

Forgotten Realms
The Veiled Dragon - The Harpers #12
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Far across the surging dunes of moonlit sea, the dark wyrm wheeled and, with a deftness surer than any desert falcon, struck again at the distant and battered caravel. The serpent caught the topyard in its ebony claws and snapped the thick timbers like twigs; the topsail tore free and away it flew, a gift to the wailing salt winds. From the caravel's distant decks rose a flurry of tiny splinters, arrows and spears hurled by men who looked like insects beneath the belly of the monster. The black shafts struck its thick scales and bounced away without causing harm. The beast swooped low over the stern, spun upon its leathery wing, and returned at once to the vessel. Its talons tore into the wooden hull as the claws of a lion tear into the flanks of a camel.

A great dune of wind-driven sea rose up before Ruha robbing her eyes of the faraway caravel and the night-black dragon. She locked her arms around the starboard taffrail of her own vessel, a forty-foot cog hired out of Lormyr, and watched the black waters gather like a mountain beside the ship. The dune crashed down, and the froth roared over the wales and swirled about her waist, sweeping her feet from beneath her hips. Ruha hugged the rail as though it were a husband. The torrent raged on, and each second seemed a minute. The angry

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sea dragged at her long aba like a ravisher determined to disrobe her, and churning tears of foam beat at her face, soaking her veil and her shawl with cold briny water. Her arms trembled with the strain of holding fast.

At last, the cog heeled to the wind and rose on the heaving sea. The fierce waters rolled across the deck and poured overboard, carrying with them all the torrent's rage, and Ruha's smooth-soled sandals found purchase on the wet planks. She stood and looked toward the distant caravel and saw neither dragon nor ship, only the splintered tip of a mainmast swaying above the crest of a faraway dune of water.

Ruha released the taffrail and clambered down the listing deck, half sliding over the wet planks to where

Captain Fowler stood at the rear of the ship. He was as much ore as human, with a jutting brow, swinish snout, and tough, grayish-green skin, and he seemed a strange sort of commander to the eyes of a Bedine witch not long absent from Anauroch's burning sands. He hugged the tiller with one burly arm, and his gray eyes never strayed from the ship's single bulging sail.

Ruha grabbed the binnacle, the wooden compass stand before the tiller, and asked, "Captain Fowler, why do you sail in the wrong direction?" She pointed over the starboard side. "Do you not see the dragon? Over there!"

"Lady Witch, I know the beast's bearings well enough." Though his voice was deep and gravelly, the captain spoke with a deliberate composure that belied his feral aspect. "But even I cannot sail Storm Sprite full into the wind. We must beat our way."

Ruha had learned a little of the strange speech used by the men who lived upon the water, enough to know Fowler meant they had to follow a zigzag course to their goal, and she did not need the captain to explain why. Even a woman who had not set eyes on a ship until three days ago could see that the Storm Sprite could not sail directly against the wind. But she could also see that Captain Fowler placed a high value on his vessel, and he

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was certainly shrewd enough to make a great show of rushing to the caravel's aid while sailing at angles shallow enough to ensure he arrived after the battle was done.

Ruha glanced over the starboard side and saw the caravel topping the moonlit crest of a rolling sea dune. High upon its poop deck sat the dragon, swatting at the far-away vessel's indiscernible crew as a man slaps at stinging flies.

"Captain Fowler, we have no time for this sailing of a snake's path! By the time we reach the ship, we shall find nothing but dead men."

"What would you have me do, Witch?" Fowler demanded. "I cannot change the way the wind blows!"

"And if you could turn the wind, would you have it blow straight at the caravel?"

The captain scowled, suspicious. "Aye, but first I would call Umberlee up from the great depths and have her chain her pet."

"That I cannot do. I know nothing of this Umberlee."

Ruha released the binnacle and cupped her hands together. She blew upon her fingers and spoke the mystical incantation of a wind enchantment. Her breath shimmered with a pale sapphire glow, then it swirled in her palms, emitting a low, keening howl such as starving jackals make at night. From Captain Fowler's throat arose a gasp of surprise, and his gaze swung from his ship's flaxen sail to the whistling breeze she held in her grasp.

"Lady Witch, what have you there?"

"It is the wind, Captain Fowler." Twinkling blue streamers spilled from Ruha's hands and spun across the gloomy deck, each adding its own piercing note to the wailing of the gale. "I am determined to reach that ship before the dragon sinks it."

"That I can see, but it is no simple thing to bring a ship like Storm Sprite around. It takes time."

"The dragon will give you no time!"

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Ruha raised her hands toward the distant caravel, which now lay hidden behind another black and looming water dune.

"Hold your magic, Lady Witch!" commanded the captain. "You may have hired this ship, but I am the—"

The dune broke over the starboard side, and a torrent of white foam came boiling down the deck. Ruha flung her spell at the distant caravel and saw a dazzling stream of blue-sparkling wind shoot from the side of her own vessel. She threw her arms around the binnacle, and the dark waters were upon her. The raging currents swept her feet from beneath her. Had her elbows not been tightly wrapped around the slippery wood, surely she would have tumbled overboard and drowned in the angry black sea. Instead, she locked her fingers into the cloth of her aba and held fast, and when the torrent had receded, she pulled herself to her feet.

A few yards off the starboard side hung Ruha's spell, a glittering wedge of blue air that constantly whirled back on itself, yet steadily drove forth into the fierce night wind. As this wedge moved forward, its fan-shaped tail broadened and stretched back toward the Storm Sprite, until it engulfed the whole of the small cog. A fog of cold indigo vapor spread over the decks, causing the crew to give many shouts of alarm and promise offerings of treasure to Umberlee, and eddies of sapphire wind sprang to life atop the taffrail. Azure drafts raced along the wales

and undulated through the ratlines, and pale glowing breezes twined their way up the mast to spread along the yardarms.

Then a magnificent flapping arose in the sail. The night wind spilled from its belly, pouring a cascade of swirling turquoise zephyrs down upon the crew, and the small cog slowed. The sailors wailed in fear, tossing many rings and earrings overboard to win the favor of their avaricious sea goddess.

"You wretched witch!" Fowler held the tiller at the length of his arm, and his gray eyes were staring in hor-

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ror at the pale breeze spiraling along the lacquered surface. If it troubled the captain to have the scintillating currents swirling over his green skin also, he showed no sign of it. "What have you done to my ship?"

"I have done nothing to harm her." Beyond the starboard taffrail, Ruha's wind spell had stretched to twice the Storm Sprite's length. The glowing breezes had lost much of their sparkle and swirl, and they were beginning to look like a flight of spears aimed straight across the churning sea. "Perhaps you should change course, Captain Fowler. The wind is about to shift."

Fowler glanced at the shining wind spell, then looked at the great water dune gathering off his ship's starboard side. "I hope you haven't capsized us!"

Ruha met his glower evenly. "And I hope you are done with your stalling, Captain Fowler."

Fowler's face darkened to stormy purple. He looked forward, and his voice boomed over the main deck like a thunderclap. "Ready about!"

Terrified though the Storm Sprite's crew might have been, the command sent every man lurching through the froth to form lines at the braces. So marvelous was their skill and balance that not one sailor lost his footing, though the raging sea would have hurled Ruha overboard in an instant. By the time the last man had taken his place, the final glimmers of blue light were fading from the rigging. The wind bent to the witch's magic and swirled around to blow against the gale. The sail filled from the opposite side, and the Storm Sprite heeled farther into the dune and began to climb its face. The torrents of water pouring over her decks grew even greater.

"Loose the braces!" Fowler bellowed.

The crew freed the heavy lines that controlled the

angle of the yardarms, leaving the sail to swing free and flap in the wind. The ship righted itself and slowed as it had earlier, but the starboard wales finally rose out of the water, and the sea drained off the decks. The captain gave no further commands and did not take his eyes from

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the dune's moonlit crest. Ruha saw his lips moving in silence, and she wondered whether he was cursing her magic or offering some bribe to the faithless Queen of the Sea. The Storm Sprite drifted to a full stop, then heeled away from the heaving sea. It slipped sideways down the face of the great water dune, and Ruha thought they would capsize.

"Haul the braces!" Fowler commanded.

The crew hauled on the thick lines that trailed down from the yardarms, bringing the sail around to catch the wind. The flaxen sheet ceased its flapping, then bulged outward and snapped taut. The sailors grunted, straining to hold the braces steady, and several were pulled off their feet and left to dangle above the deck. The ship rolled back toward the dune, and the dark waters boiled over the decks, flinging strings of men about like beads on a thread. Somehow the crew held the yardarms in position, and the Storm Sprite lurched forward again.

The taffrail rose above the crest of the dune. In the moonlight, Ruha glimpsed the distant caravel, the dragon still standing on the poop deck. The beast had ripped the mizzemast from its step and was using it like a spear to jab at its foes, almost too tiny to see, upon the main deck. The witch thought it strange that the wyrm fought with a makeshift weapon instead of spraying its enemies with fire or acid, but perhaps the creature feared sinking the vessel and losing its treasure.

The Storm Sprite's bow cleared the top of the dune, and Captain Fowler shoved the tiller to one side. The ship's bow swung neatly over the crest, and the sail sputtered as it lost the wind.

"Fill the sail!"

The command had barely escaped Fowler's lips before the yardarms swung around. Once more, the sail caught the wind. The Storm Sprite lunged forward and slipped down the back of the dune so swiftly that it reached the bottom trough before the captain could give his next command. The prow slammed into the next rolling dune, and

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the ship groaned as though her spine would break. A

wall of water roared over the forecastle and rolled down the decks to splash against the somercastle, then the bow pitched up and the flood drained overboard, carrying with it two screaming men.

Ruha cried out in alarm. Captain Fowler let out a long breath and fondly patted the Storm Sprite's tiller.

"That's a fine girl." The half-ore made no remark upon the loss of his crewmen, but looked forward and, in a calm voice, ordered, "Fasten the braces."

The crew tugged at the brace lines until the last flutter disappeared from the sail and, with the Storm Sprite rushing madly up the face of the heaving water dune, secured the lines to the belaying pins. The little cog crested the top and raced down the other side, then sped, pitching and crashing, toward the distant caravel. The sailors busied themselves with clearing away the great tangle of lines scattered over the decks, coiling the loose ends and hanging them in their proper places, and paid no heed to the misfortune of their two lost fellows.

"Captain Fowler, what of your lost men? Is there nothing you can do for them?"

The half-ore shrugged and did not look at Ruha. "Even if we could find them, I would not turn back." His voice was sharp with restrained anger. "They're the price Umberlee demanded for letting us come about, and she'd look harshly upon me if I tried to bring them back."

Ruha felt a terrible emptiness in her stomach, feeling her spell had brought the Storm Sprite around too suddenly and caused their loss. "Then I am sorry for their deaths."

"For their deaths?" Fowler snapped. "And what of Storm Sprite? She could have lost the rudder or snapped a yardarm!"

"You care more for boards and cloth than for men's lives?"

The captain's jutting brow rose, and his flat nose twitched uncomfortably. He squared his shoulders and

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looked forward and did not speak. The crew had finished the tidying of the lines and now stood in the center of the ship, clinging to whatever they could find to keep from being swept away by the cataracts that boiled down the decks each time the bow crashed into another water dune.

When Fowler finally spoke, his gravelly voice was again deliberate and composed. "I doubt the world's going to miss those two. They were cutpurses and murderers both, and if Umberlee doesn't take them for her own, I pity the shore they wash up on." The captain peered at Ruha from the corner of his narrow eye, then added, "But I warn you, Storm Sprite is mine. Hiring her does not give you leave to disregard my commands. While a ship is at sea, the captain is lord and master, and those who cross him are filthy mutineers. I could sail into Pros with your rotten carcass hanging from my yardarms, and your friends would not question your punishment."

Ruha had reason to be glad she still hid her face behind the modest veil other people, for it would do much to conceal her shock. The Harpers had paid a steep price for her passage, which, having observed the effect of gold on people in the Heartlands, she had expected to make her master of the ship. She considered challenging Fowler's claim, but saw by his composure and firm manner that he was speaking the truth. Not for the first time, the witch cursed her ignorance of the strange customs in this part of the world and wondered if she would ever learn them all.

The Storm Sprite crested another dune, and Ruha saw they had closed half the distance to the ravaging dragon. The dark wyrm stood upon the caravel's main deck, facing sternward and digging through the somercastle like a pangolin after termites. The wings upon its back were flapping fiercely, knocking aside the cloud of arrows and spears assailing it from behind. The vessel itself had begun to list, but the bow continued to slice neatly through the heaving sea, giving Ruha hope that the ship

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would survive until they arrived to help. Yet Captain Fowler had not ordered his men to take up arms. Even with a magic wind driving his vessel to the rescue, the half-ore still did not mean to give battle.

The Storm Sprite pitched downward, and Ruha lost sight of the battle. "Captain Fowler, I did not mean to challenge your authority," she said. "I was told that you are a Harper friend and, despite your mixed blood, a man of honor. I can see now that my informant was mistaken."

The half-ore's face grew tight. "I have as much honor as any human captain!" he snapped. "And would I have Storm Silverhand's name upon my ship if I were not a friend of the Harpers?"

Ruha shrugged. "I know only what my eyes show me—and I can see that you have not called your men to arms. You have no intention of aiding that ship."

"You'd do well to worry less about my intentions and think of your assignment. The Harpers are not given to hiring private ships unless the matter is urgent. Do you think Lady Silverhand would want you to risk your mission over a fight that's none of your concern?"

"Storm Silverhand is not here."

The witch's reply was evasive because she did not know the answer to Captain Fowler's question. Storm Silverhand had told her only that she was to sail to the port village of Pros, where an important Harper named Vaerana Hawklyn would be waiting to take her to the city of Elversult. Presumably, Vaerana would explain Ruha's assignment, but even that was not certain.

Ruha looked toward the distant caravel. "I do know one thing: neither Storm Silverhand, nor any other Harper, would turn a blind eye on so many people in such terrible danger. If you are truly her friend, you know this as well."

The sea was piled high before the Storm Sprite, blocking all sight of the caravel and its attacker, but Captain Fowler's gray eyes looked toward the unseen battle and lingered there many moments.

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"It will go better for us, and them, if we arrive after the battle," he said. "If that dragon sends the Storm Sprite to lie in Umberlee's cold palace, we'll be of no use to the survivors—or to those waiting in Pros."

Ruha laid a reassuring hand on the half-ore's hairy arm. "Captain Fowler, you may tell your men to arm themselves. I will not let the dragon sink your ship."

"Lady Witch, sea battles are wild things." The captain's tone was overly patient, as though he were speaking to a little girl instead of a desert-hardened witch. "Even with your magic, you might find you can't keep such a promise."

"Captain Fowler, I have fought more battles than you know. It is true that I have not won them all, but never have I abandoned someone else out of fear for myself." These last words Ruha spoke with particular venom, for she was offended by Fowler's condescension. "But if you truly value your ship above other men's lives, the Harpers will guarantee my promise. If the dragon sinks the Storm Sprite, we will buy you another."

Fowler's face hardened. "And why are you so keen to fight the drake, Witch? Do you think to redeem yourself for the Voonlar debacle?"

Ruha felt her cheeks redden, and her anger evaporated like water spilled upon the desert floor. "At least I know why you lack faith in me."

The Voonlar debacle had been Ruha's first assignment. Storm Silverhand had sent her to work in a Voonlar tavern, where she was to serve as a secret intermediary and messenger. On her first day, a slave smuggler had crossed her palm with a silver coin. Ruha, failing to understand the significance of the gesture, had accepted the offering with thanks, then balked at delivering the expected services. Feeling slighted, the furious slaver had refused to accept the coin's return and drawn his dagger. He would certainly have killed the witch if one of his own men, a Harper spy, had not leapt to her defense. As it was, she and the spy had been forced to fight their way to safety,

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leaving the smuggler free to sell a hundred men, women, and children into bondage.

"I am sorry for the misery I caused the slaves of Voonlar. Not a night passes when my nightmares do not ring with their cries." Ruha raised her chin and locked gazes with the half-ore. "But I assure you, my shame is as nothing compared to the disgrace of a coward who turns from those he can save."

The half-ore's arm slipped free of the tiller, his lips curling back to show sharp tusks and yellow fangs, and he stepped toward Ruha. The witch did not back away, nor did she avoid his eyes, and when there came on the wind a distant roar and the splintering of ship timbers, Fowler was the first to glance away.

"Do not fear the dragon," Ruha urged. "My understanding of magic far exceeds my knowledge of Heartland customs."

Fowler shook his head as though trying to rid himself of some evil thought, and when he spoke, his voice was as low and guttural as a growl.

"As you wish, then!" He thrust his leathery palm under Ruha's face. "But give me your pin. I wager this battle will go harder than you think, and if Umberlee takes offense at your gall, I'll want proof of your pledge."

Ruha started to object, then thought better and turned away. She reached inside her aba and removed the Harper's pin hidden over her heart. It was a small silver

brooch fashioned in the shape of a crescent moon, surrounded by four twinkling stars with a harp in the center. The pin had once belonged to Lander of Archenbridge, a valiant scout who had died helping the Bedine tribes resist an army of rapacious Zhentarim invaders.

The witch handed the brooch to Fowler. "Guard it well. This pin was once worn by my beloved, and I cherish it more than life itself."

"That makes the risk the same for both of us." Fowler pinned the brooch inside his tunic, then hooked his arm around the tiller and turned his attention to the main

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deck. "Man the harpoons! Break out the axes and spears! Ready yourselves for the attack!"

Every man upon the decks turned an astonished eye toward their captain, and the crew grumbled its displeasure in one voice. A greasy-haired youth in a thin cotton tunic and gray, brine-stiffened trousers rushed up the stairs, stopping at the edge of the half deck.

"Cap'n, sure ye canno' mean to strike that dark thing first?"

"I can and do!" Fowler pulled a key from a chain around his neck and passed it to the man. "Now, you alley-spawned son of a tavern hag, open the weapon lockers before the witch calls the squids to drag us all down to Umberlee!"

The youth's eyes darted toward Ruha. Though the witch did not know who the squids were or how to summon them, she took some lint from her pocket and tossed it to the wind, making many strange gestures and reciting her lineage in the lyrical tongue of the Bedine. The sailor leapt off the stairs and ducked into the somercastle. Two of his fellows followed him inside, while several others struggled forward to the forecastle, fighting their way through the churning froth that boiled over the bow twice every minute.

The magic wind continued to drive the little cog onward. At intervals, Captain Fowler adjusted the tiller or ordered the crew to tighten a line, and each time they crested a dune, Ruha marvelled at how the distance between the Storm Sprite and her goal had closed. The sailors who had gone into the somercastle returned with boarding axes and spears for their companions, and those who had struggled forward to the forecastle also reappeared, laden with thick-braided skeins and barbed har-

poons twice a man's height. They tied lines about their waists and clambered onto the foredeck, where they pulled the oilskins off three ballistae and, fighting against raging waters and the ship's mad pitching, set to work stringing the heavy weapons. By the time they fin-

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ished, the caravel lay a hundred yards ahead, lumbering forward at a shallow angle that would present her starboard side to the Storm Sprite.

The battered caravel stretched to five times the length of the little cog. Her hull, looming dark and sheer in the night, rose from the sea like a cliff. The wales were crowned by a crest of white railing, broken in many places and draped with shredded rigging. Her foremast, all that remained of three, could have scraped a cloud, and carried more cloth than three of the Storm Sprite's sails.

Having torn the somercastle completely off the caravel, the dragon now crouched on the stern of the ship. All that could be seen of the dark beast were fluttering black wings as large as sails, an immense ebony flank, and its serpentine tail sweeping back and forth across the main deck to keep at bay the warriors behind it.

The wyrm raised a black claw above the starboard wale and flung overboard a handful of refuse. Among the debris were a pilot's table and three screaming women. The witch gasped and would have asked if all sea dragons were so large, except that she feared the question would alarm Captain Fowler. Instead, she watched as the Storm Sprite and the caravel continued to crash toward each other. Already, the two ships were so close that even when the sea heaved up between them, Ruha did not lose sight of the wyrm's black wings.

At last, Captain Fowler said, "If that wyrm's not the largest ever to fly the Dragonmere, I'm the Prince of Elves." The Storm Sprite's bow crashed into the trough between two great sea dunes, and the water poured over the forecastle and came frothing down the main deck. "I hope your magic arrows are powerful ones. A dragon like that could make short work of us."

Ruha thought it wiser not to mention that, unlike most sorcerers Fowler had seen, she could not create magic arrows. Heartland wizards used expensive and exotic ingredients to cast their spells, but desert witches seldom had access to such components. Instead, they fashioned

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their enchantments from the elements that ruled their lives: wind, sun, sand and stone, and, most precious, water. Ruha was particularly adept at sand and sun magic; unfortunately, water was her weakness.

The witch rummaged through her aba until she found a small piece of obsidian. "My spell will cut through the wyrm as a scimitar cuts through a camel thief." She displayed the black sliver. "But your men must also be ready, for the first blow does not always kill."

Fowler glowered at the dark shard suspiciously. "On my command, Witch." He flashed a menacing scowl that left no doubt about the consequences of disobeying. "Not a second before."

Ruha inclined her head. "Of course, Captain."

The Storm Sprite pitched upward. The boiling waters crashed against the somercastle and poured over the wales, and the little cog rose on the water dune. Thirty yards off the bow loomed a great wall of dark planks, the hull of the mighty caravel. The witch raised an inquiring eyebrow, but Fowler shook his head.

"Harpoons, let go atop!"

They crested the dune. Ruha cried out in shock, for the caravel lay only twenty yards ahead, with the dragon's mountainous figure still hunched over the stem. A dozen astonished sailors stood at the great ship's wales, staring down at the Storm Sprite.

From the bow of the little cog sounded a trio of sonorous throbs. Three barbed harpoons arced away from the Storm Sprite's ballistae, a long braided rope trailing from each. The first shaft sailed high over the wales of the devastated caravel and passed through one of the wyrm's flapping wings. The other two harpoons dropped lower, piercing the mighty serpent's black scales and sinking to their butts. The dragon gave a furious roar. Its sinuous neck undulated in rage, and clouds of roiling black fog shot from the caravel's portholes.

The Storm Sprite started down the rolling dune, and the dragon disappeared behind the caravel's looming

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hull. Ruha thought surely they would smash into the great ship.

Captain Fowler pushed the tiller to port. The Storm Sprite swung around, though not quickly enough to prevent her bowsprit from splintering on the other vessel.

The little cog completed her turn, then a tremendous boom filled the air when she slammed hulls with the great caravel. The impact hurled Ruha to the deck, and she felt the sliver of obsidian shoot from between her fingers. A terrible rasping arose between the ships as they rubbed hulls, and the witch knew it would not be long before they were past each other.

A powerful hand closed around Ruha's wrist, and she felt herself being dragged toward the tiller. "This is no time to lie about!"

"No, wait!"

Ruha's protest went unheeded, for already Captain Fowler had pulled her to his side and set her on her feet. Her eyes darted toward the deck. The planks were wet and as dark as the night and, even if the obsidian had not washed overboard already, she would never have found it in time to attack the dragon.

"Ready, Witch!" Fowler ordered. "It's almost time."

Ruha looked forward, raising her eyes toward the wyrm. She found her view blocked by the huge flaxen square of the Storm Sprite's half-filled sail. Beneath the sheet's fluttering edge, she could see harpoon lines playing out, and also the cog's bow slipping past the caravel's massive rudder. The witch thrust her hand into her aba and found several small pebbles.

Fowler hauled on the tiller, bringing his ship smartly around the stern of the caravel. The flaxen sail filled with wind and, like a proud stallion spurred to the gallop, the Storm Sprite leapt forward. The harpoon lines snapped taut, and a tremendous shudder ran through the cog.

Fowler flashed his tusks. "Now, Lady Witch! Slice that terror out of the sky!"

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Ruha pulled the pebbles from her pocket and pivoted around to keep her gaze fixed on the looming caravel. Over the stern came a great mass of writhing darkness, the wyrm being dragged along by the sturdy harpoon lines. The dragon beat the air with its wings, struggling in vain to right itself and wheel on its attacker. Its wings were tattered and strewn with holes, while its dark scales looked strangely tarnished and dull. Even the serpent's tail ended in a long section of gray, weathered bone, as though it were suffering from some wasting disease or festering wound.

Bracing herself against the binnacle, Ruha rolled her pebbles between her palms and called upon her stone magic. The rocks began to buzz and shake, vibrating so violently that it hurt her bones to hold them. She tossed the stones up before her face, and there they hung, sputtering and whirling around each other like angry wasps.

Recovering from its initial shock, the dragon ceased its flailing and stopped trying to wheel on its attacker. It beat its wings more slowly and contented itself with staying aloft.

"I said now, Witch!"

Fowler's eyes were locked on the dragon, and Ruha knew what concerned him. Smaller wyrms than this could spew fire and acid twice the length of the Storm Sprite's harpoon lines, and the witch had no illusions about what would happen if such a spray caught the little cog. The serpent's neck began to curl toward the Storm Sprite.

"Wait no longer!" Fowler pleaded.

At last, a faint sapphire gleam appeared inside the pebbles. Ruha blew upon the swirling stones, at the same time breathing the incantation of a wind spell. They sizzled away, screeching like banshees and trailing a ribbon of blue braided light. The dragon had almost brought its head around when the pebbles tore through its wing and blasted its flank, spraying shards of shattered scales in every direction. The wyrm stiffened and dropped

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toward the water, but when its belly touched the heaving sea dunes, it roared and once again lifted itself into the air.

Fowler's face paled from green to yellow. "I was a fool

to listen to you, Witch! To think a woman who'd take a slaver's coin could know dragons—"

"Captain Fowler, wait." Ruha wrapped an arm around the binnacle, then pointed at the wyrm. "The spell has only begun its work."

The half-ore narrowed his eyes and turned back to the dragon, still being dragged along by the harpoon lines. The wyrm had curled into the shape of a horseshoe, with

both its head and tail pointing away from the Storm Sprite. Its wings were fluttering so slowly and sporadically they could barely keep it aloft, while its serpentine body shuddered with erratic convulsions.

"My pebbles have not stopped moving," Ruha explained. "They are flying about within the wyrm, tearing it apart from the inside."

"A quick kill would've been better," Fowler grunted.

The captain kept his gaze fixed on the dragon, as though he would not be satisfied until the thing dropped into the sea and sank out of sight. Behind the serpent, the battered caravel was lumbering away, rolling wildly from side-to-side as her crew struggled to bring her under control. Atop the stern, Ruha saw twenty men standing amidst the wreckage, some holding lanterns while the rest waved amulets and talismans at the Storm

Sprite.

"That seems a strange custom. Captain Fowler." Ruha pointed at the men on the caravel's stern. "What does it mean?"

Fowler shrugged, barely glancing at the display. "Who can tell? She's a foreign ship. They're probably telling us to mind our own business."

A tarnished scale fluttered off the dragon's back, followed by the spiraling blue streak of a pebble. Ruha watched closely for more such flashes, as they indicated

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the tiny rocks had demolished the internal organs and were beginning to find their way out of the body. A second stone shot from the wyrm, then a third and a fourth, and still the serpent trembled and convulsed but somehow kept from falling into the sea.

Ruha scowled. Most victims were dead by the time four stones left their bodies.

Captain Fowler must have seen her brow furrow. "How long's it going to take that wyrm to die?"

"It is a big dragon. Captain."

Another pebble escaped the serpent's body and spheraled away into the heavens, and Fowler cast an impa-

tient glance toward the departing caravel.

"I'd like to catch her if we can," he said. "A prize like that. .. If her captain's a good man, he'll reward us well."

"Captain Fowler, what is this obsession of yours?"
Ruha demanded. "Do you expect treasure for—"

Ruha's question was interrupted when the dragon finally went limp and plummeted into the water, raising such a splash that buckets of dark sea rained down upon the Storm Sprite. The harpoon lines throbbled sharply, and the cog nosed into the water and heeled toward the wyrm. Fowler shoved the tiller to port, bringing his ship around so sharply she seemed to pivot on her bow.

"Loose the braces!" he boomed. He turned to Ruha and, more quietly, asked, "If you'd be kind enough to call off your wind. Lady Witch."

Ruha uttered a single syllable, and the magic breeze died away. The crew loosed the brace lines, leaving the yardarms to swing free, and the sail snapped and popped as it flapped loose in the wind. The drag of the wyrm's enormous body quickly brought the Storm Sprite to a halt. She swung around and began to roll wildly in the churning sea, still pitching toward the bow and listing toward the wyrm.

All at once, the crew broke into a tremendous cheer, many of them calling Umberlee's favor upon the witch's head. A great swell of pride filled Ruha's breast, and for

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the first time since the debacle in Voonlar, she felt worthy to wear the pin of a Harper.

A loud, sonorous gurgle sounded just off the starboard side. Ruha looked over to see the dragon's corpse sliding beneath the churning black waters. The Storm Sprite gave a long groan and listed even farther to starboard, the harpoon lines swinging toward her hull. Several of the crew lost their footing and would have fallen overboard had it not been for the quick hands of their comrades.

Ruha looked to Captain Fowler. "Why is the wyrm sinking? Shouldn't it float?"

"Aye, it should." A larcenous gleam filled the half-ore's eyes, and he glanced toward the bobbing lanterns atop the stern of the departing caravel. "Unless its belly is filled with foreign gold!"

The Storm Sprite continued to heel, and Ruha shook her head emphatically. "No, Captain Fowler! Cut it free,

or you'll sink us!"

"Cut it free?" the half-ore scoffed. "My crew would mutiny!"

"They would prefer losing the treasure to dying, I am sure."

"Don't be," Fowler said. "It takes a lot of gold to sink a dragon. And there's the bounty to think of, too. Cormyr pays a thousand gold for each wyrm head brought to port, and every man gets his share."

"All the gold in the Heartlands will not buy their lives back."

"Aye, but men sell themselves for less every day." Fowler lifted his chin toward the crew. "If you think they'll forgo their chance to live like kings, you know less about men than you do about the Heartlands."

Ruha studied the men. As Fowler had claimed, their expressions were more greedy than fearful, and despite the Storm Sprite's increasing list, not a single sailor was moving to cut the wyrm free. The cog continued to tip farther, until at last the harpoon lines ran vertically from the wales into the water. The heaving sea dunes crashed

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over the bow with thunderous force, and the decks sloped so steeply that it was impossible to stand without holding a halyard or shroud. Still, the crew made no move to free the ship.

"What's all this standing about?" Fowler yelled. "Secure the lines to the anchor windlass and prepare to haul!"

An excited murmur filled the air as the crew leapt to the task with surprising agility, dangling monkeylike from lines and belaying pins. The sea continued to batter the Storm Sprite, spraying white foam over the decks and threatening to capsize her all too often, but it took only a few moments for the men to wrap the lines around the windlass and start winching. Their efficiency did little to soothe Ruha's nerves. In the desert only fools tempted fate, especially for a prize as petty as gold.

"What of your reward, Captain Fowler?" The witch glanced toward the departing caravel. The lanterns atop its stern were still visible whenever the great ship crested a dune, but the gray outlines of the vessel itself were rapidly fading into the night. "I thought you wanted

to catch the caravel?"

Fowler did not even look over his shoulder. "Not if the dragon pilfered all its gold."

Several wails of surprise sounded from the windlass;

then the Storm Sprite righted herself so suddenly that half a dozen men fell flat on the deck.

"What happened?" Fowler boomed. "Why are those lines slack?"

"It—it just happened," came the reply. "The harpoons must have pulled free!"

A chorus of disappointed groans rumbled through the crew, but Fowler's gray eyes shined with alarm. "All of them at once? Never."

The sailors looked at each other with baffled expressions, as though they expected one of their number to confess to some mistake that explained the mystery. A babble sounded ahead of the Storm Sprite and to both

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sides of her bow. The little cog fell abruptly silent, and every head aboard swiveled toward the noises.

Ruha slipped a hand into her aba. "Perhaps the men should retrieve their weapons, Captain—"

A curtain of black wings rose from the sea ahead, eclipsing the moon's reflection on the water and casting a shroud of murky darkness over the ship. The crew gasped in alarm and retreated toward the somercastle, giving no apparent thought to the spears and axes that lay stowed around the deck.

"What's the matter?" Fowler demanded. As he spoke, a pair of ebony talons shot from the water on both sides of the bow. There was no hide over the gnarled fingers, and even the wrists exhibited bare patches of gray, weathered bone. The claws dug into the wales, and the little cog's bow dipped into the sea. The half-ore released the tiller and stepped forward. "Cowards! Stand and fight!"

For the first time since Ruha had boarded, the captain's words seemed to have no effect on his crew. The bravest of them watched over their shoulders as they opened a hatch or door, but most simply screamed in terror and hurled themselves through the nearest opening. Their panic surprised the witch, for until now they had exhibited the unwavering discipline of men who knew their lives depended upon working together. She pulled a

small crystal of quartz from her pocket, at the same time catching Fowler's arm with her free hand.

"Your men are braver than this," she said. "It is only the dragon's magic frightening them."

"Only?" the half-ore scoffed. "It will be enough to sink us!"

Ruha pointed her crystal over the ship's bow. "I am not frightened."

The dragon's head rose into view and, despite her claim, the witch was so shocked she could not keep the syllables other incantation from fleeing her mind. She found herself staring not into the slit pupils of a wyrm's diabolic eyes, but into the vastly more sinister void of two

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black, empty sockets. Though a thin layer of shriveled black scales still clung to the beast's brow and cheeks, its snout was a fleshless blade of cracked bone and cavernous nostrils. Even the creature's curved horns, once as sturdy and long as horse lances, were mere splintered stumps of their ancient magnificence.

"Umberlee have mercy!" Fowler ripped a golden ring from his ear and hurled it overboard, a piece of bloody lobe still dangling from the clasp. "Save us!"

The dragon's empty-eyed gaze followed the arc of the glimmering earring as it plunged into the sea, then snapped back to Fowler.

"If you wish mercy, do not throw your gold to Umberlee." The dragon spoke in a voice as raspy as it was loud, and the mere sound of it made Ruha's legs shake so that she could hardly keep her feet. "Give it to me, and perhaps your death shall be quick!"

When Fowler made no move to produce more gold, the dragon opened its jaws, revealing a hundred broken fangs and a scabrous white tongue, and the Storm Sprite's sail billowed toward its mouth. A loud rasp rustled down the length of the ship, and Ruha realized the serpent was gorging itself with air. She squeezed the quartz crystal between her thumb and forefinger, at the same time summoning her spell back to mind.

The rasping ceased, and wisps of dark fog rose from the dragon's nostrils. Ruha called out the words of a wind spell. The quartz crystal evaporated in a searing flash, and a bolt of white lightning leapt from her hand. It

struck the wyrm's head with a thunderous bang, hurling desiccated scales and shards of gray bone high into the air. The creature's neck snapped back, and from its shattered maw shot a plume of boiling, turbid vapor.

The dragon roared in pain, shaking the Storm Sprite from stem to stem, and the sea sputtered with the sound of its torn flesh dropping into the water, but the beast did not slip beneath the surging dunes. Instead, it dug its ebony talons deep into the ship's wales, then laid its neck

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over the bow to display the smoking, mangled crater that had once been its face.

"Who would do this to me?" the dragon rumbled. "Cast yourself to Umberlee, or you shall wish you had."

Captain Fowler glanced back at Ruha. His lips were as white as the moon. "Well, Harper, c-can you k-keep your promise?"

Ruha thrust her shaking hands into her aba and, fearing her efforts would come to naught, fumbled through her pockets. Live wyrms could be killed, but what could she—or anyone—do against this dead beast?

The turbid vapor that had spilled from the dragon's maw earlier began to settle over the front part of the ship. As soon as the dark fog touched the rigging, lines started to snap and fall, hissing and smoking as though they were on fire. The sail broke free of the yardarms and fluttered to the deck, as sheer and full of holes as old lace. The mast, and then all the wood from midships forward, began to sizzle and fume.

Fowler sank to his knees. "Wretched witch! What have you done to my ship?"

The dragon turned its shattered face toward the captain. "Did she give the order to interfere with me? Or was it you, thinking of Cormyr's filthy bounty?"

With that, the wyrm withdrew its head and slipped beneath the sea's dark surface. Ruha stepped to the taffrail and saw the shadow of one huge wing gliding through the water toward her.

"Captain, did I not promise that the Harpers would buy you another ship?" She stepped toward the half-ore. "How can they do that if we perish with this one?"

Fowler looked at Ruha with disbelieving eyes. "You think we've a choice in the matter? If you could destroy the dragon, you'd have done it by now."

The yardarms broke free and crashed down upon the deck. The thick planks gave way as though they had been rotting for a hundred years, and the spars struck several barrels stowed below decks. One of the casks split in two,

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spilling a viscous liquid that filled the air with a bitter, caustic stench. The babble of swirling water sounded behind the Storm Sprite.

Without glancing back, Ruha pointed into the hold "What is in those casks?"

The half-ore looked puzzled, as though he found it a strange time for Ruha to question the cargo. "Lamp oil We've got to have ballast, and it might as well pay—"

A sharp crack sounded from the rear of the deck. Ruha glimpsed the tiller disappearing through its housing, then three black talons rose into sight and hooked themselves over the taffrail. The witch grabbed Fowler's arm and jerked him off the poop deck, pushing him toward a boarding axe down on the main deck.

"I cannot save your ship, Captain, but I can save us. Go and smash those oil casks."

The half-ore jumped down and retrieved the weapon, then leapt into the hold. Ruha ducked down beside the somercastle and emptied her pockets of all the brimstoni powder she possessed, piling it upon the deck before her. A sharp crack sounded from the stern of the ship, then the Storm Sprite pitched to her rear. The witch shape< the heap of yellow powder into the figure of a tiny bird and uttered a wind spell.

The brimstone vanished in a brief flash of yellow, and in its place appeared the diaphanous form of a yellow canary. Ruha pointed toward the ship's hold, where Captain Fowler was busy smashing oil casks, and made a quick sweeping motion. The little bird flitted off to circle the area she had indicated.

A tremendous crackling sounded from the poop deck, and Ruha peered over the edge to see the dragon's claws ripping into the stern of the ship. She withdrew another quartz crystal from her aba, then jumped onto the ladder and pointed it at the creature's pulverized face, yelling a series of nonsensical syllables that she hoped the beast would mistake for those she had used to cast her first lightning bolt.

The dragon's head swiveled toward Ruha. She felt oil-laden air swirling past her head and heard the unmistakable rasp of the creature filling its chest. The beast sucked the diaphanous yellow bird she had created earlier into its throat. The witch dropped behind the somercastle, squeezing the quartz crystal and uttering the incantation of a fire spell.

A fiery spark shot from the tip of the crystal, igniting the stream of air being sucked into the dragon's throat. Ruha threw herself through the somercastle door. She felt a jolting crash; then there was a searing fulguration, the smell of wood ash, and finally the cool bite of saltwater.

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Once the numb ringing inside Ruha's skull abated and it occurred to her that she was still alive, her first thought was not that she would choke on the saltwater she had swallowed, nor that the weight of her sodden aba would drag her beneath the dark waters, nor even that she might bleed to death from her many lacerations. When the witch opened her eyes and saw the sea heaving all around her, her first thought was that she would never be found.

The dunes loomed as high as mountains, with rolling, moonlit faces that blocked Ruha's sight in every direction, making her feel immeasurably alone and insignificant in the stormy vastness of the Dragonmere. They were maddeningly inconstant, now lifting her toward the stars, now dropping her into the abyssal gloom, now carrying her along on steep, tumbling slopes of water. The witch knew she could not let the sea have its way with her. She had to free herself of its capricious grasp or die, but her chest was pumping water from her lungs in racking coughs, and she could barely keep her head above the surface, much less hold herself steady on the crest of a surging dune long enough to ... do what, Ruha did not know.

In all likelihood, she was not the only one to survive the disintegration of the Storm Sprite, but there had

been no time to put the little shore boat into the water. The others would be in the same predicament as Ruha, and no doubt anxious to blame her for their troubles.

The caravel crew would have every reason to treat the witch more kindly—providing they came back. Certainly, they had witnessed the explosion that destroyed the dragon, but would they realize what had happened to the Storm Sprite? Was their captain an honest man who would turn back to help those who had helped him? Ruha could only allow herself to believe that the answer to both questions was yes; to assume anything else was to lose hope, and to lose hope in Umberlee's domain was to die.

Still, the caravel would not arrive soon. It would take time for the great vessel to come around, then she would have to beat her way against the wind—using only one of the three masts she had once carried, and probably relying upon a tiller half splintered by the dragon attack. By the time she arrived, the Storm Sprite's wreckage would be strewn across a square mile of heaving sea, and Ruha knew better than to think any lookout would spy her dark head bobbing amongst all the oil casks, splintered timbers, and shreds of dragon floating upon the surging waters.

A large, curved timber appeared atop a nearby dune, its end briefly jutting over the crest like a great scimitar. Ruha fixed her eye on the beam. As it glided down the watery slope, she started to swim, reaching forward and kicking her legs in the fashion Storm Silverhand had taught her. The witch's shawl and veil had vanished, but her aba remained securely wrapped about her shoulders, and she had to struggle against both its clumsy cut and sodden weight to make headway. Nevertheless, she did not even consider slipping out of the garment. Its pockets were loaded with exotic dirts and rocks useful for her stone magic. More importantly, all of her spells were sewn into the interior lining. In the desert, paper and ink were precious commodities, but there was always plenty

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of thread to spare for embroidery.

By the time Ruha reached the timber, she could do no more than throw her arms over the top and hang there gasping. Though she had not realized it until the exercise had warmed her body, the water was deceptively cool. Her joints began to stiffen, and she recalled Fowler's stories of pulling his sailors aboard, blue and dead after only minutes in the water. But that had been in northern seas, and the Dragonmere was in the south. The temperature here could not be so dangerous—or so the witch hoped.

Ruha fought back her growing panic, reminding herself that the sea was not so different from the desert: it was vast and empty and lonely, with most of the life lying hidden beneath the surface. True, the dunes moved faster and they were made of water, but not water that one could drink. That was as precious here as it was in the sandy wastes. And there was one other similarity, one the witch did not want to consider: the sea, like Anauroch, was hospitable to those who knew its ways—and merciless to those who did not.

Ruha contemplated her growing chill and decided it probably would not kill her. She was not shivering, she still felt her toes and fingers, and her teeth were not chattering. All in all, the witch had spent more frigid nights in the desert, and she suspected that the cool water was keeping her from bleeding to death. There were dozens of cuts on her body, some both long and deep, but all stinging bitterly from the salt. The witch could feel her blood swirling about her, warm and viscous against her skin, but she could not tell how much she had lost. Had she been on dry land, she would have examined her cuts and bandaged them all, starting with the worst one first. But in the dark, heaving sea, she had to content herself with running her fingers over each wound in turn, feeling for a heavy flow that suggested a severed vein or artery.

Ruha found no rushing streams or pulsing tides, but

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she could count her inspection only a partial success. The swirling saltwater made it difficult to distinguish an oozing flow from a gushing one. In the end, she decided the mere fact that she did not feel light-headed was proof enough that she was not bleeding to death. And she thought of at least one good thing about being adrift: in the desert, some hungry jackal or lion would smell her blood and come running, but such a thing could not happen at sea. No creature she knew could follow a scent through water.

Having convinced herself she would not be dead by the time the caravel returned, Ruha turned her thoughts to making certain she would be found. Her own people, the Bedine, used large, curled horns called amarats for such purposes. The witch did not have an amarat, since only the men were allowed to use them, but she did have wind magic.

Ruha drew a deep breath. Then, speaking from her belly, she uttered a wind spell. Within her chest, she felt a tremendous sensation of expansion, as though her torso were growing as large and round as an oil cask. She tipped her chin back and cupped a hand around her

mouth.

"I am here!" The voice that came from her lips sounded like that of a giant, deep and resonant. It was so loud that it made the water reverberate like a drum. "Come and help me!"

Ruha pulled her hand away from her mouth and silently counted to a hundred, then repeated the message. As before, her voice was that of a giant. The witch counted again, then fell into a regular pattern of silence and calling. She was always careful to keep constant both the strength of her voice and the duration between her cries, hoping that would help the caravel captain determine whether he was moving closer to her, or farther away.

Ten calls later, Ruha's cries became thunderous croaks, for her throat had begun to ache from the sheer power of

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her booming voice. Nevertheless, she continued to shout, determined not to vary her routine until her windpipes burst—though she was starting to fear the cold would kill her first. Goose bumps were rising all over her body, and she felt a cold numbness creeping into the marrow of her bones. To make matters worse, the flotsam from the Storm Sprite was drifting apart faster than she had expected. She could see nothing close by except a handful of splintered deck planks, an oil cask riding low in the water, and several slabs of rotten dragon flesh.

As Ruha watched, one of the scaly chunks vanished beneath the sea. The slab did not slip gently under the surface, as though the meat had become too waterlogged to float. It plunged downward with a sharp swish, leaving nothing on the surface except a small circle of swirling water.

Ruha was not entirely puzzled. She had seen fish take insects swimming on the surface of oasis ponds, but the slab of dragon meat had been as large as her head. The witch could not even imagine the fish big enough to swallow such a morsel. She thought of bloody legs dangling in the water and wished for a larger piece of timber—one onto which she could crawl entirely. Ruha pulled her jambiya from its sheath and prayed it would not slip from her grasp. The long, curved dagger was not particularly valuable, but it had once belonged to a man to whom she had been married for two days. He had died fighting a band of brutal invaders, and the jambiya was all she had to remember him by.

The time to call came again. "Please hurry! Something is under the water!"

Ruha forced herself not to think about her dangling legs and tried to study the sea around her, watching to see if the dragon meat continued to disappear. The task was an impossible one, for no sooner would she glimpse a slab than a dune would heave up in front of her. When the water subsided, the scaly chunk was as likely as not to be gone. The witch never glimpsed any telltale circles

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to indicate the morsel had been taken by a fish, but she knew better than to assume she would in such dark, rough water.

Ruha felt herself rise on a dune, then something bumped into her knee and rubbed past her thigh. Her scream filled the sky with a cry that boomed like thunder. She thrust herjambiya into the water and sliced into a sinuous body, her knuckles brushing along a gritty hide. A huge tail fin slapped her arm, and the creature flitted away.

The witch let out a breath she had not realized she was holding. It had only been a fish—one as large as a man, but a fish nonetheless—and apparently it intended her no harm.

A distant voice came to her on the wind. "Keep yelling, Witch! Do you think I can see you in this murk?"

Ruha glanced toward the voice and saw the blocky silhouette of a small, makeshift raft cresting the next dune. On top of it kneeled two figures, both digging into the water with short sections of deck planking. One of the men appeared rather lanky and gaunt, but the other was stocky and stout, with the jutting brow and swinish snout of a half-ore.

Ruha slipped from the crest of her dune and lost sight of other rescuers. "I am here, Captain Fowler! One dune ahead!"

"What was . . . booming about?" Now that the sea had risen between Ruha and Fowler, the wind rendered his voice almost inaudible. "Are . . . hurt?"

"I am well. Something bumped my leg, but it was only a fish."

Fowler's voice remained silent for a brief moment, then suddenly rose above all the other sounds: ". . . yourself! That fish could be a . . ."

Ruha scowled and tried to pull herself farther onto the beam, but it only twisted and dumped her back into the

sea. She tried again, kicking her feet to help lift her weight out of the water. Something slammed into the

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thick part of her leg. Her arms slipped free of the wet wood, and she felt herself spin and glide away from the timber. She heard a peal of thunder and realized it was her own wail of agony, magnified a thousand times by the magic of her wind spell. A keen, crushing ache erupted in her thigh and raced through the rest of her body, and finally she noticed the teeth. They were clamped around the thick part of her leg, driven deep into her flesh.

Ruha thrust her free hand into the water and caught hold of a gritty dorsal fin. The fish began to work its jaw back and forth, scraping the points of its serrated teeth across her thigh bone. She pulled herself toward its tail and plunged her jambiya into its flank, then dragged the curved blade back toward herself. A torrent of cool, greasy blood gushed from the wound, covering her hand.

The fish dove, dragging Ruha into the black stillness beneath the sea. She could not see its lashing body, but it seemed to be the same creature that had bumped her earlier, about six feet long, with a slender, lashing body and a plethora of long, pointed fins. She twisted her jambiya in the wound and pushed it toward the creature's underside, praying she would find something that resembled a throat.

The blade struck bone, and the jaws of her attacker closed more tightly, threatening to crush her thigh. The fish whipped its head from side-to-side. Ruha's flesh tore, and her lungs burned with the need for fresh air. She thrust her jambiya into the side of the beast's head and slashed through something soft. She felt a rush of frothy water, but the creature seemed to feel no pain. It whipped its body around and went deeper, jerking her after it. A sharp crack reverberated up her spine, followed by a brutal, stabbing pang that seemed to spring from her bone marrow itself. The witch opened her mouth—she could not stop herself—and screamed.

A deafening roar throbbed through the water, striking Ruha's eardrums with such force that it seemed her entire skull had shattered. Without realizing she had

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raised them, the witch found her hands clamped over her pulsing ears, the hilt of her dead husband's jambiya pressed against her temple. The sound had a much greater effect on the fish. The creature's body went slack,

its jaws opened, and it began to squirm about drunkenly, nearly tangling itself in her aba before it scraped its gritty tail across her cheek and vanished into the black waters.

Ruha had a fierce urge to cough and realized that her body had been trying to fill its air-starved lungs with seawater. She clamped her jaws shut and kicked toward the surface—then nearly forgot herself and screamed again when a sharp jolt of pain shot through her thigh bone. Continuing to kick with her good leg, the witch lowered a hand and found a mangled circle of flesh just below her left hip. The water felt alarmingly warm, and she could feel a steady current of blood flowing from the wound.

When Ruha's head finally broke the surface, her ears were still ringing from her underwater scream. She could not hear the wind wailing, but she did feel its cool touch upon her skin and immediately started to gasp and cough, causing such a roar with her booming voice that she felt it in her feet. Already, she was growing dizzy from blood loss, and she feared she would die before her coughing spasm ended.

Ruha slipped her jambiya into its sheath and set about unbuckling her belt. As simple as the task was, she could hardly accomplish it. With only one leg able to move and both hands required to undo the clasp, she could barely tread water. Her sodden aba kept dragging her beneath the surface, and she feared that if she allowed herself to sink too far, she would not have the strength to swim back to the surface.

From behind Ruha came the muffled, distant-sounding murmur of a man's voice. She spun herself around and, less than twenty yards away, saw a ragged section of hull planks lashed to three, low-floating oil casks. Atop the makeshift raft stood Captain Fowler and the other man,

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both shouting at the witch and waving her toward the raft.

"I am unable to swim!" Ruha's voice roared like a falling wall inside her own head, and both Fowler and his crewman cringed at its volume. "A fish attacked me. My leg is—"

Ruha's explanation ended in a strangled cry of alarm as a huge, gritty snout bumped into her back. The witch took three deep breaths while the body of the great fish brushed along her flank, its dorsal fin harrowing the water like a ship's prow. At last, the creature passed,

drawing a sharp hiss when its massive tail slapped the witch's mangled leg.

Ruha stopped fussing with her belt and filled her lungs, at the same time glancing in Captain Fowler's direction. The half-ore's eyes were bulging out of their sockets, and he was frantically tying a rope around the waist of his trembling companion.

A mountainous dune rose beside Ruha, and she saw the dark line of a dorsal fin emerging from its face. She closed her eyes and buried her head in the water, at the same time voicing the mightiest, deepest bellow her aching throat could manage. Again, the water throbbed, hammering her eardrums with a terrible, pulsing ache.

Before the witch could pull her head from the water, the enormous fish hit her—but she did not feel its long teeth tearing through her torso. Instead, the beast's nose slipped beneath her hips, and she slid along its spine until the creature started to roll toward her. With one hand, the witch caught its dorsal fin and pushed away, narrowly escaping being forced beneath the surface. The monster floated belly up for a moment, then slowly writhed down into the sea.

The snout of a smaller fish nosed Ruha's shoulder;

then she felt the rough skin of yet another creature rasping across her foot. "There are more?" she shrieked. "By Afar, I hate this sea!"

Over the roaring of the dunes came the alarmed mur-

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mur of Captain Fowler's voice, so muted by the ringing in Ruha's ears that she could not understand what he was saying. She looked up and saw him only ten yards away, pointing in the direction in which the monstrous fish had vanished a moment earlier. Beside him stood the sailor with the rope tied around his waist, staring into the dark waters and stubbornly shaking his head.

The witch filled her lungs with air and spun around to see a huge black fin slicing toward her, albeit on a somewhat crooked course. She pushed her head beneath the water and, summoning her voice from deep down in her bowels, bellowed. Again, the sea pulsed with her fear and anger, and again the great fish rolled on its back.

Ruha turned toward her rescuers and saw six more of the beasts floating with their bellies toward the sky. They all had wedge-shaped snouts and small, pitiless black eyes and shovel-shaped mouths. She began to pull herself

through the surging waters. Her head was spinning from the loss of blood, and she did not know how she would find the strength to reach the raft before the monsters recovered and swarmed her again.

The witch had taken no more than three strokes before Captain Fowler grabbed the reluctant sailor by his collar and belt, and pitched him into the sea. The man splashed down two yards away. Ruha expected the fellow to turn away and swim for the raft, but instead he cast an angry glance in her direction and thrust out his hand. She stretched forward and caught his wrist, digging her fingernails deep into the flesh of his forearm. The sailor scowled, but rolled onto his back and started to kick his legs. Captain Fowler hauled on the rope, pulling them back toward the raft.

Ruha looked over her shoulder and saw the stunned fish already beginning to twitch and squirm. She wrapped her hand into the short length of rope holding up the sailor's dingy trousers.

"Cover your ears!" The man cringed at the sound of Ruha's booming voice. "And keep kicking!"

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After the sailor put his hands to his ears, the witch pushed her face beneath the surface and let out another bellow. The concussion once more stunned the small fish into inaction, but the monster was too far away. Its fins continued to flutter, and its immense body slowly rolled in the water.

Ruha felt Fowler's thick hand in her hair. He twisted his fingers into her unbound tresses and lifted her out of the water. It was a painful way to be hauled from the sea, but the witch did not complain. She grabbed a lashing and scrambled completely aboard, hissing in pain as she dragged her savaged leg across the wet planks. She rolled onto her back and saw the sailor clutching the edge of the raft, struggling in vain to pull himself aboard. Behind him, the huge fish had righted itself and was already swinging its snout toward the raft.

"By the burning face of At'ar!" Ruha snarled, swearing her oath in the name of the fiery Bedine sun goddess. She thrust her hand into her aba and rummaged through its blood-soaked pockets. "That monster has troubled me enough!"

The sailor looked back toward the great fish. The creature was half-submerged, snaking a slow, crooked path toward the raft. Captain Fowler reached past Ruha to

grab the man's shoulder, but the fellow shook his head and swam away. At first, the witch did not understand what he was doing; after his initial reluctance to help her, he hardly seemed the type to draw a sea-monster away from his companions. Then, when the beast did not change course, she noticed the slippery red ribbon she had left on the raft planks. Perhaps lions and jackals could not follow blood trails through water, but they did not breathe the stuff.

Fish did.

Ruha withdrew two small packets from her pocket, one filled with sand, the other with lime. She poured the contents of both packages into her palm and spit on them. As the witch mixed them together, Captain Fowler took a

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boarding axe from his belt and stepped forward to meet the advancing fish. She grabbed the half-ore's leg and pulled him roughly back.

"This fish belongs to me. Captain." Though Ruha was trying to speak quietly, Fowler flinched and instinctively retreated from her thunderous voice. She drew him to her side. "Help me stand."

The captain glanced at the approaching monster, which had now submerged almost completely. Only the tip of its dorsal fin still showed, slicing across the face of a heaving dune. Fowler slipped a hand under Ruha's arm and pulled her up.

The dorsal fin was only five yards away when the rising dune swallowed it. With Fowler's help, Ruha retreated to the back of the raft. A dull buzz started to drone in her ears, and swirls of dark fog swam along the edges of her vision. The witch had lost too much blood to be standing. Her knees buckled, and, had it not been for the captain's support, she would have fallen.

As Ruha struggled to call her spell to mind, a huge gray snout burst from the water and crashed down on the corner of the raft. A pair of tiny, wide-set eyes flared briefly; then the monster squirmed forward. The raft listed toward the trough of the dune, and the witch feared they would flip over. Her vision narrowed to a black tunnel. She reached out and slapped the fish on the nose, smearing the sand mixture over its rough hide.

The fish twisted sideways, temporarily preventing the raft from tipping farther, and opened its mouth. The beast's teeth were as large and ugly as spearheads, and Ruha knew they would tear her into bite-size pieces with a single snap. She uttered the incantation of a stone

spell, at the same time hurling herself backward into Fowler's arms. They fell onto the deck together, leaving their attacker's great jaws to clap shut on empty air.

A pearly sheen swept over the head of the great fish and down its huge body. The creature squirmed farther onto the raft, forcing Ruha and Fowler to the very edge of

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the vessel's high side. It slapped the water with its tail, driving itself forward, and the magical luster of the witch's spell suddenly drained from its gritty skin. The beast grew as drab and gray as ash, and the duller it became, the slower it moved. By the time its jaws were within striking range, the monster's entire body had grown as drab and motionless as a mudstone sculpture.

Captain Fowler stretched a tentative leg toward the gaping jaws and, when his foot did not get bitten off, pushed the monstrous head off the raft. The fish slipped from sight and vanished beneath the dark water as swiftly as a stone. The witch slumped onto the deck and began fumbling at her buckle, praying she could stay conscious long enough to tie her belt around her bleeding leg.

Ruha had barely unlocked the clasp before her head thudded onto the planks and her vision went entirely black. She felt Fowler's stout fingers tugging at the belt, then the tinny sound of a man's fading voice: "Hey! These sharks..."

Sometime later, the witch awoke to a throbbing leg and the sound of arguing voices.

". . . witch for?" whined the sailor. "She's the reason we're here, I say!"

"I don't give a squid's lips what you say, Arvold! I order a man to swim, I'll not have to throw him!"

Ruha tried to open her eyes, found the effort too tiring, and settled for reaching down to feel her savaged leg. Her thigh was girded by a crude tourniquet, and her aba was torn clear to the hip—that would cost her the use of a few sand spells, depending upon how easy she found it to reconstruct the torn symbols. Her flesh was not yet numb and still warm to the touch, so the witch guessed she had been unconscious no more than two or three minutes.

"There'd have been no need to throw me, if it were worth going in," growled Arvold. "But there was no call to swim for the witch. We should've let the sharks take her."

"That's for the captain to say, not you!" Captain

Fowler's declaration was followed by the creak of a weapon's blade being torn from a plank. "I've no use for cowards, sailmender!"

"Captain Fowler, you have little room to be calling other men cowards." The spell of loudness had lapsed when Ruha fell unconscious, so her voice sounded as weak and frail as that of any woman who had nearly bled to death. "I fail to see how a man who hurls another into danger is any braver than his victim."

The witch forced her eyes open and raised her head. Her two companions sat on the front of the raft, each facing the other from his own corner. Captain Fowler, who was holding a boarding axe in his fist, brought the weapon down and buried its head in the edge of a plank.

"It's a good thing you were the one in the water, not me." Fowler glared at his sailmender. "Do you think Arvold would've pulled us back? He'd have left us to the sharks and thanked Umberlee for the chum."

Ruha let her head fall back to the deck, then rolled it to one side so she could study Arvold's face. The sailmender had a sharp-featured face with a hawkish nose and dark, glistening eyes, and in his expression there was no denial of anything Fowler claimed. Still, whether he had done it willingly or not, Arvold had saved the witch at the peril of his own life, and she was not so far gone from Anauroch that she had forgotten what such an act meant to a Bedine.

"Perhaps what Captain Fowler claims is true, Arvold," Ruha said. "But even so, you saved my life at the risk of your own. Until I have done the same, I am yours to command."

Captain Fowler winced at the statement. Arvold's lips curled into a lecherous grin, and he ran his dark gaze up the witch's exposed leg, over her bare hip, and up to her dark, ripe lips.

Ruha's cheeks burned with embarrassment, for she was unaccustomed to having men ogle her naked face. Save for her short tenure as a spy in Voonlar, she had

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ignored the Heartland women's custom of baring their visages in public, preferring to keep her own face concealed beneath a heavy scarf. All that she usually showed were her brown eyes, her aquiline nose, and, when her veil slipped low, the tribal hash marks tattooed on her

cheeks.

"Well now!" Arvold continued to leer. "That changes things."

Ruha turned away, raising a hand to cover her face. "I did not mean I would . . ." The words caught in her dry throat. "My words did not imply what you think. In Anauroch, they are a pledge of allegiance and debt."

"We're not in the desert, witch!" Arvold snarled. "We're in the middle of the bloody Dragonmere—and I say you owe me something for that, too!"

The raft bounced gently as Arvold crawled across the deck. Ruha let her hand drop to her jambiya, both angered by the fool's lechery and frightened she would have to slay him to save her honor. He could not believe she had meant to offer herself as a woman—or could he? She raised herself on an elbow and looked toward the sailmender. He stopped just beyond her reach, his gaze fixed on the curved dagger at her belt.

As Arvold contemplated his next move, a dark fog began to gather at the edges of Ruha's vision. The sharp angles of the sailmender's face seemed to soften before her, and his rough complexion grew smooth and yellowish. His hawkish nose shrank to a more graceful size and curved upward at the end. Folds of skin appeared at the corner of his eyes, giving them a narrow, slanted appearance, and his hair turned black and silky.

Ruha's hand loosened around her dagger, but she did not gasp, or even worry that she was falling into unconsciousness again. She had been suffering visions since before she could walk, so she recognized the change in Arvold's face for what it was: a mirage from the future. Sometime soon, she would meet a man with the face that had appeared over the sailmender's. She could not say

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what would happen then, but she doubted it would be anything good. It was never anything good.

Ruha's first mirage had been of thousands of butterflies. Later that year, her tribe had been forced to camp at an oasis infested with moths, and soon every piece of cloth in the khowwan was full of holes. Later, the face of a handsome stranger had appeared over that of her husband, Ajaman. Ajaman had died that night; the handsome stranger had arrived soon after to help Ruha's people fight the ones who had murdered her husband. She had eventually taken the stranger, the Harper named Lander, as a lover—only to see him felled by the same enemy that had slain Ajaman.

Noticing Ruha's distraction, Arvold slid forward, still wearing the face of a slant-eyed stranger. When he stretched a hand toward her dagger, his fingers suddenly changed into sharp talons. The flesh of his arm turned black and scaly, and the pupils of his eyes narrowed into vertical slits with irises as black as obsidian. A crest of jet-colored fins sprouted along his back, and the long, lashing tail of a dragon appeared at the base of his spine.

Ruha tried to pull her jambiya, but the sailmender's claw lashed out quick as a serpent and caught her wrist. She cried out and slammed her forehead into the strange face. Arvold raised his free hand to slap her, and it, too, was a black claw.

Captain Fowler appeared behind his sailmender and caught the man's scaly arm. Arvold's dragon tail disappeared instantly, as did his scales, his talons, and his crest of dark fins. His pupils grew round, the yellowish tint vanished from his skin, his nose grew hawkish again, and Fowler continued to hold his wrist.

"Arvold, you know what the witch meant to say. Do you really want to hold her to the letter of what she said, knowing what she's liable to do if you anger her?"

The sailmender continued to stare at Ruha's bare face, his leer more angry than lustful. Though she felt bashful and naked without her veil, the witch forced herself to

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return his gaze with an icy glare.

At last, Arvold released the witch's arm. "Ah, Umberlee take you!" He pushed himself to his corner of the raft. "If that's how you repay your debts, I'll have nothing to do with you."

Ruha let her head fall back onto the deck, weakened by both her vision and the trouble with Arvold.

Captain Fowler's swinish face appeared over her.

"Sorry I didn't move faster, Witch," he whispered. "But after you nearly called me a coward, I—"

Ruha raised a hand. "Do not apologize, Captain. You warned me before not to question your judgment—and I should have been able to handle Arvold without your help."

Fowler nodded. "Aye, any Harper should've, but you hesitated—and why you let him grab your dagger arm, I'll never know."

"I have lost a lot of blood," Ruha said.

The witch balked at telling Fowler about the mirage, for she had long ago learned that few people understood her visions. Her own tribe had banished her from their camps, believing her wicked magic caused the calamities she foresaw. Even in the Heartlands, she had twice been stoned for warning people of disasters about to befall them, and once she had been accosted for not foreseeing a catastrophe that befell the flirtatious young daughter of the mayor of Teshwave.

The witch rolled her head away from Fowler. "Perhaps I was just too weak."

The captain checked the tourniquet on her leg, then laid his leathery palm on her forehead. "You're losing no more blood, but you do feel cold as a barnacle." He grabbed her chin and pulled it around so he could look her in the eye. "You wouldn't be thinking of dying on me, would you Witch?"

Ruha tried to chuckle and failed. "Not without your permission, Captain."

Fowler glared at her from the corner of one eye. "Aye,

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that's good." He grabbed the collar of his tunic and turned it inside out, displaying the Harper's pin Ruha had given to him. "I've every intention of collecting on your promise—and don't think you can squirm out of it, like you did with Arvold."

Ruha managed a weak smile. "Get me to Pros, and you shall have your ship."

"That I shall, Witch—and it'll be easier than you think." The captain grinned broadly, then stood and turned toward the front of the raft. "Arvold, man your paddle!"

Three

The caravel's bowsprit shot over the dune crest, less the twenty yards from the raft. Beneath the giant spar, illuminated by the pearlescent sphere of a silver glass lantern, hung the magnificent sculpture of a square-snouted dragon. With its delicately curled horns, ball-shaped eyes, and lustrous green scales, the beast looked nothing like the wyrm that had destroyed the Storm Sprite. The figurehead's glower-

ing face appeared more reproachful than vicious, and there was nothing in its expression to suggest bloodlust or insatiable greed. Still, the thing was clearly a dragon, and that was enough to give Ruha pause.

The caravel's great prow burst through the back side of the dune, hurling curtains of spray high into the air. Ruha pointed at the figurehead.

"Do you see that, Captain Fowler? Is that not a dragon's head?"

The witch sat near the back corner of the raft, her mangled thigh extended before her. During the twenty minutes it had taken Fowler and Arvold to paddle into the caravel's path, everything below the tourniquet had grown numb and cool to the touch, and now the leg was beginning to turn blue, as she could tell whenever the moon's silver light flashed across her bare flesh.

When Captain Fowler did not comment on the figure-

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head, Ruha asked, "Why does the caravel carry such a thing on its bow? Could that be the reason the dragon attacked it?"

Fowler set aside the plank he had been using as a paddle. "I think not, Witch. Half the prows on the Dragonmere bear figureheads of such fiends, to scare off monsters of the deep."

Ruha studied the figurehead more carefully, then shook her head. "That carving does not look frightening to me."

The captain had no time to answer, for the bow of the great caravel was already slipping past. Along the wales stood a dozen dark figures, all shining storm lanterns over the rail. Both Fowler and Arvold jumped to their feet and waved their arms in excitement. From the shadows behind the lantern bearers emerged a figure holding a large bow nocked with a white, round-nosed arrow.

The man loosed his bowstring. The white shaft sailed over the raft, trailing a thick dark cord. Fowler let the line fall upon the planks, then grabbed it and pulled the arrow aboard. He snapped the shank at its base, then he and Arvold started to thread the rope through the raft

lashings. As they worked, the caravel continued to lumber past, taking up the rescue line's slack at an alarming pace. The lantern bearers walked toward the great ship's stern, trying to keep their lights focused upon the raft. The heaving sea made their task an impossible one, forcing Ruha's companions to labor in an irritating kaleidoscope of flashing beams. By the time the pair finished, the rescue line was stretching taut and the lantern bearers were standing atop what remained of their ship's battered poop deck.

"Hold fast!"

Resuming his place at the front corner, Arvold fell to the deck and grabbed the edges of the planks. Fowler dropped beside Ruha, flinging one arm over her shoulders and pinning her to the wet planks. The witch had barely twined her fingers into the lashings before the

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rescue line snapped tight and jerked the raft so violently it left the water.

The flimsy vessel splashed into the water an instant later. From that moment on, it seemed to Ruha that they spent as much time traveling beneath the surface as they did above it. Every time they came to another sea dune, the rescue line would drag them through its steep face, burying the raft under a foamy torrent that threatened to sweep the witch and her companions into the Dragonmere. A moment later, they would emerge on the other side and drop into the trough, then slam into the face of the next dune and disappear beneath the raging sea.

Between dousings, Ruha gasped, "Surely, there is a—" She grunted as they slammed into a trough. "—a better way to bring us aboard!"

The caravel pulled them through another sea dune. When they came out the other side, Fowler asked, "Can you fly, Witch?"

"That is bird magic," Ruha answered. "If I could fly, why would . . . ough! . . . why would I have hired you to sail me across the Dragonmere?"

After they plunged through another dune. Fowler said, "Then this is the only way. In a Sea this rough, a big ship like that can't be stopping to take aboard passengers!"

They slammed into another trough; then the ride smoothed out as they entered the caravel's wake. The ship's crew hauled the raft up to the stern corner and

lowered a rope. Fowler tied Ruha in first, and the line tightened around her chest. She rose alongside the rudder more than fifteen feet before she reached the somercastle and began to scrape along its back wall. The witch bit her lip to keep from crying out. Though her mangled leg was too numb to feel anything, she had many other cuts and bruises that protested the rough treatment.

After a painful ascent of another ten feet, several pairs of hands caught her beneath the arms and pulled her into the ruins of a luxurious officer's cabin. The walls, or rather what remained of them, were draped with silken

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tapestries depicting fanciful scenes of domestic bliss, and the floor was covered by wool carpet as plush and finely loomed as those woven by Ruha's own people.

A pair of rescuers leaned over the witch, and she gasped. Both men had smooth, yellow-tinted features, with small noses and narrow, slanted eyes. Neither face matched the one she had seen in her vision, but they obviously belonged to the same race as the man in the

mirage.

The elder of the pair, a distinguished-looking man with graying hair and a yellow patch over one eye, spoke to the other in a Kiting language of short syllables and fluctuating pitches. Both men were slight of build and no taller than Ruha herself, and they wore high-necked tunics with long sleeves and hems that swept the floor.

When the first man finished speaking, the second bowed to him, then bowed to Ruha. "Please to allow me to present Mandarin Hsieh Han Liu, Imperial Minister of Spices to Emperor Kao Tsao Shou Tang, Jade—"

The one-eyed man hissed at the speaker, who continued his introduction with barely a pause, "Jade Monarch of Shou Lung and of all Civilized Lands."

The one-eyed man bowed to Ruha, who sat upright and dipped her chin in return. Across the cabin, several more small, yellow-skinned men were hauling up the other end of the rescue line, which they had tossed down to the raft once she was aboard. Anxious to avoid being dragged overboard if their hands slipped, the witch began to untie herself.

"I am called Ruha." She spoke directly to the one-eyed man, who could hardly have corrected his translator without himself understanding Common. "I thank you for saving my life, Minister Hsieh."

"Many thanks to you, also. You save Emperor's ship, and lives of many humble servants." Hsieh bowed again, letting pass his facade of not speaking Common. He motioned to a corner behind Ruha, and an old man with a knobby, shaven head stepped out of the shadows.

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"Please to allow physician to see leg."

"Physician?"

"The mandarin's healer," explained Hsieh's assistant.

When the witch nodded, the physician kneeled at her side and set a box of carved ivory upon the floor. He pulled her tattered aba away to inspect the savaged leg. The constant deluge of sea water had kept the wound surprisingly clean, so Ruha saw that the fish had cut a circular laceration into the side other thigh. The bite was nearly a foot in diameter, and in one place so deep she saw a white sliver of bone.

Captain Fowler clambered into the cabin and stepped brusquely to Ruha's side, mercifully drawing her attention away from her leg. "How you faring? Will you live until I get my cog?"

Frowning at the half-ore's swinish face, Hsieh stepped back and called something sharp through the cabin's shattered doorway.

Ruha cocked an eyebrow at Fowler. "Surely, you do not intend to be rude, Captain." She gestured to the mandarin. "Allow me to present you to Minister Hsieh Han Liu, Imperial Minister of Spices to the Emperor Kao Tsao Shou Tang—"

"Jade Dragon of Shou Lung and all civilized lands—I know." Despite the undue emphasis he had placed on the word civilized, Fowler bowed deeply to the mandarin. "I've run cargo for the Ginger Palace a time or two—though I've never had the pleasure of boarding one of your junks before."

Hsieh relaxed and once again called down the corridor, then returned the half-ore's bow—though not so deeply, and without taking his gaze from Fowler's eyes. "Captain Fowler? Then you give order to attack dragon?"

"Aye." Fowler nodded. "But it was the Lady Witch's idea, and her magic that destroyed it."

Both the mandarin and his assistant regarded Ruha

with renewed respect, and the physician began to probe her wounds more gently. Hsieh bowed to Ruha again.

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"Forgive my discourtesy, but you do not call yourself Lady Ruha. Do you require anything?"

Ruha scowled, puzzled by Hsieh's reaction. She was accustomed to strange reactions when people discovered she was a witch, but that did not seem to be what troubled the mandarin.

"Please, Minister Hsieh, I am not. . ."

Fowler's head twisted ever so slightly from side to side.

Since the captain had at least some acquaintance with the Shou, Ruha decided to follow his lead. "Please, I am not accustomed to showing my face. I need a shawl and veil."

Hsieh glanced at his translator, who said something

into his ear. The mandarin scowled, and they had a short exchange, then the assistant bowed and scurried out of the cabin.

"Yu Po goes to fetch finest scarves from our cargo."

As Hsieh spoke, the physician pulled a pair of silver tongs from his box. The old man opened the instrument slightly and slipped the jaws into the deepest part of Ruha's wound, where she had glimpsed her white bone.

"Say if this hurt. Lady Ruha."

The physician closed the tongs, then worked them back and forth. Ruha heard a faint crunching sound. She felt a gentle vibration deep in her hip, but her leg had gone so numb below the tourniquet that she barely noticed the metal rubbing her mangled flesh. The old man gave his instrument a final twist and withdrew a huge triangle of serrated tooth.

"When the fish attacked, I ... I heard something crack," Ruha gasped. "I thought the thing had broken my leg."

"Leg fine. Bone strong."

The physician returned his tongs to the ivory box and withdrew a handful of yellow powder, which he carefully

sprinkled into the bite. Once the entire gash was filled with the dust, he half-whistled a series of strange, high-pitched syllables. The powder vanished with a flash of

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golden light; then a ring of brownish smoke drifted from the wound and filled the little cabin with the smell of brine and burnt flesh. The old man inspected the results, then took a hooked needle and a length of black thread from his box. When he began to sew, Ruha felt nothing more than an occasional tug.

The Shou crewmen soon pulled the raft's last survivor, Arvold, into the cabin. Hsieh regarded the bedraggled sailmender with an enigmatic gaze, scrutinizing the shabby tunic and the length of rope that held up his trousers. He glanced at Captain Fowler, whose dress was only marginally better, then looked back to Ruha for an introduction.

"The sailmender," Ruha explained.

"Put him where you can watch him," warned Fowler. "He's a hopeless thief, but he's good with a needle. I'd hate for you to lop off one of his hands."

Hsieh raised his brow at the frank appraisal, then spoke to two of his men, who promptly escorted the sailmender out of the cabin.

"They put him with others," explained the mandarin.

"Others?" Ruha could not keep the hope out other voice. She considered the sinking of the Storm Sprite her doing, and it would ease her conscience to hear the crew had survived. "How many did you save?"

Hsieh's lip curled disdainfully, whether at the witch's concern or the memory of the human dregs his crew had dragged from the sea, Ruha did not know.

"We save ten men," the mandarin reported. "But tonrongs do not treat them well."

"Tonrongs?" Ruha asked.

"Sharks," Fowler explained. "The lions of the sea, 'cept they eat anything, and they're always hungry."

Hsieh nodded. "Yes. Tonrongs take limbs from four of your men, and they soon die."

Ruha felt a guilty emptiness in her stomach. Unless

they found more survivors, three-quarters of the Storm Sprite's crew would perish. She let a weary groan slip

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from her lips, which caused the physician to jerk his

bloody finger out other wound.

"So sorry. Lady! Did not mean to cause pain."
Fowler regarded Ruha with renewed concern, then

turned to the physician. "She going to die before we reach port?"

The physician's shaved scalp turned an angry orange. "Not die at all! I treat Emperor once!" He tried to slip a finger under Ruha's tourniquet and barely succeeded, then nodded his head approvingly. "Not even lose leg— maybe."

Ruha mewled, then clamped her jaw shut to keep from showing any more fear. Despite her efforts, her lips began to tremble and beads of cold sweat rolled down her brow.

Hsieh spoke harshly to the old man, who paled and stooped even closer to his work.

"I tell physician if you lose leg, he lose leg. But if he fail anyway, I give you leg's weight in gold." The generous offer drew an astonished gasp from Fowler, but the mandarin was not finished. "Also, Emperor's treasury pays for loss of ship, and more, when we reach Ilipur."

Deciding it would be wiser to let Hsieh draw his own conclusions about who owned the Storm Sprite, Ruha said, "My business is in Pros, Minister Hsieh. I understand it is on the way. Perhaps you would put us ashore there?"

A look of chagrin flashed across the mandarin's face. "All our gold vanish with dragon. Nothing left on Ginger Lady but spice and ylang blossom."

"Nevertheless, I prefer—"

"Lady Witch, Ilipur's but a short distance up the shore." Fowler narrowed his eyes, trying to fill his glower with subtle menace. "It'll take only a few days extra."

Ruha returned Fowler's glare with a disdainful glance. "And what of the people I am to meet in Pros? How long will they wait?" She looked back to Hsieh. "Put us ashore

in Pros, and I will ask only one reward of you."

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Hsieh glanced at her sodden aba, no doubt reevaluating his first impression of her wealth. Only a woman of great resources would decline the reward he had promised.

The mandarin inclined his head. "If it is in my power, I give you whatever you ask."

"Please tell me about the dragon. Why did it attack your ship?"

"That's our reward?" Fowler bellowed.

Hsieh's glance darted from Fowler to his crewmen. Two men quickly flanked the captain, their heads rising barely as high as the half-ore's brawny shoulders.

"Aboard Ginger Lady, even captain respect Lady," Hsieh warned.

Fowler's eyes flashed at the admonishment, but he stood very still and made no further protests.

Hsieh turned back to Ruha, arching his fine eyebrows. "I do not understand question. Dragon attacks ship to steal gold. That is reason dragon does anything."

Ruha shook her head. "That wyrm was not an ordinary one, nor does the Ginger Lady seem an ordinary ship. The creature attacked you for another reason, and the reward I ask is that you tell me why."

A nervous croak slipped from Fowler's lips. Before the sound could become a word, the guards seized his hands and folded his wrists inward against their joints. The half-ore hissed in pain and looked away from the witch.

The mandarin pretended not to notice the captain's slip, but his face lost all expression and became as unreadable as a stone. "I do not understand, Lady Ruha. Why do you believe we know dragon?"

The image of a yellow face changing into a black dragon flashed through Ruha's mind, but she did not even consider telling Hsieh about the mirage. Judging by Fowler's reactions so far, the Shou were a dangerous people, and she had no idea how they might react to her

visions.

Ruha paused to pick her words, then said, "Does the

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Ginger Lady not carry a dragon's figurehead on her prow? And was my captain mistaken when he called your emperor the Jade Dragon instead of the Jade Monarch?"

Fowler closed his eyes and shook his head in disbelief.

The mandarin showed no sign of anger—or any other emotion. "Lady Ruha, greatest dragons are not evil. I do not know why evil dragon attacks Ginger Lady, except to take gold. I go to Elversult on unfortunate business that has nothing to do with dragon. I never see that dragon before."

"This unfortunate business you speak of, could it involve the dragon?" Ruha asked.

The narrowing of Hsieh's eyes was barely perceptible, but it was enough to alarm Fowler.

"Lady Ruha, the Shou are an honorable bunch." Though the captain struggled to keep his tone deferential, Ruha could hear both anger and fear lurking just beneath the surface. "If the mandarin's business has something to do with the dragon, he'd say so. It's—uh—bad manners to hint he's holding back."

Hsieh nodded. "Am so sorry. Lady Ruha, but you make poor bargain to trade your due for what little I know of dragon. Perhaps I find some other way to reward your noble service." The mandarin spoke to his men, then went to the cabin's shattered doorway and bowed to Ruha. "Until then, I am most happy to leave you in Pros."

Four

\ The sky above the Ginger Palace
\^ was lucid and azure, as it could be
nowhere but the arid plain south of
the city of Elversult. Anticipating a
pleasant morning of solitude in the
confines of his private park. Prince
Tang crossed the humped back of Five
Color Bridge, strode down the opal-
paved Path of Delight, and stopped beneath the irides-
cent curve of the Arch of Many-Hued Scales.

From the sleeve pocket of his maitung—the long silken

tunic favored by Shou noblemen—the prince withdrew a large golden key. It was shaped like a chameleon's head, with broad shoulder flanges and a sinuous blade resembling a long, flickering tongue. He rapped the top three times against the entryway's red-lacquered gates, then inserted the blade into a brass keyway, turned the latch, and pushed the heavy portals aside.

Prince Tang did not find his pets arrayed before the gate, as they customarily were. Instead, the rocky plaza was strangely barren, save for a half dozen buzzing, blue-black mounds scattered along one edge. Beyond the droning fly clusters, twenty quartzite boulders imported from Calimshan had been torn from their footings and strewn over the carefully shaped dunes of the park's desert quarter. In the forest region, circles of bark had been scratched around the trunks of the most exotic trees, and in the

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ingule zone, the meticulously strung jasmine vines lay sliced and twined about the base of the bamboo stalks. The swamp area was covered with tangled mats of pink and blue and yellow, decorative grasses torn from the bottom and left to drift on the murky waters, while the lotus blossoms and lily pads had been thrown onto the muddy bank to wither and die.

Tang could see only one of his pets, an elusive, jet-black river monitor. The great lizard had dragged itself from the swamp and stretched its fifteen-foot length over a stone bench, leaving its webbed feet, thick tail, and slender head to dangle over the sides. The beast's neck was twisted toward the gate, as though it had been awaiting the prince's arrival when the last gleam of hope seeped from its dull eyes.

Tang stared at the lifeless monitor for several bewildered moments, then finally realized that some contemptible barbarian had violated the sanctity of his garden. He retreated through the Arch of Many-Hued Scales, screaming as though he had been stabbed.

At the first shriek, a company of ten sentries appeared on the Path of Delight, emerging from camouflaged posts behind the walkway's white-blossomed hedges. In the blink of an eye, Tang was encircled by a bristling wall of scale-armored men equipped with long, curve-bladed halberds. They neither touched their master nor inquired as to the reason for his scream, but simply stood ready to obey his orders and defend his life.

Prince Tang entered his garden again, his protective shell of soldiers compressing around him as he passed

through the arch. He stopped inside the gateway, remaining silent while his guards examined the scene. He did not speak until their tortoise-shell helmets had stopped pivoting on their shoulders and the last gasp had fallen

silent.

"How does this happen?" demanded the prince. "Is it not your duty to protect Garden of Flickering Tongues?"

The company officer, a young moon-faced noble named

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Yuan Ti, dropped to his knees and touched his forehead to the stones at Tang's feet. "Mighty Prince, your guards fail you." Since his voice was directed at the ground Yuan sounded as though he were mumbling. "We see no one enter garden."

The prince snorted at the explanation. "How could it be otherwise? If you see intruder, he would be dead would he not?" Only Tang himself used the garden; not even his wife, Princess Wei Dao, was allowed inside. Though Yuan could not see the gesture with his head pressed to the ground, the prince waved his hand at the destruction. "But does no one hear falling of stones, or scratching of trees, or ripping of vines?"

Yuan kept his brow pressed to the ground. "Great Majesty, your unworthy guards hear nothing, smell nothing, feel nothing. Please to punish."

Tang ignored the request. "Go search garden."

The prince could not imagine how his guards had missed the sound of the park being destroyed, but he knew the young noble would never lie to him. No Shou officer would commit such a treason, and not only because he feared for his family's heads. The offense would dishonor his ancestors, causing them to lose their places in the Celestial Bureaucracy—an offense said ancestors would surely repay with all manner of curses and incurable plagues.

While the guards searched the park, Tang retreated through the gate and waited outside, praying to the spirits of his ancestors to guide his sentries to the vandal who had destroyed his park. Although the imperial weapon-masters had taught him to wield a sword as well as any man, it did not even occur to him to stay in the garden and exact vengeance himself. From his earliest childhood, the prince had been taught to retreat from danger and call his guards to take care of the problem. It was a lesson

he had not ignored once in thirty years of life.

At length, the sentries returned with unbloodied weapons and bowed to Tang. "Garden of Flickering

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Tongues is safe for Mighty Prince."
"You do not find vandal?"
Yuan shook his head. "Only lizards, and only lizard tracks."

Tang considered this, puzzled not by who had ravaged his garden or why—he knew the answers to both questions—but by how the intruder had infiltrated the heart of his palace, vandalized the park, and escaped with his life. Truly, such a feat was as worthy of admiration as it was of indignation.

When he could not think of how the culprit had escaped. Tang sighed wearily. "How unfortunate you did not capture the intruder. He has given me much work to do." The prince always tended his garden himself, calling for aid only when he needed help to move something heavy. "Return to your posts and punish each other, ten lashes each."

The faces of the sentries fell. Given the magnitude of their failure, such a light punishment was humiliating. Its temperance implied that Tang believed them incapable of doing better—which happened to be the case, though the prince did not fault the guards for their inadequacy. Even the most devoted sentries could not capture intruders they could not see or hear, or find trespassers who left no tracks. Such tasks required a wu-jen. Unfortunately, the Minister of Magic was currently at odds with Tang's own sponsor, Mandarin Hsieh Han Liu, the Imperial Minister of Spices. Consequently, the Emperor's wu-jens were considered too valuable to waste on an inconsequential embassy like the Ginger Palace. Such political frustrations were a daily part of the prince's life, and one of the many reasons he preferred the company of lizards to that of men.

Tang waited until the last guard had stepped aside, then took his key from the red-lacquered gates and stepped through the Arch of Many-Hued Scales. When he turned to close the gates, he glimpsed his guards glumly marching toward the Five Color Bridge and decided it

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would not do to have them brooding over their failure.

They were an elite company, and an elite company without honor was nothing.

"One thing more, my soldiers," he called. "You must double lashes for any man who fails to draw blood with each whip stroke."

The guards bowed in acknowledgment, and Yuan could barely keep from smiling. "Yes, Mighty Prince."

Tang closed the gate and put the key in his sleeve pocket, leaving the lock unlatched in case the mysterious vandal returned. He fetched a small shovel, a linen sack, and a copper bucket from a tool shanty near the jungle quarter, then took a deep breath and went to the first mound of flies. As he slid the shovel beneath the droning heap, the insects rose into the air, revealing a pile of rancid lizard viscera. Fighting his gorge back, he scooped up the entrails and placed them in the sack, then filled his bucket from the swamp and washed the stones.

The work was humiliating for a prince, of course, but Tang preferred doing it himself to having the serenity of his garden disturbed by servants. He cleaned up the other mounds of viscera, then placed the bulging sack by the gate. The entrails had obviously come from the belly of his dead monitor, for none of the other lizards were large enough to hold so many intestines. What the prince did not understand was how the intruder had known it was his favorite pet, a rare beast captured in the distant land of Chult. Only his personal staff knew how dearly he had paid for the creature, and they would no sooner betray him than his guards would.

Tang returned his tools to the shanty, then went over to the dead monitor. He waved aside a cloud of flies and grabbed the beast by its rear legs.

The beast jerked its feet from the prince's grasp.

Tang cried out and stepped away, his gaze dropping to the black stains that covered the bench and the stones beneath it. The stuff looked like dried blood, and the rancid, coppery smell certainly suggested appearances were

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correct. He did not see how the monitor could have lost so much blood and lived. The great lizard raised its head, fixing a dull-eyed gaze on the prince's face.

"Guards!" Tang stumbled backward toward the gate.
"Yuan! Come quickly!"

The monitor glanced at the gate, and Tang heard the sharp double click of the heavy lock-bolt sliding into its catch. He fished the key from his sleeve pocket and continued to retreat, fighting down his growing panic and trying to decide whether he dared turn his back to make a dash for the gate.

Tang, you cannot flee me.

Tang heard the voice not with his ears, but inside his mind. It was raspy and rumbling, and even if it had come from the monitor's mouth, it would have been much too resonant for a lacertilian throat.

That much, you should remember.

"Cy-Cypress?"

The monitor nodded, and Tang's feet suddenly felt as heavy as boulders. At first, the prince thought the lizard had cast a spell on him, but he quickly realized that was impossible. The beast had uttered no mystic syllables, nor made any arcane gestures with its claws. Instead, Cypress was using what the Shou called the Invisible Art, an ancient discipline whose practitioners employed nothing but the power of their own minds to perform supernatural acts. Tang had heard that his unwelcome guest was a master of the venerable art, but until now, he had been lucky enough to avoid a demonstration.

Tang's guards arrived at the park entrance and began to hammer on the gates, but they could not break through with anything short of a battering ram. Both portals were reinforced with heavy bands of steel, while the lock itself was the sturdiest Shou smiths could make. The sentries could not even scale the wall, as it was capped with a double crest of barbed spikes.

Cypress slunk off the bench, allowing Tang to glimpse a deep, white-fleshed gash that ran the entire length of

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the monitor's belly. The beast trundled across the plaza on four stubby legs, then stopped next to the prince's knee and rolled its lifeless gaze over his maitung.

Given that we have not seen you in so long, I find this altogether pretentious,

The lizard's tongue darted out to snap at Tang's maitung, which was tailored with overlapping brown patches resembling the spade-shaped scales of an armored skink.

How long has it been since you attended Lair?

"You know I resign."

Cypress slipped behind his captive and lashed out with the monitor's huge tail, catching Tang behind the knees and hurling him face first to the plaza. The prince's nose and mouth erupted in stinging pain, and he felt the unaccustomed sensation of warm blood spilling from his nostrils. He tried to rise and found himself pinned to the ground, his entire body now as heavy as only his feet had been a moment earlier. He screamed, more in rage than anguish, and wished that he had a sword in his hand—and the strength to raise it.

The hammering at the gates ceased, then a sharp boom reverberated across the plaza as several armored bodies slammed into the portals. The thick planks creaked, but the lock did not give way. Cypress circled around in front of the prince, barely glancing toward the gates.

I have told you, no one resigns from the Cult of the Dragon!

The monitor took Tang's hand in its mouth. The prince cringed, fearing he would soon have a bloody stump at the end of his wrist, but the powerful jaws did not close. Instead, the beast's agile tongue rolled over Tang's fingers, removing his golden rings. After doing the same with the other hand, the dead lizard dropped to its belly and stared the prince in the eye.

/ thank you for the offering. Now, where is my ylang oil?

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"Where is Lady Feng?" Tang groaned. "You have oil when I have mother."

A red ember sparked deep within the lizard's eye, then the beast dragged one huge claw across the prince's face.

"You dare scratch me?" Tang squawked, astonished that even a spiteful creature like Cypress would mark a person of Imperial Shou blood. He spat on the beast's snout, then added, "For that, you die thousand deaths!"

The monitor's gaping jaws opened as though to chomp Tang's head off; then the beast tipped its head sideways and did not bite. I think I shall!

A deep, rumbling laugh—more like a cough—rolled up from someplace deep in the monitor's hollow stomach, and Cypress laid one of the lizard's heavy claws on the prince's shoulder.

I shall die a thousand deaths—a thousand deaths at least!

Cypress removed the foot from Tang's shoulder and backed away, still chuckling. The prince found that his body no longer seemed quite so heavy. He gathered himself up and stood, one hand pinching his bloody nose. Another boom echoed across the plaza. The monitor's head turned so that it could watch the arch with one drab eye and Tang with the other.

Lady Feng informs me that only you know how to press the ylang blossoms, so I will spare your life—but I am losing patience. If I do not have the oil by tomorrow, I shall start returning your mother in parts.

"What you ask is impossible! Pressing blossoms take one week—"

Don't lie to me! I know how long you need to prepare the oil! The monitor whirled away and started across the plaza. Tomorrow.

A double click sounded beneath the Arch of Many-Hued Scales. The gates burst open, and Yuan led the guards into the garden. Several of the men were only half dressed and bleeding from their whip cuts. Their eyes went first to the prince's bloody face, then to the

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lumbering monitor. To a man, they lowered their halberds and charged.

"No! Stand—"

Tang's command came too late. Cypress ran the monitor's dark gaze from one end of the company to the other. As the black eyes fell on each sentry, the man wailed and slapped his palms to his ears, letting his weapon fly from his hands. In a breath's span, all ten guards lay writhing on the ground, screaming madly and bleeding from their ears. The lizard sauntered calmly into the squad's midst, paused to suck the silver honor ring off each man's thumb, and walked out the gate. By the time Cypress had lumbered down the Path of Delight onto the Five Color Bridge, the last sentry had curled into a tight ball

and lay staring at the ground in front of him through gray, sunken eyeballs.

Tang sank to his knees and looked numbly around his garden, absentmindedly counting all the boulders and trees he would have to replace. At least now he knew how the vandal had penetrated the heart of his palace; without a wu-jen, even the most elaborate traps and precautions were doomed to fail against a master of the Invisible Art.

From beneath the Arch of Many-Hued Scales came a soft-voiced cough. Tang turned and saw the lithe form of his diminutive wife, Wei Dao, standing in the gateway. She had apparently come from her gymnasium, for her brow was wet with sweat, and she wore a black samfu, a long-sleeved uniform in which she always dressed to practice empty-hand defense. Today, her attire also included a red throat scarf. Despite her ruffled hair and flushed complexion, the princess looked as striking as ever, with generous painted lips, high cheeks, and a watchful, sloe-eyed gaze.

Wei Dao bowed. "Mighty Prince, please forgive intrusion, but I hear terrible commotion."

Her eyes darted from her husband's blood-smeared face to the fallen guards, but she made no comment on

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their condition and did not move to help them. As Tang's wife, such things were as far beneath her dignity as that of the prince himself; at their first convenience, one of them would inform the commander of the guard that some of his men were in need of attention.

"I see Chult lizard crossing Five Color Bridge," said Wei Dao. "It looks in no condition to walk."

Tang rose and crossed the plaza to his wife. "We have unwelcome visitor." He left the garden and pulled the red-lacquered gates shut behind him. "We need wu-jen."

Wei Dao considered this a moment, then asked, "To stop dragon?" Then, as though there could be some question of which dragon she meant, she added, "To stop

Cypress?"

Tang nodded. "I do not understand why, but he comes himself." Cypress seldom ventured from the gluttonous comfort of his lair and would normally have sent his high priestess, Indrith Shalla, to deliver the threat. "And he

leaves in body of monitor. Why does dragon want carcass of giant lizard?"

Wei Dao's eyes flashed. "What do we care?" She took the scarf from around her neck, revealing the fading remnants of an ugly skin rash, and dabbed at Tang's blood-smearred face. "Give him ylang oil before he kill Lady

Feng."

Tang winced at his wife's ministrations. "He does not kill Lady Feng. She is safe."

Wei Dao began to scrub the claw marks on her husband's cheeks—harder than necessary, it seemed to him. "If dragon kills mother, you lose all honor before Emperor. We never return to Tai Tung. We spend rest of our lives exiled from court."

Tang could think of worse fates, but he did not dare say so in the presence of his ambitious wife. "Lady Feng is safe." He pulled Wei Dao's hands away from his stinging face. "I know."

The princess scowled and tried another tack. "Still better to give Cypress what he wants. If Lady Feng is not

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here when Minister Hsieh arrives, there be many questions. How do you explain that Cult of Dragon steals Third Virtuous Concubine?"

Tang pulled away from his wife and pushed his key into the gate lock. "I cannot give Cypress what he wants."

Wei Dao's perfect mouth twisted into a doubtful frown. "What do you mean? I see hundreds of ylang blossoms in spicehouse."

"All picked in evening." Tang turned the key and heard the double click of the bolt shooting into the catch. When the commander of the guard came to fetch his men, he would have to be entrusted with the key. There was nothing else to be done; certainly, the garden could not be left unlocked. The prince faced his wife, then said, "Ylang blossoms picked in evening are not potent."

"Not potent?"

Tang shrugged. "They are good for balms and teas, but potion made from those blossoms does not last. Only flowers picked in morning have strength to make perma

nent love potion."

Wei Dao narrowed her sloe-eyed gaze. "Why do we have only weak blossoms?"

"Because strong blossoms do not keep long. Even in a journey from Shou Lung is short, they spoil before we sell them all."

Wei Dao shook her head in open disbelief. "No. You do not want venerable mother to return! You like life of barbarian!"

Unaccustomed to being addressed in such tones, even by his own wife, the prince raised his hand—then found Wei Dao's wrist pressed against his own, blocking his strike.

They glared into each other's eyes for a moment, then Tang asked, "What if I press oil and spell fails? What does Cypress do to Lady Feng then?"

Wei Dao looked away and did not answer.

"Then we do this my way," Tang said. "We wait to;

Hsieh's ship—then I press oil."

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Wei Dao's face paled. "You mean . . . ?"

"Yes." Tang nodded. "Blossoms come on Ginger Lady."

The princess's eyes grew as round as saucers. "And you do not tell Cypress?"

Tang scowled at her naivete. "Secret of oil is to press morning-picked blossoms. If we tell Cypress, do you think he returns Lady Feng to us?"

Wei Dao lowered her gaze in a practiced show of deference. "My husband, your wisdom outshines the sun." She even managed a blush. "Please to excuse. I go do penance for my doubts."

Tang smiled benevolently, then dismissed her with a wave of his hand. "Do not be hard on yourself."

"Oh, but I must." Wei Dao bowed very low, then turned to scurry down the Path of Delight.

Five

The harbor at Pros seemed equal parts quicksand and mudflat, with just enough water to float the flat-bottomed scow carrying the Storm Sprite's survivors toward shore. Ruha sat beside Captain Fowler in the front of the boat—it seemed ludicrous to call the square end a bow—scanning the shanty town ahead. Most of the buildings were gray, ramshackle affairs in desperate need of a lime wash. The huts closest to the water hovered above the beach on flimsy stilts that looked ready to pitch their loads into the mud at the slightest push. A half-dozen rickety docks jutted far out into the bay. Two of the piers were empty;

the rest bustled with fishermen unloading their take.

As the scow approached shore, Ruha noticed that most of the catch had the same high dorsal fins and wedge-shaped heads as the vicious fish that had swarmed her. The witch could not even guess how many sharks lay piled upon the piers, but there were close to two-dozen boats unloading the sharp-toothed monsters.

Ruha looked over her shoulder to the scow pilot, a sour-faced man with leathery skin and unkempt gray hair. "That seems like a great number of sharks. Do the people of Pros eat nothing else?"

"They're not for us," the pilot replied. "The Cult of the Dragon buys all we can take—and it pays mighty well,

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I'll add."

Fowler scowled at this. "What for? Shark's hardly a

good-eating fish."

The pilot shrugged. "No one knows, and no one's asked. Since the Cult came to town, we've learned to keep our noses out of their business. You'd be wise to do

the same."

The pilot barked a command to his rowers, and the

vessel angled toward one of the empty piers. A small gang of shoremen emerged from the shanties and wan-

dered down the dock, preparing to unload a cargo the boat did not carry.

Fowler gnashed his tusks, then stood to inspect the small crowd more carefully. "I don't see Vaerana Hawklyn." He glared down at Ruha's face, veiled behind a beautiful silk scarf given to her by Minister Hsieh, and fingered the Harper's pin fastened inside his robe. "If she's not here, how do you plan to pay me?"

"Vaerana will meet us." The statement was more one of hope than conviction; it had taken the disabled caravel five days to sail the short distance from the battle site to Pros, putting Ruha ashore four days late. "And even if she does not, I have been given a local name."

"Jonas Tempaltar? No cooper I know has the gold to buy a cog." Fowler cast a longing glance toward the Ginger Lady, which still lay anchored in the bay, awaiting a small load of supplies needed to complete her most pressing repairs. "It's not too late to go to Ilipur."

"Captain, if you wish to return to the Ginger Lady alone, perhaps Minister Hsieh will give you the reward."

"Not bloody likely." During the voyage to Pros, it had grown apparent that while Hsieh felt indebted to Ruha, he considered Captain Fowler little better than an animal, hardly worthy of notice, and certainly not deserving of reward. "I'll see my gold from the cooper first."

The scow scraped over a mud bar, then slowed as it approached the pier. As the stubby vessel drifted alongside the dock, the pilot commanded his crew to raise oars.

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The rowers stowed their equipment and threw mooring ropes to the shoremen, who quickly pulled the boat to the dock and tied it to the piles.

A pair of large warriors in steel breastplates stepped forward to peer into the empty hold. Both men wore black caps embroidered with the hastily sewn emblem of a dragon's head.

"No cargo, William?"

The pilot motioned at Ruha and her fellow survivors. "Only these castaways." He glanced at the emblem on the warriors' black caps, then added, "A dragon sank their ship."

"That so?" The speaker sneered and glanced at his companion. "That's too bad for them, ain't it, Godfrey?"

Godfrey nodded. "Terrible, Henry—but they've still got to pay the harbor tax." He raised a finger and pointed it at each of the survivors. "Let's see, I count eleven people. That'll be eleven silver."

"Eleven silver!" Ruha protested. "That's—"

"That's a sight too much," Fowler interrupted. He shot Ruha a warning scowl, then motioned at two one-legged sailors who had so far outlived their amputations. "We lost most of our silver when my ship sank. Besides, you can see some of us aren't whole. We shouldn't have to pay full for them."

Godfrey eyed the pair's bloody stumps, then laughed heartily. "Very well, half-fee for the half-men. Ten silver."

Fowler glanced at the long swords hanging from the men's belts, then spread his hands. "We cannot pay your price."

It was a lie, for Ruha still had twenty silver coins that had been inside her aba when the Storm Sprite sank, but she did not contradict the captain.

Fowler reached inside his own tunic and withdrew two coins. "How about two silver?"

"For two silver, we will not let you spit on the dock." This time, it was Henry who spoke.

Fowler shrugged in resignation, then turned away

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from the two warriors. "Pros used to be an honest place. I don't know what happened."

Godfrey peered over the half-ore's shoulder, then motioned to Ruha's jambiya. "Let me see that knife. Perhaps we can let you ashore in exchange for that and the two silver."

"No." Ruha motioned to the coins in Fowler's hands. "Take those coins or nothing. I will not let you have my jambiya"

Godfrey's eyes hardened, then he and Henry drew their swords. The pilot and his two rowers leapt out of the scow, and the gang of shoremen backed down the pier. Fowler picked up an oar, as did Arvold and two more healthy crewmen. The eyes of the two armored warriors widened at the unanticipated opposition. They glanced

around the quay at the smirking faces of the shoremen and the scow crew, then gathered their nerve and stepped to within a pace of the scow.

Godfrey stretched his hand toward Ruha. "The dagger—and the silver."

Fowler looked to Ruha. "Tour call. Lady Witch."

"Witch?" The color drained from the faces of both warriors, and Henry whispered, "Maybe we oughta call for some help."

Ruha blew a breath into her hands and began the incantation of a wind spell that would silence the men's voices—then abruptly stopped as the clamor of galloping hooves reverberated down the pier. All eyes turned shoreward to see three riders charging down the quay, two holding cocked crossbows in their hands, the third leading a string of empty mounts.

The trio was coming so fast the scow crew and shoremen had to leap off the quay to avoid being ridden down. Ruha saw that the first rider was a sturdy, florid-faced woman with a flyaway mane of honey-blond hair. Like her two companions, she wore an indistinct cloak over a coat of chain mail and carried a large mace in a sling on her saddle. The second rider was a grim-jawed man with

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a drooping black mustache and stony black eyes, while the third was a rotund cleric with the heavy silver chain of a holy symbol showing above his collar. They reined up just short of Godfrey and Henry, and the two with crossbows aimed their weapons at the two ruffians.

Both warriors lowered swords, and Godfrey hissed, "Vaerana Hawklyn!"

"You know me?" Vaerana asked. "Too bad for you."

She shot the man in throat. Her companion did likewise to Henry, drawing a chorus of angry cries from the other quays. Vaerana nonchalantly glanced toward the shouting, then dismounted and stomped to the edge of the pier.

"Sorry we weren't waiting when you docked, Tusks!" she said, grabbing Fowler's hand and pulling him onto the pier. "We were expecting the Storm Sprite!"

"We had some dragon trouble." Fowler glanced at the other quays, where dozens of shouting, black-capped war-

riors were rushing toward shore, intent on avenging their comrades' deaths. "Have you lost your mind, Lady Constable?"

Vaerana waved off the captain's concern. "Don't worry about the Black Caps. They've got a few surprises waiting for them." The Lady Constable turned to Ruha. "You must be the witch Storm sent me."

"Ruha of the Mtair Dhafir at your service, Lady Constable." Ruha glanced at the two corpses lying on the pier. "Their crime was not so terrible. Was it truly necessary to kill them?"

Vaerana's eyes flashed with irritation. "Only if I don't want Cult assassins waiting behind every hill on the way home," she growled. "Now, if you're through interrogating me, can we get the hell out of here?"

"Yes, of course."

Feeling sheepish for questioning Vaerana's actions, Ruha stepped over to the side of the scow. Although Hsieh's physician had done a remarkable job of healing her wound—her thigh was now swollen to only half-

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again its normal size—the witch could not help limping as she moved.

"What happened?" Vaerana was looking not at Ruha, but at Fowler.

"Sharks." The half-ore waved a hand at his two amputees. "Them, too."

Vaerana looked the men over, then turned to her rotund horse-handler. "This is going to be more difficult than we thought, Tombor."

"We have a little time." Tombor was staring toward the shore, where the Black Caps were already ducking for cover as a hail of crossbow bolts rained down on them from the windows of several huts. "Let's just hope that once we're mounted, we can charge out of town as easily as we sneaked in."

"Maybe we should leave the one-legs here," Fowler suggested, helping Ruha out of the scow. "They aren't much good to me, and the ride's liable to kill them anyway."

Vaerana shook her head. "Can't do it, Tusks. The Cult's worse than ever; a ride on a galloping horse will seem like fun compared to what the Black Caps would do to them." She turned to the grim-jawed rider who had

killed Henry. "Pierstar, you and Tombor see to the crew. I'll take care of Tusks and the witch."

Pierstar jumped into the scow to help the amputees, while Tombor directed the rest of the crew to come around to the left side of the horses—he had to say 'port' before they understood what he wanted. Vaerana led Ruha and the captain to the first pair of spare mounts.

The Lady Constable held out the reins of the first horse. "You can ride, can't you. Witch?"

"Yes, I think so."

Ruha's reply was unduly modest, for she had grown up riding camels. Compared to those cantankerous brutes, even the most spirited stallion was child's play. She took the reins, gathered up her aba, and slipped her foot into the stirrup. Her only awkward moment came when she had to swing her injured leg over the saddle and did not

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quite succeed. A fiery ache shot through her entire body. In the tongue of her father, she cursed all fish and wished them a frigid death in seas as cold as ice.

Once Vaerana saw that Ruha could handle her own mount, she passed the reins of the second to Fowler. "How about you, Captain? Can you ride?"

"If I can handle a ship's helm, I can steer a dumb animal."

The captain picked Godfrey's sword up off the pier, then clumsily thrust his large foot into a stirrup and hoisted himself into the saddle. By the time Fowler's sailors were ready to ride, the Black Caps on shore had broken through the hail of crossbow bolts. They were advancing through the streets toward the end of the quay, where dozens of armored horsemen, all dressed in a similar manner to Vaerana and her companions, were beginning to assemble.

"I thought the Cult controlled Pros!" Fowler commented. "How'd you get so many of Elversult's Maces into town?"

"The shark bounty; the fishing captains are desperate for crews," Vaerana explained. "We snuck in a few at a time, pretending we wanted work."

Vaerana stood in her stirrups and twisted around to look at the quay behind her, where Fowler's crew sat two

to a horse. The amputees were seated before the two strongest men and tied into their saddles with leather straps. They looked rather frightened and weak, but they had heard what would befall them in the Cult's hands and made no protest.

"Listen up, sailors!" Vaerana said. "Your horses know more about this than you do, so don't start thinking you're smarter than they are. If you get in trouble, just drop the reins and hold on to your saddles."

Arvold immediately released his reins. Though Tombor had already positioned himself at the back of the group, Ruha moved her own horse out of line and deftly backed him to the rear of the line. If the sailmender had trouble,

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she did not want to miss the chance to repay the debt she owed him.

Once the witch had changed positions, Vaerana pulled her mace and set the spurs to her mount. Pierstar's horse reared, then bolted after the Lady Constable, and in the next instant the entire line was thundering down the dock.

When Vaerana neared the shore, she gave a loud whoop. The entire company of horsemen began to move, some blocking the alleys and others spurring their mounts straight down the village's largest lane.

Ruha's mount left the quay. She saw several enemy arrows streak through the air ahead of her; then she passed across the waterfront and followed the rest of the column into a warren of narrow streets. As the company passed, the warriors blocking the side streets fell in at the rear of the charge, and the witch soon found herself caught in the midst of a herd of snorting, pounding horseflesh.

The company galloped inland past a dozen ramshackle inns, then came to an intersection and turned westward. One of Fowler's men panicked and jerked his mount's reins, demolishing a shanty when the startled horse lost its footing and crashed through the hut's weather-beaten walls. Ruha saw one of Vaerana's Maces guiding his own mount into the debris to help the tumbling sailor, then she was around the corner and thundering down the muddy lane. A hundred yards ahead, the road passed through the gateway of a timber stockade, then curved around a grassy hill and disappeared from sight. A pair of Black Caps were trying to push the rough-hewn gates closed, but a flurry of crossbow bolts suddenly sprang from the front of the column to cut them down.

That was when a shower of flaming hail filled the air, followed by a flurry of arrows that caught the company in a deadly cross fire from both sides of the lane. Several men cried out, nearly falling from their saddles as fiery pellets pierced their legs and shoulders and even their

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chain-mailed torsos. Panicked, ringing whinnies echoed off the weatherworn huts as tufts of black fletching suddenly sprouted in the flanks and withers of galloping horses, and one of the beasts fell.

The rider went rolling head over heels down the street, coming to a rest before an alley too narrow to be called a lane. It was simply a space between two shanties. From this crevice shot a glimmering net of golden light, which quickly settled over the stunned horseman before he could recover his wits and rise.

Ruha yanked on her reins, nearly knocking Tombor from his horse as she crossed in front him. She guided her mount toward the lane, kicking its belly to urge it onward. The beast realized instantly what she wanted. The witch barely had time to raise herself in her stirrups before it leapt over the fallen warrior and entered the cranny, its flanks brushing the wood on both sides of the lane.

As Ruha expected, she found herself barreling down upon an astonished wizard who, lacking the time to cast a spell, turned to hurl himself to the ground. The witch spurred her mount forward. The horse caught the sorcerer square in the back with both front hooves, snapping the man's spine with a sickening crack.

"I love horses!" Ruha cried, reining the beast to a stop. "You are so much more cooperative than camels!"

The witch looked over her shoulder to see Vaerana's grim-jawed comrade, Pierstar, staring down the alley as the fallen wizard's net dissolved around him. The witch backed her mount down the lane toward the dazed warrior.

"Stand up, Pierstar!" she ordered.

The astonished warrior tossed off the remnants of the net and lurched to his feet, stuttering his astonished thanks. Ruha emerged from the alley to find a crescent of horsemen arrayed around her, firing their crossbows into the huts from which the shower of Black Cap arrows had erupted.

"That was a damned thoughtless thing to do!" snarled Vaerana Hawklyn, pulling Pierstar onto her own horse. "We go to all this trouble to fetch you, and what do you do? Put yourself at risk!"

With that, Vaerana jerked her horse toward the gate. Pierstar glanced over his shoulders and shrugged in apology. Ruha was so astonished that she could only stare after the Lady Constable.

"Go on, Witch." Tombor pointed his mace through the gateway. "And don't mind Vaerana's sharp tongue. She's just worried about Yanseldara."

"Who?"

"You'll find out soon enough." The cleric spurred his horse after Vaerana, waving at the witch to follow. "She's the reason you're here."

Ruha urged her horse after Tombor. A steady clatter of crossbows sounded behind her as, one after the other, the warriors fired their weapons, then turned to follow the rest of the company through the gate.

The terrain outside Pros was surprisingly clear. Other than a few weed-choked farm plots lying close to the village stockade, the vista was one of grassy, rolling knolls, with a vast sapphire sky hanging so low it seemed they would ride into it. The muddy road snaked its way up a broad, dry valley, meandering back and forth around the base of the dome-shaped hills, gradually growing drier and dustier as it climbed away from the Dragonmere.

At last, the road curled around a knoll and angled up the headwall of a small dale. As the company approached the slope, the largest part of the column peeled off and circled the hill, leaving the wounded and those riding double, save the Lady Constable and Pierstar, to continue up the main route.

Ruha caught up to Captain Fowler, and together they followed Vaerana to the back side of the knoll, where the warriors were dismounting and reloading their crossbows. They dismounted and passed their reins to Tombor, who had been assigned to stay with the horse holders

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and ready his healing spells. Vaerana cast a wary glance in Ruha's direction, but turned without comment and started up the slope. Fowler offered a helping hand to the witch, and they began to climb.

During the ascent, they had to pause several times to rest the witch's throbbing leg, giving them ample opportunity to study the road to Elversult. After cresting the dale's headwall, it struck out as straight as an arrow across a broad expanse of flat, featureless tableland. Already, the wounded riders and the sailors were a hundred yards across the plain, but the distance before them seemed immeasurable, and the witch could see that there were no knolls or ravines where the company of riders could hide while it regrouped and tended to its wounded.

By the time Ruha and Fowler reached the summit, the Maces had already fallen to their bellies and crawled to positions overlooking the road below. Some of the men had wrapped small strips of oil-soaked cloth around the heads of their crossbow bolts and were preparing small piles of tinder to ignite with flint and steel. The witch made note of where the nearest fire would be, then she and Fowler crawled to the crest of the hill and laid down on either side of Vaerana.

"If we are setting an ambush, I have fire magic that will prove useful."

"I'd like to keep you secret, at least as much as possible." As Vaerana spoke, she kept her hazel eyes fixed on the road. "Don't use your magic unless you're certain of getting them all."

"I cannot be certain. It depends how many they send."

"It'll be a bunch," Fowler said. "That arrow squall at the gate was no accident. They were waiting for us."

The suggestion drew an angry scowl from Vaerana. She remained silent a long time, then reluctantly nodded. "I guess we weren't as sneaky as I thought. The Cult was watching us."

"How'd they know you were there?" Fowler asked.

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Vaerana shrugged. "Pros is a small town, and we hadn't planned to be there four days. The Cult probably grew suspicious when they heard the innkeepers gossiping about all the strangers lolling about in their rooms."

"You are certain they do not have a spy among your men?" Ruha asked.

Vaerana frowned as though insulted. "Not among this bunch. Pierstar picked every man himself." She glanced down the long line of warriors as though confirming to herself that she was right. "Besides, I'm the only one who

knew you were coming. A spy couldn't have told them anything except that I was in town."

"When Pierstar fell, their wizard tried to capture him," Ruha observed. "Perhaps they were curious about what you wanted in their village."

"Not that curious," Vaerana retorted. "They've had a thousand gold coins on my head for two years. Their assassins wouldn't pass up that price out of curiosity."

"Speaking of prices," Fowler said, "a thousand gold ought to cover what you owe me when we get to Elversuit."

"Owe you?" Vaerana narrowed her eyes and glared at the half-ore as though she were considering running a dagger up his belly. "Why do you think I owe you a thousand gold?"

"Because of my promise," Ruha explained. "I said the Harpers would buy him a new cog."

Vaerana's eyes bulged. "You what?" she gasped. "Why?"

"So he would attack the dragon," Ruha explained. "It was tearing another ship apart, and it was the only way to persuade him to risk the Storm Sprite."

The Lady Constable's mouth gaped open. "You can't... you don't have the ..." She let the sentence trail off, then shook her head and cocked her brow. "Did Storm say you could do that kind of thing?"

"No," Ruha admitted.

"But it was a Harper's promise." Fowler turned out the

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collar of his tunic, displaying the pin Ruha had given him. "And I've got proof."

Vaerana stared at the silver harp and moon, shaking her head in disbelief. "You gave him your pin?"

"The ship was a very big one," Ruha said. "If I had let the dragon sink it, hundreds of lives would have been lost."

"If Captain Fowler was reluctant to attack the dragon, didn't you think it might be too much for the Storm Sprite to handle?"

Ruha shook her head. "Of course not—not with my

magic."

A purple cloud settled over Vaerana's face. "Witch, I don't know where we're going to get the money to pay for a new cog—but I can tell you this much: it won't come from Elversult's treasury! Yanseldara would never stand for that, not for Storm Silverhand herself!"

Ruha turned to Fowler with a guilty knot in her stomach. "I am so terribly sorry. Captain. They told me that the Harpers always stand behind the word of—"

"What are you apologizing for?" Fowler interrupted. "Didn't you hear her? Vaerana said we."

Ruha lifted her brow. "She did, did she not?" The witch looked back to Vaerana. "And I was beginning to think you did not like me."

"I don't, but you are a Harper—at least until Storm Silverhand gets the bill for Fowler's new cog."

With that, Vaerana fell silent and looked back toward Pros, searching for the first sign of pursuit. The Black Caps were slow in coming, which Ruha took to be an omen both good and bad. On one hand, it suggested that the Maces' escape had taken the Cult by surprise, which would make it more difficult for them to pursue. At the same time, however, the delay also meant they were taking the time to organize themselves and gather a large force.

After a few minutes. Fowler grew impatient and started to rise. "What are we waiting for? Those Black

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Caps had their fill of fighting in Pros. They're not coming."

Vaerana grabbed the half-ore's furry arm. "Don't be in such a hurry, Tusks. It's a long ride to Elversult."

"Then the sooner we get going, the sooner I get my gold."

"It's not that easy." Vaerana pulled Fowler back to the ground. "If we don't discourage our pursuers now, they won't hesitate to attack us on the open road. I'm afraid the Cult of the Dragon has grown bold since Yanseldara's catalepsy."

"Catalepsy?" Fowler echoed. "Something's wrong with the Ruling Lady?"

The Lady Constable's mouth tightened, and she looked away. "Someone poisoned her. Yanseldara's fallen into some sort of trance, and we haven't been able to call her back. That's why I sent for the witch."

"But I am not a healer!" Ruha objected. "I know little of poisons and antidotes."

Vaerana glowered at her disdainfully. "I know what a witch is."

The Lady Constable did not have time to say more, for the valley below began to resound with pounding hooves. She turned and nodded to the Maces who had wrapped oil-soaked cloths around the heads of their crossbow bolts. The warriors began to strike their flints, and within seconds several of them had ignited small piles of tinder. Faint wisps of white fume began to rise from the tiny fires, but Ruha did not think the smoke would be visible from the road, especially to someone on the back of a galloping horse.

The first riders appeared at the base of the hill, mounted on skinny horses with frothing mouths and lathered coats. The men were whipping their haggard beasts mercilessly, demanding speed that the neglected creatures could not possibly provide.

Vaerana raised her hand, holding her warriors at bay while the column of Black Caps wound its way around

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the base of the knoll. The men with the oil darts touched the heads to the small fires they had kindled, and long ribbons of black fume began to rise into the air. Several Cult warriors looked toward the summit of hill.

"Now!" Vaerana yelled.

As one, the entire company of Maces rose and aimed their crossbows at the road below. A staccato chorus cracked over the valley, and the first third of the Cult column hit the ground screaming. Blossoms of flickering orange flame sprang to life on the opposite hill.

"Reload!"

Vaerana's warriors touched the heads of their empty crossbows to the ground, then stuck their boots into the toe stirrups and began grunting and cursing as they pulled the stiff bowstrings back to the lock plates. On the road below, the anguished wails and cries for help went unanswered as the uninjured Cult warriors galloped for-

ward, trampling their wounded fellows in a desperate effort to round the corner before the Maces loosed another volley. The fires on the opposite hill began to spread, creating an impenetrable wall of flame and filling the valley with a choking pall of smoke.

Vaerana waited until the leading riders had cleared the tangle of wounded, then called, "Squad the First!"

Half the Maces loosed their bolts, again aiming at the front of the Cult column. More men screamed and fell, lengthening the obstacle course for those behind and adding to the confusion. While the first squad reloaded, the rest of the Elversult warriors turned their aim farther back, where the enemy horsemen continued to round the corner.

Vaerana waited until the first group of men had reloaded, then called, "Squad the Second!"

The second half of the company fired, downing a dozen horses and men. More riders galloped around the bend, either leaping their fallen comrades or stumbling over them, and a few alert Cult members turned their terrified horses up the hill.

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Vaerana waited until the assault had almost reached the top, allowing the second squad time to reload, then called, "All fire!"

The Cult horsemen rode into a wall of black shafts that unhorsed all but three of them. The survivors brought their mounts up short, took one look at the gang of warriors reaching for their maces, then spun their mounts around and charged down the slope.

That was all it took to break the enemy's morale. When the rest of the Cult riders rounded the corner and heard their wailing comrades, then saw three of their fellows coming down the hill at a breakneck gallop, they quickly concluded that the situation was hopeless. The entire column turned back, beating their horses as savagely as when they rode into battle.

"That'll keep 'em off our backs." Vaerana turned away from the bloody scene below and pointed at five men. "You men hang back and keep a sharp eye. I doubt the Black Caps will find their courage again, but let me know if they do. The rest of you, to your horses. We've a long ride before we're safe again."

Fowler started to take Ruha's arm to help her down the hill, but Vaerana moved between them and took his place.

"You go on ahead, Tusks," Vaerana said, slipping Ruha's arm over her shoulders. "I'll help the witch."

Fowler raised his heavy brow, then shrugged and began to pick his way down the hill. The Lady Constable let him get a little way ahead, then started to help Ruha down the slope.

"Now, about this absurd promise you made—"

"Which promise?" Ruha interrupted. "The one wherein I swore to combat villainy and wickedness, or the one wherein I swore to help those in fear for their lives?"

Vaerana stopped walking and narrowed her eyes. "Don't you quote watchwords to me! I've heard about you, and I won't stand for such trouble—not in Elversult, and not when so much depends on you!"

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Ruha lowered her gaze. "Forgive me." Had everyone in the Heartlands heard of the Voonlar debacle? "I did not mean to anger you, but what would you have done? The dragon was tearing the ship apart, and Captain Fowler would not go to her aid. Hundreds of people would have drowned."

Vaerana started down the hill again. "A tough choice, I'll grant you. But defending others doesn't mean throwing your own life away, not when people are counting on you someplace else."

"I would not have attacked if I thought the wyrm was going to kill me," Ruha remarked. "Nor would I have asked Captain Fowler to risk his ship if I thought the creature would sink it."

Vaerana shook her head in incredulity. "Well, what'd you expect? Did you think you'd kill it?"

"Of course."

Vaerana stumbled and nearly sent them both tumbling.

Ruha hissed as she caught her weight on her injured leg, then explained, "I have killed three other dragons, in the desert. And I would have killed this one, had it not already been dead."

"Dead?"

"It was like a ghoul." As they continued their descent, Ruha explained how Captain Fowler's crew had harpooned the beast, and how it come back to attack after her spell had destroyed its internal organs. "Then it sprayed a black cloud over the bow, and the entire front half of the ship dissolved."

Vaerana's shoulders suddenly grew tense beneath Ruha's arm, and her florid complexion turned as pale as ivory. "You'd better describe this dragon to me, Witch."

"As you command. First of all, it was huge, perhaps as large as the Storm Sprite herself. It was very black, with dull and withered scales and many fleshless places on its—"

"Cypress!" Vaerana hissed.

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"Cypress?"

"He came up from the Wetwoods to attack the caravans around Elversult," the Lady Constable explained. "But that was three years ago, and Yanseldara said she killed him."

"If this is the same dragon, perhaps she did," Ruha said. "He looked very dead when he attacked us."

This did not seem to calm Vaerana at all. "Then Cypress is the Cult of the Dragon's idol! No wonder they're being so bold!" She swept Ruha up and started down the hill at a trot. "We've got to hurry!"

The witch wrapped her fingers into Vaerana's cloak, terrified the Lady Constable would trip and fall on top of her. "Wait! I do not understand!"

"The Cult of the Dragon worships dead dragons," Vaerana continued to run. "The reverence keeps the spirits from being drawn into the netherworld, and the dragons just keep growing."

"Please put me down!" Ruha urged. "There is no reason to worry. I have destroyed Cypress."

Vaerana began to slow, but did not return the witch's feet to the ground. "You what?"

"I blasted him apart," Ruha confirmed. "With lamp oil and magic. From the inside. The detonation ripped him apart."

Vaerana's face remained blank and uncomprehending. "You destroyed him?" she gasped. "You're sure?"

"The explosion annihilated his body, along with the stern of Captain Fowler's ship," Ruha confirmed. "I saw the sharks eating pieces of his body. The same thing would have happened to us if Minister Hsieh had not come back."

Vaerana's jaw fell. "Minister who?"

"Hsieh," Ruha said. "It was his ship we saved. He is a Shou mandarin—"

"I know who he is!" Vaerana finally stopped and returned Ruha to the ground. They were near the bottom of the hill, less than twenty paces from the horses, but

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the Lady Constable did not resume walking. "I don't know whether to kiss you or gut you!"

"I would prefer you do neither," Ruha replied. "Instead, please explain why you are so upset."

"I think Hsieh is our enemy":

"Of course. The Shou are very fond of dragons."

Vaerana shook her head. "I'm not talking about their emperor—that's something else altogether." The Lady Constable lowered her voice. "My sages think someone's trying to steal Yanseldara's spirit."

"Ah." Ruha was beginning to understand why Vaerana thought a witch might help her friend. "Why do they think that?"

"Someone has stolen a staff her father gave her—"

"It is very dear to her?" Ruha was no master of spirit magic, but she had learned something of the subject from Qoha'dar, an old witch with whom she had been exiled as a child. "Perhaps the staff is even her most treasured possession?"

Vaerana nodded, and lowered her voice even further. "And by all accounts, Prince Tang's mother is a master of the art."

"But why are the Shou doing this terrible thing?" Ruha asked. "What do they want with Yanseldara's spirit?"

Vaerana bit her lip, then looked away. "It's my doing. They trade in poisons and fixings for dark magic. I've threatened to chase them out of Elversult if they don't stop. I guess stealing Yanseldara's spirit is their way of calling my bluff."

With that, Vaerana snaked an arm around Ruha and started toward the horses, half-dragging the witch along. "If we don't want this turning into another of your de-bacles, we'll need to ride like the wind!"

The reference to Voonlar stung like a slap, but that was not the reason Ruha pulled free of Vaerana and stopped. The witch had only a passing familiarity with spirit magic; it would not be enough to save Yanseldara.

Vaerana did not seem to realize that her companion

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had stopped until she reached the horses and took her reins from Tombor. "Well?"

"I cannot save Yanseldara." The words came so diffi-cultly that Ruha could barely utter them. "You must send for someone else."

Vaerana's face darkened. "Out of the question! I'd do this myself if I could, but the Shou know me." She grabbed the reins of Ruha's mount; then led it, along with her own horse, toward the witch. "As pitiful an excuse for a Harper as you are, you're the only one who can save Yanseldara—which means you're all that stands between Elversult and the tyranny of the Cult of the

Dragon."

Vaerana thrust a set of reins into the witch's hands.

"But, Lady Constable—"

"Don't 'but' me, Witch!" Vaerana roared. "You're supposed to be a Harper, and a Harper goes where she's called. Besides, all you've got to do is sneak into the Gin-ger Palace and find Yanseldara's staff. Even you can

handle that!"

"You do not want me to lift the curse?"

Vaerana rolled her eyes. "Why would I think you can do what Thunderhand Frostbryn could not? All I need is someone the Shou don't know—but you almost botched

that up, didn't you? Now, I'll have to do some fast riding if we don't want that mandarin recognizing you."

The Lady Constable thrust her foot into a stirrup, then turned toward the rest of the riders. "Tombor!"

Tombor, who could hardly have missed the last part of Vaerana's outburst, led his own horse forward. "Yes,

m'lady?"

Vaerana flipped her hand in Ruha's direction. "Take the witch back to Elversult. After you tend to the seriously wounded, I don't imagine you'll have any healing magic left, but do what you can for her leg. Then see that she's given an introduction to the Ginger Palace, like we

planned."

Tombor's twinkle-eyed gaze darted to Ruha, then back

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to Vaerana. "And what will you and the rest of the Maces be doing, Lady Constable?"

"Inspecting a caravan," Vaerana replied. "A Shou caravan."

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The journey to Elversult took the rest of the day and most of the next, so that they reached the outskirts of town in late afternoon. Suggesting it might be wise not to be seen together in the city, Tombor pointed out a wooded hill where Ruha and Fowler could wait while he saw to the wounded. Grateful for any chance to rest their sore rumps, the pair climbed out of their saddles and led their horses into the copse. The captain fetched some water from a nearby stream so the witch could tend her shark bite; then they settled in to wait, too weary to talk or do anything but listen to the distant creak of passing wagons.

Twilight came, and worried that Tombor would not be able to find them in the dusky wood, Ruha asked the captain to collect some sticks while she gathered some dry moss off the forest floor. She was about to strike the fire when the portly cleric emerged from the shadows, appearing so suddenly and silently that he startled Fowler and made him drop an armload of branches he

had collected.

"For a big man, you move mighty quiet." Fowler eyed a small wooden coffer that Tombor was carrying in both hands. "Especially considering that your arms are full."

A sour smile flashed across the cleric's lips and disappeared instantly, then he chuckled merrily. "Sorry;

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sometimes I can't resist. It's a gift of the gods."

"Which one?" Ruha asked. "Most priests invoke their gods often, but I have yet to hear you utter the name of yours."

Tombor set the coffer on the ground at her feet. "My god is not so vain as the others, but his healing magic is as strong as that of most—as you'll soon see." He removed a small bundle of cloth from his pocket, then turned to Fowler and motioned at the dry moss Ruha had gathered. "Would you be good enough to start a small fire?"

Ruha passed her tinderbox to the captain, then watched as Tombor unwrapped his bundle. Inside was a dark, sour-smelling balm that seemed to undulate like water. The cleric dipped his fingers into the salve, and the witch pulled her aba up to display her wound. After the long ride from Pros, it had started to open again. The edges were red and inflamed, while a steady flow of clear liquid oozed from the laceration itself.

Tombor rubbed his salve over the injury, and Ruha's leg seemed to disappear beneath a rippling shadow. The ointment felt as light as air; there was no greasy feeling or any burning sensation, only a slight, soothing coolness upon her skin, similar to what it felt like to step out of the hot sun into the shade of a large tree.

Once Tombor had smeared the balm over the entire wound, he tossed aside what remained. "It's my best salve, but I have to mix each batch fresh. It doesn't keep more than an hour." Tombor placed the coffer he had brought next to Fowler's fire, then said, "We'll let the balm do its work while I explain what I brought."

He opened the lid, revealing what looked to be several hundred pieces of gold stamped with the proud raven of the Kingdom of Sembia. Ruha had lived in the Heartlands long enough to know that the coins were accepted

as currency throughout the region, for Sembite merchants controlled much of the area's trade.

"And the Lady Constable said she couldn't buy me a new cog!" Fowler snorted.

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"She couldn't—at least not with this gold." Tombor reached deep into the chest and removed a coin, then used his knife to scratch it and reveal the dull gray sheen of lead. "The coins on top are real. The rest are fakes Vaerana took from a local thief. Don't try to buy anything with them, but they should serve to convince the Shou you're a legitimate spice buyer."

"That's to be the witch's disguise?" Fowler asked. "It's the only way we can get her into the Ginger Palace." He turned back to Ruha. "Tomorrow morning, you'll meet a local merchant we've hired to present you to the Shou. He's a useful tool, but an unreliable one, so don't tell him anything about your mission."

"Our mission," Fowler said. "I'm going with her." Ruha lifted her brow. "Thank you, Captain, but—" Fowler raised his hands to silence her. "You don't have any choice. Witch. I'm not letting you out of my sight until I get my new cog. Besides, if you don't have a body-guard, the Shou are liable to think you aren't very important."

Ruha looked to Tombor, who nodded. "It's a good idea." He reached into his pocket to remove a gold coin. It was as large as Ruha's palm, and embossed with the image of a camel and several strange letters. "Make certain that Princess Wei Dao sees this. She has a love of coins from far lands, and this one comes all the way from Calimshan."

"May I offer it to her as a gift?" Ruha asked, reaching for the gold piece. "Perhaps I can make a friend—"

Tombor shook his head, pulling the coin out of her reach. "It's better to let her find it on her own." He tossed the coin into the coffer. "Just make certain she sees it, and she'll think there are more treasures like it deeper in the chest. Her imagination will do more to win you a night in the Ginger Palace than any gift."

"And once we're inside, what then?" asked Fowler. "You'll only have a day or so to find Yanseldara's staff and get out," Tombor answered. "Vaerana will do her best

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to stall Hsieh's caravan, but she won't be able to hold it

up long without starting a war."

"What does the staff look like?" Ruha asked. "And do you have any suggestions as to where I might find it?"

"The staff isn't much to look at—it's a plain rod of oak—but there's a huge topaz on top. None of us has any idea where you should look. The Shou are a secretive people, especially about their homes. All I can tell you is that Tang's mother, Lady Feng, is reportedly a master of spirit magic."

Tombor glanced down at Ruha's leg, where the dark balm had stopped rippling and now looked like nothing more than a strange shadow with no source.

"The salve's done its work," the cleric said. "Turn your leg toward the firelight."

Ruha did as instructed. When the flickering yellow light fell on her thigh, the balm rose off her leg like dark steam. The shark bite had closed completely, leaving only a thin curved line and slight red sheen to mark where the wound had been.

"That is a most marvelous balm." Ruha looked from her wound to Tombor's heavy, jowled face. "You must tell me which god to thank!"

Pretending not to hear Ruha's request, the cleric closed the coffer lid and stood. "With that chest among your things, you'll need a safe place to spend the night. I'd recommend the Axe and Hammer. Anyone in the city will tell you how to get there."

"What about our guide?" Fowler asked.

"He'll meet you on the way," Tombor replied. "Just start down Snake Road."

"How will we recognize him?" Ruha asked.

"Don't worry about that; he'll find you." Tombor stepped away from the fire, slipping into the dusky shadows as quietly as he had appeared. "Abazm always knows who's on the road to the Ginger Palace."

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Save for an impression of impregnable seclusion, the Ginger Palace had little in common with those hulking stacks of stone Heartland lords called home. Instead of the squalid green waters of a moat, the Shou citadel was surrounded by the soldierly ranks of a ginkgo forest, and

sat not upon some windswept crag, but upon a square mound of pounded earth. The walls of its outer curtain were plastered smooth and painted white as alabaster, and they were capped along the entire length by a peaked roof of scarlet tiles. At every corner stood a tower with five stacked balconies, each one covered by a scarlet-tiled roof with upswept eaves. Inside the fortress, several buildings rose high enough above the outer curtain to display the same roof styling, lending an aura of harmony and supreme order to the entire edifice.

"I still don't like this," hissed Fowler. He was walking beside Ruha as they followed their guide, Abazm, down a white-bricked avenue toward the palace gates. The captain was dressed in a brown aba the witch had made for him the night before, and in his arms he bore the small wooden coffer Tombor had loaned them. "No one's going to believe we're spice buyers—not in these outfits!"

"If you do not like my plan, Captain, you may withdraw," Ruha whispered. She stopped and held out her hands. "There is still time."

Fowler clutched the box more tightly to his chest. "And let you out of my sight? When I've a new cog, and not a minute before."

Abazm, a greasy-haired dwarf dressed in a striped burnoose, whirled about in midstride.

"What is all this whispering, Master and Mistress?" He was surprisingly thin compared to most dwarves, with bushy eyebrows as black as kohl, a hawkish nose, and the stubble of a dark, coarse beard. "It is most unbecoming. The Shou will think you do not trust me."

"We don't," growled Fowler. "Keep walking."

Abazm glanced toward the palace and remained where he was. "If the Shou believe you have no trust for me,

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they will have no trust for you."

The dwarf's gaze dropped to the coffer in Fowler's hands, lingering there just long enough to send a shiver down Ruha's spine. After joining them on the road, he had insisted on seeing their funds before he risked his own reputation by introducing them to the Shou. Though Ruha had been careful not to let him reach into the chest, Abazm had raised an eyebrow when he saw the Sembite coins. He had offered to check them for purity, remarking that a well-placed friend had told him a local thief was

counterfeiting Sembite coins. The witch had curtly ordered Fowler to shut the chest, pretending to be suspicious of both the guide's story and his motives.

"It is not necessary that the Shou trust us," Ruha said. "It is only necessary that they like the color of our gold."

"Of course, I cannot judge that without a closer inspection." The dwarf's eyes flicked to the coffer and remained there, as though he expected Ruha to open the chest again.

"They'll like it well enough." Fowler bared his tusks at the little merchant. "Now walk."

Abazm sighed heavily, then continued down the white-paved avenue. Fowler let the dwarf get a little way ahead, then turned to Ruha.

"I don't like that little fellow, any more than I like this plan of yours," the captain commented. "I'm sure Vaerana wanted us to say we're from Sembia, like most spice merchants. We'd draw less notice than claiming we come from Anauroch."

"I do not care what Vaerana wanted." Ruha stepped to the captain's side and kept pace with him. "I am not from Sembia. How can I pretend to be from someplace I have visited only twice?"

"I've been there plenty of times."

"But you are not the spy," Ruha whispered. "And I have learned better than to pretend I am someone I am not. That is what caused the trouble at Voonlar. If I claim I am from Anauroch, there is no need to explain my igno-

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rance of Heartlands customs."

"And what about me?" Fowler grumbled. "I know less about deserts than you do about ships. At least you've sunk a ship."

Ruha reached over and straightened the checkered keffiyeh covering Fowler's head and neck. "Just look strong and mean. That's all that is expected of Bedine men."

They reached the end of the avenue, where their guide stood waiting. Abazm clambered up a broad set of marble stairs to a tile-roofed portico of simple post and beam construction. The lintel had a pair of elaborate, long-tailed peacocks engraved along its length, while the beam ends resting atop it had been fashioned into styl-

ized dragon heads. On the far side of the porch hung a pair of glossy, red-lacquered gates decorated with the yellow figures of rearing basilisk lizards. Next to each gate stood a Shou sentry armored in a conical brass helmet and a red silk hauberk imprinted with the tessellated pattern of its plate scale lining. Each guard held a long, curve-bladed polearm, the butt resting on the floor between his feet and the shaft rising vertically in front of him. Both men kept their slanted eyes fixed straight ahead, as though they did not even see the three strangers approaching.

Abazm strode straight between the two men and tugged on an ornate yellow pull cord. A muffled gong reverberated through the gates, then a small viewing portal swung open above the dwarf's head. A scowling Shou official peered down his long nose at the merchant.

"We do not expect you, Abazm."

Abazm clasped his hands and bowed so low that, had he worn a proper dwarven beard, it would have scraped the floor. "I have brought merchants from the distant sands of Anauroch, Honored One." Without standing, he waved a hand at the coffer Fowler held. "They wish to have commerce with the Ginger Palace."

The Honored One's gaze flicked over the coffer, then back to Abazm. The dwarf stepped closer to the viewing

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portal, drawing a silver coin from his sleeve and deftly displaying it between his cupped hands, where the two sentries could not see it.

"I ask Prince if he wishes to see you."

A sharp clunk reverberated through the gates, then one gate swung open. Abazm led the way inside, slipping his coin to the Honored One so smoothly that Ruha did not see it change hands. Inside, a path of white marble led across a huge, yellow-bricked courtyard to a double-tiered mansion. The building was of the same post and beam construction as the portico, save that the spaces between the posts were filled with white-plastered walls, silvery windows of rare and expensive glass, or red-lacquered doors decorated with yellow basilisk emblems. The pillars and lintels were carved with a great variety of stylized creatures: birds with tails of flame, tiger-faced jackals, furry imps with long curling tails, and a hundred more. The building's two roofs, as the witch had seen from outside, were covered with scarlet tiles and swept up at the eaves. Every detail was arranged in perfect

symmetry and balance, carefully contrived to impart upon the onlooker a complete sense of serenity and consonance, as though to imply that the master of the palace could control even the wildest whim of nature.

Ruha started to follow the Honored One across the courtyard, but suddenly found her path blocked by six guards who had apparently stepped out of nowhere. They were armed and armored as those outside, save that their emotionless gazes were locked on the witch's face.

Abazm took Ruha's sleeve and gently pulled her back. "Please, Mistress, we have not been invited into the palace."

He pulled the witch toward a pillared gallery that ran along the inner perimeter of the curtain wall, where a long line of stone benches had been provided for the comfort of those waiting to visit palace residents. Ruha counted more than thirty merchants gathered on the seats. Many wore the billowing tunics and outlandish

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hats of Sembite merchants, but there were also dwarves in striped burnouses, elves outfitted in their customary leather and green, even a pair of bare-chested ones dressed in silken knickers and garish stockings. No matter what their costume, they were all holding a coffer similar to the one in Fowler's hands.

Ruha's heart fell. Abazm had gotten them inside the Ginger Palace as promised, but it was going to be a long time before she could begin her search.

A few of the merchants called greetings to the dwarf. Abazm returned each salutation with artificial warmth and politely introduced his companions as Ruha and Fowler's side of the Mtair Dhafir. Without exception, the dwarf went on to explain that his clients were incense traders from Anauroch, and then suggested a meeting in his shop—no doubt with an eye toward earning a commission if anything came of the arrangement. With each introduction, the witch silently cursed Abazm's efficacy, but she forced herself to offer salutations and respond enthusiastically to her guide's efforts. Before she finally reached a vacant bench at the end of the line, Ruha had made three appointments for two days hence—by which time she hoped to have returned the stolen staff to Yanseldara and be well on her way back to Storm Silverhand's farm in Shadowdale.

Fowler remained strangely silent the whole time, preferring to stand behind Ruha with his gaze fixed firmly on the ground. As the witch took her seat, he leaned close to her ear.

"I told you this plan was a foolish one. I've carried cargo for half a dozen of these fellows."

Ruha looked back down the line and saw that several merchants were, indeed, staring in their direction. "Then sit down and do not look so suspicious. I am sure you are not the only half-ore they have ever seen. With luck, they will find it difficult to toll you from the others."

Fowler scowled as though insulted, but sat down with the coffer in his lap and pulled his keffiyeh down his

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brow. Ruha settled in beside him, and Abazm clambered onto the bench next to her.

"Not to worry," the dwarf whispered. "I am a favorite of the Princess Wei Dao. She will see that we do not wait more than three or four hours."

"Four hours?" Ruha gasped. That was half the day, and from what Tombor had said, Vaerana would be able to delay Hsieh's arrival little more than a day. "Is there no faster way?"

Abazm's bushy eyebrows came together in an exaggerated expression of hurt. "That is fast." He gestured to the long line of merchants. "Of late, Prince Tang has been slow about his business. Some of these men have been waiting three days already!"

Ruha glanced at Fowler and caught him sneering as though he were going to speak. "Say nothing, Fowal'sid. At least we are inside."

"Of course we are. Is that not what I promised?" Abazm cocked an eyebrow and gazed thoughtfully at Ruha. "But if that is all you wished, there was no need to hire me—as I am sure your friends told you."

"They said you could arrange a quick audience."

Ruha looked toward the rear of the courtyard, deciding to use the time to familiarize herself with the palace's layout. She could see only the front part of the compound. The back half was sealed off by a pair of winglike ramps that spread outward from the midpoint of the mansion, where it changed to a two story structure, to meet the walls of the outer curtain. Above these partitions showed the tiled roofs of two huge, single storey buildings located near the back of the compound.

In the front courtyard, where Ruha and the other merchants sat waiting, a narrow, L-shaped building stood in the southeastern corner of the enclosure. The witch concluded that this was the sentry barracks, for a steady flow of guards passed through the doors in both directions. A similar building sat in the opposite corner of the courtyard. Save for the two guards posted outside its

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doors, this structure seemed deserted.

The witch had barely finished her study before the Honored One emerged from the mansion at the head of a small procession of guards. He led the troop across the courtyard toward Ruha and her companions, drawing an astonished murmur from the pillared gallery. Abazm frowned in puzzlement, but pushed himself off the bench and turned to his clients.

"It is better than I hoped," he declared. "We will not be required to wait at all."

Fowler looked far from relieved at this news. "Why all those guards?"

Abazm shook his head, bewildered. "Because of you two, perhaps. The Shou are not fond of half-men, and they are bound to be suspicious of women who cover their faces."

The procession stopped before them; then the Honored One bowed to Abazm. "Princess Wei Dao asks you into audience hall."

The dwarf cast a smug look over his shoulder and returned the bow, as did the witch and the captain. The Honored One turned toward the mansion, and the guards closed around Ruha's small company without showing a flicker of suspicion or anxiety. The witch found it strange that, if the Shou were suspicious of either Fowler, they did not bother to take her *herjambiya* or the captain's sword.

The Honored One led the procession up a marble staircase and through an open doorway at the far end of the mansion. They passed through a high-ceilinged anteroom so quickly that Ruha barely noticed the stylized frescoes, then entered a long, spacious room hung with silk tapestries and floored with the mosaic of a beautiful, flame-tailed crane.

In a teak throne at the far end of the room sat a striking Shou woman in a tight, ankle-length dress embroidered with a golden dragon almost as sinuous as she. Arrayed around her were a dozen women and half as many men, all watching in expectant silence as Abazm

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boldly led his clients forward. As the trio drew nearer, Ruha saw that the princess was a woman who believed even more firmly than the Bedine in the power of cosmetics. Her painted lips were as glossy and red as the palace's lacquered gates, her eyelids were sapphire blue, and, save for the rouge highlights beneath her round cheekbones, her face was powdered as white as alabaster. Only a yellow scarf carefully tied around her throat seemed at all out of place, bunched up as it was around the dress's high collar.

The Honored One stopped before the throne and bowed, then flourished his hand at Abazm. "The dwarf Abazm, Princess."

Abazm stopped before Wei Dao's throne and kneeled on the floor, then leaned forward and pressed his forehead to the wood. Ruha cast a questioning glance at Fowler, who scowled at the dwarf's gesture and merely bowed. She did likewise, hoping they were not inadvertently insulting their hostess.

If they were, it was impossible to tell. The princess glared at the back of Abazm's skull as though she wanted to stare a hole through it. The Honored One slipped away from the dwarf, and no one took any notice whatsoever of Ruha or Fowler.

At last, Abazm could no longer stand the silence. The dwarf cautiously allowed his gaze to creep across the floor to the princess's feet. "Princess Wei Dao, you honor me with your radiance."

"Abazm, how surprising that you return so soon to Ginger Palace." The princess fingered the scarf at her neck. "And how fortunate."

Abazm raised himself so that he was merely kneeling before Wei Dao. "I am your servant, and the servant of the Ginger Palace as well." He twisted around to gesture at his clients, and Ruha glimpsed a bewildered gleam in the dwarf's eyes. "I have brought traders from a distant land—"

"No! No more foreign powders!" Wei Dao ripped the

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scarf from her throat, exposing an ugly swath of partially healed skin eruptions. "See effects of your pearl dust?"

Abazm gasped at the sight of the princess's ravaged complexion. Incoherent, half-voiced explanations regard-

ing Lheshaylian sorcerers began to pour from his mouth, and he looked to the Honored One for help. The Shou fixed his gaze on Princess Wei Dao and pretended not to notice.

"You say, skin shine like moon!" Wei Dao waved a hand toward the sky, gesturing so angrily that the effort carried her to her feet. "Skin shine like harvest moon, craters and all!"

Abazm leapt up, but before he could turn to run, two guards caught him by the arms. They lifted the dwarf into the air and held him before the princess, his feet dangling six inches above the floor.

"I b-b-beg your forgiveness!" the dwarf cried. "I did not know this would happen! I made my own wife try the powder before I sold it to you!"

"You give me same powder as dwarf woman?" Wei Dao snarled.

"Only to see if it was safe, Princess!"

The princess's eyes narrowed. "Liar—it is not safe!" She tied her scarf around her throat and nodded to the guards. "Take deceitful dwarf to tanning vats."

Ruha cringed at the punishment. It was unlikely that the tubs would be deep enough to drown Abazm but, unless the Shou tanned leather differently than the Bedine, the vats would be filled with harsh fluids and the foulest offal gathered from the pens of dogs and swine. The witch knew better than to think she could intercede on the dwarf's behalf, but she would not leave him behind after she recovered Yanseldara's staff.

As the guards carried him out the door, Abazm jerked one arm free and swung around to face the throne. He glanced briefly at the witch and Fowler, then yelled, "Wait! Spare me. Princess, and I will tell you something you should know!"

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Ruha's stomach grew as heavy as lead. Fowler gnashed his tusks; then the Honored One's panicked voice echoed across the chamber. "Take him away!"

The guard recaptured Abazm's arm and turned to obey.

"Wait." The princess leaned forward in her throne,

peering past Ruha and Fowler to the dwarf. "Say what I should know, Abazm. Then I decide whether to spare you."

The Honored One stepped forward, positioning himself squarely in front of Wei Dao. "Frightened dwarf say anything, Princess. We cannot believe him."

There was a catch in the Shou's voice—and Ruha thought she knew why. "But you can believe us." The witch bowed to the princess, tugging on Fowler's sleeve so he would do the same. "We have no reason to lie."

Wei Dao studied the witch and her companion, then asked, "You know what insidious dwarf says?"

Ruha turned to face Abazm, trying to decide whether it would be wiser to expose the chamberlain's corruption herself, or to restrain herself and hope the treacherous dwarf realized that his best interests now lay in working with her.

"Do you know what dwarf says?" the princess demanded.

Ruha fixed her gaze on Abazm and let her hand drift toward herjambiya. Without turning around, she said, "I think I do, yes."

Abazm swallowed hard, then looked away from Ruha. "Most Merciful Princess," the dwarf began. He glanced at the witch's hand, then continued, "Most Compassionate Lady, I beg leave to report that it is necessary to pay your trusted chamberlain in order to secure appointments within the Ginger Palace."

Ruha sighed behind her veil. She turned to face the princess, fully expecting to be called upon to confirm Abazm's story.

The chamberlain was already kneeling before Wei

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Dao's throne, his brow pressed to the floor and his arms stretched out before him. "Compassionate Princess, I beg mercy for my family."

Wei Dao raised her thinly plucked eyebrows. "Then you acknowledge this crime, Chuang?"

"I do. My pockets hang heavy with silver." Chuang's muffled voice was barely audible. "It is way of this land, and I am weak. At first, I am surprised and grateful when visitors pay me silver. But soon it is expected, and I do not open gates until—"

"Enough. You do not lie to me, and I grant mercy to your family." Wei Dao stared at the prone chamberlain until his body began to tremble and great, racking sobs reverberated across the floor. "But you dishonor your ancestors before Mandarins of Heaven, and it is beyond me to ask that they make you welcome."

"Yes, Princess. I know."

Wei Dao looked up, then turned to a squat, flat-cheeked man with an unwavering scowl and granite eyes.

"Please, General Fui."

Before Ruha realized quite what was happening, the general had drawn a heavy, square-tipped sword from one of the guard's scabbards and stepped to Chuang's side. There was a sharp, wet thunk, and the witch saw just how swiftly and surely death would come if the Shou found her out.

The general cleaned the blade on the headless chamberlain's silken robe, then returned the weapon to its owner and stepped back to his place. His face remained as impassive as ever.

Wei Dao studied the chamberlain's disembodied head for a moment, then seemed to remember herself and looked toward the chamber entrance.

"Perfidious dwarf is permitted to leave."

The guards set Abazm down. As soon as the merchant's feet touched the floor, he spun on his heel and bowed very low.

"Your wisdom is more boundless than the sky,

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Princess!" As he spoke, he was backing out the door. "Only Eldath herself is more merciful and forgiving!"

Wei Dao accepted the tribute with a faintly amused smirk. "You always welcome at Ginger Palace, Abazm. Please to call when berry lip paint is ready."

Once the dwarf was gone, Wei Dao rose and, stepping around the pool of blood at the base of the throne, led her entire entourage across the floor to Ruha and Fowler. She circled them slowly, running her gaze over their robes and studying the witch's veil especially closely, then stopped in front of them.

Ruha was astounded that Wei Dao's guards would allow their mistress to approach so closely to two armed strangers, a fact that suggested they believed the princess to be perfectly capable of taking care of herself.

"Abazm says you come to do business with Ginger Palace?"

"Aye, with Prince Tang," Fowler confirmed.

Wei Dao's eyes hardened. "Prince Tang is no longer receiving today. Perhaps you come back tomorrow."

"We're wanting a large cargo, and we're ready to pay now."

"Tomorrow."

The princess stepped away without turning her back on her visitors and paid no attention to the coffer in Fowler's hands, even when he shook it to clank the heavy load of coins inside.

Ruha laid a restraining hand on the captain's arm. "That is enough, Fowal'sid."

The half-ore scowled, but held the coffer steady, and Wei Dao stopped short of turning to leave.

"We have come to sell as well as buy, Princess," Ruha said. "And you will be more interested in our wares than your husband."

Out of the corner other eye, Ruha caught Fowler frowning at her unexpected improvisation. She ignored him and lowered a hand to the pocket other aba, asking, "If I may, Princess?"

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Wei Dao nodded, but Fowler, who had seen her draw spell components from those same pockets, cleared his throat.

"Maybe now's not the time—"

Ruha whirled sharply on the burly half-ore. "Did I not tell you to be silent, Fowal'sid?"

Fowler's leathery lip trembled with the impulse to curl into a snarl, but the half-ore forced himself to lower his gaze and nod respectfully. "You did, Lady."

When the witch looked back to their hostess, she noticed a glimmer of respect in Wei Dao's otherwise inexpressive face. Deciding that she had read the princess's

character correctly, Ruha reached into a pocket and withdrew two milky tears of hardened tree resin.

"Have you heard of frankincense or myrrh?"

Wei Dao examined the droplets closely. "Are they gems?"

"In a manner of speaking, for they are more valuable than gold. If you can have someone fetch a brazier and afill it with coals, I will show you."

| "Magic is forbidden in my presence."

| "This is not magic." Ruha found it interesting that the jshou considered sorcery a greater threat to the safety of Etheir nobility than they did blades. "The drops will produce a pleasant smoke, nothing more."

Wei Dao nodded to two men, who promptly left through a door in the rear of the chamber. Fowler continued to stare at the white tears so tensely that Ruha feared he would alarm Wei Dao. The witch stepped closer to her hostess, until their shoulders were almost touching.

"While we await the brazier, I will tell you more about these wondrous tears." Ruha raised her hand, displaying the milky drops before Wei Dao's eyes. "They are resins, scraped from beneath the bark of certain trees that grow only on the eastern side of the highest mountains in Anuroch."

"The great desert?" Wei Dao asked.

"Yes. There, we use frankincense and myrrh to scent

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the air around stagnant oases. The tears can also be pressed to create perfumes, or mixed with almond oil to create restorative tonics and soothing lotions, or stirred into elixirs to ease the pains of childbirth." Ruha paused to see if this elicited any interest from the princess.

When it did not, she continued, "They are also good for soothing stinging eyes, earaches—even as a remedy to the bites of certain venomous insects, and as an antidote to some kinds of poison."

Again, Ruha watched closely to see if the last item of her description drew any special notice from the princess. But if Wei Dao had any interest in poisons, it remained concealed with the rest of her thoughts.

"Is there anything frankincense and myrrh cannot do?" Wei Dao's voice was somewhat incredulous.

"Perhaps there are other uses, but I have described all I can demonstrate."

The two men returned with a small brazier already filled with hot coals. Ruha crushed one of the tears between her palms, then sprinkled the crumbs onto the embers. An aromatic smoke rose from the pan, filling the entire chamber with such a sweet, fresh smell that the Shou finally allowed their stoic masks to slip. They began to smile openly and crowd closer to the source, taking such deep breaths that some of them actually snorted. Even the stem-faced guards could not keep their nostrils from flaring.

Wei Dao studied her entourage's reaction in bemused meditation. "This is not magic?"

"I am no spellcaster," Ruha lied. She pressed the other tear into the princess's hand and motioned toward the brazier. "It will smell just as sweet if you sprinkle the crumbs. Tomorrow, I will demonstrate its use in the making of perfumes and poultices."

Wei Dao did not step toward the brazier. "Not necessary. We buy all you have."

"What about the price?" Fowler gasped. "Aren't you even going to ask?"

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Wei Dao glanced at the brazier, where her entourage stood sniffing the sweet-smelling smoke. "You already tell me it is more valuable than gold. I believe you."

Fowler shook his head in amazement, then looked back to Ruha. "Well, Lady Ruha, how much do we have?"

It took Ruha a moment to realize what he was asking, for she had not expected her plan to succeed quite so well. "I'm afraid we have very little at the moment." The witch had only three more tears in her pocket. "You see, our ship was sunk by a dragon—" "By dragon?"

Wei Dao's exclamation caught Ruha as much by surprise as had the offer to buy all her frankincense. "It was a very large dragon," the witch explained, keeping a watchful eye on the princess's expression. "A black one. ^ Do you know it?"

|, Wei Dao's face became as unreadable as ever. "I do not |know this dragon. But it is difficult for Shou to hear of |dragons doing evil things."

| "Yes, I have heard your emperor is a green dragon."

| "Jade." Wei Dao bowed, suggesting that the audience
| was at an end. "Please return to Ginger Palace with more
| frankincense and myrrh."

| Ruha did not return the bow. "You may be certain we
(will—but first, we are interested in purchasing some
S wares to take with us." The witch fingered the silk veil
that Hsieh had given to her. "As you can see, the love of
Shou silk reaches even into the depths of Anauroch."

"Of course. You discuss with Prince Tang." Wei Dao
bowed again. "Come back tomorrow, and new chamber-
lain sees you are among first to see my husband."

"I am sorry, but that is not possible." Ruha had to fight
to keep the panic out of her voice. "We must leave for
Ilipur tomorrow to buy a new ship."

"Then come very early in morning. Chamberlain give
you first appointment." Wei Dao turned to leave, this
time without bowing.

Ruha threw open the coffer in Fowler's hands. "Before

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you go, Princess, Abazm said you would want to see the
color of our gold."

Wei Dao spun around, affronted. "Show me money?
What for?"

Fowler tipped the box so she could look inside, and the
princess's expression changed instantly—first to one of
puzzlement, then interest.

"Yes, of course. Abazm always tells us we must inspect
coins." She glided over to the box and started to reach
inside, then remembered herself and asked, "May I
touch?"

Ruha nodded, and Wei Dao picked up several gold
pieces and raised them to her face. When Ruha saw the
coin from Calimshan slide down the long sleeve of the
princess's dress, she thought it best not to say anything.

"You stay tonight in Ginger Palace," Wei Dao said, as
though she had thought of the idea herself. "We see
Prince Tang soon after breakfast."

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Ruha raised her veil, blew into the
tree-shaped keyhole, and whispered

the incantation to her wind spell. A short blast of air whistled softly through the slot, raising a gentle clatter as it rattled the lock. The sound was not loud, but the witch cringed. After a long night of skulking through the Ginger Palace, she had worked her way deep into the labyrinthine corridors of the residential section, and the guards here were thick as ants in their hill.

The bolt slid back with a muffled clack. Ruha stood, then looked back down the long hall. Already, two sentries were stalking toward her, their bare feet sliding across the silk runner in utter silence. It was their incredible stealth that made the witch's search so nerve-racking. She never knew when she would meet one coming around a corner, or suddenly feel someone gliding past her as she kneeled before a keyhole.

Ruha pressed herself into a corner beside the door, moving very slowly and deliberately. Although she had rendered herself invisible with a sun spell, the mirage was not perfect. Any quick motion would cause a shimmering blur that might alert the guards to her presence.

The men stopped before the door, gesturing at the knob and whispering to each other in the lilting language of the Shou. After arguing a few moments, they tried the

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latch. When the door swung open, they gasped and backed away, both reaching for their square-tipped swords. One of them spoke, and the other scurried down the hall.

The remaining guard peered into the room, calling gently, as though saying someone's name. No one answered. He reluctantly entered the chamber, still speaking softly. Though she was puzzled by the man's alarm, Ruha followed him through the door and instantly realized she had found the personal quarters of Lady Feng.

Opposite the door was a glass window, through which spilled the pale dawn light illuminating an anteroom similar to those Ruha had found in the private apartments of both the prince and princess. Like many chambers in the Ginger Palace, this one was furnished with nothing more than a single low table and a few straw mats. The walls were covered not by the resplendent frescoes of birds and reptiles that decorated the other royal apartments, but by subtly hued paintings of sym-

bolic portent: a snake coiled into an ascending spiral, a feeble old man sailing backward across a rainbow, a spider that had spun its web in the mouth of a singing woman, and many more images that would have put the witch into a contemplative mood, had she not been so jittery from hours of skulking about the Ginger Palace.

The guard crossed the chamber and nervously called through the doorway into the next room. When no one answered, he reluctantly inched forward. Ruha went to the window and, while she waited for the sentry to complete his search, looked out upon the rear part of the palace complex. She could not see much, for a large, high-walled enclosure sat in the middle of the grounds, blocking her view of everything beyond save the tiled roofs of the two huge buildings the witch had noticed yesterday.

Ruha could not decide what the enclosure was. Its walls were capped by a double row of barbed spikes, as though it were some sort of prison, but the gates hung

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open beneath a strange, scaly archway that vaguely resembled a dragon's tail. A short, opal-paved path connected the peculiar courtyard to the mansion, crossing an arcing, multicolored bridge and snaking through a thicket of well-tended shrubbery. The witch noticed several sentries kneeling among the bushes, not hiding so much as trying to avoid obtrusiveness.

Ruha was dismayed to note that the sun had already risen high enough to kindle an iridescent glimmer in the pearly surfaces of both the walkway and the enclosure's scaly arch. There was not much time to find Yanseldara's staff. Soon, the breakfast servants would arrive at the guest house in the front courtyard. Fowler could probably keep them at bay, but he would be hard-pressed to explain the witch's absence when someone called to escort them to Prince Tang's audience hall.

Ruha cast an impatient look toward the room the guard had gone to inspect. She was tempted to start her own search before he left the apartment, but that would be very dangerous. As quietly as Shou sentries moved, he might slip into the chamber while she wasn't looking and see her move something. Besides, if anyone in the other rooms was a light sleeper, it would be better to let the sentry disturb them.

A short time later, the guard finally returned, muttering to himself and glancing askance at the mystical symbols on the walls. Ruha had heard no conversations or startled cries to suggest he had awakened anyone, so she did not understand his anxiety. When she had inadvertently drawn the guards' attention before, they had

seemed much more confident of themselves. In one case, they had remained quite composed while they explained to a startled bureaucrat why they had awakened him. Another time, they had efficiently searched an entire apartment without disturbing the sleeping residents.

Ruha waited until the fellow left the room, then went to the door and used the same spell she had used to unlock the latch to lock it again. A muffled cry of surprise

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sounded from the hall. The guard tried the door, again speaking softly. The witch turned away and crept silently into the next room, not caring that she had alarmed him further. When the other sentry returned, he would no doubt bring a superior, who would probably insist on searching the apartment again. If the witch was still here, the sound of the lock turning would alert her to their arrival.

The next room appeared to be Lady Feng's dressing closet. In one corner stood a wooden screen decorated with the painting of a naked king and queen lying together upon a bed of purple night. In the corner opposite the screen were two dressing bureaus, each with a costly silver mirror hanging behind it. One wall of the room was lined by several wardrobes decorated with paintings of astrological constellations.

Though Ruha considered the room an unlikely place to hide Yanseldara's staff, she paused long enough to peer behind the screen—nothing there—and open each of the wardrobes. Inside were dozens of silk gowns in many different styles, all dyed black as kohl and brocaded with the same endless pattern of open and closed eyes. The witch ran her hands over the floor and explored the corners behind the clothes. When she found nothing but sashes and slippers, she closed the wardrobes and crept into the next chamber.

Against the far wall sat the most elaborate piece of furniture in Lady Feng's apartment, a large canopied bed surrounded by a folding partition. Each panel was decorated with the fearsome aspects of leering, grotesque monsters, such as sometimes invaded a sleeper's dreams. In their claws, the fiends carried strange, exotic weapons like those stored in the secret armory that Ruha had discovered beneath the palace. There was a horned goatman brandishing a two-bladed sword, a bat-winged tiger carrying a spear with barbed points at both ends, a red-eyed centaur whirling a three-chained flail, and a wide assortment of other hideous creatures to protect Lady

Feng's spirit while she slept.

They were not needed now. No clothes lay folded on the dressing couch beside the bed, and four of the partition panels hung open, revealing a black silken quilt embroidered with the same green dragon that hung beneath the prow of Hsieh's ship. The blanket lay neatly spread over the mattress and pillows, lacking even the slightest rumple to suggest anyone had slept beneath it the night before.

Ruha's stomach sank. She had assumed all along that she would find Yanseldara's staff somewhere near Lady Feng, but it had never occurred to her that Lady Feng would not be at home.

The absence certainly explained the guards' reaction to the rattling lock, but not much else. Perhaps Lady Feng had spent the night in a lover's chamber, or communing with the spirits in some occult place Ruha had not yet discovered. There could be any number of explanations, most of which meant the staff would not be found here. Nevertheless, the witch decided to continue her search. Even if she failed to recover Yanseldara's staff—she could hear Vaerana maligning her already—at least there was a chance she would find something to lead her to Lady Feng.

Ruha crawled onto the mattress and ran her hands over the black quilt, then felt under the pillows. When she found nothing, she crawled off and straightened the quilt, then looked under the bed and stood on the dressing couch to peer above the canopy. She went to the corner and inspected a low writing desk. On the surface sat a bottle of ink, a small calligraphy brush, and several blank leaves of rice paper. A well-worn text in ancient Dwarven sat on one corner; the witch knew just enough of the arcane language to recognize the words "alchemy" and "first materials."

Though she could not see how it might be connected to Yanseldara's staff, the witch picked up the dwarven text. Aside from what she had already examined, there was

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little else in the room. She turned to leave, and that was when she heard the scratching.

It was as gentle as the whisper of her feet across the floor, but it was steady, and there was something more: a weak, plaintive whimpering. Ruha returned the dwarven text to its place, then kneeled in the corner of the room. The scratching and the squealing grew more discernible,

and she caught a faint whiff of a gamy and slightly rank odor. An animal.

Ruha ran her fingers up the corner and felt the seam of a door. She pulled the writing desk away from the corner, and a small click sounded inside the wall. The scratching and squealing stopped, but the gamy odor grew stronger. Resisting the urge to pull *laerjambiya*—if she attacked anything, the sun spell would fail and render her instantly visible—the witch laid her palms on a fresco of what looked like a slumbering mountain and pushed.

A hidden panel swung open, revealing the interior of a cluttered chamber. A small, white-furred face peered around the edge of the door. At first, Ruha thought the thing was a monkey, until she saw that its black-tipped muzzle was long and foxlike. Then she noted the black mask around its eyes and thought it looked like a raccoon, save that its head was as small and narrow as that of a weasel.

The creature, whatever it was, regarded the empty doorway for an instant, and then its nose twitched and its ears pricked forward. It raised its dark eyes, which remained as expressionless as they were large, toward Ruha's face and chittered despondently. For a moment, the witch thought the little animal could not see her and was disappointed at finding no one in the door. Then it slipped forward, revealing an emaciated body and a white-ringed tail, and gently pawed at her with two tiny black hands.

Hoping the creature was not trying to defend its territory, Ruha stepped past it into the secret chamber.

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Beneath a brass chandelier in the center of the room stood a worktable, the surface barely visible beneath a jumble of braziers, balances, cauldrons, and other alchemical instruments. Three of the laboratory walls were completely concealed behind rows of tall wooden cabinets, some so full of books and flasks they could not close. The fourth wall had two glass windows, beneath which were a red silk cushion, a box of fetid-smelling sand, and two silver bowls licked so clean they gleamed like mirrors.

| When Ruha paused at the worktable to examine Lady |
| Feng's apparatus, Chalk Ears, as she was beginning to |
| think of the black-masked creature, leapt onto the only |
| clear corner. It fixed its expressionless eyes on her face, |
| watching her so intently she raised a hand to make cer- |
| tain she had not suddenly become visible. When the |
| witch could not see her own flesh, she regarded Chalk |
| Ears with a wary eye, then reached toward a flask of

what looked like powdered blood.

A surprisingly sinister growl rolled from the creature's small throat. The hair rose along its spine and it lifted itself on its haunches, baring a mouthful of needlelike fangs. Ruha retracted her arm, and the little beast settled back onto its corner. The witch clasped her hands behind her back, then slowly walked around the table, studying the rest of the apparatus. Other than a fine coating of dust, she saw nothing to tell her what had become of Lady Feng. Chalk Ears watched her intently, but made no further objections as long as she did not attempt to touch anything.

Ruha went to the first cabinet. Chalk Ears jumped off the table and took a post at her heels. Keeping a careful eye on her little escort, she pulled the door open. As before, the creature watched her carefully, and any doubts about its ability to see her vanished from the witch's mind. Whatever it was, the animal clearly had some defenses against magic, and that could only mean Chalk Ears was Lady Feng's familiar, linked to her by a special bond of magic and love.

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Ruha had never had a familiar, since the spell that summoned them had more to do with the spirit than the elements. But she had heard other witches describe the strength of the union. Sometimes, the two were so closely bound that, over relatively short distances, they could see through each other's eyes and hear through each other's ears.

Ruha kneeled in front of the familiar. "Lady Feng?" she whispered, looking into the creature's big eyes. "Are you there?"

Chalk Ears blinked, but the tiny beast made no move to suggest that it understood.

"Why have you left your familiar alone, Lady Feng? It is starving. Shall I feed it for you and give it water?"

Again, Chalk Ears did nothing. The witch breathed a sigh of relief, confident there would have been some response if Lady Feng were listening. Even if the starving creature's mistress was as cruel as Afar the Merciless, she would share its pain and be anxious to have it cared for. In fact, it seemed unthinkable that Lady Feng would allow the little beast to fall into such a wretched

state unless she had been forced to depart under the direst circumstances.

A muffled crash rumbled through Lady Feng's apartment, and guards began to call from the anteroom. Ruha stepped into the bedchamber and pulled the writing desk back into its corner, then slipped into the laboratory and closed the secret door. She pressed her ear to the panel and heard several men rush into the room, still calling out as though they expected Lady Feng to return at any moment. Wei Dao arrived and began issuing commands. The witch listened for several moments more. When she heard no one dragging the desk from its place, she decided they did not know about the secret room and quietly resumed her search.

With Chalk Ears watching intently, Ruha carefully opened each cabinet and looked over the contents. To a nomad's eye at least, they contained an overabundance of

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magical supplies: scrolls and tomes in many different languages, a glut of ingredients for every spell imaginable and some that were not, arcane instruments so obscure the witch could not guess their purpose. Still, she found no sign of Yanseldara's staff, nor any clue of Lady Feng's whereabouts, nor any hint as to why the Shou sorceress had abandoned her familiar.

Finally, Ruha came to a locked cabinet, and Chalk Ears' long tail began to flick madly. The little beast rose on its haunches and sniffed at the doors, dripping a long stream of drool from its muzzle. The witch examined the latch and discovered that she could pop it easily enough, but Wei Dao and the guards were still shuffling about in Lady Feng's bedchamber. Fearful of making any sharp noises that might draw their attention to the secret room, Ruha decided to move to the last cabinet.

A long, deep growl rumbled from the familiar's throat. The fur rose along its spine, and it slunk toward Ruha with bared fangs. The witch pulled her jambiya and brandished it menacingly in front of Chalk Ears' face. The creature's tail rose straight into the air. It slowly backed away, then took refuge beneath another cabinet and began to whine.

Cursing the black-masked beast for a scoundrel and a blackmailer, Ruha returned to the locked cabinet and slipped her dagger blade into the door seam. Chalk Ears stopped crying and slunk from its hiding place, being careful to remain well out of reach. The witch worked her jambiya down to the latch, then twisted the blade against the jamb.

The door popped open with a loud bang and a puff of yellow smoke. Ruha cried out in shock and found herself sitting halfway across the room, hurled there more by her own surprise than the force of the blast. A scolding harangue erupted from inside the cabinet, and the image of a tall, willowy woman appeared in the air before the doors. She looked almost ancient, with coarse gray hair pulled into a tight bun and a deeply wrinkled

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face. Something seemed wrong with her eyes; one of them was almost closed, while the other bulged from its socket as though it might fall out. The woman wagged her finger at the floor and continued her diatribe, sending Chalk Ears yelping and skittering across the floor to take refuge behind Ruha. The illusion looked so real the stunned witch did not fully grasp that the trap had not been intended to frighten her until Lady Feng's familiar peered out from behind her and voiced a pitiful plea for food.

The voices of several astonished Shou guards cried out from the other side of the wall, at once puzzled and frightened. Wei Dao called something out, sounding more shocked and bewildered than the soldiers.

The illusion—no doubt an image of Lady Feng herself—continued to harangue the floor. Ruha gathered herself up, forcing herself to remain calm and consider her options. Hiding was out of the question, for the Shou would certainly investigate until they discovered the cause of all the strange noises. That left only escape, and, as far as the witch could see, there was only one possible route.

Finally, the illusion faded. Chalk Ears cautiously slunk toward the doors Ruha had pried open, where two large ceramic urns contained supplies of food and water that, apparently, the familiar had been unable to reach for several days. The guards, and then Wei Dao herself, called out. When they received no answer, the princess spoke again, this time in a more commanding tone.

Ruha went to the glass windows and looked out. She was on the second story of the palace, no more than thirty feet off the ground. The sentries lurking in the shrubbery around the opal path were all looking away from the mansion, toward the strange enclosure. When they heard the glass break, they would certainly turn toward the sound, so the witch would have to take care not to reveal herself by moving too fast.

Wei Dao spoke again, this time in Common. "I know it

is you, Witch! Come out now, or you go to Chamber of One Thousand Painful Deaths!"

Ruha had seen the room to which the princess referred. It was a dank, fetid place in the deepest of the palace's sub-basements, filled with all manor of chains, hooks, and grim instruments of agony.

Chalk Ears leapt up and grabbed the rim of a ceramic um. The whole thing toppled out of the cabinet and shattered, spilling a pool of stale water over the floor. Wei Dao hissed a command, and sword pommels began to hammer at the wall.

Summoning a wind spell to mind, Ruha grabbed the brazier off the worktable and hurled it through a window. She followed it an instant later, uttering the syllables of her incantation as she fell. A terrific gust of wind tore across the courtyard and rose up beneath her, catching her body in an airy bed as soft as a cloud. The witch somersaulted once to bring her feet beneath her, then settled to the ground as though stepping off a stairway.

The sentries in the shrubbery began to yell at each other in Shou. Several rose from their posts and started to run toward the mansion, drawing an angry shout from a young, moon-faced officer. The guards stopped where they were, but continued to stare toward the mansion, squinting and furrowing their brows as they tried to find the strange blur that had just come crashing out the window.

Ruha's stomach had tied itself into knots. The coward in her wanted to flee as quickly as possible, but that would be exactly what her hunters expected. Certainly, a messenger was already rushing to the barracks to call out the guard. Besides, the witch had not yet found Yanseldara's staff, and if the sentries would not leave their posts to investigate a breaking window, whatever they were protecting had to be important. Ruha turned toward the enclosure and, ever so slowly, began to creep down the opal path.

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* * * V -Sf.

Over the garden wall came the tintinnabulation of breaking glass. Prince Tang rose and scowled toward the palace, but the crest of the rampart rose just high enough to block the second-story windows—he himself had made

certain of that—and he could not see what had happened. No matter. Windowpanes cost as much as diamonds, but this morning he was working on the problem of the ants, and he had only a short time to solve it before his officious wife fetched him to meet with some new merchant.

Tang glanced at the gate, hanging slightly ajar, and wondered if he dared close it. He had repaired only a quarter of the damage to his garden, and every day he failed to restore the delicate balance meant more dead lizards. Still, he could not hazard shutting himself off from his guards. Minister Hsieh was well overdue, which meant the fresh ylang blossoms had not yet been pressed, which meant Cypress was likely to appear at any moment, spitting acid and demanding his oil.

It puzzled Tang that the dragon had not come already. It had been seven days since the last visit, far longer than Cypress had granted him to provide the oil, and still there had been no demands or threats. The prince was not anxious for the call, of course, but he was prepared. His guards—half new, half veterans of the dragon's first appearance—had been eating lasal leaves, a mind-numbing herb that defended against the effects of the Invisible Art. Unfortunately, it also caused tremors and disorientation, and as often as not left long-term users little better than zombies.

Trying to force all thoughts of Cypress from his mind, Tang knelt in the sand, turning back to the problem of the ants. On a slab of stone before him, four Thornback lizards were basking in the morning sun, warming their cold blood in preparation for the day's activities. They should have been plump and round of body, with blotchy,

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tan-colored hides indistinguishable from the sand of the desert quarter. Instead, they were no fatter than snakes and as white as alabaster, almost translucent at the tips of their stumpy tails. After Cypress's attack, all of the ants upon which the lizards preyed had mysteriously vanished from the garden, perhaps destroyed or driven away by the Invisible Art.

The prince opened one of the many small lacquered boxes he had brought into the park. A pair of red ants that had survived their capture tried to escape. He killed the fugitives and returned them to the container with their ten dead fellows, then sprinkled all twelve bodies onto the stone. The tongue of a single Thornback lashed out and caught one insect in midair, but it showed no interest in the others. The remaining lizards paid the offering no attention at all.

Tang sighed and reached for the fifteenth box. After several failed attempts to feed the lizards common household ants, he had ordered his servants to capture twelve of every kind of ant that lived within a mile of the Ginger Palace. He had not realized there were so many varieties, or that even Thornbacks could be so particular about the ones they ate.

Tang opened the box and found several large carpenter ants trying to chew their way to freedom. Deciding it would be necessary to punish his servants for their carelessness, he smashed the survivors and dumped the whole box onto the stone. These plumper insects seemed to interest the lizards more than the previous offerings, as they each snapped up one or two before they stopped eating.

The prince threw the lacquered box down in the sand. "You are foolish old men! Food need not taste good to save life!"

As one, the Thornbacks lifted their bodies off the rock. They puffed out their throats and bobbed their heads up and down in the universal challenge of lacertilians. At first, Tang thought his exhortation had angered them,

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but then he realized they were looking past him toward the Arch of Many-Hued Scales. The gates were closed and barred.

Ruha breathed a sigh of relief, then braced her hands against the timber crosspiece and tried to stop trembling. The trip down the path of opals had been as nerve-wracking as it had been long. When Wei Dao appeared in the mansion's broken window, the moon-faced officer had sent half his men down the path to see what was wrong. The witch had barely managed to creep off the trail before the sentries rushed past, and despite her caution, one of the men's eyes had briefly drifted in her direction.

After receiving instructions from the princess, the detail had spread out in all directions to begin searching for her. In the meantime, the young officer had assembled the rest of his men at the rainbow-colored bridge, and Ruha had been forced to creep past them less than a hand's breadth behind their backs. By the time she had passed beneath the enclosure's scaly gate, the first guards from the barracks were arriving to join the search for her. Though they had not seemed to realize she

was invisible, the witch felt certain that Wei Dao would surmise as much as soon as she emerged from the mansion to direct the search.

From behind Ruha came the metallic swish of a sword leaving its scabbard. She turned to see that the foolish Shou who was trying to feed dead ants to spiny sand iguanas had risen. The witch could not help gasping, and not because she feared the square-tipped sword he now held in his hands.

It was the man from her vision on the raft. He had the same upturned nose, smooth complexion, and silky black hair, but it was his eyes that convinced her. They were deep and dark, at once confident and self-absorbed. His

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jaw was set but not tense, and the stance he had adopted suggested that he was no stranger to holding a sword. Ruha realized at once that her first evaluation, made from a hasty glance at the fellow's back, had been mistaken; this was no simple gardener.

The man studied the gates for a moment, then glanced at his lizards and opened his mouth to call his guards.

"Please, there is no need to call for help." Ruha spoke softly and started across the courtyard, moving quickly enough so that he would see her as a shimmering column of air. "I mean you no harm."

An expression of relief crossed the Shou's face. He started to lower his sword, then glanced at the barred gate and raised it again.

"Do not think of crying out," Ruha warned. She had reached the edge of the courtyard, where the stones gave way to sand. "I have no wish to harm you. Perhaps I can even be of service, if you wish to know why the spiny iguanas will not eat your ants."

"Come no closer." The Shou pointed his sword more or less in Ruha's direction, holding it with both hands so there would be no question of disarming him with a quick strike. "Deliver your message and go."

Ruha stopped at the base of a miniature sand dune. "What of the iguanas?"

"I take care of Thornbacks myself." The man's eyes turned cold and angry, as though he blamed his unseen visitor for the condition of his lizards. "Your message?"

"Why do you think I have come to deliver a message?"

The Shou's jaw dropped, and the anger in his eyes changed to puzzlement. "Perhaps you show yourself, wu-jen." The man took the precaution of retreating a step, then lowered his sword. "And I do not call guards."

Ruha hesitated to do as he asked. Having seen him in a mirage from the future, she was determined not to leave the park without learning more about him, but her curiosity did not translate into trust. Once she showed herself, she would be at the mercy of his sword—a

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weapon that, from all appearances, he was quite capable of handling.

As if sensing her thoughts, the Shou retrieved a scabbard from the ground and sheathed his weapon. "Show yourself, wu-jen, or I draw sword and call guards."

"As you wish."

Ruha raised her hand as though to strike, and her spell evaporated in a curtain of shimmering air. The Shou's gaze ran up her the entire length of the witch's aba, over her orange silk veil, then lingered on her dark eyes. Slowly, his expression changed from wary to pleased to covetous, leaving Ruha uncertain as to whether she was meeting an unexpected friend or an incorrigible lecher.

"Who—who are you?" The Shou paused a moment, then continued to gaze into her eyes as he asked the second part of his question, "And who sends you to spy on Ginger Palace—Vaerana Hawklyn?"

Though Ruha was startled by the man's deduction, she tried not to let it show. She walked toward the Thornbacks' basking stone, being careful to hold her hands in plain sight. Then, recalling how he had originally mistaken her for a messenger and remembering how his face had changed to that of a dragon in her vision, she decided to answer his question with a deduction of her own.

"I was not sent by Cypress, if that is what you fear."

The Shou allowed a gracious smile to cross his lips, then prudently stepped away from the basking stone. "We play at same game." The Thornbacks followed his lead, clambering over the side to bury themselves beneath the sand. "But who is Cypress?"

Ruha locked gazes with the Shou. "He is the dragon, of course—the one I saw you with."

"You are ... mistaken." The Shou looked away, and, for the first time, seemed in danger of losing his composure. "What you claim is impossible."

Ruha glanced at the throng of dead ants lying upon the basking stone, then shook her head. "You have

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watched, but you have not considered."

She grabbed several lacquered boxes and leaned over the basking stone, then began emptying the contents onto the sand. A cascade of ants of all sizes and three different colors—red, black, and brown—poured onto the sand. Close to a dozen of the insects bounced up on their six legs and began to scurry away. The lizards came instantly alive, scrambling from their hiding places to devour the fugitives in a flurry of whipping heads and darting tongues.

"Ants must be alive!" the Shou gasped, looking back to Ruha. "But why?"

"You have never lived in the desert, or you would know. Small creatures like lizards often pass their entire lives without seeing water," Ruha explained. "They must take their fluids from their prey—but only from living prey. Dead bodies dry out swiftly in hot temperatures, and water is too precious to waste digesting parched carcasses."

The Shou watched his lizards catch the last of the moving ants, then he opened another box and dumped the contents onto the sand. Again, the lizards gobbled up the live insects and left the dead ones undisturbed.

Across the little courtyard came the clatter of someone trying to open the barred gates. When the portals did not swing apart, Wei Dao's muted voice rolled over the wall, speaking excitedly in Shou.

Ruha's hand dropped toward her jambiya, but the Shou raised his hand to reassure her.

"Yes, the wu-jen is here with me." He spoke in Common, so Ruha could understand him. "Not to worry. I am safe."

There was a confused murmur outside the gates, then all fell silent beneath the Arch of Many-Hued Scales. The Shou, whom the witch now felt certain to be Prince Tang, turned back to Ruha.

"They do not disturb us. Please to accept my gratitude

for saving of Thornbacks." Though the prince's tone was

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warm, he did not meet Ruha's eyes as he spoke. "But I do not understand how feeding habits of lizards concern this dragon Cypress."

"Is it not true that Lady Feng's kidnappers need her alive, just as the Thornbacks need the ants alive?" asked Ruha, implying that she knew for a fact what she was only guessing at. "What will they do once she has finished enslaving Yanseldara's spirit for them?"

Tang looked up, his eyes both betraying his astonishment and veiling something more. "You are accomplished wu-jen." The prince spread his palms and smiled warmly. "Household of Ginger Palace has need for someone like you."

Ruha scowled, taken aback by the directness of the prince's approach. "We both know I am here on behalf of someone else."

Tang shook his head emphatically. "Oh, no! I do not speak of hiring. I mean to make you Virtuous Concubine."

"Concubine!" Ruha cried, both stunned and affronted by the offer.

Tang stumbled an uncertain step backward. A concerned murmur began to build outside the gate; then the prince squared his shoulders and stepped back to the basking stone.

"You do not understand, wu-jen." Now he was speaking between clenched teeth. "Virtuous Concubine is honored position in house of Shou prince. Lady Feng is Third Virtuous Concubine, and you become Worthy Daughter to Third Virtuous Concubine to Emperor of Shou Lung. It is position more worthy than queen of any realm in Heartlands!"

Ruha began to feel a little embarrassed by her outburst, though she still found it strange that any man would propose such a thing without first making inquiries about her family. "Prince Tang, what you offer is clear enough. Still, I must decline."

Tang looked as though she had punched him in the

stomach. "You—you refuse me? A prince of Shou Lung?"

A muted thump reverberated across the courtyard;

then the top rungs of a ladder appeared above the gates. Ruha was not overly concerned. Tang had tacitly admitted that his mother had been kidnapped by the Cult of the Dragon, and in her mind at least, that made them allies, not enemies.

"I am sorry, Prince," Ruha said. "I cannot become your concubine. My other obligations would interfere."

Tang considered Ruha as though he did not understand the language she was speaking. The covetous expression she had glimpsed earlier once again filled his eyes, this time stronger than ever.

"I give you your weight in gold each year," Tang promised. "And I build you private palace!"

Behind Ruha, a familiar voice made a harsh demand in Shou. The witch looked across the courtyard and was astonished to see Wei Dao herself clambering through the narrow space between the gate tops and the archway. The princess was dressed in a simple black tunic and trousers uniform, with a row of slender daggers hanging from a black sash tied around her waist.

"Ginger Palace needs good wu-jen." Though Tang spoke in Common, his comment was directed toward his wife.

"But not Ruha," Wei Dao countered, also speaking in Common. She lowered her toes onto the crossbar, then nimbly jumped to the ground. "She sneaks into Lady Feng's private chambers—and breaks window when she tries to escape."

Ruha turned her back on Wei Dao and faced Tang. "Prince, it is not necessary that I become your concubine to serve the Ginger Palace."

The witch heard Wei Dao's light footsteps coming across the courtyard and realized the princess had not bothered to unbar the gate for the guards. Happy to see that her hosts did not consider her a threat to their safety, she continued to face Tang.

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"Prince Tang, we all wish to see your mother delivered from the hands of her captors. Does that not make us friends?"

"No!" Tang snapped, with surprising vigor in his voice. His eyes briefly flickered past Ruha's shoulder and returned. "I serve the Emperor of Shou Lung, and you serve ... a lesser master."

"But we all oppose the Cult of the Dragon." Though she was aware that Wei Dao had stopped a short distance behind her, Ruha kept her attention fixed on Prince Tang, determined to win his friendship without becoming a Virtuous Concubine. "In the desert, we have a saying:

the enemy of my enemy is my friend."

Tang's eyes flashed in anger; then he slipped around the basking stone so swiftly that Ruha barely had time to turn around before he was standing between her and the gates. The witch found herself looking over his shoulder at Wei Dao, who was standing ten paces away with one of her slender daggers cocked to throw.

"I say no," Tang said, speaking to his wife. "Put wasp knife away."

Wei Dao did not lower the weapon. "Foolish Husband, you turn back on spy! Why do you place yourself in danger? What is wrong with you?"

"What is wrong with .you?" Tang countered. "Do you defy command of Imperial Shou Prince?"

Wei Dao's eyes flared in surprise and hurt. She looked past Tang's shoulder and shot Ruha a look as deadly as her wasp knife, then reluctantly lowered both her weapon and her gaze.

"I do not mean to disobey Exalted Prince." The Princess bowed deeply to her husband. "I think only of your safety"

Ruha felt herself take a deep breath; then she slipped from behind Prince Tang and executed a bow of her own, to Wei Dao. "You have nothing to fear from me. Radiant Princess. I come as a friend to Lady Feng and the Ginger Palace, nothing more."

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Wei Dao's lips curled into a sneer. "Yes, spy always comes as friend. But do not think me stupid, Witch. You care nothing for our troubles, and I watch to make certain you do not harm Beloved Husband."

Recognizing that it was impossible to make peace with Wei Dao, Ruha turned to the prince. "I thank you for

sparing my life, Wise Prince. I assure you, I will repay the favor with friendship."

"It is not friendship I desire," Tang replied. Deftly, he reached down and pulled Ruha's jambiya from its scabbard, moving so swiftly and smoothly that she did not realize what he was doing until he held the weapon in his hand. "In Ginger Palace, you serve me, or you serve no

one."

Eight

^ Gagged with her own silken veil
k^ and forced to kneel upon the brick
^^ floor with her wrists bound behind
her back to her ankles, Ruha glared at
her captors. Tang and Wei Dao stood
at the far end of a long lime-washed
vault, mincing blossoms and filling
the air with a tangy perfume as sweet
as cassia. Though clean and tidy enough, the chamber
was crammed with all manner of vats, ovens, and other
spice-refining apparatus.

Tang and Wei Dao set their knives aside, then gathered up the minced blossoms and carried them to a large screw press in the corner. As soon as their backs were turned, the witch fixed her gaze upon a flickering oil lamp near the door and slipped her gag as the Harpers had taught her, by retracting her lower jaw until she could use her tongue to push it over her lip onto her chin. Beneath her breath, she uttered the incantation of a simple sun spell.

The flame coiled around itself, then leapt off the wick and pirouetted to the floor. Ruha tried to point toward a huge ceramic cask sitting in the corner but, with her hands tied behind her back, she failed miserably. The fire danced across the bricks toward a gleaming copper vat, which caught its light and sent a reddish glint skipping across the ceiling.

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Wei Dao's head cocked slightly.

Ruha bent her finger sharply, directing the flicker toward a black iron caldron. She barely managed to guide the flame behind the pot's sheltering bulk before Wei Dao turned to scan the ceiling. The witch tongued her gag back into place and waited until her captor's scrutiny fell on her, then glowered at the princess with a

frown that she hoped would look as helpless as it did
hateful.

Wei Dao smirked at the witch, then allowed her gaze to roam across the room until it came to the unlit lamp. If she noticed the faint wisps of smoke still rising from the nameless wick, she paid them no attention. The concern vanished from her face, and she turned back to Prince Tang.

"Thiss . . . dangerous, my husssband." Wei Dao spoke in Shou, unaware that a wind spell was carrying her voice to Ruha in the Bedine language. Unfortunately, the magic did not work well in the still air of the vault; the words were so breathy and soft that the witch sometimes missed them. "We ssshould... her and be done with it!"

"She ssserve us better alive." Tang turned the press screw, then glanced at Ruha and allowed his gaze to linger on her naked face for an indecent time, at least by Bedine standards. "We have need o/wu-jen."

". . . much trussst in love potion!" Wei Dao pointed a dagger-sharp fingernail at her husband. "Witch use love magic on you, wise husssband."

Prince Tang shrugged. "It doesss not matter, as long as she love me more. We need wu-jen, and Ruha is wu-jen."

Wei Dao's face grew crimson and stormy. The princess was no fool and believed Tang no more than Ruha did;

the prince needed the witch's magic, but he coveted her womanhood.

"How witch love you more?" Wei Dao demanded. "You sssayyang ... not potent."

"Potent enough for now. When fresssh blossoms arrive, I make better potion."

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Ruha pointed her finger toward the wall behind her. The wayward flame danced from its hiding place and began to skip across the floor.

"You are bad ssson! You risssk mother for—for—" Wei Dao's sentence sputtered to a halt, and she flung her arm in Ruha's direction. "You risssk mother's life for barbarian concubine!"

There was that word again, concubine. Ruha ground

her teeth into her gag, biting down until her jaws ached. She did not leave the golden sands of Anauroch to become a prince's bauble; if the Shou thought differently, she would show them barbarian.

"Not for concubine, for wu-jen." Tang's head started to turn in Ruha's direction, and she barely managed to guide her dancing flame beneath a brazier before his lecherous gaze fell on her face again. "And risk is mosssst sssmall."

Wei Dao shook her head violently. "Already ... over the wall!"

Whatever the princess said to the prince, it drew his attention away from Ruha. The witch gestured with her finger, and the lamp flame darted from its hiding place.

"What you think he tell . . . Hawklyn?" Wei Dao demanded. "What you think witch say ifssshe essscape, too?"

Ruha forgot about her dancing flame. Fowler had escaped! She doubted the half-ore could report anything useful to Vaerana, but at least the witch would not have to add his death to her already overburdened conscience. She circled her finger, guiding the lamp flame, which had curled toward her captors, back toward her.

Prince Tang scowled at his wife. "Why do you not tell me sssooner?"

"You at work in lizard park, leaving me to chase ssspies!" Wei Dao countered. "Perhapsss wise prince ssshould..."

Whatever the princess said, it angered her husband greatly. Tang raised his fist; then, when Wei Dao did not

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flinch, he turned away and swept a shelf clean of several porcelain jars. They shattered on the floor, releasing a cloud of fine, multihued powders. The prince let his chin drop and stared into the billowing dusts, his eyes focused someplace far beneath the bricks.

The lamp flame reached Ruha's side. She beckoned it around behind her, scorching her insteps as she guided it between her sandaled feet. Soon, the witch felt a tongue of fire licking at her fingers; then she caught a whiff of burning hemp. She began to move the flame back and forth, never allowing it to rest beneath her bindings for more than a second at a time. The syrupy perfume of minced ylang blossoms still hung in the air, but not so heavily that she dared let the acrid fumes of a rope fire

spread through the chamber.

When Prince Tang finally raised his head, he had regained the characteristic composure of the Shou. "What can half-man tell Vaerana Hawklyn?"

Wei Dao lowered her eyes. "J(iss impossible to sssay. Guards do not sssee him leave Cinnamon House during night, but neither do they sssee witch go—and we find her in apartment of Lady Feng."

"Then we assume most wretched prossspect." The prince took a copper beaker from a shelf and held it beneath the drainage spout of the oil press, then opened the valve. The sound of trickling fluid echoed through the vault, and the tangy smell of the ylang blossoms grew overwhelming in its cloying sweetness. "Perhapsss half-man report mother's abduction, but that iss crime of Cypress, not Ginger Palace."

"Vaerana Hawklyn . . . woman," Wei Dao observed. "She know we do anything to ranssom mother!"

"But she doesss not realize we must." Tang did not look up as he spoke. "It is no sssecret that Lady Feng hasss won favor of Yen-Wang-Yeh. Ssso, when Vaerana Hawklyn hear of worthy mother's abduction, what doesss she think?"

Wei Dao furrowed her carefully plucked eyebrows.

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"That Cypress needsss Venerable Scholar of Eighteen Hells to sssteal spirit of Yanseldara, ofcourssse."

Ruha nearly howled as the lamp flame scorched her knuckles, for she had been listening so intently to her captors' conversation that she had neglected the tiny fire. Having deduced already that Lady Feng had been abducted for the purpose of stealing Yanseldara's spirit, the witch found it less surprising that the Shou would cooperate with the kidnapers than that they seemed to think Cypress remained in good health. She moved the lamp flame a safe distance behind her and resumed eavesdropping.

". . . more." Prince Tang closed the drain valve and carried his copper beaker to a marble-topped table. "Vaerana Hawklyn hasss no reason to think Cypress requires more from usss to complete ssspell."

A sly smile crept across Wei Dao's painted lips. "Ssso she is looking wrong way at aussspicious time. Perhaps it

is good. . . escaped, wise husband." The princess cast a spiteful glare in Ruha's direction. "Now only witch threaten safe return of worthy mother."

"That soon change." Tang removed the stopper from a small earthenware flask and poured the contents into his copper beaker, then pricked his finger with a needle. He dribbled several drops of blood into the mixture. "When she drinks this, her only wish is to obey me."

Feeling herself flush with outrage at the prince's plan, Ruha took several deep breaths. Her best chance to learn more about the theft of Yanseldara's spirit lay in exploiting Tang's base cravings, and the witch knew such a plan would fail if anger showed in her face. She tried to calm herself by thinking of the Alam'ra Wall, a beautiful oasis where the sweet waters poured from a cliff of white stone. At the same time, she beckoned the lamp flame closer and resumed the burning of her ropes. One way or another, she would need her hands free. Whether she succeeded in manipulating the prince or not, she had no intention of allowing him to pour his potion down her

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throat. Besides, Ruha knew better than to think the princess would stand idly by while she tried to win Tang's confidence. The witch had seen the antagonism between her father's wives often enough to know that Wei Dao was jealous of her position and would do whatever was necessary to keep her husband from taking a consort.

Prince Tang stirred his concoction with a long glass rod, then poured it into a pewter chalice. He motioned to Wei Dao and started toward Ruha.

"Do not frighten wu-jen," he said. "For best effect, she must drink potion of her own accord."

The witch tested her bonds, found they still held, and lowered the knot into the lamp flame. Even she could not smell the hemp being scorched, so thickly did the cloying reek of ylang oil hang in the chamber. She continued to strain at the rope until her captors were almost upon her. Then, fearing they would notice a wisp of smoke or a flickering reflection behind her, she beckoned the fire into her hands and smothered it between her palms.

Tang and Wei Dao arrived with the love potion. The prince knelt on the floor before Ruha and pulled her gag over her chin. His wife stood behind him, with one hand close to the wasp knives hanging from her black waist sash.

"If you still have no wish to become my concubine,

drink this," Tang said in Common. He held his chalice to Ruha's mouth. "It makes you forget what you see in Ginger Palace, so we can release you without fear."

Gently working her wrists back and forth against her seared bindings, Ruha stared down her nose at the oily pink concoction. It looked about as appetizing as camel's blood, and its syrupy sweetness was twice as nauseating. The witch could hardly bear to sniff the stuff, much less drink it.

"I have no wish to forget what I have seen in the Ginger Palace."

"Then you do not leave."

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"Be that as it may, I still will not become your concubine." Ruha raised her chin. "Such a thing would not be fitting. I am a sheikh's daughter."

Tang's eyes shined with a hopeful gleam and, mercifully, he lowered the chalice. "What do you mean?"

"In Anauroch, a man may take as many wives as his camels can feed." A muffled grinding sounded between Wei Dao's clenched teeth, but Ruha ignored the noise and looked deeply into Tang's eyes. "I suppose a Shou prince can feed as many wives as he wishes."

"Her insolence is beyond forbearance!" Wei Dao pulled a knife from her sash. "I slay this savage!"

With a movement so swift that Ruha saw only a blur, Tang's hand lashed out and caught his wife's wrist. In Shou, he said, "It is for me to decide what is insolence."

"You cannot take barbarian for wife." Wei Dao protested. "Emperor never invite us to return."

The prince shrugged, then pushed Wei Dao's hand toward her sash. "We need wu-jen if we are ever to be safe from Cypress." He turned back to Ruha. "Please to pardon princess. She is only wife for many years and cannot help being spoiled."

Ruha continued to work at her bonds and graced the princess with a benevolent smile. "After she grows accustomed to the new arrangement, I am certain we will become great friends."

Wei Dao's only response was to thrust her dagger into

its sheath, but Tang accepted Ruha's reply with an equally gracious nod. "Of course that is possible, but what of obligations you speak of earlier? If they interfere with being concubine, how do they not interfere with becoming wife?"

"If you are willing to marry me, then you must also be willing to make one accommodation," Ruha replied.

"I tell you this no good!" Wei Dao scoffed. "If you value mother's life and honor of Ginger Palace, you let me kill her now."

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Ruha cast an impatient glance at Wei Dao. "I suspect our discussion would proceed more smoothly if we were alone. Prince Tang." She felt something slip in the knot behind her, but her hands did not come free. "Perhaps you could ask the princess to excuse us?"
"Do not be fool. Witch casts spell on you."
Prince Tang looked at his wife out of the corner of his eye. "It is better to have princess here—as long as she behaves courteously. Otherwise, perhaps I do as you suggest, wu-jen." He returned his gaze to Ruha. "Now, tell me of this accommodation you desire."

"I have every desire to see Lady Feng released, but not at Yanseldara's expense," Ruha replied. "If you will stand with Vaerana Hawklyn against the Cult of the Dragon, becoming your wife would not interfere with my obligations."

"What do I tell you, wise husband? Witch never be good wife." Then, in Shou, the princess added, "Ssshe baits you like witless bear."

Tang scowled, but again raised the silver chalice to Ruha's lips. "Perhaps you should drink, wu-jen. What you ask is impossible."

Ruha gagged and pulled away from the potion's mawkish smell. "Why? If it is Cypress you fear, there is no need. He is dead. I destroyed him myself."

Wei Dao snorted, and the prince raised his brow—but he did not lower the goblet. "Perhaps you do destroy Cypress, but if you think that means there is no reason to fear him, you know nothing."

"Then tell me." At last, the rope came apart. Ruha stifled a gasp of surprise and barely kept her wrists from drifting apart to betray her escape. "If I understand, maybe I can help."

"You are not that powerful, Witch," said Wei Dao.

Tang was not so quick to denounce Ruha's abilities. He regarded the witch thoughtfully, then said, "You cannot help, but perhaps you think differently about defying the Cult of the Dragon."

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"I could." The thought was not entirely outside the realm of possibility.

The prince glanced down at his pink concoction. "But if you still do not change mind, you drink potion?"

"So I will forget what you tell me?" Ruha asked, pretending she did not know the potion's true purpose. Her ankles were still bound together, and she needed more time to break the scorched rope. "Are you trying to keep the cult's secrets?"

From the way Wei Dao's eyes flashed and Tang's complexion darkened, the witch knew she had hit on a subject worth probing.

"Why should you protect the cult?" Even as Ruha asked the question, the answer came to her. "Are you in it?"

Again, Wei Dao pulled a dagger, but Tang shook his head to stop her from attacking. He looked away from Ruha and fixed his gaze on the chamber door, his expression equal parts shame and relief.

"I join when we come here." The prince's voice was hardly a whisper. "In Shou Lung, dragons are magnanimous and most honorable. How do I know they are different in Elversult?"

"Then what happened?" Ruha found herself feeling almost sorry for the hapless prince. "Did you try to quit?"

Tang slowly brought his gaze back to Ruha. "If I answer, you must drink potion."

Ruha nearly choked on her anger, but she forced herself to give him a beguiling smile. "Of course, assuming you do not convince me to stay."

"That is most wonderful possibility." The prince looked away, and again his voice grew low and ashamed. "Cypress does not allow me to leave cult. He says even prince cannot break promise to dragon. He sinks all my ships until I promise to smuggle poisons for his murderers and spell ingredients for his wu-jens. The trade is most lucrative, but I cannot sleep."

Ruha cringed to think of what would trouble Tang's

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conscience. "But why would he attack one of your ships now? You are still doing as he demands?"

Tang's head spun back to Ruha. "He attacks one of my ships?"

"Yes, the Ginger Lady."

The prince's face paled to the color of ivory, but it was Wei Dao who demanded, "How do you know this?"

"Because that is when I destroyed him." Ruha's fingers finally managed to undo the rope around her ankles, but the witch made no move to escape. "He did not sink the ship—it did not appear that he was trying—but if you are still smuggling poisons for the cult, I do not understand why he attacked it at all."

The prince turned to his wife. "He wissshes to kill

Hsieh.t"

The princess promptly shook her head. "Cypress grows impatient. It iss only warning."

"What good is warning we do not hear about?" Tang countered. "He fearsss Hsieh comes to sstop smuggling."

"How can Cypress know essteemed mandarin is on Ginger Lady? Even we do not know until lassst week."

Tang considered Wei Dao's point for a moment; then the color came back to his face. He returned his attention to Ruha.

"I tell you about Cult of the Dragon." He lifted the chalice to her mouth. "Now you drink."

Ruha turned away from the awful smell. "You have not told me why you still fear the cult, when you know I have already destroyed Cypress."

"Perhaps I do not believe you have." Tang swung the cup around to her lips. "Drink."

This time, Ruha did not turn away. It seemed reasonable for Tang to assume she might lie about destroying Cypress, but she still had not discovered what the cult needed to complete the theft of Yanseldara's spirit. She held her breath and, very briefly, touched her lips to the cup rim—then pulled away and looked into the prince's

eyes.

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"Before drinking, I must be certain there is no hope of resolving our differences. Allow me one more question."

Tang groaned and lowered the awful-smelling potion
"Ask."

"What more—"

Ruha's question was interrupted by the muffled barking of a Shou voice outside the vault; then the steel door swung open. Into the chamber swept four men wearing long, yellow hauberks of silk-jacketed scale armor. Emblazoned on each of their chests was a scarlet wyvern, the personal crest of the Mandarin Hsieh Han Liu.

Upon seeing the crest, both Tang and Wei Dao gasped. The prince barely managed to stand by the time the minister's assistant, the obsequious Yu Po, strode into the room. He stopped just inside the door and, still flanked by Hsieh's guards, regarded Ruha's captors with a disdainful sneer.

Yu Po tipped his body forward in a discourteously shallow bow. "I am Yu Po, Consssummate Scribe to Essteemed Mandarin Hsieh Han Liu."

The intrusion shocked Ruha as much as it did Tang and Wei Dao. The refinery vault was hidden in a secret basement beneath the palace's great spicehouse. Even had she anticipated Hsieh's arrival so early in the day, she would no more have expected Yu Po to search out and intrude upon the prince and princess here than in their private apartments.

"Welcome to Ginger Palace," said Tang, still holding the ylang potion. Both he and his wife returned the scribe's bow with surprising deference. "We expect Minister Hsieh's arrival for many daysss now."

"We encounter many delay sss," Yu Po returned coldly.

"Pleassse excuse us," said Wei Dao. "We join esteemed Mandarin in Hall of Amity, but firsst we must dispose of intruding thief."

Wei Dao waved a hand in Ruha's direction and drew an angry glare from Prince Tang, who would no doubt now find it most awkward to present the witch to anyone

in Hsieh's party as either wife or concubine. Not knowing what else to do, Ruha remained on her knees and pretended she was still bound. If escape had looked barely feasible before, when she had to contend only with the lightning fast reflexes of Tang and Wei Dao, it now seemed impossible.

Yu Po studied Ruha for a few moments; then, in Common, he said, "It is difficult to say what Lady Ruha is, but it seems most unlikely she is thief."

"You know her?" Wei Dao gasped.

In the same instant, Prince Tang whirled on Ruha. "Lady Ruha?" he demanded, looking hurt. "You do not tell me you are lady! Is it custom where you come from to be one man's concubine and become another's wife?"

Yu Po arched his thin eyebrows. "First she is thief, then she is wife?" He chuckled, then said, "So sorry, but wedding must wait." The adjutant motioned a pair of guards toward Ruha.

Both Tang and Wei Dao paled and quickly stepped in front of the witch. "She is guest of Ginger Palace," Tang declared. "You may not take her without my permission."

Yu Po's eyes grew as black as obsidian. "Then you come outside and explain this to Minister Hsieh," the adjutant growled. "After treatment Esteemed Mandarin receives from barbarians, he is most happy to hear that you defy him, I am sure."

Tang glanced at his wife, then asked, "What barbarians?"

Yu Po's face darkened. "Vaerana Hawklyn and her company of knaves!" He was sounding more angry all the time. "First they dare to surround Emperor's caravan and search wagons for what they call 'contraband'—Esteemed Mandarin is most interested to learn why Ministry of Spices does not know of trade in oleander leaves and puffer fish venom—and now they insult Emperor by holding Minister Hsieh hostage!"

"Hostage?" Tang gasped.

Yu Po nodded. "As we approach Ginger Palace, Lady

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Ruha's half-man rushes down road and claims to Vaerana Hawklyn that you abduct his mistress. Minister Hsieh

promises her release, but savage woman refuses his gracious offer and declares she does not release Emperor's caravan until witch is free."

Ruha cursed Vaerana for a meddling interloper. The Lady Constable had just destroyed any hope that remained of discovering what the cult needed to complete the theft of Yanseldara's spirit.

Yu Po glanced at Ruha's kneeling form, then leveled a stern gaze at Tang. "Do you still wish to keep 'guest' locked inside Ginger Palace?"

"No." The prince kneeled before Ruha and held the silver chalice to her lips. "She is free to leave as soon as she drinks potion."

Ruha grimaced at the reek of the syrupy elixir. She took her hands from behind her back and roughly pushed the cup away, then rose to her feet. "I have no wish to drink that rancid stuff."

The jaws of both Tang and Wei Dao fell when they saw the seared bonds hanging from her ankles and wrists. The prince managed to recover his wits quickly enough to grab her arm and thrust the potion toward her face. "You break promise!"

"I said I would drink a potion of forgetfulness," Ruha snapped. "That is a love potion, and I assure you that without fresh ylang blossoms, it could not possibly be strong enough."

With that, the witch brushed past her astonished captors. She snatched her jambiya off a table, then stepped into the protection of Yu Po and his guards. "Will you please take me out of here?"

The adjutant waved her through the door. They climbed a set of stone stairs and exited the spicehouse via a secret door. With two guards leading the way and two following behind, the young Shou escorted Ruha past the enclosure where Tang kept his pet lizards, through a wicket door in the bulwark that separated the rear

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grounds from those in front, and straight toward the main gates. As they walked, Yu Po said nothing and stared straight ahead, pretending not to see the many puzzled residents of the Ginger Palace who had gathered

to watch them leave.

By the time they passed through the gateway, Ruha had untied her veil and fastened it back into place over her face. She found Vaerana and Fowler, now dressed in his customary trousers and tunic, waiting for her on the portico. The Lady Constable glowered at Ruha, then took her by the arm and hustled her down the stairs toward the white-bricked avenue, where a long line of driverless wagons stood drawn up alongside the ginkgo forest. Minister Hsieh and the caravan drivers were huddled together on the opposite side of the road, surrounded by a circle of mounted Maces.

As soon as their feet touched the white bricks, Vaerana released Ruha and glared down at Yu Po—she was a full head taller than most of the Shou. "Wait here. I'll send Minister Hsieh along when I'm sure the witch is

unharmd."

"That is not our agreement."

"All right—I'll let the mandarin go when I'm good and ready," Vaerana growled. "If you don't like that, go back and fetch your little prince. I'll trade Hsieh for him anytime."

Yu Po's nostrils flared ever so slightly, but he bowed and did his best to conceal his outrage.

The Lady Constable led the way a short distance down the white-bricked avenue, and then, a dozen paces before they reached Tombor and the horses, suddenly stopped. She grabbed Ruha's arm and, unable to control her anger another moment, dragged the witch off the road. With Fowler following close behind, the two women slipped between two driverless wagons and walked twenty paces into the forest, where the fan-leafed ginkgo trees were so thick that it would be impossible for anyone on the road—Shou or otherwise—to see or hear what passed

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between them.

"This is worse than Voonlar!" Vaerana hissed. "Couldn't you spend even one night without getting caught? I almost didn't make it back in time to save you."

"I did not need to be saved!" Arguing with the Lady Constable would do little to improve her standing with the Harpers, but she was as angry as Vaerana—and with better reason. "Yu Po could not have arrived at a worse time."

"I suppose Prince Tang was going to hand the staff over?" Vaerana tugged derisively at the heavy cloth of Ruha's aba. "And what's this? Is this what you think a Sembite spice trader looks like?"

"I know less about Sembite spice traders than you do about good manners," Ruha shot back. "It was better to pose as someone I could impersonate."

Vaerana narrowed her eyes and moved forward until she was standing chin-to-chin with the witch. "We found out in Voonlar what happens when you think. You should've done what I said."

Fowler slipped an arm between Vaerana and Ruha. "If she'd done what you wanted, we'd still be sitting in the courtyard with that back-stabbing dwarf Tombor claimed was a guide." The captain pushed the women apart, then interposed himself between them. "It was only the Lady Witch's disguise and her quick thinking that got us invited to stay the night at all."

Vaerana's eyes widened at the rebuke. Her cheeks turned crimson and she dropped her eyes in embarrassment. "I shouldn't be sharpening my blade on you, Witch. Whatever happened, your life was the one at risk." She backed away and said, "Why don't you tell us what happened?"

Ruha glanced at Fowler. "I do not know how much the captain could tell you—"

"Not much," Fowler interjected. "I waited all night for you to come back and started to worry when you didn't return before dawn. Then the Shou went crazy, running

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all over swinging their boarding pikes around like they were trying to cut up the air, and I knew they had to be looking for you. I cut a hole through the roof of the guest house, then climbed over the wall and ran for the trees. Sorry I didn't stay, but I wasn't going to be much help."

"You made the right choice," Ruha replied. "And matters did not go so badly."

Vaerana's eyes lit up. "Then you know where the staff is?"

Ruha shook her head. "I am sorry. But I do know it is

not inside the Ginger Palace."

A dark curtain descended over Vaerana's face. "Not inside? But it's Shou magic stealing Yanseldara's spirit—

my sages are sure of it!"

"Yes, and Prince Tang's mother is casting the spell, as you suspected," Ruha said. "But Lady Feng has been abducted."

"Someone stole her?" Fowler's tone was incredulous.

"From the Ginger Palace?"

Ruha nodded, then described all that she had discovered, from Lady Feng's starving familiar to Prince Tang's unwitting enrollment in the Cult of the Dragon.

Vaerana listened rather impatiently until the witch finished, then regarded her with a thoughtful expression. "It looks like I owe you an apology—if you're sure of this."

"Of everything I have described, yes," Ruha replied. "But I do not understand why the cult is going to all this trouble to steal Yanseldara's spirit. Wouldn't it have been simpler for them just to kill her?"

Vaerana made a half-nod. "Sure, but then they wouldn't rule Elversult. If they control Yanseldara, they control the city."

Though not entirely satisfied with Vaerana's explanation, Ruha lacked a better one and saw no use in jeopardizing their developing truce by contradicting the Lady

Constable.

"Assuming you are correct, the cult may be further from its goal than we think," Ruha said. "To complete the

"What?" Vaerana demanded, once again sounding impatient and pushy. "If we deny them, can we stop Yanseldara from getting any sicker?"

"I could not learn the answer to either of your questions." Ruha looked away from Vaerana's disappointed face, restraining the urge to add that the Lady Constable's 'rescue' had ruined her chances of discovering more. "The cult could need anything: an instrument from Lady Feng's apartment, ingredients from the palace's warehouse, perhaps something from Yanseldara's home."

"No, nothing from Moonstorm House," Vaerana objected. "They wouldn't have one chance in ten thousand of getting anything from there."

"How do you suppose they got her staff?" asked Fowler.

Vaerana shot the half-ore a murderous glare, then turned back to Ruha without answering his question. "Your mission wasn't a total loss, Witch," she said, trying to be magnanimous and failing miserably. "At least you gave me some idea of what I'll need to ask."

"Ask?" Fowler grunted. "If you're thinking what I'm thinking you are, I want my gold now."

Vaerana frowned at the half-ore. "I can't pay out of Elversult's treasury. You'll get your gold after we take the palace."

"You intend to storm the Ginger Palace?" Ruha gasped.

"Can you think of a better way to get my hands on Tang?"

Ruha shook her head. "No, but I doubt interrogating him will do you any good. The prince is too afraid of Cypress. He refuses to believe I destroyed the dragon."

"Well, you did," Vaerana growled. "Hsieh will tell him that!"

"Somehow, I do not think it will matter." Ruha thought for a moment, trying to recall Tang's exact words when she told him she had destroyed the dragon. "He said 'Perhaps you do destroy Cypress, but if you think that means

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there is no reason to fear him, you know nothing.' I thought he was referring to the Cult of the Dragon, but

now that I reconsider . . ."

"Something strange is happening," Vaerana agreed. "I've heard reports that the cult's paying good gold to fishermen for tiny pieces of that dragon you killed."

"That'll hardly drain their treasure boxes," Fowler observed. "The sharks got most of the carcass."

Vaerana nodded. "For nearly a tenday now, the cult's been shipping wagon-loads of shark out of Pros, but none of it ever shows up in Elversult."

"Where could it be going?" Ruha asked.

Vaerana shrugged. "With all that's going on, I didn't think it was worth the trouble of tracking down. Maybe I

was wrong."

"That'd be a good idea," Fowler said. "Cypress might not be as gone as we thought."

Tombor the Jolly came stomping through the trees. "Vaerana, the Shou want their mandarin. Archers are beginning to gather along the walls."

"Let them!" Vaerana turned to go back to the road. "We're going to have a battle soon enough."

Ruha grabbed the Lady Constable by the arm. "But the Shou do not have Yanseldara's staff!"

"They're still my best hope of stopping the cult—or Cypress—and saving Yanseldara."

"I may know of a better way," Ruha said, thinking of Lady Feng's abandoned familiar. "Give me another day, and I will find Tang's mother—and Yanseldara's staff."

Vaerana shook her head. "I don't know if Yanseldara has another day—and even if she does, Elversult may not. The Cult of the Dragon is growing more powerful by

the hour."

"How long'll it take you to storm the palace?" Fowler asked. "And even if it's less than a day, can you be sure Tang will tell you what you want to know—or that it'll do you much good?"

{ Vaerana looked to Tombor. "What do you think?"

The cleric's gaze darted from Fowler to Ruha to Vaerana. Finally, he smiled and shrugged amiably. "It's all the same to me. I just need to know what you're doing."

Vaerana bit her lip, then finally said, "Tell Hsieh that he's free to go." After Tombor left, the Lady Constable gently took Ruha's arm and, in a tone that was almost pleading, said, "Witch, you can't foul this up."

"I shall not." Ruha glanced toward the road to make certain that she was still shielded from the view of any Shou, then whispered the incantation of the same sun spell she had used to vanish the day before. A shimmering wave of heat rolled down her body, leaving both her clothes and her flesh as transparent as air. "Just give me until tomorrow at dawn."

With that, the invisible witch returned to the road, where Tombor was just giving the order to release Hsieh and the caravan drivers. She went to the nearest wagon and raised the edge of its tarp just far enough to slip inside, and nearly gagged on the cloying odor that rose from the cargo box: fresh ylang blossoms.

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The servants had brought a small, triangular table of polished mahogany into the Hall of Amity and placed three teak thrones around it. Prince Tang and his wife sat close together on one side, staring at their reflections in the burnished surface, and Minister Hsieh _____ sat alone at the opposite point. The shape of the table represented the trio's nominal equality as members of the Imperial Household of Shou Lung, the seating arrangement reflected their actual status in the Emperor's eyes, and the absence of any guards except the minister's was a concession to his office: only the Emperor himself could bring personal guards into the presence of

a mandarin.

"Why does table have only three sides?" Hsieh demanded. "Where is Lady Feng?"

The knot in Tang's stomach tightened even further, but he forced himself to slacken his face muscles and meet the mandarin's eyes. "Lady Feng is not here."

The mandarin accepted the prince's nonanswer with stern inexpressiveness. "Is most worthy concubine available? I travel many thousands of li to speak to her."

The prince hazarded a glance at his wife, whose face remained as unreadable as the mandarin's. They had not expected this. Though Hsieh and Lady Feng were cousins, they disliked each other vehemently and had taken pains

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to avoid each other for years. It was even whispered that, after some incident involving Lady Feng's familiar, it had been the mandarin who had arranged the exile of the Third Virtuous Concubine.

At last, Wei Dao asked, "You have nothing to say to Honored Husband?"

Hsieh regarded the prince and princess in thoughtful silence, until a smirk of amusement flickered briefly across his lips. "No, to surprise of everyone in Hall of Supreme Harmony, profits of Ginger Palace are most satisfying. Even Emperor notice."

Tang's stomach started to writhe and churn. The good news would only make it more difficult to admit that he had allowed someone to kidnap the Third Virtuous Concubine.

"Do not look so troubled, Prince. We will talk after I see Lady Feng." Hsieh's uncovered eye narrowed in mild rebuke. "I am most anxious to hear why Ministry of Spices does not know about Ginger Palace's poison trade."

Tang rose and accepted the mandarin's admonishment with a polite bow. "I am most anxious to make report on anything you wish." He fixed his eyes on the silver-trimmed hem of the mandarin's maitung, then took a deep breath and forced himself to speak again. "But first, I must relate regrettable truth about Lady Feng."

Even a seasoned bureaucrat like Minister Hsieh could not prevent the blood from draining from his face, thereby betraying his shock. "Something has happened?"

Wei Dao was on her feet and speaking before Tang could continue. "When Prince Tang says Lady Feng is not here, he means not in Ginger Palace."

Hsieh's jaw fell, and when his brow furrowed this time, the rebuke was not a gentle one. "Then where is Third Virtuous Concubine?"

Again, Wei Dao answered for her husband. "She tends to sick friend in Elversult."

The mandarin scowled and, apparently resigning him-

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self to having all his questions answered by the princess, turned directly to Wei Dao.

"It is most indecorous to have Emperor's consort wandering about outside her palace, especially in land of barbarians." Though his face showed no sign of emotion, there was a dubious edge in his voice. "Why not bring sick friend to Ginger Palace?"

"Friend is too sick to move."

Hsieh's eyes narrowed; then he whirled back to Prince

Tang. "Who is this friend?"

"Very important—"

Hsieh raised his hand to silence the princess. "I ask

honorable husband."

Tang glanced at his wife, who wisely made no attempt to communicate what she had intended to say. Though the mandarin's gaze was riveted on the prince, his adjutant was watching Wei Dao from the corners of his eyes.

Tang could not bring himself to answer. He was too blinded by fear to see the escape toward which Wei Dao had been driving. Lying to a mandarin was both a crime as terrible as treason and an indelible stain on the honor of his ancestors, yet now that his wife had shown him the way, he wanted nothing more than to avoid admitting his

ignoble failure.

"Who is Lady Feng's friend?" Hsieh demanded.

Tang realized that his wife could have intended to give only one answer. "Lady Feng visits Moonstorm House in Elversult." The prince felt as though he would retch; his stomach was turning somersaults and his jaws were aching. "Queen of city is very ill, and her priests ask for help of Third Virtuous Concubine."

Hsieh's face did not soften. "Then why does constable woman harass Shou caravan? Making hostage of Emperor's servant is poor way to show appreciation."

As badly as he wanted to, the prince did not look toward Wei Dao. Certainly, she had already thought of an

answer to this simple question, but the mere hint of coaching from her would be enough to condemn both

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Tang and his wife to slow and dishonorable deaths.

"Barbarians have strange customs." Tang knew that his response was a feeble one, but he needed time to think of something better. "Vaerana Hawklyn does not trust after-world magic and accuses us of causing her queen's illness."

"Have we?"

Tang tried to swallow and found that he could not. "Why do you think that, Minister?"

The minister splayed his fingers, then began to tick off the names of poisonous plants that had been hidden in the Ginger Lady's cargo. "Oleander . . . lantana . . . castor bean . . . pink pea . . . Shou berry." He reached his little finger and stopped. "Need I go on?"

Prince Tang shook his head. "We only sell poisons, not use them. Yanseldara's condition is not our fault."

Hsieh lowered his hand. "You know I do not care if it is, as long as your reason is good. But if you are lying—"

"Never!" Both Tang and his wife spoke at once.

Hsieh raised a cautionary finger and continued, "If you lie to protect Lady Feng, I have no mercy."

Tang's head began to spin. "To protect Lady Feng?" he asked, truly confused. "How does lying—"

"We do not lie." Wei Dao stepped around the table to her husband's side. "We send a company of guards to inform Lady Feng of your arrival. Perhaps you wish to send Yu Po along?"

Hsieh considered the offer, then shook his head. "That is not necessary. If there is anything I should know, it is certain to come to light."

The mandarin rose and honored them with a shallow bow, then led Yu Po and his guards from the room. As soon as their steps faded from the corridor outside, Tang sent the servants away.

"Why do you lie to mandarin?" he demanded, turning to his wife. "You dishonor ancestors and condemn us to Chamber of Agonizing Death!"

"Only if Minister Hsieh discovers abduction of venerable mother."

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"How can he fail?" Tang's legs were trembling. It made him feel ashamed and weak. "Any servant tells esteemed mandarin everything he wants to know."

"True, but Minister Hsieh is sure to ask wrong questions," Wei Dao replied calmly. "He thinks venerable mother has lover, and any servant he asks certainly tells him that is nonsense."

The princess's reassurance did little to bolster Tang's courage. "But how do guards bring Lady Feng home from Moonstorm House? Cypress has mother, not Vaerana

Hawklyn!"

"Yes, but now we have fresh ylang blossoms." Wei Dao grabbed her husband by the wrist and started toward the back of the palace. "Now come. We have no more time for your cowardice—or your foolishness."

* * if! S): *

Inside the cargo box, the thick stench of ylang blossoms did more to muffle the unexpected shriek than the canvas tarp—or so it seemed to Ruha. The first screech was instantly followed by more cries from all corners of the cavernous spicehouse, and then came a brief stampede of drumming boots. Wisps of another smell, rancid and even more cloying than ylang oil, drifted through the gaps between the wagon's sideboards. After that, the cavernous spicehouse fell silent, leaving the witch to wonder if, after untold hours of stillness, she dared uncurl herself

and peek outside.

Ruha decided to wait; ten heartbeats, twenty, thirty. She had thought it would be a simple thing to stow away until the wagon was inside the palace, then slip out from beneath the tarp when it was parked to await unloading. But the Shou had driven the witch's wagon and several others into the shady coolness of the spicehouse and left them there, then began to unpack the vehicles parked outside in the hot sun. Until now, the patter of feet passing by her hiding place had been so steady that she had

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hardly dared to breathe, much less poke her head out from beneath the tarp.

Ruha's count reached a hundred. She slowly uncurled herself, taking a moment to stretch her stiff muscles in case she suddenly had to run or fight, then half-swam through the dried blossoms to the back corner of the wagon. In the inky darkness beneath the tarp, her sun spell had grown weak and expired some time ago, leaving her as visible as any workman. She used the tip of her jambiya to lift the tarp, then raised her head high enough to peer over the tail boards.

A gasp of surprise rose into her throat and escaped, half-strangled, from her mouth. Less than five paces away sat a small black dragon. Save that it was no larger than a cargo wagon, the creature was identical to Cypress, with the same dull scales, splintered horns, and sinister voids where his eyes should have been. The foul odor she had smelled earlier seemed to be coming from the carcass, and now the witch thought she could identify the stench: rotten fish.

Ruha dropped back into the wagon and tried not to choke on her own heart, which had somehow climbed high into her throat. When the creature did not immediately come tearing through the tarp, the witch dared to hope it had not seen her and frantically tried to think of some reason that did not involve her that it might be waiting outside her wagon. She failed, rather quickly, and started to consider what she might do about the situation.

Come out, my dear. Though the voice reverberated through Ruha's head without passing through her ears, it sounded as raspy and chilling as the first time she had heard it. You have no idea how I have been looking forward to our second meeting.

Ruha knew then that someone had betrayed her, but who: Vaerana or Fowler? The thought was ludicrous. They both had more reason than she to hate Cypress, yet who else could have known where she was hiding? Any-

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one they would have trusted with the secret. In Vaerana's case, at least, that circle was no doubt larger than the witch would have liked.

Come out and give me that silver I smell in your pocket. If you show that much courage, perhaps I will have mercy.

A prickling chill ran down Ruha's back, and a terrifying possibility occurred to her. I have seen your mercy, she thought. And you have seen my magic. Go away, or it will

be you who begs quarter.

The witch waited a moment for Cypress's response. When none came, she breathed a little easier. If the dragon had been able to read her thoughts, her chances of surviving the coming battle would have fallen to nothing.

Ruha sheathed her dagger, then burrowed into the ylang blossoms. She crawled toward the front of the cargo box, taking care not to jiggle the wagon. As she moved, she summoned the incantation of a fire spell to mind. She doubted that she could trick Cypress into swallowing a chestful of oil vapor again, but neither would it take such a huge explosion to destroy his new body. A smaller blast, properly placed, would prove sufficient to annihilate him.

The witch was only halfway to her goal when something jolted the wagon. She heard the zip-zip of oilcloth being ripped; then a flickering yellow light of the spicehouse's oil lamps filtered down through the ylang blossoms. Already uttering her incantation, Ruha lifted herself out of the blossoms and, expecting to feel the dragon's claws driving deep into her flesh at any moment, thrust her hand over the sideboard.

The flames shot off the wicks of half a dozen different lamps and streaked into the palm other hand, gathering themselves into a hissing, sputtering ball of fire. She whirled around, ready to slap the scorching sphere into Cypress's empty eye socket or beneath his arm, or anywhere that would channel the explosion into her

attacker's vital areas.

The dragon was not there. He stood three paces away

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from the wagon, the dark voids beneath his brow fixed on the fire in Ruha's palm. From his talons hung the remains of the shredded tarp, and she could see the tip of his tail flicking back and forth behind his head. He made no move to attack.

There's no need to burn down poor Tang's spicehouse, the dragon said. Step out of the wagon. Give me that sil.

uer I smell and answer a single question. I promise, your death shall be mercifully quick.

Ruha felt as though the fire in her hand was cooking her bone marrow as far down as her elbow, but she made no move to throw the fireball. Without being properly placed, the blast would do no more than melt a few of the dragon's scales. Besides, as much as the searing heat grieved her, the sphere could cause her no real damage until after it left her hand.

"I have known enough pain in my life not to be frightened of it," Ruha said. "If I am to die, I do not particularly care whether it is quickly or slowly."

As the witch spoke, she stepped over to Cypress's side of the wagon. To her surprise, the dragon moved neither away from the fireball nor forward to attack. Ruha might have been able to reach the dragon with a good leap, but he would have time to turn away and, in all likelihood, impale her on his long talons. If her plan was to succeed, she had to draw him closer.

"You may ask your question. Perhaps I will answer, or perhaps I will not."

You will answer. Cypress promised. And you will step out of the wagon.

"Why is it so important that I leave the wagon? I can answer your question from here."

In the black depths of the dragon's empty eye sockets appeared two dirty yellow sparks. When we met the first time, was it happenstance? As Cypress asked his question, the sparks lengthened into gleaming lines, then began to flicker at the ends and thicken into stripes. Or did someone tell you I would be there?

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"Who would have told me that?" Ruha wanted nothing more than to hurl her fireball at the dragon and run for her life, but she forced herself to stand fast. If Cypress had not attacked by now, then it had to be because he was afraid of destroying what was in the wagon. The witch tipped her hand so that the fireball was precariously close to slipping from her palm, then added, "And stop what you are—"

You will not drop the fireball!

The yellow stripes shot from Cypress's vacant eyes and joined together, becoming a long-fanged bat of amber light. Ruha brought her hand around, placing the fireball between herself and her attacker.

Stupid Harper! Flames will not save you!

The bat emerged from the fireball, its wings blazing and its eyes glowing with rabid fury. Ruha reached for herjambiya, and the beast was upon her. Instead of raking her eyes with its tiny claws or sinking its fangs into her throat, it appeared inside her mind, a flaming creature of the night, flitting across the starry sky high over her memories of Anauroch's purple-shadowed sand dunes.

Ruha cried out, but she could not bring herself to flee the dragon, or even to turn away. Cypress was already inside her mind, and trying break contact with him was as futile as trying to escape an unpleasant memory by closing one's eyes. The dragon sat motionless on the floor, his gaze pinning the witch in place as surely as if he had been standing on her chest.

Her only chance of escaping, Ruha realized, lay in distracting Cypress. No sooner did she have this thought than a small brake of saltbush sprouted from the sands other mind. The words of a wind spell rose from the brush like a swarm of sand finches. Cypress's fiery bat streaked down to dive through the heart of the flock, scattering the syllables of the incantation before they could shape themselves. Ruha's arm remained motionless, the fireball still burning in her hand.

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Cypress's bat settled on the surface of Ruha's mind and began to beat its burning wings. Clouds of hissing yellow fume curled from the tips of the fiery appendages and rolled across the dune-sculpted terrain. Wherever the haze touched, the sands themselves melted into rivers and pools of bubbling brown acid. The witch started to feel hot and limp, as though a fever had taken hold of her body, and her limbs trembled with weakness. For a moment, she feared she had guessed wrong about the dragon's fear of destroying the ylang blossoms, that he merely wanted her to drop the fireball at her own feet.

The bubbling brown pools inside Ruha's head joined and became a lake. The bat dove into the acid, sinking its fangs deep into the throat of some naked thought that was writhing just below the surface other mind. The witch saw Cypress's lips curl into something that resembled a smile; then she felt her foot sliding across the floor of the wagon. She tried to stop, but no sooner had the thought taken shape than it dissolved into nothingness in the bubbling acid. The dragon had won control of her mind, and now she had to fight him not only for her

life, but for the possession other own thoughts.

It occurred to Ruha that this was a battle not of strength or speed, but of imagination, and a rocky island of hope instantly sprang up inside her mind.

Waves of acid began to lap at its shores, filling the air with hissing white smoke and reducing the isle to little more than a sandbar. The witch pictured the sand changing to granite. She felt a strange tingling deep within her stomach, then experienced a momentary burning all over her body, as though she had exerted every muscle at once. The little island hardened into dense stone and stopped dissolving, but Ruha felt her foot slide a little closer to the rear of the wagon.

A deep-throated growl rumbled from Cypress's throat;

then the yellow acid inside Ruha's mind began to churn and froth like a storm-tossed sea. Mountainous waves rose and crashed over the witch's small isle, threatening

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to submerge it entirely. She envisioned the island erupting like a volcano, pushing its way higher above the surface and spreading immense blankets of molten stone across the lake. Again, she experienced a strange tingling deep within her abdomen, followed by a momentary burning over her entire body. She felt physically drained, as though she had been running for a long time in the scorching sun.

You only anger me. Cypress's voice broke like thunder inside Ruha's mind, and she felt her foot touch the wagon's tailgate. An untrained mind cannot prevail.

The stars vanished from the purple sky over the witch's growing island of hope. Spears of lightning stabbed at the summit of the erupting volcano, and a few hissing drops of acid began to fall on its slopes.

Then, before Cypress could unleash the full fury of his storm, a pair of familiar forms came rushing across the spicehouse floor.

"Cypress!" gasped Wei Dao. "What do you want here?"

Prince Tang drew his sword and pointed it at the dragon. "You go!" Then he looked toward the door.

"Guards!"

Cypress glanced away from Ruha long enough to flick his tail at the approaching prince and send him crashing through the flimsy door of a spice bin. That instant was

long enough for the witch. She envisioned her volcano bursting apart, flinging lava and ash in all directions. A tremendous wave of fatigue rolled over her body; then her island erupted as she had envisioned, pouring forth molten stone in such prodigious quantities that the acid lake completely vanished beneath its fiery blanket.

Ruha felt control of her limbs return. Gasping for breath and trembling with fatigue, she slipped back to the center of the wagon. Her mind was not entirely free of its attacker, however. The dragon locked gazes with her again, and once more his bat figure appeared inside her mind, rising from beneath the sea of flaming rock like a phoenix reborn. An angry rumble rolled from

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Cypress's throat; then the flaming bat transformed itself into an immense, black-haired Cyclops. The brute floated down to the ground, then waded through the lava toward the witch's volcano. He stood as tall as the summit, and his knobby hands looked powerful enough to crush stone.

Ruha pictured the ground beneath his feet turning to quicksand, but this time she experienced no strange tinglings in the pit other stomach. She felt only a dull, nauseating ache, then a searing wave of pain as the last of her energy drained from her muscles. The witch collapsed to her knees, so exhausted and enervated that she could not find the strength to rise. The cyclops stopped beside her volcano, then reached out and tore away a huge chunk of glowing stone.

As I annihilate this mountain, so I annihilate your mind! the cyclops cackled. When I finish, your head will be naught but a smoking hole, as empty and useless as a spent sulfur pit!

Ruha tried again to change the scene inside her head, but succeeded only in exhausting herself to the point that she almost dropped the fireball. The wagon rocked as someone climbed in behind her, but the witch could not rip her gaze away from Cypress's empty eye sockets to see who it was. She thought about trying to drop the fireball before the dragon seized control of her body again. The resulting conflagration would kill her as well as the newcomer, but she felt fairly certain that destroying the ylang blossoms would also delay the theft of Yanseldara's spirit.

Prince Tang kneeled beside Ruha, holding several slender yellow leaves in his hand. His eyes appeared glassy and vacant, and he seemed to be chewing something. Cypress glanced away from Ruha and glared at

Tang. Inside the witch's mind, the cyclops stopped tearing apart her volcano. She was too exhausted to take advantage of her foe's distraction, but she found herself free to look away from his gaze. A small company of Shou guards had appeared at the door and were cautiously

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advancing into the shadowy spicehouse, squinting at the dragon as though they could not quite believe their sun-dazzled eyes.

Whatever the dragon said to Tang, Ruha could not hear it, but the prince's response was short and angry:

"No. If you want oil, you leave now—or I burn wagon myself." Tang raised one of the slender leaves to Ruha's lips, then instructed, "Chew leaf, wu-jen."

Ruha clenched her teeth and considered thrusting her

fireball into Tang's face.

"Trust me. This no love potion. It is lasal. Leaf protects against Invisible Art."

Ruha allowed the prince to slip the leaf into her mouth and began to chew. The wail of a distant wind arose inside her mind, and the cyclops slowly turned toward the sound. Cypress glanced at Wei Dao, who immediately stepped to the wagon side and spoke to her husband in Shou. The prince responded sharply and pointed toward the guards, who were advancing on the unconcerned dragon with polearms leveled for battle. They seemed rather unsteady on their feet, and even from halfway across the spicehouse, their eyes appeared more glassy

than Tang's.

Inside Ruha's mind, the wail of the wind became a roar, then a howling sand cloud billowed across the boiling plain. Cypress groaned, and the cyclops turned to face the storm. The brute took a deep breath and began to blow, but his breath was no match for the fury of the gale. The sand blasted over him, and he vanished into

the tempest.

Cypress grunted, his empty-eyed head recoiling as though the storm had struck him physically. He backed away from the wagon, trembling and sputtering and madly scratching at his temples. Tang's guards charged, filling the spicehouse with a tremendous clamor as their blades struck their foe's impenetrable scales. Several of

the blades snapped on impact, but most either bounced off or became lodged without causing any damage. The

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dragon lashed out with fangs, claws, and tail, littering the floor with the shattered bodies of Tang's loyal guards.

Finding herself completely in control of her own body--if somewhat exhausted and fuzzy-headed—Ruha rose to her feet and swung a leg over the side of the wagon.

"No!" Wei Dao shrieked.

The princess leapt toward Ruha, causing the witch to hesitate just long enough for Tang to grab her by the shoulder.

"If you leave wagon, we all die." The prince's words were slurred, and he seemed to be having trouble focusing his eyes. "Only fear of burning blossoms saves us now."

"I know that." Ruha scowled, struggling against the roaring storm in her head to remember why she had decided to throw the fireball in the first place. "But I must attack . . . while we have the advantage."

You have nothing.

Cypress cast aside the bodies of two more guards, then pointed his long snout in Tang's direction. The dragon was far from destroyed, but he looked as haggard as Ruha, and more than a few of his thick scales had been pulled or cut away. Tang called something to his surviving guards, who looked rather relieved and backed away.

"But wu-jen is under my protection," the prince said, speaking in Common.

Your protection? This time, Ruha heard Cypress—though whether it was intended or an accident of his anger, she did not know. She is a Harper, sent to take Yanseldara away from me!

Tang cringed at the dragon's anger, but did not back down. "Nevertheless, while she remains in Ginger Palace, she is under my protection." The prince glanced at his battered guards and nodded once. They leveled their weapons and took a single step forward. "If you do not agree, we finish this now—and you lose Yanseldara anyway."

"Are you mad. Husband?" Wei Dao cried. "Give him

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barbarian! She causes too much trouble already."

Tang glared at Wei Dao. "I hear enough from you, Wife. I am Prince of Shou Lung, and to call me mad is treason."

Wei Dao's face darkened to an angry ocher, but she obediently lowered her gaze and mumbled, "Please to forgive outburst, Merciful Husband."

Cypress observed the exchange in silence, then pointed his snout in Tang's direction. Why all this trouble for a barbarian, Young Prince? he demanded, still allowing Ruha to eavesdrop. Could it be you have fallen in love?

"That is not your concern," Tang replied. "I have ylang oil by evening. Please to bring Lady Feng, and we make exchange."

Cypress stepped forward, bringing his nostrils almost to within arm's reach of Ruha. You are fortunate that I understand the power of love. Harper. Treat Tang well.

You owe him your life.

Ruha brought her fireball around. So exhausted was Cypress that he barely pulled his head away in time to keep her from stuffing the sphere into his nostrils.

"I'll treat Tang as well as he deserves, I assure you,"

Ruha said.
The dragon backed away and swung his snout toward

Tang.

The prince listened for a moment, then pointed to the door. "You bring Lady Feng. I see to wu-jen."

Cypress allowed his empty gaze to linger on Ruha for a moment, then turned away. With a weary beat of his wings, he lifted himself into the air and flew out the door. Tang waited until he was gone, then turned to Ruha.

"Perhaps now you understand wisdom of my actions." The prince's voice was smug and condescending. "Or do you still believe Cypress is destroyed?"

Ruha shook her head. "I do not—but how could he have survived?" The lasal haze inside her mind was already beginning to clear, but it had not yet grown thin

enough for her to understand what she had seen. "I blasted him into a thousand pieces,"

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"You destroy body, not spirit," Tang explained, assuming a superior air. "Cypress is dracolich. He hides spirit inside gem—"

"Wise Prince," Wei Dao interrupted. "Cypress says she is Harper. Is it prudent to tell her so much?"

By the scowl Tang shot his wife, Ruha could see that the prince wanted to impress her with his proscribed knowledge—and she wanted him to. The witch allowed an expectant gaze to linger on the prince's face for a moment, then rolled her eyes and looked away, letting out a deliberately loud sigh of disgust.

The silent put-down worked as no verbal upbraid could have. Tang's face reddened, and he snapped at Wei Dao, "I decide what is prudent!" When the princess lowered her gaze, Tang looked back to Ruha. "Cypress hides his spirit inside gem. After his body is destroyed, he possesses new corpse and consumes old one."

"But the sharks ate his old one," Ruha said, thinking aloud. "And that is why he smells like rotten fish now. He is eating the creatures that ate him!"

Tang nodded. "It is impossible to stop process. Even if you burn old corpse and spread ashes, he can find them and swallow them. When he has eaten enough, he becomes dracolich again."

"How close is he now?"

Tang shrugged. "It does not matter to you. For your protection, I must not allow you to leave Ginger Palace."

"Is that by Cypress's command, or yours?"

"By dragon's—and he warns me you have no gratitude. He says you do not repay my bravery as woman should."

Ruha's eyes narrowed. "And how is that?"

The prince smiled. "Ginger Palace still has need of wu-jen. Our union would be most blissful."

"Prince Tang, that will never be," Ruha said, speaking sharply. She climbed out of the wagon and moved several paces away. "But I have a better way to show my gratitude. I shall let you leave the wagon before I throw my

fireball into it."

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In the blink of an eye, Ruha was surrounded by Tang's battered and bloodied guards, each holding a long-bladed halberd or square-tipped sword within an inch other body. Wei Dao stood behind them, looking more than a little disappointed that she had not been able to draw her dagger quickly enough to kill the witch before her husband's soldiers got in the way.

Tang eyed the witch's fireball and did not climb from the wagon. "Burning blossoms would be unfortunate mistake for all concerned—especially Yanseldara."

Though the heat of the fireball felt as though it were melting her arm, Ruha stopped short of flinging it into the wagon. "Do not lie to me. I heard you say this morning that Cypress needs something more from you to complete his spell." The witch waved her flaming sphere toward the wagon. "It seems obvious enough that what he needs is fresh ylang oil."

"Yes, that is true." Tang scowled at Wei Dao and motioned for her to return her dagger to its sheath. "Cypress needs fresh ylang oil to make love spell."

"Love spell?" Ruha gasped.

"You know what ylang blossoms do," Tang replied. "You see that this morning."

"A dead dragon—a dracolich—wishes the love of a half-elf?"

Tang nodded. "He loves Yanseldara for many years, since she wounds him and sends him away from Elversuit." Tang placed a hand over his heart. "Love unrequited is most sad."

Wei Dao rolled her eyes, then gestured at the fireball still burning in Ruha's palm. "We have no time for this foolishness, Wise Husband. Tell witch why she cannot destroy ylang blossoms."

Tang looked into Ruha's eyes and, finding no sympathy there, reluctantly nodded. "Very well. Love is matter of spirit. To save Yanseldara's spirit or to steal it, same thing is needed—powerful love potion."

"Then there must be a difference in how it is used."

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"It is not necessary that you know that," said Wei Dao.

The witch ignored Wei Dao and hefted her fireball. "Perhaps you would prefer that I assume you are lying about the blossoms?"

Prince Tang looked genuinely hurt. "You call me liar? I risk my life—life of royal Shou Prince—to save you, and this is how you repay my love?"

Ruha lowered the fireball and used her free hand to snuff it out. She had learned all she was going to about the blossoms, and it was just enough to keep her from destroying the wagon.

"Prince Tang, you cannot love me, any more than Cypress loves Yanseldara." Ruha spoke softly, for her intention was more to explain than to hurt. "Only a man can love, and you have yet to become a man."

Tang leapt out of the wagon, pushing several guards aside as he stepped toward Ruha. "Shou prince becomes man in tenth year. I am man for twenty years!"

Ruha shook her head. "You want me because I deny you, and that is the emotion of a child, not a man."

Tang's face contracted into a shriveled mask of rage and pain. His mouth opened as though he were going to speak, but all that emerged was an unintelligible sputter.

Wei Dao stepped to the prince's side and took his arm. "She knows nothing. Great Prince."

The princess motioned to the guards and spoke in Shou. A pair of them sheathed their swords and seized Ruha by her arms. They started to drag her from the spicehouse, and Prince Tang made no move to stop them.

Ruha glanced over her shoulder. "A man takes responsibility for his actions, Prince Tang."

As she spoke, the witch tried to summon to mind the incantation of a wind spell and discovered she could not. Only the faintest hint of the lasal haze remained in her mind, but it was enough to prevent her from using her magic.

Keeping her gaze fixed on the prince's face, Ruha continued, "A man does not allow his fear to dictate his

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actions, and a man does not hide his mistakes from those who can help him correct them."

Prince Tang looked away, and Wei Dao urged, "Pay her no attention. After Lady Feng is returned—"

"Returned?" Ruha snapped her arms free of her captors and spun around, then found the tips of several halberds pressed against her body. She ignored them. "Prince Tang, if you believe Cypress intends to return your mother, then you truly are a child."

The guards seized Ruha's wrists and started to drag her away, until Tang spoke to them in Shou. The two men stopped, but still grasped the witch's arms so tightly her bones ached.

"If he wants potion, Cypress must return Mother," said

Tang.

Ruha shook her head. "Does he not need her to cast the magic that will make Yanseldara love him? And even if he can do it himself—which he cannot, or you could not have been confident of her safety until now—remember why he attacked the Ginger Lady. Does he not fear that Hsieh intends to put someone else in charge of the Ginger Palace? Would Lady Feng not make an excellent hostage to guarantee approval of the mandarin's choice?"

Tang turned to his wife. They began to argue in Shou.

"You need help to recover your mother." Ruha spoke loudly to make herself heard over the quarrel. "Admit that, and you have taken your first step to becoming a man."

Tang jabbed his index finger against his wife's forehead and shouted something angry at her, then whirled away and strode over to Ruha.

"I need no help to rescue Mother!" The prince glared at Ruha for a moment, then stepped past her and started toward the door. "And I am no child—I prove that soon enough!"

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The dungeon beneath the Ginger Palace was unlike any of those dank, deep, dark places from which the Harpers had taught Ruha to escape. Instead of mildew and offal, it smelled of cedar and lamp oil, and the sound that filled its corridors was not the wail of tortured prisoners, but the silken swishing of Shou robes. The doors hung on brass hinges rather than leather straps, and they were made

of red-lacquered mahogany instead of rusty iron—a construction that would make them no less sturdy once they were barred shut. The stone walls were smooth-plastered, washed with white lime, and a foot thick; the ceiling, nearly fifteen feet above, was formed by the exposed underside of the floor planks above, and therein lay the only weakness Ruha could find.

The long procession of guards reached an intersection and, when Wei Dao attempted to turn right, came to a sudden halt. The leader of the soldiers spoke to the princess in Shou. She replied sharply and pointed at Ruha. The witch had again been gagged with her own veil, her arms were pinned behind her by two separate men, and she was surrounded by a ring of warriors holding naked sword blades within inches of her throat.

Though the lasal haze had already faded from her mind, Ruha's escort had been too attentive to allow her to

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cast any spells, so she could not understand the conversation. Nevertheless, she had explored the dungeon during her initial search for Yanseldara's staff and could imagine what they were discussing. Down the left corridor lay the palace's tidy prison cells; down the right lay the gruesome chambers of torture and death, where there were certainly enough shackles, fetters, and jaw clamps to keep even a wu-jen from escaping.

Wei Dao prevailed over the commander and led the column to the right. Ruha brought a two-syllable sun spell to mind and, as the clumsy ensemble around her struggled to turn the corner, pretended to stumble. The ring of swordsmen jerked their blades back—Prince Tang had been most emphatic in saying he expected the prisoner alive when he returned—and that was all the room the witch needed.

Slipping her gag as she had once before, Ruha picked her feet off the brick floor and kicked them both backward. Only one of her heels landed on target, smashing the knee of one of the guards holding her arms. The other missed its mark and slipped between the fellow's legs. As she pitched forward, the witch brought her foot up, catching the soldier squarely in the groin. Both men screamed and released her arms, then landed beside her on the floor.

At once, Ruha rolled onto her side, looked toward one of the oil lamps hanging on the wall, then closed her eyes, covered her ears, and uttered her spell. There was

an ear-splitting boom and a flash of light so brilliant it pained the witch's eyes even through their closed lids.

The next thing Ruha knew, she was lying beneath a heap of writhing Shou guards. If they were screaming, the witch could not hear them; the ringing in her own ears was so loud she could not have heard a thunderclap breaking over her head. Half expecting to feel a long steel blade driving between her ribs, she opened her eyes and crawled from beneath the heap of soldiers.

The entire line of guards lay on the white bricks, their

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open mouths voicing screams the witch could not hear. Some of the men held their ears and some covered their eyes, but they all remained too stunned to do more than writhe in pain. The oil lamp she had used for her spell was gone, leaving a huge sooty smudge above the sconce where it had hung, but neither the wall nor the ceiling had suffered any material damage from the detonation.

Ruha searched for Wei Dao's form at the head of the column, weighing the wisdom of wading through the tangle of bodies to retrieve her late husband's jambiya from the princess. Unfortunately, the witch could not be sure how soon her captors would begin recovering from their shock. The effects would normally last long enough for her to run an eighth league, but she had no way to tell how long she herself had been incapacitated. Besides, there were a dozen more guards at the entrance to the dungeon, and it would not be long before they arrived to investigate the detonation.

Ruha pulled a dagger from a soldier's belt, then stepped over him and three other quivering men and started down the left-hand corridor. As she moved, the witch kept a careful watch on the floor, stopping to pry out any pebbles lodged between bricks. It took only a few moments to fill her hand, for even the tidy Shou could not keep from tracking tiny stones inside, and it hardly seemed worth the effort to scrape them from the seams of a dungeon floor.

The witch glanced back down the corridor. Although Wei Dao had not entirely recovered from her shock, she had risen and was picking her way down the corridor. The princess's eyes had the blank, inert stare of sightlessness, and she was moving her open hands in front of her body in an ever changing pattern of circular motions. Ruha found her pursuer's determination more than a little alarming; only a very good fighter would feel confident enough to carry the battle to a foe while both blind

and deaf.

Ruha shook her pebbles and uttered the incantation of

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a sand spell. The stones began to oscillate in her palm, scrubbing off two layers of skin before she could hurl them at the ceiling. They struck in a circle as broad as her shoulders and continued to vibrate, much too fast for the eye to follow. She heard a faint drone above the ringing in her ears, and a steady shower of powdered wood rained down on her shoulders. The witch hiked up the hem of her aba, then pressed her hands and feet against opposite walls and began to chimney up the walls of the corridor.

Ruha had climbed about ten feet when Wei Dao passed beneath her, still circling her hands before her body and staring vacantly ahead. The drone of the sand spell must have been loud enough for the princess to hear, for she stopped directly beneath the scouring pebbles and cocked her head. She turned her palm up to catch some of the powdered wood raining down her, then seemed to guess what was happening and started after the witch.

Ruha climbed to the ceiling and waited beside her circle of buzzing pebbles. The stones had dug a deep labyrinth of wormy grooves into the wood, and it would not be much longer before they scoured clear through. Already, islands of plank were trembling as though they would fall at any moment, but the witch did not dare reach up to pull them loose. The whirling pebbles would take her fingers off.

A short distance below, Wei Dao had nearly climbed within arm's reach. She carried Ruh's jambiya clenched between her teeth, and her blinking, squinting eyes were fixed vaguely on the hem of the witch's aba. Down the corridor, the guards were beginning to rise and rub their heads. Deciding to attack before they gathered their wits, Ruha pulled a foot away from the wall and thrust it at the princess's head.

Wei Dao continued to squint until the approaching kick had nearly reached her face . . . then she calmly slipped the blow by looking away and allowing the witch's heel to glance off her brow. Instantly, the

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princess's hand snapped back, smashing the hard bone of her wrist into the tendons of Ruha's ankle. A sharp, tingling pain shot up the witch's shin, and her leg went

numb below the knee.

As Ruha tried to pull her foot back, Wei Dao trapped the witch's ankle in the crook of her elbow, then locked it in place by clasping her hand against the back of her neck. She pulled her legs away from the walls and dropped, already raising her free hand toward the jambiya between her teeth.

The witch pushed against the walls with all her might, barely keeping herself from falling to the floor when Wei Dao's weight hit the end of her dangling leg. From behind Ruha, barely audible over the ebbing roar inside her head, came the muted clamor of the guards gathering themselves up to help the princess.

Wei Dao took the jambiya from between her teeth.

Ruha swung her second leg away from the wall and smashed her heel into the back of the foe's skull. Wei Dao's head snapped forward; then the knife slipped from her hand and her body went limp. The princess dropped a man's height to the floor, landing in the semi-rigid heap of someone caught halfway between consciousness and unconsciousness. A pair of guards appeared beside her immediately.

Ruha looked up and saw light shining through the grooved planks above her head. The pebbles were gone, having eaten all the way through the wood. The witch did not wait to see if the soldiers below would attack her or tend to their mistress. She braced her good foot against the wall—the leg that Wei Dao had struck was too numb to trust—then made a fist and punched it through the boards above her head. The wood fell apart easily, and she had no trouble widening the hole until she came to a solid edge. The witch grabbed hold and glanced down to see several guards climbing after her.

Although Ruha did not know any wood magic, she sprinkled a handful of decaying wood on their heads and

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muttered a few mystic-sounding syllables. That was enough to make them drop back into the corridor and scurry for cover. Having bought herself more time, the witch pushed her second hand through the hole—then gasped as her wrists were seized from above by a pair of small, callused hands. Without bothering to tear away what remained of the weakened planks, her unseen captor pulled her up through the floor.

Ruha found herself standing before a blank-faced soldier dressed in Minister Hsieh's yellow, silk-jacketed armor. She was in a fair-sized room furnished only with

kneeling mats, several low tables, and bookshelves, surrounded by a dozen more of the mandarin's guards, all with long, square-tipped swords in their hands. Along with Yu Po, Hsieh himself stood a half-dozen paces behind his guards.

"When strange events occur, it seems you are always near." Although Hsieh did not speak loudly, the ringing in Ruha's ears had faded to the point where, with a little effort, she could understand his words. The mandarin pointed overhead, where the witch's pebbles were scouring a fresh set of grooves into the coffered ceiling.

"Please to stop magic before it ruins Princess Wei Dao's apartment."

The man who had pulled Ruha out of the floor released her hands and stepped back, but the witch did not even consider casting a spell at the mandarin or any of his men. Although Tang had ordered his guards not to harm her, Hsieh's soldiers had received no such instructions and would undoubtedly strike her down at the first sign of danger to their master. Ruha gestured at the ceiling and spoke a single sibilant syllable. The pebbles fell out of the air, dropping through the hole to clatter off the dungeon's brick floor.

"So much better." Hsieh kneeled at one of the room's low tables and waved Ruha to the other side. "Please."

Ruha allowed herself to be escorted to the table, then sat cross-legged on one of the reed mats. Although she

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was not overly fond of the chairs that Heartland hosts always thrust at their visitors, she found the Shou habit of kneeling even less comfortable.

Hsieh waited for her to arrange her aba and veil, and then said, "Please to explain your return to Ginger Palace. I am under impression that Vaerana Hawklyn takes me hostage to get you out."

"She came too soon." As the witch spoke, she was frantically trying to calculate how much she should tell Hsieh about events in Elversult. Though he lacked the same reasons as Prince Tang and Wei Dao to conceal Lady Feng's abduction, he might easily conclude that the best way to recover her was to let Cypress have what he wanted. "I had not concluded my business."

Hsieh nodded thoughtfully. "And this business—whatever it is—do you finish it now?"

Ruha shook her head. "No, I was . . . interrupted."

Hsieh allowed himself a tiny smile, but made no remark about the interruption involving a trip to the dungeon. "Perhaps this business is something I can help you conclude."

Ruha lifted her brow. "Do you not wish to know what I am doing?"

"You are spying," Hsieh replied simply. "I have need of spy."

After a moment's consideration, Ruha asked, "And who am I to spy upon?"

"I come to speak to Lady Feng, but she is not here." He leaned forward and spoke so quietly that Ruha could barely make out the words. "I understand she is in Elversuit. Perhaps she dishonors Peerless Emperor of Civilized World."

Ruha frowned, confused by the mandarin's implication and uncertain what he wanted from her. "What do you think she has done to dishonor your emperor?"

The mandarin flushed and looked at the tabletop. "Perhaps she takes lover."

"A lover?" Ruha scoffed.

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Hsieh frowned and glanced toward his guards. "For spy, you are most imprudent."

"She is more than spy!" accused Wei Dao's voice.

The witch turned to see the princess pushing her head out of the hole in the floor. Her hair was disheveled and there was a red mark on her brow where Ruha's heel had glanced off, but otherwise she showed little sign of their battle.

Wei Dao allowed two of Hsieh's men to help her into the room, then pulled Ruha's jambiya from her sash and pointed the curved blade at the witch. "Lady Ruha is insidious assassin!"

The accusation caused several of the guards to reach for the witch, but Hsieh raised a finger and waved them off. "If Lady Ruha wishes me dead, she has many chances better than this to attack."

Ruha inclined her head to the minister. "I am grateful—"

Hsieh warned her off with a scowl and quick shake of

his head. "Must wait for princess. To Shou, form is all."
The mandarin looked at Wei Dao, then gestured at one of the mats beside their table. "Please."

The princess slipped the jambiya into her sash, then took several moments to straighten her hair and collect herself. For a time, Ruha thought she might be stalling until her own guards entered the room, but no one climbed into the room after her, nor did Hsieh's men give any indication that they expected—or would welcome—any of the princess's soldiers to join them. At last, Wei Dao came to the table and bowed to Hsieh, then calmly kneeled on a mat beside Ruha as though she had not just accused the witch of being a murderess.

"Esteemed Mandarin, please to forgive Prince and me." By the continuing blare of Wei Dao's voice, it was clear that her ears were suffering from the detonation even more than Ruha's. "We do not tell you all."

"Then do so now—more quietly," Hsieh urged.

Wei Dao kept her eyes lowered, "Lady Feng does not visit sick friend in Elversult."

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Hsieh barely kept from smirking. "Truly?"

"Truly. Prince Tang learns of plan to kill Third Virtuous Concubine, and he sends her into hiding." Wei Dao raised her chin and glared at Ruha. "Treacherous witch is assassin."

Ruha could not stomach the lie. "That is—"

Hsieh waved a cautioning finger at the witch. "You ignore form. Lady Ruha." Though his voice was stern, his face remained as blank as ever. "Please to let Princess explain why someone—presumably Vaerana Hawklyn—wishes to kill Lady Feng."

Wei Dao was ready with another lie. "To stop trade in poisons. Vaerana threatens many times to 'take measures' if we do not stop, but Honorable Husband does not let savages dictate business of Ginger Palace."

"How wise." Hsieh's tone was as flat as his expression was blank.

Wei Dao continued, "After we must exchange witch for person of Esteemed Minister, we think she give up and leave—then we find her hiding in ylang blossoms." The princess peered at Ruha from the corner of her eye. "She

is most resolute killer."

Hsieh nodded sagely. "Most."

"We are taking her to Chamber of One Thousand Deaths when she makes lamp explode and escapes again," Wei Dao continued. "Please to lend me sword. I promise Honorable Husband that I kill barbarian before he returns with Virtuous Mother."

Yu Po immediately reached for his sword, but Minister Hsieh quickly raised a hand to restrain him. The adjutant's jaw fell slack, as did those of several guards.

"Do you not wish to hear what Lady Ruha says?" Hsieh asked.

Yu Po and the guards glanced at each other as though the thought had never crossed their minds. "But Lady Ruha is barbarian!" Yu Po gasped. "Princess Dao is wife of son of Third Virtuous Concubine."

Hsieh nodded as though he were in complete agree-

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ment with his adjutant, then bit his lips as though struggling with a difficult decision. "What you say is most true. It does not matter that Lady Ruha saves our lives when dragon attacks Ginger Lady."

The mandarin allowed his gaze to linger on Wei Dao, who took several quiet breaths and tried not to look concerned as the color drained from her face.

"If Shou princess claims barbarian witch intends to kill Lady Feng, then we must believe her." Hsieh continued to glare at the princess. "If she feels certain we understand her correctly—and if she is certain she says what she means."

Wei Dao's painted lips began to quiver, but she did not look away from Hsieh's penetrating gaze. "I... I am certain."

Yu Po placed a hand on the hilt of his sword, but cast a questioning look at Hsieh and stopped short of drawing it. The mandarin remained as motionless as a statue and continued to glare at Wei Dao. Ruha hardly dared to breathe. She did not understand all the nuances of the exchange, but it seemed clear enough that the minister was trying to save her life—whether because he wished to repay her or because he needed a spy, she did not know. It hardly mattered, and the witch sensed that even the slightest movement on her part might well bring the

contest to an unfavorable end.

As frightened as Wei Dao appeared, it was Hsieh who looked away first. "It appears the princess is most confident of herself."

Yu Po drew his sword. Before Ruha could summon the incantation of even a simple spell to mind, two guards grabbed her arms and pushed her forward, laying her head flat upon the table. The witch uttered a silent prayer, begging the forgiveness of Lander, her dead lover, for failing as a Harper, then took her last breath and prepared to die.

The blow did not fall. After a time, Ruha opened her eyes—she did not remember closing them—and craned

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her neck against the restraining hands of her guards. She saw Hsieh and the others standing over her beside the table. The mandarin had taken Yu Po's wrist to restrain him from giving the sword to Wei Dao.

"The Emperor's justice cannot be denied, but we are in land of savages," said Hsieh. "We must allow Lady Ruha to speak, so her friend Vaerana Hawklyn may not protest that our execution is unjust."

"Esteemed Mandarin, why do we care if Vaerana Hawklyn protests?" Wei Dao's voice continued to be over-loud. "She is barbarian!"

"Vaerana Hawklyn is barbarian with army. If she makes hostage of Shou Mandarin, does she hesitate to sack Ginger Palace?" Hsieh paused to let the others consider his point, then continued, "But if we follow form of barbarians and let prisoner speak, perhaps we appease Vaerana's superiors. Perhaps we avoid battle."

The mandarin released his adjutant's wrist. Yu Po lowered his sword, but did not return the blade to its scabbard. He and the other Shou no longer seemed quite so confused by Hsieh's perverse defense of the witch's life. Ruha dared to hope their reaction meant the minister had finally prevailed in the strange battle of protocol between him and Wei Dao.

The princess frowned, but seemed unable to effectively oppose the suggestion. "Ask, but her answer is lie."

Hsieh smiled grimly. "Yes, if you say it is." He leaned over Ruha. "Lady Ruha, does Princess tell truth?"

"No." The witch's answer reverberated through the tabletop and returned to her ear sounding loud and deep. "Lady Feng has been abducted."

Ruha's assertion elicited no cries of outrage or gasps of surprise. The Shou remained as silent as stones, and by their silence the witch knew that none of them, even Hsieh, gave any credence to her claims.

Wei Dao reached for Yu Po's sword.

"I can prove what I say!" Ruha exclaimed.

It was Hsieh who scorned the witch's claim. "How can

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you prove what is not possible?"

The mandarin's tone was severe and impatient, as though he had expected her to say something else. Cold fingers of panic began to creep through the witch's belly. Yu Po was awaiting permission to yield his sword, and Ruha could not imagine what Hsieh wished to hear. Wei Dao had already declared anything the witch said to be a lie, and the Shou seemed unwilling, perhaps even unable, to believe otherwise. The truth, even if it could be proved, did not matter—and Ruha suddenly realized what the minister wanted her to say.

"Princess Wei Dao is protecting her mother-in-law," the witch said. "Lady Feng has taken a lover."

Hsieh gasped much too loudly, prompting Yu Po to step back and sheath his sword.

"Lady Ruha, you are certain?" Hsieh did not even bother to feign his shock well. "Princess Dao is . . . mistaken?"

"Is that not a good reason for her to have me silenced?"

"Indeed, but it does not work. I suspect this myself." Hsieh whirled on Wei Dao and fixed her with a stony glare. "Do I not warn you about lying to me?"

"I am Shou Princess." Though her chin was trembling, Wei Dao held it high. "I do not lie, Esteemed Mandarin."

"No?" Hsieh glanced at the guards pinning Ruha to the table, who promptly released the witch and stepped back. "Lady Ruha, please to show proof of Lady Feng's imprudence."

Ruha straightened her aba and started to remind the mandarin that what she had offered to prove was not

Lady Feng's infidelity, but her abduction—then she thought twice about confusing the issue and held her tongue. To the Shou, the witch was beginning to realize, truth was a relative thing. As long as she had Hsieh's support, any evidence she offered would no doubt be taken as proof of whatever the mandarin wished.

Ruha started to lead the way out of the room, then remembered her manners and bowed to Wei Dao, gesturing

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toward the door. "If the princess will show us to Lady Feng's apartment?"

Wei Dao frowned in confusion, then turned to lead the way out of the room.

Halfway to the door, she suddenly stopped. Her forehead was slick with sweat and her face was sick with fear. "This is not right. I cannot show others into Lady Feng's apartment."

"Then I shall." Behind her veil, Ruha allowed herself a small smile. "I know the way, as I'm sure you remember."

As the witch moved to step past, she saw Wei Dao's hand drop toward her sash.

In the next instant, two of Hsieh's guards lay on the floor holding their bloody throats, and Wei Dao was leaping through the air, slashing at Ruha's throat with her *ov/njambiya*. The witch twisted her body to the side and reached out to meet the assault at the wrist, but the princess's reflexes were as quick as lightning. She circled the blade beneath Ruha's blocking arm and reversed it, driving the tip toward her victim's heart as though she had been fighting with *jambiyas* all her life. The witch saved herself only by falling to the floor and madly flailing her feet in a desperate attempt to trip her attacker.

There was no need. Moving with a deliberate grace that appeared almost languid, Hsieh slipped behind the princess. He clamped one hand over the wrist of Wei Dao's weapon hand, then shot his other forearm around her throat and brought it up under her jawline so hard her feet came off the ground.

Wei Dao's eyes bulged and her tongue appeared between her lips. She flung her head back in an attempt to smash her captor's nose, but Hsieh simply tipped his face out of the way. The princess made a brief, rasping attempt to breathe, but the veins in her neck were being pinched shut by the mandarin's arm, causing her head to

run out of blood long before her lungs ran out of air. Her face turned a shocking shade of purple-gray, and the Jam - biya slipped from her hand. Her eyes rolled back in their

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sockets; then she stopped struggling and began to spasm.

Hsieh dropped her at a guard's feet. "Greatly unexpected. I am most curious to see what we find in Lady Feng's chamber."

Ruha could not take her eyes off Wei Dao's unconscious form. During all her training with the Harpers, she had never seen a woman move with such deadly speed and grace. Had she not seen the ease with which Hsieh disabled her, the witch would not have believed anyone—especially a one-eyed man of Hsieh's age—could move more swiftly.

"Minister Hsieh, I thank you for my life," Ruha said. "You are a man of many hidden talents."

The mandarin smiled. "In Shou Lung, we long ago learn wisdom of being better warriors than those who guard us." He turned to Yu Po and gestured at Wei Dao. "Bind princess well and take her to apartment. Inspect her chambers to see that she is ... safe."

Yu Po bowed, then began issuing orders in Shou. As Hsieh's guards scurried into action, the mandarin selected a half-dozen men to accompany him, then led the way up an immense staircase to the second story, where he astonished the palace sentries by allowing Ruha to use her wind magic to open the door to the Third Virtuous Concubine's apartment. The minister scowled at the macabre frescoes that decorated Lady Feng's antechamber, then followed the witch through the dressing closet into the bedchamber.

Ruha went straight to the corner and pulled Lady Feng's writing desk from the wall. When she did not hear any scratching or whining on the other side of the secret door, she began to fear that Wei Dao had done something with Chalk Ears. The witch took a deep breath and, wondering how Hsieh would react if it turned out she could prove neither Lady Feng's indiscretion nor her abduction, pushed open the hidden panel.

The secret chamber looked as though a whirlwind had erupted inside. The worktable in the center of the room

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had been swept clean of its cauldrons and balances, which now sat upon the floor amid a knee-deep jumble of books and broken glass. Heaps of severed bat wings, blackened fingernails, and silk-wrapped spider eggs were scattered everywhere, often coated by stripes of rainbow-hued dusts and powders. One of the cabinets had even been pulled over and now lay broken into two splintered pieces.

Save for a sleeping cushion, sandbox, and two silver bowls containing untouched supplies of food and water, there was no sign of Chalk Ears. Although the jagged shards of glass had been broken out of the window through which Ruha had escaped, the casement itself remained open and not repaired.

"Is this what you bring me to see?" Hsieh asked.

"No. What I brought you to see is gone."

Ruha could almost see what had happened. After she jumped through the window, Wei Dao, or some other guards, had tried to capture Chalk Ears. The familiar had panicked, and the ensuing struggle had destroyed Lady Feng's laboratory. In the end, the little creature had escaped through the broken window, and the princess had elected to leave it open in the hope that the beast would return.

The witch picked her way across the room. "I had hoped to show you Lady Feng's familiar." She picked up the red sleeping cushion. "But I fear Chalk Ears has fled."

"Chalk Ears? Perhaps you mean Winter Blossom?"

Ruha held her hands about a foot apart. "It was a little creature that could have been a cross between a monkey and a raccoon. I found it here when I—" The witch stopped short of admitting what she had been doing in Lady Feng's chambers. "It looked like it had not eaten for a week."

"He," Hsieh corrected. The mandarin waded into the room and kneeled beside the familiar's lair. "Winter Blossom is male lemur—though I think Eye Biter is better name."

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Ruha caught herself staring at Hsieh's silken eye patch and looked away. "Winter Blossom is more than a pet to Lady Feng. Had she departed the Ginger Palace willingly, I doubt she would have left him behind."

Hsieh sighed heavily. "But familiar is not here."

The mandarin waved his guards into the room, and Ruha's mouth went dry. She glanced out the empty window pane, already summoning to mind the same wind spell she had used to escape Wei Dao, then swallowed her fear and told herself not to panic. The guards arrived and arrayed themselves around Hsieh, at the same time blocking the witch's path through the window.

Ruha squatted beside Winter Blossom's silver bowls and waved her hand over the contents. "The familiar escaped after Lady Feng's departure, or these would not be full. Wei Dao hopes to lure him back."

Hsieh met Ruha's gaze. "I do not doubt what you say. If Lady Feng takes Winter Blossom, she takes his bed." He picked up the lemur's sleeping cushion, then tossed it to a guard. "So, where is Lady Feng, and why does she not take familiar?"

"I told you—she was abducted."

"So you do, but I think you are lying. It is so much better if she takes lover." Hsieh shook his head in disappointment, then gave Ruha a stern glance. "Perhaps you tell me what you are doing in Ginger Palace—and no lies. Today, I grow impatient with lies."

When Ruha paused to consider how much she should say, the mandarin rose. "Please do not refuse." He glanced at two guards, who took Ruha by the arms and jerked her to her feet. "Truth potions are most damaging to mind, and you cannot escape."

"It was not my intention to try to escape—and let us both hope that does not become necessary." Ruha fixed an icy glare on Hsieh and remained silent. When he finally waved his guards off, she began, "Not long ago, a staff of some sentimental value was stolen from the Lady Yanseldara . . ."

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The witch told Hsieh of how someone was using the staff to steal Yanseldara's spirit, and of Vaerana's belief that Lady Feng was responsible, and of her own effort to recover the staff from the Ginger Palace, and, finally, of her subsequent discovery of the Third Virtuous Concubine's abduction. The mandarin listened patiently and closely. He did not interrupt, even when she told him of Tang's involvement in the Cult of the Dragon and how the prince had attempted to conceal his mother's kidnapping.

When Ruha finished, the mandarin contemplated her account in silence for many moments, then raised his hand and held up three splayed fingers. "I have ques-

tions. Where is Prince Tang now?"

"He seems to have decided that the only way to redeem himself is to personally rescue his mother." Ruha did not say in whose eyes the prince wished to redeem himself. The less Hsieh knew about the prince's attraction to her, the better. "I believe he has taken a company of guards and gone to attempt that."

Hsieh winced, but nodded and folded down one of his fingers. "Second question. Theft of spirit takes no more than two or three days. Why has Lady Feng not finished?"

"I am not certain. But I do know Prince Tang was awaiting the fresh ylang blossoms aboard the Ginger Lady." When the mandarin furrowed his brow, Ruha hastened to add, "The kidnapper believes he is in love with Yanseldara. Perhaps they are for a love potion?"

Hsieh shook his head. "Then why does he steal spirit? Only reason to use love potion on spirit is to bind it to another spirit, for long journey through Ten Courts of Afterlife."

A feeling of nausea crept over Ruha. "The thief is ... he is not living. He is one of the undead."

An expression of pity passed over Hsieh's face, and he folded down his second finger. "Final question. Who is kidnapper?"

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This was the question Ruha had been dreading. She had omitted any mention of Cypress's identity, fearing that the mandarin would decide it was safer for Lady Feng to cooperate with the dragon than to help Vaerana save Yanseldara. Nevertheless, the witch had no choice except to hope she could persuade Hsieh to ally with her, for it was growing clearer all the time that she did not understand enough about Lady Feng's magic to save

Yanseldara.

"Who take Lady Feng?" Hsieh demanded.
Ruha swallowed, then said, "The same barbarian who tried to assassinate you."

Hsieh frowned at her. "No one tries to kill me."
Ruha nodded. "On the Ginger Lady. The dragon."
"You are greatly mistaken." Hsieh's rebuke was both confident and gentle. "Dragon is after gold and jewels—"

"And you," Ruha replied. "His name is Cypress, and he is the leader of the Cult of the Dragon. He fears you have come to replace Tang and stop the palace's trade in poisons, and so he tried to kill you."

"That is most impossible." Hsieh shook his head stubbornly. "I send messenger with word of my visit only one day before dragon attack. Because I travel with only light bodyguard, I instruct Prince and Princess to tell no one of my journey—unless they tell Lady Feng?"

Ruha shook her head. "I overheard them say Lady Feng was abducted before your message arrived."

"Then dragon cannot know I am coming. Who tell

him?"

That was when Yu Po appeared at the door. "Esteemed

Minister, I beg permission to report."

Hsieh frowned and started to hold him off, but Ruha, who needed time to think, said, "Yu Po is not interrupting. Let him speak."

Hsieh nodded to his adjutant, who quickly picked his way across the debris and bowed. "Princess Wei Dao is most comfortable in her apartment," Yu Po reported. "As I was inspecting her chambers to be certain of her safety,

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I find this."

The adjutant opened his hand, revealing the exotic Calimshan gold that Tombor had put into Ruha's coffer to impress Wei Dao.

Hsieh studied the coin, then scowled at his adjutant. "Wei Dao is Princess, Yu Po. Do you expect to find no gold in her chamber?"

"Not gold like this."

Yu Po pinched the edges of the coin with both hands and pulled. The coin came apart, revealing a tiny compartment where a small paper message might be concealed.

Hsieh took the two halves from his adjutant. "Most ingenious. Do you find what is inside?"

"No," Yu Po admitted.

"But I know who sent it to her," Ruha said. "And if I am correct, Esteemed Mandarin, I also know who told Cypress you were aboard the Ginger Lady."

"Wei Dao?" Hsieh asked.

"That coin was given to me by someone who promised it would win the princess's hospitality," Ruha said. "It did."

"How come Yu Po finds it in her chamber?"

"I saw her sneak it from my gold coffer. The person who gave it to me said the princess had a fondness for foreign coins," Ruha explained. "Now I think it contained a message from a spy in Moonstorm House, warning Wei Dao of my identity. The princess has been most insistent about wishing to kill me—regardless of Prince Tang's commands to the contrary."

Hsieh pushed the two halves of the coin together and folded it into his palm, then waved the witch toward the door. "It seems our mutual problem is solved, does it not, Lady Ruha?"

Ruha did not move. "No. How could it be?"

"If dragon kidnaps Lady Feng, then kidnapper is no threat."

The witch was confused by the mandarin's misunder-

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standing—until she recalled that Hsieh had seen her destroy Cypress on the Dragonmere. She had said nothing about the dragon taking another body, and Ruha certainly saw no reason to broach the subject now.

"Do you not understand, Lady Ruha?" Hsieh asked. "We have only to locate dragon's lair; then we find both Lady Feng and Yanseldara's stolen staff."

"Of course!" Ruha did her best to sound astonished. "And if you will me tell more about these ylang blossoms, perhaps I know someone who can be tricked into leading us to the lair."

Eleven

Tang's punt came to another fork in the slough. His boatpushers jammed

their poles into the black water, the butts angled forward to halt the little dugout while he guessed at the way to Cypress's lair. Behind him arose a gentle sloshing as his men struggled to stop their heavy log rafts. Save for the unremitting hum of mosquitos, no other sound broke the silence of the swamp. The evening light lay upon the glassy waters as sinuous and wispy as smoke, yielding no hint of the sun's location. Along the banks of the channels rose tangled webs of prop roots, supporting thickets of vine-choked bog cane as impenetrable to the eye as walls of stone. Even the sky itself was hidden from view, concealed behind a murky canopy of moss-draped boughs. Somewhere nearby loomed the Giant's Run Mountains, a chain of high peaks lying half a day's canter southeast of the Ginger Palace, but Tang could not find the way to their steep slopes. Though he had commanded his men to remain confident, he could feel their trust ebbing with every minute he remained lost, and even he was losing faith in his abilities. The swamp was so small that it had no name—indeed, few outside the Cult of the Dragon knew it existed at all—and twice the prince had come to Lair here with fellow cult members. It seemed impossible that its meager maze of waterways should

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disorient him or anyone else, yet Tang had been trying to locate Cypress's hole for more than two hours.

The punt rocked beneath the prince's feet. He glanced back to see the commander of the palace garrison, General Fui D'hang, stepping into the dugout from a wagon-sized raft of lashed logs. A squat, flat-cheeked man with an unwavering scowl and granite eyes, he wore a helmet of silver-trimmed brass and an oversized battle tunic over leather armor. Most of the men behind him were dressed in a similar manner, save their helmets were steel with brass trim.

The general bowed. "May it please the Prince to hear me."

As with all Fui said, the statement was a command, not a request. Prince Tang nodded, but looked away to emphasize that he would not allow the general to bully him.

"Night falls soon, and men are uneasy at being lost—"

"Do I say we are lost?" Tang whirled on the general so fast that, had his boatpushers not had their poles planted on the bottom, the punt would have capsized. "We are not lost. Dragon uses Invisible Art to confuse honorable soldiers. They may eat another lasal leaf."

Fui did not turn to issue the command. "Since you are not lost, perhaps you guide us to dry land. It is better to camp outside swamp."

"No. We must rescue Lady Feng tonight."

The general's eyes remained stony. "If we perish in dark—"

"Tonight."

Fui's Ups tightened. "Surely, Wise Prince knows it is inauspicious to attack eminent dragon at all, but to attack at night..."

"This dragon is different!" snapped Tang. "Cypress does not have favor of Celestial Bureaucracy!"

"Perhaps Wise Prince explains why it takes so long to reach dragon's palace?" Fui insisted. "This swamp is size of peasant village. By now, we should find dragon's home

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through tenacity alone."

"It is question of patience, not 'finding!' " Prince Tang turned away from General Fui, silently cursing the absence of a wu-jen. A little magic would go far toward helping him find his goal. "Tell men to be ready. Not far now!"

Selecting a direction at random, the prince pointed down the fork on the right. General Fui barely had time to leap back to his own raft before Tang's boatpushers guided the punt into the channel. As they traveled down the curving slough, the mosquito hum became a maddening drone. Though the Shou berry juice the prince had rubbed into his flesh protected him from bites, clouds of the insects dragged across his skin like chiffon.

Tang began to sense an enormous, dark presence ahead. The canopy arched higher above the water, and the swamp grew steadily murkier and more forlorn. The beards of moss vanished from the branches alongside the

passage, replaced by the curtainlike webs of brilliantly striped spiders with abdomens as large as a man's fist. Ahead of the punt, dark chevrons appeared in the water as startled snakes swam for cover. The ends of submerged logs sprouted eyes and watched the flotilla pass. A half-remembered murmur echoed through the trees from somewhere ahead: the purl of water trickling down some steep slope.

Tang felt butterflies fluttering in his stomach and beads of sweat sliding down his brow. He withdrew a handful of lasal leaves from a basket in the bottom of the dugout and distributed them among his boatpushers, then placed two into his own mouth and chewed. As the protective fog arose inside his head, he began to regard the impending battle with increasing giddiness. Soon, he would have vengeance on his enemy. After his men destroyed Cypress's new body, he himself would find and smash the spirit gem. Then, when Yen-Wang-Yeh's servants came to drag Cypress's wayward spirit down to the Ten Courts of the Afterlife, Tang would recount all the

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dragon's crimes against himself and Shou Lung, thus insuring a stern verdict that would condemn his foe to ten thousand centuries of torment in the Eighteenth

Hell.

The rancid stench of rotting fish began to waft through the air. The channel widened into a broad basin of black water strewn with mats of bog scum and studded by the naked gray trunks of a bald cypress stand. On the far side of the pool, a steep, green-blanketed scarp rose abruptly from the murky water and disappeared above the swamp's gloomy canopy. Down the face of this slope snaked a tiny ribbon of silver water, the same small brook casting its purl throughout the slough. To the left of the stream, barely visible through the whirling clouds of mosquitos, was a huge, half-submerged grotto, the moss curtain that dangled over its mouth tattered and frayed by the constant passage of some huge body.

Tang ordered his boatpushers to stop. Though the area had been darker and more crowded on the two occasions the prince had visited it before, he recognized it instantly. Just outside the cavern lay a toppled cypress where the dragon roosted during Lair, with the entire cult arrayed before him upon the same rafts now occupied by General Fui and his men. Rising from the waters around the perch were heaps of large fish skeletons, some with bits of gray, gritty hide still clinging to the thick bones, and hanging in the limbs of nearby trees were hundreds of long-toothed jaws.

Tang was most distressed to see that Cypress had already devoured so many sharks. From what the prince had learned during his brief association with the cult, when a dracolich's body was destroyed, he lost the ability to speak, cast magic spells, and use his terrible breath weapon. Unfortunately, he could regain those capabilities by consuming a mere tenth of his previous body, which he could always locate via a strange mystical bond—even if the corpse had been burned, shredded, or eaten. Judging by the number of skeletons lying in the water, Cypress

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could not be far from a full recovery.

General Fui's raft pulled alongside the punt, and Tang pointed at the cavern. "That is dragon's palace." The prince allowed himself the pleasure of a touch of sarcasm at the term 'palace.' "Men a[^]e ready?"

The general glanced at the four rafts behind his, each bearing fifteen anxious warriors, and flashed a hand signal. A gentle clatter rustled over the pond as his men reached for their halberds and pushed lasal leaves into their mouths. Fui watched a moment, then slipped a leaf between his own lips and nodded.

Tang drew his sword, then looked back to the cave and waited for General Fui to lead the soldiers forward. Thanks to his lasal-induced daze, the prince realized he could actually see the murk gathering over the swamp. It looked like a thick, oily smoke seeping from the fetid depths of Cypress's lair, where the dragon rested upon his bed of gold, dreaming of Yanseldara and filling the air with the dank gloom of his wicked obsession.

The prince's thoughts turned to his mother, and he found himself wondering what effect the unnatural murk would have on her. If the fumes darkened her fair skin, she would never forgive—most cursed lasal! That was the trouble with it; the user found it difficult to keep his mind focused on the task at hand, and he sometimes found his head filled with ridiculous ideas.

Noting that Fui still had not given the order to advance, Prince Tang looked to his general. "Why do you wait?" He waved his sword at the cavern. "Go kill dragon!"

Fui's head slowly turned toward Tang's punt. The general's pupils were nearly as large as his irises, and a blank, almost muddled expression had fallen over his normally resolute face.

"You do not lead us into cavern, Brave Prince?"

"Me?" Tang looked at the sword in his hand and understood the reason for the general's confusion. "I cannot lead way into danger. I am Prince!"

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"That is what I try to say in Ginger Palace." Under the lasal's influence, Fui spoke more freely than he would have otherwise. "Do I not suggest it is foolish for you to take field? Do I not hint that your inadequate preparations oblige men to take extra risks to protect you?"

The lasal haze inside Tang's mind began to darken and churn. "I am Prince! Soldiers die at my will!"

"True, but Honorable Prince does not waste their lives!" the general spat. "If you desire Lady Pong's rescue, you must stand aside and let someone who knows—"

A chorus of snickers filled the air behind Fui. The general stopped speaking in midsentence, and his widening eyes betrayed his astonishment at the words coming from his mouth. He dropped to his knees and kowtowed on the raft, pressing his forehead down so close to the edge that his silver-trimmed helmet fell off and slipped beneath the inky waters.

"Mighty Prince, I do not know these words! They are not my own!"

Tang hardly heard the apology. The lasal clouds inside his mind had worked themselves into a storm, and he could think of nothing but his fury.

"Words belong to him who speaks them." Tang glanced at the rafts behind Fui, where more than seventy soldiers were studying the swamp's gloomy canopy and biting their cheeks to keep from laughing. Bolts of lightning began to flash inside the prince's head. "Lasal loosens tongue. It cannot change secret thoughts of any man."

"Merciful Prince, I command garrison of Ginger Palace since it is built, and before that I humbly serve in personal guard of Lady Feng. Please to allow me honor of dying in battle." Fui lifted his head and dared to meet Tang's eyes. "Let me lead soldiers into dragon's palace."

"I myself lead way into lair." Tang glared at his general until the last soldier no longer found it necessary to bite his cheeks; then he pronounced Fui's sentence: "Shou general must respect master with heart as well as tongue, so that he does not forget himself and make men

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laugh at Worthy Prince. To fail in this is treason."

Fui's face went as stiff as a mask. He whispered a prayer, beseeching his ancestors to find a place for him in the Celestial Bureaucracy, then touched his brow to the log. "I am ready."

Tang looked past Fui to Yuan Ti, the moon-faced commander of the sentries who protected his lizard park. Since the young officer had already faced the dragon and lived, General Fui had selected him as second in command for this mission.

Yuan swallowed and reached for his sword, but his hand began to tremble, and he did not draw the weapon. The youth clenched his teeth as though fighting a wave of nausea, and tears welled in his eyes.

Tang scowled at the hesitation. "Why do you delay? Punish General Fui's insolence!"

Yuan managed to pull his sword halfway from its sheath, then turned away sobbing. The youth's profile accentuated his flat cheeks, and it was then Tang realized the boy's identity. The fury faded from the lasal - induced storm inside the prince's head, and the tempest became instead a drizzle that clouded his thoughts with cold, sick regret. It was not uncommon for Shou generals to make places for their sons in their own commands, but how was Tang to know the youth's identity? A Shou prince did not trouble himself with the domestic lives of his inferiors. He could hardly be expected to know every son that his officers brought to the Ginger Palace.

Tang allowed General Fui's boy to weep, grateful for a few moments to struggle with this new dilemma. As much as he disliked the idea of ordering a son to slay his own father, he could hardly retract the command now. The men had already come close to treason when they laughed at him earlier; to tolerate any further insubordination would only convince them that he was a weak and inept leader. Yuan would have to obey the command. If there was another way to solve the problem, the prince could not see it through the lasal haze.

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In a gentle but loud voice. Tang said, "You are a Shou soldier. You must do as I order."

The youth choked back his sobs and turned to face Tang. "Merciful Prince, the lasal leaves—"

General Fui raised his head. "Silence, Yuan!" His voice had assumed the hard edge of command. "Do not dishonor our ancestors by arguing with your Prince!"

The general pressed his brow to the logs again. The thought flashed through Tang's mind that there must be a way to show mercy without showing weakness, but it was chased into the lasal haze by a great cry from Yuan's mouth. In a motion too fast to see, the youth unsheathed his sword and brought the blade down on his father's neck. There was a wet crack, and Fui's head toppled off the raft into the swamp. The general's body shuddered once, then went limp and slipped out of its kowtow, slowly stretching forward to push its headless shoulders into the dark pool.

Fui's head rolled in the water, bringing his granite eyes around to stare vacantly upward. Tang's stomach began to feel queasy, but he clenched his teeth against the feeling and forced himself not to look away. The whole point of the punishment had been to show his soldiers that he was a strong leader, and he would not accomplish that by allowing the gaze of a dead man to intimidate him.

Yuan ripped the front off his silken battle tunic and used it to dab his father's blood off the blade. When he finished, he sheathed his sword, then carefully folded the cloth and slipped it beneath his leather corselet.

The adjutant bowed to Tang, his eyes now as hard as his father's. "I obey your command. My Prince."

Tang honored the youth by returning his bow. "The Minister of War shall—" The prince had to interrupt himself to take a deep breath and regain control of his churning stomach. "He shall hear of your dedication to duty."

Yuan's eyes showed no sign of softening, but they did shift away from the prince's face toward the water, where

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a dozen shapes were rapidly drifting toward General Fui's body. At first, Tang took the forms for floating logs. Then he noticed the eyes and nostrils protruding above the bog scum, and also the powerful tails snaking back and forth behind their bodies.

The first beast slid between the prince's dugout and Yuan's raft. Silently, it took Fui's head into its jaws and slid beneath the dark water, vanishing from sight almost before Tang realized he was looking at an alligator.

Yuan reached down to pull the rest of his father's body back onto the raft, then almost lost a hand as another of the monsters latched on to the corpse's shoulder. The cadaver slid off the logs and disappeared beneath the surface in a quick swirl. A second creature, easily as long as Tang's dugout, dove after the body-stealer, and the water erupted into a bloody, churning froth as the two animals tore the cadaver to pieces.

Tang finally lost control of his rebellious stomach and turned away while it purged itself—then nearly lost his head as a pair of tooth-filled jaws rose from the water to snap at his face. He slashed at it ineffectually with the sword in his hand, and his boatpushers stepped over to hold the thing at bay while he finished retching. Behind the prince sounded a startled scream, followed by a loud splash and the brief gurgle of a man's voice.

An astonished murmur rustled through the swamp;

then half the soldiers in the company cried out in fear
The rippling siffle of halberds slashing water filled the air. Several men fell into the pond and shrieked as they were dragged beneath the surface.

When Tang's stomach finally finished with him, he wiped his mouth on a boatpusher's sleeve, then turned to see his entire company of soldiers besieged by alligators. The men were standing back-to-back in the center of all five rafts, thrusting the tips of their long halberds at the throng of circling alligators—several of which looked longer than the vessels themselves. Many of the logs were smeared with blood, while the water was littered

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with broken halberd shafts, ribbons of shredded silk, and alligators writhing in pain.

As Tang watched, a swimming alligator whipped its body around, driving its head and forequarters onto a raft. The attack was met by a flurry of driving halberds, most of which pierced the beast's armored hide and sank to a depth of several inches. The monster clutched at the logs with the claws of its stubby forelegs and dragged itself forward. The men braced themselves, trying to shove their blades deeper into their attacker's flesh.

The creature ignored the assault and continued to claw its way onto the raft. One warrior lost his footing and slid across the raft, where another alligator seized his ankle and dragged him, screaming, into the scum-covered waters. Several others, finding their halberds' damp shafts slipping backward through their grasp, dropped their polearms to reach for their swords. Only one man could drive his weapon deep enough to cause

the behemoth any injury. The alligator simply snapped its head to one side and jerked the weapon out of the soldier's hands, then retreated into the water.

Tang peered over the side of his dugout and saw several alligators floating alongside, their ravenous gazes searching for something to snatch. Fortunately, the punt's sides were high enough to conceal his vulnerable legs, or one of the beasts would certainly have pulled him into the swamp by now. As it was, he took the precaution of raising his arms above his chest and ordering his boat-pushers to do the same, lest one of the creatures attempt to snatch a dangling hand and capsize the punt.

"Perhaps Wise Prince cares to give order?"

Yuan stood in the center of his own blood-streaked raft, apparently oblivious to the screams of the legless man at his feet. The young officer was watching Tang with what could only be called a look of impertinent impatience, as though he understood exactly what needed to be done and knew his commander for too much of a fool to see it.

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Tang scowled in thought, determined not to lose another face by asking Yuan's advice. The prince could not order an advance without forcing the men to step within reach of the alligators' snapping jaws, but neither did he see any sense in remaining where they were and allowing the monsters to pluck them off the rafts one-by-one. What they needed was magic. A wu-jen could drive the beasts away, so his soldiers could get on with the important business of finding and slaying the dragon.

An angry light flared in Yuan's eyes. "When enemy attacks, it is customary for commander to issue order."

"Alligators are not enemy!" Tang snapped, waving his sword at the beasts between their vessels. "They are stupid animals."

A loud thump sounded in the bottom of Tang's dugout. He looked down to see a scaly brown cord gathering itself into a coil. Whether because of the lasal haze in his mind or the shock of having the thing drop into his boat, the prince did not recognize the writhing tendril until it showed the pink lining of its mouth. Tang calmly brought his sword down, catching the snake behind the head.

The prince did not enjoy snakes as much as he did lizards, but he knew enough about the species to recognize the white-mouthed viper as more of a swimmer than

a tree climber. He scowled and looked up, then cried out in surprise as three more dark, writhing ropes dropped out of the canopy overhead. One of the snakes splashed into the water beside the dugout, where it was promptly snapped up by an alligator, but the other two plopped into the bottom of the punt.

Almost before he realized it, Tang's sword had lashed out to sever the head from one serpent. The other recovered from its fall quickly enough to bury its fangs into a boatpusher's leg. Unlike the other two snakes, this one was gray, with a black diamond pattern and rattles on its tail. The victim screeched and reached for his dagger. Before the man could draw his weapon, Tang grasped the viper behind its head and yanked it free. He tossed the

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serpent into the water, where a ravenous alligator quickly avenged its attack on the prince's servant.

The snake bite bled profusely, instantly coating the boatpusher's foot in sticky red syrup. The man opened his mouth to thank Tang, then cried out and dropped into the bottom of the punt. He clutched his leg and began to squirm, causing the dugout to rock dangerously.

"Stop, fool!" Tang ordered. By the panicked cries echoing across the pond, the prince knew that his boatpusher was not the only soldier to suffer a snake bite. "Do you mean to capsize us?"

The man looked up. "What does it matter? I die anyway. We all die!"

Tang slapped the man. "Poison makes bite bleed and hurt, but it does not kill—unless you spill us into swamp with alligators!" Though he was not particularly fond of serpents, the prince's poison trade had taught him more than a little about their venom. "Now stand up and return to duty."

Tang glanced up and saw another rope form dropping out of the gloomy boughs overhead. He caught this snake on his sword and flicked it away, then quickly returned his eyes to the canopy. Though it was difficult to see into the murk above, it seemed to him that the branches were alive with slinking, writhing forms, all working their way into positions over his small flotilla of rafts. The behavior seemed most unnatural for snakes, which were usually more anxious to avoid trouble than start it.

Tang hazarded a glance at the rafts and was horrified to see his soldiers in a panic. They were lying prone on the logs, groaning over their bleeding bites and begging their ancestors for help, or they were dancing madly

about on the logs, hacking at serpents and trying to stay beyond the reach of the voracious alligators. Many had failed already. The water was thick with severed limbs and shredded leather corselets, and some of the behemoths in the water were even beginning to drift away, each clutching a drowned man in its crooked jaws.

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"This is dragon's doing!" Tang yelled. "He fears to show himself!"

Another pair of snakes dropped into his dugout. He dispatched one, while the bitten boatpusher used his pole to fling the other to the alligators.

"Take up poles and go to cavern!" the prince commanded. "Do not fear snakes! If you are bitten, you can still fight."

Incredibly, the soldiers ignored their attackers and obeyed. The alligators continued to pull men into the water, and the snakes continued to rain down on their heads, but the rafts started to drift forward. Now that the company had orders, the entire troop was focused on its goal, and it did not seem to matter how many of the comrades fell. Thinking that perhaps he had a natural aptitude for military leadership, Prince Tang flicked another serpent into the water and commanded his boatpushers forward, then turned to face the cavern.

He found Cypress roosting on the toppled tree outside the cavern. The dragon looked half as large as he had in the spicehouse, with scales so dark they seemed almost shadows in the murky swamp light. Perched beside Cypress were a pair of small wyverns that had been fluttering about the swamp during the prince's earlier visits. The creatures looked like huge iguanas, save that their thick tails ended in needle-sharp barbs and they had wings instead of forelegs.

Cypress's empty eye sockets swung toward the prince. Am I to assume you don't have the ylang oil?

Tang's knees nearly buckled. His grip grew so weak that he dropped his sword into the bottom of the boat.

"I have come for Lady Feng. Then we talk about oil."

There is nothing to talk about. Without the oil, you will find only death.

"I prefer that fate to disgrace of leaving venerable mother with you."

Tang retrieved his weapon, quietly relieved that

Cypress had not yet recovered his voice. Without his

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breath weapon and magic spells, the dragon would not prove so difficult to defeat. The prince glanced over his shoulder, and when he saw the remains of his small company still behind him, he raised his sword. His hand was trembling so badly that the blade wobbled like the mast of a tempest-tossed caravel, but he did not let that stop him from pointing it at Cypress.

"There is enemy! Do not be frightened. He cannot spray you with acid, and he cannot hurt you with magic!"

Tang's soldiers raised their spears and cheered bravely, then allowed their rafts to drift to a stop and glowered at the dracolich. Cypress opened his muzzle slightly, returning the troop's glare with a mocking, yellow-toothed grin. The two wyverns licked their chops, and the alligators pulled two more men into the water.

The prince scowled at his men, unable to understand why they had stopped advancing. "Attack!"

"In what manner, Honorable Prince?" The question came from Yuan, who stood on the raft closest to Tang's dugout.

The order seemed clear enough to the prince. "Attack with swords and halberds, of course!"

Yuan allowed himself the briefest shake of his head, then turned to the troops. "Number One Raft, assault to right. Number Two Raft to center. Number Three to left, and others remain in reserve." When the men began to maneuver as ordered, the adjutant bowed to Tang. "Perhaps Brave Prince wishes to move to safer position behind reserves?"

Tang almost said yes, then remembered how his men had struggled to hide their laughter during General Fui's unfortunate slip of tongue. "No. I lead attack, as I say earlier."

Tang ordered his punt forward and was surprised by the strength of the fear that boiled up inside him. It suffused his entire being, filling him with a hot, queasy sensation as foul as bile. He felt flushed and dizzy and achy, as though he were physically ill, and it seemed that his

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whole body had suddenly gone weak. Cypress remained on his roost, flanked by his two wyverns and calmly awaiting the battle, his empty eye sockets never straying

from the prince's dugout.

Tang chewed another lasal leaf, hoping that the sickening dread he felt was the result of a mind attack and not his own weak constitution. The haze inside his mind grew thicker, but his fear did not subside.

Cypress allowed the prince's dugout to advance almost into halberd-hurling range, then nudged the two wyverns. The beasts folded their wings and tipped forward, slipping into the swamp as quietly as alligators. They dove beneath the surface, then swam toward Tang's boat, the bristling crests along their spines slicing through the scummy water like shark fins.

Tang dropped his sword and grabbed a boatpusher's halberd, then willed his heavy legs to carry him to the front of the punt. He braced his feet against the walls and tried to ignore the voice calling through the lasal haze inside his head, urging him to remember himself and take his proper place behind the reserves. The prince raised his halberd and watched the wyverns approach. They came more or less straight on, their spine crests cutting through the water to each side of the dugout. He angled his weapon to the right and thrust the blade into the water, aiming for the space between the creature's shoulder blades.

The halberd bit deep into the wyvern's thick hide and nearly jumped from Tang's hands. An unexpected scream of wild, brutal exhilaration burst from the prince's lips. He clamped down on the weapon's shaft and dropped into a squat, both to drive the blade deeper and to keep from being jerked out of the dugout. The creature's head erupted from the water, filling the swamp with a loud, sizzling hiss.

Tang jerked his halberd free and swung the blade, axelike, at the creature's head. The beast retracted its sinuous neck. Instead of counterstriking, it hissed again,

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wagging a forked tongue as long as a pennon flag.

Tang had seen whiptail lizards wag their tongues at prey often enough to know what was coming next. He dove into the bottom of the dugout and heard the wyvern's barbed tail swishing over his back. The sound ended in a slurpy thud, then a boatpusher—the snake-bitten one, judging by his delirious voice—screamed.

With a trembling hand, the prince grabbed his sword, dropped it, grabbed it again, and came up swinging in time to see the wyvern's tail jerk his boatpusher from the punt. The fellow landed facedown and did not move. So

deadly and quick was the wyvern's poison that the man puffed up before Tang's eyes. The flesh on his hands and neck grew black and slimy, while the red stain blossoming around the man's head suggested his nose was bleeding profusely.

The wyvern flicked its victim off its tail, then dove back beneath the water and swam toward Number Three Raft. Tang remembered the other beast and spun around, half-expecting to feel a tail barb piercing his own flesh. He found only an empty dugout, with a forsaken halberd and a pool of black slime to mark where the second boat-pusher had been standing a moment before.

Tang's earlier jubilation had vanished like smoke into fog; now he felt helpless and frightened. If a halberd could barely scratch a wyvern, how would it pierce a dragon's thick armor? He had been a fool to come into this swamp without a wu-jen.

The men on Number Two and Number Three Rafts voiced their battle cries and thrust their halberds into the swamp. A pair of tails lashed out of the water almost as one, each driving a barb through a soldier's leather armor. Tang saw scales rippling as the wyverns pumped their victims full of poison, then a flurry of blades as his soldiers hacked at the beasts' sinuous tails.

In the next instant, the back end of Number Three Raft rose on a wyvern's back. The creature's wings beat the swamp as it struggled to raise the boat higher. Men

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tumbled into the water, screaming and slashing at alligators. Finally, when the raft had grown light enough, the wyvern twisted sideways and flipped it.

Number Two Raft suffered a similar fate; then the two creatures dove beneath the surface and swam toward the rafts Yuan had held in reserve.

Tang grabbed a halberd and used it to push his punt after Number One Raft, which had nearly reached Cypress's roost. It was difficult to say whether the dragon was watching the approaching vessel or not. He held his head turned to one side and slightly cocked, so that one empty eye socket was turned toward the dark water and the other on the murky canopy. His scaly lips were slightly curled, as though he found the cacophony of howling voices a pleasant evening serenade.

Number One Raft scraped past a heap of shark skeletons and stopped beside Cypress's roost, less than twenty

paces from the dragon. Several men quickly formed a wall at the front of the craft while their companions gathered behind them.

Tang pushed harder, trying to catch up before they launched their attack. The voice in his lasal-clouded head kept urging him to turn back. The closer he came to his foe, the less he cared about the disrespect his men had shown him earlier—or the shame he would bring upon himself by failing to rescue his mother. Nevertheless, the prince continued forward, not because he cared about his men or was suddenly determined to prove that he was no coward, but because he knew that the only way to leave the swamp alive was to kill his foe.

Tang had almost caught Number One Raft when the men in the front hurled their halberds like spears. As the shafts arced toward the dragon, half a dozen soldiers leaped onto the toppled tree and rushed forward to attack. The boatpushers again started to move their clumsy vessel forward.

Cypress calmly brought a wing around to shield himself from the flying halberds. The steel blades pierced the

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leathery scales easily enough, but lacked the force to drag the heavy shafts through the tough hide and penetrate the dragon's body. One weapon splashed into the swamp, but most simply lodged themselves in a wing and dangled there like needles in an oxhide.

Cypress lowered his wing and swept the line of charging warriors off the toppled tree, then hopped off his roost and landed in the middle of the raft. The boat settled a few inches beneath the water, but did not sink, and its occupants whirled on their foe in a flurry of flashing steel. Growling and hissing like one of his wyverns, the dragon lashed out with tail and wings and sent bodies splashing into the water on all sides.

Tang gave his punt another shove and stepped into the bow, praying his weak knees would have enough strength to hold him up when he leaped onto Number One Raft. Before he arrived, Cypress raked his black talons down the length of the raft, severing the lashings that held it together.

The logs rolled apart, plunging all who had been standing upon them into the swamp. Tang's punt continued to glide forward, and somehow—perhaps because he was too frightened to move—the prince found himself standing fast in the bow, with a clear flank shot and Cypress looking the other way. The prince clamped his arms around his halberd and gathered his rubbery legs

beneath him, determined that the dragon would not shrug off this strike as easily as the wyvern had shrugged off his first.

Tang was staring at the scale through which he intended to drive his halberd, so he did not see Cypress's wing sweeping toward him on the backswing. He simply heard an earsplitting thump, then found himself sailing over the toppled tree trunk with his gold-trimmed helmet flying in one direction and his weapon in another. He splashed into the warm water, sank to the bottom, and nearly got tangled in a bed of fish skeletons before he recovered his wits and kicked free.

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His head ringing and his body aching, Tang broke the surface and peered over the log. The bog scum had erupted into a pink-tinged froth, with the dragon standing waist-deep in blood and shark skeletons, battering his foes with wings and tail and calmly tearing their bodies apart with gore-dripping talons. The prince's warriors could do little to defend themselves. The legs of most were hopelessly tangled among the fish bones, and the rest could barely hold their chins above the water, much less swing their heavy blades powerfully enough to pierce Cypress's thick scales.

The voice inside Tang's head shrieked through the lasal haze, reminding him that he was a Shou prince and should have fled long ago. He managed to ignore it for a short time, but when the alligators appeared at the fringe of the battle and began to drag away the wounded, the voice began to sound wise. Tang pushed away from the log and, moving very slowly to avoid attracting alligators, he slipped beneath the surface and swam toward the mountain.

Twelve

A sliver of pearly light split the mid-night gloom between the gate towers, and Ruha realized the guards of Moonstorm House were opening the gates for her. She lashed her mount with the ends of other reins, urging the exhausted Shou prancer into the ragged semblance of a gallop. The two packhorses behind her snorted in protest, but had little trouble adjusting to the new pace. They were both larger than the witch's mount and, loaded with four sacks of ylang blossoms each, far less heavily burdened.

From behind Ruha came the clatter of firing crossbows, followed instantly by the ringing echoes of iron bolts skipping across cobblestones. One of the packhorses screamed, and the witch's prancer stumbled as the train slowed. She twisted around and saw the last beast hobbling badly. Like the animal ahead of it, its chest was covered in lather, and its eyes were bulging with fear and exhaustion.

Thirty paces down the deserted street, two dozen of Hsieh's guards lashed their mounts madly, making a last desperate effort to catch Ruha. As planned, they were closing the distance and doing everything possible to make it appear they truly wanted to succeed. The lead rider accepted a loaded crossbow from the man at his flank, then raised the weapon and fired. A dark streak

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flashed between him and the hobbling horse. The beast screeched and would have fallen had the other animals not dragged it along, stumbling and staggering.

Cursing her pursuers for heartless killers, Ruha blew a sharp breath in their direction and uttered a simple wind spell. A howling gust tore down the street, blasting the first three riders half out of their saddles. As they struggled to regain their balance, they were overtaken by the galloping throng at their backs; two more soldiers raised their crossbows. Hsieh had commanded his men to make a convincing show of the chase, and Shou were nothing if not obedient.

A chorus of strumming bowstrings sounded from atop the gate towers. The leading Shou riders sprouted arrows in their chests and fell from their wooden saddles. The rest of Hsieh's men whipped their reins around, guiding their horses into a sheltering alleyway.

Ruha's prancer clattered through the dark gateway of Moonstorm House into a spacious, hexagonal courtyard of ornamental trees and twining garden pathways. The witch reined in her mount, bringing the entire train to a halt and drawing a relieved nicker from the wounded packhorse. The enormous garden was enclosed by a milky wall, with slender, cone-roofed towers standing at each of the six corners. The castle had no central keep, nor, as far as the witch could tell, any sort of inner defensework at all.

Despite the excitement of the phony chase, Ruha found herself completely and utterly exhausted by the long ride

from the Ginger Palace. This was her second night without sleep. She kept yawning behind her veil, and her eyes were burning with the need to close. She braced her hands on her saddle pommel and fought to clear her head; she could not allow herself to even think of resting, not until she had laid her trap.

Captain Fowler rushed from a gate tower's narrow doorway, followed closely by Vaerana Hawklyn, Tombor the Jolly, and Pierstar Hollowhand. Though the hour was

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well past midnight, they were still dressed in jerkins, tunics, and trousers. They had, no doubt, been up planning tomorrow's assault on the Ginger Palace.

Fowler stopped beside Ruha and took her mount's foam-covered reins. "Are you well, Witch?" The half-ore scowled at the lather on his hand, then wiped it on his pants. "And what have you done to this poor beast?"

"Galoped him all the way from the Ginger Palace, by the looks of it," said Vaerana, joining them. She turned to Pierstar. "You'd better have someone rouse John the farrier and his boys. These horses need some attention."

Pierstar stopped beside the wounded beast and winced at the two bolts lodged in its rump, then turned toward a tower in the back of the castle.

"I'll do it myself," he said. "And I'll send a patrol of Maces after those riders. I doubt we'll catch them, but I don't want them in the city. Those Shou can be sneaky."

Tombor the Jolly went to the first horse and stood on his toes so he could reach the knots. "Perhaps we should unload. Since Ruha risked her life to bring us this cargo, I assume it is of some importance."

"It is." The witch glanced at the cleric just long enough to nod, then stifled a yawn and dismounted. "It's the last ingredient the Cult of the Dragon needs to steal Yanseldara's spirit—ylang blossoms. They arrived on the Ginger Lady with Minister Hsieh."

"Then you've saved Yanseldara!" Fowler's outburst was as much question as exclamation, but that did not stop him from folding Ruha into his arms. "Maybe now you can get me my gold."

"Not so fast." Vaerana went to help Tombor unload the pack train. "As I understand things, stopping the cult's not the same as saving Yanseldara."

"That is correct. I have bought us more time, but

Yanseldara is still in danger until we recover the staff."

Vaerana tossed a sack of ylang blossoms on the ground. "I don't suppose you can tell us where it is?"

The witch shook her head. "I am sorry. Lady Feng's

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familiar was gone. It was all I could do to return with the ylang blossoms."

Vaerana sighed wearily. "I guess I'll have to do this myself."

"I am sorry I failed you."

Vaerana shrugged. "I'm sure you did your best."

The Lady Constable probably did not mean to be insulting, but her patronizing tone vexed Ruha and made the witch burn to expose Tombor's treachery. Unfortunately, vindication would have to wait. Until the cleric was gone, Ruha could not tell Vaerana about his treachery, or about her plan to trick him into leading them to Cypress's lair.

"What are you planning to do?" Ruha tried to sound genuinely sorry for her failure. Once she sprang her trap and exposed Tombor, it would be Vaerana's turn to apologize. "Perhaps I can help?"

Vaerana rolled her eyes, but managed to make a civil reply. "Why don't you get some rest? You look like you need it, and this is better done alone."

"Then you'll try to snatch a member of the cult?" asked Fowler.

Vaerana nodded and reached across a horse to untie another sack of ylang blossoms. "I know a couple of likely places to find one."

Tombor shook his head. "Even if you're lucky enough to catch someone who knows where the lair is, he won't tell you. If you want to make him talk, take me along."

"Sorry, Tombor. We'll be moving fast tonight." Vaerana patted the cleric's stomach. "I don't think you can keep up."

"You'll have to torture them."

Vaerana nodded grimly. "I won't enjoy it."

Somehow, Ruha suspected the Lady Constable of being less than honest.

"Vaerana, before you go, we should talk." Ruha could hardly explain why in front of Tombor, but the last thing she wanted was for Vaerana to leave Moonstorm House.

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"I should tell you of some other things I learned in the Ginger Palace."

"Then talk." Vaerana continued to help Tombor unload. "I don't have all night."

Ruha forced herself not to look in Tombor's direction. "First, Cypress is back."

Vaerana's jaw fell, and she let a sack of blossoms slip from her grasp.

"I saw him in the spicehouse," Ruha explained. "He was smaller than the first time I saw him. He could not speak or use his magic, but it was definitely Cypress. By kidnapping his cult members, you may be drawing his attention to you."

Vaerana turned back to the pack train. "Better to face him in Elversult than in his lair." There was not much conviction in her voice. "What else?"

"Cypress is not stealing Yanseldara's spirit so his cult can control Elversult." Ruha was frantically trying to think of something that would keep the Lady Constable inside Moonstorm House without arousing Tombor's suspicions. "The dragon wants her spirit for himself."

"For himself?" Vaerana echoed.

Ruha nodded. "I think Cypress is in love with Yanseldara, or believes he is."

Tombor raised his brow. "You seem to have learned quite a lot during your visit!"

Behind her veil, Ruha bit her lip and wondered if she had said too much. Her mind was as weary as her body, and she found it difficult to be subtle when her thoughts were so sluggish.

"I overheard a conversation between the prince and the dragon." Then, doing her best to sound indignant, Ruha said, "I am not entirely inept."

"No one said you were—er, at least not lately." Vaerana

motioned Fowler over to hold the wounded packhorse.
"But Cypress doesn't have any reason to love Yanseldara.
She's the one that killed him!"

"You don't know much about men, do you Lady Con-

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stable?" Fowler gave her a roguish, yellow-fanged grin.
"There's a fine half-elf tavern wench over in Saerloon
who slams an ale tankard against my head every time I
see her, and I keep coming back for more. What's that
tell you?"

"That you let your orcish blood get the best of you,"
Vaerana growled. "You ought to know when to quit."

Fowler shrugged, trying not to look hurt. "Maybe, but
what I'm saying is that I don't quit. I keep wanting what
will never be mine. Seems like that's what Cypress is
doing. Yanseldara killed him—maybe Sharee'll kill me
with that tankard someday—and now he's trying to steal
her, just as he stole all that treasure that belonged to
someone else. He wants what he can't have. It's part of
being male."

Vaerana pulled the last of the ylang blossoms off the
wounded horse. "Fair enough. Let's say I don't under-
stand men—not that I'd want to—what does it matter?"
The Lady Constable dropped the sack on the ground. "It
doesn't change anything I've got to do tonight."

Vaerana turned to walk toward one of the towers, and
Ruha, desperate to keep her from leaving, caught her by
the arm.

The Lady Constable frowned at the witch's hand.
"What now?"

"Do you have an oil press?" Ruha asked.

"In the kitchens," Tombor answered. "Why?"

The witch hesitated. She had already baited the trap,
and she worried that in her exhaustion, she would
explain too much and alert Tombor to her trap. On the
other hand, if she did not explain, Vaerana would not
stay to see the traitor take the bait.

"The members of the Cult of the Dragon are not the
only ones who need the ylang oil. After we recover the
staff, we must pour the ylang oil over Yanseldara to draw
her spirit back into her body." Ruha continued to hold
Vaerana's arm. "But if the oil is poured over a vessel con-

taining the spirits of both Yanseldara and Cypress, the

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two will be joined together forever. That is why I believe the dragon is in love with Yanseldara."

"And how did you learn so much about the uses of ylang oil?" Tombor asked.

"I am a witch," Ruha replied, trying to dodge the question with a cryptic reply. "So is Lady Feng."

In fact, Minister Hsieh had explained how to use the ylang oil. He had also provided Ruha with another Shou potion, one with which she was to send a message through Yanseldara to Lady Feng.

Vaerana studied Ruha for several moments, then asked, "So, you're saying we need to press the oil ourselves—and be damned sure the cult doesn't steal it back?"

"Yes." Actually, this was only what Ruha wanted Tombor to believe. The blossoms in the sacks were the old, unsuitable ones; the fresh ylang was still in the Ginger Palace, being pressed in the spicehouse refinery. "That is what I'm saying."

"Fine." Vaerana looked to Tombor. "See to it that the blossoms are pressed and well guarded."

If there had been any lingering doubts in Ruha's mind that Tombor was the spy, they vanished when she saw the delighted twinkle in his eye. "The oil will be ready when you get back."

Vaerana turned back to Ruha. "If you're satisfied, now I've got to go."

With that, Vaerana pulled her arm out of Ruha's grasp and started across the courtyard. The witch stared after her in bewilderment, then scurried to catch up.

"Wait, Vaerana! There is one more thing."

The Lady Constable stopped beneath the dark branches of a fragrant sweetbay tree. "What is it?"

Before the witch could explain, Tombor called, "There's no need to delay Vaerana. If you need something, I'm sure I can help."

Ruha glanced over her shoulder and saw Tombor coming after them, his jolly face bent into a mask of solicitous

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concern. The witch cursed under her breath and turned her back on him.

"Before you leave, you must visit me in my chamber,"

she whispered to Vaerana, "alone!"

Vaerana shook her head. "I don't have time—"

Ruha took her arm again. "You must! Promise me."

Vaerana glanced down at the witch's hand. "Then will

you let me go?"

Ruha nodded and removed her hand. "It is important."

"If you say so." Vaerana looked past Ruha's shoulder to

Tombor, who was already upon them. "Lodge the witch in

Pearl Tower."

"Pearl Tower?" Tombor echoed, clearly surprised.

"Pearl Tower." Vaerana turned to leave. "Are you having trouble with your ears?"

The cleric took Ruha's arm, gripping it more tightly than was necessary. "I'll show you to a chamber as soon as we've seen to the blossoms."

"Perhaps we could go to the tower first," Ruha suggested, worried she would not be there when Vaerana came to see her. "I have not slept in two days."

Tombor shook his head. "You said yourself we can't let these blossoms fall into the hands of the Cult of the Dragon. Besides, the kitchen is on the way to Pearl Tower. It'll take only a few minutes to stop and set up the press."

Ruha accompanied the cleric back to the horses. She removed a small satchel of supplies from her saddle, then helped Fowler and Tombor gather up the bulky sacks of ylang blossoms. Leaving the beasts with a guard, they walked down a chain of meandering pathways to a thatch-roofed shed against the back wall of the fortress. The place smelled of animal grease, smoke, and fresh Heartland spices.

Tombor stopped at the entrance and banged on the wooden door. "Up with you, Silavia! I've business in your kitchen!"

"The cook bars the door when she sleeps," explained

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Fowler. "Otherwise, the night guards pilfer her breakfast tarts."

They had to wait several minutes before a sleepy voice sounded on the other side of the door. "Go away, Tombor. I won't have you calling in the middle of the night. You only want something to eat."

Tombor looked slightly embarrassed. "I've—uh—guests with me, Silavia. We need the oil press. It's for Lady Yanseldara."

Silavia hesitated a moment, then asked, "Truly?"

"Truly," replied Ruha. "The matter is urgent, I assure you."

"Very well." Silavia sounded more put-upon than curious. "Let me throw on an apron."

From inside the building came several moments of bustling and whispering, which elicited a resentful scowl from Tombor. When a muffled thump finally announced the withdrawal of the bar, the cleric pushed the door open and stepped inside, where a stout, tousle-haired woman stood in a nightshirt and crisp white apron. The flickering taper in her hand illuminated an ashen, moon-shaped face with a bottle nose and plump-lipped frown.

Tombor dropped his sacks inside the door, then snatched the candle from the cook and went to light several others. A flickering yellow glow soon filled the room, revealing a neatly kept chamber filled with cutting tables, kneading troughs, and spice barrels. The embers of several spent fires glowed in three different fireplaces, one with a roasting spit over the hearth, one with soup cauldrons sitting in the firebox, and one built beneath a brick oven. Silavia's sleeping pallet lay behind a dough bench, where a burly, black-bearded man stood looking down at a half-eaten honeycake and two empty mead pitchers.

Tombor glared at the embarrassed man for a moment, then growled, "You'd better get yourself to the gate, John. There's a wounded horse there, and Pierstar's looking for you."

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"My thanks for telling me so, Tombor." The farrier, looking happy for any excuse to leave, started toward the door.

Tombor watched the man leave, then turned to Silavia "What was he doing here?"

"It's none of your concern who I give my honeycakes to!" Silavia retorted. "Not that there wouldn't be some for you, if you ever came around at a decent hour."

"It's this trouble with Yanseldara's catalepsy!" the cleric protested. "I've been busy."

"So have I," Silavia snorted. She led the way to a small storage pantry and unlocked the door with a key from her apron. "The oil press is in here, if you want it. Don't expect me to help you with it."

Tombor motioned to Fowler, who dropped his ylang blossoms beside the cleric's and followed him into the little room. Ruha put her own sacks on the floor and tried not to yawn as Silavia glared at her.

"Tou a friend of Tombor or Tuskface?" the cook asked.

"I am closer to Fowler. I do not know Tombor very well. Is he an important person in Elversult?"

"You could say that," Silavia replied proudly. Tombor's the one who saved Vaerana when the assassins first got after her. He's done the same twice since—at the risk of his own life, I might add."

The witch smiled, anticipating the apology she would be due when she exposed Tombor's heroism as a cull ploy "I had not realized he is so well thought of."

Fowler emerged from the storage pantry, carrying a small oil press in his arms. The device was a mere fraction the size of the screw press in the spicehouse at the Ginger Palace, being small enough so that a single cook could move it without help. Tombor followed a moment later, holding a small, empty cask beneath one arm. The two men set their burdens on a vacant table, then the cleric motioned Silavia to his side.

"How do I work this thing?"

Silavia fetched a large bowl from a shelf, then set it

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beneath the drainage spout. "It's simple enough. First you put the raw goods in here."

She pulled the handle, raising the platen and displaying a small wooden box. The bed had a grid of channels cut into the bottom, and it was tilted so that the oil would run into a collection trough at one end.

"Then you lower the top plate, and it squeezes the oil out." Silavia demonstrated, then stepped aside. "And when you're done, you clean up after yourself."

Tombor cast a wary eye at the eight bags of ylang blossoms, then looked to Ruha. "How much oil do we need?"

"Enough to cover Yanseldara from head to foot," she replied. "I suggest you press all of the blossoms."

Silavia smiled at the cleric. "It looks like you're going to be here a while. Maybe I can find some honeycakes for you."

Tombor's eyes lit up. "That would make our task more enjoyable."

"If I may be excused, I shall leave it to you to press the oil." Ruha did not bother to stifle the yawn that came over her. "I am very tired. Perhaps Captain Fowler can show me to Pearl Tower."

Silavia raised her brow. "Pearl Tower? I think not. Jarvis isn't likely to let a pair of strangers in there."

"No, but you can take her, Silavia." Tombor tried to remove a gold ring from his chubby finger, but had to moisten the knuckle with saliva before he could tug it off. "Show this to Jarvis, and hell know you speak for me."

Scowling at the imposition, Silavia accepted the ring and threw a cloak over her shoulders. Ruha retrieved the small satchel she had taken from her horse, then waved at Fowler to come along and followed her guide into the gloomy courtyard. They passed several dark sheds similar to the kitchen before turning onto a serpentine path of white crushed rock.

The witch paused there and allowed Silavia to march a dozen paces ahead, then whispered to Fowler, "You must return to the kitchens and help Tombor with the blossoms."

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The half-ore frowned. "You couldn't tell me that before we left?"

"I could not. Tombor is a cult spy."

"What?"

"I lack the time to explain, but I am certain. He and Wei Dao were working together." Ruha pushed the half-ore back toward the kitchen. "Now, return to the kitchen. When he opens the last sack of blossoms, come get me."

Fowler did not move. "Why?"

"So we can follow him to Yanseldara's staff, of course," Ruha whispered. "Go!"

"We?" he grumbled, starting back toward the kitchen. "Collecting the gold you owe me's getting to be as much work as stealing Storm Sprite in the first place."

"You stole your ship?" Ruha gasped.

Fowler frowned. "Aye—you don't think I could've bought a ship like her, do you?"

"Truthfully, I had not given the matter much thought."

Ruha turned to find Silavia waiting fifteen paces up the path, hands on hips.

"Are you coming or not? I thought you were tired."

"I am tired—extremely tired." Ruha scurried to catch up. "That must be why it did not occur to me to leave Captain Fowler with Tombor. I'm sure his work will go faster with an assistant."

"Not much," snorted the cook. "You can squeeze oil only so fast."

Ruha followed Silavia down the path, past several intersections to a slender tower faced with gleaming abalone shell. To reach the building's entrance, they had to climb a detached stairway to the second story, then cross a small drawbridge to an open portcullis. A pair of Maces stood beside the entrance, fully armored in scale-mail and equipped with more weapons than they could have used with six hands. As the witch and her guide approached, the guards continued to stare straight ahead.

The largest, a swarthy giant of a man with brown eyes

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and dark straight hair, spoke in an officious voice. "By the order of Vaerana Hawklyn, household staff is no longer permitted in Pearl Tower."

The two guards crossed their lances before the doorway; then the speaker scowled at the cook.

"You know that, Silavia—and especially at this time of night."

"Don't get haughty with me, Jarvis!" The cook produced Tombor's ring and shoved it under Jarvis's nose. "Take a look at that and do as I say."

Jarvis pulled back so he could inspect the ring, then snapped his lance back to his side and returned to attention. The smaller man followed suit.

"You have a command from the Jolly One?" asked

Jarvis.

Silavia smiled as though she were thinking of telling the huge guard to jump off the drawbridge, but she only stepped back and waved a hand at Ruha. "Tombor wants this woman shown to—" Silavia stopped in midsentence and scowled at the witch. "Not to his chamber?"

Ruha shook her head quickly. "No, and it was Vaerana who asked Tombor to see that I was lodged here."

If Jarvis was impressed, he did not show it. He simply waved Ruha into the tower, then picked up a candle and lit it from one burning in a wall sconce. Shielding the flame with his free hand, he led the witch up a spiraling staircase. The passage was so narrow that his mail-clad shoulders rasped against both walls at once.

Once they were safely out of Silavia's earshot, Ruha said, "I am expecting a—" she yawned, "—a visit from Vaerana."

Jarvis missed a step and nearly fell, filling the stairwell with a ringing clamor as he thrust a hand out to catch himself.

"Is something wrong?" Ruha found the guard's consternation puzzling. "Has she been here already?"

Jarvis shook his head and smoothed his tabard. "I haven't seen the Lady Constable, but that doesn't mean

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she hasn't been here. She might come through the passage from Moon Tower, and I would never know it."

Ruha considered this worrisome possibility, then rejected it as quickly as it entered her mind. Had Vaerana already come and gone, she would certainly have left a message with the guards.

Jarvis stopped at a landing and opened a doorway into the main part of the tower, where a short corridor led to a vaulted alcove that served as one of the fortress's exterior arrow loops. He escorted Ruha past three doors, two with loud rumbling snores reverberating through the wood, then opened a fourth. The chamber inside was as lavishly furnished as it was small, with wool tapestries on the walls, a true wooden bed, a small table with a pitcher and basin, and a stone bench built into the alcove of another arrow loop.

Jarvis lit a tallow pot hanging inside the door, then stepped aside to let Ruha enter. "I'll tell Vaerana which room you're in."

"That is very kind. And do you know Captain Fowler?" Jarvis's eyes widened slightly. "The half-ore?" "Yes. If he asks for me, please fetch me at once." The guard nodded, then backed into the hall and pulled the door shut. Ruha sat on the stone bench and peered out the arrow loop at the side of a wooded hill. She leaned her head back against the wall and felt her heavy eyelids beginning to descend. She did not have the strength to raise them.

Tang lay facedown on the dark mountainside, his toes kicked deep into the slippery mud to keep from sliding through the ferns down into the swamp. Though he had his palms pressed tightly over his ears, he could not shut out the voices of the dead. The spirits of his soldiers kept wailing at him. Their words were incoherent, but he knew what they wanted. He could feel their craving, deep

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down in his abdomen where his own shrunken spirit cowered like that of a frightened peasant. They needed him to look at them, to acknowledge the futility of their sacrifice, to intercede with Yen-Wang-Yeh and tell the Great Judge that they had died bravely and well and that their mission had failed through no fault of their own.

Tang could not bring himself to utter the prayer. To concede their valor was to admit he had suffered defeat at the hands of a barbarian; worse, it was to admit defeat at his own hands. When his soldiers laughed at him, he had let his embarrassment dictate General Fui's death. The price for that arrogance had been the failure of his

assault, and the prince did not care to admit—to himself or his ancestors—that he had been such a fool. If that made him a coward, so be it; Shou princes were taught to be cowards, and forgetting that lesson had been the cause of his ignoble defeat.

Tang's resolve only made the voices echo louder inside his head. He rolled onto his back and sat up. Midnight gloom filled the swamp below like a funeral pyre's black smoke, spreading an oily, clinging ink over everything it touched. The darkness was broken only by a faint fox fire glow that illuminated the floating corpses of the screaming dead soldiers.

"Silence, I command!" Tang hissed. "Present yourselves at Ten Courts and leave me in peace!"

A gentle sloshing sounded below. Something broke the surface of the black water, sending a crazy pattern of rippling, ghost-faint lights bouncing off invisible cypress trunks. Tang froze, praying the disturbance had been caused by a restless alligator.

It was impossible to say how long the prince stared into the darkness. He was not conscious of breathing until long after the air had grown heavy with silence and the pond had returned to its glassy stillness. It occurred to him that the voices of his dead soldiers had fallen quiet; then he sensed a pair of long reptilian necks rising from the black water. He did not see the creatures so

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much as feel a pair of lighter, warmer presences among the cypress trees below, but he knew without doubt that his craven outburst of whispering had drawn the attention of Cypress's wyverns.

Tang had not expected the two reptiles to emerge from the cave that night. They had both suffered a substantial battering during the destruction of the Shou assault party, so the prince had assumed they would lie up for the night and lick their wounds. Still, with a ready supply of fresh meat floating outside their door, it was not surprising they had come out to feed. Tang was glad he had decided not to hazard moving at night. If the creatures had been outside when he started rustling through the brush, they would surely have killed him.

No sooner had Tang finished congratulating himself on his wisdom than the ground trembled beneath his legs. He stifled a cry and, thinking one of the reptiles had landed nearby, reached for his only weapon, a pitifully inadequate dagger. Instead of feeling the sharp sting of a

wyvern's tail barb, however, he heard a series of faint, muffled knells—such as a distant bell or gong might make.

The tolling had hardly begun to fade before a loud purl rolled from the mouth of the grotto below. Cypress's form—a huge, shadowy darkness far blacker than the surrounding swamp—emerged from the lair and seemed to pause outside the cavern.

The wyverns hissed in frustration and swam, rather noisily, back into the cavern. A loud, basal throb reverberated through the swamp as Cypress's mighty wings beat the air. Visions of the dragon swooping down out of the darkness filled the prince's mind, at least until he realized the pulsing was growing softer and more distant. The dragon was flying away.

Tang sighed in relief, then kicked his heels deep into the mud and felt something slithering across his leg. The prince remained motionless until he located the creature's head, then calmly grabbed it behind the jaws and

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flung the writhing thing down the hill. He had nothing to fear from snakes—perhaps from the spirits of his dead soldiers, whose voices were again filling his ears—but not from snakes.

se * * * *

Ruha slept without dreaming and awoke sometime later, lying on the soft bed with the heavy woolen quilt pulled high beneath her chin. Her first thought was not that she usually took off her aba before sleeping, or that she never pulled the blanket up to her chin, but that she had slept the night away. She threw the cover off and rushed to the alcove, where, to her relief, she saw the treetops still dancing in silver moonlight. Only then did she notice that someone had removed her veil and realized that the tallow lamp had been extinguished—she could not have been asleep long enough for it to burn itself out!—and it occurred to her Vaerana had already come and gone.

Ruha fumbled around in the darkness until she found her veil on the stone bench, then felt her way out the door, into the hallway, and down the spiraling staircase. Jarvis and his partner were leaning on their lances outside the portcullis.

The witch paused to put on her veil, then demanded, "How long have I been asleep?"

Startled by Ruha's question, they whirled around with

lance tips lowered. When she cautiously stepped into the flickering light of their candle, both men sighed and snapped to attention.

"How long ago did Vaerana put me in my bed?" Ruha demanded.

The two guards glanced nervously at each other, then Jarvis said, "Actually, I laid you in the bed."

Ruha raised a hand to her face. "You removed my veil?"

Jarvis looked first confused, then embarrassed. "The

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Lady Constable commanded me to—er, she said that you deserved your rest—"

"Vaerana said that?" Ruha could hardly imagine those words coming from the Lady Constable's lips.

"Yes, about three hours ago. She rushed up the stairs and right back down again." Jarvis glanced at his companion, then added, "She ordered me to see that you rested comfortably, and to tell you she would look in on you when she returned."

"Kozah take her for an impatient she-camel!"

Jarvis scowled at that outburst. "There's no need for calling names. She was only trying to be considerate—and that's a rare thing for Vaerana Hawklyn."

"It would have been considerate to wake me!" Ruha retorted. "She was taking advantage of my fatigue. How soon will she return?"

Jarvis shrugged. "She was dressed for battle."

Ruha cursed again, this time under her breath. "And what of Captain Fowler? I told you to fetch me if he asked."

"He has not asked," Jarvis replied stiffly.

Ruha sighed in relief. If Fowler had not come for her, she could still spring her trap. "I want one of you to come with me, so you can show Vaerana where I am hiding."

"Hiding?"

"It is for the good of Yanseldara. That is all you need to

know, Jarvis."

Ruha started across the drawbridge without waiting for the guard to agree. Before she reached the other side, Jarvis's heavy steps were booming across the thick planks behind her.

"We're not supposed to leave our posts," he complained.

"And Vaerana was supposed to speak with me before she left. Because she did not, we must now improvise."

They descended the stairs and retraced the meandering path to Silavia's kitchen. With the door and shutters all closed, the place looked as dark and silent as the other sheds built along this section of the wall. Wonder-

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ing how those inside could tolerate the cloying smell of ylang oil without opening the windows, Ruha slipped beneath an unruly wax myrtle. She settled into a hiding place so deliberately uncomfortable that she would not fall asleep, then sent Jarvis back to Pearl Tower.

A long, bone-aching time later, Ruha began to debate the wisdom of going to check on Tombor's progress. She had expected it to take him quite some time to press all eight sacks of ylang blossoms, but the first gray hint of false dawn had already appeared in the eastern sky. Household servants were beginning to trudge about their morning tasks, and it would not be long before some passing groom or maid discovered the witch lurking in the bushes.

Ruha heard the crunch of heavy boots coming down the path. She backed out from beneath the wax myrtle and saw Jarvis and Vaerana approaching. All thoughts of chiding the Lady Constable about last night's departure quickly vanished from Ruha's mind. Vaerana was limping badly, with one arm hanging slack at her side and the side of her face so swollen it looked as if she had been kicked by a horse. What remained of her tattered jerkin was black with half-dried blood, and even her boots looked as though someone had tried to cut them off her feet.

"What happened to you?"

Vaerana squatted beside Ruha. "Ambush." The word came out mushy and difficult to understand. "They were waiting."

"And I know who told them you were coming." Ruha resisted the temptation to point out that Vaerana could

have avoided the beating by awakening her last night. "The Cult of the Dragon has a spy inside Moonstorm House."

A murderous glint flared in Vaerana's eyes. "Who?"

Ruha pointed toward the kitchen, where a pair of scullery wenches were just entering the door. "The spy will reveal himself soon enough."

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Vaerana's hand drifted toward the blood-smeared hilt of her sword. "What's the sense in waiting? Let's get him now."

Ruha laid a restraining hand on the Lady Constable's arm. "Wait. He is going to lead us to the dragon's lair. That's what I was trying to tell you last night."

Vaerana scowled. "Then why didn't you?"

"Because I would have ruined the trap," Ruha explained. "The traitor was—"

The witch was interrupted by a muffled shriek from inside the kitchen. The door burst open and both scullery wenches came rushing outside. One woman held her hands over her mouth, while the other waved her arms at the door and yelled incoherently. With a sinking stomach, Ruha leapt up and raced toward the shed behind Vaerana and Jarvis. Vaerana pulled the crying wench out of the way and led Jarvis and Ruha into the kitchen.

The room was as dark as pitch, for all of the candles and tallow lamps had been extinguished. The cloying perfume of ylang blossoms lingered in the air, though not heavily enough to disguise a coppery, more familiar scent: blood. A few steps inside the door, the Lady Constable suddenly stopped and squatted on her haunches.

"Fetch a light."

As Jarvis left to do his mistress's bidding, Ruha knelt close to Vaerana and ran her hands over the floor. It did not take long to find Silavia's plump, cool body lying face-down on the wooden planks. There was a soft, sticky mess where the back other head should have been.

"Who did this?" Vaerana demanded.

"A cult spy." Ruha no longer felt any joy in her coming vindication, in large part because they were going to find another body in the kitchen and she knew who it would

be. "This is my fault. Had I not fallen asleep—"

"This is no time for blaming yourself!" Vaerana snapped. "Just tell me about this spy."

"There were only two people in the kitchen with Silavia: Tombor and Fowler."

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"You think Tusks did this?" Vaerana scoffed. "And I was beginning to think you might not be such a bungler!"

Ruha bit her tongue. A sharp retort would do nothing to bring Fowler back, and even less to convince Vaerana of Tombor's betrayal. The Lady Constable would realize the truth for herself soon enough.

Jarvis returned with a lit candle, which he promptly used to find and light several tallow lamps. As the flickering light illuminated the room, it became apparent that Silavia had been struck down as she fled, for she had left a short trail of bloody footsteps behind her. The rest of the kitchen looked normal enough; there were no tables overturned, the room was not strewn with utensils, and the walls were mercifully unspattered with blood.

Ruha took Jarvis's candle and led the way toward the pantry. The oil press was not on the table where it should have been, but she quickly forgot about that as she stepped around the corner of the table and saw Fowler's stout body sprawled on the floor. The captain was lying amidst a pool of dark blood, with the handle of a long butcher knife protruding from the middle of his back. His neck was turned at an impossible angle, and his astonished gray eyes were staring straight ahead.

Vaerana slipped past Ruha and crouched down beside Fowler. "So much for your spy."

"I did not say that Fowler was the spy." Ruha's tone was sharper than she intended, for she was boiling over with anger and guilt. "I was speaking of your friend, Tombor the Jolly."

Vaerana's jaw dropped. "You think Tombor . . . ?"

Ruha nodded. "He was the only one in the room."

The Lady Constable rose, shaking her head. "Not Tombor. He saved—"

"I know; he saved you from the cult's assassins, more than once." Ruha paused, giving Vaerana time to draw her own conclusions. When the witch saw no sudden

gleam of understanding in the Lady Constable's eyes, she

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said, "The attacks weren't real. They were a trick to win your confidence."

A look of humiliation flashed across Vaerana's face, but it vanished as abruptly as it had appeared. "You don't know that."

"Don't I?" Ruha waved her hand around the kitchen. "Where are the ylang blossoms?"

Vaerana's gaze roamed across the chamber, her complexion turning as white as alabaster when she did not find the eight bulky sacks. Finally, the Lady Constable whirled on Ruha.

"You knew he would steal the blossoms—and you let him?" Vaerana looked almost relieved to have someone upon whom to vent her anger. "You let him kill Fowler?"

"I did not let him kill anyone!" the witch snapped. Vaerana's words hurt more than they should have, perhaps because Ruha feared there was more truth to them than she would have liked. "I had hoped we could follow him to Yanseldara's staff—which we might have done, had you bothered to awaken me and hear my plan!"

Jarvis interposed his armored bulk between the two women. "Tombor was gone by then. I doubt he stayed much longer than it took him to kill the half-ore and Silavia."

Ruha turned to the empty table and, seeing no mess upon the surface, nodded. "He was in a hurry to get out of here. He took the oil press with him."

"The press maybe, but not even Tombor could sneak eight sacks of ylang blossoms out the gate," said Vaerana. "The sentries would ask too many questions. They saw what you went through to bring those sacks to us."

"Perhaps he took them out some other way," Ruha suggested.

"Yes, and I think I see how," said Jarvis. The burly guard took Ruha's candle and went to the back wall, where a mass of roofing straw lay scattered around a butchering bench. He climbed onto the table and stuck his head up between the rafters, then raised the candle

high enough to illuminate his shoulders sticking up through a hole in the roof. "He climbed onto the roof and threw the sacks over the wall."

"Fowler's trick!" Ruha gasped.

A long, heartsick groan slipped from Vaerana's lips. She hung her head and braced her hands on the table edge. "I failed her."

"Not yet." Ruha went to the Lady Constable's side and, rather uncertainly, laid a hand on her shoulder. "Tombor took the wrong blossoms."

Vaerana raised her brow. "The wrong blossoms?"

Ruha nodded. "The ones Tombor took were only bait. They were picked in the evening, and they are not potent enough to serve the dragon's wishes. Cypress needs blossoms picked in the morning, and those remain at the Ginger Palace."

Vaerana stood up straight. "Then what are we waiting for?" She turned to Jarvis. "Find Pierstar and tell him to call out the Maces! We've got a palace to storm!"

Ruha caught Jarvis's arm. "That won't be necessary. Minister Hsieh has promised to give us the blossoms, in exchange for returning Lady Feng to him unharmed."

"How are we going to do that?" Vaerana demanded. "Isn't she with Yanseldara's staff in Cypress's lair?"

Ruha nodded. "When we recover one, we rescue the other. It costs us no extra effort."

Vaerana considered this for a moment, then scowled. "That'd be fine—if we knew where to find the lair. And since you were trying to trick Tombor into leading us there..."

Ruha raised a hand to silence Vaerana. "There may be another way. In my room, I have a potion. If we can get Yanseldara to drink it, we can contact Lady Feng and perhaps discover the location of Cypress's lair."

Vaerana studied Ruha out of one swollen eye. "Where did you get this potion?"

"From Minister Hsieh," Ruha answered. "Now that he is helping us—"

"Helping us!" Vaerana thundered. "It's Shou mag that's done this to Yanseldara!"

"Yes, but—"

The Lady Constable shook her head. "How do you know this won't hurt her?"

"I do not," Ruha admitted. "Minister Hsieh said that if the connection between Yanseldara's body and spirit is too weak, we could sever it entirely—but that is unlikely as long as she remains strong enough—"

"No!" Vaerana shook her head vehemently, then stepped away from the table and started toward the door. "When will you learn? You can't trust a Shou—ever."

"What other choice do we have?" Ruha started after Vaerana, who did not even acknowledge the question. "Wait! Where are you going?"

The Lady Constable did not even slow down as she stepped through the door. "Where do you think? To have Pierstar wake his trackers!"

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Tang saw the serpent dart beneath a ti plant and hopped across the stream after it. He stirred the spear-shaped leaves until the viper struck at his snake stick, then flipped the Y-shaped head around and pinned the creature's neck to the ground. He knelt beside his captive and grabbed it behind the head. This snake was the largest yet, so great in diameter that he could not close his hand around its slime-scaled throat. There would be plenty of venom.

The prince twined the serpent's writhing body around the shaft of his stick and, picking his footing very carefully, carried the heavy thing across the stream to his workbench. Atop the flat rock lay two sacks of supple leather cut from the collars of a pair of boots. With sharpened sticks protruding from them at all angles, the bags looked like melon-sized cockleburrs. They were stuffed with wads of silk ripped from the battle tunics of dead soldiers, whose voices Tang still heard screeching above the drone of the mosquitos.

"Be patient, my troops. Soon I intercede for you." If Tang could find the strength to see his plan through, his

ancestors would be so overjoyed that he would no longer need to hide his failure from them. "Soon I pray to Yen-Wang-Yeh; I testify to your bravery, and he renders honorable verdict."

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The spirits took no comfort in the prince's promise. They continued to screech.

Tang sighed and set his snake stick aside. He took the sack by the long, unsharpened stake that served as a handle—it was not wise to touch the bladder with bare hands—and held it close to his captive's face. The frightened viper struck instantly, sinking its fangs through the supple leather and into the wad of cloth inside. The prince shook the serpent to encourage the release of more venom, then repeated the process several more times. When he had milked the last of the creature's toxins, he flung it down the hill and stooped over to inspect his handiwork. Both sacks were so full of poison that cloudy beads of venom were seeping back through the fang holes.

Tang carried the poison-filled bladders down to the swamp, where the cadavers of his dead soldiers lay scattered across the pond as thick as lily pads. Most of the corpses had been savagely mangled by alligators or bitten cleanly in two by the wyverns, but a few were blackened and bloated from dozens of snake bites, often to such an extent that runnels of thick black fluid spilled from splits in the skin. These had been molested by neither alligator nor wyvern, and it was the observation of this fact that had kindled again the prince's hopes of redeeming himself.

After retrieving his dugout and making a careful search along the edge of the swamp, Tang had located two relatively whole bodies that were not bloated with snake poison. One man had managed to swim to dry land after being eviscerated, while the other had either drowned or died of fright—the prince had found him caught beneath a cypress root with no obvious wounds.

Tang stuffed one of his poison bladders into the abdomen of the eviscerated soldier, then used his dagger to create a place for the second ball in the other man's stomach. He closed the wounds with small wooden pins and dressed the pair in the cleanest, least-tattered battle tunics he had been able to find. If the men's spirits

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objected to having their bodies used as bait, the prince could not tell over the din of voices already assailing his ears. He loaded the cadavers into the dugout, leaning one man over the bow and propping the other in the stern. Into the bottom of the punt, he placed a halberd and some supplies he had gathered from his dead troops, including a rope, torches, oil, and a waterskin.

After peering through gray mosquito haze to make certain no alligators lurked nearby—most had retreated to their dens to gorge themselves on last night's catch—Tang slipped into the bog scum. As the water rose above his waist, the stench of decaying plants and rotten fish grew immensely more powerful. He gagged and nearly emptied his stomach, then slapped a hand over his nose and forced himself to breathe through his mouth until he grew accustomed to the reek. He pushed the dugout toward Cypress's cavern, moving so slowly that even he could not see the water rippling. A familiar, cold weakness crept over his limbs, and his heart began to pound so loudly it drowned out the wails of the dead soldiers. In response, they raised their voices until it seemed the entire swamp reverberated with their howls.

"Worthy ancestors, please to silence spirits," the prince begged. "It is difficult to be brave with such din."

If anything, the spirits wailed more loudly, yet not loudly enough to drown out the small, whispering voice that kept telling Tang he was a fool to face the wyverns alone. It was not the place of Shou princes to wade through swamps filled with the choking stench of death and rot, or to brave black waters infested with leeches and alligators.

The bottom vanished beneath Tang's feet. He forced his legs and arms into service and swam toward the cave. The closer he came to the moss-draped maw, the weaker his limbs felt. He doubted he would have the strength to enter the grotto, but that was not required. All he had to do was push the dugout into view of the wyverns, and they would do the rest.

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As the prince consoled himself with these thoughts, it occurred to him there was a weakness in his plan. How would he know when—or even if—the wyverns took his bait? The poison would be both painful and quick. Once the stakes punctured the lining of their stomachs, the great reptiles would thrash about and screech madly for a short time, but Tang would not hear them. The dead soldiers were wailing too loudly; the prince would not have heard it if Cypress himself roared in his ear.

Tang allowed the dugout to drift to a stop, then hung from its stern. He had two choices: go into the cave with the corpses, or make his report to Yen-Wang-Yeh so the soldiers would be silent.

Or sneak out of the swamp while Cypress was away, added the insidious voice inside his head.

"I do not go back!"

Feeling proud for avoiding the obvious choice of a coward, Tang took the second most cowardly course and swam the dugout toward the yawning cavern. It seemed entirely possible the wyverns would kill him, but that was preferable to disgracing his ancestors by admitting that he had turned out to be a fool.

The punt nosed in front of the cavern mouth. When the wyverns did not immediately come swooping out of the darkness, Tang took a deep breath, then slipped beneath the water and pushed the dugout around the corner. The din of his dead soldiers faded to a watery roar, and the cowardly voice in his head stopped urging him to flee. The prince continued to ease forward, hoping his feet did not break the surface when he kicked, struggling to keep his hand from slipping on the boat's slimy bottom. His lungs were already burning for air, but he knew it was only the coward in him looking for an excuse to flee.

Tang continued to kick, praying he would feel the wyverns' strike rock the dugout before his craven lips opened and sucked a mouthful of fetid water into his lungs. It occurred to him that the wyverns might be gorged already. But they had to be ravenous after last

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night's burst of fighting, and the two lizards had not yet finished feeding when Cypress sent them inside to guard the lair. Unless the prince had misinterpreted last night's events, they would be voracious enough to devour the punt as well as its contents.

So why hadn't they attacked?

Tang's yearning for air grew so overwhelming that he nearly opened his mouth. Instead, he blew his breath out through his nostrils and continued to swim.

At this point, he expected the coward inside to remind him that it was treason to risk the life of a Shou prince, to urge him to swim for the swamp. The whispering voice remained mercifully silent, perhaps because it knew Tang had come too far. The punt was his only camouflage. If he was not behind its sheltering bulk when he

pushed his head above water, the wyverns would swoop down to bite him in two, just as they had bitten apart those bodies in the swamp outside.

A black fog gathered at the edges of Tang's perceptions, and he realized he could no longer deny his lungs. He rolled onto his back and pushed his head up alongside the slimy hull. When his face broke the surface, he opened his mouth and quietly filled his chest with dank, moldy air.

The cavern ceiling hung thrice a man's height above his head. It was a dark vault of broken stalactites and shadowy hollows, dimly illuminated by the swamp's emerald light. Here and there were blocky holes where some huge chunk of stone had long ago fallen into the water, shaken loose by an earthquake, or perhaps some ancient outpouring of Cypress's anger.

Tang allowed his gaze to follow the curve of the ceiling down to the wall, then farther down to a rock ledge looming above the water. Hanging above this stony bench were two pairs of huge orange eyes with slit pupils and gleaming, voracious gazes. The prince's heart skipped a beat or several, and he stopped himself from crying out only by pulling his head beneath the water.

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The wyverns struck the next instant, taking Tang's bait so hard that they slammed the bottom of the dugout into his chest. The impact drove the air from his lungs, and he found himself choking on fetid brown swamp water. His head broke the surface of its own accord and violent coughs began to rack the prince's body. He grabbed the side of the punt and tried to regain control of his convulsing chest.

A pair of severed legs splashed down on the other side of the dugout. Tang looked up and saw four reeling wings silhouetted against the cavern's far wall. Still coughing, he grabbed for his halberd, nearly capsizing the punt as he reached inside. The wyverns turned toward him. Their orange eyes glowed bright as fire, and strings of flesh dangled between their needle-sharp teeth. In the dim light, the prince could barely make out a prickly leather ball lodged in the corner of one creature's mouth. He could not see the second poison sack, but the other reptile kept whipping its narrow head from side to side and thrusting out its forked tongue, as though something were caught in its throat.

The wyverns swooped low over the water. Tang found the heft of his weapon and saw his attackers raise their

tails to strike. He forgot about the halberd and pulled hard on the side of the dugout, flipping it over on top of him. The polearm's shaft fell across his shoulder; then a pair of loud, sharp thuds cleaved the din of his dead soldiers' voices. The bitter smell of wyvern poison filled the air. The prince grabbed the halberd and slipped beneath the surface.

A muffled crack reverberated through the water, followed quickly by a great gurgling sound as a large mass splashed into the pool. Tang kicked away from the spreading slick of wyvern poison—he did not want the stuff seeping into his scratches—and came up for air.

At the base of the stony ledge lay one of the wyverns, thrashing about in the water and hurling shards of splintered dugout in every direction. A puffy black bulge had

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formed halfway down its sinuous neck, where the snake venom was eating away the delicate tissues of the throat lining. As the ring of swollen flesh began to restrict the flow of blood and air, the creature's nostrils flared, and its eyes bulged. It swung around and, when it tried to rip the obstruction from its own throat, came away with nothing but a mouthful of black mush. It flung the putrid flesh across the cavern, then suffered a wave of uncontrollable convulsions and collapsed into the water.

A long, mournful hiss sounded from atop the ledge, where the second wyvern lay above its mate. One side of the beast's head had bloated into a shapeless mass of dark flesh. The reptile itself looked listless and sick, but there were no tremors or spasms to suggest the venom would ultimately prove fatal, and the venom ball was hanging precariously at the corner of its mouth.

If the wyvern was to die, Tang realized, he would have to kill it. He swam toward the back of the cavern, angling toward a large block of stone that rose out of the water and leaned against his foe's rocky perch. The great reptile raised its neck, turning its head to track his progress. As the prince neared his goal, the wyvern lifted its wings as though to take flight, then abruptly let them fall and reluctantly gathered its legs beneath its bulk.

If he turned back now, the wyvern would be too weak to follow him, but Tang had no desire to flee. He wanted to rescue his mother, and to do that he had to slay this beast. He reached the boulder and clambered out of the water, then started up the slippery limestone. The wyvern peered over the top, then turned sideways and whipped its poison-tipped tail toward his chest.

Tang brought his halberd around, slapping the poison-

dripping barb aside with the flat of the blade. In the same instant, he continued the motion, circling it over the top of the wyvern's tail and bringing the head up on the inside. Had he been fighting a man with a lance or spear, the maneuver would have sent his foe's weapon flying away. In this case, it twined his polearm into the

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powerful appendage. The prince clamped the shaft beneath his arms and held on tight.

The reptile pulled its tail back to strike again, jerking Tang up the boulder and swinging him across the stony ledge. He slammed into the cavern wall and nearly blacked out as the breath exploded from his body. The wyvern started to whip its tail back toward the boulder, nearly ripping the halberd from Tang's grasp, then realized it was dragging something and stopped. The misshapen head swung around and fixed an angry orange eye on the prince, who began to wish he had not been so rash when he had had the chance to flee.

Tang leapt over the tail, thereby freeing his halberd, and brought the blade around in a quick arc. The sharp edge slashed through the scaly tendril and sent the tail's poisonous barb skittering across the stones.

Even had he not felt the wyvern's hot breath washing over his back, Tang would have known what was coming next. He instantly pulled back, pushing the halberd butt into the air behind him, and smoothly switched stances so that he was facing the opposite direction. He found the wyvern's fang-filled jaws descending toward his head. The prince stepped forward to meet the attack, at the same time thrusting the butt of his weapon into the leathery ball lodged in the corner of the reptile's gaping maw.

The poison sack came loose and rolled deep into the wyvern's throat; then the beast's jaws snapped shut and severed the halberd shaft a hairbreadth above the prince's fingers. Tang started to shuffle backward, then saw a flash of motion in the corner of his eye and turned to dive off the stony bench. The leathery wing caught him squarely in the back, launching him with such force that he sailed across the cavern and slammed into the far wall. His body erupted in pain; then he plunged into the black water.

Tang floated for a long time, too sore to breathe even if he had not been lying facedown in a pool of fetid swamp water. He ached from the tips of his fingers to the ends of

his toes, which was probably a good thing, since it meant the wyvern's blow had not broken his back. He tried to take stock of other possible injuries, but everything hurt too much to tell if any particular bone was broken or out of joint. When the need to breathe finally grew sufficiently urgent, he tried to roll onto his back and discovered the water was only knee-deep. He gathered his legs beneath him and rose out of the water.

At first, Tang did not recognize the strange growling sound he heard and thought perhaps the wyvern was coming after him. Then he recognized it as his own voice, groaning in pain, and realized with a start that the voices of his dead soldiers had fallen silent. In the dim light, he could barely make out the figure of the great reptile across the cavern, lying on the ledge with its barbless tail and one leathery wing dangling motionless over the side. There was a large black bulge near the top of its scaly neck, and the amorphous mass that had once been its head was so swollen that the flesh had split open.

"Two wyverns!" the prince whispered. "Perhaps I am fool, but no longer am I coward!"

Even as he spoke them, Tang realized the words were not altogether true. There were many forms of cowardice, some more important than others, and he could not redeem himself through a single act of bravery. He turned toward the entrance of the cavern and bowed in deep respect.

"Listen, O Yen-Wang-Yeh, Great Judge and King of Eighteen Hells." Tang spoke loudly and clearly, so that his ancestors might hear his words as well. "Listen and hear testimony of foolish Shou prince who squanders lives of General Fui D'hang and many dutiful soldiers ..."

In the amber dawn light, even Ruha could see that the cart tracks led up the hill straight to the gloomy ruins of what had once been a many-spired fortress of hanging

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bartizans and dark hoardings. Tombor had driven through a grimy stream at the edge of the small wood where Vaerana had stopped the column, and the wagon wheels had left a pair of dark lines in the center of the dusty road.

"I should have guessed," Vaerana growled. "The Night Castle."

"The Night Castle?" Ruha asked.

"We've chased cult assassins in there before," Vaeranp explained. "Whenever we do, the place fills with darkness. It'll be a hard thing to find Yanseldara's staff in that murk—especially if Cypress is there defending it."

Ruha glanced toward the eastern horizon, where the shrines of Temple Hill were silhouetted against At'ar's blazing golden orb. "The sun is rising; in a few minutes, my fire spells will be powerful enough to dispel even the thickest darkness."

"That won't do us any good, I'm afraid." Pierstar Hallowhand rode up to join Ruha and Vaerana. Behind him followed one of his gray-cloaked trackers and a bedraggled, long-bearded man who looked as frightened of his mount as he did the company of Maces gathered on the road. "If the staff was there, it's gone now."

"How can you know that?" Vaerana demanded.

"Longnose found a shepherd grazing his herd south of here." Pierstar motioned his scout to bring the bedraggled fellow forward, then nodded to the man. "Tell the Lady Constable what you saw last night."

The fellow snatched his grimy cap from his head and began to wring it in his hands, then stared at the ground beneath Vaerana's stirrups. "It was well past high night, ma'am," he began. "I was waked by me dogs howling, an' I heard a bell ringing, only it was real deep."

The man paused, which prompted Vaerana's gaze to snap toward Pierstar. "I don't see what—"

"Let him finish," Pierstar said. Then, to the man, he ordered, "Go on, and be quick about it. Vaerana Hawklyn's not known for her patience."

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Looking more frightened than ever, the man blurted, "It was maybe an hour later. My dogs went mad, an' I looked up and saw a dragon flying over. I thought I'd lost me herd an' me life too, but it just flew by." He pointed toward the Night Castle. "It landed in there. I'll tell you, ma'am, I rolled me blanket quick and started the herd for these woods, but the dragon was back in the air before I made a hundred paces—an' he was carryin' something real careful-like in his claws."

"What?" Vaerana demanded. "An oak staff with a big topaz pommel?"

It was Ruha who answered. "No. Cypress would not trust anyone else with that staff. It had to be the ylang

blossoms."

"I don't know about your blossoms or your staff," said the man. "All I saw was a real fat cleric holding a big wooden cask, an' he looked about as scared as me."

"Then we've lost the trail." Vaerana did not curse or cry out; her shoulders simply slumped forward. "Even if we knew where the lair was, we can't ride as fast as Cypress can fly."

"We have lost the trail, but not the battle," said Ruha. "Minister Hsieh is pressing the real oil for us at the Ginger Palace. Perhaps we should go and retrieve it; when Cypress returns home and discovers that he has been deceived, he will come to us."

Tang hurled the torch against the gray limestone, then sat upon a fallen stalactite to contemplate the back wall of the cavern. He had explored every nook, cranny and fissure without finding Cypress's lair. Not a single passage large enough for a man, much less a dragon, led deeper into the mountain. The prince had even scaled a giant-high dropblock to peer into the ceiling's shadowy recesses, and he had seen nothing. It was as if Cypress vanished when he entered the cavern.

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Given that the dragon was more dead than alive, that seemed entirely possible. Still, Tang had not yet searched one place, perhaps because if he found the passage there, he stood every chance of dying in it.

The prince retrieved his guttering torch and climbed down to the pool. On the far bank, the cavern did not end in a true wall. The ceiling simply angled down and disappeared into the water, which was so fetid and brown with decay it was impossible to see a hand's span beneath the surface. The passage, if the cavern had one, could only be hidden there.

Tang returned to the small pile of equipment he had salvaged from his dugout and prepared for his dive. He folded his tinderbox into its oilcloth and knotted the ends together so they would not leak. He pushed the stopper well down into his oil flask and used a bootlace to fix it to his sword belt. He emptied his waterskin into the pool, then refilled it with several breaths of air and slung it around his neck. Finally, the prince uncoiled his rope, tying one end to his sword belt and the other to a small boulder at the edge of the pond.

Tang waded into the pool until it became chest-deep, then doused his torch and wedged it into his empty sword scabbard. In the dim swamp light filtering in from the cavern mouth, he could barely see the ceiling of the grotto, sloping down like the roof of some huge mouth. He swam over to it and dove. The water turned instantly as thick and dark as plum wine. The prince rolled onto his back so he could use his hands and feet to push himself along the roof of the passage.

Tang's heart began to pound in his ears and his throat grew tight, but he gave no thought to turning back. It was not that he felt no fear; on the contrary, he was filled with a cold, queasy dread that made his hands shake and his bowels churn. The thought occurred to him that the passage might have more than one branch. He could easily be swimming into an underwater labyrinth; in such suffocating darkness, he would never know it.

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Dragging himself through the passage was hard work, and Tang's breath did not last long. He turned over, then emptied his lungs into the black water. The prince pulled his buoyant waterskin beneath his body and allowed it to press him against the ceiling, then placed his lips over the mouth. Biting the stopper between his teeth, he carefully opened the skin and allowed a stream of stale air to seep into his chest. Closing the sack was more difficult. He had to use his fingers to push the stopper back into place, losing several precious bubbles when he slipped the digits into the corner of his mouth.

Tang continued forward, if not growing less afraid, then at least growing more accustomed to fear. Though he had lost all sense of direction, he no longer worried about becoming lost. No matter how complicated the labyrinth, he could always follow the rope back. He filled his lungs from his air sack two more times, each time allowing a few cherished bubbles to slip along his cheek as he pushed the stopper back into place. Even that loss did not trouble him. If he ran out of air, it would be much easier to pull himself back to the pond than to crawl forward as he was doing. Then he would simply find a couple of extra waterskins and resume his explorations.

A flicker of orange-yellow light caught Tang's eye, and he began to hope it would not be necessary to turn around. He dragged himself forward. When the flicker became a diffuse gold-red gleam pushing its way through the murky water, he realized he had to be nearing Cypress's lair. The glow was the color of flame, and fires do not burn underwater. More importantly, where there was light, Lady Feng was also bound to be. The prince pulled himself forward with renewed vigor—only to come

to an abrupt stop as he reached the end of the rope.

Tang did not even consider going back for another length of rope. Instead, he sucked the last dregs of air from his waterskin, then untied himself and swam toward the light. He began to count heartbeats, not because he feared he would drown before he reached the

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end of the passage, but to give him some idea of how far it was back to the rope. The golden glow brightened slowly. His count had reached thirty by the time it was as large as a head. At fifty, his lungs began to ache for air, and the light was no larger than a harvest moon. When the count reached seventy, his limbs grew so heavy and weak that he could hardly move them. Yellow-orange radiance filled the whole passage ahead, and still the ceiling held Tang beneath the water.

The prince blew out the last of his breath and swam another dozen strokes. His count reached a hundred and ten, and the orange glow was so bright that he could see his hands silhouetted against it. His heart began to beat faster, pounding inside his chest like a forge's trip hammer, and a trickle of sweet-tasting water seeped between his lips. At the count of a hundred and thirty, the golden light began to sparkle and shimmer, and the prince realized he had made a terrible mistake. Whatever it was, this radiance was too strong, too brilliant to be firelight. Perhaps his testimony to the Chief Judge had come too late; perhaps the spirits of his dead soldiers, angry at his hesitation, had created the luminescence to trick him. One hundred and sixty .. .

The ceiling lifted off of Tang's back, and his head suddenly popped out of the water. With a great, racking groan, he sucked in the musty cave air, continuing until it seemed his lungs would burst. An orchestra of blissful purling echoed all around the prince, giving him the feeling that he had died and, despite his many faults, surfaced in the Land of Extreme Felicity. He exhaled and drew in even more air, as though he were trying to drain the cavern of its last wisp of dank atmosphere.

The chamber itself only added to Tang's impression that he had surfaced in a place of eternal paradise. The ceiling and walls were draped with jewelry both ancient and new: thumb-sized diamonds set into gold rings, blood-red rubies strung end-to-end in long chains, emeralds as large as cat eyes dangling from ear clips of pure

platinum. From dozens of ancillary passages poured streams large and small, all passing over beds of pearl and opal before they fell into a sparkling lake that filled the lower half of the cavern.

Unlike the brown soup at the other end of the passage, the waters here were as clear as glass, and the bottom of the entire pool was covered by minted coins of every imaginable size and kingdom. A short swim away, the coins rose up to form the glistening beach of an island made entirely of precious ingots—and more gold than silver. In the center of the isle stood a single oaken staff—no doubt Yanseldara's—with three gnarled branches rising at the top to grasp a huge orange topaz. From the depths of this gem burned the fiery light that illuminated the entire chamber, glimmering so brilliantly that the prince could hardly make out the form of the tall, willowy woman standing beside it.

"Lady Feng!" Tang swam to the island, then stopped on the shore and bowed to his mother. "Will Third Virtuous Concubine honor her humble son with audience?"

The woman stepped away from the staff and peered down the slope at her son. Unlike most Shou women, she showed every day of her age—and then some. She wore her gray hair pulled into a tight bun that did little to lessen its unruly appearance, and her skin was as ashen and flaky as lizard scales. The crow's-feet at the corners of her eyes fanned out like spiderwebs to veil her entire face, while the curious way that she cocked her head only emphasized the contrast between the pop-eye through which she saw the outer world and the squinty white orb that was usually turned inward to watch the spirit world.

"Tang!" she said at last. "What do you do here?"

"I come to rescue you, Lady Feng." The prince held his bow. It was not unusual to have an entire conversation with the Third Virtuous Concubine without receiving permission to rise. It was a good thing she was not a queen; he would have had to kowtow. "I also come to destroy Cypress's spirit gem."

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"No. You mustn't!" She began to pick her way down the ingot slope. "Cypress would know!"

"It does not matter. He already tries to kill me for rescuing you."

"You risk life?" Lady Feng slapped Tang on the back of the head. "You are Shou prince!"

"Rescuing you is only way to redeem honor of Ginger Palace."

"Do I ask to be rescued?" Lady Feng grabbed Tang's chin and pulled his head up, then waved her arm around the glittering chamber. "Here is more wealth than all Imperial treasuries!"

Tang scowled at this, for his mother had always been too wise to value wealth above freedom. "What good are these riches? Whole room of gold and diamonds is worth less than nothing if it makes prisoner of you."

Lady Feng's squinty eye rolled in its socket, perhaps in dim recognition of the wisdom she herself had imparted to the prince. Her pop-eye, however, darted around the room from bauble to bauble, as though checking to be certain that each one remained in its place.

"Do not argue!" she ordered. "Wealth shown is wealth lost to thieves."

Tang shook his head sadly. "You have dragon sickness." He started up the ingot slope. "Show me where Cypress hides spirit gem; then we leave."

"Go no farther, Tang."

Tang stopped in his tracks. When Lady Feng assumed that tone, she was not a woman to be trifled with. His mother was capable of killing a man with the merest wisp of an incantation. Though he believed she loved him as any mother loved her child, she was a Scholar of Yen-Wang-Yeh, and to scholars of the Great Judge, life and death were merely aspects of one existence; even a son could not be sure his mother would care which state he happened to occupy.

After a moment's consideration, Tang realized how to solve his dilemma. He faced his cronish mother. "I only

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try to protect your treasure, Lady Feng. Cypress thinks it belongs to him. We must destroy him."

Lady Feng's pop-eye flashed in anger, but the squinty one rolled around to study him. It was horribly bloodshot, with a milky iris and a black pupil that seemed as deep as the Well of Eighteen Hells itself, and Tang had not seen it since he was a little boy.

"Tang, you try to trick me?"

For the first time since his battle with the wyverns,

Tang felt like a coward. He let his gaze drop and nodded. "But only to protect you from Cypress. Whether you understand or not, dragon sickness has made you his prisoner more than chains."

The squinty eye trembled as though from a palsy, but continued to linger on Tang's face for a long time. At last, Lady Feng said, "Tunnel is long. If we destroy spirit gem, how do we escape?"

"We carry extra air." To demonstrate, Tang opened his water skin and filled it with breath. "Then I pull us through passage on rope I leave tied to other end."

Lady Feng eyed the air sack for a long time, then reluctantly nodded. "But we do not smash gem until we are outside." The squinty eye rolled back into her head, and she added, "Then we destroy Cypress and come back to cave of wealth!"

"Of course—if that is truly wish of Third Virtuous Concubine." Tang ran a troubled eye over the glittering chamber; a month ago, his mother would have looked on the vast treasure with the mocking disdain of one who recognized such things as a worldly illusion. Now, it was all too easy to imagine Lady Feng returning to live out her life among these lonely riches. "Perhaps we even build palace for you."

A pithy smile crept across the gray lips of the Third Virtuous Concubine. "Most excellent idea. You know where to find spirit gem?"

"Cypress wishes to be with love. Gem can be only one place." Tang looked at the glowing gem in Yanseldara's

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staff. "I get staff. You gather your things."

As the prince turned to climb the ingots, a gentle wave rolled up the beach, stirring the precious coins and soaking his feet to the ankles. Tang scowled at the rising water, trying to imagine what might have caused the surge.

Lady Feng grabbed his arm and shoved him into the water. "You must hide! Cypress returns!"

Fourteen

At the far end of the Ginger Palace's long audience hall, the new chamberlain drew aside two silk draperies and

opened a pair of teak doors. A double column of Minister Hsieh's yellow-cloaked guards marched into the room and split, one line filing to each side of Ruha and Vaerana. Behind the warriors followed a parade of servants bearing a triangular table, three teak chairs, and a tray with a steaming teapot and a trio of tiny, deep bowls.

As Hsieh's men took their positions, Vaerana scowled and leaned close to Ruha. "I don't know why I listen to you. This is going to be worse than Voonlar. They mean to take us prisoner."

"You are too suspicious, Vaerana. They intend nothing of the kind."

"Then why so many guards?"

"They are only for ceremony." Ruha shook her head at the Lady Constable's suspicions, remembering how easily Minister Hsieh had disabled Wei Dao. "The mandarin is quite capable of defending himself."

Vaerana sneered doubtfully, but fell silent as the servants arrived with the furniture. They put the table on the chamber's exquisite floor mosaic, carefully arranging it so the point of the triangle stood over the head of the flame-tailed bird and the base faced Ruha and the Lady

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Constable. They placed two chairs on the women's side and positioned the third one before the tip of the table. The man bearing the tea tray stepped to one side, then stood at attention while Minister Hsieh, with Yu Po following close behind, entered the room.

The mandarin glided across the floor to the point of the table, then bowed to his guests. Ruha returned the gesture, making certain to bend lower than her host, but Vaerana barely nodded. Yu Po pulled the mandarin's chair out. A pair of servants stepped forward to do likewise for the witch and Lady Constable.

Vaerana astonished the servant by taking her own chair and placing it opposite the tea bearer. She dropped heavily into the seat, then braced her elbows on the table and faced Hsieh.

"The witch tells me you have some ylang oil."

Yu Po's face turned instantly scarlet. He slipped around Hsieh's chair. "You are ill-bred daughter of—"

"Yu Po!" Hsieh waited for his adjutant to stop, then waved at the tea tray. "You may serve."

Yu Po's jaw dropped, as did that of the tea bearer and the other servants; then the adjutant bowed to his master and stepped to obey.

Hsieh smiled at Vaerana. "Yes, ylang oil is ready." He looked to Ruha. "Where is Lady Feng?"

The witch found it difficult to meet the mandarin's gaze. "I am afraid we do not know." She saw Hsieh's lips tighten and had the cold, sinking feeling that she was doomed to appear a failure to everyone she met. "We were not able to follow the spy when he fled to the lair."

The handle of the teapot nearly slipped from Yu Po's grasp, and the lid clinked loudly.

The mandarin frowned at his adjutant's clumsiness, then asked, "Then Lady Feng cannot tell you where to find lair?"

"Vaerana is ... reluctant... to use your potion on Yanseldara." Ruha cast an uncomfortable glance at the Lady Constable, who set her jaw and showed no sign of

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feeling uncomfortable about her mistrust of the Shou. "I am sorry."

Yu Po finished pouring and set the teapot back on the tray, then picked up one of the tiny bowls and looked uncertain as to where he should place it. Minister Hsieh graciously gestured to Ruha, and the adjutant placed the vessel on the table before her. When he started to set the next cup before Vaerana, however, the mandarin scowled harshly and cleared his throat. The young man paled and nearly sloshed tea on the table as he swung his hand toward his master.

If the snub troubled Vaerana, she showed no sign. "I don't want to strain Yanseldara. She's not strong enough."

Hsieh waited for Yu Po to set a bowl before the Lady Constable, then picked up his own tea. Ruha slipped her cup beneath her veil and also sipped her drink, but Vaerana pretended not to see the steaming vessel before her.

The mandarin returned his bowl to the table. "Whether

Lady Yanseldara drinks potion is for Moonstorm House to decide, of course." Hsieh turned back to Ruha. "But if you do not know where to find lair, why do you need ylang oil?"

"Perhaps you have caught Winter Blossom?" Ruha asked. "We do know the general direction to the lair. If we carry the familiar close enough, he will lead us to Lady Feng."

Minister Hsieh shook his head. "The lemur eludes us. I fear he goes to hunt for his mistress." He looked back to Vaerana. "It appears we have only one way to find Lady Feng—or Lady Yanseldara's missing staff."

"I'm not going to pour your cricket juice down Yanseldara's throat," Vaerana declared. "It was Shou magic that put her into catalepsy in the first place."

"And it is only Shou magic that can cure her," Hsieh reminded her. "Compared to need to reunite body with spirit, risk to Lady Yanseldara is small."

"I said no."

Hsieh nodded politely. "Very well. Lady Feng is in no

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danger, but until you find staff—and Third Virtuous Concubine—you have no need of ylang oil."

Vaerana's eyes flashed silver. "You're threatening me?" "I state fact." Hsieh sipped his tea, then said, "Until you find Lady Yanseldara's spirit and free it from staff, ylang oil does no good. There is no reason to give it to you."

"No reason?" Vaerana stood, knocking her chair over. "I'll give you reason!"

"Vaerana, sit down!" Ruha urged. "It would be foolish to—"

The witch's warning was too late. Vaerana reached for Hsieh's collar.

The mandarin flung hot tea into the Lady Constable's eyes and bent toward the floor, ducking her grab easily. Without putting his tea bowl aside, he cupped his free hand behind her heel and pulled her foot off the ground. Vaerana lost her balance and fell over backward, landing on her chair and smashing it into pieces. The tips of a dozen long-bladed Shou halberds instantly touched her throat. A dozen more encircled Ruha.

Slowly, Ruha placed both her hands on the table and glanced down at Vaerana. A red mask had formed around the Lady Constable's eyes where the tea had scalded her, but the way she was blinking suggested she was more astonished than injured.

"Vaerana, if you value your life—or at least Yanseldara's—do not move," Ruha advised. "Allow me to explain the situation to Minister Hsieh, and I'm certain he—"

"You don't have to explain anything," Vaerana snarled. "All Minister Hsieh needs to know is that Pierstar's waiting outside with a hundred Maces. If I don't join him with a cask of ylang oil in the next twenty minutes, there'll soon be another two thousand—and they won't be in a patient mood."

Hsieh rose, very slowly.

Ruha said, "Minister, let me explain—"

The mandarin waved her silent, a command that was

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instantly enforced as his guards touched their halberd tips to her throat. Hsieh stepped over to Vaerana and peered down at her supine form.

"Since you know nothing but threat, we converse in manner you understand. First threat: If you try to touch me again, I snap offending arm. Second threat: If we do not find Lady Feng, you do not receive ylang oil, and Lady Yanseldara dies. Final threat: If Maces do not withdraw from grounds of Ginger Palace immediately, my guards slay them all. Then they slay your family, your servants, and everyone inside Moonstorm House."

Vaerana met the mandarin's icy glare with one of her own. "No one threatens Yanseldara or Moonstorm House. One way or—"

"Vaerana, you have the manners of a jackal!" Ruha barked. "If you say another word, I swear by the name of my father that I shall let the Shou cut your throat, and save Yanseldara without you!"

The Lady Constable looked at Ruha with the stunned expression of a sheikh being dressed down by the tribe beggar. Before Vaerana could recover from her shock, the witch turned her attention to the angry mandarin.

"And Minister Hsieh, your guards will not slay anyone inside Moonstorm House—or Elversult." Several halberds pricked Ruha's skin menacingly, but she ignored

them. "There is no time for a battle—at least not now. If you wish to see Lady Feng or Yanseldara alive again, you must work together."

"I have no need to work with this woman," Hsieh snarled. "Lady Feng is in no danger."

"I am sorry to tell you she is—and also everyone inside the Ginger Palace." When Hsieh scowled, Ruha hastened to add, "I do not speak of Vaerana's Maces. I am speaking of Cypress. We must take the ylang oil and flee before the dragon discovers his spy's mistake."

"Do not lie to me," Hsieh said. "I see you destroy dragon."

"You saw me destroy his body, not his spirit," Ruha

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said. "Do you not remember that he was undead? He has taken a new body."

Hsieh glared at the witch. "How long do you know this?"

"That does not matter." Ruha saw no use in lying; the mandarin had already guessed the truth. "What is important is that we leave before Cypress comes. If you allow him to have the oil now, you will never see Lady Feng again."

It was Yu Po who posed the question Ruha had been anticipating since they left the Night Castle. "Forgive me for speaking, Esteemed Mandarin, but perhaps we make bargain with dragon for return of Lady Feng?"

Ruha was spared the necessity of pointing out the suggestion's folly when Hsieh shot the adjutant an impatient glower. "Only fool bargains with angry dragon."

Yu Po's face reddened with embarrassment, but he was determined to redeem himself. He puffed out his chest. "I am not afraid, Worthy Minister. When I explain how witch deceives us—"

"If Cypress promises to return Lady Feng, who will cast the spell?" Ruha interrupted. "And after you give him the ylang oil, why would he return such a valuable hostage—and one who may well have the power to undo what he has worked so hard to do?"

Yu Po scowled at the witch and started to reply, but Hsieh raised a hand to silence him. "Say no more, Yu Po.

Perhaps Lady Ruha neglects to tell us about dragon's new body, but that does not make her wrong now. Go now, and prepare my guards to ride!"

Tang stopped well back in the cramped passage, where it branched into three smaller tunnels. The limestone felt almost slimy beneath his sodden boots, and the trill of the tiny stream echoed surprisingly loud in his ears. Stooping over so he would not hit his head on the low ceiling, he

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turned around and kneeled, his legs straddling the rivulet. The mouth of his hiding place was wide enough that he could see most of the ingot island, where Lady Feng stood beside Yanseldara's staff, calmly awaiting Cypress's arrival. Though the prince judged no man could see him hiding so far back in the passage, he had no idea whether the darkness would also conceal him from the empty-eyed dragon. He would find out soon enough, for it seemed unlikely the beast would waste much time before searching out the slayer of his pet wyverns.

A tremendous sloshing sounded from the treasure chamber; then Cypress's head rose into view beyond the island. The dragon appeared larger than even the night before, with horns as long as lances and a snout the size of a horse. He spread his wings, concealing the entire far wall of the cavern, and water poured down the dull scales in cataracts. He waded forward, rising high above the island as he climbed the beach of tinkling coins. Tang could see that Cypress carried a brown-cloaked figure in the talons of one hand.

The dragon paused beside the island and lowered his claw to the summit of the ingot heap. A plump, wide-eyed man clutching a small wooden cask crawled off, then collapsed to his knees and stared gaped-mouthed at the sparkling chamber around him. Cypress turned his vacant-eyed gaze on Lady Feng and dropped Tang's rope at her feet.

"I see some of your son's men survived." The dragon's booming words echoed off the stony walls like drum music. "Where are they? I would repay them for the pain they caused my pets."

When he heard Cypress assume it had taken a whole party to kill the wyverns, Tang's heart swelled with pride. Then it occurred to the prince that his mother's captor had spoken aloud, and the air inside his inflated chest turned cold and sickening. If the dragon could talk again, he could speak spell incantations and, no doubt, breathe acid. The prince felt as if he had chased a

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chameleon into the brush and found a crocodile waiting instead.

The Third Virtuous Concubine studied the rope at her feet, then craned her neck to fix her outward-looking eye on the dragon. "I know nothing of Prince Tang's men."

Cypress snorted wisps of black fume into the air, then dropped his head and held one gaping eye socket over Lady Feng's head. "Why are you lying? Perhaps you think these men can steal my treasure for you?"

Lady Feng's bulging eye looked as though it might pop from the socket. She slipped away from the dragon and started toward the man with the cask, clearly anxious to change the subject.

"Who is this fool? I do not ask for company."

The tactic seemed to work, for a crooked grin inched up the length of Cypress's snout. "He is not company; he is my spy."

The plump man rose and bowed to Lady Feng. "Tombor the Jolly at your service. Virtuous Concubine."

Lady Feng's squinty eye swung outward to gaze the man up and down, then rolled back to its original position. "I have no need of your service; you worship god of masks and betrayal. But I warn you, sentence of Number Six Court is sure to be harsh. Do not die before redeeming yourself."

Tombor's florid face paled, and he looked quickly away from Lady Feng. "I was only offering a greeting, but I shall remember your advice." He snatched up the cask he had brought and held it before him. "I have here the ylang oil you need."

Lady Feng looked at the keg, then slowly turned to face Cypress, who still wore the same crooked grin upon his long snout. "Now?"

"Of course now!" Cypress's grumbling voice spread across the water in dancing ripples. "I have been ready for weeks."

Lady Feng let her shoulders slump. "As you wish, then."

She crooked a finger at Tombor, then turned toward a small coffer of polished mahogany sitting on the near side of the island. The Third Virtuous Concubine kneeled on a small ingot terrace before the chest, then had Tombor place the cask he had brought beside it. She opened the chest and removed several bundles carefully wrapped in waxed silk.

A painful lump formed in the pit of Tang's stomach. The Third Virtuous Concubine had already prepared the other ingredients; it would take her only a few moments to mix the potion and cast the enchantment that would forever unite Yanseldara's spirit with Cypress. The prince crawled forward, struggling to think of some way short of matricide to stop his mother from finishing her

spell.

Cypress climbed onto the far shore and stretched his neck over the summit of the little island, cocking his hideous head so that one empty eye socket hung directly above the Third Virtuous Concubine. Lady Feng had Tombor remove the top of the oil cask; then she suddenly drew back and wrinkled her nose.

"Is something wrong?" Cypress demanded.

"Only horrible smell." Lady Feng took a deep breath, then leaned forward to peer into the cask.

Tang stopped a pace short of the mouth of the passage. He could go no farther without exposing himself to the dragon's view—if he had not already—and still he did not know how to stop his mother. He was surprised to realize that failure mattered to him greatly, and not only because he wanted to impress Lady Ruha by saving Yanseldara. To a great extent, his weakness was responsible for the peril of both the Ruling Lady and his mother; unless he set matters right, he would always be the same cowardly, foolish prince he had been before entering the swamp.

Lady Feng pulled back from the cask and carefully unwrapped one other silken bundles. Tang saw that he had a clear angle to the little keg. He wished for a cross-bow so he could pierce the side—and at last one desperate

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idea occurred to him. The prince retreated into the passage and found a smooth, fist-sized rock. He tore the lapel off his fighting tunic, then fit the stone into the middle of it and stepped into the mouth of the tunnel. The passage was too small for a circular windup, so he simply cocked

his arm back and hoped a simple whip-stroke would be powerful enough to span the distance.

Cypress's head instantly swiveled in Tang's direction, and the prince knew he did not have time to wait for his mother to move away from the ylang oil. He fixed his aim on the plump figure of Tombor the Jolly, who was standing on the hill above the cask, and snapped his arm forward.

The rock arced over the lake as fast as a shooting star. The shot was not a particularly difficult one, and it appeared the stone would strike its target square in the chest—not enough to kill the husky man, but certain to knock him from his feet and send him tumbling down the slope to spill the ylang oil.

Then, as the rock reached the shore of the ingot island, Cypress lowered his head. The stone bounced off the dragon's skull and splashed into the water. Lady Feng spun around, her gaze instantly rising to the passage where Tang now stood trembling, not so much in fear as in frustration. The dragon turned his head slightly and brought both eye sockets to bear on the prince.

"It seems your son has found his courage, Lady Feng."
"He finds courage, but he is still foolish boy." The Third Virtuous Concubine waved her fingers at Tang, urging him to retreat deeper into his passage. "Mighty dragon has nothing to fear from him."

"He killed my wyverns." Cypress started to circle the island. "And he was trying to spill the ylang oil."

Tang backed deeper into the passage, more because his mother had urged him to than because he imagined it would save him from the dragon. There was no hope now of stopping the spell, and he felt like a hopeless failure. He still feared death, of course, but only marginally more

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than he feared thinking of himself as a bumbling fool for the rest of his life.

By the time Cypress rounded the island, Tang could see little more than the dragon's dull scales growing larger and darker as they neared the tunnel mouth. He reached the triple fork where he had stopped before and glanced up each branch. Two of the passages vanished into inky blackness, but one, the smallest, curved back toward the lake. There was a pale yellow glow at the far end, suggesting it actually connected with the vast treasure chamber.

"Cypress, stop!" Lady Feng's voice was so muffled Tang

could barely hear it. "If you love Yanseldara, you spare boy's life."

The dragon pivoted to look down at the island, allowing Tang a clear view of his mother. Lady Feng had grabbed the lip of the open oil cask and tipped it forward. The contents were dangerously close to spilling.

"Pour it out, Wise Mother!" Tang yelled. "Life and death are same; I fear only dishonor!"

The Third Virtuous Concubine frowned in the direction of Tang's voice. "Then you are fool, Impertinent Son. You know nothing of life and death. If you do not understand that, you understand nothing at all!"

"What?" Tang gasped. If there was one thing his mother believed, it was that life and death were the same.

Lady Feng tipped the cask forward until the contents began to trickle down the side. Tombor the Jolly stooped over to reach for the other side of the cask, then found himself staring at a scorpion knife the Third Virtuous Concubine had produced from her sleeve pocket. The cleric withdrew his hand, and Lady Feng fixed her gaze on Cypress.

"Do you wish to have Yanseldara?" She tipped the cask forward even farther, and the trickle of oil became a steady stream. "Or not?"

"Very well. I am in a generous mood." Cypress waved

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Tombor away from the cask, then stepped away from Tang's passage. "I absolve the prince of his transgressions."

Tang did not believe the dragon for a moment, and knew that his mother would not either. Like any tyrant, Cypress could not forgive a rebellion against his authority. Once Lady Feng cast her spell, he would take his vengeance. So why was the Third Virtuous Concubine pretending to believe him? And why had she called the prince ignorant for quoting her?

She had tipped the cask. The Third Virtuous Concubine was trying to tell him something about the oil.

When Cypress turned his attention back to Lady Feng's preparations. Tang began to collect the largest stones he could find, piling them inside the small pas-

sage that curved back toward the lake. As soon as the prince judged he had enough to suit his purpose, he removed his clothes. He laid his battle tunic on the far side of the tunnel, arranging it over a boulder so that it would look as if he were crouching on the floor, with his back to the treasure chamber.

Lady Feng closed her mahogany coffer, and Tang knew she was getting ready to cast the spell. He laid down on his belly and crawled backward into the smallest passage, dragging his undertunic, trousers, and sword belt after him. The tunnel was so low that he could feel his back touching the ceiling. The prince began to stack the stones he gathered, scraping his elbows raw as he struggled to move in the cramped confines. The little bit of dim light vanished entirely, and he had to work in the dark, trying to feel the shapes of the rocks so he could fit them into the available spaces as tightly as possible.

His wall had nearly reached the ceiling when Tang heard his mother's muffled voice mumbling a command. Though he could not understand her words, he suspected she was calling for Yanseldara's staff. In his mind's eye, the prince saw her accept the pole from Tombor—would the traitor's hands be trembling at the magnitude of his

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crime?—and dip the butt into the ylang potion.

As though on cue, the Third Virtuous Concubine's voice began muttering the indiscernible syllables of her spell. Tang fed his undertunic through the narrow gap at the top of his little wall, stopping when he judged the tail would be touching the floor. He worked carefully, for he had plenty of time. It would take a few moments for the potion to work its magic, and, even then, Cypress would be in no hurry. The dragon would want to rejoice in his triumph and be certain the enchantment had worked before betraying his word.

Holding his undertunic against the ceiling with one hand and struggling to move stones with the other, Tang laid the last row of his wall. He folded the top of his shirt over his side of the barrier, using the extra rocks to anchor it in place. That done, he tore his trousers into strips and used them to plug the small gaps around the edges. The barricade would not stop the dragon's breath entirely, but it would absorb the brunt of the attack and, with a little luck, send the acid cloud boiling down tunnels that offered less resistance.

Tang located his sword belt and crawled backward down the tiny passage. He felt the stone around him shudder as Cypress rumbled in astonishment, and the prince knew his mother had completed her spell. What

had she been trying to tell him about the oil? Tang could think of only one thing: somehow, Tombor had pressed the wrong blossoms.

The prince felt the wall disappear beside his left foot and realized he had reached another fork. The side passage was not large enough for him to crawl into, but he was able to cram his legs in far enough to turn around and slither down the tunnel headfirst. The glow from the treasure chamber ahead had changed from bright yellow to a brilliant ruby red, and he could hear Cypress speaking in his deep dragon voice.

"Why is her spirit so—so pained? The spell couldn't have worked!"

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"I do not promise love feels good," Lady Feng countered. "You share what Yanseldara's spirit feels, and she shares what you feel. If she suffers, that is your fault, not mine."

The ingot island appeared in the mouth of the passage, and Tang stopped crawling. Cypress sat on the beach of coins, bending forward over Lady Feng and Tombor, who were standing near the summit of the isle. The dragon was holding Yanseldara's staff in the palm of his withered hand, his bony snout almost touching the fiery topaz set in the pommel.

"Then I have her?" Cypress closed the staff inside his claw. "Yanseldara is entirely mine?"

Lady Feng nodded. "Until potion wears off, yes. After that, what happens is between your spirit and hers."

"Until it wears off?" Cypress's roar was so loud that several pieces of jewelry fell into the lake. His empty claw flashed down and plucked up Lady Feng. "You told me the spell would last forever!"

"Your spy does not bring correct oil." Lady Pong's voice betrayed no hint of fear, and she stared into Cypress's eye voids without wavering. "He brings oil made from blossoms picked at night. They are not as potent as blossoms picked in morning."

"Ruha!" Tombor gasped. "That hag!"

Cypress's muzzle swung toward his spy, whose eye? suddenly grew as round as his face. The cleric began to stumble down the slope away from the dragon, and Tang felt like a new man.

"The Harper witch s-s-said they were the blossoms Hsieh b-brought," Tombor stammered. "She tricked me!"

"How unfortunate."

Tombor clasped his hands in supplication and craned his neck to look up at the dragon. "Please, 1-let me go back! I'll k-kill the Harper! I can get the b-blossoms you need!"

"If that is true, why did you not bring them in the first place?" A white glimmer flashed deep within Cypress'fr

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empty eye sockets; then he said, "Perhaps you knew you had the wrong oil, hmmmim? Perhaps you were hungry for my gold?"

Tombor dropped to his knees and tugged at the silver chain around his neck, pulling a gray velvet mask from inside his cloak. He pressed the disguise over his eyes, then began, "Unseen Mask, Great Lord of Shadows and Master of Deceit, hear the prayer of your most devoted

servant—

"Why do you pray to the King of Betrayal?" Cypress lowered his claw and, with a single black talon, flicked the gray mask away from Tombor's face. "Do you think he will give you your reward?"

Tombor threw his arms over his face and tried to turn away, but the dragon was already inside his mind. A terrified howl echoed off the cavern walls; then the plump traitor began to pack gold ingots inside his clothes, his stiff and jerky arms obviously moving against his will. Once his robe was loaded, he filled his arms and waddled down to the lake's edge, then threw himself into the clear waters. He sank like a stone.

The cleric held his breath for a long time, and Tang could see him still clutching his armload of gold ingots. At last, a long stream of bubbles streamed from his nostrils; then he opened his mouth and filled his lungs with water.

Cypress turned away from the traitor and raised Lady Feng to his face. "Now, what shall I do about you? You knew when you opened the cask that it was the wrong oil."

"It makes no difference—if you have confidence in your own spirit," Lady Feng said. "After potion wears off, you can subdue Yanseldara's spirit and make her your slave."

It astonished Tang to hear Lady Feng toying so boldly with the dragon. She knew Cypress loved Yanseldara only because no one else had ever bested him in battle. Considering that the first combat had cost him his life, it seemed unlikely he would welcome another fight for an even greater prize.

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Wisps of black fume curled from Cypress's nostrils, but when he spoke, he sounded more apprehensive than angry. "I do not want to make a slave of Yanseldara." He lowered the Third Virtuous Concubine to the ingot heap and allowed her to step off his hand. "I want her to love me, as I love her."

"You want to absorb her," Lady Feng scoffed. "She is stronger than you, and you want to make her part of yourself."

"Yes, to make her mine. Is that not what love is?" The dragon glanced toward the cavern where Tang had first taken refuge. "I'm certain your son would agree—though I'm afraid I can't allow him that chance."

"You leave son alone!" Lady Feng warned. "If you harm him—"

Cypress whirled on the Third Virtuous Concubine so fiercely that Tang feared he would murder her.

"I will kill him, and you will do nothing!" the dragon roared. "I have allowed you both to grow defiant, and now I must teach you to obey."

Lady Feng dropped to her knees, then surprised Tang by kowtowing to the dragon—dishonoring both herself and the emperor. "Please. He is only son. Punish me—"

"I need you."

Cypress drew himself to his full height, then turned Yanseldara's staff upside down and wedged the butt into a ceiling fissure. The dragon waded into the lake. Tang retreated deep into his worm hole, beseeching his ancestors to make his foe see only the cowardly prince he had been before entering the swamp.

As Cypress neared the cavern wall, his great bulk blocked the red light from the treasure chamber, plunging the prince into darkness so thick he could not see the stone beneath his nose. The cavern shuddered around his body, and the dragon's voice rumbled through the very

rock.

"... not changed after all, have you, Prince?"

There was a muffled whisper as the dragon inflated

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his chest, then a sharp hiss as he emptied it into the next tunnel. The exhalation seemed to continue forever, and soon a chorus of soft, eerie trills arose from the treasure chamber as the breath whistled through the network of passages and found its way back toward the lake. From deep within Tang's worm hole came a muffled clatter of stones, followed by the sputter and sizzle of dissolving limestone. The prince smelled the caustic stench of acid and expected to feel a stinging wind tear over his body, but the wall had not collapsed entirely. He felt only the light nettling of a faint mist. He crawled forward as far as he dared, and at last the eerie whistle died away.

Cypress stepped away from the cavern wall and turned toward the ingot island. Lady Feng threw herself into the water, wailing in motherly grief. The show was so convincing that, had Tang not been raised in the palace of the Third Virtuous Concubine, he would have believed her anguish to be genuine.

Cypress waded across the lake in two strides and plucked Lady Feng from the water. "Be quiet! That coward is not worth tears. He was groveling in the corner like a frightened child."

The report only drew louder wails from the Third Virtuous Concubine.

The dragon placed her atop the ingot heap, then circled to the far side of the island. "I will fetch the proper oil. When I return, have your ingredients ready to cast another spell—the permanent one."

Lady Feng raised her head. "Never! I let Yanseldara make slave of you!"

Cypress's claw swept down so swiftly that Tang did not see it move. It simply appeared beside Lady Feng's body, trembling with the dragon's fury, and the prince did not even realize it had touched her until he saw the blood seeping through her shredded cheosong.

"We shall see, shall we?"

The dragon dove into the lake and vanished from sight. Both Tang and his mother remained motionless

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and did not speak for several minutes. When it became apparent that Cypress would not return, Lady Feng turned toward the prince's hiding place.

"Are you there, Tang? I know you are fool, but honored ancestors claim you are no coward."

Tang pushed his head out of his worm hole. "I am here I see you kowtow to Cypress!"

Lady Feng shrugged. "I must convince him of grief Besides, shame is removed after you destroy him." She craned her neck to look at the staff lodged in the ceiling, thirty feet above her head. "Now, Courageous Prince, please to honor humble mother by climbing up to retrieve spirit gem."

* * * * «

Ruha urged her horse forward, once again nudging it between the mounts of Minister Hsieh and the Lady Constable. Vaerana had been on her best behavior since departing the Ginger Palace, but with the wooded hills of Elversult rising ahead and the planning session entering a crucial phase, the witch thought it wise to put herself between the two stubborn personalities.

"Very well. We hide Lady Yanseldara and ylang o 1 beneath city prison while we search for lair," Hsieh said "But who stays to guard them?"

"It's the Maces' barracks," Vaerana answered simply.

"Humble Minister begs to disagree." Hsieh's tone was anything but humble. "Maces know nearby lands. Perhaps they search for lair while Shou guard oil."

Vaerana leaned in front of Ruha, her face already turning the color of blood. "If you think I'm going to leave Elversult in the hands of a bunch of slanty—"

Ruha pushed the Lady Constable back toward her own horse. "The minister's suggestion has merit, Vaerana Perhaps it would be best to leave a mixed garrison at the barracks, and lend him some guides to help his men search for the lair."

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Vaerana clamped her mouth shut and took several deep breaths, then nodded curtly. "We can do that."

Hsieh looked straight ahead. "As can we—for mutual

benefit of all."

Ruha's sigh of relief was cut short by a chorus of alarmed cries. She turned in her saddle and looked down the long column to see riders of both races staring over their shoulders. They were tugging at armor buckles and tightening chin straps and generally readying themselves for battle. For a moment, the witch could not imagine what was troubling them, but then she saw it: a pair of distant black wings hanging low in the afternoon sky, steadily flapping and growing larger with every stroke.

"Most wretched dragon!"

"Elversult's just over the hill," Vaerana said. "We'll skirt the edge and make a run for Moonstonn House!"

"We secure ylang oil first—then fetch Yanseldara!"

"This is my city. I know what's—"

"You are both wrong." Ruha kept her eyes fixed on Cypress, who had already covered so much distance she could make out the lines of his broken horns. "We cannot hope to outrun the dragon, so we must outwit him."

Vaerana and Hsieh both studied the witch for a moment, then nodded their agreement. "What do you have in mind, Witch?"

"We should feign a stand in the forest. When the dragon attacks, we will split. Vaerana will take the Maces toward Moonstonn House. Minister Hsieh and the Shou will stay behind to act as a rear guard."

Hsieh locked gazes with Vaerana, then nodded. He turned to Yu Po, who had two waterskins filled with ylang oil hanging from his saddle. Although the new blossoms had yielded more, the minister had assured them this was more than sufficient to save Yanseldara. The rest had been burned at the Ginger Palace.

Hsieh took the first skin off his adjutant's saddle to pass it to Vaerana.

"That is not what I meant," Ruha said. Cypress was so

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close now that she could see his legs and arms dangling beneath his body. "Vaerana is the bait. The dragon will follow her, and we will take the oil to the barracks."

Hsieh shook his head. "That is not—"

"The witch is right. Minister. Cypress knows who the

desperate ones are. He'll follow us." Vaerana turned to Pierstar. "Do it."

"You hold one skin, Lady Ruha." Hsieh passed an oil sack to the witch, then hung the other on his own saddle and nodded to Yu Po. "You hear plan. Prepare line at edge of wood."

As the two adjutants passed the orders along, Vaerana led Ruha and Hsieh off the road. "Once you hit town, you can see Temple Hill from practically anywhere. Elversult Hall is straight across the market square from there, and the Jailgates—that's the city prison—is a block north of the hall." She looked at Hsieh. "And try not to kill any of my Maces when they challenge you. They don't know what's going on, and we don't care much for foreign armies running through our city streets."

"Not one man falls to Shou blade," Hsieh promised.

Vaerana accepted the reassurance with a grim smile. "Then I'll see you in the barracks, Helm willing." She turned away and spurred her horse after Pierstar and the rest of the Maces, who were just disappearing into the wood. "May your steel bite deep!"

Hsieh's Shou followed close behind the Maces, then stopped at the forest edge and dismounted. They quickly formed a long wall bristling with halberds and cross-bows. Ruha and the minister slipped through the line and guided their mounts past the rein holders, taking up a sheltered position from which they could flee in any direction.

There was no time to grow nervous or contemplate the coming battle. The last few men were still settling in when a deep, steady throbbing began to pound the air. The dragon appeared an instant later, flying low and fast, then wheeled toward the hill. Ruha raised a hand

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toward the sun. Before she could utter an incantation, Hsieh pushed her arm down.

"They are soldiers. It is their duty to die." He gestured at the skins hanging from their saddle horns. "We must not draw attention to ourselves. What we carry is too important."

As Cypress neared the trees, he suddenly turned and swooped along the edge of the wood. "Give me the oil!" he roared. "The oil and your gold!"

"Kozah save us!" Ruha gasped. "He speaks!"

The clacking of a hundred crossbows reverberated through the wood, and a wall of iron darts rose to answer the dragon's demands. Cypress roared and wheeled into the trees, and the battle did not begin so much as erupt. The forest shook with the crack of splintering treetops and steel blades glancing off bony scales and men screaming in fury and anguish. Ruha saw a huge, dark shape dancing across the broken oak trunks, his head swiveling this way and that as he bit attackers in two and searched for the precious ylang oil. Shou soldiers rushed him from all directions, flinging halberds and firing crossbows and hurling themselves against his flanks. Shattered scales and runnels of dark, smoking ichor began to fall from the dragon's body, and for one moment, the witch thought Hsieh's warriors might bring their foe down through sheer weight of numbers.

Somewhere up the hill, Pierstar Hollowhand cried, "Ride!"

The ground trembled with the distant thunder of pounding hooves. Cypress's slender head rose out of the melee and turned toward the sound. He tried to raise his wings so he could pursue the fleeing horsemen, but even he lacked the strength to fling off the hundred Shou hacking at his flanks. He opened his mouth, and the leaves in the trees began to rustle.

Instinctively, Ruha's hand dropped toward her pocket. "He's going to breathe!"

Hsieh reached over and grasped the witch's arm. "We

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must let him."

The dragon swung his head in an arc around himself, spraying a boiling black vapor from his maw. The caustic fog billowed through the treetops and began to settle groundward, filling the wood with a tremendous sound of sizzling and popping. Out of the dark cloud fluttered a deluge of leaves and sticks, disintegrating as they fell. Then came a cascade of heavy branches that crashed down upon the heads of the Shou and turned the forest floor into an impassible tangle of smoking, acid-drenched wood.

Hsieh's men cried out in fear and confusion, and their attack faltered. A low, bitter growl rumbled from Cypress's throat. He beat the air with his tattered wings, then rose above the carnage and, dripping runnels of acid from his dull scales, flew after the Maces.

Some of the Shou dove beneath the jumbled tree limbs to seek shelter, while others clambered across the tangled branches in a desperate effort to escape the black shroud descending upon their heads. Hsieh glanced toward the hilltop to be certain that Cypress was gone, then released Ruha's arm so she could help his men.

It was too late. The burning fumes had already reached the ground, and a hundred Shou warriors were raising their voices in a single wail of agony. Mercifully, the very darkness of the fog spared Ruha the sight of the dragon's acid eating the flesh from their bones.

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As Ruha and her companions galloped into the shadow of Temple Hill—a barren, stone-flanked tower towering high above the city's close-packed heart—they met a wall of jabbering, frightened townsmen. It was the first sign of dragon-spawned fear they had encountered. Until now, the people of Elversult had leapt into nearby doorways and hurled insults at the battered foreigners charging up Snake Road. This mob barely seemed to hear the clattering

hooves.

Ruha reined her mount to a walk, slowing the whole column. Counting Hsieh, there were thirteen riders behind her. It seemed likely that more Shou had survived the battle with Cypress, but neither the witch nor the mandarin had thought it wise to spend time regrouping. They had simply turned their horses toward the heart of the city and urged them into a gallop, trusting that any warriors who could follow.

The mob began to swirl around the column of riders. Ruha saw no blood or horrible acid burns, and the crowd appeared more determined than panicked. The witch stopped her horse and caught a swarthy man by the shoulder of his embroidered merchant's robes. He cried out and whirled around, glaring at the witch as though she had tried to rob him.

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"Sir, please tell me what is happening."

"Haven't you heard? They say a dragon's coming!"

"Where?" Ruha asked. "Is he ahead?"

The merchant shrugged. "Don't know. No one's seen him, and the Maces don't mean us to.. They've ordered everyone out of town."

"How much farther is ..."

The man turned away and vanished into the crowd before Ruha could finish the question. She urged her horse forward. The mob reluctantly parted ahead of her, alternately shouting warnings and curses. The witch ignored both and cast thoughtful glances down the empty alleyways that occasionally separated one wattle-and-daub tenement from the adjacent one. She was tempted to search for a faster route to the Jailgates, but she had seen the back streets of enough Heartlands cities to know most were confusing labyrinths of filth and dead ends.

Hsieh edged his horse alongside Ruha's, drawing several vehement curses from the river of people coming in the opposite direction. The mandarin leaned over and grabbed the rope holding the witch's skin of ylang oil, then deftly looped it an extra time around her saddle horn.

"Someone follows us." He did not point or turn his head, but his eyes flickered toward his far shoulder. "I think they are not Vaerana's men."

Ruha turned as though speaking to the minister and glanced down the avenue. It did not take long to discover their stalkers. There were at least five of them, pressed close to the buildings and scurrying along against the crowd. They wore plain cloaks that did a poor job of concealing the breastplates beneath, and they carried swords and axes on their belts. Though they were not wearing the black caps Ruha had seen in Pros, she felt sure they were cult members; their faces all had the dark, gluttonous look of pillagers and murderers.

"Have you seen more on the other side of the street?"

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"Many more."

Ruha looked forward again. "Cypress has called out his militia."

"Then he discovers trick. Soon he comes for us."

Ruha filled her lungs, and then spoke the incantation of the same wind spell she had used to attract the Ginger

Lady's attention on the Dragonmere.

"Stand aside!" Ruha's horse reared at the thunder of her voice. She maintained a secure grip on the reins and spoke again, "Clear the road!"

The command blasted a dozen nearby people off their feet. Many more covered their ears and cast terrified glances skyward, confident that such a thunderous sound could only have come from the heavens. The largest part of the mob froze in their tracks and stared at each other with dumbstruck expressions.

"Stand aside, I say!"

A few people drifted toward the sides of the street, but most of crowd remained too stunned to move. Ruha glanced back and saw that the cult members were drawing their weapons.

"Make threat." Hsieh, who was holding his hands over his own ears, shouted the suggestion. "Fear moves what kind words cannot."

"Move, or I shall move you!" Ruha commanded. "You have to the count of three. One . . ."

By the time she reached two, even the people who had been knocked to the ground were scrambling out of the way. A brief clash of steel sounded behind her as the cult stalkers rushed to attack. The witch dug her heels into her mount's flanks. The trembling beast sprang forward, leaping four people who had not been quick enough to gather themselves up.

Ruha continued to yell. The mob split before her, creating a narrow canyon down the center of Snake Road. Trusting her mount to pick its own path, she glanced back and was relieved to see the tail of her horse slapping the nose of Hsieh's. The rest of the Shou were close

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behind, several holding blood-stained swords in their free hands. The witch turned her attention forward again, doing her best to search the crowd ahead for any sign of an attack.

Ruha rounded a gentle bend and saw more people pouring onto Snake Road from a large side street ahead. In the intersection stood a small party of stern-faced Maces, blocking the narrow pathway created by the witch's booming threats. Their weapons were drawn, and behind them stood a blue-robed man with the impatient

scowl of a sorcerer who had better things to do than deal with dragon panics and columns of careless horsemen. Beyond the roadblock, the avenue continued only two hundred paces before it passed out of Temple Hill's shadow and opened into a vast, sunlit market plaza.

Ruha slowed her mount, bringing the column to a stop before the glowering Maces. A grim-faced man with a ruddy complexion stepped forward and pointed his mace at the witch.

"See here, Stranger. Even in the best of times, we don't like—"

"Vaerana Hawklyn would be most appreciative if you will lead us to the Jailgates." Although Ruha whispered the words, the leader and his fellow Maces cringed at the strength of her voice. She urged her horse forward, leaning down to offer the man a hand up. "The Cult of the Dragon is close behind, and it won't be long before the dragon himself comes for us."

The leader arched an eyebrow and lowered his weapon, but made no move to climb up behind Ruha. "What's going on?"

"We lack time to explain matter, but it is of great urgency for safety of Lady Yanseldara," said Hsieh. "Now, please to get on horse or stand aside."

The leader jammed his mace into his belt and reached for the witch's hand. "This had better not be some kind of trick."

As Ruha clasped the man's steel glove, the crowd

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began to churn and close. Someone clamped a hand over the old sorcerer's mouth; then a dagger tip erupted from his chest. Hand axes and short swords appeared from under cloaks and cleaved three Elversian skulls before the Maces realized they were being assaulted. The survivors turned to find themselves facing half-a-dozen attackers each.

"Ambush!"

The angry leader clamped his mailed fingers around Ruha's wrist and jerked, nearly pulling her from her mount.

Suddenly, he cried out in anguish and threw himself against the flanks of the witch's horse. She glimpsed the butt of a crossbow bolt sticking through the armor between his shoulders, then felt hands tugging at her

saddle straps.

"Get away from me!" she bellowed.

Her horse reared at her thunderous command, and the grasping hands fell away from her saddle. Hsieh came up beside her, at once trampling the Maces' fallen leader and burying his square-tipped sword in an axe-man's skull. Ruha urged her own mount forward, then led the column across the intersection, scattering ambushers and bystanders alike with the might of her booming voice.

They had barely crossed before a pair of gloom-shrouded figures appeared at the end of the street, blocking the route into the sunlit market plaza. The man was tall and broad-shouldered. He wore steel plate as black as jet and carried not a sword, but a sliver of darkness shaped like a sword. It was impossible to say what the woman looked like; she was a mere silhouette, a night phantom obtruding on the light of day.

Ruha dropped her reins and raised one hand toward the sky. She pointed the other at the phantom-woman and shook the lane with the rumbling incantation of her sun spell. Five streaks of golden flame shot from her fingers and arced down the street, twining themselves

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together into a crackling cord as thick as a man's leg.

The spell took less than three heartbeats to streak the length of the street, and in that time Ruha's galloping horse had carried her halfway to the marketplace. The fiery rope arced down to strike the shadow-sorceress. The black-armored knight stepped in front of his mistress, raising the tip of his dark sword as though he meant to split the fire.

Instead of dividing down the center, the blazing cord entered the dark blade and drained from sight. A black flash shone through the window of a street-front tenement; then the entire building erupted into golden flame. The conflagration engulfed a dozen bystanders and seared many more. The crowd erupted into hysteria, some howling in anguish and others wailing in terror. Those near the buildings, fearing more such explosions, pushed toward the center of the street, while those nearer the charging horses pressed toward the buildings. The witch rode into a cloud of greasy smoke, and the horrid stench of charred flesh filled her nose. She found herself struggling to keep her gorge down, sickened more by the knowledge that her magic had helped cause the

awful smell than by the odor itself.

The column had nearly reached the end of the street. Ruha felt a horse flank brush against her leg and looked over to see a Shou warrior moving up beside her, sword drawn and eyes wild with battle lust. On her other flank rode Hsieh himself. The mandarin's face was almost rapturous in its placidity, his square-tipped blade held loosely in his hand.

The dark knight raised his black sword and rushed forward to meet Hsieh. At the same time, the shadowy sorceress drew her hands up before her body, raising an impenetrable curtain of darkness around the battleground.

There was no time to rein in. Praying they would emerge in the marketplace with at least one sack of ylang oil intact, Ruha pulled her jambiya and galloped

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into the darkness. From Hsieh's side came the crackle of breaking bones, followed by the scream of a horse and the crash and clamor of armored and unarmored bodies tumbling along the cobblestones. Ruha heard the mandarin give a short angry yell; then a hand caught hold of her saddle, and she lost track of her companions.

The witch lashed down into the black murk, and her dagger sliced harmlessly through air. The cinch strap around her horse's belly popped loudly; then her saddle came loose. Ruha felt herself slipping down her mount's flank and grabbed for the ylang oil. The cobblestones slammed into her shoulder, and her body went rigid with pain. She bounced head over heels, feet still caught in her stirrups, and came to a rest, her head spinning.

The darkness around her exploded with clapping hooves and confused voices, both Shou and Elversian. A pair of steel horseshoes grazed Ruha's leg; then a horse screamed and crashed to the street. The witch found her saddle horn. She untied the oil sack and kicked free of her stirrups. A sharp point tangled briefly in the thick cloth of her aba, then pushed through and bit deep into her side.

For a moment, Ruha was too confused to realize what had happened. Then she felt a fiery sting and warm, wet blood spilling down her stomach. She screamed and rolled away, lashing out with her jambiya.

The blade dragged. Something hot and sticky poured over her hand, and a rich, coppery smell filled her nostrils. The witch flipped her wrist and brought her weapon back to inflict the famous T-shaped wound that made the

curved daggers so dangerous, but her foe had already vanished into the darkness.

Ruha pulled the ylang oil closer and clutched it to her breast. A clamorous clash of steel rang out behind her as the Shou turned to meet their cult pursuers. The witch weaved her dagger through the darkness in a blind defense pattern, but a stinging anguish was spreading outward from her wound, and her arm would not move

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swiftly. The oil sack felt warm and sticky against her breast, but she knew by its smell that the fluid was on1.;;

her own blood. Had any ylang oil spilled, she would surely have been nauseated by its sick-sweet smell.

"Ruha?" Hsieh's voice sounded shaky and weak.

"Here, Minister." Ruha heard someone step to her side, then a small Shou hand took her beneath her dagger arm. When it began to pull her up, she asked, "They did not steal your oil sack, did they?"

The hand suddenly loosened its grasp, and Hsieh's voice hissed, "I thought you had the oil."

Ruha did not hesitate; she swung her arm up backward and drove the tip of her jambiya deep into the impostor's torso. The hand opened entirely and a haggi ,i scream filled the witch's ear. She scrambled to her fe "• and stumbled away as fast as she could, clutching tt ylang oil to her breast and slashing her dagger blind., through darkness. After a few steps, the witch sniffed familiar scent. The odor was fresher and not quite - -i cloying as the ylang oil she had smelled in Prince Tang's spice refinery, but there could be no doubting it. She turned slightly off her course and followed the fragrance toward its source.

A moment later, the witch stepped into the sunlight and found herself staring at Hsieh's blood-spattered back. The mandarin reeked of ylang oil and still carri? •" his burst sack over his shoulder, and in his hand he held the dark knight's black sword. Ahead of him, the shan ovy sorceress was groaning feebly and staggerii^ through the deserted market plaza toward a looming, black-winged shape.

After a hundred tries, Tang managed a flawless hurl. Flying sideways, the golden necklace hit Yanseldara's staff, and the heavy amulet at the end whipped around and swung over its own chain. The choker slid down the

shaft and stopped at the red-glowing pommel, which hung over Tang and his mother's heads like a strange, ropy-flamed chandelier. The prince carefully pulled his rope taut, then walked around the ingot island to twine the line more securely about the shaft.

"This no time to stretch legs, Brave Prince." Lady Feng positioned herself directly beneath the staff. "Pull!"

Tang climbed to the center of the island and hauled on the rope. The staff popped free and plummeted straight toward the head of the Third Virtuous Concubine, who stepped aside and plucked it from the air without allowing the topaz to strike the ingots. Before the prince could comment on her catch, she slipped the rope off the shaft, then took a small bundle from her mahogany chest and started down the slope.

Tang gathered up his rope and empty waterskin and followed. "The passage is long one, Esteemed Mother. It would be better if you also had air."

"Cypress does not provide prisoners with sacks for air." She opened her bundle and sat at the edge of the water. "But not to worry. With you doing work, I do not need breath."

Lady Feng began to breathe quick and shallow, forcing her body to absorb as much extra air as possible.

Tang sat at her feet and tied her ankles together. "What of your spellbook?"

"Even small amount of water ruins it."

"Your chest is waterproof."

Lady Feng glowered at him. "You already pull too much. Spellbook is safe enough here, with my other treasure." She snatched the rope from his hand, then untied the jewelry he had used to weight the end. She tossed the necklace on the ingot pile. "With all my treasure."

Tang sighed, resigning himself to a return trip after Lady Feng recovered her senses and wanted her spellbook. He snatched his rope back, finished binding his mother's ankles, and fastened the other end of the line to his waist. The prince filled his waterskin with air and

tied it around his neck, then helped the Third Virtuous Concubine seal her mouth with a gag of waxed silk. She picked up Yanseldara's staff, and soon they were in the water. Tang helped her out into the lake and swam over to where the treasure vault's ceiling sloped down to meet the water.

"Are you ready. Esteemed Mother?"

Lady Feng took a few more breaths through her nose, then nodded and mumbled something that might have been, "No dawdling."

She plugged her nostrils, and Tang dove beneath the surface, dragging the Third Virtuous Concubine behind him. The light from the glowing spirit gem in Yanseldara's staff illuminated the watery cavern in shimmering scarlet light, revealing a huge, winding passage that was not so much a single corridor as a confluence of smaller tunnels arriving from all directions. Despite the labyrinthine appearance, there was no doubt about which passage Cypress used; even if the other tunnels had been large enough to hold him, his stony scales had scoured hundreds of shallow furrows along the proper route.

Although Tang could not be certain, the trip out of the treasure chamber seemed to go much faster than it had coming in. A slight current carried him forward even when he did nothing, while the light from the spirit gem made it much easier to find handholds. The prince drew himself yards at a pull, and he had just drawn his second breath from the air skin when the first brown hints of bog rot began to cloud the water. The rope grew slack as Lady Feng drifted toward him.

Tang glanced back and saw his mother's pop-eyed stare locked on his kicking heels. Her waxed gag and nostril plugs remained in place, but her cheeks were puffed-out and her face was crimson with the desire for breath. She scowled and waved him forward, then clamped her free hand over her mouth and nose.

The prince looked ahead and pulled through the pas-

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sage with renewed vigor. To his dismay, the water did not grow any murkier. The gentle current that had been pushing them forward died away. He started to worry that he had somehow lost his way, but that could not be. They had passed no side tunnels large enough to hold Cypress, and the walls in this passage still showed the deep scouring marks left by the dragon's scales.

Tang began to sense a dark presence ahead. For a moment, he feared it was their foe swimming up the passage; then he saw a curtain of gray stone at the end of the tunnel: Cypress had blocked the exit. The prince did not waste any of his precious breath lamenting the dragon's foresight. He simply pulled himself to the boulder, then turned to take Yanseldara's staff from his mother so he could search for gaps around the edges.

Lady Feng's pop-eye was fluttering in its socket. Her cheeks were no longer puffed out and her face had turned more purple than crimson. Though she still held her free hand clamped over her mouth, a small stream of bubbles was rising from between her fingers. Tang knew she had pulled her gag aside to expel her breath and was struggling not to fill her lungs with water. Only one gulp of air remained in the air skin. The prince's own lungs were burning with the desire for another breath, but he pushed the sack toward his mother's mouth.

Lady Feng caught his arm. Her squinty eye rolled forward and looked Tang up and down, and the Third Virtuous Concubine smiled. She shook her head and pushed the air skin back toward the prince's mouth, then pointed from his lips to hers.

Tang nodded and expelled his breath, then sucked the last of the air from the skin. He held it in his lungs only a moment before placing his mouth over his mother's and blowing a long gasp into her lungs. It was the third time the air had been used, and he did not know how much good it would do her, but he hoped that it would at least reduce the temptation to open her mouth.

Lady Feng accepted the gift, then pushed Yanseldara's

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staff into his hand and pulled his dagger from his belt, Tang scowled in confusion. Before he realized what she was doing, the Third Virtuous Concubine grabbed his free arm and drew the blade across his empty palm. As blood clouded around his fingers, she opened her mouth and spoke. Water rushed into her lungs, and her body began to convulse instantly as it instinctively tried to cough. Horrified at the sight of what he took to be his mother's fast-approaching death, the prince reached out to draw her close.

Lady Feng pushed him away and pointed at the bloody cloud in the water beside them. To Tang's surprise, it was coalescing into the shape of a man's head.

Suddenly, the Third Virtuous Concubine threw her arms around the prince's neck. A series of powerful convulsions racked her chest; then her body went limp and

her lips fell open. Tang clamped his hand over her mouth and tried not to think of the terrible burning in his own chest.

When the prince turned back to the crimson head, he was amazed to see the familiar grim face of General Fui D'hang floating in the water beside him.

Fui's head tipped forward, as though bowing, and floated toward a small side passage. Tang jammed Yanseldara's staff into his belt, then grabbed a handhold and pulled himself after the loyal general.

* !!! * * *

Cypress stood in the heart of the sunlit plaza, towering high above a sea of tent-roofed stalls. His empty eye sockets turned in the direction of Ruha and Hsieh. The dozens of lances and arrows hanging from his thick scales hinted at the fight Vaerana's Maces had put up before—before what? The witch had no way to guess whether the dragon had killed the Lady Constable and all her men, or had simply discovered the ruse and flown away.

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Save for the groaning shadow-sorceress and the meat animals clucking and snorting inside their cages, the market was silent and deserted, with bolts of cloth strewn through the narrow lanes and dried legumes spilling onto the ground from open sacks. Ox wagons and pushcarts sat abandoned upon the road that circumscribed the plaza, and all the buildings that fronted it had their windows shuttered and barred against the impending acid storm. On the far side of the bazaar, almost directly behind the dragon, loomed a handsome building of marble pillars and arched entranceways that could only be Elversult Hall.

The clang of steel against steel still rang from the darkness at Ruha's back, but it seemed wiser to risk that battle than to venture into the open with the dragon. The witch reached for Hsieh's shoulder, then groaned sharply as her bleeding wound protested with lances of pain. She settled for the mandarin's arm and pulled him into the blackness after her.

They took no more than two steps before Cypress's deep-voiced incantation rumbled across the marketplace. The sunlight burned the magical darkness into ash, which fell to the ground and spread a grimy layer of soot over the many corpses—Shou, cult, and horse—piled atop the cobblestones. Five blood-covered Shou were bouncing between three and four attackers each, striking as often with a driving elbow or flying foot as with

whirling blades. The street beyond was clear as far as the intersection, but beyond that it remained thickly choked with refugees.

The cobblestones trembled with the heavy thud of the dragon's step. Seemingly oblivious to his wounds, Hsieh leapt a mangled horse and charged toward his outnumbered men.

"Stay close. Lady Ruha!"

The witch clenched her teeth against the pain in her side and circled the dead beast, shuddering with fear each time she felt the ground tremble with Cypress's

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heavy step. Hsieh reached the battle and swung his sword at the nearest cult member. The man raised a long-handled axe to parry. The minister's dark blade passed through both weapon and armor with no more effect than a shadow. The instant the black sliver touched the fellow's skin, however, it grew as solid as steel and cleaved him down the center.

After that, Hsieh wielded his weapon as though it were black lightning, felling one, then two, three, and four more enemies in as many eye blinks. The remaining Shou quickly seized the advantage and began to slay their attackers.

Ruha was beginning to have visions of turning the remarkable weapon against Cypress when the last cult member fell. The witch stepped over a Shou corpse and rushed to follow Hsieh toward the intersection; then she heard the dragon's voice rumbling with another magic invocation. She scooped a handful of bloody pebbles off the street and turned, hurling them at her foe and uttering her briefest stone spell.

The rocks streaked straight into Cypress's empty eyes, striking with a loud, sharp crackle. The dragon's head snapped back; then a spray of bone shards and shattered scales erupted from the back of his skull. He roared, spraying a fine black mist into the air, and then began to shake his head.

Ruha turned to follow Hsieh. She was not disappointed; it would take a hundred such attacks to destroy Cypress, but at least she had interrupted the dragon's spell—or so she thought, until a corpse's lukewarm hand caught her by the ankle.

Ruha twisted to avoid landing on the ylang oil and came down on her wounded side. The impact drove spikes of pain deep into her body. The witch found herself

struggling for breath, and she knew she was dangerously close to blacking out. The corpse grabbed hold with its second hand and dragged itself forward. She looked down and saw that her attacker was the dead Shou over which

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she had stepped earlier. She tried to kick free, but it felt no pain from her blows and would not let go.

Hsieh appeared at Ruha's side and brought his sword down across the corpse's shoulders. The dark blade passed over the zombie's body like a shadow, causing no harm at all. The mandarin's narrow eyes grew as round as saucers; then the arms of a dead cultist grabbed him from behind and hurled him to the ground.

The cobblestones shuddered as Cypress resumed walking. Ruha craned her neck and saw that she and Hsieh were not the only ones in dire circumstances. The dragon had animated all the corpses in the street. Though the zombies were slow and clumsy, they were pressing the Shou survivors by virtue of their numbers alone.

Ruha's attacker grabbed hold of her belt, then slammed its free fist into the pit of her stomach. She tried to scream in pain, but the blow had driven her breath away, and she could do no more than grunt. The zombie raised its fist to strike again. She released the oil sack and deflected the punch with her forearm. In the same motion, the witch drove the heel of her free hand into the side of her attacker's head and heard the temple snap. ^ Pushing with all the strength in her legs, she rolled onto "- her side and threw the dead Shou off.

•^ Ruha grabbed the oil sack and leapt up. As she turned to flee, the dragon's huge shadow fell over her body. She sprinted for the intersection. The pain in her side was excruciating, but she managed to ignore it and rush forward at a pace that would have made a hare-hound proud. She kept expecting Cypress to say something, to issue a command for her to stop or at least to taunt her, but he held his tongue. Ruha found the silence even more alarming than the hiss of his lungs filling to spray acid. The dragon was thinking of only one thing: killing her. To comment on his intentions would have been a meaningless waste of breath.

The street trembled again, and Ruha knew she had no hope of outrunning her pursuer. She summoned a wind

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spell to mind and darted toward the street side, then heard the whoosh of the dragon's huge talons slicing through the air behind her. The witch forced herself not

to look toward her pursuer's face; the last time she met his gaze, he had nearly taken over her mind.

Ruha angled toward the entrance to the nearest tenement. In the corner other eye, she glimpsed Cypress's other huge claw sweeping down to pluck her up. She slammed her feet against the street and managed to slow herself, allowing the black hand to sweep past without catching her. Then, feeling like a spiny iguana dodging a hungry Bedine boy, she darted forward again.

The tenement was barely three paces away. Ruha took a deep breath, then uttered her wind spell and exhaled. A ferocious gust of air howled from her lips, blasting the heavy oaken door into splinters. The witch rushed blindly into the building's deep-shadowed interior. Three paces inside, she stumbled over a step and slammed face first into a wooden staircase.

Ruha gathered herself together and spun around, then barely leapt aside in time to prevent Hsieh's dark sword from piercing her heart. The mandarin stumbled over the same stair as the witch, but managed to recover more gracefully by picking up his feet and landing two steps up the stairwell. Behind him came two of his men, who also displayed their incredible agility by managing to catch each other when they also tripped over the step. The witch did not know how any of them had escaped the zombies—in a manner similar to how she had, she supposed—but she was glad for the company.

"Where now?" Hsieh squinted at Ruha with his uncovered eye.

"I do not know."

Ruha stepped around the stairwell and ran down a broad, dirty corridor toward the back of the building. As Hsieh and his men moved to follow, Cypress's hand burst through the doorway and caught the last one in line. The warrior howled in pain, and Hsieh raised his sword to

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charge the doorway.

Ruha caught him by the shoulder. "If that blade did not affect the corpses, it will not harm Cypress. He is also undead."

"Thank you. I would feel most foolish." The mandarin gestured down the corridor. "Please to make most of soldier's sacrifice."

Ruha turned down the hall and tried a dozen barred doors before the captured man finally stopped screaming.

There was a brief silence; then the warrior behind Hsieh said, "Dead men follow us."

"Cypress fears to destroy oil sack," Hsieh observed. "Otherwise, he sprays us with acid."

"True, but I doubt he is willing to let us escape." Ruha started down the corridor again, judging they had less than forty paces before it ended in a windowless stone wall. "And we will soon run out of room. I fear the back of this building stands against Temple Hill."

Hsieh caught Ruha by the shoulder. "You stop dead men. We find way out."

Ruha glanced down the corridor at the long line of zombies. The closest was only ten paces away, but was slow and shambling. She nodded. As Hsieh's warrior began hacking at a door, the witch picked up a small stone lying among the refuse against the wall. She used it to scrape a line up both walls to within a few inches of the ceiling. She connected them with another line on the floor, then laid the rock upon it. The leading corpse was only two steps away.

A muffled clamor sounded somewhere in the structure far above, presumably Cypress tearing the roof away. As much as Ruha wanted to glance at the ceiling, there was no time. She spoke the incantation other stone spell. The rock on the floor disappeared, then a shimmering gray wall formed between the three lines the witch had traced on the floor. The first corpse, a dark-haired cult member with an ugly skull wound, arrived at the barrier. He managed to push his head and one arm through before the magic wall

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turned as solid as granite. The zombie remained there, reaching for the witch's oil sack and moaning in the plaintive, incoherent voice of a tormented spirit.

Another crash reverberated down from above, this time followed by the clatter of falling rubble.

"He is digging his way down through the building!" Ruha cried, spinning toward Hsieh.

She completed the turn in time to see an iron bolt shoot through the breach Hsieh's man had hacked in the door. The dart buried its head in the opposite wall, and the muffled clatter of a bow crank sounded from inside the chamber. The warrior reached through the hole and lifted the crossbar off its supports.

"Get on with you!" cried the man on the other side of

the door. His voice sounded both fearful and old. "The next one won't miss!"

Hsieh's soldier shoved the door open and stormed inside, yelling, "You dare to attack Shou mandarin!"

A heavy thud shook the building; then the ceiling began to crack and groan beneath a great weight. Ruha and Hsieh followed the warrior into a small, windowless shop filled with the cluttered shelves of an apothecary. The soldier was leaning over a chest-high counter, holding his sword to the throat of a mousy, squint-eyed man. On the counter lay an empty crossbow and a crucible heating over the flame of an alcohol lamp.

As soon as she saw the lamp's blue flame, Ruha's heart skipped a beat. If she could use such a hot fire to cast her most powerful sun spell, even Cypress would be helpless to defend himself. She stepped toward the apothecary, but Hsieh spoke before she could ask the old man if he had any brimstone.

"Where is Number Two Exit?" Hsieh demanded, his gaze darting from one cramped corner to the next.

"Isn't one."

"What is this material?" Hsieh stepped to the outside wall and ran his fingers over the smooth, white-washed surface.

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"Wattle and daub," the apothecary answered.

When the mandarin did not seem to understand, Ruha said, "A sort of mud plaster."

The planks above their heads creaked, then began to pop and crack. The chandelier above the apothecary's counter started to swing, and Ruha looked up to see the exposed joist logs bowing directly over their heads. The dragon knew exactly where they were, and it took the witch only an instant to guess how. If the smell of ylang oil had led her to Hsieh earlier, then certainly the dragon, with his much larger nose, could track them by the same scent.

A tremendous splintering filled the room as five huge talons pierced the ceiling. The apothecary wailed and dropped to his knees behind the counter, and Hsieh shoved his warrior toward the outside wall.

"Kick hole."

The claws began to rip through planks of thick wood as

if they were made of paper. Hsieh's soldier sheathed his sword and stepped back to get a running start, and Ruha leaned over the counter to look at the cowering apothecary.

"Have you brimstone?" When the man only looked at her with terrified eyes, she yelled, "Brimstone powder—now!"

The dragon's fist closed around a joist log and started to tug. The beam, a rough-hewn pine trunk as thick as an ogre's leg, groaned and bowed, but it would not break—at least not easily. Hsieh's man charged across the room, then picked up both feet and attacked with a flying, two-legged stomp kick. The daub cracked beneath his heels, and he crashed through the wall to disappear outside.

The apothecary shoved an open bottle of yellow powder onto the counter and ducked out of sight again. Ruha grabbed the lamp from beneath the crucible and pulled the wick stopper. The cloth was still saturated with alcohol, so the flame continued to burn as she poured the fuel into the brimstone bottle.

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A deep, rumbling grunt shook the shop. The joist log snapped with a mighty crack, and the ceiling sagged beneath Cypress's weight. The dragon tore a handful of wood away, creating a hole twice the size of a door.

Hsieh stepped to Ruha's side. "You must come now!"

"In a moment." Holding the saturated brimstone in one hand and the flickering lamp wick in the other, Ruha turned to face Cypress. "First I must stop the dragon."

"That will not be so easy as you think!" Cypress's voice boomed through the empty hole as loud as thunder. "I have learned to be wary of you."

The dragon's second sentence tolled through Ruha's head like a striking bell, shattering her concentration. She tried to summon the incantation of her most powerful sun spell, but could not.

Did you think I had to see your eyes to attack your mind? The words echoed back and forth through Ruha's head, building on each other, growing louder and sharper with every reverberation. Any contact will do.

Ruha tried to bring the flickering wick to the brimstone bottle, but her body did not seem to hear her wishes. Her hands remained a foot apart, shaking with the memory of what she had intended, yet unable to obey. The wick in her hand sputtered and smoked darkly as it

ran out of alcohol and began to consume itself instead.

"Why do you wait?" Hsieh demanded. "Cast spell!"

The sound of cracking wood filled the chamber once again, and the ceiling sagged almost to their heads as the dragon lay on the floor above. When Ruha did not move, Hsieh apparently realized what was wrong. He pulled a lasal leaf from his pocket and slipped it between her lips. The witch allowed it to fall from her mouth; if they were to have any chance of escaping the dragon, she could not allow a lasal haze to cloud her mind.

Hsieh watched the leaf flutter to the floor, then pulled his dagger from its sheath.

"So sorry, Lady Witch." He cut the rope hanging over her shoulder and took the sack of oil. "Must not let

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dragon have ylang oil."

The dragon's withered hand came through the hole and snaked toward the witch. The mandarin quickly stepped away, then turned and threw himself through the opening in the wall.

Cypress's talons stopped a foot short of Ruha, and the din assailing her head quieted to a dull roar. The lamp wick hissed and flickered and began to shrink. The witch considered trying to resist the dragon's mind attack, but he was too powerful to defeat. Instead, she let all her defenses down, envisioning her mind as the great hall of an empty Heartlands castle, where even the slightest sound reverberated like a drum.

What is happening to you? Cypress demanded. Where is the oil?

Ruha made no reply, allowing the dragon's words to crash through her mind with such force they shattered the walls of the hall she had envisioned.

The ruse worked. Cypress's hand suddenly pulled away, and the cacophony in Ruha's mind quieted as he sniffed out the ylang oil. Her hand obeyed when she tried to move it; even the dragon could not focus his attention in two different places at once. She pushed the bottom of the wick into the mixture of brimstone and alcohol. The flame quickly returned to its steady blue gleam, but the witch forced herself not to think about her sun spell. The dragon was still inside her head, and he would feel the effort of summoning the incantation from her memory.

Ruha had to wait only an instant before Cypress's

head shot through the hole, his nostrils flaring as he tried to sniff out the fading scent of Hsieh's oil-soaked body. The witch hurled her bottle at an eye socket. The dragon flinched away, and the glass shattered against the side of his head. The burning wick instantly touched off the mixture of alcohol and sulfur, filling the chamber with a searing blue-yellow flash.

Cypress bellowed in shock and pulled his burning face out of the chamber. Ruha stepped over to the hole,

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summoning her incantation as she went. She saw the dragon's head more than two stories above, shaking madly from side to side, trailing long tails of sapphire and amber flame. The witch thrust her hand toward the fire and spoke her incantation.

The blaze erupted into a blistering orb of white-hot flame, as brilliant as the sun in the sky and twice as large. The dragon wailed in anguish. When he raised his claws to his face, they caught fire and started to burn with a flickering yellow flame. He started to dance about, and Ruha heard a tremendous crash in the next room as one of his heavy feet came through the ceiling. Burning scales began to flutter off his head and touch off fires on the floors above. Cypress raised his wings, then roared in fury and launched himself into the air.

The witch turned away from the conflagration and saw the astonished apothecary standing behind his counter, his rheumy eyes fixed on the fiery hole over his head. She pulled him from behind the counter.

"Come along. We had better leave this place," she said dragging the old man toward the hole in the wall. "Perhaps you would be kind enough to guide me to the Jailgates?"

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Deep in the Jailgates' thick foundations, Ruha caught herself staring at Yanseldara's cataleptic face. The Lady Lord lay in an infirmary bed, a honey-haired beauty with the slender face and sharply delicate features of a half-elf. Save for the amethyst circles / beneath her eyes, her skin was as pale as pearl. Her cheeks were hollow from the lack of eating, her lips as gray as ash, her brow lined by the strain of a wicked and endless nightmare. She could easily lack the strength to carry a message to Lady Feng, even if Vaerana would agree to try Hsieh's potion.

Ruha turned to the Lady Constable who, despite having been knocked through a mud-brick wall by Cypress's tail, sat in a chair next to Yanseldara's bed. A priest had already examined and straightened the swollen purple mass that had once been Vaerana's knee, but Minister Hsieh had volunteered to sew up her many deep cuts. He was sitting beside her now, smiling contentedly each time he pushed the needle into a long gash along her jawline.

Ruha said, "Vaerana, I am sorry to interrupt while you are being attended to, but we have something to discuss."

"Please to wait until I finish here," said Hsieh. "Or scar will be most unflattering."

The mandarin's voice was hoarse and raspy, no doubt from breathing the dusky smoke that pervaded even the

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fortress's underground chambers. Elversult was burning—a good part of it at least—and there was no escaping the acrid murk. The fumes hung over the city as heavy as a fog, creeping past shuttered windows and seeping under barred doors to fill every room in every building with a choking gray cloud.

Perhaps that was a blessing, given the battle stench upon which Ruha would surely have been gagging if her nose had not been so clogged by bitter soot. With wounded Maces sprawled on the floor as thick as rats or holding each other upright on wooden benches, the chamber looked less like an infirmary than a crowded tavern after a vicious and bloody brawl. Through the smoke haze, the witch saw bandaged stumps where there should have been limbs, melted flesh bubbling up between the links of scorched chainmail, and a hundred more wounds too terrible to look upon for long. Many of the warriors had suffered their injuries when they rode with Vaerana to lure Cypress away from Ruha and Hsieh, but many more had been hurt in cult ambushes. Even now, with Elversult's loyal citizens struggling to fight the fires Cypress had set in his flaming panic, more than a dozen patrols of Maces continued to battle the marauding bands.

Given the mild severity of her own wound, Ruha would have felt guilty for the healer's attention she had received the moment she walked in the door—save that her battle was far from over. Her sun spell had driven Cypress into one of the city's many lakes, but it had not destroyed him. Until the dragon was finally, utterly annihilated, the witch knew better than to think either she or Yanseldara would ever be safe.

Minister Hsieh looped his needle through the last stitch on Vaerana's jaw, then cut the suture. "You may speak now." He stood and began to cut the hair away from a long slash in her scalp. "But I advise you not to move head."

Vaerana scowled at the cascade of blood-matted tresses tumbling past her shoulder. "Are you going to cut

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it all off?" she growled. Then, to Ruha, "Well?"

Ruha glanced toward Yanseldara's slumbering form, then reached into her aba and removed the potion Hsieh had given her earlier. "If we are to finish this battle, we must contact Lady Feng."

Vaerana shook her head, then hissed sharply as Hsieh's needle dragged across her wound. "You can see for yourself she's in no condition to be carrying messages." She gestured at the bed beside her. "Besides, we've got Cypress well in hand, thanks to you—though I wish you hadn't helped him burn down a quarter of Elversult."

"One does not destroy great evil without great sacrifice," Hsieh remarked.

"We have not destroyed anything," Ruha corrected. "Surrounding Cypress while he hides in Hillshadow Lake is not having him 'in hand.' It is offering up Pierstar Hal-lowhand and his men to appease the dragon's rage."

Vaerana frowned at the witch. "Didn't you listen to the last report. Witch? Cypress lost his wings, along with his hands—and underneath that baby sun you made, who knows what's happening to his head? Pierstar has ballistae and wizards waiting on every shore. As soon as the dragon shows himself above water, they'll blast him to pieces." She glowered at the witch, then added, "And they won't burn down the city."

"It would not matter if they did," Ruha replied. "You gain nothing if Pierstar destroys the dragon's body. Cypress will simply take another; then we will not know where he is until he returns as he did before. To truly defeat our enemy, we must allow Minister Hsieh to contact Lady Feng and ask her to smash the dracolich's spirit gem."

Vaerana set her jaw. "Yanseldara's too weak. I'm not going to risk her life. And even if we only destroy Cypress's body, at least we're buying time to find his lair."

"But what of Lady Feng? Perhaps she has no time."
Hsieh stopped sewing and glanced at the bed next to

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them. "Perhaps Lady Yanseldara has even less. If Lady Feng uses oil from evening-picked blossoms, love potion does not last long. When it wears off, her spirit must do battle with the dragon's."

Vaerana craned her neck to look up at Minister Hsieh, then swore as the movement jerked the needle from his hands. "Don't you give me any Shou double-talk! You're only trying to worry me."

"Vaerana, what he says sounds very true. Why are you being so stubborn?"

No sooner had the witch asked the question than she realized the answer. The Lady Constable felt responsible for Yanseldara's condition—she had told Ruha as much shortly after their first meeting. On some level, at least, Vaerana wanted to redeem herself by becoming the Lady Lord's rescuer.

Vaerana glowered at both Hsieh and Ruha for a moment, then folded her arms across her chest. "I'm not being stubborn." She leaned back to let Hsieh finish stitching her scalp shut. "I'm being careful."

"Yes, it is good to be careful." Ruha nodded thoughtfully, then stepped over to Yanseldara's bed. "She does look very weak, does she not. Minister?"

"It does not matter. Danger is from choking on potion. Even weak bond can carry message between body and spirit."

"But Yanseldara needs extra strength to battle Cypress, does she not?" Ruha allowed her eyes to pivot toward Vaerana, then raised the potion in her hand. "Or did I misunderstand you when you gave me this?"

If Hsieh perceived Ruha's intentions, his face showed no sign of it. He frowned slightly, then said, "I think you do misunderstand, Lady Ruha. I say not to worry about Cypress, because we give Lady Yanseldara strength."

Ruha breathed a silent sigh of relief. "Yes, that is right I had forgotten."

"What are you two talking about?" Though Hsieh had stopped sewing, Vaerana remained surprisingly still. "Is

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there some way to make this safe?"

"More safe," Hsieh said. "But small risk always remains."

Ruha saw the interest fading from Vaerana's eyes.

"The greatest risk, of course, would be to you," Ruha added quickly "If Cypress caught on—"

"I don't care about the risk to me!" Vaerana twisted around to look at Hsieh, who deftly released the needle to keep from tearing her wound. "What will it mean to Yanseldara?"

"She draws strength from your spirit," Hsieh said, expounding on Ruha's fabrication. "Much better for her."

"If there is trouble, you are certain to perish," Ruha added, trying to make the ruse look as dangerous as possible. "Will you take the chance?"

Vaerana did not even hesitate. "Of course!"

Ruha handed the message potion to Hsieh. "If you will see to matters here, I must leave immediately."

"Leave?" Vaerana asked. "Where are you going?"

"To Hillshadow Lake, of course," Ruha answered. "When Lady Feng smashes Cypress's spirit gem, I suspect Pierstar will have need of my magic."

Hsieh produced the last of the lasal from his pocket. "Perhaps you need these." He gave Ruha several of the slender leaves, but saved three for Vaerana. "Now, Lady Constable, please to chew and prepare yourself."

The water tickled Tang's toes, and he knew it was rising. The prince lay beside his resting mother, his bare feet dangling over the edge of a sloping limestone ledge. The ceiling hung so low above his back that he could not rise to his knees, and the wall ahead stood so close to his face that each stale breath curled back into his eyes. Yanseldara's staff lay at his side, and the ghostly head of General Fui hovered an arm's length away. The only sound that broke the cramped silence was the erratic gasping of

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the Third Virtuous Concubine.

After pumping the fluid from Lady Feng's lungs, Tang had collapsed beside her and listened to the drops trickling off his feet into the dark pool from which they had come. The steady splashing had ceased not long ago, and now he felt a cool tide creeping up his toes. The water was definitely rising, no doubt because Cypress had blocked the cavern's only outflow.

Tang rolled onto his back, then picked up Yanseldara's staff and held the glowing pommel over the pool. An alligator could hardly have squeezed between the surface of the black waters and ceiling. While lying on his back, it was difficult for the prince to see into all the shadowy corners of the cramped vault, but he discerned no hint of an exit above water.

As though to confirm what Tang already feared, General Fui drifted to the middle of the dark pool, then settled beneath the water and stopped to wait.

Lady Feng stirred and rolled onto her back. "What is happening, Brave Prince?"

"The water rises. We must go."

Lady Feng grimaced and shook her head. "We lose our way."

Tang lowered Yanseldara's staff toward the ghostly head waiting in the dark pool. "General Fui guides—"

"Lady Feng?" The staff's glowing spirit gem dimmed slightly as a dulcet voice filled the cramped vault. "Do you hear me?"

The words were Shou, but Tang, who had met Elversuit's Lady Lord on several ceremonial occasions, recognized the voice as Yanseldara's. "Who is this?" he demanded. "You are not Lady Lord!"

"Nor are you, but I hear you in Lady Yanseldara's voice. Are you Third Virtuous Concubine?"

Tang looked to his mother, who appeared only slightly less puzzled than he. She shook her head to indicate she did not wish to speak, then motioned for him to continue.

"This is Prince Kao Chou Tang."

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"I am most pleased to hear your voice, Young Prince," came the reply. "When I give you leave to fetch Third Virtuous Concubine, I do not expect you to be gone so long."

"Minister Hsieh!" Only the cramped quarters kept

Tang from kowtowing to the spirit gem. "Please to—"

"We discuss your disobedience soon enough," the mandarin replied. "I presume you find Yanseldara's staff, or we could not speak. Do you also find Sagacious Mother?"

Before Tang answered, a terrible thought occurred to him. "Esteemed Minister, Cypress shares gem with Yanseldara. Perhaps he hears us!"

There was a short silence; then Hsieh said, "It does not matter. Witch has almost destroyed him."

This drew a smile from Lady Feng, who said, "I am here."

"Good. I bear greetings and message from Most High Emperor, but first—"

A sudden burst of darkness flared inside the spirit gem. "Tang! You are alive!" rumbled Cypress's deep voice. "Well, no matter. I am not so hurt as those fools imagine."

Tang was so startled that he let the staff slip from his hands, then barely caught it before it rolled down the sloping shelf into the dark water. Once again, the great topaz in the pommel glowed with the steady, brilliant scarlet light that it had assumed when the two spirits inside it united—though the prince fancied that he could now see glimmers of silver and black whirling deep within the gem.

"Minister Hsieh?"

Tang's only answer was a faint purl as the dark waters seeped onto the ledge where he and his mother lay.

* Sji * * *

Cypress lay at the bottom of Hillshadow Lake. Save for the golden ball still burning at the end of his sinuous neck, he was a huge black shape barely visible through the curtains of steam rising off the green waters. He

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hardly moved, and he made no sound; if not for his black tail occasionally rising to the surface, Ruha would not have known whether he still abided in his dark body.

"How long will your fire keep burning, Lady Ruha?" Pierstar gestured vaguely toward the halo of yellow, boiling waters in the center of the lake. "We've been waiting for it to die out since he went under!"

"The spell draws its fire from the sun." The witch could

hardly bear to take her eyes off Cypress. It would not be long before Lady Feng smashed his spirit gem, and then Ruha would truly earn the right to be called a Harper. "The magic will fade when the sun sets—or when I cancel the spell."

"Then you may call it off when you wish," Pierstar said. "We are ready to fight when you are."

Along with a small company of officers and runners, Ruha and the commander were standing behind the parapets of Baldagar Manor. The villa was the lowest of four keeplike mansions grouped together on the western shore of Hillshadow Lake. It offered the best view of the dragon, and it was also well placed to serve as a command post.

The lake itself lay at the foot of Temple Hill, with beachfront streets encircling one end and magnificent villas the other. Fully fifteen hundred Maces stood along the shores, either arrayed along the cobblestone roads or crowded together atop the roofs of the great mansions. In lieu of their customary maces and horse lances, the men were armed with harpoon-firing ballistae or net-flinging catapults. Should they be fortunate enough to actually bring Cypress down, groups of horse-mounted battle wizards waited in strategic locations to reinforce them.

Ruha nodded. "Your preparations are beyond reproach, Pierstar, but—how can I put this without seeming rude?"

"Rude?" the commander snorted. "Why would you worry about being rude when you've met Vaerana Hawklyn?"

Ruha smiled. "Then I will speak bluntly. While it is

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clear that even the dragon cannot slay all of the men gathered here, I fear you may not stop him from escaping. Cypress is no fool. When he leaves the lake, he will not do the predictable thing."

"Of course not. But how can we predict the unpredictable?" Pierstar asked. "We are not gods."

"No, but we can control some things," Ruha replied. "By using those to our advantage, we can guide our foe's actions,"

Pierstar raised a bushy eyebrow. "What are you thinking?"

The witch described her plan, and by the time she finished, Pierstar looked both hopeful and concerned.

"You're taking a big risk on Elversult's behalf, Lady Witch," he said. "Are you sure you want to?"

Ruha nodded. "I am sure. After Lady Feng smashes Cypress's spirit gem, we will have only one chance to destroy him—and the best way to be certain we do is to use his rage against him."

"Then Elversult thanks you, and so do I." Pierstar laid a hand on her shoulder. "I'll give the orders."

Before the commander could leave, a breathless messenger stormed out of the stairwell. He raised a hand in salute to Pierstar, then rushed over to Ruha. "Minister Hsieh sends word that he has spoken to Lady Feng—and her son, Prince Tang."

"And?" Pierstar asked.

"He reports that they have Yanseldara's staff, but Cypress interfered before he could tell them to crush the gem."

Ruha's stomach turned queasy and cold, and she grew acutely aware of the dull ache of the wound she had suffered earlier. She did not realize she was swaying, however, until Pierstar reached out to brace her.

"Lady Witch?"

"We're only fighting for time." Ruha's voice was so low that even she could barely hear it. "Unless the gem is smashed, we cannot win."

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"The Shou are a smart people." Pierstar's confidence sounded forced. "They will understand what their mandarin wanted."

Ruha took a deep breath, then nodded. "Yes, that is what we must hope. We have no other choice." Gently, she freed herself from Pierstar's supporting hand. "Perhaps you should issue your orders. There is no telling what Cypress will do now."

The commander nodded and went to speak with his officers.

When the messenger did not leave, Ruha asked, "Is there more?"

"The minister is reluctant to mix the ylang potion," the

messenger reported. "He said the spirit battle between Cypress and Yanseldara has begun. Unless Prince Tang destroys the gem, it will only distract the Lady Lord and make her weaker."

Ruha thought for a moment, remembering the fury in Tang's eyes when he vowed to prove himself a man and stormed out of the spicehouse. She had expected his words to come to nothing, of course, but if he had actually reached Lady Feng, perhaps his promise had not been an empty one.

"Tell Hsieh to give her the potion."

"Then you think the prince will smash the gem?" The messenger's voice was hopeful.

Ruha spread her hands. "Not the prince I know—but the prince I know would not have had the courage to go into a dragon's lair after his mother. We can only hope this new prince is someone more worthy of the title."

"I'll tell the minister what you said. Is there anything else?"

Ruha shook her head, and the messenger departed. Pierstar returned a short time later.

"Our wizards are on the way," the commander reported. "I've also taken the liberty of taking a few other preparations."

Pierstar gestured at the mansions flanking Baldagar

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Manor, where several ballista crews were sighting their weapons through the open shutters of the highest windows. On the roofs of the two buildings, the catapult crews were also moving their war engines into the corners closest to the command post. Although the men kept the weapons directed toward the lake, they were careful to leave room to swing around at the last moment.

"You have thought of everything, Pierstar," Ruha commented. "And now, there is no reason for you and your men—"

"We're staying." Pierstar picked up a long, steel-shanked pike and stepped to the parapets. "If you look like bait, this plan won't work."

Tang filled the waterskin with air, then pushed the stopper into place and looked over at his mother. She had sealed her nostrils with wax and was breathing shallow

and fast in preparation for their dive. The water was creeping up the ledge; already, the prince could feel its coolness lapping at his hips. He pulled his dagger and slipped the tip between the spirit gem and its mounting.

"Tang, what do you do?" gasped Lady Feng.

"Minister Hsieh says Lady Ruha almost destroys Cypress." The prince began to work his dagger back and forth. "He contacts us to smash spirit gem."

Lady Feng laid a restraining hand on his arm. "Wait until we escape cave."

"Perhaps we do not escape cave." Tang continued to pry at the glowing topaz. "Perhaps we drown first."

"Stop! I command you!"

Tang obeyed, surprised by his mother's frightened tone. "What is wrong, Lady Feng? You always say life and death are same!"

"They are, but it is great insult for humble scholar to usurp authority of Great Judge by throwing life away." She did not take her hand from his arm. "And if you

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destroy gem, how do we find way out?"

The prince waved the butt of the staff toward the dark pool, where the glowing figure of General Fui's head waited to guide them to safety. "General Fui leads us."

"General Fui is no longer bound to you by duty. Brave Prince. I call him earlier because I sense change in you that, perhaps, earns his respect. But it is difficult for him to be with us. Even most faithful of servants cannot stay-long, and in past you have done little to win his loyalty."

Tang let his head drop onto the hard stones and stared at the gray ceiling hanging like a tomb's lid above his face. He heard again the wet crack as the general was beheaded by his own son. That Fui had answered Lady Feng's summons at all was a wonder, and that he continued to wait in the dark pool was an even greater marvel.

"Fui D'hang was most loyal soldier. Not to follow him now is great insult." Tang raised his head, then gave his mother a crooked smile. "Besides, we must smash spirit gem. If we die in cavern, it is only way to protect treasure from Cypress."

Lady Feng's pop eye looked as though it might fall from its socket; then she released her son's arm. "I get rock."

The prince twisted his dagger, then caught the glowing topaz as it popped free of its mounting. He placed it on the ledge beside him and took the large rock his mother thrust into his palm. Tang lifted the heavy stone to the ceiling, a breath's length above his face, and positioned it over the gem.

"Wicked dragon, when you present yourself before the Ten Courts of Yen-Wang-Yeh, know that Prince Tang sends you there—and may the Great Judge sentence you to an eternity in all Eighteen Hells!"

Tang brought his hand down. He felt the topaz shatter beneath the stone, then heard his mother cry out as a powerful concussion hurled them both against the chamber walls. There was an ear-splitting wail and a deafening roar; then two flashing lights whirled through the

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room, one as silver as the moon and the other as black as obsidian. The prince's head felt as though it would split, and he found himself struggling for breath against a tremendous weight. He closed his eyes and beseeched his ancestors to make ready for him in the Celestial Bureaucracy.

The prayer went unanswered. Almost as soon as they had begun, the wailing and the roaring died. The flashing lights vanished, and the terrible weight was lifted from Tang's chest. He found himself lying on his back, gasping for breath and staring at the low ceiling, still lit by the crimson glow of General Fui's spirit.

"Tang?"

The prince turned his head and saw his mother lying beside him. She looked even paler and older than usual. "Yes, Lady Feng?"

"Now may we go?"

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Together, Ruha and Pierstar looked out over Hill-shadow Lake's steaming waters, waiting for the dark figure at the bottom to rise and attack. The war wizards had begun to arrive and take their positions, both on Baldagar Manor and the adjacent mansions. The witch was rubbing a round, fist-sized stone between her palms, wondering if she had misjudged Tang and desperately hoping she had not. She could lure Cypress from the

water at any time, but the ensuing battle would mean nothing if the prince had not smashed the spirit gem.

The stone grew warm in Ruha's hands. She continued to rub her hands over it, more to calm her nerves than to increase the effectiveness of her magic. She would have time to hurl only one spell at Cypress, but she did not want it to be so powerful it drove him away. Her job was to draw the dragon onto the roof of Baldagar Manor. Pierstar and his Maces would do the rest.

The ballista crews hiding in the adjacent buildings

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closed their window shutters. The last of the war wizards arrived and took their places, and still the dragon did not move. Ruha's heart sank, and she reluctantly turned to face Pierstar.

"I fear Prince Tang has not changed. Perhaps I..."

A dreadful sputter broke over the parapets, and Ruha let her sentence trail off. She looked toward the lake and saw huge geysers of steam rising from its heart. Just beneath the roiling green surface, the amber globe of her sun spell was rapidly growing larger, with the murky figure of Cypress's body rising beneath it like a swelling black cloud.

"Prepare yourselves!" yelled Pierstar.

An anxious clatter rattled across the roof as the Maces and their war wizards steeled themselves for battle.

Cypress erupted from the lake with the roar of a volcano, flinging a spray of boiling water and hissing steam in all directions. Though the golden fire had burned the scaly hide completely off his wings, that did not prevent them from lifting him into the air as the charred bones curled and undulated like so many clattering fingers. It was impossible to see through the blazing globe at the end of his neck, but the rest of his body, aside from a broad scattering of melted scales and the scorched stumps at the ends of his arms, looked remarkably intact.

Ruha set her stone on the parapet, then tucked two of Hsieh's lasal leaves into the sleeve other aba, where she would be able to reach them quickly.

A chain of cracks and loud bangs echoed over the water, the arms of the war engines slamming against their stops. Most of the missiles and nets splashed harmlessly into the water, but three harpoons lodged deep in Cypress's flanks, and one net tangled in the spindly

bones of his wings. The men who had hit quickly looped their lines around stakes driven deep into the ground, while those who had missed rewound their skeins.

Cypress roared. He whipped his fire-shrouded head

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around his body, and the instant the golden flames touched the harpoon lines and the net, they flashed and dissolved. The dragon's wings siffled through the air, and he began to rise again.

"Shut your eyes, Maces!" Pierstar ordered. "Now, Ruha!"

The witch uttered her counterspell. At the end of Cypress's neck, the fiery globe burst apart with a white flash so brilliant she saw it even through her eyelids. Summoning her stone spell to mind, she grabbed her rock and looked toward the dragon.

Cypress hung over the lake almost motionless, the tips of his skeletal wings fluttering as though that tiny motion were enough to hold his hulking mass aloft. At the end of his neck hung a smoking lump of melted bone that vaguely resembled a head. Glowing masses of cinder filled his empty eye sockets, and his long snout had fused into a stubby, tangled mass of fangs and jaw. Only his ebony horns had emerged from the conflagration unscathed, and even they made the air shimmer with heat.

Ruha hissed her spell and hurled the stone. The rock disappeared with a thunderous crack. It reappeared in the same instant, shattering Cypress's temple. The dragon's wing tips stopped waving. His gruesome chin dropped as he watched the splinters of scorched bone flutter into the water below. He brought his head up and looked toward Baldagar Manor.

You!

Ruha barely managed to stuff the lasal leaves into her mouth before a fiery yellow sun burst inside her head. She heard Pierstar and his men cry out in astonishment, then felt herself sailing backward across the roof.

Chew the leaves, she told herself.

Even as the words reverberated through her skull, she slammed down and went tumbling across the roof. If the fall caused her any injury, the witch did not know it; she could feel only the anguish inside her mind, a fiery agony

such as she had never felt. Swimming in boiling tar would have hurt less, or falling naked upon At'ar's blazing face. She glimpsed Cypress's murky figure swooping down toward Baldagar Manor; then she rolled one more time and came to rest on her face.

A lasal haze filled Ruha's head, but the dragon's fury was so great that the fog merely diffused the fire and did not drive it from her mind. The golden blaze became a choking yellow mist, not nearly as hot, but as thick as syrup. She heard screaming and realized it was her own voice.

That is but a portion of my pain. The building shook beneath Cypress's weight, and the voices of screaming Maces joined with that of the witch. Soon, you shall bear it all.

"Not all." Ruha found the strength to raise her head and saw the dragon standing in the middle of the roof, a cloud of dark acid billowing around his mangled snout. "You cannot make Yanseldara love you, and that pain I will never bear!"

Then I will make you bear another kind of agony.

Cypress's tail thrashed in anger, smashing through the parapets and sweeping half a dozen men over the side. He stooped over, reaching out as though he had forgotten \ he had only stubs where once he had claws; then a window shutter slammed open.

Ruha's world detonated: the sky went silver with lightning, meteor showers and ice storms chased each other down from the heavens, tongues of flame crackled through the air, crimson bolts and sapphire rays raced from every direction. The dragon's stump disintegrated before her eyes; a deep, rumbling growl reverberated through her bones, and the roof of Baldagar Manor began to come apart. She leapt up to run for the parapets and felt the floor vanishing beneath her feet.

The witch landed amidst a shower of snapped planks and beams, her body erupting into pain despite the cushioning of the soft furniture favored by Elversult

merchants. She lay a long time without moving, half-expecting Cypress's scorched skull to appear above her at any moment. Instead, the yellow glow and fiery pain faded from her mind and, much to her surprise, so did

the lasal haze—no doubt burned off by the ferocity of the dragon's attack. At length, the terrible aching in her body also faded, and she began to realize that, other than the dull throbbing of a few new bruises, she had

survived the fall uninjured.

Ruha clambered out of the debris and found herself standing amidst the ruins of the mansion's top story, where the family's servants and young children had once kept their chambers. She picked her way toward the front of the building, too dazed to think about what she was doing, and discovered that this floor of Baldagar Manor now held nothing but the shattered remnants of the inhabitants' belongings, two dozen groaning Maces, and the smoking, mangled corpse of a ten-foot river

monitor.

As the witch's ears stopped ringing, she grew aware of

a loud, chugging roar coming from the direction of the water. She rushed forward, then climbed over a collapsed wall onto what had once been a private balcony overlooking Hillshadow Lake. In the center of the lake, a murky green waterspout was stretching skyward, as though trying to grasp a small whirlwind with flashing ribbons of

silver and black luminescence.

Ruha heard someone clattering over the collapsed wall

behind her. She turned to see Pierstar Hollowhand's battered form limping toward her, his eyes fixed on the waterspout in the center of the lake.

"What's that?" he croaked.

"That?" The witch whispered an incantation and raised her hand, then started to spin her finger in the direction opposite the whirlwind. The vortex began to lose speed, and the two ribbons came apart. The silver light circled the shoreline once, then streaked away toward the Jailgates and vanished from sight. The black

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one was caught by the waterspout and dragged into Hillshadow Lake, where it darkened the water only briefly before sinking into the muddy bottom. "That was nothing—a fool for love, I fear."

Epilogue

Even the Shou did not have a table with enough sides for all those at the Great Banquet of Apology, so the servants had set the platters of candied duck and ginger hart upon a round table and arranged seven chairs around it in evenly spaced intervals. Prince Tang himself welcomed each guest at the door, and when Yanseldara entered the room, he produced a long oaken staff with three gnarled fingers gripping the finest ruby from his personal treasury. He held it before him and bowed very low.

"I find this in dragon's lair, Lady Yanseldara," he said. "I am sorry that I must smash original topaz."

Yanseldara accepted the staff with a sincere smile. "The topaz was ruined by Cypress's touch, and I thank you for crushing it. I accept this magnificent ruby as a token of the new friendship between the Ginger Palace and Elversult. I shall treasure it always."

Vaerana rolled her eyes, then leaned close to Ruha and, in a voice much too loud, whispered, "I'll treasure it more if they really stop selling poison!"

The servants gasped, and Lady Feng shot an indignant scowl in the Lady Constable's direction. Hsieh quickly stepped forward and smoothed matters over by personally taking Vaerana's arm.

"If we are all here, perhaps we sit down." The proces-

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sion filed somewhat uncomfortably to the table, where the mandarin scowled and turned to Prince Tang. "I see seven chairs, but only six guests."

The prince pointed to a chair with no goblet or flatware. "This is for Lady Ruha's friend. Captain Fowler. It is most unfortunate he cannot join us."

The explanation only drew a deeper scowl from Hsieh. "It is not for Princess Wei Dao?"

Tang's jaw fell. "She dishonors Ginger Palace! I do not set place in her memory!"

Hsieh's uncovered eye narrowed in what Ruha now recognized as a well-practiced expression of displeasure.

"Wei Dao is Shou princess. Trouble she cause in Elver-suit is of no consequence to Emperor, so it is appropriate to treat her as well as you treat guests."

Before the stupefied prince could respond, the mandarin spun to face Lady Feng, who was holding Winter Blossom on her shoulder and casting covetous glances at the golden serving platters. According to rumor, she had developed a distressing habit of sneaking off to Cypress's swamp with the Ginger Palace's finest tableware.

"I must offer condolences, Lady Feng," Hsieh said. "Most High Emperor sends me to invite you to Tai Tung, but your son's bad manners do not make that possible."

Prince Tang looked first insulted, then relieved. He forced a grave expression and bowed to the mandarin. "Please to pardon, but I never honor Wei Dao at my table."

"Then you never return to Shou Lung."

Tang could not keep from smiling. He turned to Ruha and asked, "Perhaps you sit next to me? I never return to Emperor's court, so perhaps you consider becoming my Princess?"

"I—uh—Brave Prince, I don't know what to say," Ruha stammered. Since his return from the dragon's lair, Tang had shown himself to be a gracious and gallant man, but the witch was not in love with him. "I will be pleased to sit with you, but perhaps we should discuss the rest at

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another time."

Hsieh frowned, almost angrily, and stepped toward the witch. "Surely you accept. It is great honor to be Shou princess!"

Ruha's heart sank. Normally, the Harpers would not dictate the person she married, but these were hardly normal circumstances; Storm Silverhand would look very unfavorably on starting trouble with the Shou. The witch glanced around the room and saw Vaerana watching her i carefully, as though she expected Ruha to start a war at any moment.

It was Yanseldara who broke the silence. "Before Ruha decides, perhaps you should give her that message, Vaerana."

The Lady Constable rolled her eyes, then turned to Ruha. "I almost forgot, Witch," she said, a roguish grin upon her lips. "Storm sent for you this morning. Some

giants up in Oak Dale stole a duke's daughter, and she doesn't think anyone else can bring the girl back alive."

Ruha did not know whether to hit Vaerana or hug her. "When did you plan to tell me? After my wedding?"

"I don't think Storm can wait that long." Vaerana chuckled, then took something from her pocket and pressed it into the witch's hand. It was the Harper pin Ruha had given to Captain Fowler. "I suppose you'll be needing this."

"I suppose I will." Ruha pinned the signet inside her aba, then turned to Tang, who looked almost as amused as he did disappointed. "I'm sorry, Brave Prince, but I cannot stay. You know I am a Harper, and Harpers go where they are needed."