

CHAPTER ONE



Why was the Forest forbidden? The very word was unmentionable. Yet everybody knew it was out there. Otherwise, how could children scare each other with whispered stories of what might be in the Forest? Gigantic sticky-buds, striped man-eaters, slithery poison? Their imaginations ran wild in a tamed world. But as each child reached Maturity and passed – or failed – the ritual test, the word *Forest* disappeared from the new adult’s mind, like a leaf dropping in autumn.

Mielitta had tried to ask adults why the Forest was forbidden but the word tied her tongue in tangled roots and instead she found herself asking the way to the schoolroom, or some other question so ludicrous that she was mocked for her stupidity. She sensed magecraft twisting her words but she could not force a different path from the one required of good citizens.

Now she was the only child who’d seen eighteen year-cycles and still been told she was not ready for testing. Her old playmates moved around the same halls as she did, girls in silken robes, boys in leatherette jerkins and long trews, while she still wore a tabard over a child’s short britches and stuffed her hair into the coarse netting of a servant’s ugly snood.

Flowers, thought Mielitta, as three girls in gowns like satin

petals rustled past her. Grace, Felicity and Espoir had turned into a golden daffodil, a blue pansy and a violet campanula respectively. Mielitta knew these flowers from the books in the library, which she was tasked with cleaning each week. She remembered when the golden daffodil used to play leapfrog against the stable wall and when the violet campanula had linked pinkie fingers with her, swearing friendship forever. But even then, her finding had set her apart. All the other children had been born in the Citadel, not discovered as a baby by the Mage-Smith. She would always be a foundling, a freak.

‘The stones be with you, Lady Grace, Lady Felicity, Lady Espoir,’ murmured Mielitta, lowering her eyes. Barely nodding slender necks, expressions stonier than the walls they passed, the ladies swished past in silence, the better to ignore such a freak.

Had they forgotten her when they reached maturity? Or did they prefer to forget their broken promises, made by childish pinkie fingers?

As the chirruping gossip started up again behind her, Mielitta was warned of a potentially worse encounter by the brown scent of peat, a metallic clank and rumbling voices. She shrank into the shadows of an alcove, held her breath. Whichever route she took from her bed to the kitchen, there was always the risk of meeting Jannlou and his cronies.

She willed herself invisible, wished she had the powers to really be so. Children entertained each other with such stories and the books she read in the library, while she was supposed to be working, tantalised her with magical possibilities for every citizen. But adults never spoke of such powers outside magecraft. It wasn’t a banned subject, like the Forest. More like a pointless train of thought, as if magecraft was the privilege of the chosen few, controlled, and those who lacked it were unimportant. Whereas the Forest was dangerous. How Mielitta knew this, she couldn’t say. She just did. In the same way she knew that people like her had no magecraft. And people like Jannlou, did.

‘My father says we must strengthen the walls of the western

keep.’ His voice was deep and echoed in its confident authority but Mielitta knew the speaker was her own age. They had not linked pinkie fingers as children and if anything had been sworn, it was eternal enmity. Mielitta had no idea why Jannlou wanted to make her life a misery. It was just another fact of her cursed life.

‘Is there a threat?’ A smoother voice. Bastien, whose fast-talking explanations always put Mielitta in the wrong. She had never snitched, even on Jannlou, but Bastien’s confessions had blamed her for a tipped bucket of water on precious books or a damaged bow in the archery yard. After all, the freak’s clumsiness was legendary. Bastien himself had created that legend and Mielitta wore her reputation like a porcupine shirt, prickles inside.

He had excelled himself with his martyred performance after Jannlou accidentally knifed him in a schoolroom rough-house. When the schoolmaster returned and questioned Bastien about the cut, he ‘couldn’t say... couldn’t tell on a girl...’ and indicated Mielitta with his eyes. As the knife had magically appeared on her desk, there was little she could say in her defence. Not that she wanted to. Not when seventeen classmates apparently accepted that she’d caused the wound. Were they scared of Jannlou and his gang? Or genuinely magicked out of their memory? She preferred to believe the latter, but then why did such magecraft never work on her?

‘There may be a threat,’ Jannlou replied to Bastien’s question. ‘My father has had word from across the Wilderness. Of,’ he hesitated, ‘of something. I can’t say more and especially not here. You never know who might be listening.’ He turned his head as he passed the alcove, his nostrils flared and he held Mielitta’s gaze in his own, red in the torchlight. Even though she looked down quickly she felt the heat, burning. If he wanted to, Jannlou could blaze light across the stone passage, reveal her. He walked on.

Like reptiles, thought Mielitta, as the young men passed. *Especially Bastien. Fork-tongue.* Chain-mail hauberks and hoods glittered like crocodile scales. Huge buckles on belts and backpacks gleamed and clinked. As they grew older and gained experience,

those belts would acquire trophies, filling the spaces with symbols of achievement.

I would like that as a job. Engraving belt motifs. Next time I go to the forge I will ask Declan if I can work for him instead of this endless cleaning and table-waiting. If I am to be a child-servant until I die, then I should seek a position that suits my situation.

She followed this distracting line of thought as the last echo of boots faded and all she could hear was her heart pounding. Why hadn't Jannlou taken the chance offered? Maybe he hadn't seen her at all. It had just been her imagination. Burning eyes! Among the books she dusted and read, there was a section full of men with burning eyes. Clearly, she should take more care. Maybe she wasn't immune to all forms of magical influence after all.

She rushed along the passageway to the kitchen, where a cauldron of soup bubbled. Today it contained orange vegetables and would be called carrot soup. Maybe the diners could taste a difference because they saw a different colour and shape to the bits in their hot water each day but to Mielitta, the food always tasted the same. It tasted of salt and Citadel water.

She had learned from her own body, sweat and blood, that tastes could be different, and her palate found the daily sustenance dull. As if she knew that something better was possible.

The same was true of scent. The Citadel food had no smell, just temperature, tepid or cool. But Mielitta could distinguish all the scents around her; dusty books in the library, laundered clothes and bedlinen, smoke and molten steel in the forge. She could smell them and see their scents in colour.

That was probably why she'd received a year-cycle gift this morning, with the instruction that she should keep it secret. When she woke up, there it was on her bed, a carved wooden box with a tiny scroll and phial inside.

My parents, was her first thought. Maybe they were waiting until my eighteenth year-cycle to tell me who I am. Who they are. Or who they were.

But no, the sender was anonymous. The writing on the scroll was in spidery green ink and made no sense. A riddle.

When the bottle is empty, you will be full.

No life ends while The One lives.

In the year of the prophecy, choose well.

She'd scrunched up the paper and thrown it on the floor but she unstoppered the phial, curious. Her nose filled instantly, glutted, as she inhaled, savoured. Her untrained nose smelled immediacy and many layers. Book-words offered themselves: musk, attar of roses, geranium, sandalwood. She'd experienced none of these but their names waited for the day she did.

She breathed deeply. She *had* to find words for these scents. A *fruit bowl*. Not the kind she now carried into the Great Hall after the evening meal, as fake as the carrot soup, but squashed blackberries, apricot smoothness and lime zest. Bound with something unexpected, mild, creamy, yellow... banana. Yes, that was the word. Banana. She had no idea how she could identify each scent but she would bet a week's food on being right. If only she could have food scented like this instead of the usual dull sustenance.

There was more to life than this bland existence. There must be. She had dabbed the perfume on her wrists, wafted in a cloud of scented beauty, waited to be told there was something different about her. All day she had worn her cloud but nobody had noticed. She was still invisible unless she failed or disappointed.

'Stop daydreaming and give me that bowl!' the fat man at the table growled at Mielitta. 'The smell's driving me crazy with hunger and you stand there like an idiot!'

For a minute, Mielitta thought he meant *her* smell.

'Mmm, carrot soup.' He sucked his moustache with enthusiasm before giving the same attention to the bowl in front of him. 'My favourite.'

Bemused, Mielitta sniffed the other bowl of soup she carried. Nothing. As if she lived in a different world.

‘Mielitta!’ This voice was right in her ear and she jumped, spilling some soup. ‘Idra isn’t feeling well so you need to take her place. Take wine to the Council Chamber right away. They’ve eaten already and are meeting now.’

‘Ten goblets?’ asked Mielitta. Her heart pounded, knowing the answer. Ten Councillors, ten goblets. She was never tasked with the Council Chamber. The most powerful people in the Citadel wouldn’t want to see a misfit, living proof that their rule did not have a place for everyone. Clearly the steward was willing to overlook Mielitta’s unfitness for the task in view of her being available, now. And she knew her way around the Citadel, unlike the little ones who beamed as they served table. Had Mielitta ever been so young, so enthusiastic?

She was still pondering the question as, with a still-beaming follower, she carried a tray to the square tower of the keep, climbed the seventy-two spiral steps and waited. Chewing his lower lip as he carried out his instructions, her young helper gave three great taps with his stick on the oaken door and opened it for Mielitta. She touched the door, breathed in its musty toasted age, marvelled at the luxury of real wood instead of woodette. Apart from the stones themselves, little in the Citadel was of natural origin, and the real wood must have come from the Forest.

‘Bring another pitcher every hour,’ she instructed the little boy, who bowed and left, proud of being so useful.

Accustomed to the signal, the mages at the table didn’t look up. Mielitta set down the tray, took a pitcher of red water, that smelled of nothing and tasted of salt, and began to pour. The steward need not have worried. Nobody in the Council Chamber had eyes for a servant, however over-age and odd, and smelling of bananas. An invisible servant who had eyes, ears and a remarkable nose, and who intended to make use of them.



CHAPTER TWO



The ten faces were known to everyone but usually Mielitta saw them from the back of the Great Hall, where she sought her usual invisibility. The Council of Ten would be on the raised podium at the other end of the Hall, either eating at the High Table or speechifying or both. This was the first time she'd been so close and the room crackled with barely suppressed power.

In her mind, she named them one by one, round the table, starting with Jannlou's father, Magaram. Grey hair feathered above his ears into a dusty black mane. No doubt it was once sleek as a colt's, worn in a warrior's queue, like his son's today. The same deceptive blue eyes, even more startling against the seamed shadows of weathered chestnut skin. The same smell.

Mielitta inhaled, tried to separate the human scents in the room until she could distinguish each person by smell but that was too difficult. She could only identify those she already knew – and two others, pungent and clashing.

Magaram was easy to recognise because of all the times she'd hidden from Jannlou, his earthy tang a warning. His father carried the same rich brown scent. Mielitta saw smells this way, in colours and book-words, though she had no experience of earth, any more

than of blackberries. All her life, words had popped into her head to match each new experience, released from her deep thinking. She just *knew*. And she'd quickly realised that the other children didn't. Not even Declan knew the words she did so she learned to keep quiet about her sharp gold senses and her book-world.

To Magaram's right was Shenagra, shimmering in an aroma of cocoa, black braids erect in a fuzzy headpiece. Brown-scented, like Magaram, but with sweetness, milk and sugar. She sometimes came to the schoolroom, tested those children who showed signs of gifts. Mielitta had felt Shenagra questing in her thoughts and she'd hidden against the wall of her mind, as she did against real walls. Now, as Mielitta poured wine for Shenagra, the cocoa shimmer brushed against her, dismissed this oddity as of no interest, passed on.

Invisible thought Mielitta and smiled to herself.

A high voice fluted, 'I checked the seals and there was a weakness in the water gate.'

Hamel. Mielitta's nostrils flared and followed a scent she perceived in emerald loops, in metallic and leatherette binding, to their source, the least human-looking Councillor. Tiny, elevated by several cushions, Hamel seemed unaware of the instinctive repulsion he evoked.

His hands drummed impatiently on the table as he spoke, the spiked nails sheathing and unsheathing. Everything about him was pointed, from the tip of his bald head and his knobbly shoulders, to the leatherette boots hidden under the table. Many wore pointed boots as fashion but everybody knew that Hamel wore them to fit his feet. Or feelers. Nobody was sure what names were suitable for the green-skinned Councillor's body parts. And nobody was likely to ask him.

Rumour said he was the result of a magecraft experiment. Whether the experiment had been a success or a failure depended on your point of view. Mielitta shuddered.

'Is this a witch-hunt or a Council of War?' A woman's voice grated like Hemel's nails on the table. Mielitta scented the mage's

scarlet trail: roses, thorns and one iron blood-drop. As dumpy and ordinary as her scent was glamorous, Puggy had bad skin, lank hair and gave the impression her robe was a punishment from which her curves were trying to escape. Nobody was hoping that they would.

Why would someone with so much power guard such an appearance? wondered Mielitta. If she were Puggy, she'd wear robes as scarlet and dangerous as her scent, smooth her skin to silver satin and drip honeyed words into the hearts of all who heard her, whenever she opened her mouth.

The two strong forces clamoured for Mielitta's nose. She could see them: an arabesque of bright emerald and an arrow-straight track of blood-scarlet, but it was the Chief Mage who replied to Puggy's question.

'Neither. It's not a Council of War – yet.' Magaram oozed calm. 'We mustn't overreact.' His glance swept the table, told them how invaluable each one of them was. 'But we must act. And we must be united.'

His next words made Mielitta doubt her ears. 'The Forest is gaining strength and Perfection is under attack.' Her hands trembled as she took the pitcher round the table, topped up goblets. But none of the Councillors even flinched at the forbidden word. Nor showed shock at the Citadel's very core being under threat. Perfection was the basis of their government, of their society and of Mielitta's day-to-day existence. Its tenets had been handed down through the generations, sanctioned by tradition and created from the wisdom of history.

Hamel repeated, 'I checked the seals and there was a weakness in the water gate. *Somebody* has allowed flow between the Citadel and the Forest.' He stared across the table at Puggy.

There was an uncomfortable silence. Then Puggy laughed.

'Oh no, you don't! Nice try but if there's a traitor in the Citadel – and I'm not sure there is – you're lighting a fire under the wrong chimney. Let Shenagra do her thing if you want proof.'

'Why not?' challenged Hamel. 'Unless the Chief Mage would

rather *not* find out where this trail leads, or rather to whom? Would rather not – act?’ His tone was a mocking echo of Magaram’s.

‘Do it, Shenagra,’ commanded Magaram, his face granite. ‘On all of us. You can start with me.’

Mielitta stood very still at her post beside the trays, in the furthest corner of a room that was suddenly too small. She had not enjoyed Shenagra’s tests in the schoolroom and she suspected this demonstration of magecraft would be a thousand times worse.

Shenagra shimmered in concentration as her black braids unwound, thinning into long fuzzy strands that extended until they reached her left-hand neighbour at the table. The questing hair hesitated, tapped Magaram’s head.

‘I am open,’ he said, his eyes shut, his body braced.

The hair streamed into Magaram, burrowing in a thousand cocoa fissures that criss-crossed his skin into crackle-glaze earthenware. Each hair began to glow, a fiery link between Magaram’s interior and the writhing mass of braids still coiled on Shenagra’s head. Then sparks began to shoot upwards from the lines of hair, raining down in a flash of words that landed on Shenagra’s burning head.

Mielitta could read some of them but they came too fast for her. *Leader. Loyal. Perfection and Citadel first. But Jannlou.*

Shenagra sat like a volcano, absorbing the lava instead of spewing it. The lightning rain of words ended, the sparks died down as the word *Future* buried itself in the coiled braids. Grey as ash, she retracted her hair, left Magaram shaking but unblemished, the cracks in his skin healing the moment each hair withdrew.

Within what was probably only minutes, Shenagra’s braided headpiece was coiled impeccably on her head and behaving once more like hair. She was paler than before but her voice showed no sign of strain.

‘You saw the words. Magaram our leader is loyal.’

Hamel frowned. 'Nobody doubts Magaram! But words can be interpreted different ways. Should the same words come from another Councillor, who's to say they mean he – or she' – a glare at Puggy – 'didn't tamper with the water gate in the mistaken belief that it was for the good of the Citadel, that it is time to open to the Forest.'

'They are not just words, Hamel,' Magaram pointed out. 'They are Shenagra's power and their meaning is clear to her, without ambiguity. We see part. She sees all. And she pays for that as we all do for our powers.'

'What if Shenagra is the traitor?' Hamel challenged.

'Then you shall have my place as leader, when you prove it.' Magaram glared. 'I stake my life on Shenagra's loyalty, not just from long friendship. You *know* she draws power from obedience to the Council and is incapable of using it against us.'

'We only have your word for that,' Hamel grumbled but was shushed.

'Next,' commanded Magaram quietly to Shenagra, who breathed deeply and turned to the Councillor beside her.

'I am open,' he said quietly, but before the test could begin, the Councillor on his left, next in line, spoke up.

'Perhaps it *is* time to open to the Forest,' he said. 'Why can't we benefit from its powers instead of this separation? We have such strength and yet we live such mutilated lives. Aren't you sick of bland food, bland surroundings, the same comfort every day, the same everything! Don't you long for something more? For contact with Nature again?'

The outcry around the table hid Mielitta's gasp. She only knew what Nature was from books but maybe that was what she wished for too? The *something* missing from her life: could *Nature*, whatever that might be, fill the loneliness that drained her each day?

Shenagra's braids shifted uneasily. 'Mutilated?' she queried, simmering.

The rebellious Councillor seemed encouraged rather than

impeded by the shocked reaction to his words. He rushed on, 'We can't even use our powers to the full, so we lead boring lives with endless meetings. We remove the spark from the children before they question the way things are and we perpetuate this dreary existence! I want to *live*, not just exist!'

Magaram gave Shenagra the briefest of glances. She nodded, tightened her lips, waited.

'You have forgotten what the world was like before Perfection, Crimvert, when all men went outside the Citadel. Risked leaving the canopy.'

Crimvert shook his head, long locks flying. *Did he have the same magecraft as Shenagra?* wondered Mielitta.

'You have all forgotten what the Forest is like,' Crimvert countered. 'Birdsong that hushes as you come near, then a flight like living arrows into the high branches of trees that whisper of shelter. You talk of our canopy as if it's a wonder but you've never seen the canopy of trees, as high as ten men, swaying in the breeze.'

There was more angry muttering but this time Mielitta was bemused, not shocked. She knew what 'breezes' were, from books, but why would you want a breeze?

'And *you've* never seen typhoons and tsunamis.' Magaram's reply was calm, tutoring naivety. 'If you'd spent as much time learning from the walls as you have enjoying your forage rights outside them, you would know our history and control this juvenile attraction.'

'I listened to the walls all my apprenticeship,' muttered Crimvert. 'They repeat themselves. The Forest never repeats. It dazzles, varies, enchants.'

This time, the room held its breath in silence at the blasphemy.

'You were trusted,' Magaram's voice grew deeper. 'You showed you could control your powers and resist temptation. You swore an oath of loyalty, on your life. But you betrayed us, left the water gate unwarded, allowed the Forest into the Citadel.' It was a statement, not a question. And it was a judgement.

'I did all that you asked me,' Crimvert replied between gritted teeth. 'My duty. I led the lumberjacks into the Forest and wiped their memories when we returned with wood. I never used the password unless I had a foraging party. All I did was observe the Forest and I realised we've been wrong! We could live Perfect lives *with* the Forest, heal this rift between men and Nature, between men and their own nature. What harm can it do to give a tiny passage from the Forest to the Citadel?'

'What harm it has done I don't yet know.' Magaram's tone was heavy. 'You have admitted your guilt. You broke your oath. Shenagra?'

Crimvert's eyes were wide as Shenagra's black braids uncoiled, sending tendrils past his neighbour and towards him.

'I am not open,' he gasped, as his throat was squeezed between tendrils that sought entry, tapping his skin.

Magaram sighed. 'We shall need you tomorrow, Shenagra. Save your strength.'

The black tendrils whipped back into neat coils. Magaram leaned thoughtfully on one hand, which glowed a sudden red.

Crimvert had barely drawn two clear breaths when he burst into flames, a blaze that made the mages flinch, although it threw no heat.

'A breeze is indeed useful,' Magaram murmured to the pile of ash remaining on Crimvert's seat. The Master Mage blew softly and a current of air picked up the ash, carried it over to the fire-place, deposited it neatly in the grate.

'A fitting end, don't you think?' Magaram asked nobody in particular. 'With the bits of wood he seemed so passionate about. Does anybody else wish for a reminder of our history? A lecture on the dangers of mixing with the Forest? On how we sustain this society as Perfect? Perhaps you question how we keep our citizens busy? Or why we limit our use of magecraft?'

Around the room, mages concentrated on not blinking, not looking down and especially not exchanging glances.

Shenagra risked making the first comment. 'We need new wards on the water gate and a new password.'

There was a ripple of relief that they were moving on to practical matters.

'A volunteer to take Crimvert's place?' asked Magaram.

Nobody looked at the empty seat or at the fireplace.

A Councillor with a metallic sheen on his arms and upper body, spoke up. 'I have no affinity with Nature. This is not a duty I will enjoy but I am a safe person to carry out such a role.'

General nods of approval were confirmed by Magaram's assent. 'Thank you, Veebo. Reset the wards as quickly as you can and I suggest a password in your honour. Radium. Reactive, lethal, barbaric – like the Forest itself and all you help protect us from. In a word, toxic.'

'I will try to be worthy.' Veebo bowed his head.

Radium, memorised Mielitta. *The way to the Forest by the water gate*. She knew where that was. She'd explored all of the Citadel open to non-mages and trespassed in a few places that weren't. In the curtain-wall underground, the water gate let in the Citadel's water supply, which was purified on entry and later channelled separately for washing, cooking and drinking.

'Let's all drink a toast.' The leaden atmosphere cooled a few degrees at Magaram's suggestion but all heads nodded.

'To our Perfect society!' Magaram raised his goblet and drank deeply.

'–our Perfect society!' All followed suit, with real or well-feigned enthusiasm.

'What about the damage done already?' asked Hamel, flexing his finger-blades.

'We don't know whether any damage has been done,' pointed out Shenagra. 'A little fresh air blowing through the water gate will be soon inhaled and gone. Maybe one or two of the younger inhabitants will be more troublesome than usual but I suspect that's all. I'll be vigilant in the schoolroom.'

‘And I with apprentice training. Double time spent on wall history.’

One by one, the Councillors suggested ways they could step up their supervision of Citadel life. Magaram suggested a speech in the Great Hall to reinforce morale. The meeting was clearly coming to an end and Mielitta would be able to escape with a little new knowledge and a lot of new questions.

Magaram drained the last of his goblet.

‘Wipe the servant clean, please, Shenagra.’

Mielitta’s stomach heaved. The instinct to run flooded her but her legs turned to mush and she couldn’t even lift one foot. She suspected that only the wall was keeping her upright as she tried to lean back further into the stone, disappear. But the black braids were unclogging, tendrils snaking towards her and the wall was just that – a wall.

She felt the first prickles on her skin, opened her mouth to say – to say what? She was no Councillor to declare that she was open. Nor was she a revolutionary to say she was not open.

Just a schoolroom test from Shenagra she told herself. And she’d evaded the last one. *It’s just to wipe me clean not to... do that thing.* She turned her imagination resolutely from what had happened to Crimvert. If Shenagra wanted to wipe out Mielitta’s memories of the last hour, then she should have what she wanted.

Mielitta built the wall in her mind, the one she’d hidden against during the schoolroom testing. But this time she didn’t hide. She pictured herself knocking on the door, pictured that little boy who’d helped her, put their conversation on a loop in her head. She, Mielitta had no memory after knocking on the door, entering with a tray, pitchers and goblets. This time it was her memories that she hid in the wall. She tucked an hour’s worth of memories into a bag, drew the strings tight and put them into a hole behind a brick. She put the brick back in place and re-ran the conversation with the boy, just as the first tendrils reached her inner core.

Knock knock, knock went the stick on the door. She played the scene as the tendrils quested around her. 'Don't forget to bring a pitcher every hour.' A tendril skittered along the wall but didn't pause. They were all over her, all into her. *Knock, knock went the stick on the door.* 'Don't forget to bring a pitcher every hour.'

'Clean,' a whisper commanded in her head but she didn't listen, didn't fall into the trap.

'She's clean,' the hairs were transmitting the message back up, up to the coiled braids, up to the follicles, to Shenagra. And then they were gone.

Mielitta opened her eyes and inhaled. A strong whiff of bananas. She must have sweated more, brought out the scent. But the Councillors seemed not to notice. Was she the only one in the Citadel with a sense of smell?

She picked up a pitcher and moved to Magaram's right side, like the well-trained servant she was, offering to pour. He covered the goblet.

'Enough,' he told her. She felt the blue gaze drill her meekly lowered head. 'You may go now.'

She looked up and let her surprise show. How fast the meeting had gone!

Shenagra nodded. 'Thank you, boy,' she said. 'Leave the tray. Someone will collect it later.'

So that was why they hadn't even noticed how oddly old she was. They thought she was a boy.

Mielitta obeyed. She knew that she'd forgotten something that was very important. And she knew exactly where in the Citadel walls she could find out what she'd forgotten. She only had to take out the brick and all her memories would be fully recovered. Her years traipsing round the towers and passages, carrying out pointless errands, had not been wasted after all. She knew every stone. And it seemed the walls knew her too.

She sensed a current of air against her cheek. *Wrong*, her senses told her. She walked steadily, not changing her pace, heading

predictably for her chamber and her bed. The Councillors were checking up on her. There would be no memory retrieval tonight. She must choose her moment, not be caught.

Pff. She was a mere servant. They'd have forgotten her by the next day.



