

The sun stood at midday, its light washing down over the roofs of the busy provincial town. Though it was still spring, the day was already hot and the brightness cast everything into stark relief. The edges of the houses, their window frames and balconies, stood out sharp and hard and all their colors, as well as those of the surrounding new leaves and flowers, were washed to a vivid glow as were the white garments of two figures scrambling up the pillars of an upper balcony on one of the larger houses. One pulled herself up onto the roof in a fluid feat of strength, then reached down to give the other a hand and together, they half ran, half crouched across the shingles, their long loose hair trailing behind them, two barefoot maidens on the edge of womanhood. At the edge of the roof they halted, measuring the distance between it and the next building across the ally. The gap was only a few feet wide but the drop to the ground below enough to inspire caution. Again, the one girl took the lead, leaping the gap as light and graceful as a deer, then turned, gesturing impatiently for her companion. The other hesitated, skittish, and made several false starts before gathering her courage to make the jump. Her comrade reached out to catch her, steady her balance, and pull her forward when she reeled back dangerously. At last, breathing, hard, they perched on the sloping roof of the cloister, the ceramic tiles hot under their feet from the midday sun.

"I still can't believe you talked me into this, Shalana," the first girl snorted.

"I still can't believe you're not curious, Kaz...even a little." Shalana shook her head in exasperation.

"Mostly I care about how much trouble we'll get in if we get caught here. We're not exactly well hidden, you know. Anyone could just look up and see us. And don't call me Kaz."

"Let's go behind that tree over there. That should give us a little more cover." The tree in question was several yards to the right, just before the corner where two of the walls joined. They sprinted for it, bent almost double and sometimes using their hands for support. Shalana trod on a loose tile, sending it clattering down into the courtyard. At last they crouched down among the branches where they spilled over onto the roof, their hearts beating furiously.

The two girls were both students, borders, servants really, at the local sanctum four the arcanelly gifted. But there the similarly ended. Shalana had the cleansing gift which could turn dirty water pure and make spoiled food safe to eat. The most powerfully gifted could even drive out some infections, though this was properly the preserve of those with the healing gift. But, even if Shalana's gift turned out to be relatively minor, nothing would stop her from living a normal life. If anything, it would make her more valued as an employee, as a citizen, and as a bride. On the other, hand KazaKu had the battle gift which endowed her with more than human strength and dexterity and a powerful resistance to fatigue and injury. Even if the side effects of this type of gift had not been an extremely violent temper, her options would have been limited. Those with the battle gift made fine warriors but were good for little else and, since women could not be warriors, she was left in a decidedly uncomfortable position.

Due to her gift's strange nature and its violation of normal social expectations, most of the girls of the sanctum kept their distance from her. Only Shalana would seek her out from time to time, which may have been why she had allowed herself to be talked into this ridiculous stunt. It had recently become known that prince Beatrus, ruler of all the land, had sunk still further into the nameless sorrow that had plagued him for years and, in fear for his well-being, his advisers had decided to relieve him of the burden of ruling for a time and sent him away to the tranquility of a monastery. When Shalana had discovered that an important and secret guest was staying at the cloister next to the sanctuary she immediately became convinced that it was the prince and decided to go spy on him.

There was just one problem with this plan. In order to get to a place where she could look down into the courtyard of the monastery she would need to climb up one of the support poles of their covered balcony, flip around onto the roof, then leap across the alley onto the roof of the monastery. This acrobatic feat was a bit much for Shalana to perform unaided but it would be no trouble at all for someone like KazaKu. Even though KazaKu realized she was basically being used, she had accepted out of a combination of loneliness and a desire to flaunt her superior physical skills and show a "normal" girl that there were some things she was better at. And, indeed, hauling Shalana up onto the

roof like a bag of flour while she whimpered in fear was the most fun she'd had a long time but now, sitting on a hot roof staring down into an empty courtyard, which was as uncomfortable as it was boring, she was starting to have second thoughts.

"Look, look, someone's coming." Shalana pointed excitedly.

KazaKu slapped her hand down and hissed, "Keep still can't you?" Despite her earlier protestations, now that she was in the position actually see the prince, she did notice a certain excitement tingling in her nerves as the figure moved out from the shadow of the cloister into the sun that flooded the central courtyard. He wore a simple garment, loose fitting and faded, of coarse brown cloth. His face was bland and impassive, the mouth wide and nose large, the brow sloping, his hair pulled back tightly so that it followed the shape of the skull, stark and dull as his features and his tunic. But the color of his hair was not dull at all. Rich, vivid brown, it had a sharp and bitter hue like the blocks of pure chocolate in the baker's shop. But over this was laid a net of other colors, paler, warmer browns, even deep blond and, on top of it all, was a bright shimmer as the light shown and reflected from his ringlets that spilled down where the hair was tied high on the back of his head. As he moved forward, the sheen surged and rippled, exactly as it would on the surface of the water. The shape of the hair itself contributed to this richness. The part stretched tight was in close waves, almost like the zig-zag of tiny lightning bolts and the different sheens and colors slide up and down the lines and angles of the strands to form the shifting web. Only the hair on top of the head was left long, the rest being shaved close, level with the top of his ears. But it had been several days since this was last done and the hair was starting to grow back so that, with the direct brightness of the midday sun, they could just make out tiny curls starting to form in the shaved area, which explained the sharp waves on the top of his head, formed when the curls were stretched out to fit into the binding.

Shalana clutched KazaKu's arm fiercely and her lips shaped the words "It's him." And, although she was irritated by Shalana outburst and would have shaken her off if she dared to move, KazaKu knew she was right. The combination of sadness and curls was a dead giveaway. When he drew near the well in the center of the courtyard, he paused, standing for a long moment with his face raised to the sky. His eyes were blank and, even without the healing gift, KazaKu could sense the weight of his despair. Then, he drew from a pocket hidden somewhere among his baggy clothes, a stick of charcoal whittled down to a fine pencil point. Kneeling down, he began to draw on the flagstones, the tied back part of his hair falling forward over his shoulder, a mass of tight curls as rich and vibrant as the hair on his head, the blend of colors reflecting and moving back and forth along the sides of the nearly cylindrical ringlets. His hand flew over the stone, smooth and sure. Gracefully, it described arcs and curves, made tight, almost imperceptible movements of fine detail.

For nearly an hour, the two girls sat and watched, unable to move for fear of discovery, even though the sun was now beating down on them. Sweat gathered on the backs of their necks and dripped down inside their clothes. The dull gray tiles became burning hot, even through the cloth of their skirts, but there was nothing they could do. KazaKu bit her lip against the pain, to keep from crying out or shrinking away but, at least, her gift made her strong in physical adversity. A quick sidelong glance revealed that Shalana had tears streaming down her face. She would most likely have some painful blisters later, unless she found someone with the healing gift to treat them.

At last, he seemed satisfied with his work and stood up, his hands black with charcoal smudges, then took a step back to look his work over. Despite the danger, KazaKu gasped in amazement. He had drawn a ship running under full sail, every line and rope sketched with precision. In the bow stood a lady with a thin face and frightened eyes. Her hands were clasped over her heart and her cloak and hair streamed away, impossibly long, in the wind that drove the ship. Nearby, the waves broke on the jagged rocks of an island littered with bones while harpies with savage faces and twisted, gleaming talons wheeled above. Everything was drawn so sharply and crisply that, even from her high vantage point, she could discern the exquisite beauty of it and she could only guess at the richness visible at close quarters.

After surveying the picture for a moment, he walked over to the well and drew up a bucket of

water. She assumed he needed a cool drink for the sun must have been nearly as brutal for him in the courtyard as it had been for them up on the roof. Instead, to her utter horror, he dumped the water on his exquisite drawing. It trickled over the stone and pooled in its hollows, clouded and dirty with the remains of the charcoal. Then he took his foot and scuffed it over the stone to rub out any bits of the drawing that might remain.

"That was the Prince. I can't believe we saw the Prince," Shalana whispered as they climbed back over the roof and down to the balcony, the pain of her burns temporarily forgotten in her excitement.

"I don't believe it." KazaKu spoke slowly, her voice dull.

"Oh, I know. He was so plain and boring. I feel bad for him. I guess all the stories we heard were true."

"That's not what I meant." KazaKu's tone came out much fiercer than she had meant it to. "Not boring at all. Plain, even sad, is too gentle a word for what he is."

Shalana was taken aback. "What is he then?"

"Tragic. Achingly tragic. Didn't you see how he created that beautiful picture without even trying, then destroyed it like it meant nothing to him?"

Her companion shrugged. "I was expecting a gallant, handsome prince. What a disappointment. Well, don't worry, I'll never ask you to do that again."

"Good, then I won't have to waste time dragging you along with me tomorrow."

"What in Mala's name do you mean, Kaz?"

Until she spoke the words, she hadn't known what she meant herself. But now she felt a strange longing swell up inside her like the pull of a current or the tension of a taut bow string. "I must see him again," she declared, her eyes far away.

"If you say so. But *why*, if you don't mind my asking?"

"I have to know," KazaKu paused, searching for the words to properly express what she felt, "to know why he is the way he is. Maybe, I don't know, maybe there's something I can do."

"Do? You?" Shalana snorted, waving her blistered hand dismissively. "You have the battle gift, not the healing gift. What could you do? And, even if you *did*, you couldn't even get close to him. If anyone ever caught a glimpse of you, they'd have you executed."

"So be it." KazaKu turned on her with blazing eyes, her hand raised to strike. But her training reasserted itself in the nick of time and she managed to catch herself in the midst of the blow. One of the things that had been rigorously drilled into her ever since brought to the sanctum as a young child, after she had broken her elder brother's arm in anger when he took her portion of sweets from her, was that those with the battle gift were prone to violent rages over the smallest slight and that it would be treated as the most severe crime if she failed to restrain herself. With good reason. Her gift made any act she performed in a state of heightened emotion much stronger and more powerful. If her blow had landed, it probably would have broken Shalana's nose. Shalana stepped back and her face went white. She knew the danger she had narrowly escaped.

The next day, shortly before noon, KazaKu was again using the support post to scale from the balcony to the roof, leaping across the space between buildings, and crouching down behind the mass of pale green leaves. The sequence of events remained largely unchanged. Around noon he emerged out into the courtyard and paced about slowly with a distant expression. Then, he knelt down and began drawing again. This time, the picture was smaller and simpler: a clawed hand crushing the skull of some rat-like animal. He finished it in half the time or less which he had taken to make the picture the day before, then sat down on the edge of the well and gazed at it morosely as he gnawed on an apple and a slice of cheese, finishing the food and flinging the core and rind into a rose thicket before wiping out his drawing again.

The pattern varied little from day to day. Some days he did no drawing and, instead, spent the entire time chewing absently at some pie or sausage or other dainty he had brought. Other times he would build strange sculptures out of pebbles or sticks and bits of moss. After fussing with them for

hours to get every detail meticulously exact, he would kick them over or crush them under his boot. Some days he would not come and then she felt an aching emptiness, as if there was nothing inside her. She would wait for an hour or more in the blistering noon heat, hoping, hoping. Once, he stayed away for three days together and she almost despaired but forced herself back, enduring the blank loneliness as best she could. Yes, his absence made her feel alone even though he knew nothing of her existence. Fortunately, by the start of the next week, he had returned. She heard later that he had been ill. Sometimes it rained and then she did not bother to make the journey. With her gift, she could have scaled the wet pillar and run across the water slicked roof with relative ease, but she knew it would be futile. He would not come out in the rain. He could not draw on the damp paving stones. And, on those days, she thought with a sick dread of winter, when all the courtyard would be buried under snow and ice for months at a time. It was too much to dream that he would regularly brave the frigid air to scratch pictures in the white drifts or that she, clinging with numb hands to the frozen roof would not eventually slip and break her neck.

Then, after she had been spying on him--she could not in honesty call it anything else--for a month or so, he came into the courtyard with another young man. This one was every inch the dashing courtier, probably what Shalana had been hoping for. His clothes were smartly cut in shining silk of deep vivid blue, stiff with gleaming golden embroidery and his hair, slick with oil, was laid upon his shoulders. He glanced around the, to him, painfully stark courtyard with a look of nervous confusion. Prince Beatrus settled down easily on the dusty ground and gestured casually opposite him. The other was incredulous and stared at him blankly.

"Sit." The word cut through the calm air, dry and harsh like bitter, grainy powder. KazaKu started sharply. She had never heard his voice before and never realized it until now. Her sudden movement jarred the tree and all the leaves quivered.

"What was that?" The young noble glanced sharply in her direction and KazaKu felt her heart come into her mouth.

"A bird? A squirrel? Who cares?" Again the harsh quiet voice easily covered the distance so she could hear it clearly. "Stop starting at shadows, Felix, and sit down."

"But, Beatrus, I paid a fortune for this doublet," Felix protested in a strained voice. His concern over his clothes seemed to distract him from the motion in the tree and KazaKu breathed a deep sigh of relief as he turned away from her to glare at his companion.

"Then you shouldn't have worn it out here." Again Beatrus pointed firmly. The other made a face but grudgingly lowered himself to the ground. Several dice were produced as well as a bag of colored chips and they spent the better part of an hour casting them on the stone between them, pulling chips from the bag, and arranging them into piles, seemingly without pattern. Score was kept on another nearby flagstone, not with the artist's pencil, but with a plain chip of stone that could only scratch thin white lines. The pace of the game was too fast and she was too far away for KazaKu to follow how it was played, and the curses and insults they flung at each other did nothing to enlighten her. Beatrus played casually, carelessly, with the same detached confidence with which he wielded the pencil. From the agitation of Felix, he appeared to be victorious much of the time as well.

As the days and weeks passed, climbing to the roof to spy on the monastery became a normal part of life. She woke each morning wondering what, if anything, she would see that day and was impatient, distracted, and fidgety until she had made her pilgrimage. She became increasingly efficient at her tasks, seeking every little trick to make her performance faster so no one would pay heed to her absences and memorized the movements of the other residents of the sanctum as they went about their tasks to ensure her the best shot at getting up to the balcony without being disturbed. When she returned, her mood dependent on what had happened. If he had made a particularly beautiful picture, she would be quiet and subdued, filled with awe at his almost divine gift and touched by melancholy over its waste. If his friends had turned out for dueling or to play the dice and chip game, which she had learned was called Alchemy, she would be elated, especially if he won, which he usually did, and she would spend the rest of the day feeling pleased with herself as if she had won too. Or, on those



days when he didn't come at all, she would return to the sanctum feeling lonely and miserable, sometimes struggling to hold back tears.

She had come to know all of his friends by name. In addition to Felix, there was Simon, a royal cousin and next in line for the throne at the moment, Heinrich, a thin, pale youth who appeared to think himself, and perhaps be, highly intelligent, Harbonius, who, based on his thick accent, must come from the southern provinces, and Ellisu, another artist. Sometimes, he would come to the courtyard alone and join Beatrice in making drawings or sculptures. Sometimes they would work on separate pieces side-by-side and, at others, they would work collaboratively on the same project. But, in either case, Beatrice always deferred to Ellisu and considered his work far superior to his own. There were other companions as well, but these four were the most highly favored, the most frequently in attendance on the Prince. All the companions were staying at a local inn, which, while the finest in town, was considered far too rustic by several of them, though Felix was undeniably the most vocal about it.

So deeply has she become engrossed in these pursuits that she lost all track of time, never noticing that several months had passed, until the other boarders at the sanctum began to become excited about the upcoming festival to mark the start of the harvest season. KazaKu was excited as well for, with most of the household gone, her task would be that much easier. But, then, on the evening of the second day of the festival, Shalana approached her.

"I didn't see you out at the fair today," she said, sounding almost concerned. "Nor the day before."

"I had some...things I had to do," KazaKu replied uncomfortably. She had never been one for subtlety and telling a lie, even a a generic half-lie, stuck in her throat.

"Well, you should get out and have some fun. Come with me tomorrow. You can wear my second best hat."

Shalana was the closest thing KazaKu had for a friend. Most girls would not only have not invited her, but would have attempted to evade the request if she had approached them. And so she did not immediately dismiss Shalana, but she did have some standards. "No hat," she said stiffly.

Shalana rolled her eyes. "You have to wear *something* nice," she protested. "It will be embarrassing otherwise." Of course, the term friend could be interpreted loosely.

"Well, never mind then," snapped KazaKu, trying desperately to control her temper, something she found at least as difficult as lying. If she lashed out at her, Shalana might decide to pry into her motives—it was the kind of thing she would do—and KazaKu just wanted her to go away.

"What can possibly have you so busy? You've never been one to do extra work, no matter what."

"Who said I was working?" As soon as the words were out of her KazaKu realized how stupid they had been. But it was already too late.

Shalana's eyes stood out from her head as realization struck her. "You can't still be going to watch the prince," she cried. "You can't be that stupid, Kaz. Please tell me you're not."

"Who said it was any business of yours?" Her now roused temper would not allow any other response, even though she knew such a statement could not help but lay her secret bare. "And don't call me Kaz," she finished savagely.

"Still you go every day?" Shalana cried in exasperation. "You're really pushing your luck, Kaz. How long can you keep this up before someone spots you?"

"As long as possible," she replied grimly. Truly, she never thought anymore about the danger, only about the strange empty ache she felt inside her that gnawed at her always and could only be soothed by watching Prince Beatrus.

"But...but...why?" Shalana twisted her hands agitatedly. KazaKu could not really imagine why it bothered her so much, unless she was afraid that, if KazaKu herself was caught, it would somehow leak out that Shalana had been the one to initially suggest the venture. "What is it that keeps pulling you back there?"

"He is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. I..."

"Are you in love with him?" Shalana's voice rose almost to a shriek.

KazaKu gestured sharply for her to be quiet. "This is treason, not gossip," she hissed.

"Don't evade my question," her companion insisted, this time in a dramatic whisper.

KazaKu made a face and shook her head. "Love? I don't know. I never imagined love would feel like this."

"What do you know? What does it feel like?"

"I would die for him. No hesitation. I would shield him with my body. When we go to the cathedral on Sundays, I think of him. You know the old paintings that are so age worn and high on the wall that you can't see the faces of the figures? I imagine that the young God, Mala's son, has his face. If I had the money, I would pay its weight in gold for a lock of his hair. I would treasure it in a box like the old saints' bones in the reliquaries."

"And you say this is not love?"

"Is it normal to see the beloved as a God?"

"No." Shalana looked slightly unsure of herself. "But what else can it be?"

"What does it matter?" KazaKu threw up her hands dismissively. "I feel what I feel. I care not if you call it love or something else."

"But you must know," Shalana dropped her voice to an even deeper whisper, "that your love can never be satisfied."

"I never imagined it could be otherwise."

Shalana looked relieved and smiled at her sympathetically. "I was afraid for a moment that you had forgotten that women with the battle gift cannot marry."

KazaKu gave a wordless cry, like an injured bird of prey, and lunged at Shalana. The other stepped back, clumsy in her fear, and tripped over the weaving bench, which probably saved her life for, as she sprawled on the floor, KazaKu's blow passed harmlessly above her. Cheated of her first target of vengeance, KazaKu seized the partially finished cloth and tore it to pieces. She kicked the loom and the wood splintered, then grabbed one of the supports and snapped it between her hands, white energy pulsed at her finger tips as the loom was reduced to splintered and charred boards. "Why did you say *that*?" she howled, flinging some of the fragments at Shalana. But, as she was still cowering on the floor, they passed over her and lodged in the plaster of the wall behind. "There are a thousand reasons why I could not be a suitable bride for him. I am poor and a commoner. I have no dowry. My mother was a milk maid. He does not know me or even know of my existence and, even if he did, he would probably prefer to marry a foreign girl who would bring a peace treaty with her. I could go on and on. Out of all the reasons, you had to pick that one."

"I...I don't understand," Shalana whimpered. When she raised her face from the floor, it was streaked with grimy tears. "Please don't hurt me. I don't know what I did, I swear. I promise not to tell anyone. If you just let me be, I'll take all the blame, say I broke the loom myself."

"You make me sick," KazaKu said contemptuously. "Like you could really make them believe you did that to the loom."

"Then I'll tell them you were provoked, that I struck you. They wouldn't blame you then."

"Best of luck with that," KazaKu replied curtly as she turned on her heel and left. Her hair was wild and tangled over her face. She was drenched with sweat so her clothes stuck to her, and she reeked of fresh blood, as she always did when she lost control of herself. The smell seemed to ooze from her very pores, advertising her blood thirst to anyone with the misfortune to be near, making her unfit to be a bride. She was already on the balcony as she thought this and, in a fresh bout of rage, narrowly reigned herself back from destroying the whole thing.

She did not know for certain how angry the elders would be. She had lost control but directed her rage at an inanimate object, instead of a person. Though that had been largely an accident they didn't need to know that. In truth, there was very little they, or anyone else for that matter, could do about someone with the battle gift, unless they wanted to kill them or break their spirit, which amounted to the same thing. All they could do was make her feel bad, bury her in guilt, as they had

done all her life. She wrapped her arms and legs around the pillar and swung herself up onto the roof. But not this time. She would not let her overly tender conscience force her to accept this treatment.

She had never gone to the cloister at night before. She did not know why she did so now but the heady smell of blood was driving her into rashness. She crouched down on the tiles, still faintly warm from the day, and peered down into the darkness but could see almost nothing below her, just the faint white of the paving stones against the rough black of the surrounding bushes and shrubs. The black shaft of the well stood in the very center like an empty eye socket into the dark recess of a skull. Nothing moved. There was no sign of life and she felt her heart wince, then gritted her teeth in self contempt. Did she really expect he would be out roaming the grounds at night?

But she was in no mood to accept defeat. Springing from the roof, she landed in the tree. Her fingers hooked deep into the rough bark as she lowered herself to the ground. The earth was cool and damp under her feet. Curling her toes, she felt them grip grass, moss, and loose soil, a rare experience indeed among the harsh stones of the city outside. She knelt down and ran her hand along one of the paving stones. The surface was even with only a faint roughness from the stone's grain. Her fingers quivered with wonder to touch the surface on which he had made such magic with the black lead.

"Who's there? Why are you in the garden at night?" The voice spoke from directly behind her. KazaKu's heart came into her mouth but, at the same time, she felt her muscles tense. The gift was surging in her again and she was ready to fight to defend herself in need be. "Answer. Now." The command was so compelling that she responded without thinking. Scrambling to her feet, she whirled around and found herself face to face with Prince Beatrus.

"My Lord," she stammered. She could not think. They were close enough to touch, close enough that she could see the whites and pupils of his eyes, even in the dark. A curl of his hair fell down behind his ear and along his neck. "Forgive me," she breathed.

"Why are you here?"

"I came to...to..." What could she say? "I came to see you."

"How did you know I would be here?"

"I didn't. It was just a guess." Which was true enough after a fashion.

"And what do you want with me?"

"I..." Again, she faltered. In truth, she had no idea. Shalana's recent claims sent a thousand different questions and strange feelings swirling through her. "I admire your skills." His face remained uncomprehending. "The pictures..."

"Do you draw?"

"No, I am not an artist. I am a fighter. But that does not stop me from appreciating the gifts of others." She flinched internally even as she spoke. Everything had been laid bare. He knew her now and she dreaded the shock and disgust that so often accompanied the revelation of her identity. But Beatrus's expression—or lack thereof—did not change. The muscles of his face barely moved at all.

"I am restless tonight," he said. "But all my companions have long since retired to the inn. Would you spar with me instead?"

This was so unlike anything that KazaKu had expected that, at first, she simply stared at him, her brain racing to remain focused on what he had just said. Finally, as his steady gaze remained fixed on her, she realized he was truly in earnest. "I would be honored," she forced, finding her voice with difficulty.

"Then let us begin." He snapped off a pair of narrow branches and handed one to her. They faced each other, crossing their pretend swords in some form of courtly ritual that he understood and she did not. She pushed lightly against his sword, testing the waters. He pushed back and she could feel the strength in his arms. She pushed harder and, as she did so, she caught a faint whiff of blood, tasted a slight metallic tang in the back of her mouth. Terror raced through her, causing her to break out in a cold sweat. If her battle fury completely overcame her, she might do something utterly insane...like kill the prince before she even realized what she was doing...assuming she was anywhere near good enough to be a threat to him at all, she reminded herself wryly.

Then he swung at her for the first time and all thoughts were devoured into the immediacy of combat. She sidestepped and flung out her "sword" to defend her leg. Although the branch was light and flimsy, her aim was true. The two pieces of wood connected solidly, sending his spinning back away from her. Crouching low, she slashed at his stomach, but the suppleness of the slender branch foiled her and the stroke went wide, throwing her off balance. He pivoted back and came at her again with surprising speed. Despite the dull slowness he normally displayed, he could move with raw intensity when he wished to. KazaKu was unable to dodge fast enough and the side of his makeshift blade caught her across the upper arm. Despite the slight protection of her heavy wool tunic, the blow left a white stripe of pain that burned into her skin and unleashed the full fury of her battle frenzy. Throwing caution of the winds, she flung herself into the attack. She swung her branch with all her might but it had neither the weight nor the stiffness of an actual blade or club and so it flew with wild speed, whistling through the air. It slashed across Beatrus's cheek and, because of its speed and plianthood, it cut like the thong of a whip. KazaKu did not realize at first what she had done and, as he came at her again, she believed nothing was amiss. Only when he sidestepped did she see the line of blood across his face, looking black in the dim light.

Because the battle gift was on her she neither feared or respected his earthly power but she felt like a blasphemer, daring to strike the creator of the beautiful pictures. Her battle energy drained from her as if she had been doused with icy water. "Forgive me," she whispered. He looked at her sharply, a confused expression on his bland features. Then, following her eyes, he touched his hand to his cheek and stared impassively at the blood drops on his finger tips. KazaKu gritted her teeth in anticipation of his disapproval but, instead, he shrugged and turned the "hilt" of his branch towards her. She had no idea what that meant. A surrender? An honorable draw? But it certainly did not seem to represent anger or triumph over her.

"What is your name?" he asked, wiping his cheek on the back of his hand and leaving a smear of blood.

"I am KazaKu," she said, raising her head. He was taller than her but they were close enough in height to look each other in the face. She was standing eye to eye with the Prince himself.

"I never heard it but then, I imagine, you have probably never heard mine either."

"Is this some kind of joke? Everyone in the land knows about Prince Beatrus and his sorrow."

The mention of sorrow seemed to irritate him. "They will go on about that," he said shortly, "until the sky falls. My 'sorrow,' as they call it, is the greatest legend, not only in this land, but among all of our allies. One would think I was in training to be a martyr. And I did not speak of the name the church gave me at my royal anointing. I am Karak."

KazaKu felt her hands clench in a weird blend of triumph and fear. She had not known he had another name. All the rulers were known by names in the high speech which they were given as part of their confirmation rites. Although, logically, they must have birth names in the common tongue, like everyone else, since these were never spoken of, it was easy to forget the fact. "You trust me?" she asked incredulously. It would damage his royal prestige to have his common name known and spoken among the people.

"Who would you tell? I may not know who you are but I do know what you are. I can be sure you don't share many secrets."

She threw back her head, tossing her hair out of her face with a snarl. Just like Shalana, he had referred to the grim reality of her gift. But, immediately, she went cold and the storm and fire was crushed out of her. It wasn't that he told her he wasn't impressed by her rage. He just looked at her and she knew. And, at that, KazaKu felt something she had never felt before. Most of the world was half in terror of her gift and, to compensate for this, felt the need to always prove themselves superior, to make her feel guilty or to point out how abnormal she was. Karak was not afraid and so he had no need to make her feel small. For the first time in her life she had found someone with whom she could be a true equal. Her mind had to laugh hysterically at the thought that she, a peasant girl, could be equal to the prince. And yet, his calm acceptance seemed much more equal than the combination of



cringing and sneering she so frequently received, especially from the other girls.

"Come back tomorrow." His steady, flat voice cut through her thoughts.

"Should I sneak back in tomorrow evening?" she asked nervously, not sure if she could manage it.

"No, come when the others do. I am not usually here at night. Be here after the ninth hour. I will tell the door warden to let you in." It seemed strange that the monks would allow a woman inside the monastery gates but, perhaps, one did not say no to a depressed Prince no matter how unreasonable his wishes, just as she was not going to object to his plan for her to waltz through the gates of the monastery and socialize with the realm's highest nobles, even though the idea sounded like utter madness. The next morning she was up with the sun, to complete her tasks in record time so she could have the day free for her crazed appointment. This was already a habit of hers, born of the months of watching him from the roof. But now it was far more important that nothing interfere. If she did not complete her work and was delayed or prevented from going she would not just be failing herself, she would let him down as well and that was unforgivable.

Although the sanctuary and the cloister shared a back alley, the journey between them was not short as their entrances were on opposite sides of the buildings so she had to go all the way around. All during the walk between the two, she felt her face burning, especially as she approached the entrance to the monastery. Women were not allowed inside. What would people think when they saw her approach the forbidden entrance? Of course it wasn't impossible that she had been sent on a mission from the sanctuary or even was just trying to sell provisions but, as she knew the truth, some part of her felt they must as well. Her hand shook as she knocked on the door and she felt sick inside. The monk who opened the door was shrouded in his dark robe so she could not see his face, thankfully as this hid any likely disapproving look. He spoke no word to her but only pointed past him into the dark corridor beyond and stood to the side so she could pass him, though she had to squeeze to do so in the narrow doorway. Whether he was under a vow of silence, thought it dangerous to speak to a woman, or was perturbed by having to accommodate the whims of an eccentric ruler, she neither knew nor cared.

He showed no inclination to guide her so she made her way down the dark passageway as best she could on her own. Ahead, she could see light streaming from under a door and hear voices. No one challenged her and she felt un-inclined to knock so she put her hand on the door and it yielded to her. Beyond was a wood paneled room with a great fireplace and Beatrus—Karak, her heart gave a jump when she remembered the secret he had shared with her—was sitting on a heavy rug spread before the hearth along with Felix and Harbonius. They were deeply engrossed in the game of Alchemy and did not hear her enter over the crackle of the fire and their own frenzied exclamations as the dice were passed around. She stood frozen in the doorway, watching, until Felix began practically yodeling, apparently signaling his victory, and leaped to his feet. Turning around, he abruptly came face to face with KazaKu who had taken a tentative step into the room.

"Why is there a peasant girl in the monastery?" he cried in affronted surprise. Of course, there was only one reason why a peasant girl would be in a monastery and she felt her hands already clenching into fists to punch him in the face as soon as he said it.

"We're starting a new game," said Karak in his deadpan voice. "Make a space for Kaz."

"You know her? Why is she here?" Felix shrieked. Harbonius said nothing but simply scowled at her.

"Are you questioning me?" Karak gestured impatiently. Felix hesitated uncomfortably. "Now sit down." KazaKu approached tentatively, not looking at Felix, and went to sit next to Karak who moved closer to Harbonius to make room and she could tell Harbonius was none too pleased about this. Felix followed, muttering to himself.

"I do not know this game," she said, hanging her head in embarrassment. Although she had grasped some of the fundamentals from watching them, there were several major gaps in her knowledge and she would never be able to fake it. She felt her face burn. How could she have even a faint hope of being accepted when their first impression of her was of ignorance? And, sure enough,

she heard Harbonius make what sounded like an indignant snort.

“Tell her,” said Karak and the color rose in Harbonius's face as he tried to fight down his anger but Felix actually took to the task with enthusiasm. His love of the game, and his desire to show off his own cleverness, took precedence over the strangeness of the situation. He immediately began rattling off a list of rules at a rapid pace, in no coherent order.

“On your turn you always get seven moves. You can either pick from the pouch or roll the dice, any combination, but it must add to seven. Once you have your elements, you can combine them to make magical substances and effects and you roll the dice to activate them. You can also act on other people's combinations, to neutralize them or make them explode. I do so enjoy using sulfur and lye. Whatever you place in the discard can be shared by others and you must discard anything you don't use unless you give up all other actions to save it.” He paused briefly to catch his breath and was off again on a completely different aspect of the game. Almost anyone would have been hopelessly lost almost at once. Fortunately, KazaKu had a keen mind which, combined with her strong motivation and the scraps of knowledge she had already picked up on her own, allowed her to quickly reach the point where she could at least limp along with the others. Harbonius was clearly irritated at the delay and even more so whenever she had to pause to think during the course of the game or had to ask what some of the different elemental combinations were and, while Karak never showed frustration with her or told her to hurry, he never reprimanded Harbonius either and so she felt an even greater need to hurry, lest he also was displeased, or at least displeased about having to deal with his companion's displeasure. Although she soon reached the point where she could keep up without embarrassment, she was only passingly skilled. Raised in a society where only practical knowledge was of value, her mind rebelled against the esoteric theories of the game, even as it rejoiced in this new form of cleverness and though, in time, this type of thought might come easier to her, how could she ever hope to equal those who had devoted their whole lives to it?

Besides, she had yet another challenge, one none of the others shared, the distraction of Karak's presence. As she sat beside him, close enough to touch but not daring to, she could not help but think of what Shalana had said. The tightness in her chest, the wild energy racing through her, was this love? She did not think so. She had no desire to kiss him, to lie down with him, the way other girls described feeling about men they were in love with. She did want to touch him, to twine her fingers in those honey and mahogany ringlets, but in the same way she would have wanted to run her hands over a rich piece of fabric in the market or stroke the velvety fur of a sable pelt. He paused in the midst of his turn and glanced over his shoulder towards her. The big, brown eyes seemed to swallow her up and she felt again, more keenly than ever before, the overwhelming need to know what was hidden behind them, what made him sorrow, what made him joy, what was in his mind as he shaped the exquisite pictures and then wiped them away. She wanted him to bare his soul to her and do it because he trusted her, because he needed her. She wanted to be closer to him and more valuable than any other living being.

And now it came upon her that she did want to kiss him, maybe even lie down with him, but not because she felt any call of flesh to flesh but, rather, so that they would share a secret that would bind him to her emotionally. If she did not do it, she could only assume some other would and the thought of someone else being that close to him, especially when she would have no part in that closeness made her feel a strange twinging pain inside her. This was jealousy she recognized, but much keener and more desperate than she had ever known before. But need she love to have such jealousy? She would be perfectly content never to touch him were there no threat of another taking her place.

By the time the gathering broke up, when the sun was already well on its way to setting, KazaKu was a hopeless mess of emotions and staggered home as one drugged. Despite her confusion and anxiety, she was awash in joy, as if light were welling from inside her, wanting to throw her hands to the sky and sing. But she held herself in with difficulty for her delight was private, a holy, sacred thing. It was as she had told Shalana. He was her Divine Lord and what she had done a form of prayer and revelation and, in her heart, she carried the most precious treasure of all, his invitation to return the following day. And, even as that thought made her giddy, she felt a rush of panic and shame, for she

knew that meant another day of Alchemy, of failing to measure up before the others. But she would do it. The price was more than worth the reward. Exerting full effort to keep from humming to herself, something completely out of character for her, she flew through her evening tasks and, even made a surreptitious start on her work for the next day, before collapsing into bed, then finding herself completely unable to sleep for some time, due to the delighted, nervous energy surging through her.