaced the books in front of the switch. She reached up behind them and quickly pulled the little knob out. When Lornk came back, she knew in her bones she’d fall to her knees and give him whatever he wanted, lest he lock her away again. Panting, heart beating wildly, she felt loathing churn in her belly, not for him, but for the clockwork doll he’d make of her.

The bookcase swung back; she clenched her fists and ran down the passageway. Oblivion, Earnk had said. A protest gibbered in her stomach, but she clamped her jaw shut and moved forward. Oblivion was better than life as his toy.

At the bottom of the ramp, Elsa squatted over the knob, holding a letter. Vic skidded to a halt.

The housekeeper trundled up, tucking the letter inside her vest. "My dear! How did you get in here?"

Thwarted, Vic sat on the cold stone floor, suddenly unable to swallow her tears. Elsa kneeled beside her and put an arm around her shoulders. "What were you going to do?"

Vic pressed her forehead to her knees. "I want to die, Elsa."

"No, you don't. Let's go up and I'll make you some tea."

Shaking her head, Vic gulped back another deep sob. "He's coming home soon, isn't he?"

Elsa squeezed her shoulders, but her voice was firm. "Now listen, miss. Don't you blame him for what those pirates did to your village." Surprised, Vic raised her head. Elsa's mouth was grim, her resemblance to Lornk sharp. "He treasures you like silver."

A clockwork doll made of silver, a fragile thing that would tarnish if left out in the air. "I can't let him own me."

"Anyone who loves you owns a part of you. The secret is to own a part of him."

"By loving him?"

Elsa nodded. "As Earnk's mother did."

"And that worked so well for her," Vic spat. "Did he kill her outright, or just neglect to feed her?"

The slap came fast and stinging. Vic stared at the housekeeper, heat spreading from her jaw to her eyebrows. Elsa's lip quivering in anger, she shook her finger. "He loved Richelle as he loved his life. Now, he has opened his heart to you, and you should cherish that gift; he doesn't give it easily."

Standing, arms akimbo, her eyes blazed with the same glacial fury as Lornk's.

Elsa escorted Vic up the tower stairs; by the time they reached the top landing, she had resumed the manner of the kindly housekeeper and promised to send some hot water for a bath. After the men brought up the steaming urns, Vic let it grow cold before she slipped into the tub. Shivering, she hoped to freeze her tears and brace herself for the future.

When Earnk arrived near sundown and fastened a chain to her belt, she managed to gulp back her protest and accept it. He offered an apology anyway. "We have customs. The crowds will be thick and I don't want to lose you. It's for your own protection."

Glum, she followed on his lead out into the street for the first time. Immediately, the crowd swept them down steep hills toward the wharves. Silks and animal tails tickled her skin as they hustled their way forward. Colored lanterns hung overhead; banners flapped from drainpipes and cornice stones. A woman danced by them and grabbed Earnk's neck, kissing him before teetering on. Everywhere people swirled in laughter and abandon, every face wearing an eager smile. After a long walk down switchbacking avenues, they entered an enormous square seething with color and music.

Every few steps a musician stood with pipes or harp or guitar or a poet heralded the passersby with tales. As the barrage of color and sound assaulted her, Vic forgot herself and began to smile. Grinning, Earnk pulled her out of the way of a passing troupe of jugglers. "Let's find the weavers. I know you don't want to stay long," he said drily.

In the cluster of crafters' booths, boys and girls bearing bolts of cloth or strips of leather hawked their way through the crowd. Young people danced by, rattling bells in their faces, trying to entice them into this booth or the other. Earnk pointed to a sign showing a strange creature with large horns

shedding its coat, and they went inside. She'd almost forgotten the precious privacy clothing provided. As she tried on one cloak and another, she bit her lip to stifle the longing to hold one around herself and walk free. But even the choice of color was not hers. "I think the gold one suits you best," Earnk said, and paid for delivery.

After a visit to a cobbler, Earnk bought them skewers lined with succulent meat, followed by a dish of sweet iced cream. A minstrel strolled by, her voice clear and lovely but her language strange.

Earnk gave the young woman some crystal stones. "She's a Lathan minstrel."

"Isn't Latha the country your father's fighting?"

"I can still admire them."

A roar went up some aisles away. Earnk said people were dancing in the center of the square. "Would you like to go see?"

At her nod, he clasped her hand and pulled her toward the noise, but as they passed a brewer's stall, someone called Earnk's name, and they slipped through the throng, across the walkway to the beckoning young man. "Come, have a drink with us," he said.

"Friends from school," Earnk whispered, pointing to a bench outside the stall. "Wait here. I won't be long."

"I can't come with you?"

"Silly law. You're not allowed in. I'll only be a few minutes."

He handed her the other end of the leash and went over to his friends. The one who'd invited him smiled and nodded at her. "Where did you get her?"

"She belongs to my father."

With that sour reminder, Vic sat. People jostled past, fascinating her with their clothes, their hair, their shapes. The mistresses on their leads all held their heads up, smiling at the admiring glances. One of them sat beside her while his master

and her friends went inside the brewer's stall. The boy's glossy black hair hung past his waist, covering his lap as Vic's had done once. She couldn't help staring at a cock much smaller than Lornk's, but just as lively. When his black, almond eyes looked up at her and he grinned, her cheeks grew hot.

"Come with me," he whispered in Betheljin, tossing his head at a space between booths.

On his third mug, Earnk looked as if he planned to stay a while.

"Why?" she asked the boy.

"They'll be there a long time."

Feeling like an errant child, but relishing a chance to *choose*, Vic tiptoed with the other mistress into the space between tents. Bushes and canvas screened them as the boy touched her arm and ran light fingers up it, making the hair stand on end. Her stomach tightened.

"I should get back now." She forgot to speak in Betheljin. The boy's grip became suddenly strong and he pressed her hips to his. Vic yelped and slapped him, pushing him away.

"Save it for your master then," he spat. "He won't want you soon enough."

"I hope you're right," she cried as she ran.

Back at the brewer's, more people had gathered around Earnk's table, all laughing and toasting. She let the crowd sweep her toward the center of the square. There, on a stage erected before the gates of an enormous palace, musicians played a reel. Couples, threesomes, people alone skipped in circles and threw their hands above their heads. The dancers spun wildly, running into each other and knocking one another down. But hands pulled the fallen back on their feet before they could be trampled, and everyone laughed. Vic grinned softly, remembering the fish scoop.

"Would you like to dance?" The question sounded entirely

in her mind, not in her ears at all. A tall young man stood in front of her, hand extended. Dark eyes danced beneath heavy lashes. Teeth dazzled white against light brown skin. Her breath frozen, she looked around, thinking he could not have been speaking to her. Then she pointed to herself and shrugged her shoulders. "It'll be fun," he said, beckoning with long fingers.

"No, thank you," she mumbled at last, backing into the crowd. The young man gazed after her, hands twitching at his sides, then shrugged and moved off. Vic watched him from a safe distance. His dark eyes glowed in the torchlight; his hair glistened in tight black ringlets; his laugh inviting as he watched the dancers—she had never seen anyone so beautiful. When the reel ended, he made his way to the stage while a woman called to the crowd for their attention. Getting a white harp from a stand at the back of the dais, he stepped forward as the woman announced, "Ashel, Recorder of Latha."

He sang in the strange language she'd heard earlier, his voice ringing deep and clear with profound emotion. The words unintelligible, the ballad still spoke of safety and home and never being ashamed again. As Vic watched, his eyes scanned the audience, resting on one and another, pausing on her, moving to someone else. The murmurs of the crowd died to a whisper, then silence as the song continued. Nearby, a large, flamboyantly silked woman placed her hand over her heart and sighed. Piqued, the blond mistress beside her rolled his eyes, but the minstrel's pure voice drew the mistress's gaze back to the stage. Then the singer's tone changed and his voice sank with despair. Tears ran down his cheeks even as Vic tasted the salt on her own lips. Enthused stomping and congested cries greeted the song's end. Vic stumbled away, feeling as lost as she had her first day in Traine.

When she got back to the brewer's, Earnk sat on the bench, alone and fuming. As soon as she emerged from the crowd, he

swiped up the chain at her belt and waved the ringed handle in front of her face. "Do I have to fasten you where I leave you? Where have you been?"

"I didn't think you'd miss me."

Grabbing her arms, he shook her. "You've embarrassed me. Do you know what that means to be snubbed by a mistress?"

"You're drunk."

Snarling, he tugged her after him, back up the steep hills to Lornk's palazzo. It was a long walk, the silence broken only by Earnk's mutterings. When they finally reached the top of the tower, he shoved her in her room and locked the door. Throat tight, eyes dry, Vic hid all the way under the covers and tried to pretend she was safe.



The next morning, she woke at dawn to find Earnk reading at the table, breakfast and flowers next to his book.

"I need a bath," she said.

He nodded at the door, eyes bloodshot. "Please go ahead." Hoping he'd leave, she took a long time in the bathroom, but he was still there when she came out.

"I didn't mean what I said last night."

She glared at him. "Don't take me out again. Next time I won't come back."

"I thought you'd become comfortable with . . . who you are."

"I hate who I am! I'm your father's *slave*, and I hate it. I hate myself."

He looked away. A warbler cried from the roof. Children shouted at each other on the street below. Vic tore at a piece of bread, aware of how noisily she ate with a nose full of tears.

"You can't hate yourself," he whispered. "You can't because you're loved."

She scowled. "Elsa told me. He loves me and it's a great gift. I'm so honored, I'm repulsed."

"I'm not talking about him." Earnk twisted his napkin. "Vic, I love you."

She put down the bread and stared at him. "You can't. You said you can't."

"I do."

"What about your father?"

"My father," he spat. He reached across the table and grabbed her head, spilling the juice. Pulling her toward him, he kissed her, then came round the table and took her in his arms. At first when his tongue pushed past her teeth, she was too surprised to do anything, feel anything. But the kiss catalyzed her anger into desire. A flame suddenly flared in the pit of her stomach, and she trembled as he tugged her head aside and kissed her neck. She wanted to go limp in his arms, wondering if she loved him back. Lornk could make a black fire erupt in her head, but she'd never felt this warmth in the pit of her stomach before.

"Wait," she breathed, his mouth hot on her shoulder. "Not here. This is your father's place."

He stopped. "So let's go to ours."

They went down the stairs, talking nervously, as if they could keep the waking servants from guessing what they were going to do. "We really should finish cleaning up the library."

"Oh yes. A terrible mess."

"Books all over the floor."

They walked very fast, barely keeping themselves from running. "Why don't we put the books on wizardry in with the other craft books."

"You think so?"

"It was a craft once, with apprentices and everything. It really did happen, you know."

In the library, they locked the doors and closed the curtains. "What about the Device?" Vic asked, her eyes fixed on the wall hiding the secret passage.

Earnk bent down to kiss her neck. "It's too soon for him to be back; it takes time to travel to and from Re." He opened his robe and pressed against her belly. His lips setting her skin aflame, Vic quivered with the anticipation and the defiance. "I'm going to die for this," he whispered. "I love you."

"Just kiss me," she gasped, clutching his neck. If Lornk killed her for this, so be it; the clockwork doll would never breathe for him again. Earnk's mouth tasted sweet and cool. His hair smelled like fresh grass. She ran her fingers through it, thick and soft. A shaft of sunlight would set it ablaze. "You're like a summer day," she marveled.

"And you are beautiful, Vic." He swept the books from the table and lifted her onto it, brushed his lips against a nipple, his tongue teasing. Sparks shot through her blood as he pulled the breast into his mouth. His cock strained within his pantaloons, and Vic tugged at his laces.

"Elsa said . . ." He pulled back, eyes earnest. "I don't want to hurt you."

Her breath short, her blood on fire, she opened her legs. "You won't."

"This explains a lot." Lornk's voice cut through their ardor, and they sprang apart like errant children. Their lord sauntered in, dangling a key from a finger. Vic's breath froze as his glacial eyes passed over her. "When I came home last night, I asked Elsa why my library was such a wreck. She said you'd taken it upon yourselves to catalog it. Now I see why the reorganization has taken so long."

"It's my fault," Vic stammered, stepping in front of Earnk.

"I'm sure it is, my dear." He took her by the scruff of her neck, pulling her head backward. "Don't worry. You'll survive."

"Don't hurt her." Earnk's voice quavered. Lornk backhanded him across the face. "My son," he snarled. "You know the price of betrayal."

Vic backed away as Lornk struck Earnk again, and again. Earnk stood still, his fingers gripping the edge of the table behind him. Whimpering at the bloody gash over his eye, Vic sank to her knees. Earnk's gaze followed her. I love you, he said silently, the words distinct in her mind. The father's next blow sent the son sprawling across the table. Her fear crystallized, Vic sprang up and grabbed Lornk's arm. "Stop it," she screamed. "You're killing him."

He smiled at her, the rest of his face smooth, calm. "That was my intent." He struck her. Reeling backward, Vic fell across a stack of books and banged her head on the edge of a bookshelf. Stunned, she grabbed at the bookcase, pulling books out as she scrambled to stay on her feet. Her knees gave out, and her fingers grabbed at something cold and hard, pulling it out. The false bookcase swung back, and she fell headfirst into the passageway behind it. "No!" Lornk cried, as she rolled down the ramp. She struggled to her feet, dazed, and heard him tripping over the books above, trying to get to the passage. Head pounding, she stumbled toward the Device. Lornk yelled for her to stop. He wouldn't kill her; he'd lock her up and strip her bare again, tinkering with her will until once again the clockwork doll breathed and blinked for him alone. The black knob jutting from the floor gleamed, inviting her to oblivion. Lornk's hand stretched toward her, his face contorted, not angry, but scared. "Not yours," she mumbled, then dropped down and shoved the knob into the southernmost position.

“No!” Father screamed, his hand passing through empty space. Earnk struggled down the ramp, wiping blood out of his eyes. Lornk spun round and grabbed him by the throat. “Did you show her this?”

Earnk shook his head. “She found it,” he lied. He glanced at the knob, and his blood went cold. “Where—”

His father released him, snarling, “To Latha”—then, choking—“to her death.”